Part I

Modernism Transplanted

1 Innocence of the Blank Slate

Postsurrealism and the Reception of European Models

In 1927 Lorser Feitelson (1898–1977), an experimental painter from New York, reluctantly moved to California. He and his wife had a newborn child and could no longer make ends meet on Feitelson's modest income. Either he took full-time employment or they cut down on living expenses. His wife had inherited a small home in Los Angeles, and hoping to live more cheaply, they decided to move across the country. Having spent most of his twenty-nine years either in New York or Paris, Feitelson was not prepared for the crushing isolation weighing upon a serious modern painter in California. In 1964 he recalled that he disliked his new home "violently in the beginning, because there was no art appreciation." Yet within six months, he was happy to be in Los Angeles

> because there wasn't any art appreciation [and] therefore the artist had to paint for only one person, himself. There was no one to write about his art; no one ever to show his art; no one ever to buy his art; therefore if he wanted to paint it was only because he himself felt it must be done. And therefore he was going to paint for its own sake and then he would do honest work. That's what I liked about it.[1]

The art scene was "free of competition," without a "star system." While he continued to hope that he could support himself through sales of his painting, he appreciated the lack of a speculative market in art work: "The moment

people see you as money, you no longer exist as art." Isolation meant that to those few for whom art was vital, its role was nothing more, but also nothing less, than enjoyment and enlightenment. A common need to build appreciation for contemporary art meant that California artists ignored the vast distances separating their studios and came together regularly to share ideas.[2]

Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982), a poet originally from Chicago, migrated to San Francisco in 1927 and had a similar reaction:

> San Francisco, when we came there to live, was very much of a backwater town and there just wasn't anything happening. . . . That's really the reason we stayed here, as it was a long way from the literary marketplace. We didn't know anybody who wasted his time talking about what Horace Gregory thought of Oscar Williams.[3]

Rexroth's memories echoed Feitelson's: there was no competition among writers or painters because there were no significant material rewards. Exchange of ideas and formation of a "creative community" were more important to Californians involved with the arts than competing for access to publication and exhibition. Clay Spohn (1898–1978), a painter and assemblagist born in San Francisco who studied under Fernand Léger in Paris in the 1920s, recalled that the artistic milieux in the Bay Area completely lacked "any such thing as competitive spirit."[4]

A corollary to these shared mythic interpretations of isolated, egalitarian, noncompetitive exchange was pride in autochthonous originality. For Nicholas Brigante (1895–1989) the important pioneers of modern painting were the men and women with whom he had struggled against obscurity. He refused to concede that they were simply following the example of movements halfway across the world in Europe. He mentioned Ben Berlin (1887–1939), who "anticipated Picasso, all the French moderns, but [was] not influenced by them." Feitelson recalled Berlin as "a lovely guy," a hero because of the uncompromising rigor of his work. A 1923 review praised Berlin as the first exponent of futurism in California, but the painter, who would die from al-

cohol abuse, was incapable of taking advantage of even the embryonic exhibition possibilities in his home state that the generally positive response to his work evoked. Too poor to travel outside the state, he learned about foreign art movements from magazines and conversations with friends, such as Feitelson, who had lived abroad. Precursor of Picasso he certainly was not. His work is full of hints that he knew the major currents of experimental painting and absorbed the rudimentary elements of European avant-garde style, not to imitate, but to adapt to his highly personal interior vision (pl. 1).[5]

One aspect of geographic isolation for visual artists was a general inability to see major works in their original form. Although a member of a later generation, Edward Kienholz's testimony on the effects of learning art history from books and journals can be helpful in understanding how isolation could affect artists' conceptions of their own work:

> If you take a mediocre painting and take a picture of it, reduce the scale, and condense the experience of the painting down to a smaller scale, it becomes much richer. And that rich look was the criterion that I always looked toward. I was working toward a picture reproduction.[6]

Helen Lundeberg (b. 1908) thought that isolation in California had stimulated rather than dampened her imagination. She painted things that she wanted to bring into the world, rather than reproductions of other paintings or existing objects.[7] As these California artists remembered their emergence as modernists in the interwar period, they could not separate their isolation from their innovative experiments. They linked the theme of isolation to a shared anticipation that they were on the threshold of a renaissance. They were an avant-garde, but not simply because of their experimentation into visual expression. They were bringing a new culture into the world.

Mabel Alvarez (1892–1984), whose murals were featured in the California Bungalow at the 1915 San Diego Pan-Pacific Exposition and who was a leading figure in the Los Angeles Art Association founded to promote and exhibit

contemporary experimentation, mentioned few living European painters by name in diaries spanning more than forty years. Her entries show that she participated actively in ongoing debates over practical and philosophical questions, but the authorities she recognized were her friends and colleagues, most notably Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell. Prior to 1914, Wright and Russell had worked in Paris, where they founded the Synchromist movement, the only American contribution to the explosion of avant-garde movements in the half decade before World War I. With the outbreak of war, they returned to the United States. Wright settled in Los Angeles in 1920 and quickly established himself as the leader of the city's modern art movement. Morgan Russell joined him briefly in 1927, and the two stimulated local painters to reexamine the images they created.

In 1928 Alvarez, upon returning home from a lecture by Wright, noted in her diary that modern art in Europe had become stagnant with self-conscious experimentation into form for its own sake. "The new renaissance must come. It is up to us to be the forerunners, the primitives of the new movement." She believed a great "faith" would emerge in California, which, combined with the experimental freedom she and her colleagues were forging, would lead to art that was genuinely new and restorative. Indeed, she had believed for many years that "faith" depended upon the study of design. "No good will come from imitating the men who have carried representation as far as it will go," she wrote in 1921. "I must have *organized design.* Simplify form to find its essential spirit." Two years earlier, she had learned in her painting class that "everything in the world was design, the design the world is working out is evolution . . . look for designs in things—inner meaning." Her teacher at the time, William V. Cahill, director of the Los Angeles Academy of Modern Art, regularly included lectures on theosophical principles in his studio classes. "Create everything from the inside out," she wrote in her notes of a lecture he gave in 1917. "Listen to the *inner* self all the time." Artistic expression was the key to the "divine or God part" of humanity. The "truth"

of creative work, be it a poem or painting or piece of music, could be judged by the experience it triggered within the recipient of conjuncture between cosmic and psychic reality. The sensation of truth was personal and private—"a perfect tone on true center vibrates and is enveloped in resonance"—not subject to social verification. The significance and ultimate value of work was always arguable, but the wise person "let go all opinions to see the right in all sides, from above . . . to listen to the Master within."[8]

A noncommercial attitude accompanied by affirmation of their innovative aspirations begin to define for us a group with specific position in society that was more than a sum of individuals. The theme of isolation that runs through participant accounts of modern art and poetry movements in mid-twentieth-century California is itself a cultural artifact, a narrative device that those involved used to impose collectively derived meaning upon individual surveys of their careers, ambitions, and accomplishments. At the same time, the theme asserted a shared project. The creation of identity through collective memory depended upon abstraction, the reduction of a jumble of events into essential attributes that allowed ready categorization. The motifs that arose to constitute informal historical judgment helped transform scattered individuals into a group as each person adopted, repeated, and structured the accounts of their own lives into a schematized representation of experience.[9] The experience that narrative repetition abstracted was intensely real, but consensus-seeking talk rendered it into an identity that favored stereotypicality over ambiguity.

The same sources that stress the isolation of California also contain a plethora of detail showing that interest in modern art and literature was active and lively. Shortly after moving to California, Lorser Feitelson joined the Los Angeles Art Association, where he became a popular lecturer on modern art movements. Newspaper critics in both San Francisco and Los Angeles gave favorable reviews to artists who broke with traditional representational forms and explored abstraction. Shows of the new art were often held over because

of public interest. Artists interacted with a network of individuals who prided themselves on their knowledge of and support for modern art, both European and American.

A center of this network was the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg in the Hollywood Hills. They owned one of the best collections of avant-garde art to be found anywhere in the world, including Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase.* Galka Scheyer brought her collection of the Blue Four—Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Alexei Jawlensky, and Lyonel Feininger—to her modernist home designed by fellow émigré Richard Neutra. Hollywood attracted a considerable number of artists, writers, and theater people, many of whom had distinguished collections and some of whom achieved significant careers outside the entertainment business. Eugene Berman, Antonin Heythum, Oskar Fischinger, and Jules Engel were among the European artists who came to Los Angeles to work in the film industry and then became prominent figures in the state's visual arts community. The California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles developed national reputations for the quality of their training. Both schools brought internationally known figures, including Alexander Archipenko, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Hans Hofmann, to the state to teach.[10]

Without this activity, the anticipation that Californians were about to make a distinctive contribution to world culture would have been merely a pathetic illusion. Instead, the liveliness of the art community generated hope and spurred creative activity. The ubiquitous motif of isolation referred then to elements of personal experience that included but went beyond the inconveniences of location. The theme expressed feelings of inseparably joined opportunity and frustration that could be explained by geography but, more fundamentally, involved the social relations that engaged artists.

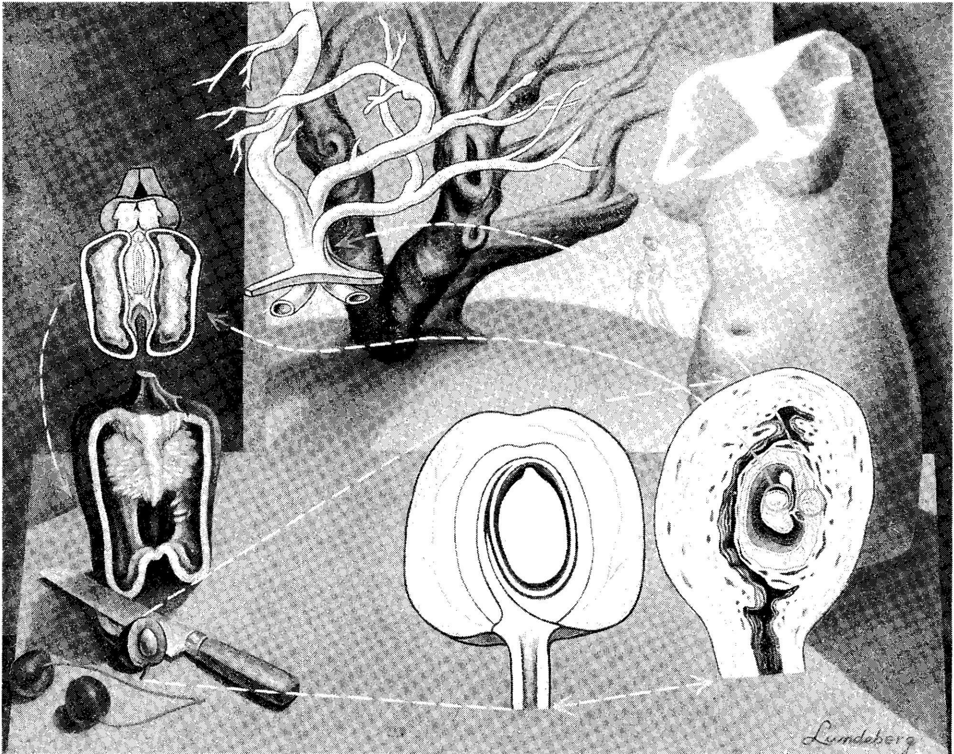
The cluster of narrative themes these artists wove together around their sense of California's geographic isolation—honesty, freedom from the ravages of competition, an egalitarian creative community, the new renais-

sance—articulated their experience of a two-pronged challenge. The first was for themselves: those who spoke of their careers in these terms wanted to make cultural life in California as rich, varied, and sophisticated as anywhere else in the world. A few, Kenneth Rexroth perhaps most prominently, argued that this new culture would be superior to what had emerged in the older centers of the United States and Europe. But even for the majority who would not go so far, the theme of isolation contained a second challenge, one directed at the very primacy of European models. It was not isolation California artists wanted, but a chance to participate equally, effected by expanding the boundaries of the art world. The avant-garde in California looked to Europe for inspiration, but even when work might appear derivative, poets and painters had pursued their own revisionist ideas that often criticized and attempted to improve upon the model received from abroad. A case in point in the interwar years was the postsurrealist movement.

Postsurrealism

In 1934 six young painters from San Francisco and Los Angeles—Lorser Feitelson, Lucien Labaudt (1880–1943), Harold Lehman, Helen Lundeberg, Knud Merrild (1894–1954), and Ettienne Ret—organized a show of their work at the Centaur Bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. In conjunction with the exhibition, they issued a manifesto, "New Classicism," that declared themselves the first surrealist-inspired movement in the United States. The painting published with the manifesto illustrated the group's focus on metaphoric thought (fig. 1). They were "surrealist" in their reliance upon associative imagery, though they were careful to state that their approach to association was based on logical principles and owed more to their reading in classical philosophy than to the theoretical writings of the French surrealists.

Favorable newspaper reviewers, following up on the manifesto's sharp criticism of surrealism, called the paintings in the show postsurrealist. The



1. Helen Lundeberg, *Plant and Animal Analogies,* oil on celotex, 1934. Courtesy of the Helen Lundeberg Feitelson Trust, Los Angeles.

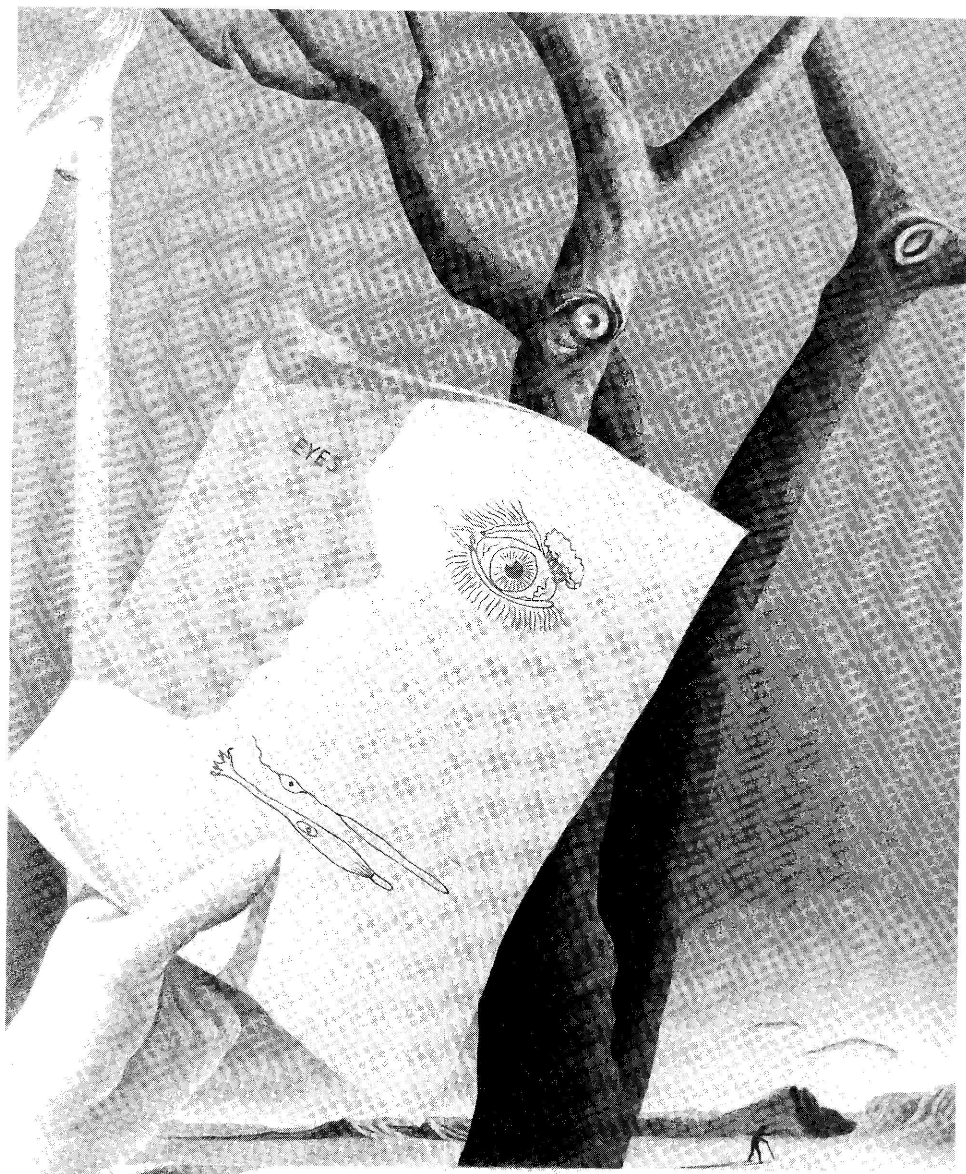
name stuck and helped draw crowds of people curious to see firsthand what an American variant of this movement would be like.[11] The following year, Grace McCann Morley (1900–1985), director of the San Francisco Museum of Art, mounted another successfully received show of that group's work at her institution. In 1936 the group, augmented by Grace Clements (1905–1968) and Helen Klokke, achieved a burst of national recognition when they exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum. The term postsurrealism proved a successful, if temporary, public relations boon. On closer examination we shall see that the postsurrealists' intellectual interests and assumptions were antithetical to those of genuine surrealism. The postsurrealists had no interest in direct representations of subconscious fear of or desire for sex, violence, and

death. Nor were they influenced by Freudian psychology. Their intellectual program was as serious, if less literary, than that of the surrealists, but their focus on cognitive process was insufficiently dramatic to sustain the momentum of public fascination their first exhibitions had generated.

The author of the postsurrealist manifesto, Helen Lundeberg, challenged the cardinal position that European surrealists gave to subconscious mental states. She proposed an art that captured the relation of self and environment by focusing instead "upon the normal functioning of the mind: its meanderings, logical in sequence though not in ensemble, its perceptions of analogy and idea-content in forms and groups of forms unrelated to size, time or space." Pictorial elements should assume subjective form but not re-create the text of dream images. With youthful bravado, Lundeberg claimed that the structural unity of intellect, emotion, and form sought by her movement, which she called "classical subjectivism," would make a decisively new contribution to pictorial art. The aesthetic structure in the works of Giorgio di Chirico, Salvador Dalí, or Max Ernst was "of no historical significance," since the work of these artists was "imitative and manneristic in its faithful mimicry of the essential principles of pictorial pattern to be found in Renaissance painting." Postsurrealists had developed an aesthetic that departed "from the principles of the decorative graphic arts" to create a pictorial structure that became the subject matter rather than being imposed upon it.[12]

At first glance, Lundeberg's *Eyes,* painted in 1938 and 1939 (fig. 2), seems derivative of European surrealist models, particularly the Belgian painters René Magritte and Paul Delvaux. The octopus-like eye in the tree, a blank sky towering over the mountain ranges and two lonely clouds squeezed into the bottom of the frame, and the figure with a cane walking in a pathless desert combine to invoke a brooding, mysterious presence confronting the woman at the window, herself squeezed into the margins of the picture. The projection of self so typical of surrealism suggests the confrontation and the triumph of nature over a tentative human subject.

Lundeberg had a different conception of the relationship of subjectivity



2. Helen Lundeberg, *Eyes,* oil on masonite, 1938–1939. Work unlocated.
Courtesy of the Helen Lundeberg Feitelson Trust, Los Angeles.

and the environment. Her placement of the word "eyes" in the shadowed profile highlights the role of intellect in imposing pattern upon vision. Mystery is not dispelled, but its source turn back onto the self as a creator of meaning. The irrational gives way to ordinary thinking processes as the home of wonder.[13] The painting challenges the human propensity to anthropomorphize the universe by projecting emotions onto natural phenomena through associations. It presented an aesthetic radically opposed to André Breton's quest for the "superior reality" found in "previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought."[14] The content of *Eyes* is the cognitive tendency to link disparate phenomena through analogy. The process induces emotional and subconscious overtones, but the tensions within the painting dramatize Lundeberg's conviction that everyday cognitive processes are the wellspring of subjective states.

Lundeberg argued for and strived to create painting that researched how the connotations of recognizable forms evoked moods and desires. She believed that painting could achieve poetic form as artists mastered scientific understanding of structure of perception and attribution. They could use this knowledge with greater certainty to stimulate specific subjective reactions through minor variation of form, line, color, and texture. Painters, in control of the language of their medium, could then reveal internal connections between experience, ideas, and moods that structured the subjective reconstitution of the external world. Lundeberg preferred the term "pictorial structure" over "design" or "composition" since "structure" seemed to her to capture more succinctly the interlocking relation of subjective and objective, while "design" and "composition" stressed primacy of the subjective element. Her goal was not to transcend the ego as the surrealists attempted, nor like the dadaists to negate it, but to define and thereby limit the scope of its authority.[15]

As substantial as the postsurrealists' ideas were, their critique never became a socially significant challenge to surrealism. They participated in the Museum of Modern Art's 1937 survey of surrealist, fantastic, and abstract art, but

curator Alfred H. Barr, Jr., noted in his introduction to the exhibition's catalog that the postsurrealists' presence was an anomaly since their attention to "object-psychology" was antithetic to art exploring the power of the unconscious. In the late 1930s the principal figures who in the following decade would forge abstract expressionism were deeply committed to the theory and model of French surrealism. From a viewpoint focused on the development of significant form, the postsurrealists were ancillary to the primary course of American art. Unable to alter the terms upon which the national art community discussed its tasks, the postsurrealists remained a movement with only regional importance.[16] They naively behaved as if their conceptions were strong enough to hold attention on their own terms and ignored that as young artists they needed to find a place for themselves in a market they could not re-create until they were inside it.

Part of the postsurrealists' failure was due to their inability to compete in an art world increasingly structured as much around the written word as around actual art objects. Lundeberg was neither a philosopher nor a writer. "New Classicism" was barely one page in length, and her subsequent statements were even shorter. She expressed her ideas most cogently in quiet, meditative paintings, purposively restricted in size and color range. Her subtle gradation of saturation and tone achieved the illusion of space and depth while bringing variety into her pictures in a way that required attentive observation if her effects were to be appreciated. The postsurrealist aesthetic was restrained to the point of being quiescent, with none of the dramatic leaping from the canvas that marked the paintings of Dalí, Ernst, or their American followers.

By sharply limiting color, size, texture, and complexity of image, the postsurrealists emphasized a picture's merger of intellectual and sensual stimulation. Contemplation led to silence, to erasure of the body into a pure mentality that was nonetheless simply one element in a vast cosmic "structure" that could be called a "composition" only by granting teleological centrality

to subjective consciousness. Her 1937 painting *Microcosm and Macrocosm* (pl. 2) argues instead that consciousness focuses only on small fractions of the knowable at any one time. It constitutes the objects of its knowledge through recourse to formal logical principles that could not function if they attempted to include the full spectrum of experience. Her painting seems to illustrate George Santayana's observation in his essay "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" that a philosophical viewpoint native to the American West would challenge the anthropocentric and "conceited notion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil, is the center and pivot of the universe." Addressing the Philosophical Union at Berkeley in 1911, Santayana advanced the proposition that those who had made their home among the forests and mountains that dominated the Pacific Coast geography could not "feel that nature was made by you or for you. . . . You must feel, rather, that you are an offshoot of her life, one brave little force among her immense forces." The reduction of the human scale before the infinitude of the nonhuman stirred "the sub-human depths and the suprahuman possibilities of your own spirit," but exposed "the vanity and superficiality of all logic, the needlessness of argument, the finitude of morals."[17]

Santayana's argument points to a principal distinction between postsurrealism and its European model. The surrealists challenged the humanist tradition by elevating irrationality to a source of wisdom. Their preference for automatism and oneiric imagery proceeded from an assumption that human concerns had a privileged relation to universal processes. The postsurrealists felt that unconscious imagery was as much a dead end as rational thinking. Jeanne McGahey, a member of a Berkeley-based circle of poets who adapted postsurrealist ideas to literary practice, argued that "the dream is probably very largely a mechanism for concealment of what goes on in the mind. It reproduces in many ways the same communication faults found in the conscious levels."[18] Dreams create unlikely associations, because they seek to suppress knowledge that has been gained; therefore accidental word and

image associations are skewed toward the irrelevant. The pivotal position of human aspirations had to be displaced into humble acceptance of the incommensurability of the human and nonhuman. Only then could exploration of truly human potentialities begin.

The intellectuals who pioneered European modernist movements wrote from a sound academic background. Lundeberg's lack of academic training in the humanist tradition hindered her attempt to define a program for postsurrealism. Born in Chicago in 1908, she moved to Southern California in 1912 when her father took an accounting job in Pasadena.[19] She grew up in a comfortable, though not affluent, middle-class suburban family that encouraged her to develop her artistic talents and look forward to an independent career. After graduating from public high school, she enrolled in the Stickney Art Academy in Pasadena, where she took both commercial and fine art classes. Her first exposures to fine art were reproductions of Renaissance old masters and of Cézanne, from whom she said she took the idea that composition begins by filling the corners of a picture. She had no hesitation to put herself or other women in as models of the universal correspondent, but almost always on the margins. This stylistic marker coded her recognition of the peripheral place of human aspiration in an expanding conception of the universe, but it also revealed a hesitation to see herself a mover and creator *in* the world.

While self-confident about her paintings and appreciative of positive reviews, in later life she saw no reason to consider her youthful career a success since she had been completely unable to support herself through serious painting. New Deal arts programs helped her escape a career in advertising that she knew would be entirely incompatible with the vision she had developed. From 1934 to 1942 she worked for the Federal Art Project mural program. Among her many projects, she designed and executed murals at Santa Monica city hall, the Inglewood post office, and Jedediah Smith Elementary School in Los Angeles—work later attacked as communist propaganda in the

early 1950s. Though grateful for employment, she recalled she never enjoyed doing public art, which for political reasons had to conform to "the hopeless sterility of the then-rising school of the 'American Scene,' a form of objective painting totally undistinguished by anything which could be called an American contribution to art: a stale rehashing of the styles and techniques of various past masters, more often than not presenting subject matter all too familiar in the daily comic strips." Tired of mixing art with illustration, Lundeberg, on the American entry into World War II, declined a position drafting technical illustrations for aviation manuals, feeling that her manual skills were better utilized in a machine shop assembling microphones for war use.[20]

In the mid-1930s she decided that she would say little about herself or her work. "Verbiage," she said, diverted the public by turning the artist into a performer. She acknowledged that arguments excited a public and built attention, but ultimately the public ceased to think of the art object as record of an inquiry and focused on the art world as a scene for spectacle.[21] The image she developed for herself matched the contemplative vocabulary of her work. Isolation for Lundeberg, symbolized in her self-portrait through a protective wall of mountains (fig. 3), was a strategic choice recording voluntary withdrawal from social processes that tended to put humanity into the center. Her creative freedom depended on limiting arbitrary social controls, be they the need to sell a product, political accountability, or the hurly-burly of the art market. A close parallel existed between her attempt to extricate herself from these entanglements and her attempt to conjure in painting a direct connection between inner and outer reality. In both situations, she relegated social forces to a subsidiary position. Lundeberg's experimentalist philosophy suggested that art was more exploration of natural phenomena than communication between members of a society. Competition between artists was an intrusion of the social world, with its emphasis on relationships and structure, into what properly should be a spiritual zone of timeless encounter.[22]

Her knowledge of the painterly tradition came almost entirely from books and from discussions with teachers and fellow artists.[23] Her most influential

3. Helen Lundeberg, *Self-Portrait,* oil on celotex, 1933. Courtesy of the Helen Lundeberg Feitelson Trust, Los Angeles.

4. Lorser Feitelson, 1936. Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

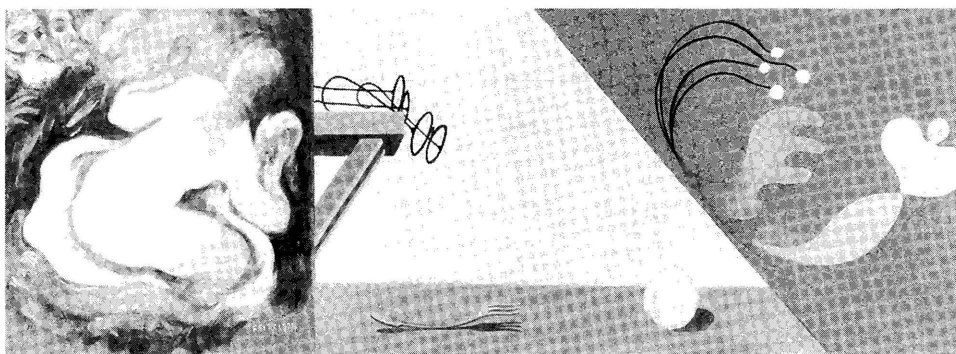
teacher was Lorser Feitelson, whom she later married (fig. 4). Feitelson had lived in Paris from 1922 to 1927. He remembered himself as a loner during his years as a modern abroad, a shy young man who observed the frenetic activity of the world's art and literary capital from the outside. Failing to make friends among the "moderns," he haunted libraries and museums and filled notebooks with sketches of work he liked, old masters as well as modern.[24]

When he settled in Los Angeles in 1927, his ability to talk about futurism, surrealism, dada, and synthetic cubism from firsthand observation made him a popular and sought-after figure. His presence brought Californians

into closer contact with a distant world. With growing self-confidence, he achieved a position as one of the leading proponents of experimentation in the California art world.[25] Feitelson introduces a protagonist group for this history: promoters who deliberately attempt to find attention and end isolation, but are equally deliberate in their efforts to maintain the "democratic," egalitarian ideals that offered a dispensation for isolation. Feitelson was in the forefront of theoreticians who understood the movement of American painting from mimesis to presence, but his work proceeded within a different conception of the art marketplace than the one that emerged in the mid-century United States.

His original sympathies had been with futurism and dada rather than surrealism, which he criticized as overly literary, but he was generally skeptical of all European avant-garde movements. He felt the futurists' attempt to capture the sensation of motion had been particularly critical to helping him define his own interests, but he argued that they had limited themselves by attempting to represent the external activity of the modern city when artists had the power to induce "psychological motion" in the viewer through the manipulation of shape and color. Beyond that he thought that the futurists' proposal to junk the old masters for a painting of modern life was jejune because they did not realize the degree to which their work depended upon a rhetoric developed during the classic age of painting.[26]

Lorser Feitelson's 1936 painting *Susannah and the Elders* (fig. 5) combined three modes of pictorial representation to expose the obsession with textual relay that continued to possess Western art. The painting consists of three panels. The panel on the left parodies an old master, renarrating the biblical story in a pastiche of Giorgione and Renoir, in effect synthesizing a basic unity behind European representational styles from the Renaissance to the impressionists. The center panel transforms the biblical text into allegorical symbols: two pairs of spectacles, a fork, and a peach, all painted in the flat realistic, academic manner favored by the surrealists. The right panel reduces the compositional patterns to biomorphic abstractions reminiscent of Joan



5. Lorser Feitelson, *Susannah and the Elders,* oil on celotex, 1936. The Buck Collection, Laguna Hills, California.

Mirò or Henri Matisse, jazzy projections that could be read as symbols but retained a nonrepresentational concreteness. The sequence showed that the emotional power of the biblical story as painting came from the arrangement of shape, color, and line.

Literal content was not irrelevant because each panel appealed to a different intellectual tradition. The old masters, surreal parody, and abstraction could equally convey emotional undercurrents in a biblical story, though similarities might not normally be recognized outside the synthetic unity of Feitelson's painting because each denotative style privileged a distinct form of thinking—sensual, intellectual, and mystical. Forms contained within them "two existences," denotative and connotative. The connotative aspects of art opened the door to the experience of reality, based on subliminally perceived connections rising to consciousness. The analogical principle, which the post-surrealists also referred to as "correspondence," linked the two existences through painting, which then became a vehicle for expanding not simply perception but an understanding of the nature of universal reality. The power of the old masters, as of the work of the then contemporary avant-garde, arose from the cognitive processes engaged by intelligent vision and interpretation. Painting itself as a process could reveal the everyday power of the senses to open avenues of speculation far beyond immediate, practical questions.

Feitelson stripped away the apparent value of the denotative level to leave art rooted almost entirely in the connotative, the codes used to convey subjective response.[27]

The postsurrealists proposed that they were engaged in a scientific endeavor best pursued through painterly experimentation into how perception of shape, line, and color generated thought and mood.[28] As a young man studying in the New York Art Students League, Feitelson had already grown obsessed by the mystery evoked by the pure form of objects. Much later in life, he still recalled a formative experience of his career, an encounter with a street pole "to which some wires were tied, or probably it was the support for a sign many years ago, almost lying on its side, kind of tilted . . . that was the greatest piece of sculpture. There's no question: it had all the monumental quality of great sculpture." Feitelson called the power of shapes encountered fortuitously "magical forms," or "subjective objects." They existed entirely in the emotions that the visual form instilled with no consideration of the denotative, use-bound aspect of the object. The emotions these forms generated were the basis for Feitelson's personal definition of "surreality" because they had no apparent explanation. All he knew was that particular objects, such as a sign post on the street, could evoke a sense of mystery.[29] "The forms coming towards us are what I call the inexplicable. . . . I was playing with these objects that have presence for me. But the word I'm using now is *ambiguity*. . . . I didn't say I like it because it has shape alone. It has this other quality that is subjective that I cannot explain. That determines my like or indifference."[30]

The encounter with the street post sparked Feitelson's interest in dada and a decision to live in Europe and participate in the avant-garde movements that attempted to break down arbitrary distinctions between art objects and the experiences of everyday life. When he arrived in Paris, he learned that Duchamp was a "has-been" and that dada was "dead," vanquished by surrealism. Feitelson decided that the European avant-garde movements, while spawning an exciting milieu, were counterproductive artistically. Theorizing and hucksterism were so intertwined that, while theories forced the pace of develop-

ment, the need to compete for attention pushed artists toward the sensational and away from logical, methodical testing of their theories. Elite art did not promote quality, but a form of rarified sensation that became a mark of distinction for those who understood the issues behind the debates. Grounding "the arts in democracy," he hoped, would bring "democracy in the arts."[31]

The Arts in Democracy

The problem of how to create a public for serious, modern art increasingly became one of Feitelson's principal occupations. He talked of knowing many people throughout his life who had shown great promise as artists, but they were "lost," mostly, he felt, because they could not make a living. He had been able to sustain his own career because his parents provided financial support. Feitelson believed that there was "no other way" for most of the people he knew in the 1920s.[32] If painting was to become a serious intellectual exploration into the processes of visual thinking, painters had to be freed from dependence upon commerce and patronage. The development of painting as an intellectually responsible form required a new relationship of the artist to society, a relationship that would bring into being a market for art beyond the rendering of pleasing illustrations. That ground depended upon the development of a broad-based middle-class public for whom the acquisition of "difficult" art would be as natural as collecting books or purchasing a piano. Such a public did not exist in the 1930s, but Feitelson assumed that the conditions in America were favorable. He also thought that this development was more likely to occur outside of New York. The gallery system in the center required high prices, while art for the middle class depended upon relatively low prices.

