BEHIND THE SCENES: *RED* BY JOHN LOGAN

Background material prepared for Ensemble Theatre Company by Anna Jensen

JOHN LOGAN ON BEING A SUCCESSFUL WRITER:

"... Here's the secret...Here it is, I'm going to tell you. This is what you have to do, it's great – don't tell anyone. You have to read *Hamlet* and you have to read it again and you have to read it until you understand every word. And then you move onto *King Lear*. And then maybe you treat yourself to *Troilus and Cressida*. And then you know what? Then you're going to go back and read Aristotle's *Poetics* until you can quote it."

JOHN LOGAN (1961-), PLAYWRIGHT

Like Mark Rothko, the artist at the center of the play *Red*, author John Logan worked for years developing his craft in relative obscurity before finding artistic and commercial achievement as a writer. And, like Rothko, when he found fame, it was stratospheric. Logan grew up in New Jersey and went to college at Northwestern University. After graduation, he worked in the university's law library for ten years as a clerk while mastering the craft of playwriting.

From the start, Logan was drawn to dark subjects, "not to sweetness and light." For example, the topics of his early plays include the Lindbergh kidnapping, the child killers Leopold and Loeb, and the murder of Italian film director Pier Pasolini.

He had been thus toiling as a playwright when he wrote the screenplay for *Any Given Sunday* (1999) "on spec." He had an agent who believed in his promise as a screenwriter and worked through multiple drafts of *Any Given Sunday* with him before it was produced. With its success, contracts for more film scripts followed. Notable screenplays include *Gladiator* (2000), *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002), *The Aviator (2004)*, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), *Rango* (2011), *Hugo* (2011), *Coriolanus* (2011) and *Skyfall* (2012).

In spite of his accomplishments as a screenwriter (*Skyfall*, for one, grossed more than $1 billion), Logan considers himself to be a playwright by nature and inclination. He became hooked on theater through Shakespeare. His father, a naval architect and Irish immigrant to the United States, convinced him to watch Olivier's *Hamlet* when he was eight years old by promising him that there were lots of swordfights in it. Logan said in a recent interview that "if you're introduced [to Shakespeare] at the right age, and it just sort of shapes your life." Shakespeare remains Logan's chief inspiration and model.

Wanting to be as close to the hand of the great bard as he can get, some of his Hollywood earnings are spent growing a collection of antiquarian books related to Shakespeare.

Production History: *Red*

Logan wrote *Red* while in London working on the screenplay for *Sweeney Todd*. He wandered into the Tate Gallery and entered the Rothko Room, which has Rothko's murals all around it. He found the paintings so moving and the story behind the Tate's acquisition of Rothko's murals so fascinating, that he felt that he must write a play about it. Logan researched Rothko's life for about a year. Because of Rothko's own extensive understanding of art history, Logan simultaneously gave himself a swift education in the history of art.

Logan envisioned *Red* being produced in the Donmar Warehouse, a 251-seat black box theater in London's West End. Logan felt the intimacy of that space would envelop the audience into a spatial sense of Rothko's art studio on 222 Bowery in New York City.

Figure 1: John Logan

The play did, indeed, premiere at the Donmar Warehouse; it starred Alfred Molina as Rothko and Eddie Redmayne as his assistant, Ken. It played at the Donmar Warehouse for nine weeks, closing on February 6, 2010. The production then moved to Broadway. In New York, *Red* won six Tony Awards, including Best Play. The same production then travelled to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 2012 where Jonathan Groff took over the part of Ken.

Logan has continued writing plays and screenplays. In 2013, he premiered two plays: *Peter and Alice*, starring Judi Dench, which played on London's West End and *I'll Eat You Last* starring Bette Midler on Broadway.

