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► **To cite this version:**

Raphael Julliard. Affective Guidance in the Creative Process: Ritual Anthropology as a Model -The Case of Jackson Pollock. 2023. hal-04114237v1

**HAL Id: hal-04114237**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04114237v1>**

Preprint submitted on 1 Jun 2023 (v1), last revised 9 Jun 2023 (v2)

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# **Affective Guidance in the Creative Process: Ritual Anthropology as a Model - The Case of Jackson Pollock**

## **ABSTRACT:**

This article proposes to use ritual anthropology to model the creative process in modern Western art, illustrated by the longitudinal case study of the work of North American artist Jackson Pollock, his statements on his process, and historical documents. First, the article applies Alfred Gell's model, where artists are either "passive" spectators or "active" creators of artworks, and signals the need for a more detailed description of the transition between these states. Drawing from the dynamics of affects found in Jeanne Favret-Saada's ethnography of rural sorcery, the article develops the model further to resolve this shift. This new model emphasizes that for Pollock artworks are used as means to experience a specific affect, the pursuit of which guides his creative process, both for individual artworks and the development of his entire body of work. The conclusion examines alternative models from psychology, further emphasizing the centrality of affects in the creative process.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Affects, Creative Process, Ritual Anthropology, Jackson Pollock, Methodology

## **INTRODUCTION**

"If we were to ask [an artist] why he did this or changed that, he might not be able to tell us. He does not follow any fixed rules. He just feels his way" (Gombrich 1951: 15). Ernst Gombrich's famous work, *The Story of Art*, narrates the order observed through centuries of transformations in the production of Western artifacts. In contrast, the remark above in his

introduction describes the seemingly ruleless affect-based way artists use in their creative process, enabling them to create these very artifacts.

This article introduces a model to accurately trace the dynamics of affects that guide artists in their process. In this regard, I will examine the case of North American artist Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), considering his artworks, and associated documentation spanning his entire career. This documentation presents verbal reports from the artist, relatives, and friends about the affects experiences by Pollock at different points in his creative process. The abstract paintings, which Pollock is most renowned, provide a place of choice to investigate the artist's affects since there is no question of figuration at play. In other words, only the artist can tell when his work *feels* complete free from the need to comply with any concrete subject. Lastly, examining an entire career provides insight into the dynamics not only of individual artworks but also across the entire process of creating his body of work.

The model itself is derived from a reading of ethnographic material in ritual settings, namely the dynamics of sorcery found in rural France as documented by Jeanne Favret-Saada (1977, 2009). It should be immediately clarified that the creative process is not a form of sorcery. Only the affective dynamics present in such settings do contribute to the understanding of the creative process. The objective is to propose a model applicable to any kind of art made by any artist. This differs from the approach of, for example, art historian Catherine Soussloff (2004) who relies on references to ritual inside Pollock's biography as a gateway to apply a ritual reading of his creative act. In her case, she draws on one utterance of the word "trance", used to describe Pollock's movements, and on Native American ritual sand paintings seen by the artist in an exhibition. In this study, I rely on the dynamics of sorcery for the model to fill a gap in Alfred Gell's influential *Art and Agency* (1998) when

dealing with an anthropological reading of art. In Gell's account, artists can be described as having an "active" or "passive" position relative to their artworks, but the transition between the two states is left unclear.

Finally, the model is compared to existing ones in the psychology of creativity to assess the place given to affects in relation to agency.

### **FROM PASSIVITY TO AGENCY**

Gell's model aims to encompass the sociology of people and artworks acting upon each other. In this article, my primary focus is the creative process leading to the artwork's completion rather than its reception by the viewers. From that standpoint, we will examine his distinction between active and passive positions.

Gell states, in a paragraph actually referencing Pollock's art, that the artist is active when the passive artwork is but "a congealed 'trace' of the artist's creative performance (Gell 1998, 33). At this point, a problem of terminology arises. For Gell, the artist is active at that moment because his artwork can act upon the viewers. However, in our case, the first viewer of the completed artwork is Pollock himself. If viewers attribute agency to the artist via the artwork, whose agency is Pollock perceiving when looking at his own works? The agency perceived is that of Pollock in the recent past, during his actual creation process. Thus, the artist is passive as a viewer of his own completed works, and active while producing them. Here is how Pollock phrasing:

When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it

come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. (Karmel 1999, 18; original emphasis).

