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## ***Franz Kline:*** ***Janus of Abstract Expressionism***

### **David Anfam**

"It just seems as though there are forms in some experience of your life that have an excitement for you." *Franz Kline*<sup>1</sup>

"Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock had identical mothers [...] You can see them on the prows of ships, breaking gigantic ice floes. Nothing turns them back." *Elaine de Kooning*<sup>2</sup>

"I am concerned with that area of excitement belonging to... man-made phenomena such as the high bridge spanning two distant points." *Ronald Bladen*<sup>3</sup>

How does Franz Kline's art look from a twenty-first century perspective? An answer to this question is inseparable from an assessment of his ongoing status in relation to his contemporaries, the Abstract Expressionists. But there is an ironic sense in which Kline fits both too easily and too awkwardly into that many-sided grouping. To be sure, no history of post-war American art would be complete without including his signature canvases galvanized by bold and predominantly monochromatic brushstrokes. Like Jackson Pollock's skeins of poured pigment, Willem de Kooning's "Women" and Mark Rothko's rectangular veils, these icons have come to embody a particular time, place and mood in American culture - not to mention the wider trajectory of twentieth-century abstraction. As Rothko gave a hauntingly intense chromatic presence to the void, and Pollock evoked the labyrinths of human consciousness and the cosmos, so Kline voiced a peculiarly American toughness, immediacy and drama.<sup>4</sup> In a nutshell, it might be described as the nineteenth-century Whitmanesque spirit of energetic realism wrenched into the darker modernist realms of film noir and New York School photography of the 1940s and 50s.<sup>5</sup> Yet that odd hybridization suggests the problems surrounding the stereotype of Kline.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Sylvester, "Franz Kline 1910-1962: An Interview with David Sylvester," *Living Arts*, No. 1, London, Spring 1963, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> E. de Kooning in C.B. Pepper, "The Indomitable de Kooning," *The New York Times Magazine*, New York, November 20, 1983, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> R. Bladen (1970) quoted in T. Kellein, ed., *Ronald Bladen Sculpture*, Greenidge, New York, 1998, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Kline's spatiality was chosen to exemplify Americanness in the revised edition of J. McCoubrey, *American Tradition in Painting*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2000, pp. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Having discussed Kline's relation to American photography at length in my *Franz Kline: Black & White. 1950-1961*, The Menil Collection, Houston; Houston Fine Art Press, Houston, 1994, a primary purpose in this essay is to explore issues not fully addressed therein.

Having died tragically young - in 1962 at the age of fifty-two - Kline's output and legend were tailor-made to fit the mythologies of Abstract Expressionism. According to this rationale, codified by even as perceptive a critic as Frank O'Hara in 1964, he was the quintessential "action painter."<sup>6</sup> That is, his style embodied the spontaneous speed and impact held to characterize this branch of the movement. Furthermore, by the early 1950s Kline had realized the most path-breaking phase of his activity involving the use of black and white - so that, as he continued to explore or expand that vein throughout the decade, there were no further major departures to complicate the neat overall plot until he reintroduced a full palette around 1956. Thus Kline in a sense is more susceptible to being pigeonholed than most of his colleagues.

At first, his position looks as forthright and unproblematic as the paintings themselves. To a degree, this assumption holds. Kline's works show a difference - and freedom - from the ideological rhetoric and concern with metaphysical content that dominated almost all the Abstract Expressionists. Unlike Arshile Gorky, whose work epitomized the way in which Surrealism was a key starting-point for the majority of the band, Kline remained virtually immune to European avant-garde trends. Even his brief encounter with Cubism happened late, involving a mere three or four years from 1946 onwards - because such Old Masters as Velazquez, Rembrandt and Goya were from the outset a more fundamental source of inspiration. Equally absent are the innovative methods of deploying materials that Pollock developed and, likewise, de Kooning's densely erotic iconography and manifold technique. The Freudian symbols and Jungian archetypes that Adolph Gottlieb's pictographs engaged are similarly nowhere evident in Kline. Nor did he ever seek the intellectual program (ranging from classical mythology to Nietzsche) that informed Rothko's pursuit of the "tragic and timeless" as well as the epic ambitions behind Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still's color fields. A hallmark of Kline's art is that it eschews transcendence.

