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Robert Motherwell

*Open*

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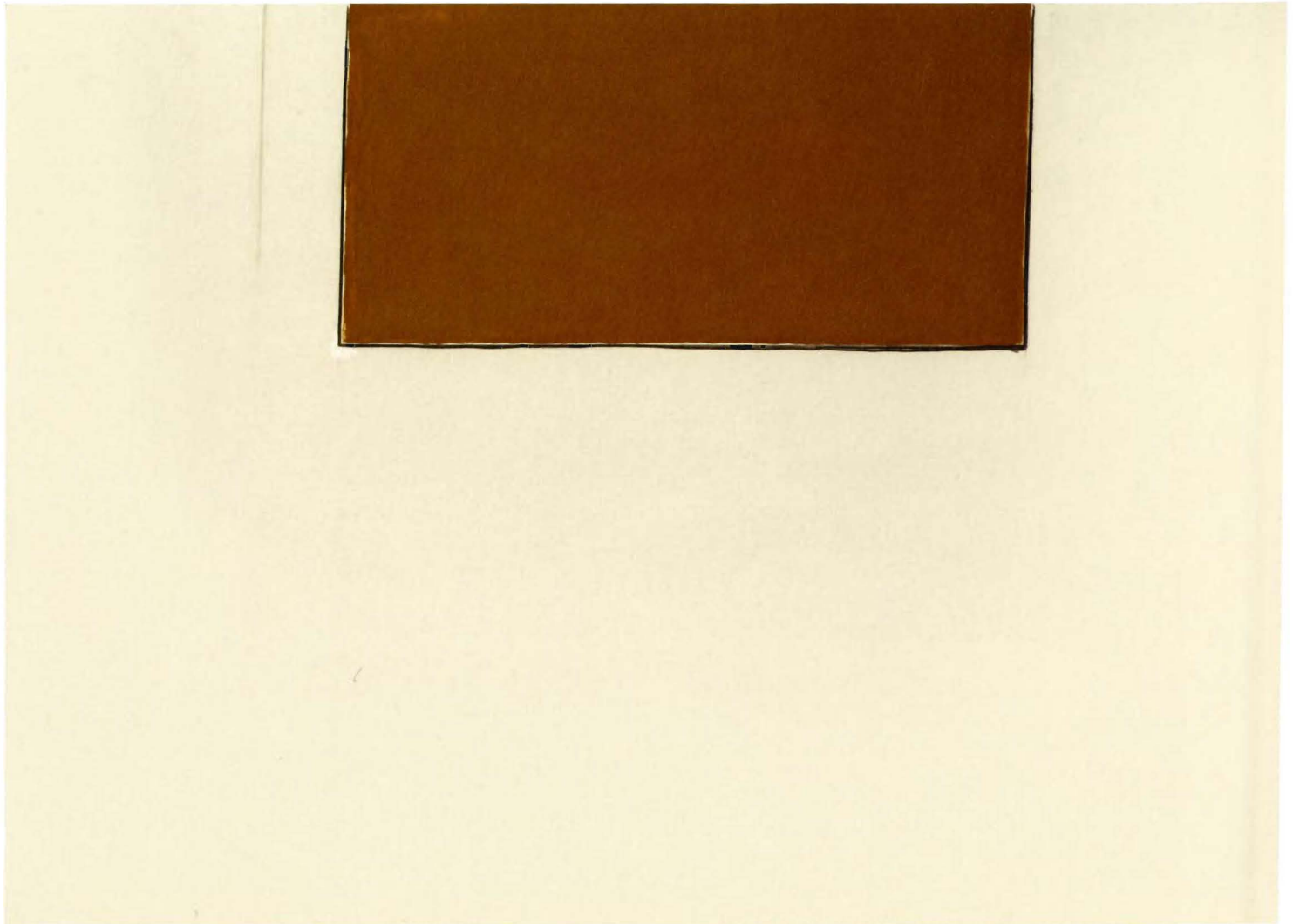
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Motherwell's *Opens*:  
Heidegger, Mallarmé, and Zen

Robert Hobbs



*Open No. 35 (Raw Umber)*, 1968  
Synthetic polymer and charcoal on canvas  
175.3 × 289.6 cms / 76 × 144 ins  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



The establishing of truth in the work [of art] is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again. The bringing forth places this being in the Open in such a way that what is to be brought forth first clears the openness of the Open into which it comes forth. Where this bringing forth expressly brings the openness of beings, or truth, that which is brought forth is a work. Creation is such a bringing forth. As such a bringing, it is rather a receiving and an incorporating of a relation to unconcealedness.  
Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 1935–36

When we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel... But if the holding is done by the jug's void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No – he shapes the void... The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that it holds.  
Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, 1971

The [Zen] master [Nan-in], however, instead of stopping when he had filled his visitor's cup kept on pouring. The [visitor, a] professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself, and then he said, "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like the cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"  
Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh and Zen Bones*, 1957

In the spring of 1967 Robert Motherwell (1915–91) discovered the format for a major series of paintings and works on paper that he pursued until the mid-1970s. when it morphed into one of several basic options feeding his largely permutative late style.<sup>1</sup> The story that he often told is that one day while working in his studio one day, he was struck by the back of a c. 1961 painting, *Summertime in Italy*, leaning against a larger, unfinished canvas with a monochromatic yellow ochre surface.<sup>2</sup> After becoming aware of the shape defined by the smaller work, he used charcoal to outline its dimensions on the surface of the larger one. The resulting configuration resembled an opening at the bottom of the canvas. Since this rectangular break in the ochre field could be construed as a doorway, Motherwell puzzled over the painting, both excited by its suggestion of an opening and troubled by its closure. Several months later, he reversed the canvas by turning it upside down, thereby transforming the door into a window, which is suspended from the top of the picture. This change released the background from its strict ties to the picture plane, permitting a new reciprocity between it and the rectangle inscribed within its parameters, leaving viewers in doubt as to whether the window, the ensuing coloured field, or perhaps both were hovering in a relatively shallow space. Motherwell recognised this indeterminate depth as an essentially new and exciting component in his work; it differed from his usual practice, beginning in the 1940s, of creating resolutely flat paintings, resembling walls, superimposed with abstract collage-like elements, punctured occasionally by prison bars, open coffins, and inaccessible windows (often placed in the upper-right corner of his ongoing *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*). He decided to celebrate his new approach by using the general word 'open' as the title for his new series, explaining:

In the Random House unabridged dictionary, there are eighty-two entries under the word 'open' that could be set on separate lines, as in a poem. For me those entries are most beautiful, filled with all kinds of associations, all kinds of images.<sup>3</sup>

In both his first full-scale monograph in 1977 and in the revised edition published five years later, Motherwell requested that the page in the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, presenting the many different definitions of the word 'open,' be reproduced large enough so that it would be entirely legible, thus solidifying connections between these paintings, poetry, and the many forms of expansiveness that their title signifies.



## The theoretical and cultural context for the *Opens*

An unabashed bibliophile, who collected not just art books and publications on art and general humanities topics but also dictionaries and encyclopedias, Motherwell loved words for their visual, expressive, and communicative powers and felt great affinities for poetry. He prided himself on owning an impressive number of general and specialised dictionaries that he would often consult in order to ascertain a range of meanings for intriguing and mystifying words. Thus, his reference, connecting the meanings of the word 'open' to the *Open* series, is consistent with his overall artistic approach to his work, even though it no doubt was also an indirect nod to the pared-down aesthetic of New York's most recent vanguard, minimalism.

Despite Motherwell's directive pertaining to the *Open* series' potential meanings, we would be doing him a grave injustice if we concluded, as people have in the past, that it sufficiently accounts for the series' importance. Having developed a strong foundation in philosophy as an undergraduate major at Stanford and as a graduate student specialising in this same subject at Harvard, Motherwell continued to read philosophy throughout his life. In consideration of his keen interest in this subject, he would certainly have been acquainted with the 1964 landmark publication of Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns' *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, which aimed at providing more in-depth selections on aesthetics than previous anthologies. As might be expected, the Hofstadter-Kuhn edition started with Plato, but it concluded with an innovative selection, the first published English translation of a seminal essay by phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) entitled 'The Origin of the Work of Art,'<sup>4</sup> which was in itself a significant event. When one takes into account Motherwell's lifelong interest in Jean-Paul Sartre's writings, which were indebted to Heidegger's thought; American philosophers' enthusiasm in the 1960s for Heidegger's works in general and this essay in particular;<sup>5</sup> and the tremendous pride Motherwell took in being intellectually current, one can conclude with a degree of certainty that he would not only have known of Heidegger's essay but also would have discussed it with friends who similarly kept abreast of new ideas. When one considers in addition the significant role Heidegger's concept 'the Open' assumes in his essay, it is possible to regard this piece as a likely source for Motherwell's series and as part of the general intellectual understanding that informed audiences in the 1960s would bring to these works.

In order to provide the necessary intellectual underpinnings for appreciating the new direction taken by Motherwell's *Opens*, I will begin by exploring Heidegger's concept of the Open, demonstrating how it redirects aesthetics and therefore is useful for Motherwell's new series. Then, I will look at ways that Heidegger's concept of the Open works in tandem with attitudes toward artistic form devised by the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98), which were crucial to Motherwell's art from the beginning of his professional career, even before he entitled an important collage *Mallarmé's Swan* in 1944. My analysis will also demonstrate how Heidegger's aesthetics differ from those espoused by this French poet. In addition, the first half of my essay will explore the concept of Zen in relation to Motherwell's *Opens* to indicate how he transposes some of its theoretical and stylistic concepts into his work. The second half of this essay will examine the *Open*'s relationship to some of Motherwell's early works and will also look specifically at several *Opens* with the aim of understanding how the content of Zen as well as some of Heidegger's and Mallarmé's ideas informs our understanding of these abstract forms.

One sure way to understand Heidegger's concept of the Open in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' is to begin by looking at this philosopher's earlier upper- and lower-case references to *Being/being* (Sein/Dasein). Heidegger equates upper-case *Being* with the great nothing or potentiality at the basis of all existence and lower-case *being* with the specific situations in which individuals find themselves. While *Being* is hidden and closed, it can radiate through individual entities, whether they be humans or works of art. Since glimmers of this *Being* illuminate aspects of everyday life, Heidegger calls this plane of *being* and form of revelation 'the Open' and connects it with the world, as his statement, cited above as an epigraph, indicates. In 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' Heidegger depends on his prior differentiation of *Being/being* in his major study *Being and Time* (Sein und Zeit, 1927) as parallels for the polarities making up works of art, even though he employs a different vocabulary for the two competing elements encompassing an artwork. He analogises *Being* as 'earth,' a word also used to represent the artistic media comprising a work of art, and *being* as the 'world,' the concept motivating the realised work of art. Between the two – between earth/material and world view/directed form – there is an intimacy and a tension whereby the *Being* of the earth/medium remains partially hidden in the completed work of art since it is subsumed under a directing world view even

*Mallarmé's Swan*, 1944–47  
Gouache, crayon and paper on cardboard  
110.5 × 90 cms / 43½ × 35½ ins  
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio

though this earth/medium participates fully in the revelation of a unique *being* in the world that the work of art helps to constitute. Heidegger points out:

In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of the struggle. But this does not happen in order that the work should settle and put an end to the strife in an insipid agreement, but in order that the strife should remain a strife. Setting up the world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this struggle. The work – being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth. It is because the strife arrives at its high point in the simple intimacy that the unity of the work comes about in the fighting of the battle.<sup>6</sup>

According to philosopher Hans Jaeger, Heidegger 'does not claim to have solved the riddle of art,' having 'regarded as his task something more modest namely to recognise the presence of the riddle.'<sup>7</sup> This riddle has to do with the ongoing tension between the eloquence and contradictory reticence of art media<sup>8</sup> vying with the persuasiveness and outgoing nature of the work's concept. Through this riddle and the ensuing tensions comprising it, Heidegger initiates a view of art as a unique and momentous occurrence, a thrust into history occasioned by the appearance of a new concept, and not a mere representation or imitation of already extant objects and ideas. This occurrence or happening can be understood as taking place in Motherwell's *Open* series in terms of an ongoing potentiality whereby his hieratic icon – three sides of a rectangle comprising an





abstracted, 'U'-shaped aperture – provides possibilities for viewers to reflect on the concept of the Open as they individually work out their own understanding of the myriad differences and connections linking their *being* with ultimate *Being*.

