

Jesse Murry with John Constable's paint brushes, Somerset, England, 1991. Photo: Richard



EXPRESSIONISM: 1980

On November 7th, 1980, a week after his appearance on the Artists Talk on Art “New Critics” panel, Jesse Murry moderated a discussion on “Expressionism” in contemporary art for the same series. “Neo-Expressionism” had not yet begun to dominate painting discourse when Murry convened a diverse group, each with different personal and historical understandings of the subject as it related to their own work. The participants included Natalie Edgar, Joseph S. Lewis III, Masami Masuda, Ana Mendieta, Peter Passuntino, Nancy Spero, and Philip Wofford. What follows is an edited transcript of the first hour of their conversation, with the opening slide presentation removed for clarity. As a whole, it offers a glimpse of Murry’s conceptual framing, situating the concerns of many different kinds of art alongside and against historical context. Of special note are his exchanges with Ana Mendieta about space, site, and the body, which intersect with his own later work on landscape.

JESSE MURRY (J.M.): I have some brief things that I want to say about this very loaded term, “Expressionism.” I decided I wanted to have a panel because I was having a critical crisis trying to understand a few currents that I was recognizing in contemporary art that I thought were “expressionistic.” Well, that’s an old term for an old movement. And what I meant by that, what I kept seeing these tendencies to be, was a stress on the individual, the self, the body, and the world—and the world being not just the community of a system, of an art world, but the world at large. And, historically, I found a few points of interest that might help to locate Expressionism, but maybe not. I thought of interest was that when the movement began in Germany in 1910, ’11 through ’14, it was a response to the situation at large as it incorporated many surrounding movements that were happening at that time—whether it was French formalist painting or other works, other kinds of art. It initially was a turn against these things, to depict human situations with a focus on the world, and not so much a concern with an *art for art’s sake* kind of art, the kind of art that generated in the formalism of the French painters, like, let’s say, Delaunay and Matisse. Fauvism, which came a little bit before the advent of Expressionism, was an expressionistic kind of art movement, but [Expressionists] were using these devices to get at more central, human issues of the individual, the individual against the world, the community, at large. The work could be characterized, as one artist

said, that his work springs from a violent need to make an “anti-realism”—a counter-image of the world. This painter, Kirchner, said: “The world is there. It makes no sense to reproduce it.” So, Expressionist art, to me in that aspect, can be characterized as an art about world interpretation and self-interpretation through the medium.

But another powerful aspect of the work is that it also came out of, for many people, the need to assault the audience in order for the work to assert itself. *This* aspect of Expressionism which came before the period of Dadaism and fed a great deal into it, I think, is still an emphatic current. It saw the work of art also as a creation and a destruction of reality—a dismantling of reality in order to again create a counter-image of the world. I also found that the stress in the work was primarily representational—all Expressionist [work]s were, but they’re seen in their distrust of appearances, to blur abstraction and representation, which also created a *hybrid* kind of form. Well, these are some of the features. Thematically, there were things depicted in the work that were very strong. There was a hedonism in most of the work of, let’s say, the French Fauves, who the Expressionists are often linked with, especially the northern Expressionists like Kirchner, Franz Marc, Egon Schiele, others—there was a concentration on making images that showed man’s alienation and isolation in the world, that reflected a spiritual crisis in the world. So action and force became

requisite in determining the art coming into being—this is historical pedigree.

I found that similar situation, in response to Conceptualist/Minimalist/reductivist art, which is a rather complex kind of art, but it is an art that does not express what I think is this emotional tenor of violence and assault—[it is] an art that does not necessarily point to the individual, the artist, as well as the work of art, in coming to terms with it ... I [find] that the contrast with [the] situation now, with the artists on the panel, with so many other artists that are expressionists that I couldn’t get to be here, but who are of interest, like Jonathan Borofsky—you can name many others. This is the situation, this is the question tonight, to openly discuss, amongst ourselves, what Expressionism is and what these aspects are.

