

Jackson Pollock's Post-Ritual Performance

Memories Arrested in Space

Catherine M. Sousloff

*In beauty I walk
With beauty before me I walk
With beauty behind me I walk
With beauty above and about me I walk
It is finished in beauty
It is finished in beauty*

—Navaho Indian Night Chant (in Rothenberg 1968:81)

In magic, as in religion, it is the unconscious ideas which are the active ones.¹

—Marcel Mauss (in Levi-Strauss [1950] 1987:34)

In France in 1958 Claude Levi-Strauss published a collection of his papers on anthropology, written between 1944 and 1957. *Structural Anthropology*, the title of the book in English, offers a comprehensive view of Levi-Strauss's theories. For those of us interested in ritual's value and historical specificity for the consideration of art and performance in Europe and the Americas since World War II—the period, media, and place of what I am calling here “post-ritual”—Levi-Strauss's essay “The Effectiveness of Symbols” merits attention. The anthropologist makes the “illuminating comparison of the shamanistic and psychoanalytic techniques in which the role of symbols” effects a cure, “whether of a psychological or physiological disturbance” (1963:xiii). For Levi-Strauss, the “*form*” of the myth, its symbolic level, “takes precedence over the *content* of the narrative” (204). He writes: “Any myth represents a quest for the remembrance of things past,” just as that remembrance may be “considered by some the key to psychoanalytic therapy” (204).

Paul Jackson Pollock's most productive years as a painter occurred precisely between the beginning of 1944 immediately after *Mural* for the lobby of Peggy



Guggenheim's townhouse at 155 East 61st Street in New York City and October 1950 when he completed the picture *Number 29, 1950*, painted on glass and made for the demonstration of his technique in the film, *Jackson Pollock*, directed by Hans Namuth and completed in 1951.² About the abstract painting called *Mural* Pollock said: "I had a vision [...]. It was a stampede" (in Varnedoe 1998:81, n. 84). At the end of the last day of filming with Namuth in November 1951, and after almost four years of abstinence and abstraction, Pollock began drinking again. He never stopped until his death at the wheel of an automobile, 10 August 1956.

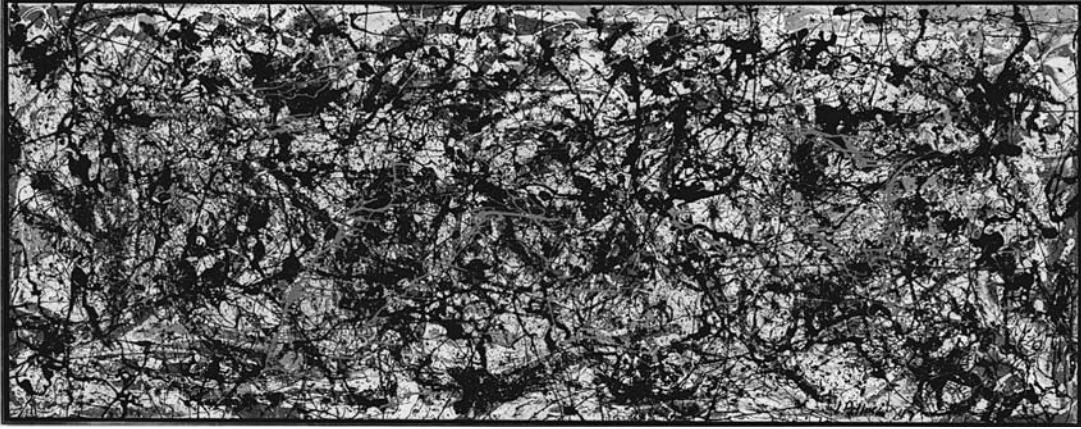
The early 1940s have been called Pollock's "totemic period": the titles of the paintings from these years—*Guardians of the Secret* (1943), *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* (ca. 1943), *Totem Lesson 1* (1944), and *Totem Lesson 2* (1945), to name only a few—together with their appropriation of symbols from Native American visual culture, surrealist art, and Jungian psychology easily reveal his debt to the form and content of myth as transmitted both through visual, historical, and psychoanalytic sources.³ The paintings of 1946 to 1950, on the other hand, make little overt reference to Pollock's earlier visual sources. These abstractions, such as *Lucifer* (1947), hide as much as they reveal.⁴ Among all of the many interpreters of Pollock's art, only Hubert Damisch has noted that for this artist at this time "the Indian example" had less to do with "iconic resonances" or the actual appearance of pictograms (or Indian sand painting), than it did with a "laying out" or "marking out" in actions that equate with the trance used in shamanistic rituals (1982:30).⁵ Such procedures place Pollock outside of historicist encounters with Native American subject matter where he has been located not infrequently. According to Damisch, Pollock's procedures move his work into the space of myth and the physical actions of ritual.

After Namuth's filming, Pollock retreats from color to black-and-white compositions, he returns to figuration, he gets stopped up, and he stops painting. Pollock's own desperate search for respite from his inner agonies during the late 1930s and 1940s led him for relief first to alcohol, a palliative he had enjoyed since his late teens. Later in 1946, when newly married, he moved with his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, from Manhattan to Springs, Long Island. Then, as before, he sought relief in psychoanalysis as well as with newer therapies for alcoholism. Pollock's regime of abstinence, psychoanalysis, and painterly abstraction for a few years takes up the same conjunctions of analytic

1. Film strip from Jackson Pollock directed by Hans Namuth, produced by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg (1951). (Courtesy of Peter Namuth for Hans Namuth Ltd.)