What we see in Kline is largely (to paraphrase Frank Stella) what is there, rather than a pointer to invisible layers of meaning or spirit. What is there, too, possesses both a white-noise level of dynamism, an opacity and a frankness that belongs less to the subjective tenor of Abstract Expressionism than it does to the objectivity of the avant-garde platforms that replaced it during the 1960s. Curiously, Kline - otherwise most typical of New York School gesturalists in his painterliness - at times seems to foretell a direction leading to Minimalism. Could the least cerebral Abstract Expressionist perhaps have been among the most forward-looking?

That Kline was paired soon after his death in an exhibition with Alfred Jensen hints that his standing may be more heterodox than is assumed, insofar as the latter was an odd-man-out among the Abstract Expressionist camp and justly regarded himself as a bridge to the next generation.<sup>7</sup>

More pointedly, a case can be made for the transmission of Kline's impulse to sculpture and thence to the specificity and objecthood that preoccupied the aesthetics of Minimalism.<sup>8</sup> It would run from Kline's influence upon someone such as John Chamberlain - who materialized his colliding forms and vivid hues in three dimensions - and from there to the pragmatic quiddity that Donald Judd sought in his box-like serial structures of the 1960s. A token of this underground connection exists

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<sup>6</sup> F. O'Hara, "Introduction and Interview," *Franz Kline. A Retrospective Exhibition*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1964, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> See D. Anfam, "Alfred Jensen: A Cosmos in Context," in *Alfred Jensen: Concordance*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 2003. The exhibition was held at the Basel Kunsthalle (January-March 1964) and thus suggests that the initial European purview of Kline may have been less rigidly canonical than its American counterpart.

<sup>8</sup> Not to mention Brice Marden's admiration for, and response to, Kline. See H.F. Gaugh, in *The Vital Gesture. Franz Kline in Retrospect*, Cincinnati Museum of Art, Cincinnati, 1985, p. 22.

in microcosm in a single piece such as Chamberlain's *Hollywood John* (1962, p. 45), which makes a quirky object out of Kline's hieroglyphic protagonists and which the sculptor, in turn, saw fit to give to Judd. By no coincidence, Judd - despite his well known strictures against Kline's "relational" procedures - was also once quick to discern a less obvious dimension to his forebear when he noticed that "Kline's sketch for *Cardinal* (1950) is surprisingly like the painting. Kline would be denounced now as conceptual and premeditated."<sup>9</sup> What had Judd glimpsed in such deliberate methods?

The flip side to Kline's personification as the "action painter" *par excellence* is now crystal clear: in general he painted slowly, made small studies that were then meticulously recast into big compositions, and so forth.<sup>10</sup> As even he admitted: "The immediacy can be accomplished in a picture that's been worked on for a long time just as well as if it's been done rapidly, you see."<sup>11</sup> By itself, this revised estimate bespeaks the latter-day realization that Abstract Expressionism contains more traditional components than was hitherto imagined when the shock of its newness meshed with the popularized existentialism of its contemporary critical reception. However, another Kline gambit remains radical: namely, the stripped-to-the-bone geometries that distinguish his first altogether extraordinary inventions, exemplified by *Wotan* (1950), *Painting No.11* (1951) and *Untitled* (1952).

Although the distant precedent of Piet Mondrian's grids, alongside that of Rothko's recent rectilinear "transitionals," is discernible in these cryptic configurations, they possess a visionary note of a kind that is liable to arise when an artist is utterly absorbed by their own imaginative horizons. Even now, these epic-cum-poignant signs continue to rivet the viewer with the grip of a revelation that feels self-evident yet inexplicable - rather as if Kline had suddenly witnessed the unexpected in the obvious. Evidence indicates that this is what lay behind their genesis.

The gallerist Allan Stone has clarified the motivation behind these images as follows:

"I raised this question of origins with Charles Egan, Kline's first dealer, good friend and a pioneer in championing the Abstract Expressionist movement.

"Tables and chairs," was Egan's answer.

"Charles, what are you talking about? You're joking!" "Not at all," Charles replied and pulled out a small abstraction, which upon close inspection turned out to be a rocking chair [...] Similarly, Egan maintained that the very spare early abstract paintings like *Wotan* (1950) were inspired by the reduction of tables."<sup>12</sup>

Such a provocative scenario has multiple implications. Firstly, it implies that the notion of Kline beckoning forward to Minimalism is not as incongruous as it sounds. For if the simplest domestic objects precipitated the eye-opening early 1950s compositions, then here is a kind of Abstract Expressionist precursor to the territory of primary structures - Judd's furniture, Carl Andre's floor pieces and subsequently Scott Burton's chairs, as well as their spartan recourse to black, white and

