

JACKSON POLLOCK / CLEMENT GREENBERG

AND FORMALIST THEORY

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PREFACE

Few painters of my generation can say they've been through art school and never felt the pressure to chip in a little something to advance the precious dialectic of Formalism.

On my own way through the system, I saw some highly original work from students and instructors alike, works that bowed wholeheartedly to the notion of subject matter from the avant-garde to 'retrograde' humanism. But the emphasis on formal elements was de rigueur for the serious painter who was always encouraged to aim for "purity", with the result that much of the work began to look like the obvious offspring of academic inbreeding and just another footnote, the umpteenth, to Formalism's draconian theme.

Against the ever diminishing demands of painterly technique, the tempting counterweight of good old fashioned strictured convention was an irresistible temptation.

My conscious approach to technique has always been immune to the siren song of existential angst, the visceral Om of Minimalism, and remains unaffected around conceptual zealots bent on purging art of its object, the last traces of "artifice", in the name of anti-form or "process" art. Straight figurative painting, unjustly stuck with the pejorative "safer" for floating on iconography, continues to horde for me an enduring risk element, something the rabid modernist rejects out of hand.

No painter of my generation can ignore the peculiar abstract phase

of Expressionism that came out of New York in the mid-forties. For it was here that painting took its most dramatic turn, most significantly with Pollock's painting.

The term "Acting Painting" was coined in a 1952 article by critic Harold Rosenberg who explained the insurgent style in terms of artistic statement, or social comment by the artist. Pollock's breakaway style reflected obsession, an artist maniacally engrossed in paint application, and gagging on existential impulse in an attempt to reach primal nerve--with minimal calculation being its charm.

Then in 1955 another American critic, Clement Greenberg, shook all previous interpretations in a landmark essay titled "American-Type Painting", in which he divines a clear strategy behind Pollock's putative obsession. De-emphasizing gestural distortion, he reports an unarguable link between Pollock and the past, traced along purely formal lines. A point of convergence is established between Pollock's work and the formal aims of late Cubism.

Having crowned a Cubist heir, Formalism, via Greenberg, proceeds to back art into a harness, and art history, by extension, is automatically reduced to an alignment of solutions bound to a long series of problems, and the making of art, a quest for an ideology of performance--chilling stuff.

Two generations down the line, artists like myself would confront this mindset in its fullest bloom upon entering the academic mill. For those artists who cared to, a careful scan of contemporary art history revealed that Formalist theory had gotten its footing on ground laid by Pollock; an

astute student couldn't miss the interpretive model's inner workings, the diabolic strategies of impoverishment and reduction that carried through in the wake of Abstract Expressionism to yield Pop Art and Post-Painterly Abstraction, and inexorably the precious ratiocination of Minimalism and Conceptual art.

The student either agreed, or disagreed, felt something like reverence for a sublime model of artistic predestination, or distrust towards a totalitarian trap.

In a way, to agree was to accept history as a determinant and to partake of a curious game obsessed with second guessing art's direction. Such a disposition found an agreeable home in institutions that flew the Modernist flag and where cumbersome technique was by decree made subsidiary to insight into significant developments and "possibilities". The intransigent illustrator was an outsider, a leper dipping back into the fetid pot of figuration.

As a questioning artist, I've asked myself if indeed high art is dependent on its alignment with historical vectors, let alone a stress on "form" over "content".

I have no answers. My only consolation rests in an image I have of the history of art running not a straight line, but a curve...becoming a circle, with an infinite number of occupiable points between 0 and 360 degrees. I assure myself that the "latest" trend is working itself my way, 4 degrees, twenty minutes down the dial from perpendicular where it's been many times before. And I continue to wait, miffed that the Formalist mindset has been able to monopolize the wheel so long, irritated at critics who've weighted

the wheel in accord with the supposed outward bound imperatives of contemporary art.

Why I should have chosen this subject should be evident by now. The Formalist dialectic occupies the heart of contemporary art, and not by accident has the basic substance of contemporary art become the protracted discourse in words. The artist who refuses to be brought into this discourse consigns himself blindly to what he mistakingly perceives to be merely an unintelligible parade of fashions.

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A DEFINITION

The only definition of "Formalism" with regard to art that Webster gives us is: "Emphatic or predominant attention to arrangement, esp. to prescribed or traditional rules of composition in painting and sculpture."

The word acquired its broader meaning when it became the name of an avant-garde Russian literary movement at the time of the first war, proclaiming "form" as the main thing in verse and prose.

Soon after, via extended use, it became a label for modernist and avant-garde art in general. Since then, it has come to connote not only a view that distinguishes between form and content in art, but a theory that holds the most progressive art to be synonymous with the pursuit of those purely formal elements; line, colour and composition. Out of this theory has come a full-blown interpretive model that views formalistic refinement as the driving aim of modern art.

It was this model, known as "formalism", that became the currency in American art writing in the 1940's.

Parenthetically, it is understood that anti-formalism, by contrast, takes a literal view. To say, for instance, as critic Robert Goldwater, that Kline's art offers an "image....of optimistic struggle of an entirely unsentimental grace under pressure," is to say much regarding its supposed gist, but nothing about its actual formal elements. Such a statement from a formalist point of view would be considered both indifferent and wanton.

The distinction between the two viewpoints was drawn early on by arch-Formalist, Clement Greenberg, who, in his own words; "...used to indulge in that kind of talk about 'content'...if I do not do so any longer, it is because it came to me, dismayingly some years ago, that I could always assert the opposite of whatever it was I did say about 'content' and not get found out; that I could say almost anything I pleased about 'content' and sound plausible." ¹

Confronted with turbulent Action Painting, Formalism would supply the light, leading a hesitant artistic milieu out of the initial confusion generated by such a potently non-representational style. It would also become the measuring rod, through a presumed logic of development, that would determine the pertinence and plausibility of new works in terms of their obsession with formal elements.

I. INTRODUCTION

Abstract Expressionism, an acknowledged landmark in the evolution of contemporary art, has done much to alter our conception of art in this century. The origins of this post-war movement out of New York are variously traceable to Synthetic Cubism, Surrealism, Fauvism (Matisse and Dufy) and the impassioned violence of German Expressionism (Oscar Kokoshka and Emil Nolde).

Of the various antecedents, Synthetic Cubism is the one most seriously entertained by the Formalist interpretive model as Abstract Expressionism's inspiration and source. Of the many individuals who contributed or fostered this post-war American movement, two figures stand out: Jackson Pollock and critic Clement Greenberg.

