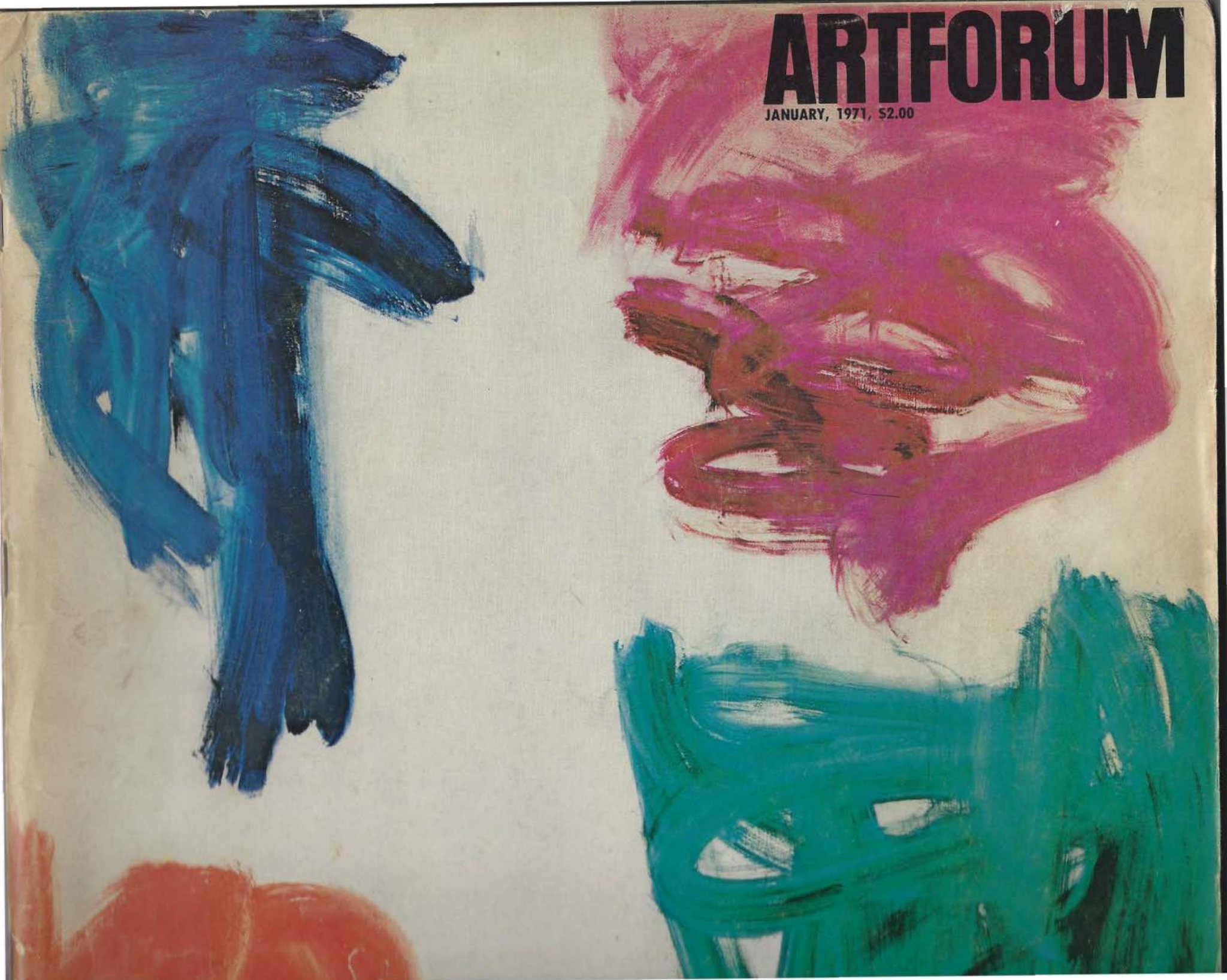

ARTFORUM

JANUARY, 1971, $2.00

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COVER: Hans Hofmann, *Color Ballet*, o/c, 78 x 84", 1961. (Color courtesy Andre Emmerich Gallery.) detail.

