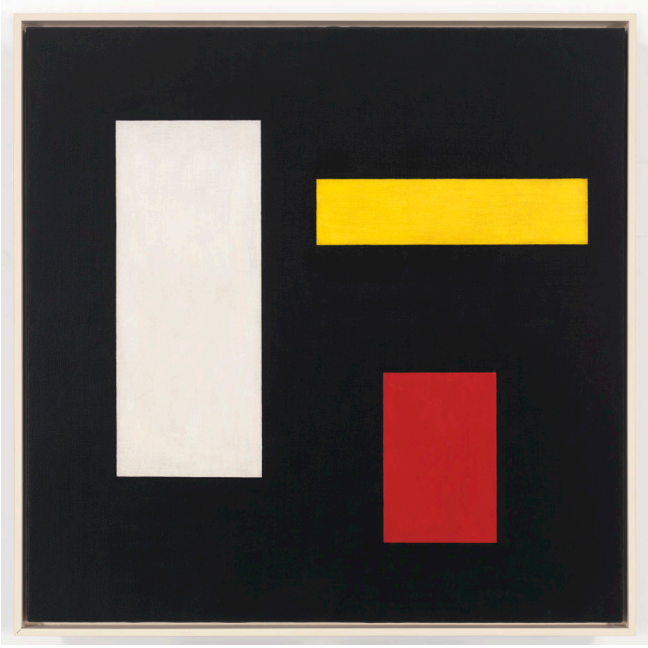
ABSTRACT BY DEFINITION: AN INDEX

SAUL OSTROW, CURATOR

GEORGE MCNEIL (founding AAA member)
Astor, 1958, oil and house paint on canvas, 65⅞ × 66⅛ inches

Organized to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the American Abstract Artists (AAA), the exhibition *Abstract by Definition: An Index* is an invitation to consider the diversity of what "abstract" means. By juxtaposing contrasting works, the installation is intended to orchestrate an internal dialogue that reflects on the nature of abstract art across several realms—philosophical, historical, etymological, and symbolic. After more than a century of shifting critical definitions and evolving practices, it is, admittedly, a bold undertaking to reconsider how the term "abstract" has come to be understood. Yet the diversity of the AAA's membership compels such a task. In the main, insofar as all representation is an abstraction—drawn from reality, forming a conceptual or cognitive model—I hope to clarify the long-standing, and ultimately nonsensical, opposition between representation and the abstract, while likewise distinguishing between the abstract and abstraction.

By conceiving this exhibition as an index, my intention was to foreground an approach that allows diverse works to be assembled without imposing a thematic framework upon them. What results is an array of methods, styles, and logics associated with "abstract art." The installation pairs related but contrasting pieces to illuminate the distinctions that emerge even among outwardly similar works: for example, the literal objecthood and event-like nature of Minimalism (late 1950s–1970s), the geometric purity of Concrete art (1930s–1950s), and the conceptualism of Neo-concretism (1959–1961)—all grounded in and departing from the legacy of Constructivism (1913–1920s). A similar genealogy can be constructed for the gestural.

