

2017

## Introduction to *Pollock's Modernism*

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### Repository Citation

Schreyach, Michael. "Introduction," in idem., *Pollock's Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 1-8.

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# POLLOCK'S MODERNISM

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YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

First published by Yale University Press 2017  
302 Temple Street, P.O. Box 209040,  
New Haven CT 06520-9040  
47 Bedford Square, London WC1B3 DP

yalebooks.com / yalebooks.co.uk

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ISBN 978-0-300-223262 HB

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016055765

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

2022 2021 2020 2019 2018 2017

Typeset by M Rules

Printed in China

Front cover: Jackson Pollock at work, 1950 / Rudy Burckhardt, photographer. Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner papers, c.1905-1984. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation ARS, NY and DACS, London 2017; © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2017

Back flap: Photograph by Ken Walker

Frontispiece: [Jackson Pollock, 1950] Photograph by Hans Namuth.  
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## INTRODUCTION

In this book I attempt to interpret the meaning of particular paintings by Jackson Pollock (1912–56). Primarily, I have aimed to build an argument that explains his achievements in light of his express goal of making a “statement.” But I have also tried to be responsive to the technical means by which he established for his viewers the conditions under which that statement becomes pictorially available to interpretation: namely, through each painting’s specialized mode of address, its unique structure of beholding. It is widely acknowledged that this aspect of Pollock’s art poses a distinct challenge; to discern, describe, assess, or evaluate it is far from simple. His pictures, and their intended effects, often seem to exceed our capacity to talk about them. Each in its own way advances certain propositions with respect to the elusive but ineluctable dimensions of perception that characterize experience – centrally, the experience of painting – but they are propositions that we are hard pressed to articulate.

Thus in *Pollock’s Modernism* I present relatively little new information about Pollock’s context, broadly construed. Although I attend carefully to details of his training and the development of his practice in relation to his artistic and intellectual milieu (especially with respect to the critical response his practice generated), I do not offer much by way of analysis concerning his historical moment, his cultural setting, his politics, his personal life, his implication in the institutional forces (media, marketing, museums) that brought him fame, or his reception by later artists and audiences. Nor does this study purport to reveal new sources that would unlock Pollock’s veiled iconography or symbolism (but I do offer new reasons for why he was drawn to the imagery of various artists who preceded him, reasons which depart from the narrative of influence and style commonly put forward to explain his growth as an artist). The terrain of “context” and “sources” has been covered, competently and

admirably, by a host of scholars whose contributions, though not always germane to the issues I address, nonetheless form the tacit background against which I advance my claims. I consider myself in debt to them, even when my conclusions – and, more broadly, my basic intuition of which aspects of Pollock's art, and of modernism at large, are the most significant – depart from theirs. (My account, in fact, diverges considerably from dominant arguments about Pollock in the scholarly literature, and I have aimed not only to specify what is at stake in our conflicts, but to explain what I think is wrong about the accounts I oppose.) I give an historical and *interpretive* account, and my stressing the word is meant to indicate that mine is an argument about what I take to be Pollock's intentions as expressed through particular works of art.

The book is structured around five terms that I shall suggest designate crucial aspects of Pollock's modernism (they serve as my chapter titles): autonomy, anamorphosis, automatism, embodiment, and projection. Throughout, I have sought to live up to Donald Judd's pragmatic mandate to "define all of the important words." Predictably enough, the main term, modernism, is the most difficult. I use it not simply periodically, but methodologically, to indicate the appearance within Pollock's art of a commitment to experimentation and self-criticism carried out in relation to the conventions of his chosen medium – a commitment that many of his best critics recognized. It might be evident, then, that my use of "modernism" is "modernist," in a sense that is deeply rooted in the claims of formal criticism. One important aim of formal criticism, as I see it, is to articulate the fragile relationship between modern artists and their audience insofar as the content of art is concerned, and in this sense its focus is both historical and epistemological. Modernity compromised the integrity of many of the structures of production and reception that had traditionally governed the artist–audience exchange, and consequently challenged artists to find new ways of communicating their meaning. Modernist formal criticism reveals how artists sensitive to that historical dilemma do not simply *react* to the external pressures they encounter professionally, but rather *respond* to deeper formal problems that they identify in the art of the recent past, and thus contend with the conditions of expression, knowing, and understanding at specific moments in time. Pollock was one such artist. His acrobatic enterprise of feeling and thinking, in his own way, about the history and possibilities of painting – and then considering how to make thinking and feeling about painting part of a practice that informs how one feels and thinks more generally – is the creative project that my use of "modernism" is meant to capture. The

