

ELLSWORTH KELLY

IN SAN FRANCISCO

MADELEINE GRYSZTEJN

JULIAN MYERS

Turn to Abstraction



FIGURE 15
Ellsworth Kelly drawing Claude Drevet, Belle-Ile, France, 1949.

A photograph from 1949 (fig. 15) depicts a man, the artist Ellsworth Kelly, seated in the sand of Belle-Ile, an island off the coast of France. He draws on a pad held on his knee with the studied pose of a trained artist, though he is incongruously stripped to a bathing suit. His subject sits a few feet in front of him: a woman, Claude Drevet, cross-legged and impassive, in loose pants rolled to her knees for wading in the surf. Her hair is tied back, and it is summer.

Many such photographs exist of Kelly sketching and observing the world around him; they inform his paintings, from his figurative work to his most abstract. They show us an artist interested in cultivating the habits of figuration—an intuitive relation between hand and eye, and between image and rendering—even as his painting seemed to move away from them, toward flatness and opticality. For the last fifty years Kelly's painting has been understood in these terms. They are the terms that Clement Greenberg set out for modernist painting, and despite the fact that Greenberg and Kelly kept a critical distance from each other—indeed, Kelly had a distinct distaste for Greenberg's role as impresario of modernist painting—his work has often been praised or critiqued on Greenberg's terms: as optical, sensuous, pure, self-critical, formalist.¹

Kelly's interest in drawing from life, evidenced by the Belle-Ile photograph, begins to suggest another story, one quite different from Greenberg's narrative of modernist painting. For if Kelly's painting embodies a particular set of modernist dialectics—between figure and ground, between color and edge, between representation and reproduction, between the traces of the artist's activity and the erasure of his presence—his methods consistently contradict or complicate these relations. Hard-edge formalism coexists, in his painting, with naturalistic representation and chance composition; found images and simple figure studies—a drawing, done on a beach in the afternoon—are immanent in the most austere abstractions.

Kelly's earliest extant paintings date from the late 1940s, after he returned from a tour of

duty in World War II. These works show an artist who had yet to find his voice, experimenting with different artistic idioms and influences, from Romantic portraiture to figures influenced by Chinese seals and early Christian iconography. These influences, disparate though they might seem, are unified by Kelly's modernist perspective (he is particularly attuned to the hieroglyphic flatness of these different modes). His self-portrait (1947; pl. 1) references the confrontational impassivity of Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait* of 1498; *Chuan-Shu* (1948; pl. 3) diverts the calligraphic line of Chinese seals into abstract form; and *Seated Figure* (1949; pl. 2) develops the flatness of a Romanesque relief—a "Christ in Majesty"—into an isolated and elliptical (and consummately modernist) body. The ontogeny of the modernist subject, then, recapitulates the history of art, from portraiture to Surrealism, before the final plunge into abstraction proper.

These formal analogies are merely art historical reflex, though; they don't explain much. Other questions begin to lead in curious directions: What did Kelly draw from these particular images? Why did they seem pertinent at this moment? What connections exist among the various influences avowed by Kelly? And to what purpose were they put? Formal genealogies don't tell us much about how he might have used premodern or modernist tropes; they preclude an understanding of the works' relation to modernist art and the conditions of modernity.

Take *Seated Figure* as an initial example. The "sources" of its abstraction are varied but characteristic of Kelly in this period: Early Christian relief, architectural iconography, and illuminated manuscripts envisioned through the lens of modernist painting. His original sketch (fig. 16), derived from a medieval manuscript, is recognizable in the painting—the angular spread of the arms, the sinewy outlines of the body—but its muscular, modular tension has been obliterated; instead *Seated Figure* is schematized, archaic, flat—a Byzantine icon mapped against an indefinite field. Despite the outlines that insist upon the boundaries of its form, it appears to be transparent

to its mottled ground; daubs of ocher mark the semicircle that defines the figure's awkwardly positioned left arm, but the marks seem purposely tentative, as if Kelly was determined to leave the relation between torso and limb unresolved. This body, we might say, is a field of uncertain relations between object and space, and while the head of the figure seems to be its one moment of resolution, it remains the schema of a face rather than the representation of one.

"Reality" and artwork are not in a conventional relation here. *Seated Figure* is neither figurative nor properly abstract—rather it is composed of transparent citations and codes that are in tension with one another. That is to say that Kelly's relation to modernist abstraction and to Byzantine icons is exactly the same: these are visual languages to learn, to juxtapose, to analyze, to counteract. This is the character of the images represented in this section: they are experiments with the rhetorical possibilities of form rather than moments along a trajectory ending in abstraction. While Kelly's serious production would soon shift away from representing the human form—"In 1949, I ceased figurative painting and began works that were object oriented," he wrote in 1969²—his structural investigation into vision and objecthood had already begun.

