

## Article

# The Semiotics of Willem de Kooning's *Easter Monday*

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**Abstract:** Critics have frequently employed strict binary schemes to explain Abstract Expressionism's singular contributions to art history: the victory of abstraction over figuration, avant-garde over kitsch, pure art over anecdotal illustration, action over premeditation, or escapist detachment over direct political engagement. Taking Willem de Kooning's *Easter Monday* as a case study, this paper will question the efficacy of such dyadic explanations to encapsulate the diversity of New York School practice. *Easter Monday* includes both figural and abstract elements, some that parade the work's impulsive and spontaneous character and others that were created by a photo-mechanical process. Some celebrate the artist's personal and idiosyncratic touch, others the impersonality of popular forms of advertising. In contradistinction, the semiotic terminology of C.S. Peirce reveals not only multiple points of intersection with de Kooning's work; it also effectively identifies and differentiates the plurality of elements the artist conjoined in a single visual field, some of which qualify as iconic, indexical, symbolic, or even as hybrid combinations of the above. These more elastic descriptors, it will be argued, are well-suited to address de Kooning's variegated surfaces: they can address his accommodation of diverse techniques, as well as the multiple ways the artist constructed meaning and responded to popular culture.

**Keywords:** Willem de Kooning; Charles Sanders Peirce; Abstract Expressionism; semiotics



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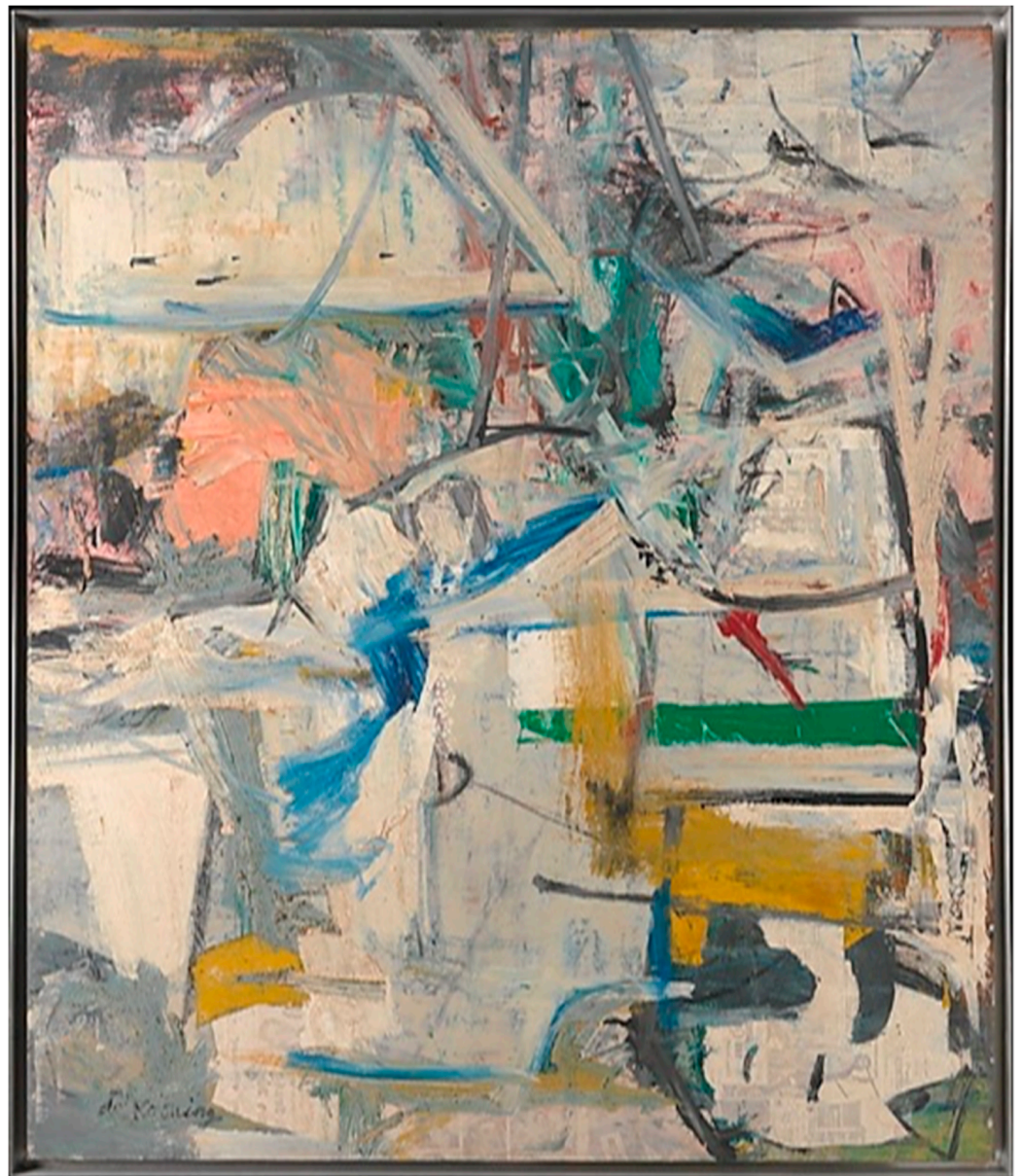
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## 1. Introduction

In his essay, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce chided logicians for parsing the “clear” from “confused” ideas of other thinkers, all without clarifying their own. This is ironic, Peirce interjects, because clarity is the logician's primary objective (Peirce 1878), and doubly ironic because Peirce enjoys a well-deserved reputation for being an exceedingly difficult philosopher himself. Still, within the circumscribed compass of art history, Peircean ideas prove remarkably useful, especially when applied to the work of Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning (Lebensztejn 1994; Shiff 2011). One says “useful” because critical assessments of the New York School have tended to advance strict binary schemes: abstraction versus figuration, avant-garde versus kitsch, American grit versus European refinement, action versus premeditation, the optical versus the tactile, escapist detachment versus direct political engagement. Taking de Kooning's *Easter Monday* (Figure 1) as a case study, it quickly becomes apparent that dyadic formulations fail to elucidate the artist's pluralistic, multi-faceted approach. *Easter Monday* includes both abstract (Figure 2) and figural elements (Figure 3) (Elderfield 2012). Some parade the work's impulsive and spontaneous character, others the repetition of photo-mechanical processes; some celebrate the artist's personal, idiosyncratic touch, and others the impersonality of commercial advertising. For these reasons, Peirce's acceptance of alterity, his tolerance of contingency, and his preference for triadic semiotic categorizations provide more effective templates to identify and differentiate the various elements de Kooning conjoined in a single visual field. His elastic descriptors and conceptual categories are not only well-suited to address de Kooning's variegated practice; they help account for numerous ways in which *Easter Monday* constructs meaning.



**Figure 1.** Willem de Kooning, *Easter Monday*, 1955–56, oil and newspaper transfer on canvas, 96 × 74 inches, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1956 (56.205.2). All artworks by Willem de Kooning © 2023 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

No less than *Interchange* or *Gotham News*, *Easter Monday* typifies de Kooning's production in the mid-1950s: at first sight, it includes neither representational references nor recognizable geometric shapes—only multiple streaks of paint for which no codified, descriptive vocabulary exists. Beyond generic terms such as “marks”, “strokes”, or “gestures”, the English language supplies no terminology precise enough to label and discriminate its formal components. Additionally, the painting looks dramatically different at a distance than at close range, leaving it uncertain as to whether its entirety or its constituent parts are most significant. Relating its formal components to one another, we might align *Easter Monday* with Clement Greenberg's notion of “allover painting”, a typically modernist compositional strategy that foregrounds the literal flatness of the picture plane by repeating formal elements with little variation from one part of the canvas to the other (Greenberg 1961). Determined to refute hostile critics who decried Abstract Expressionism as “confused” or “childlike”, Greenberg aggressively represented its working process as



disciplined and calculated. Not that his predilections were misplaced (de Kooning often established close formal connections by tracing and transposing shapes from work to work).<sup>1</sup> But despite having no clear center of attention, *Easter Monday* can hardly be described as repetitive—especially where multiple commercial images are visible (Figure 3). This is not to say that the painting is confused or childlike, only that our present conceptual categories (even Greenberg's) are not discriminating enough to differentiate its diverse pictorial elements. In view of the Whorf-Sapirian stipulation that language exerts powerful effects upon thought, it is logical to assume that *Easter Monday* would be easier to decode if a specific terminology were available to identify and distinguish its morphology—the way, say, botanists identify and differentiate plants and flowers.



**Figure 2.** *Easter Monday* (detail).

Devising new lexicons, however, requires a critical mass of scholars to build a consensus; otherwise, one is simply inventing private nomenclatures with limited utility. Besides, one cannot exclude the possibility that de Kooning crafted his canvases to discomfit his audience, deliberately employing marks that verbal language does not map. Which should not discourage scholars from engaging in classification and interpretation. As irregular as its surface may be, even *Easter Monday* will not prevent beholders from constructing some form of meaning. According to Peirce, uncertainty is emotionally disconcerting, incentivizing human subjects to seek additional information in order to form firmer opinions (Peirce 1877). Similarly, cognitive psychologists insist that, having little tolerance for disorder, the human mind tends to perceive structure where there is no structure, or project meaning where there is no meaning. Human beings, for example, “discern” animals and mythic creatures in the night sky, and attribute intentions where none are relevant (as when our ancestors imputed thunder or lightning to the actions of supernatural beings). That constellations or invisible deities that control the weather do not exist is beside the point; they are the involuntary, but inevitable results of the human mind’s continual proclivity to project meaning.

The objective of this essay, therefore, is to propose that Peircean semiotics supply a constructive lexicon to advance our understanding of de Kooning’s canvases, a lexicon, more specifically, that can account for the multiple ways *Easter Sunday*’s intricate facture

invites beholders to project meaning. To this author's knowledge, such an exercise has not yet been attempted in de Kooning studies. To be sure, semiotics is often invoked, but semiotic terminology offers a wider set of interpretive tools than has hitherto been deployed in the literature. What is more, critics have yet to notice how often the artist's statements echo ideas Peirce already articulated, so much so that their worldviews converge on numerous fronts. Of course, no single interpretive approach, no matter how adaptable and flexible, can exhaust works of art, especially ones as complex as *Easter Monday* (although if a theory can be called complex, Peirce's surely fits the bill). To fill gaps and clarify certain points, other philosophical concepts, the psychology of perception, and ideas from cognitive science will be injected at select stages of the discussion; as will references to historical events, social trends, and creative works in literature and film, all to press the proposition that signs do not operate in a social or cultural vacuum. Besides, singular methods would hardly do justice to an artist as unabashedly anti-programmatic as de Kooning. In fact, the reading of *Easter Monday* proposed in this essay will not automatically apply to the entirety of the artist's corpus. His production, after all, extends over many decades, and includes figural and landscape imagery, not to mention controversial pieces such as the Women series that raise altogether different issues (Clark 2020; Krauss 2016). This essay will focus narrowly on *Easter Monday* because it epitomizes the artist's gestural style, and because it contains a comparatively large number, as well as different varieties, of mechanically reproduced newspaper transfers. As such, *Easter Monday* stands as one of de Kooning's most variegated, inclusive, and richest paintings, a painting, in other words, whose plurality and diversity of signs a semiotically-informed approach is well-suited to interpret.



**Figure 3.** *Easter Monday* (detail).

The essay will proceed by addressing the physicality of de Kooning's process and its technical and thematic references to vernacular culture. From there, it will review how abstract gestural marks, mechanically produced popular images—and multiple combinations thereof—are fruitfully differentiated and interpretable through semiotic categories and



concepts. These concepts will be argued to befit de Kooning's pluralistic approach because, rather than being mutually exclusive, semiotic classifications permit considerable overlap. Not only can signs belong to multiple categories simultaneously, but they also manifest their "membership" in those respective categories in very different ways. The essay will also investigate how diverse modes of physical execution are susceptible to metaphorical mapping, and how this mapping allows the beholder to project a host of implications upon de Kooning's artistic production.

