

# Canvas without Stretcher: Impact of the Removal of the Stretcher during Painting after 1945— From Jackson Pollock to Tauba Auerbach

Hannah De Corte,<sup>1</sup> Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

*Abstract: For several centuries, the most common Western painting format was a stretched (and primed) canvas. From the end of the sixteenth century until the middle of the twentieth, the canvas by and large remained attached to a wooden frame and preparatory layers were applied. In this article, I examine some of the consequences and possibilities that arise from the absence of one these two components: the stretcher. I look at uses of raw and unbound canvas during the painting process, particularly at the way they changed the position of the artist's body with regard to the canvas support and tools. The shift between stretched and unstretched modified the painter's stance (from parallel to the support, to perpendicular or crossed, inducing a downward view) and introduced an awareness of the body and of the support. It modified the relationship between the painter and the canvas, so that the handling of the canvas became a component in painting techniques. I also emphasize that the removal of the stretcher opened up possibilities that continue to foster artistic inquiry.*

*Keywords: Unstretched Canvas, Unbound, Jackson Pollock, Pierre Bonnard, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Rauschenberg, Morris Louis, Sam Gilliam, Tauba Auerbach, Western Painting Format, Body, Reach, Support, Surface*

## Historical Shift

Unstretched and unprimed canvases are not uncommon supports in today's painting and art practices. However, for several centuries, they were not considered painting supports; the stretched and primed canvas was the exclusive paradigm in Western painting (*Unstretched Surfaces/Surfaces Libres* 1977). This changed after 1945. In the 1950s and 1960s, painters (located mainly in the United States and in France) questioned two crucial components of what had been the dominant format for over four hundred years; they abandoned both the stretcher—a wooden structure around which a canvas is pinned—and the primer—a protective coat of paint on the canvas that creates a hard and smooth surface for the painter to work on.

In this article, I examine some of the consequences and possibilities that arise from the absence of one of these two components: the stretcher. I examine how the use of unbound canvas as a painting support during the moment of painting changed the position of the artist's body with regard to their support and their tools; it changed not just the painter's stance but the physical relationship between the painter and the canvas surface in the studio. I describe how the painter's stance and perspective changed in floor-made paintings, and how this new approach to the canvas impacted painting techniques, including in paintings that were neither made on the floor nor on the easel but somewhere between those two states and positions, pictures made through manipulations of the canvas. I limit the field of inquiry to the moment of painting, thus leaving aside the exhibiting of unstretched canvas (until the last few paragraphs), to focus on canvas that is handled in the studio without a stretcher but has nonetheless been affixed a stretcher at a later moment, for its exhibition and conservation.

The stretcher is most often discussed in technical publications on painting<sup>2</sup> or on the restoration of ancient and modern artworks.<sup>3</sup> In the literature of the history of art, the subject is

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Hannah De Corte, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Avenue Franklin Roosevelt 50, Brussels, 1050, Belgium. email: hannahdecorte@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> See for example René Passeron's *L'oeuvre picturale et les fonctions de l'apparence*. The author defines the stretcher as a mold inside which the picture occurs (Passeron 1980).

rarely mentioned, let alone discussed. It is evoked disparately in monographs devoted to artists who have questioned the stretcher (*Robert Ryman: Used Paint* [Hudson 2009], for instance); in a few exhibition catalogues (*Unstretched Surfaces/Surfaces libres* 1977; *Off the Stretcher* 1971; *Toile libre* 1976); in interviews and isolated artists' writings of painters who worked with and on unstretched surfaces, such as Niele Toroni (*Niele Toroni* 1987) and Claude Viallat.<sup>4</sup> The subject is briefly examined in a few publications on fiber and textile art. In *Whole Cloth*, for example, Mildred Constantine documents the history of cloth in art and writes specifically about the unstretched canvas in a chapter titled "Unframed, Unstretched and Unbound," (Constantine and Reuter 1997, 79–90) mostly citing examples. Though it influenced the practice of painting (and the development of other forms of art) profoundly, the historical shift between stretched and unstretched has yet to be the object of a methodical study.

The removal of the stretcher at the end of the 1940s was a radical gesture. It had a major impact on the creation and the history of art in the second half of the twentieth century, so much so that it still resonates in today's practices. It modified the relationship of the painter's body—by extension, of the artist's body—with the handled surface. It also interrogated the status of that (canvas) surface and its materiality.

However, the liberties that emerged during the 1950s due to the removal of the stretcher have been assimilated and no longer constitute new freedoms for artists. Rather, they have become *variables* in painting and are investigated as just that. Painters play with these acquired possibilities; to incorporate them in their work does not have the same meaning as it would have had in the 1950s or 1960s. Nonetheless, the physical and technical consequences of the absence of the stretcher (such as manual manipulation of the canvas) remain active. They continue to foster artistic inquiry in the twenty-first century as Sergej Jensen's sewn and stained paintings, Adrien Vescovi's draped canvas exposed to the elements, Angela De la Cruz's deformed canvases, and Tauba Auerbach's wrinkling of canvas, for instance, show.