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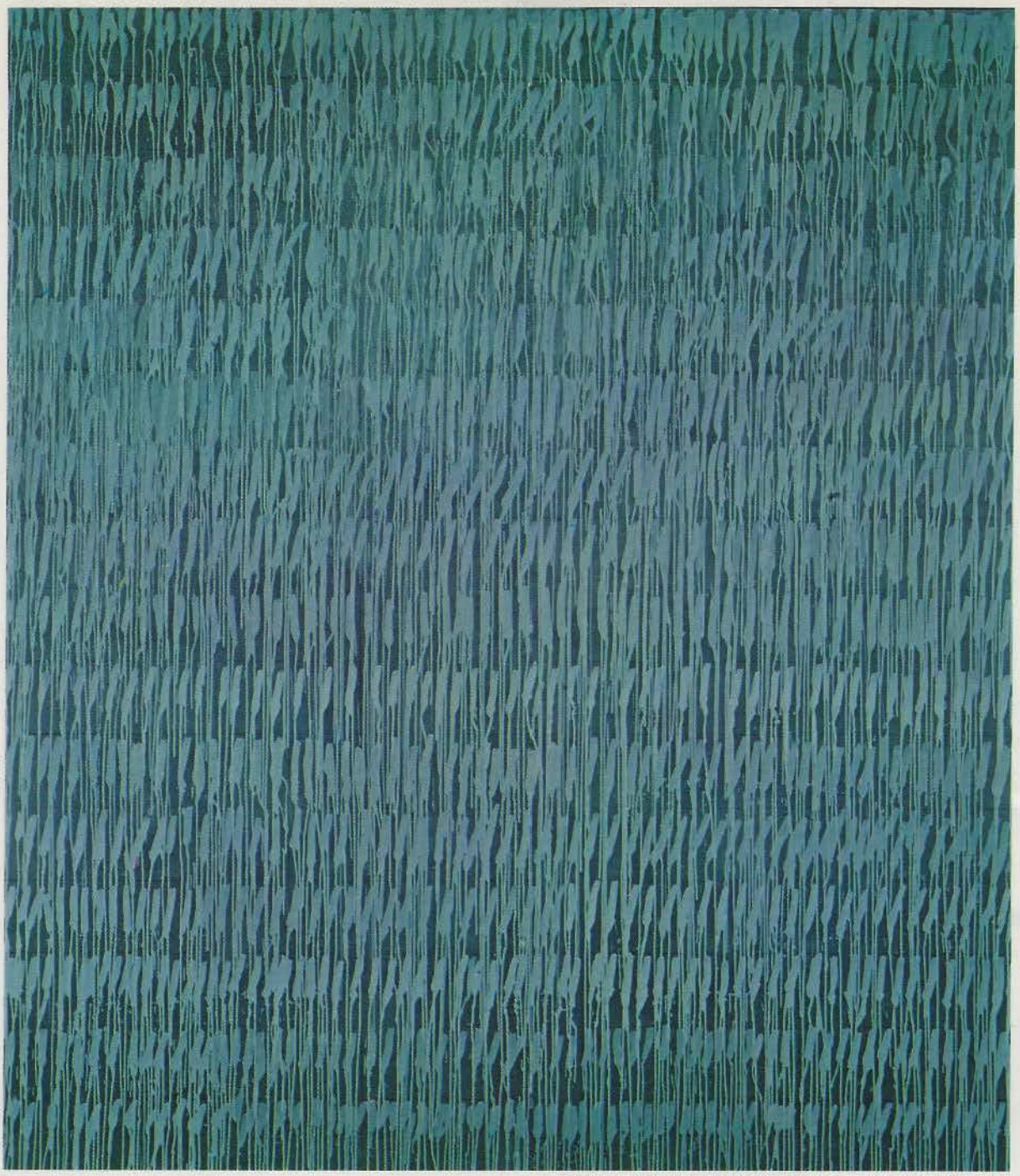
PHYLLIS TUCHMAN

Do you think that your experience or observation of art education as a student at the Art Students League during the '20s was very much different from (or like) your experience as chairman of the art department at Yale during the '60s?

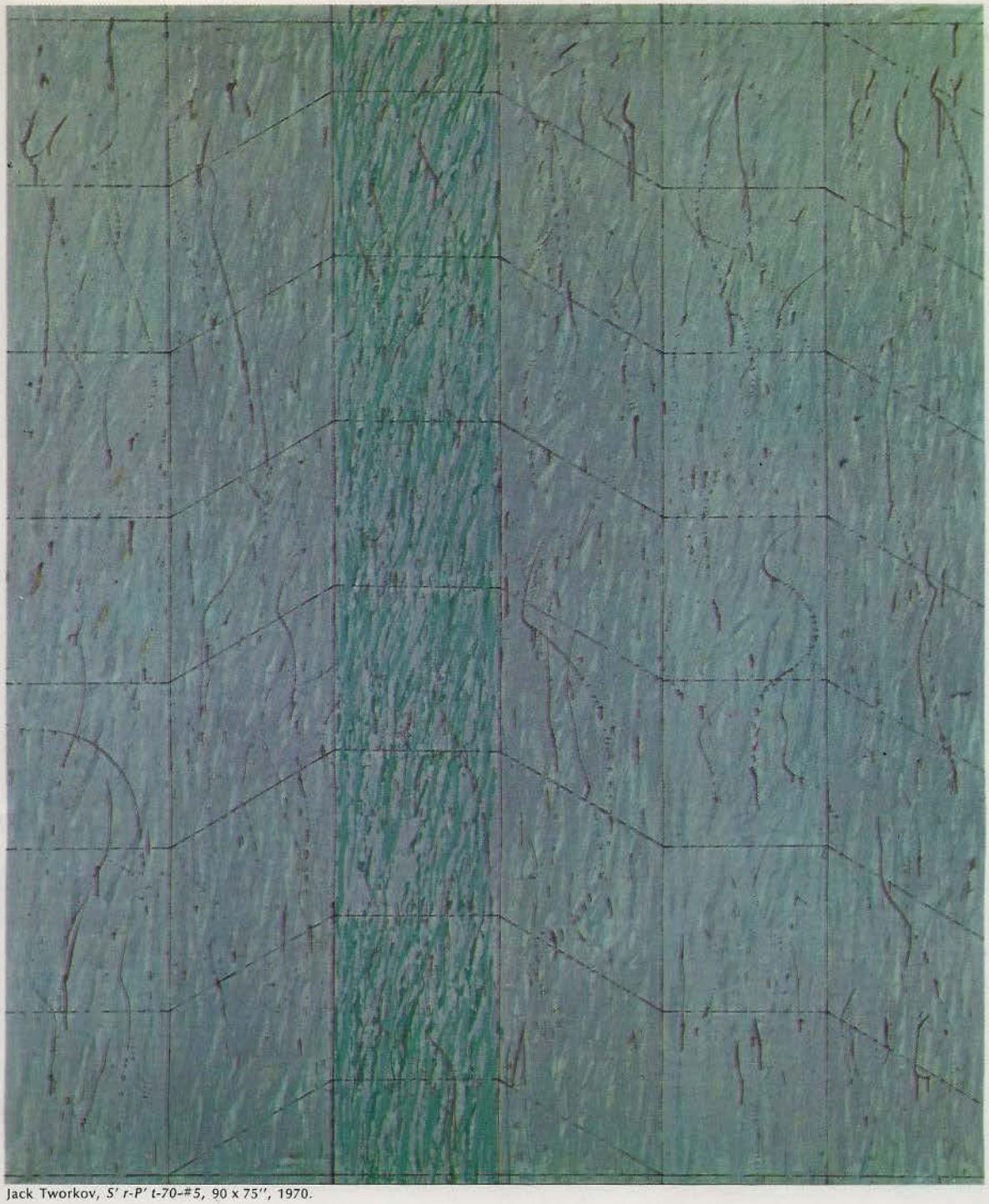
Well, I think the whole scene has changed. No one at that time looked to a university for an art education nor was there any effort to incorporate art into the university system. A student didn't go to art school to get a degree. There were no grades. There was only the relationship between the student and the teacher and student to student. The student really went to school to get what he thought he needed. Whereas I think there are an awful lot of people going to school just to get a degree. Art is one of the ways through which you trudge through college. If you're not sure what you want to be, maybe you take art courses. So there are really an awful lot of people taking art in the schools for not terribly valid reasons. On the other hand, universities, in trying to incorporate the schools into their general educational system, have imposed degrees and grades which, in a way, make very little sense in an art program. You can justify degrees in those professions where, say, the degree means some protection for society, like medicine or engineering or accounting. But it certainly doesn't make sense to have that kind of criteria applied to an artist. As the century has progressed, it has become more and more impossible to teach art at all, in the ordinary sense of teaching. The art teacher now acts as sort of critic and understanding audience. But if you're confronted by a class of students, each one going in a different direction, there's very little of what is called basic art that will make any real difference.