In some ways Heidegger's ideas work in concert with Mallarmé's, and in other ways they are at odds with the thinking of this poet, whose ideas had such an impact on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists such as Manet, Monet, Whistler, Redon, Matisse, and Picasso that he could be considered one of the major progenitors of the concept of modern art. When he was twenty-four years old, Mallarmé experienced a major crisis in which his former beliefs could no longer be sustained: at that time he realised that not only were God and the soul human constructions but also that poetry, which traditionally purifies language so that it can adequately celebrate the spiritual, was left in the tenuous position of only being able to venerate itself. Writing to his close friend Henri Cazalis, Mallarmé proclaimed his continued desire to work with poetry's ecstatic language and make known 'in the face of the Void [occasioned by a loss of faith] which is truth, these glorious lies!'<sup>9</sup> As a result, Mallarmé created a body of work that countered his no-longer-appropriate spiritual aspirations with the prosaic realisation that art's subject must be a self-reflexive concern with itself, including its aspirations and its limits. He accordingly created a series of poems called 'Homages and Tombs' that ostensibly honoured such poetic greats as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine but that countered poetry's ideals with its materials, the futility of commemorating an absent figure with the tautological act of poetry memorialising itself, and the uncontainable spirit with its empty container. Contemplating the great beyond formerly incarnated by God as an abyss and not the fecund emptiness consonant with undifferentiated *Being* that Heidegger later advocated, Mallarmé considered poetry to be a tomb or prison for incarcerating concepts and aspirations, an attitude that resonated with Motherwell's early paintings and collages focusing on such subjects as *The Little Spanish Prison* (1941), *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive* (1943), and, of course, his *Elegies*, which he initiated in 1949.

Despite these similarities, Mallarmé's preeminently negative approach is out of sync with Motherwell's *Opens*, which do not perpetuate the duality of art as a container for the uncontainable; instead they positively affirm both their self-reflexive unity and their openness to themselves as works of art as a distinct gain and

not a loss. Since Motherwell regards his art as synonymous with his feelings, he never quite approaches the type of break between artist and work that is characteristic of Mallarmé's poetry. Definitely aware of the existential void that Mallarmé's work underscores, Motherwell combats it with the effulgence of his own self that he finds mirrored in his work as well as his tremendous identification – and passionate feelings – for his chosen media and means for directing. 'Only love – for painting, in this instance,' Motherwell attests, 'is able to cover the fearful void. A fresh white canvas is a void, as is the poet's sheet of blank white paper.'<sup>10</sup> As this statement indicates, Motherwell's early conviction that his feelings can be manifested in his art as the new 'painter's objects'<sup>11</sup> enables him to identify closely with his work and thus avoid falling into Mallarmé's trap of viewing poetry as a separate, exquisite, cold, and scintillating jewel capable of only refracting itself.

Among Mallarmé's works, Motherwell has repeatedly emphasised two poems as being crucially important for his overall development: the sonnet commonly known as 'Mallarmé's Swan' and the abstract work 'A Throw of Dice' ('Un Coup Dés'). I will look briefly at these works and reflect on how they are central to Motherwell's formulation of his *Opens*. The first poem's title is actually its first line: 'The Virginal, Vibrant, and Beautiful Dawn' ('Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui'). The theme of this poem is consistent with Heidegger's conception



*Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive*, 1943

Cut-and-pasted printed and painted papers, wood veneer, gouache, oil and ink on board

71.7 × 91.1 cms / 28½ × 35¾ ins

Museum of Modern Art, New York

of art as comprising ongoing tensions between earth/world or material/concept. Mallarmé's poem is both material object (words on a white sheet of paper) and concept (the presentation of the lower- and upper-case swan/Swan) that concentrates on the earthly bird that cannot 'rend this hard lake [the typeface] haunted beneath the ice [comprised of the page itself]' ('Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre') while the constellation Cygnus, a 'Phantom whose pure brightness assigns it this domain, / ... stiffens in the cold dream of disdain / That clothes the useless exile of the Swan' ('Fantome qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne, / ... s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris / Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne').<sup>12</sup> Both birds in this work are trapped and entombed in art: the upper-case Swan, allegorised as the constellation Cygnus, is situated in the night sky, becoming, in my opinion, a permanently suspended photographic negative and an allegorical counterpart of its once living equivalent, which is trapped in the icy page on which the poem is printed. In this poem the homonymical construction of the French words *cygne*/signe suggests a range of oppositions, including bird-spirit/sign-notation, nature/art, eternity/temporality, stasis/change, and unwritten purity/codified typesetting that distinguish the poem and characterise the different worlds it is capable of holding open. By setting up the opposing realms implied by this homonym as well as by implicating what appears to be the metaphor of a photographic negative and printed page, Mallarmé works, in a Hegelian fashion, to articulate his language so that it will function as both subject and object. Thus, in this way his poem constitutes the double allegory of referring to the upper-case Swan in the night sky, which observes the surface of the page in which the lower-case swan is both literally and figuratively buried. Similar to Heidegger whose philosophy postdates Mallarmé's poetic researches by more than a half a century, Mallarmé sets up rivalling tensions in his work between his subjects and the media incarnating it.

This disjunctive/conjunctive state of creating tensions between figurative and material meaning is exactly the type of approach that Motherwell favoured when he equated the meaning of black-and-white paint in his art with the materials' history and then moved to memorialise death figuratively in such early *Elegies* as *At Five in the Afternoon*, which is titled after the repetitive line, sounding almost like a drum beat, in the first part of Federico García Lorca's 'Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías':

The chemistry of the pigments is interesting: ivory black, like bone black, is made from charred bones or horns, carbon black is the result of burnt gas, and the most common whites – apart from cold, slimy zinc oxide and recent bright titanium dioxide – are made from lead, and are extremely poisonous on contact with the body... Sometimes I wonder, laying in a great black stripe on a canvas, what animal's bones (or horns) are making the furrows of my picture... Black does not reflect, but absorbs all light; that is its essential nature; while that of white is to reflect all light: dictionaries define it as snow's colour, and one thinks of the black slit glasses used when skiing. For the rest, there is a chapter in *Moby Dick* that evokes white's qualities as no painter could, except in his medium.<sup>13</sup>

In both his *Elegies* and *Opens* Motherwell is similar to Mallarmé and Heidegger in setting up tensions that reveal some aspects of his art at the same time they close others off. However, his personal identification with his work separates it from Mallarmé's far more isolated, object-like poems. Similar to Heidegger's hierarchical *Being/being*, Motherwell is able to demonstrate how the Romantic sense of self he creates in his work (his *being*) is an individual instantiation of an even greater *Being* and thus is universally valid and relevant for others to approach through his work.

A pertinent art historical source for Motherwell's basic strategy of reiterating the conformation of an *Open*'s outer boundaries within its parameters is critic Clement Greenberg's formalist approach to the internal frames found in Mark Rothko's and Barnett Newman's work. The relevant text is Greenberg's justly famous essay 'American-Type Painting' that was first published in the mid-1950s. In this essay Greenberg elucidates the theory of Rothko's and Newman's deductive compositional structures in the following way:

They [Rothko and Newman] have preferred to *choose* their way out rather than be compelled to it; and in choosing, they have chosen to escape geometry through geometry itself. Their straight lines, Newman's especially, do not echo those of the frame, but parody it. Newman's picture becomes all frame in itself... What is destroyed is the cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine; with Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and *makes* the picture, instead of merely being *echoed*.<sup>14</sup>

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The overall effects of these deductive structures are configurations, like Motherwell's *Opens*, that are both approachable and bolted shut – works that function analogously to Mallarmé's poems and Heidegger's *Open* by restating, in structural terms, art's self-reflexive relationship to itself at the same time that it alludes to a world outside itself, which it keeps, however, firmly in check.

Whether works as art theorised by Heidegger or composed by Mallarmé, Motherwell, Newman, and Rothko contain something or nothing or only frame their potential to be open-ended containers is a moot point that served as a generative concept for the work that these individuals each explored in distinctly different ways. Mallarmé's magisterial poem, 'A Throw of Dice,' which served as the subject of Motherwell's namesake suite of seven lithographs (1962–63), is exemplary in this regard since it plays both on the subject of chance and the blank spaces of white paper that are a counterpoint to the poem's dispersed typeface. In his 'Preface' to this poem, Mallarmé describes his innovative process and reasons for emphasising the paper's evocative silence. He begins by pointing out, 'The reading process is spaced out,' and then elaborates:

The 'blanks,' in effect, assume importance and are what is immediately most striking: versification always demanded them as a surrounding silence, so that a lyric poem, or one with a few feet, generally occupies about a third of the leaf on which it is centred: I don't transgress against this order of things, I merely disperse its elements. The paper intervenes each time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws...<sup>15</sup>

Relying on the extended metaphor of the overall poem as a 'shipwreck of the Ideal [caught] on the shoals of actuality,'<sup>16</sup> Mallarmé plays with the dynamic conceit of typeface outlining a breaking wave, the overall poem depicting a shipwreck, and the two-page spreads becoming an ocean. Working in tandem with the blank spaces surrounding it, the poem is notable for its language and also for its ability to incite and excite the white pages so that their silence becomes eloquent in their haunting reticence and their blankness acts in counterpoint to the potential noise generated by the lines of typeset words. On the next to the last page of the poem, enlarged groups of words, set in capital letters, state unequivocally, 'NOTHING WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE BUT THE PLACE' ('RIEN

N'AURA EU LIEU QUE LE LIEU'), thus summing up the poem's contradictory focus on the emptiness of human experience as well as pointing to the potential for this emphatic phrase, working in concert with the blank space of the paper, to turn this nothing into something. This complementary and grudgingly positive focus between articulated and unarticulated language anticipates Motherwell's *Opens* in terms of the outlined shape and later spontaneously articulated centred glyph, which serves as one type of presence set in a unitary or loosely modulated field of color signalling a different type of ambiance. This coloured field is intended to indicate Motherwell's enlarged sense of self, and thus enacts in his work the type of striving between earth/world and media/concept that both Heidegger and Mallarmé proposed as a crucial operative for works of art. Working more in sync with Heidegger in this regard rather than Mallarmé, Motherwell cancels out the threatening void and opts instead for an integral work in which both background and foreground elements participate in the type of unity that is one of Zen's ingratiating aspects. If a void is found in the *Opens*, it is the comfortable reinforcing one of Heidegger's jug (cited above as the second epigraph to this essay) in which the quality of openness, contradictorily enough, contains itself. The route to reframing the emptying of the self so as to reestablish the void's – and the self's – innate fecundity is indicated in the story of the Zen master Nan-in (cited above as the third epigraph).

