

# A Conversation Missed

## Toward a Historical Understanding of the Americanist/Modernist Divide

Joshua Shannon and Jason Weems

It has now been some time since “Mind the Gap,” a 2004 conference at Stanford University that sought “to challenge the divide between modernist and Americanist art history.”<sup>1</sup> A central goal of the event was to trouble the conventional notion that US art made before 1945 is above all American (and the fit subject of “Americanist” art historians), while art made later is better understood under the international rubric of modernism (and studied only by scholars trained in that tradition). Papers delivered at the conference, therefore, demonstrated continuities in American art across the twentieth century and drew attention to both avant-garde and visual-culture material.

The frontier separating the two fields was hardly a transient problem. Before the Stanford conference, it had already been worrying art historians (or at least Americanists) for some time, and it has continued to do so.<sup>2</sup> Over the past couple of decades, though, the concern has been growing, with some scholars seeing the distinctions between Americanist and modernist approaches as increasingly problematic, even damaging to proper scholarship. While a major historiographical essay of 1988 called attention to American art’s 1945 endpoint without argument or justification, a similar essay published fifteen years later explicitly asked whether such a cut-off might reinscribe false notions of American insularity before World War II.<sup>3</sup> Despite such writing and the symposia explicitly dedicated to the topic, our survey of the scholarship suggests that the separation between Americanists and modernists remains quite real: for one thing, the two groups very rarely cite one another.<sup>4</sup>

But the separation between the fields is not just one of dates or topics, or even of venues of publication. Far more significantly, it seems to us that Americanist and modernist bodies of work still have remarkably distinctive characteristics, even on the occasions when they treat the same material. This chapter, then, asks why this division has been so persistent, and it identifies several historical differences of method and

style that, unless negotiated, will leave these subdisciplines substantively out of contact with one another.

We should caution from the outset that our chapter, which treats only art history in the English language, necessarily relies on generalization. Several scholars work across the lines we describe here, which are meant to delimit mainstreams of Americanist and modernist art histories, respectively. These mainstreams, in our view, have clustered in recent decades especially around the journal *American Art* and the University of California Press (in the case of Americanists) and around *October* and the MIT Press (for their modernist counterparts). Our point is not that the divide is hermetic and total—it quite clearly is not—but rather that it is real, and, for reasons we hope to show, abiding.<sup>5</sup> The first part of the chapter sketches some major areas of difference between the fields; the second half offers a case study comparing their approaches to Jackson Pollock, one of the very few artists heavily studied in both fields.

## Areas of Difference

### *Form (and Voice)*

Americanists and modernists are perhaps nowhere more different from one another than in their habitual approaches to form. In addressing artworks, Americanists very often take the things and people represented, together with their social context, as the central focus. And while Americanist art history does of course consider the means by which those things are represented, it rarely demands that its artworks embody radical innovation in their form of representation. Indeed, the treatment of a given topic generally opens, above all, onto a larger cultural history of that topic. Distinctions of innovation or quality are relatively unimportant, and the boundaries between art objects and other things, including popular culture images, are relatively freely crossed.

Among modernists, by contrast, form is almost always central. This is no accident: modernist art was defined from the start by formal innovation—by the weirdness of avant-garde depiction. And it was this weirdness—the various opacities of representation, we might say—that became the central subject of modernist scholarship. Above all, art was interesting insofar as it demonstrated problems, failures, or inadequacies of representation. Add to this the fact that abstract art (central to modernism as it never could be to the long historical field called American art) seemed more or less to preclude any talk of what is depicted. In the last few decades, many modernists have wanted to see a link between radicality of form and radicality of politics. In this mode of scholarship, the new possibilities of thought opened by avant-garde art are far more important than any local or historically specific objects or topics that might be represented, or any ideas that mass culture might formulate about them. Associated with these valuations for many modernist scholars is the imperative (influenced by readings of Theodor Adorno, for example, as well as by modernist art itself) that art take the form of negation—critiquing previous habits of sight, for example, and ultimately false political consciousness. All these discriminations (formal innovation, problematization of representation, negation of ideology) are judgments of quality. While beauty is hardly a more comfortable topic for modernists than for Americanists, modernists are far keener, if sometimes covertly, to make judgments. As such, modernists tend to be more closely affiliated with criticism than their Americanist colleagues.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed Americanists are often proactive in their efforts to write about art that they recognize to be aesthetically or politically conservative. On their motivations for this equanimity, however, Americanists as a group have been uncertain: is it merely that much American art has been undervalued, or is quality inherently a corrupt criterion for scholarship? (In our view, the role of scholarly judgment has remained regrettably implicit and undertheorized on both sides: what in fact governs our choice of objects?<sup>7</sup>)

Modernist formalism sometimes gets cast as a pursuit of quality and innovation. While these Greenbergian tendencies do exist, they represent only an elementary piece of the scholarly modernist formalism of the last thirty years. In such scholarship, radicality of form is prized not merely because it is art-historically fresh, but specifically because it is seen to make available structural rather than superficial or familiar critiques of social reality. Yve-Alain Bois, a leading formalist in modernist art history, has written that, while historically some formalism was merely “morphological” and hermetic, strong formalist scholarship “envisions form as structural,” and always brings the scholar back to history.<sup>8</sup>

Just as they focus on the form of the art they write about, many modernists take a special interest in the aesthetic quality of their own prose. While there are some prominent exceptions, Americanist scholarship as a whole is written in a voice closer to that of general historical nonfiction, aiming to communicate to the broadest readership possible. Much modernist art history, by contrast, draws extensively not only on the vocabulary of translated French and German theory but also on its academic-poetic style. Rhythm counts highly, and the pleasures of the text sometimes trump its straightforwardness.

