Art Criticism, Scholarly Interpretation, and Curatorial Intent: A Reassessment of the 1998 Jackson Pollock Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art

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Art Criticism, Scholarly Interpretation, and Curatorial Intent: A Reassessment of the 1998 Jackson Pollock Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Abstract


By Andrea Alvarez, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

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In 1998, the Museum of Modern Art held a retrospective exhibition of artworks by Jackson Pollock. Curators Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel worked in an art historical context that had been significantly shaped by the early critical writings by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. The curators’ stated intention for the exhibition installation was to provide “a fresh chance for new generations of artists to come to terms with a legendary figure” and to enable “the broader public to reassess a quintessentially American artist in light of three decades of new scholarship,” without “hewing to any particular critical dogma.” Despite this curatorial intention, this thesis examines the ways in which the retrospective inscribed Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories, while disregarding subsequent scholarship that did not explicitly inscribe or align with the mid-century criticism in its account of Jackson Pollock.
Introduction

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) was one of the leading Abstract Expressionist artists working during the 1940s and 1950s in New York City. Born in Cody, Wyoming, he was subject to popular characterizations which cast him as a “westerner” and a “cowboy,” despite the fact that he lived in the small town of Cody for less than a year.\(^1\) From an early age, Pollock was determined to become an artist, therefore he moved to New York City in September of 1930 to pursue this goal. By the mid-1940s, Pollock had developed a unique painting style that would become a subject of art historical study and debate for the remainder of the twentieth century.

Critics referred to Pollock’s art, and the art of his fellow Abstract Expressionists, as they argued for their theories about modern American painting. Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg’s theories were the most influential accounts of Pollock, as their attention to Pollock’s works shaped subsequent scholarly accounts for decades.

By 1998, when the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) held a retrospective exhibition of artworks by Pollock, curators Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel worked in an art historical scholarly context that had been significantly shaped by the two critics’ writings. This thesis examines the ways in which the 1998 Pollock retrospective—represented by the exhibition installation, text panels, labels, virtual exhibition, and its associated publications—inscribed

\(^1\) At the time, artists, critics, and dealers in New York were concerned with establishing American art as dominant over European art. As a result, artists who were championed by American critics and dealers were often subject to characterizations like these, which asserted their “Americanness” as well as their uniqueness and importance to the art world in general.
Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories, while largely disregarding subsequent scholarship in its account of Jackson Pollock.

Chapter one summarizes the Greenbergian and Rosenbergian accounts of modern painting as they relate to Jackson Pollock’s art, as well as a number of later scholarly interpretations of Pollock’s art which were published throughout the late twentieth century, in order to represent a variety of interpretations that were available to the curators of the 1998 retrospective. Some of the arguments presented rely heavily on aspects of the Greenbergian account of Pollock’s art for the purposes of new interpretations; others make connections between Abstract Expressionism and the European artistic movement known as Surrealism; and others result from a late twentieth century development known as “revisionist” art history, which includes social art history – that relates social and cultural phenomena to developments in art – and phenomenology – a philosophical exploration of the relation of the body to the objects it perceives.

Chapter two identifies the ways in which the exhibition installation and an accompanying website (a virtual exhibition still accessible on the MoMA website) inscribe the influence of both Greenberg and Rosenberg while eliding much of the intervening scholarship described in the previous chapter. The curators’ stated intention for the exhibition installation was to provide “a fresh chance for new generations of artists to come to terms with a legendary figure,” to enable “the broader public to reassess a quintessentially American artist in light of three decades of new scholarship and speculation on his work and often tempestuous life,” without “hewing to any

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2 “Jackson Pollock,” http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/226. Accessed 1 November 2012. It is possible that while the curators prepared for the exhibition by studying recent decades of new scholarship, they did not intend to implicitly or explicitly represent those decades of new scholarship in their exhibition.
particular critical dogma.”

Despite this curatorial intention, the curators inscribed the mid-century critical interpretations of Pollock (described in chapter two) in their exhibition. The installation and accompanying virtual exhibition do not represent any of the scholarly interpretations posited since the 1950s, save for a brief mention on the website. Chapter two considers the installation itself, the object labels and wall panels, as well as the virtual exhibition to analyze the degree to which these various interpretations are represented.

Chapter three examines the two essays in the exhibition catalogue, each written by one of the curators, and asserts that while neither Varnedoe nor Karmel explicitly aligns himself with either Greenberg or Rosenberg, each implicitly privileges Greenberg – though not in the same way and perhaps not to the same degree. Varnedoe’s essay emphasized the degree to which Greenberg impacted Pollock’s biography, while Karmel’s approach employed a theoretical framework similar to Greenberg’s formal analysis. The exhibition catalogue does present a more scholarly interpretation than that which was seen in the exhibition (as is typical of exhibition catalogues), however, like the exhibit, it privileges both Greenberg and Rosenberg.

Recent approaches to Pollock’s art were presented at a symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition and later compiled into a publication. Chapter four focuses on three of the essays, describing way in which they diverge from critical interpretations offered by Greenberg and Rosenberg. The selected essays, written by Karmel, T.J. Clark, and Rosalind Krauss, are based on analysis of the paintings rather than their historiography or reception. The chapter also considers the particular ways in which the symposium dovetailed with the aforementioned curatorial intentions.

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4 The scope of the curatorial intention, however, suggests the need for an unbiased representation of the scholarship.
Although the curators sought to reassess Pollock “in light of three decades of new scholarship,” the exhibition and catalogue presented a historical version of Jackson Pollock’s art, as it was seen and understood in the 1950s and 1960s. The presentation of a historical account of Pollock as presented to a 1990s audience is not problematic in theory; however, the curatorial intention might be taken to suggest that they would include, though remain neutral in their presentation of, new scholarship. This thesis demonstrates that the curators’ reassessment largely disregarded scholarly interpretations that did not explicitly inscribe or align with the criticism of Greenberg and Rosenberg.
Chapter One

In this chapter, the Greenbergian and Rosenbergian accounts of Pollock’s art will be summarized, followed by a number of later scholarly interpretations of the art which were published throughout the late twentieth century. In subsequent chapters, the MoMA retrospective exhibition, accompanying catalogue, and published proceedings of a symposium held at MoMA during the exhibition will be analyzed to determine ways in which Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s criticism and subsequent scholarly interpretations are represented and/or elided.

The critical exchange about modern American painting initiated by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg continues to be represented, implicitly and explicitly, in art historical scholarship. The differences between Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories can be characterized as divergent concerns with form (Greenberg) and with content (Rosenberg). Greenberg saw form as consubstantial with content, whereas Rosenberg had a more traditional conception of subject matter, as a narrative or other content depicted within a work of art (which in the case of Pollock’s art was the artist’s expression). By the late 1990s, the accounts of Pollock’s art based


6 In the literature on Abstract Expressionism, Rosenberg has been reduced to this limited reading based on content, however his theory is much richer in that it relies on an existential philosophy relating to the imperative to act, as first articulated by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in which the Abstract Expressionist paintings were not simply iconographical traces of the act on canvas, but were indices of the ethical decisions made by the artists in the production of their work. See “Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology and Installation Art,” by Robert Hobbs in Installations: Mattress Factory, 1990-1999 (Pittsburgh: Mattress Factory, 2001).
on form or on content were still significant factors in the interpretation and presentation of
Pollock’s art.

Greenberg based his critical acclaim for Pollock on his opinion about modernist painting
and Abstract Expressionism, which he wrote about in a number of essays starting with “Avant-
Garde and Kitsch” in 1939, in which he introduced his formalist view of art. He characterized
content (subject matter) as dissolved wholly into form, so that the content (subject) of a work of
art is form itself.\(^7\) He elaborated upon this formalist approach to art in “Towards a New Laocoön,”
published in \textit{Partisan Review} in 1940, characterizing the avant-garde as a movement that, in
emphasizing form, rather than subject matter, would firmly differentiate the arts (poetry, painting,
literature, etc.) from one another.\(^8\) This differentiation, in Greenberg’s mind, involved identifying
exactly which characteristics were essential to each of the arts, and to eliminate extraneous
characteristics.\(^9\) In terms of avant-garde painting, Greenberg considered only purely plastic
abstract qualities to be essential, thus he praised artists who worked in abstract modes.

