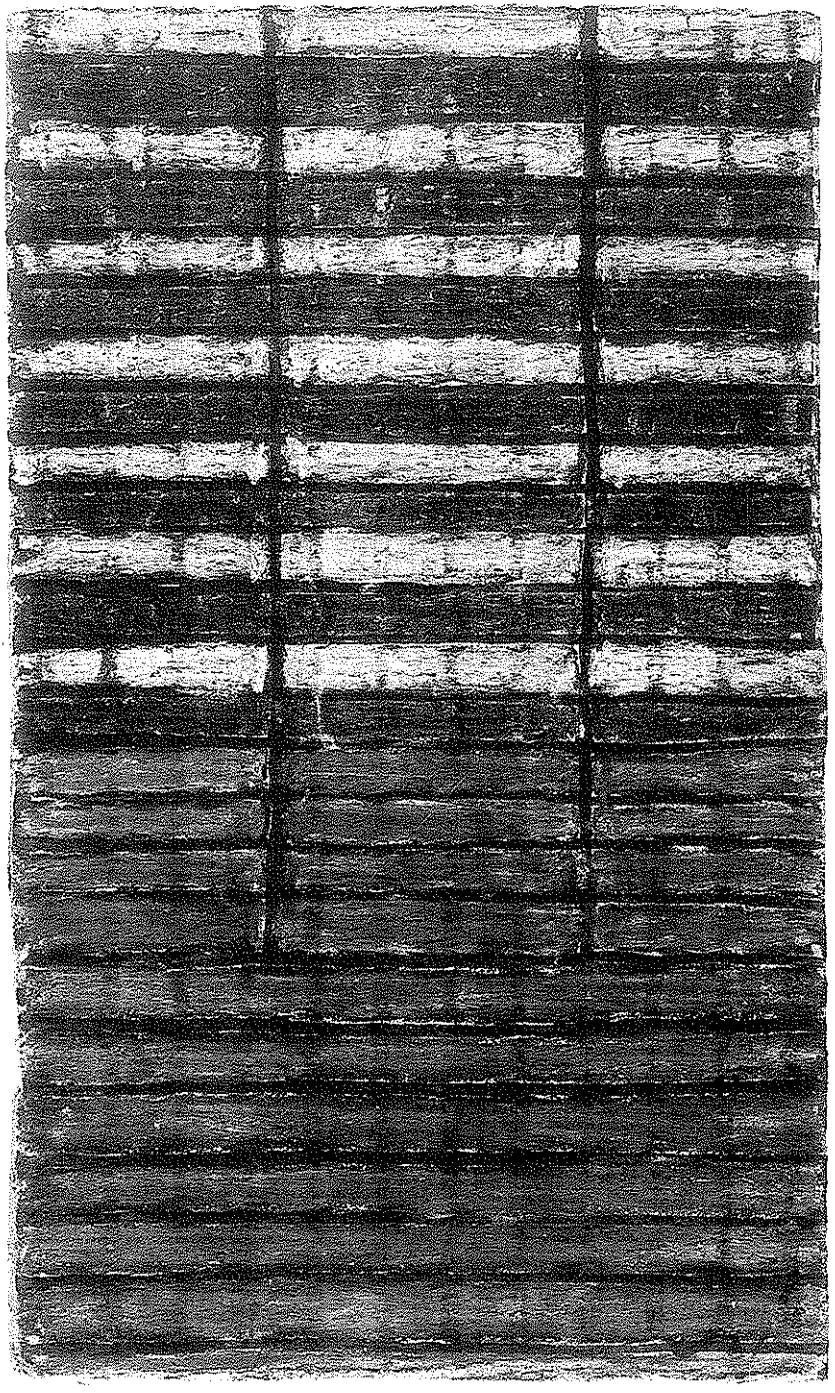

Frank Stella, *Portrait of Michael Fried Standing on His Head Far above Cayuga's Waters,* 1959. Colored ink on cardboard, 5¾ x 3⅜ inches. Text on back: "PORTRAIT OF MICHAEL FRIED STANDING ON HIS HEAD FAR ABOVE CAYUGA'S WATERS PAINTED BY FRANK P. STELLA WILLINGLY 4.3.59 AT 366 WEST BROADWAY NEW YORK CITY." Collection of the author.

Art and Objecthood

Essays and Reviews

Michael Fried

The University of Chicago Press

Chicago and London

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Cover photograph: Michael Fried in Anthony Caro's studio, Triangle Art Workshop, Pine Plains, New York, July 1986.

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To Anna

He could not persuade himself that, if he wrote round about his subject with facility or treated it from any standpoint of impression, good would come of it. On the other hand he was persuaded that no-one served the generation into which he had been born so well as he who offered it, whether in his art or in his life, the gift of certitude.

—James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK reprints much, though by no means all, of the art criticism I wrote between the fall of 1961 and 1977, the date of a short catalog introduction for a traveling exhibition of Anthony Caro's table sculptures. It is organized in three parts, arranged in reverse chronological order, but within each part the writings it comprises are presented in the order in which they were written. (In part 1, which includes both longer and shorter texts, the longer ones come first and then the shorter ones.) This sounds more complicated than it is. What the reverse chronological arrangement means is that the reader comes across my best or most mature criticism first and so is not led to plow through inferior stuff before reaching it. Moreover, since I have always tended from essay to essay and book to book to advance my arguments in stages, summarizing what has gone before and sometimes recycling previous texts, such an ordering helps neutralize the repetitiveness that can result. In any case, only when I thought of organizing a selection from my criticism in this way did I come to feel that it made sense as a book.

The texts are reprinted as they first appeared or were republished early on, though I have felt free to make small improvements of style and punctuation (while longing to make more sweeping changes), to remove italics, to eliminate or simplify footnotes. Here and there I have added footnotes to supply missing references, to correct factual errors, or, in a few cases, to cite relevant passages from earlier essays of mine that I have chosen not to include in this book. I have also updated certain references, notably to essays by Clement Greenberg that are now conveniently available in volume 4 of John O'Brian's edition of *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* entitled *Modernism with a*

Vengeance, 1957–1969 (Chicago, 1993). On the other hand, in a few instances where there is a difference in phrasing between an essay as it is given in O'Brian's edition and as it earlier appeared in a journal, anthology, or Greenberg's own one-volume selection from his art criticism, *Art and Culture* (New York, 1961), I have remained faithful to the earlier version on the grounds that it was the one I initially read and cited. (Other references I have updated are to texts by Stanley Cavell and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.) Also, in my writings of the 1960s the words "modernist" and "modernism" were sometimes spelled with a capital *M* and sometimes not; I have opted for the latter course throughout this book. However, in no instance have I modified views originally expressed or corrected theoretical or descriptive points that now seem to me mistaken.

As for the contents of this book, I haven't hesitated to leave out reviews and essays that now strike me as hopelessly immature or otherwise not worth republishing. So, for example, I have omitted all my 1961–62 monthly reviews from London, an essay on anticompositional aspects of the art of Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland of 1965, my contribution to a Brandeis symposium of 1966, and the introduction to the catalog for Caro's 1969 retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, and I have reprinted only parts of twelve of the fourteen "New York Letters" I wrote for *Art International* in 1962–64. I have also dropped certain early essays that are superseded by later ones on the same artist; I have omitted several texts from the 1980s and after that belong to a different time frame from that of the book as a whole; and I have kept illustrations to a minimum. On that score, finding photographs and transparencies for the illustrations in this book has been an ordeal, and in various instances I have had to resort to reproducing illustrations from earlier publications. The results are sometimes much inferior to what I would have wished. Worse, certain key works that I would have liked to reproduce in color turned out to be available for illustration only in black and white (that is, the work itself was unlocatable and no reliable trasparency could be found).

I wish I could say that I am satisfied with the bulk of the texts that have made it into this book. For the record, it seems to me I came into my own as an art critic and theorist only in the fall of 1966, with "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" and with "The Achievement of Morris Louis," which roughly a year later I expanded to form the text of my book on Morris Louis (reprinted here). That

I then went on to write "Art and Objecthood" provides the rationale, as well as the title, for the volume as a whole.

I'm grateful to the editors who printed my criticism, Hilton Kramer at *Arts Magazine,* James Fitzsimmons at *Art International,* and Phil Leider at *Artforum.* Leider in particular was a treat to write for: his years at *Artforum* are legendary, and it was a privilege to be part of them. I'm also grateful to the president and fellows of Harvard College for permission to republish the introduction to *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella;* to Harry N. Abrams, Inc., for permission to republish the text of my book *Morris Louis,* now out of the print; to Anthony Korner, publisher of *Artforum,* for permission to reprint essays that first appeared in it; to Catherine Lampert, director of the Whitechapel Gallery, for permission to reprint my introduction to the exhibition catalog *Anthony Caro: Sculpture 1960–1963;* and to Jack Cowart, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Corcoran Gallery of Art for permision to reprint my introduction to the exhibition catalog *Jules Olitski: Paintings 1963–1967.* I might never have written art criticism at all had I not met Frank Stella at Princeton; my debt to him and to the other artists discussed in these pages is unpayable. During the years I wrote the pieces in this book I discussed many of the ideas in them with Stanley Cavell, John Harbison, Rosemary Harbison, and Ruth Leys. More recently, Cavell, Leys, Frances Ferguson, Marc Gotlieb, Herbert L. Kessler, and Walter Benn Michaels read and commented helpfully on a penultimate draft of the introduction to this book. Lauren Freeman assisted in the preparation of the manuscript. Among those who were especially helpful to me in my search for illustrations are Ian Barker, Robert Brockhouse, Helen Harrison, Steven Harvey, Ann Jareckie, and Lauren Poster. My sincere thanks to all.

The deepest, though also the most difficult, acknowledgment I have saved for last. No one familiar with the pieces gathered in this book will need to be told how indebted they are to the writings of the late Clement Greenberg, whom I am not alone in regarding as the foremost art critic of the twentieth century. As I explain in the introduction, I knew Greenberg personally and on more than a few occasions visited studios and warehouses to look at recent painting and sculpture with him, and for several years I enjoyed not his friendship (the difference between our ages alone might have precluded that) but at least his qualified approval. Then for reasons I only partly understand, our relations gradually became impossible. But I would

not have been the art critic I was, I would not have become the art historian I am, had it not been for the need to come to terms with his thought.

* * *

With joy I dedicate this book to my daughter, Anna Lei Ci Fried.

An Introduction to My Art Criticism

Each answer remains in force as an answer only as long as it is rooted in questioning.

—Martin Heidegger, *"The Origin of the Work of Art"*[1]

HERE ARE some things I do not do in this introduction. I do not update the pieces in this book by engaging with developments or issues that emerged after they were written. So, for example, I neither address the topic of postmodernism nor discuss conceptual art, performance art, or other such developments that lie beyond the scope of my criticism. On the same principle, I say nothing about the later work of the artists—Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella, Larry Poons, Anthony Caro—whose paintings and sculptures of the 1960s and 1970s largely inspired my activity as a critic. Also, "Art and Objecthood" and my critical position generally have drawn a lot of fire over the years, but by and large I do not reply to my critics (in the body of the text, at any rate). Here and there I correct misrepresentations of my views, which of course is a reply of sorts. But I have read only some of the books and articles that take me on, and in any case I wouldn't want this introduction to come across as a reaffirmation of my convictions and rhetoric circa 1967. Although it hasn't been possible to avoid all self-justification, that has been the ideal.

A word about the timing of this book. It's not accidental that I've waited until now to bring out a selection of my art criticism. Early on it didn't occur to me to do so, and later, when it began to seem a good idea, I became involved in a long-term art-historical project, an

attempt to develop an account of the evolution of a central tradition within French painting from the first genre paintings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze in the mid-1750s to the emergence of modernism in the art of Édouard Manet and the Impressionists in the 1860s and 1870s. The core issue for that tradition concerned the relation between painting and beholder, which is to say that it was a version of the issue I had invoked in "Art and Objecthood" when I accused Minimalist art of being theatrical. At that point it made sense to hold off gathering my art criticism until I had completed the art-historical task I had set myself, which I have now done in three books: *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), *Courbet's Realism* (1990), and *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (1996).[2] This makes it possible to think of the present book both as a prologue to my art-historical trilogy and as a sequel to the historical problematic it analyzes. (When I wrote "Art and Objecthood" and related essays I was a Diderotian critic without knowing it.)

The remarks that follow are in three parts. In part 1 I give a brief account of how I began writing art criticism and how and when the pieces in this book came to be written. In part 2 I try to clarify my aims in writing various texts as well as to gloss some basic themes and concerns at work in my criticism generally. Finally, in part 3 I make a few basic points about the relation of the art criticism gathered in this book to the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French painting that I went on to write.

One more preliminary comment. Although the latest text reprinted here dates from 1977, the chronological focus of this book is the 1960s, in particular the years 1963–67. I won't try to characterize those years other than to say that they were intense and eventful, but I want to suggest that the art mainly discussed in these pages—the modernist abstract painting and sculpture of Morris Louis (who died in 1962), Noland, Olitski, Stella, and Caro, as well as the Minimalist critique of that art in the interests of objecthood and theater—was fully as central to the period as any other cultural manifestation. In that sense this is yet another book about the 1960s by an author who, then in his twenties, continues to bear their mark.

1. Some Autobiographical Background

I first became interested in writing art criticism while an undergraduate at Princeton (class of 1959). In grade school

I had painted in watercolors and oils, and at Forest Hills High School in New York City I had drawn cartoons for the school newspaper. Then my freshman year at college I met Frank Stella, who was one year ahead of me, and through him some time later I met Darby Bannard, who graduated in 1956 but who continued to live in Princeton, where he worked in a framing shop and painted. Stella had begun painting seriously at Andover Academy, and by the time I met him in the fall of 1955 he was committed to painting as his life's work. Princeton during those years had a modest program in the creative arts, and in the fall of 1956 Stephen Greene, then thirty-eight, began a three-year stint as professor of painting. Greene at once recognized Stella's genius, and they became close. In my junior year I too took Greene's course, but what mattered to me even more than the practical experience of making abstract pictures was my participation, at first mainly as a listener, in conversations with Stella, Bannard, and Greene about recent painting in New York and about modern art generally. Greene was up-to-date on developments in New York and encouraged his students to make the one-hour train trip to Manhattan to visit art galleries. Also, it was in the course of those conversations that I first heard of Clement Greenberg, who had not yet published *Art and Culture* and so could only be read in the library, in back issues of *Partisan Review* or the *Nation,* apart from the occasional current piece. (Greenberg's eminence once *Art and Culture* appeared in 1961 became so great that it's hard for latecomers to realize that that wasn't always the case.) Greenberg's verbally austere and intellectually rigorous yet passionately engaged criticism was at the farthest pole from the low-grade existentialist rhetoric and "poetic" appreciation that characterized most of the writing in *Art News,* the leading magazine of contemporary art of the mid- and late 1950s, and it says a lot about what Stella, Bannard, and I already thought and felt about painting that Greenberg was the only art critic we valued and wanted to read.

Throughout my years at Princeton I wrote poetry (I majored in English), and by my junior year I had formed the plan of also writing art criticism (at that time I had no definite academic ambitions). Some time during the spring of 1958 I wrote a letter to Greenberg (Steve Greene probably gave me his address) expressing my admiration for his writing and asking whether I might come and get his advice about starting out as an art critic. Greenberg replied by postcard inviting me to call and set a time for a visit, whereupon I got cold feet and did nothing. A few weeks later a second postcard ar-

rived saying that several pieces of mail he had recently sent out seemed to have gone astray and maybe that had happened to the card to me; he again gave me his number and invited me to call. This time I followed through, and so made my first visit to Greenberg (at 90 Bank Street) in the late spring of 1958. I don't remember much about the visit other than the nervousness I felt being in his presence. Greenberg was then in the process of revising the essays that would go into *Art and Culture* and at one point asked my opinion of Theodore Roszak's sculpture. I said I didn't like it, which impressed him. (Greenberg to his wife Jenny: "He sees through Ted Roszak!") He also said that art criticism as usually practiced was a pitiful activity and went on to warn me against the dangers of studying art history. This was one of Greenberg's hobbyhorses: he believed that the historical approach was inherently nonjudgmental and therefore antithetical to criticism. I had begun to take art history courses, which I loved, and was starting to think about becoming an art historian.

During my senior year (1958–59) I stayed in close touch with Stella, who was living and painting in New York but who made several visits to Princeton, sleeping on the couch in a suite of rooms I shared with two friends, and I also saw something of Bannard and Greene. In the fall of 1958 Greenberg gave a series of six Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism on modern painting at Princeton, which is when he met Stella and Bannard for the first time (Stella came down for at least one and possibly more of the seminars). The Gauss Seminars, then under the direction of R. P. Blackmur, my mentor in poetry, was (and is) a highly prestigious lecture-plus-discussion series which during those years was open only to members of the faculty and selected invitees from the larger intellectual community; as a rule undergraduates and their ilk could not attend, but Greenberg arranged for Frank, Darby, and me to be admitted. I wish I could remember more about the content of Greenberg's sessions; my impression is that they weren't well received, both because Greenberg's dogmatic and humorless cast of mind chilled discussion from the start and because his refusal to use slides (on the grounds that they misrepresented the works they ostensibly reproduced) meant that his audience had no way of visualizing what he was talking about. But for Stella, Bannard, and me the seminars were an event, if only because they brought Greenberg to Princeton for six weeks running and exposed us to a broad range of his views; as was typical of him, he was more interested in meeting Stella and Bannard, young paint-

ers whom he knew nothing about, than in exchanging pleasantries with academics, whom he largely distrusted.

Around Christmas 1958 I was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford for the following two years; I had entered the competition without imagining that I might be selected, and now was faced with the unappealing prospect of being away from New York at just the moment I had thought to begin writing and publishing art criticism. It must have been during the spring of 1959 that I visited Hilton Kramer, then editor of *Arts Magazine,* with a letter of introduction from Greenberg. Kramer set me to write several trial art reviews, not for publication but so that he might assess my potential as a critic, with the thought of perhaps using me when I was in England. In the meantime Stella had broken through to his first series of black paintings, which quickly met with enthusiastic responses from (among others) John Myers of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, who included one such painting in a group show in April 1959; Leo Castelli, whose gallery Stella joined a few months later; and Dorothy Miller, who chose four large black canvases for inclusion in the important exhibition *Sixteen Americans,* which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in December 1959. At the age of twenty-three Stella was on the threshold of a remarkable career, and it was doubly painful to think of going off to England just at that moment. (A few evenings before I sailed in September 1959, Stella and I were taken out to a Japanese meal by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. I often thought of that dinner during the next two years, and not only at mealtimes.) In the course of the summer of 1959, which I spent living in Princeton and working on an opera libretto for the composer John Eaton, Bannard too made a remarkable series of paintings, only some of which are extant today. I saw a lot of Bannard during those months and believed that he too was on the verge of an important career.

Oxford I loathed. I refused to study for a second B.A. in English; I wasn't academically advanced enough to write a dissertation without the sort of graduate training that wasn't available there; the possibilities for study in art history were effectively nil; and when in desperation I applied to study for a degree in history, thinking that it would be useful for later work in art history, I was turned down on the grounds that I had never studied history before, which was perfectly true but from an American perspective was a reason for taking a subject up, not for being shut out from it forever. So I soon had no

academic relation to the university at all. But I made some friends, both American and English, spent long stretches of time in Paris and Rome looking at paintings and wandering the streets, worked on my French, and read more or less systematically on several fronts, including, for the first time, Marxism and philosophy. (It was then that I first encountered the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.) I also continued to write and publish poems. (Among the friends I made at Oxford was the poet Ian Hamilton, who went on to found and edit the *Review,* the leading British new poetry journal of the 1960s and early 1970s; under its imprint I published a book of poems, *Powers,* in 1973.) In addition to letters from Stella, there were two reminders of the life I had planned to live before sailing to England: once each of the two years I spent in Oxford, Hilton Kramer commissioned me to review a book for *Arts.* This was encouraging, but by the end of my second year I was sufficiently disoriented not to want immediately to return to the United States; instead, I decided to live in London for a year, sharing a small apartment near Primrose Hill with an English friend, teaching literature in teachers' colleges (as they were then called) and for the Workers' Educational Association, and studying philosophy on a part-time basis at University College London, where I would be tutored by the distinguished philosophers Stuart Hampshire and Richard Wollheim (I had met Hampshire in Oxford and arranged this with him in the spring of 1961).

My year in London (1961–62) worked out beautifully. The city itself—getting into gear for the decade to come—was exciting and inexpensive, I was glad finally to be earning my living, I was involved in the founding of the *Review,* I enjoyed University College as much as I had abhorred Oxford (Wollheim and I soon became friends), but most important, at the very moment I moved there in September 1961, Hilton Kramer offered me the post of London correspondent for *Arts.* Naturally I accepted. This meant writing a monthly commentary on a selection of shows in galleries and museums (the choice to be made by me), and it paid enough to meet my share of the rent (seventy-five dollars a month). So at the age of twenty-two, unexpectedly, I was an accredited art critic, publishing regularly in New York! All this was heady, but it soon became even more so. Early that fall, following the opening of a show by the painter Robyn Denny at the Molton Gallery, I attended a group dinner in an Italian restaurant in Soho; at the table across from me was a somewhat aggressive character in his midthirties who said he was a sculptor and bluntly asked when I would come and see his work. We arranged that I would visit

him the next weekend, and I have a vivid memory of climbing a maze of streets in Hampstead in search of his address. Finally I arrived; there was a gate, and as I stepped through it into the courtyard beyond I found myself in the presence of two of Anthony Caro's earliest abstract sculptures, *Midday* (1960; figs. 32 and 33, pl. 13) and *Sculpture Seven* (1961; fig. 34). I was alone with these for several minutes before Caro came out of the house. But that was long enough to experience the unshakable conviction that they were two of the most original and powerful sculptures I had ever seen, that *Midday* in particular was nothing less than a masterpiece, and that the aggressive character in the restaurant—whom I had never heard of—was a great sculptor. I told Caro all this when he joined me in the garden and he seemed genuinely pleased. Our friendship took off from there. In the months that followed I saw him often, and before the year was done (at least I think this is the case) he invited me to write the introduction for an exhibition of his abstract sculptures to be held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the East End in the fall of 1963. One reason why that first experience of Caro's work remains so present to me is that it was so unexpected, in that sense so "pure." I don't mean that nothing in my earlier experience had prepared me for his art: on the contrary, I was familiar, within limits, with David Smith's abstract steel sculptures, and by nature and training I was already at home in abstraction. But Caro's sculptures weren't at all like Smith's structurally or expressively, and it was thrilling to discover in myself so intense, spontaneous, and convinced a response to work that I had come upon in this way. (Even in the cases of Stella and Bannard, my friendship with them had preceded my experience of their crucial early pictures.)

Throughout 1961–62 I wrote my London letters and a few additional pieces; rereading them for possible inclusion in this book I found them even more immature than I remembered; but nothing could have been more valuable than cutting my teeth as a critic in that way—even the distance from New York was a blessing, shielding me from external influences and forcing me to write about artists whose work I was seeing for the first time. In November 1961 Frank Stella came to London with his fiancée, Barbara Rose; they married there on November 7, with me as best man. All this while, I had been trying to figure out what to do when the year was over; finally I applied to study for a Ph.D. in art history at Harvard, was admitted to the program, and in the late summer of 1962 returned to the United States.

Graduate work at Harvard was demanding, especially at the start: my first semester saw me enrolled in Sydney J. Freedberg's seminar on Northern Italian *maniera* painting without ever having had a course on the Italian Renaissance. But even before settling in Cambridge I had been invited by James Fitzsimmons, editor of *Art International,* a magazine of contemporary art based in Lugano, to write a monthly "New York Letter" (I was to be one of two regular critics from New York, along with Max Kozloff). *Art International* had recently emerged as an important journal—Greenberg had published his article "Louis and Noland" there in 1960 and in October 1962 would bring out "After Abstract Expressionism" in its pages—and I was pleased to have the opportunity to continue writing art criticism on a regular basis. Later that year Barbara Rose wrote an essay on Pop Art and sent it to Fitzsimmons, and when he published it in *Art International,* she too was under way. By the next year she was added to the New York coverage along with Kozloff and me. My routine those first two years at Harvard was simple but strenuous: most of the month I lived in Cambridge, attending lectures and seminars, reading as much as possible in the subjects I was studying, writing seminar papers, and familiarizing myself with the paintings, prints, and drawings in the Fogg Art Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Then one Friday each month I took the shuttle from Logan Airport to La Guardia, spent two days visiting art galleries and museums, usually with Frank Stella, and returned to Cambridge on Saturday evening or Sunday morning. (In New York I stayed with Frank and Barbara, first in their apartment on East Sixteenth Street and later in one on Seventy-third and Madison; they were already the center of an artistic world—Barbara ran a continual salon—and nothing could have made a sharper break with my Harvard life than my brief visits with them. I also saw Greenberg from time to time.) Back in Cambridge I spent Sunday and Monday writing my "New York Letter" for Fitzsimmons and by Tuesday immersed myself again in my studies. (This was not a recipe for distinguished critical prose.) Practically speaking, I kept my activity as an art critic distinct from my work in art history; I never considered writing a dissertation on a living artist or seeking academic credit for my New York reviews. Intellectually, however, it was another story: from the start the distinction between art criticism and art history seemed to me a matter of emphasis rather than of principle, and my understanding of contemporary art had implications for the questions I began to put to the past. (See, however, my remarks on the difference between my art-critical and

art-historical writings with respect to the issue of antitheatricality in part 3 of this introduction.)

At some point in my second year at Harvard (1963–64), John Coolidge, then director of the Fogg Art Museum, invited me to organize a major exhibition of contemporary art. (The suggestion originated with Coolidge's assistant at the time, Charles W. Millard III.)[3] I leaped at the chance and decided to focus on three painters I especially admired, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella. I spent the fall and winter of 1964–65 writing a long catalog essay in which the work of each of the three was interpreted in the context of the development of modernist painting since Jackson Pollock. (The first part of that essay, a defense of "formal criticism," had been written some months previously for the *American Scholar*.) The exhibition, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella,* opened in April 1965. I had met Noland at a dinner with the Greenbergs on one of my early visits to New York, and we had hit it off at once; some time after that I met Olitski, probably at his studio near Bennington, Vermont, where he taught at Bennington College and where Noland also lived. (Caro too spent much of the year 1963–64 at Bennington teaching in the sculpture program; it was there that he made some of his most original early pieces, including *Titan, Bennington,* and *Shaftesbury*.) In my eyes Noland and Olitski were the strongest painters of their generation (Noland was born in 1924, Olitski in 1921), and despite their being considerably older than Stella, I thought that by showing a half-dozen first-rate pictures by each of the three and by writing a long critical-historical essay it would be possible to convey a sense of the present state and future prospects of ambitious abstraction. Coolidge gave over the main second-floor galleries of the Fogg to the exhibition, which I loved hanging and which made a powerful impression: the paintings more than held their own in the classical rooms, and it may be too that the Fogg's distance from New York—a distance that was more than simply geographical—gave them a special radiance. The exhibition was favorably reviewed by Hilton Kramer in the *New York Times,* and, most gratifying of all, Greenberg sent me a postcard (his favorite medium of communication) praising my introduction.

Around the moment of the Fogg exhibition, Olitski had begun making paintings by spraying paint into lengths of canvas, which he then cropped and framed. The new pictures struck me and others as an event, and in the early fall of 1965 I wrote an article about them ("Jules Olitski's New Paintings") which I have omitted from this

book. I then spent the rest of the academic year 1965–66 reading and thinking about earlier art. As a junior fellow in the Harvard Society of Fellows, I had been invited by the Department of Fine Arts to teach a course or seminar on a subject of my choosing in the spring semester. I decided to give a series of lectures on the development of French painting from the middle of the eighteenth century through the advent of Manet in the 1860s; I spent the fall term preparing, then drafted the lectures as I went along. Going through the lecture notes that survive, I see that I was taking the first steps toward the interpretation of that period since put forward in *Absorption and Theatricality, Courbet's Realism,* and *Manet's Modernism.* Equally important, the course confirmed my growing sense that my main concern as an art historian would be the prehistory of modernist painting, which is how things turned out. Among those in my audience was the philosopher Stanley Cavell, whom I had first met in the fall of 1962, when he was visiting Harvard from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton; Cavell had recently been appointed to a chair in the Harvard Department of Philosophy, and soon after he took up that position in September 1963 we began an intense and wide-ranging conversation that, with inevitable lapses, has continued to this day. During those years, too, I sat in on several of Cavell's courses and seminars and generally became familiar with his original and profound readings of the work of J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. As already mentioned, I had become interested in philosophy during my years in England, and now my friendship with Cavell gave me access to a style of thinking I found, to the extent that I grasped it, wonderfully congenial. Cavell himself was deeply concerned with the arts—originally he had hoped to become a composer—and the fact that I was internal to modernist poetry, painting, and sculpture and to the issue of modernism generally gave our relations a symmetry and equality that the difference in our ages might have seemed to preclude. At any rate, our conversations soon came to explore the question of artistic modernism as well as aspects of the pictorial developments that were my particular obsession.[4] (A third party in many of those conversations was the composer John Harbison, whom I met in 1964 and who soon became a close friend as well. In this connection let me also mention another composer I came to know and admire, Seymour Shifrin, who died at the age of fifty in 1980. He and Cavell had known each other at Berkeley, before Cavell moved to Harvard and Shifrin to Brandeis. For Shifrin modernism was a way of life.)

I had assumed that I would follow up that course of lectures by working full-time on a doctoral dissertation, but the claims of the contemporary situation again proved irresistible. During the academic year 1966–67 (actually starting in August 1966) I wrote four essays and several shorter pieces; I didn't know it at the time, but that year was the high-water mark of my activity as an art critic. First, I wrote an essay on a new series of shaped, multicolor paintings by Frank Stella, under the title "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings" (the second half of the title has been changed to "Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" in the present book); this was an important piece for me because in it for the first time I took issue with Greenberg's theorization of modernism in "Modernist Painting" and "After Abstract Expressionism," and also because I began to develop the critique of Minimalist art that would be taken further in "Art and Objecthood." Next I wrote "The Achievement of Morris Louis," the introduction to a catalog for the first full retrospective exhibition of Louis's painting. I had been enthralled by Louis's art ever since reviewing a show of his late stripe paintings at the Emmerich Gallery immediately following my return to the United States in the fall of 1962 (Louis had died a short time before);[5] so when Henry Hopkins of the Los Angeles County Museum invited me to organize and write the catalog for a large retrospective exhibition of his work, I was glad to accept. Choosing the works to be shown meant that I had to see everything Louis had painted between 1954 (and even earlier) and the summer of 1962. Many of his paintings hadn't yet been stretched and could only be viewed unrolled on the floor of the warehouses in New York and Washington, D.C. On those occasions I was joined by Greenberg, who was serving as artistic adviser to the estate; our relations had begun to fray toward the end of 1965, but throughout my labors on the Louis exhibition they were still good enough to make surveying Louis's oeuvre together a memorable experience. As soon as the Louis essay was done, I wrote an introduction to the catalog for an exhibition of Jules Olitski's paintings of 1963–67 that opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in the spring of 1967. I admired Olitski's work enormously and had been following it closely for the previous four years, but the introduction never quite rises to its occasion; nevertheless, I have included it in this volume. I also wrote short pieces on Caro and a young California painter, Ron Davis. Finally, for a special issue of *Artforum* on sculpture, I wrote "Art and Objecthood" (reprinted in this book), recognizing as I did so that it was bound to be controversial but of course not anticipating the full extent of the

notoriety that was in store for it. With the exception of the Olitski introduction, the essays I have just cited, long and short, were published in *Artforum,* which by the mid-1960s, under the brilliant and energetic editorship of Philip Leider, had become the foremost magazine of contemporary art. I first met Phil at the Stellas in early 1965, then spent several days with him when I visited Los Angeles in February 1967 for the opening of the Louis exhibition. *Artforum* was founded in San Francisco in 1962, moved to Los Angeles in 1965, and finally came to New York in June 1967. Although by then I was no longer writing art criticism on a regular basis, I saw Phil on all my frequent trips to New York and considered him a close friend. In 1972 Phil decided he had had enough of the art world, gave up the magazine, and moved back to California.

After a short break in the summer of 1967 I finally turned my attention to my dissertation, which I wrote on Édouard Manet's paintings of the 1860s, in particular on the meaning of his many deliberate allusions to the art of the Old Masters. First, though, I doubled the length of my Louis essay to provide the text of a copiously illustrated book on his art, which was published by Abrams in 1971 (it is that text, under the title "Morris Louis," that appears in this book). I then spent the fall of 1967 in London doing much of the research for my dissertation in the libraries of the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum. Why didn't I go to Paris, as I ought to have? Partly because of my friendship with Caro and my interest in various younger British artists (especially the sculptor Tim Scott, who in the 1960s was doing work of great originality), partly because I was already familiar with London and had other friends there, notably Ian Hamilton, whereas in Paris I knew no one and would be struggling to deal with libraries I had never previously worked in. In any case, I was living in London when in the fall of 1967 Caro exhibited *Prairie,* one of the definitive, some would say culminating, works of high modernist sculpture, at the Kasmin Gallery. I admired it greatly and wrote a short article on that show ("Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro," reprinted in this book) that I'm still pleased with. Also, on a visit to London in the summer of 1966, Caro and I had had a conversation about the problem of making *small* abstract sculptures. As a result Caro began making smaller pieces that included at least one element that ran or extended below the plane of the tabletops on which the sculptures were placed. I discuss the significance of that strategy in several essays in this collection (and will say more about it shortly), but my point here is that by the fall

of 1967 Caro had begun to produce a variety of pieces based on that structural (or "syntactic") principle, and it was fascinating to be around and watch them take shape. Finally, later that fall I made a brief visit to New York in order to see Noland's exhibition of his first horizontal stripe paintings at Emmerich's; for those of us in the color-field, high modernist camp, that too was a dramatic event, and together with Caro's *Prairie* and table pieces and Olitski's recent spray paintings it conveyed a sense of a movement in full flower. (I mention this because today it is often assumed by writers who weren't actually there that with the advent of Minimalism in the mid-1960s the high modernist group was put on the defensive—in fact "Art and Objecthood" is sometimes read in that light. But the mood in 1967–68, artistically speaking, was distinctly upbeat.)

At some point in the fall of 1967, I don't remember when, I hit upon the basic argument of my dissertation, namely, that Manet's use of sources in the art of the past was directed, first, toward securing the Frenchness of his own painting and second, toward using Frenchness itself to secure a kind of universality, which I associated with his pursuit of a comprehensive totalization of as many of the resources of painting as seemed to him artistically viable. From then on, writing the dissertation was a race against the clock (I was scheduled to take up a teaching appointment at Harvard the following September); I didn't complete my dissertation until the winter of 1968–69, toward the end of my first semester as an assistant professor in the Department of Fine Arts.

Something else I did during the spring of 1968 was organize a retrospective exhibition of Caro's sculptures to be held at the Hayward Gallery in London in early 1969, and I spent a few weeks in the fall of 1968, in the interstices of teaching and working on my dissertation, writing the introductory essay for the catalog. The strain shows, and I have omitted that essay too from these pages. But the exhibition was beautiful, especially the large downstairs room with a basketball-court-quality wooden floor in which we displayed about a dozen of Caro's sparest, most radical sculptures of the early and mid-1960s. I submitted my dissertation in time to receive the Ph.D. in January 1969, and two months later Phil Leider published it, under the title "Manet's Sources: Aspects of His Art, 1859–1865," in a special issue of *Artforum* containing nothing else. No other editor would have dreamed of doing something so infuriating to the bulk of his readership. The following September Theodore Reff, a leading scholar of nineteenth-century painting, raked "Manet's Sources" over

the coals in a short article in *Artforum,* and although I at first imagined firing off a quick response to his critique, as things turned out it took me more than twenty-five years to decide on what I wanted to say. My reply to Reff, along with much new material bearing on the topic, may be found in chapter 2 of *Manet's Modernism.*

Thereafter, my activity as a critic lessened sharply. In 1969 I wrote a short piece on some paintings by Kenneth Noland. In London for another half-year in the fall of 1970, I wrote short reviews of gallery exhibitions of sculptures by Caro and Michael Bolus, and in 1972 I wrote a brief essay on Larry Poons's first "poured" paintings, which excited me as his previous work had failed to do. (I now feel that I underestimated his early "Op" pictures.)[6] Five years later, at Caro's request, I wrote an introduction for a traveling exhibition of his table pieces. Basically, though, I stopped writing about contemporary art, for several reasons. In the first place, I had pretty much said what I had to say. My interest as a practicing critic or critic-theorist had always focused on a small group of artists: Pollock, Louis, Noland, Olitski, Stella, and Caro. By 1969 I had written about each of them several times, and although Noland, Olitski, Stella, and Caro all went on to develop in surprising ways, whatever I was likely to write about them was bound to be repetitive. Second, in "Shape as Form" and, especially, in "Art and Objecthood" I described the emergence of a basic opposition between the radically abstract painting and sculpture I most admired and what I characterized, pejoratively, as the "literalist" and "theatrical" work of a group of artists usually called the Minimalists—Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Tony Smith, Carl Andre, et al. (The art I admired I thought of as "antitheatrical.") No one with even the sketchiest awareness of recent history needs to be told that "theatricality," not just in the form of Minimalism, went on to flourish spectacularly while abstraction in my sense of the term became more and more beleaguered. This too made the prospect of writing art criticism less attractive: in addition to championing yet again the same handful of artists, I would have had to insist yet again that the dominant avant-garde modes of the day were not worth taking seriously, and *that,* I had the wit to realize, was unlikely to interest anyone. Nothing I could have said would have improved upon the position laid out in "Art and Objecthood," which continued to be read and in that sense to express the indifference or hostility I felt toward much that was taking place.

A third factor in my turn away from art criticism was that I became engrossed in the art-historical project mentioned earlier, an attempt

to give an account of the evolution of the antitheatrical tradition in French painting that arose in the middle of the eighteenth century and climaxed more than a century later in the art of Manet and the Impressionists. So that even as I sought to recover crucial aspects of the historical specificity of a large body of earlier painting and art criticism, I realized that I was also trying to understand the origins of a set of concerns that I had independently—in my activity as a critic—detected at work in the contemporary situation. And that made it seem as if I hadn't abandoned art criticism so much as discovered a new and, under the circumstances, more rewarding use for the intellectual energies it had called forth.

Finally, I remember feeling as early as the late 1960s, and with increasing force during the 1970s and after, that what might be called evaluative art criticism no longer mattered as it previously had. No longer was it read with the same interest, no longer could the critic imagine that his or her words might intervene in the contemporary situation in the way in which, perhaps delusively, I had sometimes imagined my words intervening in it, no longer were there critical reputations to be made by distinguishing the best art of one's time from the rest or by analyzing that art with respect to its treatment of issues that were, in a strong sense of the word, "inescapable." The inference seems clear that the kind of criticism Greenberg and I practiced, each in his own way, was intimately linked with the values, qualities, and aspirations of the high modernist art we found so compelling, and that with the ever growing eclipse of high modernism in the later 1960s and 1970s (and after) the role of criticism became transformed—into cultural commentary, "oppositional" position taking, exercises in recycled French theory, and so on. (If this book's subtitle were to be expanded it would perhaps be "Essays and Reviews from the Close of High Modernism.") In any case, the abandonment of evaluative criticism and the disparagement of late modernist painting and sculpture have only grown more sweeping with the passage of time.