Chronology of plays by John Logan

1986 Never the Sinner about the trial of murderers Leopold and Loeb

1987 Hauptmann about the Lindbergh kidnapping

1988 *Speaking in Tongues*

1989 *Music from a Locked Room*

1991 *Scorched Earth* (A one act play) about Chicago politics

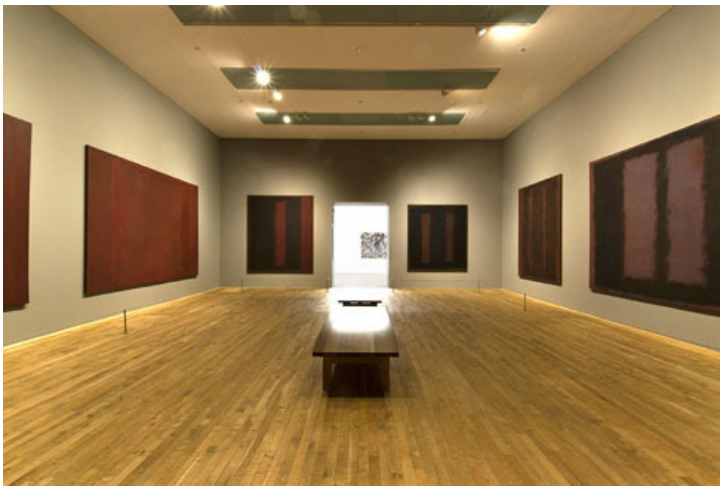

Figure 2: The Rothko Room at the Tate Modern

1992 *Riverview*, a musical melodrama set at Chicago's famed amusement park

2003 *The Master Builder,* an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's play

2009 *Red*

2013 *Peter and Alice,* about the real-life people behind *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*.

2013 *I'll Eat You Last: A Chat with Sue Mengers*, a one-woman show starring Bette Midler as the talent agent Sue Mengers.

"Every man's work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of himself."

– Samuel Butler (1835 - 1902)

MARK ROTHKO (1903 - 1970)

Figure 1: Mark Rothko, *Red on Maroon 1959*

Born "Markus Rothkowitz," Rothko lived in Dvinsk, Russia from birth to age ten. Dvinsk, now part of Latvia, was a center of Eastern European Jewish life: the town had 90,000 inhabitants in 1903 and half of them were Jewish. However, Jews lived in Dvisnk under oppression, barred from owning land and subject to raids by Cossacks. Rothko said that he recalled seeing burial mounds in the forests where Cossacks had buried Jewish victims whom they had kidnapped and murdered. In 1913, Rothko and his family fled from Russia to Portland, Oregon, following relatives who had established themselves in the garment trade. Rothko's father, a pharmacist, died of cancer just a few months after they arrived in Portland. Rothko's mother struggled to raise her three sons and daughter. In spite of not speaking any English when he arrived from Russia, by the time he was done with high school, Yale University granted him a scholarship. He studied at Yale from 1921 to 1923. He left before receiving

his degree, although the School of Fine Arts granted him an honorary doctorate in 1969. After Yale, Rothko moved back to Portland where he studied acting, and then moved to New York City. There he learned to draw and was determined to become a painter.

His early style was marked by an expressionistic use of color and the depiction of alienated figures in an urban landscape, as seen in his "Subway Series" of 1938. In the 1930's Rothko scraped out a living through commissions from the Works Project Administration and from his job teaching children at the Center Academy, Brooklyn Jewish Center. After a failed first marriage, in 1944 Rothko met Mary Alice ("Mell") Beistel, a book illustrator who was 23 years old, 18 years Rothko's junior. Mell greatly admired Rothko as an artist and the two were swiftly married. They had a turbulent marriage and fought like George and Martha from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, according to their daughter.

By the early 1940's, Rothko had become entranced by mythic subjects and the psychoanalytic theories of Carl Jung. His paintings took on the surrealistic landscape of dreams with abstracted human-like figures (See *Untitled*, left).

In 1946, Rothko moved to a new style of purely abstract shapes painted in luminous color on vast expanses of canvas. Rothko believed these large scale art works were a natural continuation of his earlier style. He had eliminated all human figures and treated the rectangular blocks as objects in a color landscape. This purely abstract style defied previous conventions of the representational nature of painting. Rothko's palette at the time was bright and energetic: yellows, oranges, bright reds, and white predominated, sometimes balanced with cooler blues or greens—and just the suggestion of black.

Rothko tightly controlled the conditions of his paintings when they were exhibited. He wanted to impact the viewer directly. The wrong lighting or being installed near another artist's work would make his paintings seem like mere decoration, to his thinking. He wished that the paintings would be viewed in indirect light from a distance of 18 inches and always grouped. Ideally, the paintings would fill a room where the viewer could immerse him or herself in the art in quiet contemplation.