This mixture of dynamism and complementarity between articulated and unarticulated aspects of the work of art – or between individual voices (the glyphs) and fields of responses (painted backgrounds) in Motherwell's *Opens* – is one of the singular most important aspects of Zen Buddhist theory and art. At this point in the discussion, I need to point out the differing ways Mallarmé, Heidegger, and Motherwell each became acquainted with aspects of Zen so that one can readily understand how affinities between their approaches and this Eastern one could have developed. Connections with Zen are admittedly more circumstantial in the case of Mallarmé. First, they are based on the great interest that a number of the artists close to him, including Manet, Monet, and Whistler, exhibited in Japanese culture. And second, Mallarmé's generalised connection with this Eastern approach appears to be the basis for the eighteen poems he wrote with the express intention of inscribing some of them, as the Chinese and Japanese did, on the surfaces of fans so that this object would become the poem and vice versa,



thereby activating, in the words of the Mallarmé scholar Henry Weinfield, 'the mysterious transformation of the animate to the inanimate, the concrete to the abstract, the material to the spiritual.'<sup>17</sup> With Heidegger, this connection is more clearly documented in terms of his exchanges with his Japanese students between the world wars, his professed interest in Japanese culture, his 'Dialogue Concerning Language' (1959) that takes place with an individual simply identified as a Japanese person, and his positive reaction to an essay by D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966) he was reading. Regarding Suzuki, Heidegger said, 'If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings.'<sup>18</sup>

Motherwell's initial familiarisation with Zen begins in the mid-1940s, but he did not relate its ideas to his work until the 1960s when he consciously applied aspects of it first to his *Lyric Suite* and then his *Open* series. Later, he used it to create a more gestural type of painting and employed such an obviously Japanese title in the 1970s and '80s as *Samurai* for this type of work.<sup>19</sup> Motherwell's art, then, comes late to Zen, embracing it only after he underwent the exhausting experience of a Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) retrospective in 1965 and needed to move in a new direction.<sup>20</sup>

So important were Zen Buddhists ideas to Americans during the initial post-World War II decade that this time period should be regarded as the Zen moment in American culture. The U.S. may have won the war, but the ensuing culture battles can be considered major Japanese victories. Because American soldiers and civilian personnel during World War II were so ill equipped to understand the Japanese, the U.S. government commissioned American anthropologist Ruth Benedict to write a study of the country's customs. Her account, entitled *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, was published in time to help American forces during the U.S. occupation of Japan. Within a decade of the war's end, a great number of Americans had familiarised themselves with aspects of this culture to the point of enthusiastically embracing Zen. The primary sources for learning about Zen were the publications of Suzuki, a follower of the Rinzai or Kyoto School, which stressed a type of instantaneous enlightenment that Americans found appealing. Because of his previous contact with the U.S. early in the twentieth century, Suzuki in his many writings was able to couch Zen in universal terms, often using Western philosophic concepts and making comparisons with Christianity, so that Zen, which at the time had few serious followers in post-war Japan, was able to achieve wide acceptance

in the U.S. Zen won approval among both marginalised and mainstream groups in the several decades postdating World War II: in the 1950s the beats and intellectuals in general embraced Zen; in the 1960s the hippies inflected its meanings in terms of their whole-earth approach; and in the 1970s mainstream participants of various self-realisation movements personalised Zen's enhanced consciousness of the concrete and everyday. The way for Zen had been well prepared in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by such American thinkers sympathetic to it as Emerson, Thoreau, William James, and John Dewey, particularly in his *Art as Experience*, which was a bible for many abstract expressionists. During the summers of 1954 and '55 MoMA exhibited an impressive authentic replica of a seventeenth-century Japanese scholar's house and garden called 'Shofuso' that indirectly helped to foster a wider appreciation for Zen. The exhibit was so popular that queues of people, waiting to see this exotic architectural presentation, extended along Fifty-Third Street and even for blocks along Fifth Avenue, and over a quarter of a million people visited the house during the course of the exhibition. By the late '50s hundreds of thousands of people had come in close contact with Zen through various publications on it and through its concomitant approach that involved not only architecture but also the art of painting, crafts, flower arranging, and archery.<sup>21</sup> In 1960, *House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon devoted the August and September issues to the Zen-related Japanese aesthetic *shubui*, which she characterised as 'the deepest beauty word in the world' that 'applies to [a] severe exquisiteness that is way beyond mere prettiness.'<sup>22</sup> *Shubui* is closely related to *wabi*, which embraces Zen, in part, through its respect for austerity and lack of fashion. Suzuki defined *wabi* in the following manner: 'To be poor, that is, not to be dependent on things worldly – wealth, power, and reputation – and yet to feel inwardly the presence of something of the highest value, above time and social position: this is what essentially constitutes *wabi*... It is in truth the worshipping of poverty.'

Writing also in 1960, philosopher and social commentator Van Meter Ames noted that articles on Zen were appearing in such mainstream magazines as *Time*, *Life*, and *The New Yorker* as well as such specialist publications as *Art News*, *Chicago Review* (which sold out three print runs of its Summer 1958 Zen issue), *Mademoiselle*, and *Vogue*.<sup>23</sup> Although Ames attributes the popularity of Zen to 'its enticing... way of living in the present without worrying about what is coming... [and its return] to a



more instinctive, non-reflective, immediate level of experience,<sup>24</sup> he does not dwell on the obvious need during the Cold War for a spontaneous, intellectual/intuitive release from daily pressures and from the almost omnipresent fear of a pending nuclear holocaust, as well as the heady sense of freedom and autonomy that can ensue from Zen's ready acceptance of the world.

Motherwell was not a Zen adherent; he was uninterested in meditating and rejected as fantasy Suzuki's Kyoto School formula of instantly achieved *satori* (insight). Instead, his affiliations with Zen are predicated on his intellectual and emotional kinship with it, which his *Opens* develop in terms of dynamic complementarity, another way of understanding this Eastern approach's essential unity. Philosopher Kenneth K. Inada has eloquently described this interactive understanding between being and the type of nothingness that parallels in many ways Heidegger's emphasis on *Being* as an ultimate and fecund emptiness. Similar to this *Being*, Zen invokes, according to Inada, 'the becomingness of things or emptiness in the beings-in-becoming.' Inada's approach is holistic in terms of Zen's ability to link presence and absence as well as his suggestion that traditional Zen painting involves the creation of works of art capable of acknowledging the prescience of open or blank spaces, which might ordinarily appear to be empty, but are in fact understood as replete with unseen potentiality.<sup>25</sup> To ensure the clarity of his approach, Inada cites the example of Zen black and white painting, which, he stresses, is not simply monochromatic. 'The black strokes,' he notes, 'are not alone for they are the result of a complementary process that includes/involves non-black components or the non-being aspect... the painting is a vital display of *beings-in-non-being*, black-in-non-black phenomenon.'<sup>26</sup> He continues his discussion by adding:

Oriental painting [referring to Zen]... impels one to go beyond the spectrum itself, to the realm of no-realm, that is, to a preconscious realm, if you will, where discrimination and selectivity have yet to arise but which is still within the becomingness of things... the realm of non-being... a constant interpenetration and involvement of being and non-being – in short the *beings-in-non-being*.<sup>27</sup>

Not just theoretical, the Zen approach to life and art has resulted in a set of stylistic practices that can be seen as beginning with the contradictory act of enunciating empty space. The pronounced asymmetry occurring in Zen painting, which is

sometimes referred to as 'one-corner art,' leaves relatively vast spaces open so that the overall work is able to suggest that these apparently unpopulated spaces in this type of work are potentially full. While most Zen painting calls for energetic brushwork as a sign of inspiration – an approach found in Motherwell's *Beside the Sea* series, *Lyric Suite*, and later *Opens* and *Samurai* series – the suggestively pregnant blank areas connoting Buddhism's fertile emptiness are more in line with the positive, yet subdued import of Motherwell's overall *Open* series as are the qualities of simplicity, severity, elegance, restraint, seemingly effortlessness, and boldness that have all been extolled as stylistic characteristics of Zen painting.

### The *Opens* and their precursors in Motherwell's art

When he created the first *Open* appropriately designated as *No. 1*, Motherwell was unaware that this work was taking him back to one of his earliest canvases, a small white painting entitled *Spanish Picture with Window* (1941), which had been left in storage and forgotten for decades. A nuanced white field, articulated by an overlapping, interpenetrating grid of thinly drawn lines, this early work surprised Motherwell for its similarity to his *Opens*. Demonstrating a unity between his earliest and most recent work, this early painting revealed that the later chance encounter of the two paintings in his studio may have moved him precisely because it culminated attitudes towards art important to him for decades.

Following the Zen dictum regarding the essential unity of all things in his *Opens*, Motherwell would begin each work with a unitary painted field, which either he or an assistant had painted and then he would fracture its surface enough to feel a personal identification with the work. In the *Opens*, apart from one or two exceptions, any intimation of a white void is dispensed with at the outset unlike in his psychic automatist works where the void, equated with the whiteness of pristine canvases, does sometimes peer from beneath the scribbles or between the chinks in his paintings' mostly resolute walls, reminding him of the great beyond. In the few *Opens* where he leaves the majority of the surface white, Motherwell assumes some psychological risk by providing full entry to the void, which for him is metaphysical, formal, and psychological; however, in these works he lessens its fearfulness by turning the white space into a 'wall'. In most of the *Opens*, the surface is made tractable and familiar in the beginning

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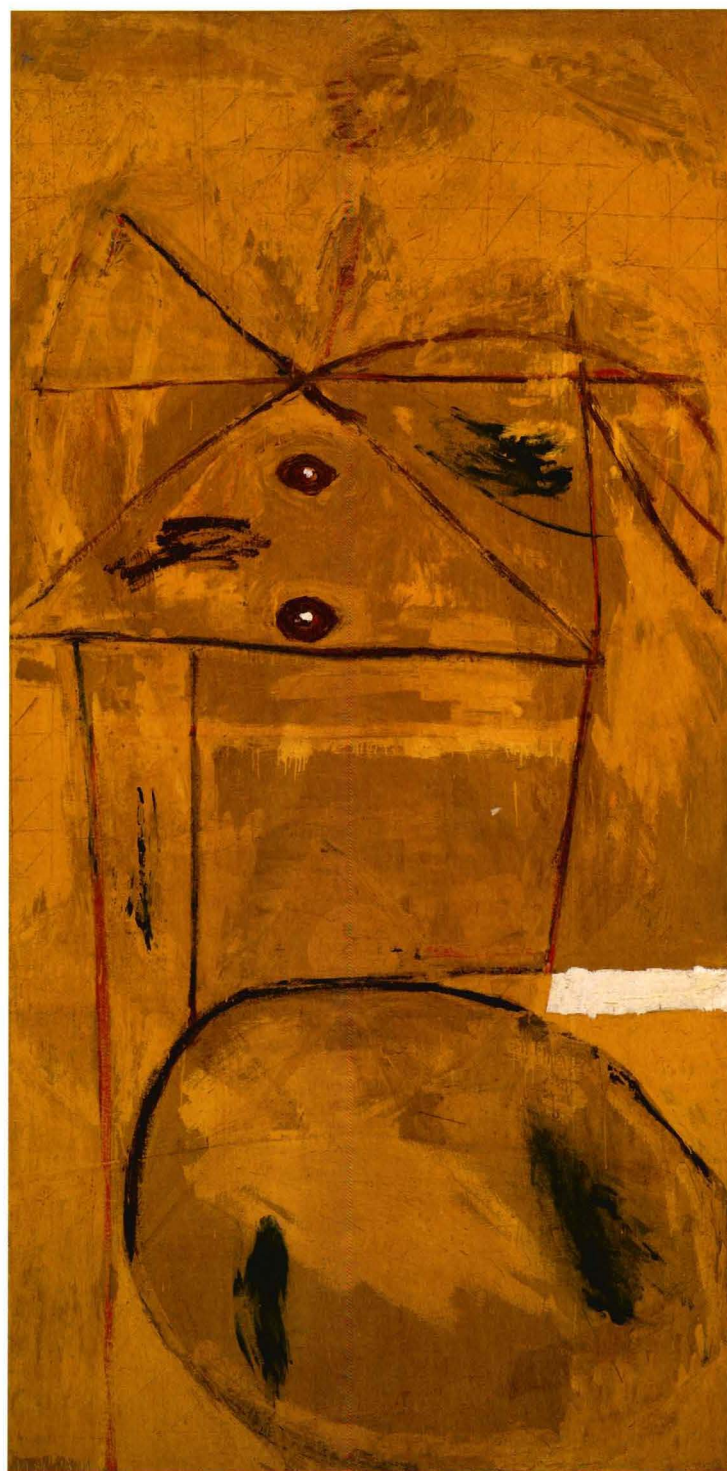
so that it will share in his identity; the colours used are those that he has made his own: it is his Gauloise blue, his warm ochre, and his radiant orange that he faces. In the *Opens*, therefore, Motherwell feels no necessity to destroy the unity of the surface because the covering is *his* colour; he can view it as part of his artistic identity. The ensuing 'conversation' that draws the *Open* and this identity together is registered at first in charcoal and sometimes is covered with a delicate sheathing of paint. Between this self and the *Opens*, then, only the mere hint of a mark can suffice, if Motherwell feels sure it represents his feeling. The situation of painting by the method of psychic automatism, which sustained his earlier work as opposed to creating with an understanding of Zen, the basic conception sustaining the *Open* series, is akin to the difference between moving into a new house and going to one's own familiar summer cottage. One might say that each time Motherwell employs psychic automatism he is psychologically taking possession of a new house, while in the *Opens* he is already home.