## Canvas without Stretcher during Painting: Floor-made Pictures

### *Detachment from Easel and Stretcher*

In Western painting, traditionally, an easel holds a stretched (and primed) canvas upright and above the floor, the wooden frame of the stretcher attached to the back of the canvas or a temporary stretcher laced to it has the canvas drum taut. The painter stands in front of the easel with body and easel parallel to each other. Painter and canvas surface are parallel. Marking tools are manipulated by the painter in the space between the body and the upright surface.

The detachment of the canvas from the easel and the stretcher during the moment of painting seems to have happened at once, in 1947, when Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) began pouring paint over unstretched canvas placed on the floor. Before attending to Pollock's stance, it has to be noted that, in rare instances, painters worked on unstretched fabric as a painting support in the first half of the twentieth century. Paul Klee (1879–1940) painted on small pieces of cloth like jute, some of which he did not place on stretchers but framed to exhibit. In photographs of Klee in his studio space in Weimar in the 1920s, the cloth appears pinned/stretched to boards that are placed on easels at eye level for Klee sitting in a chair. The parallel rapport between painter and support is quite close to the habitual one. Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), on the other hand, challenged the rapport. Bonnard tacked several pieces of cut canvas, juxtaposed, to the wall, covering the wall approximately from the ceiling to the floor.

<sup>3</sup> See for example *Conservation of Easel Paintings* (Stoner and Rushfield 2013), which features a text on the characteristics and uses of the stretcher.

<sup>4</sup> Viallat addresses the use of unstretched and unprimed surfaces as well as the stretcher and the frame in relation to the canvas and the wall (Viallat 1976). He states "painting starts with the awareness of its support" (Viallat 1976, 57).

He worked on several canvases at the same time, applying one color to several pictures (Hollevoet 1998). Christel Hollevoet (1998) estimates that Bonnard began tacking canvas to the wall around 1905. Photographs of 1944 by Henri Cartier-Bresson and photographs of 1946 by George Brassai certainly attest to the painter's method of working on canvases displayed in mosaics on the wall. On one 1946 photograph at his studio in Le Cannet, Bonnard is seen bending down, reaching downward with his paintbrush to apply paint on the canvas of *L'amandier en fleurs* [The Almond Tree in Blossom] fastened almost at floor level. Bonnard's untraditional stance recalls Pollock's stance and reach (see below) and—just like Jackson Pollock who insisted on his preference for a rigid surface under his unstretched canvas<sup>5</sup>—Bonnard may have been looking for the rigidity that he was accustomed to when painting on wood and on cardboard (Hollevoet 1998). But unlike Pollock, Bonnard's untraditional method and stance did not benefit from much exposure at the time or since (Hollevoet 1998).

Pollock's making of *Alchemy* constitutes a transitional moment as far as unstretched canvas is concerned. *Alchemy* of 1947 is one of the first works in which Pollock poured paint over the canvas, to build up a pictorial crust. Before pouring paint, he had mounted his canvas fabric to a quilting frame borrowed from his mother (Guggenheim Museum 2017). The quilting frame lets its presence be guessed on the borders of the painting. It can be interpreted as a transitional device between the easel and the floor: between strained canvas on a stretcher and loose canvas on the floor. The wooden frame (visible in photographs of Pollock working on *Alchemy* taken by Herbert Matter) functioned as a sort of hybrid of an easel and a stretcher; it allowed Pollock to frame the pictorial plane within the total canvas fabric, to maintain the fabric in a kind of tension, and to rest it against the wall for observation and for finishing touches (slight vertical runoff and other marks indicate that final touches were applied with the painting upright [Guggenheim Museum 2017]). This is the only known time that he used this device. After *Alchemy* was finished in 1947, his large drip paintings happened on spread out canvas on the floor without any frame or frame substitute. Later that year, the drip paintings or pourings were shown to the public, drew the attention of *Time* magazine (Karmel 1999, 63) and, two years later, graced the cover of *LIFE* magazine, becoming famous overnight (Seiberling 1949). Before the 1940s came to a close, Pollock had publicly emancipated the canvas from the easel (Greenberg 1948; Krauss 1999) and was the first Western artist of the twentieth century to remove the canvas from its stretcher and lay it on the floor (Fried 1998).