The scrupulous attention Rothko paid to his art's reception contrasted with his own presentation of himself. His friend, curator Katharine Kuh, said, "No other artist has ever looked less like his work than this overweight, untidy man with his high bald pate, bifocal spectacles, rumpled suit, and shirt half untucked, but when he talked, some of the magic came through." He also drank too much, chain smoked, and over-ate.

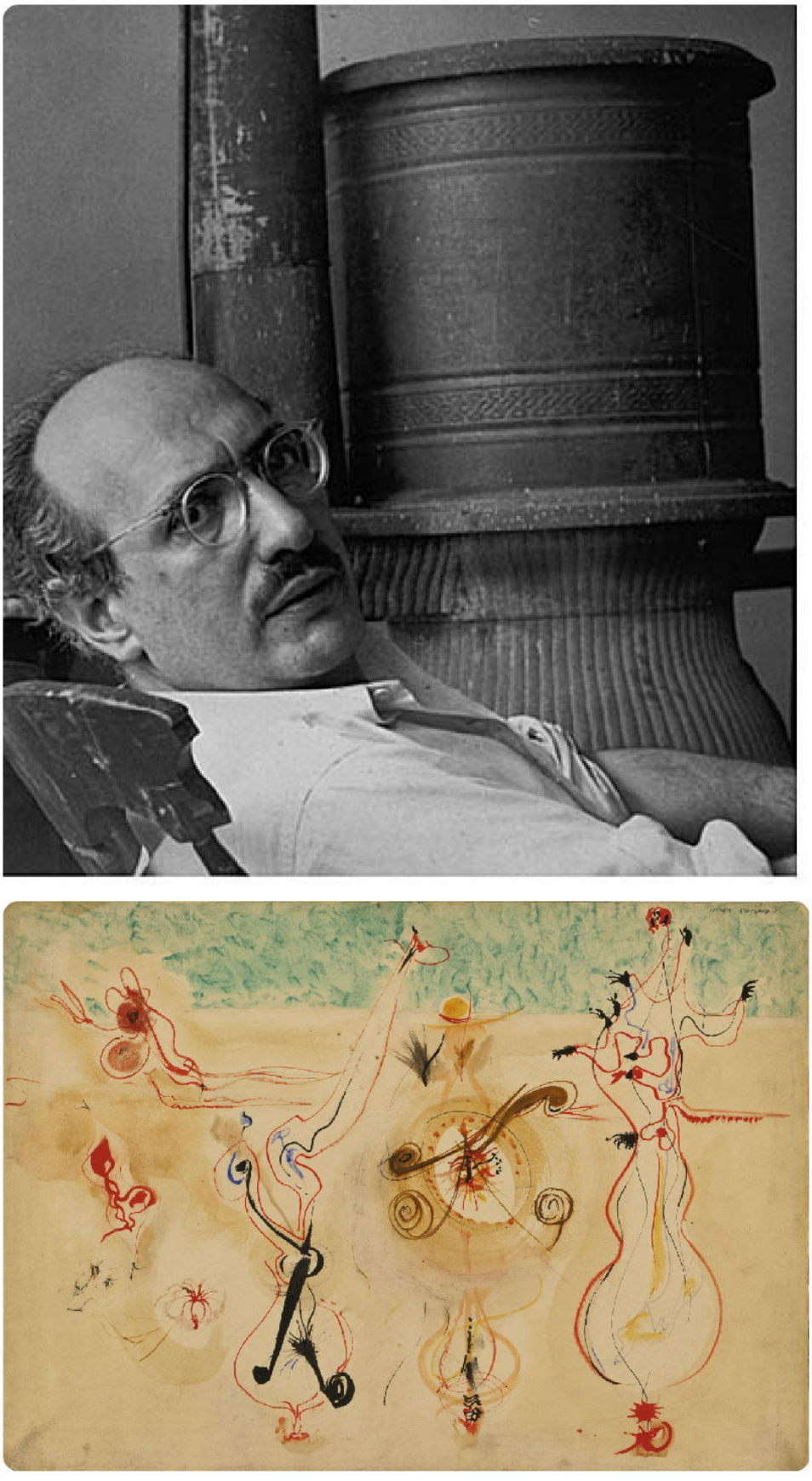

Figure 2: Mark Rothko, above and Untitled painting below.