To summarize this distinction, we might observe that Americanists and modernists agree on something important: the central topic of art-historical inquiry is *how* things are represented. The difference is that, while the *how* in question is for Americanists largely cultural and social (what constructs of race are at work in a picture, say, or what ideas of nature?), for modernists the *how* is at first structural-formal (what modes of representation are being used?), opening only through such questions onto political matters.

### *History (and Politics)*

If the two fields are distinguished by the degrees and characteristics of their orientation to form, they are likewise distinguished by the lenses they use to view history. The vast majority of Americanist scholarship operates in the mode of the social (or, perhaps more precisely, cultural) history of art. Context—chronological, local, and national—matters, so scholars carefully offer information about an artist’s studio, her training and reading, her relationship to recent problems reported by the popular press, and, at least somewhat more than modernists do, her biography. Following recent models in cultural history, this “local knowledge” becomes an entry point for understanding broader cultural issues and the social forces that underlie them.

Most modernists, by contrast, tend to see the important aspects of history as not so finely grained, either temporally or geographically. Here it is a long, epistemic view of history that matters: not the Kennedy assassination or the march on Selma, but the condition of late capitalist subjectivity. Often, when modernists discuss art deeply engaged in the specifics of its own moment, they take more interest in the fact and form of that engagement than in the specific social topics addressed.<sup>9</sup> Art remains the

central topic of inquiry, at least until the highest and most abstract layers of history emerge. And while artists are significant in modernist narratives, what matters is often not their individual agency but rather their role as conduit through which the work of art might be said to come together or appear.

The Americanist and modernist clusters are both fundamentally left traditions, each in its way heavily influenced by the intellectual legacy of Marxism. For the generation that saw the explosive growth of Americanist art history thirty years ago, however, readings of Marx mingled with interests in Pragmatism, social reform, and the legacies of New Deal liberalism, as epitomized, for example, in the writings of John Dewey. Civil rights was perhaps the most indelible chapter of recent history. Such progressive values as free speech, equal rights, and public health are centrally important in Americanist accounts of the past. For their part, modernists mixed their Marx with such figures as Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Lacan. (Michel Foucault's influence is more complicated, having been a significant source in both fields.<sup>10</sup>) The result has been an attention not so much to civic well-being as to the possibilities (and historical accounts, largely failed) of radically reordering knowledge and the social order. The stakes in such scholarship are high, and modernist histories can be agonistically, even tragically pitched.

To a degree, we do mean to suggest that American art history has a more progressive bent than modernist scholarship, which often seeks only a radical alternative to hegemony. What interests us most, however, is not the degree but rather the kind of left political commitment in each case. This leads us to the last of our synthetic sketches of the differences between the two fields.

### *Humanism (and Its Rejection)*

It seems to us that the single most significant difference keeping Americanists and modernists from engaging in conversation is this: while mainstream modernist art history is poststructuralist, most Americanist scholarship is humanist. This distinction is not absolute, of course, but it certainly separates the broad centers of the two disciplines from one another. To make clear what we mean by this distinction, let us begin by making a pair of comparisons. Each sets an Americanist historiographical essay against a modernist one. The first pair appeared in 1987 and 1988, the second in 2003 and 2004. We hope, through these comparisons, to show the ways in which each field understands the roles of scholarship (and the function of art objects) quite differently. On both sides, we will see our historiographers describing epochal shifts, beginning in the 1970s, in the aims of scholarship; we believe that the differences between these shifts, as experienced and understood by modernists and Americanists, account for much of the ongoing miscommunication.

Wanda Corn's 1988 essay "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art" remains a landmark in the historiography of American art. As its title suggests, the essay remarked on the recent and massive growth of the Americanist field, both in the quantity of work being undertaken and in the diversity of its interests and methods. Corn noted that Americanist art history had so far been dominated by "documentary monographs" that recovered empirical information and remarked that the field had suffered from too little work on "what might be called historical or intellectual 'problems.'" She added that starting in the late 1970s, revisionists had begun to enlarge the field by considering objects that had not often come in for study: work

by women, non-white artists, outsider artists, and others. The resulting questioning of taxonomy and method was so profound that, for a time, “survey books in American art suddenly stopped appearing.” In the years following, Corn noted, many Americanist art historians came to drop the exclusive attention to fine art, turning their attention also to material culture objects such as Mount Rushmore, post office murals, and kitschy motels.<sup>11</sup>

Twenty-five years later, we agree with this characterization of the revisionist turn in Americanist art history. Corn writes, though, that these shifts belonged to a broader transformation across fields, a “radical critique of art history itself, which questioned a discipline that focused so exclusively on art considered innovative and aesthetically superior.”<sup>12</sup> While we agree that other corners of art history were likewise transformed in and after the 1970s, it strikes us that the character of the shifts within Americanist and modernist art history differed in important ways. For one thing, modernists, on the whole, did not embrace popular culture but remained dedicated to the art they saw as important, sometimes dismissing visual culture studies as vague and rudderless.<sup>13</sup> For modernists, the most notable shift was not enlargement or even critique of the canon (although there was some of that) but rather a turn to a new set of questions or approaches—specifically to poststructuralist methods which, it was hoped, might help to undermine the general epistemic and social order. These differences in character between the Americanist and the modernist versions of 1970s revisionism have, in our view, set the scene for an ongoing misunderstanding. It is a misunderstanding, moreover, by which each side can perceive the other as backward or conservative for failing to have made the apparently central transformation.

