

# GESTURAL ABSTRACTION

At the end of World War II, the center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York. A new generation of American artists emerged within a movement known as Abstract Expressionism, or the New York School, which emphasized spontaneous brushwork and forms that seem to tap into the subconscious. Although Abstract Expressionism is most famously associated with the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, it encompassed a range of gestural mark-making by a host of diverse artists. Its preeminence extended from the 1940s into the 1960s, even as other movements and tendencies emerged out of or in reaction against it.

In the postwar climate, the Abstract Expressionists' fervent gestures came to signify the artists' existential struggles and, particularly in the case of large-scale paintings, their grand ambitions and bravado. A masculine mystique that attached itself to the movement essentially trivialized or excluded the work of women artists. Few commercial galleries would show women's art, and even when they did, those women struggled to have their work considered outside the lens of the feminine. Efforts to recover and reconsider these artists' works are still ongoing sixty years later.

# GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION

As transportation and communication systems expanded in the postwar era, the legacies of European Cubism and Constructivism gained increasing influence around the globe. Artists in many regions of the world began making works in which they conceived of space as the intersection of lines, shapes, colors, and planes on an implicit grid where endless experiments could unfold. This approach flourished concurrently and in sharp contrast to the subjective, gestural style of Abstract Expressionism.

In Latin America, geometric abstraction—also known as Concrete Art—became the primary currency for a new generation of avant-garde artists in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the urban centers of Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Uruguay, a geometric aesthetic was closely linked to contemporaneous projects of national modernization and utopian visions of rationalism, internationalism, and social progress. After 1959, however, a number of artists experimented with more irregular geometries and unusual colors and materials as a way of introducing individualism, sensuality, or interactivity into their art. Women artists were strikingly prominent and made formative contributions within the many progressive artistic circles in Latin America.

# REDUCTIVE ABSTRACTION

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of artists reacted against the subjective, emotionally charged gestures of Abstract Expressionism by creating works that minimize any evidence of personal touch. Their paintings and sculptures feature flat, uninflected surfaces and simplified, mathematically regular forms, often based on a grid. Many of these artists were influenced by perceptual psychology and gave particular consideration to the way viewers would physically engage with their works. Their approach marked the beginning of a questioning of conventions regarding how art could be made or experienced, an attitude that would lead to even more fervently unorthodox practices as the 1960s unfolded. This new movement toward extremely reductive geometry, which was centered in New York but had national and international corollaries, came to be known as Minimalism (though many artists resisted that label). Along with dozens of men whose work was heralded under this umbrella, there were a few key women, most of whom pursued their uncompromising visions at a certain distance from the mainstream of the movement.



# FIBER AND LINE

In the 1960s, many artists began to explore the expressive potential of fiber and weaving. Foremost among them were women. Reclaiming the historical coding of weaving as “women’s work,” challenging the notion of textiles as domestic and functional commodities, and upending the boundaries between fine art and craft, they developed a new genre of sculpture known as fiber art. Early pioneer Lenore Tawney named her innovative works “woven forms,” underlining the jump from the floor or wall into space. Drawing inspiration from ancient textile traditions, artists working with fiber crocheted, knotted, looped, wove, and sewed, using synthetic and natural fibers, and unexpected materials such as wire. Like their Minimalist contemporaries, they worked with and against the grid—inherent to weaving, in which the vertical threads of the warp interlace the horizontal threads of the weft. The logic of weaving also asserted itself in the form of gridded, webbed, and thread-like lines in works on paper.

# ECCENTRIC ABSTRACTION

In the 1960s, a number of artists began incorporating non-art materials into their work. These included both innovative technologies such as latex or polyurethane and the detritus of industry or everyday life. Women artists were key pioneers of this new direction for abstraction. By proposing mediums and methods that went beyond the familiar confines of painting and sculpture, women created a new space for their work within the cracks of the existing order. Their objects call attention to how they were made, and as a result they often take on a powerful tactility and suggest bodily functions. Employing organic, sometimes projectile forms and raw or viscous matter, these artists injected subversive, abject, and obliquely feminist content into the rhetoric of aesthetic purity and transcendence that had been one of the defining threads of postwar modernism. This new tendency was first identified by the critic and art historian Lucy Lippard, who curated the landmark exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* for the Fischbach Gallery, New York, in 1966.