## 2. Physicality

Although *Easter Sunday* is difficult to decipher at first glance, one may allow that the majority of beholders are bound to construe its colliding gestural marks as a field of dynamic activity (as active terms such as "strokes", "marks", and "gestures" themselves intimate). When this author learned that his five-year old friend saw de Kooning paintings on a museum field trip, he asked him what the works "looked like" (the question least likely to prejudice the subject into providing a preconceived answer). Revealingly, the child said not one word; he only energetically waved his arms to and fro. Having encountered the world from inside a body that acts upon other bodies, and where other bodies act upon his, the boy acquired and developed a set of internalized expectations—expectations according to which the marks before him could only have resulted from a singular process of cause-and-effect. As Peirce put it: "we regard outward objects as compelling one another, as exerting force upon one another".<sup>2</sup> Only a paint brush wielded with distinct force and velocity, our five-year old reasoned, could create energetic marks of this kind. Relying on his previous experiences, he inferred (rightly or wrongly) that de Kooning worked rapidly and impulsively.

Hardly unusual, this reading bolsters Harold Rosenberg's famous notion of action painting, a genre wherein artists allegedly cast preconceptions aside and use materials to "act" upon one another in unanticipated ways, the painting being the result of the "encounter" (Rosenberg 1952). Fortuitously, American Pragmatist philosophy is well-suited to further our understanding of such a process; Peirce, after all, christened the movement and in Greek *pragma* means "action". And yet, if Rosenberg considered the creative process exclusively from the artist's side, pragmatist philosophy may help us consider it from the spectator's—not as an existentialist affirmation of the authentic self, but as a mode of constructing a range of potential meanings. In the aforementioned essay, "How to Make our Ideas Clear", Peirce identified three levels of clarity: recognizing a phenomenon; defining it; and predicting its consequences. The first stage is of particular interest to the artist, the second to the art historian, and the third to the beholder, except in reverse. Instead of anticipating the consequences of an action, the beholder will be coaxed into inferring its precipitating causes.

Take the following passage from John Dewey's *Art and Experience*: to appreciate a work of art: "a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art" (Dewey 1934). Of course, this passage echoes ideas already voiced from Aristotle to the 19th century empathy theory of Theodor Lipps. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle called humanity a naturally imitative species, and in his *Ästhetik*, Lipps argued that the human propensity for "inner imitation" leads to a fusion of subject and object, on the basis of which we "feel" the stress and strain of acrobats or dancers on stage, or infer the emotive feelings of individuals depicted in visual art (Lipps 1903). In the same vein, Dewey insists that aesthetic reception is not a passive, disembodied form of contemplation, an account that dovetails, not only with our five-year old's reaction to *Easter Monday*, but also with the way artists of de Kooning's generation tended to peruse works of art. Jackson Pollock's biographer, B.H. Friedman, recalled how paintings in his collection

elicited unorthodox responses from the artist: Pollock “stood in front of the Mondrian with hands out as if he was about to seize and fight it. His hands twitched in the air, seeming to want to touch or feel or somehow reproduce, remake, each element of the work before him” (Friedman 1972). Coming across a piece by Arshile Gorky, Pollock “again assumed something like a fighting stance, his hands moving in the air, tracing the configuration of the painting”.<sup>3</sup>

De Kooning’s friends and acquaintances had similar recollections: namely, that he “appeared to feel visual form within himself, stretching and bending in imitative ways while either observing a figure or making a rendering” (Shiff 2002, p. 77). Extrapolating from these anecdotes, we propose that gestural abstractions were specifically devised to encourage audience members to reverse-engineer the working process in their imagination. Relying on past experiences, beholders use real-world situations to reconstruct the artist’s movements no differently than our five-year old spectator—perusing each individual stroke and inferring how rapidly and forcefully the artist moved. Which, to be clear, is not to invoke the widely debunked, erroneous idea of the “innocent eye”. Medical research has corroborated that individuals who are born blind and undergo sight-restoration surgery cannot initially differentiate, say, a cube from a sphere. To recognize what they experienced exclusively from tactile sensations, they grasp objects manually while looking, correlating vision and touch, *learning* to make those distinctions from vision alone. Analogously, even our five-year old is no completely naive beholder. Without having experienced the world from an embodied perspective, a world where objects impact one another, he could not have registered *Easter Monday* as a field of activity, let alone engaged in the process of “recreation” Dewey described.

In this regard, Richard Shiff has already fruitfully related de Kooning’s works to what Peirce called “habits of mind”,<sup>4</sup> behavioral patterns that are neither exclusively intellectual nor instinctive, yet extrapolated from a lifetime of bodily interactions with our environment. Habits help us navigate the world in which we live, dispel our doubts, and engender beliefs and opinions. In that respect, they play a positive role. But habits also form rigid mental sets whose ideological grip becomes difficult to break, closing our minds to productive, alternative points of view. In that respect, they play a negative role. De Kooning felt the danger himself. Suspicious of stylish refinement and of his own virtuosic draftsmanship, he fought against falling into the trap of painting formulaically (perhaps irritated at younger artists patently imitating his panache). For the purpose, he initiated a practice of *habit-breaking*: drawing with his eyes closed, with his left hand, or under the influence (Gruen 1972). Changing habits, Peirce declared, requires “a modification of a person’s tendencies toward action” (Peirce 1955). Even so, it cannot be gainsaid that, as much as the artist feared mannerisms and clichés, any experience of his art depends—per force—on audience members acquiring some of these very same habits themselves. A habit, Peirce reminds us, is only describable in relation to “the kind of action to which it gives rise”.<sup>5</sup> Without their proclivity to infer causes from effects, without a capacity to reverse-engineer paintings in their imagination, beholders would be no less mystified before a de Kooning than patients just recovering from sight-restoration surgery before a cone or sphere.

Insofar as beliefs and judgements are concerned, sensitivity to motion is among the most basic. Since moving objects are either potential sources of food or potential threats, evolutionary pressures have positively selected for movement detection. When someone walks past us, we naturally look up; when an object is thrown in the air, we follow its path: perceptual psychologists call this tendency “trajectory tracking” (Neisser 1976). Some animals, like frogs or *Tyrannosaurus Rexes* (if one believes the *Jurassic Park* film series), can only see objects in motion. As unlikely as de Kooning saw *Jurassic Park*, or was even aware of these findings, he could have intuited them all the same (just as human beings intuited how gravity behaves well before Newton). In effect, trajectory tracking is a perfect example of a natural disposition establishing a Peircean habit of mind: not an ideological orthodoxy one repeats by rote, but a structure of meaning grounded in a lifetime of perceptual and tactile experiences. In this way, perception and everyday motility reinforce patterns



of thought that are not exclusively ideational. In fact, using brain imaging, present-day psychologists have discovered that observing moving objects activates the very same neural mechanisms as observing static images of moving objects (e.g., paintings or photographs) (Winawer et al. 2008; Concerto et al. 2016). We can safely assume, therefore, that if trajectory tracking naturally predisposes spectators to follow strokes on a canvas, de Kooning likely did the same whenever studying his work in progress, and—in turn—used these same reactions to tweak his art for the purpose of steering the reactions of his viewers.

Of course, no aesthetic response—however neurobiological—occurs in a cultural vacuum. As much as de Kooning sought to guide his audience’s response, that audience would not have recognized his marks as belonging to the category of “art” before the 20th century. Only after the modernist celebration of spontaneity culminated in Expressionist scumbling (Costa 2022; Fraquelli and Bernardi 2021), and in the accidental, automatic techniques so prized by the Surrealists, could de Kooning and his contemporaries take that same celebration a step further: an example of *habit-breaking*, or, better yet, of *habit-expanding*. But even as all art is time-bound and culture-specific, the beholder’s ability to construe strokes on a canvas as traces of a body in motion is not an exclusively cultural assumption; as Arthur Danto put it in another context: “the body is the emblem of our common humanity” (Danto 1999). Anticipating his audience’s habits of mind (and having developed similar ones himself), de Kooning was poised to fashion a new idiom maximally suited to exploit our propensity to engage in trajectory tracking. Even if he possessed neither the critical terminology nor the conceptual tools to verbalize these notions, de Kooning could have internalized their implications on the same level the sociologist Anthony Giddens used the term “practical consciousness”—namely, ideas one puts into practice in ordinary behavior, even without being able to articulate them discursively (Giddens 1979). Philosophers also differentiate “knowing how” from “knowing what”, having the skill, say, to drive a car rather than reciting the manual from memory. Knowing, in effect, is the result of doing, or, as de Kooning put it: “you have to prove it by doing it”.<sup>6</sup>

Among Peirce’s major contentions, however, was that, despite helping us navigate our environment, our expectations are not always reliable: “[O]ur knowledge is never absolute but always swims . . . in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy”.<sup>7</sup> De Kooning, for example, professed to painting rapidly,<sup>8</sup> but the films (and first-hand accounts) of the artist at work suggest otherwise (Slivka 1989). Otherwise, because they show him spending considerable time studying his pictures, indicating how the muscularity of his process was far more calculated than its appearance suggests (Zilczer 2017). His paintings may seem vigorously dynamic, but he controlled his degree of improvisation, carefully evaluating whether to accept, modify, or reject each successive intervention. The broader implication is that our *sensations* of violent spontaneity are deceptive, and the way the strokes appear and the way they were applied do not necessarily align. Greenberg patently misdescribed allover paintings as the repetition of near-identical shapes from edge to edge, but he was not wrong to invoke premeditation and discipline in his account of Abstract Expressionism. What decades of manipulating paint taught de Kooning, among other things, was how to concoct *the illusion* of rapid spontaneity. If only for this reason, Peirce’s forewarnings should dissuade us from accepting our habits and expectations too readily; in de Kooning’s case, the paintings are one thing, their effects another.

This does not mean that causality is a fictive, arbitrary construction. Human beings could not negotiate their physical or social environments without some rudimentary understanding of causal relationships. When it comes to works of art, however—which are all artificial and contrived—we must be especially suspicious. Titian and Tintoretto, Monet and Morisot, Masson and Miró all courted the look of rapid execution, but that look is easily manufactured. “The image”, as Jorge Louis Borges so succinctly described it, “is witchcraft” (Borges 1999). De Kooning obviously upped the ante, yet his effects of impulsive improvisation raise as much skepticism as those of Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac and Allan Ginsberg. While visiting the German artist Hans Hartung, to cite another example—an artist whose images appear to have been executed with extreme brio and

élan—Gert Schiff remembered the artist’s wife divulging how carefully and deliberately her husband worked.<sup>9</sup> That Hartung’s work makes such a dramatically different impression (not to mention his extreme irritation at his wife for having revealed such “professional secrets”) says a great deal about the discrepancies between paintings and their effects.

De Kooning played a similar game, except that his willingness to being filmed signals less reticence about exposing his working process. That exposure was perhaps a form of artistic virtue-signaling, as if the artist were declaring to the audience that, in his work, everything is clearly and transparently revealed. Even so, just as deceiving an opponent in athletic competition fails if telegraphed in advance—yet requires disciplined, repeated practice—de Kooning wanted it both ways: inoculate himself against the accusation that his work was completely chaotic, but conjure the cosmetic *effect* of impulsive improvisation. Whether the audience noticed the tension was likely less urgent an issue for him than maintaining that delicate balance: encourage the public to react to his work in certain ways, yet disguise exactly how it was actually made.

### 3. Semiotics

Our susceptibility to optical illusions calls our powers of understanding into serious question. For Peirce, human beings interpret phenomena and transfer meaning by means of signs. With some exceptions, “all our thought & knowledge is by signs” (Hardwick 1977). Which does not mean that the external world does not exist, or that signs do not help us navigate our environment; only that our inferences remain provisional and fallible,<sup>10</sup> a predicament of which semiotic terminology serves as a constant reminder.<sup>11</sup> Informed by Kantian philosophy, Peirce insisted that signs function as such *for a human subject*. A sign, he writes, “is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It . . . creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign”.<sup>12</sup> And since the analysis of signs is set into motion by the signs themselves, that circularity makes it difficult to conceptualize signs as things-in-themselves, operating in a vacuum, independently of an interpreter’s recognition and decoding of a sign relation. A sign is “anything which represents something else, its *Object*, to any mind that can *Interpret* it so” (Robins 1967, 640:8).

