“JUST WHAT WAS IT THAT MADE U.S. ART SO DIFFERENT, SO APPEALING?”:

CASE STUDIES OF THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE PAINTING IN LONDON, 1950-1964

by

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Abstract

by

FRANK G. SPICER III

This dissertation investigates and analyzes for the first time in any depth British reception of four paradigmatic American artists. More comprehensive assessment of a wide range of critical responses to exhibitions of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, held in London from 1950-1964, clarifies the consequential roles these artists played in London’s exhibition culture during this period. I seek to identify what about American painting was either deemed distinctive and engaging, or was contested by British audiences, and what the cultural and institutional repercussions of this approbation or critique were. Using these four case studies as a model enables new conclusions to be drawn regarding the value of mid 20th century American artistic exports abroad. This study is about artistic reception and, therefore, focuses on the reaction of art critics and the popular press to four American artists rather than their direct impact on British avant-garde practice.

From Pollock’s first London showing at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1953 to Johns’s Whitechapel solo show in 1964, the exhibitions examined in this study emerge as nodal points in the flow of discourse around American avant-garde art in Britain. Close attention to the way the artists under consideration were received in London sheds additional light on reasons for the reconfiguration from French to U.S. influence that took place in London after World War II. This study constructs a detailed,
chronological narrative of the eruption into popular British consciousness of the avant-garde innovations of Pollock, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg.

Previous authors have barely “skimmed the surface” of the rich and intriguing reception of American artistic developments as witnessed by the British public during the 1950s and ‘60s. For example, scholars have typically overlooked the ongoing impact of Pollock and Rothko in London after 1960, and Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns have largely been omitted altogether from secondary literature relevant to this topic. In order to provide a corrective to these and other disregards, this dissertation aims at answering a variation on Richard Hamilton’s intriguing question: Just what was it that made U.S. art so different and so appealing in mid-twentieth century Britain?
Introduction

This dissertation investigates and analyzes for the first time in any depth British reception of four paradigmatic American artists. More comprehensive than any previous study, my assessment of a wide range of critical responses to exhibitions of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, held in London from 1950-1964, helps to clarify the consequential roles these artists played in London’s exhibition culture during this period. I seek to identify what about American painting was either deemed distinctive and engaging, or was contested by British audiences, and what the cultural and institutional repercussions of this approbation or critique were.

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From Pollock’s first London showing at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1953 to Johns’s Whitechapel solo show in 1964, the exhibitions examined in this study emerge as nodal points in the flow of discourse around American avant-garde art in Britain. Close attention to the way artists under consideration were received in London sheds additional light on reasons for the reconfiguration from French to U.S. influence that took place in London after World War II. This study constructs a detailed, chronological narrative of the eruption into popular British consciousness of the avant-garde innovations of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns.
Careful examination of institutional history and agency plays a crucial role in this project. Perhaps paradoxically, London art venues such as the Tate, Whitechapel and ICA were strengthened in the 1950s and ‘60s by showing exhibitions of American art. The Whitechapel, in particular, exploded onto the map of London’s artworld by means of a high profile series of solo exhibitions of artists from the U.S. I tell the story of how Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns met a larger audience by means of these exhibitions and demonstrate the importance of the role these Americans played in helping to make London an art world capital.

Perception Abroad of “The New American Painting”

Although historically based, this project is currently topical. World perception of the United States is once again an issue of consequence. U.S. global power frequently elicits international alarm, yet American humanitarianism and culture are also welcomed in many parts of the globe. Re-examining British reactions to American art shown in London in the decades immediately succeeding World War II implicates broader social and cultural themes, including stereotyping, xenophobia and nationalism, issues still of paramount interest (albeit in different contexts) today. Assessing the complicated reception of American art in Britain after 1950 provides a roadmap potentially helpful in interpreting international cultural reception in our own era of equivalent tension with regard to American hegemony.

The type of global perspective I adopt has become increasingly pertinent to humanities scholars in the 21st century. However, few American art historians adequately problematize Anglo-American aesthetic connections. British audiences have their own
distinct social and cultural conventions, and this Britishness undoubtedly affected the
sometimes equivocal reception of postwar American art in the U.K. By revealing how
Pollock’s dripped and spattered paint skeins, Rothko’s luminous fields of color,
Rauschenberg’s hybrid combines and Johns’s vernacular paintings of targets and flags
were first received in London, I explicate what these brash, revolutionary works came to
mean in a related, yet foreign, context and suggest ways that British perceptions and
responses to avant-garde American developments significantly informed Britain’s own
artistic discourse.

Previous studies have focused on the parallel maturation and ascendance of
American and British Pop Art in the 1960s, but this dissertation centers on the equally
gerpane prior decade, when avant-garde artists from the United States first invaded the
consciousness of the British artworld by means of numerous landmark exhibitions.
Modern Art in the United States (1956), The New American Painting as Shown in Eight
European Countries (1959) and solo shows of work by the four American artists named
above actively promoted American avant-garde art in Britain. Some viewers and critics
felt as though they were experiencing a foreign incursion while others more
wholeheartedly welcomed “the new American painting.” Referencing primary source
material not closely examined in any existing scholarly studies, I demonstrate, through
the dialogue generated by its curators, scholars and art critics, that the British artworld
constituted a particular polemical and liminal space. In it, acceptance/incorporation and
resistance/rejection of American avant-garde developments combined to form a
revitalizing matrix.
Toward a New Paradigm

Both high and low U.S. culture became part of the new postwar global paradigm of capitalist production and consumption, one in which Britain’s former colony became increasingly perceived as the leader. This was especially true right after the war; as British painter John A. Walker states, “there is no doubt that Abstract Expressionism had a significant—some would say liberating and energising—impact upon the British art scene, and influenced many young painters.”¹ A key impetus for this dissertation is to discern how and why this liberation came about. If Alan Bowness is correct that, “by 1960, the British assimilation of the New American painting may be said to have been completed and the turning away from Paris toward New York irrevocably accomplished,” what forces contributed to this astonishing phenomenon?² By drawing upon criticism appearing in Britain’s popular and artistic press, as well as analyzing the perspectives and interests of British writers, curators and institutions, I probe in a more nuanced manner why certain factions in Britain were or were not invested in positioning American art as innovative and avant-garde.

The title of my dissertation includes a pun on the name of a seminal work of British Pop Art. As many have described already, Richard Hamilton’s Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing? (1956, Fig. 1) neatly captured the interest in U.S. popular culture and modern life that was so vital for many artists defining their practice in postwar Britain. Moreover, its focus on consumerism served the self-interest of many British artists and critics to position America as the capitalist

¹ John A. Walker, Cultural Offensive: America’s Impact on British Art Since 1945, London: Pluto Press, 1998, 72. I will not be focusing on the influence of American art on specific British artists, which Walker and other authors have already assessed.
“other” to the U.K., thereby predetermining the response to art from the U.S. as more innovative, avant-garde and market-driven than homegrown British counterparts. Hamilton’s collage can be read as a tongue-in-cheek, metaphorical text showcasing predominantly American items relevant to the question put by the artist. It is not clear, however, whether his attitude was truly admiring or facetious. It is this uncertainty (or perhaps undecidability) that forms the basis of my investigation into the consequences, for London’s status as an art world capital, of British reception of and response to postwar American art.

Chapter Summaries and Research Methodologies

The first chapter analyzes existing secondary literature regarding British critical reception of avant-garde painting from the U.S. during the 1950s and early ‘60s, while, in order to provide context, chapter two describes the major characters and institutions constituting the London art milieu at that time. Although there were certainly other active exhibition scenes throughout the U.K. during this period, this study focuses solely on the British capital because it was clearly the richest in terms of quantity of cultural institutions and available resources for the reception of contemporary art.

Subsequent chapters more directly utilize primary source material, mostly examined during research trips to various archives and libraries in London, England; New Haven, Connecticut; and New York City. Presscuttings, art journal articles, institutional records and correspondence have provided the foundation for a methodological analysis of British reactions to American cultural exports. The majority of presscuttings pertaining to Tate Gallery exhibitions, in particular, were consulted in the
Tate’s vast collection of press material housed in their archive. In other words, these reviews were not seen in their original published context but were viewed as recontextualized in light of the museum’s history.

Unfortunately, the Whitechapel Art Gallery remained closed during the research and writing of this dissertation; therefore, primary source material in this gallery’s archive was largely inaccessible. A future book could, however, potentially include more specific information gleaned from documents and records housed in this institution, as well as additional information pertaining to commercial art galleries in London during the 1950s and ‘60s. With exception of the Marlborough Gallery’s advocacy of Pollock, the present study focuses primarily on what are today known as public non-profit museums and galleries, as opposed to the commercial sector, because larger institutions like the Tate and ICA reached a wider viewing public. It should also be noted that, in each chapter, the exact dates for Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns’s first showings in Britain were determined after consulting and cross-referencing catalogues raisonné and other available literature for each artist.

What has become known as reception theory, or response criticism, is a key methodology useful for this type of diachronic analysis. Critical theorist Terry Eagleton has described this approach in terms of the written text, but his explanation is wholly applicable to the visual arts: “In the terminology of reception theory, the reader ‘concretizes’ the literary work, which is in itself no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page. Without this continuous active participation on the reader’s part, there would be no literary work at all.”

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criticism, from Roland Barthes to Jacques Derrida and beyond, it is self-evident that readers/viewers should be considered as socially, historically and actively positioned participants in the construction of meaning. Eagleton also points out that Jean-Paul Sartre, in *What is Literature* (1948), made clear that a work’s reception is not just an external fact about it, but “a constitutive dimension of the work itself.” British audiences, as noted, have their own distinct social and cultural conventions; this dissertation has adopted as one of its briefs an in-depth examination of how these native conventions and opinions affected reception of American art in London. Although some aspects of reception theory (as defined above) do play a role, my purpose is to present a more historically-based review and assessment of exhibition culture in London from 1950-1964. This evidentiary approach yields fruitful revelations regarding the wider impact of British art venues that showed American art during this period.

Chapter three covers the early period of this study, beginning in 1946, in order to examine two particular events that preceded Jackson Pollock’s introduction to the British art world at the ICA in 1953. The Tate’s *American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* exhibition held in 1946 represented an early interest in showing “contemporary” art from the U.S in London, whereas The Festival of Britain in 1951 signified an attempt to showcase British national recovery and innovations achieved in the postwar years. Both were a concerted effort for Britain to re-connect with the world after an immediate era of isolation and re-grouping after WWII.

The period from 1956-1959 signaled a larger influx of American art into London; chapters four and five focus closely on three major exhibitions held during this middle period. The Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States (MAIUS)* featured work by Pollock,
as well as Mark Rothko’s first appearance in London, while the Whitechapel’s Pollock retrospective in 1958 became one of the most discussed exhibitions of the 1950s in the U.K. By 1959, the Tate’s New American Painting (NAP) signified the paramount expression of American Abstract Expressionism’s crowning achievements. Chapter five also addresses a wider array of little-analyzed exhibitions, such as the Tate’s Paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the ICA’s Some Paintings from the E.J. Power Collection, which included the work of Pollock and/or Rothko and contributed toward their global reputations.

The final section of this dissertation examines a later period from 1960-1964, a time characterized by the emergence of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg onto the London art scene, as well as additional significant shows that featured Pollock and Rothko. Chapter six begins with The Mysterious Sign, a group presentation at the ICA in 1960 that marked Johns’s debut in London. Marlborough Fine Art Ltd’s Jackson Pollock: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours from the Collection of Lee Krasner opened in June 1961 and, as will be seen, provided a significant “revisionist” view of the Pollock seen by visitors to the Whitechapel in 1958. This east London gallery also hosted Rothko’s first London solo exhibition, Mark Rothko: A Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings, 1945-1960, which took place in late 1961. The following year, Vanguard American Painting featured the first London showing of all four artists together.

Chapter seven covers a diverse group of shows featuring some or all of the four artists in this study. Particular attention is paid to Johns and Rauschenberg’s having exhibited in two virtually concurrent shows, the ICA’s The Popular Image and the Tate’s
Dunn International in late 1963. This chapter analyzes in new depth the massive amount of criticism surrounding the Tate’s blockbuster exhibition, *54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade*, presented in 1964. *54-64*, an international showcase of contemporary art, featured the second group showing of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns together in London and opinions about all four were revised as a result. The last chapter focuses on the final year discussed in this dissertation. A small exhibition of Rothko’s recent work opened at the Marlborough in February 1964, running concurrently with Rauschenberg’s highly successful Whitechapel solo exhibition, and the year concluded with Johns’s equally intriguing Whitechapel retrospective in December. This examination ends with 1964 because exhibitions of these four artists in Britain declined sharply in subsequent years. Rauschenberg, for instance, did not appear in another major London show until the Tate’s *Obsessive Image* exhibition in 1968.

I conclude my study with a discussion of its relevance and potential contribution to art historical scholarship. Previous authors have barely “skimmed the surface” of the rich and intriguing reception of American artistic developments as witnessed by the British public during the 1950s and ‘60s. Early in this project, for example, it became glaringly evident that Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had largely been omitted from secondary literature relevant to this topic. To provide a corrective to this and other disregards, such as Pollock’s influence on Rauschenberg’s reception in London, this dissertation aims at answering a variation on Richard Hamilton’s intriguing question: Just what was it that made U.S. art so different and so appealing in mid-twentieth century Britain?
Chapter 1 “Historiography of Secondary Literature”

In this chapter I summarize and assess the scant amount of secondary literature devoted to British critical reception of American avant-garde painting in London during the 1950s and early 1960s. Although British art historians have turned a critical eye towards this type of transatlantic examination during the past few decades, there is a necessity for more thorough and in-depth research of the critical response to Pollock, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg’s work in England. Scholars have generally by-passed or obfuscated political, social or cultural issues when discussing the interrelationship between American and British painting in London during the 1950s. My historiographic survey will proceed chronologically starting with the earlier literature and concluding with the most recent. I will begin with analyses devoted to each of the four artists who are my main subjects and then examine the conclusions of scholars who have addressed the critical reception of American painting in London as a whole during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Artist Analyses: Abstract Expressionism, Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns

Not surprisingly, Jackson Pollock’s work has received the most attention among British scholars. Jeremy Lewison, formerly Director of Collections at the Tate Modern, has been the most prolific British scholar on Pollock. Lewison points out, for example, that, after the success of Pollock’s Whitechapel exhibition in 1958 and his inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art’s American art showcase at the Tate two years earlier, it had become clear to British audiences that “Pollock was the accepted leader” of his country’s
art. Although Lewison has addressed responses to Pollock’s art in London, his analysis is general. He does not investigate specifically why Pollock emerged as the subject of such preeminent interest in London and how his work may have provided a foundation for nascent Pop artists in London. Lewison does not analyze what role Pollock’s innovative technique and emphasis on process played in aesthetic debates within art journals and the popular press in Britain. Indeed, writing in 1999, Lewison concluded that, “given the coverage that the Whitechapel exhibition had received, he [Pollock] was no longer news” by the time MoMA’s *The New American Painting as Shown in Eight European Countries* came to the Tate in 1959. Lewison’s conclusion and his metaphorical characterization of Pollock as a “waning star” by the time of Pop Art’s ascendancy requires re-investigation. I believe it is advantageous to look beyond the three exhibitions Lewison studied to determine the role Pollock’s art played in aesthetic debates in the British capital during the early 1960s.

Another British writer, Mary Yule, has written perceptively about Bryan Robertson and the Whitechapel gallery. She too claims that Pollock opened the door for subsequent American artists to be shown in London. Yule states that Pollock’s 1958 Whitechapel retrospective was particularly critical because it “offered a first-hand, large-scale experience of his work and was significant in attaining wider public acceptance for

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2 Ibid.
3 Lewison posits that, by 1959, the increased reputation of fellow artists Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko contributed to a decline in interest in Pollock. However, Lewison does not mention interest to whom and offers no evidence for this claim. Also, considering that Rothko’s major exhibition would not happen until two years later, I believe it is useful to examine Pollock’s impact beyond the year 1959, where Lewison ends his study. Ibid., 213.
American painting.”⁴ Yule’s assessment constitutes a departure point for further examination: in what ways did Pollock’s reception become a model for later responses to Rothko, Rauschenberg, and Johns in Great Britain?

Other recent British perspectives on New York School art include David Anfam’s 1990 survey book Abstract Expressionism, published by Thames and Hudson and widely distributed in the U.S. as well. One of the most prominent British specialists on this art movement, Anfam aims to enlighten his transcontinental audience and to bring attention to a phenomenon that he says “remains a shade too serious, strange and extreme” to this day.⁵ Anfam’s volume is a useful, concise overview, but he pays little attention to any effect American Ab Ex artists had on British art at the time they first exhibited in London. In Abstract Expressionism, Anfam is primarily interested in explicating the late 20th century importance of this style of art and, to this same end, he also participated in a conference held in conjunction with an exhibition on American Abstract Expressionism at the Tate Gallery Liverpool in 1992.⁶ The results of the conference were published as a separate book; its editor, David Thistlewood, included essays by both British and American scholars offering eleven revisionist art historical perspectives.⁷ While making important contributions to the field, none of these authors actually assessed Abstract Expressionist art from an explicitly British perspective.

Another large-scale British undertaking that included Abstract Expressionism, as well as modern American art in general, took place at the Royal Academy of Art in

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⁶ The exhibition was called “Myth-Making: Abstract Expressionist Painting from the United States” and was held at the Tate Gallery Liverpool from March 1992 to January 1993.
London in 1993. In the catalogue for this survey of 20th century American art, Royal Academy of Arts director Norman Rosenthal offered a “View from Europe” on art from the United States, but his is a highly generalized perspective meant to serve as an overall introduction to the expansive scope of this exhibition. It was beyond the Academy’s goal in this show and its accompanying catalogue to offer a detailed account of specific responses to American art in London. One essay in it does, however, serve as a point of departure for my own purposes. In “It’s the Sheer Size, European Responses to American Art,” Thomas Kellein refers briefly to London showings of such exhibitions as The New American Painting, but his references contribute to an overall European analysis rather than focusing on a specific London context.

Finally, a recent study published by the Paul Mellon Centre for British Studies at Yale University is devoted to examining the aesthetic clash of figurative and abstract art in post-WWII Great Britain. James Hyman, who has written extensively on British art, offers commentary in the last few pages of his book The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art During the Cold War, 1945-60 (2001) on the advent of American Abstract Expressionism in Europe. Hyman concludes that, by the end of the 1950s, “no longer was it possible simply to dismiss American art or present it as a variant of European models,” and this suggestion by Hyman forms the basis of my thesis in subsequent chapters. For example, Hyman mentions briefly Pollock’s 1958 Whitechapel show and refers only in passing to The New American Painting exhibition of 1959 but he does not

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investigate their implications for British audiences. The conflict between realism and abstraction in avant-garde circles extended beyond 1960 where Hyman ends his study, and it is my goal to analyze specifically how still-active American artists, including Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns, informed this continuing debate within the British milieu.

Secondary literature by British authors writing about Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns is lacking when compared to that concerning Pollock. In 1998 David Anfam produced a catalogue raisonné of Rothko’s painting published in tandem with the opening of a Rothko retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The efficacy of Anfam’s scholarship in editing Rothko’s oeuvre is unquestionable; the essential value for my own work of the Rothko catalogue raisonné is in the record it provides of Rothko’s exhibitions in London, detailing as well the corresponding critical literature. There are no monographic analyses of any consequence on Rothko’s work written by British authors other than Anfam. In 1987 the Tate Gallery hosted a retrospective of his work, but the accompanying catalogue featured essays by American writers only. David Sylvester is one English critic who has commented on Rothko, but his book *About Modern Art* contains only a brief passage on Rothko’s work.

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11 It should also be noted that two years after Pollock’s Whitechapel retrospective, curator and director Bryan Robertson was commissioned to write a book on the artist. See Robertson, *Jackson Pollock*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1960. I am treating this text as a primary source since it was written in response to Robertson’s curatorial endeavors for the exhibition. Furthermore, the sheer quantity of literature on Pollock indicates that he is still of importance to current British audiences.


Brandon Taylor and Andrew Forge are two prominent British authors who have written about Robert Rauschenberg. The former penned a look back on Rauschenberg’s 1964 exhibition at the Whitechapel for the gallery’s Centenary review in 2001, while the latter’s text is a biography written in 1969 on Rauschenberg’s career up to that point. In Taylor’s essay, he reconstructs the exhibition, curated by Bryan Robertson, which turned out to be one of the most highly attended in the institution’s history. Taylor also provides useful details about how the exhibition came together, but his assessment is short in scope and he does not address in it the wider implications of Rauschenberg’s local reception, as well as his ensuing impact on British art at that time. Taylor writes: “The [Whitechapel] show helped establish Rauschenberg as the main exponent of a new sensibility of ironic, amused, sometimes bewildered detachment—a detachment both personal, political and ethical—in the face of the burgeoning new commercial and cultural order of the fast-developing West.” However, Taylor does not make clear to whose sensibility he is referring. He does not analyze the complete range of reviews of Rauschenberg’s London show, which would help to elucidate the wider implications of his art abroad and demonstrate the variety of ways his works fit specifically into the aesthetic climate of 1960s London. How Rauschenberg was understood in the context of developing a native brand of Pop Art needs to be addressed. Did London critics and/or artists consider this American to be a proto-Pop or Pop artist? No writers on this artist have so far attempted to respond to either possibility.

16 Taylor, 75.
Similar questions of origin are applicable to Jasper Johns, whose first British solo show opened at the Whitechapel nine months after Rauschenberg’s closed. Other than in a few survey texts, once again no British authors of any consequence have written about Johns. 17 A survey of reviews of Johns’s exhibitions in London indicates he was indeed of interest to critics there by the 1960s. His 1964 retrospective, for instance, prompted approximately twenty-one reviews in the art and popular press. Furthermore, British critics Lawrence Alloway and David Sylvester published substantive articles on Johns after his London debut, and Sylvester would become a staunch defender of Johns’s work, even appearing on BBC radio in 1964 to discuss his art. 18 Johns would also attract the attention of British critics Norbert Lynton (Art International), Robert Melville (New Statesman), Keith Roberts (Burlington Magazine) Nigel Gosling (The Observer), and John Russell (The Sunday Times). By studying closely Johns’s exhibitions and reviews, important issues for British critics concerning his frequently ambiguous, highly intellectual aesthetic endeavors will become clearer. Comparing and contrasting British responses to American perspectives on Johns’s work will be instructive. Better understanding of the dissemination and reception of aesthetic ideas between American and British art critics will aid in developing a more global perspective on postwar culture.

Group Analyses: Views of American Artists as a Group

18 David Sylvester’s comments were delivered on the BBC’s Third Programme, December 12, 1964. They were later published as “Johns” in his book, About Modern Art, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. I consulted the latter source.
Secondary literature by scholars who have addressed the critical reception of American painting in London as a whole during the 1950s and early 1960s is more abundant than British texts on these artists treated individually. In 1984 Julian Spalding, former director of the municipal museums and galleries of Sheffield, Manchester and Glasgow, organized a revisionist exhibition titled *The Forgotten Fifties*. Spalding’s curatorial goal was to reinstate figurative painters who were largely eclipsed by the ascendency of abstract art as a result of the Tate Gallery’s 1956 exhibition *Modern Art in the United States*. In his catalogue essay, Spalding proposes that the American Abstract Expressionist art shown in the Tate’s exhibition was analogous to a parasitic invader, a sentiment echoed by numerous other critics and scholars during the fifties.19 Spalding writes: “It is ironic that the style of painting of which [John] Bratby was the most publicly famous exponent…should have been so quickly superseded by another international style, American Abstract Expressionism, which swept the whole of Western Europe in the latter part of the decade, and grafted itself successfully on to our own developing tradition of abstract art.”20 Bratby was the foremost figurative painter in Britain by the mid-1950s and Spalding quips that his obscuration became symbolic of the demise of the realist movement in Britain: “So complete was this [American] conquest that Bratby, one of the first media stars of the art world, was dropped overnight and his paintings in the Tate banished to the basement.”21

Spalding’s critically defensive posture indicates a continued fear regarding the eclipse of native British painting by foreign artists. The situation in London in the 1950s

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19 I shall address responses in primary literature, such as books, periodicals and newspapers, in subsequent chapters.
21 Ibid.
was complicated by conflicting and often paradoxical British attitudes towards American art, culture and politics. Opinions and tastes varied often among different classes and social groups, but nowhere was there more of a general wholehearted acceptance of Americanization than among the Independent Group. Although in chapter two I will examine this group more closely, it should be noted here that this loose association of artists, architects, designers and writers based at the Institute of Contemporary Art London (ICA), including, most notably, Lawrence Alloway, Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi, looked to America in its embrace of popular culture.

Independent Group members’ direct engagement with American avant-garde painting came by means of exhibitions held at the ICA and other similar venues such as the Whitechapel Art Gallery. In her 1990 essay on the Independent Group’s response to Abstract Expressionism, Lynne Cooke observes that the Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States* exhibition was their first chance to see this new American art: “The key to the excitement it generated lay in the fact that it provided local artists with their first direct exposure to Abstract Expressionist painting.” Three years later, the Tate would show another exhibition of exclusively Abstract Expressionist art. *The New American Painting as Shown in Eight European Countries, 1959-1960* was a catalyst for British abstract artists such as John Hoyland, Robyn Denny and Bernard Cohen, and Cooke argues that these artists were stimulated by these two showcases of American art: “No ambiguity attends the transition of influence and inspiration from the most recent American works in the 1956 show to those that herald the debut of these British abstract artists coming to

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maturity in the early sixties.” Cooke, therefore, is one author who attends to the contentious point that American art served as a positive catalyst for the production of young British artists coming to maturity in the 1950s.

Marco Livingstone and Bryan Robertson present arguments similar to Cooke’s in their contributions to a 1988 catalogue devoted to celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Royal College of Art (RCA). Focusing on two particular RCA students, Joe Tilson and Richard Smith (who would later mature into Pop artists), Livingstone posits that their “confrontation with large-scale American abstract painting, first seen in strength at the Tate Gallery in 1956, was to exert a more immediate and lasting influence than their shared interest in the artifacts of popular culture.” Similarly, Robertson believes that for artists like Smith and his RCA contemporaries, the early waves of American painting had a stimulating effect and, furthermore, heralded a transition from figuration to abstraction. Robertson notes that Smith “rapidly evolved from serene beginnings as a figurative painter of singular refinement to an extraordinarily detached commentator on aspects of American style in the late 1950s” and that Smith’s commentary “swiftly turned into an act of original creation.”

An alleged lack of originality and ingenuity in the British art scene spurred some artists, associated with the Independent Group in particular, to embrace the influx of American art and culture after the war. Alloway, one of the best-known critics associated with the Independent Group, expressed a scathing sentiment in a 1990 exhibition catalogue chronicling the history of the group: “If the IG or I were accused of

23 Ibid., 194.
25 Marco Livingstone, “Prototypes of Pop,” Exhibition Road, 48.
26 Bryan Robertson, “Abstract Painters at the RCA,” Exhibition Road, 72.
Americanization, the spiritless character of the British art scene may have been the real fault.” 27 This reproachful point of view indicates that Alloway and his contemporaries saw the British art scene as devoid of inspiration or character. America, therefore, was seen as an antidote to the seeming ineptitude of postwar British art. The IG was often at odds with the older members of the ICA’s administration, led by Roland Penrose and Herbert Read. Therefore, the IG’s favorable view of the U.S. was a rebellious gesture against what they saw as overly-conservative British art. Alloway writes, “The IG was engaged in a game derived from its American possibilities.” 28 As I will show in subsequent chapters, responses similar to Alloway’s assessment of the situation in the 1950s were elicited by the appeal of not only American popular culture, but the perceived ingenuity of artists such as Pollock, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg. At the same time, there was also an unequivocal backlash against the positive critical reception of American avant-garde painting in both the popular and scholarly presses.

That there was also appeal among many younger British artists looking to their American contemporaries is a point made evident by David Mellor, Professor of Art History at the University of Sussex. In his 1993 survey of the ‘60s art scene in London, Mellor focuses on a group of British artists whose 1960 Situation exhibition, he contends, “profoundly re-shaped the direction and expectations of art in Britain” in the twentieth century. 29 Mellor observes that these Situation artists, such as William Turnbull, Gillian Ayres, Robyn Denny, and Roger Coleman, strove for self-management, an image of art

28 Ibid.
professionalism and were anti-bohemian; thus, “the smartly besuited American Abstract Expressionists such as Gottlieb … or Guston or Motherwell were an impressive sight to a London avant-garde already keen to emulate the Ivy League style.”

Although the besuited-artist may seem archaic to present-day eyes accustomed to art-chic, for young British artists in the 1950s, the professional image presented by many of the New York School generation was appealing.

Mellor’s conclusion regarding American appeal to the Situation artists is analogous to the authors above: “Just as Alloway had used the urban and technical romance of U.S. culture as a blunt weapon against the English art establishment, America was to appear across the board as similar corrective to English conservatism of habit.” He contends that, as a whole, American Action Painting signified metonymically “a door to a wider world of shifted categories of spatial experience and time; the components of an aggressive post-war culture of technological expansion and consumption.”

American popular culture, as well as fine art, was part of the new postwar paradigm of capitalist production and consumption, one in which the United States increasingly became the leading figure.

Thomas Crow offers an interesting critical rejoinder to the thesis of David Mellor’s exhibition. In a published review of Mellor’s show, Crow posits that too much emphasis has typically been placed on the three major exhibitions of American painting held in London in the later 1950s, beginning with the Tate’s Modern Art in the United Kingdom.

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30 Ibid., 77.
31 Ibid., 97.
32 Ibid., 15.
Crow offers the revisionist claim that before the 1956 Tate exhibition, the artists at the ICA centered around the Independent Group developed earlier knowledge of and differently processed American abstraction. He argues instead that British artists who participated in two exhibitions, the 1959 ICA show *PLACE* and the 1960 *Situation* exhibition mentioned above, emphasized the environment or space of the work and the viewer’s participation in that space, which ran counter to the Modernist, Greenbergian aesthetic of flatness and self-sufficiency. As a result, the importance of British avant-garde artists such as Richard Smith, Robyn Denny and Roger Coleman has been downplayed or overlooked in the face of the magnitude of New York’s role in the narrative of modern art. Crow suggests that “this has compounded the distortion of the historical record, encouraging a misleadingly linear history predicated on the centrality of New York.”

Crow’s observations are certainly worth pursuing more closely in detail. The institutional enshrinement of American avant-garde art had its apotheosis in London with the Tate’s *New American Painting* exhibition at the end of the 1950s. The conflation of American art and Clement Greenberg’s formalist-focused criticism is one aspect of the debate regarding American art in London which has been addressed by Jonathan Harris. In “Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960,” Harris, a Professor in the University of Liverpool’s School of Architecture, attempts to expose and to critique exactly how and why American abstraction became paradigmatic in New York following the end of World War II. Although he does not focus specifically on Britain, Harris

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33 Crow identifies these as *Modern Art in the United States* at the Tate in 1956, the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s Jackson Pollock retrospective two years later and the Tate’s survey of American painting in 1959.
34 I will discuss these exhibitions in greater detail in later chapters.
makes an important point that relates to my overall goal in this dissertation. He writes concerning Greenberg: “Within this wider context and history, Greenberg’s critical activity may be seen as part of a particular political and ideological formation, in which the rhetoric of ‘purity’ and ‘autonomy’ has Cold War connotations. Within these conditions, art and culture in general were seen, and used, as part of a ‘cultural offensive’ against the Warsaw Pact.”36 I will return to this idea of ‘cultural offense’, but for now, it should be noted that the relation of American art to the economic, political and ideological circumstances of postwar London will form the basis of my analysis in later chapters. British responses to the work of Pollock, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg will be examined in this particular context in each chapter as a means of examining how and why these specific artists were accepted or rejected by the 1950s British art scene.

Francis Frascina, another British art historian, has alluded to an additional, crucial facet of this polemical situation in the postwar environment, the issue of ‘Americanization’. “‘Americanization’, Frascina writes, “became a buzzword: for its supporters, it legitimated ‘free-market’ forces; for its critics, it identified the US imperialist economic and ideological colonization of Western Europe and ‘Third World’ countries.”37 Frascina seeks to identify the underpinnings of the United States’ post-World War II political and cultural ubiquity. “In the period after 1950, we see both the consolidation of the USA as a new type of state power, and a boom in culture ranging from the expansion of ‘high art’ to the influence of Hollywood movies.”38 In London,

37 Francis Frascina, “The Politics of Representation,” in Ibid., 124. Frascina is currently a Professor of Visual Arts in the Department of American Studies at Keele University.
38 Ibid., 127.
this ‘expansion’ was reified by the major exhibitions of American art at the Tate and Whitechapel Art Galleries from 1956 to 1964. The consolidation of American art into a cohesive, packaged and marketable whole found its nexus in the work of Abstract Expressionists like Pollock and Rothko and their post-New York School/proto-Pop Art heirs, Johns and Rauschenberg. The values and assumptions of British critics writing in scholarly journals, broadsheets and newspapers, as well as those of the London gallery-going public, have given rise to a whole field of responses to ‘Americanization’ in the 1950s that requires examination.

In her 1995 book *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-59*, art historian Anne Massey claims that, “from 1951 onwards the balance began to shift in the ideology of modernism at the ICA. The old, radical European ICA began to disappear at the expense of a new, liberal, American-oriented ICA.” She continues: “By 1956 … modernism was identified with America and Europe had relinquished leadership of the avant-garde.”39 I reference Massey as a case in point to show how the rhetoric still used by British authors in secondary literature is analogous to writers in the 1950s. Because Massey theorizes that the meaning of modernism in postwar Britain shifted from a European to an American paradigm, her book is an indispensable resource. In it, she aims to present a comprehensive, revisionist history of the Independent Group’s contributions to the development of modern art in Britain. Massey focuses on how this drama unfolded in the tempestuous relationship between Lawrence Alloway and his fellow Independent Group members and their host institution.

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the ICA. Critical attention is not, however, given to case studies of American art and its relationship to the accomplishments of that group.

Attention should be paid to an unpublished British M.A. dissertation that is a valuable resource for researchers of American art in London. Janeen Haythornthwaite’s “American Art and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the 1950s and 1960s” stresses and sometimes overemphasizes the importance of the east-end gallery in bolstering the reputation of American avant-garde art in London. Certain scholars have cited the importance of her work in informing their own projects and this author is no exception. Although she devotes due attention to the Whitechapel exhibitions of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns, these shows require more intensive analysis than what Haythornthwaite has given them. In a brief section on Pollock’s 1958 retrospective, for instance, Haythornthwaite devotes some attention to British press reaction, but there is scant serious investigation of this large amount of material. She is even less attentive to press responses to Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns. Nonetheless, Haythornthwaite’s noteworthy, albeit cursory, account will serve as useful reference material for my own

40 This 81-page thesis is a chronological, factual account of the history of the Whitechapel from its founding in 1901 to the American art exhibitions in the 1960s. Haythornthwaite was the Whitechapel’s archivist from 1999-2004 and she is currently active in the London art scene. This graduate thesis is important to my own project primarily because it contains useful facts on the exhibitions. The Whitechapel’s archives have been closed, and the material in them has been inaccessible, for the major portion of my research and writing. Therefore, Haythornthwaite’s detailed account of the installation of the shows and the role the Whitechapel’s director, Bryan Robertson, played in them is invaluable. I received direct permission from the author to obtain a copy from the University of Southampton in England.

41 Two authors have pointed out the importance of her efforts. Brandon Taylor, in his essay on the Robert Rauschenberg retrospective in 1964 mentioned earlier, cites her thesis and in Marco Livingstone’s “Reshaping the Whitechapel: Installations from Tomorrow to Today,” her attention to details regarding the installation of exhibitions is praised. Both of these essays can be found in The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review. See footnote 15.

42 Haythornthwaite also addresses the Whitechapel exhibitions of Mark Tobey, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Morris Louis, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell and Betty Parsons.

43 In each discussion of their exhibitions, Haythornthwaite includes a few examples of press response for each artist. She cites four rather favorable reviews of the Rauschenberg show, but fails to mention any negative press. As I will show in later chapters, Rauschenberg’s exhibition was one of the most highly reviewed, and highly contentious, shows of American art at this gallery, other than Pollock’s.
comprehensive analysis of these four artists’ exhibitions at the Whitechapel, Tate and other London galleries.

Margaret Garlake, a London-based art historian who specializes in twentieth century British art, has written a valuable book that assesses the social and political contexts in which art was made, disseminated and received in postwar Britain. Garlake devotes a small part of her survey to a critical evaluation of the relationship between British art and its American counterpart during the transitional period initiated by the end of the war. What follows in her text, however, are broad, general conclusions that deserve further inquiry into specifically why changes occurred and the reactions they elicited.

She claims, for instance, that “for those artists able to respond to it, ‘Modern Art in the United States’ initiated a period when their acceptance of the formal qualities of American modernism…brought them into the international mainstream.” Later she dubs Pollock’s 1958 Whitechapel exhibition “the prelude to a series of one-person exhibitions at the gallery by contemporary Americans” and says these shows “provided the fullest source of information on the New York School to be found anywhere this side of the Atlantic.” In the first example, Garlake clarifies who “those artists” were that responded to Modern Art in the United States, but she fails to mention that the new American modernism in the Tate’s exhibition was only found in a single room devoted to Abstract Expressionism, or the fact that the entire show came from the Museum of

45 She titles this 7-page section “O My America! My New-Found Land.”
46 Garlake, 79.
47 Ibid., 80.
48 These examples being three painters at the Royal College of Art, Robyn Denny, Richard Smith and Roger Coleman, who Garlake says were already obsessed with American culture.
Modern Art’s collection. Her Whitechapel observations disregard entirely the exhibitions of Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns. In what ways were responses to their work shaped or influenced by the reactions to Pollock’s initial exhibition? The reception of these American artists in London is an area Garlake and others have either brushed the surface of or ignored altogether, a situation which I plan to amend in the following chapters.

One author who has turned a detailed, critical eye towards examining the impact of American painting in London following World War II is John A. Walker, an English printmaker and painter who is currently head of the painting department at Boston University. After studying at Birmingham University in the 1950s, Walker developed a personal idiom influenced by American Abstract Expressionism. In 1998, he published an account of the impact of American painting in London inflected and informed by his own personal experiences and recollections. Walker’s Cultural Offensive: America’s Impact on British Art Since 1945 is a valuable account that engages in a limited analysis of American painting in 1950s London.49

Walker acknowledges at the outset that his text is “certainly a study of influence” and, although he recognizes that the situation is certainly more complex, he tends throughout the book to divagate into issues of influence and impact. Furthermore, unlike the present study, Walker provides only a very broad, general survey of the impact of American painting. When he offers examples of artworks or artists to support his points, they are too often brief and cursory. Walker’s text is vital as an historical-biographical, first-person description of the London art milieu; however, obvious shortcomings necessitate elaboration and further study. Many of the points that he raises require less

attention to issues of influence or impact and more focus on the dialectical relationship of American and British art.  

Walker states as a foregone conclusion in his chapter on the impact of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s that “there is no doubt that AE had a significant—some would say liberating and energising—impact upon the British art scene, and influenced many young painters.” What Walker fails to impress upon the reader is exactly how and why this rhetorical position came about. He does not cite concrete examples of criticism or exhibition reviews, although he does incorporate a few samples of primary source material from the period, such as an important article written by critic Alan Bowness. As Walker notes, “By 1960, Bowness concluded, ‘The British assimilation of the New American painting may be said to have been completed and the turning away from Paris toward New York irrevocably accomplished.’” Furthermore, Walker’s use of terms such as ‘absorption’ and ‘assimilation’ creates the false impression that Britain was a sponge wholeheartedly ready to ‘soak up’ American avant-garde art. Nothing could be further from the truth; indeed, there was much staunch resistance among the British avant-garde and public. Walker fails to deliver the opposing angle in this polemical debate. It is not enough to claim, for example, that “predictably, the popular press’s reaction to the Abstract Expressionists showing in London in the late 1950s was contemptuous.” Walker assumes an uneducated population was attended by a mass press that would react vehemently against avant-garde innovation. He does not

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50 In the introduction, Walker gives the impression that he seeks to avoid the issue of influence. He cites Michael Baxandall, who has referred to the issue of influence as ‘the curse of art criticism,’ but throughout his text Walker refers continually to artists influenced by other artists.
51 Ibid., 72.
53 Walker, 74.
54 Ibid., 212.
consider the ideological underpinnings of the publications in question in his generalized study.

In addition to a lack of balanced primary source criticism, other lacunae in Walker’s book evidence the need to proceed beyond the impact of American Abstract Expressionist painting in pre-Pop Art era London. Consider Walker’s assessment of the situation there by the late 1950s. By the time Abstract Expressionism was in full view in London, it had passed its peak in New York. It was, as he says, “being outmoded by the Neo-Dada/Assemblage works of Johns and Rauschenberg, the Happenings of Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine and others …. The relation of some of these movements to British art will require separate treatment.”55 Once Abstract Expressionism emerged onto the British art scene, the inevitable ‘what next?’ question would arise in the early 1960s. The critical reception in Britain of Rauschenberg and Johns’s work is a topic that I take up in later chapters.56

The title of Walker’s book is also problematic. It signifies a major difficulty with this type of transatlantic analysis that, although not completely ineluctable, could be circumvented if a better analytical strategy were utilized. As I will demonstrate, “America’s dialogue with British Art Since 1945” would have been a favorable alternative to his use of the term “impact.” Martin Harrison is another British writer who has fallen prey to the trap of ‘influence’ when assessing the postwar British artworld. In Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties, a 2002 exhibition organized for London’s Barbican Art Centre, Harrison presented a long-overdue art historical

55 Ibid., 73.
56 Walker makes only a brief mention of Rauschenberg and Johns, stating that, in the 1950s, their work would have been known more through illustrations and less through exhibitions. Even though his study extends into the 1960s and beyond, Walker deems it unnecessary to address these two artists since they did not exhibit in London during this period.
examination of this period in Britain’s cultural history.\textsuperscript{57} Although \textit{Transition} was dominated by figurative artworks that Harrison relates to the urban environment or the human body, his catalogue text also sheds light on the response to American abstraction in Britain during this decade.

Harrison posits, for example, that during this period of ‘transition,’ “the reorientation of British Art in the Fifties, from the influence of France to that of the U.S., was itself affected by questions of national identity, and by an innate tendency to translate foreign influences in an indigenous manner.”\textsuperscript{58} Although ‘influence’ for Harrison remains much like the elephant in the room, his use of the term ‘translate’ as opposed to ‘absorb’ is commendable. Harrison discusses the ways that British artists ‘translated’ the innovations of American abstract painters, stating “The vigour and spontaneity of gestural Action Painters … inspired many of the younger British artists emerging in the mid-Fifties, a tendency that increased under the impact of the scale, confidence and physical presence of the American Abstract Expressionist paintings shown at the Tate Gallery in 1956.”\textsuperscript{59} It was, in fact, the scale and confidence of works in the Tate’s \textit{Modern Art in the United States} exhibition that Harrison claims made a “decisive impression” upon young British viewers.\textsuperscript{60} As noted earlier, the final room in this exhibition was devoted solely to Abstract Expressionism and the works shown in it acted as a catalyst for those dissatisfied with the stagnancy of British art since the end of the Second World War. The ‘dissenters’ to whom Harrison refers included students at

\textsuperscript{57} Martin Harrison is the author of multiple books on British painting and photography, the most recent of which is \textit{In Camera: Francis Bacon: Photography, Film and the Practice of Painting}, published by Thames & Hudson Press, 2005.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 150.
the Royal College of Art mentioned earlier, such as Richard Smith and Robyn Denny. Harrison asserts that the work of gestural painters, such as Pollock, “acted as a trigger for the Royal College of Art (RCA) dissenters, precipitating the final push out of what they saw as English parochialism.”61 American art as “a way out” or alternative to the seeming torpidity of British art immediately following the war signified a major challenge to established artists, such as John Minton, who represented traditional values in British painting.

Martin Harrison’s curatorial narrative (evident in both the exhibition and accompanying catalogue) is requisite for any reader investigating the historical conditions and cultural milieu of London in the Fifties. Much like John Walker and David Mellor, Harrison proffers essential insight into a period of Britain’s history that has often been obscured by social and cultural studies focused heavily on the “Swinging Sixties” in London. In subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will contribute further to the adequate, but little nuanced body of secondary literature related to the reception of and response to the arrival of postwar American art in London during the 1950s.

In her book *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960*, Nancy Jachec, a scholar who lives and works in England, offers a politically-based assessment of the circulation and reception of New York School art throughout Europe. Her conclusions, therefore, are generally panoptic in scope, as opposed to examining closely a particular country. By tracing the international success of Abstract Expressionism as a form of cultural diplomacy in the 1950s, she proposes that “the particular role Abstract Expressionism first played in what we shall see were stylistically diverse exhibitions, and the ideological associations it eventually came to embody, need

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61 Ibid.
to be considered in relation to the growing awareness of Abstract Expressionism’s institutional promoters of the particular usefulness of an American leftist aesthetic in appealing to a vast, discontent and growing Western European left.” The latter she calls the “liberal, unaligned left.” The problem with her approach is that she portrays Europeans as ultimately passive receptors who were eventually won over by the exhibitions of modern art circulated by the Museum of Modern Art, such as *Modern Art in the United States* (1956) and *The New American Painting* (1959). To the contrary, the next chapter will demonstrate how the political, social and cultural conditions in postwar London were far too complex to foster an unequivocal embrace of American art. Although institutions such as the Tate and Whitechapel Galleries were indeed instrumental in bringing exhibitions of American art to England, this dissertation will show that there was also resistance in the British public and press to what was often perceived as an “invasion” of art from the U.S. Jachec hardly addresses this situation in Britain and instead focuses her attention on France and Italy even though the American exhibitions traveled to London, as well as Paris and Rome. Jachec’s work is a valuable contribution to transatlantic art historical scholarship; this dissertation, however,

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63 Jachec believes that, by 1959, MoMA’s International Council, which oversaw the international circulation of exhibitions, had found its diplomatic tool: Abstract Expressionism considered as an existentialist art. This “tool” was used to win over the liberal, unaligned left in Europe by appealing to shared Euro-American cultural values and political situations. Her argument is seemingly in the same vein as that of Eva Cockroft, who sees Abstract Expressionism as a weapon, rather than a diplomatic tool. See Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39-41.
64 Jachec leaves it unclear whether or not there was an “unaligned political left” in England like that in European countries such as France and Italy. I suspect that one reason she pays little attention to England is because her argument is based on the idea that Abstract Expressionism was actively promoted as an existentialist art, which appealed more to continental intellectuals than to their British counterparts. This is not, however, a reason to overlook the reception of the work of Pollock and Rothko in London but, rather, it is all the more reason to investigate further.
underscores what she largely overlooks—the cultural intersection of the American and British art worlds in London during the 1950s and early 1960s.

One author who has focused intently on Britain is Jennifer Way. In an article published in a special issue of *Third Text*, “Europe: The Fifties Legacy,” which was guest edited by Nancy Jachec, Way argues convincingly that “Britain’s shrinking geography, and the challenge posed to its empire by the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s, had a formative impact on British art writing and practice of the time.” Her methodology is a geographically informed way of understanding postwar conditions in Britain. American art, she points out, began to be exhibited in places long associated with British art, such as the Tate Gallery, following the end of the war. Way describes how art from the U.S. began to encroach upon the London artworld, and refers to a few examples of critics’ reactions to shows such as *Modern Art in the United States*. She suggests that “as Britain transformed geographically [i.e., as the British empire devolved or shrank], references to material surfaces and to locations and spaces…reverberated in works of art writing and art culture.” This study will engender further inquiry into “the

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66 I will show later that, although this is indeed the case after the war, there was also a desire in London to exhibit American art long before the start of WWII. For instance, Roger Fry organized the exhibition *Tri-National Art: French, British and American Artists* at the New Chenil Galleries in 1925. Unfortunately, the Tate Gallery failed to bring to London an exhibition organized by MoMA and held in Paris in 1938. The inability to secure *3 Centuries of American Art* in London before the war resulted in the almost immediate appearance after the war of fine examples of early modern American art. *American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, organized by the National Gallery of Art, D.C., was held at the Tate in June – August 1946. Early modernists, such as Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, John Sloan and George Bellows, formed the core of “the present-day painting” in the show. Londoners would have to wait another ten years to see a sampling of the work of the New York School artists who were America’s present-day painters in the mid-1940s.

67 Way cites two articles from January 1956, John Russell’s “Yankee Doodles” (*Times*) and Basil Taylor’s “Modern American Painting” (*Spectator*), both of which I will discuss later. Her argument is that art writers “apprehended material features in the surfaces of the art as signs of national, specifically American characteristics—action, complexity and affluence.” See Way, 227. I agree with Way’s observations here, but would add that other features, such as size and scale, were impressive or objectionable for critics as well as artists.
art of the twentieth century…treated geographically’,”68 as Way puts it, building upon her initial geographic approach to British art during the 1950s by means of thorough case studies of the U.S.-U.K. nexus in the London art world from 1950-1964.

Thorough study has confirmed the relative paucity of secondary literature written by British authors on the topic of American avant-garde painting (represented by Pollock, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg) in the U.K before 1964. I conclude with one final example to underscore the scarce attention paid to this subject. First published in 1999, Brandon Taylor’s ambitious historical account of exhibitions in London from the 18th century to the present day addresses the British public’s response to the shows and institutions he selectively discusses.69 It is distressing, therefore, to discover that Taylor hardly mentions any of the American art exhibitions that form the basis of my own study. He devotes a single paragraph to this topic in a chapter on the founding of the Hayward Gallery in 1968. “It should be remembered,” Taylor recalls of the 1960s, “that the period was already rich in change in the visual arts. During the later 1950s the Arts Council, the Tate Gallery and the Whitechapel Gallery had become the standard bearers of progressive appetites in art.”70 These tastes, he notes, were expressed in the Tate’s two exhibitions of American art in 1956 and 1959, Modern Art in the United States and The New American Painting, respectively, in addition to the Whitechapel’s pioneering exhibitions of modern art, which included Pollock’s solo exhibition in 1958. Taylor’s acknowledgement of the significance of these American shows for subsequent British artists (in ways positive and

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68 Way begins her article with this last quote from Lawrence Alloway in his 1963 essay, “What Happened to the Frontier.” He proposed a geographical approach to art by asking, “Can the art of the twentieth century usefully be treated geographically?” See Way, 223.


70 Ibid., 214.
negative) is commonplace, as is his overall lack of intensive analysis of this important
cultural intersection.

The importance of the art institutions Taylor mentions above will be addressed in
the next section on the London milieu; for now, suffice it to say that Taylor and the other
authors cited in this chapter represent an overall insufficiency of international
perspectives on postwar American and British art connections. Most British writers have
either admitted to a small role played by American painting exhibited in London during
the 1950s-early 1960s or have dismissed vehemently the importance for local painters
and sculptors of art from the United States. The reality is, however, much more
complicated.
Chapter 2 "The London Milieu"

In the foreword to a book written in 1965, Bryan Robertson posed the following question, one that runs parallel to my own current study: “Just what has turned London into one of the three capitals of art?” This line of inquiry was actually a foregone conclusion for the Whitechapel Director, but he, along with two fellow contemporaries, set out to document the transformation of the London art scene from the end of World War II to the mid-1960s. The result was *Private View*, an insider’s guide to the major players in the London art world, written with John Russell and illustrated by Lord Snowdon.1 This text is useful for the first-hand perspective offered by its three authors, as well as their valuable insight into the important players who made London, as Robertson stated, “a force in living art.”

It is first necessary to map out the major characters and institutions that formed the London art scene during the 1950s and early 1960s before examining in-depth the critical discourse surrounding American avant-garde painting in London. It would be a much larger endeavor to be fully inclusive of the entire London artistic milieu; whole books have been devoted to this topic, as evidenced by *Private View*. Therefore, in this chapter, I will discuss exclusively the major critics and publications that responded to American avant-garde art in London; the curators, museums, galleries and institutions

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2 Ibid., 3. Professor Anne Helmreich has pointed out an important point that should be considered when approaching Robertson’s account of the British art world. As she has graciously advised me, London was arguably one of the major art centers before WWII, particularly for the art market around the turn of the century. Duveen, Christies, Sothebys and other major Bond Street galleries constituted an active art scene in London, particularly after WWI. Although the bombings of WWII caused a major disruption in the British art market, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that conditions prior to the war were not as dire as Robertson had portrayed them to be. The British market did, however, experience a market crash that took place in 1929, which is detailed in Andrew Stephenson’s article, “‘Strategies of Situation’: British Modernism and the Slump c. 1929-1934,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991): 30-51.
that played a role in exhibiting the work of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns in the capital; and certain British artists who responded directly to these Americans’ works.\(^3\)

This chapter will also make evident the complexity of the political and social conditions in postwar London. The economic and psychological fallout from the international conflict of World War II was devastating for the British and the United Kingdom was additionally faced with a challenge to maintain control over its extensive colonial empire. While the gradual devolution of the British Empire precipitated a crisis and period of doubt in 1950s Britain, the concomitant evolution of the United States into an international political and cultural force elicited vehement and often conflicting reactions of trepidation, fascination, apprehension and resistance there and throughout the world.

The Socio-Political Context

The authors of *Private View* offer a telling assessment of the changes that took place in the London art world between 1945 and 1965. “In the earlier year,” they state, “London was a battered and near-stationary city in which art was the least of people’s preoccupations; in the latter one, the position was such that *Private View*, or something very like it, had to be produced.”\(^4\) The immediate postwar years initiated a gradual period of recovery, transition and aspiration, but Britain’s national ego was bruised and battered upon emerging from the war in 1945. An estimated 40,000 people were left

\(^3\) There are numerous artists, critics and other characters who played a ‘minor’ role in the reception of American painting in London. I will, therefore, reserve them for later chapters when it is relevant to introduce them to the discussion at hand. I limit my discussion in this chapter to major critics such as John Russell of *The Times*, curators such as Bryan Robertson of the Whitechapel, museum administrators such as John Rothenstein of the Tate and so forth.

\(^4\) Robertson, et. al., *Private View*, 3.
homeless due to the German Blitz of London.\textsuperscript{5} Unemployment, inflation and an overall sense of demoralization grew to heightened levels after the initial euphoria over the Allied victories had subsided. Unlike their American counterparts, who reaped the benefits of the economic boom instigated by wartime production, Britons inhabited a bleak world and faced a daunting road to recovery following the end of hostilities. The visual arts were indeed of the least importance to the ordinary British citizen, but, as I shall show later, it was due to the diligence of certain individuals in the London art world (including Robertson and Russell) that fine art would soon begin to re-appear for the general public, albeit in fresh, novel forms. As Margaret Garlake has noted, the immediate postwar period marked “a caesura in British art practice,” which was in part spurred by the gradual arrival of art from across the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{6}

Britain’s national ego was also dealt another postwar blow when the country was forced to make the transition from empire to welfare state. The myriad complexities of international politics and diplomatic maneuverings are beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I shall address certain key events which signify metonymically the loss of England’s status as a pre-war imperial power before turning to a discussion of other domestic challenges during the immediate postwar period.

Jennifer Way has pointed out that the devolution of the British Empire had accelerated rapidly by the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{7} The once globe-spanning empire began to sustain a series of geographical losses, which included India in 1947, the Republic of

\textsuperscript{5} Estimates vary widely, but this figure is cited in Margaret Garlake’s *New Art New World: British Art in a Postwar Society*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 5. 
\textsuperscript{6} Margaret Garlake, *New Vision: 56-66*, London: Warwick Arts Trust, 1986, 7. Garlake’s text is a history of the New Vision Centre Gallery covering the ten years of its activity. I shall address this gallery later in the chapter.
Ireland in 1949 and Malaysia and Ghana in 1957. Furthermore, the Suez Canal crisis of 1956 was an international embarrassment and disastrous affair for the British government. The eventual cease-fire, which was spurred by the United States, prompted the withdrawal of England’s troops and signified a failure of the military to resolve this international crisis. As the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union escalated during the 1950s and 1960s, Britain became a secondary “pawn” in the political games played out between these two global superpowers. The United Kingdom was preoccupied with rebuilding its infrastructure after the war and retaining its crumbling international empire, whereas the United States was gradually expanding its political, cultural and economic influence across the globe.