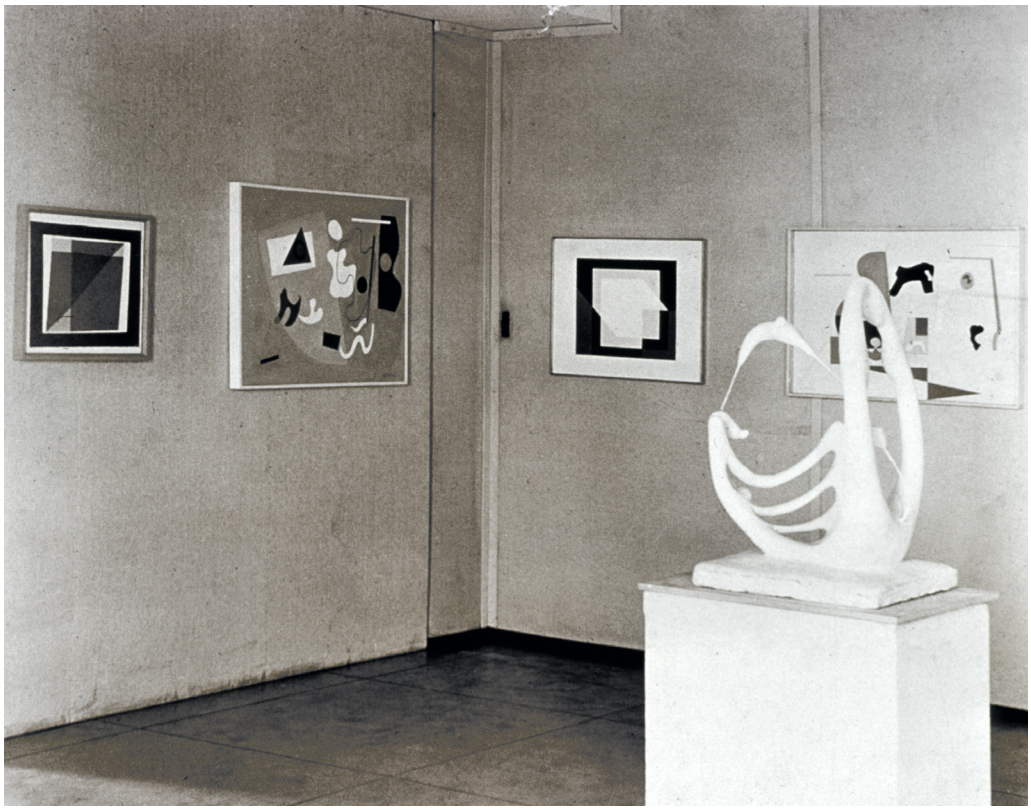


BURGOYNE DILLER (founding AAA member)
First Theme, 1938, oil on canvas, 30¼ × 30¼ inches

Within such genealogies, the abstract reveals itself not as a category of fixed features but as a constellation of concepts and practices. Amidst such entangled categories and paradigms, it is important to note that "abstract" and "non-objective" were sometimes used as synonymous terms. This historical slippage underscores why, today, the task of mapping contemporary abstract art demands renewed attention to how artists in practice negotiate the diverse concepts and practices that have come to define the boundaries of the abstract. To this end, *Abstract by Definition: An Index* repositions the AAA membership's works as a survey of those approaches dubbed "abstract." Central to the AAA's legacy is that its history is less a march toward pure form than an ongoing negotiation of propositions.

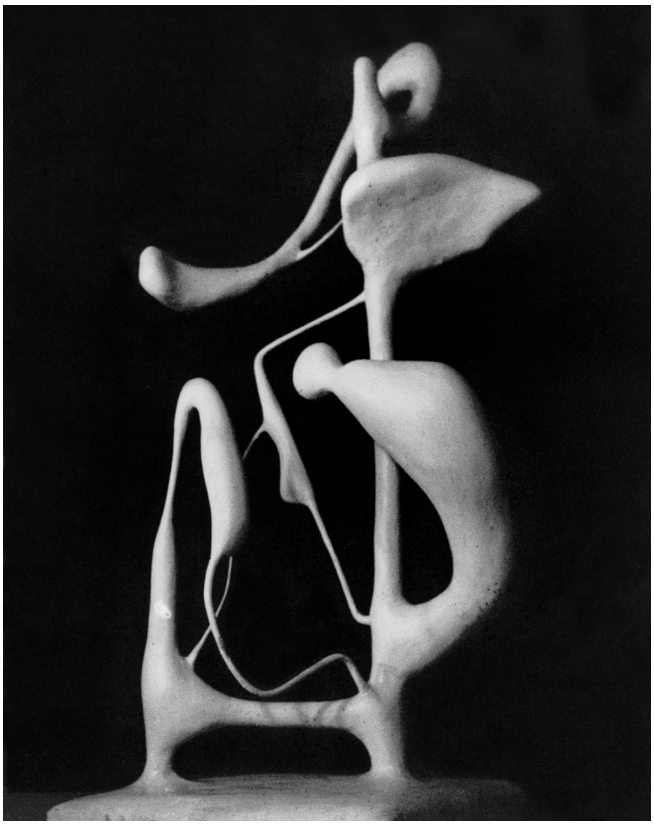
Subsequently, my intention with this essay is to return to the foundational moment when questions first arose of what and how something in art may be signified materially, rather than mimetically. So, let us begin again at the beginning: with the transition to the modern era, marked by the erosion of the authority of the hierarchical Ancien Régime in the 19th century, which compelled artists to reassert art's essential nature in a rapidly changing world. Yet this attempt at stabilization was quickly overtaken by society's unexpected socio-political and technological transformations, prompting artists to confront wholly alien demands. Modern art's first avant-garde was the Romantic Revolution, which prioritized individual expression, imagination, and emotions.

