

Touch and Scale: Cubism, Pollock, Newman and Still (1971)

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Artforum, Vol. 10, (June 1971) pp. 58 - 66. Reprinted with extracts of other pieces in Picasso's Guernica by Ellen C. Oppler, "Analysis and general Essays - Darby Bannard," pp. 299 - 305 and various.

The two words of the title evolved somewhat special meanings as I wrote this essay. By touch I mean the visible evidence of the paint stroke; by scale, the size of the canvas in relation to the less flexible size of the artist, his hand and arm and his painting tools. Touch and scale are attributes of painting. The stroke will be more or less visible, and the canvas will be more or less large. Touch and scale are totally interdependent and both are interdependent with style. Scale is usually thought of as quantity only; a big thing seems simply bigger than a small thing. For example, we marvel at the strength and resilience of the tiny ant. Apparently if an ant were the size of a man he would run faster than a horse, easily lift a rock 30 times his weight and fall 100 stories without injury. Of course, this pays no regard to the qualities which come in company with scale change. Weight increases at a greater rate than size, relative strength diminishes with size, and the very relationship to the surrounding air is not the same for the tiny creature as for the larger one. An ant is impossible in human size because its characteristics have evolved correctly for ant size. Qualities are not independent of scale because all factors do not vary equally, and if they did nothing would have changed. The same is true for painting. A big painting is not just bigger than a small painting, it is different, and it is different not only because it has a different effect, as Greenberg has pointed out, but because it must be made in a different way. Though the size of paintings may vary easily, the size of the artist will not, and the size or range of his painting tools is less changeable than the size of his canvas. The very large painting demands special mechanical treatment, and must be preceded by a conception adequate for the size. There is visual evidence for this when models or sketches are put up against larger works, particularly of abstract painting; so often the sketch has the feel of life, and the large piece, done as an enlargement on the same terms, is dumb and brittle.

Abstract painting seems to prefer large size because the best abstract painting since Cubism has come more consistently in large size, and seems to find its best expression there. But abstract painting should not be considered unnaturally large; it is more accurate to say that realist painting has always been unnaturally small, conforming to a convention coming out of medieval illuminated manuscripts and favored by convenience to this day in photographs, TV, magazines, and the rest. The assumption that a painting ten feet high or wide is "large" depends on this tradition. Large size is not essential to realist styles because the quality of a realist painting does not depend on it. This does not mean that there are no good large realist paintings, or that a realist style is free from the pressures of adaptation as scale changes. But the effects of most realist paintings are complete in modest scale, the scale of "easel painting," which has been the standard scale for hundreds of years, kept this way by tradition and convenience and by the absence of any internal reason to expand.

The means of realist painting, which subdue the visual evidence of the stroke in the service of depiction, can be taken up fairly easily to large size. Large realist paintings were usually done not to satisfy the demands of style and materials but to fulfill the demands of patrons, to fill a given, large space or to gain a theatrical effect - the effect of importance through largeness. I cannot specify the reasons why a diminished image has always been satisfactory, and still is, in our modern forms of communication; it has to do with tradition, symbology, "mental set" and the like, and it is another kind of study. But given this acceptance it is clear why a push for quality in realist painting did not force largeness. With the tradition of miniature subject matter, quality could come up within the framework of placing and rendering smaller-than-life-size figures and objects which fill the painted area. This convention forced paint wholly into the service of depiction and restricted not only the potential expressiveness of paint as paint but pointed away from the esthetic importance of the character of the painted surface and material variety and toward the relationship between the depicted subjects and the relationship between these subjects and the viewers' ideas about art and visible reality. This made no

difference to degree of quality, of course; quality came through, as always, as it does today, on top of style. But it did make a difference for scale.

The most realistic depictions of nature ever made - the paintings of the Impressionists - deliberately isolated the paint stroke as a visible unit of the picture, thereby laying the foundation for Cubism and abstraction, and, ironically, the erosion of realist art as a vehicle for the best painting. The more the stroke shows as paint the more difference size makes. I do not think size and quality were tied together until after Cubism, but size and character mesh in proportion to the visibility of the stroke in any style at any time. Seurat's tiny oil sketches may be no finer than *La Grande Jatte*, but they are certainly different in more than size; they are different in style, conception and character, in a way that a small and a large Ingres or David would not differ. Monet, who alone took Impressionism along a path laid out but never travelled in the 19th century, finally gave that style all the size it could use. As his subjects came up closer and closer to the surface, the paint pushed out to the edges of the canvas and the surface became more uniform in terms of value - forced, flat, low-incident open space coming in at the heels of the lost space-in-depth. He ended with the huge horizontal *Water Lilies*, which gave this surface, and the dry, open stroke which covered it, "wide open spaces" which would have been impossible for the precise, strong-contrast small-stroke Impressionism of the 1870s.

Large size, or at least "life" size - the space de Kooning assumed between his outstretched hands, though not traditional is certainly natural. Painting is the art of surface, is done on surface and must adapt to the conditions of surface. Except for the shallow depth of relief a painting is made by spreading paint out, back and forth, up and down. The energy of painting, especially abstract painting, which has no deep space to push into, proceeds against the limits of the surface - the edge - and when the motive become expansionist, as it has in abstraction, the limit can act as constraint. Limits are necessary, constraints are not. The edge should go expand away from the insides of a painting until the internal parts have enough room to work at full strength, which happened in the best paintings of Pollock and Newman, or squeeze down just enough to force the forms into place, which we can see in Still's paintings of the late '40s and perhaps in evolving, "original" Cubism until about 1913.