De Kooning was probably as unfamiliar with semiotics as he was with the notion of trajectory tracking. But that would not have prevented him from enlisting his own habits to fashion paintings that exploit an audience’s propensity to infer causes from effects. If Peirce’s term “index” is often used in connection with de Kooning, it is because it effectively describes the way we construe the active, dynamic “look” of his painted surfaces. In this respect, Peirce proves more useful than Ferdinand de Saussure. Unlike Saussure, who recognized the broader potential applicability of semiology, but concentrated primarily on arbitrary, linguistic signs, Peirce acknowledged a wide range of semiotic categories: chief among them being the icon, the index, and the symbol. In *icons*, the relationship between signifier and signified is mimetic or based on resemblance (e.g., a photograph or a realistic painting of external phenomena). In *symbols*, the relationship is conventional and arbitrary (as in verbal language or traffic lights, where red means stop and green means go, although these could easily be reversed without undermining the signs’ ability to communicate). And in *indices*, a direct connection or spatio-temporal contiguity links signifier and signified. Paradigmatic examples are relations of cause and effect,<sup>13</sup> the kinds of relationships that led to expressions such as: “every effect has a cause”, “to make an omelet, you must break some eggs”, or “there’s no smoke without fire”. Since smoke does not resemble fire, the relationship is not iconic; but since fires frequently produce smoke, the relationship is not purely arbitrary. Less dependent of the whims of cultural influence, causal connections are emblematic of indexical relations.

The widespread use of such common expressions confirms that mastering Peircean terminology is not required to fathom the mechanics of causality. Even without knowledge of semiotics, the reader of Daniel Dafoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* easily grasps the hero’s excitement at discovering a footprint on a deserted beach, a scenario wherein a human subject perceives



a mark as a clue, the appearance of which clearly indicates a relationship of cause and effect. Analogously, just as Crusoe reads the footprint as evidence of a human presence, we read de Kooning's surfaces, firstly, as forms and colors; secondly, as the residual traces of tactile, physical activity; and, thirdly, as evidence of a consistent pattern, such as the law of causality (Figure 2). Peirce designated these different levels of experience as: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. In addition to defining sign relations with succinct elegance, Peirce devised tools elastic enough to describe how our body-mind interactions engender assumptions about how material objects behave in the world, as well as our expectations about how they will behave in the future.

Whenever we use visual information to conjecture about the way works of art were physically made, we are reconstructing indexical signs, phenomena that are not exclusively conceptual, linguistic, or cultural. And just as importantly, because Peirce was discerning enough to recognize that our interpretations of causal relationships are susceptible to error, that acknowledgement accounts—conveniently—for de Kooning's ability to contrive the illusion that his paintings were executed with immediacy and dispatch. As blind spots bedevil human understanding, even causal connections are not completely transparent. Our beliefs, Peirce writes, “require correction and purification from natural illusions”. “[T]he adaptations of nature . . . are never found to be quite perfect; so that the argument is quite *against* the absolute exactitude of natural belief, including that of the principle of causation” (Peirce 1892a, pp. 330–31). Intriguingly, causality baffled de Kooning as well: although he worked with certain expectations in mind, his technical experiments occasionally surprised him.<sup>14</sup> Capitalizing on this phenomenon, he could easily have crafted his art to beguile his audience into believing his carefully executed marks were applied with vigor, managing, as Peirce might have put it, to twist the principle of causation into a “natural illusion”.

To deploy this “illusion”, the artist needed to extend the pigment's wetness and malleability as long as possible. When moist, strokes remain deformable, which can accentuate the effect of spontaneous energy and dynamic force. But since the artist could only afford inexpensive, quick-drying paints at this time (Lake 2010)—which impeded his ability to generate these signature effects—he delayed the drying process by affixing pages of newspapers on the picture surface. Removing these pages in-between successive painting campaigns, he discovered, to his surprise, that the wet paint had absorbed the ink of the newsprint (Figure 3). Newspaper pages were not literally glued or fastened to the canvas, as in collage; the ink simply transferred itself on the already-painted areas, but in reverse, like a mirror or printed image. Either by accident or by design, de Kooning inserted a multiplicity of signs in *Easter Monday* (Figure 3): at the most basic level, the photographic transfers qualify as icons, the gestural marks as indices, and the lettering as symbols. (De Kooning occasionally employed collage and painted on newsprint in other pieces, but not in *Easter Monday*).

#### 4. Vernacular Culture

As unlikely as he anticipated these collateral effects when first placing newspapers on wet canvases, enough examples emerge to infer that de Kooning welcomed these incursions (which he could always overpaint at his discretion) (Hess 1968, p. 76). In time, one suspects that he may have grown more discerning about which newspaper pages to choose, and where to allocate them on the picture surface. Though hardly noticeable at a distance, a vantage point from which the beholder tends to register the work in its totality (Figure 1), the transfers are impossible to miss at close range (Figure 3, Figures 5 and 6). If anything, their appearance in finished paintings testifies to de Kooning's refusal to isolate his art from lived experience. In fact, he painted commercial signs as part of his academic training, worked with illustration in his early career, and confessed to enjoying American movies and comic books.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of Picasso, Duchamp, and Schwitters, these predilections are hardly surprising; but at the time, cultural theorists strongly decried any interface between art and non-art. Theodor Adorno drew strict theoretical demarcations between “high art” and the “culture industry”, and Clement Greenberg between “avant-garde” and

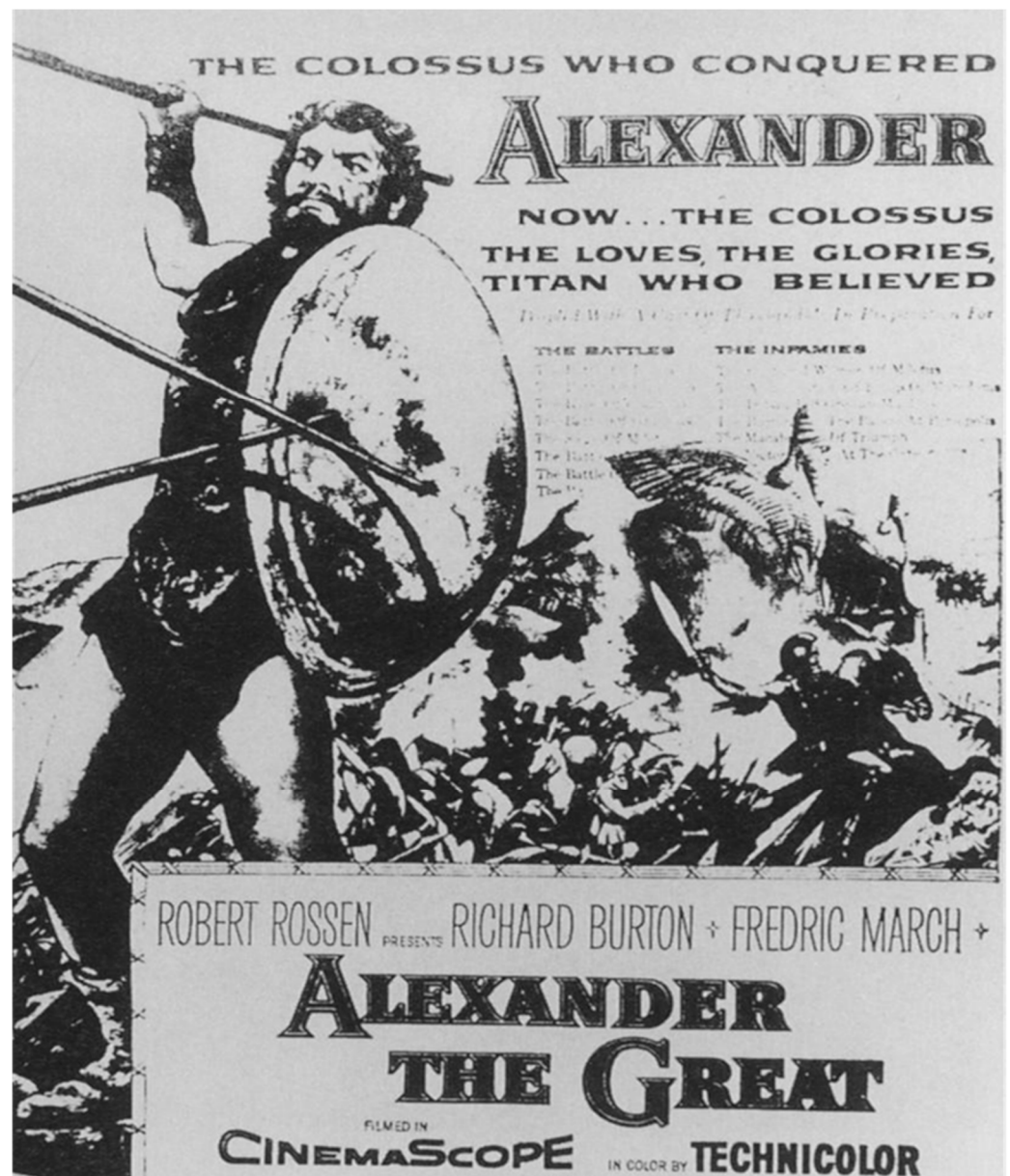
“kitsch”. Under no obligation to obey such mandates, de Kooning may have been more sympathetic to thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and John Dewey, who actually celebrated the injection of “popular” references in more elitist, artistic forms.

For de Kooning, celebrating the aesthetic properties of “art” versus “non-art”—the hand- versus the machine-made—were not mutually exclusive. According to Thomas Hess, he welcomed “the intrusion of the art of the streets into his work”,<sup>16</sup> an “intrusion” that counter-balanced his strong links with the tradition of art history and signaled an openness to the contemporary America in which he now immersed himself. De Kooning’s allusions to mass culture have, of course, elicited extensive commentary: his images of women are frequently connected to the contemporaneous infatuation with Hollywood celebrities, no less than to the popularity of the pinup (a term invented in the 1950’s). Focusing more narrowly on *Easter Monday*, Kristen Hoving Powell has conducted an admirable exercise of research, persuasively identifying its multiple newspaper clippings: from publicity for the film *Alexander the Great* (Figures 3 and 4), to a photograph of the French actor Jean-Pierre Aumont on his wedding day (Figure 5), to advertisements for Bendix refrigerators (Figures 6 and 7), Easter Candies, as well as to horror movies such as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *World Without End* (Figure 8). She insists, moreover, that the title *Easter Monday* is no arbitrary reference (as has sometimes been assumed) to the date of the painting’s completion, but, more specifically, to the day of Christ’s resurrection. Following this interpretive clue, Hoving Powell decodes a religious connotation in each “popular” image: the refrigerators allude to Christ’s tomb, the image of Aumont to the resurrected Christ, the Easter Candies to the time of the resurrection, and the films *Body Snatchers* and *World Without End* to life everlasting (Powell 1990).

Though interpretations in humanistic disciplines are seldom provable or disprovable, the implementation of consistent iconographic programs fits uncomfortably with the raw, experimental effects of de Kooning’s canvases. “When I used the newspapers in the paintings,” he recalled, “it was just an accident. When I took it off, I saw the backprint of the papers, and I thought it was nice. That’s about all. It had no social significance” (de Antonio and Tuchman 1984, p. 57). As indicated above, de Kooning’s creative process may have been less extemporaneous than it appears; but its *look* of spontaneity and evocation of violence—perhaps appropriate to the flagellation or the crowning with thorns—are inimical to the spirit of the resurrection. As the artist’s biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, put it: “De Kooning, who respected earth more than heaven, was not one of the period’s mystics. Religious themes occasionally entered his oeuvre and he admitted to a lifelong fascination with the Crucifixion. But the higher reaches of religion made him anxious. To this most tactile of painters, religious reverie seemed too airy and intangible” (Stevens and Swan 2006, pp. 379–80).

