

# Picturing Pollock: Photography's Challenge to the Historiography of Abstract Expressionism

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## Painting in Crisis

As Jackson Pollock prepared for his 1950 winter exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, the show that would introduce what have become the iconic drip paintings: *Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950* (1950), *Autumn Rhythm: Number 31, 1950* (1950), *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950), he was acutely aware that even with paintings in six exhibitions including the Venice Biennale and a traveling solo exhibition in Europe produced by Peggy Guggenheim, his critical reputation and financial situation were far from secure.<sup>1</sup> Less than two weeks before the Parsons show opened, *Time Magazine* announced with evident pleasure that his work in Venice 'Stump[ed] experts as well as laymen.'<sup>2</sup> The magazine further asserted, incorrectly, that the artist had spent the summer in Italy being brushed off by the European art world. Though incorrectly dramatized, Pollock had stayed home 'working like a demon all summer', Parsons reported, the European ambivalence to which the *Time* article alluded was real.<sup>3</sup> Guggenheim complained throughout 1949 and 1950 of the great difficulty of getting his work shown or sold, decrying the indifference toward Pollock especially in Paris and deep discounts being demanded of her. It was this frustration that led her to put on the exhibition herself, though Pollock's periodic silences during and after the show almost turn her against him as well. In early October 1950, Parsons wrote to Guggenheim explaining that the winter show was requiring much energy and implored her 'Don't be too hard on the

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Venice Biennale (June 8 – October 15, 1950) and the show at Betty Parsons Gallery (November 28 – December 16, 1950), Pollock had a solo show at Museo Correr, Venice (July 22 – Aug 12/15, 1950) part of which traveled to the Galleria d'Arte del Naviglio, Milan in October. He also had individual pieces on view in New York at Sidney Janis Gallery (Oct. 23 – Nov. 11, 1950), the *Whitney Museum of American Art Annual*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (Nov. 10 – Dec 31, 1950), and *Calligraphic and Geometric: Two Recent Linear Tendencies in American Painting* a US traveling exhibition curated by MoMA, (Oct 1950– May 1954). In Europe, he sent work to *Amerika Schildert* at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, (June 11–Sep 11, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> 'Chaos, Damn It!', *Time*, vol. 56, issue 21, 20 November 1950, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Parsons's comments as well as those of Peggy Guggenheim cited in this paragraph can be found in the Betty Parsons Gallery records and personal papers, circa 1920-1991, Bulk 1946-1983. Archives of American Art, Box 12 folders 47, 48. Parsons papers include the typescript of the letter she sent to *Time* informing them that Pollock had never been to Europe. Letter to Guggenheim imploring patience from October 5, 1950.

Pollocks.<sup>4</sup> In New York, the lead up to the winter show was also fraught. Clement Greenberg was vocal in his support, proclaiming that Pollock outshined all contemporary painters and stood his ground against any Quattrocento masters as well, and the winter show of the previous year had met with positive reviews. Many critics, however, were still publicly flummoxed by the drip paintings and far from certain about the consequences of Pollock's efforts to the history of contemporary art.<sup>5</sup> While *Life Magazine* was trafficking in the kind of sensationalism that sells magazines when it excitedly stoked controversy by asking if Pollock was the nation's greatest artist, comments such as art historian Sam Hunter's that Pollock 'reflects an advanced stage of the disintegration of the modern painting', testify to a deep-seated ambivalence regarding the past and future of art.<sup>6</sup> It was in this unsettled terrain that Hans Namuth and Rudy Burckhardt offered photography as means of apprehending the new art and approaching the complexity with which it was embroiled in contemporary life.

The U.S. pavilion of the 25<sup>th</sup> *Venice Biennale* provides a window into the conflicted state of affairs of U.S. contemporary art in the summer of 1950. The pavilion featured a John Marin retrospective that lay claim to an American tradition of Modern painting extending across the century, but it was the secondary exhibition, a group show of younger U.S. painters curated by U.S. Commissioner for the Biennale and editor and publisher of *ARTNews* Alfred M. Frankfurter and Museum of Modern Art curator Alfred H. Barr Jr. that reveals the art world fault lines.<sup>7</sup> Frankfurter chose Hyman Bloom, Lee Gatch and Rico Lebrun, for what he felt was their characteristically US commitment to both abstraction and representation. Barr staked a contrary claim for abstraction alone, selecting Archile Gorky, Willem DeKooning and the 'rhythmic variegated labyrinth[s]' of Jackson Pollock.<sup>8</sup> The pavilion, caught between contradicting agendas regarding American art and abstraction, left a correspondingly ambivalent impression on biennial viewers. Several critics found the American painting to be a betrayal of either common sense or national character.<sup>9</sup> British art historian Douglas Cooper

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Guggenheim imploring patience, Betty Parsons, October 5, 1950, Parsons Papers, Archives of American Art.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, and Josef Albers,' *The Nation*, 19 February 1949, reprinted in John O'Brian ed., *Clement Greenberg The Collected Essays and Criticism Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 285-86. Unsigned review in *Time*, 7 February 1949, and Emily Genauer, *New York World-Telegram*, 7 February 1949, reprinted in Francis V. O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967, 46.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Seiberling, 'Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?', *Life*, vol. 8, August 1949, 42-45. Sam Hunter, *New York Times*, 20 January 1949, reprinted in O'Connor, 46.

