

American Art Since 1945

David Joselit

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A canvas covered with bright spatters of paint, by Jackson Pollock. Warhol's famous image of Marilyn Monroe. "The Spiral Jetty," by Smithson, a massive curl of heaped rocks extending into the Great Salt Lake. The glaring differences among works like these make it problematic to assess modern American art. The author attacks this difficulty by identifying larger trends of the time and using them to analyze the vast array of seemingly contradictory artistic movements and styles.

Currently a Professor in Yale's Art History Department, Joselit also taught at the University of California, Irvine, and worked as curator at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Arts. He uses his experience to identify three major American trends: the creation (by television and news media) of a public consciousness; the tendency toward a personal voice as the preferred platform for political demands; and the move toward nontraditional art forms. With these trends in mind, Joselit works steadily through the artists and movements of the period.

The New York School of Pollock, DeKooning, and Rothko is discussed in depth, followed by an explanation of formalist and gestural reactions against it. Pop art is next, with ample discussions of Warhol, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, and more. Pop then gives way to Assemblage, the use of found objects to create art; Minimalism emerges in reaction to Pop; Fluxus appears, with its emphasis on everyday events. Process, systems, and site art are all explained. The most recent art explored is social commentary directed against racism, misogyny, etc., and works using technology to rework age-old motifs like crucifixion.

Joselit stays targeted on his overall theme. For example, he explains that Abstract Expressionism owed much of its success to "the attention paid to it in the mass media,...particularly within one of the most popular mouthpieces of American culture...*Life* magazine." He goes on to elucidate the conflict that such notoriety created for artists who wished to express themselves as individuals, yet found themselves suddenly public commodities. Such explanations and extrapolations are vital to understanding transitions between different movements. Overall, the reader is given a solid framework for examining this large, contradictory period.

American Art Since 1945 may overwhelm newcomers to art history: it's not an introduction so much as an academic tool for understanding the colorful, wildly varied art created between 1945 and 2002. However, it's a useful examination of the field, a tool that art lovers and art historians will want to keep handy.

JULIE DAWSON GOVAN (July / August 2003)

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