

# "THE IRASCIBLES": A SPLIT SECOND IN ART HISTORY

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*I think there's a certain myth about [the Abstract Expressionists] being a group. There was never any group . . . We didn't know each other. We were all separated. All we knew was that we were isolated, alienated, and nobodies. We didn't count in the art scene at the beginning. However, by 1945, '46, there suddenly seemed to be an awareness that something new was happening . . . certain dealers became interested in showing this work. And, well, it didn't really sell; there was no market at all . . . [The Irascibles' protest was] the one and only time we acted as a group. Otherwise, there was no sense of solidarity; there was no ideology. If there was any sense of solidarity, it was just out of a sense of mutual self-protection, like everybody else was against us, so we had to stick together a little bit.*

—Adolph Gottlieb (unpublished interview—May, 1968—with Andrew Hudson)

**B**y far the most famous photograph of the then emerging New York School of abstract painters was taken by *Life* staff photographer Nina Leen in November, 1950 (Fig. 1). It appeared in the January 15, 1951 issue, occupying almost a full page, over the caption "IRASCIBLE GROUP OF ADVANCED ARTISTS LED FIGHT AGAINST SHOW," facing the major article itself, headed "THE METROPOLITAN AND MODERN ART," sub-headed "AMID BRICKBATS AND BOUQUETS THE MUSEUM HOLDS ITS FIRST U.S. PAINTING COMPETITION." The caption and the headlines tell part of the story, the short text tells a little more, and the pictures, extending over five pages, tell the most.

*Life* was, after all, a picture magazine. What we see is Leen's large black-and-white collective portrait of fifteen American abstract painters projecting sadness, grimness, anger, and anxiety as they confront eight color-reproductions of paintings in the museum competition, including the four which received prizes from a conservative national Jury of Awards, acting on the recommendations of equally conservative regional juries: First prize, \$3,500, to Karl Knaths' *Basket Bouquet*, a competent, if belatedly cubistic, still life of lilacs in a basket. Second prize, \$2,500, to Rico Lebrun's *Centurion's Horse*, also competent, also belatedly cubistic, and, in this case, extremely derivative of Picasso's *Guernica*. Third prize, \$1,500, to Yasuo Kuniyoshi's *Fish Kite*, a romantic, vaguely surrealistic painting of a huge red paper fish being carried by a young Japanese woman in a July Fourth celebration (so soon after the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II). Fourth prize, \$1,000, to Joseph Hirsch's *Nine Men*, a realistic portrait of blue-collar workers washing up after a shift, seen by the artist as if from within the mirror behind a long trough-like basin. These paintings, better and, except for Hirsch's, more advanced than most in the competition (761 accepted by the regional juries, 307 exhibited at the Metropolitan), are comparatively conventional in subject matter and style, modest in ambition and scale—in short, only academically "modern."

The Leen photograph, though conventional too and journalistic rather than artistic (i.e., important historically, rather than aesthetically), is more interesting, intense, and complex than the kind of painting to which its collective subject is opposed. We don't see the work then being done by the Irascibles—the monumental, post-Cubist, post-Surrealist paintings of Pollock, Still, Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt, de Kooning, Motherwell, Tomlin, etc.—but we feel the monumentality of the group as a sort of random mound; a loose, ravaged pyramid in which every part is separately visible and assertive. Despite their subsequent labels as Abstract Expressionists, Action Painters, and so forth, this is a picture of a group that never was a group, a picture of fifteen individuals, unified only by the click of a camera at a particular time and place.

But such a moment, like any other, has a history.

I could go back to the birth dates of the oldest artists in the picture: Gottlieb and Rothko, both born in 1903. Or to the birth date of the oldest artist invited to be in it but away at the time: Hans Hofmann, born 1880, a year before Picasso. Or to that of Matisse, born 1869. Or Cézanne, born 1839. Or Manet, born 1832. Or Ingres, born 1780. Or . . . but eventually, in defiance of photography and stopped time, I would arrive at the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux.

Instead, I'll start with the "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35

(1950)" which, too, has its history, as described by the painter Robert Goodnough in his introduction to a partial transcription of those sessions in *Modern Artists in America, No. 1*, edited by Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt and published, in 1951, by Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc. (alas, after the death in a plane crash of Heinz Schultz, the more enthusiastically non-commercial of the publisher partners, there never was a No. 2):

In the late fall of 1948, three abstract painters, William Baziotes, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and an abstract sculptor, David Hare, began a small cooperative school in Greenwich Village in New York City; somewhat later, they were joined by another abstract painter, Barnett Newman. In the interest of introducing the students to as wide an experience as possible, other advanced artists, one by one, were invited to speak to the students on Friday evenings. The Friday evenings were open to the general public, and quickly became a physical place for everyone interested in advanced art in the United States to meet; the audiences averaged about 150 persons, all that the loft on Eighth Street that housed the school could hold.