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<sup>9</sup> D. Judd, "In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine*, No. 39, New York, November 1964, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, D. Anfam, *Franz Kline: 8/ack & White, 1950- 1961, op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Kline in D. Sylvester, *op. cit.*, quoted in S. Davidson, *Franz Kline: Paintings from a Private American Collection*, Richard Gray Gallery, New York, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> A. Stone, *Franz Kline: Architecture & Atmosphere*, Allan Stone Gallery, New York, 1997, n.p.

grey.<sup>13</sup> As it happens, Kline had depicted a door in 1945, turning an everyday item into a bare statement about planarity, weight and whiteness.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, the attachment to things and emblems nevertheless harks back to a venerable trend in American culture. This idiosyncratic mixture of innovation and tradition lends Kline his Janus-like aspect: a figure anchored in the past who broke new ground for the future.<sup>15</sup>

The "things" that filled Kline's scope were legion and have long been recounted. Apart from the aforementioned domestic artefacts, his focus fixed upon locomotives, bridges, buildings, the El and kindred mechanical or urban paraphernalia. Initially these were interpreted realistically: the train that commands *Palmerton, PA* (1941); the exaggeratedly large bridge presiding over the panoramic mural *Lehighon* (1946, American Legion Post 314, Lehighon, PA); and the ramshackle elevated railway station of *Chatham Square* (1948). Eventually these leitmotifs were indexed in diverse titles: *Wanamaker Block* (1955, in Manhattan), *Lehigh V Span* (1959-60, alluding to the Central Railroad Bridge of the 1946 mural) and *Cardinal* (1950, the name of a train). Likewise, Kline injected their power, grittiness and architectonic tension into the fabric - by turns monolithic, splintered or grainy - of his abstractions. Nor did he deny meaning by association: "If someone says 'that looks like a bridge,' it doesn't bother me really. A lot of them do [...] I think that if you use long lines, they become - what could they be? The only thing they could be is either highways or architecture or bridges."<sup>16</sup> All this is common knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Less remarked is the cultural and ideological background upon which Kline's thematics rest. Chamberlain hit the nail on the head when he observed that "with Franz Kline it was power."<sup>18</sup> Power radiates from the constructions that Kline prized - bridges, trains, New York City itself - and the speeding impetuosity of the ideograms into which he forged them. The biography is full of details reflecting the same momentum: early prowess as a college athlete, hard drinking and partying, his love of Wagner as well as jazz, and a taste for fast cars that culminated in the purchase of a black Thunderbird and a silver-gray Ferrari.<sup>19</sup> Here again the stance points two ways. On the one hand, we seem close to the masculinist rhetoric of power that critics have associated not merely with Abstract Expressionist machismo but also in particular with Minimalism's domineering aggressiveness.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the American model of reality as an empire of force is a far older paradigm.

Grounded in the United States' meteoric rise as an industrial nation from the Civil War onwards, the

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<sup>13</sup> J. Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 2001, pp. 13, 77 *et passim*.

<sup>14</sup> See D. Anfam, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> In light of the seminal import of *White Door* (1945), there is also a nice symmetry in the fact that Janus is the god of doorways.

<sup>16</sup> D. Sylvester, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. L. Steinberg, "Month in Review," *Arts Magazine*, No. 30, New York, April 1956, p. 42: "The metaphors throughout are of mechanism."

<sup>18</sup> J. Sylvester, *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture, 1954-1985*, Hudson Hills Press, New York, in association with The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1986, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> H.F. Gaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 55. The apolitical Kline is said to have admired Stalin, Al Capone, Hitler and Roosevelt alike, not for their beliefs but for their strong personalities; H.F. Gaugh, "Franz Kline: The Man and the Myths," *Art News*, No. 84, New York, December 1985, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> A.C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine*, No. 64, New York, January 1990, pp. 44-63.

first apogee of this power-driven mentality occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. American technology then attained unprecedented feats: Fordist mass production, bridges of titanic scale, all-encompassing railways and newly electrified cities that soared upwards as never before.<sup>21</sup> Famously, this was the era that Henry Adams beheld, in his *Education of Henry Adams* (1907), as a kingdom of force that was no longer, like previous ages, guided by religion, the "Virgin," but instead under the sway of another god, the "Dynamo." This is also the crucible in which Kline's vision - reiterating the romantic urbanism of the 1920s - was shaped. The significance of his initial landscapes is that they are anti-pastorals where, to employ Leo Marx's terms,<sup>22</sup> the "machine" supplants the proverbial "garden" of America so that signs of industry and *techne* are everywhere - witness the central intrusive train of *Palmerton, PA* (1941).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Kline's native Eastern Pennsylvania was of course a coal-bearing resource for all this new productivity. In view of Kline's mechanolatry, it is logical to cast him as the successor to a Machine Age ethos between the two Wars.

