

## **ART AS AN IDEA**

**The purpose of the work.** Determining the importance of the phenomenon of biennials and what is contemporary art, its historical and artistic heritage. This article examines the complexity of modern art as "historic" events. Studies of Modern Art, and artists who work and live in a complex, global, economic and cultural period. And, of course, for better understanding, a study conducted by the examples Biennale long history and reflection on basic principles and regulations that may be useful in the preparation of such a big event. Research methodology is the use of comparative, historical and logical methods. The above **methodological** approach allows wide open and analyze certain patterns regarding social components anthropological and artistic relations, to find dynamic and progressive attitude at what exactly is contemporary art. **Scientific novelty** of the work is to show bright and clear understanding of professional artists who are increasingly positioned as the last creators of society, which is available almost unlimited freedom. However, the world of art, like any other social or professional environment, has its own conventions and authoritarian system. So in that time, while artists whose names have become brands, constantly praise for their uniqueness, this article draws parallels between artists, most of which are considered not suitable for comparison. **Conclusions.** Understanding of the development paradigm of strategic importance for the development of cultural infrastructure of the state. Consider the idea of art because, as the primary cultural Rubicon overcome the marginal position of Ukrainian art of the global art processes.

*Keywords:* culture, biennial, contemporary, legitimacy, curator, Manifesta, phenomenon, art, festivalism.

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### **Мистецтво як ідея**

**Мета роботи.** Визначення важливості феномена бієнале та того, чим є сучасне мистецтво, його історична і мистецька спадщини. Проаналізувати складність сучасного мистецтва як "історичного" явища. Дослідити сучасне мистецтво та творчість художників, які працюють та живуть в умовах складного глобального економічно-культурного періоду. Дослідження ґрунтується на прикладах із багаторічної історії бієнале та роздумів щодо основних принципів і положень, які можуть бути корисними для підготовки такого масштабного заходу.

**Методологія** дослідження полягає в застосуванні компаративного та історико-логічного методів. Зазначений методологічний підхід дає змогу розкрити та проаналізувати певні моделі антропологічної компоненти в соціальних та мистецьких відносинах з метою пошуку динамічного та прогресивного погляду на сучасне мистецтво. **Наукова новизна** роботи полягає в тому, щоб продемонструвати яскраве і виразне розуміння творчості мистців-професіоналів, котрі дедалі частіше позиціонуються суспільством як останні творці, яким доступна майже нічим не обмежена свобода. Однак світ мистецтва, як і будь-яке інше соціальне або професійне середовище, має свої конвенції і систему авторитарності. Тому, поки митці, чий імена перетворилися на бренди, невпинно славлять за їхню унікальність, ми проводимо паралелі з митцями, які здебільшого вважаються не зовсім придатними для порівняння. **Висновки.** Осмислено розвиток парадигмальних систем, які мають стратегічне значення для розвитку культурної інфраструктури держави. Висвітлено проблеми мистецтва через ідею як первинний культурний рубікон у подолатті маргінальної позиції українського мистецтва у порівнянні з глобальними арт-процесами.

*Ключові слова:* культура, бієнале, сучасне мистецтво, легітимність, куратор, Маніфеста, фестивальний рух.

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### **Искусство как идея**

**Цель работы.** Определение важности феномена биеннале и того, чем является современное искусство, его историческое наследие. Изучить сложность современного искусства как "исторического" явления. Исследовать современное искусство и творчество художников, работающих и живущих в условиях переломного глобального экономико-культурного периода. Исследование проводится на примерах многолетней истории биеннале и размышлений об основных принципах и положениях, которые могут быть полезны для подготовки такого масштабного мероприятия. **Методология** исследования заключается в применении сравнительного и историко-логического методов. Указанный методологический подход позволяет широко раскрыть и подвергнуть анализу определенные модели антропологических компонентов в социальных и художественных отношениях с целью найти динамичный и прогрессивный взгляд на то, что же представляет собой современное искусство. **Научная новизна** работы заключается в том, чтобы продемонстрировать яркое и отчетливое понимание о художниках-профессионалах, которые все чаще позиционируются обществом как последние создатели, которым доступна почти неограниченная свобода. Однако мир искусства, как и любая другая социальная или профессиональная среда, имеет свои конвенции и систему авторитарности. Поэтому в то время, пока художников, чьи имена превратились в бренды, неустанно славят за их уникальность, эта статья проводит параллели между художниками, которые в основном считаются непригодными для сравнения. **Выводы.** Осмыслено развитие парадигмальных систем, имеющих стратегическое значение для развития культурной инфраструктуры государства. Рассмотрено вопрос искусства через идею как первичный культурный рубикон в преодолении маргинальной позиции украинского искусства в сравнении с глобальными арт-процессами.

*Ключевые слова:* культура, биеннале, современное искусство, легитимность, куратор, Манифеста, фестивальное движение.