While painting and observing his vast canvases, Pollock would step around them in order to reach the whole surface; as has been often repeated, he “work[ed] from the four sides” to “be literally ‘in’ the painting”<sup>6</sup> (Seiberling 1949, 44). On a few occasions, he put his hands or a foot in the painting, against the canvas on the floor. His paintings having been made on the horizontal vector, small objects on the floor of his studio, like cigarette butts or nails, easily got caught in his liquid paint pourings (Doss 1991). Although Pollock's canvases had always been stretched before being exhibited and were intended to be shown upright, hung on a wall, many of these traces—the trash caught in the threads of paint, hand and foot prints, as well as the traces of absorption of stains in the canvas—remain visible in his canvases today and bear witness to the painter's position and technique (Bois and Krauss 1997).<sup>7</sup> Pollock's way of approaching the canvas, by slowly drawing above it with liquid paint, was akin to the approach of a dancer. Frequently compared to a form of choreography, his broad and controlled gestures were caught on film. As much as the surfaces of the paintings, the moving images and photographs of Pollock at work reveal the rapport between the painter and his canvas support.

<sup>5</sup> “My painting does not come from the easel...I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or floor” (Pollock 1947).

<sup>6</sup> “On the floor I am more at ease, I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and be literally ‘in’ the painting.” (Seiberling 1949, 44).

<sup>7</sup> On the importance of the horizontal vector in Pollock's work, on the shift between the horizontal and the vertical and the difference between the two stances, see Rosalind Krauss, “Horizontalization,” in *Formless* (Bois and Krauss 1997). Yve-Alain Bois retraces the horizontalization of Pollock's painting to Mondrian's New York City painting (Bois 1993, 179–181).

In one instance, Pollock painted over a transparent support when he was asked by the photographer Hans Namuth to make a painting over a large sheet of glass so that Namuth could film him through the glass, from underneath. The resulting footage, included in the film *Jackson Pollock 51*, superimposes what is applied to the glass (the picture in the making) on his motions above the glass, showing him hunched over it, granting us a rare insight into Pollock's way of working from the perspective of the support.

### Changed Stance

When Pollock placed the canvas, unbound, on the floor of his studio, the established relationship between painter and support that had existed in Western painting for several centuries was altered; it shifted from a mostly parallel stance (between body and easel; between body and canvas surface), to a perpendicular or crossed one.

In regions where the tradition of dyeing was strong, like in Japan, the position of the artist was always more crossed and mixed; the artist would crouch down, heavily manipulate cloth materials, and approach the support from all sides (Constantine and Reuter 1997). Similarly, in the United States, artists from different traditions like the Mexican muralists and the American Indian sand painters already assumed a different stance. The muralists and sand painters seem to have influenced Pollock's technique. The former were creating monumental paintings in the 1940s, directly on walls, and pouring paint directly from the can in experimental workshops (one of which Pollock attended in 1936 [Siegel 1999]), while the latter were pouring pigmented sand through their fingers to create sand paintings on the ground: moving around them, pouring from all angles, just like Pollock would with his own pouring technique. American Indians like the Sioux also created portable paintings on buffalo and elk hides (Horse Capture et al. 1993), which could be either worn, folded, or unrolled and stretched on wooden rods. Given Pollock's interest in early American art, these elements are likely to have contributed to his choice to work off the stretcher, on the ground. With that choice, Pollock initiated a new relationship in Western painting between the painter and his support.

Soon, too, the relationship between the painter and *her* support changed. Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) began working on the floor, stapling her canvas down. She would stand or kneel on the canvas to pour paint and apply stains with a squeegee into the unprimed cotton. If Pollock's paintings can be described as “massive index[es] of the position the pictures had had to be in during the time they were being made” (Krauss 1996, 276), Frankenthaler's pictures are less visibly that, though they also feature traces of their positioning but seem to combine contrasting types of marks. In her text “Pollock's Nature and Frankenthaler's Culture,” Anne Wagner draws attention to the contrast between Frankenthaler's possible body imprint on the bottom right of *Mountains and Sea* (1952) as an index of presence, and deliberately applied paint with the soak-stain technique elsewhere (Wagner 1999). The hypothetical hip or knee imprint is taupe and manifests as a series of fanned out folds. It “blossoms on the surface like a lopsided paint flower pressed from fabric folds” Wagner writes (1999, 191) but she does not identify the material or body part that would have left the print. I would suggest that the pattern of creases, rather than be the imprint of a foreign fabric from Frankenthaler's clothing, is the trace of the canvas itself. The canvas folded briefly onto itself and was pressed under the weight of a body part during the making of painting, because some of the lower folds appear in reserve in the taupe paint and because no second—foreign—weave emerges. The weave of the canvas runs through the imprint and it is the only apparent weave pattern. Furthermore, photographs of Frankenthaler in her studio show her kneeling and stepping (with socks or slippers) on unrolled canvas. The unfolded canvas, still attached to the roll, is stapled to the floor alongside its edges. Folds can be seen to form especially near the edges of the canvas, but also reaching inwards.

