



**Barbara von Bechtolsheim**

## **Creative Couples**

### **Iconic Artists and Their Relationships**

With illustrations

(Original German title: Paare.

Von Beziehungskünstlern und ihrer Liebe)

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### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller, Yoko Ono and John Lennon, Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan, Susan Sontag and Annie Leibowitz, John Cage and Merce Cunningham...

Barbara von Bechtolsheim introduces twenty couples from the worlds of music, art and literature and talks about how creativity inspires relationships and how love in turn inspires artistic creation. The lives of many of these couples are inextricably linked. What does their day-to-day life look like, how do they deal with rivalry and stress and loss? How do they keep their love and passion alive? For these artist couples, not everything is perfect – but that is not the point. It is openness and sensitivity, steadfastness and the willingness to try new things in art and in love that inspires them.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Barbara von Bechtolsheim studied Literature, Philosophy and Psychology in Munich and Stanford. She teaches Literature and Cultural Studies at various universities and researches the creativity of couples. As a literary translator, she acts as intermediary between American and German culture in many different ways.

## SUMMARY

Creative couples seem to square the circle: they live in a lasting relationship while they are pre-occupied with their works of art. Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes are among the famous couples. For some of them it ended in disaster, but the focus of this book is on the enriching and nurturing aspects of the respective relationships. How were they able to balance creativity and a close relationship? For more than ten years I have tried to walk in their shoes, I have explored the lives and work of German and American artists, writers, musicians, I have read their poetry, prose, and autobiographical documents, I went to their hometowns, attended concerts, and went to exhibitions. I have lived and suffered with all of them, I have been enthusiastic about all of them; plus, I have collected their lessons for life. Off and on I saw them in my mind's eye at a large artists' party, a festive gathering where they would meet and exchange their memories and experiences. And I tried to imagine that I might be a guest at that event and could ask them about the lessons to learn about how to grow in a creative relationship and how to grow as an artist. How did the creative process affect the relationship? How did they deal with competition and fame, with communication and the burden of day-to-day life, with stress and loss? The result of my encounters with literature and paintings and music, with stories and documents can be summarized with the word LOVE.

Some of the artists knew each other and stayed in touch, such as Ilse Aichinger and Günter Eich who were friends with Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan. Others had similar life experiences, such as the Alberses and Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya as well as Mascha Kaléko and Chemjo Vinaver; the three couples had to leave Germany during the 30s and emigrated to the United States. Regardless of how long they were a couple – two years like Dylan and Baez or fifty years like Anni and Josef Albers – they went through good times and difficult times, none of the relationships was perfect, and they all invested in the relationship – through conversation and attention, through journals and letters, through their works of art, through leisure time and through therapy.

Nowadays, love life is challenging since alternatives to our current relationship are always available. New contenders show up on business trips, at work, on websites, and in virtual realities, and they seem to be all the more attractive than our partners since we have not spent enough time with them. The relationships of the creative couples who are introduced in this book were, at least for the given times, enriching and enjoyable, regardless of their field and

their culture, and they were creative in their art as well as in their relationship. As a result, some of the works of art or the literary texts resonated with each other.

Sociologists Niklas Luhmann and Eva Illouz have tried to explain the background and context of relationships with their multiple chances and risks. Illouz uses literature as her resource since, as she states, “literary texts are codified cultural assumptions”<sup>1</sup> and as readers we learn to understand love and its manifestations better. In particular, she raises the question why love tends to hurt; she even goes a step further to assume that pain and suffering are a paradoxical precondition of every relationship since efficiency and ambition on the one hand and passion on the other are mutually exclusive. They represent contradictory inner dimensions which operate in real life or in the intimacy of a love relationship. Our societies expect discipline, focus, competition, determination, while the relationship asks for never ending empathy, admiration, and communication. We are busy with all sorts of things and do not have the time to pay attention to each other and to care which, of course, hurts. Of course, artists have to deal with these contractions and stresses like all of us and sometimes do so through their works of art. Thus, it makes sense to find out how they are able to do that.

However, Luhmann thinks that the paradox has to do with our idea of love: on the one hand we are fortunate to be liberated from earlier social norms and expectations, but on the other we struggle with the challenges within the relationship. In other words, both partners have to use their individual resources to support the relationship since external values or norms are no longer there to rely on. Compared with the past the freedom of today’s relationships is not only a favour of the historical moment, rather it is a tremendous challenge since the basis and stability of a relationship are no longer guaranteed by family, marriage, status, or financial needs. Instead, the partners themselves have to constitute and negotiate the relationship over and over again.<sup>2</sup> Thus, today’s concept of love is a gift of our liberated society as well as the curse of individualized resources.

Creative couples are not exempt from those challenges, to the contrary. Separation, depression, and suicide were part of many stories so that one might wonder what the lesson to be learned is. However, all of them were closely connected in their love relationship, their personal growth and creativity were supported, and they could thrive within the relationship – regardless of other constraints. For example, Lotte Lenya and Kurt Weill lived an incredibly happy and

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Illouz, *Warum Liebe weh tut (Why Love Hurts)*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011. p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion (Love as Passion)*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1982. p. 198.

creative relationship even if they had agreed on an open marriage which they did not consider as a challenge of their love relationship. Likewise, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes who struggled to combine excellency as writers with a traditional family lifestyle, successfully so for a few years. Marina Abramovic and Ulay as well as Yoko Ono and John Lennon focussed their artistic work on the relationship and therefore experienced the connection in the most immediate and deep way – and consequently provoked serious and controversial discussions about all aspects of love and went through rough times themselves.

