

## Robert Linsley

*Look in the terrible mirror of the sky.  
See how the absent moon waits in a glade  
Of your dark self, and how the wings of stars,  
Upward, from unimagined coverts, fly.*  
-Wallace Stevens

This paper turns on a very small fact, that Pollock entitled his first thoroughly resolved drip painting “Lucifer.” It’s not wise to give too much importance to this or any of Pollock’s titles; many of them were likely thought up by someone else. But at the same time it would be equally unwise to underestimate this one, for it directs us to the very core of Pollock’s work—to the nature of its historicity, its expressiveness and its future potential. My argument hinges on this title, but doesn’t depend on it. Call it one of those lucky circumstances that allows the writer to become, however briefly, an historian.

To put it briefly, my claim is that as the paint falls, so does the artist. Pollock’s trajectory can be seen clearly in the works of 1946-47, at the beginning of the major drip paintings. *Full Fathom Five* and *Sea Change* are two pieces from this period into which various kinds of debris—pebbles, cigarettes, coins etc.—have fallen. They also have Shakespearean titles, drawn from the exquisitely lyrical death poem of *The Tempest*. The Shakespearean reference, whether Pollock himself made it or not, seems appropriate for the artist who declared “I am nature,” because Shakespeare, for over two hundred years, has been paradigmatic for precisely that Romantic conception of the artist. From here we could also note that this poem about the death and transfiguration of the father is an entirely appropriate reference for an artist who is just beginning to succeed in sublimating the inheritance of analytic cubism and thereby build his own magical world on the preserved and transmuted body of his most anxiously regarded father, Picasso. But I would rather swing in another direction and observe that these two pictures overlap a larger group with celestial titles - *Comet*, *Galaxy*, *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, and, most importantly, *Lucifer*. In these latter pieces the canvas on the

floor is placed in a specific relation to the sky. One member of this group (*Galaxy*) contains heterogenous material, and so belongs with the lyrical death pieces already mentioned, but the titles of the others offer complexly poetic images of falling. *Comet* seems the most literal—a bolt of light falling downward at a slant. *Reflection of the Big Dipper* is more rich in suggestion, and it has fairly readable imagery—stars, clouds and tree branches reflected in a pond—that foregrounds the function of the canvas as a passive collector. The title is explicit about how the painting works in relation to the sky above it, but for all that I think that imagery can be identified, the picture is nevertheless very abstract, and in no way illustrative. Situated on the cusp of Pollock's turn to a completely materialist and non-representational art, this residual figuration marks a gathering of energies toward the next stage; but the most interesting aspect of this work is the way that it folds a deep and spherical space onto the picture plane, and then elides the view looking down and the view looking up. It's as if the placement of the canvas on the floor has paradoxically reinvested the tradition of ceiling painting. But the invocation of Lucifer, the original fallen star, in a thoroughly abstract painting, is the clue that helps us to understand that Pollock's performance is a kind of mimesis of a particular fall, albeit an emblematic and universal one, and his landing place a place from which there is no returning upwards movement.

The materialism of Pollock's pictures, their matter-of-factness, makes them Satan's landing place, because Satan's landing place is, of course, nothing less than everyday reality, our banal present. It's axiomatic for my thesis that this world is hell—or for those who prefer a safer, more reasonable style of expression, that Hell, the Hell of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is a trope or metaphor for modernity. This is Pollock's politics, and the politics of modernist abstraction. It is more directly Milton's politics, and as such also the politics of the modern artistic subjectivity since Wordsworth. I want to show how this politics can become a political discourse through memory, a memory that could and should be provoked by some very recent and ongoing events, and that might remind us that modern subjects emerge in a context of terrorism, religious war and colonial adventures, among other things.

*Paradise Lost* was written in the period just before and after the failure of the English republic and the restoration of the monarchy in

1660. According to Christopher Hill: "...the magnificent Satan of the early books of the epic does convey some of the defiance Milton himself must have felt tempted to hurl in the face of omnipotence as the republic crashed about his ears. The rebellious energy ebbs in the later books, after the restoration of Charles II has brought Milton to recognize the full magnitude of the rethinking that is required."<sup>1</sup> In this reading Satan—after the rebellious energy has ebbed—is a typical modern person, and it is his typicality that ensures the legibility and validity of abstraction in general. But before he became a universal type, Satan was also one Romantic paradigm of the artist, a model of a disillusioned realism that yet refuses to surrender to the reality principle. That understands that heroism lies in what one makes of the present, yet understands just as well what a failure such success must be; both Pollock's ambition and his despair, ordinarily conceived.

The Thirty years War, the Gunpowder Plot, Cromwell's invasion of Ireland—these were external events that accompanied the inward labours that formed the modern subject. An ever more private spirituality, an increasing coldness towards one's fellows, a utilitarian, calculating objectivity toward nature all have their correlate in the re-siting of the epic from the plains of Troy to the soul of Man. But eventually it becomes productively clear that inwardness is emptiness, the modern subject's experience of itself is of a continuous free-fall, and so aestheticism and then abstraction are Satan's from the beginning; from this point of view modernist painting has some deep literary roots, and those roots are in the soil of a history that is still ours, not a buried stratum.

But to understand the fall as a trope of beginnings in modern art we have to know that the Protestant side during the civil war and revolution was split, and it was into *that* space that Satan fell. The artisan and merchant classes who were working to replace subsistence agriculture with waged labour, communal land with plantations and rents, and traditions of charity and poor relief with workhouses and prisons did not share quite the same values as the more radical groups—so-called Diggers, Ranters, Quakers and Levellers—whose millenarian and communist ideas seemed to centre around utopian images of the same rural world that was being destroyed. At the same time, these attacks on property and social privilege, which, as Christopher Hill has shown, were broadly based in the very lowest social strata, including landless peasants, itinerant craftsmen,

and even criminals, came with a very sophisticated theology. Thinkers such as Winstanley, Nayler, Muggleton and Clarkson held views breathtaking in their modernity, in fact views that were not widely heard again until the twentieth century: that the Bible is an allegory, that there is no afterlife and no immortal soul, that religion was an instrument of class rule and that priests cynically kept the people under a spell of superstition, that God was not a person but the totality of nature and that heaven and hell were conditions of life in this world, there being no other. The exponents of these ideas were themselves Satanic figures, but to them, a base materialism was good—for them, a world without God and his priests was a real material, secular paradise. After the restoration, thanks in no small part to this tradition of critical theology, the true hellishness of the presumed “natural” social order becomes undeniably evident and Satan then takes on his negative aura.

As a fully realized creature of the imagination, Satan cannot be securely placed on one political side or the other; he is both critic of the established order and co-creator of it. He is, as he says, creator of himself, and yet his birth was a fall. His many-sidedness is what makes him an adequate model of a modern artist—art always take sides with the defeated, with the expropriated peasants, with those expelled from the garden, but it is also of the essence of the modernizing process—and also a model of what abstraction aims to be.

The paintings of 1947 were more than formal experiments. Pollock was trying to discover what kind of artist he was and necessarily taking on or performing two very different modern roles, roles first written by the Romantics and therefore fundamental for any artist: the artist as nature—Shakespeare the model; and the artist as a fallen being, as small and dry and unable to reach beyond himself as the pebbles in the paintings, but nevertheless heroically grounded in that same alienated state—the historic model Milton’s Satan. Pollock’s articulation of these two roles is his way of transforming materialist reduction into a modern sublime; more precisely, to invoke these two personae as alternative masks for the artist is a metaphoric way of talking about that motion.

Sensitive readers will detect here a close approach to Harold Rosenberg; the tradition of abstraction that I’m going to trace out from Pollock is not subjectivist in a narrow sense but it is about how it is possible to be an artist at all, in other words about the creation of the

individual as an autonomous critical position through a kind of mimetic work on historical tradition, and this is what Rosenberg talked about. Many art historians today are unthinkingly critical of Rosenberg; some of them, T.J.Clark and Rosalind Kraus, to name two, seem to think that they have to take sides with Greenberg against his rival, as if the friction between Greenberg's reductivism and seriousness and Rosenberg's irony and social perspective was a moral issue. In actuality it's more one of expedience; Greenberg's ideas are more useful to the art historian, definitely. Rosenberg's position is always caricatured, and reduced to the straw man of "action;" in fact his actor was always on stage—never blindly flailing, but always self-conscious and historically knowing, rehearsed to the point of virtuosity, and very much aware of the audience. Rosenberg's insight is that the artist is a function of the made thing, not of the biography of the person who makes things. To confuse him with a naive expressionist requires some willful misinterpretation; but then to listen closely to Rosenberg would perhaps painfully remind art historians of the theatricality of criticism. In any event, the expressiveness of Pollock's work lies in how a gesture—a fall—can bring to life a condition—a state of fallenness. The historical continuity of this state has to be articulated with the novelty of the gesture—the question is whether it is possible to fall further and to keep falling. Though we have to consider Satan, and Milton, I don't want to propose historical origins for Pollock, but historical consequences.

Pollock's successors, Stella and Louis, rejected the subjectivist or "expressionist" reading of his work even as they carried forward its aspect of self-negation or the voiding of meaning, which we could characterize as a fall into banality and emptiness, and each of these artists teach us how to read the classic drip paintings in this way. Stella's stripe paintings, for example, force a recognition of the dumb factuality of Pollock's commercial enamel on raw canvas. Notions that the swirls and loops of paint register movements in the artist's subjectivity are put aside by an objective arbitrariness that we come to identify as fundamental to abstraction itself. Louis foregrounds the experience of passive falling as he spends most of his studio time waiting for paint to drip.

At the 1967 Pollock retrospective, the works of 1947 had an important impact on Robert Smithson. In an article of the following year, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," Smithson recognized

Pollock as one of his own precursors:

*Full Fathom Five* becomes a Sargasso Sea, a dense lagoon of pigment, a logical state of an oceanic mind. Pollock's introduction of pebbles into his private topographies suggests an interest in geological artifices.

Pollock enabled Smithson to see the entropic aspect of Louis's pours, and this was immediately reflected in the composition of the essay *Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan*,<sup>2</sup> and in his series of out-of-the-studio, real world versions of Louis's paintings, such as the *Glue Pour* and the *Asphalt Rundown*. But his strongest response to Pollock is in his series of *Non-Sites*, begun in 1968. The nihilist line runs from Pollock's drips to Stella and Louis, and the *Non-Sites* then continue the decline, arriving at rock bottom. These works remind us that there is a larger universe outside the human world, and the invocation of entropy identifies this "outside" as death, which in art is always an allegory of the process of artistic becoming. The anxiety precipitated out in those boxes full of rocks is then of the same sort that produced Pollock, for the death wish encoded in the citations from *The Tempest*—the transformative "sea change"—is also an allegory of what the paintings are supposed to accomplish, both for himself and for art. Smithson's famous dialectic of boundlessness and containment is yet another attempt to put both romantic masks into play at once; cosmic immensity and fallen matter become the tropes of a new formal text that apparently dispenses with the fictional subjectivity of the artist yet still plays out the drama of his or her formation.

I recently encountered an unpublished work in a private collection that further illuminates the depth and richness of Smithson's engagement with Pollock's roles. A montage of photos and a map, it contains its own exhaustively descriptive title:

URINATION MAP OF THE CONSTELLATION HYDRA IN LOVELADIES N.J. AT EACH STAR-POINT ON THE CONSTELLATION THE ARTIST WILL URINATE TILL A SMALL MUD PUDDLE DEVELOPES. HE WILL TAKE FIVE INSTAMATIC SNAPSHOTS OF EACH OF THE FIVE STAR POINTS, AND MOUNT THEM ON A WALL.

The piece is a documentation of a landscape intervention similar to the better known *Dog Tracks* or *Overtured Rocks*, but its reference to the sky puts it right among the Pollock's of 1947. Smithson's piss piece joins

Pollock's stick with Louis's pouring technique, but it is the quote Smithson added to the *Urination Map* that reveals his understanding of Pollock's roleplaying:

*"...who best can send on high the salient spout, far-streaming to the sky..."* A. Pope. The competition implied by the quote is ironic for sure, but Smithson does prevail, not in reaching higher than his predecessors but in falling lower as the romantic models of the artist give way to the mock-heroic of Alexander Pope. Smithson was well aware that the ironic, witty and all too knowing Pope represented a position antithetical to the Romantics, and that this attitude was still in force in contemporary culture as an antagonism between the intensity and seriousness of New York School abstraction—continued in the criticism of Michael Fried—and the dandyish detachment of Warhol. The shock of an encounter with Pope in the context of post-war American art alerts us to the presence of those roles, the Shakespearean and the Satanic, which the artist must play, or play at, because they are the strongest images of modern selfhood, and of the overcoming of that condition, that history has provided. The masks become visible as they are discarded.

While we enjoy this historical comedy, which becomes much funnier as Smithson—and of course Warhol—reinvents the hand made work,<sup>3</sup> we musn't lose sight of the opportunity it gives us to negate formalist readings of abstraction while affirming the critical function of autonomous art. In Smithson's universe it seems as if the artist doesn't exist but this is only one particular and historically grounded way of inventing the artist as a locus of critical negation, and it is this ability to invent the artist as an absence that allows modernist abstraction to survive its critique by the left avant-garde.

In his 1990 history of conceptual art Benjamin Buchloh offers what has become in many quarters a standard account of that movement. According to Buchloh, the conceptualist moment was a short interval between formalist abstraction and a critical engagement with social institutions of art in the work of people such as Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke. The key turn is marked by work that intervenes directly in the architectural fabric—examples include Lawrence Wiener's plaster removal, Michael Asher's gallery alterations, Dan Graham's and Larry Bell's refunctioning of standard building materials. Works such as these are supposed to have exhausted all the possibilities left in abstract formalism

and simultaneously opened the way to a more socially critical art.

This kind of work is a synecdoche. The artist's intervention forms part of a larger whole, namely the architecture of the gallery or other building, and the architecture is itself a functional part of something larger, the social realm in general. Meaning flows down from the larger whole to the part, from the social totality to the architecture to the artwork. The world is big and art is a small thing; abandoning all pretence of autonomy, art is supposed to institute a critique in the very act of turning toward its own ground, and its meaning is dependent on the larger whole to which it is attached. Unfortunately for Buchloh's view, the *Non-Sites* are the strongest critical response to this strategy but they actually anticipated the emergence of conceptualism as a recognized genre. Smithson hardly figures in the aforementioned historical accounts yet the implications of his work bring the whole complex into question.

In a piece such as the *Franklin Non-Site* the important structural feature is the gaps between the metal boxes, through which the gallery visitor could presumably pass. It's as if a grill has been opened in the gallery floor, allowing us to see through to a material substratum, which in a clever reversal is extruded upwards into our space. The work is just as much engaged in an interruption of the gallery yet the outdoor space called up by the *Non-Site*—quarry or land fill or sand pit—exists side by side with the framing architecture. The rhetorical model here is metonymy. The rocks are something associated with the social—raw material or waste product—yet outside of it. This place outside is what enables a critical position which from the perspective of this moment at least seems much more sophisticated than the New Leftism of neoavant-garde artists and critics. The work and the world are placed on an equal footing and they then describe each other in a two way flow of meanings. At the moment when American power, wealth and progressive ambition is at its height Smithson's entropic rockpiles passively negate their context, and retain a formal independence that gives that negation a clearly sarcastic voice. The fall into the self which is also a voiding of the self is at the same time the movement away from the social that institutes a critique.

The unsolvable dilemma facing the generation of the sixties was to reconcile a critical understanding that had dispelled the illusion of art's autonomy with demands of modernist reduction and self-sufficiency that

had become binding for all art. The tendentious and programmatic art of the thirties was understood as a mistake because it betrayed art, yet there was a growing awareness that in some sense art itself, in its current condition, was a betrayal of social potentials. The non-committal blankness so well articulated by Warhol, and perhaps to some extent by Stella, was an obvious response to a difficult situation. Art had to stand on its own without an alibi or message and so it was up to the viewer to read the politics of the work as they pleased; the artist could never get involved in all that, yet the changes in art were themselves making political readings inevitable.

Smithson was the only artist of that generation, to my knowledge, who openly spoke about what it felt like to live this paradox and gave it a dramatic shape:

The artist does not have to *will* a response to the “deepening political crisis in America.” Sooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying. My “position” is one of *sinking* into an awareness of global squalor and futility. The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art. The trap is set. If there’s an original curse, then politics has something to do with it. Direct political action becomes a matter of trying to pick poison out of boiling stew. The pain of this experience accelerates a need for more and more actions....the best and the worst actions run together and surround one in the inertia of a whirlpool. The bottom is never reached, but one keeps dropping into a kind of political centrifugal force that throws the blood of atrocities onto those working for peace....Conscience-stricken, the artist wants to stop the massive hurricane of carnage, to separate the liberating revolution from the repressive war machine. Of course, he sides with the revolution, then he discovers that real revolution means violence too. Ghandi is invoked, but Ghandi was assassinated. Artists always feel sympathy for victims. Yet, politics thrives on cruel sacrifices. Artists tend to be tender; they have an acute fear of blood baths and revolutionary terror. The political system that now controls the world on every level should be denied by art. Yet, why are so many artists now attracted to the dangerous world of politics?

In this brief text, published in *Artforum* in 1970, Smithson’s encounter with Bataille’s theory of sacrifice gives the falling imagery condensed in

the *Non-Sites* a spinning motion. The Romantic figures begin to give way to another, perhaps more ancient mask that tells us that the anguish of the fallen, who are still falling, while it might be confined to the art that expresses it, is yet entirely social in origin. The impossibility of art lies in the antithesis of commitment and freedom—but then impossibility is the condition of art's existence. There is neither a formal nor a social solution because to assume either is to remain inside the problem. The artist can move free of this dilemma but only by first acknowledging its binding nature, and the image of the vortex does this even as it maintains a continuity with Pollock's throws and drips.

Smithson's repudiation of politics may not have made him a good citizen but paradoxically it made his art far more critical than most—and to the extent that it maintains the autonomy proper to art it is more effectively critical than any openly political art could ever be. Reduction of the means of art is a test for aesthetic experience. To ask whether the emotional and cognitive experiences offered by art can survive without illusion is to suggest that they themselves may only be illusion anyway; the artist that purges illusionism from art is then also giving up his or her own illusions, and this could be figured as the falling away of a succession of masks. Progressive reduction in art could be seen as a tool of enlightenment for artists who want to know who they are and what they really feel—and to make a space within which they could feel anything—but always in relation to the surrounding social space.

It should be clear from everything preceding that Pollock's fall is not the literal fall of paint from his stick; in fact the techniques of Pollock and Louis are themselves metaphors. What is under discussion is reduction as an aesthetic posture, of which the abandonment of painterly tools and the capacities they give is only one aspect; Pollock's gesture is more than a throw of the paint, it is a deliberate declining away from the achievement of cubism. In a classic modernist strategem, he moved downward to a more fundamental plane of experience, where plastic form and pictorial space are not so clearly resolved. But this makes no sense—after all, the only experience offered by either Picasso or Pollock is the experience of art, so all talk of below or above is itself merely figurative.

Pollock's gesture is a troping of earlier art, and the only language we have to talk about it is also figurative. And though spatial tropes are

present, the temporal are more strongly felt; Pollock aims to find a place *before* cubism—the temporal movement is backward, to a more “primitive” and hence more modern achievement. Fallenness can only be acknowledged and troped through a further fall; he undoes the father by further scattering his broken forms and further collapsing his uncertain spaces.

Krasner’s description of Pollock’s ambivalence toward Picasso is well known:

...there’s no question that he admired Picasso and at the same time competed with him, wanted to go past him. Even before we lived in East Hampton I remember one time I heard something fall and then Jackson yelling ‘God damn it, that guy missed nothing!’ I went to see what had happened, Jackson was sitting, staring: and on the floor, where he had thrown it, was a book of Picasso’s work...<sup>4</sup>

but his disheartenment might better be explained by the following words of God from Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, words that might have been suggested by the illustrations in that same artbook:

Necessity and Chance

Approach not me, and what I will is Fate.<sup>5</sup>

It’s no accident that Pollock’s method should hinge precisely on the same dialectic of chance and necessity—means with which to make his own space within that aesthetic fate called Picasso.

Pollock aims to be first, and so he necessarily tropes the consequences of the first fall—labour. Work is the curse of the fallen world; interestingly Milton, in common with some of his radical contemporaries, believed that Adam and Eve also worked in the garden before the fall.<sup>6</sup> For modern art, a positive conception of labour has long been crucial.

Impressionist paintings, for example, often depict scenes of leisure, and this is one reason for their popularity, but they also display visible signs of the work that went into them - their brushstrokes show. It’s the congruence of work and leisure that makes Impressionist paintings so appealing and so significant; they are accounts of lived time, not empty time passed in routine work, or “killed” leisure time, its counterpart, but

genuinely lived time, free of the clock but measured out by the stages of an intrinsically valuable activity. It could be the very image of non-alienated labour, except that it is so dependent on typical holiday sights and scenes, and on how those summer days feel, that it can't get out of the shadow of modern work. A beautiful dream of time lived without pressure, but a time ticked off by the succession of brushstrokes, each one a reminder of the grim truth that all dreams are of a moment, and that all moments must end.

In modern art after Impressionism, sensual pleasure is increasingly expressed through large flat colour areas, culminating in the so-called colour field of sixties American modernism. The little brushstrokes disappear, except around the edges of a field, or turn into subtle modulations within it, a generalized brushiness. In the process work also seems to disappear, but not for the painter. It takes a lot of repetitive and sometimes even boring work to make a "one-shot" painting, one that gives the viewer an instant and easy pleasure. Yet each colour field is still the equivalent of one brushstroke. Impressionism is continued in these works not just through lateral openness or optical effects but in an image of an elastic present - a temporal distance that's been lived through.

In any modernist painting, what matters is the interval between the individual strokes; the shorter the interval the more vivid the experience of the work as an organic union of action and reflection. The field painting represents an inflation of the inter-time, which coincides historically with an increasingly conceptual practice within all forms of art. It is an adaptation to a world where an artist passes ever more time like an office worker - organizing, supervising, phoning, ordering, paying bills, explaining, teaching, even writing. The gap between strokes is the space of reflection, of criticism, of reorientation of energies toward the next stroke, and the wider it is the more filled in with digressions, discursions, relationships, allusions, parallels and language of all sorts—all more or less direct or indirect ways toward the next stroke but also ever more likely to form an autonomous realm of their own.

But the stroke itself, now very much larger than could be grasped by any artist's hand, is as hollowed out as the complementary inter-time. Morris Louis, for one, spent most of his working day waiting for the paint to finish dripping. Two canonical readings of his work are clearly inadequate; neither Michael Fried's claims for a high seriousness that

skates over the surface of nothingness, nor the contrary but corollary view that the pictures are pure visual pleasure really have it covered. What both miss is the labour of filling in the field—and Louis’s exemplary way of dodging that work. More germane is Shep Steiner’s Kierkegaardian reading of Louis’s anxiety. As the paint falls, so does the artist; Louis’s passive process is an experience of a fall into banality and emptiness, and though he accepts empty time without any apparent anxiety, it is precisely this acceptance that measures what is at stake. One of the beauties of Louis’s work is that each stain clearly and visibly retains its identity as a single stroke, and this is the difference between it and the work of the more strictly field painters such as Newman, Rothko, Kelly and Noland: Louis’s drips track the price paid for the one-shot painting, a price paid in “lost” time.

The works of Pollock, Frankenthaler, and Louis are openly additive; they move in one direction only toward completion—there are no corrections. Corrections and changes of all sorts, which are a turning back of the work on its own development, were of the essence of modernist painting from Cézanne right through Cubism and Mondrian, and this ability to turn back has important pragmatic consequences for any historical theory of modernism—if the artist can turn back before the work is finished, then presumably any artist can turn back at any time to any earlier modern moment, as long as modernity itself is not finished. But the reason for on-going changes and corrections was to build stronger, more compelling works—pictures with an ability to stop time and still keep it alive. Modernist painting aims to heighten the time sense by creating a vivid present; to do this it has to tinker with the past—including the past of art—and needs a strong sense of the future. The colour field continues this tradition but disassembles its time consciousness by eliminating internal movement and presenting itself all at once. The present becomes clotted with paint; there are no spaces through which time can breathe. In great modernist painting, sensuousness releases the moment and frees the viewer; the brushwork of latter day abstraction is temporal quicksand, and the even, flat field only covers over the mistake. The additive painters, on the other hand, let the time of painting unfold as an image of their own mortality. Is it because they have lost the strength to seize time and make it halt?

Paintings don’t literally move after all. Their movements are

figurative—in other words, tropes. The tradition from Pollock through Louis and Frankenthaler tropes by substituting natural process for creative power, or, more accurately, the artist's capacity to both break and invent form is figured as itself nature. Since the process used is gravity, the time of creation becomes an allegory of death—time runs out with the paint. It's easy to see a continuity with the Impressionists and their discovery that paint itself can be used to heighten the time sense, although the art actually troped is cubism, with its claim to the future. This curtailing of the time within the work is a more radical reduction of art's potentials than the elimination of figuration, but freedom from the past—meaning especially the cubist past—is supposed to open up the future and establish a new tradition. A painting without a past is a first painting, yet in practice the new abstraction could only anticipate a future of more reductions. The final swerve in this lineage is made by Smithson's *Non-sites*. Where Pollock and Frankenthaler redeemed their falling modernism by claiming firstness - *Before the Caves*, as one of Frankenthaler's punning titles has it - and Louis took the primacy of the laws of physics as a way of competitively establishing himself as earlier still, Smithson, with sardonic ambition, called on The Second Law of Thermodynamics, a more fundamental law than gravity, but this firstness is also an image of the end of time. A jumbled pile of rocks in a steel box is the ultimate cubist composition—many flat and curved planes tilted in all directions, crystalline solids and voids of any shape—but there is literally nowhere to go from there; the fall through time has finished and all potential energy has been expended. The death of painting is hardly an historical event; it is one of the major tropes of firstness and a critical perspective on the deadness of work in this culture. Only the most flat-footed literalist could take the endgame as the sign of an actual end, however deferred, and claims about the end of modernism are all too literal responses to the dying fall of one tradition of abstract art.

The most productive modern moment was cubism, and so it still remains. Oddly, the evidence suggests that it is not the period from 1910-1912 that matters as much as the interweaving and overlapping planes of the great culminating works of the twenties. These seem to be Pollock's reference point as he suggests complexly curved planes by drawing the lines that define their edges. Greenberg's insight that Pollock destroys and sublimates the space of analytic cubism is right, but only if we see that

Pollock reaches back to 1911 from the twenties. And the great unexpended potential of that moment emerges today from the work of Smithson's most significant successor, Gordon Matta-Clark.

We have to begin with Matta-Clark's brilliantly economical appropriation and negation of Smithson. Smithson thought that an artwork was a frame—Matta-Clark accepts that but doesn't need an actual frame, he just cuts a hole. He burrows into the social in a way that even dispenses with Smithson's melancholy remnants, yet his work is in no way a negation of the object in favour of an idea but a real existing material emptiness. These holes are things. But more significant yet is that Matta-Clark's engagement with Smithson's work spontaneously re-opens cubism. Though many of Matta-Clark's cuts were circular, just as many—and some of the most striking, such as the famous *Day's End*—were made of two intersecting arcs. The ends of these arcs are somewhere out in the surrounding city - grounded in the social - and as they intersect they also implicitly overlap, reminding us of a typical late cubist device and of Pollock's skeins. Likewise, cuts that run through more than one floor of a building effectively re-invent collage as the juxtaposition of social spaces even as they dispense with the need to bring disparate objects together. Matta-Clark's relation to cubism is similar to Pollock's—creative negation rather than imitation.