Scale can be changed at will, but the other means of painting must be altered by invention to fit scale change. The wrist-and-finger stroke is not like the stroke of the arm and shoulder. Each has a different effect according to the size of the canvas and will be useful only insofar as the terms of composition meet the conditions imposed by the particular size of the area to be painted. Touch, or looseness - the visible stroke - is not necessary to the quality of large scale abstract painting, but being natural to it turns up persistently. As painting has become more consciously and evidently abstract and as the content has become more identified with the materials, these materials tend to be used less and less to limit any shape which conceals any of the intrinsic attributes of the materials. An art will reach its noblest form when its materials are clear, simple and unobliged to alter or submerge their character in the service of convention, because then materials can come to the artist as fully expressive tools, primary, unhampered, free to combine and easily available on their own terms to the artist's hand and eye. When the materials of painting become "themselves" in painting, strict form dissolves, color spreads, paint becomes sticky, thin, thick or liquid looking, and only the barest accommodation is made to the only necessarily stricture, the canvas edge.

Abstract painting cannot keep the space of realist painting because by creating the illusion of deep space the painting becomes no longer fully abstract. The forms would become "unreal," like those in a Tanguy landscape, but they would be depicted forms nevertheless, and non-abstract in material terms, the terms of the best recent painting. (Ron Davis turns the whole picture into an illusion of a three-dimensional object. This is a special case, and a partial exception.) The flatness of abstract painting since Cubism, and the formal adaptations to that flatness, are a result of the loss of realist space. Objects discernible in realist space have a built-in "relatability" because of the open air in the box-like illusion of extended depth, and this illusion imposes a strong visual coherence on any varied surface. Flatness is the enemy of coherence, because coherence depends on the relatedness of parts, or visual unity, and distinct parts, or units, of the flat picture can easily become isolated from one another, turning the picture into a decorated surface of a flat object, and thereby lose its identity as a picture. Most of the essays I have written for this magazine have gone back to this one primary problem of abstract painting. The first problem of the abstract painter has been to induce pictorial coherence - not necessarily obvious or forced coherence, such as that brought about by the central massing of incident, but a coherence which sooner or later compels acceptance

of a flat decorated object as a picture. This is a special problem for touch and scale because the exposed stroke becomes a discrete unit in abstract art to the extent that it is not tied to depiction or the formation of a larger unit, and relative smallness and multiplicity of stroke increases the difficulty. It was also a special problem for original Cubism, Cubism as it was growing, before it became an applied style, because Cubism acted as the agent for the introduction of abstraction into painting by accommodating loss of depth and increasing flatness by means of a style which was almost flat visually but consisted of many distinct but similar pictorial units in a very clear relationship. Hue variation was sacrificed in favor of uniform shading, representation succumbed to the cutting edge of the flat plane, edge reference took over from realist outline, and the shallow space of flat frontal planes replaced the deep space of realism.

I want to say that Cubism was both radical and conservative, but these are two words which should be in any art writer's handbook of used-up terms. Radical, from the Latin "radix", or root, pertains to a root or foundation, and describes that which is basic, primary, inherent in the nature or essence of a thing. But for over a hundred years the word has carried the extra meaning of change or reform, especially in politics, and is now used indiscriminately to mean a new condition achieved by force. "Radical" should disappear from art writing except when carefully used to specify the essence of a style or art. "Conservative" has been misused as a substitute for outworn or old-fashioned, the opposite of radical, or new. This also comes out of political rhetoric, and the word should also be accorded very careful treatment in art writing. No work of art is altogether radical or conservative; these terms can only be properly used to describe aspects of a work. For example, great art always conserves quality, and derivative art always conserves the style derived. And any art that is truly radical must also be in some way conservative.

Original Cubism was both new and conservative; new, because it eliminated deep illusionist space in favor of abstraction, and accepted the consequences, and conservative because it did so with the full means and technique of traditionally "good" painting, which acted to "save" painting from the apparent disaster of diffusion and dissolution of surface implied by Impressionism and finally realized by Monet, and which was present in some form in all the arts at the end of the last century, in the poetry of Swinburne and the music of Wagner and his followers, and so forth, which provoked in every art a later reaction to discreteness. Cubism took its cue from the Impressionist breakup of the surface into distinct units of paint, and preserved a number of features of painting which Impressionism would have thrown out if it had held painting to its path: deliberate shading, control of detail, central massing of incident, control of internal parts according to the edge and distinct placement - all the baggage of traditional painting with a new face. Abstraction seemed not too high a price to pay to retain an attribute of painting which Impressionism threatened to dissolve, and which was felt to be more deeply necessary to art than realist depiction: the variation of the surface by visually specific units. The destruction of the realist subject was disturbing, but at least it was definite. Cubism made a picture on certain terms which could be easily seen and grasped and allowed endless variation. It was essentially simple and easy to understand and apply, and could adapt to a million uses. The strength of the Cubist style was in its utility; it provided a system which could cope with most of the fresh problems of abstraction and flatness - a visually clear and specific armature for paint always in reach of the unchanging edge.

The changes wrought on art by the Cubist style, though they certainly did not guarantee quality, appear to have been necessary to sustain high quality in art. Every generation of artists has its "frontier"; the style an artist forges against this imaginary boundary carries art quality as the visible record of what he has set himself up for and what he has done with it. Art-making, like all other worthwhile human activity, is full of impulse and action forever conflicting. The best artists always reject or modify a successful art-making method to forge one of their own, and in so doing make choices which cancel, contradict and change. We honor this now, and give it names, such as "widening the horizons," "breakthrough," "radical advance" or "new freedom." But the honor is grudging because the process is always misunderstood. No sooner do we respect apparent newness in art than legions of inferior artists take vulgar advantage of the attitude. An explicit idea about the nature of art quality will always come in company with inferior art tailored to it.

Great art always seems unusual when it is new because quality always comes in unexpected form, not because one style is better than the one before, but because art quality springs only from the activity of the artist. His art is simply what he has done. And inventive variation of the styles and forms of the best art preceding his maturity is part of the record of his

inspiration, just as dependence on these styles is his support and one of his basic materials. Cubism is the record of such invention against the biggest artistic odds of the time and is the style which carries the quality of the paintings produced in the course of its evolution. Though strict terms of style support the quality of the Cubist painting, the expression of feeling from the best of original Cubism seems more intimate with finish: touch, painterliness, sparkle, compression and concentrated multiplicity - as if the bones must be regular to give form to the flexible features of the flesh. As the internal edge becomes precise, other terms take over for expression, and Cubist quality comes up from the touch of paint, pencil and charcoal. Cubism was born under the pure pressure of inspiration; it is a style of compression, not of analysis, of inspiration, not reflection.