Intriguingly, Powell moves closer to this point of view when concluding her essay, intimating that *Easter Monday*’s vernacular references allowed de Kooning “to parody the seriousness of the Abstract Expressionists’ search for the spiritual through the personal gesture”.<sup>17</sup> This reading aligns more snugly with de Kooning’s personal predilections; and yet, the New York School artists most renowned for endowing their art with religious connotations—Rothko and Newman—were considerably less prone to foreground “the personal gesture” than de Kooning himself. If he were indeed satirizing an aspect of their work, it would have been their lofty ambitions to connote the sublime and transcendental, or their disdain of the topical and the concrete (Gilbert 2004), not their spontaneous mode of execution. Besides, such a proposition weakens rather than strengthens the case for *Easter Monday*’s religious messaging. It would have been rather unfair, even disingenuous, to evoke something as serious as “the narrative of the Easter story”,<sup>18</sup> yet subject other painters’ evocation of similar narratives to satirical commentary. (As Baudelaire put it in his study on laughter: “one never laughs in religious texts” (Baudelaire 1962).





**Figure 4.** Advertisement for “Alexander the Great”, New York Journal-American, 28 March 1956, p. 22.

Hoving Powell was not the only scholar to discern spiritual allusions in de Kooning’s work (Anfam 2003). The artist’s openness to chance and accident, however, reflects an ethos inconducive to the concoction of complex iconographical schemes, especially ones wherein every ink transfer encodes a preselected religious meaning. De Kooning admitted to appreciating billboards, the way motor oil spills onto pavements, and even how coffee leaves stains in cups,<sup>19</sup> all without detecting latent symbolic connotations. His approach, he declared elsewhere, was “eclectic ... by chance” (Kooning 1972, p. 54). There is no denying that, during the 1950’s, America positioned itself as a pious nation opposed to the atheistic Communist bloc (even adding “under God” to the pledge of allegiance in 1954). Church attendance swelled at this time, and Hollywood, sensing an opportunity, produced a string of cinematic epics such as *The Robe*, *Ben-Hur*, and *The Ten Commandments*, but whether de Kooning was riding this tide is hardly clear. As Stevens and Swan noted, he occasionally drew the crucifixion, and made vague and cryptic references to biblical themes in statements and interviews; yet these tend to reflect a nebulous worldview rather

than fidelity to a specific faith.<sup>20</sup> According to a long-time assistant, John McMahon, the numerous examples of crucifixions de Kooning encountered in Long Island communities, not fervent piety, inspired his engagement with the motif.<sup>21</sup> Besides, if *Easter Monday* visualized a commitment to religious messaging, one would expect more of his contemporaneous pieces (at least those that include newspaper transfers) to follow suit.



**Figure 5.** *Easter Monday* (detail).

By injecting vernacular references within the sphere of avant-garde art, de Kooning, rather, fashioned a hybrid idiom, something analogous to a Hegelian dialectic, where syntheses maintain aspects of the very antithetical elements they endeavor to resolve. Hegel's concept of sublation is even more *à propos*, insofar as it conveys three connotations simultaneously: to preserve, to cancel, and to elevate (Hegel 2010). De Kooning, after all, *preserved* aspects of "popular" culture in his work; *cancelled* them by changing their function; and then *elevated* them by inserting them in the domain of "high" art. His strategy is also reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's description of "*semantic hybrids*", cultural artifacts that do not merge, but set differing points of view "against each other dialogically" (Bakhtin 1981). These concepts are germane because the evidence suggests that de Kooning reveled in incongruence, in combining heterogeneous elements whose dissonant juxtapositions were devised to strike an audience as formally, technically, and thematically "dissonant". The effect recalls the way Samuel Fuller described his film noirs of the 1940's and 50's: "I love confusion, I love conflict" (Garnham 1971). In Fuller's work, Luc Moullet writes, "we see everything that other directors deliberately excise from their films: disorder, filth,



the unexplainable” (Moulet 1985). Of course, one cannot exclude the possibility that cultural artifacts that have no connection in their original context can be recombined to form one in another; but having pre-selected photographs of actors, advertisements for films and refrigerators, all reinforce the same religious significance would have required more symbolic inventiveness than Jan van Eyck, and more erudition than Panofsky.



**Figure 6.** *Easter Monday* (detail).

In a famous interview aired on the BBC in 1960, de Kooning divulged an alternative notion of meaning. “Content”, he insisted, “... is a glimpse of something, an encounter ... like a flash—it’s very tiny, very tiny, content”.<sup>22</sup> This description aligns less with programmatic iconography than, coincidentally, with Peirce’s account of how human beings communicate insights, experience unexpected sparks of inspiration, or suddenly recall ideas entertained in the past: “‘Idea’ is here to be understood in ... that sense in which we say that one man catches another man’s idea”, or “when a man continues to think anything, say for a tenth of a second, in so far as the thought continues to agree with itself during that time, that is to have a like *content* [italics mine]”.<sup>23</sup> Peirce’s brief moment of understanding is, arguably, analogous to de Kooning’s “glimpse”. “Content”, as the artist put it in the same BBC interview, is something one retains “from some fleeting thing—like when one passes something ... and it makes an impression”.

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**Figure 7.** Advertisement for Crosley refrigerators, New York Journal-American, 1 April 1956, sec. L, p. 20.

This statement suggests that, instead of devising conduits for sharing complex symbolic content from mind to mind, de Kooning conjured experiences comparable to navigating fluid environmental situations. In fact, he referred to his spaces as “no-environments”,<sup>24</sup> spaces that are neither interiors nor exteriors, but loosely connected to the artist’s studio and its surrounding neighborhood (Hess 1959). This form of conceptualization is easily understandable through a Peircean lens. By describing his working process as “eclectic . . . by chance”, de Kooning echoed Peirce’s acknowledgement of the impact of chance on natural phenomena (Peirce 1892b, CP, 6.86). “[A]n element of indeterminacy, spontaneity, or absolute chance”, he writes, always appears “in nature”.<sup>25</sup> In “The Doctrine of Necessity Examined”, Peirce rebuked philosophical determinists who explain physical events in terms of fixed, pre-existing laws. Endorsing Epicurus’ view that “atoms swerve from their courses by spontaneous chance”, (Peirce 1892a, p. 321) he coined the term “Tychism” from the Greek word for chance or fortune—a notion applicable not simply to natural phenomena, but even more to human behavior, given that—as Peirce reminds us—minds are also part of nature. Relating this idea to de Kooning is not to brand his work as random or chaotic; after all, he lived at a particular historical time, in a specific geographical environment, in a culture that held certain assumptions about what qualifies as a work of art. Even his highly indexical technique operated under multiple constraints (the limited scale and dexterity of his body, the literal dimensions of the canvas, the materiality of the paint, etc.). And it cannot be denied that—like Pollock, Kline, Rothko, Gottlieb, and Motherwell—de Kooning practiced a readily identifiable signature style.



Figure 8. Advertisement for the Albee Theater, New York Journal-American, 28 March 1956, p. 24.

Within those limits, however, de Kooning made countless unforeseen micro decisions (e.g., from what subject to depict to which hand to deploy, from how much force to exert to what newspaper pages to choose). Making few hard distinctions between finished works and sketches, or between drawing and painting, he decided everything in real time—as in a chess match or athletic contest. Umpires enforce strict rules and all players have their favorite tactics, but every move opens exponentially new possibilities, none of which are predictable in advance. De Kooning respected even fewer guardrails: while it is obvious where “the action is” during a sporting event, *Easter Monday* reveals no central focus, compelling the beholder to scan the surface rapidly from part to part, reinforcing the effects of kinetic energy the gestural marks already elicit. Even if a general aversion to disorder encourages spectators to detect connections among discrete forms and images, they will do so in a way that is open to chance, just as chess players scan the board for any opportunities that may suddenly present themselves. All of which reinforces how appropriately Peirce’s acknowledgement of spontaneity and unpredictability, as well as his recognition of sudden flashes of inspiration, suit de Kooning’s *modus operandi*, from the artist’s being “eclectic . . . by chance”, to his having “glimpses” of content.

The incorporation of numerous newspaper transfers also fits this pattern. Extracted and divorced from their context of origin, they initiated a secondary degree of unpredictability: namely, mirror reversal (Figures 3 and 4). More than the incidental consequence of hoping to maintain the paint’s flexibility, these *physical* inversions have unexpected semiotic implications: at a minimum, they affect symbolic language completely differently than indexical or iconic signs. Beholders will recognize human beings in photographs



printed in reverse (Figure 5), just as Robinson Crusoe would have interpreted an inverted footprint as a left instead of a right foot. They will even recognize refrigerators in schematic drawings printed upside down because, unlike human subjects, these appliances are largely rotationally symmetric (Figures 6 and 7); and yet, although recognizing individuals in mirror reflections, or in photographs oriented on their side, is second nature,<sup>26</sup> reading a verbal inscription in reverse is not (explaining why Leonardo wrote right to left in his notebooks<sup>27</sup>).

The reason, no doubt, is that, while millions of years of evolution have taught us that predators are equally dangerous irrespective of the side from which they attack, written, alphabetic language was only invented some 5000 years ago—giving human beings too little time to adapt (unless you are dyslexic or as brilliant as Leonardo). The same applies, mutatis mutandis, to our perusal of *Easter Monday*. Given the multiplicity of signs he employed, we can imagine de Kooning relishing inverted orientations no less than unexpected juxtapositions, exploiting—even if inadvertently—language’s vulnerability to a kind of obfuscation from which iconic photographs are immune. Not that photographs were spared de Kooning’s clever manipulations. As mentioned earlier, the artist extrapolated shapes from one painting to insert into another, often changing their orientation, and, like Pollock, he worked on canvases from all sides (Shiff 2002). In that spirit, he rotated the ad for *Alexander the Great* (Figure 3) and the photo of Aumont (Figure 5), which, in turn, incentivizes attentive observers to experience firsthand how, even on their side, photographs are easier to decipher than alphabetic scripts in reverse. Requiring multiple ways of looking or processing information, *Easter Monday* invites us to shift attention accordingly. Interestingly, recent experiments in neuroscience suggest that different cells in the brain process orientation (as opposed, say to color, shape, or texture), suggesting that we are sensitive to these aspects of perception in different ways (Tanigawa et al. 2011; Ramsden et al. 2014).

Not surprisingly, de Kooning compared looking at his art to traversing a street,<sup>28</sup> an activity that requires recalibrating our movements to avoid cars and other pedestrians, just as cars and other pedestrians recalibrate theirs to avoid us. These adjustments are sudden, unpredictable responses to an interactive environment, aspects of our motility that do not require verbalization; they have simply become automatic, like practicing a skill (another example of “knowing how” rather than “knowing what”). De Kooning painted in a similar way: “I don’t paint with ideas of art in mind. I see something that excites me. It becomes part of my content”.<sup>29</sup> According to Louis Finklestein, de Kooning did not render objects, but evoked “situations”.<sup>30</sup> Just as our gait needs constant fine-tuning to avoid other bodies in motion, the artist adapted to each new decision, compelling beholders to do the same. Throwing a multiplicity of contradictory signals in our visual field, he steers us off-course, forces our attention to zigzag across the picture surface, and frustrates our capacity to read labels by reversing them, continually keeping us off-balance. In by-now famous statements, he reiterated his love of incongruence: “The attitude that nature is chaotic and that the artist puts some order into it is a very absurd point of view”.<sup>31</sup> “For myself, I make things by accident” (Willard 1969). “Every time I paint a picture, I’m throwing the dice”.<sup>32</sup> “[A]rt is a way of living—it’s the way I live. It’s not programmatic”.<sup>33</sup> Even if his work was more calculated than it appears, such comments dovetail nicely with Peirce’s acceptance of chance and serendipity. Not only do semiotics help differentiate different classes of signs; but the way mirror reversal undermines the legibility of some more than others demonstrates how signs are experientially unequal. Some are more visual, others more conceptual; some are unintelligible in reverse, others not; some convey meaning through arbitrary social conventions, others through the ways our bodily encounters with the environment develop certain expectations.

