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Eva Cockcroft
Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War

Source: Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', *Artforum*, vol. 15, no. 10, June 1974, pp. 39–41. One plate has been omitted.

To understand why a particular art movement becomes successful under a given set of historical circumstances requires an examination of the specifics of patronage and the ideological needs of the powerful. During the Renaissance and earlier, patronage of the arts went hand in hand with official power. Art and artists occupied a clearly defined place in the social structure and served specific functions in society. After the Industrial Revolution, with the decline of the academies, development of the gallery system, and rise of the museums, the role of artists became less clearly defined, and the objects artists fashioned increasingly became part of a general flow of commodities in a market economy. Artists, no longer having direct contact with the patrons of the arts, retained little or no control over the disposition of their works.

In rejecting the materialistic values of bourgeois society and indulging in the myth that they could exist entirely outside the dominant culture in bohemian enclaves, avant-garde artists generally refused to recognize or accept their role as producers of a cultural commodity. As a result, especially in the United States, many artists abdicated responsibility both to their own economic interests and to the uses to which their artwork was put after it entered the marketplace.

Museums, for their part, enlarged their role to become more than mere repositories of past art, and began to exhibit and collect contemporary art. Particularly in the United States, museums became a dominant force on the art scene. In many ways, American museums came to fulfil the role of official patronage – but without accountability to anyone but themselves. The United States museum, unlike its European counterpart, developed primarily as a private institution. Founded and supported by the giants of industry and finance, American museums were set up on the model of their corporate parents. To this day they are governed largely by self-perpetuating boards of trustees composed primarily of rich donors. It is these boards of trustees – often the same 'prominent citizens' who control banks and corporations and help shape the formulation of foreign policy – which ultimately determine museum policy, hire and fire directors, and to which the professional staff is held accountable. Examination of the rising success of Abstract Expressionism in America after the the Second World War, therefore, entails

consideration of the role of the leading museum of contemporary art – The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) – and the ideological needs of its officers during a period of virulent anti-communism and an intensifying 'cold war'.

In an article entitled 'American Painting During the Cold War', published in the May 1973 issue of *Artforum*, Max Kozloff pointed out the similarity between 'American cold war rhetoric' and the way many Abstract Expressionist artists phrased their existentialist-individualist credos. However, Kozloff failed to examine the full import of this seminal insight, claiming instead that 'this was a coincidence that must surely have gone unnoticed by rulers and ruled alike'. Not so.

Links between cultural cold war politics and the success of Abstract Expressionism are by no means coincidental, or unnoticeable. They were consciously forged at the time by some of the most influential figures controlling museum policies and advocating enlightened cold war tactics designed to woo European intellectuals.

The political relationships between Abstract Expressionism and the cold war can be clearly perceived through the international programmes of MOMA. As a tastemaker in the sphere of contemporary American art, the impact of MOMA – a major supporter of the Abstract Expressionist movement – can hardly be overestimated. In this context, the fact that MOMA has always been a Rockefeller-dominated institution becomes particularly relevant (other families financing the museum, although to a lesser extent than the Rockefellers, include the Whitneys, Paleys, Blisses, Warburgs and Lewisohns).

MOMA was founded in 1929, mainly through the efforts of Mrs John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In 1939, Nelson Rockefeller became president of MOMA. Although Nelson vacated the MOMA presidency in 1940 to become President Roosevelt's co-ordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs and later Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, he dominated the museum throughout the 1940s and 1950s, returning to MOMA's presidency in 1946. In the 1960s and 1970s, David Rockefeller and Mrs John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, assumed the responsibility of the museum for the family. At the same time, almost every secretary of state after the end of the Second World War, right up to the present, has been an individual trained and groomed by the various foundations and agencies controlled or managed by the Rockefellers. The development of American cold war politics was directly shaped by the Rockefellers in particular and by expanding corporations and banks in general (David Rockefeller is also chairman of the board of Chase Manhattan Bank, the financial centre of the Rockefeller dynasty).

The involvement of The Museum of Modern Art in American foreign policy became unmistakably clear during the Second World War. In June, 1941, a Central Press wire story claimed MOMA as the 'latest and strangest recruit in Uncle Sam's defense line-up'. The story quoted the Chairman of the Museum's Board of Trustees, John Hay Whitney, on how the Museum could serve as a weapon for national defence to 'educate, inspire and strengthen the hearts and wills of free men in defense of their

Whitney spent the war years working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, predecessor of CIA), as did many another notable cold warrior (e.g. Walt Whitman Rostow). In 1967, Whitney's charity trust was exposed as a CIA conduit (*New York Times*, 25 February 1967). Throughout the early 1940s MOMA engaged in a number of war-related programmes which set the pattern for its later activities as a key institution in the cold war.