American economic influence in postwar Britain was palpable in the form of aid from the U.S., but many Britons perceived this assistance increasingly, and begrudgingly, as economic dependence. A few months after the Allied victory in 1945, the United States announced it would terminate its Lend-Lease program, which, during wartime, had supplied Allied nations with material goods in exchange for, in the case of England, use of military bases. In 1948 the U.S. instituted the Marshall Plan, a form of economic relief for struggling European countries in order to foster recovery from the war and prevent them from falling under the control of communism. The U.K. was by far the

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8 Other losses of empire, as Way notes, included Burma and Ceylon (1948); Cyprus, Nigeria and Sierra Leone (1960); Tanganyika (1961); Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago (1962); Kenya and Zanzibar (1963).
9 The Suez Crisis was viewed as another failure in a postwar series of many for the once-powerful British nation. There are numerous texts that address the Suez Crisis. For most recent texts, see Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain’s End of Empire in the Middle East*, London: I B Tauris, 2003, and Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
10 Materials and goods were sold to the British at far-below cost, and they agreed to pay off this debt over an extended period of time. For more information on Lend-Lease, see, for instance, William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
largest financial beneficiary of the plan by the time it ended in 1951.\textsuperscript{11} Many Britons, however, were skeptical of America’s humanitarian motivations and American aid was felt to be demeaning for a country accustomed to its pre-war status as a global superpower, as Garlake has also indicated.\textsuperscript{12} American economic relief was intended in part to promote growth and prosperity in order to counter the war’s devastating fallout, but this benevolence also generated various degrees of resentment among the British public.

It was a spirit of advocacy, rather than a quest for empire, that characterized a new era for the British nation during the postwar period, which John Walker has explained: “Gradually it became clear that Britain was no longer a world power of the first rank, that it had to dismantle its Empire and reduce its military expenditure.”\textsuperscript{13} The election of a new Labour government in 1945 spawned the growth of a British welfare state that instituted radical social reform: nationalization of Britain’s infrastructure along with free education and healthcare for every U.K. citizen.\textsuperscript{14} The expansion of art education and state patronage of the arts were to be part of these new transformations. Government subsidization of the arts proved to be one of the most important catalysts in the British art establishment. As Anne Massey observes, “the concept that art and design were part of the general prescription for the nation’s health” had emerged.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Garlake, \textit{New Art New World}, 5.
\textsuperscript{14} The Labour party held power from 1945 to 1951 under the leadership of Prime Minister Clement Attlee. Britain’s utilities, along with the mining, steel, coal and transportation industries, were all nationalized under the Labour government. The election of the party was due in part to dissatisfaction with the Conservatives, who held power until the end of the war.
The Institutional Framework—The Arts Council, Museums and Galleries

No institution was more important to state patronage and support of the arts than the Arts Council of Great Britain (AC). Prior to World War II, there was virtually no government policy for support of the arts, but in January 1940, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was established “to preserve cultural traditions and activities during the war, and to extend the accessibility of music, drama and the other arts to the provinces.”\(^{16}\) CEMA received direct government funding during the war, and it was announced in 1946 that this body would continue during peacetime as the Arts Council of Great Britain “for the purpose of developing greater knowledge, understanding and practice of the fine arts in Great Britain and increasing their accessibility to the general public.”\(^{17}\) To these ends, the AC subsidized organizations connected with the promotion and performance of the arts of Great Britain, in addition to arranging and funding certain exhibitions of American avant-garde art in London, as I shall show in later chapters.\(^{18}\) The two principal AC administrators who were instrumental in facilitating American art exhibitions in London were Philip James, Director of the AC from 1946 to 1958, and Gabriel White, Assistant Director from 1945 to 1958 and thereafter as Director.

\(^{16}\) Michael Green, Michael Wilding and Richard Hoggart, *Cultural Policy in Great Britain*, France: UNESCO, 1970, 9. This report assessed cultural policy in England, Scotland and Wales and outlined the history and shape of this policy, as well as its virtues and difficulties.

\(^{17}\) Press release on the Arts Council, Victoria & Albert Archive of Art and Design, ACGB/35/165. The British government’s Treasury funded the Council by means of an annual grant until 1965, when it was administered thereafter by the Department of Education and Science.

\(^{18}\) For example, the AC arranged the exhibition, *Paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, for the Tate Gallery in 1957. Pollock was included in this exhibition, which preceded his blockbuster one-man show at the Whitechapel the following year. The AC also organized and circulated *Rauschenberg: Illustrations for Dante’s Inferno* around the U.K. in 1964. I will address these and other topics in detail in their respective chapters.
James and White worked closely with the Tate Gallery, which was government supported, to organize the two definitive showcases of modern American art during the 1950s. As noted in chapter one, *Modern Art in the United States* (1956; Fig. 2) and *The New American Painting* (1959; Fig. 3) were drawn from the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The two American representatives for these exhibitions were Porter McCray, Director of the International Program of MoMA, who was based in New York, and Stefan Munsing, Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in London.¹⁹

The Tate’s administration was headed by John Rothenstein, Director of the gallery from 1938 to 1964, and Norman Reid, Deputy Director until 1964. James, White, McCray, Munsing, Rothenstein and Reid orchestrated the complex task of assembling these two large exhibitions that presented to Londoners the work of Pollock and Rothko (among others) as examples of the finest contemporary painting from the United States. The internal negotiations and correspondence that took place among these institutional representatives reveal that American avant-garde art spurred a dual predilection for and opposition to this new work in Britain. This dichotomy occurred within the context of local aesthetic debates over realist-based art versus modernist abstraction. Evidence of this critical discourse, and the role American art played within that framework, will be examined in the chapters that address the British popular and artistic press.

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¹⁹ McCray served as the representative for MoMA who travelled to London to supervise installation of these exhibitions. Munsing was based at the United States Information Service (USIS) Office of Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Embassy and was the liaison between New York and London. The International Program (IP) was initiated in 1952 by a 5-year grant to MoMA from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The purpose was to create greater understanding between the U.S. and other nations through reciprocal presentation of the visual arts. When the initial grant expired in 1957, sponsorship of the Program was assumed by the International Council (IC) at MoMA, a membership organization made up of arts patrons and community leaders in the U.S. The idea behind the program was to fill the void left by the fact that the U.S. had no government sponsorship or organization like the Arts Council of Great Britain. This background information comes from a notice from the IC and IP, dated May 17, 1958. TGA 92/145/1.
Whereas the Tate Gallery featured large, paramount shows of American art, by contrast, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) offered smaller, albeit equally important, exhibitions that introduced two of the four American artists in this study to London audiences.\textsuperscript{20} The ICA was founded in 1947 “to promote all that is best and most creative in the arts on a non-commercial basis by means of exhibitions, performances, study groups, competitions and discussions” and offered a diverse, eclectic array of exhibitions.\textsuperscript{21} The founding members had hoped that the Institute would be a venue to give scope to all of the arts under one roof, and after opening at its permanent Dover Street location in 1949, the British press viewed it increasingly as an experimental laboratory and a museum of modern art for London.\textsuperscript{22}

It was part of the ICA’s function to be a place for discussion, a situation that spawned one of the most legendary and highly discussed groups in British modern art.\textsuperscript{23} The Independent Group (IG) comprised active members of the ICA who questioned elitist conceptions of modern art as high as opposed to low culture.\textsuperscript{24} Its membership was

\textsuperscript{20} In addition to the MoMA and Guggenheim collection exhibitions mentioned earlier, the Tate also presented the Dunn International in 1963, which included works by Johns and Rauschenberg; 54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade in 1964, which contained works by each of the four Americans I am addressing; and The Peggy Guggenheim Collection in 1964, which included Pollock and Rothko. The diachronic changes that took place in the critical response to the artists in these shows will be traced in each chapter.\textsuperscript{21} From an ICA “Aims and Activities” pamphlet (1950), Yale Center for British Art, Special Collections Department. ICA exhibitions ranged from the mainstream (Henry Moore: Figures in Space, Drawings in 1953) to the fringe (Aspects of Schizophrenic Art in 1955).\textsuperscript{22} According to its “Policy and Aims” founding document, the institution was to be “Co-operative, Experimental, Informative and Creative.” Activities were to include painting, sculpture, music, theater, ballet, literature, film, radio and architecture.\textsuperscript{23} There has been much scholarship devoted to the Independent Group. See David Robbins, ed., The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990; Brian Wallis, “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow: The Independent Group and Popular Culture,” in Wallis, et. al., Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Pop, Cambridge/London: Clocktower Gallery/ICA London, 1988, 9-17; and Lynne Cooke, “The Independent Group: British and American Pop Art, A ‘Palimpsestuous’ Legacy,” in Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, eds., Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High and Low, New York: MoMA, 1990, 192-216.\textsuperscript{24} In his 1959 article, “The Long Front of Culture,” Lawrence Alloway, a critic and member of the group, proposed a linear continuum rather than a pyramidal or hierarchal conception of culture. Acceptance of the
fluid, consisted of a loose association of artists, critics and designers an was seen as an off-shoot of the ICA itself, which was led by the much older and more conservative Herbert Read and Roland Penrose. The IG featured among its ranks the artists Richard Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull, John McHale, and Nigel Henderson, the critics/writers Lawrence Alloway, Reyner Banham and Toni del Renzio, and the architects Peter and Alison Smithson. As Anne Massey has stated, the IG “gravitated towards the ICA as the only place in London where modern art and design could be seen and discussed” in the early 1950s. Ultimately the group became famous for its shared interest in and passion for American technology, popular culture and fine art.

The ICA featured examples of American art long before other London institutions would turn their attention to aesthetic developments from abroad, and it was, in fact, the first gallery to show works by Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns in London. The former was seen initially in *Opposing Forces* (Jan.-Feb. 1953; Fig. 4), which brought together artists who shared “an attempt to do something entirely new—an extremism which has never before been seen in England.” This show marked the debut of Pollock’s work to the London public, and this introduction sparked the first of many vitriolic critical responses in the British press. At this early stage, however, Pollock’s work was mentioned in reviews as more of a curiosity than a focus of intense critical debate.

mass media, he argued, would require a radical change in traditional notions of culture. This article is reprinted in Wallis, et. al., *Modern Dreams*, 31-40.

Massey, 6.


This quote is from a press release by the ICA Exhibitions Committee, January 23, 1953. TGA 955/1/12/45. The exhibition was curated by the French critic, Michel Tapié, and included works by Pollock, Sam Francis, Alfonso Ossorio, Henri Michaux, Georges Mathieu and Jean Paul Riopelle.
Johns made his London debut at the ICA seven years after Pollock in *The Mysterious Sign* (Oct.-Dec. 1960; Fig. 5), curated by the British art critic and journalist, Robert Melville. The goal of this show was to indicate “the various ways in which the painters of our time have revalued the symbols of written language in the course of developing the art of the sign,” and Melville included one of Johns’s numbers paintings, as well as two works by Pollock. Three years later, the ICA presented an exhibition which featured exclusively work by American artists associated with the burgeoning New York Pop Art movement. Johns and Rauschenberg were among eleven American artists in *The Popular Image* (Oct.-Nov. 1963, Fig. 6). The works in this show were assessed within the context of Pop Art’s controversial use of familiar, everyday and mass media imagery. “If vulgarity and ugliness dominate the taste of the large mass of people,” the catalogue asked, “how does this relate to the needs which are met by the creative process in the hands of a genuine artist?” As I shall show in later chapters, issues of artistic authenticity, sincerity and vulgarity were among the prevalent contexts within which the British public and press would assess the art of Rauschenberg and Johns.

One final noteworthy postwar exhibition presented at the ICA showcased works from the private collection of one of Britain’s most ardent connoisseurs of New York School Art. E.J. Power was a British electronics manufacturer, champion of modern art and active collector in the 1950s London contemporary art scene. *Some Paintings from the E.J. Power Collection* (Mar.-Apr. 1958; Fig. 7) was a small, but significant,

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exhibition that included examples of Action Painting from the U.S. As Jennifer Mundy points out in the catalogue for a 1996 Tate exhibition of works from Power’s collection, “Power himself did not go to New York until 1964, and his American paintings were, with very few exceptions, bought by Peter Cochrane or David Gibbs, who acquired them in order to sell on to Power.” Gibbs was Cochrane’s partner at Arthur Tooth & Sons Ltd., a preeminent London commercial gallery, and they bought works in New York and Paris that they thought might interest Power.

Among the American artists in this ICA showcase of Power’s collection, Pollock would re-appear later that same year in his first one-person show at the Whitechapel, and Rothko and Pollock were to be included in the Tate’s MoMA-based spotlight on Abstract Expressionism, *The New American Painting*, in 1959. The ICA’s exhibition of works from Power’s collection was an affirmation of his status as the preeminent, visionary collector of contemporary art in London. The catalogue for *Some Paintings* also offered Lawrence Alloway, one of the earliest British proselytizers of American art, an opportunity to comment on Action Painting, which had been introduced into the London milieu barely two years earlier at the Tate’s *Modern Art in the U.S.*

The Tate Gallery was the leading venue to feature Pollock and Rothko in large group shows during the mid- to late-1950s, while the ICA offered occasional, smaller exhibitions that included works by these and other American artists. The Tate was
founded in 1897 as the National Gallery of British Art but later expanded to include “modern foreign” art in 1926, as Brandon Taylor points out. The Whitechapel, however, was the first to extend to these two established New York School artists, and later to the younger Rauschenberg and Johns, their first London solo exhibitions. This east London gallery would become the undisputed mid-century destination to see innovations in American art, and this was due to the stewardship of the gallery’s young, prodigious and visionary director. Bryan Robertson took over leadership of the Whitechapel in 1952, a time when the gallery was still considered a marginal neighborhood institution and modern art was not overwhelmingly in critical favor, although there were always critics who supported it. After its founding in 1901, the Whitechapel was committed to presenting myriad exhibitions of modern British and European art in from the 1910s to the 1950s.

By 1968, the year Robertson retired from his position, he had transformed the Whitechapel into a world-renowned museum and brought an awareness of international artistic trends into public consciousness. Over the course of ten years, Robertson introduced contemporary painting from across the Atlantic to the British public and its native artists with a frequency never seen before in London. He possessed an


35 It is important to keep in mind that, throughout Robertson’s tenure, the Whitechapel was fully committed to exhibiting British and European art. The gallery’s schedule included numerous exhibitions of young and established British artists. I will address in later chapters the American exhibitions of Pollock (1958, Rothko (1961) and Rauschenberg and Johns retrospectives (both in 1964). Other Americans who were
unprecedented level of enthusiasm and commitment to art from the U.S., which, as it will be shown, he expressed passionately in numerous important articles written in defense of modern art and the Americans shown at the Whitechapel.

Mary Yule makes an important point that is worthy of mention when considering the success of Robertson’s gallery. According to Yule, “Like the ICA, the Whitechapel occupied an independent position within the London art world, less impeded by critical or ideological pressures than other institutions,” by which she means the Arts Council or Tate Gallery.36 As Janeen Haythornthwaite points out in her historical account of the Whitechapel, the Arts Council’s annual funding of this gallery did not take place until the 1960s; therefore, the gallery relied heavily on grants from charities, such as the London Parochial Charities Board and the Sir John Cass Foundation.37 Yule’s argument is valid only to a certain degree. As a non-commercial gallery, the Whitechapel is located in the culturally diverse Spitalfields area of east London and is quite far-off the beaten path of commercial West London art galleries, a fact that may have allowed Robertson a certain amount of liberty or independence in regard to the shows he presented. The gallery, however, would by no means escape critical attention as its profile increased after Pollock’s retrospective in 1958.38 At any rate, it cannot be disputed that Robertson’s critical zeal, personal conviction and curatorial acumen wittingly fostered the development of an Anglo-American dialogue in the British artistic milieu.


38 Yule notes that Robertson’s Board of Trustees also granted him a degree of autonomy that would have been impossible in other major art institutions. Ibid.
Located in southwest London, the Royal College of Art (RCA) was the source of talented, young students who would emerge into the art world after having encountered the new American painting seen at the Whitechapel and other London venues. In the mid-1950s, RCA abstract painters, such as Richard Smith, Robyn Denny and Joe Tilson, were introduced to the work of American Abstract Expressionists at the Tate. As Marco Livingston suggests, these artists’ “confrontation with large-scale American abstract painting, first seen in strength in England at the Tate Gallery in 1956, was to exert a more immediate and lasting influence than their shared interest in the artifacts of popular culture.”

It is widely accepted that the development of the British version of Pop Art in the 1960s was indebted to the mass media/popular culture interests of the Independent Group as well as to prototypes established during the 1950s by RCA students, such as Peter Blake, Smith, Denny and others. What has not been investigated to any sufficient degree is what effect the American work of Rauschenberg and Johns may or may not have had on the development of the Pop Art practitioners who came to prominence in London in the early 1960s. British critics clearly took note of Johns and Rauschenberg’s works in London group exhibitions from 1960 to 1963 (their Whitechapel retrospectives, it should be remembered, did not occur until 1964). Did these two Americans generate interest among the early-'60s generation of RCA students led by Derek Boshier, Peter Philips and Patrick Caulfield? This possibility needs to be explored.

Before discussing the gallery and market conditions of the London art scene of the 1950s and early-'60s, one last venue should be mentioned, for it was here that

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Rauschenberg would make his first British appearance. The headquarters for the United States Information Service (USIS), a division of the United States Information Agency (USIA) in Washington, D.C., was located in the American Embassy in London.⁴⁰ A new embassy was built at Grosvenor Square in 1960, which housed a small art gallery, and it was here that Vanguard American Painting (Fig. 8) was held in 1962.⁴¹ The exhibition included Pollock, Rothko and Johns, as well as Rauschenberg, and it was the first time that all four artists were shown together in London. Vanguard American Painting provides a unique opportunity to compare reception of the work of the two first generation Abstract Expressionists with the two younger proto-Pop artists.

Bryan Robertson’s remarks in Private View provide a telling assessment of the changes that took place in the London art market during the postwar period:

> English dealers were forced, increasingly, to abandon an old-fashioned laissez-faire attitude towards artists, and start a new system – new for England, anyway – of contracts and monthly or quarterly cheques as a retaining fee, to be set against work received from the artist. This put the dealers on their mettle, because to recoup their expenditure they had to work harder and at a brisker pace to sell the paintings or sculpture they had received in exchange for the income guaranteed to the artist.⁴²

In addition to such dealer hardships, many artists found it difficult to survive without taking work as part-time (or sometimes full-time) lecturers, which could further impede their level of artistic output. Dealers and artists were forced to adapt to the changing

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⁴⁰ The USIA was founded in 1953 and was responsible for foreign public diplomacy. Part of its cultural responsibilities included arranging exhibitions of American art abroad.

⁴¹ John Walker also points out an interesting fact about the USIS: “Inside the embassy there was a well-stocked library which enabled [people such as] Alloway to obtain the books, magazines and records that he needed for his research.” See Walker, Cultural Offensive, 59. By the early-1960s, Rauschenberg and Johns were already well-known in the U.S. and had appeared in the pages of international art magazines. It may be possible, although difficult to prove, that Johns and Rauschenberg became known to London art world insiders by means of the embassy’s fine art library.

⁴² Robertson, et. al., Private View, 174.
market, particularly when Britain’s cultural production began to recuperate. It became more widely evident that, compared to the pre-war years, the United States had become a major player in the international art market. The pre-war London-Paris axis was faced with a thriving new postwar source of artistic production from across the Atlantic, particularly as international travel became increasingly easier. Britain, along with the rest of the world, needed to re-evaluate its position regarding future relations with the United States, and the British art market was no exception to this requisite. It is important to assess more specifically the ways in which museums, galleries, artists and critics responded to the arrival of “the new American painting” during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Other than the Whitechapel, few smaller galleries in London offered solo exhibitions to the four Americans in this study. Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., a commercial enterprise, was one of the exceptions.43 In June 1961 the Marlborough presented *Jackson Pollock: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours from the Collection of Lee Krasner Pollock*, a show hailed for its focus on Pollock’s early work, a period that was noticeably absent from Bryan Robertson’s Pollock retrospective three years earlier. While the Whitechapel’s exhibition had already solidified the American’s status as the paragon of Abstract Expressionism, critical response to Pollock’s work underwent amendment and revision due to the Marlborough’s presentation of works from Pollock’s pre-drip painting period. Additionally, Lawrence Alloway’s concise but comprehensive

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43 The gallery was founded in 1946 by two Viennese immigrants and quickly became a renowned venue for showing and selling modern art. Exhibitions in the 1950s and 60s were diverse, ranging from Francis Bacon and Henry Moore to Wassily Kandinsky and Kurt Schwitters. It should also be noted that I was unable to locate archival material related to the Marlborough gallery during an extended research trip to London. A gallery official informed me that they no longer kept records for older exhibitions and she was unsure as to what may have happened to them. My attempts to locate them in the Tate, Victoria & Albert and National Archives were unsuccessful.
Marlborough essay served to clarify speculations and debunk myths that had surrounded Pollock and his work since his London debut in 1956. 44 Mark Rothko would receive a solo show at the Marlborough in 1964, but it was to be overshadowed by the Rauschenberg and Johns retrospectives held at the Whitechapel that same year. As will become clear, it is necessary to analyze and compare the critical response to each of these exhibitions in order to map the complete development of their reputations in England.

Although neither the Redfern nor New Vision Centre Gallery would actually show work by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns, these galleries also reflected artistic trends from America during the mid-1950s. The Redfern staged an exhibition in 1957 that proved to be an important measure of the impact of fresh, parallel currents in the London art scene. 45 *Metavision, Tachiste, Abstract: Painting in England To-Day* was curated by the British critic, Denys Sutton, who, as will be shown, was one of the first in England to write about the New York School. 46 In the exhibition catalogue, Sutton offered a counter-argument against opinions that Britain’s contemporary art scene of the mid-1950s was inert and unreceptive to fresh ideas. “It is no longer necessary,” he wrote, “to confess, as was the case some twenty years ago, that the English artist is averse to experiment. To look at the contemporary school in this country, in fact, is to be made aware of the variety of trends that exist,

44 Lawrence Alloway addressed topics that included Pollock’s output from the 1930s, the artist as a figurative painter, and the roles of accident, chance, choice and subject matter in his work.
45 The Redfern Gallery, established in 1923, showcased British and European modern and contemporary artists under the leadership of its director, Rex Nan Kivell.
46 It should be noted that “Tachiste” refers to a French style of abstract painting. The term, which is derived from the word “tache,” meaning “blot” or “stain,” is at times used interchangeably with Action Painting and, at others, is considered to be a completely different style, depending upon the author’s semantic preference. For example, Sutton argued that Action Painting was a hybrid of French and U.S., as well as German, abstract art, which created a hybrid alternative to the American genealogy. Artists commonly associated with French Tachiste painting include Nicolas de Staël, Georges Mathieu and Henri Michaux.
ranging from Realism to Constructivism to Action Painting.”47 Drab, stagnant and provincial was one assessment of the state of British art in the early 1950s. Sutton’s comments reflect the persistence of this view and the newly-felt imperative to counter it later in the decade, but it should also be noted that this ideology was based on an alleged lack of native innovation in Britain. As history clearly indicates, pre-WWII Britain was the source of exciting developments in modern art, including Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury Group, Vorticism and Constructivism.48

Action Painting’s emphasis on impulse and visual appeal allowed the artist, as Sutton claimed, “to revel in his attack on the canvas and to move his paint as free will and the unconscious dictate.”49 The liberating quality of this style from America that appealed to Sutton and others was Action Painting’s freedom from the perceived constraints of Britain’s still-prominent Neo-Romantic/Surrealist-influenced artists, such as Graham Sutherland (Fig. 9) and John Piper, as well as from the heavily Picasso-influenced figurative art of artists such as Robert Colquhoun (Fig. 10). The Kitchen Sink School of realists, supported by the Marxist critic John Berger and whose attention to social realism and everyday life was most associated with the painter John Bratby (Fig. 11), likewise provided no source of artistic innovation.50 Furthermore, in the 1950s and

49 Ibid.
50 After seeing John Bratby’s painting of a kitchen sink in 1954, David Sylvester wrote an article for the journal Encounter that he titled “The Kitchen Sink.” The epithet stuck and other artists who came to be associated with Kitchen Sink Realism included Derrick Greaves, Edward Middleditch and Jack Smith. This form of Berger-backed social realism was in stark opposition to Sylvester’s own support of existentialist modernism. It will be shown later how, after opposing American Abstract Expressionism, Sylvester became one of its biggest advocates.
60s, the Slade School of Art was dominated by latter-day followers of the 1937-38 Euston Road School of figurative painting. It seemed to critics like Sutton, who clearly favored American art, that Britain’s artistic climate in the early 1950s was now comparatively torpid, derivative and lacking in innovation.

Sutton’s *Metavisual* exhibition at the Redfern Gallery, however, offered evidence that some artists had begun to take note of recent artistic developments, particularly from the U.S. Another gallery that represented the impact of this new trend was the New Vision Centre Gallery (NVCG). Denis Bowen, an artist and instructor at the Hammersmith School of Art, opened this gallery in 1956, soon after the Tate’s showing of *Modern Art in the United States*. The NVCG was truly international in scope (over 50% of the artists shown there were from abroad) and Bowen’s self-appointed mission was to present work by young, unknown abstract artists. As Margaret Garlake has commented, the gallery “aimed to reflect a set of current tendencies otherwise hardly represented” in the London art scene.  

Bowen’s *American Painters in Britain* (July 1958) fulfilled his goal of presenting up-and-coming contemporary artists. Most importantly, however, Bowen commissioned his friend, Frank Avray Wilson, to pen an essay for the exhibition brochure. Wilson was one of the earliest adherents of New York School art in Britain, and his 1958 comments attest to the increasing re-alignment of British culture with the United States. “The deeper cultural climates of our countries run close,” he writes, “and we are both closer in sympathy with the new cultural internationalism one sees at work in Italy, in Germany, in Brazil as in Japan and in which America is fast assuming

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52 The exhibition included work by six American artists, Stephen Rich, James Legros, David Chapin, William Morris, Harry Colman and Rowena Wilkinson.
leadership.” Unlike many of their colleagues, Wilson, Bowen and Sutton acknowledged and embraced the challenges posed by the U.S. to Old World paradigms. The final section of this chapter outlines the major critics who would concomitantly offer their discussion of American artistic exports during the 1950s and early 1960s in the British press.

The Media Framework: Critics and the British Press

Not surprisingly, the merits or shortcomings of American avant-garde painting were played out in the British popular and artistic press. Only a handful of writers were cognizant of Pollock’s inclusion in the ICA’s *Opposing Forces* exhibition in 1953, but by the end of the decade and at the beginning of the 1960s, the British art establishment had become engaged in a lively, and often contentious, dialogue in response to the landmark solo exhibitions of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns.

British art journals were, of course, the primary forum in which erudite critics assessed art from the United States. Robert Melville, for instance, applied his critical acumen to multiple exhibitions of American art in the pages of *Architectural Review*. *Burlington Magazine* and *Apollo* were other respectable publications that reviewed the Tate and Whitechapel’s exhibitions of American painting. The former publication, according to media historian Sam G. Riley, “is arguably the best known and most respected of the quality monthlies in Britain devoted to connoisseurship in the fine and

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54 Melville, it will be recalled, curated the ICA’s *Mysterious Sign* exhibition. He also wrote for *New Statesman* and the shows he reviewed ranged from *Modern Art in the United States* to Johns and Rauschenberg’s retrospectives, as well as the ICA’s *Popular Image* and the Marlborough’s Pollock exhibition. All of the critics and press cited in this chapter will be addressed in greater detail in chapters on their respective exhibitions.
55 Keith Roberts and Anita Brookner were contributing critics for *Burlington Magazine*. 68
applied arts. Art historian Norbert Lynton wrote prolifically for *Art International*, a Swiss-based publication that consistently covered the London art scene, and G.S. Whittet, another prominent British critic, contributed informed, balanced reviews to *Studio International*, based in the U.K. American exhibition reviews were also found in mass media publications such as *Country Life*. As Riley also notes, *Country Life* is still widely regarded as “the doyen of British lifestyle magazines” whose appeal has been “to country people’s yearning for the town.” The *Listener* was the official published mouthpiece of the BBC, while the *Spectator* was a weekly publication that had a history as “a dignified journal of opinion and interpretation.”

Other British publications had more direct ties to United States culture. *Perspectives* was a British quarterly journal devoted to the arts and letters of the United States. *Horizon*, a monthly review of literature and art published in London beginning in 1940, presented important articles on American art for British audiences. American critic Clement Greenberg’s essay, “The Present Prospects of American Painting,” appeared in a 1947 *Horizon* issue; this forecast for American art included Pollock as one of the most original and promising artists working in the U.S. The British journal *Encounter* also covered literature, art and current affairs and featured articles by writers from the U.K. and U.S. Each of these journals provided a scholarly forum for the

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57 Ibid., 23.
58 Ibid., 204.
59 *Perspectives* began publication in 1952.
61 Herbert Read, for instance, offered a scathing assessment of abstract painting in his 1955 article, “A Blot on the Scutcheon,” which reflected his preference for social realist art. Read co-founded the ICA with Roland Penrose in 1947. Harold Rosenberg’s “The Premises of Action Painting” was also published in a 1963 issue, which was rather late for an article on Abstract Expressionist art that had already debuted seven years earlier.
discussion and dissemination of ideas surrounding new art from across the Atlantic.

Newspapers offered the general public an introduction to the Abstract Expressionist art of Pollock and Rothko and to the transitional work of Rauschenberg and Johns. Britain’s press stimulated important public interest in art from the U.S. as it became more visible in London’s museums and galleries. Critics’ reviews, however, were varied and inconsistent, ranging from ignorant and malicious to knowledgeable and poetic. Much of the popular media’s coverage of the arts was not always balanced, informed or even fair. As I shall show later, personal and political agendas were embedded in reviews that often expressed cultural stereotypes and prejudices. Some critics, such as Andrew Forge and David Sylvester, offered intelligent, open-minded assessments of America’s artists. Others, such as Alan Bowness, would warn of an invasion from across the Atlantic.62

The major London-based and regional papers that carried reviews of American art exhibitions can be divided into daily and weekly publications. The daily papers, their political orientations and any notable critic(s) who wrote for them include, most prominently, the Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph and Morning Post (both independent conservative; Terence Mullaly wrote for the latter), Daily Worker (Communist party publication), Evening Standard (independent conservative), Financial Times (independent conservative; Denys Sutton), and the London Times (the leading

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62 Andrew Forge lectured at the Slade School of Art and wrote noteworthy reviews of Rauschenberg and Johns’s exhibitions. David Sylvester wrote prolifically about American art, particularly Pollock, Rothko and Johns. Alan Bowness lectured at the Courtauld Institute in London. Although it is beyond the timeframe of this study, Bowness’s article, “The American Invasion and the British Response,” reflected many common fears expressed by critics who wrote about American art throughout the 1950s. See Studio International 173, no. 890 (June 1967): 285-93.
independent conservative British newspaper; Basil Taylor). Weekly coverage was offered by the *Observer* (independent; Nevile Wallis and Nigel Gosling), *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (independent liberal; Eric Newton), *New Statesman and Nation* (progressive and reflected labor tendencies; Andrew Forge, Norbert Lynton, Robert Melville and David Sylvester), *Spectator* (independent conservative political and literary journal; Nevile Wallis), *Time and Tide* (independent liberal; Eric Newton), *Sunday Times* (independent conservative; John Russell and *Art News and Review* (bi-monthly; Lawrence Alloway). Art critics writing in regional papers, such as the *Yorkshire Post* (conservative; Leeds), *Manchester Guardian* (liberal; Manchester), *The Scotsman* (independent conservative; Edinburgh) and *Glasgow Herald* (independent; Glasgow), offered a glimpse of the London art scene to British readers living in the north.

These daily and weekly papers were the public’s readily available source of information on London exhibitions that featured or included the art of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns. According to Colin Seymour-Ure, who has written a useful assessment of the British press and broadcasting since 1945, papers that appealed to the upper class in 1956 included the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Guardian*. The readership of the *Daily Mail* was more evenly split between the classes, whereas the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror* appealed to working class readership. Critics’ assessments of American art could attract or deter viewers who were initially unaccustomed to seeing aesthetic innovation from the U.S. Examining in-depth the critical reception of these four

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63 Information regarding the political orientations of these British papers comes from a report compiled by MoMA’s International Council for the Tate showing of *Modern Art in the United States*. MoMA Archives, ICE-F-24-54, v. 21.2. In addition, reviews in the *Times* often did not include the name of the critic who wrote the article. Basil Taylor reviewed the Tate’s exhibition, *Modern Art in the United States*, in 1956. I attempted to contact the *Times* to inquire whether or not Taylor wrote other “anonymous” reviews for them, but I received no reply regarding this matter.

paradigmatic American artists in London will explicate how their work was understood within the context of Britain’s own artistic milieu.

The present investigation into British reception of and response to postwar American art reconsiders what role it played in London as reflected in the variety of journals, newspapers, institutions, curators, artists and critics that formed such a complex artistic milieu in the 1950s and early 1960s. It would take time, however, for that cultural climate to come to fruition. Bryan Robertson’s assessment reflected in the question cited at the start of this chapter—that London had turned into one of the centers of the art world by 1965—was anything but a foregone conclusion in the immediate postwar years. Britain’s recovery from war and its transformation from empire to welfare state was a humbling, difficult process on all fronts, and the nation’s art establishment was faced with its own prospect and challenge—how to assimilate or contest the thriving innovations of postwar American art. The initial response from London, as Robertson recalled, was a “comparable inferiority complex” towards New York School art.65

Before knowing the power of overseas developments to disrupt native accomplishments, Britons were preparing to show the world the progress they themselves had achieved. The Festival of Britain was held in 1951 as proof to the rest of the world of the nation’s postwar recovery and achievements. This cultural exposition also signified Britain’s future aspirations and, therefore, will be examined in the next chapter as a means of understanding the context in the early 1950s that preceded the steady appearance of American avant-garde art throughout the remainder of the decade.

65 Robertson, et. al., *Private View*, 294. Given Robertson’s American inclinations, it should be noted that his opinion should not be taken entirely at face value.
Chapter 3 “The Early Period: 1946/1950-55”

This chapter examines the years from 1950-55, a period of gradual introduction of American avant-garde painting into the London art milieu. In 1953 British gallery visitors would see the first appearance of Jackson Pollock’s work in London at two small exhibitions held at the ICA, *Opposing Forces* and *Parallel of Life and Art*. It would take three more years for Pollock’s New York School contemporary, Mark Rothko, to debut in London at the Tate’s major showcase of the Museum of Modern Art’s collection, *Modern Art in the United States*. It is imperative to examine the critical reception of Pollock’s earlier appearances because this context set the stage for the response to his subsequent shows as well as those of his fellow American artists. Pollock’s reception by British critics and writers evolved with each of his London exhibitions; these changes will be explicated in later chapters in order to map the complex critical reactions to his innovative breakthroughs in abstract painting.

Two particular events that occurred prior to 1953 help to develop a backdrop for the introduction of Pollock, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg’s work to the British art world. The Tate’s *American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* exhibition in 1946 signified an immediate postwar commitment to showing “contemporary” art from the United States in London, a fact not previously examined. Conversely, the Festival of Britain, held in 1951, was a celebration of the nation’s postwar recovery and represented its goal to showcase domestic achievements for a global audience. In the first instance, the Tate’s expansive exhibition sought to foster cultural relations only with the U.S., whereas the Festival of Britain aimed to promote better understanding between Britain and the rest of the world by means of tourists’ visits.
to the U.K. Both events, however, were proximate, strategic attempts by the British government and art intelligentsia to establish global ties after the prolonged period of wartime isolation.

The Tate’s Early “Taste” of Modern American Art

The British Isles were dealt serious internal and infrastructural setbacks caused by World War II, due in large part to the devastating effects of Germany’s sustained bombing of London from 1940-41, as noted in the previous chapter. The Tate Gallery was not exempt from damage, but, after repairs were made following the end of the war, the museum was able to re-open with a major exhibition of American paintings organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., under the auspices of the American government and by invitation of the Tate Board of Trustees. However, it is important to note that the planning of this exhibition occurred well before the end of the war and it was also the result of a failure to bring an exhibition of this type to London before the war began.

Prior to the war, the Tate was unable to secure 3 Centuries of American Art, an exhibition organized by MoMA and sent to Paris to the Jeu de Paume in 1938. In fact, MoMA offered the show to the Tate in 1936, but Lord Duveen, then director of the gallery, declined. John Rothenstein assumed leadership of the Tate in 1938 and immediately sought to reverse Duveen’s decision in order to foster relations between the U.S and Britain. Rothenstein noted that “the Trustees of the Tate Gallery will be exceedingly gratified to know that the Foreign Office would consider it a benefit to Anglo-American relations if the Exhibition of American Art, at present in Paris, could be
shown here.”¹ That consideration contributed to the Tate’s decision to offer to house the exhibition in London, but ultimately Rothenstein found it impossible to fulfill MoMA’s original offer.² Rothenstein and the Trustees expressed to MoMA the hope that an exhibition of this type could be realized in the future, but these plans were put on hold after war began the following year.

It would take twenty years for the Tate and MoMA to realize their collective goal of producing a show of American painting in London, but the National Gallery responded to the Tate’s desire to feature art produced in the United States at war’s end. Negotiations between Rothenstein and MoMA’s Director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., had resumed in 1942. Their common goal in producing a show was to educate the British public regarding American painting. Rothenstein expressed this sentiment to Barr the following year: “The close relations between the U.S.A. and Great Britain, and the increasing and lively interest here in American culture, makes it ground for particular regret that no such exhibition can be held at present, and all the more desirable that it should be held as soon as circumstances permit.”³ The conditions laid down by MoMA, however, led ultimately to a second failure on the part of the two institutions to produce a collaborative exhibition.⁴

¹ Letter from Rothenstein to Sir Robert Vansittart at the Foreign Office, dated June 28, 1938. TGA 92/55/1.
² The Trustees decided that they could not do justice to such a large exhibition in such a brief period of time and the show would have conflicted with an already planned Canadian art exhibition. Rothenstein expressed regret over these circumstances to Lord Camrose, who had offered to pay for the show to come from Paris to London in a letter, dated July 28, 1938. Ibid.
³ Rothenstein then extended a formal invitation to Barr and MoMA to organize an exhibition to be held after the war. Letter from Rothenstein to Barr, July 6, 1943. Ibid.
⁴ In a letter from Rothenstein to James T. Soby at MoMA, dated June 27, 1944, Rothenstein noted that, per the financial arrangements laid out by MoMA, the Tate would have to pay for packing in the U.S., which they could not afford. Although the Tate offered to cover the cost of insurance, transportation and catalogues, the failure to negotiate on the part of both institutions resulted in the death of this project. Ibid.
As a result of this failure, in July 1944, the Tate extended an invitation to the National Gallery to hold a show representative of American painting from the 18th century to the present day. Rothenstein and his Trustees felt that “the cultural importance of the proposed exhibition would be inestimable and were aware that the great achievements of American painting were insufficiently known” in Great Britain. After further negotiations, the two parties agreed to organize an exhibition of masterpieces rather than an historical survey of American painting, and John Walker, Chief Curator of the NGA, formed an advisory committee that selected the work.

*American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* was finally held from June 14 – August 5, 1946, and occupied six galleries in the Tate, the only space available by the time the museum re-opened. The artists were divided into two categories, ‘Old Masters’ and ‘Early Modernists,’ in the exhibition catalogue essay written by Rothenstein. The latter group included a fine sampling of works by early American modernists, such as Arthur B. Davies, Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Adolph Gottlieb, Marsden Hartley, Robert Henri, John Marin, Robert Motherwell,

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5 Letter from Rothenstein to David Finley, Director of the NGA, July 5, 1944. Ibid.
6 The committee consisted of Alfred Barr, William Milliken (Director, Cleveland Museum of Art), George Edgell (Director, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), Juliana Force (Director, The Whitney Museum of American Art), Fiske Kimball (Director, Philadelphia Museum of Art), Duncan Phillips (Director, Phillips Memorial Gallery), Daniel Catton Rich (Director, Chicago Art Institute), Francis Henry Taylor (Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and Walker. One group selected the 18th and 19th century works, while the other chose 20th century pieces. The committee selected 180 paintings (fifteen were from collections in the U.K. and the rest came from public and private collections in America) that were “representative of the best painting produced in the U.S. to date.” Letter from Finley to Rothenstein, December 20, 1944. Ibid.
7 The Tate generated much excitement over the show. For example, the museum issued a press release over a year before the exhibition opened (dated March 11, 1945), which stated: “The display of the best British-owned American paintings side by side with the finest works from collections in the U.S.A. will give the exhibition a unique character and provide a survey of the achievements of American art of unprecedented importance.” The King and Queen even attended the Private View. TGA 92/55/2.
8 The Old Masters included Thomas Hart Benton, Albert Bierstadt, George Caleb Bingham, Charles Burchfield, Mary Cassatt, John Singleton Copley, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, George Innes, George Luks, Albert Pinkham Ryder, John Singer Sargent, Benjamin West and James Whistler.
Georgia O’Keeffe, Man Ray, Ben Shahn, Charles Sheeler, John Sloan, Joseph Stella, Mark Tobey, Max Weber and Grant Wood. These “present-day artists,” Rothenstein argued, “were part of a peculiar freshness of the intellectual and artistic climate in the United States.” The show was indeed the most representative collection of American painting ever assembled outside of the U.S. and “it gave the people of Great Britain a unique opportunity of becoming acquainted with a fascinating and rapidly developing school of painting hitherto scarcely known to them,” as also pointed out. However, the average British visitor to the show likely did not realize that there were fresher and more avant-garde trends happening in New York in 1946. They would have to wait ten years in order to see these developments in a London exhibition.

The correspondence cited above indicates that there was an early commitment on the part of the Tate Gallery, particularly by John Rothenstein, to exhibit the work of American artists for the London public. The Tate would become one of the primary British institutional patrons of American avant-garde painting in the following decade. It is also evident that there was already a strong desire to include a sampling of modern art from the U.S. in the show in 1946. Rothenstein and the Tate believed that artistic taste in Britain was changing and that British viewers would appreciate the dynamism and emotion of modern American painters. Attendance at the show reached just above

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9 It should be noted that Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell, who are considered to be part of the New York School and major Abstract Expressionist artists, each had one work in the exhibition. Gottlieb’s *Jury of Three* (undated) was an undated, small oil painting from a private collection and Motherwell’s *The Joy of Living* (1943) was a gouache, oil and collage dated 1943 and from the Baltimore Museum of Art. Both artists would be featured on a large scale in the Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States* and *New American Painting* exhibitions a decade later.


11 Ibid.
100,000, which was a testament to Britons’ interest in the Americans’ work as well as a confirmation of the unique opportunity afforded by the exhibition.12

Although Rothenstein wrote to Harry Truman in July 1946 and informed the American president that the exhibition had been received in London with “a quite exceptional degree of enthusiasm and interest,” the reactions in the British press were mixed.13 Critic H.A. Henghes made two BBC broadcasts on the exhibition in July 1946, in which he countered the common notion that American art was unoriginal or derivative. “I think it is true to say of England and the whole of Europe,” he argued, “that we have more or less assumed there is little art worth seeing produced in America, or that what there is is no more than a reflection of European art.”14 Henghes believed that the exhibition proved this to be a misconception. The Times welcomed the opportunity at last to see work from across the Atlantic, and their critic praised the Americans’ variety and freedom.15 “European influences,” wrote the Daily Herald critic, “can be seen at work among these paintings, but underneath them all there is a vitality and force which seems to be typically American.”16 His assessment of the early modernists’ work would be stated repeatedly in reviews of American art a decade later.

One critic, T.W. Earp of the Daily Telegraph, was delighted to see the revelation of a new school of national art,17 but Burlington Magazine’s reviewer was far less impressed, writing “It is difficult to feel that any of the younger painters are deeply

12 Rothenstein reported to John Walker that this attendance figure, by the Tate’s standards, was very high. Letter from Rothenstein to Walker, December 5, 1946. TGA 92/55/3.
13 Letter from Rothenstein to Truman, July 15, 1946. Ibid.
14 Written transcript of Henghes broadcast. He went on to say that the show confirmed the fact that America possessed artistic masters and Henghes also recognized in the younger modernists “a pure and free expression of common human senses.” Ibid.
15 “American Painters,” The Times, June 14, 1946.
committed either to original research in the art of picture making or to the expression of a human mood.”\textsuperscript{18} This critic, like many others, praised the work of the older generation of painters but was unreceptive to the work of the younger artists. Eric Newton was one of the minority impressed by the Americans’ achievements and autonomy. He declared wittingly in the \textit{Sunday Times}: “No Declaration of Aesthetic Independence can be read into these pictures” because “America has never had a yoke to throw off,” whereas Cyril Connolly of \textit{The New Statesman and Nation} called the show “An American Tragedy.”\textsuperscript{19}

Many critics lauded the opportunity to see such a large, comprehensive showcase of American aesthetic developments. Not surprisingly, most writers favored the work of the historical artists, particularly expatriates such as West, Copley and Whistler. Unfamiliarity with the younger generation was problematic for many critics who took the opportunity to remind Americans of how new they were to the international art scene. Yet, if the goal of the show was finally to bring a large-scale exhibition of American art to the British shores, it cannot be refuted that \textit{American Painting} was a success. The show became the earliest postwar expression of British interest in American artistic achievements of the previous two centuries.

Three important articles/texts followed the close of \textit{American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day}, one by an American critic and two by a British writer. As noted in chapter two, Clement Greenberg’s “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture” was one of the earliest acknowledgements of contemporary trends in the New York art world. Greenberg’s article covered far more

\textsuperscript{18} B.D.L. Thomas, “The Last Hundred Years of American Painting: Impressions from the Tate Gallery Exhibition,” \textit{Burlington Magazine}, September 1946.

recent developments than the Tate’s *American Painting* exhibition the previous year.20 Most significantly for foreign audiences, however, was the fact that his forecast of important American art and artists included Jackson Pollock, whose work and “the feeling it contains is perhaps even more radically American” than other artists working in the U.S.21 Greenberg praised Pollock for his superb draughtsmanship: “He draws massively, laying on paint directly from the tube, and handles black, white and grey as they have not been handled since [Juan] Gris’ middle period. No other abstract painter since Cubism has been so well able to retain classical chiaroscuro.” At this point, Pollock was still moving towards fame in the U.S. for his innovative ‘drip technique’ of pouring or casting paint from a can, stick or trowel onto a canvas placed on the floor. He had not yet made his mature breakthrough. Nevertheless, Greenberg’s article is significant because it is one of the earliest assessments of Pollock’s work published for a British audience by an American critic.

Denys Sutton expanded the scope of the Tate’s 1946 exhibition in his book, *American Painting*, published two years later. American painting’s potential, not its past, was the focus of Sutton’s conjecture and he posed an important rhetorical question that would consequently inform the perspectives of many British critics who addressed American art in the postwar period: “Will America succeed in creating a culture expressive of its national characteristics and at the same time aesthetically valid?”22 His final prognosis also points to the future role that the U.S would play in the global arena.

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21 Ibid., 26.
“At this moment of transition in her cultural life,” Sutton states, “when she is conscious of her destiny as world power, she has the responsibility of providing a world culture.” America would assume this “responsibility” in the postwar era, but the country would also have to endure the “approbation of a few and run the risk of hostility” towards its cultural developments when they became more apparent across the globe. The varied responses of British critics to the Tate’s survey of American painting cited earlier were merely a preview of the vibrant and vitriolic debates in the following decade.

Sutton followed up his book on American painting a year later with a focused examination of the provocations posed by artists from the United States to those in Britain and Europe. His article in Horizon, “The Challenge of American Art,” sought to counter traditional, prejudicial views of Americans as uncultured and outdated. Here he declared boldly that America had now assumed a position of world leadership much like Britain in the 19th century and New York was now the artistic and cultural capital of the U.S. The artistic situation in Britain and Europe, he argued, had become stagnant and outdated; art’s future, therefore, was to be found across the Atlantic and, in particular, among abstract painters. (In an effort to defend the merits of American painting, Sutton perhaps created a view of European/British painting that was not entirely accurate. He saw more promise in American artistic innovation, which to Sutton overshadowed work being produced in Europe or at home.)

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23 Ibid., 31.
24 Sutton concluded that the key to American painting’s future success would come with the ability of artists and connoisseurs to defend the values of its culture. Ibid.
26 Sutton states that, “though the majority of [American] painters are still of secondary importance [to Europeans], it is difficult to resist the feeling that the artist in America is filled with confidence and is about to scale the heights. The conditions are propitious; an audience is prepared.” Ibid., 279.
Sutton recognized the importance of spontaneity in the work of American abstractionists, whose work “verges on the therapeutic,” and he offered an excellent assessment of Pollock’s work.²⁷ He wrote, “A painting by Jackson Pollock possesses two meanings: one in terms of pure colour and calligraphy in which the tones dance with the brilliance of the lights on a skyscraper and another in terms of the need to secure deliverance from certain images.”²⁸ Sutton’s architectural metaphor foreshadows Pollock’s own belief—expressed a year later—that his work responded to contemporary life. “It seems to me,” Pollock observed, “that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique.”²⁹ Sutton recognized Pollock’s valiant attempt to develop a new pictorial language free from the constraints of the past. Furthermore, the vibrant energy inherent in Pollock’s paintings and the artist’s escape from “certain imagery,” Sutton stated presciently, would be future sources of approbation and critique among British audiences.³⁰

The Festival of Britain, 1951

In 1951 audiences across the U.K. were treated to a massive celebration designed to highlight Britain’s national identity and the recovery of the British people from the ravages of WWII. The Festival of Britain was actually a series of hundreds of “festivals”

²⁷ Ibid., 281.
²⁸ Ibid.
³⁰ Sutton, “Challenge of American Art,” 282. It should be noted here that Sutton refers to Rothko very briefly in his article. In Rothko’s work, the critic claims, “the visual impact of an early Vuillard or Bonnard is suggested but with the important difference that no theme is needed for such decorative expression.” “Decoration” would be a common charge leveled against Rothko’s work, as will be seen later.
held throughout the U.K. from May – September of that year. The motto was “Britain at Home to the World,” and an advertisement in the Times addressed the scope of the festivities:

It means that Britain is on view to the world, and that includes everything in and of Britain. The miracles of British science … and the vigour and skill of British sport. British industry in all its busy variety … and the deeply-felt faith of British churches. The glory of British music … and the lovely British countryside and its people. The whole country puts its best face forward to the world—and to itself.31

Similar to the Tate’s American Painting exhibition, the planning of this major event began at the end of the war. A committee of government officials was formed in the fall of 1945 to discuss the organization of a Universal International Exposition. Its members felt that such a promotional event “could be a great demonstration of international progress, and particularly of the standing of the British empire,” and they suggested the event be held to mark the centennial of the Great Exhibition of 1851.32 As noted, however, Britain’s empire was dissolving rapidly after the war, and by 1951, the Festival projected an undertone of damage control for the country’s image and the “standing” of the empire. In order to show the rest of the world that Britain was “still well worth seeing,” as the Times claimed, the Arts Council instituted an aggressive publicity campaign, which consisted of a four-month bus tour around Europe to advertise the Festival.33 Martin Harrison’s apt remarks captured the essence of the Festival’s aims

31 “This Is Festival Year,” Times, January 9, 1951.
32 Excerpt from the Report of the Ramsden Committee, December 17, 1945. V&A Archive, EL6/1. The Arts Council of Great Britain was deemed to be the appropriate organizing body for an event of this scale. There were, for example, 262 affiliated festivals outside of London and Ireland, Scotland and Wales all held events.
33 “This Is Festival Year,” Times, January 9, 1951.
when he recently wrote, “It was intended to boost morale in a nation only slowly
climbing out of austerity, and to act as a beacon of the promised new prosperity.”

The primary Festival exposition was held in London and featured fine art
exhibitions, opera, theatre, ballet, lectures and other miscellaneous cultural events (Fig.
12).35 Outside of the capital, provincial galleries offered exhibitions ranging from crafts
to fine art to costumes in conjunction with the main Festival. Virtually every gallery and
museum in London held an exhibition at some point during the celebration;36 two
noteworthy shows were *Ten Decades: A Review of British Taste 1851-1951* at the Royal
Society of British Artists Galleries, which was artist-run, and *Black Eyes and Lemonade*
(a.k.a., *English Popular Art*) at the Whitechapel. The former was an audacious attempt to
survey developments in British fine art since the 1851 Exhibition, while the latter was a
much more irreverent presentation of the traditional folk art and bric-a-brac of Britain
(Fig. 13).

*Ten Decades*, organized by the ICA in conjunction with the Arts Council, was
designed to trace the development of British taste over the last 100 years. It garnered
lackluster notices by most reviewers; one, for instance, wrote that the exhibition
comprised work done by men and women conscious of the critic.37 The art of recent
British artists on view in *Ten Decades* and other exhibitions during the Festival drew the

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35 For more information on the Festival, see Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, *A Tonic to the Nation: The
36 For instance, the Tate featured Henry Moore and William Hogarth exhibitions, the British Museum held
an English watercolor landscape show, the ICA had a Henri Cartier-Bresson photography show, the
Victoria and Albert Museum featured a Centenary of 1851 exhibition, as well as an exhibition of books
arranged by the National Book League, and the National Gallery assembled works from its permanent
collection.
ire of noted art historian Sir Kenneth Clark, who commented that, “apart from a few outstanding names—[Henry] Moore is the chief exception—how hard it is to persuade the intelligent foreigner to take an interest in modern English art.” Clark, much like Bryan Robertson and other critics noted in the previous chapter, was of the opinion that recent British art was generally stagnant and lacked innovation.

*Black Eyes and Lemonade*, on the other hand, featured work of a completely different type than what was on view in *Ten Decades*, and as such the Whitechapel’s exhibition was received more warmly. The organizers of *Black Eyes* decided to call the material on view “popular” rather than “folk” art, since the exhibition was geared towards tourists visiting the Festival. Viewers were delighted to see such a diverse array of curios and crafts. The *Times* called it “an extremely entertaining exhibition,” *Burlington Magazine* praised how the exhibition was “arranged with a pleasant sense of humour and without squeamishness” and the *Spectator*’s critic dubbed it “a fantastic assemblage of popular and traditional art.”

*Black Eyes and Lemonade* and *Ten Decades* are two examples of the Festival of Britain’s retrospective view of developments in British taste and culture over the previous

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39 As one organizer noted, “The subject is relevant to the 1951 Festival which would be a suitable occasion for the assembly and review of examples of the native arts of Britain as an expression of national achievement, and as a field of interest to the foreign visitor.” Letter from Katharine Baker, Secretary of the Society for Education in Art (who proposed the show), to Philip James of the Arts Council, June 1, 1950. Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB/121/347. Barbara Jones, a collector who owned most of the material in the exhibition, was selected to organize the show for the Whitechapel.

40 There is very little visual or printed documentary material to indicate specifically what objects were included in *Black Eyes and Lemonade*. Furthermore, the Whitechapel Archives have been closed and material has remained inaccessible during the writing of this dissertation. Without access to gallery’s archives, I cannot state what specific objects were featured in the exhibition.

century. The Festival succeeded in showing the world Britain’s pre- and postwar social, cultural, industrial and scientific achievements. However, there was no discernable preview of the future of British art included. Festival exhibitions presented viewers a look at traditional or established artists, such as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Walter Sickert and others, but there was no indication of a British avant-garde throughout the festivities. As a result, there was no framework for understanding the innovations of American avant-garde artists whose work would soon appear in London.

Pollock’s Early Reception

It is not surprising that America’s leading avant-garde artist was first seen in London at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The ICA offered examples of art from the U.S. long before other London institutions would turn their attention to aesthetic developments from across the Atlantic. As noted in the previous chapter, this gallery’s eclectic tastes stemmed from its association with the younger members of the Independent Group (IG), whose diverse interests included art, science, technology, design and mass culture. Lawrence Alloway, Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson, Toni del Renzio, Peter and Alison Smithson and Richard Hamilton were well aware of and had an active interest in American art and culture. However, even before the group took shape in 1952, the ICA enjoyed good relations with American art institutions and presented works from U.S. collections. *American Symbolic Realism*, for example, opened there in
1950 featuring paintings (some from MoMA) by Andrew Wyeth, Ben Shahn and Paul Cadmus.  

**Opposing Forces** (January 28 – February 28, 1953) offered the IG and other London viewers their first palpable, albeit limited, taste of developments in American painting. Curated by Peter Watson of the ICA and the French critic, Michel Tapié, the exhibition featured abstract paintings that were “concerned more with the world as revealed by the rather disturbing ‘inventions’ of our most authentic psychologists, mathematicians and logicians.” The seven artists in the show were presented not as a group but as avant-garde artists who shared an extremism not seen before in Britain. Jackson Pollock had three works in the show, two small paintings and one larger canvas, all dated 1949. The organizers touted Pollock as the most well-known artist in the exhibition and paraphrased one of Pollock’s own quotes about his painting techniques in order to illustrate his working method. This last point is significant because it provided

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42 As Anne Massey points out, American interests were channeled into the ICA through Anthony Kloman, the brother-in-law of Philip Johnson, MoMA’s Director of the Department of Architecture and Design. Kloman’s appointment helped lead to an “American-oriented ICA.” See Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-59*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, 64.

