Painting Floods:

History, Witness and Public Address in Philip Guston's Late Work

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Abstract

My thesis examines Philip Guston's paintings and drawings between 1967 and 1976. This encompasses the moment of his transition from abstraction to a cartoonish figuration. The latter tends to dominate the literature, above all his imagery of Ku Klux Klansmen, first exhibited in 1970. The context of the postponement of the artist's retrospective in 2020 lends urgency to my reframing of this moment. I do so by unearthing new archival material concerning Guston's production throughout the 1970s; and by investigating concerns that are underdeveloped in the literature: principally, the significance of his engagement with historical Italian fresco painting, and the emergence of the theme of the flood. The analysis of these themes provides new frameworks for interpreting the artist's late production and its manner of bearing witness to its time.

The first two chapters explore the artist's initial (re)turn to figuration up to 1970; the second two consider works produced from 1971–76, in the years following his final trip to Italy. Chapter 1 restores to visibility an overlooked painting from 1969, *The Deluge*, which I argue recuperates Abstract Expressionist viewer dynamics as part of Guston's intent to bear witness to contemporary violence. The second situates Guston's drawings and paintings in relation to his encounter with mediated imagery of contemporary violence and his desire to have his work "bear witness" as a result. The third chapter examines Guston's encounter with early modern wall painting in Italy in 1970–71 and traces the aftermath of that encounter in his exhibition of new paintings in 1974. The final chapter returns to the theme of the flood inaugurated by *The Deluge* and shows how Guston's flood paintings produced from 1975 allowed him to consider the limits of representation, reflect on public address, synthesise historical material, and dramatize the witnessing of historical catastrophe.

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Introduction

When is the "Now" in *Philip Guston Now*? That title, used for the 2022 retrospective of the artist's work, changed as the works crossed the Atlantic for their final stop at Tate Modern in London the following year, where it was simply entitled *Philip Guston*.[1] This ostensibly minor adjustment – the original title remained on the museum catalogue on sale in the Tate shop, making its erasure more visible – indicates a shifted perspective around the artist's relationship to the present day. The connotations of that final word became fraught following the decision by the organising institutions to postpone the exhibition, which had been scheduled to open in June 2020, for four years, later amended to two: the *Now* became *When?* And yet, for the purposes of this thesis, Guston's fractured relationship to history matters.[2] The *Now* of *Philip Guston Now* always named the artist's discontinuity with his own time, a sense of being out of joint.

The group of artworks by Guston (1913-1980) that precipitated the decision to postpone the retrospective were made between 1968 and 1970. These paintings and drawings showed imagery of members of the Ku Klux Klan, depicted in a demotic, cartoonish style, in a range of settings, including driving cars, conspiring in rooms, and even painting self-portraits and admiring art. These works were the beginning of over a decade of production, on a scale and at a volume that has no precedent in the artist's work. First shown in 1970 at the Marlborough Gallery, New York (henceforth 'the Marlborough paintings' or 'works'), these works produced a mixture of disapproval, bafflement, and dismay in their audience. The

[1] The exhibition began at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (May 1st – September 11th, 2022), then travelled to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (October 23rd, 2022 – January 15th, 2023), The National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (March 2nd – August 27th, 2023) and then to Tate Modern, London (October 5th, 2023 – February 25th, 2024).

[2] Giorgio Agamben reminds us that "the "now" of fashion, the instant in which it comes into being, is not identifiable via any kind of chronometer." This "now" "takes the form of an ungraspable threshold between a "not yet" and a "no more"." Being "in fashion", an analogy Agamben uses to "the contemporary", is a contradiction: "the moment in which the subject pronounces it, he is already out of fashion." This tension pertains to the complex temporal relationships in play in Guston's work. Giorgio Agamben, "What is The Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus? And other essays by Giorgio Agamben* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 31.

best-known critical reviews of these works were excoriating, although others were milder, and there was some praise.[3] Although Guston continued to paint in a related style for the remainder of his life, no subsequent exhibition of the artist's work has received a comparable level of attention, in its time or since.

It was the Marlborough paintings that provided the focus for the curators' concern, in 2020, about their reception among a contemporary audience. It was assumed that, in the context of the police murders of Black citizens in the US, including George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25th 2020 and the resultant protest movements, as well as the resurgence of white nationalism during the administration of President Donald Trump, depictions of the Klan hood could prove an at best ambivalent image, at worst an incendiary one. For the museums themselves, the postponement was decided at the level of interpretation; the exhibition was to be suspended for four years, until such time as "the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the centre of Philip Guston's work can more clearly be interpreted", in the presumption of a new *Now* that might assimilate these images more easily.[4]

The response to this postponement was immediate and vociferous, led by the Brooklyn Rail, which amassed thousands of signatories among artists, curators, scholars, collectors and other prominent players in the contemporary art world.[5] In this reading of Guston's work, the Klan hoods in fact represented a powerful and necessary *anti*-racist position, showing Klansmen in domestic and artistic settings that seemed to illustrate the banal ubiquity of white supremacy, including within art institutions themselves. The result of this controversy was a partial backing down from the organising institutions, who agreed to halve the postponement period to two years. Yet a critical framework had been established. Reviews of the exhibition in all its host cities rarely avoided mention of the cancellation; most

[3] The nature of these contemporary reviews will be addressed in Chapter 1 and 3 of this thesis.
[4] Julia Jacobs and Jason Farago, "Delay of Philip Guston Retrospective Divides the Art World", *New York Times*, Sept. 25th, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/25/arts/design/philip-guston-exhibition-delayed-criticism.html (accessed 30th June 2024)
[5] "Open Letter: on *Philip Guston Now*", *The Brooklyn Rail*, Sept. 20th, 2020. https://brooklynrail.org/projects/on-philip-guston-now/ (accessed 30th June 2024)

endorsed the reading of the works as anti-racist statement.[6] This level of attention informed the majority of the press coverage of the exhibition, so that the artist's output, spanning the mid-1920s to his death in 1980, was collapsed around a single period in his work. What remained intact was the Klan paintings' tendency to become metonyms not only for Guston's last decade of production, but for his entire body of work and its imputed intentions. Unfolding during the Covid-19 pandemic, the discussions that circulated around Guston's work centred around images disseminated through social media channels via smartphones; shrunk in scale, their complex surfaces and contents contracted, these paintings became more like political cartoons, and the nuance of their politics, as well as their physicality, suffered accordingly. This thesis was researched and produced, then, within an extraordinary atmosphere of attention to one artist's work, which nevertheless reinforced interpretations that apply only to a small proportion of that oeuvre. Despite, or perhaps *because* of Guston's apparent ubiquity, his late work demands further attention.

Overlooked, for example, in the intense focus on the Marlborough paintings, both during the controversy around the postponement, and in the Guston literature, is a painting that originally hung amongst them: *The Deluge* (1969) [**1**]. This work – among the largest in the Marlborough exhibition – features no imagery of Klansmen. It shows instead an expanse of dark water under a red sky, with accoutrements of the artist's studio bobbing at the horizon line. After the Marlborough exhibition, *The Deluge* remained out of sight, barely seen or discussed, and was absent from major retrospectives of the artist's work; it was hung only in the Boston leg of *Philip Guston Now*. Yet the painting inaugurates a central theme of

[6] A few responses stand out. Zoé Samudzi's essay "Under the Hood" addressed the complex relationship between Guston's Jewishness and whiteness, a tension staged in the paintings themselves. Guston "was a white Jew articulating a liminal position as someone victimized by Klan intimidation and antisemitic persecution, *and* a beneficiary of whiteness himself." The Boston leg of the exhibition did not address this, "dampen[ing] any ripple of alarm that threaten[ed] to disrupt the circulation of racial capital within their white walls." (Zoé Samudzi, "Under the Hood", *Jewish Currents,* Nov. 16th, 2022). Robert Slifkin in *Artforum* applied critical pressure to the term "freedom", a word Guston himself often used when describing his change of direction, citing Willem de Kooning's response to the 1970 Marlborough exhibition that the Klan paintings were "all about freedom". The paradox, as discussed by Slifkin, between "artistic freedom and social justice" hinges on the ambiguity of that term when applied to images of the Klan, asking questions of their maker. (Robert Slifkin, "Ugly Feelings", *Artforum* Vol. 59, No. 4, January/February 2021). Finally, Nikki Columbus' piece for *n+1* discussed the relative insignificance of the controversy that circled around the postponement of the exhibition in the light of unresolved labour issues within museums, many of them implicated in racial inequalities ("Guston Can Wait." *n+1*, online, Oct. 27th, 2020, https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/guston-can-wait/, accessed 7th June 2024).

Guston's final period of production up to his death in 1980: that of the flood. There are two named "sequels" to the painting that appeared at the decade's mid- and endpoints (*Deluge II*, 1975, and *Deluge III*, 1979), the existence of which implies the ongoing validity of ideas inaugurated by the 1969 painting. In fact, the theme of the flood flourished in Guston's work soon after the figure of the Klansman had exited his iconography for good.[7] It provided a means for Guston to dramatize reflections on his own practice; it established his orientation towards art-historical exemplars, both in recent and distant history; and it figured an address to historical catastrophe that took on urgency in the years following the Marlborough exhibition. The image of the flood came to characterise his relationship with studio practice, art history, and the conditions of his own historical moment.

This thesis' contribution to postwar art history rests on restoring to attention works and contexts in Guston's late practice that have to date received insufficient attention in the literature and in exhibitions. I do this to make the case for Guston's late work as exemplary in embodying, rather than resolving, the problems that constitute the position of the contemporary artist. Guston's late work remains an inspirational model for artists looking to orientate their practice outward, to register the effects (and affects) of the disorder of contemporary life on a subject, however contingent and contested that framework might be.[8] What is at stake in Guston's late work is a set of questions that retain their currency for a diversity of cultural productions: how can art convey an encounter with political upheaval? What are the affordances of the hand-made in a context of instantaneous image production

[7] After 1970, the Klan figure appears only intermittently in Guston's work, and disappears completely after 1974. In this thesis, I use the term "flood" to describe paintings that show figures or objects submerged or part-submerged in apparently rising water. There are many such examples in Guston's paintings, most prominently *Deluge II* (1975), *Head, Legs, Sea* (1975), *Head and Sea* (1976), *Wharf* (1976), *Bombay* (1976), *Low Tide* (1976), *Source* (1976), *Frame* (1976), *The Night* (1977), *To J.S.* (1977), *Room and Sea* (1978), *Pink Sea* (1978), *Group in Sea* (1978), *Migration* (1978), *Wave* (1979), and *Deluge III* (1979). I am not including in this list Guston's drawings and prints made during this period, many of which also show flood-like activity, nor images of bodies of water over which figures and objects are suspended, of which there are many more examples, including among the gouaches Guston made in 1980, right at the end of his life.

[8] This influence is apparent not only through the plethora of representational painters working today who make use of that mode to address and critique the notion of "representation" more broadly (including Kerry James Marshall, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Jordan Casteel, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and others), but also artists looking to frame artistic practice in relation to political life, amongst which I would include Rirkrit Tiravanija, who has made work appropriating elements of Guston's late paintings, Wael Shawky, whose videos address histories of colonial exploitation via performative modes that, like Guston's works, are closely related to childhood entertainment, and Nicole Eisenman, whose paintings and sculptures reflect the influence of Guston's iconography and address themes of queer desire and the fluidity of gender categories.

and distribution? How might one square the circle of the closed world of studio practice and the ever-shifting, unstable and accelerated experience of life outside it?

This thesis addresses these questions and is animated by absences in the Guston literature. The "failure" of *The Deluge* – its invisibility in the critical historiography of the Marlborough exhibition; its uniqueness in his body of work at that time; its almost total absence from the Guston literature; and its nonappearance in retrospective exhibitions of the artist's work, up to 2022 – provides a way to clear a path through the copious literature on the artist. Attending to *The Deluge* provides a way to test the limits of this literature and to produce new ways of thinking around his last decade of practice. By way of that painting, I propose an alternative historiography of the artist, which brings to attention overlooked contexts, objects and exhibitions, all of which address the same set of questions previously outlined. The thesis moves beyond the imagery of floods to consider broader applications of the painting's proposals about art's relationship to the social and political world. It is after all Guston's *questions*, not his answers, that keep him at the forefront of postwar creative practice.

To show how Guston's late work embodies those questions, this thesis brings to light previously under-discussed objects, contexts and archives. Principal among these is the artist's relationship to two sites: Italy (principally Florence), and Boston. To date, there has been insufficient analysis of the nature of Guston's engagement with historical painting in Italy in the immediate aftermath of the Marlborough exhibition. I address his encounter with 14th- 16th century wall painting during his final visit to Italy and bring archival work to bear in developing a fuller account of the conditions of those paintings. I then trace the resonance of that physical encounter in objects and exhibitions from the years following that visit. Attending to Guston's relationship to the sites of historical painting provides a means to imagine the *Now* of his practice differently. His later flood paintings, among others, track this difference. In visiting sites that were important to Guston – locations in Italy, as well as Boston, New York City, and the artist's own studio in Woodstock, New York – I have been able to situate my engagement with his work in phenomenological and material terms.

Guston's relationship to Boston is another notable lacuna in the literature on the artist which this thesis addresses. In mobilising archival research and interviews – most notably in connection with Boston University, his employer for most of the 1970s – I argue that the context of Boston's institutions and artists provides new frameworks for understanding the nature of Guston's late representational work and its account of the conditions of its time. One such context is his 1974 solo exhibition at Boston University, which was his first display of new paintings after the Marlborough exhibition, and his first following his return from Italy. Like all of Guston's post-Marlborough exhibitions, very little research has been done to date on this show; in restoring it to attention, I show how it provides important insight into the nature of his engagement with the art of the past. My deployment of the context of Boston Expressionism, a form of expressive figuration practiced largely by first generation Jewish immigrants to the United States, puts Guston's own late practice, and its engagement with Judaic subjects and concepts, into an important framework that has been largely missing from the literature to date, especially regarding its address to historical catastrophe.

In attending to these overlooked contexts in Guston's later practice, my thesis proposes and embodies new strategies for considering the artist's work *beyond* the Marlborough exhibition. It does so in reference to a number of theoretical positions, the most decisive of which are Michael Taussig's work on drawing and witnessing, Hubert Damisch's discussion of perspective and representation in early modern wall painting, and Rachel Haidu's recent analysis of the affective role of shape in postwar painting practices. All of these theoretical analyses support and extend my sustained address to the actual encounter with Guston's work.

Interpretative contexts for Guston's late paintings have shifted decisively in recent years. Following his death in 1980, Guston's late work was often contextualised within discourses of Neo-Expressionism, in exhibitions such as *A New Spirit in Painting* (1981) at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, where three of his late works (*The Desert*, 1974, *Red Sky*, 1978, and *Talking*, 1978) were shown alongside contemporary painting by Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer, and older work by Pablo Picasso, Balthus, Cy Twombly and

Francis Bacon.[9] This exhibition was a particular locus of critical opprobrium by the *October* circle of writers, due to its perceived presentation of "a comforting picture of the self as private, contained, and autonomous", which was framed as a "rediscovery of the private sphere", or a capitulation to market forces.[10]

Christa Noel Robbins has shown how this was framed, in writing of the 1980s and 90s, as a "horrifying reversal" of the "theoretical and political gains earned in the 1960s – gains that were understood to have been produced in and around the neo-avant-garde."[11] The association of Guston's late paintings with Neo-Expressionism was disavowed by writers of the later 1980s, such as Dore Ashton's 1988 essay "That Is Not What I Meant At All: Why Philip Guston Is Not Postmodern", which described the artist in the same humanist, literary terms used by critics of that movement.[12] Regardless, certain critical perspectives on the artist continued to be determined by an assumed affiliation with Neo-Expressionist painters, which accounts for his work's relegation by association in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism,* authored by significant figures associated with *October*.[13] This exclusion of Guston's work from theoretical frameworks since the 1960s remains largely the case, with some exceptions, as I will explore. As Achim Höchdorfer has shown, "the expulsion of painting from the theory of the mid-60s" cast certain painterly practices after Abstract Expressionism as "a hidden reserve". Since Guston's work never adopted the "antimodernist perspective" of minimal or conceptual practice, it became part of "an increasing gap between advanced criticism and contemporary painting."[14] Guston's work of

[9] Royal Academy of Arts, London, January 15th – March 18th, 1981.
[10] Most notable in this critical response to the exhibition was Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's essay "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression" (*October*, Spring 1981), which did not mention Guston but nevertheless implicates him in its critique: "For Buchloh, the *new spirit in painting* was driven by the market, achieved the commodification of painting and reflected the neoconservative ideology characteristic of Thatcherism and Ronald Reagan's presidency." Théo de Luca, *A New Spirit in Painting, 1981: On Being an Antimodern* (London: Koening Books, 2020), 20.
[11] Christa Noel Robbins, *Artist as Author: Action and Intent in Late-Modernist American Painting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 8.
[12] Dore Ashton, "That Is Not What I Meant At All: Why Philip Guston Is Not Postmodern", *Arts* Magazine, Vol. 63, No.3, November 1988, 69-71.
[13] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004). Guston is mentioned once in this influential survey of twentieth century art, in the company of artists with whom he has little in common and whose work he did not know: German representational artists Baselitz and Eugen Schönebeck. Guston's work is not illustrated in the book.
[14] Achim Höchdorfer "A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958 to 1965" (*Artforum*, February 2009), 153.

the late 1960s to the late 1970s – the very area under discussion in this thesis – has on the whole eluded theoretical frameworks in the same way. This is because, as Katy Siegel has explained, American painting of this period "never fit into the historical model of the paradigm shift, the sudden break from one dominant model to another." In this way, "a prescriptive and dogmatic version of post-modernism left painting on the other side of a false dichotomy."[15] This has left Guston's work at once much discussed and significantly under-theorised, thereby underscoring the anachronistic quality of his practice. What it also means is that painting practices that addressed the legacies of modernism from a sceptical, questioning perspective *within* painting – which is a context within which I argue Guston's late work operates – have tended to fail to secure purchase within a theoretical landscape.

However, around the turn of the current century, twenty years after the artist's death, a revival of interest in Guston's late work led to the emergence of new theoretical frameworks to analyse it. Both Harry Cooper's 2002 essay for *October* and Christopher Bucklow's 2007 book *What is in the Dwat: The Universe of Guston's Final Decade* mobilized psychoanalytic theory to address the use of imagery in Guston's later work. Cooper describes Guston as "free-associat[ing] on canvas", in which marks of the brush are repurposed within and between canvases to stand for slits in a hood, words on a page or windows in a building. Cooper's use of "slipperiness" to account for this pictorial activity is an adaptation of Lacanian "metonymy", or what Cooper calls "the metonymic logic of the Marlborough manner."[16] In applying psychoanalytic readings to Guston's work, Cooper provided an interpretation of the imagery of the artist's later work that accounted for its resistance to recognition. This was an analysis that, twenty-two years after the artist's death, uncoupled Guston's late work from the critiques that accompanied its first appearance in 1970, making room for ambiguity not only of intent but of content. Yet Cooper's important essay, despite detours into Guston's early figurations and abstractions, remains centred on the Marlborough paintings. In this thesis, I argue that alternative strategies to those paintings, which emerged in response to Guston's encounter both with sites of historical painting in Italy and art circles in Boston, require different methods of address.

[15] Katy Siegel (ed.), *High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967 – 1975* (New York: Independent Curators International / Distributed Art Publishers, 2006), 87.
[16] Harry Cooper, "Recognizing Guston (in four slips)" (*October* 99, Winter 2002), 117.

The context of Guston's relationship to Jewishness has received additional attention in recent writing on the artist. Aaron Rosen (2009) has discussed the theological implications of some of Guston's later imagery and makes use of the Jewish myth of the golem as a metaphor for understanding Guston's relationship with the history of Western painting. Mark Godfrey's essay "Jewish Image-Maker" in the *Philip Guston Now* catalogue (2020) discusses Guston's late work through a framework of Jewish concern about representation, in what he has called "Jewish readings of Guston's whole approach to image-making".[17] Guston's relationship to Jewishness has continued to feature in the literature on the artist in recent years. Dan Nadel's essay "Now You See Me" in *Artforum* made the case for Guston's Jewishness as a corrective for assumptions about the artist's "appropriation" of traumatic imagery that were mobilized in support of the postponement.[18] This thesis provides a further context for Guston's reflections upon Jewishness in postwar America: his encounters with Jewish artists in Boston, and his painterly address to the history of the Holocaust in his flood paintings of 1975.

Robert Slifkin's book *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of American Art* (2013) developed further modes of interpretation for the artist's late work, largely but not exclusively focusing on the Marlborough paintings. Slifkin roots Guston's work of the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s in discourses of the period, thereby refuting the accusations of redundancy and irrelevance that encircled the artist's late work from the beginning. Slifkin's book is the first to contextualise Guston's work within other artistic practices and concerns of the period, and does so by detaching the term "figuration" from its conventionally morphological meaning to one belonging to theories of rhetoric, for instance that of Paul de Man. This enables Slifkin to frame Guston's late practice in ways that enable it to reflect concerns of the time, such as the 1960s revival of interest in the art and culture of the 1930s, and to consider Guston's "figuration" in temporal terms. Meaning is thereby

[17] Mark Godfrey, "Jewish Image-Maker" in *Philip Guston Now* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2020), 196.
[18] Dan Nadel, "Now You See Me" in *Artforum*, Vol.29, No.4, January/February 2021, https://www.artforum.com/features/dan-nadel-on-philip-gustons-jewishness-249119/. Accessed 29th June, 2024.

created by "setting up conceptual and temporal correspondences and syntheses", which allows for contextualisation of his work's revival of earlier imagery, such as the Klan figures of his 1930s output.[19] Slifkin's book has been an important reference point in my own research on Guston's late work. In addressing objects and periods that fall outside of his remit, my thesis proposes modes of considering other aspects of Guston's later production, putting Slifkin's notion of "temporal figuration" to different uses.

This thesis is organised into four chapters. The first two focus on works produced in the last years of the 1960s, in the run-up to the 1970 Marlborough exhibition and Guston's final trip to Italy shortly afterwards; the second two discuss works produced *after* Italy.[20] This structure, then, proposes Guston's 1970-1 Italian trip as a hinge moment in his work. The works discussed in Chapter 3 and 4 explore and extend the notions established in Chapters 1 and 2, filtered through the prism of the uniquely charged encounter with historical sites and objects in Italy.

Chapter 1: *The Deluge*: abstraction, studio, and subject refocuses art-historical attention on the overlooked 1969 painting *The Deluge*. In its reduction to two horizontal fields of colour, it resembles the work of Mark Rothko, who was a close friend of Guston's and whose work, especially at the end of the 1960s, bears revealing similarity to Guston's own. I argue that *The Deluge* thereby reveals Guston's address to the legacies of modernism in a period of transition. I read the painting as responsive to the shifting contexts by which Abstract Expressionism was understood by the end of the 1960s. These contexts include painting and performance practices that recuperated, if critically, some of the premises of that movement; the recovery of the problematic legacies of muralism, which I argue is at stake in *The Deluge*'s content and mode of production; and critical positions that subjected the Abstract Expressionist legacy to analysis. The anachronistic figure of Rothko provided a model by which Guston might productively investigate the tensions of his own practice in the face of tumultuous historical incident. In this way, *The Deluge* embodies what Christa

[19] Robert Slifkin, *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of American Art* (Berkeley and Washington D.C: University of California Press and The Phillips Collection, 2013), 6.
[20] The one exception to this structure – *Poor Richard*, from 1971, which was made soon after Guston's return from Italy – proves the rule, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Noel Robbins has called "the mechanism by which the limits of both self-expression and individual action are productively investigated."[21] This is a distinct strategy from the other Marlborough paintings and prefigures the outpouring of deluge imagery in Guston's work at mid-century.

Chapter 2: To bear witness: Guston and the mediated image considers the media imagery that Guston encountered – in particular, televised coverage of the police riots in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention in 1968 – in terms of his discussion of his intention to "bear witness" in his work in a public talk that same year. Guston's encounter with mediated imagery put pressure on this intention, which is dramatized within the artist's work around that time, especially in his works on paper. I read them according to the relationship of drawing and witness as discussed in the anthropological writings of Michael Taussig.[22] I trace Guston's reorientation of his drawing practice in the years leading up to the Marlborough exhibition in order to track the increasingly "outward" focus of his work, which prepared the ground for works that deal more explicitly with the mediation of historical material. I also characterise this reorientation by contrast with related practices, both in artists contemporary to Guston and in the artist's anomalous series of drawings, *Poor Richard*, whose "failure" as political satire tests the nature of the artist's account of the conditions of his time.

In **Chapter 3: Guston in Italy, 1970-1: history, temporality, and public address** I restore to attention his final 1970-1 trip to Italy and its resonance in his practice from then on. I do so in two ways: first, by retracing Guston's encounter with specific public sites of painting in Italy, mostly frescoed chapels; and second, by examining the aftermath of that visit in works produced in the years immediately following it. These were brought together in 1974, at the artist's first solo exhibition after the Marlborough exhibition four years previously, at Boston University. Despite its importance to Guston's later practice, this exhibition has barely been discussed in the literature on the artist. In my research, I make use of the archive at Boston University, which relates to Guston's employment there as a visiting lecturer. There is

[21] Robbins, *Artist as Author,* 60.
[22] Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

insufficient scope in this thesis to fully address Guston's pedagogy, which was the subject of a panel discussion I organised at the Freelands Foundation in 2023, which included current faculty of Boston University.[23] However, my discussion of the 1974 exhibition reads it in relation to the pedagogical context in which it was shown, and therefore provides an alternative framework for addressing Guston's late work and its recuperation of historical modes of display and framing of temporality.

Chapter 4: Guston's flood paintings: representation, history, and catastrophe addresses the re-emergence of the motif of the flood in paintings made in 1975-6. I argue that Guston's return to Italian sources at this time mediated his interest in painting's public address and his demand on art to bear witness to historical catastrophe. In making distinct these two resources and identifying the uses to which these influences were put, my thesis makes the case for the different uses to which Guston's engagement with the art of the past was put. I attend in particular to the condition of these works as Guston saw them, and how their often flood-damaged surfaces informed his own address to catastrophe.I discuss Guston's engagement with historical imagery of floods in order not only to account for the abundance of images addressing this subject in the artist's late work, but also to consider the expressive possibilities provided by this subject. I do so in relation to Hubert Damisch's then-contemporary semiotic readings of historical Italian painting.[24] His discussion of Renaissance perspective and its limits enables me to consider Guston's use of floods in similar terms.

I show that, in Guston's belated address to the catastrophe of the Holocaust through his flood paintings, this reading of historical sources enables them to provide pictorial solutions for the problematic of representing the unrepresentable. I contextualise Guston's interest in engaging with the subject of the historical catastrophe of the Holocaust with reference to Boston-based artists and traditions with which he had sustained relationship throughout the 1970s. I suggest that Guston's "art world" was reoriented to Boston for much of his final

[23] "The Unteacher: Philip Guston and Pedagogy as Practice", Freelands Foundation, London, 2nd November 2023.
[24] Hubert Damisch (trans. Janet Lloyd), *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002; orig. pub. 1972).

decade. It is a fact that the Marlborough paintings, for example, were understood quite differently, and in much less pejorative terms, by critical circles in Boston when they were first shown there towards the end of 1970. I also consider the painted flood's tendency to disperse and disrupt the integrity of shapes in terms of Rachel Haidu's discussion of shape as "Guston's vehicle of choice for addressing history."[25] Haidu proposes that it is not in the recognisability of shape that Guston's paintings communicate their historical conditions – it is instead in what *happens* to shape. I argue that the flood paintings embody this approach to evoking the kinds of exposure to historical catastrophe that engendered Guston's move towards figuration in the first place, since the primary action of the flood in Guston's paintings is to pull at the boundaries of his images, to submerge them and render them strange. In doing so I propose a reading of the politics of Guston's late production that is deeply rooted in studio practice; enlivened and enriched through the phenomenal encounter with public forms of painting; sustained by a context of sympathetic practitioners and institutions; and fundamentally concerned with dramatizing painting as a point of contact between a subject and the socio-political world.

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[25] Rachel Haidu, *Each One Another: The Self in Contemporary Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2023).

Chapter 1 *The Deluge*: abstraction, studio, and subject

1.1 *The Deluge*: abstraction and public address

The absent painting

The first viewers of Philip Guston's 1969 painting *The Deluge* could hardly have failed to notice its awkward fit within the artist's production at the time. Shown as part of the inaugural exhibition of his late figurative work at Marlborough Gallery, New York, in October 1970, *The Deluge* was – and remains – barely seen within Guston's oeuvre.[26] At nearly two metres high by over three metres wide, it is a huge canvas, and was the largest in the Marlborough exhibition. Unlike most of the paintings and works on panel it hung alongside, it includes none of the Ku Klux Klan imagery with which his late output has become associated [**2**]. Instead, *The Deluge* is composed of comparatively reduced elements: a dark body of turbulent water beneath a red field. At the horizontal intersection of these two areas, a series of ambiguously described objects bob. These include a bottle, several bricks, and a flaccid circle. Described with a faltering outline, its interior marked with a stitch-like pattern, this object resembles at once a rising sun, a repair patch, and an ancient shield. A white canvas hangs on a nearby nail, which, like the bottle next to it, seems to locate the deluge within Guston's studio. Above, a seven-legged bug invites comparison to histories of disruptive illusionism with which Guston was certainly familiar.[27] The hanging canvas, too,

[26] The absence of *The Deluge* from the critical history of Guston's turn to figuration in the late 1960s is reflected in its subsequent exhibition history. It did not appear in the two subsequent showings of this particular body of work (at Boston University Art Gallery in November 1970 and La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in July 1971). In the *Philip Guston Now* exhibition, it featured in only one of the four museum venues for the artist's retrospective (the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), although it is discussed, albeit briefly, in the exhibition's catalogue.

[27] In using the image of the insect crawling on the surface of his canvas, Guston may have been thinking of the history of such devices as illusionistic flourishes, as well as allusions to the legendary origins of Western painting as described by Pliny the Elder. Guston would likely have known one of the most famous examples of

seems to respond to legacies of fictive play within modernist painting, such as George Braque's painted nail in his analytical cubist painting *Violin and Palette* (1909). [**3**]. Guston's address to these traditions of Western European still life painting treats the genre as the embodiment of painterly illusionism. It is as though the history of Western painting were subject to the dispersing, dissembling force of the painted deluge.

The Deluge, then, is a reflection on the medium itself, both in its references to the history of painted illusionism and in the condition of its manufacture. Painted wet-in-wet, the objects are built up of colours smeared by the liquidity of the waters on which they sit. In seeming imitation of the action of floodwater itself, the roiling surface of the dark field alternately reveals and conceals submerged passages of colour. Both the objects and the painted surface itself seem damaged through the battering effect of the waves. The lower section especially is marked by inconsistencies of facture, from long, smeared marks to quasi-architectonic forms that approach legibility. A strip of unpainted canvas at the bottom edge abruptly disrupts the composition. Seen in context with the paintings it hung alongside, such as *A Day's Work* (1970) [**4**], *The Deluge* is notable for its lack of visual incident. Where *A Day's Work*, like the majority of the other paintings on display, foregrounded representational content, here it is held literally at distance, floating perilously along the high waterline.[28] Whereas the visual field of the former is dominated by somewhat recognisable imagery – shoes, boots, easels, planks of wood, a dustbin, and two bloodied Klansmen conspiring in the corner – *The Deluge* reads more readily as two horizontal fields of colour, red over grey.

Yet *The Deluge* once might have seemed coherent with the other works that hung in the Marlborough exhibition. Conservation work carried out at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 2020-21, revealed a different composition beneath the painted water: the figures of three large Klansmen, grouped together in the centre of the canvas [**5**].[29] At some point between 1969 and the Marlborough exhibition's opening in October 1970, this grouping, which

this device, Petrus Christus' *Portrait of a Carthusian* (1446), which hung in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which shows a fly sitting on a ledge in front of the sitter.

[28] I will return to *A Day's Work* in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

[29] At time of writing, the conservation of the painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston has yet to be completed. Confirmed in correspondence with Kate Nesin, May 2024.

occupied the centre of the canvas, was painted over, and submerged between the two horizontal bands of red and grey. This was an action rendered metaphorical by the MFA Boston curators, whose wall text subsumed *The Deluge* within the logic of their curatorial framing of the artist's work. It read: "This painting now operates not only literally but also metaphorically: hoods (and what they represent) are part of our social fabric as well as our history, present even when "invisible."[30] Reading Guston's studio practice in allegorical terms, this interpretation fails to contextualise *The Deluge* within the artist's habits of painterly erasure. Painting over previous compositions was not unheard-of in the artist's practice, and the action of erasure was commonplace in his paintings of the mid-1960s especially. But the degree to which *The Deluge* is a complete reorientation of its earlier incarnation is utterly unique.

Another painting in the 1970 exhibition, entitled *Tower* (1970), gives further reason to treat the transformation of *The Deluge* as distinctive [**6**]. *Tower* shows a large half-erased Klansman the outline and detail of whose form remain clearly visible in the final canvas. This spectral element stands alongside a pile of dismembered limbs and indeterminate lumber, placing it more clearly in dialogue with other similar components in comparable paintings, such as *A Day's Work*. This ghostly, but legible, Klan figure might lend itself more suitably to the kind of analysis on *The Deluge*'s label in the Boston exhibition. Yet the density of *The Deluge*'s facture precludes the Klan figures' legibility. Seen from an angle, the gritty impasto of the Klansmen's outlines become only somewhat visible to the naked eye. They are more apparent in raking light, but there is no sense in which this is an intentional strategy, as it evidently is in *Tower*. *The Deluge*, then, remains anomalous within the Marlborough exhibition. It resists integration with the interpretative frame through which that exhibition has been understood. This resistance tests the limits of that interpretation, which, as I have discussed, has come to dominate the literature on the artist.

The Deluge is a new painting, not an amendment to an existing one. The changes that Guston made to the painting must have been carried out after the image was dry enough to

[30] Wall text in the exhibition *Philip Guston Now*, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, photographed by the author, September 7th 2022.

paint over. This time lag is not unusual in Guston's practice. While there is some visible contamination of the (presumably) white hoods in the grey "sea", the presence of the impasto outlines in the final work suggests that the painting likely sat in his studio in its earlier incarnation for some time before he made the decision to change it so radically. In conversation, David McKee, who worked for Marlborough Gallery at that time and was a regular visitor to Guston's Woodstock studio as he was producing the works that would eventually go on show in New York, discussed the display of sixty-five paintings, "far more than could be accommodated in the gallery" in a Manhattan warehouse, to enable the choice of works to be carried out.[31] This extraordinary installation allowed Guston, for the first and only time, to see the complete results of about two years of sustained practice in an unprecedented visual language. Despite its anomalousness, then, *The Deluge*'s presence in the exhibition was carefully considered. I suggest it was done so in the knowledge of its first audience.

Photographs of the opening of the Marlborough exhibition show, on October 17th, 1970, show many figures associated with the New York art scene of twenty years previously [**7 / 8**]. The attendees included artists such as Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, David Hare, and James Rosati; composer Morton Feldman; curator Dorothy Miller; and critic Harold Rosenberg. This was largely what remained of the New York School. As Slifkin has discussed, the "ghostliness" of the Klan hoods seemed to allegorise "the fading of abstract expressionism".[32] The rhetoric of moribundity or death clung to much of the discourse around the movement during the 1960s, and even Rosenberg, one of the few advocates for Guston's late figuration, described the surviving Abstract Expressionists as "like spirits in Hades – [they] no longer cast a shadow."[33]

Indeed, many of the central protagonists of postwar New York abstraction were no longer alive to witness Guston's final act. By 1970, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Bradley Walker

[31] "We [the staff at Marlborough Gallery] made a large selection of works for the show [and showed them in] Hahn's storage warehouse, at West 127th Street…where a very large open floor was available. I wanted Philip to have the pleasure of seeing all his large paintings together. …The show was hung in two days and in many ways hung itself." David McKee in conversation with the author, 8th December 2023.
[32] Slifkin, *Out of Time*, 110.
[33] Harold Rosenberg, *Artworks and Packages* (New York: Horizon, 1969), p101, cited in Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 110.

Tomlin, Franz Kline, David Smith, Janet Sobel, Hans Hofmann, William Baziotes, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman were all dead. As Slifkin has suggested, some of the Marlborough paintings can be described as "melancholic elegies for the movement"; I read *The Deluge* as the prime contender.[34] Uppermost in Guston's mind was the death of Mark Rothko, who had died by suicide in February 1970, eight months before the exhibition opened. Rothko was one of the few New York School artists with whom Guston remained close in the 1960s.[35] It seems unlikely that the audience at the Marlborough exhibition would have missed the painting's close similarity with Rothko's work, from its enveloping scale – one that is markedly different to Guston's own abstract paintings of the 1950s – to its composition of stacked rectangles of muted colour, and even the band of unpainted canvas at its lower edge.

Given the integrity of the outlines of the concealed Klansmen, Guston likely amended the painting when it was dry enough to be painted over. It may be, then, that he did so in the aftermath of his friend's death, in the gap between the initial Klan composition and its obliteration by painted water.[36] This resemblance went unmentioned not only in the immediate critical reception to the Marlborough exhibition, but also in the subsequent historiography of *The Deluge*. And yet *The Deluge*'s recapitulation of the compositional and painterly premises of Rothko's work is itself reiterated in Guston's later paintings, especially in his notably spare late canvases, such as *Kettle* (1978) [**9**]. *The Deluge* figures a relationship with abstraction that yields expressive possibilities for the remainder of the artist's life.

This chapter asks the question: what happens to our understanding of Guston's later work when we restore *The Deluge* to visibility? To address this, I read the painting through

[34] Slifkin, *Out of Time,* xiv.

[35] McKee recounts that, in 1968-69, Guston occasionally had lunch with old friends in New York, including David Hare, Dore Ashton, Mercedes and Herbert Matter, and Rothko, who was then consumed with establishing his foundation, which finally drew Guston away – "David, I can't see Mark again – it's too depressing. I want to talk about my latest painting and he wants to talk about his damn Foundation." Rothko's death would, I suggest, have been more painful in the light of this separation. David McKee in conversation with the author, 8th December 2023.

[36] Conservation of *The Deluge* has yet to determine the chronology of Guston's transformation of the painting in apparent allusion to Rothko's colour fields after the latter's death. The Guston online catalogue raisonné proposes that *The Deluge* was the penultimate painting he made in 1969, before the much smaller *Book and Hand*; given his profuse output in 1969, I suggest that *The Deluge* was completed in the last months of that year.

multiple frames, informed by its recuperation of elements of Rothko's paintings. First, I bring the painting into contact with marginal works by Guston that help elucidate the stakes of that recuperation, and the kind of viewer dynamics that are thereby invoked. I also discuss it alongside Rothko's own paintings made at the end of the 1960s, to show a related practice that both maintains and refuses the premises of New York School painting. I then examine Guston's recuperation of these dynamics in relation to a sequence of pressures under which the Abstract Expressionist legacy laboured in the years leading up to the Marlborough exhibition, including the emergence of artistic practices that channelled its strategies, by homage or parody, and critical positions that cast its centrality into question. What *The Deluge* inaugurated was not only the theme of the flood, which became a central part of Guston's work following the Marlborough exhibition; it also provided a means to maintain what remained for Guston unfinished business in the Abstract Expressionist project, in spite of – or even because of – the many critical responses to its traditions that emerged in the 1960s.

Figuring the art encounter

In 1972, two years after the Marlborough exhibition, Guston gave a talk at the Yale Summer School of Music and Art, accompanied by slides that showed his paintings from around 1941 to the present. This was his first public opportunity to contextualise his recent work within a longer sweep of his own output. Right after describing *The Deluge* as "a big deluge picture, a big end-of-the-world picture"[37] – an eschatological framing of the subject that I will address in the last chapter of this thesis – he was reminded of another set of works depicting Klansmen, which were not shown in the Marlborough exhibition, but which he was able to recount from memory:

> There's a whole series I don't have slides of… where I had parodies of art. I mean, I had them going to an opening. I had some looking at a Rothko. Just parodies

[37] Guston, Talk at Yale Summer School of Music and Art, August 1972, in Clark Coolidge (ed.), *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 158.

about art. They became artists. Having discussions, with a palette. Guys pointing to the window talking about nature.[38]

The Klansmen in these descriptions perform their political identity less reliably than they do in the Marlborough works. *Going to openings, having discussions, talking about nature*: the anomalousness of these activities indicate that something beyond the referentiality of the Klan is at play. Shortly after this brief discussion, a new slide flashed into view, which Guston identified as *Red Picture* (1969) by saying, "Well, that's the one, looking at the Rothko, yeah. He's looking at field painting. I just loved him. Like: What the hell is that!?" [**10**][39] *Red Picture* shows a Klansman figure gazing up at a red monochrome painting hung haphazardly on the wall above his head. Like the Klansman himself, it is a thick, dense object, its strong shadow making it cartoon shorthand for weighty, like an anvil or a grand piano. Even the work's title is part of its satirical intent: Guston generally used the word "picture" disparagingly to allude to works of art of merely decorative or commercial value. In a 1968 interview to be discussed later in this thesis, Guston described an opposition facing artists at the end of the 1960s: to "bear witness" – that is, to register the conditions of one's time – or to "make pictures or something."[40] In his affectionate ventriloquism of the Klansman, Guston makes that demarcation clear.

Also implicated in the title *Red Picture* was Guston's own past as an abstract painter. Despite his reference to Rothko, what is equally at stake in the painting's naming is his own *Red Painting* of 1950, one of his first fully abstract canvases, which bears some visual similarity to *The Deluge* [**11**]. Kate Nesin has noted a correlation between *The Deluge* and another early abstraction, *Review* (1948-9), whose red over black palette, horizontal composition and roiling surface are redolent of the later painting.[41] Transmuted into the comics language of *Red Picture*, the formal and metaphysical ambitions of these immersive, tender and expressive canvases are collapsed into a punchline. Yet Guston's dramatization of the

[38] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,*158-9.
[39] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 159.
[40] Philip Guston in conversation with Morton Feldman, the New York Studio School, October 23rd, 1968, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 81.
[41] Kate Nesin, "On Edge and At Sea" in *Philip Guston Now*, 210-11.

phenomenological encounter with a work of art stages a consideration of modernist viewership that was increasingly absent from discourses of contemporary American art.

The small paintings on panel from 1969 can be quite easily identified, but their status as a "series" is an oddity within his painting practice, especially given its overarching theme. In her 1976 book *Yes, But: A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, Dore Ashton described them as Guston's "comments on the art world", a reading he corroborated later.[42] Yet there is little doubt about the historical anachronism of Guston's satirical "art world". The wry allusion to a set of discourses ("pointing to the window, talking about nature", "Having discussions, with a palette") certainly suggests a 1950s Abstract Expressionist context rather than a 1960s or 70s one, steeped as it was in minimal and conceptual practices in which such activities would have seemed comically out of date. This anachronism is intentional. One such panel is even called *Discourse*, which shows two Klansmen in an interior pointing past a painting and towards a window; despite "talking about nature", these two characters are nowhere near it [**12**]. In these panels, two anachronisms – the canvas and the Klansman – meet in a single scene. Like the figures of the Klan themselves, which Harry Cooper has called "an obvious anachronism, showing them smoking stogies in old jalopies", these works restore to attention not only outmoded forms of painting, but outdated modes of address, too.[43] Had they hung in the Marlborough exhibition, these smaller works would have provided a context for *The Deluge*'s inclusion. They would have emphasised that Guston's recuperation of Rothko in that painting was motivated on one level by an interest in modern American art's relationship with its public.

In reading *The Deluge* in terms of *Red Picture*, it is clear that what Guston sought to restage, within the context of the Marlborough exhibition, was a charged encounter with modernist art. The anachronism of the scene's context provides both an ironic meta-commentary on the painting's subject, and an earnest attempt to think through the legacy of Abstract Expressionism's public address. This is an interest made clear in relation to another small oil

[42] Dore Ashton, *Yes, But: A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 164. Two years later, in a 1978 lecture at the University of Minnesota, Guston "openly [said] that the KKK works are a spoof of the artworld" (Christopher Bucklow, *What is in the Dwat: The Universe of Guston's Final Decade* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2007), 41.
[43] Harry Cooper, "Guston, Then" in *Philip Guston Now*, 2020, 87.

on panel painting, *Studio Wall* (1969), which shows a solitary Klansman, its finger raised as though questioning, in front of another red canvas, one of several, in various colours, hanging on the wall [**13**]. This painting-in-a-painting, too, evokes Rothko, with its horizontal line dividing the surface into parallel sections that resemble his demarcations of pictorial space. Yet the tension of *Red Picture*'s encounter is dramatized less obliquely in this work. Unmistakably face-like, the red painting seems to meet its viewer's gaze, its four vertical marks mirroring the black slits in the Klansman's hood.

Studio Wall's tense encounter between object and viewer restages Abstract Expressionist viewer dynamics in the context of their obsolescence. It does so in echo of a similarly satirical image produced during the heyday of that movement. Ad Reinhardt, who, like Guston, oscillated between abstraction and cartooning, made a well-known series of cartoons entitled "How to Look", serialised in the leftist daily *PM* newspaper in 1946. Guston's "art world" panels of 1969 and Reinhardt's cartoons occupy opposite ends of the history of Abstract Expressionism, and I read them as twin poles, bracketing the critical history of the movement. In perhaps its best-known and most reproduced single panel, Reinhardt shows a besuited man laughing and pointing at a gestural abstract painting, while looking at the reader conspiratorially, declaiming, "HA HA WHAT DOES THIS REPRESENT?". In the drawing below it, the painting has come to startling life, frowning at the man and pointing aggressively back at him, while retorting "WHAT DO YOU REPRESENT?" [**14**] The man leaps backwards in fright, his hat flying off.

The jabbing fingers of Reinhardt's image closely resemble a recurrent motif in Guston's Marlborough paintings. In *Tower*, for instance, a disembodied red hand points towards the stack of limbs and objects, in echo, perhaps, of Reinhardt's question. If the pointing fingers of Reinhardt's cartoon stands for a kind of looking that generates ontological anxiety – a gaze that goes both ways – then the subject it produces is constituted by that bewildered act of looking. Robert Storr has shown how Reinhardt emphasized the existential significance of the art encounter not only through repetitions of this panel in various contexts but also in a separate caption that emphasized what was at stake in this encounter: "After you've learned to look at things, and how to think about them, clear up the problem of what you personally

represent…"[44] What was on the line in Reinhardt's dramatized encounter was subjecthood destabilised by viewership. This is a principal dramatization of *Red Picture*, and, by inference, *The Deluge*'s marshalling of Rothko's work. The visual weight of the painting in *Red Picture*, and its position high over the head of the figure, makes it equally possible that it is the canvas, not the Klansman, asking the question, "What the hell is that!?"

The historical gap between Reinhardt's cartoon and *Red Picture* encompasses important shifts in modern American art's constitution of a public. This is reflected in Reinhardt's model of projected viewership. Though self-evidently assuming the position of a skeptical mainstream culture, Reinhardt's suited man did not reflect the readership of *PM* in which the image was originally published. Reinhardt's cartoon was in fact "produced in, and about, a compact, highly intellectual, articulate milieu in which all his nuances were appreciated, and puns and allusions understood."[45] This is a close description of the audience that had largely disappeared by the time of the Marlborough exhibition and had certainly ceded the cultural ground to oppositional practices. The history of Reinhardt's work tracks that shift. On their first publication immediately after World War II, Reinhardt's set of cartoons had a didactic, even ideological impetus; Storr characterises them as "the weapons with which he defended his faith in art's purity".[46] His dramatization of the art encounter indicates his own anxiety at what Storr has described as his sense of "the false academy that modernism was in the process of becoming, and the betrayal of modernism's ostensible principles by members of that new academy".[47] His satires took on additional acidity with the increased institutional acceptance of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s,[48] and by the early 1960s, his sense of its demise affected the increasingly disillusioned affect of the cartoons.

These shifts in tone, according to Michael Corris, "reflect Reinhardt's sense of loss of community, isolation and a feeling that the possibility for artists to exercise their sovereignty

[44] Ad Reinhardt, *How to Look at Modern Art*, cited in Robert Storr, "Diogenes of the Funny Pages" in Kristine Bell and Anna Gray (eds.), *How to Look: Ad Reinhardt, Art Comics* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz and London: David Zwirner Books, 2013), 9.
[45] Thomas B. Hess, "The Art Comics of Ad Reinhardt" in *Artforum* (April 1974, Vol. 12, No.8), 47.
[46] Storr, *How to Look: Ad Reinhardt, Art Comics*, 7.
[47] Storr, *How to Look: Ad Reinhardt, Art Comics*, 9.
[48] "It's important to remember that he was not a sniper taking potshots from afar. He was a terrorist self-embedded on his own turf." Holland Cotter, "An Abstractionism Shaped by Wounded Ideals", *The New York Times*, Nov.21st, 2013, 26.

was now far less promising than it had been during the immediate postwar period."[49] In this sense, the repetitions of "WHAT DO YOU REPRESENT?", read in parallel to this gradual "sense of loss", represent a chorus of cultural alienation. Yet this "loss of community" might just as easily be read differently. Allan Kaprow, speaking as it were for the cynics in *PM*'s readership, stated that there was by the 1960s "no longer a select, small group upon whom artists can depend for a stock response, favourable or otherwise".[50] That this was the very constituency that Guston knew would attend the opening of the Marlborough exhibition makes *The Deluge*'s concern with the demise of the Abstract Expressionist public more charged. Guston's disdain for what he called "a family club of art lovers" echoed Kaprow's complaint.[51] The 1969 panels can be read in parallel with a talk he gave that same year, at the New York Studio School. In building the case for the representational practice with which he was engaged at the time, Guston describes abstraction as a "disease" and "a lot of shit", claiming that "every time I see an abstract painting now I smell mink coats."[52] And yet *The Deluge* cannot be read as a straightforward renunciation of Abstract Expressionism.

What, then, remained available in the encounter with large-scale abstraction that *The Deluge* seemed to evoke? I suggest that to figure viewership in the person of the Klansman was Guston's attempt to restore the friction of the art encounter dramatized in Reinhardt's cartoon. This figuring of tension reflects onto *The Deluge* and its ostensibly anomalous presence in the Marlborough exhibition. By invoking the Abstract Expressionist encounter, Guston's painting raises questions of painting's role within a social dynamic. It is in reading this in parallel with Rothko's own deeply disillusioned works of the late 1960s that the possibilities for a painterly critique from within the practice itself emerge.

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[49] Michael Corris, "Ad Reinhardt" (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 82.
[50] Allan Kaprow, "The Artist as a Man of the World" (1964) in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 54. [50] David Hodge has articulated this situation similarly: "In the 1940s, the work of the emerging New York School was really only seen by a small circle of insiders, in either artists' studios or a very limited number of galleries. These viewers shared a context and a discourse with the artist, and often knew them personally. Consequently, the intimate relationship that these artists cultivated with their work in the studio generally remained in place when it went on display." David Hodge, "Why Robert Morris Couldn't Paint Anymore" in Ehninger, Krause-Wahl (eds), *In Terms of Painting*, 206-7.
[51] Philip Guston, "Philip Guston Talking", in Nicholas Serota (ed.), *Philip Guston Paintings: 1969-1980* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982), 50.
[52] Philip Guston, "The Image", talk at the New York Studio School, January 15th, 1969, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 109.

Channelling Rothko

By the late 1960s, both Guston and Rothko were producing paintings that at once evoked the compositional and painterly language of 1950s abstraction and staged a refusal of the immersive, absorptive qualities with which that work was associated. As Barry Schwabsky has argued, in the work of both artists in the 1960s "an exasperation with the given situation had already been detectable within the work itself". This became apparent in Rothko's adoption of an "almost self-consciously slapdash" facture in the surfaces of his paintings from the end of the decade.[53] In acrylic on canvas paintings such as *Untitled (Black on Gray*) (1969-70), for instance, the lush chromatics of his work of the 1950s were replaced by plainly delineated horizontal zones, rendered in plain, stark colour [**15**]. The pure black of the upper zone is held in tension with the swirling grey of the lower: where the two areas meet, the artist dragged across a lighter grey with a fairly dry brush, ensuring the visual registration of its tension of parts. Using masking tape, Rothko then created a sharp white border around the composition. This created "a zone of separation between real and pictorial space"[54] redolent of Guston's own use of a band of unpainted canvas at the bottom of *The Deluge*. In both cases, this abrupt division, which declared the restriction of the viewer's encounter with the work, announced these paintings' reckoning with abstraction's obsolescence in the late 1960s.[55]

The relatively small scale of Rothko's later paintings – *Untitled (Black on Gray)* is around 2 metres high by 1.7 metres wide, which is significantly smaller than his work of the previous decade – similarly holds absorption at bay. The large scale of his earlier works was, paradoxically, a means to generate a private address; it built a "zone of privacy…[which]

[53] Barry Schwabsky, "'The Real Situation': Philip Guston and Mark Rothko at the End of the Sixties", *Arts* 61, no. 4 (December 1986), in *The Widening Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 13.
[54] Achim Borchardt-Hume, "Shadows of Light: Mark Rothko's Late Series", in Achim Borchardt-Hume (ed.), *Rothko: The Late Series* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 26.
[55] This technical decision was more marked in Rothko's work, which had up until that point left no part of the canvas, including the edges, unmarked by paint. Guston's 1950s abstractions occasionally left all four edges uninflected by paint. However, none of Guston's abstract paintings left a clear and unmarked band at the bottom edge of their canvases.

belongs to neither and both the intimate and social worlds."[56] By disappointing the assumed viewer dynamics of his abstract paintings, Rothko's work of the late 1960s embodied a refusal to accede to any given audience. They seemed to belong to no worlds at all.