Figure 3: Top: Mark Rothko, Entrance to Subway [Subway Scene], 1938; Bottom: No. 13 (White, Red on Yellow), oil and acrylic with powdered pigments on canvas, 1958.

In 1958, Rothko was given a commission to create murals for the Four Seasons restaurant on Park Avenue in the newly completed Seagram building designed by architect Mies van der Rohe. He was to be paid $35,000 and given full artistic freedom. Rothko rented a studio space at 222 Bowery, formerly a YMCA gymnasium, in New York City that summer. The space had the approximate dimensions as the Four Seasons restaurant. He changed the studio by adding a false wall to arrange his murals and an elaborate system of pulleys to fly the paintings up. He hired an assistant, Dan Rice, to help him stretch canvases and paint the base layers of his murals. In the fall of 1958, Rothko began painting the murals in earnest. He used 5 inch housepainters' brushes and complex mixtures of pigment, glue, and paint. He would sit and consider the paintings for hours, sometimes days, according to his assistant.

Figure 4: 222 Bowery, formerly a YMCA gym, was Rothko's Studio for the Seagram murals in 1958

In the summer of 1959, he took Mell and their daughter, Kate, on a European vacation. Rothko's daughter, Kate, recalls them going to museums and archeological sites, nothing to entertain a young child. Rothko later discussed the inspirational nature of the artwork he saw on the trip. In the ruins of Pompeii, Rothko connected his Seagram murals to frescoes depicting initiation rites into the cult of Dionysus. He identified "the same feeling, the same broad expanses of somber color."

On the coast of Naples, the Doric columns at the Temple of Hera reminded Rothko of the arrangement of negative and positive space in his compositions. Rothko had previously visited Michelangelo's Laurentine Library in 1950, but on this trip, he realized how much he had been unconsciously imitating Michelangelo's design. He compared the library's false windows with his concept for the Four Seasons murals: like Michelangelo, he said he wanted the diners to feel trapped.

Figure 5: Murals in the House of Mysteries, Pompeii

The Four Seasons Restaurant opened in July 1959. Mark and his wife dined there, even though Rothko thought that spending over $5 on a meal was criminal. At the restaurant, Rothko was forced to confront the social reality of the space. The Four Seasons was a place where people came to impress one another and conduct business. He realized that no one there would ever contemplate his paintings. The experience enraged Rothko, who spoke of nothing else for weeks. He backed out of the commission even though he had already completed three sets of panels, some thirty paintings in all.

Figure 6: The Laurentine Gallery

After the Seagram commission, dark colors overtook Rothko's palette and increasingly his mind. The rooms of paintings that Rothko envisioned did materialize. First Harvard University commissioned murals for a dining room in 1961. Then, in 1964, perhaps most appropriately, monumental murals were commissioned for a new chapel to be built in Houston. The artist donated seven of the Seagram murals to the Tate Modern in London, where he was promised they would have a room of their own and hang in perpetuity.

In 1968, Rothko suffered an aortic aneurism caused by high blood pressure. He was diagnosed with cirrhosis and emphysema. His doctors advised him to work only on smaller paintings and to quit drinking and smoking. Rothko fell into despair.

On February 25, 1970, he took his own life. He had been living at his art studio where his assistant found him the next morning in a large pool of blood, having slit his wrist.

DAN RICE, ROTHKO'S ASSISTANT DURING THE SEAGRAM PAINTINGS

> *"I just wanted him [Ken] to be an emotionally agile person who begins the play in a really vulnerable position: wanting a hero." –John Logan*

While Rothko was at the 222 Bowery studio, Dan Rice, an abstract painter in his own right, assisted Rothko by stretching canvases and applying the base layer of paint on the Seagram murals. The character of Ken, whose function is to complement Rothko's character, is not a faithful portrait of Dan Rice, nor was he meant to be. About this "two-hander" of a play (a drama written for two characters) Logan said, "I knew that Rothko would have to be the prow of an ocean liner cutting through the ocean and Ken would have to be the wave that billows around it for most of the play."

