

**EMBODIED PAINTING**

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**ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE GUTAI GROUP**



# AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

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- ▶ Completely non-objective (no representational imagery)
- ▶ Improvised technique- no preplanned composition
- ▶ Emphasis is not on the end product but rather the process: not about the "image on the canvas" but the actions that go into making the image



Jackson Pollock

*Blue Poles*

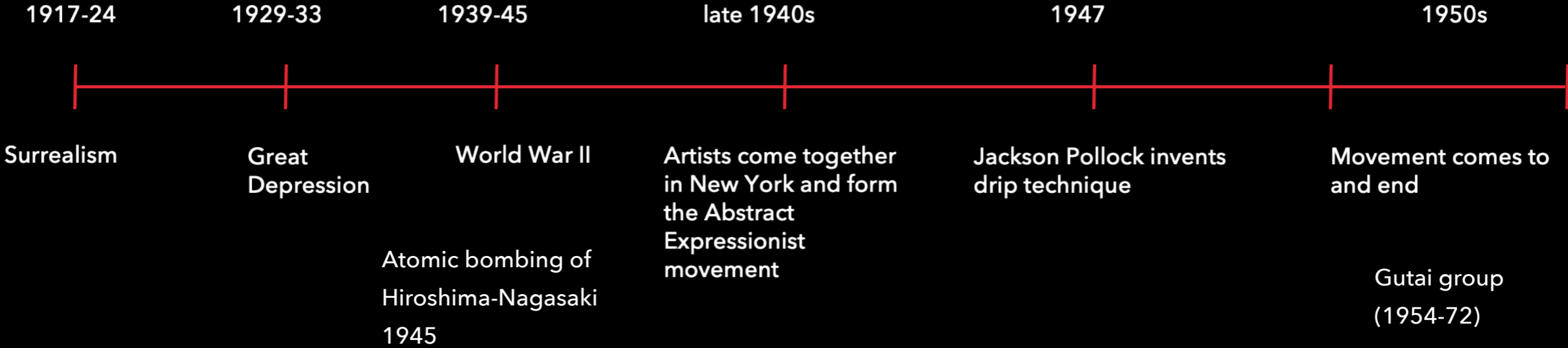
enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas

1952

(National Gallery of Australia)