The contention that the latter's theories anticipated and may have fixed the direction of Pollock's work will be one of the major issues of this thesis; also that artist and critic strayed into each other's purview in an unprecedented way. Even though a review of Greenberg's initial critiques on Pollock will show that his interpretive model was slow to grasp the salient features of Pollock's vision, once articulated, that model was to have an awesome influence on contemporary art. What this thesis hopes to bring out in the context of Abstract Expressionism, is the collusion of sorts between artist, critic and art history that created an unprecedented and unhealthy pattern of manipulation.

Certainly there are other Expressionists besides Pollock who could just as easily stand for the period, but it is Pollock's hungry initiative,

testing new waters and pushing beyond to something as startling as Action Painting, that puts him at the head of the pack. Greenberg boldly traces a geneology for Pollock.

The key factor in this equation is the affirmative power of the surface borrowed by Pollock from Analytical Cubism: "I do not think it exaggerated to say that Pollock's 1946-50 manner really took up Analytical Cubism from the point at which Braque and Picasso had left it when, in their collages of 1912 and 1913, they drew back from utter abstractness for which Analytical Cubism seemed headed."²

In the formal characteristics of Cubism, a matrix of historical pertinence suited to Pollock is clearly defined by Greenberg. And the artist's contribution is seen as a skillful blend of revolution and continuity which leaves uninterrupted the mainstream of artistic tradition.

A brief pictorial analysis of Pollock's great drip paintings will reveal the precise departure points of his revolutionary style; also a necessary jumping off point from which to examine the initial interplay between artist and critic---as it is also my intention to reveal something of Greenberg's struggle, the initial halting application of his theoretical model, always sensing in Pollock its most cogent illustration.

II. ELEMENTS OF ACTION PAINTING

Briefly, a survey of the archetypal, aggressive, mythic imagery of Pollock's work of the early forties...roughly from "Male and Female" (Figure 1) of 1942, through the Guggenheim "Mural" (Figure 2) of 1943, "Night Ceremony" of 1944, via gouaches and pen drawings of 1946, heavily reminiscent of Miro at one extreme, and Masson at the other, to the "Sounds in the Grass" paintings of 1946...reveals a gathering impetus away from the exploitation of specific single images ("Parsiphae" (Figure 3) and "She Wolf" of 1943) via the agglomeration of image types (the "Mural" and "Gothic" (Figure 4) of 1944), towards a recognition of the priority of the procedures over the results of image generation. It is in these terms that the artist progresses from a considerable dependence upon compatible but second-hand imagery towards an original mode of self-expression.

As the pace of the painting accelerates, as he gets more fully into painting, Pollock finds the actual procedure of paint application increasingly expressive.

The revolutionary character of these paintings is derived from a combination of three elements. First of all, there's the drip itself; secondly, what has come to be termed the all-over; and thirdly, the large format. In the drip, we have the drifting of a point which develops into a line without circumscribing anything. In the all-over, his most important eccentricity, we have the elimination of any idea of a central point, centre of interest, or composition. And lastly, in the large format, self-explanatory, the viewer is presented with a mural scale.

None of these elements taken by itself is inherently new. Gottlieb in some of his pictograms, and several Automatist Surrealists, had used the drip as an element in their compositions. Mark Tobey had already painted pictures of the all-over type. And fellow Expressionist, Still, had already painted very large formats before Pollock.

What constitutes the uniqueness of Pollock's experience and gives it its revolutionary character is to have combined all three elements.

In studying works like "Summertime", 1948 (Figure 5), "Number 2", 1949 (Figure 6), "Number 10", 1949 (Figure 7) and "Number 7", 1950, one recognizes a force at play, an incredible speed and nervous legibility, an irritable demanding force that can only be termed a force of raw energy. These paintings are a break with the past in the sense that they constitute a major divergence within the pictorial system itself. More than revolutionary, more than merely contesting and replacing established pictorial systems with a better one, they appear to abolish the system in toto. There is no use trying to interpret the irreducible elements that animate these paintings. The pictures constitute a resistance to all forms of interpretation. No discourse is possible on them because they mean nothing, which does not, however, imply that they are meaningless.

One can only imagine initial reaction to Pollock's surface in these great drip paintings. That they were startlingly new goes without saying. Critics, even the most receptive, had to grapple with their source:

"Works of this nature are new in the history of western civilization, and the spiritual state of the creation is as different from that of previous artists as is the look of the painting different from that of previous paintings." ³

Examining Pollock's technique in terms of the designated trio of characteristics, we see firstly that the drip is not really drawn on the canvas. He eschews the brush, opting to splash or drip the pigment on the canvas surface in a blend of control and accident. The result, a line that circumscribes nothing and renders all points of view possible, challenges the very mechanics of pictorial representation itself.

In the "all-over", used to describe the sheer havoc of Pollock's line, we have an outright assault on the conventions of linear perspective and composition. The traditional artist, to obtain the effect of reality, has to freeze the energy of his line through a determined positioning and channelling into a network of well-calculated routes on the surface of his canvas. In Pollock's drip paintings, the line is released and, let go, strives to realize its full potential all at once. The composition of linear perspective which distributes and links the diverse components of a picture has here exploded. Before a Pollock drip painting, the viewer indeed "hesitates, wavers, shifts before the discomfiting temptation to go in all directions at once." ⁴

The all-over format of works like "Summertime", 1948 (Figure 5), "Lucifer", 1947, "Alchemy", 1947, "Autumn Rhythm", 1950, and "Red Ground", "Lavender Mist", (Figure 8) and "One", all 1950, shows the figurative form

finally and thoroughly exploded.

Perhaps no one has described and understood the pertinence of Pollock's new pictorial construction and style, better than the critic Michael Fried. The importance accorded by Fried to the all-over is impressive. Speaking of the painting "Number 1" (Figure 9), he says:

"The skeins of paint appear on the canvas as a continuous, all-over line which loops and snarls time and again upon itself until almost the entire surface of the canvas is covered by it. It is a kind of space-filling curve of immense complexity, responsive to the slightest impulse of the painter and responsive as well, one almost feels, to one's own act of looking." 5

In this context then, Pollock's all-over is less a deconstructive gimmick than a device that offers us a new way of seeing.

No less innovative was his use of an extra large format to present his vision. Here, the critic Frank O'Hara suggests that the artist might have struck upon the use of the large scale as a direct result of abandoning the world of images:

"The scale of the painting became that of the painter's body, not the image of the body, and the setting for the scale, which would include all referents, would be the canvas surface itself." 6

Whatever the catalyst, Pollock's scale would have a revolutionary effect on contemporary painting and sculpture.

