HEDDA STERNE AND THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST CONTEXT

BY

SARAH LOUISE ECKHARDT

DISáfERATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Jonathan Fineberg, Chair
Professor Lisa Rosenthal
Professor Tim Van Laar
Assistant Professor Terri Weissman
ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the development of Hedda Sterne’s artistic philosophy and practice in the 1940s and 1950s. Over those years Sterne began to develop a concept of her identity as an artist that set her apart from most of her colleagues and fundamentally shaped her unique oeuvre. She defined identity as shifting and relational, influenced by changing contexts and opposed to the aggressively monolithic model of identity that generally prevailed among the abstract expressionists. She also believed in a reciprocal relationship between language and ideas: different communal languages shaped the ideas of their speakers, just as different ideas often required different languages for precise expression. Combining these two strands of her artistic philosophy, Sterne developed a career-long practice of switching styles, and even of using different styles simultaneously, sometimes to express different themes and at other times to articulate the same idea in distinct ways. Even her most abstract styles, however, recorded her changing relationship to the environment around her. This study proposes that her insistence on changing styles paradoxically expresses a coherent artistic philosophy of identity, and constitutes a critical response to the rhetoric, interpretation, and marketing of the abstract expressionism in the late 1940s and 1950s.

This project also tells an institutional and cultural history of the mid-century art world that treats the artist, her work, and the institutions that promoted (or failed to promote) it as inextricably linked. By focusing on specific points at which Sterne’s example proved inassimilable to the dominant narrative of abstract expressionism, this dissertation ultimately suggests the need for a more comprehensive narrative that redefines the essential parameters.
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INTRODUCTION: STERNE AND THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST CONTEXT

This dissertation focuses on the development of Hedda Sterne’s artistic philosophy and practice in the 1940s and 1950s. Over those years Sterne began to develop a concept of her identity as an artist that set her apart from most of her colleagues and fundamentally shaped her unique oeuvre. She defined identity as shifting and, relational, influenced by changing contexts, and opposed to the aggressively monolithic model of identity that generally prevailed among the abstract expressionists. She also believed in a reciprocal relationship between language and ideas: different communal languages shaped the ideas of their speakers, just as different ideas often required different languages for precise expression. Combining these two strands of her artistic philosophy, Sterne developed a career-long practice of switching styles, and even of using different styles

1 By context I mean both the historical time period in which the artists worked as well as the significant body of literature which has attempted to analyze and frame that period over the pasty sixty years. I use the term “Abstract Expressionist” rather than “New York School,” an equally valid option in current literature, for two reasons. First, although Sterne, as well as her artistic counterparts, strongly resisted a label of any kind and denied being a part of a movement, “Abstract Expressionist” is the term Sterne later adopted and used as short hand to designate the group of artists with which she and her work were most commonly associated. The individual names she most frequently designated in this context were Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Theodoros Stamos, Ad Reinhardt, and Willem and Elaine de Kooning. Second, while New York School implies a greater diversity or inclusiveness of artists than does Abstract Expressionism, and has been used to emphasize the individuality of each of the artists involved, it has, more often than not, been used interchangeably with Abstract Expressionism to refer to the same group of by-now canonical artists. By contrast, the larger group of artists I mention in chapter one exceed the boundaries of most “Abstract Expressionist” or “New York School” literature (with the exception of Ann Eden Gibson’s Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics, which goes much farther than the present study). My goal is not to claim this wider list of artists (including Sterne) as a part of Abstract Expressionism or the New York School, but rather to highlight the contested and constructed nature of the terms in and of themselves.
simultaneously, sometimes to express different themes and other times to articulate the same idea in distinct ways. Even her most abstract styles, however, recorded her changing relationship to the environment around her. This study proposes that her insistence on changing styles paradoxically expresses a coherent artistic philosophy of identity, and constitutes a critical response to the rhetoric, interpretation, and marketing of abstract expressionism in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The name Hedda Sterne has occupied the margins of texts on the abstract expressionists for over fifty years. Photographed standing at the apex of what we now consider a formidable group of canonical artists, Sterne’s image may never escape its *ad infinitum* reproduction as an illustration in text books, articles, exhibition catalogues, and scholarly books on abstract expressionism [Fig. 1]. Despite Sterne’s persistent presence, however, scholars have, at best, noted the need to learn more about her work; at worst, they have denigrated her presence to “chance.” Yet a survey of Sterne’s expansive body of work, and of the announcements and reviews of her mid-twentieth-century exhibitions, establishes Sterne’s pervasive role in the art world of the period. In part this project provides that survey: it examines Sterne’s works from the era of the *Life* photograph (the late 1940s through the 1950s) and uses archival documents, including exhibition reviews, personal notebooks, letters and the artist’s statements, to help frame the social, economic and intellectual context surrounding the production and reception of her works. Yet in doing so, this project does not exactly attempt to bring Hedda Sterne out of the margins and into the center (at least not the center of the art historical canon). Rather, the dissertation focuses on the ways in which Sterne consciously operated in the margins, utilizing that position to develop the theory of dynamic, relational identity that she at
once related and opposed to the ostensibly stable and universal model put forward by the
majority of her abstract expressionist colleagues, as well as by the critics and curators
who promoted their work. Sterne’s work and artistic philosophy challenge the dominant
narratives of the art of the 1940s and 1950s, in part because of the liminal position she
chose.

In an early version of her famous essay, "Lee Krasner as L.K.,” Anne Wagner
references Sterne’s presence in the Irascibles photo as a classic example of the “depth of
our ignorance” regarding the operation of gender as a “less-than-stable social
phenomena,” especially as it “impacted the construction of a postwar artistic subculture”:

Let me offer one brief sounding of the depth of our ignorance—the
notorious, brilliant photograph of the “Irascibles” taken by Nina Leen for
Life in 1951. Once you ask—if you ask—that familiar question, “Who’s the
woman?”—it’s the painter Hedda Sterne—her cultural anonymity, versus the
identities allotted Newman or Robert Motherwell or Adolph Gottlieb or
Rothko or even James Brooks, is laid bare. The issue here is not only the
status of forgotten women artists (though Lord knows I find it hard to
claim that their lack of status is not an issue). Likewise the tenor of critical
response to their work—Greenberg in 1944 calling Sterne’s art “a piece of
femininity,” for example—are not in and of themselves the issue.

Wagner’s description of Sterne’s current “cultural anonymity” helps to define Sterne’s
current position in relation to the abstract expressionists. Even if Wagner’s main concern
is not the status of forgotten women artists, she nevertheless has no examples of Sterne’s
work to reference, and so Sterne effectively functions as an icon of that forgotten status.

Thus, when Wagner immediately proceeds to outline her main concern, she asks
questions about Krasner that are at least as applicable to Sterne:

What concerns me in the particular instance of Lee Krasner, and in the
general case of artists who are female, is the problem of how an artist’s
subjectivity, that sense-of-oneself-as-an-artist (a sense inseparable from an
idea of one’s art) is formed in conditions like the ones I have just outlined.
What kind of uneasy peace is made between gender identity and artistic
identity? What gender hybrid is the result? How is artistic identity forced to restructure itself in the face of shifts in social status and experience, in the wake of career successes or setbacks, for instance, or of marriage, or birth, or even death? Gender stereotypes hit hard in such circumstances. As social facts that form part of the conditions of production of art, they leave their marks on it, limit it and define it, just as they shape the artist, offering materials for hesitation and doubt and strength concerning one’s place and identity within contemporary practice.  

Wagner’s essay, of course, goes on to use Krasner’s particular historical experience as a means of considering these questions. While the answers are specific to Krasner’s career, Wagner suggests that the questions offer a helpful model in exploring the issues of identity in “the general case of artists who are female.” Yet her example of Sterne as an icon of cultural anonymity, set in contrast to the plethora of mythologies surrounding Krasner as a “quasi-canonical” figure, sets up an informative dichotomy. Were Krasner the lone woman artist standing amidst the canonical men in the Life photograph, her image would play a very different role from the one Sterne’s currently does. In other words, Krasner has a well-defined place within the story of abstract expressionism, even if it is one rife with stereotypes and loaded with value judgments. Wagner’s questions regarding identity formation help to outline Krasner’s strategies for navigating this minefield, thereby offering richer and more varied readings of Krasner’s work, as well as highlighting the social conditions for its production. Yet Wagner rightly portrays Krasner actively working out the relationship of her gender identity and artistic identity from within the ethos of a larger definition of subjective identity accepted and utilized by the abstract expressionists. While that definition of identity has been the subject of much debate among scholars, and has been interpreted differently by different artists, for the

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purposes of this project I rely extensively on what Michael Leja labels “Modern Man subjectivity” in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* for a broad model. As he writes: “This was, I have been arguing, an art that thematized subjectivity—it claimed to issue from and represent mind and experience as these were revealed in mythic and unconscious materials and structures held to constitute the submerged foundations of human nature and being.”\(^3\) The paradox of this subjectivity, however, is that the subjects themselves claimed a simultaneous individuality and universality. Furthermore, as Leja describes, it was a “subjectivity that they imagined as 'interior.'”\(^4\) Given that these subjects were white, male and heterosexual, it became exceedingly difficult for a woman or member of a minority in the US at midcentury to occupy a subject position that could make the same claims on universality. Hence, both Wagner and Leja have persuasively outlined the ways in which female artists who had associated with the movement, such as Lee Krasner, met with continued frustration in their attempts to “thematize subjectivity.”

It is precisely at this intersection of gender and “thematized subjectivity” that I find Sterne—specifically as she is currently represented as an icon of “cultural anonymity” (read failure)—to be such a compelling case study. If she remains “culturally” anonymous, that is separate from her body of work, it is quite easy to categorize her within a group of either forgotten women artists (which refers to the larger problem of women artists’ status) or frustrated female abstract expressionists (which refers to the *a priori* exclusion of a female subjectivity from the right of universal expression) or both. Sterne does not escape either category, however I argue that taking

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4 Ibid., 269.
into account the specifics of her historical experience alongside her body of work forces an investigation from *outside* rather than *within* the definition of subjectivity operative for the majority of the Abstract Expressionists. This dissertation claims that Sterne did, in fact, thematize her subjectivity. However, it is crucial that she defined subjectivity along a different set of axes which were anathema to the “interior” and autonomous model aligned with the abstract expressionists. In effect, analyzing Sterne’s work requires a radical shift in perspective. Mikhail Bakhtin described the necessity for a paradigm shift of this order when considering Dostoevsky’s novels. He began by outlining the ways in which Dostoevsky and his work appear to fail when evaluated by one set of criteria:

If viewed from a monologic understanding of the unity of style (and so far that is the only understanding that exists), Dostoevsky’s novel is multi-styled or styleless; if viewed from a monologic understanding of tone, Dostoevsky’s novel is multi-accented and contradictory in its value; contradictory accents clash in every word of his creations. If Dostoevsky’s highly heterogeneous material had been developed within a unified world corresponding to the unified monologic consciousness of the author, then the task of joining together the incompatible would not have been accomplished, and Dostoevsky would be a poor artist, with no style at all.⁵

Although the novel is a drastically different medium from painting, the expectation of a “monologic consciousness of the author” sets the criteria for a unified style in the totality of a novel in much the same way that the expectation of an autonomous, interior model of subjectivity sets the criteria for a unified style in the totality of an artist’s oeuvre. Like Dostoevsky, Sterne “would be a poor artist, with no style at all” if we evaluate her body of work within the framework of a monologic theory of identity in which individual artists are expected to develop a personal, cohesive style of expression. Instead, Bakhtin

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proposes that Dostoevsky’s work be understood via a different set of criteria, for which he appropriates the musical term “polyphonic”: 

In actual fact, the utterly incompatible elements comprising Dostoevsky’s material are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth; and it is not the material directly but these worlds, their consciousnesses with their individual fields of vision that combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of a polyphonic novel.6

To be sure, adapting Bakhtin’s concept of a polyphonic novel (which he had himself adapted from a musical vocabulary) to the practice of a fine artist requires clarification. For instance, Sterne’s paintings do not fulfill the precise function of autonomous consciousnesses as Bakhtin describes the role of different characters in Dostoevsky’s novel. Yet, to the extent that Bakhtin emphasizes a unity based in “several fields of vision” rather than “a single field of vision,” the term polyphonic helps to describe Sterne’s use of multiple modes of aesthetic expression. If there is a unity to Sterne’s artistic production, it is her conceptual openness to external influence. This nevertheless results in a multiplicity of styles as she expresses her relationship to a variety of changing environments and contexts. In the chapters that follow, I show the defining features of Sterne’s “polyphonic” identity.

The set of questions Ann Wagner asks regarding gender and artistic identity produce different answers when the criteria shift from “monologic” to “polyphonic.” Under the criteria of a “monologic consciousness of the author” or artist, identity takes on a passive construction: “How is artistic identity forced to restructure itself in the face of shifts in social status and experience, in the wake of career successes or setbacks, for instance, or

6 Ibid.
of marriage, or birth, or even death?” [emphasis mine]. Yet the artist with a “polyphonic”
definition of practice aspires (as does Sterne) to the continual restructuring of artistic
identity with “shifts in social status and experience.” In a 1954 artist’s statement Sterne
describes such an artist:

The revolutionary artist or, rather, the creative artist, is more than anything a
constant re-evaluator, afflicted with a love of veracity. As time passes and life
moves, part of what has been true, gradually ceases to be so. And this is why
you find the older artist at times violently opposing views he held in his youth.
In both stages he tried to do away with obstructing repetition in order to
reestablish contact with the stream connecting past and future. In both stages he tried to do away with obstructing repetition in order to
reestablish contact with the stream connecting past and future.7

Sterne here emphasizes motion to destabilize several seemingly static concepts. She
suggests that “veracity,” often considered static, can only be grasped through constant
reevaluation, because truth itself changes as life moves. If truth changes, then the artist
must change with it. Finally, she describes repetition as an “obstruction” from “the
stream that connects past and future,” again a fluid metaphor. By the end of the passage
both truth and the artist are in perpetual motion, continually shifting as the artist attempts
to keep pace with truth. For Sterne, repetition—which I interpret here as stylistic
repetition—inhibits the proper function of an artist. Sterne’s philosophy of subjectivity
stresses flux (or motion), veracity (authenticity or truth), and the influences of the
external world that constantly press her to re-evaluate, change, and reposition herself.
Paradoxically, for Sterne, a passive acceptance of external change allows for greater
freedom and even an obligation for the artist to actively respond.8

7 “And this is why you find the older artist at times violently opposing views he held in
his youth. In both stages he tried to do away with obstructing repetition in order to
reestablish contact with the stream connecting past and future.” Hedda Sterne,
8 The fact, however, that Sterne consistently defines the artist as a “he” rather than “she,”
despite the fact that it is “her” artist statement, speaks directly to the social conditions of
Shaped by her early years in Romania, Vienna, and Paris, Sterne’s idea of subjectivity in flux and of a “veracity” that encompasses the changing facts of the external world derived in part from geographic, cultural, national, and political experiences that set her apart from that of from her American counterparts in the abstract expressionist milieu. Moreover, Sterne sharpened the contours of her artistic theory and practice against the model of subjectivity endorsed by the abstract expressionists. Yet Sterne’s response to the abstract expressionists is not only of interest in understanding the development of her body of work. Her difference also offers a fresh perspective from which to observe the formation of the dominant narrative of abstract expressionism itself.

Sterne’s archive poses some methodological challenges. Her personal letters and notes from the 1950s (the chronological focus of this study) are scant. Paradoxically, she received more publicity during the 1950s than at any other time in her career. This resulted in a denser cache of public documents from this period than from any other time. It includes exhibition reviews, appearances in Life magazine, and Sterne’s own artist gender that Wagner outlines in her essay on Krasner. Thus I do not suggest that Sterne’s “polyphonic” artistic practice allows her to escape the steep societal strictures placed on women artists within a deeply masculine “postwar artistic subculture” (as Wagner terms it). Like Krasner, Sterne continually negotiated gender stereotypes, from her role as an “artist-wife” to the description of her work as “feminine” in exhibition reviews. If for Wagner, however, the central issue is analyzing how, in such conditions, “an artist’s subjectivity, that sense-of-oneself-as-an-artist (a sense inseparable from an idea of one’s art) is formed,” then I suggest that the formation of Sterne’s artistic identity is incomprehensible without shifting the definition of subjectivity itself. Ultimately then, this project registers Sterne’s current “cultural anonymity” within the Life photograph as a marker of an artistic philosophy and practice so out of step with the dominant definition of artistic subjectivity among her contemporaries as to be inassimilable, even via gender stereotyped roles, to the dominant narrative of Abstract Expressionism. Sterne’s practice, on the other hand, emerged alongside and partially in response to that of the Abstract Expressionists. Thus, rather than treating Sterne’s career in isolation, this project finds the points of contact between Sterne and, as she termed them, “her friends the Abstract Expressionists” to be of critical importance.
statement of 1954 in *Arts Digest*. From 1960 until the 1980s, however, Sterne has left an abundance of private documents such as notes, letters, and interviews, many of which contain specific references to her concept of subjectivity. My own interviews with the artist, some thirty hours of conversations recorded between 2002 and 2007 when she was between the ages of 92 and 97, have helped to fill in crucial gaps. Sterne’s works themselves provide perhaps the most critical source. Like the archives, the works do not escape their own chronological challenges. When I first met Sterne I found many of these paintings and drawings in her studio and basement: some had their original stickers from Betty Parsons Gallery with the titles and dates used in their original exhibitions, others had no dates or signature and others were clearly labeled and dated when they were wrapped for storage at some point in the 1990s. Many works have been lost over the decades, however, surviving only as poor reproductions in exhibition catalogues or magazine articles from the 1950s.

In my conversations with Sterne she spoke about “my friends the Abstract Expressionists” from an unabashedly personal and critical perspective. The tenor and content of her criticisms has undoubtedly motivated me to look for evidence of this perspective in her work as well as in the archival material from that period and yet the fifty to sixty years separating her experiences from her memories has left plenty of space for those memories to evolve and transform. Rather than discount them, however, I accept them, recognizing that there is no unmediated access to any of this material, even the most seemingly objective documents from the period found in the archive. All of this material, taken together, is an accumulation of partial perspectives, none of which is
autonomous, straightforward, or definitive in itself. My hope is to treat these sources with as much transparency and historical accuracy as possible.

Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” has very much informed my approach to this material, as well as to the project at large. In her essay of the same name, Haraway argues for “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims.” In such a framework, partial perspectives offer an advantage precisely because they acknowledge their own limitations. “We do not seek partiality for its own sake,” she explains,

but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits, i.e., the view from above, but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions, i.e., of views from somewhere.9

Like Bakhtin’s description of a polyphonic novel as a higher unity that combines several fields of vision, Haraway suggests a “collective subject position” that joins partial views. More than polyphony or multiplicity, however, Haraway emphasizes the importance of embodiment and particularity. Within the terms of this project then I do not try to smooth over the gaps in information, decades between memories, or missing works, but rather treat them as a multiplicity of limited materials, or partial perspectives, that join together to provide a “larger vision” of Sterne’s artistic philosophy and historical position. It is not coincidental that Haraway’s theory of situated knowledge, or at least my interpretation of

it here, holds many affinities with my description of Sterne’s theory of subjectivity. My own academic training admittedly shapes my approach to the materials I study and even preconditions me to seek material that fit certain theoretical criteria. On the other hand, I forged a personal bond with Sterne over a shared appreciation for the finite and the particular. Furthermore, Sterne actively protected much of this material from being absorbed by various cultural narratives that threatened to flatten or essentialize it. By her own account she strongly avoided scholarly efforts to incorporate her work into the rubric of a feminist art history in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, she strongly resisted academic trends that would fall under the larger label “identity politics” in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sterne allowed me unlimited access to her studio and basement and even the drawers of her bedroom dresser, full of old black and white photographs, letters, and her 1941 passport from Romania to the United States, on the implicit understanding that these paintings, photographs, and letters comprised not “her” but historically contingent traces of her with which she often no longer felt any connection whatsoever. Fittingly, she was the first to tell me not to privilege her interpretation of her own works or even her conception of her own historical position.

Since the topic of this dissertation is essentially a de-centered theory of subjectivity as embodied in Hedda Sterne’s artistic philosophy and practice, its structure emphasizes context and dialogue rather than a stable notion of the subject itself. Thus while each chapter focuses on an aspect of Sterne’s philosophy, it begins by situating that theme within a given historical context and relationship. Given Sterne’s own emphasis on receptivity and reciprocity, however, I focus on several key relationships: Betty Parsons (her dealer), Saul Steinberg, (her husband and a fellow artist), and to a lesser degree,
Katharine Kuh (an influential curator and one of Sterne’s most ardent supporters). Betty Parsons’ emphasis on diversity of expression over a group identity for her gallery provided the literal space for Sterne to develop and exhibit her shifting styles. Parsons also gave her the philosophical support to respond critically to the work of those contemporaries who were exhibiting at the same gallery. Steinberg’s articulation of issues of authenticity as it related to identity and style, and especially as it disseminated via “cartoons” in mass-circulation publications, offers insight into Sterne and Steinberg’s common critique of some of these fellow artists. Finally, in the epilogue, Kuh’s curatorial vision of an American art history that unifies diverse environmental and regional traits—the American “e pluribus unum”—provides a contemporary critical framework for Sterne’s work as an “American” artist on an international stage. Like Sterne, Parsons, Steinberg, and Kuh, also had conflicted relationships with abstract expressionism and it is precisely where these points of conflict parallel Sterne’s divergent position on subjectivity that I find a coherent counter-narrative to the dominant narratives of the period. Thus this project also tells a kind of institutional and cultural history of the mid-century art world that treats the artist, her work, and the institutions that promoted (or failed to promote) it as inextricably linked. While Sterne’s individual experience helps to outline the parameters of the abstract expressionist movement as it was absorbed by a growing art market, the mass media, and a larger national identity, I want to suggest that those specific points at which Sterne’s example proved unassimilable to the narrative of abstract expressionism (resulting in her current cultural anonymity) suggest the need for a more comprehensive narrative that redefines the essential parameters.
Chapter one functions as a broad cultural context for the two chapters that follow by analyzing the 1951 *Life* photograph of “The Irascibles” as a document of a transitional moment in the narrative of abstract expressionism. More specifically, it traces the trajectory from an open dialogue in the late 1940s between a broad range of artists from Europe and America interested in Surrealism and abstraction to the essentializing and reification of abstract expressionism as a movement in the public imagination. In 1951 several of the now canonical abstract expressionists, led by Barnett Newman, requested that Parsons narrow the gallery’s focus to represent only a handful of men who defined themselves explicitly as abstract artists. After Parsons refused, several of Sterne’s colleagues, including Newman, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, left the gallery while Sterne remained. In contrast to her colleagues who joined the Sidney Janis Gallery, Sterne never sold enough paintings to pay her bills.\(^{10}\) Betty Parson’s employed a rhetoric of generative diversity to define her gallery, which allowed Sterne the literal and theoretical space to show her work, and yet Parsons’ philosophy proved to be unmarketable. Janis crafted a tight narrative for his gallery that explicitly paired European modernists in shows alongside the abstract expressionists, effectively validating the younger Americans’ place within the quickly forming art historical narrative and simultaneously establishing record prices for their work. Broadly then, chapter one examines the interplay between differing theories of identity and the market.

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\(^{10}\) Newman did not join the Sidney Janis Gallery and, in fact, withdrew from exhibitions all together during the mid-1950s. However, chapter one argues that he did so to exercise more control over the ultimate reception and marketing of his work. In that sense, his approach is almost the inverse of Sterne’s continued exhibitions at Parsons. John P. O’Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990); Ann Temkin, “Barnett Newman on Exhibition,” in *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 45.
More narrowly, it explores the resistance of Parsons and Sterne to the rise of a contemporary art gallery system in which artists began to market themselves, as Harold Rosenberg wrote in 1952 (the same year Pollock and Rothko joined Sidney Janis), as “a commodity with a trademark.”¹¹ I argue that Sterne’s emphasis on avoiding repetition simultaneously allowed her to resist a fixed notion of identity as well as the pressure to commodify that identity.

Chapter two focuses on Martin Buber’s concept of reciprocity as a key influence on Sterne’s artistic philosophy and explores the ways in which her 1953 exhibition of rotating canvases at the Betty Parsons Gallery served as perhaps her most literal, manifestation of a reciprocal relationship between the painting and the viewer. In a work such as Circular Machine of 1952 [Fig. 7] she invited viewers physically to turn her work, a technique that activated the role of the viewer as well as the physical environment of the gallery while simultaneously de-emphasizing her own aesthetic intentions. Thus this chapter examines Hedda Sterne’s 1953 exhibition, her first after the exodus of her contemporaries, within the larger context of Betty Parsons’ effort to preserve her gallery as a space for diverse expressions. Furthermore, the chapter explores Sterne’s exhibition of tondos as an explicit response to the theories of subjectivity proposed in the works of her colleagues, especially Barnett Newman’s works of the early 1950s. Her portrait of Barnett Newman, painted in the same year as her tondos (although not exhibited publicly for 14 years), establishes a clear antithesis: she paints Newman trapped at the bottom of one of his “zips” as his body dissolves into the background. In effect she opposes her own multiple forms of aesthetic expression (including portraiture)

and revolving perspectives against Newman’s articulation of a signature style [Figs. 30 and 31].

Chapter three begins by analyzing the 1951 *Life* magazine spread that featured Sterne and Steinberg with the headline “Romanian Born Cartoonist and Artist-Wife Ambush the World with Pen and Paintbrush” [Figure 6]. Unlike the “Irascibles” photograph published seven months earlier, this photograph showcases Sterne alongside her paintings. Yet, she also sits next to her husband, or rather her husband’s self-portrait. Immediately the document draws to the forefront several issues concerning authenticity especially as it relates to artistic identity, gender roles, and mass media. First of all, Steinberg’s penchant for wearing self-drawn masks or presenting entire drawings of himself in order to avoid posing for press photographs underlines his playful yet incisive attitude towards representation and identity. On one hand, the artist’s line is as authentic a marker as a photograph; on the other hand, it is a fiction, as artificial as any form of self-representation. In the *Life* spread, however, Steinberg’s representation of himself also claims Sterne’s representation as part of his work. The caption of the photograph beneath the photo spread reads: “Self-Portrait with Wife finds a two-dimensional Steinberg sitting sternly at a real table beside a real Hedda Sterne and a well-behaved linear cat.” Sterne plays the “real” against Steinberg’s constant permutations of the “real.” Chapter three frames their relationship within the terms of a shared critical position; both artists questioned the assertion of fixed identity in style. This chapter examines a selection of their works from the late 1940s and to mid-1950s as evidence of their dialogue. Where Steinberg’s drawings often located an empty, if darkly humorous, space behind the mask of self-expression and a consciously contrived use of style to invent personas, Sterne’s
work emphasized an abundance of shifting exterior sources that contributed to a fluid and multiple mode of artistic expression. Both artists showed at Betty Parsons alongside the abstract expressionists and socialized with Barnet Newman, Willem de Kooning, and Harold Rosenberg. Chapter two also explores Steinberg’s identity as a commercial artist. In contrast with Sterne and their mutual “fine artist” friends, Steinberg modeled a more explicit business model, mass producing his work and selling it to the highest bidder, including Hallmark. Yet he utilized his relationship to the market as another way to explore authenticity and conceptions of identity.

Finally, the epilogue points to Katherine Kuh’s placement of Sterne’s 1955 painting, New York [Fig. 78], as the frontispiece for her 1956 Venice Biennale exhibition, American Artists Paint the City as an appropriate historical example which not only made space for Sterne’s work, but also questions the inevitability of the terms in which we now define abstract expressionism. In his 1999 essay, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” T. J. Clark intimates that “there has been a feeling in the air for some time now that writing on Abstract Expressionism has reached an impasse.” As an antidote he suggests, “sometimes the way out of this kind of impasse in historical work comes from proposing another set of possible descriptions that the paintings in question might “come under”—making the proposal, especially in the beginning, with no very clear sense of where it may lead. How would it alter things, one asks, what sort of new orders in the objects would be set up if we chose to look at them this way?” He proposes the description “vulgar” which he indeed utilizes to reorder the paintings most

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13 Ibid., 375.
closely associated with abstract expressionism without, however, breaching any traditional canonical boundaries. His attempt to realign these paintings is not far off from Katharine Kuh’s 1956 use of regionalism to group many of these same paintings, and yet her “set of possible descriptions” allowed for a wider array of paintings, many of which are now unfamiliar to us. Rather than suggesting that we adopt, retroactively, Kuh’s terms however, the objective of this dissertation is to offer several historical terms that, taken together, might encourage new dialogues between works rather than exactly “new orders.”

