ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Describing Chaos: Willem de Kooning's Collage Painting Asheville and its Relationship to Traditions of Description and Illusionism in Western Art

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Any study of Willem de Kooning is inevitably speculative. As an artist he was more concerned that the viewer "never know" and in provoking questions rather than presenting answers. The diverse and disjointed de Kooning literature bears witness to his success in this regard and to the opaque nature of his achievement. Recognizing the obdurate character of de Kooning's work, this essay, rather then directly pursuing meaning, has instead tried to address the question of how de Kooning's interest in eluding definition manifested itself in one of his most important collage paintings, Asheville of 1948. The first part of the thesis reconstructs the collage painting process of Asheville presenting it as a descriptive enterprise in which de Kooning consciously pursued the more chaotic "unknowable" aspects of his visual life by illusionistically recording fragments of objects and momentary glimpses of events. Recognizing de Kooning's interest in depicting fragmented phenomena as the underlying source for the visual chaos of Asheville illuminates the painting's relationship to long

established traditions of description and illusion in Western art exemplified by the letter rack paintings of 19th century American art and 17th century Dutch art. Finally, as the contentious debate over meaning in Dutch painting illustrates, descriptive works of art, because of the ambivalent way they engage disordered aspects of visual experience, are particularly difficult to interpret. In his conscious allegiance to older descriptive and illusionistic traditions in _Asheville_ de Kooning had found an especially effective way to obscure meaning.

DESCRIBING CHAOS: WILLEM DE KOONING'S COLLAGE PAINTING ASHEVILLE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO TRADITIONS OF DESCRIPTION AND ILLUSIONISM IN WESTERN ART

by

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INTRODUCTION

"And as far as I'm concerned other people can scribble whatever they want about it."[1]

Willem de Kooning's great early interpreters, Clement Greenberg, Thomas Hess, and Harold Rosenberg were the first critics who attempted to unravel the complexities of the artist's work. In a review of his first one-man show in 1948 Greenberg wrote enthusiastically about de Kooning, pronouncing him "one of the four or five most important painters in the country."[2] His subsequent analysis of de Kooning's work, however, was inadequate for he saw it merely as a synthesis of cubist infrastructure and surrealism's organic linearity; and not surprisingly, Greenberg's enthusiasm waned when it became clear that de Kooning was not interested in the more formal problems associated with modern abstract styles. In December of 1952 Rosenberg coined the term "action painting" which quickly became

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[1] From a conversation with Bert Schierbeek, 1968 in Willem de Kooning, exh. cat., (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1968): reprinted in Willem de Kooning, The Collected Writings of Willem de Kooning (New York: Hanuman Books, 1988), 170.

[2] Clement Greenberg, "Art," The Nation, April 24, 1948, section 2, 448.

synonymous with de Kooning's work.[3] Rosenberg postulated that rather than approaching the canvas with any preformed image in his mind, de Kooning directly encountered the surface and acted spontaneously upon it without forethought. Three months later in 1953, Hess offered a more detailed look at de Kooning's painting process in his description of the making of Woman I and offered ambiguity as the theme of the work.[4] For Hess de Kooning was an artist who countered every action with a reaction, every thesis with its antithesis, without offering the traditional synthesis of the dialectical process.

In the following decades Hess and Rosenberg continued to offer important insights into de Kooning's work. As close friends of the artist, however, they also tended to mythologize de Kooning's achievement, promoting the artist as an existential hero and protean genius. While many other writers discussed de Kooning during these years, their observations tended to fall comfortably within the broad theoretical frameworks established by Hess and Rosenberg. In fact, the influence of the two writers remained so pervasive that by 1975 Lawrence Alloway could say justly and emphatically that "de Kooning criticism is still in the

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[3]Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," Art News, 51 (December 1952), 22-23, 48-50.

[4]Thomas Hess, "De Kooning Paints a Picture," Art News, 52 (March 1953), 30-33, 64-67.

hands of its founders."[5]

Although de Kooning's work has been discussed more recently within the broad context of a revisionist interpretation of the abstract expressionist movement, many problems concerning his particular contribution remain unresolved. Serge Guilbaut's Cold War politial analysis of the rise of the movement, Donald Kuspit's psychological readings, Ann Gibson's inquiries into the rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, and Stephen Polcari's discussion of de Kooning in the context of American culture and society near the middle of the century are all examples of recent approaches which touch upon de Kooning's achievement.[6] The latest monograph on de Kooning in 1988, however, broke no new ground.[7] No scholarly biography of de Kooning exists and there is no catalogue raisonné which details the history of his paintings. No comprehensive studies of his

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[5]Lawrence Alloway, "De Kooning: Criticism and Art History," Artforum, 13 (January 1975), 50.

[6]Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Donald Kuspit, "The Unveiling of Venus: de Kooning's Melodrama of Vulgarity," Vanguard, 13 (September 1984), 19-23; Ann Gibson, "The Rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism," in Michael Auping, Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 64-93; Stephen Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[7]Diane Waldman, Willem de Kooning (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988).

innovative collage painting process or of his relationship to Arshile Gorky (sometimes compared to that of Braque and Picasso) have been undertaken. In addition, although de Kooning has often been called a "conservative" among the abstract expressionists, no analysis of his early years in Holland or the impact of his training at the Rotterdam Academy has been produced.

The history and current state of de Kooning research, then, presents an odd mix of attention and neglect. On the one hand the great interpretive models of Hess and Rosenberg that helped establish de Kooning as an important painter have encouraged a great deal of theoretical speculation about his work. Conversely, there have been few rigorously detailed accounts of his life and art. It could be argued that this imbalance will be naturally redressed as the de Kooning myth fades and the new documentation and perspective needed to assess his achievement emerge. The very existence of this disparity between pure speculation and concrete documentation, however, also reflects something more profound and constant about de Kooning.

It is important to realize that not only Hess and Rosenberg but de Kooning himself encouraged the dialogue that arose about his work. De Kooning's art in many ways determined the rambling discourse associated with it and many critics eagerly accepted his invitation to "scribble"

and to speculate. It can even be claimed that de Kooning's intention as an artist was to nourish that speculation and to discourage detailed analysis. As de Kooning once succinctly put it, he was seeking to create works where "I will never know, and no one else will ever know."[8]

De Kooning's interest in exploring the unknowable presents a dilemna for the interpreter or researcher. Either de Kooning's expressed interest in obscured meaning and confusion can be dismissed as facetious and misleading and a specific meaning or interpretation adamantly pursued, or it can be accepted as the premise of the discussion about de Kooning's work. This essay takes the latter position asserting that the speculative framework de Kooning attempted to impose on his works cannot be ignored or circumvented and that paradoxically, it is in acknowledging and recognizing de Kooning's problematic interest in "not knowing" and exploring how it manifests itself in his work that we can begin to better understand his puzzling achievement. In addition, unlike previous efforts which link the entanglements of de Kooning's art to the broader philosophical agendas and world views of his time such as existentialism, the focus here is not on cultural meaning but on identifying a root cause for those complexities and

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[8]Harold Rosenberg, "Interview with Willem de Kooning," Art News 71 (September 1972), 58.

for the profusion of responses de Kooning's work has evoked.[9] That source is finally located in de Kooning's highly conscious engagement with optical experiences and with the descriptive methods needed to acurately describe those experiences.

How then was de Kooning's interest in the unknowable more specifically expressed in his art? One key to answering that question lies in de Kooning's interest in the optical chaos that results from a fragmentation of visual experience. De Kooning tellingly stated in an interview with David Sylvester that for him "content is a glimpse" and an obsessive fascination with the partial view or fragment vividly animates much of his work.[10] De Kooning's eye was drawn to the fragmentation of time and space, its more chaotic and incoherent aspects, as seen in small bits and parts of objects and glimpses of fleeting ephemeral events randomly encountered. The debris that de Kooning chose to incorporate into his paintings concretely embodied half-seen, half-understood perceptions which, when collected together, resulted in apparently mysterious and chaotically

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[9]See for instance Irving Sandler, The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) and Polcari, Abstract Expressionism for these types of cultural approaches.

[10]"Content is a Glimpse...," excerpts from an interview with David Sylvester published in Location, 1 (spring 1963); reprinted in Thomas Hess, Willem de Kooning, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art,1968), 148-49.

disordered works of art.

An additional element in understanding de Kooning's pursuit of the unknown, one largely ignored by both Hess and Rosenberg, was de Kooning's attraction to description and illusionism. Inherent in descriptive and illusionistic practices were exactly the kinds of inversions, complexities, paradoxes, and unknowns which intrigued de Kooning. Recreating chaotic visual experiences through description blurred distinctions between reality and illusion, between form and content, and between chaos and order. In obsessively exploring these unknowns de Kooning consciously created works which could not be easily analyzed or explained.

In a 1972 interview with Rosenberg de Kooning stated that "all painting is an illusion" and betrayed a fascination with the way illusionistic art occupies an essentially unknowable and indeterminate perceptual ground between the depiction of an object and the object itself.[11] This attraction to the indeterminate qualities of illusion and description emerges logically from and reinforces de Kooning's interest in the indeterminate and unknowable aspects of fragmented phenomena. If the fragmented half-seen world of de Kooning's vision lies outside the realm of understanding, de Kooning's conscious illusionistic

[11]Rosenberg, "Interview", 56.

description of that phenomena opens up and examines even more obscure areas of perception, further hindering any attempt to definitively determine content or meaning in his work.

De Kooning's interest in such an enigmatic visual domain, a kind of terra incognita, is powerfully evident in his work from 1948-1950 and finds monumental expression in Attic (1949) and Excavation (1950). The very titles of these paintings refer to de Kooning's obsession with disorder and decay. Attic evokes the discarded objects randomly accumulated in the upper reaches of a home while Excavation alludes to the historical debris associated with an archeological site. Both titles refer to collections of things which over time have fallen into disuse and disrepair leaving only partial, disorganized hints or miscellaneous clues about the shape and form of the more ordered world they once constituted.

While the very scale of Attic and Excavation declares their importance, they were preceded by a smaller but no less ambitious work of 1948 which is the focus of this study, Asheville (fig.1). Likes its two great descendants, Asheville's title, while referring to a North Carolina city, is also inscribed by de Kooning as "Ashville" on the back of the work (emphasizing the syllable ash) and evokes decay, decomposition, and dissolution, a breaking down of a clearly

organized reality into its constituent parts. In Asheville's case these allusions to decay and ultimately physical dissolution and mortality, may be associated with the emotional chaos and real physical loss engendered by the tragic death of de Kooning's friend and mentor, Arshile Gorky, who committed suicide during the time de Kooning was working on the painting.

Sadly marking a point of personal transition in de Kooning's life, Asheville also occupies a significant threshold in de Kooning's professional career. Asheville was painted following his first one-man show at the Egan Gallery in New York in the spring of 1948 and before the purchase of Painting by the Museum of Modern Art later that year in October - two events which heralded his maturity as an artist and his arrival as a major figure in contemporary art. It should also finally be noted that Gorky's death, beyond its personal significance to de Kooning, was also an important event in the history of abstract expressionism, removing a highly influential and powerful figure from the scene and leaving de Kooning as the lone compelling European voice in the nascent movement.

While Asheville deserves close study for the important place it holds, personally, professionally, and historically in de Kooning's life as discussed above, the careful scrutiny of this single work also recommends itself as an

effective way to address the vagaries of de Kooning's enterprise. Too often in both monographs on the artist and in surveys of abstract expressionism writers' observations have not been tied closely enough to specific works of art, making it difficult for the reader to follow the discussion. A single painting study will help alleviate to some degree the problem of speculation inherent in discussing de Kooning's achievement.[12]

The first part of the essay will explore how Asheville was made by attempting to reconstruct the collage painting process. Using de Kooning's own statements, commentaries and observations about the process gleaned from other sources, as well as evidence more directly associated with Asheville, collage painting is presented as a descriptive enterprise in which de Kooning is concerned with illusionistically recording spontaneous moments and minuscule bits of visual debris. Rather than random marks, these renderings depict fragmented parts of events and objects that were carefully considered and recorded by the artist. It is de Kooning's conscious notations of strange

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[12]For other single work studies on de Kooning see: Celia Marriott, "Iconograpy in de Kooning's Excavation," Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago, (January/February 1975), 14-18; Charles Stuckey, "Bill de Kooning and Joe Christmas," Art in America, 68, no. 3 (March 1980), 67-79; Kirsten Hoving Powell, "Resurrecting Content in de Kooning's Easter Monday," Smithsonian Studies in American Art, Summer/Fall (1990), 87-101.

chaotic levels of visual experience which constitute the often illegible content of Asheville.

In the second stage of the exegesis the implications of de Kooning's exploration of visual chaos in the collage process and its collage aesthetic for illuminating what type of painting Asheville is are discussed. The collage aesthetic clearly links Asheville to more immediate precedents such as surrealism and cubism. However, de Kooning's allegiance to a self-conscious, descriptive process in Asheville in which visual perceptions are translated on a two-dimensional surface also relates the painting to older illusionistic traditions of Western art that have never before been discerned in his work such as the letter rack pictures of nineteenth century American art and seventeenth century Dutch art as well as the banquet pieces of Dutch painting. What obscures these important and illuminating relationships is the extreme degree of fragmentation in Asheville. Fragmentation is an important aspect of the letter racks and banquet pieces but it is simply not as spatially or temporally broken apart or obsessively splintered in these earlier illusionistic traditions as it is in de Kooning's work. However, beyond the obvious difference in the appearance of their subjects that arises because of the greater fragmentation in de Kooning's painting, the underlying intent in recording

disorder through a descriptive process found in Asheville is surprisingly similar to these earlier works.

Finally, because of the ambivalent way they engage the more chaotic aspects of visual experience, descriptive works of art are especially difficult to interpret. As the debate over meaning in Dutch art illustrates, descriptive paintings tend to celebrate the overwhelming abundance of visual minutiae in the world while simultaneously presenting, often emblematically and in moral or religious terms, its more troubling illusory, transient and dissolute character. De Kooning, although emerging from a modern culture and therefore engaging the illusionistic tradition in a different way, found in his allegiance to older descriptive practices a way to achieve his desire of obscuring meaning and defying analysis, and a means of creating an unstable, dynamic, and disordered work of art. Compounding his strange interest in illegible fragments, his conscious description of these experiences makes it almost impossible to conclusively recover content or meaning in Asheville.

CHAPTER ONE: ASHEVILLE AND COLLAGE PAINTING

In April of 1948 Willem de Kooning had his first one-man show at the Egan Gallery in New York City featuring a series of black and white paintings. Although the show received favorable reviews from Greenberg of The Nation and Renée Arb of Art News, by June nothing had been sold, leaving de Kooning and his wife Elaine uncertain about the summer.[13] They were both thankful then when Joseph Albers, on the basis of Arb's article, invited de Kooning to teach at Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina. Their friends John Cage and Merce Cunningham, as well as Buckminister Fuller and others, were also asked to participate in what proved to be one of the most successful summer sessions ever held at the school.[14]

In late June 1948 the de Koonings traveled by overnight train from New York to Asheville. They were greeted at the college, located outside of town near Black Mountain, by Joseph and Anni Albers who showed them to their cottage with its "bare wood floors and sparse furnishings - a table, a

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[13]Greenberg, "Art," 448; Renée Arb, "Spotlight on de Kooning," Art News, (April 1948), 33.

[14]Mary Emma Harris, The Arts at Black Mountain College (London: The MIT Press, 1987), 146-158, gives the most complete account of the college and the 1948 summer session. See also: Martin Duberman, Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community (London: Wiltwood House, 1972), 280-292; Pat Passlof, "1948," Art Journal, 48, no.3 (1989), 229; Elaine de Kooning, "De Kooning Memories," Vogue, 173, no.12, (1983), 350-353, 393-394.

couple of chairs in a large room, a bed, a bureau, and a closet in the other."[15] De Kooning, initially ill at ease on the campus, soon acclimated himself and made the living room of the cottage his studio. Elaine de Kooning recalled his reaction to working in the new setting:

> At first, he was at a loss within the bare walls of the cottage. In his New York studio, surrounded by his previous work, he felt the necessary sense of continuity. Here, he was in a vacuum that he began to fill with pastels, working feverishly on one after the other for a couple of weeks until the walls were covered with them. Finally he taped a sheet of paper 25 x 32 inches to a board placed on his easel and began to use oils...[16]

These were the first steps in an undertaking of enormous complexity which would preoccupy de Kooning until the end of his stay at Black Mountain: the collage painting Asheville.

Collage painting is the term used to designate the intricate techniques which de Kooning had developed to synthesize the fragmented visual effects of collage with the fluid integration of painting in the years preceding Asheville. In these works de Kooning used preliminary collage procedures as a source for visual ideas which he would later render in a final work free from any actual collaged elements. These techniques included tearing his own drawings and rearranging them in new configurations, temporarily tacking paper overlays and palettes to the

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[15]Ibid., 352-353.

[16]Ibid., 394.

working surface, or placing scraps of magazine photos on a painting in progress for visual reference and position.

When de Kooning first started using these procedures remains uncertain and undocumented. Hess's 1953 article, in addition to his 1959 monograph and his catalogue for the de Kooning show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, are the most detailed accounts of the actual methods of the process, but they nonetheless fail to clearly outline the history of collage painting in de Kooning's career.[17] The turning point appears to occur, however, in the 1940s with works like Judgement Day (fig. 2) and Labyrinth (fig. 3) of 1946 whose final appearance bears an inextricable connection to the imagery of the cut papers and drawings of the collaging process. These works initiate a series of paintings which are the most dense and complex of de Kooning's career, including Asheville, Attic (fig. 4), Painting (fig. 5), and Excavation (fig. 6), and culminate with the famous woman series in the early 1950s.

In these works de Kooning refined the collage process into an open and flexible operation whereby drawing, collaging, and painting could interact in a bewildering variety of ways. The reported drawings on the walls of de Kooning's studio at the incipient stages of Asheville, for

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[17]Hess, "De Kooning Paints a Picture," 30-33, 64-67; Thomas Hess, Willem de Kooning (New York: George Braziller, 1959), 19-20; Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 46-50.

instance, may have been torn and then collaged onto the painting, or an image from these initial drawings could have been used as a study and the image later painted or drawn, not collaged, onto the work. A completely new visual idea could be introduced at any time in the months-long process by recording an image in a separate sketch, that in turn was subject to any number of possible uses at another time. Different areas of the painting could also be treated in a variety of ways with some areas being worked over and over again, while others might be left relatively pristine and undisturbed.

What attracted de Kooning to the complex process of collage painting? One way to address the question is to consider separately and sequentially each of the activities of drawing, collaging, and painting, that would have run concurrently throughout the making of Asheville. In so doing it becomes evident that de Kooning was drawn to the intricate mechanics of the collage process because of the kinds of disoriented visual experiences it absorbed and engendered.

In his drawings de Kooning consciously described small bits and pieces of visual debris from the world around him. These renderings were torn apart and reoriented through collage, creating an entirely new source of chaotic imagery for de Kooning to contemplate and subsequently rearrange.

These discoveries were then carefully described and rendered in paint. At every stage in this process, whether drawing, collaging, or painting de Kooning engaged in a conscious exploration of ephemeral and fragmented levels of visual experience.

