

The Mood of the Matter:

The Aesthetic Emotion at the Heart of Modernism

by Mark Daniel Cohen

No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock Paintings on Paper

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No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock Paintings on Paper

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Parler aujourd'hui de poésie philosophique . . . N'est-ce pas oublier que le but de celui qui spéculé est de fixer ou de créer une notion-c'est-à-dire un *pouvoir* et un *instrument de pouvoir*, cependant que le poète moderne essaie de produire en nous un *état* et de porter cet état exceptionnel au point d'une jouissance parfaite . . .

—Paul Valéry



A state, in itself, is nothing whatever.

—T. S. Eliot

If there is such a thing as the aesthetic emotion, what of it? If there is a distinctive state of mind, a décor of awareness, an atmosphere of thought, that works of art instigate in the receptive intelligence and in which they are received, through which they are viewed, what difference does it make? If they cast a hue upon the glass in the window of perception, set a suffusing tint in the mental lens that drenches our vision of them, a haze of vibrant tonality comparable to the invisible color of a room that we but momentarily notice as we enter—if they determine us such that they determine how we see them—what is the worth and the function of it? What does that capability convey, and what about art does it reveal to us? If art has, as one of its defining characteristics, as one of the qualities by which we recognize it, by which we know it for what it is, an attribute comparable to that of a mood-altering drug, what is the self-identifying mood that it induces and what is the significance?

For if so, there must be a commonality to all the moods induced by works of art. Otherwise, we would not call them all by a single name, we would not know them all to be of a relation—as there must be a family of such moods, or else all works of art would seem to be by a single artist, so there must be a family resemblance. But if so, this contentless quality, this vehicle of meaning, must itself have a meaning, or we are stymied at the start—this very possibility of meaning would itself be without meaning, would be mere soft-tissue machinery without import. And it must have import, it must carry significance in the sense of meaning as implication, or nothing could follow. It must lead somewhere. Otherwise, it would be inert, and if art is anything, it is dynamic. It is an application of consciousness that has been energized, that drives forward in some fashion, that results in some manner, in some matter—in something of urgency. Art is imperative. It is dire. Else, it would not be art.

The question of the induction of mood is itself an imperative, for there is a

heritage of art that has been defined by and valued for its elegance of mood, for the tonality of its impression, for its ceremonious incursion upon the portals of awareness. There is a long-standing sense of art as a retinue of knowing, as a procession of comprehension marked by its formality rather than by any particular and distinctive content of its insight. Art has long been known more as a way of knowing than by anything in particular known, known more as a ceremony of awareness, as a pomp and circumstance of impression provided for the monarch of the mind. And as such, art amounts to a set of protocols for intellectual obeisance—for a bow granted, and a criticality foresworn, for the sake of the austerity of the cortege before the aristocracy of intellectuality—for the highest dignity of knowing's sake.

Which is to say that the artistic presentation of its subject matter possesses an intrinsic gravity, has a quality of impeccability, that potentially is a way of granting an air, or of taking on airs. It is a question of style, of style installing an attitude and a principle of reception—of the artistic emotion as an open acceptance rooted in the sheer dignity of the report. This is the aspect of art that certifies Susan Sontag's sense of it as an "autonomous model of consciousness," as a form of knowing more than a resume of things known, or things presented as discovery. In the increments of its inflections, in the discretionary variations of the forms, there is an extraordinary capability, for Sontag's argument is incisive—the disposition of the will, of the posture of approach to the world, determines to a significant degree what becomes known of it. But in the commonality, in the family resemblance that makes all things artistic art, there is an element of risk: there is an intrinsic haughtiness, a lofty prepossession, that wraps anything which receives an artistic presentation. Art by its nature crosses the bridge between creating an impression and making things impressive; inherently what it portrays it approves, even if that approval stands behind a surface irony. Works of art bear a stamp of conviction. And as art sweeps into the awareness, accepted for its being art, so too is swept in whatever it signifies.

This is the matter of beauty—the compelling vision, the admirable aspect—and what is at issue is beauty's ability to beguile. It sets us at the precipice, for, as in all things, in art we must choose between prostration and power. Either we permit ourselves the mesmerization of the prepossessing image, the dazzling of the bedeviling display, the mindlessness of succumbing to the varnish of the shimmering veneer, or we select to think our own thoughts, to adopt our own values, and, thereby, set our own course. The gilt crust of the Byzantine icon dissuades the lancet of the analytical thrust, and this inherency of the peril aligns itself with Dave Hickey's sense of beauty as a Trojan horse, as a conveyer of the ideological faiths of its moment in history—as a visual credibility lathed in shimmering hypnotic ostentation onto anything of power's requisite, indiscriminately applicable.