By the beginning of the 20th century, a second vanguard arose, its realism oriented toward the turbulence of industrialization and the proliferation of new technologies. In later tellings, these two avant-gardes are immortalized as one and the same—they are characterized as rebels who critically resisted the status quo; yet in actuality, they were very different. The second vanguard served as a mechanism to articulate and absorb the shock induced by capitalism's insistent demand that modernist culture remain perpetually dynamic, responsive, and open to continual transformation. Within the canonized narrative, less-told stories unfold.



First American Abstract Artists exhibition, Squibb Gallery, New York

One such story is embedded in the history of the AAA, an organization that has navigated various critical and cultural transformations since its founding in 1936 by a group of New York-based "abstract" painters and sculptors. The artists who founded the AAA did so for a specific reason: the Museum of Modern Art mounted a major exhibition of abstract art in 1936, which consisted almost exclusively of European artists. At the time, there were numerous artists' organizations with overlapping objectives, but the AAA was one of the few groups to focus on aesthetic practice rather than social or political goals. By 1937, at the time of its first members' exhibition at Squibb Gallery, AAA membership had grown to thirty-nine. The group had expanded significantly beyond the nine artists who first met in Ibram Lassaw's studio in 1936. Among these new members were the so-called "Park Avenue Cubists"— George L.K. Morris, Suzy Frelinghuysen, Charles B. Shaw, and Albert Eugene Gallatin, who founded the Museum of Living Art at New York University (1936–1943). Membership also included immigrants to the United States, including Lassaw himself, as well as Ilya Bolotowsky, Esphyr Slobodkina, and former Bauhaus faculty member Josef Albers, who had emigrated to the United States four years earlier, after the school's forced closure by the Nazi regime.



IBRAM LASSAW (founding AAA member)
Untitled Sculpture, modeled plaster, unknown dimensions (approximately 48 inches high)

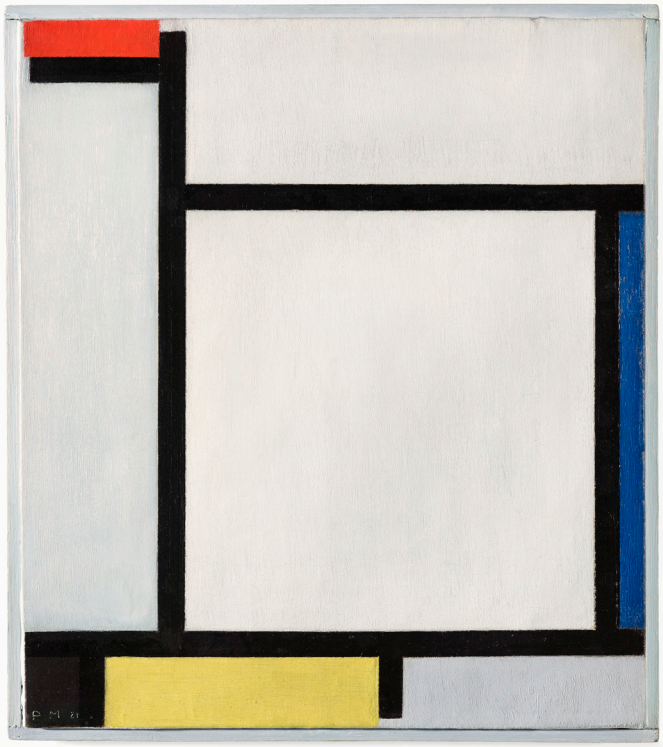
It was an audacious move to name the organization "American Abstract Artists" when, as late as 1888, Vincent van Gogh could criticize Paul Gauguin's work for being "too abstract," a reproach indicating that it had lost its grounding in direct observation and emotional engagement with lived reality. In the 1910s and 1920s, critics applied the term as they grappled with how best to describe works they considered non-representational. By the 1950s, "abstract" had come to be used as an umbrella for all nonfigurative art—a capaciousness that has generated much confusion.

It is crucial, then, to acknowledge that "abstraction," as opposed to "the abstract," historically emerged in association with the willful distortion of the codes of mimetic representation to expressive ends. The abstract itself was not the goal of early modernists like the Post-Impressionists and German Expressionists; rather, those artists sought to convey such internal states as angst, ecstasy, spiritual yearning, and social alienation. What motivated this inward turn was the rapid industrialization, urbanization and wars that had shattered the stable, rational worldview of Enlightenment idealism.

