



*Lee Krasner*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1993; pp. 88-95+97.

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Paris. Their art became part of what is known as the Letterist movement, and Krasner's art reflects either a knowledge of this art or its ancient precursor in the Near East. The greater sense of reductiveness of *Olympic* is closer to Krasner's rigorous AAA works in the style of Mondrian and to her subsequent mural designs for WNYC. It is as if she has taken a detail of one of her most abstract mural designs, removed the black cloisonné outlines, and blown up the result to monumental scale. Yet for all its apparent structure, *Olympic* is breaking apart, undermining rather than perpetuating the cohesiveness and optimism of Stella's Protractors. *Olympic* is important both as a radical shift toward a more Minimalist vocabulary and as an abstract armature for Krasner's next series.

That series, first exhibited in 1977 at Pace Gallery in the exhibition *Lee Krasner—Eleven Ways to Use the Words to See*, caught the New York art world by surprise because it represented a radical rethinking of the then sacrosanct modernist tradition by an artist long overdue for confirmation as one of its masters. Coming at a time when modernism was beginning to be regarded as bankrupt, this self-assured exhibition reinforced the suspicions of modernism's end.

The official story of *Eleven Ways* that Krasner told on numerous occasions is that in 1974 her friend the British curator Bryan Robertson had found in her barn at The Springs a group of old charcoal and oil drawings that she had made at Hofmann's school in 1937–40. Many were studies of the live model. After going through the works and deciding to have some of them framed, Krasner put aside the rest to be destroyed. Later she found the portfolio of rejects in her New York apartment and decided to use them for a series of collages. According to John Bernard Myers, who reconstructed a conversation with the artist, Krasner stated, "The first collage of the new work is called *Imperative* [1976]—meaning I experienced the need not just to examine these drawings but a peremptory desire to change them, a command as it were, to make them new."<sup>76</sup>

What Krasner and her chroniclers have omitted from her story is that in 1975 the art critic Gene Baro organized the circulating exhibition *Lee Krasner: Collages and Works on Paper, 1933–1974*. That same year the Marlborough Prints and Drawings Gallery featured a solo exhibition of her early modernist pieces entitled *Works on Paper: 1937–1939*. During the preparations for both exhibitions, Krasner had ample opportunity to reexamine her early works, to study her collages, and to see potential relationships between the two.

At the same time, the artist Miriam Schapiro, whom Krasner had known in the 1950s, was reinterpreting collage from a feminist perspective.<sup>77</sup> Schapiro, like Krasner, was carrying on an aesthetic dialogue with Stella's Protractor series, but she was reinterpreting them as giant appliqués and slowing down Stella's instantaneous gestalts by using elaborately decorated materials that invited close study. Krasner, in turn, entered into a conversation with Schapiro's collages and also with feminism, which was



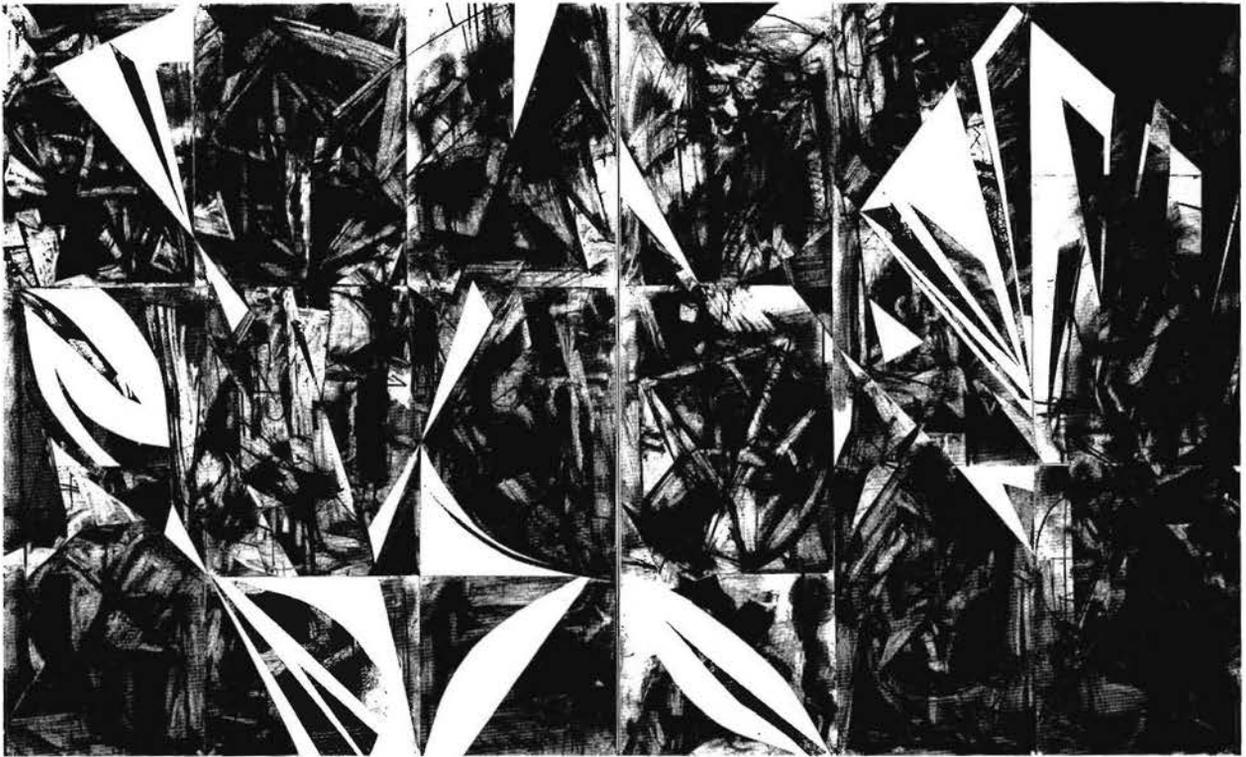
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79. *Rising Green*, 1972  
Oil on canvas, 82 x 69 in. (208.2 x 175.2 cm)  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of  
Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Victor Thaw