For the artist, the artwork appears to be more than just a material “index” as suggested by Gell’s Peircean terminology. Pollock’s engagement with the painting during the process leads him to perceive it as manifesting a form of life. There is a way to engage with the painting during the process that makes Pollock describe it as a form of life. This engagement is discussed extensively in Tim Ingold’s *Making*, where this author advocates for a never-ending process (Ingold 2013, 96), an idea which I reject partially as we will see later. For now, let us examine how, from Pollock’s point of view, his actions during the creative process lead to the feeling of agency: it appears less as mere object-making and more like an exchange taking place between two agents. Critically though, this “life-giving process” is guided by a specific type of affect Pollock identifies as “harmony”. The painting is felt as complete when this harmony is achieved during the act of painting, provided that the artist maintains contact with it. Feeling harmony, in other words, is a sign that the process is going in the right direction, and amplifying this harmony to a certain level becomes the goal of the process. When the right level of harmony is felt by Pollock, as we will see, this marks the switch from an active to a passive position: he can then cease making changes to the painting’s surface. He then becomes a passive observer, affected by the achieved level of harmony in the painting, an affect that eliminates the need for further work on the artwork.

This aligns with one of Gell’s definitions of an artist’s passivity in relation to an artwork: when the artwork “possesses the characteristics which motivate its selection by the artist” (Gell 1998, 30). In fact, there are two moments in the creative process where this type

of passivity occurs. In the first moment, as we've just seen, the artwork is "selected" as complete when it displays qualities that make Pollock feel the right level of harmony. The second moment takes place at the very beginning of the creative process, before any actual work has begun. This is illustrated by the long-running competition Pollock felt he was in with Picasso, as reported by artist Lee Krasner, Pollock's wife:

...there's no question that he admired Picasso and at the same time competed with him, wanted to go past him... I remember one time I heard something fall and then Jackson yelling, 'God damn it, that guy missed nothing!' I went to see what had happened. Jackson was sitting, staring; and on the floor, where he had thrown it, was a book of Picasso's work... (Karmel 1999, 36).

Here, Pollock appears deeply frustrated by Picasso's art, given that Picasso has presumably materialized many ideas into finished artworks, ideas Pollock would have liked to realize himself. Frustration, by definition, implies a strong limitation of agency. If Pollock is frustrated due to his inability to produce artworks comparable to Picasso's, this moment aligns with Gell's definition above. It is the particular characteristics of Picasso's artworks that lead Pollock to "select" them. And it is Picasso's artworks in particular that trigger the most frustration in Pollock among the many works by numerous artists he saw.

Pollock experiences the full affective cycle as follows: 1) passivity, sparked by seeing someone else's art; 2) agency, during the hands-on work of making his own artwork and aiming for a balance of harmony; 3) returning to passivity, once that harmony is achieved, signaling that the artwork is complete. Gell's analysis doesn't account for this chronological transition from one position to another. Although the switch from agency (artist as creator) to

passivity (artist as first viewer of the completed artwork) can be understood from these two vignettes, the switch from initial passivity to creative agency is less obvious. This is where Favret-Saada's ethnographic study of the dynamic of affects provides a useful model.

### **RITUAL DYNAMIC AS A MODEL**

Gell makes several references to sorcery in his book, specifically *Volt*, to illustrate two points. First, a "prototype" is distinct from the artwork that it shapes. As an example, the drawing of an apple, the artwork, is different from the apple that forms its prototype. Then, sorcery provides insight into how a prototype "acts" upon the other agents within his system. We will come back later at what serves as Pollock's prototype. In the meantime, I will continue to examine the sorcery analogy to uncover its inherent affective dynamics. I'll then adapt these dynamics to our understanding of the creative process, which could give us a fresh perspective on the entire artistic procedure.

Favret-Saada's 1970s ethnography of sorcery in rural France identifies three positions that exist, like Gell's, within the active-passive dichotomy. But unlike the latter, her ethnography provides a description of the shift from passivity to agency.

