

A  
CONVERSATION  
BETWEEN  
ADOLPH GOTTLIEB  
AND  
JACK BRECKENRIDGE

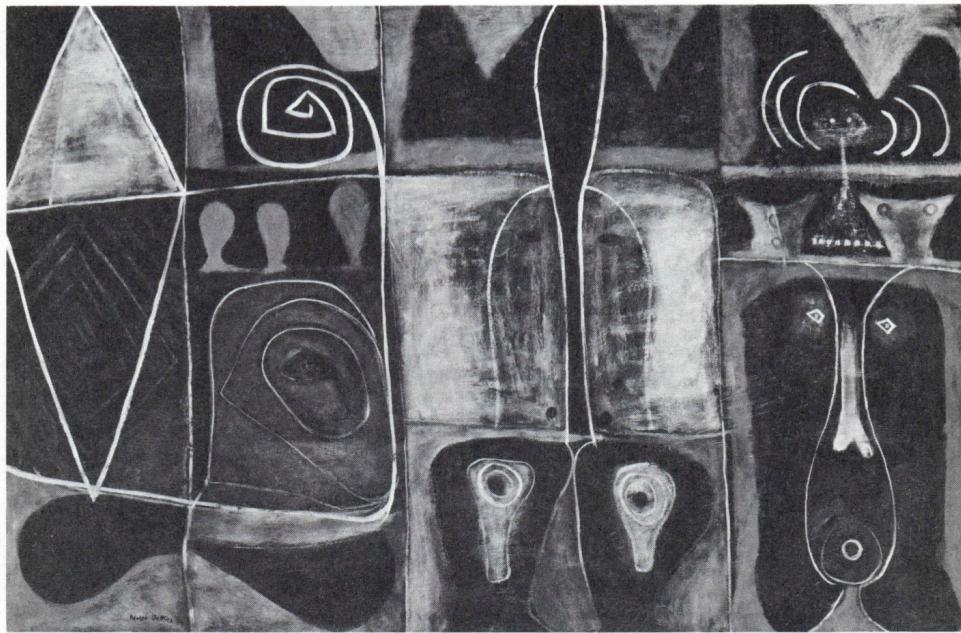
transcribed by Jack Breckenridge

*(In the spring of 1973 while on a vacation in Phoenix, Adolph Gottlieb agreed to speak to the art students at Arizona State University. At his request the presentation took the form of a conversation with me concerning the general topic "The Shift of the Art Capital From Paris to New York in the 1940s." He also volunteered to answer questions from the audience. Some of these questions were submitted in advance in writing and some were asked from the floor in the course of the evening.)*

*Gottlieb was confined to a wheel chair at this time with the left side of his body incapacitated and his speech was somewhat slowed. However, his mind was very quick and his sallies in answer to questions often brought forth quick laughter and applause from the nearly three hundred people in the audience.*

*The following pages contain substantial excerpts from the almost two hours of taped discussion and questions and answers of that evening. The evening began with a slide presentation of about fifty of Gottlieb's paintings. They were projected in chronological order on a large screen on the stage above the seated Gottlieb. The original plan was to show the slides without comment because Gottlieb had specifically asked to make no comments on the individual works. As he watched them flash on the screen, however, he was moved to begin his remarks by making a general observation about a change that took place in his work in the early 1950s. To illustrate this change I have included two illustrations. One shows the "all-over" manner to which he alluded in his opening remarks. The other painting is in his late manner and has special relevance to this conversation because it was painted during his stay in Phoenix.)*

(AG) There is something I would like to get across to you—it has to do with the different atmosphere and when I was young—as you may know, during the Forties most of us in New York were doing all-over painting. There was something in the air that made us do that. I don't know how to explain it, but we felt that was the way painting was going. It was all-over, there was no beginning and no end. I decided that I was tired of the



**1** Adolph Gottlieb, *Recurrent Apparition*. Permission of Marlborough Gallery Incorporated, New York.

paintings which were endless; which were all-over paintings. I decided that I would try to make paintings which had a focal point very much the way a portrait had. All of the paintings that were done after the Forties have that characteristic and I still retain that. As you can see there is a very defined focal point.