other terms are means by which to grasp his historically grounded and self-legislating activity in its particularity.

Central to my way of proceeding has been to engage with what to my mind are the strongest accounts available concerning Pollock's art and, more broadly, modernism. In addressing the various critical and historical positions that, in the development of my own standpoint, have molded my thinking and writing, I have adopted a framework within which my claims about Pollock have been both facilitated and constrained. Or perhaps facilitated *because* constrained. I hope to have modeled my work according to an ideal of modernist critical procedure: namely, that identifying and working in relation to openly acknowledged limits – operating within (and sometimes against) the disciplinary norms and scholarly achievements that, from my present perspective, serve as exemplars of art-historical inquiry and generate the criteria by which to evaluate the efficacy of art-historical claims – confers upon the process of inquiry itself an internal consistency at once historical, creative, and self-regulating. (It should be obvious that my convictions on this point derive from my understanding of the lessons of formal criticism, particularly that of Michael Fried.) Thus *Pollock's Modernism* incorporates, both as part of the main text and within the endnotes, protracted detours – citations that I feel are not just obligatory by protocol, but crucial to understanding the diverse orders of representation that I claim Pollock's paintings institute. In my summaries, I do my best to both present and respond to the contributions of other scholars, to build on their work in the process of explaining our measure of concord or disagreement, alignment or divergence.

Expediently: *Pollock's Modernism* investigates various strategies by which Pollock subjected traditional modes of pictorial address, and the conventions upon which he deemed them to be based, to sustained formal pressure. Why did he do so? As he insisted in 1950, it was part of his effort to find “new ways of expressing the world” around him, to discover powerful “means of arriving at a statement.” Pollock's inquiry – not prosaically technical, but driven by a self-imposed demand to establish a pictorial “equivalent” of his experience – was carried out with remarkable consistency across a range of technical experiments, and is manifestly expressed through the imagery he created and the structures of beholding that his paintings inaugurate. In what follows, I advance numerous claims about the meaning of Pollock's statements as they issue forth in his major works of art.

Chapter 1 (“Autonomy”) contends with Pollock's management, within an increasingly abstract idiom, of conventional relationships of figure,

plane, and space in a way that preserved yet transformed their significance for pictorial address. At the same time, this first chapter identifies certain oppositions that remain important for the book as a whole, such as the distinction between the actual and the virtual, the empirical and the projected, the literal and the pictorial. In contrast to accounts that stress the anti-representational “immediacy” of Pollock’s work (that, in other words, claim for his art the power to eliminate the distinction between viewer and painting in an experience that somehow unites them in a feeling of unmediated “oneness”), I categorize numerous instances of Pollock’s pictorial emphasis on the necessary *separateness* of the two. I detect in his thematic choices and technical strategies (in canvases including the early *Stenographic Figure* [c.1942] and *The Moon-Woman* [1942] as well as the later *Number 2, 1950* and *Number 28, 1950*) a commitment to his painting’s *representational* content against assertions of its power to overcome mediation (it should be obvious here that the word “representation” is used in an expanded sense, not merely to suggest the depiction of recognizable imagery). Acknowledging Pollock’s commitment to the representational status of his abstractions (to their “propositional” content as articulations of his statement) is to commit oneself to attempting to understand his intentions by interpreting them as both responsive to a history of the medium and open to the medium’s possibilities for creative expression. That obligation stands in opposition to taking his paintings as immediate conduits of a content that escapes or exceeds representation (or somehow operates “beneath” it).

