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He's sitting there just as I remember him, next to the neat little marble-topped table, with its prim lamp in gilt bronze mounted by a simple white shade, and behind him a painting that might be by Kenneth Noland but is hard to identify in the tightly held shot that frames him. His face is much the same, flabby and slack, although time has pinched it sadistically, and reddened it. Whenever I would try to picture that face, my memory would produce two seemingly mismatched fragments: the domed shape of the head, bald, rigid, unforgiving; and the flaccid quality of the mouth and lips, which I remember as always slightly ajar, in the logically impossible gesture of both relaxing and grinning. Looking at him now I search for the same effect. As always I am held by the arrogance of the mouth—fleshy, toothy, aggressive—and its pronouncements, which though voiced in a kind of hesitant, stumbling drawl are, as always, implacably final.
“I first met Jackson Pollock in ’42,” he’s telling the interviewer. “Came down the sidewalk and there was Lee Krasner whom I’d known of old and she was with a very respectable gentleman.”

He hesitates so we can let it sink in, the coupling of Pollock’s name with the words respectable and gentleman.

He begins again. “And I saw this rather nice-lookin’ guy. Lee said to me, ‘This guy’s gonna be a great painter.’” Pause.

Then the singsong of his own reply: “Well. Uh. O-kay.”

As the film cuts away from Clement Greenberg to the notorious photographs of Pollock painting, one of us is unable to hold back the question, “How many times has he told that story? One hundred? Two hundred? Three? How completely bored he sounds!”

But Clem is not bored, I think. If he’s willing to broadcast the story over so many retellings, no matter how routinized and compressed, it’s because he has a project, a mission. Lee had always said she introduced Pollock to him at a party, with dancing. Pollock, however, was never at his best at gatherings, alternately frozen with shyness and bluster with drink. So Clem’s account labors to relocate their meeting: outside the customs house where he worked; therefore during the daytime; and thus the encounter with a sober Pollock—“respectable,” a gentleman.

This, I think, is the process of sublimating Pollock. Of raising him up from that dissolute squat, in his James Dean dungarees and black tee-shirt, slouched over his paintings in the disarray of his studio or hunkered down on the running board of his old Ford. This is the posture, in all its lowness, projected by so many famous photographs, images recording the athletic abandon of the painting gesture but also the dark brooding silence of the stilled body, with its determined isolation from everything urban, everything “cultured.” The photographs had placed him on the road, like Kerouac, clenching his face into the tight fist of beat refusal, making an art of violence, of “howl.” Clem’s mission was to lift him above those pictures, just as it was to lift the paintings Pollock made from off the ground where he’d made them, and onto the wall. Because it was only on the wall that they joined themselves to tradition, to culture, to convention. It was in that location and at that angle to gravity that they became “painting.”

“He wasn’t this wild, heedless genius,” Clem continues. “No. He wasn’t that. He looked. He looked hard; and he was very sophisticated about painting.” His voice trails off, as though he were remembering.
And it's right there, in that brief paragraph, in that little clutch of sentences, that you have the whole thing, the full redemptive gesture, the raising of the work from off its knees and onto the grace of the wall in one unbroken benediction, the denial of wild heedlessness in order to clear a space for the look, the look that will (in its very act of looking) create order, and thus create painting—"sophisticated" painting.

This trajectory, moving ineluctably from disorder to order, can be tracked through the statements made by journeyman critics at the turn of the decade, as one after another they reversed themselves on the subject of Pollock's work. Before, they confessed, they could only see the wild heedlessness. Now, they say, they see the order. After the 1949 show, Henry McBride admits that previous works had looked to him "as though the paint had been flung at the canvas from a distance, not all of it making happy landings."

That's the language of before.

But now, he writes, "The spattering is handsome and organized and therefore I like it."

Which is to say that before, it was on the floor: "a child's contour map," "a flat, war-shattered city, possibly Hiroshima, as seen from a great height," "dribblings," "drooling," "a mass of tangled hair." And now, it's on the wall. Where it takes on order, and the sophistication of tradition: "elegant as a Chinese character," said the Times, while in Art News Pollock's use of metallic paint joins his work to Byzantium, to Siena, to all those sacred walls glittering with the illusioned light of transcendence: "Pollock uses metallic paint in much the same sense that earlier painters applied gold leaf, to add a feeling of mystery and adornment."

The welling up of this tide of benediction has a momentum of its own, carrying everything before it, even Greenberg. Before, the wall—the wall that was the guarantor for him of the work's condition as painting—the wall had signaled compression, concreteness, flatness; it had meant the transformation from the easel picture to the mural painting, the movement from illusional depth to a declaration of the wall's impermeable surface in all the "positivity," as he said, of its observable fact. The wall, the mural, was about thisness. It was a vertical, bounded plane, an object that stood before the viewer's own vertical body, facing off against it. This object, he reasoned, this continuous, planar object could function as an analogue for another continuous object, namely positivist science's "space," the continuum of neutral observation, the space everywhere open to examination,
everywhere absolutely equal before the (scientific) law. "The picture plane as a total object," he had written, "represents space as a total object." And the extended plane of the mural-sized painting, he thought, will make this analogy into solid, pictorial fact.

But now the very verticality of that wall seemed to carry the force of transcendence.

Greenberg’s first word for this was “hallucinated,” as he began to search for a term that would capture the way this expansive vertical surface seemed to outrun the very world of facts, and the wall itself appeared to give way: “object” now rewritten as “field.” “Hallucinated literalness,” he first decided, would set up just the right kind of tension between the pictorial wall’s flatness and the optical illusions it nonetheless released. He tried to characterize these illusions. The wall seemed to breathe, he thought, to exhale color. It took on a kind of radiance, a luminous openness, volatilizing substance. By the mid-1950s he was reading Pollock’s drip paintings as a matter of creating the “counter-illusion of light alone.”

The stolid neutrality of “space as an object,” materialist and literal, would cede its place to the idea of the pictorial field as “mirage,” which is to say a zone enveloped by the subjective possibility of error. But as such this weightless, hovering, exhaling plenum would now stand, Greenberg thought, as the analogue of “vision itself.” It would be the matrix of a gaze that, cut loose from the viewer’s body, was free to explore the dimensions of its own projective movement buoyed by nothing else but subjective reflection on its own form of consciousness. “To render substance entirely optical,” he wrote, “and form as an integral part of ambient space—this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage.”

The vertical is not, then, just a neutral axis, a dimension. It is a pledge, a promise, a momentum, a narrative. To stand upright is to attain to a peculiar form of vision: the optical; and to gain this vision is to sublimate, to raise up, to purify.

Freud had told that story years before, had he not? “Man’s erect posture,” he had written, could in and of itself be seen to “represent the beginning of the momentous process of cultural evolution.” The very move to the vertical, he reasoned, is a reorientation away from the animal senses of sniffing and pawing. Sight alone, enlarging the scope of attention, allows
for a diversion of focus. Sight alone displaces excited humanoid attention away from its partner's genitals and onto "the shape of the body as a whole." Sight alone opens the possibility of a distanced, formal pleasure to which Freud was content to give the name beauty; this passage from the sexual to the visual he christened sublimation.

"Sight alone" was very much the province of gestalt psychology, which in those years was running fullback for Freud's fancy speculative passing plays in this matter of a psychohistory of the senses. The animal can see, the psychologists wrote, but only man can "behold." Its connection to the ground always ties the animal's seeing to touching, its vision predicated on the horizontal, on the physical intersection of viewer and viewed. Man's upright posture, they argued, brings with it the possibility of distance, of contemplation, of domination. "We are able to behold things in a plane perpendicular to the direction of our gaze," they wrote, "i.e., in the plane of fronto-parallel Pragnanz and of transparent distance." Pragnanz was the gestalt psychologists' term for the clarity of a structure due to its simplicity, its ability to cohere as shape. Beheld shape, they made clear, depended on being "fronto-parallel," which is to say, vertical.

The afterlife of the drip pictures continued to be conducted within this sublimatory, formal plane of the vertical. To that we have the testimony of the procession of artists who claimed themselves as Pollock's heirs: Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons. And the accounts of critics and historians—Michael Fried, William Rubin, T. J. Clark—do nothing if not concur. The drive of sublimation moves the paintings steadily away from the material, the tactile, the objective. By 1965 this drive had already reached a kind of climax when the next logical conclusion was drawn from Greenberg's claim that the volatilizing abstractness of Pollock's line "bounds and delimits"—in Michael Fried's paraphrase—"nothing—except, in a sense, eyesight." Turning his attention to those few paintings in 1949 where Pollock has removed figurative shapes from the optical web of the drip pictures by knifing out sections of canvas, Michael describes the result. It is a break, he says, although it is not experienced as a rupture in the physical surface of the painting so much as it is felt as a lacuna—a kind of "blind spot"—in the viewer's own field of vision. "It is like part of our retina that is destroyed," he urges, a part that "for some reason is not registering the visual field over a certain area." Evacuating the work altogether from the domain of the object and installing it within the consciousness of the subject, this reading brings the sublimatory movement to its climax. "In the end,"
Michael adds, "the relation between the field and the figure is simply not spatial at all: it is purely and wholly optical: so that the figure created by removing part of the painted field and backing it with canvas-board seems to lie somewhere within our own eyes, as strange as this may sound."

To Michael’s good friend Frank Stella, however, it rang not only strange but false. The sublimated Pollock—the volatilized pigment, the patches of aluminum paint read out as a silver analogue for the gold grounds of Siena and Byzantium—raised a kind of skepticism in him. What he liked, instead, about Pollock’s metallic paint, he told the interviewer in the film *Painters Painting*, was that it was “repellent.” It repels the eye, as does much of the surface quality of the drip pictures seen up close, the coagulation of the paint in the areas where it had puddled and then shriveled in the process of drying, forming a disgusting film, like the skin on the surface of scalded milk. But Frank’s objection went in large part unnoticed; and his own use of metallic paint would itself be gathered into the sublimatory embrace of “opticality.”

Only three demurrals register within the afterhistory of the works that cannot be so assimilated, three refusals of the verticalization of Pollock, three reminders of the time when the drip pictures could still be thought of as having been “painted with a broom,” a floorbound condition that elicited the comment that “a dog or cat could do better,” the polite version of what both Thomas Craven and Tom Benton accused Pollock of in 1950: making the drip pictures by peeing on them. The three dissenting voices came from the practices of Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and Robert Morris. None of these was interested in the sublimated Pollock.

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"It is felt as a lacuna—a kind of “blind spot”—in the viewer's own field of vision . . . (p. 247)"
"After the '50 show," she would ask dramatically, "what do you do next? He couldn't have gone further doing the same thing"... (p. 255)
I try to imagine his tone the time he told an interviewer that by 1952 Pollock had “lost his stuff.” It was an expression I know he liked. I imagine him savoring the finality of it, its assaultiveness, the Middle English abruptness of the word stuff. He had given a lecture at the Guggenheim in the early ’50s where he said that Dubuffet had “lost his stuff.” And then, against the angry murmur of his audience, he added that de Kooning was another case “of an artist who has lost his stuff.” He had, he claimed, said this to Pollock directly, at the same time in 1953 when he told him the paintings in his latest show were “soft” and “forced.”

He smiles his slow, voracious grin. “Jackson knew he had lost his inspiration.” He shrugs. “Jackson had a phenomenal ten-year run, but it was over.”

I try to imagine him saying it: “All artists have their run; and yours, Jackson, is over.”

He shrugs. Sooner or later all great artists lose their stuff, after which they just keep going in the day-to-day activity of the artist treading water, making derivative, minor painting, like Dubuffet after 1950, or de Kooning after the first bout of Women.

Pollock, however, didn’t keep going. After he “lost his stuff” he was able to put together just three more shows before falling apart completely; in another year and a half, by August 1956, he was dead.

And where there’s a corpse, you could say, there’s a mystery.

