

*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.<sup>1</sup> This tough "bronco-buster of the art world" has lately suffered some slights to his manhood, however.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, she developed a convincing facility with various New

This essay derives from a lecture commissioned in 1990 by the Fundació 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).



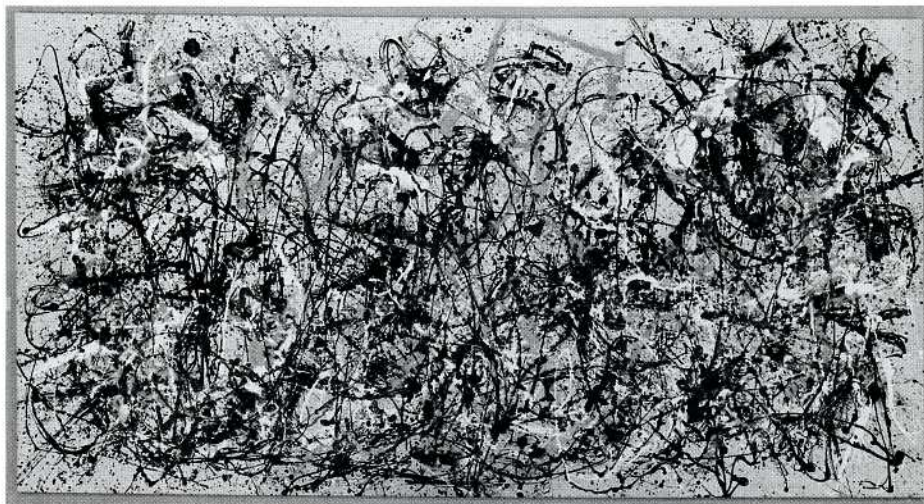


Figure 1. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm, Number 30*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 267 cm × 526 cm. Photo: Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1957 (57.92).

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.<sup>8</sup>

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).



impeded his progress in painting and caused him terrible frustration. A psychoanalyst he consulted during his early years in New York related that "at first his main preoccupation and sorrow was not being able to paint and paint as he wanted to."<sup>9</sup>

Pollock did eventually learn to draw: his sketchbooks from the late 1930s, when he was engrossed with the art of Michelangelo and El Greco, then of the Mexican muralists, and then of the Picasso who painted *Guernica*, are often riveting. But what is of interest here is his peers' estimation; and even after Pollock emerged as a leader of the New York School, they remained skeptical of his basic abilities. Robert Motherwell reportedly "was always bragging that Pollock couldn't draw," and Franz Kline went around at the reception following Pollock's funeral (in 1956) telling anyone who would listen, "Say what you want, he couldn't paint" (*ibid.*, pp. 127, 260). According to his family and friends, Pollock was inept not only at drawing but at practically everything he undertook: he couldn't dance or play an instrument; he didn't read easily; he had great difficulty speaking, unless he had had too much to drink (in which case he wasn't always lucid); and he plainly couldn't hold his liquor. So pathetic was Pollock in the conduct of his daily affairs that "he felt he couldn't go to the station and buy a ticket for himself," as Greenberg described it.<sup>10</sup>

What is at issue here is not Pollock's troubles at the ticket office but his difficult relation to languages, both visual and verbal: his perceived and self-perceived ineptitude with a pencil and brush and his no less remarked infacility with words. The small body of letters and writings that Pollock left behind is riddled with incomplete and ungrammatical sentences made up of misspelled and misformed words. "It is of the utmost difficulty that I am able to write—and then only miles from my want and feeling," a distressed Pollock once lamented to his mother.<sup>11</sup> And a psychoanalyst who treated the artist has revealed that she was hindered by

his being an intractably "inarticulate personality."<sup>12</sup> Even his wife found him " . . . very closed mouth. I practically had to hit him to make him say anything at all."<sup>13</sup> This silence was to become an indelible part of the Pollock melodrama: "He left silent as he came," pronounced a friend, "It was phenomenal, that silence."<sup>14</sup>

If Pollock was as tongue-tied and as ham-fisted as legend has it, then the question must be asked: How did he succeed in making his presence felt at all, let alone to the remarkable extent that he did? What his biographers now tell us is that his wife contrived to speak for him, that she "became Jackson's voice, corresponding with his relatives, making his phone calls, even speaking his thoughts."<sup>15</sup> This close friend, the painter Alfonso Ossorio, observed "Someone had to speak," so she did the talking.<sup>16</sup> And while Krasner was

(*ibid.*, vol. 4, doc. 12, p. 212). Thomas Hart Benton recalled how the young artist

developed some kind of language block and became almost completely inarticulate. I have sometimes seen him struggle, to red-faced embarrassment, while trying to formulate ideas boiling up in his disturbed consciousness, ideas he could never get beyond a "God damn, Tom, you know what I mean!" I rarely did know.

*Naifeh and Smith, Jackson Pollock*, p. 167

For additional testimonies to Pollock's inarticulateness, see Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, pp. 45, 65, 93.

12. The phrase is Violet Staub de Laszlo's, cited in Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 254, n. 12. The same source is cited in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 67.

13. Flora Lewis, "Two Paris Shows à la Pollock," *New York Times* (3 Oct. 1979); C21 (bylined Paris). In an earlier interview, Krasner used more decorous phrasing: "Jackson had a mistrust of the word," she explained. "Words were never his thing. They made him uncomfortable" (John Gruen, "A Turbulent Life With Jackson Pollock," *New York/World Journal Tribune Magazine* [26 March 1967]: 15).

14. Douglass M. Howell, cited in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 179. Pollock's parents are also invariably described as exceedingly laconic people: "There was no conversation at all around the Pollock family dinner table," remembered Marie Pollock. "Our parents . . . didn't need talk in the house," recalled Charles Pollock (*ibid.*, pp. 43, 168).

15. Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 402. The painter Cora Cohen pointed out, in conversation, that there was a cultural factor in Krasner's taking charge of Pollock's career and daily affairs: it is customary in Orthodox Jewish homes for the wife to assume as many as possible of the mundane responsibilities to leave the husband free to pursue religious study—a pattern that fits the household where Krasner was raised, according to Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 373.

16. Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 253, n. 2. On Krasner's role as Pollock's mouthpiece, see also Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 78, and Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 612.

9. Violet Staub de Laszlo, cited in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 66.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 102. For Pollock's self-description of his sense of helplessness, see *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings Drawings and Other Works*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene Victor Thaw [hereafter cited as "CR"] (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), vol. 4, doc. 6, p. 208, and doc. 12, p. 212.

11. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, doc. 19, p. 216. What prompted the poignant phrase cited was the news of his father's death, news that might make anyone feel at a loss for words; but Pollock expressed comparable feelings on other, less momentous occasions: "I'm usually in such a turmoil that I haven't any thing to write about and when I do after I've written it—it looks like all bunk," he wrote to his father in 1932



busy putting words in Pollock's mouth, others reportedly helped him put words on paper, ghostwriting some of his few public statements.<sup>17</sup> Pollock once protested to his dealer, Sidney Janis, that "to attempt explanation" of his art "could only destroy it"; but Janis pressed him anyway to title rather than number his pictures.<sup>18</sup> Knowing that titles facilitated marketing his difficult paintings, Krasner and others regularly helped to title them.<sup>19</sup> Not only did Pollock resist naming his most radically abstract pictures, he also hesitated signing them. But signatures also aided picture sales, so Krasner not only urged the artist to sign his work but allegedly had his signature forged on some unsigned work after his death to enhance the value of the estate, of which she was the sole beneficiary.<sup>20</sup>