According to Favret-Saada, rural sorcery is a farmer's last recourse to end a series of adverse events (unexpected livestock deaths or failed crops). These events are said to be the result of a sorcerer's curse. The farmer is the victim, thus in a passive position. To regain agency, the victim undergoes a ritual. A ritual specialist, or "unsorcerer", performs a visually striking ritual action (e.g., inserting rusty nails in a boiled ox's heart) in front of the victim. This violent ritual action is perceived as the means to fight the sorcerer's own violence inflicted upon the victim. The ritual action has to be as violent as the sorcerer's action. Favret-Saada shows that the sorcerer position is actually always a fictive one: the victim

identifies someone as their sorcerer without the latter being aware. It is the victim who, in a paranoid reflex, interprets events as being aggressively directed against them from a common origin. Thus Favret-Saada's understanding is that the specialist's ritual action is a pragmatic example of the affect the victim has to harness to escape their paranoid tendencies, a "shifter" in Favret-Saada's parlance (2009, 88). In other words, the specialist provides an affective guidance to the victim. Violence is the specific affect that the farmer has to summon in order to regain agency against their identified source of the curse. After the specialist's ritual, smaller daily rituals, prescribed by the specialist, are performed by the farmer, relying on the violent affect experienced during the main ritual. The mobilization of this violent affect by the farmer positions them as an agent. These smaller rituals are prescribed as a way to avoid any relapse in paranoia, the farmer becoming hereby their own private ritual specialist.

We can now interpret Pollock's reaction to Picasso's art in the same fashion. The farmer's adverse events reduce or halt his agency, like Picasso's artworks do for Pollock. The farmer is then regaining agency through the violence of the visual ritual performed by the specialist. Here is the main difference between rural sorcery and the creative process: Pollock is his own specialist, performing the necessary actions to regain agency. There are exceptions to this difference though. Pollock, as we will see, has been helped to refine his creative process by two types of specialists, art teachers, and therapists. In both the sorcery and the creative cases, through different means, specialists aim to foster further autonomy of their patients, another way to regain agency.

Under that model, what would Pollock's visually striking pseudo-ritual look like? Following Krasner's indication of Pollock's perceived rivalry with Picasso, we will examine a pre-abstract painting of the former where the link between the two artists is easily understandable.





***Stenographic Figure as an inverted Picasso***

Top left: Pablo Picasso, *Interior with a girl drawing*, 1935, oil on canvas, 130x195 cm, MoMA, New York.

Top middle: Jackson Pollock, *Stenographic Figure*, 1942, oil on canvas, 102x142 cm, MoMA, New York.

Bottom middle: Pollock's painting inverted on the horizontal axis and compared to similar elements in Picasso's (author's modifications).

Right: detail of *Stenographic Figure*

*Stenographic Figure* (fig. 5, top right), is a mostly figurative painting from 1942. The art historian Jeremy Lewison proposes to see it as an inverted reworking of Picasso's cubist *Interior with a girl drawing* (fig. 5, top left), created seven years earlier (Lewison 1999, 22) since the artworks share four elements of composition (fig. 5, bottom). In Gell's terminology, Picasso's painting is the prototype for Pollock's.

We can now imagine Pollock flipping through the book on Picasso's art and "selecting" this painting, for it exhibits specific characteristics. Pollock might not be able to express what those characteristics are, yet he might have felt affected by this painting more than by others. Just as the farmer does, Pollock then makes Picasso his sorcerer of sorts since the painting that affects Pollock has been made by Picasso. But instead of adverse events for the farmer, Pollock perceives in Picasso's painting the very specific level of harmony seen earlier, and his frustration comes from not being the source of that felt harmony. How to

regain agency then? What are the pseudo-ritual actions to take? In this example, the first step seems to imitate the general composition from which, for Pollock, most of the harmonious feeling seems to come. This is a way to tap into that something felt in Picasso's art. But then Pollock introduces differences seemingly aimed at affirming his own agency (for simple imitation would leave Picasso's unchallenged): Picasso's composition is inverted on the vertical axis, and the palette is shifted to a colder hue.

