

# *A Fusing of Horizons: Approaching Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” Through a Hermeneutical Lens*

by Chantelle Flores

---

---

Although Harold Rosenberg is not credited with main hermeneutical philosophers and theorists of his time, his “painting as event” presents an encounter with artwork common with the progression of literary hermeneutical thought. His “painting as event” can be analyzed as an encounter with the guiding elements of materiality as shown in the work of Louise Rosenblatt and Joanna Drucker. Often, Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” is viewed without the addition of an audience, but Christa Robbins argues that Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” should be viewed within the habituses of socio-political thought Rosenberg was inherently a part of and the audiences he commonly interacted with. With a hermeneutical lens, one can view abstract expressionism not as unattainable, heroic actions but as moments of effective history and a performance within a habitus and with materiality that all art viewers can seek to understand.

---

---

Harold Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” is credited for coining the widely-used term “action painting” to describe the abstract expressionist works being created by artists, such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Simultaneously with Rosenberg’s art criticism, new arguments in hermeneutics were being published by literary and philosophical theorists, such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. Although Harold Rosenberg is not credited within main hermeneutic publications, his argument of “painting as event” presents a perspective on one’s encounter with art common with the progression of literary hermeneutical thought.<sup>1</sup> By analyzing Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” through hermeneutic and constructivist literary theories, one can find relevancy of Rosenberg’s work in the present day and in the work of literary criticism and theory. The hermeneutic constructivist encounter between interpreter and work can be applied to Rosenberg’s own approach as a broader interaction between art and the viewer, or artist.

In “American Action Painters,” Rosenberg argues the idea of painting becoming “an arena in which to act” in contrast to ideas of painting as a means for representation of an object, real or imagined.<sup>2</sup> Rosenberg’s act of painting becomes an

“event” in which “the canvas [...] is a place where the mind records its contents” and “a ‘moment’ in the adulterated mixture of [their] life.”<sup>3</sup> The painting becomes a record of the lived experience of the artist and process, and as Rosenberg also notes, this mode of painting “attempts to initiate a new moment in which the painter will realize [their] total personality—myth of future self-recognition.”<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg’s “painting as event” then embraces a metacognitive approach to art. An initiation of a “new moment” in painting allows for a realization of the artist’s personality as their recognizable past self and the pliability of their present self to be changed by this realization—this moment of artistic encounter—in the future.<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg presents and answers a final question: “[w]hat is a painting that is not an object nor the representation of an object nor the analysis or impression of it nor whatever else a painting has ever been—and that has also ceased to be the emblem of a personal struggle? It is the painter [them]self changed into a ghost inhabiting The Art World.”<sup>6</sup> Action painting, or Rosenberg’s “painting as event,” ceases to fit into the usual categories of artistic representation and instead becomes the remnants of this artistic encounter. However, it is an encounter

---

1 Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters.”

2 Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 190.

3 Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 191.

4 Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 193.

5 Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 193.

6 Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 195-6.

no longer limited to the artist and the process but of the artist and their habitation in a more intangible "Art World," which can be the sparking inspiration for their self-recognition and reflection.<sup>7</sup>

To view Rosenberg's concept of painting as an event through a hermeneutical lens, one must first identify hermeneutical theory in a broad sense. According to Nenon's "Horizontalty," hermeneutics can be understood as an act of interpretation, or understanding, of someone or something beyond oneself.<sup>8</sup> Nenon and Gadamer write of this as an encounter between one's own "horizon"—the "all-encompassing cultural and historical backgrounds against which things show themselves to us"—and the horizon of another.<sup>9</sup> In the case of theorist Emmanuel Lévinas, the interpretation of the other can be considered the attempt at understanding the intangibility of the sacred.<sup>10</sup> The idea of art being a hermeneutical encounter with an intangible other is not unknown to Rosenberg. In Rosenberg's "Metaphysical Feelings in Modern Art," written twenty-five years after "American Action Painters," he addresses the idea of "art [...expanding] its searches into those areas of experience formerly considered to be the province of religion and metaphysics" and of "art [...having] to deal with [one's] eternal condition."<sup>11</sup> One can also take into consideration the quote from Wallace Stevens, a poet and philosopher, that Rosenberg begins his essay with: "[t]he American will is easily satisfied in its efforts / to realize itself in knowing itself."<sup>12</sup> Not only is Wallace Stevens included in hermeneutic discourse

---

7 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 195-6.