2. Jackson Pollock, *Mural* (1943). (© 1943 University of Iowa Museum of Art, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim)





3. Jackson Pollock, *Lucifer* (1947). (M. Lee Fathessee Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson)

and shamanistic techniques prescribed by Levi-Strauss during these same years for the interpretation of ritual culture.

For those seeking empirical evidence of this connection between the study of ritual and contemporary painting, of the connection between the analysis and shamanism in Jackson Pollock, the letters of the artist reveal that striving to make painting goes hand in hand with an investment in psychoanalysis, particularly the interpretation of dreams (O'Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:257). In addition, a voracious reader, Pollock's library contained, among many other titles significant to my point here, Georges Bataille's *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux: or the Birth of Art* (1955), Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1946), Frank Elgar's collection on the arts of Oceania, *Arts de l'Océanie* (1951), Jane Ellen Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1948), the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946 on *Arts of the South Seas* (1946) (O'Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:187–99). This exhibition and the 1941 *Indian Art of the United States*, also held at MOMA, made a great impression on Pollock (supp. 70).⁶ Possibly as early as 1935 Jackson, together with his brother Charles, had acquired the Smithsonian Institution's *Publications of the Bureau of Ethnology*, reports dating from 1881 to 1901 on Indian visual culture. Alfonso Osorio, Pollock's close friend during the abstract period, spoke of his deep knowledge of anthropological collections and literature (Friedman 1972:91). An apparently spontaneous autographed statement penned sometime in 1950 and associated with the Namuth film reveals more. Pollock ties process with a need or desire that is satiated by his technique:

Technic is the result of a need—new needs demand new technics—total control—denial of the accident—States of order—organic intensity—energy and motion made visible—memories arrested in space, human needs and motive—acceptance—Jackson Pollock. (in O'Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:253; in Varnedoe 1998:56)

Art historians have grappled for years with the complexity that this artist and his work give to the account of American art, particularly to what Levi-Strauss called the symbolic level of myth—its abstraction. For the most part, uneasy both over the implication that Pollock's visual symbols and his abstraction indicate a profound involvement with myth, and that his dedication to the curative potential of psychoanalysis might indicate a sustained engagement with his infantile fantasies and early family history, art historians have dis-

agreed profoundly over the interpretation of Pollock's painting. Two major trends may be identified in the interpretative frame that surrounds the work of Jackson Pollock: the essential "opticality" of his painting and the meaning of the nonrepresentational and representational marks found in them.⁷ I seek a third way into this interpretative frame through an investigation of the meaning of myth, ritual, and performance in the abstractions of Pollock.

In its predilection for representation over ritual, for narrative over myth, for content over form, art history betrays a mistrust of the seriousness of performance akin to J.L. Austin's exclusion of performance, e.g., speech "said by the actor on the stage," from the "performative utterance," characterized by Austin as ritualistic speech, such as the marriage ceremony's "I do" (Austin 1975).⁸ Austin insists on the nonseriousness of language spoken in theatrical performance, just as art historians have tended to neglect the seriousness of ritual in Pollock's paintings. But Austin's point also is that the effectiveness of performance does not depend on its performativity. In this regard, the irony for the critical viewer of the Namuth films of Pollock at work lies in the observation that the earlier black-and-white film is less filmic, mere footage—nonserious in a filmic sense—than the final color film. Yet, it gives more access to the trance state that the artist moves in, to the ritual aspects of his repetitive gestures. Lee Krasner characterized Pollock's movements in an interview, stating: "It is called dance in some form. He was a terrible dancer in terms of what is called dance. That is not a reflection of his rhythm" (in Rose 1978:n.p.).⁹ As Krasner recognized, Pollock's corporeal rhythm should not be considered ordered or systematic, but its presence in the abstractions lends weight to the performative poetics of the paintings.

In both its silence and its lack of a rhetorical structure, the black-and-white footage speaks for itself using an indexical and gestural syntax. In contrast, the final, color version of Namuth's film becomes more performative in its own

4. Jackson Pollock, *Guardians of the Secret* (1943).
(© San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)



right as film—the mythic form of Pollock and of his painting is obscured in favor of narrative. The multiple cuts on action in the film avoid “dead spots.” Such “dead spots” create the loss of narrative line. In cinema they are to be avoided if the desire is narration, such as the story of a painting. Narrative runs counter to trance. It requires rhetorical formality, such as the Morton Feldman soundtrack inserted into the second film. Narrative may be said in this case to overcome painterly abstraction.

