

## SAUL STEINBERG, MOMA, AND THE UNSTABLE CULTURAL FIELD

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Will Norman **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

### ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the U.S. cultural field of the late 1940s as an unstable territory in which the protocol for evaluation and judgment of the literary as well as visual arts underwent considerable and radical revision. It argues for the identification of a brief but discrete period lasting from the end of World War II to the closure of the decade, characterized by pronounced uncertainty and tension over what forms and practices should be understood as legitimate. It traces the onset of this moment of instability in relation to modernism, transatlantic exchange, and the institutions of culture, using the particular example of Saul Steinberg (1914–1999) and his relationship to the legacy of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). Steinberg emigrated from Italy to the U.S. during the war, having been interned as a Jew under Mussolini. A trained architect, fluent in the visual grammar of European interwar modernism, Steinberg reinvented himself in postwar America as an artist and illustrator. Steinberg proved himself exceptionally capable of traversing high and low culture, commercial and restricted fields, by virtue of his ability to negotiate the cultural field. By examining his engagements with Mondrian and the New York art world of the late 1940s, we stand to learn something new not only about him, but about the instability of the field at that time.

In studies of the "intellectual migration" of writers, artists, and thinkers from Europe to the United States in the 1930s and '40s, the dominant narrative for many years was built upon potent emblems of ivory tower isolation.<sup>1</sup> One might think of Thomas Mann and Theodor Adorno working together on *Doktor Faustus* in suburban Los Angeles in 1943, intent on shutting out the effects of a pernicious culture industry operating around them, or of French Surrealists in New York, blithely indifferent to American culture, waiting for

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the opportunity to return to Paris as soon as World War II concluded.<sup>2</sup> Such images have contributed to a persistent misconception by which the United States at midcentury functions as modernism's banal other, its brash consumerism, burgeoning entertainment industry, and perceived lack of cosmopolitanism forming a backdrop against which European tradition could perform its destiny. This version of the narrative risks degenerating into cultural history as if written by Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), but without the parodic jokes.

A more productive way of thinking about what happened to transatlantic modernism after World War II is to consider the ways in which émigré figures found themselves to be at once creative subjects and premature historical objects, having experienced the era of modernism twice, as it were – as European tragedy in the interwar period, and as American farce in the 1940s and '50s. Figures such as Theodor Adorno, Vladimir Nabokov, George Grosz, and Saul Steinberg lived through the heyday of modernist culture as a living movement in Europe. They witnessed its decline amid the crises of the 1930s and '40s, but also its prolonged afterlife in the various institutions of culture in the postwar U.S., where modernism was reborn as a commodity and as an object of study. For Adorno, Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust never recovered their dignity after he found cheap paperback translations of their work in the studios of pseudo-Bohemians in postwar L.A.<sup>3</sup> Grosz tried, rather disingenuously, to reinvent the Dada photomontage for America, to sell it as something never tried before.<sup>4</sup> And Steinberg, as I suggest in this essay, documented the death and rebirth of the grid in the legacy of Piet Mondrian, recognizing its continued existence in the figure of the business sales chart.

In order to grasp these more complex and conflicting instances of transatlantic exchange, we must come to terms with the particular and distinctive qualities of the U.S. cultural field in the key period from the later stages of World War II to the early 1950s. When I use the term *cultural field*, I am drawing on the work of the French thinker Pierre Bourdieu, in whose work the term is used to conceptualize spatially the way artists, writers, and intellectuals assume in their practices certain positions that can only be plotted and understood in relation to one another and in relation to a larger cultural system.<sup>5</sup> Inherent in Bourdieu's theorization of the cultural field is the struggle among its actors to assume positions that will bring them certain

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rewards, such as financial ones from sales or the prestige of critical recognition. For Bourdieu, each actor can be distinguished by their *habitus*, a term he once glossed simply as “a feel for the game.”<sup>6</sup>