For various reasons, the artists who founded the school, which was called "Subjects of the Artist" (in order to emphasize that abstract art, too, has a subject, and that the "curriculum" consisted of the subjects that interest advanced artists), were unable to continue the school after the end of the year, in May, 1949. In the fall, several teachers in the New York University school of art education, Robert Iglehard, Hale Woodruff and Tony Smith, privately took over the loft and continued the Friday evenings, though not the school; it became known as "Studio 35" after the address, 35 East Eighth Street; the Friday evenings were continued until April, 1950.

Among the artists who lectured to a faithful and somewhat unvarying public during the two seasons, 1948-49 and 1949-50, were Arp, Baziotes, Jimmy Ernst, Ferber, Glarner, Gottlieb, Holtzman, Kees, de Kooning, Motherwell, Newman, Reinhardt, and Rothko; Joseph Cornell gave several evenings from his fabulous collection of very early films; John Cage, the composer, Nicolas Calas, the poet, and art critic Richard Hulsenbeck, onetime dadaist and now psychoanalyst, Monsieur Levesque, a student of dada, and Harold Rosenberg, the poet and critic, were among the others who addressed the Friday evenings. Many acquaintanceships and friendships grew up among the artists as a result of these meetings, which tended to become repetitious at the end, partly because of the public asking the same questions at each meeting. To sum up the meetings, on the suggestion of Robert Goodnough, a graduate student in the N.Y.U. school of art education, who had been helping his instructors with the meetings of the second season, it was decided to have a closed, three-day session among the advanced artists themselves, with the dialogue taken down stenographically. There was no preliminary discussion of what was to be said; nothing was arranged but the dates, Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons, 4 to 7 p.m., April 21-23, 1950.

Among the dozens of advanced artists asked to participate, the following attended one or more sessions: William Baziotes, Janice Biala, Louise Bourgeois, James Brooks, William de Kooning, Jimmy Ernst, Herbert Ferber, Adolph Gottlieb, Peter Grippe, David Hare, Hans Hofmann, Weldon Kees, Ibram Lassaw, Norman Lewis, Richard Lippold, Seymour Lipton, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Richard Pousette-Dart, Ad Reinhardt, Ralph Rosenborg, Theodoros Stamos, Hedda Sterne, David Smith and Bradley Walker Tomlin.

The moderators were Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (then Director of Museum Collections, Museum of Modern Art), the only non-artist participant and one of the most noted modern art scholars, Richard Lippold, the sculptor, and Robert Motherwell, the painter, who had acted as moderator throughout the first season of Friday evenings. Lippold tended to carry the principal burden of moderating the first day, Barr the second, and Motherwell the third; Barr was prevented from being present the first day, and from



The most famous image of the Abstract Expressionists, initially published in 1951, is a picture of a group that was never a group, a picture of fifteen individuals, unified only by the click of a camera at a particular time and place.

