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Considering Franz Kline's Paintings:
(Dis)organizing and (De)centering Emotion

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I.

Franz Kline (1910-62) was one of the most interesting New York artists of the mid-twentieth century, significantly contributing to what became known internationally in the postwar period as Abstract Expressionism. Like many modernist artists and writers from Mallarmé and Melville to Beckett, he pronounced his great "No" - no to positivism, no to rationalism, no to bourgeois life and its conformities. As Kline himself summarized: "Instead of making a sign you can read, you make a sign you *can't* read."[1] His art both suggests and denies significance and meaning. Around 1950, when a new post war consumer society was beginning to evolve,[2] he radically simplified painting, reached for deeper forms of communication than those developing in popular culture, and created pictorial statements in black and white that were experiments in the relations between phenomenological perceptions of our bodies in space and our emotional responses to those perceptions. Artists as different as Brice Marden, Cy Twombly and Jannis Kounellis have all appreciated Kline, whose architectural paintings also prefigured some post-Minimalist practices. Echoes of his work can be found in art as apparently distant as that of Bruce Nauman or Richard Serra.

When you visit the galleries devoted to modern American art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York these days, you first view a large work by Surrealist expatriate artist Sebastian Matta, *Être Avec (To Be With,* 1946), made up of a complex web of semi-organic and semi-mechanical shapes. Its placement suggests that it is a precursor to Abstract Expressionism. The earliest abstract works in this area of the museum are a painting by Richard Pousette Dart *(East River,* 1939) reminiscent of Matta, André Masson, Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró; a group of 1943-47 paintings by Clifford Still, almost monochromatic except where other colors characteristically appear at its edges; some paintings by William Baziotes, with their archaic and organic set of secret symbols; Jackson Pollock's *Pasiphae* (1943), reminiscent of Picasso's work and suggestive of primitive arcane

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[1] Franz Kline, quoted in W. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma./London, 1983, pp. 75-76. Kline apparently made the remark at the Artists Club on January 23, 1952.

[2] The McCarthy era began as intellectuals and celebrities were named by the FBI as Communist Party members, thus instigating the "Red Scare." On August 29, 1949, the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb, four years after the United States. In 1950, President Truman of the United States announced a program to develop the Hydrogen bomb. Nuclear testing began in Nevada in 1951. In 1953, the Soviet Union detonated a hydrogen device, ten months after the United States (1952). 1950 also marked the beginning of the Korean war, which would end in 1953. Arshile Gorky committed suicide in 1948. In 1949, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell was published. William Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The 1950s were years both of conformity and rebellion, during which the model of the man as breadwinner and the woman as homemaker was idealized. Television began broadcasting in 1949, and by 1950 there were one million sets in America.

alphabets and symbols; paintings by Willem de Kooning, including the yellow, pink, blue and green *Woman* (1944), which again recalls Picasso; and a work by Arshile Gorky *(Water of the Flowery Mill,* 1944). These are followed by the swirling white brush strokes of de Kooning's *Black Untitled* (1948) and by his complex black and white *Attic* (1949); by Robert Motherwell's *The Homely Protestant* (1948); by Adolph Gottlieb's *T* (1950), suggestive of a wall covered by an intarsio of symbols; and by other works such as Conrad Marca-Relli's *The Battle* (1956).
From the evidence of these paintings, what many of the artists seemed to be exploring throughout the 1940s was an "all-over" surface made up of myriad gestures and layers of paint, alternately applied and scraped off, punctuated by strokes that are not clearly definable as either contour lines or thick paint marks. These large web-like works recall wild, curvy grids or barriers that seem to hover over the paintings' surfaces. Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (1950), although reminiscent of the scale of the Matta painting in the first gallery, is larger and freer than much of the rest, more open and flowing, with traces of thinner paint swirling over the canvas, as well as paint drops that suggest constellations - in black, white, brown and blue. Even decades after Abstract Expessionism 's heydey, the work still communicates the process of its making.

Next you come across *Concord* (1949) by Barnett Newman, made of two bands of masking tape partially covered by a thin wash of green, which run down the center of the tall, almost monochrome, watery green painting. The work is restful, silent, abstract, secretive. Gesture is only visible close up, from where you can perceive the strokes that created the wash of green. At its right hang two works by Mark Rothko, *No. 13 (White, Red on Yellow)* (1958), whose bottom red rectangle and top grayish rectangle hover in the middle of fields of varying yellows, and the smaller *Untitled* (1949), which is pink with watery bluish shapes within. Further right a dark black rectangle painted on a dark blue bed by Ad Reinhardt *(Untitled,* 1964) stands even more silent and still.

As you turn the corner from the Pollock, in the next gallery, opposite the Reinhardt, hangs Franz Kline's *Black, White and Gray* (1959). The work has an immediate impact and draws you into its world in a way that is very different from the other paintings in these galleries. The canvas was painted first horizontally, causing drips of black paint to form to the right. Then it was turned vertically and the heavy central structure now seems to fall menacingly off the canvas towards the viewer. The tonal scheme ranges from white to black, with many degrees of grays in between, and with large areas that look like oversized brush strokes made by a giant - some of these marks are over a yard wide. This huge scale operates perceptually by shifting your sense of location in relation to the painting: it is as if, suddenly, you are drawn close up, so that your eyes are as near to the canvas as they would be if you were looking at a detail of the nearby de Kooning black and white composition. When you get close to a detail of a painting, you "see" its materiality in a tactile way, finding your hands just a few inches from the work of art. This is a dangerous and intimate position; you fear a guard might ask you to move away, or an alarm might ring. But it is just this area of intimacy that Kline's best artworks explore. They create this effect as soon as you get into their viewing range, whether you are fifty or only five feet away from them. It is the same menacing proximity that you feel if you stand under the pillars and cables of a suspension bridge, with the pounding of passing cars above you; or if you stand in awe on the sidewalk at the foot of a tall skyscraper, almost unbalanced; or if you are so close to another person's body and psyche in a sexual encounter that you feel you might be annihilated by the experience of absolute proximity.

What Kline depicted - or rather, the "situation " he created for viewers of his paintings[3] - was what happens inside ourselves at that place where the physical and the psychological meet, where perception produces a hormonal shift that in turn produces a shift in emotions. His art is, in other words, a phenomenology of impact. As he himself put it while explaining why he no longer painted figuratively: "When I look out the window - l've always lived in the city - I don't see trees in bloom or mountain laurel. What I do see - or rather, not what I see but the feelings aroused in me by that looking - is what I paint."[4] If Kline created pictorial statements that were *situations* for viewers in which the phenomenology of perception/experience/emotion was possible, various artists of the 1960s in Europe, Asia and America would follow by directly addressing these situations spatially, without the metaphor of painting. Kline's architectural structuring of black and whites, at once organizing and dis-organizing, balancing and un-balancing, prefigure spaces where the body/mind encounters itself perceiving, and becomes present to itself through the experience.

II.

What came to be known as Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting or the New York School of painting - one of the last of the modernist movements - broadly defines the work of a number of US artists of the 1940s and 1950s (most of them born between 1910 and 1920), who focused in their art on the actuality of experience, giving image to that which occurs in the subjective psyche, considering experience itself as an aesthetic act. Most of them - Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt, Gorky, Still, Gottlieb, Baziotes, Hans Hoffmann, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Joan Mitchell, Mark Tobey, Philip Guston, Morris Louis and Kline himself were painters, and most of them began to make art in the late 1930s, creating their first mature paintings between the mid-1940s and the early 1950s. However, just as Andy Warhol came to Pop Art relatively late[5] and yet proved to be of the utmost significance in defining Pop for us today, so Kline began to address the phenomenology of emotional experience through abstraction around 1949-50, several years after many of the other Abstract Expressionists,[6] but did so in a way that offered enormous possibilities to subsequent generations of artists.

According to canonical studies of the movement, these artists reacted against Regionalism and American Scene painting. They embraced modernism, which they learned about through exhibitions[7] and through discussions with the many expatriate artists who came from Europe to live in New York during the prewar and war years. The movement emerged at a time in which psychoanalysis and the study of the unconscious became a primary cultural paradigm. But rather

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[3] The art critic and historian Dore Ashton remembers that: "The word 'situation' itself entered his discourse frequently. He spoke of his opening strokes as 'the beginning of the situation,' and he told David Sylvester that, in composing, he tried to rid his mind of anything else and 'attack it immediately, from that complete situation'." (D. Ashton, *The Life and Times of the New York School: American Painting in the Twentieth Century,* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972. Republished as *The New York School. A Cultural Reckoning,* by The Viking Press, New York, 1973, p. 181.)