To briefly characterize the dominant art historiography of Pollock, the one that insists on representation as the frame of interpretation, may well seem unfair to critics of the stature of Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, William Rubin, and Rosalind Krauss. Nonetheless, to do them some justice, we can admit of their influence, call it a genealogy in art criticism that covers the period of Pollock’s preeminence in American painting of circa 1950 to the present. In the catalogue of the 1998 Museum of Modern Art exhibition of Pollock, curator Kurt Varnedoe wrote:

The consequences of Pollock’s art are now global, but they still rest, as they always have, on a sum of individual experiences. The paintings live on as art (as opposed to interesting historical documents) principally through unrecorded, nonverbal, subjective responses. This needs emphasizing again. There was a time when it seemed very important that these be pictures without words—when the man who made them and many who were drawn to them believed that trying to say what they meant was a pointless betrayal and when skeptics for their part found the works’ groping inarticulateness all too typical of the low surliness of the age, as manifest in the moody stammering of James Dean. By now, though, these are pictures amply wrapped in words: the many stories have themselves become a story, and cocoon the work so densely that a full-time devotee of Pollock studies might thrive without ever escaping their fabric. Yet no matter how daunting the store of verbiage on art, there is always—if the subject is indeed art—a great deal (sometimes the core) left over, and only learnable first hand. (1998:77)

Art is rendered speechless according to Varnedoe, just as theatrical performance may not speak seriously according to Austin.

The implications of this view for the understanding of the work and its effect on the rhetoric of the art historian if it must be so framed will be apparent. First, critical description overwhelms artistic action. Second, that which is inside the frame takes precedence over what came before its placement there, e.g., what happened in the studio must be subordinated to what is seen in the gallery or the museum (see Buren 1979). In contrast to this prevailing museum culture, evidence suggests that in a utopian moment Pollock envisioned a different kind of placement for his large paintings. At Pollock’s second 1949 show at the Betty Parson’s gallery, Peter Blake, the architect and friend of Pollock, had made a model of the ideal museum for Pollock’s paintings. With Pollock’s input, “Blake used mirrors in the model to create ‘a continuous reflection, into infinity, of each of the long paintings’” (O’Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:126–27). The exhibition announcement said: “Murals in Modern Architecture. A Theatrical Exercise Using Jackson Pollock’s Paintings and Sculpture. By Peter Blake” (O’Connor 1967a:48). This model museum, now destroyed, was described in a publication of the time with the title “Unframed Space: A Museum for Jackson Pollock’s Paintings” (Drexler 1950:90–91; see also Varnedoe 1998:57; and Storr 1999:60–63). These titles indicate that ideally Pol-

lock wanted a break with the concept of the framed representation that determines the gallery space in order to give a more “theatrical” experience.

The fact is that in these abstractions, Pollock worked on the floor using unconventional tools and conventional tools unconventionally. He famously dripped, splattered, and poured paint over the surface of unprimed canvas, which was usually cut and stretched after being completed. The paintings had no top or bottom, no left or right because Pollock worked over them from all directions. At one point Pollock had borrowed his mother’s quilting frame so that he could work more easily from all sides on a fixed surface. Until they were viewed by Pollock and Krasner together, and signed in order to indicate their correct orientation, these paintings existed in a space outside the tradition and conventions of studio practice in Western art history (Frank 1983: 114–15; Varnedoe 1998:37–40, 47–56). In 1947 Pollock wrote of his procedures:

I work on unstretched canvas tacked (pinned) to the wall or floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I can literally work from the four sides, use heavy impasto or a fluid [...] running paint—with foreign matter added such as gravel sand, broken glass, (I use trowels, sticks knives—instead of bru [shes]) I seldom <am away from the usual> use painters tools, such as brushes easel etc. The source of my painting is the unconscious. (in O’Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:241)

In a paper written in 1950 for an art history class taught by Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University, the California artist Allan Kaprow described the effect of these paintings in a manner that captures their performativity:

A certain visual phenomenon [...] is the closeness one feels oneself to the things that go on in the painting. Though I have no scientific basis for this following, from an empirical standpoint I have found that in general, what I have considered as normal perceptive distance is that distance with which I have found it convenient to get around in life. For instance, I should not consider the great change in size experience in lifting a darning needle from arm’s length to the eye for purposes of threading out of the ordinary. But I would surely have a new and strange sensation if I could only see tabletops in terms of the grain in their wood, and not in terms of their having conventional boundaries, qualities and functions. There would be a large shift in the way I normally think of a tabletop. This may not be precisely what happens in these paintings but the experiencing of simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity is evident. (What occurs in this type of painting, I think, is not only the fact that elements are brought unconventionally close to one—if they are recognizable things—but also the fact that the elements are brought unconventionally close to *each other in scale*.) (Kaprow 1950:n.p.)¹⁰

What Pollock does in these abstractions, as a result of his actions in the studio, is to disrupt our expectations regarding the role of skill in the final marks on the canvas. In an essay on “Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art,” Gregory Bateson called Pollock’s paintings, along with “natural landscapes, ‘found objects,’ inkblots, scattergrams, [...] exceptions to the almost universal linkage in aesthetics between skill and pattern” (1972:148). In Pollock’s case, as in these others, “a larger patterning seems to propose the illusion that the details must have been controlled,” when, in actuality they have not been

(148). It is this lack of control of the medium, in its traditional sense, along with a yielding to more ritual actions that has been so invisible to most interpreters of Pollock. The illusion of control has effected an account of Pollock at odds with ritual and in concert with historical art practices, even if avant-garde.

Finally, in the art historical interpretations of Pollock “the oneiric qualities of the human imagination” will be subordinated to the artwork as object, inasmuch as the evidentiary aspects of the object as object will necessarily prevail in the interpretative strategies. Even if the films of Pollock painting or his own accounts of the role of unconscious procedures and motivations indicate a “physical system”—Bateson’s term again (1972:149)—outside the occidental painterly norm, art historians have in the main perceived representationalism in the abstractions.

