

# An Interview with Jack Tworkov

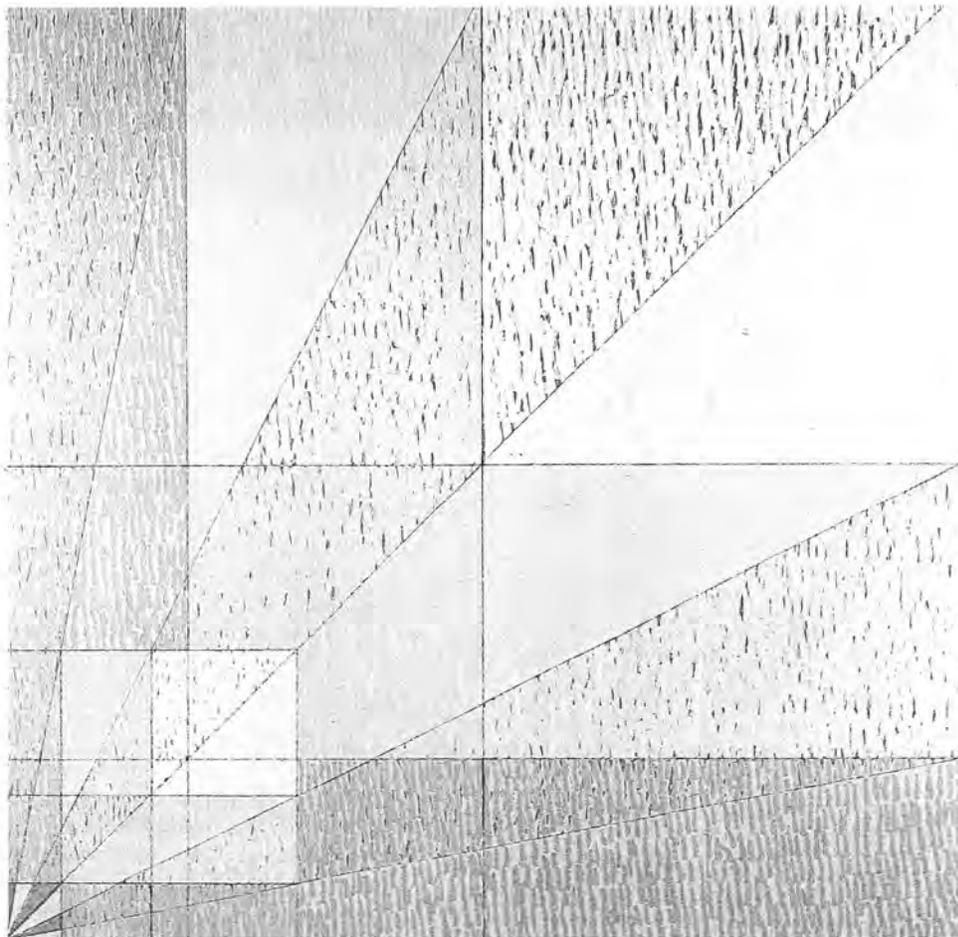
In the last interview he granted before his death in September at the age of 82, Tworkov looks back on a career whose radical shift from the Abstract Expressionism of the early years to the loosely geometric mode of the last two decades evidenced his own distrust of the purely personal.

BY STEVEN W. KROETER

**J**ack Tworkov died on Sept. 4, 1982. His death followed by several months a major exhibition of his recent work at the Guggenheim Museum. In his review for the *New York Times* John Russell said the works in that show made it clear that Tworkov had "perfected the idiom that best suits him." Perhaps in that sense the show was an appropriate final tribute.

Born in Biala, Poland, in 1900, Tworkov emigrated to the United States when he was 13. At Columbia University he studied English, only later beginning his art studies, first in Provincetown, then in New York at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League. He was among the first of his peers to experiment with abstraction, and by the late 1940s he was considered one of the leaders of the New York School. During the 1950s he was part of the Abstract Expressionist circle.