What makes the late 1940s so distinctive is that it represents a period of flux in the U.S. cultural field, during which the rules of the game, to use Bourdieu’s analogy, were themselves being contested. For a time, it was not at all clear what legitimacy or prestige might look like, what the criteria for evaluating them might be, or, indeed, what might appeal to the shifting market for culture as reconfigured by a newly emergent American middle class. Bourdieu made a distinction between a conventionally governed cultural field and an autonomous restricted one for high art, in which economic principals are reversed and, as he put it, the “loser wins.”<sup>7</sup> He was influenced in this idea quite directly by the discourse of nineteenth-century Parisian *l’art our l’art*, and the great French novelist Gustave Flaubert in particular. In the late 1940s, however, part of the confusion over the cultural field derived from the ways in which governing principles of conventional and restricted fields began to blend and overlap with one another, meaning that it was never quite clear who had won and who had lost.

Could popular crime fiction be high literature? For a few years in the late 1940s, intellectuals and writers such as W. H. Auden believed that it could.<sup>8</sup> Edmund Wilson was among those who were sure that it couldn’t, but he still felt obliged to devote several essays to making his case.<sup>9</sup> The pivotal years in the development of what would be later called film noir were also characterized by this kind of confusion, with film critics in France lauding the arrival of a revolutionary and subversive new aesthetic, while U.S. intellectuals, with a few notable exceptions, just saw violent entertainment not worthy of sustained consideration.<sup>10</sup> In 1947, Simone de Beauvoir toured the U.S., and waxed lyrical to the New York intellectual set about what she saw as the great strides made by American writers like Erskine Caldwell, Thomas Wolfe, and John Steinbeck, only to discover that among the highbrow elites these writers were already discredited as painfully naive in form and themes.<sup>11</sup> You will notice that my examples all involve some kind of transatlantic dimension, in which aesthetic protocols and *habitus* don’t quite translate across the ocean, and in fact interfere with one another disorientatingly. Kenneth Fearing summed up the fluidity, provisionality, and

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uncertainty of this moment when he described it in 1944 as “a curious interim between two ages, when history has dropped the curtain upon one of them but seems in no hurry to give the next one its shape and color.”<sup>12</sup>

The particular confusion I am interested in here involves the question of whether cartoons could be considered art. I’ll begin with a scene from New York in the fall of 1945, with Steinberg writing, in the Fiftieth Street apartment he shared with Hedda Sterne, a letter to his Italian friend Aldo Buzzi. Steinberg had arrived in the United States in 1941, from Italy via the Dominican Republic. Romanian by birth, Steinberg had originally migrated to Italy to study architecture in Milan, where he had also begun to experiment with humorous drawings and cartoons. During the war he was interned as a Jew in an Italian camp, before being allowed out on condition of his leaving the country. A man with considerable cultural fluency, well versed in the art and literature of Romania, Italy, France, and Britain, he drew upon arrival in the U.S. on contacts at various magazines, and began publishing his drawings. Very quickly he nurtured a relationship with Harold Ross at the *New Yorker* and began to publish regularly there, including during his military service in World War II, when he sent drawings back from China, Burma, North Africa, and Italy, among other places.<sup>13</sup>

Steinberg’s letter to Buzzi begins with the observation “here there’s a lot of activity, reconversion and a return to normal in grand style. A real ‘postwar’ is in sight. Plenty of inflation in art and literature.”<sup>14</sup> This letter introduces what would become a consistent theme for Steinberg: his acute awareness of how New York cultural institutions created the conditions under which modern art was created, judged, and consumed. In a direct echo of Grosz’s metaphor for the émigré artist’s arrival in America – “you have come to a gigantic fairground so make your booth as attractive as possible”<sup>15</sup> – Steinberg continues:

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The museums are crowded like the fun section at a fair, theaters and concert halls sell tickets at black market prices. The quality isn't very high but there's vitality and a hope for something better. The most acclaimed painters are the European abstractionists, a few good and most of them fake.