Seeking a mass public for modern art marked another rupture with the model provided by the European avant-garde. Antonin Artaud could say that "the break between us and the world is well-established. We speak not to

be understood, but only to our inner selves."[33] Feitelson inverted Artaud's proposition: speaking to one's "inner self" created the possibility of communicating with a mass public, of creating a world for the reception of art. In discussing a postsurrealist exhibition, Arthur Millier, art critic for the *Los Angeles Times,* stressed the group's aspirations to communicate: "The mind . . . supplies natural forms by analogy. The next step . . . is to use these inescapable forms of nature to present, not pictures of things, nor unintelligible 'abstractions,' but universally understandable ideas. If the public does not understand such pictures, [Feitelson] says, the artists can no longer blame the public. It simply means that the artist will have failed to achieve a meaningful unity in his work."[34]

Millier overstated what Feitelson viewed as a subtle and complicated relationship. Before the public would find modern art meaningful, artists had to educate them into the aesthetic process. A viewer's refigurative work needed to be as rich as the effort to make the original configuration. The public needed to understand how contemporary art responded to problems in the history of art but made them potentially resolvable by purification to the most fundamental aspects of visual creation. This understanding would not develop spontaneously simply from viewing the work. Careful education was required or audiences and artists would be discouraged and drift toward simplification of ideas into decorative or uplifting themes.

Feitelson gave of himself in apparently tireless efforts to help his fellow citizens understand art. From 1937 to 1943 he worked as Southern California supervisor of the Federal Art Project's easel painting, sculpture, and mural division. Besides doing murals himself, he provided employment to artists whose work he respected. Feitelson hired Ben Berlin to continue doing his experimental canvases, while the government provided Berlin with supplies and a steady paycheck. During his involvement with the Federal Art Project, Feitelson also collected Native Californian baskets and pictographs for the Index of American Design and worked on the restoration of the California missions. In 1944 he joined the faculty of the Art Center School (later Art Center

College of Design), where he taught both fine arts and commercial art students until his retirement.

From 1939 to 1969 he was codirector of the Los Angeles Art Association, which sponsored classes and regular exhibitions. He served as curator or juror for the Pepsi-Cola Annual Art Competition, the *Art News* National Amateur Painters Competition, the Los Angeles City Annual Art Exhibition, and the Third Biennial of São Paulo, when the United States exhibit was dedicated to the art of the Pacific Coast states. He served on the art committees of the National Orange Show, the California International Flower Show, and the Hollywood Race Track, which offered yearly prizes for the best paintings and sculpture capturing the "excitement of the horse life." Feitelson widened the scope of these prizes to include abstract art. He participated in state and local art festivals in all parts of California and traveled to Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada to serve as juror. He spoke at elementary and secondary schools, lectured at community colleges, and addressed women's groups, bringing his own paintings and those of his friends to allow his audiences to have direct contact with modern art. He was a regular juror in the annual shows of the Young Art Patrons, a women's group in the African-American community dedicated to "nurturing cultural efforts" by black, Asian, and Chicano artists. He worked with Robinson's Department Store to develop space for the exhibition of serious contemporary art in six of the chain's stores. From 1956 to 1963 Feitelson had a television show on KNBC, "Feitelson on Art," which he used to discuss modern art, its relation to European classical painting, as well as non-European traditions. "There is art in everything," he told the television critic for the *Hollywood Citizen-News.* "When you buy a lamp or a two-tone car, whether you realize it or not, you are showing an artistic sense within you." Meanwhile his painting dropped all narrative references and focused on the emotional attributes of space and color (pl. 3).[35]

The scope and variety of his activities underscores the desperate intractability of the problem his generation faced. A program of "art in the democ-

racy and democracy in the arts" was a defensible position in terms of exhibition. But it could not guarantee that a public educated to appreciate visual culture would in fact also become buyers capable of sustaining a stable, if modest, market for artists. Commercial demand for modern art in California remained shallow throughout the period, and galleries devoted to modern art opened and closed quickly. In 1948 William Copley's legendary gallery mounted six well-reviewed and attended exhibitions of René Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Joseph Cornell, Man Ray, Roberto Matta, and Max Ernst, but Copley closed because he sold exactly two pictures in six months. Betty Asher (b. 1914), who would open her own gallery thirty years later after building the contemporary collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, remembered attending Copley's Cornell show and wanting to buy several pieces. The work was inexpensive, with prices between $15 and $75, but she hesitated: "I had a feeling that my friends would think I was crazy if I bought something like that. I was really worried at that time about what my friends would think." She also enjoyed abstract expressionism, but "it just didn't seem like something one owned at that point."[36]

Feitelson was involved in Vincent Price's 1948 project to establish a Modern Art Institute in Beverly Hills, to serve as a West Coast branch of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Feitelson was not surprised by the Institute's collapse after less than a year. Its setup was precarious, he wrote Alfred M. Frankfurter, the editor of *Art News*, "and the deterioration was accelerated by the meddling coteries of self-acclaimed intellectuals, 'philosophers,' and 'psychological-aesthetes,' all arrogantly pimping for their personal panaceas. These ambitious opportunists 'took over' the moribund Institute like so many maggots, completely destroying all possibilities of attracting the necessary confidence and material support. The job was a thorough one, and it is doubtful if any such project can be renewed in the near future."[37]

He felt that the conflicts that continuously engulfed arts activities reflected the division of "contemporary art" into many "contradictory kinds of personal persuasions." For this reason, in 1949 he reversed his opinion on the

jury system. Too many artists were "specialists with a single, inflexible point of view. Though well-meaning, their judgment is of little consequence when confronted with creative work which differs greatly from their own aesthetic bias." Artists fought for control of the few prestige venues to ensure access to more affluent buyers and the best publicity in art magazines. Competition meant, as it had in Paris and New York, that reflective, disinterested examination of work suffered. "The function of the painter is to paint," Feitelson asserted in 1952 in a plea to fellow artists to end verbal theorizing and concentrate on painterly expression. Feitelson argued repeatedly that artists in California did not understand their environment. Contention between various schools of modern art simply confused potential viewers and counteracted the more fundamental work of education.[38]

The other side of the equation, the new public, rooted in middle-class, urban society, remained elusive. "Solution of the problem of the economic insecurity of the contemporary artist necessitates a clear understanding of the artist's own concept of his role," Feitelson stated in a 1950 letter to Arthur Millier, "and his position in his community, as compared to that of the artist in the past." Museum collections proved, he thought, that until modern times the artist had been the iconographical servant of authoritarian state and religious institutions. The artist gave form to the ideology and culture of his community, but without placing his own "free" ideas within the work. By adhering to group ideology, which in any event was obligatory, the artist was guaranteed "communicability, approval, and, therefore, patronage." The originality and individualism that had become essential to artistic success with the introduction of the market into cultural relations also meant an increasing likelihood that an artist would fail to communicate to a public. Publicity that created a market of "initiates" partially solved the problem, but success through familiarity meant that "new" art was no longer new by the time it became familiar to the public. "Intrinsic value" could not replace the need for publicity and education. The artist needed greater opportunity to exhibit and more "literary interpretation," in which writers used their experiences of

visual imagery to test the validity of philosophical assumptions derived from logic and the study of literature. The dealer-gallery system was inadequate and restricted originality in both new and established artists by exhibiting work that mimicked the mannerisms of already successful work. Feitelson, reflecting on his work with the Federal Art Project, considered and rejected state subsidies. "Such aid is burdened with too many non-art considerations and limitations," he said tersely, a realistic position for a period when conservative politicians and businessmen accused all forms of state intervention of being communist. Feitelson's solution was "an honest and dignified effort at private enterprise: . . . opening his own studio, on certain announced days, to visitors." Artists whose studios were geographically adjacent might coordinate their hours to open at the same time, and organizations such as the Los Angeles Art Association could assist by publishing schedules and organizing group tours.[39]

The open-studio concept, while having much to commend it, was too paltry a solution for the immensity of the problem Feitelson described. The atelier had flourished when the artist was a primary provider of images for his or her society, but it was not a form adequate for the era of nonrepresentational art. When Clay Spohn returned from his studies in Paris to San Francisco in 1927, he set up practice as a portrait painter to the middle class and earned a modest living. With the Depression his practice disappeared overnight. Photography replaced painting once and for all as the medium for recording middle-class images. Commercial art was a rapidly growing field, but many artists, like Lundeberg, thought the demands were so different that they could not do "serious" and commercial art at the same time. In effect, commercial art, thoroughly integrated in the mass publication media, had become a separate trade, with distinctive skills, knowledge, and dispositions, both technically and aesthetically.

In the field of fine art, the mass media, which had helped destroy the old system, created a new national market for painting based on publicity. The titanic temperaments and expansive egos of the abstract expressionists

brought drama onto the canvas through action and gesture, sometimes augmented by the scandal of personal life. Feitelson's craftsmanlike values, achieved in rigorous and thoughtful dedication, were eclipsed by promises of grand adventure. The era of craft and workmanlike discipline had passed away and the gentleman-like citizen artist with it. Feitelson's labors were based on a mistaken presupposition that modern art could be integrated into a democratic, entrepreneurial society merely as an extension from, an improvement upon, the old atelier system. Spectacle was essential for the artist who wished to receive recognition. Spectacle dissolved the classic liberal view of the individual as autonomous knower and artificer that moved through the works of Feitelson and Lundeberg and demanded that the artist be simultaneously performer, shaman, and perceptual investigator. Those who ignored the need to publicize themselves in any way available condemned themselves to working in perpetual obscurity. Those who resented and resisted the linking of art as spiritual exploration with an economic system based on marketing the artist's personality had to develop a new paradigm that moved beyond the liberal, democratic faith that guided Feitelson's generation. In the absence of such a paradigm, the artist faced an imperative to find position within the spectacle.

In California the theme of isolation, already a commonplace in the state's artistic communities, provided a ready springboard for an artist eager to assert that he or she represented an absolutely new beginning. The overtones of the theme shifted dramatically in response to the postwar generation's new concerns. Edward Kienholz (1927–1994) observed that in 1953, "When I first came to Los Angeles, it was virgin as far as art was concerned." Billy Al Bengston (b. 1934), who was a student in the mid-1950s, declared, "There was nothing going on in Los Angeles. Simply nothing." Carlos Almaraz (1941–1989), nearly ten years younger but following the same motif, recalled, "In Los Angeles in 1960 there wasn't much on in the arts. Your images and your ideas all came from New York—or Paris."[40] For the pre–World War II generation the theme of isolation signaled a challenge to create a cultural en-

vironment as complex and sophisticated as anywhere else in the world. For the postwar generation the theme transformed into a reductive stereotype that equated provinciality with banality. The Far West was frontier territory, backward but also a clean slate. Each artist then posed as the light-bringer, dispelling the yahoos with the power of culture and discovering in those who admired his work the new saving remnant. Yet in addition to entrepreneurial hyperbole something more fundamental was expressed in the denial of history. The postwar reworking of the isolation motif and the self-understanding embodied within it made sense only if artists had disengaged themselves from the society in which they functioned. To stand on the outside looking upon the benighted was a self-conception incompatible with the citizen-artist ideal that Feitelson promoted and tried to live, though it had already existed as a possibility in the postsurrealist conception of the artistic process. Cognitive processes separated human beings and nature, but also suggested a place of conjuncture: art, tangible record of "reflection and imaginative response."[41] The artist as investigator was but a step away from the artist as prophet, the figure who found enlightenment in the wilderness, voluntarily rejecting society but remaining at its service with a message of natural truth opposed to the mendacity of social convention.

Between the formation of the avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s and the rise of the younger, postwar generation, new developments severed the links many artists felt with their fellow citizens. They found in their conception of art justification for their sense of difference. For some, autonomy was the first step toward developing a new professional community that would eventually reintegrate artists into society. For many others, disengagement was confirmation of spiritual independence, a yearning for art to assume a sacred function and invoke an emotional intensity lacking in everyday life. If that lack seemed the result of an active denial, and not simply an inevitable, tragic part of life, the emotional experience of artistic creativity could become a force for wanting to change the world. If there were perceived transgressions by the social order against the universal, art as a privileged channel to

cosmic reality provided a self-authenticating ground from which to criticize social evil.

The first steps toward a vision of the arts as a source of subversion of dominant values, mistakenly identified as "traditional," was taken by poets, who were somewhat more insulated from the demands of spectacle and commerce. They rejected the lessons of history and the value of progress. Instead, they claimed themselves the heirs to a long tradition of "hidden" knowledge. The turn to "tradition" developed a relationship to the past that opposed the merely "historical." History they defined as a collective understanding of the past that bound communities together through an ascribed logic in past decisions, the "facts" of which determined the conditions of one's existence. History was a record of the accidental and ephemeral in human life; it sprang from the superficial conditions of an unstable social structure, always giving way to new forms. Tradition, on the other hand, was a personal reconstruction of the past that became a statement of loyalties to predecessors. Looking at the past to discover one's own proclivities, one constructed a narrative of exemplary models for making choices in the face of an uncertain and unstable future. Our discussion must now turn to the process that Kenneth Rexroth called "disengagement," its sources, and the challenges it imposed upon artists and poets as they faced fundamental career choices.

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Phoenix and the Tortoise.* Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1987.

Chapter 1

1. Lorser Feitelson, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Mr. Lorser Feitelson, May 12, 1964," interviewed by Betty Lochrie Hoag, AAA, 11.

2. Lorser Feitelson, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Lorser Feitelson," interviewed 1974 by Fidel Danieli, OHP/UCLA, 1–4, 195, quote on 77.

3. Interview with Kenneth Rexroth, in *The San Francisco Poets,* ed. David Meltzer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 9–10.

4. Kenneth Rexroth, "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," *New World Writing* 11 (1957): 28–41; Clay Spohn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Clay Spohn at his Studio in Grand Street, New York City," interviewed 1976 by Paul Cummings, AAA, 5.

5. Nicholas Brigante, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Nicholas Brigante," interviewed 1964 by Betty Hoag, AAA, 7; Lorser Feitelson letter to Francis V. O'Connor, 3 June 1964, in Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg papers, AAA; George Rodier Hyde, "Color Riots at L.A. Exhibits of 'Modernists,'" reprinted in *Accounts of Early California Art: A Reprint Anthology,* ed. John Alan Walker (Big Pine: John Alan Walker, 1988, First Series). For biographical information on Berlin see Paul J. Karlstrom and Susan Ehrlich, *Turning the Tide: Early Los Angeles Modernists, 1920–1956* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1990), 45; Nancy Dustin Wall Mouré, *Dictionary of Art and Artists in Southern California before 1930* (Los Angeles: Publications in Southern California Art, no. 3, 1975), 16; Lionel Rolfe, "L.A. Arts and Letters: From A to Zeitlin," *Los Angeles Reader,* no. 42 (13 August 1982): 9; Ted

LeBerthon, "Night and Day," *Los Angeles News,* 27 June 1940, in artist files, Ferdinand Perret papers, AAA.

6. Edward Kienholz, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Edward Kienholz," interviewed 1976 by Lawrence Weschler, OHP/UCLA, 70–71.

7. Helen Lundeberg, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Helen Lundeberg," interviewed 1974 by Fidel Danieli, OHP/UCLA, 70, 75.

8. Mabel Alvarez papers, AAA, "My Journal 1918–1928," entry January 1928; entries from diaries, 31 March 1917 and 15 November 1919; "My Journal 1918–1928," entry for 11 January 1921; diary entries for 28 and 13 October 1917.

9. See Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), 94ff.

10. John Alan Walker's *Accounts of Early California Art* collects together reviews from 1916 to 1945. The files of the Los Angeles Art Association, deposited at AAA, contain a record of exhibitions, lectures, and classes organized by the association. The Ferdinand Perret papers in AAA are an invaluable source for the study of art communities in California. Perret clipped reviews and articles about the visual arts from newspapers across the state. He also collected catalogs and brochures and membership lists of various artists' organizations. Information on the Arensbergs and their circle can be found in Winifred Haines Higgins, "Art Collecting in the Los Angeles Area, 1910–1960," dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, June 1963. Robert Perine's *Chouinard: An Art Vision Betrayed* (Encinitas: Artra Publishing Inc., 1985) is a highly contentious history of the Chouinard Art School which also includes comparative information on other art schools in Los Angeles and San Francisco. More general information on the art movements and communities in California prior to 1950 can be found in Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area 1945–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); *The Art of California: Selected Works from the Collection of the Oakland Museum,* ed. Christina Orr-Cahall (Oakland: Oakland Museum, 1984); Paul J. Karlstrom and Susan Ehrlich, *Turning the Tide*; *Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg: A Retrospective Exhibition* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1980); Henry Miller, *Knud Merrild, a Holiday in Paint* (Huntsville: Bern Porter, 1965); Nancy Dustin Wall Mouré, *Painting and Sculpture in Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1980); *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1977); Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger, 1974); Jake Zeitlin, *Small Renaissance, Southern California Style* (Los Angeles: Zeitlin, 1972).

11. After 1934 there was an increase in interest in surrealism in the American mass media. Salvador Dalí established his reputation in American popular culture as the

quintessential surreal fantasist with five feature articles in *Time* magazine alone, as well as coverage in *Arts and Decoration, Current Biography, Current History, Fortune, Life, Literary Digest*, the *Magazine of Art, Newsweek, New Republic*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Theatre Arts Monthly*. See "Salvador Dali," *Time* 28 (13 July 1936): 31–32; "Salvador Dali," *Time* 28 (14 December 1936): 62–64; "Dali's Display," *Time* 33 (27 March 1939): 31; "Dreams Paranoiac," *Time* 33 (3 April 1939): 43; "Not So Secret Life," *Time* 40 (28 December 1942): 30ff.; "Dali's Ladies," *Time* 41 (26 April 1943): 79–80; H. G. Thompson, "If You Were in New York," *Arts and Decoration* 42 (March 1935): 46–48; "Dali: In the News and in the Studio," *Current History* 50 (April 1939): 48–49; "Dali and His Wife Gala," *Fortune* 18 (December 1938): 85–86; "Surrealist Artist Enchants Hampton Manor, Near Fredericksburg, Virginia," *Life* 10 (7 April 1941): 98–101; "Fantastic Zanies of Painter's Brush," *Literary Digest* 122 (12 December 1936): 26; Henry Devree, "Three Exotics: Chagall, Dali, Miró," *Magazine of Art* 30 (January 1937): 60–61; James J. Sweeney, "Miró and Dali," *New Republic* 81 (6 February 1935): 360ff.; Malcolm Cowley, "Imp of the Perverse," *New Republic* 108 (18 January 1943): 88ff.; "Dali Dream Come True," *Newsweek* 13 (27 March 1939): 27; "Open Secret," *Newsweek* 21 (11 January 1943): 62ff.; "Rapport of Fatality," *Newsweek* 21 (26 April 1943): 82; "Portraits by Dali," *New York Times Magazine* (11 April 1943): 17; "Salvador Dali + 3 Marxes = Marie Seton," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 23 (October 1939): 734–740. Other articles on surrealism in the popular press included Klaus Mann, "Surrealist Circus," *American Mercury* 56 (February 1943): 174–181; Jean Charlot, "Surrealism: Or, the Reason for Unreason," *American Scholar* 7 (April 1938): 230–242; Bernard Byrne, "Surrealism Passes," *Commonweal* 26 (2 July 1937): 262–263; Andrew McGavick, "Weird Worlds," *Commonweal* 27 (1 April 1938): 630–631; "New Paintings for Connoisseurs," *Country Life* 73 (February 1938): 48–49; "Great Flights of Culture: Twelve Artists in U.S. Exile," *Fortune* 24 (December 1941): 102–115; Elizabeth Gilhagen, "Fantasy Rampant," *Independent Woman* 16 (February 1937): 33ff.; "Max Ernst: Portrait of a Surrealist," *Living Age* 355 (February 1939): 537–538; Eugene Jolas, "Beyond Surrealism," *Living Age* 359 (September 1940): 93–95; Robert M. Coates, "Had Any Good Dreams Lately?" *New Yorker* 17 (29 November 1941): 58ff.; B. M. King, "First Venture in Surrealism," *School Arts* 39 (March 1940): 222ff.; "Max Ernst," *Time* 28 (14 December 1936): 60; "Surrealists in Exile," *Time* 39 (20 April 1942): 48ff.; "Inheritors of Chaos," *Time* 40 (2 November 1942): 47.

12. Helen Lundeberg, "New Classicism," in Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA.

13. Arthur Millier, art critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and active proponent of postsurrealism, wrote in one essay: "Modern man's high place of mystery and world

of adventure is his own mind. Not myth nor substance, but our experience of them—thought and feeling—constitutes the highest reality of our century." Advertising and political demogoguery both relied on manipulation of associative aspects of cognition. Postsurrealist art, by bringing this process to the surface and revealing the "composition of ideas in the spectator's mind," enlarged perception of the forces surrounding modern men and women. See "Postsurrealism or Subjective Classicism: A Means to a Genuinely Contemporary Art," in Notebooks on California Artists, Ferdinand Perret papers, AAA.

14. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 26.

15. See Lundeberg's statement for *The Mirror* for the 1952 exhibition *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture,* College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois; Lundeberg's letter of 1 December 1954 to Edwin C. Rae in Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA; and Lundeberg, "Los Angeles Art Community," OHP/UCLA, 60.

16. *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 8. See also *Americans: 1942* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942), 93; *American Realists and Magic Realists* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943). For two art-historical assessments of the relationship of postsurrealism to European surrealism, see Barbara Hartmann, "Dynaton and Post-Surrealism," in *Ceci n'est pas le surréalisme, California: Idioms of Surrealism* (Los Angeles: Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, 1983), 7–14, and Jeffrey Wechsler, *Surrealism and American Art, 1931–1947* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1976), 43–47. Both Hartmann and Wechsler failed to note the antithetical relationship that the postsurrealists adopted toward surrealism. For a discussion of the development of American surrealism into abstract expressionism, see *The Interpretive Link, Abstract Surrealism into Abstract Expressionism: Works on Paper, 1938–1946,* ed. Paul Schimmel (Newport Beach: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1986).

17. George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in *The Genteel Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 62–63.

18. Jeanne McGahey in Lawrence Hart et al., *Ideas of Order in Experimental Poetry* (Berkeley: Circle Pamphlet [n.d., ca. 1945]), 23.

19. Lundeberg was part of Lewis Madison Terman's Gifted Group, selected at a very early age and then tracked at four-year periods to see how high IQ translated into success in achieving goals and personal adjustment to the social environment. See Lewis Madison Terman, *Mental and Physical Traits of a Thousand Gifted Children* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1925); Lewis Madison Terman and Melita H. Oden, *The Gifted Group at Mid-Life: Thirty-five Years' Follow-up of the Superior*

Child (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959); and Joel N. Shurkin, *Terman's Kids: The Groundbreaking Study of How the Gifted Grow Up* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992).

20. Quote from undated typed statement in Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA, probably written prior to 1943, since the text presupposes the ongoing existence of the postsurrealist movement; Gloria Biggs, "Her Paintings Express Quiet Beauty," Women Today section, *Christian Science Monitor,* 16 May 1951.

21. Letter from Lundeberg to Edwin C. Rae, 1 December 1954, Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA.

22. See William Everson, *Archetype West: The Pacific Coast as a Literary Region* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1976), 9–10, for a contrast of social structure with spiritual participation.

23. Lundeberg seldom traveled outside California, and in 1974 she said, "I've never been out of this country, except in imagination" (Lundeberg, "Los Angeles Art Community," OHP/UCLA, 70). She did attend exhibitions at local museums and galleries, and she was part of the social circle invited into the homes of the Arensbergs and Galka Scheyer.

24. Feitelson, "Tape-Recorded Interview," AAA, 4–5.

25. For a perspective of Feitelson by an artist who was more conservative, see Herbert Jepson's observation that Feitelson "would completely take over the whole show, much to the chagrin of the speaker who happened to be up on the front" whenever there were "general meetings open to the public that had something to do with art." Feitelson was "unquestionably the most articulate, the smartest, and the most interesting" of the people who moved in Los Angeles art circles in the 1930s (Herbert Jepson, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Herbert Jepson," interviewed 1976 by Marjorie Rogers, OHP/UCLA, 139). See also Millard Sheets's comment on Feitelson: "He'd painted all over Europe. He knew his way around, and he was not afraid to try anything" (Millard Sheets, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Millard Sheets," interviewed 1976 and 1977 by George M. Goodwin, OHP/UCLA, 366).

26. Feitelson, "Tape-Recorded Interview," AAA, 1–3; Feitelson, "Los Angeles Art Community," OHP/UCLA, 200–201.

27. Feitelson, "Los Angeles Art Community," OHP/UCLA, 188, 73, 92.

28. Arthur Millier expressed this in three principles he proposed to defend the universal importance of postsurrealism: "The characteristic creations of our time are completed in the brain before an ounce of construction material is mined. Ours is the age of pre-calculations so exact that their objectification seems miraculous. . . . To express this century's incredible intellectual effort, art must parallel that effort's precision

of theory and method. It must be as precise as the intricately calculated balance of a steel bridge, as absolute in the relationship of its parts as the elements of a chemical compound. . . . The artist need not be an engineer. But he must create poems for an engineering age" ("Postsurrealism or Subjective Classicism").

29. Feitelson, "Los Angeles Art Community," OHP/UCLA, 91.

30. Ibid., 86–87.

31. Undated note in Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA, probably ca. 1947.

32. Feitelson, "Los Angeles Art Community," OHP/UCLA, 191, 193.

33. Antonin Artaud, "L'Activité du Bureau de recherches surréalistes," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 1:269.

34. Arthur Millier, untitled, *Los Angeles Times,* 14 April 1935.

35. See correspondence file, Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA, for record of Feitelson's activity as a public speaker. Quotes from brochure on Hollywood Race Track fine arts program; exhibition catalog *Young Art Patrons,* 3 March 1965; Zuma Palmer, "Feitelson's Art Series Finding an Audience," *Hollywood Citizen-News,* 14 November 1956, 10.

36. William Copley, "Tape-Recorded Interview with William Copley," interviewed 1968 by Paul Cummings, AAA, 3, 10; Betty Asher, "Interview with Betty Asher," interviewed 1980 by Thomas H. Garver, AAA, 14.

37. Letter from Feitelson to Alfred M. Frankfurter, 28 September 1949, in Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA.

38. Letter from Feitelson to Kenneth Ross, 14 March 1949; catalog for *Functionalists West* exhibition, November 1952, Los Angeles Art Association galleries, in Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA.

39. Letter from Feitelson to Arthur Millier, June 1950, in Feitelson and Lundeberg papers, AAA.

40. Kienholz, "Los Angeles Art Community," OHP/UCLA, 86; Bengston quote from *Paintbox Pioneers,* "California Stories," television program, Southern California Community Television, 1987; Carlos Almaraz, "Interview with Carlos Almaraz," interviewed 1986 by Margarita Nieto, AAA, 40.

41. Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," 62.

2 After the War or Before?

Kenneth Rexroth Confronts History

In the 1930s Kenneth Rexroth (fig. 6) was one of many young communist-influenced poets who worked in the San Francisco and Los Angeles branches of the Federal Writers Project (FWP). His first wife, the painter Andrée Schafer Rexroth (1902–1940), was a dedicated Communist party activist. What kind of communist he was is open to dispute. In 1931 he wrote Louis Zukovsky that he was a Christian, communist poet in search of perpetual revolution, defined as "the constant raising into relevance of ignored values."[1] For most of his life Rexroth denied that he had ever joined the party, but on his 1940 application for membership in the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, he put down that he had been an active member of the party from 1935 to 1938.[2]

During those three years, Rexroth became a spokesperson for radical literature and painting. At a 1935 national conference of writers and artists, Rexroth urged his fellow writers to put aside arguments over the relative merits of "Proletarian art, Surrealism, or heroic couplets." First and foremost, creative people needed "the minimum conditions under which creative work is possible," which he defined as stable incomes and a plan for developing a popular audience for serious art and literature.[3] Rexroth identified the same problems that Lorser Feitelson grappled with in the 1940s, but their solutions were very different. Feitelson hoped that expanding private enterprise would allow artists to focus on their creative tasks. Rexroth believed that government

6. Kenneth Rexroth, 1945. Courtesy of New Directions.

action was essential. The pool of talented creative people had grown larger than the capacity of commercial outlets. The resulting competition, he argued, had driven down the minimum compensation that commercial publishers offered to levels too low for average writers or artists to survive through their crafts. They had to choose between starving or finding other employment to support their creative activities.

Rexroth circulated a proposal for a national registry of artists and writers, which he saw as an extension of the federal writers and arts projects. Instead of working on specific projects determined by government overseers, however, those enrolled on the national registry would work for any noncommercial institution or agency. In effect, his proposal called for government subsidy for the self-organization of artists and writers into production collectives. He tried to implement that aspect of the plan by developing a magazine for radical political poetry and fiction. Only one issue appeared, printed on FWP mimeograph machines. The lead editorial argued that California suffered from having only commercial magazines that limited themes and ideas to those that would please the widest audience.[4] Merle Armitage, the state director of the federal arts projects, quashed the magazine before a second issue appeared. Armitage later argued in his defense that conservative members of Congress opposed to government funding for the arts were looking for evidence of communists using the programs to conduct propaganda. Young radicals, however idealistic their proposals, did not understand that their magazine threatened the future of the entire program.[5]

Rexroth's interest in government support of artists and writers declined as his political loyalties shifted in 1938. The poem "New Objectives, New Cadres" exposed a break from the organized communist movement. On the one hand he saw leaders who were

> imaginary just men
> Nude as rose petals, discussing a purer logic
> In bright functionalist future gymnasia

High in the snows of Mt. Lenin
Beside a collectivist ocean.

Then there were the rank and file, incompetent, living in squalor:

He who sits in his socks reading shockers,
Skinning cigarette butts and rerolling them in toilet paper,
His red eyes never leaving the blotted print and the pulp paper.
He rose too late to distribute the leaflets.
In the midst of the mussed bedding have mercy
Upon him, this is history.

He portrayed a party theoretician as a "satyriast"

Drawing pointless incisive diagrams
On a blackboard, barking
Ominously with a winey timbre
Clarifying constant and variable capital.

His conclusion to the poem suggested that he wanted action instead of talk:

The problem is to control history.
We already understand it.[6]

In "August 22, 1939," he announced his allegiance to the anarchist tradition of socialism. Opening with the question "What is it all for, this poetry?" he asked "writers and readers" to think of poetry as statements of personal responsibilities requiring immediate action.[7] In the fall of 1939 he circulated a proposal that the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the National Council for the Prevention of War, and the Keep America Out of War Committee form a coalition to coordinate their activities against American support for Britain. The pacifist movement was divided by meaningless theoretical distinctions, he argued. If

pacifists truly believed they had a personal responsibility to prevent war, they should put aside long-term goals to focus on the immediate problem.[8]

The proposal elicited no response, and Rexroth's primary activities during the war were the writing and study that led to the publication in 1944 of his second book, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise.* He separated himself from his closest colleagues of the 1930s by resigning from the Federal Writers Project in 1940. He feared that the project would become an agency for the production of patriotic material in support of the war effort. He found a job as a psychiatric orderly in San Francisco General Hospital, a position that he used to justify his application for conscientious objector status.[9]

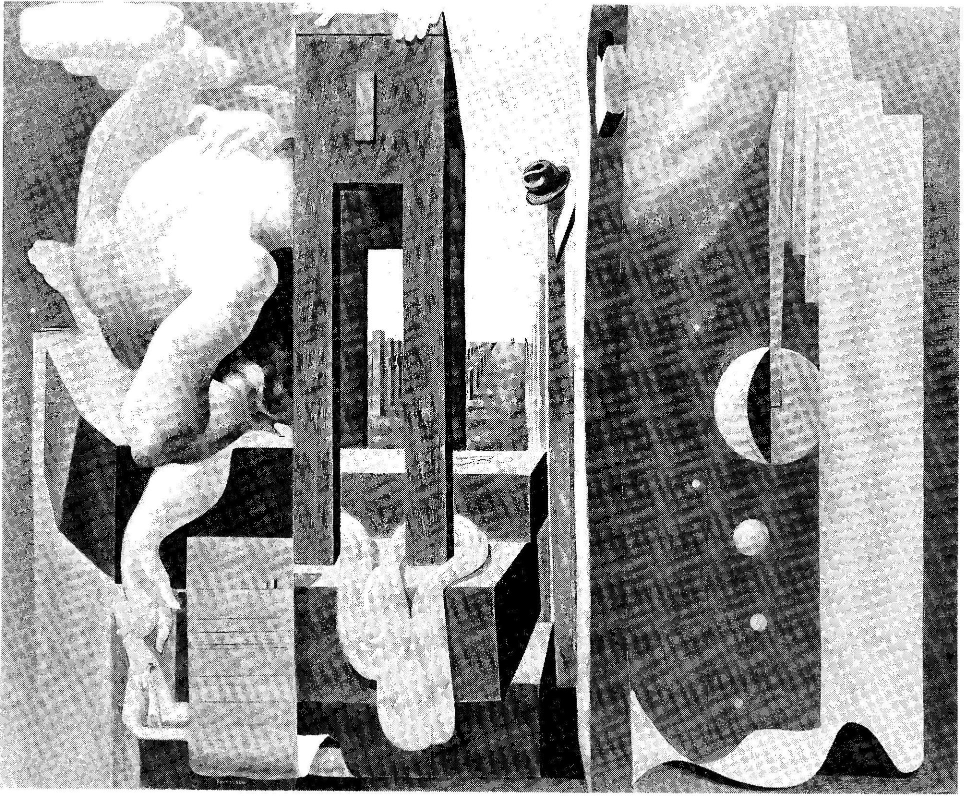
A 1940 letter from the poet Robert Horan to Robert Duncan (1919–1988) reveals how some contemporaries saw him. Horan reported to Duncan that Rexroth had tried to join the activist poets group, but they decided not to allow him to attend their meetings. Horan explained that Rexroth hectored people with his pet theories and proposals. He interrupted others as they tried to express their opinions and tended to become abusive with those who disagreed with him. Rexroth spoke as if he were the most accomplished poet in the state. Horan granted that Rexroth had promise as a writer, but Horan also confided to Duncan that Rexroth was untrustworthy and too undisciplined to work in a group trying to define and solve problems.[10]

In interviews done much later in his career, Rexroth projected himself as a man fully in control, able to accomplish his goals because he had extensive knowledge of the world. "I was always luckier than anybody else because I knew more about what I was doing," he told one interviewer.[11] He was proud to be an autodidact. He claimed he *always* knew more than experts because his interests were general and because his omnivorous reading was guided by personal experience. The sketches Rexroth made of American communists in "New Objectives, New Cadres" have the ring of self-portraits. A critique of the Communist party glossed a critical view of himself as a public figure, a self-representation that he could express only in his verse by projecting his negative self-images into "objective" descriptions of others.