The plain, flat affect of Rothko's use of acrylic paint appeared to refute the critical discourses that had ensured his earlier success, in a way that resonates with the critical reception of Guston's Marlborough paintings.[57] Both artists were understood to have enacted refusals within their later production. Hilton Kramer's headline from his *New York Times* review from October 25th, 1970 – "A Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum" – reads differently in the light of Rothko's late paintings. Kramer's critique, like the other high-profile negative reviews of the exhibition by Robert Hughes in *Time* and Robert Pincus-Witten in *Artforum*, accused Guston of being doubly late: the paintings were at once anachronistic in their use of Klan imagery, and engaged in a form of demotic "primitivism" that had already been used more successfully by other artists.[58] In his review, Pincus-Witten seemed to accuse Guston of an unwillingness to fully commit to representation, claiming that his painting was "still all about sensitive patches and Abstract Expressionist all-over" with the works' motifs doing "no more than define painterly areas." "Abstract Expressionist all-over" is true neither of those paintings nor Guston's own abstract works of the 1950s, yet Pincus-Witten's analysis accurately, if unwittingly, names the tensions that animated the painting. The distinction between "the altitude of the facture and the baseness of the humour" was an internal contradiction that was unassimilable to the critical landscape of its day;[59] by the end of the decade, it was the very feature of his late work that identified its influence.[60]

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[56] John Elderfield, "Transformations" in Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow (eds.) *Seeing Rothko*, (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2005, 111.

[57] The 1970 exhibition was Guston's first and only exhibition with Marlborough Gallery after signing with them six years previously. His departure from the gallery in 1972 can be attributed in part to the poor critical response and lack of sales from that exhibition, and certainly in reaction to the lawsuit over Mark Rothko's estate from the previous year, the repercussions of which evidently stayed with him until his death. "After what happened to Mark…I didn't want anything like a foundation". Guston in 1979, quoted in Musa Mayer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997, orig. pub. 1988), 192.

[58] Indeed, for Kramer, this style was "already on its way to being one of the moribund conventions of high art when he caught up with it". Hilton Kramer, "A Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum", *New York Times*, October 25th, 1970, 27.

[59] Robert Pincus-Witten, "New York." *Artforum*, Vol.9, No.4, December 1970, 74–75.

[60] "Guston, no stranger to contradiction, successfully pits content against form." Carrie Rickey, "What Becomes a Legend Most?" in *The Village Voice* October 22nd, 1979, 90.

Rothko and Guston both addressed the legacies of large-scale abstraction from within its expressive premises, their works embodying questions about the relationship between the art object and the social world, the studio and what lay beyond it. Belatedness and anachronism, then, were not only to be expected: they were the very medium in which such questions might be raised. Where Rothko's obdurate paintings seemed to refute, in their absolute negation of absorptive viewership, their presence within a world of interpretative play, Guston's *Deluge* recuperated the viewer dynamics of midcentury abstraction to stage a series of questions about painting's purchase within a critical context that had largely ignored it. For both artists, the painting's surface – the literal point of contact between object and world – was the focus of renewed attention. This was a particularly charged space in discourses and practices of the period.

As Rosalind E. Krauss described it in *Artforum*, only a few years after the Marlborough exhibition, certain readings of Abstract Expressionism stated that "the public surface of the work seemed to demand that one see it as a map from which could be read the privately held crosscurrents of personality – of the artist's inviolable Self."[61] By contrast with this, Krauss presents the late-1950s work of Frank Stella as having "made meaning itself a function of surface – of the external, the public, or a space that is in no way a signifier of the *a priori* or of the privacy of intention."[62] At around 2.3 metres tall by nearly three and a half metres wide, Stella's *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II* (1959) is similarly scaled to *The Deluge*, yet is distinct from it in almost every regard [**16**]. Stella applied stripes of unmixed black enamel paint that were the same width as the housepainter's brush he used to make them; they followed the basic geometric shape of the canvas itself, reiterating in every element the apparatus of their own production. For Krauss, American painting such as this insisted on the externality of an artwork's meaning. The site of exhibition, then, became the locus of activation, not the studio, and the work's public was to be understood as multiple, diffuse and contingent.

61 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post-60s Sculpture" in *Artforum,* Vol. 12, No.3, November 1973, 46.
[62] Krauss, 46.

The facture of Rothko's later paintings refuses both positions: it provided neither a "readable" surface nor the kind of uninflected painterly approach implied in Krauss' account of Stella. And yet what remained in play in the historical dovetailing of Rothko's late paintings and Guston's "early" figurative works of the late 1960s is the productive tension between public address and private production, which evaded resolution. Guston's decision, sometime in 1970, to transform *The Deluge* from one kind of painting into another keeps these tensions alive, by way of finding within them a means of dramatizing a subject's encounter with the catastrophes of the age. *The Deluge*'s recuperation of Rothko's pictorial dynamics enabled Guston to stage the problem of the relationship between public address and private expression. It was the very loss of the 1950s "art world" that rendered this staging urgent. The long legacy of *The Deluge* proves the significance of this in Guston's thinking. Yet it cannot be fully understood outside of the pressures to which it responds, and it is to these that I will now turn.

1.2 Guston in the 1960s: the self and the public

1962: Abstract Expressionism, "that odd thing"

In October 1962, Guston, alongside fellow Abstract Expressionist painters Rothko, Adolf Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell, permanently left the Sidney Janis Gallery. They did so in protest at an exhibition they held that year, entitled *International Exhibition of the New Realists*, curated by Janis and Pierre Restany.[63] The exhibition displayed work by American Pop or Pop-adjacent artists, among them Andy Warhol, Marisol, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, and Roy Lichtenstein, alongside that of their European Nouveau Réaliste counterparts, including Daniel Spoerri, Mimmo Rotella, Christo and Arman [**17**]. Lichtenstein's *The Refrigerator* (1962) was one of the first paintings to be encountered in the exhibition space [**18**]. An appropriated image of a woman smilingly wiping the shelves of a refrigerator, conveyed in the artist's then-emergent imitation of the qualities of printed illustration, the

[63] October 31st – December 1st, 1962.

painting seemed to announce the very externality of the painted surface previously described. In this sense, the work reads as contrary to the absorptive qualities of the work of Guston, Rothko, Gottlieb and Motherwell. Certainly, the gallery's decision to stage this exhibition was understood at the time as a direct refutation of Abstract Expressionism by one of the galleries that had been instrumental in popularising it. Harold Rosenberg in *The New Yorker* had "the sense that art history was being made";[64] Thomas B. Hess in *Art News* read it as "an implicit proclamation that the New had arrived and it was time for the old fogies to pack."[65]

What was held to be at stake was the same sense of a lost community that animated Guston's recuperation of Rothko in *The Deluge*. Hess' screeds against Pop Art in *Art News* throughout the 1960s bemoaned the loss of an avant-garde audience for art, which had been replaced by an "everybody" with an "appetite for novelties, for art as an object of conversation, a rung in the social ladder, a cheap investment."[66] Guston's own account of leaving the gallery reflects this position. In his daughter Musa Mayer's retelling, it was for him an articulation of "despair over the selling of art, over the slick depersonalised gloss [of Pop] … Art was no longer struggle; art had become marketing."[67] In Abstract Expressionism's self-definition, a refusal to pander to an imagined bourgeois public was a central tenet. The existential friction dramatized in Reinhardt's cartoon could hardly be occasioned by a painting like *The Refrigerator*, which seemed to embody the forbidden territory of audience solicitation. Indeed, Hess' scornfully projected "everybody" was anticipated in John Ashbery's text for the *New Realists* exhibition catalogue. For Ashbery, the artists on display in the exhibition were unified in working with "machines and man-made objects", which represented "a common ground, a neutral language understood by everybody, and therefore the ideal materials with which to create experiences which transcend the objects."[68] The novelty of the exhibition, then, was predicated on its mobilisation of recognisable subject-matter, which generated a new constituency of viewership.

[64] Harold Rosenberg, 1962, cited in Germano Celant (ed.), *New York 1962 – 1964* (New York: Skira / Jewish Museum, New York, 2022), 110.
[65] Thomas B. Hess, "New Realists at Janis Gallery", *ARTnews*, Vol.61, December 1962, 12.
[66] Thomas B. Hess. "The Phony Crisis in American Art", *ARTnews*, Vol. 62, Summer 1963, 24-28.
[67] Mayer, *Night Studio*, 102.
[68] John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987*, ed. David Bergman (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1989), 81-2.

Yet many of the other works in the exhibition refuted the claims made for them in framings such as these, deferring legibility through inconsistencies of facture or surface. Oldenburg's *Lingerie Counter* (1962), for instance, a sculptural assemblage, was neither simulacrum nor imitation of what its title purported to represent [**19**]. Women's underwear, roughly shaped in muslin and plaster and dripped and slathered with enamel paint, was hung from a metal frame suggesting a display unit of a shop, complete with neon strip light. Its evident relationship to the tropes of action painting – the use of enamel seems to allude to Jackson Pollock's use of the same medium in his work of the 50s; the application of paint and suggestion of female anatomy connects to de Kooning's paintings of the same period – is not easily summarised as either satire or homage. Its emergence from a performance context, as I will explore, similarly refutes assumptions about its engagement with a mass audience.

It is not so clear, in other words, that the works in the *New Realists* exhibition were far removed from earlier painterly practices that embraced representational motifs, such as de Kooning's *Woman* paintings of the early 1950s, Grace Hartigan's allusions to advertising and city life in her works of the late 1950s, or Larry Rivers' appropriative paintings of even earlier in the decade.[69] It may have been the fact of the exhibition's venue, and its indelible association with Abstract Expressionism, that led to the sense of cultural eclipse described in press coverage at the time. Regardless, many of the works displayed there did exactly what David Kaufmann has suggested Guston himself did: they "effect[ed] a rapprochement between painterly touch and Pop's "impurities"".[70] It is in fact in that very activity that the works in the Janis exhibition represented strategies by which artists were able to maintain some of the affective and material properties of Abstract Expressionism in works that at the same time subjected them to critique.

Guston's decision to leave the Janis stable took place in the same year as his first museum retrospective, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.[71] Shortly after the

[69] Hartigan's paintings such as *Billboard* (1957), and Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953), among others, complicate readings of Pop's antagonism to Abstract Expressionism.
[70] David Kaufmann, *Telling Stories: Philip Guston's Later Works* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2010), 16-17.
[71] May 3rd – July 1st, 1962.

exhibition's opening, he stopped painting for a year, focusing instead on producing drawings that gradually anticipated his fully-fledged return to representational imagery around 1968. This recalibration of the artist's practice through drawing is the subject of the second chapter of this thesis. Guston's response is of a piece with a broader anxiety among his peers about the moribundity of the Abstract Expressionist project. Paul Schimmel has read 1962 as the year of the death-knell of gestural abstraction: "For the Pop artist, expressionist technique was just that: a technique, a style, something that could be copied, altered, and even played with. No longer was painting seen as a subconscious tracing of emotional states of being. No longer did artists struggle to find the picture by making the picture."[72]

Oldenburg, again, is a useful counterexample to this. In *Store Days*, published in 1967, Oldenburg's collated notes relating to two early Happenings (*Snapshots from the City* (1960) and *Ray Gun Theater* (1962)), he refused to accept the prevailing critical distinction between representation and abstraction (what he called "Fig/no fig"), instead recognising the inconclusive history of Abstract Expressionism as unfinished business:

> Fig/no fig is a moronic distinction. The challenge to abstract art must go much deeper …
>
> Lately I have begun to understand action painting that odd thing in a new vital and peculiar sense - as corny as the scratches on an NY wall and by parodying its corn I hope (miracle) to come back to authenticity![73]

I suggest that Guston's own recuperation of Rothko in *The Deluge* is comparable to Oldenburg's position. Like "scratches on an NY wall", Abstract Expressionism was at once ubiquitous, illegible, and easy to pass by. Yet Oldenburg's somewhat sardonic desire to reach an "authentic" means of expression *through* parody is strikingly resonant with Guston's own. "I like Oldenburg", claimed Guston in a talk to students at the New York Studio School in

[72] Paul Schimmel, "The Faked Gesture: Pop Art and the New York School" in Russell Ferguson (ed.), *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955 – 62* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art and New York: Rizzoli International Publications), 1993, 19.
[73] Claes Oldenburg, *Store Days* (New York / Villefranche-sur-Mer / Frankfurt am Main: Something Else Press, Inc., 1967), 10-13.

1969, in the midst of the production of his late figuration, but before its public display. "Show me a person that doesn't like a twenty-foot ice cream cone made out of plastic, I don't want to know that person. …He's a kind of poet too."[74] This is the same talk in which he denounced abstraction as a "disease"; it can be read in parallel with the emergent representation that would be showcased at the Marlborough Gallery the following autumn. During a plea to "paint what you hate. Paint what disgusts you", Guston made the remark: "We're not cool. We're hot. Really, we're seething."[75] Both statements indicate the ongoing presence in Guston's mind of the example of Pop art. The former inverts Andy Warhol's statement that Pop art is "liking things"[76]; the latter suggests Guston's own reading of Warhol's ostensible detachment from his work's subject matter, paraphrased by Dore Ashton as "cool art in the face of hot war".[77] Yet as I will explore in Chapter Two, there is common ground between Guston and Warhol that subjects this distinction to challenge.

Oldenburg's *Snapshots from the City* (staged at Judson Memorial Church, New York, 29th February and 1-2nd March 1960) brought together painted cardboard and burlap "props" that were animated by Oldenburg and his then wife, Pat Muschinski [**20**][78]. The use of these objects "involved [them] in a quasi-vernacular rethinking of painting"[79] in which rough-hewn versions of quotidian objects were imbued with a vibrancy that troubled their commodity status. *Street Head III (Profile with Hat)* (1960), for instance, is a found burlap garbage bag, cut into a thick, black-edged shape that resembles at once a fire hydrant, a phallus, and the head of its title [**21**]. Displayed hanging from a wire, the object turned and quivered in response to the movements of viewers, at once undermining its gendered associations and embodying a hybrid objecthood that evaded categorisation. For Alex Potts, this literal animation of painted objects represented a reaction against "the painting as objectified thing, taken out of an open circulation between art and life and reified as a precious item."[80]

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[74] Philip Guston, "The Image", New York Studio School, January 15th, 1969, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 127.
[75] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 113.
[76] Jennifer Sichel (ed.), "'What is Pop Art?': A Revised Transcript of Gene Swenson's 1963 Interview with Andy Warhol" in *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol.41, No.1 (2018).
[77] Ashton, "That is Not What I Meant at All", 68.
[78] Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 330.
[79] Potts, *Experiments*, 330.
[80] Potts, *Experiments*, 337.

I am struck here not only by the resonances with Guston's late representation of vibrant objects whose ambiguous descriptions evade recognition but also his own critique of Abstract Expressionism as fatally entangled with the commercial art world.

Through representation *and* animation, Oldenburg and Muschinski's objects could generate slippages of signification, as described in *Store Days*:

> cock and balls
> cock and balls equals tie and collar
> equals leg and bra equals stars and stripes
> flag equals cigarette package and
> cigarettes[81]

Something very similar is taking place in Guston's late paintings, with contiguous shapes pushing at the limits of representation. An American flag is like a cigarette package as the circle in *The Deluge* is like a sun, is like a shield, is like a patch. Harry Cooper's description of Guston's objects "free-associat[ing] on canvas" bears a close similarity with this activity, through which semantic destabilisation can occur.[82] Through the ludic transformation of objects, Oldenburg and Muschinski's practice participated in a freeing up of pictorial signifiers that is closer to the painterly slippages of Abstract Expressionism than the commercial clarity of conventional Pop. By "parodying [the] corn" that the New York School had become, they found within its premises a licence to slide signs away from signification. At the same time, the coarse manufacture and abraded surfaces of these objects recycled the painterly facture of Abstract Expressionism, recuperating its affective premises.

In his 1965 anthology of the Happenings of that decade, Michael Kirby provided a means by which these events obtained some purchase in the art-historical record. In describing the events organised between 1959 and 1962 by Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Red Grooms, Allan Kaprow and others, Kirby outlined procedures that maintained elements of the Abstract

[81] Oldenburg, *Store Days*, 51.
[82] Cooper, "Recognising Guston", 108.

Expressionist legacy that are reminiscent both of Guston's late work and the critical responses to it. Happenings

> had in common a physical crudeness and roughness that frequently trod an uncomfortable borderline between the genuinely primitive and the merely amateurish. This was partly intentional, due to their relationship with action painting and so-called junk sculpture.[83]

I note here a distinction between Happenings such as Oldenburg's and Dine's – which, while experimental, were never participative, and always required a viewing audience – and Kaprow's, which "were works that engaged the viewer or participant in an immediately physical and sensory experience".[84] I suggest that the comparatively conventional theatrical form of *Snapshots from the City* and Dine's *The Shining Bed* (Reuben Gallery, New York, 16-18th December 1960), in which audience members watched the artist lying in bed in a low-lit space, slathering foil candles with flour and water before imitating masturbation, was indeed closer to the subjectivity of the action painter, including its apparently parodic performance of painterly self-indulgence.[85]

Dine called this and other Happenings "painter's theatre",[86] which were energised by "his conviction that his art grew out of Abstract Expressionism rather than as a reaction against it and that his brand of subjectivity was akin to theirs".[87] *The Shining Bed* has a remarkable similarity with Guston's own parodic imagery of the bedbound artist, in paintings such as *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (1973) [**52**]. The repeated gerunds of Guston's title, implying repetition and stasis, resemble Kirby's spare descriptions of the actions of Happenings like Dine's, which abandoned "the clichés of exposition, development, climax and conclusion, of love and ambition, the conflicts of personality, and the revelatory monologue of character."[88] Dine's return to painting after his period of working in Happenings is further

[83] Michael Kirby (ed.), *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: E. P Dutton & Co., Inc., 1965), 11.
[84] Potts, *Experiments,* 338-9.
[85] Dine's Happenings seem to anticipate later performance work that subjected the Abstract Expressionist tradition to parodic treatment, such as Paul McCarthy's 1995 video *Painter*.
[86] Dine in Marco Livingstone, *Jim Dine: The Alchemy of Images* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998), 78.
[87] Livingstone, *Jim Dine*, 74.
[88] Kirby, *Happenings,* 13.

evidence of the closeness of this form of performance to painting practice. In works such as *Shoes Walking on My Brain* (1960), which consists of a pair of paint-splattered shoes affixed to a pink cloth which partially conceals a canvas beneath, Dine's work brings together the trappings of the physical negotiation of actual space with the transformative qualities of paint itself [**22**]. The two painted eyes that peek out from under the cloth, as well as the use of the shoe motif, anticipate the appearance of similar imagery in Guston's work in the following decade. The work's hybrid objecthood subjects the legacy of Abstract Expressionism to cartoonish critique, while at the same time salvaging the subjecthood of the artist, that "vital and peculiar" element in which Oldenburg saw creative possibility.

Figuring abstraction: Steinberg and Johns

While Oldenburg and Dine's Happenings tested the ongoing validity of painterly activity from outside of the premises of the medium, similar procedures were taking place within painting and its discourses. Leo Steinberg's lecture "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public", given at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960 and published two years later in *Harper's Magazine*, articulated the nature of the pressures faced by abstraction at that time. Steinberg's writing establishes frames of reference for Guston's own later adoption of figuration. Recounting his experience of visiting Jasper Johns' first gallery exhibition, at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, in January 1958, Steinberg wrote that, in looking at the work, "one felt the end of illusion. No more manipulation of paint as a medium of transformation." Indeed, the work that prompted Steinberg's reflection, *Target with Four Faces* (1955), with its appropriated motif, composite structure combining painting and sculpture, and row of eyeless heads, seemed to utterly refute the principles of originality, medium-specificity and optical immersion characteristic of certain readings of Abstract Expressionism [**23**]. Steinberg's discussion of his encounter with the work adumbrates what was at stake in Johns' practice: "It looked to me like the death of painting, a rude stop, the end of the track."[89]

[89] Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public" (1962), in Leo Steinberg *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 13.

Next, the author quotes two unnamed "well-known New York abstract painters" reacting to the exhibition; the first says, "If this is painting, I might as well give up." The other says, "Well, I am still involved with the dream." The resigned romanticism of the second speaker unquestionably recalls Guston's own position and helps to identify the sense of anachronism engendered by Johns' work. Steinberg's own response, after a sustained analysis of the work's component parts and its possible meanings, is to be "left in a state of anxious uncertainty by the painting, about painting, about myself. And I suspect that this is all right. In fact, I have little confidence in people who habitually, when exposed to new works of art, know what is great and what will last."[90] Steinberg's reaction registers the destabilising encounter with avant-garde art in ways that recall both Reinhardt's 1946 cartoon and Guston's *Red Picture* of 1969. As in those examples, the uncertainty about the status of the object precipitates a kind of identity crisis in the viewer. Indeed, Steinberg's text seems to restage the drama of confrontation in Reinhardt's work. It is of note that all three of these represented scenarios figure the art encounter as solitary: the viewer dynamic established by Abstract Expressionism remains.

The nature of Johns' work's relationship to the legacy of the New York School preoccupied numerous critics in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1962, Steinberg returned to the subject of Johns, in an article for *Metro*, in which he identified the work's "essentially Abstract Expressionist brushwork and surface", used in such a way that it "seemed to accuse the strokes and drips of the de Kooning school of being after all only a subject matter of a different kind."[91] That same year, Clement Greenberg recognised Johns as operating "within the very space of modernist practice that the Abstract Expressionists occupied. It is a kind of disavowal in the given, as the self is conventionally associated with and indexed to the hand of the artist making the canvas."[92] The nature of Johns' relationship with Abstract Expressionism was, by 1964, endemic to critical responses to his work.[93] Even John Cage's

[90] Steinberg, *Other Criteria,* 15.
[91] Leo Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: the First Seven Years of his Art", first published in *Metro*, nos 4/5, 1962, and with revisions, by George Wittenborn, New York, 1963, in Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 22.
[92] Clement Greenberg (1962), cited in Fred Orton *Figuring Jasper Johns* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 124.
[93] "By 1964 it had become paradigmatic to discuss Johns in relation to Abstract Expressionism". Orton, *Figuring,* 122.

dismissal of this contextualisation - "Stupidly we think of abstract expressionism. But here we are free of struggle, gesture, and personal image" – nevertheless reinforced the standard critical apparatus of assessing the artist's achievement.[94]

Clement Greenberg's essay "After Abstract Expressionism", published in *Art International* in October 1962 – the same month as Guston's self-exile from the Sidney Janis stable – relegated Guston's work of the time to the past, using Johns' work to push it there. Greenberg called Guston's work "homeless representation", by which he meant "a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones."[95] For Greenberg, "homeless representation" was not a pejorative term per se – Guston in fact took it as a compliment[96] – but its approaches had, for Greenberg, "harden[ed] into mannerism"[97] by the middle of the 1950s. It was fully declared dead in the work of Johns, whose works of the mid-to-late-1950s sang "the swan song of homeless representation".[98] They did so by embracing the contradiction Greenberg identified as unresolved in Guston's work: representational methods (painterliness, tactility) served abstract ends, while abstract ones (flatness, symmetry) served the figurative. For Greenberg, this productive contradiction made Johns the "major legatee" of Abstract Expressionism.[99]

Greenberg's sense of Johns having resolved the tensions that riddled the work of Abstract Expressionism by the 1960s is reflected in the critical responses to Guston's work at that time. Paul Schimmel has described how these works were thought of as "essentially a variation on Abstract Expressionism. Their centrally weighted compositions seemed retrograde in comparison to both the allover [*sic*] field-like quality of classic Abstract

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[94] John Cage, "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas", in *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 83.
[95] Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism" (published in *Art International*, 25 October 1962; republished in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 124.
[96] "Clement Greenberg once said that some artists, like de Kooning and me, were "homeless". He didn't mean it as a compliment, but we accepted it as one." Philip Guston, interview with Mark Stevens, 1980, in Coolidge, *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 301.
[97] Greenberg in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg,* 124.
[98] Greenberg in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg*, 127.
[99] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Art Since 1900*, 513.

Expressionism and the flatness of Johns' *Flag* and *Target* compositions."[100] Yet the critical reaction to Johns provides a model for making sense of Guston's relationship with Abstract Expressionism at the beginning of the 1960s. In an interview with David Sylvester in 1960, Guston claimed that "I think of my pictures as a kind of figuration."[101] The works he was producing at that time, such as *Mirror – to S.K.* (1960) are examples of what Craig Burnett has called "incipient figuration" [**24**]. In the painting, layers of semi-transparent colour, applied in dry patches, gradually coalesce just off-centre in "a looming black head caught in the act of recognising and transforming itself."[102] The painting's tensions build from the territory of recognition. "Centrally weighted", the painting does seem to pull against the "allover" quality with which the New York School had become identified.

However, I argue that Guston's responses to those traditions were parallel to the critical readings established at the same time. Describing his struggles with representation, Guston told Sylvester about painting an image of a "can with brushes in it", before claiming that "I couldn't tolerate it…It became signs and symbols and I don't like signs."[103] Guston likely painted over this lost work. The image of the brush-filled paint can would reemerge in Guston's small panels towards the end of the decade, in works including *Untitled (Easel)* (1968), before being worked into larger compositions, such as *The Studio* (1969) [**25**]. Somewhere between 1960 and 1968, then, Guston established a means to generate a figurative practice that evaded signification. Whether he had Johns' own works showing cans filled with brushes in mind is unknown; Slifkin has identified a similar object to Johns' *Painted Bronze (Savarin)* (1960) sculpture in the foreground of *The Studio* [**26**].[104] Regardless, what this unexpected kinship reveals are possibilities for painting beyond Abstract Expressionism, by making the "homeless" quality of the work a positive characteristic, rather than evidence of anachronism. It is Steinberg, again, who seems to provide a means to understand this. I argue that his analysis of Johns establishes a critical framework for comprehending Guston's own address to Abstract Expressionism many years later. In a

[100] Schimmel in Ferguson (ed.), *Hand-Painted Pop,* 41.
[101] David Sylvester, "Philip Guston", recorded March 1960, New York City, in *Interviews with American Artists* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 92.
[102] Craig Burnett, *The Studio* (London: Afterall Books, 2014), 22.
[103] Guston in Sylvester, *Interviews*, 95.
[104] Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 44.

description that seems to anticipate the paintings of Guston's Marlborough exhibition – which he would produce a decade after the Johns show in 1958 – Steinberg called Johns' works

> situations wherein the subjects are constantly found and lost, submerged and recovered. He regains that perpetual oscillation which characterized our looking at pre-abstract art. …Johns succeeds in making the pendulum swing within the flatland of post-Abstract Expressionist art.[105]

I suggest that the submergence and recovery of the subject is at play in *The Deluge*; the painting's multiple significations – towards Rothko, towards the image of the flood, towards the practice of erasure in painting – invites a reading of "perpetual oscillation." Steinberg's mention of "flatland" is certainly an allusion to Greenberg's insistence on "flatness" in his 1960 essay "Modernist Painting" and its assertion of the "limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment."[106] Slifkin has shown how Guston's 1970 painting *Flatlands* is a "riposte to Greenberg's essay", revelling in the very qualities Greenberg saw as redundant, including illusionistic representation of surfaces and objects [**27**].[107]

The painting, which hung in the Marlborough exhibition, shows a disconnected array of objects familiar from Guston's panel paintings of two years previously, including planks of wood, disembodied hands and feet, brick walls, clouds, a clock, and two Klan hoods. Like *The Deluge*, it is an emphatically horizontal painting, which is reflected in its production. Guston worked on it from right to left, close to the canvas, which seems registered not only in the lateral transformation of shapes as the artist free-associated across the surface, but also in the temporal poles allegorised in two objects: on the right-hand side, a clock, showing 4 o'clock (presumably, given Guston's nocturnal practice, 4 a.m.), and on the left, a rising sun. In a public talk in 1978, Guston described the making of the painting: "I painted this picture

[105] Steinberg, *Other Criteria,* 25.
[106] Craig Staff, *After Modernist Painting: The History of a Contemporary Practice* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 67.
[107] Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 118-9.

without stepping back to judge it. I started on the right and kept going all the way to the left."[108] Guston's figuring of the temporality of production in *Flatlands* responds to the definition of action painting as conceptualised by his friend Harold Rosenberg in 1952, summarised by Slifkin as "unpremeditated, instinctive, and immediate".[109] Guston often mentioned the painting's relationship to his own practice of the 1950s, in which he painted very close to the canvas, not stepping back until the work was complete.[110] *Flatlands* seems to be an anomaly in revising this approach. It is the exception that proves the rule of Guston's production of large canvases after 1969. Aside from *Flatlands*, they were made through a process of moving towards and away from the work, seeing and judging it from a distance, which recuperates procedures that predated his abstract work, and which introduce additional critical frameworks for his representational practice.

Making murals in the 60s

Like all of the large canvases that were shown at the Marlborough exhibition, *The Deluge* was produced by first stapling a large unstretched canvas onto the vertical painting wall in the Woodstock studio.[111] This wall, composed of two large pieces of plastered wood held in place by wooden poles stretching from floor to ceiling, occupied the approximate centre of the rectangular studio. Its position and scale allowed Guston the space to see his work from a range of distances. Reversing the "stepped-in" procedure of his abstractions, he was able to work from a physically detached position that was closer to his practice as a mural painter of the 1930s and 40s. In her 1988 book *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston*, the artist's daughter Musa Mayer describes the scale of her father's work at this time in terms that evoke his own artistic past:

[108] Philip Guston, talk at "Art/Not Art?" Conference, University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, February 27th, 1978, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 284.
[109] Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 159.
[110] Guston himself told Dore Ashton in 1976 that this technical decision emerged from a desire to "see if I could paint a picture without stepping back to look at it…not only to suspend criticism but also to test myself, to see if my sense of structure was inherent." Ashton, 84.
[111] In Michael Blackwood's film *Philip Guston: A Life Lived* (1982), footage from 1971 shows Guston at work in the studio. My description of his practice is based partly on that footage, and partly on my own visit to Woodstock in December 2023. The cinderblock studio was completed in 1968, and the painting wall installed simultaneously.

> In 1969 and 1970, my father had begun working big, some of the canvases as large as six by ten feet, grander in scale than anything he'd done since the old mural days of the 1930s.[112]

It is clear, then, that the transformation of Guston's work at the end of the 1960s was enacted not only in terms of his revival of representational content, but also in his reorientation of studio practice. The scale of the largest Marlborough paintings, such as *The Deluge, A Day's Work* and *Blackboard*, was underscored by the graphic clarity of their contents: they seemed to invite the same kind of distanced viewership that a large-scale public mural demanded. Even the ostensible "crudeness" of Guston's representation of figures and objects recalls the formal simplicity and roughness of murals seen up close. The resistance of the painting wall, meanwhile, not only enabled certain painterly tropes to be easily carried out, such as scraping out the paint or gouging into it with a reversed paintbrush, but also effected an elision between canvas and wall that invites reflection upon the histories of painting in public sites. In recuperating the viewer dynamic and painterly strategies of Rothko's Abstract Expressionist work in *The Deluge*, Guston at the same time revived unresolved discourses around large-scale painting from the same period. This provides a means to consider his frames of viewing Italian fresco painting in the trip he took shortly after the Marlborough exhibition, which is the subject of the third chapter of this thesis.

The Deluge is the most wall-like of the paintings that hung in the Marlborough exhibition. Others show clearly described interior (such as *Open Window* (1969) and *Scared Stiff* (1970)) or exterior walls (such as *Outskirts* (1969) and *City* (1970)), but in every case these walls exist within the quasi-fictive zones of each painting's space. In *The Deluge*, uniquely, the canvas *itself* seems to substitute for an actual wall, a quality that would have been enhanced by the resistance the painting wall provided to the touch of Guston's brush. This obdurate quality is emphasised by the nail of the small canvas which seems to pierce it. The bug that appears to scuttle across its surface, meanwhile, serves to reiterate the canvas'

[112] Mayer, *Night Studio*, 149.

invocation of a wall's vertical expanse. Yet its detachment from the painting wall and subsequent stretching and transportation to the Marlborough Gallery does not preclude *The Deluge* from being understood in terms of muralism. As I will show, the mural was a complex category whose hybrid status raised questions about painting's relationship to public space. Detachment, dislocation and even damage are intrinsic to its history. It is this hybridity, and not its associations with didactic communication, that made *The Deluge*'s evocation of the painted wall significant in Guston's figuring of painting's public address at the end of the 1960s.

Critics of the Marlborough exhibition noted the works' apparent allusions to the 1930s, a period in which Guston, like many of his peers, was intermittently employed as a mural painter. In his review for *Time* magazine, for instance, Robert Hughes noted that, in this works, "it is as if Guston flipped back to the late 30s, when he was a WPA muralist – those remote days when it was still believed that political comment could give art relevance."[113] Indeed, one repeated aspect of the negative feedback to Guston's paintings was an identification of their political anachronism, regardless of the evident metaphorical intent of the Klan figures, who were never shown engaging in the kinds of rallies or acts of violence with which they were associated. Even Harold Rosenberg's positive review for the *New Yorker* reads the content of the work straightforwardly: the crudeness of the paintings' facture "enables him to give a simple account of the simple-mindedness of violence."[114] With a few exceptions, none of the critics of the exhibition were likely to have been aware of the appearance of the Klan in some of Guston's earlier paintings.[115] The scale of the work, and their ostensible allusions to modern life, was enough to evoke a context of 1930s muralism. During the Boston leg of the 1970 exhibition, Diana Loercher in the *Christian Science Monitor* described the paintings as "exceptionally large caricatures of modern man in the modern world that can best be described as cartoon murals."[116] Loercher's interpretation rightly names the paradoxical qualities of the Marlborough paintings, which

[113] Robert Hughes, "Art: Ku Klux Komix", *Time*, November 9th, 1970.
[114] Harold Rosenberg, "Liberation from Detachment", *The New Yorker*. November 7th 1970, 136.
[115] "Only Harold Rosenberg and Bill Berkson, who were friends with Guston, were aware of the specific source for the motif". Robert Slifkin, *Philip Guston and the "1930s Renaissance" of the 1960s* (The Art Bulletin, Vol. 93, No.2, June 2011), 21, FN1.
[116] Diana Loercher, "Two Individualists" (review), *Christian Science Monitor*, December 4th 1970, 17.

brought together the imposing scale of the mural with the intimacy, humour and speed of manufacture associated with the cartoon. Yet Guston's evocation of the mural in his work of the late 1960s raises questions about painting's relationship to the social and political world that have to date gone underdeveloped in the literature on the artist's work.

Guston's critics' evocation of muralism in their reviews of the Marlborough exhibition seemed to treat the term as a stable category, which conflated large scale, politically explicit content, and a didactic clarity of expression. Yet murals had always had a problematic and unresolved status within American postwar art history. As Jody Patterson has pointed out, the modernist 1930s mural was notable for its "categorical unwieldiness". On the one hand, most of the abstract murals of that time were made on portable canvases, refuting associations of permanence and site-specificity; on the other, many murals of the 1930s were painted over or destroyed within a decade of their production.[117] Guston's own history as a muralist is similarly marked by absences, erasures or ambiguities. Further, the narrative of the artist's revival of imagery of the Klan itself refers to three lost, erased or destroyed works of art, all of which depicted the Klan. These were his 1930 portable cement mural for the John Reed Club, Los Angeles, which was vandalised and subsequently lost in 1933;[118] his lost 1931 painting *Conspirators*, the preparatory drawing for which was only recovered by Guston in 1973;[119] and his huge mural *The Struggle Against Terrorism* from 1935*,* made for the Museo Regional Michoacan, Morelia, Mexico with Reuben Kadish and Jules Langsner, which was hidden behind a false wall shortly afterwards [**28**]. This was also revealed, coincidentally, in 1973.[120]

[117] Jody Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses: Painters, Politics and Public Murals in 1930s New York* New Haven and London: Yale, 2020, 7.
[118] The John Reed Club mural, one of a group of seven works produced by the Bloc of Painters, a group to which Guston belonged, was vandalised by the Red Squad, an anti-Communist wing of the Los Angeles Police Department. This seems to have been collateral damage during the Squad's violent disbanding of Japan Night, a fundraising event at the Club, on 11th February 1933.
[119] Guston's rediscovery of this drawing, his first known image of a Klansman, anticipates his ambivalent treatment of the subject some 38 years later to such an extent that Harry Cooper has described it as "a vanishing point from which much of his subsequent work was projected." Cooper, *Recognizing Guston (in four slips)*, 124.
[120] I do not think it likely that Guston was aware of this, but it is nevertheless a poetic coincidence.

Entangled within Guston's revived imagery of the Klan, then, was a history of damage, occlusion and loss.[121] In evoking muralist scale and practice in his work around 1969, Guston invited consideration of the frailty of paintings for public sites.[122] As I will explore in Chapter Two of this thesis, this framing informed his encounter with historical Italian fresco painting immediately following the Marlborough exhibition. And yet in recuperating the viewer dynamic and compositional strategies of the Abstract Expressionist canvas, specifically Rothko's, *The Deluge* embodied that movement's problematic relationship with the mural. It is by invoking these histories of large-scale works of art – the historical fresco, the modern mural, and the abstract canvas – that the painting articulates its reflection upon public address.

In reading *The Deluge* as evocative at once of muralism and large-scale abstraction, I want to consider it in relation to histories of definitional uncertainty that inhere to both forms. One such unresolved object is Jackson Pollock's 1943 work *Mural*, a huge oil and casein painting on canvas, around two and a half metres high by six metres long, which was commissioned for the entrance hall of the collector and patron Peggy Guggenheim's Manhattan apartment **[29]**. Composed of a frieze-like sequence of largely vertical forms punctuated with curlicues, patches of bright colour, and spattered paint, *Mural* was conceived to be encountered from right to left, following the physical movement of a visitor to the apartment. Having never painted a mural previously, unlike many of his Abstract Expressionist colleagues – including Guston – Pollock was "ignorant of the technicalities and atelier traditions of mural painting".[123] However, like Guston, Pollock had trained with

[121] While apprenticed to David Alfaro Siqueiros in Los Angeles, Guston assisted on the production of *Street Meeting* (1932, Choinard Art Institute, Los Angeles, CA; destroyed), *Portrait of Mexico Today* (1932, extant; moved to Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 2001) and *América Tropical* (1932, El Pueblo de Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA; whitewashed soon after, and rediscovered in the late 1960s). Aside from the Morelia mural, Guston also made the *Workers' Alliance Center Mural* with Kadish and Sande McCoy (1934, Workers' Alliance Center, Los Angeles, CA; extant); *Physical Growth of Man* with Reuben Kadish (1935-6, City of Hope, Duarte, CA; extant); *Early Mail Service and the Construction of Railroads* (1938, Commerce Georgia Post Office, GA; extant); *Work the American Way* (1939, New York World's Fair, New York, NY; destroyed); *Work and Play* (1940, Queensbridge, NY; poorly restored and subsequently disowned by Guston); and *Pulpwood Logging* (1941, Laconia, NH; extant).

[122] Possibly the most high-profile case of a mural's destruction was Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* (1932), which was plastered over in May 1932 after the artist refused to remove a portrait of Vladimir Lenin that the artist had included.

[123] Francis V. O'Connor, "Jackson Pollock's *Mural* for Peggy Guggenheim: Its Legend, Documentation, and Redefinition of Wall Painting", in *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2004), 161.

Siqueiros, and his painting's experimental techniques are certainly a legacy of that encounter.[124] Yet the Mexican artist's Marxist belief in painting's political import, and his disdain for easel painting, sat uneasily with *Mural*'s site and the conditions of its commission.

As Caroline A. Jones has argued, "Guggenheim's foyer secured a safe zone for the play of capital" in which the legacies of Mexican muralists could be reduced to a "tingling *frisson* of Mexican activism… [which] gave its abstraction a further aura of the avant-garde."[125] This internal contradiction was embedded in *Mural*'s form, just as much as its title. Indeed, Pollock himself seemed fully convinced that it was *within* the terms of this apparent contradiction that the next step for American modernism might be taken. In his 1947 application for a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, he announced that "I intend to paint large movable pictures which will function between the easel and the mural. …The pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state, and an attempt to point out the direction of the future, without arriving there completely."[126]

The Deluge embodies the contradictions of large-scale canvases at the end of the 1960s. Abstract Expressionism's repressed relationship with Mexican mural painters – a debt that has only relatively recently started to be fully explored[127] – invites a reframing of that movement's troubled sense of political address, as well as dismantling authorial mythologies that continue to cling to it. I argue that Guston's shift in studio procedures

[124] Pollock worked in Siqueiros' Experimental Workshop in New York in 1936, learning how to use spray paint, stencils, collage, and dripped or splattered paint. "Not until 1947…would [Pollock] begin to process his experiences at the Experimental Workshop." Like Guston, Pollock did not discuss the influence of Mexican painters during the height of his fame, but its importance to both of their developments was profound. Barbara Haskell, "América: Mexican Muralism and Art in the United States, 1925-1945" in *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 38.
[125] Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 225-6. Guston himself rarely discussed the significance of Mexican painting on his work; when asked to discuss it in the early 1970s, he declined, "even as there was perhaps much to say." Renato González Mello, "Prometheus Unbound: Orozco in Pomona" in *Vida Americana*, 172.
[126] Jackson Pollock (1947), quoted in David Anfam, *Jackson Pollock's Mural: Energy Made Visible* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 97.
[127] The 2020 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945* (February 17th, 2020 – January 31st, 2021) was the first major exhibition to address the underrepresented contribution of Mexican mural painters in the development of American modernism. There is doubtless more work to be done in this area.

around 1968 indicates his intention to address the unresolved history of muralism. Yet it is the very tensions that inhere to the form that rendered it available for Guston's explorations of painting's encounter with the social and political world. Neither one thing nor another, the mural provided a model for a form of painting practice that embodied the very equivocation, uncertainty, and ambivalence with which Guston himself faced the political context of his time.

1.3 Authorship and the studio

Salvaging the subject

By invoking the unresolved histories of muralism, then, *The Deluge* was able to figure studio practice itself as an articulation of equivocal political experience. This was borne out, too, in the facture of these works. Guston mentioned *Flatlands* in relation to another painting: *The Deluge*. In a public talk in 1973, he described a temporal relationship between the two canvases:

> At some point, I sort of sank the whole world, like it was doomed. In fact, it's called *Deluge*. There was, at one point, a lot of stuff below and lots going on and somehow or other it got sunk in that black water with a few forms floating on top. And that's one of the last ones. It's called *Flatlands*. It's what left.[128]

Five years later, at another talk, Guston again referred to the two canvases as a pair: "I asked myself, "What would it be like if the flood disappeared, what would be left in this wasteland?" This [*Flatlands*] is it."[129] As I will explore in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the flood's invocation of temporality – its implication of before and after – assumed significant resonance in Guston's address to historical catastrophe by the middle of the 1970s. It is true that, as Kate Nesin has pointed out, that "these works are unlikely companions; certainly one neither requires nor summons the other." Yet the narrative connection forged between

[128] Philip Guston, talk at Yale Summer School of Music and Art, 1973, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 224.
[129] Philip Guston, talk at "Art/Not Art?" Conference, 1978, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 284.

the paintings "give[s] us permission to stand in front of each painting and imagine a time when it was different."[130] What the "pairing" of *Flatlands* and *The Deluge* enables, then, is a means of considering painterly labour in allegorical terms. Guston's allusion to the field of dark paint as "that black water" reveals his interest in applying narrative logic to the practice of painting. In the context of the Marlborough exhibition, the emergence of this thematic tests the relationship between Guston's figurative painting and Abstract Expressionism. By implicating *The Deluge* within a narrative framework, Guston reinscribed temporality within action painting, thereby enabling it to speak beyond the narrow confines of Greenbergian modernism. Indeed, in his review of the Marlborough exhibition for the *New Yorker*, Harold Rosenberg set up a dialectic between action painting and the "content" of Guston's paintings: "Put simply, action painting is not about anything, while Guston's present paintings are."[131]

Since both *The Deluge* and *Flatlands* invoke the compositional strategies, studio practices, and critical frameworks of the 1950s, it is important to establish the uses to which these anachronistic devices are put – to ask, that is, what these paintings are "about". If Oldenburg recycled the painterliness of action painting in the service of semantic play and subjective expression, and Johns subjected the painterly trace to sustained investigation, what is the manner of Guston's own recuperation? What is at stake within these works is the question of a subject's relationship to the social and political world beyond the studio walls. It is in the mobilisation of the tropes of Abstract Expressionism that Guston enables his work to register a relationship with contemporary political disorder. *The Deluge*'s restaging of Rothko, then, makes the case for the ongoing validity of the canvas as the contact zone between the privacy of the studio and the public domain of historical circumstance. This is a strategy that must be understood in terms of the kinds of critical practice previously outlined; it is, in fact, energised by them.

Christa Noel Robbins' *The Artist as Author* (2021) provides a critical context for the recuperation of aspects of the Abstract Expressionist project into the 1960s. In discussing the

[130] Nesin in *Philip Guston Now*, 213.
[131] Harold Rosenberg, "Liberation from Detachment", *The New Yorker*, November 7th 1970, 136.

situation of the abstract painter around 1960 – a position that had been rendered unstable by the practices and critiques that gained an important foothold in avant-garde culture at that time – Robbins makes the case not for its eclipse by the new framings of authorship in that culture, but for its absorption and performance of those critical positions. The central challenge levelled at the Abstract Expressionist legacy by readings of Johns at the turn of the 1960s rested ultimately in the sense of its "cleaving the gestural mark from expressionist trace", an action that destabilised the authorship of the artist, a move that might be compared to the externalisation of the painted surface in the work of Frank Stella at the end of the 1950s.[132] In both cases, what this "cleaving" engendered was an interest in the possibility of indeterminacy, in which the agency of meaning making "slips from the maker to the passerby".[133] As Caroline A. Jones has explained, in the work of Johns and Robert Rauschenberg towards the end of the 1950s, this "slip" served to shift the centre of gravity away from the private expression of the solitary painter to the endless semantic possibility of a work lived out in public: "In place of the artist's body figured by the abstract expressionist canvas, these works implied activity on the part of *others'* bodies – activity that shielded, deflected, or displaced references to the artists' own."[134]

Robbins proposes something different. In discussing the work of Jack Tworkov, an abstract painter whom Guston knew well, she argues that the sustained criticism of authorship that emerged in the 1960s, and which has often been framed in the terms Jones describes, could be staged *within* painting itself. Tworkov bemoaned his own work's "feeble" and "narrow" qualities when placed in dialogue with avant-garde practices of the early 60s such as experimental film, electronics and music. This literally transpired during a Happening entitled *TV Dinner – Homage to E.A.T (Food for Thought)* at the 92nd Street YMHA in 1961, which included participation from John Cage, Stan VanDerBeek, Robert Creeley, and Merce Cunningham, among others. Tworkov's painting *Barrier No.4* (1961) was suspended above the stage; to the artist, "it looked dirty…What possible relation can this modest painting have to this happening?" [**30**].[135] Few juxtapositions could better reveal the sense of gestural

[132] Höchdorfer, *Reserve,* 155.
[133] Caroline A. Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego" (Critical Enquiry, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Summer, 1993), 647.
[134] Jones, "Finishing", 651.
[135] Jack Tworkov, 1967, cited in Robbins, *Artist as Author,* 3.

painting's anachronism in the context of an experimental culture that ceded authority from the solitary author, and explored chance, collaboration, and open-endedness as creative principles. At nearly two and a half metres tall by nearly four metres long, *Barrier No.4* is a huge, unwieldy object, in which an uneven grid of white marks is worked over with areas of loosely brushed reds and pinks; a broken grid of dark gestures is superimposed on top. In their reiteration of the format of the canvas surface, these marks seem to probe at the expressive limitations (or "barriers") of the Abstract Expressionist canvas. One might well imagine Guston turning away from such an event, sighing, "Well, I am still involved with the dream." Yet Robbins suggests otherwise. An attention to Tworkov's laments,

> which orbit around questions of intention, effect, and temporality, also reveals something held in common across that scene: a concern with the *question* of authorship and a commitment to investigating its significance in and as practice… the difference [between these practices] are less ideological than technical. …such differences are best located in the means by which questions such as authorship arise, rather than in the questions themselves.[136]

Robbins' argument provides a context for the recuperation of Abstract Expressionist viewer dynamics within the heterodox world of American art of the 1960s. Painters like Guston, then, could act "as self-conscious agents taking up the question of authorship in order to investigate its terms."[137] This "concern with the question of authorship" is one that is staged within Guston's paintings of the end of the decade. It is certainly the case that paintings such as *The Studio*, with its Klansman painting a self-portrait, reflect on a post-Abstract Expressionist conception of the author. This thematic of the anti-heroic activity of artistic practice remains a constant thread throughout Guston's later paintings, with the artist shown variously in bed, gazing at the bottom of an empty bottle, or staring incredulously at his own work. Yet I argue that such questions are dramatized within the practice of painting too, and are especially invited by the scale, composition, and facture of works such as *The Deluge*. At issue in these technical decisions is the tension of public and private brought

[136] Robbins, *Artist as Author*, 3-4.
[137] Robbins, *Artist as Author*, 9.

forward by the critical context of the late 1960s. Looking back on that period, Hal Foster claimed that at stake was "the nature of meaning and the status of the subject, both of which are held to be public, not private, produced in the physical interface with the actual world, not in the mental space of idealist conception." In doing so, it "contradicts the two dominant models of the abstract expressionist, the artist as existential creator (advanced by Harold Rosenberg) and the artist as formal critic (advanced by Greenberg)."[138]

As contemporary artist Amy Sillman has written, for Guston "the subject position is a default starting point, and he occupies that position straightforwardly."[139] Yet this does not imply that he did so uncritically. Robbins has discussed how painting itself is often "only one moment of articulation or enunciation on a continuous line of practice, which includes activities, relations, and thought processes that precede the act of making (or viewing, as the case may be) the work itself. It is out of this extended notion of practice… that the very idea of authorship emerges as a possible content on which to go to work."[140]

The subject position that is at the core of the critiques of Abstract Expressionism that I have delineated so far might then be recuperated in terms of a self that exists only in relative terms. Guston's authorship in his final decade of production can, I argue, be read in such a way. Not only did his paintings seem to reflect on his own production – a subject that accrued urgency around the middle of the 1970s, as I will discuss in the final chapter of this thesis – his practice can be seen as "extended" at this time. Reading Guston not only as a painter but as a teacher, collaborator, printmaker, draftsman, public speaker and interlocutor not only provides a means of thinking more broadly about his status as a cultural figure, it also helps to specify the nature of his ongoing dialogue with Abstract Expressionism. I want to show how this dispersed field of practice enabled the questions of authorship that inhered to the Abstract Expressionist legacy to be articulated.

[138] Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism" in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), 40.
[139] Amy Sillman, "From Garbage Cans to God" in *Philip Guston Now*, 63.
[140] Robbins, *Artist as Author*, 13.

"It may seem absurd": the studio and the world

Three months before the opening of Guston's exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in 1970, the exhibition *Information* opened just a few blocks away, at the Museum of Modern Art.[141] *Information*, curated by Kynaston McShine, showed largely text-based and politically engaged conceptual art, and very little painting. In the exhibition's catalogue, McShine articulated this absence by characterising the medium as politically impotent in the face of contemporary social turmoil: "It may seem inappropriate, if not absurd, to get up in the morning, walk into a room, and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas. What can you as a young artist do that seems relevant and meaningful?"[142] A politically engaged practice, then, emerges from a spatial dynamic at odds with painting's comparatively cloistered environment (comically characterised by the underwhelming phrase "walk into a room"). This framing of the "relevant" artist as a peripatetic figure unbound to a singular location was reflected in the exhibition's recalibration of viewers' engagement.

