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Kline As He Was and As He Is

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Kline thought that "criticism must come from those around"¹ the working artist - those who could make themselves emotionally available and could divine the savor of the studio in the work. In the forging of art history each generation has had to make its bid, but the evidence - the works of art - remain the only stable element. The one constant in art history is scepticism, especially scepticism about individual testimony. We all read Vasari, doubting his accuracy on every page. In the twentieth century, Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), based on Akutagawa's stories, unforgettably underlined, in its four testimonials about a crime, the almost certain distortion of memory, and the shifting adjustments that inevitably fringe the truth. The film appeared in the United States in 1951, just when the New York School was being identified as some sort of entity, the character of which no one seemed quite sure of. The great snare of history, then, is the obscureness, instability and plastic character of human memory.

Yet and there is always a "yet" - it must be admitted that without eye-witness testimony there could be no history at all, despite the constant quest for objectivity or "truth" in the telling of history. When Stendhal wrote his disguised autobiography, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, he repeatedly posed the troubling question of the subjective witness: "I ought to write my life; then perhaps at last, when it is finished, I should know what I have been [...] This idea is inviting. Yes, but that frightful quantity of I's and ME's what eye can see itself?" Towards the end of the book, he reiterates his subjective uneasiness, "but who the devil will have the heart to read this excessive accumulation of I's and ME's?", and, in one of his most acute comments on memory, likens memory to old frescoes in Italy where whole areas have flaked off with time. He remarks that he can speak about "only pictures" since "nothing is absolutely true but sensations."²

I believe that Stendhal had it right. Our frescoes are always tantalizingly incomplete and often misleading. History is always caught short. Still, like Samuel Beckett's disembodied voices, we must go on. Despite all the embellished weavings of individual story tellers, there is something we must call "history," and there are facts. In art history the facts are indisputably works of art. Around those facts bloom testimonies.

My testimony as someone who was "around" (as Kline put it), is that of one who in those days was called a "sympathetic witness." I entered his milieu physically - that is, I lived in the downtown quarter that abounded with artists. I trod the same streets, frequented the same cafeterias, bars, galleries, and visited artists' lofts where there was little heat and the floorboards were full of

¹ F. O'Hara, "Introduction and Interview," in *Franz Kline. A Retrospective Exhibition*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1964, p. 51.

² Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, Merlin Press, New York, 1958.

splinters with a century of dust lodged between them. In the neighborhood I wandered, and in which I still live, also dwelled one of our most penetrating cultural critics, Harold Rosenberg. He was a flâneur of the quarter, and especially 10th Street, our own bohemia, that he described as distinctly non-Parisian:

"Apart from two pawnshops facing each other on the 3rd Avenue Western corners, everything on 10th Street is one of a kind: a liquor store with a large 'wino' clientele; up a flight of iron steps, a foreign language club and restaurant; up another flight, a hotel-workers employment agency; in a basement, a pool room; in an other something stored; in the middle of the block, a metal-stamping factory with a "modernistic" pea-green cement and glass brick front; on the 4th Avenue corner, to be sure, an excavation."³

In addition to the artists who dwelled above, there were, on the street, what we used to call "Bowery bums" (now we call them "the homeless"), who often struck up conversations.

The mores of the 1930s still prevailed. Artists prided themselves on their own déclassé condition, and felt, as did the bums, that they chose to be outside society. As de Kooning said more than once, "they did not want to conform."

A note on anecdotal history: I believe that much can be gleaned from seemingly anecdotal details. What, for instance, would we know about Degas and his thoughts about art, if Paul Valéry had not conscientiously reported his encounters with the old and difficult painter? Every one who remembered Kline contributed to the store of anecdotes, and above all, the small treasure of his idiosyncratic witticisms. Elaine de Kooning knew what to tell us. She described, for instance, how Kline cleaned up his studio and bought wine and cheese for a collector who had promised to come at 5 pm to buy a large painting. "By midnight, he realized the guy had been bluffing. Resigned, he trudged over to the Cedar with his wine and cheese, handed it out, and began his story, 'First they tell you to dive, then they pull the water away!'"⁴

Here is one of the many anecdotes told to me by Tom Young, who, as a young painter, had spent a lot of time with Kline in bars, in rambles about the city, and visiting other artists:

"One time when I was at Kline's studio on Fourteenth Street, he was telling me a story, or showing me details of Rembrandt's works that contained beautiful abstractions, when he heard a noise in the wastebasket. He went over to it and freed a little mouse and just kept talking while it ran away."⁵

This incidental anecdote obviously contains an important detail, namely that Kline was not only a serious scholar of Rembrandt, but wanted to enlighten the younger painter. Other tales from Young obliquely indicate how much Kline respected tradition and how well he knew the history of the arts. Once, Young sent me a photograph of Kline visiting a student exhibition at Wagner College where Young was teaching. On the back of the photograph Young wrote: "He was wearing a jacket that was once owned by a Shakespearean actor." If one fills in the blanks in the great store of anecdotal history available in print, Young's comment reveals that Kline was an Anglophile; that he knew

³ H. Rosenberg, "Tenth Street: A Geography of Modern Art," *Art News Annual*, No. 28, New York, 1958; reprinted in *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973, pp. 100-109.