Greenberg first reviewed Pollock’s work after visiting a 1943 one-man show at Art of
This Century Gallery, where he saw what he called some of the “strongest abstract paintings” he

Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944}, ed. John O’Brian

\(^8\) The title of this essay references \textit{Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and
Poetry}, written by the eighteenth-century writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which argues that
poetry and painting must be executed separately, using techniques and devices unique to each,
rather than using poetry to inform painting or vice versa. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “Laocoön:
An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry,” in \textit{The Laocoön, and Other Prose Writings of
Lessing}, translated by Ellen Frothingham. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887.)

and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944}, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago:

had seen by an American artist. In subsequent reviews of Pollock’s annual shows at Art of This Century, which were held through 1947, Greenberg continued to praise the artist and his art, and associated Pollock with traditions from European modernism, including Cubism. This emphasis on form and European modernism characterize the criticism he wrote throughout the mid-twentieth century. Scholars positing their own accounts of Pollock’s art would later adopt this emphasis on European modernist traditions and formal analysis.

Whereas Greenberg focused on form, Rosenberg offered the term “action painting” to characterize Abstract Expressionist paintings as records of the artists’ movements upon the canvas, which he dubbed “an arena in which to act” in his 1952 essay “The American Action Painters.” Rosenberg’s “action painting” theory calls attention to the dynamism of the brushstrokes and lines in the paintings. In his mind, each painting results from a dramatic encounter between artist and canvas that leads to the expression of an artist’s individuality. Rosenberg’s essay did not name Pollock specifically; however Rosenberg certainly was aware of the artist’s active and dynamic painting technique. Films and photographs of Pollock at work,

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12 Ibid., 190.

13 Rosenberg’s essay was more about Willem de Kooning’s paintings of women, made in the early 1950s, however his emphasis on action has been associated with Pollock’s painting technique.
taken by Hans Namuth in 1950, were exhibited and published in 1951.\textsuperscript{14} These film stills and photographs demonstrated that Pollock had a radically new approach to painting in which he laid a canvas on the floor and flung paint onto it from all sides as he walked around it (fig. 1). The photographs, film stills, and films enriched and illustrated Rosenberg’s assertions (though they were published separately) by providing a visual reference to the actions described in “The American Action Painters.”

Although both critics were looking at the same group of painters and at the same body of work, their theories were not compatible with one another. Rosenberg’s theory values subjectivity while rejecting the emphasis upon objective formal traits. Although he does not explicitly name Greenberg, Rosenberg takes issue with the Greenbergian emphasis on form in the following passage from “The American Action Painters”:

\begin{quote}
The New American Painting is not “pure art,” since the extrusion of the object was not for the sake of the aesthetic. The apples weren’t brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and color. They had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting. In this gesturing with materials the aesthetic, too, has been subordinated. Form, color, composition, drawing, are auxiliaries, any one of which – or practically all, as has been attempted, logically, with unpainted canvases – can be dispensed with. What matters always is the revelation contained in the act.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

While emphasizing the act of painting, Rosenberg also considered an artist’s biography and subjectivity to be relevant to the analysis of artworks. These distinct emphases and considerations rendered Rosenberg’s theory and Greenberg’s theory irreconcilable with one another and thus have been regarded as opposing views by later scholars.


\textsuperscript{15} Rosenberg, 191.
By the 1950s, authors writing about Pollock, Abstract Expressionism, or American painting in general consistently cited the Greenbergian account and/or the Rosenbergian account of modern art, though not necessarily to endorse one above the other.¹⁶ Rosenberg’s work has largely been cited as part of the historiography of the artist, without drawing sharp disagreement or criticism. Conversely, Greenberg’s assertions regarding modernist painting and formal qualities drew harsh criticism and various challenges. For example, Varnedoe has noted that Greenberg’s writings favor certain artists over others or misrepresent artists for the purposes of his arguments.¹⁷ Thus, much of the scholarship published during the 1960s through the late 1990s responds to Greenberg’s writings, though in various degrees and for divergent purposes.

Some scholars explicitly adopted Greenbergian tenets while modifying his formalist approach. For example, in 1965 when he was a student at Harvard University, art historian and critic Michael Fried curated the exhibition *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*. At this time, Fried was looking at art in the Greenbergian tradition.¹⁸ In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Fried included a theoretical account of Pollock’s “drip” paintings of 1947-1950 while describing the historical context for the art of Noland, Olitski, and

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¹⁶ Not all authors were engaged in this debate. For example, critic Leo Steinberg took a less polemical approach to Pollock in a review of his work at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1955. See Steinberg, “Month in Review: Fifteen Years of Jackson Pollock,” *Arts* 30:3 (December 1955): 43-44, 46, in which he considers the social role of art after Pollock. The authors considered for the purposes of this thesis include critics, academics, and museum curators, many whom have held more than one of these titles throughout the course of their careers.

¹⁷ Varnedoe, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Work,” 45.

¹⁸ In later years Fried would diverge from such an approach.
Stella.\(^{19}\) Fried’s account incorporates Greenbergian ideas of line and form, but does not extend Greenberg’s concept of pictorial space, which refers to the fragmented space depicted in Cubist art. Fried referred to Pollock’s painting *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949* (fig. 2) while articulating his argument about Pollock’s use of line as independent from shapes and figures. Instead of giving contour and form, Pollock’s line, according to Fried, created a “homogenous visual fabric which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives the eye nowhere to rest once and for all.”\(^{20}\) Drawing a distinction between the pictorial space of previous modernist painting – Cubism, for example – and Pollock’s “drip” paintings, he called the new space “optical” for its inability to contain recognizable shapes and volumes.

Like Fried, William Rubin invoked a Greenbergian approach to twentieth-century painting. In 1967, soon to become curator at MoMA, Rubin wrote a four-part essay published in four sequential issues of *Artforum* magazine, titled “Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition.”\(^{21}\) According to Rubin, the myths about Pollock’s art that made it accessible to members of a general public who otherwise would not understand it also misrepresented the artist’s work.\(^{22}\) For Rubin, and Greenberg before him, Pollock’s art “was, like all other serious


Here and throughout this thesis, the word “drip” appears in quotations when it is used to categorize the poured paintings made from 1947-1950 because although the term has been adopted to name the group of paintings, it is not representative of the complexity of the technique Pollock used in their creation.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 224.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., February 1967: 14.
painting of our time, firmly rooted in European traditions.”23 Among the myths Rubin refutes are Pollock as western cowboy (initiated by stories that he grew up in the West), Pollock as violent (which arose from second-hand accounts of his alcoholism and hot tempered nature), and Pollock as faultless painter (which arose from the conception of artist as genius). Rubin even calls the characterization of Pollock as “action painter” a myth, noting that while the paintings were produced with spontaneity and movement, the artist did not engage in action for the sake of action. The action purposefully rejected tradition, habit, and expectation in order to arrive at new modes of painting.24 Rubin grants that Rosenberg’s term “action painting” is a convenient sobriquet for gestural painting, but “when Action Painting is used to define and characterize Pollock’s way of work … it becomes a falsification.”25

In late 1979, Rubin, still a Greenbergian formalist, published “Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism (Parts I and II),” in which he argued against scholarly trends that credited Pollock’s experience of undergoing Jungian analysis with the majority of his artistic innovations.26 The article cites five sources from the 1970s that contributed to, what Rubin called, the “Jungian Decade” of Pollock criticism.27 These

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 15-16.