Primarily, MOMA became a minor war contractor, fulfilling 38 contracts for cultural materials totalling $1,590,234 for the Library of Congress, the Office of War Information, and especially Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Co-ordinator of Inter-American Affairs. For Nelson's Inter-American Affairs Office, 'mother's museum' put together 19 exhibitions of contemporary American painting which were shipped around Latin America, an area in which Nelson Rockefeller had developed his most lucrative investments – e.g. Creole Petroleum, a subsidiary of Standard Oil of New Jersey, and the single most important economic interest in oil-rich Venezuela.

After the war, staff from the Inter-American Affairs Office were transferred to MOMA's foreign activities. René d'Harnoncourt, who had proven himself an expert in the organization and installation of art exhibits when he helped American Ambassador Dwight Morrow cultivate the Mexican muralists at the time Mexico's oil nationalism threatened Rockefeller oil interests, was appointed head of the art section of Nelson's Office of Inter-American Affairs in 1943. A year later, he was brought to MOMA as vice-president in charge of foreign activities. In 1949, d'Harnoncourt became MOMA's director. The man who was to direct MOMA's international programmes in the 1950s, Porter A. McCray, also worked in the Office of Inter-American Affairs during the war.

McCray is a particularly powerful and effective man in the history of cultural imperialism. He was trained as an architect at Yale University and introduced to the Rockefeller orbit through Rockefeller's architect Wallace Harrison. After the war Nelson Rockefeller brought McCray into MOMA as director of circulating exhibits. From 1946 to 1949, while the Museum was without a director, McCray served as a member of MOMA's co-ordinating committee. In 1951, McCray took a year's leave of absence from the Museum to work for the exhibitions section of the Marshall Plan in Paris. In 1952, when MOMA's international programme was launched with a five-year grant of $625,000 from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, McCray became its director. He continued in that job, going on to head the programme's expanded version, the International Council of MOMA (1956), during some of the most crucial years of the cold war. According to Russell Lynes, in his comprehensive new book *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art*, the purpose of MOMA's international programme was overtly political: 'to let it be known especially in Europe that America was not the cultural backwater that the Russians, during that tense period called "the cold war", were trying to demonstrate that it was.'

MOMA's international programme, under McCray's directorship, provided exhibitions of contemporary American art – primarily the Abstract

Expressionists – for international exhibitions in London, Paris, São Paulo, and Tokyo (it also brought foreign shows to the United States). It assumed a quasi-official character, providing the 'United States representation' in shows where most nations were represented by government-sponsored exhibits. The United States Government's difficulties in handling the delicate issues of free speech and free artistic expression, generated by the McCarthyist hysteria of the early 1950s, made it necessary and convenient for MOMA to assume this role of international representation for the United States. For example, the State Department refused to take responsibility for the United States representation at the Venice Biennale, perhaps the most important of international-cultural-political art events, where all the European countries including the Soviet Union competed for cultural honours. MOMA bought the United States pavilion in Venice and took sole responsibility for the exhibitions from 1954 to 1962. This was the only case of a privately owned (instead of government-owned) pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

The CIA, primarily through the activities of Thomas W. Braden, also was active in the cold-war cultural offensive. Braden, in fact, represents once again the important role of MOMA in the cold war. Before joining the CIA in 1950 to supervise its cultural activities from 1951 to 1954, Braden had been MOMA's executive secretary from April 1948 to November 1949. In defence of his political cultural activities, Braden published an article – 'I'm Glad the CIA is "Immoral"', in the 20 May, 1967 issue of *Saturday Evening Post*. According to Braden, enlightened members of the governmental bureaucracy recognized in the 1950s that 'dissenting opinions within the framework of agreement on cold-war fundamentals' could be an effective propaganda weapon abroad. However, rabid anti-communists in Congress and the nation as a whole made official sponsorship of many cultural projects impracticable. In Braden's words, '... the idea that Congress would have approved of many of our projects was about as likely as the John Birch Society's approving medicare.' As the 1967 exposés revealed, the CIA funded a host of cultural programmes and intellectual endeavours, from the National Student Association (NSA) to *Encounter* magazine and innumerable lesser-known 'liberal and socialist' fronts.