All three elements, the drip, the all-over, and the large format, constitute the crucial departure points in Pollock's break with pictorial tradition. Analysis of these elements emerge in their turn in Greenberg's

earliest critiques. It would be too presumptuous to suppose that the critic wound up playing the role of maestro, steering the artist's work outright in the direction the theories went; but given their eventual sweep and conviction, some influence was unavoidable and a legitimate argument can be made regarding the obtrusiveness of Greenberg's interpretive model.

But first we must understand that Greenberg's clout was no gratuitous phenomenon; the endurance of his model owes much to his own profound struggle to establish its utility.

One must go back to a time when the breakaway features of Pollock's style, the drip, the all-over, the large format, were not so clear, to the beginning when Pollock first began to tackle those elements, and Greenberg's interpretive scheme was still shaping itself.

It is clear that these elements did not boom themselves out in a revolatory thunderclap. Greenberg, armed with the rectitude of a unique germinating viewpoint, was writing at a time when there was no critical view, either about Pollock, or for that matter, the value of American painting.

III. APPLICATION OF AN INTERPRETIVE MODEL

Between 1943, the year of Greenberg's first critique, and 1952, the date of the critic's last review during Pollock's lifetime, there are many articles that accompany the artist's development. From the outset, Pollock is hailed as a young painter with an already personal style, with the ability to assimilate the influences of Miro, Picasso and Mexican painting.

Writing a review of Pollock's first one-man show, he refers to four paintings. Two large works, "Guardians of the Secret", 1943 (Figure 10), and "Male and Female", 1942 (Figure 1), and two small paintings, "Conflict" and "Wounded Animal", both 1943.

The larger paintings, which tend to regulate their motifs to the periphery, are less to his liking. He prefers the smaller works because, here, "Pollock's force has just the right amount of space to expand in; whereas, in the larger format, he spends himself in too many directions at once."⁷

We can take this last phrase to mean the all-over. Clearly it is not greeted positively.

A subsequent review of another Pollock show, this time at the Art of This Century Gallery, mentions an assortment of gouaches and oils. In this critique Greenberg is mainly interested in defining the structure of the spatial composition in Pollock's oils, comparing it with that of his gouaches.

"Those who find his oils overpowering are advised to approach him through his gouaches which, in trying less to wring every possible ounce of intensity from every square inch of surface, achieve greater clarity and are less suffocatingly packed than the oils." 8

Here again, Greenberg is showing his difficulty in grasping the all-over trend in Pollock's work. For Greenberg, this overpacking comes from Pollock's inability to order the elements of his surface into a coherent whole, or to reconcile his two dimensional tendencies with the exigencies of a larger surface.

At this stage, one adduces a certain symmetry in Greenberg's resistance, as if resistance followed by reconciliation are, for the critic, two very essential steps in the process of enlightenment. The fact is that his opinions later swing a hundred and eighty degrees on those very points of initial resistance.

With Pollock's third one-man show at the Art of This Century Gallery in the spring of 1946, the thrust of Greenberg's next critique takes ambivalent aim at the apparently overloaded character of Pollock's latest efforts. But overall he greets the work positively.

"What may at first seem crowded and repetitious, reveals on second sight, an infinity of dramatic movement and variety. One has to learn Pollock's ideom to realize its flexibility." 9

Greenberg's casual reference to variety here is extremely important. Hindsight accords it a certain glow, as it reveals what had prevented Greenberg up to that time from following Pollock in his approach to the all-over composition, and what made it acceptable to him from then on. A greater fam-

iliarity with the works suddenly reveals "variety" to him, where previously he had seen only repetition and crowding.

His reaction to Pollock's fourth show was unequivocally enthusiastic. Pollock featured fifteen canvases, again at the Art of This Century Gallery, and for the first time Greenberg tackles the question of Pollock's work within the wider context of the contribution of Analytical Cubism.

"As in the case of almost all post-Cubist painting of any real originality, it is the tension inherent in constructed, re-created flatness of the surface that produces the strength of Pollock's art." 10

Motivated by a desire to animate the painted surface completely, Pollock, according to Greenberg, has conquered the flatness of the surface, taking up the thread of painting where Picasso and Braque had left it in 1911, and carrying contemporary painting one step further. With this pronouncement, Pollock, it would seem, is officially woven into the fabric of art history.

But as impressive as the connection sounds, Greenberg has merely completed one more stage along the way to accepting the all-over trend in Pollock's work. Variety will prove the essential key.

Greenberg's comments on Pollock's fourth show at the Art of This Century Gallery confronts that other outstanding aspect of Pollock's work, the large format. At first his comments raise a question concerning the respective merits of the easel and the mural painting, referring to Pollock's use of large scale. But his reaction to the larger scale is ultimately positive.

"Pollock points a way beyond the easel," he concludes, "beyond the mobile, framed picture to the mural."¹¹

Remembering his partiality to the smaller gouaches of Pollock's second show, this summation would appear to mark the critic's reconciliation with the large format of Pollock's work. Further, it would seem that when he realizes that Pollock is not sacrificing "variety" when opting for the all-over, he is able to accept the large format as well.

He makes no special mention in his review of the paintings "Shimmering Substance" (Figure 11), and "Eyes in the Heat" (Figure 12), or "Earth Worms", all 1946, and all transitional canvases marking the end of Pollock's attachment to figuration, and preceding his great drip paintings of late 1946 and 1947.

Another Pollock show, this time at the Whitney Annual Exhibition, in January of 1948, is an apparent disappointment to Greenberg. In a review for the Nation, he merely notes,

"Jackson Pollock shows a rather satisfactory painting in which white lines are so evenly laid out on an aluminum paint ground that all intensity is dissipated and the picture becomes merely a fragment."¹²

I only mention this piece of ambivalent commentary because Greenberg is here referring to one of Pollock's most famous works, "Galaxy". To read Greenberg on this one would never guess that this is the first time Pollock is showing a painting in which the dripping technique assumes a clear importance. Greenberg omits to describe the process beyond merely holding it responsible for the increased "uniformity" of the surface.

When Pollock transfers to the Betty Parson's Gallery for a show later that same year, Greenberg's critique is a qualified endorsement of the artist's direction.

"In this day and age, the art of the painting increasingly rejects the easel and yearns for the wall. It is Pollock's culture as a painter that has made him so sensitive and receptive to a tendency that has brought with it, in his case, a greater concentration on surface texture and tactile qualities to balance the danger of monotony, that arises from the even, all-over design which has become Pollock's consistent practice." 13

This is the first time that Greenberg uses the expression "all-over". He does not as yet mention the dripping technique, but is surely alluding to it when speaking of "the greater concentration on surface texture and tactile qualities."

It would seem that Greenberg has assessed the dripping technique as a means of breaking the monotony that the all-over design might provoke. The "all-over" is here related to "variety", with "monotony" obviously being its opposite.

