

prologue

Harold Rosenberg always resisted the in-crowd. From the moment he entered Erasmus Hall in 1919, an elite high school in Brooklyn, he felt ostracized by the rivaling cliques of students who dominated the social scene. Many came from rich families—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—but he found no common ground with even the few freshmen who lived in his own dreary neighborhood of Borough Park. His father, while intellectually inclined, was a lower middle-class tailor who had moved the family from Harlem when Harold was eight to settle in a Jewish community where the way of life was decidedly conformist. Religion became anathema to Rosenberg—he hated the long, ritualized Saturday services—along with his father’s bourgeois aspirations. By the time he attended Erasmus Hall, his anti-authoritarian streak was intact. The only place he felt at home was on the baseball field or when rowing on the lake in Prospect Park.

To compound his sense of difference, Rosenberg grew to be 6 feet, 4 inches tall. By the time he was an adolescent, he towered not only over his family but also over his teachers and fellow students. With his radiant dark eyes capped by black, bushy brows and a prominent forehead, he came across as a colossus, a sort of oddity (fig. 1). To add to his eccentricity, his high-pitched, nasal voice always seemed out of sync with his height. He lumbered through the corridors of Erasmus Hall, where he became more and more introverted and had little interaction with his classmates. As a result, studying became his primary outlet. In today’s terms, he was a nerd. But once

