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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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Jackson Pollock and John Cage: An American Odd Couple

by

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Jackson Pollock and John Cage

Jackson Pollock and John Cage are legends in American history. In the centennial year of both artists' births, two exhibitions now on view in New York celebrate their work and underline the fact that even after their deaths, their influence continues to play an important role in how we understand, interpret, and even make art today.

Jackson Pollock: A Centennial Exhibition at the Jason McCoy Gallery presents a selection of significant loans including paintings, works on paper, and objects by Pollock, ranging 1930 to the early 1950s. *John Cage: The Sight of Silence* at the National Academy Museum showcases sixty pieces, mostly watercolors, created by Cage in the 1980s and 1990s, and also includes musical scores accompanied by recordings of his music, photographs, and videos of the revolutionary composer.

Pollock and Cage were aesthetic extremes of each other. Pollock sought to make paintings that were entirely an expression of his manic inner ego, whereas Cage fought to remove himself completely from the decision-making process involved in art. And yet, Pollock and Cage did have one thing in common. They shared a

common adversary: hundreds of years of European history, theory, and dominance in the arts. So while Pollock fought to break from Braque, Cage battled to break from Beethoven.

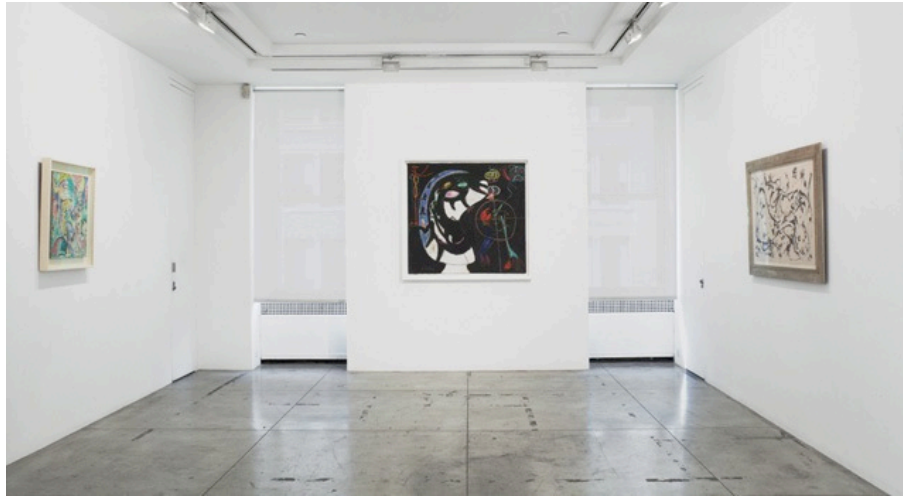
Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists attempted to strike an emotional cord through grand gestures that reflected the subconscious mind. According to Caroline A. Jones in an article in *Critical Inquiry*, the movement became a celebration of the "masculine solitary whose staunchly heterosexual libido drove his brush," with Pollock as the "quintessential hero of this powerful mythos." Pollock and the New York painters argued from an existentialist platform, "[declaring] their independence from all institutionalized concepts of the artist's role in society," writes Dore Ashton in the book *New York School*. They placed an importance on the individual over all else. "Painting is self-discovery," Pollock once said. "Every good artist paints what he is."



Jackson Pollock, "Orange Head" (c. 1938-41), oil on canvas, 18 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches (all Pollock images courtesy Jason McCoy Gallery)

At the centennial exhibition at McCoy, which not only celebrates Pollock but also McCoy's long affiliation and dedication to the artist's work, the viewer is confronted by a brute of a painting called "Orange Head" (c.1938-41). If every good artist paints what he is, then this small work shouldn't be seen as anything other than that a self-portrait. It's aggressive and primal and full of the inner turmoil that compelled Pollock to paint.

The exhibition, as argued in a terrific catalogue essay by Stephanie Buhman, suggests that Pollock never set out to tell a cohesive story or make work in a linear fashion: "Instead he was fully committed to the freedom of expression; he visited, revisited, sought, discovered, and embarked anew in cyclical tidal motions." The earliest works on display document Pollock's passion for the American West, the landscape of his youth, as well as his interest in the Mexican muralists. There are exciting examples illustrating his major shift as he began making work inspired by Jungian psychoanalysis. "Constellation (Accabonac Creek)" (1946) is a terrific example of Pollock's search into the subconscious. It's a pasty, chalky, composition of biomorphic figures that twist and bend all but in anguish as they are squeezed into the small, 21-1/2-x-18-inch frame.



Installation view, "Jackson Pollock: A Centennial Exhibition" at Jason McCoy Gallery featuring Pollock's "Night Sounds" (c.1944) in center (photo by Kevin Noble)

When Pollock moved to Springs, his work took on scale and intensity. He began painting on the floor. His Surrealist automatic drawings like "Untitled" (1946), in the McCoy exhibition, are enlarged to extreme proportion, leading to the epic canvases he executed in the summer and autumn of 1950 that made his career. Although there are no large-scale works at McCoy, "Number 34" (1949), on loan from the collection of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, is a prime example of the artist's most heroic art.