[4] Franz Kline interviewed by Selden Rodman in S. Rodman, *Conversations with Artists,* Devin- Adair, New York, 1957, p. 110.

[5] In the early 1960s, while other artists of his generation had begun to make works based on popular culture at the end of the 1950s.

[6] Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell and many others were exhibiting in the early 1940s.

[7] "Cubism and Abstract Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936; "Picasso," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939 *(Guernica* was first shown prior to this at Valentine Gallery in May of that year); "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939; "The Russian avant-garde," Museum of Non-Objective Art (renamed the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1952), New York, 1939; "Mirò," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1941; "Matisse," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951.

than exploring the universe of dreams as the Surrealists had done in the 1920s and 1930s (that is, the universe of the unconscious as it manifests itself to consciousness), these young postwar artists attempted to bypass consciousness altogether, directly addressing the needs and drives of the unconscious through the development of automatism. Even though some of them were immigrants to the United States, like Gorky, Hoffmann, de Kooning and Rothko, the Abstract Expressionists have passed into history as the first American artists to gain international recognition, thus shifting the capital of the art world from Paris to New York from the 1940s onward.[8] Yet the lofty concepts and philosophical overtones, the intense drama and dead seriousness of these painters, and of their European counterparts (whose works have been associated variously with movements such as Art autre, Informale, CoBRA, etc.) would be rejected in the 1950s by iconoclastic and pastiche-oriented artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, as well as by the Pop artists who followed them in the 1960s; by the ironic postmodernists of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as by the politically radical artists of the 1980s and 1990s, who denounced the patriarchal and male sexual rhetoric typical of the Action painters.[9] Furthermore, the 1980s constituted a decade in which virulent criticism of Abstract Expressionism was unleashed by art historians and critics who marked their disagreement with formalism by looking at the politics of postwar American art from contextual and sociological perspectives. According to these, the movement as a whole became synonymous with the triumph of America in the Cold War - an aesthetic arm of US expansionism and liberal ideology in the 1950s. Abstract Expressionism has been criticized by postmodernists of all walks as a manifestation of the ultimate patriarchal eurocentricity, as well as a form of late modernism that represented a regression from the socially engaged and revolutionary modernism of early twentieth-century avant-gardes. In the early 1980s, for example, Serge Guibaut examines the political and cultural implications of the period, asserting that the international success of an American avant-garde was due not solely to aesthetic and stylistic considerations, but also, and more importantly, to the movement's ideological resonance. Disillusioned by the left after the Moscow Trials of 1936-38, in which the Soviet Union tried some of its most prominent intellectuals including Zinoviev and Trotsky, and especially after the Russo-German pact of 1939, which was followed by the Russian attack on Finland, artists and critics such as Meyer Shapiro and Clement Greenberg in America adopted a non-revolutionary approach, finally reducing all art discourse to a discussion of quality and modernist formal approaches. The American avant-garde was inspired by Trotsky's anarchist approach to artistic practice as something intrinsically radical and opposed to any established authority, and by André Breton's internationalist stance. According to this perspective, however, during the anti-communist McCarthy era in America art was unable to be either right wing or left

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[8] The poet Frank O'Hara wrote in 1958: "The painters of this movement, so totally different from each other in aspect, so totally without the look of a school, have given us as Americans an art which for the first time in our history we can love and emulate, aspire to and understand, without provincial digression or prejudice. The Europeanization of our sensibilities has at last been exorcized as if by magic, an event of some violence which Henry James would have hailed as eagerly as Walt Whitman and which allows us as a nation to exist internationally." (F. O'Hara, "Franz Kline Talking," *Evergreen Review,* Vol. 2, No. 6, New York, Fall 1958, p. 58.)

[9] See A.E. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism. Other Politics,* Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 1997, in which the author notes that most prominent Abstract Expressionists were white heterosexual males, and that they adopted a rhetoric as bohemian disenfranchised outsiders, of freedom, individualism, formalism, connoisseurship and Existentialism, in apparent resistance to the official art world, in order to establish a small privileged community of abstractionists in favour of the autonomy of art: "Artists who were thus privileged, discredited or appropriated aesthetic strategies that paralleled experiences (such as masking, maternalism, and social invisibility) more familiar to blacks, to women, to gays, and to lesbians. As an ‘other’ to more academically naturalistic styles (regionalism, social realism) or abstract but 'foreign' modes of art (French Cubism, German Expressionism, French and Spanish Surrealism, Dutch Neoplasticism), however, Abstract Expressionism claimed for itself the mantle of marginality, mustering social strategies and aesthetic procedures that might otherwise have been used by blacks, women, and other disenfranchised groups to affirm their difference." (p. XIX).

wing, because it was abstract. Additionally the rhetoric of Action Painting was easily exported (the Museum of Modern Art's numerous international touring exhibitions during the 1950s of American art are the proof) as a newer version of European modernism once Paris had fallen under German occupation in 1940. In Guibaut's words: "Avant-garde artists, now politically 'neutral' individualists, articulated in their work values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized and co-opted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology."[10]

Paradoxically, because Kline does not fit fully into the stereotypical definition of Abstract Expressionism, he was not singled out by the postmodernist critics who reassessed the movement in more recent years. Guibaut does not mention him, and nor does Michael Leja in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism. Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (1993).[11] Leja agrees with Guibaut that Abstract Expressionism became the cultural "arm" of the United States during the Cold War, but states that it is not enough to describe the art in these terms: it is also necessary to understand *why* Abstract Expressionism was chosen for this purpose. Leja argues that after the First World War and by the Second World War, the modern self as an enlightened, rational subjectivity was in crisis because of the tragic historical events of the time. Therefore, it became necessary to "remap" the modern self in relation to contemporary beliefs about primitive residues in human nature and the unconscious contents of the mind that would explain modern man's apparently inexplicable behavior. Because the subject of these artists was the "subject" himself, with subconscious, brutal underpinnings, this art of absolute freedom could function as an appropriate cultural model for the new American self. At first glance, Kline would not illustrate this position very well, given his meditative approach to structure and de-structuring, while Pollock's gestural drippings, as well as the early Surrealist-oriented paintings of Newman, Rothko, Gottlieb and Still, make a better case. Not by chance, therefore, Leja ignores Kline's work. This reading claims to explain American Abstract Expressionism, but it focuses too narrowly on American art alone, while in broad terms all of Western art was undergoing similar developments at the time - Lucio Fontana, Jean Dubuffet, Karel Appel, Carla Accardi, Alberto Burri, Wols, Georges Mathieu, Pierre Soulages, etc., were all remapping the self in light of the crisis of modern man. In Europe, too, a rejection of figuration, Social Realism and *Novecento* art - something of an Italian version of American Regionalism - took place immediately at the end of the Second World War, and loose abstraction, often calligraphic, was identified with a notion of freedom and regained internationalism. During this period, all of Western culture was undergoing an examination and remapping of the self, as demonstrated on both sides of the Atlantic by the recovery of Kierkegaard, the writings of Husserl and Heidegger, the development of phenomenology and Existentialism[12] with Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre,[13] as well as of psychoanalysis. This explains why American artists - exported by the Museum of Modern

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[10] S. Guibaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism Freedom, and the Cold War,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 1983, p. 200.

[11] M. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism. Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s,* Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 1993.

[12] Alfred H. Barr, Jr, refers to Existentialism in the introduction to the catalog for the touring exhibition, *The New American Painting,* 1958-1959, curated by Dorothy Miller, assisted by Frank O'Hara. Barr wrote: "Confronting a blank canvas they attempt to 'grasp authentic being by action, decision, a leap of faith', to use Karl Jaspers' existentialist phrase. Indeed one often hears existentialist echoes in their words", in A. Barr, "Introduction," *The New American Painting,* Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1959, p. 10; quoted by Jeremy Lewison, "Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe," *Jackson Pollock. New Approaches,* Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999, note 64, p. 230.

[13] Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* was published in 1946.

Art International Council exhibitions - were so readily embraced by European artists' communities, rather than "imposed" upon them.

