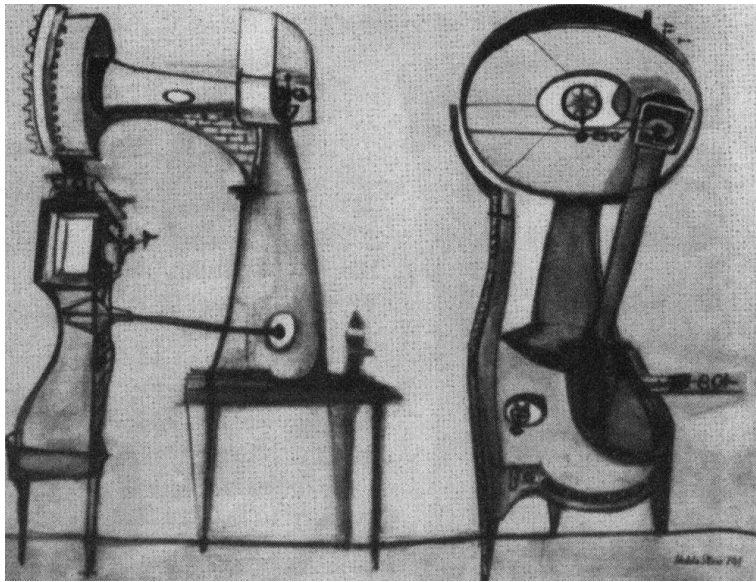


VAN DOREN
WAXTER

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Hedda Sterne

by Anney Bonney
Spring 1992



Hedda Sterne, *Machine*, 1949, oil on canvas, 30 × 40 inches.

Hedda Sterne is one of the best of the best kept secrets in the art world. Born in Rumania in 1916, educated in Bucharest and Vienna, she studied with Leger and Lhote, first exhibiting with the Surrealists in Paris.

Peripatetic and captivating, Sterne came to America in 1941, married Saul Steinberg and emerged as the lone female in the now famous photograph, *The Irascibles* — with Newman, Rothko, Pollock et al. Like her companions, she showed with Betty Parsons, a legendary dealer who became her lifelong friend.

Her brilliant mind is ruled by a passion for precision. Discipline characterizes her approach to the painter's life. Sitting in her "American Kitchen" (one of her paintings), I slipped into a gentle trance, such is the hypnotic power of Hedda Sterne and the other side.

Hedda Sterne Well, this is one of the extraordinary things...how life imitates art. Because people are so desperately looking for a formula. It was Emily Genauer who labeled the group

the Irascibles, and that remained in the minds of people—like the Cubists or the Constructivists. Did you ever read how the Impressionists came to be called impressionists?

Anney Bonney I hope so.

HS Monet showed a little drawing called *Impression*. And ever after, people tried to fit the paintings *into* the word, into the definition.

AB Looking at your work and your life, I found there was no convenient category except The Irascibles.

HS Even artists let themselves be entrapped. I've been working, you see how old I am, since I was seven. And the one thing people remember is that photograph with those artists. Well, of course everybody *died* and everybody became tremendously *famous*. . .

AB In the picture, you're the summit of a mountain of men. You were all protesting the Metropolitan Museum's hostility toward "advanced art," but how did the photograph come about?

HS There had been a meeting of artists organized by Reinhardt, Motherwell, et al. And at that meeting, the letter was conceived. There were lots of artists there, 45, but only 18 of us actually signed. Then Reinhardt and Barney Newman, released the letter to the press and it received a great deal of attention. So *LIFE* asked Nina Leen to make this photograph. And since then, every time there was a book on Barney, a book on Rothko, on Pollock, on Reinhardt, on anybody, the photograph is reproduced again, and again, and again. It is one of those miracles to have that group of people in the same photograph.

AB Besides the photograph in *LIFE Magazine*, wasn't there a more general association between you as Abstract Expressionists?