If Pollock was such a hapless figure and Krasner was such a crafty woman as one is led to believe, then another question begs to be asked: Why couldn't Krasner do for her own career what she evidently did for Pollock's; or what can account for the huge discrepancy in their reputations? Some feminist critics would argue that the best answers to this question lie with the discriminatory behavior of critics, dealers, and collectors toward women artists in general, and with the sexism rampant in the precincts of the New York School. Krasner's art probably would have been taken more seriously had she been a man; what undid Lee Krasner was perhaps not merely her sex but her success

at painting like a man—or rather like a succession of men, from Matisse and Picasso to Pollock and Motherwell. By contrast, what finally made Pollock such a compelling figure was in a sense his success at painting like a woman—or, more precisely, at assuming what might be called a "transsexuating" role as an artist. The contrast, in other words, is that between a female artist who, over the course of a long career, demonstrated her knowledge of a range of modernist languages, with their difficult, hermetic parts of speech, and a male artist who is persistently associated (as women more typically are) with a state of nonknowledge, wordlessness, and incoherence. To her feminist partisans, Krasner's command was all to her credit, but others reacted more skeptically to the specter of that oxymoronic being, a female master. Said Greenberg dismissively, "I don't think Lee was much of a painter—all brass and accomplishment"—as if accomplishment were some sort of liability; and Le Corbusier snidely adjudged of Pollock and Krasner: "This man is like a hunter who shoots without aiming. But his wife, she has talent—women always have too much talent" (*ibid.*, pp. 139, 200).

Whether Pollock aimed when he shot, the extent to which he exerted control, has always been a matter of some dispute. The painter was highly sensitive about this matter—sensitive in part, no doubt, because unloading a brush, like shooting a gun, has sexual connotations. That Pollock made his art through a series of "explosions" is a standard locution in descriptions of his technique, with all its sexual implications. The photographer Hans Namuth recalled "the flame of explosion when the paint hit the canvas; . . . the tension; then the explosion again."<sup>21</sup> The critic William Feaver less euphemistically envisioned the artist "casting paint like seed . . . onto the canvas spread at his feet. This was no sissy. . . . It was, demonstrably, the real thing . . . painting composed of . . . manly ejaculatory splat."<sup>22</sup> And *Time* magazine suggestively related that his friends had seen Pollock "emerge from the studio limp as a wet dishrag" with "a cigarette smoldering on his lip."<sup>23</sup>

Pollock's own account of his working process was likewise sexually imbued. When he began the poured paintings, he reported happily: "I'm just now getting

17. According to Krasner, Howard Putzel helped Pollock answer the questionnaire that formed the basis for his first full-length interview, published in *Arts and Architecture* in Feb. 1944 (Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967], p. 31). Other accounts have Motherwell helping to answer those questions instead (Deborah Solomon, *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987], p. 146, and Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 472). Naifeh and Smith detect Krasner's hand in many of Pollock's letters (see, for instance, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 467, although the authors err in part in their analysis of the letter in question by misreading "he" as "we," as can be seen from careful study of the facsimile of the letter published in *CR*, vol. 4, p. 230, fig. 25; O'Connor and Thaw made the same error in transcribing the letter in their doc. 50, *ibid.*).

18. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, doc. 60, p. 234. The statement in question was made in 1944 with reference to *She-Wolf*, but that Janis urged Pollock to title his mature paintings emerges in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 187, although the dealer there insists that Pollock readily agreed to do so.

19. Among the many accounts of this practice, see *ibid.*, pp. 187–188, and Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 172.

20. The allegation is made by Nicholas Carone in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 268. (Regarding Pollock's will, see Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 661.) For Krasner's account of Pollock's chronic difficulties with signing his work, see *CR*, vol. 4, doc. 102d, p. 264. Pollock himself is cited on this subject in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 187.

21. B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 162.

22. Feaver, "The Kid." Today, such descriptive phrases evoke Andres Serrano's *Ejaculate in Trajectory* photographs of 1989, as Michael Leja pointed out to me.

23. "Beyond the Pasteboard Mask," *Time* (17 Jan. 1964): 69.





Figure 3. Jackson Pollock, *The Deep*, 1953. Oil and enamel on canvas, 220 cm × 150 cm. Gift in memory of John de Mènil. Photo: Courtesy of Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.



into painting again, and the stuff is really beginning to flow. Grand feeling when it happens."<sup>24</sup> He talked also of experiencing a kind of ecstasy or loss of the boundaries of self when he worked: "I can . . . literally be *in* the painting. . . . When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing."<sup>25</sup> The image this evinces, of a painter ejaculating in the body of his picture, is suggested in a particularly graphic way by the painting called *The Deep* of 1953, with its abstractly vaginal slit (fig. 3); but a rhetoric of potency and virility is rife in discussions of all of Pollock's art—surely fostered in part by the famous film footage that shows the intensely rhythmic movements of his body, and of his flowing sticks and syringes, over the canvas spread beneath him on the floor.

That implements of painting, drawing, and writing are phallic symbols, one may take, of course, from Freud, or from less exalted sources.<sup>26</sup> And the masculinist ideal of the great painter as one who, as Renoir is supposed to have coarsely put it, "paints with his prick" helped reinforce the legend of Jackson Pollock in a way it could never do for his wife: although Lee Krasner also poured paint for a time, the critics would never think to credit her with the potency to have ejaculated it. And what flows from a woman's body—with its lack of that putatively crucial, anatomical equivalent to the brush or pen—is tacitly understood to be less subject to control, more vulnerable to happenstance or accident, than the flows of the male body. The key question for critics in Pollock's case, then—a question that became tantamount to a test of manhood—was whether, or to what extent, he could control the flow of paint on the canvas, and so control the image. *Life* magazine

sneered that Pollock "drools" and "dribbl[es]" paint, evoking the involuntary flows of the body of an infant or moron; and the association of his painting practice with basic bodily functions was underlined more recently by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, whose celebrated biography makes much of the artist's engrossment with urination.<sup>27</sup> For years, the most repeated anecdote about Pollock was of his urinating in a fireplace at a party. And some have described him as being chronically out of control of all that flowed into and out of his body: when Jackson got drunk, one friend remembered, "All he did was spit, drool, sneeze, cough, snot and piss. He was a mess, a real pain in the ass."<sup>28</sup>

The years when Pollock made most of his greatest paintings, from 1947 to 1950, are in fact the years when he had his alcoholism most in check; and he reportedly made it a rule not to paint when drunk in any case. But hostile critics have all along insinuated that Pollock's poured pictures are merely the damning evidence of his lawless behavior. Declared an Italian critic: "It is easy to detect the following things in all of [Pollock's] paintings: Chaos. Absolute lack of harmony. Complete lack of structural organization. Total absence of technique, however rudimentary. Once again, chaos."<sup>29</sup>

Not only Pollock's poured paintings but even his prior, technically more conventional work, such as *Stenographic Figure* of 1942, looked to critics like, to take a representative phrase, "a chaotic tangle of broad

24. Letter to Louis Bunce, 29 Aug. 1947, cited in Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 166.

25. This statement continues: "It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. . . . It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess"—a description of a kind of coitus interruptus—"Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well" (CR, vol. 4, doc. 71, p. 241).

26. See Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. Alan Tyson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), p. 197, and Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 155. Also, "Jacques Derrida describes the literary process in terms of the identification of the pen with the penis, the hymen with the page. . . . This model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation" (Sandra Gubar, "The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity," in *New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter [New York: Pantheon, 1985], p. 295).

27. "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" *Life* (8 Aug. 1949): 44; and "The Metropolitan and Modern Art," *Life* (15 Jan. 1951): 34. Naifeh and Smith twice tell of Pollock's relating his method of painting to a childhood memory of watching his father urinate on a rock (*Jackson Pollock*, pp. 101, 541), and they describe repeatedly his making a public spectacle of his urination, and his wetting his own and others' beds as an adult (ibid., pp. 491, 760, 770, 541, 612, 671, 762).