25 Ibid., 16.


approaches implicitly contradicted the Greenbergian approach to Pollock’s art by suggesting there was underlying meaning and decipherable content in even Pollock’s most abstract paintings, and they aligned more closely with Rosenberg’s theory concerning the role of the unconscious in the creation of a painting. Rubin, instead, insisted on the Greenbergian formalist approach to Pollock’s paintings which valued the plastic qualities of the art rather than the biographical aspects of the artist’s life as means to interpretation. He attributed the 1970s emphasis on iconography and Jungian psychology to the zeitgeist, writing that many young authors of that period were in graduate schools that emphasized literary, intellectual approaches with a focus on social, political, and psychological issues, rather than formal concerns related to the studio and the art itself.28 As the title of Rubin’s essay suggests, he was interested in presenting the limits of such criticism, therefore he demonstrated the unspecific nature of Jungian iconographical readings of Pollock’s art, since uncertainty is inevitable when performing iconographical analysis of any sort. He also indicated that the “symptoms” of schizophrenia found in Pollock’s art by C.L. Wysuph in his analysis of some of Pollock’s drawings, were actually “basic pictorial devices” in the tradition of Miró, Masson, and Picasso.29 Insofar as Jungian approaches were based on identification and interpretation of symbols, the approaches cannot offer interpretations of the poured paintings.30 Rubin, maintaining the dominance of formalism over Jungian analysis,

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28 Rubin, “Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism (Part I),” 105-6.

29 Ibid., 107-8. Pollock himself may have felt that his art represented a deeper level of the psyche. According to Rubin’s article, Pollock frequently took sketches and drawings to his psychoanalyst who used them as diagnostic tools for analyzing Pollock’s psyche.

30 Ibid., 109.
writes that the greatest flaw of the Jungian approach was “the almost total inattention … to the plastic aspects of Pollock’s formation.”

In the late 1970s, art historians expanded accounts of Abstract Expressionism, moving beyond characterizations of the movement as a rejection of subject matter to emphasize formal qualities (as championed by Greenberg) or the dynamic expression of an artist’s interior emotional or psychological state (as suggested by Rosenberg). Some scholars explored the manner in which European Surrealism and Jungian psychoanalysis influenced the development of Abstract Expressionism and Jackson Pollock’s art in particular; some explored epistemological influences, while others described visual elements that aligned with Surrealism and psychoanalysis. For example, in the catalogue accompanying the 1978 exhibition, “Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years,” hosted first by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University and then by the Whitney Museum of American Art, curators Robert C. Hobbs and Gail Levin took complementary approaches to the art in their respective catalogue entries. Levin associated the displayed artworks with Surrealism by characterizing the works as focused, in part, on the unconscious. In a separate catalogue essay, Hobbs constructed a theory that accounted for the uniqueness of Abstract Expressionism in its ability to establish and underscore connections between peripheral viewing and the unconscious using iconographical

31 Ibid., 112.
32 It was in response to this scholarly impulse that Rubin wrote his essay on Jungian interpretations of Pollock’s art.
allusions that established a perceptual basis for Abstract Expressionism reliant upon form. Hobbs’ essay demonstrates the fact that the so-called abstract and nonobjective forms in these works related to specific meanings or archetypes in the human unconscious.

Another exhibition developed within the context of the Surrealist-Abstract Expressionist trend, “American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist,” was presented at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. (NGA). In the introduction to the accompanying catalogue, curator E. A. Carmean, Jr., related the presence of discernible subjects in Abstract Expressionist art to Surrealism. According to Carmean, although the Abstract Expressionist artists did not share stylistic or thematic concerns, they were connected by one factor: “their repeated affirmation that while their works by and large reject representational matters, they nevertheless have subjects.”

Throughout the catalogue, the analysis of each artist’s works assigned varying degrees of importance to the influence of Surrealism; in relation to Pollock’s work, Carmean focused on the presence of discernible subject matter rather than the philosophical or historical influence of Surrealism. He focused on Pollock’s 1950 “drip” paintings, which appear to preclude discussion


36 The terms “archetype” and “unconscious” are associated with the psychoanalytic theory of Carl Jung. For an introduction to Jung’s theories, see chapter one of Frieda Fordham, An Introduction to Jung’s Psychology (Baltimore: Pelican/Penguin Books, 1970).


39 Ibid., 15.
of subject matter due to their highly abstracted style.\textsuperscript{40} Carmean argues that the subject of the classic “drip” paintings is painting technique itself, which closely aligns to the Greenbergian conception of form and content as consubstantial.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, Carmean was drawing attention to the affinity of Pollock’s “drip” paintings to Surrealist “automatism,”\textsuperscript{42} which refers to action “dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”\textsuperscript{43} Carmean did not argue that subject matter was all that was to be gleaned from Abstract Expressionist painting, but rather he sought to open a new avenue of interpretation beyond those of Greenberg and Rosenberg. Without citing either of the critics, Carmean asserted that the texts which came before the NGA exhibition “have, for the greater part, avoided confronting questions of subject matter and have instead divided into formal [Greenbergian] or sociological/biographical [Rosenbergian] discussions.”\textsuperscript{44}

Beginning in the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s, various new theoretical frameworks emerged in the art historical discipline, which constituted the tradition of “revisionist art history,” including phenomenological, Marxist, and postmodern approaches to art, among others. The scholarship described below represents some of these new approaches to Jackson Pollock, characterized by new modes of thinking about art and culture. Many of these do not expand upon previous scholarship (including Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories) for the

\textsuperscript{40} Carmean, “Jackson Pollock: Classic Paintings of 1950,” in \textit{The Subjects of the Artist}, 127-153.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 127.

\textsuperscript{42} Carmean, “Introduction,” in \textit{The Subjects of the Artist}, 33.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 16.
formulation of their arguments but consider social, cultural, or philosophical factors. For example, Stephen Polcari’s 1991 book *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, focuses on the intellectual interests and concerns of the artists, such as the philosophical and psychological texts they were reading, including texts on Jungian psychology. Polcari drew attention away from the paintings themselves, in favor of sketching the “cultural climate out of which Abstract Expressionism arose.” Insofar as Greenberg and Rosenberg had emphasized the paintings themselves, Polcari did not take their accounts into consideration as he sought to determine the intention behind, and meaning of, Abstract Expressionist paintings as suggested by the artists’ literary and philosophical pursuits. In “Jackson Pollock: Ancient Energies,” Polcari argued that throughout Pollock’s career, the themes the artist chose were related to the cultural interests of the time, including vitalism, spiritual energy, and the human soul. With respect to the “drip” paintings in particular, Polcari argues that they represent “the archaic, psychic and natural energies of fertility and creation – the invisible transhuman powers.” Polcari continues, “Although it has been said that a conflict between figurative and nonfigurative art troubled him throughout his life, Pollock’s real struggle was to find original form for the underlying and generative forces and struggles of primal spirit, nature, and psyche, and thus of human nature.”


46 Ibid., xix.


48 Ibid., 240.

49 Ibid., 251.
In his book published two years later, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, art historian Michael Leja reconstructs the social and cultural context that led to the advent of Abstract Expressionist art.  

Leja asserts that the “Modern Man discourse” most contributed to the artists’ creation of Abstract Expressionist art. This discourse drew from psychology and anthropology to describe the twentieth-century individual as one whose history is inextricably tied to both “primitive barbarism” and advanced modernity, thus the individual is fragmented. Therefore, within this discourse, Abstract Expressionist artists were seen as situated between primitive, instinctual forces and the presumably more civilized and reserved conception of twentieth-century bourgeois individuals. Attempting to reconcile formalist and psychoanalytical interpretations of Abstract Expressionist art, Leja negotiates between the formalist and expressionist approaches when he allows for the possibility that Pollock was incorporating the unconscious (drawing on Jungian psychology) without abandoning the influence of his modernist artistic sources.