Except for some schools where they insist purely on drawing and painting from life and landscape, there's no other school that I know of which has a coherent program, has a coherent curriculum that it can teach. So the teacher simply ends up discussing current art trends and analyzing them for the students, interpreting them for the students the best way that he can. The student takes what he can out of it and then the teacher perhaps criticizes his work on the basis of the direction which he himself indicates, very often a direction that isn't even sympathetic to the teacher. It's a very loosely structured thing. The university doesn't really know how to absorb such a thing as a modern art school into its system. The administration is bedeviled by the idea. And the school in turn is bedeviled by the demands that the university makes for grades and for systematic qualification for a degree. Actually though, it's not as anarchic as I seem to indicate, but there's a loose structure. And I know a good student manages to get a good deal out of the school, but there's also an awful lot of dead wood which moves through



Jack Tworkov, RWG #9, o/c, 81 x 31", 1963. (Leo Castelli Gallery.)

AN INTERVIEW WITH JACK TWORKOV



Jack Tworkov, *S' r-P' t-70-#5*, 90 x 75", 1970.

"I begin to see less and less conflict between intuition and reason."

the university schools, ending in an MFA.

Do you think that an understanding of philosophy or a knowledge of history becomes essential to making art?

I think that everything depends so much on differences of sensibility. For myself, I don't see how you can be an artist without valuing art, which means in a sense, valuing the tradition which an artist inherits. I don't believe that every generation can completely invent art or that such an invention would have much meaning. I think that the best of what we have in modern art derives from a tradition, derives from a past and is as strong as that tradition is strong. If that tradition is weak, then our art is weak. If the 20th century is adjudged a good century, then our art will have some meaning. If the 20th century is adjudged a bad century, then, it won't.

How did you come to see or use composition in your paintings, let's say, in the fifties and more recently?

In the fifties, I was not thinking in terms of composition. In fact, I was thinking more in terms of anti-composition, not composing. There was a naïve point of view involved. The idea was that if you did not circumscribe yourself with ideas about composition, if you permitted a kind of direct flow, just following clues as you worked, that you would come to a certain amount of more true painting. That sometimes these things were frustrated is absolutely true. I think that quite a good deal of bad painting was made that way. But I think the instinct to go that way was a good one, especially for the period. But every painter who has followed that track of unpremeditated approaches to the canvas, searching all the time, never allowing himself to fall into clichés of his own making, finally realizes that what is possible to the method is very circumscribed. The revelation that you constantly hope for doesn't necessarily happen.