As a style of compression, with its edge as ever-ready reference, blossoming at the center, in the place of greatest pressure. Original Cubism evolved as a small-scale art, with small-scale means. Though several of the earliest Cubist paintings were rather large (*Demoiselles* is about 8 feet square) the full-blast evolving Cubism of 1909 to 1912 or 1913 shows hardly a picture above 40 inches in height. It is not as important that there may be larger pictures as it is that so many Cubist masterpieces were made in such extraordinarily small size: 8 by 10, 10 by 14, and the like, and that a fully focused study of the period could contain no picture larger than about 26 by 40. Painterly ambition did not expand Cubist scale as the style evolved. Because of the extremely high and sustained level of quality we must assume not only that the effects of Cubism were complete in this scale but that larger scale was at least not essential to the quality of the Cubist picture, and perhaps inconsistent with it.

Original Cubism could keep small because concentration, compression and touch were necessary to the style, and its effects were complete in small size. Just as the Cubist armature is the skeleton of the original Cubist picture, so the rough light-dark sparkling touch of the brush - worked with the wrist and fingers - is its life and breath. And small size fits the talents of Picasso, who is a handworker; except for a few large canvases done before he was 30, Picasso's measure of success in any medium can be measured according to its immediate availability to his hand and eye. After the 1920s this restriction is more specific and more palpable, as artistic success slips away, and he turns more and more to graphics and clay. The many very large Cubist paintings done after the full bloom of original Cubism show that it is possible to paint large with Cubist principles, but with less of, or without, the life-giving touch of the earlier style, and attempts to reconstitute touch in large scale Cubism in terms of original Cubism usually fail. I discussed a particular instance of this - de Kooning's *Excavation* - in an article on de Kooning in the April 1969 *Artforum*. Apparently the only way to use Cubism in very large scale, retaining full touch and a sense of openness or "air" in the picture, is to alter the terms of the style, as Pollock did, by throwing paint and eliminating the Cubist plane, or by taking Pollock ever further, as Olitski has, by spraying at a distance and atomizing the paint particles. [Edit of last sentence provided by WDB. - Ed.] It may be possible to take Cubism up to very large scale by deliberately excluding touch; perhaps it could be shown that this is what Newman and Noland have done, but their styles are so rid of Cubist effect that it would be stretching a point. The great example of the misapplication of very large size to the Cubist style is the famous *Guernica*, which I have discussed before (*Artforum*, April 1968) and which I pick on not because it is any worse as art than many other bad, oversize Cubist paintings but because it is such a perfect example by way of its many extreme exaggerations, particularly size and theatricality, because it is so familiar to so many, and because of all paintings of this century it is specially, and in a very modern way, meretricious.

In making *Guernica* Picasso applied the mechanics of original Cubism doggedly. The composition is carefully controlled, centered and made symmetrical, darks and lights are pushed to extremes to provide "air" for over-and-under connection, hue difference is abolished, all edges are Cubistically modified - everything in the Cubist bag of tricks is ground into the picture to force coherence on the huge surface. But as so often happens in art-making, perspiration and inspiration don't mix. The painting fails in two ways, one depending on the other: it fails structurally, and, partly as a result of the structural failure, it fails expressively. *Guernica* should be the casebook example of the misunderstanding of the demands of large scale and of the failure of theatricality to overcome pictorial weakness. *Guernica* is built on the terms of original Cubism, so an analysis of its structural weakness bears comparison with the strength of the earlier style. Though simultaneous in creation, fundamental coherence seems not to be a factor of quality; it appears, at least to the intellect, to support the spirit or quality of a painting and be necessary for it, but it never guarantees it. Coherence is visual gestalt, the rendering of a surface so that the surface has sufficient visual

integrity to seem plausible as a picture. This can be done in many ways, not only by interconnection of discrete units on the picture surface but by other visual and psychological devices. For example, the use today of pale same-value hues not only make a visually continuous surface but automatically deny identification of the painting with surrounding phenomena. (Dissolution of edge and piece distinctness in Olitski's painting is precisely the converse of the dissolution of hue difference in original Cubism.)

Cubism evolved a method of picture-making which guaranteed immediate visual coherence, not only by rendering the insides of the painting in terms of the edge - the strongest factor of design of the rectangular canvas - and by the resulting interconnection of line, but also by following through by forcing everything into conformity with design-by-edge. For a comparison with *Guernica*, it is necessary to see original Cubism as a style of compression. If in the process of evolution Cubism seems analytic, "reducing" realist depiction to a simplified alphabet of forms, its spirit, the force behind it, aimed for complexity, density and richness so muscular and opaque that we can only conclude that the "bones" of the Cubist style came up not as pictorial end products but as a support for an immense superstructure of inspiration. The original Cubist picture contains a concentrated intensity which, unlike most Impressionist paintings, is immediate because there are no distractions, no overlay of nicety. (This is not a value judgment; the fresh, easy "blanket" of perfect realism of the Impressionist painting is a fine part of its quality.) All other attributes of the Cubist painting succumbed to this force, conformed to it, and by their disposition are the record of the path it took, as the fossil is the evidence of past life. The picture stayed small, as a kind of tight "belt," to force formal integration and it stayed (usually) vertical because our habits of seeing, derived from the facts of gravity and materials, let us assume that a vertical construction has more integral strength than a horizontal one. As the surface evolved into abstraction, figures were cut up into Cubist units because the conformation of real objects did not fit the Cubist scheme, until finally subject matter itself - guitars, bottles, glasses, pipes - was chosen for its Cubist-like formal regularity. The illusion of depth was shallow, extending only enough for the necessary connection-to-the-center and the painting was massed at the center. The subject was "destroyed" to bring it in line with demands made by the picture; touch, the quick electric dots and dashes, the rough and ready shading and over-painting allowed so easily on a surface small enough to show the quick work of the wrist and fingers - Picasso's strength - was the final forceful flourish of the Cubist painting. *Guernica*, though it uses the elements of design and the evolved forms of original Cubism as a foundation, reflects none of the pictorial attributes given to the Cubist picture as the style evolved. This does not prove that *Guernica* is failed art - the proof of the pudding is in the eating, of course - but tracing these things in that huge painting helps us see the failure of coherence, helps us feel, finally, the failure of the whole. Demonstrating the integral weakness of *Guernica* is easy enough; take a reproduction of the painting and fold it in half vertically - you will see that either half is compositionally stronger than the full painting. Folding it in half vertically again yields four compositions, each stronger than the halves.