T.J. Clark assessed the movement from the perspective of a social art historian, in his 1994 essay “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism.” He describes the movement in relationship to the socio-economic class structures of the mid-twentieth century, writing that the movement represented an aspiration for upward social mobility. Clark’s approach does not explicitly deny

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51 He also looked at the Modern Man discourse in terms of popular fiction and film, arguing that popular culture was the basis for art in the 1940s. Further exploration of this is outside of the scope of this thesis.

52 Ibid., 67.
the early accounts by Greenberg and Rosenberg, but rather provides another manner through
which the movement can be explained, appreciated, and studied, by examining the societal
phenomena that contributed to its creation.

Using a phenomenological approach to Pollock’s art in 1999, Rosalind Krauss considered
the relationship of the body to the horizontal canvas used in Pollock’s “drip” paintings.\(^5^4\) Taking
its title from a 1948 article written by Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss’ 1999 essay, “The
Crisis of the Easel Picture,” articulated an “anti-form” or informe interpretation of Pollock’s art,
which she had previously proposed, with Yve-Alain Bois, for a 1997 exhibition organized at the
Centre Pompidou.\(^5^5\) According to Krauss, the innovations in Pollock’s paintings were the
abandonment of traditional form and vertical orientation, as horizontality is rendered the medium
of Pollock’s “drip” paintings.\(^5^6\)

By the late 1990s, art historians, critics, and curators had collectively produced a rich
body of new scholarship on Jackson Pollock. While some of their work was still based upon the
accounts by Greenberg and Rosenberg, many scholars were not compelled to inscribe the critics’
accounts of modern art. This is not to say that new scholarship explicitly refuted Greenberg’s and

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\(^5^3\) T. J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” in \textit{Reading Abstract
535-560.


Books, 1997). While it is curious that the title is the only way in which her interpretation shares
an affinity with Greenberg’s criticism, the adoption of others’ titles to implicitly comment upon
or argue against a past scholars’ work is not unusual in art history. For example, Greenberg’s
“Towards a Newer Laocoön” drew its title from Lessing’s “Laocoön,” while Robert Hobbs and
Barbara Cavaliere wrote “Against a Newer Laocoön” which was meant as a refutation of
Greenberg’s “Laocoön” essay.

\(^5^6\) Krauss, 160-161.
Rosenberg’s work, but rather they diverged from mid-century criticism to propose a wider array of theoretically informed interpretations. It was within this context that Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel worked in preparation for the 1998 Jackson Pollock exhibition at MoMA.
Chapter Two

The retrospective exhibition *Jackson Pollock* opened on November 1, 1998, and was composed of 106 paintings, forty-nine works on paper, and three sculptures displayed in seventeen galleries on the third floor of the Museum of Modern Art.\(^{57}\) According to Pepe Karmel, one of the curators of the exhibition, the curatorial intention was “to illustrate” the development of Pollock’s oeuvre “as fully and accurately and perspicuously as we could without hewing to any particular critical dogma.”\(^{58}\) However, Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories, more than subsequent approaches to art history, informed the exhibition in ways that will be described in this chapter. Evidence of the influence of intervening scholarship, as described in the previous chapter, was not seen in the show and was only briefly mentioned in the virtual exhibition.\(^{59}\) Analysis of the installation of the works of art in the galleries, the accompanying object labels and wall panels, and the virtual exhibition created in conjunction with the show will demonstrate the manner in which the scholarly interpretations described in the previous chapter were (or were not) represented in the exhibition.

At the top of the escalator leading to the galleries in which the exhibition was installed, just outside of the exhibition space itself, hung a life-size photograph of the artist donning a

\(^{57}\) Rushing, 16-21.

\(^{58}\) Karmel, conversation with author, New York, NY, 24 May 2012.

\(^{59}\) While the curators set out to represent the development of Pollock’s work, they did not set out to represent the range of scholarly interpretations of his work. The scope of the curatorial intention, however, suggests the need for an unbiased representation of the scholarship.
denim jacket, blue jeans, and work boots, with a cigarette dangling from his lips, as he leaned against a long horizontal frieze-like “drip” painting, *Summertime: Number 9A* (1948) (fig. 3).\(^{60}\) This photograph was originally published alongside a *Life* magazine article that initiated widespread media coverage of Pollock as an American icon and rebellious cowboy.\(^{61}\) The critic Jackson Rushing questioned the curators’ proclaimed object-focused, neutral critical stance because of the biographical implications of the Pollock photograph.\(^{62}\) It drew attention to the artist’s biography, which was reiterated in the chronological arrangement of paintings in seventeen exhibition galleries which divided the artist’s works into stylistic developments. The introductory panel to the exhibition presented a brief biography of the artist, including correlations between the stylistic aspects of his work and events in his life. While not explicitly referencing the mid-century critic, this emphasis on the artist’s life can be interpreted as a Rosenbergian approach to the work, insofar as, according to Rosenberg, an artist’s life and subjective experiences directly contributed to the stylistic manner of an artist’s work.

Inside the galleries, identifying labels were presented alongside the artworks, providing the title, date, materials, and the collection or museum to which the works belonged. A didactic wall panel was located in nearly every gallery throughout the exhibit, providing biographical information and identifying formal aspects shared among the artworks in the gallery. The focus

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\(^{60}\) Thomas Griesel, Installation Photograph, IN1819.62. (New York: Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.) All of the information regarding the installation of the show and the wall texts is derived from photographs located in the online database, Artstor. The need to base such significant information on secondary sources like photographs rather than primary sources from MoMA is a result of the museums’ policy of restricting access to exhibition files to scholars until fifteen years after a show has closed. Thus detailed exhibition information will not be available until 2014.


\(^{62}\) Rushing, 16-21.
on formal elements emphasized the way Pollock’s style and technique changed over the course of his career, as well as drawing attention to motifs that persisted or reemerged at different points of Pollock’s career.\(^{63}\) For example, in one of the first galleries of the exhibition, a wall panel read:

> In the early 1930s, Pollock studied at the Art Students League with the realist mural painter Thomas Hart Benton. Pollock struggled as a student and lived a troubled life – lonely, impoverished, and increasingly prey to both emotional problems and alcoholism. Some surviving images of the late 1930s, shown in this room, seem to reflect different aspects of his personality. The haunting vulnerability of *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* (his only painted likeness of himself) contrasts with the snarl of a bull-like monster (*Head*), and other figures are charged with the connotations of myth (*Untitled [Naked Man]*) and darkly troubled sexual fantasy (*Woman*). Pollock admired the Mexican mural painters José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and the influence of their heroically muscled, often anguished rhetoric is evident in the violent cruelty of works such as *Untitled [Naked Man with Knife]*.\(^{64}\)

This panel suggests that the events of Pollock’s life were closely related to, if not the source of, the production and appearance of his works. This suggestion resonates with Rosenberg’s attention to artist’s biographies in his articulation of the “action painting” theory.

> Since their production and publication, Hans Namuth’s photographs, films, and film stills of Pollock have shaped accounts of the artist’s life and work. Due to the fame of the photographs, the rarity of seeing an artist at work, and the unconventional nature of Pollock’s paintings that begs for explanation about their production, Namuth’s photographs and film stills have been reproduced in countless essays, books, and articles on the artist. As a result, anyone familiar with

\(^{63}\) Karmel, conversation with author, New York, NY, 24 May 2012.

