

## Compare and contrast the ways in which the category of the artist is defined in the selected primary and secondary sources

This essay will explore how the category of an artist is defined, with reference to the two provided sources: a transcription of a radio interview with Jackson Pollock,<sup>1</sup> and an academic paper from 1989 by Wagner that examines ideas around Krasner's identity as an artist.<sup>2</sup> I will firstly examine the idea that an artist is someone that is self-determining, in that they are able to shape how they are perceived by others and how they experience themselves. I will demonstrate that, given his status and social context, Pollock was able to be an artist who is self-determining, unlike Krasner. Secondly, I will build on this by exploring the idea that an artist produces works that are created with some artist-given intentionality. I will demonstrate how Pollock leaned into the idea of artist-given intentionality, compared to Krasner, who rejected it.

An artist being self-determining means they are in control of their own intention. They are able to create the public perception of themselves, in which their art becomes an expression of their identity. This quality of an artist is derived from Foucault, who explores the idea of subjectivities. Foucault defines a subjectivity as "the way in which the subject experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates to himself."<sup>3</sup> It refers to more than just a person; it aims to capture the possibility of being a *kind* of person. Rather than themselves being a natural phenomenon, subjects are formed through social processes and by coming into conflict with institutions of power. From this, Greenblatt coins the term 'self-fashioning,' an active exercise where selves can be fashioned in an artful way.<sup>4</sup>

Pollock's interview with radio host Wright demonstrates this ability to determine his own selfhood. The nature of the source gives us the first clue: Pollock appears as a guest on radio in the year of his most successful gallery show; the transcript is published in a monograph about Pollock's life, a decade after his death. This shows the social importance assigned to Pollock: any criticism of his artworks is tied to his biography and personal narrative. This importance granted to him, as an artist, leads to him having the power to define the meaning of himself as an artist and the meaning of his artwork. His cryptic, almost mythic answers in the interview demonstrate this. Wright asks, "Would you say that the modern artist has ... isolated the quality which made the classical works of art valuable...?" to

---

<sup>1</sup> Pollock 1950

<sup>2</sup> Wagner 1989

<sup>3</sup> Foucault and Faubion 1998: 4611

<sup>4</sup> Greenblatt 2005

which Pollock answers, with a wink, one imagines: “Ah — the good ones have, yes.”<sup>5</sup> It is heavily implied Pollock himself is this genius artist. But as well as ‘genius,’ meant in the old art historical sense of having an “atemporal and mysterious power ... embedded in the person of the Great Artist,”<sup>6</sup> Pollock can be labelled a genius because he is in control of determining his own subjectivity. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the first-time artists could begin to directly interact with wider audiences, outside of galleries and auction houses, by engaging with forms of broadcast media. Pollock was one of the first to recognise and make use of this at the time.

Krasner stands in contrast to Pollock in this respect, as highlighted by Wagner’s gender-informed investigation of her. The title of the article, ‘Lee Krasner as L.K.,’ refers to Krasner signing her artworks solely with the ambiguous initials L.K., or sometimes camouflaging her name, or even not signing her pieces at all. Wagner argues that Krasner does this to resist her art being identified and be seen as “that of a woman.”<sup>7</sup> Krasner, therefore, is not in control of fashioning her own subjectivity. Wagner points out that this is a problem for female artists in general. There is an “uneasy peace” to be reached between gender identity and artistic identity.<sup>8</sup>

Wagner’s methodology is informed by Butler’s theory of performativity.<sup>9</sup> Butler argues that gender identity is a cultural form, which is not chosen but is compelled by social regulation of the “disciplinary society.”<sup>10</sup> This can be seen throughout the first section of Wagner’s article, where she describes the conditions of Krasner’s work. Wagner frames Krasner in the “wifely role”<sup>11</sup> of Mrs Jackson Pollock, describing her service to her husband, stuffing envelopes for his shows and answering interviewer’s questions about his works. Krasner also includes primary sources to demonstrate this: Namuth’s photograph of Krasner perched in the corner of Pollock’s studios,<sup>12</sup> and an extract from the New Yorker, where she is described as the “slim auburn-haired young woman ... making currant jelly.”<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Wagner is going beyond just providing a secondary description of Krasner’s life; she is directly presenting us with evidence that demonstrates Krasner was not in control of fashioning her self.