Creative couples often connect through their art, and if we study autobiographical texts as well as works of art we can better understand the polarities of intimacy versus distance, creativity versus crisis, zeitgeist versus continuity. The selection of creative couples comprises married couples as well as lovers in a temporary relationship; all of them documented their creative connection one way or the other in their respective works of art. Thus, a fictional space of creative exchange opens up representing the conditions of artistic productivity of the 20th century. Each of these relationships was characterized from the very beginning by hypersensitivity and also at times by a depressive disposition of one partner, and both of these characteristics contributed to the ups and downs of the creative process and of the relationship. How did the partners express their experience of the relationship through literary texts, works of art, or in letters and journals? In what ways did the creative work have an impact on the love relationship? How could the partners avoid gender stereotypes? And if not, in what way did gender stereotypes shape the writing and the works of art?

The creative relationship was not always symmetrical or equal which might have to do with the male versus female dynamics or the gender roles, but even more so with the individual artists longing to create their unique work of art. Renate Berger demonstrates the various types of structures which seem to underlie artist couples. She explains that for example during the years after World Wars I and II value systems broke down and gender roles in the work force were changing; in this context questions of art and life, passion and competition were redefined in the constellation of the artist couple.<sup>3</sup> We might extrapolate this observation and use it for today's relationships where rivalry and intimacy, relationship and professional standing have to be redefined so that our situation is somewhat similar to those of artists decades ago.

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<sup>3</sup> Renate Berger (ed.), *Liebe macht Kunst, Cologne et. al: Böhlau*. p. 30.

But what about the genius in art? Isn't the artist the individual per se? How can a couple be considered as a creative unit? And how does art contribute to the for Self? Self-psychology assumes that the search for self is relational from the very beginning; as we mature the relationship with a creative and sensitive other takes on that role of defining oneself. However, we have to consider additional relationships the creative couple experiences: the relationship with one's own work of art which reflects and confirms the identity.

There were cultural differences which had to be bridged in most relationships represented in this book. Some of the artists had to leave Germany and started a life in the new world, or the backgrounds of the Southern and Northern States clashed. Even more remarkable is the Christian-Jewish border the majority of the couples crossed more or less consciously. Or the partners came from different social backgrounds. Everyone brings a mental programming to the relationship which shapes the individuals while they take their values, expectations, and behaviour for granted. The scope of this intercultural impact enriches and yet challenges the relationship and, of course, is part of the fascinating stories to tell. So the main question remains: how did the creative couples negotiate their expectations of the relationship and of their partner and what specifically can we learn from the art of relationship without being professional artists? There are ample guides for relationship on the market and when we start reading them or decide to see a couples' therapist it is most often too late. Thus, creative couples – through their works of art and their autobiographical documents – provide us with associations, inner images, and inspiration. These life lessons can support every couple to thrive in their love relationship. However, this book is not about advice or answers. Rather it will raise questions and help knowing more about oneself and being more aware of our partner.

The twenty couples assembled in this book exemplify how two creative individuals mirror each other in their search for unique artistic expression. The partners evaluate whether the work of art is meaningful, whether it offers innovative perspectives and expressions. All of them encouraged each other's artistic ideas and thereby cultivated a joint way of life.

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*Excerpt from:*

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Joint Projects**

#### **Joan Baez and Bob Dylan**

They were the most prominent couple at the legendary peace march in 1963, queen and king of the folk scene – their voices matching and their beliefs about music and art complementing each other, she the singer, he the poet, and both of them existentially involved in the radical changes of the 60s, fighting for human rights, for peace and freedom, and for a new sense of responsibility. This was the common denominator on which their creative and emotional power was based and which was the reason for their mutual fascination – despite the turbulences of the relationship. They both performed in the coffee houses where the response of their musician colleagues measured the success. Their unconditional belief in political involvement through music connected these extremely independent individuals – and was ultimately the essence of their love. For both of them the folk scene with its authenticity and will to make a difference was an ideal context – and, paradoxically, they made sure their image met that standard. Bob Dylan wrote the lyrics which corresponded with Joan Baez' political and human rights agenda. She admired his genius, supported his first performances, and gave structure to his life. His prolific ideas inspired her musical and political goals – and gave her ambition a certain lightness and at times a sense of humour. For two years they were in love and created an abundance of songs together until the relationship fell apart.