8 Nenon, "Horizontalty."

9 Nenon, "Horizontalty," 338.

10 Lévinas is briefly quoted in an article by Gerald Bruns, in which he states that the other "confronts us in its irreducible singularity" and "is refractory to the categories by which we make the world intelligible." This intangibility is often translated into theological discourse. Bruns, "Hermeneutics."

11 Rosenberg, "Metaphysical Feelings in Modern Art," 222, 228.

12 Rosenberg quotes from Wallace Stevens' essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Stevens, Wallace. "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters."

but Rosenberg begins his essay with a quote that welcomes the realization and self-reflection that can be associated with hermeneutical encounters.

In the recognition of hermeneutic interpretation as ultimately an act of understanding, the role of interpreter can be expanded within the context of "American Action Painters." Although the above literary theorists rely upon the interaction of an interpreter and a literary work, an artist who is actively creating an art object or an art viewer are inherently interpreters as they attempt to make meaning, whether intentionally or unintentionally, of the art they interact with. One of the aims of "American Action Painters" is to provide an art audience a way to understand the gestural expressionism arising in the 1940s and 1950s in America. Rosenberg brings in the criticism of an audience with, "some people deny that there is anything original in the recent American painting."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, "American Action Painters" must not be read within purely the confines of the "event" between the artist and the art object but as a metacognitive event to be encountered by an audience.

### **Event as a Metacognitive Performance with Materiality**

As in the above summary, Rosenberg argues that "[a] painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist" and is "a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of [their] life."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in Louise Rosenblatt's "The Poem as Event," she argues that "the text is a stimulus activating elements of the reader's past experience—[their] experience with literature and with life" and that "Text becomes a 'lived experience.'"<sup>15</sup> In her case, the literary text—or Text—is the literal words, paratext, and patterns of language that are the guiding principles and that the encounter with Text becomes 'a poem.' She continues with, "[a] poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time."<sup>16</sup> In both cases, an individual inherently brings their historicity, prejudgments, and parts of their identity into their encounter with an art object, which are stimulated by the guiding features of the art object.

---

13 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 189.

14 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 191.

15 Rosenblatt, "The Poem as Event," 126.

16 Rosenblatt, "The Poem as Event," 126.

In Rosenberg's art event, an artist approaches the canvas to interact with the materiality, the guiding elements of the object, in the broad intent of creating *something*. This broad intent can be viewed as the artist's inherent seeking to understand what the canvas can become or how oneself can interact with the materiality at hand, an interpretation of potentiality. The element of *action* in the event on canvas is then this "moment" and is the "lived experience" of this potential. Through Rosenblatt's lens, action painting becomes an encounter between individual, materiality, and broader historical, social, and other contexts: an "intensely complex and evanescent web of ideas, feelings, sensations, [and] attitudes" inherently connected to the external world.<sup>17</sup> Although one can directly relate the art viewer and artist to these broader external contexts, the work of Johanna Drucker further emphasizes the encounter with materiality as having a basis within these contexts as well.

Like Rosenberg and Rosenblatt, Drucker later describes one's encounter with an object, in her case an interpretation of a literary object, as an event: "the event is the entire system of reader, aesthetic object and interpretation—but in that set of relations, the 'text' is constituted anew each time."<sup>18</sup> If one views Rosenberg's artistic event as the potentiality of "lived experience" upon the canvas and a fulfillment of possibilities, one can connect Rosenberg's event equally to Drucker's event of interpretation. Drucker further describes an aesthetic object as "[offering] its possibilities, not as a thing or entity, but as a provocation to interpretation" and that their materiality "[expresses] conditions and a field of forces" which "are always probabilistic entities, subject to constrained but indeterminate possibilities."<sup>19</sup> In Drucker's argument, she centers materiality upon the language of literature and semiotics, and her main example of the probabilistic nature to materiality is one's idiolect, the unique "signature" of language such as what words and phrases one commonly uses and their specific understanding of words.