In the cultural field, for example, CIA went so far as to fund a Paris tour of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1952. This was done, according to Braden, to avoid the severe security restrictions imposed by the United States Congress, which would have required security clearance for every last musician in order to procure official funds for the tour. 'Does anyone think that congressmen would foster a foreign tour by an artist who has or had left-wing connections?' Braden asked in his article to explain the need for CIA funding. The money was well spent, Braden asserted, because 'the Boston Symphony Orchestra won more acclaim for the United States in Paris than John Foster Dulles or Dwight D. Eisenhower could have brought with a hundred speeches.' As this example suggests, CIA's purposes in supporting international intellectual and cultural activities were not limited to espionage or establishing contact with leading foreign intellectuals. More crucially, CIA

sought to influence the foreign intellectual community and to present a strong propaganda image of the United States as a 'free' society as opposed to the 'regimented' communist bloc.

The functions of both the CIA's undercover aid operations and MOMA's international programmes were similar. Freed from the kinds of pressure of unsubtle red-baiting and super-jingoism applied to official governmental agencies like the United States Information Agency (USIA), CIA and MOMA cultural projects could provide the well-funded and more persuasive arguments and exhibitions needed to sell the rest of the world on the benefits of life and art under capitalism.

In the world of art, Abstract Expressionism constituted the ideal style for these propaganda activities. It was the perfect contrast to 'the regimented, traditional, and narrow' nature of 'socialist realism'. It was new, fresh, and creative. Artistically avant-garde and original, Abstract Expressionism could show the United States as culturally up-to-date in competition with Paris. This was possible because Pollock, as well as most of the other avant-garde American artists, had left behind his earlier interest in political activism.[2] This change was manifested in the organization of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors in 1943, a group which included several of the Abstract Expressionists. Founded in opposition to the politically motivated Artists Congress, the new Federation was led by artists who, in Kozloff's words, were 'interested more in aethestic values than in political action'. On the one hand, the earlier political activism of some of the Abstract Expressionists was a liability in terms of gaining congressional approval for government-sponsored cultural projects. On the other hand, from a cold warrior's point of view, such linkages to controversial political activities might actually heighten the value of these artists as a propaganda weapon in demonstrating the virtues of 'freedom of expression' in an 'open and free society'.

Heralded as the artistic 'coming of age' of America, Abstract Expressionist painting was exported abroad almost from the beginning. Willem de Kooning's work was included in the United States representation at the Venice Biennale as early as 1948. By 1950, he was joined by Arshile Gorky and Pollock. The United States's representation at the Biennales in São Paulo beginning in 1951 averaged three Abstract Expressionists per show. They were also represented at international shows in Venezuela, India, Japan, etc. By 1956, a MOMA show called 'Modern Art in the U.S.', including works by 12 Abstract Expressionists (Baziotes, Gorky, Guston, Hartigan, de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell, Pollock, Rothko, Stamos, Still, and Tomlin), toured eight European cities, including Vienna and Belgrade.

In terms of cultural propaganda, the functions of both the CIA cultural apparatus and MOMA's international programmes were similar and, in fact, mutually supportive. As director of MOMA's international activities throughout the 1950s, Porter A. McCray in effect carried out governmental functions, even as Braden and the CIA served the interests of the Rockefellers and other corporate luminaries in the American ruling class.

McCray served as one of the Rockefellers' main agents in furthering programmes for the export of American culture to areas considered vital to Rockefeller interests: Latin America during the war, Europe immediately afterwards, most of the world during the 1950s, and – in the 1960s – Asia. In 1962-3, McCray undertook a year's travel in Asia and Africa under the joint auspices of the State Department and MOMA. In October 1963, when Asia had become a particularly crucial area for the United States, McCray left MOMA to become director of the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund, a newly created cultural exchange programme directed specifically towards Asia.

The United States government simply could not handle the needs of cultural imperialism alone during the cold war, at least overtly. Illustrative of the government's problems were the 1956 art-show scandals of the USIA – and the solution provided by MOMA. In May 1956, a show of paintings by American artists called *Sport in Art*, organized by *Sports Illustrated* for USIA, was scheduled to be shown in conjunction with the Olympic Games in Australia. This show had to be cancelled after strong protests in Dallas, Texas, where the show toured before being sent abroad. A right-wing group in Dallas, the Patriotic Council, had objected to the exhibition on the grounds that four of the artists included had once belonged to communist-front groups.

In June 1956, an even more serious case of thought censorship hit the press. The USIA abruptly cancelled a major show of American art, '*100 American Artists*'. According to the 21 June issue of the *New York Times*, this show had been planned as 'one of the most important exhibits of American painting ever sent abroad'. The show was organized for USIA by the American Federation of Arts, a non-profit organization based in New York, which refused to co-operate with USIA's attempt to force it to exclude about ten artists considered by the information agency to be 'social hazards' and 'unacceptable' for political reasons. The Federation's trustees voted unanimously not to participate in the show if any paintings were barred by the government, citing a 1954 resolution that art 'should be judged by its merits as a work of art and not by the political or social views of the artist'.