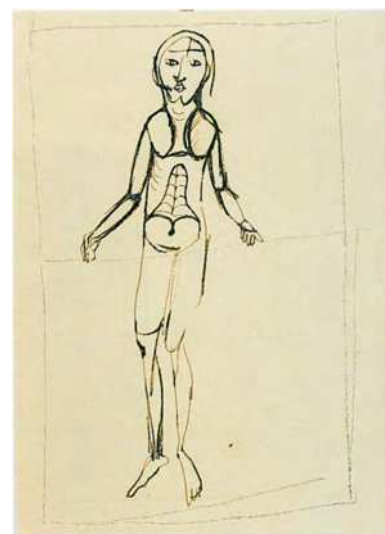


FIGURE 16
Ellsworth Kelly, *Drawings from Twelfth-Century Manuscripts*, 1949 (detail). Ink on paper.
13 3/8 x 10 1/4 in. (34 x 26 cm).
Private collection.

Notes

1. Greenberg offered a backhanded compliment in reference to Kelly's later work: "I myself admire, or at least enjoy, the works of . . . Ellsworth Kelly, but find them a little too easy to enjoy" (Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland" [1960], in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 95).
2. Ellsworth Kelly, "Notes from 1969," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Schilderijen en beelden, 1963–1979 / Paintings and Sculptures, 1963–1979*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1979), 30.

Urban Forms Distilled

In the summer of 1950 Ellsworth Kelly borrowed a camera from the mother of his host, Delphine Seyrig, while staying at her house in Meschers, France. One of the photographs he took with that camera records a map of shadows refracted on a set of stairs (fig. 17). The image is impressionistic—a momentary effect of light, captured—but also tightly structured; the staircase is centered in the frame exactly, from above, and the field of the photograph is divided between blurred, cracked earth and the fragmented interplay of shadows mapped on the uneven surface of the stairway.

The shadows that traversed the stairs fascinated Kelly; he drew and redrew them intently, the unpredictable index of shadows seeming, somehow, already composed, already on fire with meaning. He painted variations on this theme for months upon his return to Paris, and the resulting series was called *La Combe* after Seyrig's house in Meschers. The status of the photographs of the scene, however, is less clear than that of the paintings that transcribed it: are they merely documents, *aides-mémoires*? The *La Combe* paintings were developed from pencil sketches (see pl. 11) made on site in Meschers—they still exist—and the photograph was taken afterward, to record the scene of perception. To Kelly's mind, the photo failed even in this mimetic function.¹

It is suggestive, though, that the lines of *La Combe III* (1951; pl. 12) are basically the same as those described by the composition of the Meschers photo that has been most reproduced; Kelly must have drawn the image and taken the photograph at the same time of day, and from the same angle. The similarity suggests that the camera in this instance did something other than merely record the scene; at least in retrospect, its presence was somehow talismanic, essential to recognizing the painting as indexically "capturing," versus impressionistically rendering, his vision of the world. The Meschers photo makes concrete this provocative, if submerged, dialectic in Kelly's work between abstraction and "record"; the most successful objects from this period all use this rhetoric of precise *indexical* transcription of the world.

In his early work Kelly experimented with languages of form native to modernism and "art" proper, but it was only in 1949, after he had moved to Paris, that he realized the repertoire of forms and methods that would fuel his production in the coming decades. His paintings changed formally, of course, shifting from modeled figures to abstraction and from painterly brush strokes to flat, solid colors. But, more importantly, they began to incorporate new motifs and processes—among them chance composition, collage, found images, and mapping procedures—into the generation of a final work. These methods were seemingly generated *ex nihilo*. Kelly was, in postwar France, apparently distant from the state of the art in New York and, by his own account, unaware of the modernist histories that would have provided precedents for his work (he had not seen the work of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, for example). Kelly instead took inspiration from unlikely sources—from urban design and cartography, from architecture and games of chance.

Kelly described this shift in his "Notes from 1969," which was written on the occasion of his first retrospective exhibition. In these notes he claims that these new processes were in pursuit of an art that was more "object oriented," using his *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris* (1949; fig. 18) as an example: "Instead of making a picture that was an interpretation of a thing seen, or a picture of invented content, I found an object and 'presented' it as itself alone. . . . After constructing 'Window' with two canvases and a wood frame, I realized that from then on painting as I had known it was finished for me. The new works were to be objects, unsigned, anonymous."²

Window, then, cannot be understood as an austere abstraction without mistaking its project, its significance. It does not do the work of a painting; that is, it does not visually "interpret" an image in the world, nor does it mean to illusionistically fool the eye into imagining that it is a real window, opening onto another space. Rather its surface is flat and opaque, merely repeating the structural design of the window without its archi-



FIGURE 17
Ellsworth Kelly, *Shadows on Stairs, Villa La Combe, Meschers*, 1950. Gelatin silver print. 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm). Private collection.