In the spring of 1949, in a critique for the Nation again, Greenberg focuses on a major new piece from Pollock's hand, "Number 1" (Figure 9). He asserts,

"One large piece, Number 1, quieted any doubts this reviewer may have felt. I do not know of any other painting by an American that I could safely put next to this huge Baroque scrawl in aluminum, black and white and blue...beneath the apparent monotony of its surface composition it reveals a sumptuous variety of design and incident." 14

In this critique, Greenberg has wrapped into one all the analytical concepts suggested to him by Pollock's work up to that time: the apparent monotony, the variety of decisions and incidents, and the picture's encasements.

It would seem that the variety that reconciled Greenberg to the all-over composition represents to some extent the critic's last resistance to the work...still trying as he was to give some values to Pollock's frenzied elements rather than be swept away by the all-pervasive movement of the whole surface of the picture.

The last exhibition reviewed by Greenberg during the artist's lifetime was held at the Betty Parson's Gallery in the winter of 1951. The show featured twenty-one recent works by Pollock, all of them heralding a marked return to figuration. And in his critique, Greenberg now describes Pollock's previous period exclusively by the all-over concept. Further, the criterion of "variety" is no longer evoked. Clearly the work evinces a sharp change of direction, but Greenberg does not believe this endangers "everything Pollock acquired in the course of his all-over period." ¹⁵

Regarding the surfaces of this latest batch, he notes, "every square inch of canvas receives a maximum charge at the cost of minimal physical means." ¹⁶

The monotony inherent in the all-over has gained a certain degree of acceptance now in the critic's eye. It is as if the moment Pollock reintroduces figuration, and thus threatens the all-over, is also the moment of

Greenberg's reconciliation with it.

It would appear at this point that Greenberg's theories have homed in on the last of the operative distinctions of Pollock's major works.

As Formalism would have it, it is evident that Pollock is waging the vanguard battle for the serious values of high art, and that any picture dabbling in illusiory space, 3-D effects, is regressive and unlit by any standards of current visual intelligence. Flatness is the inexorable destination of art history, ie. the unification of lines, forms, colours, and contours on a flat surface, consonant with the inspiration of Cubism. Pollock, seen through Greenberg's historical prism, aligns himself with key historical vectors, and necessarily assumes a high point in the evolution of painting. At this juncture, Greenberg's consistent reference to post-Cubism becomes less a noting of influence, than a process of legitimation.

Whether or not the artist's ideas constitute an eminence in the history of painting, the end product, the work itself, seen from the spectator's point of view is indeed revolutionary. In the drip paintings there is no more distance between the eye and the image, or that imposed by perspective, and looking is simply no longer productive in the literal sense.

Inevitably opposing attitudes would crop up to battle Formalist logic, convinced that "pertinent" art had to be more than colour and shape arranged on a flat canvas along preordained lines.

But first to understand how such an aggressive interpretive model as Formalism took hold of the art scene in the first place, one has to look at the overall intellectual climate of the times.

IV. INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE

The critic, Seymour Krim, a contemporary of Greenberg's, and writing for the literary journal, *Partisan Review*, at the same time as Greenberg, has some revealing comments to offer in his reminiscences on the post-war intellectual atmosphere of New York.

Like Clement Greenberg, contributors to the *Partisan Review* and sundry similar intellectual journals that swamped New York, saw themselves in general as the intellectual shocktroops of a rising 'beat' generation, in the thick of New York intellectual life.

At once Europeanish and proudly nationalistic, 'we were,' he recalls, "one aspect of a monstrously inflated period wherein it thought it had to synthesize literature, and politics and avant-garde art of every kind, with writers insanely trying to out-do each other in Spenglerian vision." ¹⁷

"Some editors", he goes on, "wanted to relax the entire torture chamber that criticism had become, but didn't know where to begin. Precedent prevented direct writing for most of the perspiringly overwrought contributors." ¹⁸

In another comment, he zeroes right in on the grandiose aspirations of Formalism. "Concentratedly put, what had happened was that each outstanding single achievement of the recent past, by D.H. Lawrence, Picasso, Stravinsky, and Melville, was linked with the other to create a vocabulary of Modernity." ¹⁹

Rapping the overblown verbalism that prevailed, Krim urges the reader to try and appreciate how extravagant the whole conception of making volume long footnotes on the works of others became.

"It was a period," he asserts in an acid flourish, "where the display of mind disembodied from its blistered feet, overloaded, speaking a language unlike the language of regular life, snubbed the value of imagination and found it juvenile or irrational because it met no preconceptions." 20

Krim's apologist commentary tends to confirm the impression of an intellectual hotbed, a city poised for its leap onto the international art scene; and a revolutionary simmer characterized by cerebation in the extreme; and cultural theorists armed to the teeth with ambitious generalities and a self-proclaimed inside track on the true values of high art.

His suggestion that there was an implicit pressure on the artist to reflect the prevailing philosophies, is borne out by Jane Freilicker, a Realist, who attended Hans Hofmann's legendary Expressionistic school in New York as a young artist in the 1950's. She knew many of the great figures of that period, and painted a few abstract pictures herself, but retained recognizable imagery in most paintings. "It wasn't that I didn't like Abstract painting," she recalls, "but there was a great urgency, a sort of coercion then, about being part of that style." 21

To say that Pollock owes his place in art history to Greenberg per se is wrong. Greenberg did not, after all, discover Pollock. MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art, that temple of Modernism, had already inducted one of Pollock's paintings into its permanent collection before they met...and Motherwell, a

fellow Expressionist, had written a rave review for Pollock a little while before Greenberg had penned his first comments on the artist. But to say that Pollock could not in large part credit his venerable slot in the annals of Contemporary Art to the Formalist model would be facile.

If one could distill the many and varied phases of Modern Art in this century, you'd be left, I think, with the essential elements that transcend its various incarnations, namely the Modernist values of our existential age: flux, doubt, rebellion and irony. Pollock's art, touching on all four, earned him not only a spot in the mainstream of Contemporary Art, but subsequent enshrinement. He probably sought more vigorously than any of his contemporaries to embody and transcend his era, giving us an art that was a moment of crisis in every sense. As a sort of visual document, his greatest works have come to stand as a testament to the deeper currents of post-war culture.

Of the many commentaries on his great drip paintings, from "inscrutable" to "visionary", the most compelling and evocative tag of all points to a militant "silence".

Susan Sontag in her "Styles of Radical Will" probes the essential nature of modern art as presented to the public over the last few decades precisely on these terms, in an essay appropriately titled, "The Aesthetics of Silence".