Joan Baez, born in Staten Island, New York in 1941, grew up in a family of intellectuals with a Mexican-Scottish background. The middle of three sisters she admired her parents, in particular her father, who was a physicist and refused to work for the defence industry. Instead, he held freelance positions as a scholar world-wide so that the family moved a lot, Bagdad, Palo Alto, Boston, and it was not easy for her as a girl to belong anywhere. During her high school years, they lived in Palo Alto which turned out to be an utterly inspiring and liberating environment for her in terms of academia and art. In 1954, she attended an event with Pete Seeger, the radical singer song writer who had quite an impact on the American folk scene and now impressed Joan so that she picked up the guitar. Two years later she heard Martin Luther King who gave a talk on human rights

and non-violence. Both of these events gave her direction: she was determined to use folk songs for political involvement. Her family moved to Boston when she was seventeen, and she started her education at Boston university even if her actual learning happened in the coffee houses where the diverse and innovative American folk scene thrived. Baez had her first performance at Club 47 in Cambridge followed by her legendary debut in front of a huge audience at the Newport Festival in 1960. She was still self-conscious, but she did not let her terrible stage fright get in her way. The following November, she had a first concert in New York and her first album was released – to great acclaim. Her natural talent and ambition as well as her authenticity and honesty fascinated the audiences. Her girlish appearance was a model of a new femininity.

Bob Dylan's name was a persona, Robert Allen Zimmerman was a master of self-stylization, he was secretive about his family background and liked telling the most mysterious stories about his family background – growing up in New Mexico where he learned Cowboy songs, motorcycle races, performances at fairs at age 13. As a matter of fact, he was born in 1941 just like Baez and grew up in a Jewish middle-class family in Minnesota. Tuned to independence and protest as a teenager, he loved writing poetry and listening to music and enjoyed playing the guitar. After graduation he enrolled at the university, but he did not have time to attend seminars since he was too busy finding music teachers and inspiration in the clubs and coffeehouses, on radio and TV. One day, he saw Joan Baez in a New York TV-show and was fascinated by her aura and her divine voice.

He collected albums, sometimes they miraculously disappeared from the store and ended up on his record player. Gradually, he cultivated a bohemian style of second-hand clothes and a somewhat anarchistic attitude, and in his mind his mission evolved: to describe the world around him with his lyrics and poetry – and to make it a better place. Just like for Joan Baez the performance space for his first repertoire of folk songs were the coffeehouses, in his case the *Scholar* in Minnesota. He quit the university in order to be a musician and to go beyond rock 'n' roll, country and jazz. He was going to create a new kind of music: folk with a meaningful message. Very soon he left for New York and tried to find likeminded musicians. He stayed with friends and colleagues, a restless troubadour who was focussed on composing and singing his songs. His main topic was human rights, and whenever he happened to hear about violations of human rights, he would take a stance.



Early on, both Dylan and Baez were active on behalf of freedom and justice and unconditionally agreed on this premise. He was curious about Joan Baez and her success. In April 1961 he performed at Gerdes Folk City in New York alongside with other folk singers like Joan. The boyish, cute guy who would perform his own songs in such a provocative way caught her eye. After the event he followed the Baez sisters to sing a kind of *minnelied* for Joan on her guitar – and to flirt with her younger sister Mimi. Both sisters were singers and with their olive complexion and long black hair they used to attract much attention – Bob was easily smitten by beauty even if he lived in a relationship. That evening Joan sent her little sister to the hotel so that she could spend time with Bob.

Both of them represented the human rights and student movement, their allure and their way of life, but first and foremost their music stood for independence, freedom, and protest. In turn, she thought Bob was unusual and exciting, and she bought him decent clothes, a white shirt and a black jacket so that he would take himself more seriously. And vice versa, he immediately had a crush on her. In retrospect, she thought they were like twins of the counterculture who lived a myth, an idea of freedom and non-violence. Both of them put freedom on their agenda, and they were determined to live it so that they respected each other's freedom. As a result, as sensitive and complicated as they were, this mutual respect was characteristic of the relationship.

Meanwhile, Dylan wrote his songs, such as “A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall” which turned out to be the first political song for Joan Baez and initiated her personal style, gradually getting away from the traditional English and Irish songs. This particular song was indicative of their musical and aesthetic beliefs, almost like a manifesto for him as a song writer and poet and for her as a politically involved musician. Earlier she had asked him to join her on stage, partially because he seemed so insecure and young – even though, like most people she did not have a clue what a great genius he was. On the other hand, he gave her career a clear direction: protest songs rather than traditional folk music. At the Monterey Folk Festival in May 1963, they met again. It was Dylan's premiere on the West Coast while Baez was welcome by an audience of some 10,000 fans who knew what to expect. On this occasion she performed his songs and introduced him, later they performed “With God on Our Side”<sup>4</sup> as a duet which would ultimately be the core of their artistic collaboration. The song raises the question why ethics and suffering no longer matter in war times or during historical crises. How is it possible that people refer to God with a

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<sup>4</sup> Bob Dylan, “With God on Our Side”, in: *Lyrics*, p. 177.

quiet conscience? Both of them were socialized with those paradoxes of post-World War II morals, and now they called this hypocrisy into question. The song does not explicitly mention the Vietnam war as one of the historical events, but it seems obvious that they felt a moral obligation to protest against this particular war. The song also challenges their own personal ethics and grants their being part of this web of lies – which makes it so authentic and so thought provoking.

