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Notes on Surface: toward a genealogy of flatness[1]

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I.

When I think about *surface* I think of an advertisement I have seen in several of the gay publications which are distributed free in my Los Angeles neighbourhood. It shows a man with gelled hair, dramatic eyes and high cheek bones, whose face is framed by the following text: 'Beautiful? Sure./ Real? Who cares!' The ad is one of many promotions for elective plastic surgery published in the popular press – gay and straight alike – of southern California. What fascinates me about this particular exhortation to remake the body pivots on the word *real*. Clearly, for the ad writer (as well as for the man represented and for the presumed readers), the *real* does not carry the Lacanian perfume it may emanate for readers of this text. Rather, it is intended to signify 'authentic', and authenticity is dismissed with a campy shrug: 'Who cares!' But if this exclamation is accurate – if no one cares – then why does the ad take pains to preempt the anxieties it appears to disavow? For indeed, the question the advertisement asks in spite of itself – its repressed returning – is the following: 'If your face isn't real, what is?' This is a question whose significance I believe goes far beyond the precincts of the pulp press. If our bodies are as malleable as the surgeons wish us to believe and if genetic science has proven that the texture of our organic envelope is in fact a code, then where is it that we can lodge the self? Is it, as popular psychology has it, some interior essence – some inner child – or does it inhere in the changeable surfaces of the body? The radical possibility encoded in the 'Who cares!' of our advertisement, is the collapse of this dichotomy. Forget about the real, it does not exist, or it is everything that exists: *Who cares!*

This, I think, is the ethical riddle which haunts a complex and contradictory field of discourses on flatness and depth within art history. It is well known but little acknowledged that flatness, which is traditionally associated with a teleological progress toward self-referentiality within modern painting, has also served as the reigning metaphor of its supposed negation, postmodernism. Listen to Fredric Jameson:

> A new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense [is] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms to which we will have occasion to return. . . .'[2]

The kind of flatness Jameson theorizes is characterized by pastiche and simulation: it is the postmodern face of the surgically enhanced model in the advertisement I have been describing. But is Jameson's flatness the same species of flatness that Clement Greenberg posited as a fundamental characteristic of modern painting? My answer to this question is 'yes and no' and the purpose of this essay is to sketch such a response. For in my view the 'flatness' of modernism is not merely an optical event: the emergence of the flat painting marks a transformation in spectatorship in which mimetic identification with the picture is displaced by the private kinesthetic experience of the viewer. The event, as it were, moves from the conscious to the unconscious. To put it schematically, abstraction functions as a machine for recording the psychological responses of the artist in order to produce (perhaps dramatically different) psychological responses in the viewer. The depth it exhibits, I will be arguing, is psychological. In art designated as *post*modern on the other hand, a different articulation of flatness and depth arises. In such works not only optical but *psychological* depth undergoes deflation, resulting in a visuality in which identity manifests itself as a culturally conditioned play of stereotype.

Because the term *flatness* seems to have stealthily crossed and recrossed the modern/postmodern divide, I have chosen it as a wedge with which to break apart what I see as a false opposition between movements. While the concept of flatness has traditionally served to balkanize modernism, I intend to maintain its several and contradictory meanings in order to weave together a different account of twentieth-century art. I regard such an analytic project as more than an exercise in re-categorization. In order to dislodge accounts of modern art from the impacted Greenbergian tradition which persists as much in its ritual negation as in its much rarer affirmation, it is necessary to re-articulate his critical terms. But rethinking modernism is only one of the benefits of engaging once more with flatness: the term possesses significant explanatory force in analysing so-called postmodern art as well. There is a great deal at stake in acknowledging that the flatness or depthlessness we experience in our globalized world is more than an optical effect. I will argue that flatness may serve as a powerful metaphor for the price we pay in transforming ourselves into images – a compulsory self-spectacularization which is the necessary condition of entering the public sphere in the world of late capitalism.

II.

