

TITLE: Woman, I **LOCATION:** New York **DATE:** 1950-1952 C.E.

ARTIST: Willem De Kooning **PERIOD/STYLE:** New York School of Abstract Expressionism/ Gestural Abstraction/ Action Painting **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Oil on canvas

FORM:

Woman, I has neither the quality of realism nor does it portray a woman lying down in the conventional pose. Out of the jumbled array of slashing lines and agitated patches of color appears a ferocious looking woman with staring eyes and ponderous breasts. Her toothy smile, inspired by an ad for Camel cigarettes, seems to devolve into a grimace. In contrast to the appealing figurative works of an earlier day, many of his abstracted women are frankly overpowering and repellant.

FUNCTION:

An ironic comment on the banal and artificial world of film and advertising. One of six in a series.

CONTENT:

He did not consider the pictures to be of individual women but images of fertility goddesses or a satiric inversion of the traditional image of Venus, the goddess of love. The New York School believed that art should be invested with powerful content and the most potent means for giving expression to that content lay in the possibilities of abstraction in order to reduce shapes and forms to their essences.

CONTEXT:

De Kooning arrived in the United States from Rotterdam in the late 1920s and was recruited, like many artists, to participate in the government-funded Works Progress Administration (WPA), creating public art. This was at a time when other countries, such as Soviet Russia, were glorifying their leaders with socialist realist art. In response to art that had a clear duty to the state, abstract expressionism championed artists' unwillingness to be beholden to no one, not even the state. Amongst them, Jackson Pollock was the most well-known. There wasn't a cohesive style to the group, but they did share in common a fierce unwillingness to depict forms that could easily be understood. In a twist of fate, it was revealed much later that the CIA was actually a fan of the abstract expressionists. The CIA later claimed that showing abstract expressionist art was similar to airing propaganda: It promoted the freedom of American artists at a time when artists in the USSR were still stuck painting Stalin.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Just after the end of WWII, the movement was also championed as the first movement that was uninfluenced by Europe. Americans were kind of going through an identity crisis, so being different from Europe was a good thing. Producing avant-garde art that wasn't European was an even better thing. The vigorous physical interaction between the painter and the canvas let the critic Harold Rosenberg to describe the work of the New York School as "action Painting". What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The image was the result of this encounter. Where Dada and Surrealism revolted against logic, the Americans took "automatism" one step further, relying on instinct to shape works of art that were not only irrational but were, at their core, unpremeditated accidents.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

De Kooning continued to work for several years on the same canvas until it actually fell apart and he started again.. The finished work is loaded with thick layers of paint. He painted approximately 200 scraped away images of women on this canvas before settling on the final one. DeKooning often used collage as a technique or springboard to begin many of his pictures in the Woman series. He would paste images of women's smiles in the position of the mouth. The newsprint rarely survived to the finished product but often left a lasting mark on the surface.

INTERPRETATION:

The two major themes of De Kooning's work were his work was a lifelong exploration of the relationship between figure and ground, and the depiction of the female figure. Abstract expressionists of the New York School hared in common the despair and anxiety of the times, the collaborative activity afforded by the WPA, the breakthrough in aesthetic form achieved by the cubists and their experiments, and from the liberation of the subconscious attained among the surrealists using Freudian methods of analysis. Perhaps they portray what was a major psychoanalytic dilemma during the 1950s--how women could be at once seductive, alluring and immasculating. In any event, they communicate an impression of being unnerved , even vulnerable.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

"A work of art can never be the imitation of life but only ...the generation of life." Hans Hoffman

TITLE:Seagram building _____ **LOCATION:**New York City, U.S. _____ **DATE:** 1954-1958 C.E. _____

Ludwig Mies Van Der

ARTIST:Rohe and Phillip Johnson _____ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Modern Architecture _____ **PATRON:** The Seagram Corporation _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Steel frame with glass, curtain wall and bronze.

FORM:

Exemplifying a new iteration of the International Style, the 36 story building features a curtain wall of bronze and tinted glass (a non-structural element). The International Style was known for modern materials (concrete and steel) and also for the revealing the frame of the structure. The foundational idea behind the International Style is that visible structural elements can supplant formal decorative style. The building's sleek design and smooth façade lacks ornamentation, distinguishing it from other more flamboyant forms, like Art Deco. This simplicity in form also allowed for a play between the solid, extruded bronze, and the transparent glass.