Corn’s essay went further, indicating that, over time, the revisionist turn in Americanist art history came to include not only expansion (even explosion) of the canon but also efforts at forging new, more historically robust methods. Here she cited, in addition to the material culture work already mentioned, a growing interest in social-historical concerns. In this brand of recent work, analyzing cultural-institutional factors such as education, taste, and power structures took precedence over the traditional tasks of uncovering artists’ biographies and recounting their art-historical sources. What had once seemed background material, she wrote, “now became part of the foreground.”<sup>14</sup> This social-historical method has since become by far the dominant mode of Americanist art history. It is worth noting that both Americanist and modernist brands of social art history have been fundamentally influenced by the work of the modernist art historian T.J. Clark. The nature of that influence, however, has been different in the two fields. While Americanist art history situates representations within frames of genre, institution, and politics, it is generally not built on *form*. One of Clark’s great influences on the modern field, by contrast, was to demonstrate ways in which composition, style, and even facture can reveal deep social structures (as in his discussion of the historical meanings of Impressionist flatness and unfinish.)<sup>15</sup>

For our purposes, it is very interesting that in her observations on the future of the American field, Corn did add that “the most sophisticated studies of art and society” were in fact “those using post-structuralist analysis to locate the work of art within history, and history within art.” Recognizing the sensitivity of these accounts while cautioning that they “raise questions they do not resolve,” she mentioned also some new, theoretically oriented “interpretive criticism,” which, she wrote, drew from “deconstruction, post-structuralism, and psychology.”<sup>16</sup> It is true that writers in this

mode—Corn mentioned Jules Prown, Bryan Wolf, David Lubin, and even Michael Fried—often assembled speculative and subjective readings of their objects of study, and that these were frequently inflected by Freud. It strikes us, though, that few of the accounts were truly poststructuralist, at least not in the sense held dear by modernists: for all the sophistication and subtlety of their interpretation, these writers did not require their art to overturn the structures of meaning by which the world is assembled. Instead, their writing maintained the aim of uncovering individual and collective expression, however layered, socially mediated, or unconscious.

Only months before Corn's essay, the editors of the modernist journal *October* published an anthology of essays that had appeared in the first ten years of that journal's run.<sup>17</sup> They grouped the essays under the following headings: The Index, Historical Materialism, Critique of Institutions, Psychoanalysis, Rhetoric, and The Body. It is difficult to imagine a collection of essays in Americanist art history organized under these theoretical terms, although several of them could certainly be made to apply. The difference perceptible here is a symptom of the kinds of theory at work in the two fields. And it is in modernist art history, more consistently than in any other branch of the discipline, that *poststructuralist* approaches have shifted the mainstream of scholarship.

In their introduction to the volume, the *October* editors wrote that much of the work in the journal was offered as a critique of late capitalism and its "revival of traditional artistic and discursive tendencies." They went on to name directly the predominant method for this critique: "it seemed to us that the most cogent response to the return to traditional Western values in every sphere of social and cultural life [after the 1960s] was the critique of the presuppositions of those values made by French theorists, those who had come to be called poststructuralists."<sup>18</sup>

Further remarks clarified what the editors meant by claiming that they and their authors took a poststructuralist view. Primarily, this stance had to do with understanding reality as shaped by ideology and social forces, which, if refracted through the lens of sufficiently radical art, could be broken and remolded into better forms. Distinguishing themselves from more traditional individual or institutional understandings of power, they wrote that "social discourses have rhetorical force, which is not simply to say that they *affect* us ... but more, as psychoanalytic and linguistic theory teaches us, that they *effect* us."<sup>19</sup> By distinguishing the mere idea of *affecting* (altering) from *effecting* (bringing into being), the editors located social structures as the very genesis of individual human existence. The individual is not simply acted upon by society but invented by it.

Compare to this one of Corn's remarks about the role of social and economic forces in Americanist art histories. Addressing the nonjudgmental perspective of material culture studies, she wrote that such scholars do not see popular culture "as the capitalist's means of manipulating the taste, values, and pocketbook of unsuspecting citizenry."<sup>20</sup> In relief against *October's* short manifesto for poststructuralist art history, what jumps out here is Corn's passing over of the term *capitalism* in favor of the singular human figure "the capitalist." And although this may seem a minor point, Corn's phrasing bespeaks a more humanist notion of economics, in which individual agents undertake (often) self-interested actions. Modernist scholarship, by contrast, tends to understand capitalism as a force, indeed a structure, beyond and outside the actions of even big-business profiteers. The poststructuralist move is to identify the system and to seek means for undoing its seeming inevitability.<sup>21</sup>

The *October* editors offered a gloss, for example, on their brand of feminism, one that they took pains to distinguish from humanist inclusionism:

Women had to be written into historical and contemporary cultural practices as producers and as addressees. This task would entail, however, more than a simple retrieval of women from neglected historical archives or support of contemporary women's work. It would also entail a reconception of the scotoma that kept women from sight not as an impediment to be removed but as a process of vision itself. Feminism would participate in the redefinition of vision as historical.<sup>22</sup>

Here the articulated ambition of writing about art is not to make visible lost pieces of history, nor to bring forward hidden social events or even obscured psychological forces. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate that vision itself is shaped by social discourse, and, further, to enable the possibility of breaking the contemporary, patriarchal structure of sight.