From Monterey they drove to the Carmel highlands where Baez had bought a house in order to get away from the commercial buzz which was made around her on the East Coast. Here, close to the Carmel Bay and the Pacific Ocean with its bright light she could walk barefoot which was a metaphor for a way of life that suited her, in this solitude she was able to find herself. Now they were a couple and lived in this retreat, both devoted to their art: he hammered his lyrics and prose into the typewriter and played the songs on the piano which Joan had bought for him; she rehearsed the songs, and, of course, they sang together. Her letters home document that the love birds thoroughly enjoyed this life. At times, they would go on a ride along the Pacific coast or meet with their friends and family. Joan's sister Mimi was married with Richard Farina, a musician and poet, and since the couple lived in the neighbourhood there was a circle of friends who got together to play music, to write, to talk, and to laugh.

In July they were on stage as a couple at the Newport Folk Festival singing “With God on Our Side” – which both of them would include in their albums. Newport 1963: every well-known folksinger of this generation was there, Pete Seeger and Judy Collins, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and for Joan and Bob it was the absolute peak experience.<sup>5</sup> After the festival, Bob was invited by his agent Albert Grossman to see him in Woodstock, and Joan joined him there. When he was not preoccupied with his continuous flow of poetic ideas, they drove around on his motorcycle, watched movies, and went swimming. Again: friendship, socializing, and times off. On August 28th, 1963 they sang “We Shall Overcome” at Lincoln Memorial turning the old gospel song into the hymn of the peace and human rights movement. They locked eyes so that they did not have to look at the 250,000 people in the audience. Definitely a moment when they felt closer than ever, and the atmosphere contributed to that feeling: Martin Luther King gave his speech “I have a Dream” which millions of people followed on television.

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway*, p.136.

Two years later, Dylan invited Baez to join him on a tour through England, she flew over to Europe, but when she arrived it turned out that he was no longer interested. She was able to arrange a concert for herself in London, but her heart was broken: two years of music and political involvement with Bobby were over. And yet, her mission and direction were clear, she would stand up for human rights and get involved wherever protest was needed, not only at the Freedom March in Washington. She raised her voice during the student movement in Berkeley and against the wars in Vietnam, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Iraq, she protested against Pinochet in Chile and for Vaclav Havel's Solidarność in former Yugoslavia. She too had a dream and has never stopped living it. Her songs have always reflected her involvement. Likewise, Dylan had an impact on song poetry and changed cultural history with his lyrics like nobody else – which is why he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2016. With his interest in folk culture and his restless spirit, with his resistance and struggle for a peaceful world and his shocking imagery he was the perfect match for Joan Baez, at least in the good times of their cooperation. In 1966, he abruptly changed his mind about the mutual inspiration and about Joan. He no longer remembered how fascinated he had been with the foundation of the relationship. All of a sudden, the political involvement through music no longer mattered to him. Obviously, he needed to reduce the relationship to a platonic one as if there had been no love affair which so enchanted the creative collaboration. The need to refrain from relationships must have been stronger. But that was more or less true for both of them.

In 1968, they were no longer a couple, and yet she produced the album “Any Day Now. Songs of Bob Dylan”. That way she continued the creative relationship even though they no longer performed as a duo or with his team. His artistic inspiration still counted for her until 1975 when she wrote the nostalgic song “Diamonds and Rust” in commemoration of their time together, it was their musical language and possibly the most obvious and lasting document of this happy and yet challenging relationship.

They performed again at the *Rolling Thunder Revue Tour*; he had invited her, and she happily agreed. Those creative crazy weeks were a revival of the relationship, in a different way though. Joan also had acting talent, she dressed up as Dylan, probably enjoying how she could explore her former partner's personality in a playful way. There was a lot of strange role playing during the whole tour, but they made great music and had a lot of fun. However, the concerts and the film production would soon be over without any consequences. Despite repeated plans for tours, they continued to have constant fights

caused by their need for admiration – she felt he was taking advantage of her, he needed independence and innovation more than anything else. Decades after their separation they still talked about each other in the most favourable way. Maybe the way in which the broken pieces fell reflected the quality of the relationship.

One might wonder why they broke up. She was first and foremost involved with non-violence and freedom, for him poetry and music came first. Thus, they complemented each other. But maybe she expected things of him that did not match his life or his personality. Maybe he rejected a partner who was too similar or on eye level. They both found company and response with their musicians and through their audiences, while in the long run an intimate relationship such as theirs might have felt too close. Plus, their artistic and political goals provided a sense of purpose which oftentimes marriage and family give. This might be the reason why both Baez and Dylan were in and out of relationships – and why Baez' marriage with the pacifist and author David Harris lasted only five years.

*Translated by the author*

*Excerpt from:*

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Risks and Side Effects**

#### **Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock**

The sophisticated artist and the spontaneous innovator brought different social expectations to their relationship and marriage. She was a self-confident, assertive person while he was self-conscious and at times lost himself in aggression or depression. It was self-evident that she would take the lead in a joint living arrangement – which she did. However, she set her art aside and he would soon become the more prominent artist. Lee Krasner, upbeat and optimistic, knew very well that a relationship with the insecure, provocative Jackson Pollock would be a challenge. She was aware of his alcoholism – and he was not secretive about it. Early on, she noticed that he was a genius whose art came from his core being, an art that was completely unprecedented. She admired his work, she was supportive, and she found ways to deal with his alcoholism, and she never put pressure on him. Patience, reliability, consistency, those were the characteristics of the relationship for the most part. Lee connected Jackson with the New York art scene, in particular with Peggy Guggenheim who contracted him, later she initiated their move to the countryside so that he could focus more on his art and would drink less. On the other hand, he believed in her as an artist, but he did not have a problem with her leaving her creative work behind so she could promote his career. At least, she always kept working as an artist and finding new ways of expression. After his death she took care of his estate and simultaneously worked on colourful huge formats, representing the new American Expressionism just like Jackson Pollock did.