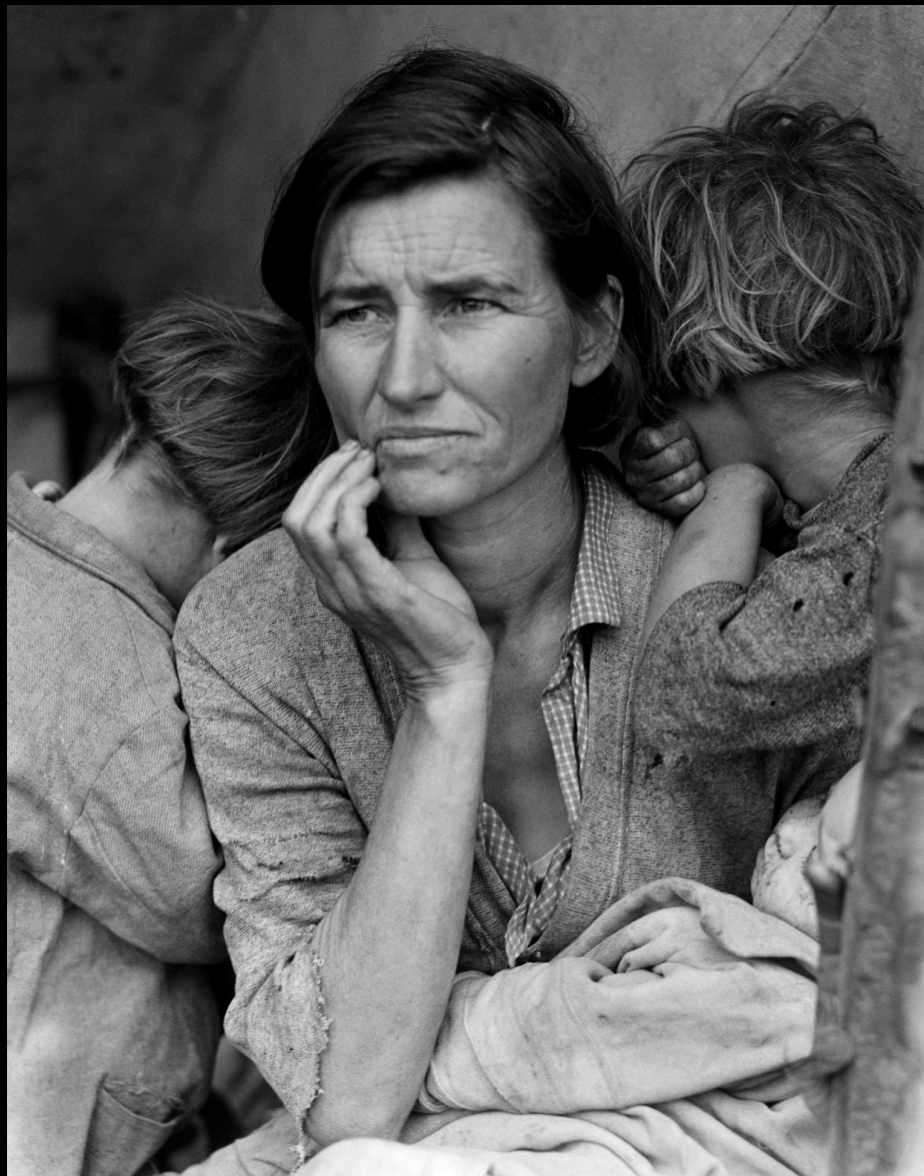
# TIMELINE

Surrealist artists start migrating from Europe to USA



Social realism was an art movement, associated with the era of the Great Depression in the US (roughly the 1930s), that depicted **the everyday realities of life**.

Social realism was critical of the social, economic, and racial conditions that made life challenging for the working classes and poor (like some works of the Harlem Renaissance)



*Migrant Mother, Dorothea Lange, 1936*



*Demonstration, Ben Shahn, 1933*

# Key Characteristics

- ▶ Political instability in Europe in the 1930s brought several leading Surrealists to New York.
- ▶ influenced by Surrealism's focus on the **unconscious**: saw painting as a struggle between self-expression and subconscious
- ▶ Two main styles: **gestural work** (Pollock and de Kooning: dynamic and energetic brushwork) and the **color fields** (Rothko: subtle color harmonies and simple compositions)
- ▶ The emphasis was on the **action** of the painters, **not the end product** of the painting.
- ▶ Although the movement has been largely depicted throughout historical documentation as one belonging to the paint-splattered, heroic male artist, there were several important female Abstract Expressionists during the 1940s and '50s who now receive credit as elemental members of the canon.

# AUTOMATISM

The process of creating art without conscious thought, accessing material from the unconscious mind as part of the creative process



Joan Miró  
*Carnival of Harlequin*  
1924-25





# Action Painting

"At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."

—Harold Rosenberg (art critic and historian)

Hans Namuth  
*Jackson Pollock painting Autumn Rhythm*  
1950

“The photos and films helped transform Pollock from a talented, cranky loner into the first media-driven superstar of American contemporary art, the jeans-clad, chain-smoking poster boy of abstract expressionism.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bICqvmKL5s>



Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock

"I'm more at ease. I feel more a part of the painting since this way I can walk around it, walk from all four sides and literally be in the painting." -Jackson Pollock