FUNCTION:

It was to be the headquarters for the Seagram Liquor company which had come from Canada after the Prohibition era.

CONTENT:

Open at the ground level, the building is supported on stilts, the functionalism of which is offset by outdoor pools and gardens sunk into a pink granite platform.

CONTEXT:

German-born architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was an early director of the Bauhaus in Berlin, a school where the earliest modernist principles of architecture blossomed – that is, until the Nazis shut it down in 1933. Mies came to the U.S. in the late 1930s and brought with him some powerful, even radical, new ideas about architecture. Located at Park Avenue and 53rd Street it is one of the most important buildings in the history of architecture in the US. It is directly across the street from the Lever House.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

High rises exuded corporate power and satisfied a utilitarian necessity for more office space. Within this milieu, Mies was the luminary of the International Style: His buildings were so well known that they were simply called “Miesian glass boxes.” These glass boxes prevailed as the most widely used corporate building style from the 1950s through the 1970s. Mies made a name for himself because he used industrial materials. The amount of glass he used in the structure allowed for breathtaking views of the city from the inside. The glass also allowed spectators below to see the skeleton of the building. The façade of the Seagram building was unlike the Carson, Pirie, Scott and Company building in that it did not necessarily stand out for surface ornamentation. What made it a founding work in the International Style was Mies's disregard for anything too over the top, like ornamental flourishes

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Mies has used Bronze to decorate the exterior of the building, making it both classical and modern. This was his way of balancing old and new. He also uses Roman travertine to encase the elevator banks. He decided to set the building far back in the lot to pay respect to the forecourt and the racquet and tennis club across the way. He made deliberate references to classical antiquity while still maintaining a modern perspective.

INTERPRETATION:

Mies Van Der Rohe's contention that “less is more” became a powerful dictum for modernist architecture. Many of these more minimalist designs are powerful, heroic presences in the urban landscape, appealing in its structural logic and clarity, the style, easily imitated, quickly became the norm for postwar commercial high-rise buildings.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

“God is in the Detail.” -Mies Van Der Rohe

TITLE: Marilyn Diptych _____ **LOCATION:** New York _____ **DATE:** 1962 C.E. _____

ARTIST: Andy Warhol _____ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Pop Art _____ **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Oil, acrylic, and silkscreen enamel on canvas.

FORM:

On the one side, the 50 repeated images of Marilyn's face are boldly colored, on the other, a newsprint-like black and white. Basing the painting off of a film still from the 1953 film Niagara, Warhol created this early silkscreen image by first creating a stencil and then attaching it to a screen. He then used a squeegee to spread colors through the screen's gaps onto a prepped canvas. At first glance, the work—which explicitly references a form of Christian painting in its title—invites us to worship the legendary icon, whose image Warhol plucked from popular culture and immortalized as art.

FUNCTION:

As in all of Warhol's early paintings, this image is also a carefully crafted critique of both modern art and contemporary life. Warhol once noted that through repeated exposure to an image, we become de-sensitized to it. In that case, by repeating Monroe's mask-like face, he not only drains away her life, but also ours as well, by deadening our emotional response to her death. Then again, by making her face so strange and unfamiliar, he might also be trying to re-sensitize us to her image, so that we remember she isn't just a symbol, but a person whom we might pity. From the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, he may even be forcing us to relive, and therefore work through, the traumatic shock of her death. The painting is more than a mere celebration of Monroe's iconic status. It is an invitation to consider the consequences of the increasing role of mass media images in our everyday lives.

CONTENT:

This early work shows that Warhol was very literally emulating the process of making commodities, himself painting soup can after soup can. This was true of his Marilyn Diptych, which took the notion of commodity to another level by applying the concept to a well-known personality. As did other pop artists, Warhol used a visual vocabulary and a printing method that reinforced the image's connections to consumer culture. Not only did Warhol force the public to reexamine their everyday surroundings he made a point about the loss of identity in industrial society. "The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine." -Warhol.