Compared to the original Cubist painting, and aside from touch, the immediate internal difference seen in *Guernica* is expansion and dispersal, the immediate external difference size and horizontality. The forms and constructive methods remain pretty much the same. We see, then, that an art-making method devised to handle the overloading and compression of original Cubism will not meet the needs of a very large mural-like space. The structural failure of original Cubism in the scale of *Guernica* is a failure of connectivity, a problem Pollock later solved by altering the Cubist method to eliminate the things which stood in the way of expansion. Picasso correctly saw that the paper-thin space of the small Cubist picture would not work for a huge one because the parts would come up flat against the surface and render the painting incoherent, so he pushed back the background and brought up the foreground by the use of extreme, almost black-white, value differences. But he kept the flat forms of original Cubism. The same forms which squeeze, shuffle and jockey about in the pinched space of the original Cubist picture are blown up, pulled apart and cast into the airy, barn-like interior of *Guernica*. The depth was needed to set the painting up rigid, like a box, but the figures do not have volume adequate for it. They inhabit the space like cardboard characters in a stage set. It seems a shame that *Guernica* was not actually constructed, rather than painted; the use of real space would have brought out Picasso's gift for sculpture and would have avoided the weakness he has usually shown for large painting.

Though the figures inhabit the same painted space there is not enough pictorial connection between them. The composition is muralized; they are dispersed horizontally, as real figures

would be, but they lack the automatic relationship of volumetric figures in deep space because they are all surface, and this surface is all frontal. The sense of dispersal with inadequate connection is heightened by the individuality of the figures, each with its own form and place, and by the extreme difference of character between the picture-edge and the figure-edge, which frustrates the edge composition which is the organizing principle of the Cubist style. The massing of incident, so much a part of the original Cubist picture and which counted so much for coherence, is just about impossible for the muralized canvas, which must have individuation, discrete scenes and the horizontality to accommodate these scenes. (The few horizontal original Cubist pictures were severely massed at the center and dissipated at the edges, and I can recall only one or two of the later collages which were horizontal and dispersed.) The free, floating figures are too flimsy and spread out to give convincing structure to the picture. Like a bridge too long for its supports, Guernica buckles despite the contrived, flaccid, central pyramid. Its component lines switch from figure to background with no objective reason, and they are loose and rubbery because, keeping to spirit of the "handmade" work of art, they have not been measured off as they should have been.

It might be answered, to all I have said about Guernica, that all this is not really important - why not take it simply as a mural, forget all the problems of structure and let the "emotion" of the painting come across. Well, a painting is a painting, and if it does not push itself into existence as a painting it fails as a painting. Nevertheless, the expressive failure of Guernica, even if it could be taken separately from its structural failure, is more directly felt, is more immediately tragic, and has more of the quality of meretriciousness than that structural failure. Feeling is the proclaimed point of Guernica, and it is in feeling that its failure is most poignant. The picture lacks touch, the mark of the brush, at least from proper viewing distance, and touch is what carries such liveliness into original Cubism, and gives such vitality to the small realist or semi-realist works of Picasso, especially the drawings and etchings, and, ironically, the studies "for" Guernica, many of which were done after the large painting. Guernica lacks touch because of scale; it is simply too large to show the wrist-and-finger work of the compact Cubist picture. The huge size of the painting also makes the figures look plotted and deliberate. These are not the distortions forced by the impacting pressure of Cubist invention, but are applied distortions, partly to keep in line with the style borrowed for use in this unfamiliar territory and partly to echo the horror of the event commemorated by the painting. The unfortunate effect is that of vulgar cartooning. The bright lamp at the top of the picture, for example, gives off a jagged body of light just like a "kaboom" in a war comic. The grotesquerie advertises itself, calls attention literally, saying "I am wounded, I am screaming, I am contorted by grief." But the emotion is not felt, unless supplied by the imagination and knowledge of the viewer, because the forms are not adequate to convey it. The figures are posed, the emotion is applied, the effect is false.

As an artist I can feel the frustration Picasso must have known while painting Guernica. I can almost taste it in some of the small sketches made during and after the work on the painting. He was stymied, and he scrawled these beautiful drawings not as studies but as a kind of "working out," as a dream works out the frustrations of the day. In these the bewilderment at the failure imposed by scale comes up raw and biting as Picasso feels the renewed power of his hand and eye. But as a critic I must point to the failure of invention which plagued Picasso in large scale despite the incredible ambition he turned into painting and the genuine feelings he wanted to bring to the world through his art. Guernica stands as a triumph of empty theatricality over pictorial quality. Go any time to the Museum of Modern Art to see the reverent group before the painting, or read its praises in a dozen books. Then go see the empty floor before another mural-size painting - Monet's Water Lilies - which is as fine and true in feeling as Guernica is coarse and dissembling.