It’s often imagined that the enigma surrounding Pollock’s work concerns the onset of the drip pictures, which is to say the invention of a procedure for making paintings more radical than anything else that had come before it. Out of what kind of inspiration did this arise, it is asked, out of what measure of formal intelligence? Was it the canniness of the master or just the result of happy accident? From whom did he copy it? Into what tradition did he imagine himself tapping? But this is surely the wrong question.

The scientist sets up an experiment. He has a hunch that if he does a certain group of procedures in a certain order he will get a certain result. And he knows he can repeat the experiment, that in subsequent tries he can widen the variables it will account for by altering it slightly. He is working by induction, from “case” to “rule,” in a logic of relations that looks like this:
Induction

Case These beans are from this bag.
Result These beans are white.
\[ \therefore \text{Rule} \] All the beans from this bag are white.

We can follow Pollock's experiment as he performed and reperformed it: laying the canvas down on the floor, building up the linear tracery that covered its surface with whorls and loops of liquid paint, varying the viscosity of the network and the size and format of the surface. We can follow the progression toward an increasingly open lattice and toward formats of less and less conventional dimensions, at first breaking with the traditionally vertical canvas by exploring exaggeratedly horizontal friezes, and then bursting the bounds of the easel picture itself by claiming extravagant amounts of surface: thirteen feet high, for example, by twenty feet wide. As he does this again and again he is, as Art News has already informed us, "painting a picture"; and although we may have questions about how and why he does it, it does not take the form of a mystery.

The mystery arises, rather, from what cannot be repeated, from what has been brought to an end, terminated, closed out. The murder mystery dramatizes this finality by producing a body: by giving finality the concrete form of the corpse. The mystery's form is the reverse of the scientific experiment, since its logic works backward from "rule" to "case," which is to say, from due to cause. C. S. Peirce, to whom we owe the example of the beans in the bag, gave this logic the name of retro- or abduction:

Abduction

Rule All the beans from this bag are white.
Result These beans are white.
\[ \therefore \text{Case} \] These beans are from this bag.

And a host of writers, fascinated by the retroactivity of the logic and attracted to the structure of the clue itself—whether that be called index, trace, or symptom—have supplied the names of famous workers in the field of retroduction: Sigmund Freud, Giovanni Morelli, Sherlock Holmes.

"The murderer always brings something to the scene of the crime," says the detective, his voice low and nasal and portentous, adding, "and, just as surely, he always leaves something behind."

Just so. It is obvious, a piece of street wisdom, a commonplace of the genre. Whether the "murderer" is repressive censor or forger or criminal,
the clue is structured by this strange caesura that announces its break with the psychological fabric of intention. The clue is precisely what was not meant, what was never considered, what was inadvertent, unconscious, left by mistake. The clue is structured by the peculiar fact that though, as a trace, it is ineradicably connected to its “maker,” its maker’s connection to it cannot be said to have the same perspicuousness. And with this slackening of the criminal’s grip on the “meaning” of his own clue, his story likewise passes out of his hands, becoming a newly born narrative. No longer the tale of the crime’s commission, it is now the story of the deed’s detection. As Holmes liked to explain to Watson, it becomes a matter of “reasoning backwards.”

We could say that both clue and corpse announce this peculiar temporal structure, each in its own way. The corpse stands for finality, for what can never be repeated; the clue stands for a break in the chain of consciousness, for what was never intended. And the story, though focused on the past, is thus strangely delivered from it. For the narrative inhabits a present that is free to continue, to keep receiving the aftershocks of the crime, it is true, but also to keep forming its own new sets of events from which its interpretation of the crime will build.

So when the detective turns his leaden gaze on the frazzled housewife standing in the black and white glare of a Hollywood noon and insists, “Just the facts, ma’am,” is he affirming Ranke’s demand that the historian summon forth “things as they really were,” thereby moving toward a truth contained in the past and unaffected by the present? Or is he rather just brushing aside her interpretation, her set of readings, the better to clear a space within which to discover his own? He wants the facts, and he wants them raw. But he does not think they will come bearing their own meaning. Interpretation is his job. And it occurs after the event. It happens now. According to the inexorable logic of the clue.

And what were the “facts,” just the facts . . . ma’am?

In 1950, at age 38, Jackson Pollock was on a roll. He had made $5,800 from the 1949–50 gallery season—the result of record sales from his 1949 show and payments for a treasured mural commission. At a time when the average white-collar worker took home $3,500 a year, this was success measured in hard monetary terms. But success was not only financial. In large banner type, Life magazine had asked twelve million readers, “Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” And although the writers
of the article’s captions tried to tip the question over into derisive irony (the “drooling” business), the body of the story and the size of the reproductions did nothing but imply that the answer was “yes.”

By 1950, Alfred Barr had purchased Number 1, 1948 for the Museum of Modern Art and, though still wavering in his own assessment of Pollock, had given impressive space to his work in the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Beginning with the spring thaw, Pollock had opened the year’s working season by embarking on a series of larger and larger paintings, climaxing in his four most ambitious and, to some, his most masterful works: Lavender Mist, One, Number 32, and Autumn Rhythm.

Deep into the summer Hans Namuth had begun a series of shooting sessions, photographing Pollock both in his studio at work and relaxing on the grounds of his house in Springs. Pollock seems to have found his reflection in the camera’s gaze all of a piece with his newly consolidated fame. In any event he agreed to Namuth’s next proposal, which was to make him the subject of a film and to train the camera on him at work . . . painting. The only other American artist he knew to have had a film made about him was Alexander Calder. So this put him in a league with the most established of artists and one moreover with important ties to Europe.

The filming began in September and finished on a cold day in late October. Pollock marked its completion by downing glass after glass of bourbon. During the dinner that followed he fought with Namuth, oblivious to the dozen or so other guests. “I’m not a phony. You’re a phony,” he kept saying. And then he upended the table, dinner and all. For four years he had stayed sober. Now he had fallen off the wagon.

He never got back on. As he wrote to his friend and supporter Alfonso Ossorio, his time in New York during and after his winter show represented “an all-time low.” The “drinking and depression,” he admitted, were “brutal.” In the spaces between wave after wave of binges, the most he could do was to make some ink drawings on the pads of Japanese paper Tony Smith had given him. Back on Long Island in early spring these drawings, becoming ever more figurative, were soaked onto long stretches of canvas to constellate paintings with, as he once more wrote Ossorio, “some of my early images coming thru.” This work, his 1951 black and white show, marking his definitive break with the drip pictures, signaled
the beginning of the end of both his art and his life. And it is this ending, this revocation, this rupture that is the mystery, the shroud of the corpse.

For Lee, of course, there was no mystery. “After the ’50 show,” she would ask dramatically, “what do you do next? He couldn’t have gone further doing the same thing.”

The idea that Pollock refused to repeat himself, that he was too authoritative a master to sink into self-imitation, is part of the myth of Pollock’s greatness. Michael Fried reverts to it in discussing the cutout pictures of 1949, with their stunning invention of the “blind spot,” as he parries the entirely plausible question about why, if this solution were so important, Pollock had limited himself to exploring it only twice. But nothing, Michael attests, could be less surprising: “Among the important American painters who have emerged since 1940 Pollock stands almost alone in his refusal to repeat himself.”

The idea of mastery as a refusal to repeat rings oddly hollow, however, amidst the actual practice of modernist art. What would we say about Mondrian, who, after having broken through to the invention of the neoplasticist grid, spent the next two decades “repeating himself”? Isn’t repeating oneself precisely what painting allows one to do, especially once one has found one’s particular language, the stylistic invention that will allow one to move inside it and inhabit it, growing and changing within the new syntax one can call one’s own? That’s what Clem praised in Pollock: the variety and drama latent within “what may at first sight seem crowded and repetitious... One has to learn Pollock’s idiom,” he said, “to realize its flexibility.” He looked at the great drip pictures of 1948, Number 1, 1948, for example. “Beneath the apparent monotony of its surface composition,” he wrote, “it reveals a sumptuous variety of design and incident.” But it was not just the variety within a given work that struck him; it was the range of feeling made possible by his newly invented idiom.

This is why for Clem, too, there was no mystery. At least not at first. In 1951 Clem greeted the black and white pictures as “a turn but not a sharp change of direction.” At the time they merely seemed to confirm the suppleness, the range of possibilities offered by the new language. He ignored the “images coming thru” and looked instead at the development of Pollock’s line, sinking as it did into the white cotton duck like ink into a blotter. “Now he volatilizes,” Clem said, remarking on nothing more than a logical permutation within an ongoing series.
It was only later that he would return to this moment and reevaluate it, understanding it not as a progression but as a rupture and a breakdown. In 1955, situating *One* and *Lavender Mist* at the very frontier of painting's future, which is to say, at the very pinnacle of opticality, Greenberg would castigate the black and white pictures as having been, in fact, a massive recantation. “In 1951,” he said, “Pollock had turned to the other extreme, as if in violent repentance.” Gone was the optical radiance, the “vaporous dust of interfused lights and darks.” In its place there was now “a series of paintings, in linear blacks alone, that took back almost everything he had said in the three previous years.” Pollock took it all back, he wrote. Though he didn’t ask why.

Into the explanatory gap of this mystery there have rushed a set of reasons based on Pollock’s intentions. A few are art-historical, like the notion that Pollock turned to figuration in order to design a set of windows for a church project; but most are biographical. He stopped the drip pictures, one goes, because the 1950 show didn’t sell, didn’t even get reviewed. He stopped the drip pictures, states another, because he got tired of the accusations that what he was doing was undisciplined, meaningless. “No chaos, damn it,” he had fired back to *Time* magazine in November 1950. He stopped the drip pictures, yet another speculates, because the only source of his inspiration was the set of childhood memories out of which he painted, supercharged memories whose images he “drew” in the air above the canvas letting the sprays of pigment fall where they might, in order to achieve the abstractness necessary to secure Greenberg’s support, but memories which, increasingly, he no longer wished to veil. In this explanation Pollock’s restlessness with the drip pictures’ subterfuge had already become apparent in 1949; it only needed Tony Smith’s urging in the spring of 1951—“Well, what you did was great, Jackson, but what are you going to do next? What is the development?”—to drop the veil.

But the very fact of the mystery—and the structure of the clue—should make us refuse this whole litany of intentions, this recital of “he no longer wished . . .,” “he got tired of . . .,” “he refused to repeat.” We know what the detective has taught us, that the clue has already cut the act off from Pollock’s control and in so doing has delivered it to another.

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Entering the scene as a criminal . . . (p. 260)
maul and ravage the creamy stuccoed surface of his canvases instead. He had begun, that is, down the attack route which is that of the graffitist, the marauder, the maimer of the blank wall. And he had made it clear that the maimer he had taken as his model was Jackson Pollock. It is not just the circularity of Twombly's marks and the loopy aimlessness of their tracks repeating over the canvas field that is addressed to the drip pictures. Rather it is the experience of the trace itself—the trace that composes the tracery of the drip paintings—as violent.

The violence that Twombly read in the traces left to mark the path of so many sprays of liquid thrown by Pollock from the end of stick or brush, the violence that he therefore "completed"—to invoke Harold Bloom's notion of the strong misreading—as graffiti, invested Pollock's traces with a form. For the formal character of the graffito is that of a violation, the trespass onto a space that is not the graffitist's own, the desecration of a field originally consecrated to another purpose, the effacement of that purpose through the act of dirtying, smearing, scarring, jabbing.

The graffitist makes a mark. Like all marks it has the character of a sign, structured thereby onto the double level of content and expression. Sometimes the content is a written message, "Kilroy was here," it says; sometimes it is the mere hiss of negation, the great big "X" that bruises the cleanliness of the wall, the slash that labels the surface "canceled." Whatever the content, however, the mark itself is its vehicle, its support, that which bodies the message forth. This is what the structuralists call the sign's level of expression, constructing it either through the medium of sound or that of image. But further, as the structuralists have taught us, each of these levels is itself subdivided, layered into a plane of form and a plane of substance. With the graffito, the expressive mark has a substance made up of the physical residue left by the marker's incursion: the smear of graphite, the stain of ink, the welt thrown up by the penknife's slash. But the form of the mark—at this level of "expression"—is itself peculiar; for it inhabits the realm of the clue, the trace, the index. Which is to say the operations of form are those of marking an event—by forming it in terms of its remains, or its precipitate—and in so marking it, of cutting the event off from temporality of its making.