By imagining viewers as, among other things, participants in a pseudo-democracy (Hans Haacke), subjects in a televised interview (Group Frontera), or data processors (Siah Armajani), the exhibition sought to activate viewership through acts of reading and cognition; "sense perception [was] reconfigured as data transmission".[143] As Julia Bryan-Wilson has described it, *Information*'s antagonistic relationship with the practice of painting was rooted in assumptions about the medium's perceived interpretative limitations: "After suggesting that the medium of painting is bankrupt – one suspects abstraction is his specific target – McShine offers up an alternative in its place: the open-ended conceptual art on

[141] *Information*, July 2nd – September 20th 1970, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. I am indebted to Robert Slifkin for discussing this exhibition in relation to Guston's work, which he does in terms of the concept of "literalism" in 1960s American art, as a foil to Guston's own. Slifkin, *Out of Time*, 35-8.
[142] Kynaston McShine, *Information* (exh. cat.), New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970, 138.
[143] Eve Meltzer "The Dream of the Information World", in Oxford Art Journal (Volume 29, no. 1, 2006), p123. Hans Haacke presented his work *MoMA-Poll* (1970), which invited visitors to cast a vote in response to a question about US involvement in Cambodia and its purchase on the forthcoming election, which implicated museum trustee Nelson Rockefeller; Group Frontera set up a makeshift television studio and asked participants to answer a series of questions, which other audience members could then view (an untitled project, 1970); and Siah Armajani showed *Number Between 0 And 1* (1969), a print-out of all the digits between 0 and 1.

display in *Information*, whose meaning was completed by the viewer. The new "relevant" art therefore hinged on the concept not only of "information" but of "participation".[144] The dialectic of open (engagement) and closed (practice) informed the politics of the exhibition, by which standard painting could only fall short.[145]

McShine's critique of the "absurd" practice of painting was in fact prefigured by statements made by artists and writers themselves in the years leading up to the exhibition. In 1963, art critic Max Kozloff wrote a long letter to *Art International* which addressed Clement Greenberg's "After Abstract Expressionism" from the previous year, which had espoused "the only way to high pictorial art" – namely, the colour field painting of Newman, Rothko, and Clyfford Still.[146] Kozloff responded in ways that anticipate McShine's critique: "How futile it is to affirm – and yet Mr Greenberg does so – that for not just a very few, but *all*, artists of ambition, the most urgent challenge is still the inventive placement of one colour against another."[147] In 1967, the painter David Aronson, a close friend of Guston's in Boston, and a future colleague at Boston University, discussed the pressures on the practice of painting in the face of the turmoil of the time: "It was fairly easy for me to realise that my artistic salvation did not lie in the tension between two different kinds of red on opposite sides of a canvas".[148] Guston's own statement about his work's reaction to very similar pressures is remarkably similar to these descriptions. In an interview in 1977, nearly a decade after the emergence of his late figuration, Guston ventriloquised his younger self:

[144] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2009), 199.
[145] One work, which existed only as a proposal for the exhibition, did have some overlap with Guston's interest in historical painting: John Baldessari's *Cadaver Piece (Proposal for "Information" Show)* (1970). Baldessari's "hypothetical" work involved displaying a human corpse lying on a surface behind a false wall. This scene could be observed one viewer at a time through a peephole positioned to generate a view closely resembling the feet-first composition of Andrea Mantegna's painting *Dead Christ* (c1480, Brera, Milan). Despite the self-evidently "literal" nature of Baldessari's proposal, its mobilisation of the tropes of historical painting, and its troubling of the embodied viewership generally projected in Minimalism, mounts a proposal for painting's ongoing vitality, a proposal all the more apposite for being a hypothetical one.
[146] Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism" (published in *Art International*, 25 October 1962; republished in O'Brian, 1993), 131.
[147] Max Kozloff, "A Letter to the Editor", *Art International*, June 25, 1963, 88.
[148] David Aronson, 1967, in Judith Bookbinder *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism as Alternative Modernism* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), 250.

"What kind of a man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything – and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?"[149]

All three of these statements gain their comic traction through a description of painterly work that is unmistakeably redolent of Abstract Expressionism. This characterisation rests on the cultural associations of the studio. As Caroline A. Jones has shown, for artists of the later 1960s such as those on display in *Information,* the studio *per se* "became the focus of an inversion and the locus of a generative critique…painting looked real only when the reality of the world outdoors had pervaded the studio, changing artists' roles, production methods, and the work itself."[150] Daniel Buren, whose work for *Information* consisted of sheets of paper printed with stripes which occupied the place of advertising on New York City buses for the duration of the exhibition, wrote in his essay "The Function of the Studio" in 1971 that "The art of yesterday and today is not only marked by the studio as an essential, often unique, place of production; it proceeds from it. All my work proceeds from its extinction."[151]

Guston's description – which, as I will explore in the following chapter, is only one of many rationales he provided for his shift to figuration at the end of the 1960s – particularly resembles McShine's in its figuring of artistic practice in spatial terms. What is implied is a desire to bridge the gap between "home" and "studio", to open up the hermetic workspace to "the public world of political life."[152] The assumption that postwar American painters "increasingly abandoned the social world in order to explore their own, personal, states of mind" is what underpins all of these critiques.[153] However, these conceptions of painting as fundamentally private rest on readings of Abstract Expressionism that essentialise the practices with which it is associated. Guston's statement, made in an interview with a major publication towards the end of a prolific career as a means of explaining its qualities,

[149] Philip Guston interviewed by Jerry Tallmer, "Creation is for Beauty Parlors", The *New York Post*, April 9th, 1977. Robert Slifkin pointed out this connection in *Out of Time*, 35.
[150] Caroline A. Jones *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.
[151] Daniel Buren "The Function of the Studio" (1971) in *Documents of Contemporary Art: The Studio* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press / Whitechapel Gallery, edited by Jens Hoffmann, 2012), 87.
[152] Jones, *Machine,* 20.
[153] Robbins, *Artist as Author,* 24.

strongly suggests that the artist's work *did* manage to resolve the tensions it describes. It is a quotation that remains dominant in essays and reviews of Guston's work, as well as being used in interpretation texts in exhibitions. And yet by the standards of McShine, Buren and others, Guston's ongoing commitment not only to painting but to the sealed world of the studio foreclosed the possibility of his work's political import.

This critique is activated in Guston's depictions of interior and exterior space in his Marlborough paintings. Space is figured continually in shorthand renderings of windows, brick walls and distant cities. Where external (public) space is a zone of implied criminality (Klansmen huddle in cars as though making an escape in *Riding Around, City Limits, Central Avenue, Dawn* and *Edge of Town*), internal (private) space is riven with regret and accusation (*Downtown, By the Window, Remorse, Bad Habits*) or legal confrontation (*Caught, Courtroom, Evidence*). The artist's solitude is therefore figured as perverse, even criminal. *The Studio* dramatizes this collision of private space and public politics in its continual oscillation between the trappings of hermetic production (heavy curtains, tins of brushes, contemplative action) and public political signage (the Klan hood/s, doubled in the act of painting). These works seem to embody what Mary Drach McInnes has called the "two major battlefields" of Guston's late paintings: "the private studio in which Guston struggles with his identity as an artist and the public field in which he makes visible his meditations on war and aggression. Guston's private conflicts in fact collide with his brutal narratives."[154]

For Guston, it *did* in fact "seem inappropriate, if not absurd" to expose oneself to the turbulence of contemporary global politics and then walk into a studio and make a painting. And yet "adjust[ing] a red to a blue" remains a characteristic not only of his abstract production, which he presumably had in mind, but of his figurative practice too. I suggest, then, that the "absurd" as described by McShine is a positive feature of Guston's sense of his painting's politics. As Elly Thomas has noted, "For an artist as acutely self-critical as Guston to see the horrors of the Shoah, the Vietnam war, police violence against anti-war protestors and civil rights activists, and then respond with a painting…is an endeavor that necessitates a

[154] Mary Drach McInnes "Guston's Private and Public Battles" in Kim Sichel and Mary Drach McInnes, *Philip Guston, 1975-1980: Private and Public Battles* exh. cat Boston University Art Gallery (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1994), 9.

form encapsulating a sense of the inadequacy of the response."[155] Thomas names the "absurd" – what she calls "a play with incongruity" – as the chief characteristic of Guston's articulation of this "sense of inadequacy". In doing so, "one is able to positively dismiss resolution in order to place unresolved process at the centre of the work."[156] The "play with incongruity" goes some way towards accounting for Guston's Klansmen, who are accorded the sensitivities of the artist and the critic in *Red Picture* and *The Studio*, and whose triangular form is continually subject to ludic transformation. I want to read this notion of the absurd more broadly, however, in thinking of the anachronistic deployment of Abstract Expressionist dynamics in *The Deluge*.

The absurdity of these characteristics is, I suggest, productive; its inability to resolve the distance between the studio and the world is the position from which its politics are articulated. As Christa Noel Robbins has phrased it, painting "is the mechanism by which the limits of both self-expression and individual action are productively investigated."[157] These are the very limits at play in the content and the form of Guston's Marlborough paintings: the Klansmen are shown constantly coming up against literal limits, from the geographical inferences of *Edge of Town* and *City Limits* to the sense of legal infraction in *Courtroom* and *Evidence*. Yet I restore *The Deluge* to the centre of this discussion because its allusion to Rothko's expressive dynamics serves, too, to demarcate the boundaries and restrictions of that painterly mode. Like Rothko himself in the late 1960s, as I have explored, a refusal to participate in painterly absorption is itself a productive strategy. In drawing on Rothko's work in the context of its anachronism and critique, Guston's painting collapses "self-expression and individual action". Its failure to square the studio and the world is the very means by which this approach takes shape.

[155] Elly Thomas, *Play and the Artist's Creative Process: The Work of Philip Guston and Eduardo Paolozzi* (London: Routledge, 2019), 63.
[156] Thomas, *Play and the Artist's Creative Process,* 154.
[157] Robbins, *Artist as Author,* 60.

Chapter Two: To bear witness: Guston and the mediated image

2.1 Guston and mediated catastrophe

"Stuck in front of the TV": Guston's *Blackboard*

Guston's painting *Blackboard* (1969), which hung in the Marlborough exhibition, shows three white Klan hoods contained within a round-edged black rectangle, which hovers at the centre of a large field of dirty pink and grey marks [**31**]. Towards the upper edge of the canvas, a thickly painted, slightly bowed black horizontal line runs across the entire width of the painting. To the left and right of centre, grey forms in various states of articulation appear through the muddied pink of the composition: one small grey rectangle to the right is the most clearly formed. This field is punctuated by painterly effects that closely resemble the artist's abstract paintings produced earlier in the same decade. *May Sixty-Five* (1965), for example, which was shown at Guston's 1966 Jewish Museum exhibition and is characteristic of the works shown there, is very close in facture, palette and composition to *Blackboard* [**32**]. The willful contamination of colour through wet-in-wet application, the visibility of earlier layers of paint in the final work, and the dark rectangular form that occupies the centre of the canvas are certainly carried over from this and many other paintings produced by the artist between around 1962 and 1965. *May Sixty-Five*'s building of form through erasure – the zigzagging, darting grey marks that determine the outer limits of the black rectangle – is repurposed in the later painting in response to historical circumstances that lie outside of formal concerns. The title's association with erasure and the overlaying of marks seems illustrated by the painting's strategies of revelation and concealment.[158]

[158] The Guston literature has tended to treat this painting as a direct illustration of its title, and is thereby read as a commentary on the American education system; my reading suggests an alternative framing more in line with Guston's elusive or metaphorical use of titles. In Tate's label for the painting, "hoods appear on the blackboard, infiltrating the classroom… [the image of the hoods] points to power dynamics and white supremacy in schools." *Philip Guston*, Tate Modern, 5th October, 2023 - 25th February, 2024.

Blackboard is closely related to *The Deluge* and is likely to have been painted shortly before it.[159] Albeit slightly less wide, it is of similar height (like *The Deluge*, it is around two metres high, and is nearly three metres wide), and it shares its emphatically horizontal orientation. The presence of the dark horizontal line and the agitated facture of the space below it recalls the delineation and watery body of *The Deluge'*s dark sea. Indeed, at one point, these paintings were alike enough to be almost pendants. The position of the three Klan heads is very similar to the same motif that occupied the centre of that painting before it was painted over. Like *The Deluge*, *Blackboard*'s flattened composition, which distinguishes it from many of the paintings it hung alongside, invites comparison between the surface of the canvas and the painted wall. Where *The Deluge* deploys tropes of pictorial illusionism to present its red field as a wall, *Blackboard*'s combination of suspended rectangular shapes, and the horizontal line, which can read as a picture rail, makes it close to paintings like *Open Window*, which shows an array of paintings hanging in a pink-walled interior, a similar horizontal line bisecting the composition towards the very top [**33**].

Blackboard operates similarly to *The Deluge* in that it stages the tensions of the portable canvas and the painted wall that inhere to the history of mural painting. And yet *Blackboard's* dark rectangle is not like the hanging canvases of *Open Window*, and the pale tonality of its surface engenders a sense instead of indeterminate location and uncertain form. This is in part a result of its channelling of many of the formal qualities of paintings such as *May Sixty-Five*, but it is a result too of the painting's principal concerns. The round-edged shape in the centre of the work – which is unique among the paintings in the Marlborough exhibition – provides a different frame of reference for Guston's interest in painting's account of exposure to historical circumstance. The wet-in-wet facture of the dark rectangle resembles less the blackboard of its title than the hazy static of a television screen.

[159] I make this claim with reference to the Guston catalogue raisonné, which lists *Blackboard* immediately before *The Deluge*. https://www.gustoncrllc.org/home/search_result?page=10&search%5Btag%5D=Figurative (accessed 29th June, 2024).

Blackboard's depiction of the Klan is quite unlike the other images of the same subject in the Marlborough paintings, none of which are shown within an internal frame.[160] The painting's evocation of television within a canvas that unmistakeably recuperates the visual language of his own abstract paintings provides a means to consider his work's staging of abstraction's inadequacies as responses to the political circumstances of their time. The televised image suggested in *Blackboard* brings together several notable concerns of Guston's later practice, principally the limits and failures of representation; the act of witnessing traumatic and catastrophic historical events; and the temporal dislocations of the art object. In this sense, both *The Deluge* and *Blackboard* reflect upon painting's encounter with other forms of image distribution, and in doing so stage a consideration of the medium's limitations.

In this chapter, I discuss Guston's figuring of witnessing in his paintings and works on paper produced around 1968. The artist's encounter with mediated images of American violence in that year informed his charge to his own practice to reflect the texture of that experience, a strategy which first emerged in his drawings. These works on paper extrapolated the issues of recognition that were brought to the fore in the media dissemination of the catastrophic events in Chicago; in doing so, they reorientated Guston's practice outwards, reframing the paper or canvas as a contact zone between the artist and the socio-political world beyond the studio walls. I discuss this recalibration in dialogue with works by some of Guston's contemporaries, who similarly sought to register the encounter with traumatic realities as mediated through television and photography. I read Guston's sense of bearing witness through a critical framework by which the act of witnessing is by definition inadequate to the task of representation. It is in this sense that I argue that these marginal works in Guston's oeuvre – few of which have to date been subject to sustained art-historical attention – provide a means to substantiate claims made in the previous chapter about Guston's dramatization of the inadequacies of his medium, as well as to establish the territory for the registration of historical catastrophe that is a central motivation for the artist's production several years afterwards.

[160] A distinction might be made here with paintings of Klansmen in cars, whose roofs act as internal frames within the painting (such as *City Limits*, 1969), yet these are contiguous with the fictive world of the painting in a very different way to *Blackboard*'s screen.

The literature on Guston has largely followed the artist's lead in relating his turn to representational imagery around 1968 with his encounter, through television and print media, with footage and photography of the Chicago riots during the Democratic National Convention that summer. In 1972, in a talk at Yale Summer School of Music and Art, Guston specified these events as formative, describing how "the Democratic [National] Convention took place, in 1968, and like everybody else I was very disturbed about it."[161] By 1974, Guston presented his late work as self-evidently "influenced" by the events in Chicago: "The Chicago Convention was going on and I was stuck in front of the TV like everybody else, watching this thing and reading about it, and I went in [to the studio] one night and started [drawing]."[162] Even at the very end of his life, he continued to refer to Chicago. In conversation with Roberta Smith in 1980, he described it as "sort of a trigger, pushed me over."[163] As I will explore, it was not merely the actual events of Chicago that mattered; it was the pressure their mediation placed upon representation. The encounter with traumatic imagery of disruption and violence was to be processed not at the level of iconography, but of facture and form.

The riots on the streets of Chicago in late August 1968 were certainly not the only decisive events of that year that might equally be described as a "trigger" for Guston's explorations of American violence in the Marlborough paintings. As Harry Cooper has identified, these might also be taken to include the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr and Robert F. Kennedy, as well as the student uprisings in May in Paris, and subsequently on university campuses in the United States; "the timelines match."[164] 1968 had already been a "shattering" year in American politics, with military setback in Vietnam and a series of public services strikes generating apocalyptic imagery in the U.S. media.[165] Regardless, it seems clear that the experience of watching the bloody confrontations between police and protestors of August 1968 was enough to push Guston's work in the direction of representation. The clash of antiwar protestors and Chicago police "turned Chicago into a

[161] Philip Guston, Talk at Yale Summer School of Music and Art, 1972, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 156.
[162] Philip Guston, Talk at Yale Summer School of Music and Art, 1973, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 223.
[163] Philip Guston in conversation with Roberta Smith, 1980, quoted in Slifkin, 30.
[164] Harry Cooper, "Marlborough Man, 1967-1970" in *Philip Guston Now*, 84.
[165] Heather Hendershot, *When the News Broke: Chicago 1968 and the Polarizing of America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 23.

war zone", which had been exacerbated by major Richard J. Daley's refusal to back down, and his summoning of U.S. Army and National Guard troops in support.[166]

Around 10,000 protestors mobilised on the streets of the city; police fought back with tear gas, rubber bullets and billy clubs, arresting over 600 citizens and injuring hundreds. The U.S. government conceded that what had transpired was a "police riot."[167] What Guston saw while "stuck in front of the TV" in August 1968 was, then, "gratuitous action by police authority…[which was] endlessly rebroadcast…It became a fixture of 1960s iconography".[168] That year, American television broadcast almost exclusively in colour, enabling its footage from Chicago to appear particularly vivid and naturalistic to its 90 million viewers.[169] The 1968 broadcast of these events were, according to David Culbert, "extremely atypical in their close-up depiction of violence."[170] It is reasonable to assume that Guston saw this footage numerous times, which was unprecedented in its violent content. Around 90 million Americans saw it in total, nearly half of the total population.

Seeing Chicago in 1968

The events of 1968, then, are inextricable from their mediated appearance. Yet this was an event whose dissemination through media channels was already implicated in the time of its occurrence. Huge trucks outside the convention had large lights that illuminated the scene, which enabled mobile camera crews to shoot the events without fear of their portable lights being smashed. These "giant trucks and lights felt more like a Hollywood movie set. You *knew* you were on camera here. Hence the "whole world is watching!" chant [by the protestors]."[171] The footage from Chicago matters to this discussion of Guston's work not just because of the violent content on display, the likes of which had never been shown

[166] Patricia Kelly, "Art and Politics, Chicago-Style: 1968", in Louise Lincoln (ed.), *1968: Art and Politics in Chicago* (Chicago: dePaul University Art Museum, 2008), 8.
[167] Hendershot, *When the News Broke,* 22-23.
[168] David Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact on Decision-Making in the USA, 1968: The Tet Offensive and Chicago's Democratic National Convention" in *Journal of Contemporary History* (Vol. 33, No.3, July 1998), 445.
[169] American television turned to colour in 1968, when NBC broadcast entirely, and CBS mostly, in colour... In October 1968, for the first time, colour sets outsold black and white." Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact", 420.
[170] Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact", 419.
[171] Hendershot, *When the News Broke* 201.

before and which finds its way into the content of its work; nor was it because of the confusion of actors generated by the footage, which finds expression in Guston's depiction of Klansmen occupied in anachronistic activities. Instead, I suggest that it is the thematic of the limits of representation that is most significant in Guston's responses to the footage.

The questions raised by the events in Chicago and their fallout leave important traces in Guston's relationship to representation. The footage became the centre of partisan discussion in the years that followed. Accusations of media bias "took root in the national political consciousness" and were made a central plank of Richard Nixon's successful run for president later in 1968, which he launched on the streets of Chicago, one week after the convention.[172] As I will explore, Guston's satirical images of Nixon, produced in 1971, examined the president's relationship to image mediation and the broader theme of representation with which the artist was preoccupied in the early years of the decade. What Chicago seems to have "triggered" in Guston – which is an important source of the emergence of the Marlborough paintings, including *The Deluge* – was a concern with the televised image's ability to collapse the temporality of historical events, to disperse the narrative of violence, and to dislocate the agency of its principal actors. In doing so, I argue that Guston's painting mobilises what Samuel Weber has called the "ambivalent simultaneity" of the televised image:

> [if] television is both here *and* there *at the same time*, then, according to traditional notions of space, time and body, it can be *neither fully there nor entirely here*. What it sets before us, in and as the television *set,* is therefore split, or rather, it is a *split* or a *separation* that camouflages itself by taking the form of a visible *image*.[173]

Blackboard's invocation of the temporal disjuncture involved in the encounter with the televised catastrophe of Chicago 1968 goes to the root of Guston's revival of representation. Weber's account of television as both *here* (as a physical object occupying domestic space)

[172] Hendershot, *When the News Broke,* 8.
[173] Samuel Weber, "Television: Set and Screen" in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1996), 120. Italics in original.

and *there* (the image world it calls into visibility) names the irresolvable tension of watching imagery of distant violence on a proximate object. The encounter with the televised image is at the same time an encounter with the problematics of representation; a representational painting, too, is "both here and there at the same time." I suggest that the central question of Guston's abstract paintings – what Leo Steinberg identified in 1954 as "Whatness and Whereness" – is reiterated in his engagement with the broadcast image.[174] In this sense, the recuperation of formal procedures in *Blackboard* and *The Deluge* that originated within Guston's earlier practices is a means of intensifying the questions those practices embodied. In translating the focal cubes and rectangles of his mid-1960s paintings into the televisual shape in *Blackboard*, Guston's work embodied the case for the ongoing validity of these concerns, *because* – not in spite of – their relegation within the cultural landscape through exhibitions such as *Information*.

When Guston described himself, as the 1960s progressed, as "feeling split, schizophrenic",[175] he was identifying not only his own sense of disjuncture, between "home" and "studio", but also the specific nature of encountering the phenomena that would push him towards representational imagery. The encounter with television emphasised the "split" that animated Guston's turn to representation. Television, to Weber, "overcomes spatial distance but only by *splitting the unity of place* and with it the unity of everything that defines its identity with respect to place: events, bodies, subjects."[176] This is a quality that is explored in artworks contemporary to Guston's own engagement with the effect of the mediated image. Edward Kienholz's sculptural tableau *The Eleventh Hour Final* (1968), for example, consists of a nondescript domestic interior, with sofa, coffee table, and plastic flowers pointing towards a television screen set into a cement tombstone [**34**]. On the transparent screen is printed a list of death tolls in Vietnam ("American Dead" / "Enemy Dead"); below it, a severed mannequin head looks back into the room [**35**]. It seems to epitomise McCarthy's description of television as "remote inscription that produces – and annihilates – places: the

[174] Leo Steinberg, "Fritz Glarner and Philip Guston at the Modern", first published in *Arts* magazine, June 1956, republished in *Other Criteria*, 283.
[175] Philip Guston quoted in Jerry Tallmer, "Creation is for Beauty Parlors", *The New York* Post, 9th April 1977.
[176] Weber, *Mass Mediauras*, 117-18.

place of the body, the place of the screen, the place of dwelling."[177] This "remoteness" is suggested in the material quality of these works that respond to the disembodied image: the grimy, dusty screen in Kienholz's installation recalls the indistinct, smeared image of the Klansmen in *Blackboard*. The disembodiment in both works – both artists show heads isolated from bodies – translates the destabilising effect of the televisual encounter into literal terms. "Feeling split" names that encounter and is embodied in practices that fail to resolve.[178]

This tracing of the affective encounter with mediated imagery of violence through unresolved and disrupted facture finds an unexpected kinship in work by Andy Warhol made earlier in the same decade. Warhol's *Race Riots*, made between June 1963 and Spring 1964, are anomalous within his oeuvre as a whole.[179] Of the eleven versions made, of most consequence to Guston's later production, I suggest, are the four large-scale versions made in 1963, the largest of which (*Mustard Race Riot* **[36]**) is composed of two panels painted in flat ochre, one covered in silkscreened images, and the other blank, which together are nearly three metres high and over four metres wide. They therefore register, like Guston's largest works, as operating within a history of large-scale paintings, from frescoes to murals and certainly, in Warhol's case, billboards. All versions make use of the same photographic material: three of Charles Moore's images of civil unrest in Birmingham, Alabama, published in a single double-page spread in *Life* magazine on May 17th, 1963, in which a police dog attacks an unarmed Black male protestor.[180]

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[177] Anna McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture, and Its Place" (*October*, Vol. 98 (Autumn 2001), 93.

[178] A similar effect is to be seen in Kienholz's 1965 installation *The Beanery*, first shown in New York in 1965, which is a walk-in recreation of a Los Angeles bar the artist frequented, with life casts of the regulars arranged inside, their heads replaced by clocks that are all set to 10.10, and their clothes and bodies dripping with polyester resin. Alex Potts has discussed an overlooked aspect of this installation: the newspaper stand *outside* the door to the bar, which reveals a newspaper with a headline from the year before the work was first shown: "Children Killed in Vietnam Riots." For Potts, "the peripheral and contingent-seeming inclusion of a reference to disturbing political developments in the outside world is in a way the point". Not resolving the tension between these two aspects of the work was a way of dramatizing the conditions of its time. In this way – as well as its use of the iconography of clocks, alcohol, cigarettes and dismembered body parts, not to mention the grimy, grungy surfaces of the installation – the work anticipates Guston's practice from a few years later. (Potts, 64-5).

[179] These works are part of Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series (1962-68).

[180] The title given to these paintings is, as Jonathan Flatley has identified, problematic, and does not occur in the original source material. "The "Race Riot" title (of unclear origin, like many of Warhol's painting titles) is misleading here, since what we see is not a riot but the organised white supremacist violence of the state,

Warhol's translation of Moore's photographic sources performed inconsistent fidelity to that material. As is characteristic of the artist's work at this time, the accidents of the silk-screening process register in alternately blotched or faded representation. They remain, however, entirely legible. Jonathan Flatley has noted how "the messy, mistake-prone silkscreened repetitions bring us *closer* to violence, in a material or affective sense, than the *Life* magazine images on which they are based." I suggest that, in the case of Warhol's own complex and unresolved relationship to these events and the broader context for which they stand, these "painterly" qualities invite a reflection not on the mass circulation of images, but on the artist's own affective encounter with these sources. The "yellowy tan" of the background, whose presence in Warhol's address to the source images is made plain in the monochromatic expanse of the right-hand panel, is, to Flatley, "close enough" to a skin tone to open up questions of racial identity that are at stake in the artist's encounter with this imagery of American violence.[181] By deploying these scenes in the same sequential order in which they appeared in *Life*, Warhol's work emphasises the cinematic quality of the reading experience, in which the eye passes from one image to the next, thereby animating them. This procedure fails to disrupt or dismantle the critical implications of the photographs by dispersing their temporality; instead, the sequential prints in *Mustard Race Riot* "emerge as scripted narrative, no matter what Warhol tries."[182]

The perceived failure of Warhol's *Race Riot* works, at least in terms of the discourses around his work that emerged around the time of their production, is revealing for Guston's own encounter with mediated imagery of police violence on the streets of American cities. Okwui Enwezor has identified the "profound political implications" of the *Race Riots* as contained within their "gnawing ambiguity, namely the difficult negotiation by a white, seemingly apolitical artist appropriating the image of black suffering without having to participate in the cause to which that black figure is staunchly devoted."[183] Enwezor's critique closely

carried out by white policemen, against an unarmed, nonviolent citizen." Jonathan Flatley, *Like Andy Warhol* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 186.

[181] Flatley, *Like Andy Warhol*, 200.

[182] Anne M. Wagner, "Warhol Paints History, or Race in America" in *Representations* (No. 55, Special Issue: Race and Representation: Affirmative Action (Summer, 1996), University of California Press), 110.

[183] Okwui Enwezor, "Andy Warhol and the Painting of Catastrophe" in Donna De Salvo (ed.), *Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 38.

tracks that of the institutional justification of the postponement of the Guston retrospective in 2020.[184] This unintended overlap indicates a common ground between Warhol and Guston, whose works embody a subjecthood which is destabilised through the viewing of the traumatic subject. Hal Foster argues that Warhol's work "evokes the mass subject through its figural projections…[and] incarnated it precisely in its guise as "witness"."[185] The "mass subject", then, cannot be shown; we can only see what it sees. Guston's *Blackboard* shows the Klansmen being watched, and the sensibility that registers the encounter recuperates expressionist brushwork to dramatize the effect of that exposure. And yet the painting Klansman of *The Studio*, at work on a self-portrait, opens up another association of that black rectangle: it is also a mirror, implicating its maker, and its viewership, in the violence of which it is a metonym.

The "clumsy" witness

Foster's use of the term *witness* names the complex condition of viewership that is at stake in these encounters with mediated violence. It is this that is at the centre of Guston's recuperation, and intensification, of Rothko's viewer dynamics in *The Deluge* and *Red Picture*; this is also critical to the artist's engagement with historical Italian sources following his final visit there in 1970-1. Establishing this equivocal category is, then, fundamental to an understanding of the politics of Guston's later work. This framing of his project in the late work emerges in Guston's drawing practice, and the affordances of drawing – in particular, its relationship to temporality, immediacy and the world beyond the studio – established the territory from which Guston's later work developed.

An untitled 1968 charcoal drawing by Guston stages what appears to be an altercation in an urban setting [**37**]. At left of centre, a hooded figure is shown in profile, and seems to lunge

[184] In the *Hyperallergic* podcast (October 1st, 2020), National Gallery director Kaywin Feldman stated that Guston's work "appropriated images of Black trauma", thereby presenting problems for its display at a time of enhanced racial unrest in America (https://hyperallergic.com/598000/philip-guston-exhibition-moved-to-2022/, accessed June 23rd, 2024)

[185] Hal Foster, "Death in America", *October*, Winter 1996, Vol. 75, 51. Foster is here citing Michael Warner ("The Mass Public and the Mass Subject", 1993): "The mass subject cannot have a body, except the body it witnesses."

with a stick towards a collection of schematic body parts at the opposite side, which are half-described in bare, hard marks of the tool. The overlapping outlines of the depicted objects generate a confusion of position and identification. The effect is that of an unresolved evocation of civil disorder, whose incomplete description invokes immediacy. The density of the charcoal medium and the evident pressure under which Guston put it renders the drawing somewhat diagrammatic in its spareness. Yet two objects invoke a spatial illusion by sandwiching the hooded figure. One is a brick wall, shown in perspective behind the spectral figures; the other, a large open book cropped at its bottom edge, its pages covered in vertical and horizontal text-like, albeit illegible, marks.[186] What is remarkable in this drawing, and unique to it, is the position of the book *between* the implied viewer and the violence unfolding in the middle distance. Its position at the paper's bottom edge insinuates a relationship between its pattern of marks and the unfolding violence beyond it.[187] In fact, the suggestion of violent action makes it unique in Guston's production as a whole. What is dramatized here is the very act of bearing witness Guston claimed as "the only reason to be an artist" in conversation with Morton Feldman in October only two months previously:

> Then I thought, "Well, that's the only reason to be an artist: to escape, to bear witness to this. Unless you want to make pictures or something."[188]

Chapter 4 will return once again to this quotation, in the context of Guston's production in the middle of the 1970s. Given the time of its utterance, though, it is easy enough to ascertain what is being borne witness to in this drawing: very likely, the unfolding violence taking place on the streets of Chicago that same year.[189] This drawing, and others produced

[186] This drawing has hardly been mentioned in the literature on the artist. Aspects of it – the brick wall in perspective on the left, the Klan hoods, the implication of violence – closely resemble Guston's *Drawing for Conspirators* (1930), a preparatory work for a now-lost painting. Since Guston had not yet rediscovered this drawing in 1968 (he would unearth it in a studio drawer in 1972), its allusions are not easily vouchsafed, but it does seem at least to evoke the artist's earlier practice in more literal ways that many of the other works he produced at this time.

[187] The unusual pattern of vertical and horizontal lines distributed across each of the pages suggests a further association: an open newspaper. For the purposes of this argument, I will not pursue this further, other than to acknowledge that such an allusion is one made possible by the open distribution of marks in the drawing, and connects to the relationship of witnessing, drawing and the media at stake in this chapter.

[188] Philip Guston in conversation with Morton Feldman, the New York Studio School, October 23rd, 1968. Published in Clark Coolidge (ed.), *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 81.

[189] The specific date of the production of this drawing is not known at time of writing. The catalogue raisonné of Guston's work on paper is currently being compiled (as of June 2024). However, I strongly suspect it to have

at this time, enfold witnessing and drawing together in ways that resonate throughout Guston's later practice. As previously discussed, Guston largely experienced the turmoil on the streets of Chicago through their repeated showings on national television. In no sense is this drawing a literal rendition of what he must have seen, and yet the work's confusion of actors, and its effect of disembodiment and simultaneity, does bring to mind the experience of watching these violent and chaotic events through the mediation of a screen. One can well imagine the artist sat in front of his television, horrified at what he sees, scribbling down his reactions in a sketchbook propped on his lap, then finding them dishearteningly inadequate to the effect of that disturbing material to which they respond. This drawing dramatizes, at least in part, that act of failed transcription.[190]

Like many of the artist's later drawings, this work bears no direct relationship with any painting. It was produced towards the end of a period in which Guston entirely stopped painting and focused instead on a sustained practice of drawing. This hiatus in painting followed the negative critical reaction to his 1966 solo exhibition of recent paintings at the Jewish Museum, New York.[191] This moment anticipates and parallels a similar response to unfavourable reviews: his final visit to Italy in October 1970, which immediately followed the largely poor reception of the Marlborough paintings. This kind of extended pause in Guston's painting practice was not uncommon. As Magdalena Dabrowski noted in her catalogue for the first comprehensive exhibition of Guston's works on paper, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1988, Guston's approach to drawing was "rather episodic in nature, since there were years when he only drew, and others when he only painted and did not draw at all".[192] Dabrowski was the first to identify these drawing periods with "major stylistic turning

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been made either during or after the artist's exposure to televised images of the rioting in Chicago, for reasons that should be apparent.

[190] There is some similarity here with drawings (indisputably) made in front of the television by Guston's friend Willem de Kooning, around 1965, as described by Richard Shiff: "de Kooning created a group of at least 22 [charcoal] drawings...[which] reflect the pleasure he took in sketching moving figures from a television screen… The small size of de Kooning's various pads of paper and the flexibility of charcoal suited the speed with which he worked, as he coordinated with the pace of the movements he was viewing. The drawings record the artist's bodily sensations felt in harmony with whatever he observed or imagined." Richard Shiff, "To Draw is to Ground" in Edouard Kopp (ed.), *Drawing is Everything: Founding Gifts of the Menil Drawing Institute* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 50.

[191] This too was anticipated earlier in the artist's career: in 1962, following his solo retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, he again stopped painting for a year, making only drawings.

[192] Magdalena Dabrowski, *The Drawings of Philip Guston* (exh. cat.) (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 10.

points", and thereby to root the transformations of Guston's painting in his drawing. Regardless, Guston's drawing practice as a whole has been somewhat sidelined in favour of his paintings, and the narrative of the resurgence of representation in his work has, by and large, been analysed in terms of painting. Dabrowski's account reminds us that drawing could be an independent practice for Guston, unrelated to painting. The affordances of drawing were central to Guston's project at the end of the 1960s. What was it, though, that was provided by the practice of drawing, and what is the relationship of drawing and witnessing?

I identify the book in this drawing as a *notebook*. In doing so, I am invoking Michael Taussig's discussion of anthropological notebooks, which posits them as "magical objects" that occupy "hallowed ground between meditation and production."[193] The curious deployment of the book in this drawing – between the viewing position and the violent events to which the eye is drawn – seems to operate in this threshold space. For the purposes of this framing of Guston's drawing, I am borrowing conceptual tools from a discipline outside of art history to develop what is taking place in Guston's figuring of witnessing. Drawing's closeness to Taussig's conception of witnessing ought to make it more central in our understanding of the political address of Guston's late work. Reading this and other drawings in terms of the affordances of the medium – what drawing can do that painting cannot – casts Guston's contemporaneous painting practice in a different light.

Taussig's 2011 book *I Swear I Saw This* is a reflection upon a marginalised practice in anthropological fieldwork that nevertheless provides a means to consider the nature of bearing witness in Guston's own works on paper. Reflecting on his densely worked notebook drawing of a traumatic and enigmatic sight, made shortly after he saw it, Taussig says that he "needed to make an image so as to double the act of seeing with [his] own eyes". In making the notebook drawing, Taussig attempted to recuperate and reenact the original act of vision, which "through drawing, stroke by stroke, erasure by erasure, amounts to a laborious seeing." Drawing is not *like* seeing; the making and unmaking of marks is an editorialising of vision. In this sense, in drawing "history is repeated in slow motion and the clumsiness of the

[193] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This,* 112.

artist actually adds to this *seeing seeing*, by which I mean to include as question the relationship between seeing and witnessing".[194] *Witnessing*, then, is understood as secondary to the act of seeing; its temporal disjuncture opens up a space of questioning. Taussig collapses the usual distinction of witness and testimony in order to keep vision central to the question he sees as dramatized by the process. Where "testimony" implies a translation into words, either written or spoken, which give clear shape to a sequence of events, "witness" holds still at the point of incomprehension, retaining (or doubling) the bafflement and shock of the initial encounter. That Taussig's "witnessing" is a different order of seeing is crucial to Guston's own thinking about the implications of the term in this work and those that follow on from it.

The question of the relationship between seeing and witnessing is what is literally dramatised in Guston's drawing, which is exemplary of the artist's exploration of the implications of witness in his later production. That relationship is explored, too, in the drawing's facture. The doubled marks such as the thick and juddering line around the hood of the central figure, certainly suggest a weighty, slow, "laborious" act of seeing, as well as the "clumsiness" Taussig identifies as endemic to the act of drawing witness. If read in Taussig's terms, this very clumsiness might be reframed as an articulation of the "doubled" vision of the witness. For the purposes of this analysis, I therefore read "witness" in the terms established by Taussig: as an act distinct from seeing which is nonetheless a reflection on that act. The notebook drawing is, to Taussig, "a seeing that doubts itself, and, beyond that, doubts the world of man". This is the territory on which "witnessing separates itself from seeing".[195] Guston's drawing dramatizes the distinction.

To witness, then, is to stage a doubtful reflection upon seeing. It relates not to the immediate encounter with the traumatic event but the attempt to transcribe or translate that experience into a visual language, a framing made literal in this drawing's content. What Taussig's understanding of witnessing produces is no stable account of the phenomenal

[194] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 89.
[195] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This,* 2.

encounter with traumatic events. For Taussig, witnessing diverges from seeing by destabilising the subject position:

> If I say that my drawing is an act of witness, what I mean to say is that it aspires to a certain gravity beyond the act of seeing with one's own eyes. To *witness*, as opposed to *see*, is to be implicated in a process of judgment – even if the court before which one is called to bear witness is (how shall I put this?) imaginary, such that the mere act of seeing tilts the cosmos and deranges the eyeball. …The *who am I?* and the *what is that?* get messed up because the field implicating observer and observed has suddenly become a zone of trench warfare, putting extreme pressure on language – as opposed, say, to a drawing.[196]

This upending of subject position is repeatedly dramatized in Guston's late production, especially in the figure of the Klansman, which always embodied a tangled array of positions: perpetrator, viewer, creator, critic, accused and accusing. The act of bearing witness on paper is the medium through which this destabilisation takes place. In reframing viewing as witnessing, Guston's work intensifies the art encounter in much the same way Ad Reinhardt's cartoon did. What witnessing does, then, is turn the act of drawing into an enquiry about the relationship between self and world, which is one subject to constant negotiation.

2.2 The mark of the witness

The bareness of drawing

Guston often figured drawing in originary terms. His 1968 painting *Paw,* for instance, shows a grey humanoid hand, its wrist streaked with hairs, in the act of dragging a stylus across a pink ground, producing a wobbly, stuttering black line [**38**]. Painted quickly, as were his other small paintings of this period, in acrylic on a small wooden panel, *Paw* embodies an

[196] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 71.

inchoate sensibility. Its bestial subject, as well as its schematic figuration, certainly relate to Guston's stated desire in his late work to "paint without knowing anything", "like a caveman".[197] And yet this is a subject position produced by the mark itself. As Guston himself said, "you don't know what the hell it is, there's no horizon line or anything".[198] The hand's act of making produces no useful knowledge; the line is no horizon. The inscribing of the mark makes of the hand a *Paw* – its crabbed fingers, gripping the stylus, are suggested in its title – and in doing so figures artistic practice as an act that opens to question the status of its maker.

Guston returned to *Paw* several times, producing a sequel in 1975 (*Paw II*), which rendered the hand fully animal-like, and revived its action in *The Line* and *Painter's Hand* (both 1979), among other works. In *The Line*, a veiny, though seemingly divine, hand has emerged from a bank of cloud to inscribe a straight black line onto red ground [**39**]. Like the divine hand of a heavenly deity, its mark is that of the first stage in a process of creation. Neither the primordial nor the celestial hand can be satisfactorily attached to a stable identity; emerging from nowhere, they make a mark by way of self-determination. In each of these images, an indeterminate zone – like a blank page – is the "implicating field". In the words of Amy Sillman, this is a "kinaesthetic field where limits are felt, ne-negotiated, re-presented."[199] The page, then, is the zone in which a subject is produced.

Sillman's description closely resembles Guston's drawing practice of 1967, which prepared the terrain on which his subsequent work could bear witness to its times. In 1966, following the disappointing critical response to an exhibition of his new paintings at the Jewish Museum, New York, Guston stopped painting.[200] The following year, he moved temporarily to Sarasota, Florida, where he dedicated himself entirely to drawing. This period of production is best epitomised not by a single drawing, but a photograph. In one of Renate

[197] "I imagine wanting to paint as a caveman would, when nothing has existed before." Philip Guston in conversation with Harold Rosenberg, 1965, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 48.
[198] Guston quoted in Nesin, *Philip Guston Now*, 209.
[199] Amy Sillman, "On Drawing" in *Amy Sillman: Faux Pas* (Expanded Edition) (Paris: After 8 Books, 2022), 87.
[200] Hilton Kramer's *New York Times* review of the exhibition (*Philip Guston, Recent Paintings and Drawings*, January 12th - February 13th, 1966) prefigures his similarly negative review of the Marlborough exhibition four years later. It describes Guston's then-abstract practice as "genteel" and "limited in range of feeling". Kramer quoted in Ashton, *Yes, But,* 133.

Ponsold's series of photographs of the artist at work in Sarasota in 1967, the artist stands by a table, his pad, brush and bottles of ink to hand [**40**]. Drawings spill haphazardly onto the floor around him and are stacked loosely on tables and benches. The speed and casualness of production the photograph implies, as well as its revelation of an unfolding process that cannot be contained in a single work, is unique in the artist's output. Working with one size of brush using undiluted black ink on large sheets of white paper, Guston produced "literally thousands"[201] of drawings, which for him was a process akin to

> starting again, like a child, just taking a very simple line… What would happen, I thought, if I eliminated everything except just raw feeling and the brush and ink, the simplest of means without even the seductions of colour. It was like testing myself, to see what I am, what I can do.[202]

In their dramatization of "recognition" through titling, the "pure" drawings figure the artist's shifted relationship to the world beyond the studio. They do so through their titles' suggestions of landscape (*Wave, Gulf Coast*), allusion to spatial co-ordinates (*Horizon, Edge*) and self-conscious attention to process (*Full Brush, Mark*). In a 1973 text for *Boston University Journal,* Guston claimed that "It is the bareness of drawing that I like. Drawing is what locates, suggests, discovers."[203] These exploratory verbs cast the subject in spatial terms; the "pure" drawings are in part a practice of orientation. This is an outward movement that prepares the territory for his more explicit acts of witnessing in drawings of the following year. Michael Auping summarises them as "drawings that operate at the very edge of description, a place where the abstract and the world meet, where the purity of the mark and the impure nature of recognition begin."[204]

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[201] Philip Guston *On Drawing* (1974) in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 260.
[202] Philip Guston (1980) quoted in Isabelle Dervaux, "Baffling Drawings: Philip Guston, 1966-1968" in Christoph Shreier and Michael Semff (eds.), *Philip Guston: Works on Paper*, Hatje Cantz (Ostfildern: Germany, 2007), 26-7.
[203] Guston in David Aronson, "Philip Guston: Ten Drawings", *Boston University Journal*, Fall 1973, p21, quoted in Dabrowski, 9.
[204] Michael Auping, "Impure Thoughts: On Guston's Abstractions" in *Philip Guston Retrospective* (ed. Michael Auping) (Forth Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2003), 50.

Yet the corpus of "pure" drawings is hard to define. No chronology for this production has yet been attempted, nor, judging by Ponsold's photographs, were they made in any legible sequence. Many remain untitled; it is likely that many more were lost or destroyed. "Pure" drawing is better understood as a collective term for a sustained practice that ran over several months. They were evidently made as part of a continuous productive flow, aided by the liquidity of the ink medium, in which the dynamism of a single mark was then subject to forms of improvisatory transformation within the drawings that followed it. As Elly Thomas has noted, the "pure" drawings "had allowed Guston to reduce drawing to its most basic elements, and there he had discovered not abstraction, but rather a renewed engagement with matter in the animation of each and every mark across a surface."[205] In understanding the "pure" drawings as drawing *in motion* – produced with a speedy, liquid medium with none of the shifts in value seen in his quill or pen drawings – the question of "location" became less about a single mark's position on the page than the artist's bodily relationship with space. This period of Guston's work reorientated his practice of mark-making in a way that had long-lasting implications for the artist's recalibration of studio practice at the end of the 1960s.

As Michael Taussig has shown, witnessing destabilises the subject position: "the field implicating observer and observed has suddenly become a zone of trench warfare, putting extreme pressure on language."[206] What witnessing does, then, is turn the act of drawing into an enquiry about the relationship between self and world, which is one subject to constant negotiation. This outward movement is one inherent to the act of drawing, as many scholars have noted.[207] Sillman has expanded upon this premise in similar terms:

> While making a drawing, you are looking down, out, across, around, and shifting boundaries between what is inside and what is outside, because as you draw your consciousness moves from inside your body toward the outside world, but you also

[205] Thomas, *Play and the Artist's Creative Process*, 50.
[206] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This,* 71.
[207] Possibly most significantly, Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Pleasure in Drawing* (2013), which describes the practice of drawing in terms relevant to Guston's project: "The subject is an endless mark [*trait*] drawn from self to self, but never like a "drawn line" [*trait tire*], since there are no rules. The subject is a mark stretched out at length from subject to subject…" Jean-Luc Nancy *The Pleasure in Drawing* (trans. Philip Armstrong) (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 86.

> simultaneously drag the outside world into your hand and eventually down onto your page.[208]

Sillman's sense of the page as an interstitial site, or a contact zone between self and world, is reflected in the role of drawing in the emergence of representational imagery in the artist's work. The "limits" she describes as in play in the act of drawing were understood by Guston in terms of representation. In conversation with Harold Rosenberg in 1965, Guston, who was then still making abstractions, though with an increasingly pictorial quality, discussed "the trouble with recognisable art", which was that it "excludes too much". What Guston wanted his work to include was "one's doubts about the object, plus the problem, the dilemma, of recognising it. I am therefore driven to scrape out the recognition, to efface it, to erase it. I am nowhere until I have reduced it to semi-recognition."[209] Where "scraping out" the recognition was a literal activity in Guston's dense painting practice at that time, it was, I suggest, within the act of drawing a few years later that he was able to stage this "semi-recognition". It is this shifted inflection in his practice of drawing that established a basis for his work's acts of witnessing the traumas of their time.

For Harry Cooper, Guston's discussion of recognition in the mid-1960s synthesised the principal concerns that led him towards his "late style": "the ethical problem of witnessing, the religious problem of picturing, the psychoanalytic problem of recollection, the phenomenological problem of perception, even the art-historical problem of progress."[210] The act of drawing stages these tensions through what Guston called its "bareness". The indeterminacy of the drawn mark makes witnesses of its viewers, as Guston articulated when discussing his drawing practice in 1974:

> We all look at spots, blotches, dots, and see things. That's a natural activity. So that there seems to me to be an interaction going on between you and it. Just

[208] Sillman, *Faux Pas,* 86-7. Michael Taussig's account of drawing is remarkably similar: "Drawing is…a depicting, a hauling, an unravelling, and being impelled toward something or somebody." Taussig, xii.
[209] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 42.
[210] Harry Cooper, "Recognising Guston" in *Philip Guston: A New Alphabet, The Late Transition* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2000), 61. These are themes that will inform the content of the following chapters of this thesis and to which I will return.

> put some marks down on the paper, and at the moment you're putting those marks down they're not just marks. I don't know what they are, but they're not just marks.[211]

The entanglement of vision, recognition and judgement becomes increasingly central in drawings produced by Guston immediately prior to his production of *Blackboard* and *The Deluge*. A 1968 charcoal drawing, *Group 1* uses a bare, stuttering mark to describe a row of five figures, sandwiched between two horizontal lines [**41**].[212] The figure on the left-hand side, with its hood punctuated with two eyeholes and legible body and leg, reads as a seated Klansman, turning towards the viewer. Yet the identity of the other bodies in the image is less easily vouchsafed. The second from right, for instance, resembles a totemic stack of shapes whose apex – a tilted pyramid – is the only clue to its identity. The complex spatial relationship of horizon and body makes the drawing disconcerting to apprehend; the parallel vertical lines that compress the figures in space, in spite of some punctuation, not only holds them into position, it also invokes the framing device of the television screen suggested in *Blackboard*. Guston's drawing is, I argue, a meditation on the relationship between drawing and recognition. It dramatizes what Kenneth Baker, in his 1977 essay on the artist's drawings for *Arts* magazine, observed; Guston's late drawings "make us see…that to draw is to form appearances only because to look at a drawing is to form appearances." The indeterminate facture of this and other drawings by Guston "reveal[s] to us the reflexive moment of our attention toward recognition…that happens when we look at what might be an image."[213] Taussig's "seeing that doubts itself" seems embodied by works like this, and the interpretative labour they oblige their viewers to undergo.

I argue that *Group 1* is a "witness drawing" in just the way Taussig meant it. An external stimulus – given the date of the drawing, very likely the chaotic events on the streets of Chicago that summer, "witnessed" through the mediation of the screen – is "repeated in

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[211] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 256.

[212] The drawing's title may, I suggest, be a reference to an abstract painting of the same title by Guston from 1964. In that work, a similar arrangement of shapes is dispersed on the canvas, one an inverted triangle resembling a Klan hood from the later drawing.

[213] Kenneth Baker, "Philip Guston's Drawing: Delirious Figuration" (Arts Magazine, Volume 51, No.10, June 1977), 89.

slow motion", and the wilful "clumsiness" of the drawn mark (its stuttering, halting line) becomes a means by which to stage the question of "the relationship between seeing and witnessing".[214] The "reflexive moment of our attention" is thereby politically charged. To "recognise" Klan figures within the historical moment of the violence and upheaval of 1968 is to read *through* real footage, to see beyond it into a broader context of systemic and historically recurrent catastrophe. This brings *Group 1* close to *Blackboard.* While the former deploys the "bare" mark of drawing to dramatize and invite acts of recognition, the latter's use of painterly erasure and equivocation embodies the uncertainties that inhere to the practice of bearing witness.

These acts of recognition imbue his work on paper with what Taussig called "a certain gravity". This is not simply to be noted in the density of the artist's mark-making and his representation of literally weighty objects, although this is not to be discounted. Rather, it is to suggest that, as Taussig put it, such drawings aspire "to a certain gravity beyond the act of seeing with one's own eyes. To *witness*, as opposed to *see*, is to be implicated in a process of judgment – even if the court before which one is called to bear witness is (how shall I put this?) imaginary."[215] The ethical tensions in *Group 1*, then, emerge out of this quality of judgement: to "see" the Klan in the events of 1968 is to frame those phenomena within established ethical categories. When translated into the visual practice of "bearing witness", then, the issues of recognition that are central to the production (and titling) of the "pure" drawings become charged with "a process of judgement." This is made literal in another drawing, produced shortly after *Group 1*.

The mark and the mediated image

The charcoal drawing *The Law* (1969) shows a Klansman seated on what appears to be an upended wooden box, complete with nails [**42**]. The figure's outline is reiterated with many repeated marks of the charcoal stick, thickening it into a weighty mass redolent of the

[214] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This,* 89.
[215] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This,* 71.

witness drawing's "gravity beyond the act of seeing." Casting its head down towards an open book resting on its lap, the figure points to the uneven grid of vertical marks on its pages, in the attitude of a teacher, or a rabbi reading the Torah. By contrast with the 1968 drawing I have related to the violent incidents in Chicago, the position of the book is related not to an act of transcription or testimony but to a form of interpretation. Assuming a position of ambiguous authority, the hooded figure appears to act as intermediary between the inscrutable marks on the page and the viewer of the image.[216] The source of the Klansman's power stems from its seeming ability to translate the text on the page, something the viewer is unable to do. I read the drawing's title as indication of its allegorical quality: if this is a figural embodiment of the law, then it is one in which legal authority is rooted in language. *The Law* reiterates the viewer's distance from comprehension by figuring authority as enacted through a perverse form of pedagogy. As in the untitled 1968 drawing to which *The Law* might be seen as related, the marks on the page remain illegible to the viewer; in Taussig's terms, the notebook "lies at the outer reaches of language and order… the notebook page is all interstices."[217]

The use of charcoal in Guston's drawings of 1968-9 is critical to their figuring of witness. These drawings eschew their medium's ability to generate tonal range, as might be seen in contemporary works on paper by Jasper Johns, Jim Dine and others, instead driving the charcoal stick into the paper to create chromatically dense, blunt lines. What results from this strategy is the retention of the bare whiteness of the receiving page, as well as a refusal of the painterly potential of charcoal. The effect has a temporal immediacy quite absent from his paintings made around the same time, such as *The Deluge* (1969). The visual availability of the draftsman's manufacturing decisions, a quality positively evaded in his contemporaneous painting practice, with its opaque layers of colour and allegories of flooding and drowning, suggests a different tense structure between drawing and painting. Drawing's immediacy evokes a kind of liveness; he later recounted how he knew a drawing was "finished" when "the line is alive. Where the line is making the form at the moment of

[216] Slifkin has discussed the pointing finger motif in Guston's late work in terms of its similarity with a yad, the rod culminating in a pointing hand used to read the Torah. *The Law* "bolsters such Mosaic allusions." Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 57.
[217] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This,* 118.

the doing of it. And it's about to change into something else, by the way."[218] Animation remained implicit in his works on paper for the rest of his life; it was their measure of success.