The eponymous girl in Picasso's painting is peacefully drawing. His execution exhibits mastery. In contrast, Pollock's rework of the main character appears more nervous. However, the main difference between the two artworks doesn't lie in the way similar elements are drawn. Pollock's painting displays many black lines, the "stenographic figures" of its title. Since those added lines are absent in Picasso's version, their origin has to be clarified. In a note written in 1950, Pollock might lead us on a path:

Technic is the result of a need— / new needs demand new technics— / total control—  
denial of / the accident— / States of order— / organic intensity— / energy and motion / made  
visible— / memories arrested in space, / human needs and motive— / acceptance— (Karmel  
1999, 24)

Mentions of "control and the denial of the accident" are probably a response to an art critic condemning Pollock's later abstract paintings for their apparent simplistic technique.

Pollock's defense rests on the notion of "need", a term he uses here three times. It is not just the artist's will that dictates the creative process. There is a deeper need to fulfill with the help of a particular technique. The technique then allows the capture of "memories in space", a formulation echoing Gell's "congealed trace" seen earlier. Yet, contrary to the latter,

Pollock's formulation seems spoken from the perspective of the artist during the creative process. The memories in question could be the ones of the "give and take" process, the dialogue taking place with the painting in the making. For the right harmony to come about, this dialogue needs to happen, motivated by Pollock's affects, translated into movements of applying paint on the canvas. This idea is condensed in the expression "make energy and motion visible". The painting could be thus seen as the evidence of a fight rooted in his need to recover agency over, in our example, Picasso.

In this light, the additional lines we see in *Stenographic figure* are ways to render the fight against Picasso. To be more precise, they are ways to enhance Pollock's first rework of Picasso's composition. On the far right of his composition, for instance, one element painted in white, blue, and ochre is overpainted with black lines that highlight and reinforce the impression of movement (fig. 6). We can deduce that these lines are added after Pollock completes the first version of the composition. Conventionally, an artist signs his work after completing it. In this case, Pollock's signature is partially covered with the same black lines as the element above. These added lines can thus be viewed as a way to "make energy and motion visible". They enable Pollock to witness in his painting the same kind of harmony he witnessed in Picasso's, despite the poor execution of his first rework. Picasso's painting is thus the "prototype" of Pollock's in two ways described by Gell. First in terms of "appearance", they share compositional elements. But then and foremost, Picasso's artwork is a prototype in terms of "presence" (Gell 1998, 26). Pollock's first rework was perhaps a good start (appearance), but to achieve the proper level of harmony experienced in front of Picasso's painting, extra movements had to be suggested. Although these lines partly mask the initial composition, they are the price Pollock pays to infuse in his artwork the same "energy" as Picasso's original (presence).

This outlines what the visually striking pseudo-ritual Pollock performs would look like. Pollock's initial passivity in front of Picasso's art is actually his frustration with the absence of his own agency, all the while feeling the right level of harmony triggered by the Spaniard's artwork. The frustration of lost agency creates a need to regain that capacity. Pollock starts by imitating the elements causing this harmonious feeling for him. During the creation of the painting, the successive traces that he paints change his overall impression of the whole canvas, an impression that guides him as to how close he is to achieving the right level of harmony. As that right level begins to affect him, the initial need to fight Picasso disappears. He can now witness a novel artwork, the result of his own agency, which allows him to experience the specific harmony he perceived while discovering Picasso's cubist painting. In this view, the creation of artworks is for artists foremost a fight over existing artifacts from their surrounding material culture that affect them in peculiar ways, but without the experience of their own agency.

#### **AFFECTIVE GUIDANCE OVER A LIFETIME**

This model reflects three phases in the creative process of producing a novel artifact. It starts with the initial loss of agency from an artwork displaying the right level of harmony. Pollock then engages in the pseudo-ritual as a sequence of actions aimed at regaining agency, guided by the increasing level of the right harmony displayed by the artwork in the making. Finally, a feeling of completion, once that right level is reached, pushes the artist into another kind of passivity: witnessing his now completed work. What this model doesn't do is clarify why artists engage in the process multiple times. As we have seen, the primary difference with Favret-Saada's ethnography is that the artist assumes the position of the specialist after being affected by someone else's artifact. One reason for the cyclic creative engagement, unlike the

farmer’s “unsorcering” ritual, might be that the initial trigger for the artist and the result of the artist’s efforts to regain agency are of the same kind: artifacts. Indeed, following the regaining of agency through the creative process, the artist relapses into a kind of passivity—witnessing an artwork displaying the right level of harmony. There are then limited possibilities to get that feeling of agency outside of engaging in artwork-making again.