III.

Although associated with the New York School of painting, Kline was not originally a New Yorker. Born in the coal-mining areas of Western Pennsylvania in the United States, he was good at sports and drawing in High School, particularly interested in caricature. His father committed suicide when he was a boy and he spent part of his childhood in boarding school. He traveled to England to study art in the late 1930s, where he frequently visited museums including the National Gallery in London. This provided him with a solid and direct knowledge of European masters including Rembrandt and Manet. He returned to the United States and settled with his first wife Elizabeth Vincent Parsons in New York in 1938, doing odd jobs and making bar sketches in exchange for beers. Some of his earliest drawings indicate a careful observation of Italian Renaissance draughtsmanship (p. 149), and some paintings explore the light of interiors in the mode of Vermeer. As can be seen from his early works (p. 151), Kline's phenomenological approach did not develop out of the formalist abstraction of early twentieth-century avant-garde art. Quite to the contrary, it came from realism - an impulse to celebrate life in all its manifestations and to understand, through representation, the human condition, at one of the darkest moments of Western history.[14] Kline grew up during the years leading up to the Great Depression - the first major crisis of Western capitalism - and lived through the period that saw the rise of fascist and nazi authoritarian regimes in Europe, the failure of the Republic and the Civil War in Spain, the Second World War and the holocaust, the shift from utopian communism to Stalinist dictatorship in the Soviet Union, and the dropping of the atomic bomb by the United States on Japan.

He began to show his paintings - still in a realist vein - in Washington Square outdoor exhibitions in 1939 and 1940, and met artists such as Bradley Walker Tomlin, Earl Kerkam and Conrad Marca-Relli. In particular, he met de Kooning at Marca-Relli's studio around 1943, and the two became life-long best friends. Kline's first abstract paintings, made in 1947-48, such as *'47 Series No. 4* (1947, p. 171), were visibly influenced by de Kooning, whose wife, the artist Elaine de Kooning, wrote the first major essay on Kline shortly after his death in 1962, republished in his Washington Gallery of Art Memorial exhibition catalog of that same year.[15]

By the late 1940s, Kline's first wife, who had been one of his main subjects in innumerable sketches and watercolors made throughout the 1940s, was in and out of mental institutions. Kline would never divorce her, and continued to visit her and take care of her throughout his life. It has been noted that his apparently calligraphic abstract paintings may have emerged from a stylization and simplification of these many sketches of Elizabeth made during the 1940s. The drawings of a solitary figure in a rocking chair, or sitting alone at a table, her head tilted downwards, are amongst Kline's most poignant early works and eventually evolved into his first fully abstract works, such as *Giselle* (1950), *Cardinal* (1950) or *Chief* (1950). The figure in a rocking chair suggests the interest both in structure and movement, organization and dynamic dis-organization of structure that would become characteristic of his abstract paintings. Furthermore, it is an existentialist metaphor for the

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[14] See Franz Kline, interviewed by S. Rodman, *op. cit.,* p.106: "People have the crazy idea that an abstract painter doesn't like realism. I like Hyman Bloom's work and, going back further, Ryder's, and even Eakens'. But the thing is that painters like Daumier and Ryder don't even really paint things the way they look. Nobody can ever look at a boat by Ryder - like a hunk of black tar - and say to me that a boat ever looked like that! Or one of Daumier's faces, composed of slabs of paint, deliberately crude! The final test of painting, theirs, mine, any other, is: does the painter's emotion come across?"

[15] E. de Kooning, "Franz Kline: Painter of His Own Life," *Art News,* Vol. 61, n. 7, New York, pp. 28-31, 64-69; republished in *Franz Kline Memorial Exhibition,* Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, 1962, pp. 8-18.

condition of modern life: the futility of its dynamism, the constant movement yet stillness and absence of progress from one point to another.

These small paintings indicate an awareness of, and interest in, the representation of pain, especially psychological pain. A study of Kline's archive, donated by his second partner Elisabeth Zogbaum[16] to the Archives of American Art after his premature death from heart disease in 1962, confirm this. Here we find a series of unique black and white, chiaroscuro photographic portraits of a woman sitting in a chair or upright in bed, presumably shot by Kline. They explore the representation of light and darkness as mutually defining and equally important parts of a unique structure, and are juxtaposed with a postcard of a Madonna by Leonardo. Other, lesser known, sources for Kline's paintings are also revealed through these papers, including older European art in an etching by Rembrandt of Christ crucified *(The Three Crosses,* 1653) and the *Agony in the Garden* by Mantegna, a 1460 painting located in the National Gallery in London, of which Kline also kept a postcard. It is thus the private sphere of the mind and the dark part of the soul that filtered into Kline's art - pain that is specific, private, rather than the collective dramas that may have lain at the heart of Pollock's interest in Picasso's *Guernica,* on exhibit in New York in 1939, the year of a major Picasso exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

Kline's public life, however, was different. Like the other painters of his generation in the late 1940s and 50s, Kline met people and exchanged ideas in Greenwich Village bars, including the famous Cedar Street Tavern,[17] Ricker's café, The Five Spot, Dillon's, The Blarney Rose, as well as in evening meetings and panel discussions at the artist-run Artists Club, of which Kline and de Kooning were co-founders in Fall 1949. Charles Egan offered Kline his debut solo show in Fall 1950, where he exhibited his first classical black and white canvases. His new pictorial statements were at once an articulation of Abstract Expressionism and a move away from the heroics and "web" of brush strokes one usually associates with Action Painting.

Pollock's first solo show of abstract shapes suggestive of a swirling web of hidden symbols, was held in 1943. His famous "drip" paintings came to maturity in 1947, after years of wrestling with, and eventually transcending, his European sources, in particular Picasso, but also Masson, Mirò, Klee, Ernst, as well as American artist Albert Pynkham Ryder's Gothic dissolutions of paint into spirituality. By 1949, Pollock was featured in *Life* magazine and he was acclaimed as the greatest living American artist. Kline did not orbit around Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery as Pollock did. The gallery, which had opened in 1942, showed European modernism, and Pollock had met Guggenheim thanks to Motherwell, who was himself in contact with Matta. The latter provided a connection between the European expatriate artists - who had emigrated to New York during the war - and the younger American artists. De Kooning had moved to the US in 1926 from Holland. His feverish abstractions of the human form, made by thrusting expressionistic brushstrokes and curvilinear, hook-like movements that create a layered and disconnected space, provide perhaps the closest example of what critics meant by the immediacy and gesture of Action Painting. His work is also the closest amongst the American artists to the rough painterly style of the European CoBRA artists working in Belgium and Holland. His first one-person show was held at Charles Egan Gallery in 1948.

Kline came somewhat late to his breakthrough black and white paintings. In the mid-1940s, he was still engaged in a somber, representational, realist form of painting evocative of American art from the beginning of the twentieth century by artists such as Robert Henri, Thomas Hart Benton and Reginald Marsh. Some of his early works in the mid-to-late 1940s were also more colorful, and

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[16] Kline lived with Elisabeth Zogbaum, but did not marry her; he was never divorced from his first wife.

[17] Often called the Cedar Bar, it was located on University Place and closed in 1963.

indicate an interest in post-Cubist abstraction.