PHILIP WOFFORD (P.W.): I’d like to read a few notes that resulted from being included on [the panel]. They extend from my concerns of painting, and they are essentially apolitical and asocial, but I hope that through the expression of some of these ideas, there is an inclusiveness that will leave open the possibility of other kinds of realities converging and affecting the work. Painting includes the classical and the primitive, metaphor, pure optics, narrative, invisibility, symbols of paintings, symbols of symbols, nothing but itself, or everything else. Painting, besides being painting, is a balancing act, ritual, habit, experience, fantasy, the real thing, or its substitute. Painting is an illusion of movement, energy, stasis, light, space, form. The better the illusion, the better the painting. In great painting, one forgets the illusion and communes with painting as reality. Painting as reality is not religion or sex or literature or nature or philosophy but can be an expression of these other realities and everything Ad Reinhardt said painting is *not*. It is in this spirit that I consider myself an expressionistic painter. Painting includes, painters exclude. I would like to do a painting that includes everything I just said.

NANCY SPERO (N.S.): Well, I would like to talk about these expressionist times that we’re living in. Perfect time for an explosion now of Expressionism, which has happened in the New York art scene. I’ve been kind of doing it myself with my partner, Leon Golub, for many, many years, but now [it] is suddenly at odds and alienated in a sense from the Minimalist structure that has been so prevalent—dying now, really—in New York City. And I want to talk, too, about my position as a woman artist in what I think is essentially a really male kind of [art]. Not that all art movements aren’t male-dominated, they certainly are, but I think Expressionism is particularly, because it is primarily so aggressive, so at odds. And the society is really ready to accept or even embrace, in certain instances—you know, like [Egon] Schiele—even nastiness, even maybe some of this punk art, which is very lively, aggressive, and titillating, let’s say, to people who haven’t been thinking in this mode. But I think that it is in the male, the classic male mode you see, and that the female voice has hardly been allowed to emerge from all this, except maybe in the traditional way. You know, in the more quiet ways, a woman sitting in the corner knitting or, you know, making pretty pictures and designs. And that’s great, but a woman really can’t participate to the full extent ... and I’d like to hear what you have to say about this. You know, I think it’s related, too, in a way, to a very macho, punk, New Wave attitude. As for myself, my work has always been very aggressive, and since 1966, when I suddenly became aggressive, combining politics, realizing that the Vietnam War was entering my consciousness, that I was tired of painting the way I had been painting. And I fused sexual imagery with the symbols of power, with the symbol of the bomb and the helicopter in Vietnam, to produce kind of an agonizing, very, very angry attack on power with these and the symbols of war. I can’t tell you how much trouble I’ve had with this work. I have never shown it as a whole. I have barely shown it at all. It came at the time of Minimalism, which is in total contradiction to what I have been doing. So I speak as a woman, as a woman artist, and as a loner, in conjunction,

of course, with Golub—but we have been doing this stuff for I won't tell you how many years. [Laughs]

NATALIE EDGAR (N.E.): My career started in Abstract Expressionism—I studied with Ad Reinhardt and Rothko, who are often said to be part of the Abstract Expressionist group. And then, later on, I went to Columbia, and I studied with Meyer Schapiro, and I heard about another kind of Expressionism—the Munch-type, German Expressionism. So it became apparent to me that there were two kinds of Expressionism, one was more circumscribed within the personality, and the other one was more involved, as you've pointed out, with the world. I found something that is a good example of the second type, the worldly type, which is: I was reading a book that Philip Pavia, my husband, is preparing on The Club, the old Club, and they had an "Expressionists" night in that Club also. And in it, a quote came up in which [an artist] said that he could tell if you were an Expressionist by the way you painted a telephone wire. ... If you were imitating nature, you'd paint a nice thin line; it would have a sag in it, it would be parabolic, or something like that. But if you're an Expressionist, you have to think about all the things that go on *in* the wire—you think about the pain and the emergency situations, the conniving, all these terrible things that go on on the telephone, the anguish, the arguing, the love story—all this goes on a telephone wire. So that's the thing: how does an Expressionist paint a telephone wire? He does not paint it as a straight thin line. He paints it thick and thin; he paints it with a lot of color, with a lot of weight. He is showing his reaction to an object in the world, and in some way, he communicates his personal reaction to you. The telephone wire, I think, is an interesting metaphor. By the way, to me, Van Gogh is the father of it all. I mean, if I said, "Who's the Expressionist?" I would go back to Van Gogh. I think today there's a new element of Expressionism. But I could go on to that later on—I'd like to talk about what I think are some modern currents of Expressionism next time around.