However, the risk is run and Hickey's characterizing holds only on the foundation of beauty's meaning. If beauty has an import of its own, if it leads to something on the basis of its intrinsic implications—if it is itself a configuration

of thought and not simply an inflecting conveyance of cargoed thinking—then it deposes the ideological infiltrator. But if it is the vapidness of mere gloss reflected in the fixed eye of the deer in the headlights, then it is nothing but an entrainment of the volition and it makes an obedience of us. It can be vision, or it can be occlusion; it can be insight or insignificance. And so, either beauty has a meaning of its own, or it is intellectual betrayal, a mesmerizing sell of the prevailing system of value, a quisling of the will.

And an art of meaningless beauty falters regardless of the judged worth of the ideology it ships, for its own value must be intrinsic—a value that cannot be acquired by proximity. Despite its august aspect, despite the nobility of its receipt, a beauty devoid of internal implication can of necessity be judged of worth only by measuring along its outward vector—only according to the effect it has on us. Art's accomplishment is then within the viewership; art's labor is in the restorative potential. Vapid beauty makes art into a sub-species of therapy, and art becomes valuable solely for its capability to retread. Its claim is to its subject rather than its subject matter, and the hazard of installing a conventionalized thinking follows naturally, for the purpose of therapy always has been the adjustment of the patient and not the critique of the prevailing norms to which the patient adjusts, norms that go unquestioned. Therapy is inherently a conservative endeavor.

And so the circle closes, for if beauty is without an inherent meaning, if the tenor of aesthetic disclosure reveals nothing but what it has been loaded to carry, it makes for a meaningless art. The art of therapy is opposite the art of meaning, the art truly of revealing, for all that is unclosed is the art itself, and us. It is we in our new dress of appropriate and appropriated attitude, and the capability of the art to grant us our renewed dispensation, that is the substance of the work—and there is nothing more. There is no third party, no conclusion to the syllogism written in the flesh, in the tissues of the mind, in the districts of our inner life that we comprehend as the heart. There is no output of the process, no result, nothing added to what it was we had when we began—there is a Phenomenological short circuit, a failure to break the circle of perception, and only the initiating components have been re-colored, the inner décor has been redone. What is at issue is solely what we are to become, and what we are to become is inured to what there is, without a revelation of what that is, without an understanding that exists for its own sake and not for the sake of making us sedate and apt for the larger dispensation, as we find it—as it finds us.

The tenor of the aesthetic is art's defining characteristic, the quality by which we know to recognize it, and with fully nonrepresentational abstraction, the tenor is the single remaining active element. The question of its meaningfulness—of its capability of output, of its leading somewhere—becomes imperative. Jackson Pollock may be the paradigmatic instance of the question at this time. Pollock's work is the heart, and surely the best known and most easily recognized example, of the arm of Abstract Expressionism devoted to the rendering on the canvas (or paper) of the emotional state of

Jackson Pollock, *Untitled*, ca. 1939-40
Colored pencils and pencil on blue paper, 6 x 7 5/8 inches
The Menil Collection, Houston.
Photo: Hester + Hardaway, © 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



the artist through the recording of the spontaneous gesture—or so the story has come to be told. It is the branch of the movement navigated by those whom the critic Harold Rosenberg marked with the phrase “Action Painters,” and as the point of the exercise presumably is to put it in the most generous fashion, the establishing of an atlas of capable inner states, a

cartography of human

mental tonalities, what is at issue is the tenor, the very vibrancy and tonality, of the aesthetic inner condition, drawn like blood from the artist himself, sampled from the artist employed as something of a lab rat, or an experimenter experimenting on himself.

The question is imperative, and Pollock must be considered the most recent first-rank demand for an answer. As the last, to date, painter of historic significance, the last who can even be considered a candidate to enter the pantheon on the same terms as Picasso, Vermeer, Velasquez, Rembrandt, he forces a question that is as easy to phrase as it is inescapable: with a mature Pollock drip painting, what is the point? Or, beyond the evidence of Pollock having been Pollock, is there one?

Although oriented on only Pollock’s paintings on paper, and thus absent any of the major works, the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York provided an adequate and ample overview of Pollock’s manner and its genesis through the development of his art. More than 60 paintings were included that ranged over the entirety of his painting career, from his earliest period beginning in 1935 to the year of his last works on paper, 1952. (Pollock died in an automobile crash on August 11, 1956. The exhibition was organized to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his death. The last four years of his life saw an arguable falling off of power in the paintings, and, as the material from the museum makes clear, they were “almost devoid of drawings.”)