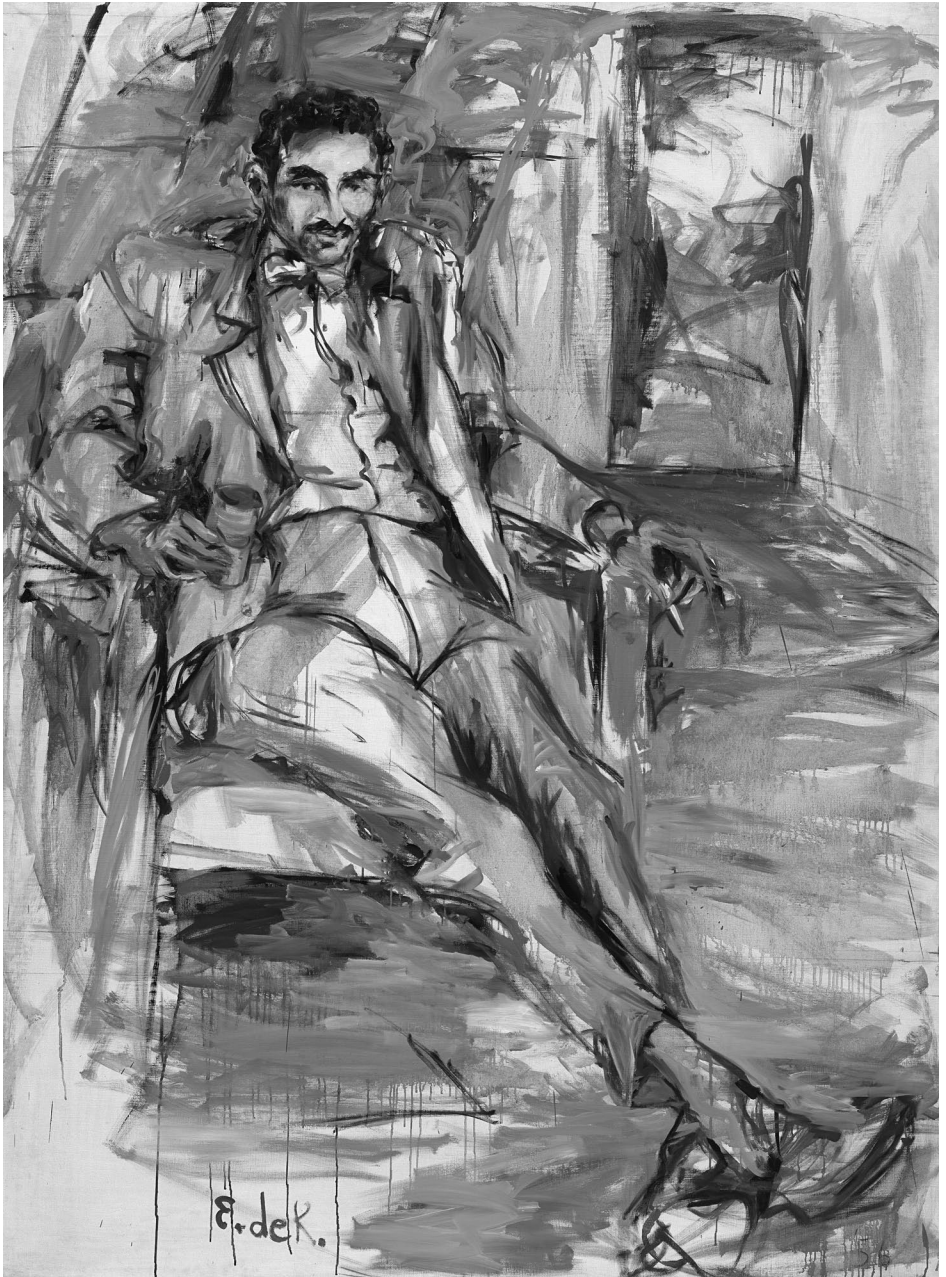


Fig. 1. Elaine de Kooning (1918–89), *Harold Rosenberg #3*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 80 × 59 × 1 inches. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Rosenberg graduated, his disdain for the in-crowd intensified, as did his requirement for independence. These traits defined him and later seeped into his intellectual life, where he became known as a loner. He may have encountered many like-minded, progressive thinkers in New York, but there were few occasions on which he became part of a community or cohesive social group, except when he was in the company of artists.

Although Rosenberg would become one of the foremost American intellectuals of the mid-century, he was constitutionally incapable of fitting in. His aversion to the status quo had been ingrained since childhood, but as his success as a writer grew, his self-confidence soared. He became not only assertive but also combative, undaunted by power. Many of his peers were put off by what they perceived as his arrogance. Others, however, viewed his willful opposition to conformist culture as a strength, particularly when he stood up to the bullying of the American Communist Party (CP), which attempted to infiltrate publishing circles during the Great Depression just as he came of age as a writer. But even his detractors knew that Rosenberg possessed a certain brilliance—particularly Clement Greenberg, the art critic for the *Partisan Review* and *The Nation*, who became one of his primary adversaries. As Greenberg admitted, Rosenberg’s erudition was astonishing. Even though he himself would never take to the philosophical thrust of Rosenberg’s essays, he came to feel undone by Rosenberg’s prominence and reputation.

the intellectual captains of thousands

Most readers of the mid-century knew Rosenberg as an art critic and only by one essay. When “The American Action Painters” was published in *ARTnews* in late 1952, it caused an enormous stir. Yet Rosenberg had actually written few tracts on art. He got his start by writing poetry, short stories, reviews, and literary commentary, in the early 1930s—just as the Depression set in—and this carried his career for more than three decades. In the “little mags” of the day, such as *transition*, *Symposium*, and *Poetry*, he expounded on his signature trope

of *action*, an idea he inherited from Karl Marx but revised decade by decade until he finally abandoned the conceit when he began to write the Art Column for the *New Yorker* in 1967.

Rosenberg's plan from the outset was to rewrite socialist theory by granting the individual, or "hero" as he called him, a central place in Marx's dialectical take on history. Although he was an admirer of the German philosopher, and of disciples such as Lenin and Trotsky, he had little truck with collective *action*, such was his contempt for the CP, especially once it infiltrated the Federal Writers Project where he was employed during the Depression. He was interested more in the drama of human *action*, or resistance to mass conformity: the ethos he believed drove the modernist period and its core investment in originality. Many of these ideas were elaborated in essays that were eventually published in *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *Kenyon Review*, and later in *Dissent*, where Marx is fused with trenchant, yet eloquent analysis of the trials that beset self-expression. Some of Rosenberg's tracts, such as "The Herd of Independent Minds," written in 1948, became scorching indictments of his peers whom he felt had forfeited their intellectual independence by remaining oblivious to "social thinking."¹ They had capitulated to the dogma of the New Criticism to explain authenticity in art and literature, with the result that their writing became disaffected from its context and succumbed to banality and sameness. It was no wonder that Rosenberg failed to secure a full-time appointment at any of these journals until he was approached much later by William Shawn to write for the *New Yorker*.

Rosenberg had been anointed the first New York correspondent of *Les Temps modernes*, the journal launched by Jean-Paul Sartre shortly after Paris was liberated from the Third Reich. By the late 1940s, his writing had become associated with the international dimensions of existentialism. He was known for his uniquely American spin on subjectivity. But the affiliation with the French periodical was short-lived, lasting less than four years. Rosenberg's morality intervened when Sartre endorsed the French Communist Party in 1952. He quit, just as he had walked out on the *Partisan Review* a few years earlier after its editors, William Phillips and Philip Rahv,

adopted a prowar stance when the United States joined the Allied Forces in World War II. Rosenberg had turned down their offer to serve as the Washington, DC, correspondent while he lived in the nation's capital working on the Federal Writers' Project. He felt there was no literary life in the city to expound upon: just a government machine that churned out conventional prose that stifled the writer's singularity.