By 1945 Rexroth had transcended a reputation as a marginal crank. He was without question one of the best poets working in California. Rexroth's new stature grew out of the publication of 1944 of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise.* The poems collected in the volume recorded Rexroth's reactions to the war and his efforts to locate in marriage the basis for an alternative society. Even reviewers who criticized the political positions in the poetry acknowledged the strength of Rexroth's formal achievement. The book opened with the long title poem, followed by a section of shorter lyrics, and concluded with paraphrases and translations from Tu Fu, Martial, Meleager, and a selection of Hellenistic, late Roman, and Byzantine poets.

In his introduction Rexroth stated that his theme was the "conservation of value" achieved through "supernatural identification of the self with the tragic unity of creative process." Rexroth argued that identification with process was not accomplished by "act of will, by sheer assertion." He sketched the program of the book as a progress toward wisdom achieved by moving from sensual abandon to "erotic mysticism," then to the "ethical mysticism of sacramental marriage," and finally to "realization of the ethical mysticism of universal responsibility." Sexuality was the avenue by which humanity had most direct contact with cosmic "process." The "Dual," the commitment of two people to each other, contained within it the seeds of the "Other," in its most direct sense the family that results from the sexual union of male and female, but also understandable as everything outside the single self and the feeling of communion one feels with those who have shared interests.[12] An interesting visual parallel to these ideas exists in a series of paintings that Lorser Feitelson executed in the mid-1930s in which he located sexuality in a larger conception of cosmic continuity (fig. 7).

The title poem of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* opens with the ominous "Webs of misery spread in the brain." Rexroth then quickly established a metaphor of edges as central to his theme: the poet and his wife are camping on the shore, on the thin line between desert and ocean, a contrast used to symbolize the soul's existence on the boundary between cosmos and society,



7. Lorser Feitelson, *Love: Eternal Recurrence,* oil on masonite, 1935–1936. Phoenix Art Museum.

"the gulf / Between essence and existence." The beach is also "on the crumbling / Edge of a ruined polity." A reminder of the war raging around the globe disturbs a much-needed vacation: "A group of terrified children" discover "the body / Of a Japanese sailor bumping / In a snarl of kelp." The horror of the decomposing body described in detail initiates a long meditation on the nature of history. The poet wants to know what is the source of "continuity, / The germ plasm, of history." Unable to sleep, he lies in his sleeping bag all night, while his wife slumbers peacefully. He listens to the cries of sea

birds and turns restlessly while he chews on the questions that the intrusion of the world war has raised.[13]

The events of the poem occur from Thursday evening to Friday morning of Easter week. On an allegorical level Rexroth transformed the historical events of Maundy Thursday into personal rituals. Having dinner and making love with his wife become the reenactment of the Last Supper. Sharing food and sex, acts central to the establishment of family, are sacraments that initiate the poet into the mysteries of Passover and Easter. The poet's sleepless night is a reminder of both Christ's solitary night of prayer on Gethsemane and Jacob's wrestling with the angel at Bethel.

The poet's philosophical ruminations weigh the possible meanings of "process," "value," and "fact"—the terms upon which Rexroth believed so much of human action had come to depend. If he could sort them out and determine their origins, he could render a judgment of civilization as it had developed. Binaries become the principal rhetorical strategy of the poem. Just as cold and heat, shadow and light, yin and yang must remain distinct, so endurance stands against novelty, wisdom against rationality, and what might happen against what did happen. By posing opposites in their antagonistic aspect, the poet forces himself to distinguish natural and social orders, poetic and historical modes of thought. This is no argument, but a set of assertions dividing the world between the lasting and the ephemeral. The fundamental polarity is that of history and poetry. History springs from death, while poetry brings forth "the continuity." To stay on the side of the social is to worship the trivial and to become an instrument of an increasingly more destructive and dangerous system of (dis)order.

Underlying the opening section is the claim that the destruction of America as a society became inescapable with the nation's entry into World War II. Like Greece and Rome, its civilization would pass. Opposed to the event of American society crumbling as have so many cultures before it is the ocean, where time flows "eventless as silt." To learn how to live in a time of

misery and chaos, one must turn to nature. The answer was not poetry as a technique in and for itself. Alluding to Rimbaud as an example, the narrating voice asserts that poetry, even poetry of an advanced persuasion, is a manifestation of rationalism when it is only a form of showmanship. Value is not the same thing as novelty, nor can it be found in the "organized ecstasy" of art that pretends to glory in the irrational but becomes, in the search for new forms only, another manifestation of step-by-step ("pedetemtim") order. The European avant-garde's privileging of emotional nihilism was not a way out of the problem, but only affirmed the "statistical likelihood / Of being blown to pieces."[14]

The posing of antagonistic binaries gives way to revelation that opposites are also complementary. Their natures presuppose one another because they are dual manifestations of a deeper, invisible and mystical unity. Invoking Chinese cosmology, the poet can imagine that "possibly history / Is only an irritability," a temporary perversion and disturbance in the natural order. Poetry and religion are both passageways between the social and natural orders, but being "on the suture," they are abstract. It is the sudden appearance of the poet's wife, "hungry, shouting / For supper . . . / Breasts quivering in their silk blouse," that interrupts his ruminations, brings him back to practical tasks, and thereby makes the natural order immediate and personal.[15]

Throughout the poem, the poet portrays his wife as the secure, stable abode of cosmic peace. As he ponders the place of value and fact, she sleeps peacefully and "her dreams measure the hours / As accurately as my / Meditations in cold solitude." The resolution of the dilemma lies in her body: "Babies are more / Durable than monuments . . . / Process is precipitated / In the tirelessly receptive womb." In the concluding image of the poem, the poet's wife emerges nude from her swim and comes up to meet him.

The sun crosses
The hills and fills her hair, as it lights

The moon and glories the sea
And deep in the empty mountains melts
The snow of winter and the glaciers
Of ten thousand thousand years.[16]

The simple, everyday act of love contains the potential of apotheosis, the surpassing of history into cosmogony.

Poetry, philosophy, religion, and sexuality are each a potential light of wisdom upon the mystery of nothing transforming into something. History has perverted all forms of wisdom and jumbled them so that they no longer serve to enlighten. The poet's task, acted out in the poem, is to align those four ways of knowing oneself so that they are complementary and each can reveal its unique perspective into universal reality. The poem pits poetry and history against each other and asks, in which should the poet place his faith and hope for a future life? The beach site, suspended between ocean and desert, allegorically reformulates the question so that he sees the cosmological ramifications of the choice he makes. Confrontation with cosmology leads the poet to consider his choice morally by meditating on the sources of value and fact. It is the dichotomy of male and female that allows him to experience divine reality. Sexual difference is both antagonistic and complementary. Aspects of the male position lie in the realm of struggle and war springing from an endless search for change for its own sake. The union of male and female is the source of change that persists and resolves antagonism into complementarity. Rexroth's maxim, "Against the ruin of the world there is only one defense—the creative act,"[17] had a more basic meaning than writing poetry, playing music, or painting.

The feminine mystique was not only a "conservative" motion in mid-twentieth-century America. It was part of a turn of people of diverse political ideologies to deeply rooted stereotypes about sexual difference in order to conjure a utopian private realm that could serve, in the imagination at least, as

a haven from the dangers engulfing the public world. To use Rexroth's binary logic, the antagonism of public and private realms could be resolved—or is it sublimated?—by the complementary relationship of male and female.

The separation of private from public modes of being led Rexroth to his own assessment of war and its causes. Sufferings that pertained to history could not be caused by want and fear because those were expressions of the natural interaction of the human animal with its environment. War was then the result of reason ("rigid / Vectors of the fallible mind"). The third section of the poem begins with a machine of war masquerading as an animal. A patrol plane sounds like an owl, but it is an imposture. Owls do not fly over the ocean. The motif reoccurs at the conclusion of the section when a camouflaged cruiser appears like a dark animal prowling the coast. The poet has to remind himself that the equation of war with animality is a trick of human reason to divert attention from its responsibility. War is not part of the processes of nature, but solely the creation of history and society. The terror of Hitler lay not in his demagogic appeal to irrationality, but in the modern state's highly organized, systematic control over the means of coercion and destruction. On this level, the American, British, and Soviet governments were no better. They ruthlessly applied the power at their disposal according to calculations of ends-means relations.[18]

"The State is the organization / Of the evil instincts of mankind. / History is the penalty / We pay for original sin," Rexroth editorialized, and then added to underscore the message, "War is the State." In the final section of the poem he argued that war is the price for believing that "salvation equals autonomy." History, which is to say war, starts with the creation of persons, it is "the price of being an individual monad." History, war, the state, rationality, and individualism function as interchangeable categories, representing different faces of the same phenomenon. They form a structure of equivalences that together represent for the poet the living presence of evil in the world.[19]

One of the most effective leaps in the poem comes when Rexroth contem-

plates the source of individuation, communication, and peace, and suddenly switches to an image of the resurrected Christ confronting his apostles:

> Came Jesus and stood in the midst, and
> Saith unto them, "Peace be unto you."
> And when he had so said, he shewed
> Unto them his hands and his side.

Jesus's wounds from the cross are a pledge of forgiveness, but they can also be a prediction that peace must lead to martyrdom. The poet prays to the Amida Buddha, perfect in body and mind, and to Kwannon, Buddha-nature in female form, for a "turn from peace," for peace has no natural reality.[20] It is solely an historical term because the word expresses a desire to preserve self and self-interest in a world that is always changing. Yearning for peace is itself a cause of war, an aspect of the rationalist desire "to control history," a goal that Rexroth himself shared in 1938. Rexroth's dialectical method required him to say that he was not *for* peace, because binaries become antagonistic when human thought insists upon phenomena having essential rather than relative characteristics. He could not be a pacifist because peace could not exist in his intellectual universe except as a byproduct of the vain hope to preserve individual identity.

Further, Rexroth saw no reason to believe that world war, however horrible it was, would end in "peace." Fascism might be defeated, but the American state would emerge, he predicted, with its faith in the efficacy of war justified by victory. An age of increasingly cruel conflicts had begun. He could not depict the dawn that greets him at the beginning of the third section in its traditionally positive Easter symbolism of a birth of a new age. He thinks it may be "the malignant / Dawn of the literate insect, / Dispassionate, efficient, formic."[21]

Against war Rexroth opposed eros, not to be understood as simply sexuality. Eros was the force for change within each person. Desire heightened

sensibility to the ordered potential of the universe. The erotically stimulated person grasped that natural processes were infinite and that imagination was essential to the operation of choice. Nevertheless, imagination did not necessarily serve the good. It had to be disciplined by ties of love and responsibility. The question of value for Rexroth could not be abstract. Once the individual contemplated what might happen to other individuals he (or, implicitly but never explicitly, she) loved, he voluntarily assumed responsibility for everything that occurs in the world done by human beings, even if he never gave assent:

> The person emerges as complete
> Responsible act—this lost
> And that conserved—the appalling
> Decision of the verb "to be."
> Men drop dead in the ancient rubbish
> Of the Acropolis, scholars fall
> Into self-dug graves, Jews are smashed
> Like vermin in the Polish winter.
> This is my fault, the horrible term
> Of weakness, evasion, indulgence,
> The total of my petty fault—
> No other man's.[22]

Rexroth presented no plan for achieving "responsibility," but the logic of his poem precluded program since his conception of free will followed from the impossibility of ever predicting what will happen. One must respond to the moment or fall into the traps of rationalist thought. In "When We with Sappho," one of the shorter lyrics in the volume, Rexroth assures his wife that humans turn to poetry to hold the essential before them, that is, to do as people have always done as long as they have sung. Spontaneity, if it is not to be formless and solipsistic, must be accompanied by tradition, which provides training and preparation but never a regimen.[23]

The abandon to sexuality that Rexroth saw as the starting point for achieving ethical responsibility was not hedonistic or self-centered. It was the precondition for mystical insight. Rexroth's lyrics belong to the venerable tradition of *carpe diem*, "seize the moment." Nature continues without stop, and for humans to observe its patterns is to understand that no activity in time can aspire to permanence. If we take the manifestations of process—the bees, moths, owls, the stars, the individual soul—as things-in-themselves, we fail to see the experience of sensual reality as an initiation into recurring forces that have no essence. The only reality is the nothingness from which manifestations spring. That nothingness is not material void. It is "nothing" because no manifestation is ever adequate to represent the unending process of which it is a part. In five perfect lines, Rexroth in "We Come Back" captured how everything material is only a temporary effusion of the "endless parabolas" of freedom-giving nothingness:

> Each year, on summer's first luminous morning,
> The swallows come back, whispering and weaving
> Figure eights around the sharp curves of the swifts,
> Plaiting together the summer air all day,
> That the bats and owls unravel in the nights.[24]

Publication of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* came at one of the most difficult periods in Rexroth's life. Attacked by a psychiatric patient at San Francisco General Hospital, Rexroth suffered a back injury that made it difficult for him to move about or concentrate on his writing. Then his second wife left him in 1944. The woman to whom he had dedicated *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* could no longer tolerate his frequent infidelities, or his explanations that his male nature and his poetic vocation required amatory explorations. He told her that her jealousy would cut him off from the full range of experience he needed to probe the human condition. She continued to pay his rent and provide him with food, but Rexroth was absolutely broke. He wrote a despairing letter to James Laughlin, his publisher at New Directions, won-

dering how at the age of forty he could have no skills that society thought worth reimbursing at a livable wage. Laughlin counseled him to go to school and become a psychological analyst, a career at which he was sure Rexroth would excel.[25] Rexroth ignored the advice and took a job as a sales clerk in a bookstore.

Then positive reviews for *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* appeared. The reviewer for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* thought that the shorter poems were "some of the most exciting lyrical and satirical poems I have come across in a long time." Conrad Aiken in the *New Republic* lauded *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* as an "impressive piece of work, very much alive intellectually, as impressive for its obvious integrity as for its range. Here is a poet to be reckoned with." William Carlos Williams wrote in the *Quarterly Review of Literature* that Rexroth's verse was "strong meat and drink written in a verse which is clear as water." He wished for more verbal invention, but predicted that Rexroth was on his way to becoming one of the leading figures in American literature.[26] Even reviewers who had reservations about one aspect or another of the book recognized Rexroth's growing control over poetic expression. The book won both the California Literature Silver Award for 1944 and the Commonwealth Club's poetry medal. Rexroth's reputation was established.

Over the next five years, Rexroth consolidated his position by editing a compilation of D. H. Lawrence's poems for New Directions, putting together a collection of verse by younger British authors, and issuing two new volumes of his own poetry, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* and *The Signature of All Things*.[27] The introductions to the Lawrence collection and the British anthology contained declarations of war against the established advanced guard in poetry. In his essay on Lawrence, Rexroth attacked the French avant-garde tradition. He suggested that his readers compare Baudelaire to Catullus. "The contrast, the new thing in Baudelaire makes you shudder," he argued. "Baudelaire is struggling in a losing battle with a ghost more powerful than armies, more relentless than death. I think it is this demon which has pro-

vided the new thing in Western Man, the insane dynamic which has driven him across the earth to burn and slaughter, loot and rape."[28] The French tradition, as those within the field of poetry knew very well, had been the most important inspiration for the modernist experiments of Pound, Eliot, H. D., Gertrude Stein, and their followers. Lawrence, Rexroth argued, had an entirely different conception of the poet. He had not wished to play the devil, as Rimbaud and Artaud had. Nor was he aspirant to heaven, like Claudel. Rexroth argued that for Lawrence the poet was simply one human being among others, a craftsman whose work was to explore the wisdom to be gained from personal experience. Attacking the emphasis on technique that the imagist school valued, Rexroth argued, "Bad poetry always suffers from the same defects: synthetic hallucination and artifice. Invention is not poetry. Invention is defense, the projection of pseudopods out of the ego to ward off the 'other.' Poetry is vision, the pure act of sensual communion and contemplation."[29]

In *The New British Poets,* Rexroth deliberately chose poets ignored by the Eliot-Auden-Spender circle and therefore generally unknown in the United States. Among the writers he anthologized were George Barker, Denise Levertov, Kathleen Raine, Derek Savage, and Dylan Thomas. Like Rexroth, these were poets of personal confession. In his introduction, Rexroth criticized Eliot and Pound for writing "self-conscious philosophical reveries full of indigestible learning" that avoided "the slightest hint of self-revelation."[30] In the course of public lectures he gave in San Francisco in 1947, Rexroth pursued his attacks by contrasting the deadening artifice of most modernist poetry with the simplicity and directness of folk songs and ballads, Chinese and Japanese poetry, and the songs and chants of "primitive" cultures. Only William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Yvor Winters escaped his charge that the quest for formal originality crippled the ability of contemporary poets to explore personal experience.[31]

Rexroth aimed to establish himself as the leader of a movement for what he called "autochthonous" poetry, inspired by a revolution away from the

word toward a poetics of immediate expression. His program stood on four basic principles that articulated the radical face of social disengagement. The first, expostulated in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise,* was that poetry should be personal witness against the permanent war state. The second was a decentering of European tradition, which had developed since Augustine, Rexroth thought, as an adjunct to the permanent war state. "The white race is going mad," Rexroth wrote, arguing that the lust for power had perverted the basic means of communication.[32] Asian poets provided a particularly valuable countertradition because Buddhism had given them a sophisticated philosophical base that detached them from their warring societies. Asian cultures also connected to a lost European antiquity. Classical civilization had shared many of the religious and philosophical traditions that remained alive in India, China, and Japan. The "occult" in the Occident was that part of pre-Christian heritage that had been suppressed and repressed but preserved in magic and folklore. Folk art and folk music could then be one basis for the eventual reunification of Europe with the rest of the world that would result after Europeans abandoned their claims to cultural superiority. These claims had rigidified into hierarchies of power in institutionalized cultural monopolies. His opposition to Eliot and Auden centered on their identification with a narrow hierarchical view of culture. He acknowledged that both had written very powerful poetry, but their public role had been to narrow the definition of high culture. His criticism of the *Partisan Review* rested similarly on its editors' attempt to establish standards for the evaluation of contemporary art and literature based on the European classics. He also opposed their active support for cold war policies, and, though he was anti-Stalinist, Rexroth felt that harping on the faults of communism only aided the most reactionary aspects of American society.[33]

The third principle was the vital importance of personal contact with raw nature. Rexroth was not antiurban. He preferred living in the city, but he thought that regular, constant exposure to undeveloped land subverted human-centered values. For this reason only, San Francisco and the urban

centers on the Pacific West Coast had a special role in Rexroth's program, which he otherwise believed could be replicated anywhere. All Californians lived within easy access of the mountains and the desert, and even within the cities people had a much closer connection to nature than the residents of eastern cities did. He thought that a similar situation existed in Latin America and Australia so that the poetry and art from these countries might share special affinities with work from California and the other western states.[34] His emphasis upon access to nature was not Arcadian. He was not interested in establishing utopian communities in the wilderness. On the contrary, he wanted to maintain distinctions between the human and the natural spheres in order that wilderness might remain a source of contrast and spiritual replenishment. In the postwar era, he saw the uniqueness of western American society increasingly in danger from proposals for development. His fifth book of poetry, *In Defense of the Earth,* published in 1956, expounded his ideas about an ecological society.

Rexroth's fourth principle was that religious faith should be present-oriented instead of focused toward the future. He was a practicing Christian, a member of the Anglo-Catholic church in San Francisco, but he rejected the presentation of the Gospels as historical documents. He preferred to think of religious images as recurring themes constantly presenting themselves in the everyday world. The vatic role of the poet that Rexroth and so many of his followers adopted came from a belief that poetry should blur the distinctions between the secular and the sacred by imbuing everyday aspects of life with religious aura. The poet would look inward to confess his or her beliefs and find a voice much larger than any individual's.

Poetry and the Postwar Boom

Rexroth's success came on the crest of rapid changes in California's poetry world. At the end of the 1930s poetry circles were personal and informal,

meeting at homes or bookstores for the discussion of work and practice. Berkeley-based poet Josephine Miles (1911–1985) recalled that the primary form of distribution of new poems in the 1930s had been circulation of typed manuscripts, which might be mimeographed so members of a poetry circle could read them before gathering. Poems were read out loud, but that was not the central focus of evenings. Poetry in the 1930s was meant to be read in private, and circle meetings spent most of their time in discussion. Public poetry readings were more formal affairs. Professional actors gave dramatic renditions of work selected by the organizers. A reading mixed classical with new poetry. Miles recalled that "it was assumed that a poet was not a good reader of his own work. . . . [Yvor] Winters was not good. [Robinson] Jeffers was not good. Nobody thought of themselves—I thought of myself as absolutely terrible, and I don't know anybody who felt he was a good reader."[35]

World War II opened up this hermetic world. Miles recalled that public poetry readings became a frequent and regular occurrence during the war. In Berkeley, senior members of the faculty organized well-attended public readings from Homer, Milton, and other classic poets. The goals of these presentations were straightforward, to strengthen the resolve of the American people by reminding them of the great classical tradition of which they were the heirs. Such readings quickly spread to San Francisco and Los Angeles, where poetry readings became regular occurrences at the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Los Angeles Vedanta Society, and the Wilshire Ebell Club.[36]

Within a very short period of time young people in Berkeley gathered for more informal open readings of experimental and personal poetry. Serious poets and amateurs shared the platform to express their feelings about the war and the dangers facing them. Similar readings became regular functions at Lucien Labaudt's art gallery in San Francisco and Stanley Rose's bookstore and gallery in Hollywood. In 1946, two years after the war's end, Madeline Gleason (1913–1979), working with the San Francisco Museum of Art, organized a Festival of Modern Poetry with events at a number of venues. Gleason's festival combined open readings with musical and theatrical presenta-

tions, as well as exhibitions of work by local artists. Many poets for the first time in their careers presented their work to people who were not devotees of the craft, but who were nonetheless interested and supportive. The increased interest in poetry led to an explosion of small, avant-garde poetry journals.[37]

A new emphasis on reading as a social event tilted the balance toward performative values. A new concept of the poem as a score emerged. Breath, intensity, volume, pitch, and speed provoked workable and more complex alternatives to rhyme and meter. Traditional poetry had maintained a tenuous link with song, the echoes of which were still present in the work of Pound and Eliot. A new performative poetry broke that link by associating poetry with everyday speech. Of the older generation of American modernists, William Carlos Williams had done the most to pioneer a poetics of the spoken word, and his influence among younger poets rose. The speech act that most easily lent itself to performance was the confession, the form which Rexroth had adopted for his poetry.[38]

Rexroth was the center of the group of poets in California whose work became the most representative of the new poetic aesthetic emerging from the cumulative effect of these changes, simultaneously formal and institutional. Many younger poets sought him out, particularly pacifists, for whom *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* had been a heady defense of their beliefs when overwhelming public opinion branded conscientious objectors to the war effort as cowards or traitors. Rexroth recalled these days as a period of "an extraordinary upsurge of what might be called apocalyptic optimism."[39]

Rexroth established his home as an institutional center by opening it every Friday night to reading and discussion of poetry. Each week, a participant presented a critical review of the career of a poet.[40] William Everson (1912–1994), Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia (b. 1927), Morris Graves, Muriel Rukeyser, Sanders Russell, Thomas Parkinson, and Richard Eberhardt were regular participants. More than personal prestige and aesthetic ideology cemented Rexroth's undisputed position as leader. Rexroth was a close personal friend of James Laughlin, the owner of New Directions press. Rexroth could

help people get published. His recommendation led to New Directions accepting books by Everson and Levertov. He also convinced Laughlin to reissue Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories,* one of New Directions's most commercially successful ventures.[41] Over the next two decades, he helped Gary Snyder, Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Nathaniel Tarn get published.

In addition to the Friday evening poetry discussions, Rexroth was a leader in the Libertarian Circle which met every Wednesday night at the Workingman's Club building. Rexroth prepared the lists of books the circle read and led discussions. Most of the poets attending the Friday evening talks also came to the Wednesday evening political discussions. The Libertarian Circle had monthly dances to raise money for its activities. During these dances, experiments with reading poetry to jazz began. The group also sponsored weekly poetry readings on Saturday nights and Sunday excursions for hiking in Marin County.[42]

Ultimately the most far-reaching development to emerge from Rexroth's combination of poetry and politics was the FM radio station KPFA, based in Berkeley. In 1947 Lewis Hill, director of the Committee for Conscientious Objectors, came to address the Libertarian Circle to enlist their support in establishing a cooperatively run, listener-supported, commercial-free radio station that would be peace-oriented. Richard Moore (b. 1927), a poet in the group who had also been on the editorial board of *Circle,* found the idea exciting. He became the principal organizer of the project and raised $250,000 to start the station. Moore was the first general manager of KPFA and turned to his friends in the Libertarian Circle to help develop programming. Pacifica later opened stations in Los Angeles, New York, Washington, and Houston. The project expanded the social influence artists and poets would have far beyond their traditional circles.

For most of the poets involved in the Libertarian Circle, the most critical activity was the launching in 1947 of a new literary journal, *The Ark,* which its editors hoped would become the leading voice of anarchist ideas in the

United States. The collective prepared two issues, only one of which had gone to press before the editorial board fell apart in personal squabbles. The lead editorial announced that the journal was open to literature that promoted "social consciousness which recognizes the integrity of the personality as the most substantial and considerable of values." The editors urged its readers to sever all relations with the state. "We are concerned with a thorough revolution of the relations between the individual and society. . . . The vanguard of such a revolt is becoming a potent force in contemporary literature."[43]

Robert Duncan's review essay on *View* magazine, the semiofficial journal of the surrealist movement, attacked André Breton and his followers in America for having turned the "revolutionary personality" into a commodity for sale to "culture collectors." Since art and poetry were the primary forms for developing a new personality independent of the state, Duncan argued, the commercialization of surrealism was a major setback for social change in the twentieth century. Duncan urged serious artists and poets to avoid the snares of the marketplace and establish networks for exposure and discussion of work free from the exchange of money for profit. Poetry readings, cooperative galleries, and collectively run magazines could provide a basis for serious consideration of new work.[44] Duncan's prescriptive program described the actual art and poetry scene developing in the San Francisco Bay Area, an underground that formed as the quantity of work produced exceeded the capacity of the local museum, gallery, and publishing scene. He projected the limitations of working in a provincial environment into a utopian vision derived from the familiar, as if the personal could exist independently of a public order otherwise found oppressive.

Rexroth did not contribute to *The Ark*, but he expressed his ideas about the social role the magazine might fill in his notorious "Letter from America," published in the British anarchist journal *Now*. Revolutionaries would use the magazine to "win back various declassés, dislocated intellectuals, self-educated workers, young artists and writers" to the cause. "Once effective cadres," he continued, "have been developed from this somewhat unpromis-

ing material, [they will] build study and discussion groups amongst the working class, or rather amongst the general population." For this task, a combination of advanced literature and political essays was essential, literature to stimulate thinking about personal choices and essays to focus discussion on social conditions. Rexroth expressed strong reservations on the quality of the "cadres" available for the work. "The war finished off a generation of USA intellectuals," he observed. "They all went to Hell on a gravy train of human blood. . . . The WPA Writers' Project changed its name to the Office of War Information; salaries were upped handsomely." The most radical non-Stalinist left journals, such as Dwight MacDonald's *Politics,* appealed primarily to "well-dressed academic intellectuals, sociology teachers, social workers. . . . This is the class that staff the New Deal, and for that matter the CP and the Trots. I fail to see how anything can come out of bureaucrats except bureaucracy." That left for the cause writers who were profoundly ambivalent whether their primary loyalties were to their careers as writers or to social transformation. Convinced that the world political situation would deteriorate, Rexroth predicted a generation of martial law, during which time anarchists would have to go underground. "That means carefully picked people, caution, responsibility, and very solid construction, too." Assessing the men he had assembled around him, he could only exclaim that he saw little of practical talents that a revolutionary movement required.[45]

His colleagues in the Libertarian Circle were furious that Rexroth's doubts about their motives and capabilities were first expressed to them in print in a foreign journal. They felt betrayed and demanded to know why had he never brought these subjects up at their regular meetings. Embarrassed, Rexroth withdrew from the Libertarian Circle.[46] At the same time, he found himself deep in dispute with the younger poets about whose work he felt most strongly. Everson recalled that Rexroth had picked out himself, Robert Duncan, and Philip Lamantia to be his lieutenants, the men who would develop and expand an aesthetic of "immediate expression." Each received a specific "assignment." Duncan was to be the group's "celebrative dionysian aesthete

with formalist adhesions"; Lamantia was to be the "dionysian surrealist"; and Everson the "Lincolnesque populist pacifist—the 'pome-splitter.'"[47] At first each was flattered by the attention and advice Rexroth gave them, but all three rebelled by the end of 1948.

The first to break with Rexroth was Lamantia. Rexroth had written the introduction to the younger poet's first book, *Erotic Poems* (1946), and had touted his use of free association of images as an alternative to surrealism. Lamantia, with the most experience working in publishing, had been elected chief editor in charge of the production of *The Ark*. It was a nearly impossible task, since many in the group felt they could make significant changes without clearing them with the rest of the board. Lamantia expected Rexroth to exert discipline. When Rexroth failed to resolve the conflicting opinions, Lamantia quit all connections with *The Ark*.[48]

Rexroth's relations with Everson were more complicated. Rexroth valued Everson as the archetypal autochthone, proof that good American poetry need have no connection with what Rexroth called the "mandarin" tradition, poetry based on scholarly erudition. Everson had been a farmer near Fresno, and Rexroth advised him that it was essential to his career that he always dress in farm clothes. In 1947, when Rexroth had invited Everson to meet the British poet and publisher Cyril Connolly, Rexroth flew into a violent rage because Everson showed up with a haircut and dressed like any other young man his age. Rexroth dragged Everson's wife, the poet Mary Fabilli, into the kitchen and berated her for destroying the effect Rexroth wanted Everson to convey of a creature "emerging straight from the soil." He apologized the following day, but tensions did not die down. Everson felt that he could no longer work with Rexroth after his mentor insisted on using the introduction to Everson's first book, *The Residual Years* (1948), as a manifesto against T. S. Eliot's theory of the poem as "an aesthetic object." Everson wrote Laughlin, asking him to pull the introduction, but Rexroth persuaded the publisher to keep it in. Reviews of the book did, as Everson feared they might, focus on Rexroth's introduction instead of the poetry, and Everson felt betrayed. He

withdrew completely from Rexroth's circles and did not speak to Rexroth for sixteen years.[49]

Rexroth's problems with Robert Duncan began when Rexroth expressed disagreement over some of the poets that Duncan and Madeline Gleason scheduled to read at San Francisco State College. Duncan felt Rexroth was unfairly trying to dictate policy to an organization with which he had no connection, but Rexroth argued that a new aesthetic could not establish itself unless its supporters gave it unwavering loyalty. The issue escalated when Rexroth discovered that poets he despised had received larger honoraria than he had. Duncan did not talk to Rexroth for six years after their break. "What is so fascinating," Duncan commented when thinking back about the anger he felt for so many years toward Rexroth, "is that our period wanted a poet to be a model person, and Kenneth wanted to be a model person." Yet at the time, Rexroth's followers understood what a difficult character he was. They respected his work and valued his ideas, so they overlooked his personal failings as long as they could. In the end, Lamantia, Everson, and Duncan continued to honor Rexroth as their "father figure." He had helped them find their voices as poets. Still Duncan observed that "perhaps Rexroth is a father figure if a father figure is someone who tells you whom to like and you never want to read him."[50]

Just as Rexroth's critique of the Communist party in "New Objectives, New Cadres" contained a hidden but fairly accurate self-portrait, "Letter from America" expressed Rexroth's misgivings over the role he had adopted. After 1945 Rexroth had become far more than a poet, or even the impresario of a new poetry movement. He had assumed the role of revolutionary strategist, and found it beyond his capabilities or even his interests. The conflicting demands upon and within him were complicated by his failure, despite public success, to achieve any kind of financial stability. Demands on his time had increased, but income from his writing remained insufficient for survival. He and his wife reconciled, but his economic dependency upon her was a constant source of friction. Whenever he felt that she was trying to use his depen-

dency to pressure him, his anger erupted in violent, physically abusive episodes. To his publisher he moaned that few poets found the "kind of wives" poets should have. She left for short intervals, but then inevitably returned, feeling that he would be unable to write if she was not there to support him.[51] In 1948, when Rexroth won a Guggenheim fellowship, he decided to cut all the Gordian knots that entangled him. He used the money to leave San Francisco, fleeing his failures with colleagues and his wife. The award allowed him to make his first trip to Europe and escape all responsibilities except those of being a poet.

In "The Dragon and the Unicorn," the poem he wrote about his trip, he confessed that the practical world drove him insane and suggested that what he said about the world of affairs was the voice of "dragon," earthbound and scared. He would retreat to his "ten foot square hut" and let the "unicorn" within him contemplate the world and write poetry. He expressed a change he hoped he could maintain:

> Once I saw fire cities,
> Towns, palaces, wars,
> Heroic adventures,
> In the campfires of youth.
> Now I see only fire.[52]

Rexroth did not in fact withdraw from the world. He married for a third time and fathered two daughters. To stabilize his income he sought out free-lance journalism work. He started writing book reviews for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1951, and in 1958 the *San Francisco Examiner* invited him to write a biweekly column on cultural and social affairs. He became a frequent contributor to the *Nation, Saturday Review,* and other journals of cultural commentary. In 1951 he began a weekly radio program on KPFA. His commentaries were often outrageous, scurrilous satires directed at the many aspects of his society that annoyed him. His poetry, on the other hand, projected serious and focused meditation on the juncture of personal, social, and

religious questions. He had to keep these two aspects of his life, these two voices with very different subjectivities, apart. He did not know how to merge the practical and the contemplative. His conception of the private eluded all sense of responsibility for the public. The work of building institutions, or determining exactly how poets would relate to their society, belonged to others.

The "Unground of Freedom"—Model for Postwar Radicalism?

