

Spring 2008

# The Cut in Collage: Pollock, Fontana, Matta-Clark, Ono

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# The Cut in Collage Pollock, Fontana, Matta-Clark, Ono

Matthew Ryan Smith

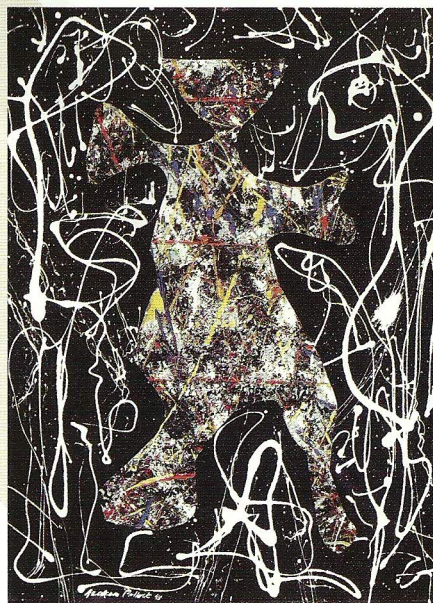
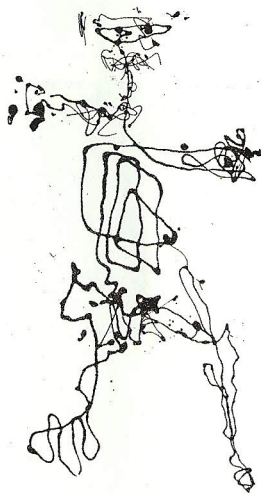
The gestures of collage are a cut above and below the level of its established meanings. To uncover its historical procedures greatly expands and explodes the narrow, formalist definition of collage. The primordial cut is one such neglected gesture, first employed in a tenth-century illustrated manuscript by the Japanese poetess Ise. Focusing on the act of cutting tips the discourse on collage in a strategic direction, while helping to broaden and redefine our relatively limited understanding of this practice.

## JACKSON POLLOCK ACTION

One of the most intriguing cuts of collage history lies in Pollock's sporadic embrace of figuration in the late 1940s and post-1951, when he abruptly abandoned his signature drip style. But even during his touchstone years, Pollock systematically revisited the particular style that he, along with many of his contemporaries, progressively distanced themselves from. Certain critics argue that Pollock was always inclined toward figuration when initiating a work, but simultaneously triumphed over it by using successive layers of webbing to camouflage an underlying human form.

Clement Greenberg's seminal 1960 essay "Modernist Painting" argued that modernism in general, and more specifically abstract expressionism, resorted to flatness to announce their differences from the past. Thereafter, for pictorial, formal, and emotional reasons, artists like Pollock, Newman, and Rothko expanded the notion of flatness to create immense paintings not seen since the nineteenth century. So it is all the more remarkable to find Pollock's *Untitled (Cut-Out)* from 1948-50 superimposing a human-shaped cutout figure on his trademark drips, the very antithesis of Greenberg's position.

In his 1952 article "The American Action Painters," Harold Rosenberg described the canvas of American action painters as an "arena in which to act," in the process promoting the artist to the role of pseudo-actor. As he continues: "A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The

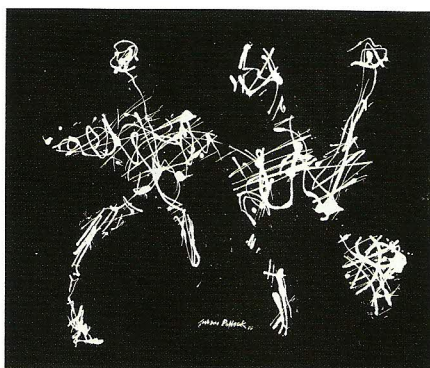


painting itself is a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of his life," inescapably abolishing the "distinction between art and life," and thus fusing the painter with his picture. At this stage, according to Rosenberg's account, Pollock can easily be imagined throwing himself both physically and emotionally into his work—expressing, you might say, the painter's personality and mindset in a convoluted grid of colors, planes, lines, and paint. In a way, this gesture of banishing the human figure from the surface of the painting, of de-grounding or excising it, is also equivalent to cutting oneself out of the picture, reenacting a theatrical suicide of sorts.