The graffitist goes up to a wall. He makes a mark. We could say that he makes it to register his presence, to intervene in the space of another in order to strike against it with his declaration, "I am here." But we would be wrong to say this. Insofar as his declaration is a mark, it is inevitably structured by the moment after its making that even now infects the time
of its making, the future moment that makes of its making nothing else than a past, a past that reads "I was here," "Kilroy was here." Thus even at the time the marker strikes, he strikes in a tense that is over; entering the scene as a criminal, he understands that the mark he makes can only take the form of a clue. He delivers his mark over to a future that will be carried on without his presence, and in so doing his mark cuts his presence away from himself, dividing it from within into a before and an after.

When Derrida would come to analyze this condition—the pure form of the imprint—to which he would give the name arche-trace, he would invent the term *différance* to account for the temporal disjunction internally fissuring this event. He would say of this form, "It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the pure movement which produces difference. *The (pure) trace is différance.* It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude." Unity, the unity of the sign, is thus preceded by multiplicity, or at least by the formal conditions of separation, of division, of deferral, which underlie the sign as its very ground of possibility. And this prior condition, intervening like a knife to cut into the indivisibility of presence—the presence of the subject to himself—is understood to be a form of violence. For if to make a mark is already to leave one's mark, it is already to allow the outside of an event to invade its inside; it cannot be conceived without "the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present." This marking, which "cannot be thought outside of the horizon of intersubjective violence," is thus "the constitution of a free subject in the violent movement of its own effacement and its own bondage."

The index's violence is not, then, just a consequence of its being the residue of a crime, but is instead a condition of the structure of the marker's having been cut away from himself; it is as though he had gone up to a mirror to witness his own appearing and had smashed the mirror instead. Had thereby voided his own presence, leaving only his mark. "Kilroy was here," he writes in a present already invaded by the future.

Twombly acknowledges the structure of Pollock's mark, his drip, his clue, as the residue of an event. Clearly, however, it is not the event that Rosenberg had sketched in his essay on action painting. When Rosenberg had said that what was to enter the canvas's "arena" was "not a picture but an event," he had made it clear that what he had in mind was one in which "form, color, composition . . . can be dispensed with." Voiding "form," the canvas would become a mirror, a vehicle of "self-revelation";
of its making, the future moment that makes of its making nothing else than a past, a past that reads "I was here," "Kilroy was here." Thus even at the time the marker strikes, he strikes in a tense that is over; entering the scene as a criminal, he understands that the mark he makes can only take the form of a due. He delivers his mark over to a future that will be carried on without his presence, and in so doing his mark cuts his presence away from himself, dividing it from within into a before and an after.

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It is this schema that is then buried by the avalanche of the poured skein . . . (p. 265)
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His graffiti as a dispersal of abstract marks, white arcs and switchbacks here scratched into gray . . . (p. 266)
it would be “of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence.” Reflecting back to the artist the image of his own acts, it would allow the actor to look his own choices in the face, to judge the authenticity of his own claims to spontaneity, to self-invention.

Twombly does not buy into this idea of an escape from form through the presence of the mark to its maker, as though in a mirror. If Pollock’s pictures can be said to have the structure of an “event” it is because they inhabit the condition of the trace and are formed by its violence against the very possibility of presence. They strike at the figure in the mirror. They smash it.

Pollock’s first drip pictures were made indeed by striking at the figure, by effacing it. Below the early webs of Galaxy and Reflection of the Big Dipper, the images of human figures are clearly visible. The web of black line has been set up to efface those figures, to cancel them. Twombly has the sense that this striking at the figure is systematic within Pollock’s operation of the trace, which is to say that it is in operation even where there are manifestly no “figures” in the underlayers of the painting.

In Number 1, 1948, for example, the sumptuous web that Alfred Barr bought for MoMA, one can barely make out an underdrawing that maps the surface with three more or less vertical poles, one at the center and the other two at either edge. It is this schema that is then buried by the avalanche of the poured skein, although the flurry of palm prints at the web’s upper margin, made toward the completion of the painting, can be said to mark the sites of the schema, lying below.

The palm prints have led recent writers on the picture to make strangely representational claims for the painting, to insist that there really are figures underneath the tracery. But Pollock did not need “figures” in order to strike at the figure. Years of training in harness to Thomas Benton, analyzing Michelangelos and El Grecos by means of schematic plumb lines and implicit vectors, had left him a relation to figurative art that was visible through its most diagrammatic mapping. In 1948 he would spend evenings pouring over art books with his new friend and acolyte Harry Jackson, analyzing the structures of the work by means of their buried schemata. Jackson has described how Pollock “brought out Cahiers d’art and analyzed Tintoretto in great detail, explaining the composition of this and that; what he was doing was bringing me pure Tom Benton: Venetian Renaissance to Tom Benton. Tom to Jack, Jack to Harry.”
In striking at the schema, the web cancels more than just this or that figure. It operates instead on the very idea of the organic, on the way composition can make the wholeness of the human form and the architectural coherence of the painting into analogues of one another, each repeating and magnifying the other’s continuity. It strikes against the organic form’s condition as unified whole, its capacity to cohere into the singleness of the good gestalt, its hanging together, its self-evident simplicity, its Prägnanz.

The form of the mark-as-graffito is, in its attack on presence, an attack on organicity, good form. Twombly would increasingly celebrate this aspect of the graffito’s “content” in his own versions of the dispersed, disseminated body. If in Panorama (1955) he had stayed within the formula of the all-over web and maintained his graffiti as a dispersal of abstract marks, white arcs and switchbacks here scratched into gray, he had by the early 1960s felt the need to acknowledge that it was in fact the body that was at stake. The savagery of the mark does not let up but its crude violence is now the site of an obsessional formulation of bodily parts. Heart-shaped pudenda and barbell testicles, hairy penises and tick-tack-toe-like vulvas, many of them surrounded by the vicious emphasis of separate frames, coalesce within a work like The Italians (1961). Over the surfaces of his Roman paintings would thus appear so many cocks and cunts, so many wounds and scorings, so many tatters splayed over the surface of the work, the erotics of which is that its body will never be reconstituted, whole.

He’s sitting there just as I remember him, next to the marble-topped table, its lamp in gilt bronze mounted by a white shade, a painting behind him that might be by Kenneth Noland but is hard to make out in the tightly framed shot we see. His face is much the same although time seems to have pinched and reddened it. Whenever I would try to picture that face, my memory would produce two seemingly mismatched fragments: the rigidly domed form of the head, and the slackness of the mouth. Looking at him now I am held, as always, by the arrogance of that mouth—fleshy, toothy, aggressive—and its pronouncements, which though voiced in a hesitant, Southern slur are, as always, implacably final.

In its flat compression, the story he’s told about his meeting with Pollock is typical of Clem’s resistance to any detailed accounts of other people. Whenever you would ask him about someone he would answer categorically: “He’s a borderline,” “She’s a pathological liar,” “He’s a drunk.” He would slam the lid shut on the past, as though looking back at the characters that filled it was simply not his affair. He only thought it respectable to talk about their art.
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The great artist as dead celebrity who had Pollock completely outdistanced was Vincent Van Gogh . . . (p. 275)
But over the years he had been led to speak about his and Pollock’s friendship with somewhat greater specificity, at first to his confidants and later to the writers and scholars who came in increasing numbers. One of the stories he told was a demonstration of their intimacy, particularly in the glory days, at the height of Pollock’s power, the summer of 1950. The two of them had left an East Hampton party one night in a common need for escape. “I didn’t tell him I was depressed,” Clem told an interviewer, “I didn’t have to—he sensed it.” And for his part he had seen Pollock’s panic in the midst of the swirl of people who were now attracted to him in the light of his Life magazine notoriety. “They didn’t see the man or the genius, they saw only a freak,” Clem said. Pollock had driven them out to the dump, sited high on a bluff overlooking Gardiners Bay, and while for the most part they sat in companionable silence, Pollock had told Clem about the fear that now possessed him. “He said he’d had a terrible nightmare. He was at the edge of this cliff and his brothers were trying to push him off.”

The terribleness of Pollock’s nightmare was, apparently, in direct relation to the spectacular quality of his sudden fame. If Pollock had, as de Kooning called it, “broken the ice,” so that collectors and museum people formerly known only for snubbing American painters now flocked to his openings, the publicity surrounding his work had also attracted the envy and rancor of his fellow artists. The brotherhood of the art world seemed to merge into the composite of his own family of five male siblings: he dreamed of “triumphing over them,” but at the same time he winced in advance before their judgment, imagining their jealous hatred. He had said as much to Denise Hare: “They only want me on the top of the heap, so they can push me off.”

When Pollock died in the car accident of 1956 his agony ended, but his fame grew exponentially. His was a famous car crash, second in media value only, possibly, to that, the year before, of James Dean.

Could Andy Warhol, obsessed by fame, not be fascinated by Jackson Pollock’s? It was Warhol’s custom in the late 1950s and early ’60s to strike up conversations by asking his interlocutor if he or she ever thought about being famous. Whatever the reply Warhol would launch into his own fantasies. “He said he wanted to be as famous as the Queen of England,” a report of one of these encounters goes. “Here was this weird coolie little faggot with his impossible wig and his jeans and his sneakers and he was sitting there telling me that he wanted to be as famous as the Queen of England! I thought that Andy was lucky that anybody would talk to him.”
The jeans, the worn sneakers, and the tee-shirts Warhol affected throughout the 1950s were inspired by Brando's Stanley Kowalski and Dean's Rebel without a Cause. It didn’t matter that the type was not his own, he was lost in admiration for the fame. And in the art world no one was as famous as Jackson Pollock for being famous.

His fascination with Pollock was not unmixed, since the machismo and the brutalities were not his taste. But still he would pump Larry Rivers for personal details, and in 1962, barely established at the Stable Gallery, he would seek out Ruth Kligman, the “death car girl,” to go around the art world with. “Andy was fascinated with de Kooning and Pollock, and through me, he wanted to be part of that lineage,” she said. “He asked equally about their world and personalities.” Years later when Kligman published Love Affair, her account of her connection to Pollock, Warhol briefly contemplated making the movie, with Jack Nicholson playing Pollock. If there were to be a movie about his own life, however, Warhol wanted to be played by Tab Hunter.

Warhol freely spoke of his admiration for Pollock’s work—he had said, dismissing a late, abstract Siqueiros in 1972, “It’s just action paintings. Anyway, Pollock was much better. Pollock was a great painter. I wish I had a Pollock”—but it’s always hard to know how to separate the feelings about the art and the feelings about the fame. When Julian Schnabel boasted, “There are three great American artists in this century. Pollock, Andy, and me. And Andy would agree,” Warhol’s “agreement” carries its inevitable load of irony. For his posture was always meant to imply that greatness had far more to do with the breadth of the notoriety than the profundity of the work.

