

Standing in front of process driven artwork, the viewer is practically compelled, consciously or not, to create a conception of the artist's work practice, to imagine the experience of what it was like for the artist to have made the work. Such a process is crucial to viewing this kind of work, beginning perhaps with Jackson Pollack's field painting, with its drippings and splatterings of house paint. Sensing Pollack's tremendous energy and drive when standing before his work is fundamental to appreciating his project. The range of responses to paintings that foreground artists' work practices is truly immense. In my own case, I think that some viewers often expect that my experience of working is a bit like this: As I work, applying one mark after another in their thousands, I'm carried along by the rhythm of my practice and the slow unfolding of the piece, and my mind slips into a kind of absorbed quietude. Sometimes the expectation is that this is a joyous, even rapturous experience. In truth, from time to time I'm lucky enough to actually experience such moments. But this essay is mostly about when the experience of working is not really of this type. Or not completely so. I've found that it's possible for the experience of working to resonate quite deeply even when my mind is ceaselessly busy. In fact, for many years I would actually seek out this latter type of working experience. I used to describe as a mental reflex, one that I couldn't escape, the practice of endlessly attempting to synthesize understandings for myself of what I was doing. I would give myself over to this kind of impulse time and again, seeking to arrive at the fullest realization of why I was making the work that I was making. At first these understandings were mostly metaphysical in nature, something to do with a desire to apprehend that which underlay the perceptible world. Eventually I came to feel that the work practice that I had evolved survived the kind of natural selection that goes on in the studio precisely because it most lent itself to the task of figuring out and never quite arriving at fully satisfying explanations. I felt that I had arrived at a way of working sufficiently enigmatic and intriguing as to sustain my curiosity seemingly indefinitely.

In time, I embarked on Ph.D. work in Jewish mysticism. That literary and practical tradition offered a monumental metaphysical system, one which I was able to map, sometimes uncannily well, onto my work practice to produce fresh modalities by which to understand and express what I was up to in the studio. This was a very exhausting course of inquiry in many ways, but also oftentimes a very invigorating one. Invariably there would be periodic moments of frustration, however. Every fresh edifice of understanding that I would build up, with the accompanying feeling that I had finally arrived at something conclusive, would always seem to collapse as, at some point, the explanation, the metaphor or the analogy at hand would just gradually cease to feel compelling. In some way, it would eventually begin to ring hollow, at which point I would work on, feeling a bit lost, until some new approach would take hold. This went on for many years. It was really a very rich way of working, though, as I say, the repeating cycle was a bit exhausting.

In graduate school, my studies found an academic grounding largely in the work of Clifford Geertz, who propounded what he referred to as the anthropological study of religion. Essentially, Geertz characterized religions as cultural systems like any other. Through these, people model both their understandings of and emotional responses to the world. The former component, understanding, or "world view", reinforces the latter, what Geertz called the "ethos", a felt aesthetic in which members of a society partake. Similarly, ethos grounds world view in emotional experience. Through the mutually strengthening feedback loop of world view and ethos, cultural participants come to believe that they make contact directly with reality as it truly

is, with the “really real”. Cultural patterns and symbols are not seen as such by those on the inside; they are simply seen as truth writ large. With a bit of introspection, I could see that this was the same sort of meaning-making reflex, the drive to arrive at a comprehensive felt understanding, that I encountered every day in the studio. At this point, my attention began to shift from deriving such understandings to observing and exploring the impulse itself. In a certain sense, I became my own anthropological subject.

As Geertz observed, cultural systems operate through a totalizing effect. They are compelling because they seem to encapsulate a complete explanation of and for reality; only in this way are they functionally transparent enough that the cultural participant feels him or herself to be in a state of contact with unmediated reality, with reality as it truly is. As I fully absorbed Geertz’ perspective, I could see that I had always intended my work to have that same totalizing effect on me. In terms of time spent in the studio, I had always intended it to be completely consuming. In terms of that same mutual reinforcement of intellectual and emotional experience I could see that I also sought that totalizing quality. Even in terms of the visual experience of the work, I could see that a yearning for a kind of totality was operative in both the all-over, utterly unitary composition of each piece and in the impulse to pack this totality as fully as possible with small units whose totality comprised the whole. The swirling composition present in my most recent set of works springs from my extensive study of Michelangelo’s Separation of Light and Darkness on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. This particular image, aside from its own compositional richness, replete with its own swirls and undulations, stands as the first moment of Creation represented on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. In this way, its content stands as a (or the) quintessential all-encompassing totality. It is no wonder that the image was embedded in my mind for years before it found its way into my own work. Finally, regarding my ongoing practice of counting each mark as I apply it to the painted surface: Certainly a painting’s title, its total number of marks, stands very literally as a totality. But also the ongoing practice, as one piece succeeds another, with the total number of marks extending across nearly an entire adult life, comes as close as I am humanly able to encapsulating the infinite, an endless totality.

I think it’s possible to sense from what I’ve written to this point that I am able to see such a totalizing impulse today from an outsider perspective, and that it thereby loses something of its capacity for transparency. This has turned out to be a liberating development. Today I can observe the stream of meaning-making that my mind relentlessly generates as I work and feel endlessly carried along, much in the manner of which I spoke first when discussing how others sometimes imagine my work practice. I hope I have suggested something of the paradox of this, of how the opacity of totalities now generates a new kind of totalizing effect, different - but inevitably the same. The human mind has evolved to ceaselessly make sense of things, to manufacture meanings. Neuroscience recognizes today that, like the body, the mind as well is an evolutionary product of natural selection. Its intellectual and emotional complexities, its anxieties and gratifications, even its totalizing conception of itself as a self in the world, these things have all been selected for over time for the advantages they afford. To step outside and observe these properties in practice is to allow conceptions to fall away as quickly as they arise, and to even begin to catch glimpses of their roots deep in the unconscious. Meaning-making, as discussed, depends upon a belief that the totalizing effect of one’s mental constructs has an elevating capacity to put one in contact with the “really real”. In an important sense this suggests a kind of transcendentalism, a belief in the ability to somehow grasp at something beyond the limits of the mind. My work practice these days I would emphasize most in terms of the

subsiding of such conceptions and of the exploration of the many layers of preconceptions undergirding them, with the accompanying recognition of another paradox, which is that, in this endeavor, there is only mind at one's disposal.