History of the art of the immediate postwar years, and in particular of the 1950s was largely dominated by stories of the rise of US art in a world transformed by the emergence of the cold war. Such narratives have largely fallen into two camps: one, modernist and celebratory of the rise to prominence of US art, the other socio-historical and critical. Perhaps these tendencies are best represented by two famous art historical studies, the titles of which transparently show the differences between them: Irving Sandler's 1970 book *The Triumph of American Painting* and Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, published in 1983. Both of these studies take abstract expressionist painting as the focus of their deliberations principally because it was the movement representing most prominently the character and value of "American" painting in the immediate postwar years.

Sandler charts the emergence of this art out of the crucible of debates about the avant-garde during the years of twenty. Most profoundly, the artists famous as the abstract expressionists – including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still – are shown struggling to produce a new art befitting the changed realities of the postwar age. Since this age was emerging as decidedly American, it was to be discovered by working through and surpassing the existing forms of the pre-war European avant-garde, most notably surrealist automatism and late variants on cubism. Sandler's book is at pains therefore to carefully elaborate the novelty of American art's new painterly techniques: the "gestural" work of, for example, Jackson Pollock – produced by movements of the artist's hand and body over the canvas – and the "color field" painting of Barnett Newman and others, characterized by the all-over application of pigment on large canvases creating expansive "fields" of color.

In departing in such a manner from European art, New York abstract art in particular came to be seen by some as the most "advanced" art of the day. Given the premium placed on being at the forefront of progressive artistic developments by the discourse of avant-gardism, New York generally came to replace Paris as the recognized center for contemporary art production. This American "triumph," seen by Sandler as a function of the quality and conviction of New York art, is accounted for in very different terms by Serge Guilbaut, one of a group of social art historians that has drawn attention to the importance of abstract expressionism's symbolization of freedom in establishing its cultural dominance at this time. [1] This was very important to a postwar US state for which ideas of freedom – of expression, of the market – were to be central in distinguishing its imperial ambitions from those of its cold war enemy the Soviet Union. From a socio-historical perspective then, the success of abstract expressionist painting is seen to reside less in any "inherent" aesthetic quality of the work itself, and rather more in how its informal, non-traditional style lent itself to being deployed as representative of specifically "American" freedoms – as opposed to the prescriptive forms of art in totalitarian states, particularly of Soviet Socialist realism in the USSR.

With these two historical accounts relating radically different stories about the emergence of US art at this time, I want to make it explicit from the beginning that the concerns of this chapter are as much historiographical as they are historical. This means that, in what follows, if necessary I will be concerned with (re)telling the different stories told about the art of this period – as well as their critical relations to one another – rather than attempting (naively) to write from any notional position of neutrality or objectivity. But also, even though I start my chapter with reference to these established studies, I want to make it clear that I do not think it sufficient to satisfy ourselves with simply choosing one account over the other in our approach to fifties art. This is because, despite their very real differences, in some respects these narratives amount to simply two different versions of the same story: that of US abstraction. In contrast, what follows will attempt to eschew such an exclusive focus by signposting other histories – of differing artistic and cultural practices both inside and outside the United States – which serve to displace the centrality of this narrative stream. For what is truly my story here is how in the fifties we witness the development and consolidation of a modernist "center" at precisely the same time that this gets undone in the various "alternative" practices to it and to American abstract expressionism.

This decentralization of "American" art and its history should be understood not only in relation to cold war politics, but also in relation to the massive social, legal and cultural changes brought about in the west by the processes of European decolonization on the one hand, and the birth of the US-based black civil rights movement on the other. From the granting of independence to India in 1947, European states faced large and effective independence movements across the colonized world, which led them gradually to loosen their hold on third world countries. The success of such movements emboldened the development of the US civil rights movement, which made significant advances over the politics of segregation throughout the fifties. This, alongside the large-scale immigration into Europe of people from former colonized countries, brought about huge challenges, and slow changes, to established western cultural forms and identities. And it wasn't just the international migration of non-white peoples that drove this process: the fifties also saw the initial development of the postwar politics of gender and sexuality. From the publication of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in English in 1953, to the birth in the early 1950s of lesbian and gay rights groups the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society, a decade often renowned for its conservatism in matters of society and culture on closer inspection can be seen to have harbored some very radical and transformative energies indeed.