The debate as to whether Kline was or was not influenced by, or interested in, Japanese calligraphy is never-ending. In the first review of Kline's work in 1950 the issue is brought up as something to confute: "Franz Kline's huge black symbols, surrounded by their white background, at first appear like inflated characters lifted from Chinese calligraphy. This instant impression is, however, misleading."[18] Another reviewer of the same show describes Kline's black and white shapes as "asymmetrical scaffoldings and tensely, precariously balanced squares and circles,"[19] rather than calligraphy, suggesting both the structures of modern life in the city - something constantly in Kline's sight in New York - as well as the history of abstraction in art ("squares and circles"). Kline transferred traditional abstraction - as obliquely indicated in this review - into a contemporary impulse to engage spectatorship in the artwork through the physical sensation and perception of energy. Shortly thereafter, Fairfield Porter wrote that "His pictures, often resembling large Chinese characters, have each an individual character."[20] Even Greenberg speaks of "blurtings of black calligraphy" in 1952.[21] It is arguable that Kline's art, rather than coming from the Orient, may have provided an impulse amongst contemporary Japanese artists towards reassessing ancient calligraphy and, as early as 1951, Kline was featured in Japanese publications (two issues of *Bokubi* magazine in 1951 published articles on his work).[22]

Around 1947, without ever exploring early twentieth century European Abstraction or Surrealism, nor post Cubist developments and continuations of abstraction in the 1920s and 1930s, Kline shifted from realism to web-like curvilinear abstract and gestural "all-over" compositions, which suggest the influence of de Kooning and the general climate of Abstract Expressionism. After a few years of these "transitional" works, typically interlacing and fragmenting pictorial space in order to avoid any possibility of distinguishing foreground and background, he came up with his large, minimal black squares and rectangles painted in broad brush strokes with oil-based enamel house paint. They parted from all that was being done at the time, revisiting on a larger scale, and with a looser tone, the essential art of the Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich. Kline probably knew the Spanish-period works by Manet that had been gifted to the Metropolitan in 1929, with their lost, empty backgrounds, their predominance of essential areas of color and luscious use of black as an opposite of blood red, but while Manet represented the breaking up of painting in the beginning of the modern age, Kline's black and white photographic gaze represented the breaking up of reality at the end of modernity. As Malevich had done with his degree-zero black square, however, Kline turned to the spirit for meaning, seeming to imply a sense of wonder totally distant from the pragmatics of down-to-earth concrete abstraction that Mondrian had suggested. "Malevich is interesting to me," Kline once said. "Maybe because you are able to translate through his motion the

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[18] G.T. Munson, "Franz Kline," *Art News,* New York, Vol. 49, November 1950, p. 48.

[19] J. Fitzsimmons, "Franz Kline," *Art Digest,* Vol. 25, No. 3, New York, November 1, 1950, p. 20.

[20] F. Porter, "Franz Kline," *Art News,* Vol. 50, New York, December 1951, p. 46.

[21] C. Greenberg, "Art Chronicle. Feeling Is All," *Partisan Review,* Vol. 19, New York, January- February, 1952, p. 101.

[22] It was the sculptor Isamu Noguchi who, visiting Japan in 1951, brought photographs of Kline's work to the artist Sabro Hasegawa, through whom they were then published in *Bokubi.* Kline in turn introduced Hasegawa to the New York art world when he travelled to the United States. "Hasegawa […] is one of a group of Japanese artists who, determined to counteract the widespread imitation of Western art in their country, has advocated a reversion to Japan's fundamental art form which is at the root of both literary and visual art traditions […] When from another country and another civilization came paintings such as those of Franz Kline, it was, to painters such as Hasegawa, not only an encouragement but almost a justification of their effort to build the revitalization of Japan's art not on the imitation of Western art, but on turning back to the sources of their own." M. Sawin, "An American Artist in Japan," *Art Digest, Vol.* 29, No. 19, New York, August 1, 1955, p. 12.

endless wonder of what painting could be, without describing an eye or a breast. That would be looking at things romantically which painters don't do."[23] Kline's square-shaped sign (in works ranging from the early *Wotan,* 1950, to *Painting No.* 7, 1952, *Painting No. 3 ,* 1952, *Untitled,* 1954, *Zinc Door,* 1961, *Red Painting,* 1961, and *Scudera,* 1961) dialogues with Malevich's, rather than Mondrian's, icon of abstraction.

A fundamental negativity - resistance to communication at the outset of a new postwar consumer society that would be characterized by "signs" and new media (television) - appears in these black and white squares and structures. Kline's image is an "open" sign, as unresolved as John Cage's was. It is interesting to note that Cage first delivered his historically acclaimed "Lecture on Nothing " in 1949 at the Artists Club in New York, and that Kline may well have attended.[24] In this improvised meditation of Beckettian resonance published ten years later, Cage states: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it... Our poetry now is the realization that we possess nothing."[25] Although Kline presented his innovative art late, in 1950, his reputation grew rapidly and steadily over the following years. As early as 1951, upon reviewing the mammoth artist-run group show held in an old antique shop on 9th Street in Greenwich Village, which has come to be called the "Ninth Street Show," *Art News* critic Thomas B. Hess singled out Kline for comment.[26] Leo Castelli recollects that the "Ninth Street Show": "came into being as an outgrowth precisely of the […] feelings the American painters had in connection with their position toward the European painters. It was a sort of outburst of pride in their own strength [...] We had about ninety painters in it, and they were almost exclusively [...] composed of artists who were involved in the Club [...] So the major figures were: de Kooning, who had taken an important hand in the development of The Club [...] De Kooning was very important. Kline was very important; Marca-Relli was a good organizer; he was also involved in it."[27]

By 1952, Kline was finally recognized as a primary figure in the New York art scene. That year, Joe Fiore, the Director of the Visual Arts Department at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, invited him to spend the summer teaching (de Kooning had taught there in 1948). Here he met poets like Robert Creeley (who became a friend) and Charles Olson (who did not, perhaps because Kline did not appreciate Olson's sense of rhetoric, or interest in ideograms, which was far from his own "realist" and "no-frills" attitude), as well as Merce Cunningham and John Cage, who were both at Black Mountain in 1948-52.

At the time, Pollock and de Kooning were the unquestioned heroes of the art world, and it is difficult today to grasp the impact that Kline's new work had, abruptly shifting critical attention. The critic Henry McBride, reviewing the annual group show at the Whitney Museum in 1952, commented: "Franz Kline's black-and-white eclipses by far the black-and-whites of Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, who used to rate above him."[28] In 1952, the Museum of Modern Art bought one of his paintings. At the end of that year, Robert Goodnough published his feature article, "Kline

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[23] Franz Kline in F. O'Hara, *op. cit.,* p. 61.

[24] It is unclear whether this lecture was actually given at the Artists Club, or at the Subjects of the Artists School, a short-lived venue founded by Motherwell, Rothko, Baziotes and Harein in Fall 1948 in New York. It is probable, however, that Kline would not have missed it.

[25] J. Cage, "Lecture on Nothing" (1949), published in *Silence. Lectures and Writings by John Cage,* Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1961, pp. 109-127 (1st edition 1959.)

[26] T.B. Hess, "New York's avant-garde ," *Art News,* Vol. 50, No. 4, New York, Summer 1951, p. 47.

[27] L. Castelli, interviewed by Barbara Rose, July 1969, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

[28] H. McBride, "No Exit at the Whitney," *Art News,* Vol. 51, No. 2, New York, April 1952, p. 36.

Paints a Picture," in *Art News.*[29] By 1953, when Kline held his third solo show at Charles Egan Gallery and also showed with Allan Frumkin in Chicago, his work was acclaimed as newer and stronger than Pollock's. By the early-to-mid 1950s, he was acclaimed as perhaps the most significant Abstract Expressionist of all. The critic Hubert Crehan, for example, reported this sense of the absolute novelty of Kline's art at the time: "Occasionally we see an exhibition [...] that comes on the scene with such aplomb, such visual impact that there can be no doubt that we are witnessing a sequence of pictorial statements that will make a lasting impression and alter the idea of what panting is [...] Whether they are paintings in any conventional sense at all (they are much more remote from the Renaissance, or even the modern, tradition than Pollock's last works) is not the issue. Who cares? If they are extraordinary statements in paint that's what we want to see."[30]

And in 1954, in an article arguing the specificity of American art at the time, critic Sam Hunter added: "The dismantling of the conventional scaffolding of abstract painting and its replacement by new pictorial substance was repeated in an even more significant show, that of Franz Kline. It is Kline now, even more than Jackson Pollock, who is pushing forward the frontiers of abstract art. Kline's art is narrower and yet more cogent than Pollock's, his forms more bludgeoning, his application of pigment more aggressive. Yet like Pollock's, his is a pure, lyrical, painterly sensibility. I cannot guess why he is such a tremendous presence […] his art is as eloquent for its elisions and omissions, for what it leaves unsaid, as it is for its explicit content."[31] From 1952 onwards, Kline was included in every edition of Carnegie International.