⁴ E. Lieber, *Willem de Kooning, Reflections in the Studio*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 2000, pp. 38-39.

⁵ T. Young, letter to the author, July 2003.

Shakespeare, or at least Shakespearean actors. We know that he loved to rummage in second-hand stores both for antiques and clothing, and was something of a dandy. To which many things can be added, such as the fact that Kline once had a studio in a building where John Ferren also worked, and Ferren, who had trained in Paris, was himself something of a dandy of the tweed jacket-and-corduroy variety, and also sported a moustache not unlike that of Ronald Coleman, one of Kline's movie heroes. According to Elaine de Kooning, Kline would hilariously imitate Coleman in a French Foreign Legion film as he "climbed resolutely on his horse while giving orders to his regiment."⁶ (I can testify that Kline was not alone in his addiction to movies. Philip Guston and I frequented 42nd Street, where there was a cluster of theaters playing foreign movies. We often went to two double-features - twelve hours of films!) Anecdotes encourage free association such as this.

If I think about the frequent allusions to Kline's addiction to the movies, I move on to one of the most important aspects of his work: his preoccupation with scale. Most stylistic shifts pertain to subject matter, methods of composition (as in classical or baroque), or techniques.

But in the twentieth century, and particularly in the 1940s, changes had a great deal to do with point of view, literally. By the 1920s, Léger had spoken of the change in scale required by the modern vision. His lecture on the subject at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935 was partially re-printed in the artists' journal, *Art Front*. In the lecture, he reiterated his earlier observations on the impact of motion pictures and how they had influenced and freed the painter's imagination:

"I would maintain, for example, that from a dramatic view point, a single hand which slowly appears on the screen and reaches toward a revolver is more dramatic than if one beholds the whole actor. A foot in a shoe, under a table, projected and magnified ten times becomes a surprising fact that you had never noticed before."⁷

I mention this lecture for two reasons. Firstly, these views had entered the culture of artists in New York and had an impact. The large canvas was not the truly innovative aspect of Abstract Expressionism, but rather, the use of the close-up to establish scale, with the implication, in Léger's modernist theory, that in the cases of things magnified ten times, one thing no longer became more interesting than another. Both de Kooning and Pollock accepted the premise, bringing their imagery close to the picture plane and often making certain that no one part of the composition was more weighty than another.

The other reason I mention the Léger lecture is because I shrink from the Saul-into-Paul conversion theory of Kline's mature work. Depending on which of Kline's witnesses you listen to, you are told that Kline was urged by his friend de Kooning to work larger, or to take his little landscape and figure studies and put three of them together. This, of course, would not achieve a change in scale but only in size. Elaine de Kooning's version was that her husband had borrowed a projector and thrown his drawings, many times enlarged, on the wall, urging Kline to do the same.⁸ This technique of distancing by bringing closer, paradoxical as it was, obviously stimulated de Kooning to think about the important issue of size versus scale. That in itself is not so exceptional since, in the history of art, there were all kinds of experiments with gadgets to change the way of thinking

⁶ E. Lieber, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁷ F. Léger, "The New Realism," *Art Front*, Vol. 2, No. 8, New York, December 1935, pp. 10-11.

⁸ E. de Kooning, "Franz Kline," in *Franz Kline Memorial Exhibition*, Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington D.C., 1962, p. 15.

about a picture. (Think of Dürer and the many other painters who experimented with the camera obscura.) Still another conversion theory is suggested by Tom Young's account of Kline foraging in the bins of surplus goods on Canal Street and finding a reducing glass.⁹ This little gadget could have been a stimulus to thinking about venerable painting problems: when the reducing glass makes a drawing seem very distant, it is difficult to determine its actual size. But if the drawing is good, it will suggest a *feeling* of scale, and a feeling of completion that the raw view of the sketch cannot quite achieve.