In the mid-1960s a dramatic change came about in Tworkov's work. He moved away from the spontaneous, automatic gestures of Abstract Expressionism and instead began to work with a more disciplined, systematic approach based on carefully thought-out geometric relationships. This "diagonal grid," as he called it, became the basic element of his work.



Jack Tworkov: *Untitled (Q1-76-#1)*, 1976, oil on linen, 80 inches square. Nancy Hoffman Gallery.

*Tworok's paintings have been exhibited extensively both in the U.S. and in Europe. His work is included in a large number of major museums and private collections. Also much sought after as a teacher, he taught at universities throughout the U.S., and from 1963 to 1969 he was chairman of the Art Department at Yale University. He was always enthusiastic about contact with young artists, and while at Yale he developed a reputation for being good at identifying promising students, working with them, and then helping them enter the art world. Jennifer Bartlett, Chuck Close, Richard Serra and William Conlon are just some of the now prominent artists who were students at Yale during Tworok's tenure.*

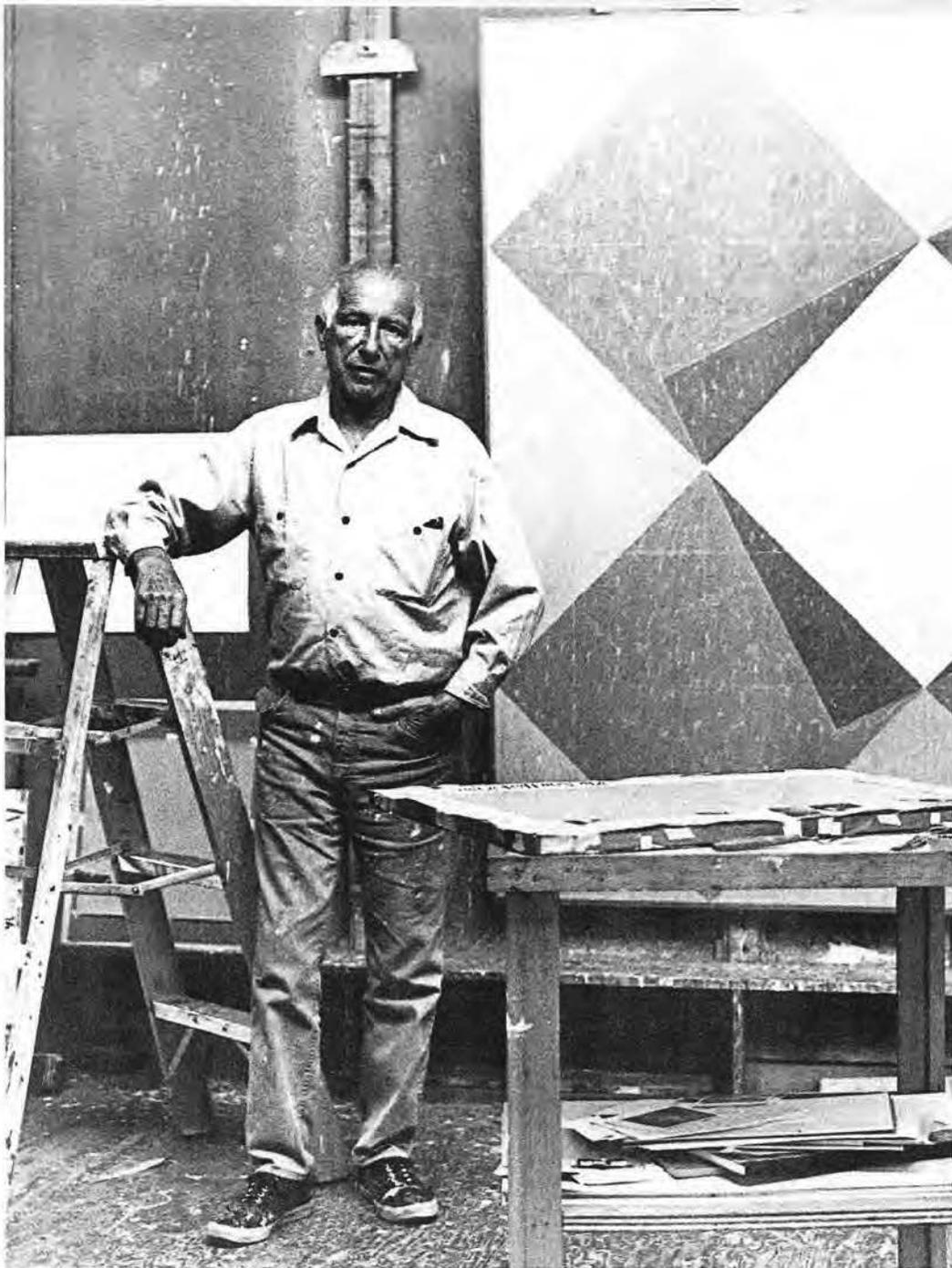
*Tworok and his wife, Wally, always spent their summers in Provincetown; the remainder of the year they lived on the top two floors of a loft in New York's Chelsea district. The top floor was their apartment; the lower floor served as Tworok's studio. This interview—his last—took place in their New York apartment on a monochromatic, damp day in March 1982—two weeks before the opening of Tworok's exhibition at the Guggenheim. He was dressed in faded blue jeans, a blue work shirt, a vest (with pockets into which he frequently slipped his hands) and slippers. The rocking chair in which he sat was alternately silent, then squeaking, depending on whether he was reflecting or replying.*