\(^{64}\) Griesel, Installation Photograph, IN1819.2. (New York: Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.)
Pollock’s work has likely seen these images, and the curators of the retrospective felt compelled to include them.\textsuperscript{65}

Namuth’s photographs were displayed in a gallery that was separate from those in which the artworks hung, along the interior walls of a life-size replica of the barn studio, in which Pollock painted from 1946 until his death.\textsuperscript{66} According to Karmel, it was important to the curators to keep photographs separate from the paintings.\textsuperscript{67} In his words, “everything that related to Pollock’s technique and his life was adjacent to the exhibition but not in the exhibition. And that was quite deliberate.”\textsuperscript{68} The decision to include the photographs and replicated barn were, however, “a matter of considerable debate.”\textsuperscript{69} For example, in her review published in \textit{The New York Times}, Sarah Boxer noted that Namuth’s films and photographs were recognized as having made Pollock famous and that in the past some had even blamed the photographs and films for the artist’s return to alcoholism and ultimately his death.\textsuperscript{70} She also wrote that in the present

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Karmel, conversation with author, New York, NY, 24 May 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid. The exhibition designers went to great lengths to acquire the same type of wood that was used in the barn’s original construction, and to get exact measurements of the structure, in order to create the most accurate replica possible.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Karmel, conversation with author, New York, NY, 24 May 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid. Italics represent his vocal emphasis.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\end{itemize}

Pollock died when the automobile he was driving crashed into a tree on August 11, 1956. He was intoxicated and speeding down a winding road in Springs, New York. Second-hand reports state that Pollock, who had quit drinking for a number of years, resumed his habit the evening that Namuth stopped filming him, perhaps as a result of a dispute between the two men.
exhibition, the photographs were utilized to strip away the myth they had been blamed for creating. According to Boxer, the curators treated “the photographs not as criticism but as hard evidence to settle some unsolved mysteries: Was Pollock controlled or wild? What is the anatomy of a splat? Are there figures hiding in the webs of paint? How did Pollock get rhythm?”

Boxer’s accolades seemed to overlook incongruent aspects of the replicated barn studio and photographic installation. The exhibition designers went to great lengths to acquire the same type of wood that was used in construction of the original barn’s construction, and to get exact measurements of the structure, in order to create the most accurate replica possible. At the same time, per curators’ instruction, they left the floor blank rather than recreating the paint-splattered floor. The sparseness of the room created a space that appeared to be for meditation rather than action, for introspection rather than production. The barn replica was met with mixed reviews. Accordingly, Jeanne Siegel wrote of its “Disneyish feel” in an Art Journal review of the exhibition and its catalogue, while Jackson Rushing saw the barn as a didactic tool that “served to demystify the drip paintings.”

In his catalogue essay (discussed in chapter 3), Karmel focused on the Namuth photographs and film stills; therefore their inclusion corresponded to the catalogue entry. Unless

Some have speculated that the act of being objectified by the camera led him back to the bottle, and ultimately his drunk driving accident.

71 Boxer, n.p. This essay reviews the exhibition installation at MoMA, however its content appears to be about Karmel’s essay in the exhibition catalogue instead of the installation. Boxer does not make a distinction between the two in her review.


74 Rushing, 16-21.
one had read the catalogue, however, it might appear – at least in this portion of the exhibition – that the curators were ascribing to the Rosenbergian account of Pollock’s art: Pollock as an action painter who did not think carefully about his compositions but rather worked instinctually based on his emotions and impulses.

The emphasis on biographical arrangement, the photograph of Pollock as rebellious artist, and the barn replica with photographs of the artist in action could have connoted a Rosenbergian interpretation of Pollock’s art. At the same time, the didactic labels appear to privilege the objects and analyze them with a Greenbergian emphasis on form, as they directed close looking. For example, one wall panel directs the visitor’s eye to loose figuration and thinly applied colors in The Key (1946) and contrasts those elements with troweled and heavy pigments in the Sounds in the Grass series, exhibited in the same room.75 By drawing viewers’ attention to the formal aspects of these early works, in which Pollock experiments with varying thinness or thickness of paint, the curators associated Pollock with the modernist emphasis on the exploration of the treatment of paint on canvas and, by extension, the eventual elimination of any content external to painting itself.

While the interpretations of Pollock and his art as elucidated by Greenberg and Rosenberg are evident in various aspects of the exhibition, the subsequent scholarship was not presented in the installation in the MoMA galleries. The virtual exhibition, created by the curators to accompany the exhibition, which was accessible on computers placed just outside the exit of the exhibition at the museum as well as online, does name alternative interpretations,

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75 Griesel, Installation Photograph, IN1819.18. (New York: Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.)
though it does not describe them. The virtual exhibition showcased some of the artworks installed in the MoMA exhibition and contextualized those works into Pollock’s biography. The website is composed of short paragraphs and reproductions of paintings, as well as Namuth photographs, and short film clips.

Consisting of a main thread of pages, with mini “side-tours” accessible via hyperlinks, this virtual exhibition combines biography and formal analysis in a manner germane to the museum installation. The biography of the artist is gradually recounted throughout the online exhibition, telling aspects of his life story in sections illustrated either by paintings made during the time in question or filmic evidence depicting the artist painting.

On the first text page of the website, the curators mention a continuing critical debate about Pollock’s art, although they do not name any authors until the very last page of text, accessed via a hyperlink called “debates about Pollock’s work,” which states:

Greenberg and his followers saw the ‘drip’ pictures as dematerialized veils of color. … Rosenberg and Allan Kaprow, interpreted the marks on canvas as traces of a private dance or ritual. In the 1970s and 1980s, critics analyzed Pollock’s early work for evidence of Jungian archetypes. … Other recent writers have linked him to Surrealist ideas.

Such general description of different interpretive frameworks does little to educate site visitors about varying critical approaches, thereby creating more questions than they answer.

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76 This online interactive exhibition remains active and accessible on the web.


78 Karmel, conversation with author, New York, NY, 24 May 2012. Karmel described the hyperlinks as “side-tours” from the primary thread of the website.

While the exhibit installation and accompanying website clearly emphasized Pollock’s paintings and biography, this focus was sometimes diluted due to the inscription of Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories. Certainly, this exhibition presented a deep and broad collection of Pollock paintings. Those viewers – including art world indoctrinates and members of the general audience – who were inclined to celebrate Pollock surely benefitted from the vast array of works presented and the intended curatorial reticence regarding evaluative statements.

The exhibition illustrated aspects of the early critical approaches to Pollock’s art through the curators’ emphasis on form, attention to line, and claims about the deliberate and calculated aspect of Pollock’s paintings which recalled certain Greenbergian tenets about modernist art in general. The inclusion of the photographs, the reliance on biography, and the frequent mention of Pollock’s alcoholism and other psychological torments brought Rosenberg’s “action painting” theory to mind. Neither of these theories, however, emerged as more important than the other, or as having had a stronger influence in the production of the exhibition. What is notable, though, is the lack of discussion of the many critical approaches offered in the three decades preceding the exhibition, since one of the curatorial goals was to exhibit Pollock in light of that body of scholarship. Mentioned only briefly in the virtual exhibition and wholly overlooked in the galleries, the Jungian approach to interpreting Pollock’s art from the 1970s, the interest in Surrealist-Abstract Expressionist connections, the socio-historical revisions of Abstract Expressionism, the emphasis on Pollock’s philosophical or literary pursuits, and other interpretations published in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, were not represented in the MoMA retrospective. While the curators were not committed to any one particular account of Pollock’s art, they upheld the nearly half-century old beliefs about Pollock as first elucidated by Greenberg

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and Rosenberg. The same might be the case in the catalogue, therefore the following chapter considers how the catalogue of the 1998 MoMA exhibition treated the Jackson Pollock scholarship and to what extent and in what ways the criticism written by Greenberg and Rosenberg as well as subsequent scholarship is inscribed or elided in the catalogue essays written by curators Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel.
Chapter Three

The 1998 exhibition catalogue, *Jackson Pollock*, contains two essays, one written by each curator, Kirk Varnedoe (then Chief Curator) and Pepe Karmel (then Adjunct Assistant Curator of the Department of Painting and Sculpture). This chapter examines the two essays and asserts that while neither curator explicitly aligned himself with Greenberg or Rosenberg, each implicitly privileges the former – though not in the same way and perhaps not to the same degree. As will be shown in the analysis that follows, the catalogue presents a much more complete historiography than is represented in exhibition, but it is not comprehensive, nor does it indicate that there are alternative interpretations to Pollock’s art other than those offered by Greenberg or Rosenberg. The emphasis on Greenberg and Rosenberg contradicts the stated curatorial intention to remain neutral regarding the varying critical dogmas about Pollock, as well as the curators’ goal to reassess Pollock in light of new scholarship.