Let us now examine some elements of Pollock’s career to see that dynamic unfold



**1. Janet Sobel, untitled**

1946, oil and enamel on cardboard, 45 x 35 cm, MoMa, New York.

throughout his lifetime. This dynamic is not the mere repetition of the model above for a single artwork. Through the iterations, Pollock learns to make “energy and motion visible” in a unique way, fine-tuning his creations to more accurately grasp the right harmony he seeks. A common entry point in Pollock’s work is his renowned abstract paintings (fig. XXX). Their



Top: Benton, *Chilmark landscape*, 1922. Middle: with underlined curves. Bottom: Pollock, ca. 1935, oil on fiberboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC.

lack of figurative elements helps us focus on the presence felt by the artist rather than their mere appearance (as is partly the case for *Stenographic figure*). It can thus be said that Pollock is searching for an inner prototype guiding his actions.

The genesis of Pollock's famous "dripping" technique, where paint is poured on the canvas on the floor, has been tentatively traced to many places: a house painter splashing clean his brushes on a board; Pollock's possible ocular migraine producing visual hallucinations; a memory of his father drawing patterns on the ground by urinating (Naifeh and White Smith 2007, 488). More probable prototypes are the works of Janet Sobel (1894-1968) "a self-taught, fifty-two-year-old grandmother from Brooklyn" (ibid., 475) which Pollock sees prior to his abstract period. Sobel produces small paintings made of curvy splashes on the whole surface of the support (fig. 1). According to the model, Sobel's artworks affect Pollock to such a degree that he feels the need to surpass their "energy" by creating similar but much larger compositions. Pollock's well-known abstract paintings occupy roughly 10,000 times more surface than Sobel's. The way they affect him thus clearly matches or surpasses Sobel's.

But if we only consider the two types of passivities, the affecting prototypes (right harmony, without agency) on one side, and completed artworks (right harmony, with past agency) on the other side, we return to where Gell was, not taking into account the transition from one to the other. So we need not only to consider prototypes of composition (Picasso, Sobel) but *prototypes of action*. It is during the process of making the artwork—the pseudo-ritual—that energy and motion are made visible, and that presence—the "easy give and take" exchange with the artwork—can be experienced by Pollock. Let us examine some of these possible action prototypes.

Charles and Sanford Pollock, two of his four older brothers, have an artistic practice. Compared to theirs, Jackson's technique might be referred to as "pictorial dyslexia" (Karmel and Varnedoe 1999, 55): a frustrating incapacity to master figurative painting techniques, against which Pollock has to fight. An action prototype that might have helped him overcome

this struggle can be found in an anecdote reporting how Pollock's teacher asks his teenage students to mix color paints in a liquid (Naifeh and White Smith 2007, 117).

After moving to New York in the 1930s, Pollock enrolls in Thomas Hart Benton's courses at an art school. Benton is one of the rare artists that Pollock names publicly: "my work with Benton was important as something against which to react very strongly, later on; in this, it was better to have worked with him than with a less resistant personality who would have provided a much less strong opposition. At the same time, Benton introduced me to Renaissance art" (Karmel 1999, 15). Benton's work is fairly figurative. As a "regionalist" artist, he developed his style depicting farm work and American landscapes with exaggerated curves (fig. XXX top and middle). He masters traditional techniques of figuration, a source of frustration of agency for a "dyslexic" Pollock. Nevertheless, Pollock tries, according to one classmate, "to replicate Benton's technique and subject matter 'down to the last brush stroke'", but only achieves "jagged imitations of Benton's sure, undulating lines" (Naifeh and White Smith 2007, 173, 202). Even if jagged, Pollock does imitate the gestures, as action prototypes, in order to understand the movements in the paintings: in contact with technically perfect artworks (appearances), Pollock needs to appropriate their "energy" (presence) to regain some proper agency in his own paintings (fig. XXX bottom).

