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LEE KRASNER'S SKEPTICISM AND HER EMERGENT POSTMODERNISM

By Robert Hobbs

Lee Krasner's art both affirms and violates the Abstract Expressionist criteria for a convincing subjectivity: throughout her work, she moved from series to series, first adopting one style and then abandoning it as her search continued. Her open-ended view of herself differs substantially from most of the first-generation male Abstract Expressionists' late modernist and highly romantic accounts of themselves and their unconscious as compleat distilleries of essential truths. Their point of view is predicated on conceiving their work in terms of symbols, which the nineteenth-century Romantic poet/critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge described in terms of imagination. He wrote, "The imagination. . . gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors."¹ In symbolic constructions, the work of art, considered as a metaphor, is viewed as representing a whole; it functions as a synecdoche in which outer form is believed to be an adequate stand in for inner essence. Differing from this symbolic and synecdochic view, Krasner's work plays on metonyms in which both she and her related attributes are connected through a chain of signifiers without being hypostatized as their essence. By relying on metonyms as opposed to metaphors, Krasner breaks away from Abstract Expressionist claims of autonomy and transcendence as she embraces the countering ideas of contingency and fragmentation. Looking at Krasner's work in this manner allows one to see how both her postmodern works made first for the 1976/1977 Pace Gallery exhibition entitled "Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See," and those created subsequent to it are not radical departures from her earlier work, but instead are far more self-conscious developments of attitudes and practices appearing in it since the 1940s, when she began viewing the self as other.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s many male Abstract Expressionists proclaimed themselves to be art's internal mirror. David Smith said pointedly, "Art. . . comes from the inside of who you are when you face yourself."² In the process of defining art in terms of themselves, a number of these first-generation male Abstract Expressionists also took refuge in heroic allusions and mythic terminology, which Krasner on occasion also adopted. Adolph Gottlieb, for example, poetically suggested in the 1940s that his work evolved from the deep strata of primordial memory that Jung articulated as "archetypes," genetic predispositions to hypothetical universal image banks situated in the

unconscious of each individual and indirectly available through dreams and free association. In 1944 he wrote, "I disinterred some relics from the secret crypt of Melpomene [the Muse of Tragedy] to unite them through the pictograph, which has its own internal logic."³ Embracing Delacroix's highly romantic and instrumental concept of the work of art as a bridge between the mind of the artist and the observer, Gottlieb continued, "Like those early [Greek] painters, who placed their images on the grounds of rectangular compartments, I juxtaposed my pictographic images, each self-contained within the painter's rectangle, to be ultimately fused within the mind of the beholder."⁴

Together with Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, Gottlieb subscribed to the idea of a universal and ultimately static art that transcends time. In their collaboration "The Romantics Were Prompted. . .," these artists wrote, "Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then."⁵ However, instead of looking outside themselves to nature as did the Romantics, these artists searched within and found "inscapes" (to use Gerard Manley Hopkins's term) that connected them with what they regarded as the very beginnings of human culture.

These and other Abstract Expressionists began evolving in the early and mid-1940s formal signs for communicating the self's great internal reservoirs, which are apprehended indirectly and dynamically, and they devised a number of formal means for doing so, including pentimenti, the break-up and radical overlapping of forms, extension beyond the limits of a given surface, and lack of finish, which can be communicated by liberal drips and splashes of paint. The irony of their situation is that once these formal codes became part of the stylistic apparatus recognized as Abstract Expressionism, they ceased to communicate the dynamics of this internal repository, associated with either the subconscious or unconscious, and promulgated instead the formalist conventions of a reified self, through the aesthetic branding of drips, zips, veils, *Elegies*, *Bursts*, etc.