The apparent banality, the "degree-zero" look, of Kline's first black and white paintings, such as *Untitled* (1951, p. 205), and *Herald* (1953, p. 215), were described at the time as "statements of an acute crisis. There is no moderation, no middle ground, no compromise. It is the crisis which must occur when the painter reaches for the widest range of vision through the most limited means."[32]

This use of the most limited means, as opposed to excess, places Kline's black and white paintings in the realm of the philosophical, of the metaphysical and of the essential. Not by chance, Kline was one of the few artists to support Newman's widely criticized first two shows of stripe paintings at Betty Parsons gallery in 1950 and 1951: "One night at the Cedar, a young artist complained to Franz how simple-minded the pictures he had just seen by a certain Barnett Newman were - just one flat color painted like a house painter, with a couple of lines through them. Franz said: 'Simple? Were they all the same color?' 'No, different colors' 'Were they all the same size?' 'No, different sizes' 'Were the stripes the same? Color? Width? Placement?' 'No, different.' 'Different?' 'Different.' Franz concluded : 'Sounds awfully complicated to me.'"[33]

Kline's works of the early 1950s could be viewed at first glance as proto-Minimalist.[34] Yet this getting down to the essentials was not so much a reduction of painting to specific structures as it

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[29] R. Goodnough, "Kline Paints a Picture," *Art News,* Vol. 51, No. 8, New York, December 1952, pp. 36-39, 63-64.

[30] H. Crehan, "Inclining to Exultation," *Art Digest,* Vol. 28, No. 15, New York, May 1, 1954, p. 15.

[31] S. Hunter, "Painting by Another Name," *Art in America*, Vol. 42, No. 4, December 1954, p. 294.

[32] P. Brach, "Franz Kline," *Art Digest,* Vol. 26, No. 5, New York, December 1, 1951, p. 19.

[33] I. Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir,* Thames & Hudson, New York, 2003, p. 60.

[34] Not by chance, Donald Judd reviewed Kline's 1961 show at Sidney Janis Gallery tor *Arts Magazine.* While he saw Kline's later work as a form of regression to naturalistic "spatiality" due to the older artist's addition of complexities such as dragged brushstrokes that create transitions between black and white, and also did not find an interest in Kline's use of color, the review is interesting because the contrast that Judd makes indirectly affirms how Kline's early paintings - the simpler black and white ones - were not only known by Judd but also admired by him: "Since 1957 Kline's painting has been deteriorating. The current show has nothing equal to the Klines of the first half of the Fifties." (D. Judd, "Franz Kline," *Arts Magazine,* Voi. 36, New York, February 1962, p. 44.)

was a search for the representation of the essential feeling of being alive. Kline - more than the others - explored the phenomenology of emotion as something intimate, deeply embedded in the individual mind and body, an almost physical reaction to closeness. His paintings affect our sense of proximity, and thus of urgency; they provide a feeling of the "close-up" and thus of the unavoidable "here and now" through their sense of disorganized organization, of unbalanced balance and in general of a dynamic structure. In the first review of his work, published in *Art News,* Gretchen T. Munson speaks of Kline's black marks as "symbols that shoot out at you like an Assyrian escutcheon",[35] and, as we have seen, James Fitzsimmons in *Art Digest* speaks of "tensely, precariously balanced squares or circles."[36] It is this sense of the extreme, this phenomenological exploration of the boundaries of perception and emotion, the bodily and mental/physical apprehension of weight and scale, that give Kline's artistic endeavor its relevance.

Most Abstract Expressionist artists, including Kline, used large formats for their paintings, compared to European works of the time. Rothko commented in 1951: "I paint very large pictures. I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however - I think it applies to other painters I know - is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside of your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger pictures, you are in it. It isn't something you command."[37]

For Kline, too, the work of art was not an object that one could observe in a detached fashion from the outside, but implied an awareness of the observer-dependency of all our observations, and thus their subjective nature. The self who was expressed in these canvases was not "in command," but overwhelmed by experience, like Ishmael floundering in the sea at the end of Melville's *Moby Dick.* But for Kline, not only was size an issue, scale - the relationship between something represented to its "real" dimensions - was also important.

To simplify the cultural geography of New York in the 1950s, the "uptown artists" - Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt - were interested in the sublime and transcendence, while the "downtown artists", such as Pollock and de Kooning, were closer to automatism and gestural abstraction. Kline is usually considered one of the "downtown artists" since he lived there and frequented the bars in this area. However, in many ways his art embraced both aspects of the New York School. His explorations of the status, meaning and implications of gesture were controlled and conscious investigations of the philosophical underpinnings of agency, and the detachment and simplification by which he pursued this endeavor recalls the reflective and metaphysical nature of Newman and Rothko, rather than the wild gestures of the downtown artists.

In the 1950s, when Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock, Kline and de Kooning were already famous, a new school of poetry emerged, whose exponents included Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Bill Berkson and Kenneth Koch, admirers of the slightly older action painters. In the mid-to-late 1950s, Beat poets and writers from Allen Ginsberg[38] to Jack Kerouac also frequently came to New York and met the artists in bars or at Kline's studio for late night discussions. Kline was very sociable, and developed a keen and witty, elliptical form of conversation, filled with jokes, for which he was known in the artists' community.

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[35] G. T. Munson, *op. cit.,* p. 48.

[36] J. Fitzsimmons, "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review," *Art Digest,* Vol. 25, No. 3, New York, November 1, 1950, p. 20.

[37] M. Rothko, excerpt from "A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting and Sculpture," *Interiors,* Vol. 110, No. 10, New York, May 1951, p. 26.

[38] In 1955, when Kline was making his major paintings, Allen Ginsberg first performed his poem *Howl* in San Francisco.

In the mid-1950s, Kline met Betsy Zogbaum and in 1959 acquired the house in Provincetown where they would spend the summers with her son Rufus. That year, his work was included in the second edition of Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, alongside that of de Kooning and other Abstract Expressionists and European *Informel* artists, although Kline did not travel to the venue. In 1960, however, he did visit France and Italy with Betsy, and exhibited at the Venice Biennale where he won a prize. During that trip in June and July, he went to Paris first, then to Rome and from there up to Venice. After the Biennale, Kline visited a number of sites built by Palladio, such as the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. He also travelled to Florence, and to the Palio in Siena. Of all the places he visited, the Umbrian town of Orvieto, with its tall cathedral and Last Judgement frescoes by Luca Signorelli in the San Brizio Chapel, surprised Kline particularly. In his papers there are a number of postcards of the chapel painted by Signorelli, each representing a detail of the complex apocalyptic fresco. Kline wrote them all out, but did not mail them off to his friends. Signorelli's theatrical and highly choreographed architectural visual construction of masses of bodies, painted around 1500, shortly before the Sistine Chapel in Rome, has a number of startling and modern pictorial devices. Among these is the depiction of fleeing figures that appear to be tumbling off the real wall of the chapel into the space of the viewer. Like many of Kline's own large paintings, Signorelli's universe is intense and dangerously unbalanced.

IV.

In Europe, and especially in Italy, if one asks people to list the American Abstract Expressionist artists, Kline is one of the three or four whom they will mention first - alongside Pollock, de Kooning and Rothko. His name springs to mind before others, such as Motherwell, Gottlieb or Still, even though those artists had been working in their mature styles long before him. In recent years, Reinhardt and Newman have also been evoked more often having been seen by some as precursors of Conceptual/Minimalist practices. Kline's first showing in Europe was of a black and white abstraction included in the show "Regards sur la peinture américaine," organized by the collector-turned gallerist Sidney Janis and selected by a young Leo Castelli, which was hosted at the Galerie de France in Paris in 1951.[39] *Chief* (1950) was included in a touring group show of American art organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. In the second half of the 1950s, Kline's works were often shown in Italy. Two major paintings were included in the Venice Biennale in 1956, and a large selection was featured in the 1960 edition, for which Kline won a prize. There were strong bonds between the American and the Roman art worlds in the early 1950s, dating back to the attempt made by the postwar abstract art movement. Formal to bridge the gap in the late 1940s. Milton Gendel was writing for *Art News* from Rome, and the Zurich magazine *Art International* was widely read in the United States. In 1952 Rauschenberg and Twombly visited America, where artists such as Burri, Afro and Dorazio were showing their work. Marca-Relli, who often travelled to Rome with the artist Toti Scialoja (Jannis Kounellis' art professor at the Academy), was an important initial contact for Kline's work in Italy. It was he who suggested in the mid-1950s that Plinio De Martiis should host a show of Kline's work at La Tartaruga gallery (an exhibition that finally took place in 1958), the same gallery that would shortly thereafter host Kounellis' first solo show. Kline visited Italy only once, during the summer of 1960, six months after de Kooning had been in Rome, yet the impact of his work on the Italian art scene was enormous, and had been so