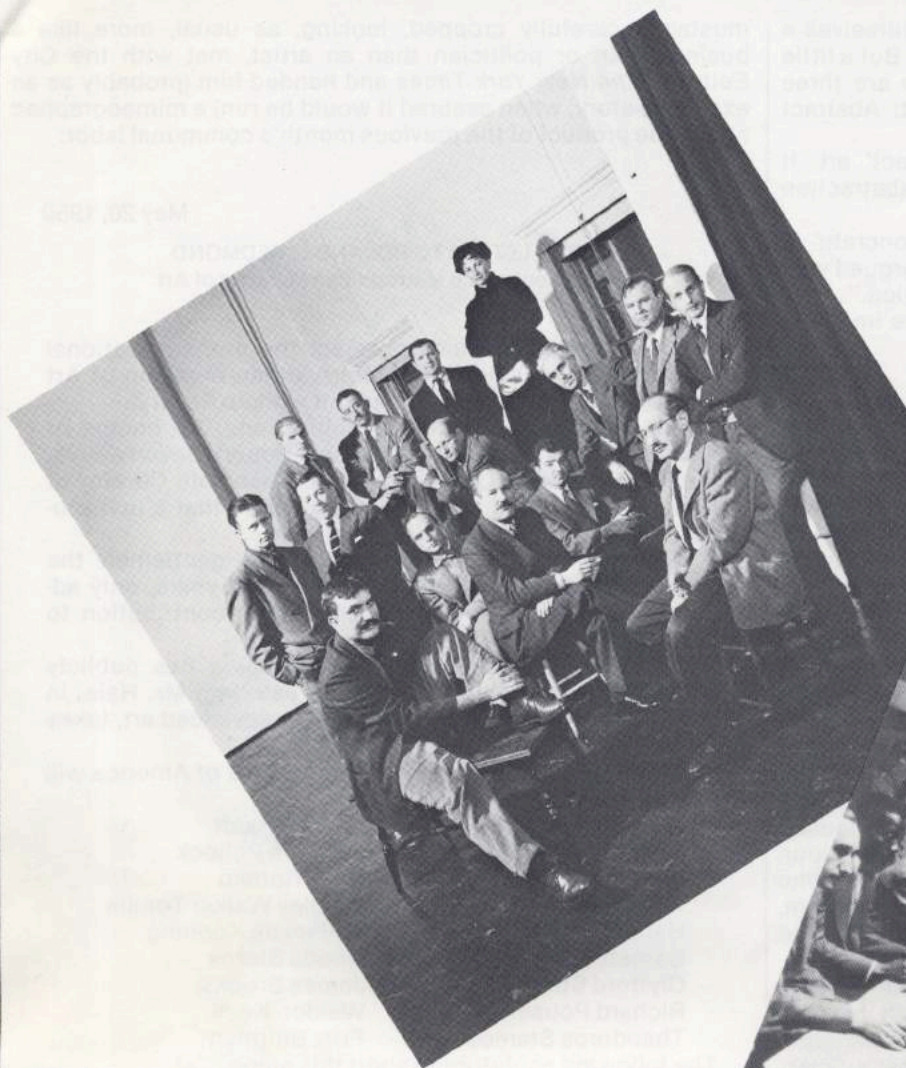


Fig. 1. "The Irascibles," photographed by Nina Leen in November 1950 and published in *Life*, January 15, 1951. From left, rear: Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne; (next row) Richard Pousette-Dart, William Bazilio, Jimmy Ernst (with bowtie), William Pollock (in striped jacket), James Brooks, Clifford Still (leaning on knee), Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin; (in foreground) Theodoros Stamos (on stool), Barnett Newman (on stool), Mark Rothko (with glasses). Photograph Nina Leen, *Life Magazine*, © 1950 Time Inc.



Fig. 2. One of the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (April 21-23, 1950). Upper photograph, left to right: Lipton, Lewis, Ernst, Grippe, Gottlieb, Hofmann, Barr, Motherwell, Lippold, de Kooning, Lassaw, Brooks, Reinhardt, Pousette-Dart. Bottom photograph, l. to r.: Brooks, Reinhardt, Pousette-Dart, Bourgeois, Ferber, Tomlin, Biala, Goodnough, Sterne, Hare, Newman, Lipton, Lewis, Ernst. Photograph Max Yavno.

the first half of the final day.

The meetings were arranged by Robert Goodnough, who has drastically edited the following text (perhaps half) of the original transcript of the proceedings; a few of the artists have made some corrections of what they said; but on the whole, this text retains the spontaneity, the unpreparedness, the rises and falls of intensity and pointedness of the meetings themselves; though a certain pathos and loneliness appears from time to time, that was not as evident at the time of the meetings as it is on reading the original text.

Toward the end of the last session, Barr reiterated a theme that had come up often during the three afternoons. He asked: "What is the most acceptable name for our direction or movement? It has been called Abstract Expressionist, Abstract Symbolist, Intra-subjectivist, etc."

David Smith: "I don't think we do have unity on the name."

Rosenborg: "We should have a name through the years."

Smith: "Names are usually given to groups by people who don't understand them or don't like them."

Barr: "We should have a name for which we can blame the artists—for once in history!"



Motherwell: "Even if there is any way of giving ourselves a name, we will still all be called abstract artists . . ." But a little later: "In relation to the question of a name, here are three names: Abstract Expressionist; Abstract Symbolist; Abstract Objectivist."

Brooks: "A more accurate name would be 'direct' art. It doesn't sound very good, but in terms of meaning, abstraction is involved in it."

Tomlin: "Brooks also remarked that the word 'concrete' is meaningful; it must be pointed out that people have argued very strongly for that word. 'Nonobjective' is a vile translation."

Newman: "I would offer 'self-evident' because the image is concrete."

De Kooning: "It is disastrous to name ourselves."