DRAWING AND COLLAGE PAINTING

When considering the role of drawings in Asheville it is important to understand de Kooning's early training as a draughtsman and the sustained interest in descriptive work which preceded Asheville. An ability to precisely record his perceptions has been manifest throughout de Kooning's career and the controlled line which would later inform Asheville finds its first important expression in de Kooning's earliest surviving drawing from his student days in Holland, Dish with Jugs (fig. 7), c. 1921.[18] In it a dish, a pitcher, and a jug are assembled on a table in a spare composition. All three objects push and demarcate the edges of the frame and are convincingly projected in space on the plane defined by the tabletop. The curve of the pitcher handle that touches the right side of the drawing, the spout of the jug near the upper edge and the rim of the dish to the left measure space two-dimensionally across the picture plane while the overlapping of the objects as well as the expansive shapes of the ovoid containers make them appear to project and recede illusionistically. The play of

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[18]The most comprehensive study of de Kooning's drawings is Thomas Hess, Willem de Kooning Drawings (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1972). See also Budd Hopkins, "The Drawings of Willem de Kooning," Drawing, 5 (March/April 1984), 121-125 and Paul Cummings, "The Drawings of Willem de Kooning," in Paul Cummings, Jorn Merkert, and Claire Stoulling, Willem de Kooning: Drawings, Paintings, Sculpture, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1983), 11-23.

light and shadow over the surface of the utensils is also deftly handled with textures and materials naturally rendered. The glint of light from the glazes of the pottery and its absorption into the dull matte finish of the bare table top are realistically expressed as are minutiae such as the ridges of the jug and the dish, the scored table, and the broken rim of the pitcher.

De Kooning recalled this exercise to Hess, describing the art school's amphitheatre where objects were arranged on a table before the students and the professor's exhortation to "draw without ideas, draw what you see, not what you think."[19] With the artist's perceptions detached from intellect, the emphasis shifted to objectively recording and transferring areas of the subject point by point to the drawing. Students were told to maintain the identical eye level and relationship to the model and to their drawing over a period of days. The objects were outlined in charcoal and then modeled in conte crayon, always keeping the surface of the paper as pristine as possible before a final thin layer of charcoal was rubbed over the paper to unify and seal its surface.

Hess has related de Kooning's attraction to the meticulous process involved in academic problems such as Dish with Jugs:

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[19]Hess, Drawings, 18.

> In exercises like this still-life at the Academy, he enjoyed (in recollection) the long hours and the patience demanded by the project. Once he said that he would like to live under some benevolent despot, a king, who would throw him in jail, and order him to spend the rest of his life working on one still-life, over and over again... There would be just one modest life long job. He was only half joking.[20]

As an academic still life in the style of William Claesz Heda (fig. 8), Dish with Jugs specifically locates de Kooning's early skills as a draughtsman in the Dutch seventeenth century tradition.

After coming to the United States in 1926, de Kooning continued to produce precisely detailed drawings throughout the 1930s and 40s. Increasingly, however, his attention turned to intriguing parts of figures and odd fragments of things and a collage aesthetic began to emerge. A famous example of this is his obsession with the human shoulder that resulted in hundreds of studies for the painting Glazier (figs. 9, 10). De Kooning has discussed his obsession for such details:

> I used to get so involved in drawing elusive things like noses. Imagine how the shadow falls on the fleshy part of the nose, and how are you going to render that with a hard pencil?[21]

Many of de Kooning's figurative drawings at this time also reflect his study and interest in Ingres' incisive use of

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[20]Ibid., 19.

[21]Schierbeek, Willem de Kooning; reprinted in De Kooning, The Collected Writings, 164.

line (fig. 11).[22]

Concurrent with drawings of these anatomical features de Kooning explored other, more illegible visual experiences. Edwin Denby, a poet and friend of de Kooning's in the 1930s and 40s recalled the artist's attraction to minute details encountered in his environment:

> I remember walking at night in Chelsea with Bill...and his pointing out to me on the pavement the dispersed compositions-spots and cracks and bits of wrappers and reflection of neon-light...[23]

In addition to his immediate surroundings, de Kooning surveyed art historical sources and the museum for visual stimuli, drawing little distinction between the two. In art as in nature it was the fragment which fascinated de Kooning. Denby described how he would scan a painting for such revelations:

> He talked about how a masterpiece made the figures active and the voids around them active as well, as active as possible,... He thought it opened where the eye believed it saw one thing, but knew it saw another, like near and far, resemblance and form... He pointed out the landscape-type scale in the shoulders of a Raphael Madonna in Washington.[24]

De Kooning credited Arshile Gorky with first showing him

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[22]See Melvin Lader, "Graham, Gorky, De Kooning, and the Ingres Revival in America," Arts Magazine, 52, no.7 (Mar. 1978), 94-99 for a discussion of Ingres and de Kooning.

[23]Edwin Denby, Willem de Kooning, (New York: Hanuman Books, 1988), 46.

[24]Ibid., 24-25. This was probably the Alba Madonna.

this way of "discovering things, details of paintings."[25]

By the time of Asheville de Kooning's immersion in the minutiae of what he saw had led him to perceive in the world around him a "no-environment" where, as Stephen Polcari has put it, "allusions to reality and the quotidian are telescoped into unknown shapes."[26] Rather than focusing upon how vision is capable of rationally ordering reality de Kooning was now interested in how very little perception divorced from intellect tells us about what is seen. Visual experiences when indiscriminately perceived instead became fragmented, anonymous, illegible, and interchangeable. By perceptually losing the forest for the trees, de Kooning had become obsessed with the lack of coherence in the visible world and the ways perceptions fell apart into discrete experiences. This perception of a "no-environment" directly parallels de Kooning's interest in "not knowing."

De Kooning's exploration of the disjointed, elusive visual effects of the "no-environment" is evident in four surviving drawings entitled Asheville. These drawings are filled with elliptical shapes and textures that describe

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[25]From an interview with Karlen Mooradian, July 19, 1966 in Ararat, vol. 4, no. 4 (fall 1971): reprinted in de Kooning, The Collected Writings, 137.

[26]Polcari, The Modern Experience, 280. See also Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1959, 18, and Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 72 for discussions of the "no-environment." Usually associated with de Kooning's urban experiences, Asheville suggests the relevance of the term for a rural setting.

perceptions. For instance, the small "windows" at the upper left of Figs. 12 and 13 create an interior space into which any number of small visual incidents have been crowded; shadows of objects, passing shapes of figures only partially registered, patterns of light and random incidental minutiae are all telescoped together in these drawings without perspective or proportion.

The technique in these drawings indicate de Kooning's descriptive intentions. His incisive line in these works creates dynamic positive and negative spaces and intricate networks of light and shadow. De Kooning's concern with controlled craft is also evident in the more complicated drawings (figs. 12, 13) in the way that he carefully modulates the flow of ink over their entire surface. By comparison a fourth sketch (fig. 15) has a black smudge or blotch which betrays itself as a type of "mistake" conspicuously missing from the other drawings.

De Kooning's obsession with a precise, controlled portrayal of incidents is also evident in some of the isolated marks of the Asheville drawings. In figure 12, for example, there are areas where the flow of ink has apparently created random effects. On closer inspection, however, these marks are found to be flowing up as well as down betraying a conscious interest in the way in which they define shapes and appear in space. On the right side of the

Saint Louis Museum drawing (fig. 14) de Kooning's interest in conscious description is seen in the way a seemingly random shape resolves itself into a precisely defined edge of serrated marks resembling a piece of paper.

It is important to appreciate the subtle dualities of these drawings to understand and recognize de Kooning's descriptive intent. By recording the ephemeral and the fragmentary de Kooning creates extreme tensions in these works via the interplay between the acute perceptiveness and manual control needed to describe such effects on the one hand and their inherently random, liminal nature on the other. Greenberg had noted this tense counterbalancing of forces in his review of de Kooning's show in 1948:

> ...there is also a refusal to work with ideas that are too clear. But at the same time this demands a considerable exertion of the will in a different context and a heightening of consciousness so that the artist will know when he is being truly spontaneous and when he is working only mechanically. Of course, the same problem comes up for every painter, but I have never seen it exposed as clearly as in de Kooning's case[27]

To interpret the Asheville drawings as frenzied abstraction is to overlook their most salient feature, their crafted imagery. As David Anfam has more recently remarked de Kooning's work at this time "required not frenzy, but utmost craft."[28]

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[27]Greenberg, "Art," 448.

[28]Anfam, Abstract Expressionism, 131.

De Kooning in fact mistrusted abstraction, preferring to base his art upon observed reality. In 1951 he expressed this attitude during a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art:

> Everything that passes me I can see only a little of, but I am always looking. And I see an awful lot sometimes. The word "abstract" comes from the lightower of the philosophers, and it seems to be one of their spotlights that they have particularly focussed on "Art"...Until then, Art meant everything that was in it - not what you could take out of it...For the painter to come to the "abstract" or the "nothing" he needed many things. Those things were always things in life-a horse, a flower, a milkmaid, the light in a room through a window made of diamond shapes maybe, tables, chairs, and so forth.[29]

And earlier he had explicitly stated his lack of sympathy for eastern art and modern abstract movements:

> I admit I know little of Oriental art. But that is because I cannot find in it what I am looking for, or what I am talking about. To me the Oriental idea of beauty is that "it isn't here." It is in a state of not being here. It is absent...It is the same thing I don't like in Suprematism, Purism, and non-objectivity.[30]

These remarks confirm Hess's observation that "almost all de Kooning's abstract shapes are based on an experience of

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[29]Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art, 18(Spring 1951), 4-8. De Kooning's antipathy to abstraction is expressed throughout this article.

[30]Willem de Kooning, "The Renaissance and Order," excerpt from a lecture given in 1950 at Studio 35, in Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 556.

things seen and carefully studied."[31]

Finally, as a reflection of de Kooning's attitudes it is also important to note that in his classes at Black Mountain he encouraged his students to train their eye and hand by carefully copying still-life arrangements just as he had at the Rotterdam Academy. This fact indicates his ongoing commitment to the principles of careful descriptive draughtsmanship inculcated by his early training.[32]

In evaluating de Kooning's draughtsmanship in the collage painting process, the gulf separating the early still life drawing Dish with Jugs from the Asheville works would initially seem too immense to bridge. The carefully contained early study would appear to have little in common with the dense, jumbled quality of the Asheville drawings. While the subject matter may have changed radically, however, it can be asserted that de Kooning's allegiance to self-conscious craftsmanship and the description of his visual experience is essentially unchanged in these two

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[31]Hess, Drawings, 20. Polcari has reinforced this observation: "De Kooning gave titles that, like his imagery, include references to commonplace things and specific places. Nevertheless specific identities, spaces, and shapes of the forms remain indeterminable," Polcari, The Modern Experience, 280.

[32]In Passlof, "1948," 229, Passlof, de Kooning's student at Black Mountain, recalled the still-life exercises.

instances.[33]

The task facing de Kooning was fairly simple in the early still life. Using a dry medium which he could erase and rework in a number of ways he was to record three objects from a single point of view in as much detail as possible. But as a mature artist, de Kooning chose not to compose his subjects but rather to record them as they were encountered. Instead of static objects it was the random bits of reality encountered in the flow and confusion of everyday life which were the subject. This task was more difficult, requiring de Kooning to describe incidents and brief moments seen quickly. In the Asheville drawings de Kooning often relied on the medium of enamel ink, using the extended ferrule and long hairs of a sign painters brush to inscribe their surfaces. In these works de Kooning deftly describes shape and form with single, flowing lines, the meticulous conte pencil marks of the still life being superceded by the virtuoso control of the brush.

In the still life, what seems evidently to be a simple pitcher is an elaborately crafted description in which all evidence of the artist's hand is concealed. In the Asheville drawings, what seems to be accidental or

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[33]Supporting this view, Cummings has noted how the admonition "to see, not think" of de Kooning's professor in the early still-life exercise "remained a keystone" throughout de Kooning's career. Cummings et. al., Willem de Kooning, 11.

abstracted is often a carefully depicted fragment full of allusions to the larger unknown context out of which it was taken, a fragment in many ways analogous to the still life's careful depiction of the accidentally broken rim of the jug. The illusion of order in the still life is simply replaced by depictions of disorder in the Asheville drawings. In both instances it is finally de Kooning's controlled draughtsmanship which allows him to capture content precisely and gather it with descriptive force into his work.

Although circumstantially persuasive, the claim that de Kooning's disjointed imagery in Asheville is descriptive and self-conscious, not abstract or automatic, cannot be fully sustained by a discussion of his drawings alone. Due to the oblique nature of his sources only indirect evidence can be brought to bear on such a hypothesis. The collaging and painting procedures themselves, however, provide more direct proof of de Kooning's concern for precisely depicting chaotic aspects of his visual life.

COLLAGE AND COLLAGE PAINTING

The process of drawing in Asheville would have entered into the process of collaging in a number of ways. One of Harry Bowden's photographs of de Kooning's studio in 1946(fig. 16) illustrates two ways that de Kooning would initially collage drawings into his work. Notice first the squared drawing attached to the middle canvas in the photo. Here de Kooning has directly collaged a separate drawing to a work in progress. The pile of drawings on the floor of the studio can also be considered a part of the collage process as de Kooning is able to test juxtapositions of shapes and forms which might eventually be incorporated into the central work.

De Kooning also used tracing paper at this time to recompose and collage forms. Hess has related how "de Kooning will do drawings on transparent tracing paper, scatter them one on top of the other, study the composite drawing that appears on top, make a drawing from this, reverse it, tear it in half, and put it on top of still another drawing."[34] In addition de Kooning utilized transparent paper to trace a section of his work from the easel itself or he might copy the passage by hand on opaque wrapping paper in order "to keep a record of a part of the

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[34]Hess, 1968, 47.

painting that is about to be wiped out."[35] These elements would then be cut up to test new arrangements and discover new juxtapositions.

Furthermore, de Kooning incorporated torn fragments of his drawings (not necessarily on tracing paper) by tacking them onto his work,"sometimes painting over part of it and then removing it, using it as a mask or template, sometimes leaving it in the picture."[36] In this way elaborate passages from other works could be placed into the painting, or new colors could be tested. When the palettes were finally removed paint which had built up around the edges remained, creating jumps or breaks in the work.

In addition to Bowden's photographs, the famous series of images Hess published in his March 1953 article also illustrate de Kooning's collage methods.[37] The use of more elaborate drawings collaged to the surface is evident in the piece of paper attached at the knees of the figure in one picture (fig. 17). In a second photograph (fig. 18) the hand to the right illustrates a less elaborately traced passage. Hess also published another photo of these traced elements for the head (fig. 19). In two of the works (figs. 17, 20) there is the more typical collaging practice of

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[35]Ibid., 50.

[36]Ibid., 47.

[37]Hess, "De Kooning Paints a Picture," 30-33, 64-67.

taking a fragment from a magazine. Here de Kooning has taken a mouth from a Lucky Strike cigarette advertisement.

In Collage of 1950 (fig. 21) palettes also serve as masks or templates. In this work, however, de Kooning left the cut papers tacked permanently to the surface. Prominently featured are a number of sections of elaborate drawings torn from other works as well as the simple monochrome palettes typical of the collage painting procedure. Collage is of particular importance to a discussion of Asheville because it is closer to its format and style, and it remains unique in de Kooning's oeuvre in retaining the actual paraphernalia of a collage painting in its final form.

Through these collage methods de Kooning achieved what would remain an aspiration at different intervals in his career, to "keep putting more and more things in."[38] These elaborate procedures appealed to de Kooning as a way to store and assemble all the discrete visual experiences he collected in his drawings. The process constituted an essentially open system into which he could add and manipulate without end the many types of pictorial elements, collected day by day, that delighted and obsessed him. It is not surprising to learn in this context that, near the

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[38]Schierbeek, Willem de Kooning; reprinted in de Kooning, The Collected Writings, 167.

time of Asheville, de Kooning was interested in the story of the artist Frenhofer in Balzac's The Unknown Masterpiece who attempts to fill a single work with a lifetime of visual experiences and artistic knowledge.[39] Infinitely capable of absorbing random bits and pieces of imagery, de Kooning's collage process could theoretically fulfill that desire.

In addition to absorbing the disordered imagery de Kooning constantly dredged up from the "no-environment," the collage techniques could be used more aggressively to process that visual debris. In the collage procedures de Kooning directly engaged his material by tearing and rearranging paper. These direct manipulations in many ways exemplify the famous action painting model of de Kooning's art which Rosenberg proposed. These actions, however, must be understood in the context of a larger cycle of descriptive activity which finds its resolution in Asheville in a painted not a collaged surface.

Although attracted to the collage method in Asheville, de Kooning eschewed the typical materials employed in building collages. While he sometimes included sources from magazines, he usually did not incorporate actual scraps

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[39]In Willem de Kooning, "Is Today's Artist with or Against the Past?" Art News 57 (Summer 1958), 28 de Kooning plaintively asked "What's so wrong with being an eclectic?" and Rosenberg, "Interview," 54, stated "I am an eclectic painter..." Hess in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 22, relates the artist's interest in Frenhofer.

taken from newspapers, fabrics, prints, etc. Rather than bits of debris collected from the world around him, he used his own drawings in which, through a descriptive process, he had recorded visual experiences by depicting the way things or events looked. In addition, the collage method was not an end in itself and eventually all of the torn drawings and tacks were removed from the surface of Asheville so that no collaged elements remained.

The removal of these elements indicates that de Kooning was not interested in physical collaging as much as the new hybrid shapes and juxtaposed forms which collaging created. De Kooning in tearing apart and rearranging his drawings further masticated their already fragmented imagery and created new chaotic jumbles of visual experience to contemplate. The seams and disjunctions of these new even more radically splintered effects could subsequently be depicted in paint.

It was Hess who first made the important observation in 1959 that Asheville indeed describes the complex shredded physical parphernalia of the collage procedures.[40] Hess believed that the tacks, the colored paper palettes, the torn and shaped drawings, and many of the visual incidents

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[40]Hess remarked in referring to Asheville that "other works are paintings **of** [Hess's emphasis] sliced and torn paintings and drawings, pinned and tacked and taped together...", Hess, 1959, 19.

that the collage phase of a collage painting generate are illusionistically painted in Asheville. He used the anomalous example of Collage, a work held in an arrested stage of the normal collage painting process with the physical collaged elements still present, to show the kind of effects de Kooning described in Asheville.

In 1980 Charles Stuckey specifically observed that de Kooning had noted a silver tack in the upper left of Asheville (fig. 22) just as it is physically found numerous times in Collage. Stuckey also identified the classic trompe l'oeil gesture of a piece of paper curling off the surface of the painting just to the left of the "grin" near the center of the picture (fig. 23).[41] Other bits of paper are rendered in almost trompe l'oeil fashion in the work as well and reinforce these observations. Just to the right of the tack a tiny piece of tan paper is represented which appears glued to the surface (fig. 24). At the top right center is a passage which mimics the grainy linescreen quality of a newspaper photograph (fig. 25) and this illusionistic effect is found again in the eye-like shape near the center right edge of Asheville (fig. 26).

Beyond these depictions of the paper and details of the collage procedure there is another level of illusionism in

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[41]Charles Stuckey, "Bill de Kooning and Joe Christmas," 78.