Mondrian, who died a year or two ago, has had a big post mortem exhibition and much publicity. He's quite in vogue right now.

The Mondrian exhibition had opened on March 20, 1945, at the Museum of Modern Art, and effectively established Mondrian's reputation as the patron saint of modernism, the vital connection between the European tradition and New York, where he spent his final years. As MoMA director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., proclaimed at Mondrian's memorial service, he "gave his life to his art more completely than any artist I know of."<sup>16</sup> Yet Mondrian's assimilation into the New York artistic establishment was understood ambivalently by Steinberg, as a sign both of the frenzied commercialization of European abstract art and as a glimmer of utopian hope. Mondrian remained an important point of reference for Steinberg throughout his career, and his subsumption by high art institutions still rankled as late as 1968, when he composed *Luna Park* (figure 1), a work in which Mondrian, Søren Kierkegaard, and Arthur Rimbaud are to be found hawking themselves at a fairground. It is worth noting, however, that whatever doubts Steinberg had over MoMA's role in determining cultural legitimacy, he was to exhibit his own drawings at MoMA in 1946 in the exhibition *Fourteen Americans*, demonstrating a complicity with institutional power that was to define his career.

We gain a clearer sense of Steinberg's self-positioning in the conclusion to the 1945 letter to Buzzi: "In my unbiased opinion, I think the only thing good here, honest and genuine, is the cartoon, the humorous drawing." This statement serves as an explicit reminder to scholars of Steinberg's work that if his preferred medium originated in the need to earn money as an architecture student in Milan in the 1930s, it became, in the U.S., part of a calculated strategy for negotiating the cultural field: he understood the medium of the cartoon (or humorous drawing) to shield its artist from the wave of publicity and boosterism that swept "Cultureburg" in the immediate postwar era, as New York sought to establish itself as the new center and authority of the modern art world.<sup>17</sup> Even while Abstract Expressionism was

enshrined as the aesthetic representation of existential freedom, Steinberg found in humorous drawings more practical, if covert, forms of experimental autonomy. Indeed, his work for the *New Yorker* and other magazines provided him with a more transparent relationship to the cultural marketplace than the complex system of patronage that obtained in the world of painting.

Steinberg's first years in the U.S. coincided with a desperate and at times brutal war for position within a fluid and unstable cultural field, in which it was not yet clear what aesthetic regime might emerge with the greatest claim to legitimacy. This confusion was visible in many of the critical responses to Steinberg's work at the time. Howard DeVree, writing in the *New York Times*, decided to mitigate against the risk of an egregious error in taste formation by equivocating: "'Is it art?' Yes. No. Anyway, it's funny and we like it."<sup>18</sup> Our two 1945 scenes are symptomatic of a brief moment when it seemed possible that the cartoon might provide a way of resolving some of the formal problems that had recently presented themselves. It might, for instance, be claimed that the cartoon form had the flexibility to develop the legacy of Joan Miró and Paul Klee while remaining faithful to what was popularly perceived as a classically American form. Thomas Craven, who had

