

Reflections on Hans Hofmann's Push and Pull ?

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Reflections on Hans Hofmann's *Push and Pull II*

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Introduction

The Ishibashi Foundation acquired the 1950 painting *Push and Pull II* (fig. 1) by German-born artist Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) in 2010. Hofmann studied painting in Germany and France from the end of the 19th century until World War I, and began his career as a painter under the influence especially of Cézanne, Fauvism, and Cubism. In the interwar years, he established himself also as an esteemed art teacher in Germany. Invited by one of his students, Hoffmann moved to the United States in 1932 and taught painting classes at art schools in New York City and Provincetown, Massachusetts until 1957. Among his students were painters and critics who would later be influential in the development of Abstract Expressionism.¹ From the 1940s, Hofmann was considered the inheritor of early 20th century European Modernism. Featured in solo shows at galleries such as Peggy Guggenheim's *The Art of This Century*, he inspired contemporary American painting.

Hofmann's 'push and pull' concept has generally been regarded as the core of his painting theory. The Ishibashi Foundation's *Push and Pull II* is a rare example of a painting of his having the concept as its title. It is curious that Hofmann, a prolific painter, gave this work in particular a title synonymous with his painting theory. An investigation of the reason is integral to accurately understanding the work.

A thorough review of Hofmann's conceptual painting theory and its development is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we focus on Hofmann's 'push and pull' concept as first published in his essay "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts" in the 1948 *Search for the Reals and Other Essays* exhibition catalog. Our aim is to examine and reveal how Hofmann's *Push and Pull II*, created two years after that essay, realized his 'push and pull' concept.

1. The "Push and Pull" Series

According to the *Catalogue Raisonné* list of Hofmann's works, there are a total of three paintings with Hofmann's 'push and pull' abstract painting concept in their title. All were produced in 1950 and presumably *Push and Pull II*, as the title suggests, may be regarded as the second in the series. However, the recorded order in the *Raisonné* does not reflect the consecutive order of the title numbers. Number 791 is *Push and Pull II*; number 792 is *Push and Pull III* (fig. 2) (private collection); and number 793 is *Push and Pull* (fig. 3) (Renate, Hans and Maria Hofmann Trust Collection). *Push and Pull*, normally to be assumed the

first in the series, has the subtitle "Study for Chimbote Mural." The Chimbote Mural, a project intended for the civic center of the Peruvian city of Chimbot, was conceived by Samuel Kootz, owner of the Kootz Gallery.

The Kootz Gallery represented Hofmann in New York from 1947 and, except for 1948 and 1956, held Hofmann's solo exhibitions annually until the artist's death in 1966. *Push and Pull II* was first shown in 1950 as a new work in Hofmann's third solo exhibition at the Kootz Gallery. Works related to the Chimbote Murals had been exhibited at the gallery just prior to that in the exhibition *The Muralist and the Modern Architect* that paired five painters and five architects, including William Baziotes paired with Philip Johnson and Adolph Gottlieb with Marcel Breuer. Hans Hofmann was paired with two architects — José Luis Sert and Paul Lester Wiener.² *Push and Pull* was shown in this exhibition along with two partial sketches for the mural paintings.

Although the exact chronology of the three painting *Push and Pull* series cannot be substantiated here, it is certain that *Push and Pull* was the first to be exhibited and it is reasonable to assume, for the time being, that it was intended as the first in a series. Being listed last of the three in the *Catalogue Raisonné* may reflect the editor's decision to post it in connection with the Chimbote Mural project related works produced toward the end of 1950. Although the Chimbote Mural project was ultimately unrealized, Hofmann's studies for it continued after 1950 and *Push and Pull* was positioned in the *Catalogue Raisonné* as the project's beginning work.

The fact that the first painting of the *Push and Pull* series was done in the context of Hofmann's mural project needs to be considered in assessing what he may have had in mind for the potential development of his concept.