The word “drawings” is not quite right, for, as acknowledged in the exhibition,

Pollock did not make preparatory sketches for his paintings, and these works on paper are not recordings of intentions for other, more fully developed achievements. They are finished works in themselves, and all are in the mode of the period in Pollock's career in which they occur, as calibrated by his major paintings. They are a parallel track, if they should be distinguished at all from the main line of his art. They are the entire career in miniature, and we see all of Pollock's manner on display, from the early figurative period, flush with personal symbology and the evident influences of Cubism, Surrealism, and Jungian psychology, represented by such works as *Untitled*, ca. 1939-40, and *The Mask*, ca. 1943, to the mature, explosive abstraction of the poured works, such as *Untitled (Green Silver)*, ca. 1949, and [*Silver over Black, White, Yellow, and Red*], 1948.

And so we see what we know so well from the major works, and the culmination is in the period of the "drip paintings" (a phrase deserving of the scare quotes for there was far more involved technically than the mere spilling of pigment, there was far more of deliberateness than Pollock is often credited with practicing, and not mere spontaneity). There, apparently, the artist's inner condition is laid upon the paper like a jazz improvisation laid upon the air—in the most emotionally intricate instances, a complex state of inner life fixed in a work of art, knowable and capable of being revisited—a sophistication of the inner world revealed and accomplished, an enrichment of the possibility of sheer living, an amplification of ourselves.

But is that all? Is it just us? Is there nothing more to all this? Certainly, Clement Greenberg—who, if he is now to be called upon for anything, is to be called upon for the artist he championed most strenuously, whose reputation ultimately will determine Greenberg's own—leaves us precisely there, perhaps against his own attempted judgment. Greenberg, evidently, had little use for Rosenberg's idea of action painting or for spontaneity of expression as the purpose of the art. He argued Pollock more as a technical innovator, as a practitioner of inventive compositional strategies, employing a network of painted lines and "interstitial spots and areas" in a manner similar to the earlier Analytic Cubism's "facet-planes" to achieve a "minimal illusion of depth" and a "dramatic and pictorial unity" resulting from subtly executed but rigidly controlled principles of variation in the network. In short, a Pollock painting is designed, not just splashed on.

However, Greenberg knew better than to leave things at that, and he addresses the pay-off: "When I first began to admire Pollock's painting it



Jackson Pollock, *The Mask*, ca. 1943
 Gouache, oil, pen and ink, and fabric on paper, 29 7/8 x 21 7/8 inches (75.9 x 55.6 cm)
 Private collection
 © 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

was for its intensity and force; later on, it was for its clarified splendor and eloquence; right now I would praise it most for its range of mood.” And so, the inner state is the matter, even if not spontaneous and uncontrolled in its application—what is revealed is the shifting temper of internal life, the aesthetic emotion fanned into a spectrum of variations. What is revealed is us.

The mood is the matter—a state of mind, an atmosphere of the awareness, an inner environment in which thinking occurs rather than the occurrence of a thought, rather than a concrete meaning. And the distinction between the amorphous vapors of an intellectual flavor and the specifiable implication of an assertive expression fixes the soul of a significant dispute, one that stands at the core of the art of the modern era.

The French poet and—to use a word that is less than adequate to characterize the range and texture of his accomplishment—intellectual Paul Valéry hailed the purpose and achievement of modern poetry along the lines of a quality akin to an aura, a potency like a charged mist of altered mental life:



Parler aujourd’hui de poésie philosophique . . . N’est-ce pas oublier que le but de celui qui spéculé est de fixer ou de créer une notion—c’est-à-dire un *pouvoir* et un *instrument de pouvoir*, cependant que le poète moderne essaie de produire en nous un *état* et de porter cet état exceptionnel au point d’une jouissance parfaite . . .

(To speak today of philosophical poetry . . . Is it not to forget that the goal of he who speculates is to fix or to create an idea—that is to say a *power* and an *instrument of power*, whereas the modern poet tries to produce in us a *state* and to carry that exceptional state to the point of perfect pleasure . . .)

For Valéry, there is a clear discrepancy between philosophy and poetry, for there is an evident and palpable distinction between the philosophical idea and the poetic “state” of mind, the aesthetic emotion, which, for Valéry, is brought in modern poetry to the intensity of a perfection and is the goal of the enterprise, the final acquisition of the reader, and, whatever it may produce, if it results in anything, self-evidently does not lead to and has no dealings with the idea.