About 10 years after Guernica was painted, Jackson Pollock became the artist who successfully took the Cubist style up to very large scale. As did all the other artists of his generation, Pollock came to artistic maturity through the absolute dominance of Cubism. To most ambitious painters of the '30s and '40s Cubism seemed the sole vessel of artistic quality. The final stages of Impressionism, as carried out by Monet at the end of his life, were, for the artists of the '30s, almost totally recessive (I say "almost," of course, because of Clyfford Still and the artists he influenced). Pollock took his training in Cubism and came to terms with it. Though his later art may not seem Cubist it is securely based in the Cubist method, just as the flower lives by the root. But if his roots were Cubist, his genius lay with the amazing energy he set against the style, an energy which always took forms more like the fluid curves of his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, than Cubist geometry. This force was part of Pollock and it is

evident in his paintings. That it was a force for the actual expansion of the Cubist picture can be seen not only in Pollock's great paintings of the late '40s but in the uncomfortable confinement of the paintings before them. The means to give form to this energy was implicit in the Cubist style as it came down to the late '30s and early '40s. The qualities of original Cubism were forged under compression, and evolved to meet these needs, but, once explicit, were applied as a skeleton; when thus externalized, ready to be assumed whole, the Cubist style came naturally to expansion, and artistic ambition pushed it out as far as it could, not only in Pollock's painting but in the sculpture of David Smith.

The most important single change Pollock made to go to very large size in his best paintings was the elimination of the opacity of the Cubist plane, which in turn got rid of shading as a means of inducing depth illusion and freed line from delineation of a substantial surface. This was not a decision made literally and applied as style, but a method built slowly, through painting only. The desire for all-over openness can be seen in some of Pollock's paintings and drawings of the late '30s, but the dense, opaque Cubist plane was still the unashamed building block of many paintings of 1946. Transparency and openness seesawed with closed Cubist opacity for many years, and the former took charge in the late '40s - a blaze of inspired art which ultimately sank back into a bog of closed forms and turbid paint.

The elimination of the opaque-plane surface catalyzed all the ingredients of Pollock's art so completely and inspired an art of such wholeness and efficiency that it is difficult to isolate the factors of organization. For example, Pollock's method of dripping and tossing liquid paint, which allowed him to retain touch and expand stroke in very large scale, clearly comes in concert with transparency because it is useless for filling in and perfect for forming a quick, long line. Furthermore, the problem of isolation, so persistent for the large Cubist painting of small opaque parts, disappears as opacity disappears. Pollock's open transparency let him paint heedless of density, which all Cubists before him were obliged to handle most carefully, adjusting piece number and piece size, because the opaque planes covered and cut off each other. In fact, because of the compositional strength of the "web" of painted line, and the visual effect of lacy, net-like depth, Pollock was able to paint some absolutely successful pictures made up of thousands of discrete planes actually flat against the picture plane, which, if visually flat against the picture plane, would immediately turn the picture into a decorated surface. This expanded density is the expression in large scale of the compressed density of original Cubism. The differences of effect are imposed by differences of scale. The small original Cubist picture set up edge-reflecting armatures to contain the flood of paint. The Pollock, too large to form regular lines and keep full touch, amalgamates armature and paint and transmutes them into a tangle of painted line which sits on the rectangular support the way a sculpture sits on its base, and pays it no more regard.

A thorough, step-by-step, fully illustrated compilation of the best American art of the '40s is overdue. What a boon it would be to see, detailed, the slow growth of the art which bloomed so gloriously in the years around 1950, and how satisfying not to be forced to guess about influences, changes, relationships and the like. The link between Barnett Newman's art and that of Clyfford Still is quite plain in 1946 and 1947, and the similarity to Monet's late Impressionism is marked, but it is hard to tell how it all worked and what the directions were. There has been a strain of artistic, or art-making, thought, which has set itself squarely against Cubism in the years since Cubism, and has a quality of wholeness behind different manifestations, from a Dali watch to the soft surface of a Rothko, from the Monet Water Lilies to the stick-insect forms of second-rate 1950s sculpture and the obsessive "singleness" of the second-rate sculpture of today. It is an idea of "real content," of something presented rather than something constructed, whether the depiction of a real object or a simple colored surface. Most ambitious painters flirted with Surrealism in the '30s and '40s, but it seems that the "surface" painters - Newman, Still and Rothko - were more in need of Surreal strangeness and "other worldly" reference than painters like de Kooning, Hofmann and Pollock, who played with Surrealism but stayed with Cubism. The emotional stance of Surrealism, the underlying pervasiveness of a sense of something there "behind" mere appearance, was an up-to-date substitute for plain subject matter, and clearly more antithetical to the Cubist attitude of digging in and building, of the direct shaping with tactile stuff, than to the soft, all-inclusive dissolving ambiance of late Impressionism. These three artists, who shared a personal distaste for Cubism, leaned on Surrealism as they worked out non-Cubist styles with some kinship to late Impressionism - styles which could stand up to the seriousness of Cubism as Surrealism never could.

This process can be traced most easily in Rothko's development, but I am not prepared to specify its course and what it held for any artist, or demonstrate the positive relationship of the various anti-Cubist strains of 20th-century art. What can be partially described are pictorial differences brought in by mere technique, in terms of touch and scale.

Perhaps Pollock has been the only artist since Cubism to make wholly successful paintings in very large scale with full touch - with every painted part of the picture reflecting the action of the artist's hand - with the possible exception of Olitski, whom I have not evaluated in this regard anyway. This is not a judgment of quality. Touch is merely a condition of style, necessary only within a particular style, such as Pollock's. It may be a natural condition of the art of painting, but it is certainly not a precondition. All of the other best artists of Pollock's time either failed with touch in very large scale (de Kooning, Still), kept away from very large scale (Gorky, Hofmann), severely reduced touch (Newman), or tied touch on as a modification of the picture units (Newman sometimes, Still, Gottlieb, Rothko, Motherwell, and most others). The easiest way to make a very large abstract painting (not necessarily a very good abstract painting) is to eliminate touch and its built-in problem of constant size relative to changing picture size, or to use it as added to other parts of the picture. Though visible touch was very much part of his developing style, Newman was the artist of Pollock's generation who most reduced it in his maturity. He left the Cubist spirit behind, but the precedent of extreme geometric Cubism may have been necessary for his painting. It often happens (but is seldom acknowledged) that certain "unusual" situations brought into art can act as a comfort, as security, without becoming influence. The prior existence of Mondrian's painting, and the recognition of the quality of that painting, may have relieved Newman of the agony of deciding whether a colored surface crossed by a few lines could be art. It is tough when your art doesn't look like art, and it is nice to know someone else has gotten away with something similar. I have no memory so heartening as the overwhelming authority of the big Newman exhibition at French & Co., in the winter of 1958-59, of paintings which were altogether new to me and which made me feel that my own paintings at that time - circles, rectangles and bands on unmodulated color - were not as totally "out of it" as they seemed.