Deciphering these different sign relations, therefore, is as much a concrete, *sensory* experience as an abstract, intellectual one. “There is no distinction of meaning so fine”, Peirce writes, “as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice”.<sup>34</sup> Analogously, we reconstruct de Kooning’s diverse means of *manual* execution viscerally in the

moment—comparably to making multiple split-second adjustments while crossing a street. The photographs and texts in *Easter Monday*, moreover, even compel us to reorient our heads to the side (Figures 3 and 5), sensitizing us to different ways of seeing and doing, adjustments we make, not in any predetermined order, and none at the exclusion of any other. In de Kooning's "no-environments", elements collide every which way: formally, technically, semantically, and experientially. The advert for the movie *Alexander the Great*, for example, makes a general allusion to the popularity of the film medium (Figure 3). From a material standpoint, however, de Kooning physically applied the (iconic) image and the painterly (indexical) strokes in radically different ways; and semantically, even if the iconic image is legible and the lettering illegible, the figure's identity (and symbolic meaning) is indecipherable without foreknowledge of the film's content. In fact, de Kooning did not include the movie's title, and only showed the figure of Philip of Macedon—not that of Alexander, the main character of the film—not to mention that he rotated the image 90° to the right.<sup>35</sup>

All of which raises multiple questions. What is the exact object Figure 3 references: the film, the ad for the film, a fragment of the ad? All of the above, or something altogether different? Just as our *sensory* experience of *Easter Monday* is analogous to walking down a street, so is our experience of deciphering its meaning. The multiple clues prompt a circuitous, fragmented process that leaves us continually on shaky ground. Do the clues signal the artist's delight in a celebrity, commercial culture; or his exposing it as a sham, a mirage everyone secretly longs to consume but that, in the end, leaves us empty and dissatisfied? Since de Kooning admitted to enjoying Hollywood movies and comic books, it would be unpersuasive to see this fractured surface as a form of social critique; and yet, instead of the narrative clarity or entertainment value we expect from film and TV, de Kooning exacerbates tension and ambiguity; not least, by inserting icons and symbols amid a piece that aggressively foregrounds the (indexical) process of its own making. Not all feature films of the time pushed escapist frivolity, of course; in some, the alienation of modern life took center stage. Even so, marginalized anti-heroes are usually redeemed through humane communities or benevolent institutions (Lipsitz 1990). For his part, de Kooning never discloses whether human beings should celebrate, assail, or simply accept fragmentation as a fact of modern life. Robert Rauschenberg—whose combination of oil and silkscreen, abstract gestural marks and representational photographs, obviously owe a great deal to de Kooning's example—did not intend his pluralistic clash of images to be predictable or divulge a single meaning: "I didn't want painting to ... achieve a predetermined result" (Lanchner 2010). Another artist who combined a gestural mode of execution with vernacular references, Larry Rivers, similarly described his own works as a "smorgasbord" (Rivers 1961). Perhaps de Kooning's art also reflects a multi-layered, discordant experience without critical judgment, encouraging the audience to return its own verdicts. A work of art is more like the real world, Rauschenberg famously added, if it is made up of the real world (Tomkins 2005).

As already indicated, Peirce readily acknowledged the role of spontaneity and unpredictability in forming "the inexhaustible multitudinous variety of the world".<sup>36</sup> "For every uniformity known", he insists, there are "thousands of non-uniformities".<sup>37</sup> It is patently obvious, he maintains, that evolution could not be set into motion if the world were fundamentally static, if the world did not *already presuppose* the possibility of change. Speaking of which, the theory of evolution stipulates that certain organisms have distinct advantages in specific environments, allowing them to pass on those same advantages to their offspring, altering their morphology over time. Neither Peirce nor Darwin knew, however, that random genetic mutations also propel change—not incrementally, but abruptly—irrespective of an organism's adaptability to its surroundings. As change was a key element for de Kooning,<sup>38</sup> with some interpretive license, we can see his newspaper transfers as the result, not of a slow, formal "evolution" (as when Picasso and Braque invented Analytical Cubism from 1908 to 1912), but as a sudden creative leap, comparable to an accidental mutation that dramatically changes an organism's genetic profile (as when Picasso and Braque

spearheaded collage in 1912). Just as animals evolve only if their biology is malleable, de Kooning could be eclectic by chance only if, like his Cubist predecessors, he was open to serendipity, explaining why, among his modernist precursors, de Kooning prized the Cubists most (de Kooning 1979).

Serendipity also breeds uncertainty. When interviewed by Harold Rosenberg, de Kooning stated: “what fascinates me—[is] to make something I can never be sure of, and no one else can either. I will never know, and no one else will ever know . . . That’s the way art is” (Rosenberg 1972; Burghi et al. 2006). Peirce was similarly disposed. “[O]n the whole”, he declared, “we cannot in any way reach perfect certitude nor exactitude. We never can be absolutely sure of anything, nor can we with any probability ascertain the exact value of any measure or general ratio”.<sup>39</sup> When scientists noticed that measuring the same phenomena yielded different results, they blamed these discrepancies on human error and compensated by recording averages. Peirce advocated a different conclusion: namely, that measurements differ because the world itself is continuously changing.<sup>40</sup> De Kooning shared this attitude. He was open to transforming his art “overnight” (Shiff 2002, p. 79) and to “sustaining” the same subject “all the time because it could change all the time”.<sup>41</sup> To conjure this effect, he left evidence of successive aesthetic decisions on the canvas surface, repainting, scraping, and smearing area upon area. If most artists disguised their pentimenti (many of which become visible only with X-rays), de Kooning flaunted them, as if to declare the entire process of making worthy of preservation in the final product—even ideas that were explored but ultimately rejected. Not surprisingly, *Easter Monday* appears in continual motion, a surface so heterogeneous that it looks different as one’s focus shifts from part to part, or from part to whole. De Kooning even saw Mondrian’s rigid, rectilinear grids as continually changing “in front of us”.<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, de Kooning exerted his powerful influence on Rauschenberg’s discordant combines, just as Peirce exerted his on Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle.

But, even as focusing on de Kooning’s absorption of diverse “popular” elements is fully warranted, the iconic photographic transfers should not be overemphasized at the expense of the indexical strokes. That would unjustifiably recalibrate attention away from where de Kooning drew it himself. By permeating the entire canvas, active brushwork spreads a connective tissue binding all the disparate iconic and symbolic elements together. In Andy Warhol’s paintings and silkscreens, the situation is exactly reversed: the commercial or figural elements are noticed first and the gestural areas second, while in Rauschenberg’s, our attention is equally divided, the two being held in relative equilibrium. In that sense, if these three artists were placed along a sliding scale, with indexical abstraction at one extreme and iconic commercial representation at the other, de Kooning’s abstractions would represent the first pole, Warhol’s hard-edged Brillo Boxes the second, and Rauschenberg’s silkscreens would lie approximately in the center. *Easter Monday* would be slightly closer to the center from the left, and Warhol’s more gestural renditions of commercial products closer to the center from the right.

De Kooning did not push the envelope as far as, but his example opened multiple possibilities for, his successors. Just as flipping pages in a magazine or newspaper draws our attention, now to one advertisement, now to another, now to superficial stories, now to others of great historical gravity, de Kooning reproduces the fragmentation emblematic of our experience with media culture. “To make his point”, Tom Hess recalled, de Kooning “opened a tabloid newspaper and leafed through its illustrations. There was a politician standing next to an arched doorway and rusticated wall, but remove the return of the arch—the wall might be a pile of shoe boxes in a department store, or ‘nothing.’ The outdoor crowd scene with orators on the roof of a sound truck could be the interior of Madison Square Garden during a prize-fight. The modern image is without distinct character probably because of the tremendous proliferation of visual sensations which causes duplicates to appear among unlikes” (Hess 1953).

It stands to reason that de Kooning sought to enact similar effects. In fact, he often sketched while watching television (Anonymous 1967), a medium whose increasing popu-



larity exposed millions of viewers to the same programs and commercials. On one side, this communal exposure created a potentially uniform customer base, fueling America's status as the world's greatest producer and consumer of manufactured goods. On the other, it broadcast disparate subject matter: news, comedy, drama, advertising, and so forth. Given de Kooning's incorporation of discordant elements, and his appreciation for the tabloid newspaper he showed Hess, it is not unreasonable to assume that the dynamic quality of his indexical marks also evokes—if only obliquely—the rapidity with which mass media compel consumers to move from one isolated order of experience to another. Some of de Kooning's highway paintings likewise conjure similar effects, being inspired by gazing out a car window, transcribing, as the artist put it, the "metamorphosis of passing things".<sup>43</sup> In this regard, de Kooning approximates Boccioni's renditions of train stations (*The Farewells*) or of passengers looking out of train windows (*Those Who Go* [Figure 9]), except that he eliminated the Futurist's anecdotal suggestions behind a torrent of gestural marks. No stranger to disconnection himself, de Kooning left his native Holland for a country where old world traditions were rapidly overthrown, and where the discontinuity of everyday life was reflected in its vernacular culture.



**Figure 9.** Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind II: Those Who Go*, 1911, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Nelson Rockefeller.

### 5. The Metaphorical Gesture

We mentioned earlier that the presence of the photographic transfers in *Easter Monday* should not be accentuated at the expense of the dynamism of the gestural strokes. Since they dominate the picture surface, it behooves the interpreter to explore how these marks function beyond prompting beholders to recreate the creative process in their imagination. If the question of meaning in de Kooning's abstractions remains a thorny one—as Greenberg put it, “you can’t specify what the emotion is”<sup>44</sup>—ideas from cognitive psychology may help advance interpretation. The linguist Eve Sweetser, for one, postulated that, as languages evolved, verbal expressions expanded from describing literal, physical situations to evoking subjective emotions or states of mind. Verbs such as “to see”, “to grasp”, or “to capture”, she argues, were first used to describe factual states of affairs: we literally *see* a person, *grasp* an object, or *capture* an animal. As languages became more intricate and sophisticated, these literal expressions evolved to evoke the more difficult, nebulous realms of emotion and psychology. Accordingly, the *physical* acts of seeing, grasping, or capturing were enlisted

to express, if only metaphorically, the more intangible, intellectual acts of expressing or understanding. Consequently, English has developed figurative expressions such as “I see your point”, “I am finally *grasping* what you are saying”, or “the artist has effectively *captured* this expression”. According to Sweetser, similar patterns are discernible in multiple cultures and languages (Sweetser 1990).

In a witty anticipation of her theory, Peirce compared “a pure idea without metaphor” to “an onion without a peel”,<sup>45</sup> a turn of phrase whose very utterance is cleverly self-corroborating. Taken together, Peirce’s wit and Sweetser’s argument invite us to explore the possibility of interpreting de Kooning’s gestural marks along similar “lines”. More specifically: whether the artist could have banked on the beholder’s proclivity to engage in trajectory tracking in order to encourage analogous forms of metaphorical mapping. Consider, for example, how the physical actions of taking a trip, running on a track, or following a path have generated metaphorical expressions such as “life is a journey”, “your argument is on the right track”, or “this is the professional path I have decided to take”. By means of projection, the concrete, easily comprehensible physical situation of forward motion has been enlisted to describe more abstract, nebulous concepts such as career, lifestyle, or political choices.

Such an approach befits the kinetic effects of de Kooning’s work because, if beholders tend to recreate the process of making in their imagination, that very recreation presupposes—if not mandates—another form of metaphorical projection: namely, an ability to read time in terms of space (an ability we employ whenever we employ expressions such as “time’s arrow”, “you need to move with the times”, or “time flies”). Any literal overlapping of strokes, for instance, will reveal the artist’s gestures in sequential order (Figure 2). As deeper layers will be assumed to have been painted first, we will read “above” and “below” not only spatially, but *chronologically*: namely, as “before” and “after”. (Intriguingly, this aspect of the working process is far more difficult to disguise than the rapidity of execution, a point beautifully satirized in Roy Lichtenstein’s brushstroke paintings). Even singular strokes will read as perduring or protending: in other words, as extending “in time”, as moving, say, *from left to right*, or as having a beginning, a middle, and end. When pigment is applied laterally on a surface, it spreads relatively evenly; but as soon as movement is suddenly interrupted, paint residues will form as the brush is lifted from its point of contact with the canvas. These residues endow painted strokes with “termination points”, from which we can infer their opposed “points of origin”. What is more, the quicker the interruption, the denser the residue, and the greater the sensation of rapid motion. Conversely, artists can prolong a stroke with loaded brush until the paint runs out, creating the opposite effect: namely, of gradual deceleration rather than a sudden stop. Of course, any competent painter can manufacture such effects at will, irrespective of how the paint was actually applied; but, insofar as spectators are concerned, these spatial clues coax them into inferring (rightly or wrongly) how “long” a gesture lasted.