In his essay “Dante,” collected *The Sacred Wood*, T. S. Eliot, no minor figure in the arena of modern poetry, cited this assertion by Valéry in order to dismiss the point in its entirety. “A state, in itself, is nothing whatever.” For Eliot, the achievement for poetry is to arrive at a concrete vision, to convey a thought that is precisely communicated. “The poet does not aim to excite—that is not even a test of his success—but to set something down; the state of the reader is merely that reader’s particular mode of perceiving what the poet has caught

in words.” There is, in essence, a meaning to the successful poetic work, a conception that is to be conveyed, and not the vagueness of a condition to be instigated. However, Eliot’s approbation is not for the idea specifically, not for Valéry’s alternative to the “state.” The poetic vision is precise, and it is also something emotionally drenched—a conception of what is lived, of “something *perceived*”—of the reality of the world as it is experienced. Even thought, when encountered poetically, must be the idea *realized*, “when it has become almost a physical modification,” and not pure theory. It is meaning that Eliot values, not a general condition of awareness, but it is meaning of another kind, not meaning as, specifically, idea, a designation that spans a particular octave and compass of thought.

It is not quite an irony that, despite their opposition, Valéry and Eliot both assert a primacy of something other than and, even in Eliot’s case, vaguer than reason and ideational thought. Although Eliot comes far closer, it is the case that neither looks to a meaning in the work of art in the normal sense of the word. And although Eliot wants something definite and, on its own terms, knowable, it is he who refers to the “artistic emotion,” which is a characterizing element of his artistic “vision.” What Eliot is after is a precisely related chorus of emotional tones, and it must be observed that Valéry no more refers to emotions than he does to the idea. His “state” is something else—a mood that is something other than Eliot’s artistic emotion. Nevertheless, both thinkers see art as oriented on us—for Eliot, it asserts something about us; for Valéry, it alters us. Between them, something has been omitted; something in the way of exact meaning regarding an external issue has been overlooked.

With Valéry, the mood is the matter, and it is no small matter, for mood is at the very heart of Modernism. If one reckons Modernism in the arts as beginning with Mallarmé and his revised aesthetic—the aesthetic of Symbolism, which influenced so many of those we take to be the foundational artists of Modernism—then the essence of the new mode at the end of the nineteenth century was an orientation on the mood rather than on the specifiable idea. Indefiniteness was the open door to the new vision. As described by Arthur Symons, art for Mallarmé had to shift its focus from the tangible reality of the clearly observable world to something evident but far more fleeting, something evanescent, something like water flashing on a stone, something more of an impression than an observation: “Note, further, that [Mallarmé] condemns the inclusion in verse of anything but, ‘for example, the horror of the forest, or the silent thunder afloat in the leaves; not the intrinsic, dense wood of the trees’.”

What is at issue, what is artistic here, is not the fact of the wood that constitutes the trees but the “fact” of the silent thunder skirting the leaves and the shudder that braces them like a cold, serrated chill slicing down the spine. From this comes Impressionism in painting, for Monet attended the evening talks that Mallarmé held at his home, and Impressionism in music, if that term so applies, for Debussy came as well, and the most advanced developments in subsequent French poetry, and much more—perhaps all that we now call Modernism. From this may well come the very idea of abstraction—the

dissolution of the observable world, of the wood of the trees.

What evidently substitutes for the material fact of the world is us—the human perspective, for the horror of the forest and the thunder afloat in the leaves are our impressions, our intrusions on the observation. They are subjective components of experience and not native facts, whatever those facts might ultimately be, if even there are any. It is we who invade the trees with horror and thunder, when we see them—when we feel them. Here is, it appears at first blush, the human naivety arising: the reflex action by which and the intellectual posture with which we measure the truth of things against ourselves, our interests, our values, our needs. The inclusion of the subjective component, of the personal reaction, reveals nothing to us other than ourselves. If we deduct ourselves and our self-fascination from the equation, there is no reason to believe in our emotional impressions, for with regard to the world beyond our minds, we have no reason to think our emotions any more reliable, and many reasons to think them a great deal less dependable, than our sensory perceptions. The thunder is us, our own demands and reactions, and nothing else.