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[39] Castelli, who had been in touch with the Surrealists before the war in Paris, had first moved to New York in 1941, and met most of the artists after 1946 when he returned from the army. Castelli would go to the Artists Club meetings from 1949 onwards and was in contact with Pollock and de Kooning. The show was widely discussed by the French artists of the time, and in particular Georges Mathieu sent Kline a dedicated copy of his *Declaration to the American Avant-Garde Painters* ("To Franz Kline whom I would very much like to meet, Mathieu, October 1952, Paris") now located in the Archives of American Art.

ever since his inclusion in the group show of American Art at the Venice Biennale in 1956.
Artist and publisher Fabio Mauri, working for Bompiani editore at the time, selected Kline's work for the cover of the first Italian edition of Alberto Moravia's novel, *La Noia,* in 1961, which became a bestseller. Kline's work was iconic, more so than that of de Kooning, and related to the postwar calligraphic - and sign-oriented abstraction prevalent in European abstraction at the time (from Wols to Giuseppe Capogrossi). But while the work of the European artists remained on the scale of the handwritten sign, Kline's gigantic markings suggested a way of reading the landscape of signs in the modern city, of understanding how our *architectural* experience of those signs constitutes modern subjectivity. It is unquestionable, for example, that Kounellis, a young Greek artist living in Rome, was passionate about Kline's work, and Kline's black marks undoubtedly played an important role in generating Kounellis' early black on white sign paintings. The collector Giorgio Franchetti, close at the time to De Martiis, traveled to New York in 1957 to acquire the twenty or so works on paper that were shown at his solo show in Rome. He also bought other large-scale paintings during his visit, including *Untitled* (1951, p. 205). These paintings would constitute a memorial exhibition in Rome in 1963. In 1957, Kline's work was included in a selection of paintings from the Guggenheim collection at the National Gallery in Rome, then run by Palma Bucarelli (which was followed by a Pollock solo show at the same museum in 1958). Carlo Cardazzo of the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan also visited Kline in the late 1950s and held a show of his works at his Milan gallery in 1958, as well as including him in a group exhibition there that year. Panza di Biumo, who had begun to collect contemporary art after meeting John Cage in Italy, suggested that Panza should look at Rauschenberg and Johns. Panza also took to acquiring Kline's paintings, and became one of his foremost collectors.[40] Five large paintings were included in another group show at the City Museum in Milan in 1958. Thanks to the intuition of a young critic, Luciano Pistoi, who would soon open a gallery, and to the French critic Michel Tapié, works by Kline were also shown after 1959 in group shows in Turin, a city destined to become the hot-bed of Arte Povera, both at the Galleria Notizie and in other locations. In 1963, Turin would also become one of the host cities for Kline's large memorial exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, touring to Amsterdam, Brussels, Basel, Vienna, London and Paris.
In the United States, a full critical appreciation of Kline's work has yet to be developed, perhaps partly because of his premature death in 1962, which meant that he left behind little more than 250 major paintings, and partly due to the lack of attention he received from the two main critics of Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Greenberg did not particularly support Kline, although he and art historian Meyer Shapiro did select one of his works for the group show of young New Yorkers, "Talent 1950," held at the Kootz Gallery in May 1950. Kline's realist roots (Thomas Hart Benton, Daumier) and his interest in classical European art (Rembrandt, Goya, Velàzquez, Tintoretto, Manet, etc.), meant that he did not quite fit into Greenberg's theory of American modernism as a formal development of the School of Paris (Matisse, Picasso) or of non-objective abstraction (Mondrian).[41]
Just as Kline's work did not develop out of early twentieth-century abstraction (although some transitional work of the mid-1940s may suggest this), nor did it develop out of Surrealism or an

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[40] Much of his Kline collection is now part of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

[41] It is important to note that Kline's first inclusion in a group show with other Abstract Expressionists was the "Talent" show at Kootz Gallery in Spring 1950, selected by Greenberg and Columbia University art history professor Meyer Shapiro. It is possible that this is where Charles Egan may first have seen Kline’s work, offering him his debut solo show in October of that year. In his 1952 article "Feeling is All" for *Partisan Review,* Greenberg notes Kline, alongside Barnett Newman, as an important new artist, who values "tautness" and "suppression of power," presenting only "the salient points of emotion".

interest in primitivism and myths as the work of Rothko, Gottlieb, Baziotes, Newman or Pollock did.

But nor did Kline's work dovetail with Rosenberg's notion of action as an aesthetic act; in fact, his work was not truly gestural (as de Kooning's or Pollock's canvases were). It was more *about* gesture, which only partially illustrates Rosenberg's 1952 description of what Action Painting was. For Kline, it was not the act of painting that was the aesthetic act; it was the act of perceiving and the process of "coming to know," of making decisions. According to Rosenberg's notion of Action Painting, the speed and immediacy with which a sensation is registered were key. The constructed nature of Kline's works - where white was painted over black and vice versa, where he carefully and slowly reproduced in his large paintings compositions first created with black brush-and-ink washes on sheets of paper torn out of telephone books - belied this categorization, even though a strong emotional impact was achieved. Kline did, however, consider the process of making the painting an important part of its meaning, as would the later artists of the 1960s. As Porter commented: "Kline belongs to the group of painters whose special interest seems to be in the aesthetic possibilities inherent in the process of painting itself... all the 'accidents' of the running and spilling and paint showing through 'corrected' areas become significant."[42] But Kline painted the *sense* of immediacy without immediacy, thus positioning himself in an almost philosophical, intellectual realm of action. He reflected *upon* agency, rather than acting self-expressively.

This can be seen by looking at how thoughtfully and meticulously he rendered in large formats the gestural compositions first made in brush-and-ink wash on a smaller scale in his numerous sketches on telephone book pages. There is a paradox in this careful passage from sketch to finished work. We would expect it in figurative painting that does not take as its subject matter or medium direct agency and gesture, but it seems inauthentic, even impossible, in the case of an artist who is attempting to grasp the "truth" of gesture (joining art and life in a utopian fashion). Yet Kline attempted exactly this. In *Study for "Hoboken"* (1950) and *Hoboken* (1950); in *Study far "Siegfried"* (1957, p. 245) and *Siegfried* (1958, p. 259); in *Study far "Untitled"* (1957, p. 251) and *Untitled* (1957, p. 253) Kline first expressed a feeling quickly on paper. Then, by enlarging and reproducing his sketch, he was able to transpose to an architectural scale what was on an intimate and private scale, sublimating the calligraphic into the architectural. His paintings reflected on the meaning of agency; they were not enactments of agency. This is difficult to perceive from catalogs and publications, because of the small size of reproduced images of paintings. Viewed in the real, however, the shift is evident: what appears like a brush stroke in reproduction often reveals itself as many strokes, sometimes totaling up to 50 or 60 cm wide, and only a giant could possibly make a mark that wide. The effect again is to dwarf the viewer's subjectivity, and could perhaps suggest the insignificance of the individual in the face of historical events.