Asheville in which de Kooning mimics more complex visual effects literally encountered in a work like Collage. The edges created by the use of the palettes in Collage, for instance, form borders and lines where juxtapositions of gesture and space collide. These edges, "the planes of a collage, the jump from one shape to another," locate ruptures in the ordered fabric of visual life, the exact place where order falls apart and chaos emerges. As such they fascinated de Kooning and in Asheville the jumps and divisions are recreated with thin slashing lines and colored shapes which separate and define areas.[42]

Also found in Asheville are the same kind of very complicated and contradictory effects of layering and depth created by the templates of Collage. In Collage, although the templates are literally present and the tacks tell us they are on the surface, this simple visual message is undermined in various ways. Paint directly on the surface below the cut-out sometimes impinges and overflows onto the templates making it difficult to distinguish the level of the cutout from the areas beneath it. The colors of these palettes are found interspersed throughout the work, again blurring distinctions. The edges and shapes of these cutouts also interlock and create mirrored shapes and forms around them which are difficult to differentiate. The final

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[42]Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 103.

result of all this mingling of features is that the cutouts are essentially camouflaged in the work surrounded by a field which mimics their shapes and colors.[43]

The palettes are gone from Asheville but similar ambiguous relationships between edges, shapes, shadows and surfaces remain. Diane Waldman has identified a passage (fig. 27) in which she believes de Kooning has introduced the unrelated imagery and ruptures of an overlay drawing directly "into the rest of his composition".[44] There are also areas where the actual ground of the paperboard substrate is visible in Asheville, but de Kooning has mimicked its color in other areas thereby confusing figure and ground in the work (fig. 28). Other instances abound in which shapes and colors interlock in ways which make positive and negative space interchangeable and highly unstable as they do in Collage (figs. 29, 30, 31).

De Kooning's process as exemplified in a work like Collage provided him in Asheville not only with the traditional trompe l'oeil effects of curling papers, tacks, and surface effects, but at a deeper level it opened up a

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[43]This fascinating analogy has been suggested by Polcari who has discussed Gorky's interest in camouflage which led him "to study and stare at the earth in order to gather information for his work," as a possible influence on de Kooning, Polcari, The Modern Experience, 277,279.

[44]Diane Waldman, Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 225.

whole new vertiginous optical adventure for the artist. When unrelated drawings or shapes were introduced onto the surface of his works they created a jungle of new visual interrelationships that in turn generated subtle visual experiences for the artist to ponder. Having already explored the world and art for the fleeting qualities he aspired to capture, de Kooning found a similar source in the visual chaos of torn papers on and off his working surface throughout the collage painting process. The collage process of Asheville, then, must be understood ultimately as another visual resource, not a method of final construction. Added to the transitory, fugitive effects of nature and art were the jumbled shapes, textures, and colors from the debris and ephemera created by the entangled collage methods themselves. In all three it was the strange disoriented fragments of vision which were prized with no clear distinctions drawn by de Kooning between these visual encounters with art, nature, or the collage process.[45]

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[45]Polcari has noted a similar mix of "multiple references and quotations from art history, modernism, tradition, and life," in earlier works like Glazier (1940). Polcari, The Modern Experience, 270.

PAINTING AND COLLAGE PAINTING

In depicting the effects of collage de Kooning returned in the final phases of Asheville to the traditional skills and craft of descriptive painting. At this stage the paraphernalia of the collage procedures was simply removed and the surface smoothly scraped and sandpapered. Denby described the purging of accumulated debris of the collage methods:

> One day the accumulated paint was sandpapered down, leaving hints of contradictory outline in a jewel-like haze of iridescence...and then on the sandpapered surface Bill started to build up the picture over again.[46]

During the making of Asheville Elaine de Kooning recalled many times coming back to check the progress of the painting only to find an image she loved "blasted away."[47] A photo by Bowden shows the residue of this type of scraping of his work surface as it accumulated on the floor of his studio and near the bottom of one of his canvases (fig. 32).

After removing the excess paint and collage materials de Kooning then fluidly rendered his effects in paint alone to create an illusion of spontaneity. As Pat Passlof, his student at Black Mountain related:

> Bill had a special feeling for surface...He wanted the paint to appear as if it had materialized there

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[46]Denby, Willem de Kooning, 18.

[47]Elaine de Kooning, "De Kooning Memories," 394.

magically all at once, as if it were "blown" on.[48] In doing so all trace of the long drawn out collage process was erased and Asheville, as Hess noted about Woman I, "gives no clue to the length of its history."[49] Instead the skin of Asheville is smooth and thin with some areas of the surface showing evidence of the scraping and sandpapering. De Kooning had in effect removed any physical, tactile evidence of the collage process or of the constant manipulation of materials involved in making Asheville. By carefully concealing the means used to create the painting, this final phase of the work engages the traditional concerns of meticulous and essentially anonymous craftsmanship essential to the descriptive and illusionistic enterprise. Although based upon chance visual encounters, in its final stages every aspect of Asheville's appearance was considered and crafted to create a convincing description of the random events and things the artist saw over the course of creating the painting.[50]

In the final painted image of Asheville references to

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[48]Passlof, "1948," 229.

[49]Hess, 1953, 65.

[50]Hess remarked in reference to Woman I that de Kooning "refuses to capitalize on the process of correction and the happy accidents it so often produces. Changes made after prolonged study or in moments of emphatic refusal, are preceded by scraping back to the canvas." Hess, "De Kooning Paints a Picture," 65.

some of these random sightings emerge. Speculation about such sources in Asheville's finished state is validated by the painting's very title which evokes a place, as well as by de Kooning's own admission that the area around the Black Mountain campus affected him.[51] In searching the Phillips Collection work for evidence of this influence two fragments in particular seem to describe landscape elements near the college.[52] At the top center of the picture is an open space defined by a horizon line and beneath this is a pool of blue color (fig. 33). This passage is similar to the profiles of the mountain and the position of the lake near the college.(fig. 34) Furthermore, the position of the passage near the top of the painting creates a sense of deep space consistent with such a reading. Another allusion rather clearly stated is the "window" of green to the left (fig. 35) which evokes a sense of looking out towards nature as well as suggesting the enclosed domestic space of the studio in which Asheville was created. Elaine de Kooning described a similar view from her studio window:

> The window, the saving feature of the studio for me, faced a dreamily beautiful lake with lush dark-green

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[51]Accession Record 150.66, The Saint Louis Art Museum, notes a telephone conversation between Emily Rauh and de Kooning about Black Mountain in which he mentioned the influence of the area around the school.

[52]Asheville was included as a landscape in David Bundy, Painting in the South, exh. cat., (Richmond: Virginia Museum, 1983).

foliage all around it.[53]

Other bits of imagery that emerge from the work include eyes, hands, and a half grin at the center (fig. 36). Speculations might also be made, as previous scholars often have, about the images de Kooning might have drawn upon from the history of art to incorporate into Asheville.[54]

In summary, an image of de Kooning as a voracious collector of ephemeral visual imagery emerges in this reconstruction of the cycles of drawing, collaging, and painting that make up the collage painting process. De Kooning explored the disoriented jumble of visual experience in every phase of the convoluted collage method and could have taken his drawings for Asheville from any number of sources including views of the mountainous landscape and the bucolic setting of Black Mountain College; moments on the road driving into town with Buckminister Fuller; visual memories of significant bits and parts of works of art de Kooning had studied at the Metropolitan or saw in Cahiers d'Art; or even mundane occurances from the daily communal

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[53]Elaine de Kooning, "De Kooning Memories," 353.

[54]Richard Hennessy, "The Man Who Forgot How to Paint," Art In America, no.6, vol.72 (Summer 1984), 17, identifies a reference to Rembrandt's self-portrait with Saskia in his lap in Attic. E.A. Carmean identified Rembrandt's Bather in de Kooning's women series, E.A. Carmean, Eliza Rathbone, and Thomas B. Hess, American Art at Mid-Century: the Subjects of the Artist, exh. cat. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1978), 177-178.

meal at the college. As an avid observer of the random minutiae of visual life, collage naturally had great appeal to de Kooning because it offered a way to assemble and coalesce various discoveries. As a process it was inclusive and indiscriminate and provided a means to continually store the eclectic fragments which delighted and fascinated him. Just as importantly, the complex collage methods also generated new imagery and odd juxtapositions of shapes and forms for de Kooning to describe.

Collage did, however, present a problem for de Kooning. The tactile qualities inherent in its physical materials interfered with the optical qualities which most interested him. Since he was ultimately interested in collage not for its constructive properties but for its visual properties, de Kooning removed any actual collaged elements in order to paint some of the incidents the collage process presented. De Kooning's depictions of collaged material in Asheville offer concrete and direct evidence of the central obsession of the work - the self-conscious description of fragments randomly taken from the chaos of life, art, and the collage process itself.

CHAPTER TWO: ASHEVILLE'S RELATIONSHIP TO MODERNISM AND TRADITIONS OF DESCRIPTION AND ILLUSIONISM IN WESTERN ART

De Kooning's interest in strange and incoherent visual experiences may seem at first a peculiarly modern obsession. However, while reflecting a modern collage aesthetic, the work, understood as a painting of collaged effects, also embraces long-established descriptive painting traditions. It is de Kooning's interest in these descriptive practices which distinguish the painting from abstract expressionism as well as other modern precedents. Furthermore these descriptive methods suggest connections, never before discerned in de Kooning's work, between Asheville and an older illusionistic branch of Western Art that is exemplified by the letter rack paintings of American nineteenth century and Dutch seventeenth century painting as well as the Banquet Pieces of Dutch art.[55] A series of comparisons with representative examples from modernism and

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[55]Historical connections fascinated de Kooning who spoke of the "train track in the history of art that goes way back to Mesopotamia," in de Kooning, "The Renaissance and Order," printed in Chipp, Theories of Modern Art, 555 and conceived of his women paintings as "the female painted through all the ages" in Willem de Kooning, "Content is a Glimpse...," excerpts from an interview with David Sylvester published in Location, 1 (spring 1963); reprinted in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 148-49. The women are usually interpreted as de Kooning's conscious engagement with the figurative tradition of Western art. For an interesting critical interpretation and transhistorical overview of the illusionistic tradition in still life from Zeuxis to Dutch still life to collage see Norman Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

these older traditions further illuminates de Kooning's odd enterprise in Asheville while also clarifying the nature of de Kooning's often remarked upon "conservativeness."[56]

The distinctions between Asheville and modernism become particularly evident when comparing the abstract-expressionists', the surrealists', and the cubists' use of collage to de Kooning's methods in Asheville.[57] Robert Motherwell's early abstract-expressionist collages such as Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive (fig. 37) incorporate and build upon the visual cues produced by the cutting and pasting of collaged papers.[58] In Motherwell's work the symbolic and associative attributes of the materials as they are found,

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[56]References to de Kooning's ties to old master traditions are scattered throughout the de Kooning literature. Carter Ratcliff extols de Kooning's knowledge of "western culture's pictorial past," Carter Ratcliff, "The Past Undone: Willem de Kooning," Art in America, 72 (Summer 1984), 114-123. Janet Hobhouse notes de Kooning's "very old-masterly sense of structure," Janet Hobhouse, "De Kooning in East Hampton," Art News, 77(April 1978), 108-110. Most recently Polcari has discussed de Kooning's "fundamental conservatism," Polcari, The Modern Experience, 267. Polcari also makes the connection that is commonly drawn between the western figurative tradition and the Woman series. Finally de Kooning also viewed himself in this way and explictly stated that he "had gone to the academy and belonged to the Western Tradition," De Kooning, The Collected Writings, 155.

[57]Waldman, Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object, 1992, has recently discussed Asheville in the context of twentieth century collage.

[58]On Motherwell's work see H.H Arnason, Robert Motherwell, (New York: Abrams, 1982); E.A. Carmean, The Collages of Robert Motherwell: A Retrospective Exhibition (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1972).

such as the wrapping paper used as a background on the right side of the work, are exploited and distilled to evoke Pancho Villa, an historically and geographically distant persona. In Full Fathom Five of 1947 (fig. 38), Jackson Pollock collages nails, tacks, buttons, and other elements directly onto the surface of his canvas.[59] This work is typical of Pollock's attempt to create works which break through the mediation of self-conscious representation to directly engage experience.[60] The collage elements here are almost superfluous to the overall patterning of the work in which they are submerged.

The examples of Motherwell and Pollock illustrate an essential division between de Kooning's Asheville and the tendencies of the abstract expressionist movement as a whole.[61] The abstract expressionists were all in various ways challenging pictorial traditions of representation and illusion which they saw as impediments to the exploration of more powerful and transcendent collective sources. Their

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[59]On Pollock see Arts Magazine 53 (March 1979), special issue devoted to Pollock; Elizabeth Frank, Jackson Pollock, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983).

[60]In 1956 Pollock derided de Kooning as "a French painter...All those pictures in his last show start with an image. You can see it even though he's covered it up, or tried to." Quoted in Hobhouse, "De Kooning in East Hampton," 109.

[61]See David Anfam, Abstract Expressionism, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), for the most recent survey of abstract expressionism.

experiments with automatism and abstraction were serious attempts to overcome the barriers of consciousness and literal representation in order to engage more transcendent experiences and to create a more universal pictorial language. In Asheville, however, de Kooning did not share these artists' commitment to tearing down impediments to reach deeper psychological levels of meaning. Instead, he insisted at the time that art must be self-conscious and accepted the conscious mimetic art of describing visual reality itself as "the mystery," the unavoidable dilemna, of the artistic enterprise.[62] For de Kooning automatic effects and abstraction could not escape the conscious state of "likeness".[63] They always refer to something in the world, and always keep their illusionistic references intact no

[62]De Kooning has remarked that "all an artist had left to work with is his self-consciousness," quoted in Denby, Willem de Kooning, 52, and in 1949 stated: "The only certainty today is that one must be self-conscious." Willem de Kooning, "A Desperate View," talk delivered at the Subjects of the Artist School, New York, February 18, 1949, published in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 15. In an interview with Irving Sandler de Kooning once said: "The mystery of the world is to see something that is really there. I want to grab a piece of nature and make it as real as it actually is..." from an early interview recalled in Irving Sandler, "Conversations with de Kooning," Art Journal, 48 (fall 1989), 217.

[63]De Kooning believed "even abstract shapes must have a likeness," quoted in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 47.

matter how abstract, random, or automatic they aspire to be.[64]

Of course, like the abstract expressionists, de Kooning was interested in random effects and more chaotic types of disordered experience. However, instead of engaging random or chance effects unconsciously through automatic methods de Kooning pursued more chaotic experiences consciously through vision. He accomplished this by allowing his eye to randomly collect impressions, rather than directing his vision or intellectually ordering it, and then consciously crafting and describing the events. The result is a work chaotically filled with visual cues randomly associated and a painting which in many respects bears similarity to the random free association of automatism or other unconscious techniques favored by many of the abstract expressionists. It might be said, however, that de Kooning's work engages the "collective conscious" of visual experience, while the abstract expressionists explored the more psychological, internalized, visionary dimensions of the collective unconscious.

The closest visual parallel to Asheville among his

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[64]De Kooning considered even geometric shapes to be "purely an optical phenomenon," Round-table discussion by de Kooning and others at Studio 35, April 1950, published in Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt, eds., "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35, 1950," Modern Artists in America (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951), 12-22, 69.

contemporaries in New York is the work of Arshile Gorky.[65] Gorky's works like The Leaf of the Artichoke is an Owl (fig. 39) and One Year the Milkweed (fig. 40) shared de Kooning's allegiance to older descriptive traditions of art, detailed draughtsmanship based on observation, and love of craft. These works do not, however, share the collage aesthetic of Asheville and rather than being densely packed accumulations of random fragmented visual cues are instead poetic and more atmospheric evocations of personal experiences and memories. Gorky's poetic vision uses detailed motifs from nature to evoke memories of other places, often his Armenian homeland. Asheville on the other hand is a more detached rendering of de Kooning's random visual encounters which obsessively engage the mystery of direct perception of objects and events for their own sake and not for cathartic personal revelations.

De Kooning's equivocal attitude toward the collective unconscious or other types of transcendent experiences also emerged in his reaction to surrealism. Surrealism's prediction of a new "absolute reality" through the "resolution of the states of dream and reality" as well as its manifestos and political agenda held little attraction

[65]On Gorky see Diane Waldman, Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective, exh. cat., (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981); Ethel K. Schwabacher, Arshile Gorky, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1957).

for de Kooning.[66] The central difference evident in Asheville is de Kooning's interest in reality and the world around him versus the surrealists' method which, as William Rubin observed, "eschewed perceptual starting points and worked toward an interior image" that they viewed as a higher reality or surreality.[67]

While de Kooning "made fun of the bad painting" of a Dali or Magritte, he did respond to the visual inventions of surrealist automatic techniques.[68] However, these automatic techniques such as torn papers or thrown ink, derived from earlier Dada experiments of artists like Jean Arp (figs. 41, 42), were used in Asheville as a new source of imagery to be self-consciously rendered. Their results were neither directly incorporated, nor left unaltered in the painting, nor were they used by de Kooning as keys to unlock the "real functioning of the mind" as proclaimed in the 1925 surrealist manifesto.[69] De Kooning's "chance" effects in

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[66]Harry Gaugh in his monograph on de Kooning concluded that his "work has less to do with surrealism than any other leading member of the New York School," Harry Gaugh, De Kooning, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), 21. David Anfam states that de Kooning "mostly kept apart from surrealism," and supports this view as well, David Anfam, Abstract Expressionism, 97.

[67]William Rubin, Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 64.

[68]Passlof, "1948," 229.

[69]Published in Rubin, Dada, Surrealism, 64.

Asheville, rather than conduits to a higher reality, are descriptions of shadows, surface shapes and lines. These "unknowable" references equivocally hint at their sources without ever clearly allowing access to their mysterious veiled origins.

The photomontages of the predecessors of surrealism, Dada artists such as Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann (fig. 43, 44), are like Asheville: accumulations of an eclectic variety of visual referents which result in often disconcerting juxtapositions of scale and content.[70] These works also share problematic tensions between chaos and order, and image and reality, as well as similar formal concerns with the visual jumps which occur along the seams of images in a collaging process. Dadaist art is, however, not interested in older disciplines of crafting illusionary imagery in fluid media but primarily in an extremely aggressive subversion of traditional notions of representation through the cutting and manipulation of modern photographic sources and materials. Rather than the concentrated looking and close observation of optical phenomena required for description, the dadaists physically dismantle and vandalize found materials, taken from a variety of popular mass media, in order to radically

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[70]See Maud Levin, Cut with a Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

challenge the assumptions and cultural authority which those types of communication represent. Whereas Dada art is an attack on a culture's lines of mass communication which results in visual anarchy, Asheville arrives at similar types of anarchic and chaotic imagery, not primarily by physically dismantling and reorienting materials, but through a process of description which nourishes continuities with established ways of seeing and picturing the world.

De Kooning's fragmented vision in Asheville is clearly indebted to the splintered armature of cubism invented by Braque and Picasso. Cubism is the most important modern precedent for the painting. The cubist collages and papier collés of Braque and Picasso (figs. 45, 46) engage many of the same issues of illusion and reality as Asheville.[71] Like Asheville they incorporate parts of banal objects taken from the ephemera of everyday activity and illusionistically mimic them. Unlike Asheville, however, the papier collés are studies of a limited group of static objects. These objects are analytically considered to reveal their underlying structures and relationships from a variety of

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[71]See William Rubin, Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989) and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine with E.A. Carmean, Jr., Braque: The Papiers Collés (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1982)

viewpoints.[72] In addition, Braque and Picasso intellectually explore, identify, and distinguish between several different levels of reality and representation in the papier collés. Asheville, however, does not analyze a set group of stilled objects but records the surface visual effects of a wide variety of subjects and events seen randomly over time. Rather than analyzing and intellectually organizing experience Asheville gathers together visual incidents from the flow of day to day experiences. The presence of physically collaged materials in the papier collés, moreover, emphasizes the discriminating, analytical tendencies of cubist collage and conversely their absence from Asheville affirms de Kooning's allegiance to a more seamless, descriptive, less ordered presentation of purely visual, not physical, phenomena.

