

Afterwards
Robert Slifkin

Avant-garde by definition is dated.
— Joan Mitchell¹

I. After Abstract Expressionism

Joan Mitchell's New York debut took place in 1951, during what many would consider to be the apogee of abstract expressionism, and her inclusion that spring in what came to be known as the "Ninth Street Show" placed her work alongside New York School luminaries such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Hans Hofmann. Nevertheless, because she was younger than these artists—and no doubt because she was a woman—she has long been associated with the so-called second generation of the movement. Being an apparent follower rather than an innovator was never a criterion of value in modernism, which generally celebrated unique instances of formal invention rather than sustained stylistic consistency; even the later work of undisputed originators was often marginalized when it no longer appeared to be at the cusp of what the critic Harold Rosenberg memorably called "the tradition of the new."²

Remarkably, Mitchell never seemed troubled by such paradigms of innovation for innovation's sake. In many ways, she embraced her status as a traditionalist (while nonetheless recognizing how the inclusion of women like herself within the modern tradition had important implications for the history of art and beyond). Throughout her long and prolific career, Mitchell sustained and expanded upon the legacy of gestural abstraction, seeking ways to invest it with a degree of consequence and coherence precisely at the moment when it seemed that its rhetoric of subjective expression had played out and become untenable.³

Mitchell's distinctly preservationist ambitions were drolly articulated by her friend Frank O'Hara in his inscription in Mitchell's copy of his book *Lunch Poems* (1964), in which he wrote, "To Joan, for saving Abstract Expressionism"; he then crossed out the last two words and added, "everything" (fig. 1). If this commitment to sustaining certain values associated with the New York School lent Mitchell's practice a degree of "conservatism," as she herself acknowledged in a 1957 *ARTnews* profile (see p. 8), it also freed her from the mythic—and arguably masculinist—fantasy that her creative practice and its attendant values were somehow generated *ex nihilo*, free from cultural constraints.⁴ In a 1986 interview, Mitchell agreed with Linda Nochlin that "second generation" was "a very boring term"; in another interview that same year, with Yves Michaud, she elaborated, "Lots of painters are obsessed with inventing something. When I was young it never occurred to me to invent."⁵ Unlike "classic" abstract expressionism's numerous ciphers of primacy—one can think of the overdetermined titles of Pollock's numerous *Number 1* paintings and Barnett Newman's *Onement, I* (1948)—Mitchell's art acknowledged and even embraced the inevitable repetition and sorts of delays that any creative act entails. Because art always appears within a matrix of conventions and traditions, even the most ostensibly unprecedented work still signals an array of antecedents and predecessors that compromises any claims of originality.

Indeed, the dynamics of repetition and belatedness—the way that art inevitably establishes precursors—were fundamental to Mitchell's artistic practice, in which memories, often of recollected landscapes, provided the impetus for her large-scale and oftentimes multipaneled abstractions. While the artist was adamant that her work did not depict specific locales, these intimations of the natural world evoke or suggest a referent (however incomplete and imaginary) somewhere and sometime prior to the painting. Just as memory coordinates remembered events within a temporal matrix so that past incidents are positioned anterior to the present moment, thus establishing a sense of historical perspective, Mitchell's unapologetically allusive abstractions

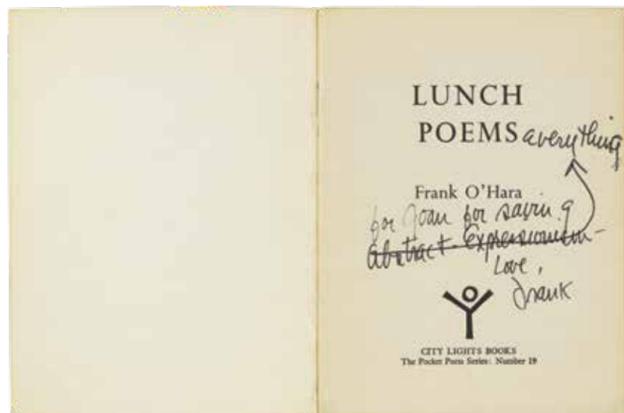


fig. 1
Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems*, 1964, inscribed to Mitchell