2. Some Thoughts on My Art Criticism

As already mentioned, I regard the reviews I wrote in London for *Arts* in 1961–62 as apprentice work. The same goes for the fourteen "New York Letters" I wrote for *Art International* in 1962–64, but I have chosen to republish portions of twelve of those as representative of my views and rhetoric at the time. I see no need

to comment on them individually, or on the brief remarks on Stella's early stripe paintings that I contributed to the catalog of the exhibition *Toward a New Abstraction* at the Jewish Museum in 1963. What strikes me today, when I consider the "New York Letters" as a group, is the prominence of a linked pair of motifs: a distaste for "sentimentality" in an improbably wide range of forms and an urgent concern with issues of pictorial structure, the tough-mindedness of which was evidently conceived by me as ruling out the sort of looseness of feeling I found repugnant (but not as ruling out the expression of feeling altogether). Indeed, my enthusiasm for Hans Hofmann was largely based on what I saw as his ability to redeem otherwise intractably corny or sentimental paint handling and color as well as his gift for resolving pictorial problems in artistically satisfying ways without being a formal absolutist. Not that I had anything against the formal absolutism of Barnett Newman or Stella—on the contrary, both were for me among the exemplary artists of the day. But Hofmann's never merely "subjective" spontaneity seemed exceptional enough to warrant special praise. (By the time I wrote my penultimate "New York Letter" in the spring of 1964 I had come to see Olitski in not dissimilar terms.) By the same token, my admiration for Andy Warhol's paintings of Marilyn Monroe was based in part on the idea that she was a genuinely mythic figure, hence beyond the unavoidably subjective element that entered into the same artist's images of Troy Donahue; what made the Marilyn pictures moving, it's implied, is that they came by their expressiveness by properly "impersonal" means. (A thematics of impersonality would later run through my analyses of figuration and color in Pollock, Louis, Noland, Olitski, and Stella, and in general an insistence on making ethically loaded distinctions between *modes* of subjectivity is a leitmotif of my criticism from start to finish.) Another early text, my essay for Caro's 1963 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, will be discussed in connection with other writings on Caro later in this section. The first text that seems to me to warrant specific commentary, then, is my introduction to the catalog for the Fogg Art Museum exhibition of paintings by Noland, Olitski, and Stella. But rather than work through my art criticism item by item, I shall proceed more irregularly, sometimes dealing with issues, sometimes with individual artists, and once, toward the end, with a single essay, "Art and Objecthood" itself.

The appeal to "formal" criticism

THE FIRST part of "Three American Painters" makes several related claims: first, that the development of modernist paint-

ing from Manet to the mid-1960s evinces "an increasing preoccupation with problems and issues intrinsic to painting itself"; second, that the nature of those problems and issues is "formal," that is to say, presumably, a matter of "form"—a term I don't quite use—as distinct from subject matter (the tendency toward abstractness would thus be a function of that order of priorities); and third, that "formal criticism" as practiced by Roger Fry and, especially, Clement Greenberg is therefore better suited than any other approach to throw light on modernist painting, by which I mean not just elucidate the problems and issues in question but also provide as nearly objective a basis as possible for specific value judgments, which, however, remain ineluctably subjective in nature and origin.[7] (I explain that "there is nothing binding in the value judgments of formal criticism" and that the "objectivity [the formal critic] aspires to can be no more than relative.") I further suggest that the best model for the evolution of modernist painting is that of the dialectic understood as an unceasing process of perpetual radical self-criticism or, as I also put it, "perpetual revolution"; and I gloss my invocation of the dialectic by insisting on the latter's nonteleological nature: thus, I say that "the work of such painters as Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella . . . aspires to be judged, in retrospect, to have been necessary to the finest modernist painting of the future." The decisive criterion of quality or value is thus a certain effectiveness or "fecundity" that in the nature of the case can be known only after the fact;[8] indeed, something of the same situation prevails with respect to "formal" or "stylistic" discriminations themselves, in that we are able to make such discriminations within a given body of work only where subsequent modernist painting has invested certain differences with a significance they did not originally have (I make this point in the opening paragraph of part 2 of the Fogg introduction and, focusing specifically on the relationship between Pollock and Louis, in a footnote to "Morris Louis").

There are difficulties with some of these formulations which should be mentioned before moving on to consider more substantial matters (one reason for owning up to them is to underscore the fact that they disappear from my work after this point):

1. I say in a brief note in "Three American Painters" that the difficulties surrounding the notion of problems and issues "intrinsic" to painting are begged in that work, and of course that's true. What does "intrinsic" mean in a situation that I specifically characterize as one in which the relevant problems and issues are describable as such only in retrospect, and then only in terms that are determined by

later developments? In the same note I remark that the idea that there are problems intrinsic to the art of painting "has to do with the concept of a 'medium'" (what I ought to have said is that the inadequacy of my way of putting things called for a certain development of that concept) and add that this is a topic philosophy and art criticism might fruitfully discuss. But I don't pursue the topic, which had to wait for Stanley Cavell's remarks on the concept of a medium in *The World Viewed* roughly five years later.

2. My contention that only "formal" criticism is capable of making "convincing discriminations of value" or, as I also put it, of "objectifying" critical intuitions which nevertheless remain grounded in subjectivity isn't helpful either. (By this time I had at least stopped using "subjective" and "subjectivity" as pejorative notions.) The idea of objectification in particular is a red herring, which is to say that the subjective/objective opposition as I invoke it is beside the point.[9] What matters is that, as I remark, "all judgments of value begin and end in experience"; the task of the critic is, first, not to flinch from making such judgments, which are nothing less than the lifeblood of his enterprise, and second, to try to come up with the most telling observations and arguments on their behalf. What those observations and arguments will turn out to be, what features of the works in question they will focus on and what sorts of issues they will involve, is in principle unknowable in advance, and in any case, as I rightly insist (following Kant in this if in nothing else), the arguments themselves will not be binding, which is what it means to say that judgments of value end in experience as well as begin there.

3. My invocation of the dialectic and of an ideal of perpetual radical self-criticism implies too simplistic or abstract a model of the evolution of modernist painting as a whole. What excited me at the time was the seeming theoretical sophistication of such a model, which in effect gave dramatic form to certain Hegelian assumptions behind Greenberg's avowedly Kantian reading of modernism as self-criticism (the joint influence on me of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's remarks on Hegel in his essay "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" and of Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* was important here).[10] But the sophistication, such as it was, came at too high a price.

4. Similarly, my attempt to use "fecundity" as a decisive criterion of quality or value—of artistic success—which also had its roots in Merleau-Ponty's essay,[11] was soon afterward put to the test by the advent of Minimal Art, which involved, as I at once recognized, an at-

tempt to go "beyond" the work of Noland and Stella in the direction of what I called "literalism" and "objecthood." As things turned out, I was sharply critical of those developments, but were they not testimony to the fecundity of Noland's and Stella's art? No, because in my view the Minimalist work that ostensibly established that fecundity was not a legitimate successor to the paintings in question. But *that* determination wasn't based on a criterion of fecundity so much as on my actual, present-tense responses to the works in question. And in fact, all my subsequent criticism (starting with the rest of my introduction to *Three American Painters*) stresses the need for new work to compel conviction here and now rather than to wait upon events.[12]

5. Not surprisingly, then, I wish I hadn't celebrated "formal" criticism the way I did. Not that there is no intellectually legitimate meaning that can be given to the term.[13] But my advocacy of it in the introduction to *Three American Painters* is inseparable from the belief that the evolution of modern painting has been away from considerations of subject matter toward an ever more exclusive preoccupation with problems and issues intrinsic to the art, a narrative I soon came to think was wrongly conceived, not only because of the problems with "intrinsic" I have cited, but also because it assumes that considerations of subject matter cannot bear directly on issues of form, or, say, of the medium. (The latter assumption is at odds with everything I have written about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French painting.) Unfortunately, the epithet "formal," soon modified to "formalist," became current to the extent that not just a certain type of criticism but also the work of Louis, Noland, Olitski, Stella, Poons, and others came to be characterized in those terms: as if their work constituted merely one of several or many possible styles of painting rather than being, as I insisted was the case, *the* valid manifestation of the art of painting at that time. Such are the risks of theorizing about art and art criticism at an early age.[14]

The issue of "opticality"

NOTHING IN Greenberg's art criticism or for that matter in mine has come in for more sustained assault in recent years than the claim that modernist painting posits or privileges or establishes the illusion of a purely visual or "optical" space, one addressed to eyesight alone. I have no wish to defend that claim here, but it should at least be noted that the idea of opticality (and related notions) plays a double role in Greenberg's criticism of the early 1960s.

Consider the following passage from his most famous essay, "Modernist Painting": "The flatness toward which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'oeil,* but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness, and the configurations of a Mondrian still suggest a kind of illusion of a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can look, can travel through, only with the eye."[15] This amounts to a *global* claim about modernist painting, which in its drive to distinguish itself from sculpture is said to have pursued opticality along with flatness from the start. "With Manet and the Impressionists," Greenberg writes in the same essay, "the question ceased to be defined as one of color versus drawing, and became instead a question of purely optical experience as against optical experience modified or revised by tactile associations" (p. 71). I think it is fair to say that this is the position that critics of Greenbergian opticality have been attacking. (A few years before, in the essay originally called "Sculpture in Our Time" [1958], Greenberg described what he took to be "a new common style" in painting, sculpture, and architecture in terms that anticipate the stress on opticality in "Modernist Painting." "Instead of the illusion of things," he wrote, "we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage."[16] That all the arts should have converged in that direction is global in another sense of the term, and there is perhaps no sentence in Greenberg's essays that has been more often cited by his critics.)

But in other texts of that moment Greenberg appealed to the notion of opticality in a distinctly nonglobal, chronologically specific way, as one of the key stylistic markers of the recent American painting he had come most to admire—the work, for the most part "keyed to the primacy of color," of Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock (in his thinned black Duco enamel paintings of 1951), Helen Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland. For example, in "Louis and Noland" (1960), which I first read while still at Oxford, he describes Louis's adaptation of Pollock's and Frankenthaler's stain technique by saying: "The effect [of staining] conveys a sense not only of color as somehow disembodied, and there-

fore more purely optical, but also of color as a thing that opens and expands the picture plane."[17] As in "Modernist Painting," opticality is contrasted with its traditional antithesis, tactility: "The more closely color could be identified with its ground, the freer it would be from the interference of tactile associations."[18] But tactility in turn is linked, in the important essay "After Abstract Expressionism" (1962), not with the sculptural as such, but rather with the widespread tendency within both the American and the European branches of Painterly Abstraction (a term Greenberg preferred to Abstract Expressionism) toward a heightened illusion of three-dimensional space. In American painting that tendency led to the de Kooningesque manner Greenberg calls "homeless representation" and describes as "a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones," while in European painting the taste for illusionism took the form of a "literal three-dimensionality of piled-on paint" he dubs "furtive bas-relief."[19] In opposition to such a tendency, the painting of Newman, Rothko, and Still is described as aiming above all at "an almost literal openness that embraces and absorbs color in the act of being created by it."[20] The term "openness," already hinted at in "Louis and Noland," was a new coinage for Greenberg and came largely to replace "opticality," which nowhere occurs in "After Abstract Expressionism," in his writings of the mid-1960s.

Not that the two uses of the notion of opticality I have been charting are entirely distinct in Greenberg's writings. There can be little doubt that his admiration for Still, Newman, and Rothko on the one hand and Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland on the other—or perhaps his belief that the work of both groups of artists pointed in the same direction—helped crystallize the global thematization of opticality in "Modernist Painting." But he himself seems to have been uncertain as to whether the recent painting he most admired marked a *return* to the optical values and emphases of Impressionism or whether on the contrary it simply made it apparent that those had been the decisive values and emphases of modernist painting all along. A sign of that indecision is the removal of a key sentence from the first version of "Modernist Painting." In the original essay, immediately following the sentence about the difference between Old Master and modernist modes of illusionism, the next paragraph began as follows: "The latest abstract painting tries to fulfill the Impressionist insistence on the optical as the only sense that a completely and quintessentially pictorial art can invoke."[21] In the final version of that

essay, however, the sentence in question has been dropped, which has the effect of removing all suggestion of a return to earlier priorities in favor of implying a consistently optical bias from Manet and Impressionism through Mondrian to the present.[22]

All this is somewhat tangled, and more than a little confusing. My aim in going into it here is to point out, first, that recent critiques of Greenberg on opticality have without exception failed to acknowledge the double valence of that concept in his writings of the early 1960s (they treat it exclusively in its global construal), and second, that my own exploitation of the notion of opticality in my writings on Pollock, Louis, Noland, Olitski, Stella, and Caro derives chiefly from Greenberg's historically more limited use of it (along with the allied notion of openness) in "Louis and Noland" and "After Abstract Expressionism," the two essays of the early 1960s that most clearly articulate his view of the current situation. That is, I had no interest whatever in the idea of opticality as a defining characteristic of modernist painting generally—in fact I mostly failed to recognize the centrality of that idea in "Modernist Painting" when I finally read it in 1965 or 1966. But as early as the spring of 1964 I took Greenberg's analysis of the role of opticality in the art of Louis and Noland in particular, along with his critique in "After Abstract Expressionism" of de Kooningesque Painterly Abstraction as tactile in its associations, as the basis for a reading of Pollock's allover drip paintings of 1947–50 as essentially optical despite the sensuous materiality of the skeins of pigment out of which they were made (see the introduction to *Three American Painters*).[23] And I went on from there, in "The Achievement of Morris Louis" and the enlarged version of that essay in my Louis book, to develop an account of the complex and shifting relations between figuration—more broadly, drawing—and color in Louis's oeuvre that still seems to me valid, an account that gives precise meaning to the intuition that between Pollock's works of 1947–51 (not just the drip paintings but the semirepresentational ones in thinned black Duco enamel as well) and Louis's mature oeuvre there exists, if only by *Nachträglichkeit,* a deep continuity of basic concerns. In short, although I would no longer baldly state, as I do in the introduction to *Three American Painters,* that "the materiality of [Pollock's] pigment is rendered sheerly visual,"[24] I continue to believe that the dyad opticality/tacticality or indeed opticality/materiality is pertinent to his and Louis's art, and I continue to have a stake in my analyses of their achievements (the Louis text in particular seems to me a high point of my criticism). In any case, a critic inevitably works with the conceptual tools at hand; what matters in the long

run is not the inherent allure of the tools themselves, which is bound to wax and wane with changes of intellectual fashion, but rather the quality of the critical and/or historical work that is done with them. (For my appeal to the concept of opticality in connection with Noland, Olitski, Stella, and Caro, see the sections "The Issue of Shape," "The Example of Anthony Caro," and "The Critique of Theatricality in 'Art and Objecthood'" below.)[25]

The issue of shape

A CENTRAL concern of the essays in this book is the problem of shape. The fullest discussion of it is found in two essays of 1966–67, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" and "Art and Objecthood," but a preoccupation with shape—more broadly, with pictorial structure—goes back to my earliest writings on Stella's stripe paintings (e.g., the "New York Letter" of November 25, 1962, reprinted in this book as "New York Letter: Louis, Chamberlain and Stella, Indiana") and the brief catalog text for the Jewish Museum's *Toward a New Abstraction* exhibition), where it is anchored, obviously, in the paintings themselves. (See also my insistence on the importance of structural considerations keyed to the framing edge in the discussions of works by Newman, Noland, and Olitski in several of the "New York Letters" excerpted in this volume. From the start, influenced by Stella's practice, I advocated a "strictly logical" relation of painted elements to the framing edge.) In the introduction to *Three American Painters* I tried to generalize the notion of a new concern with the primacy of shape into a concept of "deductive structure."[26] The thin vertical bands (or "zips") in Newman's paintings, I wrote, "amount to echoes within the painting of the two side framing edges; they relate primarily to these edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas. They demand to be seen as deriving from the framing edge—as having been 'deduced' from it—though their exact placement within the colored field has been determined by the painter."[27] I saw this as a new development and related it to the recent tendency toward opticality, on the grounds that the latter took pressure off flatness (a tactile feature) while putting pressure on shape, the other major physical or literal characteristic of the picture support. But it was in Stella's stripe paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s that the concept of deductive structure really came into its own:

> As early as 1958–59, partly in reaction against Abstract Expressionist painting such as that of Kline and de Kooning—both of whom he

> strongly admired—and partly in direct response to the work of Barnett Newman, Stella began to make paintings in which parallel stripes of black paint, each roughly 2½ inches wide, echo and reecho the rectangular shape of the picture support until the entire canvas is filled. . . . In subsequent series of paintings, executed in aluminum, copper, and purple metallic paint—in 1960, 1961, and 1963, respectively—Stella's grasp of deductive structure grew more and more tough minded, until the paintings came to be generated in toto, as it were, by the different shapes of the framing edge, and variation occurred only within the series as a whole rather than within a particular shape of canvas.[28]

I went on to argue that in this respect Stella's paintings represented a significant advance on the work of the Cubists or even Mondrian, by which I meant that they embodied "more consistent solutions to a particular formal problem—roughly, how to make paintings in which both the pictorial structure and the individual pictorial elements make explicit acknowledgment of the literal character of the picture support."

Within the next year or so, however, this way of putting the issue of shape came to seem unsatisfactory on several counts. For one thing, the notion of deductive structure seemed to imply that what was at stake was nothing more than a way of arranging pictorial elements relative to the framing edge, a morphological view I came increasingly to reject. For another, I no longer believed that the notion of "deducing" structural elements from the shape of the support adequately described what Newman and Stella were up to: it didn't fit Newman's intuitive determinations of where precisely to place his zips, and it failed to capture the sense in which in Stella's aluminum, copper, and metallic purple series the stripes and the shapes of the support are given together in a single gestalt.[29] Finally, the remarks quoted above imply that the Cubists and Mondrian had been engaged with the same problem as Stella but had failed to resolve it with equal consistency and rigor, which I came to see was an ahistorical way of describing Stella's relationship to his predecessors.

By the time I wrote "Shape as Form," my approach to the issue of shape, indeed to the writing of art criticism, was significantly different, as the first paragraph of that essay makes clear:

> Frank Stella's new paintings investigate the viability of shape as such. By *shape as such* I mean not merely the silhouette of the support (which I shall call literal shape), not merely that of the outlines of elements in a given picture (which I shall call depicted shape), but shape as a medium within which choices about both literal and

> depicted shapes are made, and made mutually responsive. And by the viability of shape, I mean its power to hold, to stamp itself out, and *in*—as verisimilitude and narrative and symbolism used to impress themselves—compelling conviction. Stella's undertaking in these paintings is therapeutic: to restore shape to health, at least temporarily, though of course its implied "sickness" is simply the other face of the unprecedented importance shape has assumed in the finest modernist painting of the past several years, most notably in the work of Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski. It is only in their work that shape as such can be said to have become capable of holding, or stamping itself out, of compelling conviction—as well as, so to speak, capable of failing to do so. These are powers or potentialities—not to say responsibilities—which shape never until now possessed, and which have been conferred upon it by the development of modernist painting itself. In this sense shape has become something different from what it was in traditional painting or, for that matter, in modernist painting until recently. It has become, one might say, an object of conviction, whereas before it was merely . . . a kind of object. Stella's new pictures are a response to the recognition that shape itself may be lost to the art of painting as a resource able to compel conviction, precisely because—as never before—it is being called upon to do just that.

The distinction between an object of conviction and merely a kind of object anticipates "Art and Objecthood," as does much else in "Shape as Form" (more on this too presently).[30] And my reference to shape as a medium reflects conversations with Cavell, to whom I showed "Shape as Form" in draft. But I want to stress certain other aspects of my argument in the latter essay.

First, the recent tendency toward opticality is again described as having played a crucial role in neutralizing flatness and thereby shifting the balance of modernist concern toward considerations of shape. But it's important to be clear that my analyses of shape in the art of Noland, Olitski, and Stella don't present opticality itself (or visual illusionism) as sufficient to enable a depicted shape, or for that matter a literal one, to compel conviction in the way I begin by claiming shape now had to do. So, for example, I am troubled, not satisfied, by Noland's narrow (eight feet by two feet), diamond-shaped paintings, whose extreme attenuation together with "the sheerly visual illusion generated by the interaction of [their] colored bands" makes their enclosing shapes seem to vibrate and shimmer, with the result that "the physical limits of [their] support[s] are overrun, indeed all but dissolved, by the painting's illusionistic presence." More broadly, I find in Noland's and Olitski's paintings different manifesta-

tions of a "conflict between opticality and the literal character of the support," but neither literalness as such (the Minimalist option) nor untrammelled visual illusionism (as in Noland's narrow diamonds) is seen by me as capable of resolving that conflict as it then stood. (Note, by the way, that for all the stress on opticality in my criticism of the 1960s, I never followed Greenberg in equating the "strictly pictorial" with the "strictly optical," as he did in "Modernist Painting" and other texts of that period.) I do claim that Stella's irregular polygons succeed in resolving the conflict by making literalness itself illusive, but what underwrites that feat in my account is the way in which his paintings ingeniously and systematically overcome the distinction between literal and depicted shape, that is, in which at their best they establish an "unprecedented continuity between the 'outside' of a given painting (its physical limits) and its 'inside' (everything else)." (Exactly how they do this is the burden of my analysis.) And that in turn has the effect of "suffusing" literalness throughout the painting, thereby "unmak[ing], . . . in the event and for the moment, the distinction between shape as a fundamental property of objects and shape as an entity belonging to painting alone that emerge[d] for the first time in Noland's and Olitski's paintings." This amounted, I thought, to legitimately sidestepping the newly urgent demand that shape stamp itself out (and in), which is what I meant when in the opening paragraph of "Shape as Form" I characterized Stella's undertaking as therapeutic, restoring shape to health. In "Art and Objecthood," written several months later, I put all this as follows: "What is at stake . . . 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. [*Legitimately* side-stepping that demand, à la Stella's irregular polygons, was tantamount to confronting it, evidently.] Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects. This can be summed up by saying that modernist painting has come to find it 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."[31]

I would not deny that my analyses of Noland's, Olitski's, and Stella's paintings continually strain against their conceptual limits. In fact, rereading for this book not just "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood" but "Jules Olitski's New Paintings" (1965; omitted from this book) and "Jules Olitski" (the introduction to the catalog for an exhibition of Olitski's work at the Corcoran), I was struck by the ex-

tent to which my focus on issues of shape and structure leads me to devote insufficient space to considerations of color and facture (not that the latter are wholly neglected). Nor would I wish to endorse each and every judgment that contributed to my arguments in 1966–67: for example, the best of Noland's narrow, diamond-shaped pictures now seem to me superb, regardless of what takes place at their edges. But my account of Stella's irregular polygons still feels largely right, along with my insistence that they represent a renewed commitment to painting, and I see no reason to back away from the claim that the issue of shape, understood in the terms I developed at the time, lay at the heart of the situation of ambitious painting at that moment. (My impression from conversations with Greenberg, incidentally, is that he never really approved of paintings that departed from the rectangle.) It's worth noting, moreover, that in my last piece of criticism proper, a 1972 article on recent paintings by Larry Poons, I observed that starting in the late 1960s there had been "a shift of pressure away from issues of shape toward issues of picture surface," and that what was at stake in that shift was precisely the question of objecthood. "The most ambitious pictorial art of the past several years," I wrote, "[has] found itself compelled to declare its identity as painting . . . by continual acknowledgment . . . that paintings consist in or are limited to their surfaces in ways that distinguish them, as it were absolutely, from other kinds of objects in the world. That is how I understand what has seemed to me the compulsion of certain recent painting of major ambition to affirm that the entire surface, which is to say *every bit* of it, is spread out before the beholder—that every grain or particle or atom of surface *competes for presentness* with every other."[32] My point in citing these remarks is not to praise their perspicuity, though I still think that this too is right (Poons's subsequent work, a body of major painting, would soon confirm my intuition). It is rather that with the new focus on surface the previous emphasis on opticality went into eclipse (I went on in the Poons article to stress the "tactility" of his color), which confirms the general point that in my criticism, if not consistently in Greenberg's, "opticality" functions in a nonglobal, temporally and stylistically specific way.

The example of Anthony Caro

As I mentioned earlier, I first met Caro and was knocked on my heels by his work in London in the fall of 1961. Not quite two years later, in the late spring of 1963, I wrote my first essay

on his art, the introduction to the catalog for his exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in the fall of that year. It's an immature production: the writing is turgid and studentish, the approach it takes is indirect and full of pitfalls, the appeal to authorities—Greenberg, Merleau-Ponty, Blackmur, Stuart Hampshire, Rilke—is obtrusive, and there is no analysis of specific works to help flesh out my general claims. (I wrote it with a sense of acute difficulty: I felt I saw Caro's sculptures clearly, even presciently, but found it almost impossible to put that vision into words. Welcome to art criticism.) But I've chosen to republish it, both because Caro's art has remained basic to my understanding of the modernist enterprise and because the Whitechapel introduction epitomizes the "mixed" state of my thinking at that early moment in my critical career. In brief, my claims on behalf of Caro's early abstract steel sculptures fell into four more or less distinct categories.

First, I cited and endorsed Greenberg's account of the consequences of what he called "the modernist 'reduction'" in sculpture, consequences that included a tendency toward opticality as well as a mode of making described as "not so much sculptured as constructed, built, assembled, arranged."[33] Here as elsewhere in my early criticism, Greenberg's writings provided the framework within which my own thought gradually found its voice.

Second, although Caro's sculptures, being abstract, in no way depicted the human figure, they nevertheless seemed to me to evoke a wide range of bodily feeling and movement. In this connection I appealed to the writings of the French existential phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, whom I had begun to read in England: his major book, *The Phenomenology of Perception,* had recently been translated, and the French original of his essay "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (mentioned above in connection with my appeal in "Three American Painters" to notions of the dialectic and fecundity) was on my desk as I wrote the Whitechapel introduction. Not that Merleau-Ponty was required to alert me to the bodily aspects of Caro's art, or of art in general. Some of my most powerful early experiences of painting and sculpture had been along those lines, and when I first saw *Midday* and *Sculpture Seven* in Caro's garden I felt I was about to levitate or burst into blossom. But Merleau-Ponty provided philosophical sanction for taking those feelings seriously and trying to discover where they led (one place they eventually led was to my book *Courbet's Realism*), and it was my good fortune that I became aware of his writing when I did.

Third, my particular treatment of bodiliness in the Whitechapel introduction was to emphasize the notion of abstract expressive gesture—a modality of gesture made possible by the medium of constructed steel sculpture. Here the influence of my Princeton mentor in poetry, R. P. Blackmur, author of a collection of essays called *Language as Gesture,* reinforced that of Merleau-Ponty, who repeatedly invokes the notion of gesture in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence."

Finally, one more set of concerns is discernible in the Whitechapel text, and it soon proved the most important of all. It first surfaces in the claim that a prelingual child in the company of adults conversing among themselves will respond to the "abstract configurations in time made by the spoken words as they are joined to one another" (the point of this was to suggest a crude analogy with our situation in the face of Caro's sculptures). But what I was trying to say came into much sharper focus when I wrote: "Everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at—except the color—is in its syntax." I associated the notion of syntax with that of abstract gesture, but what I *saw* was that the entire expressive weight of Caro's art was carried by the relations among the girders, I- and T-beam segments, and similar elements out of which his sculptures were made, not (for example) by the shapes of individual parts, nor by anything that could be called imagery, nor by what was then sometimes taken to be the industrial, modern-world connotations of his materials. (Two years later Greenberg in an essay on Caro quoted my remarks on syntax and added: "This emphasis on syntax is also an emphasis on abstractness, on radical unlikeness to nature. No other sculptor has gone as far from the structural logic of ordinary ponderable things"[34]—observations that I in turn would make use of in "Art and Objecthood" and my introduction to the catalog for Caro's 1969 retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery.) Here too "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" played a role in my thinking, in particular its brief account of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of linguistic meaning as a function of purely differential relations among inherently meaningless elements.[35] Characteristically, however, Merleau-Ponty found it impossible fully to subscribe to Saussure's ideas with respect to "creative" or "truly expressive" (as opposed to "everyday") uses of language, which he seems to have thought of as somehow—as if bodily or gesturally—breaking through the "lateral" relational network to grasp or express meaning "directly."[36] In this and other respects, the "mixed" nature of my discourse in the Whitechapel catalog had much in common

with the tensions and contradictions in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," but it also perfectly suited Caro's early abstract sculptures, which in effect combined an evocation of bodiliness with an emphasis on syntax to extraordinary effect.[37]

In the years that followed I wrote often about Caro's art, to which I have always felt a special closeness. I have also found it good to think about on several fronts. Starting around 1966–67, for example, I began to try to develop a new, philosophically interesting concept of abstraction by recasting in Wittgensteinian terms the largely phenomenological language of my earliest writings on Caro's work as well as by mobilizing the contrast, put forward in "Art and Objecthood," between literalness and theatricality on the one hand and radical abstraction and antitheatricality on the other. The short article "Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro" (1968) is an example of such an attempt, especially the opening paragraphs with their analysis of *Deep Body Blue* (fig. 42), a seemingly simple piece featuring a schematic, lintel-less "door" (two upright steel flats less than five feet high). What is crucial to our experiencing those flats as a door, I remark, is that they stand in the same plane:

> It doesn't matter that they are no more than four feet high [actually they are four feet, ten inches high], that they lack any sort of lintel, that we are not tempted nor even able to pass between them: the fact that they stand several feet apart in the same plane is enough to *make* us experience them as an abstract door (and a large, or wide, one at that). By the same token, if they are moved even very slightly out of alignment their "doorness" disintegrates and the sculpture as a whole begins to fall apart, to become arbitrary and therefore meaningless as art. This aspect of Caro's achievement may be described in different ways. One can say that he discovered what constitutes an *abstract* door, or that he discovered the *conventions*—corresponding to *deep* needs—which make something a door. Caro did not consciously set out to discover anything of the kind. On the contrary, it is because *Deep Body Blue* began in a preoccupation with particular modes of being in the world that its very success as sculpture came to depend on the making of the above discovery in, or by, the piece itself. It is as though with Caro sculpture itself has become committed to a new kind of cognitive enterprise: not because its generating impulse has become philosophical, but because the newly explicit need to defeat theater in all its manifestations has meant that the ambition to make sculpture out of a primordial involvement with modes of being in the world can now be realized *only* if antiliteral—that is, radically abstract—terms for that

> involvement can be found. (At the risk of seeming to overload the point, I will add that the cognitive enterprise in question is related, in different ways, both to European phenomenology and to the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. It isn't only modernist *art* that has found it necessary to defeat theater.)

Again, I want to hold off discussing "Art and Objecthood" for a while longer. What I wish to stress is my equating of a certain notion of abstraction ("what constitutes an *abstract* door") with the discovery of the essence of a door, or alternatively with the discovery of the conventions that make something a door, phrasing that, apart from the notion of abstractness, comes directly from the later Wittgenstein.

Specifically, it comes from a passage in the *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* in which Wittgenstein, reflecting on the nature of proofs and of the conviction they elicit, imagines the following exchange: "It is as if this expressed the essence of form.—I say, however: if you talk about *essence*—, you are merely noting a convention. But here one would like to retort: there is no greater difference than that between a proposition about the depth of the essence and one about—a mere convention. But what if I reply: to the *depth* that we see in the essence there corresponds the *deep* need for the convention."[38] (Minus the first sentence, this serves as the epigraph to "Jules Olitski.") In the "Two Sculptures" article, I interpreted depth of need in phenomenological terms, which I knew was not what Wittgenstein meant in the passage in question (but would he have objected?): my dream was to bring together Merleau-Ponty's concern with modes of being in the world with a savor of Wittgenstein's "grammatical" investigations, and although even that may have been overambitious it still seems to me to have been worth the attempt.[39]

Another, exemplary instance of what I meant by radical abstraction concerned Caro's efforts, starting in 1966, to make small sculptures that, as I first put it in "Caro's Abstractness" (1970; reprinted in this book), "could not be seen merely as reduced versions of larger ones—sculptures whose smallness was to be secured abstractly, made part of their essence, instead of remaining simply a literal, quantitative fact about them." The solution to that problem was, as I explained in the same article,

> to run or set at least one element in every piece *below* the level of the tabletop on which the sculpture was to be placed, thereby precluding its transposition, in fact or in imagination, to the ground. It at once

> turned out that by tabling, or precluding grounding, the sculptures in this way Caro was able to establish their smallness in terms that proved virtually independent of their actual size. That is, the distinction between tabling and grounding, because determined (or acknowledged) by the sculptures themselves instead of merely imposed upon them by their eventual placement, made itself felt as equivalent to a *qualitative rather than a quantitative* difference in scale. (Not only has the abstract smallness of Caro's table sculptures proved compatible with surprising largeness of actual size; it soon became apparent that a certain *minimum* size was required for their tabling to be experienced in these terms.) In these and other respects Caro's table sculptures mark the emergence of a sense of scale for which there is no precedent in earlier sculpture and no clear parallel in our experience of the world.

As I added in my 1977 introduction to a traveling exhibition of Caro's table sculptures: "From this point of view . . . Caro's abstract sculptures, large and small, grounded and tabled, inhabit another world from the literal, contingent one in which we live, a world which so to speak everywhere parallels our own but whose apartness is perceived as all the more exhilarating on that account."[40] (See figs. 49–55.)

To elaborate slightly, it's on a table rather than on the ground that one expects to encounter manipulable objects of a certain small but not minute size (e.g., cups, scissors, books, telephones, portable computers), whence the *potential* importance of the tabletop as a privileged locus for Caro's small pieces. But simply placing a physically small sculpture on a tabletop would not have realized the *abstract* smallness Caro sought; the tabletop needed to be incorporated into the sculpture, not literally, though eventually Caro did that too, but syntactically, on the plane of "form": only then would a simple phenomenological truth, that objects of a certain size tend to be found on tables, be invested with sculptural significance. And that was accomplished, at a stroke, by going below the plane of the tabletop, though exactly how a given work makes that move is crucial to its specific effect.

(Note, by the way, what this account Caro's table sculptures implies about the issue of esthetic autonomy. It is sometimes assumed that because in "Art and Objecthood" I criticized Minimalism's foregrounding of what might be called situationality or exhibitionality, I believed and perhaps still believe that modernist works of art exist or aspire to exist in a void. But I didn't and I don't. In the table sculptures, for example, Caro found himself compelled to acknowledge—to find or devise appropriate means for acknowledging—the generic

conditions of their inescapable "framedness." Similarly, in 1977 I characterized the momentousness of Caro's elimination of the pedestal in his abstract steel sculptures of the early 1960s by saying that the latter were the first sculptures [in the Western tradition] "which *demanded* to be placed on the ground, whose specific character would inevitably have been traduced if they were not so placed" [emphasis added]. In other words, their syntax was such as to require the ground as their "frame," which in turn was the precondition for the posing of the problem of smallness that eventually led to the invention of the table sculptures. Indeed, it was precisely *that* relation to the issue of framing that in my view distinguished Caro's sculptures from the Minimalist object's emphasis on the installation as such.)[41]

For a while I hoped that a comparable understanding of abstraction or abstractness could be broadened to encompass not just the whole of Caro's oeuvre but also the other recent painting and sculpture I most admired, but in the end that proved impossible. However, my inability to make Caro's work the basis for a rethinking of the meaning of abstraction in modernist painting and sculpture generally takes nothing away from the intense philosophical interest of these and other episodes in his remarkable career.

I will add here, though it doesn't bear directly on Caro, that it would be hard to overstate the importance of Wittgenstein's later writings, as expounded and developed by Cavell, to my sense of my own project not just as a critic but also as an art historian. For example, the passage from the *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* quoted above suggests that rather than give up all thought of "essence" in connection with painting or sculpture (as doctrinaire anti-essentialism would have one do), one might instead seek to *historicize* essence by producing a narrative of the shifting depths over time of the need for one or more basic conventions within a pictorial or sculptural tradition. This was what I had in mind when I first criticized Greenberg's theory of modernism (see below), and it is also one way of describing my endeavor in *Absorption and Theatricality, Courbet's Realism,* and *Manet's Modernism.* In particular, the seeming oxymoron "the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld," which recurs throughout those books, demands to be understood in the light of Wittgenstein's thought.

My double critique of Greenberg's theory of modernist painting and of Minimalism's Greenbergian advocacy of literalism

FROM MY undergraduate years, the idea of modernism and of modernist painting and sculpture—and poetry and mu-

sic—was important to me. (But not, it's worth remarking, the idea of an avant-garde. I believed from the first that what in a contribution to a symposium of 1966 I called the "traditional avant-garde" was over and done with, and I had little sympathy for what had taken its place.)[42] In part this had to do with my early education in poetry under Blackmur, whose chief admirations were the great modernist poets from William Butler Yeats to Wallace Stevens, but the influence of Greenberg was surely decisive. It isn't surprising, therefore, that for the first few years of my activity as an art critic it never occurred to me to question Greenberg's account of the inner logic of modernism put forward in such essays as "The New Sculpture," "Modernist Painting" (which as I've said I don't think I read until around 1965), and "After Abstract Expressionism," though my early notion of perpetual radical self-criticism or perpetual revolution, taken literally, was at odds with his ideas. But by the time I wrote "Shape as Form" in the fall of 1966 I had arrived at a different understanding of the modernist dialectic.

Greenberg's account was this.[43] Starting around the middle of the nineteenth century, he claimed in "Modernist Painting," the major arts, threatened for the first time with being assimilated to mere entertainment (or entertainment as therapy), discovered that they could save themselves from that fate "only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity" (pp. 67–68). (The crucial figure in painting was Manet, whose significance, as Greenberg saw it, for the inauguration of a truly optical mode of painting has already been discussed.) He continued:

> Each art, it turned out, had to effect this demonstration on its own account. What had to be exhibited and made explicit was that which was unique and irreducible not only in art in general but also in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. By doing this, each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area all the more secure.
>
> It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of every other art. Thereby each art would be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition,

and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance. (P. 68)

As described by Greenberg, the modernist enterprise involved testing a wide range of norms and conventions in order to determine which were inessential and therefore to be discarded, and which on the contrary constituted the timeless and unchanging essence of the art of painting. (Greenberg didn't use either of the last two adjectives but both are implicit in his argument.) By the early 1960s, the results of that century-long project, Greenberg's famous modernist "'reduction,'" were in. As he wrote in "After Abstract Expressionism":

> Elsewhere [in "Modernist Painting"] I have written of the kind of self-critical process which I think provides the infra-logic of modernist art. . . . The aim of the self-criticism, which is entirely empirical and not at all an affair of theory, is to determine the irreducible working essence of art and the separate arts. Under the testing of modernism more and more of the conventions of the art of painting have shown themselves to be dispensable, unessential. By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one.[44]

Greenberg may have been somewhat uneasy with this conclusion; at any rate, he went on to state that Newman, Rothko, and Still (the exemplary artists of "After Abstract Expressionism") had "swung the self-criticism of modernist painting in a new direction simply by continuing it in its old one. The question now asked through their art is no longer what constitutes art, or the art of painting, as such, but what irreducibly constitutes *good* art as such. Or rather, what is the ultimate source of value or quality in art?" And the answer he gave was "conception alone," by which he meant "invention, inspiration, even intuition (in the usage of Croce, who did anticipate theoretically what practice has just now discovered and confirmed for itself)."[45]

I first took issue with these ideas in "Shape as Form," where I criticized the idea of "'reduction'" in a footnote:

> I take a reductionist conception of modernist painting to mean this: that painting roughly since Manet is seen as a kind of cognitive enterprise in which a certain quality (e.g., literalness), set of norms

> (e.g., flatness and the delimitation of flatness), or core of problems (e.g., how to acknowledge the literal character of the support) is progressively revealed as constituting the *essence* of painting—and, by implication, as having done so all along. This seems to me gravely mistaken, not on the grounds that modernist painting is not a cognitive enterprise, but because it radically misconstrues the kind of cognitive enterprise modernist painting is. What the modernist painter can be said to discover in his work—what can be said to be revealed to him in it—is not the irreducible essence of *all* painting but rather that which, at the present moment in painting's history, is capable of convincing him that it can stand comparison with the painting of both the modernist and the premodernist past whose quality seems to him beyond question.