What disengages Asheville from the modern context of collage discussed above is de Kooning's central reliance on the act of describing. To return to the earlier comparison with Collage, Asheville is not a collage but literally a painting of a collage or, put differently, an illusion of torn and shaped papers attached to a flat surface. Once the painting is perceived in this way its relationships to older illusionistic traditions of Western art embodied in the

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[72]See Christine Poggi, In Defiance of Painting (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 59-89.

letter rack pictures of American nineteenth century artists such as William Harnett (fig. 47), John Frederick Peto (fig. 48), and others (fig. 49), and their much older Dutch seventeenth century prototypes such as Vaillant's and Gijsbrechts trompe l'oeils (fig.50 and 51) becomes evident.[73] A comparison with this great tradition of trompe l'oeil painting provides important insights into the character and dimensions of de Kooning's much commented upon conservativeness as well as the nature of his entreprise in Asheville.

In drawing a comparison between Asheville and the letter rack paintings the difference in outward appearances at first seems to preclude any similarity. If we examine the way these artists constructed their works, however, and compare the kinds of visual experiences they were interested in describing, surprising parallels emerge.

Both de Kooning and the letter rack artists began by

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[73]For an interesting discussion of the modern qualities of the American illusionistic tradition see Johanna Drucker, "Harnett, Haberle, and Peto: Visuality and Artifice among the Proto-Modern Americans," The Art Bulletin, 74, 1 (March 1992), 37-50. It should be noted that Harnett had been rediscovered in the 1930s by Edith Halpert and that a centennial exhibition of his work was held in New York at Halpert's Downtown Gallery in the spring of 1948 just before de Kooning's departure for Asheville. For a history of illusionism see Marie-Louise d'Otrange, Illusionism in Art: Trompe l'Oeil: a History of Pictorial Illusionism (New York: Abaris Books, 1975); Alberto Veca, Inganno et Realta: Trompe l'Oeil in Europe XVI-XVIII sec. (Bergamo: Galleria Lorenzelli: 1980); Celestine Dars, Images of Deception: the Art of Trompe l'Oeil (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979).

collecting ephemera from the world. In the case of Asheville de Kooning usually gathered this visual data together on paper in his own drawings, although sometimes he would take an image from a magazine. In the letter racks, the debris included letters, newspaper clippings, photos, and other miscellaneous items. In both instances the artists shared essentially the same visual interest in random minutiae.

The materials collected for these works were in turn manipulated and arranged on a flat surface. In the collage stages of Asheville de Kooning tore and reoriented his drawings. In the letter racks, the artists manipulated the debris they had gathered and then shifted and rearranged it to create similarly complex juxtapositions of shapes, forms, textures, and patterns.

What resulted from these activities was a wide range of odd scraps of visual stimuli for the artist to contemplate and ultimately to describe. An interest in the intricate lattices of space created by the overlapping of thin pieces of paper in shallow space is evident in all the works. All chose to render the tacks that held the debris on the surface, as well as the edges and shadow lines created by torn letters and curling papers. The tacks and curling papers are standard devices in letter racks and de Kooning's inclusion of these elements in Asheville indicates a

conscious, even playful, engagement with the tradition.

In addition to these standard props of the genre, all the works offer more subtle illusions of seemingly spontaneous marks. More specifically, de Kooning's practice of describing his own drawings and random marks find a striking parallel in depictions of penmanship in the letter racks as exemplified by the description of a signature and the random blotting of ink found on the card at the middle of figure 49. The depictions of wood grain and abraded and scarred surfaces in the letter rack paintings are also paralleled by the seemingly random gestures and surface patterns of Asheville. These comparisons provide evidence that what may appear to be one of the most visible differences between the works, the seemingly spontaneous gestures of ink and other random phenomena which cover the surface of Asheville, is, though perhaps not present to such an extreme degree, very much part of the tradition represented by the letter racks.

Both de Kooning and the letter rack artists share, then, an interest in focusing upon minute fragmented aspects of visual reality detached from intellectual ordering. Their attention settles upon the disorder and anonymous minutiae indiscriminately found by glancing at and gathering stray data from the world around them. The hidden and disjointed information provided by the closed letters,

obscured signatures, and torn newspaper articles have the same visual effect as the jumbled visual cues offered by Asheville. These comparisons between the minute phenomena of the letter rack paintings and those in Asheville are especially significant and fascinating because they reveal specific precedents for the strange descriptive work de Kooning was interested in. The content of the letter racks, because it is not as radically fragmented, offers a more concrete account of the elusive type of minutiae that attracted his attention and informed his work.

Finally, counterbalancing these artists' acute perception of disorder and impermanence is their allegiance to describing the look of disorder through self-conscious craftmanship. This paradox of disciplined self-control used to depict disordered flux is the essence of their illusionistic purpose and creates works where distinctions between "the look of disorder" and disorder itself cannot be easily drawn. In both Asheville and the letter rack pictures the artist covers any evidence of the painstaking process of making these pictures and effaces his labor in order to create a seamless illusion across the entire surface of his work and to present a convincing presentation of unmediated reality.

While these works share a common task of illusionistically depicting the ephemeral and the accidental

there are, however, important distinctions to be drawn. These differences appear in the degree to which they explore the chaotic aspects of visual experience. The letter racks, in their methods, imagery, and structure, are relatively austere examples of descriptive art when compared to the complex collage painting process, electic, masticated content, and byzantine spaces of <u>Asheville</u>.

The collage painting process itself was much more disorderly than the letter rack procedures. In the letter racks the artists arrayed their objects on one surface and then depicted them on a separate canvas or panel. In <u>Asheville</u> the work surface could also be the same surface where the torn papers were tacked, with collage effects being created, rearranged, and described in different areas at different times and in a variety of media. The interactions between collage, painting, and drawing were much more complex with imagery moving in numerous ways across different media and supports. This chaotic mixing of media and methods makes it difficult to classify <u>Asheville</u> as a painting or drawing and is a function of the obsessive preoccupation with disorder in de Kooning's enterprise.

The letter rack pictures explore aspects of chance and accident in a more clearly defined and legible context than <u>Asheville</u> with the letter rack itself instantly recognizable as a place where the contingent day-to-day ephemera of life

is literally stored. Thematically the letter rack provides a context for interpreting the work because the contents of the rack, though fragmented and ephemeral, are associated with a specific function. These paintings are, therefore, ultimately biographical documents which can often be traced to a specific individual and which provide in essence a portrait of that person.[74]

Asheville engages a much wider and more eclectic range of visual phenomena than do the letter rack pictures. In addition to the transitory effects of torn and collaged papers de Kooning also integrated hints of figural and landscape references as well as other fleeting incidents taken from moments in his day-to-day life. De Kooning's interest in the accidental is also more obsessive than the letter rack pictures. Whereas the letter racks frequently record distinct objects in their entirety de Kooning only records parts of these objects or their surfaces. Asheville is filled with more fragments taken from a wider range of visual cues. In de Kooning's painting it is as if the contents of the letter racks had been shredded leaving only a dense mix of small passages similar to the torn edges of the their letters or their random blots of ink.

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[74]See Doreen Bolger, "The Patrons of the Artist," in Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson, and John Wilmerding, William M. Harnett, exh. cat, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 82 for a discussion of the objects in Harnett's Mr. Hulings' Rack Picture.

The framework of the letter rack provides formal and structural clarity for the work. The diagonals, verticals, and horizontals of the letter rack geometrically order the letters and ensure a clear frame of reference for the viewer to easily read and measure objects in space. These paintings also confine their contents to a shallow space inextricably linked with a very specific type of illusionism, trompe l'oeil.

In Asheville, however, these pictorial structures are neglected or minimally present. No clear system or structure exists in which to compose the elements of the work, to create a legible and regulated space, or to establish a fixed scale of proportions and size among the elements. Only a skeletal framework is provided by the perimeter of the painting itself and the window of green on the left of the picture. Within this frame the painting, being an accumulation of bits and parts, loses any strong sense of a coherent or logical arrangement of shapes and forms and instead presents a densely filled field in which forms push and overflow the edges of the frame.

In addition to a more chaotic composition, there is also no clear ordering of space in Asheville. Certainly no perspectival system positions the viewer or regulates how the work is seen. Only discrete areas with highly unstable figure-ground relationships are randomly available for the

viewer's attention. Small pieces of Asheville may seem to infer a depth of space but they collide with the edges of another space making it difficult to distinguish the ground from the figure.[75] This spatial confusion is the inevitable outcome of the collage process in which random events are minutely described but are not calibrated or harmonized with the surrounding areas. Illusionary passage is heaped upon illusionary passage, exposing here and there small details which the eye may recognize in traditional trompe l'oeil fashion. As the viewer expands his field of vision, however, the illusion is quickly lost.

The window of green would seem to offer some semblance of spatial order for Asheville and act as a clear division between inside and outside. The window can, however, be read a number of ways either as in a room from which the beholder looks into a deeper outside space, or as a window seen from the exterior looking into a room or again, as simply a flat, abstract shape. Because these different readings are possible no coherent spatial dynamic is established. No distinct frame of reference exists between

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[75]The black and white works featured in his first one-man show at the Egan Gallery preceding Asheville are particularly illuminating examples of de Kooning's mastery of these figure-ground dynamics.

inside and outside or between the beholder and the work.[76]

Scale in Asheville is also unregulated with no attempt to calibrate rationally the depicted fragments jumbled together in the painting. Because there is no fixed measure established the size of the elements in Asheville cannot be determined. In viewing the work its fragmented passages can in one instant seem diconcertingly large and in another can appear as microscopic details. In addition, although Asheville is a small painting, it seems at times to be a larger work especially when viewed on a neutrally colored wall disconnected from any stable system of proportions and with nothing to orient the perception of its size.[77]

De Kooning's interest in these types of distortions in scale is highlighted by his fascination with the "intimate proportions" created when objects are seen close up or randomly crowd the field of vision.[78] He defined the sensation as "the feeling you have when you look at somebody's big toe when close to it, or a crease in a hand,

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[76]See Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1959, 17-18 for a discussion of the "inside/outside" effect in de Kooning's work.

[77]De Kooning has discussed his interest in making "a small painting look big" and "a big painting look small," Rosenberg, "Interview", 56.

[78]For a discussion of "intimate proportions," see Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1959, 20-22 and Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 72.

or a nose, or lips, or a necktie."[79] These forms seen close up are as hard to differentiate "as when you hold the joint of a thumb close to your eye, it could just as well be a thigh"[80] In Asheville one of the largest elements is an eye-like form on the right side which relates to this idea of intimate proportions as it protrudes aggressively forward, conveying the sense of a face passing closely by (see fig. 26).

Process, content, and structure in Asheville, then, are more temporally and spatially fragmented and more complex and eclectic than the letter rack works which because they are more formally ordered and contained and their subject matter carefully limited and circumscribed are in the final analysis more tightly focused works. Asheville is a more radically disoriented work that rarely coalesces into recognizable passages and instead presents an overwhelming tangle of fragments and small incidents that obliterate any consistent figure ground relationship.

The more chaotic nature of Asheville suggests a comparison to another type of illusionistic work also in the Dutch tradition besides the trompe l'oeil precedents of the

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[79]Ibid.

[80]Ibid.

letter racks -- the banquet piece.[81] The banquet pieces more closely parallel Asheville in two ways. First, they are more densely packed with a wider and more eclectic array of ephemera and incidents than the letter racks. Second, they are more spatially intricate, incorporating landscape, still life, and figurative settings. Like the letter rack pictures, these works present a seemingly random accumulation of carefully detailed, quotidian objects. They lack, however, their restrained, more austere, thematic and structural framework.

The banquet pieces gather together a wide variety of visual experiences with various transitory events and a riot of objects incorporated and juxtaposed seemingly at random. In de Heem's banquet piece in the Akademie de Kunste, Vienna (fig. 53) landscape passages, living creatures, fruits, vegetables, meats, and household objects such as plates, curtains, dishes, and letters are extravagantly strewn across the canvas. Interspersed in the background of The Meat Stall (fig. 54), the famous 16th century forerunner of

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[81]See Ingvar Bergstrom, Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeeth Century, translated by Christina Hedstrom and Gerald Taylor, (New York, 1956); Eddy de Jongh, Still-Life in the Age of Rembrandt, exh. cat., (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1982); Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., ed., Still Lifes of the Golden Age: Northern European Paintings from the Heinz Family Collection, exh. cat., (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1989). Also Charles Sterling, Still-Life Painting: from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century, (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

the banquet piece by Pieter Aertsen, are a landscape, through a window on the left, the biblical narrative of the Flight into Egypt in the center, and a genre scene at the right.[82] Similarly, Asheville with its window of green on the left, as well as hints of landscape, still life, and figurative elements, defies characterization as either a landscape, a still life, or a figure painting.

These works also indulge and become entangled in depictions of random patterning. The holes broken in the wood at the top of the stall, and the twisted, awkward forms and marbled designs of the meat in The Meat Stall as well as the cascading grapes and tangled vines of de Heem's work are paralleled in the varied shapes and patterns of Asheville.

As depictions of the random accumulation of visual experiences, Asheville and the banquet pieces do not present stable compositions. No clear sense of arrangement exists amid the tangled chaos of their objects. Instead, a turning mass of things and visual incidents tumble across the surface of each and seem to continue beyond the frame of the picture. In The Meat Stall the roofline and objects at the bottom of the stall are randomly cropped like many of the passages along the edges of Asheville. These paintings carefully describe disorder so as to appear as slices

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[82]For a discussion of the painting see Kenneth Craig, "Pieter Aertsen and The Meat Stall," Oud Holland, 96, 1 (1982), 1-15.

spontaneously taken out of the greater pattern of visual experience.

Enmeshed in particulars, the paintings are spatially fragmented; the eye moves in and around their rich web of details in any number of ways because no clear orientation or approach for the viewer is demarcated. In De Heem's painting an array of discrete intricate spaces is presented for the eye to wander through - atop and under the table, and across the landscape. In The Meat Stall there is no clear indication of border between inside and outside. The window at the left in The Meat Stall, like the window of green to the left in Asheville, blurs the distinction between interior and exterior space. In addition there is no spatially ordered hierarchy of events to direct the viewer's attention in these paintings. The most striking example of this is the vignette of the flight into Egypt in The Meat Stall where a subject which is usually the focus for a painting is almost overwhelmed and enclosed by the gruesome contents of the stall itself.

The banquet pieces fail to establish a consistent scale and instead revel in odd inversions of size. In de Heem's Still Life, the expanse of landscape is disconcertingly juxtaposed and overwhelmed by the smaller objects of the still life. In The Meat Stall small incidents eerily overpower other areas of the painting. An interesting

parallel with Asheville illustrates the strange sense of scale in the two paintings: in Asheville the form of an eye looming across the right side (see fig. 32) also figures prominently in The Meat Stall where the eye of the decapitated calf disproportionately and disconcertingly animates the scene.[83]

While perhaps closer to the more aggressive nature of the banquet pieces, Asheville transgresses the descriptive traditions embodied in both the letter racks and the banquet piece in a fundamental way. He inevitably subverts the tradition by obsessively focussing on how the fragmentation of objects leads inexorably to illegibility. By aggressively exploring the fragmented aspects of the tradition, he trangresses one of the central tenets of the illusionistic game - that the thing being described be recognizable. He thereby reshapes the tradition to conform to a new more distinctly modern vision, emphasizing to an unprecedented degree elements of uncertainty and chaos inherent in descriptive methods. It is this new emphasis which ultimately obscures these works' shared allegiance to a descriptive enterprise and accounts for their disparate appearances.

The comparisons discussed above are not made in order

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[83]It should be noted that The Butcher's Stall, 48 1/2 x 59 in. and de Heem's Still Life, 45 1/4 x 73 1/4 in., are both monumental still lives and much larger than Asheville.

to assert the direct influence of these earlier Dutch works upon de Kooning's painting. They do, however, assert de Kooning's conscious engagement with the descriptive enterprise of Western art and, while de Kooning complicates and trangresses that tradition in the degree to which he engages visual chaos, underlying those complications are a common vision, a common enterprise and similar results. The shared interest was in observing fragmented ephemera, the shared enterprise was the description of that ephemera, and the shared results were problematic works of eclectic content and complex structures that can be categorized in the same way. Discerning the disorder of Asheville as part of the continuum of descriptive art in Western culture helps reveal the nature of de Kooning's achievment in the painting. Claims that de Kooning was interested in consciously describing the edges of torn pieces of paper or the entanglements of random objects are also less puzzling in the light of these earlier explorations of the random minutiae of visual life. Finally, these connections also help to appropriately root de Kooning's self proclaimed traditionalism or conservatism in the visual culture in which he was raised.

CHAPTER THREE: INTERPRETING CHAOS

Understanding Asheville as a modern manifestation of the descriptive tradition of Western art might, at first, appear to offer an avenue to better interpret the painting. Instead, as the contentious debate over meaning in Dutch painting illustrates, the interpretation of descriptive works is particularly problematic.[84] At the center of the difficulty is the question of how the chaotic, seemingly meaningless nature of random accumulations of goods and incidents in these works is to be interpreted.

The debate over Dutch painting is characterized by two shools of thought. One school believes Dutch art to be primarily a delight for the senses which neglects intellectual ordering or analysis in order to describe the world as it is seen as meticulously as possible. This is the critical tradition embodied in Joshua Reynolds' famous strictures against still life and the Dutch school and

[84]For various interpretive approaches to Dutch seventeenth century art see: de Jongh, The Age of Rembrandt, 1982; Svetlana Alpers, The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983); Peter Hecht, "The debate on symbol and meaning in Dutch Seventeenth-century Art: an appeal to commonsense," Simiolus, 16, no.2/3 (1986), 173-187; Simon Schama, The Embarassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); Norman Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 1990.

affirmatively championed by Svetlana Alpers most recently.[85] The letter rack paintings and banquet pieces in this case are seen as embracing the overwhelming abundance and dazzling rich minutiae the world conveys to the eye, celebrating both the illusionistic skill of the artist, as well as the commercial success and prosperity of the society which produced the goods depicted.

Opposed to this view are attempts to interpret the content of these works through emblematic or biblical sources which provide the paintings with an allegorical rationale. These readings usually offer a moral critique of chaos. The goods and products depicted convey a moral message that the world is transient and that man is mortal and betray a distrust and fear of the moral chaos unleashed when a culture abandons itself to material and sensual pleasures.

The dichotomy of this debate is generated to a great

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[85]Still life was the lowest category of painting in Reynold's classification scheme because it did not address the more lofty intellectual ideals of history painting but rather attempted only "to give a minute representation of every part" of "low objects," Joshua Reynolds, Discourses on Art, Robert R. Wark, ed., (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 51. In A Journey to Flanders and Holland Reynolds comments about the Dutch School: "It is to the eye only that the works of this school are addressed; it is not therefore to be wondered at, that what was intended solely for the gratification of one sense, succeeds but ill, when applied to another," quoted in Alpers, Describing, xviii, from Joshua Reynolds, The Works...containing his Discourses...[and] A Journey to Flanders and Holland..., 4th edition, 3 vols., (London, 1809), 369.

degree by the nature and role of illusionism itself in these works. Illusionistic paintings are paradoxical. They often seduce the viewer with sensual, worldly, visual pleasures while simultaneously denying their existence or legitimacy. The viewer's intellectual judgement is alternately suspended to enjoy the visual pleasure of the work then subsequently engaged fully in questions of how the deception was accomplished and what it means. The genius of Dutch art is often found in the way it uses the dilemma of illusionism to engage the viewer and to reflect complex moral themes such as gluttony, man's vanity and mortality.

In assessing Asheville it might first be noted that de Kooning has often embraced the attitudes for which descriptive and illusionistic works have been traditionally censured- their lack of clear intellectual direction or organization and their indulged attraction to banal everyday sights and objects. Ideas had no inherent value for de Kooning and throughout his career he has distrusted order or definitions and belittled the intellectual content of art. He stated near the time of Asheville that "one idea is as good as another" for the artist[86] and later reiterated this belief in a 1968 interview with David Sylvester:

I don't think artists have particularly bright ideas...

