

# **17 Contemporary American Painters**

The Crossmedial  
Exhibition as  
Propaganda

# How can we make difficult art more understandable to the people? How can we make them understand that these abstract artists aren't madmen? The Soviet Pavilion is right across the road! Elizabeth Ferrell deconstructs a Cold-War infused exhibition of American abstract expressionist art.

Despite its message of world unity, the Brussels World's Fair of 1958 (the first after World War II) was a Cold-War battleground. Its Belgian hosts – perhaps recognizing that competition would prevail over the event's pretense of international cooperation less than a year after Sputnik's launch – set the stage for a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States by assigning the sparring powers adjoining plots. The fairground mapped the riven geopolitical landscape as the blocky, neo-classical Soviet Pavilion – a monument to totalitarian techné according to the U.S. press – faced off against the airy rotunda of the American Pavilion – which the domestic media interpreted as a symbol of democratic freedom and transparency.<sup>1</sup>

The ideological stakes were therefore incredibly high for the four visual art exhibitions featured in the U.S. Pavilion.<sup>2</sup> The contemporary painting show – matter-of-factly titled *17 Contemporary American Painters* – was assembled under the auspices of the American Federation of the Arts with the leadership of George Staempfli, a former curator of paintings at the Museum of Fine Art in Houston who would open a modern art gallery in New York the following year.<sup>3</sup> A jury of three museum professionals selected the exhibi-

tion's forty-four paintings by the following artists: William Baziotés, James Boynton, Lawrence Calgagno, Nicholas Carone, Richard Diebenkorn, Jimmy Ernst, Sonia Gechtoff, Grace Hartigan, Ellsworth Kelly, William Kienbusch, George Mueller, Kyle Morris, Bernard Perlin, Corrado Marca-Relli, Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, and Lundy Siegriest.<sup>4</sup>

Although the jury's proceedings were confidential, some of its selection criteria are known. Staempfli asked the committee to pick artists under forty-five years of age from diverse regions of the country. They also calculated their choices to appeal to young, sophisticated Europeans – in other words, to the continent's future ruling class.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. government had been targeting this demographic for several years with traveling shows curated by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.<sup>6</sup> During the Brussels Expo, two state-sponsored exhibitions, *The New American Painting* and *Jackson Pollock*, toured Europe promoting abstract-expressionist painting as a manifestation of the personal freedom granted by capitalist democracy.<sup>7</sup> Museum curators portrayed the paintings' non-objective subject matter as evidence of the artists' individual liberty. MoMA's director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., made this pitch in



1a.

*The New American Painting* catalog: ‘In principle [the artists’] individualism is [...] uncompromising [...]. For them, John Donne to the contrary, each man is an island.’<sup>8</sup> (The passage references a famous line from ‘Meditation XVII’ of Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624): ‘No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of continent, a part of the main.’) This state of liberty was ideally recreated for viewers by presenting the works in a white cube environment, without interpretation or contextualization.<sup>9</sup> While generally not as well-known as the established abstract expressionists featured in MoMA’s cultural propaganda, the artists picked for *17 Contemporary American Painters* worked in a similar style.<sup>10</sup> All of the paintings included in the show were abstract, and a majority of canvases were big, bold, and gestural.

However, the Brussels show differed from MoMA’s traveling exhibitions in one crucial respect: it accompanied the display of paintings with photographs and written descriptions of the artists who made them.<sup>11</sup> Staempfli commissioned Hans Namuth (who had gained

recognition earlier in the decade for his portraits of abstract-expressionist artists) to travel the country photographing each artist in his or her ‘native’ habitat.<sup>12</sup> Staempfli then selected several prints of each artist and assembled them – along with a brief biographical sketch by Namuth – on individual panels. These were displayed in slanted vitrines in the center of the exhibition space, while the paintings hung on walls around the periphery (figs. 1a & b).