And so, Eliot is right. The mood itself and in itself is nothing whatever. It is Phenomenology in the most demoted sense—not an investigation that retires to the search for first principles, that returns to zero and initiates an attempt to determine what we know and what the prerequisites of knowing are, but a blind, uncritical faith in mere impression, in perception as foundational truth, or the nearest thing we can hope to obtain. And the thunder is nothing more than us yelling back at ourselves.

But that was not the idea of Modernism, not the idea of Mallarmé, for in Mallarmé, there was the idea. The poet who stands as the fount of Modern Art had a philosophy, or pursued one. There was something he was attempting to set down, although clearly he felt the need to alter radically the means by which what he saw could be set down. Mallarmé had a vision and a body of ideas concerning the world—a new vision of the world—a philosophy to which he devoted an enormous amount of time in his attempt to write it out, and the poetry was intended, by all indications, to evoke portions of that vision. The poetic technique was a means to an end, and the end was a meaning, not merely a mood, a state of mind, triggered for the sake of its pleasure. Mallarmé referred to this work presumably of direct exposition as *l'oeuvre*, and it was not completed. All we have are the notebooks he left behind.

And so, in the end, Eliot is wrong because he is right—the state in itself is nothing whatever, but the state is not the point, and Eliot's assault of Valéry is misjudged. The state of mind, the quality of imagination, to be induced by artistic means is itself a portion of the artist's methodology. Its purpose is to calibrate the reader, to gauge the reader, to make the reader capable of coming upon realizations that then follow naturally. Like the casting of a spell that conjures insights, like a wiping of the glass on perception's window to sponge away the deluding mists through which we attempt to view the world in

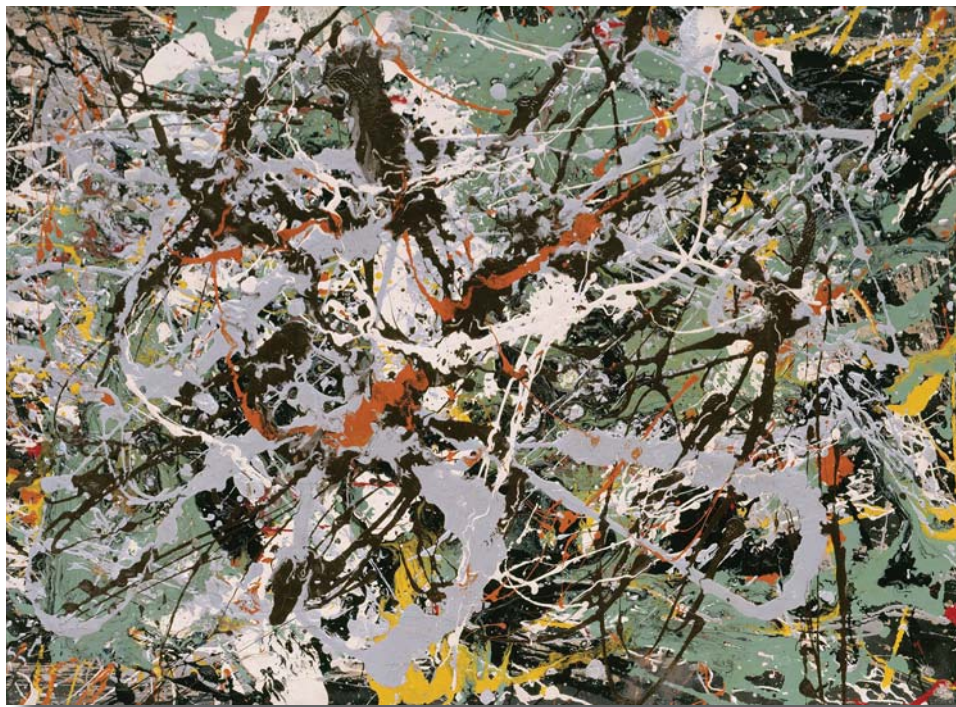
which we live, the artist's effect for Mallarmé, the result of the newly computed aesthetic emotion, is to render us able of clear vision, and what is then to come is an ontological insight, a vision of the truth, not encapsulated in artistic statement but made available by artistic influence, by instilling the poet's mind into the mind of the reader. Like any poet worthy of the title, Mallarmé is not attempting to say what he means. He is trying to show us what he means, or, rather, he is trying to make us adept of seeing for ourselves what it is he sees.