For Guston himself, the use of charcoal invoked the phenomenological encounter of body and medium: "I like charcoal because charcoal is a mess. You can't ever really fix charcoal, but who cares? It's like an extension of your finger."[219] Guston's charcoal drawings, though, are far from "a mess", and his aside about "fixing" the work is, as ever, revealing. I read his use of that term doubly: as a reference to the shortcomings of the medium itself (mistakes remain visible and cannot be amended, at least without an eraser) and to the notion of holding an image still, of fixing it in place. This, again, is curious, given the necessity of "fixing" any charcoal work with spray to prevent damage. But in his own self-imposed restrictions, charcoal's propensity to fail (to smudge, slip or smear) are what must have motivated the force with which he made the marks of his work on paper.[220] Further, Guston's conflation of the drawing tool and his own body casts a different light on *The Law*: the pointing finger of the Klansman is perhaps also a drawing one, bringing the work close with the contemporaneous painting *The Studio*, with its painting Klansman.

The Law makes visible Guston's charge to his practice in response to the kinds of violent upheavals embodied by the Chicago riots. It is significant that his most explicit representation of his encounter with mediated imagery also took place within his graphic practice. In 1970, he made a one-off lithograph, entitled *The Street*, for inclusion in *Ten Lithographs by Ten Artists*, produced in support of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine [**43**]. A discombobulating scene plays out in the image. A pile of objects – shoe soles, planks of wood with bent nails, a ladder, and a profile head with a prominent "G"-shaped ear (perhaps a nod to the artist's surname) – collects at the bottom, flanked by

[218] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 259.
[219] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 260.
[220] There may be even more to say about the artist's choice of this medium. "Charcoal had a considerable revival as a medium in its own right in the nineteenth century by artists deliberately seeking an 'authentic' material to suggest the weight, texture and drama of everyday objects, steeping the pencil in 'the marrow of life', as it was characterised in the 1890s." Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 137. One might read Guston's use of charcoal as an embodiment, however wilful, of these associations, especially in rendering objects of quotidian use.

two schematic skyscrapers at the left and right edges. Above them, cuboid shapes, like bricks or rocks, sail through the air. At left, a large, gloved fist emerges from out of the scene, holding a dark object like a billy club, which hangs threateningly over the objects below. Around the entirety of this scene, almost meeting the edge of the paper, is a rectangular frame with curved edges, rendered in a thickened line. While it is certainly redolent of a panel of a comic strip – with certain inclusions, like the "plop take" feet, indicating an allusion to comics – I read it as a television screen; it is remarkably similar to the same shape in *Blackboard*, and bolsters that interpretation.[221]

The content of *The Street* closely reflects the coverage of the Chicago riots broadcast on NBC, which showed police in riot gear dragging protestors along the streets and attacking them with billy clubs. As David Culbert has described it, the camera "has so restricted a field of vision that the entire screen is occupied by police." The viewers "see incidents of gratuitous violence, which occur over and over again right in front of the camera. … When we see a police officer jam his knee into the groin of a male protester…we know what a police riot means. We feel it."[222] The huge authoritarian fist in Guston's lithograph acts as a metonym of the aggressive reaction by police and armed forces, as well as Culbert's suggestion of its visual dominance in the footage, resembling as it does a dramatic close-up. The pile of limbs in the centre recalls the bodies of the protestors, and the objects sailing through the air suggest a rain of projectiles, perhaps bricks and pieces of wood. Even the skyscrapers that bracket Guston's scene seem to locate it at the site of the riots, among the towers of Michigan Avenue, where the worst confrontations transpired.

Seen as though from the street level, the towers rearing behind, victims below, and violence raining from above, Guston's image seems not so much to evoke the riots themselves but the effect of watching their "utter confusion"[223] unfold, mostly live, on a small television. At around 50cm high by 67cm across, the image is in fact similarly scaled to the television set Guston would have owned; the thickened line around the drawn frame emphasizes the

[221] This work is little discussed in the literature. The reference to the "plop take" was made by Art Spiegelman in his essay "KKK+KK=?!", in *Philip Guston Now*, 140.
[222] Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact", 444.
[223] Culbert, "Television's Visual Impact", 445.

physicality of the surface, suggesting the curvature of the object.[224] Even the repetition of the image through printmaking implies a response to the "endlessly rebroadcast" imagery that Guston would have watched. *The Street*'s dramatization of a tension between modes of image distribution – the televised, the printed, and even, in its compositional proximity to the Marlborough works, the painted – enables it to embody the questions to which Guston subjected his practice at the turn of the 1970s. The screen's frame, which disembodies, decontextualises, and fragments, is parallel to the limitations of the painted surface; as viewers of the image, we are cast in the role of Taussig's witness, our relationship to the scene destabilised, our subjecthood in question.

2.3 *Poor Richard* and the failures of witnessing

Nixon, abstraction, and bearing witness

In discussing Guston's imagery of television in his series of drawings entitled *Poor Richard* (1971), Debra Bricker Balken has called it

> a symbol that alludes to the impotency of abstract painting, the genre he abandoned in 1968, in part because of the content of the news that was carried into his home each evening. Abstraction had become, he felt, simply too disconnected and aloof from world events.[225]

Poor Richard – like *Blackboard, The Deluge* and *The Street* – reflects upon that very disconnection described by Balken. The *Poor Richard* drawings were produced in 1971, shortly after Guston's return to the States from his final trip to Italy, which is the subject of the third and fourth chapters of this thesis. This group of seventy-three satirical drawings about the personal and political life of President Richard Nixon is an anomaly in Guston's

[224] What I am calling the "television" in *Blackboard* is similarly scaled.
[225] Debra Bricker Balken, *Philip Guston's Poor Richard* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 9.

output.[226] It is the largest sequence of works Guston ever produced, and by far the most politically explicit.[227] Perhaps for this reason, it is generally sidelined within overviews of the artist's oeuvre, to the extent of being excluded from or underplayed within monographic exhibitions.[228] Although only published in 2001, long after the artist's death in 1980, it is clear that Guston planned for it to be published as a book before deciding against doing so for reasons that remain unclear.[229] However, it retained a degree of visibility in the artist's lifetime: the complete sequence was kept in two binders in his studio, and friends of the artist described being shown them during visits.[230] *Poor Richard*, then, occupies an awkward place within the artist's body of work. I discuss it here because its reflection upon the mediated image provides a useful foil to paintings that embody the "split" or disconnection that attends the mediated encounter with contemporary violence. I also posit *Poor Richard* as a failed project that nevertheless applies important pressure on Guston's simultaneous painting practice.

To speak of *Poor Richard* as a single, self-contained work presents its own difficulties. When Guston first made its existence known to a wider public, in a 1973 slide talk to students at Yale Summer School, he referred to *Poor Richard* as drawings "in the form of a book". In response to his disturbance at the political events of 1971, he "started doing cartoon characters. And one thing led to another, and so for months I did hundreds of drawings and they seemed to form a kind of story line, a sequence. …It's like a comic

[226] *Poor Richard* is one of three groups of drawings by the artist on the subject of Nixon, the other two of which (*The Early Years* and *The Phlebitis Series*) were made in 1975. Neither were published, nor is there evidence of Guston wanting to do so, unlike *Poor Richard*.

[227] Guston's mural in Morelia, Mexico, made in 1934-5 in collaboration with Reuben Kadish and Jules Langsner, is the next closest thing, I suggest, although it largely deploys allegory to make its anti-fascist point. The same might be said for his destroyed mural responding to the Scottsboro Boys case, made for the John Reed Club, Los Angeles, in 1932. *Poor Richard* was made in a less strident spirit, but has a much more lucid relationship to actual people and events, however fantastical their representation.

[228] For instance, *Poor Richard* was not included in the first two legs of the major retrospective *Philip Guston Now* in 2022. It was installed in the 2023 iteration at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, but on a separate floor to the main exhibition.

[229] *Poor Richard* was "intended by Guston to have a public life, to be seen and absorbed by an audience" (Debra Bricker Balken, *Philip Guston's Poor Richard* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 90). Bricker Balken discusses Guston's ambivalence about publishing *Poor Richard*. In 1974 its imminent publication was announced in *Newsweek* (alongside the publication of a new edition of Philip Roth's *Our Gang*), but he withdrew from it; it may be that "he feared the exposure *Poor Richard* might create" (Balken, 92).

[230] Musa Mayer and Sally Radic (eds), *Philip Guston: Nixon Drawings 1971 & 1975*, exh. cat. Hauser and Wirth, New York (November 1st, 2016 - January 28th, 2017), 2016, 11.

book."[231] This sense of a "story line" is central to how *Poor Richard* has been discussed.[232] Debra Bricker Balken, curator of the 2001 exhibition that first brought public attention to the work, has read it in parallel to the events of Nixon's life. As she has outlined, the earliest images in the sequence show the president as a young man, and then trace his rise to power, harnessing of voters, relationship with religion and law enforcement, and engagement with foreign policy, culminating in his then-mooted trip to China, which took place in 1972, the year after Guston completed the project. The recent discovery of many additional Nixon-related drawings made at the same time indicates a selection process that strongly implies Guston's interest in establishing a sequential narrative structure of the kind Balken describes.[233] In Chris Ware's essay on *Poor Richard*, he stops short of identifying it as a graphic novel, instead describing how "one passes through the pages as one might flip through an illustrated children's book – without actually reading the text."[234]

Balken has shown that Guston's drawings "appear to have been produced during the month of August, in one apparently manic or prolific outburst",[235] yet were at the same time the product of a sustained period of research, evidenced by the inclusion of certain specifics of Nixon's biography, in particular his own framing of his childhood.[236] What seems to have spurred Guston to produce these works at such speed were two significant events in the President's career in 1971. These were Nixon's review of the sentencing of Lieutenant William F Calley, who had been convicted for the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam, and the leak of the Pentagon Papers, which revealed for the first time the US government's

[231] Philip Guston, "On the Nixon Drawings", Yale Summer School of Music and Art, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1973, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 228. In total there are 164 drawings related to this series, with 73 chosen by Guston to form *Poor Richard* as it is known today.
[232] The most significant comparison generally made is to Pablo Picasso's etchings *The Dream and Lie of Franco I & II* (1937), in which, over the course of two sets of nine cartoon-like drawings, the dictator Francisco Franco is shown performing various evidently insincere public roles: devout Catholic, bullfighter, knight, and so on. His transformation into a rotting vegetable is where the parallel with *Poor Richard* seems most apt; this has been discussed by Bricker Balken, Cooper, and others.
[233] The additional drawings were discovered at the back of drawers in Guston's studio around 2015; there are 164 drawings in total, including the 73 used in the "official" version of *Poor Richard*.
[234] Chris Ware, "Caricature: Or, Guston's Graphic Novel", *New York Review of Books* online, February 6, 2018, accessed 29th June 2024.
[235] Balken, *Poor Richard,* 7.
[236] The drawings are "replete with biographical detail that only an avid student of Nixon could make." Balken in Mayer and Radic, *Nixon Drawings,* 205.

intentions in Vietnam, in the New York Times, starting in June of the same year.[237] Neither of these events are included or even alluded to in *Poor Richard*, and yet the erosion of public trust and political obfuscation they imply are played out in the themes of occlusion, masking, and metamorphosis that are continually dramatized throughout the sequence. The traumas of the period "remain literally out of the picture, concealed off-stage, where Nixon, Guston suggests, deemed they should be."[238]

For David Kaufmann, *Poor Richard*'s preponderance of images *outside of* the narrative of the president, including Nixon sunbathing or lying in bed, is evidence of the artist's interest in Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil", which he paraphrases as "thoughtlessness". Certainly, Nixon's "self-regard without self-reflection", his insulation from self-knowledge, renders him the very image of guileless wrongdoing.[239] That is to say that the twin scandals of the Calley commutation and the Pentagon Papers leak rendered Nixon a figure associated with deception and concealment.[240] The subject of *Poor Richard* is, then, less an account of these events than a sustained address to the territory of representation itself. The figure of Nixon embodies the limitations of representation just as *Blackboard* and *The Deluge* do; its failure as satire asserts by contrast Guston's painting's ability to register encounters with contemporary trauma through embedding, erasing or drowning representational content in fields of watery paint.

One of the earliest drawings in Guston's sequence of *Poor Richard* drawings shows Nixon's head and pointing left hand contained within a television set, which sits on top of a cloth-draped table [**44**]. His bulging, hairy cheeks and elongated nose already suggest the penis

[237] Guston's work was produced in response to a contemporaneous written satire by his friend Philip Roth, entitled *Our Gang*. Balken's text engages in a more sustained way with the relationship between these two productions; Roth referred to *Poor Richard* as a "parallel activity", a description that is an accurate one (Balken, 7). It seems to me that these two "texts" bear little significant relationship to each other, at least for the purposes of this study.
[238] Balken, 10
[239] Kaufmann, *Telling Stories,* 33-4.
[240] It is useful to compare *Poor Richard* with the preponderance of directly political work produced in response to the My Lai massacre, the most famous of which being the Art Workers Coalition's 1969 *And babies*, an appropriated photograph of the corpses of My Lai villagers overlaid with lines from the testimony of Paul Meadlo, a US soldier who participated in the massacre under the command of Calley. The comparison is a reminder of the ambiguous political position that always inheres to Guston's art, even in its most politically explicit moment.

and testicles into which his head gradually transforms over the course of the sequence. Three other images of the same scene were discovered in Musa Mayer's recent revelation of additional related drawings; all are in a comparable state of completion, and might therefore represent potential alternatives to that scene, as Guston collated the images for potential publication. All four of these images show Nixon's head and body framed within the television screen, sometimes as though physically contained, even squeezed, within the object. Nixon gesticulates, scowls, and even, in one drawing, turns red in the throes of oratory. It seems clear that Guston's image of choice for *Poor Richard* was one in which the uncanny effect of Nixon entrapped within the television set was juxtaposed most clearly with the signs of domestic American homelife. It is apparent here that at least one association invoked in this drawing is the framing of Vietnam as "the living-room war", as well as to television itself, the very medium Nixon marshalled to ensure his election as president.[241]

In the drawing Guston selected for inclusion in *Poor Richard,* Guston's scratchy ink line creates a thickened outline around the set, so that its actual bulk is compressed into an object of similar dimension to a stretched canvas. Further, the buttons and dials that run around the edge of the screen recall the nails of the reverse of a painting, a subject often depicted in Guston's late work. Guston's act of drawing dramatizes this in its conflation of the two devices of making-visible whose charged relationship is at stake in the artist's late work: the media-disseminated image and the painted one. By collapsing painting and television screen, this drawing makes clear the pressures under which Guston's studio practice laboured.

[241] Michael Arlen first coined this phrase in his 1966 article in the *New Yorker* (October 15th), which then became used to describe the visibility of the Vietnam war on US television screens. The best-known artistic response to this mediatisation of conflict in visual art is probably Martha Rosler's collage series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1967-72). For the purposes of this thesis, with its emphasis on the hand-drawn mark, the distinction between Rosler's appropriative practice and Guston's loose facture is too large to be useful here, despite some similarities in the use of televisions in domestic settings.

Nixon and the limits of drawing

Poor Richard is nothing if not inconsistent. Yet there are some qualities, beyond its loose chronology, that provide some measure of continuity. Almost every scene is conveyed with a consistent pictorial organisation of a horizontal strip of sea or land and an arrangement of protagonists congruent with the lateral movement that horizontality implies. Faces generally point to the right, sustaining a consistent narrative rhythm. The plain aesthetic of each of its constituent parts produces a fluid reading experience that is never disrupted by the intrusion of intertitles or even speech bubbles. Throughout, the viewer's position is always parallel to the picture plane; there is no shift in perspective, as there would be in comparable graphic narratives. This distancing effect is, I argue, a quality by which *Poor Richard* dramatizes the effect of witnessing previously discussed.

One sequence of six images, for instance, shows Nixon in the company of representatives of various constituencies he would set out to woo [**45**]. These include a little Black girl, a middle-aged married couple, and a long-haired hippy, each of whom Nixon embraces, his penis-head turned to the right, with his grinning expression directed over their heads. Because each of the three constituents face forwards, towards the viewer, this doubleness is played for comic effect. Nixon's phallic nose serves in each drawing as a pointer towards the next scene, with each oblivious participant unaware of the orientation of his political intentions. In this sense, the reading dynamic of the work itself is made an allegory of Nixon's own indifferent courting of marginalised groups. And yet this insistent flatness is unlike the contemporary comics narratives with which *Poor Richard* has often been compared. The spareness of its layouts bear a strong similarity to the sequential drawings of an animator's storyboard. Its pared-down compositions and lack of either diagetic or non-diagetic text implies the sustained rhythm of the moving image rather than the intermittent readerly encounter the comics form invites.

Despite this, the basic form of *Poor Richard* as a set of sequential drawings is closest to the form of a comic book, a resemblance Guston himself noted. The relationship between Guston's cartoon-like later figuration and similar aesthetics in the contemporary comics

world is a troubled one in the scholarship on both practices.[242] Like Guston, artists such as Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman made use of a self-consciously hand-drawn facture in their drawings, by way of refusing the slicker productions then espoused by mainstream comics production.[243] It is doubtless the case that both practices can be paralleled in their espousal of figurative representation. Hillary Chute has shown how underground newspapers at that time, such as Crumb's *Zap Comix* (first published in 1968), explicitly produced what Crumb called "a drawing of the horror of America" through a form of figurative representation that "understood itself as modernist".[244] What is apparent in Crumb's claim is that underground comics dedicated themselves to acts of bearing witness. Underground comics provided "a refuge for those artists still interested in the figure during the period when Abstract Expressionism was the dominant preoccupation of American art"; they "offered an aesthetic form that was both avant-garde and, importantly, figurative."[245] While this bears some interesting resemblance to Guston's own position at the end of the 1960s, it is in *Poor Richard*'s distinction from comics form that enables it to act as a dramatization of witness.

Read as a comic, *Poor Richard* is a failed endeavour, providing little or no narrative satisfaction. Nor does it make its satirical intentions clear. Although Nixon, with his phallus-nose and scrotum-cheeks, appears as a buffoon, he is rarely shown as unequivocally reprehensible, and there is even some sympathy shown, especially in the scenes of his early days. Guston's work *resembles* comics, but it does so not to secure a formal resemblance to them. Instead, *Poor Richard* provides Guston with a means to explore the issues of legibility and legality with which his later drawing output was preoccupied. Its refutation of the

[242] Art Spiegelman describes this succinctly: "…when [Bill] Berkson showed Crumb's work to Guston in 1970, he reported that the painter hadn't been aware of it until that moment. Both artists drew from the same early-comics sources and evidently synthesised their styles simultaneously, by 1967 or 1968." Spiegelman in *Philip Guston Now*, 141.
[243] It certainly seems to be the case that some underground comics artists took against Guston's adoption of a "low" aesthetic strategy in ways that precisely echo the critiques levelled at the artist by Hilton Kramer and others. As Art Spiegelman has recently put it, speaking for other underground artists who mistrusted such a move, Guston "risked career suicide by taking off his velvet-lined mandarin slippers to leap across the High-Low chasm". (Spiegelman in *Philip Guston Now*, 140).
[244] R Crumb cited in Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 103.
[245] Chute, *Disaster Drawn,* 104-105.

narrative logic of the comic actually enabled him to do this: the thematic of illegibility is both structural and dramatic within *Poor Richard*.

Poor Richard repeatedly stages the issue of recognition that is central to Guston's sense of his work's relationship to the world beyond the studio. In one drawing towards the middle of the sequence, Nixon, in his Key Biscayne vest, bobs in the Florida ocean and, espying a set of ostensibly Chinese characters in the sky, repeats them in a speech bubble [**46**]. Both sets of characters are garbled, and Nixon's inability to faithfully repeat them reflects upon his own hubris and incompetence. Nixon cannot read the world; he is in that sense performing the kind of witnessing with which Guston was preoccupied in his later work. Nixon is "blind" to the signification of the "Chinese" marks, and as a character in *Poor Richard* is constituted by (often failed) acts of reading, which includes his uninterest in the constituents he hugs in the sequence of images previously discussed. Yet it could not have been lost on Guston that the "Chinese" characters above Nixon's head are themselves incompetent approximations of actual Chinese script. *Poor Richard* thereby dramatizes a double bind. Both Guston *and* Nixon are failed witnesses; neither can competently interpret the world or bridge the gap between encounter and testimonial played out in the untitled 1968 drawing, a work that haunts Guston's imagery of testimony. *Poor Richard*'s failures to account for the real events of its time are themselves attestations of witness.

Further, the drawing recalls other imagery in which illegibility and bearing witness are bound together. Nixon's guileless gaze at the floating text, its beams of light shining onto his face, resembles representations of the Biblical narrative of Belshazzar's Feast (Daniel, 5: 1-31), in which the spectral hand of God inscribes a luminous message on the wall of the king of Babylon's palace during a lavish feast. The Hebrew message is later translated by Daniel as a warning of Belshazzar's imminent demise and the division of his kingdom, as punishment for the use of stolen sacred vessels during the event. Guston's invocation of this narrative in the drawing, which bears a compositional resemblance to the best-known version of the story, Rembrandt van Rijn's *Belshazzar's Feast* (c1635, The National Gallery, London), operates as a

central image within *Poor Richard*'s figuring of witness [**47**].[246] Like Belshazzar, Nixon is a witness to an event he cannot interpret, an inability that has catastrophic implications for his own culpability according to the narrative framework in which the scene plays out.[247] Belshazzar's bulging eyes are like that of Taussig's witness: he literally cannot make sense of what he is seeing. In the painting and the drawing, this illiteracy manifests itself in (respectively) dumbfounded and uncomprehending facial expression.[248] The destabilisation of Nixon's body in *Poor Richard* – its formal shifts and metamorphoses – is the result not only of Guston's explicit political address to the president's public image. It also makes literal Nixon's position as witness: a self that cannot hold itself together, that "doubts itself". It is here that Guston's sympathy for Nixon makes itself known; it is here that *Poor Richard*'s failure as satire is most evident.[249]

The tensions between explicit political address and a digressive and reflective tendency make *Poor Richard* a curio in Guston's body of work, whose insecure status within that output enables it to test the boundaries of the artist's sense of the politics of his work. It is quite clear that the failure of *Poor Richard* – evinced by Guston's ultimate inability to follow through with its publication, a marginality that is continually re-enacted in its relative obscurity within his last decade of production – is down to its too-apparent closeness to real events of the day. For the remainder of his career, Guston would avoid any kind of explicit allusion in his work, even when he returned to the subject of Nixon in his drawings and the painting *San Clemente* of 1975. Situated within a broader sweep of drawing, *Poor Richard* is

[246] It is notable here that Rembrandt's painting has a history of adaptation within a comics register, most notably in James Gillray's *The hand-writing upon the wall* (1803, National Portrait Gallery, London), which substitutes Belshazzar for Napoleon and, like Guston's Nixon, dramatizes the arrival of judgement in illegible gesture of unknown origin.

[247] It is likely that Guston's image refers to Nixon's "vision" of visiting Communist China, an ambition that was widely seen as contradicting his anti-Communist stance earlier in his political career.

[248] It seems to me that Guston's painting *The Line* [**8**], which I earlier discussed in relation to the originary gesture in drawing by which Guston was able to stage a kind of non-signifying, text-adjacent mark-making, may channel Rembrandt's imagery of the disembodied hand, which draws marks that defy comprehension and thereby assert drawing's primacy as embodiment of unprocessed testimonial.

[249] *Poor Richard* might also be seen to allegorise Guston's own troubled position within the American art scene of the time. Robert Storr has shown how a later painting, *San Clemente* (1975), Guston's only painting of the president, indicates a sympathy for post-Watergate Nixon, showing him dragging his hugely distended and bandaged phlebitic leg along the beach, a fat tear falling from his eye. For Storr, the conflation of artist and subject is self-evident, and one can easily compare "the weepy self-pity of the fallen president with the comparatively vigorous self-mockery of the artist's own "martyrdom" and ostracism." Storr, *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting*, (London: Lawrence King, 2020), 153.

part of a repositioning of drawing as a practice. For Guston, the blank sheet of paper was a kind of contact zone between the world and himself. This “zone of trench warfare”, as Michael Taussig put it, is one in which subject positions get “messed up” through a seeing that doubts itself. “What kind of a man am I”, then, is a question posed every time the brush or the pen touches the empty space of the page. As the central question of Guston’s later career, it is one that remains in play, terminally unresolved, and forever deferred. Taussig’s framing of witness enables us to see Guston’s turn to representation around 1968 in a different light. By way of drawing, Guston developed a relationship between political events and the ability, or otherwise, of images to bear faithful witness to them. Yet it was within this irresolvable tension that the witnessing self came to be articulated.

3.1 Painting Chapels in the 1970s

Guston, Boston and the Expressionist tradition

Despite its dominance in the literature on Guston, the Marlborough Gallery in New York was not the only venue in which the artist's new figurative paintings were shown in 1970. In November of that year, one week after the New York exhibition closed, eighteen of those paintings, including *The Studio, Blackboard, Flatlands, City Limits* and *A Day's Work,* were installed at Boston University's School of Fine & Applied Arts Gallery (SFAA).[250] The gallery, a former Buick showroom on the ground floor of the SFAA building, provided a very different context for Guston's later paintings, one which was highly generative for the development of his practice. This was a distinction made apparent in the critical reception of the Marlborough paintings on their reinstallation in Boston. While each of the most prominent New York-based critics of the exhibition, such as Hilton Kramer (*The New York Times*), Robert Hughes (*Time*), and Robert Pincus-Witten (*Artforum*), saw its failures differently, they were unified in diagnosing the changes it announced as unjustified, anachronistic and irrelevant.[251] In Boston, however, Guston's new work was received largely positively by a "surprised though receptive audience".[252]

Writing in the *Boston Globe,* Edgar J. Driscoll noted that "Not only has he returned to the figurative, but to an art of political message as well. And he does it in a most engaging

[250] *New Paintings, Philip Guston*, November 14th – December 13th, 1970, *The Deluge* was not included, for reasons that remain unclear. There are no extant photos of the installation in Boston.
[251] These responses, as David Kaufmann has summarised, "testified to a loose but insistent vanguardism [revealing] the general currency of [Clement] Greenberg's ideas even among those who seemed to oppose him." Kaufmann, *Telling Stories,* 21-2.
[252] Judith Bookbinder *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism as Alternative Modernism* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), 253.

fashion via the comic strip route, although there's nothing funny about the things of which he speaks."[253] Where Guston's Marlborough paintings failed according to New York critics' criteria that espoused aesthetic innovation, their reception in Boston revealed a different set of critical frameworks. Pincus-Witten's sense of the paintings' failure – their inability to resolve an internal tension of painterly facture and referential content – was understood, by Robert Taylor, also in the *Boston Globe,* as a continuation of the "creative use of doubt and tension in both earlier and current work."[254] Driscoll also noted "many technical similarities and holdovers" from Guston's earlier paintings.[255] As I will show, artistic and critical traditions in Boston, the pedagogical context of the university, as well as an important support network of employment and comradeship, provided a nourishing environment for the development of Guston's work throughout the 1970s. It also enabled Guston to explore the ramifications of his encounter with Italian art in situ during his final visit there in 1970, a few days after the opening of the Marlborough exhibition.

Although almost entirely passed over in the extensive literature on the artist, Guston's relationship to artistic traditions in Boston produced ways of framing figurative practice that were highly generative for his work and its relationship to art-historical precedent.[256] Guston was affiliated with Boston University from March 1970, when he was awarded an honorary doctorate of Fine Arts, and was a visiting University Professor there from 1973-78, almost the entire span of his final decade.[257] While under-discussed in the literature on the artist, Guston's work as a teacher, conducted in parallel with the development of his painting practice across the 1970s, seems to have informed his ongoing engagement with the art of the past, especially forms of painting, such as fresco cycles, that were themselves pedagogical in intent.[258] The traditions of figurative practice both at Boston University and

[253] Edgar J. Driscoll, "ART/reality via 'Krazy Kat'", *Boston Globe***,** November 22nd, 1970, A-25.
[254] Kim Sichel, "Philip Guston at Boston University" in *Private and Public Battles*, 22.
[255] Driscoll, 1970, pA-25.
[256] Guston had first lectured in Boston at the Museum School in 1949, invited by Karl Zerbe. He was invited to be a visiting artist at BU in 1961 and 1966, both times by David Aronson (Logen Zimmerman, "Aronson and Guston Connections", unpublished, unpaginated).
[257] Guston had been made an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts at BU in Spring 1970; he was a University Professor and Professor of Art from 1973 – 1978. Guston visited Boston once a month for 2-3 days a time, conducting extended crits with graduate painting students. This provided some measure of financial stability at a time in which his paintings barely sold.
[258] Guston was deeply engaged with the life of the university; he "participated in the selection of students for the programme, he built upon the figurative tradition of the school, and he attempted to help all of the

in the Boston art scene more broadly presented a critical context for Guston's figurative work that set itself deliberately at odds with that of New York.[259]

As Judith Bookbinder has argued, "Guston's connections to Boston University were strengthening at the same time that his new work was meeting a hostile reaction in New York."[260] Following the surge of institutional enthusiasm for Abstract Expressionism in New York in the 1950s, the work of these artists was quickly framed as anachronistic in its academicism; like Bay Area Figurative painters in San Francisco, and the Chicago Imagists, Boston Expressionism was, by the late 1950s, an "isolated figurative camp."[261] While Guston had a brief engagement with the Monster Roster group of figurative expressionists in Chicago in the late 1950s, he otherwise had little relationship to contemporary representational painting, outside of Boston.[262] Boston Expressionist artists, including David Aronson, Hyman Bloom, Karl Zerbe and Jack Levine, maintained European traditions of abstracted figuration, often in unconventionally archaic materials. By dint of their absence from the walls of New York museums and galleries, Boston Expressionist paintings suggested strategies for a contemporary figurative practice that eschewed the critical frameworks by which Guston's later paintings were seen to have fallen short.[263]

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students. … Guston's teachings and his paintings had a profound influence on a whole generation of painters graduating from the programme, and his presence looms as a mythic collective memory of the School." Sichel, *Private and Public Battles,* 23.

[259] "Guston admired the strength of the then-unfashionable figurative tradition of the School … Here was an audience with few connections to institutions and old colleagues in New York." Sichel, *Private and Public Battles,* 23.

[260] Bookbinder, *Boston Modern,* 253-4.

[261] Nicolas Capasso, "Expressionism: Boston's Claim to Fame" in *Painting in Boston: 1950 – 2000* (exh. cat., DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, Mass., September 14, 2002 – February 23, 2003, ed. Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Nicholas Capasso, and Jennifer Uhrhane), 143.

[262] In 1957, Guston was invited to judge the annual *Exhibition Momentum* in Chicago, which included the work of Monster Roster artists such as Nancy Spero, Leon Golub, June Leaf and Gertrude Abercrombie. Guston's text for the exhibition catalogue anticipates his own transition to representation around a decade later: "I believe it to be a tribute to some of the paintings I saw here that they participate in an interior world of feelings unafraid to reveal itself through forms. And this purity is the most human act whenever it occurs." Guston, 1957, cited in John Corbett, Jim Dempsey, Jessica Moss, and Richard A. Born (eds.), *Monster Roster: Existentialist Art in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 45.

[263] Despite being embraced by modernist institutions and artists in the 1940s – Bloom showed in Dorothy Miller's *Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States* at MoMA in 1942, after which both Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko declared him "the first among their group" (Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, 29); he also showed at the 1950 Venice Biennale alongside de Kooning, Pollock and Gorky – by the late 1950s Boston Expressionism had been sidelined by the mainstream of contemporary American art. No Boston Expressionist paintings were shown in Peter Selz's *New Images of Man* at MoMA in 1959, for example, which included work by Golub, Alberto Giacometti, and Jean Dubuffet, whose works bear some resemblance to that of Boston artists. In his review of the work of Bloom in 1946, for example, Clement Greenberg stated that "I do not think Bloom's

Boston's distinction from the critical contexts of New York is reflected in its institutional programming at the time. A culture of "Germanophilia" in Boston and Cambridge's art institutions solidified a native avant-garde that resisted formalist abstraction. The Institute of Contemporary Art staged major exhibitions of European figurative painting from the late 1940s onward, in deliberate contradistinction to curatorial policy at MoMA in New York.[264] Guston's engagement with the work of Max Beckmann, an artist to whose work he continually referred in his work of both the 1940s and 1970s, was certainly enhanced by the presence of Beckmann's paintings in Boston and Cambridge collections, as well as his relationship with Boston artists and students in the late 1940s.[265] Guston in fact saw Boston in the 1970s as similar to New York in the early years of Abstract Expressionism, before its co-option by institutional discourses and capitulation to market forces. In an unpublished letter in 1973 to friends in Florida, Guston described himself as "on a Boston kick… [it is] really the way N.Y.C. used to be years ago and which I detest now – I hardly ever go in and feel out of things there. Perhaps thats [*sic*] the reason."[266] I suggest that Boston's artistic scene provided Guston with many sustaining contexts for his turn to representation in the late 1960s. Principal among these were practices marginal to modernist discourse that deployed representation as a historically engaged mode capable of articulating an encounter with modern catastrophe.

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expressionism offers great possibilities for the future; its postulates by this time have become slightly academic [with]…superficial execution and gratuitous flourishes." Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions by Hyman Bloom, David Smith and Robert Motherwell", *The Nation*, January 29th, 1946.

[264] The Germanic Museum (after 1949 the Busch-Reisinger Museum) showed work by Neue Sachlichkeit artists such as Georg Grosz, Max Beckmann and Otto Dix, as well as Die Brücke work by Erich Heckel and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The ICA changed its name from the Institute of Modern Art in 1948, in part to announce its independence from Alfred Barr's Museum of Modern Art and its curatorial interests: "Given Boston's long time interest in Germanic culture…it would make sense to create an institution that explored alternatives to the School of Paris." The ICA showed retrospectives of Oskar Kokoschka (who also taught at the Museum School in 1948), Edvard Munch (1950) and James Ensor (1952). However, the ICA showed Boston artists only in retrospectives in the 1950s, and it was widely seen as having forfeited the possibility of creating "a strong institution willing to challenge the primacy of abstraction." Katherine French, "Artistic Paradox" in *David Aronson: The Paradox* (exh.cat., Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham, Massachusetts, November 21st, 2009 – February 28th, 2010), 9.

[265] Beckmann taught at the Museum School in 1947 and his works remained important in curricula there and at Boston University. "In that same year, Philip Guston left his teaching post at Washington University in St. Louis, where he was replaced by Beckmann (working in the United States for the first time)." Zimmerman, n.p.

[266] Unpublished letter to Martha & Ralph Hyams, October 23rd, 1973, via Doyle Auctions, New York.

The importance of these contexts for the development of Guston's practice in the years after the Marlborough exhibition is best shown in his 1974 show at the SFAA Gallery at Boston University, *Philip Guston: New Paintings* (March 15th – April 14th, 1974) [**48 / 49**].[267] This was his first exhibition of new paintings since the Marlborough exhibition. Crucially, it was also his first showing of new work since his final trip to Italy in 1970-1. The SFAA context mattered for two fundamental reasons. First, it was the only non-commercial space in which his paintings were shown during the final decade of his work, prior to his final retrospective in San Francisco in 1980.[268] Second, it was established and maintained along strictly pedagogical lines.[269] It was the only exhibition of work by a member of the faculty for the entire decade, and was accompanied by a public conversation between the artist and Harold Rosenberg, which was then transcribed for the *Boston University Journal*.[270] Unlike the audience of artists, collectors, scholars and critics of Guston's generation to whom the paintings at the Marlborough Gallery were addressed – and by which its allusions to Abstract Expressionism might be understood – the Boston audience was largely composed of university faculty, fellow artists, and undergraduate and postgraduate students. Since the exhibition was held at a time when Guston had no gallery representation, the easing of commercial imperatives perhaps made possible the unique curatorial approach that was taken.[271] This context helps articulate the exhibition's reorientation of Guston's sense of his work's public address. Further, the cultural context of Boston's artists in particular helps account for the ways in which *both* the paintings and their installation recuperated histories of public painting.

[267] The works in the 1974 exhibition were technically on sale on consignment from McKee Gallery, but this was not foregrounded in the exhibition literature, and none sold, in any case.
[268] In the 1970s, Guston had solo exhibitions of new paintings at Marlborough Gallery (1970) then David McKee Gallery, New York (1974, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979). Other solo gallery shows during the 1970s all included work that had previously been shown in New York. These are Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit (1974); Makler Gallery, Philadelphia (1975); Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco (1975); Achim Moeller, Ltd., London (1977); and Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago (1978).
[269] The mission statement produced for the opening of the SFAA space in 1958 made this clear: it "will not duplicate the programs of the museum and the commercial art gallery. Its exhibitions will clarify and amplify curriculum objectives; it will provide for the unique needs of the art student to help develop critical standards" (Boston University Art Gallery founding statement, 1958, courtesy Boston University Archives).
[270] There were only two faculty exhibitions at the SFAA Gallery in the 1960s, and the only previous public talk scheduled to coincide with an exhibition was that of Jacques Lipchitz in 1965 (in conversation with Joseph Ablow).
[271] Guston left Marlborough Gallery in October 1972 and joined McKee Gallery in May 1974.

The historical allusions in the 1974 exhibition were not overlooked in the Boston context. Writing in the *Boston Globe*, Robert Taylor noted in passing the exhibition's art-historical resonances: "one could easily write about the paintings in terms of art history. If it didn't wander too far afield, I think an essay could trace their connection to the Renaissance, particularly to Piero della Francesca."[272] It is this connection that this chapter of the thesis will address. It is one that is, I argue, deeply informed by the context of Boston University's sustained pedagogical engagement with the art of the past, both in its allusions to large-scale public painting projects Guston had recently revisited, and in its channelling of a kind of figuration capable of evoking an encounter with historical catastrophe.

1974: Guston's painted chapel

Philip Guston: New Paintings was Guston's first exhibition following his final seven-month visit to Italy, from 23rd October, 1970 to mid-May, 1971. As I will explore, this visit – Guston's third, but markedly different from the others, in experience, implication, and influence on the remainder of his work – effected important reorientations in the artist's practice. The Boston exhibition is the first to mark the shift in Guston's work engendered by his contact with these works. Despite this, the literature on the artist to date has paid little attention to the specifics of Guston's final encounter with historical Italian art; has largely overlooked this exhibition; and has insufficiently discussed any of the artist's exhibitions after Marlborough. This and the following chapter will make the case for scholarly attention on the 1970-1 Italian trip and its unfolding in the artist's work after that point. In doing so, a different inflection of Guston's engagement with representation will emerge, one informed by the phenomenological encounter with historical painting and sustained by Boston's culture of representation.

Installation photographs of the exhibition reveal a dense hang, in which paintings were hung out of chronological order. Guston himself was intimately involved with the selection and

[272] Robert Taylor, "Guston: The raw and the refined", Boston Globe, March 24th, 1974, pA-12. Taylor later chose Guston's exhibition as his favourite of the year.

hang of the works; no exhibition prior to this exhibition had the same degree of curatorial input from the artist.[273] Throughout the space, Guston's paintings were hung largely without frames and generally close together, in places almost touching. A consistent palette of pinks, reds, and greys, with accents of green and black, provided a coherence between works and collapsed the chronological gaps between them. Iconography was repeated to comparable effect, including upturned shoes, open books, half-closed blinds, dangling lightbulbs and puffs of smoke. The hang of the exhibition, then, encouraged readings between discrete paintings made at different times. The effect was of a single, cogent schema, rather than a survey of independent works of art made across a three-year period. This is a result that was carefully planned by Guston and his BU collaborator Sidney Hurwitz, the head of the School of Visual Arts. To that end, Guston produced a number of small ink drawings of his own paintings to be used in a model by Hurwitz and himself in the development of the show's hang [**50**]. Each drawing shows the composition of the work very clearly, including its dimensions. This indicates Guston's interest in the spatial dynamics of the exhibition and the details of its hang.[274]

The extent to which Guston saw the 1974 exhibition as a stage for considerations of the public address of his later production is borne out in the role of the painting *Painter's Table* (1973) within the exhibition [**51**]. The work assembles an arrangement of objects at the upper right corner of a broad pink tabletop, which occupies the majority of the painted surface. Behind, an open window with a green blind shows a black square of night sky, identifying it as analogous to the nocturnal Guston's own studio practice. Disposed in two roughly horizontal rows, the objects are mostly drawn from the artist's iconography established five years previously, namely open books, upturned shoes, cigarettes, a palette, irons, and nails. Amid these familiar forms is a new object, appearing in his work for the first time, which is picked out in a darker pink: a small canvas, painted with a single human eye,

[273] Guston's involvement with the exhibition has been confirmed in discussion between the author and Sidney Hurwitz. During Guston's employment there as visiting lecturer, "Philip was very involved not only in the selection but in the hanging." (8th September 2022). He seems to have been similarly engaged with the hanging process of his 1980 retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

[274] These small, functional drawings translate the large-scale paintings into small images that closely resemble the panels of comic strips from Guston's youth that the artist often discussed (such as George Herriman, Bud Fisher, and Milt Gross, among them). This points not only to the ongoing nature of Guston's engagement with these sources but also underscores his paintings' distance from comics art.

which gazes up and out of both its own immediate surface and the larger painting in which it sits. The agency implied by this act of looking is shared by many of the objects within the painting, such as the nail that seems to stand unaided at the table's corner, or the shoes that appear to march across the canvas. The painter's table of the title, then, is a kind of stage in which objects arranged as though components in a still life painting are imbued with a vibrancy their physical weightiness might otherwise deny.

Guston gave *Painter's Table* a prominent position in the Boston exhibition. It was the only work hung on a separate wall, which projected into the space and provided a frame for it.[275] This physical separation from the space of other paintings underscored its distinctiveness within the artist's production. Unlike the majority of the paintings on display, which were mostly landscape-oriented rectangles, and whose dispersal of contents reiterated this horizontal emphasis, *Painter's Table* is around 4 metres square, and its contents are gathered towards the centre.[276] It was one of only two paintings reproduced in colour in the catalogue, along with the rectangular *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (1973), which hung immediately to the left of the exhibition's entrance, and was therefore one of the first paintings to be encountered [**52**]. I follow Guston and Hurwitz's curatorial emphasis on both works in reading these paintings as emblematic of the reorientation of the artist's work after Italy.

In her essay in the exhibition catalogue, Dore Ashton identifies the eye on the canvas in *Painter's Table* and *The Canvas* (1973) – an image of a pink canvas propped against a stone wall, with a single eye gazing upwards – as "clearly Guston's eye as anyone who knows him will know, but it is also the eye of the witness, the ideal spectator, and doesn't blink" [**53**].[277] In casting the canvas *itself* as an unblinking witness in these paintings, Guston's painting activates an important set of meanings. These apparently animate art objects recall Ad Reinhardt's living painting from his "How to Look" cartoon, as well as the image of Nixon on

[275] Logen Zimmerman at SFAA confirms that the wall was always used as the marquee display in exhibitions in the gallery, where the most prominent works would be hung or exhibition text be printed.
[276] This format and arrangement are close to Guston's abstract paintings of the 1950s and early 60s, which are almost entirely painted on square canvases whose shape is emphasised through painterly attention to their centres. Indeed, *Painter's Table* can be read as a 1950s abstraction rendered in representational terms.
[277] Dore Ashton in *Philip Guston: New Paintings* exh. cat., Boston: Boston University, 1974, 4.

television that I read as a canvas in Chapter Two. This association emphasises the disruptive nature of the art encounter, whereby paintings respond to being looked at, rejecting the viewers' gazes or casting them as receivers of political information. Ashton's reference to *witness,* though, further charges this iconography with questions of temporality and destabilisation that are central to the exhibition and its registration of the encounter with Italian fresco. Taussig's framing of witnessing as a disorientation of viewer and viewed – "The *who am I?* and the *what is that?* get messed up because the field implicating observer and observed has suddenly become a zone of trench warfare" – provides a means to consider the broader implications of these "seeing canvases". The witnessing eye of *The Canvas* and *Painter's Table* emphasises the central preoccupation of the Boston exhibition, which develops a similar theme that I identified in *Red Picture* and *The Deluge*: the destabilising effect of looking, which is rendered allegorical through reference to established viewing dynamics. In Boston, Guston's interests are shown to have shifted towards Italian sources, thanks to his 1970-1 trip; and yet this interest remains at the root of his relationship to representational practice.

Taking *Painter's Table* as an entry point to the exhibition's internal logic – which I argue its installation on an independent wall encouraged viewers to do – the prominent eye in profile generated a movement between the canvases that lined the walls of the space. Following the painted eye's gaze, the viewer was led to the same object in *Painter's Table*, then to another eye in *Solitary*, hung on the perpendicular wall to the right; that work's upward and rightward gaze then led to *Stationary Figure* on the same wall; then to the next wall, in which the mirrored profile heads of *Smoking I* and *II* hung one above the other, which redoubled the same gaze towards *In Bed;* and from there to the final wall, with the rightward gaze of *Painting, Smoking, Eating* echoed by *The Canvas*, which completed the circuit of the exhibition by gazing towards *Painter's Table*.[278] In fact, only two canvases in the exhibition, *Multiplied* and *Ominous Land,* show a leftward gaze. Both depict a Klan hood in profile whose direction of sight is therefore less readily vouchsafed than the staring exposed

[278] This relay of gazes is not a feature of Guston's previous exhibition in 1970 at Marlborough Gallery. In that installation, the gazes of the Klansmen protagonists are, by contrast, often internal, with hooded figures gazing at each other (as in *Blackboard, Bad Habits* and *A Day's Work*), or in alternating left and right directions. There is no clear "movement" as there is in the Boston hang.

eyes of the other paintings. This consistent relay of rightward looking generates a cogency between the canvases of the exhibition, and in doing so invites a comparison with the cycles of fresco painting Guston had encountered four years previously. The "witnessing canvases", with their evocation of Reinhardt, thereby charge the physical space with questions of representation that are primary concerns in the exhibition.

There is a distinction to be made between Guston's evocation of a chapel-like space in the Boston exhibition and comparable strategies in the work of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, especially Rothko. Rothko's installations of paintings were sometimes explicitly titled in ways that invited religious readings, such as his chapel for the de Menil family in Houston, Texas, that he produced between 1964-9.[279] The fourteen canvases Rothko produced for this purpose-built space were extremely reduced in palette and touch [**54**]. Their repetition of a pared-down vocabulary of colour, tonality and scale make the space resemble less a frescoed chapel of the kind Guston certainly had in mind when planning the hang of the works in Boston, and more what Briony Fer has called "a place full of pictorial feeling, not just a place full of pictures."[280] The painting, then, was "no longer the thing on the wall but the expanded scene of viewing."[281] This is not at all the case in Guston's exhibition. Where Rothko created densely hung installations of paintings that obliged a viewer's immersion in the painting – which, indeed, often prevented their viewers from standing back from them – Guston's Boston hang encouraged a range of physical encounters, and through shifts in scale, repetition of compositional elements, and the transformation of iconography between the canvases, more closely evoked an actual encounter with painted chapels.

The Boston installation is like a painted chapel in its simultaneous linear narrative activity and subsidiary (and disruptive) pictorial events. It encapsulates various different, and often

[279] Because of his regular visits to Boston in the 1970s, Guston was probably most familiar with Rothko's Harvard murals in Cambridge, Mass., which were completed in 1962 and hung in the dining room of the Holyoake Center. After excessive exposure to sunlight, the paintings were removed in 1979.
[280] Briony Fer *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 22.
[281] Fer, *The Infinite Line,* 24.

contradictory, narrative timescales; its viewers must read both with and against the narrative flow of the cycle. What becomes available for Guston via his re-engagement with narrative fresco cycles in the immediate aftermath of his return to figuration are models of temporality by which individual paintings participate in complex networks through which their significations deepen. As I will explore, Guston's allusion to fresco cycles by Paolo Uccello, Giotto, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca was a means by which his interests in painting's public address – both its possibilities and failures – could be explored.

Guston's *Pantheon*

Sometime during the production of the body of paintings that would be installed at Boston University, Guston made the painting *Pantheon* (1973) [**55**]. It shows a tiny blank canvas on an oversized easel against a pale pink background, with a much larger lightbulb dangling down on the right-hand side. Both objects are characteristic elements of the artist's late iconography and are shorthand for the artist's studio. What is unique to this work is the painted text that floats around and between them, which lists a sequence of Italian artists' names of the 14th - 18th centuries, shown out of chronological order. They are, from top to bottom, Masaccio, Piero [della Francesca], Giotto [di Bondone], and Tiepolo, and one then contemporary name, placed behind the easel and set apart from the others: [Giorgio] de Chirico.[282] Though shown out of chronological order, the sequence of names on the right-hand side of the painting alludes to the re-emergence of perspectival space in Western painting (from Giotto through to Masaccio and Piero). This may account for the plays on pictorial fiction dramatized within it, such as the cord from which the lightbulb hangs, which neatly bisects the final "o" of Masaccio's name.

[282] Which of the Tiepolos is indicated in Guston's painting remains unclear. I suggest that he refers here to Giambattista, the father, because of his fresco practice in Venice and elsewhere, which Guston would have encountered more than once. Guston would have known Tiepolo's ceiling painting *Virtue and Nobility Crowning Love* (1759-61) at the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's holdings of the artist's work. In other aspects of Guston's career, however, Giandomenico is a more sustained presence. Guston mentioned his interest in Giandomenico's graphic work, *Divertimenti per li ragazzi* (1797-1804), on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. I see particular kinship with Giandomenico's frescoes for the Villa Tiepolo in Zianigo, which show white-hooded punchinellas engaging in similarly listless activities to Guston's Klansmen. There is more work to be done in this area.

While a small number of other late Guston paintings use painted text, there is no other that so bluntly lays out the artist's preoccupations with the work of other artists, which are shown in the art-historical shorthand by which they are best known. I suggest that Guston's relationship with the teaching faculty of Boston University informed his revived interest in historical painting in the very year he was made a visiting professor there. Under the direction of David Aronson, students "undertook [mandatory] rigorous apprenticeship with the Old Masters"; it was this traditional approach that secured Guston's participation there, as "those traditions helped sustain representational artists at a time when there were few alternatives."[283] It is no surprise that *Pantheon* was made after the Marlborough exhibition, during the years in which few paintings sold, and in a year in which Guston had no gallery representation.[284] *Pantheon*'s names were a support network.

Pantheon was never shown in the artist's lifetime, and is curiously under-represented in the Guston literature, where it is described as "a manifesto, a creed"[285]; [a list] "consistent with those figures who guided him through his first artistic explorations"[286], who were "important catalysts in Guston's late career elaboration of a new kind of figurative painting."[287] What has been overlooked thus far is the fact that, with the exception of Giorgio de Chirico, all of the artists listed in *Pantheon* are known for their paintings in public sites, predominantly frescoed walls and ceilings in architectural interiors. Although it was not unusual for artists of Guston's generation and nationality to declare their interest in Western European artists of a similar tradition, this was an interest that invariably took place at the level of style, technique or palette.[288] This is manifestly – comically – not the case in *Pantheon*. Instead, it declares the artist's interest in a history of painting's public address – a concern that, I argue,

[283] French, 2009 (p11) also notes that "Both admirers and detractors are fond of repeating the time worn joke that "BU stood for burnt umber"". Aronson had been with Guston during his first visit to Italy in 1948; Guston's engagement with Aronson via his employment in Boston may have instigated this revival of interest.
[284] Guston left Marlborough in October 1972; he joined David McKee's new gallery in late 1974.
[285] Kosme de Barañano, "Guston and the Poets" in *Philip Guston & The Poets*, exh. cat. (Germany: Hauser and Wirth Publishers, 2017), 12.
[286] Andrew Graham-Dixon, "The Culture of Painting: Guston and History", in *Philip Guston Retrospective*, 75.
[287] Peter Benson Miller, "Hoods on Vacation: Philip Guston's *Roma* series" in *Philip Guston: Roma*, Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 25.
[288] Exploring this would require more space than is available here, but good examples might be Grace Hartigan's paintings from 1952, which resulted from analysis of painters like Diego Velázquez (for instance, *The Persian Jacket*) and Helen Frankenthaler's paintings after Titian and Rubens (*Europa*, 1957, and *After Rubens*, 1961). These examples channel the painterliness and palette of the named painters.

emerged around the production and reception of the Marlborough paintings, was crystallised by the final visit to Italy, and came to its fullest fruition in the 1974 Boston exhibition.