In 1936, Pollock participates in the *Experimental Workshop* led by Mexican muralist artist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who aims at making explicitly political figurative artworks fighting American imperialism. In his workshop, Siqueiros asks the participants to prepare painted backgrounds on panels for his personal artworks. With panels placed on the ground, paint is splashed and poured directly from the can. Pollock displays little interest in the figurative aspect of Siqueiros's works, yet is quite attracted by that preparatory phase for which the muralist artist developed a theory of "controlled accidents" (Karmel and Varnedoe



1999, 46)—wording similar to Pollock’s note above. Pollock thus begin experimenting with the fluidity of paint to cover surfaces well before his abstract period. He is in the active



#### 4. Horse’s head by Picasso and Pollock

Left : Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937 (detail). Right : Jackson Pollock, plate 40 in *Psychoanalytical drawings*, (Wysuph 1970, 72).

position of the specialist looking to solve his pictorial dyslexia through the action prototypes of others. Several more years will pass before he puts this solution into practice for himself, and as a self-sufficient way of making art, independent of traditional drawing techniques.

Pollock pursues therapy for his chronic drinking problem. In 1939, he begins working with Doctor Joseph L. Henderson, a direct disciple of Jung. Henderson is also very interested in the work of Picasso. As is usual for a Jungian therapist, Henderson engages with Pollock’s drawings, still figurative at the time, blending Picassoian motifs with Jungian imagery.

Henderson confesses that he did not seek to treat Pollock’s alcoholism, but rather he “offered

occasional criticisms which [he] thought might be helpful in order to free him from his influences (mainly Picasso) that seemed to inhibit his own native ability” (Leja 1993, 139).

Henderson does not assist Pollock with his alcoholism but contributes to the artist’s fight against Picasso. Henderson occupies the typical position of the ritual specialist in Favret-Saada’s ethnography: helping the victim escape the sorcerer. Yet, Henderson does not produce the visually striking ritual to free Pollock. It is Pollock who performs the necessary actions in order to free himself. If Pollock, through therapy, cannot entirely control his alcoholism, he does, however, further develop his practice based on Picasso’s works, and regains some agency. In a drawing resulting from the interaction with Henderson, for instance, the horse’s head in Picasso’s *Guernica* is reworked. He adds a floating mane, with Bentonian-like curves as action prototypes, to his version (absent in Picasso’s), thereby increasing the head’s “energy and motion,” which he would have felt was missing from his drawing (fig. XXX).

*Stenographic figure* is made in 1942, and *Mural*, probably the gateway to the abstract Pollock we know, is produced in 1944, the same year Pollock reportedly sees Sobel’s work (Zalman 2015, 20). *Mural*, a 6-meter-long painting, is a commission from the gallerist and collector Peggy Guggenheim, which pushes Pollock to change his process. Accustomed to the easel, he now has to walk along the canvas—a new action prototype for him—to apply the layers of paint. While often considered abstract, the painting is actually built on a base of “stick figures” (Karmel and Vernadoe 1999, 90), partly covered with other colors, following their rhythm. *Phosphorescence* (1947), entirely abstract to the spectator’s eyes, is revealed on X-Rays to contain an early sketch made of these figures, which Pollock “veils” (ibid, 104). Krasner relates: “many of the most abstract [artworks] began with more or less recognizable

imagery ... Once I asked Jackson why he didn't stop the painting when a given image was exposed. He said 'I choose to veil the imagery'"(Karmel 1999, 36).

This shows the evolution of Pollock's practice. At first, there is the need to replicate the "energy" of Picasso's art. Then, work after work, as he acquires confidence, the addition of lines, the veiling, becomes his specific way of making art, his action prototype. He fully becomes a specialist able to regain agency during creation, and witness afterward the "life of its own" (presence) the painting has gained.

In August 1949, *Life* magazine publishes an article on Pollock, illustrated with his abstract artworks, titled "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" This is a consecration of sorts for it gives his work visibility in mainstream media. The tone of the article, though, might seem mocking at times. The apparent ease of making, which his paintings exhibit, suggests that they are "simple" (Friedman 1995, 140). Pollock has to prove to others and to himself that this is not the case, that his paintings are not, as a critic writes at the 1950 Venice Biennale, "chaotic" or "lacking any technique" (Karmel 1999, 68).