And there, as edited by Goodnough, the final session ended. Not until it was breaking up did Adolph Gottlieb suggest that the artists should protest the competition being sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum to which several of them, including Gottlieb, had been invited (with entry blanks due by July 1, 1950). Informal, unrecorded conversation about the method of protest followed, and the idea evolved of a public letter to the president of the Metropolitan.

Gottlieb took charge. From the mid-Thirties on he had been an organizer and/or founding member of various artists' groups. In 1943 he, with Mark Rothko, had published a letter protesting *The New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell's conservatism and lack of "globalism." From the mid-Forties on, always advocating the cause of advanced art, he had participated in major art forums. In short, of all the artists present he was probably the most experienced in art-world politics. However, if he needed help in drafting the letter, there was plenty of articulate talent available—particularly Kees, a professional poet, journalist, and photographer as well as painter; Motherwell, who had been editing *The Documents of Modern Art* for Wittenborn, Schultz; and the brilliant, witty polemicists Newman and Reinhardt.

From April 23 until almost exactly a month later Gottlieb worked intermittently on the letter, consulting with his colleagues in person, by phone, by mail, and by telegraph. (Newman and Reinhardt seem to have made the most suggestions.)

In addition to fourteen painters who were at the Studio 35 Sessions and supported Gottlieb's intention, four names were added: Fritz Bultman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. And to seven sympathetic sculptors there, three were added: Mary Callery, Theodore Roszak, and Day Schnabel. Twenty-eight artists in all. It is easy to imagine the time consumed simply in reaching them and, moreover, in reaching agreement between them, especially those who, like Gottlieb himself, measured the weight of each word in what turned out to be a comparatively short letter, not much longer than the list of signatures.

Gottlieb drafted the letter by hand (the draft remains in his files), had it typed, and finally, when the wording was agreed upon, had it mimeographed and sent or gave it to the artists for signature or written approval. Most of them signed a single sheet in person. Others turned in executed copies of their own mimeographed sheets. Pollock—the most famous of "the group," because of his prominence in *Life's* (Oct. 11, 1948) "Round Table on Modern Art" and then, stemming from it, this publication's (Aug. 8, 1949) "Jackson Pollock/Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?"—sent a telegram to Gottlieb from East Hampton, May 17: "I ENDORSED THE LETTER OPPOSING THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART 1950 JURIED SHOW."

Now Barnett Newman takes over. In 1933 he had run for mayor (against La Guardia, McKee, and O'Brien) on a ticket which A.J. Liebling wrote was based on the feeling "that the forces of self-expression should express themselves by the ballot." Or, as Newman, dissatisfied with the alternatives, announced more tersely, "I'll vote for myself!" Though he lost the election, seventeen years later he still knew his way to the City Desk, and he knew enough to choose a quiet day to go there. He waited at least one day.

On Sunday, May 21, despite the year's record high temperature of 80 degrees, Newman, wearing conservative suit, white shirt, and dark tie, his thin hair brushed down, his large

mustache carefully cropped, looking, as usual, more like a businessman or politician than an artist, met with the City Editor at *The New York Times* and handed him (probably as an exclusive story, when assured it would be run) a mimeographed sheet, the product of the previous month's communal labor:

May 20, 1950

OPEN LETTER TO ROLAND L. REDMOND  
President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Dear Sir:

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

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

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

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

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

Jimmy Ernst	Ad Reinhardt
Adolph Gottlieb	Jackson Pollock
Robert Motherwell	Mark Rothko
William Baziot	Bradley Walker Tomlin
Hans Hofmann	Willem de Kooning
Barnett Newman	Hedda Sterne
Clyfford Still	James Brooks
Richard Pousette-Dart	Weldon Kees
Theodoros Stamos	Fritz Bultman

The following sculptors support this stand.

Herbert Ferber	Seymour Lipton
David Smith	Peter Grippe
Ibram Lassaw	Theodore Roszak
Mary Callery	David Hare
Day Schnabel	Louise Bourgeois

Newman's timing was perfect. There were no very big stories on the front page of Monday's *Times*: ADENAUER IN FAVOR OF A UNITED EUROPE . . . QUAKE ROCKS OLD INCA CITY; CUZCO, PERU . . . BRITISH LABOR SETS 'MODERATE' POLICY . . . BARKLEY HINTS ARMY MAY RULE NEW LANDS . . . 60 NEW EXPLOSIONS IN PHOSPHOROUS FIRE ALARM AMBOY AREA . . . CAR LIABILITY COST UP 15% HERE TODAY . . . MERCURY REACHES 80 . . . and at the bottom of the page (continuing to page 15): 18 PAINTERS BOYCOTT METROPOLITAN; CHARGE 'HOSTILITY TO ADVANCED ART'.