Having rejected the classical canons of composition, Pollock and Abstract Expressionists found an odd ally in the ambitious, experimental composer John Cage. They saw common ground in Cage's "unshakeable determination to pursue his own individuality," Ashton writes. Cage's philosophy and notions of anarchy were a drastic departure from the Abstract Expressionists's dogmatic thrust of the ego in paint, but that both Pollock and Cage could occupy the same platform and seem to articulate related sensibilities was "an indication of the fluidity and expansiveness of avant-garde aesthetics at the time," according to Jones.

John Cage arrived in New York in 1942 with an arsenal of ideas. His friendship with West Coast painters Morris Graves and Mark Tobey enhanced his own interests in and appreciation of art, tribal cultures, and Asian philosophies. Cage liked to tell the story of finding himself standing at a corner on Madison Avenue waiting for a bus, having just left an exhibition of Tobey's paintings at Willard Gallery. He happened to glance at the pavement, and in an instant realized that the experience of looking at the pavement was the same as looking at a Tobey. Pavement or painting — for Cage, the aesthetic enjoyment was just as high. "Tobey, naturally opened my eyes to Abstract Expressionism," Cage told art critic Irving Sandler, "not to its intentions, but to its appearance."

This was perhaps the first time Cage saw art without intention and without motive, empty of ego. "The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all," he would go on to declare. "This puts one in accord with nature and her manner of operation." And in a 1965 discussion about the intensity and excitement swirling around Abstract Expressionism, he explained, "I wanted [the painters] to change my way of seeing, not my way of feeling. I'm perfectly happy about my feelings. In fact, I want to bring them, if anything, to some kind of tranquility. I don't want to disturb my feelings. I don't want to spend my life being pushed around by a bunch of artists."

In the summer of 1947, Pollock began throwing paint. Although he was not the first to use this method, "he was the first to use this technique to present a total image, destructive and creative, the very pulse and rhythm of his own life," Morton Feldman wrote. Cage began studying Zen Buddhism in earnest between '46 and '47 — about the same time as Pollock began his drips. Cage's search for tranquility "was first to change what it was that I was trying to say in my work. And, second, to change how it was I was making work."

While Pollock and his pals continued to express an interest in becoming the painting, Cage was more and more interested in not becoming the music.

Pollock believed the easel picture to be a dying form. "My opinion," he told William Wright in an interview, "new needs new techniques. The modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements [...] each age finds its own technique. The modern artist is working and expressing an inner world — in other words — expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces." Technique was, in Pollock's own words, a means of "arriving at a statement," a very personal, emotional one.

To Pollock's call for a new technique, Cage responded, "What is so interesting about technique anyway? What if there are twelve tones in a row? What row?"

To Cage, painters like Pollock and composers like Beethoven were fixated on creating an object, and not just any object, but one that had a narrative, made a statement, told a story. Pollock said, "It doesn't make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said." Cage believed Beethoven's music was "based on a marriage of form and content involving beginnings, ends and middles, and all kinds of ideas and expressions of individual feeling that have nothing whatsoever to do with sounds." Consulting the I-Ching, Cage found a way to eliminate his ego by inviting chance to take his place.

To the Abstract Expressionists, the idea of chance entering an artist's work was rather foreign. "Although de Kooning and Pollock made use of chance effects," notes Calvin Tomkins in his book *Off the Wall*, "letting the paint run and drip in their spontaneous encounters with the canvas, they were not about to hand over the whole process to accident."

"It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess," Pollock said. It was precisely this contact, this control, which John Cage wanted to give up.

"One has a choice," Cage said:

If he does not wish to give up his attempts to control sound, he may complicate his musical technique towards an approximation of the new possibilities of awareness. Or, as before, one may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.

And with added emphasis, he continued, "That's why I used chance operations [...] the work will resemble more and more, not the work of a person, but something that might have happened, even if the person weren't there."

Cage's methods and temperament contrast drastically with Pollock's heroic, rather macho commitment to inner disorder and overall composition. Cage's first painting workshop was organized in the spring of 1988 as a result of a brief experimentation with watercolors during a visit to the Mountain Lake Workshop in 1983. There, master printer Ray Kass presented Cage with a system to make work, including a studio prepared with

sixty rocks collected from a nearby river, a selection of brushes arranged according to type and size, a selection of different papers, and a palette of paints. Consulting the I-Ching, Cage began to compose his first works, letting chance choose the paper, determine placement of the rocks, and decide what brush he would use to trace them.