Near the imprint are located two arcs—traces of the borders of round paint cans—as well as small incursions of white impasto that appear sporadically across the whole surface of the

painting. The body imprint reads as situated on a higher pictorial plane than the soaked in paint of the neighboring stains, just like the cans' quarter circles that also appear *on* the canvas rather than in it, somewhere just above charcoal lines that also appear in *Mountains and Sea* but below the protruding white impasto. Because of the range and variety of Frankenthaler's marks, a distance is generated between marks of different qualities, depending on where they appear to be with regard to the support; a perceived detachment occurs between various marks on distinct pictorial planes. Paint fields and other traces appear above or below each other, installing a form of layering. The taupe folds' imprint, then, can be interpreted as an index of one of the limits of the pictorial plane; it indicates where the upper plane of the picture lies; there, where Frankenthaler knelt or sat, where her paint cans rested on the canvas, indicate a baseline pictorial plane (with fields and marks expanding below and/or above). The darkened edges of most of the painted fields (caused by capillarity and the coffee ring effect [Deegan et al. 1997], an accumulation of matter on the edges of stains) also seem to emerge on that upper field while the soaked paint between the edges is paler and retreats further back, in between the canvas's fibers with less deposit of pigment on the surface of the canvas.

The new perpendicular relationship between painter and support is particularly noticeable in *Lawn Combed*, a pencil drawing of 1954 by Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) that presents the contour of the artist's feet. Rauschenberg made this lesser known work the same year he made his first Combine Paintings—paintings made from the accumulation of found and discarded everyday objects, including fabrics. The Rauschenberg Foundation lists the work as “pencil on found fabric.” A photograph of his studio taken by Cy Twombly (who shared a studio with Rauschenberg), titled *Robert Rauschenberg, Combine Material, Fulton Street Studio, 1954*, shows Rauschenberg's materials spread over the studio floor. For *Lawn Combed*, the artist likely took a sample fabric from a stash or from the studio floor, stood on it with his bare feet, and drew their contour with a thin graphite line (Friedman 2005). *Lawn Combed* is kept behind glass in a wooden frame. The title inverts the words “Combed Lawn,” a type of finely and tightly woven cotton; the words are legible on the sample's label above the swan logo and its letters inscribed at the edge of the right foot. The fabric nature of the drawing's support is further emphasized by printed swans in the cotton and horizontal lines that are remnants of once present folds in the fabric. It is as much a portrait of the new stance of the artist as a drawing of the new position and loose state of the canvas support.

Rauschenberg's drawing of 1954 shows how much the position of the painter's body with regard to the canvas had changed in North American art over the course of less than ten years. That which previously would have been unthinkable—that a painter would sit, kneel, or stand on a canvas—was now the subject of one of Rauschenberg's casual drawings. Leo Steinberg stated in 1962 that it was Robert Rauschenberg rather than Pollock who had been most radical when he presented painted works like *Monogram* of 1955–1959 on the floor; simulating tabletops or boards, these works resolutely broke with painting's vertical field (Siegel 1999).

Following the circulation of images of East Coast American painters working on the floor in the 1950s, many artists took the perpendicular relationship with the support as a basis for artworks by the early 1960s, in various regions of the world, combining it with other traditions and concerns: Kazuo Shiraga, for example, painted with his feet, suspended from the ceiling above his canvas; while Yves Klein pressed nude women into paint and against paper or canvas, on the floor, using them as “living brushes” (commencing publicly in 1960); and Yoko Ono invited viewers onto her *Painting to be Stepped On* (1961) via a note accompanying a cut out piece of canvas placed on the floor.

## Looking Down

Surely, painting was not less physical in the past<sup>8</sup> but the physical relationship between the painter and the support morphed once the canvas was put on the floor and the painter's position afforded a downward view. Approaching the horizontal support from an upright stance, the painter is looking down; Pollock through Namuth's glass or with a knee on the canvas, Frankenthaler in her studio gazing downwards or standing on a chair to look from a higher point of view, come to mind.

Anne Wagner describes Frankenthaler looking down and drawing circles as if she were outlining a map (Wagner 1999). It indeed seems that when she was soaking the canvas and applying marks next to and below her, Frankenthaler appeared to distribute disparate elements in drifting layers (or networks) of related marks, opening up something below her, creating a layered ground. It often seems that she does this by digging or revealing rather than by adding, seemingly organizing an archaeological depth (by opening up space beneath, in between darkened edges of stains and oil or turpentine aureoles for example). In a review of a 1959 exhibition, critic and painter Lawrence Campbell remarked on this aspect of Frankenthaler's paintings as follows: "they all look as though they were meant to be looked down on from above rather than at customary eye level (...). They are crazy looking paintings" (Campbell 1959; Wagner 1999).

Body imprints and Rauschenberg's contoured feet (that occupy most of the canvas's small surface) also express that with the perpendicular stance and downward gaze—contrary to the parallel stance which frees up space in front of the canvas, between the painter and the support<sup>9</sup>—the body is in the way between the painter and the surface when the painter is at work, so that at times it is even brought onto that surface. The painter's perspective is altered. Though unstretched canvas can be pinned to the wall for observation (and Pollock notably did this) generally, during (most of) the painting process, the perception of the unstretched painting on the floor significantly diverges from that of its later, stretched and upright, state. The large unstretched canvas on the floor cannot be observed at once in its entirety. It can be seen from many angles, one area seen from significantly different perspectives.