No wonder, Peirce declared that “Time and space are continuous because they embody conditions of possibility”.<sup>46</sup> Consistent with this hypothesis, the linguist Jean Mandler argued that, when children are first confronted with an abstract idea such as time, it is easier to visualize objects moving along physical paths than to conceptualize time in the abstract (Mandler 1996). Writers and philosophers, not to mention users of everyday language, have intuited this phenomenon since “time” immemorial. We say that time is “short”, that we have known someone for a “long” time, or that a friend lives only “20 min away”. In Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, just to name another example, the hero states: “There is nothing actual about time . . . We measure time with space, but that is the same as measuring space with time”. “All our measurements are merely conventions” (Mann 2005). Mann’s character is correct that measuring time in terms of spatial increments is conventional; but, because the movement of the sun marks the passing of the day, or the hands of a clock mark the passage of minutes and hours, that same tendency easily strikes us as perfectly “natural”.

In the same way, de Kooning manufactures sensations of acceleration and deceleration that—as vivid as they may be—are not literal, but the result of projection, of the beholder’s share. Manny Farber wrote of his work’s “startling swiftness” (Farber 1950), and Harry Gaugh of its “strong kinetic charge” (Gaugh 1983). Yet it is ridiculously self-evident that painting is a static, not a kinetic idiom; and that strokes on a canvas cannot be “swift” or “fast”; they only give us *the illusion* of being so. It is almost as if de Kooning reversed Zeno’s arrow paradox: instead of a moving arrow remaining still during every time increment it occupies, de Kooning makes a stationary canvas look like a flying arrow.

But even if these sensations exist only in our minds, not *on* the canvas, this does not make them any less poignant. For all intents and purposes, these sensations accurately describe our subjective experience of the paintings themselves. An “optical illusion”, de Kooning declared, “isn’t an optical illusion. That’s the way you see it”. (Kooning 1972, p. 56) He has a point. “Our idea of anything”, Peirce writes, “is our idea of its sensible effects”.<sup>47</sup> The more individual spectators report these illusions, the more they acquire the status of social facts; and the more they recur, the more they become habitual, as is our tendency to read time in terms of space. It is not unreasonable to imagine, therefore, that, while studying his own canvases in progress, de Kooning felt, and manipulated his art so as to orchestrate, sensations of kinesthetic motion. De Kooning, Richard Shiff observed, assimilated “the internal feel of another’s body, in order to draw it . . . the meaning perceived in his line depends on whatever sympathetic, kinesthetic response it elicits in a viewer”.<sup>48</sup> Piggybacking on that observation, one could add that de Kooning used that same internal feel to anticipate and control how an implied audience might react to his art. As Peirce put it, the function of a sign is to “influence the thought and conduct of the interpreter”.<sup>49</sup> If so, part of de Kooning’s objective was to have the beholder infer the internal feel of *his own* body; and even if the means of achieving that objective were somewhat illusory, he no doubt would have replied: “it’s not an illusion, that’s the way you see it”.

If Stephen Ellis’ description of the artist—an “acrobat with a paintbrush” (Ellis 2019)—is any indication, then de Kooning manufactured these “illusions” as a matter of course. Crafting his pieces with a view to sparking physical sensations, he, like Peirce, appears to have rejected any strict dualism between mind and body. De Kooning also followed Peirce’s three stages toward clarity (recognizing a phenomenon, defining it, and predicting its consequences), except that he leapfrogged from the first to the third without worrying about the second. If he recognized and anticipated how readily his art triggered reactions of empathetic contagion, he did not bother to define the process. Nor did he need to; as an artist, that was not his responsibility. For art historians, though, the Peircean notion of the index, the psychological notion of trajectory tracking, and Eve Sweetser’s interpretation of semantic change, provide useful building blocks to fill the void. According to current psychological research, empathy is a physical process, and the brain registers the emotive valence of body movement on a par with facial expressions (de Gelder 2005). Since “individuals embody the emotional gestures of other people, including facial expressions, posture, and vocal affect”, then “imitative behavior produces a corresponding state in the perceiver, leading to the general suggestion that embodied knowledge produces felt emotional states”.<sup>50</sup>

It is therefore plausible that audiences will process the physical sensations de Kooning evokes, not completely randomly, but as conducive to, or even triggers for, the projection of meaning. In view of Sweetser’s analysis, one might proffer the hypothesis that: the longer strokes extend uninterruptedly in space, the more the beholder will construe them as continuous, stable, and regular. In which case, gestures will invite readings analogous to metaphorical expressions we use to connote progress: “I can see the light at the end of the tunnel”, “it’s smooth sailing”, or “we are on the fast track”. The more strokes undulate, the more they will be construed as turbulent, choppy, and irregular, equivalent to expressions that connote the meeting of obstacles: “fasten your seatbelts”, “I’ve had my ups and downs”, or “it was a bumpy ride”. The more violently they are broken, interrupted,



or collide, the more strokes will elicit readings analogous to expressions such as: “I am torn about what to do”, “I feel as though I am being pulled in different directions”, “I am experiencing an internal tug-of-war”. On this account, it is not unreasonable to propose that the artist fully exploited the audience’s propensity to engage in trajectory tracking to coax it into projecting an analogous range of connotations.

For John Curley, the transient effects de Kooning experienced while looking out a car window inspired him to make oblique allusions to road signs in his work, as in the painting *Detour* of 1958.<sup>51</sup> Taking this interpretation “the extra mile”, so to say, we could point out how fittingly such a turbulent image, with marks crisscrossing at multiple angles, evokes a literal detour. As strokes “collide”, “ram”, “by-pass”, or “rear-end” one another, we also feel sensations “analogous” to the emotional frustration that accompanies the inability to reach an intended destination. One might also conjecture whether *Detour* directly references Edgar Ulmer’s 1945 film noir of the same name—much of which unfolds in an automobile, and where a series of unfortunate events and ill-fated coincidences prevent the protagonist from fulfilling his objectives. Even if such a connection is impossible to verify, it is tempting to draw an analogy between de Kooning and Ulmer’s strategies: in different media, unsuccessful road trips and deflected physical trajectories become metaphors for emotional frustration and existential angst.

Whether de Kooning consciously grasped all the nuances pertaining to the construction of meaning is also impossible to verify. But one can safely assume that he recognized how his own works trigger our proclivity to engage in trajectory tracking (what Peirce might qualify as firstness); that he intuited the difference between icons, indices and symbols (secondness); and that, connecting the effects of his actions with the marks on the canvas, he—like Robinson Crusoe—understood these relationships to reflect causal patterns (thirdness). De Kooning probably also reasoned that these connections betrayed rudimentary principles which he could manipulate to affect the beholder’s perception. “The course of life”, Peirce writes, “has developed certain compulsions of thought which we speak of collectively as Experience. Moreover, the inquirer more or less vaguely identifies himself in sentiment with a Community of which he is a member”.<sup>52</sup> If only instinctively, de Kooning also counted himself and his audience to form such a community, a community that would react to his paintings according to certain shared habits, and a community to whom “glimpses” of content might be communicated.

That said, no combination of abstract strokes will convey a stable, fixed meaning, especially as few audiences are ever completely uniform. Painterly marks may read as traces of causal relationships, but their broader meanings are never fully transparent, corroborating Greenberg’s statement that emotions cannot be securely identified in de Kooning’s art. Which does not mean, from the other side, that we cannot make some general suggestions, or that any or all emotions can be projected—indiscriminately—upon his work. In every instance, our experience will be relational: if we compare each mark to the one next to it, and to the character of the painting in its entirety, some strokes will appear to accelerate, others to decelerate, creating effects equivalent to crescendos and decrescendos in musical compositions. One cluster will appear agitated, another more restrained; and, in the same way as a stroke’s character changes depending on the one adjacent to it, a painting’s character alters depending on the works hanging in its vicinity. (De Kooning himself declared “There’s no way of looking at a work of art by itself” (Stevens and Swan 2006, p. 344), just as Peirce affirmed that “there is no intuition or cognition not determined by previous cognitions”.<sup>53</sup>) If we are exposed to the extent of an artist’s repertoire, some paintings will appear more aggressive, others more serene. Even if we studied a de Kooning in isolation, our reaction will be predicated on our foreknowledge of the artist’s expressive range, from the most to the least violent piece, from the most gestural to the most reserved. These experiences will establish other versions of Peircean habits of mind, habits that will alter whenever we come across anomalous examples, causing us to relocalize an individual painting’s relative position along what we have already referred to as a sliding scale.

We have also proposed that lengthy, uninterrupted lines will reinforce sensations of forward momentum, and interrupted ones sensations of tension or anxiety. But these sensations—however vivid—will not divulge *the nature* of the tension or anxiety itself, leaving the beholder free to construe the oppositions as emotional, social, political, or something altogether different. In this regard, although formal configurations will compel some reactions, the audience has enough latitude to project meaning according to its own biases and predispositions, a projection that, like walking down a street, will be interactive and unpredictable. If strangers tell us that they are “being pulled in different directions”, we will readily discern their conflicted state; but without knowing their personal circumstances, we will be unable to determine whether the conflict relates to their private, professional, or social life. For that, we will need more information. Similarly, if *Easter Monday* provokes effects of dynamic force, and juxtaposes dissimilar examples of “popular” culture, it is not inappropriate to see the painting as analogous to metaphorical expressions such as “the pace of change is accelerating”, “modern life is moving too fast”, or “it’s hard to keep up with current events”. The 1950’s, after all, not only saw the increasing popularity of quick cars, jet travel, fast food, and rock music (which employed faster tempos); it was also the first historical era of planned product obsolescence, an era where consumer goods were produced to be continuously upgraded lest they become useless and old-fashioned. Allegedly, de Kooning told Edwin Denby that he wanted his work to look as though “a wind” was “blowing across [its] surface”, which the latter took to mean that he wanted to keep “the parts off kilter” (Berkson 1989). Whether he had this specific aspect of America in mind when wanting his images to look destabilizing is impossible to confirm, but as technological innovation overtook so many aspects of life, speed was now considered emblematic of American culture; even the food industry enticed customers with new slogans such as: “quick ‘n’ easy” and “ready in no time”.

Metaphorical mapping thus dovetails nicely with de Kooning’s *modus operandi*, not least, because metaphors do not conjure the concrete properties of objects, but relate disparate objects by means of creative analogy. Allowing considerable interpretive flexibility and latitude, de Kooning’s “glimpses” of content qualify as another mode of metaphorical projection, projections that concoct correlations about which, in the artist’s own words, the beholder “can never be sure of”. De Kooning’s opinions about the semantic ambiguities of linguistic forms are not securely documented, but the artist titled one of his paintings *Rosy Fingered Dawn at Louise Point*, referencing one of his favorite locations in Long Island, to which he rode his bicycle to observe the reflections of light on the water. Additionally, the title directly cites an oft-repeated metaphorical epithet from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Which suggests that de Kooning was not insensitive to the communicative possibilities of metaphor, and that, despite his allusions to vernacular culture, he sought, not to illustrate empirical experiences, but to invent (or recycle) creative analogies to evoke his subjective impressions of, or emotive responses to, empirical experiences.