---

<sup>5</sup> Pollock 1950

<sup>6</sup> Nochlin 1971

<sup>7</sup> Wagner 1989:48

<sup>8</sup> Wagner 1989:48

<sup>9</sup> Butler 1990

<sup>10</sup> Foucault 1977

<sup>11</sup> Wagner 1989:43

<sup>12</sup> Photograph by Hans Namuth in Wagner 1989:44 (figure 3)

<sup>13</sup> Roueché 1950, cited in Wagner 1989:43

The ability of an artist to fashion themselves is mismatched with respect to Pollock and Krasner: we learn from the interview with Pollock that not only does he have control over his narrative in the public eye, but he also has control over how he himself sees himself. Krasner does not have this power. Her lack of power as a self-determining artist, as well as her lack of power as a woman, is summarised by the lines of Rimbaud that she writes out in large characters on her studio wall: “To whom shall I hire myself out? ... What lies shall I maintain?”<sup>14</sup>

I have explored the idea that an artist is self-fashioning and in control of how they are perceived. Next, let us turn to their artworks. I will consider two claims: (i) the claim that an artist is in control of the meaning that is present in their works; (ii) the stronger claim that an artist is the one who imbues meaning into the work.

Wright’s interview with Pollock serves as evidence for both these claims. Wright regards Pollock as an intellectual source, capable of demystifying modern art for him and his audience. This is shown when he asks Pollock to deal on the difference between the modern artist and the classical artist.<sup>15</sup> Other contemporaries also ascribed this level of importance to him; the critic (and Pollock’s friend) Clement Greenberg saw Pollock’s style of painting as a way of “escaping the tradition of the easel painting,”<sup>16</sup> leading him to dub him “the greatest painter this country had produced.”<sup>17</sup> These examples show that Pollock is perceived by others to have a unique style and a superior level of control over his work, which in turn implies that he has some level of control over the meaning being communicated in his paintings.

Pollock also buys into himself having the ability to imbue meaning. He writes of the modern artist as “working and expressing an inner world” and “working with space and time, ... expressing his feelings rather than illustrating;”<sup>18</sup> both times, it is insinuated that Pollock is describing his own artistic practice. When challenged by Wright that his work is only worthwhile because of what he accomplishes by it, Pollock responds “I hope so.” This could be read as Wright claiming that Pollock’s

---

<sup>14</sup> Rimbaud 1939, quoted in Wagner 1989:32

<sup>15</sup> Pollock 1950:2

<sup>16</sup> Krauss 1999:157

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Solomon 2020

<sup>18</sup> Pollock 1950:2

artworks only have value because of their creation by the hand of the mythical artist 'Pollock,' if the emphasis is read as follows (emphasis mine):

Isn't it true that *your* method of painting, *your* technique, is important and interesting only because of what *you* accomplish by it?<sup>19</sup>

However, when reading Pollock's answer, it seems more likely that this is not what Wright is asking. Rather, it seems that Pollock believes his work to have value because it is aiming to say anything at all. Pollock's answer is as follows:

...it doesn't make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.<sup>20</sup>

I would argue that this answer shows that Pollock subscribes to claim (i), that he has some level of control over the meaning in his artworks as he wants to make sure they say something, but that he does not subscribe to the stronger claim (ii), that he as the artist is the sole source of meaning for a given work. His answer implies that he is receptive to meaning being read into his works by other viewers.

The idea that an artist is the sole source of meaning for a given artwork has been challenged extensively in the last half century, spring-boarding from Barthes and Foucault's writings on authorship. Barthes argues that the author of a work is a fictional idea and that literary works, and indeed artworks, should be considered in and of themselves.<sup>21</sup> The meaning of a piece of work is not an objective thing determined at the point of conception, but is something that has infinite variations, and is decided by viewers and readers, with reference to social and historical contexts. Foucault goes further; his influential 1969 essay<sup>22</sup> challenges the idea that one individual author is the originator of a work. Foucault argues that designating an author as a stable point of meaning was an invention by critics as a way to limit the potentially infinite interpretations of a given text. His exploration of the author function aims to show instead that there is no trans-historical human nature or inner self that persists through time.