43 This quote comes from a statement by Tapié written for the exhibition brochure. In addition, the cover of the exhibition card lists multiple –ism’s, such as Abstract Expressionism, Abstract Objectivism, Intrasubjectivism and Metamorphism. TGA 955/1/12/45.

44 The exhibition included works by Pollock, Sam Francis, Alfonso Ossorio, Henri Michaux, Georges Mathieu and Jean Paul Riopelle.

45 In the list of works, there are no titles for Pollock’s paintings, which are simply numbered 17, 18 and 19. It is unclear whether the exhibition organizers or Pollock assigned these numbers to the works, although it is most likely the former since there were 25 works in the exhibition. All three are dated 1949, two were 20” x 20” and the third was 9’ x 18’ in size. The larger work arrived from Switzerland a few days after the opening. Unfortunately, there are no images in the 2-page catalogue (which is really a brochure) and, like most of the exhibitions that will be discussed, there are no installation photographs. None of the exhibition reviews mention titles of the works. TGA 955/1/12/45.

46 The quote is listed in a press release by the ICA Exhibitions Committee as follows: “When I am in my picture I have not the least idea of what I am doing; it is only after a sort of period of ‘orientation’ that I see more or less what I have done.” Pollock’s original statement, which appeared originally as “My Painting,” *Possibilities*, 1 (1947-48): 79, was as follows: “When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have been about.” Ibid.
one of the first instances for Londoners to gain insight into the techniques that had
produced the radically abstract paintings on view in the exhibition.

Anne Massey has pointed out that Opposing Forces was the impetus for a lecture
given at the ICA in January 1953 in conjunction with a course called “Non-Formal
Painting.” Toni del Renzio’s talk, which addressed the “new concepts of space and
American Abstract Expressionism,” was the earliest example of the IG’s support for this
important movement.47 The exhibition also piqued the interest of the British press;
Pollock, more than any other artist in the show, garnered the most attention among
critics.48 At this early stage of Pollock’s exhibition history in London, critics began to
disseminate to the public information about the artist that was sometimes well-informed,
but was more often than not misleading, thus providing a source of future myths and
misconceptions about his life and art.

Pollock’s unorthodox painting methods drew intense interest from critics. The
Manchester Guardian described, quite neutrally, how the artist placed the canvas on the
floor and dribbled and spilled paint onto it, whereas the Daily Express found that the
American’s “unusual method” provoked “aesthetic frowns all around.”49 The Times was
critical of the exhibition’s overall concept and pointed out that the only common
denominator among the artists was the use of large canvases covered with paint.50 Some

47 Massey, 56. Del Renzio was an artist, writer and member of the IG.
48 Pollock is addressed at some length in almost every article of the eleven published reviews of the
exhibition.
49 “Strictly Contemporary,” Manchester Guardian, January 26, 1953. “Take an Arty Word—Non-Non-
Form: It Arrived Yesterday with Pictures to Match: Arts Council Helps to Pay,” Daily Express, January
29, 1953.
critics were particularly put off by Pollock’s techniques, while others claimed his works lacked aesthetic appeal.\(^{51}\)

Robert Melville and Patrick Heron offered criticism that was more balanced. Melville believed that all of the artists in the show were good painters, but he, like many other writers, could not discern why they were exhibited as a group.\(^{52}\) Pollock’s large canvas in the exhibition, he observed, “consists of numerous coloured calligraphies, like vast nervous systems, one over the other, which pursue their winding courses and cross and re-cross without confusion and without contracting muddy unions.” He went on to judge that “the whole heaving, undulating agglomerate makes a strangely restful image of human restlessness; it is a majestic turmoil.”\(^{53}\) Melville’s characterization of Pollock’s work in *Architectural Review* invoked biological analogies that many British critics would likewise express in their future encounters with the artist’s abstract canvases. His conclusions, which may have been formulated in reference to biomorphic Surrealist artists such as Joan Miró or Jean Arp, were the most positive by any British author in this early period.

*Opposing Forces* failed to impress Patrick Heron, who argued that the paintings in it were too experimental and should have remained in the studio.\(^{54}\) He credited Pollock as the inventor of the drip technique but criticized the artist’s formal and

\(^{51}\) The *Daily Express* critic cited Pollock’s methods and claimed, “In my wildest parodies, I have never come near this.” “By the Way,” *Daily Express*, February 3, 1953. T.W. Earp argued that Pollock and the other artists on view produced works that “are singularly devoid of any appeal through form colour or rhythm.” He sees visual anarchy as the aim of the show. T.W. Earp, “Paintings on Both Sides of the Jungle,” *Daily Telegraph*, February 13, 1953.


\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Patrick Heron, “Opposing Forces: Paintings by Seven Artists at the I.C.A.,” *New Statesman and Nation*, February 21, 1953. Heron, a painter himself, believed that “work that reeks of experimentation is not ready for exhibition.”
technical qualities. “The result,” Heron wrote, “is as mechanical as the method. Though sometimes promising drama, such works lack the personal nervous vibration a brush may impart but poured liquid denies.”\textsuperscript{55} Furthermore, Pollock’s visual vocabulary was limited to “trailed lines, blobs and splotches.”\textsuperscript{56} Heron and Melville’s interpretations indicate the polemical direction of criticism that would later surround Pollock’s art as the British gained greater access to his work, a situation that occurred similarly in the U.S. While Pollock’s canvas seemed, to Melville, like an intricate network of nerves or a patterned web lacking confusion, Heron instead perceived a lifeless machine that lacked the personal touch of the artist. For Heron, as Pollock “lost touch” with his canvas, so his work lost the indexical or painterly signature of the artist. It cannot be disputed that Pollock’s arrival in the London art world generated interest among British critics whose responses were spurred by a reputation that somewhat preceded the artist’s actual work, as well as by their own expectations of what art should be. His unconventional painting techniques were, not surprisingly, a source of skepticism for those who had never seen images of America’s leading avant-garde artist at work.

The uniqueness of Pollock’s method of painting would become more apparent after \textit{Opposing Forces} opened later the same year. The ICA’s \textit{Parallel of Life and Art} (September 11 – October 18, 1953) generated less press than Michel Tapié’s show, but visitors to the later exhibition were afforded the opportunity to “see” Pollock at work. \textit{Parallel} presented “an encyclopaedic range of material from past and present brought together through the medium of the camera which is used as recorder, reporter, and scientific investigator,” and the show focused on enlargements, X-rays, wide angle, high

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
speed and aerial photography. The 122-plus objects in this idiosyncratic exhibition juxtaposed photo-enlargements of images drawn from life, nature, industry and the arts (Fig. 14), and a Hans Namuth photograph of Pollock painting in his studio, included in the last category (Fig. 15). In his notes for the exhibition and the catalogue (Fig. 16), Nigel Henderson, who organized the show, proposed an interesting visual parallel between Namuth’s photograph and “Guillemots egg markings.” To frame his arguments, Henderson obviously utilized a documentary photograph of the artist working, instead of an actual painting by Pollock, in keeping with the show’s theme. But Hans Namuth’s photograph provided a valuable chance for viewers to see the artist’s painting technique publicized earlier that year. Parallel of Life and Art aimed to present how the findings of the sciences and the arts are aspects of a cultural whole, and Namuth’s famous series of photographs of Pollock at work in his studio in 1950 represented the intersection of painting and photography. These photographs of Pollock painting provided valuable illustrations, confirming verbal and written descriptions of the artist’s innovative drip technique.

57 ICA press release, August 21, 1953. TGA 9211/5/1/1. The exhibition was organized by Paolozzi, Henderson and the Smithsons and featured images found a wide array of technical and scientific sources, as well as newspapers and magazines.

58 A note about the Namuth illustration (Fig. 25): This is an example of a Namuth photograph of Pollock painting, not the actual one used in the exhibition. There is no way to determine exactly which Namuth photograph was in the show because there is no illustration in the catalogue (or installation shot) to indicate which one was used. The photograph is listed in the catalogue as work no. 36, “Jackson Pollack [sic] in studio” with credit given to “Hans Namuth, America.” Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Anne Massey has quoted Lawrence Alloway, who recalled that “these photographs of Hans Namuth showing Jackson Pollock at work were quite well known in England because they were reproduced earlier in a portfolio, a whole bunch of them … and Toni del Renzio had a copy of the portfolio and we all saw the thing.” It is likely that the IG members had a copy of the portfolio to which Alloway refers, but it is less certain how well known this portfolio was in England. Alloway’s quote is found originally in Bryan Robertson, “Parallel of Life and Art,” Art News and Review, September 19, 1953. See Massey, The Independent Group, 59.

61 None of the exhibition reviews mentioned Namuth’s photograph or Pollock. Critics focused overwhelmingly on what they perceived as the show’s lack of a common pattern or denominator.
Conclusion

I conclude this chapter with discussion of an article by Herbert Read, published in 1955, in which the noted British critic offered a scathing condemnation of abstract art. Read singled out Pollock as the source of a new art, composed of blots, stains or dribbles, that represented the postwar era’s “face of blank despair, of shame and confusion.”62 Read objected to the spontaneity of Pollock’s painterly technique, which, he averred, “is not in itself a guarantee of beauty or vitality.”63 The artist’s arbitrary gestures, Read claimed, lacked the formal elements of harmony and proportion and, therefore, lacked beauty. Furthermore, Pollock’s art relied too much upon the inner world: “The new art is conscious of nothing but the artist’s own personality, and with an urgent sense of desperation seeks the principle of vitality in introspection, in subjectivity.”64 Read seemed to point negatively to art’s reaction to internal or external reality.

What is most revealing about Read’s criticism is that he openly questioned whether or not a work consisting of blots, stains and drips can be considered art. It will become evident in the next chapter that skeptics would continually raise this same issue when addressing a larger selection of both Pollock’s and Rothko’s works in the Tate’s Modern Art in the United States exhibition. Johns’s and Rauschenberg’s paintings would elicit this same controversy when their works were first seen in London in the early 1960s, even though their proto-Pop Art was grounded in a different aesthetic context from their Abstract Expressionist predecessors. In particular, Pollock’s entry into the

63 Ibid., 56.
64 Ibid., 57.
British art milieu in the early 1950s was perceived with general curiosity. His three paintings in *Opposing Forces* did not receive much hostile or negative criticism, but that would change in the following years.

The Tate’s *American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* exhibition in 1946 and the Festival of Britain five years later showcased the best art from the U.S. in the previous 200 years and Britain’s domestic postwar recovery, respectively. However, by 1951, there was as yet very little indication of what was in store for the British art world from across the Atlantic. Londoners’ general unawareness of developments in American painting began to change two years later with Pollock’s inclusion in the ICA’s *Opposing Forces* exhibition, and viewers’ knowledge would be vastly improved by *Modern Art in the United States*, the Tate’s large showcase of American art in 1956.
Chapter 4 “The Middle Period: 1956-59: Part 1, The Tate”

Although the Institute of Contemporary Arts was the first London venue to introduce the work of Jackson Pollock to Londoners in 1953, the Tate Gallery was the first institution to bring Pollock and his New York School contemporaries to the attention of the British art world and public. As noted in the previous chapter, the Tate’s American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 1946 by invitation of the Tate’s Trustees. However, this survey of almost 200 years of American painting was actually the result of a breakdown of negotiations with the Museum of Modern Art intended to bring to London an exhibition of works from MoMA’s collection. Although American Painting included work by early-20th century American modern artists, the exhibition featured no examples of the avant-garde trends taking place concurrently across the Atlantic. The Tate held two major exhibitions in 1956 and 1959 that rectified this gap in Britons’ knowledge—Modern Art in the United States (MAIUS) and The New American Painting (NAP), respectively.

This chapter examines in-depth these two significant exhibitions and the response of British critics to the works of “present-day” American artists, such as Pollock and Rothko. The latter was, in fact, first seen in London in the 1956 exhibition. Initial responses to Rothko’s work and how they compared to Pollock’s will be examined. The latter’s critical assessments had already begun to be formulated by the British press three years earlier. The development of the critical dialogue pertaining to these two artists’ works while on view at the Tate in 1956 and 1959 is the central focus of this chapter. The following chapter will examine Pollock and Rothko’s inclusion in other exhibitions
during the middle period of American avant-garde painting’s presence in London during
the 1950s and early 1960s.

*Modern Art in the United States*

As early as 1953, the Tate had resumed its endeavor to feature developments in
American art more recent than the work shown in *American Painting* in 1946. John
Rothenstein wrote to René d’Harnoncourt in October 1953, expressing his belief to
MoMA’s Director that an exhibition of 20th century American painting in London was
long overdue: “I expect you are aware it was understood, after the American exhibition
which we had here in 1946, that this would be followed by another illustrating more fully
than could be done in a comprehensive exhibition, the development of painting in the
present century.”¹ Although it is unclear from the Tate’s internal correspondence
whether Rothenstein was spurred in any degree by Pollock’s inclusion in the ICA’s
*Opposing Forces* (January – February) and *Parallel of Life and Art* (September –
October) exhibitions held the same year, the Tate’s Director and his colleagues were
undoubtedly conscious of Pollock’s entry into the British art scene through these events
by means of critics’ press coverage of his unorthodox painting techniques. At any rate,
negotiations had begun by 1955 and it became evident that an exhibition that sampled
developments in recent modern American art was becoming increasingly possible.

By early 1955, MoMA was preparing an exhibition for the Musée d’Art Moderne
in Paris, which was set to open in April under the title *50 Ans d’Art Aux Etats-Unis:*

¹ Letter from Rothenstein to d’Harnoncourt, October 30, 1953. TGA 92/121/1.
Collections du Museum of Modern Art New York.\(^2\) Porter McCray, head of MoMA’s International Council, and Margareta Stroup Austin, Information and Cultural Affairs Officer at the USIS, American Embassy, London, worked in conjunction with Rothenstein and Gabriel White of the Arts Council of Great Britain (AC) to secure a stop in London after the Paris showing.\(^3\) In fact, McCray, Rothenstein, White and Philip James, also from the AC, were the central figures who brought the exhibition to fruition. There was a sense of urgency to offer British viewers a show of this type, as McCray noted in early January 1955: “…for some time we have been making the point that London is anxious to see contemporary American work, and it appears that our representations are beginning to bear fruit.”\(^4\)

Modern Art in the United States: A Selection from the Collections of the Museum of Modern Art New York opened at the Tate on January 5, 1956. It was believed that the French title “was felt to misrepresent the exhibition, inasmuch as some sections were almost exclusively devoted to the post-war period;” hence, the title for the British showing was changed.\(^5\) The long-awaited exhibition was free of admission charge and the Tate advertised it in daily and weekly papers, such as the *Times* and *Observer*. As

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\(^2\) The Paris showing included an architectural exhibit, in addition to painting, sculpture and printmaking. Due to additional costs for the Tate, the architectural section was not included in the London exhibition.

\(^3\) MAIUS was also shown at the Hague and in Barcelona and Zurich. The London showing was only possible due to the success of complex negotiations between the characters cited above. The Tate had no funds to bring exhibitions from abroad, so MoMA agreed to cover the transportation costs. The AC paid for the exhibition catalogue and the Tate covered advertising expenses. There was also concern on the part of the Americans that the Tate had not allocated enough gallery space, but, after McCray intervened, the Tate’s Trustees approved more space to be available for the exhibition. It is evident from internal correspondence that, were it not for the assistance of White, the AC and McCray, the exhibition may not have been shown in the U.K.

\(^4\) Letter from McCray to James, dated January 3, 1955. It should also be noted that in a letter from James to McCray, dated March 23, 1955, James requested that the exhibition be shown in two other “important cities” in the U.K. Although James wished to have the work of the Americans seen in provincial areas outside of the capital, MoMA did not share the same sentiment—the show was sent to the Hague after its London viewing. Both letters from Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 121/662.

\(^5\) Letter from McCray to Rothenstein, dated May 31, 1955. TGA 92/121/1.
Rothenstein stated in a press release, “Now that such an opportunity [to show a representative collection of modern American art] has presented itself, the Tate Gallery and the Arts Council are happy to welcome the first big exhibition devoted entirely to painting, sculpture and prints from the United States to come to Great Britain.”

*MAIUS* featured a large body of work—113 framed paintings, 21 sculptures and over 90 prints—and the works, which were displayed in the galleries against white walls, were divided into thematic sections in both the catalogue and exhibition. According to the catalogue introduction written by d’Harnoncourt, the works were chosen “to reveal four or five principal directions of American art over a period of approximately forty years.” However, d’Harnoncourt also made a point that critics and art historians have debated since the early 1970s. The exhibition, he stated, reflected the institutional aims of MoMA, particularly of curator Dorothy Miller and director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who selected the works. Reading into d’Harnoncourt’s point, certain scholars and critics of Abstract Expressionist art have alleged that New York School art was used, either willingly or covertly, as a weapon of the Cold War, a point with which I do not agree.

Based on this belief, *MAIUS* would seem to have inaugurated an alleged scheme by MoMA to use American art, particularly Abstract Expressionism, as a propagandistic

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6 Rothenstein pointed to the 1946 *American Painting* exhibition, which he felt did not do justice to cover the field of modern art, which was one reason why the Tate welcomed this exhibition. Undated press release. Ibid.


weapon of the Cold War in Europe in conjunction with the U.S. government, an argument that has been hotly disputed. Recently, art historian Irving Sandler has written an excellent refutation of “Cold Warrior” theory in *Art in America* in which he disproves and deconstructs purported links between Cold War political ideologies and American painting in the 1940s and 1950s.\(^9\) Although theoretically there could be merit to assertions that MoMA sent American painting and sculpture abroad during the 1950s as a symbol of American artistic and political freedom, as well as an antidote to Communist ideology, this notion is unfeasible in the case of England. As noted above, the Tate solicited MoMA unsuccessfully in 1946 and successfully in 1956 for an exhibition of American art; hence, MoMA did not strategically target the Tate for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, although the country’s social and economic condition was fragile immediately following the war, by ten years later Britain had made a remarkable recovery and was, therefore, not prone to Communist undermining. MoMA indeed aimed to send to England the best examples of contemporary American art, but it is highly unlikely that the institution’s intentions were propagandistic.

Paintings and sculpture in *MAIUS* were exhibited together, while the printmakers were presented in a separate section. Artists were divided into the following categories: “Older Generation of Moderns” (Charles Demuth, Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove, etc.), “Realist Tradition: Fact, Satire, Sentiment” (Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, etc.), “Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War,” *Art in America*, no. 6 (June/July 2008): 65-74.

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\(^9\) Sandler argues against revisionist art historians, such as Kozloff, Cockcroft, Guilbaut and others, by pointing out that Abstract Expressionism could not have been used as a weapon against communism, most notably because public, political and institutional acceptance of the new American art did not come until very late into the 1950s. Sandler effectively debunks conspiracy-type claims that the work of Pollock and his contemporaries was purposely sent around the world as a symbol of artistic freedom and an antidote to Communist oppression. See Sandler, “Abstract Expressionism and the Cold War,” *Art in America*, no. 6 (June/July 2008): 65-74.
Andrew Wyeth, etc.), “Romantic Painting” (Hyman Bloom and Morris Graves), “Modern ‘Primitives’” (John Kane), “Sculpture” (Alexander Calder, Ibram Lassaw, Seymour Lipton, Theodore Roszak, etc.) and “Contemporary Abstract Art” in the final room of the show. It was in this last group where works by Pollock and Rothko were found. Each artist exhibited two paintings—Pollock’s *The She-Wolf* (1943, Fig. 17) and *Number 1A, 1948* (1948, Fig. 18); Rothko’s *Number 1* (1949) and *Number 10* (1950, Fig. 19). Over 110 artists were selected for the exhibition, and other contemporary American abstract artists included William Baziotes, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Clyfford Still and Mark Tobey. It is evident from this list of artists that visitors were afforded the unique opportunity of seeing developments in American art from the early 20th century to more recent breakthroughs in avant-garde abstract art, especially Abstract Expressionism, which was in general less familiar to British and European than to American viewers. Holger Cahill, former acting director at MoMA, wrote the exhibition catalogue essay, “American Painting and Sculpture in the Twentieth Century,” which aimed to familiarize readers with the artists in the show via a concise art historical survey.11

Press reaction to the exhibition was anything but concise or terse. A striking quantity of articles appeared in a wide range of publications throughout the duration of

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10 This work is listed in MoMA’s collection as *Number 1A, 1948* (1948), whereas the catalogue lists the title as *Number 1* (1948). The works are one and the same.

11 The catalogue contained 44 black-and-white illustration plates. Over 5000 copies of the catalogue were sold by the time the exhibition closed. There were also public lectures held in conjunction with the exhibition, such as Ben Shahn’s “Realism Reconsidered” at the ICA on February 2, 1956. Meyer Schapiro delivered a talk on “Recent Abstract Painting in America” at the Arts Council on January 26, 1956, as well as presenting the BBC lecture “The Younger American Painters of Today.” In addition to these lectures, MoMA also supplied catalogues to the Arts Council for use in conjunction with the Tate’s exhibition, such as James Thrall Soby’s *Contemporary Painters* (1948), Dorothy Miller’s *Fourteen Americans* (1946) and Alfred Barr’s catalogue of MoMA’s painting and sculpture collections. Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 121/662.
the show, which closed on February 12, 1956. The general response to the exhibition as a whole was relatively positive. British critics took note of the freshness, strength, variety and provocative nature of the work in the exhibition, but most tended to prefer the older generation of moderns, realists, romantics and primitives over the more recent abstract artists. Ben Shahn and Andrew Wyeth, in fact, were the most favored artists, and the latter’s *Christina’s World* (1948, Fig. 20) was mentioned quite often in press reproductions and reviews. Abstract Expressionism was the most highly discussed and controversial part of the show to the degree that the work of Pollock, Rothko and their fellow New York School artists seemed in the press to comprise the majority of the exhibition, which was not the case. The “shock” of the Americans’ new art should be anything but that, as Lawrence Alloway noted in a review that appeared in *Art News and Review*, published in London.12 “Visitors to the Tate Gallery,” he argued, “who look at de Kooning, Pollock, Kline, Still and Rothko will be faced by the art of a new aesthetic which, though it is the product of a different culture than ours, is no more alien to us than any other art.”13 Alloway urged viewers not to look at Abstract Expressionism as foreign, i.e., American, but suggested rather that they should approach it from a strictly aesthetic vantage, viewing it in the context of more familiar British or European abstraction. Alloway, a constant champion and defender of American art, recognized a general resistance in his country to painting and sculpture from the U.S. He made light of a “cultural tariff” imposed by his fellow critics on American art and then sought to

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12 *Art News and Review* was published in London from the 1940s until 1961, when it became *Arts Review*. This publication is different from *Art News*, which was published in the U.S.

13 Lawrence Alloway, *Art News and Review*, January 21, 1956. This article was one of the many pressclippings from the Tate Gallery Archive that were utilized for this dissertation. There were no page numbers or publication information listed next to the clipping.
explain clearly to readers the facts, as opposed to myths, about Abstract Expressionist art.\textsuperscript{14}

Of the approximately twenty-six reviews published in newspapers and journals, most critics at least mentioned the last room of contemporary abstract painting. Because his work had been shown at the ICA in 1953, many critics were already familiar with Pollock’s work; thus, he was frequently cited as the paradigmatic representative of the new style of painting. \textit{The Illustrated London News} offered readers a preview of MAIUS works by running a full-page illustrated advertisement highlighting the show, whose significance it claimed was due to the first-time presence in London of current trends in American art.\textsuperscript{15} Critic Basil Taylor echoed this view, arguing that in 1946, there had been limited enthusiasm for what was shown in the Tate’s \textit{American Painting} exhibition; whereas, now, ten years later, the situation had changed because of the presence of Abstract Expressionist art. Represented by Pollock, Still, Kline and Rothko, Abstract Expressionism, Taylor claimed, “has gained for the United States an influence upon European art which it has never exerted before,” and he believed that what was on view in the last room in the show “may well have important consequences.”\textsuperscript{16} Taylor lauded the vigor and energetic rhythm of the abstract canvases.

John Russell offered a completely different assessment in the \textit{Sunday Times}. Russell’s Euro-centric article, “Yankee Doodles,” attempted to discredit the New York School abstractionists by suggesting that the only artists of value in the U.S. were those who were born in or trained in Europe, such as Marsden Hartley or Man Ray. “For the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} The seven illustrations included one work by de Kooning. “’Modern Art in the United States:’ Now on Show at the Tate Gallery,” \textit{The Illustrated London News}, January 14, 1956.

real rude stuff of native American art,” he quipped, “we must look elsewhere,” and he targeted Pollock’s painterly techniques with a sarcastic, critical jab. The Evening Standard critic sensed a “nightmarish element” in the exhibition, claiming that the organizers’ only motive was “to prove, apparently, that since 1913 American art has kept in step with European art.” The end result of the show, this paper asserted, was a collection of tendencies rather than achievements. The Glasgow Herald quipped that the work in the show was merely the child of Parisian artistic innovation, an attempt to downplay Abstract Expressionism’s development independent of European art by placing it within a Parisian genealogy. Nevile Wallis of the Observer pointed out that, if art can be a signal of a nation’s temperament, then prevailing uneasiness was the impression from this exhibition. Wallis perceived an air of impermanence in Pollock’s work, and other critics noticed “disturbing” qualities in the abstract canvases of Pollock and his contemporaries.

Robert Stowe of the Daily Worker, who also favored the older generation of Americans, alarmingly intoned that “the pointless, slashing violence of these works represents the unconscious suicidal desperation which is one feature of the American scene,” and he concluded that Abstract Expressionism was complete nonsense,

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17 Russell quoted Holger Cahill, who, in the catalogue essay, noted that, “at margins where the line does not rush to the edge Pollock affirms the flat space of his canvas by slapping it with his paint-covered hands.” Russell then claimed that “an interesting work just might be produced by these lowly procedures; but I don’t think that, in this case, it was the canvas that deserved the slaps.” John Russell, “Yankee Doodles,” Sunday Times, January 8, 1956.
comparing Pollock’s abstractions, for instance, to art created by animals. Stowe’s trepidation echoes the Evening Standard’s “nightmarish element” comment, and it appears that Stowe and other critics saw an expression of the anxieties of the postwar era within Pollock’s swirling webs of paint. The Daily Mail confirmed this point, noting that visitors wore unequivocally “an expression half of expectation and half of bewilderment,” coupled with a sense of anxiety, but its critic did not cite the source of this anxiety. Based on these press allegations of violent, anxious and uneasy qualities in the works, British critics appeared to read Pollock’s painterly gestures as a reflection of the psychological tensions of the mid 20th century.

Other writers leveled even more negative criticism against the Tate’s exhibition. The Scotsman’s reporter could not understand why works that “add so little to the world art movements should be transported across wide oceans and housed in one of our greatest galleries.” This critic was impressed by the memorable quality of Pollock’s She-Wolf, but at the same time was perplexed by his skeins of paint in Number IA, 1948, which, he continued, “is like a thousand railway lines, entangled like knitting which has been the plaything of a giant cat. Clapham Junction after a railway accident might have some kinship with a work that is intriguing but puzzling.” Critic T.W. Earp took issue with the catalogue’s claim that abstraction released America’s true creative forces; on the contrary, he argued, “the forces bombinate in a void” and “nothing is communicated beyond an apparently fortuitous anarchy of pigmentation” in the paintings of Pollock,

20 Stowe believed that one would achieve the same result seen in Pollock’s art by giving pots of paint to monkeys. Robert Stowe, “America’s Two Faces,” Daily Worker, January 11, 1956. Stowe also believed that Shahn, Davis and Weber represented the true face of America’s creative spirit.
23 Ibid.
Still and Motherwell. The language of violence that is so noticeable in Earp’s comments indicates that this type of reception plausibly stemmed from postwar uneasiness due to the threat of nuclear annihilation. Earp apparently viewed Pollock’s drip canvases as a potentially threatening expression of anarchistic disorder.

Of course, not all criticism was scathing or negative. There was, in fact, a noticeable pattern of dialectical attraction and repulsion in certain reviews, as in the case of the Scotsman article. In addition to Alloway’s defensive observations, there were some other rather prescient, well-informed opinions offered by British critics. Anton Ehrenzweig’s “The Modern Artist and the Creative Accident” was published in The Listener, a weekly publication put out by the BBC and broadcast on BBC radio’s Third Programme. Ehrenzweig defended painters like Pollock from the typical charge of casual doodling by elaborating a conception of the “creative accident” and by invoking Freud’s notion that most accidents are more purposive than they appear. Denys Sutton also defended Pollock, claiming that “the aim of an artist such as Jackson Pollock, who practises a sort of automatic painting, is to extend the artist’s vision; the results may not outweigh the rashness of the means; but the sincerity of the attempt and the gains it may even secure ought not to be despised.” Sutton’s approach to Pollock and his contemporaries was reserved and cautious. He believed that time would determine the role America would play in the future art market—“Whether in the long run America will

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stand in relation to Europe as Rome did to Greece is, as our American cousins say, the sixty-four dollar question.”  However, Sutton was convinced that the MAIUS exhibition disproved the myth that American modern art lacked exuberance, originality or variety.

Basil Taylor’s second article on the exhibition, appearing in the January 20th issue of the Spectator, echoed his earlier prediction that the abstract canvases in the last room would have lasting consequences. Here he posited a metaphorical link between the new body of painting and the scale and vigor of America’s technological enterprise and architectural expansion. Furthermore, Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Rothko and Still, Taylor noted, “have a great technical accomplishment, vitality and considerable formal interest,” and, he warned, “they are not to be written off or treated lightly.” Taylor’s double-dose of critical acumen stood in stark contrast to the flippant treatment offered by Stowe, Earp or the Scotsman’s unnamed critic. In the January 19th issue of Country Life, Sutton, like Taylor, followed up his comments cited above with observations on the exhibition in general and the new American painting in particular. The wide variety of styles in the show, he argued, was attributable to the diversity of American culture (i.e., a diversity of people leads to a diversity of styles). Although this point seems rather obvious, Sutton made a more important observation, particularly regarding America’s geography and its relationship to the Abstract Expressionists’ large canvases. He proposed that “the idea of space, in fact, may have—as indeed is the case in the United States—a wider connotation when the territory is the size of the American land mass.”

To American viewers, he continued, “it is … the feeling for unlimited space that renders

28 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Pollock’s Number 1A, 1948 was approximately 5’ x 8’ and Rothko’s Number 10 was 7 ½’ x 4 ¼’.
the painting of Rothko or Pollock so intriguing.” Unfortunately, Sutton did not speculate what these paintings might mean to British eyes unaccustomed to vast expanses of terrain like that of the American West. The relatively small collection of abstract canvases in MAIUS certainly made both positive and negative impressions upon British viewers, but Sutton’s point was also prescient for the interests of British audiences. Three years later, the Tate would devote an entire exhibition, instead of a single room, to large Abstract Expressionist canvases whose size became an important point of discussion among a larger group of critics.

Interestingly Rothko’s work was scarcely mentioned in British newspaper reviews of the exhibition. Pollock’s name was undoubtedly more familiar than most of the other Abstract Expressionists in the show. His gestural style had already been discussed in the British press in 1953, whereas Rothko’s two canvases in MAIUS were the first exposure for Londoners to his color-field abstractions. Any substantive critical discussion of Rothko’s work before 1956 had taken place in art journals rather than the popular press. Rothko’s name was known within European critical circles, due in part to his participation in the Venice Biennale’s American Pavilion in 1948. Critics for the art press, such as Patrick Heron, were more familiar with Rothko’s work and, therefore, were more inclined to address it, unlike many other British reviewers who were seeing these paintings in the Tate’s exhibition for the first time.

In January 1956 Lawrence Alloway seized another opportunity in the pages of *Architectural Design* to criticize misinformed British critics who failed to interpret the

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33 Ibid.
34 Baziotes, Gorky and Tomlin were other Abstract Expressionists among the 79 Americans selected for the exhibition. Pollock and Rothko were also included in the Greek Pavilion, which featured Abstract Expressionist works from Peggy Guggenheim’s collection. Pollock was selected for the 1950 Venice Biennale, but Rothko’s work was not.
new American art for their public, choosing instead to “muddle and reject it.” Alloway identified a fundamental difference between European and American artists, suggesting that “the European tendency is to turn action into connoisseurship, making a fetish of quality which the Americans avoided. There is a world of difference between using materials to record an action and using materials sensuously for the appraisal of well-trained connoisseurs.” He invoked Harold Rosenberg’s notion of “Action Painting,” arguing that the Abstract Expressionists in the exhibition were concerned with the events of making a picture and the personal freedom involved in this process, the latter connecting back to the language of anarchy, but without a negative or violent connotation. Rosenberg, an American known best for his art criticism, coined the term “Action Painting” in his essay “American Action Painters” published in Art News in December 1952. “Action Painting” eventually became associated with the gestural style of Abstract Expressionists, such as Pollock and de Kooning, as opposed to the color-field variety as seen in the work of Rothko and Barnett Newman. In this and other articles he published around the time of MAIUS, Alloway stated that he hoped viewers would not make the same mistake many critics had made in dismissing the new American painting.

John Berger, an advocate of social realist art, dismissed unequivocally and vehemently the work of Pollock and his contemporary abstractionists in his provocatively titled essay, “The Battle,” published in the New Statesman and Nation. Berger claimed (falsely) that in the exhibition’s catalogue and presentation, the Abstract Expressionists were favored over the rest of the artists in the show. In reality, “Contemporary Abstract

36 Ibid.
Art” was shown in one room and “The Older Generation of Moderns” that Berger favored were given as much treatment in the catalogue as the more recent artists. Most disturbing, however, were Berger’s misinformed, scathing assessments of the Abstract Expressionists. He asserted that their work had nothing to do with conscious thought or intention and that their paintings were “born only in the violent Act of making marks on the canvas.” Furthermore, he stated their canvases “are a full expression of the suicidal despair of those who are completely trapped within their own dead subjectivity.”

Berger, unlike Alloway, could not believe that anyone would take these works seriously. Berger’s rhetoric of violence, suicide and despair echoed Robert Stowe’s comments in the *Daily Worker*. These socialist oriented critics both projected Cold War anxieties onto American painting, which they believed represented the downfall and degradation of modern society.

One of the most vitriolic reviews of the abstract paintings in the final room of the Tate’s exhibition came from an anonymous critic in the London *Times*. “‘Heresy’ of Abstract Painting” was steeped in a language of negativity—“barren confinement,” “act of vandalism,” “iconoclast,” “decorative,” “crippling,” and “insolubly enigmatic” were phrases he or she used to describe abstract art. It is most fascinating, however, that this anonymous critic offered no concrete examples to support these claims, nor was any evidence mentioned as to why abstract art was heretical, other than the fact that it offended the writer’s own personal taste. The author failed to engage abstract art in any

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38 Ibid., 70-1. Berger also references Rosenberg in this quote, but Berger’s carries a much more negative connotation than Alloway’s own use of Rosenberg’s concept of action.  
39 Ibid., 72.  
40 “‘Heresy’ of Abstract Painting,” *Times*, July 24, 1956. The article was written well after the close of *MAIUS*, but it referred back to the exhibition.
serious critical manner, instead choosing to publish a biased attack on art not amenable to their personal tastes.

There were some more balanced assessments published in British journals, as well as newspapers, of *MAIUS* and the work of Pollock, Rothko and their contemporaries. After criticizing the exhibition’s “incoherent” layout in *Studio*, G.S. Whittet praised Pollock, Rothko, Still and Tobey as “brothers in expression of material *qua* material—large in scale, the impression they give is of paint defining its own design—a kind of *machina ex machina*.“41 Whittet was impressed by the formal qualities of the work of these artists, as was Robert Melville in *Architectural Review*. He too was appalled by other British critics’ dismissal of “the most mature and civilized painting” in the Tate’s exhibition, and he believed Pollock and company had produced a new kind of painting, not a rehashing of European art.42 Melville also recognized the importance of scale and surface in Abstract Expressionist works. “These younger men,” he wrote, “work on a larger scale, their paint surface is less dense, more luminous, … and in the lyrical art of Pollock, Rothko, Still and Guston it is always a splendid and convulsive mantle.”43

The best assessment of Abstract Expressionist art in *MAIUS* came from the painter/critic Patrick Heron, whose article, “The Americans at the Tate Gallery,” written for a U.S. audience, should, nevertheless, be examined here.44 Heron displayed a critical acumen that was impressive compared to many of his fellow British critics’ dismissive assessments of the Americans’ work. Heron offered a prescient analysis of Rothko’s work, referring to the latter as “the more important explorer in the group.”

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43 Ibid., 268.
44 Patrick Heron, “The Americans at the Tate Gallery,” *Arts Digest* (NY), March 1956, 15-17.
stated, was “discovering things never before known.” Heron was also the first British critic to write about themes in Rothko’s work that subsequent British critics would later address—optical projection and nature metaphors. He observed how, in *Number 10* (Fig. 29), Rothko’s “exquisitely powdery horizontal bands of color bulge forward from the canvas into one’s eyes like colored air in strata-form. He evokes the layers of the atmosphere itself.”

A comparison of Heron’s observations to the *Scotsman*’s critic, whose railway car accident analogy attributed a sense of violence or danger to Pollock’s work, yields evidence that fundamental differences between these two artists were being discerned in Great Britain even at this early stage. In fact, Heron criticized Pollock’s work for the opposite reason he praised Rothko’s: he was disturbed by the vortex-like effect of Pollock’s web of paint skeins. “One never comes up against a resistant plane,” he charged, and added, “one’s eye sinks deeper and deeper into the transparency of the mesh.” Pollock’s treatment of pictorial space bothered Heron, leading him to argue that the lack of planes parallel to the canvas itself created a strange denial of spatial experience, whereas Rothko’s rectangular planes projected outward and evoked visual appeal.

Before stating his overall impressions of the Abstract Expressionists as a group, Heron attempted to counter myths perpetuated in the British press. He asserted with authority that the Abstract Expressionists constituted a movement that was specifically American and it was free of European influence. Lastly, he singled out Pollock as being

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 16-17.
“such a seductive artist, as anyone acquainted with the youngest non-figurative painters of Europe or America can testify.”48 Heron recognized the significance of this group of American painters that many of his fellow critics had dismissed defiantly. Size, energy, originality, economy, inventive daring, spatial shallowness and direct execution of ideas were qualities in the works that impressed Heron, and he pointed out that the timing of Abstract Expressionism’s arrival in England was very important—the exhibition came at “the [right] psychological moment—the moment when curiosity was keenest.”49 Given the amount of attention (both positive and negative) the press devoted to such a small amount of work in the show (28 abstract canvases out of 127 paintings and sculptures), Heron’s conclusion was certainly credible. However, the attention Modern Art in the United States garnered in 1956 would pale in comparison to the amount of press devoted to the Tate’s next major showcase of American art three years later.

The New American Painting

*The New American Painting As Shown in Eight European Countries, 1958-1959* (NAP) was organized by the International Program of MoMA and circulated under the auspices of the museum’s International Council.50 Furthermore, the exhibition was assembled at the request of European institutions that wished to present a show devoted

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48 Ibid., 16.
49 Ibid., 15-16.
50 The International Program circulated other exhibitions of American art in Britain prior to NAP. In addition to MAIUS, other IP shows included *Built in U.S.A.: Post-War Architecture* (London), *The Skyscraper: U.S.A.* (Edinburgh) and *Thirty American Printmakers* (five cities in England and Scotland). MoMA also hosted numerous shows of British art in the 1950s, including Henry Moore, *Modern Architecture in England, Britain at War, Masters of British Painting: 1800-1950* and *The New Decade.*
to Abstract Expressionist art from the U.S.\textsuperscript{51} As in the past, the Tate’s Trustees invited the exhibition to be shown at their museum,\textsuperscript{52} and following its close in London, \textit{NAP} returned to New York where it was presented at MoMA. As René d’Harnoncourt noted, this was the first time that a full-scale exhibition prepared for circulation outside of the U.S. had also been shown at MoMA itself. “Even in New York,” he lamented, “we have not until now undertaken so comprehensive a survey” of Abstract Expressionism in America.\textsuperscript{53} An important fact often overlooked has been highlighted recently by Irving Sandler—MoMA did not organize a large, full-scale survey of Abstract Expressionism for exhibition either outside or in the U.S. until 1959, almost fifteen years after Pollock and de Kooning made their stylistic breakthroughs.\textsuperscript{54} This new American painting actually was still relatively “new” to the eyes of both European and American audiences at the end of the fifties decade.

Eighty-one paintings by seventeen American artists were selected by Dorothy Miller with assistance from another MoMA curator, poet Frank O’Hara.\textsuperscript{55} Porter McCray, Director of the International Program, was MoMA’s liaison with the Tate and he installed the exhibition in London.\textsuperscript{56} McCray also worked closely with Philip James

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\textsuperscript{51} The exhibition traveled to Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and London. For each venue, the exhibition catalogue was printed in the country’s native language.

\textsuperscript{52} Press release from MoMA’s International Council, February 9, 1959. TGA 92/145/1.

\textsuperscript{53} This quote comes from D’Harnoncourt’s introduction to the MoMA catalogue, which is a re-print of the version used for the exhibition in London. \textit{The New American Painting} exh. cat., New York: Arno Press, 1959, 5. The American catalogue included samples of critical responses from each European showing.

\textsuperscript{54} Sandler, 67.

\textsuperscript{55} Works were lent by 30 private collectors, five galleries and three museums. Unlike \textit{MAIUS}, therefore, works in \textit{NAP} were not strictly from MoMA’s own collection.

\textsuperscript{56} Sandler also proposes that Alfred Barr, a devoted civil libertarian who aimed to fight federal censorship of art, sent \textit{NAP} abroad in response to the cancellation by the USIA of several shows containing abstract work. While this may be true, Sandler seems to overemphasize this point in order to tailor his arguments. Barr, who was Director of Collections at MoMA when \textit{NAP} was organized, was not involved in circulating the show. McCray and the IP held that responsibility, while Miller and O’Hara chose the works. Barr’s role was to write the catalogue introduction, which traced the history of the New York School. See Sandler, 70.
and Gabriel White of the Arts Council in seeing the exhibition to completion. For example, the layout and installation of the show proved to be slightly problematic for the Tate. The British were originally unaware of the size of MoMA’s exhibition, and when James requested that the Tate de-install one permanent gallery (the green-painted gallery no. 21) to make room for the extra work, the Tate countered by offering the large sculpture hall for overflow work. White negotiated successfully with McCray/MoMA and the Tate in seeing that the additional gallery was de-installed for the exhibition, albeit much to the dismay of the Tate’s Board of Trustees.

Galleries nineteen, twenty and twenty-one were used for NAP with eight freestanding partitions all painted off-white erected in sizes varying from up to twelve feet wide and all were twelve feet high (see floorplan, Figs. 21-23). The artists Miller and O’Hara selected—Baziotes, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Gorky, Gottlieb, Guston, Hartigan, Kline, de Kooning, Motherwell, Newman, Pollock, Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Still, Tomlin and Jack Tworkov—were truly representative of Abstract Expressionism. All four Pollocks—a classic drip painting, Number 8 (1949, Fig. 24), and three of his “black paintings,” Number 26 (1951), Number 27 (1951) and Number 12 (1952)—were hung in the same gallery along with Gorky’s work (Fig. 25). Rothko had five canvases in the show—Number 10 (1950), which was also in MAIUS, Number 7 (1951), Earth and

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57 In a telegram sent to Rothenstein on December 9, 1958, McCray informed the Tate’s director that after making a preliminary layout of the show, he regretted it would be necessary to use the large green gallery, no. 21, which housed the Edward James collection. The Tate, therefore, did not learn about the actual size of the show until a month before it opened. TGA 92/145/1.

58 Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 121/747. In a letter from Norman Reid (Tate Deputy Director) to White, dated January 16, 1959, Reid reported that the Tate Board agreed reluctantly to grant the extra gallery (no. 21) for the show. The size of the show had been overlooked by the AC and the Tate; when the Tate asked if works could be cut from the show, McCray refused because of MoMA’s desire to maintain a consistent showing in each city. Reid’s letter from TGA 92/145/1.
Green (1954-5, Fig. 26), The Black and the White (1956) and Tan and Black on Red (1957)—that were displayed with works by Baziotes.

The NAP exhibition catalogue was a substantive publication that featured all seventeen artists and their work.\textsuperscript{59} White wrote the foreword, McCray the preface and Barr delivered a three-page essay on the history of the New York School, prefacing his text with nine brief quotes by the artists, including Newman, Rothko and Gottlieb. Each painter was given his/her own section that included a photograph of the artist, statements written by or about him/her and three illustrations of their works.\textsuperscript{60} Pollock’s entry featured a photographic portrait by Hans Namuth of the artist seen with a wrinkled brow, a cigarette in hand and wearing a dark t-shirt (Fig. 27). Visitors to the ICA’s Parallel of Life and Art exhibition in 1953 had seen one of Namuth’s photographs of Pollock in action, painting fervently in his studio; whereas the image of the artist illustrated in the NAP catalogue depicted him as a more pensive, slightly disturbed bohemian artist-type. Rothko’s photograph by Rudolph Burckhardt captured the painter in a suit and tie, sitting and smoking. British readers who had never seen these men were presented with two contrasting impressions—a brooding bohemian versus an intellectual artist.\textsuperscript{61}

NAP drew record attendance while on view at the Tate Gallery from February 24 to March 22, 1959. The attendance topped 14,718, the highest paying attendance for a

\textsuperscript{59} The catalogue featured 65 illustrations (61 black-and-white and four color). Three of the four Pollocks and three of the five Rothkos were reproduced.
\textsuperscript{60} The end of the catalogue included a very useful biography and exhibition history for each artist in addition to the exhibition checklist.
\textsuperscript{61} Pollock’s entry also included his Possibilities statement (“When I am in my painting...”) along with Alfonso Ossorio’s catalogue introduction to Pollock’s Betty Parson’s Gallery exhibition in 1951. Rothko’s featured Elaine de Kooning’s “Kline and Rothko: Two Americans in Action” from the 1958 Art News Annual and a statement by the artist from the October 1949 issue of Tiger’s Eye.
comparable period in the history of the Arts Council’s exhibitions at the Tate. The museum aggressively advertised the show by means of double crown posters placed in the London Underground as well as 960 copies of a three-color poster placed around the London streets. Considering that attendance had virtually tripled since the Tate’s MAIUS exhibition, which drew 4,908 visitors, Abstract Expressionism seems to have attracted a large amount of buzz surrounding its practitioners during the last three years. An “Art News Bulletin” published by the USIS at the American Embassy, London, declared in April 1959, “The New American Painting exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, described by Sir John Rothenstein as ‘remarkable for its uncompromising, outspoken individuality,’ drew wide comment in press and radio.”

Before assessing professional critics’ reactions, however, it is of interest to discuss one British visitor’s response to the show, because it exemplifies common public opinions and perceptions in England regarding abstract art at that time. This visitor to the show, A.S. Jarman actually, wrote a letter to the Tate protesting what he called the “misrepresentation” of the exhibition’s advertised title. “All the canvases exhibited,” Jarman observed, “have suffered an application of paint but only a tiny minority can claim to come under the commonly-understood title of ‘paintings.’” “A vertical black line against a grey background does not come within [the description of a painting],” he wrote. “It remains a vertical black line against a grey background. It also remains an imposter.” Jarman also objected to the liquid running of paint on many of the canvases;

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62 Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 75/101. Stefan Munsing at the American Embassy in London reported that, in the last hour of the closing day, 3,000 paid admissions were recorded. MoMA Archives, ICE-F-36-57.
63 Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 121/747.
64 MoMA Archives, ICE-F-36-57.
for him, the works in the show did not qualify as painting, eliciting his outrage over the Tate’s spending of public funds “to exhibit these examples,” as he sarcastically wrote, “of American genius.” This viewer’s angry reaction to the Abstract Expressionist canvases on view at the Tate indicates that he was unable to grasp the changing forms of pictorial language in 20th century art. In Britain, lack of any conspicuous content or discernable meaning, coupled with drip, blot or spatter techniques, in many of the works in NAP provoked particular hostility because the work itself proved challenging for viewers like Jarman to grasp upon first viewing.

Before NAP opened in 1959, Alloway had written an essay that was published by the USIS Cultural Affairs Office in London. In this “Art News Bulletin,” Alloway sought to de-bunk myths regarding the image of American painting in Europe. The flow of information on American art from magazines, catalogues and exhibitions in the U.S. had improved since the early 1950s, but Alloway identified several misconceptions that still persisted. First, as he stated, “Action Painters have since become associated with ‘the man of action,’ such as the Western film hero.” In particular, Pollock’s image typified this conflation of symbols from art and the mass media. Second, the term ‘Action Painting’ evoked “the false idea of action rather than the physical presence of the work of art” for European spectators. Similarly, the designation ‘Abstract

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66 Ibid. Jarman returned his ticket stub in a self addressed stamped envelope and requested a refund of his entrance fee. This viewer also found a writer who echoed his opinion, the critic for the Daily Telegraph. He too protested the use of public funds to pay for the display of “such egregious products.” “Portentous Art,” Daily Telegraph, February 14, 1959.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
Expressionism’ implied that American art is merely self-expression with no other significant content. Alloway believed that these terms distracted viewers’ attention away from the properties of coherence and control exhibited by these painters. Pollock and Rothko, he stated, “after rejecting conventional notions of finish and design, extended our idea of the control and order possible in a work of art.” Alloway’s assertions seemed to reflect Pollock’s own denial that chaos ruled his work. At any rate, once again Alloway aimed to clarify the facts about a grossly misunderstood art movement that would soon be on view for British spectators.

The NAP exhibition at the Tate elicited over thirty reviews in British newspapers and journals. Rothko’s paintings in the show received much more attention from critics than when he had exhibited in MAIUS, and, unlike before, newspaper reviewers, in addition to critics writing for journals, discussed and analyzed his work. Rothko garnered a large amount of praise and, to most writers, his canvases represented a highlight of the exhibition. Indeed, a noticeable change occurred in critics’ reactions to Abstract Expressionist artists in NAP, in particular a new acknowledgement that the U.S. had developed its own uniquely American, non-European-derived style of painting. The Times called this exhibition “the finest of its kind we have yet had,” terming it “the aesthetic barometer why the United States should so frequently be regarded nowadays as the challenger to, if not actually the inheritor of, the hegemony of Paris in these

70 Ibid.
71 Time magazine printed the following comments by Italian critic Bruno Alfieri who reviewed Pollock’s work in the 1950 Venice Biennale: “Chaos. Absolute lack of harmony. Complete lack of structural organization. Total absence of technique, however rudimentary. Once again, chaos,” to which Pollock responded in a telegram, “Sir, no chaos, damn it. Damned busy painting as you can see by my show coming up Nov. 28.” This appeared originally in Time, November 20, 1950. For the primary text, refer also to Pepe Karmel, Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999, 68-71.
matters.” This London paper saw in the exhibition evidence of an American indigenous style of painting and pioneering sense of individuality, echoing Rothenstein’s claims noted earlier: “The quality of adventure, of individual striving, of hammering out modes of expression with a pioneering sense of independence, lends these personal utterances a forceful, easily communicable, vitality.”73 Nevile Wallis of the Observer agreed that Abstract Expressionism was not derivative of European art: Americans “have hit on symbols expressive of this age of foreboding, of unnatural forces and discoveries in space,” thus suggesting that the United States’ technological and scientific innovations were also uniquely American.74 The works in NAP, he suggested, were “clearly attuned to the phenomena of our time.” This endowed American paintings with “mysterious and universal import.”75 The rhetoric of violence seen in some critics’ reviews of MAIUS, which plausibly stemmed from the fact that American scientific innovation had produced the most destructive weapon of the 20th century, is on pace with Wallis’s comments, albeit with less of a negative connotation.

Certain publications addressing disciplines outside of painting, sculpture or art history also published reviews of the exhibition. A critic for The Architects’ Journal deftly observed an architectural quality to the works in the exhibition. He suggested that architects should visit the show because the paintings “should be seen close together, so that they are the interior, instead of merely decorating it,” and he cited Rothko’s adjacent panels of glowing color as an example of this “new and striking” effect.76 On the other hand, some reviewers only saw the canvases in NAP as decorative wall textiles, an

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73 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
opinion based on, for instance, Gottlieb’s use of patterns of splotches and stains. The Times critic combined these two conflicting observations, stating that the works at the Tate are “perfect mural decorations” that “manage to animate more architectural space than in fact they occupy.” Most critics agreed that the impressive size of the canvases was sometimes intimidating.

The Telegraph’s Terence Mullaly, who was certainly negatively affected by the size of the canvases, wrote a scathing review of the show. He was bothered that “almost all the pictures in it are as disturbing as they are large” and objected to the “comported masses of paint that vie with the banalities of the catalogue to browbeat us into acceptance.” Mullaly believed there was no more to the works than decoration or emotion and suggested that the catalogue essays and artists’ statements were failed attempts to convince viewers there was something substantive at work. Abstract Expressionist paintings, he claimed, “have no relationship to objective strivings, rather they represent a surrender to the voluptuous and to emotional anarchy.” Mullaly’s anarchy metaphor also links Action Painting as a whole to a seemingly tormented, disorderly expression of artistic subjectivity.

The Western Morning News admitted that the size of the works was stereotypically American, quipping that “the artists follow their countrymen’s liking for ‘bigness’ as the canvases are huge.” The Evening Times (Glasgow) offered viewers a sarcastic recipe for success in following the example set by Americans’ works, “Be big,

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77 “Painter’s Surprise,” Birmingham Post, March 2, 1959.
78 Times, February 24, 1959.
80 Ibid.
have a statement and then have at it.”82 The London Daily Telegraph went beyond sarcasm to offer an outright hostile assessment: “To say it [the new painting] is worse than the old is a ludicrous statement. It is the bottom: we can sink no lower. Hitler died too soon; so did Ruskin.”83 Most of the negative reviews were spurred by discomfort in the face of a radically abstract style, the lack of overt content and the large size of the canvases on view. It is evident that these critics’ inability to move beyond the perceived absence of meaning in Pollock’s paint skeins or Rothko’s rectangles of color resulted in dismissal of work allegedly deprived of skill, taste, grace or order. Alan Clutton-Brock’s review for The Listener provided one contrast to this. He praised the visual impact of the canvases and pointed out that “the violent slashes of black across white [in a Kline painting] exert something like a spell and seem like magical signs which even if they cannot be interpreted have power over the imagination.”84

Frederick Laws of the Manchester Guardian also offered a favorable review that countered negative criticisms of the size of the works. He suggested that the Americans in the show were confident and aimed to engulf the viewer in their paintings; what made their work good was “the scale and reckless assurance of their efforts.”85 Indeed, approbation actually outweighed negative response from British critics to the works in NAP. Many, like those just quoted, praised the large size, colorful palette and visual impact of the paintings, acclaiming as well the Americans’ confidence, vitality, vigor, inventiveness, audacity and the provocative nature of their experiments. However, the

82 “It’s Easy to Paint a Masterpiece: All You Have To Do Is Get Plastered,” Evening Times (Glasgow), February 25, 1959.
response to specific works of individual artists, especially Pollock and Rothko, was more mixed and varied from critic to critic.

Pollock still had the biggest and best-known name of any artist in the show. His untimely death in 1956 had accelerated the propagation of myths surrounding his work both in the U.S. and abroad. Pollock was viewed unequivocally as the leader of the New York School by American and British critics. In fact, a photograph of Pollock’s grave would serve as the introductory plate to the book *School of New York: Some Younger Artists*, edited by B.H. Friedman and published by Evergreen Books in London in early 1960 (Fig. 28).86 The facture and formal qualities of Pollock’s paintings were the focus of British critics’ attention. The *Times* complemented Pollock’s and Bradley Walker Tomlin’s “tendency to treat surfaces of whatever size as areas to be delicately brought to life; their paintings are elaborate, without focal centres and incline more consciously to beauty or colour and texture.”87

There seemed to be somewhat of a palpable shift from critics’ perceptions of violence in Pollock’s paint skeins three years earlier to a rhetorical musing over the delicacy and beauty of his canvases in 1959. Nevile Wallis was pleased that Pollock’s work in *NAP* seemed “more stimulating than it was in the last section of the American exhibition three years ago.”88 Pollock was also identified frequently as the artist in the show who stood out from the others,89 and one publication labeled his painting Number

86 The book was published on occasion of an exhibition of the same title held at the Stable Gallery in New York, December 8, 1959 to January 8, 1960. The exhibition was not shown in London. Jasper Johns was one of the eleven artists included.
87 *Times*, February 24, 1959.
Pollock’s gestural abstractions garnered the lion’s share of praise and ire in the press, but Rothko’s color-field canvases also piqued the interest of critics and viewers.