For all of his association with some of the foremost intellectual publications of the mid-century, Rosenberg remained an outlier. He was never part of a core literary group or publication, even once he began to write for an upscale magazine like the *New Yorker*. Editors such as Phillips and Rahv knew that he could never be assimilated and expected to adhere to their editorial program. They may have solicited his reviews and essays, but they did not want his ideas imprinting *Partisan Review* on a routine basis, particularly once he accused them of succumbing to the "herd" instinct by depoliticizing the journal. Rosenberg wanted no connection with a periodical that had given up on Marx and whose cultural coverage abided by a neutral formalist outlook. It shunned the social histories that cradle writing and what goes on in the studio: these agencies, he felt, were key to understanding the meanings of the modernist period in the postwar United States. He believed *action* could account not only for the writer's choices but also for the alienation experienced through interaction with the new bureaucracies and marketplaces as cultural production escalated in the late 1940s.

Rosenberg's principles directed his professional life to the extent that they limited his publishing options. Though his independence was essential, diplomacy was never his strong suit. He thought it was his duty to point out the myopic mindset of the "intellectual captains of thousands"² who oversaw magazines such as *Partisan Review*. It was a matter of integrity. However, he never felt unmoored by the lack of a permanent home for his writing: the edge was where he wanted to be situated. From this distanced position, more could be gleaned about the changed historic circumstances that weighed upon self-expression after 1945, particularly as mass culture spread. As a result, he had strong champions in Hannah Arendt, Saul Bel-

low, Paul Goodman, and Mary McCarthy, among others, who responded to his autonomy and risk taking.

It was an ironic stroke of fate that the most prolific phase of his career came late and was associated with art criticism. Rosenberg's social world had always included artists. He had a short stint in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) as Willem de Kooning's assistant before being transferred to the Writers' Project. He loved the company of painters and sculptors, and in 1948 became an early member of The Club, an artist-run gathering place that ran a lively schedule of lectures and panel discussions in which he actively participated. In the interim, he had sustained friendships with Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman, and Jackson Pollock. He also teamed up with Robert Motherwell as the literary editor for the short-lived *possibilities*, and wrote brief introductions for exhibitions such as *Six American Artists* at Galerie Maeght in Paris and *The Intrasubjectives* at the Samuel Kootz Gallery. Many artists who became associated with the New York School responded to Rosenberg's metaphor of *action* with its core emphasis on subjectivity. Most were averse to the evaluative approaches of formalist writers, such as Clement Greenberg, especially as that tack made no provision for subject matter. When *Les Temps modernes* invited Rosenberg to write on the preoccupations of contemporary American artists, *action* became not only his conceit, but something he incorporated into his title. If Sartre had not gravitated toward the communists, "The American Action Painters" would have appeared in his journal. Instead, it ran in *ARTnews*, where it ignited an extraordinary response and became part of the identity of artists who emerged at mid-century.

For all the discussion that surrounded Rosenberg's key essay, he penned few subsequent tracts on art until the early 1960s. Although Thomas B. Hess, the managing editor of *ARTnews*, provided him with ongoing opportunity, he remained committed to writing on cultural, literary, and political themes, such as the postwar phenomenon of the "orgman" who so slavishly devoted himself to the corporation that nothing remained of his own self or individuality. To Rosenberg, such conformity amounted to a profound dehuman-

ization, akin to totalitarianism. Originality, as a result, had become profoundly threatened and vulnerable. The “intellectual captains of thousands” were mostly to be blamed. They provided no radical alternative—just dreary Orwellian prophecy that failed to grasp the undercurrents of American culture where social change was frequently articulated. If only they had consulted Marx!

Still, “The American Action Painters” continued to frame Rosenberg, and by the time he brought out a short biography of Gorky in 1962, his image as an art critic was molded, at least in the public imagination. Once the Art Column for the *New Yorker* became his beat, he knew that his idea of *action* was spent, and the term ceased to be a mainstay of his vocabulary. Its basic tenets were no longer relevant. Yet Rosenberg knew the opportunity existed to take on the new American art establishment that emerged in the 1960s: the “herds” of writers, curators, collectors, and tastemakers who canalized the interpretation of painting and sculpture. His writing remained consciously pitted against the discourse of a new generation of formalists who, in his estimation, set back criticism by avoidance of social history. Their analysis was never hard-hitting, nor did it get to the crux of an artist’s work, driven as it was by theories of stylistic continuity. It was all flaccid thinking, he felt, too mainstream and focused on connoisseurship. No wonder it became appropriated by the marketplace.

Rosenberg remains one of the most original critics to have emerged in the postwar United States. His ideas are deeply connected to the early twenty-first century, when the museum has become a contested site, its programming deemed exclusionary and narrow. He took on these issues more than sixty years before, first in “The American Action Painters” and later in the pages of the *New Yorker*. His notion of a “herd of independent minds” made him a prescient thinker. His corpus of writing yields razor-sharp insight into our current cultural predicament. No other writer on art of his generation was as fluent on the end of the modern period.