Since I reject the instant-conversion theory, I must stress the importance of the extraordinary moment now called Abstract Expressionism; in my view, the coalescence of many artistic voices at a certain moment creates a milieu in which everyone mysteriously thrives for a little while. It seemed, during the Second World War, and for a short time afterwards, that it was imperative for American artists to find a distinguishing voice, and much of their bravado stemmed from doubt, or even despair. In creating a mutual support system, these artists effectively spurred each other on. Kline was a beneficiary of this moment. His achievements were modest compared to those with whom he would have concourse between 1940 and 1950, but like most painters, he had a quick and roving eye, and his range of acquaintance, thanks to his gregarious life outside of the studio, was exceptionally wide. Kline consorted with both the sophisticated, European-born artists such as de Kooning and Conrad Marca-Relli, and also with painters, who, like him, had gravitated to the big city after being educated in the rather crude high-schools of America. Since I also came through the public school system and attended a blue-collar high-school where very few students had more than sports and movie stars on their minds, I can well imagine how Pollock, Guston and Kline fared in their tender youth. All three were first inspired by caricature and comic strips to make their mark. Their admiration for Krazy Kat and other comic strips, later discussed in high aesthetic terms, was initially an innocent appreciation for what was quite simply an American lingua franca. (Picasso had also admired American comic strips, and so had de Kooning, but with the modernists' contrariness rather than the naive schoolboy conformism of our local boys.) Kline, as some critics have emphasized, was ever the all-American boy, and even in the last year of his life attended a reunion of his high-school senior class. His athletic feats, his prizes in sports, and his romance with fast automobiles were genuine forces in his life.

But more so were his encounters with other artists, not only those who, like Guston, had a great reverence for Old Masters, but also the by-then unfashionable Reginald Marsh, a genre painter of the city and its underclass, who was entirely consumed by his admiration for Rubens, especially the quick paint sketches at the Metropolitan Museum that reveal Rubens at his most authentic painterly pitch. Kline never relinquished his deep feelings for other painters, including the frequently cited Old Masters, Velazquez, Rembrandt and Goya. But it seems, judging by the testimony of those who knew him in his student years, that still more important to him were the British artists he studied so assiduously in London while at the Heatherley School. It is difficult to decide what weight to give to those formative years, and perhaps too much has been attributed to his intense interest in classical British illustrators. I believe Kline's old friends from his English period when they report that he was strongly interested in the expatriate American, Whistler, whose London scenes, particularly of the river front life, its structures and denizens, prefigured Kline's own interest in this life, as we know from his lower Manhattan sketches of tugboats, barges, and tarred and timbered piers and bridges. Whistler's casual sketches and etchings were known to Kline and I think they were more

⁹ T. Young, *op. cit.*

significant in his formation than the more noted paintings. There are Whistler drawings that show his originality in conception (and also his intelligent assimilation of Japanese art) that probably lingered in Kline's memory. I will add to the speculations of many other art historians by citing Whistler's sketch of *Old Battersea Bridge* (c. 1872). Whistler extends the bridge to span the entire surface, with the structure below seemingly dangling from the strong horizontal above. This is an effect that I have often remarked in Kline's abstractions: an emphatic line from which all descends. Whistler further refined the drawing in a small pastel in which the scaffolding below the bridge is almost as condensed as a Japanese ideogram. Both drawings were studies for a screen, and the first was even composed of two sheets, much as Kline later often joined two vertical panels (and he, too, had once done a folding screen for an early patron.)

These speculations bring me to the vexing question of Japanese art in Kline's formation. He protested the thoughtless intimations of critics that he was in some way dependent on Japanese calligraphy in his abstractions of the early 1950s. For that rejection he made a good case. But there are other aspects of Japanese art that made a significant impression on him in his youth. We are told that he collected Japanese prints in London, and that he owned a rare edition of a late nineteenth-century biography of Hokusai. Of all the Japanese Old Masters, it was certainly Hokusai who had explored the greatest range of subjects and manners, and who, in his studies of human gesture, came closest to Western caricaturists with whom Kline was familiar. Hokusai's sketches of men and women at work, practicing their various *métiers*, were exemplary. He was a draftsman of exceptional power, whose observations of the expressive character of everyday movements - the swing of a hammer or the churn of a ladle - was incomparable. He signed himself, after all, "the old man in love with drawing" (or, in some translations, "in love with painting.")