Hedda Sterne, Betty Parsons, Saul Steinberg and Katharine Kuh are by no means the “major” names commonly associated with abstract expressionism. Yet by taking the terms of their engagement seriously, by examining their situated, partial perspectives on abstract expressionism, a host of new interpretations emerge. This project prioritizes Hedda Sterne’s theory of subjectivity as the primary, organizing term around which these other perspectives coalesce and opens up the narrative of abstract expressionism.
CHAPTER 1: “I DON’T PAINT LOGOS”

I believe in diversity, not uniformity.
-- Betty Parsons, 1952

Here the commonplace phrase, "I have bought an O" (rather than a painting by O) becomes literally true. The man who started to remake himself has made himself into a commodity with a trademark.
-- Harold Rosenberg, 1952

 Scholars most often detach the ubiquitous 1951 *Life* photograph of “an Irascible group of advanced artists” from the specifics of its production [Fig. 1]. In the absence of contextual information, different myths have coalesced around the image in an effort to explain how these artists—determined to resist classification and labels—might appear so fortuitously in a group photograph that has been described as “the unofficial portrait of the New York School.” In an image thus mistaken for a portrait of a canonical movement, Sterne has remained an enigmatic figure. Yet, in the context of its production, the *Life* photograph represented not a single movement but a dialogue, in which Sterne was fully involved. Tracing the trajectory of events that led to the photograph not only answers basic questions regarding the selection of the group, and why Sterne is in it, but also allows a reconsideration of the dynamic between individual and group identities during the period in general. Coming to terms with how Sterne belongs in the photograph necessitates a re-conception of the larger group identity. In the late 1940s and early 1950s most of the artists featured in the *Life* photograph engaged in a larger and often

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cacophonous dialogue between diverse participants including Americans and Europeans who were utilizing a variety of approaches and combinations of Surrealist techniques, geometric abstraction, figuration and cubism.

Inspired by a three-day artists’ roundtable in April of 1950, “Artists’ Session at Studio 35” (an active artists’ space in New York), the artists wrote a letter to the board president of the Metropolitan Museum complaining about the reactionary curatorial biases of their upcoming survey of American art [Fig. 2]. At the outset of the artists’ roundtable discussion (preserved in a transcript of the sessions), the sculptor David Hare said: “Everybody here knows everybody else’s work.”17 What is stunning to the contemporary reader about this is how diverse the list of participants appears compared to our current canon of artists from the era: William Baziotes, Janice Biala, Louise Bourgeois, James Brooks, William de Kooning, Jimmy Ernst, Herbert Ferber, Adolph Gottlieb, Peter Grippe, David Hare, Hans Hofman, Weldon Kees, Ibram Lassaw, Norman Lewis, Richard Lippold, Seymour Lipton, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Richard Pousette-Dart, Ad Reinhardt, Ralph Rosenborg, Theodoros Stamos, Hedda Sterne, David Smith, and Bradley Walker Tomlin. Perhaps even more interesting is the small number of galleries representing this disparate group: Betty Parsons Gallery, Thomas Egan Gallery, Samuel Kootz Galley, Peridot, Marian Willard Gallery and to a much lesser extent Norlyst Gallery. The artists who later came to be called “Abstract Expressionists” emerged from a small but heterogenous group who had regular contact with one another through their galleries in New York.

When Sterne appeared in the “Irascibles” *Life* photograph in 1951, Betty Parsons Gallery represented nine of the fifteen artists featured in the *Life* photograph, including Hedda Sterne, the lone woman pictured and one of only four women among the twenty-eight signers of the letter. While Charles Egan Gallery showed Willem de Kooning and the roster of artists at Samuel Kootz Gallery included Gottlieb, Baziotes and Motherwell, Parsons undoubtedly supported the majority of the now canonical “Abstract Expressionists,” including Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Bradly Walker-Tomlin, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Theodoros Stamos, as well as Hedda Sterne.  

Speaking of the era of the photograph (roughly 1947-1952), Newman described the intimacy of the environment in which these artists showed their work:

> [W]e had no general public. The only thing that we did have was the opportunity of seeing each other in shows, so to speak. There were just a few galleries. Peggy Guggenheim up until 1947 … and between ’47 and 52, you might say Betty Parsons, Charlie Egan and to some extent, Sam Kootz were the only places where any of us had an opportunity of presenting ourselves, of showing the work. It was not, in that sense, a true marketplace. It was not, in that sense, even a showing place. It was a very special situation. It was a primitive cultural situation.  

The three galleries that Newman lists some 19 years later match the three galleries most represented in the *Life* photograph. That Newman did not consider this “special situation” a “true marketplace,” and described it as ending in 1952, reflects the departure in that year of Pollock, from Betty Parsons Gallery for Sidney Janis Gallery, a move that would prove extremely profitable for him. Still, Newman, and Rothko soon left Parsons as well.

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18 James Brooks was showing at Peridot Gallery. Jimmy Ernst had had a solo exhibition at Norlyst Gallery in 1944, but he did not appear to be represented by any gallery in 1951.

By the mid-1950s, Rothko, de Kooning, Motherwell, and Gottlieb had all joined Pollock at Sidney Janis. To the extent that the artists really were making very little money in the era Newman mentions, the galleries were indeed not much of a market-place before 1952. After 1952 Sidney Janis aggressively marketed this much more selective group of artists and over the next few years, the value of their work skyrocketed. As this took place, the abstract expressionists emerged from a more expansive artistic culture that tolerated, if not valued, difference. With the terms difference and diversity, I do not primarily mean gender, race, or class, although given the usual, all-white, all-male abstract expressionist canon it does seem important to note the presence at the roundtable of an African-American artist Norman Lewis, as well as three women—Janice Biala, Louise Bourgeois, and Sterne. Furthermore, Parsons showed an unprecedented number of women artists for the era, so in that respect her gallery did introduce a significant amount of gender diversity to the art scene. Instead, the sort of difference that the artists pointed out during the roundtable discussion was primarily aesthetic, procedural or intellectual in nature. This type of heterogeneity, however, was ultimately unsustainable because it wasn’t profitable in the long term. The fact that Sidney Janis did not represent any women or artists of color suggests that both social and aesthetic diversity went together. In 1951, a larger group of artists was still in the midst of contesting what their work was about, defining their projects in dialogue with one another in a network of small galleries.

20 Deirdre Robson, “The Market for Abstract Expressionism: The Time Lag Between Critical and Commercial Acceptance,” in Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 420. While Robson emphasizes that the general stability of the economy in the mid to late 1950s provided the condition that allowed the Abstract Expressionists to sell their work for record prices, she also points to Sidney Janis and Samuel Kootz’s marketing techniques (which validated the artists’ worth in relation to European masters) as a key component in the American artists’ financial success.
But by 1952, with the introduction of Sidney Janis' more profitable model of an art gallery, the commercial art market began to play a larger role in defining who belonged in that dialogue. What emerged at Sidney Janis was a select group of abstract signature styles that were diverse relative to one another, yet uniform in so much as they adhere to the principle of a "signature style" in the first place. The current canon now suggests a certain inevitability about the selection of those signature styles, which makes Sterne seem out of place. Sterne’s presence in the 1951 Life photograph, however, points us to a different and more nuanced conversation. Both Betty Parsons and Sterne were conscious of the ramifications of this marketplace shift and both women made formal statements that defined their philosophies in opposition to the uniformity that the market encouraged.

The Photograph and Letter to the Metropolitan Museum of Art

The photograph can be most directly understood as the result of a letter of protest addressed to Roland L. Redmond, president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and signed by 18 painters and 10 sculptors on May 20th 1950. As the photograph’s caption in Life states:

The solemn people above, along with three others, made up the group of “irascible” artists who raised the biggest fuss about the Metropolitan’s competition. All representatives of advanced art, they paint in styles which vary from the dribblings of Pollock (Life, Aug. 8, 1949) to the Cyclopean phantoms of Baziotes, and all have distrusted the museum since its director likened them to “flat-chested” pelicans “strutting upon the intellectual wastelands.”

21 "Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight Against Show," Life 30 (January 15, 1951): 34. It is unclear why Life did not invite the ten sculptors who had also signed the letter to participate in the photograph, which would have left Sterne in the company of three other women: Louise Bourgeois, Day Schnabel and Mary Callery. Yet, even the body of the original letter refers to the “undersigned painters,” effectively ignoring the
In the letter the artists stated that they “reject the monster national exhibition to be held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art next December, and will not submit work to its jury.”

It then lists the organization of the exhibition and the choice of jurors, as well as the director and associate curator of American art, as evidence against “any hope that a just proportion of advanced art will be included.” Furthermore, the letters go on to promote the cause of advanced art by stating: “We draw to the attention of those gentlemen the historical fact that, for roughly a hundred years, only advanced art has made any consequential contribution to civilization.” *Life* notes this aspect of the letter in its extended caption

Their revolt and subsequent boycott of the show was in keeping with an old tradition among avant-garde artists. French painters in 1874 rebelled against their official juries and held the first impressionist exhibition. U.S. artists in 1908 broke with the National Academy jury to launch the famous Ashcan School. The effect of the “irascibles” remains to be seen.

It is possible one of the spokesmen for the artists’ group helped to introduce these historical comparisons. As B. H. Friedman’s article detailing the circumstances surrounding the photograph explains, Adolph Gottlieb wrote the initial letter in consultation with those who agreed to sign it and apparently received the most input from Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt. It was then Newman who delivered the letter to an editor at the *New York Times* on Sunday, May 21st, purportedly knowing that Mondays

second group of signatures headed under the sentence, “the following sculptors support this stand.”


23 "Irascible Group," 34.

were “soft” news days. The Times ran the story on the front page on Monday, May 22nd under the headline, “18 Painters Boycott Metropolitan; Charge ‘Hostility to Advanced Art,’” and the next day, Tuesday, May 23rd, the New York Herald Tribune ran a reply in defense of the Metropolitan under the headline that first suggested the group title that would remain with the photograph: “The Irascible Eighteen.” Finally, Life decided to frame its coverage of the Metropolitan exhibition after its opening in December 1950 through the lens of the controversy that had preceded it [Fig. 3]. Life’s editor, Dorothy Seiberling, apparently contacted Adolph Gottlieb about taking a photograph of the group for the exhibition and all of the artists in the photograph were called to discuss the possibility, including what they should wear: according to Barnett Newman’s wife Annalee’s memory, “Barney kept insisting the group be photographed like bankers.”

The photographer Nina Leen’s memory of the event underlines her nervousness about dealing with so many egos in one room. She recalled, “I put out the chairs and left the positions up to them. I did not dare tell them who should be in front and who should be in back—I might have put the biggest genius in the back. If I had moved an artist, he might have walked out. I just made sure all their faces could be seen.” The photograph was a work of collaboration between the artists and the press, in the sense that it began with the artists’ consensus to sign the letter in the first place, followed by the artists’ consensus to allow a photograph to be taken, knowing full well how it would be used by Life; they further made it their own through their choice of clothing and physical arrangement.

Friedman, "Irascibles," 102.
Collins has acknowledged that, according to later interviews with participants, the artists had differing levels of comfort in this “cooperation with a popular magazine.” Yet
Sterne had appeared in *Life* no less than three times in 18 months between 1950 and 1951 [Figs. 3, 4, 5, & 6]. Her first appearance was in March of 1950, only a month preceding the "Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35." The *Life* article, “19 Young Americans,” featured her with her painting, *Moonlight* (undated in the article), reproduced on the first full page of the article. Theodoros Stamos was the only other artist from the "Artists’ Session at Studio 35" in the article. This resulted, in part, from the age requirement for the contest for which *Life* solicited recommendations from American art schools and museums: Stamos, Sterne, and Sonia Sekula were the only painters at Betty Parson Gallery to meet the age requirement of 36 years or younger, as all of the other artists, including Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still were born before the 1914 birth date cutoff. Sterne, in fact, was actually four years too old, having been born in 1910. According to Sterne's 2001 confession, however, Betty Parsons evidently “guessed” at, and circulated, a false birth year of 1916, precisely when she nominated her for this contest. According to Sterne it was then Steinberg who encouraged her to maintain the fiction out of courtesy to Parsons. Sterne and Stamos, both signatories of the letter of protest, then found themselves in the odd position of being included in another show the Metropolitan at the time the letter against the Met was sent. It was a point that the unnamed editor at The New York Herald Tribune did not miss:

Yet works by no less than eleven of the twenty-eight signators are either owned by the Metropolitan or have been included in its exhibitions. Pictures by four of the eighteen painters were hung on the museum’s walls only last month in an

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28 Conversation with Josef Helfenstein, September 6, 2001, p. 11 of transcript.
29 This “mistake” made Sterne appear two years younger than her husband, rather than the four years older that she in fact was.
exhibition entitled “American Artists Under Thirty-six” (and most of the remaining signers would not have been eligible anyway because of their age).\(^{30}\)

As Bradford Collins has pointed out, the presence of Sterne and Stamos in the “abstraction” portion of Life’s “19 Young Americans” article underlines the magazine’s effort to display both abstract and figurative art as equally valid alternatives. Art historians, he argues, have over-played the media’s hostility toward abstraction and uncritically perpetuated a “bohemian legend,” whereas throughout the late 1940s and the early 1950s the pages of Life magazine, in particular, display a popular fascination with abstraction and a desire to document, if not help the public understand, its emergence. Life did not choose figuration over abstraction, but instead declared both valid. Collins argues that the artists’ “bohemian oratory” was part of their construction of an image which both inflated the hostility of their purported enemy in the press and belied their use of the press to market themselves to the very public they supposedly wanted to hold at bay. Ultimately, Collins suggests that the Irascibles photograph marks precisely the time period in American art when these artists’ conception of their work and identity evolved from “vocation” to “career”:

A closer look at the events leading up to [the Life photograph] suggests that the seamless screen of bohemian oratory maintained by artists of the New York School in the 1950s masked the fact that with them originated today’s model of art as a career to be manufactured, in opposition to the older model of it as a vocation to be followed.\(^{31}\)

Sterne also exploited the Life photo for her career. That she wore the same beret in all three photographs that appeared in Life emphasizes her consciousness of the image she

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was constructing. Her three appearances in *Life* also make clear that she was not against publicity. Her work was also reproduced in *Fortune* magazine twice, in 1954 and 1960. What she specifically criticized was the assumption that a signatory style could express an artist’s identity.

**The Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35**

The recorded transcripts of the artists' sessions at Studio 35 provide important evidence of how “advanced artists,” as they called themselves in their letter to the Metropolitan, conceived of themselves: as both individuals and a community. The idea for the letter itself purportedly grew out of the artists' sessions at Studio 35, which took place on April 21-23rd of 1950 and included a diverse list of artist participants, including a large portion of Betty Parsons’ artists, with the notable exceptions of Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko. All three signed the letter. 32 While the transcripts of the session attests to the artists’ resistance to a label—Willem de Kooning famously ends the meeting by stating, “it is disastrous to name ourselves”—the event itself emphasizes the degree to which the artists engaged in a group dialogue that assumed participation in a

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32 The topic of the letter does not show up in the published transcript of the event, however the publication acknowledges that it was “drastically edited (perhaps half)” by the meeting’s organizer, Robert Goodnough. “Artists Sessions at Studio 35,” 9. However, the issue of representing themselves to the public does come up repeatedly in the transcripts. Friedman suggests that the idea for the letter evolved out of an “informal, unrecorded conversation” as the meeting was breaking up on the last day. "Irascibles," 98. According to Collins, they were asked to support the effort because of their connection to the Betty Parsons Gallery. "A Historiographic Study," 296, n. 58.
group that was “modern, advanced, and not-academic.”\textsuperscript{33} The first topic of conversation, proposed by Herbert Ferber, addressed the public’s reception of their work:

The public has been mentioned, and it seems to me in a professional group like this we should attempt to identify our relationship to the public, perhaps in two ways. In a personal way, and in a way which relates to our work. By the second I perhaps mean that the public really is asking all the time “What does this work mean?” I think it might be helpful to adopt an attitude towards the public in the sense of an answer to the question. We needn’t answer the question. What I am asking is that we adopt an attitude of either discarding the question or trying to answer it.\textsuperscript{34}

The most immediate answer came from Adolph Gottlieb (who later took charge in writing the letter to the Metropolitan). “It seems to me,” he said, “that we are approaching an academy version of abstract painting.” While the moderator, Richard Lippold, pushed to move away from the topic of the public, Barnett Newman brought it back and reinterpreted Gottlieb’s reference to an academy more generally as “community,” presuming that abstraction was their mutual bond: “When Gottlieb raises the question of abstraction, I don’t think we should just dismiss it. It might be formulated into this question: do we artists really have a community? If so, what makes it a community.” After David Hare resisted a need for community altogether and insisted that the artists should likewise reject any need for public acceptance, Ad Reinhardt returned the conversation emphatically back to community, stating, “Newman’s question is pertinent. Why can’t we find out what our community is and what our differences are, and what each artist thinks of them?” Robert Motherwell then reiterated the question, “What then exactly constitutes the basis of our community?” Sterne’s immediate reply seemed to return to Newman’s assumed correlation between “abstraction” and “community.”

\textsuperscript{33} These passages appear in Goodnough, "Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35," 22 (De Kooning), and 11 (Ferber), respectively. 
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 10.
stated, “We need a common vocabulary. Abstract should really mean abstract and modern should really mean modern. We don’t mean the same things with the same words.” Hofmann then rejected the suggestion for a common vocabulary outright, claiming, “There is nothing that is common to all of us except our creative urge. It just means one thing to me; to discover myself as well as I can.” Yet his response, paradoxically, revealed what became the clear connection between most of the participants: art as process. For a group of artists who emphasize differences (although none as emphatically as Hare and Hofmann), their individual answers to the question, “How do you know when a work is finished” were almost comically similar. In general, the artists described their work as ongoing projects that don’t begin with any one canvas or sculpture; they described the process as a struggle with the work as a living and evolving entity that is never finished. Along the same lines, the artists seemed to agree throughout that they shared a communal identity as “abstract” artists, yet, just as Sterne pointed out, they continued to argue over a definition of abstraction, leaving them in the end with the problem of a group title. Motherwell suggested three titles all including the term Abstract: “Abstract-Expressionist; Abstract-Symbolist; Abstract-Objectionist.”

Within the context of the three day dialogue as a whole, de Kooning’s final quip—“It is disastrous to name ourselves”—does not negate the possibility of a group identity, but rather references the vitality of a community committed whole-heartedly to questions over answers. In the same way that many of the artists in attendance emphasized that a painting was never really “finished,” the dialogue regarding “what makes a community” was left open. In a sense the common protest against a label that emerged from many of

36 Ibid., 22.
the artists over the next decade became a unifying doctrine. Herbert Ferber summarized the issue of community on the first day as something that could perhaps be defined in relation to a perceived outsider: “So far as the community of artists goes, it seems to me the question would involve the question of difference—between us and other artists. In that way we may have a feeling of community.”37 In so far as the idea to write a letter of protest to the Metropolitan emerged from this general intellectual context, the photograph indeed represents a community. Yet Ferber’s suggestion that the group might define their identity best in relief, speaks more to the richness of the preceding dialogue and the artists’ valuation of an open-ended process of asking questions than it does to a lack of community altogether.

Throughout this conversation, Sterne makes several statements closely related to comments she had jotted in a 1949 notebook, as well as to the artist’s statement she would publish in 1954 in *Arts Digest*. In the context of the larger dialogue, certain aspects of Sterne’s vocabulary clearly reverberated with her colleagues, while other word choices signal a difference. Her answer to the question, “How do you know when a work is finished?” began by fitting with those of her colleagues, who likewise reiterated the importance of the process of making the work of art as an act of defining or understanding either themselves:

Painting is for me a problem of simultaneous understanding and explaining. I try to approach my subject uncluttered by esthetic prejudices. I put it on canvas in order to explain it to myself, yet the result should reveal something plus. As I work the thing takes life and fights back. There comes a moment when I can’t continue. Then I stop until next time.38

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37 Ibid., 11.
38 Ibid., 12.
Yet, unlike the others, Sterne introduced the idea of “esthetic prejudices,” perhaps hinting at her stylistic variances. On the second day of the meeting, Sterne began the conversation with the topic of titles, declaring their inadequacy:

I think that titling of paintings is a problem. The titles a painter gives his paintings help to classify him, and this is wrong. A long poetic title or number . . . Whatever you do seems a statement of attitude. The same thing if you give a descriptive title . . . Even refraining from giving any at all creates a misunderstanding.39

Like de Kooning’s resistance to a title for the group, Sterne seemed concerned that titles implied classification, and her question set off a heated debate among the artists which Motherwell clarified and redirected: “I think Sterne is dealing with a real problem—what is the content of our work? What are we really doing? The question is how to name what as yet has been unnamed.” The artists did not arrive at any answers, but like the previous topics of conversation, their dialogue reinforced the importance of the questions. Sterne appeared to share with at least Baziotes, Motherwell, Poussette-Dart, Reinhardt, and de Kooning a sense that there was a great discrepancy between what they were communicating visually and the capacity of language to classify or explain it.40

Just as Sterne was critical of titles, she also seemed to generally oppose predetermined aesthetic criteria, which she articulated at several points in the discussion as a critique of “beauty.” Richard Lippold asked a rather large question which addressed many of the artists’ shared interest in their projects as part of a continuing process rather than as objects:

There are those here who feel that the things which they make are simply moments of a continuity and, therefore, in themselves are not objects for their

39 Ibid., 14.
own sakes, but moments in the continuity. Is there an irreconcilability in making an object in itself which, at the same time, reflects continuity? This, so far, has been spoken of as incompatible.41

Sterne’s immediate reply suggests that she equates “making an object in itself” with having an *a priori* idea of what the work should be rather than making work as a process or a search: “But that means that you have decided already exactly what *is* ‘beautiful.’ ‘Beauty’ can’t be pursued directly.”42 On the third day of the meeting, she returns to this idea, stating: “I think that for the artist himself the problem is not ‘beauty,’ ever. It is one of accuracy, validity, and life.”43 Sterne’s choice of the word “accuracy” stands apart in the general vocabulary of the artists and is notable in relation to the term “veracity” in her artist’s statement of 1954, suggesting a consistent distinction in her attitude about her work. Her use of the word “beauty,” however, seems to strike a communal chord and sets off a debate between Newman and Pousette-Dart as to whether beauty represents the “known” (Newman’s position) or ultimate unknown (Pousette Dart’s position). Sterne then refused to define the word: “I am not here to define anything; but to give life to what I have the urge to give life to. We live by the particular, not by the general.” Her response, ironically, echoes Hans Hofmann’s earlier refusal of her suggestion that the group define a common vocabulary. Whereas he calls on the artists to be as different as possible, she emphasizes “the particular” over the general. While they both use the word “urge”, his “creative urge” leads him to “discover myself as well as I can” whereas she “gives life to what I have the urge to give life to.” The difference between their respective “urges” is not necessarily apparent. The discussion that follows Sterne’s mention of “the

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 18.
particular” reveals that the other participants shared a presumption that each artist is driven by an interior motivation to use a specific aesthetic style. However, Sterne’s use of the word “particular” is most likely another example of the group using the same vocabulary when they “don't mean the same things.” Gottlieb suggests that the particular will be apparent on an individual, aesthetic level:

I agree with Sterne that we are always concerned with the particular, not the general. Any general discussion of esthetics is a discussion of philosophy; any conclusion can apply to any work of art. Why not have people tell us why they do what they do. Why does Brooks use swirling shapes? Why Newman a straight line? What is it that makes each person use those particular forms that they use?

However, based on Sterne’s previous comment that she approaches her subject “uncluttered by esthetic prejudices,” the “particular” for Sterne, would seem to refer not to a consistent use of “particular forms” by an individual artist, but rather to the particularity of each subject she paints. What follows Gottlieb’s question is a long discussion that moves from Brooks’ explanation of his improvisatory method to distinctions between automatism and improvisation as processes to the question of whether geometric shapes have an inherent ability to communicate clarity or order. The conversation regarding geometry, perhaps not surprisingly, reaches the most intense and personally invested point in the entire roundtable discussion and it effectively evolves into a discussion about what abstraction means to individual artists. There seemed to be a smooth and logical progression for most of the artists from a conversation about geometric shapes to a discussion of improvisation and automatism. The quick jumps in the conversation between process and form suggest that most of the artists presumed a correlation between types of abstraction and method. De Kooning’s suggestion, however,

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44 Ibid., 10.
that geometry excluded automatism, seemed farther than the others were willing to go. He stated: “The end of a painting in this kind of geometric painting would be almost the graph for a possible painting—like a blueprint.” To this Tomlin asked, “Would you say that automatic structure is in the process of becoming, and that ‘geometry’ has already been shown and terminated?” De Kooning replied, “Yes.” Motherwell, Baziotes, Newman, and Sterne then all, in their own idioms, offered both, as Baziotes termed them, “a geometric shape” and an “unreasonable shape” as valid modes of expression. Sterne framed the debate in terms of Western and Chinese “thinking,” explaining, “I think it has to do with Western thinking. A Chinese thinks very well, but does not use logic. The use of geometrical forms comes from logical thinking.” Primitivist and essentializing as it is, Sterne’s statement reiterated Baziotes’s endorsement of equally valid possibilities.

The context of this conversation is important in an effort to understand Reinhardt and Sterne’s brief discussion of her work. As a result of her statement about “logic,” Reinhardt’s asks her to place her own work within the debate: “Your work to some extent looks generally planned and preconceived. I would like some discussion on it.” Given that Reinhardt had defended the clarity of geometry in the previous conversation and that his work was in the process of becoming increasingly geometric, the term “preconceived” may not have been quite the insult one would presume in a group of artists that emphatically stressed the importance of process. Yet, since Reinhardt does not reference any specific element or style within Sterne’s work, it is not clear what aspect of it he considered “pre-conceived.” In general, the artists’ references to one another’s works were made in loose terms of style (a swirl, a stripe). Her work certainly wasn’t geometric.

46 Ibid., 19.
47 Ibid.
in relationship to Newman’s, but then again, neither was it full of free gestural brushstrokes as in a De Kooning. What she had shown publicly during the late 1940s varied in style and levels of abstraction, but was consistent in almost always containing a reference to a recognizable subject matter (most often machines in space). Thus it seems likely that by using the term “pre-conceived,” Reinhardt was introducing to the debate on improvisation and abstraction the issue of pre-chosen subject matter. By choosing forms or structures from the environment, this line of argument would seem to indicate, Sterne also chose a form or structure for the work. Sterne’s reply does not attempt to situate her work within the terms of the debate on abstraction, but rather affirms the role of process in her painting: “Preconceived only partly. Because as I go the painting begins to function by rules of its own, often preventing me from achieving my original vision.”

Her answer recalls Martin Buber’s description of reciprocity, “our works form us.”; however, it also matches the vocabulary which the other artists use to describe “struggles” with their canvases. Reinhardt’s question points to a significant difference in Sterne’s 1940s work: it does not, on the surface, communicate the important role she felt that process played in her painting. It was process, or painting as a form of understanding, that most connected Sterne to her colleagues, and yet on a purely aesthetic level, her works apparently failed to communicate this. Her use of the word “accuracy,” although vague in the roundtable discussion, might offer clues to her conception of process when paired with the term “veracity” in her later artist statement. Arguably, focusing on Sterne’s participation in the group dialogue allows for an understanding of the many

48 Ibid.
preoccupations which Sterne shared with her fellow artists, while simultaneously laying
the groundwork for understanding her differences as still part of the same conversation.