An exemplar of this outlook is the Precisionist Charles Sheeler's paen to industrialism, a series of six scenes aptly entitled "Power" that includes *Rolling Power* (1939). The relevance of Sheeler's example is not just the obvious recognition that Kline's core themes were in principle backward-looking, an artistic *topos* already well-established in the 1920s and 30s. Instead, the subtler lesson of *Rolling Power* lies in the way in which its ultra-dynamic elements stand in absolute stasis.<sup>24</sup> The paradox is that when power resides in things, they are just as liable to be massively static as kinetic. By the same token, despite Kline's colliding pictorial syntax, his abstractions display a recurrent inclination to lock themselves tight - whether in the vice-like armatures typified by *Four Square* (1953) and *Mahoning* (1956) or the viscous blocks of *Thorpe* (1954) and *Cupola* (1958-60). The title of *Suspended* (1953) also summarizes the dichotomy that its precarious design enacts: a cusp between still frontality as rigid as that of *Rolling Power* and the impression that these quasi-geometric ciphers are verging on collapse.<sup>25</sup> Such a tension - energy versus entropy, movement against immobility - might be deemed Kline's defining feature. Certainly, it accounts for the special thrill of his drawing, which swerves between poise and awkwardness, and was doubtless at the back of his mind when explaining how "it just seems as though there are forms in some experience of your life that have an excitement for you."

Again, while that "excitement" had its roots in the dynamic/static things of power-laden early modern America, the sensibility is also tantalizingly far-sighted. How else does one account for the similarities between Kline's tectonics and those of another Minimalist, Ronald Bladen, both of whom explored the nexus between inertia, gravity and disequilibrium? It could almost have been Kline speaking when Bladen declared scale as content: "I am concerned with that area of excitement belonging to natural phenomena such as a gigantic wave poised before it makes its fall,

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<sup>21</sup> L. Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1995, pp. 3-6.

<sup>22</sup> L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1964.

<sup>23</sup> See A. Boime, *Franz Kline: The Early Works as Signals*, State University of New York, Binghamton, 1977, pp. 10-13.

<sup>24</sup> M. Friedman, *Charles Sheeler: Paintings, Drawings, Photographs*, Watson-Guption, New York, 1975, p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> Comparably, another work in Sheeler's 1939 series is the vast levitated turbine unit of *Suspended Power*.

or man made phenomena such as the high bridge spanning two distant points."<sup>26</sup>

Further light is shed on Kline's conflicted dynamics by recalling that domestic objects such as tables and chairs catalyzed his breakthrough around 1950. The corollary is the engulfing rise of such entities in daily life in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. According to the cultural historian Bill Brown's account of this curious and lengthy phenomenon, "things" became a veritable obsession, cutting across a spectrum of the American experience - from pragmatist philosophy (Henry James Sr's assertion, "I can legitimately be held to know only in so far as objects exist to make me know"), to Imagist poetry (William Carlos Williams's famous dictum, "No ideas but in things") and to popular tracts (a 1906 essay in *The Atlantic Monthly* was entitled "The Tyranny of Things").<sup>27</sup>

This hegemony of things was not, of course, confined to the United States; it enacted the far broader processes whereby advanced capitalism overturned human relations with commodities, saturating existence with inanimate objects. Although Marxist concepts of commodification, reification and alienation seem a far cry from Kline's practice, they actually strike to its crux.

Karl Marx remarked that when the table "emerges as a commodity... it stands on its head and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas."<sup>28</sup> The significance of this observation to Kline is not just that his schemata - quick with the aura of volition and presence - should have emerged from tables, chairs and the like. Nor that Kline in effect fetishized lifeless agents such as bridges, trains, cars and the metropolis. Instead it is Marx's perception that under a particular stage of capitalism the fundamental dialogue between people and things is upended - nowhere has this been taken further than in the technocratic United States.