It was this double sense of “great” that worked as a strange control over many of Warhol’s choices of themes, guaranteeing that the most kitschig image from the public imaginaire would also hook into the art of the museum, a resonance in which the utter banality and ubiquity of the one (flowered wallpaper for example) would perversely inflect the public reputation of the other (impressionism). “Andy liked his work to have art-historical references,” Bob Colacello insisted, “though if you brought it up, he would pretend he didn’t know what you were talking about.” Colacello said this in the context of Warhol’s most explicit reference to Pollock, the series of abstract expressionist look-alikes he made in 1977 and referred to as his Oxidation Paintings. But Warhol’s early Pop pictures had also announced their connection to Pollock, and this in his more typical way of furtively marrying the lowest cultural associations to the...
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And y Warhol, Oxidation Painting, 1978.

highest aesthetic ambitions. The car crashes Warhol began in 1962 were in this sense both the stuff of the most debased journalistic prying into the pain of anonymous lives and, though never announced as such, the celebration of famous deaths, for the two most important car crashes in Warhol's experience were those of Pollock and of James Dean. In a certain sense, of course, the great artist as dead celebrity who had Pollock completely outdistanced was Vincent van Gogh, whom Warhol acknowledged in his 1962 Do It Yourself (Irises) might also have been considering as the fame component in his decision to paint electric chairs, thus paying secret homage to the figure who had entered the hip art vocabulary of the early 1960s as the artist "suicided by society." But van Gogh did not, as did Pollock, inhabit Warhol's immediate art world horizon. And so Warhol's consideration of Pollock's work, for all its character of having been cathected by "fame," had a component that reached past the thematic surface and down into the structural level of form. Take the Dance Diagrams, for example. The tacky image of the middle-aged rake trying to learn the rumba from the Arthur Murray instructor in a mass-cultural fantasy of Everyman his own Fred Astaire rises from these schematic renderings of dance steps lifted from the ads carried by supermarket magazines. But as footprint finds its way to canvas, its new context carries other resonances, and we seem to hear Pollock's famously defiant, "I'd rather stand on my painting," the possible double meaning of which Time magazine rushed to exploit in its well publicized sneer at Pollock's technique: "All it says, in effect, is that Jack the Dripper, 44, still stands on his work."

That Warhol exhibited the Dance Diagrams by laying the canvases on the floor of the Stable Gallery in 1962 made it clear that his own reading of Pollock was directed toward the unmistakable horizontality that had been, as far as he could see, branded into the very weft of the drip pictures. Even before Warhol had become a certified Pop Artist, even, that is, as "Raggedy Andy," the commercial artist, was casting around for a mode of entry into the art of the galleries, he had taken Pollock's example as one point of departure. In 1961 he had spread blank canvases in front of the door to his house so that people would have to walk on them, leaving a network of darkened tracks; and it was also in 1961 that he executed what he referred to as "the piss paintings," in materials specified in their later reproduction as "urine on canvas."

It is in this convergence between the footprints and the urine that Warhol's formal reading of Pollock's act of branding his work as "horizontal" is made wholly explicit.

"Andy liked his work to have art-historical references" ... (p. 270)
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Abstract expressionism, for all the heated-up press about its release of transgressive means of applying paint, for all the sprays and showers and splatters of pigment, for all the viscosity and oily smears of wet-into-wet, continued for the most part to ratify the fact that the canvas field was a vertical facing the viewer, that the register of the image continued the age-old tradition of occupying the plane that transects the cone of vision, falling before the upright artist or viewer like a translucent veil or, for a far longer time, a transparent window.

In the work of de Kooning or Gorky or Kline, that is, the liquid paint registers the intensity and abandon of its application in runs and rivulets that, in responding to the pull of gravity, leave an indelible index of the picture's upright position over the course of its production. Pollock's application had also left an indelible index, but this time it was of the prone position of the canvas in relation to the artist who had worked above it. Whether it was in the puddles that massed in certain areas attesting to both the liquidity of the medium and the horizontality of the surface that received it, or in the throws of fluid lines leaving the trace of their fall in the halations of paler color soaking around them into the unprimed canvas, Pollock's drip technique was unique in being one massive index of the position the pictures had had to be in during the time they were being made. And unlike the other abstract expressionist works, his bore no telltale vertical runoff.

If, for Warhol, the pictures begged to be read as the residue of a liquid gesture performed by a man standing over a horizontal field, then peeing had become a way of decoding this gesture; and it was to this logical extreme that he carried his "interpretation" of Pollock's work in both 1961 and 1977. And whether it was true of the 1961 version, it was certainly the case that in 1977 the gesture had become, for Warhol, fully homoeroticized. He would not have needed anything as classy as Freud's peeing-on-the-fire footnote from Civilization and Its Discontents to make this association. Freud might have spoken about the first great feat of civilization as man's capacity to curb his impulse to pee on the fire, a desire Freud saw as arising from a primitive experience of the flames themselves as phallic, so that "putting out fire by urinating therefore represented a sexual act with a man, an enjoyment of masculine potency in homosexual rivalry." For Warhol the Oxidation Paintings were simply once again motifs that connected high and low culture—action painting and the world of the baths and their golden showers—along the vector of notoriety or "fame."
But if the Oxidation Paintings can and have been read as a homosexual decoding of the drip technique, it can also be said that they fail that technique and the mordancy of Warhol’s other readings of it. Because with the bursts and clouds of color that bloom across their surfaces, the Oxidation Paintings give no manifest testimony to the situation through which they were made. Airborne on the canvases, the halated images have no perspicuous connection to either the horizontality or the liquidity of their production; and further, exploiting a Warholian “all is pretty” decorative instinct, and as a consequence leaving behind the sense of violence that Pollock’s traces had carried, they bury the erotics of aggressive rivalry that was potential in the original, the very erotics that had probably attracted Warhol in the first place. For if the fixation on fame—as Warhol first wanted to be Matisse and then Picasso and then the Queen of England—and thus the attractions of rivalrous identification, was Warhol’s very medium, then no one was better equipped than he to appreciate the psychodynamics of violence encoded in the drip technique.

If there is a vector that connects a banalized worship of fame—the paradox of thousands of teenagers asserting their individualities, for example, by wearing the mass-produced badge of a celebrity, so that in “wanna-being” Madonna as a way of sharing in fame’s release from the crowd, they participate ever more resolutely in mass behavior—if there is a vector that connects this to mimetic rivalry, it surely moves along the course that René Girard maps as “metaphysical desire,” just as it is surely powered by a unquenchable thirst for recognition in order to feel that one “is.”

Metaphysical or triangular desire assumes that no desire is original, no wish spontaneous. Every desire is copied from someone else’s desire; every desired object is lodged in the heart of a desiring subject by having been first spotted as the object of someone else’s—the mediator’s—quest. Thus there is always, in the universe of metaphysical desire, a necessary triumvirate, the subject, the object, and the mediator. Even in the sexual love between just two people, this triumvirate is in place. For the lover and the beloved are both in the position of desiring the same object, the body of the beloved, with each one serving as the mediator for the other’s desire. This structure, which is that of double mediation, brings out the essentially rivalrous condition of triangulated desire. It is, Girard claims with Sartre, by this very rivalry, which leads the beloved to withhold the body the lover desires, that the beloved becomes ever more desirable, now clothed in the imagined majesty of a supposed autonomy and envied freedom; just as it is through the lover’s persistent pursuit of the beloved’s body that this otherwise disenchanted object becomes ever more precious in the beloved’s
own eyes, given luster by the lover's desire for it. That the triangle of desire between three—subject, mediator, and object—can, through the cat's cradle of mimetic rivalry over the same object, shrink the dramatis personae to two, makes no difference to the triangular structure of metaphysical desire. One has here simply the interlocking of the triangles, or double mediation. And it is also the case that the cast of characters can narrow to one, with the subject now in competition with itself.

If the psychoanalytic version of triangular desire casts its origin in the Oedipal scenario, which ends the rivalrous struggle by the subject's internalizing the mediator and identifying with his interdictions, then a post-Freudian attempt has been made to find an origin for this origin in a rivalrous identification of the subject with itself. The Kleinian depressive position is one such; the Lacanian mirror stage is another. In both, the model is a paranoid identification with one's rival such that by striking at that rival one is striking at oneself. If, Lacan argued, the ego can be seen to be formed in the mirror stage's labyrinth, then it is an ego constituted through the subject's emergence as its own first rival, forced to choose between the other and itself even though the other is itself. Although adult paranoia is this reflexive aggressivity writ large, it must, Lacan reasons, obey a structure of identification between subject and rival that "can only be conceived of if the way is prepared for it by a primary identification that structures the subject as a rival with himself." And this, then, is a primary rivalry that assures a primary violence.

Girard is clear about the violence inherent in metaphysical desire, driven as it is far more by rivalrous envy and hatred than by anything that could be called love for the object. He is also insistent about the degree to which this violence increases as the mediator comes closer and closer to the subject, no longer being, for example, the distant figure of the Knight that Don Quixote wants to imitate, but now merely the former schoolfellows that Dostoevski's underground man needs with all his might to force into recognizing him. And, further, since the rivalry between the subject and the mediator is, in most cases of triangular desire, between persons of the same sex, this intensity and focus can be thought, Girard says, as something to be decoded as latently homosexual. But "homosexuality, whether it is latent or not," he argues, "does not explain the structure of desire." Rather, he wants to claim, homosexuality is itself a function of a structure that produces a spectrum along which erotic value can be attached at one end to the object and at the other to the mediator. "This gradual transfer is not impossible," he writes, "it is even likely, in the acute stages of internal mediation, characterized by a noticeably increased preponderance of the
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"He delved into the deepest recesses of the unconscious, where lies a full record of all past racial wisdom" . . (p. 282)
Picasso's object became Pollock's "own" desire ... (p. 282)
mediator and a gradual obliteration of the object.” But Girard also argues that as the mediator approaches ever more closely and the struggle is over the subject’s very being, sexuality tends to drain out of the structure: “As the role of the *metaphysical* grows greater in desire, that of the *physical* diminishes in importance. As the mediator draws nearer, passion becomes more intense and the object is emptied of its concrete value.” Or again, “The ‘physical’ and ‘metaphysical’ in desire always fluctuate at the expense of each other. This law has myriad aspects. It explains for example the progressive disappearance of sexual pleasure in the most advanced stages of ontological sickness.”

Ontological sickness was not the name that any of his doctors or psychoanalysts or teachers gave to Pollock’s *drinking disorder*. But the man who ricocheted between an obsession with greatness—“Everyone’s shit but de Kooning and me”; “I’m the only painter alive”—and an increasingly overwhelming fear of nothingness—“I’m no damn good”; “I’m a fucking phony”—such that he could make these opposing claims was surely suffering from a malady of this sort.

That it was structured by mimetic rivalry is also not a difficult case to make. Pollock, after all, was the youngest of five brothers *all* of whom became artists. Within the family his most *particular* rivalry was with his oldest brother, Charles, whom he followed not just to New York and the Art Students’ League but into the very studio where Charles had become the star disciple, and there, in a struggle for Thomas Benton’s attention, he displaced Charles to become the trusted intimate of the Benton *family*. But it was not restricted to Charles. His brother Sande, who had worked in Los Angeles with Siqueiros, had communicated his enthusiasm to Jackson such that, in 1936 when the two of them briefly entered Siqueiros’s studio in New York, it was Jackson who grabbed the master’s attention. But several years later the mediator who entered Pollock’s consciousness most deeply, to become a far more permanent and infinitely more dangerous rival, was Picasso.

That Pollock had begun by 1938 to imitate Picasso’s current style as well as his image *repertory*—something that would intensify after the 1939 appearance of *Guernica*—has long been the stuff of art-historical accounts of Pollock’s work. What has tended to be increasingly stressed more recently, however, is that this imitation had as its deepest goal a desire for what Pollock understood as Picasso’s *desire*, *namely*, access to the unconscious. Perhaps Pollock did not need John Graham to reveal the secret of Picasso’s desire, but Graham, who was Pollock’s sole aesthetic and emo-
tional support in the opening years of the 1940s, had dedicated a whole system and dialectic of art to this revelation. In 1937 he had publicly celebrated Picasso’s conquest of the unconscious object. “He delved into the deepest recesses of the unconscious, where lies a full record of all past racial wisdom,” Graham wrote. It was enough for Picasso to desire this object for it to take on unparalleled glamour, and the idea of the unconscious, to which Pollock had already been introduced in not one but two analyses—the first one Freudian, in summer 1938, in the asylum called Bloomingdales; the second Jungian, in 1939–1940, in his New York sessions with Joseph Henderson—now, having surfaced as Picasso’s object, became Pollock’s “own” desire.