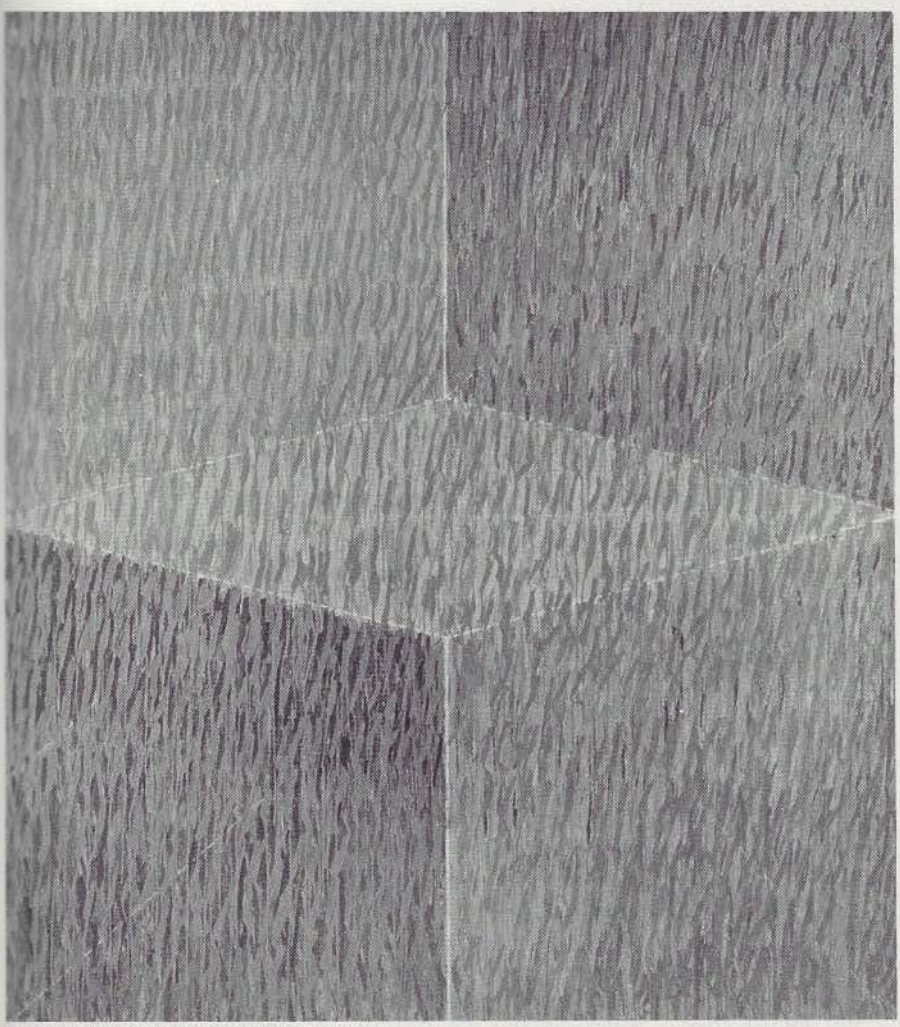
The subconscious seems to produce more or less the same material all the time, does not seem to throw up terrifically new revelations. Why it doesn't, I don't know. Maybe a grown person is already too circumscribed. A grown person is already too established before he deals with painting. The only other way in which you can open up the path is by permitting the mind to work on the material the subconscious throws up. And therefore you really need a kind of unique process, a combining of the unconscious, unpremeditated search with the conscious use of the material which comes up. So, I have deliberately turned toward planning, toward working from drawings, and to following drawings. There, too, I have to eliminate a lot of things and settle on some choices that seem to be more necessary than others. What astonishes me is that while the instinct of a painter is to constantly widen his experience and horizon, somehow it always becomes necessary also to discard things, and to limit oneself in order to

Jack Tworkov, *Dedicated to Stefan Wolpe*, o/c, 88 x 75", 1960. (J. Michener.)

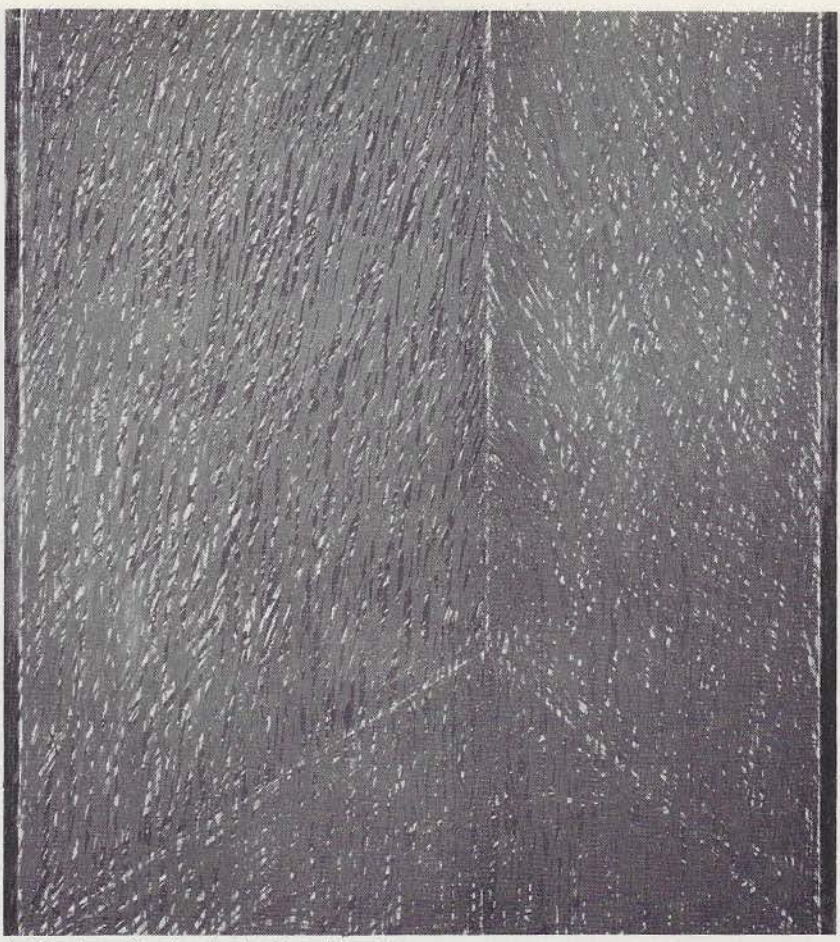
Jack Tworkov, *Duo I*, o/c, 81¾ x 57¾", 1956. (Whitney Museum.)

