

America you don't really want to go to war.  
America it's them bad Russians.  
Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians.  
The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad.  
She wants to take our cars from out our garages.  
- "America," Allen Ginsberg, 1956

War is *always* about money and money is *always* about power and influence. Since the germinal days of President George Washington, U.S. foreign policy has advocated for an isolationist sensibility - that a focus on national security holds more importance than global intervention and that Americans need not die fighting causes that don't directly affect U.S. soil. Yet, while most governments have historically treated war as a means of obtaining what they desire in the face of power and influence, the United States has proven itself to be no different. Retrospectively, there are so few years that the United States government *hasn't* been engaged in an armed conflict that the struggle for unmatched power has undeniably always been at the forefront of its ideology. When the U.S. formally entered into World War I in 1917 it became clear that non-interventionism was no longer a guiding principle; American "exceptionalism" and "war" became synonymous with one another. World War II functioned in a similar sense, however this time the United States entered into the war specifically to combat certain evils - Hitler's Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and imperial Japan. So "united" were they in their quest to overthrow totalitarian regimes that they allied with their own enemy: the Soviet Union. Relations with the Soviets had been rocky since the declaration of a Bolshevik outcome in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Instigated by this revolution, and the ceasefire of WWI, western Europe and the United States began to consider Russia and its Communistic ideology to be the most

destructive of forces. Any discord, however, was put on hold when Germany invaded Russia and Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, spurring each country's involvement in the war. Yet, when Germany and Japan surrendered in 1945 after the U.S., in an ultimate show of power, dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki relations between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. once again began to crumble. The two world superpowers began engaging in a conflict that would alter the course of globalism forever - the Cold War.

Considered "cold" because no armed conflicts technically took place, the Cold War was fought via Intelligence espionage, propagandic media and advertisements, a contentious arms race and a series of proxy wars in the eastern hemisphere all in the name of either denouncing or endorsing communism. It was truly a new prototype of war and each country knew it to be of the utmost importance to enlist as many affiliates as possible. As one method of coercing intellectuals to denounce communism, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began pouring massive amounts of money into front organizations that would in turn fund artistic exhibitions of modern art abroad as a means of capitalist propaganda. Their hope was to display the West's artistic and cultural affluence, and they believed that by exhibiting American modern art in both communist-controlled countries and countries considered to be on the borderline between capitalism and communism the seeds of "Americanism" and its cultural prowess could be planted in the minds of many. These "long-leash operations"<sup>1</sup> ranged from government-established initiatives such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) to institutions like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and their international programs, which were supported by powerfully wealthy families in cahoots with the government.

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<sup>1</sup> "Modern art was CIA 'weapon'," *The Independent*, Oct. 1995, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>.

Perhaps the most famous of these wealthy families was the Rockefellers, who founded MoMA in 1932. Even prior to U.S. involvement in either World War, anti-communist sentiment was alive and well and the Rockefellers were huge perpetrators of this attitude. In 1932, Nelson Rockefeller commissioned Diego Rivera to paint *Man at the Crossroads*, a fresco to serve as the focal point of Rockefeller Center's lobby. At this point, Rivera had proven his substantial artistic ability and was considered one of the most famous painters alive. He typically made art for public consumption, which Rockefeller saw value in. Despite accurately depicting scenes of contemporary American life, Rivera's final product was different than Rockefeller expected. He had included elements that were not in the original sketches, namely a depiction of Vladimir Lenin, which he refused to remove. The mural was chiseled off the day before Rivera was due to finish it.<sup>2</sup> Rockefeller's experience with Diego Rivera (a Realist) played a large role in his decision to establish MoMA's international program - he wanted nothing to do with realism and instead saw promise in modern art. To Rockefeller, and other paranoid jingoes at the time, realism was too distinctly Russian. It had long been the official criterion for U.S.S.R. artworks, with Socialist Realism considered the state sponsored artistic genre of the Communist Party. According to Marie Gasper-Hulvat, an Assistant Professor of Art History at Kent State University, for Russian painters the idea behind Socialist Realism was, "to paint how they think the world should be; What they think ought to happen. By painting the ideal of the future, they will create the future."