I must say that I am not prepared to make a lecture in the usual sense that we are accustomed to. I don't have the pedagogical approach. I think it is my prerogative as an old man to reminisce and go back to early days. I'll have a lot of loose ends which I hope will tie together. I think that you will find that they will tie together. I'll just go back to when I went to Europe for the first time in 1921. I worked my way over on the ship and had a lot of adventures which are another story. I eventually got to Paris and I did very little painting. I was going to the Grand Chaumière to a sketch class where I did sketches from life. While the instructor was supposed to be Lucien Simon, I never saw Mr. Simon. I just went and worked on my own. And I did something that was more useful, I went to the Louvre almost every day. I certainly went there every other day. I knew the Louvre very well. I could go in there and find my way to any painting that I was interested in seeing. I think this was the best experience that I could possibly have had because I think that the real university for any young artist is the museum which has a rich collection. I think it is much better to study with Poussin than study with Gottlieb. So you see in a sense I am very modest. At any rate, what I wanted to say was that those days were the days of the expatriates like Hemingway and others and it was considered to be very important to go to Europe for an American artist. American art at that point was—well, it was very much behind—about twenty-five years behind European art. The European Impressionists were about twenty-five years ahead of the American Impressionists. In fact, at that time American artists were waiting for the latest copy of *Cahiers d'Art* to see what was happening in Europe and that gave them a cue as to how to proceed. So I went to Europe and the best thing was the museums.

*(JB) What would you say to the young student who wishes to train himself today?*

Today I would say that he should go to New York and haunt the Metropolitan and other museums.

*And not worry about the Art Students' League?*

No, I don't think the Art Students' League would do him much good.

*You talked to me the other day about the importance of the shift of the art capital from Paris to New York.*

Well, I am very interested in that. I'll explain it to you. When I went to Paris and I lived in Europe for awhile I became a Francophile. There are many great French artists whom I admired so much that they impressed me for my whole life—older artists like Ingres, Delacroix, and Courbet. When I came back to New York I found there was a very deeply ingrained provincialism in the United States which seemed to stem from the Midwest and with it came a great deal of Midwestern painting that I thought was very bad. I'm talking about Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry. I think that, in a way, they created a vacuum into which the next generation could step.

*By being so bad?*

That's right—and I think that I should tell you that in the Forties there was a lot of talk among New York artists as to whether New York was going to be the art capital of the world. As a personal reminiscence my wife and I used to go to Provincetown in the summers in those days and in the summer of 1949 between my wife and myself and a friend of ours named Weldon Kees, who was a very sensitive poet and painter, and Fritz

Bultman, who was a painter and sculptor, we started something called Forum Forty-Nine. In the course of the summer we had a number of interesting exhibits and forums. The forums and exhibits took place in an old, no-longer-used, post office that we got the use of. Each of us took turns in organizing something and my turn came up, so I organized a forum called "French Art versus American Art." This created quite a bit of dissension. We didn't have any exhibit of French art, we had a discussion. We did show the American artists who were in Provincetown at the time. We invited a number of distinguished people to this forum, among them were Stuart Preston of the *New York Times* and Fred Wight, who now, I think, heads the art department at UCLA. Before the forum started there was a group of dissidents including Hans Hofmann and Fritz Bultman who wanted to hand out a mimeographed flyer to people who were coming in. So we said to them, "Don't hand it out, we'll give it to everyone who buys a ticket." The flyer read something to the effect that "... we are objecting to this program because we consider Paris the city of light and culture and light and culture have emanated from it for the past hundred years or more, so we are in disagreement with this topic." We then handed it out to everybody. After the forum there was a party at someone's house. While we were at the party, I went over to Hofmann. I said, "Hans, what did you really object to about this forum? Now that you've heard it, don't you think that it was all right? It was an interesting discussion." He said, "Well, I'll tell you, Adolph, you should have French art first." I asked, "Why?" He replied, "Because French art is better than American art." So I said, "We did say 'French Art versus American'." He said, "Well, then it's all right."

*Then, there was evidence, in your mind, by 1949 that . . .*

Oh, by 1949 we were afraid that we were being too chauvinistic about American art. So the question came up, were we right in being too chauvinistic? I took the position that we were entitled to it because as I saw it—well, I'll give you an example of what I mean. I was in the Kootz Gallery one time, and I was in this back private viewing room. This was in the middle Forties or the late Forties. Kootz had just been to Paris and had brought back one of the latest paintings of a young Parisian painter. To show it to this collector, he put it on a chair. Then the collector, to look at it more closely, got down and looked at it very closely, in fact, his knee touched the floor and I thought that was very symbolic—down on his knees before a French painting, because it was French. He would never have done that for a new American painting. At that point I decided that chauvinism was good for us.