Jackson Pollock

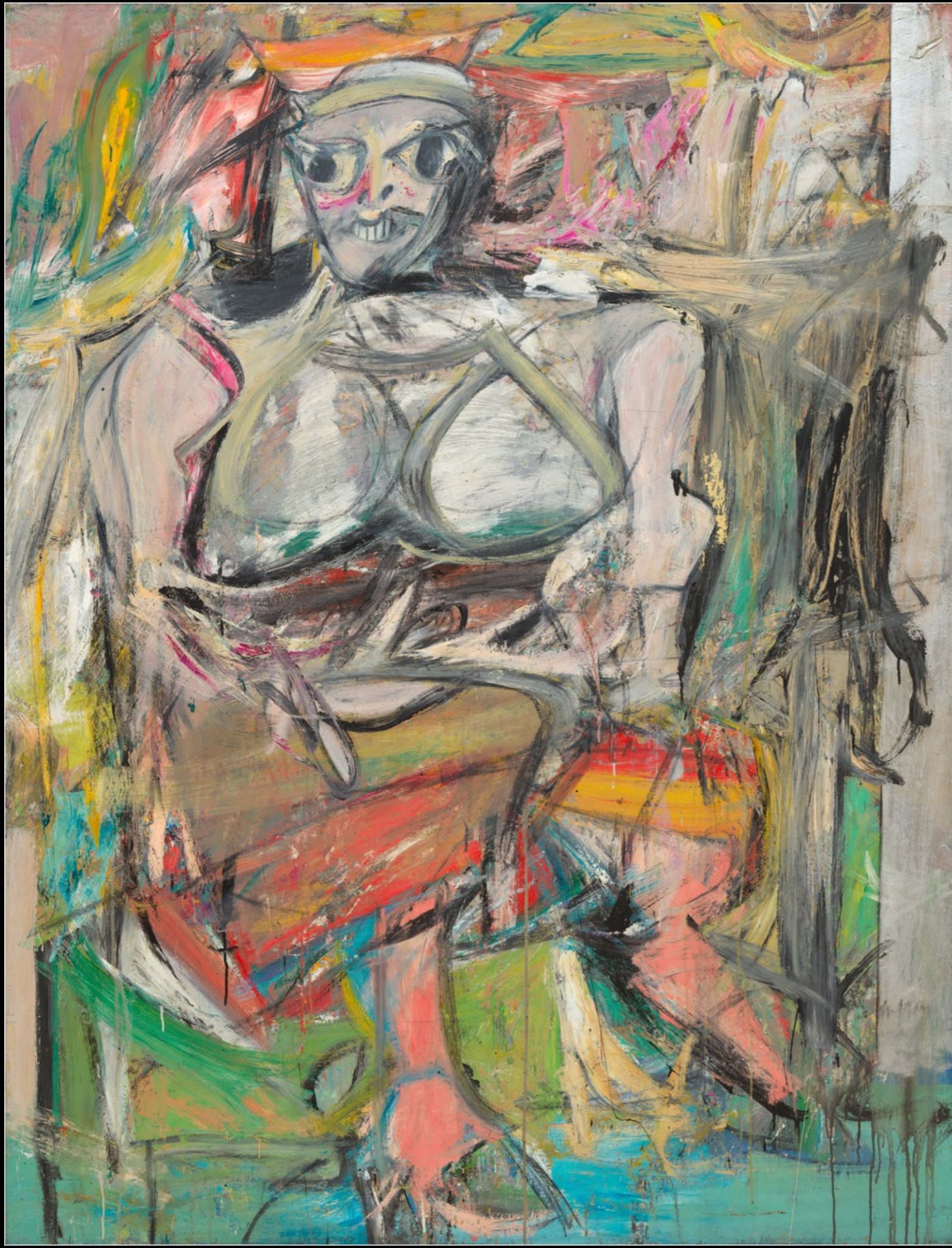
*One: Number 31, 1950*

Oil and enamel paint on canvas

Collection of MoMA



Jackson Pollock  
*White Light*  
1954



“Beauty becomes petulant  
to me. I like the grotesque.  
It's more joyous.”  
-Willem de Kooning