[86]Willem de Kooning, "A Desperate View," talk delivered at the Subjects of the Artist School, New York, February 18, 1949; published in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 15.

> Its good that they got those ideas because it was enough to make some of them great artists.[87]

Order was anathema to de Kooning, representing an unwanted constraint. In the 1949 statement he remarked:

> Order, to me, is to be ordered about and that is a limitation.[88]

In 1969 he expressed a skeptical attitude about man's desire to arrange his world intellectually:

> Insofar as we understand the universe- if it can be understood- our doings must have some desire for order in them: but from the point of view of the universe, they must be very grotesque.[89]

De Kooning also avoided any definition of art and strongly believed that "art should not have to be a certain way."[90] He thought it was "disastrous" for the abstract expressionists to name themselves and remarked that "Personally, I do not need a movement".[91] Even the titling of works disturbed him. His discomfort with order or

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[87] From an interview with David Sylvester, 1960, excerpted in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 75.

[88] Willem de Kooning, "A Desperate View," in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 15.

[89] Schierbeek, Willem de Kooning; reprinted in de Kooning, The Collected Writings, 168

[90] Willem de Kooning, "A Desperate View," in Hess, Willem de Kooning, 1968, 15.

[91] From "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)" in Modern Artists in America, (New York: Wittenborn Schutz, 1951); reprinted in Maurice Tuchman, New York School, The First Generation, Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1965), 41.

definitions was perhaps most succinctly expressed in a 1958 comment on Kierkegaard:

> I was reading Kierkegaard and I came to the phrase "to be purified is to will one thing." It made me sick.[92]

Given these attitudes it is not surprising that Asheville is not an intellectually ordered enterprise that addresses a limited problem to arrive at conclusions or solutions. In fact a compelling feature of the painting, analagous to his teacher's admonition "to see, not think" in the early still-life exercise, is its suspension of intellectual control and analysis. Because the discriminate faculties of intellect that are needed to define clearly or establish separate identities are suspended in Asheville, no clear distinctions exist in the work between abstraction and figuration, still life and landscape, figure and ground, inside and outside, painting and drawing. Instead, in the open and theoretically never-ending collage process, events and objects are indiscriminately described and randomly taken, undifferentiated from the fluid visual flow of events. The resulting confusions make Asheville an obtuse work which is extremely resistant to analysis or interpretation.

Asheville's meaning and appearance as a specific expression of chaos can, of course, be plausibly and

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[92]Willem de Kooning, "Is Today's Artist with or Against the Past?," 27.

fruitfully placed in a cultural or personal context.[93] The degree of chaos in the work can legitimately be explained through discussions of the disintegration of order felt in the wake of World War II in America or, more personally, the emotional distress felt by de Kooning following the death of Gorky in the same way that the chaotic detail and materialism of Dutch 17th century art has been rooted in the moral and economic circumstances of its time. Nevertheless all these descriptive enterprises embed in the heart of their works extremely complex, intractable, enigmatic and philosophical questions about the nature of reality and illusion which, while certainly illuminated at some level by contextual analysis, cannot be solely answered by it.

It can, in fact, finally be claimed that it was exactly the way in which description presents interpretive dilemnas that attracted de Kooning to a descriptive process. De Kooning's obsession with the interpretive limbo of pure description is consonant with his interest in the unknowable quality of a miscellaneous fragment of an object or a partial view of an event. Presenting some information but not enough information to verify fully what they are, these fragments cannot be completely recognized just as

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[93]Polcari, The Modern Experience, 1991, and Dore Ashton, The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning, (New York: Viking Press, 1972) are the best discussions of the cultural context of de Kooning's work.

descriptions of things strive to fully and illusionistically cloth themselves in the visual qualities of the objects they describe, but are never fully those things.

In compounding his problematic interest in the fragment with his interest in their description de Kooning explored the odd uncertainties, the liminal thresholds of knowledge, in his visual landscape. His strange descriptions of the chaotic aspects of visual perception make it nearly impossible to fully verify the content of Asheville or to discern fully what is spontaneous or what is consciously planned. Instead the content of Asheville elusively falls into the gap between order and chaos, and legibility and illegibility with de Kooning's expressed interest in these unknowable regions logically resulting in a painting which cannot be fully understood.

CONCLUSION

There are endemic, rather disquieting, problems associated with discussions of Willem de Kooning's collage paintings because the convoluted collage procedures, drawn out over a long period of time, leave little direct evidence of exactly what de Kooning was trying to achieve or how he actually proceeded in these works. This leaves researchers with only circumstantial evidence on which to base their theories and it is not surprising that, despite a substantial body of scholarly literature on de Kooning, there is much that is not understood about this difficult artist.

It is important to recognize that to a great degree this lack of specific knowledge about de Kooning's work was encouraged by the artist himself, who consciously sought to create works which fomented speculation rather than encouraged conclusions about his achievement. Accepting the premise that de Kooning indeed intended to create works which defy interpretation, this essay, rather then seeking a particular meaning, has instead attempted to answer how de Kooning's interest in "not knowing" manifested itself in the collage painting process of Asheville. In so doing it has noted along with Stephen Polcari de Kooning's "interest, almost unique among the abstract expressionists, in the real visual world, in everyday scenes and objects, in the banal,"

asserting that de Kooning throughout the collage process filled Asheville with descriptions of bits of objects and events.[94] It was the unknowable fragment drawn indiscriminately from the chaos of life, art, and the collage process itself which attracted de Kooning's eye with the final result being a chaotic agglomeration of visual incidents carefully described.

The conscious illusionism of Asheville distinguishes de Kooning's approach from that of the abstract expressionists as well as from the surrealists, dadaists, and cubists. These artists made a more radical break with reality. The abstract expressionists disdained self-conscious description in order to explore what they took to be unmediated, unconscious perceptions as did the surrealists. Rather than descriptively painting observed optical events as de Kooning did, the dadaists created a new art which aggressively cut and reshaped photographic images often taken from sources found in the mass media. Finally, cubist collage analytically and deliberately dissected the structure of objects in space while de Kooning was absorbed in rendering an eclectic, more indiscriminate, assortment of visual debris.

Turning away from these more contemporary examples, close precedents for the eclectic, illusionary content and

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[94]Polcari, The Modern Experience, 278.

pictorial structure of de Kooning's work are found in the letter rack pictures of American and Dutch painting and banquet pieces of 17th c. Dutch art. De Kooning's content while strangely and disconcertingly illegible because of its extreme fragmentation and ephemerality, finds parallels in these works in the Western illusionistic tradition. Moreover, Asheville's collage aesthetic and fragmentary spaces are echoed in the random accumulation of goods in these works.

The analysis of Asheville offered here is consonant with current reconsiderations of de Kooning which are largely abandoning Harold Rosenberg's action painting model in order to construct a portrait of a more deliberate painter who consciously engaged artistic traditions.[95] In Asheville de Kooning confronted traditions of description and illusionism just as he would later explore the figurative tradition in his series of women subjects and the pastoral tradition in his Long Island landscapes.

In addressing problems of interpretation raised by the description of chaos in Asheville, however, this essay's

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[95]Judith Zilczer, Curator of Paintings, Hirshhorn Museum, delivered a talk on October 3, 1993 at the National Museum of American Art discussing how de Kooning deliberated over his work. See also Judith Zilczer, Willem de Kooning from the Hirshhorn Museum Collection (New York: Rizzoli, 1993). Also Michael Zakian, a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers is currently working on a dissertation entitled, "All Painting is an Illusion": Representation in the Art of Willem de Kooning.

findings warn that the current research, while illuminating, may not deliver scholars from the treacherous paradoxes and ambiguities of de Kooning's work which Thomas Hess first began to enumerate in 1953. Instead in the case of Asheville de Kooning appears to have consciously engaged the illusionistic and descriptive traditions of Western art not as a way to clarify his purpose but as a way to assure that his work would ultimately remain unknowable and largely shrouded in mystery.

FIGURES

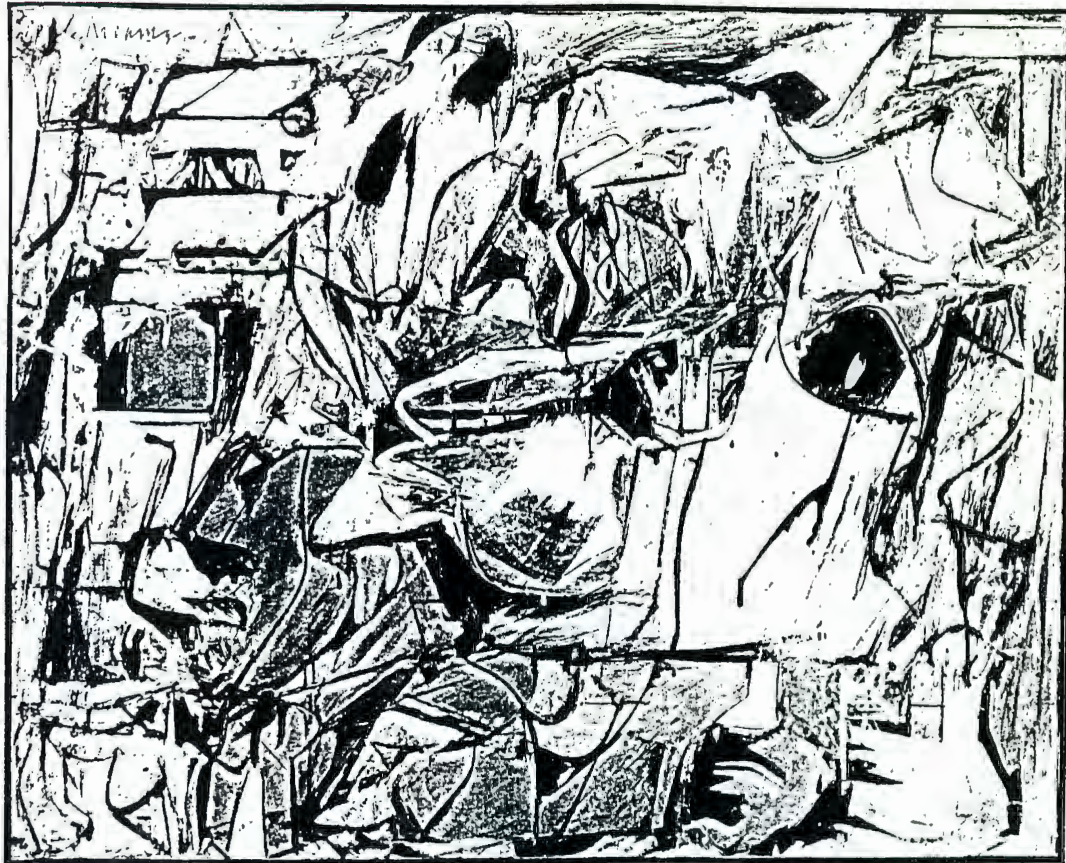

Fig. 1. Willem de Kooning, Asheville, 1948, oil and enamel on paperboard, 25 9/16 x 31 7/8 in., The Phillips Collection

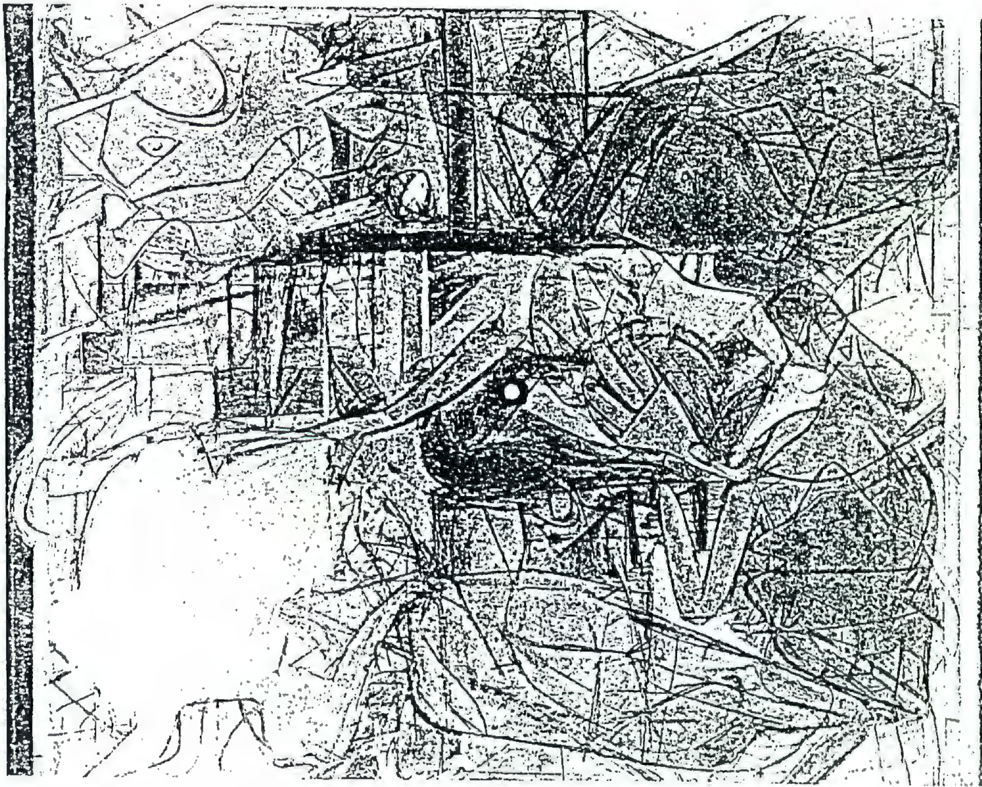

Fig. 2. Willem de Kooning, Judgement Day, 1946, oil and charcoal on paper, 22 1/2 x 28 1/2 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art

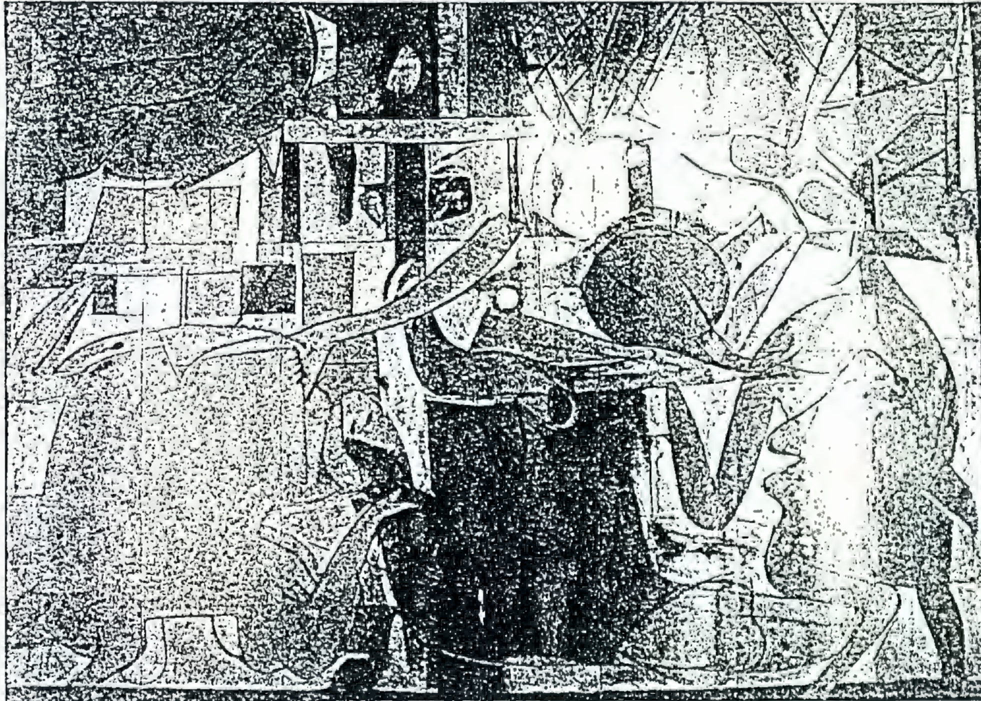

Fig. 3. Willem de Kooning, Labyrinth, 1946, calcimine and charcoal on canvas, 16 feet 10 in. x 17 feet, Allan Stone

Fig. 4.Willem de Kooning, Attic, 1949, oil on canvas, 61 3/8 x 80 1/4 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 5.Willem de Kooning, Painting, c.1950, oil and enamel on cardboard, mounted on composition board, 30 1/8 x 40 in., private collection

Fig. 6. Willem de Kooning, Excavation, 1950, oil and enamel on canvas, 6 feet 8 1/8 in. x 8 feet 4 1/4 in., Art Institute of Chicago

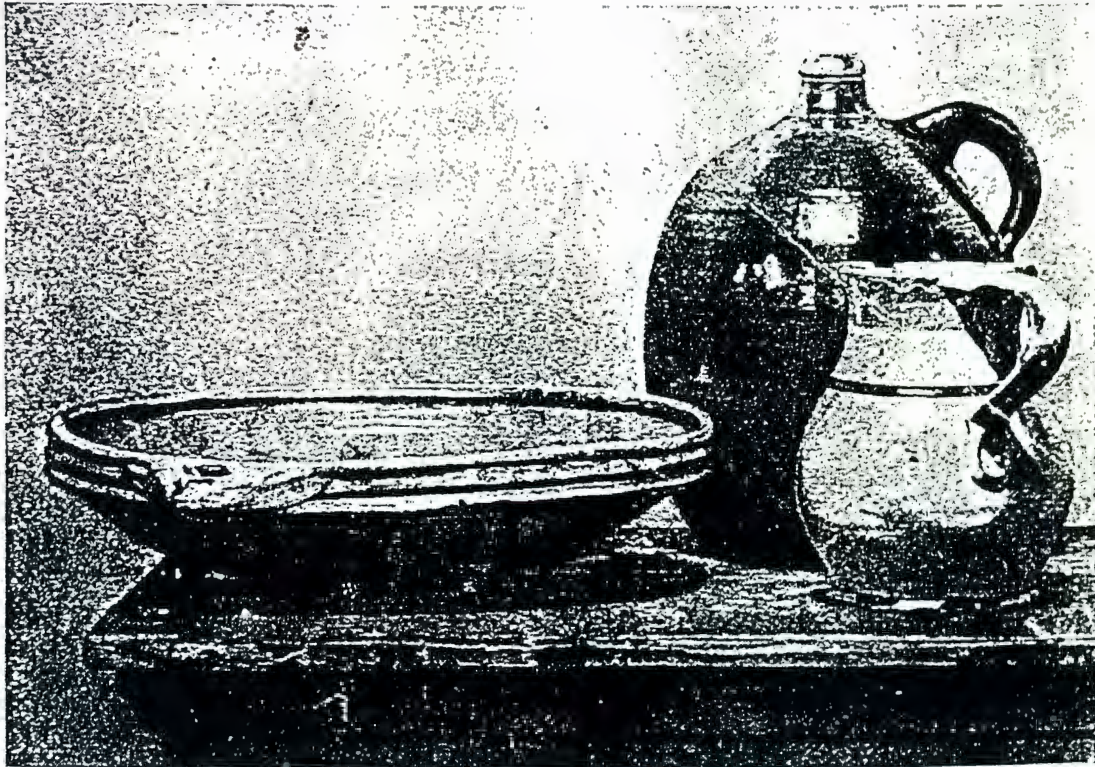

Fig. 7.Willem de Kooning, Dish with Jugs, c.1921, charcoal on paper, 19 3/4 x 25 3/8 in., private collection