This recalls Pierre Bonnard's painting *L'amandier en fleur* [The Almond Tree in Blossom]. Bonnard's downward bend as seen in Brassai's 1946 photograph suggests the variety of perspectives with which he approached a picture when working on his canvases in a mosaic display. His shifting and unusual perspectives likely played a role in the peculiar perceptions of space and unusual points of view in his paintings. In fact, in the photographs of Bonnard at work, none of the paintings are placed at eye level in a manner that one would expect. Bonnard "manipulated spatial parameters, skewed perspectives" (Amory 2009, 10); his paintings are described as containing ambivalence, spatial incertitude and "perspectival and structural contradictions" (Amory 2009, 54). Like *L'amandier en fleurs* they seem to incorporate an accumulation of fragments of different perspectives which is a reflection of the way Bonnard worked, standing and moving alongside the wall to reach the entire surface of every cut piece of canvas. The fundamental instability in his paintings echoes the painter's own skewed perspective. The removal of the canvas from stretcher and easel, as well as its horizontal placement on the floor had caused the changed stance, but another factor came into play and is intimately related the other two: the size of the canvas.

<sup>8</sup> On the physicality of painting and traces of the body (like hairs and finger prints) inside paintings, see James Elkins's *What Painting Is* (Elkins 2004).

<sup>9</sup> A desk allows an artist to work on a horizontal support/surface and, like the easel and the parallel stance, gets the lower body out of the way.

## A New Are(n)a

Along with the removal of the canvas from the easel and the stretcher during the making of the painting, the format of canvas paintings increased dramatically. Again, Pollock's painting was significant.<sup>10</sup> Soon, the new large-scale format dominated and became associated by many critics and artists with a *quality* or characteristic of North American painting after 1945, particularly from the East Coast of the United States.<sup>11</sup> Its scale having changed radically for American painters such as Frankenthaler, Jules Olitski, and Robert Motherwell, the canvas became an *environment* in which they moved around to paint (Kaprow 1958). Harold Rosenberg named this environment of the abstract expressionist painters the "arena;" defining the canvas as "an arena in which to act," and adding that "[w]hat was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (Rosenberg 1952, 25). Though the image of an arena was initially to reference the idea of "Action Painting" and the myth of a form of violence or combat involved with it (to reference the expressionist quality of the paintings of the New York School [Rubin 1967]), it also corresponds to a physical reality: the extended area of unstretched canvas on the ground, inside, against and around which the painter's body moved.

A performance held at Tate Modern in 2003 recalled the abstract expressionists' arena. For *I miss you!*, Franko B. walked down a long catwalk, which was covered in white cloth. He was without clothes, but his skin was covered in a white paste as if he were a blank canvas himself. With his inner arms cut and his veins held open, Franko B. walked up and down the catwalk several times while the blood dripped down his pale arms onto the canvas. The stained canvas was later cut in pieces and placed on stretchers, then given to friends and sold to collectors (Doyle 2013).

The performance evokes interpretations of the abstract expressionist painters' arena as defined by critics like Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. *I miss you!* can be read as an almost literal performance of the heroic interpretation of Jackson Pollock's pourings and stance. This traditional interpretation of the pourings (Perl 2009) involves the following elements: the painter using his body as a tool to *activate* the canvas "in the painting," expressing and translating a form of inner pain or violence<sup>12</sup> and pouring it onto the canvas, with gravity as an acting force; the liquid paint being considered as an extension of Pollock himself (quite literally in the case of Franko B., with his blood being a substitute for paint and interpreted as a visual form of a "psychical wound" [Heddon and Klein 2012, 43]).

## Reach

While their width could potentially extend indefinitely, the height of Pollock's formats was determined by his reach—a feature of Pollock's large-scale formats that has been overlooked. Contrary to what is often said about his process and to what Namuth's photographs would have us believe, Pollock rarely stepped on his canvases (a few hard to spot footprints bear witness to his careful steps). Rather, he worked from the sides by stretching his body to reach the center of the canvas. This means the maximum height of his painting was twice his reach from the floor to the middle of the canvas, from both sides of the canvas. His paintings relate closely to the

<sup>10</sup> The first wall-size canvases made by Pollock, but also by Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and Mark Rothko, date from the winter of 1949–1950 (Karmel 1999). Barring a few exceptions like Claude Monet's *Nymphs* and Roberto Matta's paintings of 1946, large-scale pictures had "previously been public in content (hence figurative), in manner, and in intended context" (Karmel 1999, 172, footnote 10).

<sup>11</sup> The large scale of the paintings was considered as being in line with the vastness of the North American landscape, in particular the Western plains—an association that Jackson Pollock helped create and promote (he would often cite his youth in the plains as having had an influence on his painting). This may in part have corresponded to a reality but was also a way to sustain the myth of the creation of American characteristics of art. Clement Greenberg discussed these characteristics of new (North) American art in "*American-Type*" *Painting* (Greenberg [1955] 1958).

