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January 27, 2021

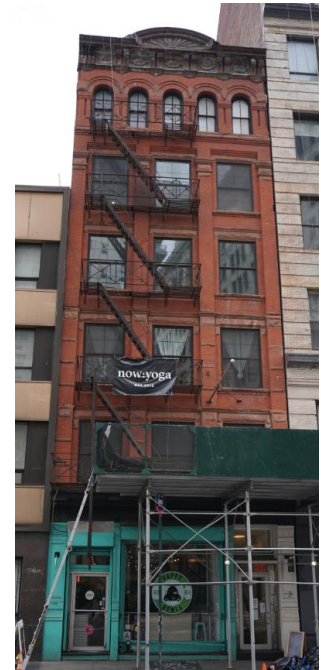
Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair  
NYC Landmarks Commission  
1 Centre Street, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10007

**Re: 61 Fourth Avenue, in the proposed historic district South of Union Square**

Dear Chair Carroll,

I write to share with you additional information we have uncovered regarding the historic significance of 61 Fourth Avenue, part of our proposed historic district south of Union Square. This intact, late 19<sup>th</sup> century structure was the studio of Robert Motherwell, one of the most significant figures of the Abstract Expressionist movement and 'New York School' of artists.

As per previous letters, other important figures were also deeply connected to 61 Fourth Avenue. As stated in our [October 31, 2019 letter](#), artist Robert Indiana (1928-2018), perhaps best known for his iconic LOVE sculpture, had his studio here in the mid-1950s. From 1959 to 1961, No. 61 Fourth Avenue housed Anita Reuben's *Reuben Gallery*, at which the first "happening," Allen Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, was staged. And iconoclastic [Grove Press](#) publisher Barney Rosset, one of the most important publishers of



the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lived here from at least 1981 until his death in 2012.

The six-story structure at 61 Fourth Avenue was built in 1889, designed by architect Benjamin E. Lowe for Mrs. Ellen R. Randell. Lowe was responsible for the design of a number of New York City landmarks, including 122 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in the South Village Historic District, 381 Lafayette Street in the NoHo Historic District, and 321 and 323 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street in the East 10<sup>th</sup> Street Historic District. No. 61 Fourth Avenue is a beautifully intact Romanesque Revival style building clad in brick with brownstone details. At the base, there is a cast iron storefront, and at the top floor are five round arched windows capped by a Queen Anne metal cornice with paired brackets.



Robert Motherwell, 1952

Our recent research has established that the building was also the home of influential artist Robert Motherwell (1915-1991), who had a studio here during a critical period of his career, between 1949 and 1952. Along with other members of the New York School such as Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Philip Guston, Motherwell is considered one of the great American Abstract Expressionist painters. Credited by *The American Art Book* as being the most articulate of this group, Motherwell became

the theorist and leading spokesperson of the New York School. He did so through lectures, teachings and writings, all the while maintaining his own productive output of paintings, collages, and prints.

His series of abstract paintings referenced political, philosophical and literary themes, frequently employing black shapes against fields of color. He once said "painting is a medium in which the mind can actualize itself, it is a medium of thought." He developed relationships with European Surrealists and other intellectuals stemming from his interests in subjects beyond painting, such as poetry and philosophy. Consequently he served as a bridge between the pre-war avant-garde movement in Europe and the post-war Abstract Expressionist movement in New York. He established automatism and psychoanalysis as the focus of American abstraction. In 1991, art critic Clement Greenberg said of Motherwell: "in my opinion he was one of the very best of the Abstract Expressionist painters."

Born in 1915, Motherwell showed great interest in art at an early age, copying old masters' works as a child. In 1930 he enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, later matriculating at Stanford University and graduating with a B.A. in Philosophy. He went on to pursue a Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard, but during a trip to Paris he was convinced to study under Meyer Schapiro at Columbia and turn his attention to painting. Nevertheless his background and training in philosophy would always inform and undergird his artistic work. While studying at Columbia's graduate program in the Department of Art History and Archaeology, he lived at Rhineland Gardens (demolished) on West Eleventh Street in Greenwich Village, a few blocks west of 61 Fourth Avenue. During this time, he was introduced to Surrealist artists such as Kurt Seligmann, Matta, and Gordon Onslow-Ford at the New School of Social Research. In the summer of 1941, Motherwell dropped out of Columbia and pursued painting full time.

Shortly thereafter, Motherwell spent time in Mexico, where he created his ink drawings in the *Mexican Sketchbook* (Collection of the Museum of Modern Art), later moving to apartments at 8 Perry and 33 West 8<sup>th</sup> Street. By the autumn of 1942 he had been introduced to Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollack by William Baziotos. Other artists and mid-century luminaries whom Motherwell would come to interact with in New York included Max Ernst, [Anais Nin](#), Andre Breton, Hans Hofmann, Marcel Duchamp, and Peggy Guggenheim.



The Mexican Sketchbook, 1941, MOMA

In 1943, Guggenheim invited Motherwell, Pollock and Baziotos to make collages for an upcoming collection. Pollock welcomed Motherwell to work in his studio. At the urging of Matta, Motherwell would continue to work in the medium of collage in the years to come. Guggenheim included in her 'Exhibition of Collage' Motherwell's groundbreaking *Joy of Living*, which was purchased by Sadie A. May for the Baltimore Museum of Art -- Motherwell's first work to enter a museum collection. Following another trip to Mexico, Motherwell also created *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive*, which was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1944.