But all things considered, it's difficult to swallow this vision of Pollock. As he once admitted in a radio interview with William Wright, "I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image and so forth, because the painting has a life of its own.... It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess." Pollock's apparent disregard for the consequences of "destroying the image" negates his concern for maintaining the flat expanse of the abstract expressionist canvas and non-representation. Pollock is more concerned with sensual affect than preserving any painterly trope.



The hypothesis grounding Rosenberg's slippery definition of American action painting is problematic for several reasons. To start with, during the years that Pollock produced the "Cut-Out" series, he also experimented with figurative drips in black and white enamel—such as in *Triad* (1948), whose webbed forms echo figurative studies for *Summertime: Number 9A* (1948) with astonishing precision. Looking at Arnold Newman's famous 1949 photograph of Pollock standing in his studio before one of these studies, one perceives that the figure's limbs and general deportment uncannily reduplicate the arrangement in *Triad*, as if to provide visual evidence of Pollock's all-over fractal technique—and not, as Newman has it, as "Romantic Artist" (note here the Holbeinian skull on the shelf above the artist). In this instance at least, it seems that Pollock made a conscious decision to cut or draw



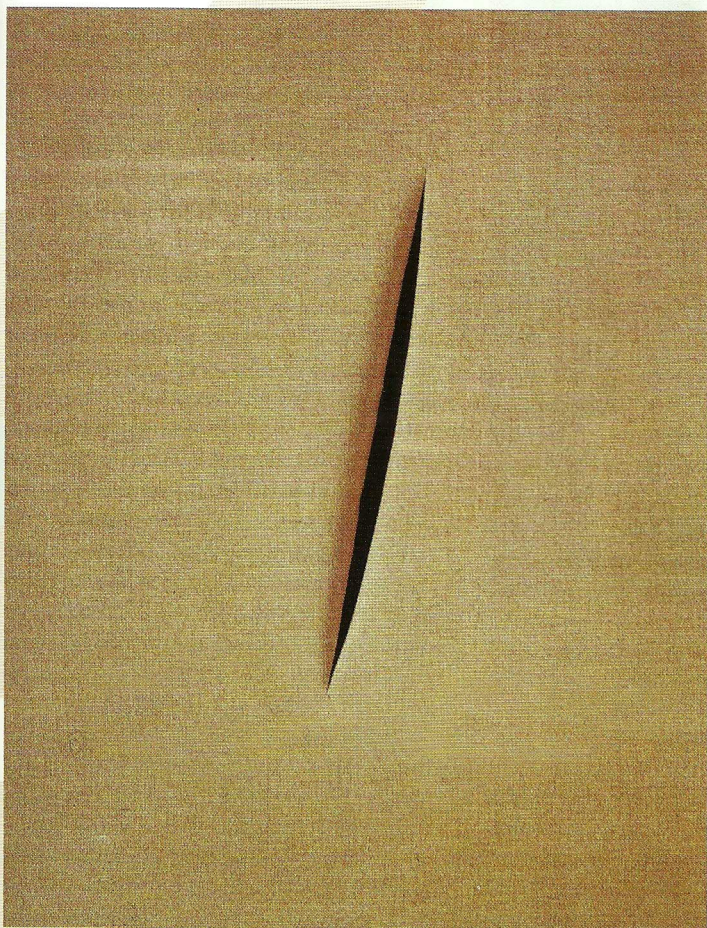
that Pollock ditched the conventional act of representation by highlighting the hollowness of the painted object *against* the underlying support or backdrop, cutting out the intervening third party. Indeed, Pollock seems to get around figuration and one-to-one likeness by maneuvering the blade instead of the brush, through excision rather than optical or material insight, advancing representation to the infinite field of abstraction.

In a January 24, 1948 review in *Nature*, Greenberg points to the "danger of monotony that arises from the even, all-over design which has become Pollock's consistent practice." Whether this suggestion came at the behest of the artist himself (there can be no doubt that the two communicated personally throughout the late 1940s), or was intended as some kind of cutting remark, Greenberg's proposition remains important

when analyzing the artist's proposed collaging technique as a precise departure from monotony. Increasingly after 1948, as if to testify to the eternal return of figuration that is painting, Pollock twisted the earlier non-figurative, dripped style one extra turn, causing the inner depthlessness to erupt figuratively into the surface as abstract ground, to cut from one plane of perspective to another, without at the same time abandoning his basic métier. Greenberg may not have had this interpretation in mind, but his remark could well have helped steer the destiny of modern painting away from the abstract notion of flatness.