John Cage, "New River Watercolor Series I (#5)" (1988), watercolor on parchment paper, 18 x 36 in. (courtesy of The Mountain Lake Workshop, Blacksburg, Virginia)

The centennial show at the National Academy Museum, co-curated by Kass and Academy Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Marshall N. Price is totally Cageian. The entire exhibition was installed using the roll of a die, with works hung high and low, off center, and even placed in corners. The installation itself offers a genuinely open naivete that underscores the very essence of Cage. Soft and introspective, the composer's works seem to illustrate the passing of time, as in "New River Watercolor Series I (#5)" (1988). Unlike Pollock's very direct approach, Cage's watercolors seem like they would have made themselves if given the right circumstances. The accompanying catalogue serves as a *raisonné* of the watercolors, and the exhibition as a whole attests to the fact that regardless of the medium, Cage consistently dismissed conventional aesthetics by limiting or eliminating the artist's choice in the creative process.

When it came to nature, Pollock and Cage also had very differing opinions. Pollock famously declared, "I am nature," while Cage believed that "the Function of Art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operations."

Pollock insisted: "My concern is with the rhythms of nature. ... I work inside out, like nature." Cage theorized: "I see art not as opposed to nature but certainly as a means of introducing us to nature of which we are a part. Art is certainly essentially a human activity, but it can move from being a selfish activity to being what I call a human activity that is fluent with nature."



John Cage, "River Rocks and Smoke 4/11/90 (#1)" (1990), watercolor on paper prepared with smoke, 27 1/2 x 41 1/2 in. (courtesy John Cage Trust at Bard College)

Cage and his anti-art antics threatened many of the Abstract Expressionists. Cage came to occupy "a radically different perspective from his cohort, serving to open a space for younger male artists whose names are legion," including Andy Warhol, Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, and countless others, Jones writes. Cage was up against a stigma that dated back to the 1930s with artists like Pollock's mentor, Thomas Hart Benton. Benton believed that intellectuals, Marxists, and homosexuals had taken over the American art scene:

Far be it from me to raise my hands in any moral horror over the ways and tastes of individuals [...] But it is not all right with the art which they affect and cultivate. It is not all right when [...] precious fairies get into positions of power and judge, buy, and exhibit American pictures on a base of nervous whim and under the sway of those overduplicate refinements of taste characteristic of their kind.

Benton's rhetoric exacerbated negative stereotypes of homosexuals in the art world and led his fellow regionalist, the painter Grant Wood, to "passively endorse his bigotry," R. Tripp Evans writes in a biography of Wood. In a 1935 essay, Wood declared that since the start of the Depression, New York City had "lost its masculinity."

The composer Morton Feldman perceived just such a homophobic bias in Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell's relationship to Cage. Feldman said, "I became quite close to Motherwell. I think that they may have had some kind of intellectual or artistic falling out [...] I would say there was a homosexual bias... not only against him but against the younger people who began to associate with him: [Robert] Rauschenberg, Jasper [Johns] and Cy Twombly." Homophobia was so prevalent that many, including Cage, avoided the Cedar Tavern all together, choosing instead to frequent the more sociable Dillon's Bar, located just three blocks north on University Place.

Pollock was a different person when he drank. "I more tried to avoid him," Cage said. "I did this because [Pollock] was generally so drunk, and he was actually an unpleasant person for me to encounter. I remember seeing him on the same side of the street I was, and I would always cross over to the other side. Now and then I would be unable to avoid the encounter; we would meet, and he always complained that I didn't like his work enough." Feldman recalls an actual fight once.

Lee Krasner asked Cage to compose the score that would accompany the now famous Hans Namuth/Paul Falkenberg film on Pollock. Cage was busy preparing a piece for twelve randomly tuned radios, but turned the job down for personal reasons: "I couldn't abide Pollock's work because I couldn't stand the man," Cage said. He gave the job to Feldman.

The film transformed Pollock from "a talented, cranky loner into the first media-driven superstar of American contemporary art, the jeans-clad, chain-smoking poster boy of abstract expressionism," wrote critic Ferdinand Protzman.

"The leading artists of Pollock's and de Kooning's generation," Calvin Tomkins confirmed, "had been, almost without exception, aggressively male, hard-drinking, and heterosexual [...] The attention and money lavished on the newcomers [Rauschenberg and Johns] led to talk of 'homointern,' a network of homosexual artists, dealers, and museum curators in league to promote the work of certain favorites at the expense of 'straight' talents." Yet as Tomkins puts it, "the real irritant [for the Abstract Expressionists] was publicity."

When Jackson Pollock died in 1956, the Abstract Expressionists lost their leader. And when the Club they had formed earlier disbanded, they lost their forum. "Feuds, alcoholism, and bitterness isolated them more and more as the years went on," writes Tomkins. "The survivors lived to feel themselves unjustly superseded by brash young newcomers taking what seemed easy advantage of the gains they had so dearly won."

Cage's genius confounded his relationship with the Abstract Expressionists. But it was the Abstract Expressionists that provided Cage with a wall he could press against. "Art can be practiced in one way or another," Cage wrote, "so that it reinforces the ego in its likes and dislikes, or so that it opens that mind to the world outside, and outside inside."

Pollock renewed the way we experience painting. Cage changed the way we experience music. Pollock had his drips, and Cage had the I-Ching. But it was their uncompromising individual pursuits of expression that made them legends.