fig. 2
Hans Hofmann
Renate's Nantucket, 1965
Oil on canvas
60 × 72 inches
152.4 × 182.9 cm

fig. 3
Willem de Kooning
Excavation, 1950
Oil on canvas
81 × 100 1/4 inches
205.7 × 254.6 cm

summon realms of both time and space. The twists and turns of her brush, coupled with the subtle tonal gradations of her palette and often large-scale format of her canvases, create the effects of three-dimensional volume within an expansive spatial perspective, calling to mind material things in the world *beyond* and notably *before* the painting. In this regard, Mitchell's "belatedness" seems less obliged to her place within the genealogy of postwar painting than to her willingness to engage with reference and remembrance.

Despite the potent appeals to innovation and immediacy that have long been associated with modern art—and postwar American painting in particular—a necessary degree of retrospection was, in many ways, fundamental to modernist claims of formal innovation; indeed, certain critics recognized how the drive for originality was largely predicated on—and could only be recognized in comparison with—achievements from the recent past.⁶ Similarly, a certain amount of perceptual recall provided a critical underpinning for the more existentialist understanding of "action painting," in which viewers were asked to recreate and reimagine the creative decisions that lay behind the succession of gestural marks on the canvas. Thus in a work like Mitchell's *La Seine* (1967; see pp. 44–51), the bulbous fields of aquamarine and crimson that seem to hover within the atmospheric amalgamation of interlacing gestures can be seen as expanding upon the flat, brash fields of color in Hofmann's paintings (see fig. 2) and integrating de Kooning's gestural pyrotechnics (see fig. 3) and the "all over" composition exemplified by Pollock's drip paintings. Her work was also often seen as being in dialogue with earlier moments in modernism: while the ambiguous web of space presented in her paintings seemed to refer to the fractured planes of cubism, her evocations of shimmering, light-infused environments led some critics to label her work as a principal example of "abstract impressionism," a designation that was likely informed by MoMA's exhibition of one of Claude Monet's large-scale paintings of water lilies, which the museum acquired in 1956 (and which one critic claimed looked "like something hot out of a New York studio").⁷

And yet, because of the way that Mitchell's gestural brushstrokes emphasize the physical and dynamic application of paint—in *La Seine* and in so many other paintings—these art historical associations are constantly snapped back, so to speak, to the immediate moment of the work's creation and, as a corollary, the present time of its beholding by a viewer. This was the existential temporality posited by Rosenberg's famous "action painting" concept, which celebrated the work of art's capacity to portray the processional residue of the artist's encounter with the blank canvas. Less often noted, but in many ways equally crucial to notions of aesthetic "action," is the way that the painting's suggestive and volumetric forms can insinuate identifiable entities (whether actual things like flowers or bridges, or simple shapes like circles and rectangles), and how the perceptual discernment engendered by such works invites an equally durational and active mode of interpretation: the viewer's gaze follows the linear configurations and nebulous congeries of paint into suggestive forms that almost, but never fully, cohere into recognizable forms.⁸

This allusiveness is most evident in *La Seine's* evocation of a landscape, with the outer two panels denoting the sort of *repoussoir* characteristic of the genre, in which a picturesque view is framed by some sort of natural entity such as a hillside or copse of trees, and the two inner panels suggesting a tree-lined body of water whose reflective surface seems to recapitulate the color and forms that surround it. Yet it is also visible in a more abstract manner in the series of loosely defined rectangular planes that punctuate the bottom of the work. These forms seem to alternate between pure pigment and indications of spatial depth through their apparent placement in the composition's foreground. As

Rosalind Krauss has noted, these repeated planar forms, which are a common motif in Mitchell's multipanel paintings, invest such works with a "grandiose" panoramic scale—their enveloping effects do not so much resemble a landscape as recreate the embodied, and notably temporal, experience of viewing one.⁹