*What do you think that this has meant to younger artists?*

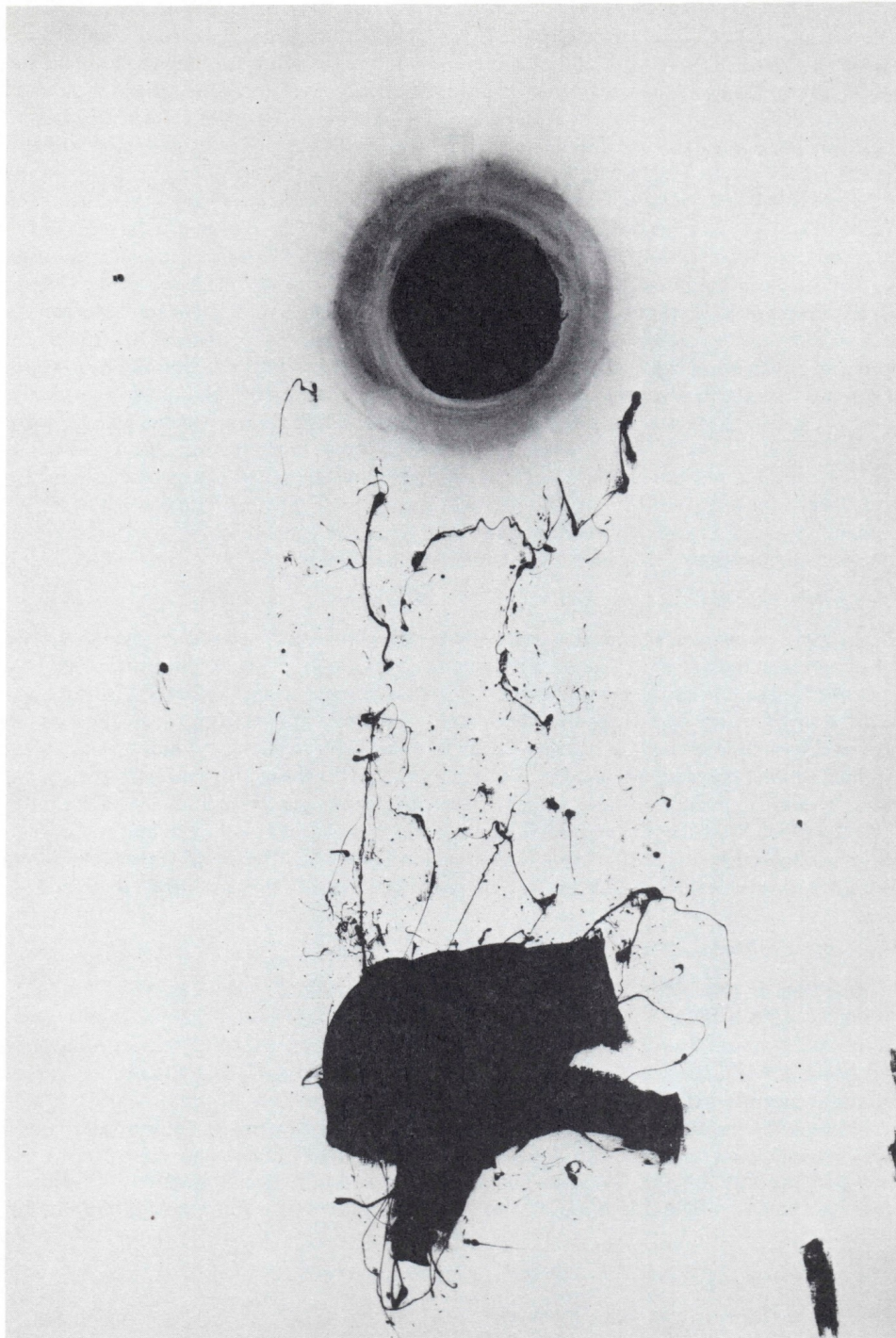
I think that it has given great freedom. As an example of what I mean, I was on a broadcast with a British critic—the broadcast was supposed to be for the BBC—and I made a point about this. I was discussing this business about American art in relation to European art and the ways it had been subservient to it. I said that France was like a colonial power in art and that we were the colonists; and that in the 1940s American artists took the tea and dumped it overboard and had their Declaration of Independence. I was curious to see how this would go over with the British. I later saw a transcript and they cut that out. I think the situation got reversed and America became the colonial power artistically. The Japanese and many others, including the French, became our subjects.

*Let's talk about the WPA. You worked for a time for the WPA?*

I did, yes. I think it was \$23.50 a week.

*A lot of people have said that this was a kind of apprenticeship for young artists of that time.*

I think the value of the WPA is vastly exaggerated.



