

# ADDRESSING DE KOONING

One of the great beauties of the City is its palimpsest nature. That is to say, the way the stories and dreams of our predecessors propel themselves into the present - be it in material fact or a knowing in the heart.



Excavation, 1950

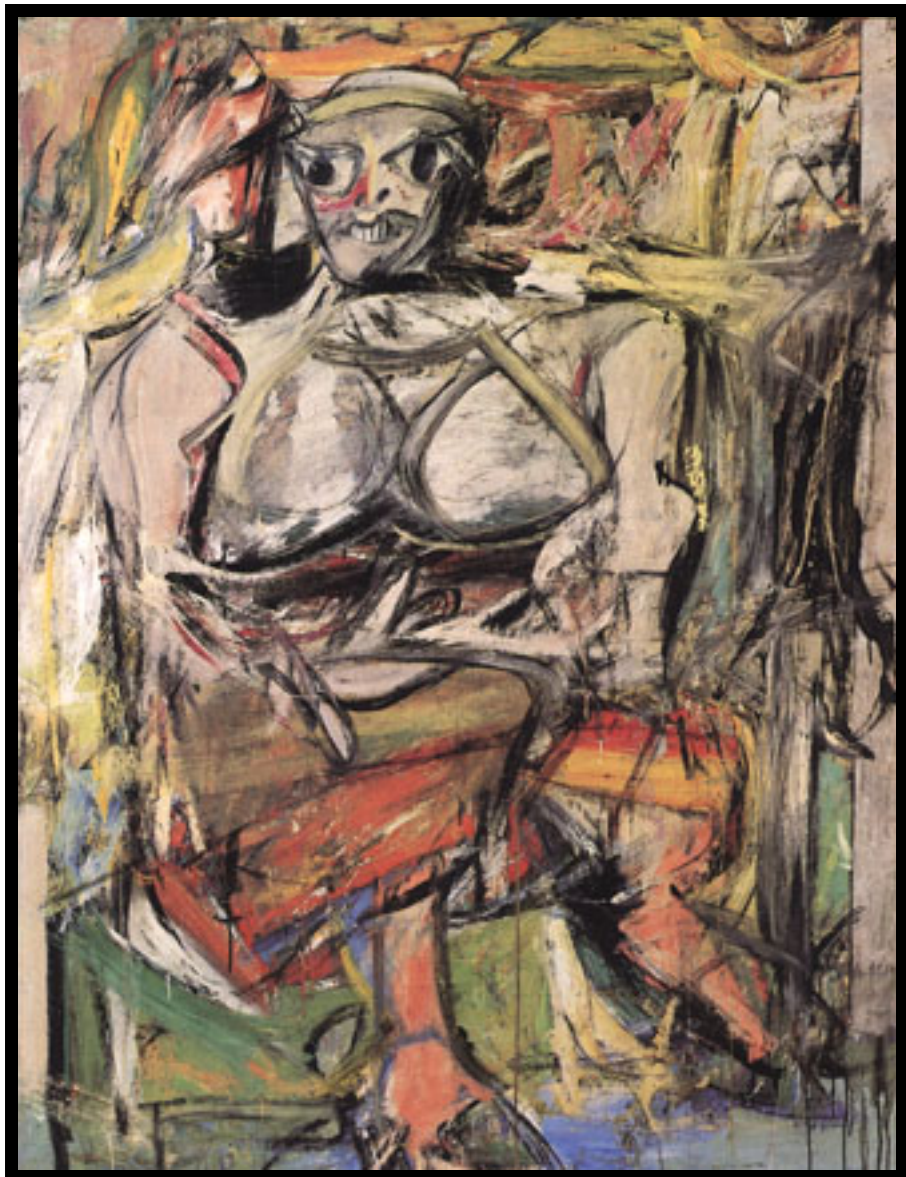
The artist Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) constructed his paintings similarly - allowing previous incarnations, traces of discarded tangents and struggle to remain visible in his finished compositions. Much of his work's lingering power derives from this honoring of each painting's history - and, by extension, the history of the painter who painted it.

Between 1946 and 1952, de Kooning maintained a studio on the second floor of a former storefront at **85 Fourth Avenue**. The space was deep, dark and unheated. One big window overlooked the street.

It was here that de Kooning created his second series of Women paintings and his black and white abstractions of the late 40s - a mode that culminated with the triumph of *Excavation*. Of that painting, his biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, write:

"In *Excavation*, de Kooning took upon himself the European clash of styles. For decades, the art of painting had seesawed between expressionist impulses and classical reserve, between the rational and the irrational. In particular, cubism and surrealism presented two contrasting alternatives, one depending upon geometry and the grid, the other upon the looser form of dreams. *Excavation* was a magisterial synthesis of these two claims on modern truth. To de Kooning's circle, cubism represented not only a certain way of organizing space, but also a responsibility to make a well-constructed picture; a painter should submit to the discipline of history and school the 'self' through rigorous analysis of painters (such as the cubists) who perpetuated the tradition. Surrealism, by contrast, presented the 'self' as a tradition of one. The surrealist found authority in private dreams rather than in any adherence to the past. In his black-and-white paintings and above all in *Excavation*, de Kooning created a powerfully poised style that integrated the rigorous detachment of cubist structure with the personal drive and spontaneity of surrealism. If the surrealist in de Kooning rattled the bars of cubism's cage, the cubist in him insisted upon order's measure. Few paintings in the history of art conveyed such respect for history, order, and tradition while still celebrating the spontaneity of the moment."<sup>1</sup>

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Woman I, c. 1950-52

society if art now sought to leave behind the personal brushstroke and flirt with infinite spaces? With *Woman I*, de Kooning began to place enormous pressure upon both the conventions of painting and upon the romantic cult of the individual, not to destroy them, as later artists and critics felt driven to do, but to preserve them. In *Woman I*, he celebrated, with "go to hell" conviction, his know-how, his love for the idiosyncratic brushstroke, and his devotion to traditional iconographies"<sup>2</sup>

1. Stevens, Mark, and Annalyn Swan. *de Kooning: An American Master*. New York, Knopf, 2004, pg. 295-6  
 2. Ibid., pg. 341-2.



de Kooning in his 85 4th Avenue studio (1946).

Photo credit: Harry Bowden

In June of 1950, in the immediate afterglow of *Excavation*, de Kooning commenced on what was to become the maddening years-long struggle that produced *Woman I*. A half century later, still able to shock and still elusive of definitive meaning, *Woman I* has generated tomes of exegeses. Stevens and Swan contribute:

"There is a final desperation in *Woman I*, one that has grown more poignant over time. In 1952, de Kooning sensed that the possibilities for painting in the last half of the twentieth century were narrowing. What were the great formal issues that might yet stimulate major work once cubism and surrealism were brought together in *Excavation* - and transcended in the manner of Pollock, Rothko and Newman? And what was to become of the individual self in modern

Next  
 Stop?  
 Depends  
 which  
 way →  
 you're  
 walking.

MAP: Addressing de Kooning