Yet *La Seine's* invitation to consider these various temporal processes, whether historical or phenomenological, is in no way exceptional to the tradition of abstract expressionism, either for first-generation artists like Pollock or for members of the second generation such as Helen Frankenthaler and Grace Hartigan. All of these artists—and numerous others—created works that set into motion complex historical and temporal dynamics that crucially informed both their semblance and significance. What distinguished Mitchell's work, and in particular her multipanel paintings, was the way it made these durational and distinctly retrospective dynamics explicit. Through her self-conscious engagement with themes of memory, belatedness, and succession, Mitchell's art, precisely in its status as "second generation," occupied what can be seen as a privileged position to reveal the myths that motivated modernism's celebration of imminence and authenticity, and also—more important to her own practice—to forge a meaningful statement from these frequently repressed dynamics of retrospection and repetition.

II. After Life

This more complex notion of what actually constituted the tradition of abstract expressionism—and in particular the way that the dynamics of retrospection and repetition operated within it—informed an important, if little known, exhibition that took place at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1957 (fig. 4). Organized by Columbia University art history professor Meyer Schapiro, *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation* included what might seem to contemporary audiences a surprising mélange of artists: categorical second-generation painters like Mitchell, Hartigan, and Alfred Leslie exhibited alongside Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (making his New York debut), who both seemed to subscribe to a new attitude that seemed to critique, or at least distance itself from, the tradition of abstract expressionism. Rauschenberg and Johns's works, with their striking invocations of common imagery and cool dismissals of romantic notions of artistic inspiration, would soon become synonymous with the rise of pop art and, as the art historian and critic Leo Steinberg argued, would augur the demise—and the newly recognizable unity—of the tradition of illusionistic picture making that extended as far back as the Renaissance and continued all the way up to the paintings of de Kooning.¹⁰

Yet such distinctions were not so readily apparent in 1957; even Steinberg, in his short essay for the exhibition catalogue, could see how artists who explicitly depicted recognizable imagery, such as Johns and Rauschenberg, and those who practiced a more allusive abstraction like Mitchell could similarly be seen as responding to the almost impossible challenge of building upon a movement essentially predicated on primacy. According to Steinberg, abstract expressionism's insistent drive to distill the act of painting into a pure expression of primal sources (or, as modernist aesthetics would have it, a pure declaration of its medium) had left it "overcharged with negations," denying its progenies "even the tradition of revolt, for there is at the moment nothing in view to be overthrown." Confronting this "terrible heritage" of confinement and exhaustion, many of these artists unsurprisingly began to explore strategies of repetition that could open up the work of art to broader, oftentimes more public, realms of experience.¹¹ In this regard, Johns's rows of common symbols like numbers and letters, Rauschenberg's assemblages of mass-cultural imagery, and Mitchell's mnemonically driven abstraction, especially when

presented in the multipanel format, can all be understood as exploring the communicative, if not occasionally the emotional, potential of repetition itself, finding within such practices not so much the means of authentic self-expression as the processes in which the world—in both its natural and cultural guises—makes itself visible and legible. Repetition, for these artists, arguably became an effective means to address—and perhaps live creatively within—what appeared to be the increasingly technologically mediated and homogenized world around them (as opposed to the emotionally charged inner world principally explored by their predecessors).

The dynamics of repetition at work in Mitchell's art are, in certain ways, most evident in her sustained practice of producing multipanel paintings. Although she wasn't able to explore the format fully until the early 1970s (following her move to Vetheuil, with its larger studio), the fact that Mitchell's first multipanel painting, the 1956 diptych *The Bridge* (fig. 5), was created at precisely the moment when a "second generation" of abstract expressionism was being classified lends a certain degree of overdetermination to this body of works' engagement with the dynamics of repetition and belatedness. Even the title of the painting is somewhat overdetermined, suggesting how the vigorous skeins of dark paint cohere into architectonic forms that summon one of Mitchell's favored motifs, taken from her childhood memories of Chicago and more recent experience in New York City, while also alluding to the way the diptych's two painterly performances, united generally by palette and facture but crucially separated in time, could be materially conjoined to compose a coherent image founded on visibly repeated characteristics; each individual panel gains significance in relation to its pendant.