Jack Tworkov, *Script*, o/c, 84½ x 75½", 1962. (Leo Castelli Gallery.)

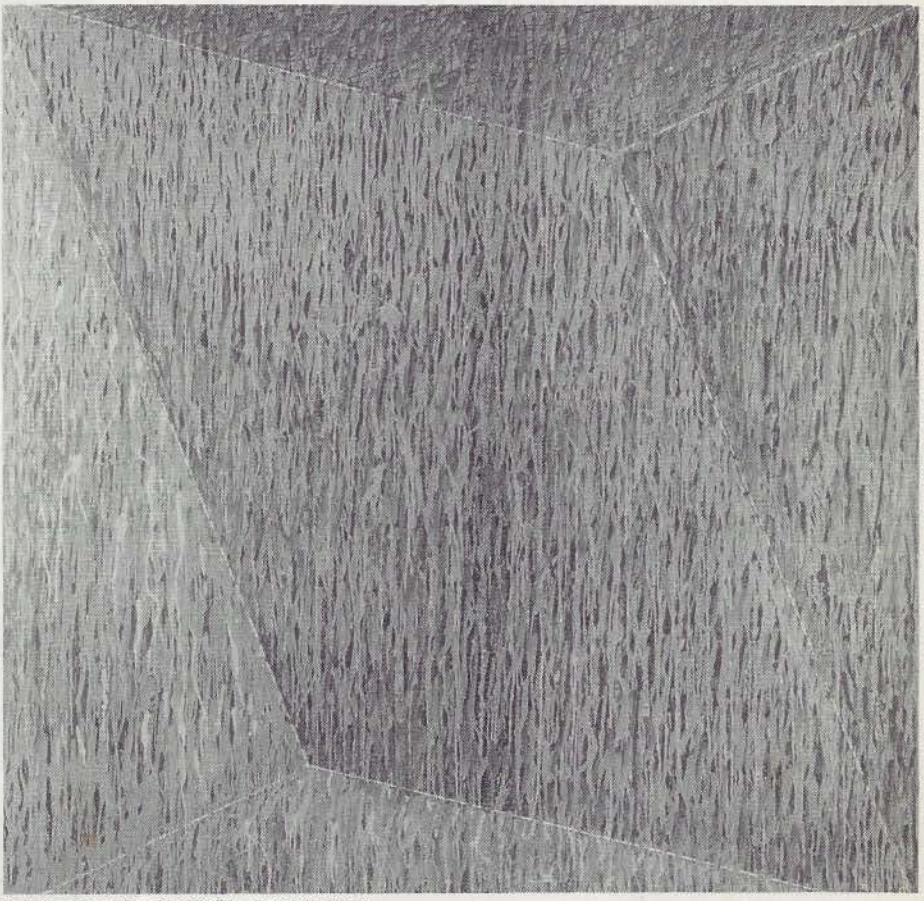
Jack Tworkov, *S' r-P' t-70-#6*, 90 x 75", 1970.



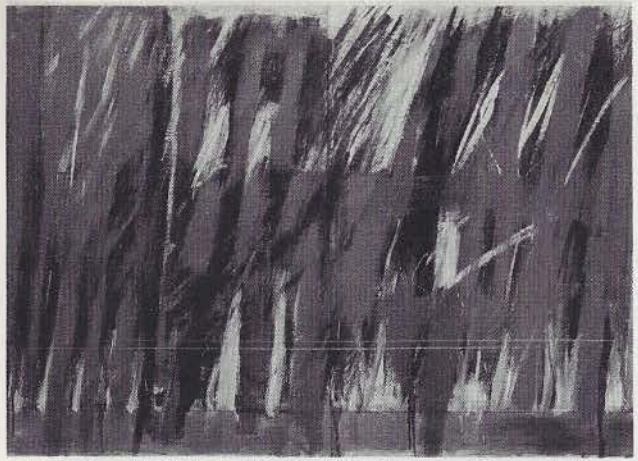
Jack Tworkov, *S'r-P' t-70-#3*, 80 x 70'', 1970.



Jack Tworkov, *Situation—L*, o/c, 80 x 70'', 1969.



Jack Tworkov, *S' r-P' t-70-#2*, 80 x 80'', 1970.



Jack Tworkov, *W. 23rd*, o/c, 60 x 80", 1963. (Museum of Modern Art.)

Jack Tworkov, *Barrier Series #4*, o/c, two panels, 94 x 151", 1961.
(University of Wisconsin.)

achieve anything. This is a paradox in the artist's work and it is a very painful one, but I think it's absolutely true. On the one hand, you'd like to break out; on the other hand, you cannot achieve anything without narrowing the way to go, without limiting yourself to some degree as to what you can do.

Why have you limited your palette so much recently?