<sup>7</sup> The pavilion was supported by The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Art Foundation of which Frankfurter was president.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred H. Barr Jr., '7 Americans Open in Venice: Gorky DeKooning Pollock', *ARTNews*, vol. 49, no. 4, Summer 1950, 60.

<sup>9</sup> *The New York Times* also reported that the US Pavilion wasn't attracting serious attention though suggested this was due to resentment toward US military and economic policies. Greenberg discusses

rehearsed the expected outburst of confusion declaring Pollock's efforts 'an elaborate if meaningless tangle of cordage and smears.'<sup>10</sup> In a more considered vein, critic David Sylvester, also British, found the new painting to be evidence of a sea change in US art. 'There is no echo', he wrote, 'of the quality in which America's greatness lies — its use of technology to make the most of nature.'<sup>11</sup> US painters, he felt, had abandoned U.S. nativism and it was a great loss.

The anxiety regarding the changing face of painting could be felt in U.S. responses as well. From his post as managing editor of *ARTNews*, Thomas Hess celebrated the fact that these young painters had 'surpassed America', and even transcended the boundaries between artist and audience.<sup>12</sup> Despite such enthusiasm, the atmosphere at magazine was not altogether hospitable to Pollock. Frankfurter had expressed his distaste for Pollock and for contemporary abstraction in general to *Life Magazine* in 1948 and his selections in Venice reasserted this opinion.<sup>13</sup> Hess, meanwhile, though generally positive, was engaging in a critical stand off with Greenberg that led him to assert the primacy of De Kooning against Greenberg's favored Pollock. *ARTNews* would rank Pollock's winter show as the second best of season, and accompanied the announcement with an unattributed portrait taken by Burckhardt, but the battle lines did not escape Pollock's notice.<sup>14</sup> The John Marin exhibition that year at *An American Place* took first place in the *ARTNews* list echoing the priority shown in Venice. By the New Year, Pollock had also begun drinking again, adding a tragic note to what was already an anxious season.

With the stakes thus high for good press, when *ARTNews* managing editor Tom Hess sent artist/critic Robert Goodnough and photographer Rudy Burckhardt to Pollock's studio in June, 1950, and when the young photographer Hans Namuth introduced himself a few weeks later as a stringer for *Harpers Bazaar*, they found Pollock a welcoming collaborator. Burckhardt recalled that Pollock and Lee Krasner had been willing participants and Namuth found the couple similarly solicitous.<sup>15</sup>

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this critical reaction, in Greenberg, 'A European View', *The Nation*, 25 November 1950, in O'Brian ed., 59-62.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Cooper, *The Listener*, 6 July 1950, reprinted in O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, 53.

<sup>11</sup> David Sylvester, *The Nation*, 9 September 1950, reprinted in O'Connor, *Jackson Pollock*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas B. Hess, 'Is abstraction un-American?', *ARTNews*, vol. 49, no. 10, February 1951, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Frankfurter's comments came in 'A Life Round Table on Modern Art', *Life*, October 11, 1948.

<sup>14</sup> The photo appeared in *ARTNews*, vol. 49, no. 9, January 1951, 42. In November 1951, Pollock publicly denounced Hess's new book *Abstract Painting*, New York: Viking Press, 1951 and threw it to the ground at de Kooning's feet. Accounts of Pollock's return to drinking and his jealousy and insecurities during the winter of 1950-1951 can be found in B.H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972 and Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1989.

<sup>15</sup>Rudy Burckhardt and Edwin Denby in conversation with Joe Giordano, for a radio program he produced and presented for WBAI, Pacifica, NYC, ca.1976. Published by Jacket magazine <<http://jacketmagazine.com/21/denb-giord.html>> last accessed, February 3, 2011. Burckhardt retells the story similarly in Rudy Burckhardt and Simon Pettet, *Talking Pictures: The Photography of Rudy Burckhardt*, Cambridge, MA: Zoland Books, 1994, 159. Namuth's account can be found in Hans Namuth, 'Photographing Pollock,' in Barbara Rose ed., *Pollock Painting*, New York: Agrinde





in Namuth's photographs.<sup>23</sup>

The history of photography in statements such as Rose's, however, figures as the place to dispose of the photographs while getting to the business of art history. Rose's impulse to return the photographs to their history, however, also offers the promise of returning to discuss problems of photography left equally unresolved. Absolved of the imposed responsibility to explain the meaning and mechanics of Pollock's painting, a task for which they were only ever partially capable, the photographs of the artist in the six months prior the historic Parsons show can be seen as parts in a complex and collective attempt to grapple with the changing face of modern art in its painterly and photographic forms.