The immediate target of my critique of reductionism in "Shape as Form" was not Greenberg himself so much as the group of artists known as Minimalists, for whom, I wrote, "all conflict between the literal character of the support and illusion of any kind is intolerable and for whom, accordingly, the future of art lies in the creation of works that, more than anything else, are *wholly literal*—in this respect going 'beyond' painting." Hence my introduction of the term "literalist" as a way of characterizing their views. What I don't quite say, however—though it's implicit in my definition of reductionism, which no one could have failed to recognize as a paraphrase of Greenberg—is that precisely with respect to his understanding of modernism Greenberg had no truer followers than the literalists. For if, as Greenberg held, the "testing" of modernism led to the discovery that the irreducible essence of pictorial art was nothing other than the literal properties of the support, that is, flatness and the delimiting of flatness, it's easy to see how a cohort of artists might come to feel that that discovery did not go far enough, in particular that it stopped short of recognizing that what had mattered all along was not those particular properties but rather literalness as such, which in the end could only be incompletely or equivocally expressed within the art of painting—for example, by Greenberg's notional stretched or tacked-up canvas or even by Stella's black and metallic stripe paintings, the recent works which more than any other were formative for literalist sensibility. From such a perspective, what was called for was the surpassing of painting in the interests of literalness or, as I also called it, objecthood: this at any rate was my reading of the Minimalist project. And my further claim in "Shape as Form" was that Stella himself had refused the literalist option in favor of a re-

newed commitment to the enterprise of painting, a commitment that was spelled out, as if in the teeth of the literalist reading of his work, in the irregular polygons.[46]

In "Shape as Form," too, after saying that the Minimalists aspired to make works that were wholly literal and thus went beyond painting, I observed that

> the literalness isolated and hypostatized in the work of artists like Donald Judd and Larry Bell is by no means the *same* literalness as that acknowledged by advanced painting throughout the past century: it is not the literalness *of the support.* Moreover, hypostatization is not acknowledgment. The continuing problem of *how* to acknowledge the literal character of the support—of *what counts* as that acknowledgment—has been at least as crucial to the development of modernist painting as the fact of its literalness, and that problem has been eliminated, not solved, by the artists in question. Their pieces cannot be said to acknowledge literalness; they simply *are literal.* And it is hard to see how literalness as such, divorced from the conventions which, from Manet to Noland, Olitski, and Stella, have *given* literalness value and have *made* it a bearer of conviction, can be experienced as a *source* of both of these—and what is more, one powerful enough to generate new conventions, a new art.

My insistence on a problematic of acknowledgment understood in this way marks another stress in the difference between my view of modernism and Greenberg's, and it also represents a further link between my writing and Cavell's, in which the concept of acknowledgment plays a fundamental role.[47] (In this introduction I have already wielded the concept of acknowledgment as defined above in the citation from my article on Poons of 1972 and in the remarks on Caro's table sculptures in the previous section.)

In "Art and Objecthood," written some months after "Shape as Form," I took on Greenberg directly (again in a footnote). After quoting his remarks about a stretched or tacked-up canvas already existing as a picture though not necessarily as a successful one, I observed:

> To begin with, it is not quite enough to say that a bare canvas tacked to a wall is not "necessarily" a successful picture; it would, I think, be more accurate [what I originally wrote was "less of an exaggeration"] to say that it is not *conceivably* one. It may be countered that future circumstances might be such as to *make* it a successful painting, but I would argue that, for that to happen, the enterprise of painting would

> have to change so drastically that nothing more than the name would remain. (It would require a far greater change than that which painting has undergone from Manet to Noland, Olitski, and Stella!) Moreover, seeing something as a painting in the sense that one sees the tacked-up canvas as a painting, and being convinced that a particular work can stand comparison with the painting of the past whose quality is not in doubt, are altogether different experiences: it is, I want to say, as though unless something compels conviction as to its quality it is no more than trivially or nominally a painting. This suggests that flatness and the delimitation of flatness ought not to be thought of as the "irreducible essence of pictorial art," but rather as something like the *minimal conditions for something's being seen as a painting;* and that the crucial question is not what those minimal and, so to speak, timeless conditions are, but rather what, at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction, of succeeding as painting. This is not to say that painting *has no* essence; it *is* to claim that that essence—i.e., that which compels conviction—is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past. The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, *alone* are capable of establishing his work's identity as painting.

My attempt to historicize the concept of essence in this way was of course indebted to Wittgenstein on essence and convention. But what I want to focus on here is the related stress on the importance of conviction (another Wittgensteinian motif, already present in earlier quotations), which has the virtue, among other things, of undoing the artificial separation that Greenberg was compelled to posit between two distinct yet somehow continuous phases in the modernist dynamic: a first phase, lasting from Manet through Abstract Expressionism, directed toward the discovery of the irreducible working essence of pictorial art, and a second phase, beginning with Newman, Rothko, and Still, directed toward the discovery of what irreducibly constitutes "good" art—a phase, as Greenberg puts it in the quotation cited above, that asks the question "What is the ultimate source of value or quality in art?"

I say Greenberg was compelled to posit two such phases for the simple reason that on his basic account of modernist self-criticism in "Modernist Painting" the enterprise of painting would necessarily come to an end with the discovery of its irreducible norms or conventions—a further point of inadvertent collusion between him and the Minimalists.[18] For Greenberg in 1962, however, despite the discovery

of the irreducibility of flatness and the delimiting of flatness, painting hadn't yet come to an end, by which I mean that certain painters continued to produce works he greatly admired, and so in "After Abstract Expressionism" he was forced to devise a second dynamic, the search for what constitutes value or quality in art, to account for that otherwise inexplicable fact. But if, as I maintained against him, the "cognitive" dimension of the modernist dynamic was an attempt to discover those conventions which, at a given historical conjuncture, were capable of compelling or eliciting conviction, then there was no reason to imagine either that that dynamic would have the shape of a "reduction" or, a fortiori, that it would be succeeded by a second dynamic aimed at determining the general grounds of value or quality in art. My way of putting this in "Art and Objecthood" was to say, "But I would argue that what modernism has meant is that the two questions—What constitutes the art of painting? And what constitutes *good* painting?—are no longer separable; the first disappears, or increasingly tends to disappear, into the second." (I seem to have been allowing for the possibility that at an earlier stage of modernism they were distinguishable, at least in the minds of its practitioners.)[49]

My further claim that a tacked-up bare canvas couldn't conceivably be a successful painting, that is, compel conviction as a painting, is something else again: in effect I was betting, with perfect confidence but also in the absence of any possibility of proof, that more than that was required. What in retrospect may seem surprising or even ironic about Greenberg's implication that a bare canvas might be enough is that no one at that moment approached his insight into the *coloristic* achievements of Newman, Rothko, Still, and others. But the reductionist logic of Greenberg's theory of modernism meant that color or indeed "openness" in recent painting could not assume the constitutive or essentialist significance of flatness and the delimiting of flatness, despite his claim that "by the new openness they have attained Newman, Rothko and Still point to what I would risk saying is the only way to high pictorial art in the near future";[50] they belonged, in his account, to modernism's supposed second phase, but *there* what turned out to be decisive was not Rothko's, Newman's, or Still's (or Louis's, Noland's, or Olitski's) handling of color or attainment of openness but rather the philosophical revelation in their works of the primacy of conception, invention, inspiration, intuition. The gulf between Greenberg's critical insights and his theoretical model was never greater than in "After Abstract Expressionism."[51]

(Recently, rereading "Morris Louis" in the light of my insistence in "Art and Objecthood" on the inevitable insufficiency of the bare canvas, it occurred to me that my discussion of Louis's unfurleds may be taken as showing what in fact was required in order that a large expanse of canvas compel conviction as painting, that is, be endowed with specifically pictorial, not simply literal, significance.[52] By the same token, my account in "Larry Poons's New Paintings" (reprinted in this book) of the exhaustion of the authority of the bare canvas ground in all recent pictures in which it had appeared suggests that by the early 1970s the evolution of advanced painting had been away from the possibility that Greenberg had glimpsed ten years before. In the Wittgensteinian terms developed above, this—more broadly, the shift away from an emphasis on shape toward one on surface—amounted to a change in the essence of painting over that period.)

I might add that along with my revision of the logic of modernist painting went a recognition of the need to rethink the significance of Manet's art, in particular his momentous canvases of the early 1860s (the *Old Musician, Déjeuner sur l'herbe, Olympia, Angels at the Tomb of Christ,* etc.). I have attempted that twice, first in "Manet's Sources" and recently in *Manet's Modernism,* where I close by suggesting that Greenberg's account of Manet as the first modernist painter by virtue of the flatness and opticality of his paintings is largely an artifact of Impressionism. (I return to this point briefly at the end of part 3.)

The critique of theatricality in "Art and Objecthood"

IT'S HARD to know what should be said at this late date about my critique of Minimalist theatricality in "Art and Objecthood." There is no need to rehearse the details of that critique here. But several points seem worth making.

1. The essay largely proceeds by analyzing a series of texts by three leading Minimalist, that is, literalist, figures—Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Tony Smith. But its chief motivation in the first place had to do with my experience of literalist works and exhibitions during the previous several years, in particular my recurrent sense, especially in gallery shows devoted to one or another artist, of literalism's singular effectiveness as mise-en-scène (Morris and Carl Andre were masters at this). As I said in a talk at the Dia Art Foundation in 1987, it was as though their installations infallibly offered their audience a kind of heightened perceptual experience, and I wanted to understand the nature of that surefire, and therefore to my mind essentially inartistic (I should have said unmodernist), effect.[53] I quickly

realized that the basis of that effect was that both work and installation (in a sense the installation *was* the work, as Thierry de Duve has emphasized)[54] solicited and included the beholder in a way that was fundamentally antithetical to the expressive and presentational mode of the recent painting and sculpture I most admired. And that led to the further claim that the present moment in advanced art was marked by an irreconcilable conflict between the "theatrical" work-in-situations of the literalists and the "antitheatrical" painting and sculpture of the radically abstract artists I championed.

2. Another source of that vision of conflict was the recognition arrived at in "Shape in Form" that whereas literalist work aimed to project and hypostatize objecthood, the abstract painting and sculpture I admired sought to undo or neutralize objecthood in one way or another. With respect to painting, the struggle against objecthood was mainly carried out (as I've said) in and through the medium of shape; while as regards Caro's sculptures the means chiefly cited in "Art and Objecthood" were those of syntax, radical unlikeness to nature, and the imitation of the efficacy of gesture. (Unfortunately, I muddied the issue by quoting Greenberg on the new sculpture offering the illusion "that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage" before going on to stress again the syntactic nature of Caro's art.)[55] I also said of Caro's sculptures that "like certain music and poetry, they are possessed by the knowledge of the human body and how, in innumerable ways and moods, it makes meaning . . . as though the possibility of meaning what we say and do *alone* makes his sculpture possible." This is obscure, as is my claim that Caro's sculptures imitate the efficacy of gesture. But especially in the light of my previous discussions of the evocation of bodiliness in Caro's art, not to mention my subsequent articles "Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro" (which includes the discussion of *Deep Body Blue* quoted above) and "Caro's Abstractness," as well as the introduction to the catalog for the Hayward Gallery retrospective of 1969 (where if anything I overstate the role of the body in his work),[56] it ought at least to have meant that I can't be charged with denying the body in favor of conceiving of the viewer as "floating in front of the work as pure optical ray."[57] (Is there another frontline art critic writing in the 1960s who harped on the importance of bodily experience to the extent that I did? I can't think of one.)[58] The crucial point, however, is that after writing "Shape as Form" I had a growing sense that something more was at stake in the struggle over objecthood. And I soon came to feel that that something more concerned the issue of the

relationship between work and beholder (Morris's "Remarks on Sculpture" insists on this). The literalist projection and hypostatization of objecthood, I went on to argue, amounted to a new genre of *theater*, while the modernist imperative to seek to negate objecthood expressed a fundamental hostility to theater in all its manifestations. (My critique of the literalist address to the viewer's body was not that bodiliness as such had no place in art but rather that literalism theatricalized the body, put it endlessly on stage, made it uncanny or opaque to itself, hollowed it out, deadened its expressiveness, denied its finitude and in a sense its humanness, and so on. There is, I might have said, something vaguely *monstrous* about the body in literalism.)

3. As the essay makes clear, I saw those as *recent* developments. For example, I wrote that "objecthood has become an issue for modernist painting only within the past several years. This, however, is not to say that before the present situation came into being, paintings, or sculptures for that matter, simply *were objects*. It would, I think, be closer to the truth to say that they *simply* were not. The risk, even the possibility, of seeing works of art as nothing more than objects did not exist. That such a possibility began to present itself around 1960 was largely the result of developments within modernist painting." I also wrote that "theater is *now* the negation of art" (emphasis added) and in general strongly implied that the high modernist struggle with theatricality was itself something new. But my invocation of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud also suggested that theatricality had been an issue for the theater for decades. And with the publication of my subsequent books on the French antitheatrical tradition between the middle of the eighteenth century and the advent of Manet and the Impressionists in the 1860s and 1870s, it became all too easy to assume, first, that I believe that a struggle between theatricality and antitheatricality was continuously central to painting from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, and second, that I agree with Diderot and other antitheatrical critics in their negative and positive assessments of a host of painters between Greuze and Manet (and earlier). Both assumptions are mistaken and could only be based on a careless reading of my work, but I want to postpone discussing the question of the relation of my art criticism to my art-historical writings until part 3 of this introduction.

4. In historical retrospect, "Art and Objecthood" was both right and wrong about the developments it described. On the one hand, it seems clear that literalism did represent a break with modernism as regards the terms of its appeal to the viewer. In fact, subsequent

commentators who have taken issue with "Art and Objecthood" are in agreement with it on that score; where they disagree hotly is with respect to my evaluation of Minimalist theatricality. This is to say that the *terms* of my argument have gone untouched by my critics, an unusual state of affairs in light of the antagonism "Art and Objecthood" has provoked.[59] On the other hand, my essay is nowhere near as pessimistic as future events would warrant from my point of view; I don't seem to have imagined the possibility that within a few years the art I admired would be all but submerged under an avalanche of more or less openly theatrical productions and practices, as proved to be the case.

It's important to recognize, however, that the extraordinary efflorescence of theatricality in the 1970s and 1980s was accompanied by a conceptual or theoretical crisis as regards the question of artistic value as such. As I wrote in "Art and Objecthood": "The concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only *within* the individual arts. What lies *between* the arts is theater."[60] And with the widespread turning away from the high modernist emphasis on painting and sculpture, not only were the new practitioners driven to ever more overtly theatrical interventions, but the very notions of value or quality or conviction lost all relevance to what was going on. This had been anticipated by Judd's claim, "A work needs only to be interesting," with which I took issue in both "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood." In the same spirit, but more programmatically, Hal Foster commented in 1987: "There's a line in 'Art and Objecthood' to the effect that painting must compel conviction. Now a primary motive of the innovative art of my generation [Foster was born in 1955] is precisely that it *not* compel conviction—that it trouble conviction, that it demystify belief: that it not be what it seems to be."[61] Elsewhere Foster has characterized the postmodern impulse in terms that relate it to Marcel Duchamp's original exposé of the institutional nature of art:

> "Quality," . . . exposed as an imposition of a set of norms, is displaced as a criterion by "interest," and art is henceforth seen to develop less by formal historicist refinement (as in "pursue the pure, extract the extraneous") than by structural historical negation (as in "how can I as an artist expand the aesthetic and ideological limits of the artistic paradigm that I have received?"). At this point, too, the object of critical investigation becomes less the essence of a medium [Foster means this in Greenberg's sense, not mine, but it would make no difference

> to his argument if the reverse were true] than "the social effect (function) of a work" in the present, and, perhaps most important, the intent of artistic intervention becomes less to secure a transcendental "conviction" in art and its institutions than to undertake an immanent critique of its rules and regulations. Indeed, this last may be seen as a provisional distinction between formalist-modernist and avant-gardist-postmodernist art: "to compel conviction" versus "to cast doubt"; "to seek the essential" versus "to reveal the conditional."[62]

In other words, what I have called a crisis with respect to notions of value is described by Foster, not unreasonably, as the replacement of one set of concerns by another, altogether different set. But the question, my question, is how deep or compelling or significant—I would even ask how difficult—an achievement "casting doubt" or "revealing the conditional" or "troubling conviction" or "demystifying belief" finally is? Put the other way around, how much is lost when the modernist enterprise as I have described it is replaced by Foster's "immanent critique"? To appeal once more to a famous crux: Tony Smith's night car ride on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike led him to some stark conclusions. "I thought to myself," Smith said, "it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it [the car ride, he seems to have meant], you just have to experience it" (I quote and discuss this in "Art and Objecthood"). This is perhaps *the* exemplary post-Duchamp instance of the revelation of the conditional, and how much weight does it finally have? Why should any experience that is not an experience of art be taken as laying bare the end of art? Would the experience of a spectacular sunset or a nuclear explosion do as much, and if not, why not? What's wrong with painting, even modernist painting, "looking pictorial"? And how tenable is the contrast between "framing" and "experiencing" on which Smith insists? (There is no more sacred term in Greenberg's lexicon than "experience.")[63]

5. A final crux in "Art and Objecthood" concerns the issue of temporality. In the essay's last pages I claimed that literalist sensibility was preoccupied with experiences that persist in time, and more broadly that the "presentment" of duration, of "time itself as though it were some sort of literalist object," was central to the new esthetic. Here too I drew a sharp contrast with the modernist painting and sculpture I most admired. "It is as though one's experience of [modernist painting and sculpture] *has no* duration," I wrote, "not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculp-

ture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.* . . . It is this continuous and entire *presentness* [a term I adopted in opposition to literalist "presence"], amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness,* as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it."

For de Duve, who endorses my view that Mimimalist work "is an art of time" ("like theater," he adds), my invocation of presentness made me "but the last in a long line of aestheticians who, from Lessing to Greenberg through Wölfflin, sought in the instantaneous spatiality of painting the specific essence of plastic art." More broadly, de Duve argues that the literalist preoccupation with duration—nowhere more developed than in the work of Robert Morris—gave "a fatal blow" to that basic tenet of classical and modernist esthetics.[64] But in the first place my overall insistence on a nonreductive modernist dialectic militated against there being any "specific essence of plastic art" as such.[65] And in the second, my account of the struggle between literalism and modernism disputes in advance de Duve's notion of a "fatal blow." More precisely, a major strand of my argument in both "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood" was that literalism arose within modernism as a misreading of its dialectic (a misreading anticipated, on the plane of theory, by Greenberg in "Modernist Painting" and "After Abstract Expressionism"), which implies that at a certain point in the recent history of modernist painting and sculpture (mainly painting), the projection and hypostatization of literalness and duration (also of endlessness, of resistance to closure) emerged as inner temptations which it was now necessary for the modernist arts to recognize as such and to take positive measures to refuse and defeat. "It should be evident," I wrote in "Shape as Form," "that . . . literalist sensibility is itself a product, or by-product, of the development of modernist painting itself—more accurately, of the increasingly explicit acknowledgment of the literal character of the support that has been central to that development." Not that "inner" and "outer" could be kept wholly distinct from one another. "Literalist sensibility," "Art and Objecthood" also says,

> is . . . a response to the *same* developments that have largely compelled modernist painting to undo its objecthood—more precisely, the same developments *seen differently,* that is, in theatrical terms, by a sensibility *already* theatrical, already (to say the worst) corrupted or perverted by

> theater. Similarly, what has compelled modernist painting to defeat or suspend its own objecthood is not just developments internal to itself, but the same general, enveloping, infectious theatricality that corrupted literalist sensibility in the first place and in the grip of which the developments in question—and modernist painting in general—are seen as nothing more than an uncompelling and presenceless kind of theater. It was the need to break the fingers of that grip that made objecthood an issue for modernist painting.

In an obvious sense, the characterization of theatricality as a corrosive force external to both modernism and literalism is at odds with a stress on inner conflict. But in another sense it heightens that stress by placing modernism and literalism on the same footing: why did the one fight off theatricality and the other accede to it?[66]

In any case, the conflict between modernism and literalism evoked in "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood" resists being redescribed as a matter of simple supercession and demystification, as if modernist painting had in fact come to an end with Stella's black pictures (Stella himself refused to regard them in that light),[67] to be not just succeeded but invalidated by literalism, which in its embrace of objecthood and temporality—also by virtue of its frankly situational character—is imagined to have established not only a new paradigm of art making but a new, more "contemporary" (e.g., nontranscendental, embodied, "externalized," entropic, divided, decentered) model of the subject or self.[68] Indeed, a sense of inner combat motivated the overtly theological cast of my essay's rhetorical frame: "Art and Objecthood" opens with an epigraph from Perry Miller's wonderful book on Jonathan Edwards and closes with two sentences that soon became notorious (the second one anyway): "We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace." As for the epigraph, it quotes Edwards writing in his journal, "'It is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed.' The abiding assurance," Miller comments, "is that 'we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.'"[69] I meant the epigraph to be taken as a gloss on the concept of presentness, and in particular as suggesting that what was at stake in my invocation of that concept was something other than *mere* instantaneousness (however that is defined), which incidentally is why dutifully rehearsing Derrida's deconstruction of the Husserlian "now" has no bearing on my arguments.[70] (Note too my reliance in the passages quoted above on constructions involving

"as though," which by itself should have ruled out taking instantaneousness literally, so to speak.) My point, I would say today, was that at every moment the *claim* on the viewer of the modernist painting or sculpture is renewed totally, as if nothing less than that is the condition of its expressiveness. By the same token, the viewer's conviction in a work's seriousness, its "quality," is never for a moment, or is only for a moment, safe from the possibility of doubt (a modernist state of affairs with a vengeance); conviction—grace—must be secured again and again, as though continuously, by the work itself but also, in the act of experiencing, by the viewer, by us.

A further feature of the epigraph is its obvious "sublimity," which means that from the outset "Art and Objecthood" can't be read in terms of an implied contrast between the (good) beautiful and (bad) sublime. I don't say I fully understood this at the time; if someone had asked me, I might have consented to the latter equation, if only because of being struck by the all-too-obviously "sublime" connotations of Smith's story of his nocturnal car ride or his evocation in the same interview of the enormous drill ground at Nuremburg. But what I actually wrote exceeds that frame (in particular, my frame exceeds that frame).[71]

3. Art Criticism and Art History

As I've already suggested, one source of confusion for readers familiar both with my art criticism and my art-historical writings turns on the role played in each by the concept of theatricality. Starting in the mid-1970s, when I began publishing preliminary versions of parts of *Absorption and Theatricality,* and ending with *Manet's Modernism* more than twenty years later, I put forward an account of the evolution of a central tradition within French painting between the middle of the eighteenth century and the advent of Manet and the Impressionists in the 1860s and 1870s. The core issue in that tradition—lucidly theorized at the outset by the great philosophe and pioneer art critic Denis Diderot—concerned the relationship between painting and beholder, which is to say it concerned the same relationship as the one that bore the brunt of my analysis in "Art and Objecthood." Furthermore, throughout that tradition the same values were in force as in "Art and Objecthood." (As we shall see, in this context sameness isn't quite identity.) By that I mean that for Diderot and the French antitheatrical tradition generally, the painter's task was crucially to negate or neutralize what I have called

the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld. This was to be done, in the first place, by depicting figures so engrossed or (a key term in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticism) *absorbed* in what they were doing, thinking, and feeling that they appeared oblivious of everything else, including, crucially, the beholder standing before the painting. To the extent that the painter succeeded in that aim, the beholder's existence was effectively ignored or, put more strongly, denied; the figures in the painting appeared alone in the world (alternatively we may say that the world of the painting appeared self-sufficient, autonomous, a closed system independent of, in that sense blind to, the world of the beholder), though it was also true that only by making a painting that appeared to ignore or deny or be blind to the beholder in this way could the painter accomplish his ultimate purpose—bringing actual viewers to a halt in front of the painting and holding them there in a virtual trance of imaginative involvement.

The antithesis of absorption was theatricality, playing to an audience, which quickly emerged as the worst of all artistic faults. Indeed, the issue of theatricality was from the outset defined in the starkest possible terms: *either* the figure or figures in a painting seemed entirely oblivious to being beheld *or* they stood condemned as theatrical. Equally all-or-nothing was the opposition between drama and theater: whereas previously the two terms were, if not interchangeable, at any rate inseparable from one another, for Diderot and the French antitheatrical tradition they were faced off against one another by definition. Drama, the positive term, absolutely precluded all suggestion that the beholder had been taken into account (no addressing the audience, falsely rhetorical gestures, symmetrical arrangement of personages, elaborate costumes); conversely, the least hint of theater turned drama into melodrama (to use a third term that would become current only in the early nineteenth century). For obvious reasons, the starkness of those oppositions has reminded many readers of the evaluative schema of "Art and Objecthood" and related texts. And since my further claim in *Absorption and Theatricality* and its sequels has been that at the heart of the evolution of painting in France between Greuze and Manet was a constantly renewed attempt to defeat theatricality by means of absorption and/or drama, and in the case of Courbet by an effort on the part of the painter-beholder to merge all but corporeally with the painting on which he was working, many readers have also assumed that my critical and

art-historical writings form a seamless whole. But that assumption is wrong in several respects.

For one thing, it ignores my insistence, spelled out in *Courbet's Realism* and implicit in *Absorption and Theatricality,* on the futility of trying to determine whether or not a given painting conclusively succeeded or for that matter conclusively failed in overcoming the condition I have been calling theater. Consider, for example, Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1785; fig. 71), the picture that more than any other marks the early triumphant phase of the modern French school. In my reading, the *Horatii* was intended by David as a rigorously dramatic, not theatrical, painting, in which each of the figures and all of them together were meant to be seen as wholly engaged in the strongly contrasted actions of swearing an oath to fight to the death for Rome (the men) and of all but collapsing in horror and grief (the women). (The contrast between the two groups was itself a vehicle of the drama.) But we also know that roughly ten years later, while working on the *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799; fig. 72), David characterized the composition of the *Horatii* as theatrical in a pejorative sense, by which I take him to have meant that the unprecedented evocation of physical and emotional intensity in the earlier work and perhaps also the starkness of the contrast between the men and women now struck him as excessive and exaggerated, which is to say as too deliberately seeking to impress. And in fact the *Sabines* marks a deliberate withdrawal from the values and effects of pictorial drama in favor of a less instantaneous and impassioned representational mode. Within roughly a decade, however, the *Sabines* was attacked as theatrical by various commentators precisely because it was seen to depict personages merely posing (i.e., insufficiently impassioned), and by the time Stendhal wrote in the mid-1820s it had come to stand for all that appeared mannered and unmotivated in the art of the David school.

Now it may seem that, confronted with these shifting interpretations of the issue of theatricality on the part of the artist, the task of the art historian is to try to resolve the matter once and for all by determining (to begin with) whether David was right about antitheatricality in 1784–85, when he painted the *Horatii,* or in 1796–99, when he found the *Horatii* theatrical and devised the significantly different mise-en-scène of the *Sabines.* (A third possibility is that he was wrong on both occasions.) But in fact the art historian ought to do nothing of the kind. From a historical perspective, looking back

at David's paintings from the late twentieth century, the *Horatii,* like the *Sabines,* is inherently *neither* dramatic *nor* theatrical. All we are justified in saying, if I am right in my claims about what David was up to, is that whereas in 1784–85 he aimed to produce an antitheatrical work by intensely dramatic means, by the second half of the 1790s the dramaturgical and stylistic resources he had earlier mobilized in the interests of visual drama now seemed to him overdone and in that sense theatrical in effect, and that he was therefore led to modify his original solution in ways that themselves were later found theatrical on exactly opposite grounds. More broadly, antitheatricality emerges in my books and essays on French painting as a structure of artistic intention on the part of painters and as a structure of demand, expectation, and reception on the part of critics and audiences, not as a formal or expressive quality inhering or failing to inhere, timelessly and changelessly, in individual works.

This seems to be a hard idea to grasp. The *Sabines* in particular tends to strike the modern viewer as so self-evidently theatrical that it can feel perverse to reject the temptation to declare it such in favor of seeking to understand, first, how it came to be the way it is and second, how it was seen both by its contemporaries and by succeeding generations of viewers.[72] (This is even truer of Greuze's genre paintings of the 1760s and after.) Perhaps one way of making that rejection feel less odd is to observe that, in my account, it was precisely the constitutive instability of the paintings and prints of the central French tradition—the works of Greuze, David, Gros, Géricault, Daumier, Couture, Millet, Courbet, Fantin-Latour, Legros, Whistler, and others—with respect to the issue of antitheatricality that provided the tradition's hidden motor, in a manner of speaking. Because the paintings in question were in themselves neither antitheatrical nor theatrical, the overarching, transgenerational aim of making paintings that seemed genuinely indifferent to the beholder could never be realized definitively and so remained continually in force. Works that at one moment were felt to satisfy that aim soon appeared not to do so, though by the same token works that were once dismissed with scorn could also come back into at least partial favor (as happened with Greuze in the 1860s). Indeed, in the 1850s and 1860s a single artist, Millet, violently divided the viewing public. For one group of critics, his works were exemplary because they appeared devoid of the least trace of consciousness of an audience; for another group, the obviousness of his efforts to produce that effect made his pictures seem unbearably theatrical—and here too the task

of the art historian is to try to understand the basis of that division of opinion, not to seek to resolve the dispute by coming down on one side or the other.[73]

It follows that those commentators who have assumed that in my art-historical writings I share the views and in particular the judgments of Diderot and other antitheatrical critics whom I cite and discuss are mistaken. Simply put, my art-historical writings are resolutely nonjudgmental with respect to individual works and oeuvres in the antitheatrical tradition (and outside it, e.g., the art of Watteau and Boucher), not in the name of an ideal of historical objectivity (whatever the feasibility of such an ideal), but rather in the interest of a particular historical project: tracking the constantly shifting and by no means unitary structure of value judgments keyed to the issue of antitheatricality as that structure found expression both in paintings and in art criticism.

In short, between myself as historian of the French antitheatrical tradition and the critic who wrote "Art and Objecthood" there looms an unbridgeable gulf. For not only is "Art and Objecthood" harshly critical of Minimalist theatricality. More important, the present writer, commenting in this introduction both on his early art criticism and his later art history, sees no way of negotiating the difference between the priority given in his criticism to judgments of value both positive and negative and the principled refusal of all such judgments in the pursuit of historical understanding, despite the fact that the developments explored in *Absorption and Theatricality, Courbet's Realism,* and *Manet's Modernism* are part of the deep background to those discussed in "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood"—and despite the fact that the latter essays belong to a tradition of antitheatrical criticism founded by Diderot more than two centuries before (as I've said, I wasn't aware of that when I wrote them). In other words, my art-historical writings investigate crucial aspects of the genealogy both of the issues treated in "Art and Objecthood" and related essays and of the judgments expressed in them. But genealogical knowledge turns out to be powerless to "historicize" my present relation to those essays: although I sometimes feel that they were written by another person (or at least in another world, that of America in the age of the Vietnam War, the struggle for civil rights, the assassinations), I cannot disconnect my present self from the evaluations they express (although I could not write those essays now, I have no choice but to stand behind them).[74] Nor is this simply a matter of my continued indifference to the work of Judd, Morris, Smith, and other

literalists: those feelings might by now have found different expression—for example, the entire issue of theatricality might by now have come to strike me as a red herring—but that hasn't happened. It's as if somewhere around 1960 time undergoes a twist, and as if this side of that twist my relation to that issue remains implacably critical, not historical.[75] (To that extent, I find myself in unexpected agreement with Greenberg's distinction between the judgmental approach of art criticism and the nonjudgmental stance of art history, though not of course with his deprecation of the latter.) And as mentioned earlier, no one of all those who have written against "Art and Objecthood" has contended that literalist art was not theatrical; instead, they have tried to reverse my negative assessment of theatricality itself, which is understandable but also suggests that the relation of work to beholder took a new, as yet "unhistoricizable" form with and around the literalist adventure. Shortly after "Art and Objecthood" appeared, Robert Smithson wrote a characteristically brilliant letter to *Artforum* in which he asked: "Could it be there is a double Michael Fried?" Whatever the right answer was in 1967, the answer now is yes.[76]

(Actually, the answer is yes only as regards the critical as distinct from the theoretical claims of "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood." My case against the *arguments* behind literalism and reductionism was ahead of its time: I owe to Walter Benn Michaels the recognition that my disagreement with the literalists on the plane of theory anticipates by fifteen years crucial aspects of the "Against Theory" debate in which Michaels and his then Berkeley colleague Steven Knapp sought to refute the premises of de Manian and other varieties of linguistic "materialism."[77] With respect to those issues, there is no question of a conflict between history and criticism, distance and proximity.)

Another assumption I sometimes meet is that I think there exists not just a certain parallel but an actual continuity between the antitheatrical tradition from the 1750s to the advent of Manet and the struggle against theatricality in abstract painting and sculpture in the 1960s. But of course I don't. Not only is there no strict equivalent in "Art and Objecthood" and related texts for the notions of absorption and drama in my art-historical writing.[78] My work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French painting has from the first been governed by the belief that the antitheatrical tradition reached a stage of absolute crisis, indeed was liquidated *as* a tradition, in and by Manet's revolutionary canvases of the first half of the 1860s, and that at least

as regards the issue of beholding whatever took place after that crisis was in an important sense discontinuous with all that had gone before. In *Manet's Modernism* I complicate that notion by describing the radically innovatory status of Manet's pictures of the 1860s as all but inseparable from the interpretation of those paintings posited by early Impressionism, but I nevertheless regard their repudiation of absorption in favor of facingness and strikingness—their embrace of what I call a "presentational" as distinct from "actional" kind of theatricality—as breaking fundamentally with the Diderotian tradition as a whole. And yet the break with that tradition did not mark the disappearance of the sort of concerns that had motivated it all along. "Painting after Manet," I write in the coda to *Manet's Modernism,* "would be severed from the Diderotian tradition that had made it possible (it would no longer be a requirement of ambitious painting that it defeat theatricality, though antagonism to the latter would remain a live option). But painting after Manet would not be liberated from the concerns of that tradition (it would not thereafter be indifferent to problems of beholding), least of all when a final step in a formalist-modernist evolution would purport to go beyond painting into Minimalist objecthood."[79] (For "formalist-modernist" read Greenbergian.) A great deal more remains to be discovered about the vicissitudes of the relationship between painting and beholder from Manet to Stella. But that is a task for other occasions and in part for other writers.

Finally, in the introduction and coda to *Manet's Modernism* I argue that the basic formalist-modernist view—enshrined in Greenberg's "Modernist Painting"—that paintings consist essentially in flat surfaces conjoined to a sheerly visual or optical mode of spatiality amounts to nothing more nor less than a theoretical rationale for the Impressionist picture.[80] For some time now, as was noted above in "The Issue of 'Opticality,'" formalist-modernism's overinvestment in opticality has been under widespread attack. But potentially far more productive of a genuine change in thinking, I suggest, is the recognition of Impressionism's role in virtually rewiring the human sensorium as far as the experience of paintings is concerned, for it is only on that basis that we can begin to gauge the extent to which even the most sophisticated-seeming modern commentaries on painting, including those of formalist-modernism's most vocal critics, have remained captive to a set of assumptions that first took shape more than 125 years ago.[81] It was in shifting the focus of attention to a consideration of the relationship between painting and beholder

that (I don't see how else to put this) I accomplished the art-historical work that made that recognition possible, and my closing point is simply that although "Art and Objecthood" and the other pieces in this book were not yet engaged in that work, it was only once they were written that it began to seem a necessary thing to do.

THROUGHOUT THE years when I was writing art criticism I also wrote poems, some of which were collected in the volume called *Powers* mentioned in part 1 of this introduction. And just over twenty years later, in 1994, Farrar, Straus and Giroux brought out a second book of poems, *To the Center of the Earth,* which comprises a selection from *Powers* along with new work.[82] I have always believed that the poems, the art criticism, and the art history go together, that they share a single vision of reality. More than that isn't for me to say.

Baltimore, Maryland
May 28, 1996

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p. 71.

2. All three have been published by the University of Chicago Press.

3. Millard was then an advanced graduate student at the Fogg; he subsequently became chief curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and also wrote art criticism for the *Hudson Review.* Other graduate students at Harvard during those years who became involved with contemporary art include Kermit Swiler Champa, Rosalind Krauss, and Kenworth Moffett. The senior professor of modern art at Harvard at that time, Frederick B. Deknatel, sympathized with that involvement. It's fair to say, though, that for all of us the dominant intellectual presence in the Department of Fine Arts during those years was Freedberg, arguably the foremost art historian of the Italian High Renaissance and Mannerism of his generation and a teacher of genius. Freedberg's "formalist" methodology no doubt reinforced our interest in Greenberg (see part 1 of the introduction to the catalog for the exhibition *Three American Painters,* reprinted in this book as "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella"), but what the two men, otherwise so different, also had in common was the distinction of their "eyes": this is evident in Freedberg's writings, but no one who wasn't present at his extraordinary lectures and seminars can imagine the inspiration they offered toward a life of *looking.*

4. For his early response to those discussions see Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York, 1969), and the section entitled "Excursus: Some Modernist Painting," in his book *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1970;

enlarged ed., Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1979). An early essay by Cavell that meant a great deal to me is "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" (1962), reprinted in *Must We Mean What We Say?*

5. Just over a year later I wrote an article, "Some Notes on Morris Louis" (*Arts Magazine* 30 [Nov. 1963]: 22–27), inspired by an exhibition of seventeen of his paintings at the Guggenheim Museum (organized by Lawrence Alloway), in which I first discussed his relation to Pollock, a point developed further in the introduction to *Three American Painters* and "Morris Louis" (reprinted in this book).

6. Through no fault of Stella, who admired them and urged them on me from the first.

7. As mentioned above, part 1 of "Three American Painters" was written in 1963–64; it was published under the title "Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism" in the *American Scholar* 33 (autumn 1964): 642–48.

8. See the last sentences of my 1963 text on Stella for the Jewish Museum's exhibition *Toward a New Abstraction* (reprinted in this book as "Frank Stella").

9. Cf. Greenberg's attempt to argue that "the objectivity of taste is probatively demonstrated in and through the presence of a consensus *over time*" (Clement Greenberg, "Can Taste Be Objective?" *Art News* 72 [Feb. 1973]: 22–23, 92). See also his "Complaints of an Art Critic" (1967), where he wrote: "Because aesthetic judgments are immediate, intuitive, undeliberate, and involuntary, they leave no room for the conscious application of standards, criteria, rules, or precepts. That qualitative principles or norms are there somewhere, in subliminal operation, is certain; otherwise aesthetic judgments would be purely subjective, and that they are not is shown by the fact that the verdicts of those who care most about art and pay it the most attention converge over the course of time to form a consensus" (Clement Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957–1969,* vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* ed. John O'Brian [Chicago, 1993], p. 265). Thierry de Duve rightly takes Greenberg to task for confusing Kant's transcendental account of esthetic judgment's claim to universality with the empiricist notion of objectivity in *Clement Greenberg between the Lines,* trans. Brian Holmes (Paris, 1996), pp. 106–10.

10. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs,* trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill., 1964), pp. 39–83. The original essay in French, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," was first published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1952 and was included in Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris, 1960). See also Georg Lukács, *History and Class-Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics,* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). Lukács's book was first published in German in 1923; I became familiar with it in the French translation of 1960. Another book that influenced me was Merleau-Ponty's *Les Aventures de la dialectique* (Paris, 1955). The claim that modernism in the arts proceeds by acts of self-criticism is at the heart of Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting," which was first made widely available in *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961) but which (like almost everyone) I didn't read until it was reprinted in slightly revised form in Gregory Battcock, ed., *The New Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York, 1966), pp. 66–77. (The revised version had also been reprinted a

year earlier in *Art and Literature* [spring 1965], but I don't remember seeing that either.) However, in "After Abstract Expressionism," which I read and absorbed when it appeared in October 1962, Greenberg spelled out the nature of "the kind of self-critical process which . . . provides the infra-logic of modernist art" (Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* 6 [Oct. 25, 1962]: 30; Greenberg's essay is reprinted with minor changes in *Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 121–34).

11. As I realized only recently, preparing to teach that essay in a seminar. "A man is judged by neither intention nor fact but by his success in making values become facts," Merleau-Ponty wrote. "When this happens, the meaning of the action does not exhaust itself in the situation which has occasioned it, or in some vague judgment of value; the action remains as an exemplary type and will survive in other situations in another form. It opens a field. Sometimes it even institutes a world. In any case it outlines a future. History according to Hegel is this maturation of a future in the present, not the sacrifice of the present to an unknown future; and the rule of action for him is not to be efficient at any cost, but to be first of all fecund" ("Indirect Language," p. 72).