I don't know if there is a single answer to that. The simplest answer would be that I became interested in a certain kind of drawing, and that by my limiting my color interests I was able to concentrate on form. Some of the paintings became for me like an extension of drawing. I saw no great difference between drawing on a piece of paper and drawing on a canvas. If the esthetic experience was valid in one, then it was in the other. And yet, that's not quite the answer. I developed a kind of distaste for color, precisely because color had become so much of an emphasis in painting—for the idea that color had to be always primary colors, clear, singing primary colors. It became very distasteful to me. Essentially, I see anything as color. Anything that you can see is color. I also reject certain psychological connotations in connection with color. Someone today asked me if in painting I get suggestions from nature, from the things I look at, especially where color is involved. The question struck me as being rather queer because it suddenly occurred to me—and it had never occurred to me before—that my own inspiration for colors are the colors on the painting table. It's the way *they* affect me rather than anything exterior. My attitude toward color is the same as my attitude would be towards charcoal. I really have no attitude towards charcoal. It's simply something I can make a mark with. To some degree, my gray paintings are the result of my charcoal drawings. My charcoal drawings preceded my paintings. For a long time I was making dark, gray charcoal drawings (since 1956 or earlier). For a long time I didn't paint these drawings although I wanted to, because I always thought that I had to translate those drawings in terms of color. Until it occurred to me, why do I have to interpret them in color? My whole fascination was with the charcoal drawings as they were. Then it became a problem for me to come as close to the charcoal drawings in color as I possibly could.

On this level, I could say this is my conscious thinking about it. Unconsciously, perhaps, there are other reasons. I have sometimes wondered if generally the emptying out of the painting —whether it is of drawing or imagery or, as in my case, of color—is not a historical thing, has nothing to do with personal psychology. That maybe it is a matter of where art stands in our time rather than personal psychology. I'm really not sure what the answer is, but I have sometimes thought that abstract painting generally in the 20th century is, perhaps, on the social level (rather than on the individual level) an expression of despair. It's very difficult for me to crow about modern art. I feel that whatever gains have been made (I couldn't name them, though I know what the losses have been), the losses have been tremendous.

Earlier, how did you choose the colors that you would use in a random, unpremeditated painting?

Well, for instance, I have occasionally set problems for myself deliberately. Like, for instance, a green painting. I painted a number of green paintings because I was really curious why green was such a difficult color to use in painting. To use almost unmodulated reds and greens in a painting was difficult and so I tried to use them. I think it's natural for a painter to sometimes search out problems that pose difficulties for painting or for himself personally and try to find out why they are difficulties. So I, for a long time, worked with a few but primary colors. I made a number of monochromatic yellow paintings. I think just simply because some aspects in my paintings present some kind of challenge that I would like to find out something about. I have a kind of aversion for what I call decorator's colors. But I always thought of color as a kind of structural element (I don't know how else to describe it). Simply, a means with which to structure. I think that color, the texture of the pigment, its flow, the canvas itself, the shape of the rectangle, are all structural elements —all equally structural elements in the making of an essentially abstract painting. So that for me, the idea of making a painting in which color is the sole effect is not an appealing idea.

How have you dealt with scale through the years?

There are some phrases, some words used in connection with painting, that are always ambiguous to me. For instance, the words scale, space, movement, sometimes people use the word "time" in referring to painting: they all are ambiguous words. I take scale always to mean relationships between things. In the case of a painting, I find it very hard to apply the word scale to it because it's come to mean large, it's come to mean size, rather than a relationship to something within the canvas or to something exterior to it. The only time that you can really speak of scale is if you paint for a specific site, if you have a specific site in mind. If you were a mural painter, then the question of scale would enter in. But I don't see where the problem of scale enters into most studio painting. So the result is that people now speak simply of scale when they mean large. They mean size. Now how large to make a painting today, I don't know. It largely depends on the condition of your studio. Some studios permit you to make very large paintings; some studios limit the size of the painting. The only other sense in which the word scale can be used, as far as I can see, is that there does seem to be a relationship between how full the surface is in relationship to size. It seems to me that as the painting empties out, it does seem to call for larger and larger size (as we've seen throughout the recent history of painting). The more you take out of the surface, evidently, the larger the painting becomes merely to achieve some sort of presence. You could make a landscape on a very

small scale, in a very small size, and still achieve an illusion of a large space. Whereas with modern painting, so often the kind of space implied is exactly equal to the dimensions of the canvas. In other words, the illusion of space, in that sense, disappears, does not exist.

Why do you still paint in such a way that you always know the top of a canvas?

For one thing, I think that there's a natural situation. If you put the canvas on the wall when you paint, as I do, so that you approach it always from the front, it's just a matter of biology in the way you brush the canvas. There is a top and bottom. There is a way in which the paint flows. Of course, if you eliminated all paint or brush sensations and all drawing, I suppose you could get to a point where the viewing angle would be the same from every position; or if you spray the canvas, maybe there is no necessary top or bottom. I use the brush. While there's a good deal of random activity in the brushwork, I do know what I want from the brush; I do know what I want from the paint. Anyone looking at the painting would know what the top was and what the bottom was. I've also watched students sometimes paint and in order to achieve a greater randomness of effect, they would paint the picture from all sides. They would revolve their picture, resting it at first on one edge and then on the other. I always felt that there was already enough confusion, that this adds even more. I know the areas where I want to leave the painting to random qualities. I also know where I want to insist on the few things that I can insist on.

In the fifties, did you pile paint as much for surface effects as for random activity?

Oh yes. I think that the idea—it all goes back to—if you eliminate subject, if you eliminate references to nature—then I feel that one of the significant things left is the trace of the hand. I know that there is an argument against the hand in present-day painting. This is the argument that has been made by a number of contemporary painters. But I believe that is among the few things left that can still be serious in art, this trace of the hand. It is the way a man reveals so much of himself, just precisely by the way he handles the paint, the way he treats the material, by the way he permits its flow, or contains its flow. There is a whole range of thought and feeling in that process. I wouldn't want to erase it. I played around for a while with the elimination of surface of that kind. But I think that it's just one more significant element that is taken out of painting which points constantly to zero painting.