Fifteen years after Corn's essay, John Davis published "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States." Also appearing in *The Art Bulletin*, Davis's comprehensive survey recounted the growth and the many changes in the Americanist field since the time of Corn's account: the involvement of art history in the US culture wars around 1990, for example, as well as the further development of institutional critique and of African American, Asian American, and Chicano art histories. Despite these developments, however, the Americanist field surveyed by Davis appears little different in terms of its relationship to poststructuralism from that described by Corn. Indeed, Davis's language echoes Corn's when he identifies, as a balance to the social and cultural art history dominating the field, a smaller but ambitious strain of work characterized by "creative speculation, attention to the psychoanalytic unconscious, and the presentist critical propositions of deconstruction and poststructuralism."<sup>23</sup>

But if we look into Davis's chief examples of this latter strain, essays from around 1990 by Jules Prown and Alexander Nemerov, we still find work quite different from modernist poststructuralism. In the former case, we encounter arguments that, while deeply psychoanalytic, do not aim to help dismantle social consciousness. Prown's method, as Davis describes it, is "to probe the kinesthetic excitement" of the artwork in order to achieve the "unlocking of mental culture (society interests him much less) inscribed, usually unconsciously, onto objects by the physical act of creation." In the case of Nemerov, we find greater overlap with modernist interests in epistemic and structural-formal thinking—Davis notes, for example, that Nemerov's writing is shaped by "internal musings about ... the nature of representation" and a sensitivity to "semiotic contingency."<sup>24</sup> However, his approach remains in at least one respect fundamentally Americanist; the critique of ideology is not dependent upon radicality of form. Quite to the contrary, the art he treats here is formally and politically conservative, and the analysis he offers is not intended by the artist but rather built by the historian.

Perhaps not surprisingly, even the most self-consciously poststructuralist Americanist scholarship is insufficient to satisfy the expectations of some leading modernists. Writing contemporaneously with Davis, the modernist Benjamin H.D. Buchloh observed that the major theoretical strains of modernist art history had been developed specifically "as attempts to displace earlier humanist (subjective) approaches to criticism and interpretation."<sup>25</sup> No doubt Prown's and Nemerov's efforts—unorthodox as they are—do no



FIGURE 1.1 Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), *Full Fathom Five*, 1947, oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, key, coins, cigarettes, matches etc.,  $50\frac{7}{8} \times 30\frac{7}{8}$  in. ( $129.2 \times 76.5$  cm). © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim. 186.1952. *Source*: Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York / Scala, Florence. © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London 2014.

better for Buchloh than the interpretive approaches that had, up to the 1970s, dominated even modernist scholarship: they hold to notions of the art object as an expression of its maker's meaning—a vessel, if even unconsciously, for “Homer's message” or for “the painters' sublimated acknowledgment of the difficulties ... in making history.”<sup>26</sup>

Buchloh's essay was one of four introductions to *Art since 1900*, the 2004 textbook that he wrote together with the three other central figures behind *October*. Each of the essays introduced a method of modernist art history: Buchloh wrote on social art history, Hal Foster on psychoanalysis, Yve-Alain Bois on formalism and structuralism, and Rosalind Krauss on poststructuralism and deconstruction. While only the last of these essays used the word poststructuralism in its title, all four echoed the 1987 *October* anthology and further developed its positions. Buchloh, for example, wrote that the aim of avant-garde art (and, implicitly, of good history of it) was to “initiate fundamental changes in the conception of audience and spectatorial agency, to reverse the bourgeois hierarchy of aesthetic exchange-value and use-value, and most importantly perhaps, to conceive of cultural practices for a newly emerging



internationalist ... public sphere.” It was no less than the “innermost *telos*” of abstraction, collage, and Dada, he added, “actively to destroy traditional subject-object relationships.”<sup>27</sup> This is not a model of art as expression, however sublimated, but of art as means for remaking thought.

Our point here is not that Americanists fetishize the individual; in many ways they do so less than their modernist counterparts. (Think of Americanist notions of pluralistic popular culture up against the avant-garde heroics that characterize much modernist writing.) We mean rather to say that Americanists generally take more interest in historical expressions—even when those expressions are unconscious, contradictory, and collective—than they do in the forms by which those expressions are made. For many modernists, by contrast, the topic is form, both aesthetic and social, and the ways in which it enables the taking apart of some expressions and the potential building of others. Let us now test these generalizations, and complicate them, in a comparison of modernist and Americanist treatments of the Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock (Figure 1.1).

### Case Study: Jackson Pollock

While modernist accounts of Pollock may be more widely circulated, the claims that both modernist and Americanist art historians make on his work are compelling, especially in relation to the historical break at 1945 problematized in the opening passages of this essay. We have selected four well-recognized analyses of Pollock’s work: two commonly affiliated with modernist art by Rosalind Krauss and T.J. Clark and two usually associated with the American field by Michael Leja and Erika Doss. Chronologically, the texts make a tight grouping as all were published in the 1990s. Our goal in comparing the interpretive strategies deployed by these authors is not to critique or even to recapitulate each of their arguments as such, but rather to locate in them the methodological and philosophical differences that shape the two fields. In doing so, however, we also aim to demonstrate some of the uniqueness of each case and to recognize moments of hybridity when they arise. In our view, the accounts by Krauss and Doss are the most different, while Leja’s is the most difficult to categorize.<sup>28</sup> We reprise the categories laid out previously for the sake of clarity.