In light of the central place of photography in the reception of Pollock, Hess's revival of the 'An Artist Paints a Picture' series in 1949 and its commitment to an art criticism of words and images was both prescient and practical. In the company of photographers, writers remained anchored to the formal qualities of artworks that were alienating certain viewers, including some at Hess's own journal. 'De Kooning Paints a Picture', a typical example with photographs by Burckhardt and text by Hess, details changes in *Woman* (1950-1952) over a nearly three year period, with photographs of the artist, his studio, and a dozen images of the work in progress.<sup>24</sup> Pollock's work tested this formula and both Burckhardt and Namuth rose to the challenge. When Burckhardt and Goodnough arrived at Pollock's home in Springs, Long Island for 'Pollock Paints a Picture', it was late afternoon. The pair were invited to stay for dinner and the next morning Pollock took them to the studio. He showed them *Number 32, 1950*, which he had just completed. There was no painting done in front of the guests and so the primary aim of the assignment could not be achieved. Nonetheless, Pollock described his process and as the photographer recalled, 'pretend[ed] he was sort of stepping into the painting and dripping paint on it.'<sup>25</sup> Burckhardt took pictures of Pollock pretending, as well as images of the studio, and of Pollock alone and with Krasner. The photographs were rejected for publication on the grounds, Burckhardt recalled, that they did not show the development of a single work.<sup>26</sup> So the article sat until

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Rose, 'Hans Namuth's Photographs and the Jackson Pollock Myth: Part One: Media Impact and the Failure of Criticism', *Arts*, vol. 53, no. 7, March 1979, 116. This essay and Barbara Rose, 'Hans Namuth's Photographs and the Jackson Pollock Myth: Part Two: 'Number 29, 1950'', *Arts*, vol. 53, no. 7, March 1979, 117-19 were published in Rose ed., *Pollock Painting*, New York: Agrinde Publications, 1980, which was itself the republication, with the addition of Rose's essays and an introduction, of Hans Namuth, *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock*, Paris: Macula, 1978.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas B. Hess, 'de Kooning Paints a Picture', *ARTNews*, vol. 52, no. 1, March 1953, 30-33, 64, 65.

<sup>25</sup> Rudy Burckhardt and Edwin Denby in conversation with Joe Giordano, for a radio program he produced and presented for WBAI, Pacifica, NYC, ca.1976. Published by *Jacket* magazine <<http://jacketmagazine.com/21/denb-giord.html>> last accessed, July 7, 2011. Burckhardt retells the story similarly in Rudy Burckhardt and Simon Pettet, *Talking Pictures: The Photography of Rudy Burckhardt*, Cambridge, MA: Zoland Books, 1994, 159.

<sup>26</sup> Burckhardt is explicit in his interview with Martica Sawin, 1993, Archives of American Art, about Hess's expectation that the photographs document changes to a single work.

May 1951 when it was completed with references to the winter show at Betty Parsons Gallery and the photographs Namuth had taken of Pollock independently of the magazine. One of Burckhardt's photographs, a shot of Pollock's paints, was also included.

Namuth had introduced himself to Pollock on July 1 as a *Harper's* photographer and student of its influential art director Alexey Brodovitch, whom Pollock knew. A studio visit was scheduled for later that month. Upon arriving at the artist's home, Namuth was taken to the studio and, as Burckhardt and Goodnough had experienced, was shown a painting drying on the floor. This time, however, Pollock decided the piece was not complete. As they looked at the canvas, Pollock began painting and Namuth took pictures. He returned the following weekend to show Pollock and Krasner the results. All were pleased and Namuth was invited to document Pollock's working process throughout the rest of the summer. In 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock', (1958) Allan Kaprow repeated the observation credited to Pollock, that the drip process made 'it difficult for the artist to see the whole or any extended section of "parts"' of his work.<sup>27</sup> It is this fragmentary experience that Namuth captured. Shooting with a medium format Rolleiflex, Namuth staked out positions around the studio, releasing the shutter as Pollock stepped into the frame.<sup>28</sup> Having no connection to the *ARTNews* project, Namuth was free to prioritize the artist rather than the development of a single work. He often positioned the camera low and aimed up to catch the full body of the painter. We see corners and edges of the painting as Pollock reaches in and over the canvas. In several images the slower shutter speeds of 1/25 and 1/50 present the blurred motion of the artist, while in other cases Pollock's fluid motions and the cascades of paint appear frozen between impulse and destination.<sup>29</sup> Hess's choice to publish Namuth's photographs alongside the Goodnough text demonstrated a radical shift in how *ARTNews* treated photography, presenting it here as an independent art form not confined to providing evidence of painterly or sculptural creativity or executing editorial demands.