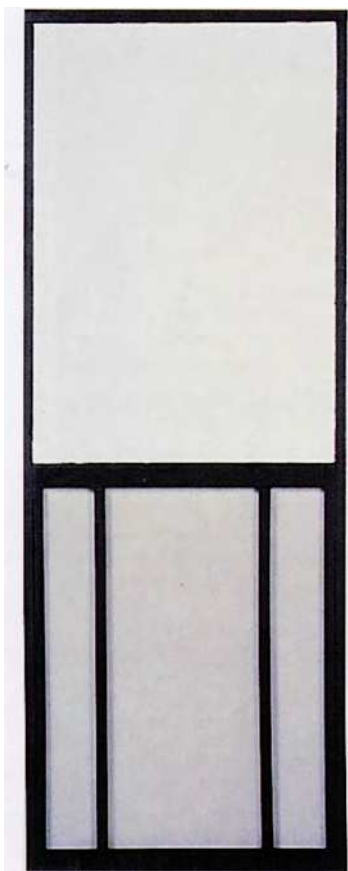


FIGURE 18
Ellsworth Kelly, *Window*, *Museum of Modern Art*, Paris, 1949. Oil on wood and canvas. Two joined panels, overall: 50 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 3/4 in. (128.5 x 49.5 x 1.9 cm). Private collection.

tectural function, the stretchers of the two canvases doubling as the window's frame. Flatness, opacity, the materiality of the frame and canvas: these are modernist virtues par excellence. But Kelly also disallowed other modernist virtues like artistic intervention or interpretation, the magic of transformation or aesthetic "naming." Instead, the form is cryptic, schematic, blank, literal—and, since Kelly revealed its original architectural source in 1970, recognizable. By simply transcribing the form, the artist meant, contrary to modernist principles, to minimize his agency in the making of the work. "Nothing is changed or added," Kelly wrote, "no shading or surface marking. They are not an approximation of the thing seen nor are they a personal expression or an abstraction. They are an impersonal observation of the form."³

This is, of course, less a description than a particular imagining of what artistic production might be: a desire for perception without metaphor, and vision stripped of personhood. It is an imagining that held a particular allure for a number of artists after World War II—I am thinking in particular of later examples, such as the blankness of Jasper Johns's *Target* series, or Robert Morris's version of Minimalist art. It is an impossible dream—Kelly's serious work never, in the end, resists the urge to manipulate, rather than simply transcribe, vision—but it haunts all of the work from his years in France.

The works in this section are all, in some sense, "found" compositions: schema that lodged themselves in Kelly's perception, totemic images that burned into his retina in Belle-Ile, Paris, and Meschers. The earliest works, *Mandorla* (1949; pl. 4) and *Kilometer Marker* (1949; pl. 5), reconstitute in stylized form structures he discovered during his stay on Belle-Ile; *Mandorla*'s curved forms were derived from ecclesiastical design, and *Kilometer Marker* from the distance-markers along French roads. Later images, though, formalize

the fractured cityscape of post-Vichy Paris. Compare, for instance, Kelly's *Wall with Pipes* (1950; pl. 8) with the larger collage *Colors on a Wall* (1950; pl. 9). Fragments of urban ephemera are set into form and then recomposed as abstraction in the collage. The artist has reproduced a spatial system—a detailed network of shingles and drainpipes in perspectival depth—as a relation between collaged bits: a pipe registers as a black rectangle, a wall as a white field.

Similarly, *Study for "Ormesson"* (1950; pl. 10) registers the chimneys and ducts of familiar Parisian walls as abstract form. But what are architectural form and urban design if not the application of abstract relations to real, material space? *Ormesson* is an image attuned to the disordered, unpredictable relations between designed space and lived experience; its image-architecture is uneven, describing buildings too close to one another, vectors of experience in uneasy relation. This is a city both ancient and evanescent, old or decimated buildings on the brink of reconstruction, an urban space about to become a museum of itself.

It is the *La Combe* series, however, that most radically applies Kelly's transcriptive mode. *La Combe III* is legible equally as an index and a map, as a chart of shadows and as a chaotic, disassembled set of vectors. Sight is fragmented into discrete objects that can be reassembled; pictorial space is mapped and schematic, modular, diagrammatic. Despite its origins in the pastoral perspective of Meschers, *La Combe III* is the most compelling example of Kelly's new, urban vision.

Notes

1. Ellsworth Kelly, correspondence with the author, 12 February 2002.
2. Ellsworth Kelly, "Notes from 1969," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Schilderijen en beelden, 1963–1979 / Paintings and Sculptures, 1963–1979*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1979), 31.
3. *Ibid.*

Chance and Determination

The works in this section are roughly contemporaneous with those in "Urban Forms Distilled," and they have a similar project: to develop Kelly's particular imagining of painting as an impersonal observation of form. "After arriving in Paris in 1948," Kelly wrote in 1969, "I realized that figurative painting and also abstract painting (though my knowledge of the latter was very limited) as I had known it in the 20th century no longer interested me as a solution to my own problems. I wanted to give up easel painting which I felt was too personal."¹

As modern art has often been associated with personal expression and artistic agency, this statement might seem perplexing. It is not, however, an aesthetic or authorial move without modernist precedents: Kelly cites, among others, sculptor Constantin Brancusi and De Stijl painter Georges Vantongerloo. More suggestive, however, was Kelly's encounter with Jean Arp, who showed him a number of proto-Surrealist works in which he and his wife, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, had generated abstract form through games of chance. Kelly was fascinated by such Surrealist diversions and soon began producing collages using scraps of paper, disassembled drawings, or torn shards of sketches. The painting *Cité* (1951; pl. 14) was conceived from one of these collages (pl. 13), as twenty modular panels that could be disassembled and reassembled at will—though Kelly would, after rearranging the image, eventually finalize its form (that of the original collage, but upside down) and join the panels in a permanent array.