Among first generation members of the New York School, Lee Krasner (1908-84) is remarkable for continuing to explore an iterative and protean self. In conversation with art historian Barbara Novak, she first disclaimed affinities with the one-image art of her peers and then attacked it. She stated, "I've never understood the fixed image. I've never experienced this state of being where you fix an image and this becomes your

identification. . . It's rigid. Its purity is alarming, so to speak. It terrifies me in a sense." To make sure her point was completely understood, she enunciated, "It's rigid, as against being alive."⁶ At another time, she affirmed, "The one constant in life is change. I have regards for the inner voice."⁷ Always in advance of her ability to realize it, this inner voice characterized a dynamic that kept Krasner open to the contingencies of a self that can only be partially understood, a self that is much more a clarion call for continued action than a reified one, which many of her peers believed to be fully manifested in terms of a single signature image.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, this Abstract Expressionist quest to manifest an essential self in a work of art seems hopelessly romantic and surprisingly naïve. This modernist assumption of a monolithic self that can be directly manifested in art has become highly suspect in recent years, when art historians conversant with the poststructuralist theories of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan have decentered the self and looked at ways this now highly improbable construct became naturalized in art historical discourses. But during and after World War II, the legacy of Romanticism was still so strong that artists believed in a seamless self that could be actuated in their art. They subscribed to an expressive aesthetics, which has its origins in William Wordsworth's externalization of his internal thoughts and intuitions in his poetry. According to literary theorist M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, a standard text on the Romantic English literary imagination, Wordsworth's program was as follows:

The first test any [romantic] poem must pass is no longer, "Is it true to nature?" . . . but . . . "Is it sincere? Is it genuine? Does it match the intention, the feeling, and the actual state of mind of the poet while composing?" The work ceases then to be regarded primarily as a reflection of nature, actual or improved; the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself.⁸

Expressive theories such as Wordsworth's and the similar ones embraced by most first generation Abstract Expressionists assume communication between creators and observers to be direct and unmediated. Both surrogates for their creators and direct conduits to their feelings, their paintings become "objective correlatives," to use T.S. Eliot's terminology, "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."⁹ Eliot considered poetry to be universally intelligible because its language corresponds to a unique intellectual and emotional experience, which in turn is capable of communicating, a belief that is consistent with the principles of New Criticism, which he helped to formulate. Robert Motherwell was fond of referring to Eliot's "objective correlative" when discussing painting, and other first generation Abstract Expressionists accepted this theory as a general truth.¹⁰

Rather than subscribing to such romantic and New Critical

ideas in poetry, Lee Krasner embraced the renegade early Symbolist approach of Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote in 1871 to his friend Paul Demeny: "I wish to be a poet and work to make myself a seer. . . . It is false to say: I think. One should say: I am thought. Pardon the play on words. I am another."¹¹ Apropos this passive construction, Krasner told her assistant John Post Lee in 1981, fully four decades after fully embracing Rimbaud's poetry, that she did not filter nature through her work, instead insisting, "It filters through,"¹² thus referring to the self as a Rimbaudian other, a concept that remained one of the key aspects of her work.

So important was Rimbaud to Krasner's early work that she wrote several lines from his *A Season in Hell* on her studio wall and kept them there until the fall of 1942, when she moved into Pollock's apartment. Often cited, the lines are:

To whom shall I hire myself out? What beast must I adore?
What holy image is attacked? What hearts shall I break?
What lie must I maintain? In what blood tread?¹³

Clearly the self suggested by these lines is chameleon-like and predicated on contingency—a self that is dynamic, mysterious, and quixotic—a moving target and not the profound internal fountainhead her fellow Abstract Expressionists maintained. Throughout her work Krasner forged a number of constructed selves that she considered likely candidates for an ultimately indeterminable and hypothetical "real" self. Relying on an insistent open-endedness that is existential in character, Krasner's constructed images of herself in her art are always exceeded by a superfluity of new choices, becoming a never-ending cycle lasting throughout her life.

Krasner erected in her life and work a number of provisional metonymical selves. Beginning with the range of names she devised during the first thirty years of her life, she assumed a number of provisional identities. Born Lena Krassner, she chose the highly fanciful Lenore, perhaps because of the Edgar Allan Poe poem with this title; later she changed her name to Leah, and finally, in the 1930s, she settled on Lee Krasner (with one s), which was sometimes abbreviated in her work to the initials L.K.

In the 1940s Krasner's relation to her work was a provisional one, as one can see looking at her gray slabs and Little Image series. According to Krasner, "I went into my own black-out period [later notable for the gray slabs] which lasted two or three years [from approximately 1943 to 1946-7] where the canvases would simply build up until they'd get like stone and it was always just a gray mess. The image wouldn't emerge. . . . I was fighting to find I knew not what."¹⁴ Later, on a number of occasions, Krasner described her intention to use intuition as a way to move from Hofmann's external nature to Pollock's "I am nature."