There are other details in Hokusai's story that might have engaged Kline. Harry F. Gaugh quotes from a letter that he wrote during his training as a draftsman in London. Speaking of his teacher, Kline says: "The technical side of things and so-called flair seem of very little interest to him [...] Hence I am trying to let good drawing predominate the otherwise technical 'smartness' my work seemed to have."¹⁰

Kline's wariness of facility was well-known to his contemporaries, and it echoes Hokusai's. Years ago I copied out the following from an old book on Hokusai, perhaps the very one that Kline owned:

"Hokusai searched for a new painting technique - instead of his brush he painted with his fingers, with a bottle, with an egg, with his left hand, from the bottom upwards, from left to right [...] [For] months on end these experiments robbed him of his sleep, for he was convinced that his virtuosity, his supreme technical accomplishments were an obstacle to true art."¹¹

I believe that Kline's "perennial melancholy romanticism," as David Anfam puts it,¹² was stirred by Hokusai's grand passion to become a good painter. Who would not be moved by Hokusai's declaration, at the age of seventyfive, that all that he had produced before the age of seventy was worthless:

¹⁰ H.F. Gaugh, *The Vital Gesture. Franz Kline*, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati; Abbeville Press, New York, 1985, pp. 30-31.

¹¹ K. Hokusai, *From the age of six I had a mania for drawing...*, Pütterschein-Hingham, Hingham, 1951, n.p.

¹² D. Anfam, "Kline's Colliding Syntax: 'Black, White, and Things'," in *Franz Kline, Black & White. 1950- 1961*, The Menil Collection; Houston, Fine Art Press, Houston, p. 14.

"At seventy-three I learned a little about the real structure of nature [...] When I am eighty I shall have made still more progress; at ninety I shall penetrate the mystery of things, at a hundred I shall certainly have reached a marvellous stage, and when I am one hundred and ten, everything I do, be it a dot or a line, will be alive."¹³

While Kline vigorously protested that his paintings were not in any way comparable with Japanese calligraphy, he nevertheless remained deeply concerned with Japanese aesthetic issues, as his friendship with Sabro Hasegawa attests. After Hasegawa's death in 1957, Kline painted several homages titled *Sabro* - evidence that should not be ignored. Hasegawa was a highly sophisticated Japanese painter, well acquainted with European art before the Second World War. He had visited the United States in 1929; been in Paris in the 1930s, and had published an influential book, *Abstract Art*, in Tokyo, in 1937. When the artist Isamu Noguchi visited Japan in 1950, bringing with him photographs of Kline's new work, it was Hasegawa who was excited by the photographs and would write admiringly in Japan's *Bokubi* magazine of Kline's "daring, strong, straight lines and their sorrows and solitudes."¹⁴ Hasegawa, with his thorough knowledge of Western abstract art, would not have confounded Kline's work with calligraphy. The two painters understood each other. Kline could easily have seconded Hasegawa's statement (poorly translated) for his exhibition in 1953, in which he declared, "Black is 'abstract', 'absolute color',"¹⁵ although Kline would have added, "but so is white."

I count the passionate side of Hokusai, along with that of Rembrandt, as truly significant for Kline. He once exclaimed: "Rembrandt's drawing is enough in itself!"¹⁶ There is no doubt that Kline, with his long apprenticeship as a draftsman, studied Rembrandt's drawings with a highly professional eye. Kline was attentive to the tools of his trade: ink and the various instruments ink requires, including quills, reeds, countless types of steel penpoints, and various ink-bearing papers. He was well aware of the means and meanings of ink drawings. The modulated use of the cross-hatch, or the spareness of contour line were meant to stand for the things of the world; were abstractions, in short. Abstraction, as all true draftsmen know, is inherent in drawing. Rembrandt's skill with the reed pen was legendary, and freed him from the despotism of descriptive line. There are many late Rembrandt drawings in which spaces are declared with abstract lines that hook through the drawing or enliven backgrounds - a use of line as modifier of space that both de Kooning and Kline employed. As for Rembrandt's paintings, it was the chiaroscuro that engaged Kline, the great contrasts between darkish depths and lambent highlights. Rembrandt's dramatic effects are easily detected in Kline's last works, and were prefigured in paintings that he made for his patron, David Orr, such as *Synagogue Interior* (1945), a faithful adaptation of Rembrandt's manner.

If Kline, in his aesthetic wanderings, had favored Old Master artists of both Western and Eastern origins who had honored the black and white terms that all drafts men weigh, there were certainly ample sources in the modernist pantheon. His move was not the *salto mortale* that later commentators discussed, but quite in keeping with the times. It is obvious that Kline had pondered and tested certain modern idioms, including that of Picasso and Braque (see *The Dancer*, 1946) in

¹³ K. Hokusai, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ S. Hasegawa, "The Beauty of Black and White," *Bokubi*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Tokyo, 1951; cited in J. Gordon, *Franz Kline*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1968, p. 12.