**Art Historical Conceptions of the Canonical Abstract Expressionists**

In a survey book on abstract expressionism, David Anfam gives a rare account of the
circumstances surrounding the *Life* photograph:

The photograph entitled “The Irascibles,” taken by Nina Leen of *Life* magazine for its
15 January, 1951 issue (since reproduced often enough to have become a cliché), was
long considered to show the Abstract Expressionist pantheon gathered to protest
against the conservative anti-modern exhibition policies of the Metropolitan Museum
of Art. Instead it was more a hurried assembly of figures who had no common
manifesto other than their “irascible” opposition to an outside enemy. Unlike most
previous avant-gardes they remained too individualistic to accept a group identity.
‘With us,’ said Newman in 1965, ‘only the individual artist can die or continue to
grow and live.’ Yet there is still scope for a more representative study than the fifteen
individuals rounded up by *Life*. It is only fair to note that Jimmy Ernst and the single
token woman, Hedda Sterne, are there by chance and find no place in the present
study.”

After discrediting the artists’ role in assembling as a group for the photograph, Anfam
goes on to assign each of the artists, excluding Sterne and Ernst, to either a “primary” or
“secondary” role within abstract expressionism based on the anonymous “consensus” of
canon formation. Anfam’s primary criterion is whether the artist in question made
“notably original statements.” As we’ve seen, *Life* selected the group on the basis of a
letter signed by the artists, not, as Anfam tells us, as “a hurried assembly of figures who
had no common manifesto other than their ‘irascible’ opposition to an outside enemy’”

What is at stake in Anfam’s description is the legitimacy of the groups’
acknowledgement of themselves as a community, not to mention their efforts at self-

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50 Some of the signees, however, were out of town at the time of the photo shoot and thus
not featured in the photograph, including Hans Hofmann.
promotion. Sterne and Jimmy Ernst were not there by chance. Rather they represent the
diversity of perspectives and aesthetic expression within the larger conversation that took
place. This is not to say that the artists’ self-selection process trumps later art historical
attempts to categorize them by their aesthetic positions but rather to suggest that the
artists’ own attempts to define themselves in dialogue as a community merit
consideration.

Confusing the matter greatly, however, are the artists’ own origin myths. Anfam,
for instance, takes Barnett Newman at his word when he stated in 1965, “With us only
the individual artist can die or continue to grow and live.”51 However, a close look at
Newman’s role as a group organizer reveals that he most often made these statements of
extreme individuality when he was paradoxically attempting to define a group. Another
of Newman’s frequently quoted descriptions of the artists’ individuality was made in the
plural: “Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making it out of
ourselves, out of our own feelings.”52 Significantly, Newman published this essay, “The


\[52\] Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” in Landau, Reading Abstract Expressionism, 139. (Originally published in Tiger’s Eye 1, no. 6 (December 1948): 51-53). In fact, Newman organized a group exhibition of his peers, which also included his own work, at the Betty Parsons Gallery even before he had his first solo exhibition in January of 1950, effectively forming a group identity before he honed and unveiled his individual artistic identity. Entitled “The Ideographic Picture” and mounted in January of 1947, the exhibition included the work of Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Boris Margo, Theodoros Stamos, Ad Reinhardt, Pietro Lazzari, and Hans Hofmann. Newman again spoke for his colleagues, describing a “new force” in American painting that was “spontaneous” and had emerged “from several points,” which he described as “the modern counterpart of the primitive art impulse.” (He also spoke for the Kwakiutl artist, when he defined this primitive impulse through the Northwest Indian’s use of abstract shapes as “directed by a ritualistic will toward metaphysical understanding.”) Furthermore, he puts pressure on the artists to define the movement for themselves: “Since then, various critics and dealers have tried to label it, describe it. It is now time for the artist himself, by showing the
Sublime is Now,” in The Tiger’s Eye, a small artist-run magazine edited by Ruth and John Stephan. Like Newman, John Stephan showed his work at Betty Parsons Gallery and like Parsons, the Stephens apparently insisted on an ethos of stylistic diversity. Both Ann Gibson and Pamela Franks have emphasized in their respective books on The Tiger’s Eye, that despite the diversity, the magazine was a collaborative effort among a wide group of artists that actively promoted a dialogue between different perspectives and styles.\[^{53}\] As Franks describes, the Stephens published statements and reproduced works by a wide variety of artists, “without regard for preexisting stylistic hierarchies.”\[^{54}\] Moreover, the Stephens’ editorial philosophy was not unique, but reflected the general idealism of the arts community at the time:

In the wake of the overwhelming destruction of World War II, the direction of art and even the very possibility of meaningful creative work were open to question. At the same time, the postwar moment, perhaps paradoxically, allowed for an idealistic internationalism and optimistic faith that open dialogue among artists and the art public could be productive, and that aesthetic value transcending medium and cultural and historical context could be possible. These beliefs were ultimately the foundation of The Tiger’s Eye editorial philosophy, as well as the motivating force for confronting the questions of their time.\[^{55}\]

Thus when Newman published his famous statement in The Tiger’s Eye on behalf of the artists in his circle—“Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings”—he understood that he was speaking

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\[^{54}\] Franks, Tiger's Eye, 12.
to and for a complex community. That Sterne, as well as most of the artists at the Betty Parsons Gallery and most of the participants in the Artists Sessions at Studio 35 conversation are also represented in the pages of *The Tiger’s Eye* underlines the actuality of the dialogue among this open and varied group of artists.⁵⁶

Likewise, Newman’s 1965 statement—“With us only the individual artist can die or continue to grow and live”—comes from a long interview in which Newman attempts to conceptualize a method for historicizing a group of individuals that were nonetheless clearly in “visual dialogue.” He suggests the need to represent a more, not less, expansive group. The premise of the interview is his critique of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s 1965 exhibition, “New York School, First Generation: Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s.” In the case of the label “The New York School,” Newman finds the geographical title inadequate because it implies inclusiveness when, in fact, he finds glaring omissions. He, of course, protested the inclusion of his by-then arch enemies Clyfford Still and Ad Reinhardt, but went on to list the artists he thinks should be included under such a rubric: “If this show truly represents the New York School, it is surprising to find them in [Still and Reinhardt] and to find artists missing such as Brooks, Stamos, Cavallon, Marca-Relli, Tworkov, Ossorio, Vicente, Glarner, Sander, etc. and the ladies Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Hedda Sterne. All were active in New York during those important years.”⁵⁷

(However, one can easily understand Sterne’s later descriptions of her generation as full of “ego, ego, ego, ego” when in the same interview Newman also explains in relation to

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⁵⁶ Sterne appeared in the *The Tiger’s Eye* twice: No. 2, p. 44 and No. 9, p. 49.

the label New York School\textsuperscript{58}: “Actually New York had nothing to do with it. In my own case, if by 'New York' is meant its institutions, it did not do that much for me. It is really the other way around. I helped make New York a place, as did Pollock, de Kooning and the others.”\textsuperscript{59} Newman’s emphasis on individuality within the interview never excludes the idea of a group, rather he defines the movement as “a collection of individual voices” which can’t be “pigeon-holed” with a label. Indeed, his suggestion for representing a larger group calls for a more historically rigorous and inclusive account of the era that would “focus on a specific time, say, 1949-50 or 1948-51.”\textsuperscript{60} He then sketched the art historical approach he would prefer:

Purely as a scholarly device to create an arbitrary point in time which presents what the artist looked like and what they saw in relation to the visual dialogue, a point from which criticism can move backward and forward in time and horizontally across the board. This would have created a fulcrum on which distinctions could be made not only between first and second generations, which is easy to do, but among the various members of the first generation. The exhibition considers the first generation a cohesive bloc, which is pure art-fiction. Just as in talking about any period in history, a groundwork is needed if the moment is to be reevoked so that a discussion can take place in relation to the event. You should be able to distinguish between those artists who move toward the event with strength, those who move toward the event with timidity, those who move on the periphery, those who move in terms of being influenced by certain formal aspects, and those who move as eclectics.\textsuperscript{61}

While Newman no doubt had an investment in precise timelines of the 1940s and 50s era due to his own vocal claims to originality over and against the work of other artists such as Still and Rothko, he also advocates for a historically accurate focus on “the event”—rather than for example themes chosen by curators—as an alternative way to capture how

\textsuperscript{58} Hedda Sterne in an interview Joan Simon, “Patterns of Thought: Hedda Sterne,” \textit{Art in America} (February 2007): 116.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 261.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 262.
this nameless “movement” functioned as a historically contingent dialogue. Furthermore, Newman appears to echo the statement written by Bernard Karpel, Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt, and printed in the front of the 1951 publication, *Modern Artists in America*, which contained the edited version of the Artists’ Session at Studio 35:

> It is true that very recently great attention has been paid to Abstract Art in exhibitions and publications. Yet, on the whole, this solicitude has been characterized by an erratic concern, full of prejudice and confused by misunderstanding. In light of its actual history, the more radical innovations and variations of Modern American Art rarely obtain recognition based on accomplishment and in terms of its specific problem: the reality of the work of art.

> This biennial is the first continuing series which promises to come to grips with that central situation. Through works and documents of its own making the scope and nature of that struggle will be self-revealed. By impartial documentation of the event as it happens, the society in which the artist exists responsibly and the world of imagery and design in which he must exist creatively, stands manifest.  

The editors’ choice of a time frame for the publication, 1949-50, matches Newman’s description of a small period of time (and in fact precisely the time period Newman suggests almost as if he were remembering this document); the editors also use the same language of an “event” which they believe can be impartially documented. What precisely “the event” means to Newman and/or the editors of *Modern Artists* is difficult to determine except through the context of the document. They refer to “a central situation” which, if paired with the following sentence, appears to be “a struggle” that will reveal itself through the works and documents “it” produces. In so much as the *Modern Artists* publication included several dialogues between artists, critics and curators which took place between 1949 and 1950, as well as a complete list of every artist who showed in New York and every museum acquisition of “modern works added to

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American public collections,” “the event” or “the central situation” appears to be wide in scope and expressed through recorded dialogues and juxtaposed images of paintings.

While the artists’ attempt to document their own history may be far from impartial, it nonetheless frames their perspective as one of a shared social and visual environment that was broad and diverse compared to later accounts. Over the following two decades, what Anfam refers to as the ongoing consensus of canon formation (which also involved the artists' own characterizations of the era) produced over-arching narratives that divided the group by aesthetic style or process or concepts of influence or originality. I focus only on Anfam because his text makes apparent what most other narratives of the era leave implicit: brushing Sterne aside (or ignoring her completely) involves sweeping away many of the messy, contradictory, or confusing elements that nonetheless comprised the artists’ shared social and artistic environment.

The Betty Parsons Gallery represented a microcosm of this larger scene, one that has suffered a similar “cleaning up” and “glossing over” of its aesthetic diversity. In a typically celebratory description of the triumph of America’s status as the center of the vanguard art scene, Clement Greenberg identified Betty Parsons Gallery as one of the “notable scenes of that triumph.” His 1956 text reveals much, not only about the perceived centrality of the gallery in the American art scene, but also about the way in which the gallery’s success had become equated, already by then, with only a handful of all male artists whom Parson’s showed during that period:

Whether or not the public acknowledges it, the status of American art vis-à-vis that of the rest of the world has radically changed in the last ten years. No longer in tutelage to Europe, it now radiates influence and no longer merely receives it. This is a triumph, and I do not see why we should not celebrate it without too many qualms about chauvinism.
One of the notable scenes of that triumph has been, and continues to be, the Betty Parsons Gallery. Mrs. Parsons showed artists like Pollock, Hofmann, Still, Newman, Rothko, Ferber, Lipton at a time when they could bring her little prestige and even less money. Since then many of these painters and sculptors have gone elsewhere, but a large measure of the prestige, if not of the profits, that is now theirs redounds upon her, as the present exhibition, commemorating the tenth year of her gallery, should establish incontestably.

Mrs. Parsons has never lacked courage. It is not a virtue signally associated with art dealers (or for that matter, with art critics or museum directors either), but then she is not, at least for me, primarily a dealer. I have seldom been able to bring her gallery into focus as part of the commercial apparatus (I am not sneering at that apparatus); rather, I think of it as belonging more to the studio and production side of art. In a sense like that in which a painter is referred to as a painter’s painter or a poet’s poet, Mrs. Parsons’ is an artist’s—and critic’s—gallery: a place where art goes on and is not just shown and sold. Long may it flourish. 63

On the one hand, Greenberg’s identification of the gallery as a site of production, rather than a place where works are merely sold, extends the private space of the studio to the more public space of the gallery. Such a description helps to emphasize the importance of this communal site for the artists as a place where they encountered one another’s work. In so far as those encounters exist on the “production” side, they speak to the importance of the artists’ dialogue with one another.

On the other hand, the short list of artists Greenberg provides, those who had already achieved a great deal of success, paints a limited picture of the sorts of encounters that took place in that space. By contrast, the longer list of artists included in the tenth anniversary exhibition attests to the variety of artists on which Parsons had always insisted, including the abstract painters William Congdon, Jeanne Miles, Boris Margo, Sonia Sekula, Maude Morgan, and the abstract collagist, Anne Ryan, the figurative painter, Walter Murch, and the frequent contributor to The New Yorker, Saul Steinberg.

as well as, of course, Hedda Sterne. Without visual representations of all of these artists it is impossible to duplicate the rich visual dialogue from which artists such as Pollock, Newman, and Rothko emerged. If one puts the contentious issues of influence and originality aside (as they tend to push for influence in one direction), this group illustrates a larger environment of experimentation imbued with a host of various individual interests from mysticism to color theory. If Ad Reinhardt is frequently described as an “outsider” among the abstract expressionists, it might be helpful to understand that he, as well as Sterne and Steinberg, emerged from a culture that highly valued “outsiders.” It was a dialogue regarding difference, as explored in the Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35, that defined these artists. The myth of a cohesive group of now canonical individualistic artists that simultaneously developed in the isolation of their own studios, came from that group’s decision to market itself in those terms. When Greenberg glides gracefully over the reason why “many of these painters and sculptors” went “elsewhere,” he evades a critical moment of self-marketing on the part of the artists that left.

Lee Hall, Parsons’ biographer, retells Parsons’ account of a dinner meeting in 1951 proposed by the “the Giants,” as she termed them. Disappointed by recent sales, or lack thereof, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko approached Parsons with a business plan. In Hall’s version, they suggested she dramatically edit the number of artists she represented in the gallery, focusing her resources on promoting their work alone in order to consolidate the gallery’s reputation and thereby their own pedigree. According to Hall, Parsons recalled Barnett Newman
saying, “We will make you the most important dealer in the world.”64 Hedda Sterne recalls a version of the story in which Newman’s claim was as grand, if not grander: “When Betty was old she told me that the group always told her ‘send out all the other artists, keep only us that will make you a millionairess.’ Barney kept telling her that. She worshipped Barney.”65 Judged by the precepts of 20th century marketing, it was a brilliant idea for a branding campaign. But it did not match Parsons’ vision for the space she had created. As she explained to Hall, “that wasn’t my way. I need a larger garden. I always liked variety.”66 Alfonso Ossorio remembered the same meeting, with a longer list of attendees and a somewhat more reasonable ultimatum from the artists: “either you cut down on the frequency of shows and give us some sort of assurance—contract of some kind—or else we’ll just have to leave you.” Ossorio’s memory of Parsons’ reply matches her own: “Betty said, ‘Sorry, I have to follow my own lights—no.’”67 Clyfford Still held his last solo exhibition there in February, 1951; Rothko in April; Newman in May; and Pollock in December of the same year.68

Sidney Janis Gallery opened across the hall from the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1949. At the start, Janis’ area of interest offered no clear competition with Parsons as he showed what Fortune would label in 1956 “blue chip” European modernist painters such as Fernand Léger and Wassily Kandinsky. However, he quickly organized a show entitled “Young Painters in U.S. and France” that paired many of the American artists

65 Conversation with author and Josef Helfenstein, May 7, 2003.
66 Hall, Betty Parsons, 102
68 Hall, Betty Parsons, 182-183.
Parsons represented with contemporary French painters. As was apparent, he was keen on establishing connections between European and American art as a means of validating the current work happening in New York. (Sterne was included in the show and paired with Vieira da Silva.) As both an avid collector of European modernism and a successful business man, Janis utilized his understanding of a European modernist context as well as 20th century business models in the management and marketing of his gallery. Thus, as he began to bring the most critically successful of Betty Parsons’ artists to his gallery, beginning with Jackson Pollock in May of 1952, he consciously framed their works as part of the European avant-garde legacy for which his gallery already had a reputation. He quickly began to sell the younger Americans at “blue chip” prices. By the mid-1950s, as Virginia Mecklenburg has pointed out, he represented Baziotes, de Kooning, Gottlieb, Gorky, Guston, Kline, Motherwell, and Pollock alongside Braque, Picasso, Léger, and Mondrian. 69 It proved to be a formidable, not to mention financially successful, combination.

By contrast, Betty Parsons was herself a painter, and opened her gallery with an exhibition of Northwest Coast Indian Painting that she had invited Barnett Newman to curate. Ann Temkin described Parsons’ inaugural choice of exhibition as “a strong statement for the philosophy of art she wished to promote: art as a fundamental human impulse rather than a luxury good.” 70 Moreover, with the exception of the group exhibition Newman curated, entitled “The Ideographic Picture,” and annual Christmas exhibitions, Parsons did not do group exhibitions and showed exclusively contemporary

70 Temkin, Barnett Newman, 29.
artists. Many of the various artists’ accounts of the gallery describe it as a place where the artists were in control, choosing which works they would include in their exhibitions and helping each other hang their shows. Lawrence Campbell went so far to describe it as an artists’ cooperative: “It is more like an artists’ cooperative, except that the spectrum of styles and talents is much wider than most artist’s juries would permit.”\textsuperscript{71} While she had a reputation for genuinely encouraging her artists in their work, she was also famously unwilling to aggressively market artists’ work.\textsuperscript{72} As her disagreement with Newman, Rothko, Still and Pollock made evident, she was also adamant in her refusal to prioritize among the artists she chose for her gallery. Her general ethos made for a daring but unprofitable environment for the artists.

While the now-canonical names of abstract expressionism are absent from Parsons Gallery rosters after 1951, her taste for variety only became clearer. Even before the artists left, however, she wove a diverse group of artists into a unique tapestry. Between 1947 and 1951 she had shown artists such as Anne Ryan, Sari Dienes, Marie Menken, Perle Fine, Day Schnabel, and Hedda Sterne in between exhibitions of Still, Pollock, Stamos and Reinhardt. In fact, she directly combined interesting, if unlikely, pairs for simultaneous solo exhibitions, bringing together the likes of Newman and Amy Friedman Lee; Pousette-Dart and Buffie Johnson; Bradley Walker Tomlin and Jeanne Miles, and Rothko with Sonia Sekula. Given this list of artists, Ann Gibson has gone so far as to suggest that variety, or as she terms it here, difference, motivated Parsons beyond all other considerations. As she explains:

\textsuperscript{72} For more descriptions by artists, see Tomkins “A Keeper."
both her advocacy of the art that became Abstract Expressionism and of art that did not issued from her belief that difference superseded "quality." Or put another way, for her, difference—stubbornly defended, even pursued past the point of practicality—was the quality she valued most highly.  

If Parsons was a key figure in literally creating a space for abstract expressionism, showing the artists when almost no one else would, she should also be acknowledged for resisting the reification of the movement.

In a radio interview of October 1952, Betty Parsons made, in the context of her stand-off with the artists that left her gallery, what reads as a defiant declaration of her gallery’s philosophy:

Each one of my painters is an individual. Once I have made my selection, I have complete trust in the artist’s creative work. Once I have decided that he is a free personality and that he is not listening to this or that, I would never dream of imposing my will to create a group for the sake of recognition or applause. What interests me solely is that fact that he is a free individual. I know that his freedom is the result of a complete self-discipline. That is why my gallery does not represent a unified school of painting. I believe in diversity, not uniformity. None of these painters is involved in seducing anyone. All he wants is to present himself. That is why I do not have any theme shows. Nor do I use any categorical devices to seduce the public or the authorities.  

Her emphasis on freedom mirrors the language of individuality closely associated with all of the artists in her gallery, including those who had just left: Pollock, Newman and Still.

Taken out of chronological context, it makes sense as a defense of even those same artists. Yet, a knowledge of the stylistic diversity of artists that Parsons fought to keep when they left suggests that this passage reveals the point at which the language of individuality that had previously applied to a diverse group of artists no longer made

sense in relation to those who asked her to make her gallery more aesthetically uniform (in so much as it would have consisted purely of abstraction and promoted a small group of signature styles). Her admonition that she does not represent “a unified school of painting” hinted that such a thing is in the midst of being formed elsewhere. Her description of what she refuses, uniformity, echoes Adolf Gottlieb’s concern, expressed the year before at the artists’ roundtable, that the group was “approaching an academy version of abstract painting.” Even if the artists who left Parsons’ gallery still saw themselves as resisting classification, their choice of Sidney Janis suggested a certain level of complicity with the dealer's marketing strategy.

Hedda Sterne’s exhibitions, on the other hand, exemplify the freedom and diversity that Parsons protected for her artists. Not only did the style and subject matter of Sterne’s works differ from exhibition to exhibition; but she also showed a variety of styles together in her exhibitions of 1953 and 1954. Indeed, Sterne recalled Parsons' gallery as a refuge from the market:

I did what I was interested in. Also, I didn’t have the need—and for that I’m not particularly proud, I was just lucky—I didn’t have the urgency to keep myself alive, because I was a kept woman, a married woman. I didn’t have to make concessions to be liked. If they liked me it was OK.... I never looked for a gallery. When Peggy [Guggenheim] left, there was Betty [Parsons] here, who was a friend. We—a group of friends—asked her to open a gallery. And she did. She took us all in because she had a theory if you take everybody in there will be good ones, too [laughs]. And that is how she became one of the great galleries in the United States. Don’t you think it is the most brilliant thinking? . . . Never did I try to sell myself and my work. I would have been bad at it. There was a time when I thought I had inhibitions about being professional, but in the end, I am glad I was like that. 75

Sterne’s marriage to Saul Steinberg provided a stable income and opportunity for travel.

Like Parsons, Sterne framed her own demand for “variety” or “diversity” in opposition to

75 Simon, “Patterns of Thought,” 116.
the pressures from her male colleagues. One exchange, which she repeated frequently, became something of a mantra. As she explained:

“my friends, the abstract expressionists would always tell me, 'one image, one image' and I said, 'I don’t paint logos.”” 76

At times Sterne has specified that it was Rothko who told her “one image, one image,” but often she simply referred to “my friends, the abstract expressionists,” as if she condensed or conflated her relationship with the entire group into a single dialogue. She genuinely considered these artists to be her friends but she equated the idea of an artist limiting himself to “one image” with corporate branding. As Harold Rosenberg wrote in his 1952 essay, “American Action Painters,” “The man who started to remake himself has made himself into a commodity with a trademark.” It is not clear how much Rosenberg knew of the meeting that had taken place at Betty Parsons Gallery or whether the date of his essay was simply coincidental, but “American Action Painters” came out just eight months after Jackson Pollock left Betty Parsons Gallery for Sidney Janis, where Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still would also go over the next two years.77 While in the late 1940s many of the artists had begun receiving critical acclaim in exhibition reviews, they rarely sold all of the pieces in an exhibition, if any, in the case of Barnett Newman, and often did not achieve their asking prices, which were considerably

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76 Hedda Sterne, conversation with Josef Helfenstein, September 6, 2001. Variations have appeared in several conversations with the author as well as in Ann Gibson, Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 95.
lower than those of more established American artists like Stuart Davis and Ben Shahn.\textsuperscript{78} By 1956—when Greenberg notes that “a large measure of the prestige, if not of the profits, that is now theirs redounds upon” Betty Parsons—many of the artists including de Kooning, Still, Rothko and Pollock, regularly sold out their exhibitions, while the price of their work had more than doubled and, in the case of Jackson Pollock, increased exponentially directly following his death.\textsuperscript{79} Between 1955 and 1957 Rothko’s income increased from $3,000 a year to $20,000 before tripling in 1958 to $60,000.\textsuperscript{80} 

Fortune magazine’s two part article, “The Great International Art Market,” published in December of 1955 and January of 1956, helped to provoke a run on the market by advertising contemporary artists in general, and Mark Rothko specifically, as great speculative investments. Yet the Fortune article itself was only recognizing a growing trend that Rosenberg had already complained about in “American Action Painters.” Whereas in 1955 Fortune, of course, celebrated the commodification of art objects, in 1952 Rosenberg had mourned that a market stood in place of a genuine audience for vanguard art:

> Limited to the aesthetics, the taste bureaucracies of Modern Art cannot grasp the human experience involved in the new action painting. One work is equivalent to another on the basis of resemblances of surface, and the movement as a whole a modish addition to twentieth century picture making. Examples in style are packed side by side in annuals and in the heads of newspaper reviewers like canned meats in a chain store—all standard brands. To counteract the obtuseness, venality, and aimlessness of the Art World, American vanguard art needs a genuine audience—not just a market. It needs understanding—not just publicity.\textsuperscript{81}


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 22.


\textsuperscript{81} Rosenberg, “American Action Painters,” 198.
Many scholars reference to “American Action Painters” in contrast to Clement Greenberg’s “American-Type Paintings,” outlining Rosenberg’s existentialist, psychologically oriented reading of abstract expressionism against Greenberg’s aesthetic, formalist approach. Less emphasized, however, is the way in which, for Rosenberg, the elevation of the “human experience” necessitated the devaluing of the finished object to such a degree that the gallery became antithetical to the studio. Greenberg does not to “sneer” at the commercial apparatus that concerns Rosenberg, who brings up the possibility that an inauthentic artist will not "remake himself" but rather "make himself into a commodity with a trademark." Rosenberg’s essay captures the tension between the existentialist language of identity that many of the artists used to describe their work and the market’s ability to assign it a monetary value. As signature styles became identified with individual artists, identity, style, and market value became increasingly enmeshed with one another.82

Sterne’s comment, “I don’t paint logos,” underlines her persevering stake in the equation Rosenberg outlines in 1952 between action and identity on the one hand, and inauthenticity and commercialism on the other. In her 1954 artist’s statement in *Arts*

82 Of course, even Rosenberg’s essay makes clear that, despite major publicity, few advanced artists were actually selling much art in 1952. He slips this detail in to provide evidence for the lack of a genuine audience, even of committed collectors. Rather, Rosenberg emphasizes the way that the media and the “Art World” stood poised to take advantage of these artists’ work and make money on them with or without the artists themselves profiting (via advertisements, publicity events, etc). In such a light, Rosenberg offers a defense for the authentic artist’s anti-commercial intentions: the market takes advantage of him without his necessarily making a profit for himself. By contrast, the inauthentic artist, rather than the market or the art world, is responsible for transforming himself into a trademark. Without naming names, Rosenberg’s essay acknowledged an already existing anxiety over inauthentic identity, distilling the notion that unnamed frauds lurked among the genuine “action painters.”
Digest Sterne described the encounter with one’s own works in the gallery as “bewildering” because they are regarded “as specimens to be fitted into a defined category or as objects desirable (or not) for reasons exterior to the artist’s day-by-day preoccupations.” She contrasts this with how the work functions for the artist in the studio, where “each brushstroke exposes you to yourself with complete intransigence—you might as well be booed or cheered by a big audience.” As in Rosenberg’s essay, the finished object is foreign to the artist and subject to commodification, recalling Rosenberg’s comment that the taste bureaucracies line works up based on style, “like canned meats in a chainstore—all standard brands.” Later in the statement Sterne explained:

Continuing to go through what has become a routine gesture, out of nostalgia for what they once meant, is an imitative attitude. On the other hand, the search for novelty when it is not an irresistible natural need results in the merely fashionable.