**Steven W. Kroeter:** The Guggenheim show is your first one-man show at a New York museum since 1971. Do you have specific goals you are attempting to achieve in it?

**Jack Tworok:** When the show was organized I insisted that the work exhibited be of recent years. I wanted my new work to be seen by itself. What I didn't want was the usual comparison between my earlier and later work. Most museum people and critics interested in me focus on the Abstract-Expressionist work from the '50s. They have given little attention to my new work, even though I prefer it. The primary reason for the show at the Guggenheim is to establish a point of view about my new work.

**SWK:** How would you describe the differences between your earlier work and the work you are doing now?

**JT:** I have had a complete change in point of view. I wanted to get away from the extremely subjective focus of Abstract-Expressionist painting. I am



*Jack Tworok, 1981. Photo Renate Ponsold.*

tired of the artist's agonies, whether in painting or in poetry. Personal feelings of that sort have become less important to me, maybe just a bit boring. I wanted something outside myself, something less subjective.

Now I surround my paintings with a system of limits—limits on the shapes that I use and the way in which I use them. I call this system a diagonal grid. Working within it is for me more creative than working in a completely nihilistic way. The limits impose a kind of order, yet the range of unexpected possibilities is infinite.

I still have to make choices. And to make these choices there is still no guidance except intuition. I am fasci-

nated with the fact that the work has its origin in system, in a given outside myself, yet within it I am able to invent endlessly. In fact, one of the reasons for leaving most of the lines in my paintings—the intersecting verticals, horizontals and diagonals—is so if a person wants to he can see the simplicity of the painting's fundamental structure. How the painting comes from the system. There are actually a lot of things that crop up in my work that I never could have invented without this system. There are forms, shapes and relationships that I never could have imagined. I've been working this way for about ten years, and the possibilities for its development still seem infinite to me. I

can imagine incredible change and development if I live another ten years. Even now I can hardly make a painting without seeing how many possibilities there are—if I had the energy, how many variations I could make on it. Not simply for the sake of having variation, but for the sake of carrying the idea forward.

**SWK:** The reasons for your move away from Abstract Expressionism seem clear. But what initially attracted you to it?

**JT:** My first exposure to abstract work came when I was on the WPA Federal Arts Project. There was a group of young painters there who were very

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much involved in automatic drawing—especially one, Walter Quirt. I got interested in what Quirt was doing. At that time I was also being exposed to Freudian thinking. I was in analysis for a short period and was showing automatic sketches to my analyst. I made quite a few paintings based on automatism. Then I went through a 3-year period—beginning when America entered World War II—when I stopped painting. I worked in an engineering shop as a tool designer. When I started painting again I turned to still life. It occurs to me now that I probably did that for the same reason that in the '60s I turned to geometry: I wanted to get away from very personal modes of expression. I found my automatic paintings too painful, too unpleasant, and I didn't want to show them. So I made a series of still lifes over a period of about two years.