By including photographs, the show violated the white cube exhibition design that MoMA used both at home and abroad.<sup>13</sup> The white walls and minimal furniture of MoMA’s galleries were supposed to erase context, communicate the sovereignty of the artist’s expression and enable viewers’ direct and purely aesthetic experience of the artworks. Namuth’s photographs invaded this pristine, decontextualized space like an alien spacecraft. They forced the paintings to interact with a foreign medium and smuggled the outside world inside the gallery’s cloistering walls. They also swapped all pretense of direct engagement for a declaratively mediated experience of the



1b. 1a & 1b:

Photographer unknown, installation photographs of *17 Contemporary American Painters* in the United States Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair, 1958. National Archives, College Park, MD: Records Relating to the Brussels Universal and International Exhibition, 1956-1959, RG 59, Photographs nos. 59-WF-58 1010-15 and 59-WF-58 1010-13. Courtesy National Archives.

exhibited works. The installation mobilized a viewing process that spanned media and visual languages, in which abstract paintings, representational photographs, and written biographical information mingled in the audience's perception and consciousness.

The exhibition was not received well in the American press. What went wrong? What accounts for the curious eruption of photography and text into the abstract art exhibition? Did their inclusion contribute to the critics' unfavorable assessment? What aesthetic and political purposes was this interplay of media supposed to serve? How, in sum, did the crossmedial exhibition design of *17 Contemporary American Painters*

speak to the ideological imperatives of the U.S.'s participation in the Brussels Expo and, more generally, of American abstract painting during the Cold War?<sup>14</sup> Since the photo-panels are lost, I base my analysis on archival evidence of the exhibition's production, installation shots, reviews, and photographs that Namuth took for the commission but which may or may not have been included in the show.<sup>15</sup>

Staempfli succinctly described the photo-panels' intended function in a memorandum from 1957: 'Photographs of the artists would go a long way towards humanizing this otherwise rather abstract exhibit.'<sup>16</sup> His statement conflates multiple connotations of the words 'humanize' and



‘abstract,’ collapsing each term’s reference to an artistic language with the type of viewing experience it was thought to prompt. Thus ‘abstract’ signifies both the non-objective character of the exhibition’s paintings and their abstruseness, while ‘humanize’ conveys both the photographs’ representational nature and their capacity to make the works more relatable.<sup>17</sup>

The idea that photography is a unifying force capable of compensating for the alienating effects of abstract painting was commonplace when Staempfli expressed it. As Abstract Expressionism rose to national prominence in the 1950s, exhibitions and popular publications accounted for the difficulty of abstraction when marketing it to mass audiences. This situation, in combination with the nation’s Cold-War values, gave rise to the narrative that the artworks’ obtuseness reflected the extreme individualism of their makers. The artist’s autonomy was a highly politicized and contested construct in postwar America because it was intimately tied to contemporary debates about the individual’s relation to society. The challenge that abstract art posed to public communication was both celebrated as a declaration of individual

freedom and disparaged as a sign of the nation’s lack of social cohesion. Photography was often framed as a medium capable of illuminating the obscurity of abstraction and, consequently, of restoring the balance between self and society.<sup>18</sup> This idea evidenced a tremendous period faith in photography as a communication and social-engineering tool, a belief that bolstered the extreme popularity of illustrated weeklies (such as *Life* magazine) and documentary photo-exhibitions (such as *The Family of Man*) in mid-century America.<sup>19</sup> The peculiar exhibition design of *17 Contemporary American Painters* reflects this period confidence in photojournalism.

The details of Namuth’s assignment indicate that Staempfli wanted the photo-displays to temper the paintings’ ‘individualism’ both by creating a more comprehensive viewing experience and by depicting the artists as integral members of American society. He charged Namuth with capturing the artist ‘in the context [of] his daily surroundings’ and in ‘relationship to [. . .] his family and friends’ – specifications clearly calculated to counter the image of the isolated artist.<sup>20</sup> Staempfli explained, ‘I cannot overstress



2. Hans Namuth, *Ellsworth Kelly with Delphine Seyrig and Duncan Youngerman in Kelly's Coenties Slip studio, 1958*, photograph. Reproduced in: Diane Upright, *Ellsworth Kelly: Works on Paper*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 1987, p. 195.

the importance of demonstrating with good photographic material that each of [these artists] is human and has normal community ties, families and all that.<sup>21</sup> Namuth's documentation of each artist's connectedness 'to the people and things with which he lives' was ultimately supposed to illuminate his belonging to the national community.<sup>22</sup> Staempfli wanted the photographs to contextualize each artist within 'the "American way of life";' the nation's common cultural habits and the ideological principles thought to underlie them.<sup>23</sup>