The letter is summarized, with some direct quotations, accompanied by lists, in their arbitrary order, of the artists who signed it. Newman explains that "he and his colleagues were critical of the membership of all five regional juries established for the exhibition but were specifically opposed to the New York group [Burchfield, Kroll, Kuniyoshi, Pleissner, Sample, Vytlačil], the National Jury of Selection [Chapin, Cook, Dodd, Hale, Pleissner, Sepeshy, Sheets, Maurice Sterne, Williams], and the Jury of Awards [Milliken, Speicher, Watkins]." The story ends: "Mr. Redmond is in Europe and could not be reached for comment. Both Mr. Taylor and Mr. Hale said they preferred not to comment until they had seen the letter."

Monday morning, at the museum, they may have prepared their reply, but it never ran in the *Times*. What appeared instead was an unsigned editorial—"The Irascible Eighteen"—published Tuesday, May 23 in the *Herald Tribune*, which had been scooped on the original story. It was almost certainly written by this paper's art critic Emily Genauer, though she has no recollection of having written it and insists that, if she did, she would not have used facts obtained from the Metropolitan but would have relied on her own voluminous files, including art catalogues. Furthermore, she is certain that the title is not hers





Fig. 3. Contact print of twelve photographs taken by Nina Leen for *Life* in November 1950, of which the third in the first series of eight was ultimately used and the fourth in the second series of four was considered as an alternate. Photograph Nina Leen, *Life Magazine*, © 1950 Time Inc.



and must have been added by the editorial board of the *Herald Tribune*, which would have based it on the use of the noun "irascibility" in the text. In any case, immediately after the *Times* story appeared, Genauer did call Jimmy Ernst, thinking that because his name was listed first among the signers of the letter, he had written it. "Was it a publicity stunt?" she asked. He explained that he hadn't written the letter, that it was a communal effort, and that, like the other artists who had signed, he believed that the Metropolitan's policies and jury system were reactionary. His comments themselves may have annoyed Genauer as much as being scooped. The Metropolitan was an institution she respected, although she had attacked it on occasion in the past; the judges, though most of them are now forgotten, included artists she also respected, such as Burchfield, Kuniyoshi, and Watkins. Perhaps the composition of the editorial is mysterious—I think not—but here is the editorial itself:

#### The Irascible Eighteen

On the grounds of taste and policy there will always be room for honest disagreement. Distortion of fact, however, is an exasperating and destructive business.

Eighteen painters yesterday sent an open letter to the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art "rejecting" the national competition-exhibition of contemporary American painting which it will present next December, on the theory that the jury named by the museum is "notoriously hostile" to advanced art. There will be many, doubtless, who agree with them, although the fairness or wisdom of condemning a jury before it has even started to consider the evidence may be questioned.

But the eighteen painters, as well as the ten sculptors who supported their stand, went further. Although, generally speaking, they represent only one facet—and a highly controversial one—of the extremely diversified field of present-day American art, they accused the museum of "contempt" for modern painting. Yet works by no less than eleven of the twenty-eight signators are either owned by the Metropolitan or have been included in its exhibitions. Pictures by four of the eighteen painters were hung on the museum's walls only last month in an exhibition entitled "American Artists Under Thirty-six" (and most of the remaining signers would not have been eligible anyway because of their age). Three of the group have already been announced for inclusion in a large show of American art from the museum's permanent collection scheduled to open in June.

At best, creative artists have no easy time of things, and one grows so accustomed to their irascibility that were it to cease one might well fear for their vitality. For the artists to criticize a jury on principle is one thing. But surely misrepresentation—actual or implied—such as is incorporated in their highly publicized protest to the museum, can only harm their cause. In time, museum directors are apt to become so irritated with unjustified criticism they will develop a protective armor thick enough to render them immune not only to constant sniping but also to new ideas.

Gottlieb, Newman, Reinhardt, et al. immediately went to work on a reply to the *Herald Tribune* editorial. Again, it would seem that Gottlieb did most of the writing. Twelve of the painters and three of the sculptors signed an approval of the letter on May 24 in his studio (this form, too, remains in his files); the other artists were reached by phone. A copy of the final typed letter, with the twenty-eight signatories listed alphabetically this time, is from Newman's files:

May 25, 1950

Editor  
New York Herald Tribune  
230 West 41st St.  
New York, N.Y.