Clement Greenberg understood that even in the flattest of modernist paintings a spectator's perception and expectation of depth could not be banished. Instead, depth was encoded, displaced, or signified within the shallow surface of the painting. One of his greatest contributions as a critic was to develop a sophisticated lexicon of such strategies. I will enumerate three of them. Firstly, he saw in collage the elaboration of what might be called a 'reverse-depth': a literal building-out from the picture plane rather than an illusionist recession beyond it. As he wrote in 1948, in a review of the exhibition *Collage*:

> the next step in the denial of illusion was to lift the extraneous elements above the surface of the picture and secure the effects of depths and

> volumes by bringing this or that part of the picture physically close to the eye, as in bas-relief.[3]

The second form of optical displacement Greenberg identifies, is what he calls 'tautness of feeling', or a compression into shallow relief of the deep illusionistic spaces of pre-modernist painting. In a 1952 essay he describes it in this way:

> Tautness of feeling, not 'depth,' characterizes what is strongest in post-Cubist art. The taking up of slack, the flattening out of convexities and concavities – the ambitious contemporary artist presents, supposedly, only that which he can vouch for with complete certainty; he does not necessarily exclude, but he distrusts more and more of his emotions.[4]

The third means of displacing depth is to transpose illusionistic recession into lateral extension. Greenberg elaborates this concept in his important essay ' "American-Type" Painting', originally published in 1955. In this text he writes:

> That these pictures were big was no cause for surprise: the abstract expressionists were being compelled to do huge canvases by the fact that they had increasingly renounced an illusion of depth within which they could develop pictorial incident without crowding; the flattening surfaces of their canvases compelled them to move along the picture plane laterally and seek in its sheer physical size the space necessary for the telling of their kind of pictorial story.[5]

This triple enumeration of a vestigial depth within 'American-Type' painting – in the 'reverse-depth' of collage, through spatial compression or 'tautness', and in the lateral extensions of monumental canvases – is both prescient and convincing. But Greenberg's exclusive focus on the optical occludes an equally, if not more important allegorical dimension of depth in Abstract Expressionism – one which is fundamental to the painting of Jackson Pollock.

This allegory arises from the conviction, shared equally by Pollock and his critics, that gestural painting emerges from an inner source – a *psychological depth*. Pollock's interest in the unconscious is well documented, as is his assertion, in a statement of 1951, that 'The method of painting is the natural growth out of a need. I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.'[6] Despite the hundreds, if not thousands, of times this equation between emotion and abstraction has been cited in describing Pollock's art, I do not know if its significance has ever truly been appreciated. How is it that a series of splashes and puddles of paint, handprints and crushed cigarette butts could come, in 1951, to stand for the psychic undergirding of the self? Greenberg was well aware of the paradoxical nature of this association between painterly matter and human emotion. In his defensive review of Pollock's 1948 exhibition at Betty Parsons he wrote:

> As before, [Pollock's] new work offers a puzzle to all those not sincerely in touch with contemporary painting. I already hear: 'wallpaper patterns,' 'the

> picture does not finish inside the canvas,' 'raw, uncultivated emotion,' and so on and so on.[7]

The list of potential condemnations Greenberg imagines ranges from a form of representation absolutely bereft of affect – wallpaper – to one consisting of nothing but undisciplined affect: 'raw, uncultivated emotion'. The fact that Greenberg *knows* that a spectator might plausibly have either response (or perhaps both) to Pollock's work leads us to the crux of the problem with an exclusively optical analysis of depth and flatness. For, as is clear in his passage on the 'tautness of feeling', which I cited earlier, the three means he identifies of displacing depth onto surface – the reverse-depth of collage, surface tension, and lateral extension of the canvas – are all underwritten by an insistence on *psychological* depth. It is worth revisiting the second passage I cited above to clarify my point:

> Tautness of feeling, not 'depth,' characterizes what is strongest in post-Cubist art. The taking up of slack, the flattening out of convexities and concavities – the ambitious contemporary artist presents, supposedly, only that which he can vouch for with complete certainty; he does not necessarily exclude, but he distrusts more and more of his emotions.