Pantheon maps out the sites of painting that Guston visited in Florence, Arezzo, Sansepulcro, Monterchi and Venice on all three of his significant Italian trips. It is notable that his list largely reflects the Western art-historical canon, while omitting artists known for panel or easel paintings from the same tradition, even ones with whom the artist had a deep engagement.[289] Further, *Pantheon*'s list is one which Guston himself later sought to amend, as I will explore in Chapter Four. I suggest, then, that *Pantheon* is an assembly of names that were of special significance *at the moment of the painting's production* in 1973; that is, as Guston was making the large-scale canvases that would constitute the main components of his Boston exhibition, such as *Painter's Table* and *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (both 1973). What was of concern to Guston at that point, two years after his return from Italy, was a lineage of large-scale painting that anticipated a mobile, embodied viewership, that dispersed narrative across large-scale architectural space, and that made use of anachronism as a device. These were concerns that became eclipsed, in later years, with different concerns and alternative sets of art-historical sources. The significance of *Pantheon* lies, I suggest, in its dramatization of unresolvable but productive paradoxes in Guston's studio practice at the time. The juxtaposition of word and image produces a semantic tension within the work between the named fresco painters, all of whom worked in public sites with teams of assistants, and the lone canvas lit by a bulb, which evinces the quiet and solitude of Guston's night studio.[290] This dramatizes the tension of public and private which is critical to the artist's work at this time.

Pantheon is also key to Guston's post-Italy practice because of the apparent anomaly of Giorgio de Chirico. By including a figure whose practice, reputation and historical position

[289] "…scholars have identified the legions of artists from other countries left out of *Pantheon*, documenting Guston's kinship with the Mexican muralists, Antoine Watteau, Piet Mondrian, Francisco Goya, Pablo Picasso, James Ensor, and Max Beckmann among others." Miller, *Roma,* 27.

[290] I read this tension as poetic, in ways that resemble Guston's contemporaneous drawn collaborations with poets, known as the "poem-pictures" (1973-8). These works, produced in collaboration with Clark Coolidge, Bill Berkson, William Corbett, and Guston's wife Musa McKim, juxtapose fragmentary imagery and Guston's own handwritten transcriptions of poetry in a remarkably similar way to *Pantheon*'s unusual composition.

are at odds with those of the names whose space it shares, Guston's painting embodies his own relationship with the art of the past and the nature of his engagement with it in the early 1970s. De Chirico is the only living artist on Guston's list; the only one for whom easel painting was his predominant mode; and the only one to whose work it can be said that Guston's later figuration bears a clear stylistic kinship. The spatial compression of de Chirico's name, shown at an oblique angle on the left-hand side of the easel, even resembles a signature. De Chirico was, primarily, a mediating figure in Guston's self-education in art history. His were among the first modern paintings Guston saw as a young man, at the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg in Los Angeles, and his earliest paintings are evident homages to the artist.[291] The de Chirico of *Pantheon* is, however, not simply the metaphysical painter whose production in the first decades of the twentieth century remained the predominant point of focus for scholarship at the time. Rather, Guston's engagement with de Chirico always encompassed work from across his career, including the later remakes of his earlier paintings, known as *verifalsi*, for which he was critically condemned by the art establishment.

Indeed, as Ara H. Merjian has shown, Guston may have had reason to see de Chirico's critical excoriation in terms that mirrored his own, even seeing him as a kindred precursor who "could pastiche both academic principles and his own, earlier imagery without remorse."[292] De Chirico's work after the 1920s, in which he revived motifs from his successful metaphysical paintings of the teens, might well be seen as paralleling Guston's own late revival of imagery he had last made use of in his work in the 1930s and 40s, such as Klan figures, dustbin lids and brick walls. What Merjian reads as de Chirico's "proto-postmodernist sensibility" – his use of pastiche, self-referentiality and allusion in his later paintings – is not shared by Guston, however. Where Guston's earlier imagery returns in his later work, it does so in transfigured, not allusory form. It is impossible, in other words, to take a later Guston for an earlier one, as might be easily done in the case of de Chirico. Yet de Chirico's "grappling with questions of figure and ground, perspectival fiction and literal

[291] Around 1930, early in his career, Guston saw de Chirico's painting *The Soothsayer's Recompense* (1913), which hung on the Arensbergs' living room wall. Guston's earliest easel paintings, such as *Nude Philosopher in Space-Time* (1935) are overt homages to de Chirico.
[292] Ara H. Merjian, "Guston's Italian Badness" in Benson Miller, Peter (ed.), *Go Figure! New Perspectives on Guston* (New York: American Academy in Rome / New York Review Books, 2014), 64.

flatness" establishes the territory by which he came to address similar art-historical precursors to Guston's list.[293] De Chirico's inclusion in *Pantheon* stood at once for a refusal of linear temporal readings of artists' careers and a means of addressing the history of his medium in terms of the mechanics of representation. The 1974 Boston exhibition and the 1980 San Francisco retrospective, both of which were hung out of chronological order, made manifest *Pantheon*'s implications. In signing his name "as" de Chirico within a painting that strongly resembles some of that artist's work, Guston aligned himself with the counter-modernism that de Chirico seemed to stand for.

De Chirico's series of still life paintings made in wartime Ferrara in 1916 seem the most evident reference points for Guston around the time of *Pantheon's* production. These works make use of *trompe l'oeil* traditions that emerged during the early Renaissance, and in doing so stage reflections upon the representational possibilities of the medium. *The Jewish Angel* (1916) is a good example: it shows a tower of tottering objects, most of which imply measurement of distance and angle, against a grey backdrop [**56**].[294] Towards the top of this vertical assemblage is a sheet of paper, with an illusionistic folded corner, on which is drawn a large, heavy-lidded eye, looking up and to the right. As Emily Braun has discussed, De Chirico's painting "throws into chaos the instruments used to hold up and construct the illusions of Western representation."[295] It is in using many of the tropes of *trompe l'oeil* illusionism (the shadows that indicate the relative positions of the objects, for instance) that de Chirico does so; this is part of his intention to "represent the appearance of nature to make apparent the nature of representation."[296] For Guston, too, the traditions of representational image-making, a history of which is implied in *Pantheon*, become a resource in his own work's analysis of representation *per se* at a moment of crisis. In both artists' works, these analyses take place within interior spaces that, like *kunstkammers*, are piled with alternately functional and curious objects; both indicate the distance of the world beyond through small windows, pushed to the rear of the compositions.

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[293] Merjian in *Go Figure!,* 74.
[294] This painting is illustrated to accompany Cooper's essay "Guston, Then" in the *Philip Guston Now* catalogue but is not discussed in depth, beyond a reference to the open eye: "Guston kept his eyes open." Cooper in *Philip Guston Now*, 128.
[295] Emily Braun, "Greetings from a Distant Friend", in *Nature According to De Chirico* (exhibition catalogue), Palazzo de Esposizioni, Rome, 2010, 44.
[296] Braun, *Nature According to De Chirico,* 45.

Yet both disrupt the temporality of these hermetic spaces through the use of the open eye, staring perpendicular to the viewer's gaze, which features in a number of de Chirico's works from 1916.[297] I have shown how the eye in *Painter's Table* and *The Canvas* acts to invoke sequential wall painting sequences through its activation of a lateral gaze between discrete canvases. De Chirico's painted eyes do something similar, leading a viewer's attention out of the perspectival framework of the composition, and projecting forwards into an imagined future iteration of its own contents. The animation of this eye dramatizes the activation of the artwork in this way: the robot-like "angel" of de Chirico's painting, like the eye-canvas of *Painter's Table*, seems propelled forward by the action of the gaze. The temporal complexity of de Chirico's paintings, as well as of the shape of his career, with its continual repetitions and rephrases of static motifs, accounts for his presence within Guston's *Pantheon*. I argue that de Chirico embodied, in these ways, strategies to find within the representational tradition certain opportunities to evoke the temporal without telling stories.

3.2 History, melancholy, and painting on the wall

Melancholy and temporality

Guston's Italian visit in October 1970 was his third in-person viewing of the trecento and quattrocento fresco cycles previously mentioned: he had also seen many of them on both of his previous trips to Italy, in 1948 and 1960.[298] These earlier visits took place at comparably pressured moments of his career. When first visiting Italy in 1948, his work was at the brink of total commitment to abstraction, which would then occupy his practice for the next twenty years. On his return in 1960, that commitment felt especially burdened by a growing interest in figuration that would fully emerge towards the end of that decade. The third visit in 1970, then, was an act of re-visiting, both of the sites themselves (in Rome, Florence,

[297] Along with *The Jewish Angel,* these include *The Pirate* and *Greetings from a Distant Friend*. All three are represented in the same way.

[298] Guston also visited Europe in 1966 with Renate Ponsold, for whom he briefly left his wife Musa at this time. They seem not to have visited Italy, but did visit Paul Cézanne's studio in Aix-en-Provence, France.

Padua, Orvieto, Venice and others) and also of the charged conditions under which the earlier trips took place.[299] Since it happened in the aftermath of the mostly negative reception of the Marlborough exhibition, the October 1970 visit was entangled with the legacy of these earlier inflection points, all of which concerned the representational possibilities of painting as a medium.[300] As I will explore, it is his engagement with public sites of painting that informed the development of his thinking on painting's relationship to its historical moment. This was enacted through a refreshed encounter with narrative-adjacent forms as well as the materiality of the works themselves, both of which were explored in his practice after his return to the States in 1971.

The timing of *Pantheon*'s production – between Guston's return from Italy and the opening of the Boston University exhibition – indicates the artist's reorientation at that time towards a practice of engagement with other artworks that is itself art-historical. I read this approach as essentially melancholy in the way Michael Ann Holly describes it. In *The Melancholy Art*, Holly describes the "estrangement" that inheres to the discipline, which "cannot overcome its loss of world…works that seem so present are actually absent; they look back at you, but whose gaze is it?"[301] Holly's account underscores the curious temporality of historical works of art, whose materiality "is a challenge to ever seeing the past as over and gone. They exist in the same place as their analysts, yet their sense of time is hardly congruent with ours."[302] This sense of loss is one Guston himself discussed in relation to the art of the past. In his 1965 essay, "Faith, Hope and Impossibility", he discussed what he called "pre-imaging" in early modern European art, or "foreknowledge of what was going to be brought into existence."[303] This is the loss of what Kaufmann describes as "a shared sense of where

[299] Guston was invited to be artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome for the academic year 1970-1. This was his second stay at the academy after his fellowship there in 1948-9. During both trips, Guston travelled extensively in Italy, as he also did when visiting in 1960. During the 1970-1 stay, Guston and his wife Musa McKim revisited sites he had seen before on one or both of those earlier stays, including Florence, Siena, Venice, Arezzo, Sansepulcro, and Naples. In 1970-1 they seem to have visited some places for the first time, including Orvieto, Viterbo, Tarquinia, Cerveteri, and Palermo, Noto, Taormina and Agrigento, Sicily. I am indebted to Peter Benson Miller for this detailed account of Guston's travels. Benson Miller, *Roma*, 36.
[300] Guston and McKim left for the Italy trip only six days after the Marlborough exhibition opening; the reviews were then posted to him while he was staying in Venice, and despite his brusque later account of his reaction to them, there is no doubt that he was deeply affected by their critiques.
[301] Michael Ann Holly *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), xi.
[302] Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, 6.
[303] Philip Guston, "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility", first published in *Art News Annual* 31 (1965-66), in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 54.

objects should be" that leaves the contemporary painter as "the victim of the depletion of certainty."[304]

Guston's melancholy approach to the history of art has something in common with Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood's conception of anachrony. This term is to be distinguished from anachronism, because the latter assumes a stable temporal framework by which disruptions can be easily identified as such. Anachrony, then, identifies less what an artwork *is* (anachronistic, or out of joint with its time) than what it *does*. In Nagel and Wood's definition, anachrony "embodies and performs…productive discrepancies" and is able to "breed its own formations of history: repetitions, regressions, distensions, duplications, folds and bends – and, above all, alongside these formations, [it has] the ability to balance incompatible models of temporality."[305] This description provides an apt account of Guston's art-historical practice, as elaborated within the works on display in the Boston exhibition.

Temporality is continually subject to critical attention in Guston's 1974 exhibition. Figurations of time are a feature of many of the paintings, such as clocks (in *Stationary Figure* and *The Hill*), rising suns (in *Ominous Land*, *Multiplied*, and *The Hill*) and night skies (in *Night*, *Couple*, *Painter's Table* and others). While this iconography does feature in some of the works on show in the Marlborough Gallery, its role within the Boston exhibition – which coheres as an installation in ways that are distinct both from the 1970 exhibition and subsequent ones – invites a different approach to Guston's invocation of the temporal. The Boston paintings evince Guston's interests in the painted surface's relationship to actual architectural space: the relay of eyes in profile draws attention to the interplay between paintings and their arrangement in the gallery. Yet the continued failure of the works' temporality to cohere – the clocks are out of sync; objects, figures and interiors are repeated from painting to painting, as though stuck in a loop – raises questions about the relationship between lived time and the paintings' suggestions of temporality. In this way, what Nagel and Wood call anachrony's "apprehensiveness about the temporal instability of the artwork,

[304] Kaufmann, *Telling Stories*, 11.
[305] Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions since 1990* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 8.

and its recreation of the artwork as an occasion for reflection on that instability" was embodied in the exhibition itself.[306]

Guston's 1970-1 trip to Italy generated new ways of thinking about his work's relationship to temporality. The temporal "repetitions, regressions, distensions, duplications, folds and bends" that Nagel and Wood assign to artworks of the Renaissance period became, in Guston's late work, strategies by which his painting could generate its own meta-historical temporality. Holly's sense of melancholic "estrangement" which she ascribes to the encounter with historical material *in situ* can then be understood as a productive position in Guston's work after 1971. It is in this sense that the closeness to contemporary events evinced in Guston's drawings and paintings from 1968-70, which I have discussed with reference to the artist's encounter with mediated imagery of violence in 1968, is nowhere to be seen in the works on display in Boston. Instead, a new orientation to time, influenced by the complex temporal structures of the works of the artists listed in *Pantheon*, enabled Guston's work to dramatize questions of his practice's relationship to history. I read this strategy in terms first articulated by Jacques Rancière; anachronic phenomena are "events, ideas, significations that are contrary to time, that make meaning circulate in a way that escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with "itself"". This helps to identify the distinctive quality of the Boston installation, which indeed enacts the circulation of meaning without any of the contemporary resonance with which the Marlborough paintings have come to be associated. Guston's Boston exhibition is, in Rancière's terms, "a signifying sequence that has left "its" time, and in this way is given the capacity to define completely original points of orientation."[307] In making his work "contrary to time", Guston's work embodied ways of thinking about questions raised but not fully explored by the Marlborough paintings. These ideas – of complicity in systemic oppression, of anxieties around one's identity, of painting's responsibility to "bear witness" – are themselves raised through the Boston paintings' figuring of temporality. Holly's question – "whose gaze is it?" – is one that is deeply implicated in Guston's address to the history of painting. The

[306] Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 13.
[307] Jacques Rancière, "The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth", cited in Kernbauer, *Anachronic Interventions*, 8.

"witnessing" canvas of *Painter's Table* invites the question and makes it central to Guston's production of a temporal structure that dramatizes a charged relationship to history.

Slifkin has argued that the nature of Guston's "figuration" in the Marlborough paintings is to be understood as "analogical and temporal"; they set up "conceptual correspondences and syntheses" between objects and earlier periods of the artist's production in ways that recall the workings of figurative language, rather than the traditionally morphological definition of the term used in art history.[308] This is redolent of the kinds of typological figuration made use of in the artists listed in *Pantheon*, as Slifkin has shown.[309] This figurative approach pertains to the Boston exhibition, too, and is in fact more pronounced in that installation, thanks to Guston's interim re-encounter with those artists' works. What is distinct about the Boston exhibition, though, is that the temporal figuration enacted in the paintings takes place between artworks in the same space, rather than outside of or beyond them, as happens in the Marlborough works. The exhibition's suggestion of a single body of paintings brought together in a coherent temporal structure, a result of its close relationship with fresco cycles, invites a different inflection of Slifkin's notion of temporal figuration.
It is certainly the case that the Boston paintings made use of a similar horizontal emphasis to those in the earlier exhibition. As Harry Cooper has discussed, the lateral compositional movement of the Marlborough paintings is a way of maintaining a kind of semantic play in Guston's late work: the movement of the viewer's eye enacts the semantic slippages that are always part of the artist's sense of figuration.[310] It is as though this strategy of figuration brought in around 1968 was activated through the compositional deployment of elements, so that, like words in a sentence, objects on a horizontal plane undergo semantic shifts as the painting unfolds visually. However, the compositional movement invited by the paintings in the 1974 exhibition is of a distinct nature to that of the 1968-70 paintings shown in the Marlborough exhibition. Where the Klansman figures of the latter body of work were often shown in motion (moving horizontally in cars, as in *Edge of Town*, or facing a powerful counterforce, as in *Scared Stiff*), thereby generating a dynamic compositional energy that

[308] Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 6.
[309] Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 26.
[310] For Cooper, "The structure of a metonymic chain…is central to the Marlborough manner. …They [the Klan figures] embody, even thematise, pictorial metonymy, the "pictorial contiguity" of one thing next to another, leading to another, pointing at another." Cooper, "Recognizing Guston", 119.

maintained the semantic mobility Cooper identified, all of the figures in the 1974 paintings are, without exception, immobile. The predominant image of the artist in bed establishes a shift in compositional mobility. I argue that this indicates a recalibrated focus in Guston's work after 1970: away from the perpetual "figuration" of shifting semantic units and towards a static mode that is, as I will explore, a reflection upon painting's public address and its relationship with its historical moment.

The sorts of temporal activity that Guston saw in historical Italian fresco cycles provided him with examples of what Eva Kernbauer has called "the productive temporal discrepancy of an action, an event, a thought, or a subject with its assigned position in a chronological order."[311] The contradictory forms of narrative temporality that co-exist within narrative fresco cycles are part of a convention of typology that posits different historical moments as mutually reinforcing. In that sense, the temporal activity of those paintings *is* productive in a theological sense.[312] Yet the question of the affordances of this kind of "discrepancy" are harder to determine in Guston's case. The primacy of *Painter's Table* invites a temporal reading of the Boston exhibition, in so far as it mobilises a viewer's attention across and between the other paintings on view, thereby "breeding its own formation of history", as Nagel and Wood had it. The repetitions between the works – especially ones figured as chronological, such as the suns, clocks and black skies – implies that the exhibition's central proposal is that of a parallel temporal zone, one which calls upon but does not obey the temporal laws of the world itself. In this sense, the studio itself becomes an allegory of a detached physical *and* temporal location. Indeed, the majority of the paintings show either the studio interior or the artist in bed, and two even represent Guston's own mailbox in Woodstock, afloat on a red sea, as though cut adrift from the contemporary world and its temporal limitations.[313] The melancholy of stasis provides its own response to the world outside the studio.

[311] Kernbauer is summarising Jacques Rancière's definition on anachrony. Because Rancière's term "never became terminologically fixed" and is sometimes used to mean "anachronistic" – a distinction that matters in the case of Guston – I will be hewing more closely to Nagel and Wood's use of the term in the following chapter. Kernbauer, *Anachronic Interventions*, 8.

[312] "Erich Auerbach insisted that the figural or typological relationship was not allegorical, but real. …Both were equally real events in the flow of history." Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance,* 33.

[313] These are *The Hill* and *Maverick Sun*. Both show Guston's mailbox, clearly labelled 660, his address in Woodstock. The former's representation of Overlook Mountain, visible outside the studio, conflates rushing

It is in the specifics of Guston's re-encounter with certain fresco cycles – by Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Paolo Uccello and Masaccio, in particular – that the expressive potential of a temporally fragmentary practice becomes apparent to him. What is at stake in this encounter is, I suggest, twofold. First is these fresco cycles' engagement with actual social space; their anticipation of a constituency of viewers; and their mobilisation of pictorial devices designed to activate an embodied viewership. The second is their material condition at the moment of this re-encounter. Guston's phenomenological engagement with damaged and/or detached wall paintings informed his relationship with painting's public address, and how that engagement manifested itself both within the content of his later paintings and in the formal and technical decisions that determined their production. The 1970-1 Italian trip, then, is a kind of watershed in Guston's work. After it, Guston's paintings both aspire to the condition of wall painting *and* dramatize its compromised and problematic status.

Drawing on the wall

Guston was familiar with the detached fresco as a compromised and uncertain object. Many were shown at a 1968 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, entitled *The Great Age of Fresco: Giotto to Pontormo: An Exhibition of Mural Paintings and Monumental Drawings.*[314] It is very likely that Guston visited the exhibition from his nearby home in Woodstock, or at the very least was familiar with the exhibition through reviews. These frescoes were displayed alongside their underdrawings, or *sinopia,* which were revealed following the removal of frescoes from their walls [**57**]. For instance, the *intonaco*, or painted layer, of Andrea del Castagno's *The Trinity and St Jerome with Two Saints* from the church of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence (after 1541) [**58**], was displayed alongside its *sinopia*, the juxtaposition of which revealed not only the extent of the compositional changes that had taken place in the final painting, but also granted visual access to drawing

water and steep hillside. No previous paintings by Guston had been so clearly rooted in his own specific geographical location.

[314] September 28th – November 19th, 1968.

from that period on a scale previously unknown.[315] Like many of the historical frescoes that became important sources for Guston's later paintings, the Castagno fresco had been removed for restoration after being damaged in the floods of 1966. The 1968 exhibition, then, at once granted access to works of art that few visitors had seen in situ and enacted a transformation of the status of those paintings. It was this recontextualization that engendered new frames of reference for contemporary American art.

In the mid-to-late 1960s, many American artists had begun to make works painted or drawn directly onto the wall of the gallery or museum space, practices which provide a foil to Guston's channelling of wall painting around the same time. In an essay published in *October* in 2009*,* Mel Bochner looked back on the cultural context of the late 1960s in order to provide some account for the revival of interest in wall-based artwork at the time, in work such as his own, as well as that of Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman and others.[316] Bochner's essay conflates geographically and historically discrete phenomena in assessing this revival, including the 1968 Metropolitan Museum of Art frescoes exhibition, the deployment of graffiti in public sites during the 1968 student uprisings in Paris, and Andy Warhol's 1966 exhibition of *Cow Wallpaper* at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Albeit diverse examples, for Bochner all were "clues to an alternative direction away from the self-contained object", which "began to suggest a new site, a new scale, a new sense of time".[317] In eliding the objecthood of the artwork, such strategies created "an unmediated experience" which "negate[d] the gap between lived time and pictorial time, permitting the work to engage larger philosophical, social, and political issues."[318] For Bochner, then, what is at stake in all three examples is a *temporal* model of artistic production that parallels "lived time and pictorial time" in a way understood to have urgent implications in the political context of the late 1960s.

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[315] I do not discuss the influence of Castagno on Guston's later work in this thesis, although I suggest that it is likely he knew the frescoes in Sant'Apollonia, Florence (1447) and did mention his name in his 1975 letter, discussed in Chapter 4.

[316] Mel Bochner, "Why Would Anyone Want to Draw on the Wall?", *October* (No. 130, Fall 2009), 135-140. A long and diverse list of artists might be included within this area, including text-based work by Lawrence Weiner; conceptual drawing by LeWitt; and minimal painting and sculpture by Fred Sandback, Richard Tuttle and David Novros, among many others. The 1970 exhibition *Using Walls* at the Jewish Museum, New York, showcased this tendency, and included several of these artists.

[317] Bochner, "Why Would Anyone Want to Draw on the Wall?", 138.

[318] Bochner, "Why Would Anyone Want to Draw on the Wall?", 140.

Bochner's interpretation applies useful pressure to Guston's interest in fresco painting at the turn of the 1970s. His reading draws a parallel between the phenomenological address of wall-based work and political immediacy. Warhol's wallpaper, for instance, made itself "a work where the viewer becomes a mobile centre" precisely through completely covering the interior walls of the gallery space and thereby demanding an unfolding set of physical encounters between viewer and work.[319] Drawing on the wall was, according to Emily Braun, "a refutation of the romantic investment in *ad hoc* process and invention…[which] negate[s] the supposed self-containment of abstract art."[320] What is quite clearly subject to question in such practices is the Greenbergian assertion of the autonomy of the painted object; in other words, the very Abstract Expressionist legacy from which Guston himself emerged. At stake was the direction of the legacy of large-scale, wall-filling artwork epitomised by the Abstract Expressionist canvas. As Alexander Nagel has pointed out, it was "the canonisation of the vast canvases of the New York School [which] brought into focus "The Great Age of Fresco" for students of art history."[321] Indeed, Bochner describes the scale of the *sinopias* on view as "larger than the largest Pollocks, Newmans, or Clyfford Stills".[322] Guston's interest in fresco, then, must be contextualised within emergent discourses around wall-based work, epitomised by Bochner's critique, which set themselves in an often critical relation to a recent history of large-scale painting.

Bochner's position is of a piece with a then-current critical shift towards phenomenology in contemporary art practice. While the revival of interest in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings following their translation into English in the early-to-mid 1960s seems to have passed Guston by, it is important to remember that Guston too framed his practice as at odds with the modernist dogmas of Greenberg and others.[323] Where Bochner read frescoes as

[319] Bochner, "Why Would Anyone Want to Draw on the Wall?", 138.
[320] Emily Braun, "Giotto at the End of Painting" in Bruno Cora (ed.), *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing: No 1126: Whirls and Twirls Reggio Emilia* (Reggio Emilia, Italy: Gli Ori, 2004), 121.
[321] Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 56.
[322] Bochner, "Why Would Anyone Want to Draw on the Wall?", 137.
[323] I am indebted to Anaël Lejeune's account of Bochner's practice in the late 1960s and early 70s for this framing: "While more and more artists were pointing to the apparent contradictions inherent to Greenberg's assumptions about the autonomy and pure "opticality" of a work of art, phenomenology (that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in particular, recently translated into English) seemed to offer a perfectly timely way out. On the one hand, phenomenology redefined the subject against the backdrop of its embodiment, fating it to an

politically articulate *because* of their conflation of "lived time and pictorial time", I want to suggest that, thanks to the complex temporal activity of early modern wall painting, Guston's engagement with fresco cycles framed them differently: as reflections on time in and of themselves; as works that were "contrary to [lived] time", not reiterations of it. It is possible to understand this as a different form of recovery of a painting tradition, yet one equally repulsed by calls for painting's purity and tautology as a medium.

Leo Steinberg's lecture "Reflections on the State of Criticism", which he delivered at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, the same year as the Metropolitan Museum frescoes exhibition, articulates the distinction between these responses.[324] Steinberg's lecture was framed as a critique of Clement Greenberg's *Modernist Painting* (1960), but unlike those wall-based practices such as LeWitt's that refuted the "self-containment" of Greenbergian abstraction, Steinberg sought to "reform and deepen", rather than overturn, this formalist discourse.[325] At the centre of Steinberg's critique, and what gave the published essay its title, is Greenberg's reading of Old Master painting. For Steinberg, "Greenberg's modernism defines itself in opposition to the Old Masters. If that opposition becomes unstable, Modernism may have to be redefined – by other criteria."[326] This discursive framing required Old Master painting to "conceal art with art" (to depend on illusionism, and to suppress attention on the mechanics by which it is produced) in order that modernist painting could, by contrast, "repudiate illusion and insist on the work's surface."[327]

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inextricable intertwining with the objects of its environment. On the other, it asserted that any sensorial action – including vision – could not do away with the body out of which it arose. Therefore phenomenology allowed artists and critics willing to distance themselves from the modernist model to pursue the same essentially formalist attention to the specificity of the artwork, while highlighting more numerous and complex possibilities for analysis." Anaël Lejeune ""'as if' it were a painting": Mel Bochner and the Issue of Painting in the 1960s and Early 1970s" in Eva Ehninger, Antje Krause-Wahl (eds), *In Terms of Painting* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2016), 192-3.

[324] "Reflections on the State of Criticism" was given as a lecture at MoMA in March 1968 and was published under the title "Other Criteria" in amended form in *Artforum* in March 1972 (vol. 10, no.7). It was then expanded and published later that same year as the title essay in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). I am using the latter text in this thesis, which is the most complete articulation of Steinberg's argument.

[325] Margaret Iversen, "Steinberg's Other Criteria" in *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 43, Issue 3, December 2020, 3.

[326] Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria" (based on a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 1968), in *Other Criteria*, 68.

[327] Iversen, "Steinberg's Other Criteria", 4.

Steinberg's address to this provides a useful critical framework for Guston's recuperation of wall painting, asserting that, in fact, "All important art, at least since the Trecento, is preoccupied with self-criticism. Whatever else it may be about, all art is about art."[328] In other words, the self-reflexivity Greenberg found in modernism was there all along; it is a matter, for Steinberg, of the *order* in which "a viewer perceives illusion and flatness." Subject matter, an aspect of painting that Greenberg insisted that modernism had done away with, was for Steinberg in fact "best discerned by what kind of viewer [the artwork] implies."[329] Since Steinberg reached this conclusion in response to paintings seen in similar Italian architectural sites to those Guston visited, it is possible to locate the formation of this formalist critique in the phenomenological encounter with the art of the past.[330] Both Steinberg and Guston, then, found a route out of modernist autonomy through the same kind of historical engagement: one emerging from the mobile, bodily encounter with art in situ.

For Steinberg, the "formal self-consciousness" Greenberg found only in modernist art was in fact present in older painting but was made hard to discern "by our habit of lifting a partial work from its setting – transposing a detached fresco or predella panel into the category of easel painting". It is, then, the specific architectural context of the fresco cycle – what Steinberg called the "wall system, each wall supporting multiple scenes set between elaborate framing bands" – that made the self-reflexivity or self-criticism of historical painting more apparent.[331] In such a context, one sees "simultaneous and incompatible systems whose juxtaposition cancels or checks the illusion".[332] The detachment of fresco, then, produced the kind of reading that reduced the concerns of such paintings into mere displays of illusionism. I argue that Guston was deeply concerned with what Steinberg called

[328] Steinberg, *Other Criteria,* 76.
[329] Iversen, "Steinberg's Other Criteria", 4.
[330] As Margaret Iversen has noted, Steinberg's 1959 essay on Caravaggio's paintings in Rome ("Observations in the Cerasi Chapel") "documents an important moment in the formation of his critical procedure" by observing that the position of paintings in the chapel "invented a new kind of spectator", rooting an artwork's meaning in the viewer's experience and their reflection upon it (Iversen, Steinberg's Other Criteria", 5).
[331] In his essay, Steinberg uses the term "Old Master" to cover a range of artistic contexts and productions, which is one way in which his polemic loses some focus. He discusses a drawing by Rembrandt, frescoes by Michelangelo and Raphael, and canvases by Caravaggio, Velazquez, and others. I suggest that his argument comes into sharpest focus in his discussion of wall-based painting.
[332] Steinberg, *Other Criteria,* 71.

the “functional multiplicity” of Italian fresco painting, in other words its complex interplay of “simultaneous and incompatible systems” of the kind seen in relation to the juxtapositions of narrative scenes, illusionistic borders and extra-temporal resonances in many of these works. These disruptions of illusionistic unity run against Bochner’s reading of wall paintings. What was lost in the detachment of fresco might then be restored by creating paintings that generated some of the qualities Steinberg emphasised.

A Day’s Work

The Metropolitan Museum of Art frescoes exhibition coincided with Guston’s interest in painting on scales he had not attempted since his work as a muralist in the 1930s and 40s. It is evident that, in paintings made around this time and displayed in the Marlborough exhibition, Guston’s interest lay in producing works that evoked histories of painting’s public address. At the same time, his paintings embodied the limitations of these works’ purchase through their compromised condition, via damage or detachment, or in the same spirit as Holly’s “estrangement”, by which the “loss of world” evoked through the contemporary encounter with historical art results in a melancholy approach to that material. The most resonant example of this is the 1970 painting *A Day’s Work,* which hung in the Marlborough exhibition alongside *The Deluge* [**4**]. The painting shows a pair of blood- or paint-streaked hooded figures beside a stack of semi-legible objects, including a nail-studded plank of wood, piles of boots and shoes, and several indeterminate shapes that seem to droop out of a rubbish bin. The proximity of the Klan figures suggests conspiracy; the mound of quasi-figurative shapes implies violence. The litotes of its title, then, seems to be an allusion to the nefarious activities of the Klansmen. For such individuals, violent acts are indeed all in a day’s work.

However, the title of the painting suggests more, drawing a parallel between the Klan activity and the action of artistic labour which is very similar to the painting Klansman in *The Studio*. The painting’s title is suggestive of the activity of painting *buon* (“true”) fresco during the early modern period, which was invariably produced in *giornate*, or day-long sessions – in other words, “a day’s work”. In a 1969 talk at the New York Studio School, given during

the production of the Marlborough paintings, he described visiting the Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, in terms that anticipate both *A Day's Work* and his ongoing recuperation of aspects of fresco practice throughout the 1970s [**59**]. Alluding to Masaccio's fresco in the chapel entitled *The Tribute Money*, Guston says that "You can see how much he painted that day. …He just painted that big robe, big foot, a nice hefty beard. …And so that was a day's work. In a fresco, you could only do eight hours or ten hours at a stretch. Well, all I know is I want to feel like that!"[333] Guston's description casts the Renaissance artist in blue collar terms which, I suggest, draws a deliberate parallel between the artist's own background as a muralist and works of art of the past.

A Day's Work reiterates elements of *The Tribute Money* [**60**]. Masaccio's narrative unfolds from the centre (the tax collector demands payment from the disciples; Christ directs Peter to the shore), to the far left (Peter retrieves the money from the mouth of a fish), and then to the far right (Peter hands the coin to the tax collector).[334] Each one of these temporally discreet parts of the narrative, all of which show the figure of Peter, is placed in a tripartite perspectival structure within a coherent landscape setting, from the middle ground, to the distance, to the relatively proximate. This disposition of parts is repeated in Guston's painting. The two large Klansmen are placed at the front right of the painting, in a similar isolated position and intimate arrangement as Peter and the tax collector; the heap of indeterminate objects in the centre is similar to the interlocked central form of the disciples; and a small block-like orange shape at the far left occupies the same position, and similar suggestion of distance, as Peter prising open the fish's mouth at the water's edge. *A Day's Work* even includes schematically rendered objects that recall the "big" robes and feet that Guston discussed in reference to Masaccio.

To suggest an allusion to Masaccio at this stage in Guston's work is to situate the older artist as a mediating figure in Guston's figuring of his work's relationship with public address. His engagement with the Brancacci Chapel frescoes recurred throughout his career, from a pair of drawings made as a young man in 1930 from a book of the paintings he found at the Los

[333] Philip Guston, *The Image*, a talk at the New York Studio School, January 15th, 1969, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 112-3.
[334] The narrative is in Matthew 17: 24-27.

Angeles County Library, to a late drawing in 1980, made just before his death, that revisits the same source in a grotesque, attenuated idiom [**61 / 62**].[335] These dates indicate at once a consistency of interest and a parallel between the period of Guston's mural production (he made the *John Reed Club panel* in the following year) and the period of his late representational mode. Two large colour reproductions from the chapel, both by Masaccio, hung in Guston's studio throughout the final decade of his life: one is a detail of *The Tribute Money*, showing a close-up of the central group of disciples; the other shows *St Peter Healing with his Shadow* [**63**].[336]

Masaccio's work embodied practices of painting that collapsed mural and fresco practice in generative ways. In interviews during the 1970s, Guston described Masaccio's frescoes in terms redolent of muralism's workaday construction and immediacy of effect: "they're painted like billboards, like sign painting, bing boom."[337] This is a description that is similar to Ross Feld's account of muralist practice in his catalogue essay for Guston's 1980 retrospective, in which the author describes how the public sites and large scale of murals "encouraged bulk and typicalness, elements to which his vital and political sympathies could respond."[338]

Although Guston's earliest mural work did include images of the Ku Klux Klan, thereby implying that his Marlborough paintings collapsed large-scale painting and political address, it was muralism's continuation of the historical traditions of public painting that enabled him

[335] In his essay "Hoods on Vacation: Philip Guston's *Roma* Series", Benson Miller alludes to "the variations [Guston] did in the last year of his life revisiting Masaccio's cycle in the Brancacci chapel in Florence." (Benson Miller, *Roma,* 23). This is echoed by Dore Ashton's account of the artist's earlier fixation on the frescoes; around the age of seventeen, "he did all the heads in Masaccio's *Tribute Money*" (Ashton, *Yes, But,* 19). I have been unable to locate any other drawings that might also be part of this group, and hope they will come to light in the assemblage of the catalogue raisonné of Guston's work on paper currently in process (as of June, 2024).

[336] Despite the simultaneity of Masaccio and Masolino's production in the chapel, both of these frescoes have been securely attributed to Masaccio since the publication of Roberto Longhi's essay "Fatti di Masolino e di Masaccio" (1940). These were part of a small group of reproductions that hung there since the late 1960s, which also included large reproductions of works by Piero della Francesca and Giotto, a framed colour reproduction of an *Adam and Eve* by Albrecht Dürer and smaller images of works by Mantegna, Duccio, Lorenzetti, Picasso and Manet.

[337] Philip Guston, *On Survival*, a talk at the New York Studio School, June 1st, 1974, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 239.

[338] Ross Feld "Philip Guston", in Henry T Hopkins (ed., curator) *Philip Guston* (exh. Cat.), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco: Braziller, 1980), 12.

to think of fresco in terms of muralism. I suggest that Guston was interested less in the political purchase of 1930s muralism than in the rhetoric of painterly labour associated with large-scale painting more generally, whose embeddedness in the materiality of painting was made apparent through destruction and damage. Indeed, Guston's own history as a muralist is made challenging to parse through acts of vandalism and erasure that would have made that past less accessible to him than that of the historical frescoes which altered the course of his work after 1971. Like his Abstract Expressionist colleagues who worked on murals in the years before committing to working on canvas, it may be that Guston found his work in muralism a somewhat embarrassing episode. From its title to its grotesque, nefarious contents, *A Day's Work* reads like an ironic inversion of Guston's huge mural showing heroically dynamic labourers for the 1939 World's Fair in New York, titled *Work the American Way.*

This paralleling of Masaccio and the WPA indicates the framework through which Guston engaged with the art of the past. His final visit to Italy in 1970-1 re-introduced him to painting in public sites, encountered in a physical setting whose publicness was evidenced in its compromised material condition. I suggest that material damage provided a mnemonic link between deteriorated frescoes and destroyed or vandalised murals, and that a figuring of painting's public address as failed or fragmentary emerged. This found expression in wilful inconsistencies of facture, dissembled bodies and dispersed compositions. Yet the Brancacci Chapel, which largely kept in place the frescoes painted by Masaccio and Masolino, did provide a model of painting's public life. What Steinberg called the "wall system" – historical fresco's complex disruptions of temporal and representational coherence – is everywhere in evidence in the chapel, most notably in the fresco to the immediate left of *The Tribute Money*: Masaccio's *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise* [**64**]. The temporal disparity between this scene from the Book of Genesis and the adjacent painting's source in the New Testament makes the case for Steinberg's "formal self-consciousness" in works of art of the past. It also illustrates the play with temporality that already existed within the historical works with which Guston engaged, as well as their demands on the viewer to discover links and correlations between discrete and temporally divergent scenes. It is this wilful fracturing of linear temporality that provides an important model for Guston, and

which can be seen at work in the Boston exhibition, with its juxtapositions of diverse scales, settings, and subjects.

3.3 Painting in public: temporality and melancholy

Giotto in Boston

Guston and McKim visited the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua in early November 1970, not long after arriving in Italy.[339] This was Guston's third visit to the site, whose interior's walls and ceiling are covered with frescoes by Giotto painted between 1303-6, an artist who is prominently named at the centre of *Pantheon* [**65**]. Giotto's chapel, alongside Piero della Francesca's *True Cross* cycle in Arezzo and the previously discussed Brancacci Chapel in Florence, provided Guston with exemplars of fresco's complex temporality that led towards the interplay of paintings and temporal concerns of the 1974 Boston exhibition.[340] Giotto's chapel is a collection of discrete narrative scenes bound together in an overarching decorative scheme. This cycle is enacted within the relatively narrow, tall space of the rectangular Scrovegni chapel designed, perhaps by the artist himself, to accommodate them. The two facing long walls (north and south) show three horizontal bands of six square scenes, separated by illusionistic frames. These sequences run from left to right from the viewer's perspective and alternate between north and south walls. They show scenes from the life of Joachim, then his daughter the Virgin Mary, then her son, Jesus Christ. The unusual dimensions of *Painter's Table* (196 x 229cm) correspond remarkably closely to those of these individual scenes in Giotto's cycle (200 x 180cm).[341] Guston's canvas presents a tipped surface whose pale colouring allows the objects it supports a sharper relief; likewise, the steep grey floors of Giotto's frescoes confer distinction and gravity on the figures and objects on view. The pedagogical quality of the chapel's frescoes, conveyed in their formal

[339] Although the specific date of this visit is not known, in her diary dated November 17th, McKim mentions the visit to the chapel as among her most moving experiences of the trip up to that point. The couple arrived in Italy on October 30th. (Musa McKim's "Italian Journals, 1970-71" in Benson Miller (ed), *Roma*, 113).
[340] Guston had two close-up reproductions of scenes from the Scrovegni Chapel on his studio wall – the *Mocking of Christ* and the *Kiss of Judas*.
[341] *Painter's Table* does have similar dimensions as some of Guston's earlier abstractions, which are usually square too; but I do not think that Guston is likely to have returned to these dimensions at this stage in his career, especially (as I will explore later in the chapter) because of the radical shift in studio practice he inaugurated around 1969, during the production of the Marlborough paintings.

clarity and consistency, may have made them particularly useful in Guston's planning of the installation of works at the Boston University space.

Joachim's Dream, for example, which occupies a position on the higher band of frescoes on the chapel's north wall, uses a landscape of pale rock to demarcate the sleeping Joachim and the two shepherds that look on [**66**]. The descending angel is the third set of rightward gazes that lock Joachim in place, reiterating the shape of the descending horizon. This is a pictorial activity that restates his theological distinction as at once socially ostracised and spiritually singled-out. As a figure Joachim is both secured within the specific temporality of *Joachim's Dream* and dislodged from it through the force of the angel's attention. A viewer might follow the angel's gaze to the immediate right of the scene, where there is an illusionistic frame whose gothic quatrefoil shows Joachim again, this time facing front with open eyes. This then leads both to the next chronological scene (*Joachim embraces Anne*) and down into analogous scenes of destruction and disempowerment (*The Massacre of the Innocents* and *The Mocking of Christ*).

Further, the appearance of formally similar characters on the lower registers of the chapel (such as Joseph, a theologically parallel role within the larger narrative, who resembles Joachim) invites the fracturing of narrative causality and the reading of typological resemblance. The layout of Giotto's scenes mitigates against a straightforward chronology of the three historically and theologically sequential narratives it depicts. Instead, scenes experienced within the vertical bands of painting often disrupt the chronology of these horizontal narratives through visual rhyme or compositional similarity.[342] These extra-narrative activities perform the theological action of typological representation, in which earlier events are shown to foreshadow later ones, thereby binding temporally discrete texts together – here, the New Testament and the *Golden Legend*, the source for the stories of Joachim and the Virgin's childhood. This repetition of pictorial devices is one means by which viewership of the frescoes actively dislocates the narrative logic of the source texts while at the same time performing the typological work required of them.

[342] For instance, the arcuated temple front in *Expulsion of the Moneylenders* is echoed in the loggia of *Pentecost,* the chronologically much later scene directly below it.

Yet the coherence of the sequences within the chapel is maintained by a consistent orientation of internal parts which maintains the direction of any viewer's reading. The horizontal bands of narrative always move from left to right. Any representation of bodily movement, such as *Christ's entry into Jerusalem* or *The Flight into Egypt*, unfailingly reiterates this activity, which is then emphasised by the gazes of the protagonists and the subsidiary characters that look on. The basic unit of this narrative momentum is the right eye in profile, which points both into the action of the scene in which it sits and beyond it, onto the next scene in the cycle, leaping over the narrow decorative band that divides them. The cycle, then, dramatizes the acts of viewing required of its audience in order to comprehend the temporality of the narratives on display. The similar relay of gazes in the Boston installation invites a parallel with Giotto's activation of viewership. Giotto's elongated profiles of eyes gazing to the right bear a striking similarity with Guston's use of the same motif and share their narrative function.

The crouched figure of Joachim makes for interesting parallels with Guston's own representations of vision in the Boston exhibition. Curled within the folds of his pink robe, Joachim sleeps, making the appearance of the angel above him a manifestation not of the sharp naturalism of the rocks with which he is surrounded but of a different, dream-like order of reality. The shepherds' obliviousness reiterates this. Giotto's deviation from Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, in which Joachim is described as "affrighted" by the vision of the angel, establishes the terms by which his work's own realism articulates different modes of representation within the same pictorial zone. Joachim's tightly closed eye, then, suggests a different level of apprehension from the unknowing stares of the shepherds. Appearance – the act of coming into sight, of entering the codes of representation – is thereby allegorised through imagery of sleep and wakefulness. The same play with vision is at work in the Boston paintings.

In Boston, to the immediate right of *Painter's Table* hung two paintings, one above the other, *Couple* and *Alone* [**67**]. The reiteration of their formal layouts invites a sequential narrative reading, perhaps of company displaced by solitude. In the former, two heads under a single bedcover turn towards each other in an otherwise bare interior; in the latter, objects

seem to have sprouted from all available surfaces, as though emerging from the insomniac imagination of its solitary inhabitant. Seemingly carried over from *Painter's Table* is a square window with a green roller blind, an object that reappears in many of the other paintings on view. Almost invariably, these windows give onto a pitch-black exterior. Images emerge, then, not from observation of a visually available external world but within the interior of the studio at night, a kind of dream-space. A remarkably similar dark aperture opens behind Joachim's sleeping head in Giotto's fresco: the black square of the hut's interior, which throws the bend of his back into sharp relief. Giotto's transformation of this same space between the two adjacent paintings (the previous image, *Joachim among the shepherds*, in which Joachim walks dejectedly through the landscape, shows the inner space of the hut quite clearly) invites a relationship between the sleeping Joachim and the black interior. In Guston's case, the aperture's refusal to grant visual access beyond the picture plane is an inversion of the conventional association between painted surface and window, and therefore maps the limits of representation. Guston's black squares seem intentionally to draw on histories of Western abstraction and its refusal of representation's possibilities.[343] Giotto's deployment of a similar device, despite its very different historical orientation, likewise seems to mark the very edges of the visible, or the representable.

Guston's return in 1970 to sites such as the Scrovegni Chapel must be understood within a context in which the role of representation within his own work was subject to extraordinary pressures. One way in which his engagement might have been inflected is through readings of fresco cycles as political through their assumed address to a broad populace.[344] This might allow a bolstering of painting's social efficacy in periods at which it was increasingly framed as detached from political realities, as discussed in Chapter One. This is certainly a relevant

[343] TJ Clark has noted the resemblance to modernist abstraction in this image. "The black square *is* inwardness – the space of uncertainty that will turn out to be modernity's great gift. It is 'interiority' portrayed as essentially impenetrable, empty, abstract…The square is abstraction." TJ Clark, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018), 73. Slifkin notes the "sly allusion" to Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism in Guston's *The Studio*, one of many art-historical allusions in Guston's late work that obliges interpretation in the form of analogy between Guston's own paintings and others in art history (Slifkin, *Out of Time,* 45-6).

[344] Emily Braun describes modernist readings of Giotto as follows: "Propagandists of the political left and right, from Diego Rivera to Mario Sironi, claimed that Giotto's stark visual language only increased the ability to speak directly to the largely illiterate "masses", and they cultivated a style of archaizing figures isolated in a flattened, atemporal space." Emily Braun, *Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing,* 115. However, the Scrovegni Chapel was certainly built as a private family chapel.

framing for Guston in November 1970, re-encountering fresco cycles while still smarting from critical feedback that failed to identify the political intent of his late figurative paintings. Yet I argue that the fresco cycles around which that encounter circled were themselves deeply concerned with representation and its limits. Within Giotto's chapel, this is taking place not only at the level of individual scenes, such as the black space behind Joachim's back, but within the overall layout and interaction of component parts within the cycle as a whole. In other words, in order to parse the nature of Guston's repeated encounters with Italian fresco paintings, his late production will have to be considered in comparable terms: as individually produced canvases within much larger bodies or sequences of work, which only occasionally come into view in individual exhibitions. Reading the Boston exhibition as a kind of painted chapel, then – albeit by making allowances for the many material, stylistic and iconographic differences – is a means by which Guston's reorientation of his practice after Marlborough can be understood.

Stationary Figure

Nearly a quarter of the paintings on show in Guston's Boston University exhibition showed variations on the theme of a bedbound figure, usually shown full-length and always parallel to the bottom edge of the canvas. The largest of these works – *Stationary Figure*, *Painter in Bed, Solitary*, and *Painting, Smoking, Eating* – were all made in 1973. They are all similarly scaled, with the same set of objects (lightbulbs, shoes, paint pots, chips) disposed differently across each of the canvases.[345] In all four, the bean- or egg-shaped figure's head is shown with a huge, bulging right eye, shown in profile, and a large cigarette, emitting variously sized puffs of smoke. These works punctuated the hang of the 1974 exhibition, and followed the exhibition's standard practice of rightward-facing heads that maintain the lateral flow around the space of the gallery. Yet within the exhibition, their repetition of the same set of compositional elements, and static, weighty content, seem to interrupt this activity, as though repeatedly reversing or holding still the narrative movement of the exhibition.

[345] These canvases range from 1.5-2 metres in height and 2.6-3.25 metres in width.

In his 1974 interview with Harold Rosenberg for the *Boston University Journal*, Guston described these works as "paintings about the painter", connecting them with what he called his "favourite" images of Klansmen from the 1968-70 body of work, which were those, like *The Studio* (1969), that showed them as painters. It was quite clear to Guston, then, that the paintings that were "influenced by what was happening" – by which he was referring to the political upheavals of the late 1960s, such as the Chicago police riots – were no longer generative for his practice after 1971. Instead, his reclining figures were more "meditative", and their recumbent positions were "a good statement of reflection".[346] Each of these paintings reiterates this conflation of physical stasis and anxious thought through an assertive formal horizontality that binds their figures into an inert position. The bean-head of *Painting, Smoking, Eating*, for example, is locked in place by the stark line of the bedclothes, and held down by the heavy-seeming plate of chips, shearing the figure of all physical agency besides the act of looking.

Guston's recumbent, reflective observer/painters have a source in his 1970 Italian trip that has to date gone unexplored in the literature on the artist: Giotto's frescoes in the Bardi Chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence.[347] During his 1971 talk at the New York Studio School, Guston described Giotto as "the other painter [besides Piero] that I was struck with and thought about all year". After the 1966 flood, Giotto's frescoes depicting scenes from the life of St Francis, made around 1325-8, had suffered little in comparison to the rest of the church, since they were made for high registers on the walls of a chapel in the southern transept, accessed by a set of steps.[348] Despite this, they bore the marks of previous restorations, because of the removal of whitewash and superimposed tombs placed there in the early nineteenth century, and the subsequent removal of overpainting in 1958-9. In *The Death and Ascension of St Francis*, a fresco on the lowest level of the chapel walls, the outline of the relocated tomb left behind a thick, coarse rectangle of exposed plaster that compresses the composition into an arrangement of heads and hands

[346] Philip Guston in conversation with Harold Rosenberg, 1974, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 277.
[347] In Storr's 2020 book on Guston, there is a reproduction of Giotto's *Death and Ascension of St Francis* used to illustrate a reproduction of a talk by the artist, but the work is not otherwise analysed.
[348] Despite this, no other site in the city better revealed the extent of the devastation wrought by the flood, and images of the flooded nave of the church, and Cimabue's crucifix that was all but destroyed, dominated media coverage of the flood and its aftermath, as I will discuss in Chapter 4.

surrounding the recumbent figure of the dead saint [**68**]. This compression separates the scene of monks mourning the death of their leader from the image of Francis's soul, borne aloft to heaven by a group of angels, which is shown above and outside the broken inner "frame". Thanks to the action of historical damage, the scene of the dead saint with his followers is isolated from the context both of the rest of the scene and the other frescoes in the same chapel. I suggest that it becomes in this way equivalent to a detached fresco; it has undergone a category shift.

The recumbent painter in *Painting, Smoking, Eating*, *Painter in Bed*, and other related works lies similarly prone in his bed, while he is visited by objects that press him into position. These objects, namely shoes, paint pots, cigarettes, and plates of food, speak of the hauntings of the past, the concerns of the present, and the future repercussions of the temptations of the flesh.[349] Something similar is enacted in Giotto's fresco. As the grieving monks crowd Francis' deathbed, their bodies form a mountainous hump very like the piles of objects that visit the bedbound Guston. Isolated from the redemptive element of the narrative – Francis' soul, soaring heavenwards, outside of the oblong of damage – Francis' mourners are locked within attitudes of melancholy and grief. Francis, his head propped on a pillow, might be dreaming these apparations of his past (the monks that became followers) and future (the monastic order they would go on to found, of which this very church is one of the best-known examples). That the bed is a site for these multiple temporalities is best expressed in *Stationary Figure* (1973), with its thick black clock weighing down the painter's chest, or else rising like a dark sun [**69**]. The surface of the canvas, too, suggests temporal strata only partially concealed: as is characteristic of other paintings in the sequence, and in Guston's late work as a whole, the act of applying colour is infused with temporal metaphor, excavating, erasing, concealing and revealing, in the same way that the damaged surface of Giotto's fresco breaks open the ostensible temporal framework of the events depicted on its surface.