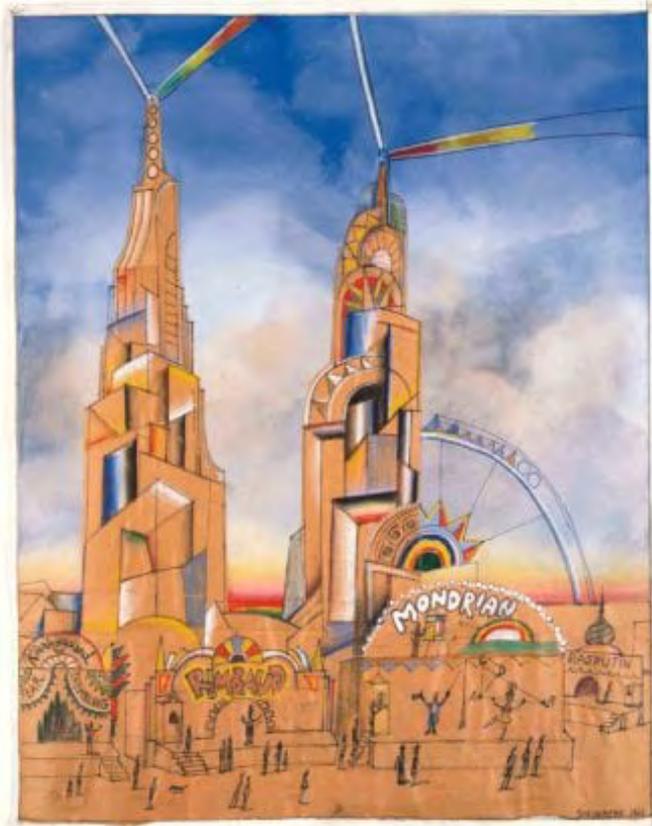


Figure 1. Saul Steinberg, "Luna Park," 1968. Collage, crayon, and watercolor on paper, 29 x 23 in. (73.6 x 58.4 cm). Private Collection. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

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championed Grosz after his immigration ten years earlier, argued as the editor of the 1943 book *Cartoon Cavalcade* that the *New Yorker* cartoon represented the latest evolution of a humorous American tradition reaching back from James Thurber to Thomas Hart Benton and Mark Twain.<sup>19</sup> Also in 1943, Clement Greenberg reviewed cautiously but approvingly William Steig's collection of drawings *The Lonely Ones*, published in 1942 by Duell, Sloan and Pearce, the same publisher that would bring out Steinberg's first book, *All in Line*, in 1945.<sup>20</sup> He noted how Steig appeared to be making a bid for the status of the cartoon as legitimate art: "For what he is, Steig is certainly very good, but I am not sure that he is satisfied to be taken just for what he is. He is after a new genre in these psychographs, a new combination of literature and picture, and he does well enough to be judged by severe standards."<sup>21</sup>

"A new combination of literature and picture" sounds like a fair description of the experimental ambitions of the young Steinberg, and this sense of formal possibility likely led to his inclusion in *Fourteen Americans*. Greenberg's short review of that exhibition admits that Steinberg's drawings are "surprisingly strong on their own terms," and yet goes on to remark that "the inclusion of Steinberg, good as he is in his limited way, seems almost a last-minute gesture of despair: for even if he were much better, he would still be relatively unimportant in terms of modern art."<sup>22</sup> By the end of the decade, however, it had become clear that the war for position in the cultural field had concluded with a victory for abstract painting followed by a period in which it consolidated and enjoyed its new position of legitimacy.

One of the clearest indications of this settling of accounts was the publication of a pair of articles by Russell Lynes for *Harper's Magazine*, in 1947 and 1949, both accompanied by Steinberg drawings. The first, titled "The Taste-Makers," provides an astute survey and breezy critique of the newly established "art boom" in New York, led by self-appointed cultural guardians, "a well-trained (if not well-disciplined) band of zealots who have constituted themselves as a sort of Salvation Army of our sensibilities."<sup>23</sup> The magazine gave the designation "pictorial comment" to Steinberg's series of drawings depicting taste itself in the process of being formed, practiced, and institutionalized. In the most interesting of these (figure 2), a dense crowd of faces stare blankly at a series of abstract figures hung in a museum or gallery. While this theme of the incomprehension of abstract art had been popular among satirical cartoonists for some time, the anarchic energy of

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Steinberg's lines achieves the effect of rendering the viewers themselves as formal echoes of the works on display; for example, the hairstyling of the women is occasionally indistinguishable from the abstract style of the artworks. In this sense, Steinberg played out the worst fear for abstract painting in the 1940s – that it might become mere decoration.