Parallel to the emergence of Expressionism in the early twentieth century, Cubism and Futurism sought to invent a new art capable of expressing a world marked by unprecedented speed, fracture, and continual displacement. For these artists, appearance was no longer an adequate register of reality; what was required was the breaking down of experience into its constituent parts. This fragmentation was necessary to capture the unstable dynamics that defined modernity.

From this grounding emerged such abstract artists as Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian, who, confronting the chronic instability of representation and the unruly volatility of romantic subjectivity, posited a radically different ambition for art. The "abstract condition" they sought to manifest was, in each case, nothing less than the principle of order itself—whether conceived as spiritual necessity

(Kandinsky), utopian transcendence (Malevich), or universal harmony (Mondrian). Here, the abstract is not merely a set of strategies but a proper subject, which requires the stripping of form to its irreducible cognitive, material, and conceptual core. What emerges is an art capable of presenting a reality at once perceptual, cognitive, and structurally symbolic—an amalgam fundamentally experiential and, therefore, resistant to any mimetic representation.



PIET MONDRIAN (former AAA member)
Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow and Gray, 1921
oil on canvas, 15½ × 13¾ inches

By contrast, the recently rediscovered paintings of Hilma af Klint—who is now heralded as perhaps the first abstract artist—are better understood as a kind of dimorphic encoding, serving a narrative system meant to render the unseen visible rather than embodying an abstract aesthetic for its own sake. This fundamental distinction—between the manifestation of an abstract, formal order (as in the work of Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian) and the encoding of mystical or esoteric narratives—places af Klint's achievement outside the primary lineage that constitutes the Western canon of modernist abstract art. Retroactively, the inclusion of af Klint in this canon as primogenitor does not substantially alter its historical course.

Abstract art's history has been made to appear stylistically and aesthetically inscribed within the negative dialectic of Western culture—as sustaining art's autonomy (its identity as art for art's sake) by continually resisting its assimilation by prevailing cultural, political, and economic forces. By the late 20th century, what had been a constellation of discrete enterprises had been recast as a singular, unified project: the abstract was to be realized as a self-sufficient entity, its own justification, substantiated by its presence. What had once been provisional gestures of subtraction and negation were ossified into a subject, and around this subject a triumphant canon was erected. With this critical-rhetorical consolidation, the abstract became codified—elevated as painting's ultimate and inevitable expression. In the process, it was stripped of its speculative vitality and divorced from the historical and socio-political contingencies from which it had emerged.

The transformation of abstract art into a singular, teleological project reinforced its instrumental history—a narrative which rested on misconceptions and inherited conventions such as the standard description of abstract art as non-representational. While this codification served institutional and ideological ends, it rendered it increasingly difficult to discern the shifting coordinates of meaning, perception, and experience that abstract art continues to engage.

As for this exhibition, *Abstract by Definition: An Index*, it is meant to draw its audience into debate by asking what it really means for art to be abstract, or whether all art is by nature abstract. As such, the works indexed here do not simply represent an art-historical succession, but manifest a spectrum of cognitive events, each staging encounters between the real and its presentational other by means of formal relationships and material properties. To underscore this open-ended dialogue, the installation juxtaposes works as contrasting polar pairings, so that each piece remains in dynamic conversation with a counterpart—reframing opposition not as binary closure but as an ongoing, self-renewing negotiation across differences.

To this end, no single narrative or discursive regime is prescribed; rather, the exhibition seeks to produce multiple, potentially incommensurable spaces—a proliferation of intentions and strategies wherein even common formal languages like geometry or gesture yield radically divergent results. The exhibition shines a light on artistic intentionality and also on the abstract's refusal to submit to a single discursive regime or logic. Indeed, to grasp the condition of abstract art today requires returning to the historical moment when the problem of how to depict a rapidly changing world provoked widespread experimentation across Europe.

As you might deduce from its installation, *Abstract by Definition: An Index* aims to unmoor the abstract from its conventions, to insist on its provisionality, and to open up new, non-literary spaces in which identity (sameness), technology (applied knowledge), and the social (collectivity) is to be renegotiated. If any argument persists, it is that the abstract remains a terrain of inquiry—a site where both the act and condition of making sense are always, productively, in question. It is for these reasons that I resisted the impulse to arrange works salon style or according to stylistic affinities. Instead, I sought for each work to serve as an entry in a shifting register, with relationships emerging through affinity, contrast, or resemblance. Within such a structure, the abstract reveals itself as fundamentally unsettled: not a fixed category or resolved identity, but a constellation of practices in which meaning and sense remain contingent, continually negotiated in the encounter.