In 1949 Rexroth published his third book of poetry, *The Signature of All Things.* He borrowed the title from a work by Jakob Boehme, the sixteenth-century German Protestant mystic. Beohme's writing had inspired sections of "The Phoenix and the Tortoise," but the later work fully revealed the centrality of Boehme's thinking to Rexroth's.[53] The source of personal identification was straightforward: Boehme was a shoemaker, a craftsman who burst the boundaries of social hierarchy to become a pivotal figure in the history of German philosophy. In opposition to the static theology of the Lutheran clergy, Boehme's visionary work survived persecution to inspire Schiller's theory of the aesthetic and Hegel's dialectic.[54]

In the title poem in *The Signature of All Things* Rexroth presented the illumination that came to him after reading Boehme. The most astonishing thing is how undramatic the event is. The poem's images block the argumentative anger and confrontation typical of Rexroth's earlier work. Illumination took the form of quiescent observation:

> The saint saw the world as streaming
> In the electrolysis of love.
> I put him by and gaze through shade
> Folded into shade of slender
> Laurel trunks and leaves filled with sun.

The wren broods in her moss domed nest.
A newt struggles with a white moth
Drowning in the pool. The hawks scream
Playing together on the ceiling
Of heaven. The long hours go by.

The passage illustrates the inseparability of order and change. The illumination suggests a pattern for purposeful human activity, at once ordinary and necessary and redolent of the work one must do upon one's own soul:

When I dragged the rotten log
From the bottom of the pool,
It seemed heavy as stone.
I let it lie in the sun
For a month; and then chopped it
Into sections, and split them
For kindling, and spread them out
To dry some more.

This simple task is the mystic experience, but since something must "happen" for the poem to conclude, Rexroth brought the lyric to a close with a cosmic experience:

I went out on my cabin porch,
And looked up through the black forest
At the swaying islands of stars.
Suddenly I saw at my feet,
Spread on the floor of night, ingots
Of quivering phosphorescence,
And all about were scattered chips
Of pale cold light that was alive.[55]

"Phosphorescence" might be a metaphor for creative fire bursting within his soul, a poetic use of Boehme's symbol to represent the inner conflict of un-

differentiated nothingness transforming itself into things in order that love, good, and truth be revealed in their purity. The word also simply describes flickering reflection of starlight upon the log lying on the ground by his cabin. Every activity, if offered to reflection, is a key to understanding to the rest of existence.

"The Signature of All Things" achieved what was already well under development in Rexroth's earlier verse—objectification of the subject. Nicolas Berdyaev noted that Boehme wrote of God's relationship to humanity but never uttered one word about his own soul or his own spiritual progress.[56] In his own poem, Rexroth implied but never stated his emotional reaction to the experiences portrayed. Word by word, image by image, he built a description of simply being in the world in order to quicken within the reader a sense of connection. The poem depends upon a subject-subject relation, in which the poet's subjectivity reduces to a mediating factor between the reader and a sensation of a larger order. There was no room for personal psychology in this process. As a poet Rexroth bracketed out his own immediate, personal reactions so that his experience could assume universal proportions.[57]

Rexroth achieved the objectivity of self and experience portrayed in his poetry with a form that stressed regularity and simplicity. In *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* he deployed a unique quantitative line, constructed of seven or nine syllables with three stresses to a line. This approach did not permit him to engage in extravagant technical display. It easily, particularly when paraphrasing philosophical argument, lapsed into the clumsiest chopped prose. Still, the tightness of the form forced Rexroth to restrict the extent of his images into discrete, easily perceived units seldom longer than ten lines and to concentrate his argument into simple, commonly understood language. Despite the erudition that Rexroth sometimes liked to display in his work, his prosody made his poems among the most readable in twentieth-century English-language verse, yet without sacrifice in depth of thought. At the same time, his simplicity and regularity tended to give experience the weight of essence and emphasized order over accident. Rexroth transformed his often

chaotic personal experiences into an idealized expression of spirit moving through the world. When the subject in his poems endures horror, agony, restlessness, sexual passion, or joy, the experience does not seem particular to the poet. By negating individual psychology, Rexroth could create a form of self that represented a generalized movement—not striving—toward freedom, a freedom that grew naturally out of the relationship the self had with natural process. Rexroth's subject was another form of Hegel's *Geist* moving from unconscious nothingness to full self-realization.

The soul becomes a rocket from what Boehme called the "unground" (*Ungrund*), one of the most influential and most difficult of Boehme's concepts. The unground is the dark and irrational abyss that lies outside being. Berdyaev interpreted the unground as nothingness with the desire to become something. "Freedom" is the acting out of this desire. "Freedom is and resides in darkness," Berdyaev observed, "it turns away from the desire for darkness toward the desire for light, it seizes the darkness with its eternal will, and the darkness tries to seize the light of freedom and cannot attain it, for darkness closes in again upon itself with its desires, and transforms itself back into darkness."[58]

If we read "desires" as an expression for psychology, it becomes clearer why Rexroth's Boehmean-influenced aesthetic needed to exclude a psychological understanding of the subject as an entropic twisting back upon itself of a drive toward freedom that seeks to secure the certainty of law. Freedom can never be predictable or probabilistic or it ceases to be free. "Free will," Boehme wrote, "has no beginning stemming from a reason; it has not been formed by anything. . . . Further, free will has within itself its own judgment of Good and Evil, has its judgment within itself, has within itself the anger and love of God."[59] Hence the importance to Rexroth of "the struggle to break out / Of the argument that proves itself."[60]

Free subjectivity required a disengagement from history, from any factor that would limit the exercise of free will tapping its resources of judgment, anger, or love. No social factors, no linguistic or semiotic determinants, no

psychological laws could coexist with free subjectivity. The free self transcends the accidental to open up the nothingness that is its origin. If the self grew from sheer potentiality, whatever form it took was fictional, crafted from the repertory of meanings and behaviors available in a society. By granting universal status to a fiction, Rexroth divorced the self from all causative factors and even from every form by which individual presence became manifest in a given society. The binaries that Rexroth established in "The Phoenix and the Tortoise" substituted stereotypes for causation, while the turn to nature mysticism was an affirmation of free will "ungrounded" in an arena of serious intellectual thought that nonetheless remained outside deterministic paradigms. The philosophy espoused by Rexroth and his followers was unabashedly irrational—but not in the pathological or oneiric sense popularized by the dada and surrealist movements. Irrationality meant nothing more or less than that no epistemological system could *ever* define the ontology of the human soul.[61]

In opposing deterministic views of the self, cosmogony restabilized identity with the possibility of free action, but action that could be only tangentially socially productive. The important goals to be achieved were not in the world, but in one's subjectivity. Disengagement entailed a cult of marginality in relation to social affairs. Poetry that tapped into human participation in natural process was subversive because it elevated the private realm in all cases over the public. Rexroth thought governments could forcibly repress a poetry of disengagement but was helpless to combat or counter it with alternative images because subversive poetry "presents a pattern of human relationships which is unassimilable by the society . . . the kind of love it sings of can't exist in this society. The song gets out like a bit of radioactive cobalt. It just foments subversion around itself as long as it is available."[62] To assert the power of "value," the imagination wedded to cosmic process, was to assert the validity of individual strategies for achieving life aims. The diminution of history and facts was not to dismiss their existence. Indeed, they were the prevailing determinate conditions structuring the field of possible behavior, but Rexroth's

poetic aim was to reduce them to a level where personal strategies were in fact simply possible.[63]

The social reality from which Rexroth and his followers claimed to disengage was the development of a permanent war state, which they held was the result of rationalist, law-bound conceptualizations. Fighting powerful enemies in both Europe and Asia, the American government, aided by most nongovernmental social institutions, promoted values of duty, responsibility, and obligation. Rexroth's poetry was an attempt to transform those values into an affirmation of individual liberty by shifting the source of value onto the cosmos. The attack on individualism that runs through "The Phoenix and the Tortoise" appears to confuse the issue, particularly if we consider the complex ego problems Rexroth carried with him through life. Yet a psychological reading of his aesthetic work that interprets the move toward nature mysticism as an effort to calm a troubled soul limits, however valid it may be on its own terms, consideration of the social influence that Rexroth and the San Francisco poets achieved. We need to examine the social origins of a quest for a freedom that was always specific and finite but infinite in its possibilities for change.

The most obvious answer, one easily supported through analysis of the texts of poems such as "The Phoenix and the Tortoise," is that the assertion of personal freedom was a response to the insecurity caused by the war. Americans believed they were free citizens in a democratic society, but the war showed that free citizens had very little control over the forces that influenced their lives. A government that ostensibly was their creation could take on a dictatorial life on its own to command the utilization of resources, economic and human, needed to achieve its international goals. In an age when the leaders of society have enormous powers under their control, Rexroth suggested that the citizen might require the foundation of the entire natural process to maintain his or her personal autonomy.

This answer raises as many questions as it solves. Presumably the war affected all citizens equally. Why then did poets (and artists) feel insecurity and

powerlessness more strongly than people in other sectors of society? Why were they such a high proportion of conscientious objectors against a war that most of their fellow citizens accepted as a justified, necessary evil? Even of those who did their service faithfully and without complaint, why would artists and poets be particularly inclined to join what one critic in a national mass circulation journal called a "cult of sex and anarchy"?[64]

The answers to these questions are more likely to abide in the specific social relations that artists and poets had with the rest of society. We can advance a working hypothesis: the lack of "minimum conditions under which creative work is possible," that is, the weakness of the institutions through which artists and poets practiced their professions, made them as a group particularly vulnerable and sensitive to feelings of powerlessness.

No direct connection need be made between the weakness of certain cultural institutions and the rapidly consolidating institutional power of the state. The specific insecurity poets felt as poets was reinforced by any insecurities some of them might have felt as citizens. Both their relationships to their profession and to the polity underscored individual impotence, an unhealthy, festering condition in a democracy. The two sources of insecurity formed an harmonic resonance that magnified the sensation of living in a structure the sole purpose of which seemed to crush liberty, or to put it in terms that became more prevalent in the late 1960s, to colonize the private world with the concerns and imperatives of the public.

The experiments of the poets, founded upon the "unground of freedom," lashed back with acts of self-empowerment. The imagination, manifested in its highest form in the aesthetic act, became the most stable source of personal freedom in a world otherwise deterministic and frightening. An absolutized privacy, no matter what the costs, turned out to be the most radical defense against the claims of public order. Bohemian enclaves developed a repertoire of self-images that proved to have appeal to the collective imagination far beyond the limited boundaries of the art and poetry worlds. As feelings of powerlessness spread, the aesthetic avant-garde provided an antidote. A corollary

of this analysis suggests why the avant-garde became a more important source for socially oppositional ideas in the post–World War II period than the American Communist party, which had grown impressively during the depression. Communists idealized institutional power, and their successes came from the manipulation of coordinated mass force. After 1947, when faced with the overwhelming power of the American state, the communists revealed how limited their power actually was. They might have survived had they continued to engage the subjective imagination of those who felt in opposition to developing trends in American society. For people yearning for an alternative to mass institutions, however, the answers communists gave to the nation's social ills seemed irrelevant at best.

But for professional artists and poets there remained a limit on the power of the imagination. The strategy of personal liberation did not answer the questions of daily existence, how to survive by creating work that society could use in some predictable manner. Achieving stability through the creation of solid institutions that would nurture and support practicing professionals remained a pressing need.

As the avant-garde community grew between 1945 and 1965, it remained suspended between goals of personal liberation and institutional stability. The efforts artists and poets made to find equilibrium led to experiments in form, subjectivity, and institutional setting. They attempted to stave off a choice between social opposition and professional commitment, for freedom meant refusing to affirm a single identity or "personality," to leave open the possibility of contrary interests and needs. The immediate practical requirement of the avant-garde was to construct a community of like-minded people who shared the belief that creativity overcame contingency. This would be a community where the distinction between producer and consumer blurred. Poets as professionals faced the need to create an affinity group. To expand beyond coterie circles poets required audiences of nonpoets who considered their reading and listening to be work as creative and restorative as the poet-producer's. Works had to function as emblems of communally shared per-

sonalistic values; performances had to "manifest" the existence of interior reality; "alternative institutions," at first ad hoc and primitive, then branching out to include bars and coffeehouses, were needed as gathering points. Above all, a tradition had to be constructed to replace a history that placed regional movements on the margins. The activity was countercultural in attempting to extend the social existence of small, personally managed enterprise. Opposition to "capitalism" was part of the constructed tradition, but transgressive relations were secondary to aspects that projected personalistic values as an alternative to hierarchy and deterministic thought.

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Phoenix and the Tortoise.* Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1987.

Chapter 2

1. Rexroth to Louis Zukovsky, 10 March 1931, Rexroth papers, DSC.

2. Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 84. Rexroth's posthumously published autobiographical manuscripts deny or-

ganizational membership but paint a picture of close involvement in many Communist party activities in the 1930s. In the 1930s he worked as an organizer in San Francisco for the John Reed Club, unemployed councils, the National Maritime Union, and the Nurses Association. See Kenneth Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel,* revised and expanded, ed. Linda Hamalian (New York: New Directions, 1991), 411–414, 417–423, 441–446, 453. From 1940 to 1943 he worked as a volunteer counselor for the National Committee for Conscientious Objectors. James Laughlin and Morgan Gibson, both of whom knew Rexroth well, thought that the Communist party had refused Rexroth membership and that he had been a close fellow-traveler in order to keep his first wife happy. This is not implausible, but their account does not explain why Rexroth would claim to be a member on his Fellowship of Reconciliation application if he had not been. Another difficulty with their explanation is that during the period of time noted on the application, Rexroth was separated from his wife.

3. Kenneth Rexroth, "The Function of Poetry and the Place of the Poet in Society," WOW, 6–7.

4. See "Proposal for a National Registry of Artists and Writers" and *Material Gathered on Federal Writers Project,* on file in Rexroth papers, DSC.

5. Merle Armitage, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Merle Armitage," interviewed 1964 by Betty Hoag, AAA, 7. Rexroth's assignments at the FWP were to write sections on campgrounds and hiking trails for the *WPA Guide to California,* but as with many other writers in the FWP, his assignments were relatively light and he had free time for personal writing projects. In effect, this proved to be a government subsidy for radical literature, for Rexroth was a frequent contributor to left-wing periodicals such as *New Masses, New Republic,* and *Frontiers.*

6. Kenneth Rexroth, "New Objectives, New Cadres," CSP, 96.

7. Kenneth Rexroth, "August 22, 1939," CSP, 97–99.

8. Proposal on file in Rexroth papers, DSC.

9. This was Rexroth's explanation. It is possible that the FWP laid him off when it began reducing its staff in 1940. There is some ambiguity about the exact date when Rexroth left the FWP, since employment records have not been available and Rexroth at various times gave different accounts of when and how he left. However, the most likely date is 1940, since he took the job as an orderly in order to be excused from selective service.

10. Robert Horan to Robert Duncan, May 1940, Robert Duncan papers, BL. Thomas Parkinson, who knew Rexroth ater 1945, referred to Rexroth's "discontinuous personality." Rexroth attacked his friends for no apparent reason and deliberately

provoked antagonism (*Poets, Poems, Movements* [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987], 261–262). Robert Duncan called Rexroth "Mr. Big Bang," referring to surprise explosions of temper. He also described Rexroth as a fabulizer, whose emotions generated strong physical "memories" of events that never occurred ("Interview on Rexroth," *Conjunctions* 4 [1983]: 95).

11. Interview in *The San Francisco Poets*, 26.

12. Kenneth Rexroth, "About the Poems," PT, 9.

13. PT, 13–14; CLP, 63–65.

14. PT, 13, 38; CLP, 63, 88.

15. PT, 15–16; CLP, 66.

16. PT, 34, 36, 41; CLP, 85, 86, 91. In the early 1960s, he wrote "The Wheel Revolves," a poem about camping with his daughter that concluded with the lines: "Ten thousand years revolve without change. / All this will never be again" (CSP, 21).

17. Quoted by Lawrence Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1959), 20.

18. After the war Rexroth agreed that the firebombings of Dresden, Hamburg, and Tokyo, the refusal to come to the assistance of the Warsaw uprising, and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were "relatively minor [evils] in comparison with the holocaust." But he added that American responsibility for "millions of dead [has] taught us that men can deliberately and knowingly choose evil" (Kenneth Rexroth, "Letter from America," *Now* [London] no. 7 [May 1947]: 7–9); see also "Excerpts from the Unpublished Autobiography," *Conjunctions* 4 (1980): 108–109.

19. PT, 23–24, 29, 31; CLP, 74, 80, 82.

20. PT, 22; CLP, 73. The Amida Buddha is the most revered of the nonhistorical Buddhas. The name derives from the Sanskrit *amitabha*, "boundless light," and symbolizes the attainment of a nature, both physical and spiritual, that is without flaw. Kwannon is a popular form of the bodhisattva Kannon, "the Great Compassionate One." Kwannon has come to represent unremitting love and benevolence, with understanding for all the causes of suffering. Originally a male figure, Kannon transformed into Kwannon, the Buddha that embraces feminine stereotypes. See Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 28, 163, 322, 325, 334.

21. PT, 29; CLP, 80.

22. PT, 40; CLP, 91.

23. PT, 47; CSP, 141.

24. PT, 53; CSP, 163. Note that there is no sense that patterns are imposed by imagination nor of a search for statistical probability.

25. Laughlin to Rexroth, 16 May 1945, Rexroth papers, DSC.

26. Reviews by Harvey Curtis Webster, *Louisville Courier-Journal,* 12 December 1944; Conrad Aiken, *New Republic,* 2 April 1945, 452; William Carlos Williams, "In Praise of Marriage," *Quarterly Review of Literature* 2 (1945): 145–149.

27. D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Poems of D. H. Lawrence* (New York: New Directions, 1947); *The New British Poets: An Anthology,* ed. Kenneth Rexroth (New York: New Directions, 1949); Kenneth Rexroth, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (Prairie City, Illinois: Decker Press, 1949); Kenneth Rexroth, *The Signature of All Things* (New York: New Directions, 1950).

28. Kenneth Rexroth, "Poetry, Regeneration, and D. H. Lawrence," reprinted in WOW, 11.

29. WOW, 16.

30. Rexroth, ed., *The New British Poets,* vii. In a letter to James Laughlin, 5 March 1941, Rexroth accused Eliot and Auden of using "coercive rhetorical incantation." Rexroth declared his own aesthetic to be one of "immediacy of utterance" (*Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin: Selected Correspondence,* ed. Lee Bartlett [New York: W. W. Norton, 1991], 6–8).

31. Lecture notes for the classes are in the Rexroth papers, DSC.

32. Rexroth, "Poetry, Regeneration, and D. H. Lawrence," WOW, 15.

33. In "The Dragon and the Unicorn" Rexroth addressed the claim of the Congress for Cultural Freedom that poets needed to defend American liberty against Soviet tyranny with these lines:

> All the world raises hell about
> Essenin and Mayakovsky.
> Twenty-three poets of "anthology
> Rank" have committed suicide
> In the USA since 1900.
> It is by far the commonest
> Form of death among poets.
> I am far better aware of
> The evils of Stalinism
> Than you are, you ex-Trotskyite
> Warmonger. But it won't get you
> Anywhere to tell me I should
> Welcome the beast who devours me
> Just because a bigger lion
> Is eating somebody else on
> The other side of the arena. (CLP, 235–236)

34. Kenneth Rexroth, "Why San Francisco Is Different," holograph for unpublished lecture, ca. 1948, in Rexroth papers, DSC.

35. Josephine Miles, "Poetry, Teaching, Scholarship," interviewed in 1977 and 1979 by Ruth Teiser and Katherine Harroun, ROHO, 54–55. Miles conceded that Carl Sandburg attracted sizable audiences to readings he gave when he toured in the 1930s and 1940s. Miles and her friends, however, considered Sandburg to be an entertainer and therefore not a serious poet, who by definition was devoted to advancing art and craft.

36. Miles, "Poetry, Teaching, Scholarship," ROHO, 58.

37. The longest-running were *Circle, Goad, Golden Goose,* and *Sulfur.* In addition, Jack Stauffacher's Greenwood Press began publishing low-cost chapbooks. Advertisements and announcements in these publications indicate that another thirteen journals in the San Francisco Bay Area and five in Los Angeles appeared with at least one issue between 1944 and 1953.

38. See William Everson, "Dionysus and the Beat Generation," in *Earth Poetry: Selected Essays and Interviews of William Everson 1950/1977* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1980), 21–28, and *Archetype West,* 132–135, for Everson's account of the development of a performative aesthetic. See also Thomas Parkinson, *Poets, Poems, Movements,* 179. For discussion of the relation of poetic composition to performance, see Michael Davidson, "Notes Beyond the *Notes:* Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics," in *Wallace Stevens and Modernism,* ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language and Performance,* ed. Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981).

39. Rexroth, "Excerpts from the Unpublished Autobiography," 109.

40. See Kenneth Rexroth, "A Selected Bibliography of Poetics/Modern [1947]" (*American Poetry* 1 [Fall 1983]: 65–66), for a reproduction of a reading list. See also Thomas Parkinson, *Poets, Poems, Movements,* 175, 303, for Parkinson's recollections of books read and the tenor of discussions.

41. Laughlin has acknowledged that he trusted Rexroth's judgment on poets "absolutely" (interview with James Laughlin in *Against the Grain: Interviews with Maverick American Publishers,* ed. Robert Dana [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986], 27, also 22).

42. Rexroth, "Excerpts from an Unpublished Autobiography," 111. George Woodcock, who ran an anarchist bookstore in London in the 1940s, recalled that Rex-

roth ordered large quantities of literature for the Libertarian Circle ("Rage and Serenity: The Poetic Politics of Kenneth Rexroth," *Sagetrieb* 2 [Winter 1983]: 74).

43. Editorial, *The Ark* (San Francisco, 1947).

44. Robert Duncan, "Reviewing *View*, an Attack," *The Ark* (San Francisco, 1947), 62–67.

45. Kenneth Rexroth, "Letter from America," holograph copy in Rexroth papers, DCS. Published in *Now* no. 7 (London, 10 November 1946).

46. Rexroth later blamed his departure from the Libertarian Circle on the activities of three secret Communist party members who infiltrated the group in order to destroy his growing influence upon left-wing politics in San Francisco ("Excerpts from an Unpublished Autobiography," 114).

47. William Everson, "Four Letters on the Archetype," in *The Beats: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Lee Bartlett (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 1981), 186–194. The descriptions completely confuse aesthetic form and personality.

48. Everson, *Archetype West*, 107; Sanders Russell to Robert Stock, 23 August 1976, Sanders Russell papers, BL; Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 153–154.

49. William Everson, *The Residual Years* (New York: New Directions, 1948), iv; Lee Bartlett, "Creating the Autochthon: Kenneth Rexroth, William Everson, and *The Residual Years*," *Sagetrieb* 2 (Winter 1983): 57–69; "Regarding Rexroth: Interview with William Everson," *American Poetry* 7 (1989): 82–86. Shortly after his crisis with Rexroth, Everson felt he could no longer live in secular society. He entered a Dominican monastery and remained a lay brother until 1969.

50. "Robert Duncan on Kenneth Rexroth," *Conjunctions* 4 (1983): 92–93.

51. Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, 130–134, 167–168.

52. CLP, 278. "Ten foot square hut" refers to the twelfth-century Japanese classic *Hojoki* ("An Account of My Hut") by Kamo no Chomei. Kamo described the destruction of Japanese society in the civil war between the Taira and Minamoto clans and his decision to "abandon" the world by refusing to participate in political disputes. The conclusion of the "The Dragon and the Unicorn" presented an initial syncretization by Rexroth of Buddhism with his ahistorical Christianity.

53. At the end of the first section of "The Phoenix and the Tortoise," the poet represents a mystic illumination of universal "process" drawn from reading Boehme:

> I see in sudden total vision
> The substance of entranc'd Boehme's awe:
> The illimitable hour glass
> Of the universe eternally
> Turning, and the gold sands falling
> From God, and the silver sands rising

From God, the double splendors of joy
That fuse and divide again
In the narrow passage of the Cross. (PT 22; CLP 72)

The narrow juncture of the cross presents an allegorical expression of the momentary, epiphenomenal character of individual human existence.

54. For background to Jakob Boehme, see Nicolas Berdyaev, introduction to Jakob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points and Other Writings* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), and Franz Hartman, *Personal Christianity: The Doctrines of Jacob Boehme* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1958).

55. CSP, 177–179.

56. Berdyaev, introduction to *Six Theosophic Points,* vii.

57. Thomas Parkinson, in comparing a translation by Rexroth of a Provençal lyric with a translation of the same poem by Ezra Pound, noted how Rexroth's approach stressed the universal, repeatable, common experience within the work, while Pound stressed the artifice and talent of his construction (*Poets, Poems, Movements,* 244–246).

58. Berdyaev, introduction to *Six Theosophic Points,* xix.

59. Jakob Boehme, *On the Divine Intuition,* quoted in Berdyaev, introduction to *Six Theosophic Points,* xxii.

60. PT, 18.

61. "The epistemological steps are bypassed by direct experience" ("Interview with Kenneth Rexroth," *Contemporary Literature* 27 [1968]: 155).

62. Rexroth, interview in *The San Francisco Poets,* 43–44.

63. These points have been influenced by my reading of Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 35–36.

64. See Brady, "The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy," 312–322.

3 Between Commerce and Imagination

The GI Bill and the Emergence of an Arts "Community"

History is a separation, Clay Spohn believed. "I feel that the past, present, future [are] together in a sense—they're one thing. They're part of the same chain, so the past is never dead." What we call history, he continued, is an illusion that people use to divide themselves into discrete parts, but the only absolute he could see in the human condition was continuation. Only things change, and time marks distance between things.[1] These reflections abruptly interrupted his account of his comfortable middle-class childhood in Oakland, California. The gentle decency and moral responsibility that had guided his parents still lived within him. Once he had thought that when he became an artist, particularly an abstract artist, he had betrayed their hopes for him. Finally at the age of sixty-seven, he could admit that the only way open to him to keep his family's values alive in the world had been as an artist.

From 1884 to 1929 his father operated a small advertising and marketing firm in San Francisco. For twenty years after his father's death, old men introduced themselves to Spohn, shook his hand, and congratulated him for being the son of John Harry Spohn, whose talents as a salesman were as legendary as his absolute honesty. His mother, Lena Schaeffer Spohn, had been an amateur painter, talented enough to win prizes for her work in local contests. She was Clay's first art teacher. He recalled that she was an excellent technician, but her philosophy had been important for his development as well. There

was no place for competition in art, she told him. Paint so everybody else could share the things he cherished most. His parents knew very little about the world outside their immediate lives, Spohn thought, but they believed that things of beauty helped people live happier and more ethical lives. The Spohns were not a church-going family, and the arts took the place of religion as an everyday source for basic values. They wanted their son to develop his talents and enrolled him in Saturday classes at the California College of Arts and Crafts, the local institution following the teachings of William Morris. By the time he was sixteen, he too had won several prizes for his work, but he understood that painting was a "private thing," a discipline of meditative self-improvement.[2]

That he might seek a career as an artist never occurred to him until he visited the art pavilion at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, where the organizers presented the most extensive presentation of contemporary European and American art in the United States since the Armory Show in New York two years earlier. The cubist work in particular set the seventeen-year-old's imagination on fire. He immediately started to work in abstraction, hoping to capture on canvas "things that you feel in nature that you don't see," things experienced not with the eyes but with the whole being. He began to conceive of art as a form of invention not to be limited to devotional study of what he "cherished." The pastoral idyll of childhood ended as he dreamed of taking his own place in an enlarged world where painting was a great deal more than "self-improvement."[3]

In 1919, discharged from a brief stint in the navy, Spohn dutifully enrolled in Berkeley to study business. After one semester he dropped out, informing his parents that the alternative was flunking out. He intended to devote his energies to painting. But he was not prepared to sever his ties to the practical world. He told his father that business needed good advertising illustrators, and he quickly found a job designing billboards to prove it. His parents wanted their son to get an education, so they offered to send him to New York to study at the Art Students League, where he could learn his craft from

the best teachers in the country. There he studied with George Luks, Kenneth Hayes Miller, and Guy Pene du Bois. It was not a happy experience. He was impatient with their representational approach to art. They ridiculed his interest in cubism and every other form of abstraction emanating from Europe. Draw more and think less, Miller advised his student. Beyond disagreements over style, there was conflict over goals. His teachers reduced art to formulas, he complained, the six rules of perspective, the four ways of modeling masses, the twelve-step color wheel. Everything they had to teach him was a safe and secure way to achieve preconceived effects. His teachers emphasized the importance of creating solid forms on paper and canvas so rich and full that their originals appeared flat and transitory in comparison, nothing more than models. Spohn and his friends, among them Alexander Calder, had no ambition to surpass reality. They hoped their never-before-seen shapes would take them into completely unknown experiences.[4]

After two years of listening to his complaints about school, his parents pressured him to translate his talents into money: decorate department store windows, illustrate newspapers, they wrote him, anything that might put him on the road to self-sufficiency. It was all right to be an artist, but he had to consider how his interests could be useful to others. He found work doing sketches of the "human pathos of everyday life" for the *New York World*, but the pay was so poor that he remained financially dependent upon his parents. They became increasingly impatient: since he had failed to put down roots in New York, why not return to San Francisco and join his father's business, where his talents could be put to use designing packaging. "I was suffering . . . because I'd get these letters from home; my mother used to write such things as: the dollar is your best friend. So corny."[5]

Torn between the thing he "instinctively wanted to do" and the thing that he "had to do from a practical point of view," Spohn suffered a complete breakdown in his health in 1924. He dropped out of school and hurried home, so weak he could not walk from one end of his family's apartment to the other. Recovered, he found work as a muralist for building contractors

and painted allegorical frescos of the muses for the back patios of California homes. Encouraged by the response to this commercial work, he ventured south to Los Angeles to see if he could fit into Hollywood as a set designer, while simultaneously hoping to interest producers in a scheme he had developed for stereoscopic effects in the motion pictures. Both efforts failed, and he returned home with a new plan, this time to study in Paris at the Académie Moderne, Fernand Léger's school. He was surprised when his father thought this a reasonable proposition. The older Spohn hoped an "adventure" might toughen his son, and Léger's academy seemed to qualify as legitimate education. Clay set off for Paris in the fall of 1926 with a promise of two years' subsidy to complete his unfinished schooling.[6]

Spohn spent two years in France, and later he was quite the raconteur of life in Parisian bohemia. His interaction with European artists could not have been very deep, since he never learned to speak French. His notebooks suggest that he often stayed to himself for weeks at a time and that most of his social contacts were with other Americans.[7] He was disappointed with Léger's school. The master wandered through the studios once or twice a month, barely looked at the work, and made only the most vague observations. Most of the instruction came from English-speaking assistants who took care of the Americans and Britons who made up the majority of students.[8] After six months, Spohn decided the school was a scam to fleece cultural tourists. He rented a cheap studio on the outskirts of Paris and set himself up as an independent painter in charge of his own education.[9] His notebooks from the period contain lists of books to read and exhibits to see. He observed the French avant-garde, but he seems to have spent considerably more time studying classical than contemporary work. Interspersed between reports on paintings he had seen, budget calculations, and recipes for mixing paints and glazes, were philosophical observations that reveal an anarchic temperament unable to escape his parents' concern that his desires be reconciled with financial practicality:

My whole life must be full of moving about quickly and traveling from place to place.

[. . .]

Avoid all bad influences both morally and physically.

[. . .]

One should never be conscious of the means, only of the results; or, never conscious of the cause, but only of the effect.

[. . .]

Mind is the only cause, mind is the source of all causes.

[. . .]

One should not think of oneself, but of one's duty.

[. . .]

The making of a picture should be great fun, if it isn't then there is something wrong with it.

[. . .]

If one lends importance to anything he becomes attached to it, and hence his spirit is not free. One must remain non-attached to whatever he does. It is then only that he can hope for salvation . . . he can only accomplish this by his detachment of his spirit to material things, which he can only do when he realizes and understands the unimportance of that which he does.

[. . .]

Thought, not money, is the real business capital.

[. . .]

Anything you can visualize you can do.

[. . .]

And what is your goal? Fame, adoration, respect, recognition—acceptance.[10]

Spohn's jottings were a curious coupling of *duty* with *detachment*, a quasi-Buddhist openness with Yankee positive thinking, in a way that voids both qualities of any practical meaning. Anxiety about money was a permanent feature of his life, as were oddball schemes to make his imaginative talents somehow fit into the entrepreneurial ethic. In October 1929 he announced the formation of a new company, "Ideas Incorporated, or the Idea Factory."

This enterprise would be a "clearing house for ideas, an agency you might say where people come to get ideas or to dispose of them."[11] The announcement was illustrated by a sketch of a robot sofa that could give massages or turn into a "love nest" on command. A sophisticated dadaist joke? or a serious, albeit ludicrous, business venture? His private notes for the scheme were so deadpan that they provide no entry into his motivations. But in either event and whether consciously intended or not, Spohn had made a statement that the artist's task was not representation, but the trial of unusual, perhaps even goofy, ideas. The artist, by exploring the edges of practicality, would be the person who determined which ideas were truly new and which were simply weird. Spohn's persistent conflicts with his parents over how he would make a living, as well as his own internal conflict between making art and making a living, were temporarily resolved in attempting to define a social role for art that went far beyond making images. Art was a mode of invention even when reduced to a parody of Franklinesque ingenuity. Spohn marks the entrance in this study of another character type, the alterego to the promoter transforming limitations into assets: the trickster figure, wandering on the outside of society, apparently wanting to join but only insofar as he can reveal the absurd heart within ambition.