HS We were in the same gallery, Betty Parsons. Some of them were my close friends. I remember Reinhardt with the greatest affection. He was a truly genuine man, a real thinking artist, but actually, with the majority, I was friends.

AB You had a sense of aesthetic community?

HS It was cooperative and cultural. We socialized. But it was strange because, for instance, there was a tremendous antagonism between some of the artists very soon afterward. They split apart. I never was antagonistic, but then I never was that intimate, either.

AB What was the split about?

HS I don't know, but I remember Rothko, even in '66, a year or two before he died, kept telling me how he missed Barney. They hadn't seen each other in years. And Barney also sued Reinhardt, because Reinhardt at one point had written something he did not like, so they were not friends at all. Clyfford Still didn't live in New York City, but he hated everybody. (*laughter*) He was a marvelous guy, totally marvelous, but very, very hostile and strangely enough, it became him. But then he died so early. All of these people died prematurely.

AB Was there a presentiment of this?

HS No. It's a mystery. Think of Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Titian, Rembrandt...like conductors, painters tend to live very long lives. It was an anomaly that they died so young.

AB I've always wondered whether it was the investigation they pioneered in Abstraction (at least in the American sense of landscape) to an ultimate, Manifest Destiny. They initiated themselves literally into the mysteries and there was no place else to go but straight into the void.

HS One thing they inherited from the Dadaists and Surrealists was being political. They thought of art as a conscious political gesture, which I never did.



The Irascibles, 1951.

AB But, you were included in the Surrealist shows.

HS Oh yes, Surrealism was my very first influence. The very first painting show I ever saw, at the age of six, was Victor Brauner's, a Surrealist. And then the Constructivists with the shaped canvases, infinitely more daring for that time than lots of things that are done now. People were "modernist" in the first half of the century in a much more passionate and convinced way. I don't think any artist now thinks that he's involved in changing the world, but things like that happened quite a bit in the first half of the century. Not being involved politically was incorrect at the time.

AB Now it's the planet of shifting paradigms. Have your ideas changed?

HS I wonder? No. You see, one really doesn't change that much. In many ways, I have a feeling that I am exactly as I was as a child, when I spent my life reading and painting. And then, erroneously, for a while, I was involved in trying to live like a grown-up, and then I got old, and now I'm back doing what comes naturally. I just read and paint. There's one thing that I did change. When I was young, I felt very guilty about not being politically involved,

about not being a Communist, or a socially-conscious painter. I was continuously feeling guilty and wrong, but in old age, I don't feel that a bit.

AB During those erroneous adult years, how did your behavior differ?

HS Well, I thought many other people knew better than I did about things concerning me. Even in my work, I would have doubts, you know?

AB Such as?

HS That another way of being—which was impossible!—or another way of looking would be more accurate. Prometheus wanted to bring the fire and the light to man but the light and the fire existed separately from Prometheus. In our time, artists are inclined to believe that art is like honey, the product of their *own* subconsciouses, their *own* minds, and I do not. I see myself as a well-working lens, a perceiver of something that exists independently of me: don't look at me, look at what I've found.

AB You're a scientific simile in an archetypal analogy. It's hard to be objective within the totally subjective.

HS I'm trying, but striving doesn't necessarily mean one succeeds. Whenever you reach a condition of true concentration, you do achieve an anonymous state. And, as a matter of fact, this is true for the onlooker, or the reader of a poem. Unless you can forget yourself when you look, there isn't a true relationship happening between the work of art and the viewer. The same thing goes for work. The more anonymous you are and the more you lose yourself, the more you add to yourself. It sounds absurd, but that's the way it really is.

AB Paradox.

HS You see, the moment you define yourself, it means you are split. One goes out and watches the other, and like all divisions, it's weakening. When you really function well, you don't know, you just do, you are not split in two as the one who defines and the one who exists.

AB Divide and be conquered. When you combined words and images in your work did that serve to synthesize the split?

HS You mean that book about the diary?