His pursuit of this “object” led him into the places where it was claimed to be kept, led him to the whole discourse on automatism, beginning in 1939–1940 with the group experiments in automatic drawing with Baziotes and Kamrowski, to the lectures in 1941 on surrealism at the New School by Gordon Onslow-Ford, to the surrealist game sessions at Matta’s house organized by Motherwell in 1942, and finally to the den of the surrealists themselves, the gallery of Peggy Guggenheim, in 1943. That he was puzzled and disappointed by the automatist image we know from Baziotes. The idea of the unconscious as a place from which to recover this or that figure, the idea of it as a kind of projective test, a “doodle reading,” was clearly not what Pollock would accept as an answer. Because in his pursuit of the unconscious object what seemed consistently at stake was to do violence to the image. And the outcome of this pursuit seems to have been the drip pictures: the competition with Picasso over the unconscious won at last.

Although it is possible to speak of Pollock’s mimetic behavior in specifically biographical terms—his imitation of the cowboy image as projected by his brother Sande; the impression he gave to so many as consistently acting a part, or many different parts: “a magpie,” Rosenberg sneered at him—mimetic rivalry is, as Girard makes insistently clear, a structure. At a sociological level this structure clarifies something of the peculiar shape abstract expressionism took as it developed over the course of the 1940s into a multiplicity of signature styles announcing so many different identities in a rivalrous struggle over the prize for originality.

While the modern masters were in Europe acting as a set of external mediators, the American vanguard artists had a more or less homogeneous style, collectivized around the imitation of a limited formal repertory: a biomorphism that went from abstraction to cloisonnist Picasso. It was only
In realizing that their rivals were not gods, the abstract expressionists were mistaken basking in the very equality that is necessary to internal mediation’s most desperate forms of rivalry, born of a need to create distinctions where no external hierarchies seem to establish them. Girard writes of the Proustian novel’s capture of this new form of alienation arising “when concrete differences no longer control relationships among men.” He also analyzes the tradition in American sociology to understand triangular desire, beginning with Thorstein Veblen’s ideas of conspicuous consumption with its notion that the compulsion to buy is powered strictly by a value conveyed to an article based on a perception of the Other’s desire. “David Riesman and Vance Packard,” he writes, “have shown that even the vast American middle class, which is as free from want and even more uniform than the circles described by Proust, is also divided into abstract compartments. It produces more and more taboos and excommunications among absolutely similar but opposed units. Insignificant distinctions appear immense and produce incalculable effects. The individual existence is still dominated by the Other but this Other is no longer a class oppressor as in Marxist alienation; he is the neighbor on the other side of the fence, the school friend, the professional rival. The Other becomes more and more fascinating the nearer he is to the Self.”

The rivalry unleashed among the Americans by the approach of the Europeans produced a rage for stylistic distinction and individuation that, it could be claimed, was structurally generated by the situation of internal mediation. Given at last the possibility of real competition with the mediators, the form the response took had the quality of finding a set of abstract marks of “uniqueness” to set each one off from his rivals. But in Pollock’s case, we could say, the grip of internal mediation was all the more strengthened by the presence in his studio of Greenberg, whose entire critical vocabulary was that of rivalry and of American artists besting the Europeans, outwitting them in the battle for History. Whatever the struc-
tural conditions were, whatever Pollock's own inclinations to mimetic behavior, Greenberg's constant extending to him of the carrot of "the best American artist," over the last half of the 1940s, reinforced the socio-logic of the structure.

Caught up in this structure of rivalry—along with Rothko and Kline and Still and Newman and de Kooning and Gorky, only, one could argue, more so—Pollock was in a battle of hatred and envy with his particular mediator, Picasso, the desired object of which would be the "figure" of the unconscious.

At some point it became clear that that figure could only be approached through bassesse, through lowering, through going beneath the figure into the terrain of formlessness. And it also became clear that the act of lowering could, itself, only register through the vehicle of a trace or index, through, that is, the stain that would fissure the event from within into act of aggression and mark, or residue, or clue.

When Pollock began to dribble a network of line over the figures on the canvases of what became Galaxy and Reflections of the Big Dipper, this bassesse was suddenly in place: both the cancellation of the figure and the registration of the beneath in the unmistakable trace of the horizontality of the event. It was as if, in a way, he had solved the riddle of She Wolf.

Both She Wolf and Stenographic Figure date from Pollock's opening encounter with surrealst notions of automatism, most concretely explained, by Graham, by Baziotes, by Matta, as "automatic writing." Writing, which differentiates itself from pictorial images by orienting itself to the horizontal surface of the table rather than to the vertical field of vision, should, by all logic, go very far in defeating the "image." That it does not was a longstanding paradox of surrealist theory and something quickly observed by Pollock. For as soon as writing is "framed" it becomes an image: either "writing" turned into a decorative picture of itself, as in Breton's presentations of schizophrenic production, or a projective matrix within which to see images, as Polonius saw the camel in the clouds or Leonardo the figures in the fire. If writing stands to painting at the right angle of horizontal to vertical, it does so, as has been remarked, through an opposition of culture to nature, its horizontality removing it from the "natural" upright field of vision to the more culturally processed domain of the written sign. But that there is an axis along which these two planes can always be folded onto one another is a function of what Foucault would call the "commonplace" of representation. What matter "pipe" or [pipe],
Both the cancellation of the figure and the registration of the beneath in the unmistakable trace of the horizontality of the event . . . (p. 284)
Their supposed horizontality could not defeat the image, it could only join it . . . (p. 289)
As writing is "framed" it becomes an image . . . (p. 284)
But it carried nonetheless these vague, original associations with the ground... (p. 289)
the language game of representation sets up an extraordinary continuity between the two. And thus it was not hard to see, as in *Stenographic Figure* for example, that the minute the written scribbles hit any portion of the painting, they were framed and thereby verticalized by that section of the image—becoming the “tattoos” on thigh or chest, the “patterns” on couch or bedclothes, the “grating” on wall or floor. Their supposed horizontality could not defeat the image, it could only join it.

In *She Wolf* of the following year this was even more so, since the random pattern produced by the all-over background of automatic doodling had in fact been expressly repackaged as an image. Onto this surface prepared by drips and spatters and sprays of color, Pollock produces an animal image by supplying a thickly painted frame that opaques out a contour around that part of the scrabbled field that will remain—left in negative as it were—as figure. Pollock had of course constructed images this way before, in the frenzy of work that spring in Siqueiros’s studio as the May Day murals and floats and banners were produced by laying stencils down on the floorbound panels and spray-painting around them. As the process continued the floor itself had become a field in which the “negative” zones left by mists of spray would mark the place where the stencils had lain, zones now profiled by the opaque color that had landed beyond their edges. Like everything Siqueiros had been producing, *She Wolf* operated the “stencil” to achieve an image. But it carried nonetheless these vague, original associations with the ground, which had been encoded into the Siqueiros process. And everything else that Siqueiros had thought he was encoding: good riddance to bourgeois culture, death to easel painting, out to pasture with “the stick with hairs on its end,” etc. Nothing that Siqueiros had managed had gone below “culture,” of course, since he had continued to produce the image. But what was lower than both the pictorial image and the cultural plane of writing was, it could be seen, the floor, the ground, the beneathness of the truly horizontal. That was lower. That was out of the field of vision and out of the cultural surface of writing and onto a plane that was manifestly below both, below the body.

At the time Pollock made *She Wolf* he could not use this knowledge. It only came to hand when he was engaged in striking, or canceling, the figure.

He’s sitting there just as I remember him, next to the neat little marble-topped table, its lamp mounted by a white shade, a painting behind him that might be by Kenneth Noland but is hard to read in the shot we see.
Time seems to have pinched and reddened his face. Whenever I would try to picture it, my memory would produce two seemingly mismatched fragments: the domed shape of the head, and the slackness of the mouth. Looking at him now I am held, as always, by the arrogance of that mouth—fleshy, toothy, aggressive—and its pronouncements, which though voiced in a modulated, hesitant drawl, are, as always, implacably final.

He had made such a pronouncement when, much to her relief, he had told Lee that the black and white pictures bore out her contention that Pollock could indeed, “draw like an angel.” But this angelism had a different meaning for him from the traditional gifts Lee thought it signified. Attached to the choo-choo train of history the angelic aspect of Pollock’s use of line was, for Clem, registered in the flight it could take, the statement it could make against the realm of matter and substance, and thus the sublimation it could perform. “Now he volatilizes,” he had said.

The meaning of Pollock’s black and white drawing for Pollock was clearly different since it left him feeling strangely shaken and insecure. Ibram Lassaw said “he seemed terribly unsure of himself,” confirming Carol Braider’s sense that Jackson “was worried about the image having come back.”

That the image had to be the dross to be left behind in order for Pollock’s recent drawing to have any aesthetic significance within an era of abstraction was the position Clem acted on as he encouraged Helen Frankenthaler to follow the lead of Pollock’s soaked black line into the antimatter field of the stained, nonobjective image. One after another Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland began to “draw” by staining. And one after another they “righted” Pollock’s painting, declaring that the spumes and furls and sprays had all along been verticals, had all along declared an analogy to landscape. “Mountains and Sea,” said Frankenthaler, smiling.

One doesn’t, however, imagine Louis smiling, as he labored in his tiny suburban room to lift his vast sheets of canvas so that the colored pours of acrylic could course down the channels he made for them in order to constellate his own version of Pollock’s linear bleeds. That he had “righted” Pollock’s line is all too evident in his own indexes of the upending of the painting process, with the individual streams of pigment still legible even as they soaked one into the other, and the “cusps” of the excess liquid building up along the bottom edge of the canvas. That Louis’s paintings are often generically referred to as veils attests to the verticalization they reconstitute as felt image. But even further, that these veils are often felt to be themselves composed of flames of color, such that what is also imaged
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Morris Louis, Saraband, 1959.

Onto the surface he had thrown a heterogeneity of trash—nails, buttons, tacks, keys, coins, cigarettes, matches . . . (p. 293)
forth is fire, is witness to the final, triumphant sublimation of Pollock’s line. If peeing on the fire is the destructive barrier to civilization in an excess of aggression against a symbolically charged nature, the preservation of fire is, Freud contends, the first step toward mastering this aggression and producing culture. Louis reconstitutes the cultural artifact that Pollock had trampled, and in the place of his strike against the vertical body, Louis remakes and thus preserves—in the abstract, purified language that itself marks the field of sublimation—the fire.

For Pollock there had been other ways besides the liquid residue of the pour to construct the index of this horizontalization of the image that had definitively canceled and dispersed it. The residue of “dumping,” for example, was another to which he had recourse early on, as in Full Fathom Five. There he had not only struck out the image by means of the black skein, he had also deposited great gouts of white lead and onto the surface he had thrown a heterogeneity of trash—nails, buttons, tacks, keys, coins, cigarettes, matches—to testify to the connection the work had had to have to the ground. The names he ratified for this first group of drip pictures also functioned to signal the fact of standing over the work and looking down: in addition to Full Fathom Five and Reflection of the Big Dipper, there were Watery Paths, Sea Change, The Nest, Vortex.

But the liquid gesture was perhaps the most efficient in that in one and the same stroke it canceled and testified, like the graffito mark, like the clue. Twombly had decoded Pollock’s gesture in one way, Warhol in another. In the late 1960s when Robert Morris was to consider the logic of “Anti-form,” he would decode it in yet a third. For Morris did not look at the structural condition of the mark, nor at the thematics of the man standing over the supine field. He looked instead at the operations of gravity, of the way the horizontal is a force that pulls against the vertical, pulling it down.