Whatever the reason for Krasner's gray slabs, from a postmodern perspective they represent the commendable failure to come to terms with a limited view of the self and an inability to use intuition as a means for distilling an image capable of encompassing and representing it. Instead of a single image, Krasner kept layering one on top of another, with none of them definitive enough to be accepted, with the notable exception of a very few works, including *Image*

Surfacing (see p. 12, Fig. 1), with its accusatory eye. Each layer or image canceled out the one below it until the painting attained the quality of mud. Krasner would then soak this Sisyphean accrual of paint in the bathtub and scrape it down down to the bare canvas, only to begin yet again.

When Krasner came close to achieving a signature image in the late 1940s with her Little Image series, it was plural, not singular, and it could easily be sorted into daubs of paint, archaic script, and drips, making up the various sub-series comprising this overall group. The visual languages of the Little Images replaced the putative presence of the artist with a series of absences—or as Derrida noted, “signs represent[ing] the present in its absence.”¹⁵ Since none of the individual sub-series comprising the Little Images provided the type of definitive solution that in turn could be refined and explored in increasing depth over the artist’s lifetime or even a five to ten year period, we must assume that they were stopgaps on a personal journey that continued to outdistance the artist, resulting in abrupt shifts and new cycles, each appearing for a time as a consummate solution, only to be discontinued over the years as a provisional one.

The year after Pollock’s death in 1956, Krasner began elaborating her own signature to the point that it became the armature for the entire painting *Listen* (1957; front cover), which she named with the help of her friend, the writer B.H. Friedman. This emphasis on her name occurs in a number of other contemporaneous works, including *Sun Woman I*, *Sun Woman II*, and *The Seasons*, as well as *Black, White and Pink Collage*, which was begun at the same time as the others but was completed in 1974.

At the time Krasner painted *Listen*, many Abstract Expressionists had already settled on their “signature images.” In consideration of this fact, we might conjecture that on one level Krasner’s extended signature in *Listen* could be considered a parody of this type of art. But the signature suggests other possible references.

Starting in the lower right, Krasner’s sprawling name appears either to have initiated or concluded the initial phase of outlining the composition with an umber imprimatura. Whether undertaken at the beginning or reinforced at the end of this process, the integral use of the artist’s name allies the overall work with her identity and helps to explain the intense emotional reaction she felt while making it. She later told her friend, the poet Richard Howard, “I can remember that when I was painting *Listen* which is so highly keyed in color—I’ve seen it many times since and it looks like such a happy painting—I can remember that while I was painting it I almost didn’t see it, because tears were literally pouring down.”¹⁶ Instead of invoking a holistic sense of self in this painting, Krasner presents a metonymical chain of images, consisting of her signature and the breastlike forms, that can be associated with her: she later acknowledged that no one was more surprised than she was when breasts began appearing in her work. In *Listen* these forms occupy the position traditionally accorded flowers arranged in a vase, a container that is partially comprised of her signature. The artist’s nature, which



Fig. 1. Lee Krasner, *Untitled* (1940), oil on canvas, 30" x 25". Collection of Faye Sarofim.

may also be metonymically connoted by the leaf-like shapes in this painting, can be equated with the same scraggly indoor plant used for some of Krasner’s circa 1940-43 Picasso-style still lifes (Fig. 1).

Krasner’s Earth Green series, including *Listen*, relates to contemporaneous conversations she had with her friend, the writer Sanford Friedman, brother of B.H., regarding Jane Ellen Harrison’s book on Greek tragedy entitled *Ancient Art and Ritual*, which was part of the Pollock-Krasner library at The Springs, and which they both read. In this book, Harrison set herself the task of trying to understand why the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were performed in Athens in early April at the Great Dionysian festival and discovered that they are all connected with the birth of Dionysus known as the Dithyramb, which is the song of rebirth. Given the importance of Krasner’s painting *Birth*, made soon after Pollock’s death and at the time she was reading Harrison’s book, we might consider it and the Earth Green series, including *Listen*, as playing the compensatory role of a willed rebirth. Continuing in this vein, we might connect the fragmented realm of *Listen* with the Dionysian theme of self-sacrifice and dismemberment, coming before metamorphosis and rebirth.