2. Hofmann's Push and Pull Concept

Hofmann's 'push and pull' concept is thought to have been presented for the first time in a series of lectures in Greenwich Village in the winter of 1938–39.³ His idea appeared in print, however, only in 1948 in his essay "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts" included in the exhibition catalog *Search for the Real, and Other Essays* for Hofmann's retrospective exhibition held in January and February 1948 at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover Massachusetts. The following appeared in that essay seemingly for the first time:

Depth, in a pictorial, plastic sense, is not created by the

arrangement of objects one after another toward a vanishing point, in the sense of the Renaissance perspective, but on the contrary (and in absolute denial of this doctrine) by the creation of forces in the sense of *push and pull*. Nor is depth created by tonal gradation — (another doctrine of the academician which, as its culmination, degraded the use of color to a mere function of expressing dark and light).⁴

For Hofmann, 'depth' is rooted in the depth of a three dimensionally perceived world and cannot be expressed as a visual illusion in two dimensions. It must be realized "as a plastic reality" "without destroying the two dimensional essence of the picture plane." In other words, the problem of expressing the experience of three dimensional perception two dimensionally on the flat surface of the picture plane is a major motif. How 'depth' is established in a two dimensional plane that by definition seems to contradict it is what Hofmann terms a "plastic" dimension and what makes that dimension possible is the nature of the 'picture plane.'⁵

Hofmann considers the 'plane' as a "fragment in the architecture of space" with the property that "when a number of planes are opposed one to another, a spatial effect results." The 'plane' and its function is defined therefore in analogy to architecture: "A plane functions in the same manner as the walls of a building." In other words, for an architect creating a space, walls are placed in response to certain conditions in the architectural space; for the painter "planes organized within a picture create the pictorial space of its composition." Thus, the 'plane' is the basic and essential element of the painter.⁶

In summary, Hofmann's theory is that the multiple planes act as forces operating 'push and pull' mechanics and, in the "plastic" sense, creating 'depth.' According to Hofmann, 'push' and 'pull' are expanding and contracting forces activated by various carriers of visual motion. Planes as carriers are more important than other elements such as lines and points.⁷ On the mechanism of 'push and pull' forces acting on the 'plane,' Hofmann states:

The forces of *push and pull* function three dimensionally without destroying other forces functioning two dimensionally. The movement of a carrier on a flat surface is possible only through an act of shifting left and right or up and down. To create the phenomenon of *push and pull* on a flat surface, one has to understand that by nature the picture plane reacts automatically in the opposite direction to the stimulus received; thus action continues as long as it receives stimulus in the creative process. Push answers with pull and pull with push.⁸

Hofmann likens the 'push and pull' response to the phenomenon of a balloon maintaining its equilibrium in all directions when inside pressure balance is disturbed by force applied on one side of the balloon.⁹ Reconsidering this image in terms of a painting, we can see 'push and pull' as a dynamic in constant tension between forces oriented three-dimensionality and forces converging toward a two-dimensional plane.

Having reviewed the relationship between the forces of 'push and pull' and the requirements for their activation as proposed by Hofmann in his 1948 description in "The Search for the Real

in the Visual Arts," Hoffman's own illustration (fig. 4) is most instructive in understanding the 'push and pull' concept in his actual painting. The image was published in the catalog for Hofmann's international touring exhibition that began at the Museum of Modern Art in 1963. William Seitz, the exhibition curator and organizer, introduced Hofmann's philosophy of painting through an analysis of Hofmann's key creative concepts. From the acknowledgements it seems that Hofmann cooperated for the writing.

The illustration shows the spatial tension that exists in nature and its transfer to the picture plane. The objects that exist in space are represented by rectangular planes. In the three-dimensional natural world, the 'push' force operates in the space where things exist and the 'pull' force in the surrounding area. The dotted line shows the variable position of things in three dimensions and the corresponding position on the picture plane, or what Hofmann describes as left, right, up and down 'shifting movement' on the picture plane. As the figure commentary caption states, "A shift on the canvas of a 'fragment of a millimeter' can be the equivalent of a great distance forward or backward in nature."¹⁰ The expression on a picture surface of a three-dimensional perception rooted in nature depends on the exact positional relationship of planes. While each plane acts as a 'push' force, misalignment works as a 'pull' force.