Greenberg establishes a chain of equivalences between optical qualities and emotional states: tautness of *feeling* is opposed to depth, the 'flattening out of convexities and concavities' is linked to what the artist 'can vouch for', which turns out to be his authentic emotions – those which have narrowly escaped 'exclusion'. Flatness here is imagined as a density or even an impaction of feeling. Consequently, depth is bifurcated into emotional and optical registers, and these are engaged in a zero-sum game. According to Greenbergian modernism, the expression of *psychological* depth requires the sublimation of *optical* depth. If, in Pollock's eyes, abstraction was a technique for performing an emotional need, in Greenberg's formulation the converse is true: optical modernism is legitimated by the painter's emotions. It is only those emotions which the painter 'can vouch for with complete certainty' which transform apocalyptic wallpaper into some of the greatest painting of the twentieth century. If what I say is correct, Greenberg's cocky advocacy of flatness veils a profound anxiety over the 'legitimacy' of abstraction. For, in this art, optical flatness is validated by psychological depth.

We can describe Greenbergian modernism, then, as a painterly practice in which the artist's unconscious is mortgaged to form. Such a proposition, linking the architecture of selfhood to the invention of aesthetic vocabularies, begs the question of visuality, or the historically specific nature of visibility within the social field. The term *visuality* is a critical category which points to articulations of visual form with extra-aesthetic determinants such as cultural institutions and psychic formations. Visuality consequently encompasses two distinct registers which are thoroughly imbricated in one another: the spectator and the spectacle, patterns of looking as well as habits of form. In my discussion of Greenbergian modernism I have raised an issue which bears on the

1 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950. Oil on canvas. 105 × 207 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund, 1957. (57.92). © 1999 Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

latter dimension of visuality: What is the association between abstraction and psychic affect? This venerable question in twentieth-century art history and cultural criticism has produced an array of responses ranging between two theoretical positions. On the one hand, there is the Lukácsian condemnation of abstraction as an effect of the alienation – or the *abstraction* – of social relations under capitalism.[8] In this view abstract art transposes the law of universal exchangeability into the arena of arbitrary symbolic form. On the other hand, a tradition runs from Kandinsky to Bretonian surrealism right up to the painters of the New York school, which associates abstraction with the translation of imagination, or the unconscious, into colour and shape. The visuality of early- and mid-twentieth-century abstraction thus emerges from alternating charges of alienation and liberation. But, as Foucault's notion of the 'disciplinary' suggests, these qualities form two sides of the same coin: in his analysis the training of docile bodies is shown to be inextricable from the imperative placed upon them to narrate themselves, to 'liberate' themselves by putting their desire into discourse.[9]

How might we locate Pollock's painting in this force-field of twentieth-century abstraction? His art of 1948 to 1951 is characterized by an insistent materiality of paint organized into overlapping nets of propelled colour, each reverberating against the others. Encountering these works for the first time a viewer unfamiliar with the history of twentieth-century art might have trouble perceiving anything but a mess of colour resembling the stains on a studio floor.[10] Further attention might reveal a pulsating optical emanation, sometimes dense and glittering, sometimes loopy and dry. But in order to understand what Greenberg or Pollock saw in these paintings one would have to ascribe to them a particular historically specific link between form and emotion. Such a way of seeing, which is neither arbitrary nor inevitable, is what the category of visuality points to. An analysis of

Greenbergian visuality must thus make sense of phrases such as 'tautness of feeling' with their particular alchemy of the optical and the psychological. To accomplish this I propose bringing one of Foucault's most powerful analyses of the modern body to bear on Pollock's painting. In describing the epistemological shift from spectacular forms of public torture to the rationally administered bureaucracy of the prison, Foucault theorizes a particular link between body and soul. He suggests that rather than the soul animating the body as a kind of trans-personal kernel of spirituality, it instead arises as the effect of a body's seizure by power:

> Rather than seeing this soul as the reactivated remnants of an ideology, one would see it as the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body. It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power. ... A 'soul' inhabits [man] and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.[11]