Pages from a Magazine (1950; fig. 19) is among the earliest of Kelly's works to incorporate the procedures of chance, and its particular materials and techniques offer us an archaeology of his turn to more "depersonalized" means of composition. It is a deceptively simple collage: the artist cut strips from the edges of magazine pages and reassembled them, creating chance juxtapositions between the inchoate shards of photographs and the empty space of the magazine's gutters. There are passages where pixilated tangle becomes form—a set of legs in the second strip, a bookshelf in the fourth?—but the effect is to remake these mediated images into new constellations of meaning, to force the blitz of culture

into the armature of pure form. Analogous works were created by a number of artists in the 1950s, for collage and cut-up techniques were the signature modes of the time. Figures as dissimilar as Bruce Conner, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Robert Rauschenberg experimented with producing form and meaning by juxtaposing borrowed images or words, each with different methods and results. Some (Paolozzi, Rauschenberg) left the images in their popular forms and created new networks of meaning among them; others, like Kelly, used this collage effect to randomize their images and to depersonalize the act of composition, to remove the artist from the fold of the image.

Kelly's mode is more innately modernist than those of any of the artists mentioned—his approach in *Pages from a Magazine* has more in common with the bricolage of Kurt Schwitters than that of Rauschenberg—but it responds to the same cultural conditions. The mythologies of postwar Western culture are implicit in Kelly's works of this period, in his imagining of art making as the organizing and structuring of bits of information, in his desire for anonymity, and in his affinity for the interrelation between art and design. He took up mass culture's negative terms—the anonymous, the statistical—and used them to the ends of art, as if to resist or redirect their effects.

Despite Kelly's use of "impersonal observation" and form generated by chance, the resulting images are not rarefied, technical "results"; they are never simply exact or merely statistical. *Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance* (1951–53; pl. 16), for instance, is consummately randomized, but its use of accident is anything but "inhuman." The work uses eighteen different hues equally distributed among 1,444 squares, half of which are black, their placement determined by chance rather than choice. Despite the work's inspiration in pieces like *Seine* (1951) and *Cité*, however, *Spectrum Colors* is a breakthrough in that it does not simply present an image impressionistically transferred from the world, but insistently evokes its process of creation. The wooden surface of the image has been divided evenly into squares of unmodulated, primary color that are randomly dispersed over its gridded surface. There is no



FIGURE 19
Ellsworth Kelly, *Pages from a Magazine*, 1950.
Paper collage. 15 1/2 x 1 1/4 in. (39.4 x 3.2 cm).
Private collection.

obscurity—each square is a defined color, unchanging within its boundaries—and no effort was made to conceal its facture: pencil lines emerge here and there through the thinned oil paint, as if to insist on the spidery tablature beneath the densely structured field. *Spectrum Colors*, then, asks to be seen as an image generated by a chance process, with Kelly merely reproducing a predetermined schema. In some ways this art object is a modernist gesture as extreme and austere as Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* or Marcel Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, though it inflects Malevich's utopian imagination with technical efficiency and reinvests Duchamp's games and statistics with an imagistic, spectral visuality.

As another example, Kelly created a sequence of associated images, fragments of process that only together constitute the complete "work of art." In 1952 he created the collage *Study for Seven Color Panels with Border* (pl. 20), which juxtaposed a short sequence of colors, separated by thin pencil lines. The arrangement has a characteristic clarity: two parenthetical blue rectangles contain variations—red and white, yellow and white—balanced by a black rectangle in the center. The collage's schematic nature is like a visual sentence—blue red white, black yellow white blue—but this sentence has the tone of a proposition rather than a declaration.

Kelly was to take up this proposition in the weeks that followed by reworking the original idea in various forms. The painting *Red Yellow Blue White and Black with White Border* (1952–53; pl. 19) was made on separate canvases with the intention that the configuration of the panels could be determined by the owner of the work. The artwork, then, would never be "final," but a perpetual collaboration between Kelly's original proposal and the particularity of its owner's arrangement. The visual order of the original collage was reimagined as a multitude of variations. A sheet of paper was covered in typescript: colors, in different variations and arrays, were tallied in the form of handwritten marks (figs. 20–21). The heading reads, "PAINTING WITH A HUNDRED VARIATIONS (7-Piece, with variations)." Proposed

incarnations of the painting vary in number and arrangement, and are listed densely, almost atop one another: "yellow white black white red," "white black blue blue yellow white," and so on.

Kelly made another collage as well, *103 Studies for Seven Color Panels with Border* (1953; pl. 21), visually detailing these different possible "artworks." In it, the artist manipulated a preordained repertory of hues into an incomplete set of variations; they are, like the typescript, dense on the surface of the image, crowded and jostling. It is an image thick with visual information and compelling in its obsessive visual activity. But unlike the seemingly conceptual proposals on the typescript, this is a material, and aesthetic, artifact. The surface of the color squares has a waxy gloss that contrasts with the unprimed matte of the paper, and in the fifty years since its making, the shards of color have begun to warp or pull away from the surface of the collage. As I am describing it, this is an object of history: a material index of human activity and manipulation.