#### *Form*

Rosalind Krauss’s writing typifies modernist scholarship in its heavy investment in form as such, together with its belief that radicality of form lies at the heart of art’s decidedly critical purpose. In her account of modernist art, *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss defines the importance of Pollock’s art in its almost insurrectionist challenge to the formal and structural conventions of representation. Describing how Pollock’s approach to form embodied such a structural critique, she writes:

At some point, it became clear that figure could only be approached through *bassesse*, through lowering, through going *beneath* the figure into the terrain of formlessness. And it also became clear that the act of lowering could, itself, only register through the vehicle of a trace or index, through, that is, the stain that would fissure the event from within into act of aggression and mark, or residue, or clue. When Pollock began to dribble a network of line over the figures on the canvases of what became *Galaxy* and *Reflections of the Big Dipper*, this *bassesse* was suddenly in place.<sup>29</sup>

For Krauss, form is not merely a locus for aesthetic innovation, but rather a register for deeper penetrations into the structural field of representation. Her understanding of Pollock's breakthrough as the ability to get beneath the figure ("bassesse") relies on a belief that specific formal acts or configurations—moving the canvas to the floor; reconstituting the intentional mark as an autonomic trace—held the potential for unmasking and subverting the structures that shaped both art and knowledge. Indeed, Krauss's own writing enacts an analogous subversion of academic writing forms in its eschewal of footnotes, its stylized repetition of phrases and passages, and its familiar references to Clement Greenberg as "Clem." Yet, central though form may be, Krauss offers no extended visual analyses of individual works. Rather, her interest in form concerns the history of the medium of painting and its structuring logic.

By contrast, Erika Doss's *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism* is, above all, contextualist. Radical formal innovation is not a central topic, and although Doss does characterize Pollock's drip paintings as "revolutionary," she writes directly against viewing this breakthrough "purely in formalistic terms." Instead, her aim is to reconnect Pollock's Abstract Expressionism to its regionalist roots, and, moreover, to attach "the story of the shift from regionalism to abstraction" to "that of the shift from the New Deal to the Cold War." Doss's method certainly does not ignore formal operations, though it does delimit the field of formal possibility and make it more purposeful in its own immediate historical context:

The abstract nature of Pollock's drips showed the tense instability of life in postwar America; the dense webbed content of his pictures embodied the entrapment of consensus culture. But the visual dynamism inherent in Pollock's abstract works also conveyed a desperate sense of the need for revolution, for the overthrow of authority. ... In the way he painted Pollock defied the conventions of traditional art making and proposed a method for self-healing and individual empowerment. He visualized especially the need to loosen—if not completely dissolve—the restraint of consensus conformity.<sup>30</sup>

Here, Doss connects visual form to external subject matter. The verbs she uses—"showed," "embodied," "visualized," "defied," "proposed"—heighten this sense that Pollock's works, if of course in abstract ways, actively represent and negotiate the concerns of the world around them.

In *Farewell to An Idea*, T.J. Clark, like Rosalind Krauss, gives formal-structural issues pride of place. "I want modernism," Clark writes, "to emerge as a distinctive patterning of mental and technical possibilities." Within these formal-cognitive operations, he adds, the most significant art is "characterized by a thickening and thinning of those patterns—by kinds of simplification or overload, stabs at false immediacy or absolute muteness, ideas of beginning again or putting an end to representation, maybe moving finally from representation to agency."<sup>31</sup> Like Krauss, Clark builds his account on a notion of the radicality of Pollock's form, but for Clark this invention concerns not horizontality and lowness but rather the painter's ongoing effort to refuse metaphor. Also, Clark, much more than Krauss, attends to the formal details of individual pictures. Consider this representative passage about Pollock's *Number 1, 1948* and its relationship to *One: Number 31, 1950*:

The picture is fragile. Tinsel-thin. ... The clouds of aluminum and the touches of pink toward bottom left only confirm the essential brittleness of the whole thing—the

feeling of its black and white lines being thin, hard, friable, dry, each of them stretched to the breaking point. ... *One*, by contrast, is more poured than thrown, and more splashed (rained) than poured. Spotted. Sprayed. Which does not mean that its surface looks straightforwardly liquid. Finding words for the contradictory qualities of Pollock's surfaces is, you see already, a torturous business.

Clark's interpretation of Pollock's form hinges on what he perceives as its efforts to resist and negate the transparency of representation. Pollock's painting, he writes, "is a constant action against metaphor: that is to say, against any one of his pictures settling down inside a single metaphorical frame."<sup>32</sup> What Clark perceives in Pollock's form is not merely a negation of external references, but rather a perpetual and open-ended disruption of any effort toward the stabilization of representation with its attendant hegemonic implications.

While Clark's structural-formal approach affirms his status as a modernist, his detailed attention to specific historical contexts (especially in his earlier work) has proven attractive to Americanist scholars. Perhaps this aspect of Clark's method has even played a role in leading some of his students to the American field, including Michael Leja, author of *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*. Like Krauss and Clark, Leja believes that much of the significance of Pollock's oeuvre (again, the drip paintings are important, though not so central as in the two modernist accounts) belongs to his formal innovation. Echoing the passage of Clark's quoted above, Leja's analysis of *Out of the Web, Number 7, 1949*, originates in a careful analysis of the formal characteristics of Pollock's art:

Thinned paint has left splashy marks that reveal fully the underlying textures; thick paint is visible in pasty impasto and in raised, smooth-edged lines and pools. The width of the line varies greatly as an index of viscosity and speed of the gesture. ... In some areas a dry brush has been dragged over textured surfaces, in others, the brush was pulled through a wet web, interrupting the flow and delicacy.<sup>33</sup>

In many respects, Leja's passage bears striking resemblance to Clark's example. Yet, whereas Clark dwells on the negations and instabilities of Pollock's marks, Leja understands these marks to function, if in very complicated ways, as metaphor. Specifically, Leja reads Pollock's paintings as expressions of what he names the "modern man" discourse of subjectivity (a discourse broadly manifest in postwar American culture, from popular psychology to *film noir*.) "The image of man struggling to exert control over the powerful forces within and without him," Leja writes, "found compelling visual form in Pollock's work."<sup>34</sup> In Leja's view, some modernist accounts have gone too far in understanding Pollock's abstraction as an attack on representation at the expense of its contextualist linkages:

The question of subject or meaning in these [Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists'] paintings is complex, it is true, but not so complex that it warrants enveloping the pictures in mystification or obscurity, or justifies the revival of untenable accounts of solely formal and expressive significance. The task is to reconcile the artists' commitment to abstraction with their simultaneous commitment to expanding abstraction's possibilities for meaning. ... their work reveals itself to be committed to devising an abstract art rich in complex, articulate metaphors.<sup>35</sup>

Pollock's abstractions, in Leja's estimation, were doubly responsive—offering a radical critique of representation even while also articulating the metaphors underlying the notion of “modern man.”