12. In the Stella section of the introduction to *Three American Painters* I cite only the first sentence of the passage from Merleau-Ponty quoted in the previous note in my own translation, adding: "The values in Stella's case are pictorial values; they are to be found, or found wanting, only in one's firsthand experience of the paintings in question."

13. See, e.g., Yve-Alain Bois, "Introduction: Resisting Blackmail," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

14. Greenberg protested against the idea that there existed a formalist school of painters or indeed criticism in "Complaints of an Art Critic" (*Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 265–72). But he himself later wrote: "It remains that Modernism in art, if not in literature, has stood or fallen so far by its 'formalism.' Not that Modernist art is co-terminous with 'formalism.' And not that 'formalism' hasn't lent itself to a lot of empty, bad art. But so far every attack on the 'formalist' aspect of Modernist painting and sculpture has worked out as an attack on Modernism itself because every such attack developed into an attack at the same time on superior artistic standards" (Clement Greenberg, "Necessity of Formalism," *New Literary History* 3 [autumn 1971]: 171–75). Incidentally, Kramer as early as 1961 referred to both "formalist criticism" and "formalist art" (Hilton Kramer, "Notes on Clement Greenberg," *Arts* 37 [Oct. 1961]: 62).

15. My reference is to "Modernist Painting" as it appeared in Battcock, ed., *The New Art,* p. 73. Subsequent page references to that essay will be in parentheses in the text.

16. In Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance,* p. 60. In Greenberg's own selection of his art criticism, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), that essay was retitled "The New Sculpture."

17. See Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance,* p. 97.

18. Ibid.

19. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," p. 25.

20. Ibid., p. 29.

21. Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance,* p. 90.

22. See, however, "Louis and Noland" (1960), where he writes: "The 'aesthetic' of post-Cubist painting—by which I mean painting after Kline, after Dubuffet, and even after Hans Hofmann—consists mostly in this *renewal of the Impressionist emphasis on the exclusively visual*" (Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 97–98; emphasis added). And from "The 'Crisis' of Abstract Art" (1964): "What looms beyond, and grows out of, Painterly Abstraction is a newer (though not necessarily superior) kind of abstract art that puts the main stress on color as hue. For the sake of this stress painterliness is being abandoned, not to be replaced by the geometrical or the 'hard-edged,' but rather by a way of paint-handling that blurs the difference between painterly and non-painterly. *Harking back in some ways to Impressionism, and reconciling the Impressionist glow with Cubist opacity,* this newer abstract painting suggests possibilities of color for which there are no precedents in Western tradition. An unexplored realm of picture-making is being opened up—in a quarter where young apes cannot follow—that promises to be large enough to accommodate at least one more generation of major painters" (Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance,* p. 181; emphasis added). The truth seems to be that Greenberg wavered with respect to the question of the persistence of Impressionist opticality in subsequent modernist painting, perhaps without fully realizing that he did so. On another kind of wavering in Greenberg's texts as regards opticality and materiality, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Greenberg's Amendments," *Kunst & Museumjournaal* 5 (1993): 1–9.

23. I first presented a version of my reading of Pollock's drip paintings at a one-day symposium on modern drawings at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard in the spring of 1964; the other speakers were Kermit Champa and Max Kozloff. See the remarks on Pollock in Michael Fried, "New York Letter," *Art International* 8 (Apr. 25, 1964): 57–58 (those remarks are not included in the selection reprinted in this book as "New York Letter: De Kooning Drawings"). Following Merleau-Ponty, I also insist in the introduction to *Three American Painters* that the distinction between opticality and tactility isn't absolute—that the senses of sight and touch "open onto the same space."

24. I moderated this claim in "Morris Louis." See T. J. Clark's important essay "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in *Reconstructing Modernism,* ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1990), pp. 172–242, for a thoughtful critique of my stress on the opticality of Pollock's allover paintings. Clark himself, however, implies that the viewer loses sight of the materiality of Pollock's picture surfaces at distances greater than "three feet or so," which he calls "a quite ordinary viewing distance" (p. 236 n. 60). But that is not an ordinary distance from which to view Pollock's allover drip pictures with the aim of seeing them in their entirety—just try holding your ground no more than three feet or so from *Number One* (1948) or *Lavender Mist* (1950). So even for Clark the "optical" reading of Pollock remains an open question. There is also a strong affinity between Clark's "agonistic" account of *Cut-Out* (1948) and related works, including *The Wooden Horse* (1948), and my own analysis of those works in the introduction to

Three American Painters (as Clark acknowledges, p. 237 n. 78). Another recent writer who alludes to the "non-atmospheric opticality" of Pollock's allover drip paintings is de Duve in *Clement Greenberg between the Lines*, p. 22.

25. By far the most extreme recent critique of Greenberg and me on opticality is Rosalind Krauss's book *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1993). But the highly personal tone of her treatment of Greenberg is such that readers may fail to grasp that the true target of Krauss's antagonism is not Greenberg's or my writings on modernist painting and sculpture so much as modernism itself. Like Greenberg in the revised "Modernist Painting," she holds an adamantly global vision of "mainstream" modernist painting as optical from start to finish, which in her case means that she regards modernist painting itself as promulgating a single, unchanging set of misconceived values and assumptions associated with vision (e.g., vision as a vehicle of pure immediacy, instantaneity, transparence, disembodiedness, self-knowledge, and autonomy)—with the exception of a few seemingly marginal but for her exemplary artistic episodes in which something she calls the "optical unconscious" comes to the fore. Her antioptical heroes include Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Alberto Giacometti in his Surrealist phase, Georges Bataille the theorist of *l'informe*, Pablo Picasso in certain quasi-"flipbook" drawings, Pollock in his allover drip paintings, which Krauss reads as "indexically" belonging to the floor or ground to the extent that they are traduced when hung on a wall (which of course is how they were made to be viewed), the trio Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and Robert Morris in certain Pollock-derived works, and Eva Hesse. Krauss's project in her book is thus to sketch "an alternative history, one that had developed against the grain of modernist opticality, one that had risen on the very site of modernism only to defy its logic, to cross the wires of its various categories, to flout all its notions about essences and purifications, to refuse its concern with foundations—above all a foundation in the presumed ontological ground of *the visual*" (p. 21). Although I can't begin to assess her alternative history here, the very terms of her project mean that she has at least as great (and as unexamined) an investment in the global idea of modernist opticality as any critic or historian before her. For an acute review of her book see Stephen Bann, "Greenberg's Team," *Raritan* 13 (spring 1994): 146–59. There are also pertinent observations in Mikkel Bogh, "Det begærende øje," *Øjeblikket*, no. 19 (winter 1994): 48–49.

26. I first introduced this notion in the course of a discussion of recent paintings by Jules Olitski in my "New York Letter" in the May 1964 issue of *Art International* (reprinted in this book as "New York Letter: Olitski, Jenkins, Thiebaud, Twombly").

27. Cf. Greenberg: Newman's straight lines "do not echo those of the frame, but parody it. Newman's picture becomes all frame in itself, as he himself makes clear in three special paintings he has done—paintings three or four feet long but only two or three inches wide, that are covered with but two or three vertical bands of color. What is destroyed is the Cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine; 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" ("'American'-Type Painting" [1955; revised version, 1958], in Greenberg, *Art and Culture,* pp. 226–27). I quote this passage in my "New York Letter" for May 25, 1963 (reprinted in this book as "New York Letter: Noland, Thiebaud"), where I also add that "in Newman's work there is still an important zone of decision left that smacks of geometrical thinking: namely, the decision where exactly to place the vertical line or lines. And until this decision itself is somehow determined by a relatively manifest internal logic generated by the painter's awareness of the framing edge, an element of geometry persists, small but for the time being irreducible." Obviously I thought the first painter whose paintings satisfied those "logical" demands was Stella, which is probably why I didn't follow Greenberg in saying that in Newman's art the picture edge "makes" the picture as distinct from "echoing" it.

28. This largely repeats a passage in my "New York Letter: Noland, Thiebaud."

29. I still rely on the notion of deductive structure in "Jules Olitski's New Paintings" (*Artforum* 4 [Nov. 1965]: 36–40). For that matter, I still refer to the literal shape determining the structure of Stella's stripe paintings in "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (reprinted in this book), though it's also in that essay that I first deploy the concept of "acknowledging" the literal character of the support *in the place of* that of "deductive structure" (see "My Double Critique of Greenberg's Theory," below, for more on "acknowledgment" in this sense of the term). I explicitly drop the notion of deductive structure in favor of acknowledgment in "Jules Olitski" (reprinted in this book), where I also say: "One trouble with [the notion of deductive structure] was that it could be taken to imply that *any* structure in which elements are aligned with the framing edge is as 'deductive' (more or less) as any other." My various accounts of the role of pictorial structure in Stella's art are criticized by William S. Rubin, *Frank Stella* (New York, 1970), pp. 54–60.

30. See also the Stella section of the introduction to *Three American Painters,* where I resist the view that "the assertion of the literal character of the picture support manifested with growing explicitness in modernist painting from Manet to Stella represents nothing more nor less than the gradual apprehension of the basic 'truth' that paintings are in no essential respect different from other classes of objects in the world." The recognition that Stella's stripe paintings simultaneously emphasize their "thing-nature" and insist on their paintedness is at work in one of my first "New York Letters" (reprinted in this book as "New York Letter: Louis, Chamberlain and Stella, Indiana").

31. From the foregoing it should be clear that nothing could be further from my views in "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood" than the simplistic notion that my "concept of the medium of shape . . . argued for the special importance of the pulverization of edge, the setting up of the illusion that one cannot secure the experience of distinct objects because one cannot locate their contours" (Rosalind Krauss, contribution to a panel on "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," in *Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture, Number One,* ed. Hal Foster [Seattle, 1987], pp. 60–61).

32. I first used the notion of "competing for presentness" in connection with Olitski's use of color in his paintings of 1963–64 (in "Jules Olitski"). And of course the major precedent for Poons's "poured" or "thrown" paintings of the 1970s and after was Olitski's spray paintings from 1965 on.

33. Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," p. 142.

34. Greenberg, "Contemporary Sculpture: Anthony Caro," in *Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 205–06.

35. Merleau-Ponty's essay begins by invoking Saussure as follows: "What we have learned from Saussure is that, taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so much express a meaning as mark a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs. Since the same can be said for all other signs, we may conclude that language is made of differences without terms; or more exactly, that the terms of language are engendered only by the differences which appear among them" ("Indirect Language," p. 39). I was also struck by Merleau-Ponty's reference to "the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the eloquence of their arrangement and configuration alone, implants a meaning in that which did not have one, and thus—far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs—inaugurates an order and founds an institution or a tradition" (p. 67). And of course my evocation of the prelingual child is nothing more than an adaptation of the passage evoking the child's initiation into language by virtue of the first phonemic oppositions (pp. 40–41).

The "'syntactic' and implicitly Saussurean" aspect of my early account of Caro's art is recognized by Yve-Alain Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," in *Painting as Model,* p. 285 n. 41. See also the exchange over my account of Caro's work in "Art and Objecthood" between Rosalind Krauss and myself in the discussion following the individual presentations in "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," pp. 71–75, as well as my "Afterword" to that exchange in Foster, ed., *Dia Art Foundation Discussions,* pp. 86–87, in the latter of which I rebut what I take to be her view that a differential structure could produce only an effect of deferral or lack of plenitude (as opposed, say, to one of presentness). In a subsequent essay, "Using Language to Do Business as Usual," Krauss returns to the topic, granting my theoretical point but insisting that there is indeed "a contradiction between the experience described in 'Art and Objecthood,' an experience of Caro's sculpture, for example, in which the object's physical presence is completely eclipsed by its utter transparency to us as meaning, meaning which is, moreover, characterized as timeless and immutable; I see a contradiction between this—which is *parole*—and something like a Saussurean connection to *langue*" (Rosalind Krauss, "Using Language to Do Business as Usual" in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation,* ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey [New York, 1991], p. 93). The basic principle she invokes is Gombrichian in its starkness (also its simplemindedness): "We cannot analyse the production of illusion at the same time as we are having it" (ibid.). But even putting aside the question of the accuracy of Krauss's paraphrase of my evocation of the experience of Caro's sculpture and forbearing to ask whether in English one "has" an illusion at all, it seems clear that she has taken my words in "Art and Objecthood" as the record of an experience *in the present,* which

amounts to an almost parodic version of "being swamped by immediacy, by meaning as presence" (ibid.)—precisely the metaphysical illusion she credits Saussure and Roland Barthes (in *S/Z*) with enabling us to get beyond. In fact there is nothing in my remarks about Caro in "Art and Objecthood" that indicates that they should be read in that light: I nowhere portray myself as in the grip of an experience of Caro's art *in the moment of writing*. In effect Krauss both produces and has that illusion on her own and then taxes me with the failure to realize that my Saussurean claims are thereby invalidated.

36. For the distinction in question see Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language," p. 44. See also his claim that "try as each word may (as Saussure explains) to extract its meaning from all the others, the fact remains that at the moment it occurs the task of expressing is no longer differentiated and referred to other words—it is accomplished and we understand something" (p. 81). As he also puts it, speaking subjects have "the power . . . of going beyond signs toward their meaning" (ibid.). One consequence of this view is that for Merleau-Ponty "language speaks, and the voices of painting are the voices of silence" (ibid.).

37. One other passage from Merleau-Ponty's essay bears on my account of Caro's art in the Whitechapel introduction: "If it is characteristic of the human gesture to signify beyond its simple existence in fact, to inaugurate a meaning, it follows that every gesture is *comparable* to every other. They all arise from a single syntax" ("Indirect Language," p. 68). I first suggested that "the tension [in Merleau-Ponty's essay] between a Saussurean conception of language as difference (i.e., as 'pure' relation) and a thematics of gesture and embodiment captures the difficulty of adequately theorizing Caro's breakthrough achievement" in "Anthony Caro, *Midday*," *Artforum* 32 (Sept. 1993): 139.

38. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1956), p. 23e (pt. 1, par. 74).

39. Where I follow Wittgenstein (in the passage from the *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*) in speaking of conventions, Stanley Cavell prefers to use the Wittgensteinian concepts of criteria and grammar—of grammar "schematized" in criteria—drawn from his reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe [Oxford, 1958]) in order to avoid the contractual or indeed conventionalist implications of the first term, a point developed at length in Cavell's *Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, New York, Toronto, and Melbourne, 1979) and reiterated in his "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, 1989), pp. 29–75. In both texts Cavell alludes to Wittgenstein's statement, "Grammar expresses essence" (*Philosophical Investigations*, pt. 1, par. 371). More recently, Cavell has exemplified the concept of criteria with respect to the question of "a thing's being a table" in a way that explicitly invokes what might be called phenomenological considerations, and incidentally invites comparison with the account of the genesis and meaning of Caro's table sculptures I am about to summarize (Stanley Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and in Kripke," in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* [Chicago and London, 1990], pp. 93–95).

40. See "Anthony Caro's Table Sculptures, 1966–77" (reprinted in this

book), where I also discuss Caro's use of handles in his table sculptures to "distance" the viewer, i.e., to enforce the sculptures' "apartness." Cf. my insistence on the importance of Caro's refusal in his sculptures of the 1960s and 1970s to "allow the beholder to enter a given work, to step or stand inside it," a refusal I interpret as "only one aspect, albeit an important one, of [his sculptures'] antiliteral, antisituational character" ("Caro's Abstractness"). (Both texts postdate "Art and Objecthood" and so presume the struggle against literalism and theatricality I associate with abstraction in that essay.)

The trope of another world may strike some readers as an idealist one, but my intention, it should be clear, was to offer an alternative account of the "apartness" (or, say, "otherness") of Caro's sculptures to a claim to ideality. The world of Caro's sculptures, I would like to say (but can I meaningfully?), is just as proximate to us and just as difficult of discovery as is the "ordinary" or the "everyday" in Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell. Among many relevant texts by Cavell, see "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," where the "knowledge of what Wittgenstein means by grammar" is likened to but also distinguished from "the knowledge Kant calls 'transcendental'" (pp. 64–65), "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London, 1988), pp. 153–78, and "Declining Decline." In "Declining Decline" Cavell expands on Wittgenstein's "intuition that human existence stands in need not of reform but of reformation, of a change that has the structure of a transfiguration" by saying that the latter's "insight is that the ordinary has, and alone has, the power to move the ordinary, to leave the human habitat habitable, the same transfigured" (pp. 46–47). Cf. my claim in the introduction for Caro's 1969 retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery: "*All* the relationships that count [in Caro's work] are to be found in the sculptures themselves and nowhere else. Even the relation of his sculptures to the ground is not to the actual ground, the literal floor beneath our feet, but to the ground as conceived abstractly, in purely relational terms. Though precisely because this is so, Caro's sculptures have changed forever the ground on which we stand; while theatrical work, by including the actual ground and the actual beholder in the situation which it determines, leaves both unaltered, unilluminated" ("Introduction," in *Anthony Caro,* catalog for exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, Jan. 24–Mar. 9, 1969, p. 13). Indeed, I speak in that introduction of Caro's first welded steel sculptures achieving "the new, *un*distanced connection with the beholder which he had been seeking since before his American visit" (p. 10; emphasis added), just as in "Art and Objecthood" I argue that literalist work distances the viewer. See also the concluding passage of my essay "Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland: Some Notes on Not Composing" (not included in this book), quoted in n. 46 below. Obviously there is room for further clarification in this area, distancing in one sense of the term being equivalent to undoing distance in another.

41. It might be helpful if, this once, I were to restate my argument in Derridean terms. On the one hand, to describe Caro's problem as having to find a way to make sculptures that would be abstractly or intrinsically or essentially small, as opposed to literally or extrinsically or contingently small, is to appeal

to a range of oppositions—all organized around the conceptual dyad inside/outside—that Derridean thought routinely and efficiently deconstructs. But on the other, Caro's solution to that problem, as well as the sculptural practice that set the stage for its being posed in the first place, radically recasts, we might say deconstructs, the very distinction between inside and outside, or to put this slightly differently, they build a certain "parergonality"—tabling, and before that, grounding—into the sculptures, and moreover do so perspicuously, in a way that can't be missed. (See Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian MacLeod [Chicago and London, 1987], pp. 17–147, esp. 37–82.) For Craig Owens, writing in 1979, "'The Parergon' [pt. 2 of "Parergon"] signals a necessity: not of a renovated aesthetics, but of transforming the object, the work of art, beyond recognition" ("Detachment: From the *Parergon,*" in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture,* ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynn Tillman, and Jane Weinstock [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1992], p. 38). But this is to draw an impermissibly avant-gardist moral from Derrida's text. I would even suggest that Caro's modernist interpretation of the issue of framing, with its seemingly more modest logic of transformation, comes far closer than Owens's hyperbolic "necessity" to the import of Derrida's thought.

42. The symposium, "Art Criticism in the Sixties," was held at Brandeis University on May 7, 1966; the other participants were Barbara Rose, Max Kozloff, and Sidney Tillim and the moderator was William C. Seitz. The four papers were subsequently published as a pamphlet, *Art Criticism in the Sixties* (New York, 1967).

43. In what follows I make use of portions of an essay not reprinted in this book, Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Reply to T. J. Clark," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (Sept. 1982): 217–34 (in a special issue entitled "The Politics of Interpretation"). Clark's essay to which I was replying, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," appears in that issue as well (pp. 139–56). Subsequently Clark responded to my critique of his account of modernism in "Arguments about Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried," in *The Politics of Interpretation,* ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago and London, 1983), pp. 239–48. Recently Thierry de Duve has commented at length on our debate in *Clement Greenberg between the Lines,* chap. 2, "Silences in the Doctrine."

44. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," p. 30. I quote the last two sentences with approval in the introduction to *Three American Painters.*

45. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," p. 30.

46. In the course of a 1964 discussion of recent paintings by Jules Olitski, I claim that what is at stake in the work of Newman, Stella, and Noland "is perhaps the most radical break to date with the conventions of easel painting, along with the possibility of replacing those conventions with new modes of organization and seeing—based upon an explicit recognition of the framing edge as the most important single factor in the determination of pictorial structure—which will somehow open up into a zone of freedom as large, in its own way, as that enjoyed by traditional painters during the past five centuries" ("New York Letter: Olitski, Jenkins, Thiebaud, Twombly"). Needless to say, my remarks about the imminent

opening up of so large a zone of freedom proved to be absurdly utopian, but what I want to stress is, first, the suggestion that the structural innovations of Newman, Stella, and Noland constitute or imply "a radical break . . . with the conventions of easel painting," and second, that I nevertheless envisage not the abandonment of painting as such but rather, it would seem, a new kind or modality of painting. This is about as close as my own criticism gets to a literalist point of view—not very close, in other words—and of course I soon realized that nothing in Newman, Stella, or Noland broke with or indeed challenged the conventions of easel painting.

Another short-lived point of possible rapprochement between my criticism and literalism is the subject of an unpublished essay by Dr. Harry Cooper, who suggests that two texts omitted from this book, "Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland: Some Notes on Not Composing" (*Lugano Review* 1 [summer 1965]: 198–206) and "Jules Olitski's New Paintings," appropriate the Minimalist discourse of noncomposition for distinctly anti-Minimalist ends, i.e., in the interests of "immediacy, directness, and wholeness of effect." So, for example, I claim in "Some Notes on Not Composing" (basing myself in part on remarks by Caro) that looking at Caro's sculptures compositionally, in terms of relations of balance and the like, "ruins" the work for us in the sense that "the grip of the sculpture is diffused" (the sculptor's account of what went wrong when he "composed") (p. 206). I write in conclusion,

> We step back, see how it looks, worry about its appearance—above all we put it at arm's length: *this* is what composing, seeing it in compositional terms, means. We distance it. And our inclination to do this amounts in effect to a desire to escape the work, to break its grip on us, to destroy the intimacy it threatens to create, to pull out. And one doesn't step back or pull out just a little, or more or less. (The relevant comparison is with human relationships here.) One is either in or out: and if one steps back, whatever the grip of the thing was or may have been is broken or forestalled, and whatever the relationship was or may have been is ended or aborted. There is even a sense in which it is only then that one begins to see: that one becomes a spectator. But of course the object (or person) now being seen for the first time is no longer the same. (Ibid.)

Cooper detects in the above an early intimation of the argument of "Art and Objecthood" and further suggests that I was soon led to abandon the issue of noncomposition when Stella's irregular polygons marked the return of a certain sort of composition, and more importantly "saved subjectivity [a major concern of mine, in Cooper's view] from the threat of radical deductivism (the stripes) without devolving to the ambiguous, unrigorous tension between literalness and depiction (the old ground of subjectivity, unavailable, as it were, since the stripes collapsed it), a tension which Noland and Olitski had brought to a head." Cf. my objections to the "composed" quality of recent paintings by Helen Frankenthaler in "New York Letter," *Art International* 7 (Apr. 25, 1963). (The remarks on Frankenthaler have not been included in the selection reprinted in this book as "New York Letter: Hofmann"). My thanks to Dr. Cooper for allowing me to see

his intelligent and interesting essay; the remarks on subjectivity and impersonality earlier in this introduction were prompted by his observations.

47. In n. 12 of "Jules Olitski," I state that the concept of acknowledgment of the shape of the support is meant to replace that of deductive structure. For Cavell on acknowledgment see, e.g., the essay "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?;* his remarks on acknowledgment in connection with painting and film in *The World Viewed,* esp. pp. 109–10 and p. 239 n. 40.; and chap. 13, "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance," in *The Claim of Reason,* pp. 329–496. I should mention that I spoke of Stella's stripe paintings making "explicit acknowledgment" of the shape of the support in the introduction to *Three American Painters* (see the passages quoted above), but the term itself didn't yet have the significance I was soon to give it, as the appeal in that introduction to the notion of deductive structure makes clear. Unfortunately, I continued to deploy the concept of explicitness in connection with that of acknowledgment in "Shape as Form" and subsequent essays, which I think was a mistake: part of the point of stressing acknowledgment in those contexts was to avoid the pitfalls of the idea of making explicit, and I wish I had kept the two terms rigorously separate. And yet the fact that I did not, indeed that the phrases "explicit acknowledgment" and "explicitly acknowledge" came so readily to hand, suggests that the distinction in question was (and, I think, still is) conceptually insecure. I'm not sure what to do about this other than to call attention to the problem.

48. In fact, Greenberg writes in "Modernist Painting": "No one artist was, or is yet, consciously aware of [the self-critical tendency of modernist painting], *nor could any artist work successfully in conscious awareness of it*" (p. 75; emphasis added)—a surprising claim in view of Greenberg's having just elucidated that tendency with all the clarity at his command. What did he think would become of modernist painting now that he had laid bare its inner workings?

49. "My own views on the question of 'art' and 'good art' are different from both Greenberg's and Fried's," Thierry de Duve writes apropos of my critique of Greenberg. "Paraphrasing Fried, I would argue that what modernism has meant (notice the past tense in Fried's text as in mine) is that the two questions 'what is painting' and 'what is good painting' *were* not separable (the past tense is not in Fried)" (*Kant after Duchamp* [Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1996], p. 236 n. 55). As a logical rather than as a strictly historical point (i.e., as pertaining to a certain structural unconscious of modernist pictorial practice) this is undoubtedly correct; notice, though, how de Duve says "were" rather than "have never been" (for him modernist painting is *over*). In general, de Duve's account of Minimalism's relation to Greenberg and Stella closely follows mine in "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood," though to very different ends.

50. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," pp. 29–30.

51. De Duve, however, feels that Greenberg has been misrepresented by his critics (starting with me), who have attributed to him an essentialist philosophy whereas in fact his critical procedures were consistently empiricist (de Duve, *Clement Greenberg between the Lines,* pp. 70–71). But in the first place Greenberg's *critical* procedures aren't at issue in what I wrote, and in the second his empiricist cast of mind didn't prevent him from formulating an ahistorically essentialist

theory of modernism (or perhaps I should say an ahistorically essentialist—also a highly schematic, but that's not the problem—*history* of modernism). For de Duve, Greenberg's statement in "After Abstract Expressionism" that "modernism's self-criticism is 'entirely empirical and not at all an affair of theory,' and [that] its aim is 'to determine the irreducible *working* essence of art'" (de Duve's emphasis) should have sufficed to make clear that he was not "a Platonist of pure painting" (*Clement Greenberg between the Lines,* p. 71 n. 47). But neither disclaimer bears on the central issue, which is that Greenberg imagines the (empirical, atheoretical) operations of modernist self-criticism as arriving, indeed as having arrived, at painting's irreducible norms or conventions—flatness and the delimiting of flatness. (Italicizing "working" in no way qualifies "irreducible.") It was precisely an awareness that the narrative of "Modernist Painting" led conceptually to a certain impasse that inspired Greenberg to postulate the second dynamic mentioned above, with all the problems attendant upon it.

In 1978 Greenberg added a postscript to "Modernist Painting" in which he insists, first, that he doesn't advocate, or subscribe to, or believe in the rationale of modernist art that his essay describes, and second, that he doesn't regard "flatness and the inclosing of flatness . . . as criteria of aesthetic quality in pictorial art" but merely as "the limiting conditions" of that art (*Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 93–94). But the crucial question is not whether Greenberg should be read as explicitly or implicitly encouraging artists to make art in the spirit of his essay (that would be one version of thinking of him as an advocate of modernist self-criticism) but rather whether he subscribes to or believes in the view that that is how the modernist arts, painting in particular, have actually functioned. Obviously he does, and I disagree. As for his second point, he is right to say that he never presented flatness and the inclosing of flatness as criteria of quality, though whether "limiting conditions" means the same as "constitutive norms or conventions" and, especially, "irreducible essence" ("working" or not) is questionable to say the least (see the long quotation from "Art and Objecthood" above, with its distinction between "minimal conditions for something's being seen as a painting" and "those conventions which, at a given moment, *alone* are capable of establishing [a] work's identity as painting"). Pace de Duve, Greenberg never understood the force of at least one line of criticism of his theory of modernism. See also Greenberg, "Complaints of an Art Critic," pp. 267–68.

It's interesting, by the way, that as late as 1958, when Greenberg revised his essay "'American-Type' Painting," he was still struck by the fact, as it seemed to him, that "painting has turned out to have a greater number of *expendable* conventions imbedded in it [than the other arts], or at least a greater number of conventions that are difficult to isolate in order to expend" (*Art and Culture,* p. 208, as he also says, "Painting continues, then, to work out its modernism with unchecked momentum because it still has a relatively long way to go before being reduced to its viable essence" (p. 209). Within four years this perception would change dramatically, concomitant with, though not I think simply in consequence of, the emergence of the literalist point of view. See de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp,* pp. 215–18.

52. Another, more radical strategy for achieving this was never actualized. In a letter to the author of January 1960, Stella, about to start work on the aluminum pictures, wrote: "I have figured out what the last stripe paintings will be—clear plastic paint stripes on raw canvas, so that when the canvas is lighted properly only a bare canvas will be evident." To adapt Duchamp's epithet, a more *infra thin* difference from mere bare canvas can scarcely be imagined. (What lay beyond the last stripe paintings Stella didn't say.)

53. Michael Fried, contribution to "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," pp. 55–56. See in this connection my early critique of Poons's "Op" paintings on the grounds that the effects they seek are "irresistible" and imply a mode of address "to us as subjects, not spectators" in "New York Letter: Kelly, Poons" (reprinted in this book).

54. Thierry de Duve, "Performance Here and Now: Minimal Art, a Plea for a New Genre of Theatre," *Open Letter* 5–6 (summer–fall 1983): 255–56.

55. I had recently stressed the opticality of Caro's sculptures in the last section of "Shape as Form." Nothing in "Art and Objecthood," however, supports the claim that "Fried's differentiation between the presence of the (temporal) object and the presentness of the (timeless) pictorial depended on the opposition between the optical and the tactile; for optical qualities imparted by modernist painters defeated the 'Objecthood' of Fried's title, and the tactile qualities of the works of literalist art identified them as objects" (Margaret Olin, "Gaze," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff [Chicago and London, 1996], p. 211).

56. The first sentence reads: "Anthony Caro's sculptures have always been intimately related to the human body" ("Introduction," *Anthony Caro*, p. 5). Further on I write: "If there is a single assumption behind Caro's work it is that anything the body does or feels or undergoes can be made into art" (p. 14). Incidentally, there is almost nothing about opticality in that introduction. Indeed, I say of Caro's *Prairie*, a likely candidate for an optical interpretation, that it "goes further towards completely revoking the ordinary conditions of physicality than any other sculpture in Caro's oeuvre. In the grip of the piece one's conviction is that the horizontal poles and corrugated sheet are suspended, as if in the absence of gravity, at different levels above the ground. Though once again this is done, not by hiding the physical means by which those elements are supported from below, and thereby seeming literally to suspend them in midair, but by acknowledging the means of support in such a way as to accomplish the abstract suspension not just of the elements in question but of gravity itself. The result, as in other sculptures by Caro, is something deeper, more radical, more abstract than illusion" (p. 15). See also the account of *Prairie* in "Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro" (reprinted in this book), in which I claim that in that sculpture "Caro on the one hand has frankly avowed the physicality of his sculpture and on the other has rendered that physicality unperspicuous to a degree that even after repeated viewings is barely credible," and my description of the second of two untitled sculptures by Michael Bolus in "Problems of Polychromy: New Sculptures by Michael Bolus" (reprinted in this book), which concludes, "What remains in doubt, I feel, is whether the sculpture as a whole is

physical enough to secure a convincing sculptural identity or whether it is finally too unassertive and attenuated to establish itself other than as a kind of shimmering mirage."

57. Krauss, contribution to "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," p. 61. More recently, in the essay "Using Language to Do Business as Usual," she remarks apropos of my quoting Greenberg on opticality: "If 'Art and Objecthood' quotes this passage from Greenberg with approval this is because it organizes the model of virtuality that Fried wants to contrast with literalness. And that model is that of the impossible suspension of the work in space as if it were nothing but pure optical glitter, without weight and without density, a condition that establishes the corresponding illusion that its viewer is similarly bodiless, hovering before it as a kind of decorporealized, optical consciousness" (p. 88). I might add that what gives Krauss's attempt to make me (or "Art and Objecthood") an advocate of opticality *tout court* just a tinge of bad faith is the awareness she elsewhere evinces of my "bodily" reading of Caro's work (see Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* [Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1977], p. 186).

58. In addition to the passages already cited, in "Jules Olitski" and again in my short article on Ron Davis's plastic paintings (reprinted in this book as "Ronald Davis: Surface and Illusion") I speak of their work as "address[ing] itself not just to eyesight but to a sense that might be called one of *directionality*," as if "what is appealed to is not our ability in locating objects (or failing to) but in orienting ourselves (or failing to)"—a "bodily" ability, it goes without saying. And in a slightly different register, the epigraph to my 1965 essay "Jules Olitski's New Paintings" is the famous sentence from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, "The human body is the best picture of the human soul" (p. 181e), a statement I thought of as resonating with, not against, the paintings in question.

59. See, e.g., de Duve, "Performance Here and Now"; Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945–1986*, ed. Howard Singerman, volume accompanying an exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 1986, pp. 162–83; and Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October*, no. 8 (spring 1979): 75–88. The sole exception of which I am aware is an essay that, being a deconstructive reading of my work (also being somewhat Cavellian in approach), isn't exactly critical of my argument: Stephen W. Melville's "Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism," *October*, no. 19 (winter 1981): 55–92, reprinted in a collection of Melville's writings, *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, ed. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (New York, 1996). Let me take this opportunity to say how much I have learned from Melville's "Notes"; at the moment it appeared I felt utterly remote from my art criticism, and his essay gave me back that body of work with interest, as it were. See also Melville, *Philosophy beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism*, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 27 (Minneapolis, 1986), chap. 1, "On Modernism."

60. See also "Shape as Form," n. 9, and the introduction to *Three American Painters*, where, taking off from Greenberg's remark (in "After Abstract Expressionism") that "much more than before lends itself now to being experienced

pictorially or in meaningful relation to the pictorial," I contrast the "apparent expansion of the realm of the artistic" in Dada and Neo-Dada with the "[real] expansion of the realm of the pictorial achieved by modernist painting."

61. Hal Foster, in the discussion following the panel "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," p. 80.

62. Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," p. 177. In this passage Foster is responding in part to certain claims by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde.* In his essay Foster rightly observes that my hostility to Minimalism in "Art and Objecthood" was partly motivated by the former's "reprise of avant-gardism." For the suggestion that my characterization of Morris's work as theatrical may be countered by the recognition that his work poses a series of questions about the nature of art, objects, and the self, see Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, "Chapter 3: Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered," in *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties,* by Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris, Charles Harrison, and Paul Wood (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1993), pp. 191–96.

63. It may seem churlish to pick on Smith again here, but I'm probably reacting to Georges Didi-Huberman's gross overestimation of his achievement in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris, 1992). It's impossible to convey the intellectual flavor of that book in a few lines. Suffice it to say that the author finds in Smith's *Die* a work of exemplary profundity, and that he marshals against "Art and Objecthood" a killer lineup of world-class intellects—among them Walter Benjamin, Derrida, Freud, Lacan, and Merleau-Ponty, not to mention Joyce and Kafka—all of whom are brought together under a notion of the "image dialectique" that emphasizes, predictably, "le *clivage* à l'oeuvre: soit le clivage du sujet du regard" (p. 178 n. 67). The degree of seriousness of Didi-Huberman's engagement with my arguments may be gauged in a short passage in which, glossing a quotation from Smith, he first asserts that Smith himself didn't see his sculptures as "theatrical" (I never said he did and in any case what Smith thought in that regard is irrelevant), adds that we may envisage them as "monuments of absorption" (by critical fiat, evidently) and then states in a footnote that this is to allude to my oppositions (merging "Art and Objecthood" with *Absorption and Theatricality*), which therefore are, in this case, "inopérants" (pp. 74–75).

A few critics have struggled to carry over the concept of value into the new situation, or at least to indicate how that might be done. For Melville, interested in performance, this involves enlarging the concept of painting, which, however, has the effect of leaving the question of the *medium* of performance all the more unresolved. "We cast 'postmodernism' at a deeper level if we say that the allegorical impulse is one which would acknowledge explicitly the futility of trying to sort the 'mere' from the 'pure'—an impulse to embrace the heteronomy of painting," he writes in "Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory." (He detects such an attempt at sorting in "Art and Objecthood.") "Such an acknowledgment demands that we accept—as best we can—that the field we call 'painting' includes, and cannot now be defined without reference to, its violations and excesses—performance work in particular. (Performance continues then to lie between the arts and has always to be asked what it counts as—for whom it counts. We will want to say—in this context at least—that performance is not [yet] an

art in itself, but a way in which various arts may find themselves outside themselves. It is not clear to me what it would take for performance to establish itself as an art—what, that is, its 'proper' medium is. The undeniable fact that performance has established itself as an artistic practice, even a central practice, tells us nothing about how and where it counts)" (pp. 80–81). See also idem, "How Should Acconci Count for Us? Notes on a Retrospect," *October*, no. 18 (fall 1981): 79–89; idem, "Robert Smithson: 'A Literalist of the Imagination,'" *Arts Magazine* 57 (Nov. 1982): 102–5; idem, "Between Art and Criticism: Mapping the Frame in *United States*," *Theatre Journal* 37 (Mar. 1985): 31–43; and idem, "Moments Lucid and Opaque like Turner's Sun and Cindy Sherman's Face," *Art & Design* 7 (Mar.–Apr. 1992): 20–23. The Smithson and Turner and Sherman essays are reprinted in *Seams*. For Crimp in "Pictures," on the other hand, it is precisely the modernist concept of the medium that the new work he advocates seems to him to have called into question. And as an avant-gardist rather than a modernist critic (this is the meaning of his postmodernism), he is less concerned with the idea of value than with ensuring "the possibility that art can [still] achieve a radicalism or avant-gardism" (p. 87 n. 15).

64. De Duve, "Performance Here and Now," p. 249.

65. See in this connection my earlier reading of Olitski's paintings as involving a "sequential" mode of seeing (in my "New York Letter: Olitski, Jenkins, Thiebaud, Twombly" and the section on his art in the introduction to *Three American Painters*). More recently, I have stressed the "slowness" of Gustave Courbet's paintings in both *Courbet's Realism* (throughout the book) and *Manet's Modernism* (pp. 294–95). For Greenberg, on the contrary, the requirement that the full effect of a painting, by which he means its unity or lack of unity, must declare itself in "a split-second glance" holds for all paintings without exception (Clement Greenberg, "Seminar Four," *Art International* 19 [Jan. 1975]: 16).

66. In view of the above, I find it strange that W. J. T. Mitchell could write in a recent essay on Morris: "Both the indictment of minimalism (chiefly by Michael Fried in 'Art and Objecthood') and its canonization by defenders of the American avant-garde in the sixties are conducted in the language of absolute breaks with the past, undialectical negations of a reified 'tradition'" ("Wall Labels: Word, Image, and Object in the Work of Robert Morris," in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, catalog for exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Guggenheim Museum Soho, New York, Jan.–Apr. 1994, p. 262).

67. Indeed, Stella's close friend, the future Minimalist Carl Andre, in the earliest and most prescient of all texts on the painter, wrote apropos of the black paintings, "His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting" ("Preface to Stripe Paintings," in *Sixteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller, catalog for exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Dec. 16, 1958–Feb. 14, 1959, p. 76). In this connection let me add that in the discussion following the Dia panel on "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," taking issue with Benjamin Buchloch's literalist reading of Stella's black stripe paintings and more broadly with his anachronistic account of the artistic situation in New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I said of Andre ca. 1959 that "he appeared to me as a very bright person but a very alien form of intelligence" by

virtue of what might now be called his proto-Minimalism ("Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," p. 79). I also said apropos of Stella at that time, "In a sense Carl Andre and I were fighting for his soul, and Andre and I represented very different things" (ibid.). Following the publication of the Dia volume, Andre sent me a note gently chiding me for "suggesting that Frank's soul had been put at risk between us" and reminding me, entirely correctly, that "Frank has always been too much his own man to let his soul be swayed so easily."

68. In addition to the texts by de Duve, Didi-Huberman, Foster, and Krauss already cited see, e.g., Maurice Berger, "Wayward Landscapes," in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem,* pp. 18–31, and indeed the Morris catalog as a whole. One sentence from another essay in that catalog is irresistible for its mandarin ferocity even though it doesn't bear directly on the topic of this note: "The assault launched by a Modernist critical establishment on 'literalism' and 'theatricality' thus had the aspect of a desperate defense by the sclerotic theoretical apparatus of a movement in decline, of a critical orthodoxy unequipped in its Symbolist-derived fetishization of 'presentness' to deal with the polymorphic, polysemic renewal of temporally grounded artistic practice" (Annette Michelson, "Frameworks," in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem,* p. 60). The reference to Symbolism obviously alludes to my writings on Louis.

69. See Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (1949; rpt., New York, 1959), pp. 328–29.

70. As Krauss does in *The Optical Unconscious,* pp. 214–15.

71. I've been helped to recognize the "sublime" aspects of my texts of 1966–67 by the writing and conversation of Stephen Melville. Robert Smithson, by the way, cannily saw a metaphor of sublimity in my description of the bare canvas in Louis's unfurleds as "at once repuls[ing] and engulf[ing] the eye, like an infinite abyss," though he also believed that the "weakness" of that metaphor bespoke my "fear" of the unboundedness implied by Smith's car ride ("A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" [1968], in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings,* ed. Jack Flam [Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1996], pp. 103–4). For Smithson, the car ride was emblematic of "the state of [Smith's] mind in the 'primary process' of making contact with matter," a process "called by Anton Ehrenzweig 'dedifferentiation'" and involving "a suspended question regarding 'limitlessness' (Freud's notion of the 'oceanic')" (p. 103). Greenberg, for his part, invokes the eighteenth-century notion of the sublime in connection with Minimal and Conceptual artistic practices in "Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties" (1969), in *Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 302–03.

72. For Norman Bryson, for example, in the *Sabines,* the "explicit surrender of the image to an audience . . . signals a regression to such outward-turning theatrical pictures as [David's earlier] *The Death of Seneca*" (*Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* [Cambridge, 1984], p. 94). Here as elsewhere, Bryson's semiological approach leads him to think he can simply read off meanings from the works he considers, without reference to contextual considerations that would bear on, for example, the very concept of theatricality in the sentence just quoted. For a somewhat fuller critique of Bryson along these lines see Michael Fried, "David et l'antithéatralité," in *David contre David,* 2 vols., acts of a collo-

quium held at the Louvre Dec. 6–10, 1989, ed. Régis Michel (Paris, 1993), 1:199–227. My comparison between the *Horatii* and the *Sabines* summarizes the discussion of those works in *Courbet's Realism*, pp. 15–18.

73. See Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, pp. 190–92 and passim.

74. I have no choice but to stand behind them inasmuch as I haven't been led by further reflection or subsequent events to renounce them. What I can't do, it turns out, is disengage from them, which is to say treat the author of those texts *purely* as a historical figure.

75. In a recent article, W. J. T. Mitchell writes that I argue in *Absorption and Theatricality*

> that the emergence of modern art [in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries] is precisely to be understood in terms of the negation or renunciation of direct signs of desire. The process of pictorial seduction Fried admires is successful precisely in proportion to its indirectness, its seeming indifference to the beholder, its antitheatrical "absorption" in its own internal drama. The very special sort of pictures that enthrall Fried get what they want by seeming not to want anything, by pretending they have everything they need. Fried's discussion of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* and Chardin's *Boy with a Bubble* might be taken as exemplary here and help us see that it is not merely a question of what the figures in the pictures appear to want, but the legible signs of desire that they convey. The desire may be enraptured and contemplative, as it is in *Boy with a Bubble*, where the shimmering and trembling globe that absorbs the figure becomes "a natural correlative for [Chardin's] own engrossment in the act of painting and a proleptic mirroring of what he trusted would be the absorption of the beholder of the finished work" (*Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 51). Or it may be violent, as in *The Raft of the Medusa*, where the "strivings of the men on the raft" are not simply to be understood in relation to its internal composition and the sign of the rescue ship on the horizon, "but also by the need to escape our gaze, to put an end to being beheld by us, to be rescued from the ineluctable fact of a presence that threatens to theatricalize even their sufferings" (ibid., p. 154).
>
> The end point of this sort of pictorial desire is, I think, the purism of modernist abstraction, whose negation of the beholder's presence is articulated in Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* and displayed in its final reduction in the white paintings of the early Rauschenberg. Abstract paintings are pictures that want not to be pictures. But the desire not to show desire is, as Lacan reminds us, still a form of desire. The whole antitheatrical tradition reminds one again of the default feminization of the picture, which is treated as something that must awaken desire in the beholder while not disclosing any signs of desire or even awareness that it is being beheld, as if the beholder were a voyeur at a keyhole. ("What Do Pictures *Really* Want?" *October*, no. 77 [summer 1996]: 79–80)

There is much I disagree with in the second paragraph, but what I want to stress is that Mitchell misreads *Absorption and Theatricality* when he speaks of me

admiring an indirect process of pictorial seduction or being enthralled by Chardin's *Boy with a Bubble* and Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa,* as if my stance toward the problematic traced in that book and the two that followed it were that of a knowing aficionado instead of a hard-working art historian.

The same issue of *October* contains an article by Rosalind Krauss, the next to last paragraph of which states:

> If this peculiar convergence between Lacan [in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*] and Michael Fried's [analysis of Pollock's *Out of the Web*] is interesting to contemplate, it is because Fried has generalized his analysis beyond Pollock or even modernism, to a condition he advocates as highly desirable for painting (and indeed for art itself), and which he calls "absorption." That "absorption" should now be welcomed by "picture theory" [Krauss refers here to Mitchell's article], which is to say, that a convergence between it and concerns with image-as-identification that are generalized throughout Cultural Studies should be conceivable, seems unsurprising insofar as "absorption" itself is symptomatic of the way art history is recutting even its most "proper" concerns to meet the requirements of the "cultural revolution." ("Welcome to the Cultural Revolution," *October,* no. 77 [summer 1996]: 96)

Here as often when Krauss writes about my work the crucial question is whether she is being disingenuous or whether she really doesn't understand what I've said. For a long time I thought I knew the answer, but I'm no longer sure.

Someone else who conflates my art-critical and art-historical writings, to the extent of claiming that "Diderot's criticism of art and of the theater is the touchstone of Fried's entire critical project, whether it concerns eighteenth- or nineteenth-century French painting or sculpture made in the United States in the 1960s," is Margaret Iversen in *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1993), pp. 131–32.

76. See Robert Smithson, "Letter to the Editor," in *The Collected Writings,* pp. 66–67. The key sentences read: "Every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes—*ad infinitum.* Every war is a battle with reflections. What Michael Fried attacks is what he is. He is a naturalist who attacks natural time. Could it be there is a double Michael Fried—the atemporal Fried and the temporal Fried?" (p. 67). Although I didn't realize it then (Phil Leider did though), Smithson's writings of the late 1960s amounted to by far the most powerful and interesting contemporary response to "Art and Objecthood."

77. Knapp and Michaels's original essay (1982), along with various responses to it and two replies by them to their critics, are usefully gathered in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago, 1985). In this connection it's significant that Smithson argued for a proto-de Manian view of language in the same essay in which he responded to "Art and Objecthood" ("A Sedimentation of the Mind," p. 107), which is to say that he alone among contemporary artist-writers seems to have been aware of the implications for the question of linguistic meaning of my assault on literalism (or at least of his antithetical position). Smithson's linguistic materialism may be

contrasted in turn with the altogether different (i.e., "against theory") view of writing and its materiality put forward in the introduction and Crane chapter of my book *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago and London, 1987). Michaels is currently preparing an essay on questions of theory in the 1960s that will deal in part with this aspect of the controversy over "Art and Objecthood."

78. A point missed by Didi-Huberman when he characterizes Tony Smith's sculptures as "monuments of absorption" and by Krauss when she says that absorption is "a condition [Fried] advocates as highly desirable for painting (and indeed for art itself)" (see notes 63 and 75 above, respectively). The term "absorption" does occur once in "Art and Objecthood," where I remark in deprecation of the cinema, or at any rate in explanation of my claim that it isn't a modernist art, that it provides "a refuge from theater and not a triumph over it, absorption not conviction." But this is a contrast that has no place in my writings on earlier art.

79. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 407. It's noteworthy, too, the extent to which photography-based (or simply photographic) work of the 1970s and after—for example, that of Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, and Gerhard Richter—has found itself compelled to address issues of beholding, often by an appeal to absorptive means and effects. This is a large topic.

80. Ibid., pp. 17–19, 407–9.

81. Among those assumptions is the basic modernist tenet that what matters is the ability of new paintings to "sustain comparison" with older works whose quality is not in doubt, a tenet I unequivocally endorsed even as I first formulated my critique of a reductionist conception of modernist painting in "Shape as Form" and then reiterated in "Art and Objecthood." On the historical roots of that idea see *Manet's Modernism*, pp. 414–15; for its indispensableness to my project in that book, see ibid., p. 416; for fresh evidence of its continued life see de Duve, *Clement Greenberg between the Lines*, chap. 2, "Silences in the Doctrine."

82. Michael Fried, *Powers* (London, 1973); and idem, *To the Center of the Earth* (New York, 1994).

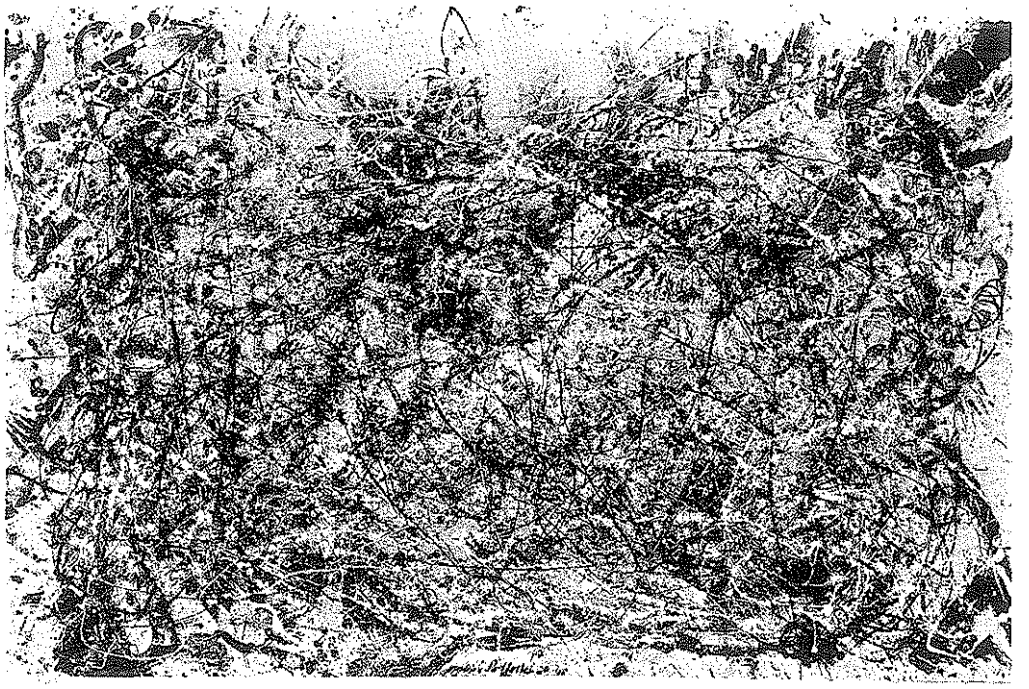

Figure 1. Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1948*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 68 x 104 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. © 1997 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: © 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

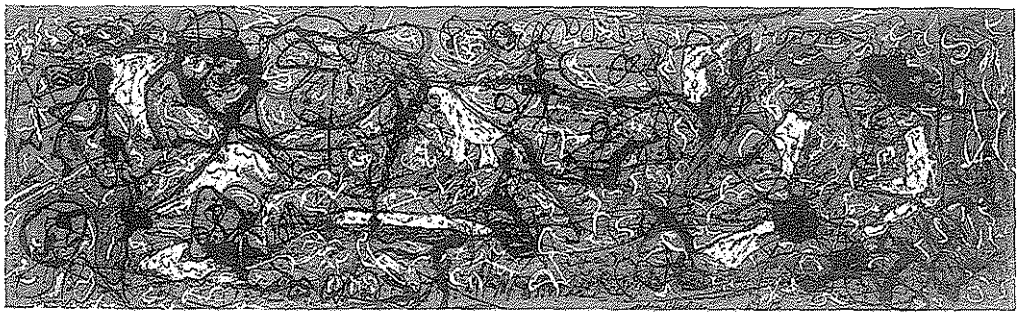

Figure 2. Jackson Pollock, *White Cockatoo: Number 24A, 1948*, 1948. Enamel and oil on canvas, 35 x 114 inches. Private collection. Photo: Oliver Baker. © 1997 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

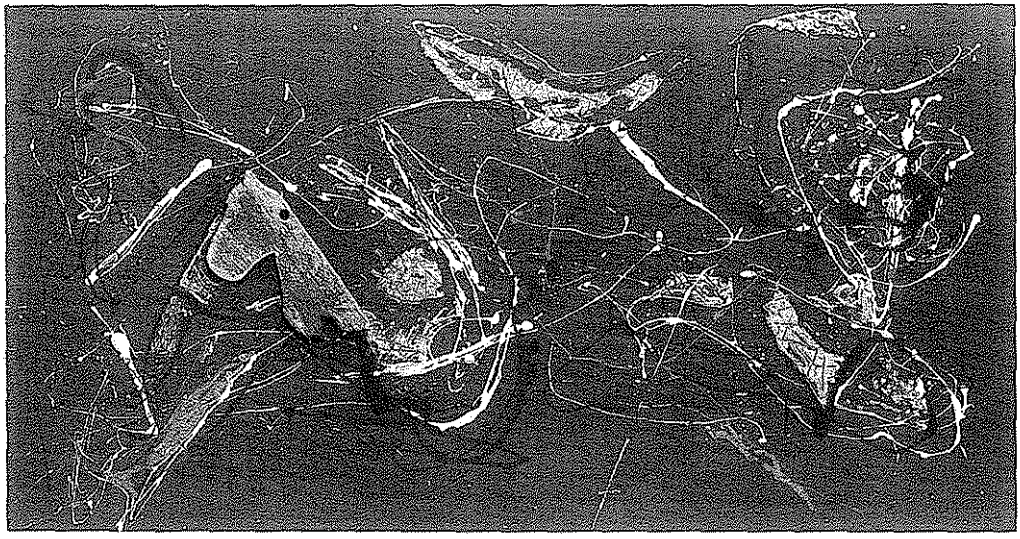

Figure 3. Jackson Pollock, *The Wooden Horse: Number 1A, 1948*, 1948. Oil, enamel, and wooden hobby horse head on brown cotton canvas, mounted on board, 35½x 75 inches. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. © 1997 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy Statens Konstmuseer, Stockholm.

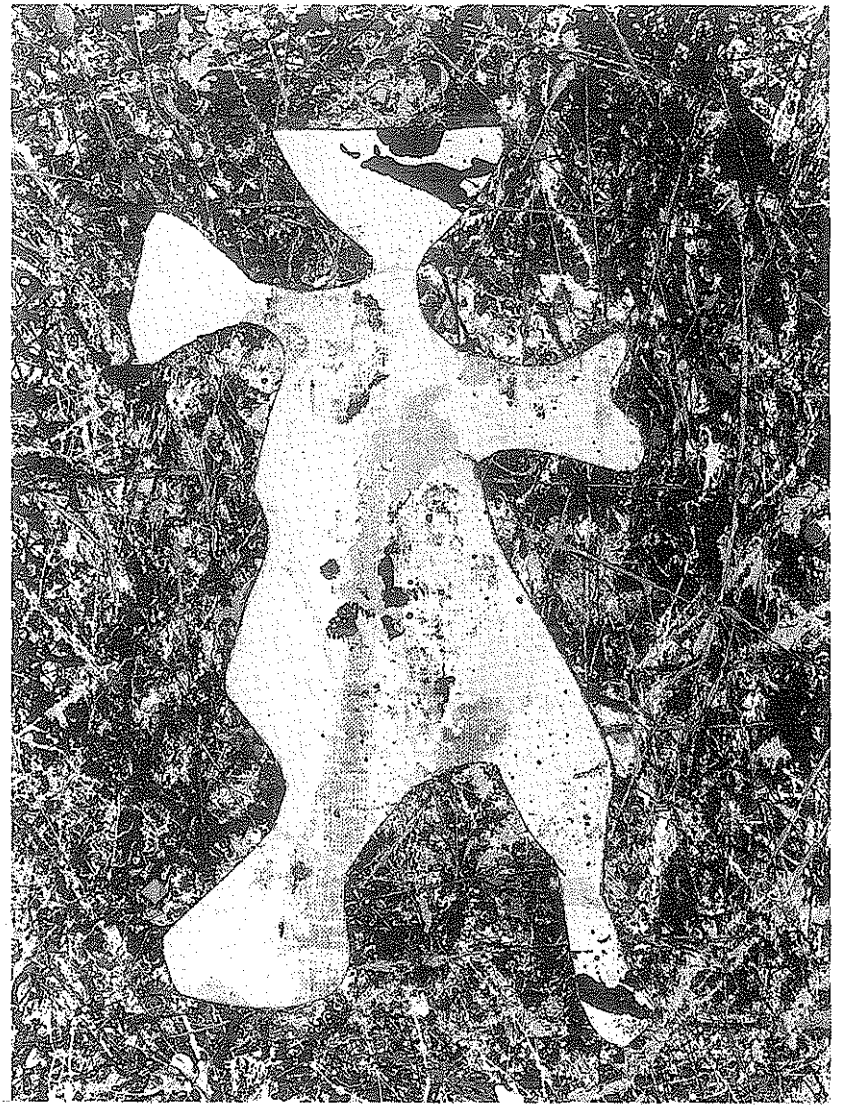

Figure 4. Jackson Pollock, *Cut-Out*, ca. 1948–50. Oil on cut-out paper mounted on canvas, 30½ x 23½ inches. Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan. © 1997 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan.

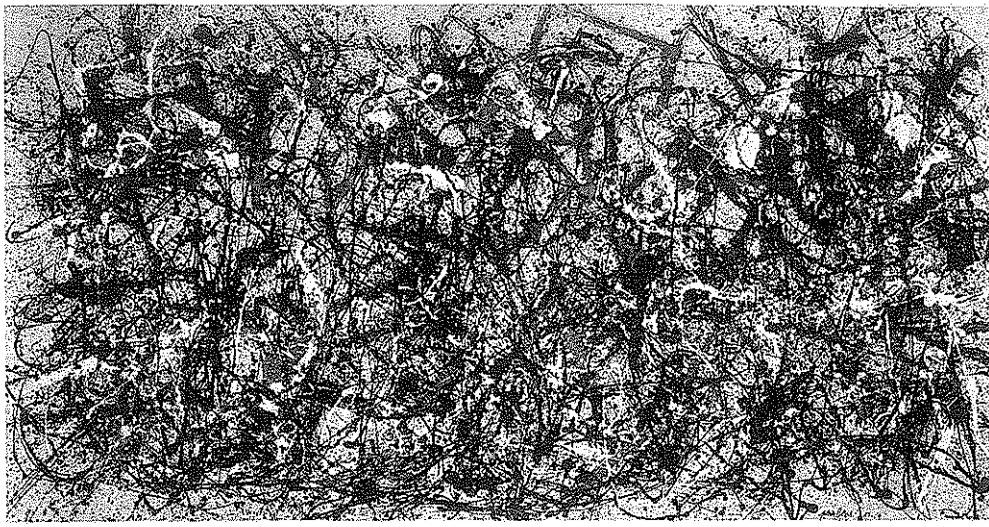

Figure 5. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 195●*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 106½ x 212 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw. © 1997 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1957 (57.92).

Figure 6. Jackson Pollock, *Number 3, 1951*, 1951. Enamel on canvas, 56 x 24 inches. Private collection. Photo: © 1997 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

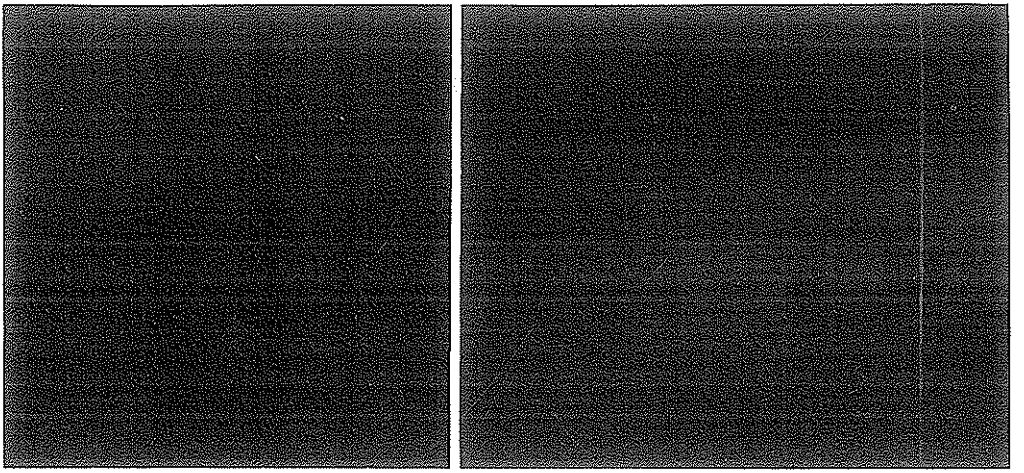

Figure 7. Barnett Newman, *Cathedra,* 1951. Oil and Magna on canvas, 96 x 213 inches. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. © 1997 The Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure 8. Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 86⅝ x 105¼ inches. Collection of the artist, on extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © 1997 Helen Frankenthaler. Photo: © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

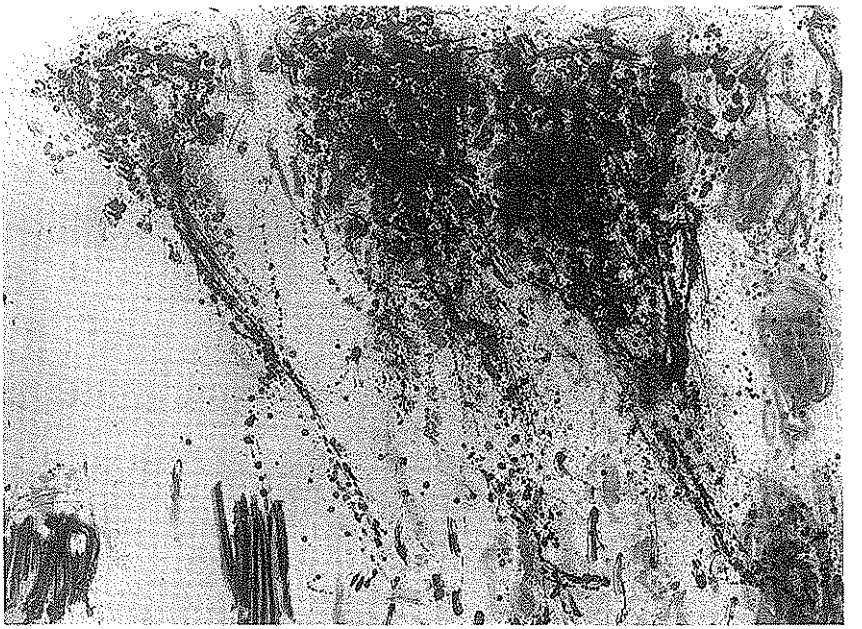

Figure 9. Morris Louis, *Trellis,* 1953. Acrylic resin on canvas, 76 x 104 inches. Estate of the artist.

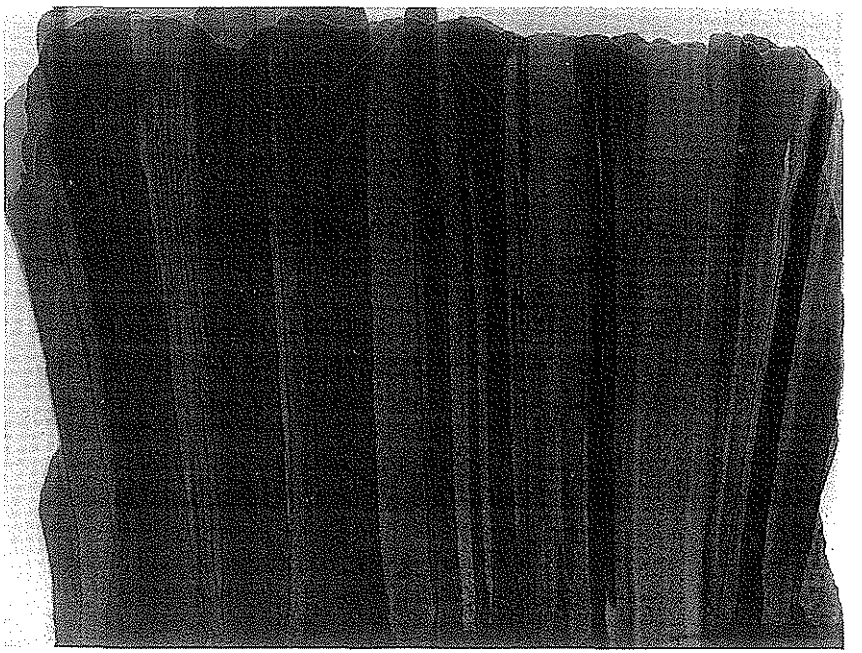

Figure 10. Morris Louis, *Intrigue,* 1954. Acrylic resin on canvas, 80½ x 105½ inches. Private collection, New York. Estate of the artist.

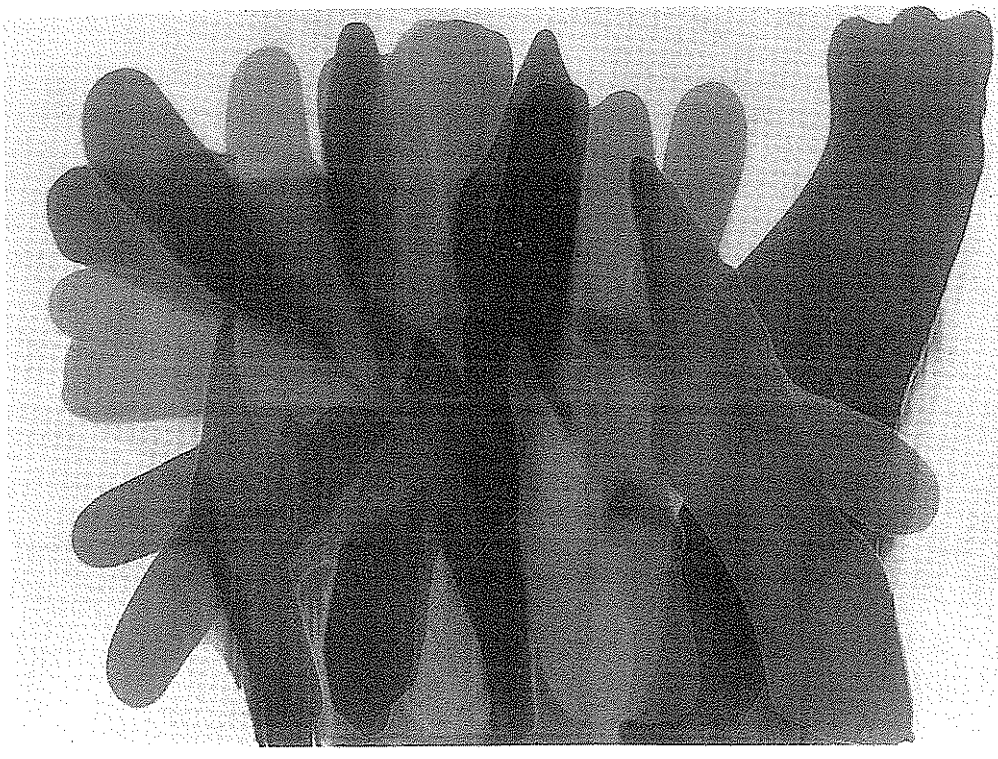

Figure 11. Morris Louis, *Floral*, 1959. Acrylic resin on canvas, 103 x 142 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Green, Detroit. Estate of the artist.

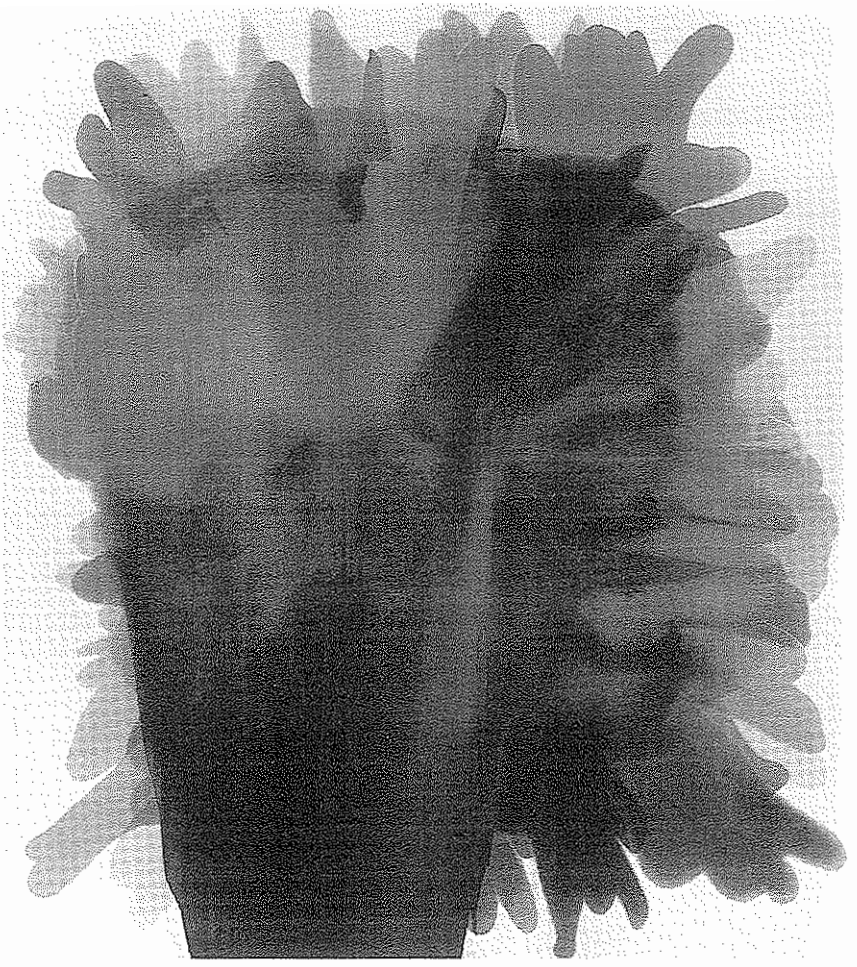

Figure 12. Morris Louis, *Aleph*, 1960. Acrylic resin on canvas, 104 x 93 inches. Private collection, New York. Estate of the artist.

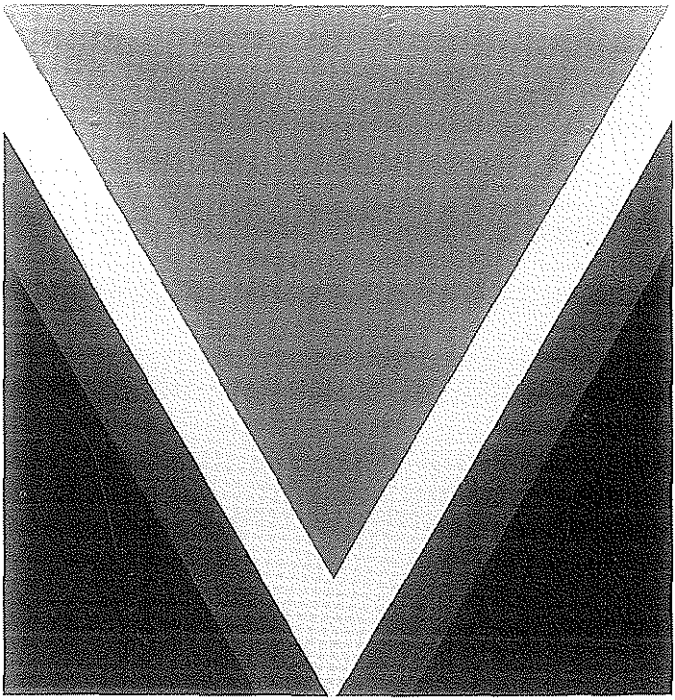

Figure 13. Kenneth Noland, *Yellow Half*, 1963. Acrylic resin on canvas, 70 x 70 inches. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1964. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

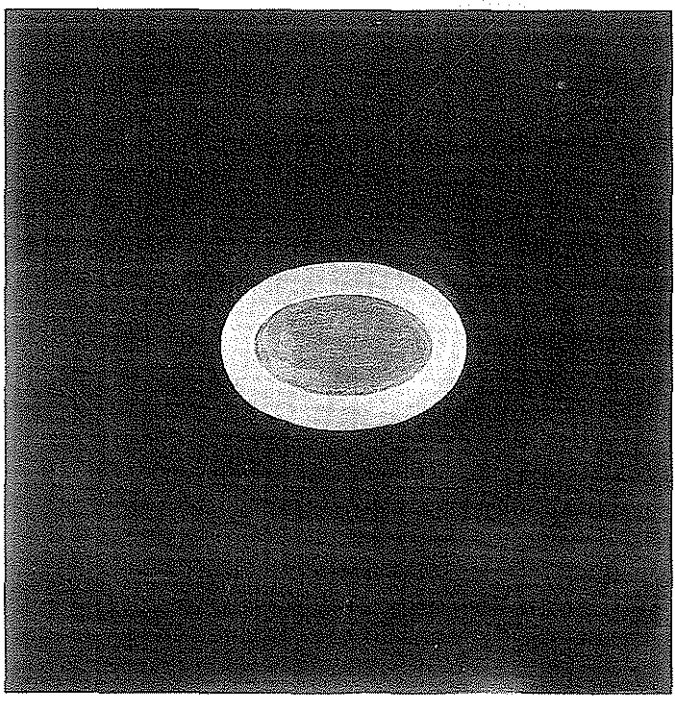

Figure 14. Kenneth Noland, *Hover*, 1963. Acrylic resin on canvas, 69 x 69 inches. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Louise E. Bettens Fund.

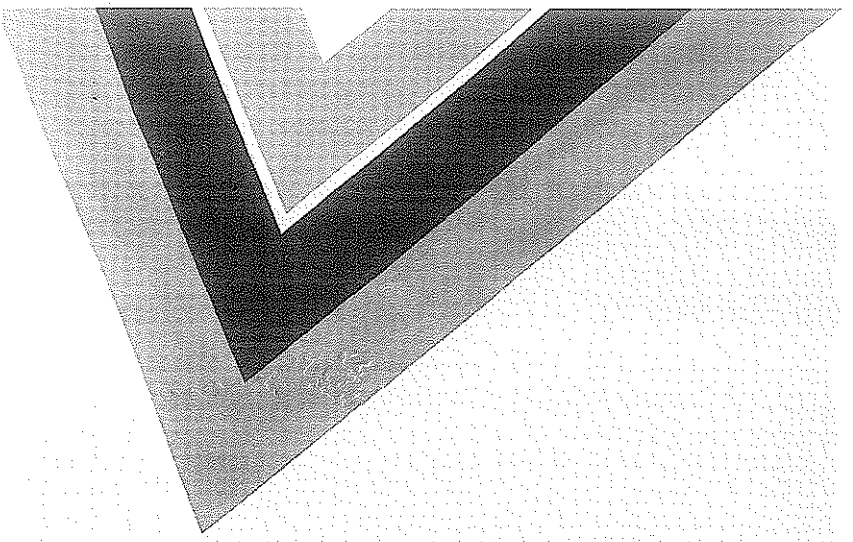

Figure 15. Kenneth Noland, *Karma,* 1964. Acrylic resin on canvas, 102 x 144 inches. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums. Gift of Kenneth Noland. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums.