Citing no one in particular, but moving in a broad unencumbered sweep to embrace the heart of Modern art, she retrieves some penetrating and refreshing insights.

In a comment that might as well have been written as a vindication for the abstruse nature of Pollock's work, she ventures, "The most valuable art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence or unintelligibility." 22

"So far as the Modern artist is serious," she continues, "he is continually tempted to sever the dialogue he has with his audience. Silence is the furthest extension of that ambivalence about making contact with the audience, which is a leading motif of Modern Art." 23

Without venturing a judgement on any particular trend, Sontag hits on a truth regarding the ideological undercurrents that have been driving Modern Art through its rapid succession of styles.

"Art today," she opines, "is foundering on the debilitating tide of what once seemed the crowning achievement of European thought: secular historical consciousness. In little more than two centuries, the consciousness of history has transformed itself from a liberation, an opening of doors, a blessed enlightenment, into an almost unsupportable burden of self-consciousness. It is scarcely possible for an artist to write a word, or render an image, that doesn't remind him of something already achieved." 24

Modern art, she maintains, tends to transmit this alienation produced by historical consciousness. "Whatever the artist does is in alignment with something else already done, producing a compulsion to be continuously checking his situation, his own stance, against those of his predecessors and contemporaries." 25

V. AN OPPOSING 'ISM'

Formalism's monolithic thrust through the contemporary art scene was bound to generate resistance. On the one hand, there are still the advocates of Formalism who follow a strict party line in clinging to precious historical tangents; on the other hand, the likes of author Tom Wolfe, whose response in "Painted Word", published in 1975, takes an obviously dim, cynical view of the whole Modernist continuum. For him the new element that has entered the individual art work, becoming constitutive of it, is the appeal, tacit or overt, for its own abolition and ultimately the abolition of art itself. In his own words, painting has gone totally "extra-atmospheric."²⁶

His opinions, laced with wry prose, plug unarguably into that opposing partisan view within American criticism that eschews Formalist dogma for a more literal slant. His source, describable as Greenberg's opposite number within the fiefdom of contemporary criticism, is Harold Rosenberg, who, possessed of a more literal bent, downplays the formal innovations of Abstract Expressionism, and sees the solutions offered to problems of colour, space and scale, purportedly plaguing Abstract art since Cubism, as incidental to other objectives.

Rosenberg's essay, "The American Action Painters", published in Art News in 1952, offered a sense of intense and early sympathy with the Expressionist's enterprise, and an assertion of compatibility between the poet and the painters. Its prose tended more to theatrics than analysis and wove no major statement concerning Expressionism's Formalistic aims.

Greenberg's "American-type Painting", published in the Partisan Review three years later, presented, on the other hand, a strong intellectual pitch for the actual formal appearance of Abstract Expressionist paintings.

The latter is in many senses the antagonist of Rosenberg's essay. In an excellent article by Philip Leider, published in the September, 1965 issue of Artforum, the author points out how Rosenberg caught the sense in existential terms of what the artists were about. Greenberg's essay, however, he points out, involved a rather different set of assumptions. In Greenberg's essay, the intentions of the artists have little enough to do with the situation in which they find themselves. Whatever their reasons for making paintings, they must begin with the state of Abstract art as they find it. The future may or may not understand the jist of the 1940's and 1950's as Harold Rosenberg does, but it will certainly understand the main directions of 20th Century painting, and the success or failure of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, as any school, will depend on its relations to this direction. The moment which Rosenberg describes as one in which "the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act" (referring to Action Painting) "is described by Greenberg in much more verifiable terms." ²⁷

With the ascendant appeal of Greenberg's "system", so the Formalist model hardened, particularly in the work of younger critics influenced by Greenberg.

The rival camp, characterized as Literalist, takes its point of departure from a response to the literalness and "evidentness" of the procedures

of paint application and of the painted surface in Abstract Expressionism.

In "Literalism and Abstraction", a subsequent article by Leider, the Abstractionist or Formalist view of Pollock, he explains, "...is a view so thoroughly a part of the literature that students run through it by rote... how his art broke painting's dependence on tactile, sculptural space; how the all-over system transcended the Cubist grid; how it freed the line from shape, carried Abstract art further from the depiction of things than had any art before; how it created a new kind of space..."²⁸

The Literalist view emerged somewhat more hazily according to Leider. In his opinion, "...eyes did not see, or did not see first and foremost, those patterns as patterns of line freed from their function of bounding shape and thereby creating a new kind of space. They saw them first and foremost as skeins of paint dripped directly from the can. Paint, that is, which skipped the step of having a brush dipped into it."²⁹

No secrets, no abstruse motive, only "...energy freed by this bluntness, this honesty, this complete obliviousness of the process by which the picture was made."³⁰

According to Leider what Literalism saw in Pollock was, "...an Abstract art that derived its strength from the affirmation of the 'objectness' of the painting and from the directness of the artist's relation to his materials."³¹

Such a view of Pollock would naturally lead one to seek in quite different places for a way to continue making meaningful art than would a view based on the Abstractionist reading of Pollock. Such a view did subse-

quently take hold, explored with great ingenuity by Jasper Johns in the late 1950's, with flags and targets that seemed to address the lingering illusionism and vestigial representationalism that was part of the profound ambivalence of 50's Abstraction.

However, pursuing the ideal of a completely consistent, non-referential Abstract painting was still very much Formalism's driving aim on the heels of Abstract Expressionism. With Clement Greenberg very much in the fore, and Greenberg-influenced critics Michael Fried, William Rubin, and others in greater or lesser degree, the stampede turned from the outdated, imitative, ambivalent gestural painting of the New York School to an extreme two-dimensionalism, objectness being the thing to beat, through colour and as much as possible through colour alone.

In a 1962 article, "After Abstract Expressionism", Greenberg looks back on Abstract Expressionism's dominant mode, extreme painterliness, as an "...instance of that cyclical alternation of painterly and non-painterly which has marked the evolution of Western art since the 16th century."³²

Painterly Abstraction of the 50's began to degenerate into an affair largely of mannerisms, according to Greenberg, "...and as the 1950's wore on, a good deal of Abstract Expressionistic painting began fairly to cry out for a more coherent illusion of three dimensional space and to the extent that it did this, it cried out for representation."³³

It was logical, therefore, that when painterly abstraction in New York finally crystalized into a set manner, "it did so in a series of outspokenly representational works, namely de Kooning's "Women" pictures of

1952-55." 34

The labels attached to this manner by Greenberg is "homeless representation," meaning a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones.