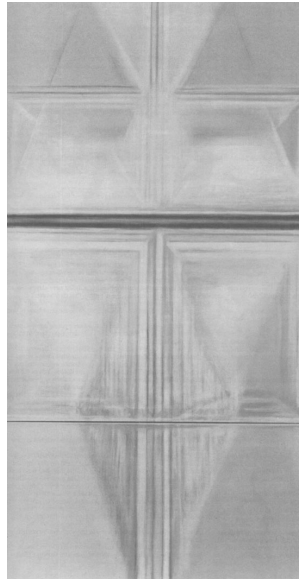
AB Yes.

HS But that was just a short period. It was at one point in my life.

AB But, it was the midpoint.

HS Later I realized that whatever I did was a diary. The funny thing is, if you want to talk about perception and beauty, they're either evanescent, like the beauty of a smile, the beauty of a rainbow, or there is the beauty of Egyptian architecture. These are two extremes of the

perception of beauty, and actually, in a good work of art they should coincide. Wittgenstein said anybody who lives fully in the present lives in eternity. The functioning of an artist turns out to be of this nature.



Hedda Sterne, *Untitled*, 1990, oil on canvas, 86x50".

AB Paradoxical again, you mean the split has more to do with spatial and temporal concerns than thought and image. I've noticed that some of your early works were about memory but incorporated the present. They were really beautiful.

HS You know what happened? It has very much to do with being a refugee. You see, before I came here, I was doing a combination of accident and Surrealist collage. And then, when I came to the United States, I was struck that this country was more Surrealistic than anything anybody imagined. Already in '41, I'd seen in California, buildings in the shape of ice cream cones and oranges that you could walk into. That kind of freedom, that romanticism about the future, was utterly delightful to me. So I became a passive observer, for a while. I started looking at my American kitchen, and I painted my American kitchen. Then I went on the streets, and I did cars. Then I did all the highways and all the machinery. All of those things struck me as tremendously poetical and symbolic. If you look at my work from the beginning, it is an absolute diary. Finally, I came back to some form of abstraction. Abstract, such an unsatisfactory definition. How can art be abstract?

AB Because, of course, it's our third paradox!

HS Yeah, but people just don't revise words at all. Words get sedimented.

AB Well, on one level it means non-representational and on another it means theoretical. But of course, it's still an image.

HS In the early '50s, a group of painters from Japan came and demonstrated what they called Noh drawings. The drawings had two meanings: one mundane and one philosophical or mystical.

AB Did you use Surrealist techniques, like forms of Automatism, in Vienna or Paris in your early days?

HS Well, the combining imagination was my invention, but that was in the Surrealist speech, without a doubt. You hear stories about the Surrealists, how intimate they were.

AB How intimate were they? They didn't seem to be that comfortable with women.

HS Well...yes, they believed in an "amour fou" (*laughter*), but in a way that would *deeply* irritate a young, post-feminist woman. But everything keeps changing, beautifully, and in a very satisfactory way for me. You understand that when you come from Europe—where I grew up was about 60 years behind the United States. So when I traveled to the United States, I didn't only travel in space, I also traveled in time. It was a tremendous cultural leap, especially in the role of women in the world. For instance, I have known women M.D.s who have become M.D.s in order to catch a husband. (*laughter*) You see what I mean? For the women I knew, my generation, the ultimate goal in life was a husband. They had totally a slave mentality. You have to understand that some of the greatest philosophers in antiquity were slaves. So when I say slave mentality, I don't mean that they weren't intelligent, but they were part of a culture, and their dreams and their aims were slave-like. It's inconceivable for somebody of your tender years.

AB Not that tender. I've read that at a very young age you said you wanted to be a "great artist." So you didn't say, "I want to be a great wife?"