80. *Imperative*, 1976  
Collage on canvas, 50 x 50 in. (127 x 127 cm)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Gift  
of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Victor Thaw in honor  
of the 50th anniversary of the National Gallery  
of Art



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becoming an important artistic subject in the 1970s. Instead of using fabric, Krasner appliquéd sections of her own drawings to canvas. This process was not a new one for Krasner, who had been recycling her rejects for several decades. But taking recent works and reusing them is a vastly different proposition, psychologically, from going back to one's student efforts and reworking them. The subject of this new series was the history of modern art, which was also Krasner's history. By incorporating her least interesting drawings into these pieces, she made a statement about the need to critique and rework the past. (These collaborations with her youth may also have been informed by some of Pierre Alechinsky's contemporaneous artistic collaborations with other artists, poets, and the authors of old letters found in flea markets.)

In *Eleven Ways* the past is viewed as a series of fragments, unobtainable in its entirety and understandable only retrospectively and incompletely. The series presents an oblique and warped view of the artist's past, and in particular her failures. But Krasner's student works serve not only as the unseen background of her mature art but also as formal elements within it, subject to editing in order to create forceful compositions in the present.

The titles for the collages originated with Krasner's friend Saul Steinberg,<sup>78</sup> who has been concerned in his own work with art as language and with seeing as an encoded process. Although Krasner was probably unaware of the term "deconstruction" (and although only a few critics and historians have applied the term to this series), these works are in fact deconstructions of modernism. Her drawings from the Hofmann

81. *Diptych*, 1977-78  
Collage on canvas, 66 x 114 in.  
(167.6 x 289.6 cm)  
Private collection; Courtesy Robert Miller  
Gallery, New York

82. *Past Conditional*, 1976  
Collage on canvas, 27 x 49 in.  
(68.6 x 124.5 cm)  
The Estate of Lee Krasner; Courtesy Robert  
Miller Gallery, New York

School embody a host of conventions that she regarded as no longer relevant modes of seeing and as inadequate representations of reality. Through her radical cuts, Krasner acknowledged the drawings' inadequacy and their provisional status as works of art but also reinforced the fact that the series of new collages depended on them for its full meaning. Krasner's use of "words" as a basis for her series parallels the emphasis on language studies by many artists—including Conceptualists, Neo-Expressionists, and appropriators—beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the present. Krasner's interest in language and her act of undermining the content of her early drawings placed her in the forefront of postmodernism even though she still thought of herself as a modernist. In some of these works she used rubbings from the charcoal drawings that appeared on the protective sheets interspersed between them. These faint impressions resemble erasures and leave viewers perplexed as to whether they are real drawings or pale reflections, thus making the conditional verb tense cited in the titles of some works in the series particularly appropriate. In *Past Conditional* Krasner employed two overlapping but nonalignable systems. One is the Hofmann-derived style of the original drawings, the other is the internal rhythm of the collage itself. *Past Conditional* connotes the problems of trying to work with radically different systems—a problem all too familiar in this computer age, when different types of software, representing discrete forms of logic, are so often incompatible.

*Imperfect Indicative* provides an excellent example of how Krasner edited her past to propel it into a new realm of understanding. She left some drawings in this collage complete while fracturing and recombining others into abstract shapes that



recall the Celtic and medieval manuscripts so important to her. The cut-up drawings in *Imperfect Indicative* retained only traces of their past identity, becoming embellishments of new ideas.

Krasner set out to critique only her own past in *Eleven Ways to See*, but she ended up taking on that part of the modernist enterprise that Hofmann had synthesized and codified. In this series she began to critique modernist art generally, as opposed to individual artist's styles, and to find it woefully lacking. This distrust of modernism infused some of her last works, so that the final period of her career became a time when she alternated between belief and disbelief.