**2** Adolph Gottlieb, *Burma Red*, (1973). Collection of Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, N.Y. Photograph courtesy of Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, N.Y.

*What do you think, then, of government support of the arts?*

I think that is very dangerous. It has a tendency to try to influence the artist. Just like dealers try to influence artists.

*Have they tried to influence you?*

Yes. Oh, sure. Either to maintain a style or to get certain qualities that they like or that they think are saleable.

*Do you believe that the dealer system is a bad system?*

No, I think that it is the best system that we have.

*Then you don't agree with the dissatisfied younger artists in New York. There are a number of dissatisfied young artists—*

Oh, yes, but in many cases it is a matter of sour grapes. They can't seem to adapt to the dealer system so they want to abolish it.

*How do younger painters go about breaking into this system?*

They have to make a little name for themselves among the New York artists. To be there, to be in group shows, and be part of the give and take.

*Then someone is not going to walk in from off the streets and knock the dealer dead with his work?*

No, that's very hard. The dealers are very jaded. They have so many artists come in every day and show them work. They can assume before hand that it will be no good.

*When you talked earlier about the "give and take" among artists, were you talking about something like that which went on in the Club in the late 1940s?*

Like the Club—where artists would express their views about what a painting should be and what it is, and others could attack.

*Where did you meet?*

We met in an empty loft on Eighth Street. Sometimes we would visit in other artists' studios and say whatever we thought.

*You just spoke right out?*

Well, we were friends.

*Do you still have a close association with many of those artists today?*

I don't. Most of us sort of outgrew this.

*There has been a good deal of talk about the influence in New York in the Forties of Europeans who arrived because of the war. People like Léger, Mondrian, Lipchitz, and others.*

Yes, I met a number of them.

*Do you feel that they exerted any kind of influence on American art or do you think that things had already been solidified by that time?*

I think that by that time Surrealism was a definite influence on American art because

the work was being shown in New York by various dealers. Then when the artists came over that showed us that they were just people like we were.

*Do you feel that there was an impact of Surrealism on your work during this period?*

Yes, I think so—definitely. There was a gallery in New York called Gallery Sixty-Seven. It had a show called “A Problem for Critics.” It included my work, Pollock’s, Rothko’s, Hofmann’s, and a number of others. The problem was how to characterize this work. Most of it had some Surrealist influence. A lot of it had some Cubist influence. I felt that the work we all were doing was kind of a merger of both—Surrealism and abstraction.

*Were you people interested in the abstraction of George L.K. Morris and the people in the American Abstract Artists group? Did you have much contact with them?*

No. Well, they were friendly. Actually, what happened, as I see it, was that the American Abstract group was very dogmatic about their idea of abstraction. If anybody had any figurative tendency at all his work was taboo. At that point, I, and a lot of other artists, didn’t share that view.

*You didn’t agree with the Metropolitan Museum, I believe, in 1950 when the eighteen of you—*

That’s right. That was the Pepsi-Cola show. The objection was that there were two local jurors in all parts of the country which would make it regional. I think part of our viewpoint was against regional art which was one of the big phases of American art. We felt that regional art was provincial and retrogressive.

*What you called the “Corn-Belt Academy” in your letter to the New York Times in 1943?*

That’s right. I’d forgotten about that.

*You wrote in Tiger’s Eye in 1947 about your art being “. . . the expression of the neurosis which is reality.” That sounds parallel to Surrealist concerns. What do you think of this in terms of your art today?*

Well, I think it has a relationship. You see, I was very much interested, as a lot of artists were, in Jung at the time. I accepted the idea of a universal unconscious.

*And by working in this kind of imagery you were getting to this universal unconscious by speaking a kind of common language. Yet, don’t I understand that you feel you are really not trying to paint for the masses?*

Good Lord, no. Just the reverse. You know what Gorky called Social Realism at the time? He called it poor art for poor people.

*(Reading a question submitted in advance) “How essential is it to the livelihood of the artist for his imagery to be recognizably his own and do you feel this degree of sameness is a compromise to maintain a level of success?”*

That’s a very good question. Every day an artist has to examine his feelings and ask himself if this is what he really wants. It becomes more difficult if you are successful because you might be doing something to satisfy a demand; a market that’s been created. Or you might be doing just the opposite to be perverse. I have a great deal of perversity in me, so I always have to question it. I assume that this is true of lots of artists. If they weren’t a little perverse in some way they wouldn’t be artists. They would conform to something.

*The common question from students submitted to me in advance was, "Who or what had the greatest influence on your work?"*

Oh, Cimabue. He has a very forceful image.