### *History (and Politics)*

Orientation to form inevitably bleeds into matters of historical context. Yet if modernists and Americanists share history in common—the objects, personalities, events, and stories are often the same—their deployments of these materials diverge both in overarching concept and specific application.

Again, the most categorical differences can be seen between Krauss and Doss, for whom what is relevant (as history) varies greatly. Krauss's historical framing of art is epistemic rather than detailed, almost subterranean rather than explicit. She specifically argues for holding the history of art apart, at least for a time, from history more generally.<sup>36</sup> As historical evidence, Krauss calls on few artifacts beyond the paintings and their criticism (by Greenberg especially) and a fractured and stylized version of Pollock's biography. Any historical or political relevance for Pollock's negation—his horizontality, lowness, and formlessness—remains, until the very end of her account, unnamed. In her last two pages, however, Krauss writes that Pollock's art acts against collective repressions associated with modernist opticality. Seeming to imply that such anti-transcendental actions might help to undercut the ideologies underpinning hierarchy, she writes that Pollock's work had managed to “undo form by knocking it off its sublimatory pedestal, to bring it down in the world, to make it *déclassé*.”<sup>37</sup>

Doss offers a direct contrast. Where Krauss's history is abstract and structural, Doss's is specific and contextualist. From the outset, Doss identifies her topic as a discrete set of historical objects (“American art from the Depression to the Cold War”) framed by a definite history (the “socio-political and cultural conditions of its age”).<sup>38</sup> And unlike Krauss, who maintained a distinction between modernist art and other modes of cultural discourse, for Doss the relationship between art and its historical milieu is robust and everywhere entangled. In a representative passage, she writes:

Pollock focused on the tragedy of contemporary social alienation and the primacy of individual expression. ... For postwar intellectuals who had abandoned the “search for community” in favor of “the virtues of privacy and personal fulfillment” and the search for individual identity, Pollock's aesthetic model was perfectly appropriate. But, his appeal to individual empowerment was also an enormous threat to the ideology of postwar consensus, which albeit conflicted, centered on conformity and consumption.<sup>39</sup>

Here, the grounding for Pollock's work is not the long epistemic history of modernity, but rather the relatively discrete social environment of America's late 1940s transformation from Depression-era populism to postwar consumerism. The motivating agents of history are people—who function either as groups (the New Deal generation, the WPA, postwar intellectuals) or as individuals (Pollock and his teacher, Thomas Hart Benton). While artworks are privileged, their value is not unique. We sense, for example, that Doss finds almost as much of interest in the 1949 *Life* magazine layout on Pollock as she does in his paintings. This relatively nonhierarchical approach positions art within the mainstream of cultural objects and enables a wide

range of historical subject positions—middle-class magazine readers, for example, in addition to avant-garde critics—to emerge.

Clark's handling of Pollock's relationship to history is far less oblique than Krauss's but still in many ways characteristically modernist. Unlike Krauss, Clark understands art to have an explicit and synthetic relationship to historical forces, but the relationship is long and grand. Consider his introductory remarks on the relationships between modernism ("a particular mode of representation," or a "family of modes") to modernity ("a social order"). He writes:

Modernism's disdain for the world and wish for a truly gratuitous gesture in the face of it are more than just attitudes: they are the true (that is, agonized) form of its so-called purism. ... And yet the thought of belonging and serviceability (of Economy as an ideal) haunts modernism, all the more so because belonging and serviceability are sensed to be modernity's true opposites—the dimensions to experience it most ruthlessly outlaws or travesties. These antinomies of modern art, and their relation to a history it invents ... and misrecognizes, are what this book is mainly about.<sup>40</sup>

Here, modernism as an artistic mode takes form only in synchronicity with modernity, with social structures ground into the pigment of form. Still, Clark envisions both modernism and modernity primarily as broad conditions whose reach extends beyond the discrete situation of any particular time and place.<sup>41</sup> An understanding of Pollock's cultural milieu circa 1948 is important, but somewhat less so than a longer view of modernity's core operations—which are understood to play out epochally. The historical circumstances in Pollock's art are, in other words, only *relatively* different from those in other of Clark's "episodes" of modernism.