In 1953 the process, as with *Cité*, came full circle. Kelly decided that the painted version would be mounted permanently in the order of the collage that initiated the cycle of variations, as if to somehow complete or control their proliferation.² It is, unlike *103 Studies*, a set of canvases with the look of an altarpiece: ageless, static, precise, and motionless. But behind its surfaces—between the lines, so to speak—sounds the cacophony figured in the other versions.

Notes

1. Ellsworth Kelly, "Notes from 1969," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Schilderijen en beelden, 1963–1979 / Paintings and Sculptures, 1963–1979*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1979), 30.
2. Kelly recounted his decision-making process in a letter of 28 March 2002 to Chad Coerver: "When the painting [Red Yellow Blue White and Black with White Border] was completed, I considered that the eventual owner could exhibit one, two, three, four, five, six, or seven panels, in any configuration they wanted. But after making the collage of variations, I decided the original configuration of the finished painting was my best solution and the only solution for the painting."

FIGURES 20–21
Ellsworth Kelly, *Painting with a Hundred Variations*, 1953 (top: recto; bottom: verso).
Typewriting and ink on paper. 8 x 7 1/2 in.
(20.3 x 19.1 cm). Private collection.

Silhouette, Shadow, and Line

Kelly's work from the second half of the 1950s has received less critical attention than the objects he made in France, possibly because he seemed in the later work to reject, or at least leave behind, many of the methods that had been so productive in the previous years. These works are not so insistently based on the afterimages of the visual world, and do not employ modular forms or the processes of randomization and chance. They rely less upon statistical organization or on subtly technologized vision, and count more on deceptively simple plays between figure and ground in the tradition of much of the best abstract painting of the late 1950s.

This does not mean, however, that Kelly abandoned the resources that he developed in the early 1950s, merely that these methods began to take on different significance or were used to other ends. This body of work is difficult to understand because critical language often falters in relation to high abstraction, or falls back upon biography, leaving the paintings themselves in a historical no-man's-land. The work deserves better. While it has been possible for critics to find the references in French works such as *Study for "Ormesson"* or *La Combe III* (pls. 10, 12) since Kelly revealed his "sources" in the 1970s, that method becomes less useful when addressing the works he made upon his return to the United States in 1954.

The interest of the works in this section resides in their particularly modernist language of abstraction, in the developing tensions between figure and ground and between painted form and the boundary of the canvas. Their logic is a formal one, one that presses toward the limits of the terms of representation: Is it possible to make an image with only one color? With only one gesture or outline? Is a simple black square enough? Is the fragment of a silhouette—just a field of black, with a white swath missing from the top—enough to signify space, shadow, figure, place, movement? Unlike earlier images that proposed themselves as indices or afterimages of visual patterns, these merely assert themselves impassively, formally. They are not, like *Cité* (1951; pl. 14),

objects that Kelly "organized" to generate a final form, but paintings that plot color against color, painted mark against recessed ground. Critic Rosalind Krauss has discussed paintings of this sort in structuralist terms, claiming that this play of difference between figure and surface is all that is needed to constitute a field of meaning.¹ Images such as *Black Ripe* (1955; pl. 23) and *Red White* (1962; pl. 25) mean to assert this difference between form and field as stridently as possible. The intention is to use a form that almost entirely fills the canvas, forcing the painting's "ground" to coextend with its "edge," to render the constructed nature of their visual space. These images concern the limits of visual meaning; Kelly intended to render the mechanisms of pictorial convention, and of vision, as such.

But this does little to explain the particularity of Kelly's approach to representation during this period, or the difference between these images and the modular or chance-generated artworks that preceded them. If an image like *Black Ripe* is at pains to reduce painting to the simplest structures of representation, to give its swollen form the force of a declaration, it does so by peculiar and telling means. I've called *Black Ripe*'s form swollen, and so it is: black, simple, but also awkward, bulging, organic—ripe like a fruit ready to burst. In contrast to the refined symbols and distant diagrams of the French work, *Black Ripe* manifests an organic sensibility common to Kelly's work of these years. *Wall* (1958; pl. 22), for example, seems to subtly bend out of shape against the gestalt square of the canvas, and *Red White* seems uncomfortably wedged onto its field of white, as if the conventional relations between field and form had slowly begun to warp over time.

Kelly explicitly imagined painting in bodily terms during his years in New York. How else are we to make sense of the curious photograph from 1958, first reproduced in the 1996 Guggenheim retrospective catalogue, in which the artist stands nude in his studio, flanked by tall potted plants and paintings, holding one of his paintings from this period over his groin and abdomen (fig. 22)?²

FIGURE 22
Ellsworth Kelly at Coenties Slip studio,
New York, 1958.

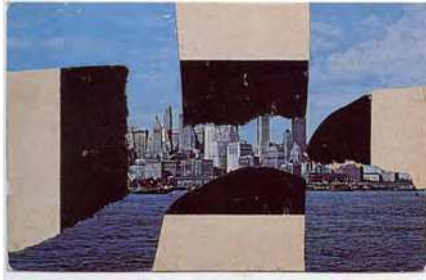


FIGURE 23
Ellsworth Kelly, *Four Blacks and Whites, Upper Manhattan*, 1957.
Paper collage on postcard.
3½ x 5½ in. (8.9 x 14 cm).
Private collection.