---

17 Rosenblatt, "The Poem as Event," 128.

18 Drucker, "Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality," 8.

19 Drucker, "Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality," 13.

Rosenberg writes that "[l]anguage has not accustomed itself to a situation in which the act itself is the 'object'" and "[s]ince there is nothing to be 'communicated,' a unique signature comes to seem the equivalent of a new plastic language. In a single stroke the painter exists as a Somebody—at least on a wall."<sup>20</sup> First of all, Rosenberg credits language as a main means for "defining" objects and communication. However, he separates action painting as a kind of creational action rather than an action as a language for communication. I would like to argue that there is something being communicated through Rosenberg's "new plastic language" and the "unique signature" (or idiolect) one forms around the materiality of action painting.<sup>21</sup> In its broadest sense, communication can be defined as an exchanging or conveying of ideas, thoughts, feelings, or information. In the case of Rosenberg, the lack of communication is not necessarily a lack of informational exchange but rather a lack of communication within the context of oral and literary tradition. Rosenberg's artistic event is not communicating through the "object [...] the representation of an object [...] or the analysis or impression of it [...] or the emblem of a personal struggle."<sup>22</sup> However, there is inherently space for one to interpret communication. If the object is the act itself and the gesture becomes a new language, an art viewer can of course understand or "read" that an action has taken place. Is this not a communication of action and an example of the acts the art viewer and interpreter can equally participate in?

Thus, the artist's interaction, or encounter, with the materiality of the medium and the "language" of gesture allows for a communication of action. While action painters may not be representing or painting with the intent of portraying anything "deeper" than the materiality of the canvas, they are still inherently transferring an understanding of the materiality, communicating the ability to create art in this gestural style, and portraying their idiolect of this new plastic language. In this way, interpreters and art viewers can seek to understand the artist's encounter with materiality as a metacognitive performance while being able to internalize for themselves the

---

20 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 194-5.

21 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 194-5.

22 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 195-6.

actions they can perform upon their own canvases. This understanding and interpretation then reflects a hermeneutic approach as Nenon's hermeneutic description of the fusing of horizons, one's overarching habituses, historicities, and cultural and social influences. Nenon quotes Gadamer that these "horizons are never closed horizons [...] but are always in movement in the encounter with new experiences and with others" and that "understanding is always the process of the fusing of such purportedly self-subsisting horizons."<sup>23</sup> The artist allows themselves to approach the canvas with their own horizon of prejudices, an accumulation of artistic knowledge and skill or the assumptions of how certain materials will interact on the canvas, and leaves the finished canvas—or "new experience"—having fused horizons with something new, a new understanding of the materiality or even an idea for the next artistic encounter inspired by what has been accomplished. Likewise, the art viewer approaches action painting with their own horizon of past experiences with art and background knowledge on art forms, styles, and theories. Yet, after encountering an art piece they have never seen before, the art viewer will leave their encounter with a fused horizon as well, a slightly changed perspective on art or a connection formed between themselves and the art or between the art and some other object.

### **Event as Self-Reflection and Effective History**

It's important to look at Rosenberg's description of action painting once more as an act embedded in the artist's biography. When the painting itself is "a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of [their] life" and "of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence," one can view this not only as a depiction of Nenon's horizontality but specifically as the role of effective history in hermeneutics, which relies upon one's engagement with self-reflection and an understanding of the habitus(es) one's inherently a part of.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Rosenberg writes that "the act on the canvas springs from an attempt to resurrect the saving moment in his 'story' when the painter first felt [them]self released from Value—myth of past self-recognition. Or it attempts to initiate a new moment in which the painter will realize [their]

---

23 Nenon, "Horizontality," 338.

24 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 191.

total personality—myth of future self-recognition."<sup>25</sup> Here, Rosenberg's resurrection of a captured "saving moment" is the artist's reflection upon their historicity, habitus, and what has led them to the moment in which they can freely act upon the canvas. Yet, the artist's action upon the canvas can also be a moment in which the artist realizes the totality of themselves in relation to their historicity and is thus able to fuse their horizon anew. Rather than this dichotomous statement of "or," I would like to argue that the event Rosenberg depicts relies inherently upon past self-recognition to create a moment of future self-recognition—effective history in action.