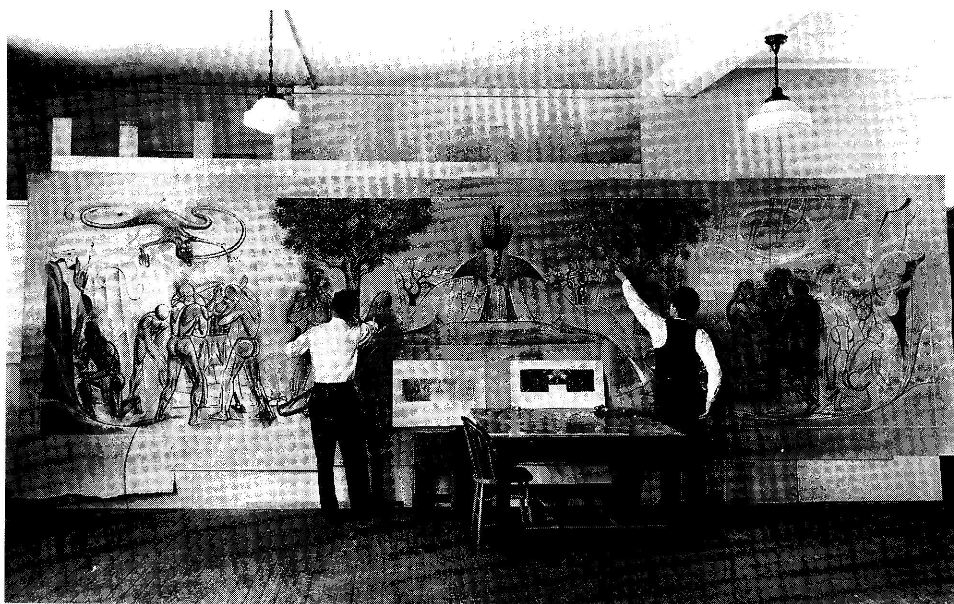
Ideas Inc. came after Spohn's forced return to America. In 1928, as his thirtieth birthday approached, his parents decided the days of adventure had to end. For five months they incrementally reduced his allowance, justifying their action with warnings that family finances were not as healthy as he assumed. He vowed to tough it out and stay but returned home a second time undernourished and on the verge of physical collapse. Once again his parents nursed him back to health. When he was on his feet, they rented a studio on the outskirts of San Francisco's financial district and set Spohn up in business as a portraitist. To his own surprise, he developed a clientele. Spohn's eclectic training allowed him to produce in either traditional academic or mildly avant-garde styles, depending on his buyer's preferences in world culture.

In October 1929 the stock market crash hit and his customers vanished.

His business folded, as did his father's marketing firm. For the next five years the Spohns experienced a tragic unraveling of their fortunes. His father died within a few months of losing his business. Spohn became responsible for his mother's support, while his brother, once seemingly destined for a good career in engineering, became an alcoholic. Spohn confronted the irresponsibility of his youth. His wanderings had overstretched his father's surprisingly limited capital resources, but paternal generosity had achieved nothing. Spohn was talented, but barely employable. He drifted from job to job, and might have permanently vanished from the art world had not the New Deal provided him with his second opportunity to earn a living as an artist.

Federal subvention of artists started modestly in December 1933 when the Treasury Department established the Public Works of Art Program with funds from the Civil Works Administration. Painters and sculptors qualifying for relief could obtain temporary jobs decorating public buildings and parks. Spohn was one of the first people hired in San Francisco in January 1934. Later the same year, this limited program expanded as Congress authorized the Treasury Relief Art Project to employ artists with no other means of support in decorating 2,500 federal buildings in all parts of the country. In 1935 the Works Progress Administration established the Federal Art Project to provide long-term employment for out-of-work artists. Slightly over 11,000 artists went to work for the WPA. Older, more established artists filled the rolls of the Easel Painting Section, which paid them to work in their studios on personal work, which then belonged to the government. Younger artists, such as Spohn, were assigned to the much more visible mural project.[12]

From 1934 to March 1941 Spohn worked on one or another of the three relief-based arts projects. He created murals of California history and legend for schools, post offices, and military bases across the northern part of the state. Spohn was a skilled and frequently praised craftsperson. Publicists for the WPA often presented his work in local newspapers as evidence of quality of Federal Art Project murals.[13] This success gave Spohn some freedom in a program that was frequently frustrating to creative people. He could choose



8. Clay Spohn (left) with assistant Alden Clark working on cartoon for *The Spirit of New Almadén,* 1938. Photograph by Federal Arts Project. Clay Spohn papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

his subjects and faced little criticism of his cartoons. The murals were always representational, but Spohn pushed his style as far as he could in the direction of simplified planes. In *The Spirit of New Almadén,* a reworking of a Costanoan myth for a high school auditorium in Santa Clara County, Spohn abstracted the modeling to achieve flatter, less sculpted figures than was typical of WPA art in California (fig. 8).

Like Helen Lundeberg working in southern California, Spohn did not consider any of his WPA work to be "painting." It was all "illustration." He acknowledged that the job had been an interesting experience, but his main satisfaction came from giving his "clients," the people he met in the schools, military bases, and office buildings where he worked, something with which they would be happy to live for years. He hated the bureaucracy that infested the Federal Art Project. He had to submit all his plans to county committees consisting of local politicians and established artists not employed in the relief

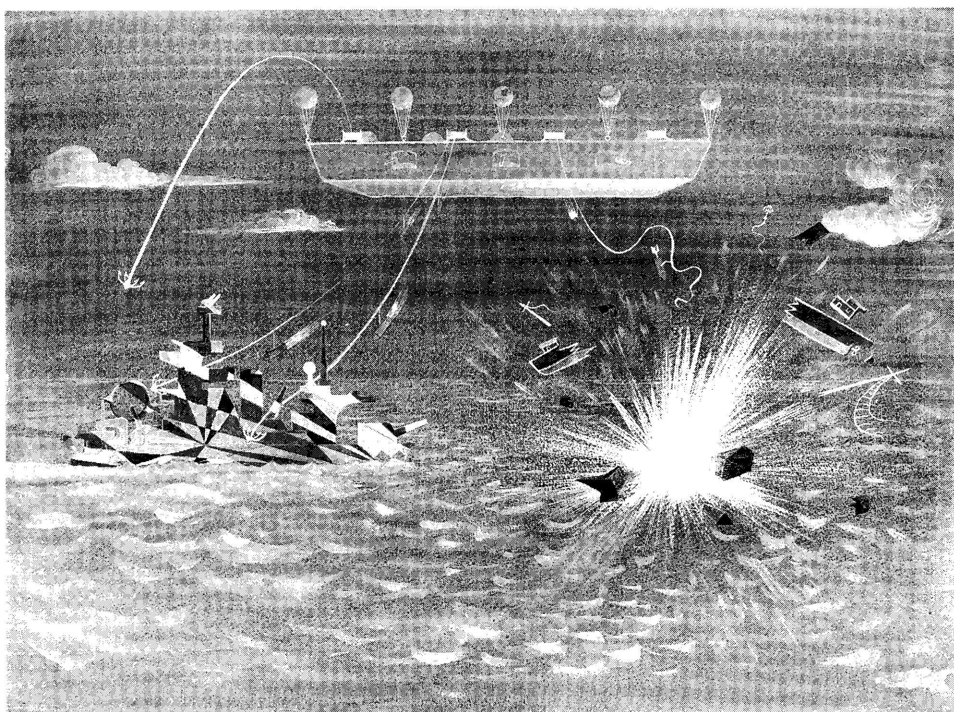
efforts. These committees reviewed all project topics and designs for suitability to community tastes. Once they had approved a cartoon for a mural, any further changes, however slight, had to return to the oversight committees for their concurrence. Bureaucratic process made it extremely difficult for artists to engage in creative give-and-take with the local people who would be using the building and whose input Spohn found most valuable.[14]

The New Deal federal arts projects were embroiled in political controversy throughout their brief existence. A majority of state governments, which appointed the county oversight committees, lobbied Congress to transfer the programs entirely to state control. They argued that appointees from Washington were insensitive to local traditions and tastes. Whether such charges were true or not, governors wanted to include jobs in the various arts projects in the patronage they distributed. Established professional artist groups, such as the national Fine Arts Federation and state groups such as the California Watercolor Society and the California Landscape Painters Society, opposed the federal arts projects as unfair competition. Private artists found themselves excluded from most government-sponsored decoration, a market that prior to the depression had been a lucrative source of income for artists with the right political connections. These groups preferred elimination of the means test that limited participating artists to those who would otherwise be on relief. They also supported transfer of art funds to the state level where they would have more influence on contract allocation.

Artists working in the program had to placate federal supervisors edgy about anything that might offend a congressman and state-appointed oversight committees often hostile and out to prove that federal support for the arts was a waste of money. In addition, many artists resented stylistic limitations. The program was a subsidy for the individual, but not for development of the individual's vision. On the other hand, the Federal Art Project allowed artists to develop a body of work. Spohn admitted that the WPA had not been time wasted because the work had forced him to develop disciplined, efficient work habits.[15]

In 1941 Spohn went to work as a draftsman in a naval shipyard. Despite twelve-hour shifts, for the first time in nearly ten years he started producing purely personal work again, depicting the disturbing images bubbling out of his subconscious. The fall of Paris provoked a profound inner crisis for Spohn. One of his first war-inspired works was the mixed-media *Wake Up and Live.* He painted a life-size fly on a board set in the back of a box, then attached a fly swatter with a spring and pull chain so that a viewer could pull the chain and make the swatter hit the fly. "The idea behind it," Spohn explained, "was that if we didn't wake up to the real facts that were going on with the war in Europe, and so on, we might find ourselves in a bad way. But no one interpreted it this way." When it was exhibited in the fall 1941 San Francisco Art Association Annual, audiences thought Spohn was making a satirical comment on the show and on painting in general. Spohn submitted the work to the painting section, but the jury refused it, angrily denouncing it as dada junk. He then resubmitted it to the sculpture section, which in turn passed the piece to the commercial and industrial art section. After much debate, that jury panel agreed to include Spohn's piece, but only so that San Francisco would be allowed to see what had upset so many people. After two days, the annual's governing board removed the piece from the show because of attempts to destroy it. San Francisco's first dadaist provocation was particularly ironic; it existed only in the imagination of those good burghers for whom culture was still a trivial form of moral rearmament.[16]

Spohn's next project was a series of gouaches, "Fantastic War Machines and Guerragraphs," painted in early 1942 and inspired by nightmares he suffered after Pearl Harbor (fig. 9). The objectification of inner psychological tension might qualify these paintings as surrealist exercises, but Spohn refused a surrealist label for the series. He preferred a more homespun term, "pranksisms." While the surrealists believed that bringing forth the imagination into the light of day was essential to the task of human liberation, for Spohn, the imagination was part of the technology that made America so powerful and,



9. Clay Spohn, *Fantastic War Machine*, gouache on paper, 1942.
Oakland Museum, Gift of Peggy Nelson Dixon.

therefore, made life in the modern world so uncertain and frightening. The Idea Factory he had fantasized about in 1929 had taken root in the war industry; no idea was absurd if invincibility was the goal. In his exhibition statement, the artist explained that war made guarantee of infallible aim the sole goal of invention, and anything that conceivably might fit that aim was bound to be tried.[17]

Spohn's new work brought him to the attention of Douglas MacAgy (1913–1973), curator at the San Francisco Museum of Art. MacAgy observed that Spohn's war machine gouaches were important statements on the war because the B-29 was a more vivid and truthful symbol of America at war than GI Joe. America's victory would flow from the wondrous efficiency of its

machine culture, yet the power of American machinery meant abandoning all pretense to individual empowerment. "The inventer himself is a potential victim. At the service of each side, the machine attacks both," MacAgy wrote in a 1944 essay on Spohn's work. American technology, necessary to prevail, challenged the power of the human spirit and the omnipotence of thought. Citing Freud's *Totem and Taboo,* MacAgy argued that in the era of machines only in art "has the omnipotence of thought been retained." MacAgy predicted that the new society ushered in by American victory would inevitably increase the social power and presence of artistic production. Artists would be called upon to convert the universe-threatening power of the war machine into an object of wonder and thereby restore to humanity "a sense of omnipotence" untenable in the face of the technology society had developed. MacAgy saw art increasingly becoming "a narcissistic adventure," but even more necessary than ever before in history if people were to find the courage to live with the technology their society had brought into being. "The playful ingenuity of these creations gives them an individuality, but of a kind which cannot be mistaken for independence. It appears as a rather exuberant exercise of control over what might have been a wayward monster . . . the vitality of their representation is an effective substitute for the exciting characteristic of self-sustained motion in the machine of wonder."[18]

MacAgy arranged Spohn's first one-artist show. He also secured for the artist a part-time teaching job at the California School of Fine Arts, a position that became full-time in 1945 when MacAgy became director of the school. MacAgy's predictions about the postwar status of art seemed partially fulfilled with a sudden, unexpected expansion of the school's student body with returning veterans. The school under MacAgy's direction and with Spohn as one of the principal instructors became a vibrant center in the evolution of abstract expressionism. From 1945 to 1950, Spohn, approaching and then passing his fiftieth birthday, suddenly was a leader in society, one of those who would alter his country's view of art. Nonetheless, his success has some-

thing uncanny about it, as if it were merely a trickster's illusion. His paintings are seldom seen. His most important work from the period has vanished. His name is known only to specialists, yet his contemporaries considered him a profound inspiration. Spohn's object-image sleights-of-hand show how in the postwar period in America the power of art transferred from objects ("monuments") to ideas, hopes, and memories.

This transfer took place first of all in a special group of students, those veterans who, for absolutely no practical reason, turned to art when they were given the opportunity to achieve their educational dreams. The GI Bill of Rights, passed in 1944, proved to be one of the most important pieces of legislation ever affecting the arts. By offering generous educational benefits to veterans, Congress purposefully expanded education in every field, including those to which it gave no thought. Indeed, it voted down a proposal that would have restricted veterans benefits to courses of study leading to employable skills. Distrusting the process of government rationality, Congress preferred to rely on individual self-interest to achieve the greatest possible good. A desire for self-improvement brought new art, drama, dance, and writing schools into existence, and revivified old, waning schools. Mature artists like Spohn found employment as teachers, employment that, unlike work for the depression-era programs, left them free to pursue their personal vision of art. Perhaps as important, the explication and rationalization of teaching methods may have encouraged them to carry their investigations to logical extremes.

The numbers of students who passed through arts training programs were so large that a "community" was founded, one much larger than the private market for art could possibly engage. It was a "community," in part because the professional basis of the arts was temporarily thrown into confusion. With no possibility of earning a living through their work, most young artists placed more importance upon the spiritual aspects of their vocation than the practical. In this new context, an oddball character like Clay Spohn, far from being simply a maladjusted eccentric, became an exemplary model for a gen-

eration of artists that, like him, sprang into being suspended between commerce and imagination.

Between 1945 and 1956 two and a quarter million veterans attended college-level schools under the GI Bill (65,000 were women). By 1947 total college enrollment in the United States had jumped 75 percent over the prewar record. The number of students attending state universities was more than twice the number enrolled in the prewar period. Even private universities, with higher tuition and often stricter admissions requirements, had record jumps in attendance.[19]

Educators were surprised by the educational choices veterans made. The assumption that their primary goal would be to learn practical skills was overturned when veterans who attended college-level institutions preferred liberal arts education over professional training. A study at UCLA in the 1946 academic year showed that veterans were more likely than nonveterans to enroll in humanities majors and were less likely to choose science, business, or education.[20] The author of the UCLA study also noted that the grades of veterans were "appreciably higher in all groups and in all semesters."[21] The Carnegie Foundation for Higher Education financed a study of veteran performance at twenty-five institutions of higher learning during the 1946 academic year. The researchers found that in every school included in the study, veterans earned higher grades than nonveterans, even though veterans did not feel that grades were, or should be, important motivating factors. Examining background characteristics and motivations to test possible explanations for the superiority of veteran performance, the study's authors determined that, while veterans were more likely to come from families with lower educational levels than nonveterans, both groups of students came from such widely heterogeneous backgrounds that no explanatory conclusions could be drawn from either family origins or prior education. Neither did better utilization of time

account for the veterans' higher grades, since veterans with high grades did not by and large spend more hours studying.

Examination of reasons for seeking a college education yielded answers that were also unexpected. Forty-four percent of veterans responded that "self-improvement" was their principal aim in going back to school, an answer that only 12 percent of nonveterans selected. Fourteen percent of veterans responded that their education was directed toward entering a profession, compared to 37 percent for nonveterans. Nearly equal and sizable blocs—41 percent of the veterans and 48 percent of the nonveterans— indicated that "making more money" was their primary goal. The heterogeneous nature of both the veteran and nonveteran student population makes generalizations about motivations selected from a multiple choice questionnaire difficult. The greater number of veterans choosing "self-improvement" as a goal suggests that many had a humanist rather than an instrumental view of education, which would be consistent with the greater tendency to select majors in the liberal arts found in the UCLA study.

The only factor the authors of the study would hypothesize as a possible explanation of veteran performance was that a larger number of veterans made an active choice to go to school; they were no longer following a predetermined life or career course. "The superiority of the veteran student," they wrote, "was not due primarily to any psychological characteristics associated with greater age or with experience connected with military service." Much more important was "a process of self-selection growing out of a complex of circumstances which included the educational benefits of the GI Bill and the delaying of college matriculation on the part of veterans. Those veterans who decided to go to college included a larger *proportion* of strongly motivated and academically-minded men than would otherwise have gone to college."[22]

The GI Bill profoundly affected colleges and universities by expanding the potential student body. The effects of the bill were even more significant for

art schools. From fall 1946 to spring 1952, veteran enrollment ranged between 40 and 69 percent of total student registration at the five most important art schools in California: the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, and the Chouinard Art Institute, Art Center School, and Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. If only full-time students are considered, the impact of veterans upon art schools was even more dramatic. When part-time, evening, and Saturday students are excluded, the percentage of veterans was never less than 70 percent of students at these schools from 1946 to 1952, and was frequently well over 80 percent. Only in the spring of 1953, as the World War II veterans benefit program wound to a conclusion, did the number of veterans begin to decline.[23] The demand for art education stimulated by the GI Bill was so great that twenty new art schools were organized to offer training to veterans, eleven of which were still open in 1956.

Government subsidy for the arts had shifted from the prewar Works Progress Administration to schools that were in many cases financially dependent upon veterans' educational benefits to a degree that most general-education colleges and universities were not. The subsidy was invisible since it was part of a much larger program that had no policy goals regarding the arts, but it was still there shaping the opportunities for both older and younger artists.

No studies comparable to the Carnegie Foundation report were done of art students to determine their particular motivations. Oral histories have documented the motivations of those who later established successful careers. Some, like Lee Mullican (b. 1917), completed an education begun before the war. In Mullican's case, military service (he drew maps for the Army Signal Corps) was a critical factor in forcing him to confront and define his life goals. As a teenager he knew that he wanted to be a painter. Raised in rural Oklahoma, he had no models to follow for developing a career, and his knowledge of developments in American and European art came entirely from magazines. At the urging of his parents, when he entered college, he prepared for a career as a high school teacher, assuming that painting would be his private

hobby. Then, after the collapse of France in June 1940, selective service registration became mandatory. Mullican decided he simply could not return to the University of Oklahoma and pursue business as usual. At the last minute before fall term classes commenced, he enrolled in the Kansas City Art Institute. He assumed he had only one year before he would be drafted, and in that time he would do only what he wanted.[24]

Mullican's sense of self-determination thereafter was inextricably linked with the exploration of modern art. He "cherished and celebrated every discovery" in music, foreign films, literature, and painting. "It was just all awakening." If he was to survive, he had to live as an artist and painter. Modern art meant first and foremost abstraction, which Mullican defined as the creation of an alternative world. Representation, he believed, limited an artist to interpretation of the currently existing world. The idea that one should paint the world as one saw it was a trap because a representative artist was forced into assuming that the existing world was the only one that could be. Abstraction was the necessary avenue for imaginative freedom, for a full critique of reality and the positing of unlimited alternatives. These alternatives would not yield themselves easily. Abstraction was not simply a flow of fantasy. It required discipline to develop a logically coherent and emotionally satisfying alternative reality, one that *could* exist. The alternate world sprang from deeply emotional reactions to phenomena that presented themselves in nature. "There was a pleasure in doing that thing which did not look like anything else. It was completely the invention of a new world."[25]

Mullican knew that he wanted to be an artist and overcame his hesitancy when he faced the reality of war and its possible consequences for his own life. Others like Connor Everts (b. 1928) had never considered, even in a casual way, the possibility of a career as a painter. Everts was born in Tacoma, Washington, but raised in Los Angeles, where Everts's father was an organizer for the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. Everts was drafted in 1945 and spent two years in the navy. After his discharge, he decided on the spur of the moment to enroll at Chouinard Art

Institute. He was surprised to find that most of the men in his art classes were like him: discharged veterans from working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds taking a plunge to see if they had any talent.[26] Everts's near total lack of knowledge about art made his entrance into the professional art world difficult and frustrating. Every critique was "agonizingly embarrassing," he recalled, "because my work was so absolutely terrible. It was so amateurish." He overcame his failing well enough to win a Fulbright fellowship to study in England in 1951.[27]

Robert Irwin (b. 1928) likewise recalled that he had no interest in fine art at any time prior to his discharge. As he thought about what he might do as a civilian, he considered that he had a "natural talent" for drawing pictures of racing cars, airplanes, and surfers. He decided that he would go to art school and find out how to become an illustrator. He recalled that he had been naive and totally unintellectual, but once in school he realized that imagery itself did not interest him. He enjoyed the physicality of art, the pleasures of surfaces, line, and color. Only as he began to work with the materials did he begin to feel a passion for the career he had chosen. Sometimes the reasons for entering art school were entirely frivolous, even if the final result was a lifetime commitment to painting. Jorge Goya (b. 1924) had been stationed in the Bay Area during the war and decided he wanted to stay after the armistice. Art school intrigued him after he saw a show of contemporary art at the San Francisco Museum of Art, but he also figured art school would be easier to enter than a regular college and using the GI Bill would give him the funds to stay in San Francisco without having to find a job.[28]

Certainly it would be wrong to overemphasize the capricious way in which many GIs came to the arts. Frank Lobdell and Nathan Oliveira had both known they wanted to study painting before their military service. Each had taken classes at a local junior college. The GI Bill allowed Lobdell to attend the California School of Fine Arts full-time, while Oliveira pursued both bachelor's and master's degrees at the California College of Arts and Crafts.

Their benefits allowed them to focus on developing their talent and to do it in the best possible environment, instead of going to a less expensive public school. Lobdell, for one, pursued his studies in a systematic way: after spending three years at the California School of Fine Arts, where he was in the thick of the abstract expressionist revolution, he then transferred to the École de la Grande Chaumière in Paris to expose himself to a more traditional approach to training.[29]

As the GI Bill became an established part of American life, some younger artists actually looked forward to military service. Wally Hedrick (b. 1928) had wanted to attend the California School of Fine Arts after he graduated from high school, but his family could not afford the fees. He spent three years hanging around the school, sneaking into classes, but he could not pursue a set course of study. After President Truman sent United States forces into Korea, Hedrick was drafted. Rather than resenting military service, he was hopeful that Congress would extend veterans benefits to cover Korean War service. In 1952 Congress approved extension of the GI Bill programs. Hedrick recalled, "As soon as I got my discharge, I just knew that I had it made because [enrolling in the California School of Fine Arts was] what I really wanted to do." For African-American artist John Outterbridge (b. 1933), military service itself suggested that he might be able to make a living as an artist. Stationed in Germany during the Korean War, Outterbridge began his career by making camouflage. He did the assignment with such skill that he was soon spending his time producing the base's posters, banners, and murals. When he left the service in 1955, Outterbridge followed the advice of his commanding officer and enrolled in an art school to develop his talents more systematically. Noah Purifoy, another African-American artist, arrived at Chouinard Art Institute only after having first earned a master's degree in social welfare. He had to overcome his misgiving that art was too frivolous an endeavor for a black person. He decided that since it was government money, he could afford to experiment. He would spend a trial year in art school. If

his teachers felt he had promise, he would continue, otherwise not. The whole prospect was a frightening gamble, but one he could take only because he felt the conditions were such that a true test of his abilities could be made.[30]

Accounts of the decision made to attend art school tend to combine frivolous and serious explanations. Perhaps Everts, Irwin, and Goya made their tales of entering art school comical and trivial so they could shunt aside the painful doubts they must have felt about the practical wisdom of their course. As Purifoy indicated, his decision was a "gamble," as self-indulgent as a trip to Las Vegas because there was little likelihood that the several thousand graduates each year from California art schools and college-level art programs could find art-related employment, much less establish careers as painters or sculptors. Government support strengthened his courage to explore his self-potentiality, as if the monthly check were some sort of public affirmation that a purely personal interest might have legitimacy. If pursuing personal desire was frivolous, public subvention allowed the adventure to be engaged in a serious manner, increasing the pressure on the individual to live up to his expectations, to make the gamble, which was his country's as much as his, less risky.

Accounts of teachers and fellow students stress the commitment and seriousness of the GI Bill generation. Jay DeFeo (1929–1989) enrolled in the art department at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1947. She thought most of her teachers were stodgy and old-fashioned, imitators of Cézanne and Picasso. Her fellow students, however, so many of them veterans, insisted on the importance of abstract expressionism as a break with previous avant-garde painting styles. She emphasized the seriousness of the veterans in the art department at Berkeley and spoke of their example as a positive challenge to herself to rethink her assumptions about quality in art. Their discipline helped confirm her own efforts to impose discipline upon her own work. To compete with them was a sobering experience. While she acknowledged that many had not been good artists, she recalled that the milieu the veterans created had been more important to her training than the pedagogy

of her teachers. Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) taught at the California School of Fine Arts from 1947 to 1950. He thought that the "GI Bill people were rebellious and [set to] turn things over, and didn't paint where they were supposed to paint in the school . . . it was pretty chaotic." The veterans were not necessarily better painters or sculptors than preceding generations, but they did not accept the dictums of their teachers. They wanted more than a set of rules about how to go about the craft of art. Diebenkorn found the students demanded serious intellectual reasons for everything. The shift toward art as a philosophical rather than a practical discipline was grounded in the sometimes endless discussions that increasingly engaged teachers and students.[31]

Elmer Bischoff (1916–1991) also taught at the California School of Fine Arts in the GI Bill period. He felt that the students came in with a spirit very different from what he had experienced before the war as an undergraduate in the Berkeley art department. They had a "sense of urgency about things," "a religious character" that shaped their expectations about how art could help society.[32] Bischoff's reaction to the students was shaped by his own experiences in the war. He served in Britain as an officer in the Army Air Corps at a base conducting daily bombing runs over Germany. When he arrived, he had been "absolutely baffled by the chaos and the complexity" of the tasks involved, but "absolutely amazed at the innate know-how that was displayed. This was very much of a democratizing experience like I'[d] never encountered before." His prior life had been sheltered, giving him contact only with people from university-educated, middle-class backgrounds like his own. Never before in his life had he been so dependent upon people from other backgrounds. He was surprised to find out that "Cal, the fraternity, all seemed less important to being a leader after the war, [it was] not really preparation for getting a job done." War service humbled his opinion of himself, but yet raised his sights. If he could expect more of people, he could expect more of himself.[33]

His experiences teaching after the war replicated his wartime experiences

by challenging his basic attitudes about art and negating most of what he had learned at Berkeley:

> Art to me had been an external acquisition, again like getting a degree, and you learned these things, and you learned those techniques, you learned these powers of composing and organizing and, to a certain degree, of inventing, certainly you learned stylistic attributes. And then you manipulated all this, very much like a commercial artist in that sense. You didn't dig any further, you didn't come up with things that bewildered you. . . . You dealt with things you had full control over, you were certain about. You might even meet deadlines, you were that sure.[34]

Faced with students like the men he had encountered in England, he had been prepared for excitement, energy, and discipline. He had not anticipated how that drive to live up to one's duties would affect the practice of art. The push to explore the possibilities and the limits of abstraction came out of a "free-wheeling atmosphere" in which the distinction between instructors and students dissolved, without anybody planning for it, into a relation between older and younger artists, who in truth were not very far apart in age. There developed an openness in which students and faculty freely criticized each other's work in progress, "nobody trying to be top dog." It sounded idyllic, the interviewer commented, perhaps with a tone of skepticism. "It was idyllic," Bischoff rejoined, "but with still a strong feeling of individuality." The only thing to which he could compare the school was "a community of monks, all praying, but each in his own way." And every piece of art was done "as though you're talking to all mankind over the face of the globe. . . . The assumption was made that there was nothing esoteric and nothing secret about what was being done, about the world of paint and shapes and so forth. That this was innocent and direct and available as anything could possibly be."[35]

No doubt there was an element of nostalgia for a lost paradise running through Bischoff's account of the California School of Fine Arts. He recog-

nized it himself and several times cautioned his listener that darker undercurrents would emerge as they plunged more deeply into the history of the school. But his sense of transformation remained. While teaching at the school, he put behind him the neoclassical cubism that he had learned as a student. He shed the pride of being able to say "I know how" to embrace the paradoxically more goal-oriented position "I don't know how" (but I'm going to find out).[36] The GIs taught him that art did not come from the past but always struggled to reemerge in the present, a lesson that freed him to find his own vision as a painter.

The California School of Fine Arts was an unusual place, not simply because of the nature of the students. A singular pedagogical vision emerged there which allowed the promise inherent in the broadening of educational opportunity to achieve an unusually full realization. We must now look more closely at its history from 1945 to 1950, when it became a center for exploration in American painting and showed how the school environment might provide the institutional grounding that artists desperately needed if they were to be productive citizens.

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Phoenix and the Tortoise.* Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1987.

Chapter 3

1. Clay Spohn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Clay Spohn, Friday, September 25, 1965," interviewed by Harlan Phillips, AAA, Second Part, 10.

2. Spohn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Clay Spohn at his Studio in Grand Street, New York City," interviewed 1976 by Paul Cummings, AAA, 2, 5–6, 8, 11–12.

3. Ibid., 21, 83.

4. Ibid., 17–19, 21–23.

5. Ibid., 24.

6. Ibid., 24, 35–39, 41–43, 52. Health collapses were to become a regular feature

throughout Spohn's life. As career pressures built, he was overcome by mysterious stomach ailments and migraine headaches. By the end of the seizure, he had to withdraw from the conflict facing him into the care of his parents or, in later life, the care of the woman in his life at the time.

7. His Paris sketchbooks contain drawings of the originals for Hemingway's characters in *The Sun Also Rises,* people he appears to have known quite well.

8. See Emling Etten and Marina Pacini, "Studio in Paris," *Archives of American Art Journal* 30, no. 1 (April 1990): 24–35, for a student's detailed description of the Académie Moderne during the years Spohn lived in Paris.

9. Spohn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Clay Spohn at his Studio in Grand Street, New York City," AAA, 46–50.

10. Notebooks, 1927–1929, Spohn papers, AAA.

11. 1929 notebook, Spohn papers, AAA.

12. Kenneth Rexroth had an amusing anecdote he frequently recited of getting lost in the basement of the federal office building amongst all the neglected paintings and sculpture that belonged to the federal government (Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth,* 77–78).

13. See for examples *San Francisco Chronicle,* 30 January 1941, 11; *San Jose Mercury,* 2 February 1941, 21; *San Francisco News,* 8 February 1941, 13.

14. Spohn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Clay Spohn at his Studio in Grand Street, New York City," AAA, 64–66. For overviews of the New Deal–era art projects, see William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: 1969); Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Milton Meltzer, *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York, 1976); Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Art Patronage: 1933 to 1943* (College Park: University of Maryland Press, 1966); *Government and the Arts in Thirties America: A Guide to Oral Histories and Other Research Materials,* ed. Roy Rosenzweig (Fairfax: George Mason University Press, 1986).

15. Spohn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Clay Spohn at his Studio in Grand Street, New York City," AAA, 66. The Federal Art Project also encouraged the organization of artists' groups, such as Artists Equity, to represent artists in their dealings both with government employers and with gallery owners.

16. Letter to Mary McChesney, 25 April 1963, Spohn papers, AAA.

17. Spohn quoted in Douglas MacAgy, "Clay Spohn's War Machines," *Circle* 5 (1945): 39.

18. Ibid., 40, 42.

19. Keith W. Olson, *The GI Bill, the Veterans, and the Colleges* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1974), 44.

20. Byron H. Atkinson, "Veteran vs. Non-Veteran Performance at UCLA," *Journal of Educational Research* 43 (December 1949), 299–302.

21. Ibid., 302.

22. Norman Frederiksen and William B. Schrader, *Adjustment to College* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1951), 63, 93–96, 180–183, 235, 247, 255–257, 308–309, 326–327, 352; quote on 48.

23. A year-by-year examination of student enrollment records at the California School of Fine Arts between 1945 and 1953 shows that veterans using the GI Bill were the following percentages of total student enrollment. For those years where records separate full-time day program enrollment, the overwhelming importance of veterans for the school becomes inescapable.

Veterans Using the GI Bill

Year	*Percent of GI-Bill Students in Total Student Body*	*Percent of GI-Bill Students among Full-Time Students Only*
1945	14	49
1946	47	—
1947	57	74
1948	53	74
1949	54	87
1950	53	—
1951	59	—
1952	30	—
1953	—	61

Source: California School of Fine Arts, "Enrollment Figures and Lists 1945–1956," San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.

24. Lee Mullican, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Lee Mullican," interviewed 1976 by Joann Phillips, OHP/UCLA, 15, 32.

25. Ibid., 17–18, 20, 36–37, quotes on 18, 37. Discharged from the Army Signal Corps at the war's end, Mullican decided to settle in San Francisco, where the arts community seemed to him deeply committed to abstraction. Mullican entered the circle surrounding Kenneth Rexroth, and one of his drawings was used for the jacket of James Laughlin's *New Directions* no. 10. Mullican also visited Henry Miller in Big Sur and illustrated Miller's studies of Thoreau and the American transcendentalists. Mullican's closest and most important alliances were with the émigré surrealist dissidents Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1959) and Gordon Onslow-Ford (b. 1912). Mullican, Paalen, Onslow-Ford, and the Venezuelan painter Luchita Hurtado formed the Dynaton group.

26. Connor Everts, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Connor

Everts," interviewed 1976 by Robin Palanker and 1982 by Sylvia Tidwell, OHP/UCLA, 1–54.

27. Ibid., 72.

28. Robert Irwin, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Robert Irwin," interviewed 1976 by Frederick S. Wight, OHP/UCLA, 5–6, 26; Jorge Goya interviewed by Mary Fuller McChesney, quoted in McChesney, *A Period of Exploration: San Francisco, 1945–1950* (Oakland: Oakland Museum, 1973), 6.

29. Frank Lobdell, "Interview with Frank Lobdell, April 9, 1980, Palo Alto," interviewed by Terry St. John, AAA, 14–18, 28; Nathan Oliveira, "Interview with Nathan Oliveira," interviewed 1978 and 1980 by Paul J. Karlstrom, AAA, 30.

30. Wally Hedrick, "Wally Hedrick Interview #1," interviewed 10 June 1974 by Paul Karlstrom, AAA, 13; Suzanne Muchnic, "It's Time to Return to His Art," *Los Angeles Times,* 19 September 1992, F1, F6; see also John Outterbridge, "African-American Artists of Los Angeles: John Outterbridge," interviewed 1990 and 1991 by Richard Cándida Smith, OHP/UCLA; Noah Purifoy, "African-American Artists of Los Angeles: Noah Purifoy," interviewed 1991 by Karen Anne Mason, OHP/UCLA, 17, 29–30.