Varnedoe’s essay, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Work,” is largely biographical – describing the artist’s personal and professional relationships, particularly his close association with Greenberg. It also presents a condensed historiography that recounts Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories and includes a passing mention of a theory by Rosalind Krauss, thereby arguing that there is not one definitive interpretation of Pollock but several.

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While recounting Pollock’s biography, Varnedoe discusses the mythologizing of Pollock’s life and its effects on the creation and interpretation of his art. Varnedoe notes that Pollock’s life took on a mythic quality after he began making “drip” paintings in the late 1940s and his reputation as a rebel was generated by popular articles like “Pollock Paints a Picture” and “Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” in which Pollock was cast as an uncultivated American artist whose psychological and emotional struggles that were expressed in his violent temperament contributed to the development of his original painting technique. The artist’s tragic and sudden death in 1956 contributed to his “canonization as an exemplary martyr in the great romantic tradition,” and was represented in publications by what Varnedoe called “hagiographers.” At the same time, Varnedoe argues that it is not wise to separate Pollock from the myth. “Myths after all,” Varnedoe continues, “are their own realities, and in Pollock’s case they have been especially fertile.”

While describing Pollock’s artistic development, Varnedoe considers the artistic influences, predecessors, and mentors who played a role in Pollock’s early career. Among these, Varnedoe describes a “filial” bond with Pollock’s teacher, the artist Thomas Hart Benton, and the artist’s interest in the techniques employed by Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. He also describes the artist’s relationship with his brothers who supported him financially during his first decade in New York City, and the artist’s relationship

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84 Varnedoe, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Work,” 18.

85 Ibid., 18.
with the artist Lee Krasner. Krasner and Pollock met in 1940 when they were preparing for a group exhibition organized by the artist John Graham, and they married in 1945.

Krasner was well connected and fully immersed in the New York art world. She had a special interest in European modernism that she shared with some of the friends and colleagues to whom she introduced Pollock, including Peggy Guggenheim, his first major dealer and patron, and Greenberg, who celebrated Pollock’s work throughout the 1940s. Varnedoe’s essay states that the relationship between Pollock and Greenberg “shaped both Pollock’s career and the subsequent perception of it.”

By allowing Greenberg to affect him personally and professionally, Pollock participated in the creation of his myth as a quintessential modernist American artist who rejected traditional easel painting and its conventions and turned instead towards mural painting and the modernist suppression of established conventions.

Despite the curator’s emphasis on Greenberg in terms of Pollock’s history and reliance on Greenberg for his characterizations of Pollock’s art, Varnedoe invokes a number of previously articulated arguments against Greenberg. For example, he accuses Greenberg of applying too narrow a theory to too narrow a view of Pollock’s art, and he describes much of the critic’s writings as littered with “forceful but unexplained pronouncements” and “salted with ennobling associative references to past greatness.” Since the 1970s, art historians and critics whose works represent various theoretical approaches had argued similarly, thereby challenging

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86 Ibid., 42.

87 It has often been noted that the artist’s statement in Pollock’s 1947 Guggenheim Foundation application appears to have been dictated by Greenberg. In it, Pollock echoes Greenberg’s recently published opinion about the end of easel painting and the new modern tendency towards the mural. Whether Pollock’s application was dictated by Greenberg or not is impossible to determine, however a synchrony between Greenberg’s critical thought and Pollock’s creative activity is evident.

88 Varnedoe, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Work,” 45.
Greenberg’s influence and the power of his rhetoric. Varnedoe’s brief mention of these arguments indicates that he did not subscribe to a strictly Greenbergian interpretation of Pollock’s art, although he does not adequately represent the scholarship from whence these arguments came.

Varnedoe’s essay does, however, briefly compare Rosenberg and Greenberg’s theories, characterizing their difference as a divergent concern with content versus form. Varnedoe incorporates Rosenberg’s theory into his essay in a strictly historiographic manner; he did not aim to challenge or criticize Rosenberg’s “action painting” theory in the same way that he reviewed Greenberg’s theory. Varnedoe treats Greenberg as pivotal to both Pollock’s biography and historiography, whereas Rosenberg’s theory is considered only historiographically, and then only briefly.

Although Varnedoe does not articulate any critical opinions save for those past arguments he presented against Greenberg, he does argue against Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois’ approach to the classic “drip” paintings, which draws from George Battaile’s term informe, or formless. Krauss and Bois argue that the “drip” paintings should be seen horizontally; therefore they state that they are best seen when exhibited on the ground. Varnedoe disagrees, arguing that although the “drip” paintings were executed on the ground, orienting them vertically onto the wall was also an essential part of the process, both during their execution and after. Varnedoe writes, “Pollock made them down in order to put them up, and the procedure has a complexity in its wholeness that resists triage into more and less essential components.”

89 Ibid., 44.

Varnedoe’s lengthy account of Pollock’s life and work concludes with the assertion that the reason for the enduring impact of the paintings can only be gleaned firsthand, which accounts for the curators’ intent to refrain from privileging any critical dogmas in the exhibition. Instead, one of his curatorial goals was to draw attention to the artworks for close study, and to break through decades of verbiage. Perhaps because of this aim Varnedoe did not present more recent scholarship (save for Krauss’ argument, which he dismissed), however Varnedoe’s emphasis on biography and historiography necessitates a more complete account of the scholarship than that which he presented. The reader was presented with an incomplete and outdated understanding of Pollock’s art under the guise of a detailed biographical and historiographical essay.

Karmel’s essay, “Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth,” on the other hand, presents a new argument about the artist’s process. In undertaking such a project, Karmel addresses a challenge that Varnedoe posed in his essay: “between the abstracted fascination with the act that descends from Rosenberg, and the abstracted attention to form that descends from Greenberg, yawns an immense gap begging to be filled with better empirical knowledge about the basic mechanics of the ‘drip method.’” Karmel attempted to fill that gap in his essay for the *Jackson Pollock* catalogue.

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91 Varnedoe, “Comet: Jackson Pollock’s Life and Work,” 55. That this is the only argument Varnedoe takes the time to refute suggests that the curators had particularly strong opinions on the formlessness argument. This is confirmed in their symposium presentations, and in the conversations surrounding those presentations that led to public exchanges between Krauss and Karmel regarding their respective theories.

92 Ibid., 76-77.

93 Ibid., 49.

Karmel’s argument about Pollock’s process is centered on analysis of the Namuth photographs, films, and film stills. Using the filmic evidence, Karmel implicitly refutes Rosenberg’s “action painting” theory, which has long been associated with Namuth’s work. In addition, Karmel’s emphasis on formal analysis and his approach to form and content as consubstantial is largely Greenbergian.