The second article by Lynes would become one of the classic accounts of cultural stratification at midcentury. "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" marked the acceptance of New York intellectuals as figures of cultural authority, and also their vulnerability to satire, responding directly to the impact of such articles as Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) and Dwight Macdonald's "A Theory of Popular Culture" (1944).<sup>24</sup> Lynes's approach was to organize his map of the cultural hierarchy through attention not to the essential qualities of particular artists, writers, or thinkers, but to the construction and display of aesthetic taste by particular social groups. Steinberg's accompanying drawing (figure 3)



Figure 2. Saul Steinberg, Untitled. Published in Russell Lynes, "The Tastemakers," in "Harper's Magazine," June 1947, 483. Whereabouts unknown. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

once again draws attention to the sense in which high art might be assumed to be decoration, with the torch of illumination transformed for the middlebrow into a decorative lamp for a bourgeois apartment.

Steinberg later described this postwar moment in U.S. cultural history as one in which, just as “news is caused by journalists,” so “art was caused to happen by museums,” and this dialectical aphorism, which would not be out of place in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (1951), represents one of the keys to understanding his distinctive practice.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Adorno’s response to this situation was the prescription of ascetic retreat from the culture industry, Steinberg’s solution was to cultivate an intensely reflexive aesthetic that incorporated the institutionalizing practices of taste formation and performance themselves into both the style and subject matter of his work. In this way, one of his most distinctive aesthetic strategies came into view: the reframing of abstraction in the realm of figurative representation. This strategy had the effect of conveying a facility with the theory and practice of

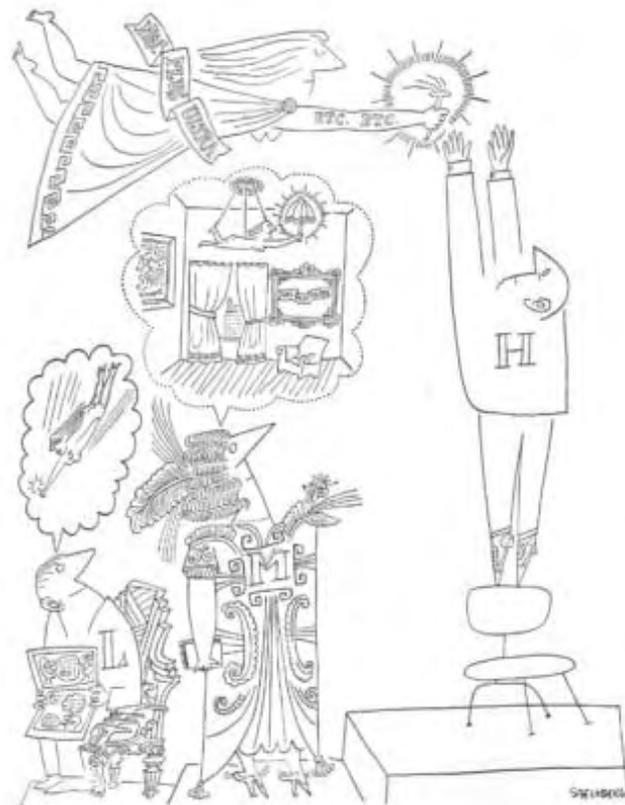


Figure 3. Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*. Published in Russell Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” in “Harper’s Magazine” 198, no. 1185, February 1949, 24. Private Collection. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

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modernist painting while also maintaining an ironic distance from it. Even more importantly, it permitted middle-class readers of slick magazines the luxury of gentle self-criticism.

The solution was so successful that it became possible for Steinberg to create an illusion of privileged independence from the cultural field altogether, when in fact it only tied him closer to certain other institutions in the publishing world: *Harper's Magazine*, *Time*, and, above all, the *New Yorker*. These magazines constructed and marketed a position of autonomy and critical independence to advertisers as a disposition of cultural sophistication, a commercially desirable quality that entailed a detached facility with all strata of culture alongside a refusal to accept the categories themselves as absolute. A marketing pamphlet produced by the *New Yorker* in 1946 made the claim that its subscribers were "at least all of the following: Intelligent, well-educated, discriminating, well-informed, unprejudiced, public-spirited, metropolitan-minded, broad-visioned and quietly liberal."<sup>26</sup> The term "sophisticated" is likely absent here because of the way it had, in this period, taken on pejorative connotations for intellectuals critical of the *New Yorker's* tendency to bring commerce and *Kultur* into apparently peaceful cohabitation in its pages.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the language of the pamphlet, and especially its gestures towards accumulated cultural capital and discrete cosmopolitanism, speak to the magazine's unwavering loyalty to Steinberg, whose developing style conformed so precisely to its projected image, tacitly assuming familiarity with a common set of broadly spaced cultural coordinates that he described in 1952 as "the alphabet invented by the moderns."<sup>28</sup>