Despite its abstractness, *Listen* correlates with the Freudian psychologist Dr. Otto Rank’s theory of creation through naming. As Rank explains:

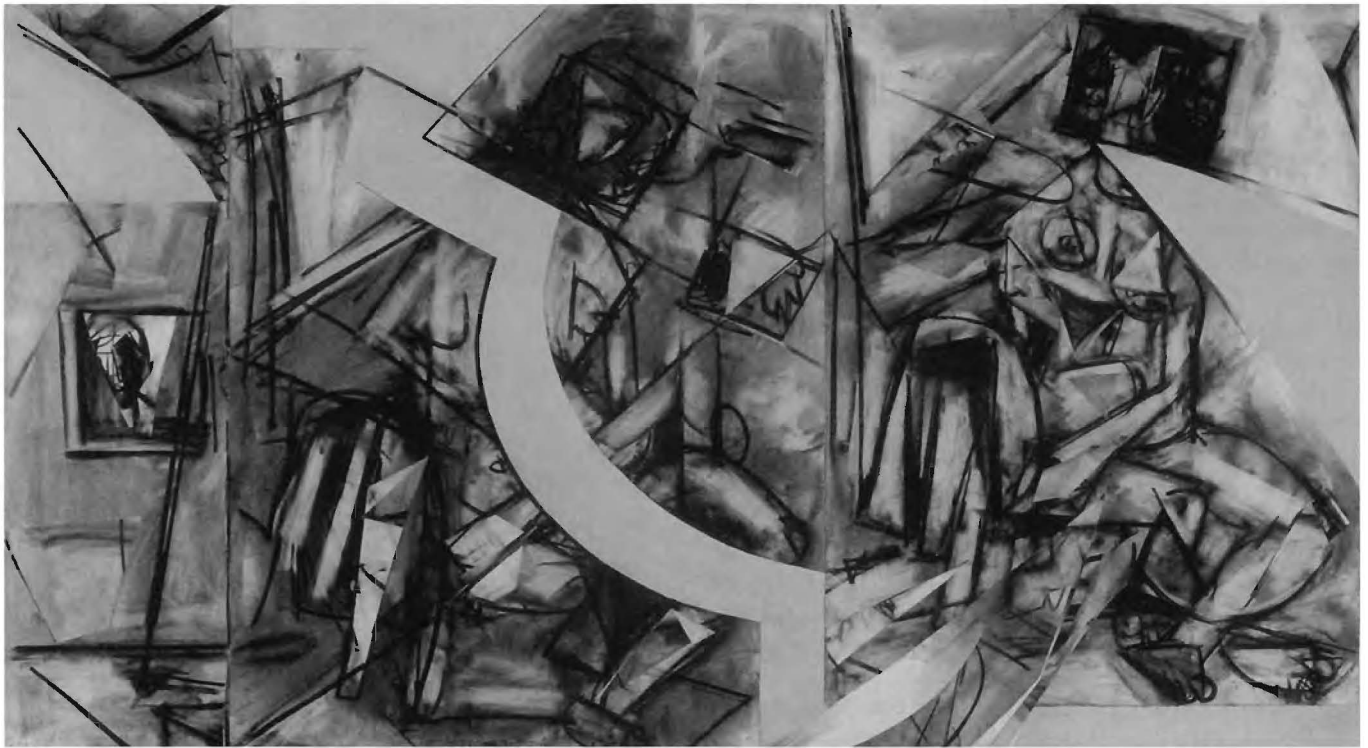


Fig. 2. Lee Krasner, *Past Conditional* (1976), collage on canvas, 27" x 49". Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Photo courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

The myths which deal with the creation of the world out of the human body are really speech-myths which represent man's conquest (that is, his creation) of the world by naming the objects (that is, by metaphorically expressing them through speech). This creative power of language. . . does not merely "tell" the myths, but forms them physioplastically . . . [since they] are only grand linguistic metaphors for this projection of the parts of the body onto the whole universe.¹⁷

In *Listen* Krasner's speech myths are transformed into a written and painted myth—the metonymical chain associated with her through her signature and the breasts—but instead of comprising a new word and world, this painting conflates what is known, thus the imperative "[to] listen" as its title rather than the originary injunction "to name." In consideration of this painting's rich saturated hues, *Listen* might at first seem a "happy" picture as the artist suggests; however, on reflection it is not surprising that she cried when she considered the amputated breasts, the hothouse plant leaves, and the lack of connection with either an integral or self-sustaining nature that this metonymical chain of imagery underscores.