**SWK:** Did you consider continuing in that genre?

**JT:** Those paintings were well received, but for me they were just a way of getting back into something else. It was a way of testing my hand and eye. I wanted to find out if I could *see* again, draw again. But I knew that my real interest was in abstraction.

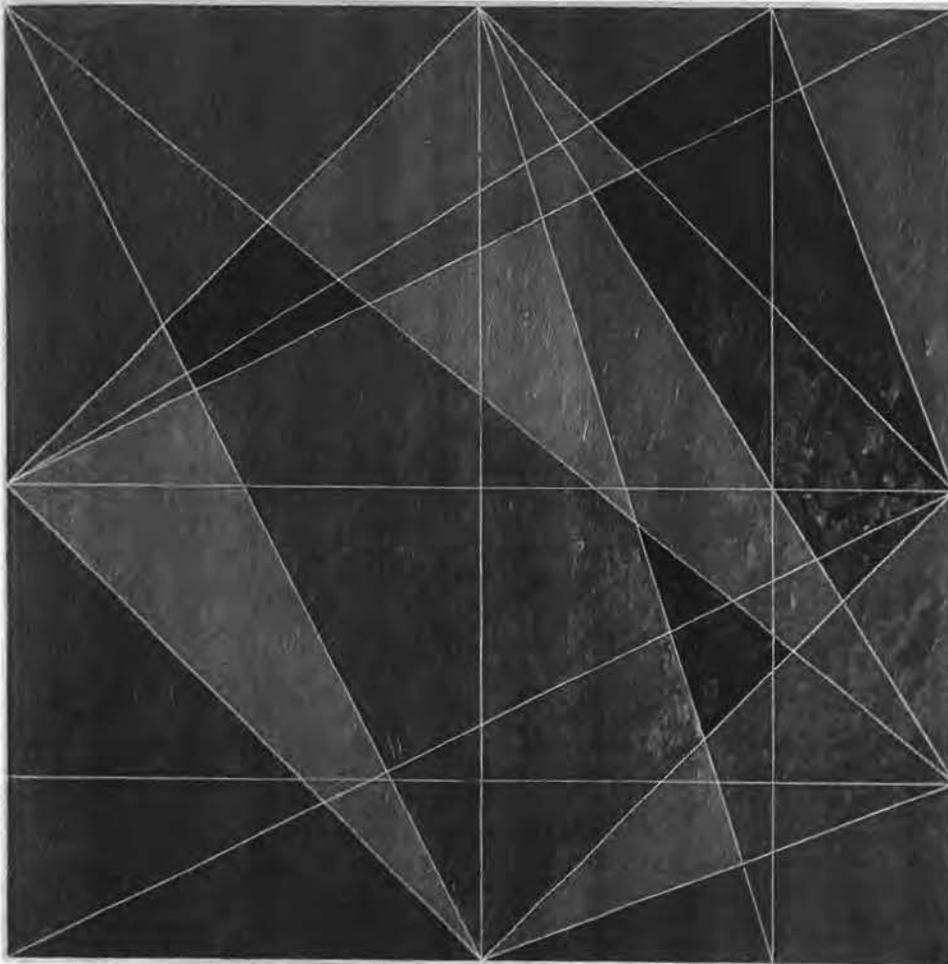
**SWK:** It was these still lifes that were



*Untitled still-life, ca. 1950, oil on canvas, ca. 24 by 36 inches. Collection Mrs. Anna Bing.*



*Study for "House of the Sun" Series, 1952, oil on paper, 27 1/2 by 26 inches. Portland Museum of Art.*



Indian Red Series #2, 1979, oil on canvas, 72 inches square. Nancy Hoffman Gallery.

exhibited at your first show at the Egan Gallery. This had a rather significant effect on your subsequent reputation, didn't it?

**JT:** If I had shown my abstract paintings—as Egan initially wanted—I might have been counted among the first automatic, abstract painters. Instead I came along as a still-life painter who slowly got back into abstract painting.