¹⁵ S. Hasegawa, "Belief," 1952, in *Sabro Hasegawa*, New Gallery, New York, January 1953.

¹⁶ K. Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists*, Harper & Row, New York, 1962, p. 143.

their Cubist phase. Then, inescapably, there was Picasso's black-to-white experiment in the monumental *Guernica* (1937) - a painting with which every painter in New York was familiar, since it hung in the Museum of Modern Art. Among Picasso's avowed admirers was de Kooning, who sometimes followed the Spanish master unabashedly (as when he experimented with black enamels, as had Picasso before him). The fact is that after World War II there was a pronounced interest in overthrowing the old Impressionist embargo on black both in Europe and the United States. In New York, the impetus largely derived from Matisse, whose Moroccan masterpiece (*The Moroccans*, 1915-16) was on permanent view in the Museum of Modern Art. In Paris, as early as 1946, there was an exhibition with the manifesto-like title, "Black is a Color." On that occasion, the Maeght Gallery had published remarks by Matisse in which he asks rhetorically, "Doesn't my painting of Moroccans use a grand black which is as luminous as the other colors in the painting?"¹⁷ and compares his use of black to that of the double-bass as a solo instrument. A year later, Matisse told an old friend that Pissarro had said, "Manet is stronger than us all, he made light with black."¹⁸ Since what happened in Paris was always noticed in New York, within a matter of months the dealer Sam Kootz planned an exhibition, "Black or White: Paintings by European and American Artists." The foreword was written by Robert Motherwell and dated February 10, 1950. The exhibition included several of Kline's closest associates, among them de Kooning, Bradley Walker Tomlin, and Motherwell, whose painting *Granada* (1949), according to Motherwell, was admired by Kline.

Motherwell's concluding sentence in the catalog could represent Kline's own view by 1950, that "If the amounts of black or white are right, they will have condensed into quality, into feeling."¹⁹ Later, when Motherwell wrote a memorial tribute to Kline in August 1962, he pointed out that they had both developed "an art of opposite weights, and absolute contrast." He considered that, "Kline's great black bars have the tension of a taut bow, or a ready catapult. And his sense of scale, that *sine qua non* of good painting, is marvelously precise."²⁰

"The tensions of a taut bow"... The issue of tension in Kline's mature work has been considered by many commentators, often in terms of the tensile power of those shooting lines spanning the upper regions, or the cat's cradle of linear directions in the more complex works. But the tension that Kline created has to do with drama and not merely associations with spans, bridges, scaffolding, or any other object-like evidence of the principle of tension. It must be imagined as the eternal division between dark and light, that ancient doublet incised forever in Western thought by Heraclitus. I think the poet, Octavio Paz, in *The Bow and the Lyre* (1956), can speak for Kline's feeling for tension as a principle: "An image by Heraclitus was the starting point of this book [...] the image appears before me: the lyre, which consecrates man and thus gives him a place in the cosmos; the bow, which shoots him beyond himself."²¹

Kline longed to shoot himself beyond himself. Every nerve was enlisted while he was at work. His emphasis on "feeling" as the proper criterion for a painter was not casual. Those great diagonals he

¹⁷ H. Matisse, "Interview with André Marchand: The Eye," 1947, in J. Flam, ed., *Matisse on Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, p. 175.

¹⁸ H. Matisse, "Black is Color," 1946, translation by J. Flam, in "Témoignages de peintres. Le noir est une couleur," *Derrière le Miroir*, Galerie Maeght, Paris, December 1946.

¹⁹ R. Motherwell, "Black and White," in *Talent* 1950, Kootz Gallery, New York, February 1950.

²⁰ R. Motherwell, "Homage to Franz Kline," August 17, 1962, in *Franz Kline. The Color Abstractions*, The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C., 1979, p. 43.

²¹ O. Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1973, p. 202.

avored reflected his inner rhythms, his own way of vaulting into the grand spaces he envisioned. How endemic to his whole being those diagonal trajectories were can be gauged by the way he danced. I remember very well dancing with him, and in an article I wrote shortly before his death, I described his "impulse to shoot out into space, to slam through a wilderness of black and white and reach a climax of total freedom:"²²

Anyone who has seen Kline dance will recognize immediately how profoundly instinctual his "thrust" is. He dances as he paints, beating out an idiosyncratic rhythm over sustained periods, and then suddenly, and with *élan*, breaks the rhythm dramatically by shooting out one foot in a precipitous *accent grave* movement. (One of his paintings is in fact called *Accent Grave*.)