In effect, for Sterne, both the routine gesture and the search for novelty in and of itself are the equivalent of the “better” of advertising copy: fraudulent. Rosenberg’s essay also differentiates between an inauthentic act and “the difficulties that belong to a real act.” The lack of a genuine struggle, or the ease of a brushstroke, translates into an inauthentic identity: “a unique signature comes to seem the equivalent of a new plastic language. In a single stroke the painter exists as a Somebody—at least on a wall. That this Somebody is not he is beside the point.” Whereas Rosenberg leaves little advice for how the viewer, or artist for that matter, discerns among genuine acts, Sterne offers her own definition of the revolutionary artist in her 1954 Arts Digest statement as “more than anything a

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84 Ibid.
constant reevaluator, afflicted with a love of veracity."86 Moreover, in Sterne’s definition, the “real act” as Rosenberg termed it, embraces change and stands in opposition to “obstructing repetition.”87

Sterne shared with her contemporaries in the Artists’ Session at Studio 35 discussion an emphasis on process or, as she defined it within that discussion, painting as a way of simultaneously explaining and understanding. However, her vocabulary of “accuracy,” as she phrased it in the roundtable discussion, and “veracity,” as she terms it in her artist statement, stand out. Insomuch as this “love of veracity” ultimately necessitates contradiction, it helps to explain her shifting aesthetic styles as well. Couched within the terms of the preceding dialogue, however, her definition of the creative artist as a “constant reevaluator” who tries to do away with “obstructing repetition” also reads as a strong critique of the signature styles that had emerged among her colleagues. That those signature styles proved to be marketable, while Sterne’s shifting aesthetic approaches did not, is, I am arguing, not coincidental to her current obscurity.

87 "And this is why you find the older artist at times violently opposing views he held in his youth. In both stages he tried to do away with obstructing repetition in order to reestablish contact with the stream connecting past and future." Hedda Sterne, “Documents: From Studio to Gallery,” Arts Digest 29 (October 15, 1954): 4.
CHAPTER 2: STERNE’S PHILOSOPHY OF RECIPROCAL IDENTITY

Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us.  
-- Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

In other words, the thing doesn’t exist except in interdependence with its surroundings.  
-- Hedda Sterne, 1992

In 1953, Sterne opened an exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery that included several painted tondo canvases each mounted to the wall on a ball-bearing axis which allowed the viewer to turn the pieces at will [Figs. 7-13]. As one reviewer described:

> These four pictures may be turned (although there is one best way of looking at them), and strange things happen as this is done. Their shape is altered; parts of the pictures come forward, others recede. These movements reverse themselves after another fifteen-degree turn.  

Stylistically the works range from almost complete abstraction to what appears to be a more naturalistic reference to an industrial landscape. Only the landscape [Fig. 7] contains the artist’s signature, however, suggesting an ultimate orientation for the work, while Sterne provided no guidance for the other pieces, leaving their position and interpretation open to the audience.  

As the reviewer notes, motion activates the elements of the compositions both literally and metaphorically. However, the object’s motion depends on the viewer and, as his or her arm connects with the painting, the action of directing the work establishes a symbiotic relationship between painting and

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91 It should also be noted that Sterne added signatures at various times, sometimes at the pressure of Betty Parsons, collectors and/or other advisors. Thus it is not clear that she had necessarily signed this work by the time of the exhibition.
viewer. Theoretically, Sterne’s invitation to viewers to place their hands on her work opens the pieces to a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. Yet this reviewer notes the possibility of motion even as he asserts a hierarchy with a “best way of looking” at them. While it is only one review, it registers a pattern that Sterne faced throughout much of her career. Her repeated emphasis on reciprocity and multiplicity—as expressed through both the content of individual works and her continually shifting aesthetic styles—met with a cultural blindness produced by most critics' and viewers' search for the singular theme or style which they had come to expect.

Sterne’s motivation for the revolving tondos is connected to the type of interchange recorded with Ad Reinhardt during the “Artists’ Session at Studio 35” in which he commented that her work looked “pre-conceived.” When she responded that her work was “pre-conceived only partly” she stated that the painting itself “begins to function by rules of its own, often preventing me from achieving my original vision.” This sense of the work’s autonomy was critical to her artistic philosophy: the tondos’ ability to be turned communicated a key aspect of the way in which the work “functions by rules of its own.” Her emphasis on “accuracy” in the same Studio 35 dialogue also communicates a second element. In this case, perceiving the work accurately means acknowledging that the painting is continuously capable of change. As the viewer attempts to control the work by moving it, he or she also has to adjust to his or her changing relationship to the work. In this way, Sterne hoped the viewer would enter a reciprocal relationship, mirroring, and helping to explain, her artistic process. Indeed, the multiplicity of styles in which she painted the tondos illustrated a certain submission to the specificity of the subject that, via the concept of reciprocity, opened her own identity
up to change. Ultimately, with the tondos, motion became a strategy for Sterne to communicate reciprocity while evading precisely the singular identity her audience sought. Sterne’s concept of reciprocity was influenced by Martin Buber’s concept of relational identity as put forth in his book, *I and Thou*.

The period in which Sterne conceived and executed the *tondos*—beginning in 1949 with the first circular sketch in her notebook and continuing to the beginning of 1953 when she exhibited them at Betty Parsons Gallery—coincides with the period in which the still unnamed group of avant-garde artists in New York were struggling to define themselves. Sterne was a vocal part of this conversation and her *tondos* are the visual counterpart to the statements she made regarding her process and the role of the artist. The works function as markers of both similarity and difference: they emphasize the open-ended nature of her process while also making a bold statement against “repetition” and “routine gesture.”

**Contextuality and Reciprocity: Sterne’s Concept of Identity**

Nearly forty years after her 1953 exhibition, in a 1992 interview, Sterne still relished the tondos’ relationship with the viewer:

> I did revolving tondos in '52 and I put them on a kind of lazy susan, and people could stop them whenever they wanted. The meaning kept changing, for instance the color would suggest nearness and then you’d turn it another way and it would suggest distance. I think human beings have a nostalgia for a relationship with a work of art. It’s a mutuality. Beauty is not in the painting, and not in the eye of the beholder, but in between. In Quantum Physics, they call it contextuality, this mutual influence. In other words, the thing doesn’t exist except in interdependence with its surroundings. And that is what I wanted to do with the round paintings. Just look at paintings, see what they do to you, and leave your
expectations at home. I wish I could give people a manual to show them how to look.92

Given that the word “contextuality” did not come into usage within quantum physics until the Kochen-Specker theorem, published in 1967, Sterne articulates a description of her project here through a vocabulary she absorbed many years after its completion.93 Although it is not clear when or how she came across this term or how well acquainted she was with the theorem itself, the definition of “contextuality” as it functions within the Kochen-Specker theorem reveals a definite affinity with Sterne’s over-all conception of identity:

[B]oth types of ontological contextualism … do entail that system properties which we earlier thought to be intrinsic become relational in the sense that a system can only have these properties either if it has certain others, or if it is related to a certain measurement arrangement.94

Such a shift from “intrinsic” to “relational” lies at the core of Sterne’s entire aesthetic project, thus the term she appropriates from quantum physics, “contextuality,” and the definition she provides for it offer a valuable metaphor for the tondos specifically, and her body of work as a whole.

But Sterne relied less on quantum physics for her definition of “contextuality” than on Martin Buber’s I and Thou, a text which she read in 1930 at the age of 20 and which she referenced frequently to explain her use of the word “mutuality.”95 As Walter Kaufmann notes in the introduction of his 1970 translation, Buber’s prose was obscure:

92 Bonney, “Interview,” 58.
95 Conversation with the author, January 26, 2005.
“It is not even impossible that in places Buber himself was not sure of the exact meaning of his text.” Sterne seems to have gleaned Buber’s basic premise that identity formed through relationship. At the outset of his book, Buber sets up a linguistic dichotomy in two pairs, the “I-Thou” pair and the “I-It” pair. In both pairs the “I” exists, yet in the “I-It” pair the “I” remains disparate from the objects it experiences or utilizes. Thus other humans can function within the pairing as objects to be utilized by the “I”. What differentiates the “I” in the “I-It” relationship from the “I” in the “I-Thou” relationship, according to Buber, is reciprocity: “Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us.” For Buber it is reciprocity that allows for a wholeness of being. It is only in relationship with someone or some thing outside of oneself that one experiences a completeness of identity. The dissolution of boundaries between the inner and the external gives rise to Buber’s concept of the “between.” As he explains: “This is no metaphor but actuality: love does not cling to an I, as if the You were merely its ‘content’ or object; it is between I and You.” Given Buber’s definition of “between,” Sterne’s notion of “contextuality” as “mutual dependence” appears to owe more to Buber’s concept of reciprocity than to quantum physics. In her reference to her tondos, Sterne holds out the concept of beauty as something that, like Buber’s concept of love, occurs “between” the work and the beholder, intrinsic to neither independently.

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97 Buber, I And Thou, 67.
98 While Buber’s use of abstract concepts such as love and spirit remain in themselves debatable among scholars and readers (as to whether he uses the words to reference traditional theological concepts of “God” or simply the secular possibility of a communion among human beings greater than their disparate parts), he definitely conveys his concept of the “between” when he defines them.
99 Buber, I And Thou, 66.
In a conversation with Josef Helfenstein in 2001, Sterne invoked Buber’s *I and Thou* to explain both how her work hovers between the figurative and the abstract, and how “words are limited.” As she described it, she saw Buber’s “I and Thou” in a visual form: “thoughts become images, wordless thoughts.” She would break off in mid-sentence to complete her thought non-verbally, drawing with her finger in the air. Thus the transcripts of the conversation read as incomplete, broken, when in person Sterne had filled in the gaps with visually legible diagrams. Preceding and intertwined with her explanation of Buber, however, are her thoughts on Hegel’s dialectic as a cross shape:

When I was very young I had a friend who was a Christian boy, not because he was born a Christian, but because his poems are like Rilke’s love letters to God. And he had this idea... thinking... that the cross had nothing to do with the crucifixion on the wooden cross. It has to do with Hegel. That the shock of two truths explode into a third. And you see, this is the shape that becomes a cross.

Then Sterne moved immediately on to the Star of David:

And the Star of David, you remember how it is... Is it abstract? If I see the other way things function, then it is like a gesture of a shape... And the two triangles cross... In Buber it says the relationship between man and God, and two souls, the relationship is I and *dich*, is you meet in the dark, you don’t see me, I don’t see you and you say, “Is that you, Hedda?” And I don’t say, “Yes.” I say, “Is that you, Josef?” And the crossing of the questions... you don’t give me an answer and I don’t give you an answer. But the questions meet. And look at the triangles. That I see.

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100 I had versions of the same conversation with Sterne (for example on January 2, 2004) about Buber and the Star of David where she gestured in the air with her finger.
101 In a later conversation with me June 26, 2003, she explained that this same boy introduced her to the work of Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, N. Berdyaev, Vasily Rozanov, and Lev Shestov (Leon Chestov).
102 Conversation with Josef Helfenstein, September 6, 2001, page 5 of transcript.
103 Sterne also repeated this explanation very clearly in a conversation with the author on January 2, 2004: “I think I already told you that for me the Star of David is what Buber said in I and Thou about the crossing of the questions.”
Throughout the eighties Sterne, in fact, painted works that combine the elements of the cross and the Star of David, yet which don’t necessarily register as crosses or stars to the uninformed viewer [Figs. 14 & 15]. Instead, the overlapping triangles and horizontal and perpendicular lines convey a charged space in which intersecting planes seem to both project forward as well as recede. According to Sterne’s explanations these non-figurative works are not “abstract” because they do, in a sense, represent concrete, albeit non-verbal, ideas. Moreover, it would seem that she chose these specific, iconic symbols to dissect and reassemble for the immense challenge they provide in separating such powerful connections between sign and signified. To describe these works with words clearly violates her explanation of this series as “wordless thoughts,” yet, given her verbal attempts at describing how she “sees” (or one might say, visually understands) key concepts from Hegel and Buber, it is difficult not to regard them as synthesis and reciprocity. In 2003, Sterne synthesized elements of her explanation of Hegel and the cross and Buber and the Star of David with her previous description of beauty. Rather than describing “beauty” or “truth” or “the meeting of questions,” she describes her “theory” of “what art is”:

I have a theory that art is not on the canvas and not in the eyes of the beholder but the shock, the meeting, is like an explosion. It is something that occurs, a situation. . . And when this reaction occurs, that is what art is.  

Sterne articulated her theory of art as a “situation” some fifty years after she painted the tondos. However, Sterne’s 1949 notebook contains a drawing and notes that connect her earlier work and her later descriptions of how she visually understood the concepts of Hegel and Buber.

Sterne’s 1949 Sketch

Clearly marked “1949” at the start, Sterne’s notebook of that year ends with a forceful sketch of a cross overlaid with two intersecting triangles [Fig. 16]. The shapes of the cross and triangles are contained within a circle, beneath which Sterne wrote, “Intercrossing questions, appeals/Infinite push outwards/inwards.” Given Sterne’s 2001 and 2004 descriptions of the way in which she envisions Buber’s “I and Thou” relationship as the meeting of two questions and two overlapping triangles, the sketch makes clear that she had already formulated this visual conception by 1949. While Sterne did produce paintings within circular forms between 1949 and 1952, she did not paint perpendicular crossing lines and overlapping triangular shapes until the 1980s. By contrast, her tondo paintings contained a variety of images, including one that portrayed the figure of a woman merging with abstract shapes in the middle of the canvas [Fig. 13]. Even the most abstract of these paintings used circular or swirling shapes rather than triangles or crosses [Figs. 8, 10-12]. Rather than a one-to-one relationship between her visualization of a concept and the final painting then, this sketch refers to her understanding of the painting’s relationship with the artist, as well as with the viewer.

105 Since Sterne, in fact, credits the idea of the cross as an illustration of Hegel’s synthesis to her friend from her years studying philosophy at the University of Bucharest (roughly 1928-1930), the over-lapping triangles may also have been an idea carried over from this earlier period. She mentions this friend and the philosophers she read at the University in a 1981 interview for Archives of American Art (Phyllis Tuchman, "Oral History Interview with Hedda Sterne, 1981 Dec. 17," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessed May 23, 2011, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-hedda-sterne-13262) as well, in a recorded conversation with the author on June 26, 2003.

106 This portrait remains only as a black and white photograph with the word “destroyed” marked on the back in Sterne’s papers at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
Sterne was not trying to paint images of reciprocity in and of itself in the tondos; but instead she was trying to achieve reciprocity between herself and the work and facilitate reciprocity between the work and its audience.

Sterne’s notes preceding the sketch include early, less complete variations on concepts she would develop in her 1954 artist’s statement in *Arts Digest*. Like her 1954 statement, Sterne’s 1949 notebook contains references to what one might summarize as authentic freedom, which she describes as “Freedom only as it is fought for. Freedom acquired.” More connected, however, in her notes than her published statement is the sense that this freedom is acquired through “contradiction.” In the middle of her notes she writes the phrase, “Hardly a statement of art which doesn’t contain its own contradiction, refutation.” And at the end of her notes, just preceding her sketch, she uses the word “contradiction” as synonymous with “advanced” or “rebellious,” explaining:

> [Art then] is a continuous current throughout all time and many a breaking with tradition is only a *effect* of reestablishing of contact with the real stream as opposed to *meaningless*, obstructing repetition. Contradiction again for the most contemporary artist or what is called advanced (rebellious) is nearest - likeliest to become part of this illuminating continuity for the perpetuation of this stream is ultimately the aim of the artist. He can only do so by completely playing into the present.

The label “constant reevaluator” in her later published statement seems to have replaced the word “contradiction” in her notes. In her 1954 statement the act of constant re-evaluation causes the artist to appear to contradict herself or himself whereas in the notes, contradiction itself seems to allow the artist to “become part of this illuminating continuity.” In both cases, however, reevaluation or contradiction suggest change in relation to a “current throughout all time” or a “stream connecting past and future.”

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107 Notebook marked 1949, Hedda Sterne Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 145, under Personal Notes and Jottings. (Also box 145, Folder 3, “Notes and Jottings.”)
source of “the stream” as a concept, however, remains obscure in both documents. Given her interest in a particular strain of 19th and early 20th century philosophy and poetry, as well as mysticism, however, the stream may allude to a mélange of different philosophic concepts of the relationship of the eternal or the infinite to the finite. Again and again, Sterne’s descriptions of her interest in 19th century concepts revolve around the idea of a paradox such as, for instance, the sublime within the ordinary. According to such types of paradoxes, Sterne’s concept of contradiction suggests that the form of the finite will always change as it attempts to communicate the infinite. In both her notebook and her published statement, the ultimate obstruction to this relationship of the finite to the infinite or the artist to “the stream,” consists of “meaningless repetition” or “routine gesture.” Her formula for perpetuating this stream—“playing into the present”—may again refer back to her interest in Martin Buber’s concept of reciprocity, especially as her sketch of “intercrossing questions” directly follows these sentences. In I and Thou Buber defines the present as something accessed through relationships: “The present—not that which is like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of 'elapsed' time, the fiction of the fixed lapse, but the actual and fulfilled present—exists only in so far as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being.”\(^{108}\) The reciprocal relationship, for Buber, is precisely the place in which the finite exceeds its limits and enters a space that is outside of time. This points to another important idea for Sterne, that the mundane contains within itself concepts of the divine.\(^{109}\)

\(^{108}\) Martin Buber, I and Thou, 63.

\(^{109}\) In a September 6, 2001 conversation with Josef Helfenstein, as well as in several conversations with the author, Sterne emphasized passages from Roberto Calasso’s 2001
Having studied philosophy at the University of Bucharest from 1928-1930, Sterne was well read in philosophy, theology and fiction. In 1981 she provided a list of thinkers she had read to Phyllis Tuchman, who was interviewing her for the Smithsonian:

I read Husserl, Rosenov. Not to talk about Hegel etc., etc. I read all the great Germans, Heidegger. Maritain. And for some reason or other, Maritain was the greatest. And Berdyaev. These two mystic philosophers were the most powerful influence. I also had a friend who died later in Russia who was a Christian poet…. I mean not because he was born a Christian. His poetry was Christian mystic poetry. And he also gave me lots of books.\(^{110}\)

To this list she later added Lev Shestov, another Russian Jewish philosopher with connections to Martin Buber and Nikolai Berdyaev.\(^{111}\) Jacques Maritain, Nikolai Berdyaev, Lev Shestov and Martin Buber—all existential theologians—engaged the issues of existence and subjectivity that interested Sterne. They each emphasized the individual's need to seek actively an understanding of his or her unique existence in relationship to God.\(^{112}\) While Sartre’s existentialism was famously atheistic, there are book, *Literature and the Gods*, as a confirmation of her own long standing interests in concepts of the divine within the mundane. In particular she had Josef Helfenstein read this paragraph by Callaso on Mallarmé out loud: “Mallarmé was always drawn to a neutral form of the divine, an underlying ground beneath everything else, nourishing everything else and from which all else springs, a ground at once cosmic and mental, equally shared out, and of which he would one day write: ‘There must be something occult in the ground of everyone; I firmly believe in something hidden away, a closed and secret signifier, that inhabits the ordinary.’” Sterne’s immense receptivity in her 90s to recent works of philosophy and literature (she had read Calasso’s book weeks before it had even been reviewed in *New York Review of Books*) seemed paradoxically motivated by a persistent need to find affinities with previous works (a lifelong commitment to 19th century authors such as Mallarmé). Thus while she perpetually digested the new, it seemed to continually affirm a model or philosophy that she held for some seventy odd years.

\(^{110}\) Tuchman, "Oral history interview."

\(^{111}\) Recorded conversation with the author, June 26\(^{th}\), 2003 (tape 3).

\(^{112}\) Inso much as Berdyaev, Shestov and Buber engaged in a dialogue that emphasized their differences, it would be impossible to ascribe with certainty what understanding Sterne gained specifically from each, let alone what of it, precisely translated into her work. Yet, as a group, her enduring memory of the importance of their ideas for her
affinities between the theologians' search for meaning outside of organized religion and Sartre’s impetus for an individual to take responsibility for defining himself or herself outside of accepted social roles. Sterne vigorously denied being involved in any organized religion but she believed in an element of human experience which was beyond rational thought. If there is an analogy to be made between Sterne’s interest in existential theologians and her artistic philosophy, it is perhaps one she articulated best herself:

Once I told the abstract expressionists a story and they took it like a kind of model or something. A little girl was drawing and her mother asked her, “What do you draw?” And she said, “I’m drawing God.” And the mother says, “How can you draw God when you don’t know how he is?” “This is exactly why I draw him.” Isn’t that a beautiful story? I told it to Barney and he liked the story so much that every time afterwards he always used it, you know. This story came to illustrate for Sterne what she held in common with the abstract expressionists: art making as a process of understanding. The fact that Sterne chose an illustration that makes God the object of understanding highlights a key difference from the existentialist language often associated with the abstract expressionists' effort to understand themselves. “God,” for Sterne, is a pantheistic presence or “mystery” located in the mundane; she did not try to understand herself in isolation, but rather in relation to the things around her.

reinforces the level at which Sterne seriously engaged the question of existence and subjectivity. Moreover, the fact that she engaged these questions through the work of theologians reveals the multi-dimensional way she approached identity. Despite their differences, all of these thinkers were grouped under the umbrella of “existentialism” because they emphasized the individual's need to actively seek an understanding of his existence in relationship to God, rather than accepting the religious norms provided through creeds and rituals.

113 Conversation with Josef Helfenstein September 6, 2001.
114 Conversation with author, June 26, 2003, tape 1, page 35 of transcript. Also, February 6, 2004 (recorded but not transcribed).
While theological language, even of an existentialist brand, seems out-of-step with present readings of mid-century abstract expressionism, recent scholars have pointed to Harold Rosenberg’s interest in Martin Buber, especially within the context of his need to negotiate a secular Jewish identity in the midst of a rising Zionism following World War II and the holocaust. Mark Godfrey noted that Rosenberg reviewed three publications by Buber in the mid to late 1940s and he quoted from Rosenberg’s review of Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim* in *Commentary* in 1947 as evidence of Rosenberg’s attraction to the Hasid as a precursor of the modern individual: “Hasidism was primarily a training of individuals in the direction of an infinitely extended and subtilized discovery and re-creation of the self.”¹¹⁵ Likewise, Matthew Baigell takes an interest in Rosenberg’s reviews of Buber’s writing in the late 1940s, especially within the context of Barnett Newman’s interest in Jewish mysticism as a source of material for his stripe paintings. Baigell argues that Rosenberg “misread” Buber’s work through the lens of Sartre. This is a purposeful “misreading,” placing the emphasis on individual acts of self-definition rather than on the relationship of the individual to God. Furthermore, Baigell puts several of Rosenberg’s quotes from Buber back in context in order to emphasize Rosenberg’s selective reading of the text. While Baigell didn’t provide evidence that Newman himself read Buber, he argues that Newman’s use of Jewish mystic texts paralleled Rosenberg’s reading of Buber: both made selective choices of material that affirmed an existentialism concerned with self-definition rather than the subject’s

Godfrey and Baigell’s articles help clarify two things: First, far from being an obscure figure Sterne only read in her youth in Romania, Martin Buber was a relevant intellectual figure being read and reviewed in the US in the mid to late 1940s. Second, in the 1940s Buber’s texts were digested in a particular intellectual context that included Sartre’s version of existentialism. Thus Sterne’s interest in Buber in 1949 was not necessarily out of step with her cultural milieu; however, it would appear that her emphasis on reciprocity over and against self-definition was subject to the same sort of “misreading” as was Buber’s text.

Sterne’s reading of Buber was informed by her idea of what she called “mystery,” a term which she used throughout her career. In so far as Sterne’s paintings of the physical world were indeed attempts to communicate a reciprocity with her inanimate

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116 Matthew Baigell, “Barnett Newman’s Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take” in Landau, Reading Abstract Expressionism, 615-624. (Originally printed in American Art (Spring 1994): 32-43.) Also, in a lecture, Yves-Alain Bois claims that “Newman’s philosophical grounding was really Martin Buber, he was really close to ‘I and Thou’ in many ways. The way you oppose picture to painting, picture always implied depiction, result, something that is an a priori image that is then put on the canvas. For Newman there’s a phenomenology of presence, he didn’t want to have anything prior. The canvas is some statement of presence for the beholder.” However, since the talk is in lecture format without footnotes, Bois doesn’t cite a source for his knowledge of Newman’s interest in Buber: "'Here I am': On Newman’s use of laterality," European Graduate School, August 2002, accessed 16 October 2011, http://www.egs.edu/faculty/yve-alain-bois/articles/here-i-am-on-newmans-use-of-laterality/ 117 As she explained, “I saw and felt that there is secret significance in whatever was physical.” She also utilized the myth of Jupiter in her definition of mystery, explaining that the Roman god was the same even as he transformed himself into different shapes. In addition, she likened mystery to the way in which “the air you breath now may have been expelled by a pygmy six thousand years ago. Because everything remains the same and changes into each other over time.” At a later point in the same conversation, she further defined her relationship to mystery by explaining her function as an optic instrument: “Reality is there and I see it, I’m ready to see it. Blindness comes from my incapacity. Ideas are eternal and there for everybody to find, so what we understand is what our limits and abilities and our talents can get. It’s unlimited, we are limited.” Recorded conversation with author, June 26th, 2003. Tape 2, page 6 of transcription; Tape 3, page 9 of transcription.
surroundings, she definitely extended Buber’s concept beyond his original intent. The somewhat pantheistic dimension in which she established a mutuality with buildings, machines and highways is definitely her own interpretation, well beyond the examples of reciprocity with non-human living beings that Buber provides, such as animals and trees. In fact, Walter Kaufmann notes that in Buber’s 1957 edition of the book, he deleted the epigram that had begun the 1923 edition in order to limit a common pantheistic misinterpretation of his work. However, according to Kaufmann, the German edition that Sterne would have read began with an uncited quote from Goethe that shares definite affinities with Sterne’s concept of mystery:

So hab ich endlich von dir erharrt:
In allen Elementen Gottes Gegenwart.

Thus I have finally obtained from you by waiting
God’s presence in all elements.

If Sterne’s concept of painting as a form of understanding shares an emphasis on process with her abstract expressionist colleagues, she arrives, it appears, at almost the inverse result. Rather than achieving a unique style that communicates any sort of self-definition, she appears to merge with the objects she explores subjecting herself to the multiplicity of their various forms in order to achieve a reciprocal relationship. More than any other artist of her period, Sterne’s philosophy contains the most similarities with Dubuffet’s artistic interpretation of existentialism in which the subject is so much a part of its surroundings that it threatens to dissolve into the material around it. Yet, where Dubuffet’s perspective offers the continual threat of loss—of the form being absorbed

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into the canvas—Sterne utilizes reciprocity as a productive relationship that continually generates new entities.

The whole of Sterne’s diverse body of work best exemplifies her notion of the “present” as an act of reciprocity made evident through her shifting forms and styles. Yet within the context of her notes and her sketch of “intercrossing questions,” I am arguing that her tondos were a uniquely literal experiment in her body of work, physically manifesting the reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the painting. In other words, they were an attempt to provide the “manual” she still wished she “could give people to show them how to look” when she discussed the tondos in 1992. It is perhaps then not by chance that Sterne chose the word “manual” since it was arguably as the paintings were handled that they functioned like a manual, demonstrating for the viewer how to enter into a reciprocal relationship.

Most of the contemporary reviewers did not seem to miss the point that the works were to be turned. As one contemporary critic in Arts Digest described:

The change and growth that have marked Miss Sterne’s work of the past few years continues. In these recent paintings, the motif of the personalized machine is less evident; it has now given way to experiments with the dynamics of space and movement. In a group of tondos—each mounted on a concealed central axis—Miss Sterne suggests the interchangeability of top, bottom and sides. These paintings are actually discs, which can be turned so that relations between their spatial elements constantly change.

One might expect a greater sense of surprise at the idea, or at least the novelty, of a painting as a disc to be spun by hand. Interactive work was hardly de rigueur in 1953.

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119 Bonney, “Interview,” 58.
121 It might, however, be interesting to pursue a connection between Sterne’s tondos and Marcel Duchamp’s roto discs, which were released in New York in 1953. While I have not been able to find documentation for when or where precisely he made them available,
However, the reviewer makes sense of the spinning works, to some degree, as a logical, if experimental, outgrowth of the machines Sterne began painting in the late 1940s: her previous paintings had portrayed the motion of machines while remaining static themselves, whereas these abstractions suggested machines through their literal movement. In fact two of the paintings almost look like close-ups or enlarged portions of previous machine paintings in which the circular joint of the machine acts as a central element within the composition [Figs. 17 & 18]. Isolated, however, the circular motifs featured in the tondo format no longer connote Sterne’s totemic vision of devouring machines with anthropomorphic features. And for this development, one reviewer at least seemed relieved. Stuart Preston, writing in the New York Times, explained:

Machinery has always been a source of ideas for Sterne’s abstract painting. In her new work at the Betty Parsons Gallery, she is happily no longer fascinated by its complex oddities. It is structure, the dynamic functionalism of a turbine, for example, that sets her to creating decisive compositions of similar force and efficiency, locking them securely within round or rectangular canvases.122

Like the reviewer for Arts Digest, who noted that “the motif of the personalized machine is less evident,” Stuart Preston interprets these works along much more formal, yet literal lines. Whereas her previous machines were sometimes loosely lumped in a surrealist category as “fantasies,” these reviewers seem to focus on the tondos as abstract experiments that are at the same time securely wed to the machines they represent. Preston makes a connection between the “dynamic functionalism” of the machines that apparently inspired the works and her “decisive compositions.” In praising Sterne’s increased objectivity, however, both reviewers seem to miss the radical subject position it would make sense if he had shown them in the context of the 1953 exhibition of Dada art he curated for the Sidney Janis Gallery in April and May of that year.

Sterne provides for them as viewers. By placing the paintings on an axis, she has literally invited visitors to take the paintings in their hands and turn them at will. If she represents the machines in a “less personalized” fashion, she makes the relationship to the viewer much more personal. Far from the typical presentation of the artist’s intention passively accepted by the viewer, Sterne insisted on a type of explicit viewer collaboration or participation. As the reviewer I quoted at the start of this chapter noted, turning the painting destabilized the image:

> These four pictures may be turned (although there is one best way of looking at them), and strange things happen as this is done. Their shape is altered; parts of the pictures come forward, others recede. These movements reverse themselves after another fifteen-degree turn.  

Like the writer from the *Arts Digest*, the *Art News* reviewer understands that moving the image changes its internal spatial relationships (whereas Stuart Preston from the *New York Times* doesn’t even note the paintings’ capacity for movement). Yet the reviewer’s “one best way of looking” contrasts with Sterne’s strange use of the term “veracity” in the artist’s statement she would publish in 1954:

> The revolutionary artist or, rather, the creative artist, is more than anything a constant reevaluator, afflicted with a love for veracity. As time passes and life moves, part of what has been true, gradually ceases to be so. And this is why you find the older artist at times violently opposing views he held in his youth.

For Sterne, then, it appears that it is “a love for veracity” that causes a perpetual state of reevaluation because truth gradually changes. Thus one can imagine how Sterne might have hoped that, as the viewer turned the painting, stepped back to look, turned the painting again, and so forth, he or she would have enacted her concept of the revolutionary artist as a constant re-evaluator. More than a formal exercise in the

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123 L.C., *Art News* 51 (February 1953), 54.
dynamics of spatial relationships, the tondos were for Sterne quite literally a hands-on lesson in her process of observing. What the spinning tondos made visually apparent, was that she never regarded the mundane objects that often comprised the subjects of her paintings, or the paintings themselves, as stable forms. Rather her subject matter, like the paintings she produced, were continually shifting and it was the perceiver’s obligation to remain open to their changes. Given Sterne’s interest in philosophy and theology, it is fitting that she ended her artist’s statement with a quote on religion from a philosopher:

A. N. Whitehead says of religion, “the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within the passing flux of immediate things, something which is real yet waiting to be realized, something which is a remote possibility yet the greatest of facts, something that gives meaning to all that passes and yet eludes apprehension.” The above could define what art is to the artist. He knows very well that the essentially elusive cannot be grasped and transcribed, only he doesn’t believe it. Each painting is started in the hope of doing just that.125

Like Sterne’s story of a little girl that draws God precisely because she does not know what he is like, Sterne uses another metaphor for an attempt to “transcribe” the “essentially elusive.” Moreover, this quote reiterates her explanation of the artist as a constant reevaluator. Only here, rather than “truth” gradually changing as the artist scrambles to reorient himself, “religion” becomes the metaphor for a constant “something” that can only be apprehended as it “stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things.” Thus, again, she focuses on a paradoxical combination of the finite and infinite in terms that offer stability only via flux. In the end, according to Sterne, “veracity” must take into account motion and motion prohibits stability.

If Sterne’s various styles, especially as articulated through the four tondos she exhibited, function as a concrete visual example of this philosophy of “veracity,” she

125 Ibid.
definitely did not ascribe to “one best way of looking.” Within the group of four tondos, as the *Art Digest* reviewer noted, “Each tondo is painted in a different way.” There are records of at least eight different tondos from the 1950-1953 era, although according to the reviews she exhibited only four. Two tondos remain in the collection of Sterne’s estate [Figs. 7 and 8] and one is in the Illinois State Museum collection [Fig. 9], while the locations of the other five remain unknown with only black and white reproductions left to attest to their existence. Of these, one black and white reproduction appeared on the cover of the 1953 exhibition invite and thus definitely appeared in the exhibition [Fig. 9], and the other three black and white reproductions can be found in Sterne’s papers in the Archives of American Art [Figs. 11, 12, & 13]. As a group they represent a remarkable set of stylistic variations. On the extreme side of a figurative mode of representation, Sterne achieved an almost photographic likeness, fittingly, in her portrait of the photographer (and writer, editor and art patron), Dorothy Norman. Strangely, however, the composition features a shift one third of the way from the top, after which Norman’s neck and the collar of her jacket seem to morph into an abstraction that might resemble an underground system of roots. Since Norman’s face definitely orients the work, it would seem highly unlikely that Sterne exhibited the portrait on a rotating axis. However, given the circular format and era of the work, it draws her consistent practice of portraiture into conversation with her more abstract pieces. The photograph of the painting is marked “destroyed” on back, but it is unclear whether Sterne destroyed the painting herself out of dissatisfaction with it or whether it was damaged accidentally. Another tondo stands out as the most literal and naturalistic interpretation of a machine

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part, painted in earth tones and, as one of the reviewers described, muted by a warm glaze [Fig. 9]. She established depth with warmer tones in front, overlapping darker, shadowy forms in back. She seemed to have repeated the basic elements of its composition, however, in a much more abstract piece that uses a similar three-prong shape swirling clockwise. Without the nuts and bolts, however, it either suggests the same machine part or wheel blurred through motion, or simply a variation on a composition: one representational and one much more abstracted. Similar to the swirled composition [Fig. 12], Sterne painted four other works which, taken out of the context of her larger body of machine works, could be interpreted as simple compositions of overlapping geometric shapes: circles, lines, triangles and squares. The only of these available in color introduces a bright, contrasting palette of ochre and turquoise blue and illustrates how the color relationships would have shifted as the work spun, with dark shapes coming forward to dominate at one angle, and lighter colors emerging at other angles [Fig. 8]. Finally, one painting appears to be something of an abstracted, industrial landscape with edges softened by a spraying technique she would utilize more fully in her paintings of New York City of the mid to late 1950s [Fig. 7]. Perhaps the most ambiguous composition, it lingers between representation and abstraction in much the way her spray roads and bridges of the mid-1950s would. The only composition to be signed on the front, the blue and white section in the upper left quadrant suggests a sky and thus also seems to orient the work as a landscape. Yet the diffuse edges of the white over the blue, the sprayed black lines which cut across the canvas diagonally, and the areas of sprayed ochre, seem to muddy the sense of foreground and background. Finally, the reviewer comments that one of the paintings was painted in black and grey tones, suggesting that
she left color out of one of the works all together. If we trust the reviewer’s comment that each of the four tondos exhibited were “painted in a different way,” than we can presume that she must have showed the signed tondo that used the spray technique, the most illusionistic of the machine parts, and two abstractions: most likely one in color and one in black and white. Clearly, stylistic variations enter as variables in the theme of motion adding another layer onto her concept of “veracity.”

In addition to the four tondos, according to the reviews of the exhibition, she showed at least three other groups of works: the reviewers mention at least “three versions of Structure”; a painting titled, Pendulum;127 and at least two works described as “variations on a theme suggesting growing forms,” some of which include an image that “relates to a figure, perhaps a musician with a graceful instrument, formed by linear arabesques.”128 Using a database of works still in Sterne’s collection, it is possible to reconstruct a selection of the other paintings most likely included in the exhibition.

Based on the criteria of Betty Parsons Gallery stickers on the back of the works, in addition to dates, and titles, nine works appear to match descriptions from the exhibition reviews [Figs. 19 -27]. When compared to the stylistic changes between entire exhibitions of Sterne’s work, such as her Parsons shows in 1958 and 1961 [Figs. 28 & 29], the 1953 exhibition contains a certain, if very relative, unity. She alters her palettes from deep reds, greens, and yellows to soft earth tones of browns and ambers and she varies her compositions from flowing, gestural lines, to starkly contrasted primary shapes of circles and rectangles. None of the paintings could be described as a quintessential

128 P.B. “Fifty-Seventh Street,” 18
Hedda Sterne, yet as a group their variations cohere, as if she is repeating a similar phrase in several different languages.

Indeed, as her long time friend, Dore Ashton, has pointed out, “Sterne is fluent in four different languages just as she is fluent in several modern visual idioms.”129 Sterne commented on the particularity of language in a letter written to Saul Steinberg during WWII, in 1944:

I’ll write some ideas I had if you like it or not — Spontaneity — Exclamations like Oh! Ah! Hell! Gosh! Golly! — are supposed to be spontaneous — and if you speak a certain language — after a time you surprise yourself how spontaneously you exclaim it in that particular language. I like the sound “onomatopoesie” [sic] French produce when indignant! And about sense of humour — I think the value is the moment of the change of point of view. The possibility to cope with a situation by changing your way of looking at it. Esprit de conservation — Surprise — choc — which produces freshness, fresh eyes on things to be intellectually, spiritually, moving easily. If it becomes a steady, continuous attitude, uninterrupted, its as bad as [obscured].130

First of all, the letter is written in English, the language Sterne learned fourth, after Romanian, German and French. While she and Saul could have corresponded in their native Romanian or in the French they both knew (Saul, likewise knew four languages fluently, Romanian, French, Italian, and English), they chose to write their letters, their only means of contact at the time across great distance, in their respective fourth languages. As recent émigrés to the US, there was, of course, an obvious motivation to master that language. The point, however, is that Sterne writes about the need for fresh perspectives, about the importance of “the moment of the change of point of view” as someone who, at the time, must have been in a continual act of translation between

130 Hedda Sterne to Saul Steinberg, 1944, The Saul Steinberg Papers, MSS 126, Box 85, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
languages as she chose the appropriate words to write or speak in English.\textsuperscript{131} The notion of surprise at an ability to communicate spontaneously in a “particular” language implies that she knows other languages and that each offers different ways to communicate spontaneously.

That Sterne focuses on “spontaneity” in this letter in the first place and that it would become such a key concept for the abstract expressionists was not coincidental. Surrealism was an operative model for Sterne and the American artists she had already begun associating with through Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in 1944 and automatism was a prevalent technique that utilized spontaneity. Sterne’s cogent connection between spontaneity and the specificity of language, however, suggests her early awareness of the way that cultural constructs, such as language, mediate emotion.

Thus while many of the artists interested in Surrealism, including the nascent abstract expressionists, looked to techniques like automatism to produce a more immediate and supposedly direct mode of expression, Sterne pushed the concept of spontaneity in a different direction: she suggests the possibility of spontaneity in multiple languages as a “shock” producing technique in its own right. Although she referenced humour, her

\textsuperscript{131} The absolute control with which Sterne had exercised her command over multiple languages became more apparent when at 100 years old, having suffered 2 serious strokes and being completely bedridden, Sterne retained the ability to speak lucid thoughts, yet had lost the ability to choose the language in which she expressed them. Thus she began a sentence in English but after a pause, she slid into German. After a friend might urge her to speak English, she would begin again in French and after catching herself, finish in Romanian. On her 100th birthday enough friends circled her bed to provide a translator for each language. From one perspective this fluidity signaled a loss of control that frustratingly impeded clear communication, and exemplified the loss of dignity that accompanies aging. Yet from another perspective, and at risk of romanticizing her plight, these continual shifts in language only amplified the tendency of a mind that had consistently placed a high value on simultaneity and multiplicity in every mode of expression, from spoken word to artistic styles and mediums.
husband’s primary genre, her emphasis on the advantage of multiple perspectives, or even more specifically, “the moment of the change of point of view,” suggests that she was already considering shifts in style as an operative artistic tactic that produced “fresh eyes.” If we take into account Sterne’s deliberate display of multiple styles in one exhibition, especially an exhibition at the height of her colleagues’ display of monumental and consistent signature styles, she seemed to be making an almost-manifesto like claim that “veracity” can only be achieved through acknowledging multiplicity and motion.

Of all of the diverse paintings Sterne included in her 1953 exhibition, there is one striking omission. In 1952 she painted a set of portraits featuring Barnett and Annalee Newman, neither of which she showed in 1953 [Figs. 30 & 31]. Considered with the works in the exhibition painted in the same year they add yet one more style to the array of her simultaneous visual experiments. Furthermore, they provide a strong example of her ability to use varied compositional elements to communicate the differing force of each personality. Annalee towers over Barnett, in a shorter but wider canvas, while the depth of her facial features brings her head to the forefront of the composition. In contrast, Barnett occupies only the lower half of his taller but narrower canvas and the flatness of his face seems to merge with the background of the painting. She rises with tangible force while he seems to recede as an ethereal vision. As more than one viewer has commented, Sterne chose a format for Barnett Newman’s portrait which mimics the narrow verticality of his famous zips [Fig. 32 & 33].

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\[132\] In fact the measurements of Sterne’s canvas are only a few inches taller and narrower at 88 x 26 inches than those of his painting *Abraham* which was roughly 83 x 34.
I would like to take this interpretation one step farther by suggesting that Sterne’s depiction of Newman—almost at one with his signature style—offers a concrete, visual antithesis to her philosophy of artistic freedom and flux. If, for Sterne, the men seem to echo with a chorus of “one image, one image,” Newman’s zips are perhaps the kind of singular image she imagines as a logo expressing the identity of the man himself. Ann Temkin has concisely stated a similar sentiment regarding Newman’s work: “For Newman, the elaboration of the zip was identical to the elaboration of the self, which he had struggled three decades to achieve. For his entire generation, the self provided the cardinal subject of their art.”

Illustrating Temkin’s essay are two different photographs from Newman’s two solo exhibitions at Betty Parsons Gallery in which within the composition Newman becomes aligned with his zip. In the first, taken in 1950 on the occasion of Newman’s first solo exhibition, Aaron Siskind double exposed the photograph so that a ghost like light grey stripe floats in front of Newman dropping down along on his left side while he stands framed in the doorway of the installation [Fig. 34]. At first the viewer presumes it is a zip, disembodied from its painting, but on closer looking it appears to be the vertical edge of the door behind Newman, with the hinges just visible. Coincidently, the dimensions of the door were similar to the height of the paintings, especially because the paintings were hung low to the ground. Seizing on this correspondence, Siskind framed the image so that the zips in the paintings form a rhythm with the compositional elements of the room itself, thereby extending the paintings’ environment and merging Newman with it.

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Likewise, a year later, on the occasion of Newman’s second exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, Hans Namuth used a similar compositional strategy to associate Newman with his zip [Fig. 35]. Again Newman stands in the doorway of the exhibition space, but this time he is bifurcated by a wall, leaving only a thin strip of himself visible, echoing the composition of the painting to his right. Especially in the instance of the Namuth photograph, it would seem safe to presume Newman’s cooperation in posing for the photograph, supporting Temkin’s assertion that he strongly identified with the zip. Sterne’s depiction of Newman within the format of his vertical zips was then of a kind. While there is little information available regarding the specific circumstances in which she painted Barnett and Annalee, as a general practice she had her subjects sit for her, thus Newman would have been aware of her choice of format. That he may well have interpreted the portrait as a compliment speaks to the subtlety of her criticism. It is her portrait of him within the context of the rest her work that delivers her message. In this case, Sterne showed the portrait of Barnett Newman in her exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1954, the year after she exhibited the tondos.

If the tondos appeared to each be painted “in a different way,” the 1954 exhibition looks as if she took the three most stylistically diverse tondos and developed them along separate and divergent paths to achieve intentionally jarring contrasts. Reviews from the exhibition make clear that she showed three distinct bodies of work. The Arts Digest reviewer’s description of one group containing “atmospheric and amorphous mists” confirms that she introduced a group of paintings made with a spray paint can at this exhibition. Based on dates, these might have included works like Third Avenue, El, now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York No. 1, currently owned by the
Toledo Museum of Art and, *New York VIII*, which the Museum of Modern Art purchased the same year [Figs. 36, 37 & 38]. The same reviewer, however, also singled out a large painting in a very different style, “*Barocco #14*” in which he feels that “the artist has come closer to symbolic and plastic form expressing the psychological and philosophical content of her art.”

A reproduction in the magazine matches a work still in Sterne’s estate [Fig. 39]. Finally, all three reviews of the exhibitions note at the end of their respective columns that she showed portraits of three well-known art world “sages”: Barnett Newman, Friedrich Kiesler, and Leo Lerman [Figs. 30 & 40].

Stuart Preston’s review of the exhibition reflects the wide degree of critical acceptance she would gain through the spray paintings she first exhibited in this show:

> A high level of mysterious meaning is presented in Hedda Sterne’s delicate and accomplished abstract oils at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Their sensibility is more discernible than it is articulate, and though they may be interpreted as grasping toward the unattainable they can be enjoyed for their own sake as well. The machine forms that used to be so prominent in her work have now retreated, leaving place for the creation of a sumptuous world of shifting light and color and of one shape invisibly merging with its neighbor.

It was the spray paintings from this exhibition, as well as the next two solo exhibition she had at Betty Parsons Gallery in the 1957 and 1958, that major museums and collectors would purchase in the mid 1950s to mid 1960s and show alongside the abstract expressionists: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, and The Toledo Museum of Art all own spray paintings by Sterne. In essence, these were the works that made aesthetic sense alongside her colleagues. All three of her reviewers

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136 Ibid.
seemed to comment on the way in which the spray technique played with the depth of the painting and the relationship of elements to one another: as Preston put it, “one shape invisibly merging with its neighbor”; the Arts Digest reviewer noted that the “space-form dissolves into atmospheric and amorphous mists”; and the Art News reviewer described the way in which “a sense of revolving and soaring movement is still present in sky-ward aimed networks of black shafts, choicely angled and charged, sometimes, with the atmosphere amid which the eye loses high-flying things.” While all three reviewers still relate her work to structures in the city, their descriptions of her spray technique (although none of them seem to register that she has actually used a spray can) register the way her work fits with the all-over pattern and shallow depth of field most commonly associated with artists like Pollock and de Kooning. However, because she did not exhibit this particular style until the mid-fifties, she has been subject to the “second generation” abstract expressionist label. By examining her exhibition strategy, however, I want to argue against a traditional reading of stylistic progression. Rather, Sterne clearly exhibited her spray paintings as one possibility among several simultaneous modes of expression. Moreover, in exhibiting the spray paintings alongside portraits at a moment when figurative art was completely outmoded in her avant-garde art circles she makes a particularly strong claim for her own artistic freedom. Finally, by showing a canvas, Barrocco #14, that utilized an illusionistic style similar to the one she executed in warm tones for Tondo #22, she registered a third option: a fantastical beast like figure constructed out of machine scraps (perhaps a junk heap). This painting took her previous anthropomorph machine themes of the late 1940s, and painted it in a completely different manner, much more similar to her portraits: with a simplicity of means in a muted palette.
*Barrocco #14* registers her conscious resistance to the notion that via her machine and city themes she was progressing along a linear path toward increased abstraction. Like her portrait of Dorothy Norman, her spray painted industrial landscape, and her illusionist machine part in *Tondo #22*, all painted in the tondo format, this 1954 exhibition forces the viewer to accept all of these aesthetic approaches as the simultaneous output of one artist.

Thus when she exhibited works that bear the most aesthetic resemblance with that of her peers, Sterne seems to have intentionally communicated several modes of resistance to any general similarity with the group. First, via exhibiting several styles at once she refuted the notion of a signature style. Second, by leaving the theme of the city visible in even her most abstract painting, she maintained her emphasis on painting as a process that registers her reciprocal relationship with exterior objects (the junk heap), environments (the city), or people (the portraits). Just as the tondos gave the viewer a chance to experience the way in which the painting shifted forms, Sterne displays here for her audience what she described to Steinberg in her 1944 letter: “the value is the moment of the change of point of view.” If her exhibition registers a critical response against the concept of signature style, however, it is far from a claim against the possibility of direct expression. Rather, just as she wrote to Saul regarding spontaneity in particular languages, her paintings communicated her “love of veracity” precisely by displaying her ability to exclaim spontaneously in several different visual languages. While all of her reviewers seemed to tolerate her different styles by either ignoring some of them or simply choosing a favorite, none of them commented on her various modes of expression directly, except, perhaps, when the Art News reviewer gave her what was
probably for Sterne the ultimate compliment: “here is an inquiring, not always assured art.” However, the Arts Digest reader did pick up a certain element of satire in her painting of Newman, noting: “Of the three, the painting of Leo Lerman is the most accomplished, though the other two have a certain satire and charm.”137 Indeed, Sterne did choose to exhibit the painting of Newman a few months after Ad Reinhardt categorized Newman as a “artist-professor and traveling design salesman” among other names, in an article published in the College Art Journal and entitled, “The Artists in Search of an Academy, Part Two: Who Are the Artists?” Newman was so incensed by the article that he claimed Reinhardt had slandered him and promptly took his former friend to court.138 If her portrait of Newman, serenely contained within his zip, is at all ironic, one imagines that it was still for Sterne, “accurate” in 1954.139 While Newman did not leave Betty Parsons Gallery for Sidney Janis in 1952, he did almost completely withdraw from the art world for the next six years due partially to what might be described as an inability to absolutely control the reception of his work. In other words, by removing his work from the arguably unpredictable and diverse environment of

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137 A.N., "Hedda Sterne," 21. While the portrait of Barnett Newman is now in the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College and Kiesler is still in private collection of the Sterne estate, the location of the Leo Lerman portrait is unknown and no visual records of it have been found.
139 When speaking about her friendship with Ad Reinhardt, Sterne explained, “Reinhardt always was the pure one and attacked Rothko, Newman, all of these worldly plotters of career. And he attacked them very effectively.” Conversation with author, February 7, 2004.
Parson’s Gallery, he sought power over the context as well as the work itself. His decision reflects an understanding of reciprocity similar to Sterne’s; however, he makes the reverse decision. In a 1955 letter to Sidney Janis, Newman, goes so far as to explain his decision not to even attend Rothko’s exhibition opening in terms of his need to protect his own work:

I must unequivocally separate myself from Rothko because he has publically identified himself with me so that the expression of my own personal integrity becomes for him a shield whereby he can achieve perpetual surrender. He may do what he wishes, but I do not want his surrender to reflect on my intention not to.

He opts for isolation out of fear of contamination. Sterne’s painting of him almost fading into his own work plays a sophisticated role in her exhibition. Not only does she characteristically develop a particular style to express her understanding of him as accurately as possible, that representation of him registers her dialogue with him. If her tondos the year before had been a “manual to show people how to look” they had pointed out, in particular, a need for mutual submission to context: the meaning of the work shifted as the viewer moved it, but the viewer also needed to be open to the work’s ability to change. By contrast, Newman appeared to float in a static oasis: the antithesis of her philosophy of veracity via multiplicity and motion.

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CHAPTER 3: STERNE AND STEINBERG’S CRITICAL DIALOGUE

In August of 1951 Sterne appeared in *Life* magazine for the third time in 18 months, this time with a headline that included her name, after that of her husband, in large type: “Steinberg and Sterne: Romanian-Born Cartoonist and Artist-Wife Ambush the World with Pen and Paintbrush [Fig. 6].” She sits against a wall hung with 5 of her paintings. Next to her on this full page spread, however, was not exactly her husband, but her husband’s line drawn portrait of himself, surrounded by 9 more of his drawings [Fig. 41]. Their work shared a wall, and Steinberg bent his portrait so that his feet rest on the same ground plane as hers, but they are not in the same dimension. Or rather, Steinberg’s two-dimensional drawing of himself, opposed to—as the photo caption describes her—“a real Hedda Sterne,” sets up a dichotomy between the fictive and the real that plays out, nonetheless, in the two-dimensional format of the magazine photograph. Thus his drawing of himself suggests a metanarrative: the constructed nature of Sterne and Steinberg’s representations as artists.

If Sterne’s operative term in the early 1950s was “veracity,” Steinberg’s was most certainly “fiction.” Yet, neither of them used these terms in a straightforward manner. Sterne’s definition of veracity was complicated by the fact that she defined truth as something accessible only through contradiction and expressed through multiplicity, whereas Steinberg’s exploration of fiction depended on a continually shifting concept of “the real.” Considered together, Sterne’s concept of veracity and Steinberg’s use of fiction function like inverse definitions of each other. Their idiomatic use of each term emphasizes the high value they both placed on mutability and unstable concepts of

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141 “Steinberg and Sterne,” *Life* (August 27, 1951), 50-54.
identity. Viewed side-by-side, as in the Life photograph, their distinct bodies of work make clear that they evolved different tactics to achieve their goals. Yet they shared a critical framework that informed their work, from their choice of subject matter to their decisions regarding how and where to display it. Given Sterne’s commitment to reciprocity, her dialogue with her closest intellectual partner is vital to a fuller understanding of her work. The boundaries of that dialogue, however, are hardly clear-cut. Steinberg produced thousands of drawings over his career, which provided a running commentary on several environments, ranging from their shared kitchen to the art world at large. Thus, Sterne’s most intimate dialogue paradoxically provides an expanded perspective on many of her more public art world contexts.

Almost exactly two years and two weeks before Sterne and Steinberg’s August 27 feature in Life, Jackson Pollock had famously appeared in the same magazine (August 8, 1949) on a two-page spread, leaning against his painting, arms crossed defiantly, cigarette dangling from his lips and eyes gazing straight at the camera [Fig. 42]. The notorious headline—“Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”—marks the ground line where Pollock’s feet rest in a break between “greatest” and “living.” The bravado of his stance and gaze seem undermined by a gimmicky design tactic that incorporates his image into the over-all design layout. While the placement of Pollock’s feet is a minute detail, Steinberg’s drawn foot, bent to merge with the ground line in a black background that otherwise barely registers depth, mimics the design decision in Pollock’s Life spread.\(^\text{142}\) In Steinberg’s case, however, it produces an entirely different

\(^{142}\) If the position of Pollock’s foot in a magazine spread seems too minor for Steinberg to consciously quote, it is worth noting that he spent paragraphs in a 1967 interview at the Louvre describing the way in which the literalness of a row of four tiny mosaic block
effect. By preemptively claiming his identity as his own representation and consciously forming it to the artifice of *Life*’s setting, he gives the viewer a knowing wink that allows him to avoid being made a fool by publicity. Moreover, he consciously seats himself in the exaggerated trapping of a 19th-century European room complete with elaborate crown molding and a vase full of fronds sitting on top of a ridiculously tall and ornate column. The curled lines of his mustache and the delicate curlicues on the tips of his shoes, as well as his petite hand poised on his crossed leg, involve even his own persona in such polish and fussiness. He is in every way the opposite of the tough American artist dressed in denim that Pollock embodied. Moreover, the *Life* feature on Pollock republished his famous quote—“When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I am doing”—bringing to the fore the relationship of the artist’s identity to his work. As Pollock leans on his painting, the article suggests, the two are bound together in an almost one-to-one relationship: he is his work, the work is him. Steinberg takes this equation one step further, eliminating the separation entirely by presenting himself as his drawing. While Steinberg was certainly making fun of himself, the full satiric effect of the joke is only comprehensible with Pollock’s *Life* spread as a precedent.

The punchline, however, also depends on Sterne. Despite Steinberg’s two-dimensionality in drawn form, his image on white paper comes forward while a “real Hedda Sterne,” clothed in black, recedes into the black background. Moreover, the dramatic red cross of her scarf and even the red of her lipstick echo the linear red

teeth on a horse in a wall-sized Roman mural transformed the entire narrative of the mosaic into an abstraction about horse dentistry. Pierre Schneider, “Steinberg at the Louvre,” *Art in America* (July-August 1967): 83-84. In an earlier interview, Steinberg defended his work against accusations of “cruelty” by explaining that there was an “element of goodness” in his “sympathy for things too small to be noticed.” Rosalind Constable, “Saul Steinberg: A Profile,” *Arts Digest* 28 (February 1, 1954): 29.
elements in her paintings: she becomes as much a part of her page’s composition as the lines in Steinberg’s self-portrait work into the composition on his half of the spread. Their presentation as a couple repeats the contrast between the real and the drawn that plays out in several of Steinberg’s drawings hung on the wall around his portrait, such as the “real” leaves providing beards for the drawn gentlemen in the upper left corner of the spread [Fig. 43]. Steinberg bedecks the vaguely Eastern European military officers with elaborate medals and authenticates their identities with extravagant signatures beneath them. Yet “the real” leaves, used to form their beards, mock the legitimacy of these traditional markers of authority. It is a simple formula that nevertheless allots for endless variations depending on which elements Steinberg chooses to represent as real, and on how he incorporates those elements into the overall composition. In each case, however, the representational elements point to the construction of the supposedly real ones. In the midst of this formula, a real Sterne demurely sits with her hands held open in her lap, seeming with a half-smile to put up with her husband’s ruse. Yet the question remains as to how precisely to understand her work in relation to Steinberg’s.

Despite it’s stylized prose, the Life article's description of their separate projects sets in place a common theme:

As artists the Steinbergs pursue their separate ways. Saul goes to his studio every morning where “sometimes I just lie down.” Hedda works in their apartment amid pebbles and firemen’s hats. Both are fascinated by the U.S.; he by the habits of people; she by machines and towering structures. Both want to create a new picture of America, but not the same picture.  

 Appropriately, the following spread features a reduced version of Steinberg’s 25 foot “panorama of the American Parade” [Fig. 44 and 44.a], and the last page of the article

\[143\] “Steinberg and Sterne,” 51.
features three more machine paintings by Sterne and a statement on the quality of mystery she finds contained in the particularly American landscape of “mechanized power” [Fig. 45]. The Life description of their dual projects is not inaccurate. Yet their separate images of America were not only about the “habits of people” and the mysteries of “machines and towering structures”; they were, in fact, completely bound up with their exploration of artistic identity and authenticity. For each artist the individual and the built environment were entwined. Thus an investigation of the American environment simultaneously engaged questions about the definition of a self within that context.

Sterne and Steinberg were not collaborative partners: they produced distinct bodies of work. The Life article, however, was published in the midst of a two-year period in which they made a series of simultaneous appearances as artists that began with a photograph of the couple together in Flair in March of 1950 along with examples of their work (including a monotype by Sterne of a machine titled “the couple”). They also appeared in dual solo exhibitions in the Spring of 1952 at Gump Gallery in San Francisco, followed by simultaneous solo exhibitions at the Museu de Arte, São Paulo, Brazil; in each they showed a related, if not the same, body of work as appeared in Life. Outside of this two-year period, however, Sterne and Steinberg did not show their


work together in public. They did not even hang their work together at home.

According to Sterne, this was strategic on her part. As she emphasized in several conversations, she was determined to avoid any sense of competition between them. Within the context of not showing her work next to his, she emphasized her distaste for art historical approaches that encapsulate “the Napoleonic idea of art as a contact sport with greater, greatest, first. I don’t think art works like that at all.” Likewise, she explained that when a reporter asked her to decide whose work was ”greater or better, Bill or his wife” (referencing Willem and Elaine de Kooning), she refused to answer because, “the rose doesn’t compare itself to the Lily.” She further extrapolated, “I think that this ‘best’ and ‘influence’ and power—introducing the elements of power continuously—is completely false. This is another thing that I totally fought in my life — competition between him [Steinberg] and me.” The rhetoric in the Life article indicates that depending on the hierarchy at stake, she was not always the only one at risk of being slighted when their work was considered side by side: he was a “cartoonist” while she was a “leading abstractionist.” In a pre-pop art world that still highly valued “fine art”

with the addition of several more machine monotypes and the exclusion of “Flivver,” her portrait of an antique car.

146 In a June 26, 2003 interview, Sterne recalled that in Brazil the reviewers hardly mentioned her but that in the US they were treated “evenly.” However, their coverage in the Brazilian magazine Habitat listed above was actually more even handed than their Life article. Nonetheless, she expressed that after these joint publications and exhibitions, she was “so worried that this kind of thing would influence our relationship that I tried afterwards to avoid it.” She added, “I remember how upset he was once when a painter said, ‘Oh you are influenced by your wife.’”

147 Conversations with author, June 26, 2003, January 26, 2005, as well as October 15, 2007. The art historian, Dore Ashton, a mutual friend of Sterne and Steinberg’s in the 1950s, confirmed in a conversation with the author on June, 2009, that visitors had to ask Sterne to take them upstairs to see her work.

over the commercial, his drawings stood on the margin while her chosen medium, painting, was undoubtedly the celebrated mode of expression.

On the other hand, Sterne was subject to reviews that deemed her subject matter and/or style either masculine or feminine (depending on the work or the reviewer). This tendency to describe her work (as well as that of many women artists at the time) in gendered terms emphasized the way in which her own gender was always on view alongside her work. *Life* exemplified this trend, not only in labeling her an "artist-wife," but also as it addressed her subject matter: “Turning away from more feminine themes, Miss Sterne tackled such subjects as engineering projects and battleships, airports and city streets.” Moreover, Steinberg’s *American Parade* received a two-page spread while Sterne’s one-page feature faced a Playtex girdle advertisement. The juxtaposition of the ad next to Sterne’s paintings provides an efficient, even if happenstance, reminder of the social conditions in which Sterne both produced and exhibited her work. Thomas B. Hess, writing a review for *Art News* of her 1950 exhibition of machines at Betty Parsons Gallery, gave a clear assessment of the way in which typical preconceived notions might color the viewers consideration of Sterne’s work in relation to Steinberg’s:

Hedda Sterne is the wife of the brilliant cartoonist Saul Steinberg, and a superficial examination of her canvases and monotypes in her most recent, and sixth, New York exhibition might result in the verdict that she mirrors her husband’s fantasies in more complex mediums. Both are fascinated by the grotesques of mechanization; both have a calm, immensely complicated and cultivated wit; both have mastered a line as sensitive as a seismograph’s needle. But such a decision would be as unfair as it is superficial. Miss Sterne has created, with a minimum of means, a very personal world of forms which are controlled by their own laws of space and color.\(^\text{149}\)

Hess draws out into the open the two clearest presumptions: first, that the husband would have the idea (fantasies), which the wife would “mirror”; second, that she would communicate those ideas in “more complex mediums.” The fact that Hess clearly labels such presumptions unfair and superficial may have encouraged Sterne and Steinberg to allow their work to appear together in *Life* just a few months later. On the other hand, Hess’s initial “superficial examination” demonstrates precisely the reasons they must have ordinarily kept their work apart.\(^\text{150}\) Sterne’s may have decided not to display her work next to Steinberg’s at home in order to protect them both from a prevalence of complex cultural hierarchies; yet by hiding her own work, while his was on display for visitors to their home, she also acquiesced to the prevailing domestic gender hierarchy. As she remarked delicately, “And also, he was, how can I say it? [long pause] He had more ego than I had.”\(^\text{151}\)

Sterne’s emphasis later in life on her efforts to keep their work separate, however, obscures the strategic pairing of their work from 1950 through 1952. Her later ambivalence regarding the relationship of their work might, paradoxically, have to do with the importance she placed on their dialogue. For instance, she described marriage in the same terms she used to explain Buber’s concept of reciprocity: as a “sublime” conversation in which “the two ways of thinking merge and meet and confront and it’s

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\(^\text{150}\) Sidney Janis Gallery’s 1949 exhibition, “Artists: Man and Wife” (which did not include Sterne and Steinberg) may have been what encouraged Hess to provide such a forthright comparison of the couple’s work even though they were not showing their work together at the time. The now famous reviews of the Janis show may also have been what prompted Hess to warn against simplistic assumptions based on gender roles. As one review of the exhibition had stated: “There is also a tendency among some of these wives to ‘tidy up’ their husbands’ styles. Lee Krasner (Mrs. Jackson Pollock) takes her husband’s paints and enamel and changes his unrestrained, sweeping lines into neat little squares and triangles.” G.T.M, *Art News* (October 1949): 45.

\(^\text{151}\) Conversation with author, January 26, 2005.
growth and gratification.”\textsuperscript{152} Moreover, she credits her ongoing conversation with Steinberg for satisfying her need to seek feedback or praise for her paintings elsewhere (such as at the club and the Cedar Tavern): “Showing him was enough for me.”\textsuperscript{153} The brief period of time in which they showed their work together publicly suggests a conscious choice on their part to reveal aspects of their private dialogue.\textsuperscript{154}

Sterne and Steinberg met early in 1943, when Sterne, who was impressed with his drawings in \textit{Mademoiselle}, invited him to tea.\textsuperscript{155} They shared much in common: they had both grown up in Bucharest, Romania, they had both briefly attended the University of Bucharest, and they had arrived as émigrés in New York within a year of each other (late 1941 for Sterne and mid 1942 for Steinberg). They had also each spent a significant amount of time outside of Bucharest before emigrating due to World War II: she in Vienna followed by Paris, and he in Milan. Moreover, they shared a background in design. While Sterne had not formally studied architecture, she had worked in the studio of Marcel Janco.\textsuperscript{156} Known in Western art historical narratives primarily for his association with the early phase of Dada in Zurich during World War I, Janco continued to play a major role as the leading proponent of avant-garde art in Bucharest in the 1920s and 30s. As the premiere modernist architect in Romania, he also promoted a belief in a

\textsuperscript{152} Conversation with author, June 27, 2003, tape 3 page 15.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{154} Another private aspect of this dialogue worth pursuing in the future are the drawings which Steinberg made for Sterne in dozens of books they shared which are now in Sterne’s estate, as well as the unsigned, undated notes written in Sterne’s distinct handwriting and apparently given to Steinberg throughout the course of their relationship as they are sprinkled randomly through the 80 plus boxes that comprise his papers at the Beinecke Rare Book Room.
\textsuperscript{156} Converation with author, January 2, 2004.
design concept similar to the Bauhaus *gesamtkunstwerk*. Alongside her explorations in painting and sculpture, Sterne had actively considered a career in fashion design in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Steinberg had formally studied architecture in Italy but his 1940 diploma was useless: it declared him “Saul Steinberg of the Hebrew race” after the race laws passed under Mussolini in 1938 had barred Jews from the profession. After finally escaping Italy in 1941, it was the popularity of Steinberg’s drawings in *The New Yorker* and *PM* magazine that assured him entrance into the U.S. on a visa. Once there he immediately enlisted in the armed services to guarantee his citizenship. He and Sterne had known each other for only a matter of months when he shipped off in May of 1943, but they corresponded continually until his return in October of 1944, when they married. In the short period of time before he left, they had already begun to join their diverse, yet equally elite, social worlds. Upon arriving in New York Steinberg had reconnected with an old friend from Milan, Constantino ("Tino") Nivola, who was by then an art director for the design magazine *Interiors*. Nivola enjoyed functioning as something of a nexus for émigrés and American artists, designers, and architects. He introduced Steinberg to Betty Parsons who held a joint show of Steinberg’s drawings and Nivola’s paintings at Wakefield Gallery in April of 1943, just before Steinberg left for the war. Steinberg also introduced Parsons to Sterne and the two women spent the summer of 1943 together in Provincetown, Massachusetts. By 1943, Sterne had already developed her own set of contacts, most of them through Peggy Guggenheim, whom she

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157 Database for the Hedda Sterne Estate, Record numbers 824-842.
158 Smith, *Illuminations*, 27, 30-32.
had sought out immediately after she had arrived in New York in 1941.\textsuperscript{159} Guggenheim’s exhibition space, The Art of this Century Gallery, as well her marriage to Max Ernst, provided the physical and social space for a formidable group of European émigré artists to gather. By 1943, this group expanded to include an emerging group of American artists. In 1942, Sterne was included in \textit{First Papers of Surrealism}, an exhibition curated by Marcel Duchamp and Andre Breton.\textsuperscript{160} In 1943, concurrent with Steinberg’s exhibition at Wakefield, Sterne participated in a group show, “Exhibition of Collage,” at Art of this Century that also included Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock.\textsuperscript{161} Just months later, in November, Betty Parsons would give Sterne her first solo exhibition at Wakefield Gallery. By 1943, Sterne and Steinberg had individually established many of the interests, subjects, and relationships that would inform their artistic practices, yet from the outset of their relationship they shared the process of adapting to a new national and geographic context, as well as a complex social network and an emerging art market.

In a 1944 letter dated February 28, almost four months after her first solo exhibition opened at the Wakefield Gallery in November of 1943, Sterne described to Steinberg the effect the show and the reviews had had on her. I quote the letter at length because she analyzed several key issues to which she would return throughout her career:

\begin{quote}
Conversation with author and Josef Helfenstein, February 18, 2003. According to Sterne, in 1938 Hans Arp had seen some of her collages on display in the Salon des Surindépendants in Paris and asked her permission to send a selection to Peggy Guggenheim who had a gallery in London at the time, Guggenheim Jeune. This previous connection is what encouraged Sterne to seek Peggy Guggenheim out immediately upon arriving in New York.
\end{quote}

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Strangely enough though — I began to really progress a little after the show — a lot of things became clear to me — among other things that there is practically no vanity left in me — and very little ambition too — and that there are very few people who can really tell the difference between good and bad art — what charms them is just a little superficial part of it — and if you choose to be a good artist, an honest one — its like being truthful — nobody can control you, you just can’t help it — but success doesn’t depend on that — success is mostly a malentendu. One of the strangest things for me is the fact that you who are more than a good artist are successful — there is something seductive about your work that makes people take the good thing without knowing it? Don’t know if I am clear — everybody liked in my work exactly what I am trying to loose a certain “joli”, “pleasant” (I’ll probably never loose — because I am nothing much really). I’d like to be able to make things like Monteverdi (you remember my records?) I mean austere, measured — like prayers pure in form and content and all the emotion sublimated — unrecognizable — humble, like the middle ages monk. You have most of the qualities of the great, really great artist — I know it (I talk about you and me just like two examples) you achieve without effort things for which others have to work years — a free flow between your intention and realization, your [unreadable] and your line, etc. in peace with each other — and a point of vue which is strictly yours — truly original — my love, my friend, when, my dear, will we work together again?? I work rather much continually.162

Already in 1944, just months after her first solo exhibition, Sterne made apparent her frustration with the concept of success, not necessarily monetary success, but more precisely critical success. Notable, as well, is that from the start of her public career (as marked by her first solo exhibition) she contrasts herself with Steinberg. Here she sets up a dichotomy in which a “good” artist is antithetical to a “successful” artist, yet she immediately acknowledges that Steinberg inexplicably represents both. Critical to the dichotomy, as she experienced it, is the fact that the critics apparently misunderstood her work and yet she still achieved favorable reviews. When she equates a “good” artist with an “honest one,” she describes an artist that separates his or her work from the response of the audience. According to her initial formulation, only the artist who disregards or at

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162 Saul Steinberg Papers, mss 126, Box 85, Folder H.S. 1940s, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
least distrusts success can be free: “no one can control you.” Steinberg, according to her letter however, exerts such control over his audience that he is the one who “seduces” them into taking “the good thing without knowing it.” The tension between “honesty” and “success” is one that reverberates throughout Sterne and Steinberg’s careers (even though they both denigrated the term, “career”).

Sterne made these observations about success after not a failed exhibition, but a rather successful one. With hindsight, it is clear that she was about to begin a 15-year span of frequent solo exhibitions, favorable reviews and acquisitions by major museums. Through the lens of a generalized 1970s and 80s feminist perspective—such as the one espoused by the Guerilla Girls' famous 1988 poster that made the sarcastic claim, “The Advantages of Being A Woman Artist: Working without the pressure of success”¹⁶³—Sterne’s current art world obscurity might seem inevitable. Yet Sterne did seem to feel the pressure of success from the outset and expressed dissatisfaction with the false pretense on which she clearly felt her own success would rely. Reflecting on this issue seventy years later her perspective seems remarkably consistent:

Many times I did things that were successful and I could have stayed there and Sell! Sell! Sell! The Sprays were extraordinarily successful. At the beginning the Memories. I had a number of periods where I could have stopped and gotten a successful quote career. But I never thought art was a career or a profession. I knew what I needed to do.¹⁶⁴

Her 1944 letter seems to already set aside the notion of a “career” so much as her later choice of words can be associated with her sentiment that she has no “vanity” and “ambition” left in her.

When Sterne states that the critics have grasped only a “superficial part” of her work, she describes it only as "pleasant," without identifying the aesthetics or subject matter that they have appreciated. Likewise, when she describes the direction in which she wants to move she doesn’t suggest a particular style. Rather, she offers a complex set of descriptors that seem to connect with her earlier description of a “good artist, an honest one”: she wants her work to be humble, austere, measured. Ultimately she sets as a goal the complete “sublimation of emotion” to the point in which it is unrecognizable. Her descriptions might conjure an image of minimalist art with a subdued palette and simplified forms; yet she actually continued to paint a variety of subjects in a varied and colorful palette. If it is at all possible to decipher what she meant by phrases such as “all the emotion sublimated” and “humble, like a middle ages monk,” one has to set aside common notions of linear aesthetic development. Over the next decade she continued to experiment with different styles as she selected different subjects. If her work from 1944 into the 1960s can be said to progress in a linear direction, one might argue that it led to greater reliance on her external environments.

When Sterne first arrived in the US in 1941 she was still using a Surrealist-inspired technique which she called *papiers arrachés et interprétés*. She ripped large pieces of paper, let them fall on another piece of paper of contrasting color and then freely associated until an image emerged from the chance composition [Fig. 46]. These were the works that had caught the attention of Hans Arp in Paris in 1938 and which won her inclusion in a show of collages at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery in London that year. This was also the technique she used for the works she showed in a group exhibition at Guggenheim’s *Art of This Century* in New York, as well as in *First Papers of*
Surrealism. Reviewers of her 1943 solo exhibition at Wakefield (to which she refers in her 1944 letter) most consistently referred to a series of small egg tempera paintings titled *Puzzles I, II, III, and IV.* Alternately titled “Open Enclosures,” the one painting from the series left in her estate portrays evocative scenarios, painted on a miniature scale, juxtaposing seemingly unrelated spaces such as empty rooms with elaborate wall paper, a galloping horse, a framed picture of a fish on a wall, several seascapes, a desolate landscape with tiny figures trekking across it, and repeated grid patterns suggestive of trellises or screens [Fig. 47]. Like her collages, reviewers described these paintings as Surrealist, most likely because the highly personal iconography of objects and spaces fit within the by-then-popular association of Surrealism with dream imagery. The work Sterne showed in her next solo exhibition in 1945 can hardly be called less personal as it featured paintings of her memories of her childhood in Romania. Yet, in relation to her later work, these paintings offer a visual transition. Her earlier themes featured figures or interior spaces that appeared to be linked by personal associations inaccessible to the public viewer. The Memory paintings articulated a more singular emphasis on a figure’s relationship to its environment, offering an exaggerated but coherent perspective for the viewer. For example, Sterne relied on a child’s perspective of architectural interiors to express the way in which external environments shape memory. She frames a family dinner with stacks of furniture that loom over the figures’ heads, reaching to the ceiling, their large scale dwarfing the children [Fig. 48.] Beginning in 1945, Sterne painted exclusively what she later termed “the visually immediate.” There are no longer human

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figures present as she began to paint the objects and environments she directly encountered, including her bathroom sink [Fig. 50], views out of her New York City apartment [Fig. 51] and an early model Ford [Fig. 49]. Finally by the late 1940s she seemed to develop an almost obsessive preoccupation with machines [Figs. 17, 18, 55, 56, 57, 60, 61, 64, 65], followed by an equally focused period on roads and bridges in the mid to late 1950s [Figs. 36, 37, 38, 78].

Sterne’s language remains remarkably consistent in documents ranging from her 1944 letter Steinberg, to her comments in the 1950 Artists’ Roundtable, to her 1954 artist’s statement in *Art Digest*. In all three she used words that imply objectivity: “good,” “truthful,” “honest,” “humble,” “accurate,” with the ultimate goal declared as, “veracity.”

Trying to pair this language, however, with any particular work or even body of work listed above would verge on the absurd. The combination of exceedingly objective language with her highly subjective images seems to clarify Sterne’s decades long commitment to a paradox in which only the most subjective perspective can offer objectivity. At the end of her life, reflecting on her attitude towards her art from the forties forward, Sterne chose the same vocabulary to describe her ultimate goal, only this time bringing these seemingly conflicting notions into one formula:

I want to be molded by my beliefs and my emotions. Without being an egomaniac. On the contrary, I want to be a good mirror. I want to be a good reflector. Accurate, Precise, Truthful. That is what interests me, not to be a signature. I am not my signature. I am an instrument for correct perceiving. I want to be an instrument for accurate perceiving.166

Sterne’s equates her identity with both a reflective surface and a transparent lens: both objects which function as filters of their environment. Thus subjectivity, here defined as

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being “molded by my emotions,” has to take into account the source of those emotions. If she is a reflector, her emotions reflect external stimuli. This formulation might easily, however, lead to the presumption that either Sterne would paint naturalistic landscapes and environments or, even more likely, since she uses the language of an “instrument” and elsewhere a lens, that she would use photography as her medium. Yet she specifically rejects photography as an option: “Photography is a great creator of lies because time never stops. It is a human sin because life flows. The only thing that exists is the flow.”

Thus, there are three interrelated aspects of Sterne’s concept of the external world which need to be factored into her concept of herself as a mirror reflecting that world: the continual motion of all things, the coexistence of the seen and unseen, and the specificity of an idea’s relationship to the means of its communication. Hence she has explained that “the unseen truth is absolutely indispensable to the so-called immediate reality. One cannot exist without the other.” The “unseen” for Sterne is most often an idea or a symbol, which the object does not merely represent, but actually contains. Painting, for her, is the process of ascertaining the idea from within the object as she simultaneously figures out how to represent this idea on canvas. As she describes it, “When you work from life you recognize in something an existing shape that provokes an idea, and then what you do is a response, an exchange.” For Sterne, the particularity of this idea, however, determines the aesthetic form it takes:

Andre Breton . . . said “ideas always want to become concrete.” So, as ideas change, the shape and images change. There are things you make out of wood, things you make out of metal—the same thing with visions and ideas. A painting

\[167\] Ibid.
\[168\] “The unseen truth is absolutely indispensable to the so-called immediate reality. One cannot exist without the other.” Ibid.
is like that. . . . It had to have that shape and no other—that form, that materialization in this way.  

All of these strands came together for Sterne as a very specific, and to her logical, artistic process. Like her definition of mutuality and reciprocity, Sterne’s description of this process seems to be clearly informed by Martin Buber’s description of art: “This is the eternal origin of art that a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him. Not a figment of his soul but something that appears to the soul and demands the soul’s creative power.” Buber describes “the work” as something the artist “confronts,” but also as something that comes into being “through” him. He clarifies, “Not as a thing among the ‘internal’ things, not as a figment of the ‘imagination,’ but as what is present.” It is the otherness of the form that qualifies it for the act of reciprocity: “And it is an actual relation: it acts on me as I act on it.” Thus, what appear to be otherwise cryptic pronouncements of “accuracy” by Sterne, unfounded by any specific criteria, are in fact value statements that refer to her deep-seated commitment to Buber’s principles of reciprocity, both as he applies the concept to human relationships and as he uses it to define the act of making art. According to this central belief, Sterne’s criteria for terms like veracity, accuracy and honesty, usually gauge a work of art by the process in which it was produced. Buber’s emphasis that the “form” in art is not “internal” or from the “imagination” but rather actually present, seems to have been particularly important for her, as it is reflected in statements such as this:

In any case, all along it was never imagination or self-expression. I always thought that art is not quite self-expression but communication. It is saying, hey, look! Of course, what you react to has to be transformed, without a doubt, or otherwise it is not art—but you do that whether you want it or not. The intention,

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170 Ibid.
171 Buber, I and Thou, 60.
the purpose, is not to show your talent but to show *something*. This is very important. Because I grew-up and lived in a period of ego, ego, ego, ego. And I was always anti-ego….And I was always trying to reduce the ego. I tried to think in a way that was accurate. Not subjective. Not agonistic.172

Here, Sterne’s positive statement also has negative implications: ego and self-expression lead to inaccuracy. One could quote numerous statements associated with abstract expressionist artists that efficiently conjure the same concept of “self-expression” to which she refers here. As Jackson Pollock famously stated, “Painting is self-discovery. Every good painter paints what he is.”173 Barnett Newman also declared, “The self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting.”174 For Sterne, to define herself against “self-expression” was, in effect, to offer a major critique of her generation. By her own assessment, her biggest difference from her abstract expressionist peers had to do with their limited perception of identity as she saw it reflected in their signature styles. In another statement made late in her life, she identified repetition as the ultimate inaccuracy (just as she had in her 1954 artist statement):

Repeating the same image again and again because it represented you like a signature, this is a kind of repetition as if using the same words for very different ideas….and then it becomes incorrect, a lie.175

These were harsh words and they suggest a greater than actual distance between Sterne and many of her colleagues. Her attitude, however, can be understood as a response to what she felt was a perpetual misunderstanding of her work: “It wasn’t what everyone thought it was, that I was inconsistent.”176 Rather, for her, it was the consistency of her

176 Ibid.; Relatedly, Katharine Kuh recalled a specific experience in the 1960s in which she and Sterne deemed Rothko’s most current work “repetitions of the past.” She
process (which she claimed remained constant through all of her styles) that illustrated her larger project.

The Machines of the late 1940s offer an opportunity to examine the way in which her self-described process registered itself aesthetically. According to Sterne’s later accounts of her machines, the works revolved around two primary, related ideas. The first involved the machine as an unconscious self-portrait of the engineers and designers who produced them: “I call them anthropographs because I saw that people making machines unconsciously make a self-portrait of their inner needs. Grasping, needing, wanting, chewing. All the destructive, recycling, needs of the human psyche. . . Unconsciously the shape of the machine showed what the human being is after.” The second idea she emphasized incorporates the concept of the machine as a self-portrait into her larger 1940s project of coming to terms with American culture in general:

When I tried to understand a theory of the United States, I began with the nearest: my bathroom, my kitchen, up in the street. Everything that struck me directly, I confronted physically, became an idea and became a symbol, and became a symbol of the American approach, the human approach of trying to change reality to fit him. This is the United States: taking all of the physical universe and having it serve him.

Sterne was certainly not the first European artist to respond to the New York environment by taking up machines (or even bathroom fixtures for that matter) as a central theme. The machine had functioned as a central metaphor and subject for Francis Picabia and

explained, “Rothko appeared uninvited one evening at Hedda Sterne’s house while she and I were having dinner. . . . Even before we had finished our coffee, he insisted that we accompany him to his studio to see the acrylics. . . . Our fleeting impression was of an occasional triumph interspersed with perfunctory repetitions of the past. When we left him to go home we were both pierced by his overwhelming solitude.” Katharine Kuh, *My Love Affair With Modern Art*: 162.