Pointedly, his praise goes to three New York painters who have renounced painterliness, or at least painterliness associated with Abstract Expressionism, for the sake precisely of a vision "keyed to the primacy of colour"....they are Newman, Rothko, and Still, and all three happen to be the "first serious Abstract painters, the first Abstract painters of style, really to break with Cubism." 35

Greenberg refers to the kind of self-critical process which he thinks provides the "infra-logic of modernist art"; and under this process more and more of the conventions of the art of painting show themselves to be "dispensable", "unessential".

"By now it has been established...it would seem that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture." 36

Standing on the summit of Formalist logic, Greenberg is able to say of the artists, Newman, Rothko and Still, "...the question now asked through their art is no longer what constitutes good art as such. Or rather what is the ultimate source of value or quality in art? And the worked out answer appears to be: not skill, training or anything else having to do with execution or performance but conception alone." 37

"It is true", he goes on, "that skill used to be a vessel of inspiration and do the office of conception but that was when the best pictorial art was the most naturalistic pictorial art."³⁸

"Inspiration", he asserts, "remains the only factor in the creation of a successful work of art that cannot be copied or imitated."³⁹

Finally, for Greenberg, quality and meaning lie now almost entirely in conception.

By the 1960's, Pollock is retired with all honours as a major landmark along the Modernist road. But not all of him. It is a tenet of Formalist criticism that Pollock's works after his great drip paintings, after 1950, generally represent a decline after the high point of the preceding three years.

According to Greenberg's disciple, Michael Fried, "...from 1951 on (Pollock's) work shows the strong tendency...to revert to traditional drawing at the expense of opticality...these works probably mark Pollock's decline as a major artist."⁴⁰

Of the paintings derogated under this programatic critique, are several of Pollock's most intense achievements; "Blue Poles", 1952 (Figure 13), and "Portrait and a Dream", and "Ocean Greyness", 1953 (Figure 14).

But by strict Formalist standards these works are necessarily historically retrogressive and unfaithful for reverting to representation.

VI. CONCLUSION

The question remains, how was a critical model such as Formalism, theoretically dedicated to self-criticism, how was it able to change into a process of legitimation? Somehow, in Greenberg's hands the interpretive model overstepped its function as an instrument of self-criticism, and stepped outside its critical role, seeking to establish rather than merely question, the dominant ideology behind the artistic act.

The problem is clearly attributable to an unwholesome overlap of functions, that of the critic and art historian, in one person, namely Greenberg. Rosenberg, in his definition of the ideal relationship between the artist and critic, between art criticism and art history, stresses the ever present need for clear separation between critic and historian.

"Art historical knowledge has for the art critic a different function than it has for the art historian. The critic is not primarily concerned with tracing the evolution of style and arranging works within them. He approaches the work not as the product of a past time set in a niche. He sees it rather as an act that has taken shape through the painter's battle with uncertainties, counterforces, temptations..." 41

Rosenberg is especially harsh on "certain" critics who lay down the law to art "in the name of art history."

"Art criticism today is beset by art historians turned inside out to function as prophets of so-called inevitable trends...determinism similar to that projected into the evolution of past styles is clamped upon art in the making. In this parody of art history, value judgements are deduced from a presumed logic of development, and an ultimatum is issued to artists either to accommodate themselves

to these values or be banned from the art of the future. An aesthete founded on art history wields a club of dogma similar to moralistic criticism in the 19th century or political criticism in the Soviet Union." 42

One can only assume that the notion of historical inevitability was, and is, heady stuff. Those critics prone to its fumes, seem as intoxicatingly eager to make art history as the artists themselves.

But in so doing, the critic necessarily defeats his own purpose... no less than the artist who saddles himself to the conviction that there is a historically determined way to make art.

Pollock's works survive today because of what the artist himself put into them. In art the ideologies of the moment, necessary to the making of young artists, soon rust away. What's left behind is what matters most in painting...intensity of imagination, and some particular vision...and no one can deny Pollock these.

POSTSCRIPT

Over the course of this paper, I've had to ask myself if Greenberg, the arch-Formalist, is really such an aesthetic demagogue, specifically, one who modulates an authority derived from the past with the superstition of progress. Greenberg clearly objects to the characterization "Formalist". In his own words:

"...a frequent imputation this writer minds is that he is for the order and logic he discerns. Because he has seen "purity" and "reduction" as part of the imminent logic of Modernist art, he is taken to believe in and advocate "purity" and "reduction". 43

Greenberg denies that his aesthetic judgements go according to a position or a "line". Those who think they do..."are motivated by a need to pin a critic down, so that you can say, when you disagree with him, that he has motives, that he likes this or not that work of art because...his program forces him to..." 44

His rebuttal echoes a self-professed tenet that the critic is constantly under the obligation to recognize his prejudices, leanings and inclinations as such and keep them from interfering.

But an impossible task, given the involuntary nature of aesthetic judgements!

Greenberg's emphatic conviction suggests a past crisis, a protestant-like confrontation and purge of ungovernable bias, perceived as every critic's curse. The critic redeemed, cleansed of personal prejudice is able to boast

a pure and objective lens when viewing art in terms of its formal elements. Possessed of an ideal yardstick in these formal elements, the critic pronounces authoritatively on a chastened art, an art resolutely and compliantly divesting itself of the vile temptations of "content". Greenberg's monomaniacal perception, delivered with intimidating rectitude and laced with pious disclaimers of personal manipulative input, nonetheless, presents the art world with an interpretive model whose deterministic reflex automatically withholds or dispenses blessings and confirmation for generically new works, depending on whether or not they walk in the hallowed steps of Formalism's sanctimonious logic.

Such an aggressive and righteous interpretive model necessarily entails a "program" for art...how could it be otherwise?