Only a few of Kline's critics probed the physiological or psycho-motor origins of his imagery. Jules Langsner, a Los Angeles critic and great friend of Guston, wrote in 1963: "The viewer responds directly to a physical entity possessing certain kinds of image properties [...] the message conveyed is isomorphic. That is to say, structured image and the state of being it evokes and represents correspond."²³

Claude Cernuschi observed that, in his view, "Kline's abstractions signify and communicate in terms of the physical sensations they produce," and discussed the idea of painting-as-experience in largely psychological terms.²⁴

Since Kline laid great stress on the experiential character of his work in its special sense of engaging both the painter and the matter, the paint itself, in a kind of duet, it would be well to acknowledge his few statements of aesthetic intent. Much of his work in the studio had to do with measuring, equating or disrupting the weight of his forms as they slowly became what he called "an organization."

The Spanish critic and curator Manuel J. Borja-Villel thought Kline's work had a "strict inner logic."²⁵ Kline himself, referring to Mondrian, made a curious remark: "He's done it with paint illogically to himself."²⁶ Perhaps Kline's "strict inner logic" had to do with a deep and abiding inner rhythm that drummed out inexorably certain primal patterns.

Although he never spoke of his own inner rhythms, Kline made it known that he was deeply susceptible to music. He was, in fact, more than a passive listener. He was a connoisseur. He loved authentic jazz, as did Igor Stravinsky, and listened to the great jazz cornet player, Bunk Johnson, whose riffs many of us admired during the 1950s. More significant perhaps was his response to grand opera. His allusions to the human voice, and the variations amongst opera singers such as Jussi Bjoerling and Enrico Caruso, were those of a knowledgeable connoisseur, as were his remarks about Richard Wagner. While it is not unusual for some painters to think of their work in terms of music (Joan Mitchell, for instance - an artist whom Kline admired - talked about Monteverdi), Kline's Wagnerism was an authentic source in his emotional life and had to do, I think, with his

²² D. Ashton, "Franz Kline," *Cimaise*, No. 8, Paris, May-June 1961, p. 76.

²³ J. Langsner, "Franz Kline, Calligraphy and Information Theory," *Art International*, No. 7, Zurich, March 1963, pp. 25-29, republished in *Franz Kline*, Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1963.

²⁴ C. Cernuschi, "Franz Kline's *Probst I*, A Cognitive Approach to Gestural Abstraction," *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Vol. 6, Boston, 1994, p. 93.

²⁵ M.J. Borja-Villel, Introduction, *Franz Kline, Art and the Structure of Identity*, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; Electa, Spain, 1994, p. 11.

²⁶ F. O'Hara, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

ambition to paint *towards* a climax, much as Wagner had used stealthy approaches to the full throated climax in *Tristan and Isolde* (1865). Contemporary composers such as Morton Feldman and Edvard Lieber felt affinities with Kline's visual musicality. Each of them dedicated compositions to him. Poets also found affinities with Kline. The musicality of poetry in Kline's work was expressed by some of his earliest commentators. The painter and art critic Hubert Crehan was among the first. In his review of an exhibition in 1954 he wrote:

"No lover of oil painting can miss Kline's engrossment with medium, his knowledge of its limitations. But he does not affect a high bravura style. Instead there are areas in the pictures painted with an attitude of disdain that marks them with an indifference to the ideal of the obsessive craftsman. This is both temperamental and a cultural sign. As the most consummate poet will some times deliberately destroy the perfect beat of a line, only to accent the perfection of the others, so the painter will often mutilate a passage for an effect."²⁷

What Crehan "heard" in Kline's imagery was the frequent syncopation; the dissonant passages, and the improvisational asymmetry deliberately invoked in both jazz and modern vanguard music - something Kline occasionally called his "dis-organization." The poet Frank O'Hara grasped Kline's fusions and spoke of his gift of placement, and his consciousness of the vitality and freshness "of a slightly 'off' position."²⁸

Although Kline was ambivalent about what is generally called "style," in commonsense terms he decidedly had one. I have always thought that he had style in the way the term was used by a jazz trumpeter I once heard who, after a long improvisational digression, waved his instrument and shouted exultingly, "Man, I got style I ain't even *used* yet!" What strikes me now, a half-century after I first knew Kline and his work, is that his apparent immediacy - the style we have come to recognize - obscured the range, complexity and diversity of his oeuvre. If I try to compose a morphology of the variety of his approaches it becomes apparent that his probes of space and light were more complex than we originally believed:

There were the early 1950s variations on geometrical forms, such as the rectangle that registered as sharp, dissonant, startling in *Wotan* (1950), as in *Untitled* (1950), *Untitled* (1951) and in *Herald* (1953).