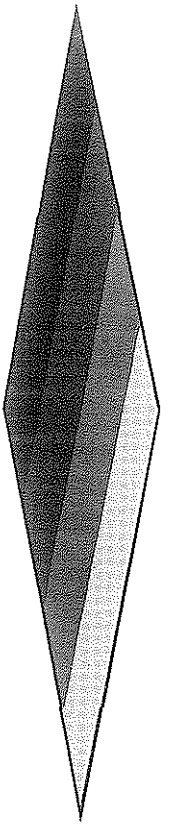

Figure 16. Kenneth Noland, *Thaw,* 1966. Acrylic resin on canvas, 102 x 19 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

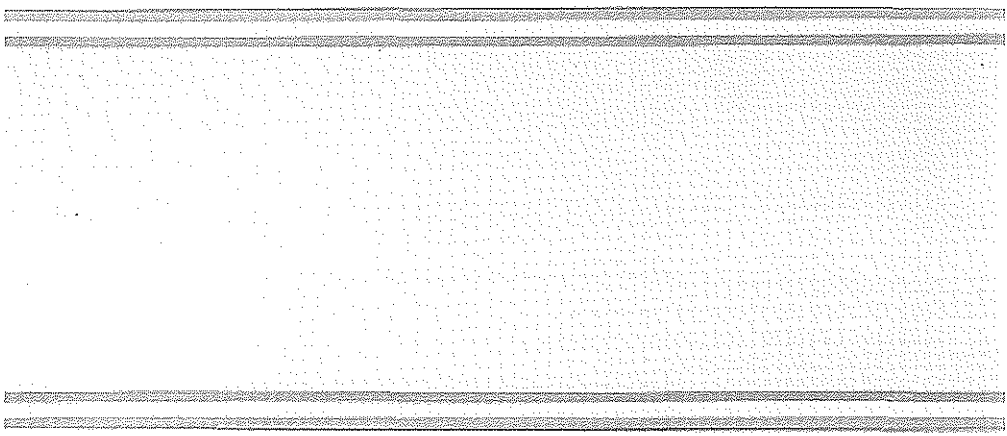

Figure 17. Kenneth Noland, *Via Token,* 1969. Acrylic resin on canvas, 100 x 240 inches. David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

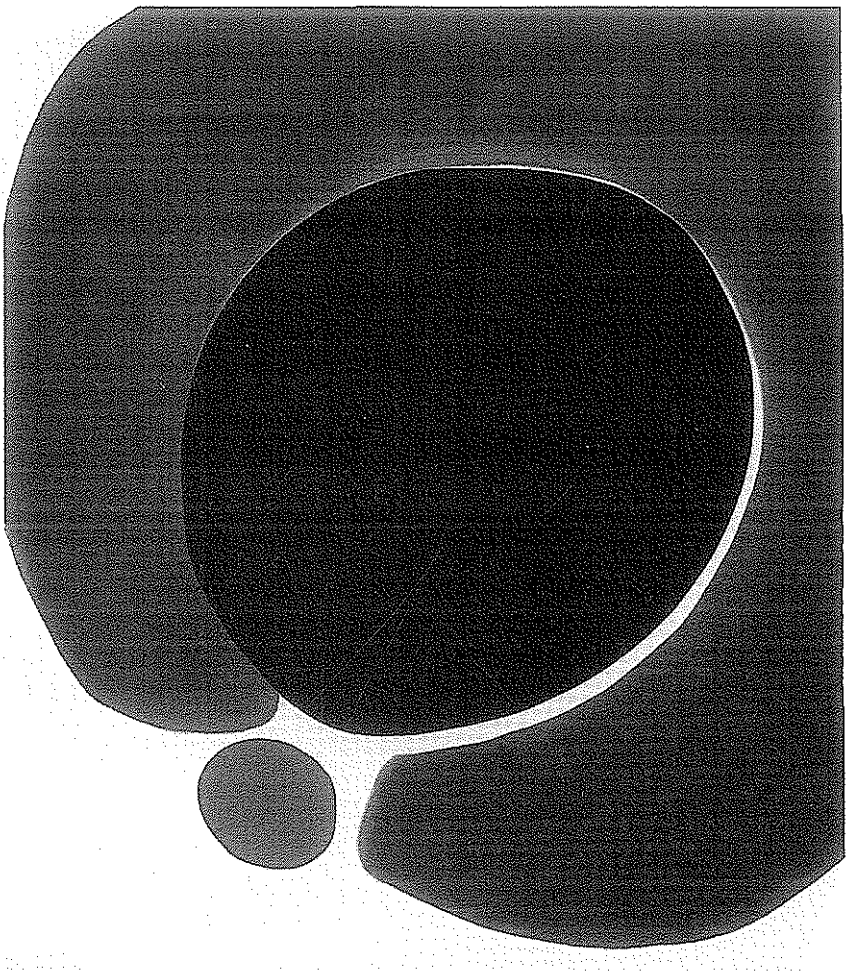

Figure 18. Jules Olitski, *Cleopatra Flesh,* 1962. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 8' 8" x 7' 6". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of G. David Thompson. © 1997 Jules Olitski / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photograph © 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

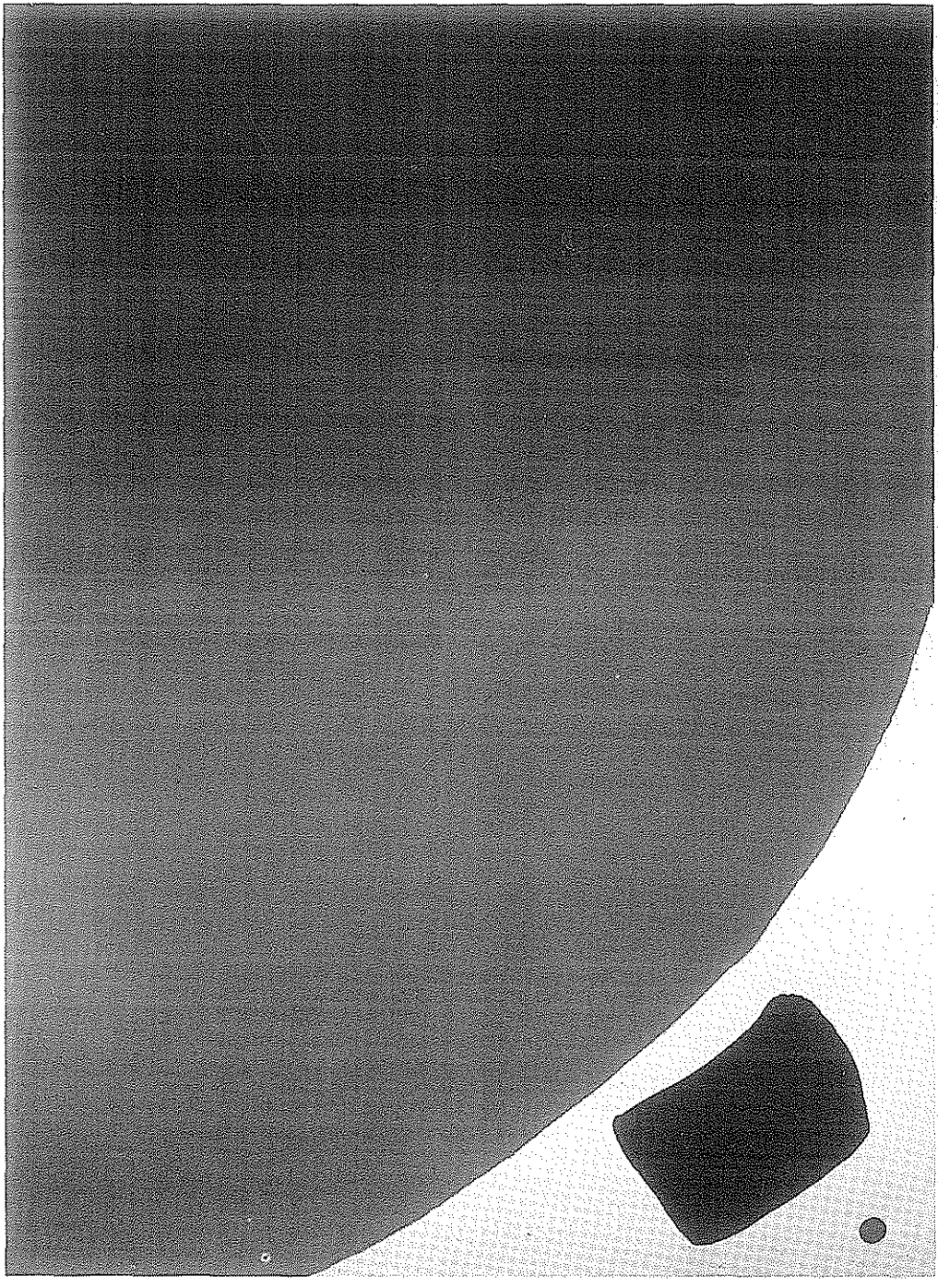

Figure 19. Jules Olitski, *Fatal Plunge Lady*, 1963. Oil-miscible acrylic on canvas, 100 x 72 inches. Private collection. ● 1997 Jules Olitski / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

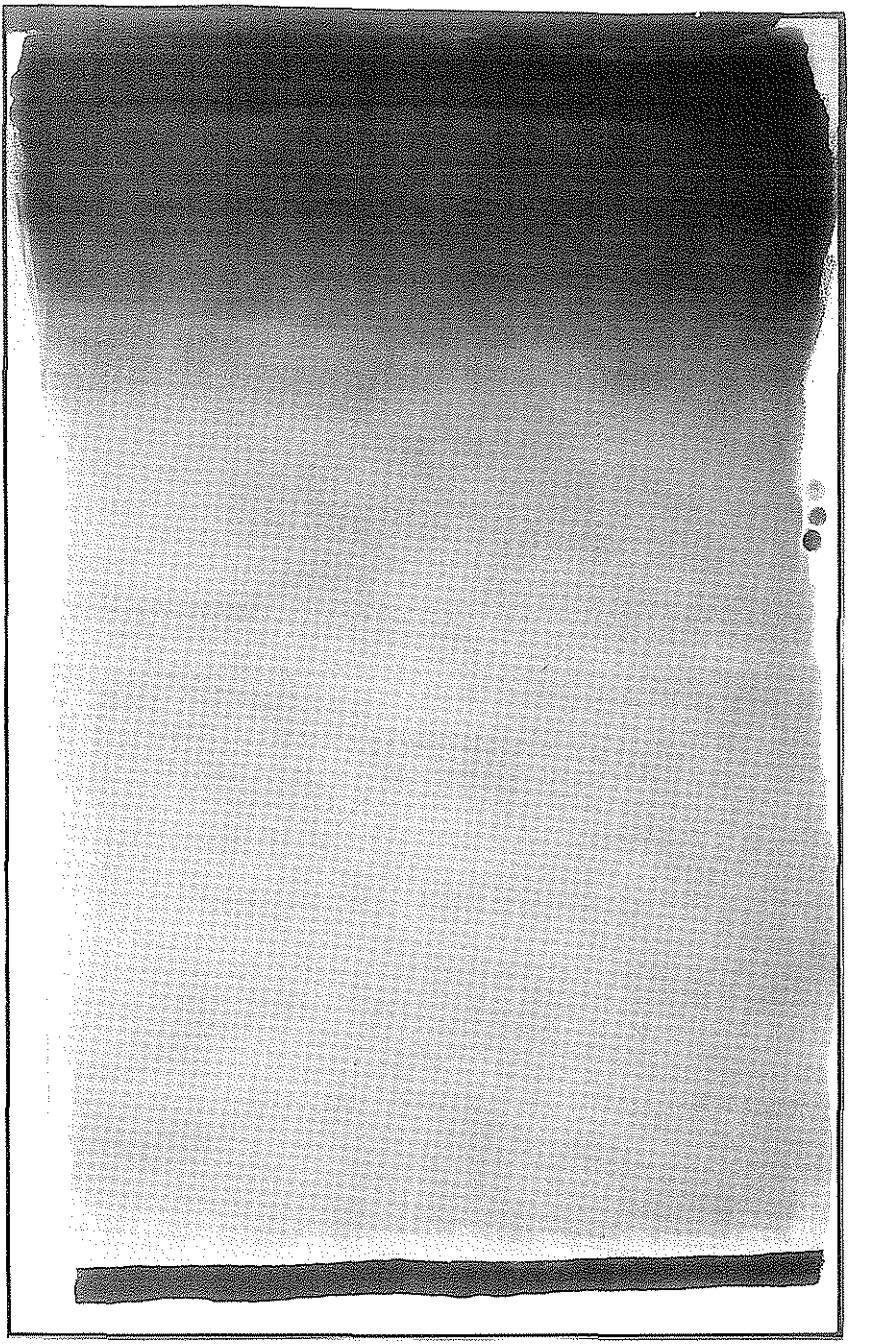

Figure 20. Jules Olitski, *Tin Lizzie Green,* 1964. Water-miscible acrylic on canvas, 130 x 82 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. © 1997 Jules Olitski / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.

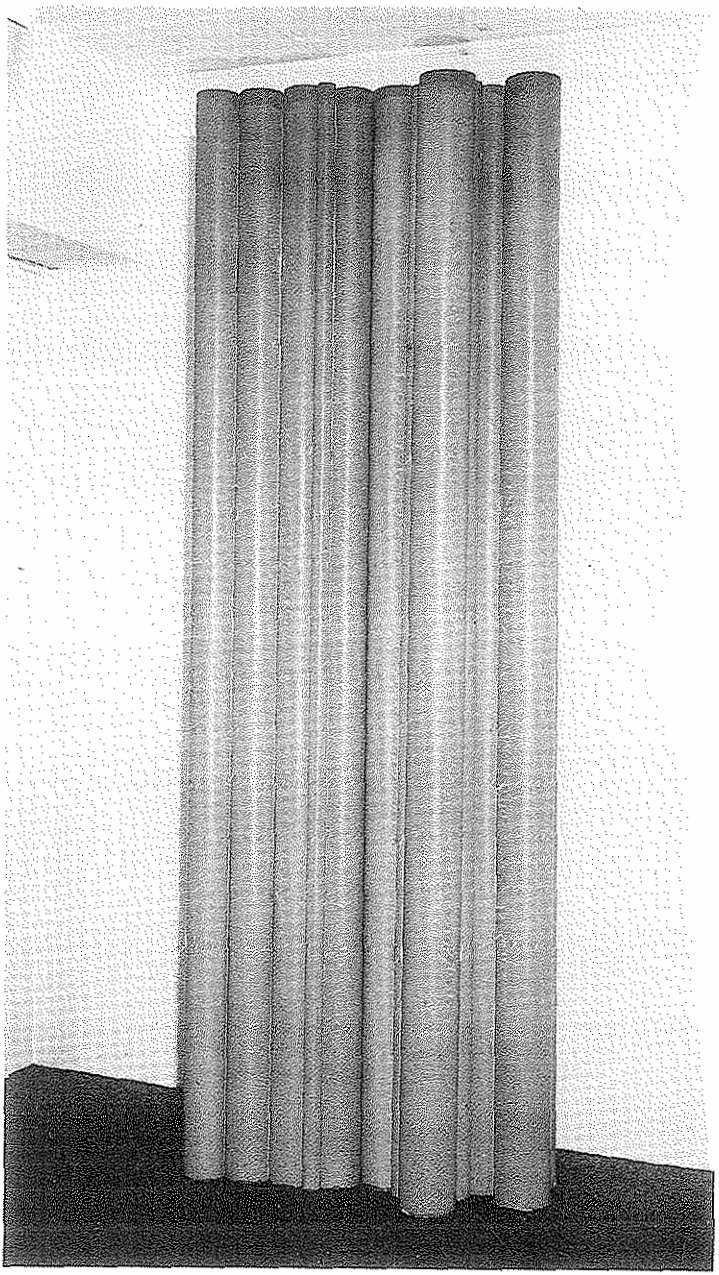

Figure 21. Jules Olitski, *Bunga 45*, 1967. Aluminum with acrylic paint. Robert Rowan Trust, Pasadena, Calif. © 1997 Jules Olitski / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

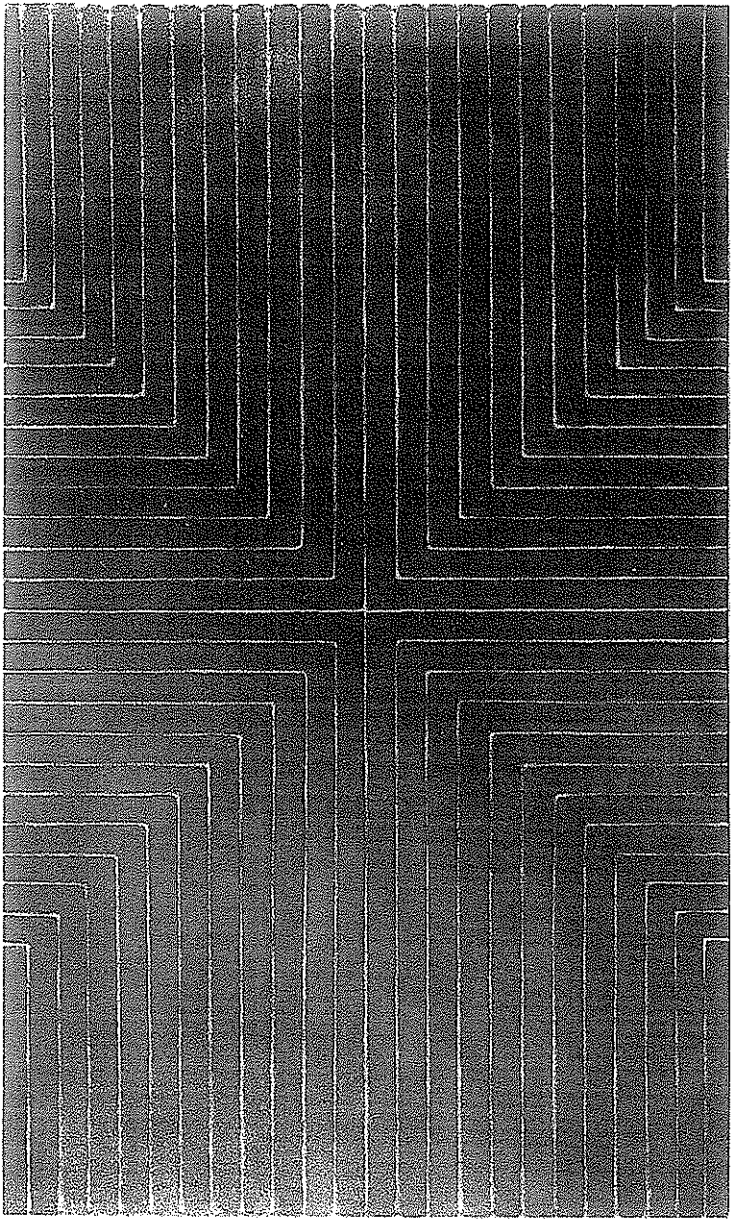

Figure 22. Frank Stella, *Die Fahne Hoch,* 1959. Enamel on canvas, 121⅞ x 73⅞ inches. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene M. Schwartz and purchase, with funds from the John I. H. Baur Purchase Fund; the Charles and Anita Blatt Fund; Peter M. Brant; B. H. Friedman; the Gilman Foundation, Inc.; Susan Morse Hilles; the Lauder Foundation; Frances and Sydney Lewis; the Albert A. List Fund; Philip Morris, Inc.; Sandra Payson; Mr. and Mrs. Albrecht Saalfield; Mrs. Percy Uris; Warner Communcations, Inc.; and the National Endowment for the Arts. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Copyright © 1997 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

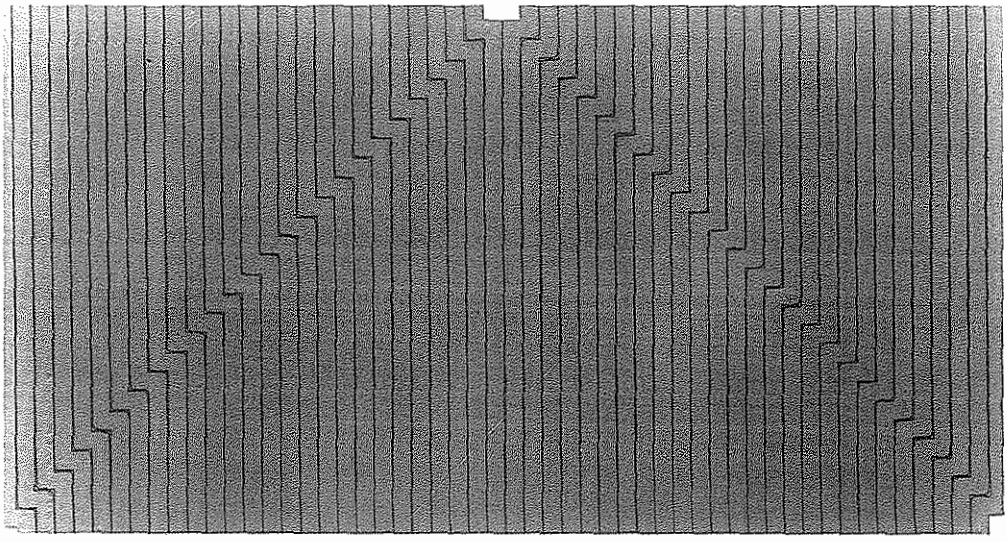

Figure 23. Frank Stella, *Union Pacific,* 1960. Aluminum paint on canvas, 77 x 154 inches. Des Moines Art Center. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Collection of the Des Moines Art Center, 1975.62.

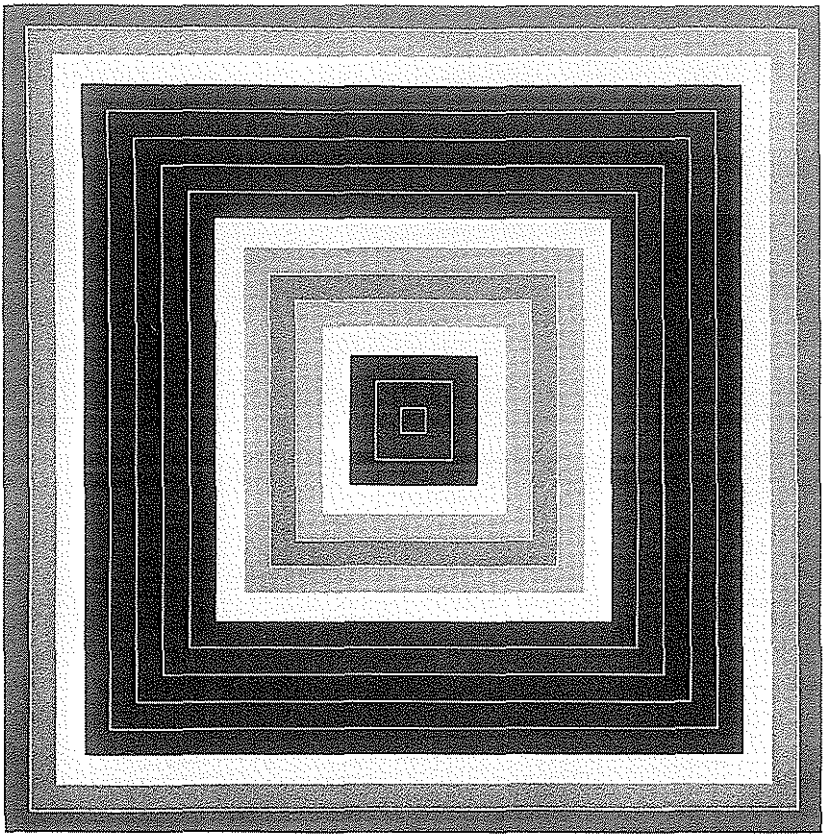

Figure 24. Frank Stella, *Cipango,* 1962. Alkyd on canvas, 85¼ x 85¼ inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York.

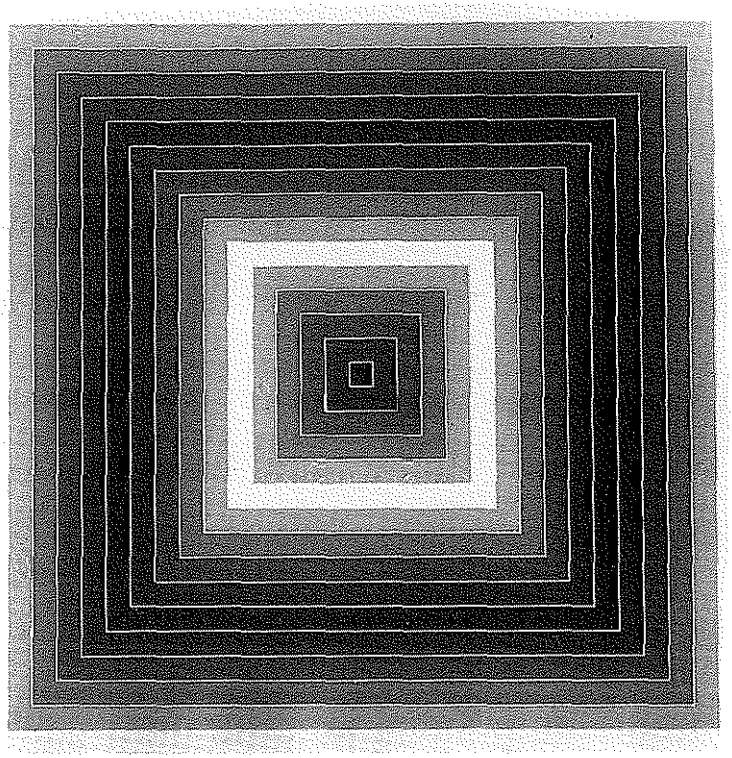

Figure 25. Frank Stella, *Sharpeville,* 1962. Alkyd on canvas, 85 x 85 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York.

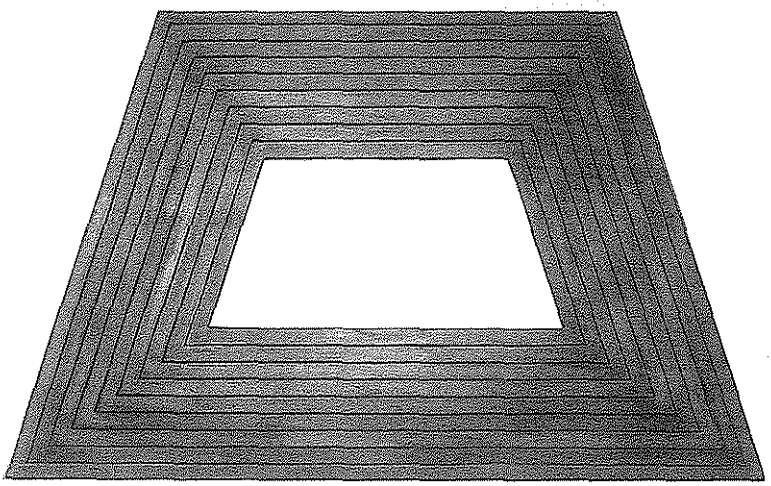

Figure 26. Frank Stella, *Ileana Sonnabend,* 1963. Oil on canvas, 72¾ x 128 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Ken Cohen; courtesy Knoedler & Company, New York.

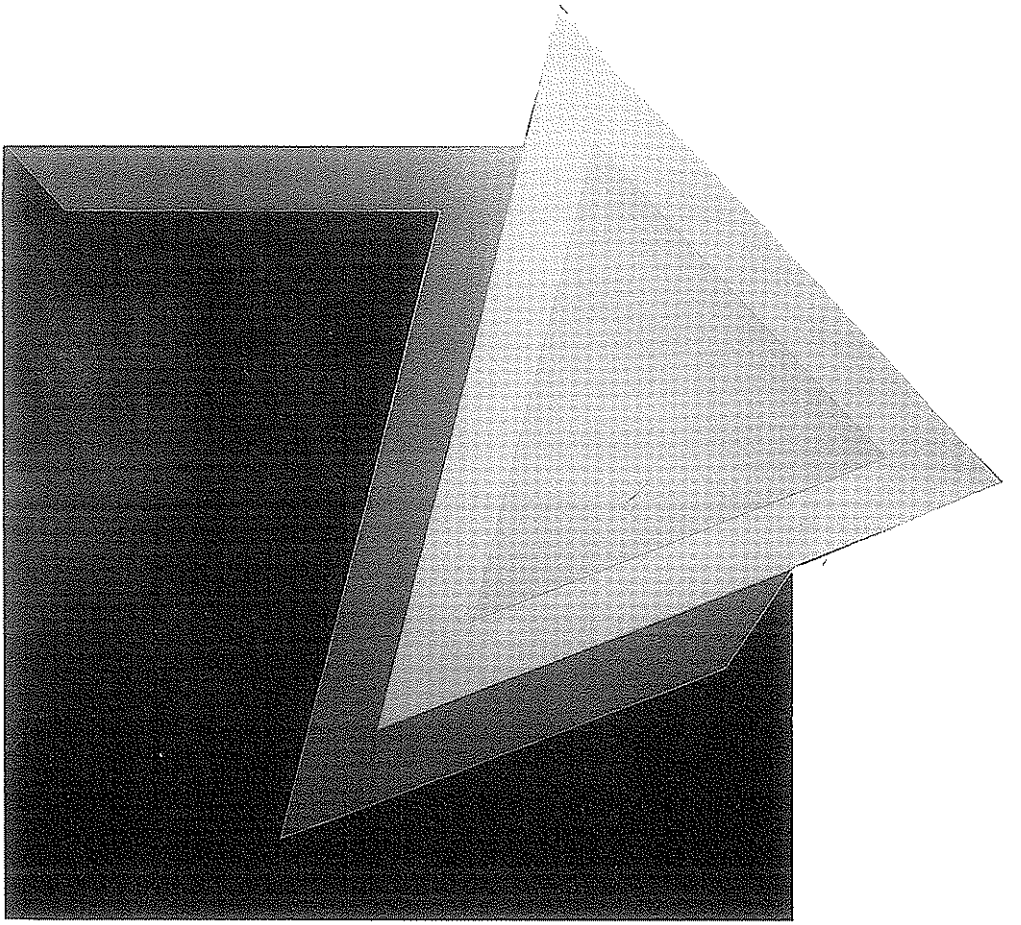

Figure 27. Frank Stella, *Moultonboro III,* 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 110 x 120¼ inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Eric Pollitzer.

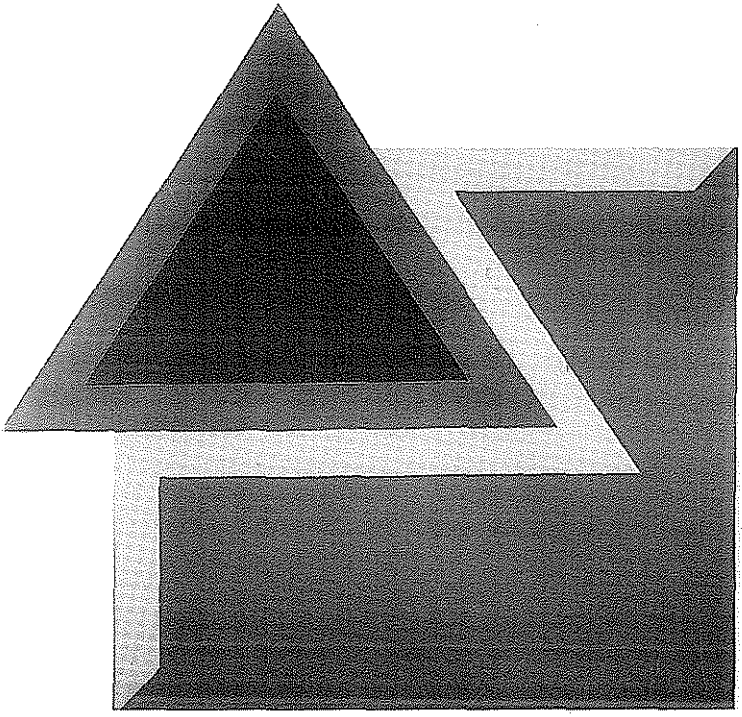

Figure 28. Frank Stella, *Chocorua III,* 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 120 x 128 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Eric Pollitzer.

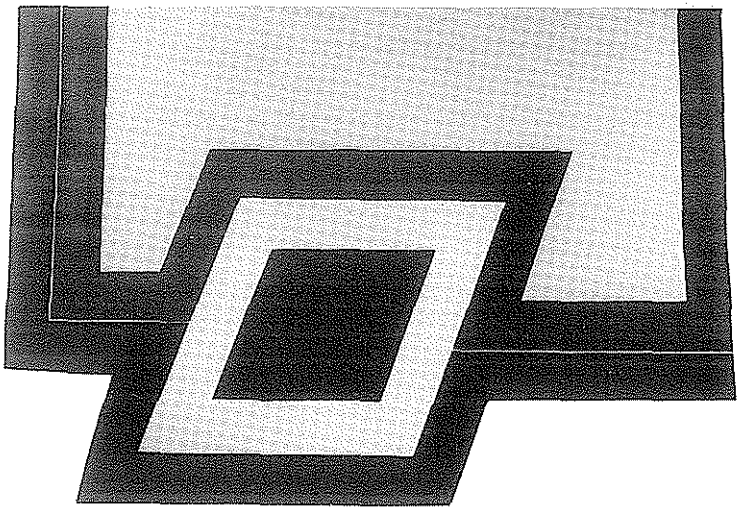

Figure 29. Frank Stella, *Conway III,* 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 80 x 122 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

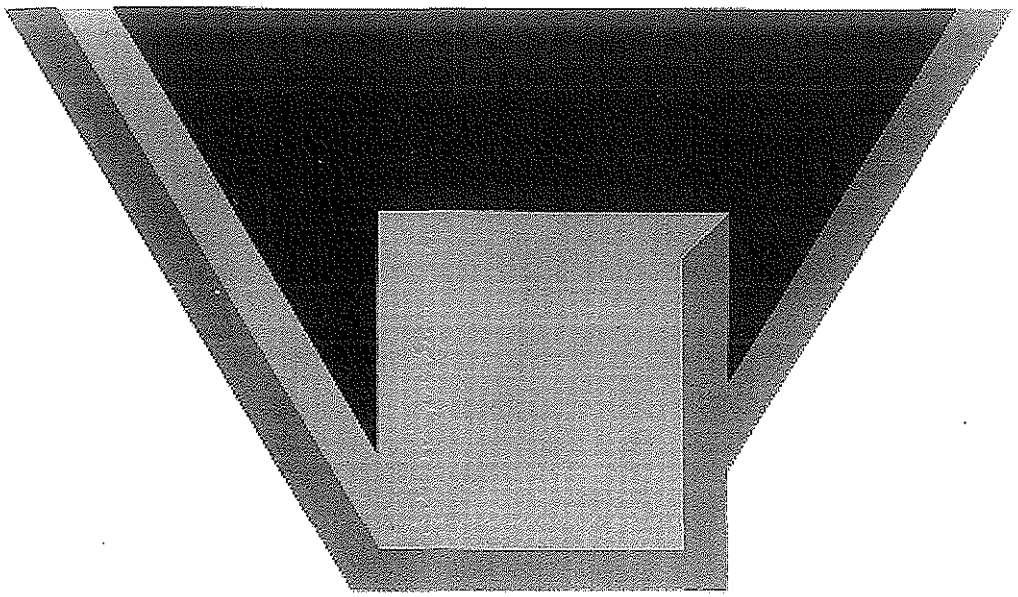

Figure 30. Frank Stella, *Union III*, 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 103¾ x 173¾ inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

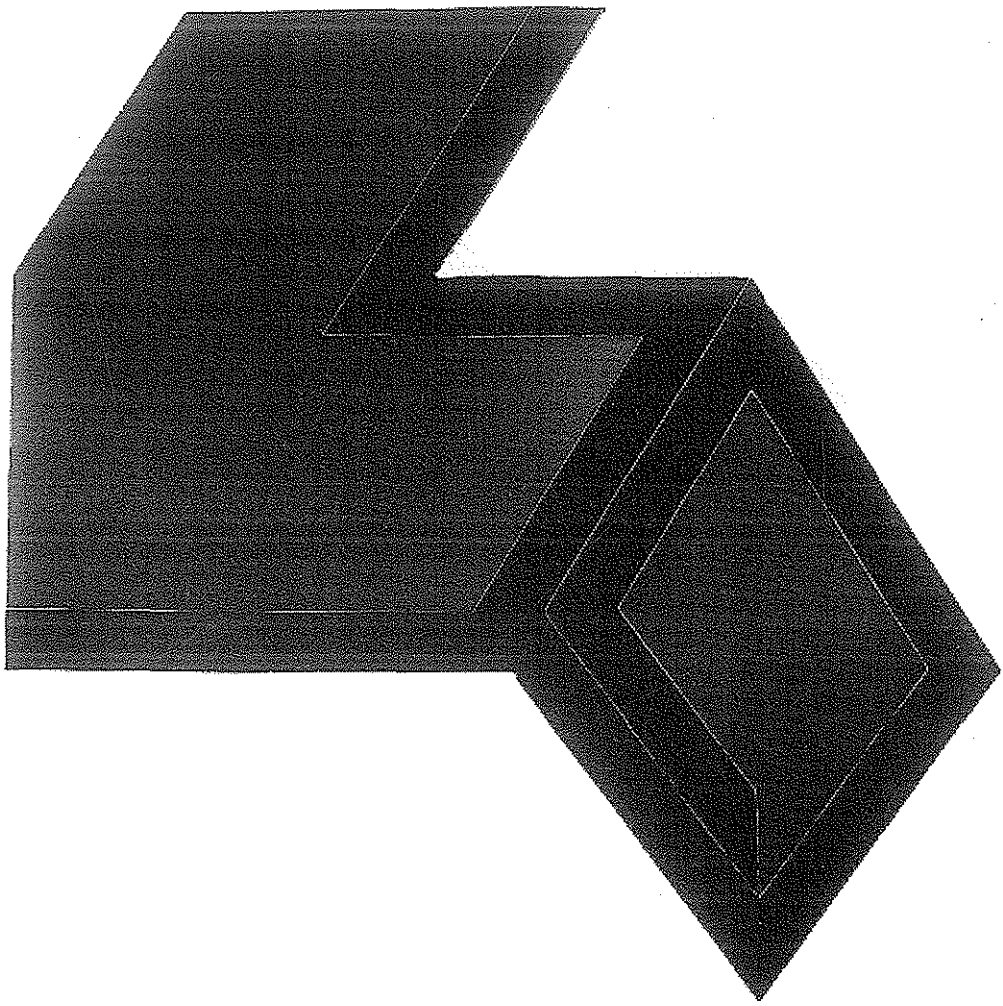

Figure 31. Frank Stella, *Effingham III*, 1966. Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 128 x 132 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Frank Stella / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Eric Pollitzer.

PART ONE:

1966–77

Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons

The craving for simplicity. People would like to say: "What really matters is only the colors." You say this mostly because you wish it to be the case. If your explanation is complicated, it is disagreeable, especially if you don't have strong feelings about the thing itself.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

1

FRANK STELLA'S new paintings investigate the viability of shape as such. By *shape as such* I mean not merely the silhouette of the support (which I shall call literal shape), not merely that of the outlines of elements in a given picture (which I shall call depicted shape), but shape as a medium within which choices about both literal and depicted shapes are made, and made mutually responsive. And by the viability of shape, I mean its power to hold, to stamp itself out, and *in*—as verisimilitude and narrative and symbolism used to impress themselves—compelling conviction. Stella's undertaking in these paintings is therapeutic: to restore shape to health, at least temporarily, though of course its implied "sickness" is simply the other face of the unprecedented importance shape has assumed in the

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finest modernist painting of the past several years, most notably in the work of Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski. It is only in their work that shape as such can be said to have become capable of holding, or stamping itself out, or compelling conviction—as well as, so to speak, capable of failing to do so. These are powers or potentialities, not to say responsibilities, which shape never until now possessed, and which have been conferred upon it by the development of modernist painting itself. In this sense shape has become something different from what it was in traditional painting or, for that matter, in modernist painting until recently. It has become, one might say, an object of conviction, whereas before it was merely . . . a kind of object. Stella's new pictures are a response to the recognition that shape itself may be lost to the art of painting as a resource able to compel conviction, precisely because—as never before—it is being called upon to do just that.

The way in which this has come about is, in the fullest sense of the word, dialectical, and I shall not try to do justice to its considerable complexity in this essay. An adequate account of the developments leading up to Stella's new paintings would, however, deal with the following:

1. *The emergence of a new, exclusively visual mode of illusionism in the work of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Morris Louis.* No single issue has been as continuously fundamental to the development of modernist painting as the need to acknowledge the literal character of the picture support. Above all this has tended to mean acknowledging its flatness or two-dimensionality. There is a sense in which a new illusionism was implicit in this development all along. As Clement Greenberg has remarked:

> The flatness toward which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an utter flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'oeil,* but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness, and the configurations of a Mondrian still suggest a kind of illusion of a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension.[2]

But the universal power of any mark to suggest something like depth belongs not so much to the art of painting as to the eye itself; it is, one might say, not something that has had to be established so much as something—a perceptual limitation—that cannot be escaped.[3] In contrast, the dissolution of traditional drawing in Pollock's work, the

reliance on large and generally rather warm expanses of barely fluctuating color in Newman's, and the staining of thinned acrylic pigment into mostly unsized canvas in Louis's were instrumental in the creation of a depth or space accessible to eyesight alone which, so to speak, specifically belongs to the art of painting.

2. *The neutralizing of the flatness of the picture support by the new, exclusively optical illusionism.* In the work of Pollock and Newman, but even more in that of Louis, Noland, and Olitski, the new illusionism both subsumes and dissolves the picture surface—opening it, as Greenberg has said, from the rear[4]—while simultaneously preserving its integrity. More accurately, it is the *flatness* of the picture surface, and not that surface itself, that is dissolved, or at least neutralized, by the illusionism in question. The literalness of the picture surface is not denied; but one's experience of that literalness is an experience of the properties of different pigments, of foreign substances applied to the surface of the painting, of the weave of the canvas, above all of color—but not, or not in particular, of the flatness of the support. (One might say that the literalness of the picture surface is not an aspect of the literalness of the support.) Not that literalness here is experienced as competing in any way with the illusionistic presence of the painting as a whole; on the contrary, one somehow constitutes the other. And in fact there is no distinction one can make between attending to the surface of the painting and to the illusion it generates: to be gripped by one is to be held, and moved, by the other.

3. *The discovery shortly before 1960 of a new mode of pictorial structure based on the shape, rather than the flatness, of the support.* With the dissolution or neutralizing of the flatness of the support by the new optical illusionism, the shape of the support—including its proportions and exact dimensions—came to assume a more active, more explicit importance than ever before. The crucial figures in this development are Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. In Stella's aluminum stripe paintings of 1960, for example, 2½-inch-wide stripes begin at the framing edge and reiterate the shape of that edge until the entire picture is filled (fig. 23); moreover, by actually shaping each picture—the canvases are rectangles with shallow (one-stripe-deep) notches at two corners or along the sides or both—Stella was able to make the fact that the literal shape determines the structure of the entire painting completely perspicuous. That is, in each painting the stripes appear to have been generated by the framing edge and, starting there, to have taken possession of the rest of the canvas, as though the whole painting self-evidently followed from not merely

the shape of the support, but its actual physical limits. Noland, on the other hand, cannot be said to have confronted the physical limits of the support until his first chevron paintings of 1962. His initial breakthrough to major achievement in the late 1950s came when he began to locate the center of concentric or radiating motifs at the exact center of square canvases (pl. 7). This related depicted shape to literal shape through a shared focus of symmetry. Whether or not Noland recognized that that was the significance of centering his rings and armatures of color is less important than that he experienced the centering itself as a discovery: a constraint in whose necessity he could believe, and in submission to which his magnificent gifts as a colorist were liberated. His shift to chevron motifs a few years later was, I believe, inspired in part by the need to achieve a more active or explicit relation between depicted and literal shape than the use of concentric rings, none of which actually made contact with the framing edge, allowed. Within a few months Noland discovered that suspending his chevrons from the upper corners of the support (the bottom edge of the lowest chevron running into each corner) empowered him, first, to prize loose the point of the bottommost chevron from the midpoint of the bottom framing edge, and second, to pull all the chevrons away from the central axis of the painting—thereby enabling him to work with rectangular formats other than the square (figs. 13, 15, pls. 8, 9). In those paintings—the asymmetrical chevrons of 1964—the exact dimensions of the support become important in this sense: that if the edge of the bottommost chevron did not *exactly* intersect the upper corners of the canvas, the relation of *all* the chevrons—that is, of the depicted shapes—to the shape of the support became acutely problematic and the ability of the painting as a whole to compel conviction was called into question. Since that time, apparently in an attempt to make depicted shape relate more generally to the shape of the support in its entirety, Noland too has shaped his pictures. (His recent work includes a number of narrow, diamond-shaped pictures that I shall discuss further on.) It cannot be emphasized too strongly, however, that Noland's chief concern throughout his career has been with color—rather, with feeling *through* color—and not with structure, which makes the role that structural decisions and alterations have played in his development all the more significant. This is not to say that Noland's colorism has had to maintain itself in the teeth of his forced involvement with structural concerns. On the contrary, it is precisely his deep and impassioned commitment to making color yield major painting that

has compelled him to discover structures in which the shape of the support is acknowledged lucidly and explicitly enough to compel conviction.