To *Listen* we can apply Derrida's description of the incorporation of a signature in an artistic work as a type of self-sacrifice in which a creative individual's identity loses its sovereignty as it is siphoned into the art. Although Derrida describes a literary situation, his observation is equally applicable to art:

The law producing and prohibiting the signature . . . of the proper name, is that by not letting the signature fall outside the text any more, as an undersigned subscription, and by inserting it into the body of the text, you monumentalize, institute and erect it into a thing or strong object. But in doing so, you also lose the identity, the title of ownership over the text; you let it become a moment or a part of the text, as a thing or common name.¹⁸

Similar to a number of Krasner's best works, *Listen* seems poised between being made and starting to deliquesce. Its present status is conditional and almost miraculous, since change seems so much a part of its being. Its present alliance with the artist's name is a situation that appears on the verge of transformation, and thus one's interpretations also appear to be subject to change. We might say that instead of producing an art that only objectifies process, which it inadvertently does, Krasner creates paintings whose ostensible subjects are predicated on contingency, making both their current state and any ventured reading appear to be only momentarily applicable. Her means correlates with another and less rigid definition of imagination—differing from the symbol—and also provided by Coleridge, who discussed the importance of creating images that are not easily verifiable. Emphasizing the importance of "hovering between images," Coleridge stated in his 1812 lecture on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, "As soon as it [imagination] is fixed on one image, it becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination."¹⁹



Fig. 3. Lee Krasner, *Present Conditional* (1976), collage on canvas, two panels: left, 72" x 60"; right, 72" x 48". Photo courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

For her first retrospective exhibition, which Bryan Robertson curated for the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1965, Krasner provided a statement that poetically underscores her denial of both an essential self and an integral style, even though on first appearance her analogy to a lettuce leaf seems to support the opposite conclusion. It is reproduced on a separate page that concludes this catalogue's general stocktaking of her work. She began by pointing out that "Painting, 'when it really happens' is as miraculous as a natural phenomenon—as say a lettuce leaf. By 'happens,' I mean the painting in which the inner aspects of man and his outer aspects interlock."²¹ She elaborates on her initial idea by stating, "One could go on forever as to whether the paint should be thick or thin, whether to paint the woman or the square, hard-edge or soft, but after a while such questions become a bore. They are merely problems in aesthetics, having only to do with the outer man."²²

She then emphasizes a highly romantic and modernist concept of the work of art as an autonomous and transcendent whole, "But the painting I have in mind, painting in which inner and outer are inseparable, transcends technique, transcends subject and moves into the realm of the inevitable—then you have the lettuce leaf."²²

Taken on face value, the statement would appear to support a belief in an essential self in which inner and outer worlds reinforce opposite sides of a permeable membrane, representing the artist's inner and outer worlds. But if one considers a lettuce leaf as a fragile element of a larger entity, then each internally and externally consistent leaf, which might be construed as synonymous with one of Krasner's many

discrete styles presented at the Whitechapel retrospective, is broken away, one after another, over a period of time.

Because Krasner's metaphor is so remarkable, one wonders about its source, and the most convincing candidates are the series of photographs of cabbage leaves that Edward Weston made in 1931 and exhibited in New York soon thereafter. These sensuous, undulating shapes, looking very much like lettuce, are beautiful in their fragility and transience, each discretely unified, and each self-consistently seeming to support an essence that differs, however, with each successive image in the series, thereby constituting a dynamic while framing a contingent, not autonomous situation.