That Namuth's work did not in fact explain Pollock's paintings was clear to several of its first viewers. Edward Steichen, curator of photography at MoMA, commented, 'this is not the way to photograph an artist. The nature and personality of such a complex human being are only partially revealed when you show him at work.'<sup>30</sup> Steichen suggested incorporating scenes of the artist's life into the series, which Namuth did do. Such inclusivity fit the general philosophy at *ARTNews*, which typically included portraits of the artist in their home or studio with the

<sup>27</sup> Allan Kaprow, 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock', *ARTNews*, 57, no. 6, October 1958, 26. Kaprow's article is accompanied by Burckhardt's photographs.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock helpfully reminded their readers of such technical restrictions of the Rolleiflex in their critical review of Rose, et al. *Pollock Painting*, Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, 'Jackson Pollock, Painting, and the Myth of Photography', *Art History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1983, 114-122.

<sup>29</sup> For shutter speeds see Hans Namuth, 'Photographing Pollock', in Rose ed., *Pollock Painting*, np.

<sup>30</sup> Namuth, 'Photographing Pollock'.

illustrations of the work in progress. Namuth faced the added challenge that with none of the familiar signs of artistic creation, no easel, no model, or even paintbrushes his portraits risked reinforcing the presumption that Pollock worked so far outside the traditions of art history that his results lay beyond the definition of art. Namuth also noted that *New York Times* critic Stuart Preston found the photographs increased his ambivalence towards Pollock's painting.<sup>31</sup> Namuth had felt a similar distress upon first seeing Pollock's work and it is telling that his photographs did not dispel such discomfort or confusion. Steichen and Preston were immediately aware, in a way that has been obscured by the subsequent familiarity of the images, that in 1950, the photographs may have shown an artist in motion, but they did not necessarily help the viewer appreciate his results.

### Pollock Paints a Picture

If Namuth's images are potentially disorienting, the text for 'Pollock Paints a Picture' is confounding. To start, Namuth's name is misspelled in the byline. Secondly, either the painting illustrated has been mistitled or is the wrong work. The caption reads: 'It's only title is Number 4, 1950.', but the work shown is *Autumn Rhythm: Number 31, 1950*. Like the spelling mistake, the misattribution could have been caught: *Number 4, 1950* had been illustrated and correctly labeled in *ARTNews* in December when it accompanied the review of the Betty Parsons show in which it and *Autumn Rhythm* were featured.<sup>32</sup> Compounding the editorial gaffes is the confusing relationship between the text and images. Goodnough describes a sunny day in June and a canvas that, like *Autumn Rhythm*, was begun with a sortie of abstract black drips such as can be seen in the photographs that dominate the article. As has been observed by others, much of what follows in the text does not apply to *Autumn Rhythm*: it was not painted in June, it does not have aluminum paint, and it is unlikely to have been nailed to the wall during the process of painting.<sup>33</sup> Goodnough does not use the name *Autumn Rhythm*, calling the canvas he discusses *Number 4, 1950*, a painting he likely saw on his June visit as it can be seen stretched and leaning on Pollock's studio wall in one of Namuth's photographs. Painted in oil, enamel, and aluminum paint, *Number 4, 1950* is a dense composition plausibly

<sup>31</sup> Namuth, 'Photographing Pollock'. Preston's review of Pollock's November 21-December 10 show at the Betty Parsons Gallery appeared in the *New York Times*, 27 November 1949.

<sup>32</sup> The fact that the photographs and text were produced separately and that the article had a twelve-month gestation could be an excuse for the ambiguity in the piece, though other articles in the series were similarly prolonged and involved multiple photographers. Burckhardt and Hess started 'DeKooning Paints a Picture,' in June 1950, William Averbach photographed later stages of the piece, and the final essay was published in March, 1953. Burckhardt credits Averbach in Archives of American Art, Oral History Interview with Rudy Burckhardt by Martica Sawin, January 14, 1993. *ARTNews* attributed all the photographs to Burckhardt.

<sup>33</sup> Pepe Karmel, 'Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth', in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jackson Pollock*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998, 94-95.



created in stages as recounted in the text, however with dimensions of 48 7/8 x 37 7/8 inches it is far from the 9 x 17 foot canvas Goodnough described. If he isn't describing *Autumn Rhythm* or *Number 4, 1950*, the most obvious candidate for the source of Goodnough's observations is *Number 32, 1950*, the work Burckhardt photographed Pollock pretending to paint; several details, however, disqualify it as the sole source of the text. For one, as is evident in Burckhardt's photographs and would have been clear at Betty Parsons, *Number 32, 1950* was not created with multiple stages as the essay describes. It is also evident in the photographs that the painting had not yet been cut from the roll of canvas when Goodnough saw it, making it difficult to have been nailed to the wall for the periodic viewing as recounted in the essay. The smaller *Number 4, 1950* could have been moved around this way, but with the 8'10' x 15' *Number 32, 1950* or the 8'9' x 17'3' *Autumn Rhythm*, Pollock surely followed the method Burckhardt recalled him describing: with the painting unfinished on the floor, Pollock climbed a ladder to assess the image from above. In an essay that purports to detail the production of one work, it is impossible to find any single painting that corresponds to Goodnough's description.