FOOTNOTES

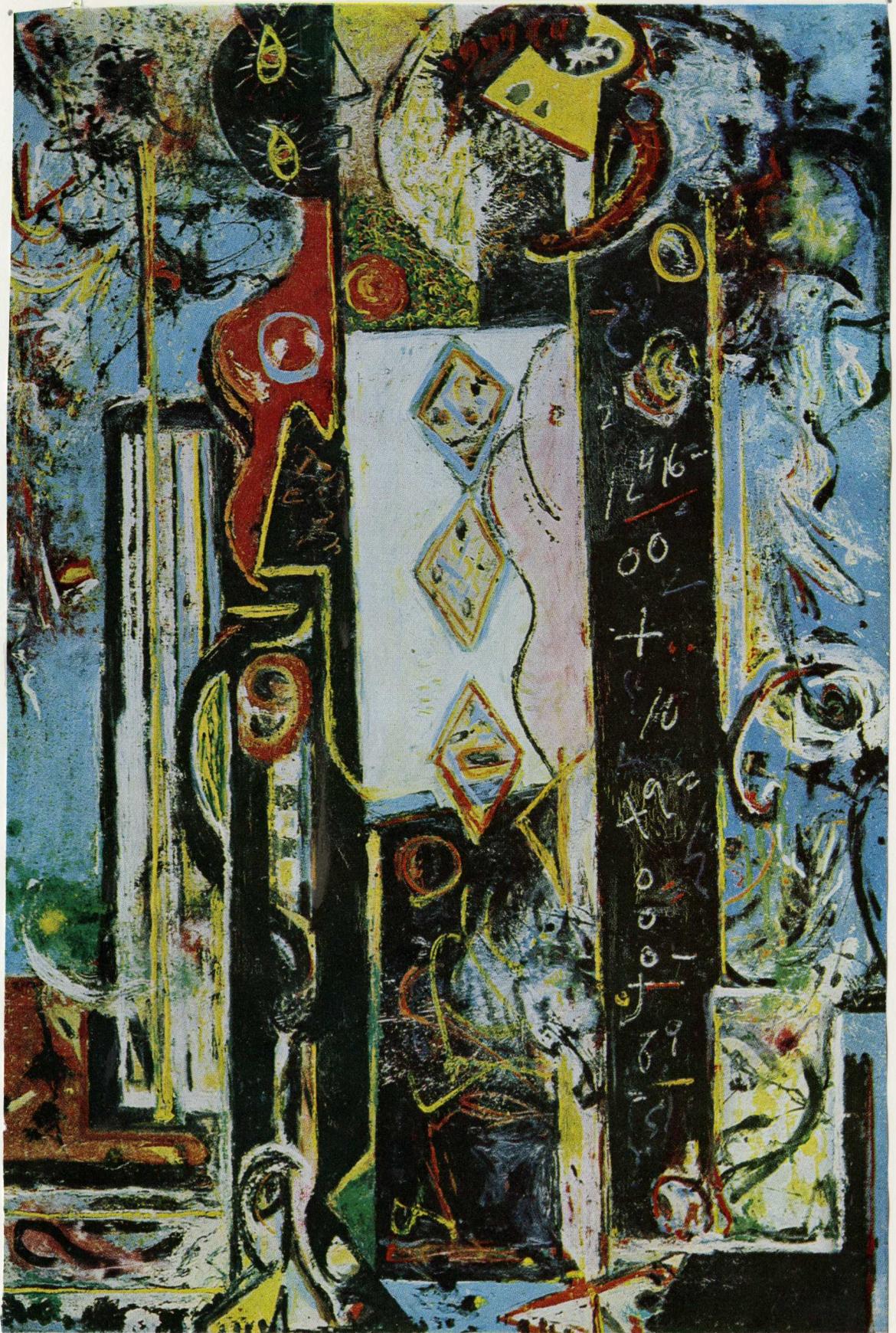
1. Clement Greenberg, Problems of Art Criticism, (Artforum, September, 1967), page 39
2. Clement Greenberg, American-Type Painting, (Partisan Review, Spring, 1955), page 211
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6. Frank O'Hara, op. cit., page 23
7. Clement Greenberg, Art, (The Nation, November 27, 1943), page 621
8. Clement Greenberg, Art, (The Nation, April 7, 1945), page 397
9. Clement Greenberg, Art, (The Nation, April 13, 1946), page 445
10. Clement Greenberg, Art (The Nation, February 1, 1947), pages 136-137
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16. Ibid.
17. Seymour Krim, Views of a Nearsighted Cannoneer, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), page 30
18. Seymour Krim, op. cit., page 31
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21. Newsweek, (June 7, 1982), page 67
22. Susan Sontag, Styles of Radical Will, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), page 21

23. Ibid.
24. Susan Sontag, op. cit., page 24
25. Susan Sontag, op. cit., page 25
26. Tom Wolfe, The Painted Word, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), page 97
27. Philip Leider, The New York School/The First Generation, (Artforum, September, 1965), page 6
28. Philip Leider, Literalism and Abstraction: Frank Stella, (Artforum, April, 1970), page 44
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31. Philip Leider, op. cit., page 45
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33. Clement Greenberg, op. cit., page 26
34. Ibid.
35. Clement Greenberg, op. cit., page 29
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37. Ibid.
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40. Michael Fried, Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella, (Catalogue for the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965)
41. Harold Rosenberg, Art on Edge: Criticism and Its Premises, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1971) page 146
42. Harold Rosenberg, op. cit., page 147
43. Clement Greenberg, Problems of Art Criticism, (Artforum, September, 1967), page 39
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Male and Female. 1942. Oil on canvas, 73¼ x 49". Collection Mrs. H. Gates Lloyd

Pablo Picasso



■ *Mural*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 7'11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 19'9 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Collection State University of Iowa, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim



■ *Pasiphaë*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 56 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 96". Collection Lee Krasner Pollock