The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to *Easter Monday*. According to Max Kozloff, Bernice Abbott and Helen Leavitt’s photographs portray the American urban landscape as “a jumble of diverse sensations” (Kozloff 1984). So does *Easter Monday*; except that, instead of recording diverse people and settings, he evoked the *subjective sensation* of “jumbled diversity”. Like many Abstract Expressionists, de Kooning implemented his own version of Mallarmé’s dictum: “Paint not the thing but the effect of the thing”. This notion was widely endorsed among the New York avant-garde, but it is not an easy one to clarify; how, after all, does one separate the “effect” from the “thing” that produces it? Predictably, Peirce provides valuable assistance, namely, by underscoring how human beings make distinctions at different levels of abstraction: distinctions, say, between different *things*—a white sail or a smooth surface—and different properties, such as “whiteness” or “smoothness” (the *effect* of things).<sup>54</sup> Whether qualities such as whiteness or smoothness “as such” even exist independently of white and smooth objects is a question as old as Plato and Aristotle; and yet, even if they have no literal existence, we would not have devised such abstractions if they did not serve some purpose. In many cases, we determine what multiple objects have

in common, and extrapolate generalizations from concrete situations, just as we employ useful terms such as “society” and “culture” even though, in actuality, “societies” and “cultures” do not literally exist—only populations of distinct individuals. By fashioning static, abstract paintings that trigger effects of velocity, de Kooning, arguably, places us in precisely this situation. Even as perusing his canvases generates sensations of speed and dynamism, it is not easy to specify exactly *what* is being fast and dynamical.

One could even make the case that this ambiguity served de Kooning’s purposes. Torn between Europe and America, tradition and modernity, high art and vernacular culture, he also sought to evoke a feeling of “disconnection” analogous to that seen in, say, Abbott and Leavitt’s images, except at a higher level of “abstraction: namely, at the level of “roughness” rather than at the level, so to say, of a “rough surface” or a “rough ride”.<sup>55</sup> For that reason, on a sliding scale between abstract and literal disconnection, we can place Abbott and Leavitt’s photographs at one pole, and de Kooning’s abstractions—such as *Ruth’s Zowie* or *Palisade* (which include neither icons nor symbols)—at the other. *Easter Monday* would then lie only slightly closer to a center firmly occupied, again, by Rauschenberg’s combinations of found objects and abstract strokes. In employing semiotic terminology and the metaphor of the sliding scale, we hope to acknowledge both the literal, concreteness of *Easter Monday*’s heterogenous surface—the “things” we experience at close range—versus the more abstract feeling of velocity and discontinuity—the “effect of the things”—we experience at a distance.

Even so, we must always remain cautious; because the painting remains at a high degree of abstraction, our interpretations remain fallible—abductions rather than deductions—and the discontinuity of modern life is but one of many plausible readings de Kooning’s sensations of frenetic activity can sustain. Against the backdrop of historical events (e.g., the Russian acquisition of nuclear weapons, the stalemate in Korea, the military intervention to enforce racial de-segregation in the South, and the “red scare”), his images could convey a more pointed political subtext, channeling the acute anxieties that clouded the nation’s economic prosperity and superpower confidence. Just as cinema and TV created a common audience across the country, the prospect of nuclear Armageddon enveloped that same country in a common climate of fear. It would not be misplaced to see de Kooning’s clashing gestures as capturing this despondent mood as well. (*Easter Monday*’s inclusion of an advertisement for *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Figure 8) could easily be taken as an allusion to McCarthyist hysteria). The interpretations that will be the least persuasive are those that associate the image with sensations of rest, calm, or serenity.

## 6. Semiotic Fusion and Membership Gradience

To this point, we have respected the distinction between icons, indices, and symbols; but even as all three appear in *Easter Monday*, these categories reveal considerable overlap. For this reason, Richard Shiff warned that such “distinctions cease to be effective [vis-à-vis de Kooning]; each of the various material and pictorial elements serve multiple purposes”.<sup>56</sup> But one can make a case that these categories remain useful all the same. It is important to remember, firstly, that, while the icon-index-symbol is Peirce’s most important trichotomy (and the one on which he lavished the most attention), it is not the only one he devised. As he sharpened his analysis, his terms become perhaps overly technical for art historical as opposed to philosophical purposes: qualisigns (qualities), sinsigns (singular events), and legisigns (general laws). Within this framework, *Easter Monday*’s immediate qualities (colors, gestures, dynamic effects) count as qualisigns; the coordination of these qualities into a singular event in time and place as a sinsign; and our interpretation of its marks as the result of the natural law of causality as a legisign. Another important Peircean triad is the distinction between rhemes (terms), dicisigns (propositions), and arguments. In this framework, the proper name “de Kooning” counts as a rheme; the labeling of *Easter Monday* as “a work by de Kooning” as a dicisign; and the specific reasons for attributing *Easter Monday* to de Kooning, or the adducing of evidence to support an interpretation, as arguments.



It is also important to remember, secondly, that, for Peirce, all these categories inter-connect. To anyone familiar with the artist's work, the terms "de Kooning paintings", will call up images, techniques, and ideas. Every ink transfer in *Easter Monday* may not be identifiable, but these conjure the associations we attach to the notion of "mass media". And if combined with a number and a dollar sign (Figure 7), these iconic images will invoke the context of production and promotion, purchase and sale, that surrounds commercial products, no less than concepts of efficiency, functionality, as well as the snob-appeal we connect with certain brands. Image and text combinations thus provide excellent examples of dicisigns (propositions that, as such, are open to doubt or confirmation). The statement "*Easter Monday* is a work by de Kooning" is such a proposition, independently confirmable by consulting an authoritative publication, just as visiting certain retailers can confirm whether the advertising of a refrigerator for a certain price (Figure 7) is authentic. Dicisigns thus convey information, as opposed to have information simply extracted from them.

Which is not to say that dicisigns have single, fixed meanings. In newspapers, advertisements encourage consumers to act rapidly lest they lose their opportunity to "grab a bargain". Inside cultural artifacts that allegedly raise higher philosophical questions, those same advertisements can misfire and remain open to alternative, satiric readings. Likewise, the poster for "Alexander the Great" is, theoretically speaking, also a dicisign, basically, because it combines image and text, and verifiably reflects the product it advertises (Figure 4); and yet, de Kooning dismantles the very structure he put together. As the text is difficult to read in reverse and the image hard to identify (Figure 3), its propositional combination of elements tug at each other, threatening to devolve into discrete, disconnected rhemes.<sup>57</sup> If de Kooning employed the iconic/linguistic combinations emblematic of dicisigns, he also pulled these combinations apart, exacerbating the sensations of fragmentation visible throughout *Easter Monday*.

For his part, Peirce fully acknowledged how signs serve a multiplicity of purposes; in fact, he argued that sign relations multiply into the thousands,<sup>58</sup> an intimidating degree of complexity that explains why Peircean semiotics have proven less influential than, say, Saussure's (Elkins 2003). Still, Peirce conceded that analyses need not necessarily be extremely intricate or even precise to be useful: "It is a nice problem to say to what class a given sign belongs; since all the circumstances of the case have to be considered. But it is seldom requisite to be very accurate; for if one does not locate the sign precisely, one will easily come near enough to its character for any ordinary purpose of logic".<sup>59</sup>

Even within the icon-index-symbol triad, crossovers emerge at multiple levels. Having taken photometric pictures of stars while working at the Harvard Observatory, and as a practicing photographer himself (Robbins 2014), Peirce recognized the intricacies of the medium. Since they resemble their subjects, he classified photographs as icons; but since they record light and radiant energy on photo-sensitive material, he acknowledged their indexical qualities as well (whether on a glass plate or through the process of printing negatives upon paper or newsprint).<sup>60</sup> A photograph, he declared, "is an index having an icon incorporated into it".<sup>61</sup> When de Kooning manually affixed newspapers on his paintings, the ensuing photographic transfers resulted from an additional relationship of cause and effect, and thus arguably qualify as *doubly* indexical. Photographs, moreover, accrue different *symbolic* meanings when they serve various functions: documenting events, selling products, illustrating gossip columns, or acquiring the status of commodities such as works of art. In that context, we even refer to them as "a Man Ray", "a Steichen", or "a Cindy Sherman", triggering all the accompanying connotations (aesthetic, financial, prestigious) such attributions suggest.

If icons can be indexical, indices can be iconic. The footprint Robinson Crusoe found on the beach did not resemble a human being, but provided a visually recognizable outline of a human foot. Cuts may not resemble knives, or strokes of color paintbrushes; but the width of lacerations or brushstrokes betray a great deal about the instruments that caused them (just ask art conservators or forensic pathologists). In parallel, arbitrary symbols acquire indexical qualities whenever they are drawn, written, and printed. Letters carved

in stone are primarily symbolic, but to anyone ignorant of the language employed, they will register mostly as indexical. For Peirce, these multiple, overlapping properties<sup>62</sup> mean that signs rarely qualify as “pure” specimens.<sup>63</sup> It can even be argued that multi-dimensional signs are the most informative. Unless one specifies the identity of the person or object an icon is meant to resemble (or the specific purpose the image is meant to serve), its efficacy as a likeness will be difficult to gauge. A clearly-labeled map will have greater utility than a blank one, just as fingerprints if they are cross-referenced in a police database.

From this standpoint, semiotic categories are themselves generalizations extrapolated from a fluid manifold of sign relations,<sup>64</sup> prompting expositors of Peircean theory to pay increasing attention to manifestations of semiotic fusion,<sup>65</sup> examples of which permeate *Easter Monday*. The photographic ink transfers—and, to a lesser degree, the way *visual* superimpositions betray the chronological sequence of paint strokes—are conspicuous instances of iconic-indexical fusion. The physical impressions of newspaper writing are examples of indexical-symbolic fusion; and the social meanings we ascribe to the photographs, or the way we value them as an art form in our culture, are examples of iconic-indexical-symbolic fusion. On this account, de Kooning’s deployment of signs was not restricted to their “purest” incarnation, if one can even use such a term. Icons, indices, and symbols are not discrete, mutually-exclusive forms of classification, and perusing *Easter Monday*—a valuable art historical exercise or aesthetic experience in its own right—proves doubly serviceable by conspicuously showcasing the elasticity of, and mutual interconnections among, Peircean categories.<sup>66</sup>

That said, it is equally important to keep in mind that, although a sign may fulfill multiple semiotic functions, these functions (i.e., iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity) are themselves separate and distinct.<sup>67</sup> And depending on which of these functions is of interest to the interpreter, signs will be classified differently. A chemist may think of a photograph primarily as an index and a historian as an icon; a photographer may think of a photograph as an icon when pointing the camera, but as an index when printing a negative. Detectives will think of a fingerprint as an index while dusting a surface, as an icon when looking through a criminal database, and as a symbol if its discovery is touted as an exemplary way of solving a case. The same pertains to *Easter Monday*. De Kooning likely thought of newspapers as indices when hoping to keep the paint moist, as icons when deciding which ink transfers should remain visible, and as symbols whenever discerning a “glimpse” of content.

And just as signs crossover multiple categories, a sign’s position in a single category is relative. Even if semiotic functions—e.g., iconicity or indexicality—are fixed, different signs will serve these same functions unequally. For this reason, signs can be assigned what cognitive psychologists call “membership gradience”, meaning that certain members will be considered “more” or “less” central than others. A photograph, for instance, will count as a better example of an icon than a highly stylized portrait; a conventional word a better example of a symbol than an onomatopoeic one; and a gestural painting a better example of an index than a polished surface. In other words, even as all artificial objects (and natural processes) are the result of causal relationships, the more conspicuously the making process is betrayed in its structure or appearance, the more an object will qualify as paradigmatically indexical. The previously employed metaphor of a sliding scale applies here as well. All paintings are indices, but a Tintoretto is more emblematic than a Masaccio, a Delacroix than a David, a de Kooning than a Delaunay. Similarly, the diagrammatic drawings of refrigerators are iconic (Figure 7), but less emblematically so than the ad for *Alexander the Great* (Figure 4), which is less iconic than the photo of Aumont (Figure 5). In this way, the concepts of semiotic fusion and of membership gradience permit finer discriminations than merely categorizing elements as iconic, indexical, or symbolic. As unlikely as de Kooning self-consciously sought to span this entire spectrum, as an equal opportunity poacher, he did not restrict himself to a single type of sign, nor to appropriating a single type of “popular” source.