This image is intended to be humorous, of course—the painting as a bathing suit—but in a way that is telling: the curved forms of the painting seem to rewrite the boundaries of Kelly’s body in a new, stylized form. What is being claimed for this painting? Or for Kelly’s body? This image speaks first to the way that art can be a source of intimacy and play between friends (someone was evidently there to take the image, after all). Moreover, it demands that this group of works be understood in new terms; it suggests that Kelly’s painting of the late 1950s attempted to incorporate the pleasures, plenitudes, and awkwardness of the body into its formal relations, as if to disrupt the statistical schema and disembodied vision of the French work with a new and playful animality (this exploration of bodily forms would be taken up again in the totemistic sculptural work of the 1970s).

If these artworks mean to resist what I have described as Kelly’s striving toward perception without metaphor, they do not abandon the impulses of his French work entirely. Look, for instance, at the way that *Wall* and *White Form on Black* (1955; pl. 31) still labor to suggest the play of cast shadow and still take their formal cues from the phenomenology of architectural space. It is not difficult to see a shadowed awning or window in their abstraction. Likewise compare the interplay between figure and ground in *Maillot*

Jaune (1957; pl. 27) with that in the collage *Four Blacks and Whites, Upper Manhattan* (1957; fig. 23), done the same year. *Maillot Jaune* references clothing—the yellow jersey worn by the day’s winner in the Tour de France—but also means to perform, with its blue incursions onto a yellow field, a similar play between immediate form and panoramic distance, between close figure and deep space. This is not an artist who has abandoned his fascination with architecture and urban abstraction, or with popular imagery and decoration, but one who has rethought their importance and fit them into the frame of a different aesthetic project: that of laying bare the machinery of representation, of reducing it to its most basic, mechanistic terms. The forms are often still “found,” as they were in France, but in these works Kelly’s transcription functions in new, and newly sensual, ways. These paintings mean, despite their formal nature, to return us to a world we might recognize as our own: our space, our vision, our body and experience.

Notes

1. See Rosalind E. Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Part 2” (1977), in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 210–19.
2. Diane Waldman, ed., *Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 63.

Breaking the Plane

Ellsworth Kelly's work has evolved not so much in a linear fashion, progressing from one style to the next, as in a cyclical one; he will abandon a method or motif when it has run its course and then return to it a decade later to imagine it in a different context. One such motif has been the "broken plane"; it has taken on various incarnations throughout the years but has always signaled a turn in the work toward incorporating aspects of objecthood and architecture.

Antibes (1950; pl. 33) was made in Paris upon Kelly's return from the Musée Picasso at the Palais Grimaldi in Antibes. This piece uses the diagrammatic lines that characterize many of the works from this period, and its discolored white monochrome makes it resemble a cryptic archaeological object or a bleached fossil. Simply defined by shallow relief, its forms are eccentric, suggesting architectural schema seen askew, the ideal geometries of modern design witnessed by a body in motion. *Antibes* bears much in common with slightly later paintings such as *Ormesson* (1950), attempting as it does to imagine the rendering of space as seen by an objective, inhuman eye or by the panoramic gaze of the urban planner.

Antibes was a transitional object for Kelly, who was at this moment in his career negotiating an abstraction between Cubist form and monochrome. Its forms are still perceptibly influenced by the impenetrable schema of Cubism and by the relief paintings of Jean Arp, but the work is on the brink of discovery. Just as Kelly means, with *Antibes*, to represent space and architecture abstractly, so does the object itself break the two-dimensional plane of the representative surface literally, its forms protruding in relief from its cardboard face and a thick string emerging from the center. Like many of the objects he made in early 1950—among them *Window V*, his first proper shaped painting, and *Neuilly* (fig. 24), a work that transferred the found decorative pattern of paving stones into an austere relief—*Antibes* developed upon the breakthrough of his *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris* (1949; fig. 18), which had been done two months before. As noted elsewhere in

this volume, Kelly conceived of these artworks as objects rather than images, and breaking the two-dimensional plane of the canvas was his first step toward this new objecthood.

White Relief (1950; pl. 34), shown with *Antibes* in Kelly's first major exhibition at Galerie Arnaud in 1951, uses the broken plane to even more dramatic effect. Its forms—regular rows of polygons that emerge an inch from the wooden surface, varying only on the top row—are plotted in a stark three-dimensional lattice that holds none of the representational residue of the maplike *Antibes*. *White Relief* instead merges the codes of painting and sculpture; it is mounted upon a wall but depends for its power upon its mute, materialist rejection of the volumetric spatiality that illusionistic painting had assumed since the Renaissance. The resulting painting-object short-circuits the ease with which we imagine pictorial space, compelling the eye to travel over a repetitive and antinaturalistic topography that forces us, again and again, to return to the contingency of our own vision and movement around the artwork. Looking at a reproduction of the work, its forms seem static, repetitive, and ideal, but in person the piece is constantly in motion, the levels of each of its projecting elements uncertain. Shadows cross and lock together, giving the piece a liminal or dreamlike animation that counters its blank materiality. If *Antibes* is an ancient artifact, then *White Relief* is its modular, futuristic opposite.