In Chapter 2 (“Anamorphosis”), I consider Pollock’s investigation of the convention of painting’s “point of view” with regard to *Mural* (1943). I argue that the artist’s critique of traditional modes of pictorial address was stimulated by his increasingly sophisticated sense of what linear perspective specifically, and pictorial projection in general, could (or could not) achieve within an idiom of radical abstraction. Scholars have commonly seen in *Mural* a fused interplay of figuration and abstraction, and thus have taken the work to embody a transition between Pollock’s earlier concerns with overt subject matter (especially psychological or therapeutic imagery) and his later all-over canvases of 1947–50. To counter this oversimplification, I examine the impact on Pollock in 1936 of David Alfaro Siqueiros’s experiments with anamorphosis, the technical construction of a distorted visual projection that a viewer perceives naturalistically, or as “resolved,” from a particular point of view. I contend that Pollock absorbed from Siqueiros the principle of anamorphic repositioning, and then capitalized on its possibilities to embed within *Mural* a structure

of beholding that generalized its effect. Pollock's interest in that formal solution was perhaps sparked by the conditions of the painting's commission: it was to be hung on the right-hand wall of the narrow entrance hall to Peggy Guggenheim's New York apartment, and thus seen first at an angle by mobile spectators. But Pollock's effort was also stimulated, I argue, by the painter's response to a "crisis" of easel painting, one best diagnosed by Clement Greenberg, whose critical analysis of the issue helps contextualize the problem of perspective and "standpoint" facing Pollock in his execution of a mural-sized canvas. In short, I argue that in *Mural* Pollock embedded, within a frontal view, something like the possibility of seeing the pictorial array *from another standpoint* (without, of course, requiring the viewer to physically occupy some other position in actual space from which the painting would "resolve"). This was to *generalize* the convention of painting's point of view.

I turn in Chapter 3 ("Automatism") to a theme of major importance in Pollock studies (and in Abstract Expressionism more generally). To describe their physical and psychological involvement in their artistic acts, Pollock and his peers frequently spoke of an experiential mode characterized by a feeling of total absorption, of seeming not to know what they were doing while they were doing it. An epigraph chosen by Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg to introduce the first, and only, issue of *Possibilities* (1947/8) was taken from Juan Gris: "You are lost the instant you know what the result will be." In the same issue, Pollock penned a statement that described of his own feelings of creative dissociation, declaring: "When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing." But he also indicated that conceptual or propositional content permeated the process of making nevertheless: after his famous "'get acquainted' period," he was able to "see what [he had] been about." Arguably, that very suture of "mindedness" and "embodiment" (although never separable insofar as *agency* is concerned, it is sometimes heuristically useful to distinguish them) allowed Pollock, as he painted, to make his "statement" intensely yet adroitly. During his putatively "automatic" activity, he came to understand which dimensions of his technique could serve expressive (i.e. meaningful) ends, and to deploy those techniques in the service of pictorial address. While I strongly reject the common contention that Pollock's process itself generates meaning, it seems correct to say that his involvement with the medium is the means by which he came to realize his intentions (latent or manifest). Practically, I pursue the degree to which the dissociation between an agent and his acts can be represented in painting by focusing on the pictorial structures and effects of *Cathedral*



and *Lucifer* (both 1947) before moving on to discuss Pollock's masterpiece, *Number 1A, 1948*. Theoretically, my targets are Motherwell and Rosenberg, and my orientation to the problems their writings generate is throughout this chapter guided by the work of Walter Benn Michaels. Whether we think of it as a mode of experience, a set of techniques, or as a dissociation of intention and outcome, automatism – insofar as we deem it a content of Pollock's art – must be pictorially thematized. Only then can we attempt to interpret and understand the particular kind of agency Pollock intends to represent.