In navigating these waters, de Kooning played a double game. Recreating the impression of the tabloid article he mentioned to Thomas Hess—where images signify differently when isolated or recombined—he wrenched iconic advertisements and celebrity photographs from their original contexts. In *Das Kapital*, Marx argued that, when made into commodities, objects transcend their sensual properties and foreground their use- and exchange-value: “It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness” (Marx [1976] 1990). A powerful point. In *Easter Monday*, however, things are not that simple. Instead of camouflaging, de Kooning foregrounds (albeit in a somewhat deceptive way) the amount of labor involved in bringing his work into being. Additionally, even as he transferred newsprint into paint, and paint into a commodity (a “work of art”), his indexical process erases neither the factual concreteness nor the previous connotations of the photographic elements—allowing the audience to recognize them for what they are (or, perhaps more accurately, for what “they were”). We may not recall a celebrity’s name, but we will recall the genre to which celebrity photographs belong (advertisement, gossip column, etc.), a genre whose original connotations, though not always discernible with specificity, “spill over” into the new environment. One could even argue that, given his penchant for incongruence, de Kooning courted this dual effect, withholding the rationale for including foreign elements inconsistent with their new setting, obscuring their communicative function, and initiating a tug-of-war between old and new contexts. If signs become more informative when fulfilling multiple functions, de Kooning’s recombinations, conversely, short-circuit their informational yield, leaving the recovery of specific meanings in abeyance.

For these reasons, the normally useful adage that “context determines meaning” is ill-suited to *Easter Monday*. As its surface includes multiple images, those images conserve a general feeling of discord. De Kooning’s carefully crafted settings are never powerful or overwhelming enough to completely repurpose any newly inserted artifact. We may not be incentivized to buy a new refrigerator when perusing *Easter Monday* (Figure 6), but the advertisements’ original function is difficult to ignore (Figure 7). Consumer behavior was first recognized as a target of market research in the 1940’s and of psychological investigation in the 1950’s. Relying on this research, companies cleverly manipulated idealized images of women as excellent cooks, showcasing kitchens as the “heart of the house”, inundating TV and magazines with commercials for prepared foods and new appliances. A new stove or refrigerator—the ads intimated—signaled the virtues of selfless housewives as much as their financial security and proficiency with the latest technology. As emotional satisfaction was associated with the power to purchase material goods, a blind faith in modern progress was encouraged. De Kooning does not propagate these messages, of course, but neither does negate them; he simply allows them to stand next to others of potentially opposite meaning.

Alternatively, de Kooning may have denounced consumerism and a celebrity culture in a subdued and understated manner. Advertising is so insidious, after all, because it influences consumers in subliminal ways, and de Kooning could also have worked on that level, but in reverse, using subtlety and nuance to disclose, and simultaneously undercut, advertising’s deceptive messaging. When affixing the ads for refrigerators, for example, de Kooning placed them upside-down (Figure 6), which, in concert with mirror reversal, dilutes whatever cravings for material goods the ads manipulate the audience into feeling. Admittedly, there is no evidence that de Kooning meant this move to convey counter-cultural sentiments; quite the reverse, he was already cited above as ascribing no “social significance” to these incursions. But one cannot exclude the possibility that he was deliberately playing a rhetorical game, inciting curiosity like Andy Warhol who—despite representing race riots, electric chairs, and atomic explosions—called himself a superficial person behind whose images stands nothing at all. The prospect that de Kooning operated



in a similar manner is an attractive one to contemplate, although, as it stands, there is insufficient data to substantiate it.

## 7. Conclusions

Even if *Easter Monday*'s disparate elements fail to convey a consistent message, they still telegraph the artist's active engagement with "popular" culture, a culture allegedly opposed to the "elitism" to which his own paintings aspire. As previously intimated, *Easter Monday* enacts something analogous to what Bakhtin called "semantic hybrids", where differing points of view clash "against each other dialogically", or a Hegelian dialectic, where opposing factors retain their identity even when synthesized. Against the backdrop of Peircean semiotics, we are better positioned to parse how the diversity of these effects are set into motion. Ostensibly, it was insufficient for de Kooning to reproduce the iconic appearance of advertisements, underscore the indexical processes of making, or evoke the symbolic meanings communicated by consumerist culture. Instead, all these tactics were deployed simultaneously, generating multiple sign relations and creating manifold instances of semiotic fusion. Within a single visual field, these disjunctions and incongruities recreate the feelings of disorientation and transitoriness we often experience when exposed to mass media. Anticipating Rauschenberg's combines, whose emulations of the "real world" also betray multiple sign relations and examples of semiotic fusion, de Kooning injected icons, indices, and symbols of consumerism in canvases thought to be exclusively devoted to expressing the artist's personal subjectivity. As Tom Hess put it, de Kooning developed a process whereby the artist or beholder must "jump" or "leap from shape to shape",<sup>68</sup> to which one also may add: from sign to sign, from sign relation to sign relation. Even if he could not have gone as far as Warhol, Rivers, or Rauschenberg, de Kooning's ethos was not all that different, and his powerful influence on their work betrays how much their own experiments hinged upon his.

Given the above, it is hoped that the reader will be persuaded that Peircean semiotics supply helpful conceptual categories and descriptors to differentiate the disparate elements in, and help advance the interpretation of, *Easter Monday*. Not surprisingly, this mode of analysis has also proven fruitful with respect to other images and cultural artifacts.<sup>69</sup> Not only by differentiating icons, indices, and symbols, but also by outlining multiple examples of fusion and crossover among semiotic designations. At a second order level, the distinctions between qualisigns, sinsigns, and legisigns, rhemes, dicisigns, and arguments are also helpful, though perhaps to a lesser degree than the primary icon-index-symbol triad. As already insinuated in the Introduction, no single theory can address all issues and answer all questions raised by works of art. With respect to de Kooning, ideas regarding the experiential links undergirding metaphor, as well as the notion of membership gradience, also contribute to understanding the construction and projection of meaning. Even if we limit ourselves to evaluating the indexicality of gestural marks, the psychological concept of trajectory tracking as well as the recent discovery (through brain imaging) that human beings respond to images of moving objects no differently than to moving objects themselves is highly suggestive. Further research in these areas may bolster interdisciplinary collaborations between art historians, cognitive linguists, psychologists, and neuroscientists, as well as unearth supplementary connections between perception, cognition, and interpretation in the humanities. Whether art historians will be enticed to employ Peircean semiotics more robustly in the future—either when addressing de Kooning's work, or when tackling other aesthetic issues—is impossible to predict. No doubt, Peirce himself would have seen the incorporation of his ideas in art historical discourse as a constructive way of making our ideas clear.

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## Notes

- 1 Elderfield, “Space to Paint”, 13.
- 2 Peirce (Peirce 1931–1958) (Hereafter as CP, followed by paragraph number).
- 3 Friedman, xiv.
- 4 Schiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning*, 40ff.
- 5 “Pragmatism in Retrospect: A Last Formulation”, in Buchler, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 286.
- 6 De Kooning cited in (Hess 1968, p. 15).
- 7 CP. Vol. 1, 171.
- 8 De Kooning, cited in (Anonymous 1959).
- 9 Personal conversation with the author, Fall 1987.
- 10 (Moore 1982); see also CP. Vol. 2, 227.
- 11 Peirce was somewhat ambiguous on these questions; see (Bergman 2004).
- 12 CP. Vol. 2, 228.
- 13 *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, 56. CP. Vol. 2, 248.
- 14 De Kooning in (Hunter 1975).
- 15 De Kooning interviewed in *Painters Painting*, Documentary Film, Arthouse Films, Directed Emile de Antonio, 1973; see also Schiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning*, 126.
- 16 Hess 1968, 76.
- 17 Hoving Powell, 99.
- 18 Hoving Powell, 100.
- 19 See Schiff, *Between Sense*, 240.
- 20 Hess 1968, 15.
- 21 Richard Schiff, in communication with the author, Fall 2022.
- 22 “Willem de Kooning,” in David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) <https://www.dekooning.org/documentation/words/content-is-a-glimpse> (accessed on 16 July 2022).
- 23 Peirce, CP. Vol. 2, 228.
- 24 Hess 1968, 78.
- 25 C.S. Peirce, “The Architecture of Theories”, in Buchler (ed.) *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 318.
- 26 See Schiff, *Between Sense*, pp. 169–70.
- 27 Hoving Powell, 97.
- 28 See note 22.
- 29 Irving Sandler, “Interview with Willem de Kooning,” 16 June 1959, cited in Sandler *The New York School*, 9.
- 30 “Marin and de Kooning”. *Magazine of Art* 43(October 1950):205.
- 31 De Kooning, Willem. *The Renaissance and Order*. Autumn 1949. Talk delivered at Studio 35, 8th Street, New York.
- 32 Stevens and Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master*, 270.
- 33 Rosenberg, “Interview with Willem de Kooning”, 57.
- 34 C.S. Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief”, in Buchler (ed.) *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 30.
- 35 According to Hoving Powell, p. 89, Philip is meant to represent a Roman centurion, and the rotation of the image is meant to represent that the centurion lies in most representations of the crucifixion on his side, as if dead.
- 36 C.S. Peirce, “The Doctrine of Necessity Examined”, 334.
- 37 C.S. Peirce, “Uniformity”, in Buchler (ed.) *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 223.
- 38 Schiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning*, 190ff.
- 39 CP. Vol. 1. 147.

- 40 C.S. Peirce, “The Doctrine of Necessity Examined”, 329.
- 41 De Kooning, quoted in Rosenberg, “Willem de Kooning”, 1973, *Art & Other Serious Matters*, 164. The ellipsis is in the original.
- 42 De Kooning, statement, “Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35”, 23 April 1950, *Modern Artists in America*, pp. 19–20.
- 43 Rosenberg, “Interview with Willem de Kooning”, p. 55. See also (Curley 2010), and Timothy J. Clark’s untitled lecture in (White et al. 1996).
- 44 Clement Greenberg cited in (Davenport 1948).
- 45 *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*. Vol. 2 (1893–1913), edited by the Peirce Edition Project, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 392. (Hereafter EP).
- 46 CP. Vol. 4, 172.
- 47 See “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”.
- 48 Shiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning*, 162, 166.
- 49 CP. Vol. 4, 447.
- 50 Niedenthal and Winkielman, “Introduction”, in *Emotion and Consciousness*, 4.
- 51 John J. Curley, “Running on Empty: Willem de Kooning in the Late 1950s”, *MODERNISM/modernity*, 73.
- 52 CP. Vol. 8, 101.
- 53 CP. Vol. 5, 284.
- 54 CP. Vol. 4, 428.
- 55 CP. Vol. 4, 235.
- 56 Shiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning*, 38.
- 57 EP. Vol. 2, 282.
- 58 CP. Vol. 1, 291.
- 59 CP. Vol. 2, 265.
- 60 EP, Vol. 2, 4–11.
- 61 CP, Vol. 4, 447.
- 62 CP. Vol. 2, 281, 306.
- 63 C. S. Peirce, Manuscripts 284, “Basis of Pragmatism”, 1905, p. 43, cited in Catherine Legg, “Discursive Habits: Peirce and Cognitive Semiotics”, Lecture, 2 March 2021, International Center for Enactivism and Cognitive Semiotics.
- 64 See Mats Bergman, *Fields of Signification: Explorations in Charles S. Peirce’s Theory of Signs*, 294.
- 65 (Farias and Queiroz 2014; Stjernfelt 2019); Catherine Legg, “Discursive Habits: Peirce and Cognitive Semiotics”, Lecture, 2 March 2021, International Center for Enactivism and Cognitive Semiotics.
- 66 One thinks, also of de Kooning’s drawing of a woman (1952), around which he asked his wife, Elaine, to press her lips. The drawing of a woman is very *indexical*, and *iconic* only in a limited sense, while the impression of the lipstick on the page look like lips (and therefore iconic), were caused by a person’s lips being pressed upon the paper (and therefore indexical), and because the action was performed by the artist’s wife, must have carried poignant meaning (and therefore symbolic). In his discussion of this image, Shiff, is more open to Peircean categories: see *Between Sense and de Kooning*, p. 201.
- 67 Peirce, however, was not always consistent on this score; see Bergman, *Fields of Signification*, pp. 294–95.
- 68 Hess, 1968, 47.
- 69 See, for example, (Cobley et al. 2011; Trisno et al. 2019; Sarapik 2013; Plakoyiannaki et al. 2012; Robbins 2014; May 2017).

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