Neurology And Art: Willem De Kooning

The extent to which disease interacts with artistic abilities has always been a topic of great interest and in this new series we explore this in the world of art. Many famous artists have suffered from neurological conditions, which in some way have altered their work, whether it be through some alteration in end organ function (e.g. Monet and his eyes) or some more central cause (e.g. Goya). In all cases there is a fascinating and unique insight into the effects of diseases of the nervous system on an individual, and their expression through the evolving and changing visual works produced. In the first article in this new series we consider Willem de Kooning and his work and the effects that his late onset dementia had on this.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century America became a locus of global cultural activity. Europe, which had previously housed and nurtured the avant-garde within the bohemian setting of modern Paris, had become socially ruptured by World War Two. The Nazi occupation of Paris had left a culture fractured by political disparity, with different facets fighting a philosophical battle over questions surrounding social responsibility. America, meanwhile, was experiencing unprecedented levels of strength. An economic boom impelled the growing consumer society and capital ideology began to lead the world into a new era of commoditisation.

Contemporary culture found itself disoriented by the rapidly changing bureaucratic structures. The preceding artistic styles of Cubism and Surrealism were underpinned by political ideologies veering on the far-left. In the wake of the war, hope of a communist nirvana had shattered, with Stalin’s Russia exemplifying the potential evil of the left wing. For Willem De Kooning and his contemporaries, among them Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell, art had its most obvious avenues of progression blocked off. These artists, later categorised as the Abstract Expressionists, responded by internalising their artistic concerns, with a privileged emphasis placed on painterly abstraction as the ratified expression of the self. Their aspiration was to enact an unabated interaction with the canvas, sourcing a universal creative drive latent within human consciousness. Motherwell concisely summarised the idea with his assertion that ‘painting is… the mind realising itself in colour and space’.2 Newman augmenting this with his use of shape as a ‘vehicle for an abstract thought complex, a carrier of… awesome feelings’.3 Stylistically, this led the artists to work on expansive canvases, characterised by a dynamic use of colour. De Kooning was to become the figurehead of Abstract Expressionism par excellence, his popularity in the forties paving the way for others and forming the erudite counterpart to the bohemian explosiveness of Pollock.

Much of the early work of Abstract Expressionism grapples with the transition of the avant-garde from Europe to America, and De Kooning was no exception. Pink Angels (1945) with its biomorphic shapes and fluid composition reveals an artist heavily under the influence of Surrealist painter Yves Tanguy. After a series of black and white abstractions, it was in the work Excavation (1950) that De Kooning most clearly established a more idiosyncratic style for himself. The work is hardly free of a European and modernist approach to art; the modulated structure of Excavation is highly reminiscent of Cubism whilst the attempt to manifest unconscious thought through unrestrained spontaneity nods to the popularity of Surrealism. Here, however, De Kooning has fused the two into something unique, with the catalyst being a distinctly American sensibility. The title references the new building work undertaken by a newly mone
ment, De Kooning pictorially describes the relationship between the objectified figure and the painter, a subject implicitly framed by the objectification of femininity throughout commercial America. De Kooning’s semiotics make explicit the shared unconscious forces at work in each scenario, that of a physical longing overwrought with sexual anxiety, an idea possibly gleaned from the current popularity of Sigmund Freud at that time. In a broader sense, De Kooning’s Woman decried the end of modernist painting, taking a subject of perennial artistic interest, and implanting it across the canvas. A new era was being ushered in and art was swept along with it, moving away from exhausted conventions and towards pure abstraction. De Kooning, however, mercilessly forged a new identity for traditional painting, the Woman series providing the highly charged response to the dilemma faced by art and serving as the nail in the coffin for modernism.

Whilst De Kooning’s early abstractions lie at a pivotal point within the vicissitudes of art history, his later works form indexical reference points to an artist clinging to his fading mental faculties. The progression of the artist’s Alzheimer’s throughout the eighties accompanied abrupt changes in style, raising questions on the extent to which the new works should be considered ‘authentic’ De Koonings. At the start of the decade, the artist had moved away from some early experimentation with sculpture, to painting untitle abstracts that blended naturalistic hues of colour, seemingly inspired by his new surroundings of East Hampton. Here was an artist staying true to his attempt of ‘slipping’ into a glimpse, taking Monet as a point of departure and dissolving recognisable shapes into an immense experience of organic colour. In 1982, De Kooning suddenly began rapidly reducing his style, painting smaller works with far fewer brush strokes. An artist who had taken two years to finish his first Woman painting began producing a worryingly high number of works, doubling his work rate in 1983 by completing fifty-four works in just one year. Incidents such as an infamous encounter with the president in which De Kooning did not recognize the American leader (and on being told who he had met afterwards, merely remarked ‘geez, I knew he looked familiar’), revealed the full severity of his condition. The new work began to garner uniformly bad reviews, with Time magazine describing them as ‘a lot of banality and parody, conscious or not’. Yet, De Kooning had not completely lost control of his aesthetic judgment. In 1983 the artist’s wife, Elaine, worried that his palette was becoming too limited throughout the proliferation of new works, bought new tubes of paint, which she surreptitiously left with his favoured colours, only to find them unused several weeks later. In some ways then, late paintings by De Kooning exhibit the ultimate extension of the artist’s aesthetic theory. The contact with a deep rooted creative force that survived beyond a coherent understanding of the external world, demonstrate the unconscious forces De Kooning contrived to harness in his early life. Critically lauded or not, his last works stand as a testament to the enduring presence of one of the last century’s great artists and the creative will of the individual triumphing over its own destitution.

This last phase of his life with its greatly increased output has drawn comments from others, not only as to whether he truly had Alzheimer’s disease (AD) (as opposed to depression, Wernicke’s encephalopathy, etc) but also as to the extent to which a brain undergoing a neurodegenerative process can continue to generate meaningful works. If the brain cannot remember simple events nor hold coherent conversations or thoughts, then how can the art it generates have anything to say? Art that takes as its origins some sort of social context for its content cannot surely be regarded as making any profound statement if the author of it has an advancing dementia. Of course disease and its treatment can bring out creativity but they can also rob it of its content. Does this describe the later works of De Kooning or does his art not require the conscious, cognitive processes stored in those parts of the brain affected by the evolving AD process? We will return to this theme in this series as we consider the lives and neurological conditions of other famous artists.

REFERENCES
3. Interview with the artist: Robert Hughes The Shock of the New, Episode 6: the view from the edge (London: BBC, 1986)