

ACTING OUT THE AB-EX EFFECT



THE WORLD WAS SUPPOSED TO END this past May, but we're still here. No Rapture, no Apocalypse. The same could be said of Abstract Expressionism: That dripping, demonstrative, unabashedly tactile practice has met its maker many times over. Yet its effects are everywhere apparent. AbEx is there, of course, in works that dramatize the false promises and ignominious delinquency of the genre, pushing gestural abstraction to its stained, ripped, debased, and de-skilled limits (witness David Hammons's recent suite of literally trash-bagged pictures). It is there when artists make one more cool, laid-back critical feint in the supposed endgame of painting. But it is also newly and forcefully present as a growing number of artists rediscover its profligate processes and materials,

across disparate media and in unexpected hands. After all, in its day AbEx migrated to film, fashion rags, cold-war embassies, and TV, from *Mad Men* America to postwar Japan. So we shouldn't be surprised at its relevance for artists now—not so much in terms of its redemption or its ripeness for mockery, but for the promiscuous results its redeployment might yield.

This coming fall, major retrospectives of Willem de Kooning and Gerhard Richter will simultaneously bookend the legacy of AbEx: from early concerns with composition, opticality, physical gesture, and ego, to noncomposition, the conceptual evacuation of gestural subjectivity, and pastiche. And a panoply of shows this past spring have featured contemporary artists who have by and large taken the action of mark-

making—the “spatter-and-daub (-and-scrape-and-swipe-and-pour-and . . .),” in curator Harry Cooper's words—to new arenas not only in painting but in performance, film, and beyond. The question is, then: What is at stake in these various reframings and reinterpretations of Abstract Expressionism?

This special section of *Artforum* considers both the historical nuances and the contemporary persistence of AbEx—the ways in which artists are engaging its expanded notions of affect and experience, but to vastly different ends. If the initial efflorescence of action painting has long been caricatured as vulgar machismo, that vulgarity has been reclaimed by artists, not least women and queers, Amy Sillman argues here, because AbEx has everything “to do with



Amy Sillman's studio, New York, 2009. Photos: Amy Sillman.

the politics of the body." Such a re-reading of Abstract Expressionism finds its echoes in work that pulls the gesture, the painted mark, and the viewing of images into performances or sprawling installations that upend ideas of agency and presence. (As the artist Ei Arakawa reminds us in his text for this issue, "Painting is watching.") If, in the 1950s, art informal impresario Georges Mathieu was already selling his TV-ready painting events (described here by scholar Molly Warnock as "Gallic corn") and Cy Twombly was discovering an "untutored rawness" in pencil and paint (per curator Ann Temkin), today artists as diverse as Josh Smith, Nicole Eisenman, Albert Oehlen, Richard Prince, and Leidy Churchman are exploring the visceral and the embodied within a world they know to be

mediated, networked, and marketed all at once.

So rather than focus on the state (or dissolution) of one medium, or on monographic treatments of individual artists, the writings that follow pursue the more granular trail of materials, processes, and intricate social and medial dynamics. Several authors—Cooper, Sillman, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Daniel Marcus—look at the overlooked: the contradictions of AbEx (the "band of selves," the "controlled accident"), which have come to shape much artwork today; AbEx's trade in sexuality, camp, and vulgarity; the physical care of AbEx surfaces and their striking material properties; the figuration, the face, that AbEx seemingly left behind but which would now seem to have resurfaced. Other contributors, including David Joselit and Graham

Bader, plumb the way gestural abstraction and spontaneous mark-making are always already tied to systems of communication and exchange. And fourteen artists—from Rodney Graham to Julian Schnabel—weigh in on their own relationships to AbEx, while Temkin, Warnock, Carroll Dunham, Jordan Kantor, and Mark Godfrey each give close-up readings of five individual artworks or projects. Such a focused eye is needed. While much of the art world is constantly looking at the big picture, on the hunt for the next new (technologically or economically determined) zeitgeist, the texts here take the opposite tack: zooming in, remaining open to the reverberations, however slight or vague or low to the ground, that aesthetic acts may leave in their wake.
—Michelle Kuo

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

ACTING OUT
THE AB-EX EFFECT

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"The Irascibles," New York, 1950. Front row, from left: Theodoros Stamos, Jimmy Ernst, Barnett Newman, James C. Brooks, Mark Rothko. Middle row: Richard Pousette-Dart, William Baziotes, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin. Back row: Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne. Photo: Nina Leen/Getty Images.

Spatter and Daub

HARRY COOPER ON THE CONTRADICTIONS OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

ABSTRACT: LITERALLY, "TO PULL AWAY." EXPRESS: "TO PUSH FORTH." Did Robert Coates, the critic who gave *Abstract Expressionism* its current usage in 1946 (it had previously been applied to the work of Kandinsky), sense the etymological contradiction? Probably not. Was it a coincidence that he was reviewing the paintings of Hans Hofmann, known for his "push-pull" theory of composition? Probably. For Coates, the term was simply more "polite" than "spatter-and-daub school of painting."

The Abstract Expressionists often insisted that their work had a subject, which meant that it was neither abstract (in the sense of being nonrepresentational, purely formal) nor expressive (in the sense of being immediate, crylike). The term must have seemed as misguided to them as *Cubism* had to Picasso, who responded by adding bouillon cubes to his work. It may be preferable to Harold Rosenberg's existentialist *action painting*, Clement Greenberg's nationalist "*American-type*" *painting* (don't forget the scare quotes), or somebody's urbanist *New York School*—but not much. At least *spatter-and-daub* (-and-scrape-and-swipe-and-pour-and . . .) makes material sense.