ANA MENDIETA (A.M.): I would like to say first my position of why I'm on this panel, because I feel that my work embodies a lot of expressionistic tendencies, in that it's very emotional, which is something I think Nancy sort of touched on. But I like to connect the word "Expressionism" to "emotionalism" as well. I also feel that the reason that I'm an artist is because I really have had no choice. Earlier in my life, I decided that I would be either a criminal or an artist, because making art for me personally is an anti-social activity. I was very angry to be in this culture, to be put into this culture—American culture. And I needed to express this anger, which has taken on other qualities along the way. But I think that in terms of what is happening within the art world today—I mean, in terms of what is around, the galas and things—I think that women's art that has included autobiographical material is not necessarily expressionistic at all. I tend to see that as narcissist[ic] more than expressionistic, because it's really not a *reaction to*, but it's sort of more *looking at* the self. It's not really humanistic in the way that I think Expressionism is in general—dealing with humanity at large. I think it's work that is very dangerous for a lot of people to deal with because they cannot deal with these emotional aspects of the work.

JOSEPH S. LEWIS III (J.S.L.): I've been trying to deal with the idea of content, context, and a variable I'll call "action" in my work. One of the reasons why I'm in the art field [is] to remain sweet. Going through a very rigorous academic tradition and being involved with academic or commercial-type artists [in] about 1976 really started to turn my stomach. I was doing some, you know, very nice landscapes and pretty straightforward stuff, but what happened was that instead of trying to make some kind of statement with my work, to make a particular point, I found myself veering out into these real eclectic esoterica. And I had fun doing it, but what happened to me was that I became very bitter [about] being lumped into a non-existing group of artists, i.e., "performance artists,"

because performance art has never been taken seriously, and the people that they do take seriously are not really performance artists but merely reflect various attitudes in theater and the other technical communication arts, i.e., video. I found myself being, like, almost dejected in myself because of that, so I started trying to do these things—indirect associative social commentary. And *Shangri-La* was really a breakaway piece for me. A very dangerous piece to do as well. And I found myself thriving on that fringe point of being, when your life is actually involved with your work to the point where you can be seriously reprimanded for doing what you're doing.

[audience laughter]

You know what I'm saying? I mean, just putting the paint on the wall. ... I mean, that's great, there are gonna be great technicians, gonna be great painters and artists, but I just don't see it anymore. I think Expressionism is kind of [a] tool to use as a departure point to connect with the people who really support artists, and that's everybody in the street. ... Those are the people art should talk to. And this other, like, academic and self-serving type situation, really bothers me. So that's why I *feel* that I'm an Expressionist, although I'm not sure exactly what the hell I'm doing.

[audience laughter]

J.M. Masami, I wanted to ask you in response to his comments on performance art, how you, as a performance artist, see Expressionism, if at all?

MASAMI MASUDA (M.M.): I really don't know why I'm here to talk about Expressionism, but I can, we can, talk about art. ...

J.M. Let's talk about it.

M.M. I don't like to talk art scene, art history. Or, people who like art, in a gallery ... just fake and not unique and, like, just [in] the system. ... You see? Just *me*. So, that's how I feel about it.