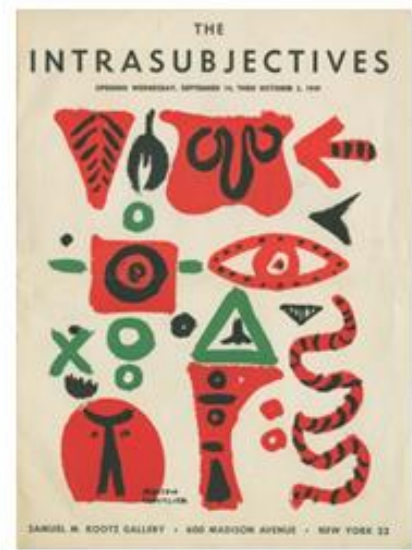


Joy of Living, 1943, [Dedalus Foundation](#)



Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive, 1943, [MOMA](#)

During this time, Motherwell began to lecture on art, and his writings on the subject were published in journals such as *Dyn* and *Partisan Review*. Additionally, he developed a series of writings contemplating contemporary art in collaboration with art critic Harold Rosenberg. He had his first solo exhibition at MOMA in 1944. In 1945, he signed a five-year contract with the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery and his work was featured in exhibitions in museums around the country. Alongside Baziotes, David Hare, Rothko and Clyfford Still, he started a school run by and for artists known as 'The Subjects of the Artist,' which helped cement the downtown art scene. In August of 1949, Motherwell traveled to Provincetown with Willem de Kooning, and delivered the talk "Reflections on Painting Now" as part of a symposium distinguishing between the emerging "New York School" and the "Paris School" of artists.





The Kootz Gallery, after a one-year hiatus, re-opened in 1949 at 600 Madison Avenue. Its first exhibition was *The Intrasubjectives*. The catalogue featured an essay by Harold Rosenberg, and brought together artists who would later be known as the Abstract Expressionists, including de Kooning, Gorky, Pollock, Rothko, Reinhardt, Tomlin Baziotes, Gottlieb, Hare, Hans Hofmann and Motherwell.



[“At Five in the Afternoon,” 1948=49, the first painted picture in the Elegy to the Spanish Republic series](#)

In 1948-49, during the time that Motherwell occupied his studio at 61 Fourth Avenue, he began his lengthy series of paintings, *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, which memorialized the lost Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. This homage to the victims of this war would be the theme of his works for decades to come, and consists of 150 variants of black forms on white backgrounds. He insisted that these paintings were not political, but rather his intent was to insure that those who lost their lives were not forgotten. During his time at 61 Fourth Avenue, his works included *At Five in the Afternoon* (1948-49), *The Voyage* (1948-49), *Madrid* (1950), *Wall of the Temple* (1951), and, *Wall of the Temple III* (1952). In 1950, Motherwell worked with the Architects' Collaborative led by Walter Gropius, and exhibited a maquette for a sixty-foot long mural for a junior high school in Attleboro, Massachusetts called *Mural Fragment*.

**Robert Motherwell  
School of Fine Art  
Painting,  
Drawing,  
Theory  
61 Fourth Ave., N. Y. C.  
Tues., Wed., 7-10 P. M.**

Following the closing of The Subjects of the Artist school, Motherwell started 'the Robert Motherwell School of Fine Art Painting, Drawing, Theory' at No. 61 Fourth Avenue in the autumn of 1949. Studio 35, under the leadership of three New York University professors -- Tony Smith, Hale Woodruff and Robert Iglehart -- opened at the former site of The Subjects of the Artists at 35 East 8<sup>th</sup> Street, and Motherwell continued his lectures there. Another group of artists, Philip Pavia, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, rented a studio next door at No. 33 East 8<sup>th</sup> Street, for their own public discussion space which they called 'The Club.' Initially its members were only artists, but eventually it would expand to include art critics. Museum directors including Alfred H. Barr, Jr. of the Museum of Modern Art attended some of The Club's lectures (known as their Friday night talks), merging the uptown art world with downtown. According to Willem de Kooning, "The Club came along just at the right time. It was so important getting together, arguing, thinking. I believe it helped take away our provincialism." According to Motherwell's foundation, Dedalus, The Club would become the intellectual and social anchor of the downtown art scene.

Later in his career, Motherwell was the recipient of numerous medals, degrees and awards, including the National Medal of the Arts in 1989. Additionally, in 1982, a permanent Motherwell Gallery was installed at the Bavarian State Museum of Modern Art in Munich. This was the only gallery installed to a living artist among other modern masters such as Matisse and Picasso.

The impact of the work which took place at 61 Fourth Avenue and the figures connected to it was exceptionally broad and deep, affecting the art world and the larger culture. This is however a phenomenon which we see throughout the area south of Union Square, in building after building which remains unprotected and therefore vulnerable to compromise or demolition. On this basis, and on the basis of the myriad other historic and architectural resources in the area we have detailed previously, we again strongly urge you to designate the area south of Union Square an historic district as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Andrew Berman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Andrew" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Berman".

Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

cc: Borough President Gale Brewer  
Council Member Carlina Rivera