

GRILLO

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM
BEYOND THE FIFTIES

FOREWORD BY DONALD KUSPIT



FOREWORD

John Grillo is the leading master of the second generation of Abstract Expressionists. By the early sixties automatist gesture was no longer a novelty, and it became permissible to be subtle as well as explosive. It also became permissible to allude, however obliquely, to landscape—to be “scenic”—and to generate structural effects, that is, coherent if still insecure form emerging from the incoherent flux of dynamic gestures. A contrast had to be established, to show that the gestures were not simply indiscriminately-blindly and redundantly-overall, and to show that, for all their over use they still had a certain generative power, however ironic the results. Thus, in Grillo's *Yellow Vapors*, 1961, a rectangular island—a frame within a frame—unexpectedly emerges in the rush of gestures. It functions as a kind of center, however literally off-center, and has a stabilizing, grounding effect, however peculiarly groundless and tentative the stability of the rectangle. It is a bit of eternity, as it were, in the midst of the contingency of gestures. It is a trace of determinate, differentiated, intelligible form within the unintelligible formlessness. Drive is tempered by the possibility of thought—meditation on geometry—making the work more emotionally subtle than if it was all raging gesture. The rectangle is cut by diagonal slashes, but it remains intact, and the diagonals themselves converge to form, however reluctantly, a rudimentary triangle. Geometrical fundamentality thus comes to compete with and in a sense complete gestural fundamentality. They are conflicting yet uncannily integrated foundations of art. Indeed, modernist art is essentialist, that is it believes there is a foundation of art, contradictorily conceived as chance gesture and intelligible geometry: why not show the opposites united to quintessential effect, as Grillo does?

This geometrical effect—a kind of hesitant geometrical afterimage, as it were—occurs again and again, with wonderful unpredictability, in the midst of an apocalypse of gestures, to allude to the title of a 1961 painting. Triangles frequently appear, more or less centered, but also cosmic circles—all emerging out of the swirl of gestures, which slowly builds up in an interplay out of which the geometry emerges, charged with their energy. It is all the more subtle by reason of Grillo's tendency to use mostly red and yellow—primary colors that can be alternately delicate and vivid, as Grillo shows. Even in the bright sea of the 1959 *Red and Yellow*, patches of stable form emerge—or are they fragments of some geometrical Atlantis that has sunk beneath the surface? Indeed, the sense of rising and falling, surface and depth, with no priority between them, is crucial to Grillo's painting, giving it a certain resonance beyond that created by the gestures in headlong, if sometimes modulated, motion.

The emergence of the geometrical “object” gives Grillo's paintings a subliminal landscape dimension, as I have also suggested. But it is a landscape of abstractions, rather than of sensations of nature. It is as though, like Cézanne, he wanted to; follow Poussin: be rigorous but also register the indisputable reality of nature. But we have advanced beyond Poussin and Cézanne: Grillo knows that abstraction has become the indispensable reality, and displaced nature, and that only abstract sensations—be that gestural or geometrical—make ultimate sense in art.