All of these energies, as we shall see, are played out within emergent forms of art practice at this time. In particular, I will be concerned to draw out how such world historical developments come to be productive of multiple new ways in which the very idea of "politics" comes to be understood and practiced in cultural terms. This may seem to be odd given that it is during these years that we come to witness the rise to power of an institutionally and critically sanctioned modernist view of art, in which any discussion of the po-

litical is seen to be deeply irrelevant to considerations of the aesthetic value of works of art. But it is the contention of this chapter that the emergence of the idea of an “a-political” art, is, in itself, deeply political – being only one form in which various economic, institutional, and political interests come to forge their ideological articulation at this time. It can be taken alongside with other discourses and practices, which variously attempt to reformulate the relations between “art” and “politics,” and the precise ways in which these terms might be understood. I will consider, therefore, amongst other things, the “queer” silences of so-called Neo-Dada art, the participatory activism of Neoconcrete art and Happenings, as well as the ambivalent reflections on mass culture evident within emergent pop art, with a view to illuminating the various generative models of critical culture produced well before the artistic rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Sometimes, for the agents of such alternative cultural activities, abstract expressionism seemed so culturally dominant, so all pervasive, that, as the artist Robert Rauschenberg has recalled: “Jasper [Johns] and I used to start each day by having to move out from abstract expressionism.” For Rauschenberg and others in the 1950s, for me as well as I write this chapter in the early years of the twentieth-first century. For in what follows I too shall endeavor to “move out” from abstract expressionism, both in the sense of taking it as my starting point, as well as in terms of going beyond it in my attention to other artistic and cultural practices. Insofar as I do this, my chapter will hopefully mime some of the strategic maneuvering of 1950s artistic practices. It will take abstract expressionism as starting point only in order that – as the beginning – it might be destructively undermined and dispersed by the other, multifarious aesthetic and political possibilities provided within fifties culture.

If we are talking about stories of A-Political painting it was during the 1950s that modernist discourse came to be established as the pre-eminent, and institutionally sanctioned, discourse of art in the western world. Spearheaded by US art critics Clement Greenberg and (in the 1960s) Michael Fried, and supported by the Museum of Modern Art in New York as well as journals like *Partisan Review*, modernist criticism exhibited a formalist approach to art which held the “integrity” of the individual mediums of painting and sculpture, above all, to be sacrosanct. This meant that painting, for example, should concern itself only with that taken to be “proper” to itself: its flatness and two-dimensionality. The most “advanced” art, wrote Clement Greenberg in 1955, was that which tested “the limits of the inherited forms and genres, and of the medium itself.”<sup>3</sup> The work of Still, Newman, and Mark Rothko was taken to be most advanced by Greenberg at this time by dint of the “emphatic” flatness of their paintings, derived from the “alloverness” of their surface design. This was brought about by the relative lack of tonal variation across the canvas field and resulted in a comparatively undifferentiated and expansive, whole.

This strict valorization of an art that stayed close to the “essence” of its medium came to be the dominant way of accounting for the value of “a- political” painting in the postwar years – a-political because its value as art was deemed to be purely aesthetic and autonomous from all other systems of worth. Such a modernist view was in many ways in stark contrast to art critic Harold Rosenberg’s perspective on abstract expressionist art. For Rosenberg, writing in 1952, the value of abstract expressionist work accrued less to its formal character as painting, and rather more to its status as artistic action. Indeed, writing in an article significantly entitled “The American Action Painters,” Rosenberg helped usher in a shift in conceptions about the ontology of the postwar artwork by approaching abstract expressionist works in terms of an event: “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act. ... What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” [2] This not only inaugurated an understanding of the work of Pollock at all, which would be important for the subsequent development of Happenings and performance art in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but was also important in thinking through the political importance of such artistic actions: “The big moment came when it was decided to paint ... just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value – political, esthetic, moral” (30). Although this may seem of a piece with the formalist appreciation of the autonomous value of the modernist artwork above, especially in its characterization of action painting’s distance from political and moral values, Rosenberg’s reference to action painting’s “gesture of liberation” clues us in to the ways in which he understands it as a fundamentally political kind of act – an originary and revolutionary one, freeing the artist from all conventional structures of meaning and value.

This reading of action painting’s revolutionary ethos has been subject to much criticism by art historical accounts produced within the past few decades informed by feminism and post-colonial theory. Both Amelia Jones (1998) and Rebecca Schneider (2004) have variously criticized the idea of action painting’s singular “originary” gesture as a patriarchal trope designed to style the masculine subject as creative and generative of culture, whilst relegating its presumptive feminine Other to the realm of nature and the procreative. This draws our attention to the ways in which representations and evaluations of the action painter’s gesture were often coded with stultifyingly conventional gender meanings, making it difficult for women to take up the brush as abstract expressionist artists. Not only were the paintings of Pollock, for instance, as T. J. Clark has argued, “clearly implicated in a whole informing metaphors of masculinity” (“the very concepts that seem to apply to them – space, scale, action, trace, energy ... are all, among other things, operators of sexual difference”), but women artists were also limited by the expectation that they act as wives and mothers within the conventional frameworks of mainstream heterosexual culture.