Kelly would return to this problematic repeatedly, during his time in France and later, always (under)mining the tension between optic and object and the unpredictable relation between art, architecture, and viewer. It would take on different formal characteristics over time in his work—he introduced color to the problematic in the late 1950s, for instance—but these works would maintain what one might call the spectral logic of Kelly's abstract objects, his fascination with obscured relations between pictorial elements, with ancient and futuristic modes of vision, with distorted perception and cast shadows, and with hermetic, private codes.

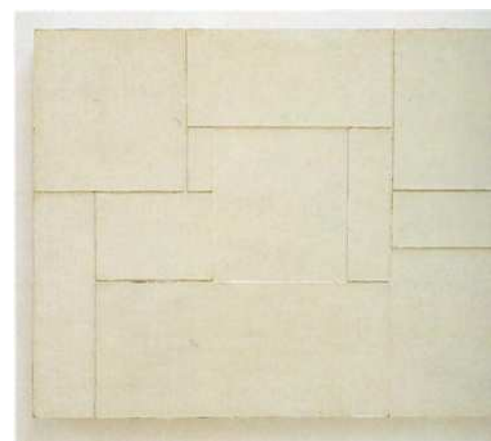


FIGURE 24
Ellsworth Kelly, *Neuilly*, 1950. Gesso on cardboard mounted on wood. 23 x 31 3/8 x 1 1/2 in. (58.4 x 79.7 x 3.8 cm). Private collection.

Concorde Relief I (1958; pl. 36) might serve as one example. It is an echo of the much larger *Wall* (pl. 22), done in the same year, and rests, like that painting, upon the juxtaposition of two elements, the first a static, rectangular “frame” and the second an overlaid and slightly out-of-sync “figure,” which repeats but distorts the original frame structure. Both works use their two elements to generate a system of difference—and so of meaning—based on the slightest variations between forms. *Concorde Relief I*, however, counters its minimal means with the natural grain of its polished wood surface and, as in *White Relief*, with the play of shadows that blurs the economy of its adjacent forms. In other words, this relief poses a set of abstract relations only to complicate them, to mystify them. But were they ever really in place? In images such as this one Kelly never fully allows the relations that would constitute pictorial meaning—the basic structures of figure and ground—to fully exist in the first place, and so his images are always on the verge of constituting a system of meaning, always intimating a field of difference that never quite appears. *Concorde Relief I* is fixed in this inchoate state, before difference can establish itself, a prelinguistic or preinterpretive utterance on the threshold of taking form.

It was this quality that led one reviewer, on the occasion of Kelly’s first solo show at Galerie Arnaud, to describe him as an artist who “intentionally cultivated broken rhythms, fragmented areas of color, and studied fragmentation.”¹ The work offers an image, in some sense, of meaning fragmented by new social forms, and of (visual) language struggling to find a new context, which calls to mind the apocalyptic beginning of Clement Greenberg’s landmark 1939 essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch”: “A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its develop-

ment, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything.”² Ellsworth Kelly, at the extreme of *Wall* and *Concorde Relief I*, offers an image of this shattered and reconstituted language. They are objects as austere and forceful as any modernist art has produced.

It is interesting, then, to see how easily this modernist dialectic was overturned in Kelly’s subsequent work. *Blue Red* (1966; pl. 38), for instance, seems to effortlessly overcome this particular problematic by simply shifting one of its canvases onto the floor and into the space of the viewer; with a single gesture, the work circumnavigates the dialectics of figure and ground, engaging with literal, rather than figurative, space. The work is fragmentary only in that its structural field is posed not within the work but by elements outside of it. *Blue Red*’s field of difference—its pictorial meaning—is completed instead by its engagement with the matrix of architecture and the diegesis of the audience’s movement around the body of the artwork. This new relation in effect “completes” the stalled circuit of meaning. It would be this development that would drive Kelly’s work in the coming years.

Notes

1. G. B., “Kelly,” in *Arts: Beaux-arts, littérature, spectacles* (Paris), 4 May 1951, cited in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 189.
2. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, vol. 1, *Perceptions and Judgements, 1939–1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 6.

Objectifying Color

A painting by Ellsworth Kelly from 1968 (pl. 40): two separately stretched and painted canvases, uniformly textured and colored within their bounds, one red, the other green. Eccentric, irregular geometries that vary only in their color and proportion, the panels are carefully made and mounted so that the large edge of the red panel matches exactly to the small edge of the green, giving the two canvases the effect of a single, geometrical gestalt, though perhaps one seen from a strange perspective or shifted into a perfect Platonic space. The white wall of the gallery encourages the impression that the piece is afloat in an ideational field and that the viewer can imagine the painting-gestalt in this field fully formed, shifting and turning—seen now from this angle, now from that one. *Red Green* is an artwork that simultaneously evokes the precision of industrial technology and the saturated colors and abstraction of graphic design. So too we might imagine *Blue White* (pl. 44), done in the same year, as posing an abstract field of difference against the “ground” of the wall, an inscrutable image devoid of detail, verging as close as a painting can to becoming pure information.