To summarize, three major outcomes of the dominant readings of Pollock’s abstractions from 1946 to 1950 preclude ritual: (1) interpretation relies essentially on the description of the painting in the museum; (2) even if acknowledged as significant, intentionality (conscious or unconscious) and procedure refer to the painting in the museum; (3) the quest for an interpretation of technique and process based upon rationalized criteria and accounts supports a reading of Pollock’s paintings as representations at the expense of understanding their ritual and performative efficacy for both the artist and the viewer.

This analysis proves useful to understanding the genesis of Namuth’s photographs and films. We know that he began with candid still photographs in black and white of the artist at work. Rosalind Krauss has noted that counter to Pollock’s self-characterization, the photographs “recreate the space of all-over pattern in which the human figure can barely exist, or in which its relationship to gravity, to a solid foundation, is made equivocal at best” (1980:n.p.). After the photographs Namuth moved to a preliminary film session using black-and-white stock in primarily long takes. Several months later he came back to the studio and filmed in color for about two weeks, returning to the editing room to add in music and commentary. The narration came from a compilation of earlier interviews conducted by others and edited by Pollock for the film. Namuth inserted the flourish of the signature of the artist at the beginning and end of the film to further enhance the narrativity of Pollock painting. Pollock himself hated signing, according to Krasner (Friedman 1980:n.p.). Ever since it was first shown at the Museum of Modern Art on 14 June 1951 the film—although constructed, filmic, and highly performative as film—has served as an illustration and document of what Pollock during his most important years as an artist *did*, and a key to what his work *means*.

The final version of the film functions in a dialogic relation with Pollock’s paintings as objects. This dialogue between the color version of the film and the abstract paintings has determined both the understanding of Pollock’s working methods and the interpretation of the work. In this sense, the relationship between the abstractions and the filmic representation of Pollock painting has functioned as a closed system of interpretation, preventing other ways of understanding the working methods of Pollock. This closed system has been reinforced over the years because the film has often been shown in a continuous loop together with the exhibition of the abstract paintings. Enlarged stills from the film by Namuth of Pollock painting have also become standard visual material in exhibitions of Pollock’s paintings (Rosenberg 1967a:4).¹¹

Namuth’s first, black-and-white film takes us closer to the rhythm and gesture of Pollock’s painting, although the filmmaker chose to use point-of-view overhead shots, which distance him and us from Pollock’s actions. On the other hand, the second film is more like a performance in the “nonserious”



5. *A photo of Jackson Pollock painting, by Hans Namuth (1950). (Courtesy of Peter Namuth for Hans Namuth Ltd.)*

Austinian sense because it is narrativized in several ways, including by means of extensive editing. Most strikingly in regard to technique, Namuth urged the artist to work on glass, a new medium for Pollock, so that the camera could capture that which, in fact, Pollock had never before painted, thereby simultaneously providing and upholding the illusion that this is Pollock painting. In fact, Pollock paints differently on glass.

The minority voice in Pollock's critical historiography begins with Harold Rosenberg, or perhaps with his wife, May Natalie Tabak who, on 25 October 1945, served as the sole witness to the Pollock-Krasner marriage ceremony: "Who gives this woman? *I do.*" Pollock insisted on a church wedding (O'Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:235). The Austinian exemplar of the performative indicates that Rosenberg's relationship to Pollock painting falls outside the closed dialogic system of filmic event and abstract painting.

Harold Rosenberg's corpus of published and unpublished manuscripts con-

firmly that his views on Pollock gestated over a number of years, until his famous 1952 essay in *Art News* on the American Action Painters. Here, and in a later essay written in 1967 for the *New Yorker* on the occasion of a major Pollock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Rosenberg filled in the outlines for a radical commitment to art as ritual and act that went back to his earliest interests in drama and theatre, already evident in 1932 (1967b). His thinking about “action” in the painterly arena, as he called it, always involved the act in the dramatic arena. In the *Art News* essay, Rosenberg includes a section entitled “Dramas as if.” He views the contingency and possibilities presented by theatre to art as a sort of new aesthetics:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. (1952:23)

Similarly, in the book *Performance Theory* Richard Schechner proposes a way of seeing the contingency of performance through the subjunctive, “as if.” Schechner elucidates our understanding of Rosenberg’s views of the altered states of performance that allow both for the conscious and the unconscious to operate simultaneously or in dialectical relationship to each other: elements that may be conventionally controlled no longer are, but without a loss of overall pattern (Schechner [1977] 1988).¹² This dialectic in action “opens” or liberates for active use the unconscious space that Pollock found so important.