The trenchancy of Lee Krasner's personal critique and her courage in still trying to break through limits continued in some of the works made during the last five years of her life. The increased critical attention to her art generated by important shows and a retrospective encouraged her to become reacquainted with various aspects of her past and to oscillate between searching self-criticism and thoughtful, well-deserved self-congratulation.

On occasion she reconceived some of the themes important to her in a distinctly new way. A significant late modernist work is <sup>83</sup> *Crisis Moment*, an abstracted still life consisting of blossoms resembling blood. The mixture of violence and beauty—unexpected though not unprecedented in her oeuvre—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.

<sup>84</sup> In Krasner's *Between Two Appearances*, she contrasted two codes of expression: spontaneous drips and thoughtful representation. By cutting the drips out of older works, she transformed them into distinct signs for feeling—in effect, putting quotation marks around the drips and giving them an element of the Neo-Expressionist irony then prevalent in the art world. The fact that the heads in the painting are not collaged and look as if they were created with genuine feeling heightens the quality 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.

Although some critics and art historians may persist in referring to Lee Krasner as Mrs. Jackson Pollock, she was far more than that: a modernist in the reactionary 1930s; a first-generation Abstract Expressionist in the 1940s; an incipient feminist who mounted a critique of the macho-oriented styles of Pollock, de Kooning, and Motherwell (among others) in the 1950s; a visionary in the late 1950s and early 1960s; a late Abstract Expressionist willing to accommodate aspects of color-field and hard-edge painting in the mid-to-late 1960s; and a significant postmodernist in the 1970s and early 1980s.

83. *Crisis Moment*, 1980  
Oil and paper collage on canvas, 69 x 54½ in.  
(175.3 x 139.1 cm)  
Private collection; Courtesy Robert Miller  
Gallery, New York

84. *Between Two Appearances*, 1981  
Oil and paper collage on canvas, 47 x 57¼ in.  
(119.3 x 145.4 cm)  
The Estate of Lee Krasner; Courtesy Robert  
Miller Gallery, New York



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84



85. *Imperfect Indicative*, 1976  
Collage on canvas, 78 x 72 in.  
(198.1 x 182.8 cm)  
Estate of Lee Krasner;  
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery,  
New York

In her work Krasner always insisted that modern art must be international and never parochial. Because her work was predicated on an understanding of the self as dynamic and interactive, she was never content to establish a singular style to connote her own individuality, as many of the other Abstract Expressionists did. Rather, she embraced change, which generally took shape through a highly charged dialogue with other artists and herself.

58. Tabak, in Potter, ed., *To a Violent Grave*, p. 162.
59. Downs, *ibid.*
60. Krasner, in Munro, *Originals*, p. 116.
61. Rose, *Retrospective*, p. 95.
62. Krasner, interview with Hobbs and Levin. Even two decades after Pollock's death and de Kooning's affair with Kligman, Krasner was still bitter. Her fury extended to de Kooning's work: "Well, with regard to de Kooning, certainly he is one of the leading forces in this movement. With regard to his series on *Woman*, I reject them one hundred percent; I find them offensive in every possible sense; they offend every aspect of me as a woman, as a female." (Krasner, interview with Dolores Holmes, 1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 5.)
63. Krasner, in Cindy Nemser, "The Indomitable Lee Krasner," *Feminist Art Journal* 4 (Spring 1975): 9.
64. Krasner, in Landau, "Lee Krasner's Past Continuous," p. 76.
65. Krasner, in Richard Howard, *Lee Krasner: Paintings, 1959-1962* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1979), n.p.
66. There are few references in the literature to Krasner's iconography. The major exceptions are Marcia Tucker, *Lee Krasner: Large Paintings* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974), and Bryan Robertson's essays.
67. Krasner, in Tucker, *Lee Krasner: Large Paintings*, p. 8.
68. Howard, *Lee Krasner: Paintings, 1959-1962*, n.p.
69. Krasner, *ibid.*
70. Krasner, interview with Seckler, December 14, 1967, p. 11.
71. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures: Second Series* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969), p. 265.
72. Howard, *Lee Krasner: Paintings, 1959-1962*, n.p.
73. *Ibid.*
74. Krasner, *ibid.*
75. Krasner, in Munro, *Originals*, p. 119.
76. Krasner, in Myers, "Naming Pictures," p. 71.
77. Both Miriam Schapiro and her husband, Paul Brach, had known the Pollocks in the early 1950s, when Brach was close to Pollock. Because of this early association, Krasner would certainly have been alert to the critical attention that Schapiro was receiving as a leader of the feminist movement.
78. Jeanne Siegel, *Collage Expanded* (New York: Visual Arts Museum, 1984), n.p.