

Transcript of *Art of Another Kind: International Abstraction and the Guggenheim, 1949–1960*

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Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

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Tracey Bashkoff, Curator, Collections and Exhibitions:

This exhibition *Art of Another Kind* is drawn from the collection of the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum and features largely a number of works that [director James Johnson] Sweeney collected in the 1950s but also goes through to the present day and actually includes works that were collected even just this year. It covers a period from 1949, which is the year that Solomon [R. Guggenheim] passed away, to 1960, which was when James Johnson Sweeney left the museum as director.

Megan Fontanella, Assistant Curator, Collections and Provenance:

James Johnson Sweeney really championed the artists he called the “tastebreakers” of his time, those who break open and enlarge our artistic frontiers. These artists who perhaps disregard current vogue standards of taste and produce art that maybe is not acceptable today, but will be acceptable tomorrow. I think that’s really a wonderful idea that you cannot always follow the prevailing norm, and in this period you see so many artists embracing diversity, individuality, the so-called art of another kind. With the exhibition’s title, we were really inspired by this 1952 book and accompanying exhibition that French art critic Michel Tapié authored and organized and this idea of *un art autre*, or art of another kind—this break with traditional notions of composition and this movement toward something wholly other.

The exhibition includes both paintings and sculpture from the 1950s, from artists exploring abstraction in both the United States and primarily Europe, but it also includes artists that were immigrating to these international art centers. So you have Kenzo Okada coming to New York, José Guerrerro, a Spanish artist as well. It’s really this

wonderful moment of international exchange and this dialogue on abstraction.

For instance, the Cobra movement emerges in this period, its artists including Asger Jorn, Karel Appel, Pierre Alechinsky, and those artists are working out of Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Brussels, which gives the movement its name. In Italy you have Alberto Burri forming the Gruppo Origine. In 1951, you have Art Informel emerging under the banner of the School of Paris (École de Paris) in the postwar period, leading artists including George Mathieu, Pierre Soulages, Zao Wou-Ki.

[break]

The more experimental trends in art were initially in danger in the postwar period because of the more conservative trends and this kind of fear, I think, of abstractionists being perhaps subversive. And in 1948 then—Art Institute of Chicago director Daniel Catton Rich published an article that called for a so-called “freedom of the brush,” and this idea that artists should be free to embrace any kind of style that they choose to, whether that’s abstraction or something more representationally based. I think it really paved the way in the 1950s for artists to feel more confident in exploring avant-garde, experimental, in many ways radical trends.

I think one has to remember that the 1950s are very much a period of social and political anxiety and tension. You are also coming out of World War II, ending in 1945, with that, memories of Nazism and this fear of the spread of Communism, with the Soviet Union becoming a major power player in the postwar period. So in this really tense political climate, there was very much this concern that artists were not being allowed to embrace the freedom of the brush, that a period of conservatism would ensue. I think one of the most prominent manifestations or contradictions to that fear was the 1950 so-called modern manifesto that the Whitney Museum [of American Art in New York], the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York collectively issued, stating that artists can pursue whatever style he or she so chooses and that art would be international in its focus and kind of this return to international exchange. And the manifesto really sought to affirm that experimental

art wasn't subversive and that abstraction in particular in all its various forms, ranging from the more representational to the completely abstract, should thrive and should grow. In the 1950s there's a movement toward greater international exchange and openness.

[break]

The exhibition really illustrates the diversity of artists working in this period, so artists pursuing very individual styles, even if by the end of the decade many of the New York-based artists get grouped together under this term "Abstract Expressionism." You also see many artists working outside of their native countries. For instance, you have American artists Ellsworth Kelly and Sam Francis working in Paris for large periods of time; similarly in New York, which in the postwar period emerged as this really vibrant art scene. You also have artists that are moving back and forth quite a bit. So for instance, Italian artist Afro Basaldella comes to New York in the 1950s for frequent exhibitions of his work and really encounters the New York art scene, in particular Willem de Kooning, who later in 1959 spends the winter working in Afro's studio. You also have Antoni Tàpies coming to New York from Spain, so it's really a wonderful moment of exchange and dialogue on contemporary art.

What emerges in the 1950s is this idea of very much embracing the individual, so the artist as this pioneering solitary person. I think part of that is also the fear of group identity in this period is kind of underlying that, but also coming out of World War II and Nazism and all of the trauma and devastation of that time, there's this interest in reclaiming the humanity and individuality that perhaps had been lost or somewhat blurred during World War II.

Regardless of this interest in individuality, you do see moments of artists coming together, so for instance in New York at the Club, which in the 1950s was kind of this informal assembly of avant-garde artists that was not only painters and sculptors, but also dancers, musicians, critics, people who were just interested in avant-garde art.

Bashkoff:

This exhibition *Art of Another Kind* speaks to the institutional history of the museum in the 1950s as well as the art scene of the 1950s. The diversity of artists and the methods that they were working in is really evident as you go through the exhibition. You see not only differences between the different cities and countries that artists were working in but [also] the differences in materials and the multiplicity of styles that artists were engaged in at the time.

Fontanella:

I think this exhibition is a testament that Sweeney's notion of the so-called tastebreakers really won out in the end because so many of these artists that at the time were perhaps younger or emerging or more radical and experimental provided some of the most vital art from the 1950s.

In 1953, Sweeney really aptly summarized the postwar prognosis when he said, and I quote, "Yesterday is not quite out of sight; tomorrow is not yet in view. But the atmosphere of vitality is unquestionable."