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Anthropology and aesthetics

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Pollock and Krasner

Script and postscript

ANNA C. CHAVE

The venerable legend of Jackson Pollock, that oft-told American tale, is the story of a taciturn, "hard-drinkin' . . . farmer's son from Cody, Wyoming" who "rode out of the Mid-West to put citified art to rights" with his sweeping lariats of paint.¹ This tough "bronco-buster of the art world" has lately suffered some slights to his manhood, however.² With the closer scrutiny of Pollock afforded by a rash of recent biographies, the maker of the famed and defamed poured and dripped paintings (fig. 1) has unexpectedly emerged as a vulnerable and even sexually confused figure.³ As for his spouse, Lee Krasner, her image also has been subject to revision. Once dismissed as an inconsequential figure, dwarfed by Pollock's formidable stature, she has since been touted both as a worthy artist and as the mastermind behind her husband's immense success. No less an authority than Clement Greenberg (who himself could have laid claim to engineering Pollock's rise) has declared that "for his art she was all-important, absolutely," while the dealer John Bernard Myers asserted, "There would never have been a Jackson Pollock without Lee Pollock and I put this on every level."⁴ Such assessments of Krasner's influence often carry a derisive edge, however, as when

the painter Fritz Bultman referred to Pollock as Krasner's "creation, her Frankenstein," adding "Lee was in control toward the end and very manipulative."⁵

This matter of control—the fact that, by all accounts, Krasner was a deeply controlling person while Pollock was chronically veering out of control—is a crucial factor in the work as in the lives of both these artists. The way Barbara Rose narrated the story of the couple's "working relationship" (as she was first to do), he was her creation from the outset: when Krasner and Pollock met in 1942, she was a smart, well-connected New Yorker whose intensive studies at Hans Hofmann's school had brought her au courant with events in the Paris vanguard, while he was a misfit hick who—having separated himself with difficulty from his mentor, that self-styled hillbilly painter and archenemy of modernism, Thomas Hart Benton—was adrift and consumed by doubt. Pollock's engagement with the work of such comparatively marginal figures as Benton and the Mexican muralists had left him groping for a language to articulate the social content and the mythic dimension of art. Krasner's training had brought her, by contrast, a sure command of the idioms of cubism and the School of Paris. As Rose portrayed it, then, Krasner had to catechize Pollock in the dominant tenets of modernism.⁶

If Krasner enjoyed some initial advantage in the studio, it proved evanescent, for her encounter with Pollock caused her to question so severely what she knew about making art that between 1942 and 1945 she did not complete a single painting.⁷ Subsequently, she developed a convincing facility with various New

This essay derives from a lecture commissioned in 1990 by the Fundacio Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, which has plans for its publication. I thank Michael Leja and Lisa Saltzman for their criticisms of its earlier versions.

1. William Feaver, "The Kid from Cody," review of the *Jackson Pollock: Drawing into Painting* exhibition in its Oxford, England, Museum of Modern Art venue, 1979. A copy of this review is in the artist's file on Pollock at the library of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

2. Dorothy Seiberling, "Baffling U.S. Art: What It Is About," pt. 1, *Life* (9 Nov. 1959): 79.

3. The biography that focuses most on Pollock's sexual instability, going so far as to make, to my mind, unconvincing insinuations about his engaging (willingly or otherwise) in homosexual activity, is Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989).

4. Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (Wainscott, N.Y.: Pushcart, 1987), p. 139. Also, in a lecture in 1980, Greenberg described Krasner as the "greatest influence" on Pollock (Ellen G. Landau, *Jackson Pollock* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989], p. 253, n. 10). Myers made his statement in an undated, unpublished interview with Barbara Rose (*ibid.*, p. 253, n. 2).

5. Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 115. And in the words of Isamu Noguchi, "Jackson was guided by a definite apparition, meaning Lee. She was the agent, be it angel or witch" (*ibid.*, p. 79).

6. Barbara Rose, *Lee Krasner/Jackson Pollock: A Working Relationship* (East Hampton, N.Y.: Guild Hall Museum, 1981), p. 8. Rose's account exaggerated the degree of Pollock's ingenuousness in 1942 and diminished the role John Graham played in his formation before he even met Krasner, as Naifeh and Smith point out (*Jackson Pollock*, p. 406).

7. "Later, she would refer to this as her 'blackout' period" (*ibid.*, p. 402). "The effect of Pollock's art on Krasner was to cause her to question everything she was doing," noted Rose in a slightly later account (Barbara Rose, *Lee Krasner: A Retrospective* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983], p. 50).



Figure 1. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm, Number 30*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 267 cm × 526 cm. Photo: Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1957 (57.92).

York School idioms, beginning with that of Pollock, as she created a group of her own poured and dripped “all over” pictures between 1946 and 1949 (fig. 2). It followed that Krasner was reflexively identified as Pollock’s wife and described by the press in solicitous but inaccurate terms as “an artist in her own right.” In fact, she never could nor would decouple herself from Pollock. Whereas he prevailed in the studio, however, it appears that there were ways in which she prevailed at home: visitors describe how the more urbane and cultivated Krasner was forever “educating” or improving her spouse, the uncouth high school dropout.⁸

To hear his biographers tell it, the cause of Jackson Pollock’s deep feelings of inadequacy was less his limited formal education than the immense difficulty he had in mastering his craft. The consensus about Pollock within his family is that he never really did learn how to draw—not like his eldest brother, Charles, a wondrously adept draughtsman. Classmates from the Art Students League likewise remember that no matter how diligently he applied himself to drawing, Pollock never really measured up. This trouble with drawing



Figure 2. Lee Krasner, untitled, 1948. Oil on canvas, 76 cm × 64 cm. Photo: Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Donald T. Braider, 1986 (1986.354).

8. Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 174. For comparable observations by Fritz Bultman and B. H. Friedman, see *ibid.*, pp. 65, 78. Further: “She was much brighter than he was and she ran his career”, says Lionel Abel. ‘She carried the ball for the enterprise. She thought the whole thing out from the beginning: how to put him over and make him a big success. How to attack rival painters and rival movements’” (Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 404).