**SWK:** Now that you've stepped away from the very personal statements associated with Abstract Expressionism, where does inspiration for your work come from? How do you move from one painting to the next?

**JT:** As soon as I begin a painting I start making drawings based on variations of that painting. So it's difficult for me to separate completely one painting from another. It's a continuous process. For instance, just recently I came back from Provincetown and was working with a sketch which would have made a very good large painting. Scale would have meant a lot to this painting. In order to give it the struc-

ture I'd imagined I would have had to build six panels, each panel 90 inches by 45 inches. But I have not been too well lately, and I was afraid to undertake it. I thought it would be just too much.

I set that sketch aside, and I started making another based on two panels, 90 inches by 75 inches, which I had in the studio and were already stretched. It so happened that my wife came down to my studio and saw this sketch. She liked it very much and told me I ought to go through with it. So I went ahead and put together the panels, and I was prepared to spend the rest of the winter working on that painting.

But something happened. I went into the studio the next day and began working on the panel and—well, to make a long story short—somehow or other things came together, and to my amazement the painting came off about ten days after I started. I could have made changes on the canvas, but that would have been like painting a picture on top of a picture. I felt it was important to accept the things that

came up out of the canvas quite spontaneously. And the result was . . . I mean all of a sudden the several months of work that I had anticipated was right there in front of me.

**SWK:** That must have been a wonderful feeling.

**JT:** It was quite wonderful. And the reaction to the painting [See p. 86, *Dip-tych for Wally*] has been very good.

**SWK:** What about your work habits? How often do you paint?

**JT:** Generally I work every day. And as a rule I work on more than one painting at a time, especially in Provincetown where the days are long. But I am not by nature addicted to things, you know. I love to work every day. But if it's a good day for swimming, I'll go swimming. If friends come to visit, I'll visit with them.

**SWK:** You've been going to Provincetown for many years. Can you see its influence in your work? Do you feel different working in Provincetown than working in New York?

**JT:** I'm not sure, because my work is abstract and I don't depend upon the natural environment for the way I paint. If there is an influence it is an influence that I am hardly aware of.

The difference is more in the studio itself. I have a smaller but better studio in Provincetown where I work almost exclusively by daylight. Here I have to use a mixture of daylight and incandescent light. I think that makes a difference. Another possible difference is that in the summer in Provincetown I am perhaps more physically relaxed than I am in New York in winter. I am also much freer from the art world in Provincetown. Not that I have much to do with the art world here. I haven't read an art book or an art magazine in years.

**SWK:** What types of things do you read?

**JT:** I read quite a wide range of things. I am more likely to buy books of poetry than fiction. I try to keep up with contemporary poetry, but I also go back to the classics. I spend much too much time reading the newspaper, and have been trying to break my addiction to the *Times* for years. When I go into the hospital, at least I don't have to look at the newspaper.

**SWK:** Early in your career you did a substantial amount of writing for art publications. In many of these writings Cézanne takes on great importance. Was he a major influence on you?

**JT:** Cézanne's painting was very important to me. Perhaps of greatest interest was how he saw the stroke as a

kind of structural component—similar to the way notes are used in music. Very early on in my career I made an association between Cézanne and Bach. It seemed to me that what Cézanne did with modulating tonalities over a series of strokes was very similar to the concept of modulation in music. What intrigued me was how he would use the same group of “notes” throughout an entire canvas.

However, I was probably influenced as much by Cézanne’s devotion to painting as I was by his actual painting, for his was a devotion which had nothing to do with display, had nothing to do with attention-getting devices, had nothing to do with making his way in the world. Not that he didn’t want to get recognition, to be exhibited and so on. For example, he was very grateful for the group of young painters that formed around him toward the end of his life. He even began to pontificate for them. Yet when he painted he could think of nothing else. Everything went into it. It was, for him, a search. That is a word he used so often, I believe it’s absolutely authentic. The feeling of searching was constantly with him. It was like a god in his work. Like some