The disturbing gap between the assumed subject of the text and that of the photographs has led scholars to imagine other ways to align the text and images. In his groundbreaking analysis of Namuth's portraits of Pollock at work, Pepe Karmel, presuming fairly that Goodnough saw Namuth's photographs prior to publication, suggested that he based his essay on the images. Karmel's assertion, if true, implies that the crisis brought on by the photographs — that they would come to replace Pollock's paintings as the foundation for critical literature, curatorial practice, and the public imagination regarding the artist — was operative at their very introduction to the art world.<sup>34</sup> Abandoning the search for a singular source for Goodnough's text and reading it instead as based on the author's knowledge of several different works, however, reveals an essay that like Burckhardt's and Namuth's photographs, is not about a Pollock painting, but rather is about Pollock painting.

After the June visit to Springs, Goodnough not only completed 'Pollock Paints a Picture', but also reviewed the Parsons show, for which *ARTNews* published the accompanying image of *Number 4, 1950*. Excepting Greenberg, there were few if any critics who had spent more time looking at and writing about Pollock than Goodnough and he had done so in the artist's company.<sup>35</sup> Goodnough even refers readers of the May article to the winter exhibition at Betty Parsons. Returning to his text we read that Pollock circled the canvas, crouched, stepped onto the painting, and reached rhythmically from the can of black enamel in one hand to

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 94, 96 and Pepe Karmel ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999, 74. Karmel takes this observation to its logical conclusions with regards to Rose's argument suggesting that Harold Rosenberg's 'The American Action Painters,' was the result of 'Rosenberg ... describing Namuth's photographs as interpreted by Goodnough.' Karmel, 96.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Coates and Emily Genauer had written multiple reviews of Pollock's exhibitions, but not in as great depth as Goodnough.

let 'the paint fall in a variety of movements on the surface... weaving [p]ools of black, tiny streams and elongated forms.'<sup>36</sup> Minutes later his 'rhythms were intensified with counteracting movements' completing what Goodnough imagines is a first stage of the painting.<sup>37</sup> This description matches both *Number 32, 1950* and the first stage of *Autumn Rhythm*, so the reader can connect the description with an illustration. Goodnough's review of the Parsons show had addressed both the 'ecstatically energizing', 'open black rhythms' of Pollock's large canvases and the 'convergence of tensions' in the smaller works.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, 'Pollock Paints a Picture', appears to have combined discussion of the large and small works, conflating references to *Number 32, 1950*, which he saw with Burckhardt, and *Number 4, 1950*, which he saw at least at the Parsons exhibition if not in the studio as well. Goodnough's mention of 'a few movements in white painting constitu[ing] the final act', a detail he could have known from seeing *Autumn Rhythm* at Parsons, suggests that he did edit the essay to accord with the newly chosen Namuth photographs, as a top coat of white featured in that piece is not part of either *Number 32* or *Number 4*.<sup>39</sup> Goodnough ended his review by assuring readers that the exhibition, 'if to some overpowering, can not be absorbed in one viewing – one must return', an experience that underlay 'Pollock Paints a Picture'.<sup>40</sup>

## Partial Results

Just as readers might have expected 'Pollock Paints a Picture' to explain methodically the artist's practice, Pollock had every reason to expect Namuth to present it clearly. The young photographer had come to the US after a career as a correspondent in the 1930s. His portfolio of Spanish Civil War photographs capture the speed of the events, the personalities of the actors, and convey the sense that Namuth felt himself a partisan. He stayed in Spain, he has said, because he was committed to the Republican cause and similarly explained that his art world portraiture relied more on his intimacy with his subjects than skill with the camera.<sup>41</sup> He also had an abiding interest in the theater and a gift for drama. Conrad Marca-Relli, painter and friend of Pollock and Krasner, commented that the couple had been quite appreciative of Namuth's 'showmanship', and clear facility with portraiture.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to personal relationships and drama, Namuth spoke of two very different photographic influences. On the one hand he looked to the work of Paul

<sup>36</sup> Robert Goodnough, 'Pollock Paints a Picture', *ARTNews*, vol. 50, no. 3, May 1951, 40.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Robert Goodnough, 'Jackson Pollock', *ARTNews*, vol. 49, no. 8, December 1950, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Goodnough, 'Pollock Paints a Picture', 41.

<sup>40</sup> Goodnough, 'Jackson Pollock', 47.

<sup>41</sup> Archives of American Art, Oral History Interview with Hans Namuth, conducted by Paul Cummings at the artist's studio in New York, New York. August 12 and September 8, 1971.

<sup>42</sup> Marca-Relli cited in Naifeh and White Smith, 648.

