ANYONE BUT BUSH?
The Unbearable Lightness of Liberal Politics
Michael Lerner  Katrina vanden Heuvel  Douglas Rushkoff

LAW AND HIERARCHY
PETER GABEL

SPECIAL ISSUE
CULTURAL ALIGNMENTS
MARGOT DUXLER

SPIRITUAL BALANCE
SHEILA PELTZ WEINBERG

ZIONISM AND OCCUPATION
STEPHEN ZUNES

The Passion of Jesus ... Stop Blaming the Jews!
JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN  JAMES CARROLL
Bram Dijkstra's latest book should be compulsory reading for all red-diaper babies and fellow travelers—for all those, in short, whose intellectual, cultural, and social roots can be traced to the Depression and the mass movements of the 1930s and 1940s. Dijkstra plucks out of the dung-heap of history a body of paintings that captures the sweep and tensions of that period more effectively than any written text—a time when dissent and critical inquiry were lauded as consistent with First Amendment rights and when belonging to the Communist Party could be trendy and not necessarily branded with the Mark of Cain. The visual examples he dredges up from the swampland of cultural and historical neglect shed light on a wide range of interconnected political and sociological issues critical for an understanding of twentieth-century American history.

Dijkstra's title, American Expressionism, is designed to turn traditional art criticism of this era on its head. The artists Dijkstra studies are more typically described as "social realists" or "surrealists," and dismissed as the impoverished siblings of the avant-gardist Abstract Expressionist movement, which has dominated critical thinking about the period. Yet, as Dijkstra points out, both movements of the era agreed upon the principle of "Expressionism," a term invented during that era to dialectically oppose the nineteenth century's Impressionism. Early twentieth-century expressionist artists embraced a proactive approach to painting in opposition to the passivity implied by the impressionists. Artists strove for a "freedom of expression" in the liberation of the brush technique, the freedom to exaggerate what the eye espies in nature. Daringly grouping both realists and surrealists under this rubric, Dijkstra limns as expressionists all those who not only exaggerated natural forms, their spatial relations, and colors but who mainly bent, twisted, pulled, and stretched their figurative elements until, even as they approached the brink of formlessness, they yielded something of the pain of everyday life. It is as if these artists work to reveal all the contortions and uncontrollability of the society whose inconsistencies they sought to disclose.

Where the "social realists" and "surrealists" differed from their Abstract Expressionist counterparts was not so much in technique as in content. As the name implies, Abstract Expressionist work had little recognizable content, especially as first generation artists like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline moved into their mature work. The "American Expressionists," in contrast, clearly (if exuberantly) depicted the world in which they lived.

The "American Expressionists" clearly (if exuberantly) depicted the world in which they lived.

Albert Boime is professor of Art History at UCLA and is currently writing a multi-volume social history of modern art. Volume 3, Art in an Age of Counterrevolution, 1815-1848, will appear this spring.
allied with the Regionalists, who mocked the alien-sounding names of the social expressionists and their work as hopelessly un-American.

Being Left and Jewish meant engagement with an ideological stand that promised to rid society of the scourge of racism and discrimination in all its ugly forms. Meanwhile, the artists, like American Jewish intellectuals generally, preferred to think of themselves as “internationalists” rather than call attention to themselves as Jews, creators of a brand new secular world of Enlightenment universalism.

In fact, these “American Expressionist” artists thought of themselves, and were understood by their contemporaries, to be authentic modernists. That is not, however, how they were understood by a later generation of critics, led by Clement Greenberg, who categorized their art as a naïve throwback to nineteenth-century figures as opposed to the avant-gardeism of the Abstract Expressionists. Even members of the political Left have often seen themselves allied with the work of the trendy avant-gardists (and more recently postmodernists), thus reinforcing the systematic bias of mainstream cultural institutions.

Dijkstra probably strays off the mark near the end of his book when he particularly excoriates the Jewish postwar critics and artists who rejected the social expressionists in favor of the avant-garde. He rightfully sees irony in the fact that critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were mainly assimilationist Jews bent on rejecting their cultural and religious heritage and establishing themselves as “sophisticated intellectuals.” Dijkstra sees these critics as the gatekeepers of the new American high art, serving up a “third way” besides Zionism and leftist politics and argues that their new cultural elitism led them to denounce the predominantly Jewish socially conscious artists.