The importance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to my interpretation, which can be discerned obliquely in the first three chapters, becomes more explicit in Chapter 4 ("Embodiment"). I continue to correlate my account of Pollock's meaning with an account of pictorial effects, since my guiding assumption is that to grasp the significance of the artist's paintings, interpretation must proceed from the modes of pictorial address the works are intended to elicit – which is to say from the structures of beholding they establish in relation to the conventions of the medium. Although he never wrote about Pollock (who was almost his exact contemporary), there exists a profound accord between key aspects of Merleau-Ponty's notion of lived perspective and Pollock's art. To guide my analysis of the major drip, pour, and spatter canvases of 1947–50, I build on the philosopher's alignment of embodied intentionality – a subject's general directedness to the world at the levels of motricity and the automatism of mental life – with creative expression and meaning. Merleau-Ponty's attempts to articulate the significance of "pre-objective" or "pre-reflective" depth in relation to the "natural" or "reflective" attitude that characterizes our daily experience illuminates the painter's analogous efforts to express and represent that depth pictorially. At the same time, I offer additional support for using phenomenology in interpreting Pollock's art by discussing the impact on his milieu of the psychologist Paul Schilder, whose theory of the "body-image" is not only relevant historically, but is also astonishingly useful conceptually for fathoming certain dimensions of Pollock's canvases. (Schilder's classic book *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* [1935] was cited admiringly by Merleau-Ponty throughout his writings, and was repeatedly invoked – without citation – by Meyer Schapiro.) I attempt to explain how certain paintings, including *Number 1, 1949*, *Number 32, 1950*, and *One: Number 31, 1950*, allow a viewer to retrieve (but not literally) something like the spontaneous coming-into-being of one's own body image. More importantly, Pollock renders that core experience of embodiment a content of painting,

thus securing a space within a convention for our reflection on it. Another way of putting the matter is to say that Pollock represents the body as it is psychosomatically, libidinally, and physically lived “from the inside,” reaching for expression and directed intentionally toward its projects.

Chapter 5 (“Projection”) concentrates on the black paintings of 1951–2, a body of work that for various reasons has received far less attention than Pollock’s other canvases. Owing to the primacy of the artist’s concern to give visual form to modes of embodied experience, I continue to consider his efforts in light of phenomenology. In my approach to the black paintings, I explain how Pollock interrogates certain conventions that govern the representation of the figure in order to express the relation of pictorial projection to embodied seeing. By various means, Pollock makes a normally intangible mode of vision and visibility available for reflection and analysis. To further my case, I rely also on the philosopher Stanley Cavell’s theorization of the movie screen in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971), using my reading of Cavell’s account of the screen to elucidate the visible/invisible character of the blank raw canvas in certain black paintings. I furthermore try to correlate my analysis with the massive gains made for our understanding of Pollock’s classic pictures by formal criticism, chiefly that of Michael Fried. In 1951–2 Pollock, I suggest, achieves abstraction within the context of a figurative style that would seem to renounce it as a possibility. But now “abstraction” isn’t just a term to describe non-representational imagery; it is rather to be understood as a mode of embodied projection itself.

In short, *Pollock’s Modernism* argues that the artist subjected the phenomenological interdependence of sensation and cognition in our embodied experience to pictorial scrutiny. In so doing, he simultaneously responded to established conventions by which those imbricated domains of experience could be represented by painting and made into a content of art, and inaugurated new ones. From our present vantage point, it is clear that Pollock’s work transformed subsequent notions of artistic activity, and that his paintings provided later artists with unsurpassed models of artistic intensity and achievement. Still, surprisingly little writing has been devoted to the patient observation, description, and analysis necessary to come to terms with key instances of Pollock’s body of work. The particularity of the paintings themselves has often been elided – even willfully ignored – by reduction and generalization (casually, any “Pollock” will do to illustrate some point). Above all, my aim in this book has been to confer upon single works the type of attention that I believe is required to discern, acknowledge, and understand the structures of

beholding Pollock wanted each of them to sustain. But this is not to say that I consider my study merely interpretive rather than historical. Quite the contrary. I hope my argument is attentive to the historical variability of modes of pictorial address (and thus forms of beholding), while at the same time remaining sensitive to Pollock's works of art as being permeated, delimited, and framed by his artistic intentionality.