Strand and Edward Weston.<sup>43</sup> This interest in canonical modernist photography accords well with practices in the Design Lab, the name of Brodovitch's school where Namuth studied. Design Lab alumni include Richard Avedon and Irving Penn whose sensitivity for abstraction in figural photography set the tone for contemporary photographic portraiture. Complementing and perhaps surpassing his interest in modernist abstraction was Namuth's devotion to Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose work Brodovitch featured in the same volume of *Portfolio* as Namuth's.<sup>44</sup> Famous for his identification of photography with the 'decisive moment', the simultaneous manifestation of 'the significance of an event' and the 'precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression', Cartier-Bresson provides compelling precedents for Namuth's Pollock photographs.<sup>45</sup> Namuth speaks of the Pollock session in terms that echo Cartier-Bresson's thoughts on his art. Watching Pollock in the studio, Namuth equated 'the act of painting', with 'what takes place in his face', and 'what's happening inside.'<sup>46</sup> The image may have been the product of setting a kind of trap – establishing in advance the frame of the image and its depth of field, waiting for the artist to step into the frame, and then tripping the shutter release. The successful photograph however, was a result of a confluence of aesthetic, physiognomic, and psychological events that correspond to the intimacy Cartier-Bresson required between the 'organization of forms' and the 'significance of the event.' Namuth's success was to use the methods by which he ensnared an image to generate the intersection of factors that produce a portrait of the creative act.

Namuth's aesthetic in the Pollock portraits is defined by the slowed exposures showing Pollock blurred in action, the alternately quick snapshots that capture the painter's body in mid-gesture, and the cropping out of most of the painting and the studio in order to see the artist. This visually fragmented quality is compounded by a semantic partiality that is indicated in two ways. First, the criticism written since the 1970s that has placed the photographs, like the paintings, into political and gender-sensitive social discourses has argued, convincingly, that the meaning of the art is dependent on larger historical narratives that involve the Cold War, gender, and power. The object in art history is only ever part of the story. In addition, Namuth's imagery, and Burckhardt's as well, expresses its contextual dependence in a formal and specifically photographic way through their

<sup>43</sup> Archives of American Art, Oral History Interview with Hans Namuth.

<sup>44</sup> The *Portfolio* feature on Pollock, while it showcases Namuth's work, is a display of Brodovitch's design aesthetic and attitude toward Pollock's work. The article features dramatic cropping of the 28 photos of Pollock in action with each image reduced to roughly two inch squares and aligned to look like six strips of film repeating Brodovitch's use of actual strips of Herbert Matter's film, *Works of Calder* (1949-1950) on the cover of the volume. Following the photographs are two pages, each with two blown-up details of a Pollock painting as the final spread. It is a curious coincidence that Pollock himself assisted Matter with the film of Alexander Calder that Brodovitch used on the cover.

<sup>45</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson, 'The Decisive Moment (1952)', in Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*, New York: Aperture, 1999, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Archives of American Art, Oral History Interview with Hans Namuth.

fragmentary compositions and aerial views, 'air-views' as Bauhaus photographer and theorist Lazlo Moholy-Nagy called them. While Pollock painted, *Autumn Rhythm* or *Number 32, 1950* was only ever experienced in parts. As Burckhardt described it, 'when he worked...[Pollock] was submerged, in a way. To see everything he had done, he had to hang the canvas on the wall. Or if he wanted a quick look, he would leave it on the floor and get up on a ladder.'<sup>47</sup> Both Namuth and Burckhardt followed Pollock's lead up the ladder, even climbing to the rafters to find a view from which the paintings made sense. Rosalind E. Krauss has argued that these 'aerial views' amplify the disjunctive contrast between the experiences of perception and production during the act of creation and those of reflection and analysis afterwards. These fragmentary images of painting and painter caught in a fraction of a second from up above denote the profound difference between the viewing position of the artist as he creates and contemplates and that of the viewer examining the results. Namuth's portraits, she argues, constitute a critical interpretation of Pollock's paintings as explorations of the limits of corporal sensation and analytical intelligence. Krauss thus challenges the interpretation of Namuth as usurping the object of art criticism in favor of learning from him as art critic.<sup>48</sup>

Standing in front of Namuth's photographs, either enlarged beyond life size or framed and hung on a wall, draws attention to the separation of horizontality and verticality so important to Krauss's reading of both Namuth and Pollock. The shift from the handheld image in the pages of an art magazine to a work of art on display is the first move in what will become a perpetual oscillation between different modes of viewing suggested in the images. Seen lying flat as they appeared when first circulated, the photographs duplicate the ordering view from above and identify the perspective of the viewer with that of photographer on a ladder or the painter standing above the canvas. This view also repeats the perspective of the photographer in the darkroom, art director designing a magazine layout, or the individual reading an article, all activities in which Namuth as a Design Lab participant was well versed. Emphasizing the vertical sight lines of Pollock as he paints and Namuth as he prints, develops, and edits creates a common viewing experience shared by the painter, photographer, and the viewer. The history of the Namuth photographs, however, demonstrates how quickly and forcefully they were displayed on the walls, enlarged to take on the scale of the paintings and framed to adopt the conventions of art. Shifting the viewers' sightline to the horizontal, to the one position in which Pollock did not create his drip paintings, repeats the procedure enacted upon Pollock's paintings as they rose from

<sup>47</sup> Carter Ratcliff, *The Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996, 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> Krauss makes her argument in Rosalind Krauss, 'Emblèmes ou lexies : le texte photographique', in Hans Namuth, *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock*, Paris: Macula, 1978, 15-24 translated as 'Reading Photographs as Texts,' in Rose ed., *Pollock Painting*. In treating Namuth as an art critic, Krauss is building on arguments in Jean Clay, 'Hans Namuth critique d'art', *Macula*, vol. 2, 1977, 24-25.