Thus, the induction of the exceptional state of mind is for the sake of altering us to a purpose, of changing our perceptual capacity such that we can "see" beyond the range and specifications of normative perception, such that we can "see" beyond the veil of appearances—such that we can see the truth, spontaneously realized. It is evident at this point that a distinction is best made between emotion and mood, for we must consider that two different capabilities are under consideration here. What Mallarmé sought to raise through the influence of his notoriously obscure poetic technique is something other than a component of ordinary emotional experience—it is something other than ordinary in any possible sense. He looked to a revelatory state of mind, and we may reserve the word "mood" for that—the term surely was employed by Yeats for similar purpose. It then becomes clear that what Eliot valued was emotions, artistically encapsulated—in a sense, he saw the poet as the documentarian of human emotive existence. The "state" of mind for Valéry, who was something of a devotee of Mallarmé and Mallarmé's Symbolist aesthetic, is more akin to the art of the sorcerer. What he is after is a different quality of "vision." And it is best to assign the "aesthetic emotion," despite Eliot's use for his purposes of the similar phrase, to the designation of mood, to the overarching aura of the artistic frame of dreaming.

This is the essence of Modernism, this search for an insight into a truth that evades the ordinary mind, this hunt for the quarry of truth that eludes the hounds of rational pursuit. The game is a species of the sublime, and it is the soul of the endeavor of every major abstract visual artist from Kandinsky to Pollock and beyond. The purpose of the project of abstraction—or Modernist abstract art, or abstract painting that had not demoted itself to the stable of formalism—is to create an artistic mood, to purify and induce the aesthetic feeling, so as to trigger the spontaneous realization of the truth of things, so as to alter the mind's eye, so as to see as we are otherwise incapable of seeing—so as to unchain the potencies of the mind that have been shackled to the normative vision of the real.

Sontag once characterized the modern artist as a broker in madness, and the attribution holds if we view such artistic madness as the poise it appears to possess from the point of view of ordinary thought, if we take the departure from the normal and move doggedly into the truth as if "mad."

In short, this is Kant—the aesthetic mind as capable of conceiving what breaks the norms of the rational, as penetrating more deeply than the limits of reason permit, as able to know comparatives that result of no standard computational



Jackson Pollock, *Untitled (Green Silver)*, ca. 1949
Enamel and aluminum paint on paper mounted on canvas
22 3/4 x 30 3/4 inches
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
Gift, Sylvia and Joseph Slifka. 2004.63.
Photo: David Heald, © 2006 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York.

comparisons, as powered to recognize the absolutely great. As sublime; as unchained. And it is not very different from Nietzsche, if we take the Dionysian, in its version as a state of mind, as possessing a special status, as in some sense more exalted than the Apollinian state—as revealing something of truth. The distinctions

between the aesthetics of Kant and of Nietzsche, the differences between them regarding the value and the function of art, are finally in the details. The details are imperative, they speak of conceptions of art and of reality that differ profoundly, but there is a family resemblance in these aesthetic philosophies that must not be ignored. In broad terms, the essential point is the same, and the manner in which philosophical positions arrange themselves when seen in a distant overview is as important as the intricate examinations of the differences of detail, even if academic careers generally are not made by observing broad alignments and discrepancies, for they tell us the large questions we are entertaining, and what, in the gravest sense, is at stake. It is imperative that we know how our positions line up. In Kant and Nietzsche, and in Schopenhauer and many others, there is announced the death of the credibility of the quotidian, of the plainly self-presented, and there is claimed special powers of accuracy for aesthetic perception. Much of the modern world essays from this position. The differences regarding what is to be found in the artistic vision is in the end of small importance because there is no saying it, no recounting it, no bringing it back for those who have not made the aesthetic excursion. It is available only through the actual artistic product, and thus what we really have is a wall Kant builds against himself; *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the philosophical work of literary art; and the body of Modernist art that has sprung from this soil, or from thoughts similar that were nourished by underground tributaries of purely artistic origin.

Of course, something must be said—in relation to Kant, who is being offered as providing the foundation of Modernism generally and of abstraction specifically—regarding the shift in this argument from the beautiful to the

sublime. It can be claimed that abstraction in art bypasses the beautiful, in Kant's sense of it, and directs the aesthetic interest immediately to the sublime. The prepossessing quality of the image—the hypnotic aspect, the impeccability of its presentation—is not in its pleasure, universal to the judgment or otherwise, but in its provocation of the sense of sublimity, become possible precisely because nature is not represented.



. . . whereas natural beauty (such as is self-subsisting) conveys a finality in its form making the object appear, as it were, preadapted to our power of judgement, so that it thus forms of itself an object of our delight, that which, without our indulging in any refinements of thought, but, simply in our apprehension of it, excites the feeling of the sublime, may appear, indeed, in point of form to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account.