While Hofmann has, as an educator and an artist, written extensively and logically about his basic concept of painting, specific reference to his own work in explaining his theory is absent, at least in the published texts. It is as if he were avoiding a conceptual understanding of his creative work, and it is clear that he changes his style in short periods of time or even simultaneously juxtaposes multiple styles. It is therefore no easy task to grasp Hofmann the educator, theorist, and dedicated artist. In view of that, it is worthwhile considering Hofmann's creation of three consecutive works with 'push and pull' in their titles three years after he published this concept. Following is analysis and discussion of the significance of the titles of the three works in the series, including *Push and Pull II*, that reference Hofmann's concept.

3. The "Push and Pull" Series Paintings

Marcelle Polednik's "In Search of *Equipoise*: Hans Hofmann's Artistic Negotiations, 1940–1958" included in the *Catalogue Raisonné* is the only instance this author can confirm of concrete mention of three 'push and pull' series paintings. Polednik notes that it is difficult to identify Hofmann's painting development and points out that the clear emergence of the "push and pull" concept in 1948 roughly coincided with subtle transitions in Hofmann's painting from that time. She then mentions "a sequence of three compositions that explicitly tackle the concept of 'push and pull.'"¹¹ This clearly indicates the 1950 series of three paintings.

Polednik describes *Push and Pull*, the first of the series, as a work that focuses the viewer's attention on the key 'push and pull' elements of a red triangle, yellow square, and green trapezoid that create a sense of depth in an unusually truncated composition mediated by intervals. Specifically, the contrast between these three elements — the smooth, sharp contours

of the triangle, the frontal axis of the yellow rectangle, and the volumetric form of the green trapezoid – evokes a dialogue between flatness and depth, as well as dimensionality.¹²

Based on this compositional feature, Polednik points out that *Push and Pull II* and *Push and Pull III* are layered with a high density of competing forms and colors,¹³ in a completely different configuration and direction from *Push and Pull*.

Moreover, for *Push and Pull II* she states that the dynamic role of the picture plane in the 'push and pull' technique is emphasized more than in *Push and Pull*. Specifically she writes, 'At times the white background retreats, isolating the contours of certain forms; in other passages, it rises to the foreground taking the shape of a fully formed color plane that forces previously dominant forms to retreat.'¹⁴

Push and Pull III as the last work in the series combines elements of each of its precursors. The use of a white background as both neutral field and active participant further amplifies the competing forces that animate and stabilize the composition.¹⁵

While Polednik's comparison and positioning of the three works is acceptable, *Push and Pull*, the first work, presents the essence of 'push and pull' in minimal elements but what specifically is being attempted in the second work, *Push and Pull II*?

The dynamic composition of the picture plane Polednik points out can be recognized in the arrangement of the planes of the various colored surfaces, such as the trapezoidal square and the pentagon crowded together and the predominantly white tones of the surrounding areas giving the impression of rich nuances of *matière* throughout. It is also pointed out that the boundary between the color surfaces and the surrounding areas can be made obvious or be obscured, allowing us to sense that the background is receding or moving forward.

However, it is difficult to recognize that the background projects to the foreground in this work to the degree Polednik posits in what she refers to as "rejection of the predominant form."

If we categorize elements according to color surfaces on the picture plane, the breakdown is 4 or 5 red, 2 magenta, 2 brown, and 1 green, but even within the same color there are differences in tone saturation. Among the different color planes, it is the bright red of the pentagon at the lower center that attracts the eye, but the swelling of the paint, or an impasto effect, is noticeable in this area when viewing the painting. If the color saturation and impasto combine to create an effect that pushes this part of the painting to the foreground in comparison to other areas of the painting, then we have a more complex picture plane dynamic that does not converge to the binary scheme of background and color plane that Polednik briefly points out.