CONTEXT:

Warhol started making his series of "Marilyn" paintings only after the star had died of an apparent suicide, and eventually collected them with other disturbing paintings under the title "Death in America." Warhol transferred the logic of the assembly line to his paintings of pop culture figures, whose images were already in constant circulation in magazines and film. The serial repetition of Monroe's face over and over again—not unlike a commodity produced in an assembly line—is similar to his paintings of Campbell's Soup, another popular commodity and one he loved to buy and eat on a daily basis. Warhol was unabashed about his serial, assembly-line process, even naming his studio "The Factory" to drive home this point.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Warhol's works reveal that he was influenced not only by pop culture, but also by art history—and especially by the art that was then popular in New York. For example, in this painting, we can identify the hallmarks of Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. The seemingly careless handling of the paint and its "allover composition"—the even distribution of form and color across the entire canvas, such that the viewer's eyes wander without focusing on one spot—are each hallmarks of Abstract Expressionism, as exemplified by Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. Yet Warhol references these painters only to undermine the supposed expressiveness of their gestures: like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, whose work he admired, he uses photographic imagery, the silkscreen process and repetition to make art that is not about his interior life, but rather about the culture in which he lived. Pop art is assumed to be a reaction to abstract expressionism, and the alienation of the people in its gestures.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The stencil process allowed him to repeat many images of Marilyn and others—but not without drips and imperfections. Warhol was totally cool with these flaws, even embracing them as part of the process. Especially in the black and white images, Marilyn's face becomes so blurred that it's nearly impossible to decipher the starlet's features. Though he was an award-winning illustrator, instead of making his own drawing of Monroe, he appropriates an image that already exists. Furthermore, the image is not some other artist's drawing, but a photograph made for mass reproduction.

INTERPRETATION:

As a darker interpretation, the almost complete blotting out of Marilyn's face in the fourth column from the right could allude to Marilyn's eventual downfall from stardom...or her death. By screening broad planes of unmodulated color, the artist removes the gradual shading that creates a sense of three-dimensional volume, and suspends the actress in an abstract void. Through these choices, Warhol transforms the literal flatness of the paper-thin publicity photo into an emotional "flatness," and the actress into a kind of automaton. In this way, the painting suggests that "Marilyn Monroe," a manufactured star with a made-up name, is merely a one-dimensional (sex) symbol—perhaps not the most appropriate object of our almost religious devotion.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The images on the left in color represent her in life, the black and white images on the right represent her in death. The term "Pop" was coined by English critic Lawrence Alloway in 1954 to refer to the universal images of "popular culture", such as movie posters, billboards, magazine and newspaper photographs, and advertisements.

TITLE: The Bay **LOCATION:** New York **DATE:** 1963 C.E.

ARTIST: Helen Frankenthaler **PERIOD/STYLE:** Color Field/Abstract Expressionism **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Acrylic on Canvas.

FORM:

Large swaths of color float outward from the center of un-gessoed canvases, sometimes engulfing their surroundings, other times remaining separate from other adjacent colors. In other works, these drifting forms are interrupted by strokes of concentrated color. This kind of painting is often classified as Color Field painting, painting characterized by simplicity of line and a focus on color as the subject rather than as an add-on. The first generation of Abstract Expressionists, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman were the first important Color Field painters, while Helen Frankenthaler is often classified as a second-generation member of the group.

FUNCTION:

CONTENT:

“Sentiment and nuance are being squeezed out so that if something is not altogether flatly painted then there might be a hint of edge, , chiaroscuro, shadow and if one wants just that pure thing these associations get in the way.” Color field painting lacks the aggression of Abstract Expressionism. It relies on subtle tonal values that are often variations of a monochromatic hue. Her work features mysterious shapes hovering in an ambiguous space. Her works use landscapes as a starting point and basis for the imagery in her works.