Instead of using automatism as a means to an end, Motherwell tries in the *Opens* to cancel out the end and to think only of the moment. With these paintings he concentrates on relaxing and becoming one with his art in place of manoeuvring and manipulating it so that in the end it will share in his identity. With psychic automatism, the unconscious is – in the words of the French symbolist Arthur Rimbaud – the 'There where the I is another'; with Zen, the 'it' and the 'I' are one. Relying on the knowledge accrued from Zen, one realises that the unconscious, the nature existing within humans, is not extrinsic, and one comes to recognise that it is neither a pagan god nor an alien other that must be beseeched and that requires human sacrifice in the form of oneself: in Zen, the idols are cast down and the temple is cleaned out, so that one can see an essential harmony.

This contrast is evidenced by looking at such early works as *The Homely Protestant* (1948), created through the method of psychic automatism. Here, the idol remains in the form of a figure presiding in the underworld. This painting is important for understanding Motherwell's overall development since it anticipates, in terms of its field and schematic figure, the monochromatic background and glyph of the *Opens*, and yet it represents the very different mindset characteristic of his early work. As with a great deal of abstract expressionist painting of the 1940s, *The Homely Protestant* is both evocative and foreboding. The figure resembles one of Poe's fancies, his largely unarticulated intuitive meanderings that can never be

approached head-on or delineated in detail because of losing their poetic evocativeness. They, like the material gleaned from the fringes of the unconscious, can only be approached indirectly. The situation is akin to the fairy tale about the emperor of China who was never to be directly looked at with the result that one's conception of him was largely subjective and had more to do with the aura of power that he wielded than with the personage himself.

This analogy is especially apt when one considers that Motherwell's painting *The Emperor of China* (1947) is a direct precursor of *The Homely Protestant*. One of the sources for



*The Homely Protestant*, 1948  
Oil on composition board  
248.3 × 122.6 cms / 97¾ × 48½ ins  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

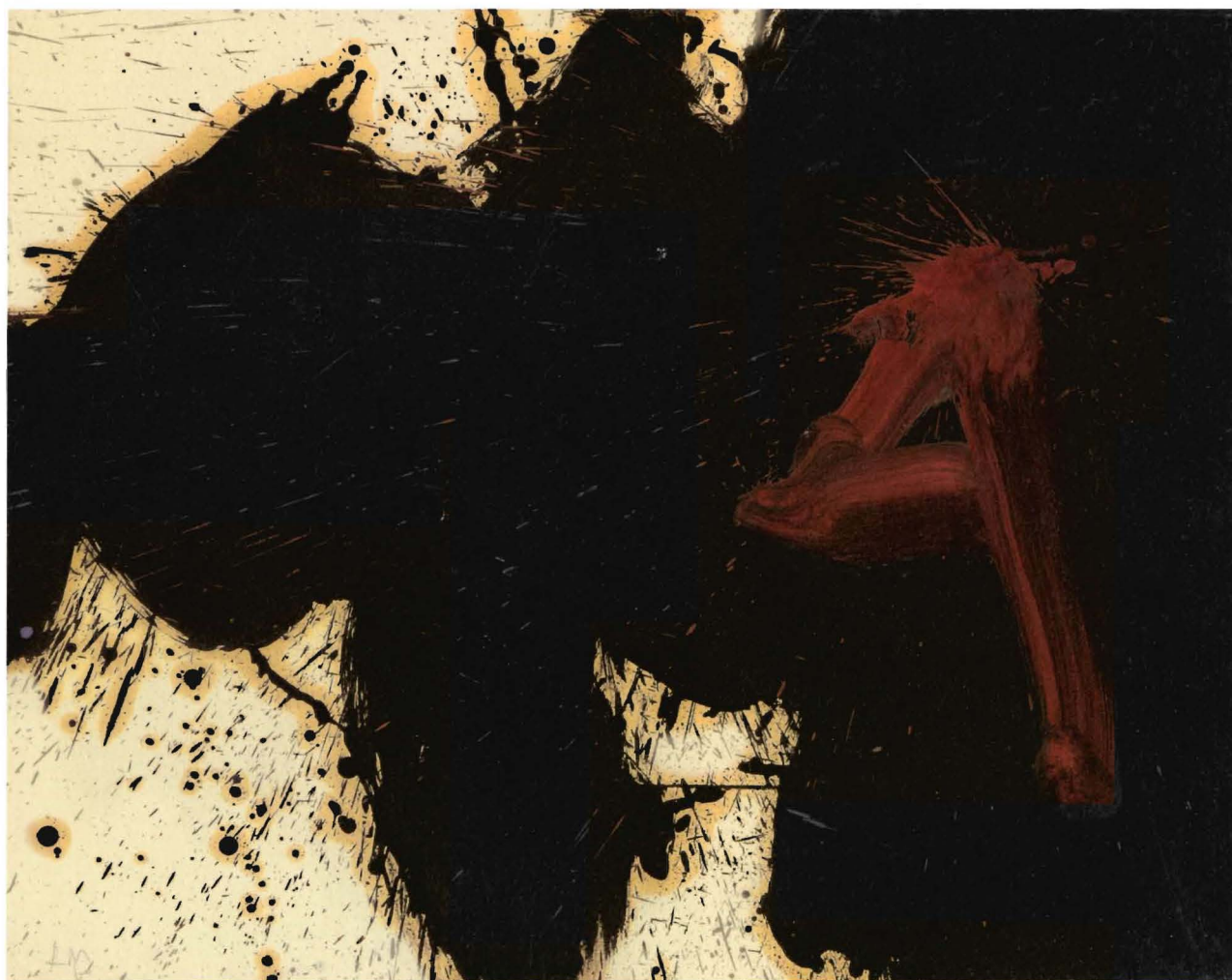


*The Emperor of China* title is a hallucinatory, almost surrealist, piece of the same title written by Paul Goodman and published by Motherwell in the single issue of the periodical *Possibilities*, which he co-edited with John Cage, Pierre Chareau, and Harold Rosenberg in 1947. In his prose poem, Goodman describes the emperor as a small man with an ochre complexion, who dreams of immortality and consequently summons a sorcerer to prepare a potion of vitality for him. Ochre, perhaps a memory of the emperor's complexion, and Chinese red are the predominant colours of this painting as they also are of *The Homely Protestant*. The dark rich ochre in both paintings is suggestively penumbral. In *The Homely Protestant*, its use for the diamond-shaped pattern in the background resembles tribal art or ancient petroglyphs while the figure's body seems to comprise undulations on the walls of a palaeolithic cave. Differing from these two forms, the red skeletal parts of the figure appear to have been rubbed on with a stick. The shapes that look as if they are part of the geological conformation of the cave's wall collaborate with the drawn forms to suggest that what is presented in the painting is analogous to what one finds in the far recesses of the mind, the place where archetypes are supposed to arise. The suggestion, once one's vision sharpens to take in the details, is strengthened by the fantastic shape to the right of the figure that resembles a fish and the appearance of this creature leaves one with the

feeling that *The Homely Protestant*, fishing in the deep of his own unconscious, has landed some strange piscatorial creature.

What the painting also communicates is a groping intuition that attempts to unearth an underlying meaning to existence. The painter uses several means available to him to locate the painting in the realm of the unconscious. The title itself comes from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, a masterpiece of the free associational technique. Forcing himself to incorporate the elements of chance even to the point of choosing the title, Motherwell opened Joyce's book and, without looking, put his finger on a page, the phrase underneath it was 'the homely Protestant,' which became the painting's title.

When asked if the painting *The Homely Protestant* might have other resonances for him, Motherwell responded that it perhaps was himself. In New York City with its predominately Catholic and Jewish society, Motherwell in the 1940s was somewhat of an outsider since he was born a Protestant and reared on the Pacific coast. He has said that this painting is concerned with the essential loneliness that he feels from time to time. But its title may have other references, including two important Protestants whose works were of great importance to Motherwell: one was Søren Kierkegaard, the other, Piet Mondrian. Kierkegaard wrote the small book *Purity Of Heart Is To Will Only One Thing* that Motherwell has cited on a number of occasions; in this book



Kierkegaard separated the world into three levels: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Art belongs to the first; it might hope to assume aspects of the second; but it can never be part of the third. Seeming to follow in Kierkegaard's footsteps, Mondrian devoted his life to attaining a type of purity in his work that aimed to present, with clarity, the true nature of reality, with the additional goal of ensuring its use as an instrument for representing universal freedom. If we agree that Motherwell's *Homely Protestant* could refer to these two men and their works as well as himself, then their incorporation implies a wish to circumscribe the content of his painting by locating it in the realm between the aesthetic and the ethical. By relying on psychic automatism to penetrate the deeper recesses of his mind, Motherwell hoped to achieve some semblance of the ethical and remain true to what he really felt. Knowing that reality and truth can easily elude one, Motherwell attempts in this painting to be as honest as possible as he analogises, as we have just seen, *the unconscious* in the primordial terms of cave painting, thus ensuring its antiquity and foundational qualities. In this painting, he dramatises modern reality as going beyond the ineluctable limits of reason, and the reality, which he presents, is one that circumscribes the mysterious unknown without actualising it. His is basically a Freudian-Jungian intimation of the locked secrets that are contained within the unconscious. At the time Motherwell felt the oppression of the void, which he understood in terms of his unknown and largely unknowable self. While he rejects the void and opts for a primitive panacea in the form of the type of archetypal god-icon in *The Homely Protestant*, which is intended to soothe the anxieties of both prehistoric and modern people, in his subsequent *Elegies* he characterises the void as a white background fenced in by massive plinths, which are closely linked together by squeezed ovoids.

The sgraffito designs, scratched into the surface of the paint of *The Homely Protestant* with the blunt end of a brush, are telling hieroglyphics that communicate indirectly. They reinforce the theme of the picture, becoming signs *that are intended to communicate feelings, not facts*. They are a language that testifies to the compulsion humanity has to record its own history, so that its existence becomes more real and tangible to it. Their value is similar to the importance placed on ancient scripts, such as those mysterious, coloured grids appearing on the cave walls of Lascaux, which provide neither facts nor sociological information, but remain intriguing. Probably the reason they fascinate us is that these prehistoric markings serve as symbols

of the indomitableness of the human spirit and its desire to assert itself. In the same way that these ancient hieroglyphics signal humanity's presence, the rudimentary markings on the background of *The Homely Protestant* attest to painting as a type of communiqué – not of the facts that they provide, for they give us almost none, but of the intimation we have that these signs contain locked within themselves clues to the meaning of existence.

While the skeletal drawing and ochre-inflected field of *The Homely Protestant* foreshadow the thin network of lines, often assuming the form of a 'U' set in a nuanced, nearly monochromatic field in the *Opens*, the artist's intentions in the earlier and later works vary greatly. To the former work, Motherwell brings a knowledge of Joyce, Picasso, and Mondrian, as well as an interest in tribal and palaeolithic art. In the years following he learned not to tell everything in a single painting. No longer thinking that an individual work must anthologise all his stylistic habits, he stops when he believes a distinct feeling has been registered in the work. Although *The Homely Protestant* is representative of Motherwell's early style, at the time he was still attempting to get beyond his artistic sources, even though traces of their legacy persisted in his work in allusive forms. The late 1940s was a time when Motherwell was emerging as his own person in his art; even though in the early '40s, he had achieved an independence in terms of his collages. In *The Homely Protestant*, the source of inspiration for Motherwell's art is psychic automatism, in which he is concerned with self-discovery, with finding out exactly who he is. In the *Opens*, since he has discovered and affirmed this identity for several decades, he takes it as a given and signals it in the form of an initial unitary field that is covered in one of *his* colours. In the earlier work, the universal resides in the particular and is the end-result of a particular coming to grips with material indirectly coaxed from what the artist assumes to be his own unconscious; in the *Opens*, the particular, barely actualised in the 'U'-shape, is projected against an environmental sense of self.

