

GESTURE AND MATTER

INTERNATIONAL ABSTRACTIONS (1945-1965)

Exhibition from 13.05 to 7.09.26

After World War II, a new artistic movement – abstract, gestural and matterist – spread out from Paris. With the trauma of war and techniques of mass extermination laid bare, artists felt that they needed to wipe the slate clean, to “start from scratch as if painting didn’t exist” (Barnett Newman). The influence of Surrealism had also imposed the notions of the unconscious and automatism*, leading the proponents of this new form of abstraction to opt for spontaneous gestures and invent new ways of covering the canvas.

After 1945, Paris became the centre of the artistic world once again for a time, now rivalled by New York. The French capital acted as a platform for abstraction, supported by a dense network of galleries and a new generation of art critics. It drew European artists, often fleeing authoritarian regimes in their home countries, but also Americans and many artists from Asia. The “Gesture and Matter” exhibition looks back at the international development of this abstract expressionism over two decades.

málaga



Ciudad
de Málaga

**Centre Pompidou
Málaga**

A few definitions

Lyrical Abstraction

A pictorial movement that gained momentum in France from 1947 on, developing around the duo formed by critic Jean José Marchand and painter Georges Mathieu. It was characterised by an emphasis on gesture, spontaneity and a focus on the lyricism of colour and on signs inspired by calligraphy. Today, the term is often applied to the French gestural abstraction scene of the 1950s.

Action Painting

Coined in 1952 by American art critic Harold Rosenberg, this term refers to a new way of painting that emerged in New York in the 1940s, in which the artist's whole body was involved in the process. Inspired by the automatic writing* of surrealism, this art form was imbued with a vitality that likened it to abstract expressionism*. Essentially non-figurative, its subject was the very act of painting, caught in the urgency of communicating the impulse.

All-Over Painting

A pictorial practice that consists in covering the whole surface of the painting, which seems to extend beyond its edges. It removes the problem of planes and that of the relationship between the background and the shape. American abstract expressionist* artists used this technique extensively and Jackson Pollock drew on it when he developed his dripping* technique in 1945.

Informal Art

A European branch of post-war abstract painting that stood as a counterpart to American abstract expressionism*. It developed largely in France, where it was theorised by critic Michel Tapié. The works by informal artists were very diverse, but their main traits included gestural freedom, emphasis on the pictorial matter and improvisation, which allowed a great force of expression.

Automatism

A creative technique that focuses on the free expression of the unconscious. Psychic automatism was encouraged by André Breton in his *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924. This rejection of reason and quest for spontaneity found an echo in informal art* and abstract expressionism*, particularly among artists who used a type of calligraphy.

Biomorphism

From the Greek *bios* (life) and *morphè* (form). In the 20th-century art world, this term referred to the use of organic forms that recalled the natural realm, particularly in surrealism (such as in works by Jean Arp and Joan Miró). In painting, biomorphism was reflected in gestural spontaneity and automatism*.

Dripping

A term used to refer to the pictorial technique developed by Janet Sobel and made popular by Jackson Pollock, consisting in letting paint drip onto a substrate placed on the floor.

Abstract Expressionism

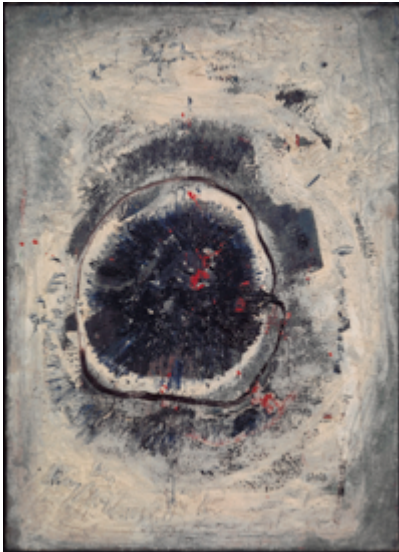
A movement that emerged in New York in the 1940s. Most of these artists practised gestural painting carried out with great energy. They chose large canvases and applied paint with brushes that were sometimes extremely big, letting it run or even throwing it directly onto the substrate. Initially only applied to American art, the term's definition can now be broadened to cover all gestural artists active in the post-war period.