CONTEXT:

The Bay was chosen as one of the paintings for the American pavilion of the 1966 Venice Biennale. Rather than produce sharp, modulated shapes as the hard edge artists had done, the color field painters poured diluted paint onto plain canvas and allowed the pigment to soak in. Helen Frankenthaler was part of the New York School of abstract expressionism as a color field artist. She was inspired by Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Frankenthaler helped jump-start the genre of color field painting, which shared some characteristics with abstract expressionism. In contrast to the work of abstract expressionists, color field painters cleaned up abstract expressionism’s angsty act, channeling happiness and peace in their harmonious swaths of color. the shades of blues that run into one another are part of a specific process of pouring paint on to the canvas rather than painting the colors onto the surface with a brush, as the leading Abstract Expressionist painters, like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline, were so famous for doing. Frankenthaler is capable of suggesting space through subtle color modulations. By pouring fields of thinned vibrant color onto unprimed canvas, the resulting central image is open, billowing and abstract, free of gestural brushing.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Frankenthaler, who poured thinned acrylic paint onto a canvas from above and let it flow and soak into the untreated fibers naturally, was all about relaxation. She wasn’t going to control where the paint went. As a substitute for the action of the brush, Frankenthaler would lift the canvas and tilt it at various angles so that the paint would flow across the surface. She had to account for gravity and the ebb and flow of a liquid across a flat surface, so a fascinating aspect of Frankenthaler’s method is the blend of the artist’s control paired with the unpredictability of the forces of nature.

INTERPRETATION:

The sense of natural spontaneity and devotion to color is part of what makes The Bay and the work of the Color Field painters so compelling. “When you first saw a Cubist or Impressionist picture there was a whole way of instructing the eye or the subconscious. Dabs of color had to stand for real things. It was an abstraction of a guitar or a hillside. The opposite is going on now. If you have bands of blue, green and pink, the mind doesn’t think sky, grass and flesh. These are colors and the question is what are they doing with themselves and with each other. Sentiment and nuance are being squeezed out.” -Frankenthaler

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

“I think accidents are lucky, only if you know how to use them.” -Frankenthaler

TITLE: Narcissus Garden _____ **LOCATION:** Originally in Venice _____ **DATE:** 1966 _____

ARTIST: Yayoi Kusama _____ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Happening/Performance _____ **PATRON:** _____
Art

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Mirror balls

FORM:

She placed fifteen hundred shiny, silver balls about the size of a fortune teller's crystal ball on the lawn outside the Venice Biennial. (Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennale is by far the oldest and most prestigious. It was created for the precise reason of establishing a platform for art world participants to compare and contrast the art created across the world, and is colloquially known as the "Olympics of art.")

FUNCTION:

The point of the mirrored balls was to get attendees to confront their own vanity. Narcissus Garden was a performance piece, which meant that visitors had to interact with the artwork and artist on many levels, from doling out the two bucks for the silver ball to looking into its shiny surface.

CONTENT:

With the early performance art of the 1960s, artists like Kusama facilitated live events that enabled interactions between artists, the space of the performance, and the audience. Performance art expanded how audiences usually approached a work of art. They were no longer limited by a specific genre, like painting or sculpture. Art historian Jody Cutler places Kusama's oeuvre "in dialogue with the psychological state known as narcissism," as "narcissism is both the subject and the cause of Kusama's art, or in other words, a conscious artistic element related to content." Narcissus Garden references the ancient myth of Narcissus, a young man who is so enraptured by his image in reflecting water that he stares at it indefinitely until he becomes a flower...or until he falls into the water and drowns.

CONTEXT:

Her art channeled the mindset of the 1960s, which was a time when Americans everywhere were questioning the conservative values of the previous decade as well as the motivations behind U.S. intervention in Vietnam. During the opening week, Kusama placed two signs at the installation: "NARCISSUS GARDEN, KUSAMA" and "YOUR NARCISSIUM FOR SALE" on the lawn. Acting like a street peddler, she was selling the mirror balls to passers-by for two dollars each, while distributing flyers with Herbert Read's complimentary remarks about her work on them. She consciously drew attention to the "otherness" of her exotic heritage by wearing a gold kimono with a silver sash. The monetary exchange between Kusama and her customers underscored the economic system embedded in art production, exhibition and circulation. The Biennale officials eventually stepped in and put an end to her "peddling." But the installation remained.[2] Her interactive performance and eye-catching installation garnered international press coverage.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Narcissus Garden riffed on the idea of sculpture. Kusama's sculpture was interactive. It didn't sit on a pedestal. The artwork was a performance in which visitors were as much a part of the encounter as the artist. Kusama was also riffing on the concept of narcissism. The silver balls reflected the surface of the surrounding landscape and one's personal reflection. It was impossible to look at any portion of the installation without also seeing a reflection of yourself. Kusama personifies the conjunction of art, popular culture, advertising, and marketing that increasingly characterizes the art of the 21st century.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Although Kusama was not officially invited to exhibit, according to her autobiography, she received the moral and financial support from Lucio Fontana and permission from the chairman of the Biennale Committee to stage 1,500 mass-produced plastic silver globes on the lawn outside the Italian Pavilion. The tightly arranged 1,500 shimmering balls constructed an infinite reflective field in which the images of the artist, the visitors, the architecture, and the landscape were repeated, distorted, and projected by the convex mirror surfaces that produced virtual images appearing closer and smaller than reality.