A key to Clark's influence on both modernists and Americanists lies in his ability to balance, to a degree, contextualist and epistemic histories. This desire to see history both from on high and close in also emerges in Leja's work. Sounding very much the Americanist, Leja writes that his aim in studying Pollock is to enable the artist's "reinsertion into history," and to demonstrate "the extensive interdependence between New York School art and the culture in which it flourished." Hence his close readings of "popular philosophy, cultural criticism [and] Hollywood movies." Sounding like a modernist, however, Leja insists, too, on a place for long epistemic structures—particularly for *ideology*, which he defines as "an array of basic propositions and attitudes about reality, self, and society embedded in representation and discourse and seemingly obviously true and natural."<sup>42</sup> Leja, then, reads Pollock's paintings both as expressions of their time and place and as objects that might make visible some of the basic cognitive apparatuses of modern hierarchy. If one aspect of his method makes Leja appear to us more Americanist than modernist, it is his rejection of an agonistic, Adornian mode, in which art must attack the palliative, ideological functions of mass culture. On the contrary, Abstract Expressionism, he writes, is little different from *film noir*: "both repress some anxieties, but give visual form to others."<sup>43</sup>

### *Humanism (and Its Rejection)*

To say that the Pollock literature shows modernists to be poststructuralist and Americanists humanist is not, of course, flatly or simply true. But consider the tendencies of each of our pairs. Krauss and Clark may disagree broadly in their readings of

Pollock, yet both believe that the work of art is shaped by pervasive epistemic structures. In Krauss's handling, these structures belong chiefly to art itself, with Pollock's "formlessness" constituting an assault on the structures of modernist, transcendental opticality. Although she takes an interest in Pollock's psychological biography (and certainly sets him dramatically apart from other artists), agency in her view seems almost to belong as much to art itself as to its makers: in her formulation it is "the mark" in the drip paintings that "cuts itself away from any intentional matrix to achieve its own isolation."<sup>44</sup> Clark's Pollock is similarly poised against powerful and abstract structures. Clark avows that his opinions of Pollock's paintings "do not tally in any obvious way with other (equally banal) opinions I have about politics, realism, modernity, capitalism, and so forth." Rather, the value of the paintings lies in an overall "resistance and refusal," or "some form of intransigence or difficulty"—provided, that is, that such ideas "have any sustaining force still left them."<sup>45</sup> Such negation is formal and also social; what is to be resisted is not historically specific but ultimately structural and comprehensive. Here, Pollock's painting does not express social conditions (such as Doss's postwar alienation and consumer culture) but rather works in a "utopian, slightly lunatic" way as if to "*overcome*" history itself. Like the other great "limit cases" of modernism, these paintings are busy dreaming that "[h]uman nature is going to be remade" and that "[a]rtists have invented a new alphabet."<sup>46</sup>

For Leja and Doss, Pollock's art is deeply tied to individual agents, particular historical configurations, and explicit representational purposes. In Doss's account, for example, the sustained interpersonal relationship between Pollock and his former mentor Benton serves as the linchpin for a new explanation of Pollock's turn to abstraction—one that figures the artist's shift not as a radical turn against the conventions of art or the structures of modernity, but instead as an effort to negotiate the cultural issues of midcentury American culture. Although she does see the paintings in relationship to "corporate and political forces" that Pollock could not control, these forces only emerge to the historian's eye when they are tested by the actions of individuals. For Doss, social conditions are always interwoven with individual experience: Pollock "painted to express social alienation and propose modes of personal transformation."<sup>47</sup> This rhetoric of personal expression exemplifies the humanist core of Americanist art history. For his part, Leja, again embodying aspects of both fields, endorses a view of the human subject as "simultaneously dominated by discourse and empowered to function as more than an 'actor for the ideological script.'" Concerning subjectivity, Leja writes that his book aims "to eschew both extremes [social determination and autonomy] by portraying the artists as agents making decisions within systems of constraints, namely, discourses and ideologies whose reshaping, development, and extension are determined in part by those decisions."<sup>48</sup> Seeming at once both humanist and poststructuralist (or, perhaps better, not purely either), Leja keeps in view both the "expressive power" of Pollock's paintings and also the "ideological components of their aesthetic stature."<sup>49</sup>

## Concluding Observations

Our goal in this chapter has not been to advocate either an Americanist or a modernist approach, but rather to better understand the beliefs and circumstances shaping the differences between the two. What has emerged, we hope, is a recognition that each field

has developed methods that are uniquely responsive to its objects and interests. As such, we do not wish to end with any prescription that each field improve itself by being more like the other. Indeed, we are not convinced that the distinctions between the fields require a “solution” in some definitive form. We conclude instead with some very brief notes about the possibilities and problems endemic to each method, in hopes that further attention to these might encourage the development of new methodological terrains.

Modernist art history has proven compelling to many audiences in its formulation of methods for perceiving the systematic and diaphanous powers that underlie not only representation, but also history, politics, and everyday life. Art becomes meaningful as a way to disclose, analyze and, ultimately, negate the codes and rules that underwrite power. This approach, however, has sometimes generated notions of the human subject as so deeply socially constructed that individual expression is nearly impossible. The subject is fractured and atomized, and there is little space outside the total power of capital. Though often useful and compelling, such formulations can both underestimate individual agency and diminish difference. Such approaches can also be problematic in their downplay of specific pictorial subjects in favor of broader questions of form or representational mode.

Americanists, for their part, are deeply invested in the premise of the individual subject as a consequential figure in cultural discourse. This proposition is the source of what might be perceived as American art history’s greatest strength: its ability to give voice to a plurality of subject positions. Americanists also maintain the notion that the work of art can still persuasively function in narrative, expressive, lyrical, and even moralizing modes. While these notions of individual and artwork will strike some modernists as romantic or naive, we believe that they too open up artistic meaning, not least for the potential purpose of imagining a world very different from the one we inhabit.