<sup>12</sup> About Pollock and violence, see Bryan Robertson's monograph (Karmel 1999, 173, footnote 25).

human scale in their making process. The lateral extension of his formats and their restricted height is a witness to his deambulation around the canvas.

That the performative dimension of Pollock was picked up and formulated by Allan Kaprow soon after Pollock's death has been often remarked (Kaprow 1958). As Kaprow sensed, that aspect gave rise to a lot of experimentation. The perpendicular and bodily relation between artist and two-dimensional supports—reminiscent of Pollock's body to canvas relation—is often evident in the work of artists who mix performance art with a form of graphic or visual recording of this performance on a surface (outside of time-based media) like American artist Trisha Brown (Rosenberg 2016) or German artist Hilka Nordhausen (1949–1993). For her “Untersuchungen zur Handreichweite” [“Investigations on Hand Reach”], Hilka Nordhausen focused on the body and its limits, in several untitled pieces of 1974. In *Ohne Titel (Zeichnung auf Nessel)* [Untitled (Drawing on Canvas)] for example, Nordhausen drew short parallel lines in circles around her body in a seated position, as far as her reach would allow her to draw. In *Ohne Titel (Kreidekreis)* [Untitled (Chalk Circle)], she similarly drew circles around her body on the floor, with her limbs extended. Confining the expressionists' arena to a reduced field of action, she further reduced the parameters of Pollock's reach and let the area of mark making be defined by the limits of the (seated) body and by the length of her limbs. In doing so, Nordhausen proposed a way of measuring space and surface, inhabiting a small area of the canvas and self-inscribing it, providing “an experience of the canvas as a ‘place of its own’” as Wagner describes Frankenthaler's (Wagner 1999, 191).

Constraints on reach also are at the core of Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint* series. In the ongoing series which Barney (born 1967) started at the end of the 1980s, he shows the limitations of the body. Through a deliberate set up of resistance, his body is hindered by obstacles and physical restraints such as harnesses as he tests the limits of the body's reach. Barney's drawings are traces of his efforts to reach the surface, traces of form occurring through resistance. The position of the artist's body and its perpendicular or crossed stance, which painters from the New York school initiated, deeply influenced how artists have approached the support (canvas and others such as paper and the wall) since and how they thought out their relationship with it.

## Manual Handling of Unstretched Canvas

### *Tilting, Folding, and Crumpling*

The distance between the painter's body and the support also changed; traditionally, a painter would have stood vertically, in front of and parallel to a canvas, which rested on an easel. In this simplified situation, the painter's arm, hand, and tool created a certain distance in between them and their support.

By walking around his canvases, Pollock had only partially absolved this distance. To pour paint over the canvas, he used tools like wooden sticks or hardened paintbrushes that worked like sticks. His tools did not usually touch the surface as Pollock merely navigated them “just above” the canvas (Siegel 1999). The canvas mostly remained in the same flat, spread out position on the floor until completion.

On the contrary, the generation of artists that closely followed the New York School (American and European artists that were profoundly influenced by it) used devices and their hands and bodies as tools to manipulate the canvas. Color-Field painters Morris Louis and Sam Gilliam were among the firsts to use the canvas in this manner.

Around 1958, Morris Louis (1912–1962) developed a staining technique to let paint flow by manipulating the canvas: the raw, unprimed, and unstretched fabric was loosely stretched on a work stretcher (Upright 1985) or held in folds with clips (Siegel 1999) and was tilted in order to influence the absorption of the paint by the canvas (Fried 1998). Louis' magna acrylic resin



paint was very diluted with turpentine, almost transparent and absorbed between the fibers of his cotton canvas, leaving its weave visible everywhere (Upright 1985). Louis likely placed braces of his work stretchers under his folded and hanging canvases to direct the flow of paint. The braces left traces and created symmetric patterns of flowing lines around them. These produce some optical effects, a soft form of *trompe-l'oeil* as the canvases look like they were folded in these areas which they were not exactly. Louis also moved the paint with cheesecloth balls on the end of wooden sticks (Upright 1985), cotton to cotton. Gravity came into play, to flow the paint downwards but also horizontally into the canvas; in Louis' canvases vertical runoff is very rare whereas horizontal seepage into the fibers is omnipresent. Louis's paintings essentially (re)present the traces of the flowing and absorption of paint. Paint handling replaced gesture. As Jeanne Siegel put it, "by manipulating the canvas somewhere between wall and floor, he found a way to vary the pour and stain process" (Siegel 1999, 43).