Matta-Clark's works are all space—they contain nothing that could be construed as equivalent to a brushstroke—and so their time is only the time of everyday life. But everyday life and everyday time is the material of art. Brushes, paint and canvas are tools for sculpting time, but it can be done without them. What matters is not the medium or method, but that the present should live, or that artists and viewers should be able to live in it. Smithson's entropy is the final trope in a tradition that in reaching for ultimate beginnings and ends had to cut away the particular past and future that belonged to its own present. Earlier modernism, on the other hand, constructed the present as a space of some elastic dimensions, as a pause that gathers into itself a specific and not so distant past and a specific possible future. Once in such a space, one could presumably do something that really would constitute life, and this is where avant-garde politics begins. Matta-Clark's work, like most avant-gardist work of the sixties, places all value in the real time of contemporary labour, but nevertheless it contains absolutely no suggestion of entropy, and this is

why its surprising recovery of cubism seems productive rather than accomplished. It is in no way grounded in the “anxiety of influence,” in other words in the claim that the modernist past is finished, and though it does have the form of a synecdoche, it differs from work supported by Buchloh, such as Weiner’s plaster removal, in that it doesn’t accept the necessity of the grid or the square. It’s a kind of drawing and cutting directly into the social substratum that yet keeps open the formal possibilities of drawing and cutting.

At the turn of this century, the pictorial initiatives of the beginning of the last seem—should I say it?—timely. But the split between DeKooning’s version of cubism and the field paintings of Frankenthaler, Louis and Noland—which are supposed to mark a fundamental and irrevocable break with cubist space and cubist form—has become canonical, and unreflective. American painting has flattened itself into a corner, and cubism is above all an art of turned corners. Perhaps abstraction might benefit if we could see Pollock’s lines as cuts and the spaces between them as planes—in other words see Pollock as closer to De Kooning than we are used. Then the openness of the field could combine productively with the interlocked forms of the past buried beneath its surface—and then painting might have its time once more.

One might use the following terms to try and describe the spaces in a painting by Pollock - transparent globular bulges, superposed wires and threads, pleats, plateaux and cliffs. Andreas Neufert, the leading scholar of Wolfgang Paalen, has traced out the Austrian artist’s importance for abstract expressionism, and for Pollock in particular. Paalen was strongly opposed to Matta’s conception of a multi-dimensional perspectival space, holding that space was a function of the viewer’s perceptions, that the viewer must actively create it. Paalen’s space could never be an empty box, however twisted, and it could never be consistent or unified over the whole field of the canvas. What Paalen was reaching for, in Neufert’s words, was a unification of seeing and imagining, both for the artist and the viewer.

This throws a different light on Pollock’s scale. In the large drip paintings, one can see the overall rhythms of Pollock’s lines and the shapes they create from some distance back, but closer up the broader pattern is lost and the surface of the picture begins to undulate and breathe in and out as one notices a multitude of recessions and

overlappings among the skeins and stains. In cubist pictures, on the other hand, both of these aspects - the larger design and the movement of the planes as they project forward and fold back - can be seen from the same viewing position. Pollock splits these two aspects apart, and in that way adds a temporal element to the viewing experience, for the viewer is required to move. This is in line with Paalen's demand for a simultaneous creation/perception - an active concept of an image constantly in formation. The viewer has to move just as the artist does. Neufert's startling and highly original suggestion is that Pollock's swirls and loops are a mimesis of the experience of looking at a cubist work - the constant back and forth movements in every direction over the surface of the picture that the viewer has to make in order to assemble for themselves a coherent image.

Pollock adopts Picasso's aim - to render the forms that create space transparent. Braque's counter-suggestion - that the space around the object must become tangible - is an unfortunate dialectical move, one that works against cubism, obscuring its ambition and achievements. Pictorial space is transparency, by definition. Space and form are always inter-effective, creating and defining each other, and historically forms were always solid and opaque, making space a circumambient medium. Cézanne's twisted and folded spaces showed a way out of the box, and Picasso competitively took those folds and bent them further, driving them right through each other. The straight lines in a cubist painting of 1911-12 form strict boundaries for the individual strokes of paint, almost always marking a shift of colour or tone, yet we can still feel the space flowing through the planes. Pollock continues in the same direction by setting his stronger and more prominent lines against, beneath and above amorphous clouds and fogs of paint. Even where they close in on themselves to make skeletal volumes, the effect is still one of free and transparent movement within and through the paint.

The possible spaces and volumes of Pollock's work only exist inside the tangled woolly mass that forms the image, and that sits rather neatly inside the edges of the canvas. From this observation it's easy to follow the logic of Le Va, Morris and Hesse, but the question is what kind of space lies outside the image? In what kind of space does it rest - is it Malevich's or even Matta's kind of infinity, and does that type of space form the limiting boundary of Pollock's, and Paalen's, ambition?