The effect of differences in saturation is found not only for the same color but also in the relationship between the red, magenta, green, and brown colors. In other words, the 'push and pull' mechanism is in large part related to the function of color saturation where bright and vivid colors seem to expand and advance while dark and dull colors seem to contract and retreat. In this regard, William Seitz, organizer of the 1963 Hofmann retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York noted, "The contradictory pull can be achieved by the use

of a powerfully advancing red or yellow and by paint impasto which in its relief demonstrates the actuality of the painting's skin."¹⁶

There is no doubt that Hofmann's use of color derives from Cézanne. After explaining the basic mechanism of 'push and pull' in "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts," his first text on the concept, Hofmann brings up the name of Cézanne, arguing that Cézanne "created a great sense of volume, pause, pulsation, expansion and contraction through color." He goes on to say that Cézanne understood color as a 'push and pull' force.¹⁷

As Polednik pointed out, *Push and Pull II* is not composed solely of colored surfaces. The lower right corner of the red triangle in the bottom center section is cut off and the center of the red trapezoid just above it is largely penetrated. The mainly white vacant spaces are intended for balance rather than as margins around the color planes and are not monotone, unlike the white spaces in the other two works of the series. Other colors are mixed in and scratches are applied here and there to add nuance. The rich nuance, including in the brown plane, where the force of 'pull' acts can be viewed as an attempt to delve deeper into the dynamics of 'push and pull.'

The third painting of the series uses the same size canvas but is characterized by a structure of overlap, with a large plane arranged diagonally at the center and a number of other forms in overlap. The white area, occupying a larger proportion than in the second painting, is neatly defined and uniform, and clearly delineated. At the same time, the magenta, blue, and yellow color planes retain a sense of painting and, through conscious positioning, the relationship of contrast between white and other colors is clear. Many remaining lines and an arrow possibly suggesting shift movement of planes convey the impression of experimentation for a particular purpose.

Based on the above identified characteristics of the three paintings and the tightly knit balance of various power relations, *Push and Pull II* can be considered to realize the 'push and pull' concept with a more complex structure and with the highest degree of pictorial completion.

A high degree of abstraction is pursued in all three "Push and Pull" series paintings, with no apparent attempt to represent reality. It is notable that from around 1949 Hofmann was giving his paintings conspicuously abstract titles reflecting notions of specific colors, space, or rhythm involved in their composition. Examples are *White Space* (1950, St. Louis, Washington University Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum) and *Blue Rhythm* (1950, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago), both produced in the same year as the "Push and Pull" series and exhibited at Hofmann's annual solo exhibition of that year at the Kootz Gallery. Undoubtedly, the titles of the "Push and Pull" paintings fit Hofmann's tendency to champion abstraction. Notably, even works that retained shapes of an interior space, a still life, or an outdoor landscape have abstract titles, a prime example being *Magenta and Blue* (1950, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art). (fig. 5)

In other words, the 1950 "Push and Pull" series can be regarded as Hofmann's attempt to revisit and more purely explore his core concept of abstract painting published two years earlier but crystallized over many years. At the same time, the series paintings may be seen as the beginning of a new phase of strengthened abstraction for Hofmann who adapted a

variety of styles over the next fifteen years until his death.

Push and Pull II and *Push and Pull III* exhibited in Hofmann's Kootz Gallery 1950 solo exhibition clearly attest to his trend to increased abstraction, both in the titles and content, in this period. As the exhibition was of paintings newly produced in 1950, works of previous years were not present for comparison. Critics, however, noticed the emerging direction in Hofmann's paintings. Only five reviews appeared,¹⁸ but Howard Devree in the October 26, 1950 *New York Times* wrote, "Here are some surprises, in that the color-forms like explosive calla lilies, so prominent in his work a few years ago, have given place to highly organized spatial arrangements." He described *Push and Pull* as exemplary of Hofmann's current direction where "stress is primarily on tensions."¹⁹ James Fitzsimmons, in his *Art Digest* article titled "Hofmann's Nature" wrote, "With the exception of a few works, the progressing abstraction is somewhat bewildering. Such paintings as *Push and Pull II* or *Magenta, Yellow and Black* ... seem altogether non-objective.... concerned only with the exploration of tensions."²⁰

The two articles, being written in 1950 when *Push and Pull II* was first shown, are rare and highly significant as testimonies confirming Hofmann's creative direction and the place this painting occupies in this period.

Conclusion

This paper examined the mechanism of Hans Hofmann's 'push and pull' concept through its realization in the three works of the "Push and Pull" series and the use of 'push and pull' in their titles in the context of tendencies in Hofmann's production between 1948, when the concept was first published, and 1950 when the three paintings were produced. It was found that *Push and Pull II*, the focus of this paper, realized the 'push and pull' concept in a more complex and dynamic form than the other two works in the series and that it reached a high level of abstraction that elevated Hofmann's evaluation at this time in his career.