By declaring that 'the soul is the prison of the body', Foucault points to a logic of introjection in which disciplinary regimes directed at the body from outside are encoded and perpetuated from 'within' through the psychic imperatives of the soul. Such a formulation sheds light on the articulation of painterly gesture and psychic affect in Pollock's art. If not quite the codified movements of the factory worker, the rhythmic actions which Pollock's body registers in paint pivot on a disciplinary beat of repetition.[12] The force of his canvases derives largely from how they simultaneously put pressure on the limits of intelligibility while suggesting the emergence of order from chaos. If, as I am suggesting, Foucault allows us to see the modern unconscious as an effect of bodily discipline, the link established by both Pollock and Greenberg between psychic affect and painterly form attains a certain epistemological sense. In Pollock's art the crassly physical – his gruff choreography, the flung paint, the bits of refuse – is made to signify the emotional, the unconscious. It is worth pausing to remark on this association for despite its familiarity, it is far from self-evident. Like Foucault's definition of the disciplinary, the visuality of Pollock and Greenberg presumes that a soul is constituted through bodily inscription – it is not above or beyond the body, but its simple correlative. If this is the case, painterly depth, as practised from the Renaissance onward, loses its special force. When interiority is found to be co-extensive with the body an art of surfaces – of flatness – would seem to be inevitable.

A series of drawings by Jasper Johns each entitled *Study for Skin* is such an art of the surface. In these works, Johns literally unwraps his own skin. The drawings were made by applying oil to his head and hands, and then pressing these parts of himself onto sheets of paper, over which he subsequently rubbed charcoal. The *Skin* series was produced in preparation for an unrealized project which Johns described in a notebook entry of 1960:

> Make a plaster negative of a whole head.
> Make a thin rubber positive of this.
> Cut this so it can be (stretched) laid
> on a board fairly flatly. Have it cast in
> bronze and title it *Skin*.[13]

Like a collapsed balloon, Johns proposes deflating a three-dimensional head, and stretching it out into a 'fairly flat' surface. In this literal equation between skin and surface he enacts what I have identified as a mortgaging of the self to painterly form in the art of Jackson Pollock: it is 'captured' in and on the picture plane. As Max Kozloff has memorably written, 'Nowhere in Johns' work has there been a more poignant effect of imprisonment, of the artist himself striving to break free from the physical limits of a work of art into which he has willfully impregnated his own image.'[14] The metaphor of imprisonment in this passage is worthy of remark. For in the decade intervening between Pollock's gestural painting and Johns's *Skin* drawings the implicitly disciplinary nature of the former has given way to the explicitly repressive containment of the latter.

Although seemingly exceptional in Johns's career, and while seldom discussed at length in the literature on his art, the *Skin* drawings belong squarely within his concerns of the late 1950s and '60s. I will suggest just two of several ways in which this is so. Firstly, the skin drawings are consistent with Johns's persistent inclusion of plaster casts in his paintings. In fact, they explore in different terms the relationship between pictorial and sculptural values which had been introduced in works such as *Target with Four Faces* (1955) and, later,

2 Jasper Johns, *Study for 'Skin I'*, 1962. Charcoal on drafting paper. 22 × 34 in. Photo Dorothy Zeidman. © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, New York.

Watchman of 1964. Secondly, there is evidence that Johns came to associate wax with the look and texture of flesh – consequently his longstanding use of an encaustic technique might be interpreted as an effort to associate the surface of a painting with the surface of the body. In a 1964 interview, for instance, he remarked,

> The idea for [*Watchman*] first occurred to me two years ago, when I visited Madame Tussaud's, in London. The image of flesh, the image of skin – images I had never used before. I have tried since then to include those images in my work, but in vain. The idea of the leg of a person sitting on a chair came to me about a year ago.[15]

Despite his not-quite-accurate declaration that he had not yet utilized images of flesh, this interview is useful in suggesting the association Johns made between wax – the medium of Mme Tussaud – and the appearance of skin. Perhaps his attraction to the exhibits of a wax museum was as much a retrospective recognition of earlier concerns as it was the impetus toward a new direction in his art.