There were the clean, built, carefully weighed-out forms in disequilibrium such as *Accent Grave* (1955).

There were the architectonic, suggestive structures, such as *Tower* (1953), *The Bridge* (c. 1955) and *Shaft* (1955).

There were the surfaces filled with colliding and almost randomly unpacked forms such as *Mahoning* (1956) and *Turin* (1960).

There were paintings in which bulk and mass predominated such as *Thorpe* (1954) or *Untitled* (1957). (Kline told David Sylvester, "there's a particular static or heavy form that can have a look to it, an experience translated through the form; so then it does have a mood.")²⁹ There were paintings that Clement Greenberg disparagingly called "malerisch," where Kline worked with rumbling, billowing masses of grays and blacks; retrieved the half-tone; and played upon the dramatic, and sometimes melodramatic, climaxes as in *Siegfried* (1958) or *Requiem* (1958).

There were also combinations of all the above, such as *Palladio* (1961) and *New Year Wall* (1960).

²⁷ H. Crehan, "Inclining to Exultation," *Art Digest*, Vol. 18, New York, May 1, 1954, pp. 15-33.

²⁸ F. O'Hara, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

²⁹ D. Sylvester, "Franz Kline 1910-1962: An Interview with David Sylvester," *Living Arts*, London, No. 1, Spring 1963.

When Kline called paintings "walls," it is well to remember that other Abstract Expressionists, notably Pollock and Motherwell, had pondered the mural as an alternative to easel painting. They thought of "wall" abstractly, like Hadrian's mysterious wall. Forms then were flattened and read laterally, with spaces unfurled thinly rather than in depth. Among Kline's late works were *Orange and Black Wall* (1959) and *Shenandoah Wall* (1961).

In so many of Kline's mature works there was a cunning introduction of ambiguity that instantly gave way to an ensemble of form and space in a single stunning first impression. I think of *Meryon* (1960-61), Kline's tribute to that nineteenth-century etcher much admired by Baudelaire, in which Meryon's noun, "tower," is transformed into an active adjective: "towering."

Often the startling singleness of first impressions has obscured Kline's rich painterly means. He knew how to modulate. His impastos were richly worked. His surfaces were often worked over with one-inch brushes - the tools of the old-fashioned easel painter. If a ragged edge were required, he was skillful at dragging his brush, or modulating the density of his strokes. If there were a visible crudeness in the final flourish, it was intentional, and served Kline's purpose of disrupting unchallenged visual habits.

Kline's range can be assessed in a review of the strikingly diverse critical responses that his work elicited. One of the earlier critics whose work, alas, is rarely cited, was the astute Swiss-born Georgine Oeri. She was eager to stress Kline's unique way of evoking space: "Kline discovers and at the same time conquers space [...] As a dancer's pose and movement transform and activate the whole of the stage, Kline's space becomes a physical event and is filled with events."³⁰

While Oeri focused on the nature of Kline's spaces, Robert Goldwater emphasized his unique sense of scale:

"The true scale of these canvases is not in the measurements, large as these are. It is instead generated from within, by an immense internal unit, a swath of a rectangle, a closed shape of a crossed one, that pushes and extends the perimeter until it has sufficient room to take its proper form."³¹

David Anfam remarked on the tendency to collision amongst Kline's forms, while pointing to his artful transgression of syntax. Still others spoke about the power of his "directional" strokes; his "centripetal" composing, and the splendor of his invented light. I myself noted Kline's attention to detail that was visible despite the appearance of swiftness and insouciance in his technique. It is worth mentioning that Kline was enraptured with small, old, beautiful objects such as watches, and elegant, oddly designed antique spoons.

There remains the question of Kline's "Americanness," of ten discussed in the context of Abstract Expressionism. He, and most of his associates, thought that since the work was done in America it was American, and left it at that. They all knew quite well that there can be no pure provenance for works of art, and found the loud proclamation of the "triumph" of American art distasteful. Yet, as a cultural historian, I can discern tendencies in the thought of American creators; a climate of thought that affected poets, novelists, musicians and painters as they worked. O'Hara found "vulgarity and drama" in Kline's earlier work that would later emerge transformed in the work of the 1950s. O'Hara himself had been primed by the modernist's respect for the chastening effects of vulgarity, both in the French tradition of Apollinaire and the American tradition established by such poets as

³⁰ G. Oeri, "Notes on Franz Kline," *Quadrum*, No. 12, Brussels, 1961, p. 94.