The *Opens* are what Motherwell is when the fears and internal conflicts giving rise to the tension in the *Elegies* are cathartically displaced, and when those periodic seizures of anxiety are placated. If we look closely at some of the *Elegies*, we see that, underneath the fleshy genitalia or between those intercolumniations blocked by suspended ovoids, there exists the mere hint of a grid that becomes the 'U'-shape in the *Opens*. It is evident even in the first *Elegy* in the form of the thin, cutting line separating the two ovals

*The Figure 4 on an Elegy*, 1960  
Oil on paper laid on fibreboard  
58.1 × 73 cms / 23 × 28½ ins

on the right; apparent also in *The Spanish Death* (1975) in the lines surrounding the large vertical; and manifest also in many other *Elegies* in the form of drips that are continued into subtly wavering lines. In these works Motherwell attempted to surmount or to resolve the internal conflicts, but his efforts to achieve harmony were ruled out at the outset because he was using a vocabulary of forms and a methodology that had arisen for the express purpose of embodying those conflicts. All he could do to achieve harmony in the *Elegies* was to permit the forms to explode, just as one reduces pressure in a boiler by releasing steam. While this was temporarily satisfying, in the long run it could not meet the increasing need he had for a resolution of these conflicts. In *The Figure 4 on an Elegy* (1960) Motherwell intuitively attempted another means for achieving stability, this time using the mystical number four. In this painting this number, which, according to Jung, has connotations of God's dark or shadow side, symbolically balances the exploding forms. In the *Opens*, however, equilibrium is incorporated into the very composition of the picture itself in the form of a unitary field and the 'U' configuration placed near its centre.

Before Motherwell attained the relative equanimity of the *Opens*, he took his art through several stages, which at the time may have appeared undirected in their variety, but in retrospect reveal an internal logic surprising in its clarity. During the time he was making the exploding *The Figure 4 on an Elegy*, Motherwell abstracted the splashed passages of paint found in it and used them as the basis for his *Beside the Sea* series. In this group of paintings created entirely in the seaport village of Provincetown, Massachusetts during the summer of 1962, Motherwell found that if he wished to make paint resemble the breaking waves that struck with tremendous force the concrete bulkhead adjoining his seaside studio, he had to slash paint with the full force of his body. Since ordinary paper could not stand up to this treatment, he had to use five-ply laminated Strathmore drawing paper. The lightning-like explosions of paint comprising this series do not resemble real waves in the sense of being faithful to their surface appearances; instead, they are waves notable for their power and force. Choosing not to duplicate nature's surfaces, Motherwell gained strength from its tremendous power to produce the climatic breaking of waves that punctuates the moment when tension is released before the waves merge once again with the ocean. These ecstatic works – so filled with freedom and an especially exhilarating vitality – accord with Motherwell's interest in Zen even though he was not

consciously thinking about them in these terms; the breaking of the waves in the *Beside the Sea* series can be seen as engaging metaphors for the sudden spurt of realisation an individual studying Zen attains of the noumenal origin of being.

In 1965 Motherwell began the works known as *Lyric Suite* in which for the first time he self-consciously attempted to incorporate the methods of Zen painting. At the same time he wanted to break out of the configuration of the *Elegies* and found a new schema for *The New England Elegy*, a mural he had been commissioned to paint by architect Walter Gropius for the John F. Kennedy Memorial Federal Building in Boston. In order to prepare himself for this commission, and possibly because he had been wanting to play with Zen painting techniques, he bought a thousand sheets of Japanese rice paper, measuring nine by eleven inches, approximately the same proportions as the mural, and decided to make a thousand brush-and-ink drawings without premeditation.

When Motherwell later jotted down notes on the original conception of *Lyric Suite*, he emphasised his intention to create spontaneously without any forethought and without looking back:

PAINT THE THOUSAND SHEETS WITHOUT INTERRUPTION, WITHOUT A PRIORI TRADITIONAL OR MORAL PREJUDICES OR A POSTERIORI ONES, WITHOUT ICONOGRAPHY, AND ABOVE ALL WITHOUT REVISIONS OR ADDITIONS UPON CRITICAL REFLECTION AND JUDGMENT AND SEE WHAT LIES WITHIN, WHATEVER IT IS. VENTURE. DON'T LOOK BACK. DO NOT TIRE. EVERYTHING IS OPEN. BRUSHES AND BLANK WHITE PAPER!

He has recalled that when he made these drawings, he placed them on the floor and considered his actions to be painterly equivalents to Stéphane Mallarmé's goals in 'A Throw of the Dice.' While the automatic drawings comprising *Lyric Suite* are simple in format, often composed of only a few strokes of the brush, the works reveal changes of mood, and Motherwell's handling of the brush varies from slashing ink to gently stroking the paper and from casually dripping liquid in haphazard puddles to writing with the brush. Considering as a whole, this group is notable for the elegance and refinement of his spontaneous strokes and spatters. One senses that Motherwell has achieved





*From the Lyric Suite*, 1965  
Ink on Japanese paper  
27.9 × 22.9 cms / 11 × 9 ins



in these paintings a modicum of un-self-consciousness that he hoped to realise so that he does not act, but becomes part of the act that directs him as much as he directs it. As in his *Beside the Sea* series, he has attempted to achieve the simplicity and directness of Zen by simply painting. In this series he creates with a great deal of spontaneity and freedom, but his work, since the beginning, has been characterised by a similar casualness evident in his drips and spatters. What he discovered in this series that is of importance to the *Opens* is the confidence that only a few strokes of the brush, flowing forth with a minimum of calculation, can convey a sense of self. Ironically, this sense of self comes close to some of Helen Frankenthaler's works of the early 1960s, so that the ensuing conversation in *Lyric Suite* is both Motherwell's colloquies with himself and his work as well as with his wife's art.

While *Lyric Suite* did not result directly in the discovery of the configuration that has given rise to the *Open* series, these unpremeditated works did provide a notable break in his style. Many of his pictorial solutions in the decade following *Lyric Suite* are markedly different from those that were made earlier. However, the *Opens* are not mere by-products of *Lyric Suite*; they are its fringe benefits, because the *Lyric Suite* paintings, in which Motherwell's only intention was to avoid intentions as well as revisionist afterthoughts, provided him with the courage to venture further by opening a schematic window to serve as the main focus of his compositions. What is important about the motif of a window in the *Open* series is not his discovery of it, for it has been evident, even if in a subsidiary capacity, in his art from the beginning. He permitted this element to stand alone as an iconic emblem characterising the entire series as more accessible and inviting. If one surveys the range of Motherwell's art, the *Opens* appear in retrospect to be a consequence of former concerns. They were foreshadowed by the shape of the abbreviated windows of the *Elegies*, fenestrations with bars found in the *Spanish Prisons*, frames surrounding his work, and generous sliding glass doors in several of his studios, including the one looking out on Provincetown Bay. Apertures have also been important for those groups of artists and individual painters whom he has consequently admired, including the early German Romantics, Matisse, Bonnard, Mondrian, and Picasso, who have each explored the theme of the window and its close relation, the French door, in their art. At an early point in his career, Motherwell was consciously aware of this abiding theme in modern art; he remembers that both the surrealist Matta

Echaurren and he were fascinated in the 1940s with the problem of the French door in twentieth-century painting and discussed the pros and cons of its development in the work of Picasso and Matisse.

One of the reasons why they found the theme of the window in modern art so compelling is that this motif reiterates the overall format of most paintings, so that the work of art, which itself is an open, contains in itself the subject of an aperture. And this opening tautologically reflects one of modern painting's major goals: the creation of self-enclosing and self-sufficient work. Although these works share a pared-down appearance with minimalist art, then in its hegemony as a vanguard style, the *Opens*' emphasis on reductive self-expressiveness differs substantially from the Merleau-Pontian inspired openness of Robert Morris's works that were intended to project outward to viewers, thereby taking into consideration their embodied perception.

Incipient *Opens* have always been a part of Motherwell's repertoire. Moreover, they are also proliferated throughout his studios. If one examines old photographs of his former working spaces or visits his present one, ghostly rectangles, resembling the 'U'-shaped emblems of the *Opens*, are evident on the walls and on the floors. Close study of his studio photographs reveals that when Motherwell or an assistant paints the backgrounds of his collages or edges of his canvases, they are propped against flat surfaces and freely brushed with paint that extends well beyond the perimeters of the surface being worked and spills onto floors and walls. Bearing the imprint of numerous prior works, the studio's surfaces are extension of his art's penitenti. When he paints the *Opens*, the 'U'-shapes relate to these traces of paint left in his studio. They look as if Motherwell has gathered the painted rectangles from the floors and walls, conserved, and then refined them so that they could serve as the main protagonists of his new series.

Symbolically, with these 'U'-shapes, Motherwell introduces the world outside the picture-plane. His incorporation of his studio practice into his art accords with Mondrian's acute awareness of the problems facing sensitive individuals who have needed to create working spaces conducive to their vision. Mondrian's insight is a reason why he made his studio into another work of art that paralleled his own. Often speaking of how moved he was by the austere elegance of Mondrian's studio, Motherwell unwittingly humanised his own by leaving traces of his art on its surfaces. Then, going a step further, he

unconsciously mirrored aspects of this environment in his art. Rather than becoming exemplary of an art focused solely on art, Motherwell's *Opens* are refined distillations of his working methods that tautologically unlock the concept of openness itself and reflect on the quality of reflection so that the paintings suggest an equivalency in which outside and inside are one and the same thing.

If Motherwell is concerned with presenting an art devoid of subject matter so that one can apprehend in tangible form the intuitive looking-into associated with *satori* (the state of enlightenment in which one comprehends Zen's essential meaning), then he might have purged intellectually and logically comprehensible content as Ad Reinhardt did in his black icons, which are concerned with the emptiness of Zen and the great unknown important to other religions. Motherwell, however, did not want to create paintings that challenged the work of art's position as art; neither did he choose to create paintings whose primary value was to work on viewers as a catalytic agent, leading them to Zen through a refutative process. Instead, he chose an alternate and far less ascetic path notable for radiant surfaces intended to give connotations of the effulgence and bliss that attends *satori*. On a number of occasions he has compared the *Opens* to poetry and underscored the titles' relationship to the definitions for this word in the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, as mentioned earlier. These definitions are expressed positively; only a few are negative, so that these many meanings of the word 'open' reinforce the accessibility of the apertures in his paintings, which generally emphasise expansiveness, exposure and availability as opposed to hermeticism, concealment, and obstruction.

Differing from strict Zen meditational procedures in his *Opens*, Motherwell generally did not want to present the uninitiated with contradictory *koans* for which there are no rational answers and in which there are only barriers to all but the fortunate few who are able to make intuitive leaps that bridge the synapses between individual finiteness and universal understanding. He wanted to embody the spiritual in material terms and to present his own understanding of *satori* so that the *Opens* become ecstatic visions, thereby differing from Reinhardt's black paintings that can be understood as oracular and pedagogical dicta. Qualitatively speaking, one method is not necessarily preferable to the other: Motherwell's paintings, with their expansiveness and restrained figuration, are more

in line with Zen art, while Reinhardt's correlate more with Zen meditation techniques.

In *Blueness of Blue*, a painting completed in February 1974, Motherwell concerns himself with the problem of the mysterious and obvious aspects of this hue. Like Zen, this painting is involved with the 'thusness' of a particular concrete entity, in this case, blue, and this fascination becomes readily apparent when one looks directly at the work. In creating this painting, the important question for Motherwell seems to have been how can he give form to the formless, make the ineffable apparent, and create so that paint is capable of radiating an essential quality of being. In this painting he creates blue areas that are structured without appearing to be tightly organised and a composition that is organised without appearing to be overly arranged. Employing the fresh and intense blue found on packs of his Gauloise cigarettes, his brush, with wide strokes, creates billowing shapes, currents and eddies as well as small but intense areas of drips whose prominence makes viewers realise their seemingly accidental appearance is intentional. Nuanced, variegated passages of azure separate, interpenetrate, and intermingle like themes in a Bach cantata: one blue starts a theme that is picked up by another variation of this hue, played in a different key, and echoed by still another variant on his Gauloise blue.