If, as Kozloff suggests, Johns's adequation of skin and painterly surface thematizes an imprisoned body welling up from just below the paper's surface like a distorted reflection on a pool of water, in their formal structure these works also produce an allegory of the mind, or memory. In a sketchbook note of 1970–71 Johns wrote:

> Devise technique/to imitate 'magic picture pad' – image printed in invisible size on/paper becomes/visible when/scribbled over/with pencil. . . .
> (This was already done in the/*skin* drawings./Using oil.)[16]

The allusion to a 'magic picture pad', set off in quotations in Johns's text recalls Freud's utilization of a child's toy, the 'Mystic Writing-Pad', as a metaphor for the relationship between perception and memory. The mystic writing pad is composed of transparent layers of plastic and thin paper attached to the top end of a tablet with a malleable surface – in Freud's day the underlying tablet was wax. When a child writes or draws on the mystic pad with a stylus, letters and lines appear where the thin surface paper is pressed against the soft medium below. These images may be erased by pulling the transparent sheets apart from the underlying tablet but, as Freud insists, a trace of each inscription remains in the surface below. The allegory is simple and elegant: in the realm of consciousness, one perception follows another, each fading away in order to make room for the next, while in an underlying register of the unconscious this chain of ephemeral conscious stimuli lays down lasting memory traces. In the process of making his *Skin* drawings Johns embraced the duality – and delay – characteristic of the psychic topography described by Freud, but in reverse. The laying down of the original inscription, which in the mystic writing pad is visible, is virtually invisible in Johns's drawings, consisting as it does in the oily imprint of his face and hands on paper. It is the *belated* painterly gesture of applying charcoal onto the stained surface which reveals the initial indexical traces of the

body. Johns's 'magic picture pad' is thus the converse of Freud's 'mystic writing pad'. In Freud's allegory, perception leaves an unconscious or preconscious trace, but in Johns's version, such invisible or inaccessible marks are recuperated through the gestural application of medium.

If what I say is true, Johns, like Pollock, had invented an art of surfaces in which the body and its unconscious are articulated in a distinctively disciplinary fashion. In both artists' works traces of the body are generated through performative processes which allegorize the mind. If, in Pollock's art, the beat of repetition only implicitly suggested a Foucauldian regimentation, such a disciplinary experience is made explicit in the skin drawings through what Kozloff called a 'poignant effect of imprisonment'. And yet the body in Johns's *Skin* series remains largely unmarked, seemingly universal. This is not the case in a series of strikingly analogous works by the African-American artist David Hammons, also made by rubbing his greased body against paper and then working medium into the oiled surface. In one of Hammons's body prints, *Spade* (1974), the non-specific ethos of imprisonment Kozloff noted in Johns's *Skin* series is associated with a particular source: a vicious racist epithet. *Spade* consists of an imprint of the artist's lips and nose beneath two perfectly circular rings which read as eyes. This abstracted face is pressed within the contours of the playing-card icon of a spade, as though the body had been sliced by a cookie cutter whose inverted heart-shaped top forms a head rising from a stem-shaped 'neck'. Hammons addresses his fascination with the spade in a 1986 interview:

> I was trying to figure out why Black people were called spades, as opposed to clubs. Because I remember being called a spade once, and I didn't know what it meant; nigger I knew but spade I still don't. So I just took the shape and started painting it. I started dealing with the spade the way Jim Dine was using the heart.[17]

In this work the *violence* of form – its real capacity for injurious identification – is made explicit. In *Spade* the artist's occupation of a stereotype is enacted through the binding or limitation of his imprinted body by a readymade contour. This encounter between an unwrapped expanse of flesh and a precise iconic outline allegorizes the collision of two models of identity: one in which subjectivity is immanent to the body, and one in which the architecture of selfhood is imposed from without. I have argued that a disciplinary logic characterizes even Pollock's art, but the fact remains that in his own view, and in that of his closest critics, Pollock's canvases marked the difficult emergence of an inner 'freedom'. No such myth remains in the body prints of David Hammons. Here optical flatness does not simply dramatize the co-extensivity of body and unconscious, but rather performs a coercive process through which selves are *flattened* into types. In repeating his racist interpellation as 'spade', Hammons makes explicit the price we pay – in unequal measure according to our race, gender and sexuality – in having to exist as images for others, and in having to adjust to the images others have of us. If the disciplinary nature of the body mortgaged to form is largely veiled in the critical reception of Pollock's art, Hammons leaves no doubt as to its

3 David Hammons, *Injustice Case*, 1970. Mixed media: bodyprint (margarine and powdered pigments), American Flag. 63 × 40 1/2 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum Purchase with M.A. Acquisitions Fund.

political nature. In his work flatness signifies identification, and identification is a violent process indeed.

III.