Pollock has to find a way out. In 1951, he notes in a letter that he is running tests on Japanese papers (Friedman 1995, 171) given to him by his artist friend Tony Smith. Pollock pours lines of black ink on their surface (Delahunty 2015, 17). The paper absorbs and diffuses the ink in peculiar ways, another type of "controlled accident" as an action prototype. This reaction of the paper might have echoed Pollock's use of unprimed canvases at times since 1947—the canvas fibers spread the paint in similar ways— for the 1951 series of black paintings that directly succeed his abstract period. He explains: "I've had a period of drawing on canvas in black—with some of my early images coming thru—[I] think the nonobjectivists [abstract expressionist artists] will find them disturbing—and the kids who

think it simple to splash a Pollock out” (Friedman 1995, 174). The paint he uses is more fluid, employing at times a turkey baster, for greater precision while drawing. He can now show that he controls what he is doing while still achieving results as harmonious to his eyes as the abstract works (fig. 7).



**7. Jackson Pollock, *Number 7***  
1951, 143x167cm, enamel on canvas, National Gallery of Art,  
Washington DC.

This line no longer “veils” a weak copy of a Picasso, or covers the initial rhythmic stick figures, but is a drawing technique, an action prototype, that belongs to him. This is *his* line. It “makes the energy and motion visible” even with simpler designs. Whether figuration reappears or not, this is his mastery of the line which is at stake. With it, comes a certain maturity of the specialist position. This maturity is the confidence to be able to create visually striking artworks to fight the energy of the works of Picasso, Sobel, and others along the way. However, in 1951, he also fights his own abstract paintings from the previous years. Indeed, the abstract Pollock became internationally famous (Zimmer 2016, 221), but was criticized for the apparent ease of his production. For the 1951 Pollock, the abstract Pollock took the sorcerer’s position.

Even though the two Pollocks are the same person, in terms of his experience of creation, the abstract Pollock is someone else. The abstract paintings are material proof for the 1951 Pollock that there was *then* a Pollock able to produce artworks which *now* affect him in a very specific way. Furthermore, his abstract paintings probably have a more precise effect on the 1951 Pollock than Picasso's artworks had on the abstract Pollock. The abstract works were made by the abstract Pollock to surpass the Spaniard's works' presence. In turn, the 1951 Pollock feels the need to escape the abstract Pollock paintings to gain his agency back. This is the moment in Pollock's career that encapsulates the best the self-competition artists entertain. It is probably present earlier in the development of the artist, but oftentimes obscured by the competition against others.

After showing these new works, one critic writes that Pollock "found his own way of dealing with human experience". Yet, the global audience is now used to the abstract works and finds it difficult to see the black paintings as continuous with the earlier works (Delahunty 2015, 19). In 1952 and 1953 Pollock uses colors again, contrasting with the black from the preceding year. Those years, however, are dominated by depression and the return of alcoholism (Zimmer 2016, 239). Despite these detours and the criticism, Pollock seems to have never given up his path of "making energy and motion visible" through his line, building confidence, painting after painting. However, this confident position is fragile. It can be occupied at times during the creative process but never secured. Indeed, when a painting approaches completion, Pollock reverts to the passive position we've seen earlier, being a witness of his own art, seeing but "memories arrested in space" of a time when he is about to feel the specific harmony he is seeking.

## CONCLUSION

With the model we have discussed, each painting is the result of affective guidance aimed at overcoming a felt passivity, defined as the feeling of the right harmony displayed in an artifact, but without the accompanying feeling of agency. This process occurs for artifacts made by others, but along the way also for the ones made by oneself. The critical point here is that agency, by definition, can only be felt by the artist through his creative actions. The artist's double transition from passive to active, at the start of the process, and from active to passive, at the end, forms the basis of the dynamic by which a body of works is slowly constituted. Artworks, in this view, are but means for the artist to experience, during the act of creation, a specific type of affect, a specific harmony in the case of Pollock. Competition, initially against the work of others and then against one's own, sustains the activity throughout a lifetime. Since each successive work has to match or surpass the previous one's "energy" or presence, artists are incrementally guided throughout their careers to perfect the means, the action prototypes, to feel their specific affect.