In 1976 Lee Krasner embarked on a radical new course in which she dramatized confrontations between modernism and incipient postmodernism as well as between her own earlier and recent work in the important series *Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See*, which includes such pieces as *Imperative* (Pl. 1), *Imperfect Subjunctive*, *Past Conditional* (Fig. 2), *Present Conditional* (Fig. 3), and *Present Subjunctive* (all made in 1976). The significance of the different verb tenses used to title this series is that they change the act of looking from Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's insistence on the *presentness* of modernist art in the 1960s to a delayed and extended form of viewing more in keeping with Derrida's post-structuralist theories, particularly his concept of *difference*—his special conjunction of "difference" and "deferring" that is spatial in demarcating distinctions among closely associated entities and time-bound in delaying ultimate or transcendent meanings.

In 1975, the year before Krasner created this important new

series, an exhibition of her works on paper, beginning with pieces from the year 1933 and continuing up to that time, opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. It was curated by New York critic Gene Baro. This and other contemporaneous exhibitions of Krasner's works on paper caused her both to think about her past accomplishments and to consider ways that her art had gone through dramatic changes in the over four decades that she had been making it. In addition to the Corcoran showing, the print and drawing room of Marlborough Gallery in New York featured a companion exhibition subtitled "Works on Paper: 1937–1939." The two exhibitions were selected in part from a cache of Krasner's Hofmann School drawings (ca. 1937–1940) that Robertson had found in the early 1960s when they were stored in a barn on The Springs property where they had been summarily deposited almost two decades earlier and promptly forgotten. At the time Robertson had been assiduously searching for works by Krasner to include in her Whitechapel retrospective. He chided Krasner for not using fixative on these early pieces, since some charcoal drawings had smudged, while still others had left ghostly mirror impressions on the sheets of paper separating them. After selecting the best works, Krasner put the rest in storage and again ignored them until the advent of the Corcoran and Marlborough exhibitions caused her once again to search for this early body of work.

In 1976, the year following these two exhibitions, Krasner began thinking yet again about these drawings and decided to use discarded pieces of them for a series of monumental collages. Such a process of recycling her own and even Pollock's discarded paintings and drawings had been important for both her relatively small black-and-white and large, intensely colored collages of the 1950s, and so she repeated this practice albeit with an important difference: instead of cohering the collected remnants into seamless yet intense and highly rhythmic works, she exaggerated differences between the old drawings and the new structures under which they were now subsumed. The artist recalled, "At first I did have some nostalgia about the drawings, but then I began to look at them as if they weren't done by me—simply pieces of material for making new work."²³ The thirty-five to forty-year-old drawings were mostly studies of studio models in which Krasner had carefully adhered to Hofmann's method and had taken as a key compositional determinant the overall dimensions of the paper employed (See for example p. 35, Fig. 1.).

This series was made in the late 1970s when Greenberg's prescriptive formalist program was considered bankrupt, painting was regarded as an old fashioned art form, and originality was thought to have been provided a *coup de grace* by Roland Barthes's 1968 essay signaling the author's death. In this series Krasner mines both her past and her present to create a disjunctive rather than a nostalgically retrospective view and a style of poised contradiction and artfully placed crosscurrents. And the work in turn destabilizes both past and present as it ricochets back and forth between them and the tremendous gaps in space and time separating them. In these works Krasner sets in motion a critical process of differing values through oppositions between modernist autonomy and a postmodern depreciation of that

sovereignty. These late works are meta-paintings, commenting even as they present different aspects of the artist's work.

These collages can be considered in general to be distantly related to contemporaneous Pattern and Decoration work and specifically to be conversant with aspects of the feminist art movement then being led by an associate from the early 1950s, Miriam Schapiro, the wife of Pollock's friend, painter Paul Brach. As part of her overall feminist program, Schapiro had developed a new hybrid art form based on patchwork quilts and collage that she called "femmage." Among the works that Krasner no doubt saw in the 1970s were Schapiro's widely published Collaboration, Fan, and Vestiture series that looked like the shaped canvases of Frank Stella, with the important proviso that they were composed of laces, richly embroidered silks, velvets, sequined appliques, and chintzes. Although Krasner did not indulge in the use of such elaborate materials for her work, her collage method did parallel Schapiro's desire to collect the fabric of women's lives—namely her own—and use it as a basis for her art.