Objections against censorship were also raised by the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (which was revealed as receiving CIA funds in the 1967 exposés). Theodore Streibert, Director of USIA, testifying before Senator Fulbright's Foreign Relations Committee, acknowledged that USIA had a policy against the use of politically suspect works in foreign exhibitions. The USIA, as a government agency, was handcuffed by the noisy and virulent speeches of right-wing congressmen like Representative George A. Dondero (Michigan) who regularly denounced from the House floor abstract art and 'brainwashed artists in the uniform of the Red art brigade'. As reported on 28 June, 1956 by the *New York Times*, Fulbright replied: 'unless the agency changes its policy it should not try to send any more exhibitions overseas.'[3]

The Rockefellers promptly arranged a solution to this dilemma. In 1956, the international programme of MOMA was greatly expanded in both its

financial base and in its aims. It was reconstituted as the International Council of MOMA and officially launched six months after the censorship scandal of USIA's *100 American Artists* show. MOMA's newly expanded role in representing the United States abroad was explained by a *New York Times* article of 30 December, 1956. According to the *Times*,

> The government is leery of anything so controversial as art and hampered by the discreditable interference on the part of some politicians who are completely apathetic to art except when they encounter something really significant ... Some of the immediate projects which the Council is taking over financially are United States participation in three major international art exhibitions and a show of modern painting to travel in Europe.

This major show of American painting was produced two years later by MOMA's International Council as *The New American Painting*, an elaborate travelling exhibition of the Abstract Expressionists. The exhibition, which included a comprehensive catalogue by the prestigious Alfred H. Barr, Jr, toured eight European countries in 1958-9. Barr's introduction to the catalogue exemplified the cold-war propaganda role of Abstract Expressionist art.

> Indeed one often hears Existentialist echoes in their words, but their 'anxiety', their commitment, their 'dreadful freedom' concern their work primarily. They defiantly reject the conventional values of the society which surrounds them, but they are not politically engagés even though their paintings have been praised and condemned as symbolic demonstrations of freedom in a world in which freedom connotes a political attitude.

As the director of MOMA from its inception until 1944, Barr was the single most important man in shaping the Museum's artistic character and determining the success or failure of individual American artists and art movements. Even after leaving MOMA's directorship, Barr continued to serve as the Museum's reigning tastemaker. His support of Abstract Expressionist artists played an influential role in their success. In addition to his role at MOMA, Barr was an artistic adviser to Peggy Guggenheim, whose Surrealist-oriented Art of This Century Gallery gave some of these artist their first important shows in the mid-1940s. For example, Peggy Guggenheim's gallery offered one-man shows to Jackson Pollock in 1943, 1945, 1947, Hans Hofmann in 1944, Robert Motherwell in 1944 and Mark Rothko in 1945. Barr was so enthusiastic about the work of the Abstract Expressionists that he often attended their informal meetings and even chaired some of their panel discussions at their meeting place, The Club, in New York City.

Barr's 'credentials' as a cultural cold warrior, and the political rationale behind the promotion and export of Abstract Expressionist art during the cold-war years, are set forth in a *New York Times Magazine* article Barr wrote in 1952, 'Is Modern Art Communistic?', a condemnation of 'social realism' in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Barr argued in his article that totalitarianism and Realism go together. Abstract art, on the other hand, is feared and prohibited by the Hitlers and Stalins (as well as the Donderos of the world, who would equate abstraction with communism). In his battle against

the ignorant right-wing McCarthyists at home, Barr reflected the attitudes of enlightened cold warriors like CIA's Braden and MOMA's McCray. However, in the case of MOMA's international policies, unlike those of CIA, it was not necessary to use subterfuge. Similar aims as those of CIA's cultural operations could be pursued openly with the support of Nelson Rockefeller's millions.

Especially important was the attempt to influence intellectuals and artists behind the 'iron curtain'. During the post-Stalin era in 1956, when the Polish government under Gomulka became more liberal, Tadeusz Kantor, an artist from Cracow, impressed by the works of Pollock and other abstractionists which he had seen during an earlier trip to Paris, began to lead the movement away from socialist realism in Poland. Irrespective of the role of this art movement within the internal artistic evolution of Polish art, this kind of development was seen as a triumph for 'our side'. In 1961, Kantor and fourteen other non-objective Polish painters were given an exhibition at MOMA. Examples like this one reflect the success of the political aims of the international programmes of MOMA.