Gutai

A Japanese movement that was founded in 1954 and disbanded in 1972 after the death of its founder, Jiro Yoshihara. The word is the contraction of *gu* (instrument) and *tai* (body) and means "the body as an instrument". French art critic Michel Tapié, who travelled to Japan in 1957, played a vital role in promoting the movement in France and Europe. The Gutai artists often made their works *in situ* in front of an audience and thus influenced happenings and performance art.

“Art of Another Kind”

In 1952, art critic Michel Tapié, principal advocate of “informal art*”, gathered abstract artists who rejected both figurative elements and geometrical shapes under the label of “art autre”, or art of another kind. In the immediate post-war period, two such artists inaugurated this new way of painting, presented by Galerie René Drouin from 1945 on: **Jean Fautrier**, whose work *Otages* (Hostages) gave an existential, almost tragic dimension to this form of abstraction; and German artist **Wols**, who proposed a biomorphic*-inspired, non-figurative language first in watercolours, then in paintings. Wols’ paintings fascinated the young **Georges Mathieu**: already receptive to Surrealism, like his friend **Camille Bryen**, he too covered the canvas with abstract forms, stains, drips and thick layers of colour straight from the tube.



Wols, *Grenade bleue* [Blue Grenade], 1946.
Oil on canvas, 46 x 33 cm

“This vigilant and mute automatism* does not burst forth in lightning strikes, it is a controlled process of maturing.”

Jean-Paul Sartre on Wols



Joan Mitchell, *Sans titre* [Untitled], 1954.
Oil on canvas, 254 x 203,7 cm

“On the floor, I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting.”

Jackson Pollock

Transatlantic exchanges

Though New York’s artistic and intellectual scene came out of World War II stronger, young American artists nevertheless continued to turn towards Paris. Former Air Force pilot **Sam Francis** spent a number of years in the French capital. As for **Jackson Pollock**, a key figure in action painting*, he was the subject of an exhibition in Europe for the first time at Studio Facchetti in 1952. His all-over* compositions caused a sensation, along with his technique of dripping* paint, marking a wide range of artists from **Georges Mathieu** to **François Arnal**. Often made on large-format canvases, these artists’ works were marked by an intense gestural approach and a physical relationship to the medium. The canvas became a performative space, as was the case for American painters, such as **Joan Mitchell**, who was also living in Paris at the time. Mathieu worked for a transatlantic shipping company and was well-placed to foster dialogue between North American and European abstract artists, as in the exhibition “Véhémences confrontées” (Confronted Vehemence) at Galerie Nina Dausset in 1951.

Black is a Colour

Named after the title of an exhibition at Galerie Maeght in 1946, this section features abstract artists that turned to the restraint and solemnity of black. In the aftermath of war, **Pierre Soulages** became known for thick calligraphic symbols painted in walnut stain, the first pieces in a body of work dedicated almost exclusively to the colour black. Like **André Marfaing**, Soulages explored the full visual and expressive potential of strong contrasts with white. This chromatic minimalism makes the artist's vocabulary of gestures even more visible, along with the more or less ductile qualities of the materials. While **Gérard Schneider** drew inspiration from music, opting for vigorous brushstrokes, **Hans Hartung** enlarged his ink on paper across the canvas. The opposition between black and white can also instil a feeling of gravity, or even tragedy, as in the work of **Antonio Saura**, which draws on the great tradition of baroque Spanish painting.