³¹ R. Goldwater, in "Introduction," *Franz Kline 1910-1962*, Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York, March 1967, pp. 5-6.

William Carlos Williams and even Wallace Stevens. These poets incorporated the grit of everyday life to avoid meaningless abstraction, or the hollow elegance of the poetaster. They used the vernacular as a purgative. Deep in the American grain lurked the suspicion of high-flown theories and practices often associated with the old country, Europe. Kline shared this suspicion and was quick to point out to Katherine Kuh that there was "imagery" but no "symbolism" in his work: "I'm not a symbolist. In other words these are painting experiences. I don't decide in advance that I am going to paint a definite experience, but in the act of painting, it becomes a genuine experience for me."³²

Kline's emphasis on the non-symbolic character of his work, and his insistence on what he called "painting experiences" reflect a forceful strand of thought in America broadly termed "empiricism," and more specifically, as determined by William James, "pragmatism." It was very much alive in Kline's moment. Artists admired John Dewey's viewpoint, pithily summarized in the title of his popular book, *Art as Experience*. The refusal of arcane implications in art was visible in the defiance of the composer John Cage, who was much admired by the painters in Kline's circle. In Cage's celebrated *Lecture on Nothing* (first published in 1959), he stubbornly insisted on his American pragmatism: "Nothing in life requires a symbol, since it is clearly what it is."³³

Of course, Cage himself was one of America's most romantic artists who, like Oscar Wilde, worked mightily to put his art into his life. Kline, on the contrary, put his rich emotional life into his art. O'Hara said he loved paradoxes and theatrics, hinting at Kline's sophistication. Anyone who loves paradox is already rather complicated; as for theatrics... well, I prefer the word "drama." Kline's passion for music-drama points to more complicated responses than merely pragmatic concerns.

At the time Kline was emerging - after his fortieth year, as he said - there were words flying around, somewhat as in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's early 20th-century collages, *Parole in Libertà*, but these words were derived from the prevalent thinking known as "Existentialism." Words such as "risk" and "authenticity" circulated in the art world. While not given to theoretical formulations, Kline did avail himself of one of the favored existentialist terms: "situations." He often pointed out that his opening strokes, those initiating gestures, were what he called "the beginning of the situation." Such "situations," and the use of current philosophical jargon, often garnered scorn from the critics.

Without belaboring the point, I want to suggest that these abbreviated references really had meaning for the painters, who, by emphasizing the act itself of painting, sought to invoke the most authentic experience they could know. For Kline, the process of painting would satisfy a craving for absolute light and, along with it, a melancholy acknowledgment of shadow. Cernuschi recognized this when he discussed Kline's interest in the value of contrast. My own first thought about Kline concerns light, but I always sense that he was in quest of the impossible: the painterly characterization of space.

Since Cézanne, painters have longed to realize - to make real - that elusive noun, "space." Its nature can only be determined relatively, since we all exist in it and carry it about like our skin (as Stendhal asked, "what eye can see itself?"). Each attempt to characterize it carries the risk of solipsism. Usually objective references to space are impoverished. There is a building with trees around it. The building abuts space, but the trees *encompass* it. Light is in the interstices, jostled by the wind. Such descriptiveness, and more poetic flights of fancy, such as a bird's cry as it wheels against the sky, punctuating space, was not adequate to Kline's deeper intuitions. His emotional needs, purged of borrowed language, had to be met by undertaking risks. He was no *naïf*. He knew

³² K. Kuh, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

³³ J. Cage, *Silence*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1966.

that artists whom he admired, past and present, experienced painting as a quest.

Hints in his biography tell us that his interest in the Old Masters was kindled by his knowledge of their urgent searching. I remember my own astonishment when I discovered that Kline knew about Rembrandt's visit to Hercules Seghers, that remarkable eccentric whose intimations of the nature of space were highly abstract, particularly in his drawings and etchings. No wonder that Kline thought of his own work as an oeuvre in transit. "I paint an organization that becomes a painting."³⁴

To end my rumination on Kline's remarkable *dénouement* (an un-knotting, as the French say) of his painter's life, I return to the wise and exceptionally candid Matisse on the subject of Manet: "It only goes to show that while one can change one's means instantaneously, feeling has a continuity that may sometimes evolve, but only gradually."³⁵

³⁴ K. Kuh, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

³⁵ H. Matisse, "Edouard Manet vu par Matisse," *L'Intransigeant*, Paris, January 25, 1932, p. 5; cited in J. Flam, *op. cit.*, p. 295.