Far less romantic and idealistic than Schapiro, Krasner was appropriating her own modernist exercises for compositions alluding to two different metonymical chains, depending on her early works and recent ideas, which were based on lateral extension and which in part deflected the original intent and meaning of her Hofmann school drawings. To appreciate the critical act that Krasner's collages enact, it is helpful to compare her approach with that of contemporary linguists. Prior to the 1960s, many linguists operated like modernists in positing ideal channels of communication in which messages were unmediated by misunderstandings and in ignoring the general cultural noise that might interfere with the original intent of a communiqué. Slowly, however, linguists became aware, as have postmodernists, that there are no ideal speaker/listener situations and no totally homogeneous communities ensuring perfect understanding.

In the collages, ironically titled *Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See*, Krasner turned early works into decorative patterns that are then cut up and rearranged without consideration of their original intention, thus interrupting their original message. The resulting collages exhibit a lack of sync between Hofmann's codification of the rules of modern art (exhibited in the original drawings) and the overall curvilinear rhythms to which Krasner subjected them. In this series, she dispensed with Hofmann's universally oriented modernist grammar as she raised the question of artistic language to a new level in which her German teacher's modernism became the object, but not the subject of the new works of art. In her collages, language is viewed diachronically and dialectically and no longer in terms of the harmonious universals that Hofmann had originally intended.

Instead of working with Sanford Friedman and Richard Howard to title *Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See*, Krasner relied on conversations with essayist and gallerist John Bernard Myers. Although Myers certainly contributed to the titles of these series, the idea of dealing with time through references to verb tenses was made by Krasner's longtime friend, the artist Saul Steinberg, who posed the idea of "a linguistic system suggesting time and its conditions"²⁴ as the subject for these

works. The importance of such verb tenses as “present conditional” and “past continuous” is that they undermine the full presence of the modernist work of art at the same time that they acknowledge multifaceted ways of looking at art. In addition, the series’ ongoing dialectic between past and present enabled Krasner to debunk the theory that artists create works with a unitary focus even if she employed contradiction as a stylistic device. In these collages, she carries on a point/counterpoint discussion with her past self about the continued relevance of modernism, its ghostly impressions, and aftermath. The artist quotes herself, only to undermine herself, and thus to throw art into a quandary of possibilities. The process is similar to the internal gaps occurring in Rimbaud’s poetry that force readers to develop their own readings of particular works that are then retroactively attributed to them.

This internal dialectic between the artist’s selves that have changed over time is also evident in the later piece, *Crisis Moment* (1972-80; Pl. 2), a collage painting for which she cut up lithographs from her Pink Stone editions (part of the Primary Series, 1969). The work is an abstracted still life consisting of blossoms that appear to be clotted with blood. The mixture of violence and beauty—unexpected though not unprecedented in Krasner’s work—gives new meaning to the French term for still life, *nature morte* (literally, “dead nature”). Some of the flowers or buds resemble egg shapes, complicating still further the intermingling of life and death, birth and growth. For *To the North* (1980), lithographs from the Blue Stone edition (taken from the same Primary Series) were employed. A similar deflection of present and past times can be seen in the postmodern *Between Two Appearances* (1981; Pl. 3), in which the spontaneity of Krasner’s dripped oil paint on paper has been reconstrued as a series of collage elements so that she both creates and cites quotations of her own creativity in this piece. In this metonymical construction, she contrasted two codes for her own expression: spontaneous drips and thoughtful representation. By cutting the drips out of older works, she transformed them from distinct signs for feeling—in effect, putting quotation marks around the drips and giving them an element of Neo-Expressionist irony prior to the time this type of art was becoming important in New York. The fact that the heads in the painting are not collaged and look as if they were heightens one’s sense of doubt, causing one to suspect that they may be real while the drips are counterfeit. But the drips are actual; it is only the excision that makes them look unnatural. The two appearances of the title thus become two contradictory illusions that the artist chose not to resolve.