28. John Cole, cited in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, pp. 166–167. Nor was it only bodily fluids Pollock reportedly lost control of: de Kooning gleefully related a story told him by Franz Kline of Pollock pouring wine at a restaurant and becoming "so involved in watching the wine pour out of the bottle that he emptied the whole bottle. It covered the food, the table, everything. . . . Like a child he thought it was a terrific idea—all that wine going all over" (James T. Valliere, "De Kooning on Pollock: An Interview," *Partisan Review* vol. 34, no. 4 [Fall 1967]; repr. in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, ed. David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990], p. 374).

29. As cited in O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 55. Also, Harold Rosenberg reportedly taunted Pollock that "you paint like that monkey," referring to a laboratory animal that had been set to work making paintings for reasons that are now obscure (Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 182).





Figure 4. Jackson Pollock, *Stenographic Figure*, 1942. Oil on linen, 102 cm × 142 cm. Photo: Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bareiss Fund.

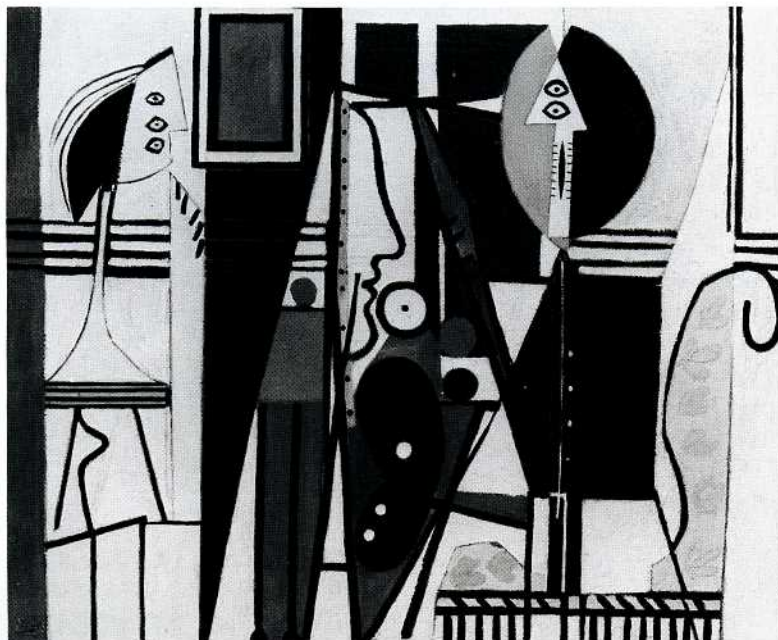


Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *Painter and Model*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 130 cm × 163 cm. Photo: Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection.



lines, wiry lines, threads and speckles. . . . What it means, or intends, I've no idea" (fig. 4).<sup>30</sup> *Stenographic Figure* could be seen as bearing a loose relation to Picasso's *Painter and Model* of 1928, replete with its palette of primary colors, black, white, and gray (fig. 5). But while Picasso's rigidly outlined artist neatly limns a naturalistic profile of his sitter's face, Pollock's artist is like a comical clerk spewing a ream of numbers, letters, and cryptic marks that careen off his paper and settle like flies all over the surface of the picture. Something about those garbled, frenzied marks began to attract a sensitive viewing public, however; and buoyed by the positive response to this picture—from such well-placed figures as Piet Mondrian, Peggy Guggenheim, and the reviewer for the *New Yorker* magazine—Pollock kept on writing. After 1942, his pictures increasingly looked like tablets inscribed, in whole or in part, with obsessive jottings and marks, until he finally lifted his paintbrush from the canvas, unrolled the fabric on the floor, and let his script flow freely with the movements of his hand, arm, and body.

Jackson Pollock's classic poured and dripped paintings evince complex manuscripts or palimpsests covered by a snarled, alien script. That script also may recall the physicalized and sprawling scribbles of the preliterate child who tries to produce handwriting by furiously willing a legible text onto a page. For that matter, Pollock generally felt as small children often do: excluded from language and ill-served by speech. Although many critics read his vigorous script as a manly affirmation of potency, that same script could be read instead as an aggrieved and urgent admission of impotence. In Jacques Lacan's rewriting of Freud, where language is identified with the almighty phallus, feelings of inadequacy in relation to language are symptoms of castration—a state that men and women necessarily, although unequally, share insofar as we are all "inevitably bereft of any masterful understanding of language, and can only signify ourselves in a symbolic system that we do not command, that, rather, commands us."<sup>31</sup>

The notion that Pollock's distinctive scrawl was merely childlike and random was something that always rankled the artist. "I can control the flow of the paint," he insisted, "there is no accident."<sup>32</sup> When, in

1950, *Time* magazine headlined an article on Pollock "Chaos, Damn It," the painter testily cabled back: "NO CHAOS DAMN IT. DAMNED BUSY PAINTING."<sup>33</sup> Yet drips are an index of accidents in Western culture; and the space that Pollock unremittably left between the end of his brush or stick and the surface of his canvas was ineluctably the space of accident, of a loss or surrender of control. (This space is what decisively separates Pollock from the Surrealists, moreover, whose concept of automatic writing and the controlled accident had helped encourage him to liberate his line, and what separates him also from artists like Mark Tobey, Cy Twombly—or Krasner, for the most part—who retained the role of, and the control of, the renderer in creating their calligraphic pictures.) To a significant extent, refusing control, as Pollock did, meant refusing the authority of craft—refusing mastery.

That the poured paintings are never purely random or chaotic, that they could never have been done blindfolded, for instance, is plain enough to an attentive viewer. What attests to the pictures' manipulated character is the range of gestures, from broad to tight, lilting to tense; the measured degree of density to the webs of lines; the varied ordering or layering of the (however limited) palette of colors; the nuances in the viscosity and refractive properties of the diverse types of paint; and, in many cases, the artist's attention to keeping the majority of his meandering paint skeins within the borders of the canvas. For Pollock, then, the pressing question was not whether he could maintain any control but how much control he ought to exert, or whether the real test of his mettle might be the extent to which he permitted himself to let go in spite of the critics' taunts.

Jackson Pollock's radical painting practice might be said to represent a freedom, the taking of a freedom, which was practically political in its dimensions.<sup>34</sup> The

30. Maude Riley, "Review," *Art Digest* (1 April 1945): 59.

31. Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 20.

32. CR, vol 4, doc. 100, p. 262; see also *ibid.*, doc. 87, p. 251 ("I deny the accident"). Krasner, too, affirmed: "His control was amazing" (*ibid.*, doc. 102d, p. 264).

33. "Chaos, Damn It," *Time* (20 Nov. 1950): 70–71 (the headline referred to Alfieri's description of Pollock's work as total "chaos"); Pollock, "Letters to the Editor," *Time* (11 Dec. 1950): 10. In a letter written to his father in 1932, Pollock spoke of "doing every thing with a definite purpose—with out a purpose for each move—thers chaos [sic]" (CR, vol. 4, doc. 12, p. 212).

34. Of interest in this regard is the impression that Pollock's work made on the painter Gerhard Richter when he encountered it at the Documenta exhibition in Kassel in 1958 and determined that it was "not a Formalist gag, but rather the bitter truth, liberation." Mused Richter, "I might almost say that these pictures were the real reason for my leaving East Germany" (Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Interview with Gerhard Richter," trans. Stephen P. Duffy, in Roald Nasgaard, *Gerhard Richter: Paintings* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1988], p. 15).



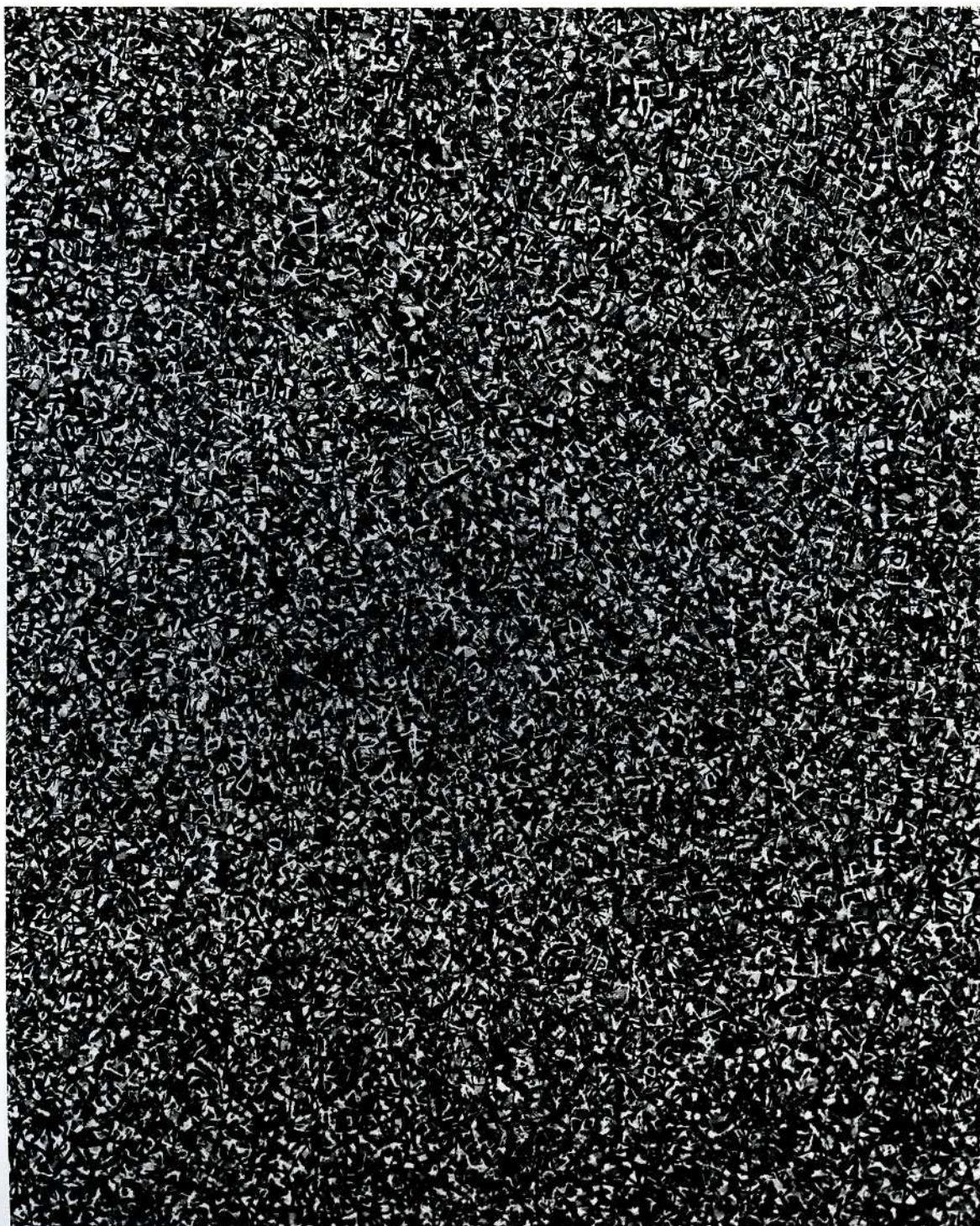


Figure 6. Lee Krasner, *Continuum*, 1947–1949. Oil and enamel on canvas, 135 cm × 107 cm. Photo: Courtesy of Robert Miller Gallery, New York. Photo: Zindman/Fremont.



lawlessness these pictures evince becomes especially pronounced, however, when we contrast Pollock's full-bodied and expansive script with the cramped and involuted script produced by Krasner in the late 1940s. Krasner produced her postscript to Pollock's script—the diminutive "Little Image" series—in the small upstairs bedroom of the couple's farmhouse while Pollock was making monumental pictures in the capacious barn in back.<sup>35</sup> Rose insists that "the decision to work small and retain maximum control was her own," but she adds that Krasner was not "psychologically free enough to let go."<sup>36</sup> What helped to keep her enchained was no doubt her self-appointed role of serving as Pollock's voice, a role that must have impeded her developing a distinct voice of her own. Commented Arthur Danto, "There is no recurrent touch, or whatever may be the pictorial equivalent of voice, in Krasner's canvases"; there is only "the echo of other voices"—chiefly, while he lived, that of Pollock.<sup>37</sup>

In endeavoring to empower Pollock, then, Krasner wound up disempowering herself. Presumably, she would not have endured that sacrifice for just anyone: there was something about Pollock's art that she deeply identified with, something that seemed to stymie and even to displace her own production, almost as if, while she was busy talking for Pollock, Pollock was painting for her. "I had a conviction, when I met Jackson, that he had something important to say," she explained after his death. "When we began going together, my own work became irrelevant. He was the important thing."<sup>38</sup> Naifeh and Smith detect an insidious pattern in the couple's relationship: as long as his work went well, hers tended to go badly, and vice

versa—the exception being this moment between 1946 and 1949 when she succumbed to his influence and began to make something like "Pollocks."<sup>39</sup> But Krasner's Pollocks were Pollocks with a difference: where his script was free and fluid, hers was constricted, congested, obsessive. To deride a picture like *Continuum* of 1947–1949 (fig. 6) as "derivative," in the usual way, then, is to ignore its distinct charge and to miss its intense affectivity. Although she was using Pollock's language, Krasner was making something other than Pollocks: an image less of rampant lawlessness than of rampant order—an order, like that of cancer cells, turned in on, replicating, and consuming itself.

Pollock liked to talk about how well a painting was going in terms of the ease of the "flow": "When I'm working, working right, I'm in my work so outside things don't matter—if they do, then I've lost it. That happens sometimes, I guess because things get in the way of the flow" (Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 129). But if flow and freedom were what counted most to Pollock, "flow" is important to everyone else, too. "Human beings live in, and on, flows," Klaus Theweleit observes. "They die when streams dry up."<sup>40</sup> In his pioneering study of *Male Fantasies*, Theweleit dwells on the significance of the flow; and although he focuses on a population remote from the New York School—namely, professional soldiers in Germany between the wars (including some who went on to help form the core of Hitler's *Schutzstaffe*)—many of the discursive and symbolic formations he describes plainly overreach their immediate context. Freud's writing was rife with the imagery of fluid mechanics. He visualized the libido, more specifically, as "a flow that must be regulated"—so notes N. Katherine Hayles in her insightful study of gender encoding in the science of hydraulics with its paradigmatically "masculine channels and feminine flows" and its longstanding difficulty in accounting for the dynamics of turbulent flow.<sup>41</sup> In the population Theweleit studied, flows

35. Pollock made small paintings, too, of course: in fact, the preponderance of his work was relatively modest in scale, but the pictures his heroic reputation was built on were those heroic in scale.

36. Rose, *Lee Krasner*, p. 56. Although Rose argued that the difference in their studios was not a determining factor in their work, pointing out that Pollock had made a large canvas in the same bedroom before he converted the barn into his workspace, Krasner told Lawrence Alloway in bitter terms that she resented the discrepancy in the scale of their studios (Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 638).

37. Added Danto, "The whole [Krasner retrospective] exhibition is a series of surrenders to artistic personalities stronger than her own, and those surrenders are what enabled her to paint. Even though huge and bold, Krasner's work has something of the art school exercise about it" (Arthur Danto, "Lee Krasner: A Retrospective," in *The State of the Art* [New York: Prentice-Hall, 1987], p. 36).

38. Gruen, "A Turbulent Life," p. 14. Pollock's work "opened a new channel, a new avenue for me," Krasner also recalled. "I started to break away from what I had learned" (Grace Glueck, "Scenes from a Marriage: Krasner and Pollock," *Art News* [Dec. 1981]: 59).

39. Regarding the couple's destructive symbiosis (which Rose was the first to remark), see Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, pp. 483, 571, 672. Of the "Little Image" paintings, Pollock reportedly said, "Lee keeps copying me and I wish she'd stop" (*ibid.*, p. 640). His attitude toward Krasner's painting is said to have been mildly encouraging, at best; brutally dismissive, at worst (*ibid.*, pp. 571, 751).

40. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume One: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 266–267.

41. N. Katherine Hayles, "Gender Encoding in Fluid Mechanics: Masculine Channels and Feminine Flows," *Differences*, 4, no. 2



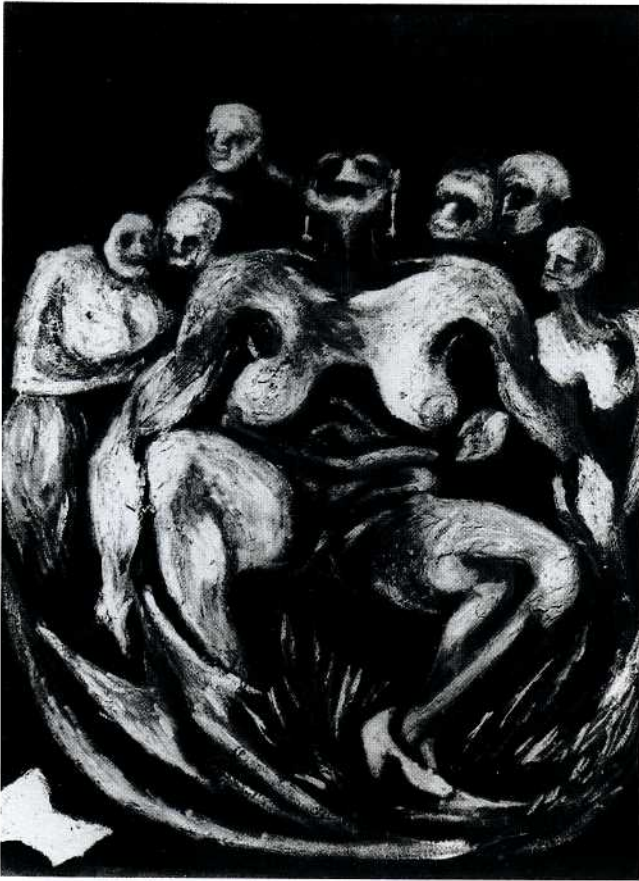


Figure 7. Jackson Pollock, *Woman*, ca. 1930–1933. Oil on rough side of masonite, 36 cm × 27 cm. Photo: Courtesy of Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe.

likewise were associated predominantly with the female body and, as such, considered repugnant and even dangerous; for what flows may escalate into a flood.<sup>42</sup> The dissident Lacanian theorist Luce Irigaray observed that the most dangerous floods identified with women are those related to childbirth and the body of the mother: fluids “threaten to deform, propagate, evaporate, consume him [the male subject], to flow out

(Summer 1992): 30. “In hydraulics as in Freudian psychology, intuitions about flow come together with laws of conservation to posit equivalence between regulating fluids and regulating behavior,” adds Hayles; and “It is significant . . . that Freud chose ‘sublimation’ to describe the process of converting libido into a socially constructive force, for in its technical meaning sublimation denotes the transformation of a solid into a gas without going through the liquid phase. Better to bypass liquidity altogether than to risk being caught up in the vagaries of turbulent flows” (ibid., pp. 31, 32).

42. Theweleit acknowledges that male bodies also generate flows, but in the fantasies of the population he studied, those flows

of him and into another. . . . The ‘subject’ . . . finds everything flowing abhorrent. And even in the mother, it is the cohesion of a ‘body’ (subject) that he seeks. . . . Not those things in the mother that recall the woman—the flowing things.”<sup>43</sup>

In the early 1930s, Pollock conjured a nightmarish image of a kind of devouring mother dominating a row of five cowering, emaciated men (fig. 7). This picture begs to be examined in a biographical light in view of the fact that Pollock, the fifth of five sons, had a dreadful birth, during which he was nearly strangled to death by his own umbilical cord.<sup>44</sup> As an adult, Pollock is said to have had a very disturbed relation to the forceful woman he occasionally referred to as “that old womb with a built-in tomb.”<sup>45</sup> He told Krasner that he sometimes “had trouble working because the idea, or the image, of his mother came over him so strongly that he’d see her,” and his pictorial flows became dammed (as related by Cile Downs, in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 204). Alluding to a productive period of painting he enjoyed in 1950, Pollock once told a friend: “Last year I thought at last I’m above water from

remained deeply associated with the fearsome floods of the female body: “Fear of the flood has a decided effect . . . on the structuring of their [the soldiers’] bodily feelings,” as they suffered from sustained erections they could not or would not relieve; also, in the military, “Fluid fell under the heading of dirt . . . [and] unmanliness” (Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, pp. 249, 410).

43. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 237. In Irigaray’s analysis, as Hayles notes, “The privileging of solid over fluid mechanics, and indeed the inability of science to deal with turbulent flow at all,” is attributed to “the association of fluidity with femininity. Whereas men have sex organs that protrude and become rigid, women have openings that leak menstrual blood and vaginal fluids. Although men, too, flow on occasion . . . this aspect of their sexuality is not emphasized. It is the rigidity of the male organ that counts, not its complicity in fluid flow” (Hayles, “Gender Encoding,” p. 17).

44. The brush with mortality that Stella and Jackson Pollock both suffered during his birth was evidently a subject of family discussion and family lore (see *CR*, vol. 4, doc. 1, p. 203). Following the birth, Stella was told she could have no more children and, interestingly and atypically, Jackson grew up knowing that his parents had both desperately wanted their fifth son and final child to be a girl (Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, pp. 42–43, 69). That Pollock’s reading and developmental difficulties may well have stemmed in part from his traumatic birth has been suggested to me by numerous interlocutors.

45. Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 203. Stella Pollock and Lee Krasner both are habitually assigned the role of the “terrible mother” to Pollock’s “bad son” in their friends’ reminiscences and in the literature (see, for instance, ibid., pp. 209, 275). Tellingly, Pollock’s father, LeRoy, who all but abandoned the family when Jackson was a child, and whose youngest son believed that his father “thinks I’m a



now on in—but things don't work out that easily I guess."<sup>46</sup>

Critics typically associate Pollock's flows not with the engulfing floods of the female body but with masculine streams of urine and semen. Semen attests to the presence of desire; and the Freudian image of desire as a flow has lately been reshaped by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for whom "the unconscious is a flow and a desiring machine" (Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, p. 255). Because sexuality and love "dream . . . of wide-open spaces and cause strange flows to circulate that do not let themselves be stocked within an established order," further, that machine is implicitly revolutionary.<sup>47</sup> Under patriarchy, "the work of domination has consisted in subjugating, damming in . . . [while the] desiring-production of the unconscious has been encoded as the subjugated gender, or femaleness," Theweleit suggests. As he describes it, then, the subversive errand of Deleuze and Guattari is to take Freud's mandate for human development—"Where id was, there shall ego be"—and reverse it, demanding: "Where dams were, flowing shall be." Concludes Theweleit, rather than sublimation, "a different process is applauded here: dive right in, be dissolved, become nameless—and not just in a regressive sense. What is seen here is a breaking out, a crossing of boundaries to discover . . . new streams, . . . [and] deterritorializations" (ibid., pp. 432, 270).

Jackson Pollock's impossible aim was to paint "out of [the] unconscious," as he famously put it.<sup>48</sup> Many critics have sensed that the artist's rawest feelings flowed through his streams of paint—the feelings of a man who confessed he sometimes felt as if he were "skinned alive"; felt like "a clam without its shell."<sup>49</sup> Pollock tried to assuage that pain with the "grand feeling" he got when "the stuff is really beginning to flow"; tried, in effect, to dissolve himself in his work—work he wished to leave unnamed and unsigned.

bum" (letter of 1931, CR, vol. 4, doc. 11, p. 211), generally gets portrayed as a pitiable, not a censurable, figure—and never as an important source of Pollock's problems.

46. Letter to Alfonso Ossorio (CR, vol. 4, doc. 94, p. 257).

47. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, as cited in Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, pp. 269–270. Within the capitalist system, "under no circumstances could desires be allowed to flow in their inherently undirected manner . . . desires had to be channelled . . . [to] bolster the flow of currency. Streams of desire were encoded as streams of money" (ibid., pp. 270–271).

48. CR, vol. 4, doc. 113, p. 275. See also ibid., vol. 4, doc. 72, p. 241 ("The source of my painting is the unconscious").

49. Ibid., vol. 4, doc. 103, p. 267 (misspelled as "skined" in the original); and Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 156.

Pollock had some dephallicizing impulses, in other words, toward abnegating the role of the author. (As for Krasner, she did not enjoy the prerogative of renouncing the position of authority that she was largely precluded from assuming in the first place, both due to her gender and because she was not the originator of the language she used.)<sup>50</sup> For Pollock, it followed that becoming a public name or figure, even the public face of contemporary art, proved a deeply troubling experience. After being featured in a story in *Life* magazine in 1949, he reflected that once *Life* had finished with one of its subjects, "You're not your own anymore—maybe more, maybe less. But whatever the hell you are after that, you're not your you." And as for the film of Pollock made by Namuth in 1950, it made him think that "maybe those natives who figure they're being robbed of their souls by having their images taken have something";<sup>51</sup> and it also triggered his return to drink in a violent break from several years of sobriety.

Jackson Pollock hated being objectified, in short, and that aversion was in a meaningful way continuous with his distinctive mode of painting. What distinguishes Pollock's work from almost all other art before it is not merely that he poured paint on canvas but that he kept those streams of paint from forming pools or bodying shapes or objects, and so configuring a composition. Theweleit observes that "flows have no specific object. The first goal of flowing is simply that it happen (and only later that it seek something out)."<sup>52</sup> What Pollock's flows generated might be termed a kind of decomposition, with streams of paint running more or less evenly all over the picture surface; there is no center in his paintings, no one area predominating over others. This refusal to allow discrete pictorial territories to develop on his complex road maps, a resistance to borders or outlines, might be said to render Pollock's pictures exercises in "deterritorialization," in a process of deconstructing and dehierarchization. This is, in a sense, what critics alluded to when they remarked on the "complete lack of structural organization" in

50. "The female subject can participate in this fantasy of sexual and discursive divestiture only in a displaced and mediated way. She can assist the male subject in removing his mantle of privileges, but she herself has nothing to take off" (Kaja Silverman, "The Female Authorial Voice," in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988], p. 192).

51. Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, pp. 114, 129. Pollock said he allowed Namuth to film him because Krasner "kept at me" (ibid., p. 129).

52. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, p. 268.



Pollock's art and its "abnegation of all composition in the traditional sense."<sup>53</sup> Critics generally refer to this radical painting mode as "all-over painting," yet no one has noted that idiom's double meaning: "all over" means not only "everywhere" but "finished," which is precisely what Pollock's art would signify to many: that European modernism was finished—or even that painting itself was all over. As de Kooning bluntly put it: "Every so often a painter has to destroy painting. Cézanne did it. Picasso did it with cubism. Then Pollock did it. He busted our idea of a picture all to hell."<sup>54</sup>

Pollock created pictures that many viewers could not recognize as pictures at all; pictures substituting chaos—albeit a painstakingly manufactured chaos—for composition. Remarked the sculptor Constantine Nivola: "The French would say of de Kooning, 'As painting, we can recognize this.' Of Pollock, 'This is not painting! Only in America could it happen' " (Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 221). Through the nonsensical graffiti with which he covered his pictures, Pollock perpetrated a kind of willful defacement or erasure of established pictorial languages. At first he had hoped to master those languages; but the established canon admitted no American masters, and Pollock wished to be a great American artist, the first to paint on, or to paint, the tabula rasa of American culture. Less drawn to the Metropolitan Museum than to the Cedar Bar, Pollock was "very mad at civilization," observed a friend who witnessed some of his drunken sieges;<sup>55</sup> and that roiling anger finally placed him in a different relation to the canon from his

wife, who would never shed the role of acolyte in the church of high culture. While Krasner endeavored from the first to insinuate both herself and Pollock into a high cultural frame, Pollock was toiling away in Krasner's own backyard at leveling that very frame and projecting in its stead an image of the unframed or the void.<sup>56</sup>

The effect of Pollock's classic poured and dripped paintings is often cosmic or oceanic, like the infinity of the universe as inscribed by the constellations and the seeming infinity of the ocean as marked by the repetitive patterns of the waves—an effect underscored by some of the titles he approved, such as *Galaxy*, *Comet*, *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, *Full Fathom Five*, and *Sea Change*. The extreme open-endedness of Pollock's paintings—not only the fact that the most impressive of them cover a relatively vast expanse but the way there seems to be no end to the patterns that form the pictures—was a feature that troubled some critics, but that the artist himself especially valued.<sup>57</sup> The sense that Pollock's predominantly horizontal paintings give, of going on and on while going nowhere in particular (as they lack any notable landmarks), may well relate to his intense feeling for the American landscape, especially the boundless, open spaces of the West—the memory of which he managed to recapture in the East in the presence of the ocean.<sup>58</sup> "There is in Pollock some fundamentally

53. Alfieri, cited in O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 55; and Edith Hoffman, "Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions," *Burlington* (Feb. 1957): 68. Pollock did have to reckon with the actual, physical borders of his canvases, of course, and sometimes he looped most of the paint skeins back at the pictures' edges, tacitly acknowledging the limitations of the space, whereas at other times he poured paint on a canvas and then cropped a picture out of it after the fact, in which case the trajectories of the paint skeins were necessarily interrupted by the picture's edge.

54. Rudi Blesh, *Modern Art U.S.A.: Men, Rebellion, Conquest, 1900–56* (New York: Knopf, 1956), pp. 253–254. De Kooning usually is described as Pollock's chief rival for leadership of the New York School; but de Kooning was unquestionably the figure most emulated by other painters in the circle because, as Al Held aptly remarked, "de Kooning provided a language you could write your own sentences with. Pollock didn't do that" (Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 714).

55. Manuel Tolegian, cited in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 47. Tolegian recalled Pollock's having smashed a Catholic altar in a church, ripped his (Tolegian's) paintings off the wall of a gallery, and smashed the windows in a building (*ibid.*, pp. 47–48, 57).

56. It bears noting, as an aside, that Lenore Krassner deliberately took the "Krass" out of Krassner (besides adopting the gender-neutral name "Lee" in preference to her given first name).

57. In 1948, Aldous Huxley said of Pollock's work: "It raises a question of why it stops when it does. The artist could go on forever. I don't know. It seems to me like a panel for a wallpaper which is repeated indefinitely around the wall" (from a roundtable discussion on modern art in *Life* [18 Oct. 1948], as cited in Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 179). Recalled Pollock some time later: "There was a reviewer who wrote that my pictures didn't have any beginning or end. He didn't mean it as a compliment, but it was. It was a fine compliment" (Berton Roueché, "Unframed Space," *New Yorker* [5 Aug. 1950]: 16). And "there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end," Pollock once declared (*CR*, vol. 4, doc. 100, p. 262).

58. "I have a definite feeling for the West: the vast horizontality of the land, for instance; here only the Atlantic ocean gives you that," observed Pollock (*ibid.*, vol. 4, doc. 52, p. 232). "'Jackson's art is full of the West', [Krasner] said. 'That's what gives it that feeling of spaciousness. It's what makes it so American'" (Roueché, "Unframed Space," p. 16). Horizontality is conventionally coded feminine, verticality masculine, the former connoting passivity or inertia, the latter activity and erectness. It bears noting in this context that Krasner explicitly stressed the predominant verticality of her own work (Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975], p. 94).



American quality," declared the cultural historian Leslie Fiedler, "so that I think of him along with Huckleberry Finn and Jay Gatsby; a 'heart-of-the-heart-of-the-country' American. This is because of the contempt he had for boundaries."<sup>59</sup>

Pollock was often asked if, as an artist, he didn't need or want to go to Europe. He replied impudently, "Hell no. Those Europeans can come look at us" (Landau, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 266), knowing full well that the proverbial New World was widely regarded by Europeans as a gaping cultural hole. Before World War II, "absolutely no one thought American painting could rival French painting, then or ever," recalled Lee Krasner.<sup>60</sup> If Europe represented the center of cultural authority and knowledge—the Father, metaphorically speaking—the New World represented the Mother, in all her nonknowledge and relative lack of authority or presence.<sup>61</sup> Pollock's painting, in its attempt to describe "unframed space" (as Krasner phrased it), and in its act of destructuring and decentering, may in a sense be seen as an attempt to visualize the void, the hole, the Mother.<sup>62</sup>

Alice Jardine has suggested that "we might say that what is generally referred to as modernity, is precisely the acutely interior, unabashedly incestuous exploration of these new female spaces: the . . . exploration of the female, differently maternal body."<sup>63</sup> Further, "Over the past century, those master (European) narratives—history, philosophy, religion—which have determined our sense of legitimacy in the West have undergone a series of crises in legitimation"; and that crisis has propelled a radical rethinking, marked by a rejection of

Anthropomorphism, Humanism, and Truth. . . . In France such rethinking has involved, above all, a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives' own "nonknowledge," what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a "space" of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control) and this space has been coded as *feminine*, as *woman*.

Jardine, pp. 24–25

The task undertaken by some contemporary theorists, as Jardine describes it, then, is "the putting into discourse of 'woman'," that is, of the master narratives' absent term (*ibid.*, p. 25). But feminist critics are not completely sanguine about these new roles that male theoreticians have been positing for women. Gayatri Spivak observes that throughout Jacques Derrida's critique of phallogentrism, he "asks us to notice that all human beings are irreducibly displaced although, in a discourse that privileges the center, women alone have been diagnosed as such; correspondingly, he attempts to displace all centrism" while using woman as "the 'model' for deconstructive discourse." Spivak criticizes Derrida's "desire to usurp 'the place of displacement'" thereby, in effect, doubly displacing women; and she writes insinuatingly of "the male appropriation of woman's voice."<sup>64</sup>

Returning to Pollock: one might see how, in his tacit assumption of the position of the woman—the decentered and the voiceless, the one who flows uncontrollably, the one who figures the void and the unconscious—he remained, on some level, a man using his masculine authority to appropriate a feminine space.<sup>65</sup> In fact, one woman had tried to articulate that space before Pollock did, in a similar way—not Krasner but Janet Sobel, who made poured, all-over compositions that unmistakably made an impact on Pollock (fig. 8). Greenberg recalls that "Pollock (and I myself) admired [Sobel's] pictures rather furtively" at

59. Leslie Fiedler, "Was Jackson Pollock Any Good?" *Art and Antiques* (Oct. 1984): 85. Contended the dealer Holly Solomon, "Pollock invented a new language for us, for Americans. . . . He taught us how to breathe" (*ibid.*, p. 85).

60. Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 341. This situation was not entirely altered after the war. To Hilton Kramer, Pollock's art would be "dim indeed" compared to that of the European masters: "It is only the poverty of our own artistic values that has elevated his accomplishment into something higher" (Kramer, "Art: Looking Back at Jackson Pollock," *New York Times* [5 April 1967]: 44).

61. In a sense, the United States had, like Pollock, only a distant or remote father—Europe, that is—with whom it maintained strained relations, longing for approval, but bent on independence.

62. Interestingly enough, Pollock was named for Jackson Hole in his birthplace of Wyoming (Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 43), and was subject to being teased about "Jackson's Hole" when he mused aloud philosophically, as he sometimes was prone to do, on the subject of the "hole" or the "void" (Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, pp. 203, 192).

63. Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 33–34.

64. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman," in *Displacement, Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 170, 173, 190.

65. "It has also become clear that the imaginary femininity of male authors, which often grounds their oppositional stance vis-à-vis bourgeois society, can easily go hand in hand with the misogyny of bourgeois patriarchy itself" (Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986], p. 45). "Society often tolerates and even encourages the femininity of male artists," observes Mira Schor; "Catherine Elwes . . . writes that 'their role is often to provide the opportunity for other men vicariously to experience their buried femininity. The power and prestige of the artist's biological masculinity is reinforced rather than undermined by artistic forays into





Figure 8. Janet Sobel, untitled, ca. 1946. Oil and enamel on composition board, 46 cm × 36 cm. Photo: Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of William Rubin.



the Art of This Century gallery in 1944; "The effect—and it was the first really 'all-over' one that I had ever seen . . .—was strangely pleasing. Later on, Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him."<sup>66</sup> When Sobel is mentioned at all in accounts of Pollock's development, however, she is generally described and so discredited as a "housewife," or amateur, a strategist that preserves Pollock's status as the legitimate and unique progenitor, both mother and father of his art, a figure overflowing not only with semen but with amniotic fluid.<sup>67</sup>

What separates Pollock's work definitively from Sobel's is the heroic scale his pictures sometimes assumed and the relatively free flow of his paint. As for Krasner's all-over pictures, her postscript to Pollock's script looked less like Pollock than like something else: like the compressed and chilling record of one woman's strangled speech. If, in some sense, Pollock and Krasner both were struggling to get "Out of the Web" (to take the title of a painting of 1949 by Pollock), he alone managed to leave his webs open enough on occasion to offer glimpses of escape. Krasner's sense of being bound or trapped emerged not only in her tightly closed webs, however, but in her career-long practice of obsessively reworking, cannibalizing, and demolishing her work: "Jackson never destroyed his work the way I do," she noted. "If he had things that didn't come off, he'd put them aside for later consideration."<sup>68</sup> Observed another artist and artist's wife, Elaine de Kooning, Krasner became "kind

the feminine. His status as an artist partly depends on this poetic femininity" (Schor, "Representations of the Penis," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* [Nov. 1988]: 8).

66. Greenberg's next sentence quickly retreats from the suggestion that Sobel—whom he describes as "a 'primitive' painter . . . who was, and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn"—may have been a significant source for Pollock: "But he had really anticipated his own 'all-overness' in a mural he did for Peggy Guggenheim at the beginning of 1944" (Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* [Boston: Beacon, 1961], p. 218).

67. Luce Irigaray has suggested that men have conspired to keep naming, representing, and cultural production generally a masculine prerogative, thus in a compensatory way usurping the biological status of women as the site of reproduction or procreation (in *Speculum*, pp. 23, 33, 41–43). As for Sobel, her work is nowhere to be seen, on a regular basis, in any major museum (although the Museum of Modern Art owns two paintings), nor is there any monograph on her.

68. Glueck, "Scenes from a Marriage," p. 61. In the years after she first met Pollock, Krasner painted what she called her "gray slabs": canvases (eventually thrown out) that she covered over and over with paint "until they'd get like stone and it was always just a gray mess" (Nemser, *Art Talk*, p. 87). In 1953 she began a series of collages made up of her own old drawings, torn into shreds; many of

of the opposite of competitive with Jackson. She wiped herself out."<sup>69</sup>

Jackson Pollock's pictures are often described as exalting the freedom of individual action and expression and, by comparison with Krasner's constricted pictures, they surely appear to. Yet the freedom in question in Pollock's art was, in a sense, a freedom to express frustration. As the painter George McNeil put it, "The freedom with which Pollock painted then, that was great. Everybody was changed by his work . . . he was able to project his frustrations—his work came from this" (ibid., 100). Pollock's script had better be read not simply as an affirmation of freedom, then, but also as an image of the frustration that triggered that affirmation. Observed a doctor friend of Pollock's: "I think Jackson was trying to utter something. . . . There's an utterance there, but it's a lot like trying to understand brain-damaged people or those with an autistic or dyslexic factor, or psychotics" (ibid., 177). Although Pollock wrote and wrote in his art, his script was never lucid, never legible. But that Pollock's art would "stop making sense" may be construed not as the babbling of a helpless fool, but as an artist's ingenious way of testifying to the failure of writing, or painting and drawing, to represent experience; or as a material protest against the poverty of received modes of communication.

"The threads of communication between artist and spectator are so very tenuous" in Pollock's work, one critic commented, that "there are times when communications break down entirely, and, with the best will in the world I can say of such pieces as 'Lucifer,' 'Reflection of the Big Dipper,' and 'Cathedral' only that they seem mere unorganized explosions of

those drawings came from her years in Hans Hoffman's school, where, interestingly, she once suffered the insult of having Hoffman tear up and rearrange a newly completed (and admired) drawing in front of the class (Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, p. 386). Krasner proceeded to "slashing" and collaging her own old oil paintings: "it is dangerous for me to have any of my early work around because I tend to always want to go back into it . . .—so the less around the better," she told an interviewer, while explicitly expressing feelings of hatred for her own old work (Nemser, *Art Talk*, pp. 93–94).

69. In Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, p. 175. "Lee was his victim in the end," pronounced Greenberg (ibid., p. 174). Observed Potter, Krasner was "trading on the trajectory of his fame, although not admitting to herself how much she was putting her own work and self aside from his" (ibid., p. 226). The increased visibility Krasner's art found in the decades following her husband's death was tacitly viewed more as an insidious index of Pollock's stature than as a positive measure of her own, as it was known that she controlled the holdings of the Pollock estate and so was a figure to be indulged.



random energy, and therefore meaningless."<sup>70</sup> The significance of Pollock's tangled script lay elsewhere, however—not in its communicativeness but in the act of writing itself. "What is at stake in writing," the critic Barbara Johnson observes, "is the very structure of authority itself," as writing is a form of control. And whereas the graphocentric, logocentric logic of Western society "has been coded as 'male', the 'other' logics of spacing, ambiguity, figuration, and indirection are often coded as 'female'," such that a critique of graphocentrism and logocentrism "can enable a critique of 'phallogentrism' as well." In the history of modern literature, the writer who is credited with introducing space or spacing into reading is Stéphane Mallarmé, who gave "a signifying function to the materiality—the blanks, the typefaces, the placement on the page, the punctuation—of writing."<sup>71</sup> In the history of art, Jackson Pollock, the vaunted "action painter," achieved something comparable, not only in forgoing the representational function of drawing but in letting the action of and the spacing of lines on canvas alone be his image.

"To act . . . to produce upon many a movement that gives you back the feeling that you originated it, and therefore exist: something no one is sure of," wrote Mallarmé in a text called "Action Restrained":

. . . to send a force in some direction, any direction, which, when countered, gives you immunity from having no result . . .

Your act is always applied to paper; for meditating without a trace is evanescent, nor is the exalting of an instinct in some vehement, lost gesture what you were seeking.

To write—

The inkwell, crystalline like consciousness . . .

You noted, one does not write, luminously, on a dark field; the alphabet of stars alone does that, sketched or interrupted; man pursues black upon white.

This fold of dark lace, which retains the infinite, woven by thousands, each according to the thread or extension unknowing a secret, assembles distant spacings in which riches yet to be inventoried sleep.<sup>72</sup>

Remarks Johnson, "Mallarmé is here suggesting that action cannot be defined otherwise than as the capacity

to leave a trace—a written trace, a trace not of clarity but of darkness. It is with his obscurity, his nonknowledge, that man writes, and the poet's duty is to stand as guardian of an ignorance that does not know itself, an ignorance that would otherwise be lost" (ibid., 30).

If Pollock's unraveling script is still mesmerizing more than forty years after he wrote it, it may be for a related reason: because Pollock's writing is writing that unwrites itself, that deauthorizes language, where language is identified with the phallus, the word of God the Father, and the constraints of law. Johnson observes that "what enslaves is not writing per se but *control* of writing, and writing as control" (Johnson, "Writing," p. 48). Pollock offers a spectacle of writing that does not control or order but *disorders*; writing degenerated into lawlessness, anarchy, chaos. Critics described his art in terms of "the absurdity of sheer scribble"; as "formless, repetitious, empty"; and as "a loose, shapeless mess of paint without any apparent will to form."<sup>73</sup> But the primal chaos suggested by Pollock's art—an art of deterritorialization, full of lines, but no boundaries or borders; an art of dedifferentiation, spilling with flows, neither and both male and female—spells a perversion or a reversal of values, of the logic of the biblical universe that moves purposively from chaos or "indistinctness to separation and demarcation"; division, order and control.<sup>74</sup> In a world where order is, ipso facto, patriarchal order—the world as we know it—Pollock's perverse spectacles of chaos and formlessness may serve as a vision of a reality, a material reality, other than that of the paternal universe.

73. "Beyond the Pasteboard," p. 69; Emily Genauer, "Sad Art of Pollock in Museum Show," *Herald Tribune Book Review* (23 Dec. 1956); Victor Willing, "Thoughts After a Car Crash," *Encounter* (Oct. 1956): 66.

74. Not only the specific phrase cited but this notion of chaos and perversion generally is taken from Janine Chasseguet-Smargil, "Perversion and the Universal Law," in *Creativity and Perversion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 10 and passim. It bears noting that science since Pollock's day has come to evaluate chaos in more positive terms, reconceptualizing it as "the progenitor of order rather than its opposite," but in her analysis of contemporary chaos theory, Hayles has shown that the feminineness or "otherness that chaos represents, while immensely attractive, is also always a threat, arousing the desire to control it, or even more extremely to annihilate it" (Hayles, "Gender Encoding," pp. 32, 33; see also Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990]).

70. Robert M. Coates, review, *New Yorker* (17 Jan. 1948): 57.

71. Barbara Johnson, "Writing," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990) pp. 46–48.

72. As cited in Barbara Johnson, "Is Writerliness Conservative?" in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 29–30.