An unnamed critic for the London *Times* placed Rothko’s works at the opposite spectrum from Pollock’s “elaborate” canvases, stating that the former was more inclined to “extreme simplicity to achieve complete placidity,” whereas the latter’s work tended to veer towards complexity. Wallis again invoked a technological aesthetic in describing his own experience of viewing Rothko’s paintings, claiming they conveyed a sense of “unnaturally luminous fields, tranquil yet ominous after some nuclear convulsion.” Wallis was an exception to the majority of critics who described Rothko’s work in terms that related to natural elements and the calming effects thereof. Eric Newton of *Time and Tide* was extremely impressed with Rothko’s work and excluded him from an otherwise negative assessment of the artists in the show. “His large areas of gentle colour,” Newton suggested, “softened at the edges, are as sensitive as anyone could want: yet they have to be big for one has, as it were, to *swim* in them—a mild but very delightful experience.”

Whereas Newton perceived an absorptive quality in Rothko’s paintings, Alloway believed that his work projected visually into what he called the viewer’s “literal participative space.” Alloway felt that Rothko’s surfaces pushed at the spectator and his radiant colors projected into the viewer’s own space. It is interesting to contrast Alloway’s observation with Heron’s argument cited earlier that Pollock’s lack of pictorial

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90 “Vitality of the New York School,” *Jewish Chronicle*, March 6, 1959. This publication may have taken a noticeable interest in Rothko because of his Jewish heritage.
91 *Times*, February 24, 1959.
92 Wallis, “Deathless Duck.”
surface draws the viewer’s eye deep into a transparent mesh or web of paint. On the other hand, according to Alloway and similar to Heron, Rothko’s rectangular bands of yellows, reds and browns appeared to protrude optically forward from the canvas surface, thus occupying not pictorial space but rather the viewer’s space. His use of color earned Rothko the label of masterful colorist by critics. John Russell of the *Sunday Times* was moved by “the absolute tranquility of the great single chords of colour which well out” from Rothko’s canvases, while the *Jewish Chronicle* dubbed him “one of the finest colourists in the exhibition.” Dennis Farr in *Burlington Magazine* made an important point when he identified a dichotomy in the exhibition between the tormented frenzy of gestural canvases by Pollock and de Kooning and the “idyllic, calm, aquarium-like compositions” of Rothko, a recognition of increasing differences between the gestural and color-field branches of Abstract Expressionist art. Critics varied in their overall assessment of Abstract Expressionism after reviewing the exhibition, at times extolling the vigor and energy of the American works and, at others, condemning their alleged lack of harmony, order or beauty. Yet, as Alloway reminded readers and his fellow critics, the New York School was “not all one big splash of paint,” but was instead comprised of “a varied and complex body of artists with different ideas and performances as any first-rate group can show.”

This complexity and variety proved to be a double-edged sword for the Americans in the Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States* and *The New American Painting*

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95 Ibid.
97 *Jewish Chronicle*, March 6, 1959.
99 Alloway, “Paintings from the Big Country.”
exhibitions. An artist like Pollock was either praised as a pioneer for his freedom from conventional painting techniques, or he could be accused, as American artist J.A.M. Whistler was a century earlier by British critic John Ruskin, of flinging a pot of paint into the face of the public. Although Britons disagreed on the merits or drawbacks of scale, degree of abstraction, use of color or lack of apparent content in the New York School works, most recognized that both Modern Art in the United States and The New American Painting provided unique and important opportunities to view a brand new style of work not well-known in Britain prior to 1956. It cannot be disputed that these two exhibitions held at the Tate served the important function of introducing Abstract Expressionist art into the British artistic and critical milieus. MAIUS offered viewers a broad survey of 20th century American art as well as a sampling of contemporary developments occurring since the previous decade; NAP was a more consolidated showcase of the best examples of contemporary American art.

Returning to a point made earlier, some critics and art historians, such as Max Kozloff, have argued that Abstract Expressionism was utilized in the 1950s, willingly or not, by MoMA and the U.S. government as an instrument in the Cold War fight against communism across the globe. Pierre Jeannerat, who wrote for the Daily Mail, saw a different kind of war initiated by the Tate’s NAP. The Royal Academy in London hosted an exhibition of Soviet paintings on loan from Moscow at the same time as the Tate’s show of American art. Jeannerat believed that, with the opening of the latter exhibition, seen in combination with the former, NAP brought to London “a cold war on

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100 The exhibition was called Russian and Soviet Art.
the aesthetic front.” Instead of politicizing the works in the Tate exhibition, Jeannerat focused on their aesthetics, pointing out that each show offered viewers an important opportunity to compare and contrast art from both countries. He concluded that all of the American paintings “get their unquestionable power from the very opposite of [Soviet] photographic representation,” and, if such American forms “can ever incorporate the strength of the handling and come right out into the open, New York will indeed become a capital of art; and that even Moscow will have to take note of the fact.” Scholars such as Serge Guilbaut and Irving Sandler will continue to debate theories about the degree of complicity artists, curators, institutions and critics may or may not have had in Cold War cultural politics, but there is no denying the striking aesthetic differences between state-sanctioned Soviet social realist art and the work of the Abstract Expressionists, a fact that Jeannerat reiterated in his article. The Tate’s two exhibitions of American art indicated to Londoners that artists in the U.S. were producing an art that was distinctly American when compared to the art of Britain, France and other European democracies and even more opposed to that of totalitarian countries such as the Soviet Union.

*Modern Art in the United States* strengthened Pollock’s status as the most well-known and controversial Abstract Expressionist artist, and this show introduced Rothko to the London art world. Three years later, *The New American Painting* confirmed Pollock’s reputation as the “leader” of the New York School (despite his passing), but this exhibition also ushered Rothko more firmly into the British critical dialogue regarding abstract art. In the interim between the Tate’s two major showcases, there were

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102 Ibid.
other exhibitions of American art that also played a crucial role in the reception of American avant-garde painting in London. A year before the Tate hosted *New American Painting*, the Whitechapel held their first in a series of shows devoted to contemporary American artists. *Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956* featured a larger body of his work, and, while on display from November to December 1958 in this east London gallery, received massive coverage by the British press. This outpouring of positive and negative criticism will be assessed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5 “The Middle Period: 1956-59: Part 2”

The Tate Gallery’s *Modern Art in the United States* (MAIUS) and *The New American Painting* (NAP) exhibitions inaugurated an influx into London of contemporary American painting into that had not been seen in Britain on such a large scale before or immediately after World War II. These two major showcases fostered an increased awareness for British critics, curators and spectators of the exciting artistic developments in pre- and postwar America. However, between 1956 and 1959, institutions in addition to the Tate participated in Britain’s direct engagement with contemporary American art.

*Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956* took place at the Whitechapel in 1958 and the British press criticism that covered this show constitutes a major part of the present chapter. This exhibition of Pollock’s paintings, drawings and watercolors was a unique opportunity for Londoners to assess his oeuvre on a level analogous to the Tate’s wider presentation of Abstract Expressionist art in *The New American Painting*. However, because they provided more access to Pollock and Rothko’s Abstract Expressionist works, other exhibitions in London from 1956-1959 that included their paintings should be assessed first.

**The Tate’s Guggenheim Exhibition, 1957**

Following the success of its exhibition, *Modern Art in the United States: A Selection from the Collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York*, one year later the Tate endeavored to feature work from the collection of another New York museum. *Paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* was held April 16 – May 26, 1957, affording Londoners a rare opportunity of seeing seventy-five works from the
Guggenheim’s collection in New York. The show was arranged by the Arts Council under the auspices of the Tate. Gabriel White and Philip James coordinated the exhibition along with the Guggenheim’s Director, James Johnson Sweeney. These organizers selected samples from the Guggenheim’s collection they hoped would present some of the finest examples of modern art, and it was James, in fact, who first suggested the idea for the show to Sweeney. The seventy-five paintings selected featured a blend of European and American artists, including “older” masters of modern art, such as Kandinsky and Cézanne, as well as more contemporary modernists, including Gottlieb, Kline and Pollock. The latter’s *Ocean Greyness* (1953, Fig. 29) exemplified Pollock’s re-introduction of semi-figurative elements into his paintings after dripping and pouring paint onto his canvases to create highly non-objective compositions between 1947 – 1950. Visitors to *Modern Art in the United States* the year before had already seen two examples of Pollock’s initial move away from figuration towards total abstraction in *The She-Wolf* (1943, Fig. 17) and *Number 1A, 1948* (1948, Fig. 18). *Ocean Greyness* represented Pollock’s subsequent re-engagement with figurative elements in his abstract designs.

The Guggenheim exhibition attracted a fair number of accolades from the British press since critics were delighted to have the opportunity to see works from the museum’s prestigious collection. The fundamental difference between reviews of *MAIUS* and the Guggenheim exhibition was that the latter attracted far less harsh criticism because it did not focus solely on American artists, as had the former show;

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1 The exhibition went to the Hague after its London showing. The AC also arranged a simultaneous School of Paris exhibition for the RBA Galleries that came from the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 121/434.
2 Sweeney makes note of this fact in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue.
instead, emphasis was also placed on European developments. As Eric Newton in Time and Tide suggested, the Guggenheim exhibition “gives the art historian a solid foundation of source-material for a history of modern painting during the last fifty years, with an emphasis on extremes.” Newton also observed that, since the Tate had focused in the past on collecting British art, London had no major representative collection of art from outside of England. This was a situation Paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim helped to rectify. The Daily Telegraph saw the show as “a rare opportunity to understand the more progressive trends in twentieth-century art.” Hence, due to his radical departure from orthodox painting techniques, Pollock once again became the focus of critics’ attention.

Compared to Pollock’s earlier showings in London, this time reviews were relatively positive. One critic noted that “there is hope in the Ocean Greyness of Jackson Pollock, who drops his paint from the top of a ladder. On this occasion his aim has been convincing. The great whirlpools of paint with their colourful islands are singularly effective.” The Times praised the painting’s “baroque largeness of movement” and the Glasgow Herald called it a “kaleidoscopic composition.” Pierre Rouve seized the opportunity in Art News and Review to pose a defense of Pollock’s work by countering the common early perception among British critics that this type of abstract art was nothing more than chaos, an accusation first posed by Italian critic Bruno Alfieri in 1950.

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4 “Pictures from New York at the Tate,” Daily Telegraph, April 17, 1957.
5 G.S.S., “Pointillism Is Academic: Tate Gallery Show,” Scotsman, April 24, 1957. His claim that Pollock dropped paint from the top of a ladder was, of course, not true. This critic may have confused Pollock’s technique with Hans Namuth’s photography sessions of Pollock painting in his studio. Namuth climbed a ladder to gain a bird’s-eye perspective of Pollock at work.
Art of this type, Rouve argued, “remains an expression communicated through formal coherence and never through arrogant chaos.” Most critics who mentioned Pollock’s work in their reviews of the Guggenheim exhibition were generally in agreement that *Ocean Greyness* represented a fresh view of visual experience.

On the other hand, when faced with the highly exciting abstract compositions of Pollock and Franz Kline in the Tate’s Guggenheim and MAIUS exhibitions, John Russell of the *Sunday Times* pondered whether or not there was a future for figurative painting. Such a high level of abstraction, he felt, signaled a new visual experience for viewers, and this kind of work posed a serious challenge to the hegemony of traditional figurative art. John Godling also singled out Rothko and Pollock, whose work, he believed, had the power “to force the spectator to participate in the process of creation or least to shock him into a new visual and emotional awareness.” The Guggenheim exhibition, which drew approximately 14,000 visitors, successfully conveyed the message that abstract painting was alive and well in Europe and the U.S.

The Guggenheim show enabled British viewers to see important works from a highly renowned American museum, but the exhibition also cast recent abstract painting as the next stage in modern art’s evolution by displaying it along side earlier Post-Impressionist, Cubist and Expressionist masterpieces. Just like the response required of these earlier movements, the advent of Abstract Expressionism also required new strategies of looking and seeing. As the critic for the *Daily Telegraph* observed, the exhibition indicated that contemporary painters like Pollock had made radical breaks with

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10 Attendance figures from Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 121/434.
the past, and, he cautioned, “to derive any pleasure from their work it is, therefore, necessary to make adjustments that many find difficult.”

The overall appeal for most critics of *Paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* was that the “shock” of newer works by Pollock and Rothko was tempered by the (no less radical) older modernist masters such as Kandinsky and Cézanne. The exhibition presented Londoners with a unique visual context for Pollock and Rothko’s work by placing them within a historical lineage of abstract painting from the previous fifty to seventy-five years.

**The Redfern Gallery’s Metavisual Exhibition**

*Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract: Painting in England To-Day (MTA)*, held at the Redfern Gallery in April 1957, was curated by Denys Sutton, one of the first British critics to write about the New York School. This exhibition provided a strong indication that British artists had begun to take note of recent artistic developments, particularly from the U.S. Sutton aimed to prove that artists in the U.K were not averse to experiments in contemporary art and he sought simultaneously to disprove the notion that British art was provincial or devoid of innovation compared to Europe. “It is no longer necessary,” he wrote, “to confess, as was the case some twenty years ago, that the English artist is averse to experiment.” He pointed to trends in recent British painting, ranging from Realism to Constructivism to Action Painting, and his selection of artists for the Redfern show confirmed this aesthetic diversity.

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11 *Daily Telegraph*, April 17, 1957.
12 As previously noted, “Tachiste” refers to a French style of abstract painting. The term, which is derived from the word “tache,” meaning “blot” or “stain,” is at times used interchangeably with Action Painting and, at others, is considered to be a completely different style, depending upon the author’s semantic preference.
The goal of this dissertation is to examine the reception of American avant-garde painting in Britain; thus, it should be noted here that many artists who encountered the new American painting in *MAIUS* in 1956 were most impressed by Abstract Expressionist art. As John Walker, an English printmaker and painter who is currently head of the painting department at Boston University, has correctly pointed out, “there is no doubt that abstract expressionism had a significant—some would say liberating and energising—impact upon the British art scene, and influenced many young painters.”¹⁴

For instance, the London artists in *MTA* were certainly aware of American painters such as Pollock. Davie engaged in a painting technique similar to Pollock’s method, which involved placing his canvas on the floor (Fig. 30) and Ayres is known also to have been encouraged to paint on the floor after seeing Hans Namuth’s photographs of Pollock painting.¹⁵ While producing her painting *Distillation* (1957, Fig. 31), Ayres likewise worked on the floor and applied paint to canvas with rags and brushes, as well as pouring it from the can.¹⁶ However, the goal of this study is not to determine the flow of influence from one country to another.

In a catalogue sponsored by the Redfern, Martin Harrison recently assessed Sutton’s *MTA* exhibition in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of its showing. Harrison’s comments on the 1957 exhibition are worthy of attention. The terms he chooses to describe the works by British abstractionists in the show are equally applicable to the art being produced by American Abstract Expressionists. As he wrote, the heterogeneous group of artists in the show—which included Ayres (Fig. 31), Davie

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¹⁵ Walker makes note of this point about Ayres. Ibid., 45.
¹⁶ This information is from the Tate Gallery’s display caption for the painting in their permanent collection.
(Fig. 30), Robyn Denny, William Gear, Heron, Roger Hilton, Peter Lanyon and Ralph Rumney—“experimented with fluidity of meaning and association, metamorphism, lyricism, flatness, gesture, monochrome or vivid colour, and texture, in process-dominated paintings that reflected the urgency of the theoretical issues they raised.”

The question of whether or not this approach was spawned by art from outside Britain or was the product of homegrown achievements is not as significant as the fact that (according to Harrison) “Britain’s avant-garde had transcended its influences to make decisive and original statements” by the late 1950s and early 60s. Sutton’s *Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract* affirmed that avant-garde painters in England by 1957 had assimilated new, innovative techniques and had developed their own brand of contemporary art.

Three months after the Redfern Gallery’s survey of trends in recent British abstract art, another London gallery interested in the avant-garde held its annual *Summer Exhibition* from July-August. Gimpel Fils featured a show that was international in scope, highlighting works by British artists Graham Sutherland, Anthony Caro and Barbara Hepworth, as well as Nicholson, Davie and Denny; French artists included Jean Dubuffet, Nicolas de Staël and Hans Hartung. The American painter Sam Francis was joined by Pollock and Rothko, who were each represented by one painting—for Pollock

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18 Ibid.

19 Gimpel Fils was founded by brothers Charles and Peter Gimpel in 1946. The gallery gave Lynn Chadwick, Anthony Caro and Alan Davie their first solo exhibitions. This information comes from the gallery’s website, gimpelfils.com. It should also be noted that my repeated attempts to contact the gallery for information on their archival or administrative material were unsuccessful. As a result, I was able to find virtually no information on this exhibition. The gallery published a brochure for the exhibition that I examined in the Tate archives, but it only lists the names of the artists and their works. The exhibition included paintings, gouache, watercolors and sculpture.
Electric Night (1946, Fig. 32) and Rothko Blue Cloud (1956). Despite the fact that Rothko had been shown for the first time in London only a year earlier at the Tate, Gimpel Fils’s Summer Exhibition received virtually no press coverage. However, an unnamed critic observed in the Times: “Mark Rothko is an artist more talked about than exhibited in this country, which makes the inclusion here of his ‘Blue Cloud’ of particular interest.”\(^{20}\) Based on the scant critical attention paid to Rothko’s work in MAIUS the year before, until his work was shown in NAP in 1959, he was still rarely being discussed in the British press, a situation much different from that of Pollock. Thus, the Gimpel Fils summer show is noteworthy because it provided a small but worthwhile opportunity for viewers to become more familiar with Rothko.

The E.J. Power and Other ICA Exhibitions

In 1958, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) hosted an important exhibition of works from the private collection of one of Britain’s most enthusiastic connoisseurs of Abstract Expressionist art.\(^{21}\) Some Paintings from the E.J. Power Collection, which included examples of Action Painting from the U.S, was held at the ICA from March 13 – April 19. Pollock’s Unformed Figure (1953, Fig. 33) and Banners of Spring (1946) and Rothko’s No. 14 (1949) and White Cloud (1956) were presented, along with works by de Kooning, Kline and Still.\(^{22}\) The Europeans Dubuffet and Antoni Tàpies

\(^{20}\) “Action-Painting from America and France,” Times, July 19, 1957. Pollock’s work was not mentioned in this very brief review.
\(^{21}\) As noted in chapter two, Power was a British electronics manufacturer, champion of modern art and active collector in the 1950s London contemporary art scene.
\(^{22}\) According to Jennifer Mundy’s description of his Abstract Expressionist purchases, Power bought a Rothko painting of 1949 in 1956 (she does not cite the specific work), Pollock’s Banners of Spring in January 1957, and two more (unspecified) Rothkos in August 1957. In January 1958, Power acquired two more Pollocks, including Unformed Figure (1953). As previously noted, Power assembled much of his
were also included. Lawrence Alloway’s catalogue introduction and discussion of the paintings in the exhibition indicated his continuing strong commitment to explicating the conventions of Abstract Expressionism to British audiences. Here he explained,

“American action painting was, in its first phase, the biggest break imaginable with art as generally understood, including earlier modern art. Now, after ten years, the pictures have changed because we have learned to read them.”23 Yet, even as late as 1958, the British public and press were still learning how to understand, or “read,” these paintings.24

As Alloway acknowledged, Londoners had, however, come a long way from their initial encounter with Pollock’s work in the ICA’s Opposing Forces exhibition in 1953. He recalled from Pollock’s London debut that his work seemed random and confusing at the time.25 Five years later, viewers could see that “the action painters can do as much with their paint as other painters do who retain the conventions” of painting.26 Alloway also countered, as he had two years earlier, false charges that Pollock’s work was steeped in chaos. In Unformed Figure, for instance, “even when his pictures seem to be a random aggregation of marks they nevertheless reveal a sense of pattern which keeps pace with his freedom, even as it scorns conventional formulae for order.”27 Despite the fact that Pollock’s paintings appeared to be a jumbled web of paint skeins, order, pattern and rhythm were, in fact, visible within Pollock’s gestural, abstract compositions, he asserted.

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24 Alloway appears to have been referring to himself and other advocates of Abstract Expressionism who had had more far more experience in viewing the art of Pollock, Rothko and other New York School artists.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
Alloway made another important observation that pertained to the different painterly techniques of Rothko and Pollock. “Action Painting,” he pointed out, “is often thought of as a rapid, exciting business, all splash and dribble, a gamble, as in pictures of Pollock at work.” But Rothko was a ‘slow’ action painter whose “glowing, imperturbable paints stains reveal no track of wrist- or arm-movements.” Without delineating it as such, Alloway was referring to the two different directions of Abstract Expressionism, gestural and color-field painting, practiced by Pollock and Rothko, respectively. In both No. 14 and White Cloud, Alloway sensed a feeling of weight behind Rothko’s works, “as if they were under pressure, deep in the sea,” which exemplifies how critics often invoked nature or natural elements, such as air or water, in their interpretations of Rothko’s paintings. The ICA’s exhibition of paintings from Power’s collection provided another significant encounter with Abstract Expressionist art in London, and Alloway’s comments in the catalogue were an equally important contribution to the critical dialogue surrounding this transatlantic movement.

While only a handful of critics covered the Power exhibition, substantive reviews were published by the Times, The Listener and Art News and Review. A critic for the Times claimed that the works of American painters in the show stimulated the faculties of suggestion and imagination in viewers, who need a “vocabulary of verbs and adjectives rather than references to the natural world” to appreciate their quality. The Times decried the lack of access to the Americans’ works in England and cited Still and Rothko as the best painters of Abstract Expressionism, but, once again, Pollock was labeled the

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28 Ibid.  
29 Ibid.  
most celebrated painter of the group. This critic sensed in Rothko’s work “a vivid indication that indistinct forces are hovering placidly in space,” another instance where nature or natural forces were utilized to describe the experience of viewing his work, which is a seeming contradiction based on the comment quoted above. Pierre Rouve observed that Power’s collection was “still wrapped in deep mystery for the commoners of the British art world,” but at the same time stated that he believed the exhibition was one of the most stimulating presented recently by the ICA. Rouve also disagreed with Alloway’s claim that Action Painting represented a break with (particularly European) modern art of the past; he instead suggested that the movement was “a protest whose heat has melted the European ingredients into the American crucible.”

Andrew Forge saw a chance in this exhibition to re-assess the Americans and he agreed with Alloway’s claim that their Abstract Expressionist canvases no longer seemed as random as they had years earlier. “Indeed,” he pointed out, “it is hard to imagine how even Pollock’s looked unorganised. The latter of his two pictures here, ‘Unformed Figure’ of 1953, is closely knit and rhythmical.” This sense of order led Forge to conclude, much to his dismay, that Pollock’s works possessed a “decorative sameness;” once the paintings’ fierceness wore off, he decided they were quite monotonous. Forge was more impressed with Rothko’s rectangles of pure color and the artist’s “distinctive response to the paint, to its translucency, which creates an ambiguity between the

31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
physical surface of the canvas and the imagined surface of the colour.”36 Seven months after the ICA’s Some Paintings from the E.J. Power Collection, Forge would have an opportunity to test his theory about the alleged monotony of Pollock’s paintings in the Whitechapel’s showcase of a larger body of the artist’s work.

Throughout the 1950s, the ICA continued to expand its scope of surveying innovations in American art beyond the New York School’s achievements. It hosted a range of shows that aimed to capture the creative spirit of American culture.37 In September 1956, the ICA hosted American Cartoons (Fig. 34), which later toured throughout the U.K.38 This exhibition examined American cartoons and cartoonists who wrote for The New Yorker magazine. An Exhibit of Eight American Artists: Paintings and Sculpture was held the following year and featured four painters from Seattle and four from New York, none of whom were considered to be Abstract Expressionists.39 The exhibition presented work that ranged over many different styles in order to provide “further proof of the vitality and scope of modern American art.”40

36 Ibid.
37 In an internal report on American-based activities at the ICA, “American Culture and the ICA,” it was reported that “it has been the policy of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, since its inception in 1947, to represent aspects of American culture in London as fully as possible within the limited means at its disposal.” The three primary means to achieve this were to arrange exhibitions of American art, invite Americans to lecture at the ICA and invite Europeans with knowledge of the U.S. to speak at the Institute. TGA 955/1/2/2.
38 The show was sponsored by the American Federation of Arts in New York and circulated abroad under the auspices of the USIS. It was accompanied by a small catalogue with text by Elodie Courter, Director of the Exhibition, and illustrations. Fifty-eight works were accompanied by a selection of books, biographies and autobiographies on the artists in the show. The exhibition traveled to Manchester, Edinburgh and Belfast. TGA 955/1/12/80. I was unable to locate any press reaction to this show.
39 The painters included Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson and the sculptors were David Hare, Seymour Lipton, Rhys Carparan and Ezio Martinelli. The exhibition was held in collaboration with the USIS, under the patronage of the American ambassador, John Hay Whitney, and the works were selected by Richard E. Fuller, President and Director of the Seattle Art Museum. TGA 955/1/12/93. As was the case with American Cartoons, I was unable to find press reviews of the show.
40 This information is taken from an ICA press release for the show. TGA 955/1/12/93.
At the same time, the ICA was equally committed to presenting developments in contemporary British art. *Statements: A Review of British Abstract Art in 1956* was held in January 1957, and *Place* was presented from September-October 1959. The former sought to offer “a cross-section of current abstract art and aesthetics in Britain” and included Terry Frost, William Gear, Roger Hilton, Kenneth and Mary Martin and Victor Pasmore, as well as Hepworth, Heron, Davie and Nicholson.\(^{41}\) The catalogue for *Statements* was written by Alloway, and included the claim that many of the artists in the show had turned away from the School of Paris to embrace examples of American art.\(^{42}\)

*Place* (Fig. 35) featured work by three British abstract painters—Richard Smith, Ralph Rumney and Robyn Denny—who collaborated to create “an environment of paintings.” They placed their abstract canvases of solid colors on the floor of the gallery, propped against the walls, resulting in the viewer being, in effect, surrounded by the paintings.\(^{43}\)

Thomas Crow has discussed the interaction in *Place* between the artwork presented as an environment and the viewer’s interaction with that environment. Crow suggested that, “faced with this environment made of paintings, the viewer gradually sorted out its logic by moving through it and absorbing its visual cues.”\(^{44}\) Spectators were meant to make a passage through the show, and the rationale for the artists’ choices included “contemporary science fiction’s vivid simplification of cybernetics, as well as

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\(^{41}\) This information comes from the exhibition announcement. TGA 955/1/12/83.

\(^{42}\) For instance, Alloway cited the example of Alan Davie, who, “though the creator of a personal style, received his initial impetus from the earlier work of Jackson Pollock.” The catalogue contained statements by all twenty-one artists in the show but no images. ICA Ephemera, Yale Center for British Art (YCBA) Archive.

\(^{43}\) *Place* was organized by the artist Roger Coleman. This information is taken from the exhibition card. TGA 955/1/12/110.

popular sociology’s hypotheses about new mental states induced by technological change and information bombardment in the modern city.”

Crow’s observations about *Place* help to explain T. W. Earp’s commentary on paintings by Pollock and some of the other Abstract Expressionists shown in the Tate’s 1956 MAIUS exhibition. In these works, Earp argued, “the forces bombinate in a void” and “nothing is communicated beyond an apparently fortuitous anarchy of pigmentation.”

The *Times* reviewer concluded that the show did not fully explore the implications of the artists’ ideas and suggested that “a comment is attempted and brought off on the nature of American abstract painting, to which all three artists are deeply in thrall.”

Whether intentionally or not, Smith, Denny and Rumney’s collaborative environment of canvases with all-over color displayed aesthetic similarities to the color-field paintings of Rothko and fellow American artists Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Clyfford Still and Robert Motherwell.

One of the most memorable and highly discussed ICA-related exhibitions of the 1950s was *This Is Tomorrow*, shown at the Whitechapel from August – September 1956. The exhibition consisted of twelve separate environments, each created by a team of one architect, one painter and one sculptor. Thus, the exhibition’s goal was to promote collaboration among different fields of artistic practice while countering

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45 Ibid.
specialization of the arts. Among the dozen environments in the show, John Voelcker, John McHale and Richard Hamilton created a memorable “funhouse” for their collaborative offering.49

This is Tomorrow marked the final activity of the ICA’s Independent Group members, who had ceased to meet in 1955, but the exhibition is most remembered today for Hamilton’s iconic proto-Pop Art work, Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing? (1956, Fig. 1).50 This collage consisted of images clipped from McHale’s cache of American magazines brought back to London after his fellowship at Yale during 1955-56.51 American artist and critic Thomas Lawson has made an interesting observation regarding one visual component of Hamilton’s interior scene.

While the abstract pattern on the floor, meant by Hamilton to be a small carpet, was actually an aerial photograph of sunbathers on a beach, Lawson dubbed it coyly “a nice area rug with an abstract, ‘Jack the Dripper’ pattern.”52 Considering Hamilton’s penchant for using visual puns, could it be possible that the artist included this rug as a coded

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49 Viewers of the second group’s exhibition were assaulted with an array of objects, ranging from optical patterns, photographic enlargements of cinematic imagery, a jukebox playing top twenty hits and Robby the Robot from the 1956 MGM film, Forbidden Planet.

50 Only twelve of the thirty-six participants were IG members. Anne Massey has made an important clarification to the mythology surrounding Hamilton’s iconic work. She pointed out that the collage was not exhibited as a work of art because it was never originally intended as such. It was reproduced in black and white as one of the twelve posters representing Hamilton’s group and was printed in the catalogue. Massey suggested that it was only in later years that the collage came to be regarded as a fine art object in itself. See Massey, The Independent Group, 117.

51 Allegedly, Hamilton’s wife and Magda Cordell, a founding member of the IG and the wife of McHale, looked through the magazines to find things that Hamilton said he wanted for the collage. This information comes from the film, Fathers of Pop (1979), directed by Julian Cooper and written/narrated by Reyner Banham. Hamilton has denied this claim and maintains that he created the collage. It appears plausible that the collage was a collaborative effort, but Hamilton has garnered virtually all of the recognition for this artwork.

reference to one of Pollock’s gestural abstractions on view at the Tate earlier in the year?53

When I recently questioned Hamilton about this, he denied this suggestion. He replied:

I can't say that I was thinking of Pollack [sic] at all with this contribution to my collage. I was simply doing my best to find some way to represent humanity in general. Having included Adam and Eve it seemed proper to show people en masse. A detail from a postcard showing thousands of people on a beach seemed to fit the bill. A carpet was the best way to get the masses into the image.54

In any case, despite Hamilton’s intentions, it cannot be denied that the pattern of the rug/photograph (coincidentally) resembles one of Pollock’s abstractions.55

In his introduction to the catalogue for This is Tomorrow, Alloway claimed that “no single exhibition since the Festival [of Britain in 1951] has given so wide a survey of British creative power in the arts, made so wide a sampling of creeds and methods, nor offered the visitor so full a range of aesthetic experience.”56 Attendance at the show ranged around 20,000 visitors, and, as one critic concluded, it provided a “witty, intelligent, and, on the whole, an effective reminder that art is or should be a part of life and not merely an aesthete’s unearthly paradise.”57 Only a few years later, Londoners would encounter the work of American artist Robert Rauschenberg, who stated more explicitly that art could be part of life, and the boundaries between them could be blurred.

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53 David Mellor has suggested that the tin of ham on the table is meant to be a pun of the artist’s name: HAMilton. See Mellor, “A ‘Glorious Techniculture’ in Nineteen-Fifties Britain: The Many Cultural Contexts of the Independent Group,” in Robbins, The Independent Group, 235.
54 Email from Richard Hamilton, August 21, 2008.
55 Hamilton also revealed in his email that “there was one item in the This Is Tomorrow installation that was deliberately [a] reference to Pollack [sic] and that was a dribbling of fluorescent paint stimulated by ultra-violet paint light on the floor of a space capsule section in the structure. It was not directly related to a Tate show. We [were] aware of Pollack [sic] some years before that.” Ibid.
Denis Bowen’s New Vision Center Gallery (NVCG), located near the Marble Arch area of London, embraced work in the style of American Abstract Expressionism in the late 1950s, but did not exhibit work by Pollock, Rothko or their contemporaries. The gallery exclusively featured an array of British and foreign avant-garde artists who painted in an abstract idiom. Most of the painters and sculptors shown were neither internationally renowned nor were they familiar to most Londoners, but Bowen’s commitment to presenting work that was not widely known in Britain indicated his desire to promote an international exchange of ideas within the London art community. For example, the gallery hosted *Form Plus Experiment: An Exhibition of Non-Figurative Art Organised by the Free Painters Group* in February 1957, which contrasted constructivist and Abstract Expressionist-style work. The artists in the show included Bowen, Halima Nalecz and Frank Avray Wilson (co-founders of the gallery with Bowen), in addition to Peter Stroud, Albert Berbank and Robin Craig. Their collective goal was to “present an extreme contrast in visual experience by grouping works of similar style, contrasting the intellectual and rational force of the constructivists with the emotive potency of the abstract expressionists.” The exhibition, however, was poorly conceived and was largely deemed a failure by critics. The organizers believed that constructivist work involved “contemplative understanding,” whereas the appeal of Abstract Expressionism was “primarily immediate and irrational,” but this opinion indicated a misunderstanding of the latter style. Abstract Expressionism could indeed elicit visceral responses from viewers, but artists like Rothko—and even Pollock, as in *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender*  

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58 For an excellent account of the artists who exhibited at the New Vision Centre Gallery, see Margaret Garlake’s *New Vision: 56-66*, London: Warwick Arts Trust, 1986.
59 Denis Bowen Papers, TGA 8724/1/16.
60 One critic called the entire show “chaos.” Michael Kaye, *Sennet*, February 26, 1957.
Mist) (1950)—also invited visual contemplation; their works could be as equally intellectual as instinctive, a fact this exhibition failed to grasp. As was often the case throughout the 1950s in both Britain and America, critics and the public were still learning how to understand and grasp Abstract Expressionist art.

Mark Rothko would receive added attention from British critics as his work appeared more often in exhibitions around London during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Following upon Pollock’s initial appearance in the ICA’s Opposing Forces exhibition in 1953 and Rothko and Pollock’s inclusion in the Tate’s Modern Art in the United States in 1956, the smaller exhibitions of American art discussed in this section were valuable and much needed opportunities for the British to continue to engage Abstract Expressionist art from the United States. As has been established, one of the most common complaints among British critics up through the late 1950s was lack of access to this type of work in England. In 1958, the Whitechapel Art Gallery rectified this situation by offering one of the most important exhibitions of American art in postwar London, a Jackson Pollock retrospective.

Pollock’s Whitechapel Retrospective

In 1956, Bryan Robertson, Director of the Whitechapel, visited the U.S. on a two-month State Department grant. While in New York, he met MoMA’s Porter McCray.61 Robertson already possessed a strong affinity for the U.S. and its culture, and he visited

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61 Janeen Haythornthwaite, “American Art and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the 1950s and 1960s,” unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Southampton, October 1998, 29. The Whitechapel Archives have remained closed and inaccessible since November 2006 while I have been working on this dissertation. Therefore, I have had to rely more heavily on secondary as opposed to primary sources. The archive is scheduled to re-open in spring 2009.
numerous critics, curators and artists while traveling around the country. Robertson persuaded McCray to agree to an exhibition of Pollock’s work to be shown at the Whitechapel in London two years later. *Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956* was organized by MoMA’s International Program (IP), led by McCray, under the auspices of the International Council (IC) and was first shown at the São Paulo Biennale in 1957. The exhibition later traveled to London and then to Paris, where it was shown in conjunction with *The New American Painting* in January 1959. MoMA curator Frank O’Hara selected the twenty-nine paintings and twenty-nine drawings and watercolors that covered Pollock’s activity from 1937-1956, and Sam Hunter, Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA, wrote a lengthy catalogue introduction to the artist’s work.

Hunter also compiled information about Pollock for a press release issued by the American Embassy in London prior to the exhibition’s opening, which served consequently as a useful source of information about the artist for British critics. Hunter overtly championed Pollock as one of America’s most innovative, revolutionary painters:

In the beginning Pollock had felt his artistic mission was to disorient, to unsettle and to promote disorder, and with an unexampled savagery he proceeded to make of his art a kind of wrecking enterprise. His first exhibited work looked somewhat like a battlefield after a heated engagement, strewn in this case with the corpses of Picasso, Masson, Miro, and fragments of American Indian art. The accelerating tempo of his revolt led him to search for a total freedom that would transcend his artistic sources and his own mood of crisis. He created finally an

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62 The São Paulo show contained thirty-four paintings and twenty-nine drawings and watercolors by Pollock. Since he was part of the U.S. representation, there were also works by five painters—James Brooks, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline and Larry Rivers—and three sculptors—Seymour Lipton, Ibram Lassaw and David Hare. MoMA Archives, ICE-F-35-57.

63 The exhibition was called *Jackson Pollock et La Nouvelle Peinture Americaine* in Paris. It was shown in Rome, Basel Amsterdam, Hamburg, Berlin and London before traveling to Paris. Because of space limitations, the Whitechapel could only show Pollock’s work. Ibid.
autonomous and sovereign artistic reality, powered by its own dynamism, monumental in its scale and breadth of freedom.\textsuperscript{64} Based on these comments, it appears that Hunter turned his initially negative impression of Pollock’s art into more positive opinion, but his lofty rhetoric is worthy of further consideration. Hunter created a somewhat mythic impression of Pollock as a native “savage” who initially fought against the European grain and eventually supplanted his influences by developing his own unique and “monumental” aesthetic. As a champion of American art, it was obviously in Hunter’s own interest to present such a depiction of Pollock’s career. By the time British audiences encountered it, Hunter’s characterization of Pollock as transcending his artistic roots had already solidified his reputation as one of America’s most autonomous and original 20\textsuperscript{th} century painters.\textsuperscript{65} These assertions made by Hunter also countered the notion widely debated within the British press that Pollock’s work was derivative of European art. In fact, Hunter intentionally emphasized that Pollock and his fellow Abstract Expressionists had moved beyond the stylistic trappings of their European forebears to create a progressive and distinctly original version of American art.

After much anticipation, \textit{Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956} opened at the Whitechapel on November 5, 1958 and ran until December 14th. It was the first in a sequence of shows at this east London gallery devoted to contemporary American artists following a series of exhibitions of work by Barbara Hepworth, Piet Mondrian and Nicolas de Staël. The gallery promoted Pollock as “the first American painter to decisively influence


\textsuperscript{65} Hunter’s catalogue essay, discussed below, provided important biographical information about Pollock’s life and career.
European painting of the present decade” and labeled him one of the most important painters in contemporary art. Of further significance was the fact that Pollock’s Whitechapel exhibition was the first one-man show of a contemporary American abstract artist in London.

Installation of the work in this show was supervised by McCray, Robertson and Stefan Munsing of the USIS at the American Embassy, London. Robertson hired Trevor Dannatt, an English architect, who built a system of moveable, free-standing rectangular breezeblock walls that cleared more space for the placement of works on the permanent side walls; furthermore, Dannatt’s semi-permanent walls also allowed paintings to be displayed singly throughout the show and not stacked or banked (Fig. 36).

The architectural historian Victoria Newhouse has recently published a useful, detailed analysis of the installation and layout of Pollock’s work in the Whitechapel’s galleries. Newhouse suggests that Dannatt’s unique solutions helped to reify Robertson and McCray’s curatorial vision of the show. For example, Dannatt used fabric overhead and carpeting on the floor: “Strips of white muslin were stretched in a taut zigzag from the entrance to the back of the gallery, covering the central portion of the ceiling, to reduce the twenty-foot height [of the gallery]. A cross axis was created by a broad strip of carpeting that ran the width of the gallery at midpoint.”

67 Haythornthwaite, 4.
68 Victoria Newhouse, “Jackson Pollock: How Installation Can Affect Modern Art,” in Art and the Power of Placement, New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005, 142-211. Four white cinderblock walls, 5 ½ feet high, extended from the center of the rectangular gallery. Two long walls were offset from but parallel to one another and two shorter ones were perpendicular to them. Canvases were presented chronologically beginning with the wall to the right of the entrance. As detailed by Newhouse, 175-6.
69 Newhouse, 176. Haythornthwaite, 34, notes that the muslin strips were also used to hide the potentially distracting blue ceiling of the gallery.
also observed, “the walls’ sturdy masonry conveyed a feeling of permanence compared with the flimsy temporary panels on which canvases were routinely mounted.”

Displayed in this unique environment, Pollock’s work appeared more vibrant than it had in the Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States* exhibition two years earlier. “Pollock’s work,” as Newhouse suggests, “had a greater sense of scale in the [Whitechapel’s] contained and somewhat fussy interior than it did in open, unarticulated museum spaces” like the Tate’s. The opportunity to see a large quantity of his works, coupled with Dannatt and Robertson’s inventive solutions for displaying it, offered British viewers a new perspective on Pollock’s art than in their previous encounters with his canvases in 1953 and 1956 had provided. Seen in the context of a one-person show, the presentation and display of fifty-eight paintings and drawings by Pollock commanded a new and different form of attention from critics reviewing the exhibition. The *Observer*, in fact, made mention of the unusual installation walls in its photographic caption of the show (Fig. 37).

Pollock, who was by then deceased, had his first solo exhibition at MoMA two years earlier. Intended as a mid-career retrospective, it became a memorial after his tragic death in August 1956. In New York his paintings were hung primarily on white walls and spread out over a wider area in the museum’s large galleries (Fig. 38), whereas, in the Whitechapel, the muslin fabric used behind several canvases helped soften the texture of the side walls, which consequently created a visual interaction between

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70 Newhouse, 175-6. The fate of the walls after the exhibition closed will be discussed in chapter six.
71 Ibid., 175.
73 The New York exhibition took place from December 19, 1956 – February 3, 1957 and was curated by Sam Hunter.
background textures and the paintings.\textsuperscript{74} The works were also located in closer proximity to each other in the Whitechapel’s smaller gallery space than at MoMA, which could have potentially affected, either for better or for worse, the viewing of Pollock’s large, all-over compositions in the former space.\textsuperscript{75} At any rate, the innovative display aspects of Pollock’s showing in London, Newhouse claimed, caused his works “to radiate violence and energy” because they seemed to dissolve the surfaces of the walls.\textsuperscript{76}

Dannatt’s innovative use of breezeblock walls, fabric and carpeting, coupled with Robertson, McCray and Munsing’s astute curatorial vision, created a distinctive view of Pollock’s work.

Pollock’s paintings on view at the Whitechapel elicited varying reactions from critics. Before examining these reviews, a consideration of what other ways the image of Pollock’s life and art became shaped during his retrospective exhibition in London is in order. Other means were provided for understanding the work of this highly-discussed American painter besides impressions initiated by British press coverage of his exhibitions.

In addition to Sam Hunter’s press release and British press reviews of the Whitechapel show, other related forms of media, such as Hunter’s exhibition catalogue, Hans Namuth’s 1950 film of Pollock painting and BBC radio programs devoted to the retrospective, played a role in Britons’ reception of America’s best known Abstract Expressionist painter. The cover of the Whitechapel’s catalogue featured Pollock’s \textit{One},

\textsuperscript{74} This observation was made by art historian and independent curator Marco Livingstone. See Livingstone, “Reshaping the Whitechapel,” 33.

\textsuperscript{75} In the smaller Whitechapel gallery, viewers would have been in close proximity to Pollock’s canvases, but it would appear to have been more difficult than at MoMA for a viewer to position him/herself at further distances from the paintings.

\textsuperscript{76} Newhouse, 176.
1950 (Fig. 39) and the frontispiece overleaf (Fig. 40) carried the same Namuth photograph of Pollock that would be used the following year in the Tate’s *The New American Painting* exhibition catalogue (Fig. 27). In addition to Pollock’s biography, exhibition history, bibliographic information, seventeen black-and-white illustrations of works and a five-page catalogue essay written by Hunter, a single quote from Pollock was also reproduced in the catalogue. An excerpt from his answer to a questionnaire, printed in *Arts and Architecture* in 1944, comprised a response by the artist to the query of whether or not he felt there was an “American” type of painting. “An American is an American,” Pollock stated, “and his painting would naturally be qualified by that fact, whether he wills it or not. But the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country.” In this statement Pollock seemed to suggest that the notion of a “British,” “French” or even “American” type of art was irrelevant; instead, he emphasized the universal nature of problems facing contemporary painters. This choice of quote may suggest that the Whitechapel sought to establish a genealogy for Pollock more catholic than the Tate Gallery’s emphasis on the strictly American roots of Abstract Expressionism. Consider in this context the title of the Tate’s showcase of painting from the Museum of Modern Art. MoMA’s choice of “The New American Painting” had a different connotation as opposed to, for instance, “New Painting from the U.S.” Pollock’s quote also contrasts with emphasis by much of the British press throughout the 1950s on qualifying the new style of painting from New York as either European-derived

77 Haythornthwaite, 33, notes that costs were reduced by the decision to model the catalogue off of the one produced for Pollock’s show at MoMA in late 1956. MoMA also insured the show and helped pay for transportation costs. In addition, the Arts Council offered the Whitechapel £250 towards the expenditure involved in organizing the show, as well. Letter from the Arts Council Secretary General to Bryan Robertson, November 12, 1958. Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 29/61.

78 Answer to a questionnaire, written by Pollock and published in *Arts and Architecture* 61 (February 1944): 61.
or distinctly American. At any rate, no doubt Pollock would have agreed that the experiences of a painter working in the U.S. could indeed differ vastly from those of an artist working in Paris, but he emphasized his belief in the need to move beyond national boundaries or schools of art and to focus instead on common aesthetic challenges faced by contemporary painters.79

Hans Namuth’s film of Pollock painting, produced in November 1950 and premiered at MoMA’s memorial exhibition in 1956, was shown for the first time in London while Pollock’s exhibition was on view at the Whitechapel.80 Robertson screened the film after giving a public lecture on Pollock at the Arts Council on November 20, 1958,81 and the film also aired on the BBC television program “Monitor,” broadcast on November 23rd. In addition, the BBC’s publication The Listener printed a still from Namuth’s film just over a week after it aired (Fig. 41).82 Robertson’s screening at the Arts Council and the BBC’s broadcast of Namuth’s film offered Londoners actual documentary evidence of Pollock’s often misunderstood or mischaracterized painting techniques, further evolving Pollock’s image in Britain. This critical process had begun

79 I do not mean to imply that Pollock was making a profound philosophical statement; rather, his quote contrasts with many American and British critics who assessed the “Americanness” of Abstract Expressionist painting. Clement Greenberg, in fact, wrote an article in 1955 that he called “American-Type Painting.” Ellen G. Landau has noted in her anthology on Abstract Expressionist texts that, in the revised version of Greenberg’s essay published in 1958 in Art and Culture, Greenberg claimed he got the term ‘American-type painting’ from British critic/artist Patrick Heron. Greenberg’s essay originally appeared in Partisan Review 22 (Spring 1955): 179-96, and is re-printed in Landau, Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, 198-214.

80 Namuth aimed to capture footage of Pollock painting on film and in color, as opposed to photographic black-and-white stills. The footage featured Pollock working outdoors on a canvas placed on the ground and Namuth also filmed Pollock painting on glass. He filmed from underneath the glass to capture Pollock dripping paint onto the surface.

81 Robertson’s lecture was also accompanied by an (unknown) painting. MoMA Archive, ICE-F-35-57, V.35.7. According to Haythornthwaite, 37, Robertson’s talk and film were so popular that people were turned away; as a result, Robertson delivered a second performance. Robertson was later commissioned by Thames and Hudson to write a monograph on Pollock that was published in 1960. He traveled to the U.S. to meet Pollock’s wife, the artist Lee Krasner, who assisted him with the book.

with the first appearance of three of Pollock’s paintings in the ICA’s *Opposing Forces* exhibition in 1953, continued with the inclusion of one of Namuth’s black-and-white photographic stills of Pollock painting in *Parallel of Life and Art* and culminated with Namuth’s film appearing in London in 1958 in conjunction with the artist’s Whitechapel retrospective. As has been shown, the Tate’s two major exhibitions of American art, *MAIUS* in 1956 and *NAP* in 1959, provided the British public with actual examples of Pollock’s style of painting; yet, the documentary photographs and film were needed for important insight into his painting techniques. The image of Pollock as ‘Jack the Dripper,’ wildly and haphazardly flinging paint onto a canvas, had often been the source of critics’ ire or misunderstandings. Those who saw Namuth’s film and photographs could see proof that Pollock’s methods and paintings were not born from chaos, but instead were the result of Pollock’s carefully controlled, rhythmic actions.83

During the Whitechapel retrospective, the BBC broadcast two radio programs that provided a forum for critics to discuss the paintings and techniques of Pollock. Even with the advent of television, radio was still an important source of news and information

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83 British art historians Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock have addressed Namuth’s documentation of Pollock painting, arguing that Namuth created “a body of photographic rhetoric” that constructed an image of Pollock, one they refer to as a “mythic subject.” Since his paintings were in demand in 1950, they suggest that Pollock realized the importance of his work and, therefore, allowed Namuth to photograph him. As a result, Pollock’s complicity suggests that Namuth’s photographs were a matter of self-promotion and good publicity for the painter. They also believe that Namuth’s photographic rhetoric was a form of propaganda, pointing out that MoMA was not only circulating Abstract Expressionist work as propaganda, Namuth’s images of Pollock were circulated as propaganda, as well. I disagree with these assertions. Orton and Pollock cite a letter from McCray to Robertson written on November 11, 1957, in which he notified the latter of the availability of Namuth’s film. They believe that this gesture was part of MoMA’s grand propaganda conspiracy à la Kozloff or Cockcroft. However, it is plausible that the film could have been offered as an educational or informational tool to supplement the exhibition similar to the catalogue, which, based on their logic, would have also been a propaganda tool. While I agree with Orton and Pollock’s claims that Namuth’s photographs constructed a particular image of Pollock and the photo sessions should not be treated merely as innocent reportage, I do not agree with what they believe were the underlying motivations to produce these photographs and why they were disseminated. They also fail to address the reception of Namuth’s “constructed image” of Pollock. See Orton and Pollock, “Jackson Pollock, Painting and the Myth of Photography,” in *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, 165-76.
for the British public in the late 1950s. The program *Comment* aired on November 7, 1958, on the BBC’s show *Third Programme*. It featured the British critic and curator David Sylvester discussing Pollock’s exhibition of paintings at the Whitechapel.84 Sylvester set out to dispel myths of Pollock as “the great wild man” or “an iconoclast,” instead calling these labels “half-truths whose oddities have been magnified out of all proportion.”85 Repeating a standard cliché, Sylvester admitted that chaos was the first impression that viewers, including he himself, tended to receive upon seeing Pollock’s abstract canvases for the first time: “The first time I saw some Pollocks—it was in 1950—I thought they were incoherent nonsense, messy, uncontrolled daubs, pots of paint flung in the public’s face.”86 He now admitted he was wrong. After seeing the Whitechapel exhibition, Sylvester was convinced that Pollock was indeed a master of handling paint and organizing color. “What the exhibition has made me see,” he confessed, “is the serenity of his art” and “the interplay of improvisation and control,” the latter being far greater than many people thought.87

As seen in the previous chapter, Patrick Heron claimed in his 1956 review of *MAIUS* that Pollock’s treatment of pictorial space in his work was bothersome, leading the British painter and critic to conclude that the American artist’s lack of planes parallel

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84 David Sylvester, *Comment*, no. 81, was broadcast from 8:00 – 8:20 p.m. The information from these programs comes from unpaginated typewritten transcripts of broadcasts from the BBC Archives in Reading, England.
85 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
to the canvas itself created a strange denial of spatial experience. Sylvester now proposed an astute counter-interpretation to Heron’s impression, suggesting that “the absence of focal points is intended to make us get into the painting in imagination, not to try to see it over there, away from us but to enter it and explore it.” Where Sylvester saw a pleasantly inviting absorptive effect in Pollock’s paint skeins, Heron had sensed a disturbing gravitational pull that drew the viewer’s eye into a transparent vortex or web. Heron could not see beyond the bothersome optical effect of Pollock’s unstable pictorial surface; Sylvester, on the other hand, transcending the painting’s surface, entered the work optically through the faculty of imagination. Sylvester also pointed to the “all-over” quality of Pollock’s canvases and suggested that a viewer standing before one of his poured works was not a spectator but rather a participant: “With a Pollock we create the perspectives as we move about the painting,” which is not a finished product but rather “a living organism” that is evolving continually. The responsibility for meaning and experience in Pollock’s art thus shifted from the artist to the viewer: “To look at a Pollock over a period of time,” Sylvester believed, “is not to acquire a deeper understanding of a finished thing but to observe and to assist in its growth.” This indication of a shift in responsibility for finding meaning in an artwork would also appear in the critical dialogue surrounding Johns and Rauschenberg in the early 1960s.

The comments and observations on Pollock that Sylvester made on the BBC’s Third Programme were certainly some of the most discerning by a British critic up to that

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88 Heron observed that “one never comes up against a resistant plane” and added that “one’s eye sinks deeper and deeper into the transparency of the mesh.” Heron, “The Americans at the Tate Gallery,” *Arts Digest* (NY), March 1956, 16-17.
89 Sylvester, *Comment*.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
The BBC followed up his *Comment* with *The Critics*, a program featuring a panel discussion of subjects from literature, film, theatre and fine art. Pollock’s Whitechapel exhibition was one of the topics discussed on the show that aired on November 23 and 27, 1958. This particular panel included Paul Dehn (Chairman), Margaret Lane (Literature), Fred Majaldany (Film), Philip Hope-Wallace (Theatre), James Kennaway (Radio) and Basil Taylor (Art). Sylvester had opined that Pollock’s works in the Whitechapel show evoked serenity and elegance, but Taylor argued that these same aspects diluted their quality. He saw an apparent paradox in work that was so aggressive and iconoclastic, but, “so soon after the shock, becomes ingratiating, even charming and loses that disquieting, unnerving power and ambiguity” that characterizes the best painting. Taylor discerned an aesthetic of violence in Pollock’s turbulent webs of paint, but he also admitted that there was a great deal of conscious deliberation in the methods the artist used to create those results.

Margaret Lane questioned the success of Pollock’s finished canvases. She concluded that Pollock utilized a visual language that was too private or cryptic, which resulted in his inability to reach his viewer beyond any immediate aesthetic impression: “You can get a feeling of pleasure, a decorative sense of satisfaction from them, but I find it difficult to believe that they can really evoke emotion because they are not appealing to

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94 Ibid.
any of the associative things in one’s mind.” 95 Although the tone of her review was somewhat negative, Lane’s comments reveal how she wanted to read the work, supporting the notion that Pollock’s works were shifting the ways in which artworks were received in Britain. For Lane, despite Pollock’s talent as a designer and colorist, the lack of any discernable content or meaning in his compositions ultimately precluded the artist’s ability to connect with his audience on an emotional level.

Basil Taylor concurred, suggesting that the future of abstract works like Pollock’s that conveyed nothing more than an immediate “sensational experience” or decorative appeal would depend on whether or not they could offer viewers “other kinds of experience which one finds in other sorts of paintings.” 96 Taylor, however, failed to specify what types of experiences or paintings would fulfill these criteria. The Critics panel was in general agreement that Pollock’s work lacked deeper meaning below the surface appearance of his drips and spatters of pigment.

Ten years earlier, a group of internationally renowned critics, authors, dealers and curators had assembled for a special roundtable discussion on modern art published in *Life* magazine. 97 The comments and conclusions of The Critics panel were somewhat similar to those of the *Life* panelists when they addressed the merits and failures of Pollock’s art. For instance, although they did not specifically cite Pollock, the *Life*

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 “A Life Roundtable on Modern Art,” *Life* 25, no. 15 (October 11, 1948): 56-79. The panelists included Clement Greenberg, James Fosburgh (*Life* adviser), Meyer Schapiro (art historian), George Duthuit (editor of *Transition Forty-Eight*, Paris), Aldous Huxley (author), Francis Henry Taylor (director of Metropolitan Museum), Sir Leigh Ashton (director of Victoria & Albert Museum), R. Kirk Askew, Jr. (NY art dealer), Raymond Mortimer (British critic), Alfred Frankfurter (editor of *Art News*), Theodore Green (professor of Philosophy, Yale), James Johnson Sweeney (author/lecturer), Charles Sawyer (dean of Yale’s School of Fine Arts), H.W. Janson (art professor), A. Hyatt Mayor (curator of prints, Metropolitan Museum) and James Thrall Soby (MoMA’s Chairman of Painting and Sculpture).
panelists tackled the prevalent use of private symbolism in modern artists’ works. Alfred Frankfurter, editor of *Art News*, warned in *Life* that, “by giving license to every kind of private symbol, every kind of private experience, as the basis for a style, we are setting up a real cult of unintelligibility—unintelligible ever to the followers of the school who practice it,” which revealed, in the U.S., a tension in the act of reading the artwork.\(^98\) Frankfurter’s point was repeated in Lane’s allegation of Pollock’s inability to connect with his audience. Furthermore, speaking on behalf of his fellow British critics, Raymond Mortimer disparaged the lack of availability of Pollock’s work in England.\(^99\) By 1958, critics in the U.K. were still pointing to a dearth of access to Pollock’s work, a situation the Whitechapel’s Pollock retrospective helped to remedy.