The way they met was indicative of their relationship and how it would unfold: Krasner had received an invitation by the influential art dealer John Graham to participate in a show on American and French Art which he was going to exhibit at the New York gallery McMillen. European artists such as Picasso, Braque, Matisse, de Chirico, and Modigliani were juxtaposed with contemporary American art, or rather, with Abstract Expressionists of the New York School. Graham was motivated by the prejudice that the United States did not have a culture of its own which his show was going to undo. Thus, Lee Krasner was among the selected Americans in the exhibition along with the more

well-known Stuart Davis, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky plus Jackson Pollock whom she had not heard of. In November 1941, Lee, aged 33, went to see him in his studio, he lived around the corner of her house. He asked her to come in, and she was overwhelmed by the expressive, emotional works of art she saw – but also by this shy, introverted man. She wondered how such an admirable artist could live nearby without her knowing about him. Above all, his approach to art seemed so different. Since cubism had given her direction she was impressed with the immediacy and uniqueness of Pollock's paintings. Later she confessed that it had taken her years to get over this impression. While she looked at his paintings it occurred to her that she had danced with him at an artist party four years ago – and he had constantly stepped on her feet. Self-confident Lee was an excellent communicator so that they started a nice conversation and she invited him to visit her. It took three weeks until he finally came to her studio where he watched her paintings with great attention and appreciation. Very soon, the two artists were lovers embarking on a life filled with love, art, creativity, and craziness.

The Krassners were Jewish immigrants from Odessa and made a living for their five children with a small fish and fruit market in Brooklyn. Lee's mother was a talented businesswoman, unlike her father who was a sensitive intellectual, interested in literature, philosophy and Jewish tradition. Lee was born in 1908 into this industrious ambition which she disliked early on. She had set her mind on becoming an artist and on attending Washington Irving School, the only school in New York where they offered art classes for girls. Shaped by the immigrants' experience of her family she was a decisive teenager who would not be discouraged by rejections or disappointments – just like later on when Jackson's ups and downs did not discourage her. When she was seventeen, she started a three-year program at the Women's Art School of Cooper Union at the National Academy of Design while she enjoyed the Metropolitan Museum as much as she could. This is when she decided to drop her first name Lena – Lee sounded modern and androgynous. Plus, she simplified the spelling of her last name. Both of these changes were a response to her parents' unwillingness to adjust to the new world. At the National Academy of Design she studied the classics – and ultimately found this tradition conventional and restrictive. Despite these doubts she got a degree as a teacher of drawing even if she did not envision herself as an instructor. Now she was free to learn in a more independent way, to exchange her ideas with other artists, and to experiment with her style. She supported herself by working as a cocktail waitress and from time to time as a model.

Jackson Pollock, four years younger than Lee, was born in Cody, Wyoming, as the youngest of five brothers. His father did his best at various jobs, he bought a farm in Arizona, and later one in California, but his efforts failed multiple times so that he became more and more disillusioned and started drinking. His mother took care of the family, always coming up with new ideas for the future – eight different homes during Jackson's first sixteen years. Finally, his father left the family, provided financial support, and stayed in touch through irregular family visits. Not a stable family, neither in emotional nor in economic terms. His mother ruled over her five boys – loving attention was not her way. When she came to visit the young couple in New York, Lee had to pick Jackson up in the hospital where he had ended up after a drinking binge so that they could all attend the perfect dinner Stella Pollock prepared. The mother-son relationship was definitely unresolved. Jackson found solidarity with two of his brothers who also had ambitions in the arts. Just like Lee he decided as a teenager that he wanted to become an artist of some sorts. At age sixteen he was expelled from school because he was too outspoken, so he started studying art. In particular, he was inspired by the Mexican muralists, but also by Krishnamurti, an Indian spiritual leader who resided in Ojai in Southern California. Just like his older brother Charles Jackson took on the role of a bohemian and future artist. The unsteady childhood, the lack of a father, and his escape into rebellion led to nervous breakdowns and alcoholism which, of course, interfered with the pursuit of his art work. Nevertheless, he moved to New York where his brothers Charles and Sanford lived and began to study at the Art Students League. He admired his teacher Thomas Benton so that he stayed for five semesters until he got tired of Benton's rather traditional ideas of construction, balance, and rhythm. Instead, Jackson was fascinated by mythology, by the unconscious mind, and shamanism.