HS No, no, I wasn't exactly like everybody else. I have to clarify that when I said "great artist," I didn't know what I was saying. I read so much as a child, people gave me books way beyond my understanding. And they also gave me art books. You never saw the word "artist" alone in these books, it was always "great artist" So when I said "great artist," I had no sense of grandeur or majesty. I have to clarify this because I remember hearing a story like that about Edith Sitwell where she said, "I want to be a genius."

AB Well, in its archaic form, genius still means deity.

HS Well, having met her later, I think she really meant it. (*laughter*)

AB I interpreted "great artist" to mean that you wanted to have vision...

HS No, no! What did I know at five or six about vision? I only knew that this was what I wanted to do. I spent my day copying everybody in art history. You know, I did not have bad taste at all. To this day, I think Leonardo is the marvel of the lot of us. This all-encompassing mind, and in each line you can tell the kind of mind he has. Another thing, having read in such a disorganized way, I had no idea of chronology. So I thought if Picasso does it this way and Leonardo does it that way, it's a matter of personal choice, which gave me the idea that anybody can do whatever they want in time, anytime.



Hedda Sterne, *Manhattan #1*, 1958, acrylic spray paint on canvas, 42x72". Courtesy the artist.

AB Were you always predisposed to the line? You're such a draftsman.

HS I think so. In the sense that I discovered color at around 17; before that, I did only sculpture and drawing. And then, at 17, I discovered—like a big bang—color, and it was a *tremendousexperience*.

AB For a big bang, your color is very subtle.

HS Because I never think of color as pigment. Color serves in my paintings to indicate distance, nearness or roundness. I use color only as a means to define things, just like the line.

AB You don't use it emotionally?

HS Well, it is emotional, strictly emotional. I know people who are real colorists, like the young Rothko. When he did the walls of light, he said it all with a surface of color, but I organize space. I always have organized space.

AB I'd say you use values like acoustics. You intensify space with silence.

HS I believe that real strength is precision and accuracy. Great strength is a kind of relaxed quiet. The whisper can be much more powerful than the shout.

AB I've never seen anyone who modified their work so completely according to subject. Your portrait of Frederick Kiesler has a face without features. And the portrait of Barney Newman has a face with no body. We have the essence of them.

HS Well, again, it's the need to concentrate on the essential. It wasn't planned that way. There are people who talk about feelings of the mind? I was never able to do something out of pure mind. In other words, if I would arrive at a conviction intellectually about what art should

be, it would show in my work maybe five years later, when it had been totally integrated into my entire being. When you are shaped as an artist, all influence is really temporary.

AB Do you have a particular spiritual discipline that you adhere to?

HS Oh yes. I've been meditating since 1966.

AB Transcendental?

HS I didn't have a guru ever, but I read all the books. I gradually worked out my own system. It's very, very much a part of my life.

AB Your recent work suggests that interior approach. I see you as an architect of the spirit.

HS Really? Thank you. There is something...you notice that people talk about enlightenment and light? And elucidation and clarity? Think of the double meaning of "light." Imagine that the world is like a diamond with millions of facets. My analogies have something to do with crystal, light, mirroring, transparency. Years ago, I wanted to actually work with light.

AB It's more interesting that you work metaphysically, that you structure space with line to evoke the idea of light.

HS You are right. Because I read somewhere that the unsuccessful struggle has its poignancy, you know?

AB I don't think you're unsuccessful. It's about depth and perception.

HS But it isn't light.

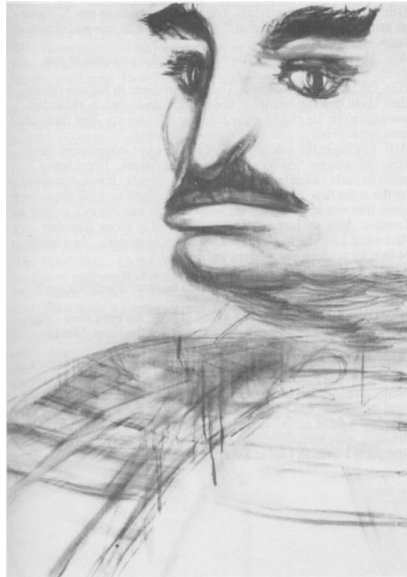
AB Precisely, but done with line. It stimulates the experience of light through its own geometry. You worked with shaped canvases for awhile.