Critics have noted Rosenberg's work, in regards to "American Action Painters," as "an affirmation of the ego" and even a "petty-bourgeoisie version of the Cartesian 'Cogito ergo sum.'"<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Rosenberg's positioning of art as heroic and self-congratulatory has been viewed as inaccessible or elite, especially in masculine descriptions such as the "white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael."<sup>27</sup> In the context of only "American Action Painters" and connected associations to Rosenberg's artistic event being heavily individualistic, it makes sense for critics to interpret action painting as placing an impossible weight of heroism onto artists and their actions as seemingly outside of any external forces. Yet, according to Robbins, "American Action Painters" must not be seen as constrained within a vacuum. Rosenberg's "Character Change and the Drama" happened to be written in 1932, twenty years before his publication of "American Action Painters." In Christa Noel Robbins' "Harold Rosenberg on the Character of Action," she examines a collection of Rosenberg's works, such as "Character Change and the Drama" to shed light on Rosenberg's Marxist ideologies and connections to socio-political contexts. Robbins writes that "Rosenberg's concept of action painting can only be properly understood with reference to his long-term inquiry into how the *individuality* of action can be said to relate to

---

25 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 193.

26 Robbins, "Harold Rosenberg on the Character of Action," 197.

27 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 193.

the *sociality* of form.”<sup>28</sup> The idea of individual action is then recognized as a part of social habituses in Rosenberg’s earlier work.

However, Rosenberg creates the distinction of individuality sparking from the action itself, the role in artistic encounter as described previously, while sociality comes into play in regards to “form.” Form can be considered the materiality of gesture, brushstrokes, and handling of material upon the canvas and further connected to the art institutions, traditions, and cultural and societal practices that have caused painting to even become a common form of art in the first place. Although the abstract expressionism, or action painting, Rosenberg writes about was considered both unconventional and a “new plastic language” at the time of first publication, these labels can only be placed in relation to the old or the conventional practices such as the habitus of artistic form and art institutions. To critique an institution or create the unconventional, one breaks away, or experiences hysteresis, from a habitus *from within* its confines. In Pierre Bourdieu’s “Structures and the Habitus,” he describes habitus as “the durably installed generative principle of *regulated improvisations* [that] produces practices which *tend* to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions [...], while adjusting to the demands inscribed as *objective potentialities* in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, understanding that the artist and art viewer are inherently a part of a habitus does not necessarily have to be a prison or define every action, thought, and the like as being a kind of mechanical representation of the habitus. As much as the habitus regulates our “improvisations” and practices, one must take note that it is ourselves who shape such habituses to begin with and that these actions within our habitus(es) are still improvisations and “potentialities” within our own situations.<sup>30</sup> The habitus can be considered equally a part of one’s horizon(s) and subsequent historicity, and thus, understanding the habitus and performing actions from this point of understanding allows for history to transform into effective history. The

---

28 Robbins, “Harold Rosenberg on the Character of Action,” 199.

29 Bourdieu, “Structures and the Habitus,” 751.

30 Bourdieu, “Structures and the Habitus.”

recognition of one’s place in relation to overarching habituses is a vital step in this act of understanding and self-reflection, especially when one, like Rosenberg’s action painters, wishes to perform the unconventional.

### **Hermeneutical Understanding in Art Viewing**

It is unknown whether Rosenberg would have considered himself hermeneutic, and therefore, I would like to mention that it would be wrong to assume that Rosenberg was inherently hermeneutic. However, his revolutionary concept of “art as event” connects to later hermeneutic publications, such as the work of Rosenblatt ten years later, and he does present an understanding of at least the work of hermeneutic philosopher Wallace Stevens. Although Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” is seen mainly as an expression of an individual’s freedom through action, if analyzed in relation to hermeneutic philosophers and Rosenberg’s other works, the individuality of his action is one that is “inseparable from the biography of the artist” and their life.<sup>31</sup> I argue, especially through Robbins’ analysis of Rosenberg’s “Character Change and the Drama,” that Rosenberg’s understanding of the artist’s biography and life is not merely situated to the internal of the individual but to the external materiality and habituses they are a part of. Although Rosenberg showcases these ties to the work of hermeneutic philosophers, “American Action Painters,” with its depiction of the event between oneself and materiality and this moment of self-reflection, is not credited in later hermeneutic publications or even within the sphere of literary thought.