THE SEAGRAM BUILDING AND THE FOUR SEASONS RESTAURANT

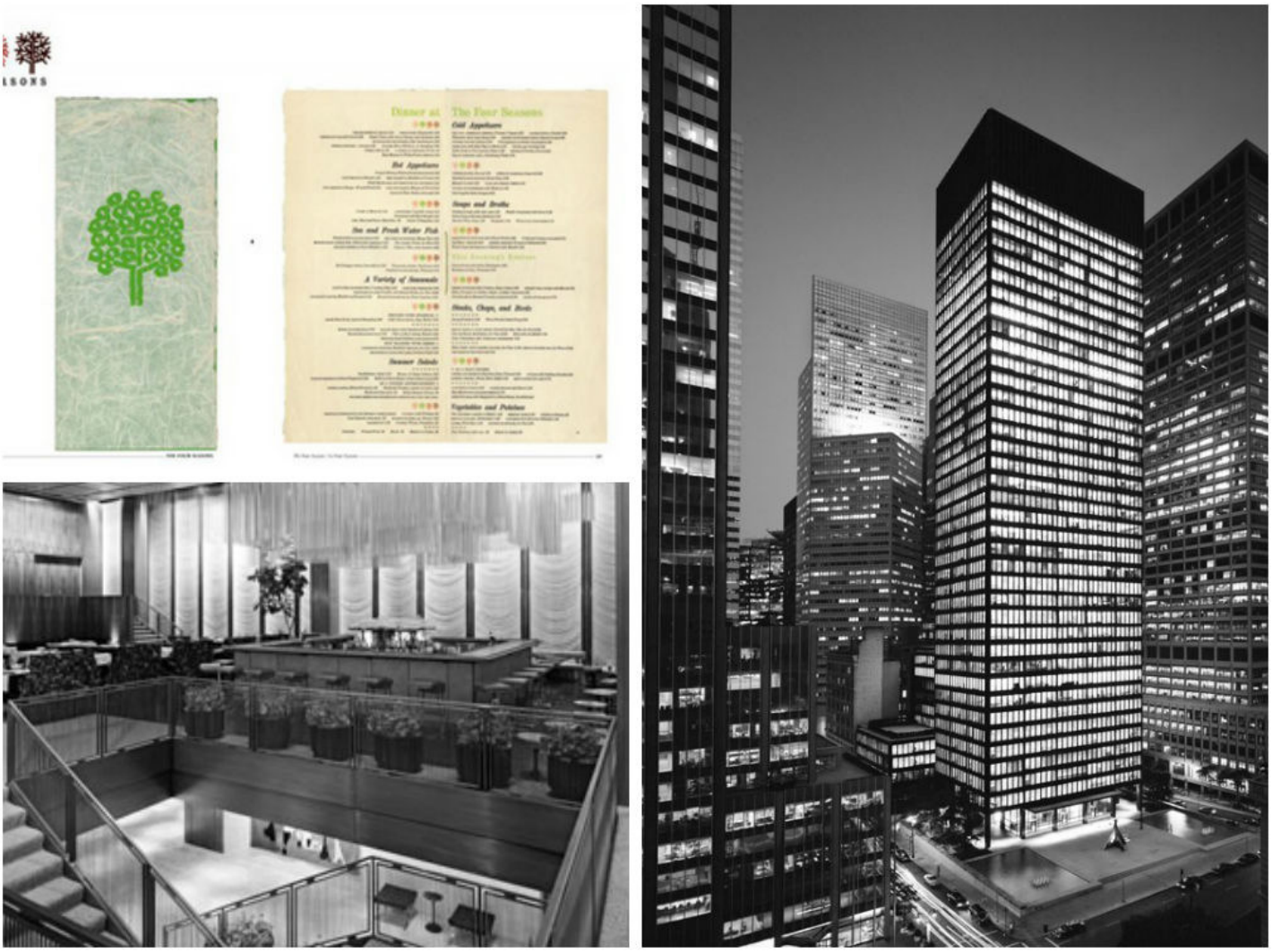

Figure 7: The Four Seasons, left and the Seagram Building, right.

"Less is more" –Mies van der Rohe

The Most Expensive Restaurant Ever Built: The Four Seasons Restaurant

When it opened in 1959, the Four Seasons Restaurant was the most expensive restaurant ever built: the budget to decorate and furnish the restaurant was $4,500,000. A substantial portion of that budget was spent on the artwork: the sculpture above the bar was made by the American abstract sculptor Richard Lippold (see the lighting fixture above in the Four Seasons' bar); a painted curtain by Picasso hung in the hallway; and, Rothko's murals were intended to grace some of the walls.