After the exhibition opened on November 5, 1958, *The Critics* panel discussion, David Sylvester’s observations on *Comment*, Hans Namuth’s film shown by Bryan Robertson and by the BBC, as well as the Whitechapel’s catalogue published on occasion of his exhibition, all aided in the dissemination of information about Pollock, enabling the British public and press to develop a better understanding of his art than was possible five years earlier. The paintings and drawings on view were themselves the best indication of Pollock’s stylistic evolution, but the comments cited above point to the fact that the terms of assessing his paintings were changing in the U.K. The retrospective traced chronologically Pollock’s development as a painter and featured works in his semi-figurative abstract style of the early-1940s (*Male and Female*, 1942), paintings in

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 76.

\(^{99}\) Mortimer noted that “it is painful for us, coming from abroad, to be asked to give snap judgments on paintings unfamiliar to us.” He called Pollock’s painting, *Cathedral*, which was being discussed by the panel, “a rather frightful escape into the exploration of texture.” Ibid., 70. Greenberg thought *Cathedral* was “a first-class example of Pollock’s work, one of the best paintings recently produced in this country,” and Sweeney admired the painting’s “spontaneity,” “freedom,” “expression,” “sense of textured surface” and “linear organization.” Ibid., 62.
his classic drip/poured style (Out of the Web, 1949) and the Black Paintings of the early 1950s. Absent, however, were the works made in the 1930s when Pollock was first developing his own style after studying with the American Regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton.\textsuperscript{100} It is unclear why Hunter did not include a few examples from Pollock’s early career, which would have illustrated Hunter’s discussion in the catalogue of the influence of Benton, Albert Pinkham Ryder and the Mexican muralists’ on Pollock’s work. Three years later, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Marlborough Fine Art Ltd. would exhibit Pollock’s early work, thus providing an important glimpse of his artistic roots missing here.

Not surprisingly, the British press devoted a substantial amount of media coverage to the Whitechapel’s first solo exhibition of a contemporary American abstract painter. Images of Pollock in the act of painting or installation photographs of the Whitechapel exhibition were published in British Vogue (Fig. 42), the Observer (Fig. 37), East London Advertiser (Fig. 43) and News Chronicle (Fig. 44), and these captured the attention and curiosity of gallery visitors around London as well as press from all over Great Britain.\textsuperscript{101} For example, The Glasgow Herald reported that Namuth’s film shown on the BBC’s “Monitor” on November 23 had boosted to new heights the already record attendance at the show: there was an ever steadier stream of viewers after this program aired three weeks past the show’s opening.\textsuperscript{102} This paper also observed an interesting phenomenon elicited by Pollock’s exhibition: “To these enthusiasts from the West End,”

\textsuperscript{100} There was one work from the 1930s in the exhibition: Flame (1937).
\textsuperscript{101} Vogue (Britain), November 1958; Observer, December 7, 1958; East London Advertiser, November 21, 1958; “He Just Dripped and Flicked Paint,” News Chronicle, November 13, 1958. Like many reviews cited throughout this dissertation, these references are from newscloppings that did not include page numbers.
\textsuperscript{102} “Provocations Pollock,” Glasgow Herald, November 26, 1958. Haythornthwaite, 37, points out that average daily attendance for the show was 439, and, due to the high attendance figures, the show was extended for an additional two weeks.
of London, who were the typical gallery-goers, “are now added East-enders whose previous indifference to the revolutionary art show in their midst has been stimulated into active attendance by television-promoted curiosity.”

The Listener acknowledged the success of the show’s publicity, saying that the film confirmed that Pollock’s works should be seen in person: “The Monitor item sent me, as it must have done others, to Whitechapel to see for myself: and this is just the kind of good television can do.”

The success of the publicity was also reflected in the diversity of the crowds, thus confirming Robertson’s belief that all Londoners, not just West Enders, were ready to see contemporary American art. Furthermore, as Haythornthwaite has observed, the publicity attention and diverse crowds indicated that the way for the gallery’s director to put Whitechapel on the map was to exhibit American rather than European art.

Pollock’s exhibition prompted critics to comment as to how unusual it was to see such radical art on the east end as opposed to viewing it in a West End gallery or a major museum exhibition.

The London Times stated its belief that the Whitechapel’s showcase of Pollock’s art was an important affirmation that this painter’s work was more than just gimmick or ‘action.’ In a November 30th Times article, “London Views Advanced American Painting of Today,” Sylvester reiterated what he had expressed on the BBC’s Comment program a few weeks earlier. “A myth had evolved in this country,” he observed, “of Pollock as a hairy-chested iconoclast in a trance, creating at random a frenzied chaos which was

103 Ibid.
104 “Critic on the Hearth,” The Listener.
105 Haythornthwaite, 25.
106 The Evening Standard observed on the day of the exhibition’s opening: “It will be interesting to see how the East End public, for whom the gallery was built, react to these astonishing examples of new American folk-lore.” “Whitney in Whitechapel,” Evening Standard, November 5, 1958.
beautiful or messy, according to your taste.”¹⁰⁷ The show revealed, on the contrary, that Pollock was “a far more controlled artist than not,” despite Pollock’s own statement in Possibilities, an American magazine.¹⁰⁸ As Sylvester suggested, Pollock’s adversaries would be hard-pressed to argue that he did not know what he was doing while working. In another Times article by an anonymous critic, Pollock was dubbed the “Hero-Figure of Action Painting” and it was emphasized that his work possessed grace and refinement. The Times’ suggestion that Pollock and other American artists were producing art with an “innately refined and aristocratic quality” was a far cry from British critics’ proclamations a few years earlier that American artists were provincial or derivative.¹⁰⁹ Critics were moving beyond hearsay and now devoting serious attention to Pollock’s paintings.

In the Sunday Times, John Russell identified what he believed to be the true nature of the problem surrounding critical discussion of Pollock’s work. In Great Britain, too much emphasis had been placed on automatism, which “has been stressed to a point at which Pollock’s entire activity has been given the air of a stunt.”¹¹⁰ Automatism, accident and haphazardness had been both misrepresented and overemphasized by many local critics as Pollock’s modus operandi, and Russell urged viewers to avoid these same mistakes. Sylvester and Russell pronounced that the exhibition yielded strong evidence that Pollock’s designs were careful and conscientious, contrary to the myth of Pollock’s

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Pollock had stated: “When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have been about.” Possibilities 1 (1947-1948): 79.
¹⁰⁹ “The Hero-Figure of Action Painting,” Times, November 11, 1958.
violent creative act of painting.¹¹¹ There was a palpable tension between critics’
(mis)conceptions of Pollock’s Action Painting drip technique and the reality of his
completed canvases, as a third Times article pointed out: “It is their grace and sensibility
which makes the deepest impression, and a quality which seems peculiar to Pollock of
intense nervous vitality contained within a large and flowing expansiveness.”¹¹²

Once critics began to transcend early perceptions about Pollock, there still
remained difficulty separating the art (and the man) from the myths. Many turned to
Hunter’s exhibition catalogue and press release for further information about the artist.
The publication What’s On cited Hunter’s catalogue essay in which he called Pollock an
artist who painted “as a skillful cowboy twirls his lariat.”¹¹³ The Glasgow Herald
referenced Hunter’s press release analogy that Pollock’s paintings were like “a battlefield
after a heated engagement, strewn in this case with the corpses of Picasso, Miró and
fragments of Red Indians.”¹¹⁴ Despite greater praise on the part of some reviewers,
Pollock still attracted his share of negative attention. The Evening Times asserted in a
November 8th article, called “Artistic Anarchy,” that Pollock had “opened the floodgates
to the charlatan, the fool and the misguided,” while Robert Wraight of the Star

¹¹¹ Other publications agreed with Sylvester and Russell’s assertion that Pollock possessed a strong sense of
control while he painted. The Scotsman’s critic actually counted the number of yellow splashes in each
half of Pollock’s Summer Time (1948) and determined that each half had the same number. “It was
immediately obvious,” he concluded, “that the painter knew what he was doing.” Scotsman, November 17,
1958. For similar opinions, see Eric Newton, “Jackson Pollock at the Whitechapel Art Gallery,” Time and
Tide, November 15, 1958, and Winefride Wilson, “Critics’ Columns: At the Whitechapel Gallery,” Tablet,
November 29, 1958.
¹¹³ What’s On, November 14, 1958. Hunter’s text appears in Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956, London:
Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1958, 12. As previously noted, Alloway had attempted in July of the same year
to counter the idea that all Action Painters represented “the man of action,” such as the Western film hero,”
which shows that Alloway was not quite successful in shifting the terms of the debate.
sarcastically branded his style the “chuck-it-on technique.” Critics’ references to anarchy or chaos represent the perception that Pollock’s seemingly chaotic works were visual manifestations of the social anxieties and tensions of the modern era.

The artist’s most vociferous adversary in England led the pool of critics determined to counter Pollock’s achievements. In “The White Cell,” published in the *New Statesman* on November 22, 1958, John Berger did acknowledge for the first time that Pollock was a highly talented artist, but he denounced him nevertheless as one whose art contributed to the disintegration and decadence of Western culture. Berger suggested that Pollock “imaginatively, subjectively, isolated himself” from the outside world and produced paintings that “are like the pictures painted on the inside [white cell] walls of his mind.” Berger saw Pollock’s appeal in the artist’s invitation to “forget all, sever all, inhabit your white cell and—most ironic paradox of all—discover the universal in your self, for in a one-man world you are universal!” His final comment was a seemingly equivocal description of Pollock’s work: “These pictures are meaningless. But the way in which they are so is significant.” Berger’s former total condemnation of Pollock’s work in his 1956 article, “The Battle,” had yielded to an open acknowledgment of Pollock’s painterly skill as a draftsman and a concession that the

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115 “Artistic Anarchy,” *Evening Times*, November 8, 1958. Robert Wraith, “Chuck-It-On Paintings Fail to Impress the East End,” *Star*, November 12, 1958. In a July 1, 1958, preview article, *The Star* questioned the validity of Pollock’s paintings qualifying as art by suggesting that “the results might be good wallpaper or carpet designs but his admirers insist that they are pictures.” “Drip, Drip...,” *Star*, July 1, 1958. A similar observation was made by the American author Aldous Huxley. Participating in *Life* magazine’s roundtable discussion of modern art, Huxley observed that Pollock’s work “seems to me like a panel for a wallpaper which is repeated indefinitely around the wall.” “A Life Roundtable on Modern Art,” 62.

116 It should be remembered that Berger was an ardent proponent of social realist art and, therefore, largely condemned abstract art in general.


118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.
artist was indeed not an iconoclast.¹²⁰ For Berger, a proponent of social realist art, Pollock’s introspection and inability to connect with the outside world was an issue (and indeed a deficiency, according to a BBC The Critics broadcast heard around the same time as Berger’s review). However, this disconnection could be re-viewed as a positive attribute when interpreted through Berger’s white cell metaphor.¹²¹

British critics proposed other creative ways of ‘reading’ Pollock’s work. In order to characterize the effect of looking into Pollock’s web of paint skeins, Simon Hodgson of the Spectator invoked an interesting psychological metaphor. “These coils,” he suggested, “all these endlessly moving arabesques of paint, have each the same emphasis, and this sameness of focus, from top left to bottom right, can lead, if not to hallucination, to a sort of neurasthenic dazzle.”¹²² The American neurologist George Miller Beard defined ‘neurasthenia’ in 1869 as a medical condition whose symptoms included fatigue, anxiety and depression resulting from exhaustion of the central nervous system; the same symptoms were relevant responses to the technological and media advances of the postwar era. As Hodgson suggested, Pollock’s seemingly endless lines of paint could possibly produce a visually exhausting effect on a viewer’s eyes searching for a focal point. However, Hodgson qualified this observation by stating, “the heavy areas of color overlaid with a nervous and elegant tracery marry perfectly and produce images of power and a strange, somewhat matter-of-fact lyricism.”¹²³ As Hodgson and Berger’s reviews indicated, by 1958, London writers were producing unique ways of interpreting Pollock’s

¹²¹ The Critics was recorded on November 20 and broadcast on November 23 and 27.
¹²³ Ibid.
work, and these interpretations added to the already existing body of positive and negative criticism in the British press.

Lawrence Alloway likewise developed his own interpretive strategy for understanding Pollock’s abstract canvases. In an article written for *The Listener*, Alloway described the experience of viewing Pollock’s pictures in terms similar to those he would apply to Rothko’s works in the Tate’s *NAP* exhibition the following year. As we know, he would argue in relation to Rothko’s work that it projected visually into what he called the viewer’s “literal participative space.”124 But Alloway actually initially coined a version of this phrase after seeing Pollock’s paintings in 1958, writing: “His pictures appear to advance into our space rather than invite us into theirs,” which Alloway called an “enveloping-space effect.”125 Thus, both he and Hodgson developed useful interpretive strategies that assisted British viewers in understanding the seemingly complex art of America’s most avant-garde painter, thereby changing positively the terms of British art discourse concerning advanced American painting.

Providing another key statement on contemporary American art, Patrick Heron published an article in the January 1958 issue of *Arts*, ten months before Pollock’s exhibition at the Whitechapel would open. Here, Heron, addressing the relationship of American and European art, past and present, argued that indifference in Britain to art from the U.S. came to an end after seeing the single room of abstract art in the Tate’s *MAIUS* exhibition. Consequently, Heron suggested, “for the time being, America is

present in our [Britons’] consciousness with the same force and frequency as Paris.”

His qualification, “for the time being,” seemed to be a foreshadowing of Pollock’s exhibition less than a year later, which seemingly leveled the playing field between Paris and New York. After the Tate’s NAP exhibition, New York would definitely be in the forefront. Heron also questioned whether or not members of the current generation of American painters were an isolated phenomenon, asking: “Are new names once again emerging more frequently in Paris, and even London, than in New York? Has the Pollock generation not really got true successors in America?”

With the emergence of Johns and Rauschenberg in London at the turn of the decade, Heron’s queries would soon have answers.

Jackson Pollock’s exhibition seen at the Whitechapel was also shown in Paris in conjunction with the New American Painting. It is interesting to compare a few selections of the French reception of Pollock’s Abstract Expressionist idiom as a way to conclude this chapter.

Compared to the buzz produced in London, Pollock’s works were far less positively or warmly received in Paris. André Chastel of Le Monde saw in them a fundamental difference between Europe’s and America’s approach to painting: “In Europe we have returned … to the notion of the ‘object’ and the privileges of painting treated as such; in the United States … men have discovered the facility and the strangeness of the very act of painting.”

Chastel’s comment reflects Harold

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127 Ibid.
128 Jackson Pollock et La Nouvelle Peinture Americaine was shown at the Musée National d’Art Moderne, January 16 – February 15, 1959. These reviews are from the MoMA Archives, which contains a very small selection of French press coverage compiled and translated by the International Council. See ICE-F-35-57, V.35.8.
Rosenberg’s emphasis on technique or action in Pollock’s work, implying that Pollock’s emphasis on indexicality drew its meaning from personal anxiety.

Contrary to British critics such as Sylvester who perceived beauty and lyricism in Pollock’s paintings, the critic for *Carrefour* warned against looking for such positive qualities: “Do not look for form, light, composition or even a thought or a feeling of beauty or poetry in the work of Pollock. For this he cares very little.”¹³⁰ Furthermore, this author once again claimed that his paintings were a direct manifestation of Pollock’s temperament, suggesting that, “as his temperament was passionate, his painting is subjective, uncontrolled, irrational.”¹³¹ Georges Boudaille’s assessment in *Lettres Françaises* was more reserved and potentially positive; he argued that “Pollock is not, under any circumstances, the great master they would like us to admit, but in the probable evolution of contemporary art, he will without doubt have the place of a daring forerunner.”¹³² Most French critics were, however, less willing to acknowledge the importance or significance of this American painter.

Yet Pollock did garner the approbation of a few French critics who were not totally dismissive or skeptical of his work. The publication *Combat* referred to Pollock as the hero of the Musée’s exhibition and suggested it was useless to attempt to trace the origins of his art because they began in the Western Hemisphere, not in Europe.¹³³ However, this anonymous critic, like his peers, viewed Pollock’s life (or personality) and his art through a psychological lens: “The visible evolution during the years goes from daring anxiety to the secret acceptance of this despair: from *The She-Wolf* to

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¹³¹ Ibid.
The prevalence and popularity of existentialist philosophy in France undoubtedly influenced Parisian critics’ conflation of Pollock the man and his work, seeing his art primarily as a manifestation of his apparently tortured personal existence and his attempt to come to terms with the general anxieties of the modern era. At any rate, certain French critics were willing to concur that Pollock was indeed the leader of a new generation of American painters, although, as Pierre Imbourg suggested sarcastically, only because “it is necessary … for the other side of the Atlantic to have a great painter to compete with Cézanne or even Utrillo.”

In the spring of 1959, Porter McCray requested that lenders to the Tate’s *New American Painting* exhibition extend their loan(s) so that the exhibition could also be shown at MoMA after its European tour. In a letter to art dealer André Emmerich dated March 17, 1959, McCray drew the following conclusions about the American exhibitions that had recently circulated throughout Europe:

> After seven previous showings *The New American Painting*, to which you so generously lent from your collection, is now on view at the Tate Gallery in London, its last appearance in Europe. Throughout its tour … the exhibition met with critical acclaim and popular success. It is not an overstatement to say that this exhibition, along with the Jackson Pollock show, has brought about a new evaluation of American art in Europe.

By the end of the 1950s, it had become evident that contemporary American painting, led by Jackson Pollock, was being seen in a very different light by British critics than earlier in the decade. After the Whitechapel exhibition opened, Alloway observed how Pollock and his style of Action Painting were previously “misunderstood as anarchistic

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134 Ibid.
ejaculations of paint all over the picture surface.” Faced with so much more evidence presented by the east London exhibition in 1958, he pointed out, “critics have dropped the myth of Action and plumped for a myth of Order. Pollock is, now, an exponent of order, of control, with an ‘aristocratic’ ability to put paint in the right place.” As analysis in this chapter indicates, Alloway’s claims were more akin to wishful thinking.

Conclusion

The Tate Gallery’s Modern Art in the United States, Paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and New American Painting exhibitions, the ICA’s activities, ranging from Opposing Forces to Some Paintings from the E.J. Power Collection, the Redfern and New Vision Centre Gallery’s exhibitions and, of course, the Pollock retrospective at the Whitechapel all allowed the British critics and public to evaluate more closely the nature of cultural export from the U.S. On November 6, 1959, seven months after NAP closed, the Times Literary Supplement published an extensive, feature-length article titled “The American Imagination: Taking Stock: A Scattered Abundance of Creative Richness.” This article attempted to analyze American imagination and national character through an assessment of the various arts in the U.S., and it featured, at the beginning, one of Hans Namuth’s photographs of Pollock painting in his studio. Perhaps this photograph was intended to supplement the British assessment of American character espoused in the text:

Here, then, is one of the great contradictions in the American experience. And its results will often be found in American arts and letters. Side by side with vigour will be morbidity; action will be matched with frustration; death will deny life. This will surely be true at both the

conscious and subconscious levels of the American experience and will be similarly evidenced in both levels of the American imagination.\textsuperscript{138}

The duality between randomness and control often puzzled British critics as they attempted to reconcile the myths and legends about Pollock, an allegedly wild, out-of-control artist who seemingly cast pigment onto his canvases, with evidence from the photographs, film and his paintings that suggested Pollock’s work was not chaotic. Widespread stories of the artist’s battles with personal problems such as alcohol fueled many of these perceptions; it was even more difficult to rectify these lurid accounts with the lyrical elegance of Pollock’s arabesques of paint.

To most Londoners who had been following avant-garde art from the U.S. in the five years since the Tate’s \textit{Modern Art in the United States} exhibition, it was evident by 1960 that there were definitely American qualities unique to Abstract Expressionist art. The painterly scale, freedom, innovation, vigor, ambition, variety and duality in Pollock and Rothko’s art were characteristics the \textit{Times Literary Supplement} identified as uniquely American and, consequently, were inherent to their work. The American imagination, it concluded, “is sometimes grotesque, often naïve. But it is never pale, never passive. It has the vigour, the variety and the creativity to justify anyone’s attention.”\textsuperscript{139} At the start of the next decade, British critics’ attention would turn to the second generation of the New York School, led by Rauschenberg and Johns, and responses to their art will be the focus of the final part of this study. As Heron had wondered about possible successors to Pollock and Rothko’s generation, it remains to be seen whether or not the British would regard these two younger artists as worthy.


\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
Johns’s debut in London, as well as Rothko’s major Whitechapel retrospective and Pollock’s Marlborough exhibition, will be assessed in the next chapter.
On March 11, 1960, John Rothenstein, director of the Tate, announced to the English press the formation of an American Friends of the Tate group. The *Times* devoted three articles to this event. In one of them, Rothenstein pointed out that there was not one single representative permanent collection of American painting in England or anywhere else outside of the U.S. As such, the goal of this new group was to provide a “window for American art” by establishing the first broadly representative permanent collection of American avant-garde painting and sculpture outside of the U.S. to be placed on view for the British public as well as international tourists visiting London.1 As Rothenstein noted, the gallery’s exhibitions of American art in 1946, 1956 and 1959 had been only temporary. London, he said, needed a permanent presence of art from the U.S. because “the sending of modern American works to Europe in recent years has revealed the existence of an active avant-garde, which has captured the imagination of many European artists. It can no longer be supposed the role of the United States merely to be the patron of European art: it has something to contribute creatively.”2

Most Britons were aware of earlier American masters such as Benjamin West, James Abbot McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent, who were expatriates who had worked in England. But Rothenstein also highlighted the importance of the native school of Americans who had “stayed home to paint.”3 The British had sampled American

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1 “British Window for American Art: Friends of the Tate Group Formed,” *Times*, March 11, 1960. The group was headed by J.H. Whitney, American Ambassador to Britain, and was incorporated in the U.S. as a non-profit cultural organization. The group wished to assemble a collection of about fifty American works for the Tate’s permanent collection and wanted to have a special room in which to showcase it. However, the Tate already had works by American artists in its collection, acquired with the assistance of the British Friends of the Tate group.  
3 Ibid.
artistic exports during the 1950s, but it was now time, he said, to establish a permanent presence of American avant-garde innovation in London. In the Times’s “Reports from America: New York’s Claim as Modern Art Centre,” exciting developments taking place in New York were confirmed. The MoMA and Guggenheim were being supplemented by smaller galleries popping up all over Manhattan, as well as collectors, banks and companies who were buying contemporary abstract paintings. The paper also cited the Beatniks who were “putting NY on the map” by spurring experimentation with alternative art forms, such as electronic music, jazz and film.

Abstract Expressionism had been the dominant idiom (or synonym) for avant-garde art from the U.S. in 1950s Britain, but challenges by a new generation of artists to the hegemony of New York School artists such as Pollock and Rothko had already begun in the U.S. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg could be placed in the Times’s category of younger Americans who were experimenting with alternative modes of artistic expression. As Norman L. Kleeblatt has commented recently about Johns, he “was an artist caught between the gestural, action-driven technique of first-generation Abstract Expressionists and the methods of Pop Art,” a situation equally applicable to Rauschenberg. The work of these two men formed a crucial bridge or transition between Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and ‘50s and Pop Art of the 1960s, and

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4 Interestingly, the British Friends of the Tate, not the American group, gifted Jackson Pollock’s painting Yellow Islands (1952) to the Tate, as reported in a letter from Tate Trustee Colin Anderson to a Robert Adeane, June 16, 1961. In another letter, from Norman Reid to Adeane, December 19, 1961, Reid mentioned that the American Friends decided not to give a Jasper Johns painting, choosing instead to donate a Mark Tobey work. However, the British Friends gave John’s O Through 9 (1961) to the gallery that same year. Both letters: Friends of the Tate Gallery Acquisition File, TGA 20/6/1.


these two artists would play dual roles as younger second generation Abstract Expressionists as well as pioneers of Pop practice. The remaining chapters will examine how the work of Johns and Rauschenberg came to be understood in both contexts in early 1960s London. At the same time, attention will be devoted to British responses to exhibitions that also featured Pollock and Rothko in that decade, particularly Rothko’s Whitechapel retrospective in 1961. Additional consideration will be given to the evolution of the reputations of these two men in later years. Comparing the response of British critics to Johns and Rauschenberg’s works, and assessing the ways in which this reaction was affected or influenced by their Abstract Expressionist predecessors, has never before been done. Toward that end, the ICA’s *Mysterious Sign* exhibition held in 1960 will be discussed first. It is not surprising that it was this institution that brought Johns’s work to Londoners’ attention for the first time, much as it had done with Pollock’s art in 1953.

**The ICA’s Mysterious Sign**

*The Mysterious Sign* was curated by English art critic Robert Melville, who wrote regularly for *Architectural Review* and the *New Statesman*. It was held at the ICA from October 26 – December 3, 1960. As Melville declared in the brief catalogue introduction, “the present exhibition is intended to give some indication of the various ways in which the painters of our time have revalued the symbols of written language in the course of developing an art of the sign …”7 The show was international in scope, comprising over fifty paintings created from 1913 to the present day by artists from the

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U.S. and Europe. Pollock was represented by two works in the exhibition. According to the catalogue (Fig. 45), these included *Painting* (1946), a mixed media work on paper from E. J. Power’s collection, and another of the same title, a 1951 ink and watercolor on rice paper loaned by David Gibbs and Co., Ltd.\(^8\) However, more significantly, Johns’s *White Numbers* from MoMA (1957, Fig. 46) was included in the exhibition, marking the debut for this younger artist in a London gallery or museum. The ICA declared in an exhibition announcement that Melville’s show was the first time in London that American artists were represented in strength beside their European counterparts. The Americans’ pictures, it was noted, “are comparatively small and explode the idea that the new American paintings have to be large to be impressive.”\(^9\) By presenting paintings of modest dimensions, *The Mysterious Sign* countered the widespread notion that all new work being created by Americans was large in scale, an impression imparted by the sizable abstract canvases seen in the Tate’s *New American Painting* exhibition the previous year.

Press reviews of Melville’s show were not abundant, but critics who wrote about it were generally impressed with his intelligent survey of the various ways that contemporary artists were utilizing marks, signs and private alphabets in their work. The *Times* praised Melville for explaining how the sign was attaining a new, independent function in present-day painting. The works on view proved “the importance to abstract art of the hieroglyph as a visual convention for communicating or implying meaning

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\(^8\) There were no illustrations of these two works in the catalogue. In fact, only a few works were illustrated. Other artists in the show included the Abstract Expressionists Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Bradley Walker Tomlin and Mark Tobey. Europeans included Jean Arp, Man Ray, Antoni Tàpies, Kurt Schwitters, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Georges Mathieu, Henri Michaux, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Max Ernst, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alan Davie and Peter Blake.

\(^9\) ICA Exhibition Announcement, TGA 955/1/12/123.
without any sort of representation."¹⁰ David Sylvester explained Melville’s theme in
New Statesman as a focus on “the incorporation into twentieth-century painting of letters,
numbers and other conventional signs (arrows and the like), not in the form of
inscriptions but as an integral part of the texture of the painting.”¹¹ Although he did not
mention Johns specifically in his overall assessment of the works in The Mysterious Sign,
Sylvester made comments descriptive of Johns’s White Numbers. The works on view, he
suggested, do not “always entail using real letters but only forms that could be letters,”
and moreover such paintings tend “to rejoice in the ambiguities that arise from using
letters or possible letters—in the mysteriousness of the sign.”¹²

Johns’s deadpan incorporation of everyday, familiar symbols such as letters,
numbers, targets or the American flag into encaustic paintings which seemed to retain
Abstract Expressionist brushwork had intrigued and confounded American critics who
began addressing the artist’s work on the occasion of his first solo exhibition at Leo
Castelli Gallery in New York in 1958.¹³ The ambiguous, liminal quality of Johns’s
paintings of numbers, targets and flags would likewise become the focus of British
critics’ attention in the coming years as Johns was exhibited more often in London.
Melville’s The Mysterious Sign exhibition inaugurated Johns into the London art scene,
and, as John Russell noted in the Sunday Times, the ICA offered a chance to view small

¹¹ David Sylvester, “Figure Painting,” New Statesman, November 26, 1960.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Jasper Johns: Paintings was held at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York from January 20 – February 8,
1958. For reviews of this show, see "Trend to the Anti-Art: Targets and Flags," Newsweek, vol. 51, no. 13
Castelli Gallery earlier in 1960. Jasper Johns was held February 15 – March 5, 1960. For reviews, see
Emily Genauer, "More Good Solo Shows: Jasper Johns Show," New York Herald Tribune, February 21,
but choice works, such as Johns’s, not often shown by London’s dealers.\textsuperscript{14} Just a few years later, Johns would appear in major exhibitions at the Tate and Whitechapel galleries, as a result attracting a large degree of critical attention in the British press.\textsuperscript{15} For the time being, it is significant to note that the ICA, as it had in 1953 with Pollock in the \textit{Opposing Forces} exhibition, offered Londoners their first glimpse of Johns’s equally intriguing and more enigmatic work.

Although most critics did not specifically discuss Johns’s work in \textit{The Mysterious Sign}, he was not completely unknown in Britain prior to 1960. In 1958 the USIS Cultural Affairs Office in London published an Art News Bulletin in anticipation of the Tate’s \textit{New American Painting} exhibition scheduled to open the following year. The Bulletin featured Lawrence Alloway’s “Myths and Continuance of American Painting,” written after his return to Britain from a two-month trip to America financed through a U.S. State Department exchange program. Alloway’s goal in this piece was to debunk myths regarding the image of American painting in London, and his essay included brief references to Johns and Rauschenberg, whose work he had encountered in New York. Alloway pointed out that talk of the demise of American art amongst the second generation of Abstract Expressionists had been greatly exaggerated; on the contrary, he predicted continued achievement among the younger generation. He characterized Rauschenberg as an artist “concerned with the potential of meaning in worthless objects” and labeled Johns a follower of Seurat, based on his sensitive and methodical painterly

\textsuperscript{14} John Russell, “Art Galleries,” \textit{Sunday Times}, November 20, 1960. Johns’s first solo exhibitions in Europe took place in 1959 at the Galérie Rive Droite in Paris (January – March 1959) and the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan (March 1959). He also participated in the 29\textsuperscript{th} Venice Biennale, June – September 1958. \textsuperscript{15} Johns and Rauschenberg were included in the Tate’s \textit{Dunn International} (1963) and \textit{54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade} exhibitions; in addition, each had a solo exhibition at the Whitechapel in 1964. These shows will be examined in subsequent chapters.
“By painting literal images of targets and flags,” Alloway observed perceptively, Johns “plays with the constant properties of familiar signs.” Johns’s “literalism” challenged the very essence of these common signs by pointing to their constantly shifting properties as objects, paintings and/or signs.

American author B.H. Friedman’s *School of New York: Some Younger Artists* was published in London the following year. In it, Friedman and other contributing authors sought to examine the directions in which up and coming contemporary artists, such as Johns and Rauschenberg, were moving. Johns’s *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955), *Broken Target* (1958) and *The Large White Flag* (1955) were illustrated and the New York collector Ben Heller commented on Johns’s work, suggesting that viewers should look at Johns’s canvases more as immediate and direct painting experiences and less as flags or targets themselves. Heller also claimed that Johns forced (or wanted) the viewer actually to look at his paintings as painted objects. However, the reality of their perception was much more complicated. Johns’s depiction of familiar objects posed the problem of whether these were indeed just paintings, copies of the objects themselves or something in between. These complex theoretical issues would proliferate within the British press, just as they had for American audiences, as Johns’s works began to be

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17 Ibid.
18 B.H. Friedman, ed., *School of New York: Some Younger Artists*, New York/London: Grove Press/Evergreen Books, 1959. This book featured entries written by various authors on artists, including the sculptor Richard Stankiewicz, and the painters Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Goodnough, Alfred Leslie, Joan Mitchell, Raymond Parker, Larry Rivers, Jon Schueler, Grace Hartigan, Johns and Rauschenberg. Color and black-and-white images of their works were also reproduced. The text concluded with photographs of the artists. Rauschenberg is shown standing beside one of his combine paintings and Johns is smoking while sitting in front of a target painting.
19 Ibid., 30.
exhibited more often in England. This criticism would become most prevalent during
Johns’s major Whitechapel retrospective in 1964, which will be discussed in the final
chapter.

Pollock’s “Revisionist” Exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art, 1961

A year after Johns and Pollock were featured in The Mysterious Sign, the latter
was given an important solo exhibition that has been somewhat overlooked in Pollock
scholarship. As established in chapter one, British Abstract Expressionist scholar Jeremy
Lewison characterized Pollock metaphorically—but incorrectly—as a “waning star” by
the time The New American Painting came to the Tate in 1959. Given the coverage that
his 1958 exhibition at the Whitechapel received, Lewison argued, Pollock “was no longer
news” after 1959. Indicated by the in-depth examination of criticism in chapter four,
Lewison’s arguments require revision. As long as Pollock was perceived to be the leader
among Abstract Expressionist painters in the U.S., British critics continued to devote a
large portion of their attention to his painterly style and techniques. This was true even
after the Whitechapel retrospective and, as we have seen, by the turn of the decade,
Pollock was still commanding the attention of writers who reviewed exhibitions that
included his work.

One of the most important such shows opened in June 1961 at Marlborough Fine
Art Ltd., a commercial gallery located in the heart of London’s West End. Jackson
Pollock: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours from the Collection of Lee Krasner

20 David Myers wrote Rauschenberg’s entry. His combine paintings Lincoln (1958), Monogram (1959) and
Trophy (1959) were illustrated. Myers’s entry is not very substantive or worth quoting.
21 Jeremy Lewison, “Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe,” in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe
"Pollock is significant in the history of Pollock’s shows in London. It offered a revised view of the Pollock Londoners had seen in 1958. The exhibition was organized by Lawrence Alloway, and, as the Times suggested in its headline “Violent Side of Pollock: What Early Works Reveal,” this show “corrected” incomplete impressions viewers had received three years earlier. Because Alloway’s exhibition included work by Pollock from the 1930s, the Times noted, this exhibition was “far more revealing about the early work than Whitechapel was, and to know the early work well is to see the later abstracts, the famous ‘drip’ paintings of the late 1940s to the mid-1950s (Pollock died in 1956), in a different light.” This exhibition, in fact, elicited somewhat of a reversal of opinion of Pollock’s works among British critics. In 1953 Pollock had been viewed with skepticism and hesitation due to the seemingly violent appearance of his drip paintings, but after his retrospective in 1958, critics frequently praised the beauty and elegance of the very same works. As previously shown, once this came about, Pollock’s painterly methods were considered more controlled and calculated than anyone initially thought. By 1961, British critics’ “discovery” of paintings from Pollock’s pre-drip period that actually evoked aggression elicited a return to discussions of apparent rage or fury in Pollock’s work. This analytical direction was more similar to when his work had first been seen at the ICA or in the Tate’s MAIUS in 1956.

The Marlborough exhibition was, in fact, weighted heavily toward examples of Pollock’s works done prior to his mature style beginning in the late 1940s.

23 Ibid.
24 The Tate acquired Pollock’s Naked Man with Knife (c. 1938-40) in 1981, a painting depicting a violent scene of three interlocking figures. The Tate’s acquisition (presented by Frank Lloyd) could affirm the notion that the British were indeed interested in and fascinated by the darker side of Pollock’s works.
Approximately thirty paintings and drawings from the 1930s were selected by Alloway, Krasner and her consultant, gallerist David Gibbs, who assisted in making arrangements for the Marlborough show. Pollock’s *Self Portrait* (1933, Fig. 47), *Woman* (undated, Fig. 48), the Mondrianesque *Interior with Figures* (1937, Fig. 49), his Picasso-inspired *Masqued Image* (1938, Fig. 50) and multiple drawings were representative works shown from this early period. In combination, these selections allowed the viewer to assemble a portrait of Pollock’s search for his own artistic identity.25

Numerous paintings and drawings from the early 1940s included in Alloway’s exhibition exemplified Pollock’s progression toward his mature style. These included *Bird* (1941), *Stenographic Figure* (1942, Fig. 51), *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* (1943, Fig. 52), *Night Mist* (1944) and *The Wooden Horse* (1948). Only one work, titled in the catalogue as *1950*, qualified as a representative drip painting, signifying Alloway’s commitment to presenting viewers with the unfamiliar side of Pollock. The exhibition concluded with a few samples of Pollock’s so-called “Black Paintings” from 1951 and 1952.26

Faced with all of this new evidence, G.S. Whittet argued in *Studio* that Pollock “became a larger more complete artistic personality by light of the [Marlborough] exhibition,” which “revealed the fury and the fervor that precedes those elegant arabesques of dripped pigment.”27 The *Times* reiterated Whittet’s point, also suggesting that the early works showed “a Pollock of much greater violence than is usually credited by people who see, in the tangled linear webs and skeins of these late paintings, not their

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25 Krasner estimated the dates of the pre-1938 works.
26 These works, painted on unprimed canvas, were primarily black in color and more figurative than his previous series of drip paintings.
extreme nervous tension but only the gracefulness of endless arabesque and a generally ‘decorative’ function.”

The Marlborough’s exhibition of Pollock’s early works offered an alternative paradigm to British critics’ more moderate discussions of the beauty or elegance of the drip paintings on view in the Whitechapel’s 1958 retrospective. As a result of this show in 1961, it became entirely plausible for Londoners to view the “classic” poured works also in light of the visceral “tension” of the drawings and paintings made by Pollock in the 1930s and early 1940s that led up to their creation.

Pollock, by now considered a quintessential gestural Abstract Expressionist, was also being reconfigured in the U.S at the start of the decade. For instance, the American critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried now employed interpretive strategies that placed value on formal issues in Pollock’s works and began to realign him as a color field painter. As Ellen G. Landau has pointed out, Greenberg had found a way by 1958 “to reconcile Pollock’s more tonal gestural style with the primacy of flatness valued by his newly endorsed color field artists.”

Greenberg was developing his new brand of critical ideology to promote “Post-Painterly Abstraction,” painting that, he asserted, stressed flatness and opticality. Landau observes that Michael Fried, a student of Greenberg, likewise downplayed notions of action and process as valued by Greenberg’s rival critic Harold Rosenberg in the 1950s. She writes, “Fried wanted instead to credit Pollock with the creation of homogenous optical fields, addressed to eyesight alone,” thus better positioning Pollock as a prototype for Greenberg’s Post-Painterly Abstraction as opposed

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to a Rosenbergian Action Painter.31 While Pollock’s work was being realigned within the polemical debates in American art criticism in the early 1960s, British critics were returning to the visceral, Rosenberg-inspired existential qualities of Pollock’s work that had dominated their own criticism in 1953 and 1956. Viewing the pretext for Pollock’s mature style in the Marlborough show, Londoners developed a dual perception of Pollock as a painter of elegant beauty and violent aggression. As noted, previously examined criticism has indicated that this duality resulted in a dialectical tension that frequently remained unresolved.

Alloway’s essay for the Marlborough exhibition catalogue provided an extensive written supplement to the works in the show, thereby offering a better understanding of Pollock’s work for those who read it. He traced Pollock’s life and development as an artist, focusing on the main periods of Pollock’s artistic production: the 1930s, 1942-46, 1947-50, 1951-52 and 1953, culminating with his death in 1956. Alloway’s detailed analysis of Pollock’s sources and influences, from Benton and Regionalism to Jungian psychoanalysis, provided London viewers and writers with an informative context for understanding unfamiliar work from early in Pollock’s career. Robert Melville, in fact, came right out and stated that the Marlborough catalogue provided the British with a useful art historical analysis of Pollock’s art. He went so far as to state that it was the most thorough study of Pollock’s work ever attempted.32 However, Melville’s comments, either intentionally or not, overlooked Bryan Robertson’s first British

31 Ibid., 27. As Landau also notes, Michael Fried posited these ideas in an essay written to accompany Three American Painters—Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella, an exhibition he organized in 1965 for Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum. Part of the essay was reprinted as “Jackson Pollock,” Artforum 4 (September 1965): 14-17.
monograph written on Pollock and published the year before. More importantly, though, Robertson and Alloway’s analyses were equally significant contributions to early British scholarship devoted to Pollock’s work.

As a result of Alloway’s writing, Jungian psychoanalysis became an active part of the British critical dialogue over Pollock’s art. The *Times*, for instance, now observed that Pollock’s work was full of private ideograms and motifs suggested by subconscious Jungian imagery (as well as Surrealism, which had a more serious history in Britain).³³ Hugh Graham of the *Spectator* argued that, “as an active disciple of Jung, [Pollock] trusted that his intensely personal visions would have the general validity of every emanation from the collective unconscious.”³⁴ Referring again to Alloway’s observations, Graham pointed out to readers of the *Spectator* that the artist’s early works proved that “the totemic and the mythological” were important subjects that mattered to Pollock in his early stage.³⁵ The Jungian context proved to be a useful tool for Britons to decipher the visual syntax of Pollock’s early work.

British critics also referred frequently to sources of inspiration for Pollock’s early works, as identified by Alloway: Cubism and Picasso of the late 1930s, Mexican muralists, such as José Clemente Orozco, and American Indian art. One of the most substantive developments in Britons’ understanding of Pollock’s work was cited in the *Times*: “What this early work brings out, in addition to the expressionist fury, and what

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³⁵ Ibid.
the choice of sources confirms, is the amount of figuration in Pollock’s art.”36 This fact had not been as evident prior to the Marlborough’s exhibition.

In his Sunday Times article, “The Agony of Jackson Pollock,” John Russell agreed, noting that visitors to Marlborough would discover a new side of Pollock—“a painter more often figurative than abstract”—and he concurred with other critics that this exhibition offered an important chance to evaluate Pollock’s indebtedness to Jungian analysis, Picasso and the Mexican muralists.37 Reviewers, it seems, were delighted to discover these aspects in works never before been seen in London. Of the sixty-two paintings in the show, Russell believed only two (unspecified) works had been shown previously in Britain, which lent added importance to gaining a fresh look at Pollock.38 Michael Strauss, writing for Burlington Magazine, likewise applauded the show’s display of unknown and unfamiliar pieces, and he called Krasner’s comprehensive personal collection of her husband’s oeuvre “one of the most momentous documents of American art.”39 If Pollock’s “star” had begun to wane after 1958, as Lewison suggested, then what actually had faded was his reputation as the quintessential abstract painter.

As a result of the Marlborough exhibition and Alloway’s accompanying scholarship, Britons’ superficial perception of Pollock as ‘Jack the Dripper” yielded to more critical discussions of the myriad facets of his work. Jackson Pollock: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours from the Collection of Lee Krasner Pollock provided the British with a revisionist perspective on Pollock, making this overlooked exhibition an

38 Ibid.
extremely important event. By showing examples of Pollock’s early work, the Marlborough exhibition also fostered a more complete image of Pollock and his body of work, revising the one that Londoners had begun to perceive in 1953.

**Rothko’s Whitechapel Retrospective, 1961**

Three years after Pollock’s highly successful retrospective at Whitechapel, Mark Rothko was featured in the second solo exhibition for an American abstract artist at this London gallery. *Mark Rothko: A Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings, 1945-1960* was held at Whitechapel from October 10 – November 12, 1961, the first single showing of the artist’s work to be seen outside of the U.S. Peter Selz, Curator of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA, selected the forty-eight paintings in the exhibition, which was held under the auspices of the museum’s International Council (the Arts Council also contributed a modest grant towards installation of the show). Rothko’s show had originally been held at MoMA January 18 – March 12, 1961 (Fig. 53) and, after its London showing, it was circulated throughout Continental Europe.

There were notable differences between Pollock and Rothko’s solo exhibitions at the Whitechapel. First of all, the latter was the result of close consultation with the artist, who supplied detailed advice and instructions on wall color, lighting, height and groupings of work. As Janeen Haythornthwaite points out, Rothko and his wife visited

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40 It should be mentioned that Pollock was included in a group exhibition at Marlborough the following month. *Some Aspects of 20th Century Art* was held from July – August 1961. However, there is scant primary source material or information available for this exhibition. After searching through all of the British publications I have been citing thus far, I was also only able to locate one review that mentioned the show. As a result, I have chosen not to include this show in my discussion. Hopefully, at a future date, I can uncover any available information.

41 MoMA Archive, ICE –F-66-61. Porter McCray of the IC and Stefan Munsing of the USIS in London also assisted with the show.

42 The exhibition traveled to Amsterdam, Brussels, Basel, Rome and Paris.
London for ten days and he was involved in both the hanging and opening of the show. Because Pollock had died in a tragic car accident two years before his big exhibition in London, there was no possibility of his collaboration with the gallery. Second, there were variations in the layout of the two shows. Rothko’s paintings, as Marco Livingston has observed, “were hung very low on both the permanent load-bearing walls and on temporary screens so that the entire space was saturated in, and activated by, the surfaces of floating color (Fig. 54).” Pollock’s works had been placed higher than Rothko’s on the same gallery walls (Fig. 55). Trevor Dannatt constructed the semi-permanent walls for both exhibitions, but the ones he built for Rothko’s exhibition were taller than those made for Pollock’s show in order to accommodate Rothko’s largely vertically-oriented canvases. The temporary walls for the Pollock show had, in fact, been removed for an exhibition of Henry Moore sculpture in 1960 and apparently were never used again. Dannatt also opted not to utilize strips of white muslin to cover the central portion of the ceiling for Rothko as he had for Pollock’s show in order to reduce the height of the gallery. The rectangular bands of color in Rothko’s paintings were complemented by the ninety-degree angles of the gallery’s walls and ceiling.

43 Janeen Haythornthwaite, “American Art and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the 1950s and 1960s,” unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Southampton, October 1998, 45. She also noted that Rothko suggested only minor alterations to the hanging of the show: he wanted three works lowered by one inch to bring out a band of yellow at the base of each painting. Rothko stressed to Robertson the importance of not hanging the paintings in a line and to have a wall for each painting where possible.
45 Haythornthwaite, 45. The catalogue for Rothko’s show indicated that the architectural setting of the gallery was specially adapted by Dannatt and Alan Irvine, also an architect.
46 Ibid. Haythornthwaite indicates that temporary walls “were once again built” for Rothko’s exhibition. Without access to the Whitechapel’s detailed archives, it is impossible to determine with absolute certainty if Pollock’s walls were destroyed and discarded or if the material was in some way re-used to construct Rothko’s walls. Given that three years separated each artists’ exhibition, it appears plausible that new material was used to build Rothko’s walls.
By the time it closed in November 1961, Rothko’s exhibition had attracted close to 9,000 visitors. Bryan Robertson made an interesting observation regarding Rothko’s show compared to the Pollock retrospective held three years earlier. In a Whitechapel publicity report, Robertson pointed out that Pollock’s show had drawn double the number of visitors compared to the final attendance figures of Rothko’s exhibition, but he noted that “comparison would be unfair as Pollock had a much larger reputation in England. Rothko attracted a more specialized public, very notably from artists and students.” In addition, as Haythornthwaite points out, “there was not such extensive press for Rothko as there had been for Pollock; Rothko was not as well known in Britain as Pollock, hence there was less local interest.” Lower attendance figures and less press coverage might lead to the conclusion that there was a general lack of British interest in or enthusiasm for Rothko’s show, but this was certainly not the case. As the first and highly touted of artists in the Whitechapel’s series of solo American shows, Pollock’s shadow would loom large over all subsequent presentations. Rothko’s serene rectangles of vivid color may have appeared more ‘reserved’ than Pollock’s swirling webs of paint skeins, but it would be wrong to assume the former’s paintings were deemed more esoteric or specialized.

The successive exhibitions of Pollock and Rothko in this east London gallery definitely shared certain similarities. As indicated by the title of Rothko’s exhibition, a decision was made to omit work prior to 1945, a situation that Bryan Robertson lamented in his catalogue preface. This choice, he noted, made it hard for Londoners “to gauge the

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47 Whitechapel publicity report, MoMA Archive, ICE-F-66-61, V.58.4.
48 Haythornthwaite, 46.
artist’s handwriting in its entirety.”

Unlike Pollock’s Marlborough exhibition featuring examples of his early works, no works from the 1920s or ‘30s were included in Rothko’s Whitechapel show; the resultant lack of a complete picture of Rothko’s development, particularly his Surrealist roots, was as deficient as Pollock’s Whitechapel showing, which featured only one painting from the 1930s, had been three years earlier. Selz’s catalogue essay, written for Rothko’s MoMA exhibition seen in New York earlier in the year, did help to remedy this situation by providing background information about the first sixteen years of Rothko’s artistic career. For instance, Selz identified Surrealism as “a liberating instrument for Rothko,” as it had proven to be for many American artists, and he stated that it was Rothko’s interest in Surrealism that led to an exploration of myth.

The catalogue also re-printed an article written by Robert Goldwater on the occasion of the MoMA showing, entitled “Reflections on the Rothko Exhibition,” an excellent review of MoMA’s show. Goldwater provided critical formal analysis of and contexts for understanding Rothko’s works, thereby complementing Selz’s contribution.

These two essays, as Robertson observed, combined “to give us a fair indication of Mark

49 Bryan Robertson, “Preface,” Mark Rothko: A Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings, 1945-1960, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1961, 5. Robertson did not indicate exactly whose decision it was not to include work from early in Rothko’s career. This choice was likely made by Selz and Rothko.

50 Selz, “Mark Rothko,” Mark Rothko, 16, cited Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, Joan Miró and Max Ernst as being influential Surrealists for Rothko.

51 Robert Goldwater’s “Reflections on the Rothko Exhibition,” originally appeared in Arts 35 (March 1961): 42-5. It is re-printed in the catalogue, Mark Rothko, 21-5. The Whitechapel catalogue comprised a biographical note, lists of Rothko’s solo and group exhibitions, a bibliography and illustrations of all of the paintings (five color photographs). The New York and London catalogues were virtually identical, except that, in the MoMA version, a photograph taken by Herbert Matter in 1960 of Rothko wearing a suit jacket was included. The London version featured a different ‘portrait’ of the artist—a photograph of Rothko in a button down shirt lighting a cigarette. This was taken by Bernard Gotfryd from Newsweek magazine, as indicated by the catalogue.

52 For example, Goldwater observed of the projective quality of Rothko’s paintings, “Their projection from the wall, and the shadow this projection casts, bringing them away from the wall, are essential to their unity.” On the largeness of Rothko’s canvases, he offered this explanation: “Granted Rothko’s creative obsession, granted his insistence upon a visionary simplicity, and a subtlety within that simplicity, scale is the means he has employed to make his pictures both distant and demanding. He has imposed his vision upon us. Is not this what art is for?” Ibid.
Rothko’s sources of reference and the progress he is making in absorbing and surmounting those references.”\(^53\) Therefore, although the show lacked actual examples of early works, at least the essays aimed to fill the gap in knowledge of Rothko’s artistic roots. But, as Goldwater noted, even still “the movement of development has been underplayed, and the insight of origins has been denied the spectator, who is confronted by a vision without sources,” adding, however, his view that the later paintings remained “sufficient unto themselves.”\(^54\) By seeing his Whitechapel exhibition, British viewers could gain a strong perspective on Rothko’s mature style.

Rothko’s exhibition, like Pollock’s, was discussed at length on the BBC’s program *The Critics.\(^55\)* The panelists on this show airing in October 1961 included John Summerson (chairman), H.A.L. Craig (broadcasting), Pamela Hansford Johnson (literature), Riccardo Aragno (film), Harold Hobson (theatre) and Andrew Forge (art). In conjunction with Rothko’s paintings on view in the Tate’s *NAP* exhibition in 1959, Lawrence Alloway had focused on their projective quality and Forge now invoked Alloway’s concept.\(^56\) Forge suggested to BBC listeners that viewers should approach Rothko’s paintings “simply as coloured surfaces which affect you actively,” observing that “they throb in front of you, they loom in front of you, they penetrate and envelope you like a sustained chord in music.”\(^57\) While Forge’s description ascribed a certain erotic effect to Rothko’s works, Pamela Hansford Johnson perceived an apparent emptiness in the paintings on view, one that, she believed, led “into the abyss of artistic

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\(^{53}\) Robertson, 4.

\(^{54}\) Goldwater, re-printed in *Mark Rothko*, 23.

\(^{55}\) Rothko’s show was recorded on October 12, 1961, and aired on October 15 and 19\(^{th}\).

\(^{56}\) Alloway believed Rothko’s work projected visually into the viewer’s “literal participative space.” See Alloway, “Paintings from the Big Country,” *Art News and Review*, March 14, 1959.

\(^{57}\) *The Critics* program. BBC Archives, Reading. Tape No. TLO 66557.
mysticism.”58 H.A.L. Craig disagreed, arguing that Rothko’s compositions were full of serenity: “There’s a tremendous calm and repose about them. They’re much more classical in feeling than most modern painting.”59 To support this argument, Craig suggested that the experience of viewing Rothko’s works was rooted in nature: it was analogous, he claimed, to looking at the sky, which produces feelings of calm and peace.

While Harold Hobson admitted he had had no type of experience at all after seeing Rothko’s works, Riccardo Aragno recounted that, upon walking into the exhibition, he was immediately struck by Rothko’s use of color. “The pleasure of colour,” Aragno admitted, “was one that I haven’t felt for a very long time, and I think that Rothko is of all the modern painters the one that uses the most beautiful colours.”60 While Aragno’s comments on Rothko’s masterful and optically stunning use of color were contrary to the artist’s own assertion that he was not a colorist, Goldwater clarified this seeming contradiction in the catalogue: “Of course what Rothko means is that the enjoyment of color for its own sake, the heightened realization of its purely sensuous dimension, is not the purpose of his painting.”61 Color was merely a vehicle in Rothko’s greater quest to paint subject matter that was “timeless and tragic.”62

Because of the panelists’ differing experiences upon seeing Rothko’s work at the Whitechapel, in the aggregate their comments expressed on the BBC contributed to

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Goldwater, 22.
62 On June 13, 1943, Rothko, along with Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman, published a brief, manifesto-like statement in the *New York Times*. In it they professed: “We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.” They continued: “We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.” These assertions formed the basis of Rothko’s approach to artistic production throughout his career. Reprinted in Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 149.
dialogue in the British press over its merits and failures. The seemingly projective quality of his paintings and the firsthand experience of viewing them—coupled with critical discussions of Rothko’s use of color and scale and what message his works conveyed—were topics repeatedly addressed by British reviewers in print and on the radio. Although he did not attract the sheer quantity of reviews that Pollock received in Britain, Rothko received more overwhelmingly positive press there.

How did art historians react to Rothko in Britain? Writing for *Burlington Magazine*, the 18th century expert Anita Brookner praised Rothko’s exhibition as dramatic and congratulated the artist for being “a painter of high seriousness and subtlety.” Brookner alluded to the distinction between Rothko’s color field works and gestural painters such as Pollock or de Kooning: “These huge impassive areas of colour … are at the very opposite pole from the excitable and egocentric works of the New York abstract expressionists,” she stated, judging Rothko’s paintings as more serious and meaningful than the work of other New York School artists. However, Brookner was also critical, stating that she experienced “a limited reaction” after viewing Rothko’s exhibition. Her encounter was contrary to Robertson’s claims, which Brookner quotes, that Rothko’s canvases carry the viewer “beyond the end into a new and transcendent

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid. It is not entirely evident what Brookner meant by “limited,” but she added that she was carried to “a sort of spiritual Stonehenge, obliged to concede some strange presmonitory power to vast expanses of dark blue or dark red.” In a bizarre comment, Brookner also claimed that her intention was not to denigrate Rothko’s talent but “to isolate the mild hysteria that his pictures are apt to induce.” She may have been alluding to hysteria over Rothko’s talent or popularity.
being,” a transformation she rejected. She countered: “To claim ‘transcendence’ for an oeuvre that seems to have evolved to a point not only of no return but of no advance may be to anticipate greatness a little too easily.” To Brookner it appeared that, in the paintings on view at the Whitechapel, Rothko had reached a ‘dead end.’ Consequently, she was skeptical as to whether or not he could take his style any further. Brookner feared that Rothko’s work was devoid of any future evolution or stylistic development, a prognostication the artist would, in fact, disprove later in the decade.