While *The Bridge's* conjunction of two formally similar yet apparently spontaneous artistic acts might appear to subtly undermine the rhetoric of immediacy and individualism that supported a great deal of abstract expressionism, a more overt declaration of gestural repetition would be performed one year later by none other than Rauschenberg, when he created his own diptych of sorts: *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957; figs. 6, 7), in which he arranged a series of mechanically reproduced images, such as calendar pages, photographs from newspapers, and lithographic illustrations, on two separate canvases and adorned them with nearly identical brushstrokes, thus asserting a likeness between autographic and mechanical markings. As numerous scholars have since argued, artists like Rauschenberg and Johns—and others even more directly associated with pop like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein—would explore the dynamics of repetition to convey crucial aspects of the modern social landscape, in which it appeared that cultural constructions and symbolic representations rather than any sort of primal natural essence provided the basis for an increasingly broad realm of everyday experience.¹²

Yet, unlike these artists associated with pop, whose work addressed the various ways that repetition fundamentally informed mass culture (from the matrix of dots that constituted a halftone silk-screen reproduction to the row of commodities in the supermarket), Mitchell explored the possibilities of repetition to assert the primacy of painting as, one might say, a certain kind of culture (i.e., art), in which the reoccurrence of motifs and concepts creates significance within tradition rather than banality within abundance. This admittedly conservative commitment to the conventions of art and the tradition of painting in particular is perhaps most concisely expressed in her assertion in her 1986 interview with Michaud that she painted "paintings" and not "pictures."¹³ "Painting paintings" encapsulates the logic of repetition that propelled Mitchell's practice, in which nature is always mediated through representations, whether those are memories or other works of art, including most significantly her own. "I paint paintings," moreover, serves as a potent

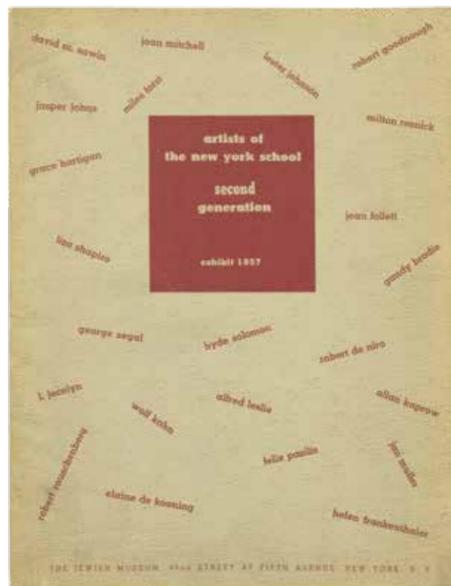


fig. 4
Exhibition catalogue for
*Artists of the New York
School: Second Generation*,
The Jewish Museum,
New York, 1957

fig. 5
Joan Mitchell
The Bridge, 1956
Oil on canvas, two parts
45¾ × 70¾ inches
116.2 × 178.8 cm



fig. 6
Robert Rauschenberg
Factum I, 1957
Oil, ink, pencil, crayon,
paper, fabric, newspaper
clipping, printed repro-
ductions, and calendar
pages on canvas
61 1/2 x 35 3/4 inches
156.2 x 90.8 cm

fig. 7
Robert Rauschenberg
Factum II, 1957
Oil, ink, pencil, crayon,
paper, fabric, newspaper
clipping, printed repro-
ductions, and calendar
pages on canvas
61 3/8 x 35 1/2 inches
155.9 x 90.2 cm

riposte to the sorts of assertions of primacy by first-generation artists like Pollock, who (as recounted by Lee Krasner) famously responded to Hofmann's question of whether he painted from nature by declaring, "I am Nature." (It seems worth noting that Krasner stated that Hofmann replied to Pollock's bold assertion by warning him that if he didn't work from nature, "You will repeat yourself.")¹⁴ For Mitchell, on the other hand, nature was no more primary than culture, and repetition was nothing to be feared since it was the inevitable result of any sort of engaged artistic practice.