When art critic B. H. Friedman visited the Four Seasons to write a review, a Jackson Pollock painting was on temporary display while the Rothko murals were being painted. Friedman imagined Rothko's work adorning the restaurant and expressed skepticism that Rothko's murals could transcend the

commercial context of the posh restaurant: “It will be a surprise if he [Rothko], any more than Lippold the sculptor who provided the light fixtures of the restaurant, transcends decor.”

> *Rothko: I know that place is where the richest bastards in New York will come to feed and show off… And I hope to ruin the appetite of every son-of-a-bitch who eats there.*

The Four Seasons’ had the notion, novel for its time, that its menu would change seasonally to offer the freshest food available. The menu, elegantly and minimalistically presented to the guest on Japanese paper, presented mostly French cuisine in American portions at hefty prices (the dollar signs omitted, naturally).

A sample of the offerings in summer of 1959:

Bouquet of crudités, hot anchovy dressing	1.75
Small clams with green onions and truffle	1.65
Beef marrow in bouillon or cream	1.65
Crisped shrimp filled with mustard fruits	1.85
Rack of lamb *persillé* [with parsley] with robust herbs, for two	13.00
Stuffed breast of chicken with tarragon, *demi-deuil* [a cream sauce with truffles]	4.85
Avocado with sliced white radish	4.25

That $13.00 rack of lamb at the Four Seasons would cost $105.00 today.

FAUVISM AND CUBISM

> *Rothko: We destroyed Cubism, de Kooning and me and Pollock and Barnett Newman and all the others. We stomped it to death. Nobody can paint a Cubist picture today.*
>
> *Ken: You take pride in that. ‘Stomping’ Cubism to death.*

Fauvism was an avant-garde movement active in France from 1898–1908. Fauvist artwork, such as the *Red Studio* [see below], is characterized by non-naturalistic color and striking graphic compositions. The name of the group derives from a derisive phrase used by an art critic who attended their first exhibit in Paris in 1905: he referred to the artists as “les fauves” (“wild beasts”). Most of the Fauvists abandoned Fauvism for Cubism. Cubism was an avant-garde movement in the visual arts created by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque; it grew out of Fauvism and was named for

the cube-like appearance of forms in Georges Braque's work. The Cubists fragmented the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane and reassembled it without regard for traditional perspective.

Figure 8: Matisse, The Red Studio 71 1/4" x 7' 2 1/4" (1911).

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

> *"We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art." -Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman (Letter to the New York Times)*

In the 1940's and 50's, the term "Abstract Expressionism" was applied to a group of painters, most of whom lived in New York and whose works featured an abstraction of subject matter. Rothko's mature color field paintings grouped him with these artists. Though their paintings did not necessarily resemble one another's, they all emphasized the materiality of paint itself through the expressive use of color and abstraction. For example, William de Kooning depicted the human form into rawly exectuted angular shapes while Barrett Newman displayed pure fields of color in strictly controlled rectangles. Jackson Pollock dripped paint over canvases that he spread on the ground. His action paintings made the viewers aware of the physical action of painting.

The Abstract Expressionists pared down painting to elemental conflicts of "light and scale, and of void and presence." By confronting the viewer with such stark elements, the Abstract Expressionists

reflected the existential mood in the United States after World War II. Their seriousness, high-mindedness would be challenged by the Pop artists who came after them.