Morris Louis soaked his large stained canvases from the *Veil* and *Unfurleds* series—the titles refer to the realm of textiles, ostensibly evoking the fundamental woven nature of his painting—in a studio so small he could not have manipulated the canvases once properly stretched, inside it (Upright 1985). Choosing unstretched canvas eliminated the constraints of the stretcher and easel; practical considerations of space are not foreign to the developments of the here described painting techniques. During the 1950s and 1960s, the manual manipulation and folding of the canvas while working was in line with an urban reality: artists had increasingly smaller studios and apartments (with rent prices increasing drastically after the war, and the city of New York becoming a new center of the art world, while large canvases were in high demand). Working off the stretcher enabled certain artists to make monumental formats in small spaces.

Like Morris Louis, French-Hungarian painter Simon Hantaï (1922–2008) was a pioneer in the manual manipulation of the canvas. From 1960, Hantaï developed a whole oeuvre around a folding technique (*pliage* in French). He meticulously manipulated his canvases before immersing them in paint. He would fold them in a precise way until he was holding only a small square or ball of layered textile. Sometimes, he would tie a thread or a rope through or around this canvas bulk. Then, he immersed it into one or more buckets of paint before unfolding it and revealing the painting. The folding and tying technique let areas of the canvas in reserve. As a consequence, after unfolding, they revealed the blank primed canvas and created patterns on the stretched-out canvas (Warnock 2012). With Hantaï, the painting during the making process is no longer seen from a skewed or shifting perspective as in some stretcher-less canvases in wall- or floor-made pictures, but becomes *unseeable* (Singerman 2003).

### *Trompe L'oeil*

After Louis and Hantaï, the manipulation of canvas became an area of investigation for painters; they began investigating the multiple possibilities of handling the unstretched canvas by tilting, cutting away, pressing, folding, and unfolding it. Take Sam Gilliam (born 1933), for instance. Gilliam is known for his draped paintings—stained paintings which unfold from the wall, into the exhibition space or hang from the ceiling. Before he made his first draped paintings of unstretched and stained, unprimed canvas in 1968, he had initiated a series of stretched color field paintings on beveled-edge stretchers (Hankin 1998). He made these following the (slightly misinterpreted) footsteps of Morris Louis and after visiting Kenneth Noland's studio in New York in 1966. Likely stemming from a mistaken reading of Louis' tilting technique as a folding one (reading the traces of the braces as those of folds), Sam Gilliam began to stain and rub rolls of raw canvas pouring paint over raw unstretched canvas to fold, roll and crumple it while still wet; he pressed the canvas onto itself, using it as a tool and generating (at times symmetric) patterns of blots and stains. He would then attach it on obliquely cut stretchers. The bias-cut edge of the stretcher was introduced by Gilliam to stand out from the wall (Binstock 2005). It

moves the frontal plane (slightly) away from the wall, towards the viewer. Besides the beveled edges, which do introduce a slope, the surfaces are flat. Though the frontal plane is somewhat protruding, and though the staining rather affirms the flatness of the canvas, the perceived pictorial space inside the paintings is a receding one; the folds from the making process—now flat and held in tension—generate effects of depth that mainly suggest a recessive space (like a sky or cosmic landscape). The (pictorial spaces of the) beveled-edge paintings do not appear flat precisely because their surfaces are.

Folds from the making process also produce effect in Tauba Auerbach's work. In 2009, Auerbach (born 1981) began developing techniques of folding and scrunching of fabric surfaces. For her *Folds* paintings, she sprays pigment over crumpled fabric from different angles, and with various colors, before unfolding and flattening its surface. The unfolded canvases are placed on a table, under heavy presses, letting gravity operate. Once the flattened canvas has been stretched, its off-stretcher manipulation leaves creases that give the viewer the impression that the surface is wrinkled yet it is absolutely flat. The canvas of the *Folds* bears witness to Auerbach's heavy handling, creating an ambiguity between a two-dimensional and three-dimensional surface—a trompe-l'oeil effect (Auerbach 2011). The sprayed *Folds* paintings evoke wrinkled sheets over a mattress. Traces of her handling in the stretched canvas also reveal the canvas's previously unstretched and malleable state which Auerbach references in other works like the *Weave* paintings. The *Weave* paintings are strips of unprimed canvas woven on stretchers. They also create a trompe l'oeil, oscillating perception of their surfaces between two and three dimensions (Fiske 2012). The *Weave* series state the woven nature of canvas painting and demonstrate the ability of a stretcher to make a soft, woven and open surface appear like a hard, uniform and full surface. In a sense, the *Weaves* reverse the trompe l'oeil effect of the *Folds*. The *Folds* present as soft and wrinkled surfaces (similar to that of a bed) despite the fact that they are thick and spray painted canvases, flat and held in tension; the *Weaves* appear to present a flat and hard surface that easily passes for that of a painting without any paint material to speak of (they are read as possibly a printed pattern or the image of a computer code), while they are in fact a soft and woven material that presents differences in relief and interstices.