Sir:

The editorial called "The Irascible Eighteen" in the New York Herald Tribune, May 23, 1950, remarks, "were the artists to criticize a jury on principle is one thing, but surely

misrepresentation—actual or implied—such as is incorporated in their highly publicized protest to the Metropolitan Museum, can only harm their cause."

The undersigned artists are accused in this editorial of "misrepresenting" the Metropolitan Museum's hostility to advanced art, on the ground that eleven of the twenty-eight signatories' works "are either owned by the Metropolitan or have been included in its exhibitions." We would like to point out that works by those of us concerned were exhibited in the "Artists for Victory" show, organized not by the Metropolitan, but by a separate organization, Artists for Victory, Incorporated; or in the exhibition of the United States State Department's collection (at the exhibition of which the Metropolitan displayed a sign specifically rejecting responsibility for the choice of the works in the United States State Department Collection); or finally, in a show called "American Artists under thirty-six," from a collection of young artists' work chosen by, and reproduced in part by Life Magazine. It is incredible that the Metropolitan Museum could suggest that, in housing three exhibitions innovated by other organizations, it has displayed great sympathy for the small minority of advanced artists therein represented. It is true that, during the last seven years, the Metropolitan has purchased, among dozens of academic work[s], a few works from the undersigned group. It is equally incredible that this ought to be regarded as real recognition; it shows only that the prestige of advanced art is sufficient that a few examples of it will be tolerated by the Metropolitan. Perhaps it is not too much to insist that it is the editorial in the New York Herald Tribune (which was awfully quick to take the side of the Metropolitan), not the undersigned artists, that is misrepresenting the issue in the present case.

We now reiterate the point of our original open letter. . . . For further clarification we wish to say that our concern is not that any specific advanced artists could be excluded from the show, but that, because of its choice of jurors any representation of advanced art will be on the basis of masking the real politics of the Museum. For a hundred years there has been a sharp split between an "official" academic world of art and the world of advanced art. One has nothing to do with the other. [The alphabetical list of twenty-eight names follows.]

The reply speaks for itself now, though it was not published at the time by the *Herald Tribune* and has never, to my knowledge, been published there or anywhere else since. Understandably, this letter, like the previous one, focuses on the situation of "the advanced artists of America." It does not indicate just how backward the Metropolitan was even in regard to internationally accepted Post-Impressionists, Expressionists, Cubists, etc. However, Gottlieb, like his colleagues, was aware of this. For example, he had saved copies of a cycle of open letters, beginning more than a year earlier, to the Metropolitan from James N. Rosenberg, a wealthy lawyer and patron and friend of artists, who had given up the law to paint full-time. One brief quotation from Rosenberg's letter of January 7, 1949 is enough to make the Metropolitan's position clear:

. . . when we turn to "modern" paintings you do not own and possess a single example of the works of Seurat, Van Gogh, Matisse, Roualt, Soutine, Modigliani, De Segonzac, Friesz, Braque, Chirico, Orozco, Rivera, the new school of British painters, Kokoschka, Corinth, Chagall, Bonnard, Vlaminck, Utrillo. The only Picasso you own—the important Portrait of Gertrude Stein—came to you by her bequest and has been deposited by you with the Modern Museum . . .

The *Herald Tribune* did publish (June 2) a comparatively middle-of-the-road letter from the painter Peter Blume, who defended the fairness, sympathy, and integrity of the jurors but observed that "Fortunately museum directors are forced to follow where artists lead. All museums must recognize this at last." However, by then the story, based on the first letter of "The Irascibles" (i.e., the one before they were given this name), was being disseminated through news services and magazines.

Of course Weldon Kees did not have to wait for that. In the June 3 issue of *The Nation* (where he had succeeded Clement





Fig. 4. The best of the four alternate shots taken in the anteroom of Life's studio. Clockwise around perimeter: Still, Ernst, Motherwell, Gottlieb, de Kooning, Tomlin, Newman, Pollock, Brooks, Reinhardt, Sterne, and Stamos. Low in center, left to right: Rothko, Poussette-Dart, and Baziotes. Photograph Nina Leen, Life Magazine © 1950 Time Inc.



Fig. 5. Some of those involved with Forum 49 at the Gallery 200 in Provincetown. Left to right: Hans Hofmann, Karl Knaths, Weldon Kees, Cecil Hemley, and Fritz Bultman, of whom Hofmann, Kees, and Bultman are the three missing painters from the photograph of "The Irascibles." The photograph was taken at Gallery 200 in late June 1949 in front of paintings by Chermayeff, Knaths (three), Bultman, and Pollock, all probably painted in 1948, except for two of Knaths' done earlier.