The essay begins with a history of the photographs, films, and stills, including criticism regarding how they were first received and reproduced. Karmel’s primary criticism is that various authors who have used the photographs, films, and stills for their arguments about the paintings have relied more on the filmic evidence for the paintings than on the paintings themselves. For example, he asserts that Rosenberg’s essay “The American Action Painters” relies on “Namuth’s photographs as interpreted by Goodnough” in the Artnews essay, “Pollock Paints a Picture,” rather than any specific paintings. Karmel describes the photographs as “swathed in rhetoric” and therefore restricted to certain interpretations about Pollock’s process, which as he demonstrated, may have been based on the filmic evidence rather than on the paintings themselves. Despite drastic changes over the years in Pollock scholarship, the interpretation of the photographs and their use to describe his process as spontaneous “action painting” have persisted since the early 1950s. The influence of Rosenberg’s rhetoric was to

95 Ibid., 92.

96 Ibid., 96. Rosenberg knew Pollock well since they were friends and neighbors in Springs, New York (Hobbs, conversation with author, 26 November 2012). Therefore, it is unlikely that Rosenberg would have based his argument solely on the photographs, however the interpretation of Pollock’s art does appear to be based on the photographs alone.

97 Ibid., 97.

98 Ibid.
encourage both artists and critics to focus on Pollock’s technique rather than on the resultant works.

Karmel’s formalist approach to the paintings includes analysis of composite images of film stills and photographs of the artist at work in order to closely inspect and chronicle the process of creation from the first drips of paint to the last. Karmel identifies figurative elements in the early stages of production, which are then covered by densely layered applications of paint. Karmel argues that although it would appear that the figurative elements are only visible in the early stages of the work, Pollock was in fact using the underlying figuration to compose his paintings: “Rather than an evolution from figuration to abstraction, Pollock’s working method seems … to involve an alternation between the two modes of image-making.” Pollock used the underlying figuration to build his abstractions by reinforcing existing forms with additional lines, filling in empty spaces with lines, and adding new contours to the figures in black while erasing old contours in white and tan. This account of Pollock’s paintings counters long-held interpretations of the “drip” paintings as having been produced with spontaneous and impulsive movements of the artist over the canvas, and instead demonstrates that the “drip” paintings were made through a deliberate and calculated process.

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99 Karmel is not employing Greenbergian formalism here. Rather, the term “formalist” is meant to suggest that his focus is on the form as seen in the paintings, not on the theory-laden Greenbergian formalism about opticality and flatness.


101 Ibid., 124.
Karmel’s essay thus refutes Rosenberg’s “action painting” theory in its rejection of the “spontaneous” and “impulsive” descriptions of the process. Although Karmel’s essay relies on formal analysis and is devoted to the exploration of Pollock’s technique, his approach and his observations do not strictly align with Greenberg, because the critic would reject the presence of underlying figuration for the sake of arguing that the “drip” paintings were fully non-representational. Karmel’s reliance on essays written by William Rubin, a Greenbergian scholar, and his attention to the objects, however, can be seen as an embrace of the idea that the content of Pollock’s classic paintings was the exploration of formal qualities, which aligns with Greenberg’s approach to form as integral to content. Although Karmel’s essay represents a new interpretation of Pollock’s art, it is still reliant on fundamental principles of early criticism.

This chapter has demonstrated that in their respective catalogue essays, the curators’ arguments implicitly align with Greenberg’s theories in their accounts of Pollock’s life, process, and artworks, while also implicitly rejecting Rosenberg’s “action painting” theory. Varnedoe’s frequent mention of Greenberg in Pollock’s biography and his reliance on Greenbergian language for description of the paintings suggests an affinity between Varnedoe’s and Greenberg’s approaches. The implications of Karmel’s argument about Pollock’s exploration of form and line indicate a correspondence between Karmel’s argument and the Greenbergian concept of the content of a work of art as form itself.

While the curators frequently discussed and cited Greenberg and Rosenberg in their essays, and Varnedoe provided a thorough biography, neither curator presented alternative interpretations to Pollock’s art. Of course, this is not necessarily expected of curators in their exhibitions and catalogues, however the stated curatorial intention in this case – to refrain from ascribing to any particular interpretation and to reassess Pollock in light of thirty years of new
scholarship – can be interpreted as the intent to present a neutral account of the art and the recent scholarship. Their emphasis on Greenberg and Rosenberg demonstrates an implicit preference for the early critical accounts, and thus the product of their research diverged from their curatorial intention.

The curators, perhaps seeking a way to incorporate recent scholarship, organized a symposium to be held in conjunction with the exhibition. The invited participants included art historians who had previously published “revisionist” interpretations of Pollock’s art, and conservators from MoMA who had analyzed the paint and techniques Pollock used in his “drip” paintings.
Chapter Four

MoMA hosted a symposium in conjunction with the retrospective exhibition on January 23-24, 1999, during which scholars presented distinct interpretations of Pollock’s art. The presentations, which were edited and compiled in a publication titled *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, offered ways of looking at Pollock’s art that had not been represented in the exhibition or catalogue. This chapter will briefly describe selected presentations, and it will consider the relationship of the symposium to the exhibition as a whole, asserting that only with the symposium and its publication did MoMA make new scholarly approaches available to the public.

These new approaches no longer relied heavily on the Greenbergian or Rosenbergian accounts of Pollock’s art; instead, the symposium presenters formulated arguments upon new theoretical frameworks based on trends in “revisionist” art history and postmodern approaches to art. The nine symposium presentations included theoretical frameworks and art historical perspectives that differed in scope and intention. Ranging from Rosalind Krauss’ phenomenological postmodern approach in “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” to T. J. Clark’s


103 Karmel’s symposium presentation was quite similar to his catalogue essay; therefore it is the only essay in the symposium publication that has an affinity with the exhibition. Karmel’s account to Pollock is a new approach to Pollock’s process, but is based upon early critical approaches. Thus, the emphasis in this chapter on new interpretations is partially based on the waning reliance on such early approaches.
Marxist approach in “Pollock’s Smallness,” these varied perspectives provided new ways to view, interpret, and understand Pollock’s art. Three of the symposium presentations presented object-based interpretations, whereas others considered factors such as the historiography of Pollock and the reception of his art in Europe. T.J. Clark, Pepe Karmel, and Rosalind Krauss each presented a mode of thinking about and looking at Pollock’s artworks that drew from recent theoretical perspectives in the field of art history.

Clark’s essay, “Pollock’s Smallness,” focuses on a group of miniature (22” x 22”) paintings Pollock executed on Masonite in 1950. According to Clark, the small size of these paintings, in contrast to the better-known monumental paintings Pollock executed in the same year, suggests that Pollock was acutely aware of the distinction between size and scale. Clark argues that although these two groups of paintings have vastly different literal sizes, they contain the same metaphorical scale. The small paintings complement his monumental canvases, especially when exhibited beside one another as they were in a 1950 exhibition of Pollock’s work at the Betty Parsons Gallery, because they differ in literal size but not in metaphorical scale. Clark’s essay is illustrated with a photograph of this installation, which reinforces his argument that “bigness needed smallness in order to register as such,” and that “largeness in Pollock is made out of an unregenerate, unsublated smallness,” indicating that bigness and smallness play off of each other in Pollock’s works (fig. 4). Clark argues that one impetus for Pollock’s monumental “drip” paintings was his exploration of the correlation between size and scale of his

104 Clark, “Pollock’s Smallness,” 15-16.
105 Ibid., 20.
106 Ibid., 21.
107 Ibid., 23.
works. According to Clark, Pollock “was looking for the moment at which the small became the large” when he painted his 1950 “drip” paintings. Clark’s approach to these objects is based upon a formalist emphasis on the object (here, its literal dimensions) as well as its content (its metaphorical scale). His emphasis on both the literal and metaphorical defies categorization as either Greenbergian or Rosenbergian, and problematizes the distinction between size and scale, or, in other words: form and content.