The Gadamerian hermeneutic encounter depicted in Nenon’s work as an understanding of the other, whether the other is *something* or *someone* previously unknown to us, is a concept key to recognizing ourselves in relation to another and for expressing the pliability of our own horizons to internalize the horizons of others. If one only views the artist portrayed in “American Action Painters” as a thoughtless, intentless being simply acting freely from any constraints of the external world, the artist becomes an impossibility. Yet, if one views the artist as approaching the materiality of the canvas with inherent thought and satisfying possibilities

---

31 Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 191.

emerging from their inherent relationship with the external world, "American Action Painters" depicts artwork that is both a part of the "lived experience," accessible for art viewers to internalize through interpretation and for the artist to be recognized in the recognition and subsequent "breaking" out of the conventional habitus of artistic form.

Rosenberg ends "American Action Painters" with the following statement: "American vanguard art needs a genuine audience—not just a market. It needs understanding—not just publicity."<sup>32</sup> For Rosenberg's goal of "American Action Painters" to become a reality, the art viewer must be involved in more than simply the economics and institutions behind action painting. Rosenberg's art viewer must be able to reach understanding of the artist and the artist's new language, an understanding that can only truly happen when one self-reflects while becoming pliable to the unknown world of the other. It is not a reflection of action beyond any constraints but a reflection upon the possibilities regulated by such external constraints. This understanding of Rosenberg's work then corresponds with the later critique and discourse surrounding neo-expressionism, which of course had its basis within the unconventional work of Rosenberg's depicted artists. It is a transition of discourse that views expressionism and expressionistic work as part of a greater habitus and our collection of symbols. Therefore, Rosenberg's "American Action Painters" becomes a vital steppingstone in art history, art discourse, and even the realm of hermeneutical literary and philosophical discourse.

By being able to understand "American Action Painters" through a hermeneutical, primarily literary, lens, as readers we have taken part in a hermeneutical process ourselves. The horizons and habituses of the fields of art criticism, history, and theory can be pliable, able to be connected to and inspired by discourses happening in the fields of literature and philosophy. Just as Rosenberg's action-based artist is meant to create a means of pliability and understanding in a desired art audience, "American Action Painters" is meant to invoke the same kind of understanding in its desired audience. It is not a heroic, masculine action artist that Rosenberg truly depicts, but a metacognitive action artist who is a part of the world around them and represents "lived

experience" as common encounter. It is with this level of understanding that gestural expressionism, and all art for that matter, should be viewed. The action artist approaches the canvas open to the possibilities regulated by their—and the materiality's—historicity and habitus, their mind open with merely the intent of creating something through their performance and event with the external "other." Likewise, we can approach art with the same openness to possibility, our main intent simply to understand and remain pliable to the new.

### Notes

I must thank and credit Dr. Justin Wolff and Dr. Carla Billitteri with the University of Maine for providing the background knowledge, feedback, and coursework that led to this final analysis.

### Works Cited

- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Structures and the Habitus." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated (2017): 745-767.
- Bruns, Gerald L. "Hermeneutics." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Ed. by Michael Kelly, Oxford UP, (2011). [oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0261](http://oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0261).
- Drucker, Joanna. "Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality," *Parallax* (2009): 15:4. 7-17.
- Nenon, Thomas J. "Horizontality." *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*. Ed. by Niall Keane, and Chris Lawn, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated (2016): 335-340.
- Robbins, Christa Noel. "Harold Rosenberg on the Character of Action." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2, June (2012): 195–214. DOI: 10.1093/oxartj/kcs019.
- Rosenberg, Harold. "The American Action Painters." In *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*. Ed. Ellen G. Landau. New Haven: Yale University Press (2005): 189-198.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 198.

Rosenberg, Harold. "Metaphysical Feelings in Modern Art." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1975): 217–32. [jstor.org/stable/1342900](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1342900).

Rosenblatt, Louise M. "The Poem as Event." *College English*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1964): 123–28. DOI: 10.2307/373663.

Stevens, Wallace. "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf (1951).