31. Jay DeFeo, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Jay DeFeo (1) at the Artist's Home, Larkspur, California," interviewed 1975 by Paul Karlstrom, AAA, 13, 15–20; *Jay DeFeo: Works on Paper* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1989), 13; Richard Diebenkorn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Richard Diebenkorn in Santa Monica, California, May 1985 and December 1987, Susan Larsen, Interviewer," AAA, 54.

32. Elmer Bischoff, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Elmer Bischoff, Berkeley, California," interviewed 1965 by Mary McChesney, AAA, 12.

33. Elmer Bischoff, "Interview with Elmer Nelson Bischoff," interviewed 1977 by Paul J. Karlstrom, AAA, 25.

34. Ibid., 26.

35. Ibid., 27–29.

36. Ibid., 30.

4 Revolution at the California School of Fine Arts

Abstract Expressionism in San Francisco

The California School of Fine Arts, founded in 1874, was the first art academy west of the Mississippi and the fourth oldest art school in the United States. The school was a division of San Francisco Art Association, a nonprofit membership group that brought together artists and art patrons to promote the visual arts. The association also ran the San Francisco Museum of Art, sponsored an annual juried show open to all members, and hosted the Montalvo Summer Opera Workshop in the wine country sixty miles south of San Francisco. The school was located on Russian Hill a few blocks from the North Beach area in a lovely Mediterranean-style building with an extraordinary view of the bay, a setting that made it a popular place for high society gala events in the 1920s and 1930s. The school had the reputation of having the most conservative curriculum in the state, with a faculty that steadfastly clung to the beaux-arts academic tradition.

By the end of World War II the school was on the verge of permanently closing. Depression and war had reduced the student body, but this school suffered more than others in the state. In 1942 the school's director quit when there was no money to pay his salary. William Gaw (1891–1973), one of the faculty members, filled in as acting director until a replacement could be named, but the board was unable to find anyone willing to take over what appeared to be a doomed institution. At the end of 1944, the board of trustees considered shutting the still-directorless school and selling off the real estate.

10. Douglas MacAgy, 1945. Courtesy of the Library, San Francisco Art Institute.

Most of the faculty had left by then, only a skeleton program remained, and Gaw, having become chair of the art department at Mills College across the bay in Oakland, was unwilling to continue even as interim director. At that point, thirty-two-year-old Douglas MacAgy (fig. 10) proposed to take over the school, provided that he had a free hand to revise the curriculum and hire faculty as he saw fit. The board agreed to his conditions and appointed him director, effective July 1, 1945.

MacAgy, a student of Albert Barnes, had come to San Francisco in 1940

to be a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Art. His wife, Jermayne MacAgy (1914–1964), found work as curator of education at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. When her boss went into the navy, she became acting director of this museum dedicated to old master and academic painting. The MacAgys quickly became the most active proponents of contemporary art in the Bay Area. Jermayne initiated an exhibition program of young artists from all over the United States. She staged the first Jackson Pollock exhibition in San Francisco in 1942 and followed it with one-artist shows by Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Clyfford Still, and Arshile Gorky. Douglas focused more on assisting emerging talents in the Bay Area. He also proved to have good instincts for showmanship. Two of his best-attended exhibitions were a survey of circus art and a look at the influence of jazz on visual art and movies, a show that reflected his involvement as the drummer in an amateur Dixieland band.

MacAgy invited several painters he had met as curator to join him in remaking the California School of Fine Arts into an experimental center. Edward Corbett (1919–1971), David Park (1911–1960), Hassel Smith (b. 1915), and Clay Spohn formed the core of the new painting faculty, joined in 1946 by Elmer Bischoff and Clyfford Still (1904–1980), with Richard Diebenkorn added in 1948. He recruited the independent surrealist Dorr Bothwell (b. 1902), who also taught classes in textile design. He invited Ansel Adams to organize a department of photography and hired Adams's younger colleague Minor White to be the principal photography instructor. Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, Ad Reinhardt, Man Ray, and Salvador Dalí came to teach for individual sessions, and MacAgy spent three years unsuccessfully trying to convince Marcel Duchamp to come out of "retirement" and join the regular faculty of the school. Old school brochures had described its faculty as "meticulous craftsmen"; MacAgy struck out these words from public relations materials and stressed instead that his teachers were "strictly contemporary in spirit."[1] MacAgy was convinced that only by making the school the

center for the most advanced thinking in the visual arts would it be able to survive.

The dire financial situation began to turn around as the first veterans enrolled in the fall term 1945. By the following spring term, the change in the school's fortunes was stunning. Enrollment leaped to 1,017 full- and part-time students, 350 percent greater than the previous year. Full-time enrollment was 71 percent greater than in the spring term 1929, the previous high-enrollment record, while night students increased 38 percent over 1929. MacAgy noted in his report to the board that, in addition to veterans, enrollment had been increased by "many others who are using money earned during the war for further education and refresher courses."[2] Registration and school income increased annually through 1949, and trustees, pleased by the success of the contemporary-oriented program, responded by giving MacAgy and his faculty salary increases averaging 20 percent a year, while agreeing to all of MacAgy's proposals to expand the curriculum.

Every class was reviewed and restructured. An experimental class in the history of art was introduced that substituted student sketches for lectures. Believing that the study of motion was essential to painting, MacAgy introduced a class in abstract filmmaking. Another class attempted to "outwit prejudice," by having the teacher call out subjects for the students to sketch in quick thirty- or sixty-second sketches. Faced with hundreds of sketches on a variety of suggestions—scenes, objects, emotions, actions—students were to learn what their stereotypical graphic responses to various situations were. The faculty organized exercises in surrealist techniques, but they were not supportive of programmatic painting. They used automatic techniques to overcome the subconscious, not to re-create it. Elmer Bischoff recalled that the most fundamental change in the curriculum was ending sequential skill acquisition. In the 1940s most schools, whether they followed beaux-arts, arts and crafts, cubist, or Bauhaus principles, had first-year students work entirely in black and white. In their second year, they moved on to color theory.

Only after mastering a series of exercises did students put paint on canvas. At the California School of Fine Arts, all prerequisites for the painting classes were eliminated. From the first term on, students spent the majority of their time in the studio painting or sculpting, and MacAgy ordered that studio facilities were to remain open twenty-four hours a day so that students could work whenever and as long as they needed. Students were free to choose their theory and technique classes as they explored particular problems in their own personal work. "It was taken for granted," observed former student Hubert Crehan (b. 1918) in 1956, "that almost everyone knew why he was there, that he would work independently, seeking guidance and stimulation in the discussion of ideas and problems stemming from painting."[3]

In one faculty meeting in 1947, the painting teachers debated whether they should continue to offer courses in life and figure drawing. Most agreed that students who wished to "develop an ability to draw what they see" should feel that they could acquire that skill, but they needed to learn that vision was a more complicated affair than mere representation. Hassel Smith, who taught most of the drawing courses, was not satisfied with that formulation. He angrily labeled the belief that vision had access to raw "reality" "a monstrous superstition." Everyday vision was a product of ideology, he stated, and creativity depended upon developing the techniques that allowed an artist temporarily to pierce the illusions of ideologically manipulated sight. To concede that artists could ever draw something "exactly as they saw it" abandoned the goal of all serious artists to force viewers to forget how they had seen things previously. MacAgy commented that Smith's "line of thought" was vital and asked his faculty to consider the relationship of vision, ideology, and representation when planning their courses.[4]

MacAgy continued training in commercial art and in crafts such as jewelry and ceramics because he thought such skills helped artists earn a living. But he argued that students whose primary interest was in making money would, and should, gravitate to other schools that concentrated on the applied aspects of art. His prediction that postwar students at the California School of Fine

Arts would be primarily interested in the pure rather than the applied arts proved correct. Students continued to request new classes in painting and sculpture. They wanted more guest teachers from New York who could bring news of the latest East Coast developments in abstract expressionism. As the GI Bill allowed students to switch schools easily if they were not satisfied with the program, MacAgy warned his board that the school had to put more money into experimental arts or risk losing the veterans who brought in over two-thirds of the school's income.[5]

Indeed, full-time students were much more likely than part-time or night students to focus on fine arts classes. Teachers committed to abstraction taught the largest classes and had greatest contact with the student body. Teachers with a representational approach, generally cubist or surrealist inspired, had approximately half the students of the teachers committed to an abstract expressionist program. Commercial art teachers saw less than one-third the students seen by the fine art experimentalists.[6] MacAgy argued that the students themselves had made his core group of painting instructors the heart of the school he wanted to build, but he also claimed, with justification, that his school was not based on a sectarian aesthetic program. Representational painting and sculpture, advertising art, and industrial design remained important parts of the curriculum, but subordinate to a conception of art as exploration. Serviceability, MacAgy told his students and teachers, need not be "an intrinsic characteristic of art," but for those who wanted careers in industry and commerce, an experimental training would better prepare them to generate truly innovative designs.[7]

The California School of Fine Arts and Abstract Expressionism

In 1944 Robert M. Coates observed in the *New Yorker* that a new style of painting had suddenly proliferated throughout New York's galleries. This work was not abstract, by which he meant compositions of nonrepresenta-

tional geometric or biomorphic forms. Nor was it surrealist, in the sense of recording psychic imagery, though Coates saw that the painters utilized automatic techniques borrowed from the surrealists. The "free-swinging" and "spattery" method of applying the paint reminded him of expressionism, but there were "only vague hints at subject matter." He concluded that "some new name will have to be coined for it, but at the moment I can't think of any." Within two years, the term "abstract expressionism" had come into general usage to describe the new nonfigurative painting that Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, William Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and a score of others were producing. Unlike previous artistic movements in the United States, abstract expressionism was very much associated with one city—New York—and helped establish the city's post–World War II reputation as an international cultural capital.[8]

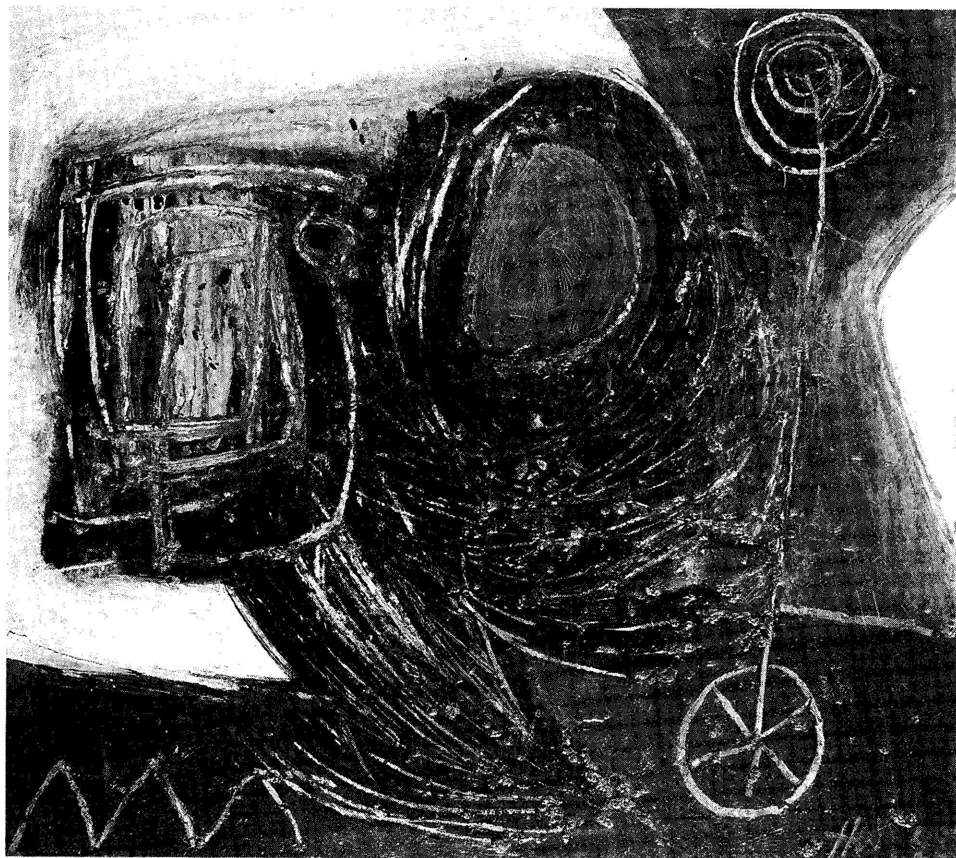
Few artists in California were immediately influenced by the new development. Only at the California School of Fine Arts was abstract expressionism taken up with unabashed enthusiasm. Hubert Crehan recalled that, when he started at the school in 1945, there was a prevailing sense of dissatisfaction with "the impasse bequeathed by cubism," but that none of the teachers presented convincing alternatives. He thought that the break came from a student, John Grillo (b. 1917), who spent several months in New York before enrolling at the San Francisco school in the spring term 1946. Grillo's work, influenced by what he had seen in New York, presented "partially realized open, free forms." Crehan reported that Grillo's sketches had a sharp and immediate impact upon other students and teachers, initiating a rush to elaborate upon the visual ideas implicit in Grillo's somewhat primitive studies. Exhibits of paintings by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Arshile Gorky at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1946 reinforced the influence of the new work emerging from New York.[9]

The San Francisco school of abstract expressionism was derivative from the original impetus in New York, yet a distinctive look quickly emerged as

artists reworked the ideas within the highly interactive environment at the California School of Fine Arts. Most striking was the absence of action painting, the sublimation of image into gesture stretching across the canvas in brush strokes so individual that the act of applying paint to canvas became a statement of self-identity infinitely more transcendent than any images an artist conceived. Harold Rosenberg felt gesture was so central to the new school developing in New York that he proposed the term "action painting" as a substitute for abstract expressionism. The encounter of material and direct activity without any preconceived image led to a "painting that is an act inseparable from the biography of the artist."[10]

In San Francisco, brush work remained subsidiary to other forms of painterly expression. The paintings remained visual projections rather than muscular extensions. Thomas Albright located the particular characteristics of San Francisco abstract expressionism in the use of large areas of paint, organized into splotchy, irregular shapes, a style that precluded reliance upon gestural showmanship. San Francisco painters also favored the use of transparent washes in order to create layers of overlapping, superimposed shapes. The most common colors were earth browns, dull reds, ashen blacks and greys (pl. 4), sometimes contrasted with bright, not brilliant, oranges and yellows (pl. 5). Albright saw a pastoral element in these paintings; mud, crust, silt, and clouds provided the hidden subtext for forms and colors.

San Francisco painters developed an excessively thick use of impasto that paralleled the surface effects that the New York school derived from gesture. Impasto gave a sculpted quality to the surface and allowed for a wide variety of textures ranging from gentle ripples to "tortured" peaks lifting off the canvas. Streaks of color appeared as cracks rendering masses apart, or sometimes as subsurface phenomena on the verge of breaking through and creating new relationships on the superficial picture plane (fig. 11). Painters layered strokes on top of each other so heavily that often the paint did not dry completely. Wet-on-wet application gave paintings a viscous feeling, as if the images were



11. Hassel Smith, *Chrystopramos in Turmoil,* oil on canvas, 1948. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: F. W. Seiders.

provisional and tidal forces were trapped beneath the canvas, straining to break free and eradicate the painter's work in the process. The temporary quality of the paintings was often reinforced by the use of substandard, less expensive materials such as denim instead of canvas.[11]

The most commanding presence on the California School of Fine Art's faculty was Clyfford Still, the only nationally recognized pioneer of abstract expressionism whose work developed entirely outside New York. Born in North Dakota and raised in Spokane, Still studied art at Spokane University and Washington State University, where he taught for eight years before mov-

ing to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1941 to work in the war industry. Unlike most other American abstract painters, Still had a profound disdain of cubism and every variety of French avant-garde. In 1929 he turned to Edvard Munch and Chaim Soutine as alternative foundations for a genealogy of modern art. Still's paintings in the 1930s were expressionist studies of the environment around Pullman, Washington, where he lived. The resolution of the problems he posed for himself evaded him as he spent a decade struggling to rework "phylogenetically" the development of painting from 1850 to his time. In 1941 Still abandoned all representation and began experimenting with lines and colors for their own sake, without any element of figurative allusion. He credited the breakthrough to intensive study of Pacific Northwest Coast Indian art, but unlike others who appropriated Native American imagery and myth, Still looked for a way of visualizing that might help him repudiate the "authoritarian implications" present in the "grand tradition" of European painting, but without in any way using imagery meaningful only in the specific context of Indian societies.[12]

His first one-artist exhibit was at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1943. Critics responded negatively. However, it was not abstraction itself that upset them. Art critics in both the San Francisco and Los Angeles papers were supportive of nonobjective work exploring composition in abstract form. Rather, critics thought the paintings were insufficiently abstract. Still's refusal to provide a clear spatial context for the shapes he displayed seemed a willful negation of the artistic need to bring order out of chaos.[13] For Hassel Smith, however, the show was a revelation. Smith recalled returning several times to view work that was to him of an entirely new approach to painting. The exhibition forced him to consider what he was attempting to do with his own work. In Still's painting the viewer entered an enclosed space ("marsupial, troglodytic, and aquatic," Smith called it), with floor, ceiling, and walls implied, "though none of these limitations upon the space is ever actually encountered." Still's painting, Smith thought, was a "mental bubble" that the viewer entered rather than a window looking at an externalized vision. Smith

was not sure whether this was the discovery of a pure interior vision or of another reality. But his choice of the words *marsupial* and *mental bubble* highlighted the solipsistic aspect of this new approach to painting. Still's painting absorbed the viewer into the cognitive world of the artist. Reference to everything external to that singular vision vanished. The entirely interior statement became universal and established, for that individual work, all possible definitions of "natural." The more a work was a "mental bubble," the more absolute it became. In a process similar to what we observed occurring in Kenneth Rexroth's poetry, Still's approach to abstraction rendered the psychology of individual perception into an apparently universal subjectivity.[14]

It was this "objective" character of Still's work that appealed to Douglas MacAgy and led to Still's joining the faculty in the fall term 1946. MacAgy, as confused as his contemporaries by the new developments in painting, was troubled by the extreme emphasis upon the subjective mental state of the painter that seemed to be a hallmark of the expressionist abstraction sweeping both New York and his school. MacAgy found "authority" in Still's work, a reliance upon an internal structural "logic" that saved the work from the twin dangers of being purely psychological or decorative. He believed Still's paintings were less emotional and thus more directed to further refinement and technical extension than other approaches he had seen. Harold Rosenberg spoke of the painter performing directly upon the canvas, but in Still, the textures, oil washes, color fields, and masses were self-performative, acting out an ideal logic. One of Still's students at the California School of Fine Arts, sculptor Jeremy Anderson (1921–1982) recalled discussions in class when Still proposed that "ideas were souls without bodies," existing eternally but independently of the human realm until an artist through intense concentration caused them to materialize in a painting or sculpture.[15]

In the development of expressionist abstraction, Still stood at the polar extreme of Pollock. As Still's style matured in the late 1940s, color field became increasingly important, and his interests would influence the work of his

friends Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.[16] But even as he himself moved into color-field painting, Still remained concerned with the material aspect of paint and its application. Still's pictures were marked by thickly troweled textures juxtaposed against thinly applied pigments, while decisively ragged edges helped subvert establishment of a privileged picture plane with stable figure-ground relations.

Still taught two seminars at the school, space organization and drawing composition. In weekly gatherings and in one-on-one encounters, Still spent little time discussing the individual paintings of his students. He spoke instead in general terms of his conception of art history. He frequently used biological metaphors. That ontogeny recapitulated phylogeny, he thought, looking back at his own struggle to master the avant-garde tradition, was as true of artistic development as it was of the evolution of species.[17] A model of biological development suggested that no artist could cling to the past without degenerating. Without rejecting his or her predecessors, the painter died spiritually and creatively. An individual grew by facing the limitations of the past. This could be done by attempting to paint in the style of earlier artists, but the goal was not to emulate "masters." Only by confronting their methods of construction in a direct physical manner could a contemporary painter break the hold of "masterpieces" to stop new vision.

Every authority, Still argued, ossified the least creative aspects of a preceding artist and stymied the development of personal identity. His own path had been one of persistent struggle against the traditions handed to him as sacred. Only painting day after day, he said, trying out but then rejecting the various paths indicated by his predecessors, had led him to a successful resolution of the contradiction between the past and the present:

> Neither verbalizings nor esthetic accretion would suffice. I had to accomplish my purpose, my emancipation and the exalting responsibility which I trusted would follow, totally and directly through my own life and hands

> . . . until those symbols of obeisance to—or illustration of—vested social structures, from antiquity through cubism and surrealism to my then immediate contemporaries, were impaled and their sycophancy on the blade of my identity.[18]

He put particular importance on the frame of mind that the student artist developed. Most students, he thought, wanted their work to "out-smart, out-original, out-nervousness, out-blah everyone else's." Craving approval rather than success, they "dig and smear and smudge for the Curator. And the Critics."[19]

Still told his students they had no control over their paintings unless they also controlled exhibition and discussion of their work. With his encouragement, in 1949 twelve of his students opened the first "alternative" gallery in California, the Metart Galleries, which occupied the top floor of an old office building in a rundown section of San Francisco.[20] The manifesto of the group stated that Metart Galleries "was formed in direct response to the problem of bringing the work of the creative artist to public attention under conditions which leave the artist freest from outside control." The group rejected the power of commercial dealers to emphasize the decorative aspects of art as they sought sales. They also criticized the power of museum curators to pigeonhole artists and their work in fictional historical continuities that made sense only in terms of an intellectual argument. Art, they said, and this was central to Still's philosophy, lay outside both commerce and history. "The value of an artist lies primarily in his integrity and intelligence as a human being engaged in a cultural activity." In a final rhetorical flourish, the gallery's organizers announced that they hoped to reach "working people" and that Metart would be open in the evenings and on Sunday afternoons.[21]

Most students found Still unapproachable. "Still had a contempt for the general run of people," Clay Spohn thought, "since he felt most of them were stupid fools. He didn't give a damn about anything other than his vision of some kind of ultimate." Ernest Briggs recalled that as a student in the late

1940s, one had to choose between "decorative take-offs, a lot of so-called Klee-type things and very sweet French surfaces" and Still's painting. "It was absolutely a contradiction of all the rest. . . . I mean, if you accepted it, you had to reject the other, and if you accepted the other stuff, you had to reject [Still]." The harshness of the choice had "a very repelling effect, and yet somehow you felt the vitality and fresh air." Jeremy Anderson felt that Still genuinely liberated his students: "The longer people studied with Still, the less their work looked like his."[22]

A small group of approximately forty students coalesced around Still, while a few others ventured to take occasional classes with him. Elmer Bischoff viewed Still and his group as a "school within the school." Refusing even to attend school dances, Still's students held themselves aloof from the rest of the student body and assumed that their work was purer. The hermetic quality of the Still group was emphasized by the studio that he chose as his studio and classroom. Students descended into the basement, proceeded past the boiler room, and then suddenly discovered a cell more appropriate to a monastery. He worked in a large room at the bottom of the school's highest tower. The studio walls rose up a thirty-foot shaft to the ceiling, where a band of clerestory windows let in light without providing a glimpse of the outside world. Still's situation embodied the principle most perfectly, Bischoff thought, that the California School of Fine Arts was "a monastery with a brotherhood composed of members recently liberated from a world of semidarkness. . . . Once within its walls, the individual felt himself beyond the reach of society in general. Beyond this, for the long haul, the artist himself was seen as needing to stand as a fortress against the dissuading and subversive forces of the outside."[23]

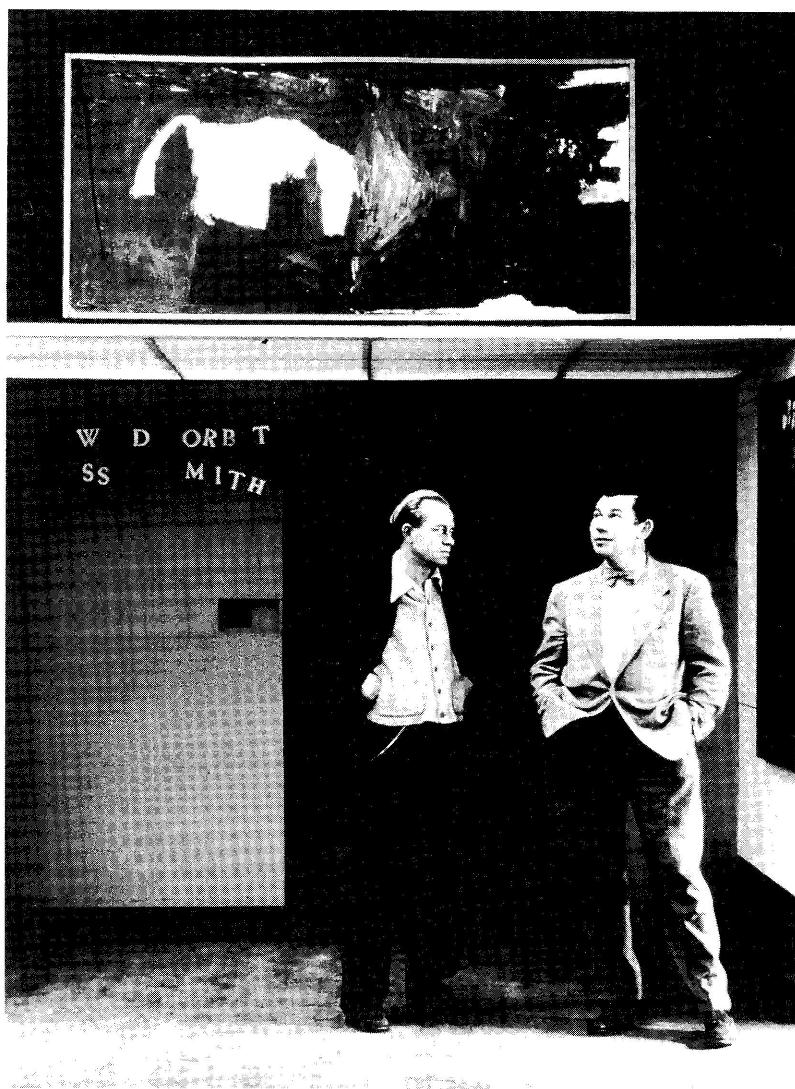
Tensions existed between Still and his fellow faculty because he refused to assume any responsibility for management of the school outside his own classes. He resisted all efforts to coordinate instruction, and he refused to teach any elementary-level classes. He wanted only students who had already determined their artistic goals and had decided that they needed Still to get

there.[24] Disagreements between Still and the faculty led to his resigning in 1948. He removed to New York, but returned to his position at the California School of Fine Arts after a one-term absence. The austere moral stance he imposed on himself required a school environment for support. He despised "the myth of the artist in his studio 'waiting to be discovered'" and proclaimed that "there has never been a time when I was not involved in the art world."[25] He intended to impose his conditions upon dealers and museums. To accomplish that he had to be in the public eye, and his role as star teacher at the California School of Fine Arts provided him with the platform he needed to expound his viewpoint.

Painting as Event

Still's influence on most students and faculty at the California School of Fine Arts was indirect. The intense moral purity of his position appeared validated by his disdain for the market. He was no hypocrite who talked one way, yet acted like everybody else. His work challenged deepest convictions but was so visually powerful that, even if unwilling to walk all the way with him in his aesthetic anarchism, his colleagues at the school had to think deep and hard about what he said, visually and verbally. Hassel Smith, a junior member of the faculty, had been profoundly moved by Still's work since he first viewed it in 1943, but he could not accept Still's idealist philosophy. Smith was a Marxist, and he needed to find a materialist kernel.[26] He struggled with the problem for four years before he began work on his first abstract paintings in 1947 (fig. 12).

In the late 1930s Smith had been part of a painting group that, imitating the example given in France fifty years earlier by Camille Pissaro, Maximilien Luce, and Vincent van Gogh, traveled around the Bay Area painting scenes of California's agricultural life. During the war he worked with the Farm Security Administration providing welfare services to migrant farm labor in the



12. Hassel Smith and Ernest Mundt at exhibition of paintings by Smith and Edward Corbett, California School of Fine Arts Gallery, January 1951. Courtesy of the Library, San Francisco Art Institute.

Central Valley. During this period he did a body of work that captured living and working conditions in the cotton fields around Arvin and Delano. His subject matter flowed from his concern with social inequality, but he had not wanted "to make a social or political statement in the usual sense. There's nothing ennobling the worker." He had wanted to transmit as accurately as possible the actual conditions he had observed. The people he was employed to help were literally starving to death before his eyes in the richest agricultural region of the United States. He wanted to bring their situation to the attention of the world, and his pictures of farmworker life did find an audience. They were exhibited in five cities, reprinted in popular journals and local newspapers, and eventually the San Francisco Museum of Art bought a selection of the work for its permanent collection. But in the end, nothing changed in Arvin. Moral awakening did not flow, evidently, from a brutally honest brush.[27]

Encountering Still's paintings posed another equally difficult but more metaphysical problem for Smith as he contemplated the limits of representation:

> There is a reality which is corporal (three-dimensional) and your approach to it as a painter is bound to be visual and entirely two-dimensional. This is to disregard the devices of illusionism. . . . The metaphysical impossibility of bringing over three dimensions into two finally just drove me crazy. You cannot succeed the way I was posing the problem to myself. There was no way I could succeed.[28]

He had learned that art could never convey the reality of a "corporal" experience. To show people drawings and paintings of migrant worker life would never give his viewers anything resembling the shock he himself had experienced living among these people. He thought his work had been quite good as art, but that was the trouble. His viewers, including communists, focused on their art experience rather than on the life experience portrayed in the work. Under these conditions, Smith complained, the artist was little better

than a "social toady." For the art experience to have social effect, it had to be itself a "corporal" experience. That conclusion pushed him toward abstraction, because the life experience in the visual arts took place only at the point of contact between artist and material and then, later, between crafted object and viewers as they imaginatively refigured the artist's process of configuration. For art to generate a crisis in the viewer, it had to challenge conventions of perception and cognition.[29]

Despite Smith's slow start, many critics—Alfred Frankenstein, Thomas Albright, Allan Temko—described him as the single most influential abstract expressionist painter in California.[30] In part this was due to Smith's role in the school. While Still retreated into his graduate seminar, Smith did the yeoman work, teaching more students every term than anyone else on the faculty. He was responsible for the introductory figure and life drawing classes, as well as painting technique. Frank Lobdell, Sonia Gechtoff, Deborah Remington, Manuel Neri, Joan Brown, and Roy DeForest are among the former students at the California School of Fine Arts who have mentioned Smith as the key person who pushed them to rethink their work.[31] Smith developed a close relationship with southern California painters and actively worked to keep Bay Area and Los Angeles artists aware of each other. Both Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer thought he was a critical influence upon San Francisco poets. He was always ready to sit down and discuss theoretical issues. When talking to poets, he frequently challenged Kenneth Rexroth's idea that a poem could, or should, be a direct statement of the poet's thoughts and feelings. Language, Smith argued, reconstructed experience in a form as distant from the poet's inner feelings as a painting was from the original view. The problem was how to escape the artifices of representation, which focused the public's attention on the artificer's skills, and create direct experiences that had bearing on other aspects of a viewer's everyday life.

The sensation he had with Still's work of entering a "mental bubble" pointed the way to a solution to the problem. But he wanted to keep his paintings in a more direct relationship with the world at large. By shifting

from a biological to a cognitive paradigm, he could think of a painting as an "event." In 1952 Smith wrote, "My paintings are intended to be additions to rather than reflections of or upon 'life.' . . . I can bear witness that my paintings [are] 'accidents.' I see them but I do not know why they look as they do. They are *crucial events* in my life, but the cause of them, except in an immediate sense—who can tell what it is?" He then compared Leonardo's and Botticelli's reactions to the late fifteenth-century Florentine religious demagogue Savonarola. Leonardo tried to convey Savonarola's power by sketching the reformer. Botticelli was possessed, and years later Savonarola's message came through in the style and content of Botticelli's painting. If painting were to have a possible social effect, it could not have any direct illustrative or political purpose. For a painting to be an "event" that is "real," it must have a quality of contingency. The artist uses his or her craft to concentrate the experience of the "event," but cannot plan for the effect. By 1957 he had reached the point where he wrote friends, "I prefer to make something neither more nor less understandable than nature's works and no less permanent than some, and a lot more permanent than others. To the guy who asks me 'What is that? what is THAT supposed to be?' (and, believe me, I am not scornful of him) I can only say in the deathless words of King Louis the First [Louis Armstrong], 'Man if you have to ask, you will never know.'"[32]

Douglas MacAgy explained Smith's developing position as a reaction to the crisis of aesthetic form brought about by widespread cynicism regarding public traditions and values. Traditional art, MacAgy argued, had contained personal revelation, but until the emergence of the artistic avant-gardes in the mid-nineteenth century, such vision also had to serve other, public needs if it were to be countenanced and preserved for the historical record. These predetermined public values provided the forms framing personal expression. The avant-garde began producing art of personal vision for its own sake, MacAgy thought, but still within a context of putative public service. Artists from Courbet to Picasso had imagined that their personal visions could reform public vision. The triumph of abstraction after 1945 had been possible

because purely individual insights of living people had suddenly seemed to many more important for survival of the world than long-respected traditions. Yet personal insights severed from a conforming ideology had no predetermined forms or rules for explication. Hence the crisis of form which many critics took to be a product of abstraction was, together with abstraction, an expression of the reversal of the priority of public and private values.