Just slightly off-centre, the black 'U'-shape, which seems to lie flat on the surface, reinforces the smoky tumultuousness of the underpainting that peers through Motherwell's currents of azure. There is gravity to the thin black line that serves as an intellectual focus and a hurdle over which viewers must leap if they wish to fathom the meaning of the open beyond. Or if one prefers, the 'U' is a meditative icon that strangely enough makes the openness of the work more apparent in the same way that masters of Japanese haiku recognised that words and sounds paradoxically give form to silence.

Relying on Zen terminology, one might hypothesise that the thin black lines function as a *koan*, a contradiction to occupy the mind while allowing the spirit to roam freely, hopefully merging with the ineffable blue background. Similar to *koans*, there are contradictions in the *Opens* between the linear and the painterly; that is, between the line forming the 'U'-shape and the open field behind it, leaving one in doubt as to how this configuration is supported. Is it on the surface of the canvas, deep within the space of the picture, or is it obliquely positioned? And because this glyph differs from the style of its nuanced background, one

wonders why it is there. It seems to hold something, and yet what it holds is the space that buoys it up. In other words, that which it contains, in turn supports it: inside is outside, and vice versa. One begins to realise that the 'U'-shape in this painting, similar to Heidegger's analysis of the jug (cited as an epigraph) is to be regarded as a construct existing in the mind, for the blue current underneath, which appears more insistent, is uninterrupted by the figure's presence as if it is unaware of this glyph's existence. The black lines become a point of focus while the rest of the painting exists as peripheral vision. As hard as one might try, it is impossible to concentrate on the painting without seeing the 'U,' but when one stares at this configuration, it loses its dominance as the background becomes increasingly persistent. Looking at this painting for a time, one might begin to experience the vertiginous feeling described by the late symbolist French poet Paul Valéry (1871–1945), one of Motherwell's favourite poets, in his 'Cimetière Marin' (1920) in which he stares down at the Mediterranean beneath him and, then, becoming lost in reflection, wonders if he is gazing up at the sky, or peering into the water because different aspects of the landscape melt and coalesce into a single unity. Like Valéry's poem in which the poet sits by a seaside cemetery, reflecting on life and death, the opening in this painting calls to mind Motherwell's windows of his *Spanish Prisons* and *Elegies*. In these earlier works the window serves as a liminal fulcrum between life and death; it becomes an iconic passageway that is held up as important in its own right, intimating that this painter is no longer concerned with death *per se* because he is more fascinated with a point midway between life and death in which one is aware, as in the *Zen koan*, of the contradiction of one's original self or face before being born. In terms of Valéry's last line in his poem 'It is necessary to hold to life' ('Il faut tenter de vivre'), it is necessary to live fully and completely, simply, without introspection concerning one's ultimate end.

Motherwell's *Blueness of Blue* parallels a section of the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti's (1902–99) *A la pintura* cycle that became the subject of his series of prints he preferred to call a *livre d'artiste*. In this poem the pristine qualities of blue are extolled:

11

Sometimes the sea overflows  
on the palette, and surrenders its secret  
in sky-colour, washes of heaven.

El mar invade a veces la paleta  
del pintor y le pone  
un cielo azul que sólo da en secreto.

12

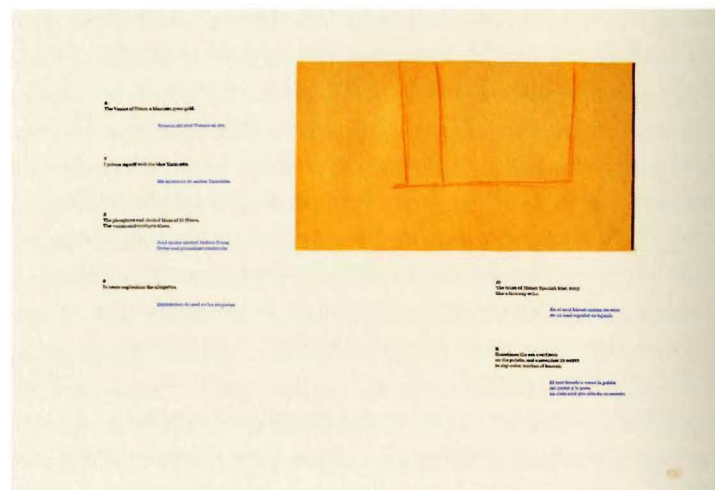
Blue remembers some marvel of motion when  
having been blue was immaculate.

Tiene el azul extático nostalgia  
de haber sido azul puro en movimiento.

13

Canvas cannot contain it: but  
blue circles the square like the bell of the lamp.

Aunque de azul no esté dentro del cuadro,  
como un fanal lo envuelve.



*A la pintura: Blue 6–11, 1972*

Brushed aquatint, aquatint, lift aquatint and letterpress on J.B. Green paper  
64.8 × 96.5 cms / 25½ × 38 ins

While the content of this painting like the poem is concerned with the colour blue, neither one is generated by purely formalist concerns; rather their significance depends on the artist's associations with sea and sky as well as the feelings that these two entities call to mind. While the *Blueness of Blue* celebrates the formal qualities of texture, hue, value, and proportion among others, it is involved with them as one becomes intrigued with a natural phenomenon, thinking of it as the microcosm that encapsulates within itself elements of the macrocosm. In a Zen sense, this work is not to be associated as much with emotion, which it assuages and transcends, as with the artist's convictions regarding the intrinsic quality of blue.

Although Motherwell is focused in the *Blueness of Blue* on the unique properties of this colour, in the painting *A la pintura No. 12* (1971) he is intrigued with the intensity of the colour red. Huge blocks of hue in this painting occupy the majority of the field. While the *Blueness of Blue* makes one think of the sky and the sea, *A la pintura No. 12* reminds one of Motherwell's early *Spanish Prisons*, which were characterised by a careful placement of a window, often barred, on a large wall. In this painting the window is differentiated from the field by a rectangle, enclosing an area in which black paint has been blended into the red. In the centre of this area there is a white opening, lightly articulated with blue. Whether the single white passage is to be regarded as a beam of light through a window or as a splintered pane of glass is up to the viewer. Placed high on the wall, and thus inaccessible, the window is a mysterious opening. Viewers' relationships to this wall are ambiguous: they cannot ascertain with certainty if they are inside a red room or located outside and gazing at a red wall. The number '12' in the title is a clue for figuring out the artist's intentions and placing this hieratic window and stolid red wall in a context, since it refers to plate twelve in his illuminated book, *A la pintura*, which enumerates the following specific associations with red that Alberti delineates:

8  
Carnation explosions, erect  
in the ivory round of the tightening nipple.  
*Como el clavel que estella en los ceñidos  
marfies de unos senos apretados.*

9  
The poppy in fugitive cochineal.  
*Com el grana fugaz de una amapola.*

10  
Think how I dwindle away  
in the least of the violets.  
*Pensad que ando perdido en la más mínima,  
humilde violeta.*

11  
Brueghel's and Bosch's inferno:  
the night-hag that stares  
from the eyes of insomniac children.  
*Soy el infierno – Brueghel,  
Bosch – y el nocturno espanto  
en los ojos insomnes de los niños.*



*A la pintura: Red 8-11, 1972*  
Aquatint, lift ground aquatint and letterpress on J.B. Green paper  
64.8 × 96.5 cms / 25½ × 38 ins



Of all Alberti's associations mentioned, the ones in the last stanza, referring to Brueghel and Bosch and their horrific visions of hell, seem to be much more closely allied to the claustrophobic atmosphere of Motherwell's painting, which communicates a mental state of self-imposed enclosure. In *A la pintura No. 12*, the opening cancels itself out, resembling more an enclosure than an open, and is consequently much closer to Reinhardt's black paintings.

Despite the simplicity of the *Opens*' schema, Motherwell tries not to repeat himself as a comparison of *Blueness of Blue* and *A la pintura No. 12* indicates. He moves from the atmospheric suggestiveness of the former to the subject of incarceration in the latter work. Even in such a painting as *Summer Open with Mediterranean Blue* (1974), which at first appears to closely resemble *Blueness of Blue*, the *Open* configuration is directed toward a different goal. Painted in the summer of 1974 in Motherwell's Provincetown studio, the work relates more directly to the atmospherics of the golden summer sunlight and ocean surrounding this seaside building even though its title refers to the Mediterranean. For this work Motherwell chose an international identity because it more precisely defines his interest in the bright, harsh sunlight familiar to him from his childhood in California and linked in his mind to his long-abiding interest in the work of Matisse and Miró. He also decided that a designation referring to the New England coast would elicit a different set of associations that he prefers not to privilege in this work. Because Provincetown's indigenous population is largely composed of Portuguese fishermen and their families, the town often reminds Motherwell of fishing villages on the Mediterranean coast. Moreover, he has rationalised that Provincetown is geographically the same latitude as the Mediterranean, consequently his title.

*Summer Open with Mediterranean Blue*, unlike *Blueness of Blue*, is painted over a rich ochre ground, which is barely perceptible, but does warm this cool hue. This approach has a basis in Milton Avery's work, and it is worth noting that Avery spent several summers in Provincetown in the 1950s where he reconnected with his old friends Adolph Gottlieb and Rothko and no doubt became acquainted with Motherwell. On the left of *Summer Open*, rivulets of paint cascade down the surface and give a directional flow to the canvas. Underneath the black 'U' on the right, an undercurrent of scudding blue reinforces the movement of the drawing and relates it more to the background.

This horizontal blue painting is more harmonious than *Blueness of Blue*, since it does not have the smoky imprimatura rumbling beneath its surface. Areas of azure on the far right and far left are barely differentiated, indicating the uniform surface with which Motherwell began. With sustained looking, one becomes aware that the 'U'-shape in this painting not only acts as a focus but also serves as a transitional device that helps to orient the viewer to the work. Whereas in traditional landscape painting the artist often invites viewers to saunter in their imaginations down roads or paths that begin in the foreground; in this abstract painting, excepting for the 'U,' all one is presented with is an inflected open field. Because it is so open, the easiest access is the 'U' that prevents one from being engulfed by the field's expansiveness.

In the *Opens* the point of view is not the usual one of spectator to tableau; instead it involves reciprocal unity. In order to grasp the most elucidating perspective for comprehending these works, observers must make an imaginative leap inside the picture so that the space encloses them. One could argue that this space is a correlative of the psychical space that individuals encompass within themselves, so that when they look at the *Opens*, they introspectively gaze inward at themselves. Although they are outside the work, they are immersed in it and consequently co-exist with the flux of energy that radiates both outwards and inwards. This state resembles the awareness of Zen in which one does not inhabit and enclose one's being as a separate entity, rather one radiates a field of being. The old definition of being as a state of unique separateness is here regarded as an antiquated one dominated by both the Freudian ego and old school philosophical thinking in which art is viewed primarily in terms of representation rather than presentation and second-hand knowledge as opposed to primary affirmations. In Motherwell's *Opens* this older attitude toward art is replaced by a sense of self that depends to a certain extent on interrelatedness with others as well as with oneself and, even more importantly, on one's awareness of the great nothingness, which is the source of all being. Imbued with these ideas, Motherwell in 1973 took on the subject Plato and the third order reality outlined in his story of the Cave in a series of *Opens* entitled *Plato's Cave*, which endow this shadowy realm with the forceful presence of Edmund Burke's sublime. Like the fluctuating dark mysterious presence found in these and other *Opens*, Zen's comprehension of human understanding is an extolling of the individual through the realisation of its relative

insignificance: one is hero and coward, victor and victim, god and mere human animal, all at the same time, just as one is also universal and specific.