the studio floor to the gallery wall, but in doing so distinguishes the photographs from the paintings. As demonstrated by the walls of Pollock's studio covered with his own art, the painter was deeply invested in understanding this shift in viewing perspective. As Burckhardt observed, such binary changes of perspective were an integral part Pollock's practice. The traditions of photojournalism and design and the modes of viewing they produce are not similarly structured. Manipulating the photographs of Pollock to hang in a museum requires that they simulate the painting on the wall or the wall text beside it. After becoming fixtures in museums, photographs of Pollock painting require de-familiarization lest they be mistaken for imitations or explanations of their subject. In fact, the experience of actual viewing the portraits provides the first steps in challenging the relegation of the photograph to explanatory device: Namuth's photographs hang rather uncomfortably on the wall. Their fragmented views were taken with such dramatic points of view that one can feel the changing position and even posture of the photographer as he moved through the studio. Looking, Namuth seems to argue through example, demands movement; thus other sightlines, even if not always present in the museum are always implied. Like Daumier's famous cartoon of Nadar overlooking Paris in his balloon or Moholy-Nagy's scenes of urban life from above, fragmented aerial views are invitations to approach modernity and to imagine it from positions other than the one in which we find ourselves standing.

Burckhardt and Namuth's air-views introduce another invitation to active viewership and one in which Edward Steichen again plays a significant role. During the First World War, Steichen not only served as Alfred Stieglitz's contact in Paris, proving his eye for modern aesthetics, but also as a commander of the American Expeditionary Force in charge of creating and processing aerial reconnaissance photography. Allan Sekula, in his discussion of Steichen's wartime images, observed that for them to be meaningful they required extra-visual information. This demand for context was not because the aerial images were like puzzle pieces to be fit into a larger pictorial whole but because their capacity as signs demanded discursive context. In the case of the aerial views of enemy territory, the photograph functions within a network of topographical and ideological statements that translate the abstract shapes into landmarks; it is in a discursive rather than pictorial context that aerial images communicate. Unlike the ideological function of propaganda, aerial images are formally not narratively structured as discursive. This syntactic dependence and the stakes involved with the photographic assignment, whether military or journalistic, requires the 'anchorage' that Roland Barthes theorized, the securing of a particular meaning to an image, most often with text.<sup>49</sup> As Sekula wrote of Steichen's aerial photography: 'Interpreting the photograph demanded that it be treated as an ensemble of "univalent" or indexical

<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image (1977)', reprinted in Liz Wells ed., *The Photography Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2003, 117-119.

signs that could only carry one meaning, that could point to only one object.'<sup>50</sup> The condition of such a singular purpose would be forced upon the multivalent image. In the light of Sekula's discussion, Namuth's photographs respond to the didactic demands of *ARTNews*, not merely by being assembled so as to reconstruct the canvas or the room but by being fit into larger discussions such as the evaluation of contemporary art, the promotion of Pollock's career, or the creation of national identity. It is the form of the photographs that determines their dependence on information from without, but unlike military examples, it is unclear from where it will come. As has been documented by numerous art historians and suggested above, the US political and culture industry took on the task of inscribing the images of Pollock into a coherent narrative of US exceptionalism and power. Such cultural anchorage, however, was not yet in place in 1950 and *ARTNews* took considerable risks publishing photographs that, unlike the standard fair of the 'Painter Paints a Picture' series, were not and could not be securely anchored by their text.

### **Picturing the Situation**

Separated, indeed liberated, from the text and the responsibility of explaining either U.S. painting or its criticism, Namuth's portraits of Pollock reveal themselves to inform and depend upon a multitude of social, aesthetic, and physical phenomena. Whether we consider the narratives they suggest, the uses to which they've been put, the compositions they display, or the photographic properties they possess, Namuth's portraits of Pollock appeal to their context for signification. Such an iconoclastic, collaborative, even collectivist reading of the Pollock photographs was certainly not desired in the 1950s. Between the time they were taken and enlisted to define US art and culture in the 1950s and 1960s and when they were examined in the 1970s and 1980s, however, sufficient changes in approaches toward history and subjectivity had occurred to encourage re-evaluations of the function and functionality of such photographic representations. Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) demonstrates the opportunities such philosophical reorientation had for photography. The anti-oedipal subject is a dispersion of entropic particles. Father and mother figures, 'exist only as fragments', shattered and dispatched to contact 'various agents of the collectivity.'<sup>51</sup> All subjects, Deleuze and Guattari explain, 'are at grips with, and directly couple to, the elements of the political and historical situation.'<sup>52</sup> The life of the subject entails multiple relationships to elements in the social environments as well as all manner of other subject/fragments. Representations of such a life, one can reasonably conclude, must

<sup>50</sup> Allan Sekula 'The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War', *Artforum*, vol. 14, no. 4, December 1975, 28.