The London Times critic was, by contrast, thoroughly won over by Rothko’s “walls of light, into which he is uncannily able to infuse life and significance,” praising “the nature of Rothko’s paintings not to elude criticism but to lead to thought.” The Evening Standard’s critic also wrote a very perceptive review of the show. In “This East End Setting Is Ideal for Rothko,” he or she was initially skeptical of what Rothko’s work would mean for the audience for whom the Whitechapel was founded. Although initially believing that the show would be poorly received, this critic changed his or her mind after seeing it: “Seen en masse, the sincerity and beauty of Rothko’s paintings are

66 Ibid. Brookner actually misquoted Robertson. In the catalogue preface, he had written “transcendent beginning,” not “transcendent being.” Robertson published a rejoinder in Burlington Magazine the following month to correct Brookner’s mistake. He admitted that her “limited reaction” to Rothko’s work was fair, but in defense of the artist, Robertson stated: “The artist’s evolution shows clearly a stripping away of what, for him, are inessentials, and an equally marked building up of fresh sources and principles.” The journal also included a response by Brookner to Robertson’s rejoinder, where she quipped that if Rothko was moving towards a new development of his style, it was up to the artist, not Robertson, to prove that to her. See Robertson, “American Abstract Paintings,” Burlington Magazine 103, no. 705 (December 1961): 513.
67 Brookner, 477.
68 As a testament to Rothko’s ‘greatness,’ the Tate graciously accepted Rothko’s gift of his so-called Seagram Murals in the late 1960s. The paintings date from 1958 and had been intended to hang in the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York City. However, Rothko decided instead to keep the finished works and he gave a group of them to the Tate, where they now hang in the Tate Modern’s “Rothko Room.” The rest of the forty paintings were dispersed to Japan’s Kawamura Memorial Museum and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. This series will also be the focus of the Tate’s Rothko exhibition opening in September 2008.
Admitting it was a mistake to think Rothko was merely interested in the decorative relationship between color and form, this author wrote perceptively, “What I once took for emptiness turns out to be a spacious simplicity. The smallest alteration of design or colour would totally change or ruin the effect of each picture.”

Taking note of Rothko’s skill in using tonal variations within his bands of color, an assertion was made that, as a result, each work was emotionally charged and projected its own distinct mood. Another unnamed Times reviewer was impressed by Rothko’s talented use of tonal changes, stating that his paintings invited long contemplation through horizontal shapes and subtleties of tone. This resulted in “a spiritual experience” or “mystically uplifting and mentally cleansing process.” In the mind of this second critic, Rothko’s work possessed a palpable therapeutic value.

Some newspaper reviewers in London and its environs praised the evident care and thought devoted to the hanging and placement of Rothko’s works at the Whitechapel. Since he came to assist Robertson with the exhibition’s installation, Rothko was also available to speak with reporters. The Yorkshire Post published “A Talk with Mark Rothko” the day after his show opened. Its critic described the experience of meeting the painter. Because he was wearing a business suit, Rothko was described as someone who did not look like the stereotypical practitioner of his profession. Rothko’s besuited attire lent him the air of a businessman or college professor, more intellectual than the average artist. As an affirmation of Rothko’s goal of creating ruminative work, the reporter

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid. This critic was so impressed by Rothko’s work that he or she claimed the American was more original than most British artists: “Rothko is far more original than the sort of abstract painter whom the West End gallery-goer will inevitably compare him with, such as Ben Nicholson or Victor Pasmore.”
quoted Rothko as saying: “You see the pictures. You look at them and you think about them. This is what interests me.” Rothko, the *Yorkshire Post* suggested, sought to create an experience for the viewer that was conducive to thoughtful, reflective contemplation of his paintings.

Eric Newton of the *Manchester Guardian* also saw success in the simplicity and immense size of Rothko’s paintings. He too felt that viewers should succumb to the physical presence of Rothko’s canvases, and he opined metaphorically that Rothko’s works seemed to stare at the viewer like sphinxes: “A sphinx, despite its silent inscrutability, is always charged with meaning, even though it may be a meaning that defies translation into words.” Newton’s equivocal description of Rothko as “a large, magnetic, taciturn simpleton” reflects the complicated reality that some British viewers and critics, while they sensed the “presence” of Rothko’s monumental canvases, were unable to pinpoint or exactly describe that experience. Newton believed that words could not accurately convey the essential quality of Rothko’s paintings. As a result, in his view, they remained silent, as opposed to the signification practice associated with Pollock and Johns.

Of course, the apparent reticence of Rothko’s works did not prevent critics from trying to characterize them. Alan Bowness also sensed the insistent presence of Rothko’s canvases to which Newton alluded. “At Whitechapel,” he wrote, “you have only to watch a girl dressed in red passing in front of them to see the reciprocal effects on colour and shape.” Bowness also pointed to the absorptive effect as the viewer stood before

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76 Ibid.
these paintings: “It is not difficult to feel oneself absorbed into the great fields of colour with their suggestions of infinite space.”77 Jasper Rose of *Time and Tide* concurred, offering an analogy from nature to describe the experience of viewing Rothko’s work: “Altogether the sensation they provide is unusually physical and unusually enveloping. It is like swimming in deep, warm water.”78

Contrary to many critics, however, Jasper Rose also offered negative criticism of Rothko’s enveloping canvases. Despite their gratifying effect, this writer believed, “these pictures are intellectually frustrating, and ultimately spiritually enervating. They tell one nothing.”79 Rose decried the alleged impassive and indifferent qualities of Rothko’s paintings that neither accepted nor denied intellectual, mystical or other meanings the viewer chose to put on them. It is interesting that neither Rose, nor any other British critic who reviewed the show, cited specific paintings to support their arguments, whether positive or negative. Rose’s frustration stemmed from a perception of an impervious quality in Rothko’s compositions. Lawrence Alloway noted that this was actually a common trend. Many writers, he pointed out, agreed that Rothko’s works mean something, “probably something rather grand, though what it is has not been clearly stated.”80 Alloway then attempted to characterize this meaning: “What we have in Rothko, perhaps, is a combination of an Estheticist absorption in art, combined with a belief in, to use his words, ‘tragic and timeless art.’”81

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78 Jasper Rose, “Clarity Begins at Home,” *Time and Tide*, October 26, 1961. J.M.N., “Rothko Clings Only to Colour,” *Yorkshire Post*, October 17, 1961, offered a similar assessment, stating that the viewer was “submerged by the rich waves of colour” in Rothko’s canvases.
79 Ibid.
80 Lawrence Alloway, “Notes on Rothko,” *Art International* 6 (Summer 1962): 94.
81 Ibid, 93.
Bowness was the only British reviewer to point to Rothko’s Jewish heritage as a possible source of import in the works shown at Whitechapel. Although he did not explore this topic in depth, Bowness made the claim that Rothko’s paintings evoked a “religious atmosphere.” “Their purpose,” he averred, “seems to be to invite meditation, and they suggest some kind of mystical inspiration on the artist’s part that Rothko’s Russian and Jewish origins may help to explain.” On the other hand, writing in the *Jewish Chronicle*, Peter Stone made no mention of Rothko’s ethnicity, focusing instead on the merits of his use of scale and color. Stone’s comments on Rothko’s works, in fact, bring to mind characteristics American art historian Robert Rosenblum had assigned to the “Abstract Sublime” earlier the same year. Rosenblum identified what he described as sublime feelings of awe, terror, boundlessness or divinity in relation to encountering the abstract canvases of Pollock, Rothko, Still and Newman. Stone commented similarly on Rothko’s works on view at the Whitechapel, stating that their “size and simplicity usually provide the semblance of strength, and one can get the same kind of feeling from these paintings that one gets from standing on the seashore or beside an elephant at the zoo.” However, Stone’s characterization appears somewhat simplistic when compared to Rosenblum’s more profound conceptualization. Stone’s experience with Rothko’s work resulted in a feeling of calm, what he called “a gratifying feeling that everything is

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83 Bowness, “Absolutely Abstract.”


all right after all,” as opposed to the grandiose sense of awe that Rothko’s paintings awoke in Rosenblum.  

At any rate, Bowness’s interpretive strategy in the Observer seemed to echo the Times’s assessment that Rothko’s works projected spirituality. The meditative quality sensed by Bowness was confirmed by Michael Fried, who, after seeing the Whitechapel show, reported his impressions in the New York publication Arts Magazine. Fried observed how no one in the crowd present the day he was there, which he described as a mixture of art students and posh older gentlemen, “seemed in a rush to go or even to see everything fast. Instead they sat around or leaned against walls, just looking, letting the paintings work on them and hardly arguing.” Fried’s observation of Rothko’s effect on London viewers, coupled with comments on the absorptive quality of his works made by British critics, bear an interesting relation to a point made during discussion of Rothko’s work on the BBC’s The Critics panel. While John Summerson saw a contradiction between Rothko’s works projecting and the viewer being absorbed into the paintings, Andrew Forge summed up what could be read instead as a positive duality in Rothko’s canvases: “You project into them and you get something from them.”

Taking a jab at British critic John Berger, who had denounced Pollock as an artist contributing to the disintegration and decadence of Western culture, Fried also argued

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86 Ibid.
88 The Critics program.
89 See John Berger, “The Arts and Entertainment: The White Cell,” New Statesman, November 22, 1958. Fried, 38, also blamed Berger for the tendency, since the Tate’s NAP exhibition, “to subsume all contemporary American painting under the epithet ‘Action Painting’ and to take Pollock as its sole paradigm.” Fried believed “there could have been no better corrective to this slovenly and irresponsible misconception than the present [Rothko] exhibition.” However, Fried does not specify exactly whose
that the greatest Abstract Expressionist works were the very opposite of decadent: “They are perhaps the most profound cause for hope our culture has.”90 Based on their generally favorable reception in the British press, Rothko’s paintings certainly seemed to represent a more positive achievement in comparison to his predecessors. Fried joined British writers in making direct comparisons between Rothko and Pollock, to the former’s greater credit. The American critic cited Rothko, rather than Pollock, as exerting “the greatest single influence on contemporary British painting—a fact which the present exhibition makes unmistakably clear.” Fried offered no solid evidence for this claim, other than to suggest that Rothko should come to mind when looking at Patrick Heron’s work.91 Of course, it is not surprising that Fried would champion Rothko’s color field paintings because they created a direct link between Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction that Fried, like Greenberg, was promoting in the 1960s.

Making comparisons with canonical European innovators, Alan Bowness argued provocatively that “the non-expressionist, non-action nature of his [Rothko’s] work—for among the New York painters Rothko plays Seurat to Pollock’s Van Gogh—has made it immediately sympathetic to English taste.”92 With this favorable comment, Bowness seemed to imply that the reserved tranquility of Rothko’s color fields was more generally appealing to British audiences than Pollock’s swirling webs of paint, and it is probable that Rothko’s works appealed more to Bowness’s own taste.

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90 Fried, 39. His only major criticism of Rothko’s show was the lack of work prior to 1945, which he felt would have given a sense of history in Rothko’s work.
91 Ibid., 38. Fried provided no sense of what those similarities were between the two painters.
92 Bowness, “Absolutely Abstract.”
As Bowness’s comparison exemplifies, unlike analyses of Rothko’s work made during the 1950s, British critics writing in 1961 now tried to situate Rothko’s work within a European historical context, not unlike some responses to the works by Pollock and Johns’s exhibited in *The Mysterious Sign*. This angle yielded largely positive comments for Rothko, as opposed to the often derisory juxtapositions of Pollock’s work to European painters during the previous decade. Keith Sutton saw a “spiritual connection” between Rothko and Mondrian, while the *Yorkshire Post*’s critic referred to Rothko as a master colorist without a contemporary equal and likened him to Veronese and Van Gogh. Although this label might have been to Rothko’s chagrin, he could not expect to avoid such characterizations since the entire Whitechapel show consisted of paintings composed of luminous bands of hue. Rothko’s (disingenuous) denial could have been made to ensure avant-garde status for his art by seeming to disassociate himself from his European predecessors. But that did not stop the British critics. Alloway, for instance, discussed Rothko in relation to both French artist Pierre Bonnard and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, the 19th century American expatriate artist who had worked in Britain. Alloway labeled Rothko “a highly lavish and indulgent colorist.” Whether or not he approved of these comparisons, such reactions to Rothko’s Whitechapel retrospective ensured that, in Great Britain, he could no longer be considered an unfamiliar American artist overshadowed by the legacy of Jackson Pollock.

94 J.M.N., “Rothko Clings Only to Colour.”
95 Alloway, “Notes on Rothko”
Once again, it was David Sylvester who provided the most poignant, poetic review of Rothko’s retrospective for the *New Statesman*. In Rothko’s work, Sylvester stated, “emotion is unadulterated, isolated” and the critic, as always sympathetic to American art, described the works on view at Whitechapel as “haunting.”96 Furthermore, Sylvester drew an excellent analogy between Rothko’s stacked rectangles and the sight of buildings along Park Avenue in New York dissolving in light.97 Sylvester asserted, however, that Rothko’s works were ultimately as “beyond poetry as they are beyond picture-making.” He suggested that instead they were really about “intense and utterly direct expression of feeling through the interaction of coloured areas of a certain size.”98 For Sylvester, the main point of Rothko’s work was not its sensitivity, but the fact that “violence and serenity are reconciled and fused,” and this synthesis is what made Rothko’s “a tragic art.”99 Such coexisting qualities in Rothko’s compositions had remained unreconciled in Pollock’s work.

In an undated letter from Rothko to Bryan Robertson sent after his trip to London, the artist actually expressed delight over the favorable reaction to his show among British critics. After reading many of the reviews, Rothko commented, “As you might suspect, I consider [David] Sylvester’s [review] a masterly penetration into the subject and meaning of my work.”100 He also revealed that the Tate Gallery was interested in acquiring two of his works. Undoubtedly, this lent further credibility to Robertson’s choice to mount a

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97 Sylvester did not state the exact time of day for his analogy.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Letter from Rothko to Robertson, undated. Whitechapel Art Gallery Archive (photocopy).
second retrospective exhibition of an American artist.\textsuperscript{101} That a major London museum
was seeking to add the work of a contemporary American artist to its permanent
collection was fostered in large part by the Whitechapel’s retrospectives in east London.
The next major showcase of American avant-garde painting would take place in 1962 in
the central part of the city in a location directly connected to the United States.

The \textit{Vanguard American Painting} Exhibition

\textit{Vanguard American Painting (VAP)} was held at the American Embassy,
London, in Grosvenor Square from February 28 – March 30, 1962. This show was
extremely unique in that the works of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns were
shown together in England’s capital for the very first time. \textit{VAP} afforded Londoners
their first opportunity to see Rauschenberg’s revision of Abstract Expressionism
alongside Johns’s like-minded paintings. Johns and Rauschenberg were professional and
personal associates who had lived together in New York City during the 1950s. Whereas
Johns’s first New York one-man show took place at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958,
Rauschenberg had his first solo exhibition there at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951.\textsuperscript{102}

In 1963, Jerome Donson wrote a brief article for the American publication \textit{Art
Journal} that is useful for offering insight into this overlooked exhibition held the prior

\textsuperscript{101} Rothko does not make clear which particular paintings the Tate was interested in acquiring. However,
based on the acquisition dates of Rothko’s works in the Tate, it appears the museum did not purchase works
in 1961. The first Rothko was acquired in 1959 (\textit{Light Red Over Black}, 1957) and the Tate did not acquire

\textsuperscript{102} For comprehensive sources on Rauschenberg, see Walter Hopps, \textit{Robert Rauschenberg: A
Johns and Rauschenberg, can be found in Jonathan Katz, “The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert
Rauschenberg,” in Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., \textit{Significant Others: Creativity and
year. Donson, at the time Director of the Long Beach Museum of Art, was appointed as traveling curator for VAP. According to Donson, VAP was organized under the auspices of the United States Information Agency (USIA) at the request of Yugoslavia. An exhibition devoted particularly to American Abstract Expressionism was stipulated.\textsuperscript{103} The idea behind this was to provide European viewers a sense of what contemporary American art was about; consequently, organizers of the show grouped the thirty-three artists selected under the umbrella label of “Action Painters,” a.k.a., “Abstract Expressionists.”\textsuperscript{104} VAP traveled first to Vienna in June 1961, then went to Yugoslavia, Great Britain and had its final showing in Germany in May of 1962.

Because Cold War tensions were heightening in the 1960s, it is interesting to consider the lineup for this show outside of London. Vienna had been a city divided into American, British, French and Russian zones until the mid 1950s and Yugoslavia had broken away from the former Austro-Hungarian empire to become a communist state. Outside of Britain, therefore, VAP traveled to places with either strong or partial ties to the Soviet Union, which perhaps lends these showings a more politically-motivated appearance.\textsuperscript{105} It could be argued that American artistic innovation was being showcased


\textsuperscript{104} The artists were recommended by H.H. Arnason (Guggenheim Museum), John I.H. Bauer (Whitney museum), Adelyn Breeskin (Baltimore Museum of Art) and Henry Hope (Indiana Museum of Art). Arnason selected the paintings and wrote the catalogue essay. Some of the more notable artists included Baziotes, James Brooks, de Kooning, Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis, Gorky, Gottlieb, Guston, Hans Hofmann, Ellsworth Kelly, Kline, Motherwell, Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Stamos, Still, Tomlin, Jack Tworkov and Esteban Vicente, in addition to Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns. Loren Maclver and Hartigan were representative women artists, and Arnason included Milton Avery, Stuart Davis and Mark Tobey as “pioneers” of the modern movement.

\textsuperscript{105} These points have been raised by Professor Anne Helmreich, to whom I am grateful for bringing this information to my attention.
in these places as an alternative to Soviet state-sponsored art, as opposed to the far less-politicized climate of the *New American Painting* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1959.

Three paintings by Pollock—*Night Ceremony* (1944), *Cathedral* (1947, Fig. 56) and *No. 10* (1949)—were included in the “Action Paintings” section of *VAP*, while Rothko’s *Red and Orange* (1955) and *White Center* (1957, Fig. 57) were exhibited in the “Abstract Imagists” segment. In a rather bizarre move, Johns and Rauschenberg were placed in the “Surrealist Exploration” part of the show. It is unclear why the organizers would associate these two artists with the Surrealist movement, but it is plausible that Surrealism was a familiar framework for a British audience. Their works were at that time more commonly labeled “neo-Dada” by American critics because of aesthetic similarities to Dada pioneers such as Kurt Schwitters or Marcel Duchamp, both of whom, earlier in the century, had utilized everyday, readymade materials to create works that challenged the very definition of art and the act of artistic creation. As Donson vaguely described, “the exhibit was arranged in this manner so that visitors would sense the cohesive direction of the important, experimental styles in the history of American art.”

In any case, for the London showing, all of the artists’ works were displayed in the U.S. Embassy’s entrance halls and foyers (Fig. 58) and in the library (Fig. 59). Johns had two encaustic paintings in the show—*Grey Rectangles* (1957) and *Reconstruction* (1959)—as well as an oil on canvas, *False Start* (1959, Fig. 60).

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106 Donson, 243.
107 A note about these images: the only London installation views I have been able to locate are small illustrations from Donson’s article that I was able to scan. Unfortunately, the quality of these small illustrations makes it difficult to discern details in these views. For example, in Fig. 61, the painting on the far right with the two viewers standing in front of it looks like it may be Pollock’s *Cathedral*, although Donson did not state this in his figure caption.
Rauschenberg’s combine paintings *Double Feature* (1959), *Summer Rental +1* (1960) and *Trophy 1 (for Merce Cunningham)* (1959, Fig. 61) were exhibited. Cultural Affairs Officer Stefan Munsing designed the show’s catalogue, which featured Pollock’s *Cathedral* on the cover and included an illustration of one painting for each artist.

H.H. Arnason’s catalogue essay traced the historical progression of modern art in the U.S., a process, he wrote, that culminated with “the most powerful original movement in the history of American art,” Abstract Expressionism. Arnason pointed out the deficiency of applying generic labels, such as ‘Action Painting,’ to the work of such diverse painters such as Pollock, Hans Hofmann, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Ad Reinhardt or Rothko. To remedy this confusion, Arnason applied his own brand, ‘Abstract Imagists,’ to works by Rothko, Newman, Gottlieb and Reinhardt. These artists, according to Arnason, achieved “symbolic content” through “dramatic statement of isolated and highly simplified elements.”

Arnason had coined the term “Abstract Imagists” for a 1961 exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, *American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists*. In the catalogue for this show, he described the ‘Imagist’ branch of Abstract Expressionism as “the drawing together among certain artists of some elements of free and geometric expression towards the end

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108 The only British lender to the exhibition was E.J. Power; otherwise, all of the paintings came from American museums/galleries or private collections, or they were lent by the artists. The works by Pollock, Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg were from collections in the U.S., such as Robert and Ethel Scull, Mrs. Michael Sonnabend, Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Reis, Alfonso Ossorio, Mrs. Harriet G. Peters, Mrs. W. Tilton Sisler. The Leo Castelli Gallery and the Dallas Museum of Fine Art also loaned works.

109 Catalogues were printed and prepared in the various languages and the artist entries included a brief biographical chronology of their lives, as well.


111 Ibid.
of greater simplicity, clarity, and power of expressive means.”112 In the VAP catalogue, Arnason again noted how he sensed “an all-encompassing presence” in Abstract Imagists’ works and he described this sense of presence as resulting from “an ‘image’ in the context of an abstract symbol rather than as a reflection or imitation of anything in nature.”113 Arnason’s idea of “presence” conjures Eric Newton’s observation the year before that viewers were apt to succumb to the sense of physical presence that emanated from the surfaces of Rothko’s abstract canvases.114 The “Abstract Imagist” distinction posed by Arnason helped further clarify for British audiences the noticeable aesthetic differences between gestural painters, such as Pollock and de Kooning, and color-field artists like Rothko and Newman.

Arnason viewed Johns and Rauschenberg in the context of younger artists who were “attempting to break what they feel to be the tyranny of abstract expressionism.”115 He highlighted Johns’s attempts at re-creating everyday, familiar objects, such as flags or targets, as paintings, and he saw in Rauschenberg an artistic kinship with Schwitters. By 1961, according to Arnason, American art was indeed “varied, experimental, healthy and prolific;” moreover, Johns, Rauschenberg and other younger artists in the VAP show

112 See Arnason, *American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists*, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1961. Arnason’s quote is from an excerpt re-printed in Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 245-50. Nowhere in the VAP catalogue does it indicate that the exhibition is the same as or adapted from the Guggenheim’s show. For instance, a comparison of Arnason’s two essays indicates they are not identical, nor do the exhibitions have the same artists. However, Arnason made many of the same arguments in both essays.

113 Arnason, “Introduction.”

114 Newton, “The Magnetic Simpleton.” The concept of “enveloping-space effect” should also be recalled from the previous chapter. Alloway coined this phrase in 1958 to describe how Pollock’s pictures appeared to have a presence in the viewer’s space. As Alloway stated, Pollock’s works “appear to advance into our space rather than invite us into theirs.” See Alloway, “The Art of Jackson Pollock: 1912-1956,” *The Listener*, November 27, 1958. A year later, Alloway also extended this idea to Rothko’s work, arguing that his paintings projected visually into what he called the viewer’s “literal participative space. Alloway, “Paintings from the Big Country,” *Art News and Review*, March 14, 1959.

115 Arnason, “Introduction.”
(such as Ellsworth Kelly and Richard Diebenkorn) represented the future of American painting because of their fresh artistic visions. Due to a lack of space in the Embassy, however, the exhibition could only give a partial glimpse, albeit an important one, of new directions in American painting.

Although Donson explained that VAP was seen by “thousands of people” during its European tour, he provided no exact figures for any venue. Likely because of its location in the embassy, as opposed to the seemingly more public spaces of the Tate or Whitechapel, British press reaction was limited compared to previous exhibitions of American art already discussed, although Rauschenberg’s work created a noticeable amount of buzz among reviewers. The Times criticized the cramped exhibition space at the Embassy, a problematic situation because “the energy of American painting demands space.” Yet, the Times admitted, this exhibition was one of the best selections of American art for Londoners since the Tate’s NAP show in 1959. Of particular interest for this reviewer were the younger artists, whose work showed evidence of the re-appearance of figurative elements that had “hovered beneath the surface of action-painting in the early fifties, the ghost of which [had] never been happily exorcised.” After a long hiatus, it seemed, recognizable imagery was “forcing itself to the top again in talk about ‘the image’ or in the neo-Dada work of which Rauschenberg’s ‘combine paintings’ are the only example” on view.

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116 Ibid. Arnason conceded that, among the younger artists, it was too soon to tell “which artists represent the genuine avant garde and which is a more momentary reaction.”
117 Donson, 245.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
The *Times*’s unnamed critic believed that “aficionados” of American art would consider the title of the Embassy exhibition to be misleading: “There is nothing ‘vanguard’ about it now as New York understands the word, except, possibly, the inclusion of three Rauschenbergs.”\(^{121}\) Of course, while American audiences may have been familiar with many of the artists in the show, the paintings by the younger second generation of artists on view would have been quite unfamiliar to ‘uninitiated’ British viewers. Johns’s work had only been shown in London once before in the ICA’s *Mysterious Sign* two years earlier. The *Times* critic, however, emphasized the latest examples of American art, commenting briefly on the iconic Abstract Expressionists in the show, such as Pollock and Rothko, whose works were still “commendable and magnificent.”\(^{122}\)

Based on the exhibition’s title, Nevile Wallis expected more up-to-date works than those actually shown in *VAP*. He suggested in the *Observer* that the art of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, already seen in abundance in London, had become ‘old hat’ and “so widely accepted that their painting has ceased to be avant-garde.”\(^{123}\) Wallis stated his belief that the future of American art lingered amongst “the impatience of younger individualists” who, he thought, were overshadowed in this show by the reputations of Pollock and Rothko. Consequently, Wallis suggested that Londoners turn their attention to Rauschenberg. He pointed out that *Double Feature*, seen at the Embassy, signaled a revival of Dada, although he commented equivocally that

\(^{121}\) Ibid.  
\(^{122}\) Ibid.  
Rauschenberg’s combine paintings resembled “the work of a souvenir hunter.”¹²⁴ Nonetheless, it seemed that by 1962, the arrival of Johns and Rauschenberg in London provided a new trigger for a wide variety of British critics interested in truly “new” or “vanguard” American painting.

Not surprisingly, for the more reserved author John Russell, VAP provided a significant chance to review classic and early works by “seniors” of the New York School, such as de Kooning and Clyfford Still. Even he felt that the revelation in it of paintings that had been done recently by James Brooks, Grace Hartigan and Rauschenberg, representatives of influential new currents in contemporary art, was more important. “It is to-day, not in the first flurry of five years ago, that manifold American influences are at work in Europe,” Russell argued.¹²⁵ Abstract Expressionism, he pointed out, had become institutionalized: “When the Governor of New York (Mr. Nelson Rockefeller) and the Chase Manhattan Bank ran up the flag of abstract expressionism, the triumph of the New York School was so complete as to induce alarm as much as satisfaction among its main representatives.”¹²⁶ Because of this co-option, newer artists were in a position to usurp the attention of British critics like Wallis and Russell in search of avant-garde work.

The Guardian published an excellent review of VAP that included illustrations of Rauschenberg’s Trophy I and Johns’s False Start. This paper’s critic, George Butcher, also lamented the excessive weight put on work from the previous decade and a half and wished for a stronger demonstration of the new directions in which American paintings

¹²⁴ Ibid.
¹²⁶ Ibid.
were headed. He too believed Pollock and Rothko represented the past (the latter, he wrote, went on “painting soft-edge commentaries on the emotive pulse beats of colour meeting colour”), whereas Johns and Rauschenberg signified the future. In fact, Butcher believed, Johns and Rauschenberg were the only two truly vanguard artists in the show. Whereas he commented that Johns’s *False Start* was “a traditional action painting plus an element that may be called neo-Dada,” for Butcher, Rauschenberg’s *Trophy I* was more advanced because, in it, the artist “uses quotations from life and from earlier styles of modern art.” To Butcher, the act and the idea were the two most important qualifications to attain “vanguard” status, which signaled his endorsement of Rauschenberg and Johns.

Substantive reviews of *Vanguard American Painting* also appeared in other British publications and art journals, some emphasizing the younger artists and some not. In *New Statesman*, David Sylvester offered a passionate defense of the seasoned veterans elsewhere criticized for being too familiar. On the contrary, he argued, their familiarity “did not mean that they are accepted—and in fact they are not accepted—by the majority of intelligent people without a special interest in art, or even by the majority of people who do have an interest in art, or even by all art critics or artists.” Sylvester thought the show evoked a strong sense of continuity in recent American painting and as such was “a most valuable anthology of vanguard American painting.” As opposed to some of his colleagues, Sylvester praised the Embassy’s unorthodox installation of the paintings.

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128 Ibid. However, based on Butcher’s description of it, Rauschenberg’s artistic practice could also be interpreted negatively as copying. In reality, though, Rauschenberg’s combine paintings were far more complex creations extending beyond notions of plagiarism. *Trophy I* is a rebus that challenged and critiqued Rauschenberg’s artistic predecessors while simultaneously sampling from their work and the everyday world around him.
in lobbies and reading rooms, environments that were “not sacrosanct.” Although Sylvester implied in his review that the first generation of New York School artists were still in critical disfavor, by 1962, he, like most British critics, was ready to move on to more current developments in American art. But not all were so ready.

Arguing that Pollock and Rothko still constituted the vanguard, Robert Melville defended the first generation of Abstract Expressionists in *Architectural Review*. These two, he stated, had become “pillars of American culture” and attempts by the younger generation to thrust them into the past were so far unsuccessful. Rauschenberg, Melville argued, lacked the boldness and innovation that defined a ‘vanguard’ artist: his “use of ready-made material is far from being a rebellion against painting: it is an attempt to make a contribution to abstract expressionism by an indirect route.” This writer stressed Rauschenberg’s works as representing a continuity, rather than a break, with the first generation of Abstract Expressionists.

**Conclusion**

In the March 1962 issue of *The Studio*, G.S. Whittet took the opportunity to reflect back upon the Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States* exhibition held six years earlier. Because of it, Whittet concluded, “the British public and to a more intense degree

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130 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
133 Melville was perhaps unfamiliar with Rauschenberg’s exercises in challenging the cult of originality and genius that had become the standard critical paradigms for Pollock’s generation. For instance, Rauschenberg’s *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957, Fig. 62) are classic examples of his ironic counter-argument. By painting one canvas in an Abstract Expressionist manner and then attempting to duplicate the results, Rauschenberg was posing a direct challenge to American critics, such as Greenberg and Rosenberg, whose ideological agendas during the 1940s and 50s promoted the supremacy of the American Action painter’s alleged autonomy and originality.
the British artist came to realize that a revolution had occurred.”

By 1962, the seventeen painters shown in the ‘Contemporary Abstract Art’ section of MAIUS were certainly regarded in Britain as established pioneers of Abstract Expressionism. Whittet perceptively observed that younger American artists, such as Rauschenberg and Johns, already showed signs of not following their elders. Four months later, the Times lamented that many first generation Abstract Expressionists were watching as their achievements became cliché at the hands of up-and-coming artists seeking to escape from under their shadow.

Although specific examples were not addressed, the Times critic saw a transition occurring in current art forms, citing how a change “from formal or technical experiment in the art of painting to a concern with the broader issues of what has, for the sake of convenience, to be called ‘imagery’” was taking place. A marked “shift of emphasis from the ‘how’ to the ‘what’ of painting” was visible in the work of younger American artists. In other words, in the work of Johns and Rauschenberg, recognizable imagery, content and subject matter were re-emerging in a greater degree than observed in the more abstract canvases of Pollock and Rothko. This return to figuration, initiated by Pollock before his untimely death, was to become a hallmark of the next big movement, Pop Art.

By 1962, the reputations of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were well-established in Britain. During the next two years, additional exhibitions of their work would take place in London, but, as in Modern Art in the United States and Paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum held the previous decade, Pollock and

Rothko’s paintings would primarily be viewed in the context of group showings.\textsuperscript{136} Both, as well as Johns and Rauschenberg, were in the Tate’s 54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade, a major survey of trends in contemporary art of the previous ten years held in April 1964.\textsuperscript{137}

Prior to their Whitechapel retrospectives held that same year, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg participated in two highly reviewed group exhibitions in 1963, the Tate’s Dunn International and the ICA’s The Popular Image. Discussion of the latter at the beginning of the next chapter will provide a starting point for assessment of how and why the British soon came to see these two artists less as followers of Pollock and Rothko and more as independent practitioners of highly innovative, intriguing artistic practices.

\textsuperscript{136} The Marlborough did hold a small solo exhibition of Rothko’s work in 1964. This show will be discussed briefly in the final chapter.

\textsuperscript{137} The Tate Gallery held an exhibition of Peggy Guggenheim’s collection from December 31, 1964 – March 7, 1965. Although paintings by Pollock and Rothko were included in this show, press reaction to their work is not relevant to my narrative. British critics were more interested in Peggy Guggenheim and her collection as a whole rather than the individual artists she collected. The one Rothko painting in the show was deemed to be an inferior example and critics considered the eleven Pollock paintings on view to be excellent examples of his work. There was little substantive discussion of either artist.

In a conversation with Tate Gallery Curator Jeremy Lewison in 1998, British Op artist Bridget Riley recalled that, although she was impressed by Jackson Pollock’s work, “I also thought it was an impossible position and I found that terribly distressing as well as moving.”¹ Lewison chose to interpret Riley’s perhaps somewhat equivocal opinion as more negative than it may have been. In “Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe,” he asserts that, by 1959, when the Tate opened New American Painting, Pollock had become “a waning star,” so that, for artists like Riley, Pollock’s direction represented a “dead end.” To some degree Riley supports this opinion in another statement: “What Pollock did was very important but at the same time it was a death knell,” since it ‘had nothing to be explored.’”² In part, the goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that Riley’s more negative leanings toward Pollock were, in fact, not shared universally in the British artworld of the early 1960s.

Pollock, and to a lesser extent Rothko, provided complementary models for avant-garde innovation that continued to generate interest among British artists and critics during the final years of this study. Before beginning an examination of how and why Pollock and Rothko’s Abstract Expressionist works informed forthcoming dialogue about

² Ibid. Lewison also commented in a footnote that at the time (he does not specify exactly when), Riley “probably would not have known Kaprow’s article ‘The Legacy of Jackson Pollock … in which he argues that Pollock’s paintings represented a dead end.’” However, Lewison’s assessment of Kaprow’s opinion is not entirely accurate. Allan Kaprow, in “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” Art News (October 1958): 24-6, 55-7, Kaprow argued that Pollock’s paintings were less important as traditional objects, but not less important as artistic statements. Pollock’s choreographed movements of splashing and dripping paint onto his canvases were substantially significant for the development of artistic performativity, what first came to be known as “Happenings” and eventually “performance art.” Kaprow’s article is re-printed in Ellen G. Landau, Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, 181-87. For an excellent take on the “Performative Pollock,” see Amelia Jones, “The ‘Pollockian Performatve’ and the Revision of the Modernist Subject,” in Body Art: Performing the Subject, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 53-102.
Rauschenberg and Johns’s aesthetic developments, the critical reception of the ICA’s 1963 exhibition, *The Popular Image*, which included these two young American artists, needs to be assessed. This analysis will reveal the terms by which British critics both accepted and rejected certain aspects of the avant-garde practice of the two younger Americans.

The Tate’s *Dunn International*, held in 1963, likewise enabled British reviewers to begin to debate the less familiar work of Johns and Rauschenberg. Close examination of its reception will establish that critics could now discuss their works independently of Pollock and Rothko, their Abstract Expressionist predecessors. Finally, the Tate’s 54-64: *Painting and Sculpture of a Decade*, held in early 1964, featured work by all four artists. By examining criticism surrounding this show, key similarities and subtle differences between the ongoing British reception of Pollock and Rothko in light of the achievements of Rauschenberg and Johns is revealed. The years from 1963-64 were a time when major exhibitions including these four U.S. artists enabled Londoners to understand individually and in concert two generations of American avant-garde painting.

**The Pop Art Context**

Before examining the ICA’s first significant showing of American Pop Art in London, it is necessary to establish a brief history of this important movement. Pop Art is widely considered to have emerged simultaneously in the U.S. and Britain in the early 1960s. Because it was both indebted to and reacted against the subjective, expressive idiom of the New York School, American Pop’s emergence in the ‘60s is largely credited as an evolution from transitional work made in the 1950s by younger artists like Johns...
and Rauschenberg. The prominent practitioners of American Pop—Larry Rivers, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana—created works marked by a conspicuous return to figurative imagery, drawn primarily from popular mass culture. Unlike Johns and Rauschenberg, who retained the gestural traces of Action Painting, their work was characterized by a banal, straightforward treatment of commercial subject matter.3

Pop Art’s development in Britain, which actually began slightly earlier, is often attributed to the mass media/popular culture interests of the ICA’s Independent Group (IG) and the Royal College of Art (RCA) prototypes established during the 1950s by Peter Blake, Richard Smith and Robyn Denny, but this commonly accepted genealogy is flawed. For example, British critic Lawrence Alloway is typically credited with coining the term “Pop Art” in his seminal article, “The Arts and the Mass Media,” published in Britain in 1958, but Alloway never used those words. Instead, he used the phrase “mass popular art” to describe new forms of popular culture and mass media communication that had become a conspicuous part of daily life in Britain, including film, television, cybernetics, magazines and comics.4 Also a part of Pop’s mythology is the legendary letter written by Richard Hamilton to his colleagues Peter and Alison Smithson, dated January 16, 1957, in which Hamilton ‘defines’ Pop Art as “popular, transient, transient, transient,

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expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous and Big Business.”

However, as Anne Massey has pointed out, by the term “Pop Art,” Hamilton was not referring to painting. She has likewise clarified Alloway’s “invention” of the term: “The basic assumption which Alloway made is that the Independent Group had been the instigator of a new aesthetic, which encompassed fine art and ‘pop art.”

However, by “mass popular art,” Alloway actually meant only technologically reproduced products of visual culture. While the IG and Pop shared basic interests, their histories are more complex.

Massey’s revisionist arguments debunking the presumptive continuity between the IG and British Pop artists of the early 1960s challenges commonly accepted notions about the origins of British Pop. As she points out, “It seems that those painters involved in the creation of Pop Art in the 1960s [the RCA generation led by Derek Boshier (Fig. 63), Peter Phillips (Fig. 64) and Patrick Caulfield (Fig. 65)] regarded the Independent Group as a rather insular clique, whose work was little known.” It is Massey’s contention that “the later manifestations of the Pop Art movement should be regarded as a separate entity rather than the fulfillment of the work begun in the 1950s” by Hamilton and his colleagues. The informality of the IG, whose meetings produced few written records, has allowed history to mythologize the group. As Massey suggests, “It was not

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5 Re-printed in Madoff, 5-6.
6 Anne Massey, in *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-59*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, 117, points out that Hamilton’s frequently cited definition is only a partial quotation from the whole letter and it should be read in its entire context. “An analysis of the complete text,” she writes, “puts an entirely new emphasis on the frequently quoted list of attributes of Pop Art. Hamilton was actually discussing the possibility of staging a follow-up exhibition to *This is Tomorrow* in his letter.” Massey’s point downplays the acceptance of Hamilton as the unequivocal “father” of Pop Art in Britain.
7 Ibid., 111.
8 Ibid., 104. There were, however, links between ex-IG members and the RCA group. For example, Alloway wrote for the RCA magazine *Ark*, edited by Roger Coleman.
9 Ibid., 106.
until the impact of Pop Art in 1962 that the Independent Group ceased to be remembered as an informal discussion group.”10 She concludes convincingly that, contrary to popular thought, Pop Art legitimized the IG, not the other way around. As Richard Smith has noted, the RCA generation of the early 1960s admired the IG’s attitudes more than the works they created.11

American art historians have commonly viewed the work of Johns and Rauschenberg as forming a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art in the U.S., but how their work was viewed within the British critical milieu of the early 1960s has not been sufficiently explored. Examining the ICA’s Popular Image exhibition affords an opportunity to assess critical perspectives on these two important American artists in order to ascertain how their work was perceived by British reviewers.

The ICA’s Popular Image

The Popular Image exhibition, held at the ICA from October 23 – November 23, 1963, was considered by British critics to be the first comprehensive showing in England of American painters employing primarily what reviewers commonly referred to as “popular imagery.”12 Alan Solomon, Director of the Jewish Museum in New York from 1959-1965, provided a brief essay for the ICA’s short exhibition catalogue (Fig. 66). Writing for a British audience, Solomon discussed how this new form of art had emerged in the U.S. from everyday life and culture. Rauschenberg, he wrote, “was the first to

10 Ibid., 111. The “myth” of the IG, she argues, has been largely based upon articles by former members of the group published in the early 1960s. In other words, the IG has written much of its own history.
11 As noted by Richard Smith in the 1979 film, Fathers of Pop, directed by Julian Cooper and written/narrated by Reyner Banham.
12 The exhibition was organized by the ICA in conjunction with the Illeana Sonnabend Gallery, Paris. The works in the show came from the stock of Sonnabend’s gallery, as noted by Robert Melville, “Exhibitions: Paintings: Surrealist and Others,” Architectural Review (February 1964): 139.
acknowledge positively the necessity for reconciling art and life, for breaking down the isolation of art from conventional modes of experience, for accepting art as a significant condition of life, rather than adjunct to it.” Unlike other commentators on Rauschenberg’s oeuvre, Solomon did not cite Duchamp or Schwitters as precedents for the younger artist’s work. Solomon’s strategy seems to have been to place Rauschenberg at the forefront of Pop Art and to contextualize and legitimize Rauschenberg’s most frequently cited quote: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made (I try to act in the gap between the two).” However, Rauschenberg’s quote actually contradicts Solomon, because art and life, according to the artist, could not be fully reconciled.

Solomon also suggested of Pop Art that “the fact that these images are ‘fun’ and are easy to ‘like’ has little to do with the way the artists see them or use them; the precarious balance between gross ugliness and exquisite beauty which lies at the centre of their exploration of the repertoire of familiar images raises issues which the art public has not really been prepared to face.” Solomon asserts that, although the works in *The Popular Image* seemingly lacked seriousness due to the artists’ use of familiar imagery from the mass media or popular culture, the new art form on view represented an earnest, fundamental “search for the common factor in all esthetic experience.” Although his choice of the phrases “exquisite beauty” and “gross ugliness” to characterize the artists’ endeavors seems rather extreme and polemical, Solomon was likely referring to the

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13 Alan Solomon, untiel essay, *The Popular Image*, London: ICA, 1963, n.p. The catalogue is only a few pages in length with very few illustrations. It does not contain the titles of works in the show and the illustrations are only accompanied by the artist’s name.

14 Ibid.
dichotomy between fine and commercial art within the Pop Art idiom, or what Clement
Greenberg referred to as the binary oppositions of avant-garde and kitsch.\(^{15}\)

The artists included in *The Popular Image*—Alan D’Arcangelo, Jim Dine, Mel
Ramos, James Rosenquist, Wayne Thiebaud, John Wesley and Tom Wesselman, as well
as Indiana, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Warhol, Rauschenberg and Johns—depicted
commonplace objects from mass culture but painted them in a way that projected
indifference onto their subject matter. This seeming indifference, as will be shown, irked
certain critics in Great Britain.\(^{16}\) In fact, it was the conspicuous degree of directness and
verisimilitude in their paintings that formed the basis of British critics’ dialogue about
American Pop Art. Some viewers were unable to discern if, to use as one example,
Warhol’s paintings of Campbell’s soup cans were product advertisements or works of art.
Issues of this type were discussed on the BBC’s program *The Critics*, particularly in
reference to Johns and Rauschenberg’s works included in *The Popular Image*.

Rauschenberg was already well-known in the U.S. for his so-called combines
[amalgamations of painting and sculpture, such as *Canyon* (1959, Fig. 67)]. After
producing a series of transfer drawings on the subject of Dante’s *Inferno* from 1958-60,
he had moved on to silkscreen paintings at the start of the next decade. Rauschenberg’s

in, for instance, Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, London: Routledge, 2000,
48-59. Greenberg defined “kitsch” as “popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes,
magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing,
Hollywood movies, etc., etc.” These art forms, he said, were the inferior rear-guard to the superior avant-
garde of Western culture.

\(^{16}\) It should also be noted that a similar, although not identical, exhibition was held from April to June of the
same year at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art in Washington, D.C. *The Popular Image Exhibition*
featured the same artists as the ICA’s show, but the American version included Vern Blosum, George
Brecht and Robert Watts and did not feature work by D’Arcangelo, Indiana, Ramos and Thiebaud. The
catalogue for the Washington venue also indicates that different works appeared here as compared to the
ICA’s showing. Alan Solomon wrote essays for both catalogues that featured similar ideas, although the
British version was much more brief since that catalogue was only a few pages in length.
two silkscreens in the ICA show, *Payload* (1962) and *Bait* (1963), exemplified his more recent artistic endeavors, whereas Johns was represented by three “older” works, *Flag on Orange Field* (1954, Fig. 68), *Flag Above White* (1954) and *Figure 8* (1959).17

*The Critics* panel discussion on *The Popular Image*, broadcast on November 3, 1963, featured critics David Sylvester, Richard Aragno and Janet Adam-Smith. Sylvester singled out Lichtenstein and Johns as the two strongest painters in the ICA show, and he described the latter’s paintings of the American flag as “some of the most beautiful and mysterious things in post-war art;” Aragno concurred, citing their decorative appeal.18

Adam-Smith provided a more substantive assessment of the exhibition than her two colleagues. Reminding listeners that the works on view at the ICA were concerned with objects from everyday experience, she noted that, earlier in the year, *The Critics* had reviewed an exhibition of Kurt Schwitters, an artist who also used everyday objects to make new aesthetic creations.19 Likewise, as Adam-Smith pointed out, “in one or two of the pictures here [in *The Popular Image*], particularly one by Rauschenberg I’m thinking of, the same thing happens, a new object is created out of these objects in everyday experience.”20 For Adam-Smith, this transformation from an everyday to a fine art object formed an essential part of Rauschenberg’s creative process. She was, consequently, 

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17 Information in ICA archival material (as found at the Tate Archives) indicates that *Flag on Orange Field* and *Flag Above White* were painted in 1954, but this may be incorrect. Johns’s well-known *Flag on Orange Field* is dated 1957 in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996. Johns also did not complete his first *Flag* painting until the spring of 1955. In addition, *Flag Above White* is also known as *Flag Above White with Collage* and is dated 1955, not 1954, in Varnedoe. Based on a comparison of *Flag on Orange Field* in the ICA catalogue and in Varnedoe, they appear to be one and the same. Unfortunately, *Flag Above White* is not reproduced in the London catalogue, nor are there installation photographs of the exhibition.


19 Adam-Smith did not state specifically where the Schwitters exhibition was held, but its venue was Marlborough Fine Art Ltd. in early 1963.

20 *The Critics* program, BBC.
critical of how, in some of the works in the show, other artists appeared to be “just reproducing straight an object.”

Such an excessive degree of verisimilitude, coupled with a perceived lack of “painterly” qualities, disturbed Adam-Smith. However, all of the panelists not only agreed that the works included in the ICA’s American Pop Art show prompted viewers to re-evaluate things commonly seen in everyday life, but also concurred that the works on view instigated a re-examination of the fundamental nature of art. Johns’s famous dictum—“to paint things the mind already knows”—and Rauschenberg’s previously cited quote vaulted these two artists to the forefront of British aesthetic debates about the nature of perception and reality, object and image.

British reviewers were generally pleased with the opportunity to glimpse American pioneers of Pop Art at the ICA instead of by hearsay or reproduction, but their opinions and reactions to the works on view were not all salutary. In “Bad Pictures, Good Show” written for the *Sunday Times*, John Russell singled out Jasper Johns, praising his masterful paint handling, or “*la belle peinture,*” but he argued that the Americans in the show were in general inferior to their British counterparts. Without providing specific names, Russell claimed that “the good British pop artists are people who really know what a picture is: and in the best of their work layer upon layer of wit and pathos is secreted.” Although Russell may or may not have been biased towards his own native artists, such as the aforementioned Boshier and Caulfield, his comment reveals an important current within British comparisons of the two versions of Pop. Americans were frequently criticized for an overt, straightforward approach, whereas

21 Ibid. Adam-Smith did not specify to which of the other artists in the show she was referring.
23 Ibid.
their U.K. analogues were praised for their discreet treatment of subject matter. This
difference was likely perceived at the time as cultural and rooted in the stereotype of
Americans’ brashness as opposed to the modest decorum of Britons.

Agreeing with John Russell, Nigel Gosling of the *Observer* likewise found the
Americans’ directness to be “a disturbing sight.” The key to understanding their work, he
argued, was to comprehend that “it is not disguised or translated and no moral questions
of admiration or disgust enter in” to the equation.24 In other words, the artists’
ambivalence toward their subject matter was problematic for this critic, as well. Gosling,
like Russell, also compared Pop’s British and American versions, criticizing the former
for digressing into a “domesticated collection of bibelots, a modern substitute for
Victoriana.”25 Gosling’s ire may have plausibly been directed at a composition like
Patrick Caulfield’s *Vases of Flowers* (1962, Fig. 65), whose subject matter focused on
two small decorative, household objects.

The American counterparts, on the other hand, seemed to Gosling to be even
worse. “They are not fun,” he stated bluntly. “On the contrary they are rather
disagreeable, conjuring a sense of aesthetic weightlessness which lasts a long time after
you leave the gallery.”26 Gosling’s distaste for the Americans’ work led him to claim that
their art was the result of a deliberate act inspired, in particular, by Rauschenberg’s quote
about acting in the gap between art and life. The means for this, according to Gosling,
was “to use direct, without the normal transmuting with ‘painterly’ terms, the normal
things which occupy our daily life—photos, food labels, ads, clothes, etc.”27

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
Although Gosling was clearly perturbed by the Americans’ unmitigated candor, he was not entirely dismissive of their works. He believed their artistic endeavors were nevertheless important because they also raised such crucial questions about the nature of art, as “what is art for, what do I actually get out of a picture, what is the difference between the feeling I experience in front of a real apple and a painted apple?”

Gosling seems to be placing Pop Art in the tradition of Belgian Surrealist René Magritte’s famous composition, *The Treachery of Images* (1929, Fig. 69), which featured a painted pipe with the caption, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (“This is not a pipe”). Magritte’s work raised the epistemological question of whether or not the pipe was real or the image of a pipe, and Gosling suggested that this visual conundrum extended into Pop Art’s own critical dialogue, particularly in the case of Johns’s paintings of flags, targets and numerals.

The *Times* featured the most blistering review of the ICA’s *The Popular Image* exhibition. In “American Pop Art Makes a Poor Impression,” their unnamed art critic provided a stark comparison between the Americans on view in the show and the British practitioners of Pop. Noting the former as brasher, with little appeal to wit or the eye, the *Times* formulated a scathing comparative description of American Pop Art:

> But then it does not try to work, as ours does, by painterly means and association of ideas. It is basically a form of realism, illustrating the doctrine that art is to be reconciled to modern life by, in the first place, drawing on the imagery of billboards, food labels, magazine reproductions and the like, and, in the second, by presenting such material with what amounts to monstrous verisimilitude to the originals.

Due to the excessive degree of realism employed, this reviewer considered American Pop to be unintellectual and unmediated as a whole. He or she stated caustically that it

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28 Ibid.
“smack[ed] of the meretricious,” thereby seeming flashy in skill but lacking in real content. According to this critic, American Pop aped Duchamp “without adding anything but size to his own conception of the ‘ready-made’ while robbing it of its wit.” Warhol and Oldenburg were mistakenly associated with the “anti-art” spirit of Dadaist subversion and highly criticized for their sense of cold detachment. Elsewhere, Mario Amaya suggested similarly that Rosenquist, Wesselman, Warhol, Lichtenstein and Dine made no Duchampian criticism but merely commented “with an air of cold detachment … on what we have all begun to take for granted in our day to day existence,” namely the objects and images of consumer culture. He also observed that American Pop Art “has nothing to do with art of the recent past and it refuses to organize itself on any presupposed artistic canons,” not even subversive ones. Amaya’s claim of the Popists’ absolute autonomy from influence was certainly exaggerated. More importantly, though, he stated that the Americans’ works as a whole were “coarse-grained, vulgar and plain ugly by conventional standards,” but at the same time suggested positively that their art was “always visually stimulating and often enlightening.” Amaya’s overall opinion of the artists included in The Popular Image was obviously mixed.

The only artists not denigrated for lack of originality by the Times reviewer were Johns and Rauschenberg, whom this critic, like Amaya, considered to be the prevalent pacesetters for the others in the exhibition. Observing that the two appeared “oddly soft and painterly beside the rest of the company,” Rauschenberg and Johns, it was suggested, elevated the otherwise low level of personal invention and aesthetic integrity evident in

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
works throughout the exhibition.\textsuperscript{34} Not all reviews, though, were as harshly critical as the
\textit{Times}’s article. Amaya, for instance, saw Johns and Rauschenberg as important links
between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art.

Agreeing that these two painters “strongly inspired the new art,” Amaya pointed
out that Johns and Rauschenberg produced works more stylistically similar to Abstract
Expressionism, but, by incorporating recognizable imagery into their compositions, they
represented a simultaneous departure from this earlier movement.\textsuperscript{35} In \textit{Arts Review},
David Bindman claimed that Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein were now as equally
important in America as their New York School predecessors had been. “Many
museums” in the U.S., Bindman wrote, “regard possession of a representative
Rauschenberg or Lichtenstein as essential as a Pollock or de Kooning to a well-rounded
collection of modern American art.”\textsuperscript{36} Although asserting that the younger artists had
attained their own level of importance, Bindman still viewed Johns’s work through an
earlier lens, suggesting that Johns “has come to a specialized use of the image after a
thorough absorption of Abstract Expressionism.”\textsuperscript{37} Bindman would have been more
accurate had he also mentioned that, after learning from Pollock and Rothko’s lessons,
Johns had purposely rejected the premises of both Action and Color Field painting.

Despite the fact that the artists in the ICA show were not explicitly politically
motivated, certain British critics detected political and social undertones within the works
on view in \textit{The Popular Image}. Whereas Amaya, in his review for the \textit{Financial Times},
argued that Warhol and company were making “devastating comments” on contemporary

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item [34] “American Pop Art Makes a Poor Impression,” \textit{Times}.
\item [35] Amaya, “Time of Pop.”
\item [37] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
American society and posing serious questions about postwar capitalist culture, Guy Brett, writing for the *Guardian*, claimed that Pop was a democratic art because it broke down the barriers between art and life.38 But, as Keith Roberts opined in a review for *Burlington Magazine*, “Beneath the wry, cool surfaces with their blown-up strip cartoons … there seems to be a desperate attempt [by American Pop Artists] to discover what makes democratic culture tick.”39 Stuart Penrose deplored in *The Tribune* what he saw as an “obsession with the over-played symbols and images of postwar American society,”40 commenting that U.S. Pop Art’s development could be traced back to Pollock, who, Penrose claimed, “represented clearly the social and political significance of this phenomena [sic] in American painting.”41 Although Penrose did not further explain this claim, it is likely that he perceived Pollock’s shattering of conventional painterly techniques as (democratically) leveling the playing field for the subsequent generation of artists in both the U.S and Britain.

Such complexities about Pop’s historical development and comparative stylistic evolution in the U.S. and Britain were conspicuously evident in two additional reviews of the ICA’s exhibition. Not surprisingly, Reyner Banham, a former Independent Group (IG) member, assumed a staunch defensive posture for the U.K. movement in an article for *New Statesman*. Here Banham wondered sarcastically how “supposedly intelligent British critics could stand in front of these pictures and suppose they had ‘inspired’ the British Pop Art movement.”42 His disdain stemmed from evidence that his former colleague, Richard Hamilton, “was painting pictures comparable (in content and style)
with Rosenquist’s man/equipment mural five years ago, long before any Rosenquists had been seen over here.”43 Banham’s motive, however, appears perhaps disingenuous. It was certainly in his own best interest to promote the IG members as the true progenitors of Pop Art in Britain and the U.S., but, in doing so, Banham clearly failed to address or acknowledge the accomplishments of Johns and Rauschenberg who had been working since the early to mid-1950s within a nascent Pop idiom.