But perhaps the self-contradiction of *AbEx* is inspired: The term might well stand for a riven movement. I don't mean the familiar split between the Color Field painters (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still) and the gesture painters (Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline)—a false distinction if ever there was one—but rather some real contradictions, sharp enough to hurt. And deep enough to preoccupy artists to this day. Here are ten:

1. *The band of selves.* The famous *Life* magazine photo of "The Irascibles" says it all. Fifteen painters and not a single look or gesture of connection between them. They hold their cigarettes, themselves, or both. In 1950, having worked hard to carve out individual manners, they are a lot more concerned with the risks of appearing together in *Life* magazine than with the undeniable benefits. How embarrassing.
2. *The nonteaching academy.* A related antinomy. In 1948, Rothko, Still, Robert Motherwell, David Hare, and William Baziotis set up the Subjects of the Artist School. The program was based, it seems, on an intense desire not to be Hofmann, presiding superbly over his atelier. No, they would be a "group of painters, each visiting the center one afternoon a week, each an entity different from the others, each free to teach in whatever way he chose or free to stay away," as Still put it. He never showed up—big surprise—and the school dissolved after a year.
3. *The conviction of doubt.* "Our moods do not believe in each other," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in "Circles." "I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall." The emotional roller coaster of the Irascibles might seem overwrought to us now, but it ran deep. You can't kill Picasso and Matisse without a lot of faith and a lot of doubt. But more than that, they actually had faith in doubt. To borrow de Kooning's phrase, they were all "slipping glimpsers."
4. *Undead nature.* (They tried to kill it, but it kept coming back.) When Hofmann made the challenging observation that Pollock did not paint from nature, the latter reportedly responded, "I *am* nature." Arshile Gorky hunkered down, drawing his weeds and thistles point-blank. De Kooning rode his bike. The AbExers devised various strategies to dislodge a picturesque relationship to the world—and yet, like a bad



Above: Jackson Pollock's studio, East Hampton, NY, 1975. Photo: Susan Wood/Getty Images.

Below: Adolph Gottlieb, New York, 1970. Photo: Arnold Newman/Getty Images.





Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas, 87 x 118". © Estate of Jackson Pollock/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Above: Franz Kline, *High Street*, 1950, oil on canvas, 58 3/8 x 77 1/2". © Estate of Franz Kline/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Below: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1949, oil on canvas, 81 3/8 x 66 3/8". © Christopher Rothko and Kate Rothko Prizel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

perfume, it hung around. Greenberg, a Sunday landscape painter, dubbed one of Pollock's works *Lavender Mist*, and it stuck.

5. *The controlled accident.* "I don't use the accident—'cause I deny the accident," said Pollock. He was *not* protesting too much! The more you look at Hans Namuth's films, the less trancelike the painter seems. (Question: Who said, "When I am not conscious of what I am doing, it's a complete success"? Answer: Matisse.) Kline and Motherwell enlarged their slightest gestures; Pollock and de Kooning shed randomness all over the place, carefully.
6. *The unfinished masterpiece.* "When is a painting finished?" was one of the great questions of the day, often kicked around The Club. Short answer, which would have saved a lot of breath: When it is not.
7. *The silent word.* Rothko all but stopped writing around 1948—that *annus mirabilis* in which he, Pollock, and Newman all found their signature devices—because, I suspect, he came to regard painting as speech. The same is true of many of his cohort. Too bad, because painting isn't speech, certainly not abstract painting, whose marks have no dictionary. Realizing this, Adolph Gottlieb stayed fairly legible, whether his tragedies were Greek (*Eyes of Oedipus*, 1941) or atomic (the "Bursts," 1957–74). The others staked all on cryptic glyphs, ambiguous gestures.
8. *The mural on the easel.* Much as they disdained the "painter's ass" (Dutch *ezel*, "donkey"), much as they strove for the expansive public statement, they kept making, and eventually started selling, what Greenberg in 1948 succinctly called "the movable picture hung on a wall."
9. *Apocalyptic wallpaper* (Rosenberg, 1952). An oldie but a goodie, capturing the full yin-yang of the sublime and the ridiculous. Decoration as the only possible postnuclear history painting. 'Nuff said.



It is marvelous how much of contemporary art seems dedicated to taking AbEx's contradictions and rendering them still sharper.



Left: Philip Guston, *To B.W.T.*, 1952, oil on canvas, 48½ x 51½".

Right: Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2007, oil on canvas, 60 x 48".



10. *The cosmic ego.* How do you transcend self via a signature style? Robert Frost nailed it in a lilting, self-mocking poem about peering past his reflection in the bottom of a well and finally seeing, "[t]hrough the picture, a something white, uncertain / . . . / Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something."

It is marvelous how much of contemporary art seems dedicated to taking these contradictions and rendering them still sharper. (Or perhaps not so marvelous: Without the retrospective lens of contemporary practice, perhaps many of them would not have been visible in the first place.) Just think of the visually overwhelming wallpapers—the opposite of polite backgrounds—produced by Andy Warhol, or the silently screaming words of Christopher Wool's stenciled paintings, or the uncanny reanimation of nature at the hands of Matthew Barney, or the near parody of self-doubt personified by a Martin Kippenberger, or the conflation of aesthetic control and sensory chaos in the work of Christian Marclay, or Josh Smith's brushy abstractions of his own name, which make the phrase *signature style* explicit. Perhaps the most influential contradiction of all can be laid at the doorstep of the Subjects of the Artist, for its abdication of pedagogy virtually defines today's model of what we call art school. As I heard Matthew Ritchie remark in a lecture at the Phillips Collection the other day, "You can't teach art, but you can learn it."

And yet all this ambiguous homage does not do the trick for me, does not bring back what I imagine or fantasize to be the ethos of the AbEx era. I miss the old contradictions (as opposed to their latter-day cartoon versions), the loose ends, the overreaching. The agony of victory and the thrill of defeat. Painting today (forgive me) is too stylish, too self-conscious. Give me more of what Philip Guston, in one of his rare essays, called "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility" (1965). If possible. That would be a nice legacy. □



Above: Matthew Barney, *Drawing Restraint 13: The Instrument of Surrender (detail)*, 2006, cast petroleum jelly, cast polycaprolactone thermoplastic, self-lubricating plastic, black sand, 3' x 35' 3" x 15' 2".