Willem de Kooning  
*Woman I*  
1950-52



Lee Krasner Noon 1947 Oil on linen

# The Soak-Stain technique— Helen Frankenthaler's process

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBKNifpTSFk>





Helen Frankenthaler  
*Jacob's Ladder*  
1957



**Color field:** A movement characterized primarily by large fields of flat, solid color spread across or stained into the canvas creating areas of unbroken surface and a flat picture plane. The movement places less emphasis on gesture, brushstrokes and action in favour of an overall consistency of form and process.





Mark Rothko  
No. 5/No. 22  
1950  
Oil on canvas  
Collection of MoMA



Mark Rothko

Untitled

1969

Acrylic on paper

Collection of the Tate

## The question of scale

“I paint big to be intimate.” –Mark Rothko

The emphasis is on the personal (authentic expression of the individual) rather than the grandiose.





# JAPANESE GUTAI GROUP

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# Historical Context



The Gutai group formed by Jiro Yoshihara in Japan in 1954

# Key characteristics of Gutai

- ▶ During World War II, Japan's totalitarian regime promoted totalising nationalistic ideas and suppressed any individual expression.
- ▶ Emerging in the postwar period, Gutai therefore emphasised **individualism** in their works. "Never imitate others: make something that has never existed before." -Jiro Yoshihara
- ▶ **Gu (tool) Tai (body)**: sought to use the body as a tool for mark making and connect the use of material with action
- ▶ They believed in **concept over form**, and entirely rejecting representative art.
- ▶ They wanted to move away from the emphasis on the physical art object towards the invisible world of ideas and philosophies.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xCg79GrWaM>



Kazuo Shiraga in his studio





Kazuo Shiraga , Work II, Oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 1958

"Performance Painting"