[349] The imagery of shoes revives not only the piles of clothing familiar from photography of the Nazi concentration camps, but also the upturned soles in early cartoons that Guston returned to at the time.

Guston's "bed" paintings no doubt engage with the history of imagery of melancholy. The geometric shapes that litter the bedside of the figure in *Alone* certainly channel the enigmatic forms that surround the contemplative angel in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencholia I*, a print of which hung on his kitchen wall for his whole professional life, alongside Piero's *Flagellation* and Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* [**70**]. Doubtless many other tropes of melancholia from the Romantic tradition fed into Guston's tragicomic self-portraiture too.[350] His friend the poet Clark Coolidge described that Guston in fact "sometimes thought of himself as the angel in the *Melencholia*…[s]itting and moving in one of those brief pauses he so loved. Things momentarily in balance, etc."[351] Coolidge's description is striking in part because Dürer's print seems redolent not of pausing but of immovable stasis. Yet within the universe of Guston's expanded territory of painting's temporality there is a sense in which melancholy is an operative function, and that stasis is in fact generative. What Kaufmann has called Guston's "Sisyphean" contemplation – a reading that seems especially appropriate for the status of the "bed" paintings in the Boston exhibition, and their repeated return to the same site and situation, with the same disbelieving, yet energised gaze pushing them forward to yet more repetitions – makes melancholy "the manic engine of his later works."[352]

The melancholia of Dürer's angel is likely informed by their encounter with a set of disconnected objects that, like the shoes, paint pots and disembodied fingers that float above the recumbent painters, defeat interpretation. The melancholic gaze shared between Dürer and these works by Guston is enacted through a dramatization of an engagement with objects that, through representation, evade contextualisation. *Painter's Table* seems to embody this. The arrangement of objects along the upper edge of the table forms a sequence, with the eye-canvas bracketed by two pairs of real objects Guston had in his studio, both of which were relics of an earlier, industrial America: two railroad spikes and

[350] Space does not permit a thorough unpacking of this extensive lineage, but one example is illuminating: *Alone* seems to replay Henry Wallis' *The Death of Chatterton* (1856, Tate) in comic mode, both in its slumped figure facing downwards, half-open window behind, and the piles of detritus on the floor below. Wallis' shredded poetry is transformed by Guston into a pile of discarded books. Regardless of the accuracy of the specificity of the reference, there is something of the Romantic persona that remains in Guston's work, as formulated in paintings like Wallis'.

[351] Clark Coolidge, unpublished correspondence cited in David Kaufmann, "Guston's Melancholy", in *Go Figure!,* 114.

[352] Kaufmann in *Go Figure!*, 120.

two flatirons. Their blue-collar associations are brought forth by contrast with the row of objects beneath them: a stack of books, a paint-daubed slab, and an overflowing ashtray, all suggestions of postwar bohemian living. In some senses, then, *Painter's Table* hinges on shifting concepts of labour: Guston's own collecting of iron objects recalls and re-enacts his father's employment as a junk collector in Montreal and Los Angeles [**71**]. Yet the position of the spikes engenders additional associations. The spike at the top right stands alone, casting a red shadow that doubles as a stream of blood; the eye, which stares at it in horror or surprise, seems implicated in this internal narrative of injury.

The spike's position invites comparison with a similar object in a painting Guston is likely to have known, which hung at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston while he was a visiting lecturer at Boston University. *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* is an Alsatian panel painting, made around 1470, by an unidentified artist, which was acquired by the museum in 1956 [**72**]. Its iconography is, to some extent, standard. Jesus Christ is shown at the foot of the Cross, surrounded by the objects of the Passion: the spear, the column, the Crown of Thorns, the nails, a scourge, a birch reed, and a pole with a sponge. Christ's position, his head in one hand as he looks downwards, invokes associations with figures of melancholia, including Dürer's work. As an *imago pietatis*, the work sits outside of narrative contextualisation: Christ is neither being deposed from the Cross, nor is he shown in the act of resurrection. Instead, his own melancholy contemplation of bodily pain, enacted through his gaping, bleeding wounds and the presence of the objects that caused them, intends to invite sympathetic actions from its viewers though prayer and contemplation.

Each object in the painting is to be contemplated as separate from its temporal function, as part of a sequence of physical tortures enacted on Christ's body, culminating in his death on the Cross. Like relics, these are objects that are both indexically determined by and definitionally separated from the events from which they derive their authority. This is made apparent by their complex spatial relationships within the painting. The nails in particular are depicted as though suspended above the arms of the cross, making their detachment from the Crucifixion narrative through prayer easier to enact. Guston's railroad spikes reiterate this effect; the right-hand spike repeats the position of the right-hand nail, along with its association of bodily agony through the red shadow it casts. Shown alongside the

"witnessing canvas" discussed previously, the objects in *Painter's Table* are to be understood within the context of a melancholy gaze. In this sense, the staring figures of the bed paintings – as well as the repeated profile eyeballs throughout the Boston exhibition – dramatize Guston's own melancholy relationship to the art-historical sources that informed his work, and in doing so seem to repeat Holly's question: "whose gaze is it?"[353]

Piero: painting and estrangement

In August 1971, three months after returning from his final trip to Italy, Guston gave a talk at the New York Studio School to a group of staff and students, accompanied by slides. During the talk, which was his first public discussion of the visit and the effect it had on his work, Guston largely focused on his encounter with the work of Piero della Francesca in Arezzo. He had often discussed his interest in Piero's painting, beginning in a 1960 interview with David Sylvester, and wrote a short essay in 1965 on the artist, entitled "Piero della Francesca: The Impossibility of Painting", published in *ARTnews*. The 1971 talk, however, evinces the significance of the final Italy trip. Speaking extemporaneously, as though articulating his changed understanding of Piero in real time, Guston returned to the subject of the picture plane, the issue on which his refutation of Clement Greenberg's modernism largely rested. In Guston's critique of Greenberg via Piero, the plane was "not a material surface"; instead, it was a "totally imaginary place, plane, which has to be created by illusions." The apparently unintentional slippage between "place" and "plane" led him further; it was "an illusive imaginary place where forms of this world, trees, people, furniture, objects, momentarily come to rest. No, erase that. Not "come to rest", pause. I think my great attraction to Piero is a sense of pausing." The representational content of Piero's painting was only readable as such because of the potentiality of movement, which is always implied by the presence of other images around them. This "pause", then, "gives promise to future structures never finished, always looking as if they're going to avoid this total immobility."[354]

[353] Holly, *The Melancholy Art,* xi.
[354] Philip Guston "On Piero della Francesca" (New York Studio School, August 1971), in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 137.

During the talk, Guston read his 1965 *ARTnews* text aloud, prefacing it by suggesting that it was more about himself than Piero. "The Impossibility of Painting" was written during the period of Guston's most acute dissatisfaction with his own production as an abstract painter, a position reflected in the poor critical reception of his new paintings at the Jewish Museum, New York, the following year. As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, the title of his essay proved prophetic, as he abandoned painting completely for the following two years. In the essay, Guston asked if Piero's *Flagellation* were "a vast precaution to avoid total immobility, a wisdom which can include the partial doubt of the final destiny of its forms?"[355] Guston's later realisation that his "Piero" is in fact a concealed self-portrait is reflected in its phasing as a question: the artist's works were at that time preoccupied with self-questioning and doubt. This much-worked-on text, the first of only two published essays by the artist, was edited down by Guston from hundreds of pages to only a few hundred words, in an act of erasure that recalls his painting practice at that time.[356]

Guston's reiteration of the same phrase in the 1971 talk implies not only a more established sense of his position on Piero's work in the intervening years, but also emphasises the significance of his then-recent Italian trip. I argue that this shifted position suggests that Guston had by that point reached a rapprochement between his reading of Piero and his own studio practice. As David Kaufmann has suggested, for Guston, "painting's condition of possibility lies in the contingency of its arrangement of objects, in the radical instability of its organisation."[357] What this meant in 1965 was the production of discrete paintings that staged this contingency through minimally allusive monochromatic palettes and tentatively representational formal elements. In 1971, however, Guston seems to have recognised that this "condition of possibility" lay in the kind of dispersed, architecturally determined public painting practice he saw in Arezzo. This is an important shift. The fractured narrative structure of Piero's cycle, which is a very different kind of narrative strategy to Giotto's

[355] Philip Guston, "Piero della Francesca: The Impossibility of Painting", first published in *ARTnews*, May 1965, 38-9, reprinted in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 41. It should be noted here that Guston refers only to two Piero paintings in this text, the *Flagellation* and the *Baptism of Christ*: both are panel paintings seen in museum settings, despite the fact that by 1965 he had already visited Arezzo twice.
[356] The original text has never been found and is presumed destroyed. He described it as "literally hundreds of pages" in the 1971 talk, and compared it with the act of painting because of how "elusive the whole damn thing became" (Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 142).
[357] David Kaufmann, "'A Vast Precaution to Avoid Immobility': Philip Guston's *To I.B.* (1977)", The Burlington Magazine, Vol.143, No.1178 (May, 2001), 297.

typological approach in Padua, itself dramatizes this sense of potentiality by eschewing the possibility of a straightforward narrative reading.

Even by 1948, the time of Guston's first in-person viewing of the *Legend of the True Cross* (1452-66) cycle in the Bacci Chapel at the church of San Francesco in Arezzo, Piero had been "secularized" by scholarship through allusion to the modernist artists that revered his work [**73**].[358] I do not seek to recapitulate the significant body of scholarship on Piero's afterlife within nineteeth- and twentieth-century artistic practice, because by the time of Guston's final visit to Italy in 1970, such discourses no longer had currency for him. In 1971, he described this tradition as "my background in painting, my heritage."[359] Suffice to say that the formalist readings of Piero that had become established in the first decades of the century bore little relationship to Guston's own looking at the artist by 1970.[360] What Guston saw on his third visit to Arezzo was a cycle of paintings he already knew well, both from his two earlier trips and in his own library of reproductions. What became available for him during and after that visit, though, was the inference of the quality of "pausing" that he had always noted in Piero's work. I argue that it was in understanding Piero's "pauses" as anachronic and processing them in his own work following that encounter, that Guston was able to determine the direction of his own later production following the Marlborough exhibition, which culminates in the paintings on display in Boston in 1974.

Piero's cycle explores the epic narrative of the wood from which Christ's crucifix was built, whose best-known account was in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* (1265). A sapling planted in the body of the dead Adam is later cut down and used as a bridge, which is

[358] Albert Boime has provided a critical historiography of these efforts. Guston knew Roberto Longhi's 1929 monograph on Piero well; he in fact stole his copy from the Los Angeles County Library as a young man, never to return it. The fact of Longhi's book being published by modernist publisher Valori Plastici served to link "Longhi and Piero with the Italian metaphysical school and the Novecento movement". For Boime, "the fascination of modern art historians with Piero may consist in their need to remove their work from the realm of studio practice by identifying with the social sciences and physical sciences. In the case of Piero, painting becomes an intellectual operation." Albert Boime, "Piero and the Two Cultures" in Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Piero della Francesca and His Legacy,* Studies in the History of Art, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Symposium Papers XXVIII (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), 262.
[359] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 139.
[360] For example, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin's book on Piero's *Flagellation*, published in 1972, emphasised "the suppression of overt sentiment and apparent emphasis on formal values at the expense of the religious subject" in order to "find aesthetic fulfilment in the work without reference to its meaning." Boime, p263

recognised as sacred by the Queen of Sheba; it is then used as the Cross of Christ; it is later buried, unearthed, recognised for its miraculous properties, stolen, and finally restored to Jerusalem by the eastern emperor Heraclius. Piero further complicates his source narrative through a spatial arrangement that is "distorted almost to the point of chaos", although not in a way that was unusual in early modern narrative fresco.[361] It is therefore not surprising that Guston himself, in recapping the True Cross narrative in 1971, eschewed a discussion of its iconography in favour of an analysis of specific details, particularly those that pertained to the quality of "pausing" previously discussed. For instance, Guston describes visiting San Francesco with a group of other painters who like him were then resident at the American Academy in Rome. When one of his companions notes the strangely placid expression on the face of one of the soldiers as he stabs another in the neck, Guston responds in terms that underscore his engagement in Piero's staging of temporality [**74**]. The figure is "killing this other man as if he's picking a piece of grass in the earth or lifting up a button. …Like he's an eternal man eternally stabbing another man. A timeless stabbing."[362]

The battle scene from which that incident derives occupies one of the lowest registers of the chapel wall, and depicts the 7th century *Battle of Heraclius*, in which the True Cross is recovered after its theft by the Persian king Chosroes. A frieze-like band of interlocking soldiers and horses runs horizontally across the expanse of wall; it is so densely woven that it consists largely of heads, bodies and limbs rendered fragmentary through superimposition. Guston's reading of the scene in temporal terms holds true for Piero's use of then-contemporary armour and weaponry, as well as the effect of contingency its paused action generates. Its allusions to earlier representations of related scenes similarly disrupts the source narrative's own temporal setting.[363] It is in this sense that the scene embodies Nagel and Wood's assessment of the anachronic artwork as that which "repeats…hesitates… remembers" and is "an occasion for reflection upon that instability."[364] Guston's

[361] As Marilyn Aronberg Lavin discusses, "rearranged chronology was not an exception but the rule…the purpose of the "irregular" monumental mode was to express the concepts of morality, theology, and politics embedded in the apparently simple stories depicted." Lavin, *Piero della Francesca* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 31-3.
[362] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 146.
[363] Lavin notes that sources for the scene may include a relief on the Arch of Constantine, Rome, as well as a statue of Constantine from Constantinople which Piero encountered through another artist's drawings (Lavin, 98).
[364] Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance,* 13.

identification of the extranarrative and transhistorical inferences of the stabbing scene enables that moment to become a reflective activity within the work; I suggest that Piero's deployment of contemporary clothing and settings invites this. One result of this anachronic interpretation of Piero is to enable the production of a kind of imagery that sits outside of the conditions of its own context, while at the same time establishing a mode of commentary upon it.

Anachrony is of particular relevance in the *True Cross* cycle because of the subject which Piero was charged to depict. The Cross's various incarnations in the cycle are a reminder that it is the sole object that binds the disparate scenes together, as the narrative motor for the frescoes. At one and the same time, the Cross detaches itself from the temporality of any given scene because of the implications of suffering and salvation it embodies within Christian theology, a condition made emphatic in the interior of the Bacci chapel, with its large duecento crucifix hanging at the chapel's entrance.[365] The Cross itself is shown by Piero from almost every conceivable perspectival angle, and is usually much taller than the human characters that surround it. The liturgical role of Piero's frescoes insists, then, that they be read counter-temporally; in fact, their efficacy as public works of art requires it. This is evident in the narrative action of individual scenes within it. In the section depicting *The Finding of the Cross,* St Helena and a group of workmen surround an excavation site in an identifiably local Italian landscape, in which three crosses, including Christ's, have been unearthed [**75**]. As the workers grip the excavated objects, watching St Helena's reaction to the discovery, their affect is grave, even melancholy. This narrative event is what Rosalind E. Krauss has called "simultaneously a finding and a refinding and thus a present that is also a past".[366]

It is in this sense that Guston's engagement with Piero's frescoes comes closest to embodying the particular nature of his address to the past in his work immediately following his final trip to Italy. The unearthed crosses are themselves like works of art of the past that "seem so present [but] are actually absent". The abstracted gazes of Piero's workmen seem

[365] Master of St Francis, c1270-80.
[366] Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Grid, the True Cross, the Abstract Structure" in *Piero della Francesca and His Legacy*, 305.

as “estranged” as Guston’s bedbound artist, staring at the objects that seem at once dug up out of a personal or collective past and bluntly, frankly present.[367] The rightward gaze that runs around the walls of the Boston exhibition is Guston’s own: a vision that doubts itself, that remains alienated from what it sees, and yet, Sisyphus-like, raises its head to look, again and again.

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[367] Holly, *The Melancholy Art,* xi.

4.1 Floods, history, and the studio

The *Red Sea* triptych

Around 1975, Philip Guston started to produce paintings that figured historical catastrophe in the form of floods. These works were shown the following year at David McKee Gallery in New York, Guston's first exhibition of completely new work since the Boston University exhibition.[368] The exhibition showed ten large canvases produced during 1975, and one from 1974.[369] One such painting is the so-called *Red Sea* triptych (1975), which was first shown in the McKee exhibition [**76**]. It is the only work of its kind in his entire late production, and one of only two triptychs in his body of work as a whole.[370] It consists of three almost square canvases, each around two metres high by two metres wide, and each titled differently (*Red Sea, The Swell, Blue Light*).[371] Each stages a similar catastrophic event in which a flow of red water spans across the width of the canvas, with disembodied heads and limbs bobbing on its waves. All three use a wedge of densely applied red paint sandwiched between variably worked wet-in-wet areas of mostly black, on top, and mostly pink, beneath. The uneven level of this red tide suggests a turbulent flow of ambiguous direction; schematically described ripples and waves indicate flux. The complete triptych,

[368] *Philip Guston Paintings 1975,* 6th March – April 10th 1976.
[369] David McKee's previous exhibition, Guston's debut at the gallery, showed many paintings (including *Painter's Table*, *Painting, Smoking, Eating*, *Ominous Land* and others) that had previously been displayed in Boston.
[370] His only other triptych, *Reconstruction and Well-Being of the Family (Social Security Triptych)* was made in 1942 for the Wilbur J Cohen Federal Building in Washington DC as part of Guston's employment by the WPA. This painting, certainly made under the influence of Max Beckmann's triptychs he would have seen at the Buchholz Gallery, New York in 1938 or 1939, was the last of Guston's WPA commissions before he dedicated himself in a more sustained fashion with easel painting.
[371] Their exact dimensions are as follows: *Red Sea* and *The Swell*, 186.7 x 200cm; *Blue Light*, 185.4 x 204.5cm. This square format was not uncommon for Guston at this time; other paintings from 1975, including *Painter's Hand*, *Pink Summer* and *Spleen* are of similar dimensions. The three canvases read as square, and as identically sized.

then, appears to either show the same unidentified zone, flooding three times, or a single unfolding scenario, with a rhythm of liquid surges.

The decision to hang the three canvases as a triptych seems to have occurred only once they had arrived at McKee's exhibition space; the diversity of size between *Blue Light* and the others reinforces this.[372] They are too large to have been painted simultaneously, or to have been viewable as a triptych in Guston's studio.[373] Indeed, as Guston explained in a letter to poet Bill Berkson the following year, the choice of "trying to select 9 or 10 paintings from about 40 for [the] McKee show" resulted in the artist "shift[ing] pictures around for days and nights, *reeling* from the diverse possible *meanings* the pictures possess when in different image relationships." The work's categorical complexity is an indication of the dynamic pictorial activity of Guston's floods, in which, as he described it,

> images of one painting move into another…nothing to do with separate pictures anymore but a sort of confused *swarm* where everything can become everything else – in a split second.[374]

The paintings' status as a triptych is a contingent one, and the individual paintings do not seem to anticipate or require that structure, despite later displays that treat that framing straightforwardly.[375] Instead, these paintings distilled some of the reasons that led Guston back to representation at the end of the previous decade, dramatizing the sheer range of potential meanings his works could generate and eroding the distinctions between discrete paintings. In this sense, the *Red Sea* triptych embodies the artist's mistrust of what he called

[372] Confirmed in conversation with David McKee, 8th December 2023, New York.
[373] In using the term "*Red Sea* triptych", which I do throughout this chapter, I am following Guston's own use of the phrase, as described by Godfrey: "Guston was known to call the entire triptych *Red Sea*, suggesting the importance of the title for him." Godfrey, *Philip Guston Now,* 200.
[374] Philip Guston, letter to Bill Berkson, 1976, as quoted in Robert Storr, *Philip Guston* (New York: Abbeville, 1986), 109. All italics in original text.
[375] The painting is rarely lent from its home at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and was not shown in the major retrospective *Philip Guston Now* (2022-4). It was displayed in the exhibition *Philip Guston and the Poets* at the Galleria dell'Academia, Venice in 2017 (May 10th – September 3rd, 2017) on three temporary walls set at obtuse angles, which evoked the traditional triptych format, as did its placement in an apsidal bay window.

"recognisable art", that it "excludes too much". Instead, the openness of these paintings include "one's doubts about the object, plus the problem, the dilemma, of recognising it."[376]

The flood in the *Red Sea* triptych takes place within an indeterminate zone, yet consistently recalls the scene of its own production. In the right-hand painting, the upper corners of two stretchers are shown bobbing in the current, and the imagery that seems to float around them is evidently drawn from paintings he produced in the previous five years of figurative work. The staring, disembodied heads and inverted shoe-soles that appear to be transported between each of the canvases situate the scene of the deluge within the space of Guston's Woodstock studio. *Blue Light* shows the corners of stretchers bobbing in the waves, and the light-pull dangling over the sea in *The Swell* recalls similar fixtures in the studio. Further, the black background, which is shared by most of the flood-like canvases shown in the 1976 exhibition, invokes the artist's nocturnal practice, even the view from the studio's windows. Imagery from other paintings in the artist's late body of work return here as they do elsewhere, including the large, disembodied foot in *Red Sea*.[377]

Guston's locating the deluge in the studio was enabled, I argue, by the condition of the work's production. 1975 was one of the most fertile years in the artist's practice, the year of what he called his "big painting streak" with "a rush of "forces" running through all the forms".[378] Following the 1974 Boston University exhibition discussed in the previous chapter, Guston's productivity had slowed dramatically, to be resumed in full by March 1975.[379] His resumption of his painting practice coincides with the re-emergence of the flood motif, in what Robert Storr has suggestively called his "creative tsunami".[380] The flood, then, is at once destructive *and* generative, bringing more paintings into fruition through its continual flow. I argue that the floods' regurgitation of earlier motifs in Guston's own work was made possible through the presence of earlier artworks in the artist's working space. By

[376] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 42.
[377] I suggest that this image is a revival of his 1974 painting *Relic*, itself a rethinking of the colossal foot of Constantine from Rome, which he had revisited in 1970-1.
[378] Philip Guston, letter to Bill Berkson, March 7th, 1975, in Storr, *A Life Spent Painting,* 326.
[379] It was typical of Guston to experience an impasse in his work immediately following a large exhibition, as I have shown in relation to his exhibitions in 1964 (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), 1966 (The Jewish Museum, New York) and 1970 (Marlborough Gallery, New York). Each of these exhibitions forced a period of self-analysis which often led, as here, to significant changes in his practice.
[380] Storr, *A Life Spent Painting,* 197.

the mid-1970s, the Woodstock studio was full of very large unsold canvases whose imagery therefore remained available for Guston's recycling in works of the middle of the decade. Denise Hare's series of photographs, taken in 1975 for inclusion in Dore Ashton's critical biography of the artist published the following year, show many large paintings in racks or leaning against the walls, as well as old and new works on paper pinned to the artist's noticeboard [**77 / 78**]. The presence of Hare and Ashton would have provided an additional opportunity to revisit earlier periods of his practice from an analytical perspective and goes some way towards framing the retrospective note of many of these works.[381]

Another painting of 1975, entitled *Division*, makes an even clearer parallel between the flood and the studio [**79**].[382] The artist's painting table bisects the space horizontally, its surface littered with many brushes and thick blobs of black or red paint. These objects, dispersed across the table, are depicted as though animate: the brushes bend and sway, and the paint blobs seem to scatter like insects. In the foreground, a reversed canvas, resembling those in the *Red Sea* triptych, leans against the table, further situating the scene within the artist's studio. Yet beyond the desk, a roiling pink and red sea is surging, bearing aloft the detritus of the artist's work, including the heads and shoe soles familiar from earlier paintings. Guston's description of the painting's genesis encapsulates its sense of slipping from real to imagined space: "I began working at my painting table and then the water above it gave me the idea of a flood with people drowning."[383] Guston's curious phrasing suggests a causal relationship between "working" and the appearance of water: it is as though the act of painting releases a surge of floodwater, thereby collapsing Guston's improvisatory practice with an uncontrollable release. "The water above it" is also, perhaps, another painting, even part of the *Red Sea* triptych, which is then reanimated in *Division*. The flood paintings in this way reflect at once upon the practice of painting, the liquid materiality of paint, and art's tendency to revive past imagery.

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[381] It is worth mentioning that some writers, Robert Storr and Magdalena Dabrowski among them, have claimed that Guston revived a 1943 drawing of Navy training which showed servicemen afloat in a body of water (Storr, 2020; Dabrowski, 1988). I do not think this is especially operative at this point in Guston's career, since it was a relatively minor work and one he did not possess an image of in the 1970s.

[382] This painting was unseen during Guston's lifetime and was first shown at the exhibition *Philip Guston: Private and Public Battles* at Boston University Art Gallery in 1994 (September 17th – October 30th, 1994).

[383] Philip Guston, "Philip Guston Talking", in *Philip Guston Paintings,* 54. *Division* was not shown in the Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibition, but the *Red Sea* triptych was (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, October 13th – December 12th, 1982).

Division and the *Red Sea* triptych dramatize what Mary Drach McInnes has called the "two major battlefields [that] appear in the artist's late work: the private studio in which Guston struggles with his identity as an artist and the public field in which he makes visible his meditations on war and aggression."[384] These analogies to conflict aptly describe the tensions at play in the paintings' uneasy collision of the familiar space of the studio and the chaotic, unknowable force of the floodwater. The action of the artists' tools enact the disturbance of the water's appearance: they cower in response. Stick-like and frail, the artists' brushes seem inadequate to the task of representation. Further, the bifurcated space of *Division* articulates what is at stake in the work, and in the flood paintings as a whole. For Drach McInnes, the painting "splices together the private drama of the artist with historical events and biblical apocalyptic imagery… [its] essentially private narrative …reaches into the public arena for larger historical meanings."[385]

Drach McInnes' characterisation of the flood paintings gets at what they dramatize, which is the "struggle" to reconcile competing zones of experience that evade reconciliation. These are a public discourse of catastrophe, epitomised by the water's swamping of the canvas and its dissolution of the human figure, and an attempt to capture its effects in the artist's idiomatic language within the private space of the studio. The painter's table, bisecting the surface of the painting, is another example of the artist's dramatization of the artwork as interface between disruptive political encounter and the surface of articulation. In this way, it recapitulates the central drama of the untitled 1968 drawing discussed in Chapter Two. As in that drawing, what is at stake is the limits of representation *and* the possibility of a mark-making practice that might bring forth the enormity of socio-political turbulence, disruption and horror. Guston's floods, then, articulate the tension of art's inadequacy to fully address these phenomena, enacted through the scenario of painting and its flimsy apparatuses.

This chapter will account for the emergence of Guston's flood paintings amid a context of political disarray, which in itself brought to the fore the key issue with which the floods contend: the role of painting within the articulation of catastrophe. Regardless of its

[384] Drach McInnes, *Private and Public Battles*, 9.
[385] Drach McInnes, *Private and Public Battles,* 12.

contingent status as a triptych, the artist's decision to refer to the *Red Sea* canvases as such is highly suggestive of the flood paintings' engagement with historical painting on theological subjects.[386] While barely related to the compositional category of the triptych, they do summon religious connotation in subject, and resemble sequential narrative paintings in format, which was a key source for their emergence. Produced during Guston's period of sustained contact with Jewish figurative painters in Boston, these paintings navigate related terrain, mobilising Biblical imagery in the service of addressing historical catastrophe. I want to show how the artist's "second return" to Italian historical sources provided him with exemplars both of flood representation and the pictorial challenges they embody. By reaching back into his own encounters with fresco paintings in the light of new demands he himself placed on his practice, Guston found a way to synthesise the subject of the encounter with catastrophe with a painting practice that embodied and dramatized the failures of the medium to fully articulate it. Restoring to his work the implications of the unprecedented 1969 painting *The Deluge*, as discussed in Chapter One, Guston's floods represent a sustained reflection upon the limits of representation. It is this in particular, as I will explore, that makes them particularly acute reflections upon the Holocaust and the problems of its articulation.

Reading damage

In November 1975, towards the end of his exceptionally productive year of painting, Guston wrote a letter to his old friend and colleague at the New York Studio School, Mercedes Matter.[387] Clearly written in a burst of energy, Guston's letter indicates not only the creative fervour in which the flood paintings were made, but also the renewed significance of the art

[386] "*Red Sea* is part of a triptych that includes *The Swell* and *Blue Light*. Yet Guston was known to call the entire triptych *Red Sea*, suggesting the importance of the title for him." Godfrey in *Philip Guston Now*, 200. In catalogues and essays, the triptych is always given the three discrete titles of the paintings and referred to only casually as the *Red Sea* triptych. Guston continued to refer to it as a triptych as late as 1979 (interview with Jan Butterfield, 1979, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 259).

[387] This letter has been mentioned in Chapter Two; here I use it to consider Guston's altered concerns in 1975. It is significant that Guston was writing to Mercedes Matter, who was a more significant figure in Guston's life than has to date been fully acknowledged. According to Elly Thomas, Matter was one of three people "whose critical validation he had relied on in the past" – the others being his wife Musa and composer Morton Feldman. Guston's "need for approval" from these three interlocutors was a significant factor in certain moves in his work – even in rejection. Elly Thomas, *Play and the Artist's Creative Process,* 63.

of the past that accompanied their production. "What a FABULOUS source of inspiration the past is!" he writes, noting that "When I was a boy of 17 or so, all I could look at was Piero, Massaccio [*sic*] and other later masters, and here I am back again for the last ten years or so, but with greater intensity and in a renewed ALIVE way." In addition to Piero and Masaccio, who had featured in his painting *Pantheon* (1973), Guston names as current interests the work of "Orcagna, Mantegna, Signorelli, Michelangelo, Castagno, Uccello, etc."[388] As in the painting, Guston again refers to artists best-known for their work in fresco. He seems to have experienced renewed interest and enthusiasm in these historical examples in 1975, even planning a "fresco tour" in Italy with Bill Berkson that year that never came to pass.[389]

What is distinctive about those names, as opposed to those mentioned in *Pantheon* (with the exception of Giotto), is that it includes artists known for apocalyptic or catastrophic subject matter.[390] I therefore discuss two of Guston's pantheons – both the *painted* list of central and north Italian fresco painters in 1973, whose works mostly showed New Testament and Golden Legend narratives, and the *written* list in 1975 of fresco painters from the same locations, whose works largely addressed Old Testament and apocalyptic subjects. This is an important shift in Guston's orientation to historical painting. In the works shown in the Boston University exhibition in 1974, the reference points that I have identified are generally more restrained in content, from Giotto's frescoes of the life of the Virgin and the death of St Francis, to Masaccio's images of the Acts of the Apostles and Piero della Francesca's True Cross cycle. I argue that this return to historical Italian sources was driven not, as in the Boston paintings, by an interest in the staging of temporality and the inferences of anachrony, but instead by Guston's own intent to dramatize the effect of historical catastrophe and its pressurisation of representational art. Of particular significance in this were images drawn from Old Testament narratives, which not only

[388] Philip Guston, letter to Mercedes Matter, November 13th, 1975, cited in Michael Semff, "Am I Re-incarnated? On Philip Guston's "Italian Malaise" and His Bridges to Europe" in Christoph Shreier and Michael Semff (eds.), *Philip Guston: Works on Paper*, Hatje Cantz, 2007 (Germany), 13.
[389] "…for days now I've been thinking of Italy – especially Northern part – How wonderful [a trip together] would be. Plus Venice & Padua – there is Mantua, Piacenza, then down to Lucca, Pisa…How about a fresco tour...Clearly, I am a hopeless case – Italian sickness…"Letter from Guston to Bill Berkson, October 28th, 1975, in Amanda Renshaw's chronology of the artist's life, in Storr, *A Life Spent Painting*, 327-8.
[390] This includes images of the *Great Flood* and the *Last Judgement* by Michelangelo from the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City; Orcagna's fragmentary frescoes of *Hell* and *The Triumph of Death* (Santa Croce, Florence); and Signorelli's apocalyptic images of *The Damned in Hell* and *Deeds of the Antichrist* (Duomo, Orvieto).

figured catastrophe, but also informed Guston's interest in engaging with the subject matter of the Holocaust.

The kinds of paintings to which Guston turned during the production of the flood paintings were ones in which the representation of catastrophe was to some extent reflected in the condition of the paintings themselves. This is another important distinction from the sources I have discussed in relation to the 1974 Boston exhibition, which were cycles of painting that informed Guston's melancholy reflections upon temporality. In the 1975 works, the materiality of fresco – more precisely, its tendency, by dint of its public life, to bear the marks of damage and decay – became a point of focus for Guston's address to the past. This is rooted in the actual experience of encountering these works in situ in 1970-1.

The literature to date has failed to acknowledge the specific conditions of these works at the time Guston saw them, and how their dark, abraded surfaces, and often insufficient lighting, made them in places almost illegible. None of the fresco cycles Guston visited during any of his Italian trips had been restored; they were all in poor condition.[391] Whether experiencing them at a remove, in his initial interest in art history books, or in person, the fresco cycles which formed a critical foil to the shifts in Guston's practice were always seen in an abraded, defaced or damaged state. Even the reproductions of works of art by Piero, Giotto and Masaccio that were pinned to his studio wall in Woodstock showed their poor condition clearly [**80**]. The flaked and chipped paint surface in Guston's reproduction of Piero's *Flagellation* disrupts the clarity of the image; this must have informed his relationship with that artist's work. Close-up black-and-white photographs of heads from Piero's *True Cross* cycle and Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel showed not only the cracks in the supporting plaster but the marks of defacement inflicted upon them. His engagement with the art of the past, then, whose importance to his practice is unanimously agreed upon in the literature, must be understood within a context of damage and abrasion, which, I argue, informed his relationship with painting's public address, a critical aspect of his turn to figuration.

[391] The Brancacci Chapel was fully restored from 1984-1990, the Scrovegni Chapel in 2001-2, and Piero's frescoes in San Francesco were restored from 1991-2000. All of these restorations were transformative, making the colour and detail of the works immediately legible, to the point of arousing controversy in some quarters.

Yet the 1970-1 trip would have made the condition of these paintings particularly apparent. While it is the case that Guston's final Italy trip should be understood as a revisiting of sites he had, in some cases, seen more than once before, and knew well from his extensive library, what he saw during the eight months of residency there had in many cases changed utterly, especially in Florence. The catastrophic flooding of the river Arno on November 4th, 1966, caused extensive damage to art and architecture in and around that city. The work of emergency restoration was underway during the 1970 trip, but was far from complete, and so the condition of the sites and the works themselves were notably poor when Guston saw them. The damage caused to works of art and architecture in Florence after 1966 brought to the surface what was already inherent to Guston's encounter with Italian frescoes. I want to show how the condition of these paintings furnished Guston with metaphors of vulnerability and dissolution that are at the centre of his conceptualisation of painting's relationship to public address at the beginning of the 1970s.

As I will explore, the context of the 1970 visit exacerbated the significance of public sites of painting. Consequently, the more visible damage to painting made particularly apparent in post-flood Florence would have inflected Guston's sense of public painting's vulnerability and propensity to fail. I suggest that the nature of Guston's own practice *after* Italy, as showcased for the first time in the 1974 Boston exhibition, is deeply informed by this encounter. Yet his interest in fresco as a mode of public address cannot be extricated from his late representational mode.

Guston was likely fully aware of the scale of the damage to paintings in Florence before his visit. International media coverage of the flood and its aftermath was extensive and accompanied by copious photographs of the damaged sites and their repair.[392] The frailty of painting was made particularly apparent; it was an abiding metaphor in press accounts of

[392] For example, Joseph Judge's article "Florence Rises from the Flood", *National Geographic*, Vol. 132, No.1, July 1967, was accompanied by many colour photographs of the flood and the restoration effort, as well as an illustrated map of the historic centre of the city which included captions describing damage to specific works of art.

the seriousness of the damage.[393] The project of detaching fresco paintings from their supporting walls was effected immediately. In the two years following the flood, over 3000 square metres of fresco was removed using the *strappo* technique and remounted onto new supports. This recontextualization rendered these detached frescoes definitionally uncertain; removed from the physical site to which their compositional devices corresponded, their social and theological semantics were suppressed. As I will explore, the category shift involved in this material displacement provided Guston with a model of a painted object that occupied both public and private zones. The detached fresco could then materially embody the tensions of public and private that characterised Guston's later practice described by Drach McInnes: "[its] essentially private narrative …reaches into the public arena for larger historical meanings."[394]

Luini, Uccello and the flood

Two frescoes in particular resonate with the works Guston produced in the middle of the 1970s: Paolo Uccello's *Flood and Waters Subsiding* (1447-8), made for one of the cloisters of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, known because of its palette as the "Green Cloister", and Bernardino Luini's *The Egyptian Army Drowned in the Red Sea* (1513-14), made for Villa La Pelucca near Monza, which Guston would have seen in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan.[395] There are a number of ways in which these frescoes informed Guston's revival of the motif of the flood in his exploration of catastrophe and the limits of its representation around 1975.[396] Both, firstly, depict the unfolding of catastrophic events drawn from the Old

[393] The caption for the churches of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, in Judge's map state respectively that "oily tide swamps [the church], ruins Cimabue's "Crucifix", damages Gaddi's "Last Supper"" and "oil streaks frescoes in Spanish Chapel and Strozzi Chapel". Cimabue's crucifix was described in the same article as "the single greatest loss to art". The framing of the loss of heritage overwhelmed accounts of the loss of life and the damage to infrastructure.

[394] Drach McInnes, *Private and Public Battles,* 12.

[395] The association with Luini's frescoes was made by David Kaufmann via a conversation with Archie Rand, a good friend of Guston in the 1970s. According to Kaufmann/Rand, "he kept Luini's upturned faces and his own trademark inverted legs, which he found – however fortuitously – in his predecessor's painting" (Kaufmann, *Telling Stories,* 48). Rand claimed that Guston "practically copie[d] Bernardino Luini's *Deliverance of the Israelites*" for *Deluge II*, also "cap[ping] the feet with Bud Fisher shoes." Archie Rand, "The Victory of the Futile" in *Arts Magazine*, Volume 51, No.10, June 1977, 66.

[396] It is certainly the case that there were other flood-related paintings with which Guston may have been familiar from his trips to Italy and through his extensive library, including Bronzino's *Crossing of the Red Sea*

Testament in which "natural forces became the agents of violence".[397] They are also both detached frescoes, removed under different circumstances but to similar effect, whose status as objects, through physical damage and recontextualization, has shifted. They are paintings designed to be encountered within a sequential narrative, their removal from which not only renders their contents less readily legible but also calls into question the theological or temporal rationale that might otherwise account for the extremity of the events they depict. Finally, they are paintings in which the subject matter of the flood requires their artists to probe at the limits of representation.

As encountered in the museum context, Luini's fresco of the flood consists of two rectangular paintings (each 168 x 130cm) that show a single continuous scene; the two panels are together known as *The Egyptian Army Drowned in the Red Sea* [**81**].[398] Commissioned for the main hall of the country villa of Gerolamo Rabia, the frescoes were originally experienced alongside other scenes by Luini from the Book of Exodus, each of which emphasised harmonious relationships between human and nature and God's blessing of the Israelites.[399] The complete fresco of the Red Sea was transferred onto two panels and moved into the museum in 1821-2; although the majority of the paintings are held by the Brera, much of their narrative context has been lost in the transition. This recontextualization of the paintings affected their adoption by Guston into his own production around 1975. Shorn of the redemptive context of the villa's cycle, as well as its temporal association with agricultural capital, the *Red Sea* panels suspend the narrative in a scene of horror. In the right-hand panel, Moses and the rescued Israelites stand on the

(c1540) in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Cosimo Rosselli's *Crossing of the Red Sea* (c1481-2) in the Sistine Chapel, and Michelangelo Buonarotti's *The Deluge* (c.1508-12) from the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican City. However, I focus here on these examples because there is more evidence in Guston's work for the artist's engagement with them.

[397] Kaufmann, *Telling Stories,* 48.

[398] Guston's encounter with Luini came at a moment of revival in the fortunes of the artist, following two postwar exhibitions in Lombardy (Como, 1953 and Palazzo Verbania, Luino, 1975). This context might have made Luini, who is possibly the least-known of the historical artists with which Guston's work engaged, more visible to an artist with a sustained interest in Italian Renaissance painting. The Luino show was covered in some international press, including *Le Monde*.

[399] Other scenes in the cycle include miraculous scenes of succour such as *The Collection of Manna* and *Moses Brings out Water from the Rock* (both Brera). Rabia's commission seems to have been intended to emphasise his self-image as an "*imprenditore agricolo"* ("agricultural entrepreneur") who derived capital from the land surrounding the villa (Giovanni Agosti and Jacopo Stoppa, *Bernardino Luini e I suoi figli*, exh. cat., Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2014, 124).

shore of the Red Sea, gesticulating as they look on at the drowning Egyptians. The remaining half of that panel, and the entirety of the left-hand panel, show the Egyptian army in various attitudes of panic and despair. Human and horse heads appear from the waves; the carriages of generals, one on the back of an elephant, slowly sink; upturned legs and flailing arms are everywhere apparent. The upright and orderly Israelites provide a contrast to the scene of disorder, chaos and dissolution wrought by the rising waves. The bodies of the Egyptians are inverted; the water disrupts the army's organisation, making it succumb to the dispersing force of the flood.

Over three-quarters of the space of Luini's fresco is taken up by water, a ratio that is very similar to Guston's flood paintings. The perspectival recession towards the horizon is marked not by orthogonals or tonal gradation but by the punctuation of human and animal bodies as they break the surface. Because of the inconsistency in scale of these appearances, the fictive space of the painting remains unmeasurable. This points to an important feature of such depictions: that they circumvent and defy any attempt to impose legible recessive depth upon them. The unmappable quality of the flood in Luini's painting is certainly reflective of the disorderly deaths of the drowning Egyptians, and the orderly disposition of the Israelites by contrast. At the same time, the vertical depth of the water itself is similarly beyond measurement: heads and bodies are shown at different heights, indicating treacherous depths below. These two unverifiable data – the horizontal extent of the flood itself, and the vertical depth beneath the waves – single out the representation of flood as beyond the reach of perspectival mapping, a quality that is, as I will explore, crucial to Guston's exploration of the limits of representation.

Further, Luini's flood shows an essential quality of the represented flood: to make fragments of bodies. Most of the Egyptian army is shown in abbreviated form. The tops of heads, inverted legs, hands, knees and feet puncture the surface of the water, standing for the dissolution of the Egyptian body politic, which has been reduced to disembodied pieces. Encountered outside of an architectural setting that might otherwise account for this disorderly array of body parts, the painting – itself a fragment removed from an organising context – becomes able to assume unanticipated meaning for Guston. It is not hard to see how a painting like the *Red Sea* triptych channels the implications of the represented flood.

Its upturned legs, staring heads, and ambiguous spatial characteristics all echo this and other earlier representations of the flood subject. His own floods, similarly, are both unmappable and fragmentary, deploying the thematic of the flood as experienced through detached frescoes like Luini's. Read not as a triptych but as a sequence, very like panels removed from a larger cycle of paintings, the *Red Sea* canvases explore the implications of the flood narrative on representation itself.

Guston's reference to Paolo Uccello in the 1975 letter names a specific point of reference that sheds a useful light on Guston's production of flood paintings in the mid-1970s. It is undoubtedly the case that Guston had encountered a range of Uccello's paintings, both in situ and in museum contexts, and knew his work well through his extensive engagement with art historical literature. I would not be the first commentator on Guston to notice the significance of his *Battle of San Romano* series (c1438-60), which he would have seen in its component parts in London, Paris and Florence during separate trips to each site, and of which he kept a reproduction on his kitchen wall, alongside Dürer's *Melencholia I*, for many years. It seems clear, then, that Uccello had been a long-term touchstone for Guston throughout his career; his murals of the 1930s show a clear influence, to the point of deliberate allusion.[400] This is to suggest that Guston's engagement with the work of Uccello was related to his sense of the artist as a maker of public-facing works of art, which, like his own mural practice of the 1930s and early 1940s, deployed experimental pictorial strategy in the service of public address.[401]

Two Biblical scenes share a single space in Uccello's lunette for the cloister of Santa Maria Novella, Florence [**82**]. On the left- and right-hand sides are two images of Noah's Ark, indicating the work's temporal span of before and after. The desperation of people's attempts to board the vessel as they sink beneath the waves gives way to a scene of aftermath, with corpses washed up on dry land being pecked at by crows. Central to

[400] For example, the heads that emerge from roundels in his mural with Reuben Kadish, *Physical Growth of Man* (City of Hope, Duarte, California, 1936) certainly allude to Uccello's very similar images of prophet's heads in his fresco of a large clock in the Duomo, Florence.
[401] In a 1965 interview for the Archives of American Art on his work as a muralist in the 1930s, Guston discussed his influences at that time as "the Renaissance chiefly – Piero, Mantegna, Uccello" (Philip Guston, "Interview with Joseph S. Trovato" in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 40).

Uccello's dramatization of the Old Testament narrative is his linear perspectival structure, generated by the zooming othogonals of the Ark, which is shown twice, framing the waterlogged figures. The artist's attempt to map a recessive structure onto the composition's central zone is by contrast chaotic and challenging to read; limbs, heads and bodies are tightly compressed within this space. The redemptive conclusion to the flood – Noah receiving the olive leaf from the dove, indicating the cessation of the disaster and the arrival on dry land – occupies deep space in the painting's perspectival scheme, with images of the drowning and dead taking up the majority of the surface. Uccello's painting literally foregrounds the catastrophic consequences of the flood.

Disrupting the narrative legibility of the painted scene is a full-length figure to the right of the centre, who seems unaffected by the dramatic events behind his back; he turns to the right, towards the entrance to the cloister, and looks in that direction, out of the painting's fictive space. The only narrative connection he has to the flood scene seems to be the two disembodied hands that grasp his ankles; the fresco is too abraded to decipher their function within the painting, but they may represent the artist's attempt to resolve the ungainly compositional effect of his presence there. The identity of this figure has been the subject of speculation, but what is more significant here is his effect on the painting as a whole, or rather, his tendency to break the painting's temporality open and subject it to question.[402] His disruption of the temporal clarity of the flood scene (before, left, and after, right) dramatizes this apprehensiveness, as does his anxious and foreboding affect. Because temporality inheres to the theological subject of the Flood – it is a kind of divine reset, or second beginning, a theme emphasised in the cloister thanks to the presence of other images of the Creation – the extra-temporal suggestion of this anonymous figure is singularly appropriate.

[402] William E. Wallace has summarised the theories of this figure's identification: "Some scholars identify the figure as Noah…[or] as a type of Albertian *festiaolo* figure [a kind of chorus figure, pointing the viewer's attention to important aspects of the painting, as identified in Leon Battista Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435)]…[or] a portrait of Leon Battista Alberti…[This] still does not explain the action or purpose of the anomalous figure." William E. Wallace, "Between Flood and Fire", *Source: Notes in the History of Art* (Vol. 31, No.2, Winter 2012), 24-6.

The physical condition of Uccello's fresco also makes it a resonant object in Guston's exploration of the limits of representation. It had been detached from its wall some years before the 1966 Florence flood, but it had been reinstalled in its original location in the cloister and was therefore badly damaged at that time [**83**].[403] By the time Guston visited sometime in 1970-1, the work was on display inside the chapter house of the church and shown alongside other detached frescoes from the same cloister. Photographs taken after the 1966 flood reveal the condition of the painting; its detachment in 1907 did not prevent additional abrasion. In many places the damage to its surface, in the form of deep scratches and loss of pigment, rendered its narrative contents almost unreadable. This is the condition in which Guston encountered it, which was emphasised by the photographic reproductions to which he would have turned around the time of the making of the flood paintings.[404] I doubt Guston would have missed the irony of a flood-damaged Flood painting. I suggest, then, that Guston's flood paintings restage the damaged surfaces of fresco paintings as part of this address to the limits of representation.

4.2 Floods and the unrepresentable

Floods and the limits of representation

Aaron Rosen's discussion of Guston casts his recuperation of the flood subject in historical painting as itself "an imaginary act of exhumation." For Rosen, Guston's paintings are acts of salvage, in which he "had to extrapolate from the actual physical condition of the fresco to envision himself reclaiming it from a state of decay." *Deluge II* (1975), for example, recapitulated Uccello's *Flood* "as if this fresco has itself suffered a sea-change; tossed about,

[403] Domenico Fiscali, conservator in charge of the Green Cloister, detached Uccello's *Flood* in 1907. The painting, and others by Uccello and his studio, was then installed in its original semi-exterior location in the cloister, which was badly affected by the 1966 flood.

[404] Tom Conley has noted "the matteness of black-and-white photographic reproductions of Uccello's fresco and their tendency to emphasise scratches and scars that turn the painting into a speckled and leprous surface of dessicated plaster." "Introduction: Writing Painting", Tom Conley, in Jean-Louis Schefer *The Deluge, The Plague: Paolo Uccello* (trans. Tom Conley) (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995; originally published in French by Editions Galilée, 1976), 14.

broken, and finally reconstituted in the caked surface of Guston's canvas" [**84**].[405] Much the same can be said for the *Red Sea* triptych's restaging of historical flood narratives. The painting not only reiterates the painted flood's tendency to reduce the human body to fragments but is also *itself* fragmentary, composed of three parts that might well be substituted for others, its surface by turns thickly slathered with paint, drily scuffed or scraped away, as though abraded by natural forces. Rosen's argument draws on the analogy of the Jewish golem myth, a preoccupation of Guston's later years. The "battered forms" of Uccello's painting "come alive as the daubs, lumps, and bodies of paint which they are. That is to say – as *golems*."[406] The golem, a creature formed from "Prague riverbed clay" which was then animated into uncanny (and destructive) life, can come to stand for the artist's own interest in the hubris of representation per se, as understood through the complex relationship with imagery in Jewish religious tradition. Mark Godfrey has shown how Guston made use of the golem as part of his own struggle with the vanity and even heretical act of representation – "an attempt to imitate God" – in which "pasty American oil paint" could quite easily substitute for the golem's gooey embodiment.[407]

Rosen's framing of the Uccello painting as *itself* a golem, reanimated in Guston's work, makes clear the nature of the artist's reconfigured address to the art-historical past in his paintings of 1975. The "exhumation" of Uccello not only recalls the actual detachment and recontextualization of the fresco after the 1966 flood, it also dramatizes Guston's address to the art of the past as uniquely sensitive to the condition of this and other works of art. While the reference to the golem certainly points to the Judaic interests that became more pronounced in the artist's work alongside his revival of a figurative mode, it also emphasises the issue of representation that is especially attached to flood imagery. Under investigation in Guston's flood paintings is the artist's own practice: both the acts of "salvage" enacted in their return to historical examples and his painting's tendency to both reveal and conceal figurative representation. As I have shown in the first chapter of this thesis, painting's two-pronged quality of revelation and concealment is central to Guston's sense of what

[405] Aaron Rosen, "Philip Guston: Recasting the Past, or How to Make a Golem" in *Imagining Jewish Art*: *Encounters with the Masters in Chagall, Guston and Kitaj* (London: Routledge, 2009), 53.
[406] Rosen, *Imagining Jewish Art*, 53.
[407] Godfrey, *Philip Guston Now*, 197.

figuration could provide his work at the end of the 1960s: this is one of several functions of the imagery of hoods and masks in his work at that time. What the flood paintings do, though, is to stage this quality of painting in allegorical mode, imbuing paint *itself* with figurative potential. The image of the flooded studio, then, raises the stakes of Guston's own practice.

In both Luini and Uccello's frescoes, the flood presents the artist with a unique problem: how to represent, in convincingly illusory space, the unmappable, unstable territory of unruly water. This is a question not so much resolved as asked by those paintings. Hubert Damisch's 1972 writings on cinquecento frescoes provide a means to think through the implications of "unrepresentable" elements in this pictorial tradition, and as such develops a theoretical basis for their appearance. Damisch's book *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting* addresses the imagery of cloud formations in the work of a number of Italian fresco painters. In my reading of Guston via Damisch, the role of floodwater in representational painting is usefully comparable to that of /cloud/. In drawing on Damisch's then-contemporary theorising, the dialectic of shown and hidden that is staged in the flood paintings can be understood as deeply engaged with the implications of these historical models. Damisch's framing of natural phenomena that escape the ordering system of linear perspective – and which, in doing so, exist in a dialectical relationship with the measurable – is highly suggestive for Guston's use of the flood motif as a reflection upon what painting can or cannot show. This, in turn, embodies Guston's response to historical catastrophe.