Having come to a style of strict regularity and diminished touch, Newman was not hampered by the move to very large size, because the elements of his style could be enlarged or reduced mechanically. For Newman's art the change in scale was more a change in effect than process. It was the difference, in Greenberg's often quoted words, that "more blue is simply bluer than less blue." This does not mean that Newman, by virtue of technique, was altogether free of obligation to large size once he got there, but his art-making means did not set obstacles to expansion. The fragility of Newman's style in very large size depends not at all on touch nor scale, as can be seen by the absolute differences in quality between otherwise very similar paintings, for example, the very big, red-dominant, horizontal paintings he did in the early '50s. These differences are as slight as they are important. One Newman, like *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (probably the most familiar of his best paintings), has a quality which is almost magic, while another quite similar painting can be conspicuously just stripes on a colored canvas. Though Newman's paintings speak a different language, they share with the paintings of the geometric Cubists their absolute dependence on adjustment, and it may be accurate to say that if this is not true of all art (or may be less overt in other styles) it is certainly true of all art of visually clear-cut parts. By bringing full touch to large scale, Pollock seems to have gained an advantage (for the process of painting, not for final quality) denied Newman. Pollock's style was more muscular and adaptable, and not only did he have to bruise it pretty badly before it gave in, but when his inspiration was exhausted the paintings changed overtly. A bad Newman, on the other hand, "looks" just like a good one.

As it does for Cubism, the quality of Newman's art comes across on top of its mechanics. The stripe activates the painting but the surface moves the viewer, and in failure, it is the surface which lies dead. In a way this is true of all painting, because all painting is done on surface. But in Newman's best paintings the surface is held up as nothing more than it is and what it can most readily hold, and the stripes which "zip up" the colored expanse are there in its service, not to play games with the edge, squeeze off a centralized subject or merely create incident. Eventually Newman lost this concept, which is so basic to his art, and in his paintings of the '60s the stripe takes on the importance of a subject and the surface becomes background, or extra space, and that is why these pictures are no more than they can be described to be, and fail as art. The less the stripes declare themselves, the less weight they have, the more they resist seeing - because they are thin, or similar in value to the field, or "oddly" spaced - the less they act as equal to or more important than the colored surface the

better the painting probably is. The fugitive character of the Newman stripe is quite the opposite of Cubism's edge-dominated interior line, and gives away its different purpose. It is there to resonate the surface, like a pebble thrown on calm water, and though it appears to the Cubist-trained eye to be doing Cubist work, and does take its configuration from the edge, it is, because of its edge similarity, the simplest and least obtrusive agent of this non-Cubist effect. A history of 20th-century art styles could be written solely in terms of edge and surface, touch and scale. Original Cubism, constructed in terms of edge, was animated in terms of surface. It may be true that the course of high art since Cubism, the continuing readaptation of present styles to the "fresh earth" turned up by the best previous art, has been working out of the expressive usefulness of the plain, flat, painted surface, which, since the exhaustion of depicted deep space, has slowly become the vehicle of abstract art. We see Newman's best paintings as extremely taut, sensitive surfaces, usually unmodified by the touch which is so often the agent of feeling. Because these paintings were not expressive through touch or complex relationships, the burden of expression was thrown on surface; the surface thus needed no more than color and large size to assert itself. Newman may have done better if he had chosen to activate his surfaces more directly. I say this not because I can describe any way he could have done this, but because I remember several of the big "non-touch" Newmans, which had a slight mottling across part of the expanse of color, and this seemed to hike them up another notch in quality.

Touch has been as necessary for Clyfford Still as it was for Pollock; unlike Pollock and Newman he has not succeeded in very large scale. This is partly because his touch never expanded but was adapted, and could work up to a middling large size - about 70 by 90 inches - and partly because his technique of applying paint led him to a manner of layout in very large size which "contradicted" the other elements of his style.

The character of Still's art springs from his small-scale, Impressionist-type method of laying on paint; he has stuck to this method with great resolve, and his genius has been to take full advantage of its effects. (Acceptance and adaption to the consequences of a primary choice is a seldom-recognized attribute of artistic genius.) It is not easy to be certain whether Still's avowed loathing for Cubism is responsible for the non-Cubist character of his painting, but it is clear that the small-stroking and insistent filling-in on a large surface precluded successful Cubist treatment of that surface. Still's stroke - paint-laden, random, rough-edged, uneven - is completely unsuitable for the fashioning of a Cubist edge, and the small, filled Cubist piece the stroke might form would run the risks of isolation and locked-up surface. Just as Pollock held on to Cubism and altered his stroke, so Still rejected Cubism and kept his stroke. Given the small stroke and the large canvas the other factors of Still's style were forced to conform. Rather than put the stroke to work as outline in the service of depiction or Cubism, Still let it do what it could do best: cover surface. Still's painting is surface painting; the paint is used for covering with no concession to illusion, and the effect of the paintings is that of the condition of surface. The edge is manifestly that of a flat thing which leaves a ragged edge where it is torn, shows other surfaces by opening up and covers and spreads, creeping into holes and crevices on the way. Other art has approached this condition, but usually through failure or other terms, like de Kooning's paintings of the middle '50s, large-scale small-piece Cubist paintings which could not handle the paint they were forced to hold. Those similar-size Cubist forms, loaded with paint and stymied by a too-shallow implied depth, cannot get across to each other, and become the thwarted prisoners of their edges, and the painting comes to the viewer as a clotted surface only.