Kline appears to have sublimated such displacements into the stuff of his art so that - despite having originated in a disturbed affective realm - they end in a sheer, exhilarating play of forces. O'Hara caught the expressive eloquence to which Kline raised such untoward base material: "These personages which are at the same time noble structures (*Cardinal*, 1950; *Elizabeth*, 1958; *Siegfried*, 1958, p. 259), these structures which are at once tragic personages (*Wanamaker Block*, 1955; *The Bridge*, c. 1955, p. 229; *C & O*, 1958), seem both to express and to live by virtue of the American dream of power."<sup>29</sup>

While a full-throttle Marxist critique would interrogate the agenda at stake in such a "dream of power," as well as its switches between people and structures, there are nevertheless other pertinent clues that reveal inward currents beneath Kline's ostensibly extroverted pictorial strategies.<sup>30</sup> For instance, Elaine de Kooning's comment about Kline's mother begs the question of a possible Oedipal dilemma, especially given the suicide of the artist's father, and its legacy: "She could walk

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<sup>26</sup> As with Kline, Bladen's ostensible Minimalist effects sprang from a Romantic sensibility.

<sup>27</sup> B. Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003, pp. 1-24.

<sup>28</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, quoted in B. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> F. O'Hara, "Franz Kline Talking," *Evergreen Review*, Vol. 2, No. 6, New York, Fall 1958, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. B. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 7: "Taken literally, the belief that there are ideas in things amounts to granting them an interiority and, thus, something like the structure of subjectivity."

through a brick wall. Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock had identical mothers.... You can see them on the prows of ships, breaking gigantic ice floes. Nothing turns them back." Here there is a nod towards what the psychologist Julia Kristeva would characterize as the "phallic mother" - the transference of thrusting masculine traits onto the erstwhile maternal imago - in a narrative that hints at Kline's parental traumas.

Less speculatively, the crucial juncture when Kline left behind figuration reveals the underside to his involvement with a "dream of power." His route to abstraction began in 1946 with *The Dancer*, a darkly opaque personage influenced by "analytical" Cubism, which must allude to his wife Elizabeth, who had been a ballerina. Simultaneously Kline embarked on numerous studies of his wife seated in a rocking chair. However, Elizabeth succumbed to depression and schizophrenia at this very point and was institutionalized in May 1946, not to regain her sanity for some twelve years. The rocking-chair series fragments and deconstructs its subject; Harry Gaugh notes how in several works on paper Kline omitted Elizabeth's face because "she isn't there any more."<sup>31</sup> Thereafter the chair, empty or with shadowy imprints of a sitter, was overlaid with heavy dark strokes that imprison and obliterate it. From here it was a short step to Kline's expansion of these studies, projected by a Bell-Opticon, into the large scale of 1950 onwards.

Although Gaugh acknowledges how these small oils and drawings of 1946-49 reveal Elizabeth's disintegrating personality,<sup>32</sup> he underplays the striking extent to which the resort to absence, effacement, instability and entrapment provided the matrix for what has come to appear the diametrically opposite tenor of Kline's subsequent art. In short, the real-life context was the antithesis of empowerment: Elizabeth's helplessness and her substitution by an erstwhile inanimate adjunct, her chair. Furthermore, Kline's *Still Life With Puppet* (c. 1940, p. 143) shows a human emblem drained of vitality and *Red Clown* (1947) is a self-portrait mask whose tilted head - an ancient symbol of melancholy - continues in his treatments of Nijinsky. Perhaps most striking is the convergence between the decision to portray the Russian dancer and his own wife's plight: both performers went mad. By contrast, the dancer, as the literary critic Frank Kermode has shown, is the paramount Romantic metaphor of the ideal unity of motion and stillness, mind and body. W.B. Yeats summarizes the trope: "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance?"<sup>33</sup>

What Kline did in the all-important 1946-49 transitional works was to dismantle, efface, destabilize and imprison this figure of living unity. Such destruction gave birth to the ensuing colossal structures. Powerlessness and passivity segued to the dominion of action.

To grasp the true pitch of Kline's mature oeuvre from then onwards, it is necessary to override the categorizations that split Abstract Expressionism into "action" versus "color-field" factions. The reason is that Kline's Janus-like makeup confounds the clichés summoned to compartmentalize these two hypothetical cliques. In particular, the "color-field" wing is sometimes supposed to encapsulate an "abstract sublime" rendition of nature, whereas the "action" exponents addressed the

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<sup>31</sup> H.F. Gaugh, *The Vital Gesture. Franz Kline in Retrospect*, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> H.F. Gaugh, "Franz Kline: The Man and the Myths," op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>33</sup> F. Kermode, *Romantic Image*, Routledge, London, 1957; re-ed. 1986, Chap. IV, "The Dancer". Kline loved to dance, and various titles, such as *Giselle* and *Merce C.*, referred to the medium.

city.<sup>34</sup> Yet Kline in fact seized upon the interface between the two: the American "technological sublime."