Greenberg as art critic), Kees begins his column with a sympathetic review of Tomlin's current exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery and then devotes the rest of his space to the Metropolitan. He reminds his readers that the museum's Hearn Fund, "for purchasing work by living American artists, has been left in the vaults . . . and what little has been touched has been spent for paintings that might as well have been chosen by a committee of Congressmen or the ladies of the Elkhart Bide-a-Wee." He attacks the philistinism of Francis Henry Taylor, who compared *Guernica* to *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and remarked that Picasso "only substituted Gertrude Stein for Florence Nightingale." He goes on to laud Rosenberg's open letters and to criticize the Metropolitan's jurors. "It has been suggested that this jury 'may surprise us' by picking an adventurous and valuable show. I look forward to this with the same

warm expectations that I have of the American Legion building a series of marble shrines honoring the memory of Randolph Bourne or of Baudelaire being voted the favorite poet of the Cicero, Illinois junior high schools." Finally, Kees quotes in its entirety the artists' original letter, which he "was pleased to sign."

Though thorough and detailed, Kees' column was obviously partisan and aimed at the small readership of a liberal journal. A very much larger audience would be reached by *Time* (June 5). The popular news weekly—as always, attempting or pretending olympian editorial detachment—makes the protest its lead article in the art section. At the top of the page, abstract paintings by Baziotes, Reinhardt, and Hofmann are reproduced. The text begins with excerpts from the letter. Then it quotes Hofmann, "the dean of the protesting group": ". . . At the time of making a



picture, I want not to know what I am doing; a picture should be made with feeling, not with knowing. . . ." And then Reinhardt, "among the most vocal of the signers": "Anyone who would sit down to paint grass today is just an illustrator. . . ." And finally Francis Henry Taylor, the Metropolitan's "witty director": "Instead of soaring like an eagle through the heavens as did his ancestors and looking down triumphantly upon the world beneath, the contemporary artist has been reduced to the status of a flat-chested pelican, strutting upon the intellectual wastelands and beaches, content to take whatever nourishment he can from his own too meager breast."

The stage is set for the still larger spread in *Time's* sister publication, *Life*. Soon after the *Time* article appeared, *Life* began planning its picture story for sometime after December 5, when the winners of the Metropolitan competition would be announced. Until well into November there were many calls back and forth between Dorothy Seiberling, an art editor at *Life* to whom the story had been assigned, and Gottlieb, who conferred frequently with Newman and with Tomlin when necessary to have him act as arbitrator between themselves and between them and the other painters. Most of the calls were about *Life's* need for a photograph of "The Irascible Eighteen."

At the Studio 35 Sessions, Max Yavno had taken some candid shots. The two best known of these (Fig. 2) show the opposite ends of the makeshift conference table—dominated by bottles of beer and plates of pretzels, cheese and crackers—at which twenty-two participants sit; six of them, near the center of the table, duplicated; others, particularly at the extreme ends, obscured. This pair of photographs is certainly not up to *Life's* standard, and besides, only eleven of these participants are "Irascibles."

Gottlieb tells the next part of the story (in his unpublished interview with Hudson): "[*Life*] wanted us to come to the steps of the Metropolitan Museum with paintings under our arms and to stand there and be photographed. So we said, we don't mind being photographed, but we're not going to be photographed that way, under those circumstances, because that would look as if we were trying to get into the Metropolitan and we were being turned down on the steps. So they said, well, how would you like to be photographed? And we said, well, just hire a studio and take a photograph of us, that's all—in neutral territory, not on the Metropolitan steps. So they were very surprised at this, because nobody refuses anything to *Life* magazine." Barnett Newman's widow, Annalee, remembers even more specifically that "Barney kept insisting the group be photographed *like bankers*." And Stamos recalls that the thing everyone feared most was being ridiculed.

*Life* didn't have to hire a studio. It had one on 44th Street, just west of Sixth Avenue, near the Blue Ribbon, a German restaurant, since torn down. Based on vague recollections, it was probably at this restaurant that fourteen of "The Irascibles" met soon after the lunch-hour rush on the afternoon of November 24. Brooks and Pollock took the train in from East Hampton and arrived early. Hedda Sterne arrived late and went directly to the studio. Bultman was in Rome, where he stayed until Christmas. Kees had gone to San Francisco, where he subsequently settled for the remainder of his short, brilliant life (in 1955 he abandoned his car on the approach to the Golden Gate Bridge and probably jumped from it, though his body has never been recovered). And Hofmann had remained in Provincetown, Massachusetts, from which he sent a telegram to Newman: "SORRY NOT TO BE WITH YOU ALL ON THE FOTO. WITH MY SYMPATHY FOR OUR CAUSE."