HS Yes. 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 surrounding. And that's 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. As a matter of fact, now I have a hard time showing paintings. I feel like hiding them.

AB Well, true nature loves to hide. I was going to ask you about that. You've shown consistently over the years.

HS The first years, beginning in 1943, I've shown practically every year, and the more I've aged the more reluctant I am to show. But I'll have some terrific shows posthumously. I want

to tell you something also, a little secret. Last summer, I read a book by David Bohm, the physicist, called *Order, Science, and Creativity*. They gave chimps paint and found that they'd rather paint than do anything else, they even forgot to eat. The only thing that stemmed the flow of the hated word, "creativity," was when they began to reward them for painting. I have seen in my life again and again what fame does to people and I think that, subconsciously, I blundered to protect myself.



Hedda Sterne, *Harold Rosenberg*, 1964, pen and ink, pencil on paper, 11×14 1/8". MoMA, The Joan and Lester Avner Collection.

AB I'm sure that you could have attained more recognition. Certainly, if context is an issue, you were absolutely in the right place at the right time over and over again.

HS For a while, that was true. In the early '40s, I had a lot of it but then less and less, and now I have gotten to the point of what I always considered the worst, being in an ivory tower. Now I believe that that recognition in the '40s and the '50s was the worst thing.

AB Ivory tower, ivy and all, speaks of an isolationism and privilege. It filters through...

HS Of course, you're absolutely right.

AB Was it a sense that you might lose your soul that kept you so private? What made you pull back from the possibility of being very famous?

HS I don't know if I had the possibility. I bet you've seen enough to have recognized how many people, painters too, are like addicts. The need for attention is so pathetic, it's such a loss of freedom, such a slavery. So it isn't a question even of being *that* famous. I mean, the idea of worrying whether you get an inch or five inches in the paper is so extraneous and uninteresting for anybody who thinks correctly. And yet, you can see, they literally martyred Victor Brauner.

AB I wanted to ask you about that.

HS You know the story of the eye, no?

AB I'd like to hear it.

HS 10 years before the accident occurred, Victor had been painting a self-portrait with a big wound in place of his right eye. And he made endless paintings of people looking at a detached eyeball. And then, one night he was at a bar in St. Germain, when a drunken brawl broke out between two painters. And one of the painters picked up a glass and threw it, and it accidentally hit Victor. And he lost his right eye. From then on everybody paid attention to him. He started selling and became a successful painter. When I met him in Paris, he had just bought a wooden hand. I said to him, "Watch out! Look at what you are doing." I mean, he was the joy of all the psychologists, I can tell you.

AB Was he dabbling in black magic?

HS I don't know about that. You know how people say, "I'd give an arm to obtain this and that?" Well, he gave an eye and obtained fame.

AB There has to be a sacrifice to the gods if you want to join them. Big dues.

HS Oh, absolutely, always. There are regions in Europe where they claim that the builder of the church has to wall in either his sweetheart or his child for the building to stand up. And there are innumerable songs and poems about this myth.

AB Virgins in the volcano. What was Peggy Guggenheim like?

HS She was my first friend in the United States. There was a salon in Paris called Salon des Surindependants. It was organized by the artist Arp. He had seen my collages, and he took some for a show that was at Guggenheim Jeune, which was Peggy's gallery in London. Also, we had a mutual good friend in Victor Brauner. And when I moved to New York, we were neighbors. As a matter of fact, for a while, she was my only friend.

AB Was she with Max Ernst?

HS That's how I met Max. I grew up infatuated with his work.

AB He was a very handsome man.

