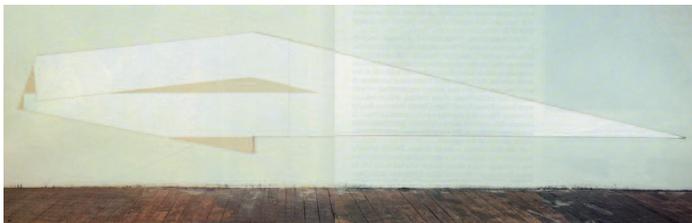


PAINTING SPEED

BY TIFFANY BELL



Ted Stamm: CDD-002, 1981-82, silver acrylic and lacquer on canvas, 32 by 193 inches. All photos courtesy the Estate of Ted Stamm.

For the most part, Ted Stamm's paintings have the austere, cool look of Minimalist objects; he used shaped canvas, primarily a flat, black paint, and geometric forms with hard edges. Stamm himself encouraged an understanding of his work in Minimalist terms. In 1983 he wrote that his work dealt "with the painted physical object and the installation space as a total space,"¹ and he frequently emphasized his interest in materials.

At the same time, his painting includes elements that contradict a Minimalist reading. In his mature work (beginning in 1972), he was not quick to give up traces of the gestural marks of his early lyrical abstractions (1968-72), and he often used sharply angular or very irregular canvases hardly like the geometric forms usually associated with Minimalism. So, too, in his late paintings (ca. 1980-84), streamlined shapes incorporate a sense of velocity and high-tech design that further dissociates them from the more sedentary, monumental stance of classic Minimalist objects.

Initially, the contradictions between the Minimalist context and the non-Minimalist aspects of Stamm's painting made his work difficult to understand. This confusion, together with a general trend away from modernist abstraction, has delayed widespread interest in his work. However, after reconsideration of his art at a memorial exhibition last February at the C.W. Post campus of Long Island University (Stamm died in 1984) and at a show this fall at the Condeso-Lawler Gallery, the contradictions begin to dissolve.

At first Stamm investigated pictorial techniques used to define objectness. Influenced by the Minimalist desire to make nonreferential art, he was also involved in the Conceptualist

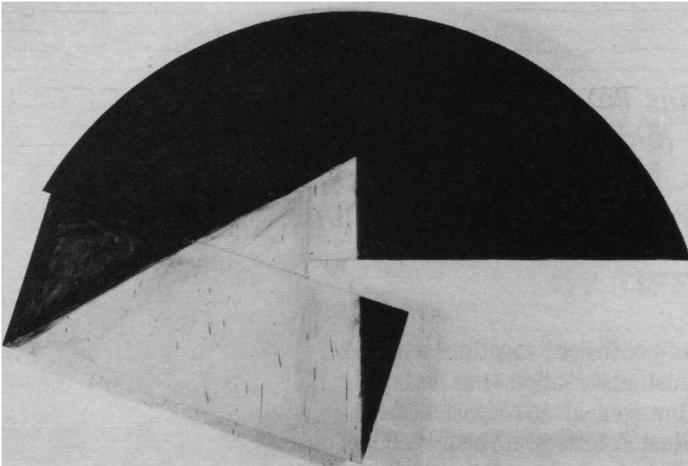
interest in process. From 1972 to the mid-'70s, his work evolved from these two sources.

In 1972 Stamm began his "Cancel" paintings, made by covering some of his brightly colored lyrical abstractions with gridlike layers of black paint. Although flecks of color are still visible, the black effectively "cancels" the expressive content of the gestural abstractions. The "Cancel" paintings also mark the beginning of Stamm's infatuation with black on raw canvas, perhaps the most consistent aspect of his work. With the exception of an occasional white, silver or red, this color, associated with toughness and impersonality, was the only one he used after 1972.

From that point on, Stamm worked in a method similar to Frank Stella's, making different, sometimes overlapping series. After the "Cancel" paintings, he began his "Roll" drawings and paintings, which further removed his art from personal, gestural associations. Stamm invented a system whereby the roll of dice or the spinning of a roulette wheel determined what each work would look like. Numbers were given to predetermined patterns; one roll decided the format of the painting, another roll how many layers of paint it would have. (Friends were often the dice rollers and the resulting paintings would be named for them.) As Stamm's work developed in concert with the Conceptualist ideas around him, he stressed the systematic aspect, rather than the chance element, of this approach.

In 1974 Stamm turned to shaped canvases. The first format he developed—and continued to work with throughout his career was a rectangle with a shorter triangle attached to the left. He called these shapes "Woosters" after a form seen in the pavement on Wooster street where he lived. If his "Cancel" and "Roll" series rehearse Conceptualist concerns with process, his early "Woosters" are exercises in formalist devices. In a manner reminiscent of Robert Mangold's painting, drawn lines function as pictorial equivalents of the actual lines made by the edges of the stretchers, and as in Stella's "Irregular Polygon" series of 1966, literal and depicted shapes are contrasted.

The "Dodger" shape, named for the Brooklyn Dodgers and possibly derived from the curved perimeter of a baseball field, is the second predominant format of Stamm's paintings. Begun in 1975, the "Dodgers" are generally made of arched stretchers which angle into a rectangle on the left side. Although these paintings, like the



Dodger-5, 1975, oil on canvas, 63 1/2 by 102 inches

"Woosters," are still tied up in formalist concerns (flatness, frontality and the integration of literal and depicted shape), their eccentric formats make them appear less derivative of Minimalist paintings. Perhaps influenced by Stella's idiosyncratic shapes, Stamm used chopped and notched stretchers attached at peculiar angles in the early "Dodgers." The black areas, "sloppily" painted, accentuate this irregularity; they do not restate the overall shape of the painting but instead respond to one or more of its boundaries. This formal eccentricity also recalls the personal aspects of Stamm's early lyrical abstractions.

By 1976 the "Dodger" shape had become simpler: the drips and erasures seen in the earlier "Dodgers" had disappeared, the surfaces had become smoother, the blacks flatter and the painted edges more sharply defined. In these later "Dodgers," the personal element previously evoked by gesture or idiosyncratic design is conveyed by a more emblematic quality. Stamm identified the "Dodger" shape with himself. That he thought of this image as a kind of personal sign is also apparent in his more Conceptualist projects involving the "Dodger" form.

In 1976 Stamm began a series of street pieces. The first and most elaborate was the "Designator Series" in which he discreetly stenciled a small "Dodger" shape in locations in New York City that had significance for him: the building he lived in, the steps of his local post office, the building in which a close friend lived, etc. The project eventually took four stages: in the first, he painted the shape black; on a second visit, if the image had been altered, he painted a silver "Dodger" over it; the third time, he stenciled a black T on the silver shape; and on the final visit, he made a silver T. In this project

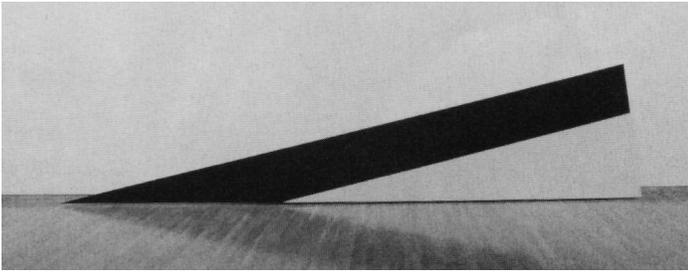
the "Dodger" not only designated places of biographic importance but also marked the passage of time. Emblematic of Stamm's art, it registered his presence in the world.

In the later "Dodgers" and in two related series, the "C-Dodgers" begun in 1978 (basically the same shape but simpler and sleeker) and the "Zephyrs" of 1979 (a similar shape but without a rectangle at the left), the painted black areas became explicitly cruciform. This emphasis on relating his canvases to the architectural surroundings and vertical stance of the viewer is also evident in the later "Wooster" paintings. Directing attention to the installation of his work, Stamm hung his "Low Woosters" (LXWs) of 1980 very close to the floor. The "Incline Experimentations" (IXSs) of 1983—long, thin triangles related to the "Wooster" shape—were hung less than half an inch off the floor and tilted slightly (with their top corners closer to the wall). This stress on objectness not only enhances the emblematic quality of the paintings, but also operates as a counterpoint to a new element—a sense of motion or speed that Stamm introduced into his art at this time.

A student of industrial design in college, Stamm maintained an interest in the design of fast-moving vehicles. Many of the titles of his paintings derive from the names of cars, trains or airplanes. The "Zephyrs," for example, are named after a sleek, high-velocity train; the C in "C-Dodgers" refers to the supersonic Concorde. Even the abbreviations in his titles suggest a kind of speedwriting or tech language. This interest in motion is evident in the continuous development of the paintings toward a more streamlined, high-tech appearance. One of the last major works Stamm completed was a long, sleek painting on aluminum titled CDX-J (1983). Although he was not completely satisfied with this work, it echoes the power and speed of race cars and jets more clearly than any of his other paintings.

Rather than the still, existential presence of the classic Minimalist object, then, Stamm's work conveys a sense of latent energy by association with technological design. Interestingly, this element of his work appears to relate to a position recently presented by artist-critic Peter Halley.

In a recent article Halley describes aspects of Stella's work in terms that clearly pertain more to his own paintings than to Stella's.² He suggests that evenly painted surfaces and taped edges create a "cool, science-fictional look" and views stripes as "bands for



IXS, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 4 feet 8 inches by 19 feet 9 inches

movement or circulation." Halley further associates pictorial movement with the speed of electrical currents, and relates aluminum paints to "elements of the hyperreal, post-industrial world." His own paintings register these interests in geometric configurations painted with Day-Glo colors that resemble models for electrical systems.

Although Stamm's concerns with speed and technology may seem similar to Halley's, Stamm did not use abstract means to represent observed patterns in contemporary culture as Halley does: Stamm worked within the modernist tradition of self-reflexive abstraction. Nor do Stamm's paintings exist as signs severed from reality as Halley suggests his do: their clear, persistent definition of objectness asserts a physical continuity between the space-time of art and that of life. Furthermore, although Stamm, like Halley, responded to elements of a post-industrial environment, the technological references in his work derive less from a conscious recognition of our putatively postmodern context than from an embrace of modernism itself.

Stamm's concern with speed stemmed from his modernist belief in progress. As with the Italian Futurists, his fascination with modern design and technology was integrally related to an idea of a painting for the future. Indeed, he claimed his project was to advance painting and publicized his intention with his slogan "Painting Advance Stamm 1990." Idealistic though this project was, Stamm's paintings do suggest that abstraction—even an abstract painting rooted in modernist concerns—can address the complexities of contemporary reality.

1. Ted Stamm quoted in "Condeso/Lawler Report," May 3, 1983.
2. Peter Halley, "Frank Stella and the Simulacrum," *Flash Art*, Feb.-March, 1986, pp. 32-35.

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