## LUCIO FONTANA WAITING

The American performance artist Al Hansen once said in a June 1966 letter to *Arts and Artist* that, "Destruction is a perfectly logical arena to perform in." The same might easily said of Argentinean-born Lucio Fontana and his elegantly violent, divisional *tagli* or "cuttings." Substituting box-cutter and canvas for paintbrush and paint, the artist wields a knife like an old master, but this time rendering the void left by the cut as paint, as we see in his *Spatial Concept "Waiting"* (1960). Discussing Fontana in the context of collage clearly necessitates a radical reconsideration of its basic precepts, beginning with simply affixing one object to another. His *tagli* indeed attach various visible *concetti spaziali*, such as that of the void, to perceptively rearward and/or frontward spaces conjured in the two-dimensional plane of the canvas. Seen in this light, the act of carving out an indefinite, blackened slash of infinity inside the painting could be considered a type of collage, almost a cut above it. It effectively splits the all-over-ness and integrity of the picture plane asunder, penetrating and dividing it but never completely, always allowing the canvas to remain intact both before and behind.



(TOP TO BOTTOM) JACKSON POLLOCK, *TRIAD*, 1948, OIL ON CANVAS. LUCIO FONTANA, *CONCETTO SPAZIALE-ATTESA* (*SPATIAL CONCEPT "WAITING"*), 1964, TEMPERA ON CANVAS, UNFRAMED 57.5 X 45 CM.



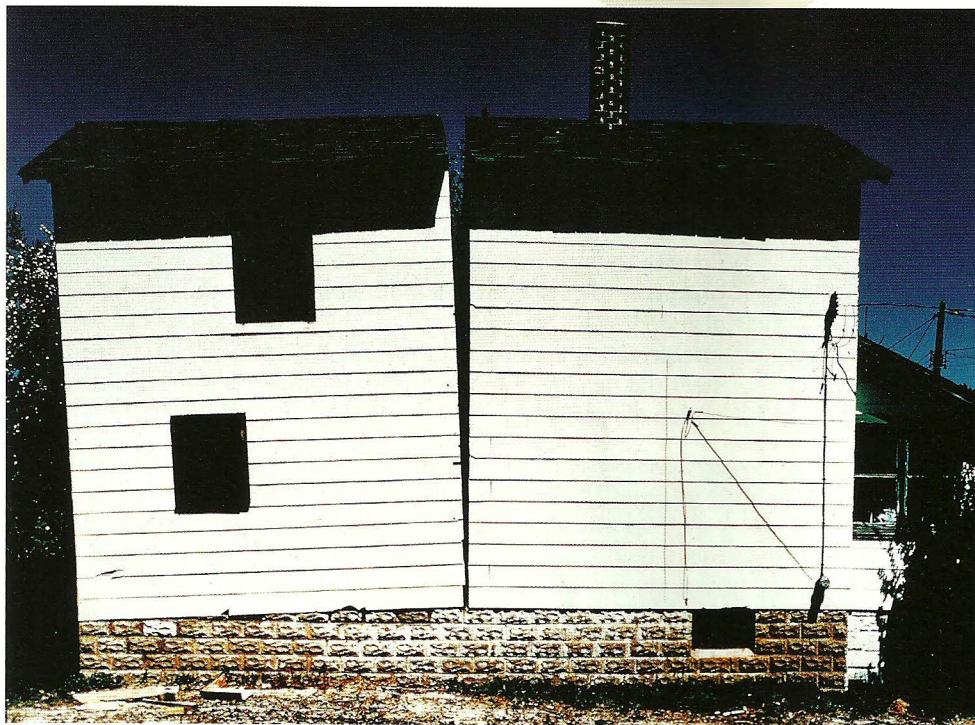
In fact, rather like the collagist “paste-up” method of randomly editing and re-contextualizing materials at will, Fontana’s approach remains fundamentally time-based. In the throes of “waiting” (*attesa*) for the moment of expression to strike, Fontana charges the canvas like a matador his bull, haphazardly slicing the canvas from top to bottom, as if tearing at its flesh-like surface. The artist’s final withdrawal of the blade is like the collagist’s retraction of the glue gun, a sharp realization of that inspiring moment.