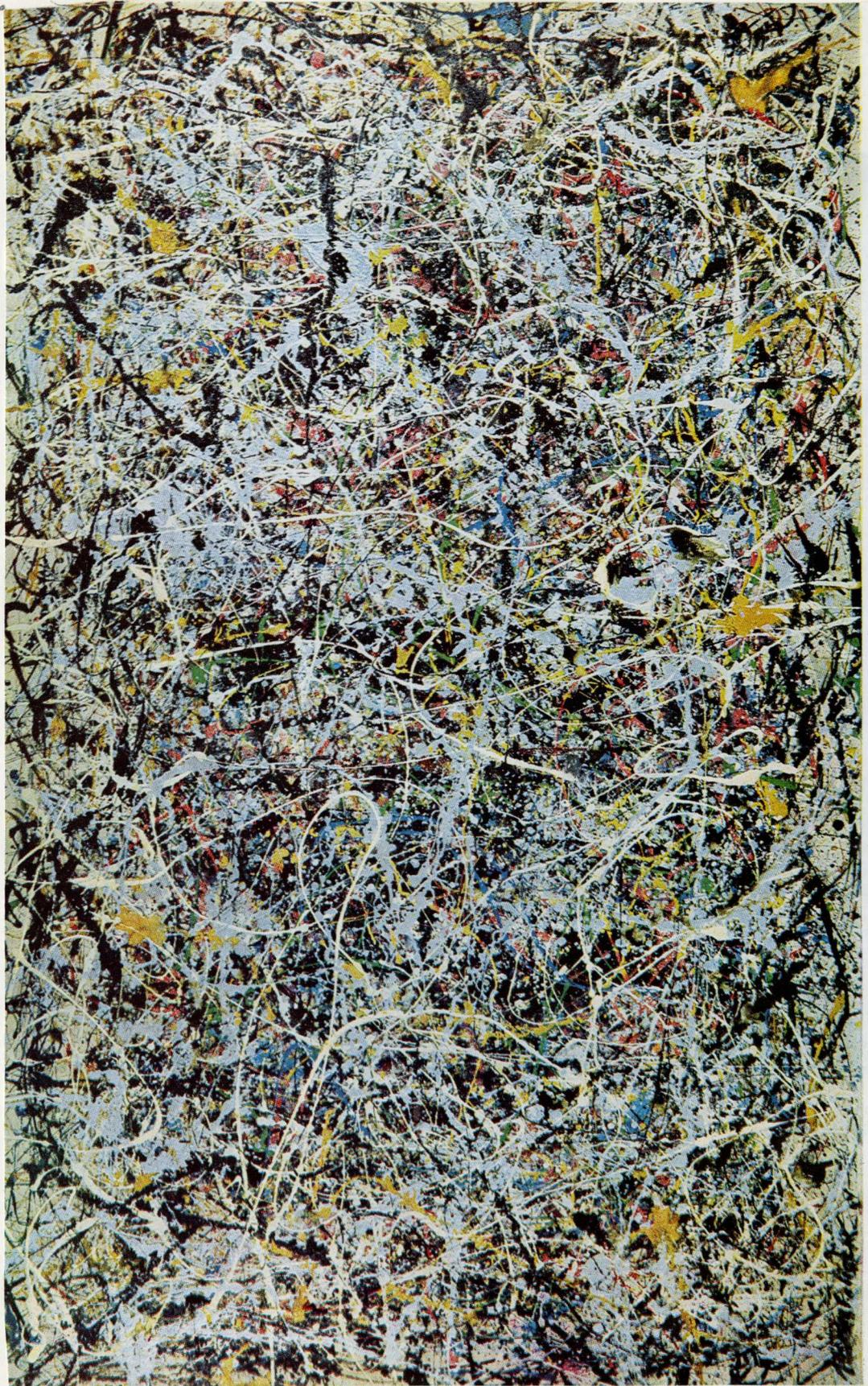


Gothic. 1944. Oil on canvas, 84½ x 56½". Collection Lee Krasner Pollock



LAVENDER MIST 1950

FIG.8



■. *Number 1*. 1949. Duco and aluminum paint on canvas, 63 x 102". Collection Arthur Kinader

FIG. 9

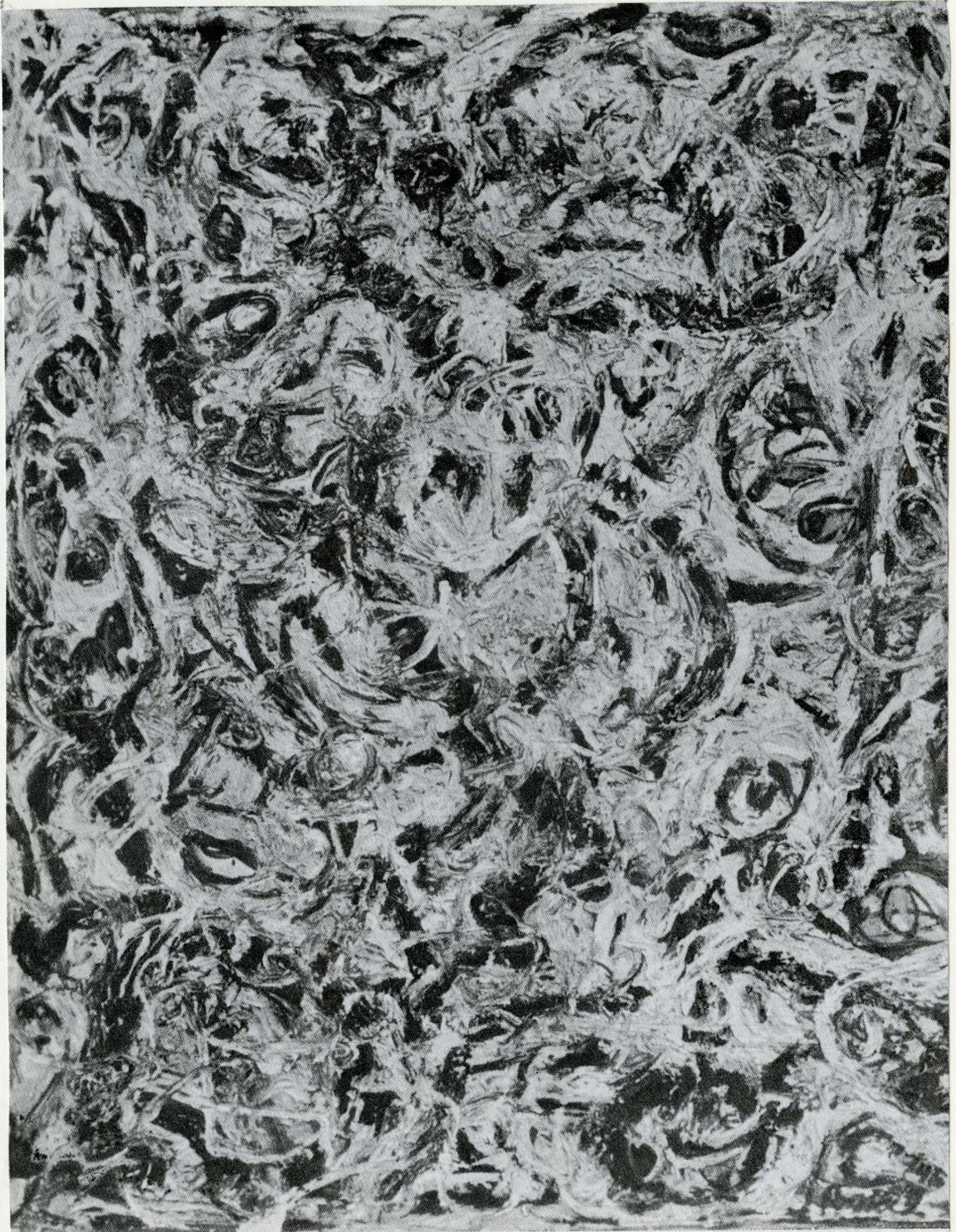


■ *Guardians of the Secret*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 48 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 75 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". San Francisco Museum of Art

FIG. 10



FIG. II



■ *Eyes in the Heat*. 1946. Oil on canvas, 54 x 44". Collection Peggy Guggenheim

FIG. 12



■ *Blue Poles*. 1953. Oil, duco and aluminum paint on canvas, 83 x 192½". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller

FIG.13



■ *Ocean Greyiness*, 1853. Oil and duco on canvas.