Both images do as much to trouble this reading, however, as to validate it. Kelly counters it first and foremost by his use of subtle formal distortions, which ensure that the shapes are not actually coherent as gestalt or ideal forms. Their geometries are bent out of true, and their obscured structures subtly force attentive viewers to constantly renegotiate their impressions of pictorial space and the gallery’s architecture. Perspective, in a room of Kelly’s objects, is corrupt. Moreover, these are not represented, painted “compositions,” but juxtaposed objects. This is key. They are not represented forms, but objects literally “organized” against the wall of the room, which, as I have argued, is thereby written into the visual economy of the artwork and is there counteracted, put into question. In this particular sense—in his willingness to play tensions within the work against the stability of the architectural space—Kelly has as much in common with Richard Serra as he does with color-field painters

such as Kenneth Noland or Larry Poons (who were not so attuned to architectural context). These readings exist in productive tension in the works in this section: color as an absolute, spiritual ideal versus painting as material form; the form and glow of ecclesiastical objects next to the unstable, edgy forms of modern design; each image as a fragment of sensory experience, an ephemeral moment of vision.

These have been the terms on which the work has been understood, but they are not the only narratives that this work makes possible; there are other dialectics operating beneath its saturated surfaces which inform their architecture of meaning and which determine the conditions in which we see them. One example (there are more) might draw upon the submerged but significant relations between Kelly’s mature abstraction and the indexical procedures present in his oeuvre, that is, on the terrain of Kelly’s photography two decades after the Meschers photos.

These later photographs would seem to mark a moment: Kelly was at an early high point of his success, with large-scale public commissions (including a mural for the UNESCO building in Paris) and two major monographs of his work on the verge of release. He had recently reprinted the French pictures and, inspired by them, took up photography again after twenty years. The resulting photographs have been republished a number of times but rarely discussed; they are, after all, not finished works, but documents, moments in process.¹ I want, however, to insist upon their importance, and on the productive interrelation between Kelly’s painting and his more ephemeral practices, because motifs and methods tend to ricochet in his oeuvre from “serious” to incidental work and back. Moreover, Kelly’s work, unlike much modernist painting, derives its power not from its “purity,” I would contend, but from the density and complexity of its relations to the world.

A photograph, then, is taken from the highway in Austerlitz, New York, in 1970 (fig. 25). It shows a stand of bare trees and clouded sky, and a curve of snow-covered ground, though the

FIGURE 25
Ellsworth Kelly, *Curve Seen from a Highway*,
Austerlitz, New York, 1970. Gelatin silver print.
11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm). Private collection.

composition is simplified and flattened into two fields of color, giving the image the look of simple abstraction. This photograph works, first, as part of an ensemble of Kelly's paintings, extending from the simple two-panel works of 1968 that had preceded it (*Black White* [1968] and the aforementioned *Blue White*) to later curved works and sculpture (*Diagonal with Curve XIV* [1982; pl. 54] or *Blue Relief with Black* [1993; pl. 46]). In this sense, the photograph documents Kelly's practice of relentlessly discovering abstraction—fragments of curves, patterns of light and dark—in visual perceptions of the quotidian or natural landscape.

But this image exists as well as part of a photographic sequence—taken in Long Island, New York City, and upstate New York—of barn doors and shingled roofs, squares of tarmac, aluminum siding, and broken windows. In each, there is an attention to associative, productive abstraction, but also to vernacular architecture, to curbs and highways and low-level urban design. Kelly is only rarely interested in nature; more often he tracks the simple geometries of lived space, the abstraction of functional architecture ("the work of an ordinary bricklayer" he wrote in 1969, "is more valid than the artwork of all but a very few artists"²). Photographs like these connect his work to a different story about modernity, one related to travel and the dislocation of the countryside, to the picturesque ruins left by postwar urban development. They provide a counterpoint to his painting, one that enters their fragmented

and futuristic shards of color information into a dialectical relation to aging or reconfigured architecture and the pastoral landscape. This dualistic nature, this dialectical movement, is present in all of Kelly's work.

Look again at Ellsworth Kelly's art: measure the saturated, futuristic density of *Red Green* against the deconstructed architecture and faded white of *Antibes* (1950; pl. 33). Measure the tracery of shadows (on the edge of disappearance: a cloud covers the sun, and it's gone) in *La Combe III* (1951; pl. 12) against your own silhouette as it blurs the surface of *Diagonal with Curve XIV* or *Blue Relief with Black*. Imagine, then, a new, objective, associative, indexical, visual intelligence—Kelly's intelligence—moving through a landscape formed or destroyed by human activity; and imagine an art—his art—attempting to articulate that world, in all of its density and evanescence.

Notes

1. Various photographs from this period appear in, among others, Diane Waldman, ed., *Ellsworth Kelly: Drawings, Collages, Prints* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1971); Diane Upright, ed., *Ellsworth Kelly: Works on Paper*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), and Diane Waldman, ed., *Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996).
2. Ellsworth Kelly, "Notes from 1969," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Schilderijen en beelden, 1963–1979 / Paintings and Sculptures, 1963–1979*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1979), 31.