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Frank Stella

Connections

HATJE CANTZ

Connecting Past and Present

Robert Hobbs

"There are two problems in painting. One is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to ma a painting. The first is learning something and the seco is making something."

Frank Stella, Text of a Lecture at the Pratt Institute, 1959-56

Stella's Paintings: From the Late 1950s to the mid-1980s—Excision and Literalization

Introduction

In order to appreciate the far-reaching historical contributions of Frank Stella's overall work, it will help to begin by clearing up several of the persistent misconceptions plaguing it from its beginning in the late 1950s, since these misconstruations have undermined the sea change this artist initiated with his Black Paintings (1958–60). Among the most important reconsiderations of painting as a distinct genre Stella's initial series introduced are: 1) moving away from the romantic idea of a canvas as the artist's own surrogate and repository for personal feelings; 2) isolating the title of the work of art as a self-referential label and undermining its former role as a key to interpreting a work of art; and 3) imposing the strictures of vision on painting, so it becomes first and foremost an exercise in a particular mode of seeing a work as a separate, autonomous entity. Since *Connections* emphasizes formal relationships cohering Stella's admittedly diverse body of work into an overall entity while making links between dissimilar pieces refreshingly evident, this essay will undertake the different tactic of viewing Stella's long-term strategies for realizing a distinctly new content as a union of two very distinct bodies of work, involving first subtracting perceived nonessentials from painting and then later retrieving for reconsideration some of these jettisoned conventions.

I will therefore view Stella's work as joined through an overarching dialectics, predicated on first an initial rejection of Abstract Expressionism's late romantic legacy. This first period in turn comprises two distinct phases whereby the artist's hand is in the beginning effaced and then acknowledged in the mid-1970s in the Exotic Birds, albeit ironically, as an artistic convention on a part with a number of others he had already been paring away from painting. In this way both painting and artists' gestures can be seen without the baggage of traditionally accepted metaphysical associations, including the ideology of humanism and other such concepts beyond empiricism's strict range. This first part of Stella's project, extending from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s, can be understood as a substantial reworking of the highly precious and long celebrated nineteenth-century art for art's sake aesthetic, with its highly decorous and dandified overlays, elitist pretentions, and removal from the prosaics of everyday life. This Stella does in order to reveal art as comprising a set of rigorously conceived positivist propositions, shorn of metaphor and other such decorous metaphysical embellishments, including the myth of serving as repositories for artists' feelings, personality and biography, as well as the times in which they lived. In this first period of his work, Stella intended art, which he considered at the time to be synonymous with painting, to be *tout court* a scrupulous perceptual encounter, albeit a self-conscious one so that perception would work in tandem with apperception. Objectified and set off from the wall by his decisive use of extra thick stretchers to emphasize contradictions between a given work's actual shape and the depicted images on its surface, Stella's essentially ascetic view of painting was to be clearly defined by both the perceptual elements it circumscribes and by the extra-visual terms it rejects. Since Stella has been a rigorous thinker from the very beginning when he looked at Abstract Expressionism in terms of the artistic elements it opposes in its efforts to encumber painting with meaning and avoids, such as decoration, which these mid-century artists regarded as mindless, he was bound at some point to begin a dialectical investigation of the practices he had rejected, and he did so beginning in the mid-1980s with his series dedicated to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and continued doing so at the end of the 1990s when he became acquainted with Heinrich von Kleist's novellas, dramas, and theoretical writings on art, which even now have an impact on his thinking. The combination of first moving away from Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, followed by accepting and transforming certain aspects of it, starting in the 1980s with the implicit Merleau-Pontian phenomenological mode of embodied perception once demanded by its "big pictures," constitutes an overall thematic of excisions and connections distinguishing Stella's overall oeuvre.

Stella, then, first clears a path for making a new type of art in 1958, his last year at Princeton and first one in New York, when he perceives the profound ramifications of the contradictory image/object dichotomy represented by Jasper Johns' Flags seen at Leo Castelli Gallery, and he continues to develop this approach, making it an inextricable part of modern art history, in the many series he innovates over the next two decades. He subsequently enlarges on this first period of logical positivist objectification in a second phase, beginning in the mid-1970s with a new form of painting comprised of cut-out pieces of corrugated aluminum assembled into high reliefs. Seven years later he articulates a rationale for this work in his analysis of the Baroque artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573–1610) by looking at it from the perspective of abstract painting. This stocktaking took the form of a series of six lectures presented under the title *Working Space* Stella gave at Harvard University from October 1983 through April 1984 when he was named Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry.[1] The basis for the reconsideration of pictorial space found in these talks no doubt comes from Stella's experience creating the Exotic Birds (1976–80), with specific works in this series titled with the names of endangered or extinct birds, and the contemporaneous Indian Birds (1978–79), with individual paintings named for species found only on the Indian subcontinent. The works in these series were not intended as illustrations of their titles, except perhaps ironically, since their raucous graffiti picks up on the contemporary vernacular form of aggressive spray-painted inscriptions of New York self-taught artists' names or tags—analogized, maybe, as Exotic or Indian Birds—then emblazoning New York's

subway cars and inscribed on some of its buildings. Stella's generic paint gestures at this time emulate the brash handwriting of this street-wise graffiti art, and at the same time emphasizes how this type of industrial folk art constitutes a specific genre, a type of mark-making seen in his work in terms of ironic quotation marks, indicating its idea of individuality to be only a construct, thus contributing to Stella's overall structuralist view of art.

After a little more than a decade of looking at style as subject matter and gesture as a mode of mark-making in the 1970s, Stella began to shift the focus of his art by revisiting the area he had initially dispensed with in the late 1950s—that is, ideas associated with the late romantic Abstract Expressionist art of his youth—and he found in this type of painting absorbing challenges. These include the transformation of some Abstract Expressionists' reliance on pentimenti—those layers of willing, according to Motherwell[2]—into overlapping vectors signaling different velocities and realities. They also comprise the stoppage of action, in particular, the static realization of Pollock's action painting into the mediated signs Stella calls the "frozen gesture[s]."[3] involving differences between brushwork viewed as indexes and icons, as well as the topological pressures on given shapes achieved through computer-aided design software, a kind of computer-aided machining or CAD/CAM software. These reconsiderations of aspects of Abstract Expressionism achieved largely through the many topographical deformations achievable through CAD/CAM programs have enabled Stella to reorient his work, transforming it into a new dialogue between visual and virtual modes of seeing, which he continues even now to investigate and mine in complex overlays of diverse spaces similar to those appearing in *Cantahar*, 1998. As Stella has noted:

> The gradual change from planar surfaces to more volumetric surfaces is a topological problem, basically the exploration of more intricate or more complicated surfaces to be worked on, i.e. painted on. The expansion of surfaces available to abstraction is what has kept me going.[4]

So, instead of proposing only one overarching gestalt for Stella's more than five decades as a practicing artist and in place of subdividing it into the numerous series he has created over the years, as is usually done, I will view it in terms of two basic interrelated ones, a yin-and-yang proposition, so to speak, with its initial *raison d'être* found in the sweeping tabula rasa first realized in the Black Paintings and perpetuated in a variety of ways in works made until the early 1980s when Stella begins substantially rethinking his overall program by retrieving some of the artistic conventions he initially rejected and then proceeding to add references to different ways of morphing two- and three-dimensional designs to achieve new and elastic deformations—actions betokening a range of actual and illusionistic spaces.

The Black Paintings

I will then begin with Stella's first series, the Black Paintings, which includes *Clinton Plaza*, 1959, and base the first half of this essay's discussion on them, since this group of works has enormous ramifications for Stella's long-term critical method, formative to so many other works in this exhibition from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. The Black Series reveals with great clarity Stella's truly radical tactics for rethinking painting in terms of its literal equivalents—a structuralist approach—while being mindful of how apperception's self-consciousness transforms mere seeing into an aesthetically conditioned, enlarged realm of awareness. Particularly notable examples in *Connections* includes the following works and their titles, which, for the most part, function as useful identifying handles rather than clues to specific contents and are for that reason categorized according to different series of names arbitrarily selected by the artist; they include: *Creede II* from the group of Copper Paintings (1960–61), with all its titles taken from towns in Colorado's San Juan Mountains; *Sidney Guberman*, a work from the Purple Series (1963–64) whose titles refer to names of the artist's friends; *Moultonville II* from the Irregular Polygons (1966–67), all named for New Hampshire towns; *Felstzyn III* identified, like the rest of the works in the Polish Village series for Polish synagogues destroyed by Nazis; and *Lettre sur les aveugles II*, 1974, one of the Diderot series, the largest of the Concentric Squares, with its titles all referring to works by the French eighteenth-century critic and encyclopedist Denis Diderot. Misinterpretations of the Black Paintings and their impact on our understanding of such works as those listed above involve perpetuating the myth of symmetrical relationships between the content of specific paintings and their titles used as guides, despite the fact that so many of Stella's titles are categorical names of towns, synagogues, friends, and literary works, as seen in the above list.

A particularly notable instance of relying on paintings' titles as beacons for individual work's content is the enumeration of topics provided by then Baltimore Museum of Art curator Brenda Richardson for her retrospective view of the Black Paintings. Because she was so well versed in these works, one would expect Richardson to present Stella's own perspective on titles as inconvenient yet necessary identifying labels. Beginning with the Black Paintings, Stella recognized the confusion stemming from such nonobjective titles as "untitled" together with numbers, so he opted for clearly distinct labels, names really, for distinguishing individual works, even though he was not consistent in the choice of titles for his first group of works, since he named them for buildings as well as places in New York City with personal associations for him. This inconsistency provided Richardson the occasion to associate his titles with melancholy, empathy, blacks and jazz, and, most controversially, an uneasy encounter with fascism:

> Death and especially suicide are prevalent references in the titles [of the Black Paintings]. The names of three paintings incorporate Nazi references. Four titles derive from major disasters. Several names come from song titles with unusually depressing subject matter. Several others are named for "black and deviate" nightclubs (in [William] Rubin's words). Stella loved jazz and went to nightclubs and bars for both music and socializing; the artist says the atmosphere some of these clubs reminded him of the pre-Nazi, German cabaret scene with its particularly bizarre mentality. References are made to Negro or blind jazz musicians. When place names are used as titles, they invariably refer to areas of urban blight, tenement housing, minority neighborhoods. For Stella to call the titles "downbeat" is clearly an understatement.[5]

1 Frank Stella, *Working Space*, (Cambridge, MA and London, 1986), p. 19.

2 Robert Motherwell, "Statement," in Motherwell, exh. cat., Samuel M. Kootz Gallery (New York, 1947), n.p. Motherwell's definitive statement on pentimenti in his art is the following:

I begin a painting with a series of mistakes. The painting comes out of the correction of mistakes by feeling. I begin with shapes and colors which are not related internally nor to the external world; I work without images. Ultimate unifications come about through modulation of the surface by innumerable trials and errors. The final picture is the process arrested at the moment when what I was looking for flashes into view. My pictures have layers of mistakes buried in them—an X-ray would disclose crimes—layers of conscious ness, of willing.

3 Frank Stella, "Melrose Avenue" in *Frank Stella at Tyler Graphics* (Minneapolis, 1997), p. 39.

4 Frank Stella, e-mail message to the author, August 21, 2011.

5 Brenda Richardson, *Frank Stella: The Black Paintings* (Baltimore, 1976), p. 4.

Although Stella's titles for individual Black Paintings can be regarded as ways to characterize this color composed of all the colors and thus an ultimate value in terms of an emotional and depressing semiotic, Richardson's exploration of the titles' references leaves neither room for irony nor a consideration of the artist's dry wit, which, we will see, is crucial to his understanding of the series and the titles he appended to individual works. While the intentional fallacy definitely has its limits, on occasion it is worth being invoked when one wishes, as in this case, to determine Stella's self-conscious desire to enter into the history of modern painting and change its course.

In addition to these names and the content Richardson pins to them, the title of another Black Painting, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, 1959, which the Museum of Modern Art acquired in 1959 (Stella's first museum purchase), has seemed to a number of critics and art historians to establish unassailable bridges between the artist's life and his work. For them, the painting's meaning is restricted to the title's confirmation of the artist's specific circumstances and emotional outlook while painting this work. At the time of creating it, however, Stella was not depressed since he was discovering the freedom of being a young bohemian artist in lower Manhattan at night while working days as a housepainter in New York City's outlying boroughs.[5] Although alignments between the artist's biography with his art contradict Stella's pointed assertion in 1968, "I . . . want my painting to be so you can't avoid the fact that it's supposed to be entirely visual,"[7] it has proven useful for historians and critics wishing to confer traditional legitimacy on the Black Paintings as responsible iconographic endeavors predicated on the artist's experiences and personality.

The often-cited equation of artists being inextricably connected to their work and its meanings is particularly vexatious in this situation since it can neither be proved nor disproved. Despite these difficulties, this approach became a last-gasp romanticism, taking the form of often-repeated mantras in the 1950s, when Abstract Expressionist individuality, in league with French existentialism, dictated necessary alignments between artists and their work. This uneasy linkage between artist and work, in fact, characterized the dominant reception to Stella's Black Paintings soon after their first New York exposure in The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition *Sixteen Americans*, which opened in 1959, when the then art critic William S. Rubin described, in an *Art International* review, how the works "eerie presence" had "mesmerized" him.[8] In retrospect, Rubin's impassioned reaction appears less informed by knowledge of the actual intentions of the Black Paintings than his own grounding in American Abstract Expressionist practices. At the time such painters as Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock regularly applied inflated labels like *Elegy to the Spanish Republic, Ocean Greyness*, and *Easter and the Totem* to their paintings in an effort to reinforce the intended epic grandeur and profound content of their works, and allude as well to their own individual prescience and commitment.

Because Rubin subsequently became MoMA's highest ranking curator and one of Stella's most prominent advocates, even giving him at age thirty-two, a full-scale retrospective in 1970, the very deliberate bad-boy tactics of this artist's first series, which will be discussed shortly, continued to be passed over in favor of the time-honored tradition of aligning an artist with his work. Although Rubin attempts in his catalogue essay for this first retrospective to give Stella leave to create a less restrictive purview for his art, his assessment of the Black Paintings remains conservative and limiting as his following analysis of them indicates:

> To some extent, however, Stella's deadpan approach to the discussion of his painting is belied by the evidence of his own associations with them, as indicated by their titles . . . Stella invests considerable interest in his titles, which sometimes bear a rather direct associational relation to the image . . . As in Stella's other series, there is an underlying unity among the titles of the Black pictures, though these titles were not arrived at as systematically as later ones were. The earlier, rectilinear Black pictures bear titles reflecting what Stella calls "downbeat" or "depressed political" situations . . . Stella's titles constitute personal associations with the pictures, and he would be horrified at the idea that a viewer might use them as a springboard to content. But the very fact of their existence—quite apart from the particular nature of the metaphors involved—suggests the way in which Stella is drawn to associations whose ambiguities potentially subvert the formal and intellectual rigor of his art.[9]

In 1976 Richardson took up Rubin's gauntlet, advancing it further when she associated this assumed beat-style dejection with a political point of view in her catalogue on the Black Paintings.[10] "It would be difficult to ignore, too," Richardson opines, "the relationship between the black of the painting and the [Italian] 'Blackshirts' . . ."[11] She adds, "there seems to be convincing evidence that Stella was assigning titles to the Black Paintings based on associations of content as well as form."[12]

But Richardson's argument is inconsistent with the concerted efforts Stella made early in his career to distance his work from himself and thereby preclude interpretations predicated on reading his art in terms of either himself or a presumed literary or historically prescribed content. This course of action correlates with the overall goal in the first half of my essay to discern and analyze the across-the-board modus operandi Stella employed during the first three decades he made art. Working in concert with his long-term friends Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre, Stella carefully staged the reception of his Black Paintings. I begin my analysis of Stella's efforts to distance himself from his work through the creation of an unconventional and unreliable persona by looking again at Frampton's 1959 full-length photograph of him standing against a white backdrop, wearing a three-piece suit and tie, while standing *contrapposto* with studied nonchalance and firmly stashing one hand in his suit pocket. Far more appropriate for a Princeton yearbook than a museum catalogue presenting cutting-edge artists to the New York art world, the photograph was submitted to MoMA curator Dorothy Miller for publication in her *Sixteen Americans* catalogue. Even though Stella later recalled Miller's concern about the decorum of this image, even to the point of asking for "a more informal photograph," he chose not to comply with her request. Thus, he broke with an established yet unwritten code for vanguard representation in the 1950s by not appearing as the expected angry young lion and by presenting himself instead as a paragon of good taste. While Frampton's photograph of him might be taken as proof of the artist's sartorial affiliations, it can also be looked at as a tongue-

6 Ibid., p. 145.

7 "Questions to Stella and Judd: Interview by Bruce Glaser, Edited by Lucy R. Lippard" in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York, 1968), p. 158.

8 William Rubin, "Younger American Painters," *Art International* 4, no. 1 (January 1960).

9 William Rubin, *Frank Stella* (New York, 1970), pp. 44–45.

10 Brenda Richardson, *Frank Stella: The Black Paintings*, exh. cat., Baltimore Museum of Art (Baltimore, 1976).

11 Ibid., p. 39.

12 Ibid.

in-cheek jab at 1950s New York vanguard conformism, comprising the standard uniform of dungarees and an overall disheveled existential or quasi-beat appearance. The contrasting formal image of Stella, then, anticipates the type of critique artist Les Levine later lobbed at the conformism of the so-called nonconformist art world when he appeared regularly in suit and tie rather than the then *de rigueur* rumpled shirt and jeans.

This photograph of Stella can also be regarded as a wry postscript to the assessment critic and painter Elaine de Kooning, made in her 1955 essay "Subject: What, How or Who?" regarding the foibles and pretensions of the mid-twentieth-century New York art world. Her condemnation appeared in *Art News*:

> Revolution means existence, not progress, for the artist. But you cannot knock over a structure that has already been blown to pieces. In a period like the present, eclectic to the point of chaos, there is no way to contradict, because each revolution is immediately swallowed by a convention. Every new style is accepted without question by the artist and the audience of the avant-garde . . . There is, however, still a prevalent belief that abstract art is, per se, revolutionary, that representational art is, per se, reactionary . . . Shocks today are mock-shocks. The opponents are all straw men . . . Docile art students can take up Non-Objective art in as conventional a spirit as their predecessors turned to Realism. The 'Taste bureaucracy'—museums, schools, art, and architecture as well as design and fashion magazines, advertising agencies—all freely accept abstraction, if largely on a false premise, as a matter of style, not of subject.[13]

De Kooning's essay describes a new apathy at work in the mid-century New York art world when traditional tensions between old and new art, as well as conservative and radical thinking, were being relaxed. As a young student, Stella had assiduously read *Art News*, then considered the cutting-edge periodical of choice, and no doubt would have known of de Kooning's piece. Even if he did not, her criticisms reflected prevailing sentiments regarding the academicism of abstract art, substantiated by the noted realist painter and subtle critic Fairfield Porter in 1961. Instead of viewing the tradition of continual innovation as a subject to bemoan, Porter assumes it to comprise an essential part of any established culture. He even claimed the Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell, son of a former Wells Fargo Bank CEO, as a leader of the traditionalist camp, since his seeming nonconformity exemplified the then unwritten but rigorously adhered to rules of vanguard conformism:

> Motherwell believes in the formality of his own time, which is called informality. He completely accepts his era. Even his belief in novelty (which he has stated) is conservative. His is the conversation of the soft shirt, the open collar, the modern chair—a decorous liberalism . . . His acceptance of his era is so uncritical as to be liberating . . . Motherwell is of his time and very much in it.[14]

This mid-century assessment of the vanguard as an established culture with its own set of conventions and implicit rules for membership is crucial to our understanding of the dry wit underlying Stella's three-piece suit in his first public appearance as an artist. This image is also our initial indication of his attempt to position his work in a dramatically new way so it might be seen outside the strictures of the then regnant art historical canon.

In looking at Stella's Black Paintings it is important to take into consideration the currency of black humor at the time. Around the same time as this series of work, the older and established New York abstractionist and one-time Abstract Expressionist Ad Reinhardt was rethinking the academicism of the vanguard and considering how to pose a radically new solution by joining avant guardism with its opposite in his own work. Thus, Reinhardt was forging the same type of synthesis of progressive and regressive trends, of advanced form and an almost reactionary reliance on the empiricism of early twentieth-century formalism, as that formed by Stella's Black Paintings and the photograph of himself in a three-piece suit. In addition to this combination of images in *Sixteen Americans,* Stella in concert with Frampton and Andre was working out details about how to continue this process of positioning himself in relation to his own Black Paintings so that they would constitute vanguard art's endgame solution. Since such far-reaching aspirations for a young artist might at first appear incredulous, I should point out that historically they began entering the realm of actual artistic possibility during this time when the endgame tactics of the once again celebrated Marcel Duchamp were being discussed.

The title of Duchamp's painting *Tu m',* 1918, which is translated as "you me," implies that the prospective viewer, whom the work addresses with the French familiar pronoun "tu," is encouraged to react to the painting according to the implied verb, which the observer must provide. The painting, which is part of Katharine S. Dreier's bequest to Yale University, was reproduced in the Guggenheim Museum's catalogue, *Jacques Villon—Raymond Duchamp-Villon—Marcel Duchamp* for the 1957 winter exhibition, which Stella and his close associates would no doubt have seen. *Tu m',* also a pun on the word "tomb," one of many such word plays in Duchamp's repertory, is a literalization of this genre's traditional mode of functioning. In my opinion it might also refer back to the series of "Tombs," poems taking the form of eulogies dedicated to such eminent figures as Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Poe, and Paul Verlaine with the intent of toasting them at the same time that it buried them in black type, which in turn is incarcerated on white pages, by the eminent French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, who regarded poetry and art as eminently formal propositions, structuralist tactics *avant la lettre*. Similar to Mallarmé, by transposing into explicit concepts art's implicit contradictory conventions regarding its illusory nature, Duchamp set out to entomb retinal art, i.e., create a richly ironic sepulcher for it in the form of this last painting. In this work, which is intended to end the fictive pursuits of retinal art by nominating and objectifying its functions one by one, Duchamp discovered literal equivalents for painting's traditional functions. Consequently he interpreted hue as a range of color swatches; Plato's relegation of art to only copies of mere copies as a series of painted shadows of his readymades as well as the actual shadow cast by a three-dimensional bottle brush attached perpendicularly to the canvas; illusionism as a trompe l'oeil rip held together with actual safety pins; and art's use of signs and symbols as an emblem of a pointing hand, painted in oils and signed in graphite, by the sign painter R. Klang.

13 Elaine de Kooning, "Subject: What, How or Who?", *Art News 54,* no. 2 (April 1955).

14 Fairfield Porter, "Tradition and Originality," *The Nation,* (1961); repr. in Rackstraw Downes, ed., *Art in its Own Terms,* (Boston, 2008), pp. 121-4.

Even if Stella was unacquainted with Duchamp's last rites for painting, which this French expatriate presented in the shrouded guise of epistemological inquiry instead of the long acclaimed eternal and universal realm of a eulogy bemoaning a lost or irretrievable ontology, he would most certainly have been aware of Robert Rauschenberg's Neo-Dadaist send-up of *Tu m'*. In *Charlene*, 1954, Rauschenberg updated the project of the man he and Johns nicknamed "the Master"[15] by discerning literal equivalents for art's purported functions in terms of candidates, an ironic way of fulfilling Rauschenberg's often expressed desire to bridge the gap between art and life. In this way he could characterize painting as a set of outdated conventions equivalent to the effects of the planned obsolescence then affecting the post-war marketing of trendy objects, with the readily available realization they would soon be superannuated. Rauschenberg used an actual light bulb in *Charlene* to signify painting's traditional capacity to illuminate its subjects and cast light on topics of great interest; bicycle reflectors to indicate art's ability to mirror aspects of reality; the covering of a multicolored umbrella to convey painting's reliance on competing color theories, often schematized as color wheels; newspaper comics to connote the information art divulges through its depictions; reproduced images of great masterpieces to support painting's reliance on art history; a Statue of Liberty bordered in black to proclaim art's symbolic propensities; and a teenager's handwritten letter to a friend in ceremonial puffy script to reinforce art's—and particularly romantic art's—traditional role as a special and often personal form of communiqué. Even the name "Charlene" literalizes one of art's most enduring conventions since this title is simply the name of a female, chosen at random.[16] Rauschenberg referred to works resulting from this type of procedure as "rebuses," and even called one of his assemblages *Rebus*, 1955, which he initiated like a sentence on the upper left with the partial phrase in capital letters, "THAT REPRE" in obvious reference to its representational role. The term also pays homage to Cubist collages and their similarly oriented project of dissecting representation in terms of different levels of realism, including trompe l'oeil, analytically drawn and painted elements, as well as the utilization of such actual letters as "jou," designating the French word for "game" and thereby signaling art's playful role in the type of diversions its different forms of depiction can produce, as well as referring to "journal," meaning newspaper and by extension the news or information to which painting indirectly alludes.

Adhering to this grand tradition of perpetual innovation, baptized by critic Harold Rosenberg in the 1960s as "the tradition of the new,"[17] while acknowledging a recent awareness of its inherent conservatism, Stella took pains to disconnect himself from Abstract Expressionist assumptions about the artist's personality inhering in the work of art by reducing this convention to a no longer relevant lens for looking at art. One of the ways he enacted this separation in formal terms was to create sets of centralized abstract patterns, painted in a straightforward and workmanlike manner, so the resultant images would not be interpreted as abstract runes pointing to his unconscious fantasies and desires. Then, as a parody of the Abstract Expressionist penchant for using suggestive titles, Stella together with Frampton and Andre chose both noncommittal place names and highly pretentious designations, which would either seem irrelevant or stretch credibility to the extreme. In this way Stella was able to point up the ridiculousness of trying to circumscribe a perceptual experience through the literary device of titles.

Although Carl Andre's description of titling *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* has been cited as a reason for the presumed dark and shadowy meanings of the Black Paintings, both the excessive detail included in his description, the ensuing hilarious and pretentious identifying tags given to his own series of panels, and his own conclusions about the entire process indicate the tongue-in-cheek humor involved in subscribing to such a ponderous title—a dry wit suggesting a high degree of skepticism about its applicability to Stella's work. Richardson, however, summarized Andre's thoughts about the choice of this title, without taking into consideration the insider joke involved:

> *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* is a title given to Frank Stella by Carl An dre. When Andre first arrived in New York City in 1957 he did a series of four pastel drawings "about the adventures of Reason and Squalor." He said that he had in mind the genre of allegorical paintings of the Renaissance. He had been reading William Blake (Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* contributed to the title), and he says too that he probably remembered, at least subconsciously, J. D. Salinger's story, *For Esmé—with Love and Squalor*, which he had also read (thus probably contributing the word 'squalor' to the title). The first in the series was *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor;* then came *The Flight of Reason and Squalor into Egypt, The Capture of Reason and Squalor by Pirates*, and finally *The Ransom of Reason and Squalor*. Andre destroyed the pastels, but both he and Stella liked the titles of the series (feeling that *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* was appropriate to the psycho-sociology of being a young artist in New York City at that time). Accordingly, Andre gave the title to Stella to use for the Black Paintings.[18]

Andre's enumeration sounds more like a Hogarthian satire on the sanctimonious morality of contemporary romances, taking the form of an unabashedly ribald *Rake's Progress*, than the chronicle of a disheartened young painter unburdening himself through his work.

In addition, Andre's description accords well with the parodic game of discerning the enormous gaps between painted forms and ascribed content Stella had played at Princeton with his schoolmate Walter Darby Bannard, who later became a noted Color Field painter and formalist critic. According to Stella:

> Darby and I used to play a game which was to decide what the paintings [in the *Art News* series on such-and-such an artist paints a picture] were really like on the basis of what the people wrote about them . . . and how you were supposed to look at something . . . (Name) showed at the Stable [Gallery] . . . has a "breakthrough" of the overall battle, collage, and it becomes "very complicated," "very expert," "very well done" . . . I began to feel very strongly about finding a way of working that . . . you couldn't write about . . . something that didn't lend itself easily to being blown up, to being quickly over promoted, something that was stable in a sense . . . that wasn't constantly a record of your sensitivity, a record of flux.[19]

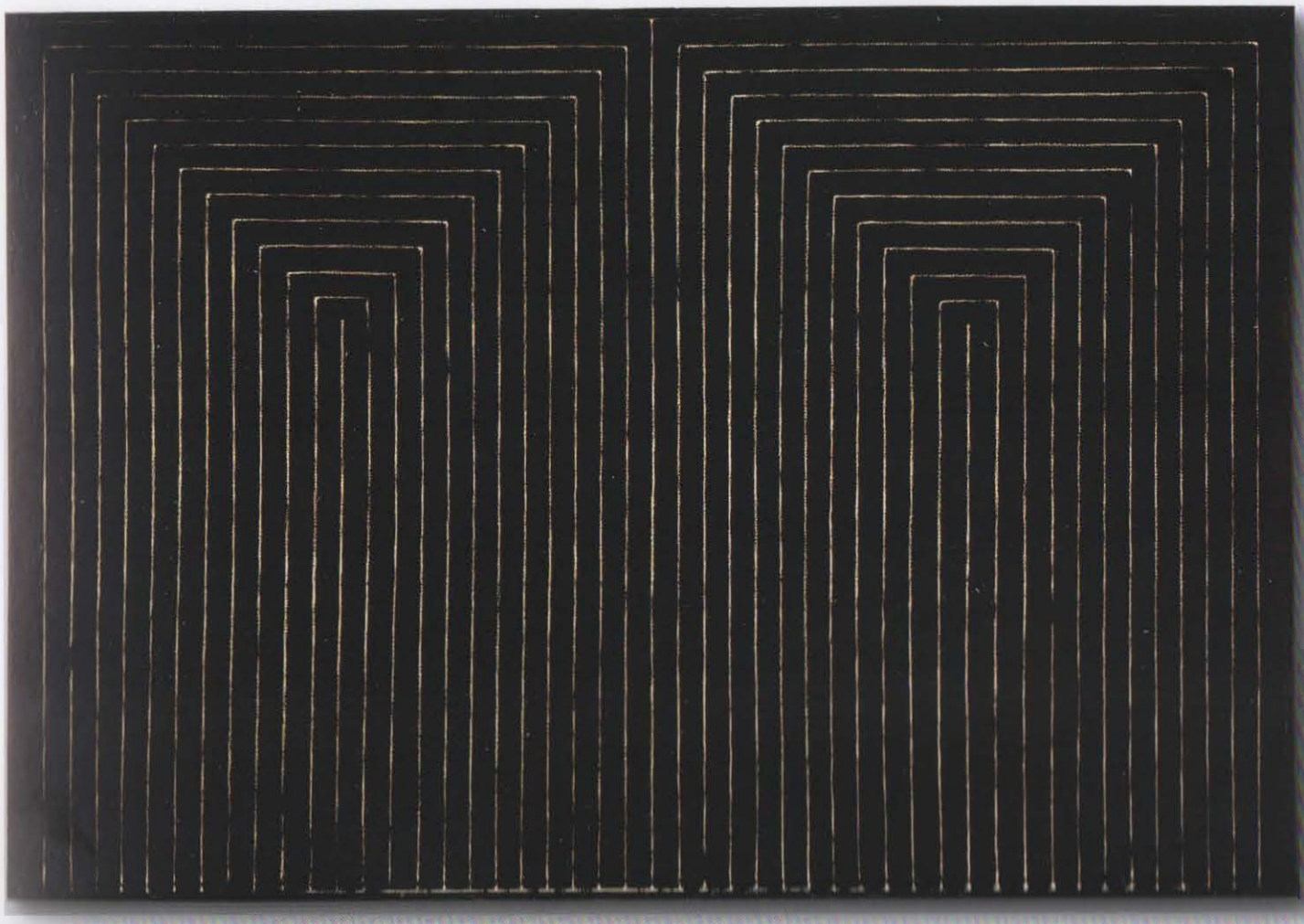
15 Yvonne Thomas, conversation with the author, December 9, 2005. Thomas, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist in the 1950s was well acquainted with Duchamp, Rauschenberg, and Johns and recalled the way the two young two artists referred to Duchamp at that time.

16 Lawrence Alloway notes, "Until this time most of the artist's works had been untitled. At the insistence of friends, Rauchenberg quite literally chose a 'name'—Charlene—for this painting," cf: Lawrence Alloway, *Robert Rauchenberg* (Washington, D. C., 1976), p. 78.

17 Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York, 1965).

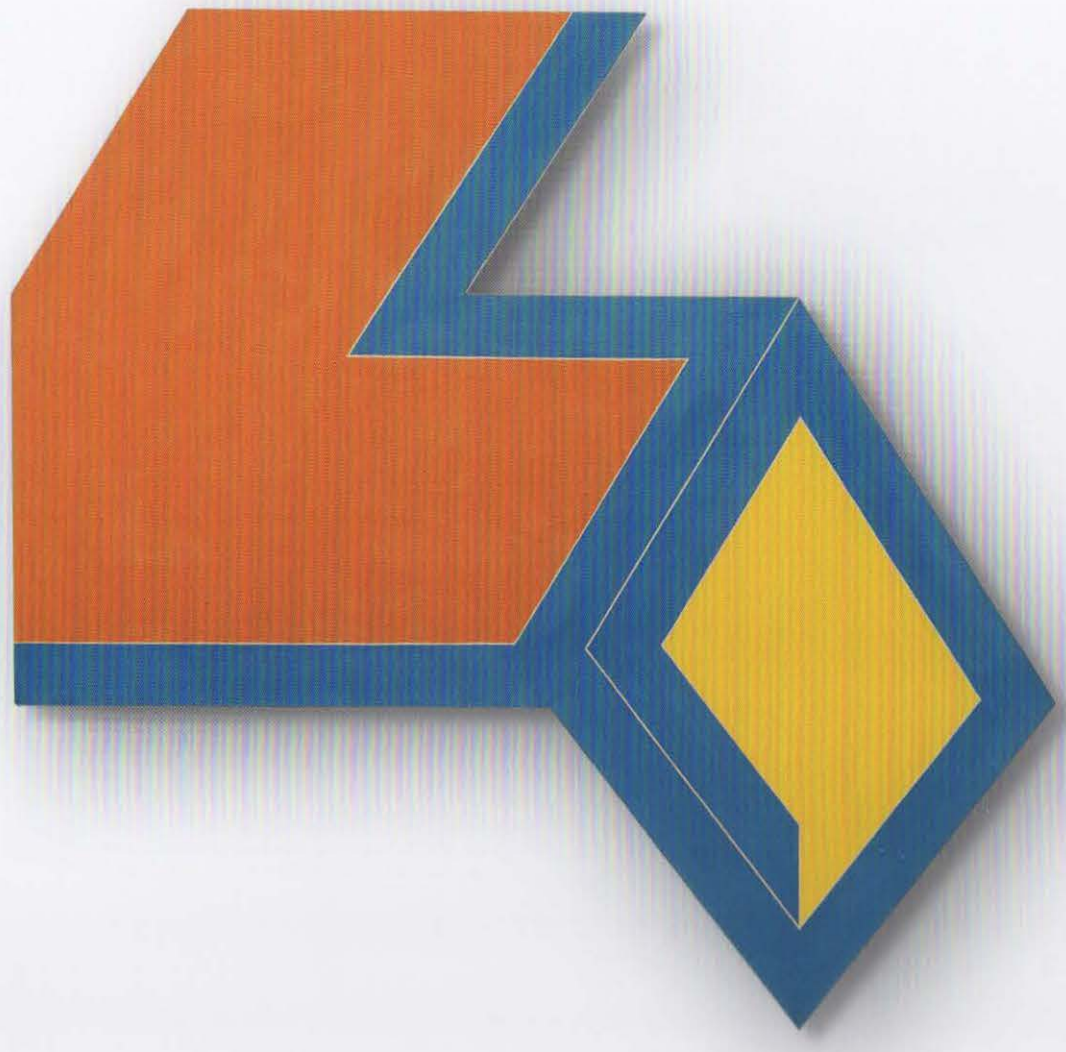
18 Richardson, p. 46.

19 Cited in Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago and London, 1996), p. 120, who notes that the quotation was taken from transcripts of Frank Stella interviewed by Alan Solomon for (W)NET, 1966, take 5 (typescript p. 5).



The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II
1959

Enamel on canvas
230.5 × 337.2 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Effingham I
1967

Acrylic on canvas
335 × 327 cm
Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

The terms of this game are instructive since they present Stella rehearsing, then, subsequently debunking the prevailing rules for success in the art world in which he was to find himself a leading participant in just a few years. Using socialist Pierre Bourdieu's theories, we might conclude that as an undergraduate Stella was already aware of the field of cultural production where he was to become a key player and was practicing with Bannard ways his particularly rigorous visually and perceptually oriented habitus might be used to subvert major accepted conventions.[20] Although the above anecdote was recounted approximately eight years after initiating the Black Paintings, Stella's recollection of his cynicism regarding vanguard art's established playing field helps us understand the role skepticism and humor were to assume in his development of the Black Paintings.

Instead of privileging his own voice in print, Stella relied on Andre to compose the artist's statement for publication in *Sixteen Americans* and Frampton to dictate, under the painter's name, a letter rebutting critic Emily Genauer's negative review in the *Herald Tribune*. Together, these two pieces of writing helped to give the traditional artist's persona and presumed authentic voice—both holdovers from romanticism—a *coup de grace*. Several years before Andy Warhol demonstrated the extent to which the mid-twentieth-century artist's voice had become compromised and mediated when he sent a double to impersonate himself on the university lecture circuit, Stella permitted—and, I suspect, even encouraged—his persona to become a Charlie McCarthy doll for his friends' ventriloquizing. Although he no doubt recognized the significance of this tactic, its effectiveness depended on an ability to cancel out the impact that titles and artist's statements traditionally have. Given this state of affairs, one might well ask why Stella did not counter Rubin and others by revealing his original aims. My assessment is this: if Stella revealed his joke, then its humor and punch would have been sacrificed, thus turning a wry riposte to prevailing practices regarding the presumed authenticity of an artist's voice into a pedantic response. In addition, his revelation would have constituted a new critical iconography for the work, thus distancing the viewer from it even more by replacing actual seeing with theorizing about levels of mediation. Once the shenanigans of Stella and his friends were uncovered, Stella took recourse in his often remarked upon bashfulness:

> I was shy. And they were very aggressive and loved to do it. Hollis, I mean there was no stopping him . . . The best letter, it was all Hollis's ideas, too. He was mad because Emily Genauer criticized me. He loved to attack critics. But it was a good letter . . . very cute and very clever. [Carl's essay] was sort of mystical . . . I would've never thought of that in a million years.[21]

But shyness cannot account for Stella's desire to invalidate the paramount roles both titles and the artist's persona have played in Abstract Expressionist art, so that his "final solutions" might rise anew from content's ashes and testify to the freshness and candor of the new empiricism he hoped to effect in his less mediated work.

These ploys for distancing painting from both their artists and titles, together with Stella's matter of fact way of working, enabled him to adopt Rauschenberg's literalization of painting's functions into his own work. In doing so he transformed painting in a heretofore unprecedented manner, ensuring its status as a clear and cohesive structural entity in which such naturalized terms as title, mode of being created, and connection with the artist's self are all abstracted and denaturalized, thus negating them as mediating forces. He placed his titles in quotation marks, so to speak, so that they might function quizzically as self-reflexive entities, referring more to their unnatural mode of operation than to a content to which the paintings are appended. If they continue to be used as guides to interpretation, the resultant explications tell us as much, if not more, about the person conducting the investigation than they do about the work in question. This new and fresh way of projecting the meaning of the works of art outward to prospective viewers incorporates a phenomenological mode of inquiry French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, known for his theories regarding embodied perception, would have applauded. As artist-sanctioned heuristic devices, Stella's titles can only be taken abstractly as pointing to the fact that names of works of art are arbitrary tags, he untraditionally used to attach arbitrary meanings to abstract works of art.

In Stella's work, painting can be divided into the two processes of generation and execution. The first procedure is akin to designing, while the second correlates with a housepainter's straightforward desire to cover a surface as expediently and effectively as possible. As this artist noted, "I didn't want to make variations; I didn't want to record a path. I wanted to get the paint out of the can and onto the canvas . . . I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can."[22] From this statement we can conclude how Stella's painting defines art in terms of age-old connotations of skill, craft, and trade, giving rise to the often cited reduction of the work of art to the simple designation "work," an approach following in the wake of his early series of Black Paintings and perpetuated by the 1960s Minimalism with which his art has at times been associated.

Only by calling attention to the artificiality of the conventions of the artist's voice (his or her persona), allusive titles, and their way of working together to comprise traditional painting can Stella emphasize the arbitrariness of art's construction as an overall naturalized system with rules governing the operation of each individual element. While his strategy might appear in retrospect to be motivated by a desire to move art from the Abstract Expressionist assumption of surrogate being to a new postmodernism realm intent on critiquing and analyzing the type of knowledge art is presumed to communicate, it appears Stella at the time only wanted to cancel out these conventions, not use them as a basis for a new theoretical system. We might summarize his Black Paintings as a concerted effort to eradicate as many of the fringe elements as possible infecting the direct perception of the actual visual formats facing viewers. While this concerted activity explains how Stella attempted to create a new *tabula rasa* for painting, it also clarifies the following statement, he made in 1964:

> My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he's doing. He is making a thing. All that should be taken for granted. If the painting were clean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion . . . What you see is what you see.[23]

20 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Jackson (New York, 1993).

21 Jones, p. 119, referring to Stella's interview with her, July 18, 1990.

22 "Questions to Stella and Judd" in Battcock, p. 157.

23 Ibid., p. 158.

Significantly enough, this statement was made the year after he completed his Purple Series in which he stretched credulity between his minimal forms and the tantalizing references in the works' titles to portraits of such art world figures as the well known New York art dealers Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend, as well as his long-term friend, the artist Sidney Guberman, thus forcing the issue of relating abstract art to the subject matter of referential titles by demonstrating their arbitrariness.

In his Black Paintings, as we have seen, Stella managed not only to parry the many thrusts made by the Abstract Expressionists in the direction of sublime and transcendental art, but also to deliver with indisputable cool an irrevocable coup de grace to this sometimes-hyperventilated work. His in-depth knowledge of the late and final phase of romanticism represented by Abstract Expressionism enabled him to perceive, with amazing acuity, the exact position of its Achilles' heel. Early on he had determined its weakness to be located in contradictions between its avowedly materialist concerns and transcendental pretensions. In light of this ongoing contradiction, it is not surprising that a crucial reference for Stella's early work is his profound understanding of the enormous disparity between minimal form and maximal content proposed by Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings.

A heretofore largely unacknowledged source for Stella's art is Clement Greenberg's illuminating characterization of Newman's works in his seminal essay, "American Type Painting," as deductive structures whose internal shapes, i.e., zips, were determined by the overall works' governing edges. Greenberg points out:

> Newman's [straight lines] especially, do not echo those of the frame, but parody it. Newman's picture becomes all frame in itself . . . With Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and makes the picture, instead of merely being echoed. The limiting edges of Newman's larger canvases, we now discover, act just like the lines inside them: to divide but not to separate or enclose or bound; to delimit but not limit.[24]

Stella reaped enormous benefits from Greenberg's conversation by transforming this dependence on the overall perimeters of a painting for both its composition and content into a cogent and arresting critique. Throughout the course of his painted criticisms Stella reaffirmed Greenberg's idea of painting as a self-sufficient object. This reflexivity and objectivity first occurs in his Black Paintings; later it becomes the basis for the punched out corners of his Aluminum Paintings and subsequent series of shaped canvases, including his Copper Paintings, which metamorphose into new shaped configurations almost annually in the 1960s. In the best sense, Stella's incisive thrusts at abstract expressionism represent criticism as a form of backhanded homage, a form of allegiance intended to eradicate what it represents.

The deeply critical nature of Stella's work enables us to look beyond the abstract expressionist delineation of a heroic ethos to discern the radically different ideas they so forcefully and eloquently set in play. With his most trenchant work, Stella has been far tougher and more in touch with his times than he consciously acknowledges. Beginning with this Exotic Birds of 1976, he initiates an uneasy alliance of nonaligned sign systems that he, together with the German painter Sigmar Polke, was among the first to undertake. In these works, painted on industrial fabricated honeycombed aluminum and cut-to-form shapes organized to constitute high reliefs, making them resemble turn-of-the-century punch-out Valentines, Stella marshaled a battery of different painting styles. Conceived in raucous and discordant colors, these paintings concede the desecrating power of graffiti at the same time that they revitalize the formative, critical authority of abstract painting, which at the time had assumed the dry and academic character of a no longer vital modernist style. As Stella noted in *Working Space*:

> Painting today is trying to be deliberately messy in order to deny the fragility and limits of the surfaces available to art. This is why the creation of graffiti has become such a natural expression of the current art-making sensibility. Art wants real, durable, extensive surfaces to work on; it does not want to be limited by the refined surfaces of recent abstraction, inertly pliant and neatly cropped cotton duck.[25]

In these works paint acts as an insult as well as an affirmation. This attitude is reinforced by the etched surfaces that mar the purity of the aluminum panels employed in the Exotic Birds and contemporaneous Indian Birds, and the occasional final generous sprinklings of glitter that heighten, even as they cheapen, the entire enterprise, giving it a knowing and tawdry streetwise character essential to its ebullient stridency.

Between Minimalism and Color Field Art in the 1960s

This examination of Stella's Black Paintings represents a first and necessary step toward establishing a basis for looking at his subsequent work. The next step—a much briefer one—consists of understanding his subsequent ability to straddle clearly established boundaries starting in the mid-1960s between the two main camps squared off for sustained battle. These opposing groups were 1) the Minimalists, who were loosely grouped around either the empirical and positivistic approach discussed in Donald Judd's essay "Specific Objects"[26] or the phenomenological orientation of Robert Morris' "Notes on Sculpture,"[27] and 2) the Color Field school, comprised of such members of the Greenberg camp as Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Larry Poons, who were united in reinforcing art's putative transcendent role.[28] Created with one-by-three stretchers, much deeper than those normally used, Stella's relief-like shaped canvases assured him a firm position in the Minimalist camp since their object-like character occupied the type of middle ground Judd commended in "Specific Objects." But to the most rigorous defenders of this group, particularly the critics Mel Bochner and Lucy Lippard,[29] he seemed to have strayed from unmitigated objecthood's true course in 1966 when he painted such Irregular Polygons as *Moultonville II*. These paintings, consisting of groups of works with the same outside configuration, contrasted overall governing shapes with different internal depicted configurations to demonstrate how illusionist tactics can diverge from literal form and often undermine it.

At the same time the Irregular Polygons isolated Stella from a number of mainstream Minimalists, it endeared him to Color Field painters and its critics, including his long-term friend from his undergraduate days at Princeton, the critic and art historian Michael Fried. A close adherent of Greenberg's formalist theories, which parallel New Criticism in their extraordinary reliance on meaning inhering within the art object, Fried invoked

24 Clement Greenberg, "American-Type Painting," (1955 and 1958) in *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961).

25 Stella, *Working Space*, p. 51.

26 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook 8* (1965), pp. 74–82.

27 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part I," *Artforum 4*, no. 6 (February 1966); "Notes on Sculpture, Part II," *Artforum 5*, no. 2 (October 1966).

28 For more information on the little understood origins of the term "Color Field," cf. Robert Hobbs, "The Term 'Color Field': A Reframing" in David Moos, ed., *The Shape of Colour: Excursions in Colour Field Art 1950–2005* (Toronto, 2005), pp. 18–23.

29 Mel Bochner, "In the Galleries: Frank Stella," *Arts Magazine 40*, no. 7 (May 1966); and Lucy Lippard, "Excerpts: Olitski, Criticism and Rejective Art, Stella," in Lucy Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York, 1968), p. 210. For an excellent discussion of Stella's position in relation to the polarization of 1960s art in the United States between Minimalism and Color Field painting, cf. James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven and London, 2001), pp. 119–127.

Guadaloupe Island Caracara
1979

Mixed media and metal
238.1 × 307.3 × 45.7 cm
Tate, London

in the mid-1960s the preeminence of art's opticality and buttressed it with an emphasis on art's presumed "presentness"—his term for a truly great work's capacity for self-renewal—and regarding it as constituting a special form of grace consonant with art's aesthetic purity.[30] Although Stella might appear at this point in his life to be on the verge of joining the Color Field camp, since his work was included in a number of shows focusing on this material, he never submitted to its quest for transcendence. Instead, he kept his options open, veering first one way and then another. Even though Minimalists decried the heightened decorative appeal of his enormous Protractors together with the ways the permuting bands, fans, and interlaces, such as *Variation X*, confused and subverted the overall shaped canvas's authority, these paintings continued to conflate aspects of painting and sculpture, and to reassert the object-like character recommended by the Minimalists.

Rather than looking at Stella's aptitude in the 1960s for tolerating differences as a weakness, it can be considered an enormous strength, since it destabilizes Minimalism's and Color Field's separate purviews, forcing observers to rethink categories once so clearly demarcated they were believed to be inevitable consequences. This same ability to think outside the constraints of a given system, which enabled Stella to critique many truisms of Abstract Expressionism in his Black Paintings, later empowered him to partially erase the seemingly impenetrable battle lines drawn by Minimalists and Color Field painters by demonstrating their boundaries to be not only penetrable but also permeable.

Stella's Later Painting: Abstract Expressionism, Phenomenology, and Topology

"The popular denigration of formalism lasting from the 1970s to the 1990s probably wouldn't have been so consequential if it had been limited to critical and academic discourse. Unfortunately it spread to the practicing art world and made painting the target and foil for all the newer art activities which saw themselves as the successors of painting."

Frank Stella, *Mr. Natural: Larry Poons*, 1999

As we might expect, this healthy disrespect for reified boundaries found in Stella's work in the 1950s and 1960s is also evident in his subsequent work, only his major opponent since the middle of the 1980s is not other artists so much as himself, and the fierce series rejections on which his reputation was predicated in the late 1950s and 1960s. The portion of his past work he seems to have been most intent on taking to task is his early aversion to Abstract Expressionism's heroics. After the mainstream developments in conceptual art in the mid-1960s when typeface and photography were preferred over painting, in part, for their ability to separate the personal from the categorical in decided preference for the latter, Stella reached the stage where he believed, as a painter, he had a great deal more in common with old guard Abstract Expressionists and decided to mine some of these commonalities in his work, beginning in the mid-1980s. For this reason, he started invoking and rethinking certain aspects of romanticism rather than out-of-hand rejecting them. In the middle and late 1980s, continuing until the late 1990s, his work thus began to constitute a sustained rereading of certain aspects of the American romantic Herman Melville, and, later, the German writer Heinrich von Kleist has been Stella's romantic writer of choice. But since Stella has never been a conventional artist who merely accepts the world as it has been presented to him, we should not expect his embrace of romanticism to constitute a simple renouncement of his secularly oriented work of the 1950s and 1960s, and a ready acceptance of an unquestioned, personally intuited form of transcendence.

Stella's work of the 1970s and 1980s, which continued his program of finding literal equivalents for paintings' formerly perceived metaphysical functions, represented a significant benchmark for a generation of postmodern painters coming to maturity in the 1980s, including Peter Halley, Shirley Kaneda, Jonathan Lasker, Fabian Marcaccio, and David Reed. However, instead of making a pact with a younger generation as did Barnett Newman in the 1960s when he socialized with such minimalists as Dan Flavin and Donald Judd, Stella has preferred the more solitary company of the august tradition of great painting, testifying to the imaginative exploits of old as well as modern masters, in addition to certain aspects of the Abstract Expressionist art he himself had questioned and cast aside in the 1950s.[31] Invoking some of the ideas of these mid-century artists in the past two-and-a-half decades, he revisited their desire to rely on their own unconscious feelings in their art and used, in particular, their emphasis on touch as a guide for finding ways to re-present this artistic device though a broad range of topological hybrids, many of which he discovered through the use new types of computer software programs. [32] Although he appears to be presenting at times a similar directness in his own art, his years of distancing himself from his work, coupled with decades of viewing art in terms self-reflexive sets of convictions—titles as literature, paintings as perceptual, art as structural propositions, etc.—keeps him from succumbing to the temptation to try to transcribe feelings directly into his art, thereby transforming it into something much more in the vein of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's postructuralism and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as we will see.

To buttress his quest to realize in his work some of these romantic attitudes, Stella created between 1985 and 1997 an extended series of 266 works of art, including murals, sculptures, metal reliefs, and mixed media prints, all on the subject of Melville's *Moby Dick*. This book had been important for many Abstract Expressionists, who viewed it in terms of ultimate ideas about the self's quest for the unknown: Jackson Pollock, for example, found Ahab's maniacal search for the white whale a fitting metaphor for his attempts to manifest Jungian archetypes in the sea of pristine canvas that confronted him, and Robert Motherwell analogized his use of paint as ambergris, the waste of sperm whales like Moby Dick, which starts off smelling like fecal waste and acquires, with aging, a sweet earthly smell, making it traditionally an essential ingredient in perfumes smelling like musk.[33] However, unlike these artists, Stella, the product of a more prosaic and sceptical age, came to Melville's novel indirectly through his two sons Peter and Patrick, their interest in whales, and his visits with them to the Brooklyn Aquarium in the mid-1980s to see its two beluga whales—a species that turn white as adults—and a pair of females, consisting of one famous for having been the first to give birth in captivity to a calf able to survive longer than a couple of days.[34] While Melville viewed Moby Dick as evil, made even more so by being clothed in white, the whales at the Brooklyn

30 Originally published in the June 1967 issue of *Artforum*, Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" was reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York , 1968), pp. 12-23.

31 The substantial part of "Now" was published as "Frank Stella: Matrixed and Real Space" in *Frank Stella: Recent Work* (Philadelphia, 2000).

32 Frank Stella, interview with the author, New York City, September 30, 2000.

33 During my first meeting with Robert Motherwell at his home and studios in Greenwich, Connecticut in October 1974, I brought up the subject of his reference to ambergris lying on the surface of the ocean in one of his unpublished notes made a number of years earlier and conjectured his possibly intended use of it as a metaphor for the plastic automatist form of artistic creation which he named and subscribed to, with the ambergris symbolizing the artist's inspired use of oil paint, the sea referring to the unconscious mind, and the white canvas the elusive white sperm whale, Moby Dick. Motherwell became excited about the reference since he had entirely forgotten it and confirmed my reading as characteristic of his way of thinking. This exchange, which immediately established a bond between us, also initiated our hermeneutical way of conversing about his art in terms of its symbols, while circulating around a given subject and interrogating it from a number of perspectives. For an essay on differences between Abstract Expressionist plastic automatism and Surrealist psychic automatism, cf. Robert Hobbs, "Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism: From Psychic to Plastic Automatism" in Isabelle Dervaux, ed., *Surrealism USA* (New York, 2005), pp. 56-65.

34 Born in 1974, one of the white beluga whales at the Brooklyn Aquarium, named Kathy, gave birth to a calf in 1981, called "Nikki" for NYCI (New York City's First), the first beluga born in captivity to survive more than a few days; and a decade later Kathy gave birth to another calf. Martha Hiatt, Kathy's handler, liked to say, "If Walt Disney made a beluga, it would have looked like her," so Stella' knowledge of this whale and her personality needs to be considered when thinking about his response to Melville's *Moby Dick*, cf: "Kathy the Beluga Bids Bye," http://gothamist.com/2004/04/11/kathy_the_beluga_bids_bye.php.

Aquarium were anything but malevolent. Although beluga whales are usually over thirty feet long and weigh seven tons, making them extraordinarily impressive and even daunting, the ones in Brooklyn, from all accounts, were wonderfully benign, even docile as their names Kathy and Marina indicate.

Reflecting the Brooklyn Aquarium's view of belugas as frisky, responsive, and playful as well as the widespread concern about the precarious future of whales in the wild, which are forced to live in increasingly adverse natural habitats, Stella's works on the ostensible subject of *Moby Dick* represent a fundamental reconsideration of the meaning of whales in contemporary culture, so that they are no longer regarded in terms of either Ahab's darkly romantic fate, the unknown, or a vengeful God. Instead they became the inspiration for realizing thematically the new form of virtual imagery afforded by both the proliferation of PCs in the 1980s and CAD/CAM software. The enhanced mode of drawing these innovations permit, makes many of the intricacies of topographically distorted and stretched forms readily available, since it provides a dramatically innovative way of virtually modeling forms on the computer to achieve particularly fluid designs capable of simulating both two-and three-dimensional movements, while making the analogy of underwater space with the elasticity of topological mutations a convincing one for Stella.

More than simply a formal innovation, I would argue that Stella's commitment to permuting topologies in his art and their many morphed shapes, each transformed topological project betokening a movement and a consequent delineation of a different space, is a means for realizing a very complex and important cosmology on a par with Henri Bergson's duration and Gilles Deleuze's becoming. Not a simple view of being as static, this dynamic ontology is predicated on a concept of multiplicity and heterogeneity so radical that it undermines any type of stable Archimedean vantage point, or homogenous space for understanding either the art or the reality it heralds, since the viewer's perception changes with the many implicit perspectives being viewed in Stella's seemingly chaotic sea of images. The resultant intermediate state between actuality and illusion, as well as between the real and the virtual in Stella's work since the early 1980s needs to be understood as extensive, in the Bergsonian sense of constituting a number of competing spaces comprising differently calibrated degrees of heterogeneity and homogeneity.[35] While the computer is an exciting new drawing tool, the CAD/CAM programs should be considered as catalysts and means for Stella to move beyond a coextensive view of the world: relying on space as a metaphor, he is able to view the world as multiple, dynamic, highly complex, and exhilarating.

Stella's introduction to CAD/CAM programs began unceremoniously around the time of his first Waves with a desire to show one of his son's grade-school class how the same shape, performed or permutated in a number of the different keys offered by computer programs, can assume radically dissimilar forms. Among his first forays in this territory are photographs of his own exhaled cigar smoke taken from six distinctively different points of view, then fed into a CAD/CAM-type program capable of drawing compound and complex curves to generate both solid-state images resembling Max Bill's sculpture and schematic wire-frame diagrams approximating CAT scans. No doubt intrigued with the ways the metonymic and syntagmatic sign of smoke rings can suggest his presence and at the same time herald his absence, Stella subsequently made these spirals in both their solid-state and schematic formats a mainstay of his recent work, including his concentrated investigation of whales and underwater imagery where stretched and transformed shapes playfully emerge, recede, and compete for viewers' attention. He has used this range of images in conjunction with a host of forms, ranging from the type of signs commercial artists refer to as "banner" to graffiti and spray painted stencils of perforated rings.

For Stella this new mode of conceiving space and drawing flexible shapes worked well with more traditional views by complicating arrays of interpenetrating and sharply juxtaposed competing, and oscillating spaces. In addition to both the beluga whales and the CAD/CAM-type software serving Stella as a subject and mode of working, respectively, for his series of Wave reliefs, initiated in 1986 and titled after chapters in Melville's *Moby Dick*, these software tools were important for the continuation of this series in 1986 under its new name *Moby Dick*, a title he continued to employ through the subsequent nine years he continued working on this group. Although Melville's *Moby Dick* is ostensibly a romantic topic, Stella has swapped the romantic view of unbridled human, animal, and nature's (the sea's) passions for that of a multiplicity of abstracted animal and machine parts as well as underwater references and some of the topological manifestations that can be generated with CAD/CAM programs. Not alone in his investigation of these new tools, Stella and his experiments also need to be seen as part of a generational response of creative individuals excited by CAD/CAM-type of software, which soon morphed into a range of tools for enhancing imagery and drawing compound complex curves, a group of architects, including Santiago Calatrava, Frank Gehry, and Zaha Hadid, as well as several decades of architectural and multi-media students, who have learned to use these new software in the classroom.

After embracing the topic of whales and the task of rethinking Melville's novel as a basis for his art, Stella became acquainted with the novellas of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century German romantic Heinrich Von Kleist in the late 1990s and looked to them as possible screens for projecting his ideas. As part of our move to the subject of von Kleist, we might well ask how Stella, a painter known for the rigorously logical positivist mode of address in his art until the mid-1980s; an artist whose career from the late 1950s until that time was predicated on a dazzling display of continuously revitalizing tabula rasae; and a thoroughgoing vanguardist whose work was predicated on expunging art of antecedent metaphysical speculations, could make such an about turn and begin gleaning some of the metaphorical baggage he had consistently jettisoned over the years.

His fascination with Kleist provides a partial answer, since this writer's thought represents a parallel trajectory to Stella's, even though their lives and psychological dispensations are remarkably different. Born in 1777, Kleist was an heir to eighteenth-century rationalism and its concomitant belief in people's ability to foreordain their destiny. Life, however, demonstrated to this unstable and perhaps schizophrenic personality an opposing route. Mired in misfortunes and plagued by instability, Kleist was personally haunted by Kant's theories regarding the limits of human knowledge and the resultant circumscription of enfolded appearance and reality into

35 An excellent discussion of Bergson's theorization of the different spatialities constituting extensivity is found in John C. Mullarkey, "Bergson's Method of Multiplicity," *Metaphilosophy 26*, no. 3 (July 1995). Cf. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, (London, 1988, rpt. 1911), p. 326. This is the translation of *Matter and Memory* Bergson himself authorized.

Salta nel mio Sacco
1984

Mixed media
373.5 × 325 × 39 cm
Tate, London

perpetual conundrums incapable of resolution. Such a realization left him personally bereft of the comforts and satisfactions of ultimate truths; at the same time it bolstered him with the new artistic agenda of giving stable artistic form to this profound albeit disconcerting insight regarding human beings' lack of sync with nature and the concomitant inconsistencies between thinking and feeling, resulting in a liberal use of irony and paradox in his fiction. Unaffected by the pain of Kleist's intellectual and emotional indecisiveness or aware of it and able to move beyond its trauma, Stella has remained undeterred by the drawbacks affecting this Romantic and excited, instead, about the range of formal possibilities Kleist's aesthetic investigation of irresolution affords him as well as this nineteenth-century thinker's sardonic view of the world that could be applied to the Abstract Expressionist's persistent questions about their ability to realize their feelings in their works in terms of the static notations Stella calls, "frozen gesture[s]."

In certain respects Stella's own career represents a narrative somewhat similar to Kleist in appealing first to the logic of preplanned and carefully administrated personal decisions before acknowledging, years later, how in his own art life conforms neither to one's plans nor one's dreams. In other words, while the very young Stella could attack and discard in his painting many of the metaphysical trappings associated with it, secure in his belief in this genre's inherent stability and continuity, the more seasoned Stella had personally witnessed the many critical hits aimed squarely at painting, particularly in the 1960s, with the net loss of unsettling it in successive decades to the point it needed his and others' protection and occasional resuscitation if it was to continue.

Kleist's deep melancholy about Enlightenment philosophy's inability to reach clear, defensible, and rational conclusions, together with the consequent instabilities appearing in his writing, made him an ideal model for theorists coming on the heels of structuralism. In fact, he became a cult figure for cutting-edge academics and artists after Deleuze and Guattari resurrected him in their respected tome, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (published first in French in 1980 and translated into English in 1987). For these thinkers, Kleist's writings, together with those of Kafka and Nietzsche, epitomize the type of rhizomatic lines of flight they were advocating. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari noted:

> Everything . . . in [Kleist's] writing as in his life, becomes speed and slowness. A succession of catatonic freezes and extreme velocities, fainting spells and shooting arrows . . . Kleist offers a wonderful explanation of how forms and persons are only appearances produced by the displacement of a center of gravity on an abstract line and by the conjecture of these lines on a plane of immanence.[36]

Focusing on radical and empirical immanence rather than transcendence and imbued with the different types of velocities, constituting becomings—the perpetual and non-theological new ways of being they discerned in Kleist's writings—Deleuze and Guattari claimed his work as an exemplary literary model for their updated form of phenomenology, since they viewed him as a writer eminently capable of dislodging the monolithic stolidity of the self through the permeable schizzes, that made him and others constantly open to the outside. No longer a static, stable, and reliable perspective for interpreting one's own experiences, Kleist's openness to changing velocities made him a preeminent model for the poststructuralist self.

An heir to the unflagging optimism of the American pragmatic tradition, Stella has reconfigured Kleist's encircling and at times frightening dualities—the Deleuzian and Guattarian schizzes—into a range of perceptual and pictorial categories. Although in the following analysis Stella is focusing on the art of Caravaggio rather than the writings of Kleist, it underscores how he was subsequently able to enlist this German romantic, beginning in 1998, as a sympathetic spirit and, just as importantly, why he chose to do so. Stella explains:

> What the best art does is give us the best of both worlds—the perceptual and the pictorial. At the risk of sounding obtuse, I don't mean this remark as a play of opposites, the perceptual versus the pictorial. I mean that the best art gives us the ability to see and hold together different images for the purpose of acting on or resolving them. That is, it gives us the ability to make complicated and/or multiple perceptions effectively pictorial.[37]

Kleist's indeterminacy in recent years has become a *modus operandi* for Stella, who has found in it a worthy raison d'etre for works like *Cantahar*, 1998, featuring ricocheting forms that spring forward and oscillate back into sometimes deep and often vertiginous spaces, effecting thereby exciting multiplicities. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "Kleist is the author who best integrated these sudden catatonic fits, swoons, suspenses [sic.], with the utmost speeds of a war machine."[38] Stella's oscillating patterns seize and momentarily suture the viewer's gaze before it abruptly breaks off, only to be captured by other arresting shapes. Thus, these discordant forms choreograph, through perception, the discontinuities and multiplicities of the contemporary world's extensiveness. In this manner, Kleist's German romantic uncertainty reinforces Stella's jubilant embrace of a jumbled world, spanning the old and new millennia and approaching the sanguinity of chaos theory. *Cantahar*'s rhizomatic field of different velocities is strident, bracing, and vital, and its new emphasis on structured chaos was anticipated in Stella's relief *Diavolozoppo (#2, 4X)*, 1984, and evident as well in a number of his sculptures, including *Hacilar Level V*, 2000, and *K.37 (Lattice variation) protogen RPT (full size)*, 2008.

Cantahar, an imaginary place with its origins in De Verennes de Mondasse's *La Découverte De L'Empire De Cantahar* (1730), and a title that is unusual for Stella in partially circumscribing the type of content revealed in the art, is a particularly apposite example of his fascination with virtual imagery. In this work one finds a clear example of Stella's cacophonous composition with its assertively flat forms, diagrammatically drawn three-dimensional shapes, perforated spaces, and deeply receding and undulating forms to suggest the disjunctive realms and unpredictable lines of flight occurring when surfing the Internet. In this work the chaotic realm of recent technology, constituting a matrixed sea of electronic commerce, including a wealth of disparate sign systems each jostling for attention and together alluding to the complexity of a world view realized through relying on the drawing tools available through CAD/CAM programs that have replaced the pared down forms and straightforwardness of Stella's early work.

36 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987), p. 268.

37 Frank Stella, "Grimm's Ecstasy" (1991) in Bonnie Clearwater, *Frank Stella at Two Thousand: Changing the Rules* (North Miami, 2000), p. 68.

38 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 400.

What makes his later work so very complex is the way he joins aspects of topologically permuted surfaces with the very real space of viewers well schooled in looking at such large scale Abstract Expressionist paintings as Pollock's drips, Newman's "zips," and Rothko's lambent fields, who expect to come close to these works so that they might be surrounded and embraced by the ambient environments they establish. And what makes Stella's work so exciting is his ability to frustrate and undermine this former way of looking, so that viewers are forced to rethink, in compelling and meaningful ways, their bodily responses to works of art.

An antecedent for these types of ongoing contradictions of complex, overlapping, and jostling spaces comprising a painting like *Cantahar* is Stella's differentiation between Renaissance and Baroque painting in *Working Space*. His analysis of Titian's late painting, *Flaying of Marsyas*, ca. 1570–76, a central component of his 1983-84 lectures at Harvard, serves as an allegory of the destruction of the Renaissance painting conceit about perspectival art's impenetrable window, so that it might provide a distilled view of special and discrete worlds. Stella begins by pointing out:

> He [Titian] clearly meant for us to understand the perils faced in a lifetime committed to the making of art. For the professionals who were to follow him, he warned that the artist's gifted touch would violate, perhaps irreparably, any surface that it graced. He showed that the articulation of surface could be as destructive as it is creative, that a blurred, pulsating surface often announces the exhaustion of space. [39]

Looked at in terms of Stella's early development and its affinities with the contemporaneous hegemony of Greenberg's formalist system of aesthetics, which was predicated on an orthodoxy of painting as a self-defining and self-limiting genre, integrally coupled with a flat surface to achieve its maximum effect, such a statement is indeed surprising.

In his analysis of Titian's painting, Stella analogizes its brutally desecrated surfaces with the flaying of Marsyas's skin to effect overlapping poetic and structural metaphors about painting itself. Apropos Titian, he adds:

> He shows us [in this painting] a concern for the future which points out all the brutality and vulnerability inherent in the endeavor of painting. Yet in front of the *Flaying of Marsyas* we want to believe that beauty of presentation overcomes the cruelty of revelation. [40]

Although Stella has been criticized for regarding this brutality metaphorically and formally as an allegory of painting instead of iconographically as a story about Greek and Roman mythology, his insistence on viewing it in this manner is indicative of the force he needed in order to extricate himself from his earlier approach and rethink the possibilities of new and contradictory forms of space, including cyberspace. "The skin of a defeated artist," Stella explains in gristly detail, referring ostensibly to Marsyas but also to the process of effecting a permeable painterly surface, "is scored and peeled away, his body is openly violated to reveal the anatomy of pictorial creation rather than the details of human suffering."[41]

Once the invisible barricade formed by the metaphor of painting as a window in Italian Renaissance art and the inviolable picture plane in Greenbergian formalism is punctured and peeled away, a new understanding follows. In *Working Space* Stella looks to the past to sanction the new order he had already initiated in the 1970s in his own work, first tentatively in the Polish Villages and then with more gusto in the Exotic and Indian Birds.[42] He retroactively attributes the model for this new approach to the heightened realism of Caravaggio's use of human scale, and he assumes it to constitute an important role in the process of moving space away from Renaissance perspectival recession by advancing it forward into the viewer's realm. According to Stella, Baroque realism achieves a new dimensionality, and we might more readily understand his excitement about it if we equate it with theater in the round rather than the traditional proscenium stage.

Stella elaborates on his theory of peeling away the Renaissance and modernist picture plane to reveal the forward moving projections of some Baroque works by emphasizing the image of the decapitated Goliath in *David and Goliath*, 1610, a particularly grisly image reputed to be a self-portrait of Caravaggio, as a heightened pictorial element, capable of moving forward and breaking through the picture place as well as receding behind it into deep picture space. The advanced position of the giant's head, appearing in the guise of the artist's visage, no doubt symbolizes for Stella the enormity of Caravaggio's accomplishment as well as his own. Figuratively speaking, both of them have decapitated inherited concepts of good painting in order to bring about a new awareness. Stella states with measured eloquence:

> In Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* this concept is an implicit overture; in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* it is an explicit declaration. There is no mistaking the message of young David's display of the older warrior's head. To see this painting only on the level of a victory of good over evil, or the eventual triumph of Christianity over paganism, is to ignore the message the artist sends about his personality, his craft, and their common endurance . . . By offering us the elevated, protruding head of Goliath, Caravaggio freed the encrusted pictorial space that Titian was beginning to pierce at the end of his life . . . If we imagine a single Renaissance vanishing point moving toward us, encircling the condensed pictorial experience of the past, we can see it transformed at the limits of our focused recognition into Caravaggio's face. As we register this perception, we see Goliath's head (Caravaggio's pictorial will, as it were) pass by us as an exploded point about to disperse itself into a continuum of movable pictorial space, going beyond us to create the space of our pictorial present and future.[43]

Goliath in the guise of traditional illusionism is forcefully and brutally excised from Caravaggio's work in order to engage pictorial space with real space and create a very practical "working space," the particularly apt title of Stella's lectures and the publication of them. Although Stella does not qualify this conjunction as phenomenological, it is indicative of this philosophical view, particularly in its Merleau-Pontian phase. At this point in our discussion, it is necessary to register Stella's claim never to have read any of the phenomenologists, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[44] But we should again make note of his early and long friendship with Michael

39 *Working Space*, p. 102.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid. Frank Stella, conversation with author, August 25, 2011. Although Stella uses Titian's painting to exemplify the more abstract idea of painting, he is clearly aware of the iconographic debate around this work, including hypotheses conjecting its creation to be undertaken under the artist's initiative rather than as a commission. In particular Stella has pointed to S.J. Freedberg's "Titian and Marsyas," *FMR Magazine no. 4* (September, 1984), 51–64. In this essay Sydney Freedberg proposes that Titian's painting was inspired by the horrific act of Turkish soldiers flaying alive the Venetian captain Marcantonio Bragadin in 1570. Rather than depicting the event directly, Titian framed it as an allegory, and according to Freedberg, after the subsequent Venetian victory over the Turks at Lepanto:

> The tragedy had to be commemorated and the harrowing image dealt with—at once exorcised and exalted—and since it was unthinkable in Titian's aesthetic that it could be depicted as a historical occurrence, it had to be represented by an analogue, and the flaying of Marsyas was . . . ready to hand . . . [In Titian's painting] despair turned into celebration: as in the deeper meaning of the Marsyas legend torment in the end laid truth bare, and as in the Christian legend, sacrifice begot redemption (p. 63).

42 Barbara Rose, conversation with author, April 1994, Richmond, Virginia. While in Richmond for a public conversation with John Chamberlain at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Rose emphasized Frank Stella's long-term admiration for John Chamberlain's work, including the acquisition of a relief that was prominently displayed in the couple's apartment in the 1960s; she accorded this respect an important role in Stella's move to more three-dimensional works in the 1970s.

43 Ibid.

44 Stella, interview with the author.

Fried, who first read Merleau-Ponty in the 1950s during his year abroad in Paris. A decade later Fried made full use of this philosopher's approach to phenomenology in terms of the polarities informing his renowned essay "Art and Objecthood."[45] Fried's differentiation between pictorial and literal spaces in art may well have anticipated Stella's analysis of the puncturing of the pictorial in the passages on Titian and Caravaggio referred to above. In the following section of *Art and Objecthood,* Fried distinguishes between looking at mere objects and viewing art:

> What is at stake in this conflict is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects: and what decides their identity as painting is their confronting of the demand that they hold as shapes. Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects. This can be summed up by saying that modernist painting has come to find its imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to painting—it must be pictorial, not, or not merely, literal. Whereas literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not, indeed, as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.[46]

Fried's enthusiasm for Merleau-Ponty's thought enabled him in this article to distinguish between modernist and Minimalist attitudes toward paintings and ordinary objects with great perceptive acuity. His initial and sustained interest in Merleau-Ponty no doubt resulted in conversations with Stella that were focused on phenomenological issues even if they were not labeled as such. Stella's keen interest in the interrelationships between actual and pictorial space accounts for his affiliations with both the Minimalist and Color Field camps in the 1960s since it implicates the physical body of the see-er with what is actually seen, and this approach is a fundamental aspect of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Moreover, the physicality involved in looking at projective elements jutting out from the traditional modernist picture plane and dispersing it—a crucial aspect of Stella's art of the past three decades—is likewise phenomenological.

In conclusion, whether his art is conceived in three dimensions or in two, Stella puts his viewers through the traces, making them work to transform perception into apperception, so that they become conscious of what they are seeing and how it differs first from traditional painting and then later from Stella's own earlier work. Whenever we look at his art, we are asked to make connections between present and absent elements, and to think about art epistemologically so that we rethink accepted truisms and decide if they are essential or not. We might ask if it matters whether Stella is subscribing to romantic, phenomenological, or Bergsonian and Deleuzan concepts in his art in the past few decades and whether meaning must indeed be at least in part a literary overlay or if it can be realized in the conjunction of these works and viewers' responses to them and thus circumscribed mainly by this physical and mental interaction. Stella's overall art suggests it can be any of these propositions and also all of them. His personalization of phenomenology in the work of the past few decades—and even in his earlier works, starting with the Polish Village series—with all its complexities of illusionistic and actual space is of paramount importance since it reinforces a dominant episteme of our age. That is: it involves the relativity of seeing and understanding as necessarily perspectival modes of perception and apperception crucial for the development of meaning. As Merleau-Ponty, who was influenced by his reading of Bergson and thus aware of the way one's actions affects one's comprehension of space, has pointed out, understanding is dependent on both the orientations of the person looking and the material seen, on physical as well as mental conditions. In this manner the authority of the external world is partially undermined, and the role of the individual, while certainly not drawing near the autonomy of nineteenth-century bourgeois individualism, is inscribed in the world, partially determined by it, and also a crucial factor in its meaning. We might conjecture that Stella's reclamation of abstract expressionism enables him to think about the implicit embodied perception crucial to an appreciation of the so-called "big picture," and what Stella's work does is to underscore this type of viewing, even as it mixes it with the disembodied seeing assumed by virtual and cyberspace. Stella's work enacts occasions for viewers to exercise aesthetically the contradictory roles that phenomenology and the matrix, as a set of polymorphous and heterogeneously diverse universes, have outlined for them both philosophically and mechanically by understanding how aspects of our chaotic and information-rich world can be electrifying, embracing, confounding, and beautiful. This approach goes far beyond its seeming instrumentality by making the complexities of modern viewing both accessible and rewarding. Important in themselves and as representatives of the present world order, Stella's works necessitate an ongoing aesthetic negotiation of phenomenological inquiries, an understanding of morphed forms, and the diverse spaces they define, as well as an appreciation of art as an epistemological interrogation of its own traditional and present-day capabilities in order to confront the chaos of the world in the new millennium and formulate responses as to its significance.

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45 Fried, pp. 116–47.

46 Ibid., p. 12.