I know I've eliminated an awful lot in my own painting, maybe urged on by the same things that have urged on other artists who have reduced the content of their pictures. But I find myself pushed on in that direction somewhat unwillingly. I go along up to a point out of curiosity, out of a desire to find out. But if I could, I would like to increase the content and weight of a picture, rather than reduce it any more. Certainly, I don't want to go toward zero painting. One aspect of abstract painting was to examine itself; that is, to examine painting itself as a subject. I think that part of this examination was paint, pigment, really. People speak about it as color, but pigment involves something else besides color. And I think there was a real interest in paint for its own sake because it was the medium, the medium that you work with. There was a tremendous amount of curiosity about what you could do with the medium, what medium is. And I look upon pigment as a writer or poet would look upon words, to experiment with its range, what is possible to the medium.

Again, in a sense, it is dictated by the idea of what is possible to abstract painting. I think it is also important to remember that abstract painting is not terribly old as painting goes and part of this experimentation was due to the fact that this represented something new in painting. It needed that kind of experimentation. Of course, at this point, almost anybody can ask: Why do you have to insist on abstract painting? I do think that is an extremely serious question. I've battled with this question ever since I turned towards abstract painting. In my case, certainly, it was not because I had a distaste for representational painting (there was too much there that I loved and that I like. And, also, I was not altogether unskilled in it). I could have developed in that direction. It's just really that I could not see, for myself at any rate, that references to nature had that kind of serious implication any more. In fact, it seemed to me that in some cases, references to landscape, to figure, had for some painters created a more decorative picture than the abstract styles had. If you take the word decoration as representing a less serious attitude in art, a more ingratiating kind of picture, then it seems to me that the references to figure and landscape sometimes are, in that sense, even more decorative, more ingratiating. And I don't have to point out that as far as conveying information is concerned, representational painting is vastly inferior to other available media.

Have you continued to make figurative studies?

I draw from the figure more for the pleasure of just drawing. I don't deny that there is for the artist a really great subjective pleasure in observation, in keen observation, and in seeing and setting down a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface. But that's a private pleasure. I don't really see it as a factor in my painting. Whether it ever could be, I really don't know.

One critic recently wrote that he felt that in all the artists of the first generation there was one element in common: a syntactical conception (having to do with surface, paint quality,

a way of acting before the canvas). Do you see this?

If you turn towards abstraction, you are always concerned with the means of the paint itself. Paint itself became important, became a subject for exploration. The way paint was put on became an important thing, as important for the painter as a gesture is for a dancer. Instead of reading meanings from references to nature, you had to read meanings directly from the artist's gesture, from the sensibility with which he used paint or color (because that's all there was to deal with). In other words, there was a reduction of the artist's means to relatively few components and it was the way he handled those few components that made the expressive quality of his painting.

Do you think, then, that technique became as important as subject matter?

I think technique is always important—even the rejection of technique is a technique. And there was a great deal of rejection of technique in Abstract Expressionist painting, which in itself became a technique of working. If Pollock dribbled paint, it was a rejection of one kind of technique, but it established another kind of technique. Certainly Pollock after a while knew pretty much how he was going to make his picture just as much as any painter ever did. And all technique means is that I can repeat my performance.

Do you think that surface qualities or surface incident seen in the art of the first generation or Abstract Expressionism present a significant point of departure for artists today—or that activity on the surface is coming to be significant again?

That's what I hear all the time, that younger painters are again involved with surface and with Abstract Expressionist painting. I haven't seen enough of it; really, I don't know. I think for me the important thing was that there was a naïve trust in random activity, in automatic painting, in the unconscious. I think it's a little naïve to give it as much trust as we did. I think that it's a very important aspect of an artist's work to learn from the unexpected, to learn from accident. But I believe for myself in a kind of reconciliation between that and thoughtfulness. As I said before, I begin to see less and less conflict between intuition and reason. I think that both are integral processes, that the problem is to keep the painting open to both impulses. I think that if I have any conflict with the color field painters, it is their naïve exclusion of the hand, of the automatic and random activities in a canvas, their insistence on almost mechanical craft, comprising the conceptual, reasoning qualities to the exclusion of the other. I think that either extreme is naïve. Either extreme is only half of the story. I think that in painting, as in life, both play an enormous role. You wouldn't be alive if

you eliminated all impulse and you couldn't live if you eliminated all thought. Generally, I think that this business of position holding is a bad thing in art. I'm sick of the whole thing of merely advancing towards a position and making a thing out of that position regardless of what kind of art results from it. I'm really more interested in art than in positions—regardless of styles.

Do you think there's more a difference of space than of color between paintings by first generation artists or Abstract Expressionists and color field painters of the sixties?

Yes, I think so. Of course, I don't know what is meant by Abstract Expressionists, although I was considered an Abstract Expressionist. I saw no connection between my work, say, and Rothko's or Newman's. I admired Rothko's work enormously, but I know that Rothko resented any identification with what was sometimes to be called action painting. The real difference there, really, was the emphasis on automatic and random activity, on the one hand, and the emphasis on deliberate design, on the other.