Even though Motherwell has acknowledged that Zen was a major generative factor of his *Open* series, only in 1975 did he make an explicit reference to it in one of the titles for the *Opens*. At that time he started at first casually and then seriously referring to a group of charcoal studies made in February of 1973 as the 'Zen' series. They are the first of his *Opens* to be directly inspired by a treasured seventeenth-century Japanese ink-on-paper Zen painting with a prominent *Ichhi* (one) centred on it, which he had acquired in the early 1960s by trading several of his own works to artist-collector Ulfert Wilke.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

This discussion of Motherwell's *Opens* has not paid strict attention to the series' chronological development. The reason for this is because there is very little stylistic *progression* in them, and, in the interests of pursuing the series' sources and overall content, paintings have been selected according to the ways they develop the motif. But a word about their development is in order. The developmental changes in the *Opens* that, of course, follow some kind of progression, although this topic is beyond the scope and intentions of this essay, are less changes in the works themselves than a growing awareness on the part of the artist of their possible range. Soon after beginning the *Opens*, he discovered that they could be used in relation to the other series. In the '70s he employed the *Opens* not only for themselves but also as receptacles for other themes that preoccupied him throughout his life. Typical of Motherwell's permutative ability to readjust and rearrange his symbols and forms is a group of *Elegies* in the '70s in which he dialectically synthesised portions of the *Opens* and the *Elegies* by sometimes putting the latter in an *Open* format and using them to fill the 'U'-shape, and at other times placing them against an *Open* background, to see if they can stand up to an indeterminate space rather than a more enclosed one. He also employed characteristics of the aesthetic of the *Opens* as a precondition for creating many other works, in particular some of his large and colourful collages. Over the years the *Opens* became a standard, together with the *Elegies* and collages, for assessing Motherwell's connections with former interests and his willingness to discard,

change, or retain them according to their resiliency or receptivity to his major ways of looking at the world. Always the Romantic who regards his work as distillations of his feelings, Motherwell believed that in reworking his art, he was working on himself as well as producing universally relevant metaphors that testify to the ways in which he, as a refined sensibility, is able to accommodate himself to the fluctuating and constantly changing world in which he lived.

The author gratefully acknowledges the genial and thoughtful help provided by Timothy Andrus, Thalhimer Research Assistant, Virginia Commonwealth University.

## Notes and References

### Robert Motherwell's *Opens* in Context – Robert S. Mattison

1. Jack Flam, *Motherwell* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 26.
2. The author spent the year 1979–80 at Motherwell's studio researching his doctoral dissertation 'The Art of Robert Motherwell during the 1940s,' Princeton University, 1985. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations are taken from interviews with Motherwell preserved in either audio recordings or notes.
3. *The basic writings of C.G. Jung*, ed. Violet Staub de Laslo (New York: Modern Library, 1959); *Carl G. Jung, Man and His Symbols*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964); *C.G. Jung*, ed. Amelia Jaffe (New York: Vintage Books, 1965).
4. Flam, p. 26.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
6. When Motherwell used the term window, he did so most often in quotation marks or with the phrase 'so called'.
7. H.H. Arnason, 'Motherwell: The Wall and the Window', *Art News*, 68, no. 4 (Summer 1969), pp. 48–52, 66ff.
8. Flam, p. 26.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
10. Robert S. Mattison, *Robert Motherwell: The Formative Years* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 56.
11. Robert Motherwell, 'Notes on Mondrian and Chirico', *VVV*, no. 1 (June 1942), pp. 59–61.
12. Piet Mondrian, *Plastic and Pure Plastic Art*, Documents of Modern Art series (New York: George Wittenborn Inc., 1945). Preface by Robert Motherwell.
13. Motherwell titled the list 'The Ethical Determination of Mondrian's Aesthetic.' He divided it into opposing categories of 'good' and 'evil'. Some of the oppositions include: 'life', rhythm – death, immobility; the universal – the 'tragic' and the particular; clarity – obscurity; unity – chaos; peace – suffering; rationality – irrationality.
14. Mattison, p. 47.
15. Flam, p. 16.
16. Robert C. Hobbs, 'Robert Motherwell's *Open Series*' in *Robert Motherwell* (Dusseldorf: Stadische Kunsthalle, 1976), pp. 45–54. The books containing Suzuki's writings in Motherwell's library include: Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism; Selected Writings*,

ed. William Barrett (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) and *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of Daisetz T. Suzuki* (London: Rider & Co.: 1963).

### Open to the *Open Paintings* – John Yau

1. David Bourdon, 'Elephantine Doodling', *Village Voice*, 11 November 1965, p. 13.
2. H. H. Arnason, 'Robert Motherwell' in *Robert Motherwell*, Second Edition, New and Revised (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), with and introduction by Dore Ashton, and an interview with the artist by Barbaralee Diamonstein, p. 70.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
6. Motherwell would not have known of these early works by Ryman, who had his first one-person exhibition at the Paul Bianchini Gallery in 1967, but it is very likely that Ryman knew the older artists work from when he worked as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1953–60) and frequented the gallery scene.
7. The difference between Frank Stella and Robert Ryman is that the former approached painting as an ideal while the latter approached it pragmatically.
8. Arnason, p. 163.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
10. The parallels between the work of Motherwell and Twombly are properly the subject of another essay, which the author plans on writing.
11. Arnason, p. 171.

### Motherwell's *Opens*: Heidegger, Mallarmé, and Zen – Robert Hobbs

1. Originally, this essay was published under the name of Robert C. Hobbs as 'Robert Motherwell's *Open Series*,' in *Robert Motherwell*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf, Stadtische Kunsthalle, 1976), pp. 45–54. While this new version incorporates entire sections of the 1976 essay, which have been substantially edited and revised, it also contributes a discussion of Martin Heidegger's important essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' and Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry that were not part of the original piece.

During the academic year of 1975–76, while teaching art history at Yale University, I lived in Motherwell's guest house. Since my dissertation on his *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, written

under the helpful direction of Donald Kuspit, was completed in the spring of 1975, I had ample opportunity to continue my discussions with Motherwell in areas not previously covered. One of these was his *Open* series, which culminated in an essay that was published in conjunction with his first European retrospective. Motherwell read my essay and suggested putting in italics certain words and passages that seemed to him particularly relevant to his way of working and thinking. Since these italicised passages reflect his emphasis and thus are part of the history of the essay, I have decided to leave them in the text, even though it has been necessary at times to change the verb tenses.

2. Because so much of the background information for the *Opens* comes from ongoing conversations with Motherwell over the 1975–76 academic year, I decided not to footnote individual conversations but to rely on the general knowledge accrued from our discussions and the fact that Motherwell read over the essay and approved all the factual references included in it as true.

A reversed canvas placed against a larger work is the basis for Jasper Johns' *Souvenir*, 1964, which Motherwell may well have seen, but there is no reason to assume that this work was a source for the *Opens*, even though the comparison is a compelling one. My thanks to Timothy Andrus for bringing this comparison to my attention.

3. H.H. Arnason, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1977), p. 163.

4. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964).

5. As an example of the widespread significance academic philosophers attributed to Heidegger's aesthetic views as both cutting-edge and state of the art philosophy, it is worth recounting that in 1967, the same year Motherwell initiated the *Opens*, I was enrolled in an undergraduate course in aesthetics at the University of Tennessee (Knoxville). Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' was one of the main texts studied in this class, which devoted several weeks to reading and discussing it.

6. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in Hofstadter and Kuhns, eds, p. 675.



7. Hans Jaeger, 'Heidegger and the Work of Art,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 17, No. 1 (September, 1958), p. 71.

8. This complex idea is evident in Heidegger's statement, 'The earth is not simply the Closed but rather than which rises up as self-closing.' Heidegger, p. 680.

9. Henry Weinfield, introduction to Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), p. xiii.

10. Robert Motherwell, 'Black or White,' preface to the catalogue of an exhibition at the Kootz Gallery, New York [1950] in Stephanie Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 72.

11. Robert Motherwell, 'Painters' Objects,' *Partisan Review*, *Art Chronicle* (January 1944); reprint Terenzio, ed., p. 24 (page references from the reprint edition). Writing of Mondrian in this essay, Motherwell concludes:

We are much more interested in the structure of reality [than Renaissance artists were], or – if you object to the philosophical implication, you English-speaking people with your conventional notion that art is principally a question of beauty – what interest us is the structure of painting, not the appearance of the 'objects' of the external world. An empty canvas is more to the point, in being itself, an 'object,' and not merely an awkward image of 'real objects'; and is, moreover, as Kandinsky says, far lovelier than certain pictures. The problem is more nearly how not to lessen the original virginal loveliness of the canvas.

12. Mallarmé, 'The Virginal, Vibrant, and Beautiful Dawn,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 67.

13. Motherwell, 'Black or White,' in Terenzio, ed., p. 72.

14. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, reprint, 1965), p. 226.

15. Mallarmé, 'Preface' to 'A Throw of the Dice,' in *Collected Poems*, p. 121.

16. Weinfield, p. 164.

17. Ibid., p. 196.

18. William Barrett ed., *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1956), p. xi.

19. Stephen Addiss, 'Provisional Dualism: Robert Motherwell and Zen' in *Robert Motherwell on Paper: Drawings, Prints, Collages*,

ed. David Rosand, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia

University, 1997), pp. 59–81. Addiss, a specialist in Zen painting, focuses on Motherwell's later works on paper and more gestural approach to Zen (c. 1970s and '80s). Addiss's insightful formalist approach to traditional Zen painting and Motherwell's art differs from the more conceptual approach that my essay proposes.

20. The difficulty of this retrospective, curated by the poet Frank O'Hara, can be understood by looking at an installation shot of the gallery containing his *Elegies*. Hung together on the same wall, the paintings tended to cancel each other's force, turning the entire ensemble into a decorative and even slick assembly, whose overall effect was heightened by the reflections of these paintings in MoMA's highly polished floor. Cf. Arnason, plate 181, pp. 144–145.

21. In this regard it is important to point to Jasper Johns' early targets and the appealing book, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953) by Eugen Herrigel that was widely read at the time. Herrigel's book focuses on target practice as a long-sanctioned Japanese way to learn about Zen, making one wonder about the relevance of this book and Zen for Johns' work.

22. Elizabeth Gordon, 'We Invite You to Enter a New Dimension: *Shubui*' (editorial), *House Beautiful*, 102, No. 9 (August 1960), p. 88. In her editorial for this first issue on Japanese Zen-related interior design aesthetics, Gordon relates that *shubui* is an adjective, while *shibusu* is a noun. However, in her editorial and the essays appearing in both issues, the adjectival form is used as a noun. This is consequently the reason for my doing so here.

23. Van Meter Ames, 'Current Western Interest in Zen,' *Philosophy East and West*, 10, No. 1/2 (April–July, 1960), p. 23.

24. Ibid. p. 25.

25. Kenneth K. Inada, 'A Theory of Oriental Aesthetics: A Prolegomenon,' *Philosophy East and West*, 47, No. 2 (April 1997), pp. 120, 122.

26. Ibid. p. 125.

27. Ibid. p. 125.

28. Stephen Addiss reproduced this painting in his essay 'Provisional Dualism: Robert Motherwell and Zen,' p. 68. Addiss compares this work to Motherwell's lithograph *Brushstroke* (1979–80), and the comparison is compelling for the similarities between the two works, even

though the prominent brushstroke is horizontal in the Japanese painting and is vertical in Motherwell's print.

### The Dialectic of Open and Closed in Robert Motherwell's *Open Series* – Donald Kuspit

1. Robert Motherwell, 'A Process of Painting,' *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 140.

2. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crisis in Verse,' *Mallarmé*, ed. Anthony Hartley (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), p. 174.

3. Motherwell, 'Testimony Before the Select Subcommittee on Education,' p. 187.

4. Motherwell, 'Letter from Robert Motherwell to Frank O'Hara,' p. 151.

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 13.

6. Daniel Dervin, *Creativity and Culture: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Creative Process in the Arts, Sciences, and Culture* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 20.

7. Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present, 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 622.

8. H.H. Arnason, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Abrams, 1982, 2nd ed.), p. 113.

9. Hanna Segal, *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1991), pp. 41–42.

10. Arnason, p. 101. The poem is a response to Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series and the homages to Mallarmé, and the *Je t'aime* series, and a celebration of what Motherwell called 'the skin of the world, the sound of the world': 'art can be profound when the skin is used to express a judgment of values.'