Damisch's book begins with an analysis of the literal representation of cloud formations in the wall and ceiling frescoes of Antonio da Correggio, in which the appearance of cloud "contradicts the very idea of outline and delineation, and through its relative insubstantiality constitutes a negation of solidity, permanence and identity". These "nebulous structures" enabled Correggio to "position, split up, and confuse [his] figures", as seen in works such as his fresco of the *Assumption of the Virgin* (1526-30) for the dome of Parma cathedral [**85**].[408] His painted bodies that soar upwards "defy the laws of gravity and

[408] Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* 15.

likewise the principles of linear perspective."[409] Correggio's /cloud/, then, is an unmappable pictorial phenomenon; it "contradict[s] the very idea of outline and delineation" and "lends itself to a world of shapes in movement and deformed by movement".[410] Like the jutting limbs and heads in Luini and Uccello's flood paintings, Correggio's fresco shows "fragmentary, split-up figures *drowning* in a mass of…indefinite cloud" *[italics mine].*

It is from this contradictory pictorial function – its negatory effects within the illusory zone of the painted space – that Damisch develops his theoretical framing of */cloud/*. Its appearance as such defines it not as literal representation but in its oppositional signifying capacity. Within the fictive structures of the traditions of linear perspective within which both Luini and Uccello (and, indeed, the other Italian painters discussed in the previous chapter) worked, /cloud/ names an element that, largely by dint of its supernatural associations, cannot be contained within that rational, signifying system. /Cloud/, then, is for Damisch a "free vector that lends itself to operations the nature of which…is semiotic, both in a signalling sense and syntactically."[411] /Cloud/, then, is the other of representation. Its presence within Correggio's paintings serves to reinforce the structures of fictive space. /Cloud/ has no meaning inherent to it (unlike cloud itself); it is infinitely substitutable, and its value emerges only in relation to the architectonic constructions of the rest of the image; it is the outside of the system. Like Correggio's clouds, Uccello and Luini's floods mediate between earthly and divine zones. Both take the form of natural phenomena that originate from a supernatural source which by nature cannot be mapped. Both enable the fragmentation of bodily representation; both generally exist in the context of larger fictive spaces by which their nebulous form can be understood. It is in this sense that I consider these painted floods as behaving much as /cloud/ does: as an unstable element that nevertheless vouchsafes the illusory stability of the remainder of the image.

Further, painted cloud and flood share the foregrounding of painterly facture. In Luini's flood, a pattern of parallel vertical marks, dabbed on loosely in a feathery pattern quite unlike the remainder of the painting, indicates the lapping waves in which the Egyptians

[409] Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* 15.
[410] Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* 17.
[411] Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* 15-16.

sink. Damisch notices that, in such cases, the pictorial work in cloud's "designating" the space "manifest[s] the determining role that is played by the sensible component (paint) in pictorial expression".[412] Put simply, the representation of cloud – as with flood – asserts, as in no other part of the painting, the role of painterly facture in constructing space. This allows painterly effects to take on the essential qualities of natural phenomena themselves. The painted cloud (or flood) is, after all, "an unstable formation with no definite outline or colour and yet that possesses the powers of a material in which any kind of figure may appear and then vanish."[413] This is, I suggest, an effective definition of Guston's allegory of painting in works like the *Red Sea* triptych, whose palette continually slips between red, grey, pink and white, whose edges are only vaguely determined, and which at once makes visible (through transporting across the canvas) and invisible (through submerging or sinking) a series of fragmented figures.

Damisch's work articulates the dialectic at play within the same painting traditions with which Guston engaged in his later practice; and yet Guston's own images of floods apply pressure to representation, rather than affirm its claim to veracity through a differential semiotic system. It is here that Guston's floods divert from and even call into question the representational certainties of the Renaissance pictorial tradition. Guston's floods do not unfold, as Uccello's does, within a perspectival framing that is stabilised by contrast with the unruly motion of its other. Instead, Guston's flood paintings dramatize the destabilisation of the representational system described by Damisch. In doing so they stage the tension or "conflict" described by Drach McInnes between the "private studio" and the "public field", one which can be articulated but not resolved within the action of the painting, and whose lack of resolution enables the floods to repeatedly appear in the artist's work.[414] Guston's floods dramatize – both literally, in his figures' struggle to break the surface of the rising tide, and figuratively, in the perpetual disorder of painted signs – a tension that is itself an exploration of the limits of representation.

[412] Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* 31.
[413] Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/,* 31.
[414] Drach McInnes, *Private and Public Battles,* 9.

The return of the deluge

Rosalind E. Krauss' analysis of the paintings of Agnes Martin provides an application of Damisch's discussion into the realm of painting practices contemporary to Guston. For Krauss, painting "understands its scientific aspirations – toward measurement, toward the probing of bodies, toward exact knowledge – as always being limited or conditioned by the unformed, which is unknowable and unrepresentable." /Cloud/, then, is "the lack in the centre of that knowledge, the outside that joins the inside in order to constitute it as an inside."[415] The /cloud/ signifier, then, plays the role of "a 'remainder' – the thing that cannot be fitted into a system but which nevertheless the system needs in order to constitute itself *as* a system."[416] Damisch's conception of perspective was, in Krauss' analysis, "a structure of exclusions, whose coherence is founded on series of refusals".[417] It is because Krauss is engaging with a practice that, like Guston's, sits outside of the iconographic and religious contexts of the historical paintings previously discussed that her designation is particularly useful in nuancing Damisch's terminology for the purposes of my argument. Yet Krauss' reading of Martin, led by close analysis of the phenomenological encounter with her abstract canvases, locates /cloud/ at the level of optics, which is "bracketed" by two distinct but interconnected elements of the painting: its square panel support and the grid-like pencil pattern on its surface. Her terminology for this optical event - "unknowable and unrepresentable" – names that element of Martin's paintings that defies signification.

Krauss describes the temporal unfolding of a viewer's experience of Martin's work, which takes place over a sequence of three different viewing distances, each slightly further back from the painting's surface, and by which the effect of /cloud/ comes to be realised.[418] In this sense, one's engagement with Martin's canvases comes to imitate the conditions under which the works were made. Clearly, Guston's representational language places different demands on its viewer. An engagement with the *Red Sea* triptych, for instance, requires a lateral movement of eyes and body between all three canvases, with the washing motion of

[415] Rosalind Krauss, "Agnes Martin: /Cloud/", 1993, in *Bachelors* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 84-5.
[416] Krauss, "Agnes Martin: /Cloud/", 82.
[417] Krauss, "Agnes Martin: /Cloud/", 84.
[418] Here Krauss is summarising Kasha Linville's account of Martin's paintings, which moves gradually away from the initial close looking at the materiality of the canvas's surface. Krauss, "Agnes Martin: /Cloud/", 78-9.

the waves encouraging this horizontal phenomenological experience. Like the artist's own body, the viewer's moves back and forth between and across the individual paintings. This is in stark and, I suggest, deliberate contrast with the manufacture and phenomenological address of his abstractions of the 1950s, made close-to the surface of the canvas, sometimes without the artist stepping back before the painting's completion. His floods' tendencies to invite a lateral encounter between canvases, especially in the sequential suggestion of the *Red Sea* triptych, not only demands a reorientation of the encounter with the art object, it also obliges a physical remove which generates a critical distance between viewer and object. This also clearly articulates their relationship with histories of paintings made for public sites, as discussed in Chapter 3: the same kind of physical encounter is obliged by Uccello and Luini's frescoes, for example, both of which similarly invite a viewer's reflection upon the events depicted and their broader implications beyond their original narrative context.

Krauss' reading of Martin's /cloud/ as a synonym for "remainder", or something "refused", enables Damisch's interpretation to be differently inflected in the light of Guston's interest in historical catastrophe and its articulation. The red and pink water that seems to surge through the artist's studio in *Division,* bearing aloft as it does heads, shoe soles and books, can be read as this "remainder", which is *both* the detritus of the artist's past *and* the energy that restores it to sight. The dispersal and truncation of body parts that Damisch notices in Correggio's frescoes is less easily determined in this and other related works by Guston. There is no evident distinction between rippling water and lines of text, for example, or the curve of a wave and that of a heel. Both are described with the same wavering red line. The division of the title, then, although ostensibly between the solid world of the studio apparatus and the swirling current beyond, is also in play within the flood itself, which continually collapses divisions between apparently discrete objects and forms. Within this body of refusal, the bobbing heads are expressive markers that point to the unknowable quality of the flood. These staring faces are "cast aside and muted by an unnamed event to which they cannot attest."[419] Jana V. Schmidt's description shows how

[419] Jana V. Schmidt, "Philip Guston's Piles" in *Traversals of Affect: on Jean-François Lyotard* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 142.

Guston's engagement with strategies of "unrepresentability" in historical painting should be read in terms of the artist's broader interest in historical catastrophe that continually puts pressure on representation. This takes place at the level of making, as embodied in the way that the implications of the first *Deluge* painting unfold in its sequel, *Deluge II*, made six years later.

It is curious that Guston decided to return to the subject of the deluge at this stage. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, his first iteration of the subject seems to have represented a dead end in the development of his late figuration. While the Klan hoods of that period were gradually phased out of the artist's works in the years that followed, Guston produced no flood paintings at all between *The Deluge* in 1969 and *Deluge II* in 1975.[420] Further, the second *Deluge* painting bears little resemblance to the first. Whereas in the earlier work the field of water dominated the visual field, supporting a small row of objects at the horizon line, in *Deluge II* the thick horizontal band of lapping waves is filled with a chaotic tumble of images. These include a series of disembodied, staring heads; two picture frames; several upturned legs; a boot, a bottle, manhole covers, and other ambiguous objects that seem to have been cast adrift from earlier paintings. Above, a series of what look like heavenly bodies sit on a pink sky, as streaks of red rain at the far left cascade into a black passage of water. In this way, the flood motif becomes the stage for visual incident in a way that was suppressed in the earlier painting. What is dramatized in *Deluge II* is the water's tendency to make fragments of the objects it obscures. In doing so, each object's integrity is systematically collapsed: because not fully seen, few of the painting's images lend themselves to easy naming. The order is flooded. This troubling of representational certainty is the principal dramatic action of the painting.

It is this, I suggest, that accounts for the artist's return to the subject of the flood after a long period of absence.[421] The 1969 painting's submergence of representational content –

[420] Ross Feld was the first to identify Guston's floods with resurgence as well as destruction. Looking back on his review of the 1976 David McKee show that first displayed the *Red Sea* triptych, he recapitulated his earlier writing on the painting. This was "not only about submersion but also about dogged *reappearance*, a swirling down but also a bobbing up". Feld, *Guston in Time: Remembering Philip Guston (*New York: Counterpoint, 2003), 43.

[421] This retrospective quality is shared by other paintings produced in 1975. *Paw II* (1975), for example, which was shown in the 1976 exhibition at McKee's gallery, revived the 1968 painting *Paw* that had played an

the three Klan figures, obscured by the body of dark water that gives the painting its title – presented new possibilities for Guston in a period in which the limits of the representable took on new urgency. The flood's return, then, reactivates the tensions of the earlier painting in the light of the artist's shifted priorities for his work. *Deluge II* seems to dramatize this in its evocation of the act of painting itself. Below the body of water is a recumbent figure, whose body, which is little more than an outline, fills the expanse of the canvas's bottom edge. A painting hand emerges from mid-torso as though shown in the act of delineating the pile of motifs that are clustered above it; a block-like palette stands alongside. This spectral self-portrait is unmistakeably a restaging of some of the imagery from the 1974 Boston exhibition discussed in the previous chapter, especially those works, such as *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (1973) that juxtaposed a recumbent figure with a mound of imagery heaped onto its chest. I argue that the distinction between these two incarnations of the bedbound painter marks an important shift in Guston's work, of which the flood paintings are an embodiment. I have previously suggested that the bed becomes a site of anachronic activity in those earlier paintings, with objects from earlier stages in the artist's life and work returning to the artist in a scene in which apprehension about the artwork's own temporal stability is at stake.

In a lecture in 1978 at the University of Minnesota, Guston described himself at the end of the 1960s as "very disturbed by the war and the demonstrations." Coincident with this, he was "flooded by a memory" of his earlier anti-Ku Klux Klan paintings, which then led, he claimed, to his return to that motif in the works he showed at Marlborough Gallery in 1970.[422] This description of Guston's return to representation is far less often cited than his "what kind of a man am I" dramatization in 1977, which allowed him to frame himself in assertive terms, like a political activist. It is certainly the case that Guston altered his position on the motivations behind what had by then become mythic in the artist's public

important role in the Boston University exhibition. Here, the creaturely hand that was shown in the earlier painting drawing a single line on a surface is instead depicted reaching, with canine claws, towards a partially unfurled scroll. The 1968 painting's association with the originary gesture of the drawn line is here rewound and held in suspended animation. It is as though by doing so, Guston's painting dramatizes a double return, reviving the historical moment of his own recuperation of figuration seven years previously.

[422] Philip Guston, talk given at "The Big Question: Art/Not Art?" conference at the University of Minnesota, February 27th, 1978, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 282. I take "the demonstrations" here to be a generic reference to student-led uprisings in America in 1968, most of which were pitted against the Vietnam war.

image, but it is nevertheless fascinating to note how readily he was able to render himself by turns active or passive participant of his own aesthetic transformation. The "flooded" Guston of 1978 presents the action of revival as one in which the artist is a helpless observer, the recipient of a perhaps unwanted resurgent memory. It is significant that this alternative account of the artist's shift at the end of the 1960s is one that is first articulated in Guston's flood paintings.

The prone painter in *Deluge II* doubles as the landscape across which the flood unfolds. Its tiny brush and stump-like hand, creased with lines, seem frail against the vitality and literal density of the heads and limbs that float above it. As in *Division*, the apparatus of representation appears to wilt or shrink in the face of overwhelming and inexplicable historical events. Where the Klan painter of *The Studio* (1969), who is unquestionably framed as participant in the horrors of the age, paints and smokes with large and virile hands that imply violent potential, the painter of *Deluge II* seems barely able to raise its hand to paint. The Klansman's workplace, with its frame of pink drapes, blue sky beyond, and small, clearly stretched canvas propped on an easel, is, I suggest, *a* studio but not *the* studio, regardless of its legibility as a self-portrait, a reading Guston endorsed. The flood paintings reframe the act of making. In returning to the source of his artistic transformation, the Guston of the second *Deluge* finds alternative work for figuration. The Marlborough paintings' dramatization of complicity and complacency cedes ground to an address to the failures of representation itself. The contained and often centralised compositional structures of those paintings, embodied by the strong pictorial device of the equilateral triangles of the repeated hoods, gives way to dispersed arrays of visual incident in which dissolution, not concentration, is the predominant compositional and affective mode.

Shape and the formless

The flood paintings' horizontal insistence extrapolates the implications of the images of the recumbent painter first shown in the 1974 Boston exhibition. It appears, though, that the implications of horizontality itself are addressed in a more sustained way in the flood paintings of 1975 and onwards. These paintings condense and dramatize horizontality as such and enable its implications to become central to the concerns of the painting. This is an

event made literal in the 1975 painting *Painter's Head*, which shows a grey-haired face, unmistakeably Guston's own, staring with bloodshot eye at a canvas pinned to the wall, which shows a single black horizon line on a white field, thereby collapsing the spare mark-making of Guston's drawings with the basic structure of the flood paintings produced contemporaneously [**86**]. As I will explore, it is the flood paintings in particular that return to the subject of witnessing and its limitations first proposed by the "pure" drawings.

Bodies of water allowed Guston to emphasise this essentially horizontal orientation. In the first two *Deluge* paintings as well as many related works produced in 1975, the horizon line is reiterated both through colour divisions in zones suggesting sea, sky, and land, and in repeated patterns of horizontal ripples that indicate the water's movements. Kate Nesin has identified the horizontal tendency in Guston's late works as a means of indicating "the very edge of sight", an "optical limit" which is the threshold of representation itself.[423] Nesin points out that the flood paintings are "his largest body of horizon-oriented compositions" which thematise "the incapacities of optical experience."[424] In *Deluge II*, this limit is made literal in the unfathomable depths of the body of water, and in the distant galaxies and planets that float mysteriously above the horizon. The two floating heads that gaze towards them are unable to comprehend (or even fully perceive) what they look towards. Positioned in a diagrammatic array of positions – left, right, up, out, and across – these heads embody a bewildered subjectivity. The upper zone at which they peer emphasises the supernatural or otherwise unaccountable origins of the flood itself, as it does in other paintings of this time.

In *Blue Light*, the right-hand panel of the *Red Sea* triptych, for instance, the black sky above the field of bobbing shoes is punctuated with three extra-pictorial phenomena: a fall of rain, an insectoid sun, and a rectangular patch of blue [**87**]. These serve to generate a jarring distinction between studio interior and exterior landscape, thereby performing the conflict between public and private previously discussed, as well as to rehearse, with mordant irony, traditional iconography of divine justice and redemption. Caught up in events they cannot comprehend, these heads – each a stand-in for the artist, the *Painting, Smoking, Eating* self-

[423] Nesin, *Philip Guston Now*, 208.
[424] Nesin, *Philip Guston Now*, 215-6.

portrait detached and multiplied many times over – embody a destabilising encounter with historical catastrophe.

Guston's deployment of the motif of the flood around 1975 enabled him to consider the limits of representation, while at the same time dramatizing the effect of the encounter with those limits, as embodied by the floating, staring heads of *Deluge II*, or the wilting tools of *Division*. This emotive encounter takes place at the level of shape, with forms pushed, sunk or stretched to the limits of signification, thanks to the dispersing, swamping quality of the floodwater itself. The *Red Sea* triptych is perhaps the best example of this, in that its tripartite structure and turbulent compositions showcase the represented flood's ability to unmoor a given shape from a stable identification. The shoe-shape in the right-hand painting, *Blue Light*, is a case in point. This first appears as grey outline with its distinctive hobnails, then morphs into related head or book shapes, thickens with colour or trails into the patterns of the water. A related effect is staged in the left-hand painting, *Red Sea*, in which the same shoe-shape is shown multiple times, in spectral outline or stone-like grey impasto, as limp, severed phallus or muddied painter's palette. It is the pressure of that which defeats representation that causes these shifts in objects associated above all with groundedness, stability, and the upright. The transmutation of these objects provides a means to think through the central concern of Guston's flood paintings: what happens to representation in the face of its own limitations? How might the catastrophic encounter be mapped onto the shifts and animations of shapes that bob on or sink under the painted waves?

Guston's floods stage the regurgitation of earlier imagery from the artist's work, an activity made possible by the conditions of the artist's own studio space. The studio, "flooded by a memory", then becomes a site in which the effect of exposure to historical trauma is played out in the stresses under which this imagery is put by the action of the water. It is these stresses, enacted in the shape-shifting events they induce, that maps the artist's registration of his own encounter with catastrophe. In exploring this dimension of the flood paintings, I want firstly to consider how this dramatization of pressure is enacted at the level of shape. In this way, Guston's floods enabled his canvases to become stages for the dramatization of

the effect of historical catastrophe on the artist-subject, in part by restaging his own practice in allegorical terms.

Rachel Haidu's *Each One Another: The Self in Contemporary Art* (2023) establishes a useful distinction between Guston's shapes and visual signs. The shapes of his Klan hoods in the 1969-73 paintings, for example, "draw us into the framework of expressivity", beyond their "references to mere objects and to history." Slumping, pointing, or bent over, the shape of the Klan hoods "overpowers received ideas, bringing us further into history's fullness, its deeper address of *each* of us." The very same can be said of the shoes that undergo dynamic transformation in the *Red Sea* paintings: they are alternately spectral, physical, flaccid and sculptural, all within the parameters of the two-part sole shape. It is this "expressive fullness" – the rich potentiality of shape's meanings – that can "mitigate the acts of reference that shapes often enact." This allows shape to "become Guston's vehicle of choice for addressing history."[425] It is through shape and what it goes through within paintings (regardless of their abstract or representational qualities) that his work evokes what Haidu calls the "historical conditions", rather than the specific events, of his time. Shapes "generate a sensitivity to the historical moment that draws on or speaks to an understanding of the self." It is in Guston's shapes' relationship with representation – a relationship that is, as I will explore, animated, dramatized and intensified by the actions of the flood – that the encounter with "historical conditions" comes to be articulated.

Shapes like Guston's shoes "can convey even without communicating directly what a given shape 'is': shapes can produce a sense or feeling about themselves on an intuitive level, one that seems to address their viewers at a level of interiority." As the shoes in *Red Sea* flop, slump, or slip into the waves, they, like the artist's shapes more broadly, "seem to address the perceptive, intuitive, interior self without even naming a shared idea like 'sadness' or indeed any concrete referent."[426] Because Guston's shapes, according to Haidu, do not function through a structuralist conception of difference but rather accumulate in variation, their meanings emerge outside of or beyond the referential. The shoes in *Red Sea* thereby

[425] Haidu *Each One Another*, 5-6.
[426] Haidu, *Each One Another*, 14.

"gain a connotive or even characterological depth or richness."[427] It is the repetitiveness of Guston's forms – the "piles of corpse legs or shoe soles, the flotsam of heads floating at sea" – that evokes a subjecthood that is, for Haidu, a tragicomic one: "it slowly dawns on us that we have been here before, we realise our own pathetic, denuded state." This is "a condition of subjecthood that is deprived of any kind of immediate relation to history"; his floating heads bear witness to a belated catastrophe, since "the tragic (genocide, apocalypse, murder) does not survive its repetition intact."[428] As I will explore, the temporal disjuncture implied in Haidu's reading of Guston's work as tragicomic inheres to the subject of the Holocaust, especially in the artist's belated address to the subject in the mid-1970s.

It is within the flood paintings that these activities are most effectively staged. This is because it is the flood itself that pushes at the boundaries of shape, muddying discrete outlines and seeming to induce the physical collapse of solid objects. Marooned in the waves, the *Red Sea* shoes invoke a desolate affect that is an intensification of the "characterological" quality of their slumped shapes. This, brought into focus by their reference to Biblical and art-historical sources, illuminates the kinds of historical events to which the flood paintings can be said to constitute a response. Through their deployment of the structural language of shape-making – seen in the thickened textures of the shoe-soles, their tonal range, and their distinct, if wavering, outline – Guston's shapes need not signify *as* shoes, but nevertheless "pull *on* the effort of representation, its connotive or intensive depths." It is in this way that Guston's floods stage the limits of representation *both* through their use of unfathomable red tides and in the shapes buoyed along by them. What is at stake, then, is the emotive or communicative possibility of these paintings.

Guston's floods drag shapes along, contaminate their boundaries, push them above or under the waves; they exceed the boundaries of their canvases. I have already referenced Krauss' use of the term "unformed" to describe the "unrepresentable" that keeps the stability of perspectival painting together. This holds true for the phenomenological reading of Agnes Martin's paintings previously discussed, as well as the perspectival structure that

[427] Haidu, *Each One Another,* 18.
[428] Haidu, *Each One Another*, 16.

enables the chaos of Uccello's flood to be comprehended within the *Deluge*. Haidu shows how shape "seems to be the opposite of formlessness or failures of articulation", and thereby "seems to correlate only to formed subjects, not to the formless". This would of necessity render the flood as "that which lies outside of the category of the subject, or that which makes up the category of subjects deemed nonsubjects." A case might be made for this reading within those historical exemplars from which Guston drew, but I suggest that the materiality and facture of the artist's floodwaters pulls against any such binary reading. The waves in *Division*, for example, continually fluctuate between shape and shapelessness to the extent that establishing a "formed subject" within them seems fruitless. For Haidu, this relation leads towards a consideration of "the *expressivity* of the formless": "Thinking about shape and formlessness together invites us to consider how the frameworks of expressivity and formlessness might stand in for "feeling" or indeed the haunting of the subject/nonsubject."[429]

Indeed, "shape and formlessness" cannot be disentangled in the flood paintings. In *The Swell*, the central canvas of the *Red Sea* triptych, outlines run across the slanted horizon, shifting from sun to palette, small to large head, light pull to shoe sole. This transmutation of shape articulates Haidu's "expressive fullness" through the repetition of stretched and bent oval shapes that sit at the edge of recognition. The uneven horizon line above which they appear seems to activate the slips and shifts in their appearance. Below the horizon, two shapes in the red water behave differently. On the right-hand side, a pink shoe, its hobnails picked out in black, sails across the water. Below it, a related rectangular shape, painted in black outline against the red water, cannot be so easily determined. Though asymmetrically divided in the manner of the shoe sole, its sharp edges recall the artist's images of books; Guston has worked a lighter tone into it that appears to be formed by the motion of the waves, drawing it away from the deep space of the water so that it is both underneath *and* on top of the tide.

[429] Here Haidu is quoting Judith Butler's description of the differential construction of the human "that produces the more and the less 'human', the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the 'human' as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation." Judith Butler, Introduction to *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p8. In Haidu, *Each One Another,* 19.

A similar effect is generated in *Red Sea*, in which a large, disembodied foot-like shape is picked out in pink and grey against the cadmium red of the waves, superimposed on and contaminated by some black lines that are partially visible beneath it [**88**]. And yet Guston has worked back into it, building an outline in thick red around its edges. In this way, Guston's floodwaters resist a reading of formlessness. They reiterate and reinforce shape *and* erase and submerge it. The ostensible "formlessness" of the water in the *Red Sea* triptych is belied both by these formal qualities that assert its agency within the picture's world and by its propensity to activate the changes within objecthood I have previously described. It is in this sense that Guston's flood paintings become stages for "the expressivity of the formless." This is particularly the case in the bottom third of *Red Sea*'s surface. Against a thin pink ground, two trailing red marks, whose pigment fades in and out of view, sketch out a basic structure. Alongside and overlapping these is a squashed grey-pink oval, positioned like the head of the recumbent painter in *Deluge II*, a painting whose basic format it reiterates. The "haunting of the subject/nonsubject", then, takes place at the level of painterly facture. The flood's haunting of the artist, who watches as the waves crash in through his darkened studio, is in its constant threat, never quite followed through, to push shape beyond the boundaries of representation. This is the tension staged by Guston's floods.

4.3 Catastrophe, flooding, and bearing witness

"To see it totally and bear witness"

In conversation at the New York Studio School with Morton Feldman in 1968, during the period of his work's transition into figuration but before its first public appearance, Guston described his current interests. He opened the discussion with an extended exegesis of Jean-François Steiner's book *Treblinka*: *The Revolt of an Extermination Camp* (1966). The book, published in the USA the previous year and which Guston had recently read, was both a detailed account of the workings of that camp and a narrative of revolt and escape. Guston described how Nazi administration had to "benumb the killers" in the concentration camp, to allow the mass executions to take place without "the incredulity of the tormentors"

preventing it from happening. So too were the victims "benumbed", in part thanks to the transformation of the train platform at which they arrived in the camp. It was "decorated like a small-town railroad station…[with] trompe l'oeil painted everywhere…[including] potted palms and a pot-bellied stove." This sufficiently placated both perpetrators and victims into thinking, in his paraphrase, "What the hell, it's life." Those who escaped the camp had to "unnumb" themselves from this comforting illusion, "to see it totally and to bear witness". "I began to see all of life really as a vast concentration camp. And everybody is numbed, you know. Then I thought, 'Well, that's the only reason to be an artist: to escape, to bear witness to this. Unless you want to make pictures or something.'"[430]

The literature has generally tended to treat Guston's handling of the subject matter of the Holocaust in terms of paintings that emerged in 1976, which depicted piles of legs and shoes that bear a strong resemblance to the photographic documentation of the camps the artist had first seen in the mid-1940s. The 1968 discussion cited above – made in the company of an old friend, in a pedagogical context, in which Guston would be more candid, more willing to expound – suggests, however, that this interest in the subject coincided with, and is implicated by, his own revival of representation. It is certainly the case, as I will explore, that the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, the Second Commandment ban on graven images, emerged as a concern both serious and comic throughout the artist's final decade. However, Steiner's book, as Guston himself pointed out, was "not just another Holocaust book."[431] In her introduction to the edition that Guston read, Simone de Beauvoir describes its "altogether unusual" tone: "neither pathos nor indignation, but a calculated coldness and sometimes even a dark humour. The horror is evoked in its day-to-day banality and almost as if it were natural."[432] Steiner's description of the decoration of the false railroad station, for example, is presented as a quasi-artistic struggle for the SS officer Kurt Franz. On inspecting the incomplete site, he decided that "something was still missing" to complete the illusion. He was "troubled, pensive and occupied" by this absence, before realising what it was: a clock. He had a clock face "painted on a wooden cylinder twenty-eight inches in diameter and

[430] Philip Guston, Conversation with Morton Feldman, New York Studio School, October 23rd, 1968, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 80-1.
[431] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings,* 80.
[432] Simone de Beauvoir, preface to Jean-François Steiner, *Treblinka: The Revolt of an Extermination Camp* (trans. Helen Weaver) (New York: Signet Books, 1967), 11.

eight inches thick", with hands permanently set to 3 o'clock. In doing so, "Untersturmführer S.S Kurt Franz had just stopped time in Treblinka."[433]

Guston certainly read Steiner's text in terms that reflected his own relationship with studio practice. Steiner's ironic description of creative angst would, I suggest, have felt familiar to Guston and relevant in his work's critique of Abstract Expressionist practice, of which it reads as a dark inversion. Further, the image of the large, immobile, illusory clock as a bleakly comic signifier of art's suspended temporality, and its troubled relationship with historical time, explains, I argue, its preponderance throughout Guston's final decade of work. One such example is *The Magnet*, from 1975, which hung in the 1976 McKee exhibition in which the flood paintings were first shown [**89**]. On an uneven red ground somewhat like the waters of the contemporaneous *Red Sea* triptych, two thick and densely worked objects, with wide, illusionistic edges, are shown together: a clock, with a huge hand pointing upwards, and a canvas depicting a red seascape. An opened book on the red foreground shows lines of indecipherable text and a large question mark; a lightbulb dangles from the upper left corner, which places the work within the studio interior. The painting's title has led some writers to read the clock as a compass. For Kosme de Barañano, its north-pointing needle is "understood as an aesthetic metaphor, refer[ing] to isolation…the ideal of artistic creation as something that takes place at a remove from the institutions, canons, and conventions of the art world."[434] David Kaufmann, by contrast, reads the object *both* as compass and clock, pointing out that "deciphering the painting is less important than pointing out that it is a painting to be deciphered. It turns the viewer's inability to interpret it into a theme."[435] Kaufmann's argument reads the painting in terms established by Guston's at-a-remove reading of Walter Benjamin, whose concept of allegory as a phenomenon that "rejects unity and insists on internal disjunctions" provides a framework for understanding the artist's wilfully dispersed and evasive imagery in his later paintings.[436] The placement of the large question mark is Guston's typically straightforward way of announcing his own painting's failure to cohere into sense.

[433] Steiner, *Treblinka,* 154.
[434] de Barañano, *Guston and the Poets,* 25.
[435] Kaufmann, *Telling Stories*, 60-1.
[436] Kaufmann, *Telling Stories,* 56.

I read *The Magnet* instead as a painting that brings together the principal concerns of Guston's address to historical catastrophe. Held in place by the lightbulb, the canvas and clock embody the problematics of representation that are central to Guston's handling of the theme. These objects' deeply shadowed edges indicate illusory depth, while retaining a spatial positioning that is unclear. In doing so, they indicate the concern with illusionism that was, for Guston, inextricable from the subject of the Holocaust. Treblinka's fictive railroad station provided Guston with a means to consider visual art as "a cover-up or obstacle to the truth."[437] Jana V. Schmidt situates Guston's fascination with Steiner's book at the core of this occupation. To "see it totally and to bear witness", then, the artist would need to dramatize the questioning of art's relationship to historical reality. What such an act would entail is neither a rejection of the fictive space of the painting nor an assertion of the flat plane of the picture surface.[438] Instead, pictorial illusion would need to be open to corruption, contagion and disarray in order to both figure it *as* illusion and to account for its degradation in a post-Holocaust culture. *The Magnet*'s unstable iconography embodies this. Where the clock both alludes to the ironic Treblinka "clock", as well as the artwork's anachronic ability to figure and critique its own temporality, the painting-in-a-painting indicates the medium's representational limits. It is highly significant, I argue, that both objects suggest, in their coarse, lumpen manufacture and play with pictorial illusion, the failures and limitations of painting's attempts to bear witness. It is the painted flood that best performs this. *The Magnet*'s painting, then, comes to stand for representation itself.

Guston's address to the subject of the Holocaust in the flood paintings was, as I will explore, a return to concerns first articulated in his representational paintings of the 1940s. These are very differently inflected in his late practice, however. It is the revival of ideas first explored in his 1969 *Deluge* – especially its dramatization of the political implications of paint's ability to obscure or erase its own contents – that provided Guston with a visual expression of the limitations of representation that inhere to the subject of the Holocaust.

[437] Schmidt, "Guston's Piles", 149-50.
[438] Throughout his career, Guston would refer to painted space as "imaginary", "illusive", "a metaphysical plane of infinite continuity", "an illusion – a piece of magic", and usually in contradistinction to Greenbergian proposals about the assertion of flatness and generally in negative terms.

The 1968 talk on *Treblinka* indicates that the Holocaust as a subject in painting distilled many of his work's major preoccupations: it tested the boundaries of representation, subjected illusionism to critique, and figured Guston's own relationship with Jewishness. Above all, Guston's address to the subject of the Holocaust was enacted in dramatisations of the *effect* of encountering the aftermath of those events, as explored in the flood as a pictorial action that subjected content itself to a series of transformative, destructive, dispersing and fragmenting events.

Mark Godfrey has discussed how questions of Jewish identity became increasingly important for Guston in his final decade. These were certainly questions that circled around the Jewish *Bilderverbot* or restriction on representational imagery. Guston's relationship to the *Bilderverbot* was often something he couched in comic terms, and I suggest that his relationship to it was one underpinned by a sense of the absurd.[439] Where his abstract production "could be cast as continuing Jewish thinking, image-making could not." Godfrey's essay addresses Guston's allusions to "Jewish ideas and creation myths" in his images of Torah scrolls, books, and golems, which "helped him to understand his own practice" and to some extent assuaged his own lingering anxiety about the issue of representation itself.[440] This was unusual among his fellow Jewish Abstract Expressionists, such as Rothko and Barnett Newman, whose work generally eschewed the religious specificity that came to characterise some of Guston's work in the 1970s. Rothko's tendency to "generalise" his practice – to leach it of specificity, and thereby be taken as "universal" – is summarised by Kaufmann as "paint[ing] a Jewish God without Judaism."[441] Perhaps the most useful framework for understanding Guston's Jewish relationship to representation is what Anthony Julius has called "iconoclastic art", which he contrasts with the "aniconic", an art that seeks to "render the infinite and put presence in question", such as Rothko's abstractions.[442] Jewish iconoclasm, by contrast, is a form of picturing that "attacks the icon",

[439] In a 1969 talk, for example, Guston ventriloquised God in a way that closely resembles a comedy routine, saying, "…we all talk with God, and God tells me: "Look, you sing about what I make, you know? Don't fuck around, don't try to be me. You sing about what I make."" Philip Guston, "The Image", talk at the New York Studio School, January 15th, 1969, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 110.
[440] Godfrey, *Philip Guston Now*, 196.
[441] Kaufmann, *Telling Stories,* 76.
[442] "…the Jewish Abstract Expressionists were largely indifferent to their origins and did not relate their art endeavours to any Jewish art tradition." Anthony Julius, *Idolizing Pictures: Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Jewish Art* (the Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures) (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 44.

as mandated by the strictures of the Second Commandment.[443] Jewish iconoclasm has "a paradoxical, even self-cancelling quality. …It exists in order to contribute to the battle against idolatry, and hazards its own extinction in the process. It is, therefore, unavoidably, an art of irony. It views itself with some scepticism."[444]

In a 1974 interview with Harold Rosenberg, Guston articulated his ongoing dislike of the New York art world in terms that seem to assert, by contrast, the importance of the context of Boston Expressionist artists. Guston complains about what he calls "the internationalisation of art": "in the last 20 years, when you open an art magazine, some guy in Capetown is painting exactly like some guy in Haifa or Soho. There is no difference." By contrast,

> the more I go to Europe and see the paintings of the past it strikes me that the place, and the time, and the smell, the flavour, are all essential qualities of a work of art.…What I am getting at is that I find more and more that what I like is what has a feeling of poetry and is the expression which is of a time and place and region. It is saturated with particularity.[445]

The milieu of fellow Jewish representational painters in Boston offered Guston both the specificity of allusion to Jewish traditions that had been suppressed in the work of Rothko and others, and a connection to the history of painting understood through a phenomenological framing that embeds viewing in the physical encounter with place. Guston's description of the smell of the Brancacci Chapel ("I can smell the lime. How did he feel?")[446] emphasises the importance of his sensory engagement with the specificity of historical sites. What Boston offered was at once a community of makers for whom that past remained an important source, and a particularity of production and subject matter that refuted the "internationalisation" he not only felt excluded from in the 1970s but worked to distance his work from through an increasingly personal, even biographical,

[443] Julius, *Idolizing Pictures*, 42.
[444] Julius, *Idolizing Pictures*, 58.
[445] Harold Rosenberg and Philip Guston, "On *Cave Art*, *Church Art*, Ethnic *Art* and *Art*." ARTnews, December 1974, 40.
[446] Guston in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 112.

iconography. In 1978, Guston provided a short text for David Aronson's retrospective exhibition at the Rose Art Museum, which emphasises the importance of Aronson's work, and the work of his fellow Boston Expressionist painters more broadly, for Guston's own:

> David Aronson comes to Art from a path we hardly remember. …He drew aside a curtain as if to show us what was already there. …Aronson not only reveals his alchemy, he is also its witness. David caused me to remember and made me a witness too.[447]

What Boston artists like Aronson and Hyman Bloom caused Guston to remember is not straightforwardly apparent. Both were born in Eastern European shtetls and moved to Jewish areas in Boston as children; though one place removed from the immigrant experience, Guston's childhood was not dissimilar.[448] Both, like Guston, "had deeply conflicted feelings about [their] heritage and felt that [they] must explore forbidden "graven images" and tackle traditionally Christian iconography."[449] It is this tension, encapsulated in Julius' term "an art of irony", that accounts for the preponderance of Christian iconography in Jewish modern art of the early 1940s, such as the works assembled for the 1942 exhibition *Modern Christs* in New York, most of which were by Jewish artists.[450] These were themes processed through both an immigrant experience and a sense of cultural marginalisation that accompanied it. Boston artists provided an example to Guston of a secular Jewish art that could draw on Renaissance materiality and modes of

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[447] Guston, 1978 in catalogue for *David Aronson: a retrospective* (Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, 4th February – 18th March 1979; The Jewish Museum, New York, June 6th – September 4th, 1979), quoted in Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, 247-8.

[448] Recent research on Guston's origins has shifted the story often told of his family background. Rather than being born in Odessa, then part of the Russian Empire, Guston's parents seem to have come from Poland, and were perhaps married in Odessa, before moving to Canada in 1904 and 1905, where Guston was born in 1913. Guston emphasised the connection with Odessa in both paintings and public statements, perhaps seeking to forge a link with one of his favourite writers, Isaac Babel, who came from Odessa. This research is discussed in Harry Cooper's essay "Guston, Then" in *Philip Guston* Now (p5). Guston's considerations of his own origins was likely informed by his encounters with Boston-based artists. "As Aronson had done in the 1940s and 50s, Guston spent the 1970s rediscovering his identity. Aronson served as a guide in G's exploration of, among other areas, the Jewish Germanic world of his parents." Bookbinder, *Boston Modern*, 247.

[449] Capasso, *Painting in Boston: 1950-2000*, 151.

[450] *Modern Christs*, Puma Gallery, New York, April 6th – 26th, 1942. The exhibition included work by Louise Nevelson, Adolph Gottlieb, Marc Chagall and David Aronson. Both Chagall and Aronson substituted their own self-portrait for that of Christ. French, "Artistic Paradox", 6.

representation,[451] while at the same time subjecting that representation to a scepticism that emerged in caricature, exaggeration, the grotesque, the comic, and the sentimental. [452]

Aronson's 1958 painting *The Golem* prefigures Guston's interest in the same subject that informed his relationship with representation at the turn of the 1970s [**90**]. Aronson shows a recumbent golem in a rectangular frame gradually coming to life, as a rabbi and surrounding apprentices chant and pray it into animation. Painted in wax encaustic, an ancient material the Boston Expressionists deployed as a counter-modernist strategy, the work refuses to participate in mandates against both figuration and narrative.[453] The very figure of the golem, in fact, embodies that position; Katherine French has claimed that "Aronson recreated [the golem] in order to defend painters against Greenberg's injunction against traditional subject matter."[454] As Aaron Rosen has discussed, the golem is a reanimation of dead matter that embodies Guston's recuperation of the art-historical past as "battered forms."[455] The fact that Aronson's golem emerges from what resembles a painting-in-a-painting, its feet spreading out from the top of its frame, seems to dramatize this.

In making Guston a "witness", then, the Boston Expressionists granted Guston the licence to perform witnessing within his own work, which meant engaging in a form of representation that doubted itself; like Michael Taussig's witness, the image is "born of doubt in the act of perception… mysterious, complicated, powerful. And necessary."[456] To bear witness is to acknowledge the failure of representation to faithfully record historical reality. For Anthony Julius, "Holocaust art is at the edge of the modern Jewish art of witness. This is because it is an art which takes a subject that both defies and compels representation."[457] To "see it

[451] For instance, Jack Levine used gesso in his famous work *Welcome Home* (1946); Zerbe used encaustic in his paintings from the late 1930s onwards, later adopted by Aronson; and Aronson recreated the "black oil of the Flemings" by boiling lead white in linseed oil (French, Artistic Paradox", 9).
[452] David Kaufmann has used the Yiddish term *shpritz* to characterise the tone of Guston's later paintings, which have much in common with work by Levine and other Boston artists. They have "that particular mixture of pragmatic impatience, hair-splitting idealism, grandiosity, sentiment, and self-loathing." Kaufmann, p86.
[453] Aronson used wax encaustic from the 1940s onward, and therefore did so in distinction from Jasper Johns, whose motivation in using it is quite different.
[454] French, Artistic Paradox", 11.
[455] Rosen, *Imagining Jewish Art*, 53.
[456] Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This,* 1-2.
[457] Julius, *Idolizing Pictures,* 51.

totally *and* to bear witness" [italics mine] – Guston's declared aim for his own figurative practice, the motivating force behind the exceptional outpouring of creative labour that would result in the flood paintings – are, notably, two different events, divided in time and space. This is the gap in which the flood paintings sit.

Framing catastrophe

As I have previously explored, Guston's initial turn to figuration at the end of the 1960s should be understood within a political context in which representation – that is, mediated imagery of contemporary disorder – was uniquely pressured. What I have described as the reorientation of his practice around 1975 was carried out within a parallel environment. The socio-political turmoil of the mid-1970s is enough to justify the artist's interest in catastrophe at this time: "post-civil rights racial retrenchment, the war waged in Vietnam…the crises of governance and public confidence that followed the collapse of Richard Nixon's administration…dogged by memories of the World Wars and nightmares of a nuclear holocaust".[458] At the same time, two devastating floods in June 1972 and September 1975 inundated many mid-Atlantic states including New York, and caused unprecedented destruction.[459] These "American scenes" of infrastructural and environmental damage, political crisis, and the failures of the social promises of the late 1960s "pose questions about the limits of representation: how to describe in a time following a cruelly optimistic period of change?"[460]

Guston did produce works on paper that addressed these contexts, bifurcating his practice between drawing and painting just as he had in 1971, during the production of *Poor Richard*.[461] Where these works were, as before, relatively direct in their satirical intent, the

[458] Haidu, *Each One Another,* 21.
[459] "Hammering rains and swelling flood waters inundated sections of the metropolitan area and a wide swath of the state's Southern Tier for a fifth consecutive day… Thousands of homes in Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island had flooded basements; most major arteries in the city and suburbs were impassable…" Robert D. McFadden, "Five Days Of Rain Inundate Parts Of City And State" (*New York Times*, Saturday Sep.27th, 1975, 1). Woodstock, where Guston lived, was not affected, but he must have been aware of these events, which affected the lives of friends and colleagues in New York, Boston, and elsewhere.
[460] Haidu, *Each One Another,* 21.
[461] In 1975, at the same time he was producing the flood paintings, Guston returned to the subject of Nixon, inspired in part by the revelation of the Watergate scandal and the president's resignation the previous year.

flood paintings represent a response to Haidu's question of "how to describe". In fact, I argue that the flood paintings' engagement with the Holocaust in itself constituted a response to the political conditions of their time by dint of the representational failures inherent to the subject. Guston certainly read the Holocaust in terms that excised it from the specifics of history and enabled it to flexibly adapt to more recent catastrophes. Indeed, by the mid-1970s he, as Mark Godfrey writes, "could only understand the Holocaust as connected to successive horrors in which his own government was an aggressor."[462] For instance, in a 1973 letter to his friend Bill Berkson, Guston responded to news of Augusto Pinochet's coup in Chile by saying that "our whole lives (since I can remember) are made up of the most extreme cruelties of holocausts. We are the witnesses of the hell."[463] In other words, the only possible recuperation of the subject was one which acknowledged the historical belatedness of representation.

Guston's 1976 painting *Pit* secures the significance of the flood paintings in the artist's figuring of historical catastrophe [**91**]. The painting is roughly divided into horizontal thirds, with the lower two-thirds occupied by a dark aperture that takes up most of the canvas's lower edge. A cluster of upturned legs, with hobnailed shoe-soles, pokes up from the pit, as though discarded; a disembodied head below stares into a green sea which flows beneath it. Above these events, and bracketed by flames at each side, is a painting in an Old Master frame, very like the same object in *Deluge II*. Depicted in simple foreshortening, it shows a red seascape on which orange rain falls. Rocks scattered on the surface below it are illuminated by a strong light; the radiance of this painting-in-the-painting grants it a quasi-divine, or at least supernatural, presence in the composition. The work's doubled perspectival structure, in which the framed painting is seen from below and the pit from above, emphasises what Robert Storr has identified as its connection to the structure of Last Judgement imagery, "where the hierarchic levels of the universe are arranged in balcony-

This resulted in two new series of works on paper, *The Phlebitis Series* and *The Early Years*, and his first, and only, painting of a specific historical figure: *San Clemente*, his grotesque and tender portrait of Nixon dragging his phlebitic leg across a California beach. As I have shown in relation to Guston's *Poor Richard* series (1971), the figure of Nixon provided the artist with a vehicle to consider the ethical dimensions of representation and recognition, issues of renewed importance by the middle of the decade.

[462] Godfrey, *Philip Guston Now,* 201.

[463] Philip Guston, letter to Bill Berkson, October 7th 1973, cited in Ashton, *Yes, But,* 177.

like tiers."[464] Yet the painting's pairing of viewpoints goes further than this: it invites comparison with stacked fresco cycles, such as Uccello's Green Cloister, in which adjacent scenes have divergent perspectival schemes. This allusion to the illusory strategies of large-scale narrative art is resonant in the light of Guston's discussion of *Treblinka* and "the problem of art as deception" previously discussed.[465]

Storr's reading of the painting's ostensible allusion to the kinds of eschatological imagery with which Guston was familiar has enabled *Pit* to be read as the most explicit of the artist's late paintings to confront the Holocaust. As Mark Godfrey has discussed, the piles of shoes and body parts, as well as the presence of flames, make this allusion apparent. Within this reading, though, the painted canvas seems anomalous. Perhaps "it is there to restate what painting ends up being if it fails its human responsibilities", that is, to bear witness to the conditions of its time. The alternative is to make "harmless decorations, or, worse, pictures that are complicit." This makes *Pit*, for Godfrey, "an allegory of painting's pitfalls and purposes."[466] In *Pit*'s allegorical conceit, then – and it is a painting that Guston singled out specifically as such[467] - an image of a painting can come to stand for a broader reflection upon the canvas (and indeed the practice) of which it is a part, namely a cultural phenomenon that is capable of *either* moral rectitude or complicity in the very evils it seeks to expose. The unstable placement of the canvas in *Pit* appears to reflect this, suggesting that it might easily topple over into dangerous terrain – the fire perhaps, or the pit beneath.

For Bryan J. Wolf, the Holocaust is "the enabling condition" of Guston's late production. Discussing the frames-within-frames that appear regularly in his paintings after 1975, Wolf describes them as "meta-painting[s]", "meditation[s] on paradox and impossibility." These frames "seize chaos and banality and horror" and "mould them into a shape, into a meaning, into a framed image, into art." In this way, Guston's address to the catastrophe of the Holocaust is "not in the telling, which can never be adequately accomplished, nor in the

[464] Storr, *Philip Guston*, 74-5.
[465] Schmidt, "Philip Guston's Piles", 150.
[466] Godfrey, *Philip Guston Now,* 202.
[467] Ross Feld describes Guston referring to *Pit* as an allegory in a talk given in Boston in 1977, his first public use of the term to describe his work. Feld, *Guston in Time*, 13.

witnessing, which bears witness only to its own failures, but in the framing."[468] Yet what is it that is being framed? The painting in *Pit* is more than an allegory of painting's perceived ethical responsibilities within a culture – it is an allegory of the *act* of painting too, which the flood paintings embody because of their foregrounding of painting's interplay of visibility and erasure.

Guston's choice of a flood painting as his allegorical embodiment of "painting" is one deserving of greater attention. In his conversations with Dore Ashton around the time of his production of the first flood paintings, Guston looked back on his work of the late 1940s, in which he had first attempted to address the subject of the Holocaust: "Much of our talk was about the holocaust and how to allegorize it". Guston claimed that he was "searching for the plastic condition, where the compressed forms and spaces themselves expressed my feelings about the holocaust."[469] His paintings *The Porch I* (1946-7) and *The Porch II* (1947) are generally taken to embody the realisation of that emotional condition, which Bryan J. Wolf has summarised as "denial, complicity, and guilt."[470] In both paintings, semi-abstract vertical and horizontal frameworks intersect with representations of children, some masked, some playing instruments, all entangled with each other and even inverted, revealing the soles of their shoes (in *Porch II*). [**92**] The pictorial structure seems to compress the figures into shallow space. Elements of the second painting are drawn from specific photographic sources related to the Holocaust, as Dan Nadel has shown.[471] Despite this, neither can be thought of as explicit.

Yet Guston's decision to "allegorise" the catastrophe of the Holocaust was already belated in the late 1940s, which accounts, perhaps, for the complex mesh of feelings described by Wolf. In a 1972 talk at the Yale Summer School of Music and Art, Guston discussed the *Porch* paintings as being made "after the films of the concentration camps started coming back,

[468] Bryan J. Wolf, *Between the Lines: Philip Guston, the Holocaust, and "Bad Painting"* in *American Art*, Vol. 34, No.1, Spring 2020, 81.
[469] Philip Guston cited in Ashton, *Yes, But*, 74. The lower case "holocaust" is in the original text.
[470] Wolf, *Between the Lines,* 75.
[471] "The central figure in *The Porch*, 1946–47, is based on photos of concentration-camp survivors with food bowls hanging from their necks…" Nadel, "Now You See Me", https://www.artforum.com/features/dan-nadel-on-philip-gustons-jewishness-249119/. Accessed 29th June, 2024.

and photos and stories."[472] Schmidt has attended to Guston's phrasing, showing how it was indeed in the "coming back" of this imagery – in other words, its second iteration in newsreels and documentaries in 1947, two years *after* the first publication of photographs of the concentration camps in 1945 – that initiated the artist's serious address to the subject. In this way, "the camp footage may have really hit Guston the second time around, leaving him a "witness" only to deferral itself."[473] This, I suggest, is the operative mode of Guston's responses to the catastrophe of the Holocaust. The flood painting in *Pit*, Guston's allegory for his own practice as a painter, indicates a disastrous event that is temporally and spatially out of sync with the rest of the painting. The framed painting that bobs on the waves of *Deluge II* is similar: its pale waves fail to recount the catastrophe of which it is a part. Deferral, belatedness, and the failures of representation, as brought to the fore by the political and social unrest of the first half of the 1970s, are embodied in these paintings of paintings. The allegorical intent of these images is precisely their ability to stage what Shoshana Felman has called "the radical failure of witnessing" that inheres to the subject of the Holocaust. This is "the impossible historical narrative of an event without a witness, an event eliminating its own witness."[474]

"A magnificent ruin"

The subject of the flood is particularly suited to the staging of these questions. The *Red Sea* triptych's recuperation of Old Testament narrative paintings embodies this intent in, I argue, two principal ways. The first is in Guston's attention to the heavily damaged condition and physical decontextualization of these works, which is mediated through both the representation of fragmentation and dispersal in the painting and in its broken and disrupted painterly facture. The second is in the subject matter itself, which, as I have shown, suggests an urgent "second return" to the Italian sources the artist had encountered in person at critical moments in his career. These points of contact – in 1948, 1960, and 1970 – all engendered new strategies of reframing his own practice, and in particular its

[472] Philip Guston, Talk at Yale Summer School of Music and Art, 1972, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 151.
[473] Schmidt, "Philip Guston's Piles", 148.
[474] Shoshana Felman, "Crisis of Witnessing: Albert Camus' Postwar Writings", *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn, 1991, 237.

relationship with representation and public address. His re-engagement with those sources in 1975, as evidenced in his letter to Mercedes Matter, is pivotal to the renewed pressures under which his practice was put.

To engage in such a sustained manner with imagery of the Old Testament floods, as Guston did in many paintings and drawings around that year, is to invite reflection on catastrophe and redemption. Emil Fackenheim's 1990 book *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust* discussed the impossibility of what he called a "seamless" reading of such stories in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Implied in the narratives depicted by Luini and Uccello in the two frescoes discussed earlier is a redemptive conclusion by which the catastrophic events depicted might be understood. Yet within a post-Holocaust context, such "triumphalist readings" of the Biblical sources ignore both the "tensions within the text and the tensions caused by historical catastrophes."[475] Fackenheim's "seamless" reading – one in which catastrophe, understood as divine retribution, is thereby resolved within the text – gives way, then, to a "ruptured, unseamly" one. This is a telling that, according to Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, has been "deliberately interrupted by the reality of Jewish suffering and Christian complicity in that suffering, rendering suspect any sort of triumphalist reading of biblical promises or accounts of deliverance."[476] I argue that Guston's address to these paintings of the past reads them against the grain: as "unseamly" narratives that thereby embody Felman's "radical failure of witnessing".