To maintain the small trowelling stroke, the touch it left and the surface it created, Still had to evolve a style which would make successful art and leave these things undisturbed. This style had to face the threat of visual flatness, the isolation of picture units and the resulting quality of decorativeness, which destroys coherence. Still coped with all this with a brilliantly integrated set of techniques. Unlike the units of Cubist painting, which are relatively equivalent in piece-size, Still's color units vary extremely in size, so that a maximum of contact can be maintained by surrounding. Furthermore, the edges which make this contact are ragged and meandering, and push into each other like roots after water, which gives them great "combining power." Separated units are often identified by color similarity, so that they look as if each is part of another, mostly covered, continuous sheet of color. Sometimes the painting is modulated more by surface texture and hue difference than by value difference, or by value difference more than by hue difference, so that the surface, though large and visually variegated, is quite homogeneous in terms of at least one component of color. The small stroke, so deadly to the large Cubist picture, actually intensifies relationship in the Still

painting; it covers the surface with a relatively uniform texture, and enhances combination by the greatly increased edge-length of the fringy shapes it produces so naturally. Variety is great but mostly confined to elements of painting least likely to create visually discrete units. Unlike Cubism, Still's painting regards the edge as a nuisance and accommodates it barely but adequately, as the expanding and contracting forms come up and fall back from it, like waves from a shoreline, or, particularly in the earlier and better pictures, "square up" to a vague horizontal-vertical. Still's paintings are born of movement on surface and in terms of surface, and all their visual features bear the character of this movement. By capitulating to surface, which most artists have worked against, by forcing illusionist depth on it, Still's art may be the most natural of the century, the only painting to call its shots entirely in terms of this most basic material while keeping the sticky, viscous quality of oil paint both visible and expressive. Still's art received color as the inevitable result of a style which worked solely in terms of surface and left large areas open to any natural attribute of surface. Furthermore, his technique of painting could be used to work and re-work a colored surface without messing things up, because the working itself was left as the final "look" of the surface. Also, by painting absolutely flat, Still did not have to fuss with shading, mixing black in, which was such a bugaboo for so many of the Cubist Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s. Though it is true that an original Cubist masterpiece can seem to shimmer coloristically despite a surface of the most austere hue, Cubism as a style has never favored expressive color because it subordinates color to define shape, or uses value difference to shade into depth illusion, which works against the exposure and variation of hue. Cubist paintings can be and have been colorful, of course, but they are usually not expressive through color. Cubist color can be gratuitous, or seem that way, and it will not disturb the Cubist effect. To "show off," color needs friendly surroundings: flow, broadness, flatness--- qualities of surface, not structure. Color needs its own kind of space to combine unencumbered. This is why color is so difficult for Cubist sculpture, which establishes itself through clearly articulated shape. Cubist painting sometimes needs color to identify and sort out shape and strengthen connections otherwise hidden in two dimensions, but on Cubist sculpture, especially open Cubist sculpture, with specific exposed shapes, varied color over defines particular parts and blocks integration. Still has not made many color mistakes and he has shown a superb sense for combining the few colors he uses. In particular, he has avoided a pitfall which has caught many abstract artists more coloristically ambitious: oversaturation with bright colors of dissimilar hue. Though not impossible, it is very difficult to make good pictures this way, with straight, bright, "tube colors." Newman sensed this, but Kelly has not. Bright color juxtaposition can work when it used to identify planes, which some of the Abstract Expressionists did, and it can become expressive through careful adjustment, openness or extreme variation of "piece" size, as can be seen in some pictures of Hofmann, Noland and Louis. But bright-color different-hue juxtaposition of areas of similar size across a visual flat surface has been a tough nut because this form of composition thwarts visual integration. When surfaces, clearly discrete by means of saturated hue, operate at full intensity on a visually flat surface, they oppose combination by the loudly declared difference, even when illusionistic devices are used to force them together. It is easier and usually better to vary color intensity, to use a red and a grayish red rather than a red and a green. Still, who had so much surface to hold color, heightened the integration of surface compositions by varying other color elements more than hue difference. When there is strong color variety in a Still painting it is more dark to light and bright to gray than hue to hue. Fully saturated different hues come together seldom, and then only under the most carefully prepared conditions, and the stronger and more opposed they are the more they have been given prudent handling. Bright red is a favorite color; usually it is used with a somber, colorless foil like black, or a grayed red or tan or brown, or with "cousins" on the color wheel, like orange, orange-yellow and other closer reds. A bright red never, to my knowledge, comes smack up against an equally bright green or blue of similar area. Even in the few paintings where bright-color confrontations occur they are modified by extreme size difference or separation by a neutral expanse. By careful adjustment of saturation Still preserved the fragile integrity of his surface compositions and heightened the "feel" of color difference. Still's use of color was entirely adequate, in a way, but I feel that his style left much more room for color variety, more color inspiration. The color resolutions are so often overpungent, somber and dramatic in a way that seems to refer out of the picture back to some non-pictorial concern of the artist. This is just guesswork from experience and I cannot substantiate it in words. Still's best paintings do their job with surface and form, but it is color which makes the surface sing, and often, especially when looking at the larger, later horizontal pictures, I wish

for a little more lightness and variety - not literal openness, but color "play." Still's paintings are best when they are overwhelmed by colored paint, when they are flooded and stuffed, and though there is no stylistic similarity, I think back to the vibrant compression of original Cubism, and the quite different demands of evolved Cubism, which call for more and more openness to more efficiently expose the small Cubist piece. Cubism has moved fruitfully to openness, but Still's art suffers from it. His paintings are at their worst when he pulls the shapes apart, lets them lie on top of a field and keeps plenty of air between them. This fact seems absolute for Still's art: as soon as the edges disengage, the painting is in trouble, and the further and more pronounced the separation the worse the effect. The ragged edge, which Still has always retained, evolved to enhance combination. When these edges are pulled apart they are torn from their function, like an uprooted tree, and they dangle, a pictorially useless applied effect. Still's edge got its character through contact. The actual process of painting, as his style evolved, kept one color area shoving and probing the one adjacent; the paint combined in minute ways, pushing back and forth, over and under. The effect is the extension of the idea, an evolved look which reflected the process of combining of the flat surfaces and further enhanced the appearance of integration. When the edge is pulled out and exposed to the air it plays itself out into nothing. Incidentally, it is interesting to note how important the edge is to a painter who works in terms of surface, just as the surface was so vital to the edge-constructing Cubists.