Far from being instinctive and gestural, there is thus an experimental aspect to Kline's variations on similar structures in paintings created over a period of years. While the three paintings *Vawdavitch* (1955, p. 227) and the two *Untitled* (1957) works reproduced here appear to be gestural complexities, each a unique moment in experience that is different from any other (to view them as variations on a theme is counter-intuitive, since it contradicts the sense of being in front of a unique and unrepeatable experience), they reveal themselves instead to be almost proto-Conceptual modular variations on a structure of signs. Kline adopts, in other words, an almost scientific attitude towards painting, which is visible in his attempt to study and compare the effect of slight changes in these paintings, creating infinite variations on a small set of similar compositions, much as a psychologist of visual perception might do. In some cases a body of works can develop a theme

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[42] F. Porter, "Franz Kline," *Art News,* Vol. 50, New York, December 1951, p, 46. This review precedes Rosenberg's famous "The American Action Painters" article in the *Art News* of December 1952.

with variations, as in jazz, over a period of many years. *Four Square* (1956), for example, is recollected when looking at *Black and White No.2* (1960, p. 271), or *Slate Cross* (1961, p. 293). *Buttress* (1956) is suggestive of a large black cross with a diagonal movement at bottom right, and it is interesting that in Kline's papers there are various postcards of crosses in art, from Lorenzo Maitani's *Crucifix,* which he had bought during his trip to Italy in 1960, to a postcard sent to Kline by Adelyn Breeskin in 1960 of a Rembrandt's print of a Crucifixion scene. The same cross structure with a slant on the bottom right forms the axis of two later paintings *(Flanders,* 1961, and *Le Gros,* 1961). Another form of experimentation is to take a closer look at a detail from a structure rather than varying it. From this perspective, many of Kline's first large black and white abstractions resemble enlarged details of parts of his rocking-chair drawings, or of architectural steel structures like suspension bridges, while some works like *Caboose* (1961) suggest close-up details of other paintings, in this case, *Le Gros.*

According to postmodernist criticism, formalistic analysis today can bear no fruit, and can only repeat the trite statements made by the first promoters of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s such as Greenberg, Rosenberg, Hess, O'Hara and Irving Sandler. And yet, very little in terms of formal analysis has actually been attempted up to today. Rosenberg and Greenberg rarely wrote in depth about individual artists' works, and many texts on the movement by other authors refer to the private lives of the artists more than to their art. This is possibly connected to the fact that some of the artists themselves, and Kline is no exception, spoke rarely, and only allusively, about their work.[43] Perhaps dumbstruck by the shocking level of tragedy and violence in the world around them, the Abstract Expressionists, just like many artists in Europe at the time, moved in a pre-linguistic universe of emotions and perceptions, suspicious of verbal language as much as they were of all forms of constituted and codified systems of knowledge and ideology. After all, the fascists had been amongst the first effectively to study systems of signs and communications as vehicles of propaganda, and the new consumer society was busy laying the grounds for what would become the stereotyped, conformist society of spectacle and advertising.

However, although the Conceptual artists, the Minimalists, post-Minimalists and the Arte Povera artists of the 1960s and 1970s felt distant from the silence, the heroics and the modernist notion of artistic autonomy embraced by the Abstract Expressionists, it is unquestionable that the focus of the earlier artists on phenomenology, on process and on the *hic et nunc* direct experience of life as an aesthetic proposition would be developed in later decades. They would be "spatialized," shifted from the pictorial surface, away from easel painting, to the three-dimensional horizontal field, and developed in various forms of happenings, post-Minimalist installations, Body and Performance art.[44] Pollock, for example, opened the field of "formlessness" that would be played out by Allan Kaprow, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris.

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[43] See, for example, Kline's statement: "Since 1949 I've been working mainly in black and white paint or ink on paper. Previous to this I planned painting compositions with brush and ink using figurative forms and actual objects with color. The first work in only black and white seemed related to figures, and I titled them as such. Later the results seemed to signify something - but difficult to give subject or name to, and at present I find it impossible to make a direct verbal statement about the paintings in black and white." (J.I.H. Bauer, ed., *The New Decade:* 35 *American Painters and Sculptors,* Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1955, p. 48).

[44] Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois argue this shift in the exhibition catalog *L'informe: mode d'emploi,* Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1996; translated into English as *Formless: A User's Guide,* New York, Zone Books, 1997. Stemming from Greenberg's own readings of Pollock's work from 1947 onwards ("a way beyond the easel, beyond the mobile, framed picture, to the mural, perhaps"), Krauss sees Pollock's line as dissolution, which develops into Robert Morris's notion of "anti-form". She summarizes, "Pollock's line, in undoing the traditional job of drawing (which is to create contour and bound form, thereby allowing for the distinction between figure and ground), struck not only against drawing's object - which is form - bui against form's matrix, which is verticality. Pollock's line produced the unheard-of condition of burrowing itself into the domain of the horizontal." (R. Krauss, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," *Jackson Pollock. New Approaches,* Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999, pp. 160-161)

Unlike Pollock, Kline did not question the *verticality* of his pictorial statements. He was sure which way up each painting should be, even though one can often see drips going sideways in finished paintings. These drips function as markers that reveal a *change,* a choice, what the French call an *écart,* a *difference,* a moment in which the artist turned the painting around, deciding its final orientation. This does not mean that the painting can be hung in any position. It only suggests that the artist allows the viewer to see that he changed its direction at a certain point during its making. Kline thus visualizes the process of thinking itself, the act of turning something over and over until we recognize it, until it assumes a stable significance.[45] But he did point, just as radically, to an escape from easel painting through the large scale of his paintings, and by dissolving the function of line drawing, which is traditionally to provide contour and bound form. He substituted these with brush strokes that structured his paintings as if they were close-up experiences of details of larger, more complex articulations. By doing this, he returned to, and developed, one of modernism's earliest attempts to move away from easel painting through the lesson of photographic "snapshots" and the random "cropping" of the visual field as Impressionists from Manet to Degas had done in the nineteenth century. Each painting *(White Forms,* 1955, reproduced here is but one example) is a single detail, just one portion of the broad field of experience on which he focused. "In these paintings," William Seitz has written, "the image implies outer limits which are not stated within the format."[46] A Rothko suggests a spiritual world beyond the bounds of the easel, and may inspire lofty feelings, a world that is not contiguous to the canvas. The works of Pollock and de Kooning are bounded by the borders of their canvases, defining universes within them. Kline's paintings, however, almost always seem to have been cut out from a larger field of forces, extending above, below, to the right and to the left of the canvas, a field that is the space of the viewer, our space, as we stand before his paintings. Yet it is a transfigured space, a field made up of modulated emotional vectors.

Each of Kline's paintings is thus a suspended and precarious "moment" in a stream of moments where structure is provisionally balanced, dynamic yet centered - in other words it is *de-centered.* One could say the same of Kounellis' later installations, and of Nauman's Corridor pieces, or Serra's tilted architectural spaces that explore psychological limits of perception. Serra, like Marden, studied at Yale University, whose Visual Arts Department was headed by Joseph Albers. Albers knew Kline and was on a panel at the Museum of Modern Art with him in 1954. Both Marden and Serra were interested in the Abstract Expressionists, and made frequent visits to New York from New Haven to visit shows. It is probable that they may have seen Kline's last show at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1961, as well as the memorial exhibition at the gallery in 1963. Paintings such as *Black Iris* (1961, p. 295), *Meryon* (1960-61, p. 283) and *Slate Cross* (1961, p. 293) were included in these exhibitions. That Marden was particularly interested in Kline can be seen in the shallow depth, emphasis on plane and diagonal marks in his early work. He was aware of Johns and Rauschenberg

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[45] It is interesting to note that Gestalt psychology of perception was also developing at the time, and Rudolph Arnheim would publish his major book, *Visual Thinking,* shortly thereafter, in 1969. The writer and artist Fielding Dawson, who was Kline's student at Black Mountain College, describes the certainty of Kline's final orientations: "One afternoon I knocked on his door and he let me in; he had finished a painting […] It was about four feet by six, black on white […] I said something about how I thought it was horizontal […] He was surprised and said it was vertical, and he began gesturing the way the black lines went up. He glanced at me and said it was vertical. I gestured along the two horizontal parallel lines with a little flashing dart between […] and said, 'But that's horizontal!' 'Yes - sure!' he cried, 'What they do is set it right; the whole motion is vertical.' (F. Dawson, *An Emotional Memoir* of *Franz Kline,* Pantheon Books, Random House, New York, 1967, p. 10.)