As long as individual experience was deemed to be a better guide to reality than social conventions, collective values would also be thrown into crisis, subject to constant reformation as people considered and reconsidered the possible meanings of their experiences. MacAgy, like Smith, was unsure what the public value of art might be in these conditions. He suggested that abstract expressionist paintings framed the epistemological crisis and thus might help people learn to live without the certainty of form, without fixed, preset interpretive viewpoints. He hoped the prejudice that art was guided by laws of necessity would lose its hold. Art was a sign of freedom because it was a realm of human activity that was purely playful and often frivolous. Harking back to his wartime prediction that the "narcissistic" role of art would grow, MacAgy viewed artistic creativity as a revelation of human being rather than a method for grasping "universal law." Freedom and science were in opposition because when necessity entered the picture, choice left. As the impact of science upon society grew, so would the impact of art, because no other human endeavor manifested as clearly the irrational heterogeneity of human purposes. After so many centuries of teleological thinking, aesthetic experimentation, if freed from the necessity of communicating predetermined messages, could help an adjustment to a newer view of humans as purposeful but purposeless beings. The public value of art might then be simply to demonstrate that not everything need have public value, a contradiction he likened to developing a taste for walking "over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches" rather than choosing the straight path "with no collateral interruption."[33]

Irrationality and Democracy

As we reach the point where the intellectual figures behind the California School of Fine Arts' version of abstract expressionism confess that they cannot define the public uses of what appears to them as an intensely private art form, the trickster emerges to show that seriousness and inconsequentiality are not incompatible at all. Filled with nervous energy, constantly talking and joking, Clay Spohn was a popular figure at the school, where he taught spatial organization and a class in abstract painting. His contribution to the school, however, is best seen through a casual project of his, the Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects. "The Unknown can't be defined," Spohn observed, "because, by definition, the Unknown becomes the Known. It could be any real truth regarding the Known, for the admission of not knowing is a degree of knowing. Consequently, the Unknown becomes the Known and the Known becomes the Unknown."[34]

In December 1949 this philosophical "prankism" became the basis for a "happening" staged by Spohn with the assistance of Richard Diebenkorn, Adaline Kent, Hassel Smith, and Elmer Bischoff. The Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects was originally planned as an adjunct to the San Francisco Art Association's annual costume ball, but the exhibit was so popular that the school held it over for a month. The idea for the event sprang from MacAgy's desire to make the annual ball something that would suggest to the school's patrons the nature of artistic creativity. Spohn suggested that the event be called "the Ball of the Unknown," in which all would dress up in their interpretation of the "unknown." He hoped that the focus of the event might shift from the spectacle to the process of imagination as "the 'unknown' is in reality the only thing we ever know, since we know it and are aware of it by feeling . . . instinct and intuition and [it is] ultimately the basis for all cognition."[35]

Spohn had been collecting scrap metal and unusual objects which he dis-

covered in trash bins. MacAgy suggested that as part of the ball Spohn use this material to construct a "museum" that would force the party-goers to look at waste in a new light. Spohn recalled,

> I would pick up little pieces of cast-off parts of machinery and then get some wire and a piece of metal and put it all together, wire them together and make an object of it. One had a little watch attached to it that I found; it was called "Starter for a Rat Race," another one was "A Hat Tree for a Neighborly Garden." . . . in my kitchen cabinet way in the back I found a bottle of rice. The rice hadn't been cooked and it had all turned green and I thought, gee, that looks like little mouse droppings. So I put them in a bottle and called them "Mouse Seeds." . . . I gathered up a lot of stuff from the brush of the vacuum cleaner, stuff from the carpet, and called it "Bedroom Fluff."

The dust had acquired a transparent, fluorescent texture unlike anything Spohn had ever seen before, and he thought everyone would find it as fascinating as he did. One of the most powerful pieces was an arrangement of two discolored, oxidized forks the tines of which had entwined. He put the arrangement on a piece of black velvet in a box, an image he read as frustrated hands reaching out of an opulent prison. "Old Embryo" he constructed by stuffing a battered, transparent Halloween mask of an old man with a very long mustache into a two-gallon chemical bottle to give the impression of a little old man with a very large head.

In less than a month Spohn created forty-two pieces for the exhibit. "The thing that fascinated me with the material that went into the making of the museum," Spohn explained, "was the fact that this material was on its way to becoming nature; it was returning to nature from whence it originally came. All things, even the man-made things, having once been things of nature—that is, in a natural state—must again, sometimes, return to nature. Man only borrows them to make what he thinks to be something that is not nature. But

nature, in time, disproves this illusion by reclaiming them again in her own time and her own way." Spohn downplayed the museum as just "a fun thing to do," but noted that the process had been "almost poetic" for him: "It's still the same material, it has just taken another form and what was accepted as wonderful at one point was changed and then rejected at another point." After pausing, he made a statement about the objects he had found that could also have been about his own life and its troubles: "Things of nature should never be considered to be junk or trash or entirely useless or futile."[36]

Little remains from the exhibition. Some pieces were stolen. Others Spohn gave to students to use as still-life material. He made no effort to preserve the work, nor did he think documentation was important. He had demonstrated his point that art was a process of reassembling, revitalizing, reconstituting, and reemploying and thereby keeping an object alive as a product of the imagination. He hoped to demonstrate that the "effect" created the "cause," meaning that the means were the end result and justified themselves. The process of any activity was always the only real aspect of the activity: "Method I always had considered to be the basic and essential subject matter."[37]

Dismantled and dispersed, the museum became a legendary event in the history of the MacAgy regime at the California School of Fine Arts. After all evidence of the event had vanished, the pieces resonated in the memory of those who had participated in its lunacy, leaving an instructive message for many that an "art work" existed first and foremost in the "imaginary lens of the mind's eye," and only secondarily in the object (the importance of which after it had initiated a reaction lay in its possible role as an economic counter). "Whimsical nature mysticism" Spohn called his collection of objects constructed from refuse. The exercise was an early example, together with Sabato (Simon) Rodia's Watts Towers, of assemblage in California, a form that developed into a major genre in the 1950s. Spohn rejected any implication that his project worked in the dada tradition. Dada's purposes, he thought, were ulterior to art, to put across a literary or verbal concept. More fundamentally, he

thought it was ridiculous for anyone to suggest that he was anti-art. While the dadaist wanted to destroy the power of art, Spohn wanted to build it up.[38]

His denial is important because it can remind us that social relationships, not formal attributes, determine the possible meanings of aesthetic production. In California, art lacked sacral power. There was nothing for artists to discredit or rebel against, other than their own lack of significance. The idea of exploding the difference between art and life paralleled dada, but Spohn's aim was to prompt his viewers to see that aesthetic processes underlay every aspect of their thinking and behavior. Life is a search, he thought, for the ideal, that is for the reality in the interior to be manifested in the outer world with the same tangibility that it exists in the imagination. Each person tried to bring his or her inner life outward, just as an artist did.[39] If nonartists recognized that, they might then support serious investigation by artists into the aesthetic component of cognition rather than restricting art to illustration of what was already very well known, such as the historical events he had painted for the federal mural project.

The Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects might have appeared frivolous in 1949, a passing piece of carnival humor, but it pointed to the provisional nature of human production. Nothing was sacred or final, not even art. What was left was a memento of a process of exploration, like a snapshot, only of an interior state. That activity, flourishing in schools, was more deserving of public support than employing artists to construct "monuments" that simply affirmed what was already well known. Spohn's project helped argue the model of contemporary art as a vital part of humanistic education. Given that the arts required subsidy to arrive, Spohn had demonstrated his conviction that the subsidy developed after the war was better for artists and ultimately might be more productive to the public as well.

As a teacher in 1947, Hassel Smith demanded that his colleagues train students to pierce the ideology of vision by uncovering entirely new ways of see-

ing. Did abstract expressionism present a sufficiently new way of seeing that could be subversive of dominant ideology? As Smith considered the evolution of the California school, his answers evaded the question of sight and returned to ways of construction. As the artist's focus slid from the realm of necessity and law to areas of chance and volition, the form that abstract expressionistic work had taken in California seemed to him to result from the peculiar relationship the artist in the provinces had with society. In 1956, after Hubert Crehan published an article in *Art News* that argued that there was no difference between abstraction on the West and East coasts,[40] Smith jotted down notes for a reply in which he outlined his conception of what made California abstract painting distinctive from work produced in New York. First, he noted geographical separation. His own most consistent exposure to work from New York was through photographs in magazines, while he saw the work of his friends on a daily basis. Since the significant aspects of abstract painting did not reproduce, for better or worse, the only real influence upon California painters was local work. A second factor, he thought, was that abstract painters in San Francisco had more "naive notions of surrealism and dada" than their counterparts in New York, but a more profound attachment to the romantic implications of those movements. They did not want to do work that looked surrealist, but they were committed to showing another reality that would emerge from spontaneity and improvisation rather than trying to materialize the dream world.[41] Third, the artists had a profound love for jazz. Painters frequently discussed their work in terms of a jazz aesthetic—which he defined as virtuoso execution, humor, loudness, self-assertiveness, and assumed naiveté—and valued other artists by their ability to translate these virtues into their painting.[42]

Finally, Smith stressed the importance of the lack of an "organized or effective art market" upon painters. Local galleries, other than a few alternative cooperative galleries with no outreach to people who bought paintings, simply did not show local artists who worked in an abstract manner.[43] This, he thought, was the "number one influence" upon the regional school.

Painters do occasionally sell paintings (for prices under $500) but the *possibility* of sale is so remote that it might just as well not exist at all. However hard he may try to create a painting which will PLEASE a prospective, hypothetical customer, no customer appears and in the end the painter is encouraged to paint without any customer whatsoever (none exists) in mind. The "San Francisco School" is therefore marked by its ungraciousness, its positive unwillingness to please. In no other locality will you find so many paintings being produced about which it can be said, "I wouldn't put THAT on my shit-house wall."

Smith felt that the originator of the San Francisco movement was Douglas MacAgy, who provided a home at the San Francisco Museum of Art and then at the California School of Fine Arts where artists could explore their conceptions as if they were important even if they had no customers. Museum and school could provide an adequate counterpoint to the marketplace if directed by people who were interested in art as a source of new ideas.[44]

Elmer Bischoff likewise pointed to the lack of a market to explain features of California abstraction. "You fully expected that your paintings would just pile up in your studio, your sculpture would just pile up in the backyard," he commented. The result was that "your own appreciation and the appreciation of a few colleagues, that was it, that was the end." Since the work existed only for exchange of ideas, the crafting of work was often careless. The immediate purposes did not require the very best paints, or even care in composition. The idea a painting expressed was always provisional, so an artist might decide to leave a piece half-finished once the drift of an effect became clear. Artists were tempted to be easy on themselves, moving on and trying something new without necessarily stopping to explore the full consequences of any one idea. The result, Bischoff thought, was that abstract expressionism in California became effect-oriented and insufficiently thought through, a fashion rather than a method of investigation. The interior quality of the work became superficial, and thus a break with abstraction had to occur earlier in San

Francisco than it did in New York. This argument was part of Bischoff's explanation for his decision to return to figurative painting in 1952. To reground his work in a disciplined manner, he had to return to things that existed outside of himself and begin to speak of relationships again.[45]

The explanations that these artists constructed for themselves on how the absence of a market for serious painting shaped the development of their work bears deeper examination. Certainly, compared to New York, there were virtually no venues for exhibition and sale: the Lucien Labaudt Gallery in San Francisco and Hazel Solomon's gallery across the bay in the industrial, oil-refinery suburb of Richmond were the only two commercial galleries between 1950 and 1956 that exhibited abstract paintings. Still, lack of market relationships tells only half the story. By 1952 the well-publicized and well-attended annual San Francisco Art Association show was dominated by abstraction, and artists exhibiting in it could sell directly to the public.[46] The San Francisco Museum of Art, under the direction of Grace McCann Morley, remained sympathetic and supportive of the new work, giving frequent exhibitions and purchasing work for the museum's permanent collection. Even daily newspaper critics embraced abstract expressionism, if for no other reason than such local developments could dispel persistent fears that California was indeed an out-of-the-way corner of world culture. In 1950, when the third Clyfford Still one-artist show was held in San Francisco, Alfred Frankenstein asked Still's student Hubert Crehan to write the review for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, guaranteeing a serious if hagiographic explanation.[47] Erle Loran, chair of the art department at Berkeley and initially an opponent of abstract expressionism, writing in *Art News* in 1950, favorably compared the San Francisco movement to the French impressionists as a group movement collectively exploring a new trend in painting.[48] Abstract expressionism gained public acceptance in those areas around which the art world was structured. Galleries ignored the new art, but in California at that time they were not as important players in determining aesthetic attitudes as public institutions. When artists spoke of painting or sculpting only for their friends, that

audience nonetheless constituted a network of relationships that involved exhibitions, publications, teaching positions, and other rewards that made it possible for a person to say, "I am an artist."

The absence of a market, which we should not confuse with absence of institutional infrastructure, did give artists an option of retreating from the immediate public eye and concentrating on their "investigations." In 1951 Frank Lobdell announced that he would have no exhibitions for at least five years while he proceeded to work intensely in his studio. He broke his self-imposed public silence in 1955 by agreeing to Grace McCann Morley's request that he participate in the American pavilion she organized for the 1955 São Paulo Biennial, but he avoided other opportunities to exhibit until his 1959 one-artist show at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles.[49] Retreat did not mean that nobody saw his work; his friends, those who needed to see the directions he was testing, were able to come to his studio, observe, and discuss. But there was no need for Lobdell to time his development according to a schedule of public exhibitions, required by both artist and dealer to maintain overhead. The school setting provided an alternative to the commercial gallery, and San Francisco painters believed it gave them more personal honesty (pl. 6).

Clyfford Still told his students that painting was always a statement of personal morals, expressed both in the object and in the conditions surrounding the display of the object. Either the artist was independent or compromised. Writing in 1948 to Betty Parsons, his New York dealer, Still insisted that she not show his work to anybody who lacked insight into the aesthetic and moral values Still proposed in his paintings. He demanded that she prevent anybody from writing about his paintings without his explicit permission. In particular, he did not want either the influential critic Clement Greenberg or Alfred Barr from the Museum of Modern Art to have any access whatsoever to view his work because in Still's opinion they had proven themselves capable only of imbecilities.[50] In 1952 Still announced that he would no longer allow his paintings to be exhibited unless he controlled the conditions of their exhi-

bition, including placement, lighting, and access to the work by critics. His work disappeared completely from public view until 1959, but his international reputation provided him with some protection. Collectors and curators came to his door, increasingly prepared to accede to his demands.

But what about younger artists who were influenced by his example but known only to each other and the small arts communities of California? In their case, an anticommercial position had little meaning as a tactical position, and so it deepened into an existential condition. What are we to make of Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick deciding not to attend the opening of *Sixteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1959? This was the first exhibition of their work outside California, and it was a major show, the exhibition that established international reputations for Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Frank Stella. Hedrick and DeFeo did not have the money for a trip to New York, but they did not think their presence at the museum would be important in any event and might distract attention from their work. Either critics liked their work or they did not, and the presence of the artists should be irrelevant to an honest qualitative reaction. In recalling this episode, Hedrick went on to comment more generally that museums seemed interested in his work only when he had already moved on to another set of problems and the benefits he might get from a public show were reduced to "a little money."[51] The stance of a fiercely independent investigator developed in a provincial environment made little sense when that artist entered a more developed world. Their art might not have been provincial, but their self-image was.

It was an image in generalized opposition to any concentration of power. Jorge Goya, a student at the California School of Fine Arts in the MacAgy period, recalled that Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko were "dead set against French painting. . . . So they yakked, yakked, yakked against it and the students picked up this opposition to something . . . but it wasn't French painting." Goya could not specify what the opposition attached itself to. When he tried to be more specific, he lapsed into his perception of West Coast abstrac-

tion as an expression of childlike emotions: "All kinds of strange childhood haunts and fantasies got into the painting." Antiprofessionalism rose to take pride, as Gordon Cook did, in the fact that people on the West Coast were not "in any sense technically equipped to be artists, or talented in the historical sense to make art," yet there were so many "total clubfoots, who make marvelous works of art."[52]

Was private vision irresponsible solipsism or genuine effort to carve a place for inner feelings in the public realm? Both aspects were always present, in unstable tension with each other. Only by examining how the ideas embodied in the work functioned in specific situations can we determine the historical meaning of an aesthetics based on private values. The public role art played depended on the uses people made of their interpretations. The conflict between public and private values that Smith, MacAgy, and Still each in their own way identified as the source of abstract expressionism was particularly acute in California, where artists were absolutely dependent upon the public sector for recognition and support. That support was predicated on the public values of education. Could a purely interior vision, which moreover refused to specify any consequences resulting from its interaction with the world, find justification, and not simply a home, within an educational context? Douglas MacAgy had said yes, but in 1950 his conception of the art school as an experimental center was challenged. Perhaps, his board of trustees questioned, public institutions needed to be more directly responsible to social needs.

Abstraction versus Design

As early as March 1948, trustees of the California School of Fine Arts began to worry about the fate of their school when the GI Bill expired at the end of 1956. In June the board discussed options for adjusting to a future without students backed by government funding. All agreed that the school would

need to reduce the number of classes sharply, but debate followed over the areas where cuts would best be applied. MacAgy argued that the fine arts program in painting and sculpture should be maintained without cuts as long as possible, while a slight majority on the board felt that advertising, commercial art, and industrial design courses were likely to attract new students. A person paying tuition out of pocket was more likely to want employable skills at the completion of schooling. For those on the board who took a practical position, many of the new courses MacAgy's faculty had developed in the fine arts were luxuries that would have to be canceled. This discussion began a seven-year-long controversy over the school's direction.[53]

Much of this debate was to be expressed in contesting evaluations of the Bauhaus approach to arts education. The famous Bauhaus school had been founded in 1906 as the Grand Ducal School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar, Germany. The school was not a fine arts academy, but a technical school, focused on product design, architecture, and the manual arts. Emphasis shifted from handcraftwork to design for machine-tooled mass production when the architect Walter Gropius became director in 1919. He gave the school its new official name of the Bauhaus (House of Construction) to mark the centrality of architecture as the primary art form of the twentieth century. Gropius proclaimed that his new school would "create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist."[54]

Gropius thought that painting was an obsolete art form that would be replaced by a higher form of environmental decoration. He abolished studio courses in favor of theoretical classes examining optical effects generated by color, line, and mass. Bauhaus-style products were logically determined by the requirements of function, materials, tools, and efficiency, combined with testing of the psychology of perception to achieve a product that was entirely rational in the principles of design, construction, and function. Under Gropius, the school was more than a technical school. It aspired to re-create the humanist tradition in terms relevant to an increasingly technological society.

The work methods and product prototypes developed at the Bauhaus were to spread throughout industry and revolutionize not only design but the manner in which people lived.

Because the school served the future interests of all society, Gropius opposed both production for luxury and individual expression. In 1922 Gropius dismissed the mystic Johannes Itten as director of education because Itten overemphasized the importance of subjective creativity. He admonished Itten that "what is important is to combine the creative activity of the individual with the broad practical work of the world!" Living within good design principles would promote the "transformation of the whole life and the whole of inner man," Gropius told his students as he moved to rationalize the school's pedagogical efforts. Product design would be the source of an "architectonic" order that united the inner and the outer lives of human beings in a uncontradictory whole. The school's faculty and students would be "pioneers of simplicity," combatting the waste of luxury by finding an aesthetically pleasing but "simple form for all life's necessities."[55]

After the Nazis came to power in 1933, many of the Bauhaus's teachers and students fled Germany and eventually settled in the United States. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe taught at the Illinois Institute of Technology and established a private practice in Chicago, where he built his famous Lake Shore Towers. Walter Gropius joined the school of architecture at Harvard University in 1938 and also started a private practice, The Architecture Collective, that designed housing tracts, shopping centers, school buildings, and office complexes. Josef Albers directed the art department at Black Mountain College and then moved to the studio art program at Yale University. Other former Bauhaus personnel assumed leadership of the Rhode Island School of Design, the art department at Brooklyn College, and Harvard University's fine arts department. In 1940 Walter Paepcke, chairman of the Container Corporation of America, funded László Mohóly-Nágy's Institute of Design in Chicago. This private, nonaccredited school was the closest attempt to emulate Bauhaus structure and curriculum in the United States. "What we

need," Mohóly-Nágy had written in 1925, "is . . . a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing *Gesamtwerk* (life) which abolishes all isolation in which *all individual* accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a *universal* necessity."[56]

Mohóly-Nágy's formulation suggests a lurking totalitarian dream underneath the global idealism, for the abolition of "isolation" might very well mean the end of private choice. Neither the idealism nor the totalitarianism impulse translated very well when Bauhaus principles came to the United States. The Bauhaus school in Germany had been a state-funded institution, founded to strive for innovative research that prodded and stimulated new activities in both the private and public sectors. The ideal of the total community that moved through the Bauhaus's work provided an element of indeterminacy, as there was no agreement, nor could there be short of dictatorship, as to the needs of the "total community." In the United States, however, such a program altered as it entered schools dependent upon grants from private corporations. The total community shrank to one segment with relatively predetermined needs. Corporate sponsors, as at the Chicago Institute of Design, did not presume to direct curriculum, but funding flowed from an expectation that students suitably trained for the needs of modern corporations would graduate and find their way into the job market. Attention shifted from the research laboratory ideal to the production of students with definable and measurable skills.[57]

MacAgy feared that the American version of the Bauhaus model turned schools into "laboratories of design for industry." But even if the Bauhaus in America could have reproduced the idealism of the original German school, MacAgy fundamentally disagreed with Gropius's conception of the function of art and the art school. "Exclusive attention in this direction may invalidate the creative function" of the art school, MacAgy warned his colleagues in San Francisco. "If the study of art is to be considered in relation to the full resources of personality, it must be admitted that current forms of industrial product appeal only to some of these resources. It follows that a school deals

with this fraction of personality to the degree in which it concerns itself with such forms."[58] MacAgy wanted to emphasize art that grew out of its own independent existence, not limited in any way by "serviceability." The idea of an architectonic order linking inner and outer lives ran in the opposite direction of a group that wanted to establish a place for the irrational, understood in a philosophical sense as a state of being not reducible to any system of explanation. Instead of order in human life, MacAgy and his colleagues hoped to introduce a place for chance and the mysterious. They rejected the concept that an ideal order was possible, or even to the benefit of humanity.

MacAgy presented his philosophy most cogently at a talk given at the annual meeting of the National Association of Schools of Design in 1949. He wished to counter ideas that the distinction between fine and commercial art had no place in a democratic society and that the best way to bring art to the public was to subsume the fine arts into commercial art. In this viewpoint, the proper place for Mondrian's work was on a Kleenex container and democracy in the arts would be achieved when the drugstore had replaced the museum as the locus for society's most important visual images. MacAgy was not opposed to improving the quality of commercial design, but he did not want to see utilitarian goals become a limit. Advanced-guard experiments could feed commercial art, but such benefits would come naturally as byproducts of expanding visual imagination.

After several explicit criticisms of the Bauhaus school, MacAgy argued that too many art educators in the United States had encouraged this attitude by placing excessive emphasis on plastic form and sensory experience and by neglecting problems of meaning. The visual form of advertising art and a painting might sometimes be similar, but the communicative message contained in commercial packaging derived, he claimed, from a "coercive" effort to increase sales. The effort often failed, but the visual design was subjected to a formula, "A plus B produces C," commodity plus package produces sales. Fine art, MacAgy acknowledged, may also be coercive, and he pointed to the social comment of Ben Shahn and the "admonitory surrealism" of René Ma-

gritte as examples of contemporary art with well-defined messages. Yet he felt that the appeal of Shahn's and Magritte's paintings was not exhausted by their overt messages. In fine art, communication was always uncertain: "Because these 'poetic' resources of the mind can't be circumscribed like units in a production line, they don't lend themselves to manipulation in conventional causal sequences. Rhetorical controls are subject to unknown motives—to hazard and miracle." Inability to predict what the full statement of a piece will be makes experimentation the hallmark of fine art.

The Bauhaus blending of fine and commercial art, MacAgy argued, would lead to a resurrection of the nineteenth-century French École des Beaux Arts, which judged art with arbitrary and limited, because knowable, standards, the universality of which would be derived from a narrow interpretation of psychological science. Academic training had the advantage for educators that students "could be led through a series of commonly understood steps to a predetermined goal. Deviations from established norms could easily be seen and duly punished, while competent conformity could as easily be selected for reward." To make sure that his audience did not misunderstood his position that an academic art could only be antidemocratic, he cited Machiavelli's dictum that "Government is nothing but keeping subjects in such a posture as that they may have no will, or power, to offend you." The canons of a Bauhaus-inspired art as applied in the United States would be "those of salesmanship and industrial efficiency." Instead of art being a mode of experimentation whereby the limits of psychology were constantly tested and expanded, an art philosophy that sought to eliminate the distinction between experimental and commercial expression would function to limit understanding of human potentiality to those aspects most convenient for the groups in American society with the most power.[59]

MacAgy struck a theme we have seen before motivating Kenneth Rexroth, Lorser Feitelson, and Helen Lundeberg: art becomes a vehicle for human liberation when it escapes the requirement of representing a canon of preconceived values and ideas. Only as art becomes experimental and problematic

can it begin to play an active role in promoting democracy. It accomplishes this by providing a counterbalance to propaganda and commercial manipulation. Without in any way being anti–"free market," MacAgy nonetheless expressed a philosophy hostile to exorbitant dominance by wealth and commerce upon culture or education. Against a utilitarian perspective, he posed the ideal of a philosophically inspired school, providing an environment for group exploration of a common set of basic problems without regard for their immediate practical import, but which would have a more general social benefit of helping to create a system of checks and balances for civil society.

As discussion about the school's future progressed, faculty members organized to defend their own interests. In August 1949 the faculty sent a letter to the board of trustees demanding that the school raise salaries to University of California levels and that the school introduce a tenure system guaranteeing job security to senior faculty. While the faculty had prospered during the boom years, they feared that future cuts would be made at their expense and, therefore, in the quality of instruction.[60]

MacAgy supported the faculty and warned his board that only by committing to the philosophy of instruction he had developed would the school maintain its record attendance levels. Serious students wanted a faculty that was truly full-time, who pursued their artistic investigations and their teaching simultaneously. But recognizing the uncertainty of the school's finances with the wind-down of the GI Bill, he proposed developing a core faculty of ten to thirteen individuals capable of teaching all aspects of the curriculum. The core faculty would have the same pay and working conditions as university professors, while adjunct instructors could be brought in to augment offerings as finances permitted. With this plan MacAgy stated he believed he could complete the transformation of the California School of Fine Arts.[61]

The board sat on MacAgy's proposal, and in May 1950 he suddenly resigned, citing as his reason a desire to return to curating exhibitions and writing about contemporary art.[62] Hassel Smith reported later that MacAgy had told him personally he quit because the trustees had refused to add Marcel

Duchamp to the faculty, the first time the trustees vetoed a MacAgy proposal for the school.[63] In 1972, when asked about this, MacAgy laughed and admitted that such a turn of events would have made a "great terminus" to the story, but he did not know how such a "rumor" had started. MacAgy had spent several years trying to convince Duchamp to come out of seclusion and join the faculty in San Francisco, but there is no evidence in the board minutes that MacAgy ever made a specific request for an additional faculty position. MacAgy knew that the school could not avoid cutbacks of some sort, and he admitted that he began to worry about how well his conception of an art program would function in reduced circumstances. He wondered if the board of trustees might not be right and that, with the end of the veterans educational benefits, art schools would return to their traditional student bodies: "throngs of girls who can't make college and want to mark time while they look for husbands" or academic painters "who would trade being artists for being teachers when the cards are down." He came to the conclusion that the postwar situation was unique because government funding had encouraged an unusual group of students to enter an environment normally out of bounds to them.[64]

MacAgy left the California School of Fine Arts to work as a special consultant to the Museum of Modern Art investigating the possibility of opening a West Coast branch. After his wife Jermayne began to work with the de Menil family in Houston, curating shows of their collection of twentieth-century art, the MacAgys moved to Texas, where Douglas became the director of the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts. He would continue to have a prominent museum career. In 1968 he became director of exhibitions for the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1972 he joined the staff of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., as chief curator, a position he held until his death in 1973.

For his replacement at the California School of Fine Arts, the trustees selected Ernest Mundt, a sculptor on the faculty. Mundt was a German émigré trained as an architect before he came to the United States in 1939. MacAgy

had hired him in 1948 so that students at the school might be exposed to Bauhaus principles. Faculty and students interpreted Mundt's selection as a repudiation of MacAgy's vision of the school and an attempt to transform the institution into a training school for advertising and industry. Mundt stated he would maintain an independent fine arts program, but he wanted the curriculum to put greater emphasis upon design principles, applicable to either fine or commercial art, as the circumstances warranted.

In a 1952 speech to the San Francisco Art Association in conjunction with the association's annual show, Mundt criticized the "neoromantic" art so prevalent in the exhibition. He acknowledged that such work was a "thorn in the flesh of complacency, the bad conscience of a society too superficially optimistic about the benefits of progress." But he identified a singular flaw in the thinking of the "neoromantics": as they denied "the possibility of communal relations," they also denied the importance of communication. This characterization by Mundt was not entirely accurate. The possible social functions of art concerned many of the painters, but they did value "self-expression" over "communication," which they defined as the transmittal of a predetermined message. Mundt was right when he argued that emotional intensity had become the yardstick for evaluating work and the tendency to view an artist's work as a unity did shift emphasis onto "who makes a statement rather than on what is being said." But despite the new work's emphasis on individuality, Mundt thought it undeniable that the result of "an approach to art that denies cognition and depends on an excitement of blood and nerves" was that at "the end of the road to introspection, below the base of the superstructure of civilization, there is the unifying fact of undifferentiated biological existence." Conformity inevitably replaced investigation, but he doubted that genuine experiment had ever been involved in expressionistic abstraction (as he phrased it). Self-revelation occurred only because the artist produced work for an intimate group of friends. The positive contribution of this work was that it uncovered the flaws inherent in "traditional ways of conveying meaning through art." Western art tradition had relied on shared codes

and values. A new art might arise on the ruins of communication based on a scientific approach to cognition of symbols and perception of images. The study of both conscious and subconscious responses to visual stimuli would be the basis for a new, truly communicative art which he thought essential to the functioning of civic society.[65]

Mundt's speech showed how democratic rhetoric was used by both sides of the debate, nor need we doubt either side's sincerity that its conception of art would help expand access to the means of communication. The question facing students, faculty, and administration at the California School of Fine Arts in the early 1950s was whether the institution should be a training school or a source of generalized cultural innovation. Neither goal was particularly "undemocratic," although, ironically, MacAgy's apparently impractical program was based on a more realistic assessment of the school's situation.

Mundt's speech was made as the last of MacAgy's closest associates on the faculty were forced from the school. Clyfford Still was the first to leave. He resigned in the summer of 1950, since, with MacAgy's departure, he saw no reason for serious artists to remain in California. He convinced Clay Spohn to move to New York with him. To stem a flood of resignations, Mundt assured the remaining painting faculty that he wanted them to continue. He intended to introduce more classes on the "empirical" aspects of art, but he assumed that the remaining faculty would be flexible enough to take responsibility for a new curriculum tying together the industrial and the fine arts.[66]

Distrust between the faculty and Mundt were exacerbated by Mundt's inexperience as an administrator in a period of contraction. Several weeks into the fall 1950 term, Mundt had to cancel several classes and reorganize others to compensate for budget shortfalls he had not expected. The most divisive issue confronting faculty and administration was the faculty's demand for employment contracts with long-term job security provisions. The faculty expected quick action on the contracts, for reasons of personal security but also as evidence that Mundt and the board were truly committed to continuity in the school's program. To help resolve the issue more quickly, the faculty

withdrew its request for pay parity with the university. Mundt asked the board to approve contracts for a core group of thirteen faculty members. The board tentatively consented in November 1950, but said it would delay signing contracts until April 1951 when the earliest projections could be made of fall term enrollment.

April came and went without a comment from the board about the proposed contracts or any public assessment of the school's financial health. Smith and Park, the leaders of the faculty negotiating committee, were convinced that Mundt wanted to purge MacAgy's faculty and that he was using promises of contracts to string them along while he recruited replacements with philosophies closer to his own. In July 1951, after a series of stormy faculty meetings, the core of the fine arts department, David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Hassel Smith, and Minor White, resigned to protest the board's bad faith. They were joined by Edmond Gross, the school's senior advertising art instructor. Mundt convinced the teachers to withdraw their resignations, but the board continued to delay executing the contracts. Mundt decided that Smith was the main organizer of opposition to change in the social and fired Smith in the middle of the fall term 1951, canceling the courses Smith was teaching. David Park and Elmer Bischoff immediately resigned, and an emergency protest meeting of the student body challenged Mundt's management of the school.[67]

The trustees attempted to regain control of the school by purging the school's faculty. In May 1952, at the same time that Mundt gave his speech criticizing the neoromantic movement in art, the trustees mailed letters to two-thirds of the faculty, almost all in the fine arts department, informing them that their services were no longer needed. Mundt was given free hand to design a school with an explicitly Bauhaus orientation. At the same time, the board made recruitment difficult for Mundt by shelving the idea of a core faculty with long-term employment security. Declaring that teachers at a professional school should be professional men not dependent upon teaching for their livelihood, the trustees cut salary levels while simultaneously equalizing

salaries. All teachers received the same base pay per course no matter his or her level of experience or years of service at the school.

The California School of Fine Art's new program was based on the assumption that the future of art lay in the merger of fine art with commercial and industrial design. The makeover of the school proved to be a disaster that brought the institution to the edge of bankruptcy and permanently closed its doors. As key faculty left, student enrollment plummeted. In the fall term 1952 only sixty-one full-time students registered, down from 325 the previous year.[68] Students unequivocally registered their disapproval with the changes in the school's direction by dropping out. Mundt and the trustees believed they could ride out the crisis by seeking a new type of student. The board voted to institute a degree program in the fall term 1953 and to send recruiters into high schools in the state. Mundt sought contracts with the Department of Defense to train in-service military personnel in commercial art and industrial design, but the military services were prohibited by law from contracting with an unaccredited school. Mundt organized an undergraduate program, and the Western College Association provisionally granted accreditation for a bachelor's of fine arts degree program in December 1953, with the stipulation that the school add courses in science and psychology to its English and history nonart electives.

The number of full-time students rose to sixty-nine in 1953, an increase the school administration considered to be due entirely to the degree program. The improvement in the day program was more than offset by sharp decreases in night school and Saturday enrollment, which Mundt thought was the result of new, free adult education courses that municipal park and recreation departments had begun to offer. By the fall term 1954, full-time enrollment rose to seventy-four, and the school faced three consecutive years of operating annual deficits greater than $20,000. Both the Western College Association and the Office of Veteran's Affairs inquired if students would be able to complete their training. Mundt replied that the school could not guar-

antee this, and the veteran's affairs office suspended the school's eligibility to receive payments for tuition under the renewed GI Bill.[69]

Mundt pursued the possibility of merger with the Art Center College of Design, an art school in Los Angeles that he learned was considering opening an extension in San Francisco. The Art Center had a strong fine arts department, chaired by Lorser Feitelson, but the school's primary focus was on commercial and industrial design. Mundt enthusiastically reported that Art Center turned away hundreds of students every year and was able to expel students who did not work. The president of the Art Center promised Mundt to "pour" funds already granted by Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Chrysler, and "many advertising agencies" if the school redesigned its curriculum to emphasize illustration, industrial design, and graphic design and layout. He also promised to raise faculty salaries immediately, but he warned Mundt that the Art Center could not support any fine arts classes. Students increased in studying painting or sculpture would enroll at the Los Angeles campus. The California School of Fine Arts campus would focus entirely on preparing students for employment in the American corporate world.[70] Mundt and the board of trustees hesitated at the prospect of completely gutting the oldest fine arts school in the western United States of fine arts instruction. Then negotiations collapsed when the Art Center refused to accept responsibility for the California School of Fine Arts's debts.