4. The primacy of literal over depicted shape. In both Noland's work and Stella's stripe paintings the burden of acknowledging the shape of the support is borne by the depicted shape or, perhaps more accurately, by the relation between it and the literal shape—a relation that declares the primacy of the latter. And in general the development of modernist painting during the past six years can be described as having involved the progressive assumption by literal shape of a greater—more active, more explicit—importance than ever before, and the consequent subordination of depicted shape. It is as though depicted shape has become less and less capable of venturing on its own, of pursuing its own ends—as though unless, in a given painting, depicted shape manages to participate in, by helping to establish, the authority of the shape of the support, conviction is aborted and the painting fails. In this sense depicted shape may be said to have become dependent upon literal shape—and indeed unable to make itself *felt* as shape except by acknowledging that dependence.

2

LET THIS stand as the general background of concerns from which Stella's new paintings emerge. A fuller delineation of their immediate context is still required, however, if the concentrated and radical exploration of shape which they undertake is meaningfully to be described.

Although Noland has found it necessary to develop structures in which the shape of the support plays a determining role, his continuing ambition to liberate feeling through color has made him reluctant to call attention to the physical limits of the support—the way, for example, Stella's stripe paintings call attention to them. In the latter, Stella identifies the shape of a given picture with its framing edge, thereby assimilating the first to the second. Noland, on the other hand, is anxious to keep this from happening; or rather, the same concerns that compel him to acknowledge the shape of the support also compel him to try to keep our awareness of the support's physical limits to an absolute minimum. Above all, Noland is anxious to keep us from experiencing the shape of his paintings as *edge*, hence as something literal and nonillusive; and in order to make

sure this does not happen, he tries to keep us from experiencing the shape at all. It is as though, for Noland, to experience the shape of a painting is inescapably to experience the painting itself as something literal, as a kind of object; and this would compromise its presence as visual illusion. And in fact the shapes of his paintings are never experienced as acutely as the limits of and boundaries between the depicted elements within them.

That Noland's paintings avoid calling attention to their physical limits does not mean that those limits are not still there—and there to be felt. What put them there to be felt is the acknowledgment of literal shape that the paintings themselves make—an acknowledgment that exerts upon the edge a kind of pressure, or inquisition, from which it cannot escape. If Noland's paintings offered some alternative to our experiencing their shapes as an aspect of their literalness—either by positively identifying literal shape with illusion, or by repudiating it altogether—their efficacy as illusion or presence would not be, as I sometimes find them to be, threatened by, or at, the edges. (The suggested alternatives are those explored in Olitski's spray paintings and Stella's new pictures, respectively.) This is not to deny that throughout Noland's masterful paintings of the past several years the literal shape of the support is made to seem the outcome or result of the depicted shapes—rather than, as in Stella's stripe paintings, the other way around. But the fact remains that a painting by Noland cannot be said to *hold* as shape—it cannot be said to need to, either—but merely to *have* one, like any solid object in the world. Or rather, it is as though the shape were itself a kind of object in the world—an object that has been prized loose from the illusionistic presence of the painting by its very importance to the structure of that painting. One is made to feel, that is, that in these paintings the distinction between depicted and literal shape marks a difference not simply between two kinds of shape—each, so to speak, conceived of as a pictorial entity—but between two utterly distinct and different kinds of *entities*. The first of these, depicted shape, is powerless to make itself felt except by acknowledging the primacy of the other, while that other, literal shape, does not hold as shape. It *is* a shape, but what this now seems to mean is only that it is an object in the world—an object whose relevance to our experience of the painting is not clear.

The fact that in some of his recent paintings Noland has not been content simply to minimize the shape of the support, but has instead begun actively to subvert it, suggests that his previous paintings may

have come to seem problematic to him for the sorts of reasons I have been discussing. For example, his last show at the Emmerich Gallery included four eight-by-two-foot diamond-shaped paintings in each of which four relatively broad bands of color run parallel to one or the other pair of sides, thereby acknowledging the shape of the support (fig. 16). At the same time, however, the extreme attenuation of these pictures makes them unable to contain within the limits of the support their own extraordinary presences as color and illusion. In the grip of the sheerly visual illusion generated by the interaction of the colored bands, the acute-angled corners of the support appear to vibrate and shimmer, to erode both from within and without, to become even more attenuated and needlelike than they are, while the obtuse-angled corners tend to round off, to appear dull or blunt. The result is that the physical limits of the support are overrun, indeed all but dissolved, by the painting's illusionistic presence. At the same time an effect like that of simultaneous contrast between the colored bands makes them appear to overlap one another physically, like shingles. So that, while the physical limits of the support are assaulted by illusion, the (depicted) boundaries between the bands are the more acutely felt—as if absorbing the literalness or objecthood given up by the support. Moreover, because some sort of progressive sequence (e.g., of value) among the bands appears to be required for the illusionistic overlapping I have just described, one's experience of these paintings involves a sense of directionality. One is aware, that is, of being held and moved by a progression or sequence—a resource until now foreign to modernist painting—and this further intensifies the assault these paintings make on their own static, literal shapes. In several other paintings in the same show—long horizontal rectangles with a few parallel bands of color, again arranged progressively, running their entire lengths—Noland achieved an equal subversion by somewhat simpler means: the rectangles are too long, and proportionally too narrow, to be experienced as discrete shapes. Instead, confronted head on, they seem to extend almost beyond the limits of our field of vision, to become nothing but extension, to only *end up* being rectangular; approached from the side (their length makes this inviting) what is striking is not their rectangularity but the speed with which that rectangle—or rather, the speed with which the colored bands—appear to diminish in perspective recession.[5] Here, again, although the relation of depicted to literal shape within each painting acknowledges in the simplest possible way the primacy of the latter, the actual limits of the

support do not quite manage to constitute a single, definite shape, while the boundaries between the colored bands seem almost tactile or stepped by comparison.

I have argued elsewhere that the desire to oppose the kind of structure at work in Noland's and Stella's paintings provided much of the motivation behind Jules Olitski's first spray paintings of 1965 (pl. 10).[6] Those pictures are completely devoid of depicted shape, and in fact represent what is almost certainly the most radical and thoroughgoing attempt in the history of modernism to make major art out of nothing but color. At the same time, no paintings have ever depended so completely or so nakedly for their success on the shape (and in particular the proportions) of their supports, experienced, one might say, in relation both to nothing particular within each painting and to everything it contains.[7] It is, I think, true of those paintings—and of no others—that they succeed as paintings just so far as they succeed, or hold, or stamp themselves out, as shapes. And in fact no shapes, depicted or literal, have ever stamped themselves out more compellingly or more feelingly. In the sense in which I have been using the word, it is not true to say that these paintings "acknowledge" the shape of the support; but the quality of individual works depends even more intimately upon it. (In this respect they differ sharply from Noland's pictures, whose success or failure as art does not depend on their efficacy as shapes.) So that while they were made in opposition to a mode of pictorial organization which established the primacy of literal over depicted shape, in Olitski's early spray paintings literal shape's assumption of authority has become not merely relative but absolute, as though it alone were capable of performing the office of shape, of being felt as shape.

The very success of Olitski's paintings as shapes lays bare the conditions that make that success possible—conditions it is hard to imagine any paintings but his being able to fulfill. It is, to begin with, clearly central to their potency as shapes that they are wholly devoid of depicted shape; but it is also clear that two paintings equally devoid of depicted shape may succeed unequally *as* shape (and, therewith, as works of art). Moreover, virtually all the best early spray paintings belong to a single format—the narrow vertical rectangle—and the more any painting departs from that format toward the horizontal or square the more likely it is to fail. This is connected with the fact that when the early spray paintings fail—relatively speaking—we tend to see the framing edge as marking the limits of a spatial *container* and the sprayed canvas itself as something like *background* in

traditional painting. The narrow vertical format somehow keeps this from happening, not by denying the illusion but, so to speak, by making it self-sufficient, a presence, like that of a human figure, instead of a void waiting to be filled. In the best narrow vertical paintings the framing edge does not appear to contain the illusion; on the contrary, the illusion "contains" the limits of the support. So that whereas the relatively square paintings can often be seen as receptacles which may happen to be empty but which could be filled, could contain objects, the best narrow vertical pictures *already contain* their object, namely, the edges of the painting, its outermost and tactile limits. (In this connection it is significant that, in the paintings in question, all relatively well-defined bursts of color and variations in value are restricted to the vicinity of the edges and corners of the canvas.) One might say that whereas in traditional painting the illusion of a tactile space commences at the inside of the framing edge, in the best early spray paintings the illusion of something like depth or space accessible to eyesight alone ends at the outside of that edge. And that whereas traditional illusionism begins at the surface of the canvas, the strictly visual mode of illusionism of the Olitskis in question ends there.

In recent paintings, such as those exhibited at the 1966 Venice Biennale, Olitski has taken to masking out all but thin bands around two or three sides of the sprayed canvas, spraying some more and then removing the masking (pl. 11). The result is a clear difference between the previously masked and unmasked areas, a difference that can be subtle or blatant and can vary enormously from place to place along the boundary between the bands and the rest of the picture which they partly frame. Further, this internal "frame" is not strictly parallel to the edges of the canvas; sometimes its long vertical component is inflected slightly away from the perpendicular. Both these developments can be understood, at least in part, as undermining or mitigating the absoluteness of the primacy which literal shape assumes in his first spray paintings. To begin with, the partial internal "frame" amounts to something like depicted shape; and this in itself means that the quality of individual paintings no longer solely depends on the almost unanalyzable relation between the sprayed canvas and the shape of the support that apparently governs the success or failure of the early spray paintings. But because the boundary between the framing bands and the rest of the painting consists of the same pictorial stuff—the same sprayed color—as the areas it delimits, the role of the internal "frame" as a kind of middle term be-

tween the shape of the support and the rest of the painting is far more complex than that played by depicted shape in Noland's paintings or Stella's stripe paintings. To be sure, the internal "frame"—more accurately, the boundary between the "framing" bands and the rest of the painting—relates structurally to the shape of the support. But it also establishes an extraordinary, indeed unprecedented, continuity across that boundary. This enables the paintings in question to contain depicted shape, or something like it, and yet be seen as pictorially seamless and integral—like the early spray paintings. Moreover, the fact that the long vertical component of the internal "frame"—or the vertical boundary between that "frame" and the rest of the picture—is sometimes inflected away from the perpendicular further reduces the perspicuousness of literal shape's primacy at the same time that it acknowledges, or is made possible by, that primacy. That is, in these paintings the primacy of literal shape is such that even a slight departure from verticality within the painting makes itself felt with an intensity of expression that I for one find astonishing. But it is precisely the strength of that primacy that enables the paintings in question both to tolerate the departure and to move us by it. The very acuteness, even poignancy, of our experience of what is, after all, an extremely slight inflection acknowledges the strength, and more than that, the *depth*, of the norm from which that inflection departed—in this case, the rectangular shape of the support. But the fact remains that what we actually feel, and are inexplicably moved by, is the inflection from the norm rather than the norm itself. All these differences between his early and later spray paintings have enabled Olitski to realize his ambitions across a considerably wider range of formats. And if it is true, as I believe it is, that none of the later spray paintings (none that I have seen at any rate) stamps itself out as shape quite as powerfully as the best of the early ones, part of what these differences have meant is that the quality of a given picture no longer depends entirely on its success or failure as shape.

There is, then, a sense in which the conflict between a sheerly visual or optical mode of illusionism and the literal character of the support is central to both Noland's and Olitski's paintings. In Olitski's pictures—at any rate, the early spray pictures—the conflict is naked and direct. It is, for example, felt in the threat that the illusion will seem almost to come detached from the framing edge, to leave the literal shape hanging on the wall and situate itself indefinitely further back. This is not to say that when this doesn't happen

the illusion is properly described as attached to the edge of the support. Rather, the physical limits of the support mark or declare or simply *are* the limits of the illusion itself. We become aware of the conflict in question only when, in relatively less successful paintings, illusion and literal shape actually part company—despite the fact that when that happens, the illusion can no longer be described as sheerly visual, any more than background in traditional painting can be characterized in those terms. In Noland's paintings, on the other hand, opticality and the physical limits of the support are not juxtaposed against one another as in Olitski's paintings. Instead, it is the structure of his paintings—the relation between depicted and literal shape in them—that brings the two into conflict with one another. This is what makes the fact that his paintings do not stamp themselves out as shapes feel like a failure or refusal to do so—a failure or refusal that, especially in the light of Olitski's spray paintings, leaves the literalness or objecthood of the limits of the support there to be felt. I said earlier that Noland himself seems to have become increasingly troubled by this and in his recent narrow diamond and long horizontal rectangle paintings appears to have tried to subvert their shapes. But it should be remarked that this does not resolve the conflict between opticality and the literal character of the support that, I have claimed, is central to both Noland's and Olitski's work; if anything, it intensifies it.

3

IT IS only in the presence of this conflict that the question of whether or not a given painting holds or stamps itself out as shape makes full sense—or rather, only here that the issue of "the viability of shape as such" characterizes a specific stage in resolving or unfolding problems of acknowledgment, literalness, and illusion which, as I said at the beginning of this essay, have been among the issues of modernism from its beginning. In Stella's stripe paintings, for example, the reiteration by the stripes of the irregular shapes of the support makes the dependence of depicted on literal shape far more explicit than Noland's paintings ever allow it to seem. But if one asks whether Stella's paintings hold better or make themselves felt more acutely as shapes than Noland's paintings, the answer, I think, is not just that they do not, but that the whole issue of holding or failing to hold is much less relevant to them. That is, because they

are not illusive in anything like the way Noland's and Olitski's paintings are, there is nothing for them to hold as shapes *against*.[8]

I must emphasize that in defining this conflict between visual illusionism and literal shape in Noland's and Olitski's paintings I have not meant to imply an adverse criticism either of the quality of their best paintings or of the general level of their respective achievements. This is worth stressing precisely because there are certain younger artists to whose sensibilities all conflict between the literal character of the support and illusion of any kind is intolerable and for whom, accordingly, the future of art lies in the creation of works that, more than anything else, are *wholly literal*—in that respect going "beyond" painting. It should be evident that what I think of as literalist sensibility is itself a product, or by-product, of the development of modernist painting itself—more accurately, of the increasingly explicit acknowledgment of the literal character of the support that has been central to that development. But it ought also to be observed that the literalness isolated and hypostatized in the work of artists like Donald Judd and Larry Bell is by no means the *same* literalness as that acknowledged by advanced painting throughout the past century: it is not the literalness *of the support*. Moreover, hypostatization is not acknowledgment. The continuing problem of *how* to acknowledge the literal character of the support—of *what counts* as that acknowledgment—has been at least as crucial to the development of modernist painting as the fact of its literalness, and that problem has been eliminated, not solved, by the artists in question. Their pieces cannot be said to acknowledge literalness; they simply *are literal*. And it is hard to see how literalness as such, divorced from the conventions which, from Manet to Noland, Olitski, and Stella, have *given* literalness value and have *made* it a bearer of conviction, can be experienced as a *source* of both of these—and what is more, one powerful enough to generate new conventions, a new art.[9]

Because Frank Stella's stripe paintings, especially those executed in metallic paint, represent the most unequivocal and conflictless acknowledgment of literal shape in the history of modernism, they have been crucial to the literalist view I have just adumbrated, both because they are seen as extreme instances of a putative development within modernist painting—the increasingly explicit acknowledgment of literalness per se—and because they help make that development visible, or arguable, in the first place. They are among the last paintings that literalists like Judd are able to endorse more or less without reservation, largely because the ambition to go beyond

them—to pursue their apparent implications—was instrumental in the abandonment of painting altogether by these same artists.

In Stella's new paintings, however, the relation between depicted and literal shape seems nowhere near as straightforward in its declaration of the latter as in the stripe paintings—or, for that matter, in Noland's work. Rather, there is a new and somewhat startling freedom both in the variety of shapes used in a given picture and in their disposition relative to one another and to the support. This is not to say that the shape of the support is either ignored or denied. On the contrary, it is very clearly taken into account; but the way in which this is accomplished does not affirm the dependence of depicted on literal shape so much as it establishes an unprecedented *continuity* between them. In *Moultonboro III* (1966; fig. 27), for example, the shape of the support is an irregular polygon formed by superimposing a triangle and a square, the first apparently having come slanting down from the upper right to wedge itself deeply into the second. (In *Chocorua III* [1966; fig. 28] a triangle is superimposed on a rectangle; the same is true of *Tuftonboro III* [1966] except that the rectangle is missing its upper right corner; while in *Conway III* [1966; fig. 29] a parallelogram is superimposed on another, this time more horizontal, rectangle. These are the only formats among the eleven Stella has used for his new paintings that have been arrived at by superimposition pure and simple.)[10] The triangle itself comprises two elements—an eight-inch-wide light yellow band around its perimeter and the smaller triangle, in Day-Glo yellow, bounded by that band—both of which seem to be acknowledging, by repeating, the shape of the support. For that reason it is almost startling to realize that only a relatively small segment of the triangle coincides with, is part of, the shape of the support. Most of the triangle lies wholly inside the picture and, in the terms proposed at the outset, exists only as depicted shape. Even more surprising, however, is the fact that realizing this does not in itself undermine the triangle's efficacy as shape. It is as though that segment which coincides with the literal shape of the painting somehow implies the rest of the triangle—the merely depicted portion of it—strongly enough for the latter to succeed as shape despite its failure to relate self-evidently to any other segment of the framing edge. But it would, I think, be just as true to one's experience of *Moultonboro III* to claim that what enables the relatively small segment of the triangle that coincides with the shape of the support to make itself felt as shape is what might be called the implicative power, in this context, of the merely depicted portion of the

triangle. The yellow triangular band and the Day-Glo triangle within it are, after all, what make that segment intelligible: without them, and without another largely internal shape—the blue Z-form in which the triangular band (and hence the triangle as a whole) rests—the upper right-hand segment of the support would not be part of a triangle but would belong instead to the literal shape of the painting perceived in its entirety as an irregular seven-sided polygon, whereas in the painting as it stands roughly the opposite is the case. The beholder is in effect compelled *not* to experience the literal shape in its entirety—as a single entity—but rather to perceive it segment by segment, each of which is felt to belong to one or another of the smaller shapes that constitute the painting as a whole.

This last point is important. For one thing, it indicates a crucial difference between Stella's new paintings on the one hand and Noland's and Olitski's pictures, as well as Stella's own previous work, on the other. In this respect Noland's paintings in general are closer to Olitski's spray pictures than to Stella's new work, despite the fact that—unlike Olitski—both he and Stella work with nonrectangular supports and discrete areas of color. It also suggests that, confronted by Stella's new paintings, the distinction between depicted and literal shape becomes nugatory. It is as though in a painting like *Moultonboro III* there is no literal shape and, therefore, no depicted shape either; more accurately, because none of the shapes that we experience in that painting is wholly literal, there is none that we are tempted to call merely depicted. There *are* shapes that lie entirely inside the picture limits—that do not make contact with those limits—just as there are others that partly coincide with the edge of the support. But neither kind of shape enjoys precedence over the other—neither sponsors nor guarantees the other's efficacy as shape—any more than either the depicted or the literal limits of a shape that partly coincides with the edge of the support are experienced as more fundamental to that shape's efficacy than the other. Both types of shape succeed or fail on exactly the same grounds—grounds that do not concern the relation of a given shape to the shape of the support seen in its entirety. Each, one might say, is implicated in the other's failure and strengthened by the other's success. But the failure and success of individual shapes cannot be understood in terms of the distinction between depicted and literal shape with which I have been working until now.

The relation between depicted and literal shape that holds in the stripe paintings no longer holds in these, not because the relation

has been altered or defied but because the distinction is defeated by the paintings themselves. Nothing, apparently, is more central to their conception than the desire to establish all shapes on an equal footing—to make pictures that comprise nothing but individual shapes, each of which is felt to stand or fall without reference, or appeal, to a single master shape, the support seen as a single entity. In fact, because in most of the new pictures the physical limits of the support are not perceived as constituting a single shape, there is even a sense in which—despite the nonrectangularity of their supports—the pictures in question are not shaped: if being shaped implies having an *enclosing* shape, the term is less applicable to Stella's nonrectangular pictures than, for example, to Olitski's rectangular ones. (In this same sense the physical limits of the support can be said not to constitute a *framing* edge.) It should be remarked, however, that Stella could not have made paintings of which this is true except by using irregular supports—that is, by avoiding not only the rectangle but geometrically regular figures of any kind—in order to prevent the eye from instantly perceiving the shape of the support as a single entity. Moreover, the fact that in perhaps the three most successful subseries of the new paintings—the *Union, Effingham,* and *Wolfeboro* pictures (all 1966)—Stella has not used regular geometric shapes at all seems to me to have something to do with their success (figs. 30, 31). In certain other of the new paintings, the eye pounces on a shape of that kind and only then takes in the rest of the painting. When that happens, the rest of the painting is put under enormous pressure by the geometrically regular shape to match its own sheer perspicuousness—which, inevitably, it cannot do. In other words, regularity of shape seems to be enough in itself to disturb the parity among shapes on which the success of Stella's new pictures seems largely to depend. In *Moultonboro III,* as in the *Chocorua* and *Tuftonboro* paintings mentioned earlier, the desire for parity manifests itself in the implied juxtaposition of two equally regular and hence equally perspicuous shapes (a triangle and a rectangle). But in each of the above works the two shapes compete for one's attention, almost as though they were juxtaposed to one another within a larger conventional painting with the result that one tends to pull back, to distance the works in question, and, as it were, to surround each of them with an imaginary rectangular frame large enough to contain the actual painting and some space around it besides. In the *Union, Effingham,* and *Wolfeboro* canvases, in contrast, no such competition for one's attention takes place: none of the elements they comprise is in any

way perspicuous, or even particularly interesting in itself; one does not "recognize" any of them—except perhaps the trapezoid at the bottom of *Wolfeboro* (and then, as we shall see, it is an open question what one "recognizes" it *as*). And far from being inclined to distance or frame these pictures, I for one feel strongly that, more than any pictures I have ever seen, they ought not to be framed at all.

Moreover, the fact that the physical limits of the support do not make themselves felt as a single entity but in effect belong segment by segment to individual shapes the remainder of whose limits do not coincide with those of the support implies a strong and, I think, unprecedented continuity between the "outside" of a given painting (its physical limits) and its "inside" (everything else). The eight-inch-wide colored bands deployed throughout the new paintings are a kind of paradigm for that continuity. In general one such band begins by running along at least one side of the support (in *Union III* the same band runs along four or five sides) until at some point or other it encounters another shape whose "merely" depicted portion it follows into the heart of the canvas, taking the beholder with it. That is, a particular stretch of the edge of the painting is first isolated from the rest of that edge—the band broadens and usurps the office of the edge—and is then carried into the interior of the painting. The result is both that the paintings are infused with an extraordinary and compelling directionality, and that one is made to feel that the important difference in them is not between "outside" and "inside" but between open and closed. The side or sides along which the bands run are experienced as closed (or closed *off*) while the others are felt as open—and when, as in *Union III* and *Effingham III* (figs. 30, 31), the open side or sides are at the top of the painting, the effect can be one of an astonishing vertical acceleration, soaring, or release. There is, one might say, no more "outside" or "inside" to the best of Stella's new paintings than to the individual shapes they comprise; and to the extent that a given shape can be said to have an "outside" and "inside" the relation between the two is closer to that, say, between the edge of a tabletop and the rest of that tabletop than to the relation between the edge of a Noland or an Olitski or even a Stella stripe painting and the rest of that painting. This is not to say that Stella's new pictures are nothing more than objects. Unlike Judd's constructions, for example, or Bell's glass boxes, they do not isolate and hypostatize literalness as such. At the same time, however, literalness in them is no longer experienced as the exclusive property of the support. Rather, it is suffused more generally and, as

it were, more deeply throughout them. It is as though literalness in these pictures does not belong to the support at all except by coincidence: specifically, the coincidence between the limits of the individual shapes that constitute a given painting and the physical limits of the support—as though, that is, one's experience of literalness is above all an experience of the literalness of the individual shapes themselves. Though of course what I have just called their literalness is identical with their success as shapes—and that, while not a direct function of the literalness of the support, is at any rate inconceivable apart from that literalness.

The dissociation of literalness from the support that I have just tried to describe is intimately related to another aspect of Stella's new paintings, namely, their extraordinary, and sheerly visual, illusiveness. This is not to say that, in a given picture, each shape seems to lie in a definite or specifiable depth relation to every other. On the contrary, nothing is more fundamental to the nature of the new paintings' illusiveness than the extreme ambiguity, indeterminacy, and multivalence of the relations that appear to obtain among the individual shapes, as well as between those shapes and the surface of the picture (or, at any rate, the *plane* of that surface). In *Moultonboro III*, for example, although one is not made to feel that the light yellow triangular band stands in any single or definite spatial relation to the turquoise blue Z-shaped band into which it fits, one nevertheless experiences their juxtaposition somewhat as though both were objects in the world, not simply or even chiefly shapes on a flat surface—objects, moreover, whose relation to one another, and indeed whose actual character, are ineluctably ambiguous. This is most salient in the case of the Z-shaped turquoise band, largely because—or so it seems—its top and bottom segments are not parallel to one another. (The first, running as it does along the upper edge of the square, is horizontal, while the second, flush with the lowest side of the triangle, slants from the lower left toward the upper right.) That is, one tends to see the bottom segment, or the bottom two segments, as though somewhat from above and in perspective—while at the same time one is not given enough data to locate them in a definite spatial context, in relation either to contiguous shapes or to some ground plane. Moreover, because the top segment of the Z-form runs across the upper edge of the square and is therefore horizontal, one tends to experience that segment as frontal. But this would mean that the Z-form is not only irregular in two dimensions but bent or warped in three—though it is not at all clear which segment or seg-

ments are bent or warped and which, if any, are to be taken as normative. The beveled ends of the Z-form, each parallel to nothing else in the painting, compound the ambiguity by implying that the respective planes of both the bottom and top segments are warped away from, or are oblique to, that of the picture surface—though, of course, they might *not* be. (Almost all the bands in Stella's new paintings are beveled in this way, a factor that adds immeasurably to the illusionistic power and general complexity of the paintings in question. In fact, its absence from *Conway* is partly responsible for the relatively flat and conventional appearance of that picture.) The result is that the Z-form is seen as participating in a wide range of equally ambiguous and indeterminate spatial situations—more accurately, an entire gamut of such situations, each of which is simultaneously not merely compatible with but continuous with or transparent to every other. But it is not just the situations in which the Z-form finds itself or the relationships into which it enters that continually escape one but—more than anything else—its "real" shape. (Similarly, when one "recognizes" the shape at the bottom of *Wolfeboro III,* does one "recognize" it as a trapezoid—its configuration on the surface of the canvas—or as a rectangle seen in perspective?) It is as though across the entire gamut of illusionistic possibilities the "real" Z-form—flat or warped, regular or irregular, partly or wholly parallel or oblique to the picture surface—lies somewhere out there, beyond the painting, waiting to be known. There is, of course, a "real" Z-form on the surface of the canvas. But the configuration on that surface of the individual shapes that constitute a given picture is no more definitive in this regard than their possible configurations in illusionistic space: above all because, as I have claimed, literalness in these paintings is primarily experienced as the property not of the support, but of the shapes themselves. All this makes Stella's new paintings as radically illusive and intractably ambiguous as any in the history of modernism. Radically illusive in that what is rendered illusive in them is nothing less than literalness itself; and intractably ambiguous in that the shapes they comprise are experienced as embracing an entire gamut of existential possibilities, including their juxtaposition on the surface of the canvas, each of which is "continuous" with every other and none of which is sufficiently privileged to make one feel that it, at any rate, is really there. There is, one might say, no *it* at all.

Stella's new paintings, then, depart from his stripe paintings in two general respects—first, by not acknowledging literal shape, and second, by resorting to illusion—both of which ought to make them

unpalatable to literalist sensibility. Indeed, I suggest that it is one of the most significant facts about his new pictures that Stella seeks in them to repudiate not literalist taste or sensibility exactly, but the literalist implications which, in the grip of a particular conception of the nature of modernist painting, his stripe paintings appear to carry. This is not to claim that his new pictures are chiefly a response to the drawing of those implications by Judd and others. Rather, I am suggesting that it was in his own unwillingness, even inability, to pursue beyond painting what were *to him as well,* if not indeed before anyone else, his stripe paintings' apparent implications in that direction that Stella discovered both the depth of his commitment to the enterprise of painting and the irreconcilability with that commitment of what may be called a reductionist conception of the nature of that enterprise.[11] At the same time, it is hard not to see their relation to Noland's and Olitski's paintings as issuing, at least in part, from a dissatisfaction or an uneasiness with their work that—to my mind, at any rate—has much in common with that which literalist sensibility appears to feel. Moreover, it is tempting to regard this in turn as evidence in favor of the suggestion that the impulse behind the work of literalists like Judd and Bell is anything but alien to Stella. Because if it is true that, unlike Noland and Olitski, Stella has actually *felt* a reductionist conception of his undertaking urge toward the isolation and hypostatization of literalness, it would be surprising if there were not at least some agreement between his response to painting other than his own and the literalist attitude toward that same painting. And in fact Stella's new paintings can, I believe, be seen as responding critically to the same aspect of Noland's and Olitski's paintings that, I suggested earlier, literalist taste finds unacceptable, though here again the differences between Stella and the literalists lie deeper than their apparent agreement. From a literalist point of view the aspect in question is experienced as a conflict between pictorial illusion of any kind on the one hand and literalness as such on the other; the conflict is unacceptable because it compromises the latter; and its elimination entails making works of art (or putative works of art) that are nothing but literal—works in which illusion, to the extent that it may be said to exist at all, is itself literal. Whereas Stella's new paintings, by making literalness illusive, not only come to grips with but actually resolve what I described earlier as the conflict in Noland's and Olitski's paintings between a particular kind of pictorial illusionism—addressed to eyesight alone—and the literal character of the support. And by so doing they unmake,

at least in the event and for the moment, the distinction between shape as a fundamental property of objects and shape as an entity belonging to painting alone that emerges for the first time in Noland's and Olitski's paintings.

4

IN CLOSING I want merely to touch on another aspect of Stella's new paintings: what seems to me their intimate and profoundly significant relation to the finest modernist *sculpture* of the recent past. (I am thinking chiefly of the work of English sculptor Anthony Caro.) Almost any of the remarks and observations I have made about the new pictures could, I think, lead to an obvious comparison with Caro's sculptures: in pieces like *Bennington* (1964; fig. 36) and *Yellow Swing* (1965; fig. 37), is not literalness made illusive? Moreover, the relation between Stella and contemporary sculpture is far from superficial or coincidental. Rather, it has to do with the problematic character of shape in the most advanced painting of our time—even, I want to say, with the nature of shape itself, with what shape is. In any case, I am suggesting that one result of the development within modernist painting discussed in this essay is that for the first time since the late eighteenth century sculpture is in a position to inspire painting, and that in Stella's recent paintings this has actually begun to happen. At the same time, however, painting is in a position not simply to be inspired by advanced sculpture, but in certain respects fundamental to that sculpture actually to have certain advantages—though not of quality—over it. I will mention three: (1) The intractable ambiguity of the visual illusionism in Stella's new pictures goes beyond advanced sculpture in the direction of the opticality and illusiveness—of seeming a kind of mirage—that, as Greenberg was the first to remark, is basic to the latter.[12] Because sculpture is literal it can, in the end, be *known;* whereas the shapes that constitute Stella's new paintings, and the new paintings as experienced wholes, cannot. (2) The fact, or the convention, that paintings hang on a wall means that Stella's new paintings begin off the ground, whereas advanced sculpture—which, as Greenberg has again remarked, is illusively weightless—has to begin at ground level and literally climb to whatever height it reaches. This "advantage" is perhaps most strikingly evident in *Effingham III,* largely because that painting as a whole is most like a ground plan. *Union III* as well profits from it immensely. And in general Stella can float or suspend ele-

ments as though without visible means of support. (3) There is no general difficulty about the use of color in Stella's paintings, but the problem of color in contemporary sculpture is in important respects acute. By this I mean not simply the propriety of applied color but the fact that all sculpture, like all solid, opaque objects, is colored, or has color, or anyway has *surface*. It is as though, finally, the opticality toward which advanced sculpture aspires brings one up short, not against its literalness exactly, but against the fact that when we perceive a solid object, eyesight makes contact with no more than its surface (and then only part of that). Put slightly differently, it is as though advanced sculpture, such as Caro's, makes that fact a disturbing one, and in effect thrusts it into our awareness. In comparison with such sculpture, painting, I want to say, is *all* surface.[13] (Which is not the same as saying that it is done on a flat and very thin surface; an element of equal thinness in a Caro is experienced as solid.) Stella's paintings, by the closeness of their relation to advanced sculpture, make that difference more salient than it has ever been.

NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lectures on Aesthetics," in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief,* compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees, and James Taylor, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966), p. 36.

2. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1966), p. 73.

3. Mondrian, in his paintings of the 1920s and after, often seems to be attempting to combat just this minimal illusionism. Sometimes, for example, he stops his black lines short of the framing edge, thereby emphasizing their paintedness, i.e., the fact that they are marks on a flat surface. In other paintings he takes the more radical step of *continuing* the black lines and even the blocks of color *past* the edge onto the sides of the canvas (which was to be exhibited with its sides visible). The result is that one tends to see these paintings as solid *slabs,* which helps to counteract—though it cannot efface—their minimal illusionism.

4. Greenberg says this of Noland's paintings in Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International* 4 (May 1960): 28.

5. That Noland's long horizontal paintings make their own shapes ungraspable in this way was observed by Rosalind Krauss in "Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd," *Artforum* 4 (May 1966): 24–26.

6. In my essay "Jules Olitski's New Paintings," *Artforum* 4 (Nov. 1965): 36–40, not reprinted in this volume.

7. In his brief remarks on Olitski's work, published in the catalog to the

United States pavilion at the last Biennale, Clement Greenberg wrote, "The degree to which the success of Olitski's paintings depends on proportion of height to width in their enclosing shapes is, I feel, unprecendented." Greenberg goes on to note the relative superiority of the pictures with tall, narrow formats. See Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," in *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957–1969,* vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1993), pp. 228–30. [In fact, Greenberg wrote: "Because they attract too little notice as shapes, and therefore tend to get taken too much for granted, he has had more and more to avoid picture formats that are square or approach squareness. He has had also to avoid picture formats that are long and narrow, simply because these tend to stamp themselves out as shapes less emphatically than formats that are tall and narrow do" (pp. 229–30). In "Jules Olitski's New Paintings" I had previously observed that "despite their hostility to deductive structure, Olitski's spay paintings depend for their success upon the new and more acute awareness of the shape and size of the support embodied for the first time in deductive structure. . . . In fact, no paintings, Noland's and Stella's included, have ever been put under greater pressure by considerations of shape and size; or, more accurately, have ever put those considerations under greater pressure" (p. 40).—*M. F., 1996*]

8. The aluminum paintings of 1960 are an exception to this. Although not illusionistic, they can, I think, be said to hold as shape—chiefly by virtue of the fact that their supports depart from the rectangular only by a few shallow notches at the corners and sides. As a result the paintings are seen as restrained or held back by those notches from completing the rectangles they all but occupy. This gives the shapes of these paintings something to hold against, i.e., the pressure from within each painting toward the rectangle it almost is, and in effect makes the question of whether or not they compel conviction as shape a real one.

9. Judd, almost certainly the foremost ideologist of the literalist position, has written: "A work needs only to be interesting" (Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook,* no. 8 [1965], p. 78). It is hard to know exactly what this means, because some work, such as Noland's, Olitski's, and Stella's paintings, is more than just interesting. It is, I want to say, *good*—more accurately, good *painting.* And in fact—despite the proliferation of work that is neither painting nor sculpture, and despite the pervasiveness of the facile notion that the arts in our time are at last heading towards synthesis—what modernism has come increasingly to mean is that, more than ever, value or quality can persuasively be predicated of work that lies only *within,* not *between,* the individual arts. (Though it has also come to mean that that work must challenge, in characteristic ways, what we are prepared to *count* as belonging more than trivially to the art in question.) The circularity of this state of affairs will be repugnant to many, and it is certainly harrowing, but I do not think that it is self-condemning. The crucial question, after all, is not so much whether anything artistically valuable lies outside the circle, as whether a meaningful concept of artistic value or a significant experience of it can reside anywhere but in its coils.

My own impulse is to say that interest is basic to art—but not to either making

or judging it. And if it is objected that what we ought to try to do is enjoy art rather than judge it, I would simply say that that may have been possible once but isn't anymore. This, however, is not to contrast enjoyment with judging—it is rather to insist that there is no real enjoyment, or no enjoyment of what is really there, apart from judging. One can still enjoy Olitski's paintings simply as color, if one wants, but that is not to enjoy them or be moved by them or see them as *paintings.* And this means that there is an important sense in which one is not seeing them at all. But to experience painting as painting is inescapably to engage with the question of quality. This, too, is the work of modernism, and if one does not like it one ought to face the fact that what one does not like is painting, or at least what painting has become.

10. Stella made four paintings in each of the eleven formats. There are, then, eleven subseries within which not only the shape of the support but the configurations on the surface of the canvas are identical.

11. I take a reductionist conception of modernist painting to mean this: that painting roughly since Manet is seen as a kind of cognitive enterprise in which a certain quality (e.g., literalness), set of norms (e.g., flatness and the delimitation of flatness), or core of problems (e.g., how to acknowledge the literal character of the support) is progressively revealed as constituting the *essence* of painting—and, by implication, of having done so all along. This seems to me gravely mistaken, not on the grounds that modernist painting is not a cognitive enterprise, but because it radically misconstrues the kind of cognitive enterprise modernist painting is. What the modernist painter can be said to discover in his work—what can be said to be revealed to him in it—is not the irreducible essence of *all* painting but rather that which, at the present moment in painting's history, is capable of convincing him that it can stand comparison with the painting of both the modernist and premodernist past whose quality seems to him beyond question. (In this sense one might say that modernist painting discovers the essence of all painting to be quality.) The object of his enterprise is therefore both knowledge and conviction—knowledge through, or better still, in, conviction. And that knowledge is simultaneously knowledge of painting (i.e., what it must be in order to elicit conviction) and of himself (i.e., what he finds himself convinced by)—apprehended not as two distinct entities but in a single, inextricable fruition. It should be clear that the conception of modernist painting that I have just adumbrated is not only antireductionist but antipositivist; in this respect I believe it has significant affinities with the persuasive account of the enterprise of science put forward by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962). The further exploration of these affinities would, I am sure, prove rewarding. But a footnote is not the best place to begin.

12. Clement Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," in *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), p. 144.