By focusing on affects as the main motivation of the artist's action, the gap between the passive and active positions in Gell's argument seems bridged. Affects are specific to each person. What affects me might not affect you, and the way I can produce an artifact that can affect me in the way I need will not be the same as yours. In other words, this is a subjective matter. Yet, the expression of this subjectivity is related to Edward Morphy's critique, in the pages of this very journal, of Gell's lack of consideration for the artifacts' "meaning" beyond their semiotic content. If art is a "mode of action", it must integrate how "people who...interact with works of art...do so with some background of knowledge and experience...of the artwork itself and of innumerable previous interactions involving it, or similar objects" (Morphy 2009, 14). Here, I propose that affects participate in the meaning-

making process one goes through, since background knowledge and experience can be expressed in the harmony Pollock finds during creation: his paintings feel harmonious to him because they fit the previous experience of harmonious art Pollock had, with his own works or those of others. To Pollock's eyes, his works are meaningful because they make him feel that specific affect he has been after his whole life. Or as Pollock states: "painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is." (Leja 1993, 186). Through art-making, as a mode of action, one experiences the self as an agent capable of producing that specific affect, rooted in subjectivity.

The model I propose builds on Gell's focus on agency, enriched by the dynamic of affects found in Favret-Saada's ethnography of sorcery. It is built on historical rather than ethnographic data, for this article's aim is to provide a perspective on a long-term practice, challenging to study through ethnography alone. Applications of this model are currently tested in close collaboration with artists, in particular regarding its limitations, such as the somewhat linear description of the creative process. For instance, many compositional and action prototypes are involved in the creation of new artworks.

The development of an apt model for the creative process may require an interdisciplinary effort. In conclusion, I will therefore compare my model to one elaborated by a succession of psychologists. In 1926, Graham Wallas identifies, after a speech by Hermann von Helmholtz in 1891, four stages in the "art of thought", that we can assimilate to the creative process at large: preparation ("hard, conscious, systematic and fruitless analysis"), incubation ("unconscious mental exploration"), illumination ("appearance of a happy idea"), and verification (testing and shaping of the idea) (Wallas 1926, 80-1). In 1961, Mel Rhodes proposes the "four P's of creativity". For our purpose, the Person refers to the artist, the Process encapsulates Wallas' four stages above, the Product means the artwork, and

the Press is the global environment of creation. A person creates a product by going through a process surrounded by a pressing environment, made of “sensations and perceptions from both internal and external sources [reflecting] uniquely upon the originator’s self” (Rhodes 1961, 308). Yet Rhodes advocates for the study of each “P” in relative isolation from the others to dissipate the “fog” surrounding what creativity actually is. This then results in a lack of dynamism in the model. Vlad Glăveanu (2013) thus proposes to expand these individual-focused definitions and proposes the “five A’s model”, a more dynamic way of linking Actor (a person performing social roles), Action (psychological and behavioral dimension of the process), Artifacts (as cultural objects, broader than bare material products), Audiences (the social aspect of Rhodes’ Press), and Affordances (physical aspects of the Press). This change of terminology widens our understanding of each component. For instance, “actor” implies the existence of an audience and an action to be performed for it, whereas “person” tends to be understood in narrower terms: a person doesn’t necessarily need an audience and action to be defined. Thus, creativity, in this view, takes place in the interrelation between the five A’s. Glăveanu’s model is for now proposed as a framework for future research and not as the result of a study. The five A’s could also be mapped onto Gell’s terminology: actor corresponds to the artist; artifact to the index or artwork; audience to the recipients; and affordances to a form of prototypes. After appreciating the similarities and without stressing further here the differences between these psychological and anthropological models, it seems interesting to underline that in both cases the vector of the interrelations between the terms can be identified as affects. From what we have seen with the Pollock case, I would argue that affect is the vector. Pollock, as actor, is affected by the affordances of artifacts made by others or by himself. He performs his art — the aptly named “action painting” to



affect an audience, in the middle of which he stands as the first viewer of his finished paintings. His actions are guided by the quest for an affect, toward completion.

Positioning affect at the center of these models opens interesting research possibilities across various academic fields. As I have tried here, examples drawn from art history can be examined for the affective connections that artworks establish with each other, following Aby Warburg's notion of "Pathosformeln". This enables anthropology to link these longitudinal lines of creative processes to other forms of affect-driven, meaning-making actions such as rituals in non-Western contexts, thus touching on processes that might be universally human. Furthermore, methodologies from experimental psychology could be adapted to conduct fieldwork with artists in their environment, to examine precisely how affects are driving meaningful actions. Such an interdisciplinary effort would broaden our understanding of art and creativity.



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