Rothko found a theme with which he stayed the rest of his life. Most of the people that I was associated with, in the fifties, thought of every painting as an exploration. We were not concerned with an identifying image. Every painting sought to push away from the periphery of previous experience. A lot of it failed, of course. As to where the question of space is concerned —Abstract Expressionist painters did not reject the idea of illusion, the illusion of depth. Certainly, I did not. I don't know that there is more than a mere difference here, that there is a vital, esthetic principle involved. Except it seems that the whole century was moving constantly to a further and further emptying out of the elements that made up a painting. And it was moving towards zero elements and actually we did get a kind of zero painting. And my instinct was not to go that far. The idea of negation has gone as far as I can bear. And if anything could be re-introduced into the painting that had a yes quality rather than a no quality, I was for it. There was, of course, enough negation in my own work. But I tried to hold onto whatever I could. I mean that the constant moving towards *zero means* in painting was ultimately to lead toward the negation of painting; and I wasn't ever prepared then, and I'm not prepared now, to say no to painting.

Were the paintings you did in the fifties directed by your gesture?

I think that there was so much talk at that time of getting away from French art. We wanted to get away from Picasso, we wanted to get away from Matisse. And the only way you could do it was by abandoning composition and to trust to intuitive, automatic action. And then the feedback from that kind of activity was a guiding point. The movement had very strong negative impulses: not to paint like Picasso, not to paint like Matisse, not to be influenced even by the painters one most admired. And this was so much in the air. Maybe the influence was Freudian psychology. The theory that automatic activity is psychologically determined gave you a kind of reassurance, a trust in automatic activity.

Did first generation or Abstract Expressionist painting seem to relate to Cubism originally?

I don't think we had too close a connection with Cubism. My idea of Abstract Expressionism was that it tried to skip the Cubist period. Personally, I had a much stronger relationship to Cézanne and Impressionism and the Fauves especially. They were much more meaningful to me than the Cubists. I think that today (maybe) I have a greater appreciation of early Cubism, of Analytic Cubism. I really despise later Cubist work—whether it's Picasso's or anybody else's. I never cared much for Braque as a painter, except his earliest Analytic Cubist paintings. I was always fascinated by Analytic Cubism, but I saw it as a spin-off from Cézanne and Impressionism. When I turned to abstract art, I wanted to skip the whole Cubist period. The Abstract Expressionists became much more interested in the psychology of automatic painting, of random activity in the painting, of undesigned, unpremeditated approaches to the canvas.

What did you learn from Cézanne's painting?

While I have an extraordinary fondness for Cézanne, I wouldn't want to limit the answer to just Cézanne because I would rather say it's what Impressionism as a whole meant. And that was an independence of the surface from the things represented. The surface of Impressionism cannot be found in nature (at least it did not attempt to imitate nature), it can only be found in painting. But the surface of Impressionist painting, including the surfaces that Cézanne created, were invented forms through which nature was seen. It was like an invention of forms, a screen of forms through which nature could be looked at. But what the eye could actually see on the surface is not to be found in nature. There are no little color planes in nature, but they did exist in Cézanne. There are no dots, as there are in Seurat, but they became a form through which to build and through which to see. I think this is the terribly important and radical thing that Impressionism contributed to painting and that Cézanne was simply more lucid than most Impressionists about this. There was a tremendous lucidity—and a kind of terrific *passion,* that people never mention, in Cézanne's work. Cézanne's lucidity comes out of a terrific passion. There was a kind of order in Cézanne which was more or less conceptual. Fundamentally, just like the dots of Seurat had to be at random (he could not have planned every dot), only the total idea that he wanted to arrive at was conceptual. So, in a sense, Cézanne's painting, with its recessions of

planes, had to be fairly spontaneous and chancy all along. Only the overall concept was kept in focus. The actual doing was a step-by-step experience of the painting. And in that sense, you had to feel your way, which meant that you had to allow for random qualities. If at first Cézanne thought that he could derive his painting from looking (like one always imagines Cézanne with a brush suspended in his hand, looking at the scene, and waiting for what the next touch ought to be), that might have been the way when he started out. But by the end of his life, Cézanne knew he could not make that painting by just looking at the subject. He really became abstract. If you take a look at some of his last paintings, the landscapes, it can no longer be related directly to seeing. He only had a general concept of the landscape. But the actual painting he really had to do from his head—it was no longer possible to see it in nature. So that Cézanne laid the basis for the abstract picture, as the Impressionists generally did.

I think, for instance, that abstract painting is inconceivable without the Impressionists. Abstract art could never have developed without Impressionism as a precedent. I think that as a precedent for abstract painting, Impressionism is perhaps more significant than Cubism, aside from the fact that Cubism itself derived out of Impressionism.

Why did The Club seem to slowly dissolve itself?

I think primarily because it became a career vehicle for some artists. And so then it lost its early innocence, you might say. There was an early kind of camaraderie that was kind of just for itself. It created a cohesiveness, you know. There was some cohesiveness among the artists that created The Club. And that was, just for a moment, a very nice period. The members, as everybody knows, came to be known as Abstract Expressionists, but no artist thought of himself as an Abstract Expressionist at the time. No one thought in those terms. No one thought he was going to have a great career; no one thought in terms of success. So The Club was just a place to talk, to drink, to dance, mostly to dance. It was a tremendous dance place. It's the dancing that I look back to with nostalgia. Then they started these evenings, these discussion evenings which attracted a lot of people. And then more and more people saw The Club as a kind of "in" place. So it persisted for a long time. But a lot of people who were originally in it sort of dropped out, lost interest in it. I think that The Club was one of the few instances in my life where I remember the artists looking for something simple, something enjoyable, not opportunistic. For a little while, it was nice to be surrounded by friends. People were very close to each other. I imagine young artists today have it in SoHo. But the artists of my generation—what is left of it—don't. They fell apart. ■