A less biased review came from the British art historian and critic Norbert Lynton. Writing for *Art International* in February 1964, Lynton expressed his opinion that the ICA’s exhibition was far too small and relied too heavily on “outsiders” like Johns and Rauschenberg, sarcastically describing the former as “a loveable old square” and the latter “a man with a great facility for a facile kind of art.”44 Lynton asserted his belief that the Rauschenbergs on view were “particularly weak,” but he did not state specifically why he believed Rauschenberg and Johns were not certified Pop artists. According to Lynton, the rest of the artists on view were viable “Popists” who made their name with more or less one idea illustrated in a variety of examples, but he was expressly skeptical of the future for this group of American artists. “The worrying thing about American Pop,” Lynton suggested, “is that it is devoid of any purpose outside of itself; the painter appears to have no aim but that of making a particular picture and then making another. Which seems to preclude development.”45 The mechanically reproduced appearance of many of the pictures troubled Lynton; he did not greet with approbation the goal articulated by Andy Warhol in November 1963: “The reason I’m

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43 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
painting this way is that I want to be a machine.”

Unlike Johns and Rauschenberg, Warhol sought to obliterate all traces of the artist’s hand in his art, thus countering Abstract Expressionism’s emphasis on artistic subjectivity with an alternatively hyper-objective Pop Art aesthetic.

Lynton also offered his own assessment of British Pop, which, he argued, was charged with an “element of Victorianism” and “a heady mixture of humour and artistic virtuosity.” Discernable painterliness mattered greatly to British reviewers of Pop Art, and Lynton’s perception of Victorian qualities (which he did not specifically identify) in the work of U.K Pop artists echoed in Nigel’s Gosling’s claim that their compositions digressed into Victoriana, although historicism was less problematic for Lynton than for Gosling. To these critics, “Victorianism” likely signified a subtle sense of moral attitude by British artists toward their subject matter, as opposed to American Pop artists’ overtly celebratory treatment of their depicted pop cultural subjects.

Lynton articulated an important distinction between the approach to American subject matter by U.S. and British artists. Without citing specific works, Lynton suggested that Londoner Richard Smith’s art “implies a different kind of nostalgia—a non-historical nostalgia for certain aspects of American life that most of us share to some extent and which colours our reactions to American Pop and may make us more

46 This quote was actually Warhol’s response to a question from Gene R. Swenson about why he painted the way he did. Warhol also commented famously in the same interview that “I think everybody should be a machine.” For the full interview, see Gene R. Swenson, “What Is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I,” in Kenneth Goldsmith, ed., I’ll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews, New York: Carroll & Graff, 2004, 15-20. Swenson’s interview originally appeared in the November 1963 issue of ARTnews.


indulgent to it than to those to whom the everyday world of America is everyday.⁴⁹ A key aspect in British reception of American Pop Art, as indicated by Lynton’s observation, involved London’s more removed degree of familiarity with the everyday objects Warhol and others painted or sculpted. This cultural distance certainly affected to some degree artists’ and viewers’ responses to the works on view at the ICA.

After participating in *The Popular Image*, Johns and Rauschenberg both had solo exhibitions at the Whitechapel in 1964. Before analyzing the response to these two shows, however, it is necessary to address two significant international showcases of modern art, the first of which, the *Dunn International*, opened at the Tate eight days before the close of *The Popular Image* at the ICA. Unlike Pollock and Rothko, Johns and Rauschenberg were among the 101 artists selected for the *Dunn* exhibition. This provides an opportunity to assess the critical reception of these two younger artists independently of their Abstract Expressionist predecessors and within the context of a large London group show.

**The Tate’s *Dunn International***

Because of London’s stature as a world capital, it is somewhat surprising that, prior to 1963, it had not hosted a major, inclusive global exhibition featuring wider developments on the international contemporary art scene. In a letter written in March that year, British art historian John Richardson expressed dismay over this situation to architect Sir Colin Anderson, lamenting the fact that “London is the only major art centre never to have had a ‘Biennale.’” Referring to the one underway, he added, “Ours will, I

⁴⁹ Ibid.
hope, attain a higher level of quality and give a more coherent view of contemporary art.”

Richardson thereafter became the organizing secretary for the *Dunn International: An Exhibition of Contemporary Painting Sponsored by the Sir James Dunn Foundation*, which was held at the Tate Gallery from November 15 – December 22, 1963. The show had actually opened at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, two months before it traveled to London. Gabriel White of the Arts Council (AC) petitioned the Tate Trustees to host the exhibition. It was, he noted, “to be of the nature of a Biennale in which artists of all nationalities and schools will be invited to submit a painting.”

The Tate agreed to be the show’s host institution in London, for which the AC bore all internal costs.

Johns and Rauschenberg were among the 101 contemporary painters selected for the *Dunn International*, which featured artists from twenty-three different countries.

The exhibition was organized by a committee set up by the Sir James Dunn Foundation, which was established by Lady Beaverbrook (Marcia Anastasia Christoforides, formerly Lady Dunn) in memory of her first husband, James Dunn, a wealthy Canadian financier. The painters were selected by an advisory committee consisting of Kenneth Clark (art historian), Anthony Blunt (Courtauld Institute), David Carritt (Christies London), Gordon Washburn (Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh), White and Richardson. This panel generated

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50 Letter from John Richardson to Sir Colin Anderson, March 5, 1963. TGA 92/178/1.
51 The exhibition was on view in Canada from September 7 – October 6, 1963.
52 Letter from Gabriel White to Norman Reid of the Tate Gallery, February 19, 1963. TGA 92/178/1. Prize money was awarded to artists by a panel of judges, consisting of Douglas Cooper, Andrew Ritchie, Peter Wilson and Richardson. According to the catalogue, the winners included Ivan Albright, Alex Colville, Sam Francis, Ennio Morlotti, Kenzo Okada and Paolo Vallorza.
53 According to the Arts Council’s exhibition press release, “101 works by 101 artists of all nationalities, trends and styles will chart the whole gamut of contemporary painting from academic naturalism to ‘pop’ art, from the 82 year old Spaniard, Picasso, to the twenty-four year old Australian Brett Whiteley. Other well-known artists included Marc Chagall, Salvador Dali, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, Joan Miro, Willem de Kooning and Graham Sutherland.” Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 75/97.
a broad list of who they deemed to be the most important 20th century painters and then narrowed the list to 101. Richardson negotiated with and selected the work for each artist. According to Richardson, Mark Rothko was invited but declined to exhibit “in mixed company.”

Richardson composed brief entries in the exhibition catalogue for each artist, and his description of Johns’s painting Periscope (1963, Fig. 70), for example, concisely captured the essence of Johns’s endeavor. “The simplicity of his subject matter—targets, letters of the alphabet and numerals—is deceptive,” Richardson wrote, adding “in actual fact his paintings pose and resolve subtle problems of pictorial reality.” Richardson’s comments aptly reflect Johns’s self-stated desire to paint “things the mind already knows” or “things that were seen and not looked at, not examined.” He also referred in Johns’s entry to the artist’s “friend,” Robert Rauschenberg, and touted both men as “the two most influential American artists of their generation.”

Rauschenberg was represented at the Dunn International with Trophy II (1960-61), a combine painting dedicated to Marcel Duchamp and his wife, Teeny (Fig. 71). Not surprisingly, then, Richardson interpreted Rauschenberg’s composition through the lens of Dada, as well as Abstract Expressionism. “Influenced by the Dadaists and de Kooning,” he wrote, “Rauschenberg has revolutionized modern American painting with eye-catching ‘combines’—part painting, part sculpture, part ‘ready made’—which

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54 Prize money was awarded to six artists by a panel of judges, consisting of Douglas Cooper, Andrew Ritchie, Peter Wilson and Richardson. According to the catalogue, the winners included Ivan Albright, Alex Colville, Sam Francis, Ennio Morlotti, Kenzo Okada and Paolo Vallorza.
55 Letter from John Richardson to John Rothenstein (Tate Gallery), June 20, 1963. TGA 92/178/1. Clyfford Still refused to exhibit for the same reason and Francis Bacon also declined to participate (for unstated reasons).
57 Ibid.
challenge most artistic concepts.” Although these comments are hardly as astute as Richardson’s remarks regarding Johns, they indicate that Rauschenberg’s combines were viewed by some in Britain (as well as the U.S.) as a marriage of Dada’s use of ready-made objects and Action Painting’s painterly gesture. In fact, Rauschenberg utilized gestural brushwork and found objects, such as a spoon, metal chain and drinking glass, to create *Trophy II*.

Nigel Gosling of the *Observer* argued that the *Dunn International* “provides the best conspectus of contemporary art seen in London for years, putting the Tate’s own collection in the shade,” while art historian Michael Levey, writing in the *Sunday Times*, judged the exhibition “a surprisingly agreeable and stimulating guide to the confusing diversity of today’s art.” In a review for the *Guardian*, Eric Newton praised the *Dunn’s* wide scope and commended its avoidance of a “gargantuan approach like the Venice Biennale.” The majority of U.K. reviewers were impressed by the compact presentation and diverse array of 20th century painters selected by the show’s organizers, but some critics accused the selection committee members of being too old or part of, as Denys Sutton suggested, the artworld “old guard.” Sutton’s belief seemed to imply that having younger critics on the committee would have altered the final choice of artists. Terence Mullaly argued likewise that those responsible for the selection “have not resolved the problem as to whether they are showing examples of the 101 best living painters, or, alternatively, whether they are illustrating recent trends.”

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58 Ibid.
Despite certain reservations, critics like Mullaly and Sutton were quick to point out that Londoners should be grateful for the opportunity to see such an impressive variety of works. British press reaction to the Dunn exhibition was overwhelmingly favorable, and many critics who discussed the American contingent focused more intently on Rauschenberg’s combine than on Johns’s encaustic painting. Furthermore, seen in the context of such international stars as Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dalí, Stuart Davis, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Sam Francis and Mark Tobey, British reviewers were apparently unimpressed by Johns. Sutton, in fact, was the only writer to mention him in a review.  

Rauschenberg, on the other hand, drew the attention of critics whose comments about his work ranged from bewildered to praising. Perhaps in the playful spirit of Dada, an anonymous reviewer for the Evening Standard wrote that, at the exhibition’s preview, “someone asked if it was permitted to change the water in the glass which decorates the painting by the American Robert Rauschenberg.” Critics thus drew attention to the presence of objects from the real world in Trophy II. For instance, Robert Wraight of the Tatler once again interpreted the spoon, metal chain and drinking glass as “basically a return to the Dadaism and ‘ready-mades’ of Marcel Duchamp,” whereas an unnamed critic for the Evening News naively believed Rauschenberg’s use of objects was merely a “joke.”

The Times, conversely, cited Rauschenberg’s tripartite combine as a fine example of “nicely calculated appeal and audacity,” a stunning endorsement from a publication

63 Sutton made only a brief comment on the tonalities in Johns’s painting.
64 Evening Standard, November 14, 1963.
that had lambasted the ICA’s exhibition of American Pop Art earlier the same year.66 Studio International’s G.S. Whittet saw Rauschenberg as the most truly revolutionary artist in the exhibition, arguing that his use of “ready-made ingredients” provided viewers with a provocative “shock of neo-Dada.”67 It was probably the precarious balance between real and painted objects in Rauschenberg’s *Trophy II* that caused his work to stand out to viewers. It is unclear if they understood, however, that, while his combine paintings were reminiscent of Dada’s playful spirit, these works represented a serious endeavor to bring the artist into the world outside of the studio and vice-versa.

Jasper Johns’s *Periscope* (1963) obviously failed to capture similar attention by British reviewers of the *Dunn International*. Although the reasons for this are unclear, it is possible that Johns’s painting simply did not stand out as much among the other works in the show. Johns’s oil on canvas that incorporated stenciled names of colors in non-corresponding hues may have been more easily overlooked among works by more well-known Americans, such as Sam Francis’s lyrical abstraction [*Round the Blues* (1957)], Mark Tobey’s calligraphic composition [*Blue and White Calligraphy* (1962)] or Willem de Kooning’s gestural portrait of Marilyn Monroe [*Marilyn Monroe*, (1954)]. Rauschenberg’s provocative blend of two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional objects appears to have overshadowed his colleague’s work, which could have been underestimated as simply yet another visual analogue of Abstract Expressionist painting. Critics instead appeared to be more concerned with other artists in the show (Picasso and Dalí, were the most frequently praised) and clearly were more interested in

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Rauschenberg. The fact that the show was weighted heavily toward abstract as opposed to figurative compositions also drew varying amounts of praise and criticism in the press.

Reviews of the Dunn International as a whole, however, indicate that Londoners were pleased to see such a comprehensive survey of contemporary painting. As Gosling observed here, “there are superb pictures in every room, and artists like Tàpies, Francis, Rauschenberg, [Ellsworth] Kelly and Dubuffet look like major painters,” which, in his opinion, they often did not.68 It is not surprising, therefore, that the Tate decided to mount a more ambitious exhibition of contemporary art the following year. Over 300 works were included in 54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade. This show, like Vanguard American Painting held in 1962, brought together all four artists at the center of this study on a much grander scale than the Embassy’s substantially smaller exhibition.

54-64

To say that the Tate’s 54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade (Fig. 72) was a “mammoth” exhibition would be to reflect the opinion of virtually every reviewer in Britain. Held April 22 – June 28, 1964, 54-64 elicited over forty articles in the British press. Funded by a large grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, a Portuguese private foundation that operates a UK Branch, 54-64 featured 359 works by 170 American and European artists.69 This ambitious undertaking took almost three years to plan. It was organized by a committee consisting of Alan Bowness (Courtauld Institute), Lawrence Gowing (principal of the Chelsea School of Art) and Philip James (former art

68 Gosling, “100 Stars at the Tate.”
69 Roughly a third of the artists in the show were American. The foundation gave the Tate a £35,000 grant for the show. Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 13/393. The foundation was established in Lisbon in 1956 at the behest of a clause in the will of petrol magnate Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, who was of Armenian origin and an avid arts philanthropist. The UK Branch, also established in 1956, supports projects in the arts, education and social change in the UK and Republic of Ireland.
director of the Arts Council). Design and installation were handled by the architects and former Independent Group members Alison and Peter Smithson.

In November 1961, Gowing had written to Tate director John Rothenstein to propose the idea for this exhibition. Because London lacked a major show like the Venice Biennale or Germany’s Documenta, Gowing expressed his concern that “painters and those who look at painting in England were suffering from the lack of the kind of large scale international exhibition of current work which is commonly seen in continental centres and in America.” While Gowing had the specific interest of British artists and art lovers in mind, his motives reflect Great Britain’s overall goal of becoming competitive in the increasingly global art market. At any rate, Gowing’s idea was warmly received at the Tate. Although the Dunn International would open five months before 54-64, the latter would be far more encompassing in numbers and feature both painting and sculpture. Because the Tate also had a relatively weak acquisition fund, an exhibition such as this was a key way to augment their relatively meager holdings of contemporary art.

The most remarkable feature of 54-64 was the sheer volume of work on display. The exhibition organizers expressed their encyclopedic aim in the show’s catalogue: “The exhibition is chiefly concerned with kinds of painting and sculpture that have seemed to increasing numbers of people in many countries to be particularly

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70 According to the notes from the Advisory Committee for Painting meeting, January 29, 1962, David Sylvester had been mentioned to be on the committee, but apparently Bowness objected to working with him (for unstated reasons). There was also discussion about travelling the show around the UK, but that idea was scrapped, mainly because conditions at the Tate could not be repeated elsewhere and lenders were reluctant to allow their works to travel. Victoria & Albert Archive, ACGB 75/119.
71 Letter from Lawrence Gowing to John Rothenstein, November 10, 1961. TGA 92/181/1.
72 After the close of 54-64, the Tate Trustees approached the Gulbenkian Foundation to ask if they would consider doing a similar show on a triennial basis. This information comes from a letter written by Chris Whishaw on behalf of the Trustees to the Foundation, October 21, 1964. However, I could find no follow-up correspondence on this matter. TGA 92/181/2.
characteristic“ of the past ten years. The artists selected read like a canon of early to mid-20th century painters and sculptors. Francis Bacon, Georges Braque, Anthony Caro, Henri Matisse, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Indiana, Philip Guston, Roy Lichtenstein and Barnett Newman represent just a fraction of the Europeans and Americans chosen to participate. Pollock was represented by one painting, Frieze (1953-55), while Rothko had five canvases in the show: Light, Earth and Blue (1954), Reds—No. 22 (1957), Black in Deep Red (1957), Black Stripe on Red (1958) and Bottle Green and Deep Reds (1958). Johns also had five works chosen for display, Large Target Construction (1955), Flag (1958), Map (1961), Passage (1962) and Sculpmetal Numbers (1963), whereas six examples of Rauschenberg’s work were chosen: Untitled (1953-54), Monogram (1959), Allegory (1959-60), Wall Street (1961), Almanac (1962) and Windward (1963).

According to the Smithsons’ floorplan, Pollock’s painting was installed between work by André Masson and Hans Hofmann; Rothko was placed with Patrick Heron; Rauschenberg was on view with Jim Dine, John Chamberlain and Lichtenstein; while Johns was shown in an adjacent gallery with Claes Oldenburg, David Hockney, Peter Blake, James Rosenquist and Richard Stankiewicz. It is interesting to note that Rauschenberg’s combine Monogram, which is meant to be viewed from all four sides, was situated against a gallery wall at the Tate, a placement which impeded seeing this hybrid work in the round (Fig. 73). Although it is not clear why Monogram was installed in such a way, placing the work against the wall conveyed a sense of aesthetic liminality

73 In the exhibition catalogue, there is no author listed for the essay; it appears to have been written collaboratively by the show’s organizers. 54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade, London: Tate Gallery, 1964, 7.
74 This floorplan is from TGA 92/181/2.
stressing the notion that Rauschenberg’s combines were not strictly painting or sculpture but a mixture of both.

Critical response to the Tate’s exhibition as whole was as diverse as the works contained within its galleries. Most British writers agreed with the Times that having firsthand access to such a large body of modern art was important for Britain’s own artists, viewers and patrons of the arts. The exhibition, according to its reviewer, “abounds in information of past achievements and evidence of the sheer pace and excitement of past activities in international art.” John Russell concurred, arguing in the Sunday Times that this historical survey of modernism provided Londoners with a unique chance to see some of the best art from the past ten years. The exhibition also allowed direct visual comparisons between international artists, and, as Russell suggested, “instead of conversational swordplay about the relative stature of New York, Paris and London, we can see the best of each, more or less, within a yard or two of the best of others.” The Tate show, as another critic quipped in the Evening Standard, “makes a visit to the Museum of Modern Art quite unnecessary.”

Most British reviewers were impressed by the Smithsons’s installation of the work, but some criticized what they saw as an apparent lack of cohesive thematic arrangement or artistic selection on the part of 54-64’s organizers. Diana Rowntree wrote a praising review for The Guardian, in which she lauded the Smithsons’s understanding of “how architectural skill can be used properly, anonymously, to give the exhibition its intended form.” Conversely, Mario Amaya critiqued 54-64 as simply “a conveyor belt”

75 “Proof Enough of the Vitality of Recent Painting and Sculpture,” Times, April 21, 1964.
77 Roger Berthoud, “This Huge Exhibition is a Triumph,” Evening Standard, April 20, 1964.
type of exhibition that regrettably catered to a new emerging aesthetic of large, eye-catching works. This situation demanded, he suggested, “a different approach to art viewing, and in such an exhibition we are hardly able to contemplate each work independently or for any length of time.”

The inclusion of 360 objects appeared to many a bit overzealous and was one of the shared complaints of critics who reviewed the show. Although, in 54-64, the Tate succeeded in presenting a comprehensive view of the art of the previous decade to the London public, as Guy Brett’s comments in the Guardian exemplified, some reviewers criticized an overall lack of cohesive theme for the show and its catalogue. It was Brett’s opinion that “the general themelessness of the show is exemplified by the tome-like catalogue, it’s somewhat biased towards the unsigned, and the artists thrown together without any apparent order.”

Bowness and his colleagues may have fared better to follow Mies van der Rohe’s principle of “less is more” in their selection process.

In a follow-up to Brett’s article published in the Guardian the next day, Eric Newton’s column exemplified how critics’ opinions of 54-64 varied even within the same publication. Newton expressed his belief that the show’s actual strength was in its stylistic arrangement. He wrote, “The bewildering complexity of contemporary, or near-contemporary, stylistic stratification is rather neatly sorted out by arranging the exhibits in stylistic groups so that one no longer wonders what artist’s work one is looking at but what stylistic formula he has chosen to follow.”

Newton observed that 54-64 successfully conveyed what the show’s organizers set out to accomplish: presenting

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examples of paintings and sculptures they believed were “particularly characteristic” of the previous decade. By contrast, Brett overlooked the fact that the overarching theme of the exhibition was to survey a decade’s worth of artistic activity.

Even among those critics who understood and appreciated the goals of 54-64, many expressed the desire for an organizing principle to give shape to an assessment of trends in contemporary art. Edwin Mullins made a very pointed argument in the *Sunday Telegraph* in his provocatively titled article, “All Look and No Think?,” that those who put together shows such as this “should discover what they think is good, and then be prepared to justify their choice—in words, because I know of no other way.” The lack of a more theoretical basis for the Tate show irked Mullins, but the fact that some of the artists included used theory as a guiding principle conversely bothered some other critics. Terence Mullaly, writing for the *Daily Telegraph*, saw the show as a “No-Man’s-Land of the Moderns” because “art’s latest manifestations have done nothing to bridge the gap between the artist and the majority of those who care about art.” Mullaly felt that most of the work spoke “an esoteric language.” Johns and Rauschenberg were frequent targets of this type of critical backlash against work perceived as rooted too much in theory or, as Mullaly suggested, in “nonsense.”

Peter Stone’s review, “Ten Years of What?,” published in the *Jewish Chronicle*, singled out works by Johns, along with Jim Dine and Ad Reinhardt, as examples of what he likewise called “nonsense.” In a veiled reference to the heritage of Dada, Stone pointed out that, in Johns’s *Flag*, for instance, “theories have been found to justify these

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84 Ibid.
things, and can be found to justify most things.”

Stone warned against the danger of accepting unequivocally whatever younger artists like Johns needed to create, an opinion based on his belief that Johns was rejecting rather than trying to build upon the past. By contrast, in an article published the same day as Stone’s, Nevile Wallis more favorably described Rauschenberg (and Dine) as creating “New York products which sprang with sophisticated defiance out of the mocking non-art of 1920 Dadaism.”

As Denys Sutton pointed out, with regard to the younger generation of artists in 54-64, much of their work required an open mind to appreciate. Their meanings went deeper than the seeming appearance of being abjectly theoretical, esoteric or nonsensical. The core issue of the show, as Wallis pointed out, was the opportunity it provided to assess what contemporary art could mean to the viewing public. An anonymous critic for the Evening Standard provided one plausible answer to this question in a report on public reception in the galleries. “Those critics,” he or she suggested, “who believe that it is the function of art to outrage us may be rather piqued”; “it is surely the ultimate irony that avant-garde painting is now received in a mood of genial acceptance.”

Although this critic did not provide detailed descriptions of visitors’ positive reactions to the works, it was observed that viewers were generally “young and immensely cheerful” and offered little ridicule of the works on view. Despite the fact that this report did not specifically indicate the reactions of older gallery-goers, it is nevertheless interesting for its firsthand account of at least a portion of the show’s public.

Edwin Mullins, who was initially skeptical in his opinion of 54-64, did soften his tone in a reassessment published near the close of the exhibition. Similar to Mullaly’s

assertion that too much of contemporary art lacked social responsibility, Mullins likewise sensed that current artists seemingly felt themselves freed of this traditional responsibility. But, he added, now the artist had to create usefulness for himself. “If painting and sculpture are to have any continued function at all,” wrote Mullins, “this can only be by continually testing out conventional responses to what we see around us, and by endeavouring to pioneer new regions of visual experience.”

This observation was particularly appropriate for understanding Rauschenberg’s artistic endeavors. In his second go-round, Mullins aptly described Rauschenberg, Johns and their fellow American Pop Art cohorts, including Dine and Lichtenstein, as artists whose quest was “for a new kind of symbolism: not just neo-Dada rebellion against ‘Fine Art’ but an attempt to use everyday images with the simple eloquence of a poet using everyday words.”

Johns, Rauschenberg and the younger American generation unequivocally commanded more press than their predecessors, but Pollock and Rothko also received attention from British critics reviewing 54-64. As opposed to the diverse attitudes towards Johns and Rauschenberg, in general both were favorably discussed. It was frequently lamented, for instance, that Pollock was severely under-represented by just one painting, the twenty-six by eighty-six inch canvas, *Frieze* (1953-55). As the *Times* critic commented, “Pollock, incontrovertibly one of the giants of the decade both in scale and invention, is represented here with total inadequacy by a comparatively small frieze, flanked with large paintings by Hofmann and Masson.”

John Russell argued that Pollock’s impact on modern art was rendered “incomprehensible if we know him only by

89 Ibid.
the late and small ‘Frieze,’ here dwarfed by the contributions” of Hofmann and Masson, and Nevile Wallis agreed, deeming “inadequate” the inclusion of only one Pollock painting.\(^9^1\)

Although Pollock was not in the spotlight as he had been three or four years earlier, he was, however, still in favor among those British critics who referenced his other Abstract Expressionist compositions, as in the case of Nigel Gosling, who referred to Pollock’s works in *The Observer Weekend Review* as “splendidly confident gestures.”\(^9^2\) Gosling viewed Rothko as a consummate artist among other “mystic poets” on view in 54-64, such as Kenneth Noland, Clyfford Still and Helen Frankenthaler.\(^9^3\) Not surprisingly, as they had in the past, critics also lauded Rothko as a masterful colorist.\(^9^4\) Norbert Lynton considered him to be the one artist in a group of older contemporaries who “may well be on the brink of some period of consummating activity that will set a splendid finis to their art.”\(^9^5\) Seen in the context of criticism generated by the large 54-64 group exhibition, it is evident that Pollock and Rothko remained duly respected artists in London but certainly they did not garner as much either positive or negative commentary as the up-and-coming generation.

As previously noted, on November 6, 1959, *The Times Literary Supplement* published an extensive, feature-length article titled “The American Imagination: Taking Stock: A Scattered Abundance of Creative Richness.” Featuring one of Hans Namuth’s 1950 photographs of Pollock painting in his studio, this article, appearing seven months after the Tate’s *New American Painting* closed, attempted to analyze postwar American

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\(^9^3\) Ibid.
\(^9^5\) Norbert Lynton, “Modern Artists and the Late Style,” *Times*, June 23, 1964. The other artists he cited were Henry Moore and Lucio Fontana.
imagination and national character. Four days after the opening of 54-64, the Sunday Times Colour Magazine published a similar feature, “America on Target.” This ten-page supplement to the Tate’s exhibition featured additional photographs of American artists, including Johns, Rauschenberg, Rothko, Davis, Kelly, Lichtenstein, Guston, de Kooning and Newman. David Sylvester wrote captions that attempted to provide readers with brief snippets of information about these artists on view in 54-64. In comparison to The Times Literary Supplement five years earlier, what is most telling about this article was its main headline. According to the magazine, “One of the biggest exhibitions ever held at the Tate Gallery opened last week …. Of 120 foreign artists represented, 50 are Americans, most of them New Yorkers. New York has clearly displaced Paris as the headquarters of contemporary art.”

According to Sylvester, Jasper Johns was one of the key figures in this alleged displacement of artistic power from Europe to the U.S. As a result, Johns was featured on the magazine’s cover (Fig. 74). According to Sylvester’s account, which concluded by querying of this New York takeover “How Did It Happen?,” America’s artistic hegemony went along with its ascendancy to the role of political leader of the West. As Sylvester recalled, “When the European powers weakened, America abandoned her traditional isolationism and developed her latent resources to fill the vacuum.” He suggested that Europeans had been reluctant to accept what was now a foregone conclusion, namely America’s leadership in art as well as on the world scene. But Sylvester somewhat simplistically promoted the idea of an American cultural invasion

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96 “America on Target,” Sunday Times Colour Magazine, April 26, 1964, 23-33. The photographs were taken by the American photographer Dan Budnik.
97 Ibid., 24.
98 Ibid., 34.
that Britons and Europeans should accept passively without precondition. The Cold War environment of the 1950s and ‘60s was dominated by a political clash between the U.S. and Soviet Union. Sylvester’s pro-American sentiments plausibly stemmed from a conscious (or unconscious) desire to align himself and Britain culturally with the U.S. Consequently, “realignment” would have been a more appropriate term for Sylvester to use rather than “takeover.”

Furthermore, British and continental European art continued to flourish during this time period, and although the U.S. was appearing to emerge as the undisputed leader of the global artworld, it should be recalled that the exhibitions discussed in this study were typically the result of a desire on the part of the host institutions to feature shows of American artistic innovation. U.S. cultural exports were obviously highly valued in Britain in the postwar period. Political aims may or may not have been the ulterior motives of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate or the Whitechapel, which organized these shows. What is clearly evident in the Sunday Times Colour Magazine feature article on the 54-64 show is that, by 1964, American artists such as Johns, Rauschenberg, Pollock and Rothko were viewed by British critics (both positively and negatively) as cutting-edge figures in global contemporary art.

As a reaffirmation of this situation, the Sunday Times published a second special article titled “Art ’54-64 Q. & A.” at the close of this show. This full-color insert featured four prominent British critics asked to assess the present state of art by answering a series of questions. One of these was whether or not New York had become the world’s art capital.99 Douglas Cooper, John Rothenstein, Bryan Robertson and David Sylvester

99 Douglas Cooper, et. al., “Art ’54-64 Q. & A.,” Sunday Times, June 21, 1964. Other questions included: How does British art stand up in an international context and what will happen in art in the next ten years?
offered intriguing answers to this by now common assertion. Rothenstein, Robertson and Sylvester all agreed to a certain degree that presently New York was in fact the art world’s main creative center. While Rothenstein declared that “New York has evolved original ideas, most conspicuously in the painting of Jackson Pollock,” he also pointed out that New Yorkers such as Pollock had pushed to a grander scale the utmost conclusion of ideas that were already current in Europe.\(^{100}\)

Cooper’s assessment of New York’s purported art world dominance, however, resulted in the most palatable model of the new international art scene offered by any of these critics. He believed that there was no single capital of the art world, proposing instead that “its functions now seem to me divided between Paris, London and New York.”\(^{101}\) In other words, traditional nationalistic boundaries were being transcended, resulting in a new model of globalization in the contemporary art world. Even the terms “British” or “American” seemed to Cooper archaic and incapable of capturing the new transnational environment. As international travel was becoming progressively easier in the postwar era, artists from countries all over the world were becoming increasingly interconnected. Traditional boundaries, divisions or labels had become ever more fluid.

It was this more boundless situation, in fact, that had prompted the organizers of 54-64 to hold this exhibition in the first place. In an article written for *Studio International*, Alan Bowness offered his perspective on the genesis of the show. Bowness revealed that the inspiration for 54-64 was British artist Roger Fry’s second Post-Impressionist exhibition. This seminal presentation of British, French and Russian artists held at the Grafton Galleries in 1912 brought contemporary European art to

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100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
London and was highly influential in the development of an avant-garde generation of artists in Britain at the start of the 20th century. Fifty-two years later, the same spirit of shared international artistic innovation became the fundamental principle of Bowness, James and Gowing’s Tate exhibition. Its central theme was promotion of the interlocking, not rivalry, of artists in cities such as Paris, London and New York. The goal of 54-64, Bowness suggested, was to promote the interchange of ideas, thereby increasing awareness of global developments, and diminishing the importance of one school’s dominance over another.102

Conclusion

Not every critic, of course, was as sold as Bowness on the equitable intentions of the Gulbenkian’s organizers, based on the evidence that almost half of the foreign artists selected for 54-64 were American. Two months after the show closed, Robert Melville argued in the pages of Architectural Review that, “since the Gulbenkian ’54-64’ show at the Tate, there has been talk, in London, of a New York/London axis, but we must be a pretty dreamy lot if we think there’s anything in it.”103 After characterizing the New York School as “the phase of the big, heroic American gesture; a vague but purposeful gesture, standing for big thoughts about important matters,” he asserted that a younger group, led by Johns and Rauschenberg, had now risen to the forefront, ushering in a second phase fundamentally different from the first, but equally consequential.104 The

104 Ibid.
newer American agenda, according to Melville, entailed “discovering for us the treasures under our noses,” a goal with “no less solemn intentions” than had their elders.\textsuperscript{105}

At the same time, Melville also offered tough criticisms of the second generation. Initially praising Johns, Rauschenberg, Dine and Oldenburg as “brilliant, daring, subversive and reckless,” ultimately Melville averred that they had “failed because of a fundamental timidity.” As opposed to their Abstract Expressionist predecessors, Johns and Rauschenberg’s work was not daring or bold enough and looked too packaged. Melville criticized these younger painters for “hiding from the world behind their made-up problems” and suggested that “their words are far too big for their actions.”\textsuperscript{106}

Robert Melville’s comments in \textit{Studio International} encapsulate the problems and criticisms Johns and Rauschenberg faced as their work was prominently featured in the ICA’s \textit{The Popular Image} and the Tate’s \textit{Dunn International} and 54-64: \textit{Painting and Sculpture of a Decade} exhibitions. Rauschenberg’s combines and silkscreens and Johns’s encaustic paintings were alternately praised for being part Dada’s heritage and criticized as poor imitations. Some critics considered Rauschenberg and Johns to be prefiguring or participating in Pop Art, while others, including Melville, suggested snidely that Johns and Rauschenberg were “applying themselves to the task of keeping Abstract Expressionism alive at any cost.”\textsuperscript{107} Even after their inclusion in three major group exhibitions, it is evident that Britain still lacked a clarion picture of these two artists’ endeavors. The final chapter will examine the Whitechapel’s Rauschenberg and

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 135-6.
Johns solo shows, both held in 1964. These exhibitions on London’s east end provided a more coherent representation of their complexity.
Chapter 8 “The Later Period: 1963-64: Part 2”

By the early 1960s, the Whitechapel Art Gallery had developed into the leading destination in London to see contemporary art from Britain, Europe and the United States. As we have seen, Bryan Robertson’s curatorial tenacity and acumen had led to the gallery’s establishment in the late ‘50s of a series of solo exhibitions featuring the work of American artists. Beginning with the highly successful Pollock show in 1958, these Whitechapel “retrospectives” became a key means for Londoners to assess and evaluate American artistic exports on a separate, case by case basis. As previously noted, less well-known artists could be overlooked in large group exhibitions (likely the cause of Jasper Johns’s inability to attract the attention of British critics who reviewed the Tate’s Dunn International in 1963); the Whitechapel series played a prime role in addressing this situation.

In February and December of 1964, the Whitechapel provided unfettered access to a larger volume of work than had been previously seen by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, respectively. The British press devoted a great deal of attention to the Whitechapel’s spotlights on Rauschenberg’s combines, drawings and silkscreens and then Johns’s paintings, drawings and sculptures. Because a majority of these works had never before been seen in Britain, Rauschenberg and Johns’s solo exhibitions enabled British critics to formulate a clearer understanding of their related artistic enterprises. This chapter will assess the varied reactions to each of these shows in order to explicate formal and conceptual issues most important to London-based art critics in the early ‘60s. Prior to examining Rauschenberg’s Whitechapel retrospective in February, taking a look
at Mark Rothko’s concurrent solo exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery will allow for a fuller assessment of the British reaction to American avant-garde painting at this time.

Mark Rothko’s Marlborough Exhibition

From February to March of 1964, Marlborough Fine Art Ltd. held a small one-person exhibition of thirteen Mark Rothko color field paintings.1 Unfortunately, even though this show included many fine examples of Rothko’s recent output, very few publications covered it. This was due in large part to the fact that, as Pierre Rouve noted in *The Arts Review*, Rothko’s work was returning to London during the height of excitement over the Rauschenberg exhibition at Whitechapel, which overshadowed Marlborough’s smaller survey of an artist further along in his career.2 Nevertheless, Rothko, who had already developed a well-known profile in British critical circles, maintained his status as an important and highly respected American painter even after Abstract Expressionism was no longer in vogue. Those reviewers who did comment on the show were uniformly positive.

One example of this esteem was found in the *Times*. After pointing out that Rothko’s work would certainly elicit an element of surprise if it were to display some degree of radical change, the *Time* art critic ended up praising Rothko for remaining “A Constant in Art.” Rothko, he or she suggested, was analogous “to a fixed star which,

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1 As the exhibition catalogue indicates, all thirteen works in the exhibition were for sale. The checklist only lists dates for the first five canvases: 1951, 1956, 1959 and 1961. The other eight works are undated, but were likely painted in 1961. The catalogue did not feature an essay but did include a biographical note, a list of Rothko’s principal one-person and group exhibitions, a list of works in public collections, writings by Rothko, select exhibition catalogues and bibliography and the show’s checklist.

however, often seen, never fails to arouse admiration.”3 To most viewers, Rothko’s consistent visual appeal was based on his luminous bands of color, which, it was observed, were “magnetic rather than assertive.”4 This acclaim echoed what Eric Newton had written about Rothko’s work in the Tate’s *New American Painting* exhibition five years earlier. Newton had stated metaphorically how it seemed to him that Rothko’s large areas of color invited the viewer “to swim in them.”5

Pierre Rouve believed this same absorptive quality should prompt art critics to tackle larger philosophical questions about being and existence inherent in Rothko’s compositions. In his *Arts Review* article, Rouve argued that “criticism must cease to skate on the surface and must plunge into the abyss of being” in analyzing Rothko’s art.6 This internationally renowned art critic—who at various times in his life worked as an interpreter, university lecturer and a broadcaster for the BBC World Service—suggested somewhat poetically that Rothko was a painter of “a perpetual epiphany of the ineffable.” Rouve’s rhetoric pointed to what he believed was Rothko’s quest to paint the infinite. He thereby described Rothko’s color bands as “tiles of infinity” that revealed what was “infinitely beyond all of us.”7 Rouve’s observations recall Rothko’s self-stated belief that a picture should be, for the artist and viewer, “a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.”8

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4 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
Rouve’s comments also ascribed a spiritual or religious quality to Rothko’s works, as well as a priestly status to the artist himself. Indeed, Rouve believed that Rothko “stirred the spirit” and “sanctified the senses” in his art.\(^9\) Evidence supporting this critic’s observations included Rothko’s commission in 1964 to create a meditative space housing his canvases that would later become known as the Rothko Chapel, in Houston, Texas. That Rothko’s color field canvases invited focused meditation on the part of the viewer was corroborated by *Burlington Magazine* critic Keith Roberts. After visiting the Marlborough show for the first time, Roberts recalled that the atmosphere in the galleries was “an almost palpable mood of calm, paralysing calm”\(^10\) He had the same experience on his second visit. Michael Fried had described the same effect on London viewers in his review of Rothko’s Whitechapel exhibition for the New York publication *Arts Magazine* three years earlier. As we recall, Fried noted how viewers “sat around or leaned against walls, just looking, letting the paintings work on them.”\(^11\) Roberts now agreed with Fried’s observation, suggesting provocatively that viewers should stand before Rothko’s canvases, “allowing the beautiful harmonies in individual colours themselves to work their will on one’s receptive, though watchful faculties.”\(^12\) Rothko’s compositions invited the viewer to participate in a seductive visual experience of total immersion in various hues and tonal variations of color, providing a sensation much like

\(^9\) Rouve, *The Arts Review*.
\(^12\) Roberts, “Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions.”
viewing a sunset, as G.S. Whittet suggested. “To analyse Rothko,” he believed, “is to attempt to dissect the sunset,” which was an elusive endeavor.\textsuperscript{13} Rothko’s superb color skills were widely considered to distinguish this indefatigable older artist from his younger American peers. “Sixty-year old Rothko,” Whittet wrote, “sets his juniors an unattainable goal” of achieving transparency of color.\textsuperscript{14} The Marlborough’s small exhibition of Rothko’s work in 1964 indicated that, despite never straying from his “unsurprising” aesthetic formula of luminous, rectangular bands of color, the physical experience of seeing Rothko’s work in person never lost its paramount importance to British critics. Moreover, the totality of his works had a greater effect than the individual paintings themselves, which feasibly was why Rothko had declined to exhibit in mixed company in the Tate’s Dunn International the year before. While Rothko’s entire oeuvre was based on multiple variations of rectangular bands of color, his overwhelmingly positive critical reception in Britain belied any perception that his abstract canvases were simplistic or facile. Rothko’s mastery of this stylistic convention, coupled with the spiritual, meditative qualities of his works, earned him a steady reputation as one of the brightest stars among established American artists. Rothko’s reception was quite different from that of Robert Rauschenberg.

Rauschenberg, a younger American artworld celebrity, was not as well-known in Britain as Rothko or Pollock; yet, his 1964 Whitechapel solo show drew the highest attendance of any at that venue up to that time. The critical reception of this show will be discussed to assess the ways that the reception of Abstract Expressionism, particularly the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. Whittet believed that Rothko’s painterly handling, proportions and shading allowed him to achieve the nearest to transparent color that flat paints could attain.
work of Pollock more so than Rothko, would play a role in British opinions of
Rauschenberg and Johns’s combine and encaustic paintings, respectively.

Robert Rauschenberg at Whitechapel

Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns began to rise to prominence in the
American artworld in the late 1950s, but, as already indicated, they were not as widely
known in the British art milieu as Rothko and Pollock during this same time period.
Johns, in particular, did not draw much interest from British critics when he exhibited in
group exhibitions in London in the early ‘60s. However, Rauschenberg and Johns’s solo
shows, both held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the same year, were largely
responsible for changing their reputations from moderate unknowns to notably salient
American artists in the view of the London artworld.¹⁵

Robert Rauschenberg: Paintings, Drawings and Combines, 1949-1964 ran from
February 4 – March 8, 1964. As a lifetime American art aficionado, the Whitechapel’s
director Bryan Robertson had wanted for quite some time to hold an exhibition of
Rauschenberg’s work. According to Janeen Haythornthwaite, former archivist at
Whitechapel, by 1964, Robertson felt intuitively that the timing was now right to show
Rauschenberg in London. Robertson’s instinct was likely based on the positive attention
Rauschenberg had received during the ICA’s Popular Image and the Tate’s recent Dunn
International exhibitions, but his decision may have also been influenced by the fact that

¹⁵ It should be noted that Rauschenberg was included in the exhibition, Art: USA: Now: The Johnson Collection of Contemporary American Paintings, held at the Royal Academy of Arts from February 16 – March 17, 1963. The Johnson Wax Company, based in the U.S., had purchased one painting each from 102 different artists created in the previous three years. This corporate collection showcase traveled from Wisconsin to Tokyo and then to London. Because I was unable to locate substantive reviews that mentioned Rauschenberg, Art: USA: Now will not be discussed in this study.
Rauschenberg would be in London performing with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in January and February of 1964. The success of Rauschenberg’s Jewish Museum retrospective, organized by Alan Solomon in New York in 1963, was another influential factor in Robertson’s decision to organize the Whitechapel show.

Despite Rothko’s continuing success at Marlborough, art historian Brandon Taylor has pointed out that, by 1964, Abstract Expressionism was definitely no longer au courant in London. Rauschenberg’s uniquely avant-garde blend of high and low art, melding the everyday object and modernist painting, made the possibility of showing his work to Britons even more appealing for the Whitechapel’s director. Even before plans began in 1962, Robertson proposed a plan to Leo Castelli, Rauschenberg’s dealer in New York, to show this popular young artist in London. In a September 1962 letter to Castelli, Robertson declared that, “A Rauschenberg show is tremendously important for London and the mental climate is now exactly right.” Castelli agreed, the following year, pledging to help assemble works for a London showing. Robertson also enlisted the help of Castelli’s former wife Illeana Sonnabend, one of Rauschenberg’s first art dealers in Europe, to bring the show to fruition.

Rauschenberg’s Whitechapel retrospective focused on his combines from 1954 onwards (for example, Rebus [1955, Fig. 75]) and his silkscreen paintings of the early 1960s. His so-called Dante drawings (1959-60) were also part of the exhibition (Fig. 76).

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19 Letter from Castelli to Robertson, October 12, 1963. Whitechapel Art Gallery Archive (photocopy).
20 Sonnabend wrote to Robertson on October 15, 1963, informing him that Castelli had forwarded Robertson’s letter to her and that she wished to explore with him the possibilities for such a show in London. Whitechapel Art Gallery Archive (photocopy). Sonnabend held a Rauschenberg exhibition at her gallery in Paris from February – March 1963.
Executed in chalk, pencil, watercolor and transferred photographs, the latter comprised thirty-four drawings illustrating the same number of Cantos in Dante’s *Inferno*. They came to London from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which had purchased them in 1963. Because the Modern’s International Council was already planning to tour the drawings around Europe from 1964-65, Robertson successfully negotiated with William Lieberman, MoMA’s curator of prints and drawings, to include them as part of the Whitechapel show. After the Rauschenberg retrospective closed, the drawings were displayed independently in a separate show at the U.S. Embassy, London (Fig. 77). *Rauschenberg: Illustrations for Dante’s Inferno* later traveled to the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne’s Hatton Gallery, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the Arts Council Gallery in Cambridge before heading off on a continental European tour.22

Robertson hung Rauschenberg’s paintings on the Whitechapel’s gallery side-walls. Freestanding sculptural combine works stood on the floor (Fig. 75), whereas larger paintings and the Dante drawings were hung on breezeblock walls (Fig. 76) similar to those Robertson had used in the Pollock and Rothko retrospectives in 1958 and 1961, respectively.23 Altogether forty combines and silkscreens, along with thirty-four Dante illustrations, successfully filled the space of this gallery in a dazzling installation.

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21 Rauschenberg based the drawings on John Ciardi’s 1954 translation of Dante.
22 The exhibition was shown under the auspices of MoMA’s International Council at venues in Austria, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia and Belgium. The framed 14 ½ x 11” drawings returned in late 1965 to the U.S, where they were exhibited at MoMA and then circulated throughout the U.S. and Canada. The exhibition was accompanied by Dore Ashton’s commentary on Rauschenberg’s drawings. Using quotes from Dante to “read” Rauschenberg’s contemporary updating of the Medieval poem, Ashton provided useful iconographic readings of complex drawings that she viewed as frames in a film. For instance, she detected contemporary political themes in Canto XII, where Virgil was represented by presidential candidate and U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and Dante was represented by President John F. Kennedy. MoMA Archive, ICE-F-97-64, v. 79.4.
23 Due to lack of full access to the Whitechapel Archive, it cannot be determined at this time whether or not the breezeblock walls in Rauschenberg’s exhibition were the same as those used in the Rothko show three years earlier. Because the Rauschenberg walls were shorter, I believe they were not the same.
As Robertson pointed out in the catalogue preface, Rauschenberg was much younger than the other American artists shown at Whitechapel in recent years. Pollock, Rothko, Mark Tobey and Philip Guston were part of the generation that paved the way for the innovative and sometimes bewildering work of Rauschenberg and his contemporaries, including Jasper Johns. Robertson attempted to dispel any sense that Rauschenberg’s work was sensationalist by suggesting that viewers look below the surface appearance of his combines to find deeper meaning. Once viewers “looked beyond the stuffed goat and the tyre, the winking light bulbs and the built-in radio sets,” Robertson suggested, they would see that Rauschenberg was, in fact, “a classical artist with a fastidious sense of structure and a hypersensitive understanding of space.” An equal challenge for Robertson was convincing critics and viewers that Rauschenberg’s combines filled with *objets trouvés* were more than just spectacular throwbacks to Dadaist nihilism.

In addition to Robertson’s comments, Rauschenberg’s Whitechapel catalogue also included written contributions by the Americans Henry Geldzahler, John Cage and Max Kozloff. Geldzahler, Associate Curator of American Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a strong supporter of Pop Art, offered astute reflections upon Rauschenberg’s Jewish Museum retrospective held in the spring of 1963. The disparate found objects in Rauschenberg’s compositions, Geldzahler argued, retained their

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25 Tobey’s exhibition was held in 1962 and was first shown at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris. Guston’s show, which had been on display at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, took place the following year.
26 Ibid.
“uniqueness and qualities as object” and yet managed to combine successfully to form a painting.\textsuperscript{28} This aesthetic synthesis occurred because “whatever Rauschenberg uses [in his work] brings to its new context the fullness of the context from which it has been ripped, enriching the associative value of his work without devitalizing it by an overly specific content.”\textsuperscript{29} In other words, the individual parts within the overall composition were separable and consonant at the same time.

Geldzahler also believed that Rauschenberg’s art ultimately presented no sense of closure or single, ultimate meaning to the viewer. Instead, as he aptly observed, “we end up without a story, but with something much richer—the associative and imaginative leaps that Rauschenberg’s works open up for us.”\textsuperscript{30} While Geldzahler’s comments on the combines, Dante drawings and silkscreens previously seen in the Jewish Museum show created a useful backdrop for understanding Rauschenberg’s endeavors, John Cage’s “On Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work” was a poetically charged and subjective meditation upon Cage’s personal experience after having met Rauschenberg at Black Mountain College in 1949.\textsuperscript{31} In it he also commented on Rauschenberg’s works, observing metaphorically that, for instance, “there is no more subject in a combine than there is in a page from a newspaper. Each thing that is there is a subject. It is a situation involving multiplicity.”\textsuperscript{32}

Conversely, Max Kozloff’s “Rauschenberg’s Recent Works” more directly complemented Geldzahler’s objective assessment. Kozloff saw in Rauschenberg’s

\textsuperscript{28} Geldzahler, 4.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{31} Cage’s comments are an extract from his \textit{Silence: Lectures and Writings}, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961.
oeuvre a tribute to and extension of the great art movements of the twentieth century, particularly Cubism, Futurism and Surrealism, and he stated that no other recent artist, not even Johns, took “such a polyvalent and imaginative inventory of modern life.”

Most interesting, though, is Kozloff’s assessment that Rauschenberg “stands ultimately aside from the pop art which owes so much to him … by his ambition to derive as much sensuous profit from it as he can.” Not only did Kozloff consider Rauschenberg as prefiguring Pop Art, but he also believed that there was never an element of complacent detachment from the subjects of Rauschenberg’s compositions; in other words, unlike any other American Pop artists, Rauschenberg was, to paraphrase Kozloff, contemplative, nuanced, engaged and avoided self-defeat.

Robertson’s intuition about the proper timing of Rauschenberg’s show proved to be correct. According to scholar Mary Yule, his solo exhibition drew 52,000 visitors to the Whitechapel, the highest attendance figure ever at that time. Undoubtedly, Pop Art’s current high profile in the London contemporary artworld and Rauschenberg’s established reputation as a prominent figure in the New York art scene played major roles in drawing interest in his work from average viewers and professional critics. As Taylor has noted, the majority of the British press saw Rauschenberg as “the enfant terrible of a

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Mary Yule, “A place for living art’: The Whitechapel Art Gallery 1952-1968,” in Margaret Garlake, Artists and Patrons in Postwar Britain: Essays by Postgraduate Students at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, 110. Haythornthwaite, 55, points out that the average daily attendance was 1,876, the highest ever recorded in the entire history of the gallery.
new type of artistic consciousness that was both fascinating (and fascinated) and unsettling.”37

The BBC aired two New Comment radio programs devoted to the Rauschenberg retrospective, adding to all of this attention. The first, heard on January 26, 1964, a week before the exhibition opened, featured a conversation between Robertson and Rauschenberg. The Whitechapel director stated his belief that Rauschenberg’s work had little to do with Pop Art in the general sense of the phrase as it was understood at that time. Instead, much as Pollock had done for his fellow artists when he was alive, Rauschenberg, Robertson suggested, had “unleashed, as it were, a lot of possibilities for other artists who are now working in the pop art field.”38 As always the consummate British authority on and ardent supporter of American art, Robertson was convinced unequivocally that Rauschenberg had inherited Pollock’s legacy. Both, he argued, had “opened up the doors and windows” and “created a situation which made for much more flexible movement and much more flexible set of possibilities” for other artists in the American and European artworlds.39 Pollock had been described as the “hero-figure of Action Painting” by the London Times in 1958; Robertson now proposed that Rauschenberg had likewise become “a kind of hero figure for a widely distributed younger generation of artists all over American and Europe.”40

The second BBC New Comment program aired soon after the Rauschenberg exhibition opened. British art critic and curator Edward Lucie-Smith’s “Robert Rauschenberg and His New York Contemporaries” was broadcast on Third Programme

37 Taylor, 72.
39 Ibid.
February 18, 1964. Here Lucie-Smith commented on what he believed were fundamental differences between British and American attitudes to modern art. He stated, for instance, that “things which seem self-evident in New York are apt to be profoundly misunderstood by a British audience,” providing one possible reason why British viewers may have found Rauschenberg’s work puzzling.41 Of course, certainly not all British viewers were naïve or unaware of developments in the American art scene. Unfortunately, Lucie-Smith did not disclose exactly what “things” were misunderstood rather than “self-evident.” However, the reasons for Rauschenberg’s montage of dissonant objects in his combines were not entirely obvious to all American viewers, either.

In order to alleviate potential confusion about the works on view at Whitechapel, Lucie-Smith enumerated Rauschenberg’s artistic strengths, which he identified as “freewheeling inventiveness and virtuosity,” as well as humor and “tremendous fluency and capacity for developing and transforming pictorial imagery.”42 The Dante drawings in particular revealed each of these as positive attributes, but Lucie-Smith also sensed that, as seen in a combine such as Bed (1955, Fig. 78), Rauschenberg’s playfulness could sometimes “go a little sour on him.”43 By incorporating real, unadulterated objects, such as a bedsheets, tire or stuffed chicken, into his compositions, Rauschenberg perhaps ran the risk of creating a false impression that his work was disingenuous or lighthearted. In order to counter that misconception, Lucie-Smith pointed out that, in his opinion,

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
Rauschenberg was among “the subtlest and most sophisticated artists living” at that time.\textsuperscript{44}

In the pages of the \textit{Sunday Telegraph}, Edwin Mullins bluntly reiterated Lucie-Smith’s point about the risks of Rauschenberg’s playfulness. Mullins reminded readers that anyone who placed a stuffed chicken or necktie in a work of art was a sitting target for mockery, but Mullins was also quick to state that viewers should not dismiss Rauschenberg as being merely “a pretentious joker.”\textsuperscript{45} Arguing, as did Robertson, that Rauschenberg was the most important American painter since Pollock, Mullins saw him as the equal beneficiary of Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters. Mullins suggested, however, that Rauschenberg went beyond Duchamp by realizing that “an assembly, or collage, of real or photographed objects has its own quite ridiculous unreality unless the artist can bring them to life.”\textsuperscript{46} According to Mullins, Rauschenberg had transcended Duchamp by making his objects an integral part of an aesthetic composition. Furthermore, as opposed to Duchamp’s generally static readymades, Rauschenberg’s combines, drawings and silkscreens were imbued with a certain cinematic quality. Mullins recognized that there was a dynamic in Rauschenberg’s combines between the real (object) and the unreal (paint) that resembled cinema, and Lucie-Smith had likewise proposed the idea that the Dante drawings, for instance, could be read like overlapping frames of a film.\textsuperscript{47} Viewed in this way, Rauschenberg’s drawings appeared to be rooted in a modern technological context.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. Lucie-Smith also referred to Jasper Johns in his comment. 
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. 
John Russell regarded Rauschenberg’s retrospective as one of the most important shows that had come to London in recent years. “Rauschenberg,” he wrote in the Sunday Times, “has precisely the qualities which make for new art: jumping nervous energy, the ability to dominate and organise a great variety of material, a command of new visual techniques and (as important as any) a sense of history.”48 Although Rauschenberg’s art evoked modern qualities, such as cinema, Russell contended they were equally significant for their historical quality. Using Rauschenberg’s graphic work as an example, Russell argued that “the visitor has only to study (to study, not to look at) Rauschenberg’s thirty-four drawings for Dante to see that he is the conscious executant of an immensely complex intention.”49 Nigel Gosling agreed, calling Rauschenberg in the Observer, “A Jackdaw of Genius.” According to Gosling, his show was “a five star victory” and the Dante drawings were “graphic masterpieces.” Gosling was most impressed by the way, throughout his oeuvre, that Rauschenberg played upon varying levels of reproduction.50 For instance, in some of his combines, Rauschenberg would photograph an object, instead of using a real one, and then incorporate the photograph into the composition. Since, like Pop practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic, Rauschenberg utilized mechanical means of reproduction, did Gosling see a direct connection between Rauschenberg and Pop Art? In his opinion, Rauschenberg was a “Poppa of pop-art, maybe. But it would take a wise child to recognise this refined, poetic father.”51 This critic therefore viewed Rauschenberg as an artist who had initially prefigured but soon transcended the Pop idiom.