Uccello's anonymous *festaiolo* figure, staring out of the contained space of the painting, invites typological readings of the flood by pointing towards adjacent frescoes by which the tumult of the flood might be contextualised within a broader narrative sweep. It is easy enough for Christian theology to cast the Flood in this way, by paralleling it with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; this, however, casts Christians as rescued, the non-Christian as condemned. For Fewell and Phillips, "the biblical narrative's gesture to turn divine violence into a kind of sacrament ironically echoes the very practice of using the sacrificial

[475] Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, "Genesis, Genocide, and the Art of Samuel Bak: 'Unseamly' Reading After the Holocaust" in *Representing the Irreparable: The Shoah, the Bible, and the Art of Samuel Bak* (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2008), 80.
[476] Fewell and Phillips, *Representing the Irreparable*, 75.

term “Holocaust” to label the murder of six million Jews.” Indeed, “the Genesis text, like the Nazis, buries its corpses between the lines, in the unmarked mass grave of a text doing its best to acquit God of mass murder.”[477] As I have explored, the specific conditions in which Guston encountered his historical sources provides a framework by which readings such as these might come to exist. I suggest that Guston’s encounter with the detached and damaged frescoes of Uccello and Luini – indeed, with all of the artist’s engagements with the material conditions of historical fresco paintings discussed in this thesis – enabled them to be read as “seamless”. In other words, Guston read these historical sources as components of a broader narrative cycle that had been removed from that setting and were thereby made available for recuperation in the artist’s own practice. It is this, I suggest, that accounts for the narrative adjacency of Guston’s late figurative paintings, in which the apparatus of storytelling is deployed not in the service of narrative clarity but to imply a larger organising context from which it has been excised.

Guston’s flood paintings enabled him to imagine a form of representational practice that was wilfully unresolved. The tripartite structure of the *Red Sea* triptych, which itself resembles detached panels from a larger narrative cycle, provides an example of this model of “unseamly” narrative. In addressing the work of Samuel Bak, an artist and Holocaust survivor Guston likely knew from his time in Italy,[478] Fewell and Phillips describe the workings of such a painting. In Bak’s *Elegy III* (1997), “our focus is shifted away from the rescued righteous to the devastation of the deluge itself… rendering void all easy identifications with Noah and his family as the recipients of divine grace…in short, all attempts to make sense of undeserved suffering” [**93**].[479] This interpretation serves well as an account of the detached Uccello and Luini frescoes, and indeed Guston’s own flood paintings. One example of this is the redemptive rainbow, which Uccello showed in the

[477] Fewell and Phillips, *Representing the Irreparable,* 81-2.
[478] Bak was in Rome from 1959 - 1963, which overlapped with Guston’s stay in Rome in 1960. Moving to Boston in 1993, his work has become contextualised within that of Boston Expressionist painters such as Aronson and Bloom; like them, he is a first-generation Jewish immigrant to the United States whose work uses figuration and allegory to address the catastrophes of the twentieth century. I am indebted to Alexandra Cardon, Chief Curator of the Samuel Bak Museum: The Learning Center, Omaha, Nebraska, for these insights.
[479] Fewell and Phillips, p84. Bak’s appropriation of Dürer’s angel from *Melencholia I* “repositions [it] from the threshold of the German Renaissance on the verge of Enlightenment to a more recent moment, one that questions the very concept of enlightenment and progress.” Fewell and Phillips, *Representing the Irreparable,* 78.

fresco immediately below *The Deluge*, indicating, in the Biblical source, the relief of the flood and the rescue of Noah and his family. The ruined rainbow that slices across Bak's composition, which is a repeated motif in his work, is an "iconoclastic" image in the sense Anthony Julius meant it: "it views itself with some scepticism". Such an image is made literal in *Deluge II*, in which celestial phenomena appear in the sky above the flood, at which the disembodied heads caught in the waves stare, unblinkingly. Guston's imagery of vision in his flood paintings perform the sceptical gaze described by Julius: it is as though the painting stares at itself. I suggest that this emerges from Guston's imagery of the "witnessing canvas" in works such as *Painter's Table*, and its role within the 1974 Boston exhibition.

At stake in this dramatization of scepticism is the conflation of flooding and painting. Mark Godfrey has asserted that the flood paintings should be read "more as allegories of painting (and of Guston's way of destroying and creating) than as pictures of floods."[480] As I have explored, the subject matter of the flood cannot be dismissed quite so easily: it is certainly the case that Guston's flood paintings responded to the historical interpretations of the flood narratives in fresco paintings, and that the Old Testament source evokes Judaic allusions that were of significance to Guston at this point in his career, which were certainly informed by his sustained engagement with painters in Boston. Yet Godfrey's interpretation deserves some unpacking in relation to the reframing of studio practice that I have discussed in relation to Guston's work around 1975. In an interview with Jan Butterfield in 1979, Guston claimed that "a wonderful work of art should be a magnificent ruin, because it is impossible!" This is the result of what the artist called an irresolvable "'contest' between meaning and structure", which unfolds during the process of making. "For example, in my triptych from 1975, the *Red Sea*. My God! Do you know how many paintings are under each one? About twenty paintings! Twenty paintings in order to get to the fixation that 'feels right'. Well, I couldn't begin with that!"[481]

It is striking to note that Guston referred not to motifs or images "underneath" the *Red Sea* canvases, but to whole *paintings* submerged during the process. This suggests that Guston's

[480] Godfrey, *Philip Guston Now*, 200.
[481] Philip Guston, Interview with Jan Butterfield, first published as "A Very Anxious Fix: Philip Guston", in *Images and Issues* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1980), p34-5, reprinted in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings*, 294-5.

ambitions with the flood paintings was to provide commentary on his own oeuvre more broadly, bringing into play the iconography he had developed in the preceding years. It is also apparent, given the relative thicknesses of the different areas of the canvases, especially the bands of thinly painted pink at the bottom of each one, that it was the red waves that enacted these acts of erasure, so that the curving actions of the dense red cadmium light slipped between metaphorical and actual acts of submersion. Recovering this allegorisation of studio practice that he had first made use of in *The Deluge* (1969), Guston also recuperated the painted erasures of his abstract paintings of the early to mid-1960s. Yet the "allegories of painting" embodied by Guston's floods ought, I suggest, to be read in the light of the "unseamly" interpretations of Biblical source material discussed previously. Aaron Rosen's reading of Guston's engagement with Uccello's *Deluge* convincingly suggests that this conflation of flood and studio practice should be understood as implicated in the narratives to which the artist responded.

It may, according to Rosen, "have been God's part in the narrative which most compelled him as a painter." The divine Flood lends itself to being read as

> the account of an *artistic* destruction and renewal. God's decision to 'blot out' all but a tiny cohort of people and animals…is the reaction of a despondent painter confronting a composition gone awry. If God's intuition as an artist was not to start entirely afresh, but to begin again on the same canvas…Guston set out to do the same in his late work, restarting the history of painting from its remnants.[482]

Rosen's description provides a useful framework for understanding the preponderance of flood paintings produced by Guston from 1975 until his death in 1980. Certainly, the flood paintings enabled Guston himself to "restart" his own practice as an abstract painter by rendering his own earlier strategies of overpainting, erasure, and contamination in allegorical terms. And yet the nature of that allegory, as identified by Rosen, is one in which broader questions of a post-Holocaust consciousness come into play.

[482] Rosen, *Imagining Jewish Art,* 65.

Guston's channelling of divine fabrication is perhaps best epitomised in his 1978 painting *The Line*, with its veiny hand emerging from clouds to draw a single line on the earth below [**39**]. In its evocation of the Biblical division of the waters, *The Line* belongs to the broader project of allegorising studio practice in wilfully hubristic terms. It is after all a compositional dividing line too: one which establishes opposing zones in Guston's painting, between studio and flood, between water and sky. One can easily imagine it as the first mark in a series of horizontals in the construction of a flood painting, itself later to be submerged beneath torrents of red marks. I have already mentioned the 1975 painting *Painter's Head*, made in the midst of the emergence of the flood paintings and the surge of creative energy during which they were made, in which the artist, in a moment of pause, stares glumly at a single black line bisecting a canvas, like the very mark being inscribed in *The Line*. For Guston, the simple act of mark-making could be at once a grandiose act of world-building and an absurd, self-parodying gesture. This is of a piece with the artist's reframing of studio practice in paintings such as *The Studio* (1969), whereby the artist is cast as the cultural personification of evil and corruption within an image that nevertheless displays all the trappings of the refined painter. It is, in a sense, not a stretch to imagine Guston adopting a new role around 1975, once the Klan imagery had spent its energies, assuming the role of a vengeful God in the same self-parodic spirit of *The Studio*. In casting oneself in divine terms, the same kind of discourses of culpability and collusion invited by the Klan paintings emerge again some years later.

And yet, reading the *Red Sea* triptych via the former discussion of post-Holocaust readings of the Biblical flood, I suggest that the flood paintings are more than mere continuations of this distancing quality that emerges with Guston's revived figuration. In his "unseamly" recuperation of the damaged frescoes of Luini and Uccello, Guston parallels the act of painting with acts of irredeemable, and unrepresentable, destruction. In *Blue Light*, the right-hand canvas in the *Red Sea* triptych, and the only one of the three canvases to be signed, Guston comes close to dramatizing the complex interweaving of manufacture, culpability, and vision that characterise the flood paintings' address to historical catastrophe.

A large head on the right-hand side of the painting gazes to the left as it is swept along on the waves. It looks across, past a cluster of bobbing, inverted legs, at a form that resembles it: a featureless grey bust of a human body, which nevertheless seems to be looking back. This moment of confrontation between maker and made, between artist and artwork, seems to have been brought into being by the flood's dispersal of imagery, so that the artist is brought face-to-face with his own creation. Like the golem, the sculpture is an act of hubris, a parody of divine creation. Guston's flood paintings both call into being and reflect upon the ethics of representation, viewing themselves with scepticism and asking, as Guston himself did, on returning to the studio the morning after a heavy night of painting, "my God! Did I *do that*?"[483]

[483] "Philip Guston Talking", in Serota (ed.), *Philip Guston Paintings,* 55.

Conclusion: Churning the world

In 1931, at the age of eighteen, Guston had a non-speaking role in Archie Mayo's film *Svengali* as an archetype of an artist, complete with beret and smock [**94**]. This was one of several films in which he appeared as an extra during his early years in Los Angeles. In later conversation with Dore Ashton, he reflected that, during that period, "I stormed the Bastille [and] participated in the fall of Babylon."[484] *Svengali*, an adaptation of George du Maurier's 1894 novel *Trilby*, narrates the story of the titular character's manipulation of a young artist's model. The popular craze for the novel, of which Mayo's adaptation was one of numerous theatrical and cinematic versions throughout the twentieth century, had a "decisive…influence on the stereotypical notion of bohemia."[485] Guston's involvement in the film, however marginal or comic, connects him to ideas of artistic activity that retained currency in his later practice: *Svengali*'s melodramatic vision of a bohemian lifestyle was ultimately not far removed from Guston's own.

Despite the apparently satirical intent of the painting Klansman in *The Studio* or the inert glutton of *Painting, Smoking, Eating*, Guston's works were produced in a context that is closer to the worlds of those paintings than that of his peers. Guston's solitary night studio, with its teeming ashtrays and clinking bottles of booze, is more like the nineteenth century fantasy of *Svengali* than the bustling efficiency of Warhol's Factory, or Donald Judd's austere, businesslike studio at 101 Spring Street, New York. The central question raised by the postponement of the *Philip Guston Now* exhibition in 2020 – what was the artist's relationship to his political moment? What kind of participant in those politics was he? – continually butts up against the facts of his work's production: in the studio, far from both the tumult and the cultural activity of the city, his blinds drawn against the day. It is a vision that Amy Sillman has lampooned as "so earnest, so caring – with a smock, and our tongue between our teeth, paintbrush poised, trying so hard – like the artists in a Jerry Lewis movie." This seems to describe Guston's role in *Svengali*. And yet the studio – for Sillman as

[484] Ashton, *Yes, But,* 18.
[485] Lucy Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 331.

much as for Guston himself – remains the site of this most embarrassing of pastimes: "staying up late in a studio trying hard to make a "better" oil painting."[486]

The studio is the eternal subject of Guston's later paintings: it is flooded with water, ransacked by rampaging legs, infested with scuttling bugs; it becomes stage set, raft, street, battlefield, desert, canyon, the site of the beginning and the end of the world. Guston internalised his influences both in the absorptive sense, of attending to and learning from the art he admired, and in a literal one. When processed in Guston's work, the external address of frescoes by Masaccio and Uccello, or the murals of Siqueiros and Orozco, are always subject to the compromising, cramping medium of the studio's interior space. The tension between these modes of address gets close to addressing the questions that emerged around the postponement of *Philip Guston Now.* Guston's late work attempts to establish a relationship to politics *as such*, rather than enunciating statements on the political events of his day.

This is most apparent when considering Guston's Klan paintings alongside then-contemporary practices that make explicit the positions that have often been inferred from Guston's work. May Stevens' *Big Daddy* series (1967-76) dovetails with Guston's late work and is far less equivocal in its figuring of white supremacy and patriarchy. *Big Daddy with Hats* (1971) shows a nude, paunchy white man, with a bulldog on his lap [**95**]. Hovering around him are several "hats" that might be cut out and attached to his head, each a shorthand for white, male, Anglo-Saxon, heteronormative authority, among them a police cap, an army helmet, and, to the right, a white Ku Klux Klan hood. Stevens' collapsing of authoritarian symbology and sardonic allusions to childhood play within a printmaking practice that thereby values the portable, the replicable, and the legible, is very far from Guston's muddy Klansmen, who are ambiguously rendered in huge, densely worked canvases that were not widely shown in their time. The directness of Guston's political address is usefully tested alongside Stevens' articulations of politics. When asked, in a questionnaire for *Artforum* in 1975, what were "the prospects of painting in this decade",

[486] Sillman, "Shit Happens: Notes on Awkwardness" (originally published in *Frieze d/e*, no.22, December 2015 – February 2016), in *Faux Pas*, 166.

since “painting has ceased to be the dominant artistic medium”, her reply subjects the politics of Guston’s work to question:

> Why is it so hard for art-minded people to understand art as a natural vehicle for political passion, not an adulterant but an irritant, a stimulant, a rich and common source of energy? The obvious answer is that art which the establishment is least able to accept is not the avant-garde (which fights prior art concepts) but the politically effective (which fights establishment myths of patriotism and nationalism, the superiority of one class, sex or race to another).[487]

What is happening, then, in Guston’s studio, since it is none of the “politically effective” practices implied in Stevens’ description? This is a question also asked by Sillman, whose invocation of Jerry Lewis subjects the romantic tradition of the painter to ridicule. “So what are we doing? I can still only call it looking for this fragile thing that is awkwardness. This is not alienated labour, nor a commodity precisely, but a need, a way of churning the world, as your digestive system churns food.”[488] This is a close description of what is happening in Guston’s late work; *churning* works well both as a description of the swirling, seething floodwater in *The Deluge* and the *Red Sea* triptych and to its active processing of the history of the medium, the encounter with contemporary and historical traumas, and its allegorisation of the dissembling, drowning tendencies of the act of applying paint to a surface. “This churning”, as Maggie Nelson has assessed it, “need not be disciplined into emancipation, reparation, or obligation. It can be a sign that we are, or once were, alive.”[489]

[487] May Stevens in “Painters Reply”, *Artforum* Vol.14, no.1, September 1975, 35-6.
[488] Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 167.
[489] Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (London: Penguin Random House, 2021), 72.

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Illustrations

1 Philip Guston, *The Deluge,* 1969, oil on canvas, 77 x 128 in. (195.6 x 325.1cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

2 Installation shot of *Philip Guston Recent Paintings,* Marlborough Gallery, New York, 1970, by unknown photographer with *The Deluge* and *A Day's Work* (1970), https://www.gustoncrllc.org/home/exhibitions/1160

3 Georges Braque, *Violin and Palette (Violon et palette),* autumn 1909, oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 16 7/8 in. (91.7 x 42.8 cm), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

4 *A Day's Work,* 1970, oil on canvas, 78 x 110 in. (198 x 279cm), Private Collection

5 Illustration showing shape and position of hooded figures beneath the surface of *The Deluge*, courtesy the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

6 *Tower,* 1970, oil on canvas, 72 x 80 ½ in. (182.9 x 204.5cm), Private Collection

7 Guston with James Rosati and Willem de Kooning at the Marlborough Gallery opening, October 1970. Photograph by Steven Sloman, https://www.philipguston.org/home/scrapbook

8 Guston with David Hare and Harold Rosenberg at the Marlborough Gallery opening, October 1970. Photograph by Steven Sloman, https://www.philipguston.org/home/scrapbook

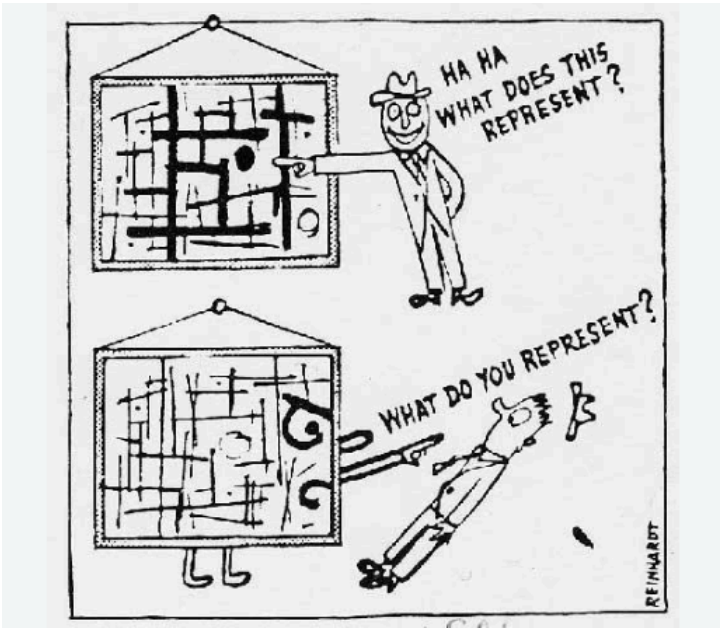
9 *Kettle*, 1978, oil on canvas, 70 x 93 in.
(177.8 x 236.2 cm), Philadelphia Museum of Art

10 *Red Picture,* 1969, oil on panel,
24 x 26½ in. (61.0 x 67.3 cm), collection of Robert Lehrman, courtesy of Aimee and Robert Lehrman

11 *Red Painting,* 1950, oil on canvas, 34⅛ x 62¼ in.
(86.7 x 158.1 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York

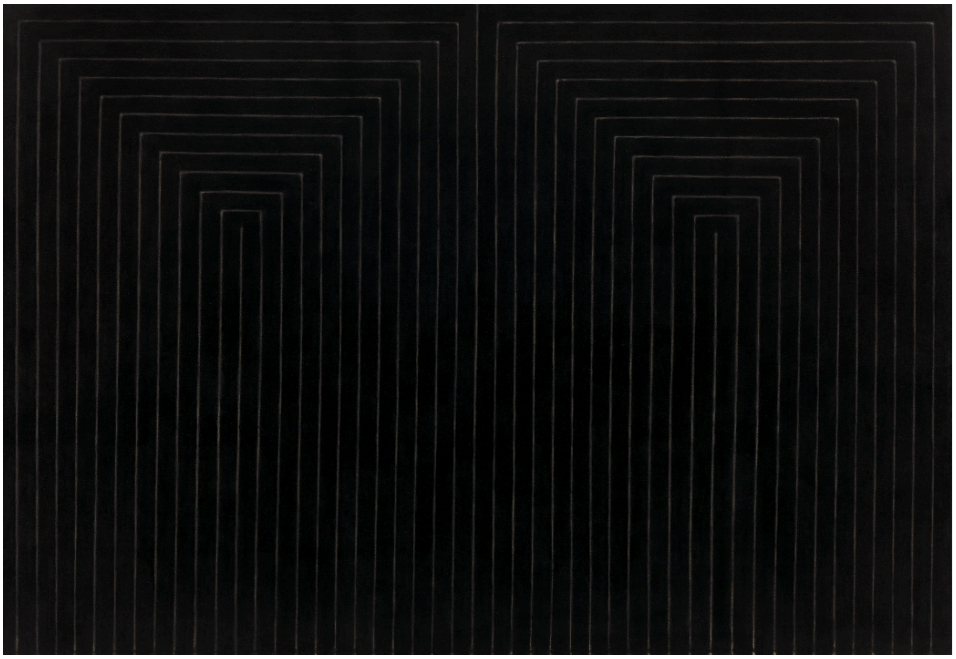
12 *Discourse,* Oil on panel
24 x 26½ in.
(61.0 x 67.3 cm), Private Collection

13 *Studio Wall*, 1969, oil on panel, 26 x 40 in. (66 x 101.6cm), Collection Unknown



14 Ad Reinhardt, *How to Look at Low (Surrealist) Art* (detail), 1946, page from *PM* 3 (March 24, 1946), https://www.artforum.com/features/opening-lines-the-drawings-of-ad-reinhardt-199364/

15 Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Black on Grey),* 1969-70, acrylic on canvas, 80 1/8 x 69 1/8 in. (203.3 x 175.5 cm), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York



16 Frank Stella, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II*, 1959, enamel on canvas, 92 ½ x 141 in. (230.5 x 337.2 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York

17 Installation shot of *International Exhibition of the New Realists* by unknown photographer, Sidney Janis Gallery, 1962

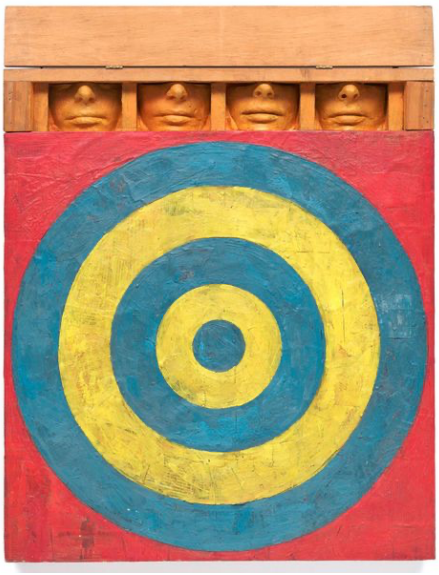
18 Roy Lichtenstein, *Refrigerator,* 1962, 68 1/8 x 56 1/4 in. (173 x 142.8 cm), The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, Conn.

11 Claes Oldenburg, *Lingerie Counter,* 1962, muslin, canvas, plaster, enamel, metal stand, neon tube, plastic flowers, mirror, fibreboard, 86 x 64 x 50 in. (218 x 162 x 127 cm), Museum Ludwig, Cologne

20 Oldenburg and Pat Muschinski *Snapshots from the City* 1960, © Martha Holmes / TIME & LIFE Images / Getty Images

21 Oldenburg and Pat Muschinski, *Street Head III (Profile with Hat)*, 1960, burlap and newspaper, painted with casein, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

22 Jim Dine, *Shoes Walking on My Brain*, 1960, oil, cloth, painted paper and leather on canvas 40 1/2 x 37 in. (102.9 x 93.9 cm), Private Collection



23 Jasper Johns, *Target with Four Faces* 1955, Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, overall, with box open, 33 5/8 x 26 x 3" (85.3 x 66 x 7.6 cm); canvas 26 x 26" (66 x 66 cm); box (closed) 3 3/4 x 26 x 3 1/2" (9.5 x 66 x 8.8 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York

24 *Mirror – to S.K.*, 1960, oil on canvas, 63 x 74¾ in.
(160.0 cm x 189.9 cm), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

25 *The Studio,* 1969, oil on canvas, 48 x 42 in.
(121.9 cm x 106.7 cm), Promised gift of Musa Guston Mayer to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

26 Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze,* 1960, oil on bronze, 3 1/2" (34.3 cm) high x 8" (20.3 cm) diameter, Promised gift of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis in honor of David Rockefeller to the Museum of Modern Art, New York

27 *Flatlands,* 1970, Oil on canvas
70 x 114½ in.
177.8 x 290.8 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

28 Guston, Reuben Kadish and Jules Langsner in front of *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, 1935, Morelia, Mexico

29 Jackson Pollock, *Mural*, 1943, oil and casein on canvas,
95 3/8 x 237 3/4 x 2 1/2 in. (242.25 x 603.89 x 6.35 cm), The Stanley Museum of Art, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa

30 Jack Tworkov *Barrier No.4* 1961, oil on canvas, 94 x 151 in (238 x 383.5cm), The Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin

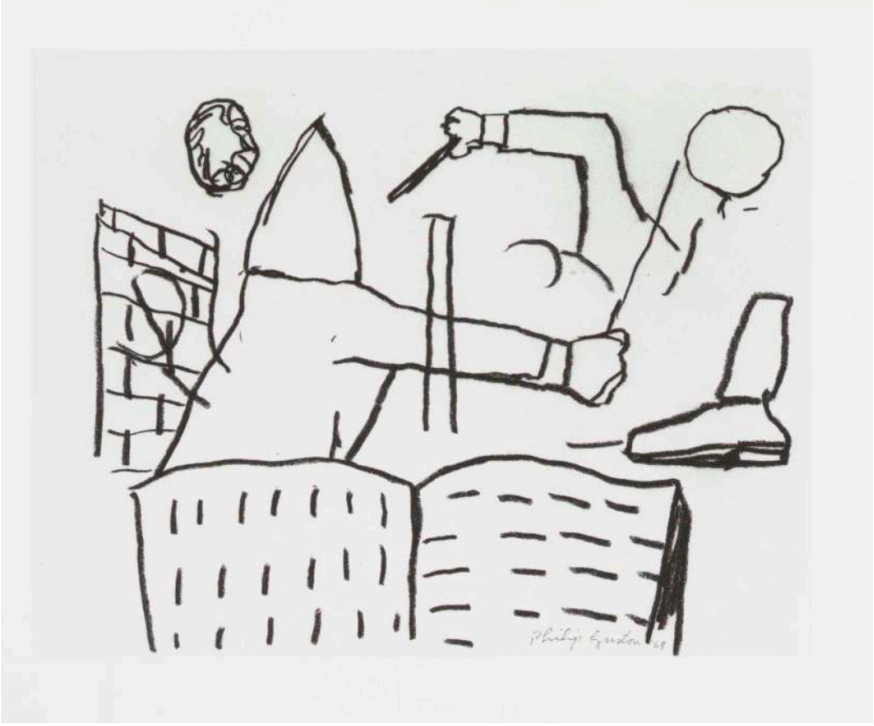
31 *Blackboard,* oil on canvas,
79½ x 112 in.
(201.9 cm x 284.5 cm), Private Collection

32 *May Sixty-Five,* 1965, oil on canvas
70 x 80 in.
(177.8 cm x 203.2 cm), Private Collection

33 *Open Window*, 1969, Oil on panel
32 x 40 in.
(81.3 cm x 101.6 cm), Private Collection

34 / 35 Edward Kienholz, *The Eleventh Hour Final*, 1968, mixed media assemblage, 120 x 144 x 168 in
(304.8 x 365.8 x 426.7 cm), Glenstone, Maryland

36 Andy Warhol, *Mustard Race Riot*, 1963, acrylic, silkscreen ink and graphite on canvas
2 panels--panel with images: 113 7/8 x 82 in. (289.3 x 208.3 cm.)
monochrome panel: 113¼ x 82 in. (287.7 x 208.3 cm.)
overall: 113 7/8 x 164 in. (289.3 x 416.6 cm.)

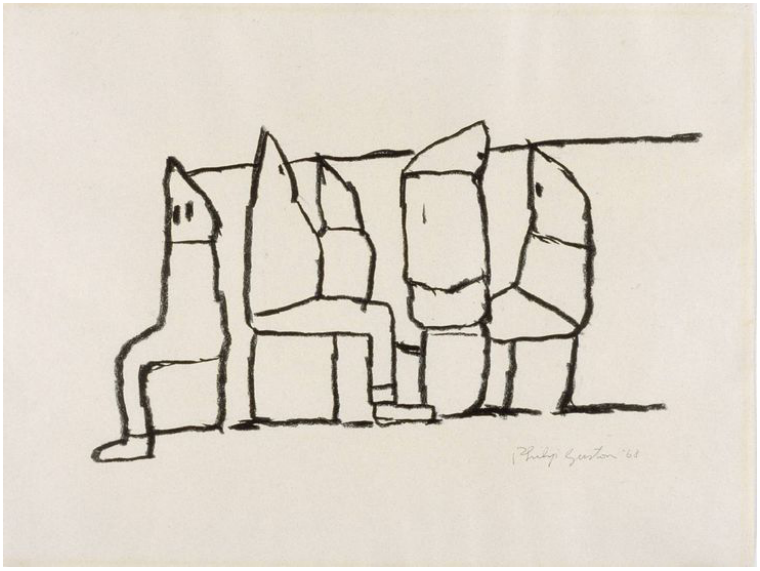


37 *Untitled*, 1968, charcoal on paper, 18 x 24in (45.7 x 61cm), Private Collection

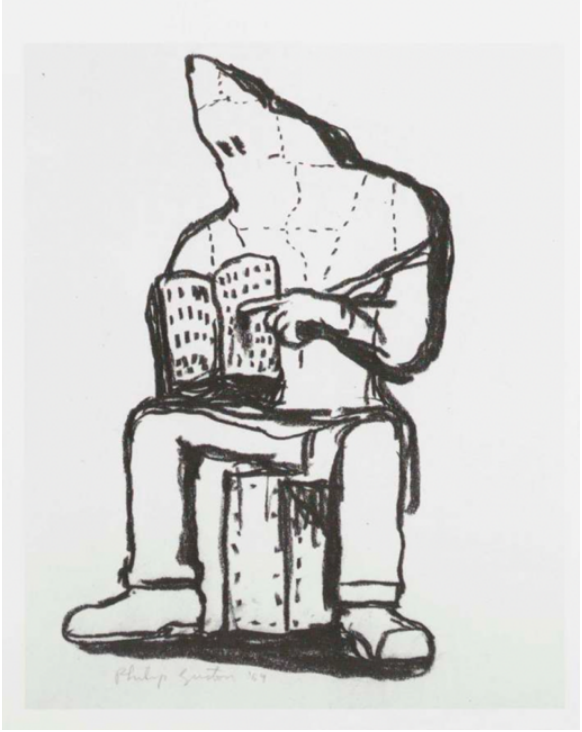
38 *Paw*, 1968, acrylic on panel, 30 x 32in (76.2 x 81.3cm), Promised gift of Musa Guston Mayer to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

39 *The Line,* Oil on canvas
71 x 73¼ in.
(180.3 x 186.1 cm), Promised gift of Musa Guston Mayer to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

40 Renate Ponsold, photograph of Guston in Sarasota, 1967

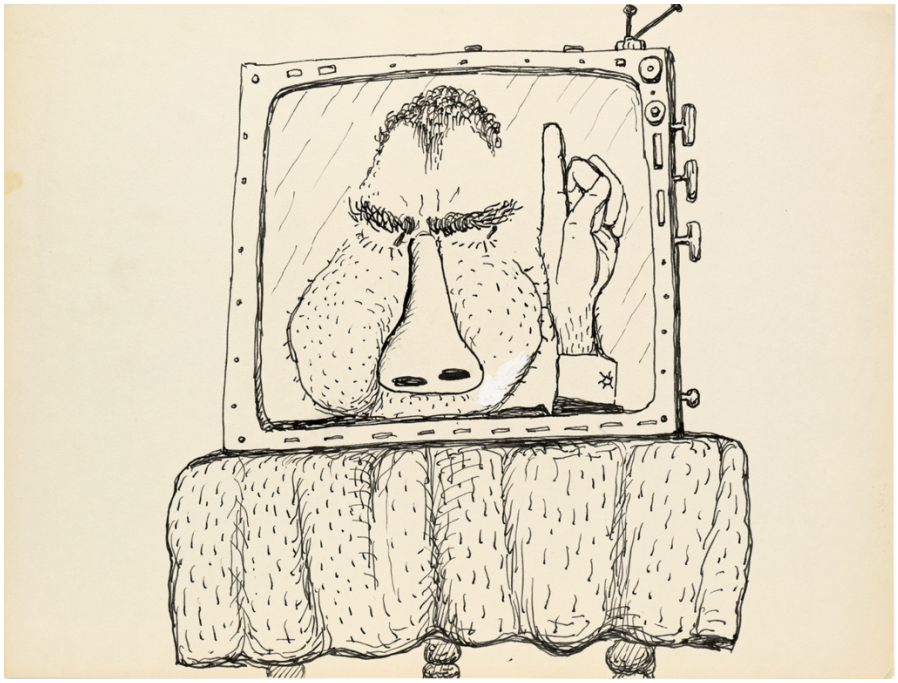


41 *Group 1,* 1968, charcoal on paper, 18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61cm), Tate

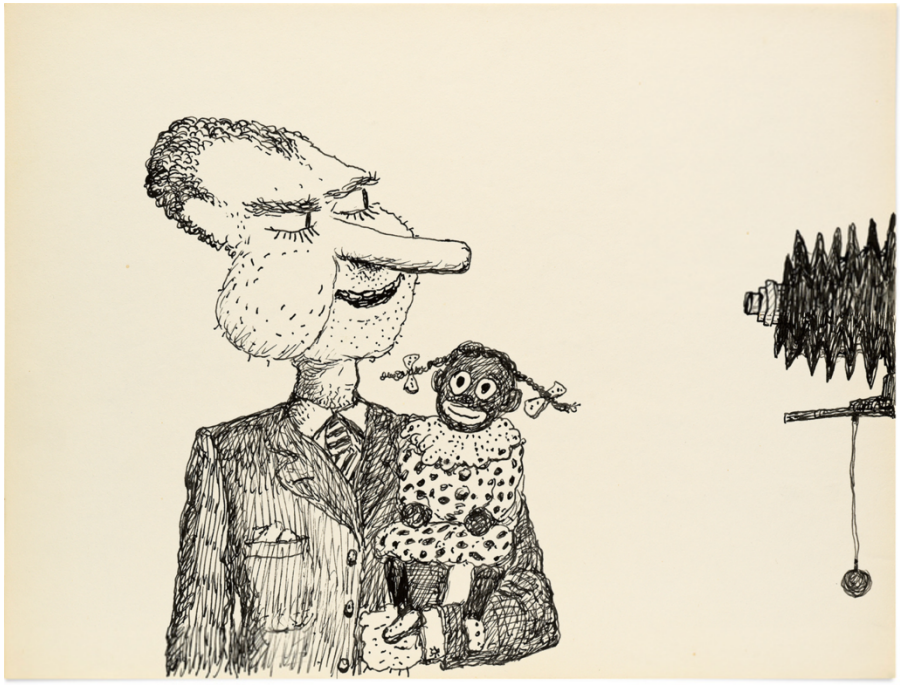


42 *The Law*, 1969, charcoal on paper, 17 7/8 x 14 5/8 in. (45.4 x 37.2 cm), Private Collection

43 *The Street* 1970, lithograph on paper, composition (irreg.): 19 7/8 x 26 5/16" (50.5 x 66.8 cm); sheet: 22 5/16 x 30 1/16" (56.7 x 76.3 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York



44 *Poor Richard* (no. 9), 1971, ink on paper, 10½ x 13⅞ in. (26.7 x 35 cm), The Guston Foundation, Promised Gift to the National Gallery of Art, Washington



45 *Poor Richard* (no. 22), 1971, ink on paper, 10½ x 13⅞ in. (26.7 x 35 cm), The Guston Foundation, Promised Gift to the National Gallery of Art, Washington

46 *Poor Richard* (no. 41), 1971, ink on paper, 10½ x 13⅞ in. (26.7 x 35 cm), The Guston Foundation, Promised Gift to the National Gallery of Art, Washington

47 Rembrandt van Rijn *Belshazzar's Feast* c1635, oil on canvas, 66 x 82 in (167.6 × 209.2 cm), The National Gallery, London

48 Installation shot, *New Paintings, Philip Guston*, Boston University's School of Fine & Applied Arts Gallery, 1974

49 Installation shot, *New Paintings, Philip Guston*, Boston University's School of Fine & Applied Arts Gallery, 1974

50 Guston sketches for Sidney Hurwitz, 1974, pen and ink on paper, 4 x 5 in. (10.2 x 12.7 cm). Private Collection

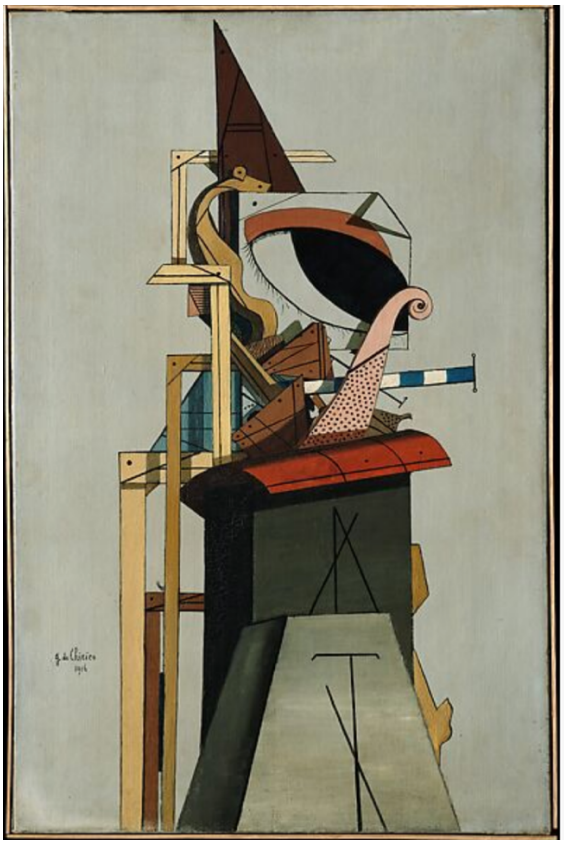
51 *Painter's Table,* 1973, oil on canvas, 77¼ x 90¼ in. (196.2 x 229.2 cm), The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

52 *Painting, Smoking, Eating,* 1973, oil on canvas,
77½ x 103½ in.
(196.8 x 262.9 cm), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

53 *The Canvas,* 1973, oil on canvas,
67 x 79 in.
(170.2 cm x 200.7 cm), Collection Unknown

54 Mark Rothko, The Rothko Chapel, 1964-7, photograph by Thomas Struth for The New York Times (April 2017)

55 *Pantheon*, 1973, oil on canvas, 45 x 48 in.
(114.3 x 121.9 cm), Promised gift of Musa Guston Mayer to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



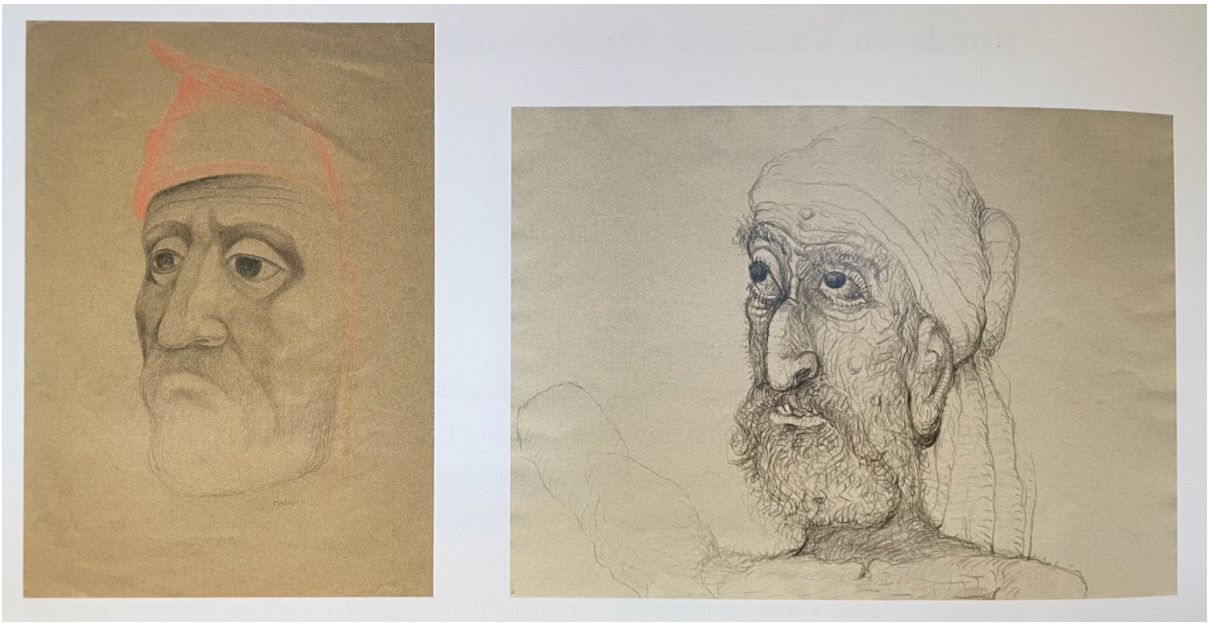
56 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Jewish Angel,* 1916, oil on canvas, 26 7/8 × 17 3/4 in. (68.3 × 45.1 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

57 Installation shot, *The Great Age of Fresco: Giotto to Pontormo: An Exhibition of Mural Paintings and Monumental Drawings*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1968

58 Andrea del Castagno, *The Holy Trinity, St Jerome and Two Saints*, c.1453, fresco, Santissima Annunziata, Florence

59 Masaccio, Masolino and Filippino Lippi, Brancacci Chapel, c.1426-82, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence

60 Masaccio, *The Tribute Money,* fresco, c.1426, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence



61 / 62 Untitled drawings after Masaccio: left: 1930, pencil and coloured pencil on paper, 13¾ x 9⅞ in. (35 x 25 cm); right: 1980, pencil on paper, 12 ¼ x 17 in. (31 x 43 cm),

63 Guston's studio wall with reproductions. Photographs by author.

64 Masaccio, *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise,* c1426, fresco, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence

65 Giotto di Bondone, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, c1300

66 Giotto, *Joachim's Dream,* fresco, c1300

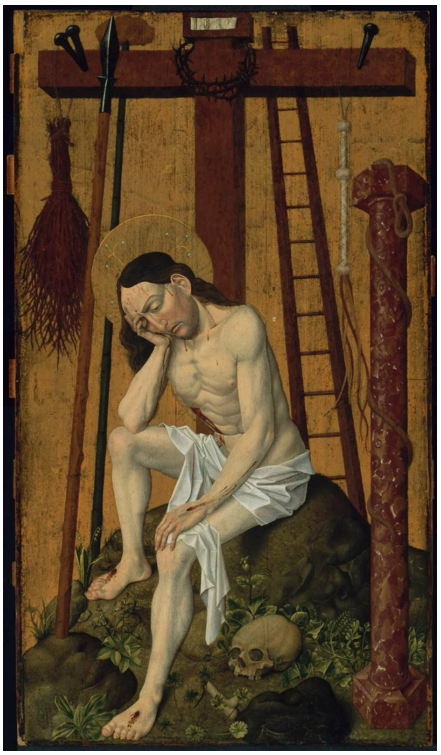
67 Installation shot, *New Paintings, Philip Guston*, Boston University's School of Fine & Applied Arts Gallery, 1974 with *Couple* and *Alone*

68 Giotto *The Death and Ascension of St Francis*, c1325-8, fresco, Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence

69 *Stationary Figure,* 1973, oil on canvas,
77¼ x 128¼ in.
196.2 cm x 325.8 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

70 Albrecht Dürer, *Melencholia I*, 1513-4, engraving, Plate: 9 7/16 × 7 5/16 in. (24 × 18.5 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

71 Guston's tools and paints. Photograph by author.



72 Alsatian, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows,* c1470, oil on panel 69.2 x 39.4 cm (27 1/4 x 15 1/2 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

73 Piero della Francesca *Legend of the True Cross* cycle, fresco, 1452-66, Bacci Chapel, San Francesco in Arezzo. https://www.iguzzini.com/projects/project-gallery/the-legend-of-the-true-cross-by-piero-della-francesca-in-the-basilica-of-san-francesco/

74 Piero della Francesca *Legend of the True Cross* cycle (detail from *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroes*), fresco, 1452-66

75 Piero della Francesca *Legend of the True Cross* cycle (detail from *Finding of the True Cross* fresco, 1452-66

67 *Red Sea, The Swell, Blue Light* (*Red Sea* triptych), oil on canvas, 1975, 73 x 237 ½ in. (185.4 x 603.25cm), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

77 / 78 Denise Hare, photographs of Philip Guston and Dore Ashton in Guston's studio, Woodstock, 1975

79 *Division* 1975, Oil on canvas
59⅝ x 88¾ in.
(151.4 x 225.4 cm), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

80 Guston's studio wall with reproductions. Photographs by author.

81 Bernardino Luini, *The Egyptian Army Drowned in the Red Sea,* 1513-14, fresco, each panel 66 x 51 in. (168 x 130cm), Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

82 Paolo Uccello *Flood and Waters Subsiding* 1447-8, fresco, 85 x 201 in. (215 x 510cm), Santa Maria Novella, Florence

83 Paolo Uccello *Flood and Waters Subsiding* photograph of post-1966 condition

84 *Deluge II*, 1975, oil on canvas, Oil on canvas
79¼ x 111 in.
201.3 cm x 281.9 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

85 Antonio da Correggio *Assumption of the Virgin* 1526-30, fresco, Santa Maria Assunta, Parma

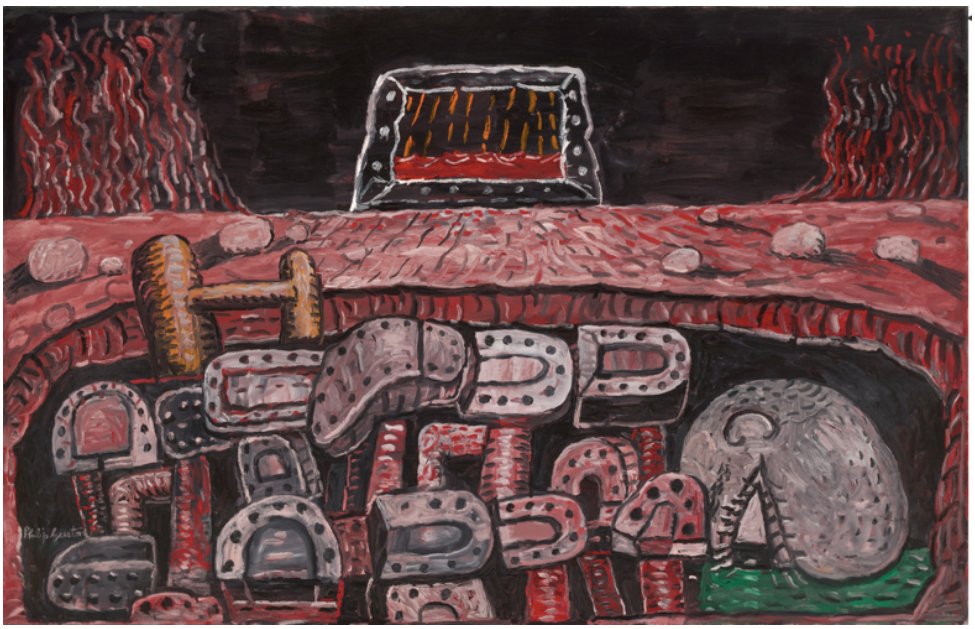
86 *Painter's Head*, 1975, oil on canvas, 73 x 80½ in.
(185.4 cm x 204.5 cm), Private Collection

87 *Blue Light*, 1975, oil on canvas,
73 x 80½ in.
(185.4 x 204.5 cm), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

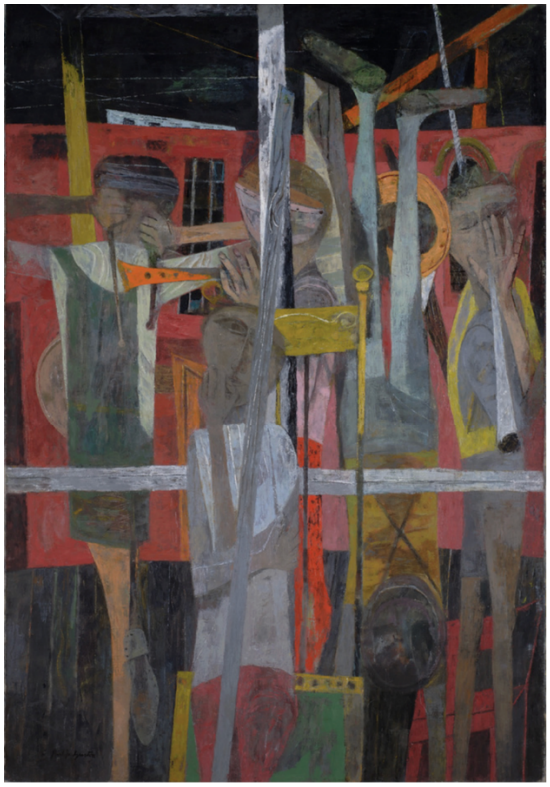
88 *Red Sea,* 1975, oil on canvas,
73½ x 78¾ in.
186.7 x 200.0 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

89 *The Magnet,* 1975, oil on canvas, 67½ x 80¼ in.
171.4 x 203.8 cm, Private Collection

90 David Aronson, *The Golem,* 1958, encaustic on panel, 57 x 64 in. (144.8 x 162.6 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



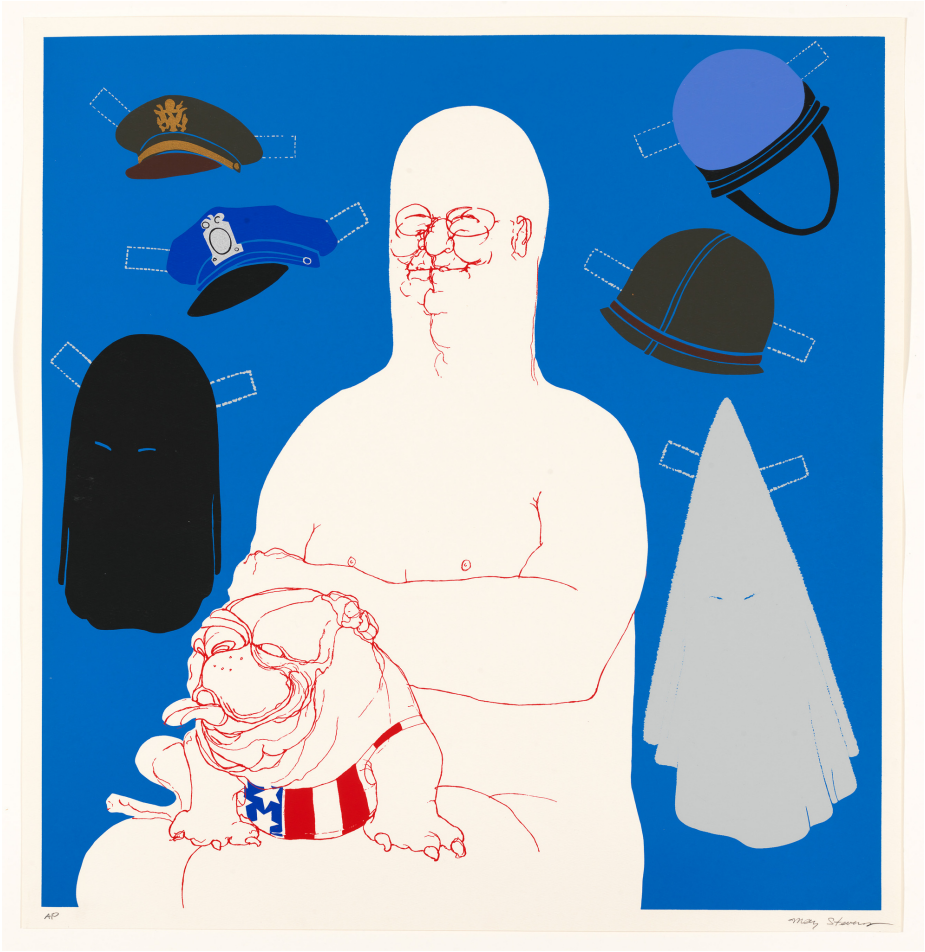
91 *Pit*, 1976, oil on canvas, 75 x 116 in.
190.5 cm x 294.6 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



92 *The Porch II*, 1947, Oil on canvas
62½ x 43⅛ in.
(158.8 cm x 109.5 cm), Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York

93 Samuel Bak *Elegy III* 1997, oil on canvas, 47 ¼ × 50 ¼ inches (120 × 127 ½ cm), Private Collection

94 Archie Mayo, *Svengali* (1931), 1hr 21min, still with Guston at centre, in beret



95 May Stevens, *Big Daddy with Hats*, 1971, screenprint, Sheet: 23 × 22 3/16in. (58.4 × 56.4 cm) Image: 22 × 21 3/16in. (55.9 × 53.8 cm), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York