Gravity, he saw in Pollock’s work, had become a tool for the production of the work, every bit as much as the sticks from which the paint was flung or the arm’s gestural reach as it flung it. Because of this, Pollock’s work had constituted a “direct investigation of the properties of the material in terms of how paint behaves under the conditions of gravity.” Gravity was what had combined with the liquidity of the paint to read through the finished work as a sign of process. “Of the Abstract Expressionists,” Morris wrote, “only Pollock was able to recover process and hold on to it as part of the end form of the work. Pollock’s recovery of process involved a profound re-thinking of the role of both material and tools in making.” The rigidity imposed on most art materials—canvas is
stretched, clay is formed on internal armatures, plaster is applied to lath—is a fight against gravity. So that ultimately what is conceived of as form is what can maintain itself as vertically intact, and thus a seemingly autonomous gestalt. It's not, Morris reasoned, that what he was calling antiform—"random piling, loose stacking, hanging"—had no form, no edge, no boundaries. It was that lacking rigid form it could not remain upright, resistant to gravity.

When Greenberg had produced his own analysis of Pollock's dripped line, his own scenario for why the artist had turned to this manner of drawing, he had explained it as a way of avoiding the cut. "Pollock wanted to get a different edge," he said. "A brush stroke can have a cutting edge that goes into deep space when you don't want it to." For Greenberg the dripped line avoided the edge that would cut into space, the edge that would differentiate figure from ground, by isolating forms. By not cutting it would allow the canvas to read as an unbroken continuity, a singular, undivided plane. And that plane would then, according to the logic of opticality, yield up an analogue of the immediacy, the unbrokenness of the visual field and of the viewer's own perception of that field in an all-at-onceness of visual reflexiveness. By avoiding the production of forms (cut out within the field) the work would produce form itself as the law of the formulation of form.

But for Morris everything in Pollock's line had indeed to do with the cut, with something slicing not into space but into the continuity of the canvas plane as it conventionally stretches, rigid, across our plane of vision. The lengths of felt Morris began to work with were submitted to a process of systematic cuts, slicing into their pliant fabric surfaces, disturbing their planar geometries even while the cuts themselves were geometrically regular slashes. The irregularity came when, the work lifted onto the plane of the wall, where it hung from hooks or suspended from wires, gravity pulled open large gaps in the fabric surfaces, gaps that could be called neither figure nor ground, gaps that somehow operated below form.

Gravity had also been what Hans Namuth had had to respect when planning for his film on Pollock. It was not enough merely to stand back from the process as he had done in his still photographs, the upright body of the photographer tracking and recording the gestures made by the upright body of the painter. He wanted the connection of the flung paint to the horizontal field to be absolutely manifest, something that could only occur if one could see the painter's body and the result of the gesture conflated onto the same visual plane. The answer to his dilemma, he said, came to
stretched, day is formed on internal armatures, plaster is applied to lath—a fight against gravity. So that ultimately what is conceived of as form is what can maintain itself as vertically intact, and thus a seemingly autonomous gestalt. It's not, Morris reasoned, that what he was calling anti-form—"random piling, loose stacking, hanging"—had no form, no edge, no boundaries. It was that lacking rigid form it could not remain upright, resistant to gravity.

When Greenberg had produced his own analysis of Pollock's dripped line, his own scenario for why the artist had turned to this manner of drawing, he had explained it as a way of avoiding the cut. "Pollock wanted to get a different edge," he said. "A brush stroke can have a cutting edge that goes into deep space when you don't want it to." For Greenberg the dripped line avoided the edge that would cut into space, the edge that would differentiate figure from ground, by isolating forms. By not cutting it would allow the canvas to read as an unbroken continuity, a singular, undivided plane. And that plane would then, according to the logic of opticality, yield an analogue of the immediacy, the unbrokenness of the visual field and of the viewer's own perception of that field in an all-at-onceness of visual reflexiveness. By avoiding the production of forms (cut out within the field) the work would produce form itself as the law of the formulation of form.

But for Morris everything in Pollock's line had indeed to do with the cut, with something slicing not into space but into the continuity of the canvas plane as it conventionally stretches, rigid, across our plane of vision. The lengths of felt Morris began to work with were submitted to a process of systematic cuts, slicing into their pliant fabric surfaces, disturbing their planar geometries even while the cuts themselves were geometrically regular slashes. The irregularity came when, the work lifted onto the plane of the wall, where it hung from hooks or suspended from wires, gravity pulled open large gaps in the fabric surfaces, gaps that could be called neither figure nor ground, gaps that somehow operated below form. Gravity had also been what Hans Namuth had had to respect when planning for his film on Pollock. It was not enough merely to stand back from the process as he had done in his still photographs, the upright body of the photographer tracking and recording the gestures made by the upright body of the painter. He wanted the connection of the flung paint to the horizontal field to be absolutely manifest, something that could only occur if one could see the painter's body and the result of the gesture conflated onto the same visual plane. The answer to his dilemma, he said, came to Jackson Pollock, One (Number 31, 1950), 1950.

Gravity was what had combined with the liquidity of the paint to read through the finished work . . . (p. 293)
Something slicing not into space but into the continuity of the canvas plane as it conventionally stretches, rigid, across our plane of vision . . . (p. 294)
Gaps that could be called neither figure nor ground, gaps that somehow operated below form . . . (p. 294)
Suspended on the other side of two sheets of glass were two painters painting . . . (p. 301)
Picasso had come suddenly, frighteningly, nearer . . . (p. 301)
Drawing images across an imaginary "fronto-parallel," vertical expanse . . . (p. 302)
him in a dream. He decided to use a sheet of glass as Pollock's "canvas" and, lying below it, to take up the same absolute horizontal as Pollock's own pictorial surface, to shoot upward through the glass and onto the spectacle of Pollock painting.

But Namuth's dream had a name, of course. It was called Picasso.

As a European and a cosmopolite, Namuth knew what was happening in Paris and most particularly knew of the comings and goings of the most famous artist of his century. A filmmaker himself, he had to know of Paul Haesaerts's film Visite à Picasso, which was shot in 1949 and released in the spring of 1950. This, the first film to which Picasso had consented, is also determined to give its viewers direct access to the maestro at work. To this end it captures its image through the pane of glass on which Picasso obligingly paints. Of course in this case the transparent working plane is vertical and never more so than in the final shot when we see Picasso framed by a long French window inside the farmhouse at Vallauris as he fills its surface with a whimsical figure displayed for those of us looking on from without. He ends the film with his famous signature which he signs on another pane of glass in anticipation of the actual date when the film will be finished: "Picasso 50."

Namuth opens his film with Pollock signing his name. Although the shooting occurred in October 1950, Pollock is directed toward the date of its release. So he signs "Pollock 51." Perhaps the idea came to him in a dream. But the encounter with Picasso across the medium of this film had, I would venture, more the character of a nightmare. For now, suspended on the other side of two sheets of glass were two painters painting, each one able in this strangely resemblant activity to be substituted for the other, to be slipped the one on top of the next. From being a distant rival, an external mediator, Picasso had come suddenly, frighteningly, nearer. This was now the arrival of the internal mediator, so close that he strangely doubles the subject. And the result, as Girard sees Dostoevski predicting, is a kind of poisoning of the will, a paralysis.

There are not one but two stories of Lee Krasner's hearing Pollock hurl a book of Picasso's work on the floor and rage about the fact that "that guy missed nothing." The first is located in New York, before they moved to Springs; the second in 1954 while Pollock was recovering from a broken ankle. Whatever the date of the incident, the two versions bracket the period of the drip pictures during which time Pollock had discovered
something Picasso had not. But the revelation of the film was its creation of a condition in which the two of them can be seen to have discovered the “same” thing: the possibility of making an image by means of an airborne gesture through which one could see the body of the artist himself. Pollock would probably not have seen illustrations from Haesaerts’s Picasso film (although Namuth probably would have). But he would most certainly have seen the next best thing: Picasso’s *Space Drawings* photographed by Gjon Mili and not only widely published in 1950 but exhibited as well at the Museum of Modern Art. Looking through the extraordinarily authoritative pencil line of light that curves through open space to sketch the outline of the bull or the gesture of a figure running, one can see him there as well, bare-chested, in his all-too-familiar boxer undershorts, impishly grinning: Picasso—sucking all the air out of the space, taking up all the room. “Goddamn it, that guy has done everything. There’s nothing left.”

The scene Pollock carried out with Namuth just before he upended the table and dumped twelve dinners in the laps of his guests rings with this sense of outraged revelation at the sight of his own diminished stature and that of the bearer of bad tidings. “I’m not a phony,” he kept saying to Namuth. “You’re a phony.” His sense of his own fraudulence never left him after that. He would say that there were three great painters in the twentieth century, Matisse, Picasso, and himself. And tears would course down his face. After the film Pollock had painted just one more full-scale exhibition, the black and white pictures, and then had barely been able to put together the five works he needed for the next show. The following year’s exhibition had had to be a retrospective since, as everyone now knew, Pollock could no longer paint. A year and a half later he was dead.

After the film Pollock’s work had simply lost its relation to gravity, and so even though he continued, in the black and white pictures, to make paintings by pouring liquid paint, these were now conceived as huge, representational drawings, and even his tools—basting syringes filled with black enamel instead of his old battery of sticks and encrusted brushes—resembled the draftsman’s equipment of pen and ink, the better to form the image. And the image, resistant to gravity, floated above the canvas onto the plane of the vertical, just like the “pictures” that are formed by the myriad tesserae of Roman mosaics which, in constellating a figure from the zodiac on the floor, resurrect out of the ground itself an image of the sky above. Pollock’s “volatilized” line cannot but act now like Picasso’s light-pencil, drawing images across an imaginary “fronto-parallel,” vertical expanse.
Even when Pollock tried to return to the abstractness of the drip technique, his way was now blocked by a rivalry that meant he was condemned to the plane, if not the letter, of the image. *Blue Poles* is the massive testimony to this confusion. Though parts of it look like the earlier dripped skeins, the work is also awash with great runs and rivulets of paint that stream like so much cream-colored rain “downward” along its surface, giving evidence to that part of the picture’s execution done while the canvas was hanging vertical, on the wall. The “blue poles” that were added near the picture’s completion only ratify both this commitment to the vertical and this resurrection of the schematized “body,” as Tom Benton’s diagrammatic vectors from his analyses of the world of Renaissance art now recompose themselves from their former dispersal in *Number 1, 1948* to constellate the traditional decorum of the processional frieze. “From Tom to Jack. From Jack to Harry.”

The relation of Pollock’s authentic drip pictures to gravity in the field of the real is different of course from the way the pictorial image—from within its virtual field—can come to visualize our own upright bodies and their relation to gravitational force. For gestalt psychology all vertical fields will—like a kind of mirror—already be structured according to the body’s own organization, with a top and a bottom, a left and a right. The field, they say, is anisotropic. This internal differentiation lying *in potentia* in the very background within which the gestalt will appear already attests, then, to the features the brain will project onto the perceptual field in order to organize the gestalt: its simplicity, its hierarchy, its balanced dynamism. The gestalt will thus be, in a sense, a projective image of our bodies’ own resistance to, their triumph over, the gravitational field.

Through the distance Pollock’s drip pictures had traveled from this mirrored projection of the organization of the viewer’s body, they had become anathema to the Gestalt psychologists, the very thing they loved to hate. What the works projected instead, as Rudolf Arnheim saw it, was the directionless monotony of “a kind of molecular milling everywhere.” They were nothing but an attempt to make a picture out of mere background trivia, the very thing the human perceptual apparatus does not even see. The retina at the back of the eyeball may duly register background forms but, the gestaltists insisted, such forms have no psychological existence whatsoever. Since they are not included in the chosen gestalt (or figure), they are not perceived at all.