PETER PASSUNTINO (P.P.): Like Masami, I'm not quite sure why I'm here either, because I have mixed feelings about Expressionism. From my point of view, Expressionism isn't as intense for myself as for some of the other panelists. My feeling about Expressionism is that it's something that weaves in and out of an artist's entire career. ... For example, paintings I did in the '70s were involved with the war. And I did [a] number of pictures against the war, that were about the Vietnam War, the demonstrations. I did paintings with a kind of Mardi Gras atmosphere of New York ... that symbolized that movement we were in. When the war was over, I continued to paint war pictures, but I didn't feel their intensity. I didn't feel honest in painting war pictures. I felt it was another move, and it was another kind of war, maybe not as transparent as the Vietnam War. And I found I couldn't use [the expressionist manner of painting any longer]. I had to use more subtle means. I became more involved with [the] interplay of people in my paintings. More involved with the environment people were in. So I feel that [Expressionism is] part of my palette now. ... It's a very difficult thing to talk about, Expressionism. Most painters I know that have painted expressionist have gone

through this crisis. I'm just an oil painter, but I also have done expressionist paintings.

J.M. I also wanted to throw out the notion of Expressionism as being a spatial notion. A spatial concept, in the sense that two kinds of spaces in expressionist work seem to me to converge: the space of the individual, which is private space, with the space of the work of art, which is external or public space. And I think that for performance artists, there is a link here that somewhat relates to the expressionist desire to use "primitive" sources. [*To Ana Mendieta*] I wanted to ask you, related to the body and the relation to internal and external space, why you chose "site," Ana?

Another aspect of Expressionism is a relationship to "nature" and "primitivism"; whatever those words mean, that does not receive this as something alienated but [rather] something to be embraced. The use of "primitive culture" is not the same as, let's say, in a Picasso painting like *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which is [using it] for essentially formal ends and means. But these aspects of primitivism and mythology are embraced by the artist who moves as an Expressionist, as a means of integrating internal and external states. You were describing something of that nature to me when you were talking about your figures and why you chose to make them in relation to your body size and [to locate] them in real situations and actual contexts in the world.

A.M. Right. Because when we had that conversation, basically what I was saying was that to me, the figure in my work, in my *Earth Body* sculptures, the figure represents me. It is me. And originally, when I started working in this way, I was in the actual work, physically. My body was there. Now it is just my size and, you know, it's sort of become a hieroglyph or a mark of my body. But the reason ... I can't tell you the reason why I started doing this, because, you know, I've learned a lot about what I'm doing through years of filtering out what it means and why I am working in this way. I know that it has a lot to do with the fact that I was taken from my homeland and that I had no land, therefore I was drawn to the earth. And I think my work has very much the death instinct in it. The death wish. That is very strongly a part of my work, and I want to become one with the earth and go into it. And that ... Pardon?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Where are you from, Ana?

A.M. Cuba. So my work really comes from a need of placing myself on this earth and, you know, literally placing myself within the natural environment.

J.M. Is that really a *death wish*? Because the way I see it, in your work, the body extends to nature, and nature extends to the body in the actual pieces. They leave the individual physical stamp of your body in that space, but they're not an imposition of a structure in that space. It's like an image that becomes a part of the space. So it seems to me that that is a life affirmative kind of thing because it becomes a part of the actual space, and that kind of reciprocal relationship—a body extends to nature, and nature extend[s] back through it.

A.M. Right, what you're saying is right, but I don't see the death wish as a negative thing at all. Because life

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is death and death is life. I mean, it's a cycle. So I personally feel that that's what it is. You know, maybe it makes you feel uncomfortable to throw out the fact that we all, whether we want to deal with it or not, have a death wish in us—we have the pleasure wish, and we have the death wish. The life and death. That's basically who we are and what we're doing here. Uh, pardon?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm lost!

A.M. Well, then that's your problem.

[audience laughter]

A.M. He asked me specifically some questions about my work which I'm responding to, okay? What you're doing here, I don't know.