[46] W. Seitz, *op. cit.,* p. 63.

but preferred Kline and Abstract Expressionism.[47]

When Kline died in 1962, *Life* magazine gave enormous coverage to the event. Elaine de Kooning commented: "Franz, laughing in front of one of his black and white paintings, obviously making a wisecrack, in the wonderful photograph printed in *Life* after his death, has the open gesture of his own painting. It is not surprising that this photograph is tacked on the walls, coast to coast, of the studios of artists who never knew him."[48]

While Pollock had died in 1956 when the post-Minimalists were still young, Kline's death in 1962 was front page news and discussed broadly at the time, also by younger artists, who were thus very aware of his work. Younger artists at the time, like Serra, Nauman, Marden, Robert Smithson, or the Arte Povera artists in Italy, from Kounellis to Pistoletto, from Merz to Anselmo and Zorio, did not need to react against Pollock or Kline in the same way that Rauschenberg had done in the 1950s. Kline's oblique references to architecture, to the steel structures of construction in the city, would become real steel, real iron, real spaces. It was not necessary for this generation to dismantle the heroics, the drama and the "abstract" nature of Action Painting because Pop Art had already achieved this shift from the interior to the exterior, from abstraction to "real life". In the early 1960s the Pop artists took over from Kline and Pollock as the major artistic figures, and it was partially against the ironic, detached, clean and antiseptic nature of Pop that these younger artists reacted when engaging in process, field and perceptual structures. Like the Arte Povera artists and their critic friends in Italy, these soon to-be post-Minimalists looked back positively to some art of the 1940s and 50s. A link between the two was the art critic Carla Lonzi, who was one of the first to write about the works of the Arte Povera artists in Turin, and was also keenly interested in the Abstract Expressionists, consistently writing catalog essays for shows in the late 1950s and early 1960s such as "Artisti Americani" at Notizie gallery in Turin in 1961, which included work by Kline.[49]

Fielding Dawson describes Kline's studio in the 1950s, in ways that suggest his interest in energy and motion, both elements that would become important to the younger artists of the late 1960s:

“April, 1953, at a wooden table in a wooden loft where every object held meaning. The chairs, particularly the rocking chair; his toy trains on little stretches of track. Wherever he moved, they went with him. They were imbued with him, and his touch was on them. His signature looks like a train. Sense of power, motion, identity and emotion; mountains and valleys of Pennsylvania and childhood. He had a sense of engines. Those cigarette lighters seemed like engines, and his intuitive concepts of structure and energy gave complete factual stand in his sense of the formidable square, and like Dickens he gave things human traits, laughing at the way a car looked at him. Trains and trucks and cars and ships moved by engine, creating tension and conflict."[50]

While Kline was making art, scientists were developing Quantum field theory, describing phenomena involving electrically charged particles that interacted by means of magnetic force. This created a context for artworks that explored a similar field, by artists like Serra, Giovanni Anselmo and Gilberto Zorio. In this climate, Kline's sense of tension, of a contracted structure about to release energy, and of artworks as "situations," were highly relevant to many of these artists of the late 1960s.

Many have written about Kline's sense of scale, how something big can be communicated even on a

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[47] Jeremy Lewison comments on Marden's connection with Kline in J. Lewison, *Brice Marden Prints 1961-1991,* Tate Gallery, London, 1992, pp. 14-15.

[48] E. de Kooning, *op. cit.,* p. 18.

[49] C. Lonzi, *Artisti Americani,* Notizie, Turin, 1961.

[50] F. Dawson, *op. cit.,* p. 30.

small sized piece of paper, and many have recounted the story of his discovery of the effectiveness of large scale through a chance test made with an overhead projector in de Kooning's studio some time in 1949. But Kline had been looking for a new way to achieve an intimate relationship between the viewer and the artwork before coming across the projector. Authenticity and intimacy are connected for Kline; they both imply a one-to-one relationship, an emotional connection even within the modern urban space and web of fleeting relations. "If you're a painter," Kline once observed:

"You're not alone. There's no way to be alone. You think and you care and you're with all the people who care, including the young people who don't know they do yet [...] Jackson [Pollock] always knew that if you meant it enough when you did it, it will mean that much."[51]

These issues have become topical again today - as the art of William Kentridge or Janet Cardiff indicated in the late 1990s. They are asking how to move beyond the irony of postmodernism, how to explore the emotional dimension in the public realm, the depth of experience, of memory, and pain, while remaining within an apparently obsolete notion of art's autonomy.

V.

It has been suggested that Kline's art can be divided into "periods" Certainly it is true that his realist work first gave way to colorful semi-figurative sketches in the mid to-late 1940s, and almost completely to abstraction by the late 1940s. It is also true that these transitional works of 1947-48 were followed in 1950 by his simple black and white paintings, and that by 1955 his work was often more "painterly"[52] and was experimenting with color again *(King Oliver,* 1958, p. 261). One could continue in this vein by stating that his work of the later 1950s was characterized by complex, highly dramatic and articulated paintings where grays again "spatialized" the black and white marks in the field, although on a larger scale *(Siegfried,* 1958, p. 259), and that he ended his life and oeuvre after making a series of large colorful paintings, some of them almost monochromatic, such as *Red Painting* (1961) and *Scudera* (1961). But this notion of "periods" does not take into account the fact that, generally, different types of work ran parallel for Kline. For example, right up to the end of his life, he was making black and white paintings, and some of his last (including *Riverbed,* 1961, and *Caboose,* 1961) were simple, sweeping structures that recall the most essential of the early black and whites. *Luzerne* (1956), although made in the mid-1950s, also recalls Kline's earlier simpler structures.

Kline's first show of abstract color works was held in 1956 at Sidney Janis Gallery, and included *The Bridge* (1955) and *Yellow, Red, Green and Blue* (1956). But in that same show he also chose to present classical black and white works such as *Accent Grave* (1955, p. 223) and *Luzerne* (1956), thus underlining how color was present again without denying the black and whites. Color becomes visible and prominent in works such as *Mycenae* (1958), *Provincetown Il* (1959, p. 265), *Dahlia* (1959), *Yellow, Orange and Purple* (1959), *Henry H. II* (1959-60), *Torches Mauve* (1960) and *Andrus* (1961). But the 1956 Janis show also marked the beginning of another major aspect of

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[51] F. O'Hara, *op. cit.,* p. 63.

[52] See D. Waldman, *Willem de Kooning,* Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 1988, pp. 109-110: "Just as de Kooning inspired generations of artists, he in turn was inspired by the work of his friend and colleague Franz Kline. *Suburb in Havana,* 1958, and *Black and White, Rome D,* 1959, reflect Kline's tough architectonic forms that integrate both black and white with the picture plane. His large, rugged but precise forms […] his powerful brushstrokes and bold calligraphy had an undeniable impact on de Kooning's late 1950s landscapes. Following Kline's example, de Kooning incorporated powerful architectural elements, but he retained a sense of the intimate gesture that is absent in Kline's raucous paintings. De Kooning, in turn, influenced Kline's late paintings. The introduction of color in Kline's late paintings […] clearly was inspired by de Kooning’s example."

Kline's oeuvre. It included *Buried Reds* (1953, p. 213), one of the first works in which Kline begins to embed color beneath black and white paint. This covering up of color, allowing only some traces to remain, also occurs in a number of later works such as *Horizontal Rust* (1960), *Probst I* (1960), and *Lehigh V Span* (1959-60).

Amongst the most moving aspects of viewing a Kline in the flesh is this discovery that in the sweeping black and white areas are "hidden" traces of color. It recalls what Italian artist Burri called *annottarsi* (to grow into night), or his traces of red or gold paint that can be found in the narrow interstices of his brown sacking. It also recalls Still's edges of color, but rather than being almost off the canvas as in a Still painting, it is embedded within it, at a deeper or lower level, beneath most of the visible surface. In light of the psychoanalytic fashion of the time, this technique suggests a visualization of the unconscious impulses creeping up to the surface, which cannot be completely removed by the "black and white" world of consciousness. It also inverts the stereotype used in films where color indicates the here and now while black and white indicates something that belongs to distant memory. But what does this "cover up" signify? One thinks of the *pentimento* (regret) of classical art, when an artist working in fresco covered up the image painted with another layer of color on top of the dry wall surface, so often studied by art historians to explore the creative processes of Renaissance artists. It expresses the passage of time and therefore the presence of consciousness. But this passage of time is not the same duration that Pollock chronicled with his dripping technique; it is not the passage of a continuous duration as in the movements of a dance. Kline's *pentimenti* are the visualization of subsequent moments in time, of different present tenses, each divided from the other by a lapse during which the subconscious and consciousness both interact and operate. It also reveals thought and reflection, a more intellectual and less automatic/ physical endeavor than a dance, just as it uncovers the impulse that lies behind renouncing something - wanting and desiring it, even seeing glimpses of it, and yet, in the end, giving it up, letting it go, as in those simultaneously pleasant and sad moments when we evoke a memory. Covering up a color that was on the canvas at a prior moment suggests doubt. It renders consciousness manifest; it visualizes subjectivity, the process of creating knowledge, of knowing, and yet it never allows doubt to fall into certainty, or offers a body of constituted knowledge. In stead, it keeps knowledge and belief suspended in an open field.