Having succeeded so handsomely through MOMA in supporting the cold war, Nelson Rockefeller moved on, in the 1960s, to launch the Council of the Americas and its cultural component, the Center for Inter-American Relations. Funded almost entirely by Rockefeller money and that of other American investors in Latin America, the Council advises the United States Government on foreign policy, even as does the older and more influential Council on Foreign Relations (headed by David Rockefeller, the CFR is where Henry Kissinger began his rise to power). The Center for Inter-American Relations represents a thinly veiled cultural attempt to woo back respect from Latin America in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution and the disgraceful Bay of Pigs and Missile Crisis incidents. In its Park Avenue offices of a former mansion donated by the Rockefeller family, the Center offers exhibitions of Latin America art and guest lectures by leading Latin American painters and intellectuals. Like the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund for Asia, the Center is yet another link in a continuing and expanding chain of Rockefeller-dominated imperialism.

The alleged separation of art from politics proclaimed throughout the 'free world' with the resurgence of abstraction after the Second World War was part of a general tendency in intellectual circles toward 'objectivity'. So foreign to the newly developing apolitical milieu of the 1950s was the idea of political commitment – not only to artists but also to many other intellectuals – that one social historian, Daniel Bell, eventually was to proclaim the post-war period as 'the end of ideology'. Abstract Expressionism neatly fitted the needs of this supposedly new historical epoch. By giving their painting an individualist emphasis and eliminating recognizable subject-matter, the Abstract Expressionists succeeded in creating an important new art movement. They also contributed, whether they knew it or not, to a purely political phenomenon – the supposed divorce between art and politics which so perfectly served America's needs in the cold war.

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Attempts to claim that styles of art are politically neutral when there is no overt political subject-matter are as simplistic as Dondero-ish attacks on all abstract art as 'subversive'. Intelligent and sophisticated cold warriors like Braden and his fellows in the CIA recognized that dissenting intellectuals who believe themselves to be acting freely could be useful tools in the international propaganda war. Rich and powerful patrons of the arts, men like Rockefeller and Whitney, who control the museums and help oversee foreign policy, also recognize the value of culture in the political arena. The artist creates freely. But his work is promoted and used by others for their own purposes. Rockefeller, through Barr and others at the Museum his mother founded and the family controlled, consciously used Abstract Expressionism, 'the symbol of political freedom', for political ends.

Notes

1 Cited in Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, New York, 1973, p. 233.

2 For Pollock's connections with the Communist Party see Francis V. O' Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, New York, 1967, pp. 14, 21, 25, and Harold Rosenberg, 'The Search for Jackson Pollock', *Art News*, February 1961, p. 58. The question here is not whether or not Jackson Pollock was, in fact, affiliated with the Communist Party in the 1930s, but, simply, if there were enough 'left-wing' connections to make him 'politically suspect' in the eyes of right-wing congressmen.

3 For a more complete history of the right-wing offensive against art in the 1950s and the role of Dondero, see William Hauptman, 'The Suppression of Art in the McCarthy Decade', *Artforum*, October 1973, pp. 48–52.

11

Terry Eagleton
Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism

Source: Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review*, no. 152, July–August 1985, pp. 60–73. This text has been edited and footnotes renumbered accordingly.

In his article 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (*New Left Review*, 146), Fredric Jameson argues that pastiche, rather than parody, is the appropriate mode of postmodernist culture. 'Pastiche', he writes, 'is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language; but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.' This is an excellent point; but I want to suggest here that parody of a sort is not wholly alien to the culture of postmodernism, though it is not one of which it could be said to be particularly conscious. What is parodied by postmodernist culture, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant-garde. It is as though postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of such revolutionary avant-gardism, one of whose major impulses, as Peter Bürger has convincingly argued in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [see Text 6], was to dismantle the institutional autonomy of art, erase the frontiers between culture and political society and return aesthetic production to its humble, unprivileged place within social practices as a whole.[1] In the commodified artifacts of postmodernism, the avant-gardist dream of an integration of art and society returns in monstrously caricatured form; the tragedy of a Mayakovsky is played through once more, but this time as farce. It is as though postmodernism represents the cynical belated revenge wreaked by bourgeois culture upon its revolutionary antagonists, whose utopian desire for a fusion of art and social praxis is seized, distorted and jeeringly turned back upon them as dystopian reality. Postmodernism, from this perspective, mimes the formal resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant-garde, while remorselessly emptying it of its political content; Mayakovsky's poetry readings in the factory yard became Warhol's shoes and soup-cans.

I say it is *as though* postmodernism effects such a parody, because Jameson is surely right to claim that in reality it is blankly innocent of any such devious satirical impulse, and is entirely devoid of the kind of historical memory which might make such a disfiguring self-conscious. To place a pile of bricks