HS Oh, he was. He was like a bird of prey, his eyes were forget-me-not blue. He and Peggy were married at the time. She lived in an extraordinary house and gave huge parties. I had never seen social parties in my life before, birthday parties, marriages, but I never understood social business parties. I was totally puzzled, this tremendous friendliness and cordiality among total strangers. But I also didn't know about the vivacity of people who had a drink or two under their belt, it's very different from drinking wine with dinner. A kind of so-called freedom. At the first party I went to I sat in a corner watching. Finally, an old gentleman with glasses sat near me, and we both commented on this. He had a strong accent like mine, and we were both bewildered. Suddenly, I realized that he attracted people like a magnet and that this was, in fact, Mondrian himself, and that the party was for him. All of her parties were memorable. They were always for someone. She had a huge combined party for Saroyan and

Gypsy Rose Lee. Peggy herself had a very unusual mind, unusual personality. When she divorced Max, she closed the gallery. Fortunately, a group of painters begged Betty Parsons to open her own gallery, and she did. Betty and I were good, loving friends to her death. I had guest shows in lots of galleries, but my “steady” was Betty. She was a totally lovable woman.



A corner of Hedda Sterne's studio, photographed in 1970 by Duane Michals. Courtesy of the artist.

AB She had such an eye. She took on some pretty difficult people.

HS Well, she didn't even have so much of an eye, she took chances, even on things she didn't particularly like.

AB Was she governed by anyone's opinions in particular?

HS Well, Barney was a great advisor to her. The first show she had in the gallery was curated by Barney.

AB I liked your portrait of his wife, Annalee, very much.

HS She was always an extraordinary woman. At one point, I wanted to write about American artists' wives. In my generation, there were a few such totally fabulous, loving great women. Totally selfless. There's a grandness in great passion and dedication. I know people who are a team. I can't think, for instance, of Christo without his wife. They are a team.

AB When you were married to Saul Steinberg, was that difficult? You were obviously not in the wife of the artist role. You're an artist and it wasn't that kind of symbiotic team.

HS In the apartment, there was never something of mine on the wall. And lots of people, our friends, didn't know I was Hedda Sterne.

AB Didn't *LIFE Magazine* take care of that?

HS Well, that was at the very beginning, and people forget this kind of thing very quickly.

AB Was that a problem?

HS No, because I was always such a totally intense admirer, I still am, of his work, without any reservation, even before I met him. And I do not think that familiarity has to...

AB & HS (*simultaneously*) breed contempt.

AB Have you been living alone since then?

HS Since '61, yes.

AB Has meditation taken the place, or is it an adjunct to religion?

HS It's absolutely, totally different. It has to do with cleaning the lenses, you know. Developing and taking care of your mind. A mind has to be both reflective and transparent. I do not separate any form of apprehending, perceiving and understanding. Let's say the intellect is like going through the jungle with a machete, and the meditative mind is soaring above the jungle. C.S. Lewis said, "If the brain and the mind are only a bunch of cells, what reason do you have to believe in it or trust it?" In other words, the first reasoning you do is an act of faith.

AB Do you follow a religion?

HS No, none. Never.

AB Dore Ashton described you as having pagan qualities because you see life in everything.

HS Pantheistic. Christ says, lift the stone and you find me, cut the flower and you find me. I can't imagine an artist not being aware of the miracle of it all.

AB Then there's a sense of intuitive direction, a longing, a desire, Pathos.

HS "Tao" means The Way. It's like being in a groove. Painting is correcting. It's correcting and correcting until it's right. You learn about contextuality better than any scientist if you really experience what you are doing. Did you ever see Albers' *Book of Colors*? It is a philosophical treatise.

AB It's poetic praxis, not the what but the how.

HS Exactly. And I believe art to be a form of knowledge. This is what one does, or what life is all about, an effort to understand.



Hedda Sterne, *Portrait of Frederick Kiesler*, 1954, oil on canvas, 72×42". Courtesy The Queens Museum.

—Anne Bonney is a painter who lives and works in New York.