49 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
A feature-length article in the *Observer*’s “Weekend Review” on February 23, 1964, offered one of the most substantive and well-written critical assessments of Rauschenberg’s work in the British press. Although “Rauschenberg: New Pace-Setter in Art” was written anonymously, this article can undoubtedly be attributed once again to the *Observer*’s art critic, Nigel Gosling. Here Gosling addressed Rauschenberg’s relationship to Pop Art in general and to British artists in particular, concluding that “he may have started off the current that led to it [Pop],” but his work “has little in common with its practitioners, especially the British ones. There is nothing brash, glamorous, jolly or crude about his work.” These comments indicate that Rauschenberg was viewed as a figure who already loomed large over late 1950s – early ‘60s American art and was fast becoming a positive standard within the contemporary British artworld. The *Observer* suggested that Rauschenberg provided the answer for those who “have cried out for a return to subject matter in painting (as opposed to drips and spatters).” Moreover, like Robertson and Mullins, the *Observer* review invoked a telling comparison between Rauschenberg and his more notable Abstract Expressionist predecessor: “Like the drip-painter Jackson Pollock, whose show in London more than five years ago summed up an earlier period of painting, he stands for a whole generation” of contemporary artists. Rauschenberg had thus very quickly become the representative, metonymic figure of a post-Abstract Expressionist era, his work calling into question what Andrew Forge referred to as “the cult of the unique creative act, the very basis of Abstract Expressionism.”

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
While it was obvious that Rauschenberg’s hybrid compositions marked his affinity for the detritus of daily life, the Observer reviewer also suggested provocatively that his work signified “a love for what a big commercial city stands for.”\textsuperscript{56} Although lacking the conspicuously commercial or advertising tenor of, for instance, Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans or Roy Lichtenstein’s comic book paintings, Rauschenberg’s combines and silkscreens nevertheless enabled a realization that “the conditions in which many of us have to live can be the material of beauty.”\textsuperscript{57}

Rauschenberg’s environment—inside and outside his studio—obviously provided the source material for his art. Nigel Gosling’s characterization of Rauschenberg as a consummate ‘big-city artist’ whose work reflected “the city’s complicated privacies and alert, needling intelligence, its kaleidoscopic rhythms and mixture of tawdriness and sentiment” comprised the most insightful interpretation of Rauschenberg’s artistic endeavor appearing in the British press during the Whitechapel exhibition.\textsuperscript{58} The qualities Gosling observed situate Rauschenberg’s work as a representative of the myriad urban complexities and challenges evident in the postwar era.

Similar to Gosling’s assessment that part of Rauschenberg’s success was due to his utilizing multiple levels of reproduction, Forge suggested that it was his use of montage that enabled Rauschenberg “to explore counterpoints between formal relations and psychological ones, nuances of feeling.”\textsuperscript{59} This technique created a sense that Rauschenberg’s works inhabited multiple states of being, appearing as Forge stated, as

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{56} “Rauschenberg: A New Pace-Setter in Art.”
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Forge, “Robert Rauschenberg.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
“both painting and sculpture, book and thing, movie and real life.” This kind of simultaneity was certainly the result of Rauschenberg’s desire to inhabit the gap between art and life, and British critic Robert Melville perceived the liminality inherent in Rauschenberg’s compositions. In “Miscellany: Fear of the Banal” written for *Architectural Review*, he posited that Rauschenberg had successfully transcended the fear of banality—what Melville felt was one of the driving forces of modern art—by creating “the unequivocal image,” one “deliberately devised to be open to the understanding of all the community.” Rauschenberg, Melville suggested, avoided any form of “dada subversion or perversity,” offering work that instead inhabited “the gulf between the transformed and the untransformed.”

These two conditions need not be synthesized or reconciled because such disparity was the precise source of Rauschenberg’s artistic acumen. As James Burr suggested in the *Times*, it was Rauschenberg’s talent to assemble seemingly disparate objects into “aesthetically and plastically satisfying wholes.” “One finds oneself,” he averred, “accepting the oddest combinations as meaningful on several levels, and the levels go down deep, with the hallucinatory inevitability of dreams. They wear their rightness with authority.” While in a work like *Monogram* (1959, Fig. 73), Rauschenberg’s visual lexicon of a tire and stuffed goat appeared at first to be the result of a puzzling, private or esoteric language, his art, as G.S. Whittet suggested, became an “illustration of life by assembling its actual details in settings and presentations where we

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60 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
expect art.” 65 Whittet argued that the key to understanding Rauschenberg’s work was to
“find the art in it for ourselves.” 66 Consequently, the viewer became, by necessity, an
active agent in the construction of meaning in Rauschenberg’s art, crucial to the
interpretive process.

Other critics analyzed Rauschenberg’s endeavors in relation to previous 20th
century art movements. As previously noted, it was Robert Melville’s consistent position
that Rauschenberg (and Johns) unequivocally endeavored to keep alive the diminishing
flame of Abstract Expressionism, an opinion not shared by many of his colleagues. In his
April 1964 article “Miscellany: Fear of the Banal” written for Architectural Review,
Melville again argued that Rauschenberg’s work was “a brilliantly ingenious contribution
to abstract expressionism” and compared him favorably to Pollock. 67 Guy Burn’s
assessment for The Arts Review also pointed to Rauschenberg’s “abstract expressionist
slop-and-trickle” as evidence of the painterly aspect of his self-stated desire to act in the
gap between art and life (the “junk objects” he used formed the basis for the latter). 68
Although Burn referred to Rauschenberg as a so-called “Poppa of Pop Art,” he believed
that Rauschenberg’s work more importantly invoked “that other great innovator and
iconoclast, Picasso.” 69 Rauschenberg’s art was “far from being popular in the sense of
Pop music,” Burn suggested; instead, “it is another breakthrough, a revolution against
established modern art, as when Picasso painted the Demoiselles d’Avignon.” 70

66 Ibid.
67 Melville, “Miscellany: Fear of the Banal.”
68 Guy Burn, “Robert Rauschenberg: Whitechapel Art Gallery,” The Arts Review (February 22 – March 7,
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
critics such as Burn promoted the notion that Rauschenberg’s art had lasting power because it could hold up against the giants of 20th century modern art.

It should be pointed out that not every critic reviewed Rauschenberg’s work on view at the Whitechapel in a favorable light. While the overwhelming critical consensus was indeed positive, a few writers dissented significantly. Terence Mullaly, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, condemned “the uncritical, or even worse, cynical praise that has been bestowed on the 34 ‘combine drawings’ illustrating Dante.” Mullaly was unable to consider Rauschenberg a serious artist, calling his work mere “innocent fun.” He suspected that the justification for Rauschenberg’s type of work was the same as that for Surrealist painting, “namely that it heightens our awareness of everyday objects.” Mullaly likely had in mind Dada, not Surrealism, but it is nevertheless surprising that this typically unbiased critic did not offer further justification for his negative assessments. In Mullaly’s opinion, it was difficult to discern whether the works themselves or “the esoteric nonsense” written about Rauschenberg were “a greater affront to the intellect or to the senses.” He prognosticated that Rauschenberg’s work would not have a lasting effect or future value, not a very perspicacious prediction.

Writing in *Art International*, Norbert Lynton offered a logical explanation for the point that Mullaly failed to explain sufficiently. The high attendance figures at Whitechapel, Lynton wrote, indicated that there was undoubtedly intense interest in Rauschenberg’s work; indeed, he doubted that “any young artist’s work has ever been
received in this country with so much public interest and enthusiasm.” But although the Rauschenberg show was magnificently displayed at Whitechapel, in Lynton’s opinion, British critics had become caught up in the hype surrounding the exhibition:

“Rauschenberg, through no fault of his own, appears to be more than usually ringed about with writers who have left their critical and analytical faculties behind in their excitement.” Lynton believed that the high degree of praise bestowed upon Rauschenberg and a striking lack of more critical assessments of his art represented failure on the part of some writers to provide balanced criticism.

By establishing a link between Rauschenberg, Duchamp and Action Painting, Lynton tempered Rauschenberg’s ultra-revolutionary stature as promoted by critics like Guy Burn. Lynton reminded his readers that Rauschenberg was part of a long history of 20th century artists and writers who had utilized montage, “the literary/painterly method par excellence for this century.” For him, Rauschenberg’s works ranged from “the corny to the magnificent,” with the three-dimensional combines falling under the first category and the two-dimensional silkscreen and oil canvases of 1960-64 and the Dante drawings in the latter. The strength of Rauschenberg’s graphic works, Lynton suggested, “lies in the fact that they have a theme, whereas the paintings have to be given one by the viewer.” In other words, using one of his own favorite titles, a Rauschenberg combine painting was a “rebus” whose references needed to be decoded.

Keith Roberts agreed with Lynton’s more equivocal assessment. Writing for Burlington Magazine, Roberts was disappointed by what he claimed was Rauschenberg’s

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
excessive difficulty and remarked upon the lack of a cohesive theme in his works. In the works on view at Whitechapel, Roberts wrote, “nothing is single and clear, everything is muddled and plural and as life passes it leaves a dirty stain round the bath.” Roberts also criticized the combines for their lack of surprise and freshness, arguing that it would have been revolutionary “to put a coke bottle in a show in 1912, but by now that familiar object has become as conventional in its own way as the Apollo Belvedere.”

Unfortunately, Roberts could only see Rauschenberg’s Coca-Cola Plan (1958, Fig. 79) as a distilled perversion of Dada. He was unable (or perhaps cared not) to interpret the bottles as more than just literal objects, thereby failing to understand Rauschenberg’s underlying transformation of these ubiquitous symbols of consumer culture into religious icons. Roberts suggested that viewers should look instead to Rauschenberg’s recent silkscreen paintings in order to see where “the images cooperate, the sense of flux is preserved [and] a unifying style” can be found.

Similar to Rothko, Rauschenberg’s display at the Whitechapel Art Gallery was characterized by an extraordinary amount of approbation from British critics. On the other hand, Pollock’s work had been much more controversial and sparked highly contentious debates in the British press, particularly in the early years of his exhibiting in London. In his assessment of response to the Rauschenberg retrospective, Brandon Taylor concluded that the overarching leitmotif of critical response to it was “welcome puzzlement, puzzlement combined with the reassurance that Rauschenberg was a master draughtsman in the European tradition and a master philosopher (of some kind) with

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79 Ibid.
resources of urban detritus and paint."80 Reviewers felt more at ease discussing the Dante drawings, perhaps because Rauschenberg’s graphic works were more conventional than his unorthodox combines. Based on the massive viewer turnout and extensive reviews it generated, Bryan Robertson was indeed correct to conclude that the timing was right to present a retrospective of Rauschenberg’s work in 1964 London. Only nine months after Rauschenberg’s exhibition closed, Jasper Johns would receive his share of the spotlight at Whitechapel. There was equal press interest in Johns’s work, but lesser attendance at the exhibition.

Jasper Johns at Whitechapel

In 1964, Harold Rosenberg published a collection of writings he titled The Anxious Object. Rosenberg, a long-time champion of Abstract Expressionist Action Painting, abhorred Pop Art; based on this negative opinion, he suggested in one of the book’s key essays, “Toward an Unanxious Profession,” that recently artists had begun to produce “‘anxious object[s]’ existing in a kind of perpetual artistic limbo, insecure about [their] own identity.”81 Johns’s encaustic paintings of targets, flags and numerals were an obvious source of anxiety for Rosenberg, and, as Norman Kleeblatt notes, Rosenberg’s “discussion of irony, parody and lack of subjectivity in Johns’s work made it clear that these qualities constituted his difficulty.”82 As Kleeblatt also observes, “Johns’s calculated response to Abstract Expressionism was at once attractive and troublesome”

80 Taylor, 74.
82 Kleeblatt, 177.
Kleeblatt’s comments about Rosenberg’s reaction to Johns effectively characterize the duality of Johns’s highly innovative and sometimes bewildering aesthetic endeavor. Appearance and reality in a Johns encaustic painting or sculpture are frequently two very disparate paradigms. This incongruity likewise became a critical flashpoint for British critics who reviewed Johns’s Whitechapel exhibition.

Alan Solomon had given Robert Rauschenberg his first career retrospective at New York’s Jewish Museum in January of 1963. A year later, Solomon organized Johns’s retrospective at the same venue. Simply titled Jasper Johns, the show was held from February 13 – April 12, 1964, generating intense waves in the American artworld. Featuring seventy-eight paintings, sixty-three drawings, sixteen sculptures and seventeen lithographs, Johns’s solo exhibition was accompanied by a sixty-three page catalogue featuring essays by Solomon and John Cage. Solomon’s substantive, pithy text provided an excellent introduction for those unfamiliar with Johns’s work. The public had not seen much of what was on view at the Jewish Museum; for this reason, Solomon’s commentary was a useful explanation of Johns’s complex aesthetic endeavors.

As Kleeblatt notes, in his catalogue essay, Solomon found Johns’s work to be “as enigmatic and ambiguous as it was deadpan.” For example, in his analysis of Johns’s bronze light bulb, Solomon refers to the viewer’s sense of uncertainty over “whether or not he has simply cast the real objects in Sculpmetal or bronze, or even just coated them

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83 Ibid.
84 Solomon’s text was supplemented by six illustrations, in addition to the fifty-one illustrations in the rest of the catalogue. A substantive bibliography of books, catalogues and periodicals for Johns was also included. Cage’s five-page text, “Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas,” was written at Stony Point, New York in 1964 and featured Cage’s reflections on Johns accompanied by passages of quotations from Johns’s notebooks and published statements.
85 Kleeblatt, 178.
with Sculpmetal, since they appear so true to life." Solomon suggested it was best to approach Johns’s sculptures and paintings as a series of rhetorical questions, unanswerable ones that kept the viewer off balance, constantly investigating reality and truth. Like Rauschenberg, Johns shifted the responsibility for meaning and interpretation to the viewer, who he hoped would re-look at familiar things with a fresh eye. As previously noted, Johns’s self-stated goal was to render things “the mind already knows” or things that were commonly “seen and not looked at, not examined.” Although he wanted to look anew at already familiar images and objects from daily life, Solomon observed, Johns had in fact moved to the point where, for instance, “the likeness of his sculpture to the real objects creates a genuine confusion about the identity of these objects.” The fundamental question in regard to Flag (1954-55, Fig. 80) becomes whether or not it is a real or painted flag. Importantly, Johns leaves this issue ambiguous and unresolved. He provided little room for stability or certainty in his witty, trompe l’oeil compositions.

Not surprisingly, Jasper Johns’s aesthetic achievements and his ubiquity on the American art scene also attracted the attention of Bryan Robertson at Whitechapel. With the assistance of Castelli and Solomon, Robertson organized Jasper Johns: Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures, 1954-1964, which was presented at Whitechapel from December 2 – 31, 1964 (Fig. 81). Johns’s London showing was slightly smaller in

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87 Johns quoted in “His Heart Belongs to Dada,” Time 73 (May 4, 1959): 58.
89 Ibid.
90 Janeen Haythornthwaite, 56-7, points out that Castelli organized the loan of all of the Johns paintings that were shown at the Venice Biennale and Documenta earlier that year, in addition to work from the Jewish Museum retrospective. Since the USIA had organized the American show in Venice, the Whitechapel assumed responsibility for transporting works from Venice and returning works to the U.S.
scale than his Jewish Museum retrospective. Robertson secured forty-nine paintings, eleven sculptures and forty-eight drawings, but no lithographs were included. The exhibition catalogue featured an exact re-print of Solomon and Cage’s essays written for the Jewish Museum.

Janeen Haythornthwaite is the only author who has previously addressed the response to Johns’s exhibition at Whitechapel. Unfortunately, she provides no examples or analysis of what she calls “the range of press coverage” this retrospective garnered. According to Haythornthwaite, the average daily attendance for Johns comprised less than one-quarter of the visitors to Rauschenberg’s show; thus, it is tempting to assume that the British press likewise paid less attention to Johns. On the contrary, however, the approximately twenty-one reviews published during his show are a strong indication of palpable interest in his work among critics and writers in London. Moreover, their reactions to Johns’s show were as complex as Johns’s own artistic enterprise.

Not surprisingly, one common critical topos was to compare Johns to Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock and his own close associate Robert Rauschenberg. The Times suggested that, while the latter was “a performer” whose work was “full of artifice,” Johns was a more withdrawn artist whose art raised important questions of “the relationship between the banal and the rare, between mass-production and craft, between

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91 The United States Information Service Gallery at the American Embassy, London, hosted an exhibition of Johns’s lithographs from December 1, 1964 – January 8, 1965. Jasper Johns: Lithographs also traveled to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Oxford and Edinburgh. The lithographs were lent by the Leo Castelli Gallery. Johns’s Whitechapel show completely overshadowed this lithograph exhibition and most critics only mentioned the show as a notice to viewers.

92 The Whitechapel’s forty page catalogue included fewer illustrations than the Jewish Museum catalogue. There were no images in Solomon’s essay, but the bibliography was included.

93 Haythornthwaite, 57.

94 Johns’s daily average was 430, compared to 1,876 for Rauschenberg.
crowd and solitary.” In Nevile Wallis’s opinion, the Whitechapel’s Johns exhibition was inconsequential when compared to Rauschenberg’s show, although he praised and denigrated both to some degree. Wallis opined in the *Spectator*, “Reason, meaning, identity all took flight into the stratosphere with the brilliant and bemusing exhibitionism of Robert Rauschenberg there. The atmosphere now seems inescapable.” Johns’s heady intellectualism appeared to Wallis as burdensome when compared to the seemingly more lighthearted combines of Rauschenberg. Although Wallis warned that Johns’s excessive reliance upon irony might alienate his viewers, he also lauded Johns’s renewal of the spirit of Dada (and Abstract Expressionism). Johns’s hybrid contribution involved the fact that “he has accepted ideas from this ironic anti-art, and freely from the American action painter’s surface, in pursuing his own philosophic inquiry.”

As we might expect, according to Robert Melville, Johns had fully embraced the Abstract Expressionist idiom, albeit at times unsuccessfully. For instance, in *According to What* (1964, Fig. 82), Melville suggested, Johns seemed capable “of pushing the paint around as aggressively as Pollock and was no less inclined to fasten chairs and other oddments to his canvases and produce no less brutally disheveled effects than Rauschenberg. The result was a visual and emotional mess.” G.S. Whittet, on the other hand, argued that, although Johns had produced “paintings in which the swirling staccato brush strokes are at one with the *lingua franca* of abstract expressionism,” he was not

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97 Ibid.
simply rehashing the lessons of gestural painting. Johns’s appropriation of Pollock’s and de Kooning’s expressive brushwork was instead an ironic, veiled critique of Action Painting’s excessive emphasis on subjective expression. Since this was a factor that required pre-existing knowledge to understand, it may have been one source of public frustration with Johns’s work. As Norbert Lynton astutely observed, “the target and the flag were answers to Johns’s need for an external motif, to replace and thus call into question the abstract expressionist’s faith in ‘inner necessity.’” In Lynton’s assessment, Johns’s work was effective precisely because he had the restraint “to moderate his rejection of abstract expressionism and its subjective displays.”

In two articles that appeared in different publications on the same day, Edwin Mullins and Nigel Gosling offered similar opinions of what they each considered to be fundamental differences between Johns and Rauschenberg. Mullins wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph* that Johns’s work had “none of the brilliant brash theatricality which made Rauschenberg’s earlier exhibition so exciting,” and he provided a polemical model for understanding aesthetic differences between these two young friends. Johns’s work, he suggested, “represents the imaginative smallness of good taste,” whereas Rauschenberg’s displayed “the splendid dynamism of vulgarity.” In a review published in the *Observer*, Gosling argued likewise that Rauschenberg was more theatrical and playful than Johns, dubbing the latter a “poker-faced and deadly

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101 Ibid. Lynton also believed that Johns’s painterliness differentiated him from Duchamp.
103 Ibid.
stonewaller.”  Citing Johns’s representative characteristics as restraint, reticence and dead-pan detachment, Gosling warned against judging him as “a kind of anglican Rauschenberg.”

He explained that Johns possessed a fierce intellectual approach that harked back to Duchamp, “whose icy nonsenses twisted the potential whimsicality of the Dadaists into stern metaphysical channels.”

Johns’s work, according to Gosling, was imbued with an acute wit somewhat less conspicuous than Rauschenberg’s equally clever efforts. Johns’s excessive use of irony or wit likely contributed to the ire of critics or viewers who were not immediately aware of the subtexts inherent in his paintings.

As has been amply demonstrated, both the philosophical and painterly qualities of Johns’s work prompted diverse opinions among British critics. Almost every reviewer referenced Johns’s iconic Flag in order to ascertain whether or not he was creating objects, art or something entirely different. Keith Roberts was highly disappointed that Johns was “sailing the creative seas with too intellectual a compass,” arguing that “his questioning of ‘experience’ and ‘reality’ have introduced into his work obscurity and an undesirable intellectual inflation.”

Johns’s mental fortitude and hyper-intellectuality obviously bothered Roberts, whose objections reflect an anti-conceptual bias against Johns’s paintings of flags and numerals. Not only is this attitude reminiscent of the criticism leveled against Marcel Duchamp’s Dadaist endeavors earlier in the century, it prefigures the negative criticism of Minimalist art later in the 1960s in Britain and the U.S.

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105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
Some reviewers dismissed altogether the flag-or-painted flag debate. Melville, for instance, stated quite confidently there was no issue of “either/or” in Johns’s *Flag* paintings. The question was “made up because,” Melville believed, “everyone knew all along, Johns paints representations of the American flag.”\(^{108}\) Whereas Johns’s decision to paint a symbol imbued with infinite subjective associations disturbed Melville, conversely, Whittet praised Johns’s rejection of the notion (first posed by Dada) of “a painting representing only something else.”\(^{109}\) Andrew Forge astutely observed that, in Johns’s *Painted Bronze (Beer Cans)* (1960; Fig. 83), “What we see is precisely the thing in front of us, an object which appears incredibly to resemble a beer can, and offers us all sorts of ways of reflecting on how it might be related to a beer can, but which is ultimately itself.”\(^{110}\) Johns’s *Flag* was simply a painting to Melville, but Forge saw the self-reflective nature of this work as enabling the possibility for multiple associations and meanings. Johns was exploring the important dynamic between what Forge concisely described as “the relationship between the way things look and their material nature.”\(^{111}\) In his typically ambiguous manner, the viewer was left to ponder fundamental issues in a way that revealed more about the viewer than the artist himself.

Contrary to their disagreement over Johns’s conceptual skills, or lack thereof, British critics agreed far more often on Johns’ superb painterly talents. John Russell wrote in the *Sunday Times* that “the consistent feature of the work is the delicate beauty of its execution.”\(^{112}\) Paul Grinke, a critic for the *Financial Times*, believed that “the one straw of sanity which is offered among these riddles is the sheer painterliness of all the

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111 Ibid.
works. Gosling marveled over Johns’s painterly touch and “delicious sensual language,” factors which saved his works at the Whitechapel from digressing into “mere cerebral backgammon.” Gosling’s comments are similar in nature to Keith Roberts’s anti-intellectual bias against Johns’s work. For these two critics, the value of his paintings currently on view at Whitechapel was situated in their traditional painterly, not experimental or conceptual, qualities.

Lynton, however, became visibly concerned about critical overemphasis of Johns’s painterly skills. The rhetoric espoused by Russell and Gosling, for example, was evidence of what Lynton called “a lot of carping at John’s [sic] supposed ‘old masterly’ attachment to paint and to its handling.” He believed that this painterly quality was “at least as important a part of his work as everything else” and did not diminish his status as “precociously authoritative” among other contemporary artists. Lynton felt the necessity to keep Johns contemporary rather than allow critical discourse to place him in the context of old master painters.

David Sylvester’s comments on Johns provide a fitting conclusion to analysis of the critical reception of Johns’s retrospective at Whitechapel. Sylvester, previously a strong supporter of Pollock, was Johns’s staunchest advocate in Britain; therefore, on December 12, 1964, he delivered a talk about Johns’s exhibition on BBC radio’s Third Programme. “Jasper Johns at the Whitechapel” featured observant remarks by Sylvester that were designed not only to promote Johns’s work, but also to clarify the seeming

114 Gosling, “A Stonewaller from New York.”
116 Ibid.
complexities within his art. Sylvester commented that a viewer’s relationship to a Johns artwork was such that, “It might be said that when a Johns Flag or Target is exposed to the public, it goes through a ‘psychological’ process of ‘defacement,’ by which we impose our interpretations upon it.” Johns’s paintings of numerals and flags required an active mental engagement on the part of the viewer, as opposed to the experience of viewing a Rothko painting, which, as many critics agreed, acted upon the more passive viewer.

It was clear to Sylvester that, contrary to Pollock’s, Johns’s art appeared to be “isolated from the man, stands apart from him, does not lean on his myth or his explanations, reveals nothing about his personal life and as little as possible about his personal tastes.” This attempt at personal detachment and total objectivity was described as Johns’s telling reaction to the too intense focus on personal expression fostered among the first generation of New York School artists. By the late 1950s, using irony and parody as their tools, both Johns and Rauschenberg were attempting to empty Action Painting’s loaded brushwork of subjectivity and private meaning in lieu of a different kind of content, seemingly more objective and less personal.

Johns, who revered Marcel Duchamp as much as he questioned his Abstract Expressionist predecessors, reveled in ironic gestures and witty puns, at times enjoying the sense of puzzlement surrounding his work. He was, as Sylvester argued, “too much of an ironist not to enjoy the spectacle of our confusion.” As such, instead of providing answers, Johns looked for more questions. Interrogation and inquiry were

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117 Sylvester’s comments were later published as “Johns” in his book, *On Modern Art: Critical Essays, 1948-96*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1996. This is the source I used.
118 Ibid., 223.
119 Ibid., 225.
120 Ibid., 226.
Johns’s *modus operandi* as he executed multiple variations of the same theme—numerals, letters, maps, targets and flags. Duchamp had also created multiple versions of his readymades, but Sylvester believed the two artists were different. Whereas Duchamp was more rhetorical, Johns was more clinical or experimental. Unlike Duchamp, Johns “doesn’t do something in order to provoke a certain effect. He does something, then waits to observe the reaction it gets.”121 Sylvester believed that Duchamp was more engaged in aesthetic provocation than Johns.

Imputing to Johns an interest in “re-creating the process of perception rather than the objects perceived” also led Sylvester to compare the young American to Picasso and Braque. Sylvester made a fascinating case that the key to Johns’s concerns could be found “in the last phase of Analytic Cubism and the phase of transition towards Synthetic Cubism.”122 Like the pioneer Cubists, Johns was preoccupied by the relation of art to reality, and vice-versa. This alternative genealogy is significant because it indicates that Johns was valued more for his relationship to European art than to American prototypes such as Pollock or Rothko. Perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, British critics like Sylvester sought to bolster Johns’s artistic importance by connecting his work to the pioneering innovations of European modernists.

**Conclusion**

In their reviews of Jasper Johns’s Whitechapel exhibition, British critics prominently avoided discussion of his relationship to the Pop Art context in Britain, although Rauschenberg received more attention in this regard than Johns. Critics

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121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 228.
generally agreed that Rauschenberg’s work prefigured and contributed to the Pop Art idiom that came to prominence in the U.S. and Britain in the 1960s, but they were not equally sure about viewing Johns’s work in light of the relatively recent construct of Pop. This critical label was still being worked out in both the American and British press. In Britain, Johns’s work was more frequently assessed relative to Dada or Abstract Expressionism than Pop, which indicates that reviewers there were more comfortable placing Johns in an established historical context. British reviewers were also more unequivocally interested in the formal and philosophical aspects of Johns’s work on display at Whitechapel than in his possible status as a progenitor or practitioner of the Pop idiom. After seeing a large sample of his work, as opposed to only a few examples in a mixed exhibition, London critics in fact perceived Johns’s endeavor to be outside of the Pop context. His selective sampling of Abstract Expressionism’s gestural brushwork and Dadaist conceptual approach seemed to align him with these two styles more so than Pop Art. This lent his work a different kind of significance and importance compared to other contemporary American painters.

Interestingly, there was also very little critical consensus concerning Johns’s comprehensive reexamination of highly recognizable symbols in his paintings and sculptures. Some reviewers were impressed by Johns’s ability to create an unresolved dialectic between representation and reality, image and object. Others dismissed entirely his overly intellectual emphasis on the relativity of perception and experience. As noted, the fact that Johns shifted responsibility to the viewer to create meaning and value in his work appears to have alienated some viewers and critics in Britain, but this same quality was what most strongly attracted other writers. His indulgent use of irony and ambiguity
certainly also contributed to the selective perception that his seemingly simple work was too difficult to puzzle out. Johns insisted that we look again at familiar images and objects, but his imperative was unrequited among a contingent of London critics who dismissed his work as excessive, academic gameplay.

Although Johns’s calculated questioning of established values and assumptions was challenging to certain British critics, as we have seen, there was more accord regarding Johns’s painterly skills. Johns’s paintings were lauded for their strength of execution and refined surfaces, causing him to be described as a master of paint and its handling. Critics may not have agreed on the success of Johns’s conceptual approach, but many shared the opinion that his aesthetic outcome was as successful as that of any other painter of his day. This approbation did not compare, however, to British opinions of Rauschenberg’s work on view at Whitechapel. The latter’s retrospective garnered more expressions of certainty concerning both his artistic skills and his shortcomings.

In general, London critics appeared more comfortable discussing Rauschenberg’s combines, silkscreens and drawings than his colleague’s trompe l’oeil sculptures and encaustic paintings. Johns’s ambiguity and detachment were off-putting to a larger degree. Although the form of a Rauschenberg combine painting was not immediately indicative of its meaning or content, his use of actual objects engaged viewers to a greater degree than Johns’s seemingly aloof compositions. British reviewers overwhelmingly praised Rauschenberg for his graphic skills in producing superb illustrations of Dante’s Inferno, while the cinematic quality and simultaneity of his drawings and silkscreens also had great appeal. To a certain degree, Rauschenberg’s body of work seemed visceral
compared to Johns’s more distant, intellectual approach, thereby fostering a heady
reception for the former in Britain.

Since first exhibiting there in 1956, Mark Rothko remained consistently well-
liked in Britain. But Rauschenberg, whose first London solo show overlapped with a
major London Rothko exhibition, would prove more influential for the younger
generation of artists then working in Britain and the U.S. Although his combines at
Whitechapel received mixed reviews, at times being criticized for a lack of thematic
coherence, British writers generally agreed that Rauschenberg had transcended the
achievements of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, as well as having
prefigured those of American Pop artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein. Johns’s “anxious
objects,” to quote Harold Rosenberg, were greeted with a slight sense of trepidation and
generated disagreement regarding the success of his aesthetic investigation into the
equivocal relationship between representation and reality. There is no question, however,
that, by the end of 1964, the Whitechapel had provided Londoners with an indelible
understanding of Johns and Rauschenberg’s internationally renowned art, which further
informed and enhanced British aesthetics during the 1960s.
Concluding Remarks

This dissertation has provided a comprehensive assessment of the critical reception of American painting in London during the 1950s and early 1960s. In order to counter a surprising lack of analyses of British response to artistic exports from the U.S. at that time, I conducted a systematic close reading of critics’ reactions to the work of two iconic Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, and two transitional artists of the following generation, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. The continuing relevance and importance to art history of aesthetic contributions by these four artists is incontrovertible. It could be taken as axiomatic that each would appear in any survey of the development of modern art in America published in the U.S. Interest in their oeuvres remains high and each has been, or will be, the subject of 21st century scholarly studies and museum and gallery exhibitions in the United States. As I have shown, their potential relevance to the British artworld, however, has in large part been overlooked or underplayed. Examining critical response to the work of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns in London has allowed me to argue that these American painters were almost as important to the British as they were to American audiences, either as influential figures to emulate or as artistic forces from the outside against which to react.

Recent trends in American art studies indicate that interest among art historians in international perspectives continues to accelerate in the 21st century. For example, participants at two symposia in 2005 and 2006, both held under the auspices of Stony Brook University and the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, specifically examined Abstract Expressionism from an international perspective. Papers at the 2005 conference, “All-over: Abstract Expressionism’s Global Context,” included
investigations of New York School art in the context of parallel artistic developments in countries such as Mexico, Latin America, the former Soviet Union and Japan. \( ^1 \) Joan Marter’s 2007 anthology, *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, gathers together a wide range of scholars who have examined Abstract Expressionism in the global arena. \( ^2 \) The Smithsonian American Art Museum hosted a three-day symposium in fall 2006 also based on a similar theme, “American Art in a Global Context.” These and other conferences and publications indicate the perceived value of examining world-wide, cross-current trends involving U.S. art.

Art historical scholarship in the United States has focused intently on the relationship and importance to 20\(^{th}\) century American developments of the four artists who are the focus of this dissertation. The main question I asked to generate this study, have the innovations of these artists seemed as important to British art historians, artists and critics as they obviously have been to Americans, led to analysis of as many responses as I could find to the work of each shown in Britain from 1950-1964. Examining both solo and group exhibitions, I worked to sort out issues of importance to British art commentary that no doubt affected the development of avant-garde art in London.

As has been shown, for example, three of Pollock’s abstract canvases were initially received with a sense of curiosity in the ICA’s *Opposing Forces* show in 1953,

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The theme of Stony Brook’s 2006 conference, which took place May 2-3, was “From Abstract Expressionists to ‘The Magicians of the Earth’: A New State of the Art World.”

but the discourse around his work shifted to issues of violence, chaos and anarchy when he was shown in the Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States* three years later. This rhetoric of anarchy seemed to reify postwar tensions and anxieties that British critics saw manifested in his webs of paint. After Pollock’s major Whitechapel show in 1958, conversation shifted back to a recognition of refinement, not chaos, in his paint skeins, and these more temperate terms were also reflected in reviews of his contributions to the Tate’s *New American Painting* in 1959.

By 1961, however, because of the Marlborough Gallery showing of his early work, a dual perception emerged of Pollock as a painter of both aggression and elegant beauty, which became an unresolved dialectic. British reaction to Johns was similarly unresolved. His intellectual endeavor in painting, to examine the nature of representation and reality, was not as well-received as Rauschenberg’s seemingly more playful combines meant to inhabit an irreconcilable “gap” between art and life. Like Rothko, Rauschenberg’s reception by British critics was much smoother than either Pollock’s or Johns’s. Yet, where Pollock was viewed as “the hero figure” of ′50s Action Painting by the British, Rauschenberg would be similarly considered heroic for a younger generation of artists coming to maturity in the 1960s. By tracing the trends and changes in British art discourse surrounding the work of these four Americans, I have exposed a variety of underexamined issues in art historical scholarship.

Prior to this study, no American or British scholars had discussed the Tate’s 1946 exhibition, *American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day*, as a precursor of American art shows in 1950s London. This immediately postwar exhibition offered the British a partial taste of contemporary American art by so-called “Early
Modernists,” such as Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley. As pointed out, the average British viewer was likely unaware that there was much more currently happening in New York in the work of artists like Pollock and Rothko. *American Painting from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* not only represented a new British interest in artistic developments from the U.S., it was also, to a great extent, a harbinger of the more advanced American shows that would take place the following decade.

The Critics and Exhibitions

As this dissertation has shown, the specific relationship between Pollock and Rothko’s reception and Johns and Rauschenberg’s subsequent interpretation by the British has also not been adequately analyzed. Scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have largely ignored presentations of the latter two in the U.K. That no author other than Janeen Haythornthwaite has studied Johns’s major Whitechapel retrospective seems puzzling to say the least and many scholars’ singular focus on the Tate’s *Modern Art in the United States* and *The New American Painting* to the detriment of other influential exhibitions has created misleading perceptions of American art’s presence in London in the ‘50s and ‘60s. This study rectifies lingering misconceptions by bringing analysis of the ICA’s E.J. Power and *The Mysterious Sign* exhibitions, as well as the Marlborough Gallery’s Pollock and Rothko solo shows, *Vanguard American Painting* at the American Embassy and the Tate’s *Dunn International* and 54-64 exhibitions, into the critical discourse. Examining British response to these and other shows not commonly discussed allows for the infusion of new validity and insight into contemporary art criticism.
My project, the interrogation of American art’s reception by British critics, authors and curators in the 1950s and ‘60s, is based on tying together a vast body of primary and secondary source material heretofore widely scattered across or only occasionally mentioned in art historical literature. As a result, this dissertation provides a valuable historiographic record and in-depth analysis of hundreds of exhibition reviews and articles, many in ephemeral sources. It also aims at correcting repeated misconceptions. In “Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe,” for example, Jeremy Lewison did not analyze what role Pollock’s innovative technique and emphasis on process played in aesthetic debates within art journals and the popular press in Britain.\(^3\) Lewison chose not to look beyond the Tate’s *New American Painting* exhibition in 1959. As a result, he did not see that Pollock’s Marlborough solo exhibition in 1961 actually bolstered opinion of his art in Britain. Likewise Lewison asserts that the rise in Rothko’s reputation contributed to an alleged decline in interest in Pollock’s work, but this claim is belied by subsequent evidence. Lewison’s study ends two years before Rothko’s retrospective at the Whitechapel. My dissertation has offered evidence that conclusively expands Lewison’s claims.

Margaret Garlake’s assessment of the socio-political context of art’s creation, dissemination and reception in postwar Britain is an extremely informative text, but her analysis of the role that American art played in this context remains broad and generalized.\(^4\) She argues that Pollock’s Whitechapel retrospective inaugurated a series of important and informative shows featuring contemporary American art. Although this is

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true, Garlake’s observations do not take into direct account the extent of the roles that Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns would play in this effect. My analysis exposes the rich depth of perceptive criticism prompted in the British press by their shows and trains a more specific focus on the particular importance of opinions of Pollock in critical reactions to the Whitechapel’s enterprise.

It is also evident that secondary sources have tended to overlook Britain when discussing Abstract Expressionism’s global reception. Despite the fact that it is based on a British dissertation, even Nancy Jachec’s *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* exemplifies this unfortunate trend.\(^5\) Jachec’s text is propitious, but she focuses on France and Italy even though *Modern Art in the United States* and *The New American Painting* generated equally large amounts of press in London as they did in Paris and Rome. Brandon Taylor’s ambitious history of exhibitions in London from the 18\(^{th}\) century to the present day also scants American painting’s dissemination in the British art milieu.\(^6\) His text is informative as institutional history, but Taylor only briefly acknowledges that there were the kinds of exhibitions discussed in this dissertation. He mentions *Modern Art in the United States* and *The New American Painting* but does not investigate further the important positive and negative reactions to these and other similarly themed projects prompted in the British press.

Despite attempts by writers to remain unbiased or neutral, criticism is, in its most basic form, the expression of an opinion or observation of a subjective, historically positioned agent. Furthermore, all critics have agendas. For instance, it should be clear

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by now that David Sylvester, Bryan Robertson and Lawrence Alloway had reasons to align themselves with the U.S. avant-garde. Moreover, as a consequence, Robertson’s criticism sometimes tended to paint an inaccurate, dour impression of the state of British art by comparison. Not surprisingly, Sylvester was one of Jasper Johns’s biggest supporters in Britain. As a former Independent Group member, Alloway’s allegiance was to the United States’ position as the capitalist (and pop cultural) leader of the free world during the Cold War era. In fact, Alloway moved to New York in 1961, married the American painter Sylvia Sleigh, and became senior curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum from 1961 to 1966. After losing out to Norman Reid for the directorship of the Tate in 1964, Bryan Robertson also moved to the U.S. and he directed the Museum of the State University of New York from 1970 to 1975. In 1960, Sylvester spent a few months in the U.S. interviewing American artists for BBC radio and his commentary has often been cited by American critics and art historians working on artists with whom he spoke. Based on sound advice, this study has attempted to be mindful and aware of the ulterior motives, ideologies and rhetoric that formed a subtext in British reception of American painting.

Artists’ Opinions

Results of the four case studies I have undertaken elucidate how the public, critics, curators, and collectors in Britain received and responded to paradigmatic exemplars of American Abstract Expressionist painting and early stages of Pop Art in

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part by exposing the cultural biases, presuppositions and attitudes that informed their reactions. Since Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were the most acclaimed Americans whose work first reached the shores of the U.K. in the postwar period, their reception in London during this time presents a test case as to how critics, artists and the general public outside the U.S. did or did not welcome American art. This dissertation explicates the myriad ways that directions coming from the U.S. informed, accented and accelerated the growth of Britain’s avant-garde during the postwar period.

Many of the main characters who played a role in this study are no longer living. As a result, there have been few opportunities to gain firsthand accounts from curators, writers or artists about their recollections and experiences of American art in London during the 1950s and ‘60s. Consequently, a fitting conclusion may perhaps be found in remarks made by British abstract artist Robyn Denny to Jeremy Lewison in 1997. In a telephone interview, Lewison asked Denny to comment on his experience of seeing Jackson Pollock’s work for the first time. Denny, a graduate of the Royal College of Art in 1957, confirmed that he had first seen Pollock’s work in 1953 at the ICA’s Opposing Forces exhibition. Denny’s recollection is worth quoting:

But I don’t remember ever thinking that the painting [Action Painting] was about the act of painting. I thought it was a sort of cultural manifestation rather than a sort of technical one. And it was to do with the way artists thought, rather than to do with the

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8 Sadly, John Russell and Robert Rauschenberg died while I was writing this dissertation. Jasper Johns is the only surviving artist of the four, but attempts to contact him through his gallery went unanswered. There was a slight possibility to meet with Richard Hamilton while I was researching in London, but he had sustained an injury prior to my arrival and was, therefore, unavailable for an interview. He did, however, answer an email inquiry.
way they produced art, and to some extent therefore it was the rejection of a tradition, and the development of a new one.\(^9\)

Denny, clearly impressed by the possibilities that Pollock’s work opened up, added that artists like Pollock gave artists like himself “permission to do anything, so to speak.”\(^10\)

He also corroborated a fact that this dissertation has confirmed, namely that many Britons abandoned the “crazed-artist” perception of Pollock and began to see his work, previously deemed violent, as alternatively lyrical and serene. Denny expressed his opinion, contrary to Bridget Riley’s, that Pollock’s work did not represent a dead end. Jackson Pollock, Denny stated, “was the beginning of something,” adding that “a new definition of the future was opening up with his work.”\(^11\) This is similar to the comment by American Post Painterly Abstractionist Helen Frankenthaler that “you could depart from Pollock.”\(^12\)

As we know from chapter five, Denny and fellow artists Richard Smith and Ralph Rumney collaborated to create “an environment of paintings” in Place, held at the ICA in 1959.\(^13\) The works on view in this show were aesthetically analogous to Abstract Expressionist color field paintings, and Denny actually admitted to Lewison that he was personally much more affected by Rothko’s work in this vein than by any of the Pollocks he encountered. Denny was not, however, similarly impressed by Johns and Rauschenberg. When Lewison asked if these two had looked more interesting to him

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\(^9\) Robyn Denny, in a telephone interview by Jeremy Lewison on the work of Jackson Pollock, November 18, 1997. Tate Gallery Archive typed transcript, TAV 1853A.

\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid.

\(^12\) Frankenthaler made this comment to Henry Geldzahler in an October 1965 interview for Artforum. She also added, “Given one’s own talent and curiosity, one could explore, originate, discover from Pollock as one might, say, from Picasso, Gorky or Kandinsky.” Re-printed in Barbara Rose, Frankenthaler, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971, 30.

\(^13\) They placed their abstract canvases of solid colors on the floor of the gallery propped against the walls, resulting in the viewer being, in effect, surrounded by the paintings. Place was organized by Roger Coleman.
than Pollock or Rothko, Denny replied, “I was a bit wary of them, really,” admitting he
had never really admired their works because they seemed to him to appeal more to a
European sensibility.¹⁴ Although he did not clarify this comment, Denny was perhaps
referring to the perception that Johns’s work definitely (and even Rauschenberg’s to a
certain extent) was more intellectually infused compared to Pollock or Rothko’s
seemingly visceral and/or more sensual compositions. Johns and Rauschenberg, Denny
suggested, “seem to bridge the gap between the great cultures [of America and Europe] in
a way, which I am not sure attracts me.”¹⁵

Robyn Denny’s comments on Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns reflect some
of the trepidation also felt by British critics who reviewed their work, opinions of which
ran the gamut from appealingly intriguing to a source of uncertainty. This was
particularly the case in regard to Johns’s encaustic compositions of common objects, such
as flags, targets and numerals. I had expected to find commentary regarding the
jingoistic “Americanism” of Johns’s paintings of the U.S. flag, or statements about what
these politically-tinged images meant to British critics. They instead focused more
intently on the formal issue of the appearance of Johns’s paintings as real versus painted
objects. Aesthetics, not political symbolism, was of greater concern for reviewers of
Johns’s work.

Despite Robyn Denny’s disinterest in them, as David Mellor has indicated, other
British painters did take some cues from Johns and Rauschenberg. For example, Peter
Phillips, who attended the Royal College of Art from 1959-1962, likely saw
reproductions there of Johns’s flag compositions, thereby inspiring his own paintings that

¹⁴ Denny Interview.
¹⁵ Ibid.
incorporate the Union Jack, such as Purple Flag (1960, Fig. 84). But Mellor does not point out there is also clear evidence in Phillips’s painting of the impact of Johns’s targets, as well as Rothko’s color field layout. Mellor observes that Richard Smith painted Lee I and Lee II in 1961, the depiction of a double close-up showing a blue denim back pocket of a pair of Lee Cooper jeans, without recognizing that Smith’s painting is compositionally and conceptually similar to Rauschenberg’s earlier set of works, Factum I and Factum II (1957, Fig. 62). Smith’s exploration of the aesthetics of the corporate brand is also analogous to Rauschenberg’s critique of the Abstract Expressionist “brand” of painting, which valued artistic originality and authenticity. Although British critics certainly disagreed over the merits and drawbacks of Johns’s and Rauschenberg’s works, their art undoubtedly provided a departure point for certain U.K. artists, like Smith, working in the Pop Art idiom.

As this dissertation has clarified, the British public and art establishment evinced a vivid and assiduous reception of American avant-garde painting appearing on the 1950s and early ‘60s London art scene. The way remains open for future studies of the reception abroad of other areas of American artistic and cultural export, such as sculpture, literature, film and music. A parallel analysis of the reception of British art in the U.S. during this same time period would provide another useful comparative examination. Turning the tables to assess what American critics deemed distinctive or engaging about mid-century British art is an equally underexamined area of art scholarship that merits further analysis.

17 Ibid., 126.
As the West sought to supplant and suppress the spread of Soviet communist aggression, the United States became the leading political, cultural and military force in the Cold War era. A significant contingent of British artists, curators and institutions obviously became invested in aligning themselves with the U.S. in the form of American artistic exports. For example, the Whitechapel Art Gallery’s solo exhibitions of American artists positioned Bryan Robertson’s gallery as the prominent place to see contemporary art in London. Robertson’s pro-American sentiments spurred his decision to create events that allowed British critics and the public to evaluate more comprehensively than ever before the work of Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns. The Tate Gallery became an even more progressive art institution based on cutting-edge exhibitions ranging from Modern Art in the United States in 1956 to 54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade eight years later. Lawrence Alloway and the Independent Group at the ICA were conspicuously interested in presenting exhibitions that featured American artistic innovations.

By aligning themselves with the rise of the U.S. in the global arena, the critics and institutions discussed in this dissertation fostered a relationship reconfiguring the old London-Paris nexus and creating a new and stronger U.S.-U.K. alliance that would further the interest of Britain’s future development as a major artworld powerhouse. The significant role that Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Johns played in the process of positioning London to become an ever-increasing alternative capital of the artworld had not, prior to this study, been adequately explored. By 1964, as one critic indicated in reviewing the Tate’s 54-64, a visit to MoMA for Londoners was now “quite
unnecessary.”¹⁸ This show ushered in an important moment when contemporary art took a globalized turn in Britain and, by establishing even stronger ties than before the war with American museums such as New York’s Museum of Modern Art, British institutions created a reciprocal mechanism to showcase U.K. artistic developments elsewhere.

As the U.S. ascended to the role of the leading capitalist producer of consumer goods in the postwar era, the British public became major consumers of American advertising and products, from candy bars and comics to movies and television. The activities of the Independent Group show clear evidence of the kind of fascination with American culture that soon developed. This study has attempted to assess other, more “high” cultural forces that contributed to this phenomenon. British critics actively engaged with American artists in order to develop clearer critical positions regarding the complex developments in postwar American art. Although there was obviously both consensus and disagreement among reviewers, as I have shown, the critical reception around American painting in London during the 1950s and early 1960s constituted a robust culture of opinions. The door has been opened to further scholarship regarding the intersection of postwar American and British art up to and including the exciting scene today.

¹⁸ Roger Berthoud, “This Huge Exhibition is a Triumph,” *Evening Standard*, April 20, 1964.
Fig. 1 Richard Hamilton *Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956)
Fig. 2 *Modern Art in the United States* Catalogue Cover
Fig. 3 *The New American Painting* Catalogue Cover
Fig. 4 Opposing Forces Catalogue Cover
Fig. 5 The Mysterious Sign Catalogue Cover
Fig. 6 *The Popular Image* Catalogue Cover
Fig. 7 Some Paintings from the E.J. Power Collection Catalogue Cover
Fig. 8 Entrance to *Vanguard American Painting*, American Embassy, London
Fig. 9 Graham Sutherland *Christ Crucified* (1946)
Fig. 10 Robert Colquhoun *Woman With a Young Goat* (1948)
Fig. 11 John Bratby *The Toilet* (1955)
Fig. 12 Official Program of the Festival of Britain, 1951
Fig. 13 Installation view of *Black Eyes and Lemonade* exhibition (Image from *The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review*, 2001)
Fig. 14 Installation View of *Parallel of Life and Art*, 1953 (Image from www.independentgroup.org.uk)
Fig. 15 Jackson Pollock Painting, Summer 1950. Photo by Hans Namuth
Fig. 16 Catalogue Cover for Parallel of Life and Art

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

Parallel of Life and Art

Held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts

September 11th to October 18th, 1953.
Fig. 17 Jackson Pollock *She-Wolf* (1943)
Fig. 18 Jackson Pollock *Number 1A, 1948* (1948)
Fig. 19 Mark Rothko *Number 10* (1950)
Fig. 20 Andrew Wyeth *Christina’s World* (1948)
Fig. 21 Floorplan of *New American Painting*
Fig. 22 Floorplan of *New American Painting*
Fig. 23 Floorplan of *New American Painting*
Fig. 24 Jackson Pollock *Number 8* (1949)
Fig. 25 Installation View of *The New American Painting*, Tate Gallery. Photo Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY
Fig. 26 Mark Rothko *Earth and Green* (1954-5)
Fig. 27 Hans Namuth Photograph of Jackson Pollock
Fig. 28 Photograph of Pollock’s Grave in *School of New York*
Fig. 29 Jackson Pollock *Ocean Greyness* (1953)
Fig. 30 Alan Davie in Three Early Stages in the Execution of a Painting (Image from Bryan Robertson’s *Private View* [1965]. Photograph Undated).
Fig. 31 Gillian Ayres *Distillation* (1957)
Fig. 32 Jackson Pollock *Electric Night* (1946)
Fig. 33 Jackson Pollock *Unformed Figure* (1953)
Fig. 34 *American Cartoons* Catalogue Cover (ICA, 1956)
Fig. 35 Exhibition Announcement for *Place* (1959)
Fig. 36 Three Installation Views of the Whitechapel’s Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956
(Image from The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review)
Fig. 37 Photograph from the *Observer* of *Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery (Image Undated)

*The exhibition by the American “action-painter” Jackson Pollock is drawing record crowds at the Whitechapel Gallery, where local visitors mix with art-lovers from far afield. Special walls have been built to hang the huge pictures.*
Fig. 38 Installation View of *Jackson Pollock* at MoMA, December 19, 1956 – February 3, 1957. Photo Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Image Reference: ART364196
Fig. 39 Cover of Pollock’s Whitechapel Exhibition Catalogue
Fig. 40 Frontispiece overleaf for the Whitechapel’s Pollock exhibition
Fig. 41 Film still of Pollock painting by Namuth, published in *The Listener*, December 4, 1958.
Fig. 42 Illustration of Pollock Painting, *Vogue* (Britain), November 1958

Jackson Pollock, centrifugal force among American non-objective painters, is having a big posthumous show at the Whitechapel from November 6.
Fig. 43 Illustration of Pollock’s Whitechapel Exhibition, *East London Advertiser*, November 21, 1958

New on show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery is a collection of paintings and drawings by Jackson Pollock, the American artist. The collection has been widely shown in Europe. The showing at Whitechapel is the only one in this country, and the last before the pictures return to America. The pictures are acclaimed by the critics, but many of the ordinary people of East London wonder what they are all about. Halifax Photos
Some stared in admiration; others—as this cross-section of the onlookers shows—were less keen to inspect the "action paintings" of the American artist Jackson Pollock at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, yesterday.

Mr. Pollock, who died two years ago in a car accident, is considered by American modern art enthusiasts to be their country's greatest artist. Today some of his paintings are worth thousands of pounds.

His "action painting" technique consisted of first tacking a canvas to the floor. Then, with a brush, he would drip, flick and throw paint on to it—completing a canvas in about two hours.

Picture: John Silverside
Fig. 45 Cover of *The Mysterious Sign* Exhibition Catalogue, ICA, 1960
Fig. 46 Jasper Johns *White Numbers* (1957)
Fig. 47 Jackson Pollock *Self Portrait* (1933)
Fig. 48 Jackson Pollock *Woman* (undated)
Fig. 49 Jackson Pollock *Interior with Figures* (1937)
Fig. 50 Jackson Pollock *Masqued Image* (1938)
Fig. 51 Jackson Pollock *Stenographic Figure* (1942)
Fig. 52 Jackson Pollock *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* (1943)
Fig. 53 Installation view of Mark Rothko at MoMA, January 18 through March 12, 1961. Photo Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Image Reference: ART364236.
Fig. 54 Installation view of *Mark Rothko: A Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings, 1945-1960* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery (image from *The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review*).
Fig. 55 Installation view of Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1958 (image is from The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review).
Fig. 56 Jackson Pollock *Cathedral* (1947)
Fig. 57 Mark Rothko *White Center* (1957)
Fig. 58 Entrance to the *Vanguard American Painting* Exhibition, American Embassy, London, March 1962 (Image from Donson, “The American Vanguard Exhibitions in Europe”).

![Fig. 14. Entry to the exhibit, American Embassy, London, March, 1962.](image-url)
Fig. 59 Installation View of *Vanguard American Painting*, American Embassy Library (Image from Donson, “The American Vanguard Exhibitions in Europe”).
Fig. 60 Jasper Johns *False Start* (1959)
Fig. 61 Robert Rauschenberg *Trophy I (For Merce Cunningham)*, 1959
Fig. 62 Robert Rauschenberg *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957)
Fig. 63 Derek Boshier *Identi-Kit Man* (1962)
Fig. 64 Peter Phillips *The Entertainment Machine* (1961)
Fig. 65 Patrick Caulfield *Vases of Flowers* (1962)
Fig. 66 Cover of *The Popular Image* Exhibition Catalogue, ICA, 1963
Fig. 67 Robert Rauschenberg *Canyon* (1959)
Fig. 68 Jasper Johns *Flag on Orange Field* (1954)
Fig. 69 René Magritte *The Treachery of Images* (1929)

*Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*
Fig. 70 Jasper Johns *Periscope* (1963)
Fig. 71 Robert Rauschenberg *Trophy II* (1960-61)
Fig. 72 Catalogue Title Page of *54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade*, Tate Gallery.
Fig. 73 Installation View of Robert Rauschenberg’s Monogram (1959) in the Tate Gallery Exhibition, 54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade. © The Tate Gallery
Fig. 74 Cover of the *Sunday Times Colour Magazine*, April 26, 1964
Fig. 75 Installation View of Robert Rauschenberg: Paintings, Drawings and Combines, 1949-1964, Whitechapel Art Gallery, February – March 1964 [Image from The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review]
Fig. 76 Installation View of Robert Rauschenberg: Paintings, Drawings and Combines, 1949-1964, Whitechapel Art Gallery, February – March 1964 [Image from The Whitechapel Art Gallery Centenary Review]
Fig. 78 Robert Rauschenberg *Bed* (1958)
Fig. 79 Robert Rauschenberg *Coca-Cola Plan* (1958)
Fig. 80 Jasper Johns *Flag* (1954-55)
Fig. 81 View of *Jasper Johns: Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture, 1954-1964*, Whitechapel Art Gallery [Photograph from the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, December 17, 1964]
Fig. 82 Jasper Johns *According to What* (1964)
Fig. 83 Jasper Johns *Painted Bronze (Beer Cans)* (1960)
Fig. 84 Peter Phillips *Purple Flag* (1960)
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Note: Exhibition Reviews are divided into “Anonymous” and “Authored.” The “Anonymous” reviews are alphabetical by publication, then chronological within the same publication. “Authored” reviews are alphabetical by author’s last name, then chronological under the same author.

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