

PICTURES OF NOTHING

ABSTRACT ART SINCE POLLOCK

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SURVIVALS AND FRESH STARTS

I was asked by a friend after last week's lecture why I had settled on the term "abstraction" instead of "nonfigurative" or "nonrepresentational," which he preferred. "Abstraction," after all, comes from the Latin *abstractus*, a word meaning to pull or draw away from. It tends to suggest that abstraction is somehow a derivative or second-order kind of art, drawing away from something the artist has actually seen.

In fact, this distinction between reductive and productive ideas of abstraction has been a bugbear in the history of art. When the French abstract artists of the 1930s tried to form a group, they got caught up in a huge debate about what to call their movement: they could only agree on a hyphenated term, "*abstraction-création*," distinguishing between those who were distilling

forms from visual experience and those who claimed that they were creating pure forms not derived from vision or nature. Other artists have proposed the term "concrete art" to represent something that is not abstract or drawn out of experience. I always thought this sounded too much like cement, so I am staying with "abstraction." I purposely use it because I think everyone understands what I mean by it, and because I would rather say something more productive and positive about the nature of abstraction than that it is "not something else." I also dislike the opposition between abstraction and creation because it seems to me to pose a false dichotomy between what the eye does and what the mind does.

As I pointed out in the last lecture, talking about Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, there is

Detail of figure 2.7 (opposite)

no seeing without some schema in mind, and certainly there are very few thoughts in the mind that do not, in some sense, depend on experience. You cannot draw a circle around the mind and say that everything inside the circle is pure creation and everything outside is mere observation. I prefer to roll with the circle: to insist on the constant cycling between representation and abstraction, between drawing forms out of the world and adding new forms to it. This is true neurologically, in the way that we perceive and interact with the world, and it is also true socially, in terms of abstraction's history: there has been a constant cycling between seeing and inventing, representing and abstracting. This pertains especially to the use of already extant man-made forms such as those we will be examining here.

Today's lecture is largely about the 1950s, and before we look at any work, I want to begin with two pieces of received wisdom about the 1950s and 1960s. First, the belief that abstract expressionism like Pollock's succeeded because of a CIA plot, that its triumph was engineered by malevolent and manipulative forces who exported it as propaganda for the United States.

Second, the belief that abstract expressionism was killed off around 1960 by the young turks of pop and minimal art, whose inventions were simply a reaction to the exhaustion and depletion of abstract expressionism. On the one hand, we have the conspiracy theory of a CIA plot; on the other, we have the catastrophe theory about the collapse of abstract expressionism and its replacement by minimalism. It seems to me that each of these theories oversimplifies history and falsifies some very basic issues.

Let us look first at the CIA plot. In 1958, the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art sent abroad an exhibition called *The New American Painting*, which was seen in London, Paris, Milan, and five other European cities (fig. 2.1).¹ Along with other traveling exhibitions mounted by MoMA—so the argument goes—this exhibition was a stalking horse for a governmental or at least an establishment vision of America and American freedoms. Supposedly the government, together with various corporate interests (such as those of the Rockefellers), used the Museum of Modern Art as a cover for exhibitions that were tools in a battle for the hearts and minds of the European intelligentsia.



That is, they were Cold War weapons aimed against the Soviet Union to demonstrate the greater freedoms and possibilities of the American way. The exhibitions were a way for Americans to show the Europeans that America was not all Coca-Cola and bubble gum but in fact had a culture worthy of respect. In short, the exhibitions were designed to win the intellectual leadership of Europe over to the American side in the Cold War.²

Now there is perhaps more than a grain of truth to this argument. It is well documented that many government agencies, such as the CIA and the USIA (U.S. Information Agency),

were extremely interested in waging a cultural battle during the Cold War. Major magazines thought to be liberal and independent, like *Encounters*, were in fact funded by the CIA.³ The same was true on the Left as well: it was not just a right-wing paranoid fantasy that the peace movement in Europe in the 1950s was substantially funded by Moscow. There was plenty of cultural propaganda on both sides. I just don't think the idea of cultural propaganda applies to *The New American Painting* or to the Museum of Modern Art.

Perhaps it is because I worked at MoMA for almost twenty years that I have a hard time seeing the museum as an efficient tool of any particular interest. My friend Adam Gopnik used to say that, from the outside, the Roman Empire looked like all aqueducts and legionnaires; but from the inside, it looked like rats in the sewers. But even an objective outsider, looking at the conspiracy theories about abstract expressionism, would notice that they involve a lot of guilt by association and examples of six degrees of separation: the protagonists at MoMA are tools of the establishment because someone's brother's cousin worked for the Rockefellers, or

2.1
Cover of *The New American Painting, As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958-1959* (exh. cat., New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959)

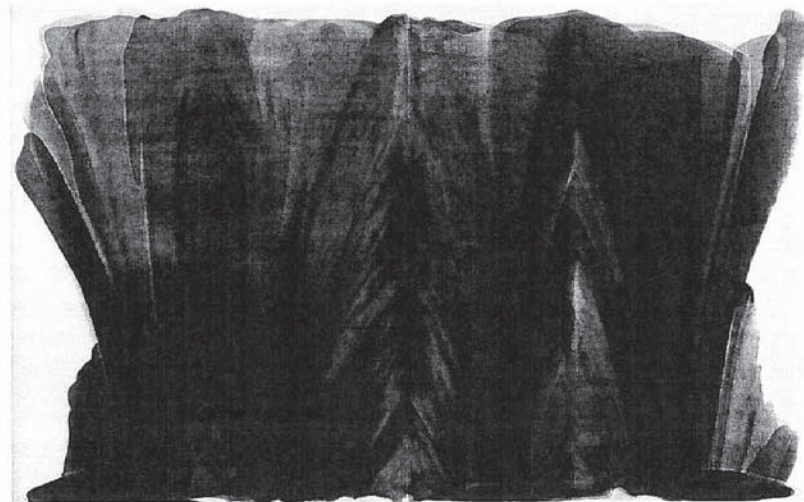


2.2
Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm (Number 30), 1950. Enamel on canvas, 266.7 × 525.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, George A. Hearn Fund, 1957

because they were in the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) during World War II, etcetera, etcetera. And the argument, it seems to me, loses a lot of ground just on its particulars.

First of all, it would certainly be ironic, though not implausible, that America would be exporting as a tool against Communism the very art that at the time was being denounced as Communistic in the House of Representatives. (There was in the late 1940s and early 1950s a major campaign against modern art, spearheaded in Congress by Representative George A. Dondero of Michigan and echoed by politicians and newspapers across the country; this led to

the cancellation, for instance, of the exhibition *Advancing American Art* organized by the State Department in 1946.) I think that no two people were in more agreement about their dislike for abstract art than Stalin and President Harry Truman, for example. Both of them disliked it a lot.⁴ It is also ironic that critics discuss these shows as if they were imposed on Europe as an act of brutal American imperialism, when in fact the Europeans strongly beseeched the administrators and curators at the Museum of Modern Art to send the shows; that is why the shows were mounted. The French critics were the ones who read abstract expressionism as being echt



2.3
Morris Louis, Tet, 1958. Synthetic polymer on canvas, 241.3 × 388.6 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art

American. They were the ones who insisted on Pollock, for example, as a lariat-swinging son of Wyoming, whereas at home Clement Greenberg and later William Rubin were insisting on Pollock's links to Picasso and Braque and analytic cubism of 1911 and 1912.³

But the big problem with the idea of these exhibitions as tools of Cold War propaganda is that one simply cannot control the outcome of abstract art such as Pollock's (fig. 2.2). For

Clement Greenberg and his followers, the logical consequence of Pollock culturally, in the line that started with Picasso and Braque and analytic cubism, would be a more ethereal, still form of abstraction, that is, something more allover, even less dependent on line and traditional space, such as the gorgeous stain paintings of Morris Louis (fig. 2.3). In Greenberg's view this would be the logical progression of where an artist should go having been stimulated by Pollock's

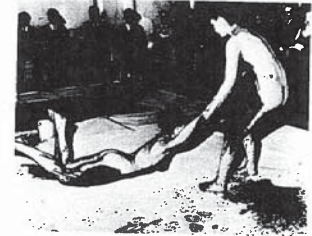


example.⁶ But for many European artists, Pollock's example led in a completely different direction. Even before they saw Pollock's paintings, they had seen Hans Namuth's photographs of Pollock at work (fig. 2.4). These photographs inspired for them a very different idea of what the next logical step in modern art might be. For example, in 1960 the French artist Yves Klein staged a performance piece, *Anthropométries* (fig. 2.5), that clearly relates to Pollock's idea of painting on a canvas laid on the floor. The difference is that, instead of dripping paint from a stick, Klein hires models, covers them with blue paint, and has them dragged across the canvas, while an orchestra plays in the background in front of a suited audience. Considering the complexity of translating Pollock into French, one might say in response, "Vive la traduction" (Long live translation). The photograph could be the frontispiece for an essay on the Frenchness of French art. But I'm not at all sure what it did to change Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas about Coca-Cola as a symbol of U.S. imperialism.

More seriously, however, once abstract expressionism was let loose on the world, it became

the preferred style of artists and intellectuals who dissented against dictatorial governments supported by the United States in Europe, and in Latin America and the Caribbean as well.⁷ Thus, if the U.S. officials were trying to use abstract expressionism as propaganda, they had picked up a loaded gun, and they were just as likely to shoot themselves in the foot as to discredit Communism. Abstract expressionism just does not work that well as agitprop.

The [art historical] Left, it seems to me, has a contradictory view of abstract expressionism. On the one hand, it is seen as such a powerful carrier of American values that it gets a headlock on its viewers, brainwashing them. Or it is no more than a decorative necktie, something that can be easily trivialized and turned into a fashion accessory, so that Cecil Beaton, in 1951, could use *Autumn Rhythm* as the backdrop for a *Vogue* feature on "The New Soft Look" (fig. 2.6).⁸ The Left is unsure whether abstract expressionism is an opiate or a cocktail, a sinister Trojan horse for American values or a pathetic running dog of American capitalism. Either way, the assumption is that abstraction—and



2.4 (opposite)
Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock, 1950, Gelatin silver print, 37.8 x 30.5 cm, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, gift of the Estate of Hans Namuth

2.5
Yves Klein, *Anthropométries* (performances), 1960. "Anthropométries de l'époque hène," *Galerie Internationale d'art contemporain*, Paris, March 9, 1960

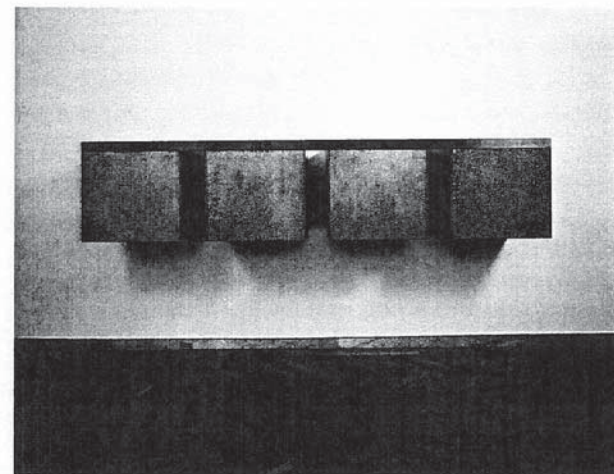
2.6
Cecil Beaton, "The New Soft Look," March 1, 1951, page 158, Cecil Beaton / Vogue, © 1951 Condé Nast Publications Inc.

abstract expressionism in particular—is too easy to manipulate, its meaning is too unclear, and it is too usable by the bad guys.

From a leftist point of view, *Autumn Rhythm* functions as an oversized allegory: the enormous scale of the painting stands for the vast space of the North American continent, while the freedom of Pollock's gestures stands for the freedom of the individual. Such paintings could be promoted and hyped as seductive symbols for America and for capitalism. But if abstract expressionism promoted a fake Americanism, the Left sees a *true* Americanism embedded in minimalism, with its repetitious structures, its hard-edge geometry, its dependence on large scale, its regularity, and its cold efficiency (fig. 2.7). From this perspective, minimalism is seen as a technocratic or corporate kind of art, an art covertly about the side of American life that is all about power and production.⁷

Thinking locally, one could easily argue this fake versus real Americanism another way. It is a contingent but meaningful fact that a painting such as Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* of 1950, with its allegorical expression of freedom, could

not have been shown or even reproduced in Moscow in 1950. Pollock's painting does not, of course, excuse lynchings in the South or bad wages in Detroit or poverty in Appalachia at that time, any more than the peace movement in Poland excuses the Gulag. As for the reading of minimalism as a coded representation of power, it seems to me that minimalism is just plain odder than that. Judd's metal works were not mass-produced but fabricated at a kind of mom-and-pop metal shop, Bernstein Brothers in Long Island City, using galvanized iron, stainless steel, aluminum, brass, colored Plexiglas, and the kind of translucent enamel paints used to customize Harley-Davidsons. The results are not overpowering or impersonal; in fact they are often kind of fussy, slick, and decorative. There is something small-time and peculiar about the fabrication of a lot of minimalist works that suggests not industrial mass production, but old-fashioned craftsmanship. In this sense, minimalism seems to express a nostalgia for small-product America, for chopper shops and body shops or businesses that make metal door frames or install aluminum siding.



2.7

Donald Judd, *To Susan Buckwälder*, 1964. Galvanized iron and blue lacquer on aluminum, 76.2 × 358.2 × 76.2 cm. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; gift of Frank Stella (PA 1954)

This minimalist nostalgia might dovetail, for example, with the nostalgia in Lichtenstein's embrace of romance comics, or Warhol's love for the faded glamour of Marilyn Monroe. The leftist view of minimalism sees Judd's sculptures as symbols for industrial defense contractors like the Raytheon Corporation; but Bernstein

Brothers bears the same relationship to Raytheon that *True Romance* comics bears to the mass media. So looking closely at the question of fabrication leads you to a very different view of minimalism.

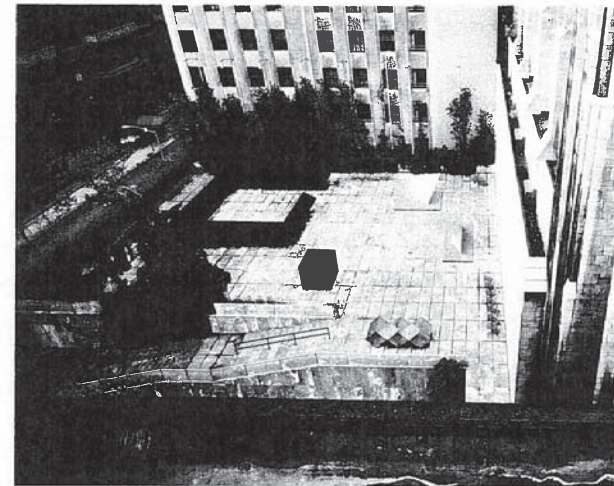
Be that as it may, the question of the [art historical] Left's reading of the fake and the true

Americanism in abstract expressionism and in minimalism begs a much larger question: Can abstract art have a fixed meaning? As I pointed out earlier, abstract art makes bad agitprop, because the only way to control its meaning is to control the people who view it. If viewers have the right to make up their own minds about Pollock, some are going to feel that his work is about savage energy, others about lyricism; some will think it dances, others that it explodes; etcetera, etcetera. And when the Left asks abstract art like Pollock's to be more resistant to bad uses, when it calls for greater rebellion and greater intransigence on the part of the art, it seems to me that what is being called for is a monolithic social solidarity that would limit the potential meanings produced by the art.

As we have seen, the same abstract form can give rise to very different meanings. That is the reception end of it. Today I want to concentrate on the inception of this art, that is, on the way that different meanings and intentions can give rise to, or attach themselves to, very similar forms. Similar forms give rise to different meanings, and different meanings and

intentions give rise to similar forms. We need to look extremely closely at the particular things before us, because in art we do not make things any simpler by making simpler things. Reduction does not yield certainty, but something like its opposite, which is ambiguity and multivalence. So rather than taking an extremely complicated and thorny situation and trying to make it simpler, I am trying to sow complexity and confusion.

My test case for demonstrating the complexity of simplicity is the hard-edge geometric art of the 1960s. I will take as my starting point an exhibition called *Art of the Real*, another Museum of Modern Art exhibition sent abroad, this one in 1968, ten years after *The New American Painting*. There is ostensibly a shared aesthetic among all the objects in the show (fig. 2.8); its thesis was that, after the weakened, second-generation, Tenth-Street-gallery abstract expressionism of the late 1950s, there emerged in the early 1960s an art of a greater certainty, a greater decisiveness, a greater clarity, a greater sharpness. This art had nothing to do with angst or metaphysics or psychology.



2.8
Installation view of the exhibition
Art of the Real, The Museum
of Modern Art, New York,
July 3 through September 8, 1968

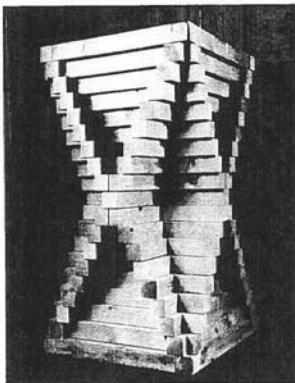
It had no hidden cards; everything was on the surface. It was a new, echt American art: brash, hard-nosed, and *empirical*. It was all about the immediacy of sensory apprehension, about things that were real, that were hard, that you could test out by kicking them.

One of the works in the show was *Cedar Piece* by Carl Andre, which was originally conceived in 1959 but then destroyed and rebuilt for an exhibition in 1964. In a photograph of the 1959 ur-version, now lost (fig. 2.9), the piece

appears Lincoln-Log simple and gruff in a way that fits in with Andre's reputation as a former brakeman on the Pennsylvania Railroad in the early 1960s. But this is a brakeman who went to Phillips Academy Andover with Stella. Andre's piece may look simple, but it is involved in a broad and complicated reinvention of modern art, breaking with the tradition of constructed sculpture that had dominated modern art from Picasso through David Smith. Such sculpture seemed to Andre to retain a residual

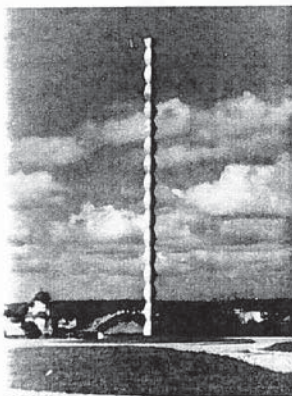
2.9

Carl Andre, *Cedar Piece*, 1959 (remade in 1964). Wood, 5.08 x 10.16 cm fir (1959), 10.16 x 10.16 cm cedar (1964), 74-unit stack, 10.2 x 10.2 x 92.1 cm each, 92.7 x 92.7 x 174.6 cm overall. Kunstmuseum, Basel



2.10

Constantin Brancusi, *The Endless Column* in Tirgu Jiu, c. 1938. Gelasin silver print. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

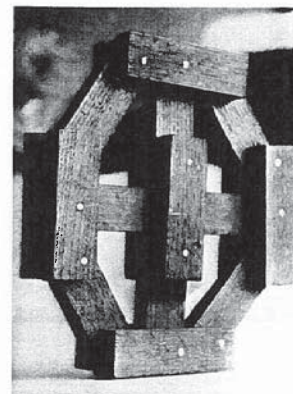


anthropomorphism, a kind of head-and-torso structure. It also displayed a residual pictorialism in the way it hung on a wall or was arranged in a plane.⁹ Instead of looking back to that tradition, Andre reached back to another point in early modern art, to the art of Brancusi. What he admired about a work like Brancusi's *Endless Column* in Tirgu Jiu (fig. 2.10) was that it seemed to eliminate the idea of the head and foot, because it was equal parts of each: turned upside down, it would look exactly the same. Andre also liked the way that the column avoided being pictorial: instead of having a pedestal or an implied frame, it sat directly on the floor, with no symbolic separation from us, but instead an immediate involvement in the present tense. Andre's *Cedar Piece*, sitting directly on the floor, with its upside-down/right-side-up symmetry, its four identical sides, and its rough, hand-cut edges, had a lot of the same sculptural qualities as Brancusi's work, in contrast to the cubist tradition of constructed sculpture.

⁹As a rule, constructed sculpture was meant to be seen from the front like a painting, not from all sides like sculpture.—PK

2.11

Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Spatial Construction No. 18*, 1921. Wood, 18.5 x 15.5 x 4 cm. Photographed by Aleksandr Rodchenko in 1924, entire series destroyed in 1920s and 1930s

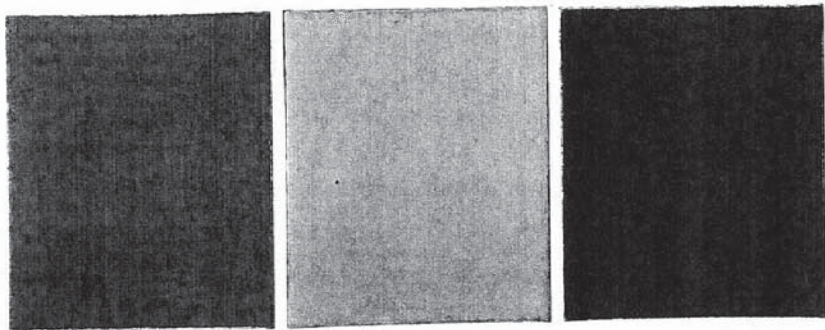


This is just part of the broader remaking of the modern tradition that takes place between 1955 and 1960. In the same years, we see a revival of Duchamp in the United States and in Britain, accompanied by a revival of Italian futurism, flowing directly into pop art of the 1960s. There is a revival of modern traditions outside the School of Paris, outside the Picasso-Matisse mainstream; in the mid-1950s, these are used against both the School of Paris and the New York School deriving from Pollock and de Kooning.

Andre, in particular, is doing something more complicated and tougher than just reviving Brancusi. Although he revives some of Brancusi's forms, he gets rid of the romance of carving that was so important to Brancusi. The repeated units of the *Endless Column* look the same, but they were all hewed by hand, and so are subtly different from one another. In contrast, Andre's *Cedar Piece* is assembled from modular units. Instead of the custom-made volumetric solids of the Brancusi—a series of back-to-back pyramids—Andre works with ready-made materials like railroad ties or

two-by-fours. In doing so, Andre seems to be invoking Russian constructivist works such as Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Spatial Construction No. 18* of 1921 (fig. 2.11).

Russian constructivism, like futurism and Duchamp, was being revived and thought about in a new way in the late 1950s. The year 1958 saw a major Malevich show in Amsterdam, for example, and in 1962 the British art historian Camilla Gray produced *The Great Experiment*, the first widely available documentation of the early years of constructivist experiment in Russia, which had been so effectively suppressed by the Soviets since the 1930s.¹⁰ What Andre



2.12
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pure Red, Pure Yellow, and Pure Blue Colors* (from the triptych *The Smooth Color*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 62.5 × 52.7 cm each. *Museum of Private Collections, Moscow*)

and others learned from Gray was that Russian constructivism was a two-pronged tradition. On the one hand, the constructivists wanted to analyze the primary elements of all experience: to go back to a modular two-by-four art, to strip away everything until only the fundamental, elemental basics of art remained. This led to works like Rodchenko's painting *Pure Red, Pure Yellow, and Pure Blue Colors*, which consists of nothing more than three panels—one red, one yellow, one blue—placed in a row (fig. 2.12). Simultaneously, the constructivists strove to make art *useful*, a tool of mass persuasion. They wanted to remake everything from towers to teacups, and especially the means of mass communication [billboards, public address systems, reading rooms, newspaper kiosks, etc.].

So a constructivist like Rodchenko, at the same time that he was exploring the basic elements of painting, was also designing advertisements (fig. 2.13).

Art, as such, was less interesting to the constructivists than was visual experience and its productiveness in a new society. Their grand project was to remake art and society from stem to stern and top to bottom. After flourishing in Russia for around a decade, constructivism was then suppressed in the climate of the 1930s, when the Soviet government demanded a more understandable kind of art that could get its message across to the people—in other words, socialist realism. Meanwhile, however, the double tradition of elemental analysis and public outreach worked its way into European and American

culture via the German Bauhaus. The elemental strain found expression in pedagogical works such as Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* series (fig. 2.14); the interest in communication led to a revolution in the look of advertisements and posters, such as those designed by Herbert Bayer (fig. 2.15). By the 1930s and 1940s, the fiery ideology of Russian constructivism had been institutionalized, banalized, and commercialized by the Bauhaus and its clones; instead of preaching revolution, artists were teaching geometric abstraction as a model for "good design" in advertising and publishing.

Stella's 1962 *Gran Cairo* (fig. 2.16) looks a lot like one of Albers' homages. But in real life, Stella's 217-centimeter square is powerful and aggressive merely in its dimensions—as big as a man—and its colors are as jazzy and bold as the colors in the paintings of the contemporary pop artists. It is very 1960s. The Albers is a lot smaller—just 46 centimeters high—and its colors are more harmonious and demure. It seems staid and didactic, the residue of an old system. The differences between the paintings seem a lot more important than the fact

that both paintings are organized around concentric squares. If a graduate student proposed the Albers as a "source" for the Stella, the professor would probably sneer at the student's naiveté.

Let's go back and look closely at another descendant of Albers. Thousands of students trained in good design and good advertising at the Chicago Bauhaus, or Black Mountain College, or Yale under Albers must have been asked to study works such as Albers' lithograph

"When American artists like Stella started making hard-edge geometric abstractions in the late 1950s and 1960s, they were excited to discover the revolutionary roots of abstraction, but the last thing they wanted was to be associated with the seemingly exhausted tradition of "good design." When you look at the Stella and the Albers in reproduction, the difference between the two is not so obvious; the crucial differences are in the details that get lost in reproduction.—PK



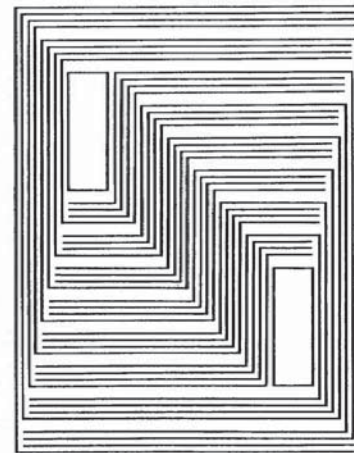
2.13
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *advertisement for cigarettes*, 1924. *Gouache on photographic paper, 13.4 × 32 cm. Rodchenko Archive, Moscow*



2.15
Herbert Bayer, Architecture
Slide Lecture, Professor Hans
Poelzig (Architektur Licht-
bilder Vortrag Professor Hans
Poelzig), 1926. Letterpress, printed
in color, 48.6 × 65.1 cm. The
Museum of Modern Art, New
York. Gift of Philip Johnson

of 1942, *To Monte Alban* (fig. 2.17). It is an image that exploits repetition, conundrums of recession and projection, and qualities of line, such as the contrast between thick and thin—all basic elements of design. Yet certain artists trained in this tradition of diluted or so-called diaspora constructivism tried to bring it back into the realm of painting. The French artist François Morellet was one of them. He worked as an industrial engineer or designer for most of his career but became interested in moving his sense of abstract design out of that utilitarian

world into the world of art. Morellet's *Painting* of 1953 (fig. 2.18) clearly anticipates Stella's 1959 canvas, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* (see fig. 1.9), but there is a huge and important physical difference between these works. The Morellet is 60 centimeters on the long side; the Stella is over 2.3 meters on the short side. The Morellet feels like a small demonstration piece, while the Stella is a big physical object, with a stretcher as thick as your fist. Stella takes the idea of parallel lines—the systematic repetition of stripes—and elevates it to something larger.



2.17
Josef Albers, *To Monte Alban*,
1942. Zinc plate lithograph,
48.3 × 60.9 cm. *The Insej*
and Anni Albers Foundation,
Bethany, Connecticut

2.18
François Morellet, *Painting*, 1953.
Oil on canvas, 40 × 60 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo, The Netherlands

The difference in size corresponds to an important conceptual difference.

Morellet's systematic approach is an echo—a *ping!*—of the constructivist tradition, an approach that revives the movement's ideals of impersonality and objectivity. Morellet espouses

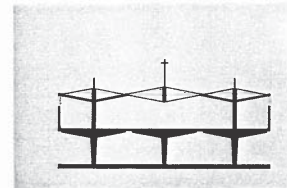
a kind of socially productive anonymity that would encourage social solidarity through its universally apprehensible forms. It is an unromantic, anti-bohemian aesthetic related to the positivist belief in modern technology and modern science as models for a better society.

It reflects the situation of postwar France, and the need for a constructive art that would regenerate European culture after the debacle of World War II. In contrast, Stella's impersonality is likely a reaction against the sloppiness of second-generation abstract expressionism. Stella's canvases have the scale and the same immediate physicality, even the same house paint you find in Pollock's big paintings of 1950 (see fig. 2.2). At the same time, they express the year they were done, 1959, in their black espresso-grind kind of darkness, which gives the sense that they are the last breath of the beat generation. (It's no accident that many of Stella's titles refer to bars and dives in New York.) So between Morellet and Stella you have two very different motivations for systematic composition. Morellet gets there from commercial design and constructivism. Stella gets there from Pollock and from the stripes in Jasper Johns' flag paintings.

This collision between different traditions, it seems to me, made the art scene in the 1960s a world of confusion, a world in which overlapping claims are made on very similar art forms to argue for very different points. If you

compare the catalogue for Max Bill's *Fifty Years of Concrete Art*, a 1960 exhibition in Switzerland, to the catalogue for Eugene Goossen's *Art of the Real*, seen at MoMA in 1968, you will find many artists whose work appears in both shows. Bill claims that he is showing the reflowering of a long constructivist tradition; Goossen claims that he is showing the birth of a new, hard-edge American art style. The 1960s saw a collision between revivals and fresh takes, but these fresh starts often take the form of a leap *back*, over the diluted version of the constructivist tradition to its roots in Russian art of 1920 or 1917. So in the early 1960s, we find Donald Judd writing about Malevich, Carl Andre going back to Rodchenko (and Brancusi), Dan Flavin naming his neon pieces for Vladimir Tatlin, and so on.

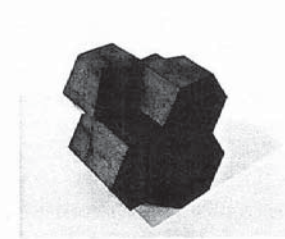
The place where it is easiest to see the confusion between old and new ideas about systems and impersonality is in the work of the sculptor Tony Smith. The minimalists embraced Smith's large-scale geometric sculptures of the 1960s. And yet Smith was a close friend of Pollock's in the heyday of abstract expressionism in the early 1950s, and the roots of his aesthetic are



anchored in that group. Before his involvement with the abstract expressionist painters, Smith had trained in architecture, and architecture of a very particular kind. In his drawings of the 1950s, such as his plan for a Catholic church (fig. 2.19), we see nested hexagons and a lattice structure reflecting his interest in organic form. Smith's organicism connects in part to the Bauhaus, but more specifically to his training with Frank Lloyd Wright, who wanted to draw an ideal geometry out of the complexity of nature and use it to reform our lived environment.

After 1960 Smith plucked this sense of organic geometry out of its architectural context and used it to make sculpture. One of his later, quasi-minimal sculptures, with the delightful title *Bees Do It*, looks literally like a section of a

beehive (fig. 2.20). He used an even more complex, octahedral pattern for sculptures such as *Smoke* (fig. 2.21), designed for *Scale as Content*, a 1967 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery.¹¹ Here, Smith looked completely at home next to younger geometers like Ronald Bladen, with his large *X* (fig. 2.22). Everyone saw their work as closely related, even though they belonged to different generations. We are back then, as with Albers, Stella, and Morellet, at a confusing crossroad, where the juxtaposition of work—because it is similar in form—leads to a misunderstanding of intent. If you look at his origins, it is clear that Smith is coming from a different place than Bladen. Therefore, minimalism scholars—and Smith scholars—often talk about him as an



2.19
Tony Smith, *Untitled (Church)*,
c. 1950. Ink on paper.
35.1 × 55.6 cm. Tony Smith
Estate

2.20
Tony Smith, *Bees Do It*, 1970.
Wood model, 34.3 × 38.7 ×
27.9 cm. Tony Smith Estate

2.21

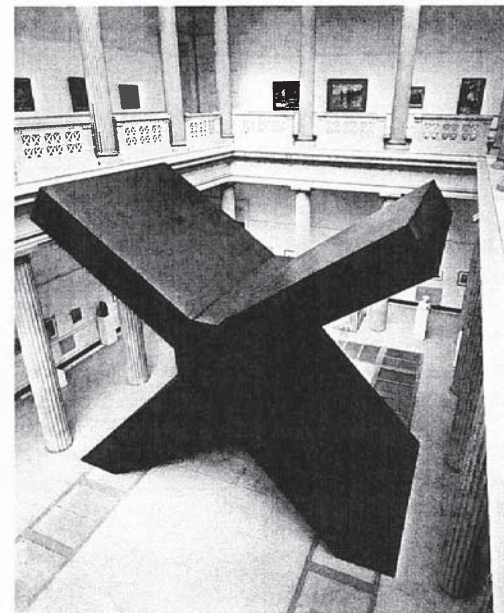
Tony Smith, *Smoke*, 1967.
Painted plywood mock-up, 61.0 ×
121.9 × 86.4 cm. Installed at the
Corcoran Gallery, Washington,
DC, October 1967–January
1968, in the exhibition *Scale as
Content*, subsequently destroyed



anomaly: it is a misunderstanding, they tell us, and to place Smith within minimalism. And yet, I wonder whether that is true, whether when you look closely at this pattern of look-alikes that we are building here, Smith doesn't seem to be part of this larger picture in the 1960s of recouping

and reinventing the past, on the one hand, and on the other of translating from architecture and architectural concerns into painting and sculpture and art.

A more interesting and complex case than Smith's is that of Ellsworth Kelly, the last



2.22

Ronald Bladen, *The X* (in the
Corcoran Gallery of Art's 1967
exhibition *Scale as Content*),
1967. Painted wood, later
constructed in steel, 670.877 ×
731.943 × 366.183 cm

American artist of stature, certainly of his generation, to have depended crucially on training in Paris as the foundation of his work. It had once been *necessary* for any American artist to go to Paris, but Kelly chose to go to Paris at what seems like exactly the wrong time, during the

boom years of abstract expressionism. Kelly was away from the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and only returned around 1953. At the moment he came back, his work looked pretty *retardataire*, or backward. But, come the 1960s, it was embraced as a precursor of the

new hard-edge American art. Kelly's work was featured in the *Art of the Real* exhibition, along with Andre's *Pyramid*. In fact, Kelly's black-and-white relief of 1949 (fig. 2.23) was placed on the opening wall of the exhibition, next to Georgia O'Keeffe's 1929 painting, *Lake George Window* (fig. 2.24). Both objects are roughly the same size, which is not very big. The Kelly is a fragile lattice of wood struts with a canvas behind it, rather like a kite. Goossen placed it next to O'Keeffe's painting for a couple of reasons. For one thing, he wanted to root the new hard-edge work of the 1960s in echt American art like O'Keeffe's. The precisionist detailing of *Lake George Window* belongs to a vernacular current in American art going back to the Shakers, and the juxtaposition placed Kelly's spare, geometric construction in the same tradition. The second reason was that both works represented windows. Originally, Kelly's black-and-white relief had been untitled, but he now decided to rename it *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, taking pains to reveal to Goossen and others his exact source for the image. In the catalogue, Goossen made a good deal of the connection between Kelly and

O'Keeffe, insisting that the new "art of the real" had to do with *seeing*, with empiricism—that is, with sensory apprehension rather than with any smarmy idealism or metaphysics. Rooting the new art in actual experience of the world was a way of accenting this difference. Together, Kelly and Goossen repositioned *Window* in the world of American empiricism.

In the 1990s the connection between Kelly's painting and its source was revised yet again, this time in Duchampian terms. The claim was made that Kelly's *Window* represents not merely a natural impression, but a radical act of mind and strategy akin to Duchamp's subversion of authorship, cutting out the idea of composing or inventing and replacing it with acts of discovery and appropriation as a means of making art. Whereas Goossen and Kelly in the 1960s push against the ideal in the direction of seeing, in the 1990s the push is against the ideal in the direction of *thinking*, toward a Duchampian sense of strategy and subversion. In the 1960s, then, Kelly is more like Judd; in the 1990s, he seems more like Johns. The same two ideas are being pushed back and forth.

2.23 (opposite, left)
Ellsworth Kelly, *Window*, Museum of Modern Art, Paris, 1949.
Oil on wood and canvas, two joined panels, 128.3 × 49.5 × 1.9 cm. Collection of the artist

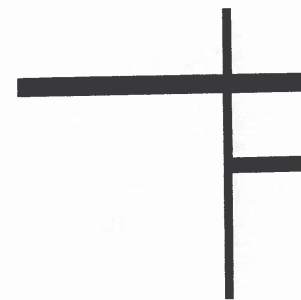
2.24 (opposite, right)
Georgia O'Keeffe, *Lake George Window*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 101.6 × 76.2 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the Richard D. Bradley Bequest

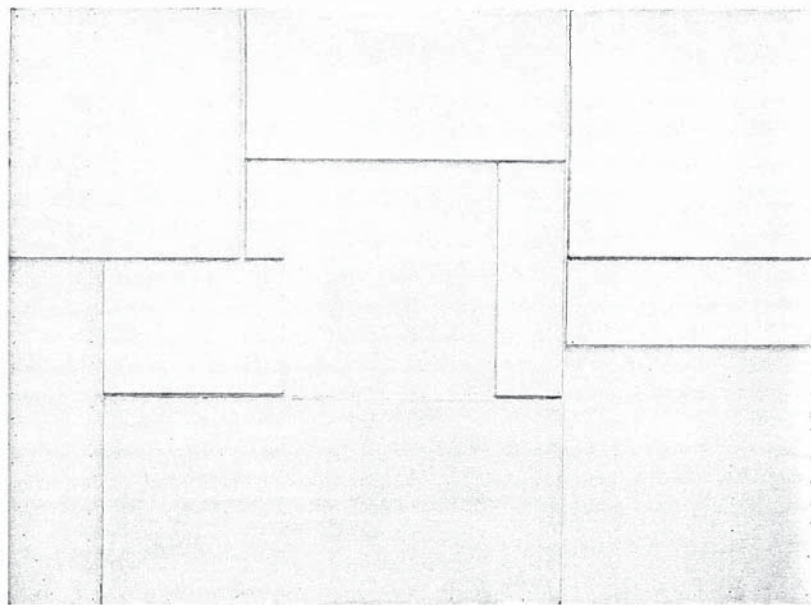
2.25
Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. II*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 50.5 × 50.5 cm. Collection Van Abbeuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

At the risk of piling still more on this delicate structure, is there not something missing in this equation, some kind of middle road leading back to the actual relief in black and white? After all, it is not just any window in Paris that Kelly has depicted. Anyone who has been to the Palais de Tokyo or the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which is now housed in that building, knows that its architecture has a somewhat Fascist feeling but also has strong echoes of modern design. It is right at home with a painting like Mondrian's *Composition No. II* of 1930 (fig. 2.25). Just as Mondrian drew inspiration from architecture, architects drew inspiration from Mondrian. The elongated proportions and the parsing of the tripartite division at the bottom of the museum window echo the formal ideas of artists like Mondrian. And then Kelly comes along and brings those ideas back into the world of painting. So we are again moving in a circle from high abstract art into the broad world of modern design and back again. Another Kelly, *Neully*, is identified solely by its locale, a suburb of Paris (fig. 2.26). Kelly later explains that its pattern was traced from paving stones

in a walkway there, but this real-world source does not disguise its uncanny similarity to the idealist geometry of Mondrian, van Doesburg, Georges Vantongerloo, and many other Dutch artists of the 1920s and 1930s.

When Kelly was painting in Paris, Mondrian was a relatively unknown artist, but the built environment of the 1930s and 1940s, like the building from which Kelly's window was taken, was suffused with the diluted principles of Mondrian's painting. Kelly's eye absorbed these principles in an unconscious way. The point is not to point out a particular source, but to



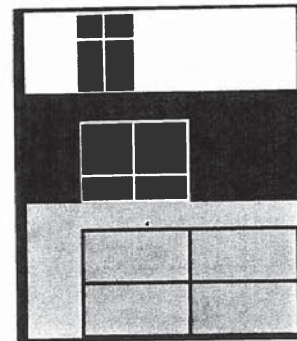


recognize a world of forms. Kelly's earliest training, before he entered the army and World War II, was at Pratt Institute, where the curriculum had recently been redesigned in imitation of the Chicago Bauhaus. At that point, Kelly aspired to be a commercial artist, so he took design classes that were based on exercises like

Josef Albers' *Interior* of 1929, with its interest in proportions, black-and-white reversal, and so on (fig. 2.27). Presumably because of his design skills, Kelly served in a camouflage battalion. It was only after the war that he moved to Boston, where he attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and then to Paris, deciding to become

2.26
Ellsworth Kelly; Neully, 1950.
Gesso on cardboard mounted
on wood, 58.4 × 79.7 × 3.8
cm. Collection of the artist

2.27
Josef Albers, *Interior*, 1929.
Sandblasted opaque flashed
glass, 24.8 × 20.7 cm. Josef Albers
Foundation, Bethany, Connecticut

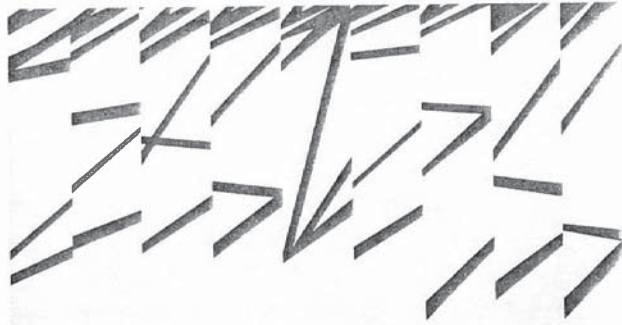


a "high" artist rather than a commercial designer. Thus one could argue that *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris* represents a marriage between the two sides of Kelly's early life. It is, I think, a self-conscious statement about the promotion of minor forms to major status: their transformation from design back into art. (I think, for example, of my friend Adam Gopnik's argument about the process by which Picasso took the deforming, aggressive, caricatural style of his sketchbooks and transferred it to the canvas of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, elevating an innate, already acquired language into the realm of art, where it was changed by its new context and in turn changed that context, radically transforming the language of modern art.¹²)

Window is the result of neither a pure act of seeing, as Goossen would have it in *Art of the Real*, nor a pure act of thinking and appropriation, as in the Duchampian interpretation. The widespread diffusion and dilution of Mondrian's art in modern architecture and design meant that both the thing seen and the way the artist saw it were already corrupted, already impure.

Let me drill this home further with a slightly later example of Kelly's work, *La Combe I* (fig. 2.28), which is divided into sectional planes with a beautiful rhythmic structure. Like *Neully*, it is identified only by the place in France in which it was made. Much later, Kelly revealed that the painting was based on shadows falling on a set of stairs (fig. 2.29). A quick comparison shows that the painting was not a direct translation of the photograph. There are, in fact, many versions of *La Combe* that reuse the staccato beat, the broken forms, and the diagonals in different ways. When Kelly looked down on those stairs, something—perhaps his training at Pratt years before—gave him the ability to apprehend the patterns and

¹² According to the artist, the photograph was made after the painting, not before.



2.28
 Ellsworth Kelly, *La Combe I*,
 1950. Oil on canvas, 96.5 ×
 161.3 cm. Whitney Museum of
 American Art, New York, gift
 of the American Contemporary
 Art Foundation, Inc., Leonard
 A. Lauder, President 2002.249



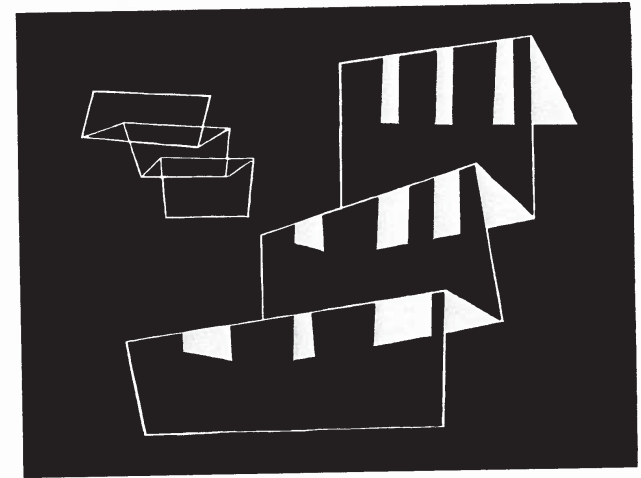
2.29
 Ellsworth Kelly, *Shadows on
 Stairs, Villa La Combe, Meschers*,
 1950. Silver gelatin print, 35.6 ×
 27.9 cm. Collection of the artist

2.30

Josef Albers, *Steps*, 1931. Gouache
 with pencil underdrawing on
 paper, 45.7 × 59.2 cm. Hirshhorn
 Museum and Sculpture Garden,
 Smithsonian Institution, gift of
 Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

2.31 (opposite)

Richard Paul Lohse, *Ciclinger &
 Co., New Year's Card for 1962*,
*Frohe Festtage und beste
 Wünsche zum Jahreswechsel*,
 1962. 21.5 × 21.2 cm (open).
 Collection of the Winterthur City
 Archive, Winterthur, Switzerland



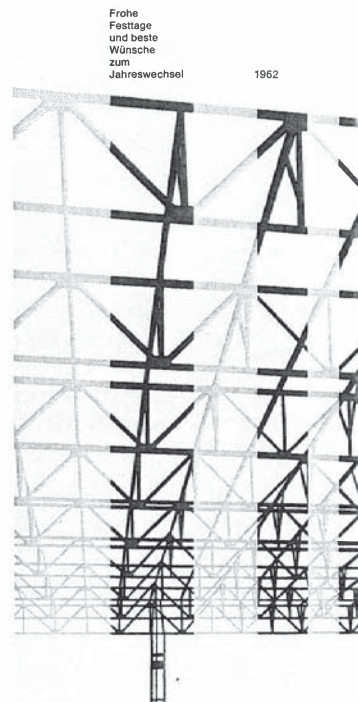
counterchanges between light and dark, to see the flat pattern in a three-dimensional scene. The composition is reminiscent—and again, this is not an argument for a source but a more generic reference—of a 1931 design exercise by Albers called *Steps* (fig. 2.30).

One could find dozens of similar examples, because this is the same vocabulary found in

the advertising of the time. For example, a 1962 poster by Richard Paul Lohse takes a familiar object and makes it unfamiliar by breaking it up with fields of overlay—a good constructivist principle that has been in play since the 1920s and 1930s (fig. 2.31). Lohse is an interesting figure, almost forgotten in the United States, but important in the history of European abstrac-

tion. Lohse was a concrete artist in Zurich, very close to Max Bill, and like Morellet, he made his living in commercial design and graphic work but aspired to be an artist. There is an obvious similarity between Kelly's 1951 painting, *Colors for a Large Wall*, and Lohse's 1950 conception, *Complementary Groups Formed by Six Horizontal Systematic Color Series* (see figs. 1.11 and 1.12). The difference is that Lohse's work is just a conception: a small sketch for a large painting that he did not actually make until 1975 (fig. 2.32). In actuality, Kelly's 2.4-meter-high painting has a completely different relationship to Lohse's 1950 sketch than it does to the 1975 painting based on it. As with the paintings by Morellet and Stella that I discussed earlier (see figs. 2.18, 1.9), the difference in size leads to a dramatic difference in effect.

Although Kelly was working on the same continent at the same time, he was coming from a completely different place. He was in contact with John Cage in New York, with Jean Arp in Paris, and with a residual Dada tradition. Just as Cage's musical compositions incorporated random tones and intervals, the arrangement

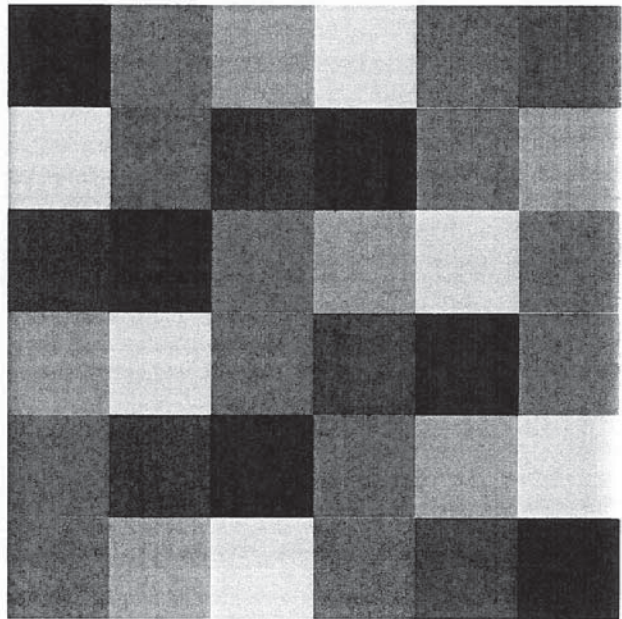


of Kelly's *Colors for a Large Wall* was based on chance, not on a scientific analysis of the spectrum or a systematic organization of colors. Serendipity rather than system was Kelly's way to get outside himself—to escape subjectivity. Kelly's faith in serendipity meant that his work was surprisingly sensitive to his environment. *Colors for a Large Wall* was painted shortly after he came back from a visit to the south of France,* and one gets a strong sense of Matisse in some of Kelly's colors (late Matisse was very much a factor in art of the early 1950s); the white panels evoke the white light of the Mediterranean basin. The more you look at Kelly's picture, the more you see its syncopation, its jazziness, its brightness, its upbeat personality—qualities that make it unpredictable and constantly interesting. In contrast, Lohse's work looks more static, more stable, more inert, with its deadened, scientific impersonality. On his trip to the south of France, Kelly also visited Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation* in Marseille, where he saw how Corbusier had painted large blocks of colors on the walls of his

* According to the artist, it was painted while he was in the south of France.

new (and dramatically different) buildings. In the recently relocated 1978 work of Kelly's in the atrium of the National Gallery of Art, just outside this auditorium, we can see a distant cousin of Kelly's early 1950s desire to reunite constructivist abstraction with architecture. Corbusier's example seems to have inspired Kelly to find his own way of uniting constructivist abstraction with architecture. In 1957, after returning to the United States, he makes a huge relief for the lobby of a Philadelphia office building, which takes the analysis of art and color and the spirit of his serendipitous arrangement of colors from *Colors for a Large Wall* and projects it back onto the wall at a much, much bigger scale (fig. 2.33).

We find something similar in a polychrome wall designed by the artist Alejandro Otero (fig. 2.34) for the school of architecture at the University of Venezuela, in Caracas, which was being built by architect Carlos Villanueva in the decade from 1950 to 1960. But there is a difference between Kelly's work and that of his peers in other countries. In 1951 Kelly painted a picture called *Cité*, which he imagined in a sketch as a giant mural (figs. 2.35, 2.36). In this case, Kelly



2.32
Richard Paul Lohse, Complementary Groups Formed by Six Horizontal Systematic Color Series, 1950/1975. Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the Richard Paul Lohse Foundation, Zurich, Switzerland



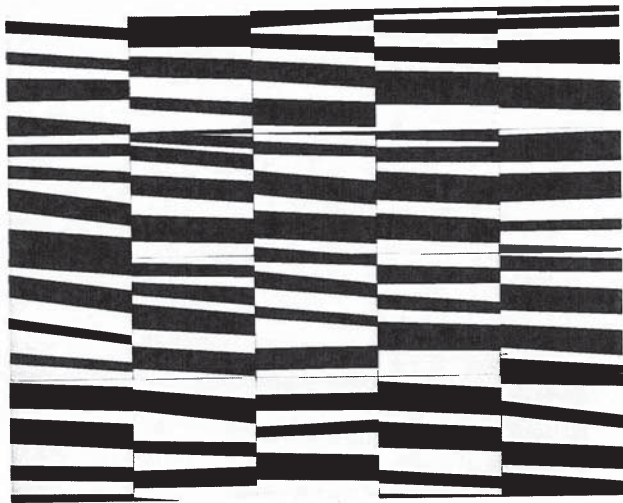
2.34
Alejandro Otero, Polychrome Façade for the School of Architecture, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 1952–1960. Carlos Raúl Villanueva (architect), Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas

began with a composition of roughly parallel slanting lines, of different widths, which he cut into squares and then reassembled by chance. The resulting picture has an odd combination of freedom and gridlike rigidity, and it is this combination that distinguishes Kelly's work from the very similar work of artists such as Jesús-Raphael Soto (fig. 2.37), a Venezuelan artist who becomes an acquaintance in Paris.

Max Bill helped export constructivism from Europe to Latin America, where Venezuelan artists like Otero and Soto made it into a new high art of socialist solidarity with definite political associations. Venezuela was run by a dictator who had overthrown an elected civil government. Contrary to our usual assumptions about avant-garde art and politics, abstraction became a kind of official style, as seen in numerous murals at the University of Venezuela.⁴ Kelly is on the fringes of this quasi-official resurgence of hard-edge constructivism. He is acquainted with artists like Soto, and he even applies to teach at Max Bill's school in Ulm. (Lohse taught in the Zurich branch of the same school.) What makes Kelly different is his interest in chance, his refusal to make an art of the necessary. In that sense, I think, Kelly is premonitory of much of the abstract art of the 1960s.

Finally, I want to look at another artist represented at the University of Venezuela in

⁴ In the diasporic phase of constructivism, hard-edge abstraction can be associated with either left-wing ideals (as in the cases of Lohse and Bill) or with right-wing regimes (as in the cases of the Venezuelan artists); in either case, it is associated with the idea of social solidarity and a powerful state.—PK

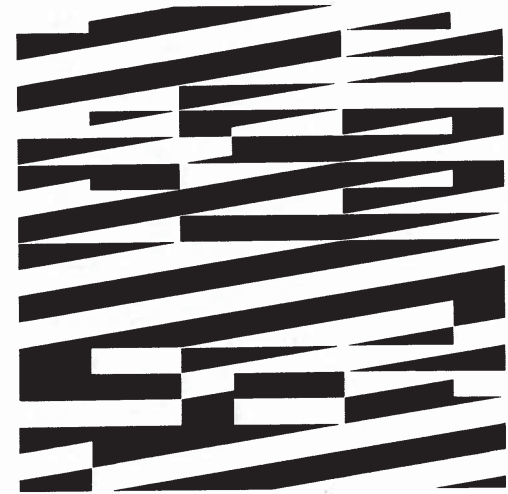


2.35
 Ellsworth Kelly, *Cité*, 1951. Oil
 on wood, twenty joined panels.
 142.9 × 179.1 × 5.08 cm.
 San Francisco Museum of Modern
 Art and anonymous private
 collectors. © Ellsworth Kelly



2.36
 Ellsworth Kelly, original sketch
 for *Cité*. Ink, 4.8 × 5.4 cm.
 Collection of the artist

2.37
 Jesús-Rafael Soto, *Parallèles
 interférentes noires et blanches*,
 1952. Tempera on hardboard,
 120 × 120 × 6 cm. Fundación
 Museo de Arte Moderno Jesús
 Soto, Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela

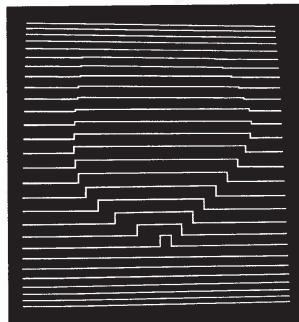


Caracas: Victor Vasarely, who painted a mural, *Positive Negative*, for the university's concert hall. Vasarely is the forgotten man of geometric art. He follows the profile that we have already identified: he trained as a Bauhaus-style commercial artist and only later turned to fine

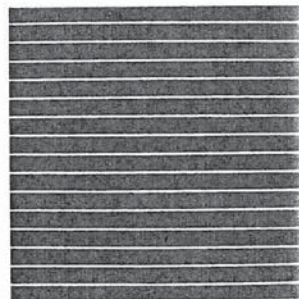
art. When he first came to Paris, he did not go to the Louvre for years. He was astonished to find out that his favorite artist, the poster designer A. M. Cassandre, was in fact just mimicking forms that had been invented years before by Corbusier and others. He is purely a product of

design, of corporate advertising; and yet, in the 1950s, he takes the techniques of tricking the eye, the techniques of diluted constructivism, and turns them back into a new ambition for a globally meaningful, scientific art. He is the head of a group called the Center for Research in the Visual Arts, a team of artists who aim to be anonymous—not bohemian or romantic. They want to promote a kind of vision that depends on the purely optical, on the retinal vibrations of the eye (fig. 2.38). It is an utterly democratic kind of vision because it requires no elite training, because it speaks directly to every person; it harkens to an ideal of social solidarity at the same time that it venerates science.

Vasarely's work is intriguingly close to Stella's (fig. 2.39). Both use stripes, and yet there is a crucial difference between them: Vasarely wants a form built-up out of an optical illusion, as in Albers, and Stella does not. In fact, Vasarely was Stella's great bugbear. In a famous 1964 interview Stella insisted that, in spite of the fact that Vasarely's work used many of the same basic schemes, "it still doesn't have anything to do with my painting. I find all that European geometric



2.38
Victor Vasarely, *Ilike*, 1956–1959.
Oil on canvas, 107.95 × 100.012
cm. Collection unknown



2.39
Frank Stella, *Palmito Ranch*,
1961. 30.5 × 30.5 cm.
Collection of the artist

painting—sort of post–Max Bill school—a kind of curiosity—very dreary . . . I can't think of anything I like less." Stella is at pains to insist that, whatever the formal similarity between his work and Vasarely's, it is extremely different because, in Stella's work, "What you see is what you see."¹³ He wants to insist that there is no social agenda in his work, no theory, no rationalism in the European sense. Stella's relationship to constructivism is like Pollock's relationship to surrealism. A Pollock like *Autumn Rhythm* (see fig. 2.2) offers a translation or extrapolation of surrealism: certain principles of the earlier style are reimagined and transformed by a new scale and a new physicality that leaves behind the earlier style's ideological baggage and its metaphysical claims. Similarly, Stella gives a new lease on life to the formal language of constructivism by dropping the baggage that it formerly carried; the forms of abstraction are now literally put into play.

The revival of the Russian constructivist tradition on two sides of the Atlantic Ocean—the contrast between the diluted constructivism that rises out of design in the work of Albers,

Morellet, Vasarely, and Soto, and the leap back to the original sources in the work of Stella and Judd—set the stage for a ripe confusion. Very different ambitions and intentions gravitate toward the same set of forms. It is a classic split between European and American views of the world: between rationalism and empiricism, between an idealist hope for a universal language of forms and a pragmatic insistence on particular realities ("what you see is what you see"), between the belief that you make art more democratic by reducing it to the essence of form and the belief that you make it democratic by rejecting the whole idea of essence. In Vasarely, Soto, and other European and Latin American artists, the tradition of hard-edge geometry deriving from constructivism assumes a fixed meaning as the art of a social collective, whereas Stella, Judd, Andre, and other North American artists use the same geometry to make an art of individualism that does not attribute meaning to form, but instead emphasizes the praxis of the artist, which we will get to in the next lecture.

We are back where we started: with the problem of the eye and the mind. Vasarely stresses

the mind, while Stella calls for a purer, more immediate opticality that does not involve the mind. Both rebuff subjectivity and make a claim to objectivity. What results are two very different utopias, each flawed in its own way. The next chapter will explore what might be wrong with the minimalist vision, with the pragmatic philosophy of "what you see is what you see." Here I only want to stress that we are dealing with a more confused picture of geometric abstraction than we started with. What emerges from the collisions and confusions that I have discussed is a certain vision of history. It does not have to do

with conspiracy theory or catastrophe theory. It is not about fixed intentions, clean demises, or new inventions. Rather, it is a history of constant argument, of constant recyclings of form. Indeed, the reinvention of the old as something new is the engine that makes this history go. Forms are endlessly mobile, moving from art to architecture, and then from mere design back to high art. Even at its most reductive, even when it gets pared down to pure geometry, to a bare-bones "art of the real," abstraction provides no respite from interpretation, nor any retreat from the contingencies of history.