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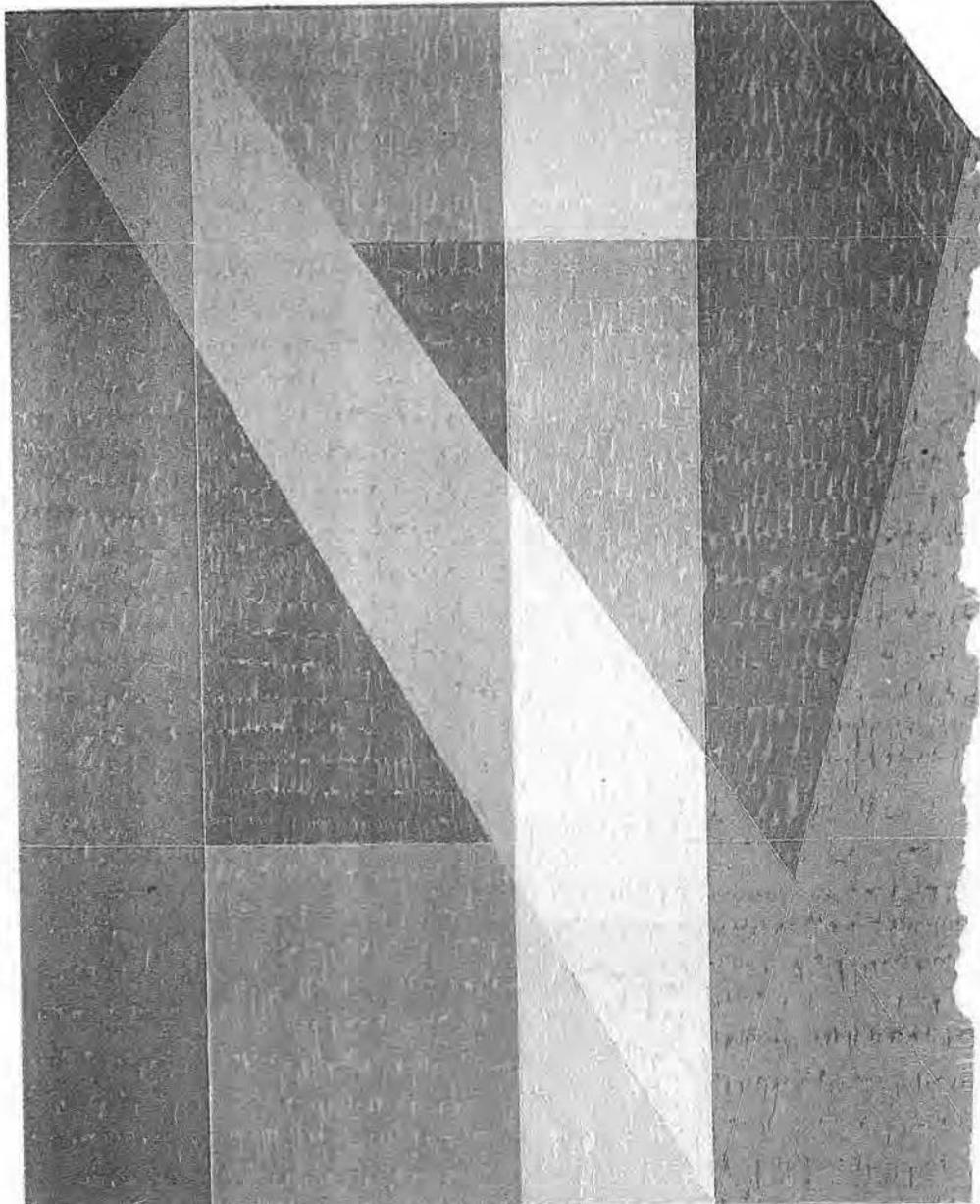
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kind of vision or ideal always just a bit beyond him.