Rosenberg viewed Pollock’s “modifications of painting,” as he called them, and the artist’s unconventional techniques and media, as closer to “the resiliencies of verbal utterance” than to the rigid tradition of painting inherited from the Renaissance. According to Rosenberg, “the core of this effort lies in the tradition of art as ritual.” Rosenberg, then, took at face value both Pollock’s desire to get at his own unconscious motivations through verbalization—the “talking cure” of psychoanalysis—and his connection to the painting of the West: Indian artists and Mexican muralists (Rosenberg 1967b:168). What can be said today of Pollock’s painting, if we take up the seriousness of Rosenberg’s theory of performance and ritual?¹³

With the performative Pollock, the abstract paintings retain allusions to, although not the symbols of, “the American West”: explicitly both Native American art and Mexican mural painting. Pollock’s birthplace, Cody, Wyoming, near Yellowstone, had been admitted to the United States in 1890, only 20 years before Pollock’s birth. For the first 20 years of his life Pollock and his family led a nomadic life, moving many times from Wyoming, home of the Sioux-Cheyenne Indian nations; to Phoenix, Arizona, home of the Apache nation; to Chico, California, home of the Maidu peoples; to Riverside, California, home of the Chumash. During the summers of his teen years, and even after his move to New York City late in the summer of 1930, Pollock accompanied his father, a surveyor and road worker, in mapping expeditions that sought to chart for the United States government former Indian lands in the western United States, particularly in California and Colorado. His father’s physical estrangement from the family had occurred when Pollock was a boy and these trips reinforced in Pollock a connection between the Western wilderness and reunion with the father (Solomon 1987:33; Maloon 2002:205). When their father died in 1933 Jackson’s older brother, Sanford McCoy, wrote: “His absence will leave a gap in our lives which can only be filled with our untiring efforts towards those cultural things which he, as a sensitive man,

found so sordidly lacking in our civilization” (in Maloon 2002:192). In Jackson Pollock’s family romance, the Native American signs lead us to his love for his father, something Lee Krasner said several times after Pollock’s death (Rose 1980:n.p.).

In his late teens Pollock attended art school in Los Angeles where he was exposed to the Mexican muralists, mainly through the influence of his brother, Charles Pollock. Until a recent and important essay by Robert Storr, the significance of the Mexican muralists had tended to be downplayed in the literature on Pollock in favor of the purported influence of Thomas Hart Benton, Pollock’s first teacher in New York (Storr 1999:33–69).¹⁴ In fact, Pollock worked in 1936 with David Siquieros, together with his brother Sanford, as an apprentice in the Experimental Workshop in New York City run by the Mexican painter. From Siquieros, Pollock learned to use enamel paints and to make murals without a sketch (O’Connor 1967b:21; Karmel 1998:137). These techniques and procedures went counter to what Pollock had studied with Thomas Hart Benton. Charles later recalled them as significant factors in Pollock’s rejection of Benton’s regionalism, or the painting of “social context” (Maloon 2002:13). Nestor Garcia Canclini has proposed that Mexican modernism in the 1930s, in the work of Rivera, Kahlo, Orozco, and Siquieros, “could be said to be a result of sedimentation, juxtaposition, and intersections of indigenous traditions, Spanish Colonial Catholicism, and modern political, educational, and commercial policies” (in Goldman 1994:53). Pollock learned some things about mural painting and radical politics from Siquieros but he had exposure to both before he went to work with Siquieros in 1936. Pollock learned some kind of mural painting from Siquieros but he also learned a radical politics, both earlier than 1936.

Jackson knew of Rivera’s work in 1929 through the urging of his brother Charles. Jackson’s first exposure to Orozco may have come as early as 1930 when Charles went to see the mural painted by the Mexican artist at Pomona College. Jackson’s affinity for Siquieros may have come as early as July 1932 in Los Angeles, where the Mexican artist made a mural at the Chinouard School of Art, in a collaboration with “20 professional painters of Southern California,” one of whom was Sanford McCoy (Siquieros 1932). During the summer of 1932 Siquieros painted at the art school and also downtown in the Plaza Art Center. He also taught mural painting techniques and lectured to local audiences. In an open meeting of the John Reed Club of Hollywood (2 September 1932), Siquieros spoke on “The Vehicles of the Dialectic Subversive Painting.” He said, in part:

The hand-brush has been up to now the most important instrument of pictorial production, and then the hand-brush is but a wood-and-hair machine in this iron-and-steel age of ours. The texture produced by the same corresponds to its physical primitivism; in spite of any genial effort you might display to handle it. With a slow, old machine, you can not be able to make a modern product, and you can not expect either to obtain an entirely revolutionary plastic instrument. [...] What are those modern elements, and instruments of production which can also be good for the dialectic, subversive painting? The driller gun, the cement gun, the water-proof cement, the electric projector, the previously colored cement mortar, the spray gun. (Siquieros 1932)

Pollock’s technique, a technique in the service of politics and art, begins here in California. In words that echo Siqueiros, Pollock said in 1950:

My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. (in O'Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:249)

An earlier background in Mexican mural painting must be seen as significant to *Mural*, Pollock's painting for Peggy Guggenheim and his initial foray—although not painted on the floor—into the abstract action paintings that Rosenberg associated with ritual acts. In 1936 in New York City, 400 artists formed the First American Artists' Congress against War and Fascism, and gathered at the New School for Social Research from 14 to 16 February. Siquieros and his followers in the Experimental School were part of this group and published their proceedings in the same year. In that pamphlet the artist Gilbert Wilson contributed an essay entitled, "The Artist and His Audience: A Mural Painter's Conviction" in which he wrote about his reaction to Jose Orozco's frescoes:

Here was art as I had never before experienced it; but from that moment on I know it was what I wanted Art to be—a real, vital, meaningful expression, full of purpose and intention, having influence and relation to people's daily lives—a part of life. Here was the first *modern* art I had ever seen. At least, it was the first creative work done in my own time that seemed to have any need, any excuse for being. (Wilson 1936:129)

This brief survey of what might be called a "postcolonial" Jackson Pollock, someone subject both to indigenous culture and political art with historicizing impulses, locates him in a context outside the museum and the gallery. Pollock sought through his practice, particularly in those crucial years just after World War II, a form of expression that allowed him to transcend the growing political constraints of "art" and the artist that imposed themselves upon the New York "high" art scene during the postwar period in the United States (Leja 1993:179–209). Pollock's innovation from 1947 on may be understood as a technical practice that underscores the nonimperialistic, the other-than-European, the nonmainstream, the naturalistic—through practices that refer both to the healing rituals of Native Americans and to the politics underpinning Mexican mural painting. Inasmuch as Pollock's paintings do not copy such models, these forms of expression may also be called improvisational, or liminal, to borrow a term from the anthropologist Victor Turner (1982). These practices move across the thresholds of ritual and the unconscious.

Improvisation had been part of Pollock's technique since his "totemic period" and may be understood as a key element of those important works shown at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery in 1943 (Hopps 1987:256). Improvisational gestures in painting resonate with the kinds of techniques found in American modern dance and poetry in the period leading up to World War II.¹⁵ In those media and well before Pollock's so-called action paintings, improvisation also meant liberation from Europe and a choice for indigenous life, actuality, and "the revivification of values," a phrase taken from the poem "Spring and All" by William Carlos Williams (Williams 1974: 114).¹⁶

Earlier I said that Hubert Damisch correlated the actions of "laying out" or "marking out" in Pollock's big abstractions to Pollock's family romance, specifically to the identification with and love for the father.¹⁷ Pollock's painting procedures have been seen by numerous others as substitutes, or even tempo-

6. *Film strip from Jackson Pollock directed by Hans Namuth, produced by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg (1951). (Courtesy of Peter Namuth for Hans Namuth Ltd.)*

rary cures, for the effects that he sought from his overuse of alcohol. More psychoanalytically, Pollock's physical expression in the abstract paintings must be related differently to his addiction—to the deeper emotional wound that it obsessively seeks to heal; to the past that he sought to remember and, possibly transform.

Krasner said that "the private gestures and dances" of his floor painting had trancelike effects on Pollock (in Rose 1980:n.p.).¹⁸ According to the *OED*, trance may be understood as "a state of mental abstraction from external things; absorption, exaltation, ecstasy, rapture." In a Western Indian tradition, trance, or possession, carries with it the healing properties necessary for a passing over from life to death, as in the verb form, *transir*, to depart or transit from life, to pass over, to cross, to go. In this state in the mid- to late 1940s Pollock sought not only a temporary, partial return to his deceased father, but, more importantly, relief from the pain of his departure during childhood.

Betty Parsons said of Pollock: "He was always in transition. His vibrations, to me were always those of a driven creature" (in Naifeh and Smith 1989:7). The Pollock family had made numerous and difficult transitions during Jackson's childhood and adolescence, something remarked on more by his brothers than by him. Pollock began his new form of expressive practice after he moved from his studio in the bedroom at Springs, Long Island, into the more ample space of the barn. In the house and earlier in his studio in New York City, with the exception of *Mural*, Pollock had made easel paintings; with the move into a new space, Pollock moved into the realm of ritual and into the space of the father, his past. He called these paintings a transition from easel painting to mural: "the pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state, and an attempt to point out the direction of the future, without arriving there completely" (in O'Connor and Thaw 1978, 4:238). These paintings may also be understood as the result of a crossing over to the father. They are neither painting, in the traditional sense, nor murals, in the sense of the Mexican mural, which is painted directly and permanently onto a wall site.¹⁹

In a psychoanalytic sense, these works correspond to the "Transitional Object." Jacques Lacan defines the object in analysis as "a point of imaginary fixation providing satisfaction for a compulsion" (1999:115; my translation). The physical actions of Pollock portrayed in the black-and-white film footage indicate a compulsive sort of repetition. Pollock himself said that he did not know what he was doing when he was "in" these paintings. According to D.W. Winnicott's 1953 formulation "the transitional object lies 'between the thumb and the teddy bear.' For while this object is 'an almost inseparable part of the infant,' distinct in this sense from the future toy, it is also 'the first not-me possession.'" It gives relief from the past, i.e., the breast, providing a psychic rest, so to speak, on the way to the father. Like Pollock's action paintings, "the relationship to the transitional object—a halfway house between subjective and objective"—comes from a source other than the point of view of the child, "nor is it a hallucination" (in Laplanche and Pontalis 1973:464–65). Like a ritual trance or possession, engagement with transitional phenomena effect an intermediate step belonging to the sphere of illusion so that, according to Winnicott, imaginative living and creation may take place. Pollock's paintings provided him with satisfaction as "memories arrested in a [psychic] space." For the viewer they are the visualization or the remains of ritual action, and contain other meanings as well.