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<sup>2</sup> "Destroyed By Rockefellers, Mural Trespassed On Political Vision," *National Public Radio*, March 9, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/03/09/287745199/destroyed-by-rockefellers-mural-trespassed-on-political-vision>

Take Yuri Pimenov's *New Moscow*, for example. Still currently on display in the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the image is wrought with Soviet cultural indicators. The artist used oil on canvas and the piece measures roughly 140 x 170 cm. Painted in 1937, 20 years after the Revolution, the work can be seen as propaganda of Stalin's plan to reorganize Soviet society into the kind of culture that Lenin had dreamt of. The painting is from the perspective of convertible backseat, driven by a young woman. She is driving down a busy boulevard with



many cars, electrical wires, street lamps, massive buildings and city-dwelling people surrounding her as she goes. In the windshield, a lively red carnation hangs proudly - the flower of the 1917 Revolution and a symbol for the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> This is not a photographic snapshot, but an idealized image of a would-be society. The

people on the streets are not capitalist consumers, but instead are Pimenov's attempt to depict happy people, dressed in bright colors, satisfied with their lives and perhaps on their way home from work. The fact that a woman is driving is also significant. It indicates a liberated status, as does her short hair which points to the fact that she is not an old woman but a *new* woman in *new* Moscow. Young, vibrant and supporting of the Soviet regime, the image is trying to convey energy and enthusiasm at the possibilities available in the newly established communist society.

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<sup>3</sup> "Red Carnation Revolutionary Flower," *Soviet Art*, 2016, <http://soviet-art.ru/red-carnation-revolutionary-flower/>

Needless to say, the United States was not happy with positive demonstrations of Communist ideals, nor with the fact that Russian painters showed promise in terms of artistic ability. At first, the U.S. took a leaf from Russia's socialist book and in 1935 established The Works Progress Administration (WPA) as part of Franklin Roosevelt's (FDR) Second New Deal. The goal of the program was to employ the mass-unemployed. Out of 10 million jobless citizens in the United States in 1935, 3 million were given WPA jobs.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this was one of the first programs that the government used to present America's artistic prosperity, as well as a belief in the importance of art and artists to societal well-being. Among these newly employed workers were artists enlisted to paint social realist murals in public places like post offices and train stations. What's more, the WPA provided an occupational avenue for artists to focus solely on artistic development. Interestingly, many of these artists would go on to become renowned Abstract Expressionists, such as Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock<sup>5</sup>. Unfortunately, the program was short-lived. World War II thrust the country into the shambles of war once again and New Deal employment programs were rendered obsolete due to a shortage of workers.

It's important to note that during World War II the United States and Russia dawned a the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend mentality. These two forces were by no means in accordance with one another - capitalism and communism are fundamentally opposing philosophies and FDR and Joseph Stalin were not made to forget that. According to the U.S. Department of State, "The alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II developed out of necessity, and out of a shared realization that each country needed the

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<sup>4</sup>"FDR Creates the WPA," *History*, May 6, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fdr-creates-the-wpa>

<sup>5</sup>Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* (May 1973).

other. Ideological differences were subordinated, albeit temporarily, to the common goal of defeating fascism.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, motivated by the Nazi defeat of France in the summer of 1940, FDR and his CIA began to grow wary of the increasing encroachment of the Germans on capitalist territory and made diplomatic maneuvers to improve relations with the Soviet Union. Come the end of the war, however, and despite the establishment of the United Nations, these ideological differences between the U.S. and Russia caused such bitter dissension that in April 1947 the conflict was coined by Bernard Baruch, a presidential adviser, as the Cold War: “We are today in the midst of a Cold War. Our enemies are to be found abroad and at home. Let us never forget this: Our unrest is the heart of their success.”

This war was not just about atomic bombs and Browning machine guns, it was about cultural paranoia with each side vying for ultimate significance. It was a haunting suspicion that leaked into everyday life. It was about making “them Russians” into the bogeyman. Likewise, the Russians were using their power and influence to paint Americans as fat, greedy, culturally-challenged individuals - ones with no sense of state pride or patriotism. Now more than ever the United States needed to establish cultural and societal prominence, and what better way to do this than via modern art.