*(Reading) "In your earlier pictograph paintings even though individual, personal symbols were compartmented, the surface treatment of the painting appeared to have an all-over sameness. In later "Blast" pictures a different approach is employed in the execution of the top half of the painting from that used in the bottom half. What is your feeling about the idea, perhaps best exemplified by the color-field painters, that a painting should be all of one piece?"*

That's a good question. I'll try to explain it. When I did the pictograph paintings I was thinking of them as all-over paintings, with no focal point and no beginning—they ran out on all four sides. And I reached a point where I felt that I had enough of all-over painting and that it was a kind of New York mania. I wanted to buck the other painters and all I had been doing, so I reversed myself and decided to make paintings with a definite focal point, which at the same time would control in some subtle way the space of painting. I think it's just as simple as that. Just that I decided I might go do a different kind of painting.

*In your later works, do you use trowels and other kinds of devices on the bottom part of those paintings where one sees those big strokes?*

I work in many ways. I try everything. Miro once said that he tried everything including urinating on the painting. I doubt that he did it.

*(Reading) "Many people sincerely feel that Jackson Pollock is the greatest painter of our century. How do you feel about this?"*

I think that he is vastly over-rated. I think he used to seem to be a violent painter. He now seems to me to be a gentle, lyrical painter, especially in the painting at the Met called "Autumn Rhythm." It is a very gentle, lyrical painting. And when you met him as a man, if you got him when he was sober, he was very gentle.

*(From the Floor) In your opinion what should be the function of an art instructor in a university?*

I am very much in wonder as to what the function of the instructor is. I don't think the instructor can make an artist out of someone who isn't an artist. I think that you are an artist when you start or you're not. There is no such thing as an art student unless you accept the idea that you are a student all of your life. I don't think that the university is the good place at all. I think the place to go is to a museum. You have to go and look at Chardin and Courbet and see how they did it. If you don't have the capacity to learn, nobody can give it to you. Years ago the big question was that everyone was looking for a key or a clue; some sort of a formula for making a work of art. Nobody ever found it.

*(From the Floor) What is your opinion of the art of 1960s; Funk and Junk, Op and Pop, Minimal art, and art of the 1970s?*

I think that my generation is largely responsible for a lot of it and I feel ashamed for us.

*In what way do you feel responsible?*

Anything could be a work of art—almost anything—and the artist was completely free to do anything he chose.

*(From the Floor) You implied that contrary to painting for the masses, your art was a very personal and private statement. I wonder if that could be extended to invalidate the*

*political and social art forms?*

I think the didactic art that the Mexicans tried to do had no value because whatever message they had could have been gotten across to the masses better by television or the movies. The same thing is true in the Soviet Union. Their painters, I believe, convinced very few people.

*(From the Floor) I wasn't thinking in terms of "convincing," but rather "commenting."*

Oh, "commenting." If there is no convincing, what value is the comment?

*(From the Floor) I wonder if you have ever experimented with polymer or other synthetic paints?*

I have used acrylics, that's all. I think that one of the worst things about contemporary painting is the excessive use of acrylics and masking tapes.

*(From the Floor) When you say that the Abstract Expressionists have become a major influence in the world, was the acceptance gradual or overnight—as a group or individually? How did it happen?*

It took many years to get acceptance. That put us in the position of being part of the establishment which wasn't very comfortable.

*(From the Floor) Can you comment on what the function of critics might be, if any—critics like Greenberg or Rosenberg?*

I think people like Greenberg or Rosenberg have a great deal of influence.

*Do you think it is all to the good?*

Frankly, if they are on my side, I think it is good.

*(From the Floor) In titling your paintings, how do you come about the wording if, as you say, the subjects are very personal and not able to be understood by using words.*

I have a great deal of difficulty with titles. I like them to be ambiguous. I look at the painting and I try to think of what it suggests. I'll come up with that kind of a title which is ambiguous. It is very generalized and somewhat abstracted.

*(From the Floor) You were saying that students should go to a museum. Do you mean by this that a serious art student should study the big names and imitate their styles before starting his or her own style?*

Yes, the big names. I don't think they will form their own style until they have done that.

*(From the Floor) Is it a lot harder for a woman to get established—to get a name? If it is, how much longer will it take?*

I think it is harder for a woman especially if she is black.

*(From the Floor) How long was it before you became self-supporting from your art?*

It wasn't until about the 1950s. There was a parallel question asked by a student when I was teaching at UCLA, "Mr. Gottlieb, about how much do you make a year from your paintings?" I said that is between me and the Treasury Department.