At the beginning of this article I suggested that Levi-Strauss's conception of the dialectic relationship between ritual and psychoanalysis might prove useful in thinking about the abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock. I suggested that



this may be so precisely because Levi-Strauss's views could aid in a better historical understanding of the position of Pollock's painting in post-World War II thought and life. I have relied on theoretical discourses put forward between 1944 and 1956 by a variety of the disciplines: art criticism, psychoanalysis, studio art practice, poetry, and anthropology. What I have constructed is a Jackson Pollock deeply embedded in the thought—the most advanced thought—of his times. In the early 1960s, just after Pollock's death but based on a picture of the artist already represented in the color Namuth film, academic art history took over this Pollock—Siquieros's Pollock, Rosenberg's Pollock, Levi-Strauss's Pollock, Kaprow's Pollock. It preferred to understand Pollock's abstraction as a painterly problem, a problem of what Michael Fried called in the late 1960s "objecthood" (Fried 1998:148–72). This is not to say that artists after Pollock and influenced by him did not understand their paintings in this way. They most probably did. Others, such as Warhol in his *Dance Diagrams (Tango)* of 1962, also understood the deep performativity of Pollock's abstractions (Jones 1998:84–102). But it is to say that Pollock's abstractions may be most felicitously located in a "post-ritual" situation, in which both a political and aesthetic consciousness may rest complexly, and not always happily, upon unconscious desire.

Notes

1. Levi-Strauss's study of Mauss was first published in French in 1950. He is quoting from Mauss ([1902–03] 1950).
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2. Namuth's film opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, on 14 June 1951.
3. The best discussion of the works of this period in regard to their significance for American painting is Hopps (1987:254–78).
4. In the extensive literature on Pollock exist debates concerning how much of a figurative composition underlies many of Pollock's abstract paintings. One important aspect of concealment, or "veiling," as Lee Krasner called it, surely is that it whets the viewer's appetite for identifiable symbols (see Rubin 1979:83–86). Michael Leja's recent study of Abstract Expressionism emphasizes the figuration of veiled Jungian symbols in Pollock's work in order to understand Pollock's conception of the unconscious (1993:121–202). Rosalind Krauss has interpreted this desire for underlying or initiating figuration together with its identification as a "misreading," understood as a function of the pressures put upon the subject's experience of Pollock's abstraction: "The first is that there is a shift from the object to the subject, as the emphasis is displaced from a material surface to a mode of address, namely viewing" (1999:165). Two other essays in this same volume deal with Pollock's technique and present views divergent with her interpretation (Coddington 1999:101–115; and Mancusi Ungaro 1999:117–53).
5. It will be useful here to cite the discussion of "pictographs" that Pollock would have known from an exhibition that influenced him a great deal:

Pictographs show a very wide range in design style. Some are entirely abstract, some have highly conventionalized natural forms, and others are remarkably realistic. Occasionally combinations of all three styles may be found. The arrangement of design elements is usually more or less haphazard. Some pictographs, however, are well composed. In size they range from small to gigantic. (Douglas and D'Harnoncourt 1941:113)

In contrast to Damisch and to my argument here, Pepe Karmel has suggested that the view of a shamanistic Pollock arose as a result of the images and films made by Namuth,

- who had documented rituals in Guatemala in 1947 (1998:90). That the production both of Pollock as we know him best and of his paintings emerges through the *photographs* of Namuth was argued first by Rosalind Krauss (1980:n.p.).
6. W. Jackson Rushing has explored the significance of these and other exhibits on Pollock and his contemporaries (1992:191–236; and Rushing 1995).
 7. Although the statement of these two trends in the historiography necessarily overgeneralizes the complexity of the individual arguments that underwrite them, “opticality” belongs to a tradition that begins with the criticism of Clement Greenberg (1961; see also Fried 1965 and Krauss 1993). Important discussions of the meaning of the “mark” may be found in Leja (1993), Varnedoe (1998), and Clark (1999). These interpretative frames are further complicated by the fact that the “opticality” arguments lead to discussions of Pollock’s performativity, unconscious and otherwise; while the other argument leads to discussions of intentionality, or its absence; and consciousness of technique versus unconscious action. In other words, issues of consciousness and unconsciousness pertain in both approaches. Tim Clark’s essay on Pollock provokes this level of thinking through the political and aesthetic meaning of Pollock’s paintings and a concept of the unconscious (1999:299–369).
 8. For an extensive critique of this important distinction in speech categories made by Austin and discussed by Jacques Derrida, among others, see Soussloff (1999:73–77).
 9. On several occasions Namuth, whose knowledge of dance pertains here, referred to Pollock’s “dancelike” movements (in Karmel 1978:89–90).
 10. Kaprow’s unpublished essay for a course at Columbia University was reworked considerably in a famous 1958 essay: “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” (Kaprow 1958:24–26, 55–57). The earlier manuscript, however, gives a sense of how a sympathetic reader understood the paintings close to the time they were made. Notes on the manuscript in the hand of Meyer Schapiro reveal that while he appreciated Kaprow’s analysis he did not consider Pollock’s achievement to be a major one.
 11. At this point, we might indeed ask what sort of visual document would serve to illustrate the ritual and the myth of Pollock’s painting? Visual anthropology has long sought a way to use film as part of ethnography, in what could be called a nonillustrative manner. The best recent examination of this desire may be found in David MacDougall’s *Transcultural Cinema* (1998:254–74). The so-called “participatory” or “direct” cinema of Jean Rouch provides a method for an “ethnographic cinema in the first person,” in which the meaning of ritual performance may be visualized. Rouch’s film, *Tourou et Bitti* (1967) (or *Les Tambours d’Avant: Turu et Bitti* [1971]) documents Songhay possession in Simiri, Niger, in which “the camera is perfectly integrated with the pro-filmic event” (Rouch 1979:23). This film produces that which it is meant to record. The duration of the film consists of one long take with a hand-held camera, thereby ceding the film’s rhythms to those of Rouch, who in effect performs the ritual of possession of the Songhay (Stoller 1992:163–173).
 12. Leanne Gilbertson’s unpublished essay on Rosenberg brings out the affinities between Schechner and Rosenberg (2000). Amelia Jones has also explored the “Pollockian Performative” but her interesting understanding of “performative” derives from the field of performance studies in relationship with painting (1998:53–102). Jones and I are at times in profound disagreement, e.g., she sees performance in Pollock as contingent on reception, in contrast to the fixed object of the work of art that demands an engagement of the artist’s intention. In this essay I try to move performance in Pollock toward the realm of ritual in order that that performance may be located in the intention (conscious and unconscious) of the artist, perhaps more securely than in the reception of the viewer. Secondly, I would insist, as above, that to view the work of art as “object” means not a situation of intentionality pure and simple, as Jones seems to want, but, particularly in regard to the opposition of object-performance, entails a giving over of the object to the realm of reception without any responsibility to the artist’s intention.
 13. The “seriousness” of Rosenberg has in the main not been allowed in most of the critical literature on Pollock and this fact of the historiography must in itself be understood as a response to a perceived “nonseriousness,” in the Austinian sense, of a point of view, such as Rosenberg’s, that sought to insert theatre into the serious discourse on art.
 14. The recent catalogue of the work of Charles Pollock by Terence Maloon (2002) adds a great deal to our knowledge of the Pollock brothers’ exposure to Mexican mural paint-