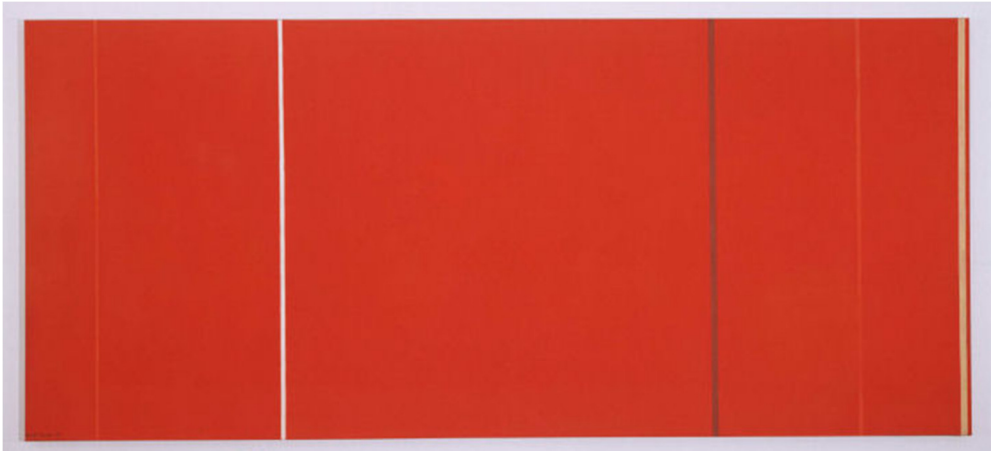

Figure 9: Barnett Newman (one of Rothko's closest friends): Vir heroicus sublimis, oil on canvas, 2.42×5.41 m, 1950–51.

Figure 10: Jackson Pollock: Summertime: Number 9A, oil, enamel and house paint on canvas, 0.85×5.55 m, 1948.

POP ART

"Less is a bore" –Robert Venturi

Pop art first emerged in the UK where artists made commonplace pieces of consumer culture (advertisements, automotive design, or illustrations for popular fiction) the basis of their art work. They would draw out the latent eroticism in the materiality of popular culture. Richard Hamilton, an early Pop artist, defined Pop art as "popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business." In other words, the exact opposite of Rothko.

Whereas British Pop art critiqued commodity culture, American Pop artists maintained an ambivalent attitude toward consumer culture. They delighted in it and simultaneously exposed it as surface masking an absence of values. For example, Andy Warhol's silkscreened icons of Hollywood film stars (See *Marilyn Diptich*, below), point out the flatness and contructedness of the image while celebrating its glamorous subject.

International Exhibition of the New Realists in NYC, 1962

The Sidney Janis Gallery (Sidney Janis also represented Rothko and other Abstract Expressionists) exhibited the first major show of Pop art in a collection entitled, “International Exhibition of the New Realists,” in 1962. Some die-hard Abstract Expressionists such as Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell protested the exhibit as degenerately commercial by quitting the Sidney Janis Gallery.

Figure 11: Andy Warhol: Marilyn Diptych, 1962

"If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings . . . There's nothing behind it." –Andy Warhol

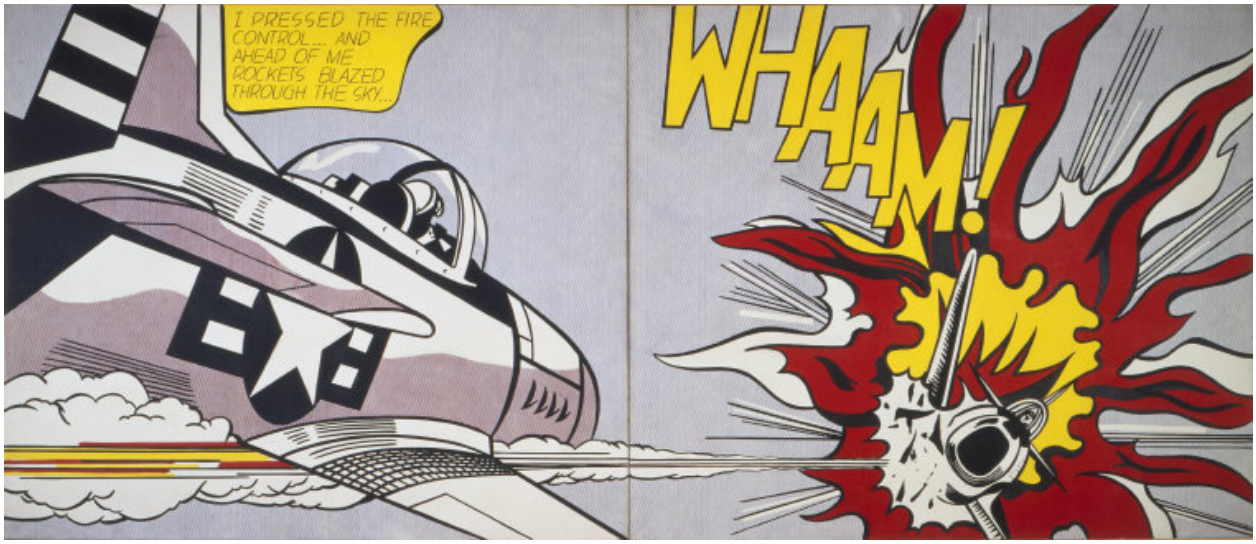

Figure 12: Roy Lichtenstein: Whaam!, acrylic on canvas, 1.73×4.06 m, 1963.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE AND *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF MUSIC* (1872)