**SWK:** While we are talking about influences, what about de Kooning?

**JT:** I greatly admired de Kooning—as much for his intelligence as for his painting—and we were good friends for a number of years. But there were other influences in my painting which I consider more important, longer lasting. I’ve had no contact with de Kooning since the middle ’50s. And even then we were very, very different people. With very different temperaments. So it astonishes me that my name is so often associated with his—as if I’d lived off him, which is ludicrous. Even if he influenced me, I don’t think I ever strove to do what he was trying to do. My concern with form was greater than



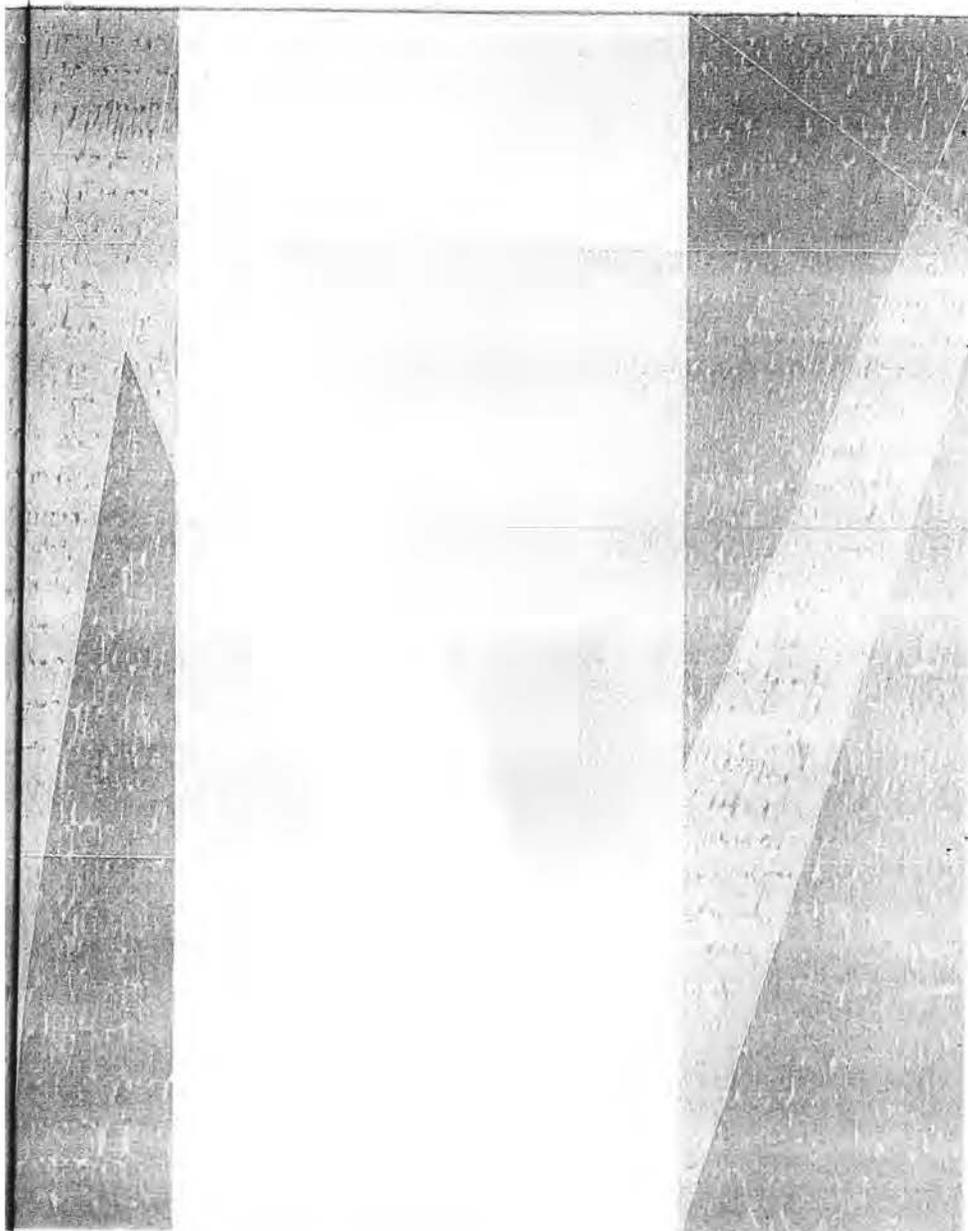
Diptych for Wally, 1982, oil on canvas, 90 by 150 inches. Nancy Hoffman Gallery.

my concern with idiosyncratic expression. This perhaps is even the connection between my earlier work and my present work. But now my present work I see as entirely my own. I see no comparison with anyone else’s work—though some people would try to relate me to some younger painters for a variety of strange reasons. But then critics will always try to find that kind of association. They can’t imagine an artist working in his studio and just letting it become his world so completely that he doesn’t really give a damn about what goes on outside.