## Notes

- 1 The conference was organized by Richard Meyer. Meyer, 2004, p. 5.
- 2 Ellen Wiley Todd convened a panel at the 2007 meeting of the College Art Association called “Troubling That 1945 Border Again.”
- 3 Corn, 1988, p. 188n1; Davis, 2003, p. 572.
- 4 The Arts and Humanities Citation Index—although it is clearly incomplete—gives some indication of the poor engagement. Using sample groups of Americanist journals (*American Art*, *Archives of American Art Journal*, and *Winterthur Portfolio*) and modernist ones (*Art Journal*, *October*, and *Oxford Art Journal*), we found only eighteen citations across the Americanist/modernist divide since 1996 (compared with 3,006 citations of these journals overall). Index consulted online in November 2012.
- 5 Some may object that we contrast Americanist art history to *October* rather than to modernist art history as a whole. There are of course modernists working outside the methods we focus on here, but it is no exaggeration to say that the methods clustered around *October* have defined the leadership of that field over the last quarter-century. In using the term “modernists” we refer also to contemporary art historians who, for the most part, share training and publication venues with those working on modern art.
- 6 Americanists have their closest cognate, by contrast, in cultural history. We would venture to add that cultural studies is separated from cultural history by a divide in many ways analogous to the one we describe here.

- 7 For two Americanist treatments of the question of quality, see Corn, 1988, pp. 190–191, and Meyer, 2004, *passim*.
- 8 Bois, 2011, p. 33. Bois cites Roland Barthes’s explicitly historical formalism as a source.
- 9 See, for example, most of the scholarship on Robert Rauschenberg or even Hans Haacke. The modernist Hal Foster has recently noted his preference for scholarship that periodizes art to a paradigm rather than historicizing it to a social context: Foster, 2011, p. 13.
- 10 Americanist scholarship is largely consonant with Foucault’s telling of history in epistemic periods.
- 11 Corn, 1988, pp. 193, 197, 199, 203–204.
- 12 Corn, 1988, p. 199.
- 13 See Hughes, 2007.
- 14 Corn, 1988, p. 200.
- 15 See especially Clark, 1984.
- 16 Corn, 1988, p. 201.
- 17 Michelson, Krauss, Crimp, and Copjec, 1987.
- 18 Michelson, Krauss, Crimp, and Copjec, 1987, pp. ix, x.
- 19 Michelson, Krauss, Crimp, and Copjec, 1987, p. xi, emphasis ours.
- 20 Corn, 1988, p. 204.
- 21 The fact that modernists are generally concerned with more recent history is relevant: the conditions described are more or less still with us, and want correcting.
- 22 Michelson, Krauss, Crimp, and Copjec, 1987, p. xi.
- 23 Davis, 2003, p. 555.
- 24 Davis, 2003, pp. 556, 553.
- 25 Buchloh, 2011, p. 22 (parentheses original).
- 26 Prown, 1987, p. 41; Nemerov, 1991, p. 289.
- 27 Buchloh, 2011, pp. 25, 31.
- 28 Leja’s account was first developed as a dissertation advised by Clark. Any of these scholars might debate our categorizations, which derive foremost from their scholarship but also from their conference participation, their publication venues, and their specializations within their university departments.
- 29 Krauss, 1993, p. 284.
- 30 Doss, 1991, pp. 347, 345, 312, 356.
- 31 Clark, 1999, p. 7. The chapter (6) that we draw on most heavily is based on an earlier essay: Clark, 1990.
- 32 Clark, 1999, pp. 310–311, 338–339.
- 33 Leja, 1993, p. 279.
- 34 Leja, 1993, p. 283.
- 35 Leja, 1993, p. 8.
- 36 Krauss, 1993, pp. 12–13.
- 37 Krauss, 1993, p. 307.
- 38 Doss, 1991, p. 1.
- 39 Doss, 1991, pp. 365–366.
- 40 Clark, 1999, pp. 7–8.
- 41 This relatively epistemic notion of history is more pronounced in *Farewell to an Idea* than elsewhere in his writings. His previous book, *The Painting of Modern Life*, is decidedly more contextualist in its interweaving of form and social history.
- 42 Leja, 1993, pp. 324, 4, 6.



- 43 Leja, 1993, p. 17.  
 44 Krauss, 1993, p. 308.  
 45 Clark, 1999, pp. 313, 364.  
 46 Clark, 1999, pp. 369, 7 (emphasis original).  
 47 Doss, 1991, pp. 416, 6.  
 48 Leja, 1993, p. 10.  
 49 Leja, 1993, p. 5.

## References

- Bois, Y. (2011). "Formalism and Structuralism." In H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.-A. Bois, and B.H.D. Buchloh (eds.), *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. 2nd edn. New York: Thames & Hudson, pp. 32–39.
- Buchloh, B.H.D. (2011). "The Social History of Art: Models and Concepts." In H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.-A. Bois, and B.H.D. Buchloh (eds.), *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. 2nd edn. New York: Thames & Hudson, pp. 22–31.
- Clark, T.J. (1984). *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Clark, T.J. (1990). "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction." In S. Gilbert (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 172–243.
- Clark, T.J. (1999). *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Corn, W. (1988). "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art." *Art Bulletin* 70 (2), pp. 188–207.
- Davis, J. (2003). "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States." *Art Bulletin* 85 (3), pp. 544–580.
- Doss, E. (1991). *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foster, H. (2011). *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hughes, G. (2007). "Hal Foster." In D. Costello and J. Vickery (eds.), *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 67–70.
- Krauss, R. (1993). *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Leja, M. (1993). *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Meyer, R. (2004). "Mind the Gap: Americanists, Modernists, and the Boundaries of Twentieth-Century Art." *American Art* 18 (3), pp. 2–7.
- Michelson, A., Krauss, R., Crimp, D., and Copjec, J. (eds.) *October: The First Decade, 1976–1986*. (1987). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Nemerov, A. (1991). "Doing the 'Old America': The Image of the American West, 1880–1920." In W.H. Truettner (ed.), *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920*. Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, pp. 285–343.
- Prown, J.D. (1987). "Winslow Homer in His Art." *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1 (1), pp. 30–45.