As historian David E. Nye has outlined the genre, the technological sublime is Kline's sphere *par excellence* - a set of attitudes to machinery and the urban that pays homage to railways, bridges, skyscrapers and so forth.<sup>35</sup> We witness the awesome, uplifted span of *Painting* (1952) with analogous sensations to those who have marvelled at the Brooklyn Bridge. Similarly, the varieties of the technological sublime accord with Kline's varying modes.

Thus the railroad's "dynamic" sublime, which annihilated time and distance, corresponds with Kline's esteem of speed (no matter how slowly he contrived its illusion) and destruction of space. By comparison, the "geometrical" sublime of bridges and skyscrapers articulates the same effects as those instances, such as *Mahoning Panel* (1961), where Kline instead prefers a monumental, stationary bulk.<sup>36</sup> He also confessed that he aimed for illegible signs: "Instead of making a sign you can read, you make a sign you can't read."<sup>37</sup> From the 1920s onwards, Americans' view of the city through the lens of the geometrical sublime elicited the same ambiguity:

In the night city there were no shadows, no depth, no laws of perspective, and no orderly relations between objects... An immense sign bulked larger on the skyline than a far more substantial building, and gargantuan electrified objects distorted the sense of scale. The city as a whole seemed a jumble of layers, angles and impossible proportions; it had become a vibrating, indeterminate text that tantalized the eyes and yielded to no definitive reading.<sup>38</sup>

Even Kline's singular colorism - saturated, artificial, bewildering - evinces the unnatural optical combinations of the "electrical" sublime, the neon-illuminated nocturnal cityscape.<sup>39</sup>

In keeping with Kline's double-edged drive, residues of enduring negation nonetheless infiltrate this positive dynamism. Apart from the artist's documented stress upon tragedy and loneliness (which is anyway a further trait of the modern human being adrift within the inhuman urban sublime),<sup>40</sup> they continue to linger in the snares or mazes, familiar from the entrapped Elizabeth/dancer studies.<sup>41</sup> The art historian Kent Minturn tellingly likens such tangles as *Mahoning's* to the structures in film

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<sup>34</sup> I. Sandler, "Abstract Expressionism: The Noise of Traffic on the Way to Walden Pond," in C.M. Joachimides and N. Rosenthal, eds., *American Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1913- 1993*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1993, pp. 77-83.

<sup>35</sup> D.E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, MIT Press, Cambridge London, 1994, p. XIII.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, chaps 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> Kline, speaking at the Artists' Club, January 23, 1952, quoted in W.C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 75- 76. On the American urge to create signs, see T. Tanner, *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York, 1987.

<sup>38</sup> D.E. Nye, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-172.

<sup>40</sup> H.F. Gaugh, pp. 67- 68, 98. D.E. Nye, *op. cit.*, pp. 194, 197.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. L. Steinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 43: " In all of these, the open patches [...] are like vanishing glimpses of light seen through collapsing scaffolding, they flit and dart like crazed creatures in a maze, like cruel memories of openness within a system closing fast about you."

noir (p. 51) that denote the city's awry grid enframing its denizens.<sup>42</sup> A different threat to autonomy arises from Kline's knack of tilting shapes off-balance and blurring their contours (often with small brushes) so that, as in *Abstraction* (1950-51), they seem in violent motion or wrecked - a parallel to the out-of-focus "action" shots of humanity under extreme pressure that became part of American everyday consciousness in the 1940s.<sup>43</sup> Can Kline possibly link that age of the imperilled individual with the contemporary revival of the sublime in photography? Both Kline's art and the contemporary photographer Andreas Gursky's scenes evoke an impersonal world of strangely personal forces - vertiginous, dynamic, limitless yet often claustrophobic and with time or space collapsed into monolithic stasis and flat signs.<sup>44</sup> Seen from this postmodern viewpoint, where human traces are overawed by technology of their own making, Kline's dialectic looks as trenchant as ever.

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<sup>42</sup> K. Minturn, "*Peinture Noire: Abstract Expressionism and Film Noir*," in A. Silver, J. Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader*, 2, Limelight Editions, New York, 1999, pp. 294-95.

<sup>43</sup> Further highlighted by the Museum of Modern Art's 1943 exhibition, "Action Photography," New York.

<sup>44</sup> A. Olin, "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime," *Art Journal*, No. 61, New York, Winter 2002, pp. 22-35.