**SWK:** What about the outside world? Is it possible—or even desirable—for the artist to have a sympathetic relationship to it?

**JT:** Oh, I would have loved to have

lived in a time when the relationship between the artist and society was a natural one, a sympathetic one. I don’t find that to be true today, though. Sure, if I could be a master painter and influence the world I would be very happy to do that. But I just don’t see it. I think even in some cases where the world has read politics or sociology into modern paintings the tie was very largely invented. When I look at Picasso’s *Guernica* I see all the mythology—very largely erotic mythology—that he dealt with for years and years before the civil war in Spain. But I cannot very easily read *Guernica* as a social document. If it weren’t for the title, how many people could go into the museum, look at it, and read anything from it about the Spanish civil war? I doubt if



anybody could.

**SWK:** You've spoken before about striving for "self-completion." Do you feel that self-completion is a more appropriate goal for the artist than making a political or sociological statement?

**JT:** When I have spoken before about self-completion I was speaking in general terms about what sets an artist apart. And I was trying to say that I believe that most artists feel they are incomplete people—they look to their work for self-completion. Other people have put it differently. Some say they are looking for identity; it never occurred to me that way. What did occur to me was that my work gave me a sense of being which otherwise I couldn't have. And as a matter of fact,

it's still true that if I don't work for a period of time I become lost, disoriented. I need to work in order to be *connected*. In fact, the words "to be" are the important ones. "To work" is "to be."

Outside of art the equivalence of working and being does not exist to the same degree. I'm surrounded by people who do all kinds of work; I would be deprived if I were not. And these are very, very decent people, but I don't feel that their work is related to their being in the same way that mine is. They can work and get satisfaction from doing their work well—like any human being. I especially feel that way about people doing manual work; a good carpenter or mason comes very close to feeling the sense of being that

an artist feels. But I think that most people more or less have to separate their being and their work: being exists somewhere outside work. I find that very little outside my work has importance for me.

**SWK:** Does that intensity of focus tend to cut you off from the world? I know you once wrote that "the feeling that I am an alien in the world persists with me to this day." Is this what you had in mind?

**JT:** When I said that, I really had two things in mind. First, I am Jewish, and how pleasant can it be for me to read T.S. Eliot and find him so bloody anti-Semitic? Or to read Pound and find the same thing in him? Or to have known Cummings and to have read some of his very stupid anti-Jewish things? So that's part of it.

The other thing is that in a sense, as an artist, you *are* an alien. I mean by that: how much of what is absolutely central to our culture concerns art? How much in spite of the museums, in spite of the art schools? When you take a look at American life, how much of it is really influenced by art? Collectors use their paintings as decoration. As cultural preening. They have paintings; they have books. But how much do those acquisitions contribute to their idea of life? To some ideal of what a human being ought to be?

Millions of things influence American life more than art. Pick up a copy of the *New York Times* and take a look at its ads, and you get an idea about what influences life. Art is not a genuine factor in most people's lives.

**SWK:** These feelings must surely affect how you view yourself in the role of artist. And the world's reaction to you in that role.

**JT:** The word "artist" has become a very odd word for most people. While I feel comfortable with the idea of *being* an artist, all my life I have almost wanted to avoid saying that I am one. Even now, if I have to fill out a form which requests my occupation, I will put down "painter," leaving whomever reads it to guess what kind of painter. The world doesn't really know what to think about those who call themselves artists.

I am bitterly aware that my life coincides with one of the most brutal centuries in history. I'm bitterly aware how helpless art has been in affecting a true civilization. What we call civilization today is more like a terminal disease.

Author: Steven W. Kroeter is an associate editor of *The Paris Review*.