Kazuo Shiraga

*Challenge to the Mud*

Performance

1955



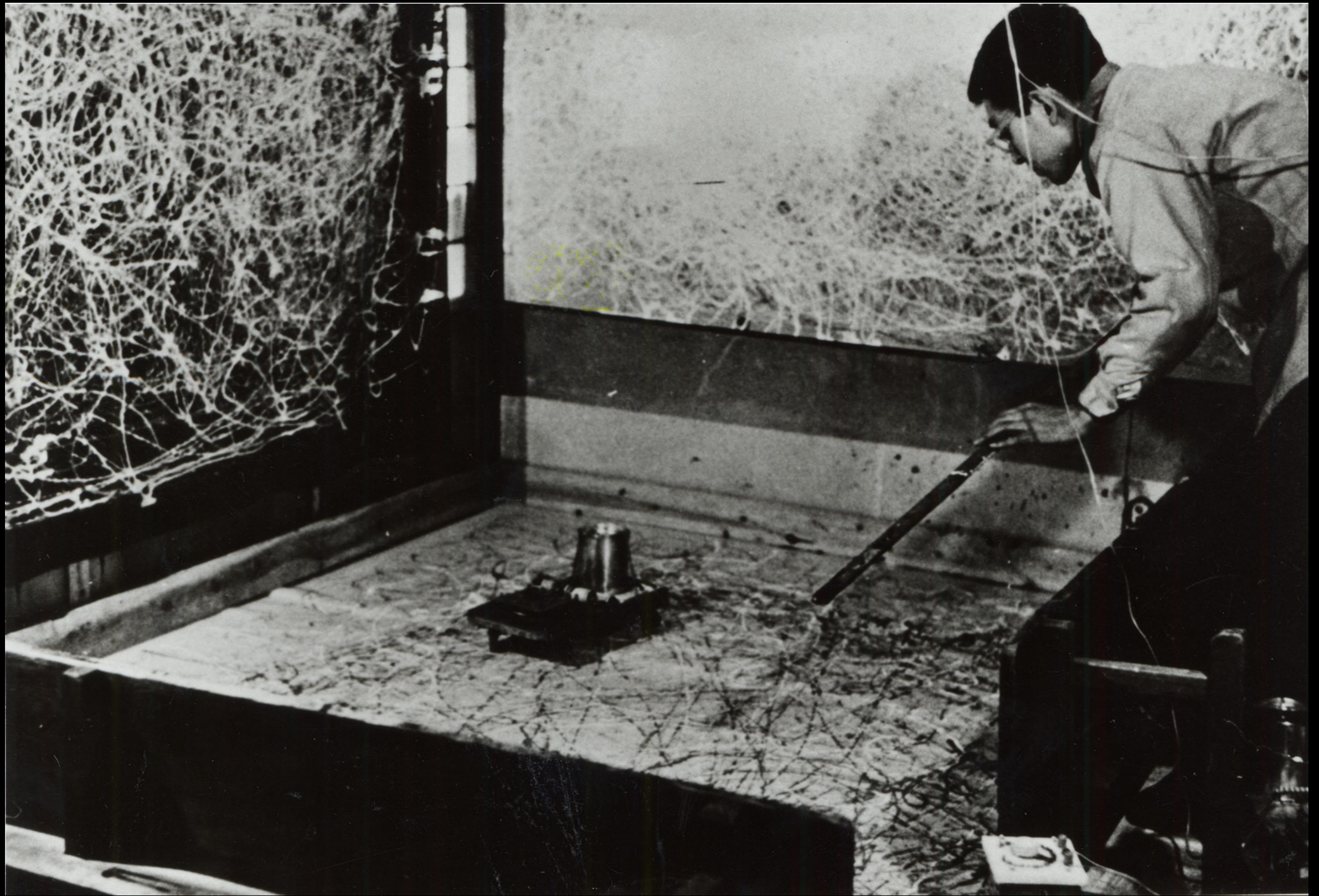
Saburō Murakami  
Laceration of Paper  
1956



**SHOZO SHIMAMOTO** making a painting by hurling glass bottles of paint against a canvas at the "2nd Gutai Art Exhibition," Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, c. October 11-17, 1956



**SHOZO SHIMAMOTO**, *Work*, 1955



Akira Kanayama

*Work*

1957

## ADDITIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS:

Compilation of Gutai performances: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH2RFsfcpT4>

Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, NY

*Gutai: Splendid Playground*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY25hyMx8z0>

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ▶ Is the "process" more important than the "product"?
- ▶ How do we address the "lack of skill"
- ▶ How does the absence of an image affect your analyses?
- ▶ How do we experience the remnants of a performance after its time?

## GLOSSARY

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**Abstract:** A term generally used to describe art that is not representational or based on external reality or nature.

**Action painting:** Art critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term "action painting" in 1952 to describe the work of artists who painted using bold gestures that engaged more of the body than traditional easel painting. Often the viewer can see broad brushstrokes, drips, splashes, or other evidence of the physical action that took place upon the canvas.

**Allover painting:** A canvas covered in paint from edge to edge and from corner to corner, in which each area of the composition is given equal attention and significance.

**Expressionism:** Encompasses varying stylistic approaches that emphasize intense personal expression. As Expressionism evolved from the beginning of the 20th century through the early 1920s, its crucial themes and genres reflected deeply humanistic concerns and an ambivalent attitude toward modernity, eventually confronting the devastating experience of World War I and its aftermath.

**Performance art:** A term that emerged in the 1960s to describe a diverse range of live presentations by artists, including actions, movements, gestures, and choreography

**Picture Plane:** The virtual, illusionary plane created by the artist, parallel to the physical surface of a two-dimensional work of art; the physical surface of a two-dimensional work of art, e.g. a painting, drawing, or print.

**Scale:** The ratio between the size of an object and its model or representation, as in the scale of a map to the actual geography it represents.