Right: Christopher Wool, *Trouble*, 1990, enamel on aluminum, 108 x 72".



Largeness is ride
on vision.
of the world
seeing double

Eyes in the Heat

DANIEL MARCUS ON

FIGURATION IN JEAN DUBUFFET, CATHY WILKES, AND JOSH SMITH

IT IS 1946. The war has just ended, and Henri Michaux, an avant-garde poet turned painter, finds himself haunted by faces: “As soon as I pick up a pencil or a brush, ten, fifteen, twenty of them surge up to me on the paper one after the other. And most of them wild. Are all those faces me? Are they other people? From what depths?” In Michaux’s works of the period, these questions are redoubled on the page, where the human face is reduced to a zero-point of legibility. A year earlier, Michaux had started on a series of faces using thin washes of gouache, watercolor, and ink to evoke the eerie cohort. Fugitive, tortured, these small works on paper distill the basic attributes of the face: the ghostly outline of a head and the bare, and occasionally grotesque, indications of eyes and a mouth. The faces came to him from within, Michaux claimed, each with its own persona: horror, misery, joy, and so on. They belonged to him, he concluded; they were *his* faces, the grimaces of a host of inner selves. But they were trapped on the inside, unable to get out:

Behind the face with its motionless features, deserted, now no more than a mask, another superiorly mobile face contracts, seethes, simmers in an unbearable paroxysm. Behind the set features, desperately seeking a way out, expressions like a pack of howling dogs . . . Lost, sometimes criminal faces . . . Faces of sacrificed personalities, “I’s” stifled, killed, by life, willpower, ambition, by a propensity for rectitude and consistency.¹

The story of modernist painting could be written as a story of the face—beginning with Manet’s *Olympia* and ending in crisis, with Jackson Pollock’s *Eyes in the Heat*, or the monstrous child-animal faces, as disturbing in their way as Michaux’s wraiths, that proliferate in the work of the Cobra group at roughly the same moment in the 1940s. In the period immediately after the war, however, representations of the face all but disappeared from painting. Why? And what explains the face’s uncanny return in the work of so many contemporary artists—among them Cathy Wilkes and Josh Smith, whose work I’ll examine below?

To find answers to these questions, we will need to return to the beginning of the postwar period, to 1946. The bewildered tone of Michaux’s essay indicates the distance between then and now: We have come to take notions of the divided self as something of a given, but in the wake of World War II this schism was still being formulated, giving rise to a vast theoretical discourse in the decades that followed. Michaux’s projection of a division between the inner and outer face presages Jacques Lacan’s theorization of the “split subject” of psychoanalysis, for example. In fact, postwar continental philosophy is positively brimming with theories and philosophies of the face, from Emmanuel Levinas’s to Giorgio Agamben’s. It was in these years, too, that American cognitive psychologists discovered that the construction of faciality as such is contingent rather than innate. As far as art-critical diagnostics go, though, it is surely Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who have furnished us with the most useful definition of the



Above: Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2010, mixed media on panel, 60 x 48".

Below: Cathy Wilkes, *Non Verbal* (detail), 2005, oil on canvas, mannequins, aluminum tray, corn oil, LCD screen, stroller, mixed media. Installation view, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh. Photo: Ruth Clark.





Jean Dubuffet, *Dhôtel nuancé d'abricot*
(Dhôtel with a Tinge of Apricot), 1947, oil
on canvas, 45 7/8 x 35". © Fondation Jean
Dubuffet/Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York/ADAGP, Paris.

again at the portrait of Tapié, I think I can see why. Too much of the painting happens on the surface, such that the face's grip on the stuff of the painting—its material substance—comes across as weak. The conjuncture of face and matter fails to conjure up anything like a bodily presence. Paint does not add up to flesh, in other words. This failure of embodiment seems to have caused Dubuffet real frustration in the early months of the project. Though he rejected the idea that portraiture had to be about resemblance, a portrait still had to evoke *somebody*, even if it was just that—some body, which is to say, nobody in particular. Hence the breakthrough of the later portraits: His paintings of July and August 1947, of which *Pierre Matisse, portrait obscur* and *Dhôtel nuancé d'abricot* are key examples, evoke the stuff of the body without renegeing on the facialization of the canvas surface. In these works, face and flesh no longer coincide at the level of *disegno*, but they continue to inflect each other nonetheless.

To make this strategy work, Dubuffet had to find ways of making paint more than mere stony geology, and of evoking the body without drawing it. Instead, the presence of the body had to emanate directly from the painted ground. In the end, he achieved this quality by ratcheting up the size of the *grandes têtes* and by distorting the outline of the figure's body beyond recognition, so that there could be no confusion of the drawn body and the corporeality of the paint. Color played a crucial role as well. The skin tone of the Matisse portrait varies between bruise-black and inky purple, shot through with traces of red lipstick—and I am describing not the figure's lips but the effects of Dubuffet's much-labored underpainting. *Dhôtel nuancé d'abricot* achieves this effect by different means: The face of the subject, novelist André Dhôtel, is a tangle of deep incisions, but the real event of the painting is not the caricature itself. Rather, it is the flashes of red, burning peach, and mustard that electrify the space within its incised furrows, and their contrast with the chalky white of the skin. Something in this canyonland of paint is evocative of the body, even if only as an absence, the object around which these traces of color might once have cohered. It is not *someone's* body, but it is *somebody*. It was here, in his intransigence, that Dubuffet arrived at his radical reimagining of figuration, conceiving the figure in terms of generic corporeality—depersonalized, and even degendered.⁵ As such, the portraits can be seen to anticipate modes of counterfacial resistance that would proliferate in decades to follow. If the authoritarian face could not be overcome, it could at least be countered with a *bodily* absolute.

But this strategy would not be pursued in painting after 1946. Even Dubuffet would come to backtrack from his innovation in the years that followed. Rather than a triumph, 1946 marks the date of painting's full subsumption to the authority of the face, heralding the flattening of surface and the purging of interiority that would culminate with post-painterly abstraction. As the represented face dropped away from painting, then, painterly faciality moved toward its apogee. Henceforth, artists who sought to resist the regime of the face and to accommodate bodily interiority would turn to other modes of practice—performance, sculpture, film. In 1946, Dubuffet found himself at the crossroads of this schism; that is to say, he found his investigation of the human face leading toward ever more extreme articulations of corporeality on the one hand and faciality on the other. Though each of these possibilities—absolute face versus absolute body—would attract partisans in the decades that followed, Dubuffet himself withdrew from the field. His portraits took the face and body as far as they would go without coming apart or collapsing into each other; surviving their rupture would be a task for other artists, and other subjects, to navigate.

But wait: Aren't Dubuffet's portraits meant precisely to negate the historical genre of portraiture? Shouldn't we be talking about the politics of *art brut*, or the covert operations of the *informe*, the undoing of figuration at the primordial site of subject-formation? What is year zero if not another name for the "zero degree" of painting, i.e., the modernist project of returning the medium to its limit conditions? No doubt these are relevant questions, but I think they misread the historical stakes. The crisis of faciality should not be attributed to painting alone. To lack a face of one's own, and/or to wear a face copied from magazines, movies, or TV; to feel oneself reduced to the bare life of the body, whether at the shopping mall or in the custody of the police: These are facts of life in the metropolitan West. The history of the face tracks the evolution of domination: While, in the early modern period, the face dominated the body from an abstract remove (i.e., the face of God), after 1946 these

To lack a face of one's own, and/or to wear a face copied from magazines, movies, or TV; to feel oneself reduced to the bare life of the body, whether at the shopping mall or in the custody of the police: These are facts of life in the metropolitan West.

Jean Dubuffet, *Pierre Matisse, portrait obscur* (Pierre Matisse, Dark Portrait), 1947, oil, sand, and gravel on canvas, 51 1/2 x 38 3/4". © Fondation Jean Dubuffet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.



few years, the pictures he made at Gould's suggestion threw him into a new sort of mania. In the months that followed, he would make hundreds of portraits of sitters from Gould's circle. These works were intended as a wholesale travesty of the genre; Dubuffet toyed knowingly with the appearance of his subjects, giving them traits and costumes they did not have or wear—fat men became thin, the bald acquired flowing manes, and so on. This was more than mere caricature. The point, the artist explained, was to make “effigies” as opposed to mirror images, or even psychological studies, of his subjects. He would begin by preparing his canvases horizontally on the studio table, slathering the shape of the figure onto the canvas. Following this initial partitioning of figure and ground, he went about torturing the thickened paste—his term was *haute pâte*—into a state of geological roughness, adding sand, ash, and charcoal dust to bring the surface texture to the proper consistency. Only when the *pâte* had been worked over extensively would he begin to sketch out the portrait itself, incising the figure's features directly into the painted batter, touching up here and there with paint, caking the surface with more ash and sand, and repeating until the picture seemed finished—a process that sometimes took weeks to complete.

Three extraordinary portraits from this series were recently on view as part of the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris: Two late canvases, *Pierre Matisse, portrait obscur* (Dark Portrait) and *Dhôtel nuancé d'abricot* (Dhôtel with a Tinge of Apricot), both dating from July–August 1947, hung side by side with an earlier portrait, *Michel Tapié soleil* (Michel Tapié the Sun), done in August 1946. The larger-than-life scale of these works is often lost in reproduction, as is their thick, densely worked materiality. As paintings of faces, they are strikingly oversize, so much so that in some cases the facial features no longer cohere when seen at close range. Two of the portraits at the Pompidou, those of Pierre Matisse (Dubuffet's New York dealer) and Michel Tapié (the art critic), render the model's head as a giant pancake, though that is no indication of either man's bigheadedness. Dubuffet liked, as he put it, to “inscribe faces which are in reality gaunt and angular inside a roughly circular shape, the form of a gourd or a tart.” This pancaking of the model's head could be comical or mystifying, and in the case of *Michel Tapié soleil* it is decidedly the latter. This has something to do with Dubuffet's use of materials: In addition to the usual infusion of ash and sand, he has applied bits of twine and pebbles to the canvas to accentuate the details of Tapié's bulbous moon face and miniaturized body. Most important, though, *Michel Tapié soleil* takes the face out of the picture and puts it squarely on the canvas surface, like a work of graffiti rather than of portraiture. This maneuver served Dubuffet's efforts to depersonalize the portraits, wrenching the face free of the particularities of the sitter's body. The effect was to *facialize the canvas*, orienting the surface-level composition around the symmetry and centrality of Tapié's mustachioed face—a move that foreshadows many of the key innovations of postwar American modernism, from the reiteration of the canvas rectangle to the exploration of the matter of paint. Frank Stella's *Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, 1959, is waiting in the wings, as is Jay DeFeo's *Rose*, 1958–66.

But Dubuffet did not make this leap. In fact, the solution of the graffiti face does not seem to have much satisfied him. Looking

JULIAN SCHNABEL

The Rothko Chapel was a staple of my consciousness. When I was at school in Houston, I could go there at different times of day and physically engage those works—the way the paint was put on the canvas, the thickness of the stretchers, the edges of the paintings. I learned a lot there. Yet in the early 1970s when I arrived back in New York, the cathedral of Abstract Expressionism, I felt like an outsider. The legacy of AbEx at that time was the pervasive question as to whether figurative imagery was still viable. Could it still be modern? I didn't want to make work that was manneristic, didn't want to just draw a figure in a way where people would recognize my style, the way they could Richard Lindner's, say, or Lester Johnson's. Rather, I tried to make the painting itself into the figure, to shape the painting and put materials other than paint and canvas into it. For me, there was an anthropomorphic quality to painting. It was like a body intruding into the room, and somehow the object, the painted thing, had to have an outside and an inside that I could draw on top of. And in so doing, I developed my ideas of pictoriality.

At a certain moment when one looks at the Rothkos, they start floating. For my own paintings, I needed something to transgress that sensation. I realized I had to do something to the surface of the painting that contradicted what was already there. I couldn't find myself in one configuration, one irreducible image or so-called signature style that represented me. What I have done over the course of the past thirty years is to assemble a new architecture for painting, making the physical fact of painting into something that is more than pictorial. The battle between the object and the picture is what my paintings came to be about. I discovered that the physical support could be the architecture of a painting but so too could an illusionistic image (a pictorial image) provide that architecture. In both cases, I paint on top of these things to meld the notion of illimitableness into an accumulation of painted decisions that could be seen as time maps. In the repetition of making things, I search for something ineffable, using materials and gesture—seeking an unfathomable equality of marks where time ceases to matter.

I always need to obliterate the image, as with the intervening purple shapes that obscure the preexisting face of the “Big Girl” paintings, 2001. The added abstract glyph implies another temporality. It annotates and becomes a new ground that commandeers the painting's prior set of meanings. If you think of Franz Kline's work where he painted directly on Homasote walls, or Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, or the Rothko Chapel, maybe you start to think about the Springs studio of Pollock as a chapel: I needed to put the walls and the floor into my painting, too. It wasn't enough to have simply one layer of meaning—one surface, one image. □

JULIAN SCHNABEL IS A NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST.



Julian Schnabel, *Vision de Merde* (10,000 Apologies), 1989, oil on green tarpaulin, 8' ¼" x 10' 6 ½".

abstractions were atomized into the vast apparatus of social control called biopower and spectacle by its most trenchant critics. This transposition marked an epochal shift in the equation of power and resistance, opening up new avenues of exploitation but also furnishing new means of dissent.

On one side of the face-body divide, postwar youth, feminist, and queer movements would make use of what I am calling “generic corporeality,” advocating the transformation of bare life into radically new ways of living, while on the other side, in the war rooms of spectacular control, metropolitan life would be reorganized around increasingly disembodied modes of experience, with every available surface converted into a luminous facial screen—beginning with the TV set and culminating in a ubiquitous array of digitally manipulated image streams. There are social conditions, in other words, underpinning the crisis of faciality in painting. This is not to say that Dubuffet reflected on these conditions with any great sophistication, but that he *lived* them, or at least was able to imagine what living them might mean. The same can be said of the next generations of artists, those who anteceded Dubuffet and whose work accepts the face-body schism as a *fait accompli*. In this regard, a short history of faciality and its twentieth-century discontents would get much out of Andy Warhol, Donald Judd, and Dan Flavin, but also Eva Hesse, Paul Thek, and Carolee Schneemann. These artists—all of whom, not coincidentally, had moved away from painting—internalized the crisis of faciality deeply; for them, there was no question of looking on from the outside. I am suggesting, then, that we read the zero-degrees of postwar art in terms of the absolutes of postwar life. In our own moment, as postwar capitalism enters a decidedly new phase of crisis, it seems crucial to ask how the face-body dialectic continues to inflect developments in contemporary art and culture, and how painting might reveal and respond to that dialectic.

TWO CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS come immediately to mind, though they may initially seem quite the odd couple. The first is Cathy Wilkes, a Glasgow-based artist best known for her meticulous assemblage-based installations, which earned her a Turner Prize nomination in 2008. Wilkes’s installation *Non Verbal*, first exhibited in 2005 at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, seems particularly relevant. It comprises a host of found objects, mostly household wares, including a stroller, a flat-screen television, a pair of salad bowls, and a shallow basin filled with cooking oil and harboring, among other things, a DVD player and a remote-control device. The key elements of the installation, also found objects in their own way, are the two female mannequins standing on either side of the TV set. Each mannequin has a small abstract canvas affixed to its face. The canvases themselves are intimate works, painted quick and loose, a thick daub here, a thin wash there. They are the products of Wilkes’s hand, though she does not label them as works in their own right. In one of the two canvases, two circular shapes read insistently as eyes, making the painting a sort of mask for the mannequin—an expression for the expressionless, perhaps. Speaking about her use of mannequins, Wilkes explains that she employs them to help imagine what a viewer might be feeling or seeing in the space of the exhibition. It is a gesture that works both ways: The mannequins confront viewers as stand-ins for the absent artist as well as for the absent users and consumers the objects call to mind. That is not to say, though, that the gap between artist and viewer is easily bridged. *Separation* is a key term for Wilkes, summing up the limit conditions of interpersonal experience:

Even during the most intimate experiences when I have extended beyond myself, far out of my limits, my body and mind; the births of my children, the deaths of my parents, separation has remained unbridgeable. I rely on my feeling about this, our separation from each other, me the artist, and you . . . There’s no expectation that an audience will participate. And no need for someone to fully understand. At the same time, through contemplation and communion, all objects can become transcendental.⁶

Wilkes’s meditation on family life, alienation, and transcendence strikes me as particularly important for understanding the face-body dyad in its contemporary form, pointing as it does to a regime of facialization operative within the sphere of social reproduction—the home, in other words. This tallies with what Marxist critics have come to understand about the restructuring of capitalist societies in the late twentieth century, and the expansion of the commodity



Above: Jean Dubuffet, *Michel Tapié soleil (Michel Tapié the Sun)*, 1946, gravel and sand on hardwood, 43 3/4 x 34 1/2". © Fondation Jean Dubuffet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Below: Cathy Wilkes, *Untitled*, 2010, oil on canvas, 9 7/8 x 14".



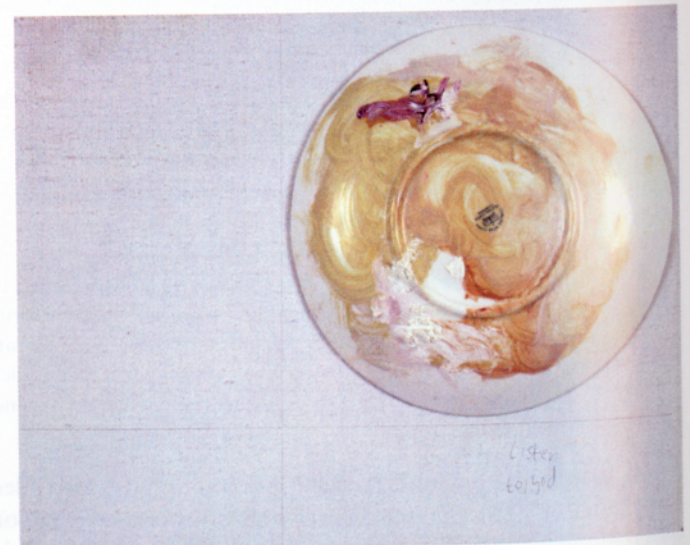
Paintings function in Wilkes's exhibitions by bodying forth a sort of homeless expressivity—affect without a proper owner, faceless interiority that is simply *someone's*.



into the most intimate quarters of the everyday. As theorist Silvia Federici notes, the process of postwar economic restructuring began with the induction of female workers into the labor force en masse, and has proceeded on the assumption that women would continue to shoulder the unpaid work of social reproduction.⁷ At the same time, computerized design technologies have made possible a revolution in the sphere of everyday consumption, refining the “face” of manufactured objects to correspond one-to-one to the “profile” of the consumer. It is not surprising, then, that Wilkes has found the objects of the post-Fordist household so deeply shot through with alienation. Her response, it seems, has been to revive—though in ways utterly contemporary—Dubuffet’s painterly tactic of counterfacial resistance, which had been left in cold storage almost since its discovery.⁸ Paintings function in Wilkes’s exhibitions by bodying forth a sort of homeless expressivity—affect without a proper owner, faceless interiority that is simply *someone’s*—that is, as it were, generic—and that can be passed from person to person. This approach to the medium, which art historian David Joselit has recently diagnosed in terms of the transitive insertion of paintings into networks of circulation and signification,⁹ puts Wilkes in the company of a handful of other artists, including Jutta Koether, Ida Ekblad, and Rachel Harrison, who treat abstract painting as one mode of practice among others. However, for Wilkes, this frictionless circulation is circumscribed by the gallery enclosure: Affect might flow freely in the exhibition space, but in the sphere of the everyday, and most particularly in the close quarters of the domestic sphere, such communion is strictly delimited by the presence of others—other bodies, other faces. For Wilkes, paintings are meant to undermine the barriers of everyday separation and to open up connections between people. Of course, this is an ambiguous gesture: In *Non Verbal*, the two small canvases both obstruct and liberate vision, blocking the mannequins’ view while opening a conduit between invisible worlds of feeling.

Left: Cathy Wilkes, *Non Verbal* (detail), 2005, oil on canvas, mannequins, aluminum tray, corn oil, LCD screen, stroller, mixed media. Installation view, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh. Photo: Ruth Clark.

Above: Cathy Wilkes, *Untitled*, 2010, oil and tempera on canvas, 8 x 10”.



Cathy Wilkes, *Listen to God*, 2005, oil and mixed media on canvas, 8 1/2 x 10”.

Ambiguities of this sort are crucial to Wilkes's project; her point is not to negate the face outright but rather to transpose the site of face-body struggle—the site of painting, that is—from gallery to home and studio (as adjunct to domestic space). Though modest in scope, this transposition signals a major shift in the relationship of art to its space of exhibition. Through much of the late twentieth century, the white cube played the role of the facial machine par excellence, a site where autonomous faciality arrayed itself against a homogeneous mass of spectatorial bodies. But this system would prove inflexible to a fault, breaking down under the pressure of the bodies it had been invented to neutralize. Long since inoperative, the white cube is rendered completely obsolete under the current regime of microfacial control. With the autonomous face in the process of dissolving itself directly into the fabric of everyday life, the gallery container demands to be repurposed or cast aside. Wilkes's work, displacing the gallery as the primary site of contestation, makes strides in this direction. Her process is by all accounts opposed to the separation of studio work from everyday life: When assembling an installation in the studio, for example, Wilkes often appropriates *objets trouvés* directly from her home, culling her own unwashed salad bowls, jam jars, dishes, and plates, which she folds back into the weave of everyday life once an exhibition has ended, their gallery sojourns merely brief interruptions in their domestic lives. She has also made the home a site of production/exhibition in its own right. For example, Wilkes will sometimes hang a painting in progress above her bathtub for weeks or months, washing it clean from time to time in the manner of a nurse or caretaker. In this gesture, the unfinished canvas takes on multiple roles: as a vulnerable body, like that of an elderly parent or child; as an object of reverence, its washing echoing the Christian ritual of washing feet; and as a yet-to-be-identified presence, to be propitiated as well as interrogated. These ambiguities speak to the vitality of domestic space as a site for painting—not as a substitute for the gallery (that is, not abandoning it as a space of display) but as a testing ground for experiments with face and gesture, embodiment and affect.

COMPARE WILKES'S WORK, then, to that of Josh Smith, the New York-based artist who first gained renown for using the letters of his generic, all-American name as raw material for neo-abstract painting. If Wilkes is finding new ways to contest the face, Smith has embraced it. Wilkes's paintings are almost always small, understated, and quietly emotive, and almost always appear as part of installations, while Smith's canvases are large, extroverted, wildly gestural, and dashed off as quickly as possible. Whereas Wilkes might spend weeks dwelling with a single unfinished painting, Smith produces canvases by the dozen, sometimes generating an exhibition's worth of work in under a week. In the past decade, Smith has emerged at the forefront of a revival of gestural abstraction, confounding the distinction between high-modernist expressivity and the impossible coolness of "conceptual" painting. For example, in a well-known gesture cribbed from the Warholian playbook, Smith has standardized the format of his paintings, almost all of which measure sixty by forty-eight inches (though there are deviations from this format, notably his small "palette paintings," most of which measure twenty by sixteen inches, one-third the size of the larger canvases) and are priced equally according to size. Hung cheek by jowl on the gallery wall, these works proclaim their status as commodities in no uncertain terms.¹⁰ Like many of his colleagues, Smith switches fluidly between the laptop and the canvas, repurposing digital photographs of older works, sometimes downloaded from his own website, in order to furnish motifs for new paintings. Rather than playing the manual against the digital, though, Smith's work aims to dissolve the distinction between these terms, treating the canvas as a sort of laptop—that is to say, as a machine that facilitates the interchangeability of images and signs, connecting painting to, rather than cordoning it off from, networks of value and reproduction. Smith's collapsing of digital and manual production accounts, in part, for his cut-and-paste approach to painting; he treats even finished works as "files" to be manipulated *en abyme*. As such, he has been quick to signal his indifference to the legacy of modernist abstraction: "Ultimately [my paintings] end up being emotional but they don't mean anything, they were intended to be sort of a caricature of abstraction. But they end up pure abstract paintings. I don't care so much about how they look because I know how they look. It's not an issue for me, I'm not concerned about how they look. I know how they're going to look: they are going to look like abstract paintings."¹¹

LESLEY VANCE

The first painter to make a meaningful impression on me in school was Jackson Pollock; the first painter to make a meaningful impression when I encountered his work in person was Mark Rothko; and the artist I keep going back to right now is Lee Krasner. I especially love her collages. I admire their force, their uncompromised dynamic. And I can relate to the role destruction played in their creation.

At one point in the early 1950s, Krasner grew dissatisfied with some drawings she had been working on in her studio, so she tore them to shreds and tossed the scraps on the floor in frustration. The sight of those fallen fragments triggered much of her subsequent work—collages made from ripped-apart drawings and, later, from torn sections of paintings.

I had a similar moment of destruction born from discontent a few years ago, only instead of tearing up my painting, I scraped away paint. This act of erasure produced a more intuitive composition and opened the door to the type of spaces I now pursue. Likewise, the paintings I end up being the most satisfied with have to go through a stage in which I dislike the work enough to lose it for a while, prompting nonsensical actions that become essential. □

LESLEY VANCE IS A LOS ANGELES-BASED ARTIST.



Lesley Vance, *Untitled (44)*, 2010, oil on canvas, 16 x 14".



Smith's canvases are not the salvation of abstract painting; they are a means of surviving the afterlife of the white cube even as the support system of the postwar world collapses (or is privatized) around us.

Left: Josh Smith, *Large Collage (New Museum)* (detail), 2009, eighteen mixed-media collages on panel, each 60 x 48".

Opposite page, top: View of "Josh Smith: Faces," 2005, Taxter & Spengemann, New York.

Josh Smith, *Untitled* (detail), 2011, mixed media on panel, eight parts, overall 10' x 15' 8".

In 2005, Smith exhibited a ream of some 717 drawings of faces at Taxter & Spengemann in New York. The drawings each measured five by eight inches; per usual, Smith produced them at a furious pace, repeating a set of stock gestures, swoops and wiggles of the hand, to play endless variations on his subject. Though the face drawings do not, as in Dubuffet's portraits, attempt to conjure up a body of any kind, Smith has refrained from facializing the paper surface outright: These are not graffiti faces, despite their oblique reference to certain genres of street art. Though Smith claims to have done them more or less automatically, "without thinking or looking," the drawings go well beyond the zero degree of faciality, in some cases spiraling toward an excess of decoration, with heads banded in stripes, adorned with densely looped wrinkles and strung-out fried-egg eyes. One senses a combinatory logic at work in the progression from face to face: Smith seems to cross-match one set of gestures with or against another, playing each image off the next, so that the series mutates as it unfolds. I have my doubts about whether the artist's eyes were closed during the process.

Smith's faces are no mere one-off experiment: He has filled at least seven artist's books with face drawings and has incorporated faces into a handful of other books as well. Yet he has never made a series of paintings based on the face. To say this polemically, I do not think the human face is paintable for Smith, though he comes close in his recent paintings of skeletons and dragonflies, which debuted at Luhring Augustine in New York in February, or the paintings based on leaves and fish that he has been doing since 2009. The problem is one of redundancy: His paintings already have a face—the face of the commodity. Smith's Warholian operations, his uniform sizing and pricing of paintings and the arbitrariness of his motifs, are designed to facialize his canvases absolutely, overcoding them in advance with purely abstract faces. This is not an incidental facet of Smith's oeuvre: Far from deconstructing





the commodity status of the art object, his paintings wear this mask gladly—and to their benefit. The artificial equivalence of Smith's work belies a ferment of pictorial waywardness that tends to rule out questions of quality. His paintings are all equally unruly, but also equally boneless and bodiless. Or at least, they should be. As far as I am concerned, Smith's work is best when it does not attempt to suture the body and the face back together; he is at his best, in other words, when the only face of painting is its exchange-value or brand name. The same cannot be said of his drawings and artist's books, which wear the commodity face less comfortably. For this reason, though, it is possible for Smith to draw what he is unable to paint.

Make no mistake: Smith's canvases are not the salvation of abstract painting; they are a means of surviving the afterlife of the white cube even as the support system of the postwar world collapses (or is privatized) around us. In this sense, they have more to do with the modernist past than the artist himself would likely want to admit. For this reason, Smith's paintings are eminently useful: Any installation of his work has the effect of making visible the gallery's obsolescence—the whiter the cube, the better. Smith's current installation of paintings in Greenwich, Connecticut, at the Brant Foundation Art Study Center, which features some of the artist's largest and most wildly colored canvases to date, only confirms this rule, while facade becomes face at this summer's Venice Biennale, where Smith has emblazoned the Biennale's title, *ILLUMINATIONS*, in monumental letters across the front of the Palace of Exhibitions. The face of the white cube has a devoted partisan in Josh Smith, maybe the last of his kind. There are many compelling reasons to want to preserve the autonomous separation of face and body, and to uphold the doxa of postwar modernity. We should not take Smith's partisanship lightly.

In the world outside the gallery, though, it is difficult to ignore the growing entanglement of face and body, whether in the fractured mirror of spectacle or the constrictions of private space. We cannot afford to leave the contours of the face unaddressed. Perhaps painting will play an active role; perhaps it will simply be a bellwether, reminding us of the stakes of the face as year zero winds down its final hours. In either case, it is up to us to think face and body together in the time that remains—we who have never had faces of our own and whose bodies are foreign to us. Painting is one tool in our arsenal. □

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For notes, see page 430.

NICOLE EISENMAN

Scaling up and unmitigated personal expression were emblems of the mancentric world of midcentury AbEx. However, as we know, women weren't invited to that party. This is pretty ironic given that the very ideas central to AbEx—antirational ones, driven by emotion and passion—have long been considered stereotypically female. But we made up for it big-time in the 1990s and 2000s, resurrecting the AbEx project and bringing it to the next level—the work of Keltie Ferris, Amy Sillman, and Wendy White comes to mind here. I'm a big advocate of the politics of self-expression and the existentialist individualism that AbEx helped to open up, my own work being decidedly queer.

De Kooning and Pollock showed us all over again that abstraction and figuration are not mutually exclusive. Through painting I can find the point at which representation dissolves into abstraction and at which abstraction begins to represent. But the event horizon for that moment is slippery and inexact, dependent on the context of a given brush mark, the viewer's physical proximity to the painting, and his or her willingness to associate meaning with form. In my paintings there are often islands of abstraction—figures made from one big rough brushstroke or a series of marks meant to represent a feeling that floats in the air. Yet I contain all of this within a representational framework. I like the way our world looks too much to not show it to some degree. □

NICOLE EISENMAN IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK.



Nicole Eisenman, *The Breakup*, 2011, oil and mixed media on canvas, 56 x 43".

face. In their magnum opus, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari consider the face to be a machine that sets up shop at the site of the human head but is not bound there.² Faces can appear anywhere: on walls or in the clouds, in dappled shadows or the bark of a tree. In fact, anything that gives the impression of staring back at us—a clock, an unpaid parking ticket, an expensive gift—can be said to have a face. Faces are what lift objects into the realm of signification; they are also what delimit the interiority of things, implying an agent behind the mask.

But make no mistake: The facial machine is by no means benign. Though it takes up residence on the surface of things, the face cannot fuse with the matter it enwraps. To query the human visage, then, is to confront the face as something autonomous, contiguous with the body but not tethered to it. Left to its own devices, Deleuze and Guattari argue, the body is a wild, unruly multiplicity of impulses, affects, and gestures; but when colonized by a face, this multiplicity becomes organized around the absent center of the *I*, the empty signifier underpinning all meaning making. As such, the face is a template for a power relation that projects itself across historical horizons (early modernity, industrial modernity, postmodernity), morphing as it goes along, but always turning on the colonizing relationship of surface and unity against interiority and multiplicity.

This symbiotic relationship can be discovered in every facial apparatus. Money is a face, for example, that wraps itself around the body of the commodity-object. Because the face is always alien to the body to which it attaches, face-body relations are fraught with antagonism and even open hostility. At a certain point, which Deleuze and Guattari connect to the ascendance of Christianity and designate as “year zero,” the face came to dominate the body absolutely: In a manner alien to the pagan subjectivity it displaced, Christian subjectivity formed itself in relation to an abstract, unitary, fully autonomous godhead with total authority over the bodily realm. And, as it happens, year zero also marks the birth year of modern painting—or, to be more precise, of *early* modern painting. The advent of Christian figure painting made it possible to render visible the subordination of the body to the abstract face, but it also opened up a new field of covert resistance to facial authority.³ And this jockeying between the authority of the face and bodily affect would come to characterize the dialectical field of modern painting in the centuries that followed.

Here, however, I’d like to pose a *second* year zero—one that designates a point of rupture in the trajectory of modern painting. Nineteen forty-six does not mark the end of figuration per se; it is rather the point at which the image of the human body ceases to be a site of resistance to the authority of the face. Afterward, such resistance might take other forms or operate in other media, but this antagonism would no longer play out in the arena of painting.

AMONG EUROPEAN MODERNISTS of the late 1940s, Michaux was not alone in his obsession: It was his exposure to the work of Jean Dubuffet in 1945 that ignited his interest in faces, inspiring his later meditations on the topic. Indeed, in the yet-to-be-written history of modernism’s crisis of faciality, Dubuffet might be the central protagonist. A self-proclaimed champion of “anticultural” values, Dubuffet had embarked on an all-out assault on the figure during the war years, reducing the body to a cartoonish outline and the face to a stupefied grin—parodies of figure painting, but figures nonetheless. Whereas the Abstract Expressionists would suppress figuration, Dubuffet remained devoted to the figure in the aftermath of the war. Though he was one of the only French painters of his generation whose work was taken seriously by the New York abstract painters and their critics, he would come to pursue a different path, a welding of figuration and materialism.⁴ In his works of the late 1940s, Dubuffet brought figure painting to the breaking point, retaining only the essential propositions of figuration, whatever they might be. Central to these investigations was his series of monumental portraits, which the artist would come to refer to as his “*grandes têtes*” (big heads). In the process of making these works, Dubuffet managed to extract from the crisis of painting a genuinely new concept of the figure. This was, I will argue, a crucial moment for twentieth-century art, portending both the best and worst that could be expected of painting in the years to come.

The idea for a series of portraits came to Dubuffet in August 1946, when Florence Gould, the moneyed hostess of a literary salon he frequented, proposed that he make portraits of the other guests, among them Michaux. Though the artist had painted portraits in the preceding



Henri Michaux, *Personage ton bistre* (Personage Tone Yellow-Brown), 1946–48, ink, gouache, and watercolor on paper, 20 x 12 1/2". © Estate of Henri Michaux/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

In his works of the late 1940s, Dubuffet brought figure painting to the breaking point, retaining only the essential propositions of figuration.