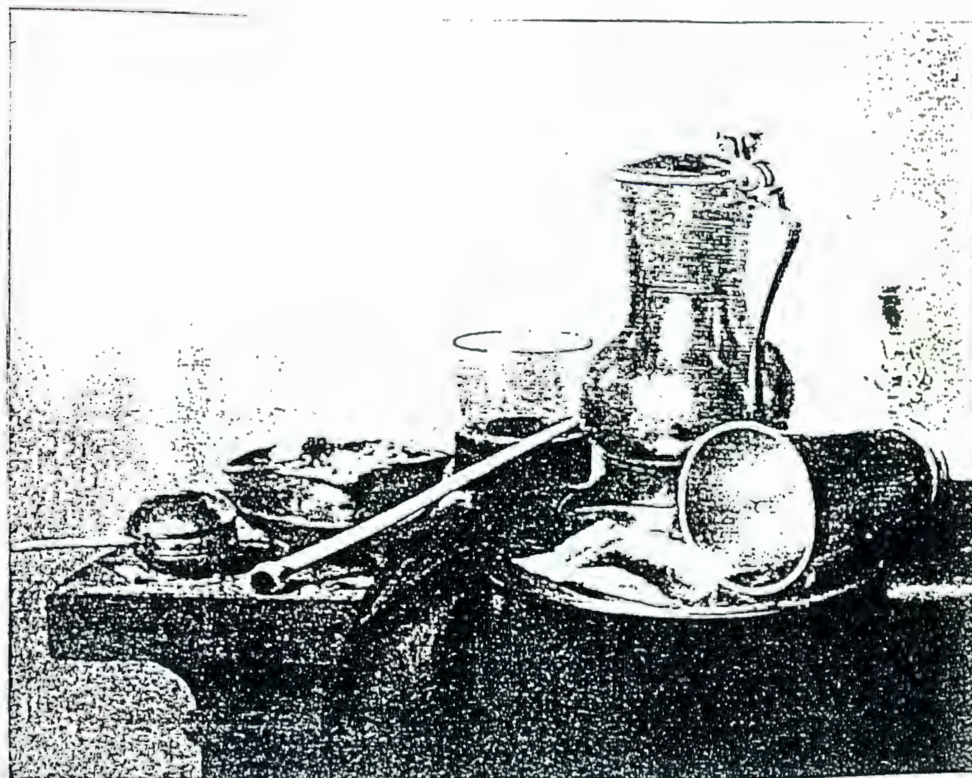

Fig. 8.Willem Claesz Heda, Wine, Tobacco and Watch, 1637, oil on wood, 16 1/2 x 21 in., M. Redelé Collection

Fig. 9. Willem de Kooning, *Study for Seated Man*, c.1938-39, pencil, 14 1/4 x 11 1/2 in., private collection

Fig. 10.Willem de Kooning, <u>Glazier</u>, c.1940, oil on canvas, 54 x 44 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art

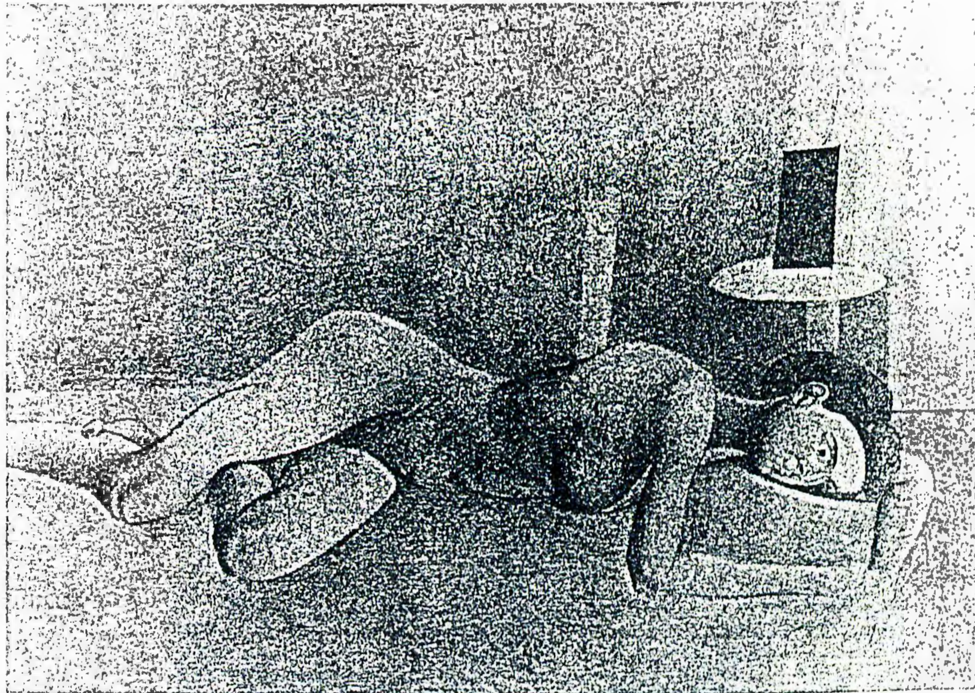

Fig. 11.Willem de Kooning, <u>Reclining Nude</u>, c.1938, graphite on paper, 10 1/2 x 13 in., Mr. and Mrs. Steven Ross

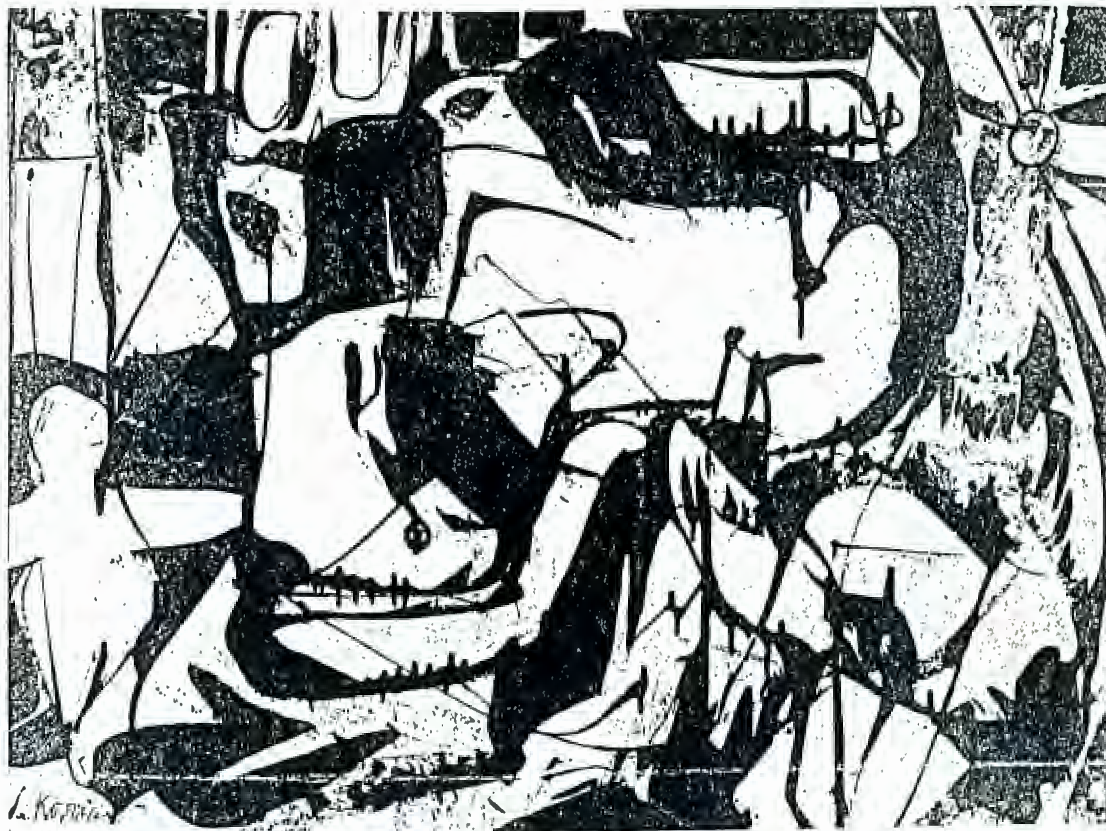

Fig. 12.Willem de Kooning, Asheville, 1948, enamel on paper, 22 x 30 in., private collection

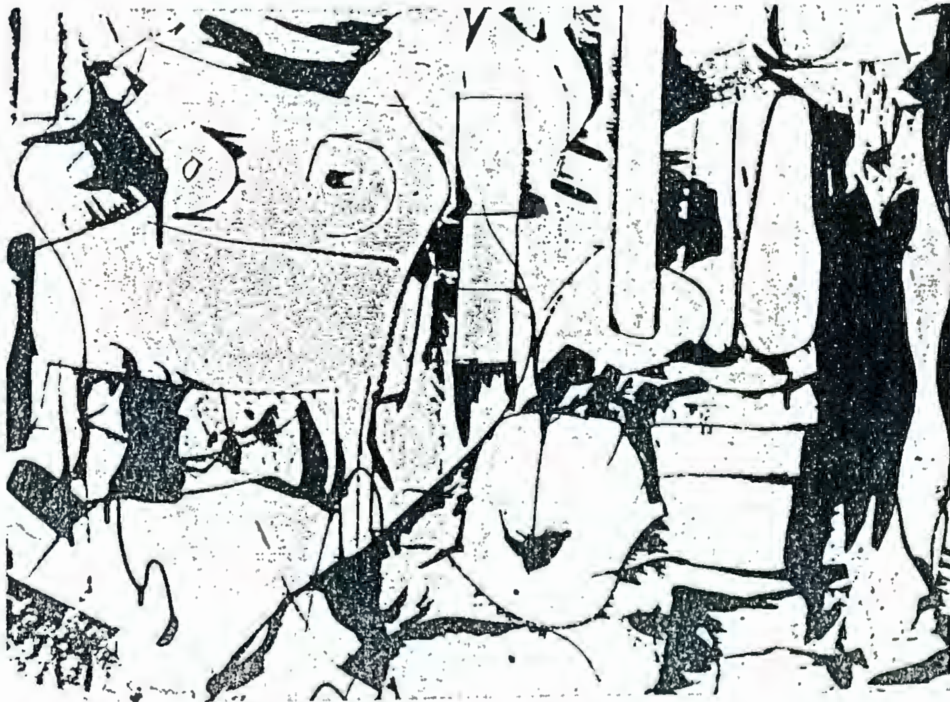

Fig. 13.Willem de Kooning, Asheville, 1948, oil on paper, 22 x 30 in., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Sonnabend

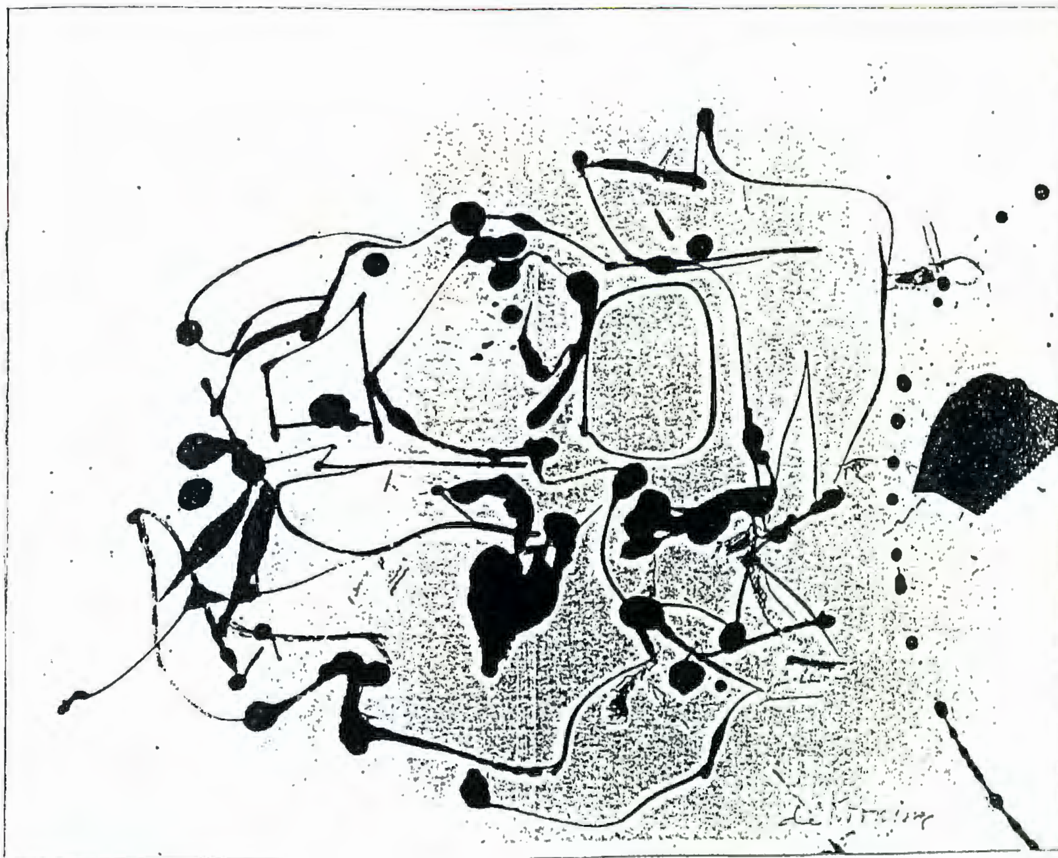

Fig. 14. Willem de Kooning, Asheville, 1948, sapolin on paper, 19 x 24 in., The Saint Louis Art Museum

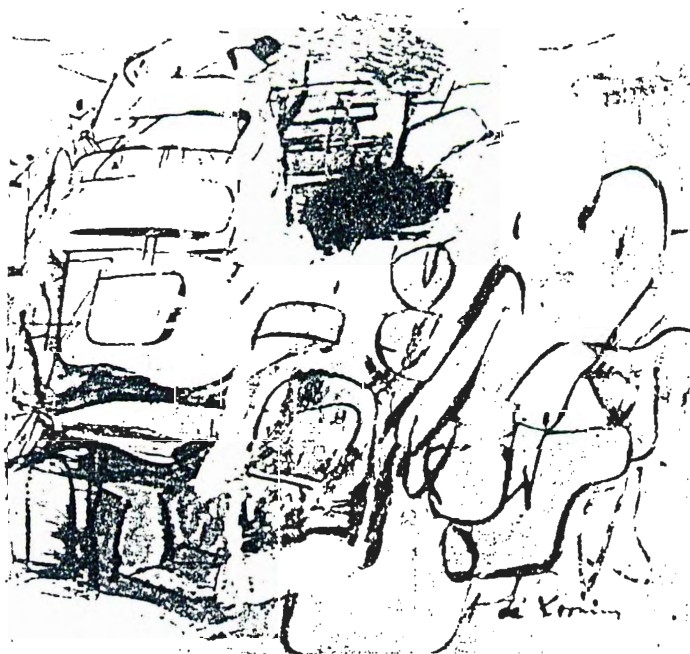

Fig. 15.Willem de Kooning, *Asheville*, 1948, oil on board, 24 1/8 x 25 1/8 in., Allan Stone

Fig. 16.Harry Bowden, De Kooning's Studio, November 1946

Fig. 17.Rudolph Burckhardt, Willem de Kooning, Woman, 1950-52, Stage 1

Fig. 18.Rudolph Burckhardt, Willem de Kooning, Woman, 1950-52, Stage 2

Fig. 19.Rudolph Burckhardt, Willem de Kooning, Woman, 1950-52, tracings

Fig. 20.Rudolph Burckhardt, Willem de Kooning, Woman, 1950-52, Stage 3

Fig. 21.Willem de Kooning, Collage, 1950, oil, enamel, thumbtacks on cut papers, 22 x 30 in., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Solinger