In keeping with his assignment, Namuth depicted the artist as a thoroughly social animal. His seemingly candid shots frequently capture the artists interacting with other people and performing ordinary roles in society (e.g., the artist as family man, neighbor, teacher, et cetera). When combined on the panels, these images mapped each artist's network of private and public relationships. Furthermore, they often implicate the viewer within the normalized social scenes they represent. One typical shot situates the viewer as Ellsworth Kelly's dinner guest (fig. 2). The fragmentary composition and low angle of view create the illusion that the viewer is 'in' the scene – sitting across the table from the conversing artist in his Manhattan loft, which was part of the Coenties-Slip artists' colony.<sup>24</sup> In the background, a woman and small child play in the commodious interior.<sup>25</sup> The artist – a gay man – appears to perform both gender- and hetero-normative roles within this web of interactions staged across the photograph's lateral composition. Like many of Namuth's photographs of Kelly, this one represents him within the Coenties-Slip community even

as it normalizes the spaces and relations of that bohemian collective through strategic framing.

Namuth not only situated the artists socially; he placed each within a series of nested physical environments – home, neighborhood, city – that ended, conceptually, with the nation, a context represented by the Pavilion housing the installation. A photograph of William Baziotis, for example, adamantly contextualizes the artist within a specific milieu (fig. 3). Namuth places the artist in the street. A row of boys crowds close to the lens, eliding the foreground and flattening the cityscape of large apartment blocks and wide streets beyond. Baziotis is nearly lost in the fray: his head and shoulders barely peak above the boys' caps, and one of their arms threatens to occlude him altogether. Only Namuth's selective focus and an arrow-like tree differentiate the artist within the photograph's jostling visual field. The shot takes pains to perceptually integrate the white, middle-aged artist with his Harlem neighborhood, an environment which the photograph codes as urban, working class, African American, and vibrantly youthful.<sup>26</sup>

Namuth's photographs represent relationships and places particular to each artist's life but do so in ways that familiarize them – that fit the specific details of individual biography into typical, non-threatening molds. Thus Kelly's communal and queer Coenties-Slip circle resembles a heterosexual family, and Baziotis' Harlem a friendly neighborhood where 'the color line does not exist' – perhaps suggesting that these American artists are approachable and not that different from the European audience.<sup>27</sup> In these photographs, difference provides superficial inter-



3. Hans Namuth, *William Bazotes*, 1958, photograph. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. ©1991 Hans Namuth Estate.

est that gives way easily to a sense of commonality. Staempfli expressed this imperative in his directions to Namuth: ‘What we would like to get across to our large foreign audiences is that the artist is not only a creator but also and simply a human being’ and thus, the statement implies, like the viewers.<sup>28</sup> Namuth’s seemingly informal shots of artists smiling and socializing in everyday situations foster a congenial atmosphere that inclines viewers to sympathize with those depicted. By putting a relatable face to the sublime and potentially disturbing works, the photographs provided a sometimes misleading human-interest angle into the show’s abstract paintings.

The photojournalistic style of both Namuth’s images and Staempfli’s arrangement of them was vital to conveying the artists’ approachability. Due to their documentary aesthetic, the photographs appear uncoded; they read as direct windows into real events from the artists’ daily lives. This fiction of transparency was essential to each panel’s ability to acquaint viewers with the artist in a seemingly natural way – through his or her biographical sketch and (simulated) social interactions. Emily Genauer’s review for the *New York Herald Tribune* indicates that the panels’ text contributed to the images’ explicitness. She excerpts a passage accompanying Bernard Perlin’s panel: ‘He keeps to himself and goes three times a week to the gymnasium for exercise (picture here of Perlin in shorts working with dumb-bells).’<sup>29</sup>

Her use of the phrase ‘picture here’ to join her description of the photograph to the quote conjures a spatial – specifically, caption-like – relationship between the two media that did not exist on the panels, where the text was presented as a solid block (the English original followed by French and German translations) rather than fragmented and paired with corresponding images.<sup>30</sup> Genauer’s reading suggests that Staempfli’s montages resembled an illustrated weekly’s photo-essay enough to prompt a similar viewing experience – one in which photographs appeared to illustrate (i.e., to serve as informational and rhetorical equivalents of) prose.<sup>31</sup> This photojournalistic relationship between text and image facilitates (deceptively) clear communication by anchoring polysemous pictures to specific, stable meanings.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the panels should be considered photojournalistic panels, rather than photo-panels.

