

(shorter version)

A couple of years ago I had the refreshing experience of hearing one of my students declare that post-modernism was old hat. If post-modernism is a period style, and if young artists feel that period is now ending, we must wonder how long art will continue to play out the implications of inventions and discoveries now well understood or whether a real future can yet be built on the achievements of the twentieth century. The question is particularly acute for abstraction. From the start abstraction was supposed to open infinite possibilities, possibilities that could only grow as the viewer's sensorium changed and adapted to the new language. But at the end of the century a supposed state of total freedom often looks like the most limiting position of all and abstraction the hardest form of art to imagine on the forward side of history.

There is a certain hope in the art world that abstraction can be revived as a major contemporary practice. This hope is naturally associated with concerns about American primacy in the arts, but American abstraction may well have betrayed its own origins. What began as a critique of the complacent sensuousness of French art, what was once called its "cuisine," has in some quarters 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. It's those artists who have broken with painting who are the best witnesses to whatever resources the medium still contains, and it's now becoming clear that Robert Rauschenberg was one of the most important.

Starting around 1969 Rauschenberg made a number of works that spoke the situation of painting at that time. It's easy to see pieces such as the *Glue Pour* and the *Asphalt Rundown* as out-of-the-studio, real world versions of Morris Louis's poured paintings, but Rauschenberg was also very involved with the whole tradition from which that work had come, particularly with Pollock. In his article "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth

Projects," of 1968, he recognized the entropic aspect of Pollock's method, and thereby identified the painter as one of his 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.

I recently encountered an unpublished work in a private collection that further illuminates the depth and richness of Smithson's engagement with painting, and with Pollock in particular. The piece, called *Urination Map of the Constellation Hydra*, is a documentation of a landscape intervention, but its most important features are its reference to the sky and a brief handwritten quotation.

At the recent Pollock retrospective a room of works from 1947 provided the opportunity to make some connections that Smithson himself must have made at the 1967 Pollock show. The piece he singles out, *Full Fathom Five*, is not the only one with a Shakespearean title, the other is called *Sea Change*. These are the pictures into which various kinds of debris - pebbles, cigarettes, coins etc. - have fallen, and they belong to a larger group that also contains several 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. Only one member of this group (*Galaxy*) contains heterogenous material, but the titles of the others offer complexly poetic images of falling. *Reflection of the Big Dipper* has fairly readable imagery - stars, clouds and tree branches reflected in a pond - that thematizes the function of the canvas as a passive collector. *Comet* seems the most literal, with a bolt of light falling downward at a slant. But the invocation of Lucifer, the original fallen star, in a thoroughly abstract painting, is the clue that helps us to understand that as the heavens fall so does the artist, and his landing place will be the materialism of the all over abstractions, devoid of imagery and free of all striving for transcendence.

These paintings 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 - the model being Shakespeare; and the artist as a fallen being, expelled from any experience of plenitude, as small and dry and unable to reach beyond himself as the pebbles in the paintings but nevertheless heroically grounded in that same alienated self - the historic model in this case being 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 figurative way of talking about that motion.

Pollock's successors, Stella and Louis, rejected the "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 swept away by an objective arbitrariness that we come to identify with the essence of abstraction itself. Louis foregrounds the experience of passive falling as he spends most of his studio time waiting for paint to drip. It was his work that alerted Smithson to the entropic element in Pollock, and his piss piece then 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 most unmodern Alexander Pope and the mock-heroic, their exact antithesis. Smithson was well aware that the ironic, witty and all too knowing Pope was anathema to the romantics, and that this attitude was still in force in contemporary culture. The shock of encountering Pope at all in the context of modern 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.

I don't propose a return to some naive grounding of the work in the artist's biography, yet in modern criticism something of the drama of the artist is lost. The tradition of abstraction that I'm tracing 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 the emptying out of historical tradition. The artist is an actor, but where Harold Rosenberg put the emphasis on the action I'm suggesting it should be on the stage, and on the staging of a character. While we enjoy this historical comedy, which becomes much funnier as Smithson (and of course Warhol) reinvents the hand made work, we mustn't lose sight of the opportunity it gives us to negate formalist readings of abstraction while affirming the critical function of autonomous art. Smithson can help us to see how this works if we recognize that the *Urination Map* is only an occasion for further meditation on insights that were already implicit in earlier works, namely the *Non-Sites*, begun in 1968, the year after the Pollock retrospective. The nihilist line runs from Pollock's drips to Stella and Louis, and the *Non-Sites* then continue the decline, arriving at "rock bottom." A formalist reading that detects a similarity between Smithson's jumbled rocks and Pollock's all over drips is not wrong but still misses the deeper relation between them. 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 dispenses with the fictional subjectivity of the artist even as it still tells the drama of his or her formation.

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. The *Non-Sites* in fact do have a critical edge. At the moment when American power, wealth and progressive ambition is at its height, Smithsons entropic rock piles passively negate their context. The fall into the self which is also an emptying of the subjective from the work is at the same time the movement away from the social that institutes a critique.

I have to strongly emphasize that I'm not advocating formalism nor art for art's sake. The nihilist line also has to be sharply distinguished from the ironic reflection of the normal emptiness of mass culture, or from work that is often described today as "abject." Further, abstraction itself is in no way a privileged genre; the important difference for any art is between that which stages the fall into emptiness and that which is simply empty.

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 so the assumption of the artist's role must entail a movement of some kind. For the artists I am discussing that 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 kind of 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 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. There is, in fact, no guarantee that American artists will be the ones to make the best use of their own painterly resources. 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 histories.

Robert Linsley, Vancouver June 1999