Spade begs a vexing question which haunts much of the art produced over the past twenty-five years: what is the place of stereotype in visual culture? One thing is clear: the repetition and re-framing of normative images drawn from the media and elsewhere has become a dominant postmodern strategy. More than that, such repetitions are regularly regarded as political acts – as 'subversions' – both by artists themselves and by art critics. In the case of *Spade*, for instance, Hammons's citation of a racist epithet can be interpreted as an instance of hate set against itself. But his reiterative gesture can just as easily be condemned for re-circulating an offensive slur within publics, such as the art world, which do not normally traffic openly in such crude characterizations. Precisely such a debate has arisen around the work of Kara Walker, a young African-American artist whose best-known projects consist of large-scale black paper cut-outs which form tableaux of fictionalized scenes inspired by the antebellum south. These works are full of exaggerated racial attributes, perverse eroticism and frank scatology resembling the phantasmatic transmogrifications of history which occur in romance novels. Walker's summary of one of these pulp novels sounds like a description of her own work: 'There's this novel, *The Clansman*, which describes the deep South in a gothic Victorian style, all sorts of tantalizing creatures with grotesquely large lips, whose dirty hair is tied with dirty ribbons; catlike.'[18] After Walker had won a prestigious MacArthur award a few years ago, a letter campaign was initiated by African-American artists of an older generation, including Betye Saar and Howardina Pindell, protesting the 'negative images' her work disseminated. One of the strongest accusations launched against Walker was that her work pandered to the largely white establishment of art critics, curators and collectors serving up racist messages in the guise of avant-garde experimentation. The African-American artist Thom Shaw, whose assessment of Walker's art is more judicious than some, was one of several to point this out:

> The works are obviously targeted at whites. It's ironic that they buy it. I do have a problem with some of the curators. One can make a substantial argument that they're only showing the stereotypes.
>
> We're still looked at as Sambos. So when you see them, bigger than life, frozen in time, it does hurt.[19]

My intention here is not to adjudicate this debate – or even to suggest that such judgement is possible. As someone who is granted the racial invisibility that comes with whiteness in the United States, I cannot know what it is to be marked as people of colour are whenever they enter the public sphere. And yet, I do wish to point to the burden of stereotype which is unequally shared by all of us – even, increasingly, heterosexual white men. What the controversy surrounding Walker's art makes clear is that stereotypes are particularly charged representational units

4 Kara Walker, *From the Bowels to the Bosom*, 1996 (installation view). Cut paper and adhesive on wall. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.

against which individual identities are produced. The struggle to reframe stereotypical images is thus central to an anti-racist, anti-homophobic and feminist politics. But how exactly can this be accomplished visually? I return to the question I posed earlier: is reiterating a stereotype a subversive act or does it merely extend the violence of a crude slur? Walker's critics point to this dilemma when they accuse her of irresponsibly disseminating negative images of slavery. The art historian Lizzetta Lefalle-Collins has stated this position unequivocally: 'Derogatory imagery should not be put out without explanation. If you use it, you have to use it with some responsibility.'[20] But what exactly constitutes such explanation and such responsibility? Must controversial images be framed institutionally with interpretive materials, such as artist's statements, wall labels, or symposia, in order to clarify their author's intentions, or should such positioning be immanent to the visual object itself?

By way of addressing this dilemma I want to return to the issue of flatness. For indeed, Walker's works are physically flat: they are simple monochromatic cut-outs placed flush against the wall. But they are also blank – *flat* in their visual presentation, which eschews all detail except for the intricate contours of their cuts. Once again, Walker's own account is eloquent. Of the silhouette, she claims '[i]t's a blank space, but it is not at all a blank space, it is both there and not there.'[21] This formal oscillation between positive and negative, body and

shadow, black and white, captures the insidious nature of the stereotype. Stereotypes, like Walker's silhouettes, are always 'both there and not there'; they are blank in their generality, and yet powerfully present in their introjection by the stereotyped subjects and their racial others. Walker's works present themselves as malfunctioning templates, switching on and off from presence to absence. Her reiterative act is therefore unstable, allowing – even perhaps calling – for an interruption in its operations. But this does not fully explain – or explain away – the venality of the slave scenarios she represents. In these works there is a sharp sadistic pleasure evinced in scenes of bodies cut up, combined in polymorphous sexual configurations, and exploding piles of shit. Walker is frank in her desire both to occupy and pulverize the abjection of slavery: her statements, like her art, demonstrate a desire for, as well as a disgust with, the stereotype. She has stated:

> I figured out that I was a milestone in people's sexual experience – to have made it with a black woman was one of those things to check off on your list of personal accomplishments. That already has a slightly masochistic effect: to have just been the body for somebody's life story. I guess that's when I decided to offer up my side-long glances: to be a slave just a little bit. ... So I used this mythic, fictional, kind of slave character to justify myself, to reinvent myself in some other situations.[22]

What this passage insistently suggests is that the stereotype is not external to either the objectified subject or her racial other. The reified slave is not only a locus of oppression – though this is its strongest and most pernicious characteristic – but also a site of *desire*. In the example provided by Walker, the slave woman is an object of fascination for a white lover, *but also for herself*, who, as a well-educated middle-class African-American woman living in the late twentieth century, should 'know better' (as her critics have repeatedly claimed). According to this account, the racist stereotype is introjected and partially digested, but also partially expelled – an expulsion Walker hints at when, asked about the prevalence of scatological scenes in her art, she responds: 'Really it is about finding one's voice in the wrong end; searching for one's voice and having it come out the wrong way.'[23] In Walker's art, the stability of stereotypes is violently undermined: she animates them in order to break them apart literally and phantasmatically. Her cut-outs constitute an instance not of *reiteration*, but of *re-articulation*.

The political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have used the term *articulation* to signify the possibility of political action in the dispersed social field of late capitalism. For them, the simple oppositions of class conflict central to orthodox Marxian analysis have been eclipsed by a plurality of *subject positions* founded in various attributes of gender, race, sexuality, religion and nationality. Politics proceeds by producing and articulating new identities which arise in order to make new democratic demands. The Civil Rights movement, feminism and gay liberation are exemplary. But despite their emphasis on identity, Laclau and Mouffe posit a radically anti-essentialist model of subjectivity; for them identities are differential, constituted only in the moment of articulation:

> A no-man's-land thus emerges, making the articulatory practice possible. In this case, there is no social identity fully protected from a discursive exterior which deforms it and prevents it becoming fully sutured. Both the identities and the relations lose their necessary character. As a systematic structural ensemble, the relations are unable to absorb the identities; but as the identities are purely relational, this is but another way of saying that there is no identity which can be fully constituted.[24]

Laclau and Mouffe bring us back to *flatness*, the central concern of this essay. Their understanding of identity politics is *lateral* in that it arises from a differential economy of coexisting subject positions rather than emerging from an essential human depth. This shift from a model of subjectivity founded in interiority to one in which the self is constituted through a play of surfaces is what I have designated as psychological flatness. And indeed, just as I have analysed various ways in which psychological and optical flatness are articulated with one another in twentieth-century art, the tropes Laclau and Mouffe repeatedly return to are visual, often focusing on surfaces and planes. One example will suffice to capture the flavour of their language. In discussing the concept of hegemony – a politics founded in differential articulations and coalitions rather than in stable class oppositions – they write:

> the diverse surfaces of emergence of the hegemonic relation do not harmoniously come together. ... On the contrary, some of them would seem to be surfaces of *dissolution* of the concept: for the relational character of every social identity implies a breaking-up of the differentiation of planes, of the unevenness between articulator and articulated, on which the hegemonic link is founded.[25]

Articulations of identity are characterized by a 'breaking-up of the differentiation of planes'. The language of political theory approaches the idiom of art criticism. Laclau and Mouffe could be describing a painting by Pollock.

IV.

As I hope my analysis suggests, both the followers of Greenberg and those who would supersede his legacy have misunderstood flatness, even though Greenberg himself had an anxious inkling of how modernist opticality was mortgaged to psychological depth. I have attempted to defamiliarize the qualities of flatness and depth by demonstrating that, within them, the psychological, the optical and the political are intricately interwoven. We live in a world in which identity is form, and form is identity: proof of this is everywhere, from the evening news to the internet. But art historians persist in dividing the art of form – modernist painting – from the art of identity politics – postmodernism. This essay is an attempt to trouble such a false division by showing that both 'modern' and 'postmodern' art struggle over the same stakes – namely, how to locate subjectivity in the disciplinary world of late capitalism. One of the primary lessons of modern art

has been its paradoxical demonstration of the depth of surfaces. It is a lesson from which we still have much to learn.