Describing Lee Krasner, a first generation Abstract Expressionist and the wife of Jackson Pollock, in terms of postmodernism might appear to be merely an interpretative ruse mainly geared to provoke intense discussion. But I hope this essay has provided enough analysis to make this point. By choosing to look at certain discrete periods and works in Krasner oeuvre, my aim was to emphasize the contingent and continuously emergent self that she continued throughout her life to rename and to couch in often radically different styles, including painterly and constructivist approaches. It is important, too, to point out that Krasner’s 1970s and 1980s

departure from the basic tenets of Abstract Expressionism paralleled those of a number of her peers who entered into dialogues with art postdating Abstract Expressionism. While Barnett Newman served as a mentor for such a sixties minimalist as Dan Flavin, Rothko’s ascetic late work, Motherwell’s *Opens*, and Richard Pousette-Dart’s black-and-white works (to name the art of only three Abstract Expressionists) all responded to minimalism in highly individual ways that demonstrated their desire to keep abreast of recent developments while also personalizing them. Wishing to be part of the cultural dialogue, they found ways to approach contemporary discussions without totally rejecting their earlier work. Krasner did the same, and as this essay has indicated, she was admirably equipped to do so because of her early skepticism regarding the hyperbolic romantic goals that most first generation Abstract Expressionists espoused. Instead of making claims about her ability to reach some mythic Olympus, which was psychologically reconfigured in terms of archetypes and liminal imagery, Krasner was content in her work to reference herself in terms of an evolving metonymic chain that connected the prosaics of her actual world with the poetics of her collages and paintings. •

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Notes

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Statesman’s Manual” in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1816; rpt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 29.
2. David Smith, “Tradition and Identity,” (1959) in Clifford Ross, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 184.
3. Sidney Janis, *Abstract Art and Surrealist Art in America* (New York, 1944), cited in Lawrence Alloway, “Melpomene and Graffiti” in *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 27.
4. Ibid.
5. Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko with Barnett Newman, “Statement” (*New York Times*, June 13, 1943) in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1992), 562.
6. Barbara Novak, “Excerpts from an Interview with Lee Krasner” (Boston, October 1979) in *Lee Krasner: Recent Work* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1981), n.p.
7. Lee Krasner, interview by Gaby Rogers, 1977; Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. (microfilm 3774).
8. M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953, rpt. 1971), 23.
9. T.S. Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems” in *Selected Essays*, 3d ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 124.
10. Motherwell, conversations with author, 1974-1979. During the period of writing my dissertation on Motherwell’s *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, followed by the year I lived in this artist’s guest house while

teaching at Yale (1975-1976) and the period of co-curating the exhibition *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* with Gail Levin for the Whitney Museum of American Art, I spent many hours discussing Abstract Expressionism with Motherwell. At that time, the term "objective correlative" was one of his favored expressions for referring to his art.

11. Harold Rosenberg, "The Profession of Poetry," *Partisan Review* 9, no. 5 (September/October 1942): 407. I have chosen to cite here and in my other work on Krasner this citation rather than other published references to Rimbaud's statement because Krasner was lifelong friends with Harold Rosenberg and most likely would have known about it from her conversations with him. Cf. Robert Hobbs, *Lee Krasner* (New York: Independent Curators International in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1999).
12. John Post Lee, "Interview with Lee Krasner, East Hampton, New York, November 28, 1981" in "Lee Krasner and Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See" (senior thesis, Vassar College, December 4, 1981), 36.
13. Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell: Un Saison en Enfer*, trans. Delmore Schwartz (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1932), 27.
14. Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 86ff.
15. Jacques Derrida, "Difference," in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 138.
16. Richard Howard, "A Conversation with Lee Krasner" in *Lee Krasner Paintings: 1959-1962* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1979), n.p.
17. Otto Rank, *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 227ff.
18. Jacques Derrida, *Singeponge/Singsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 56.
19. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Text of Lectures 1,2,6,7,8,9, and 12 of the 1811-1812 Series as published by John Payne Collier in *Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton* (1856)" in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, vol. 2, *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 495.
20. Lee Krasner, "Statement" in Bryan Robertson and B.H. Friedman, *Lee Krasner: Paintings, Drawings, and Collages* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1965).
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Grace Glueck, "Art People: How to Recycle Your Drawings," *New York Times*, February 25, 1977, sec. C, p. 18.
24. Jeanne Siegel, "Collage Expanded," Visual Arts Museum, New York, October 1-20, 1984, n.p.

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