In March 1954 Mundt informed the School Committee of the board of trustees that he proposed to reorganize the curriculum once again, independently implementing the curriculum that had proved so successful at the Art Center. The Department of Design was to be put in the foreground, and the fine arts "must take a secondary place." Painter Nell Sinton, chair of the board committee with oversight of the school at the time, immediately convened an emergency meeting of the committee, which prepared a report to the board of trustees reassessing the problems at the school. The committee urged the board to acknowledge that the sole source of the school's crisis

was the repudiation of the experimental program initiated under Douglas MacAgy. Only one member of the board, Robert O. Bach, an advertising agency art director and a part-time instructor at the school, supported the changes Mundt wanted to make. He argued that the future of all art lay in advertising and commercial art because that was the art of the people. Only those caught up with outmoded, romantic, and elitist ideals resisted Mundt's reforms. The school needed unity to continue, and Bach urged all trustees and faculty who had no connection with commercial art to resign. Bach predicted that once the cloud of controversy left the school, California business and industry would enthusiastically support an institution providing them with trained, competent professionals in graphic and industrial design.[71]

Bach's lengthy reply to the Sinton report reads like an aria from a tragic opera. Proclaiming the purity of commercial artists and decrying the faithlessness of fine artists lusting after fame and fortune, Bach was not surprised at the denouement; the world was too impure to sustain a noble vision. The board voted against Mundt's proposed changes, and Mundt resigned immediately. The board appointed a junior faculty member, Gurdon Woods, a former painting student of David Park, to lead the school back to its postwar orientation. Woods asked Elmer Bischoff to rejoin the faculty. Together Woods and Bischoff rebuilt the painting faculty by seeking out former students from the MacAgy period. Frank Lobdell, working as a short-order cook in a Sausalito coffee shop, returned to the school to chair the painting program. Enrollment more than doubled in the first year of the new administration as the school's reputation as an experimental center was reestablished.

Irrationality and Democracy Revisited

While the specific issues wrenching the California School of Fine Arts from 1950 to 1954 were fought out at the mundane level of employment-security

contracts and curriculum structure, fundamental philosophical disagreements were at the heart of the struggle for control of the school. For the artists surrounding MacAgy, art entailed wresting a piece of mystery out of primal chaos and embodying mystery into a form that could be contemplated; the value of the product lay in its inexplicable, irrational character. For Mundt, art was a fully "rational" and "empirical" method that led to the creation of works derived from knowable goals and capable of arousing predictable responses.[72] These philosophical differences involved two distinct conceptions of the social value of art: an icon for subjectivity or a product created for a specific use. For Mundt and the majority of the board of trustees in 1950, a design-based program appeared inevitable because rational people did not embark upon a career without knowing what they wanted to accomplish. There was so little possibility for a "free" artist to establish him- or herself, they could not conceive that a school such as MacAgy had brought into being could permanently attract students.

Their decisions were based on a fundamental error in assessing the expanded student body brought into being in the post–World War II period. In this they were not alone. The most prominent national voices worried about the narrow, career-oriented focus they assumed a broader-based, more democratic student body would have. James B. Conant, president of Harvard University, had vocally opposed the education provisions of the GI Bill, proclaiming that the "least capable among the war generation" would flood institutions of higher learning. Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, thought that GIs would turn universities into "educational hobo jungles," dragging down levels of scholarship by their demand for training in skills that could get them jobs.[73]

Jacques Barzun from Columbia University worried that the GI Bill, with its premise that everyone in a democracy who wanted a college education should be able to get one, would inevitably lead to the debunking of both European tradition and faith in natural genius. Inexorably, he warned, Americans had inched to the idea that education was a natural right and, in

itself, sufficient grounds for advancement in employment. While these ideas had advanced the farthest in the United States, Barzun assumed that every nation with democratic institutions would be forced in the postwar period to make university-level training universally accessible. The trend would not stop with undergraduate education. He predicted universal education would expand to include master's and doctoral studies, and the entire university system would be oriented to certifying capability of performing specified jobs. Learning for its own sake, Barzun was certain, would vanish with the advent of mass education, and the modern age so transformative of the world would come to an end. He could see no possibility of intellectual or technological progress with the triumph of democracy and belief in the equality of every experience.[74]

"Mass education always means a certain number of concessions," warned prominent New York art critic Clement Greenberg. The American middle class understood that self-cultivation would define social position, and therefore mass cultivation had become a permanent feature of American society. On the positive side, Greenberg found serious painting and literature appearing in popular magazines, but "high culture," developed on class distinctions, could be swept away as the democratic masses rendered "standards of art and thought provisional" in the process of making world culture part of its life.[75]

Such arguments grew from assessments of the "masses" made by observing popular media such as motion pictures and magazines, as well as witnessing the cataclysmic events surrounding the triumph of "mass leaders" like Hitler. Closer to home, the persistence of racial segregation, religious bigotry, and vigilante action against labor unions suggested to some that expansion of democracy might lead to a more closed society. The potentially dangerous consequences of lowering standards established over a period of centuries worried intellectuals, but warnings also appeared in popular magazines. *Newsweek* advised its readers that the GI Bill might be good business for colleges and universities struggling to make ends meet, but would ultimately prove disappointing to students who expected a serious education. As

colleges competed for "business," standards would be lowered to the lowest common denominator, exactly as had occurred in popular entertainment. *Time* magazine told its readers that the expansion of university education might eliminate the class of educated men who stood above society and criticized it for its own good. There might then be no respectable counterbalance to public opinion, so easily manipulated by demagogues, and major changes in the structure of American society could be made in the heat of passion without adequate discussion of the consequences.[76]

In such a pervasive intellectual climate, reasonable men and women might easily conclude that the future of art lay in advertising and industrial design, though that conclusion was a surrender to the forces of "barbarism" that Conant, Hutchins, Greenberg, and Barzun wanted to hold at bay. Driven by financial concerns, the school's board could not believe that a humanistic art education could survive. Like it or not, student preferences would inevitably be for practical, employment-oriented programs. As we have seen, studies of veterans' actual decisions about courses of study indicated that humanities education expanded with the entry of new students, but these studies do not appear to have affected national discussion of educational issues. The trustees at the California School of Fine Arts disregarded their own school's experience. The actual phenomenon of "mass education" did not coincide with the imaginary construction so many intellectuals had made. Yet not all intellectuals were blind to the positive changes occurring. In 1952 Lionel Trilling of Columbia University wrote in the *Partisan Review* that American culture was "notably better off" than at any other time in the twentieth century.[77] At first glance, this was an astonishing statement. Beyond the obvious fact that 1952 was the height of the McCarthy terror, on a purely cultural level no emerging writers in the United States even remotely approached the caliber of Eliot, Pound, Williams, Stevens, or Faulkner. Trilling's comment made sense only in the context of his personal professional activities in the postwar period. American universities had grown and were educating more students, in part thanks to the GI Bill. The cream of those new students had gone to

elite school such as Columbia, which thanks to the emphasis on private initiative put in the bill, could accept or reject GIs as it pleased without fear of government pressure. Many had majored in the humanities, and several of Trilling's students in the late 1940s then took jobs with publishers, magazines, and book clubs after graduation. Former students working at the New American Library and Signet Classics asked Trilling to choose classic works of literature for reprint in paperback editions to be sold to an expanding market of college-educated readers. Trilling advised three book clubs as to their selections. His observation that American culture was "notably better off" was an expression of satisfaction that university education and fine literature were reaching more people than ever before in America's history. Trilling had recognized that mass education could indeed create a more democratic culture in America, if by that one meant the established classics of Western civilization reaching more people.

Douglas MacAgy was another individual who expected that the opportunity of a broad education would make "high culture" more democratically accessible. He staked out this position at an early date when the possible effects of "mass education" were little more than speculation. If, by mid-1950, he too lost hope in the future of the California School of Fine Arts, his resignation came not from despair over the new students the GI Bill had gathered into his school's studios. Instead, he worried that the experiment in "mass education" was soon to end and the more narrowly based student body traditionally found in art schools would return in full force. His rhetorical statements that art was important to democracy arose from faith in the capacity of people to seize hold of creative possibilities. It was an irrational faith, but, by being open to irrationality, MacAgy and his teachers were sensitive to the variety of human response, a variety that gave them hope for their own project. While MacAgy's short-term efforts were frustrated, the adhesion of students and teachers to the vision he had projected vindicated his general program. Technically, it is correct to say that subsidy for artists came from the government in the post-1945 period in the form of veterans' educational benefits,

but in actual fact, subsidy for the arts came from those students whose conception of "self-improvement" led them into educational courses that offered spiritual growth rather than skill acquisition.

Most of those students left art school without locating a permanent place where they could function as artists. The GI Bill thus had a part in creating a "community" of free-floating artists in the 1950s that would erupt into public attention in 1958 as the so-called beats. The media particularly emphasized the transgressive, anomalous aspects of this generation of artists and poets. We might entertain the possibility that, however outrageous the behavior of some individuals, the thrust of the media's response was not primarily motivated by particular actions of poets or artists. We may instead be observing a continuation of the anxiety that many intellectuals felt in 1944 at the expansion of education. The fears that the basis of education would be destroyed by the influx of people who believed in the "equality of every experience" transferred a decade later to the realm of culture in a heightened form. While the GI Bill gave colleges and universities control over admissions and the conditions of education, the new art and poetry of the 1950s was often literally in the streets, uncontrolled by any responsible overseer. The danger of the new generation of artists and poets lay in their potentiality as a force for unpredictable cultural change.

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Phoenix and the Tortoise.* Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1987.

Chapter 4

1. See, for example, the statement prepared for *San Francisco: The Bay and Its Cities* (New York: Hastings House, 1946), in San Francisco Art Association papers, AAA.

2. Minutes of Board Meeting, 5 March 1946, SFAA.

3. Douglas MacAgy, "Revising an Art Training Program" (n.d., ca. 1946), holograph in Douglas MacAgy files, San Francisco Art Association papers, AAA; Bis-

choff, "Interview with Elmer Nelson Bischoff," 38; Hubert Crehan, "Is There a California School?" *Art News* 54 (January 1956): 33. Hassel Smith, a student at the California School of Fine Arts from 1936 to 1938 and then a teacher there from 1945 to 1951, felt that the school from 1945 to 1950 was "completely Doug." Every course reflected his theories of art education, which the faculty enthusiastically accepted (interview with Smith by author, 1989, untranscribed).

4. Minutes, Faculty Meeting, 6 November 1947, faculty meeting files, SFAA.

5. Minutes of Board Meeting, 8 February 1945; Minutes of Board Meeting, 5 April 1945, SFAA.

6. Class lists, 1946–1950, SFAA.

7. Douglas MacAgy, "Exopathic Aesthetes" (n.d.), holograph copy in Douglas MacAgy files, San Francisco Art Association papers, AAA, 6; Douglas MacAgy, "Revised Training for the Artist" (n.d., ca. 1947), Douglas MacAgy files, San Francisco Art Association papers, AAA, 3.

8. Robert M. Coates, "Assorted Moderns," *New Yorker* 20 (23 December 1944): 51. Irving Sandler's *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Praeger, 1970) offers a basic history of abstract expressionism. Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) challenges Sandler's formalist interpretation by placing the new developments in painting in the context of cold war cultural policies. Sidney Janis's *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944) and Schimmel, ed., *The Interpretive Link* provide accounts of the roots of particular abstract expressionist painters in surrealism. It is important to note that while abstract expressionism developed within the context of the New York art world, it also faced opposition from important institutions within that world. Museum exhibitions of the work took place in San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston several years before the Museum of Modern Art finally acknowledged the existence of abstract expressionism in 1947.

9. Crehan, "Is There a California School?" 35. Hassel Smith dismissed Crehan's version as "sheer nonsense" ("Notes on the École du Pacifique," ca. 1956, Hassel Smith papers, AAA). Smith felt that Clyfford Still, Clay Spohn, Lu Watters, and other local artists had already developed their own forms of abstraction in the early 1940s independent of the New York school. It is certainly true that Clyfford Still's work was fundamental to Smith's shift from figurative to abstract painting, but interviews with participants at the California School of Fine Arts generally support the conclusion that the inspiration to move into abstract expressionism came from observing, however indirectly, developments in New York.

10. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 23–39.

11. Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area,* 39, 42, 44. See also Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 41–45; Maurice Tuchman, "Diebenkorn's Early Years," in *Richard Diebenkorn: Paintings and Drawings, 1943–1976* (Buffalo: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1976).

12. Clyfford Still, quoted from interview by Ti-Grace Sharpless, in *Clyfford Still* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1963), 4. For biographical material on Still see Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area,* 15–36; Clyfford Still, *Clifford Still* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976); Clyfford Still, *Thirty-three Paintings in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery* (Buffalo: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1966); *Clyfford Still,* ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979).

13. Alfred Frankenstein, "This World of Art," *San Francisco Chronicle,* 14 March 1943; Arthur Millier, *Los Angeles Times,* 27 March 1943.

14. "Notes on the École du Pacifique," Hassel Smith papers, AAA.

15. Douglas MacAgy interviewed by Mary Fuller McChesney, quoted in *A Period of Exploration,* 5, 83; Jeremy R. Anderson, untitled, *The Artist's View* no. 2 (September 1952).

16. Rothko introduced Still's work to Peggy Guggenheim and arranged his first New York show in 1946 at Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. Still was responsible for Rothko teaching two terms at the California School of Fine Arts.

17. Clyfford Still interviewed by Mary Fuller McChesney, quoted in McChesney, *A Period of Exploration,* 36.

18. Ibid.

19. Still to a friend, December 1949, quoted in O'Neill, *Clyfford Still,* 27.

20. The students who formed Metart Galleries were Jeremy Anderson, Ernest Briggs, Jack Cohantz, Hubert Crehan, Edward Dugmore, Jorge Goya, William Huberich, Jack Jefferson, Kiyo Koizumi, Zoe Longfield, Frances Spencer, and Horst Trave.

21. Press release, Metart Galleries, April 1949, Jack Jefferson papers, AAA.

22. Clay Spohn interviewed by Thomas Albright, quoted in "The Critical Year for Rothko," *San Francisco Chronicle,* 13 March 1983; Ernest Briggs and Jeremy Anderson interviewed by Mary Fuller McChesney, quoted in McChesney, *A Period of Exploration,* 40–41, 43.

23. Elmer Bischoff interviewed by Thomas Albright, quoted in *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area,* 26.

24. Bischoff, "Interview with Elmer Nelson Bischoff," AAA, 42.

25. Clyfford Still interviewed by Thomas Albright, quoted in *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area,* 31.

26. Smith grew up in San Mateo, fifteen miles south of San Francisco. His father was an advertising and sales executive for the metals industry. Smith studied art history at Northwestern University and had planned to pursue a Ph.D. in art history at Princeton. But after taking a summer course in painting from Maurice Sterne at the California School of Fine Arts, he impulsively decided to enroll full-time in painting at the San Francisco school. To support himself while painting, Smith found a job as a social worker in 1938. His direct encounters with the "working poor rather changed" his life, he observed. He had lived a protected existence, but as he became aware of the deprivation in American society, he began a quick conversion to Marxism. His left-wing politics do not appear to have been an issue at the school. When the Federal Bureau of Investigation came to the school to ask MacAgy about communist influence in the school, MacAgy escorted them to the door (interview with Smith, by author, 1989, no transcript).

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Smith quoted by Douglas MacAgy in his essay "Hassel Smith" (n.d., ca. 1960), holograph copy in Hassel Smith papers, AAA.

30. See Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area,* 52; Herschel B. Chipp, "This Summer in San Francisco," *Art News* 56 (Summer 1958): 48ff.; Alfred Frankenstein, "New Gallery but an Old Name," *San Francisco Chronicle,* 28 February 1977; Allan Temko, "The Flowering of San Francisco," *Horizon* 1 (January 1959): 4–23; Allan Temko, "Hassel Smith," undated manuscript of essay in Hassel Smith papers, AAA.

31. Some of these figures were students at the school in the late 1950s, long after Smith had left the school's faculty, but he maintained a close, if informal, contact with developments at the institution.

32. Hassel Smith, "Art in Action: The Appeal to Reason," *The Artist's View,* no. 1 (July 1952), BL; Smith to "friends staying in Italy," February 1957, published in *Hassel Smith, Recent Paintings* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Association, 1957). Smith did not deny that left-wing artists could donate their services to political events by designing posters, banners, and illustrations. He had contributed to an illustrated version of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1948. But such work, he thought, had no closer relationship to his conception of art than working for an advertising agency and developing art to sell cigarettes.

33. MacAgy, "Hassel Smith," Smith papers, AAA.

34. Douglas MacAgy, "Clay Spohn's Museum," typescript in Douglas MacAgy files, San Francisco Art Association papers, AAA.

35. Spohn to Mary McChesney, 15 April 1963, Spohn papers, AAA, 2.

36. Spohn, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Clay Spohn at his Studio in Grand Street, New York City," AAA, 70–72.

37. Spohn to McChesney, 15 April 1963, AAA, 2, 23–26.

38. MacAgy, "Clay Spohn's Museum," AAA; Spohn to McChesney, 25 April 1963, AAA, 3–S.

39. Ibid., 51.

40. Crehan, "Is There a California School?" Crehan wrote his article to dispute a contention by Tapiès and others in Paris that a distinctive school of painting and sculpture had emerged in California which Europeans needed to consider in addition to the work produced in New York. Crehan argued that work in California was nothing more than a provincial variant of ideas elaborated in New York, with nothing original having been contributed. The suppression of the distinct contribution of the CSFA school was so thorough that in 1963 John Coplans wrote a series of articles for *Artforum* to retrieve this history and show that California abstract painting had not begun in the late 1950s, as assumed by most New York critics.

41. Interview with Smith by author, 1989, no transcript.

42. Jazz was clearly an important aesthetic inspiration to the New York school as well.

43. Interview with Smith by author, 1989, no transcript.

44. "Notes on the École du Pacifique," Hassel Smith papers, AAA.

45. Bischoff, "Interview with Elmer Nelson Bischoff," AAA, 35, 44–46. Of course, Bischoff's characterization of abstract expressionism as a "fashion" contains a defense against the harsh criticism he received for returning to figurative painting.

46. In the roster of artists exhibiting in the 1952 San Francisco Art Association annual, forty-one artists submitted abstract expressionist work, while twenty-five artists submitted work based on geometric or biomorphic abstraction. In addition, there were eighteen figurative painters, seven surrealists, and six painters still working with cubism ("Painting and Sculpture, 1952," San Francisco Art Association).

47. Hubert Crehan, "Art Page," *San Francisco Chronicle,* 3 July 1950.

48. Erle Loran, "San Francisco Art News," *Art News* 49 (April 1950): 50.

49. Lobdell, "Interview with Frank Lobdell," AAA, 35–36.

50. Clyfford Still to Betty Parsons, 20 March 1948, in Betty Parsons papers, AAA. In 1952 he broke off relations with Parsons and all dealers, reclaimed his paintings, and refused to exhibit anywhere.

51. Hedrick, "Wally Hedrick Interview #1," AAA, 43–45.

52. Jorge Goya interviewed by Mary Fuller, in "Was There a San Francisco School?" *Artforum* 9 (January 1971): 48; Gordon Cook interviewed 1972 by Dan Tooker, quoted in Plagens, *Sunshine Muse,* 45. In this context, it is interesting to compare West Coast attitudes with those of Clement Greenberg, who helped define abstract expressionism in an environment with a more developed, intermeshed gallery, museum, and critical system. Anticommercialism, Greenberg complained in 1947, was the stock-in-trade of the provincial figure who opposed the formation of an intellectual elite by falling back on the myth of the common man "who re-enacts the life of the early frontiersman in his physical self-assertion, in his communal ego, and in the fact that his pathos emerges in time and space." Anticommercialism stalled artists in a "kind of democratic free-for-all, in which every individual, being as good as every other one, has the right to question any form of intellectual authority." Until objective standards of quality were established, the dominant tradition in American culture would be romantic and subjective. "Sensibility confined, intensified, and repeated . . . has been a staple of American art and literature since Emily Dickinson. . . . The art that results does not show us enough of ourselves and of the kind of life we live in our cities, and therefore does not release enough of our feeling." Greenberg demanded that the dominance of the "wild artist," the "Whitmanesque blowhard," come to an end. Americans needed a cultural milieu in which its leaders discouraged obsession with extreme situations and states of mind. Only when artists placed their relation to the great tradition at the center of their work and discounted entirely their relationship to a mass public, could they hope to create new artistic standards for that public (Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," *Horizon* no. 93–94 [October 1947]: 22).

53. Minutes of Board Meeting, 25 March 1948; Minutes of Board Meeting, 18 June 1948, SFAA.

54. Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 17.

55. Walter Gropius, "The Viability of the Bauhaus Idea," in Wingler, *The Bauhaus,* 52; Walter Gropius, "Address to the Students," in Wingler, *The Bauhaus,* 36; Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965; first published 1935), 65; Gropius, "Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus," in Wingler, *The Bauhaus,* 132; Oskar Schlemmer to Bruno Taut, in Wingler, *The Bauhaus,* 78.

56. László Mohóly-Nágy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 17.

57. James Sloan Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism,*

Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 66–70, 76–77.

58. Douglas MacAgy, "The California School of Fine Arts and its Eastern Counterparts 1947," report submitted to faculty and board of trustees, 24 October 1947, SFAA, 2–3.

59. Douglas MacAgy, "Educational Conflicts between the Fine and Commercial Arts," holograph of paper presented at National Association of Schools of Design, Cincinnati, 28 November 1949, MacAgy papers, SFAA.

60. Minutes of Board Meeting, 18 August 1949, SFAA. The school's charter with the state established it as a division of the University of California, even though it had its own board of trustees to set policy and received no funds from the state university system. All faculty appointments and school curricula went to Berkeley for review and approval.

61. David Park's description of MacAgy's plans in Park to Ernest Born, 12 July 1951, faculty correspondence files, SFAA.

62. MacAgy to Board of Trustees, 1 May 1950, in Minutes of Board Meeting, 29 June 1950, SFAA.

63. Smith repeated the story when I interviewed him. Hassel Smith: "Douglas told me that he had been for some time at loggerheads with the board and found it increasingly difficult to carry out his own program. He had persuaded Duchamp to come to the school. The board had refused to accept the appointment, so he quit. That's disputed by others, but that's what Doug told me" (interview with Smith by author, 1989, untranscribed).

64. MacAgy interviewed by Mary Fuller McChesney, in McChesney, *A Period of Exploration*, 83–84. Hassel Smith, who had attended the school from 1936 to 1938, shared this assessment. He noted how unusual the student body was after 1945. The rich young men and women who had filled the school before the war had disappeared (Smith interviewed by author, 1989, untranscribed).

65. Ernest Mundt, "Three Aspects of Contemporary Art," in *Painting and Sculpture: The San Francisco Art Association* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952).

66. Minutes of Board Meeting, 24 January 1952, SFAA.

67. Hassel Smith interviewed by the author, 1989, untranscribed; Park to Ernest Born, President, Board of Directors [*sic*], 12 July 1951, faculty correspondence files, SFAA; Minutes of Board Meeting, 24 January 1952, SFAA. Hassel Smith had no doubt that Mundt became director with the goal of undoing the MacAgy program completely and that he wanted to fire all the people associated with MacAgy. If Mundt hesitated at first, he was afraid of student reaction and had waited for the older stu-

dents to graduate before embarking on his plans for restructuring the school (interview with Smith by author, 1989, no transcript). After leaving the California School of Fine Arts, Smith went to work teaching art to elementary school children at a private school. Then in 1953 he bought an apple orchard in Sebastopol, fifty miles north of San Francisco, and ran a farm for ten years, while he continued to paint in a studio he built for himself on his property. Douglas and Jermayne MacAgy remained supporters, and in 1957 Jermayne arranged his first major exhibit outside of California at the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum, where she was the director. Walter Hopps exhibited him to considerable success in Los Angeles at the Ferus Gallery. Commercial sales and critical reviews led Smith back into the classroom, but FBI visits to his employers continued through the mid-1960s and helped convince Smith and his wife in 1966 that they should permanently relocate to Britain, where Smith accepted a faculty position at the Bristol College of Art.

68. Full-Time Enrollment, Fall Terms, California School of Fine Arts, 1944–1956

Year	*Full-Time Enrollment*	*Year*	*Full-Time Enrollment*	*Year*	*Full-Time Enrollment*
1944	54	1949	372	1954	74
1945	92	1950	352	1955	185
1946	480	1951	325	1956	259
1947	413	1952	61		
1948	383	1953	69		

Source: San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.

69. Minutes of Board Meetings, 26 June and 20 November 1952; 19 November and 17 December 1953; 23 November 1954, SFAA.

70. Edward Adams, president, Art Center College of Design, to Mundt, 28 October 1954, correspondence files, SFAA.

71. Mundt to Neil Sinton, chair, School Committee, 23 March 1954, School Committee files; Memo (n.d., ca. April 1954), School Committee files; Robert O. Bach, memo to San Francisco Art Association board (n.d., ca. April 1954), SFAA.

72. Mundt to Ruth Armer, 28 May 1951, correspondence files, SFAA.

73. *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* 46 (22 January 1944): 244; Robert M. Hutchins, "The Threat to American Education," *Collier's* 40 (30 December 1944): 20–21.

74. Jacques Barzun, "The Higher Learning in America," *Horizon* no. 93–94 (October 1947): 99–104.

75. Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," 22.

76. "Bursars Rub Hands over GI Bill But College Standards May Suffer," *Newsweek* 27 (8 January 1945): 66–69; "Double Trouble: Are More Studies, More Facilities, More Money the Key to Better Education?" *Time* 58 (26 July 1948).

77. Lionel Trilling, "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* 19 (May-June 1952): 318–326.

5 The Avant-Garde, Institution, and Subjective Shift

We have investigated three models put forward in the 1940s to project a role for art and poetry in society. Douglas MacAgy, Lorser Feitelson, and Kenneth Rexroth each attempted to give creative people a basis for understanding what art should be and who an artist is, at a time when previous uses of art and poetry were in question. Each displayed a style of leadership dependent upon personal charm, knowledge, and the ability to talk interestingly on a wide variety of topics. In a society thousands of miles from their culture's historical monuments and devoid of stable institutions, their personal interpretations of tradition helped create a collective imagination of place and time. They did not offer "history" but personal opinion, a feeling for how California poets and artists related to other parts of the world that could be the basis for developing local "traditions." They were not trained scholars, but they were assertive, erudite, and talented. Lacking any of those three qualities, they could not have achieved a leading role for any length of time. Their leadership could exist only when institutions were weak and personalities had to act as centers.

Rexroth, fired by revolutionary ideology, and Feitelson, moved by more mundane entrepreneurial values, believed that creative people could fill the void by building their own cooperative, self-managed institutions. Douglas MacAgy proposed a very different institutional model: the research-based center of higher education, where poetic imagination was joined to a rigor-

ous, methodological study of one's specialty, while also freed from any need to participate in the marketplace. In the 1940s the relationship of creative people to the academy was still new, and the parallels between humanistic investigation and creative process remained to be determined.

Postwar expansion of American higher education proved to be a boon for poets, as well as visual artists. Josephine Miles, who taught in the English department at Berkeley, remembered that "things were very prosperous for poetry in the forties, as they were in other ways too." The influx of veterans had brought a new set of students—mature, more friendly, and wanting to learn. The increased interest in poetry led Miles to expand her once very small poetry classes. In one semester she recalled the department offered sixteen different creative writing sections and she hired former students, including Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, later to be leading figures in the San Francisco "poetry renaissance," to help meet the demand for these classes.[1]

Regular poetry readings at colleges and universities proved to be popular events after the war and indeed expanded. In 1946 a program of weekly readings, inaugurated by Rexroth, started at the old downtown campus of San Francisco State College.[2] These readings provided a regular forum for local poets and a place where nationally and internationally known poets could come to read. With a regular schedule and good newspaper reviews, the state college poetry readings attracted audiences that averaged in the hundreds. Confident that they could pay expenses and fees, the program's organizers, Madeline Gleason and Robert Duncan, invited poets from across the country and from Britain. Dylan Thomas read three times to packed houses. In 1954 these regular readings were formalized into the San Francisco Poetry Center, a division within the state college under the direction of Ruth Witt-Diamant, who was not a poet but a professional administrator. Once again, Rexroth initiated the new center by giving the first reading, this time focusing on his translations from Chinese poetry and giving extemporaneous comments between each poem comparing the situation in the United States with the conditions that led to the collapse of the Tang and Sung dynasties.[3]

The range of the center's activities grew to include classes for both serious and amateur poets (a distinction difficult to maintain since neither made money), seminars, archives, and theater productions. Growth of college-level writing programs opened a new form of employment for poets, even though Rexroth and his followers scoffed at academic poetry. "Small holes cut in the paper," Rexroth called it,[4] but in 1965 Rexroth finally escaped his persistent poverty by accepting an offer to be poet-in-residence in the English department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he taught until 1973.

But in 1950 the relationship of the creative arts to academic education was still uncertain. The poet Yvor Winters referred to his colleagues in the Stanford English department as "you professors," and Josephine Miles observed that philologically inclined faculty looked down upon their colleagues who were also creative writers as somehow less serious.[5] The conflict over the direction of the California School of Fine Arts was part of a larger debate in American society over the appropriate location and the possible functions of art: Could it have an autonomous, independent role, or was it the servant of more strategically placed forces? Was art inevitably of interest to small elites only, or could it develop a democratic public? The answers one had for these questions had implications for who should be an artist and how that person was selected. Although the specifics of the answers given by Feitelson, Rexroth, MacAgy, and their associates were different, a context of common assumptions unified their disparate responses. In addressing the formal, institutional, and subjective problems of poets and artists working in a provincial environment, the California post–World War II avant-garde assumed a distinctive discourse that was evidence of a subjective shift with implications beyond practice of the arts.

That discourse contained four primary semantic categories. In each, the discourse took strong normative positions on the relation of the sacred and profane, individual and society, difference and conformity, dialogue and communication:

1. The avant-garde on the West Coast had a preference for cosmological-theosophical over psychological-sociological understandings of art and of the individual's relationship to larger forces. The sacred, which need not involve a personalized deity, was valued over the profane.
2. Private, interior experience was assumed to have a privileged relationship to cosmological process; this belief presumed a crisis in the authority of historical tradition. Individual choice was valued over social unity.
3. Freedom arose from the irrational, nonlawful aspects of cosmological being; heterogeneity—i.e., difference—was fundamental to the human condition. Conformity was an unnatural attempt to repress what lay inside each individual's soul. Historical "facts" served hierarchy, while tradition was liberating because it grew from a voluntary personal response to the repertory of the past. Freedom was not an achieved state but a continuous act of moral exertion that rested on the willingness to state, "This is what I believe."
4. Although art could be used to communicate preset ideas and feelings, limited pragmatic functions were insufficient to justify artistic creation. Art was exploration of being, "self-expression," but only in the sense of exploring the possibilities of self implicit in heterogeneity. The models for artistic communication were personal relationships and dialogue. The term "communication" took on a limited, negative meaning associated with the mass media: one-way transmittal of messages from those with power to those without. "Self-expression" short-circuited that process by emphasizing values of sharing and response. Personal belief remained meaningless until it was expressed to others and received response. The desired end result of freedom was not the solitude of individual belief, but a strengthened because uncoerced collective agreement that took into account a greater variety of experience.

These four semantic categories were not uttered in a uniform or consistent manner, nor were they necessarily used to achieve compatible goals. They provided a normative guide that shaped the ways in which many artists and poets expressed a sense of connection with each other and defined the forces they considered hostile to their interests. This discourse was used by both those whose ideological sympathies were explicitly prosocialist and communitarian, such as Kenneth Rexroth and Hassel Smith, and by those who were committed to the liberal values of individual enterprise, such as Lorser Feitelson and Douglas MacAgy. The blurring of ideological distinctions within an aesthetic vision of the relation of psyche, society, and cosmos facilitated its spread, for no sharp commitment to a particular ideal social structure was required. Divisions were more likely to be over the best institutional strategies to secure a position for the arts in United States society. Nonetheless, the religious metaphors permeating the vision of the arts contained within them potentiality for a radical critique of social authority and provided a discourse available to articulate discontents.

To understand how these cultural shifts affected artists and poets in the 1950s and why they thought of themselves as both a social and aesthetic avant-garde, we need now to examine their self-conceptions as historical actors. Expressed in their verbal reflections, their art, and their actions, their subjectivity shaped a broad and diverse artistic range. The artistic community established its own norms, with priority given to self-narration as the key act leading to personal liberation, the partitioning of efficacious and futile historical action, and the location of value. The theory that artistic creation fostered the acquisition of knowledge from sensuous experience required setting limits for personal space within which the public sphere could not intrude. This step had profound social and political consequences, but the first step was always within an individual, who had to mediate between competing loyalties and responsibilities. A growing sense of the inviolability of personal freedom and experience was the contribution these efforts made to public life, though the form often gave that contribution a contradictory character.

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
BL	Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CLP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1968.
CSP	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1966.
DSC	Department of Special Collections, University Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
OHP/UCLA	Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.
PAS	Public Affairs Services, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
PT	Kenneth Rexroth. *The Phoenix and the Tortoise.* Norfolk: New Directions, 1944.
ROHO	Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
SFAA	San Francisco Art Association Archives, Library, San Francisco Art Institute.
WOW	Kenneth Rexroth. *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth.* New York: New Directions, 1987.

Chapter 5

1. Miles, "Poetry, Teaching, Scholarship," ROHO, 151–154, quote on 151.

2. Press clipping, *San Francisco Chronicle,* hand dated 1946, in Rexroth clipping book, Rexroth papers, DSC.

3. Jack Pennington, "A Day of Cold Food," *San Francisco Chronicle,* in Rexroth's clipping file, Rexroth papers, DSC.

4. "An Interview with Kenneth Rexroth," *Conjunctions* 1 (1968): 60.

5. Miles, "Poetry, Teaching, and Scholarship," ROHO, 65–66.