Those were the 30s, the Great Depression had affected American industry, unemployment was at twenty-five percent, and young artists were not very well-off. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt's government responded with the New Deal and started programs to support thousands of artists, a concept which was also supposed to strengthen democracy. The respective income was rather modest, but Krasner and Pollock both applied. Krasner was assigned to the painter Max Spivak who at the time created decoration for children's hospitals. Pollock's job was to work on public buildings, to design lipsticks and ties, and for a while he was the janitor and built frames at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, later to become the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In both

cases, they had ample independent time to work on their own art. Krasner started working with Hans Hofmann, an artist and art historian who had recently immigrated from Germany. She discussed abstract art with him and started working in that style. First and foremost, she was enthusiastic about the sense of innovation and modernity including equal opportunities for women artists and financial independence for every artist, regardless of gender. As opposed to Pollock she was very involved and attended political meetings and events. If the police arrested the activists she did not mind. Pollock was rather apolitical and more interested in new artistic experiments and ideas. Thus, the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, a colleague of Diego Rivera, inspired him to use industrial and enamel colours or to spray colour onto the canvas. Also, passion and suffering were an integral part of Pollock's creative process while Krasner was more focused on formal considerations. Krasner was impressed with the power and obvious emotional content of his work whereas she evaluated her work by comparison with Matisse and Mondrian. In that regard, they were very different in their attitudes, and yet they committed themselves to being a couple: he was the genius with a difficult psychological disposition, and she was "Pollock's girl". At the time, it was challenging for a woman to have a successful artist's career; even if she was self-confident, the culture was not yet supportive of women in the arts. As a result, she might have projected her own ambitions onto Pollock and did the best she could to support his talent and to pave the way. Thus, rivalry was not an issue for them. Comparing early self-portraits of both artists highlights this difference in self-perception or self-knowledge: in the middle of a bright outdoor scenery, she looks at us – and at herself in the mirror – with pride, an artist who has a clear mission, whereas his face is painted in dark colours, somewhat mysterious, in search of this being behind a mask. She shows the woman painter in her environment which is her world as opposed to the narrow display of his features, shedding orange light on the face from the side. Very different partners who were aware of their differences.

Krasner moved into Pollock's apartment in Greenwich Village which he had shared with his brother Sandy and family before Sandy had to move for work. They made sure that both of them had an individual studio where they respected each other's privacy before they would pay each other a visit and discuss their work. The stability of such an everyday life turned out to be excellent working conditions – first and foremost for Pollock. They both found new approaches in their art and felt enriched by the dialogue. She was not in search of her own style, rather she considered change as her "style". His paintings



documented passionate emotions and brought his unconscious to light – mysterious and as such indicative of his personality. He lived in his own emotional chaos which he tried to structure through painting. Besides, alcohol as well as psychotherapy and medication were efforts to find a way out of the darkness. Since he was not a verbal person, he brought his drawings to the therapy sessions, and since his early therapists were in favour of C. G. Jung, he learned a lot about symbols as expression of the individual as well as the collective unconscious; these learning experiences inspired his art. As far as his therapy was concerned, he was not so much expecting help, instead, he was primarily eager to be taken care of so that he was free and could devote himself to painting. Basically, Krasner took on that job. She had already been part of the art scene during the 30s and had a network of artists and gallerists to whom she introduced Pollock. An important figure in the New York scene was Peggy Guggenheim, at the time married to Max Ernst and an art collector and patron. In October 1942, she opened her gallery Art of This Century where her Spring Salon for Young Artists in May 1943 was meant to support young American artists. She thoroughly disliked *Stenographic Figure* which Pollock had submitted, but Piet Mondrian and James J. Sweeney of the Museum of Modern Art were excited about it so that she changed her mind and accepted his painting for the Spring Salon. Pollock and Krasner shared this success with his mother Stella Pollock. Jackson: “I have been showing some of my paintings – and have been offered a one-man show at the Art of this Century in November.” And Lee in another letter: “As he told you, Peggy Guggenheim came up to see his work – She bought a drawing and is giving him a one-man show in November – She is really very excited about his work, in fact she said one of the large canvases was the most beautiful painting done in America. She wants to handle his work and can do a lot for him.”<sup>6</sup> Which she did: very soon she contracted him for her gallery. From the family correspondence we may conclude that Lee was as proud as he was and they wanted his mother to acknowledge his success – which might have been a step in the direction of independence from his family helping him to get over his self-doubts and feelings of inferiority.

Guggenheim commissioned the artist to create a huge mural for her apartment. It was supposed to be painted on canvas so that she could take it along whenever she moved. The canvas was 95 x 237 inches and as such too large for their apartment where Pollock

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson Pollock (New York) to Stella Pollock (Iowa) 1943, and Lee Krasner (New York) to Stella Pollock, 1943, no date, *American Letters*, p. 185.

wanted to work on it. Thus, Krasner and Pollock tore down a wall and carried the debris downstairs at night so that the owner would not notice. Now there was space enough for the painting. However, nothing happened day in and day out. Apparently, Pollock was overwhelmed or felt under pressure by the dimensions of the project. Krasner was aware of it but did not put any pressure on him. And then, one day, he came up with the core idea and worked on it nonstop until *Mural* was completed. Obviously, over a certain period of time for meditation the creative process crystallized. Krasner was wise enough not to interrupt him. Colours, rhythm, movement, energy, ecstasy – Guggenheim was fascinated. While Pollock was the rising star Krasner was no longer recognized as an artist, rather people envied her for being so close to Pollock – but how she had to confront and mitigate his mood swings including his feelings of inadequacy and his alcohol abuse was nothing to be envied. Both Lee and Jackson knew that his illness endangered their relationship as well as their art. After a tremendously enjoyable summer vacation with friends on Long Island Krasner suggested that they move to this area. She thought life near the ocean might be healing and inspiring for Jackson and keep him from drinking. However, he liked the city and refused, but a few days after they returned to New York he brought it up again – he was going to give it a try. So they found an old farm house in Springs, 100 miles away from New York City which they eventually bought with a down payment that was a loan from Peggy Guggenheim. Despite the rivalry between the two Jewish women, Lee had convinced Peggy that the move was beneficial for Jackson and his art. Very soon, he enjoyed Springs with its scenery which reminded him of his upbringing in California. Before they moved Krasner insisted that they legitimize their relationship of three years. Maybe it had to do with her father who had recently deceased. Or it was a matter of social recognition which was a criterion during the 40s. Possibly, marrying out was an act of rebellion against her family. Either way, she gave him an ultimatum: either they got married or they would separate. Pollock agreed to get married, but insisted on a church wedding, he preferred a ritual over going to City Hall. It was up to Lee to find a minister who was willing to marry a mixed couple. Eventually, on October 25th, 1945 they held the ceremony at Marble Collegiate Church. In Springs the newlyweds went through challenging times: they had to get rid of all the stuff the former owner had left behind, layers of old wallpaper, furniture, gardening tools, while there was no toilette in the building, coal was rationed, at night it was freezing since they had moved into their new home in November 1945. They tore down walls so that the small rooms downstairs were

turned into a large living room where they could welcome guests, they painted the walls in plain white and decorated the house. Since they could not afford a handyman, they had to take care of everything. The lawn around the building had to be cut, they bought a goat to assist with that. Most of the time they got around on their bicycle before they could afford a car in 1948, the famous Model A, which made their shopping trips easier. Creating their living space must have been beneficial for the relationship and for their art – primarily for Pollock's art. He had scheduled a solo exhibition for April of the following year which was important to him since he insisted that he support the family by selling his works of art. Thus, he used one of the upstairs rooms as his studio while Krasner found a corner in the living room where the light was not ideal. During the next summer they rebuilt the barn into a studio for him which was spacious enough for larger formats. Lee moved into the upstairs room, the second one was going to be a guest room since they expected their friends, artists and writers from New York, to visit. Regardless of the different working conditions they respected each other's art. In general, he would start working in the afternoon, however, there was no electric light and no heating in the barn. She worked in the mornings while he was still asleep or trying to wake up with coffee and cigarettes. But they respected each other with their different rhythms. Specifically, they had agreed that they would only visit each other in their studio upon invitation. She was usually surprised how much he accomplished within so little time. A few words were enough to express their approval: "It works", or else "It doesn't work." They did not exchange their ideas about art, the paintings spoke for themselves.

At times, Lee and Jackson would sit on their porch and look at the landscape. Maybe they talked about the art scene. Or they turned to the simple things. She was a great cook, he liked to bake apple pie or bread. They also shared the yard work, weeding, watering, cutting the grass. Often the house was filled with jazz, which Jackson loved – she did not, but she put up with it. Also, they went for long walks along the beach and through the dunes where they found things that inspired them in their art. During this time, Krasner painted her *Little Images*, small all-overs with layers of paint. Maybe she was inspired by Pollock when she put the canvas on the floor or on the table so that she could drip the colour on or put it on with a knife, very much in control, just like Pollock who was very conscious of the creative process even if the paintings looked spontaneous. They put some of the *Little Images* on the walls in the house with their hieroglyphs reminding Lee of the Hebrew writing of her childhood which she never really understood. Gradually, her

creativity came back: she collected shells and stones which she assembled with glass pieces from their earlier WPS projects onto two old wheels. Jackson used concrete to glue the pieces on, a welder attached legs so that they had two exceptionally beautiful tables at the centre of their home. There is a photograph from the spring of 1949 that shows Lee and Jackson in conversation with their friends around a table. In the new studio as well as outdoors Pollock had plenty of space to experiment, his creativity was abundant. Dripping and pouring became his techniques which expressed his feelings in a very immediate way without representing anything. The canvas covered the floor of the studio or was kept in place with wooden boards outdoors so that Pollock had a very physical connection with his work-in-progress, sometimes it was a painful process as he became part of the work of art, when he stepped on it or walked around it, working from above. This technique reminded him of the Native American sand painters he had admired as a young man. He no longer used a brush, instead he worked with knife, spatula, trowel to mix the sand, glass, or other materials into the thick paint – acrylic and car paint – which he would apply to the canvas. The dimensions increased – and so did the recognition in the art world. In August 1948 *Life* published an extensive portrait about Pollock, the media accolade so to speak, but costly for the artist and for his wife. Here is how Lee remembered this additional stress: “As Jackson’s fame grew, he became more and more tortured ... My help, assistance, and encouragement seemed insufficient. His feelings towards me became somewhat ambiguous.”<sup>7</sup>

No longer being recognized as an artist must have been unsettling for Krasner. Also, she used to review her older works to see whether they still met her aesthetic standard. Many of her paintings which are depicted on photographs no longer exist so that we may assume she either discarded them or used them for new collages. The sense of freedom in their new home inspired Lee to look for new techniques and to throw out older paintings. She cut with scissors or knives what she did not like, likewise she recycled works Pollock had dismissed and used those bits and pieces for collages. In a sense, he had lived on her energy for years, now she used some of his paintings thereby creating joint works of art – which were proof of their equal standing as artists even if she never needed or intended such evidence. During their early years in Springs both partners painted in a similar general style, bright colour, movement, white lines emerging from dark foreground and background instead of the earlier flat enclosed figures. For example, soon after their move