At times, Namuth protested the aesthetic strictures imposed by the Brussels project. His creative conflicts with Staempfli are manifest in a letter criticizing the curator’s choice of photographs for the panels:

To give you an example: I am quite disappointed that in the case of Marca-Relli you are omitting the large photograph of his face; I value this picture very much; the same applies to the face of Bernard Perlin with his eyes closed which I think is an outstanding one



4. Hans Namuth, *Barnett Newman*, 1951, photograph. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. ©1991 Hans Namuth Estate.

in the entire group. Pictures like these reveal more about the man, in my opinion, than all the supermarkets in the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Here, Namuth reveals his preference for intimate portraits over the documentary, situation-based shots Staempfli selected. His comments indicate that he also took issue with the panels' portrayal of artistic identity. For Namuth, the locus of the artist's selfhood – and thus the most worthy subject to capture on film – was his subjective interiority, not his participation in 'the American way of life.'<sup>34</sup> Namuth's conflict with Staempfli betrayed his allegiance to the model of artistic identity, and the conventions for representing it photographically, that developed around Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>35</sup> Photographs of the solitary artist absorbed in contemplation within his cloistered studio – such as Namuth's portrait of Barnett Newman from 1952 (fig. 4) – pictorially codified the persona of Romantic genius adopted by many abstract expressionists.<sup>36</sup> Such images served as public expressions of artistic autonomy and the privacy of abstract art.

The Brussels exhibition – perhaps due to its pressing political stakes – subverted the tropes for representing abstract artists. Namuth's photographs for this occasion made over the lonely visionary into an Average Joe engaged in the world around him. They also assumed a dif-

ferent role in the viewer's experience of abstract artworks. Secluded in his austere studio, the artist exemplified the transcendent, autonomous selfhood that the viewer ideally attained in front of the abstract expressionists' sublime canvases. Such photographs drew an analogy between the subject positions of the artist in his studio and the viewer in the gallery that preserved the autonomy of each. The archetypal portrait of the abstract-expressionist artist supplemented his paintings by reinforcing – rather than by counterbalancing and thus, contradicting – their account of the private self. Standing back-to-back in the middle of the gallery and facing out towards the works, Staempfli and Namuth's panels physically usurped the position of the ideal beholder, according to the 1950s' convention of direct, autonomous viewing. The panel's centrality and direction, that is, implied that they constituted an interpretive layer of information between viewer and artwork.

Namuth was not alone in objecting to *17 Contemporary American Painters*. The overwhelmingly negative press the exhibition received indicates that the photojournalistic panels failed to suture the tears that abstract painting was seen to rend in America's social fabric. A chorus of critics and visitors feared that expressing individualism through the language of abstraction came at an undermining cost – communication failure. A reviewer for *Time* articulated this view: 'They [the



artworks] leave no doubt that in the U.S. an artist is free to pursue his personal vision and interpretation. The hope of the U.S. show is that this unique message of freedom will make its way through the bewilderment.<sup>37</sup> Given the exhibition's high political stakes, the argument went, these opaque works were not only frustrating; they were dangerous. By 'representing the wildest extremes of personal liberty', the paintings supposedly conjured a fragmented America – a society unable to strike the proper balance between personal freedom and the national good, private and public, individual and collective.<sup>38</sup> By portraying Americans as atomized, decadent, and self-centered, abstract art, commentators warned, played into Soviet propaganda and catalyzed dire political consequences.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that most reviewers did not mention the photojournalistic panels and panned the exhibition by rehashing clichéd criticisms of abstract art suggests that photography failed to perform the mediating role that Staempfli intended. The one review to include an analysis of Namuth's photographs and texts suggests why. Genauer's unfavorable article begins by deriding the panel notes and, by implication, the photographs that illustrated them as packaged, superficial, and frivolous. 'It's completely in character with our exposition planning,' she continued, 'that the same audience first assumed to be sophisticated enough to appreciate the most difficult abstractions should now be addressed on the kindergarten level.'<sup>40</sup> In her view, the condescendingly-simplistic panels were inadequate because they were utterly incongruous with the works on display. Rather than translate the paintings' 'sophisticated' aesthetic language into a comprehensible idiom, the photographs, in her view, spoke past the works – their 'kindergarten level' communication style overcompensating for abstraction's difficulty. The two media failed to cohere in Genauer's experience of the exhibition: the photographs' and biographies' model of identity could not graft onto the paintings' existential account of selfhood; the mundane sociability simulated by the photographs conflicted with the transcendent experience of individual interiority fostered by the paintings; the photojournalistic panels' cheery tone clashed with the paintings' bravado. As a result, the artist as Everyman and the artist as Other passed without meeting.

Interpreting the experience of viewing art as an inter- or intra-subjective encounter – as, that is, staging either the viewer's relationship with society or his alienation from it – was pervasive in Cold-War America. This reading is evident not only in *17 Contemporary American Painters* but also in MoMA's representation of Abstract Expressionism and *Life's* coverage of abstract art. *17 Contemporary American Painters* represents a moment when extreme ideological pressure was put on the viewing experience of art – when the ability of works to communicate was analogized to the ability of individuals to relate to one another in society. During the Cold War, culture became a stage for debates about the proper balance between personal freedom and societal cohesion, individualism and collectivity. *17 Contemporary American Painters* attempted to simulate a balanced relationship between the self and American society by creating a reciprocal relationship between media. Specifically, Staempfli endeavored to use photojournalism's combination of photography and text to compensate for the alienating effects of abstract painting by staging the opposite experience – i.e., social belonging – between viewer and artist. Ultimately, however, the two formal languages were too disparate (and, most likely, the political climate too charged) for them to cohere meaningfully in the viewer's experience. In hindsight, the crossmedial installation design of *17 Contemporary American Painters* speaks to art's complicated liaison with society. It evidences the simultaneous confluence of and collision between capitalist democracy's imperialism and the art world's romanticism, as well as the curator's perilous attempts to mediate between them. ○

#### Personalia

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## Notes

- For examples of this popular binary interpretation of the Soviet and American Pavilions see 'Our Image at Brussels' in: *Life*, 14 July 1958, p. 44 and Walter H. Waggoner, 'We Look at Them, They Look at Us' in: *The New York Times Magazine*, 11 May 1958, pp. 12-13, 63-64.
- The U.S. Pavilion's visual art program included *Indian Art in the United States* (organized by René d'Harnoncourt of the Museum of Primitive Art, New York), *American Folk Art* (organized by Mrs. John A. Pope of the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service), *Contemporary American Sculpture* (selected by the Office of the Commissioner General in cooperation with the architect of the U.S. Pavilion, Edward D. Stone), and the subject of this paper, *17 Contemporary American Painters*.
- Staempfli's official title was Assistant Chairman of the Fine Arts Section. He answered to both Harris K. Prior, Director of the American Federation of the Arts (AFA), and Thurston Davies, Executive Director of the U.S. Pavilion. The task of organizing *17 Contemporary American Painters* fit the AFA's mission to foster public access to original artworks by assembling exhibitions for display both at home and abroad. By the late 1950s, the venerable non-profit had plenty of practice assisting the U.S. government in crafting exhibitions for international art fairs. It had, for example, organized the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale since 1924.
- The AFA-appointed jury was made up of Grace Morley of the San Francisco Museum of Art, Robert Beverly Hale of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and H. Harvard Arnason of the Walker Art Center.
- Grace Morley, unpublished letter to Everett Elliott, 25 July 1958, American Federation of Arts records, 1895-1993, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. I will henceforth refer to these records as 'AFA, AAA.'
- For more information about the well-documented relationship between MoMA and the U.S. government see E. Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War' in: *Artforum*, June 1974, pp. 39-41, M. Kozloff, 'American Painting during the Cold War' in: *Artforum*, May 1973, pp. 43-54, S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, and J. Elderfield (ed.), *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad, Studies in Modern Art 4*, New York: H. Abrams, Inc., 1994.
- The three exhibitions were simultaneously on view in Europe at various moments during 1958. After The Brussels Expo, the paintings from *17 Contemporary American Painters* were displayed at the United States Information Service Library in London. At this time, *Jackson Pollock* was showing at the Whitechapel Gallery, and *The New American Painting* was scheduled to open at the Tate the following February (Margaret Cogswell, unpublished letter to Stefan Munsing, 8 July 1958, AFA, AAA).
- Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 'Introduction' in: *The New American Painting: As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958-1959*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959, p. 15. The full quote is as follows: 'In principle their individualism is as uncompromising as that of the religion of Kierkegaard whom they honour. For them, John Donne to the contrary, each man is an island.'
- The introduction that Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MoMA's director, wrote for *The New American Painting* catalog exemplifies this interpretation. Essays like Barr's implicitly contrast America's gestural abstractions with Russia's content-laden, state-sponsored realism.
- Two of the New York artists featured in the Brussels show, Baziotes and Hartigan, were also included in *The New American Painting*.
- It is unclear who came up with the idea of incorporating photographs of the artists into the exhibition, though correspondence indicates that it may have originated with Morley (Morley, unpublished letter to Harris K. Prior, 2 December 1957, AFA, AAA).
- Namuth was a German émigré based in New York City. His most famous works, then and now, are his iconic photographs of Pollock painting, which were first published in *Portfolio* in 1951, and his short film (*Pollock Painting*) depicting the same subject, which he co-produced with Paul Falkenberg in 1951, and for which Morton Feldman wrote the score.
- Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Museum's first director, crafted this installation idiom, which became the dominant mode of exhibiting modern art in the twentieth century (C. Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800-2000*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).
- Like the term 'intermedial,' 'crossmedial' implies an interaction between media – that different material forms affect or bear on one another. Unlike the former term, however, the latter connotes contention as well as connection – that the media are at cross odds or are even 'cross' (as in displeased) with one another. I argue the relationship between painting, photography, and text in *17 Contemporary American Painters* fits the simultaneously complementary and contestatory dynamic implied by the term 'crossmedial.'
- If the panels are extant, I have yet to locate them. They appear to have passed into the proprietorship of the American Federation of the Arts at the Expo's end.
- George W. Staempfli, U.S. government memorandum to Dr. Thurston J. Davies, 6 December 1957, RG 59, Records Relating to the Brussels Universal and International Exhibition, 1956-1959, Box 1, folder 'Fine Arts,' National Archives, College Park, MD. I will henceforth refer to this folder as 'RG 59, NA.'
- 'Humanize' also alludes to the Fair's slogan, 'A World View – A New Humanism,' which expresses the event's stated goal of fostering global unity through the recognition of mutual humanity. See: R. H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s*, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, p. 94.
- Life* magazine's postwar coverage of the visual arts exemplified the overt politicization of abstract art and the abstract artist. From the late 1940s through the early 1960s, *Life* heralded its signature brand of photojournalism as the antidote to modern art's obscurity. Incorporating nonobjective works into photo-essays, *Life's* editors claimed, made the former's enigmatic language instantly legible. The magazine framed its mediation between avant-garde and public as a not only cultural but also political task. 'This tremendous, individualistic struggle, which makes modern art so difficult for the layman,' explained *Life's* editors in 1948, 'is really one of the great assets of our civilization. For it is at bottom the struggle for freedom' ('A *Life* Roundtable on Modern Art: Fifteen Distinguished Critics and Connoisseurs Undertake to Clarify the Strange Art of Today' in: *Life*, 11 October 1948, pp. 56-79). But, *Life* cautioned, the artist's flaunted independence – manifested in the avant-garde's elitist 'cult of unintelligibility' – also imperiled the Free World ('In a Second Revolution the New Role for Culture' in: *Life*, 26 December 1960, p. 45). 'The chasm between artists and democratic society could conceivably prove as frustrating to cultural progress as the old class war,' warned a 1960 editorial. 'Yet, it can be bridged' (ibid.). When modern art's individualism strayed into 'alienation and obscurity,' when its autonomy courted solipsism