Most of the abstract expressionists were profoundly influenced by the concept of invented space proposed by Paalen and first convincingly embodied in Pollock's large scale drip pictures, at least the visual evidence suggests as much. De Kooning's work, for one example, is thoroughly relativistic - space only appears through the motion of adjacent planes and cannot be seen as an empty container for pictorial incidents. The same could be said about Kline's work, or Frankenthaler's. David Smith might be on the same track in his *Hudson River Landscape*, but ultimately the relations between the different parts of a sculpture will all exist within the white box of the gallery. These thoughts might give rise to the question whether painting has more spatial resources than installation, and whether cubist and abstract painting might to this day be capable of a more sophisticated engagement with social space than any installation. Greenberg's criticism of De Kooning's cubism, that it was always fitting itself to the frame, is not really correct, and in any event it is not a sufficient basis for a break with the cubist legacy. There is no reason why an articulated and divided interior couldn't avail itself of the openness and expansiveness of post-painterly abstraction. Imagine twisted and overlapping planes, folding and bulging forward and back, diving under each other and resurfacing, but treating the edges of the canvas as if they didn't exist, implying that we only see a portion of a larger whole. This kind of composition would implicitly reach out into social space, but retain illusionism.

Both Picasso and Pollock are working against the opacity of paint itself, for the medium that is supposed to create space can be itself nothing but a blockage of the same. Such is the magic of great painting—to assert and simultaneously overcome its own materiality. To put it another way—all painting is illusionistic. The important question is whether avant-gardist forms founded on a presumed or desired break with painting really are capable of founding a new genre of practice that doesn't fall under the rubric of illusionism. The evidence from Smithson and Matta-Clark is ambiguous. Since the importance of Cubism was precisely the way in which it reached out beyond painting, it may seem perverse to look back through the works produced by those energies to their pictorial origins.

Be that as it may, there is hope in many quarters that abstraction can be revived as a major contemporary practice. This hope is naturally

associated with concerns about American primacy in the arts; the enormous attention paid by the New York art press to the end-of-the-millennium Pollock retrospective at MOMA—*Art in America* ran three stories, *Artforum* two, the latter by art historical heavy hitters Thomas Crow and Michael Fried—at the very moment when globalism had become a new watchword, when Latin and Asian artists were more visible than ever before, and when an African had just been chosen the curator of the first Documenta of the new century, seems to signify something—a certain anxiety as much as the powerful interests involved. One wonders what artists in the rest of the world thought. But American abstraction has betrayed its own origins. What began as a critique of the complacent sensuousness of French art, what was once called its “cuisine,” has itself become exactly that. The frisson produced by the juxtaposition of a stroke with a smear or a stripe with a wipe is just not going to cut it; unless it can provide more than a private satisfaction there is no reason why anyone should care about abstraction at all. The weakness of formalism lies in its inability to give form to either artist or viewer; the autonomous self-sufficient work has to be reinvented, and not as a new formalism.

The voiding of tradition is not a given; the present as the abyss of nihilism is not just everyday background, it has to be entered, and therefore the assumption of the role of artist must entail a movement of some kind. For the artists I am discussing this movement was a fall, and in western culture a fall has long been constitutive for any selfhood. But the process of individuation, the way that a global, urban capitalist society produces a specific type of alienated individual, is not restricted to the west and it is occurring everywhere under conditions of social and political crisis. The economy is cruel, the environment is collapsing, the bombs are dropping—from Serbia to Iran to America, the modern critical consciousness shares social, discursive and cognitive space with patterns of thought that haven’t changed since the Middle Ages or before. All over the world intelligent people are trying to get a perspective on the insanity around them that would also allow them to construct themselves in an effective way. What else could art be for? In urban cultures with an old history two very flat, stereotypical characters often become quite prominent—the mask of the aesthete (formalism) and the mask of the polemicist. Because they leave subject and object separate, these masks

actually block the possibility of a response to the world that could also recreate the artist—but that is exactly what a new abstraction would have to be. Within every culture—Asian, African, Latin American, European—there are traditional collective patterns that give meaning to life and there are also emergent solitary ways of knowing that can only be articulated through a denial of existing meaning. The tradition of negation grounded in abstract painting can hardly be finished, only the inadequate readings of it have come to rest in their respective historical and geopolitical contexts.

I'm saying that the world could use Pollock, could use Smithson; that modernist abstraction is not the property of America, because it is grounded in historical experiences that are universally modern, and it's not the form of the works that matters as much as their power of negation. At the same time, an appropriation of modernist abstraction can only occur as a critique. And a critique of the reduced temporality of abstraction is a good place to begin to open modernist painting to history once again.

Robert Linsley, Kitchener Jan. 2002

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hill, Milton and the English Revolution, London 1977, p.368

<sup>2</sup> See my "Mirror travel in the Yucatan: Robert Smithson, Michael Fried and the New Critical Drama," Res #37 Spring 2000, pp.7-30

<sup>3</sup> Smithson's "Urination map" predated Warhol's piss paintings by a long time. The latter belong to the late seventies.

<sup>4</sup> B.H.Friedman, "An Interview with Lee Krasner Pollock," in Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews , ed. Pepe Karmel, MOMA New York 1999, p.36

<sup>5</sup> John Milton, Paradise Lost, (VII 172-173) ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, New York 1962, p. 169

<sup>6</sup> Hill, Milton, p.395