Fontana’s sculpturally reductive *tagli* also result in the abstraction of the painterly gesture, as visible in his “spatial concepts” as is the presence of the void. To Fontana, the void is a visible dimension, a dark, ominous realm beyond the confines of the canvas. As Fontana him-

function more like slashed gateways to the possibilities of living life in a dimensional collage.

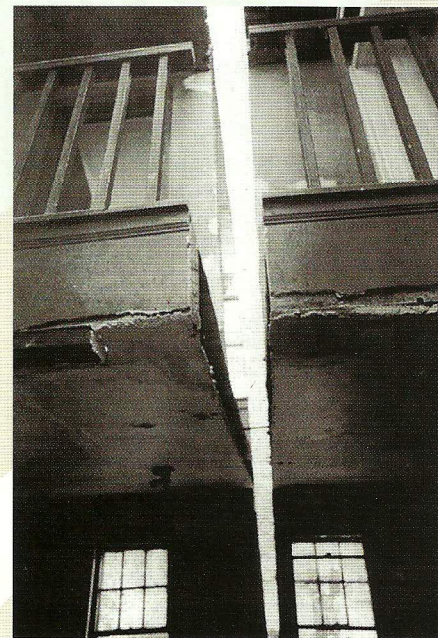
#### GORDON MATTA-CLARK LIFT-OFF

Matta-Clark is a contemporary strategist of this same dimensional collage. His influential *Splitting* (322 Humphrey Street, Englewood, New Jersey) (1974) grandly communicates what it would feel like to live at once inside and outside, before and behind the world we visibly inhabit. By slicing a derelict, two-storied suburban home neatly in half, the artist created one of the most threatening and even healing cuts in collage history. Physical danger seems to lurk above and below the floorboards, threatening the very foundations with scraps of falling debris, and in the grind-



self confesses, “I made holes in order to discover ... the cosmos of an unknown dimension.” Cutting the canvas permits this unknown, hypothetical “cosmos” to burst through into lived space, obscuring our visible world with a seemingly infinite void. In effect, Fontana’s cut-and-thrusts only give birth to this other universe from the solitary perspective of our own reality, and vice versa. They

ing chainsaw Matta-Clark wields like a brush. It is thanks to his violent instrument that the guts of the Englewood house, long forsaken to darkness and decay, were spilled open to the light of day. But this cut equally causes the emotional release that comes with taking away all domestic security. *Splitting* essentially demolishes the stereotypical home, undermining its sense of privacy



and function as a safe haven or retreat.

Liza Bear, in her 1976 interview with Matta-Clark, calls his work “clean-line brutality.” Yet such an overt tearing away at the temporal and social world also suggests a rather different sort of cut, specifically one resulting from methodical excavation or *décollage*. The precise opposite of collage, a process of building up images from existing pieces, *décollage* is created by withdrawal, laceration, “*étrécissement*”—the act of scissoring, peeling off, and otherwise removing sections of a single image or surface layers of superimposed images (as in the 1950s “lacerated posters” of Mimmo Rotella). In fact, Paris’s 1960s Nouveau Réalisme movement owed its existence mainly to a critique of the collaging techniques used in mass media advertising, which it felt removes images from their original temporal and material context, thus underscoring a practice of social disengagement. *Décollage*, on the contrary, makes the arbitrary social contract become unstuck or achieve “lift-off” (as per the aviation sense of the French term), exposing the remnants underneath to public edification. *Splitting* fits well into the same problematic, blowing the lid off lower-class housing while exposing stereotypical fears over what happens if their con-





tainment fell apart. Matta-Clark's lift-off soars like a socialist manifesto.

## YOKO ONO DÉNOUEMENT

Yoko Ono is another example of recent artists employing collagist strategies in the context of sequential flux. Like Félix González-Torres, Ono requires audience participation to "complete" the work, quite literally editing the performance in the midst of its unfolding. At the start of her renowned, often-restaged *Cut Piece* (1964/65), the artist takes a seat onstage, sits cross-legged, holding up large silvery scissors in front of her. There is a touch of ceremonial *seppuku* hanging in the air. Out of the blue, Ono solicits people from the audience to approach the stage and cut off her clothing piece by piece, using the scissors provided. Her fellow "performers" are instructed not to take away the dress clippings, but to place them on the floor around Ono in a fashion reminiscent of Arp's *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* (1916-17). This cutting continues until the moment of unbosoming, whereupon Ono adroitly covers herself. Thus "covered"/uncovered, Ono becomes part of the collage/performance herself.