But if they are not perceived, Anton Ehrenzweig replied, it is because they are repressed. Speaking in 1948 in the service of what he chose to call
depth vision, he thought of this domain of unconscious, primal sight as "gestalt-free, chaotic, undifferentiated, vague, superimposed." He likened its lack of differentiation to the perceptual field of the infant whose own Ego fills the entire world, running together inside and outside, making of all men, for example, "papa." He likened its superimposition and ambiguity to that of the dream or the fantasy. He likened the way it tended to project sexual imagery uniformly onto all parts of the visual field—as in the phallic profusion of both dreams and "primitive" sculptures—to the libidinal thrust of the unconscious and its drive toward pleasure, only to meet the stern resistance of the superego of form. He thought of the formless, gestalt-free products of depth vision on the analogy of the dream thoughts that, upon waking, are submitted to the censorship of the organizing principle Freud had called secondary revision, a force that creates the good form of a narrative where in the dream itself there has only been the Dionysian chaos of unrepressed affect. He thought of depth vision also as manifesting itself in the artist's unconsciously wrought technique—its linear meanders, the nervously erratic quality of its brush work—only to be made over, in its own kind of secondary revision, into the "form-control" of the "surface gestalt."

It was clear to Ehrenzweig, however, that the implacable force of the superego's will-to-form would mean that whatever had surfaced from "unconscious depth perception" would itself be denied through a need to impose order. In thinking about this phenomenon in the historical development of art, he saw two ways in which this imposition had been asserted. One had been to submit the ambiguous field to what he called "the constancy of thing-perception," or more simply put, to realism, and to accede thereby to the authority of science. Another form of denial had been, he said, "style perception," which takes the new way of seeing and rationalizes it by turning it into form. "All subsequent generations," he said, "will perceive the style instead of the gestalt-free symbol play, once the style formation is achieved." And he added, "Once secondary style elaboration has covered the wild form-play of art, never again can the human eye see its full effect, neither this generation, nor future generations."

Thus it was not only that Ehrenzweig could have predicted that what had initially been registered as Pollock's aggressivity—the work's "violence, exasperation and stridency"; its "Gothic-ness, paranoia and resentment"—would be made over into the "secondary style elaboration" of opticality; he could also have foreseen that even the psychologist's experience of all that wild "molecular milling" would be made over into the structural
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Jackson Pollock, Blue Poles, 1952.

Runs and rivulets of paint that stream like so much cream-colored rain... (p. 303)
Diagram for Convergence, from Matthew Rohm, *Visual Dynamics in Jackson Pollock*. Made over into the "secondary style elaboration" of opticality . . . (p. 304)
composure of gestalts. Thus a disciple of Arnheim, in service both to his
gestaltist master and to the doctrine of opticality, now reads into Pollock's
dripped pictures the very anisotropism of the vertical field's way of "mir­
roring the living organism." This latter-day interpretation thus sees Pollock
as building the gestalt into the drip paintings both at the level of the
"microstructure"—the drips themselves—and at that of "primary struc­
tural configurations"—the overarching forms Pollock is imagined as infus­
ing into his dripped fields in order to achieve Pragnanz. The configurations
that are listed by this strange intellectual hybrid, the optico-gestaltist, are
the basic motifs of pole, butterfly, arabesque, and labyrinth. Although there
is an attempt to read Autumn Rhythm itself in terms of the structural
configuration of repeated poles, this breaks down into an admission that
here the poles are strangely "exploded," "diffuse," and only vestigial.
Instead it is to Blue Poles that the writer turns for unalloyed evidence of
Pollock's looking to enforce the gestalt, to Blue Poles and to the other drip
picture Pollock tried to make once his hold on his own mark had been
broken: the 1952 painting Convergence. But these disastrous works are
not happy examples to project back onto the drip paintings. Pollock had
produced Blue Poles in an agony of desperation to retrieve something he
had lost, but according to Clem, he knew it "wasn't a success. He knew
it was over, that he'd lost his inspiration."

But Pollock's public "success" was made for him by a systematic misread­
ing of his painting, by—to say the word—a repression of the evidentiary
weight of its most basic and irrefutable mark. Pollock's "success" depended
on a reading that overlooked the horizontal testimony of his line, a testi­
mony that resonates indexically from within any other possible apprehen­sion of it. For even as the dripped labyrinth permits an experience in terms
of "interfused lights and darks," even as it evokes the luminous cloudiness
that would seem to underwrite a name like Lavender Mist, the indexical
mark can be read across and through that very ascensional axis, doing its
work to lower and desublimate the perceptual field, doing the "job" that,
two decades earlier, Bataille had given to the informe: to undo form by
knocking it off its sublimatory pedestal, to bring it down in the world, to
make it déclassé. Given the sublimatory force of the modernist reading,
however, Pollock's thrown lattice was no longer seen as violent; it was
now hallucinatory, a mirage. According to the principles of opticality
projected within it, it had become a visual plenum in which nothing "cut"
into space. Further, due to there being no inside or outside to the contours
formed by this line, the continuum it seemed to project was now felt to
resonate with that peculiar soothing and compensatory sense of indisso­
luble connection of the individual to eternity, “a feeling,” Freud had said in another context, “as of something limitless, unbounded, something ‘oceanic.’”

It was only in 1951, when Pollock had “lost his inspiration” and his relation to the miragelike, optical character of the oceanic could be thought to have failed, that he would once more be seen as “violent.” With the black and white pictures, he took it all back, Clem had said, “as if in violent repentance.”

If the oceanic feeling can be regarded as an analogue for modernist opticality, it is itself, however, a strangely slippery concept. In Freud’s view, the oceanic feeling is at one and the same time the basis of religious sentiments and the ground of a limitless narcissism, the infant’s experience of a total lack of difference between itself and its world. It is this very lack of difference that, Freud also asserts, allows for primitive man to see nature as an extension of himself and thus, in phallicizing the fire, to enter into aggressive, sexualized play with it. Civilization will deeroticize the fire, returning it to the reality of its naturalized, desymbolized difference from the human sphere. Civilization will strip the oceanic of this aggressive, undifferentiated lining, will repress it.

Against the “success” that a modernist reading had in store for them, however, the drip pictures can still be seen to retain the cutting edge of an indexical mark, one that slices the works loose from their purported verticality, by dropping them, visually, to the floor. It is a mark, as well, that cuts itself away from any intentional matrix to achieve its own isolation as “clue,” the simultaneity of the visual present already thus fissured by time. And it is a mark that cuts loose the work it marks from any analogies with the gestalt of the body whole. Instead, in dispersing and disseminating the corporeal itself, it sets up a thematics of the sexual and the rivalrous that will return against the very “oceanic” condition of modernist aesthetics the aggressivity and formlessness of its repressed.
All this happens and is all recorded on the surface of the body without organs: even the copulations of the agents, even the divisions of God, even the genealogies marking it off into squares like a grid, and their permutations. The surface of this uncreated body swarms with them, as a lion's mane swarms with fleas.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus

He's sitting there just as I remember him, next to the neat little marble-topped table, with its prim lamp in gilt bronze and its assortment of tiny ashtrays, one of them containing a heap of crumpled butts, the only disarray in this fanatically ordered space. I am across the room from him, perched on a long yellow sofa above which there hangs a dour Hans Hoffman, a brown surface of palette scrapings from which two squares of pure color have been allowed to escape with relative impunity, a larger one of vermilion, a smaller, acid one of green. As usual he is lecturing me, about art, the art world, people we know in common, artists I’ve never met. As always I am held by the arrogance of his mouth—fleshy, toothy, aggressive—and its pronouncements, which though voiced in the studied hesitancy of his Southern drawl are, as always, implacably final.

We have been talking about critics, one of whom has just presented her views in an attention-grabbing article about art he detests.

"Spare me smart Jewish girls with their typewriters," he laments.

"Ha, ha, ha," I reply, sparkling with obedient complicity.

I think of that now as I wonder how many of us there were in those days, in the mid-1960s, smart Jewish girls with typewriters, complicit, obedient, no matter what long streak of defiance we might have been harboring.

And I remember that as what Mark thought to mention first, picturing Eva Hesse to me from their days at Yale, starting off his description by telling me of her desire for instruction, of the way she faithfully jotted down the titles of books he referred to and the things he said about them. Though he had, perhaps, been drawn to her, what he immediately recalled was the air she often had of an obedient schoolgirl, the one that had made her a star in Josef Albers’s class, far and away his favorite pupil.
Lucy Lippard is struck by this also and she remembers Eva's dutifulness in the role of wife, such that when they first knew her none of them really understood how seriously she took her art. Over and over her book on Hesse corroborates Mark's memory as she tells of Hesse's lists: the column of writers—Gide, Nabokov, Joyce, Dostoevski, Austen, Ortega—followed by the note confessing, "I have become a reader—the thing I've wanted most, but was in too great a conflict with myself to do"; the lists of word definitions, which became a habit all through the decade, aided by the huge thesaurus she finally bought as she searched for titles with the right degree of literacy for her work. Lippard tells how a list of possible titles with a somewhat poetic cast—"marking time, nice question, liar's dice, make sense, last not least, fairly fast, three of a kind, pride's profile"—was jettisoned to be replaced by quite another kind of roster, one filled with more "intellectual" words, "like those drawn from the thesaurus category 'circular motion' referring to the forms she was using: Circumnavigation/ circumflexion/circuit/evolution/circumscribe/circuitous, devious/rotation, gyration, convolution/vortex, maelstrom, vertiginosness, vertigo/rotate, box the compass, gyrate/enfoldment, evolution, inversion/circle—corden, cincture, cestuis, baldric/(complex circularity) convolution, involution, undulation, sinuosity/coil—labyrinth/wind, twine, swirl, entwine, undulate/meander, indent, contort/involved—labyrinthine/in and out/eccentric."

And here's another list: "Vertiginous Detour/ box the compass/baldric/labyrinth/Ennead/Several/ingeminate/biaxial/dyadic/dithyletic/bigeminate/ingemination-repetition."

Standing back now and looking at those swarms of words zanily filling the page, producing the strange ululalia of a burble of off-rhymes—"wind, twine, swirl, entwine"—so dear to Artaud, we cannot help but think of Hesse's favorite term for her art, her highest critical encomium, the word "absurd." When she speaks of her "most important early statement"—the 1966 Hang Up—she justifies its centrality to her work by specifying, "It was the first time where my idea of absurdity or extreme feeling came through." And absurdity, Hesse was fond of pointing out, is one of the things repetition is effortlessly capable of producing. "My idea," she had said in 1970, speaking about the aesthetics of composition, of form, "is to counteract everything I've ever learned or been taught about those things, to find something else. . . . If something is absurd, it's much more exaggerated, more absurd if it's repeated."

Indeed, Hesse had made herself into the specialist of repetition-as-absurdity, which is to say repetition recast from the minimalist projection of
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"And—oh! more absurdity!—it is very, very finely done . . ." (p. 313)
“Convolution, involution, undulation, sinuosity/coil—labyrinth/wind, twine, twirl, entwine, undulate . . .” (p. 310)
arithmetic, impersonal law—the grids, the serial expansions, the systemic progressions—into the disruptive subjectivity of an infantilized world of babble, of gurgle, of a viscerally conceived world of play. The exquisitely wrought drawings of hosts of concentric circles each graded from white through middle gray to dark, each placed on its own square within the compartment of a delicately inscribed grid, always managed to escape the realm of conceptual art’s logic and to lodge themselves within the bodily and the obsessional, all the more so when, from the center of each targetlike circle, there would project the delicate filament of a length of clear plastic string—so many hairs marking the aureoles of so many nipples.

But Hesse would not have placed the lists copied down from the thesaurus in this domain of the absurd. Those lists came from a world of intellect it would not have occurred to her to challenge. This, we could say, was what marked her obedience.

The other thing that marked it was her adherence to painting, to its problematic, which is that of the vertical field: bounded, image-filled, wall-oriented, the vehicle of “fronto-parallel” address. Although she had decided to contest its rules, and that in the most subversive way possible, she had not simply walked out of its discursive space and slammed the door. She had not, that is, as so many of her critics suppose, become a sculptor.

