

ARTISTS' SESSIONS AT STUDIO 35 (1950)

SOBERSCOVE PRESS / WITTENBORN ART BOOKS

becomes uniform and finally they become completely white and simple. When there is nothing else to take away, it is “finished.” Yet I am disgusted by simplicity. So I look for a larger form and look for another work—which goes through the same process of elimination.

GRIPPE: A work of art is never really “finished.” There is a feeling of trying to express the labyrinth of one’s mind—its feelings and emotions, and to fulfill one’s personality. Each work is trying to complete the expression of that personality. Whether it becomes profound, I don’t know, but I think the artist is very aware of himself in relation to the rest of the world.

REINHARDT: It has always been a problem for me—about “finishing” paintings. I am very conscious of ways of “finishing” a painting. Among modern artists there is a value placed upon “unfinished” work. Disturbances arise when you have to treat the work as a finished and complete object, so that the only time I think I “finish” a painting is when I have a dead-line. If you are going to present it as an “unfinished” object, how do you “finish” it?

LEWIS: I have stopped, I think, when I have arrived at a quality of mystery. I know this doesn’t describe it, but it is the best word I can use.

HOFMANN: To me, a work is “finished” when all parts involved communicate themselves, so that they don’t need me.

MODERATOR MOTHERWELL: I dislike a picture that is too suave or too skillfully done. But, contrariwise, I also dislike a picture that looks too inept or blundering. I noticed in looking at the Carré exhibition of young French painters who are supposed to be close to this group, that in “finishing” a picture they assume traditional criteria to a much greater degree than we do. They have a real “finish” in that the picture is a real object, a beautifully made object. We are involved in “process” and what is a “finished” object is not so certain.

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HOFMANN: Yes, it seems to me all the time there is the question of heritage. It would seem that the difference between the young French painters and the young American painters is this: French pictures have a cultural heritage. The American painter of today approaches things without basis. The French approach things on the basis of cultural heritage—that one feels in all their work. It is a working towards a refinement and quality rather than working toward new experiences, and painting out these experiences that may finally become tradition. The French have it easier. They have it in the beginning.

DE KOONING: I am glad you brought up this point. It seems to me that in Europe every time something new needed to be done it was because of the traditional culture. Ours has been a striving to come to the same point that they had—not to be iconoclasts.

MODERATOR LIPPOLD: There are those here who feel that the things which they make are simply moments of a continuity and, therefore, in themselves, are not objects for their own sakes, but just moments in the continuity. Is there an irreconcilability in making an object in itself which, at the same time, reflects continuity? This, so far, has been spoken of as incompatible.

STERNE: But that means that you have decided already exactly what *is* “beautiful.” “Beauty” can’t be pursued directly.

GOTTLIEB: There is a general assumption that European—specifically French—painters have a heritage which enables them to have the benefits of tradition, and therefore they can produce a certain type of painting. It seems to me that in the last fifty years the whole meaning of painting has been made international. I think the Americans share that heritage just as much, and that if they deviate from tradition it is just as difficult for an American as for a Frenchman. It is a mistaken

assumption in some quarters that any departure from tradition stems from ignorance. I think that what Motherwell describes is the problem of knowing what tradition is, and being willing to reject it in part. This requires familiarity with his past. I think we have this familiarity and if we depart from tradition, it is out of knowledge, not innocence.

DE KOONING: I agree that tradition is part of the whole world now. The point that was brought up was that the French artists have some “touch” in making an object. They have a particular something that makes them look like a “finished” painting. They have a touch which I am glad not to have.

BAZIOTES: We are getting mixed up with the French tradition. In talking about the necessity to “finish” a thing, we then said American painters “finish” a thing that looks “unfinished,” and the French, they “finish” it. I have seen Matisses that were more “unfinished” and yet more “finished” than any American painter. Matisse was obviously in a terrific emotion at the time, and it was more “unfinished” than “finished.”



**ALFRED H.
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**ROBERT
MOTHERWELL** **RICHARD
LIPPOLD**



**AD
REINHARDT** **RICHARD
POUSETTE-DART**



**WILLEM DE
KOONING** **IBRAM
LASSAW** **JAMES
BROOKS**

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STERNE: I think the titling of painting is a problem. The titles a painter gives his paintings help to classify him, and this is wrong. A long poetic title or number. . . . Whatever you do seems a statement of attitude. The same thing if you give a descriptive title. . . . Even refraining from giving any title at all creates a misunderstanding.

REINHARDT: If a title does not mean anything and creates a misunderstanding, why put a title on a painting?

BROOKS: To me, a title is nothing but identification. I have a very hard time finding a title and it is always inadequate. I think when titles are very suggestive, they are a kind of fraud, because they throw the spectator away from the picture rather than into it. But numbers are inadequate.

GOTTLIEB: I think the point Miss Sterne raised is inevitable. That is, whenever an artist puts a title on a painting, some interpretation about his attitude will be made. It seems obvious that titles are necessary when everybody uses them—whether verbal or numbers; for purposes of exhibition, identification and the benefit of the critics, there must be some way of referring to a picture. It seems to me that the artist, in making up titles for his pictures, must decide what his attitude is.

MODERATOR BARR: Most people seem to think that titles are a kind of necessity. Does anyone think that titles have real usefulness in supplementing the object?

ROSENBERG: The title is always arbitrary because we deal with unseen audiences; the reason for a title is that every Tom, Dick and Harry has to have some link. Once I had a show where I had numbers from one to twenty, and when it came to a question of reviewing, the critics found that number six was better than four, etc. I hope that the onlooker will make up his own title!

POUSETTE-DART: I think if we could agree on numbers it would be a tremendous thing. In music they don't have this dilemma. It would force people to just look at the object and try to find their own experience.

ERNST: I would object to doing any such thing as that—such as numbering a picture. I don't particularly care what people classify me as, or whether people understand the title or not. It suggests something to me, or something may pop into my head—so I give it that title.

SMITH: I think titles are a positive means of identification. I never objected to any work of art because of its title. The only people who have objected were critics because they did not like the work.

REINHARDT: The question of abandoning titles arose, I am sure, because of esthetic reasons. Even titles like “still life” and “landscape” do not say anything about a painting. If a painting does have a reference or association of some kind, I think the artist is apt to add a title. I think this is why titles are not used by a great many modern painters—because they don't have anything to do with the painting itself.

MODERATOR BARR: There are some painters who attach a great deal of importance to titles.

MODERATOR MOTHERWELL: I think Sterne is dealing with a real problem—what is the content of our work? What are we really doing? The question is how to name what as yet has been unnamed.