(*The Critique of Judgement*, trans. Meredith, § 23)

Not capable of an envisioning in nature, in the given availabilities of form, the sublime is a function—like the abstract composition whose principles of departure from nature is necessarily not derivable from nature—of purely mental formulations, of powers capable only to thought.



For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. Thus the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime. Its aspect is horrible, and one must have stored one's mind in advance with a rich stock of ideas, if such an intuition is to raise it to the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime—sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality.

That quality of finality available only to the mind threatens not only to defy observation in nature but to elude visual organization in the work of art, corresponding potentially and in aesthetic ambition to the difficulty of founding or finding comprehensive laws for abstract composition. The correspondence to the sublime may evade all visual encapsulation, whether natural or devised—it may be essentially non-visual.



But in what we are wont to call sublime in nature there is such an absence of anything leading to particular objective principles and corresponding forms of nature that it is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime.

The suggestion of Pollock here is self-evident and inescapable, as well as the necessity of resorting not to the visual encapsulation but to the evocative mood.

(Kant's specification of a "finality," of a completeness of form, of a self-contained and self-accomplished quality, that is to be discovered in the mind but not in nature, if extended to the possibility of a finality not to be visualizable in any manner, implies a correspondence to higher geometry, in which structures that can be described with precision trigonometrically cannot be visualized, even to the mind's eye, i.e., multi-dimensional forms, such as a Hypertorus or Hypersphere: "Hence it gives a veritable extension, not, of course, to our knowledge of objects of nature, but to our conception of nature itself—nature as mere mechanism being enlarged to the conception of nature as art—an extension inviting profound inquiries as to the possibility of such a form." Nature defined as the mechanism of form itself, as the possibility of form, extended—structural coherence beyond the capability of the senses seen as the substance of the sublime. However, this line of thought is necessarily the subject for another and more extensive inquiry.)

And so, the stream of Abstract Expressionism reputedly dedicated to the spontaneous emotional expression of the artist, the current of the "Action Painters," may be about something more than mere sincerity of inner reaction and personal attitude. It may be comparable to the other branch of the mode in its intrinsic ambition, to the more geometric manner of such as Rothko and Newman that pursues the insight of the sublime through mathematical regularities, that pursues an honesty and not a sincerity, that chases after a truth-telling. It may be so, but the determination is difficult if not impossible, for as the realization sought is inherently unspeakable, it is unspeakable even to ourselves. With regard to the sublime, we cannot be certain of what we are looking to see or if we are seeing what qualifies as the accomplishment. What we typically have done is attempt to recognize the sublime by feel, to attribute an insight upon feeling awestruck by the work of art, and there remains perpetually the risk of "reading into" the work, of convincing ourselves we feel the presence of the awesome revelation and then attaching that feeling to the work, claiming the feeling an objective attribute of the art, of intruding ourselves into the art rather than observing with full critical-mindedness what is before us—of talking ourselves into it. As viewers of abstract visual art, we are doomed to working blind.

The question, in short and in each case of abstraction, is—does the artist get there? In Pollock's case, with the mature works, with the drip paintings, it is Greenberg's notifications that give us the option. The netting of line work that establishes the beginnings of the perception of depth, the faceting of the surface that arranges repetition tactics to organize



the visual presentation, the carefully accomplished compositional strategies, demonstrate the presence of a methodology for achieving an orchestrated effect, a means for reaching past the limits of an unthinking commission of reactive gesturing—for getting somewhere, somewhere of aesthetic deliberateness. As compositional structures, they are, and they are of course, geometric, and they relate Pollock's apparently spontaneous paintings to the clearly more cautious works of geometric Abstract Expressionism, demonstrating Pollock's works to be variations of the same mode. But these technical factors indicate mere possibilities of achievement, means that, as Greenberg once observed, do not guarantee an end, and we remain with the question: what precisely are we seeing?

And there is no settling the question, for we would have to know the sublime to know if we are seeing the sublime in Pollock's paintings, and the unsettling result is that abstract art remains a matter of faith—and faith is not an intellectual stance. But there are determinations, modest ones, we can make. With Pollock, we know there are claims by mathematicians that fractal patterns have been located in his paintings. Richard P. Taylor, Adam P. Micolich, and David Jonas presented their findings in *Nature* (see *Nature*, vol. 399, 3 June 1999), and they observed that the fractal dimensions increased over time as Pollock refined his drip technique, demonstrating a deliberateness to the application of the technique and showing, in their words, “the fingerprint of nature.” The aesthetic question then becomes whether we are seeing the “fingerprint” of something more than nature observed, whether we are seeing the fingerprint of the truth of nature—of nature in itself, beyond normative perception.