At first, the CIA attempted to fund MoMA exhibitions directly. In 1946, the Department of State forked out roughly \$49,000 of taxpayer money (roughly \$665,000 today) to purchase 79 oil paintings by 45 well-known artists from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>“The United States, the Soviet Union, and the End of World War II,” *U.S. Department of State*, May 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/46345.htm>

<sup>7</sup> “Historical Controversy of "Advancing American Art" Revisited,” *KGOU*, March 18 2013, <http://kgou.org/post/historical-controversy-advancing-american-art-revisited>

The show was titled “Advancing American Art” and was shown in Paris, Prague, Czechoslovakia, the Caribbean, Cuba and then Haiti, but was abruptly cancelled before shows in Hungary, Poland, and Venezuela due to heavy criticism. The criticism festered not only because they had used taxpayer money to buy art that the average taxpayer would never actually see, but also because many of the artists included were known to have communist ties<sup>8</sup>. Thus, “facing intense disapproval by Congress with the prospect of losing all funding for its cultural programs abroad, the State Department chose to recall the exhibition and the paintings were soon sold at auction.”<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the government came up with a more surreptitious way of funding exhibitions. In 1950 in Berlin the CIA covertly established the Congress of Cultural Freedom (CCF). It wasn’t until 1968 that the information regarding the CCF’s CIA-ties were exposed. The main purpose of the CCF was to show that capitalist democracy was more compatible with the flourishing of culture than communism. Through the funding of arts and literary magazines such as *Encounter*, orchestral concerts of city philharmonics, art exhibitions, news publications, as well as international conferences focused on scientific progress, the CCF was able to spread its anti-leftist agenda in over 35 countries.<sup>10</sup> Their aim was to build a reputation of Western artists and intellectuals whose work could be viewed as, “supportive (or at least uncritical) of American foreign policy and free trade, and to show Western Europe as somewhere where the arts were

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<sup>8</sup>“Historical Controversy of "Advancing American Art" Revisited,” *KGOU*, March 18 2013, <http://kgou.org/post/historical-controversy-advancing-american-art-revisited>

<sup>9</sup>“Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy,” *Georgia Museum of Art*, 2014, <http://georgiamuseum.org/art/exhibitions/on/art-interrupted>

<sup>10</sup>“Origins of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1949-50,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Jun 27, 2008, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/95unclass/Warner.html>

both supported and allowed to flourish uninhibited by the elite.”<sup>11</sup> The CCF posed considerable questions in the face of government interference. While the concept of a well-funded cultural institution is appealing to artistic promotion, the fact that the government was making decisions which then influenced public consumption was a semi-new idea and one that would have lasting effects on America as an intellectual safehaven. Perhaps Frances Stonor Saunders states it best, "The real point was not that the possibility of dissent had been irrevocably damaged or that intellectuals had been coerced or corrupted (though that may have happened too), but that the natural procedures of intellectual enquiry had been interfered with.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet, perhaps the most effective tool the government used in promoting modern art as a means of capitalist propaganda was the MoMA and its establishment of its international program in 1952. The brainchild of Nelson Rockefeller (and incited by the *Man at a Crossroads* debacle), the program was set up to receive a five year annual grant of \$125,000 (roughly \$1,100,000 today) from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of MoMA’s international program was overtly political: “To let it be known especially in Europe that America was not the cultural backwater that Russians, during that tense period called ‘the cold war,’ were trying to demonstrate that it was”<sup>14</sup> In her 1974 essay *Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War*, Eva Cockcroft writes, “In terms of cultural propaganda, the functions of both the CIA cultural

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<sup>11</sup>“The Cultural Cold War: Corporate and State Intervention in the Arts,” *Lib Com*, Sept. 2006, <http://libcom.org/history/articles/cultural-cold-war/>

<sup>12</sup>Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 344.