It is true that Greenberg deeply admired T.S. Eliot and shared many of the pretensions of the St. Louis-born British citizen to higher culture, but in the end neither Greenberg nor any other Jewish critic should be pigeonholed because of their ethnic origins. While the phenomenon of Jewish assimilation in the mid-twentieth century is certainly of interest, it is also worthy of note that Greenberg never changed his name and served as managing editor of Contemporary Jewish Record from late 1944 through the last issue in June 1945 and as associate editor of Commentary from November 1945 until 1957.

It’s also unfair to suggest, as Dijkstra does, that these pro-avant-garde critics contributed to the Cold War climate of hostility towards artists like William Gropper, since the same bigots who ran the House Un-American Activities Committee were also those who perceived Abstract Expressionism as Bolshevist. Despite recent disclosures of CIA involvement in the promotion of Abstract Expressionism abroad, those who hauled Gropper over the coals for his work for the New Masses, Daily Worker and Morgen Freiheit would have preferred his style any day to that of the Abstract Expressionists. Here it’s less a question of the artists’ Jewishness than their ideological affiliation. Jewish abstractionists like Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman also entertained utopian visions of a more inclusive American society in the postwar delirium of the
BOOK REVIEW

Anton Refregier (1905-1979), Guernica, 1937. Oil on panel.

1950s, creating imagery associated with a Sublime New World. They saw themselves as part of an emerging Golden Age in which society, purged of its disruptive political elements on both the Right and the Left, would start life afresh as a classless republic. That another agenda unfolding in the American imperium led to the appropriation of their work for Cold War propaganda should be understood as one component of a larger constellation of forces that declared the American Century.

In fact, the irony is that Abstract Expressionism actually shares many of the qualities of social expressionism except for the absence of recognizable subject matter that can be immediately translated into socially redeemable ideas. Almost all of the artists of the first generation of Abstract Expressionism shared the lifestyle and politics of their more literal-minded colleagues, and even did work in the Thirties and early Forties that in mood and theme approximated their production. The space-bending and figurative malformations of their paintings were justified on the grounds that they conveyed exceptional states and abnormal social and political phenomena. Artists viewed their nascent abstractions through the lens of events like Hiroshima or geographical spaces like the American West and natural phenomena like stormy skies and blazing red suns. Indeed, the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War might have been lost to history if not for Picasso’s notable masterpiece, future abstractionist Philip Guston’s terrifying Bombardment (see page 79) and the social surrealist Anton Refregier’s Guernica (above).

Dijkstra’s contribution not only fills a major gap in the historical record by resurrecting the currently unfashionable social realists, but also in the process conveys in a broad range of imagery the capacity for dissent through visual expression. Admittedly, it takes courage to embrace the figurative, socially conscious artists of the Depression era, who have been so stigmatized that they now are almost universally shunned. Yet these artists walked the walk between individual fulfillment and social responsibility, tapping into modernist ideals to reach the goal of peacefully changing American society by contributing to ending American capitalism through revelation of its contradictions in stark images of breadlines, strikes, lynchings, and homelessness and now and then the projection of a new social order.

Their contribution as record-keepers of these visions of a brighter future, the flagrant contradictions of capitalism, and the awesome threat of fascism remind us that all events are mediated through representation in one form or another. Every effective politician knows the power of images and how to manipulate them, and politicians are among the first to attack artists who probe beyond the envelope and force the public to reexamine entrenched assumptions. Who can forget the violent controversy over the National Endowment for the Arts—all about politics but displaced to issues of pornography and family values? While we as a society pride ourselves on freedom of artistic expression there are apparent limits, and although no member of Congress would dare state them a priori the constraints reveal themselves whenever an artist crosses the invisible line.

When will the country learn that those who care most deeply about it are often its severest critics? Artists most often are those who expose the disconnect between national rhetoric and national reality, and at no time was this more evident than among the community brought to light by Dijkstra. Despite the dogma from the Right about the pitfalls of “propaganda” or “message” art, these painters sincerely believed that revolutionary aims would culminate in innovative art, and that even visual forms redolent with political purpose could be both relevant to social struggle and still attain to the status of high art. For them art was inseparable from the intense ideological conflicts generated by the crisis of American capitalism and from the heated debates over the shape of an alternative socialist future.