Marcel Duchamp’s New York Dada movement from 1915 through the early 1920s, as evidenced by Picabia’s paintings from this era such as *Daughter Born without Mother*, 1916-17 [Fig. 52], as well as Duchamp’s quintessential work, *The Bride Stripped Bare, Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-1923 [Fig. 53] (not to mention the readymades). Moreover, there was a precedent for Sterne’s studies of monumental New York City bridges in Joseph Stella’s futurist-inspired visions of the Brooklyn Bridge, such as *The Bridge*, ca. 1919 [Fig. 54]. As Wanda Corn has pointed out in *The Great American Thing*, these artists, including Sterne, came to New York with pre-set expectations of a mythic machine-age America already in mind. It is then not surprising that all of these artists would mine machines and man-made structures for often-ambivalent symbols of both a national identity and the general conditions of modernity.

Sterne may not have intentionally placed herself within this lineage, since it is not clear how conscious she was in the late 1940s of Duchamp and Picabia’s specifically American body of work from 1915-1923. Yet there are distinct similarities between the conditions in which Sterne produced her machines and Duchamp and Picabia produced theirs: just as New York Dada emerged from artists escaping the devastation of World

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181 According to Sterne, however, she met Duchamp early after her arrival in 1941 and “was in awe of him.” Moreover, she felt “incredibly privileged” to have seen him “a lot.” When I asked her specifically if she ever discussed her own machines with him she responded, “When you were with Duchamp he chose the subjects. . . To talk about [the machines] would be like talking about myself and the last thing I would dare to do is to talk about myself.” Conversation with Josef Helfenstein and author, February 18, 2003.
War I, Sterne was working after her own escape from World War II. Moreover, New York Dada emerged as a dialogue between European artists and their distinctly American counter-parts, such as Alfred Stieglitz and his 291 Gallery, all of whom were steeped in Cubism, the current avant-garde European movement. Likewise, Sterne came to New York fully versed in the most recent avant-garde European movement, Surrealism, and quickly became associated with American colleagues who were themselves in the process of absorbing its precepts and techniques. Thus her machines, like those of New York Dada, emerged out of a hybrid between European modernism and a specifically urban New York landscape, as well as an American art scene.

Given her close association with Surrealism in the early and mid-1940s, it makes sense that Sterne’s contemporary reviewers continued to see “Surrealist overtones” in the work she exhibited even into the early 1950s. Indeed, there is an emphasis on the irrational running through many of Sterne’s machines which would seem to relate to both Dada and Surrealism. For instance, a work like Sterne’s Machine

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182 In the late 1920s she had followed the beginning of the movement from Bucharest via periodicals at a local bookshop, Hasefer, with an international selection of journals and books. She remarked, “as a teenager I practically lived there.” Conversation with author, October 14, 2007. When she traveled between Bucharest and Paris in the 1930s, her primary contact was Victor Brauner, an artistic mentor for Sterne from Bucharest who was a part of the close-knit group around Andre Breton before WWII. Conversation with author, January 2, 2004. In this conversation I brought Sterne images of Victor Brauner’s 1924 publication, 75HP, which contained Victor’s portrait of her as a thirteen-year-old. She discussed her relationship with the entire Brauner family extensively, including Teddy Brauner, Victor’s younger brother and her close friend, who was a Surrealist photographer, as well as their other brother, Harry Brauner, a musicologist who made field recordings of Romanian folk music. Sterne remembers that Harry Brauner brought Lee Miller and Roland Penrose to visit her in Bucharest in the late 1930s.

183 For example, as late as 1954 her images of the cities were described in these terms: “An apparitional element with Surrealist overtones appears in a kind of dream imagery (see New York III) by which objects encountered in the city assume ogreish, mysteriously organic looks.” P.T., Art News 53 (November, 1954): 52.
Structure XVIII [Fig. 17] echoes some of the formal properties of Picabia’s Daughter Born without a Mother. Both artists utilize either metallic paint or gold leaf in what might be described as a portrait of a machine structure. In Picabia’s work, however, he began with a found technical illustration from a journal or manual and painted over the background with metallic paint. The gold would seem to reference the tradition of religious icon paintings, and thus elevates the status of the machine to something like that of a saint. It is the title, however, that claims the image as a gendered portrait of a “daughter.” The words of the title simultaneously imbue the painting with a human quality as they also point toward the absurd rupture between language and image: the word girl juxtaposed with a picture of a machine part. Sterne’s painting, on the other hand, gives a seemingly straightforward title, Machine Structure XVIII, yet presents the opposite: a machine imbued with human qualities. While Picabia renders his machine nonfunctional due to its isolation from a larger structure, he keeps a seemingly objective, diagrammatic aesthetic. Sterne’s machine, by contrast, lacks any functional integrity even though it appears to be whole. The neck is far too thin to support the head while the head itself seems to meet no practical purpose. The arms, which look like pincers of some sort, hang too short to effectively connect with the machine’s own interior, let alone reach beyond the machine itself. Moreover, Sterne whitewashed over other parts of the machine, leaving its full form obscured. She employs the gold leaf to highlight what might appear to be critical junctures, yet in each case, the gold only draws attention to the unclear relationship between the part and the whole. Sterne’s Machine XVIII represents a strain of Sterne’s machine images that featured by-and-large ineffectual, top-heavy, vulnerable, and precarious structures. Within this body of work one finds Antro II and
Antro III, Machine 5, and over fifty carbon transfer line drawings on paper [Figs. 55, 56, & 57]. Alone, these works might fit more cleanly within a Dada and Surrealist lineage that emphasizes the absurd and the irrational.

Simultaneously, however, Sterne produced another body of machine paintings that translated looming structures into less animistic, more abstract, all-over compositions. This body of work includes four of the five paintings surrounding Sterne in the Life spread [Figs. 58 & 59], excluding only the work at top center which clearly fits within the Antro I & II series. Airpot I [Fig. 60] offers another example from this group of machine-based abstractions. Here, as in the works in Life, Sterne blurs the relationship of the machine with its architectural environment, flattening the compositional space. In Airport I, the form of a plane clearly flies across the top of the composition, but the patterns behind and below it, which are composed of the same colors and shapes as the plane itself, seem to suggest a bird’s eye view of the landscape. The upside down numbers 11 and 12 (in the upper center of the canvas and the lower right, respectively) further disorient the perspective. The entire canvas is painted in the same palette of a cool, light blue contrasted to a range of warm tans, ochres and yellows, producing a pulsating, dynamic rhythm. Airport I, like the other works in this group, emphasizes a complex and totalizing environment for the machine rather than a portrait of the machine’s vulnerable “character.”

Taken alone, even these two distinct groups would simplify Sterne’s output in this era. They represent the two most cohesive directions she appeared to follow, as well as the two bodies of work on display around her in the Life spread. Readers who merely

184 Of the works featured around Sterne, only the central work, Airport, 1949, remains in Sterne’s estate (Inventory #172). The locations of the rest of the works are unknown.
flips the pages past Steinberg’s *American Parade* find three examples of other styles, including *Flivver*, an eerie portrait of an early automobile reminiscent of a t-model Ford; *Warship*, (alternately titled *Totem I* in Sterne’s collection record and *N.Y., N.Y. #17*, in newspaper reviews of her 1950 Betty Parsons exhibition) which the *Life* caption indeed described as an “enigmatic structure” which “reminded artist of barbaric totem pole created to scare away evil”; and, *Construction*, the simplified silhouette of a bridge and highway overpasses conglomerate which apparently appears out of an ethereal blue mist and, according to the caption, “leads nowhere” [Fig. 45].

Sterne’s title, *Totem I* [Fig. 61], and the *Life* caption for the work, provide a clue to another context for Sterne’s machines. In 1946 Barnett Newman curated the inaugural exhibition for Betty Parsons Gallery. Titled *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* [Fig. 62], the show and his essay emphasized a connection between a specifically North American “primitive” art and contemporary abstraction: “Does not this work rather illuminate the work of those of our modern American abstract artists who, working with the pure plastic language we call abstract, are infusing it with intellectual and emotional content, and who, without any imitation of primitive symbols, are creating a living myth for us in our own time?”185 Just three months later he curated the counter-part to this exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, *The Ideographic Picture*, which brought together the work of 8

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185 Barnett Newman, *Northwest Coast Indian Painting*, Betty Parsons Gallery, September 30th-October 19th, 1946, Betty Parsons Papers, Group Exhibitions, Box 18, Folder 38, Archives of American Art, accessed October 8, 2011, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/-emph-render-italic-Northwest-Coast-Indian-Painting-emph-1946-Printed-Material--307420. As Anne Temkin has demonstrated, part of Newman’s particular interest in North West Coast native art stemmed from his search for a specifically American origin within which to situate contemporary art as by the 1940s African art as well as Oceanic art had already been firmly appropriated by European modern art via Cubism and Surrealism. *Barnett Newman*, 29-30.
artists, including Theodoros Stamos, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and himself. Just as the essay for the *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* exhibition had referred to modern American abstract painters, the essay for *The Ideographic Picture* made an extended reference back to the work he had shown in the *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* exhibition in order to frame and define the modern art impulse:

The Kwakiutl artist painting on a hide did not concern himself with the inconsequentials that made up the opulent social rivalries of the Northwest Coast Indian scene; nor did he, in the name of a higher purity, renounce the living world for the meaningless materialism of design. The abstract shape he used, his entire plastic language, was directed by a ritualistic will toward metaphysical understanding. The everyday realities he left to the toymakers; the pleasant play of nonobjective pattern, to the women basket weavers. To him a shape was a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable. The abstract shape was, therefore, real rather than a formal “abstraction” of a visual fact, with its overtone of an already-known nature.  

Newman’s co-option of the Kwakiutl artist in this passage obviously has far more to do with abstract art in 1947 than with the function or context of the Kwakiutl art itself. His projected hierarchy between “artists,” “toymakers” and “women basket weavers” relies initially on a separation between art and design that he had emphasized in the essay for the *Northwest Coast Indian Painters* essay as well:

[I]t would be a mistake to consider these paintings mere decorative devices… Design was a separate function carried on by the women and took the form of geometric, non-objective pattern. These paintings are ritualistic. They are an expression of the mythological beliefs of these peoples and take place on ceremonial objects only because these peoples did not practice a formal art of easel painting on canvas.  

In both passages, Newman denigrates design as “non-objective pattern” while emphasizing the ritualistic and metaphysical role of abstraction for the artist. (The clean

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187 Newman, *Northwest Coast Indian Painting*.
gender lines he provides to divide design from ritual are almost too obvious to highlight, yet it is worth noting that the group of artists he showed in the Ideographic Picture did not include any women, despite the fact that Parsons already represented a significant number of women artists.) Between these two exhibitions Newman had begun painting works like Euclidian Abyss [Fig. 63], which he first exhibited in Ideographic Picture. As Ann Temkin has pointed out, he was at pains to differentiate his work from geometric abstraction, which he felt was incapable of expressing the depth of meaning his works contained. In fact, as she notes, the collector who bought Euclidian Abyss in 1947, Burton Tremaine, sent a request in January of 1948 to use the work for “sales promotion work, reproductions, trademarks, etc.” at his manufacturing business, Miller Company. Thus it would seem that Newman had intuited from the beginning the risk that some would interpret his abstractions as design elements; hence the need to clearly demarcate the territory of the artist, both in his originary myth of the Northwest Coast Indian artists and in the circle of contemporary abstract artists he featured alongside his own work.

Newman’s text sets up a binary between functional objects and ceremonial objects that Sterne seems intent on collapsing in a painting such as Totem I. Although heavily editorialized, the Life text is the only record (in English) of Sterne’s comments specifically on her machines from the same era as she produced them:

Her fascination with mechanical creations stems almost entirely from her contact with America where, she says, “there is a mystical trust in machines. In other days we prayed for rain. Now we send up an airplane to make it.” To Miss Sterne there is a quality of mystery about the machines which do such superhuman things, and she tried to inject that quality of mystery into her pictures. “If there were no mystery,” she says, “I could not paint.”

188 Temkin, Barnett Newman, 152.
According to Sterne’s later explanations of her emphasis on “mystery,” its use here can be equated with Newman’s similar use of the terms “metaphysical” and “ritualistic.” Sterne, however, locates these qualities in precisely the places and kinds of objects, “the everyday realities,” that Newman considers incapable of functioning as a “vehicle for an abstract thought complex.” Totem I provides a particularly clear example since, in it, Sterne seems to have consciously engaged the potent vocabulary of Northwest Coast Indian art that she shared with her contemporaries. Given Sterne’s close association with Betty Parsons and her gallery, she certainly must have attended, or at the very least received extensive reports of, Newman’s inaugural exhibition as well as the Ideographic Picture. Moreover, Sterne had been close to John Graham in the mid to early 1940s, and Newman notes on his checklist and in his acknowledgements that Graham lent a piece from his own collection to the exhibition.190 Another New York émigré associate of Sterne’s, Max Ernst, also lent four pieces and, as Jackson Rushing has noted, Newman himself owned four “museum quality” totems in the 1940s.191 In short, Sterne not only had ample opportunity to see examples of Northwest Coast ceremonial art and totems; she also moved in social circles that admired them, or even laid claim to them as inspiration. Moreover, whereas few sketches remain for any of Sterne’s paintings, an unprecedented seven sketches and/or monotypes of the warship/totem form remain in Sterne’s estate attesting to the centrality of the work for her [Figs. 64 & 65].192

192 Hedda Sterne Estate database record numbers 1415-1420 and 1422.
revolving tondos brought to the fore her theory of a reciprocal relationship between the artist and object as well as viewer and object, *Totem I* offers the clearest illustration of her committed belief in mysterious elements contained within the ordinary. It also, however, registers a direct response to Newman’s claim that contemporary abstract artists did not imitate “primitive symbols” but rather used abstraction to create “a living myth for us in our own time.” Sterne, in fact, does reference “primitive symbols” directly in her painting, but she does so to give anonymous engineers and ship designers the credit as the mythmakers of their time. Via her painting, she too claims the power of “primitive” expression, only to relinquish it, as she merely “mirrors” the very area of contemporary culture that Newman sought to separate from the function of art proper. One imagines that he would place ship engineers and airplane designers in the same category as toymakers and basket weavers. While it was her painting (or, as she might describe it in Buber’s terms, her act of reciprocity, which had brought the painting into being), it was not, for Sterne, self-expression. By her formula she was not a mythmaker but a translator of the myths contained within the man-made environment around her. Thus *Totem I* stands at the crux of her engagement with and critique of the artists of her generation.

Sterne’s persistent focus on the mystery contained within a man-made landscape, however, was by no means only celebratory. Her association of a warship in New York Harbor with “a barbaric totem pole created to scare away evil” provides a less than idealistic image of both the contemporary and so called “primitive” cultures she quotes. The awkwardly balanced, hybrid totem/warship, in fact, offers an impossible composition in which the side of a razor thin tower at the center of the ship seems to melt into a shadow without defining how several crucial planes of the structure meet. Likewise,
wires appear to dissolve before reaching their connection; and what appear at first to be solid blocks of color in fact dissolve at several junctures into amorphous mists that blend into the background. As an unstable picture plane, the painting offers a hybrid model between abstraction and illusion. The reference to a built structure keeps in view the inherent distortion of translating the image into an abstracted visual language. More importantly, however, these open, unresolved areas in many of Sterne’s machine structures highlight her process of painting as a form of study or research. They are not only investigations of the machine structures themselves, but also formal and conceptual explorations of how to represent the idea embedded within the object or environment; as such they are quasi-machine-symbols in a perpetual state of transition between the two.

The 1951 *Life* description of Sterne’s “fascination with machines” stemming from her “contact with America” sounds remarkably like the 2003 description of how the things she physically encountered in the US transformed into ideas and symbols of “the American approach.” If we rely on her own interpretation of her work then we can read the machines, as well as the Spray paintings that succeeded them, as investigations of not only a general “theory of America,” but specifically her embodied position within it. In this sense, these works explore the reciprocal relationship between national and individual identity. Sterne’s images of machines may critique her American environment without negating its power.

This reading of Sterne’s exploration of the built environment makes even more sense in the context of Sterne and Steinberg’s close relationship and intellectual dialogue
with the architect, designer, and cultural critic Bernard Rudofsky and his wife, Berta.\textsuperscript{193}

The Rudofskys, like Sterne and Steinberg, came to the US during WWII as émigrés. Although best known for a book he published in 1965, \textit{Architecture without Architects}, Rudofsky had already engaged many of the ideas from this later work in his 1931 dissertation for the Technische Hochschule in Vienna, Austria, which approached vernacular architecture in Santorini from a cultural and historical perspective.\textsuperscript{194} Also like Sterne and Steinberg, Rudofsky traveled extensively, always comparing the particularities of a culture by way of the “anonymous” or “non-pedigreed” structures its people produced. He distrusted the modern architectural emphasis on functionalism, not because he disliked modern architectural aesthetics, but rather because he questioned the ways in which modernist architects accepted “function” without questioning the ways in which learned behavior and social norms dictated the values on which it was based.\textsuperscript{195}

One of Rudofsky’s deep commitments was to the significance of everyday activities and gestures, about which he felt modern people had “uncertain information,” because they had not been exposed to other ways of bathing, eating, traveling or shopping. He did not necessarily privilege non-Western vernacular architecture over Western models; rather, he insisted on a multiplicity of examples (as offered in \textit{Architecture without Architects}) so that one could compare the variety of ways in which humans related to their

\textsuperscript{193} Sterne’s best friend of sixty years, the painter Vita Petersen (who studied under Hans Hoffman), pointed to the centrality of the relationship between Sterne and Steinberg, Bernard and Berta Rudofsky, and Tino and Ruth Nivola in a conversation on June 29, 2009. In this same interview she explained that Sterne’s approach had always been too intellectual and conceptual (as opposed to “felt”) to qualify as Abstract Expressionist.


\textsuperscript{195} de Wit, "Rudofsky's Discomfort," 133-134.
environment, thereby undermining the legitimacy of a singular cultural approach. His research was informed by a diverse set of cultures: from Mediterranean to Islamic, African, and Japanese. On the other hand, he was not a relativist: he believed that architectural spaces powerfully shaped living experiences and thus he was constantly researching a “natural theory” of dwelling that would promote the optimal relationship between lifestyle and environment. When *Architecture Without Architects* was published in 1964 he considered it the result of “forty odd years” of “methodical travel and long years of residence in countries that afforded a study of vernacular architecture.” Wim de Wit, the main architectural historian to have written about Rudofsky’s work, argues that, while Rudofsky was not anti-American per se, his continual process of research challenged American habits and behavior more than any other culture, such that the American built environment operated as something of a baseline for his investigations. De Wit credits Rudofsky’s mainly émigré circle of friends (of which he considers Steinberg a crucial member) for helping him keep an outsider’s perspective within the US where he had nonetheless officially been a citizen since 1948.

Sterne and Steinberg must have met Bernard and Bertha Rudofsky by the early 1940s, as evidenced by Steinberg’s portrait of Rudofsky dated ca. 1943-44 and his 1946 drawing for Bertha Rudofsky [Figs. 66 & 67]. All of the details in Steinberg’s portrait of Rudofsky surely reference the architect’s 1944 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

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196 One of these projects was the Nivola’s House-Garden in Amagansett, NY, as discussed in Andrea Bocco Guarneri, "The Art of Dwelling," in Platzer, *Rudofsky*, 145-149.
198 de Wit, "Rudofsky's Discomfort," 117.
Art, “Are Clothes Modern?”—the main premise of which was to demonstrate the ways modern clothing not only formed, but also deformed, the human body. The “R” in Steinberg’s pictogram drawing of Rudofsky’s name forms a figure featuring an enormous breast with a bra strap holding it straight forward, while he composed the lowercase “d” in his name from a corseted bust of a Victorian era woman. Steinberg draws Rudofsky (recognizable by the caricature of his eyebrows and mustache) shaped by his clothing as well, with an elongated neck formed by an absurdly stiff collar. Moreover, he is a man/beast (one of Steinberg’s favorite mythical references) with each of his four feet shaped by a different style of fashionable shoe. By contrast, Steinberg’s drawing for Berta features a man on all fours in the nude wearing the Bernardo sandals that Rudofsky designed as his seminal challenge against the accepted habit of wearing what he considered “foot deforming” closed toes shoes.

With Steinberg and Rudofsky’s relationship in mind, the reader can hear (and see) clear echoes of Rudofsky’s perspective on vernacular or anonymous architecture in a feature Steinberg wrote and illustrated for a February 1953 issue of Art News as a review of the Museum of Modern Art’s architectural exhibition, *Built in U.S.A*:

The major exhibition opening at the Museum of Modern Art, titled *Built in U.S.A.* and accompanied by a book of same name, is an optimistic survey of a few handsome works selected from an enormous field of nonsense—thus a narcissistic view which leaves the impression that things are doing splendidly.

In architecture, for obvious reasons, faults are more important than virtues. The overwhelming presence of bad architecture cannot be ignored, and praising a few cases of honesty (or talent) never stopped a crime wave.²⁰⁰

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After describing several examples of recent trends, Steinberg offers to present some “unphotogenic views.” Below his text, the reader finds Steinberg’s illustration of an architectural photo shoot in which the ideal view of the building is based on a model and requires a fake back-drop, enormous lights and several cameras to produce [Fig. 68]. On the facing page, he juxtaposes this fictional drawing with his own “real” photograph of three awkward chimneys or exhaust pipes on a city building top, to the bottom of which Steinberg drew tiny people and cars, producing the converse effect of scale [Fig. 69]. In the doctored photograph, the chimneys appear impossibly enormous, as opposed to the drawing of the photo shoot, in which the tiny architectural model is made to appear, the viewer presumes, life-size in the final photograph. Like a structure from one of Sterne’s machine paintings, the top-heavy chimneys in Steinberg’s photograph are supported by skinny poles propped at awkward angles. Moreover, Steinberg’s tiny fictional pedestrians and drivers, making their way at the base of these monstrosities, emphasize that these are the sorts of anonymously designed structures around and under which people actually live. In typical Steinberg fashion, he brings together a drawing that exposes the fiction of photographic representation with a clearly altered photograph that puns on what he describes in the text as the “underworld of postwar architecture.” Although humorous drawings, they reflected a longstanding conviction that he had shared privately in a letter to his Italian friend Aldo Buzzi already in 1946: “I can’t write you an essay on America but I’ll give you some mixed news: the general tendency is toward streamlined bad taste, in architecture and industrial design.”

201 Saul Steinberg, Letter to Aldo Buzzi, January 26, 1946. Translated transcription provided by the Saul Steinberg Foundation.
Steinberg’s drawings, made specifically for the Rudofskys and the *Art News* review of architecture, highlight the shared dialogue between two architecturally-trained cultural critics. While Sterne was neither an architect nor a cultural critic (at least publicly), Steinberg and Rudofsky’s commentaries on the built environment help to define one of the critical milieus within which to understand Sterne’s encounters with her American environment. The social context provided by this milieu found representation in the text and arrangement of the issue of *Art News* that featured both Steinberg’s review of *Built in U.S.A.* and a review of Sterne’s exhibition of her revolving tondos at Betty Parsons Gallery (discussed in chapter 2). Rudofsky’s investigations of American culture also provide an important back-drop for Sterne and Steinberg’s feature in *Life*. Their separate images of America, as described in the *Life* text, might be considered part of this larger émigré circle’s exploration of the ways in which the self related to the built environment.

Despite both Sterne and Steinberg’s close association with architects and designers, however, the abstract expressionists, especially as represented at the Betty Parsons Gallery, provided one of the primary contexts in which their work was exhibited and understood. If Sterne’s criticism of her peers was veiled, Steinberg’s was not. Like his position on American architecture, Steinberg made his attitude known both publicly and privately. In a letter to Aldo Buzzi in 1949 he remarked: “Recently I think I’ve discovered the key to understanding the American abstract painters: they’re primitives.”

Three years later, under the section title “Anti-Expressionism” in an article

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202 Saul Steinberg, Letter to Aldo Buzzi, New York, December 7, 1949. Translated transcription provided by the Saul Steinberg Foundation.
about his 1952 exhibition, the *New York Times* journalist, Aline B. Louchheim, quotes Steinberg:

“Humor” says Steinberg, “is the antithesis of expressionism. Expressionism—the direct outpouring of the artist’s emotion or state of mind or hatreds—seems to me a kind of blackmail on the spectator, the Grand Guignol of art. I believe the artist’s feelings must be sublimated and objectivized through the language of art. Certainly my drawings are a protest, but they make that protest with a sort of pudeur, sort of in a nagging way, quietly undermining the things I protest about.”

Since the phrase “Abstract-Expressionist” was already in play (as noted in the 1950 artists' sessions at Studio 35 in which Motherwell presented it as one of three options currently in circulation), Steinberg clearly references the art of his colleagues, especially given that the exhibit being reviewed was held jointly between the Betty Parsons Gallery and Sidney Janis Gallery: precisely the places where “Expressionism” was on display.

Examining Steinberg’s 1952 joint exhibition, which Loucheim deemed his first important “one-man show,” offers insight into his exploration of identity, representation, and the current New York art scene. Steinberg, ever aware of larger contexts, approached the exhibition on three levels. First, he dealt with an iconography of identity and authentication in the work itself. Second, he harnessed the context of the gallery to activate the meaning in several of the drawings. Finally and relatedly, he used his open-ended (if not clearly outsider) status as a commercial artist and cartoonist to launch a critique of the fine art gallery system which he was, nonetheless, utilizing.

According to the *New York Times* review, Steinberg’s exhibition contained over 100 drawings, which the review notes included, among other themes, examples of his diplomas and his parade series. While there are no records left regarding which specific

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diplomas he exhibited, it is possible, based on records in the Saul Steinberg Foundation, to identify a group of parade drawings with Betty Parsons stickers from the 1952 exhibition. Whereas the *American Parade* featured in the *Life* article takes on a more typical parade subject, “allegorical floats,” several of the works titled *Parade* shown in the 1952 exhibition feature little men ceremoniously hoisting over their heads accepted signifiers of authenticity—signatures, seals, and thumbprints [Figs. 70, 71, 71.a, 72, 72.a, 72.b]. In the context of the Parsons and Janis galleries, however, the men carrying lines and brushstrokes provide a particularly humorous commentary on the era. In Steinberg’s world an abstract brushstroke stood on par with an elaborate signature. Isolated and given a tangible weight (some take more than one man to hold aloft, while others are visibly unwieldy to balance), each of these marks reveals its contingent status. Minus their officiating documents or painted compositions, the signatures and brushstrokes reveal themselves as mere representations of authority and authenticity, making the serious parade of self-importance even more ridiculous. Speaking in regard to the signatures on Steinberg’s fake diplomas [Fig. 73] rather than the parade series, the *New York Times* review picked up the reference to “‘correct collectors’ of art who buy signatures instead of paintings.”

In his 1978 catalogue essay for Steinberg’s first museum retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American art, Harold Rosenberg repeatedly placed Steinberg within the context of the abstract expressionists by emphasizing Steinberg’s explicit treatment of identity as a primary subject within his art. However, Rosenberg makes a key distinction:

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204 Louchheim, “Steinberg.”
“Steinberg’s approach has been the opposite of the Expressionists.”

Rosenberg notes that while the abstract expressionists made a claim on immediacy via reference to an interior self, Steinberg constructs his image out of publicly available, found materials such as rubber stamps. Thus according to Rosenberg, “In his drawings Steinberg records everything about himself but without providing information—except what he has been making up. His art is the public disclosure of a man determined to keep his life a secret.”

Yet, according to Rosenberg, Steinberg nonetheless succeeds in using these materials to construct an equally legible worldview: “With his rhetoric of signs, Steinberg melds self and surroundings into an ego/cosmos as explicit as that of Rothko and Pollock.”

Rosenberg’s essay, however, focuses on the ways in which Steinberg’s fictional self projects this cosmos outward. It is possible, however, to read Steinberg’s images from the opposite direction: by investigating public vestiges of authenticity, he, in fact, grants them more authority in determining individual identities. As he makes signs, brushstrokes and signatures concrete, he explores the ways in which they signify authenticity. Yet this does not, in fact, diminish their power. As Joel Smith has noted, it is difficult not to place Steinberg’s fake diplomas in the context of his useless architectural diploma, which declared a professional degree alongside his ethnicity, "of the Hebrew race,” and thereby barred him from using it in fascist Italy.