<sup>13</sup>“Building a Continent: The Museum of Modern Art and the Politics of Circulating Images,” *The Rockefeller Archive Center*, 2010, <http://rockarch.org/publications/resrep/delreal.php?printer=1>

<sup>14</sup>James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 383.

apparatus and MoMA's international programs were similar and, in fact, mutually supportive.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, unlike other governmental agencies unsubtly employing methods of red-baiting, the CIA and MoMA’s cultural projects provided well-funded and even trendy arguments and exhibitions needed to convince those behind the iron curtain of the advantages of life and art in a capitalist society. In order to do so effectively, a new type of American painting needed to be discovered and, thus, the meteoric rise of Abstract Expressionism was initiated. Cockcroft states, “In the world of art, Abstract Expressionism constituted the ideal style for these propaganda activities. It was the perfect contrast to ‘the regimented, traditional, and narrow’ nature of socialist realism. It was new, fresh and creative. Abstract Expressionism could show the United States as culturally up-to-date in competition with Paris.” Russell Lynes, writing of this new international branch of MoMA, states that the museum now had the entire world to "proselytize" with what he considered the "exportable religion" of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>16</sup>

Declared the artistic "coming of age" of the United States, Abstract Expressionist paintings were exported abroad almost immediately.<sup>17</sup> Holland-born Willem de Kooning's work was included in the U.S. representation at the Venice Biennale as early as 1948 (he became a U.S. citizen in 1962). By 1950, de Kooning was joined by Jackson Pollock. By 1956, a MoMA show called "Modern Art in the U.S." unveiled Abstract Expressionist works by Mark Rothko, Pollock and de Kooning and toured eight European cities, including Vienna, Austria and

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<sup>15</sup>Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum*, Vol. 15, no. 10 (June 1974), 39-49

<sup>16</sup>“Building a Continent: The Museum of Modern Art and the Politics of Circulating Images,” *The Rockefeller Archive Center*, 2010, <http://rockarch.org/publications/resrep/delreal.php?printer=1>

<sup>17</sup> Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum*, Vol. 15, no. 10 (June 1974), 39-49

Belgrade, Serbia.<sup>18</sup> In 1958-1959, another MoMA show titled “The New American Painting” included works by de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, Grace Hartigan and more and was shown in Basel, Milan, Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and London.<sup>19</sup> This particular show offers a prime example of how swiftly and covertly the CIA was working to present these exhibitions by using “beard” or front operations: In Paris, the “The New American Painting” show met obstacles when attempting to transport the art to London. The CIA sought out millionaire MoMA board member Julius Fleischmann Jr. and asked him to provide the funds (via the Fairfield Foundation, a CIA run cultural charity) that would enable the art to be moved to London’s Tate Gallery. He quickly obliged.<sup>20</sup> According to Tom Braden, the first chief of the CIA’s International Organizations Division and the executive secretary of MoMA in 1949, “Setting up beard foundations on the fly was not as difficult as one might imagine.”<sup>21</sup>

MoMA’s many exhibitions abroad were hugely successful in promoting American art, mostly due to the impact this new aesthetic had on unsuspecting viewers. But why Abstract Expressionism? And why these artists? Of the many Abstract Expressionists who established their names via the



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<sup>18</sup> Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum*, Vol. 15, no. 10 (June 1974), 39-49

<sup>19</sup>“The New American Painting, large exhibition, Leaves for year-long European tour under auspices of international council at Museum of Modern Art,” *Museum of Modern Art*, March 11 1958, [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/2342/releases/MOMA\\_1958\\_0025.pdf?2010](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/2342/releases/MOMA_1958_0025.pdf?2010).