The separation of the fields to form independent units, and the consequent rending of the combined edges of the Still picture, came in company with expanded size, particularly in the large horizontals after about 1957. Still is considered one of the founding fathers of the wall size painting but it is in this size that his failure has been consistent and most painful. Certainly the failure of a painting is simply and only the failure of inspiration - particularly for Still, because his method was so strong - but there is a deliberation about this failure which is like Newman's failure in later years. Each artist evolved a style which produced pictorial effects, and then altered later on with a determination to produce not good painting but obvious masterpieces. To do this each had to turn against his style to bring in devices more appropriate to theatrical effect, which went against the quality of their art. Pollock's later failure, on the other hand, was more a failure of inspiration, as if the wind had gone out of his sails, and had none of this quality of purpose. But, true as this may be, it is hard to pin down because it is about motivation. The mechanical failure of Still's later paintings is something else; it shows up in the functional disintegration of the picture and can be put into words. The best Still paintings, those of the late '40s and some paintings of the early '50s, are medium-size, about 60 to 90 inches high and 40 to 70 inches wide, and always seem slightly too small for their contents. The creeping fields are rebuffed by the edges as they move outwards, and the compression forces energy in and on all interior configurations, producing the tortured, twisting edge-entwining and surface-loading which are the trademarks of his style. (Recall that this is just the opposite of the relaxed, slightly-too-large-for-the-image look of Pollock's "exploded" Cubism). They also are slightly vertical and usually have a slightly vertical bias within the picture, which facilitated movement in that direction, was another factor of all-over unity, and fitted the nature of Still's style, slightly pressed in at the sides, slightly "squeezed."

The failure of Still's art since the middle '50s is not the failure of color, which is adequate if uninspired, and not the sole result of separation of edge, which enervates the picture but does not destroy its composition. It has more to do with complexity, placement, dispersal and the relationship of touch and scale. When Still went to very large size, particularly very large horizontals, he made scale changes without adequately compensating changes in his style, and carried a style suited for medium-large scale unaltered to very large scale. He did not adapt the size and the energy of direction of his painted surfaces. Instead of finding a way for his rough, colored field to expressively fill the larger canvas he simply exaggerated the prior, barely discernible vertical bias into a simple compositional method, cutting at random into the larger form, or he set similar-size areas side by side. His super-flat surface, so susceptible to the visual isolation of forms, immediately succumbed. The compressed involution which sews up his best paintings blew away in the broad, horizontal space, and the intensity of confluent forms evaporates when they are physically separated. Still has tried to compensate for this by maintaining a single value across the surface, or by "hanging" forms against a unifying white canvas, but to my eye it has not worked. The character of his forms, and of his surface, evolved for the too-tight compression of the medium-scale paintings of the late '40s. Formed up into individualized areas and laid out over a huge airy surface they look helpless at best and

silly at worst, because the reason for their visual character is not evident from the character of the organization of the picture. Furthermore touch, the unvarying constant of Still's art, is deprived of its effective strength in very large scale not only because touch on edges has lost its function, as I described before, but also because its size remained more or less the same as the scale of the painting itself expanded, so that the effect of the stroke, particularly for the rough, same-hue variety within a single area, is much less visible.

Thus the horizontal over expansion of the painting destroys the effect and character of the variegated surface because the surface is too large to properly show stroke, because it separates the forms and makes the character of their edges gratuitous, and because it puts too many unrelatable areas on a visually flat surface. The slackening of energy and integrity brought on by huge scale has led Still to fill the picture artificially, often with small patches creeping along the edge or corner - decorative memories of the earlier pictures - and it has pushed him into deliberate "map-making" to compensate for the lost effectiveness of the relatively diminished stroke. As an artist, as with *Guernica*, I want to cut these pictures along a vertical, or squeeze them down and watch the random, spread-out forms push and jostle and shrink until they take only as much space as they can defend. It is quite different from the feeling engendered by so many small, overloaded, Cubist-derived paintings and sculptures, which would gain so much by expansion and openness.

The promise of Still's art has never really been taken up by other artists. He has not been influential in proportion to the quality of his work, as many lesser artists have. Newman was certainly influenced by him, and perhaps Rothko, but these artists have made paintings different enough to erase most trace of that influence. Most abstract art has flowered on the Cubist root; even Olitski, who seems to be the herald of loose, open, large-scale color painting, is far more firmly founded in Pollock, or in evolved late Cubism, because of relationship-through-openness, than in Still's opaque, stifled fields. But the paths and traces of 20th-century art may be coming together in ways that are hard to discern for their very closeness. The naturalness, "surfaceness," compression, potential for color variety and dense substance of Still's best paintings seem to cast farther into the future than the delicate openness which so plainly marks the best painting of today. This openness is "space between." Perhaps it is unnatural to painting. One way or another it requires part of the space given up to paint not to receive paint, or creates a visual illusion in order to fill the canvas, and this kind of painting does not give itself fully to surface, which is the first property of the art. Openness belongs to sculpture; Cubism is a sculptural style, so openness belongs to Cubism. The evolution of Cubist painting down to Pollock, Hofmann and perhaps Olitski can be seen as the re-ingestion of many of the natural ingredients of painting - painterliness, "life-size" scale and affective color - and by the altering of the Cubist style by what these materials require to function well. The dissolution, expansion and readaptation of Cubism has left many a masterpiece but it may be Still who is too persistent to remain recessive, and who will give us the thin filament back to Monet and forward to an art altogether free of Cubist convention, to an art which revels in dense, unsymmetrical painted surface and rich color while holding the soft austerity of Newman's broad expanse and Pollock's lively touch.

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