This expansive understanding of nature was articulated by Elaine de Kooning in an article published in *ARTnews* in 1955 that notably contained an illustration of an untitled painting by Mitchell and included one of the first citations of her work in a national print magazine. "Nature," de Kooning wrote, may be defined as anything which presents itself as fact—that includes all art other than one's own. And after a while, one's own too, if one begins to be detached from it and influenced by it, which happens to almost every artist.... If one does not want to paint a still life or a landscape or a figure now, one can paint an Albers or a Rothko or a Kline. They are equally real visual phenomena of the world around us. That is, there is a point where any work stops being a human creation and becomes environment—or nature.¹⁵

If, in one sense, de Kooning's statement presages an emergent postmodern sensibility that would inform a great deal of pop art in which the world is understood to be constituted from nothing but representations—where even what is taken to be natural is always already culturally encoded—it also suggests how second-generation abstract expressionists like Mitchell were already, and in many ways equally, attuned to dynamics of mediation and belatedness at play in any attempt to capture and convey crucial aspects of the world around them. Art, for Mitchell, was always after life, and life was everything available to perception.

Notes

1 Joan Mitchell, quoted in Irving Sandler, "Is today's artist with or against the past? Part 2. Answers by: David Smith, Frederick Kiesler, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell," *ARTnews* 57 (September 1958), p. 41.

2 Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959).

3 On the sense of exhaustion in the abstract expressionist movement, see Thomas B. Hess, "Editorial: The Many Deaths of American Art," *ARTnews* 59 (October 1960), p. 25; and John Canaday, "In the Gloaming: Twilight Seems to Be Settling Rapidly for Abstract Expressionism," *The New York Times* (September 11, 1960), p. X21.

4 Irving Sandler, "Joan Mitchell," in B. H. Friedman, ed., *School of New York: Some Younger Artists* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 47.

5 "Oral History Interview with Joan Mitchell," conducted by Linda Nochlin, New York, April 16, 1986 (transcript), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 28; Joan Mitchell, interview with Yves Michaud, 1986, repr. in Yilmaz Dziewior, ed., *Joan Mitchell: Retrospective—Her Life and Paintings*. Exh. cat. (Bregenz: Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2015), 56–57.

6 On this retrospective dynamic in postwar modernism, see Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried, and Clark* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

7 Louis Finkelstein, "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism," *ARTnews* 55 (March 1956), p. 36.

8 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon, 1959), pp. 23–39. For a discussion of the temporal aspect of Rosenberg's concept of action, see Robert Slifkin, "The Tragic Image: Action Painting Re-figured," *Oxford Art Journal* 34 (June 2011), pp. 227–246.

9 Rosalind Krauss, "Painting Becomes Cyclorama," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974), p. 52.

10 See, for instance, Leo Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art" and "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 17–54, 55–92.

11 Leo Steinberg, introduction to *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*. Exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1957), p. 7.

12 On the crucial role of repetition in such practices, see Brandon W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); and Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

13 Mitchell, interview with Michaud, in Dziewior, *Joan Mitchell: Retrospective—Her Life and Paintings*, pp. 56–57. On this statement, see Ken Okiishi's essay "Painting Painting" in the same volume, pp. 45–49.

14 "Oral History Interview with Lee Krasner," conducted by Dorothy Seckler, November 2, 1964 (transcript), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 12.

15 Elaine de Kooning, "Subject: What, How, or Who?" *ARTnews* 54 (April 1955), p. 27, repr. in *The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), p. 144. Mitchell herself noted in a statement for the Whitney Museum of American Art's *Nature in Abstraction* exhibition in 1958: "I am very much influenced by nature.... However, I do not necessarily distinguish it from 'man-made' nature—a city is as strange as a tree"; in John I. H. Baur, *Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art*. Exh. cat. (New York: MacMillan, 1958), 75.