Indeed, when she returned from her year in Kettwig, Germany, during which she had lifted the imagery of her painting into the realm of bas-relief, she thought she was headed into the three dimensions of the world of sculpture. So she made Laocoön, undoubtedly naming it in a rededication of her art to a new medium. But the work is a disaster—literal, awkward, depictive: a big jungle gym with a lot of snakes. No, the “absurd” work of the same moment is Hang Up, an enormous, empty picture frame, the site of painting declared and defied at the same time: “It sits on the wall,” Hesse said, “with a very thin, strong, but easily bent rod that comes out of it . . . and what is it coming out of? It is coming out of this frame, something and yet nothing and—oh! more absurdity!—it is very, very finely done. The colors on the frame were carefully gradated from light to dark.”

**Hang Up** not only marks Hesse’s convocation of her art to the realm of the absurd, it declares her refusal or her inability to leave the territory of painting. She bristled at Albers’s limitations, his rules, his dicta, at the monomania of an art “based on one idea.” She wondered, “How much more can be done with this notion?” She said, “There isn’t a rule . . .
don't want to keep any rules. I want to sometimes change the rules.” But the same docility that led her to buy the thesaurus kept her fixated on the pictorial.

Do we need examples to drive this point home? She invented a new support, rubber and fiberglass over cheesecloth, and from this she made *Contingent* (1969), hanging, veil-like, perpendicular to the wall, or as *Expanded Expansion* (1969), propped directly against it. The huge scale of the latter, or of the propped fiberglass poles of *Accretion* (1968) or of the fiberglass boxes of the wall relief *Sans II* (1968), orients itself to the heroic scale of abstract expressionism, to its claims to mural status, to its bluster and scope. Just as the medium itself in its translucence and relative weightlessness proclaims its proclivity toward the “optical.” “What Eva was able to do,” Mel Bochner would later say, “was to work directly with light; she was able to make light a medium of sculpture.” But surely it was the other way round? By infusing the rigid materials normally associated with sculpture with this effulgent luminosity, and connecting this radiance to the wall, she had reassociated them with painting and with the problematic of two dimensions, not three.

And then there is the glittering fiberglass bramble of *Right After* (1969), with its later *Untitled* version in a skein of latex-covered rope, and the last work she completed, the seven hanging, fiberglass-covered poles (1970). The relationship of all of these to Pollock is wholly explicit. Hesse herself spoke of this to *Time* magazine. Referring to the rope piece, she said, “Chaos can be structured as non-chaos. That we know from Jackson Pollock.”

This knowledge is projected within the vertical domain of painting; it is suspended, it is airborne, it is optically displayed. And yet the knowledge itself is understood as transgressive. Hesse’s complicity is here at work in the most corrosive of ways, burrowing from within the pictorial paradigm to attack its very foundations . . . like the L Schema tunneling away from within the inner core of the Klein Group. For Hesse had come to have a very particular take on the domain of painting, the shorthand name for which—although she would never have called it this—is *bachelor machine*.

It surely was fortuitous that in May 1965, almost at the end of Hesse’s year in Germany, she and her husband, Tom Doyle, would travel to Bern for a show that included objects by Marcel Duchamp. All during the spring Hesse’s work had been changing, projecting outward from the picture plane into a kind of low relief built up of papier-mâché, plaster, rope, and...
sometimes metal. In their strange connection of the organic—she described one as comprised of breast and penis forms—to the mechanical—"Thus they look like machines, however they are not functional and are nonsense," she wrote—the works move toward the domain that Duchamp had mapped in the *Large Glass*. One, called *Eighter from Decatur*, has the look of an electric fan, its wire blades projecting from a panel inscribed with the arcs of what reads as a partial spiral: the form and motion of the *Rotoreliefs* reconceived in the contemporary language of early '60s "funk." Another, called *Top Spot*, is strangely predictive of what was to come once Hesse had returned to New York. On a white masonite board that announces the ground or plane of the relief there swarms a strange assemblage of tubes and porcelain connective sockets, forming a series of aberrant machines hooked, daisy-chain-like, one to the other, all of them clinging precariously to the blankness of the flat surface. What Hesse would abandon once she got back to New York was the funky quality of the forms, the obviousness of their dada disorder. What she would keep was the system: the hook-up of the bachelor machines and their underlying meaning as "desiring production"—which is to say, *pure process*—distributed over the transparent glass surface, a territory—that of painting—to which they cling but which they can never articulate. For painting has now become what Deleuze and Guattari were soon to define as "the body without organs."

It is as anachronistic to read Hesse through the *Anti-Oedipus*, published two years after her death, as it is to read Pollock through the *Oxidation Paintings* or Morris's felt pieces. Because although Hesse may have felt a connection between her work and something of what Duchamp meant to the 1960s art world, she cannot have known or intended anything like the theorization Deleuze and Guattari would develop on the basis of the bachelor apparatus. Yet the model projected by that theory maps directly onto her work, describing it with a strange exactitude, capturing the schizoid of its autoeroticism coupled with its fanatical order, projecting the cunning of its enormous ambition trapped inside the autistic limits of a fixed convention.

Deleuze and Guattari begin with the body understood as a series of part-objects—breast, mouth, stomach, intestines, anus—each of which is a machine. But unlike the world of mechanical production, where a machine is one thing and its product is another, removed from it, discrete, separate, the desiring production of the part-objects is a process in which there is no distinction between production and product. For the flows produced by one machine, the breast, say, provide the continuum into which the
next machine, the mouth, can cut, thereby setting up the precondition of the mechanical, which is to articulate matter. As each machine cuts into the continuity of the flows produced by its neighbor only to produce a new flow for the next machine to cut into in its turn, all are organized in relation to three principles. The first is repetition, for as Deleuze and Guattari say, “although the desiring machines make us into an organism, at the very heart of this production the body suffers in being organized in no way at all”; the second is continuity, for which the operative term is process; the third is desire, or the connective “labor” that drives libido toward producing/product.

Since the model of the Anti-Oedipus derives from Melanie Klein, it is not surprising that it should include that other aspect of the paranoiac-schizoid scenario of early development: the infant’s body experienced as invaded by the part-objects that persecute and attack it and that the infant tries to pulverize and attack back. If the part-objects are rebaptized desiring machines, the threatened, paranoid body is now labeled the body without organs. This body, static, nonproductive, is also the body without an image, the gestaltless body, or the body without form. And it is over this body, locked in a relation of attraction/repulsion, that the desiring machines are distributed, although they can never articulate this body, for which the term Deleuze and Guattari invent is “detterritorialized.” Nonproductive, formless, the body without organs is instead the site of inscription or recording, it is the place through which signs circulate in an effort to decode the flows of desire, at the same time setting up the illusion that they themselves are the agents of production. “When the productive connections pass from the machines to the body without organs (as from labor to capital),” they write, “it would seem that they then come under another law that expresses a distribution in relation to the nonproductive element as a ‘natural or divine presupposition’ (the disjunctions of capital).”

When Hesse came back to New York she discovered process, which is to say she came to understand the logic of flows of material—latex, fiberglass, rubber tubing—that would produce a continuum, a flux, into which the moldlike machines of her work could cut. And each mold, each cast element—sphere, tube, sheet, open box—by being repetitively set in series, would in its turn produce a new flow, a new continuum that would offer itself to the next act of cutting. Thus she no longer needed to fashion objects that looked like machines in the manner of the German reliefs. She had constructed the system of desiring production instead. Far more abstract and morphologically noncommittal, it was far more disturbing and, in its Beckett-like ingeniousness, far more “absurd.”
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"Chaos can be structured as non-chaos. That we know from Jackson Pollock..." (p. 314)
A kind of amorphousness, the threat that a body “that suffers in being organized in no way at all” lies behind the surface . . . (p. 320)
And these machines are, as I have said, always deployed in relation to the planarity and verticality of that territorial convention called painting. It is thus that when Hesse “reads” Pollock’s work in *Right After* and the “rope piece,” she locates her reading in the sublimated, fronto-parallel plane of modernist opticality, the skeins dancing weightless before our eyes. But though she locates this plane by means of her own insistence on uprightness, and of the wall as a kind of backdrop or support for the image, she also defies the *meaning* of the plane, its existence as a precondition of *form*. The bounded, flattened plane of painting, after all, functions like the mirror described by Lacan, reflecting back to the subject the flattering picture of Pragnanz, of the organization and order of the good gestalt always there in potentia and, by means of its reflection, always assuring the viewing subject a concomitant logical and visual control. Hesse replaces this plane. In its stead, the implicit support of her images is the body without organs. Which is to say the plane has been redefined as the “uncreated body” over which the process-machines of her work swarm “as a lion’s mane swarms with fleas.”

In 1966 Lucy Lippard instigated *Eccentric Abstraction*, an exhibition tailored to, among others’, Hesse’s new work, which she saw as a collection of bulbous, organlike, erotic-abstract forms, an aggressive challenge to minimalist sculpture. But Hesse surprised her by submitting *Metronomic Irregularity*, a bramble of cotton-covered wire projected from the relief plane of three square panels. That it was not a provocation for sculpture but rather organized itself in relation to painting was leapt on at once by Hilton Kramer, who denounced its vocabulary as “second-hand,” since, he pointed out, it “simply adapts the imagery of Jackson Pollock’s drip painting to a three-dimensional medium.”

Kramer went on to attack this move as yet another example of what Donald Judd had announced in 1965 as the strategy of “specific objects,” that attempt to void the convention of painting, with its forms tucked away safely behind the plate glass of the surface and cosseted within illusionistic space, by producing these forms *literally*, in real space, thereby rendering painting itself obsolete. “What was formerly part of the metaphorical and expressive fabric of painting,” Kramer lamented, “is now offered as a literal *thing*. A kind of technological positivism triumphs, but at the expense, I think, of a genuine imaginative probity. . . . Here, as elsewhere, the prose of literal minds effectively displaces the old poetry.”

Lippard’s response to this was to point to the way imagery used up in one medium can take on new power in another and so while she admitted the
pictorial character of Hesse’s work, she insisted that in the end it should be evaluated as sculpture, going so far as to liken it to the problematic, begun by Gonzalez and elaborated by David Smith, of “drawing in space.” Thus by beginning with her admiration for Eva’s subversiveness—a feeling that resonates on nearly every page of her superb book on Hesse—she ends by bringing her into the safe harbor of a three-dimensionality that poses no problems for painting, that ignores the notion of “want[ing] to sometimes change the rules.”

The rules of painting are clear, as transparent as a diagram is to the logic of its relations, as bounded as a frame is by the law of exclusions that render it a terrain of self-contained autonomy. We know this logic. We have seen its picture.

By projecting the pictorial plane into real space, Hesse confronted it with a kind of amorphousness, the threat that a body “that suffers in being organized in no way at all” lies behind the surface of that mirror seemingly “pregnant” with its own gestalt. For the logic of relations she substituted the flux of process, and for the transcendental signified that projects meaning onto these relations she presented the dispersed, disorganized subject who is merely the sum of the apparatus. By being redefined as the body without organs, the convention called painting is projected as a paranoid space incapable of further articulation, a surface that merely multiplies more and more attempts to decode desire, while all the time the machines keep laboring in their parallel circuit, producing and intersecting flows.

The circuit of the L Schema maps onto the grid of the Klein Group, undermining it from within. Just so does Hesse’s process elaborate the space of painting with its modernist laws, only to sap it from its very center: yet one more avatar of the optical unconscious.


**Greenberg on Pollock**


A useful close reading of Greenberg's evolving interpretation of Pollock's work is François-Marc Gagnon, “The Work and Its Grip,” *Jackson Pollock: Questions* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1979), pp. 15–42. Gagnon convincingly demonstrates that Greenberg continued to analyze Pollock's work in terms of the relatively traditional value of organic structure (variety within unity) and to be hostile to the idea of all-over composition, calling it “monotonous,” until relatively late (1948). He also argues that when in 1948 Greenberg related Pollock's composition to synthetic cubism, this was a slip and he really meant analytic cubism, as he stated in his criticism from 1955 on. Yve-Alain Bois contests this latter point in his “The Limit of Almost,” in *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pp. 16–17.