<sup>51</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 97.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

be directed toward these connections. Passages of *Anti-Oedipus* read like instructions for contemporary portraiture directing our attention away from the individual and instead to the 'uncle from America, a brother who went bad, an aunt who took off with a military man, a cousin out of work ... an anarchist grandfather', none of which explain the character of the subject, but rather amplify the multiplicity of his or her character and the excess of significance he or she possesses. Deleuze and Guattari elaborate how the networks that provide meaning expand: 'Families are filled with gaps and transected by breaks that are not familial: The Commune, the Dreyfus Affair, religion and atheism, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of fascism, Stalinism, the Vietnam War, May '68.'<sup>53</sup> The modern individual has ceded the centre of attention to the flows of information, influence, and affect that punctuate life. In this context, the partiality signified in the photographs of Pollock, whether through visual, narrative, or formal means, correspond to the reinterpretation of the subject from being the source of meaning to a conduit for information. As claimed by artists and critics of the 1960s and 1970s, the entire situation demands attention.

While Namuth's photographs, in retrospect, successfully capture the fragmentary character of the contemporary artist, revisiting Burckhardt's photography provides a glimpse at more contextual portrayal of the 1950s New York art world. Burckhardt had emigrated from Switzerland to New York in 1935 and, through introductions from dance critic Edwin Denby whom Burckhardt had met in Basel, quickly fell into the circle of artists including Willem DeKooning, Aaron Copeland, and Paul Bowles. Despite being drawn to the city, he was initially unable to photograph New York because he couldn't grasp the relationship between its parts. In time, he acclimatized by photographing details, 'walls, building entrances, standpipes, candy stores, barbershops, Coca-Cola or telephone signs.'<sup>54</sup> From these elements he slowly pulled back until, as Denby recalled, '[he] was taking photographs of New York that keep open the moment its transient buildings spread their unknown and unequalled harmonies of scale.'<sup>55</sup> His accomplishment was presenting New York as a network of relationships and the same is true of his portraits of artists. Burckhardt's photographs of Pollock were a collaboration as the two men composed an image to convey the point of their conversation. Burckhardt continued photographing for the 'Painter Paints a Picture' series well into the 1960s and his many photos show numerous preparatory studies and artists at work, yet what we see most is decision making. Artists think and pictures change, though the criteria remain unknown. Nor is the process particularly dramatic; men and women sit or stand or crouch, some smoke or touch paint to canvas. Nothing much happens. In place of answers or actions, there are tools: paint, brushes, cans, trays, rags, paintings and sketches; spaces: studios, living rooms, streets, woods, rivers,

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Phillip Lopate, *Rudy Burckhardt*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Lopate, 11.

and yards; and people; artists, models, families, and friends. Sometimes our eye is directed to a can of paint, often open, sometimes to a passing car, or a fleeting glance, or a friend's mother-in-law. It is through these additional elements that the pictures function, becoming as it were, invitations to look past the art and the artists to the situation that nurtured them. Painter Alex Katz described Burckhardt's practice in similar terms, praising it for taking 'anything that exists as a possibility for art.'<sup>56</sup> Burckhardt's wandering gaze is quite different from the focused trap-like vision Namuth enlisted in Pollock's studio. Discussing art criticism, Burckhardt praised inventiveness in front of a picture. 'People would object. They'd say ...he's not talking about the painting', when in fact, good criticism was Burckhardt felt, 'parallel poetry.'<sup>57</sup>

The photographs of Rudy Burckhardt and Hans Namuth demonstrate that conveying the meaning of abstract expressionism did not necessarily require witnessing the creative act. Seeing it, even capturing it on film, did not necessarily explain it. Both Burckhardt and Namuth's photographs were the result of collaborations with Pollock in which the studio was treated as a stage on which to enact scenes that convey a sense about one way to make art. Burckhardt's portraits and Namuth's views of Pollock painting do not deliver the expected image of the modern artist or the expected version of photographic evidence. This isn't the complicated soul channeling his psyche through his brush. Namuth's oeuvre is full of those; but not here. On the pages of *ARTNews*, May 1951, readers were introduced to something outside tradition. Namuth's Pollock and Burckhardt's pictures force the viewer to seek out interpretive options. Partial and entropic, these fragments and scenes ask us to relate art and artists to worlds beyond the studio and the artist's mind. Returning the photographs of Pollock to the history of photography reveals documents that, even under the pressure of cultural politics or personal and international identity, insist on their own partiality. In the end, Namuth and Burckhardt portray the new American painting as the product of forces, from partisan politics to personal insecurity, from creative inspiration to community. Returned to the history of photography, we have photographs worthy of the abstract expressionist context that inspired them, not simply documents and evidence of the cultural politics of the Cold War.

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<sup>56</sup> Alex Katz, 'Rudolph Burckhardt: Multiple Fugitive', *ARTnews*, vol. 62, no. 8, December 1963, 38.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Pettet, *Conversations with Rudy Burckhardt About Everything*, New York: Vehicle Editions 1987, np.



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