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<sup>7</sup> quoted from: Gail Levin, *Lee Krasner*, p. 269.

they created paintings that seem to be inspired by the bright light near the ocean, e.g. Pollock's *Shimmering Substance* (1946) and Krasner's *Noon* (1947) in similar formats, both bright yellow as the predominant colour, movement, shining effects. The two paintings seem to be in dialogue with each other or to mirror each other. Similarly, Krasner's *Shattered Light* and Pollock's *White Light*. Both paintings created in 1956 seem to reflect the bright light of the Atlantic and prove how their style is different and yet how the artists pursue similar topics and goals. Krasner's collage is dominated by pale umber colours, the way she organizes the pieces of paper carefully connected by pencil and crayon create movement and energy of the light. In between, red and yellow patches add shimmer and brightness. The title *Shattered Light* might refer to the question how colours break out of white light and/or how they represent emotions; and how conflicting emotions are part of a unique whole. By contrast, Pollock adds the white lines onto the other colours, almost like a third dimension swinging over the coloured ground, energetic elements which cross and ultimately dominate darkness. Both paintings lack an obvious centre, the eyes swing back and forth and create all sorts of structures depending on how we look. Both artists add yellow and orange and some cobalt blue light effects to their painting, as opposed to Krasner's brown and Pollock's contrast of black and white. Their techniques are very different: Krasner assembling pieces of their earlier works into this new body of art, Pollock using the brush, letting the structure of the canvas shine through, and organizing colours and lines into a dancelike play. At least, the works of art were in communication.

Pollock wanted to start a family with her, but she declined, she wanted the two of them to devote themselves to their art. Plus, she felt that with Pollock at her side she already had to bear enough responsibility. However, Jackson's alcoholism continued to be a problem, more and more so for both of them. Jackson was fully aware of how much it was a burden on Lee. When she mentioned how much she was worried he would show empathy and say something like "I know it is hard on you. But I cannot tell you that I will stop drinking since you know that I try. Maybe you can imagine it to be a storm. It will pass by."<sup>8</sup> Their joint effort to confront his severe psychological problems must have connected the partners and kept the alcoholism from destroying the relationship. In this sense, Lee was definitely not co-dependent, rather her commitment to Jackson was unconditional. She knew very well that he had two sides, the kind and empathic person

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<sup>8</sup> Lee Krasner, "Who was Jackson Pollock? Conversation with Francine du Plessix and Cleve Gray", in: *Lee Krasner-Jackson Pollock*, p. 101.

when he felt at ease as opposed to the furious, violent man who got angry at something or someone. Not to identify those states with him as a person and to notice that they will go by saved and strengthened the relationship and helped her keep her balance.

The above-mentioned article in *Life* created a lot of publicity upon publication just as a recent film on Pollock. He had reason enough to be proud of his accomplishment, but instead he felt distracted from his work and from himself. When Lee and Jackson spent a while in New York to see an exhibition and visit with friends he started drinking again and felt depressed; his creativity almost died away. Alcohol dominated his life – and ultimately destroyed the love relationship. In 1955, they started a couples therapy which helped boost Lee's creativity but did not help Jackson or the relationship. She had her first solo exhibition in New York which in turn put pressure on Jackson. He started an affair which he mistook for a way out of the dilemma. She had to take care of herself and decided to travel to Europe to see friends and to visit museums. From Paris she sent greetings letting Jackson know how much she missed him and wished she could share the experience with him. On August 12, 1956, Lee received a message from one of their friends: Jackson had died in a car accident. She immediately booked a flight back to New York and left the same day.

After Pollock's death Krasner moved into his studio and began creating larger formats. Life and art were one for her so that she was able to work through the loss and mourning in his environment: wild eyes, dripping colour, pink and red, expressing her suffering and broken heart. But she was also Lee in her very own creativity; she experimented with shades of brown in her series *Umber* which used to be Pollock's favourite colour range. Almost full circle she returned to the times when they got to know each other. Besides, the earthy colours were a pragmatic solution: during the daytime she was busy with taking care of Pollock's estate so that only the evenings and nights were left for her art. Since she did not like to use electric light the umber colours were a good choice. Also, she started using different colours and shapes such as lively pink and bright green or figures dancing on the canvas. These new approaches brought her back to life. In later years, she moved back to New York where she bought her own apartment in 1967.

The creative relationship is still alive in the works of both artists expressing their communication, the tension, and the close connection. Comparing selected works clarifies in how many ways they inspired and shaped each other's art. In retrospect, one might say that they were equal partners, had a lot of respect for each other's art. She was very

connected with the artistic and cultural context while he was more of a genius who used his art to fight his demons and find himself. They loved each other unconditionally. His affair was a drastic turning-point for Krasner and Pollock, and there was not enough time left to talk about it and to find a resolution. His psychiatric disease was the actual reason why the relationship ended and why his life ended, but as a couple they were able to live a joyful and loving relationship for a fairly long time.

*Translated by the author*