- and hermeticism, *Life* would undertake the crucial task of reintegrating it with the mainstream (ibid.).
- 19 Blake Stimson investigated many such facets of the postwar perception of photography in *The Pivot of the World: Photography and its Nation*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.
  - 20 Staempfli, unpublished letter to Hans Namuth, 17 January 1958, RG 59, NA and Staempfli, letter to Namuth, 23 October 1958, RG 59, NA.
  - 21 Staempfli memo, 6 December 1957.
  - 22 Op. cit. (note 20), 17 January 1958.
  - 23 Ibid. Staempfli reiterated this sentiment in a congratulatory letter to Namuth dated 23 October 1958: 'Thanks to your effort we were able to illuminate with great poignancy the American scene and the civic climate in which our artists live and work.'
  - 24 In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Kelly occupied a loft at 3-5 Coenties Slip, a former light-industrial building overlooking the East River. Other artists who lived and worked in the building during this period included the abstract painters Agnes Martin and Jack Youngerman and Pop artists James Rosenquist and Robert Indiana. For more information about the Coenties Slip artist community see: J. Beardsley, *Nine Artists/Coenties Slip*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974.
  - 25 The woman depicted in the photograph is the French actress Delphine Seyrig, and the child is her son, Duncan Youngerman. When the picture was taken, Seyrig lived with Duncan and her husband, the American painter Jack Youngerman, in the same building as Kelly.
  - 26 Baziotes' location – like most of the places depicted in Namuth's photographs – is identified in the brief biographical sketch that was affixed to his panel (H. Namuth, 'Notes on Painters,' AFA, AAA).
  - 27 Ibid.
  - 28 Op. cit. (note 20), January 17, 1958.
  - 29 E. Genauer, 'U.S. Art Show at Brussels Fair Baffles or Amuses Europeans' in: *New York Tribune*, 22 June 1958, s.p., AFA, AAA.
  - 30 Since the panels are no longer extant, it is difficult to determine how Staempfli's choice to lump the text together, rather than distribute it into captions, would have influenced the viewer's experience. I speculate that the distance between text and image would have diluted the connection between them somewhat, giving the viewer more latitude to interpret photographs. However, the panel's divergence from the typical photo-essay format does not appear to have made much difference to Genauer.
  - 31 In fact, Staempfli unsuccessfully petitioned *Time*, *Life* and *Look* to publish Namuth's 'picture stories' as magazine spreads (Staempfli, unpublished letter to Prior, 4 December 1957, AFA, AAA and Staempfli memo 6 December 1957). This fact suggests that the curator intentionally modeled the exhibition's photo-panels on the illustrated weekly photo-essay.
  - 32 In this example, Namuth's note moors the equivocal snapshot of Perlin in the gym to a concrete event – the artist's tri-weekly workout. My analysis is informed by Roland Barthes' famous structural analysis of the press photograph in 'The Photographic Message' in: *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 15-31.
  - 33 Namuth, unpublished letter to Staempfli, 11 March 1958, AFA, AAA.
  - 34 One could also argue that Namuth objected to Staempfli's presentation of the photographer's work as photojournalism rather than art. Depending on whose side you take, *17 Contemporary American Painters* can be considered a crossme-
  - dial exhibition or a crossmedial art exhibition, in accordance with contemporary standards.
  - 35 Fred W. McDarrah, a staff photographer for *The Village Voice* and *Life* magazine also contributed to the development of these tropes for representing abstract-expressionist artists.
  - 36 This characterization of the artistic identity cultivated by many abstract-expressionist artists derives from C.A. Jones, 'The Romance of the Studio and the Abstract Expressionist Sublime' in: *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 1-59.
  - 37 'Americans at Brussels: Soft Sell, Range and Controversy' in: *Time*, 16 June 1958, s.p., Sonia Gechtloff papers, 1957-1980, AAA.
  - 38 As cited by: R.H. Haddow, op. cit. (note 17), p. 126.
  - 39 For examples of this sentiment see: D. Brinkley, 'Downright Shameful,' in: *The New Republic*, 7 July 1958, p. 8, J.S. Drago, letter to the editor, in: *The New York Times*, 13 March 1958, page unknown, and N. Kent, 'Why Did They,' in: *American Artist*, May 1958, p. 3. The exhibition was one of the most contentious aspects of the U.S. Pavilion. Broadening the show to include representational paintings was one of the few suggestions made by George V. Allen, director of the United States Information Agency, whom President Eisenhower sent to investigate citizen complaints about the Pavilion. The controversy that *17 Contemporary American Painters* kicked up in Brussels became the focus when it was later shown in New York to raise funds for charity. The show's press release announces this slant: 'Few people who did not actually see the much-debated exhibition of American Painters and Sculptors at the Brussels Fair really know what all the shouting is about. Here is a chance to see for yourself' (Press release for World House Galleries, undated, AFA, AAA). Despite its failure at the World's Fair, the exhibition's crossmedial design had an afterlife in the United States. Panels with photographs of the artists were also displayed in the traveling exhibition *The Individual and his World*, which was organized by Fred Martin for the San Francisco Art Bank in 1959.
  - 40 These adjectives are implicit in Genauer's snide description of the notes as 'Miss Subways type comments' ('U.S. Art Show'). This reference to a New York City Subway poster campaign that featured headshots and brief descriptions of attractive female riders likened the account of identity created by the photo-panels to that of a personal ad.