Various photographs from the period testify to the biases women faced, showing female artists like Lee Krasner and Elaine de Kooning as passive wives to their active and creative male husbands, as does the recent biopic *Pollock* (2000), directed by and starring Ed Harris in the leading role, with Marcia Gay Harden, literally and diegetically in a supporting role as “Pollock’s wife” Krasner. [3] Female artists, in order

to survive and be recognized as artists therefore, had to do all they could to suppress their identities as women. The art historian Anne Wagner discusses, for example, how Lee Krasner would invariably sign her work as “L.K.” – or not sign her work at all – in a bid to escape her critical interpellation as a “woman artist” and all the stereotypical expectations that such a phrase brought in its wake (Wagner 1989).

It was a similar story too for black artists attempting to enter into the western mainstream of modernist abstraction. Ann Gibson, for example, has written of the prejudice faced by African-American abstract artists such as Norman Lewis and Beauford Delaney whose work, though visible at the time, was often viewed in stereotypical racial terms and seen to be of lesser value than that of their white male peers (Gibson 1997). This was equally true for black artists working in Europe. Aubrey Williams, born in Guyana but working in London from 1952 onwards, was – like other (white) artists in Britain including Patrick Heron – heavily impressed by a show of American abstract expressionist painting held at the Tate Gallery in London in 1956. This was to have an effect on the development of the abstract style of Williams’ painting during the 1950s, perhaps bringing it closer to the work of Arshile Gorky than to Jackson Pollock. However, as Rasheed Araeen argues, despite Williams’ attempt to work in the manner of his American heroes, his paintings were repeatedly viewed in primitivizing terms by British critics. Araeen cites Jan Carew, writing in 1959 in the *Art News and Review*:

These paintings ... express in essence a sense of being which differs from that of the European in the same way that the music of a spinet differs from the rhythm of a drum. ... His art reflects the instinctive sense of rhythm of the Negro fused with the mythopoetic imagination of the Indian-Voodoo and the image of gods and man, the dreams born in cradles of a forest and brought to the city where twentieth-century man paces the pavements of destruction.

Thus Williams’ work is seen to be the product of some essential, unchanging ethnic culture, born of a place alien to the western “center” and remaining fundamentally distinct from it. We shall see later how such constructions of “the Negro” get played out in fifties Beat culture, but for now it will suffice to consider the colonialist ironies of modernist abstraction at this time. For, as the art historian David Craven has argued, while it was acceptable for white abstract expressionist artists to borrow freely from the forms of Native and Latin American painting (Pollock’s art, for instance, was indebted to the work of Navajo sand painters and Mexican muralists such as David Siqueiros), it was not deemed acceptable to the western art establishment for colonial subjects to traffic in the techniques of modernist art and hope to be treated with the same degree of seriousness and accorded the same value. [4] Which is to say that, whilst artistic practice in the western metropolis was undeniably transformed by the influx of artists from (increasingly former) colonies during the 1950s, artistic discourse was largely mired in US- and Eurocentric understandings, and was therefore largely unable to respond in a productive manner to the post-colonial challenges provided by the art of the day. This, alongside my comments about gender above, make of the discourses of 1950s abstract painting a curious amalgam of revolutionary and reactionary values and attitudes.

Not everyone in the fifties, however, wanted to get on the bandwagon of modernist abstract art. Many viewed the development of abstraction as the cultural arm of US imperialism and much debate took place in European circles, particularly on the Left, about its viability as artistic form. As Brendan Prendeville has written in a very useful account of realist art during this time (Prendeville 2000), in 1947 Soviet Socialist Realism was forcibly asserted as the official artistic credo for the USSR, paying great attention to the value of figurative – as opposed to abstract – art in representing the “realities” of life under communism. This view of an explicitly political art was also taken up by numerous left-wing artists outside the Eastern bloc countries, despite Stalin’s show-trials and the Nazi–Soviet pact of the late 1930s, which had caused many Soviet sympathizers in the west to turn away from communism in general, and Stalinism in particular. Artists as varied as Renato Guttuso in Italy and André Fougeron in France practiced their own versions of social realism, whilst in Britain the critic John Berger took up the cause of art for society’s sake by debating the merits of abstraction vs. figuration with the painter Patrick Heron in the pages of the *New Statesman*. Instead of the abstract expressionists, or indeed the abstract canvases of Heron himself, Berger championed the work of British artists like John Bratby instead, a so-called “kitchen sink” painter famed for his representations of everyday, mundane urban scenes. [5] In addition to such Left critiques, abstraction also had its reactionary right-wing detractors, particularly in the US. Thomas Hart Benton, for example, a leading member of the American regionalist school of painting in 1930s, remained a vociferous critic of abstraction well into the early 1950s. For Benton, as for Berger and others, abstraction offered nothing but “an academic world of empty pattern” as opposed to an art that could claim to represent the everyday realities of people’s lives.

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*Стаття надійшла до редакції 14.06.2016 р.*