11. Before he was an artist, Motherwell was a philosopher – his art can be understood as philosophical poetry, in George Santayana's sense of the term – and Whitehead was the philosopher who had the greatest influence on his idea of abstract art. It was Whitehead who taught Motherwell 'that correct abstraction is one of our most powerful, necessary, and efficacious modes of thought. It is a form of emphasis, as A.N. Whitehead said, of expressing what one wants to without being involved in everything else: '... superfluous details would, in the mind of the beholder, encroach upon the essential elements' (Matisse, 1908). Motherwell, p. 75. Whitehead's sentence

'The higher degree of abstraction the lower the degree of complexity' was 'of great help' to Motherwell, p. 142. He almost always sought philosophical and poetic precedent to just his own abstraction. The linking of Matisse with Whitehead shows that for Motherwell abstract art and abstract philosophy were inseparable. Apollinaire's notion of "a pure art"... anticipating an aesthetic notion of A.N. Whitehead's even shows that art could even lead the philosophical way.

Motherwell, p. 64. Motherwell's profound indebtedness to Whitehead is especially clear in his endorsement of Whitehead's 'beautiful' description of creativity: 'Creativity is the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendental fact. It is the flying dart, of which Lucretius speaks, hurled beyond the bounds of knowledge.' This is not a specifically French or American experience, but inherent in the universe's structure.' Motherwell, p. 67. It is the flying dart of Cupid, as Lucretius says. Can one read the lines of Motherwell's rectangles as the throbbing darts of erotic desire, converging to form a once loved person, who looks primitive because she is the object of primitive love? It is a person from Motherwell's past, reappearing in the abstract form of the screen memory which the rectangle of the *Open* series is. It seems that childhood amnesia can only be lifted when the beloved personages of one's childhood are transmuted into the aesthetic gold of abstract symbols.

12. Hartley, p. ix. Motherwell, p. 217 quotes Mallarmé's remark. It has a certain relationship to Simonides's remark, which Motherwell quotes in 'A Process of Painting': 'Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting with the gift of speech', p. 138.

13. Ibid. p. 191–192.

14. Ibid. p. 198.

15. Analysing Mallarmé's 'swan' sonnet, Wallace Fowlie, *Mallarmé* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1953), p. 99 writes that 'the swan is a spectre because his whiteness merges with the colour of the snow and ice... The neck of the swan is free above the ice, but if it is undying... the body is held under the ice. The freedom of the air has been replaced by the frozen lake, once another element of freedom, but which has become, with the advent of winter, a prison. Since the fight is waged between two degrees of whiteness: the winter frost and the plumage, the scene takes on the aspect of a fantasy, of

a spectral silenced combat.' Fowlie adds, p. 100: 'The image is so mythic, so charged with the oldest desire of man to rise above the world of matter to which he is chained, and to become a pure spirit, angelic and bird-like, that we are able to recognise in it a monument to existence itself, an epitaph in the form of a metaphor into which the adventure of destiny is condensed.' The same can be said of Motherwell's *Open* series.

16. Arnason, p. 112.

17. It is worth noting that the earliest known 'art' is 'a geometric design' etched 'in the flat surface' of a 'piece of reddish brown stone, simple crosshatchings framed by two parallel lines with a third down the middle.' 'The scratchings on this piece of red ochre mudstone are the oldest known example of an intricate design made by a human being.' It is seventy-seven thousand years old, and 'could have been a religious object, an ornament or just an ancient doodle.' Guy Gugliotta, 'The Great Human Migration,' *Smithsonian*, 39/4 (July 2008), pp. 57–58. Motherwell's rectangle is even more primitive and simple – two parallel lines connected by a third line, with no crosshatchings between them suggesting that it touches a deeper creative nerve. It is certainly more poignantly abstract – a distillation of the picture frame itself, as well as the window frames of Matisse's open interiors, which derive the intimately closed interiors of Vuillard. They can be traced back to Baudelaire's poem *Les Fenêtres*, which probably also influenced Delaunay's series of paintings with that name, and, perhaps, the rectangle of Motherwell's *Open* series. If 'one of the most striking aspects of abstract art's appearance is her nakedness, an art stripped bare' (Motherwell, p. 86), then the open rectangle is completely naked, unlike the ancient geometric design – its nakedness is shielded by the crosshatchings. It conveys 'the reality of insight' – 'interior reality' – undisguised by the 'reality of sight' Apollinaire's words, quoted approvingly by Motherwell, p. 64. Clearly the open rectangle is the most naked of Motherwell's abstract personages, indicating that the *Open* series is the purest art Motherwell ever made, and as such the climactic statement of his abstraction.

19. Motherwell, p. 216, was 'sympathetic' to Baudelaire's 'theory of correspondences,' noting that 'part of what art is consists of finding correspondences that are unexpected

to the ordinary eye.' He also quoted Baudelaire, p. 23: 'The study of the beautiful is a duel in which the artist cries out in terror before he is vanquished' – a remark which lives on in the famous lines of Rilke's First Duino Elegy: 'beauty we can barely endure, because it is nothing but terror's herald; and we worship it so because it serenely disdains to destroy us.' This might be the motto of Motherwell's *Open* series.

20. For Mallarmé rhythm was the saving grace of the sea, indicating it was not entirely a matter of chance, or rather that chance had a certain rhythm to it, like the waves that seemed to appear by chance but moved in rhythmic unison.

21. For Duchamp, 'The "blank" force of Dada was very salutary. It told you "don't forget you are not quite so blank as you think you are".' Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 394. Motherwell knew Duchamp, and was influenced by his theory and practice of art. Unexpectedly, Motherwell (p. 52) linked him with Mondrian (they are linked by their 'rejections,' 'negations'). Motherwell was influenced by the ideas and works of every artist he included in the 'Documents of 20th Century Art' series he edited, suggesting his own ideas and works are a grand synthesis of modernism.

22. In his 1954 lecture on 'Symbolism,' Motherwell states 'that "adequate symbolisation depends on adequate consciousness", p. 103.

23. Motherwell, p. 217. Motherwell was psychoanalysed, and knew the basic ideas of psychoanalysis, as well as the use to which surrealism put them. He was not opposed to applied psychoanalysis, so long as it was 'adequate,' like George Painter's psychoanalytic study of Proust, p. 153. He notes that David Smith saw Ernst Kris, the author of *Psychoanalytic Explorations of Art* – which Motherwell probably read – but that it was too late to save Smith from himself, p. 153.

24. Motherwell, p. 139.

25. Ibid. One can't help thinking that Wilhelm Worringer's famous *Abstraction and Empathy* – which was first published in the United States by a psychoanalytic press – had a profound influence on Motherwell's thinking about his art. It is clearly an attempt to integrate abstraction and empathy – to create an empathic abstract art.

26. Fowlie, p. 31 notes the importance of the 'symbol of the blue sky' for Mallarmé, and, at

the same time, his fascination with what Fowle calls the 'metaphysics of night,' that is, 'the theme of absence or vacuity,' which is his 'richest theme', p. 63. The luminous blue and elegiac blackness of Motherwell's paintings symbolise the same extremes of contradictory feeling. They 'mystically' unite in the *Open* series, even as they remain at odds.

27. 'The ethical concept as expressed by Kierkegaard hit me,' Motherwell said (214). He quoted at length Kierkegaard's idea of the ethical, p. 103: 'it can teach a man... to venture everything for nothing, to risk everything, and also therefore to renounce the flattery of the world-historical... a daring venture is not a tumultuous shriek, however reckless, but a quiet consecration which makes sure of nothing beforehand, but risks everything... dare, dare to become nothing at all, to become a particular individual.' Motherwell 'believe[d] profoundly in Kierkegaard's three stages, aesthetic, ethico-religious, and religious,' noting that 'the aesthetic can embody ethical decisions,' and adding that Kierkegaard 'is right when he says faith always involves risking "venturing out upon 70,000 fathoms of water": that real thought can only be real (or transcendent) in the absurd paradox', p. 111.

28. Motherwell, p. 86.

29. D.W. Winnicott, 'Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self' (1960), *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), p. 148, writes: 'True Self is the theoretical position from which comes the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea. The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real.' One can say that Motherwell's whole artistic effort was to become an increasingly True Self, thus avoiding becoming a False Self, which 'results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility,' as Winnicott says. But a sense of nightmarish unreality informs his *Spanish Elegies*, and futility lingers in the space of his *Open* series.

30. Segal, p. 35.

31. Ibid., p. 48.

32. See Segal, pp. 50–51 for an account of the transformative function of the 'container-breast.' It has lost its organic roundness and naturalness (and with that its warmth, however much Motherwell tries to warm it up with his feelings), as the flat lines of Motherwell's stern abstract

rectangle show, confirming the inability to contain its openness blatantly announces.

33. Motherwell, p. 8.

### Robert Motherwell: The Poetic Vision – Mel Gooding

Abbreviations: RM: Robert Motherwell; CW: *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio, (University of California Press, 1999); Arnason: *Robert Motherwell*. Text by H. H. Arnason, Introduction by Dore Ashton, Interview with RM by Barbaralee Diamondstein (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York, Revised Edition, 1982); JF: *Motherwell* by Jack Flam (Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1991) Robert Motherwell is quoted from the following essays, letters, notes and interviews (italic emphasis is always as in the original): 'Painters' Objects', January 1944 (quotes Picasso) (CW p. 23); interview with David Hayman, 12 and 13 July 1988 (apropos illustrations for *Ulysses*) (CW p. 282); letter to Andrew Hoyem, 1987 (quoted CW p. 283); 'On Rothko', March 1967 (CW p. 195); 'The Book's Beginnings', 1972 (apropos *A la pintura*, the initiation of the *Open* series and its iconography, the *Random House Dictionary* (CW p. 210); 'The Significance of Miró', May 1959 (apropos automatism, Matisse's brushwork, etc.) (CW p. 115); preface to *possibilities* 1 winter 1947–48 (CW p. 45); letter to Edward Henning, 18 October 1978 (apropos automatism as a 'creative principle' etc.) (CW p. 230); 'RM: A Conversation at Lunch' Nov 1962 (apropos 'accidents' in painting) (CW p. 136); 'What Abstract Art Means to Me', 5 February 1951 (quotes Whitehead, and on 'need for felt experience...') (CW p. 86); interview with Richard Wagener, June 14 1974 (apropos 'direct and indirect correspondences', 'my orange picture') (CW p. 214); 'Preliminary Notice to Marcel Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*', 1949 (CW p. 70); conversations with Jack Flam (JF pp. 11, 18); letter to Bruce Grenville, 4 February 1982 (apropos Matisse, and 'visual education') (CW p. 250); note to *The Persian No. 1* (August 4, 1974) (apropos Matisse and 'the Parisian mode') (Arnason p. 196); 'Beyond the Aesthetic', April, 1946 (apropos 'pure' colour...) (CW p. 38). The epigraph from Delacroix's *Journals* is excerpted from his entry for Thursday, 20 October 1853. Baudelaire is quoted extensively from *The Salon of 1859*, section IV 'The Governance of the

Imagination' (in *Baudelaire: Art in Paris 1845–1862*, trans. and ed. Jonathon Mayne, Phaidon Press, London 1965). Dore Ashton wrote of Baudelaire's 'irremediable modernity' in an introductory essay contributed to *Baudelaire's Voyages: The Poet and his Painters* by Jeffrey Coven (Little, Brown and Company, Boston etc. 1993). Ben Belitt edited and translated *Rafael Alberti: Selected Poems* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1966). Alberti is quoted from 'A Paintbrush' p. 179. After completing *a la pintura* Motherwell's *Alberti Suite* of mostly black *Open* paintings continued his engagement with the work of the Spanish poet, especially with the poem 'Black'. In 1981–83 he responded to Alberti's 1980 tribute, 'El Negro Motherwell', with *El Negro* (1981–83), an artist's book of nineteen original lithographs. The relevant page from *The Random House Dictionary, The Unabridged Edition* (Random House Inc. 1966) is reproduced in Arnason p. 80, and 'set on separate lines' as Motherwell imagined it might be, *ibid.* p. 164. Breton tells the story of Saint-Pol-Roux in the First Manifesto of Surrealism (1924). On Motherwell and James Joyce see especially *Robert Motherwell: A Dialogue with Literature* (Galerie Bernd Klüser München, Munich 2001).