One such convention, which Steinberg addressed regularly throughout his oeuvre, was the grid. Following Rosalind Krauss's brilliant 1979 essay on the subject, the grid has been associated with a particular canonical enunciation of modernist values, focused on "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."<sup>29</sup> Tracing the development of Steinberg's grids, from the drawings of his early career to his architectural satires and beyond, takes us some way towards understanding his relationship to modernist aesthetics and the cultural field more generally. If Krauss reads the grid as a formal device that "states the autonomy of the realm of art" and "crowd[s] out the dimensions of the real," then Steinberg's grids perform the work of returning those components of the real to the

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work, thus making abstraction itself the object of interrogation.<sup>30</sup> In his work, the grid becomes more than a method for organizing the visual field – it is also recognized as a form of spatial discipline with concrete social effects. This attitude to the grid is in evidence even in Steinberg's earliest humorous drawings. In one (figure 4), it is figured as a sales chart through which a line descends before exceeding its boundaries and breaking, violently, a path through the floor. Like so many of Steinberg's drawings from this period, its wit derives from the way in which his line breaks out of the confines imposed on it by convention to unexpectedly take on some other representative function. Not only does the drawing indicate a covert identity shared between the aesthetic grid and the world of business that abstraction claims to exclude, but it also performs the cartoonist's line, errant and irascible, refusing to pay allegiance to either.

In 1940, for his essay "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Clement Greenberg composed the first formulation of what would become the defining argument of his career, which sets out a number of concerns for the next generation of modernist art critics to navigate, among them Krauss and Michael Fried.<sup>31</sup> Greenberg claimed that the logic of the avant-garde across all the arts had been established as demanding "purity and the radical delimitation of their fields of enquiry," leading to the conclusion that the "purely abstract or plastic qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count."<sup>32</sup> Seen in this context, Steinberg's drawings appear willfully heretical in a sense that was to recur throughout the 1940s and '50s, as Greenberg's authority as theorist for the New York avant-garde grew steadily. Tom Wolfe's coruscating history of the New York art world in *The Painted Word* (1975) later testified to the aura of unshakeable moral authority that came with these pronouncements; according to Wolfe's account, "when Greenberg spoke, it was as if not merely the future of Art were at stake but the very quality, the very *possibility*, of civilization in America."<sup>33</sup>

But Steinberg's drawings internalized the rhetorical excesses of art theory and deliberately turned them on their head, in a travesty of their Eliotic pretensions of high culture. Whereas the logic of modernism in the visual arts was revealed as the impulse towards media-specific purity – or, in Fried's rapturous prose, "space experienced in sheerly visual terms" – Steinberg foregrounded the interactions between abstraction and language, and began to describe himself as more of a writer than a visual artist.<sup>34</sup> When the avant-

garde was defined as a defense against the incursions of bourgeois kitsch, Steinberg perversely staged their mutual relation, as in his drawing of Mondrian as a romantic aesthete painting his grids in a baroque interior (figure 5). And when the achievement of a painting was measured by its ability to collapse the distinction between the absolute space of the image's surface and the space represented to the mind, then Steinberg consistently sought opportunities to stage dissonant encounters between the two.



Figure 4. Saul Steinberg, Untitled. Published in "All in Line" (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1945). Whereabouts unknown. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

Despite the irony, and bantering wit, that appropriates the grid as a sales chart, we need to credit Steinberg's serious statement that Mondrian was the "key to modern art." Mondrian's essay "Liberation and Oppression in Art and Life," begun in London in 1939 and completed in New York in 1940, reads now like a founding document of the cultural Cold War, with its explicit analogy between the dialectic of freedom and limitation in painting, and the Allies' struggle against totalitarianism in World War II. "They develop together," he wrote, "until the oppression of limited form is ended."<sup>35</sup> Mondrian set out here an immensely positive vision for the future of abstract painting in its inexorable movement towards freedom, and implied through his analogy that the victory of the Allies was just as necessary. New York's particular sense of rhythm, "marvelously determined and full of vitality [...]"

expressed in real jazz, swing, and Boogie-Woogie music and dance," made it the ideal place for artistic culture, as "the continual search for freedom," to flourish.<sup>36</sup> Steinberg likely read this essay in 1945, when it was included in the first English translation of Mondrian's collected prose, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, published to coincide with the MoMA exhibition mentioned in the letter to Buzzi. By that time Steinberg had seen enough to recognize Mondrian's utopian vision of modernist transcendence in exile as beautiful and precious but untenable. If we recognize something of Mondrian's dialectical formal oppositions in Steinberg, they are robbed of their grand historical teleology.

The instability of the cultural field of the postwar United States, at the moment when, to use Serge Guilbaut's famous phrase, "New York stole the idea of modern art from Paris," generated a distinctively reflexive, sophisticated, and ironic aesthetic – one far removed from the heroic narratives of Abstract Expressionism that have dominated accounts of the New York scene in the late 1940s.<sup>37</sup> Steinberg's example shows the way in which this instability could be negotiated and indeed exploited at the levels of form and content. It was never clear if, accepting for a moment Bourdieu's metaphor of the game, Steinberg had really won or not. What we can say with more certainty is that unlike many of his painter friends in this period, such as Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, Steinberg achieved considerable personal security and comfort while maintaining modest prestige. The latter was to grow as his career developed, until, in 1969, John

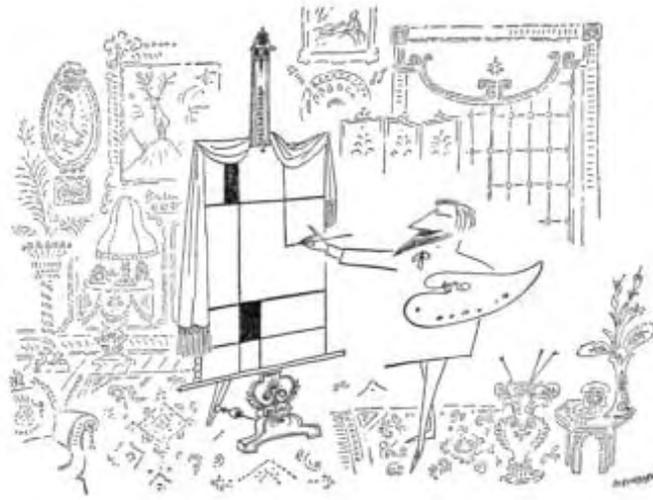


Figure 5. Saul Steinberg, Untitled. Published in "The New Yorker," November 1, 1952. Private Collection. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

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Ashbery could finally claim that "Steinberg's genius [...] over his and everyone else's protestations, gently but firmly transformed his inspired doodles into art."<sup>38</sup>

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2. On Adorno and Mann's collaboration on *Doctor Faustus*, see Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific*, 242–64. The view of the French exiles as "waiting out" the war can be traced to Fleming and Bailyn, introduction to *The Intellectual Migration*, 6. Dickran Tashjian's account of French Surrealists in New York during World War II largely confirms the indifference of key figures such as André Breton to American culture; see Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 176–234.
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4. See Will Norman, *Transatlantic Aliens: Modernism, Exile, and Culture in Midcentury America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 80–81.

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