[audience laughter]

N.E. Do you want me to go next? Okay. I told you I had a third part to my first statement: what is Expressionism going to be today? I think that has something to do with what you're thinking about, which is it's coming back to society, but it's not gonna come back in the old form. It's going to come back in a form of what's called "Structuralism." Which means that parts of society ... it's sort of like anthropology. [People like] Bronisław Malinowski or Claude Lévi-Strauss, they say every society in the world has the same form. They have all those death problems, they have marriage rites, they have art, but every human being in the whole world has to pass through this social structure. So then, this performance idea, that's where that all is, you know. [It] has very much to do with this idea of social structure, bringing Expressionism back to Structuralism, and having the object in it act as a sign in the passage of the social structure.

Now, where I got a cue on all this was in the Joseph Beuys show, which I think was a very clear example of German Expressionism brought up to date in the 20th century. And if you recall—I don't know how many of you saw that, but he had two rows of sleds, filed, you know, double file, aiming, heading into an old Volkswagen bus. You know, a very striking image, and it was a caravan. And in each sled, there was a flashlight, and there was some fat—food, a little can of food, and some flashlights. Now, all that, that's a sign. Every one of those things is a sign. There were no human beings present, but we knew that there were 30 or 40 soldiers there once, and they're all dead. It was really a tragic ... it was really an anti-war statement. But it was done in this new way, which he actually calls "social sculpture." But I'm giving it a new name, call it "structure"—it's "Structuralism." And it has to do with, you know, giving a passage in your life, as you go through life, with these signs you delineate a drama. And that, I think, is where a lot of American performance art[ists] think that they are central to Expressionism. By the way, my own point of view, I'm not gonna talk about, you have to come see my show. [Laughs]

J.M. The notion of *drama*, does that mean the drama of eye and hand in making the work? Let's say in your case, Philip, as a painter? Or does that mean the drama of world events and crises at large? The way you respond to drama in your work, Nancy?

P.W. If I could respond to Jesse's question—I feel a little bit like an old-fashioned dinosaur sitting here tonight because I really believe in the power of painting. Because I have a long-standing, a lifetime, connection to the greatest paintings of all cultures. And it seems to me that what my work is about ... is the primacy of painting. Because of its paradoxes, its built-in paradoxes, its illusions, so forth. I find it very difficult to deal with the political implications and a lot of the comments that've been made tonight. I find it very difficult to deal with the, I suppose, social, political, aspects of some of the comments made. But I would say that powerful painting, whether it be Goya's last black series, of the *Witches' Sabbath*, and some of the

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other incredibly powerful images of spirits floating over non-specific landscapes, carry about them a kind of resonance which transcends politics, which transcends societal conflicts, which transcends subjective expressionistic, poetic, metaphorical, indulgences, needs, desires, urges ... and finally becomes a reality in itself. And if you are prepared to deal with that reality, then you can get the message, and if you're not, then you veer toward another kind of aspect. And, what I find going on today is, you know, it finally derives from what is high art and what is, uh, public art, or kitsch or—

N.S. Uh-oh! [laughs]

P.W. ...um, people's art! Or street art! And I don't see any particular conflict between the two. I feel, contrary to what Clement Greenberg says, and contrary to what all of the people who fight against Clement Greenberg say, that there is a very nourishing relationship between public, street, common, people's, everyday, discovered, revealed, devastated, whatever [type of] art and formalism. The best aspects of spirituality that derive from as far back as Giotto and Piero and go through, you know, the Abstract Expressionists, Impressionism and so forth, so on. And I'm here as, primarily, a lover of painting, and as, I suppose, a kind of spokesman for the validity of painting in an age when everybody asks if painting is dead, which is the question that's been asked for the last 20 years. And believe me, when I go into my studio, and I am faced with the problems of recreating the world from scratch, and I come up with something that excites me, and that other people respond to, I'm convinced that painting is alive, is not dead, and that all you have to do is tune into yourself, to the essence of where you're coming from, use that as the material, get it into some kind of harmony with visual reality, and you've got something.

[end of tape]

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