It was necessary first to grasp the original stage verbalization of the concept in the form presented in 1948 as a base, but that was just the proverbial tip of the iceberg, with much of the accumulated thoughts and practices of 'push and pull' formative elements beneath the surface. Next, it was obviously essential to separately investigate Hofmann's ideas about the major elements of picture plane, surface, and color in order to understand how 'push and pull' could be established. That is exactly the approach William Seitz took for the 1963 retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Although the exhibition was presented as a retrospective exhibition, most of the exhibited works were recent, dating from 1956 and later. Seitz aimed his analysis at, as the exhibition title suggests, Hofmann's philosophy of painting in his later years. If there were a further point of view to introduce, it would have been how the 'push and pull' concept was formed. As stated above, Hofmann was influenced by Cézanne in reference to color in 'push and pull.' Similarly, his thoughts on form must also have been fleshed out through constant debate with others, particularly in the midst of 20th century modernism's development.

The conceptualization of 'push and pull' occupies a

privileged position in the consideration of Hofmann's art, but an understanding of the process of its formation in relation with other shaping elements is needed for a more accurate stance. In that case, the "Push and Pull" series and *Push and Pull II* could take a new position with new meaning.

(Curator, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation)
(Translated by Cheryl Silverman)

Notes

1. Painters taught by Hofmann included Lee Krasner, Arshile Gorky, and Helen Frankenthaler. The art critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were also his auditors.
2. José Luis Sert most well known as the architect of the Spanish Pavilion, where Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* was exhibited, for the 1937 Paris Exposition.
3. Lucinda Barnes "Push and Pull", *Creation in Form and Color: Hans Hofmann* (exh.cat.), Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Munich : Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2016, p.147.
4. Hans Hofmann, "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts", *Search for the Real, and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Massachusetts : MIT Press, 1967, p.43.
5. Hofmann, *Ibid.*, p.44.
6. Hofmann, *Ibid.*, p.44.
7. Hofmann, *Ibid.*, p.44.
8. Hofmann, *Ibid.*, p.44.
9. Hofmann, *Ibid.*, p.44.
10. *Hans Hofmann*, by William C. Seitz with Selected Writings by the Artist, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1963, p.30.
11. Marcelle Polednik, "In Search of *Equipoise*: Hans Hofmann's Artistic Negotiations, 1940–1958", *Hans Hofmann: Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings*, v.1, (ed.) Suzi Villiger, Stacy Gershon[et al.], Farnham : Lund Humphries, 2014, p.42.
12. Polednik, *ibid.*, p.45.
13. Polednik, *ibid.*, p.45.
14. Polednik, *ibid.*, p.45.
15. Polednik, *ibid.*, p.45.
16. William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press; London : National Gallery of Art, 1983, p.79.
17. Hofmann, *op.cit.*, p.45.
18. In chronological order —① *The NY*, Oct. 26th, 1950, no.37, ② *New York Times*, Oct 29th, 1950, ③ *The Nation*, 171, no.20, ④ *The Art Digest*, vol.25, no.3, Nov 1, 1950, ⑤ *Art News*, 49, no.7.
19. Howard Devree, "Modern Round-Up: Europeans and Americans in Current Shows," *New York Times*, Oct. 26th, 1950.
20. James Fitzsimmons, "Hofmann's Nature", *The Art Digest*, vol.25, no.3, Nov 1, 1950, p.17.

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fig. 2— Hans HOFMANN, *Push and Pull III*, 1950, Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 121.9 cm, Private Collection

Image courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY

fig. 3— Hans HOFMANN, *Push and Pull [Study for Chimbote Mural]*, 1950, Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 124.5 cm, New York, Renate, Hans and Maris Hofmann Trust

Image courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY

fig. 4— Diagram after Hofmann explaining "Push and Pull" mechanism (reprinted from "William C. Seitz, *Hans Hofmann*, (exh.cat.), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1963, p.30")

fig. 5— Hans HOFMANN, *Magenta and Blue*, 1950, Oil and graphite pencil on canvas, 122.1 × 147.5 cm, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art

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