Jackson Pollock, *Silver over Black, White, Yellow, and Red*, 1948
Enamel on paper mounted on canvas, 21 x 31 1/2 inches (61 x 80 cm)
Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
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The findings support and cement Greenberg's claims about the care and intricacy of the compositional strategies, as well as the alignment with the more easily recognized geometric manners of other Abstract Expressionists. In short, the apparent difference in manner between Pollock and Rothko, say, may be a matter of nothing more than sophistication of geometric technique, as if that were nearly nothing. But the question of ultimate significances is not answered in this—the fractal patterns still are only aspects of the works, facial features of the paintings. Nevertheless, we can now begin to infer on the basis of the hypothetical, for cogent thought is always promising.

If it were to be the case that Pollock's works induce the mood of spontaneous realization—that they are not spontaneous renderings but carefully wrought works for triggering spontaneous insight—if Pollock does raise the intuitive grasp into consciousness, does his mathematics participate in the process? Even assuming the efficacy, we cannot be sure the math would be the active agent, but inferences can be drawn from the further assumption, from the “what if,” from the construction done from the other end. If the math were to be proved participative in the insight, if the intuition were demonstrated to be triggered by a confrontation with geometric structure, made conscious by a conscious engagement with geometric formulation, then it would follow that the intuition is itself geometrically structured—that geometry is intuitive. For a system to be relatable to another system, the systems must be systematically similar, they must be of a piece structurally, the principles of organization must bear a resemblance—the systems must be capable of integration. Further, art is the providing of the vicarious experience—it is the sensory presentation of the “what if”—and thus Pollock's fractal patterns must be “digestible” by the imagination and, if capable of intrusion into and invocation of the intuition, they must be “digestible” there, as well.

Although art can be made with fractal patterns, fractals, as well as geometric figures of any disposition, do not in themselves make a work of art. The unadorned Golden Ratio is merely the Golden Ratio. If it were the case that Pollock takes us “there” and does so by means of his complex geometries, he could do so only by envisioning fractal structures within an artistic imaginative expanse, only by combining awareness of geometry with the artistic emotion, with and within the aesthetic mood. That mood is dependent upon artistic means, it would be rendered artistic by being rendered artistically, and the capability factor here would be the handmade quality, the “painting” quality—the quality of the atelier, the haptic component, in which the aspect of the hand, heightened through the honing and control of craft, would ramp up the density of the encoded data, would enrich the work, and transform the compositional elements into experiential qualities, as if environmental for the imagination. The hand, through its inescapable tracking of unconscious impulse—through its orchestration of its intricately committed gestures, through its recording and coordinating of its variations of movement—intrudes more information into the work than ever could be installed deliberately, infuses the work with the tempo as well as the temper of the unconscious, whence most of those commitments arise, and the geometrical, compositional

elements of the work become instilled with the directions and the deliberations of the intuition, and are capable of serving as the trigger for the realization of the intuitional content—potentially.

At this juncture, a potentiality is what it all must remain, for dealing with the sublime has this difficulty intrinsically. The sublime stands at the frontier of consciousness, charting the territory between the conscious and the unconscious minds, and resides entirely upon the possibility that we know something more in our unconscious “state” than we do in full consciousness. And therein is the problem. If we were to dredge the depths of what we know without knowing it, we might well by the transposition distort beyond authenticity the very knowledge we are attempting, and if the truth of things has no relation to our unconscious awareness, if the unconscious mind is the habitat of pure fantasy, then the entire enterprise is hopeless, and we might have no capability for recognizing that fact. Worse still, the very phrase “unconscious awareness” might be of necessity a contradiction in terms, in which case we are chasing a chimera, and art is merely a pleasurable state of mind, and a self-hypnosis.

But it is all a matter of faith, and to take the faith as lightly as we can, to take it as promising only the credible and coherent possibility that art may open our better mind, the mental realm in which we realize more than we typically know, we must acknowledge the fact that Modernism generally, and Pollock as one of its most salient examples, presents nearly insuperable challenges to confirmation. But in that we ought to recognize that Modernism, the great artistic innovation of the last century, has left us with one of the great challenges to aesthetic thought, and it is ours to take up the challenge, one that will be faced only when we find a method to discover to ourselves what, if anything, Modernist Art has discovered.