Fig. 22.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

Fig. 23.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

Fig. 24.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips
Collection

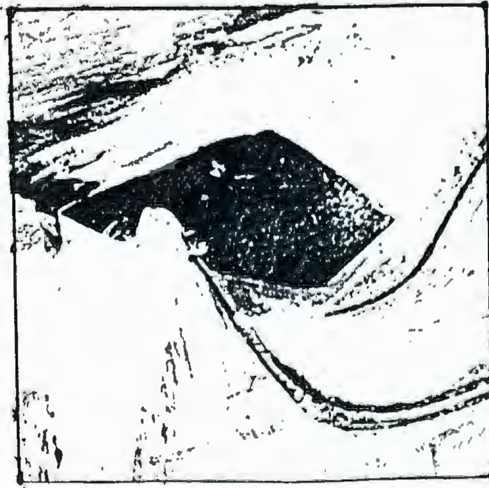

Fig. 25.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

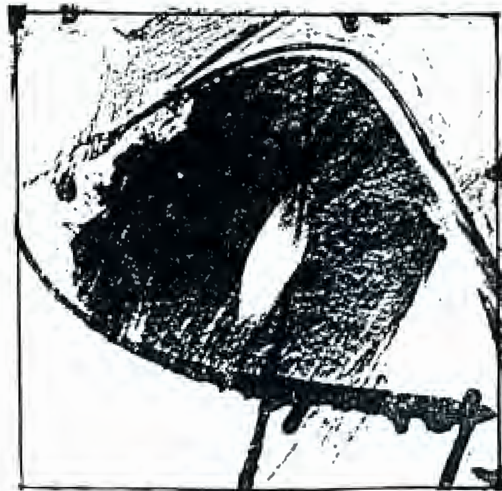

Fig. 26.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

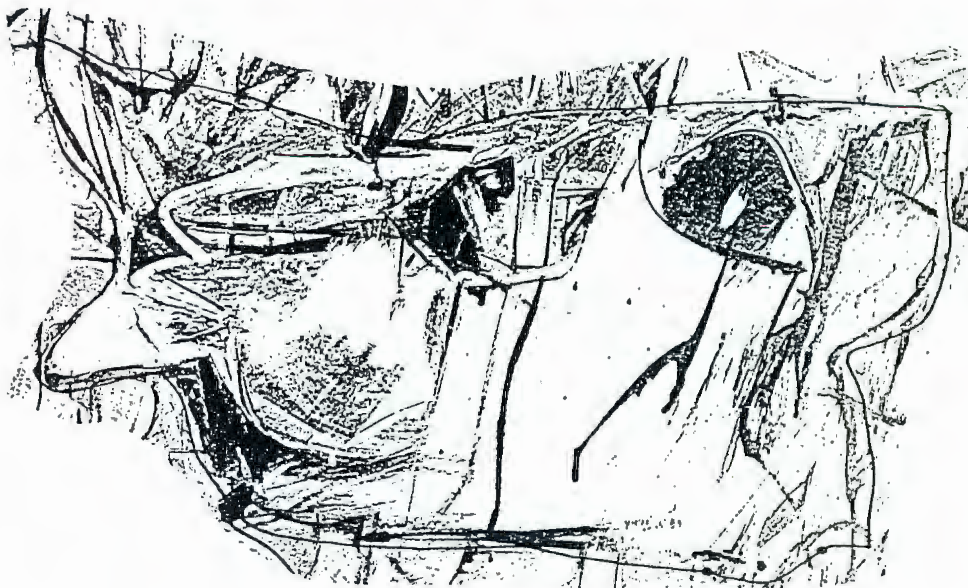

Fig. 27.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

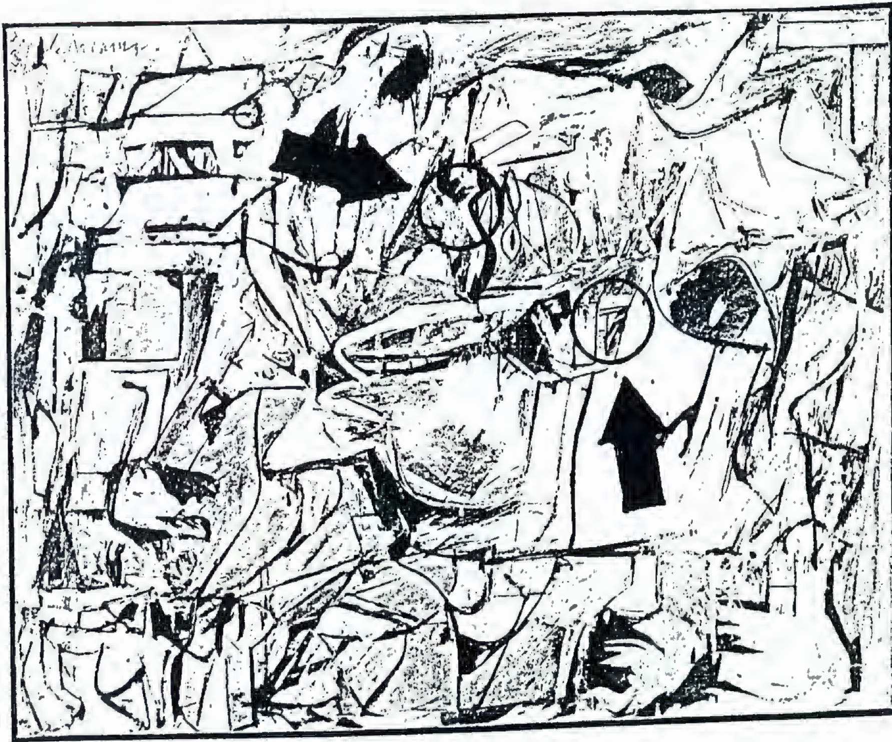

Fig. 28.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

Fig. 29.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

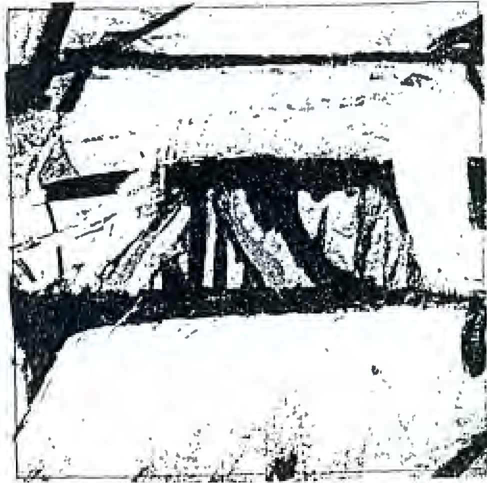

Fig. 30.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

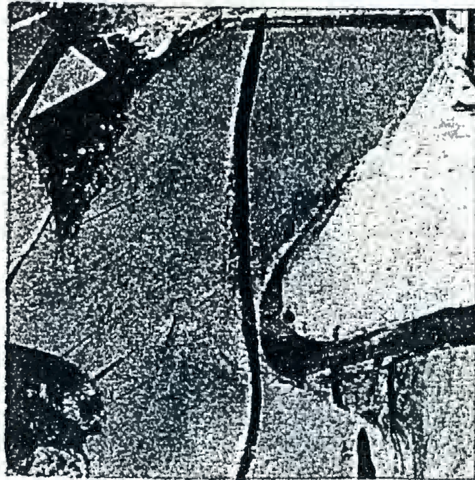

Fig. 31.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

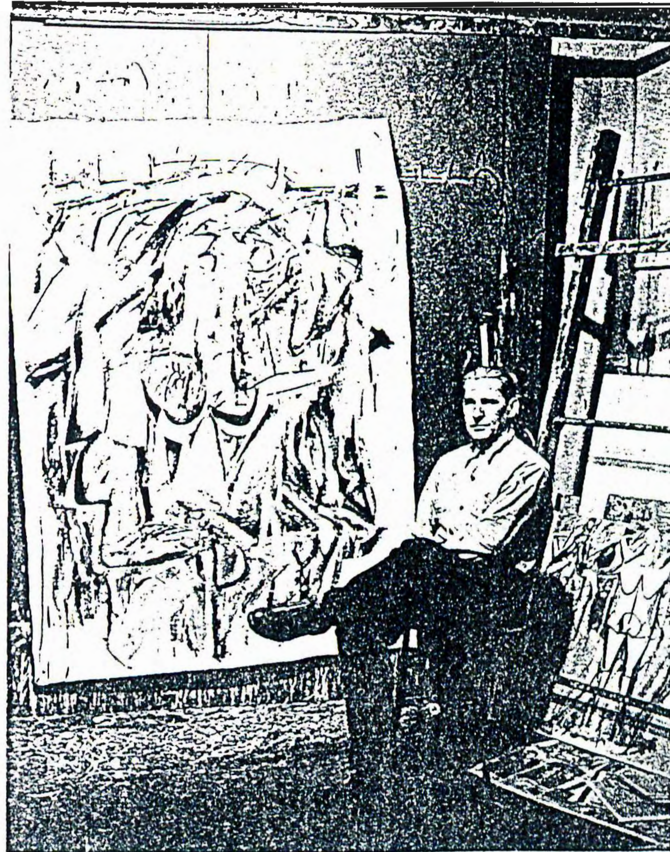

Fig. 32. Harry Bowden, De Kooning in His Studio, January, 1950

Fig. 33.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

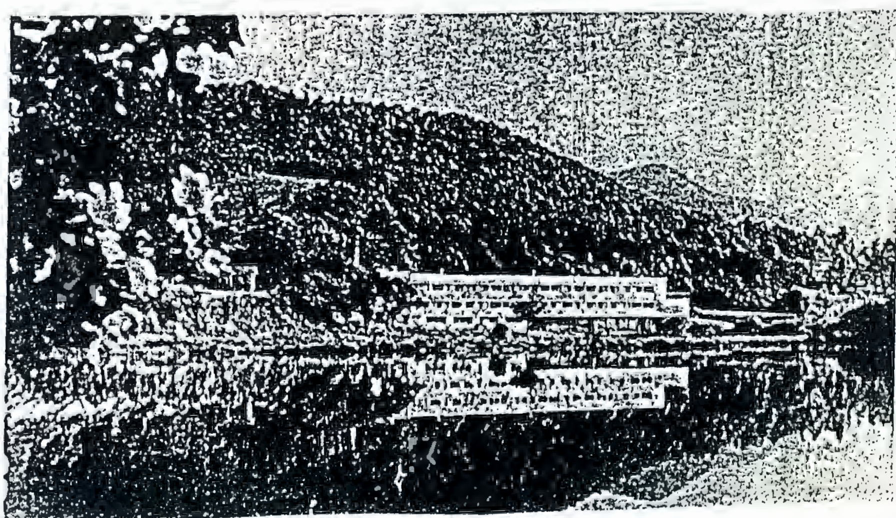

Fig. 34.John Harvey Campbell, view of studies building at Black Mountain from across the lake.

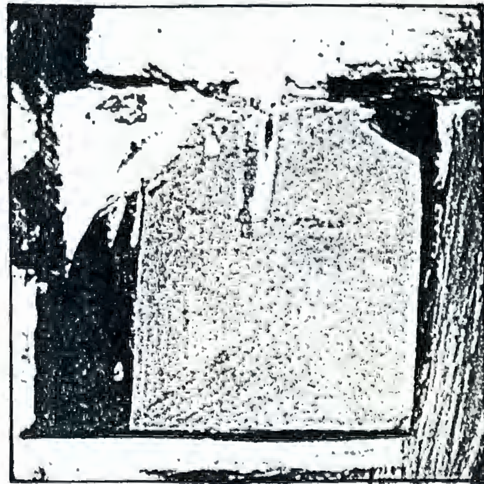

Fig. 35.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

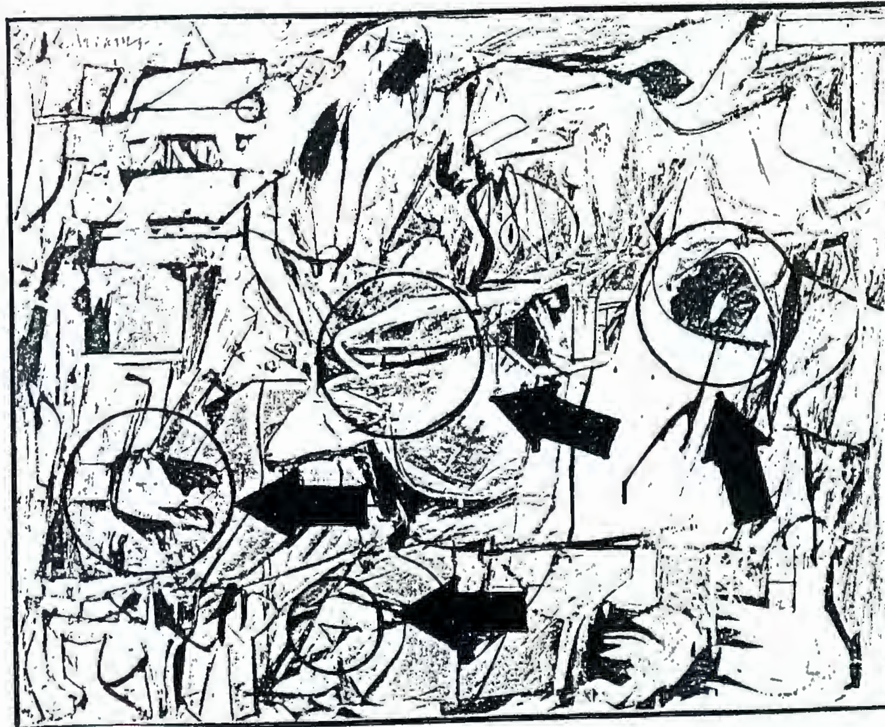

Fig. 36.detail of Willem de Kooning, Asheville, The Phillips Collection

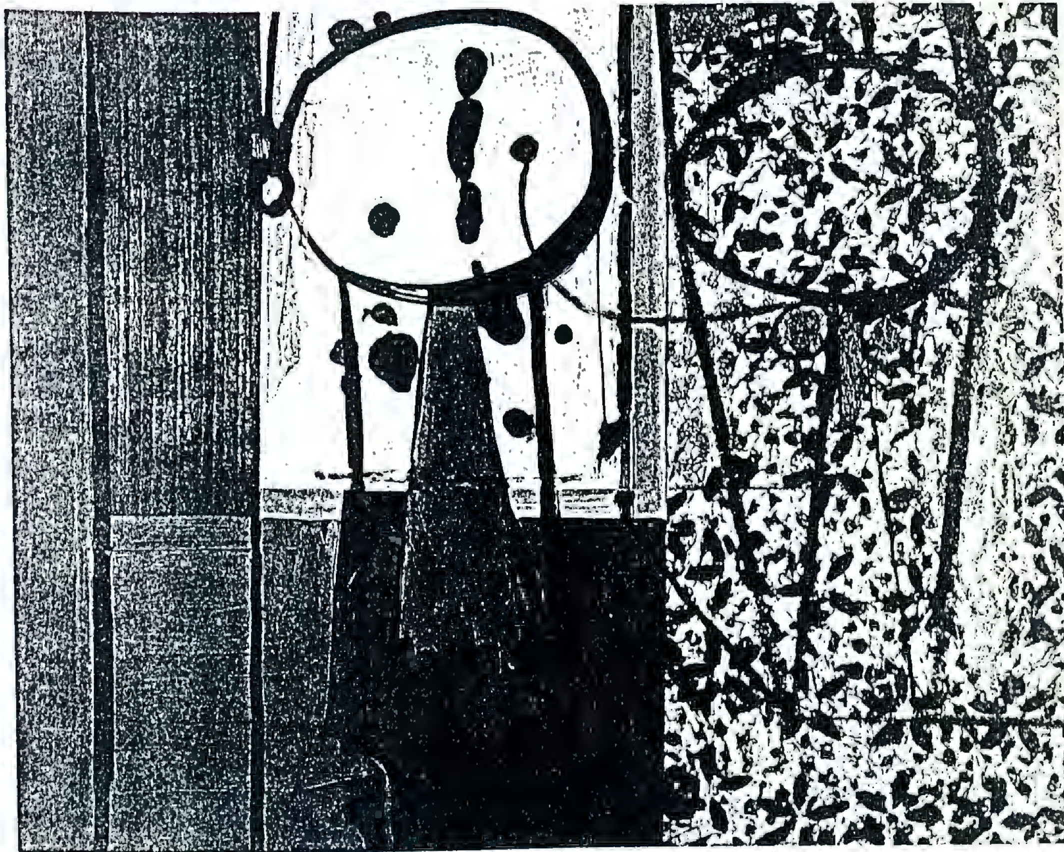

Fig. 37. Robert Motherwell, Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive, 1943, gouache and oil with cut and pasted papers on cardboard, 28 x 35 7/8 in., The Museum of Modern Art

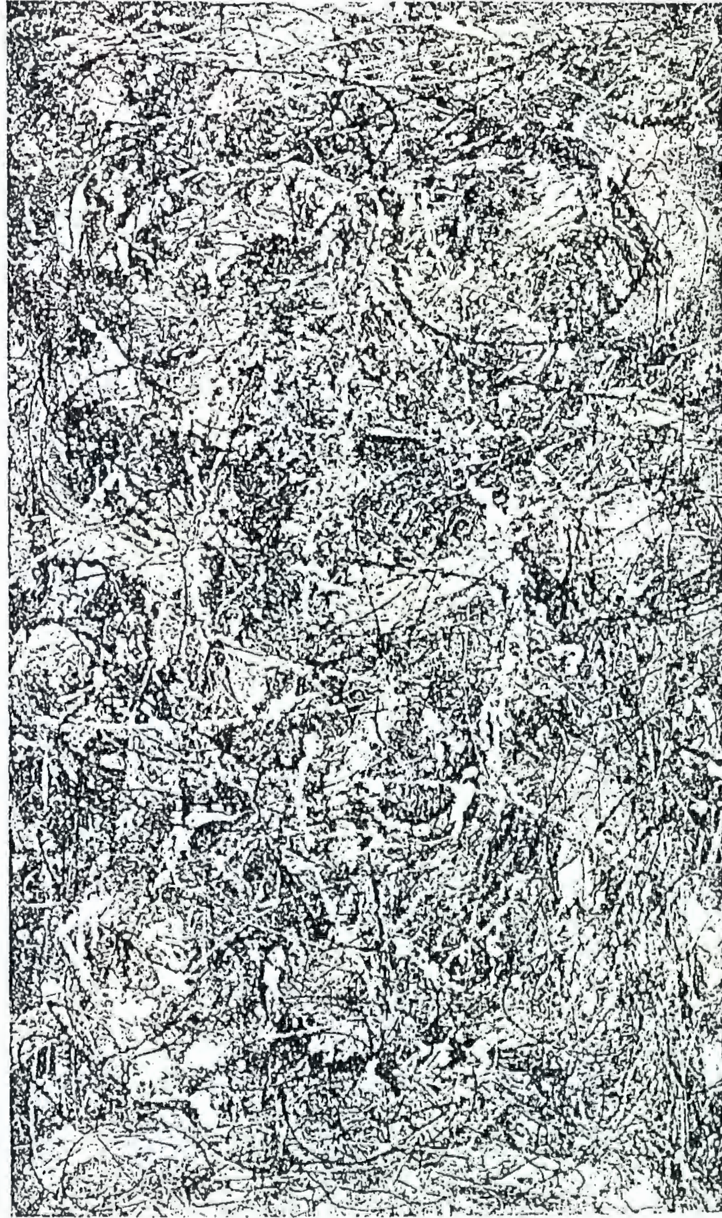

Fig. 38. Jackson Pollock, Full Fathom Five, 1947, oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, keys, etc., 50 7/8 x 30 1/8 in., The Museum of Modern Art

Fig. 39. Arshile Gorky, The Leaf of the Artichoke is an Owl, 1944, oil on canvas, 28 x 36 in., The Museum of Modern Art

Fig. 40.Arshile Gorky, One Year the Milkweed, 1944, oil on canvas, 37 x 47 in., National Gallery of Art

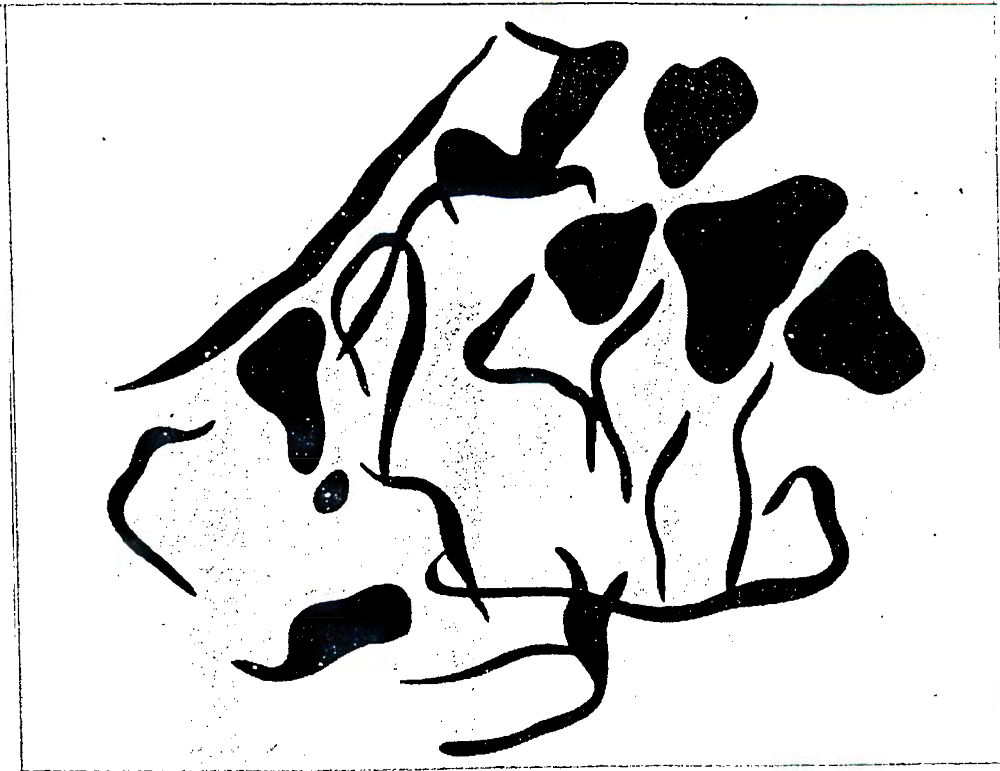

Fig. 41.Jean Arp, Automatic Drawing, 1916, Brush and ink on gray paper, 16 3/4 x 21 1/4 in., The Museum of Modern Art