- ing and to an understanding of the significance of Benton for both of them. In 1946 Pollock praised the “intelligent attack on Benton” by H.W. Janson in *Arts Magazine* (see O’Connor and Thaw 1978:supp., 70).
15. I am contrasting here the approach taken to movement and improvisation by Pollock and its influence from 1930s American poetry and dance, to the choreography of Martha Graham from the mid- to late 1940s, which deals with issues of myth, Jungian archetypes, and Greek drama, particularly in her *Errand into the Maze* of 1947. On a view opposed to mine here, see Stephen Polcari (1990). On Graham’s methods in the 1940s see Franko (1996).
 16. Life’s processes are very simple. One or two moves are new and that is the end. The rest is repetitious. / The Improvisations—coming at a time when I was trying not to remain firm at great cost—I had recourse to the expedient of letting life go completely in order to live in the world of my choice. / I let the imagination have its own way to see if it could save itself. Something very definite came and I found myself alleviated but most important I began there a way to revalue experience, to understand what I was at—The intent of Improvisations is their placement in a world of new values. (Williams 1974:113)
 17. Hopps follows Damisch to some extent in this understanding of the significance of what the former calls “gestures”:

Pollock’s gestures were attuned to exploratory streams of imagery that developed during the act of painting or were come upon as revelations. The intensity of Pollock’s psychic identification with his work introduced a new degree of subjectivism into the painting process; with him, gesture in painting came to signify a language of expressive graphology unique to the artist. Working within gestural abstraction, Pollock nevertheless created a body of imagery, which, while eschewing the topical or anecdotal, explored the atavistic and the archetypal. (Hopps 1987:258)
 18. See also Robert Goodnough’s observations of Pollock at work:

Starting almost as a ritual dance might begin, the graceful rhythms of his movements seem to determine to a large extent the way the paint is applied, but underlying this is the complex Pollock mind. At first he is very much alone with a picture, forgetting that there is a world of people and activity outside himself. Gradually he again becomes aware of the outside world and the image he has begun to project is thought of as related to both himself and other people. (1951:38ff.)
 19. In this regard the later remarks of Siqueiros are illustrative:

I think every new conception in mural work can give the spectator, who is not in the habit of seeing a mural, a surprise. Don’t forget we live in a time of easel painting. In reality the only thing we have that concerns the creations of the present are the exhibitions. In the mural there is the need for many important things. One, the mural is going to be seen by a public who have not exactly come to see it. The public is going to see the mural even if they don’t want to see the mural. The mural is in their path. In the process, they are forced to turn their heads—to see one side, to the other side, to see the vaults. To see from up to down, from right to left, even if they don’t want to. I think it is very easy to understand that. It means the spectator cannot escape from the mural. He is going to see it. If he is not blind, he sees it even if he doesn’t want to. (in Stein 1994:345)

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Catherine M. Soussloff is Professor of History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is also director of a faculty research group on Performance and Visual Culture. Author of *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), editor of *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (University of California Press, 1999), Soussloff has written recently on feminism and film in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (University of California Press, 2001); *Expressionist portraiture and Jewish identity in Diasporas and Exiles* (University of California Press, 2002). An essay on the future of visual and performance studies recently appeared in *Social Text* (73:4, 2003; coauthored with Mark Franko). Her current book projects address the subject in early 20th century Viennese art and interdisciplinarity and art history.