INTERPRETATION:

Perhaps most profoundly, Kusama was pointing out something about the commercialization of art. At two dollars a pop, these balls did not beg the high price like most art that was shown at the Biennale. While officials of the Biennale eventually shut Kusama's peddling down, the installation remained in place and has been replicated many times in many different locations by request. This original installation of Narcissus Garden from 1966 has been frequently interpreted by many as both Kusama's self-promotion and her protest of the commercialization of art.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Kusama later returned to Tokyo where, in the vein of van Gogh, she now lives willingly at a psychiatric hospital. Those shiny balls, now made of stainless steel and carrying hefty price tags, have become a trophy of prestige and self-importance. Originally intended as the media for an interactive performance between the artist and the viewer, the objects are now regarded as valuable commodities for display.

TITLE: Lipstick (Ascending) On Caterpillar Tracks **LOCATION:** Connecticut **DATE:** 1969-1974 C.E.
ARTIST: Claes Oldenburg **PERIOD/STYLE:** Pop Art **PATRON:** Stuart Wrede and Yale University's Architecture Department the Colossal Keepsake Corporation

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Cor-Ten Steel, steel, aluminum, and Cast resin; Painted with polyurethane 1966.

FORM: the original monument, measuring 7.2 x 7.6 x 3.3 meters (that's length, height, width). It was made of plywood and had an inflatable vinyl balloon at its top, which got punctured and was replaced by a metal cap the week following its installation, as the first photograph of this post shows. Subsequently, Lipstick, having suffered from degradation and vandalism, was removed in March 1970. It was re-made some four years later, of weathering steel and fibreglass. The new version is still in place, in the courtyard of Morse College, and belongs to Yale Art Gallery, where you can see, use and touch it in its final form.

FUNCTION: The sculpture first appeared on the campus of Yale University in 1969 during the rising tide of Vietnam War protests. The artist envisioned Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks as a platform to enable a public speaker at these types of student events. The commission was perfect timing as student protests go because the sixties were an era of counter-cultural fervor—especially in lieu of the Vietnam War. The sculpture, as a result, became a fixture of anti-Vietnam and feminist rallies. It was the perfect emblem for both causes and was eventually reconstructed in steel (the original was plywood with an inflatable tip on the lipstick) for permanence.

CONTENT: With Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks, Oldenburg mashes together two completely different objects: a tube of lipstick and a tank. Each object has its own use-value and context, but Oldenburg strips each of its function to shore up a range of different associations, from the architectural to the phallic to a commentary on masculinity and femininity. "I alter to unfold the object." Oldenburg said, to make us "see", perhaps for the first time, an object we look at everyday.

CONTEXT: Oldenburg made the 24-foot-high sculpture in collaboration with architecture students at his alma mater and then surreptitiously delivered it to Yale's Beinecke Plaza. In Beinecke Plaza, the sculpture overlooked both the office of Yale's president and a prominent World War I memorial. Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks claimed a visible space for the anti-war movement while also poking fun at the solemnity of the plaza. The sculpture served as a stage and backdrop for several subsequent student protests. After some time, the original had to be replaced with a metal version, and it was accepted as a piece of art for the college courtyard. Oldenburg had mixed feelings about his work being recognized as a "work of art", when it was original intended to be a political statement.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION: With Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks, Oldenburg wasn't celebrating a particular event, nor did he try to memorialize one person. At the same time, Oldenburg didn't care to create anything remotely abstract or overly intellectual. His pop culture sculpture came as a reaction to other artistic movements, such as minimalism, which promoted art that tried not to look like a real world object.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS: Oldenburg and the architecture students never intended for the original Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks sculpture to be permanent. They made the base of plywood, and the red vinyl tip of the lipstick could be comically inflated and deflated—although the balloon mechanism didn't always work. The original remained in Beinecke Plaza for ten months before Oldenburg removed it in order to remake the form in metal. The resulting sculpture was placed in a less-prominent spot on Yale's campus, where it remains to this day.

INTERPRETATION: In the Yale sculpture, the artist combined the highly "feminine" product with the "masculine" machinery of war. In doing so, he playfully critiqued both the hawkish, hyper-masculine rhetoric of the military and the blatant consumerism of the United States. In addition to its feminine associations, the large lipstick tube is phallic and bullet-like, making the benign beauty product seem masculine or even violent. The juxtaposition implied that the U.S. obsession with beauty and consumption both fueled and distracted from the ongoing violence in Vietnam. 1969 was a big year for women, in America as well as more locally at Yale. Around the US, women were claiming their right for gender equality, for better education, for sexual and abortion rights. At Yale, interestingly, 1969 was the year the University went co-ed, thus admitting women to study there.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS: "I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary". In 1967 Oldenburg created the first earth art piece, he dug a hole in in NY's Central Park and then reburied the soil taken from it.

TITLE: Spiral Jetty **LOCATION:** Great Salt Lake, Utah, U.S. **DATE:** 1970 C.E.

ARTIST: Robert Smithson **PERIOD/STYLE:** Land Art/ Site Art/ Environmental art **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Earthwork: mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, and water coil.

FORM:

Rather, it was composed of natural elements from the surrounding area (salt, crystals, mud, and water) and meant to be observed from various angles and at various times of the year. The spiral form extends out into the water. Depending on the run-off from the surrounding mountains, it can either be completely submerged or visible to onlookers. The water surrounding it is red in color, which can be attributed to the salt-tolerant critters (mostly bacteria and algae) that make the lake their home. It is 1500 feet long made of basalt, limestone rocks, and earth expanding out into Utah's Great Salt Lake.

FUNCTION:

While a jetty usually serves a purpose, often by protecting a docking area or creating a narrow passage to concentrate water flow, this one had no utility. A jetty is supposed to be a pier in the water, here it is transformed into a curl of rocks sitting silently in a vast empty wilderness, and because of environmental changes, it is often surrounded by dry lake bed.

CONTENT:

It is a coil of rock in a part of the Great Salt Lake that is extremely remote and inaccessible that features mines and mining equipment. The spiral can be found in Ohio's Great Serpent Mound so it is a motif that has historic precedent.

CONTEXT:

The ecology movement of the 1960's and 1970's aimed to publicize and combat escalating pollution, depletion of natural resources, and the dangers of toxic waste. Widespread concern in the US about the environment led to the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969 and the creations of the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Environmental artist used their art to call attention to the landscape and, in doing so were part of this national dialog. Environmental artists insist on moving art out of the rarified atmosphere of museums and galleries and into the public sphere.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

He was a leading participant in a group of artists whose medium was dirt and whose tools included bulldozers. He even hired a construction company to haul in tons and tons of rock for the Spiral Jetty. The land artists were a group of rugged rebels who detested the "white cube" of the gallery and the exclusivity that it stood for. Not only that, the gallery was just too small for the scale of work they envisioned. In leaving the gallery behind, Smithson and others became part of an anti-institutional trend.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Smithson was adamant that Spiral Jetty juxtapose natural with industrial elements. The dilapidated pier and unused oil rigs that sat nearby were part of the context of its display and interpretation. Moreover, when he initially made Spiral Jetty, he intended that it completely decompose into the water. He was a big believer in the idea of entropy: To him, an artwork didn't need to be permanent or stand the test of time without ever changing. Instead art, like other organisms, could break down, change, or completely disintegrate. He used industrial construction equipment to manipulate vast quantities of earth and rock on isolated sites. The artist recognized that the work's location made it inaccessible to a broad audience. With these things in mind, he documented Spiral Jetty in a number of more permanent, more accessible forms including photography, film and text.

INTERPRETATION:

Photography went hand in hand with land art because, as artists went further afield, pictures became the main means for documenting that land art even existed. Pictures, moreover, had the ability to transmit that existence to the art world. Smithson discovered that the molecular structure of the salt crystals coating the rocks at the water's edge is spiral in form. *"As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizon only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. The site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty."*

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Sadly, while the artist was surveying property for another project, his airplane crashed, killing him. In the years since his death, some have argued to preserve his desert artwork; others, of course, look forward to the changes the Spiral Jetty will undergo with its continued entropy.

TITLE: House in New Castle County **LOCATION:** Delaware, U.S. **DATE:** 1978-1983 C.E.

Robert Venturi, John Rauch,
ARTIST: and Denise Scott Brown **PERIOD/STYLE:** Post Modernist Architecture **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood frame and stucco.

FORM:

The house sits surrounded by rolling fields, beside a thickly-wooded forest. Like many traditional American farmhouses and barns, the painted siding is white and the intersecting gables are clad with unstained wood shingles. It may look conventional and familiar but on closer inspection the exterior is enlivened by a diverse array of mischievous and sometimes perplexing architectural features.

FUNCTION:

It was designed to house a family of three. The wife was a musician, hence the sitting room with two pianos, an organ and a harpsichord. The husband was a bird watcher, so he wanted large windows facing the woods.

CONTENT:

The “front” of the New Castle County House incorporates a floating arched screen that, like a highway billboard, rises somewhat awkwardly from the lower edge of the gable. Though Venturi claimed this curved feature had Austrian Baroque origins, like a garden gate or eyebrow dormers found on some Victorian houses, it functions as a sign, identifying the structure as a residence. Since the owners enjoyed bird watching it may also have doubled as a blind, camouflaging the large windows behind it. The “rear” facade is even more curious and complex. While it, too, is dominated by a prominent arched screen, this screen is framed by the edges of the gabled roof. Supported by what appears to be a Doric colonnade, the four stubby columns are, in fact, almost flat. Thin as the outer walls, these cut-outs carry little weight and enclose the recessed porch. While the column on the far right grows seamlessly out of the adjoining wall, the left column appears split in half by the addition of an aluminum drain pipe. Classical in derivation yet slightly cartoonish, this somewhat awkward assemblage gives the house a simultaneously grand and whimsical appearance.

CONTEXT:

As a reaction to the clean lines and austere functionalism that modernism had adopted and promoted in its brutalist concrete buildings, postmodern architects were more playful in their approach to design. Compared to their serious modernist compatriots, postmodernists included everything but the kitchen sink in their designs. They questioned the validity of the modernist approach to architectural design. They consciously selected past architectural elements or references and juxtaposed them with contemporary elements or fashioned them of high-tech materials, thereby creating a dialog between the past and the present.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown published a book called Learning from Las Vegas. In it, the husband and wife team championed the idea of disorder. Las Vegas, they noted, was a city best known for disorder, and not the “what-happens-in-Vegas-stays-in-Vegas” kind of disorder, but architectural disorder. In their book, they promoted the idea of “messy vitality over obvious unity.” Their New Castle County house embodied this messy vitality because it integrated many different and eccentric forms. Rather than continue in the disciplined, austere footsteps of European architects Le Corbusier (below) and Mies van der Rohe, he highlighted historic structures that exhibit a “messy vitality over obvious unity”. More than anyone, Venturi is credited with inventing the jaunty pluralism of Post Modern architecture.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown derived their inspiration from the everyday, not from utopian ideals. Because the style of architecture they constructed followed the vernacular, or the language of the everyday, it wasn’t very flashy, but it still aspired to respond to context or environment. Venturi’s penchant for remixing elements garnered him the title “father of postmodernism.” More than that, he threw out the old adage “less is more,” and replaced it with his own, “less is a bore.” Rather than copy a specific style, he borrowed freely, juxtaposing, collaging, and reinterpreting forms from distinct periods and places. Venturi asserted that form should be separate from function and structure.

INTERPRETATION:

This private residence remains a playfully challenging work expressing a refreshingly pluralistic view of architecture and design. Venturi argued that architecture should accept not only historical styles but respect “dumb and ordinary” vernacular buildings. As Venturi put it, “Main Street is almost all right.”

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

TITLE: Androgyn III **LOCATION:** Polish artist, on display
in New York **DATE:** 1985 C.E.

ARTIST: Magdalena Abakanowicz **PERIOD/STYLE:** _____ **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Burlap, resin, wood, nails, string.

FORM:

The seated human form is fragmented and hollow, without a face, feet, or hands. Made from molded resin, the surface—or skin—of this fragmentary person is rough, creased, and wrinkled like dried earth or old cement. Androgyn III uses the same molded-torso shell that Abakanowicz employed in her sculpture series *Backs* (1976-1980). The piece is made of burlap, resin, wood, nails, and string. Unlike the *Back* series, however, in which the figures sat directly on the floor, the Androgyn torsos are seated on low stretchers of wooden logs, perhaps filling in for lost legs.

FUNCTION:

CONTENT:

In the 1970s, Abakanowicz began to experiment with other materials including burlap, string, and cotton gauze. In 1974, she began to form figures by dipping burlap and string into resin, which she then pressed into a plaster mold. Sometimes she took a cast from the body of a friend for these forms. The figures are hollow and repetitious. The body as a structure became increasingly important to Abakanowicz and she visited laboratories to learn more about dissection and the construction of the human body. The effect of *Seated Figures* and *Backs* can be chilling and is often understood as expressing dehumanization in the twentieth century. In these works, the same shape is repeated but the surface of each figure has an individual texture, the result of Abakanowicz's unique handling of the materials.

CONTEXT:

She was born a member of the Polish aristocracy in 1930. When World War II erupted and the Germans invaded her country, she witnessed her mother's arm being shot off when a drunk soldier burst into their house. While the family survived the war, they were forced to hide their identities to avoid further persecution in postwar communist Poland. Androgyn III, when looked at in the light of the artist's personal history, can be viewed as an individual who has not only lost pieces of his or her physical self, but also his or her identity. The anonymous, seemingly miserable figure is in stark contrast to the style of Social Realism that was forced upon the populace. Abakanowicz specifically chose sculpture to avoid the state-sanctioned art style. Abakanowicz remembered, "...we, as family, lost our identity. We were deprived of our social position and...thrown out of society. We were punished for being rich. So I had to hide my background. I had to lie. I had to invent."

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Social Realism was the style taught in art schools during this era and initially Abakanowicz experimented with textiles and weaving in order to avoid it. Social Realism demanded images of smiling workers and a perfected society and although Abakanowicz disliked the style, she was ultimately required to adopt it in order to obtain a degree and enter the Polish Artists Union—a step required of all professional sculptors. Socialist Realism was a style of art found especially in the Soviet Union, China, other communist nations from the 1930s until the 1980s. Its images of happy, healthy, and productive workers celebrated labor's role in making the state strong. It used bright colors and bold, easily understood graphics and was often used as propaganda. In 1967 Abakanowicz began creating forms made with fabric and tapestry. She became well known for work she called *Abakans*.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Abakanowicz's artistic career began in the 1960s, when she received great acclaim for her abstract woven hangings made from rope and fiber. Her freestanding sculptures—made from burlap, string, and cotton gauze—first appeared in the early 1970s. Her fragmented humans have appeared both singly, as in *Androgyn III*, and in groupings, as in the public art piece *Agora*, which Abakanowicz developed between 2004 and 2006 for Grant Park in Chicago. A distinguishing feature of all of the burlap casts is the wrinkled skin and the implication of backbones, musculature and veins. The bodies, or body parts, more accurately, are intended to be seen in the round as the hollow interior is as much a part of the piece as the molded exterior. Space is as significant as mass in these works.

INTERPRETATION:

The Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz would say this isn't one particular person, but that the piece is "about existence in general." Because the figures are headless, they lose any specificity they might have had and become universal explorations of the human condition. Neither male nor female, young nor old, the figures are simply shells that point to the emptiness of human life. *Androgyn III* alludes to the brutality of war and the totalitarian state. The body is a husk without arms, legs or a head. It is an expression of suffering, both mournful and disturbing. "*I see fiber as the basic element constructing the organic world on our planet, as the greatest mystery of our environment. It is from fiber that all living organisms are built--the tissue of plants and ourselves. Fabric is our covering and our attire. Made with our hands, it is the record of our souls.*"

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Becoming: Between myself and the material with which I create, no tool intervenes. I select it with my hands. I shape it with my hands. My hands transmit energy to it. In translating idea into form, they always pass on to it something that eludes conceptualization. They reveal the unconscious.

– Magdalena Abakanowicz