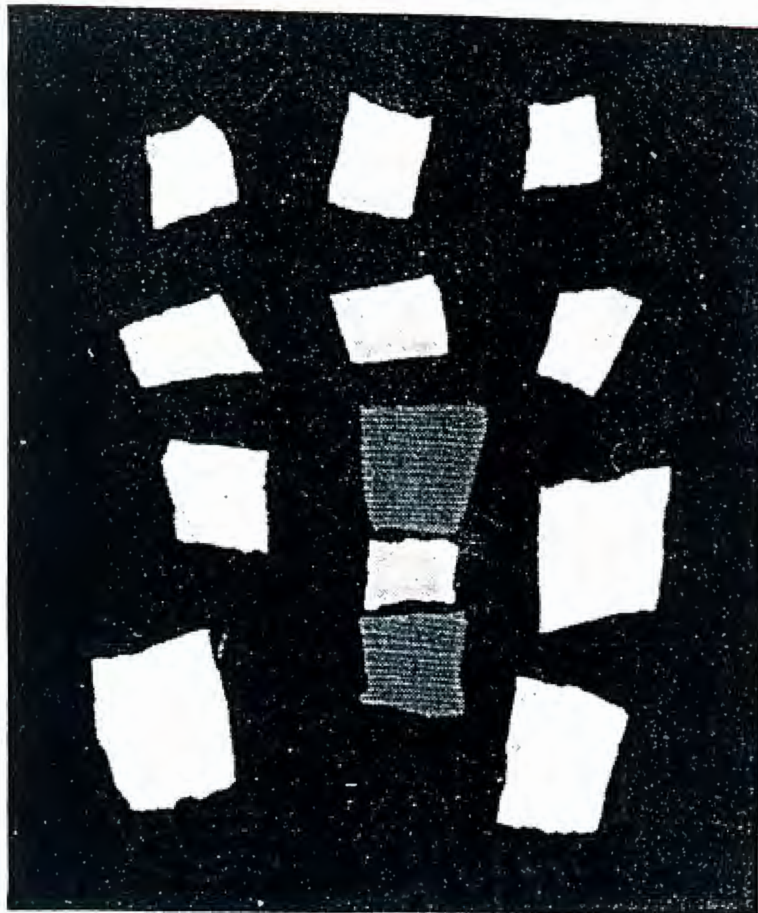

Fig. 42.Jean Arp, Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance, c.1917, 12 3/4 x 10 5/8 in., Collection P.G. Bougiere

Fig. 43. Hannah Höch, Cut with the Kitchen Knife, 1919, collage with pasted papers, 44 7/8 x 35 1/2 in., Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin

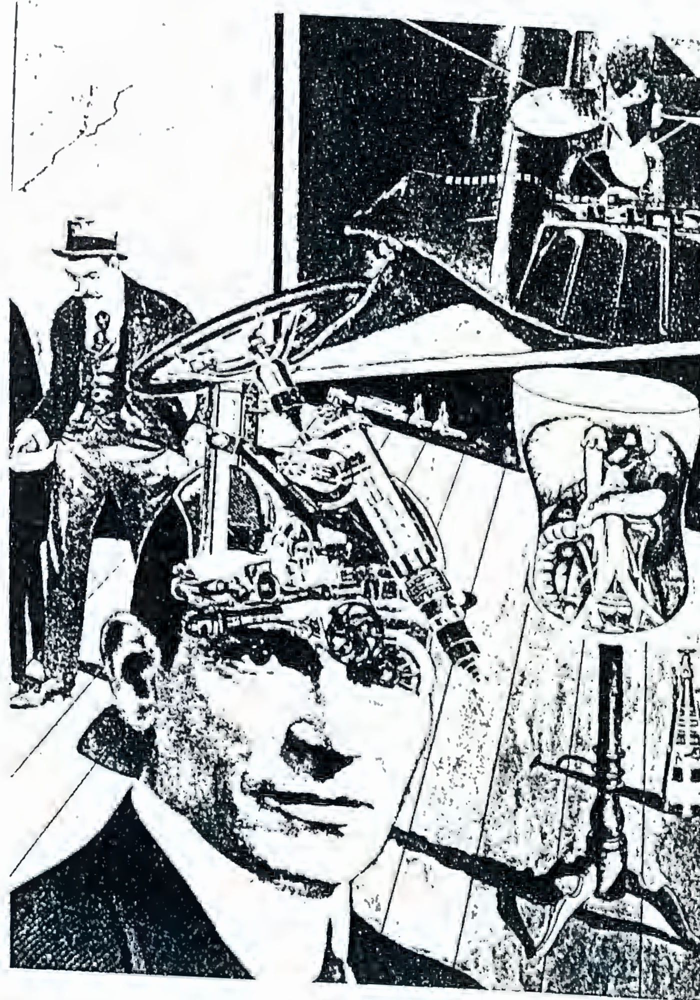

Fig. 44. Raoul Hausmann, Tatlin at Home, 1920, collage of pasted papers and gouache, 16 1/8 x 11 in., Moderne Museet, Stockholm

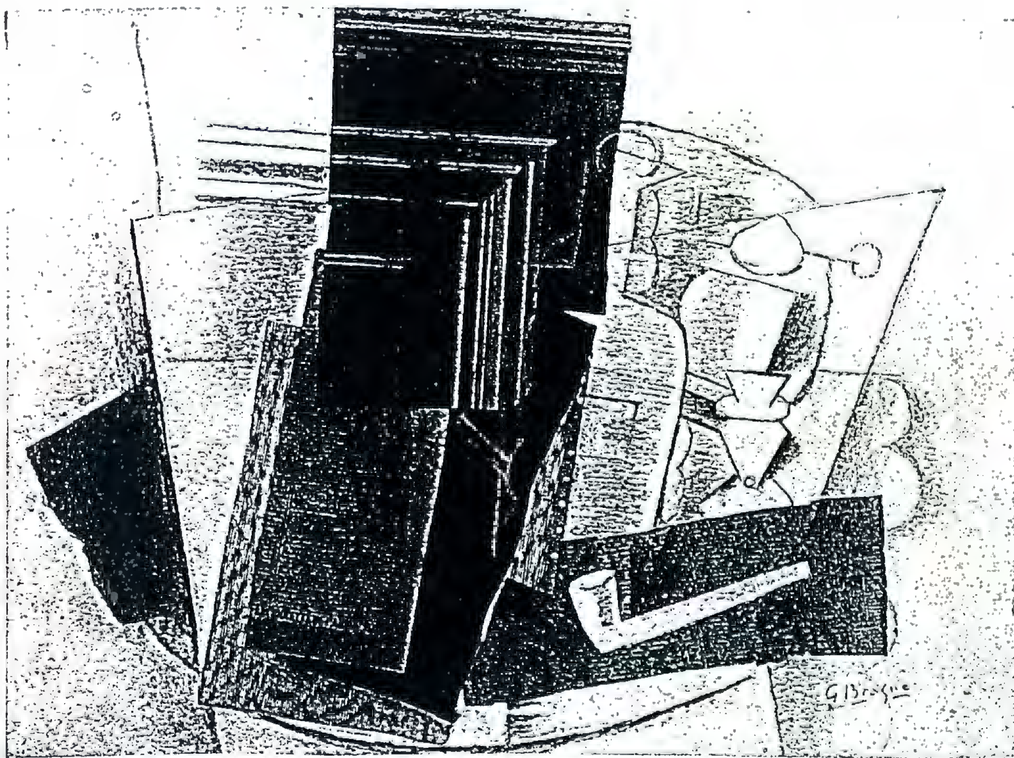

Fig. 45. Georges Braque, Still Life with Packet of Cigarettes, 1914, papier collé and charcoal on paper, Collection of John R. Gaines

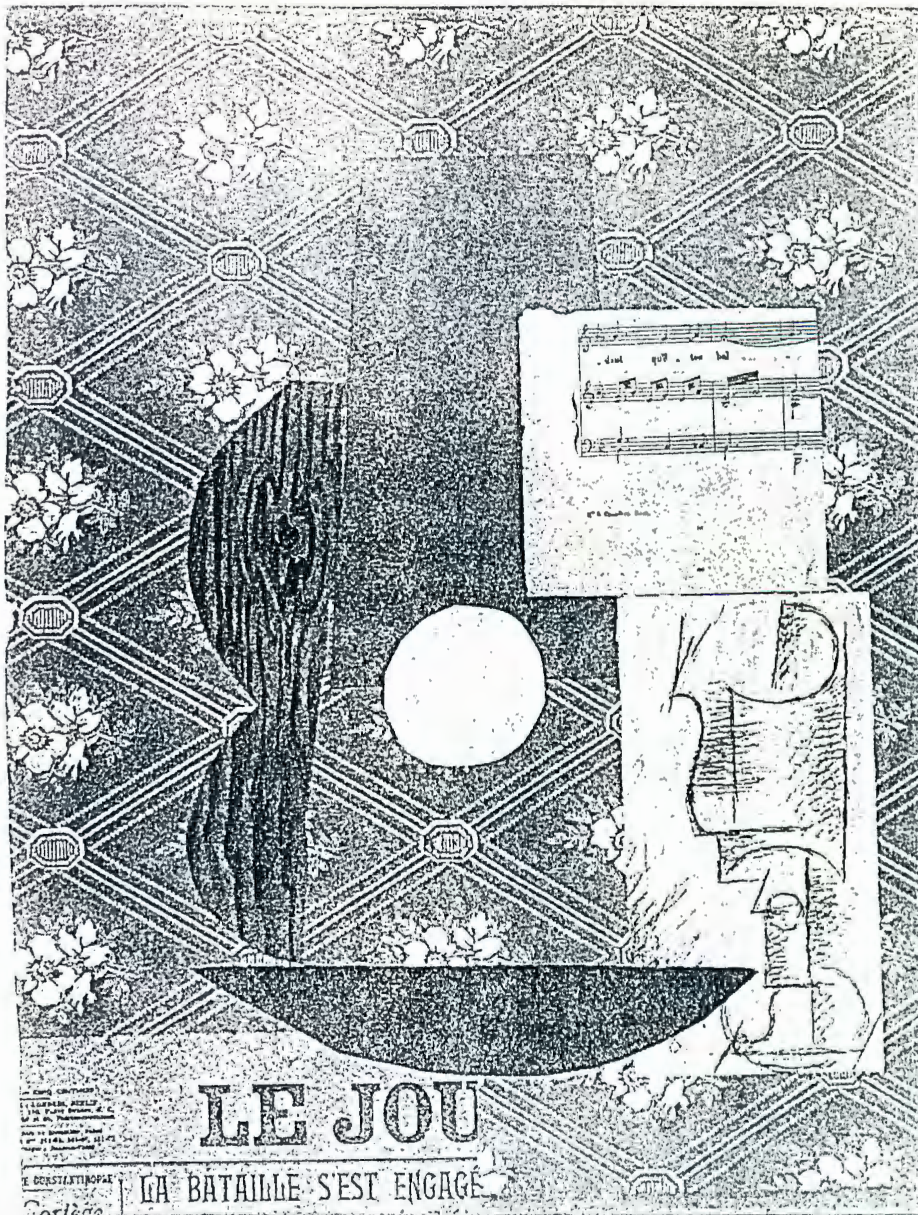

Fig. 46. Pablo Picasso, Guitare, partition et verre, 1912, papier collé and charcoal on paper, McNay Art Institute

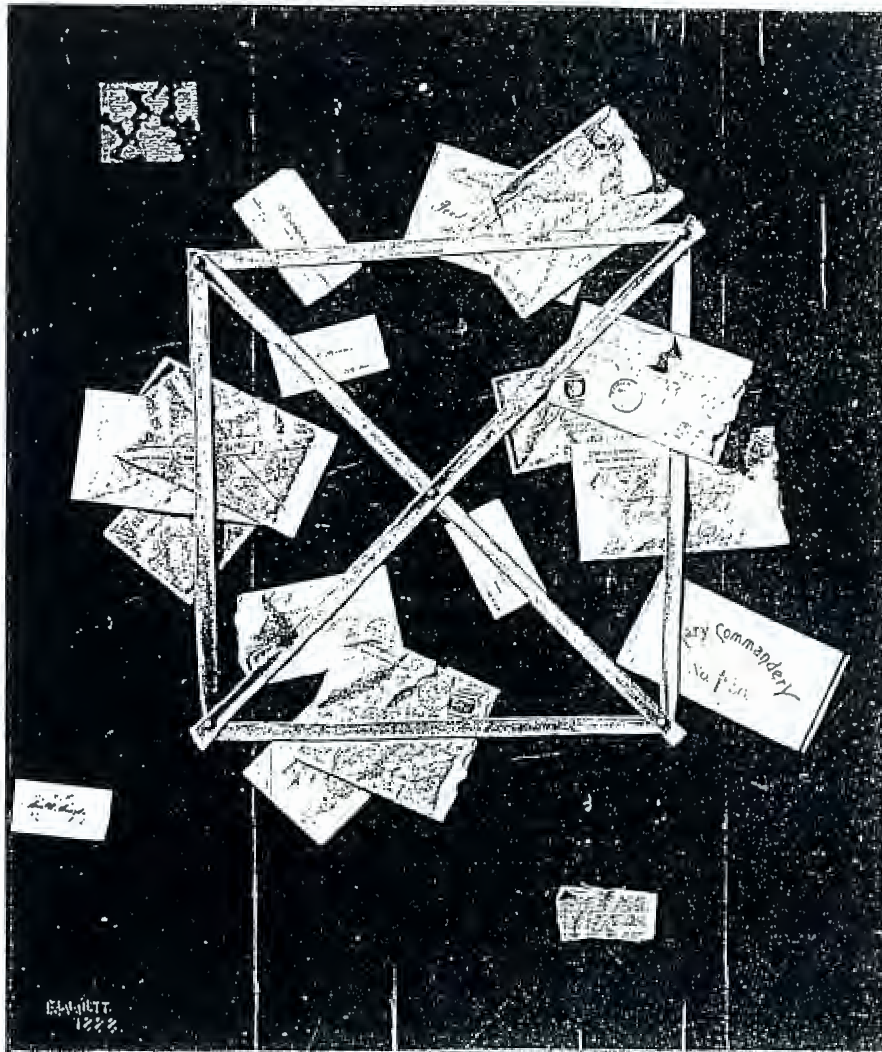

Fig. 47.William Michael Harnett, <u>Mr. Huling's Rack Picture</u>, 1888, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in., Collection of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, Jr.

Fig. 48.John Frederick Peto, <u>Old Souvenirs</u>, c.1881, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 49. Anonymous American, <u>A Deception</u>, 1802, watercolor, ink, and pencil, 16 x 10 3/4 in., private collection

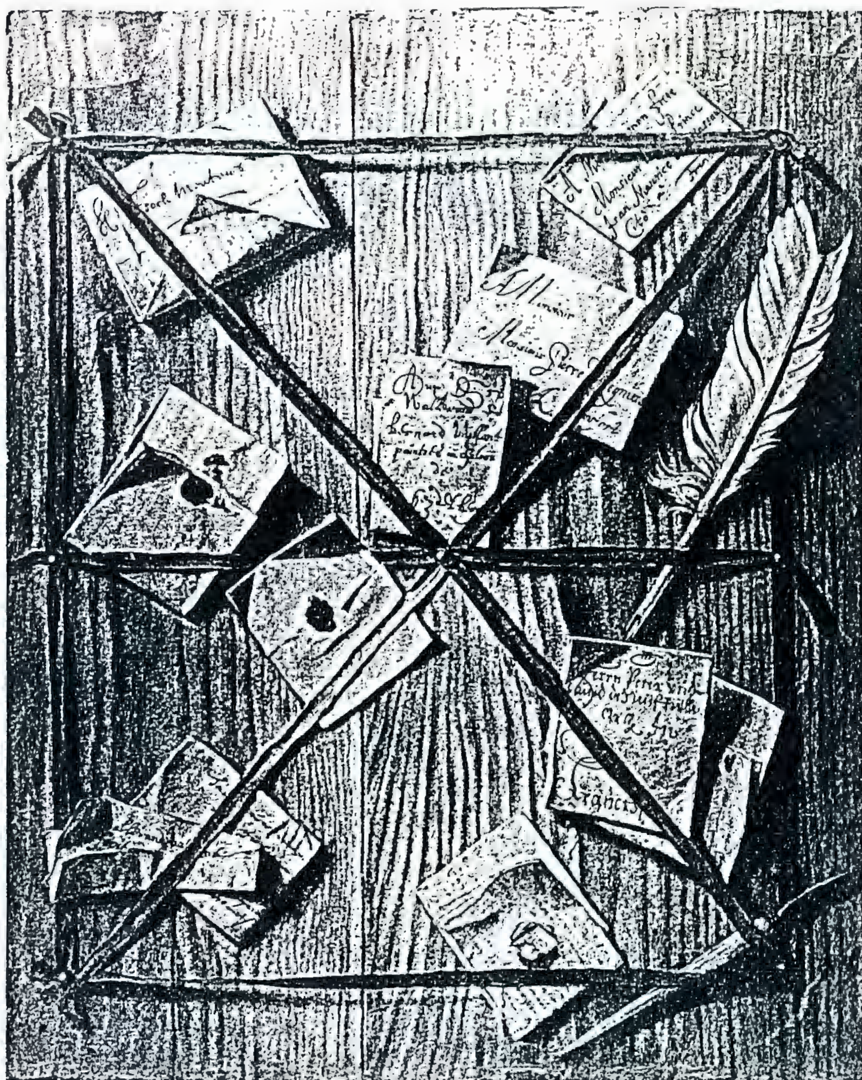

Fig. 50. Wallerand Vaillant, Trompe l'oeil: Letters, 1658, oil on canvas, 20 x 15 3/4 in., Gemaldgalerie, Dresden

Fig. 51. Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts, _Trompe l'oeil of Letters_, 17th c.

Fig. 52.detail of Anonymous American, A Deception

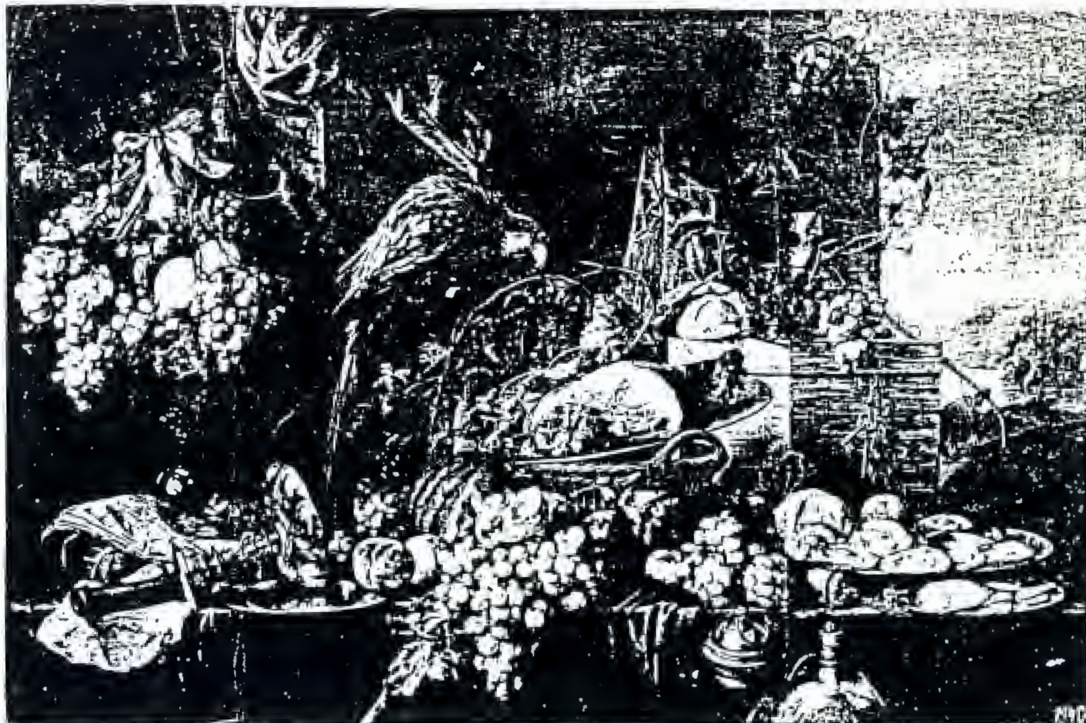

Fig. 53. Jan Davidsz de Heem, Still Life, oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 73 1/4 in., Akademie de Kunste, Vienna

Fig. 54. Pieter Aertsen, The Meat Stall, 1551, oil on panel, 48 1/2 x 59 in., University Art Collections, Uppsala University, Sweden

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