The fourteen men at the restaurant—all wearing shirts and ties; Newman, Reinhardt, and Still wearing dark suits, "like bankers"; the others wearing lighter suits or sports jackets—proceed to the studio where Hedda Sterne, in an elegant cloth coat, joins them and Nina Leen awaits them. Leen's name is punningly appropriate. She is slight, bony, birdlike, with a fair complexion, bright eyes, and an efficient manner, more Germanic than Slavic, though she was born in Russia. She knows that with a group this size she must work fast before her subjects become impatient, tired, or uninterested. She leads them from the low-ceilinged anteroom to the double-height studio. There, offering them a bench and a few stools and chairs, she tells them to place themselves. Newman wisecracks, "How do

you want us to sit—according to our voices?" Leen tells him and the rest to sit wherever they want. Newman chooses a low stool, front and center. Stamos (the youngest artist there) and Rothko (one of the two eldest) flank him. Pollock places a higher stool behind Newman. Reinhardt stands behind Pollock. Perhaps, momentarily, there is further jockeying for position, but the structure for this picture is already established.

Looking at the artists through the view-finder of her Rolleiflex, Leen begins to refine the composition. With the vertical shape of a *Life* page in mind, she has Sterne stand on a stool, and she asks those on the outside to move in closer. Others are told to move or turn slightly so that no one is blocked. Lighting is adjusted. The first picture is snapped.

Leen now does most of the moving. In eight shots (Fig. 3), the basic composition is unchanged. Then she finishes the roll (four more shots—again, Fig. 3) in the anteroom. There, except for Stamos, who maintains a prominent foreground position, the artists rearrange themselves in a different and very much less formal composition.

The entire session took about an hour, though several of the artists experienced it as being longer. Motherwell said recently, "If some of us look angry, the anger was probably at the photographer."

On November 28, Leen turned in the entire take of twelve photographs. Sometime in December, soon after the Metropolitan prizes had been awarded, the selection of her photographs was narrowed to two, depending on final layout: the third in the first series, which was ultimately used, and the fourth in the second series (Fig. 4).

No single photograph can define the Abstract Expressionists, any more than can that label itself. Leen's comes closest, but I want at least to add Bultman, Hofmann, and Kees. It would be convenient if there were a photograph of just the three of them, but the nearest I can come is a picture of them with Knaths and the poet (later a publisher) Cecil Hemley (Fig. 5). It was taken in the summer of 1949 at 200 Commercial Street, near the center of Provincetown, in a garage turned into a gallery/lecture hall where these artists and Gottlieb, among others, ran Forum 49, a series of evenings similar in cultural breadth to those begun the previous year at Subjects of the Artist (and similar also to those which would continue in New York at The Club from that year until 1962 and in East Hampton at the Signa Gallery from 1957 to 1960).

Split seconds accumulate. I look again at Goodnough's introduction to the "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35." Among the painters who attended, why weren't Janice Biala, Norman Lewis, and Ralph Rosenborg asked to sign the letter? Or, if they were, why didn't they? No one remembers. I flip through the subsequent *Modern Artists in America* illustrations from the 1949-50 season and wonder, too, why such free, spontaneous abstractionists as Tobey, McNeil, Cavallon, Kamrowski, Diebenkorn, Kline, Guston, Bischof, Parker, Vincente, and perhaps half a dozen others weren't asked to sign. No one remembers. There is an installation shot of five magnificent late paintings by Gorky. . . . But in this case a reason exists for his exclusion. The paintings are in a memorial show at Kootz Gallery (March 1950); in July of 1948 he had hanged himself, the first of several suicides among this generation of American painters.

Split seconds have a future as well as a past. No group photograph of the Abstract Expressionists has been as widely reproduced as Leen's. Among other places, it has been used as a major illustration in the catalogue of Motherwell's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (1965), Reinhardt's at the Jewish Museum (1966), in Irving Sandler's *Triumph of American Painting* (1970), and in my own *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (1972). But Reinhardt uses the photograph best. In the Jewish Museum catalogue his image is clear and isolated in a square of light, the other artists partially obscured by a benday screen. This, it seems to me, is the way in which each face in this famous photograph must be looked at—and then beyond these individual faces to the many which are missing, and beyond them all to the paintings of this single moment, which still haven't been studied carefully enough and can't be reduced to a short, official list.