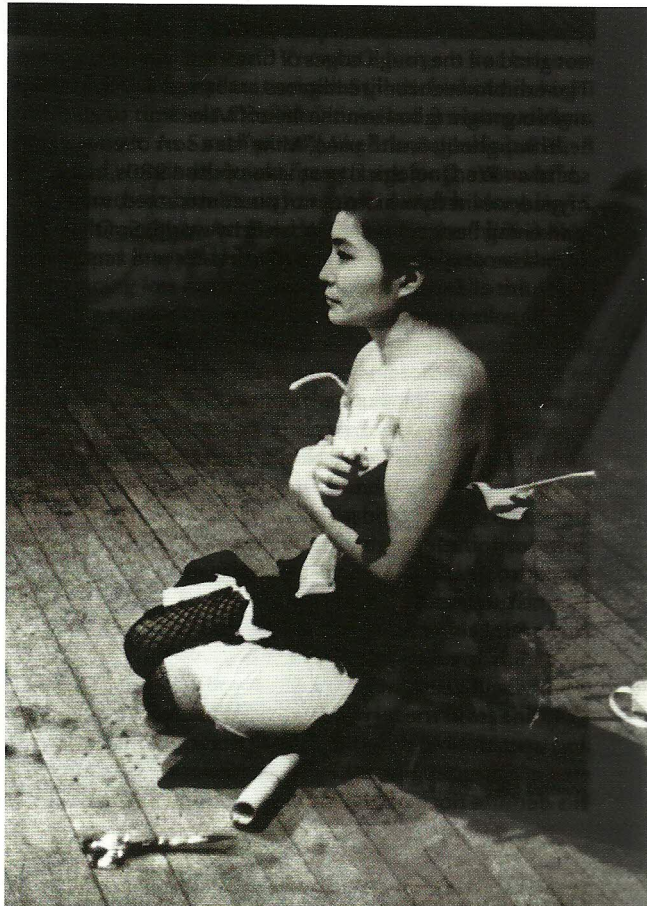
*Cut Piece*, in effect, allows audience members not only to become perfor-

mance artists in their own right, but to submit their immediate environment to a process of temporal abstraction. The agents' spontaneous cutting and removal of particular sections of Ono's dress mimics editing techniques like collagist "paste-ups" or Fluxus happenings, taking jabs at everything from exhibitionism and voyeurism, intermedia and event scores, high art seriousness and the flow of time. In addition, the very presence of razor-sharp scissors invokes a hint of danger for Ono herself, especially during subsequent performances when she faced accusations of having cut up The Beatles. The incremental disrobing of Ono is the inevitable dénouement of Fontana's *Spatial Concept "Waiting,"* except that here the slashing of the canvas reveals the all-too-human void.

The German-born Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell once advocated what he called *dé-coll/age* (here French colloquial for a plane crash), essentially the blurring

and dismembering of mobile fragments of reality, such as occurs in his TV *Dé-coll/age for Millions* (1959-63) where three minutes of blurred transmission acts as a synecdoche for mass obfuscation. Something similar also "happens" in Ono's *Cut Piece*, where performers simultaneously destroy the subject's integrity and the traditional artistic process of construction with only a few snips. At once destructive, violent, and yet creative, the cut in collage historically unveils art's potential for an infinite variety of material shortcuts.

MATTHEW RYAN SMITH is an MA candidate in History of Art at the University of Toronto. **SOURCES:** Eddie Wolfram, *History of Collage: An Anthology of Collage, Assemblage, and Event Structures* (London: Studio Vista, 1975). Pepe Karmel, "Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth," in Jackson Pollock, exh. cat. (New York: MoMA/Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1998), 102-3. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," first published in *Art News* 51/8 (December 1952), 22. Beyond Painting: Burri, Fontana, Manzoni, ed. Matthew Gale & Renato Miracco (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 82. Pamela E. Lee, Gordon Matta-Clark: *Object to be Destroyed* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 23-24. Jerry Hopkins, Yoko Ono (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1986), 49.



YOKO ONO, *CUT PIECE*, CARNEGIE REHEARSAL HALL, 1965.