Karmel’s emphasis on form is demonstrated in his essay, “A Sum of Destructions.” As in his catalogue essay, Karmel implicitly refutes Rosenberg’s “action painting” theory by arguing that the underlying figuration in the classic “drip” paintings was the result of a calculated artistic process. In the tradition of Greenberg and Rubin, Karmel draws attention to the artist’s European sources – Picasso and Miró in particular – as he employs formal analysis to identify traces of veiled figuration in Pollock’s paintings. Karmel notes that although the paintings from the classic period are considered the completely “abstract phase” of his career, “it is not clear that abstraction and figuration are mutually exclusive in these paintings.” This is to say that figuration played a significant role in the creation of these “abstract” works, and that the act of veiling, destroying, or outlining the representative figures was a critical part of Pollock’s process in which he explored the limits of representation and abstraction. Karmel likens Pollock’s painting process to that of a jazz musician’s improvisation, which results from the musician’s knowledge of a great repertory of riffs and chord combinations, which are quickly called upon as

108 Ibid., 29.


110 Ibid., 89.
the improvisation progresses. Pollock, according to Karmel, developed a repertory of signs and symbols, of marks and splats, which he called upon as he improvisationally executed his classic “drip” paintings.

Finally, Karmel writes that Pollock’s paintings were considered chaotic or lacking in structure because they were not only breaking up figures, but also breaking up pictorial space. The distribution of lines throughout his paintings suggests that they consist of a series of layers, each of which spans the entire surface of the canvas. These layers create the appearance that each painting is a condensed space containing many volumes, and it is this variation on alloverness that distinguishes Pollock’s paintings from those which are not considered chaotic or lacking in structure (Monet or Mondrian, for example).

As in his catalogue essay, Karmel’s implicit rejection of Rosenberg and emphasis on formal analysis suggests that his interpretation was informed to some degree by Greenbergian analysis of Pollock’s art. In the symposium essay, the affinity with Greenberg is greater due to the frequent references to Pollock’s European modernist sources as well as the discussion of pictorial space. The argument does not align with a strict Greenbergian interpretation, however, because Karmel’s focus is on the underlying figuration in Pollock’s paintings. Thus, Karmel uses various aspects of Greenbergian formalism to argue for his own account of the work which itself challenges the Greenbergian interpretation.

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111 Karmel may have arrived at such an analogy after reading the first installment of William Rubin’s “Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition” of 1967. On page 15, Rubin likens Pollock’s process of improvisation based on stored decisions to Mozart’s composition of the overture to Don Giovanni. In the same essay, Rubin also noted that Shimmering Substance (1946) and Eyes in the Heat (I) (1946) had totemic presences lurking “in the interstices of the white lines,” which anticipates Karmel’s argument about veiled figuration.

112 Karmel, “A Sum of Destructions,” 93.
Rosalind Krauss’ symposium presentation took its title from a 1948 article written by Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” but its use of phenomenological analysis to explore the relationship of the body to the horizontal canvas that Pollock used while making his “drip” paintings is in sharp contrast to the formalist interpretation Greenberg employed in his article of the same name.\textsuperscript{113} Varnedoe had argued against this phenomenological approach in his catalogue essay, therefore one of her aims was to defend the “anti-form” or \textit{informe} interpretation of Pollock’s art, which she believed had been “reductively and misleadingly presented in the Pollock catalogue – as in the critical literature generated by the exhibition.”\textsuperscript{114}

Krauss’ approach explores the relationship of the “drip” paintings to the artist and viewers’ bodies, as well as Pollock’s exploration of line. In his “drip” paintings, according to Krauss, Pollock’s line did not create contour and bind form as line traditionally does. Pollock’s line worked against “form’s matrix, which is verticality.”\textsuperscript{115} The axial rotation from vertical (on the wall or easel) to the horizontal canvas on the floor defeated form as traditionally conceived. These shifts towards formlessness and horizontality are what Krauss characterizes as the major innovations in Pollock’s paintings. She argues that horizontality is the medium of the “drip” paintings, and she defines a medium phenomenologically as the place “within which artists understand themselves to be working … an axis onto a field, rather than the physical limits of the


Krauss’ phenomenological analysis of Pollock’s paintings represents an art historical trend to understand objects by their relation to one’s own body.

Clark, Karmel, and Krauss advanced new arguments regarding the artworks, unconstrained by the historical criticism of Greenberg and Rosenberg and its distinctions between form and content. While these perspectives have the potential to enrich one’s understanding of Pollock’s art, the effect was symposium attendees or readers of the publication.

By providing a venue for the presentation of new approaches and by subsequently publishing those approaches in conjunction with other exhibition publications, the curators demonstrated an awareness of new and varying accounts to Pollock’s art, as well as their desire to fill in the gaps in the historiography presented in the exhibition and catalogue. Without the symposium and its accompanying publication, however, the Jackson Pollock exhibition could be deemed a presentation of an incomplete historical account of the artist to a contemporary audience. The strength of the exhibition is also its foil, since the broad scope of the symposium presentations points to the gaps in scholarship in the exhibition and catalogue, especially in light of the curators’ intention regarding recent scholarship.

\[116\] Ibid., 175.
Conclusion

This thesis examined the installation, text panels, virtual exhibition, and publications associated with the 1998 Pollock retrospective, and it has demonstrated that the exhibition inscribed Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s theories, though it did not represent subsequent scholarship in its account of Jackson Pollock. It began by reviewing a variety of interpretations of Pollock’s art. It then assessed the exhibition installation and virtual exhibition in light of those interpretations and found that both the museum and virtual exhibitions represented early critical accounts of Pollock as described by Greenberg and Rosenberg whereas recent scholarship was not presented. Subsequently, the exhibition catalogue was examined, focusing especially on scholarly interpretations of Pollock’s art. Both essays implicitly inscribe Greenberg and Rosenberg – privileging Greenberg and countering Rosenberg – but neither explicitly assesses the “three decades of new scholarship” that constituted the context in which the curators developed the exhibition.117

The symposium presentations described in chapter four represent a number of scholarly interpretations of Pollock’s art that were concurrent with the exhibition. The inclusion of the symposium among the exhibition programs strengthened the overall exhibition by creating a venue for new theoretical interpretations of Pollock’s work, that were not represented in the exhibition or described in the catalogue. However, the presentation of a range of interpretations not represented in the exhibition can also be interpreted as having drawn attention to the relatively narrow range of scholarship in the exhibition. Regardless, the fact remains that the

exhibition benefitted from the symposium presentations because they represented the context of recent scholarship within which the exhibition was planned.

The interpretation of the exhibition installation, virtual exhibition, and catalogue as presented in this thesis demonstrates that the implicit inscription of Greenberg’s formalism and Rosenberg’s emphasis on subjectivity, coupled with the elision of more recent approaches to the art suggests that the exhibition presented a mid-century version of Pollock to a late-twentieth century audience at MoMA.

The curatorial intention to exhibit the art without “hewing to any particular critical dogma” could be taken to mean that the Jackson Pollock retrospective would present a complete historiography or a dispassionate account of a selected historiography, thereby offering a number of available interpretations of the art. By exploring the various aspects of the exhibition, it has been shown that the symposium was the critical aspect insofar as it allowed for the presentation of varying scholarly interpretations. Without the symposium, the exhibition may not have adequately represented or reassessed Pollock in light of new scholarship.

This thesis identifies numerous ways to interpret Pollock’s work, none of which is decidedly correct or incorrect, however an exhibition that presents art within a narrow range of theoretical frameworks misrepresents the field of art history. Alternatively, an exhibition that presents a range of scholarly interpretations prompts visitors to consider the meanings of artworks in ways – both intellectually and visually – that they otherwise might not consider. By doing so, the museum exhibition would introduce visitors to a range of perspectives through which to interpret and understand visual and material culture.


Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. “Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry,” in *The Laocoön, and Other Prose Writings of Lessing*. Translated by Ellen Frothingham (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887).


———. “Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism (Part I).” Art in America 67, no. 7 (November 1979): 104-123.

———. “Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism (Part II).” Art in America 67, no. 8 (December 1979): 72-91.


Figure 3. Installation of Photograph at *Jackson Pollock* exhibition. Thomas Griesel, Installation Photograph, IN1819.62. (New York: Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.)