

## Lyrical Abstraction

In the strict sense proposed by the painter Georges Mathieu and the art critic Pierre Restany, lyrical abstraction referred to a French equivalent of New York's "action painting" after 1945 and during the 1950s. It was characterised by the production of vehement signs, the gestural and spontaneous expression of forms deriving from impulses and the unconscious. Whilst a certain lyricism was already present in the work of Kandinsky before the First World War, and Hans Hartung before the Second World War, it is generally agreed that lyrical abstraction originated with the 1947 exhibition organised by the painter Georges Mathieu at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in Paris. Mathieu wanted to call the exhibition "Towards Lyrical Abstraction", but the title was rejected by the organisers. The artists involved were Wols, Bryen, Hartung, Mathieu, Riopelle, Atlan, Ubac and Arp, and it was in connection with the event that the art critic Jean-José Marchand first used the term *lyrical abstraction* to describe the remarkable works on display, which revealed an inner force through the traces of powerful gestures, as well as making a strong emotional impact on the viewer. The tendency also encompassed the approach of figures like Schneider, Soulages, Hantaï and Degottex.



Georges Mathieu, *Seventh Avenue*, 1957, oil on canvas

In a more general sense, the expression developed at the same time as a term for any abstract tendency running counter to geometric abstraction (characterised by the simplification of forms and the quasi-mathematical organisation of its compositions) through its emphasis of organic structures and the physical involvement of the painters in their work. In 1949, at the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, the divide between proponents of lyrical and geometric abstraction was exacerbated following the publication by the salon committee of a manifesto stipulating that the only admissible form of abstraction belonged "to the domains of considered expression and Euclidian regularity". Hartung, Schneider and Soulages came together to express their disagreement. From that point on, mixed exhibitions became increasingly rare, before finally disappearing in 1950 at the onset of the dispute between hot and cold (in other words lyrical abstraction versus geometric abstraction).



Maria Elena Vieira da Silva, *The Theatre of Gérard Philipe*, 1975, oil on canvas

Lyrical abstraction can encompass very different artistic currents – informal art, nuagisme, "abstract landscape art", tachisme, etc. – and is quick to overlook their distinctive features, resulting in a term that is as vague in its definition as the New School of Paris, with which it overlaps.