While there was great irony to this document, which Steinberg himself relished, its effects were all too real. This paradox, the legitimating power of exterior signs to determine one's identity, gets at the

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206 Ibid., 13.
207 Ibid., 17.
208 Smith, *Illuminations*, 27.
darker side of Steinberg’s concept of the self. His drawings ceaselessly pointed toward the edifice of representation, but never offer any other alternative. In this sense, his illegible signatures and isolated brushstrokes indeed offer the only vestige of himself he is willing to provide, yet these marks may not necessarily hide a “secret” life but instead constitute it. His iconic 1954 image of a man composing his own head out of calligraphic marks seems to offer a concrete antithesis to Sterne’s later remark, “I am not my signature” [Fig. 74].

The literalness of Steinberg’s treatment of identity translated into his approach to the encroaching threat of the Sidney Janis Gallery on Betty Parson’s territory as well. After Pollock, Newman, Still and Rothko left Betty Parsons Gallery, Sterne registered her resistance in an exhibition of multiple styles critiquing the rise of the signature style (as discussed at length in chapter 2). Steinberg, on the other hand, took a characteristically prescient and preemptive approach. Not only did he feature a body of work that examined “signatures” themselves; he brought the context of the art gallery itself into the foreground. In February 1952, a few months after Pollock had notified Parsons that he was leaving, but before Pollock officially signed with Janis, Steinberg took the unprecedented step of holding a solo exhibition simultaneously at Betty Parsons and Sidney Janis, taking advantage of their location across the hall from one another. Over twenty years later (but only shortly after his fourth joint exhibition between the two galleries), he explained the difference between the two dealers to Calvin Tomkins, once again in terms of fiction:

One of the attractive things about Betty is that she resembles fiction more than anything else. She exists in the way that Raskolnikov exists, or Julien Sorel. The profession of art dealer is very difficult, very delicate. A dealer is the intermediary between two of the most important things in life—fame and money—and the fact
that Betty is a fictional character makes it easier to deal with her, although it also
makes things less precise. Janis now, is completely brass tacks.”

Other than noting the fact that the exhibition spanned both galleries, a 1952 review by
Aline B. Louchheim in the New York Times, does not note any irony or humor in this
joint gallery arrangement. Louchheim does, however, aptly outline Steinberg’s main
artistic tactics in terms that might generally describe not only the drawings in the
exhibition, but also his purpose for joining the spaces of the opposing galleries as well:

Steinberg’s humor is based on candid exposure of reality; or on unexpected
contrast; or on exaggeration to the point where the subject is revealed in all its
absurdity; or on incongruity. But nothing is ever carried beyond plausibility:
rather, it is brought to its ultimate truth.

Utilizing the two galleries simultaneously provided exactly the sort of contrast or
incongruity on which his work relied. Just as he utilized the Life article format to address
the fiction of identity, he appeared to harness the gallery context to bolster the thematic
interplays within the drawings he exhibited: one of the drawings in the show titled
Parade portrayed stodgy, middle or upper class women casually carrying away art like
shopping bags [Fig. 75]. One of the women holds a work that portrays a woman drawn in
the same style, while another woman hoists a miniature of one of Steinberg’s popular
architectural piazza drawings, like the one of Piazza San Marco that was featured on the
exhibition invitation cover. Thus his joint show seems to acknowledge that, despite the
two gallery owners’ pronounced differences, they are each in the business of selling work.
If Parsons resembles fiction and Janis is brass tacks, they are both, according to
Steinberg’s later description, mediators of fame and money. He includes himself in the
equation, however, since he frankly acknowledges the ultimate fate of his works as

209 Quoted in Tomkins, “Keeper,” 46.
210 Louchheim, “Steinberg.”
commodities. Precisely how Parsons resembled fiction and Janis was “brass tacks,” however, must have only been understandable to those in an inner circle of artists who knew both dealers well. Sterne remained at Betty Parsons Gallery and exploited her freedom there by producing shows that took advantage of Parsons' hands-off approach (which may or may not qualify as a characteristic that makes Parsons fictional according to Steinberg), whereas Steinberg refused to choose between them and thereby incorporated the contrast between the galleries into the display of his work. Whereas Sterne’s decision emphasized her resistance to entering the market at all, Steinberg insists on keeping money visible at all times. Yet, even as Steinberg’s arrangement highlights the tension between the two, he still benefited from both: he maintained a loyalty to Parsons while presumably gaining dividends from Janis.

In an interview with Katherine Kuh in 1961, Steinberg employed the term “fiction” in much the same way that he used the drawing of himself in the 1951 Life photograph: as a mask. Yet in this episode he explains. Kuh had been chosen to interview Steinberg as part of the Archives of American Arts series of interviews with American artists. Part way into the conversation, Steinberg apparently left abruptly with no explanation and sent a letter a few days later that relied on the concept of “fiction” to define both his reservations about the project and the terms of his future participation:

211 Tensions between the gallery owners couldn’t have been as high in 1952 as they were by 1963, when Betty Parsons sued Janis after he and the building’s landlord apparently brokered a deal in which Janis gained Parsons’ half of the floor and she was forced to move. On the other hand, their radically different approaches to running their galleries had to be apparent to most onlookers soon after Janis moved into the space across from Parsons in 1949. See Tomkins, “Keeper,” 59. The joint exhibition arrangement must have been important to Steinberg as he held three more simultaneous exhibitions after the galleries were no longer located near each other in 1966, 1969, and 1973.
“I question the position of the artist. This situation implies the collaboration of the artist in the manufacture of history and this sort of instant history is traditionally made to resemble the textbook and the popular version. In other words, fiction. . . . (This exercise is dangerous too. The man involved in his own history becomes himself a work of art. And a work of art doesn’t permit changes and it doesn’t paint or write.) ... If I follow my instinct, which is non-fiction, I would greet your questions with grunts, sighs, silence. You would not print that. If I decide to cooperate with you I would give you fiction, entertainment and for this performance I demand to be paid. The money will clarify our positions and certainly make me take this project more seriously.”

In typical Steinberg fashion, he closed the letter by welcoming Kuh to print the letter as a conclusion to the incomplete interview for the archive, “this for free of course.” The letter functions as an interruption in the context of the archival project, pointing to the conventions of the interview itself rather than the content of the conversation. Both of these elements—moments of rupture in representational constructs and transparent economic exchanges—are hallmarks of Steinberg’s work, especially in the decade between his photograph with Sterne in 1951 and his interview with Katharine Kuh in 1961. In the letter, however, Steinberg traces an unusually clear path between the issues of representation and money: stable representations, such as autobiographical histories, produce fiction; fiction, in turn, transforms the artist into a work of art; works of art do not change. Thus, according to Steinberg’s formulation, producing fiction risks stasis. In order to avoid the ultimate danger—an immobilized artist or work of art—Steinberg does not avoid fiction. Rather he offers fiction, but clearly labeled as a genre. The only

212 Katherine Kuh Papers, box 2, folder 28, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Reprinted as an Appendix in Smith, Illuminations, 249, with a descriptive note, “Typed letter, dated November 9, 1961, on New Yorker stationary, with Steinberg’s home address rubber-stamped at the top.”

213 There is no record of the interview with Kuh or the letter in the Archives of American Art. It is not clear whether Kuh ever submitted the material or if the AAA decided against accepting it. Instead, AAA has transcripts of two later interviews, one from 1963 with Paul Cummings and one from 1971 with Grace Glueck.
other option, non-fiction, is in fact not a viable alternative as it is essentially incommunicable. It is the fee, the paid performance, which allows him to avoid all pretense of sincerity, thus maintaining his freedom.

This was, in effect, the precept on which Steinberg based much of his career. He showed his drawings at Betty Parsons as well as at Sidney Janis, where his work fell under the rubric of “fine art.” Yet he also readily bragged in print that the design for one Hallmark Christmas card provided enough money to support him for two years.\(^{214}\) Neither did he hide the fact that he produced large scale murals to be featured in the dining rooms of luxury cruise ships, as well as allowing his drawings to be reproduced on wallpaper and fabric. Of course, he achieved the most notoriety as a cartoonist for the New Yorker. More often than not Steinberg’s drawings offered sophisticated cultural critiques, regardless of whether they were viewed as originals on gallery or museum walls or found as reproductions in the pages of a magazine. Again, Aline Loucheim’s New York Times review of his 1952 exhibition emphasizes the elevated status his more receptive audiences granted him. She described him as an artist “who uses line to satirize the complacencies, authoritarianisms and inflated vanities of our time with the same bite and purpose as Voltaire used the written word.”\(^{215}\) Noting precisely this type of assessment, Rosalind Constable focused on the “challenge” of where to place Steinberg two years later in a 1954 Art Digest profile on the artist. Already historicizing his cultural role, she cited an early review of his inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1946 exhibition, Fourteen Americans, to emphasize Steinberg’s ambivalent status in the American art scene:

\(^{215}\) Loucheim, “Steinberg.”
Reviewing Steinberg’s contribution to the [Fourteen Americans] exhibit in the New York Times Magazine, art critic Howard Devree asked, “It’s Funny—But Is It Art?” For two columns he wrestled with the problem and came up with the conclusion: “Yes. No.” Since then Steinberg has been compared to Voltaire, Klee and Picasso, described as a descendent of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, and early icons.  

Ultimately Constable withholds judgment, like Devree, settling on the persistence of his dual status: “There is still a certain amount of confusion in the public mind today as to whether Steinberg is a cartoonist or is to be taken seriously. Even specialists in art and museum directors are not sure how to take Steinberg.” Like Steinberg’s drawing of himself in the Life photograph spread with Sterne, this confusion was strategic on his part. Devree’s answer—“Yes. No.”—left Steinberg the open space he demanded to maintain his artistic freedom while his audience’s “confusion” conversely prepared them to approach his work with an open mind.

The choice of a label—from cartoonist to the Voltaire of his era—conditions any consideration of Sterne and Steinberg’s intellectual dialogue as artists in the 1940s and 50s. Steinberg the cartoonist might appear irrelevant to Sterne’s body of work, while Steinberg the “descendent of Proust, Joyce, Kafka” risks over-shadowing it. The Steinberg who relished his ability to occupy both of these poles simultaneously, however, deeply engages Sterne’s commitment to the act of continual re-evaluation. In an interview with Adam Gopnik in the late 1980s Steinberg described the “nature” of the modern artist in terms clearly associated with Sterne’s determination to disregard success so that “no one can control you.” As she stated in her letter to him in 1944:

> Becoming an artist was not, is not an intention. I don’t think that anybody starts with the absolute idea of being an artist. . . . Sure, you decide to become a

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217 Ibid., 24.
museum artist, you can decide that, but in my eyes that’s just as bad as becoming a commercial artist, in the sense that you are not any more a modern artist. You are subjected to the pope and the prince. The nature of the modern artist is to search, is to be in a precarious position and to be non-professional.\footnote{Smith, 	extit{Illuminations}, 22: "Gopnik, Adam. Multiple typed drafts and galley proofs of collaboratively scripted 'talks' with Steinberg, 1986-93, with Steinberg's hand emendations. YCAL [Beinecke[, boxes 48] and 67."}

Arguably, Steinberg, who was at that point in his life both a museum artist and a commercial artist, consciously used these terms against each other to destabilize his position in either realm. Sterne, on the other hand, launched her resistance against “success” or a “career” from within the gallery system: she continued to show her work regularly throughout her life, knowing simultaneously that Parsons would never pressure her to sell her work. Thus her choice not to actively market her work conversely suggested that her work simply was not marketable. Likewise, her marital status as a wife allowed her the monetary freedom not to make a living from selling work (especially considering Steinberg’s secure financial status). Simultaneously the cultural role of “wife” at mid-century conditioned and limited the seriousness with which other artists and critics accepted her identity as an artist. Nonetheless, Sterne and Steinberg clearly agreed on the high value they each placed on the artistic freedom that their different tactics ensured them.

Just as Steinberg received publicity through 	extit{Life} while winking at the fiction of artistic identity, and just as he marketed his work through galleries while calling attention to the gallery system itself, he likewise seems to have relied on Sterne’s considerable domestic labor. He acknowledged her work with the bravado of large, fake certificates recognizing her dish washing and cooking ability, hung appropriately over the kitchen sink and the stove top [Fig.76]. In part, the certificates are humorous for their scale,
official language and elaborate hand, in contrast to the humble roles that they commemorate: dishwasher, cook. But the larger incongruity can be grasped only with knowledge of the full context: Sterne is not only a wife but, as the Life article described, she is at “the forefront of leading U.S. abstractionists.” Or also in the words of the article, she is “artist-wife.” Steinberg’s certificates acknowledge the discrepancy between her public profession and her domestic, menial labor, yet he continues to reap the benefits of both. Not only did she literally cook their shared meals and wash their dishes under his certificates daily; the evidence of her “other” work (as discussed at the beginning of this chapter) also did not expose the “fiction” of a singular role. As she recalled, “But in my social life I was Mrs. Steinberg. . . There was a separate world where people didn’t even know I was an artist.” Confirming this memory, Elsa Maxwell’s 1946 review of Betty Parsons Christmas exhibition records what must have been a common reaction:

> Then I came across a Hedda Sterne, which was a curious concept called, “The Memories of Aunt Cathy.” I would not mind owning it at all if I had a wall to hang it on. Then I remembered that I knew Hedda Sterne quite well as Mrs. Steinberg. She is the wife of the talented artist of the New Yorker, with whom I have occasionally played cards.

Steinberg’s certificates, hung on the kitchen wall, required knowledge of their domestic context to complete their significance. Yet few visitors to their home knew of Sterne's multiple roles, and Steinberg's certificates only made them less visible. So only a small circle of friends could ascertain the full meaning of this domestic exchange.

This chapter began with a highly public example of their dialogue as portrayed in Life and ends with a private example as hung on their wall because each helps to illustrate

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an essential aspect of their work: both artists relied extensively on their contexts to produce the content of their work, as well as to display it. Yet in each of these cases, Steinberg’s fictional representation defines Sterne’s “real” identity. The editorial choice of the word “real” in relation to Hedda’s image in *Life* was intended as a straightforward descriptor of the juxtaposition between a drawing and a photograph. As such, it provides a helpful foil in her consistent yet highly idiosyncratic use of words such as “veracity,” “accuracy,” “honesty,” and “truth.” Ultimately, Sterne considered any isolated group of her works antithetical to “the real Hedda Sterne,” while Steinberg insisted that his fictive self provided the only available reality. In effect, Steinberg’s fictional self offered a concise critique of identity while simultaneously functioning as a kind of logo by which he could easily be recognized and understood. His very criticism of representation served to consolidate his own representation. Meanwhile Sterne’s larger project was far less conducive to singular images in magazines. Like her relationship with Steinberg, Sterne’s association with the abstract expressionists continually threatened to define the reception of her work. Her complex philosophy of reciprocity and its incumbent emphasis on exterior environments and multiplicity failed to register as either an expression of her own identity or a critique of others.
EPILOGUE

Sterne’s 1955 painting, *New York* [Fig. 78], appeared as the frontispiece for Katharine Kuh’s 1956 Venice Biennale exhibition, *American Artists Paint the City*. Paired with a quote by E. B. White, Sterne’s painting illustrates a key element of Kuh’s curatorial narrative—the direct influence of an artist’s immediate external environment on the work he or she produces: “New York is nothing like Paris; it is nothing like London; and it is not Spokane multiplied by sixty, or Detroit multiplied by four. It is by all odds the loftiest of cities.”221 Kuh’s curatorial essay goes on to unabashedly promote American art as a product of its physical environment: “The light in America, almost always brighter than in Europe, defines our surroundings with intense precision, accounting in part for the American artist’s emphasis on the specific rather than the general.”222 She proceeds to use this thesis to link artists as diverse as Reginald Marsh, Stuart Davis, Jacob Lawrence, Joseph Stella, and Jackson Pollock. Her emphasis on the external environment produced a specifically American and regionalist lineage that legitimated the perspectives of immigrants as much as those born natively:

As might be expected in America, many of the artists in this group were not born in the United States. Frequently, because they come from elsewhere, recognition of personal characteristics in their own country is more acute. But what seems most arresting is how closely American artists, whether native born or not, are related to their own environment, how deeply they draw on their surroundings and how reliant they are on life around them for source material.223

Kuh’s curatorial emphasis on external stimuli, which was consistent with several other books on 20th-century art that she wrote from the early fifties through the mid-sixties,

222 Ibid., 8.
223 Ibid., 31.
provided a framework in which Sterne’s painting made thematic as well as aesthetic sense alongside the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline. On reviewing Kuh’s comments for individual artists, it is striking how unfamiliar a now canonical artist like Pollock’s work seems through Kuh’s lens. She wrote, “Pollock is famous for rich web-like pigment dripped on huge canvases. Compulsive and limitless, his painting reflect both the accidental beauty and furious intensity of life in the New World.” Indeed, Pollock was apparently not happy about the inclusion of his work, Convergence [Fig. 77], under a theme with which he did not identify in the least. Yet, if Kuh’s category seems superficial or ill suited to Pollock’s work, it is perhaps no less restrictive than the formalist claims Clement Greenberg made in his 1955 essay “American Type Painting,” which imposed a strict hierarchy on the work of abstract painters and excluded the work of the majority of contemporary American artists all together. While Kuh’s theme may have been unique, her effort to situate abstract expressionism within a specifically American art historical tradition that emphasized a plurality of styles from abstract to figurative was not. As Mary Caroline Simpson has pointed out, Kuh’s Venice Biennale exhibition was followed in 1957 by a textbook, Art in America: Fifty Painters of the 20th Century, whose co-editors included the MoMA curator, Dorothy C. Miller, and which strategically placed Pollock within the lineage of such iconic American painters as John Sloan. Moreover the book claimed, “In spite of the recent popularity of abstraction, it is apparent that the last fifteen years has produced, in

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224 Ibid., 45.
225 Caroline Mary Simpson, “‘American Artists Paint the City’: Katharine Kuh, the 1956 Venice Biennale and New York’s Place in the Cold War Art World,” American Studies (Winter 2007): 41; based on a quote from an interview between Jackson Pollock and Rodman, Conversation with Artists, 84.
America, a greater diversity of styles, subjects and attitudes than any comparable period of the past.”

Undoubtedly, these attempts to situate abstract expressionism within a specifically American aesthetic tradition as opposed to a European modernist tradition were part of a politically motivated nationalist trend. Much as Sidney Janis purposefully placed Pollock and de Kooning in the context of Leger and Kandinsky, Kuh’s exhibition grouped them with Stuart Davis and Edward Hopper. Even under such auspices, however, Kuh’s image of America, much like that of Betty Parson’s, seems strikingly current in its diversity. Even now, for example, the work of Jacob Lawrence and Norman Lewis, whom were also featured in Kuh’s biennale show, are all too often isolated within the context of African-American art rather than featured in the larger narrative of American art. Kuh’s larger thesis of American plurality offered a way to reflect the complex tapestry of current approaches without imposing stringent hierarchies or theories of originality and influence. That Sterne found a spot at the center of such a vision should by now not be surprising.

Moreover, Kuh’s enduring support for Sterne, which (Sterne notes in a 1967 letter addressed to Kuh) began in 1955, the year before the Biennale, attests to Kuh’s understanding of Sterne’s larger project: “Katharine, do you know?, looking back, as far as 1955, you are about the only person, who has shown consistent faith in my work, and what’s more Acted upon this faith.”

In the 12-year span that Sterne references, her work had undergone far more radical stylistic shifts than at any point in the 1940s and

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early 1950s. This suggests that Kuh, like Parsons, understood that these changes were fundamental to Sterne’s process. Likewise, however, just as Parson’s insistence on diversity met with resistance, Kuh’s biennale exhibition met with harsh reviews, in part because it “misrepresented” contemporary American painting. The American Pavilion at the following biennale in 1958 featured two painters and two sculptors who all worked in an abstract idiom: Seymour Lipton, David Smith, Mark Rothko, and Mark Tobey.\(^{228}\) In all three cases—Parsons’ gallery, Kuh’s biennale, and Sterne’s over-all oeuvre—a pluralistic approach ultimately proved inassimilable—in Parson’s case to the art market, in Kuh’s case to the positioning of American art on an international stage, and in Sterne’s case, to the larger narrative of abstract expressionism.

As this dissertation has shown, a close examination of the historical terms of these women’s participation in the broader cultural context at mid-century emphasizes the variety of alternative perspectives involved in the dialogue on contemporary American art. As current art historical approaches look not only for diversity writ large, but more specifically for points of exchange between seemingly disparate artists and philosophies, Sterne’s work, in its many variations, will continue to emerge as a compelling strand in a complex story.

FIGURES
(Works by Hedda Sterne and owned by the Hedda Sterne Estate unless otherwise noted):

May 20th, 1950

OPEN LETTER TO ROLAND L. REDMOND

President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Dear Sir:

The undersigned painters reject the monster national exhibition to be held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art next December, and will not submit work to its jury.

The organization of the exhibition and the choice of jurors by Francis Henry Taylor and Robert Beverly Hale, the Metropolitan’s Director and the Associate Curator of American Art, does not warrant any hope that a just proportion of advanced art will be included.

We draw to the attention of these gentlemen the historical fact that, for roughly a hundred years, only advanced art has made any consequential contribution to civilization.

Mr. Taylor on more than one occasion has publicly declared his contempt for modern painting; Mr. Hale, in accepting a jury notoriously hostile to advanced art, takes his place beside Mr. Taylor.

We believe that all the advanced artists of America will join us in our stand.

Jimmy Ernst  Ad Reinhardt
Adolph Gottlieb  Jackson Pollock
Robert Motherwell  Mark Rothko
William Baziotes  Bradley Walker Tomlin
Hans Hofmann  Willem de Kooning
Burnett Newman  Heddie Sterne
Clifford Still  James Brooks
Richard Pousette-Dart  Weldon Kees
Theodores Stamos  Prits Bultman

The following sculptors support this stand.

Herbert Ferber  Seymour Lipton
David Smith  Peter Grippe
Irben Lassaw  Theodore Roszak
Mary Callery  David Hare
Guy Schmeib  Louise Bourgeois

Figure 3. *Life*, (January 15, 1951): 34 – 35.
Figure 4. *Life*, (March 20, 1950): 82, 83.

Figure 5. *Life*, (March 20, 1950): 93.
Figure 6. *Life*, (August 27, 1951): 50-51.
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Figure 8. *Tondo*, ca. 1952, Oil on canvas, 30 in. diameter.
Figure 9. *Tondo #22*, 1953, Oil on canvas, 30 ½ in. diameter, Illinois State Museum; gift of Ryerson Tull, Inc.
Figure 10. *Tondo*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 35 in. diameter, formerly collection of Saul Steinberg, current location unknown.
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Figure 12. Revolving Tondo, 1953, dimensions and location unknown (black and white photograph in Hedda Sterne Papers at Archives of American Art with date and title written on back).
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Figure 17.a [detail]
Figure 18. *Monument*, ca. 1949-51, Oil on canvas, 52 x 30 in.

Figure 18.a [detail]
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Figure 20. *Untitled*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 70 x 32 in.
Figure 21. #45, 1952-53, Oil on canvas, 60 x 36 in.
Figure 22. *Structure #IV*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 39 ¾ x 29 ¾ in.
Figure 23. #XIV Red and Green, undated, Oil on canvas, 30 x 39 in.
Figure 24. *Red Structure*, ca. 1951, Oil on canvas, 60 x 36 in.
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Figure 29. *Untitled*, Undated, Oil on canvas, 86½ x 50 in.
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Figure 31. *Annalee Newman*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 78 x 34 in., Collection of Priscilla Morgan

Figure 34. Aaron Siskind, Barnett Newman at his exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1950. Double-exposed photograph.

Figure 35. Hans Namuth, Barnett Newman with Onement II, Eve, and Joshua, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1951. Silver Gelatin Print.
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Figure 44. *Life*, (August 27, 1951): 52-53.

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Figure 55. *Antro II*, 1949, Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 51 in.

Figure 56. *Antro III*, 1949, Oil on canvas, 48 in. x 29 1/2 in.
Figure 57. *Machine 5*, 1950, Oil on canvas, 51 x 38 ¼ in.
Figure 58. Detail, *Life*, (August 27, 1951): 51.
Figure 59. Detail, *Life*, (August 27, 1951): 51.
Figure 60. *Airport No. 1 (Airplane Landscape)*, ca. 1947-1949, Oil on canvas, 60 x 42 in.
Figure 61. *Totem Pole I, (N.Y. N.Y. #17)*, 1949, Oil on canvas, 38 x 16 in.
Figure 62. *Northwest Coast Indian Painter*, Exhibition Guide Cover, 1946, Betty Parsons Papers, Archives of American Art.
Figure 63. Barnett Newman, *Euclidian Abyss*, 1946-47, Oil and gouache on canvas board, 27 ¾ x 21 ¾ in.
Figure 64. Hedda Sterne, *Untitled [Study for Totem I]*, 1949, Ink on paper, 7 1/8 x 5 ½ in.
Figure 65. *Untitled*, 1949, Monotype, 12 ¾ x 8 ½ in.
Figure 66. Saul Steinberg, *Portrait of Bernard Rudofsky*, ca. 1943-44, Photostat, 11 ¾ x 8 ½ inches), The Bernard Rudofsky Estate, Vienna.
Figure 67. Saul Steinberg, *To Bertha*, 1945, Ink on paper, 8 7/18 x 10 ¾ inches, The Bernard Rudofsky Estate.
By Saul Steinberg

BUilt IN U.S.A.

Postwar architecture, 1945-52

The major exhibition opening at the Museum of Modern Art, titled Built in U.S.A. and accompanied by a book of the same name, is an optimistic survey of a few handsome works selected from an enormous field of nonsense—thus a sarcastic view which leaves the impression that things are doing splendidly.

In architecture, for obvious reasons, faults are more important than virtues. The overwhelming presence of bad architecture cannot be ignored, and prizing a few cases of honesty (or talent) never stopped a crime wave.

Not seen in the Museum’s exhibition are the latest and most significant developments in the underworld of postwar architecture, such as:

- Giantism . . . the marble cottage (and its city cousin, the bury basement) . . .
- the new slums . . . masterpiece . . . the primitive modern in skyscrapers and official buildings . . . the disappearance of the craftsmen . . . the new role of the architect
- as interior decorator or lay-analyst to affluent families . . . easel architecture . . .
- city planning made to impress airplane passengers . . . photogenics . . .

Some unphotogenic views are presented on this and the following three pages.

Figure 68. Saul Steinberg, “Built in USA,” Art News (February 1953): 16.
Figure 69. Saul Steinberg, “Built in USA,” *Art News* (February 1953): 17
Figure 70. Saul Steinberg, *Parade 5*, 1950, Pen and ink and watercolor on paper, The Saul Steinberg Foundation, New York
Figure 71. Saul Steinberg, *Untitled [Parade]*, 1950, Pen and ink, fingerprints and rubber stamps on paper, The Saul Steinberg Foundation, New York

Figure 71.a Detail
Figure 72. Saul Steinberg, *Parade*, 1950 Pen and ink, crayon, watercolor and rubber stamps on paper
Figure 72.a Detail

Figure 72.b Detail
Figure 73. Saul Steinberg, *Large Document*, 1951, Ink, rubber stamp, and collage on paper, 29 x 23 in.
Figure 74. Saul Steinberg, *Untitled (Man Drawing a Calligraphic Head)*, 1954, Ink on paper
Figure 75. Saul Steinberg, *Parade*, 1951, Pen and ink, crayon and watercolor on Strathmore, 14 x 22 ¾ in.
Figure 76. Lillian Bristol, *Portrait of Hedda Sterne*, 1977, Black and white photograph, 8 x 10 inches
Figure 77. Jackson Pollock, *Convergence*, 1952, Oil on canvas,
Figure 78. *New York*, 1955, Oil on canvas
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Sarah Eckhardt, Richmond VA

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