In comparison to Pollock, Krasner's art not only omits the "evocations of myth and shamanism"<sup>23</sup> that are present in his artwork, but moreover refuses to portray any meaning whatsoever. Wagner argues

---

<sup>19</sup> Pollock 1950:4

<sup>20</sup> Pollock 1950:4

<sup>21</sup> Barthes 1997

<sup>22</sup> Foucault 1979

<sup>23</sup> Wagner 1989:49

that any presence of meaning “remains at the level of a resemblance approached, then skirted...” so much so that “the essence of Krasner’s art [is] its refusal to produce a self in painting.”<sup>24</sup> The reason for this, Wagner continues, is that it serves as an answer “to the most problematic issue [Krasner] faced: establishing an otherness to Pollock that would not be seen as the otherness of Woman.”

Wagner goes on to consider Krasner’s shows and catalogues that serve as evidence for this hypothesis about Krasner’s rejection of an artistic selfhood. One show, in 1951, served to distance herself from Pollock,<sup>25</sup> and later artworks were received poorly, being reviewed as “quiet, discreet, and feminine.”<sup>26</sup> These reviews mention neither Pollock nor Krasner’s marital status, however the effect is that Krasner reaches a “neutrality too easily equated with womanhood.”<sup>27</sup> Wagner’s article ends with a reluctance to pass judgement on Krasner’s eventual artistic journey, but a comment on the consequences of creating a public self.

Therefore, we see that Krasner stands in stark contrast to Pollock. In trying to frame herself as other from her husband, and in aiming to avoid the charge of femininity, her artwork begins to lose meaning. Importantly though, this is because of Krasner herself: she is the one who is responsible for the absence of meaning. With regard to claim (ii), we see from Wagner’s analysis that Krasner is the one who is imbuing a (lack of) meaning in her work. However, in regard to claim (i), we see that this does not happen from a position of control; it is a consequence of the social structures she has created her work in. This conclusion therefore challenges Barthes’ perspective, that an author is ‘dead’ and has no connection to their work. However, it serves in defence of Foucault’s theory of the author-function, which argues that despite the surrounding discourse and cultural context makes up part of authorship.

This essay first looked at the idea that an artist is a person who is self-fashioning. I argued that Pollock was able to fashion himself, while Krasner was not able to fashion herself. Secondly it looked at the idea of artist-given intentionality. I argued that Pollock had some control over the meaning in his works but was not the sole determinant of their meaning. Krasner in contrast, *was* the sole determinant of the (lack of) meaning in her work, but that this arose from her lacking control to begin with.

---

<sup>24</sup> Wagner 1989:51

<sup>25</sup> Wagner 1989:53

<sup>26</sup> Wagner 1989:54, citing reviews of Krasner’s 1951 show

<sup>27</sup> Wagner 1989:55

## References

- Barthes, Roland. 1997. 'The Death of the Author', in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by K. M. Newton (London: Macmillan Education UK), pp. 120–23
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge)
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Paris, France: Gallimard)
- Coudault, Michel. 1979. 'What Is an Author?', in *Textual Strategies*, ed. by Josue V. Harari (Cornell University Press), pp. 141–60
- Foucault, Michel, and James D. Faubion. 1998. *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2005. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press)
- Krauss, Rosalind. 1999. 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture', in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. by Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York, NY, USA: Museum of Modern Art), pp. 155–79
- Nochlin, Linda. 1971. 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', in *ARTnews*
- Pollock, Jackson. 1950/2003. 'Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) Interview with William Wright', ed. by Paul Wood Charles Harrison (Cornwall: T. J. International), pp. 583–86
- Rimbaud, Arthur. 1939. *A Season In Hell*, trans. by Delmore Schwartz (Norfolk: New Directions)
- Roueché, Berton. 1950. 'Unframed Space', *New Yorker*, p. 16
- Solomon, Tessa. 2020. 'Jackson Pollock's Largest Painting Is Touring the World, and Its Mysteries Are Coming to Light', *ARTnews* <<https://www.artnews.com/feature/where-is-jackson-pollocks-mural-1202685945/>> [accessed 24 November 2021]
- Wagner, Anne M. 1989. 'Lee Krasner as L. K', *Representations*: 42–57