Antonio Saura, *Inès*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm



Kazuo Shiraga, *Chizensei Konseimao (Nature Planet)*, July 1960. Oil on canvas, 161,5 x 130 cm

**"My painting becomes unreadable.
Still lifes and flowers no longer exist.
I tend towards an imaginary, indecipherable
form of writing."**

Zao Wou-Ki

Asia/The West

**"It is an emotional state that causes me to
draw lines, to create certain forms, in order
to try to transmit and inspire
a similar emotion."**

Hans Hartung

Despite the draw of the United States on many young Japanese artists, several chose to move to France in the 1950s. These included **Toshimitsu Imai** and **Key Sato**, who oriented their abstract creation around working with the canvas, creating references to the telluric dimension of nature. In 1957, critic Michel Tapié visited Japan accompanied by Georges Mathieu, which intensified the relationship between the Parisian scene and the Gutai* movement. This avant-garde group was founded in 1954 and included key figures such as **Kazuo Shiraga**, who reconsidered the artist's relationship to the canvas and the pictorial material with spectacular energy. The same attention to nature runs through the works of Chinese artist **Zao Wou-Ki**, who arrived in Paris in 1948 and devoted himself to a refined synthesis between abstract gestures and Far-East landscape tradition. There were also Western artists fascinated by zen spirituality and calligraphy, such as **Jean Degottex** and **Mark Tobey**, who moved more towards an art of signs.

European dissemination

Throughout the 1950s, a dense network of international galleries, magazines and critics disseminated and promoted gestural abstraction, which became a common language all over Europe. In Franco's Spain, with **Manolo Millares**, as in Communist Poland, with future playwright **Tadeusz Kantor**, this aesthetic was seen as a space for resistance to the dominant cultural dogma. In West Germany, painter **Ernst Wilhelm Nay** stands as an example of artistic freedom in the face of an East German cultural policy that was hostile to abstraction on principle. However, from the mid-1960s on, gestural and matter-ist painting began to fade out as a return to figuration dawned, with Pop art in the United States, Nouveau réalisme and Figuration narrative in France, and Equipo Crónica in Spain. **Michel Parmentier's** work, which concludes this exhibition, provides the transition between this gestural language and more radical and minimalist approaches of abstraction.



Michel Parmentier, *Peinture n°6* [[Painting no.6], 1963. Oil, wax, pencil and collaged papers on canvas, 162 x 130 cm

“Art is neither a reflection nor a transposition of reality; it is a response to reality.”

Tadeusz Kantor

El Paso (1957-1960)

El Paso (“The Step” or “The Passage”) was an artistic group formed in Madrid in 1957 in opposition to the censorship and obscurantism of Franco's military dictatorship. Its members included painters Antonio Saura, Rafael Canogar, Manolo Millares and Luis Feito, and critic José Ayllón.

Their practice was characterised by formal austerity and metaphysical aspirations. El Paso placed emphasis on the freedom of creation through the language of informal art. The group's artists aimed to create a rupture that would lead to the transformation of Spanish society, organising actions to disseminate their art and relay their claims across the country: they signed two manifestos, published a bulletin, held exhibitions and conferences and took part in the international “Arte Otro” event, presented by Michel Tapié in Barcelona in 1957. However, the renown of the El Paso artists crystallised certain contradictions and dissensions and the group disbanded in 1960.

“El Paso is an *activity* that aims to create a new mindset within the Spanish art world. [...] El Paso intends to create a climate that allows the free development of art and the artist and will fight to overcome the acute crisis that Spain is undergoing in the field of the visual arts.”

Manifesto of El Paso, 1957

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Family tour



Labels designed for
children are available
in the exhibition
to help families

discover a selection of works
throughout the tour.

Guided tours

The mediation team offers you
guided tours to discover the
works from the exhibition, in
an active and sensitive way.

Individual tours

Wednesday at 6 pm
Visit in Spanish
Included in the price of the ticket
Inscription on the same
day at the reception
25 people maximum

Groups

In Spanish, English and French
25 people maximum
By prior reservation:
educacion.centrepompidou@
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Family tours

Only for the semi-permanent
exhibition
Sunday at 11.30 am

Discover all our activities (tours,
workshops, events...) on our website:
centrepompidou-malaga.eu

Information

Opening hours

9.30 am to 8.00 pm, every day
Ticket offices close at 7:30 pm
The museum is closed on
Tuesdays (except holidays
and days before holidays), 1
January and 25 December

Prices

Temporary exhibitions:
€4, concessions: €2.50
Semi-permanent exhibitions:
€7, concessions: €4
Semi-permanent and
temporary exhibitions:
€9, concessions: €5.50

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