### Final Remarks: The Potency of Stretching

When the canvas was detached from the easel and the stretcher during the process of painting, the relationship between painter and canvas—between artist and support—changed radically. Painters began moving around and across the extended plane/area that was the new topography of the canvas on the floor. It introduced an awareness of the body in painting—an aspect of Pollock's work that attracted attention in the early 1990s (Siegel 1999)—and awareness of the support and fundamental questions of reach. The new perpendicular and mixed stance of painters overlooking their supports also manifested in the manual handling of the canvas and its uses as the tool of a technique, rather than merely as a support to apply paint on. Canvas became a tool *with which* to paint.

Neither Louis, Pollock, Frankenthaler, nor Hantai ever exhibited their canvases without stretchers. Although they worked with unstretched canvas and can be seen on photographs surrounded by unstretched canvases in their studios, the canvases were not intended to be shown without having been strained on a stretcher. The artists did not present their works in this way. It appears that Pollock had not imagined this evolution as he stated on several occasions that he believed the evolution of painting was for it to exist directly on the wall (Krauss 1986; Karmel 1999); it seems that Pollock thought the canvas support would dissolve and he did not foresee (or witness, for that matter<sup>13</sup>) the exhibition of unstretched canvas.

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<sup>13</sup> Just like Morris Louis who died in 1962, Jackson Pollock died at a young age, in 1956.

The model of the stretched and primed canvas was so dominant at the time that, after the canvas had been removed from the easel and stretcher during the moment of painting in 1947, for many years it seemed inconceivable (or irrelevant?) for artists to exhibit their canvases without stretchers. The exhibiting of canvases without stretchers began in the early to late 1960s.<sup>14</sup> Sam Gilliam is likely the first to have shown unstretched and unframed canvas in North America, in 1968. Gilliam's work takes place in the shift between two states of the canvas—stretched and unstretched. The questions Sam Gilliam dabbles with in the beveled-edge series are explicit when he deploys similar surfaces in unstretched and sculptural *Drape* paintings that affirm their three-dimensionality like *Carousel* and *Idle Twist*. Through Gilliam's oeuvre, the viewer is made to understand that illusionism is directly related to the flatness of the support. What is on show is the potency of the stretching of the canvas. Though, simply put, modernity sought to do away with traditional illusionism and the traditional recessive space in painting, and did so (among other means) by affirming the flatness of the support, a missing link was expressed in Sam Gilliam's work (De Corte 2019). Not only does he show that flatness is prone to illusionism, displaying how easily stains can evoke recessive spaces like cosmic space or a landscape, for example. But, more importantly, Gilliam showed that (in)tense flatness is imperative for illusionism to occur—the first illusion being that a painting is *not* a piece of fabric on a wooden frame. That first illusion is installed with the stretcher and the primer: the canvas becomes a *subjectile*, a potential support for projection. Inversely, traces of absorption and unstretched displays of canvases counteract that illusion, reinforcing the perception of the fabric in the canvas.

It is no coincidence that across the aforementioned (early and current) uses of unstretched canvas in the painting process, allusions abound to fabrics and to the woven nature of the canvas painting support: the quilting loom that Pollock borrowed from his mother; Frankenthaler's weave and body print; the names of Morris Louis's soaked series; the omnipresence of raw, unpainted canvas in the paintings of this time, the weave of the canvas remaining visible throughout painted areas, too, etc. Without stretcher, canvas was visibly a fabric: a woven, fibrous, absorptive and malleable material that can be hyper sensitive to happenings and manipulations. It became apparent that a painting was, essentially, a piece of cloth that the stretcher and primer transformed into the space of painting. In *After Abstract Expressionism* Clement Greenberg declared that "a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one" (Greenberg 1962, 30). This assumption was challenged by artists such as Robert Ryman (Hudson 2009) and Sam Gilliam through their practices and exhibitions. The canvas unstretched and untacked became a subject for painters and a new potential state for painting.

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<sup>14</sup> First occurrences of the unstretched canvas in an exhibition context are uncertain, both in the United States and in Europe. Washington Color-Field painter Sam Gilliam is said to have been the first American artist to exhibit unstretched canvases as paintings in 1968 (Binstock 2005). Though some of Robert Ryman's small raw and unstretched canvases are dated to as early as 1961 and Ryman was already exploring the dynamics of stretching in the early 1960s (Bois 1993), he usually placed his untacked canvases inside handmade frames for exhibition. In Europe, the dates are comparable. French painter Albert Ayme claims he began painting unstretched raw cotton canvas aimed to be presented as such in 1962, with *Le dialogue sans fin*. But it is unclear when it was first exhibited. Starting in the early 1960s, Ayme painted large mural sheets of unstretched canvas four years before Claude Viallat adopted this innovation (Manuel 1992). Claude Viallat of the French group Supports/Surfaces began exploring the possibilities of the support and the stretcher, from 1966 onwards and were among the firsts to exhibit unstretched canvases.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Hannah De Corte:** Researcher in Art and Sciences, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium