

EMBODIED PAINTING

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE GUTAI GROUP



AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM



Jackson Pollock
Blue Poles
enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas
1952
(National Gallery of Australia)



- ▶ Completely non-objective (no representational imagery)
- ▶ Improvised technique- no preplanned composition
- ▶ Emphasis is not on the end product but rather the process: not about the "image on the canvas" but the actions that go into making the image

TIMELINE

Surrealist artists start migrating from Europe to USA

1917-24

1929-33

1939-45

late 1940s

1947

1950s

Surrealism

Great Depression

World War II

Atomic bombing of Hiroshima-Nagasaki 1945

Artists come together in New York and form the Abstract Expressionist movement

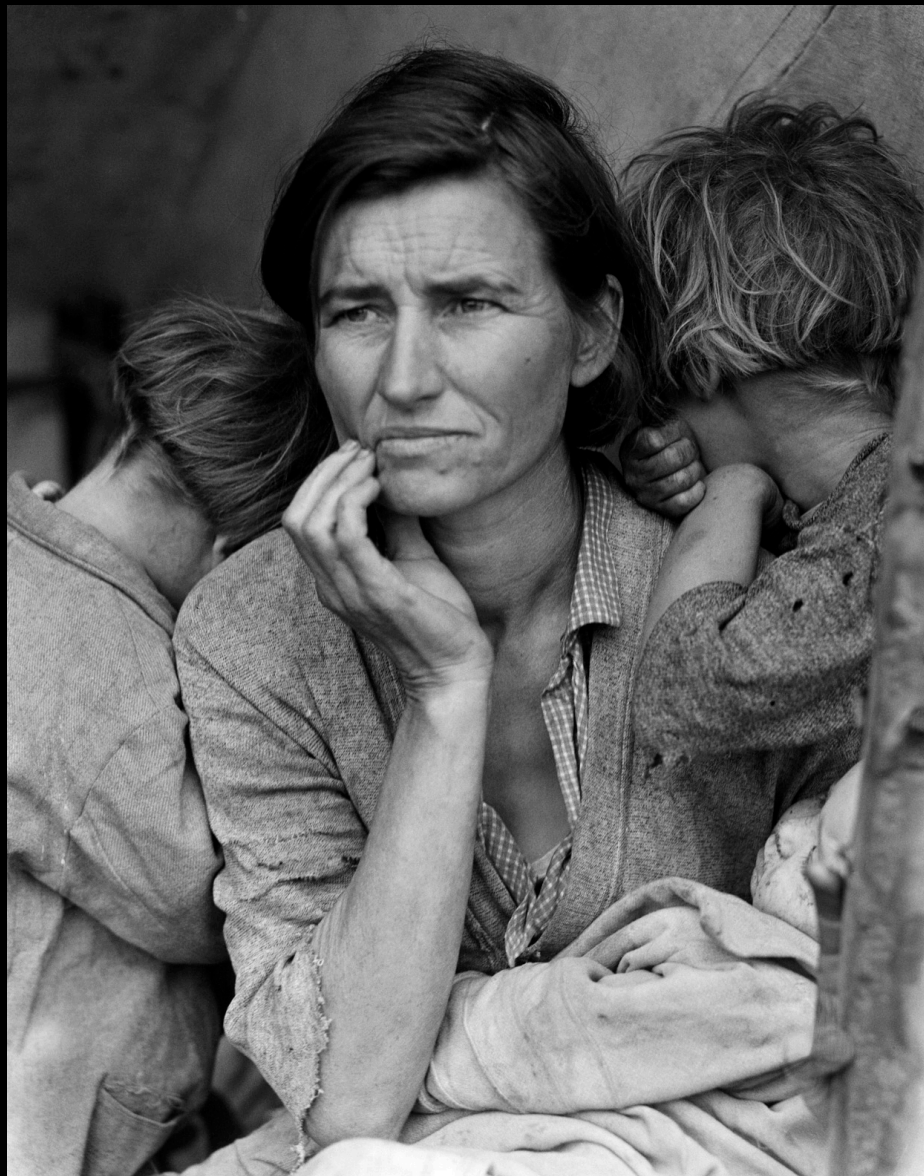
Jackson Pollock invents drip technique

Movement comes to and end

Gutai group (1954-72)

Social realism was an art movement, associated with the era of the Great Depression in the US (roughly the 1930s), that depicted **the everyday realities of life**.

Social realism was critical of the social, economic, and racial conditions that made life challenging for the working classes and poor (like some works of the Harlem Renaissance)



Migrant Mother, Dorothea Lange, 1936



Demonstration, Ben Shahn, 1933

AUTOMATISM

The process of creating art without conscious thought, accessing material from the unconscious mind as part of the creative process



Joan Miro
Carnival of Harlequin
1924-25

Key Characteristics of AbEx

- ▶ Political instability in Europe in the 1930s brought several leading Surrealists to New York.
- ▶ influenced by Surrealism's focus on the **unconscious**: saw painting as a struggle between self-expression and subconscious
- ▶ Two main styles: **gestural work** (Pollock and de Kooning: dynamic and energetic brushwork) and the **color fields** (Rothko: subtle color harmonies and simple compositions)
- ▶ The emphasis was on the **action** of the painters, **not the end product** of the painting.
- ▶ Although the movement has been largely depicted throughout historical documentation as one belonging to the paint-splattered, heroic male artist, there were several important female Abstract Expressionists during the 1940s and '50s who now receive credit as elemental members of the canon.



Action Painting

"At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

—Harold Rosenberg (art critic and historian)

Hans Namuth
Jackson Pollock painting Autumn Rhythm
1950

“The photos and films helped transform Pollock from a talented, cranky loner into the first media-driven superstar of American contemporary art, the jeans-clad, chain-smoking poster boy of abstract expressionism.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bICqvmKL5s>



Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock

"I'm more at ease. I feel more a part of the painting since this way I can walk around it, walk from all four sides and literally be in the painting." -Jackson Pollock



Jackson Pollock

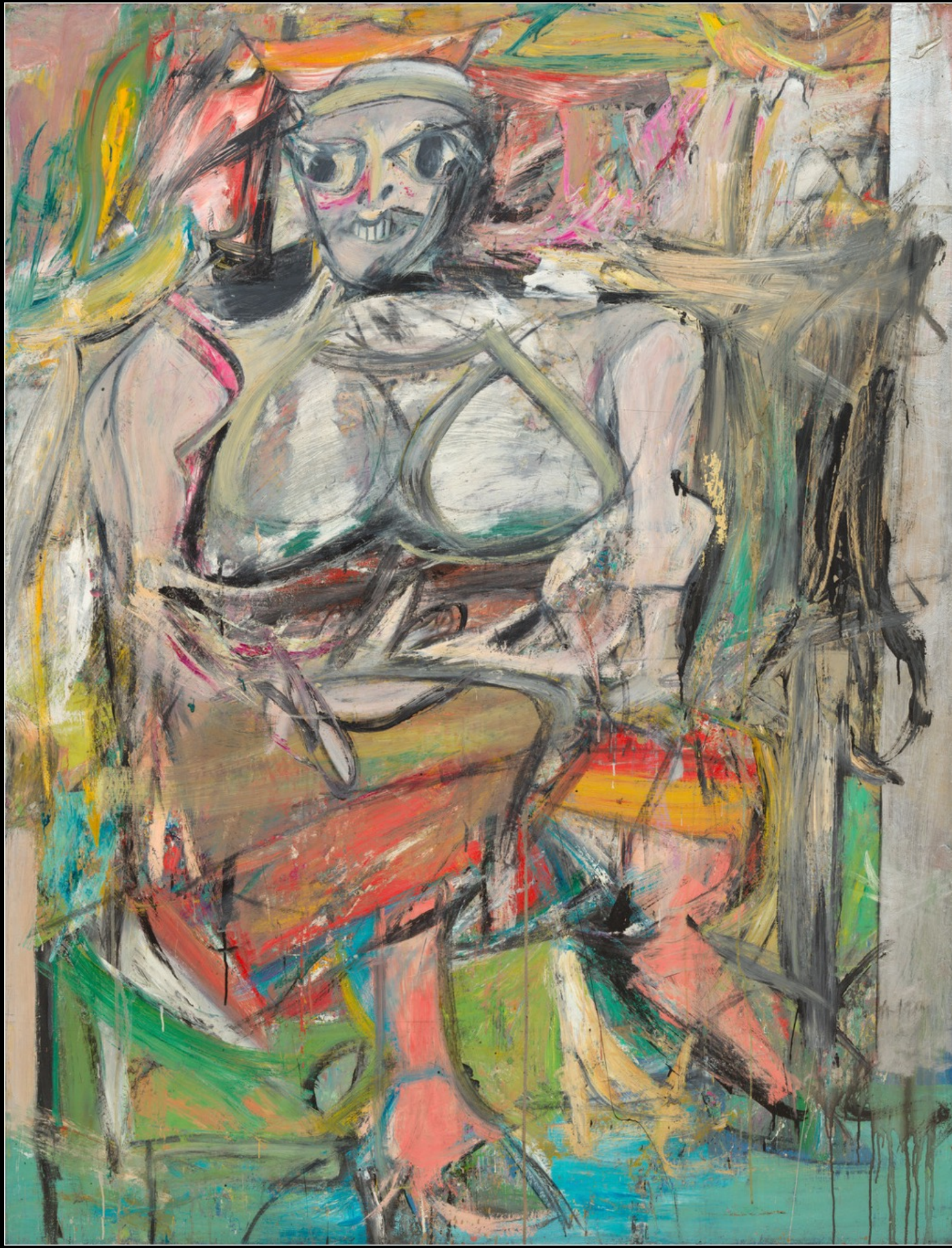
One: Number 31, 1950

Oil and enamel paint on canvas

Collection of MoMA



Jackson Pollock
White Light
1954



“Beauty becomes petulant
to me. I like the grotesque.
It's more joyous.”
-Willem de Kooning

Willem de Kooning
Woman I
1950-52



Lee Krasner Noon 1947 Oil on linen

The Soak-Stain technique— Helen Frankenthaler's process

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBKNifpTSFk>





Helen Frankenthaler
Jacob's Ladder
1957

Color field: A movement characterized primarily by large fields of flat, solid color spread across or stained into the canvas creating areas of unbroken surface and a flat picture plane. The movement places less emphasis on gesture, brushstrokes and action in favour of an overall consistency of form and process.





Mark Rothko
No. 5/No. 22
1950
Oil on canvas
Collection of MoMA



Mark Rothko

Untitled

1969

Acrylic on paper

Collection of the Tate

The question of scale

"I paint big to be intimate." -Mark Rothko

The emphasis is on the personal (authentic expression of the individual) rather than the grandiose.





JAPANESE GUTAI GROUP

Historical Context

- ▶ Japan in the 1950s: in the process of renewing itself and recreating the nation after the devastation of WWII
- ▶ Relations with the West are being reestablished- New internationalism had a very strong impact on Japan's cultural scene and its art world: hence, a growing belief in individual freedom and younger democracy.
- ▶ During WWII, Japan's totalitarian regime had promoted the idea of **nationalism** that had **restricted individual expression**
- ▶ Members of the group now, after the end of the war now rebelled against this attitude in their artworks and encouraged the public to do what no one has done before.



The Gutai group formed by Jiro Yoshihara in Japan in 1954

Key characteristics of Gutai

- ▶ Emerging in the postwar period, Gutai emphasised **individualism** in their works.
“Never imitate others: make something that has never existed before.” –Jiro Yoshihara
- ▶ **Gu (tool) Tai (body)**: sought to use the body as a tool for mark making and connect the use of material with action
- ▶ They believed in **concept over form**, and entirely rejecting representative art.
- ▶ They wanted to move away from the emphasis on the physical art object towards the invisible world of ideas and philosophies.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xCg79GrWaM>



Kazuo Shiraga in his studio



Kazuo Shiraga , Work II, Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 1958

"Performance Painting"



Kazuo Shiraga

Challenge to the Mud

Performance

1955



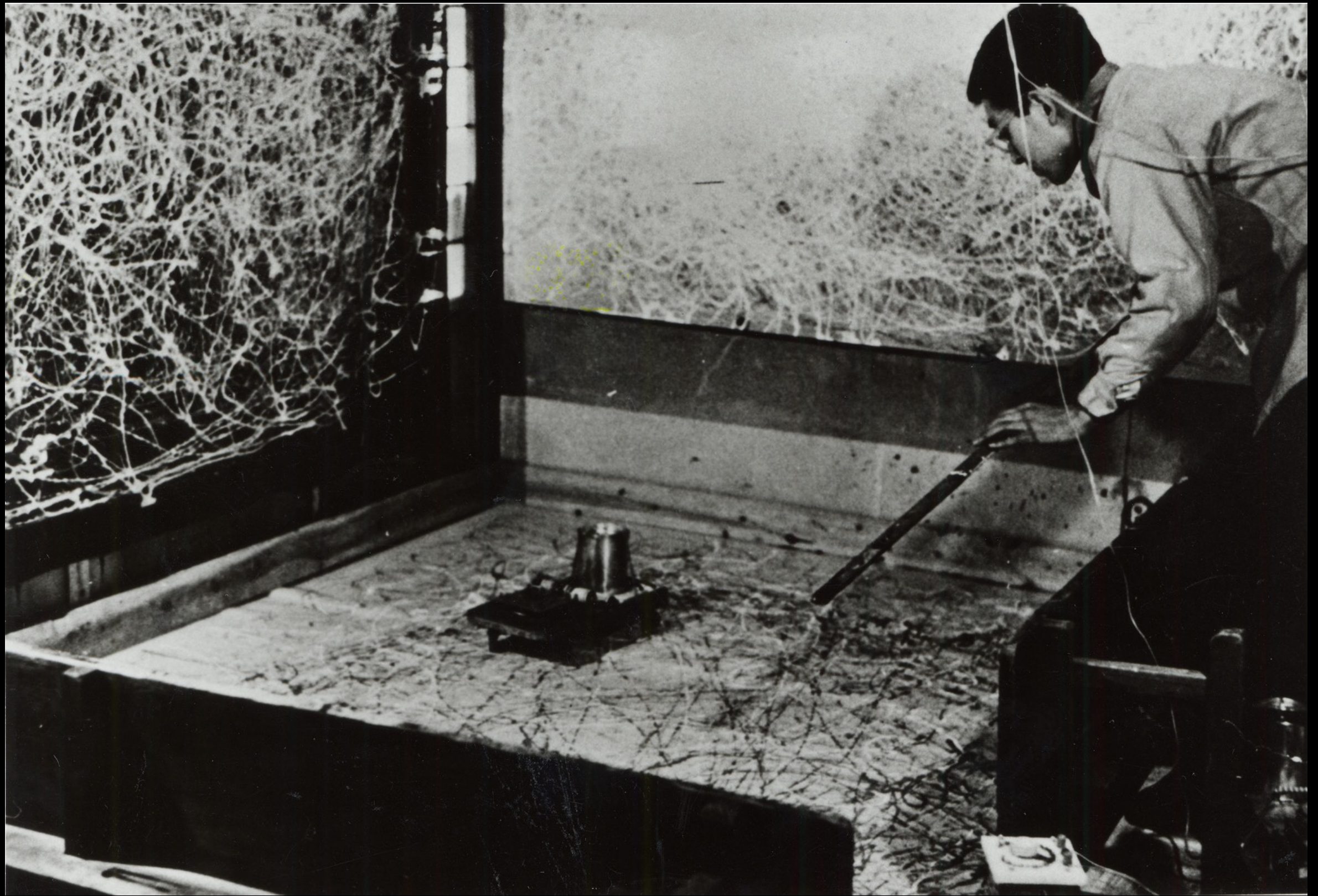
Saburō Murakami
Laceration of Paper
1956



SHOZO SHIMAMOTO making a painting by hurling glass bottles of paint against a canvas at the "2nd Gutai Art Exhibition," Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, c. October 11-17, 1956



SHOZO SHIMAMOTO, *Work*, 1955



Akira Kanayama

Work

1957

ADDITIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS:

Compilation of Gutai performances: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH2RFsfcpT4>

Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, NY

Gutai: Splendid Playground: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY25hyMx8z0>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Is the "process" more important than the "product"?
- ▶ How do we address the "lack of skill"
- ▶ How does the absence of an image affect your analyses?
- ▶ How do we experience the remnants of a performance after its time?

GLOSSARY

Abstract: A term generally used to describe art that is not representational or based on external reality or nature.

Action painting: Art critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting" in 1952 to describe the work of artists who painted using bold gestures that engaged more of the body than traditional easel painting. Often the viewer can see broad brushstrokes, drips, splashes, or other evidence of the physical action that took place upon the canvas.

Allover painting: A canvas covered in paint from edge to edge and from corner to corner, in which each area of the composition is given equal attention and significance.

Expressionism: Encompasses varying stylistic approaches that emphasize intense personal expression. As Expressionism evolved from the beginning of the 20th century through the early 1920s, its crucial themes and genres reflected deeply humanistic concerns and an ambivalent attitude toward modernity, eventually confronting the devastating experience of World War I and its aftermath.

Performance art: A term that emerged in the 1960s to describe a diverse range of live presentations by artists, including actions, movements, gestures, and choreography

Picture Plane: The virtual, illusionary plane created by the artist, parallel to the physical surface of a two-dimensional work of art; the physical surface of a two-dimensional work of art, e.g. a painting, drawing, or print.

Scale: The ratio between the size of an object and its model or representation, as in the scale of a map to the actual geography it represents.