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Notes

1 An early version of this paper was given at Stanford University in May of 1998 in a conference titled 'The Object Inside: Looking within the Space of Art History.' I would like to thank the conference organizers, Alexander Nemerov and especially Pam Lee, for inviting me to participate and for their useful feedback.

2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 9.

3 Clement Greenberg, 'Review of the Exhibition *Collage*', in *The Nation*, 27 November 1948, reprinted in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 260.

4 Clement Greenberg, 'Feeling is All', in *Partisan Review*, January–February 1952, reprinted in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950–1956*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 102.

5 Clement Greenberg, '"American-Type" Painting', in *Partisan Review*, Spring 1955, reprinted in ibid., p. 226.

6 Jackson Pollock, from the narration for the film *Jackson Pollock* (1951), by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg, in Herschel B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p. 548.

7 Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Worden Day, Carl Holty, and Jackson Pollock', in the *Nation*, 24 January 1948, reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 2*, op cit. (note 3), p. 201.

8 Fredric Jameson summarizes this position concisely: 'The framework of the work of art is individual lived experience, and it is in terms of these limits that the outside world remains stubbornly alienated. When we pass from individual experience to that collective dimension, that sociological or historical focus in which human institutions slowly become transparent for us once again, we have entered the realm of disembodied abstract thought and have left the work of art behind us. And this life on two irreconcilable levels corresponds to a basic fault in the very structure of the modern world: what we can understand as abstract minds we are incapable of living directly in our individual lives and experiences. Our world, our works of art, are henceforth *abstract*.' Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 169.

9 It is Foucault's well-known thesis that the imperative to speak our sexuality which is associated with various 'liberatory' feminisms and lesbian, gay and transgendered struggles since the 1960s, is also and equally a way of laying ourselves open for colonization and discipline by various technologies of power. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

10 The organizers of the recent Pollock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art seem to agree: a photograph of the floor of Pollock's studio on Long Island was included as supplementary information.

11 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, pp. 29–30.

12 It may seem paradoxical to consider Pollock's painterly style, typically understood as an expression of the artist's creative (and political) freedom, in terms of discipline. However, it is well known that Pollock's technique was the product of a great deal of skill. In fact, it is precisely the disjunction between its ostensibly freewheeling nature and the almost classical balance of many of his compositions which lend a certain force to my argument that these paintings are as much about controlling as they are about expressing psychic effect.

13 Jasper Johns, sketchbook note, Book A, p. 23, *c.* 1960, reprinted in Kirk Varnedoe (ed.), *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, compiled by Christel Hollevoet, New York: The Museum of Modern Art (distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), New York, 1996, pp. 50–1.

14 Max Kozloff, *Jasper Johns*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968, p. 47.

15 Yoshiaki Tono, 'I Want Images to Free Themselves from Me' (in Japanese), in *Geijutsu Shincho*, Tokyo, vol. 15, no. 8 (August 1964), pp. 54–7; reprinted in Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, op cit.

(note 13), p. 96.
16 Jasper Johns, sketchbook note, Book C, *c*. 1970–71; reprinted in Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, op. cit. (note 13), pp. 73–4.
17 Kellie Jones, 'David Hammons', in *Real Life*, no. 16 (Autumn 1986): 2-9, reprinted in Russell Ferguson et al. (eds), *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990, p. 210.
18 Jerry Saltz, 'Kara Walker: Ill-Will and Desire', [interview], in *Flash Art*, vol. 29, no. 191 (December 1996), p. 82.
19 Quoted in 'Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes', in *The International Review of African American Art*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1997), p. 13.
20 ibid., p. 14.
21 Saltz, 'Kara Walker: Ill-Will and Desire', op. cit. (note 18), p. 82.
22 ibid., p. 86.
23 ibid., p. 84.
24 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 1985, p. 110–11.
25 ibid., p. 93.