Mark Rothko felt an affinity for Nietzsche's belief in the power of art to connect human beings with a primordial life force. In Nietzsche's book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the author explains that Greek tragedy was the result of a confrontation of two aesthetic impulses, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The Dionysian is the force of myth, of ambiguity, of change, of frenzy, of instinct, of drunkenness and of music; the Apollonian force is scientific, has clearly defined borders, is static, controlled, rational, sober and associated with the plastic arts. For Nietzsche, Greek tragedy improved human suffering by making it an art form. By turning the human condition into an object of contemplation and a beautified experience, the Greeks made it more bearable.

According to Rothko's biographer, James Breslin, Rothko classified his fellow artists into the cateogories of Apollonian or Dionysian. Rothko believed his own art was Apollonian, but he keenly wished that it engaged more with the Dionysian. He wanted his art work to be a direct visceral experience like music. "The people who weep before my pictures," Rothko said, "are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!"

Figure 13: Friedrich Nietzsche

Ken: In your pictures the bold colors are the Dionysian element, kept in check by the strict geometric shapes, the Apollonian element. The bright colors are your passion, your will to survive – your 'life force.' But if black *swallows those bright colors then you lose that excess and extravagance, and what do you have left?*

Nietzsche's major ideas such as the Dionysian and Apollonian affected many visual artists, in spite of the fact that Nietzsche mainly wrote on music and theatre. Nietzsche placed a positive value on the role of conflict and innovation in the creation of the work of art. His philosophy was admired by the German Expressionists and by Rothko, whose mythological subjects of the 1940's were directly related to his reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

PSYCHOANALYSIS: TRANSFERENCE

> *Rothko: Consider: I am not your rabbi, I am not your father, I am not your shrink, I am not your friend, I am not your teacher – I am your employer. You understand?*
>
> *Ken: Yes.*

The character of Rothko asserts to his new assistant, Ken, that he doesn't wish to be any kind of mentor to him. As the play's plot continues, Rothko does indeed become a kind of rabbi, father, shrink, friend, and teacher to Ken. The relationship between the two men is at the heart of the play: "To me the play is really not about art at all…," Logan says, "I wanted to write a play about teachers and students, mentors and protégés, fathers and sons." The play offers a parallel between the intergenerational conflict between Rothko and Ken and the Nietzschean struggle between successive art movements, the Cubists, the Abstract Expressionists, and the Pop artists. Before writing *Red*, Logan had most recently adapted Henrik Ibsen's play, *The Master Builder*, which concerns an architect who faces an existential crisis as he faces a younger generation.

Mark Rothko read Nietzsche along with the psychoanalytic theories of art in Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung; their ideas led him to see the visual arts as a means to reach into the mythic layers of the psyche of an individual and society. In *Red*, the character of Rothko uses some psychoanalytic techniques on Ken, asking him to freely associate and thereby get to the "truth" of Ken's unconscious. As the action of the play unfolds, Rothko accuses Ken of projecting some of his unresolved childhood issues onto Rothko, which is a process psychoanalysts refer to as "transference." Transference occurs in the course of the relationship between therapist and patient and it may also occur in the teacher-student, mentor-mentee relationship, according to psychoanalytic theory. Freud defined transference as the means by which a person in therapy "transferred on to the doctor intense feelings of affect which are justified neither by the doctor's behaviour nor by the situation that has developed during the treatment." The patient may respond to the therapist with admiration, with hostility, or with some of both.

The relationship of Rothko and Ken might be seen through the framework of transference. The playwright draws an analogy between successive generations of artists creating a new style and the primordial conflict between father and son. Logan's Rothko tells Ken, "The child must banish the father. Respect him, but kill him. […] Courage in painting isn't facing the blank canvas, it's facing Manet, it's facing Velasquez." The nature of the play's tragic effect is in witnessing how Rothko deals with the rising generation personified by Ken.

SET DESIGNER'S INSPIRATIONS FOR *RED*

Figure 14: Set Designer and Director's inspirations for Red: images of Rothko in his studios