<sup>20</sup> Brian Kannard, *Steinbeck: Citizen Spy* (Nashville: Grave Distractions Publications, 2013), 31.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Kannard, *Steinbeck: Citizen Spy* (Nashville: Grave Distractions Publications, 2013), 33.

genre, some of the most commercialized by MoMA were Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko (Rothko being born in Russia obtained U.S. citizenship in 1938 after moving to New York City). The art of the Abstract Expressionists - who were all Americans, either by birth or via naturalization - was nonpolitical by nature, which appealed to the CIA's need to establish America as an artistic resource, not just a politically opinionated canvas. The art was also often simplistic in ways. Unlike the realism of Soviet art, or even the regionalist work that was already coming out of the United States, Abstract Expressionism offered a purely aesthetic experience and typically lacked any jarring social commentary. Mark Rothko's paintings, for example while exploring such themes as color theory, are decorative at best. Rothko's *No. 10*, for instance, created in 1950 and shown in the "New American Painting" exhibition, employs roughly four oil paint colors - a bright yellow, a muted mint, a deep cerulean and a gray that looms in the background, poking out from behind its brighter constituents. The rectangles of color classify each as holding its own importance and the canvas as a whole, measuring at around 229.6 x 145.1 cm, appears suspended above a viewer as a psychedelic cloud might. Yet, the painting itself doesn't incite fear, sadness or excitement as a Socialist Realist piece like Pimenov's *New Moscow* may. Instead, it feels momentary and unaffected.

Likewise, Pollock's *Number 12*, created using oil paints on masonite and also shown in "New American Painting," has a momentary feeling as well. A viewer may *feel* the presence of the artist moving across (or rather, up) the canvas, however there are no figures, it is completely abstract. More astutely, it's numerous skeins may act as the painting's subject,<sup>22</sup> or maybe it's large (78.8 x 57.1 cm) canvas does. The individual colors don't stand to mean anything, they

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<sup>22</sup> Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 413.

simply blend with one another into one large composition. Either way, there is nothing about a Rothko or a Pollock that one would passionately react to - they exist only in the moment of looking at and admiring them. What this points to is a larger implication for using Abstract Expressionist art as propaganda: if the “people” in charge of society want a capable workforce who are going to work tirelessly to improve life for the whole of society they’re going to try to encourage art that is momentary - art that you



don't emotionally take with you. Art that doesn't make you think or ponder - again, like the social realist art of Russia might. By disregarding the social impetus that art *could* convey via its depiction of social truths, the government can effectively distract viewers from the realities of America's faulty capitalist system and in turn can make communism look like a colorless and disheartening quality of life.

To state that modern art, and namely Abstract Expressionism, was a weapon of the government almost sounds like an oxymoron. The avant-garde and the government are often contrary to each other, not cooperative. However, even skin-deep research into post-war CIA operations can show just how connected the CIA and MoMA were during this period - William Paley, a founding father of the CIA, sat on the MoMA international program members' board and John Hay Whitney, who had served in the CIA's predecessor, the OSS, was the board's

chairman.<sup>23</sup> What's more, even today most Americans have a skewed view of Russia and its culture. Perhaps they most often think of words like cold, alcoholic, unartistic, or authoritarian - superficial traits that most Russians would gladly combat with positive counters. What this points to, however, is a success on the part of the CIA in sculpting a collective public opinion.

In spite of this, it would be untrue to say that the artists sanctioned by Abstract Expressionism were aware or approving of the ties between their work and the propaganda it pushed. Perhaps it *is* possible to be moved by Abstract Expressionism in a way that is not completely apolitical. The freedom in their art-making that the Abstract Expressionists aimed for implies a revolutionary credo in regard to the American experience and even accepted behaviors of the time. They fought against these things with their art, and there is no doubt that Abstract Expressionism was something entirely new. However, if the CIA is skilled at anything, it's cleaning up their tracks. Accordingly, most of these artists had no idea that their work was being carefully selected as a means of fighting a war for societal and cultural domination, and because of this it remains a pure and reactionary art form. Barnett Newman, a color field painter, famously said of the Abstract Expressionists, "We felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world destroyed by a great depression and a fierce World War, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello."<sup>24</sup> Abstract Expressionism is not government art, it is expressionism at its finest and

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<sup>23</sup>"Modern art was CIA 'weapon'," *The Independent*, Oct. 1995, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html>.

<sup>24</sup>"Abstract Expressionism, an introduction," *SmartHistory*, August 9, 2015, <https://smarthistory.org/abstract-expressionism-an-introduction/>

despite it coming into a strange alliance with elite powers, there is as much to be said for the artistic enterprise of this art form as for the elite powers which took severe advantage of it.