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Entropy and Real Estate

As an undergraduate art student, I avoided ever thinking much about Pollock -- mainly because most of my teachers were already trying to palm off "their" generational Abstract Expressionism on me and my friends. We were into conceptual art instead, which, at the time, seemingly demanded a renunciation of gesture and expressivity. Today, both sides of that polemic, taken at face value, seem redundant. Eventually, Pollock's influence did begin to creep into my work, largely through secondary sources: Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson. Pollock's process of painting on canvas spread out over his studio floor, then stretching it and mounting it on a wall, created a particular tension between horizontal and vertical axes. Here, horizontality betokened entropy; verticality, signification itself. This logic informs the brown impasto sculpture and reliefs I made in the late 80s and early 90s. Vis-a-vis Kaprow and Smithson, Pollock's restraint impresses me now more than ever. He never claimed to "blur art and life" as Kaprow has done so insistently or as Smithson's late earthworks seem to imply.

The retrospective at MOMA nonetheless forced me to reconsider Pollock's career as a social phenomenon. This is always one demand of the blockbuster exhibition. I feel much more ambivalence about the way his career played out -- and continues to play out -- than I do about the ostensibly "formal" legacy of his oeuvre. The cardinal points of that career are surprisingly prescient; one can easily trace the social axioms of the current New York art world directly back to the moment of Pollock's ascendancy. Pollock, however, did not *cause* the resulting conditions; instead he was bound up in a pregnant nexus of social forces.

Authenticity is a key term in Pollock's life story. It is the "content" of the Abstract Expressionist ethos. Less obviously, the myth of authenticity functions as a prerequisite for Pollock's transformation into a pop icon. Because Pollock was born in Cody, Wyoming, writers liked to portray him as a cowboy -- or some kind of rugged western figure. Today Bruce Nauman's persona functions similarly. Even so, as Pollock biographers Stephen Naifeh and Gregory White Smith have pointed out, Cody, Wyoming was a tract housing development, the brainchild of none other than "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Buffalo Bill was not a cowboy; he was an entrepreneur, a westernized P.T. Barnum. Pollock's work came to the fore as American postwar society entered a new phase of mass culture. Real estate developers invented the suburbs. More than anyone else, more than the highly esteemed architects, were the ones who shaped American culture during this phase.

Looking at the retrospective, a sense of handmade spectacle immediately struck me. (Vis-a-vis Debord, "handmade spectacle" may be an oxymoron.) It was hard not to be. After all, there was the barn -- or at least a simulation of it, oddly adorned with Hans Namuth photographs. Not far away hung *Mural* (1943-44), painted for Peggy Guggenheim's apartment. This arrangement purported to be educational. Yet, if one thinks that Namuth's photos capture the real process of the work, the decisive moment, then the imbrication of Pollock's entire oeuvre within mass media starts to get lost. Ironically, to put the viewer "inside" the process, Pollock and Namuth staged a painting together, by doing one on glass. Why not? The premise of Action Painting, after all, suggests an arena. Curiously, this event hastened the painter's decline. Right after the

shoot, Pollock went on an alcoholic bender, confronting Namuth with the retort, "I'm not a phoney!" Stranger still, Robert "Ondine" Olivo's performance as the Pope in Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* repeated this scenario. There, a young upstart charged him with being a phoney and he vented his uncontrolled rage on her.

If we are looking for a "punctum" in Namuth's documentary material, it is undoubtedly Pollock the man. He was startlingly photogenic. Moreover, he had cultivated a sense of style, comparable to that of James Dean or Marlon Brando, that has lost none of its iconic force. That was no accident. As a young man, Pollock was a chameleon. He went through a string of distinct phases, totally overhauling his appearance each time -- now dandy, now Krishnamurti, now cowboy. After this he finally coalesced as the figure we now remember. Surprisingly, then, where Pollock accepted a degree of artifice in his work, he totally disavowed it in his person. His famous rejoinder to Hans Hoffmann was, "I am Nature." The choice of a boulder as his grave marker only underscores that sentiment.

The very scale of Pollock's painting transformed the normative art-viewing experience, taking it from connoisseurship to bodily impact. If this literalizes a variant of the Kantian sublime, it also registers the urban experience of billboards and large-scale neon signs. This may be why Cecil Beaton wanted to use those paintings as backdrops for a fashion shoot published in *Vogue Magazine*. What was in it for Pollock was greater exposure. By foregrounding the painting process itself, Namuth's photos play a decisive role in the reception of results. Pepe Carmel pointed that out in his essay for the MOMA catalog. This, however, did not stop Carmel from taking the process one step further in his quest for the final word on Pollock's technique. To prove his point, he commissioned computer-aided montages and reconstructions of Naumuth's photos as part of his research. These elevate the tension between the real and the constructed in this material. In some respects, the documentation displaces the paintings themselves. It guarantees our investment in their sublimity. Thus, Namuth established a connection between the painting event and photo journalism that resonates in the work of Yves Klein, Fluxus, Kaprow, Smithson, Sherrie Levine and many others.

The premise of stardom -- i.e., the spectacularization of the individual -- may be Pollock's and the New York School's most enduring impact on the "infrastructure" of East Coast American esthetic sensibility. Since Pollock, the status of star progressively dilates to include Warhol, Jeff Koons, Mark Kostabi and Matthew Barney. Indeed, Warhol's "fifteen minutes" edict allows almost anyone to see him- or herself as such in some rarified, subcultural way. Yet, the requisite degree of irony is always provisional. Even Ondine, at least once, took himself seriously in this respect. The movement of the New York art galleries from SoHo to Chelsea seems uncanny. It recalls Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, namely the restaurant scene in which waiters and waitresses appeared dressed as Buddy Holly or Marilyn Monroe. Here, Tarantino hurls the pre-digestedness of pop culture (or, at least the worst overdetermined sectors of it) back at his audience. In Chelsea, everybody already seems to know her or his role. By that I do not mean that people become automatons. Rather, they move into previously occupied niches with a high degree of self-consciousness, testing the nuanced disparities between their experience and what came before. This is a karaoke sensibility, informing modes of artmaking and social behavior. It appears, among other things, in decade-revivalist fashion, ostensibly critical practices like appropriation and sampling and, ultimately, through simply the lazy recycling of pre-existent

forms. Moving out to the Hamptons, Pollock and Lee Krasner were true pioneers. It has become a real estate developer's dream.