13. See Thompson Clarke's essay, "Seeing Surfaces and Physical Objects," in *Philosophy in America,* ed. Max Black (London, 1966), pp. 98–114. The fact that eyesight touches only the surface of solid objects, and then only part of that surface, has traditionally played an important role in philosophical skepticism.

Morris Louis

The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.

—Karl Marx[1]

MORRIS LOUIS was born Morris Bernstein in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 24, 1912, and died of lung cancer in Washington, D.C., on September 7, 1962. He lived for painting. According to his widow, the former Marcella Siegel and now Mrs. Abner Brenner, he habitually rose early and worked at least as long as there was daylight in a small, first-floor room in their suburban Washington house. The period of Louis's major accomplishment began some time in 1954 after he had given up traditional easel painting in favor of staining acrylic paint into lengths of canvas (at first sized and later unsized) and continued until about three months before his death, when the malignancy was first diagnosed. Louis's technique during these years entailed constant stooping and bending, which resulted in a chronic condition of the lower back that caused him great pain but could not keep him from working. Among those who knew him there is universal agreement that Louis's integrity was remarkable. This integrity—which, not surprisingly, appears to have made itself felt from time to time as something harsh, secretive, even

This is the text of *Morris Louis* (New York, 1971), which for some years has been out of print. A first version of the present essay, roughly half its length, served as the introduction to the catalog of the full Louis retrospective exhibition of 1966–67 (Los Angeles, Boston, and St. Louis) and was published under the title "The Achievement of Morris Louis" in *Artforum* 5 (Feb. 1967): 34–40.

ungenerous—went hand in hand with a deep confidence in his own powers, though not necessarily in the value of what he had already done. Mrs. Brenner has remarked that Louis always thought of himself as young, his life's work still in front of him, but never doubted that he would accomplish what he had to do. Louis's belief in himself survived not only the long maturing of his art but, after 1954, periods of uncertainty about what to do next. It is characteristic of Louis's strength of mind that he was able to ride each such episode out and then put it behind him: once he found himself in a new vein all uncertainty vanished. Throughout his career Louis destroyed large numbers of paintings that failed to satisfy him. On one occasion, when he became convinced that an entire series of paintings that had just been exhibited in New York was inferior to his previous work, he did not hesitate to destroy all those within his reach—at least a year's work.[2] There can be little doubt but that the sudden onset of his terminal illness prevented him from pruning his oeuvre as thoroughly as he would have done had he had more time and strength. Louis seems to have had little taste for artistic gatherings of any kind. He never learned to tolerate light conversation about painting, nor to reconcile himself to the inevitable circumstance that his students were often less passionately devoted to painting than he. Above all Louis appears to have been profoundly serious and to have respected only those individual men and women whose integrity, discipline, and seriousness could stand the test of his own. The assumption behind these remarks is that the impress of Louis's seriousness can be felt throughout his mature work: the sensuous, subtle, sometimes electrifying color of his finest paintings ought not to numb us to the fact that, for Louis, painting consisted in far more than the production of sensuously pleasing or arresting objects. Rather, it was an enterprise which unless inspired by moral and intellectual passion was fated to triviality and unless informed by uncommon powers of moral and intellectual discrimination was doomed to failure.

The ambition to make good paintings has always entailed a stringent artistic morality. But for Louis, as for modernist painters generally, the relation of his personal integrity to that actually manifest in his paintings seems to have been acutely problematic. Louis's notorious reluctance to visit New York, both before and after his breakthrough to major achievement in 1954, is a case in point. In an obvious sense it was characteristic of his integrity: he seems always to have been reluctant to expose himself to much contemporary painting, perhaps because by not doing so he minimized the risk of coming

under the influence of another's art. But it is also possible that that reluctance played him false: Clement Greenberg has remarked that Louis might not have executed the series of paintings he later came to repudiate and destroy had he allowed himself to visit New York more often in order to see what kind of paintings he did not want to paint.[3] Such visits, Greenberg seems to be claiming, not only would not have compromised Louis's integrity; they would have helped him to make it count pictorially. This is a characteristically modernist insight into a characteristically modernist situation. It implies that even the most incorruptible integrity in combination with even the highest gifts cannot guarantee that the paintings that result will evince integrity in pictorially significant terms. And this in turn suggests that, in modernist painting, integrity is not only a moral condition but a pictorial task. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this has always been the case, but that under modernism the fact that this is so has been made lucid and explicit, with the result that the problem is experienced with unprecedented sharpness.

The kind of problem this is becomes clearer if one considers the most important event in Louis's career, his breakthrough to major achievement. Until 1954 Louis's work is of limited significance. One is tempted to characterize it, what has survived of it, as both minor and provincial. This is not to say that by the late 1940s Louis was not an extremely accomplished painter, or that his dedication to painting was incomplete. But there is nothing about *The Ladder* of 1950, or the *Charred Journal* pictures of 1951, or the collages of 1953 that, even in retrospect, presages his subsequent emergence as a painter of the first importance. In 1952 Louis entered into friendship with another Washington painter, twelve years younger than himself, Kenneth Noland. Noland had previously studied at Black Mountain College, where he had met Clement Greenberg, and in April 1953 Noland persuaded Louis to come with him to New York to visit Greenberg and see what they could of current painting. In both respects their trip (April 3–5) was a success. They talked at length with Greenberg, who arranged for them to visit Helen Frankenthaler's studio, where a recent painting, *Mountains and Sea* (1952; fig. 8), impressed them powerfully. Noland recalls that Louis in particular was struck by Frankenthaler's picture, which seemed to both men charged with implications they were anxious to explore. For several weeks after their return they worked together, sometimes on the same canvas; Noland has described their cooperation at this moment as an attempt to defeat their previous assumptions about painting.

This entailed trying to eliminate everything recognizable—because familiar—as structure, as well as experimenting with new techniques. Within a short while each returned to working alone.

In January 1954 Greenberg visited Washington to see if either Louis or Noland had done anything that ought to be included in an exhibition of "Emerging Talent" he was then choosing for the Kootz Gallery in New York. Greenberg recalls being shown about thirty paintings that Louis had made since their first meeting. Many contained floral motifs and all but five or six seemed to Greenberg to depend too obviously on Jackson Pollock. From these five or six Greenberg finally chose three—*Trellis* (1953; fig. 9) and *Silver Discs* (1953) among them—for the exhibition at Kootz. In the light of Louis's subsequent development the tentative, unrealized character of these paintings is unmistakable. At the same time they document Louis's desire to bring his work into close relation with that of Pollock and Frankenthaler. In *Silver Discs,* for example, the use of aluminum paint, with its high reflectance, derives from Pollock; and the looseness of handling represents, it seems, an attempt to get away from the packed, fundamentally Cubist structural mode of Willem de Kooning and his followers. But Louis had not yet found anything that could be called an alternative either to Cubist principles of structure or to Abstract Expressionist brushwork, and in the end *Silver Discs* remains at least as close to de Kooning as to Pollock. *Trellis,* with its dripped pigment and expanse of bare canvas, is closer in spirit to Louis's mature work but seems in retrospect to derive from Pollock and Frankenthaler rather than to go on from them. Color begins rather tentatively to make itself felt here, but without more than hinting at the importance it was soon to assume.

Later that year Greenberg suggested to the dealer Pierre Matisse that he consider giving Louis a one-man show. Matisse agreed to look at his work, and sometime during the winter of 1954 Louis sent nine large, unstretched paintings to New York. All had been made since Greenberg's visit, by staining waves of the acrylic paint Magna into lengths of canvas that had previously been at least partially sized. When, together with Helen Frankenthaler, Greenberg unrolled them, he was astonished to find himself for the first time in the presence of Louis's mature art.

Because similar transitions have taken place in the careers of several, though by no means all, important modernist painters, certain aspects of Louis's breakthrough have a significance that is more than personal. I will cite four:

1. Louis was past forty when it took place. This indicates that modernist painting may exact a far longer term of apprenticeship, if I may call it that, than traditional painting ever did.

2. The paintings that constitute his breakthrough represent a radical departure from his previous work, especially work executed before his visit to New York, as regards both technique and general appearance. This means that if his development up to 1954 is thought of as a period of apprenticeship, the relation that his mature pictures bear to his apprentice work is without precedent in traditional painting. Pictures like *Intrigue* (fig. 10), *Salient,* and *Iris* (all 1954) do not represent a culmination or fruition of specific tendencies visible in his previous work. On the contrary, they amount to a repudiation of that work and its underlying assumptions. They are, to be sure, the fruition of his lifelong commitment to painting. But the discontinuity between Louis's mature work and what has survived of his previous painting inclines one to say that the commitment, or the depth of it, did not find its way into his art until the breakthrough itself.

3. Indeed, it can be said that what Louis broke through to was not just a new kind of painting but his own artistic identity as well. Greenberg has described Louis's response to Pollock and Frankenthaler in the following way:

> Abandoning Cubism with a completeness for which there was no precedent in either influence, he began to feel, think, and conceive almost exclusively in terms of open color. The revelation he received became an Impressionist revelation, and before he so much as caught a glimpse of anything by [Clyfford] Still, [Barnett] Newman, or [Mark] Rothko, he had aligned his art with theirs. His revulsion against Cubism was a revulsion against the sculptural. Cubism meant shapes, and shapes meant armatures of light and dark. Color meant areas and zones, and the interpenetration of these, which could be achieved better by variations of hue than by variations of value. Recognitions like these liberated Louis's originality along with his hitherto dormant gift for color.[4]

It ought, I think, to strike one as strange to speak of recognitions liberating an artist's originality or his gifts. Much of the strangeness resides in the implication that prior to those recognitions his originality and his gifts were simply not in evidence. But the discontinuity between Louis's breakthrough pictures and his previous work suggests that something of the sort was in fact the case. Louis's break-

through consisted, one might say, not in suddenly covering a great deal of ground which until then he had been traversing slowly, but in discovering, suddenly, where he really was—a discovery that gave him access at last to his own powers, originality, vision, experience, integrity. . . . In pictures like *Intrigue, Salient,* and *Iris* Louis broke through to these—he made them count in his work—for the first time.

4. The relation of Louis's mature paintings to those of Pollock and Frankenthaler on the one hand, and to the work of subsequent modernists such as Noland and Jules Olitski on the other, makes it tempting to describe Louis's breakthrough as one in which painting itself broke through to its future. Louis said of Frankenthaler, "She was a bridge between Pollock and what was possible."[5] This remark is extremely suggestive. For one thing, it implies that Pollock's achievement demanded to be taken into account by any painter who, like Louis, wanted to make paintings capable of eliciting the kind of conviction Pollock's paintings elicited—that the very possibility of making convincing painting had come to seem, in large measure, a function of what Pollock had done. At the same time, Louis's remark implies that it was far from clear exactly how Pollock's work ought to be used in order to realize that possibility. Louis had been interested in Pollock, chiefly on the basis of reproductions, before visiting New York, and one can say of the 1951 *Charred Journal* pictures that they are influenced by him. But Pollock remains exactly that, an influence, in those paintings; as a result the paintings themselves remain of minor importance. Whatever else the right use of Pollock was to mean, it had at least to signify a relation to his work which did not allow him to remain an influence, that is, one which could not be described in terms of anything that might be called their respective "styles."[6] And it was Frankenthaler who gave Louis the decisive clue as to how this relation might be achieved.

As Greenberg has remarked, one of the consequences of Louis's exposure to the work of Frankenthaler and Pollock was the liberation of his gift for color. The question which now arises for me is: What was it in Pollock's work, revealed through Frankenthaler's, which effected this liberation? What possibility, hitherto unrecognized, was now opened? I am going to claim that the crux of Louis's relation to Pollock concerns the role, function, and status of *drawing* in their respective oeuvres, and that, in general, issues and considerations associated with drawing are central to Louis's achievement. This is not to say that his accomplishments as a colorist have been overrated

by his admirers. Louis ranks among the supreme masters of color in modern art: if this is not yet orthodox opinion, it will be soon enough. It is, however, to suggest that his mastery of color must be understood in relation to certain issues raised for the first time, it now seems, in Pollock's paintings of 1947–50—above all by the refusal of his dripped, allover line to be perceived as bounding or circumscribing shapes and figures, whether abstract or representational.[7]

In Pollock's finest paintings of this period, such as *Cathedral* (1947), *Number 1, 1948* (1948; fig. 1), *Number 1, 1949* (1949), and *Autumn Rhythm* (1950; fig. 5), line is no longer *contour*, no longer the *edge* of anything. It does not, by and large, give rise to positive and negative areas: we are not made to feel that one part of the canvas demands to be read as figure, whether abstract or representational, against another part of the canvas read as ground. This is tantamount to the claim that, in Pollock's allover drip paintings of 1947–50, line has been freed at last from the job of describing contours and bounding shapes—that it has been purged of its figurative character. And this amounts to the claim that, in these paintings, traditional drawing is revoked, or dissolved, at any rate drastically undermined. Not that in Pollock's work of this period there is nothing to be called drawing. But starting with this work the determination of what, in a given instance, constitutes drawing is a problem without a general answer: we no longer know beforehand what drawing is, though we may find ourselves recognizing something as drawing, often to our surprise.[8] It should also be remarked that in Pollock's 1947–50 pictures the dripped, allover line is not experienced as though it were some kind of tangible object in its own right—the way, for example, individual lines in Vasily Kandinsky's paintings often seem like segments of wire suspended in space. On the contrary, the illusion established in these paintings is not of tangibility but of its opposite: as though the dripped line, indeed the paintings in their entirety, are accessible to eyesight alone, not to touch. This is not to minimize the sensuous, often opulent materiality of their surfaces; it *is* to claim that that materiality is subsumed within a pictorial whole which, in an important sense, is based on the negation of materiality as such. It is what I shall call the opticality of the 1947–50 paintings, founded on the negation not only of traditional tactile illusionism but of traditional drawing as well, that lies at the heart of Louis's relation to Pollock.

Even during these years, however, Pollock seems to have chafed at

the deep need to expunge figuration from his work and on several occasions made paintings that may be described as attempts to combine figuration and opticality—more precisely, to achieve a kind of figuration whose limits, while distinct, are not perceived as illusively tangible, as contour or edge. Only one of these paintings was wholly successful: *Out of the Web* (1949; pl. 1), in which Pollock accomplished figuration by negating—actually cutting and scraping away—parts of an allover field dripped onto the smooth side of a piece of brown Masonite. In *Out of the Web* figuration is not seen as an object in the world or shape on a flat surface; it is not seen as the presence of anything, but rather, one might say, as the absence of portions of one's visual field. This impression is strengthened if one asks oneself where the excised and scraped portions appear to be situated in relation to the rest of the dripped field. For me, at any rate, they do not exactly seem to lie behind the field, despite the fact that where the paint has been removed one sees the brown Masonite beneath it, and they do not seem to lie either on the surface itself or in some close, ambiguous, essentially Cubist relation to it. In the end the relation between the figuration and the painted field virtually defeats description: it is as though the figuration is situated *within one's eyes*, as strange as this may sound. And indeed, the figuration in question, which seems on the verge both of dancing off the visual field and of dissolving into it, is almost as hard to focus on as a sequence of actual blind spots would be. In *Out of the Web* Pollock succeeded by the most radical of means in achieving figuration whose limits, while razor sharp, are not perceived as contour or edge, as the limits of something tangible. Characteristically, however, Pollock abandoned the solution. It could not be improved upon and repetition would have debased it.

In 1951 Pollock returned to traditional drawing with a vengeance in a series of paintings executed on raw canvas in black Duco thinned with turpentine. In comparison with the type of painting then dominant in New York—the style associated chiefly with de Kooning—Pollock's 1951–52 pictures are devoid of a whole range of tactile connotations. But this has mostly to do with their general openness and extraordinary facture—the paint is, in effect, soaked into the canvas—rather than with the character of the figuration, whose drawnness ineluctably alludes to the world of tangible things. This is true even though a stained edge or line is, in a sense, neither hard nor sharp; in Greenberg's words it is not a "cutting" edge.[9] There are, however, a few paintings made at this time—for example, *Number*

3, 1951 (1951; fig. 6)—in which the limits of the configurations made by the thinned enamel defy being read as drawn, as having been circumscribed by a cursive, draftsmanlike act. (This is entirely compatible with the observation that each such configuration appears to have been produced as a whole by a single large act of drawing.) As a result the paintings in question are experienced in exclusively visual terms and anticipate perhaps more closely than any other paintings by Pollock what Louis accomplished roughly two years later in his own breakthrough. In fact, one way of describing Louis's accomplishment might be to say that he found in stained color the means to a synthesis of figuration and opticality equivalent to that which Pollock achieved in the few pictures like *Number 3* in which the thinned pigment has soaked into raw canvas in such a way as to seem to have *assumed* its limits—as it were, by capillary action alone—rather than to have been circumscribed *by* them. Pollock is said to have regarded *Number 3* as one of the strongest of his pictures of this period, and it is an open question why he never pursued what are from our present vantage its apparent implications. Perhaps it was because those implications were not apparent to him. There is, for example, an unmistakable allusion to the human figure in *Number 3,* and it is likely that this, rather than any quality of figuration, is what Pollock mostly saw in it.

In Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea,* which appears to have struck Louis with the force of revelation, Pollock's stain technique is adapted to the making of a kind of abstract landscape. Areas of color allude more or less frankly to the world of objects and appear to be juxtaposed to one another, however loosely, in something like the space of that world. Frankenthaler's characteristic reliance on a fundamentally drawing gesture, at once more cursive and less emphatic than Pollock's, is evident throughout the painting. In places she even bounds or subdivides areas of color with thin, wiry lines; and in general the perimeters of these areas strike one as drawn and therefore as tangible. It is, of course, in its exploitation of stained *color*—whatever the character of the figuration in it—that *Mountains and Sea*—is the bridge between Pollock and Louis which the latter knew it to have been. What is less clear is how that bridging relation ought to be described. It might be claimed, for example, that what Frankenthaler revealed to Louis were certain possibilities for color opened up by staining. But this, although not exactly wrong, fails, I believe, to account for the fundamental differences between Frankenthaler and

Louis as well as for the depth of Louis's relation to Pollock. I want to suggest instead that what Louis may be said to have found in *Mountains and Sea* were certain new and hitherto unimagined possibilities *for figuration*—for combining figuration and opticality in a new synthesis of seemingly limitless potential—which the staining of different colors, rather than just black as in Pollock, opened up, and that it was the realization of those possibilities that liberated Louis's gift for color. Merely staining thinned pigment of various hues into bare canvas was not enough to do this. It was only when Louis discovered in the staining of such pigments the means to a kind of figuration capable of sustaining a broad gamut of internal articulations all of which are experienced as illusively intangible—as accessible to eyesight but not to touch—that his breakthrough was at last under way.

Roughly, Louis discovered that if *successive waves* of thinned pigment, each a different color, are stained into a length of canvas, what is produced is a single, visually continuous configuration within which the individual configurations left by each wave in turn, or at least the limits of or transitions between those configurations, are still visible. By laying down wave on top of wave of liquid pigment Louis literally put color into color—more precisely, color configuration into color configuration—so that, within the stained portion of any veil painting, the perception of a change in hue, almost no matter how slight or seemingly insignificant, indicates a transition between configurations. One might say that the perception of such a change *is* the perception of figuration. This is true even when, as often happens, one cannot make out the shape or the original color of the configurations involved. The fluctuations range from minute gradients fragile enough to be quenched by artificial illumination to abrupt, linear, sometimes almost crystalline transitions both of hue and, up to a point, of value. But even at their most salient the limits of individual color configurations are not experienced as though they were the edge of some kind of tangible thing; rather, one's eye is gripped and moved by an extraordinarily compelling continuity *across* those limits which in effect forestalls their assuming tactile significance.

At least three factors establish such continuity. First and perhaps most important, there is the unbrokenness of color itself across the limits—an unbrokenness of pigment belonging both to the individual color configurations and to the last, unifying wave of darkish color which, almost from the start, Louis spread across the entire

stained portion of the veils. Second, the characteristic facture produced by staining reinforces the experienced continuity of color. As early as 1960 Greenberg wrote:

> Louis spills his paint on unsized and unprimed cotton duck canvas, leaving the pigment almost everywhere thin enough, no matter how many different veils of it are superimposed, for the eye to sense the threadedness and wovenness of the fabric underneath. But "underneath" is the wrong word. The fabric, being soaked in paint rather than merely covered by it, becomes paint in itself, color in itself, like dyed cloth: the threadedness and wovenness are in the color.[10]

Because the colors are, in Greenberg's words, "identified with the raw cotton surface,"[11] the continuity of the actual fabric across the portion of the picture surface impregnated with paint literally is one with that of the color itself. Third, the limits of the individual color configurations themselves—remarked, so far as is possible, in their own right—often do not strike one as drawn. In this respect, though not morphologically, they are like the dripped, allover line in Pollock's paintings of 1947–50 or the perimeters of the stain configurations in the few sheerly optical black-and-white pictures of 1951–52. But Pollock himself never abandoned the physical act of drawing, and it has been remarked how the "figure" in *Number 3* seems to have been laid down as a whole by such an act. In several of Louis's early stain pictures as well, something analogous makes itself felt—more strongly, in fact, than in any prebreakthrough paintings that have survived. For example, in *Untitled B* (1954) various color configurations seem to have been flung onto the canvas. But this appears to have been a brief and perhaps purging episode, and Louis's full-blown veil paintings of 1954—*Salient, Iris, Intrigue*—give the impression of not having been drawn, or acted on in any way. Among other things this seems to have meant that the risk of simply falling back into the constraints and gratifications of traditional drawing, and thereby into conventions ineluctably tactile in their connotations—a risk whose imminence is felt throughout Pollock's masterpieces of the late 1940s—was not one that Louis had to face. The opticality of his postbreakthrough work was much less precarious, much more firmly established than that of Pollock's allover drip paintings. Not that this saved Louis from losing his way. He seems to have spent the years 1955–57 making paintings whose figurative mode was close to that of Abstract Expressionism and all of which, except for a very few

not in his possession at the time, he subsequently destroyed. But losing his way entailed as drastic and general a reorientation of his art as breaking through did in the first place, and the paintings produced during that period seem, on the strength of the few that still exist, to have almost nothing in common with the 1954 veils. This proved to be an advantage when, in January 1958, Louis decided that the work of the preceding years was inferior to his 1954 paintings. The very discontinuity between the two meant that Louis did not have to reverse himself; rather, he was able simply to go back to painting veils as though he had never left off. (It was, one might say, not until early 1958 that Louis came to recognize the full significance of the early veils. Nothing like Louis's return to a previous moment in his development can be found in the career of any other major artist. I suggest, however, that precisely the same possibility of radically discontinuous development that first appeared in the characteristically modernist phenomenon of breakthrough has here become manifest in that of a painter who has already broken through losing his way and then finding it again, years later, where he lost it.)

But while the later veils are continuous with the earlier ones, there are important differences between them—differences that can perhaps be summed up in the claim that throughout the later veils color is much more closely and specifically answerable to figurative concerns and impulses, including the impulse to do away with figuration within the stained portion of the canvas altogether, than in the earlier paintings. The figuration within the stained portions of the later veils tends to be simpler, starker, more regular than in the 1954 paintings—less a function of slight changes of hue, faint bleeds of thinner, and coarse granular deposits than of definite, readily apparent limits. One no longer has to look for it—in the color, for example. In fact one does not look *into* so much as *at* the color of the later veils, and one's sense of the continuity of color in them is not, as in the earlier veils, largely the result of its continuous fluctuation so much as of its uniform, or uniformly dense, extension across the entire stained portion of the canvas. Individual color configurations no longer flow across one another but, instead, tend to be laid down either alongside and often partly overlapping one another or in laterally extensive but vertically oriented (e.g., flamelike, stalagmitelike) strata: the lateral expansiveness of the color is not enacted by any apparent flow in that direction but is simply stated by the breadth of the painted field. It is not surprising that all but a very few of the

later veils are physically much larger than the earlier ones. Similarly, the coloristic richness of the strongest 1958–59 veils consists not in the simultaneous presence of several more or less disembodied hues in the same portion of the canvas, but in the binding together in a single darkish tonality—often brown, bronze, or green—of the comparatively few, and for the most part clearly delimited, hues they comprise. Traditionally, shading to a dark monochrome has meant the extinguishing of color. But throughout the later veils individual configurations are made coloristically continuous with one another by a shared toning, a shared banking of their fires. Indeed, definiteness of figuration and darkness of tonality seem closely related, as though such definiteness necessitated an even stronger, more compelling continuity of color than the superimposition of successive waves of thinned pigment alone could provide. Whereas experiencing the 1954 veils involves the recognition that various fugitive, seemingly insignificant phenomena have assumed the import of figuration, one is met and struck in the later veils by figuration whose perspicuousness is equal to that of traditional drawing and which only subsequently, as it were, one realizes consists in an unbroken, and in an important sense uniform, continuum of color.

That changes such as these went hand in hand with a significant gain in monumentality, if not in sheer quality, can be seen by comparing *Intrigue,* probably the strongest of the 1954 pictures and an unquestionable masterpiece, with *Terranean* (1958; pl. 2), which along with others among the later veils establishes a magnitude of realized ambition which perhaps only Pollock among Americans had previously achieved. *Intrigue* ravishes the beholder with its fullness of something like detail: the subtle, modulating color, simultaneously metallic and floral, the warm soft sepia graining of what may have been the last wave of pigment, the delicate, irregular, fugitive pattern of the overlapping configurations, the fragile, cloudlike crests of those configurations, aureoled by faint bleeds of thinner, evoking distance. . . . *Terranean* on the other hand strikes one as wholly devoid of incidental felicities. The stained portion looms as though just risen, its proportions together with the dense brown tonality of the whole connoting overwhelming mass, its internal figuration stark, sharp, almost menacing, at once flamelike and mineral in character. And yet, for the reasons I have given, one's perception both of the stained area as a whole and of the figuration it contains is not of things that are precisely tangible. Rather, it is as though the apparent massiveness and solidity of the one and the apparent hardness and

sharpness of the other were experienced by eyesight alone, without reference to the sense of touch; as though massiveness, solidity, hardness, and sharpness as such were known to eyesight alone and not to touch; as though the sense of touch *itself* were strictly visual.

The result, in this and other 1958–59 veils, is an extraordinary illusion: not of bodies in space, and not of space alone, but of modes of matter, modes of substance, none of which are wholly alien but none of which are entirely familiar either. It is as though some time after his return in early 1958 to painting veils, Louis discovered in the staining of successive waves of thinned pigment into raw or partially sized canvas the illusion of a new substance—a new, or fifth, element—whose properties he went on both to explore and to exploit, not systematically but with characteristic imagination, discipline, and resourcefulness. In comparison with the later veils one feels that the 1954 pictures explore and exploit the properties and behavior of thinned pigment itself.

If there is one aspect of the 1958–59 veils which Louis himself regarded as problematic, it is the relation of the stained portion of a given picture to the rough "border" of bare canvas which he consistently chose to leave between its sides and top and the framing edge. Nothing could have been simpler than to have placed the limits of the support wholly within the stained portion of the canvas, and Louis's refusal to do so more than twice—in *Atomic Crest* and *Longitude* (both 1954)[12]—strongly implies that the contrast between the stained and the bare canvas was important to him, perhaps because it virtually ruled out the possibility of seeing the interior of the veil configuration as a kind of *space* and thereby helped secure its illusive substantiality. At the same time it seems clear that Louis did not want the veil configuration to be seen purely and simply as a physical object, or its limits to be perceived as the edges of some sort of planar or otherwise tangible thing. In order to prevent this he tended to keep the amount of bare canvas at the sides and especially at the top of the veil configuration to a minimum: the less there was, the less the stained portion would be seen as silhouetted against it, and the less the bare canvas itself would assume the character of an independent spatial container in its own right. (Significantly, whenever Louis changed his mind about how much canvas was to be left between the veil configuration and the framing edge it always was to reduce the amount, never to increase it.) The desire to prevent the veil configuration from being seen principally as a silhouette, and instead to direct attention to its internal articulation, was almost certainly a factor

in the consistently large size of the later veils. (The paintings that are the hardest to understand in this context are the split or "open" or "columnar" veils, in which Louis chose to divide the veil configuration vertically into several slightly fanned-out prongs or limbs. This inevitably tends to emphasize the silhouette-like, therefore sculptural, character of the stained portion of the canvas, though it is also true that the generally rather loose, often scrubbed handling of the darkish segments themselves, in conjunction with the bare canvas intervals between them, invites one to experience the paintings in question as above all atmospheric.) Finally, in numerous paintings made during these years Louis took to hanging "tails" of thinned pigment from the outward-sloping sides of the veil configuration—in the split veils, from the individual segments—so as to soften the transition between the stained and the bare canvas. If this interpretation of the darkish "tails" in paintings like *Terranean* and *Tzadik* (1958) is correct, it seems fair to say that Louis need not have bothered; the ability of the 1958–59 veils to subsume under a sheerly optical mode of illusionism an extraordinary range of tactile qualities and effects, including the apparent hardness of the limits of the veil configurations themselves, has proved virtually limitless. But it would not be surprising if Louis, isolated by the advancedness of his sensibility, was less confident that this was so than we are now.

Because Louis painted in complete privacy we have no eyewitness account of how he worked. But it seems clear that the veils were made chiefly by pouring thinned Magna, the acrylic paint manufactured by his friend Leonard Bocour, onto a length of canvas which he had partly stapled to a kind of scaffolding or support. The paint ran from top to bottom as the paintings are reproduced here, and by tilting the scaffolding and manipulating the canvas itself Louis seems to have been able to control the flow of pigment across its surface. One can usually see the crests of the original configurations along the top of the veil configuration, where the first bright washes bellied before beginning their descent toward the bottom of the canvas. The darkish cusps often found at the bottom of these paintings are the result of unabsorbed paint having collected there in shallow pools after having flooded down the rest of the canvas. In some paintings the character of the figuration within the stained portion of the canvas suggests that Louis may have clipped folds together to make a series of pleats, into which the paint was allowed to flow and which were removed after it had dried, though there is evidence that at least

some of the time he employed a stick wound with cloth to direct the paint flow and perhaps even to determine rather precisely the limits of individual configurations. Some such implement was clearly used to help spread the last wave of thinned pigment across the stained portions of many of the 1958–59 veils. The room in which Louis worked was smaller than many of the veils he painted during 1957–59, and the vertical divisions which in some pictures punctuate the spreading color at approximately the middle and again about two feet to the right are almost certainly the result of his having had to fold the canvas in order to work on it in sections.[13]

It was Pollock who first removed the canvas from both stretcher and easel. Louis clearly found this liberating, but there is a difference between the two men that must be noted. Pollock placed the unstretched canvas on the floor or, at least up to 1947, tacked it to the wall; he needed, he said, "the resistance of a hard surface."[14] Whereas Louis seems to have needed nothing more, but nothing less, than the resistance of the *canvas itself.*

The exact chronology of Louis's career is obscure and likely to remain so.[15] He seems not to have kept any records of his work as it progressed, and signed and dated his paintings only when they were stretched and framed for exhibition. It even appears that he may have dated some of them according to when they were stretched and framed rather than according to when they had been painted. As a result we have only the roughest idea of the order in which Louis painted the 1958–59 veils, and so cannot hope to speculate intelligently about his development during that period. (For example, it would be useful to know when the split veils were painted relative to the others.) Nor do we know exactly when Louis painted the last veils, though it seems to have been around the time—either just before or, more likely, just after—of his first show at French & Company in April 1959.

He appears not to have found himself in the next major vein of his career, that of the paintings known as the unfurleds, until June or July 1960. That leaves about fourteen or fifteen months between the last of the veils and the first of the unfurleds. In retrospect this seems to have been a period of considerable uncertainty for Louis, during which he explored several disparate pictorial modes and even submitted to various influences. It would be wrong, though, to compare this period with the one that falls between the earlier and later veils. Between the late spring of 1959 and the early summer of 1960

Louis did not so much lose his way as launch a number of more or less tentative excursions from the place he found himself at the end of the veils. The pictures he made during this period are therefore of great interest. The best of them are also very good, though none achieves the same level of quality as the strongest of the veils, unfurleds, or stripes.

The magnificent *Saraband* (1959; pl. 3), one of Louis's masterpieces, seems to have been among the last of the veils and therefore brings us to the verge of the period in question. One can see in it how the fundamental conception of the veils—the binding together of individual color configurations in a single, continuous, completely integrated pictorial fabric—began to be called into question by the separating out of the various components. In particular, the final, hitherto unifying wave of darkish pigment now appears independent of, almost billowing in front of, the underlying configurations—an effect Louis did not pursue. In other paintings, notably *While* and *Where* (both 1960), Louis chose to do without the last wave of dark pigment entirely: both consist simply of what lies under the dark wave in a painting like *Lamed* (1959).[16] And it is in the direction of specifying and juxtaposing individual color configurations in a way that the medium of the veils did not allow that Louis moved, at least for a time.

For example, the paintings known as florals (1959; fig. 11) that Louis made during this period—exactly when is not certain—may be seen as an attempt to make individual color configurations perspicuous as discrete entities, as specific shapes, and thereby to match traditional drawing's ability to describe and specify shapes or figures. In this respect they break with the figurative mode of the veils, in which the limits of a given configuration are never seen as enclosing that configuration and often not even as belonging to it. At the same time, the fact that individual configurations are not literally isolated from one another on an expanse of blank canvas, but instead are allowed to overlap, and in some cases are partly or almost wholly overlaid with a wash of thinned pigment, evinces, it seems, a considered reluctance to give up what was after all the medium of his initial breakthrough. But it is also true that while the individual color configurations in the florals overlap one another, they do so in such a way as to leave no doubt where any single configuration begins or ends—for instance, by crossing at different angles. In fact, the specifying of individual configurations as discrete shapes seems to have

been concomitant with a reaction against the predominantly north-south orientation of the veils. The colors, too, are more intense, more nearly opaque than in the veils, and contrast more among themselves. Even in those pictures in which Louis laid down a uniform wash across at least some of the individual configurations, their original hues make themselves felt from beneath as if by force. The result is that whereas experiencing the veils involves becoming sensitive to a new kind of internal articulation of what remains a single, comprehensive configuration—a single continuum of color—the emphasis in the florals falls on the individual configurations themselves, in their discreteness and profusion.

It is hardly surprising that the florals encounter certain difficulties which the veils do not. The most important of these is that the individual color configurations tend almost invariably to assume a kind of plastic or tactile identity—to be seen as tangible entities nosing past and across one another in something like traditional space. In some pictures the configurations seem flatter, more nearly planar, in that respect more Cubist in feeling, than in others. But whether apparently flat or more full-bodied, they seem to float in a watery space of uncertain depth, a space that not only contains objects but is itself contained by the limits of the support. One's sense of the illusive tangibility of the configurations is exacerbated when, as is often the case, one comes to see their limits as determined by the artist's wrist, which is to say as drawn. (Figuration in the veils, in contrast, gives the impression of having been determined by uniform, impersonal, not just natural but elemental forces.) More generally, there is something slightly lopped or summary, in that sense arbitrary, about the shapes of the individual configurations in the florals—as though the shape of a given configuration derives whatever conviction it can be said to possess from the illusive tangibility of that configuration rather than from the character of the shape itself. And this makes the color of that configuration seem arbitrary, as if merely added or applied: what matters, one feels, is the illusion of discrete forms milling in somewhat liquid space rather than the precise shapes and colors of those forms. To say this is not to deny that the florals contain passages of great loveliness and originality, especially toward the outer reaches of the stained areas, or that some of the florals overcome these difficulties to a remarkable degree. That this is so is a measure of Louis's genius for improvisation. There is, however, a group of floral-type paintings, the so-called Aleph Series (fig.

12), which postdate the "pure" florals—they were painted, it seems, in the late spring of 1960, after Louis's second show at French & Company—to which the above strictures do not quite apply. The most obvious differences between the "pure" florals and the Aleph Series paintings are also the most important: in the first the individual configurations almost always seem to drift in toward the middle of the canvas, crossing one another at various angles as they go, while in the second they appear instead to radiate outward from a common center. Furthermore, the entire central portion of the Aleph Series paintings, amounting in some cases to most of the canvas, is covered by a copious dollop of heavy, mostly brownish pigment. The result is that the individual configurations no longer seem to slide past one another at different depths but instead are seen as belonging to a single, compound image. It is also true that in several of these paintings the dollops themselves are perceived as tangible if somewhat amorphous, somewhat fluid entities in which the individual configurations are mostly embedded. In *Aleph I, II, III, V,* and *VI,* however, the compound image made by the radiating configurations and central stain is experienced not as flowing off the bottom of the canvas, but rather as suspended at its center, and this has the surprising effect of rendering that image comparatively disembodied, insubstantial, intangible. Kenneth Noland, in his own breakthrough paintings of the late 1950s, was the first to discover the dephysicalizing, dematerializing power of centering and suspending as such. *Aleph I, II, III, V,* and *VI* are, accordingly, closer in conception to Noland's work than anything else in Louis's oeuvre, and may in fact owe something to his example. Whether or not this is so, the fact that Louis did not pursue this mode of pictorial organization suggests that it may have been alien to his imagination. Throughout his career he seems to have experienced a need to anchor the stained portions of his paintings to the limits of the support: one might even say that for Louis the task of structure consisted largely in the resolution or satisfaction of that need.

During this period Louis also painted many other pictures. The most important among them are probably the ones which Greenberg has described as geometric, in which Louis, perhaps partly in response to Newman, divided the canvas into clearly (though not rigidly) delimited areas of single colors. His motivation seems to have been toward clarity and simplicity of structure, but there is a schematic quality to these paintings which seems foreign to Louis's art

and to which he never returned. There are yet other paintings which seem to evince the influence of Still, but these are by and large less successful than the ones already mentioned.

Louis himself regarded the unfurleds, which he seems to have worked on from the early summer of 1960 until (at the latest) early 1961, as his most ambitious statement (pl. 4).[17] In these pictures parallel but irregular rivulets of intense, generally opaque color are arranged in inward-slanting banks on both sides of large canvases. The rivulets are a new kind of figuration in Louis's work. Neither line nor shape, they have the self-sufficiency of the first and the corporeality of the second. Not only do they not strike one as drawn, one cannot for the most part even read around, or along, their perimeters. It is, one might say, as though they *have* none—more accurately, as though even at their broadest they are *all* perimeter, *all* limit. That one is driven to formulations of this sort is due largely to their color, the intensity and constancy of which across each rivulet prevents one from distinguishing, in the act of perception, between perimeter and interior. Instead, the eye incorporates each rivulet whole.

But the unfurleds' relation to drawing concerns more than just the rivulets of color. It has to do as well with the vast expanse of canvas into which they are stained and whose original blankness (the blankness, one feels, of an enormous *page*) they simultaneously destroy and make pictorially meaningful. Specifically, it is as though drawing's primitive character as mark, as something decisive, irreversible, even cataclysmic that happens on, and to, the blank page or canvas—something that, thereafter, is manifest both in its own right, as a unique entity, and in its ineluctable consequences for the perfect blankness and apparent flatness of the original sheet—is, in these paintings, made perspicuous as never before. "The first mark on a surface," Greenberg has observed, "destroys its virtual flatness."[18] In the unfurleds Louis made major art out of what might be called the *firstness of marking* as such—a firstness prior to any act of marking (e.g., drawing), prior to individuation as a type of mark (e.g., a line), and prior as well to any draftsmanly task (e.g., the circumscription of shapes and figures). One's experience of the unfurleds can be vertiginous. The banked rivulets—here again their vibrant, biting color is crucial—open up the picture plane more radically than ever before, as though seeing the first marking we are for the first time shown the void. The dazzling blankness of the untouched canvas at once repulses and engulfs the eye, like an infinite abyss, the abyss

that opens up behind the least mark we make on a plane surface, or *would* open up if innumerable conventions both of art and of life did not limit the consequences of our act.

Greenberg has remarked on the probable importance of Noland's paintings of the late 1950s to Louis's development beyond the veils:

> [Louis's] art would have evolved anyhow, I feel, towards intenser and more opaque color, and vertical stripings were already emerging from under his "veils" in the years previous. Noland's influence served, however, to speed their emergence, and his example also demonstrated the uses of the off-white of the unprimed cotton duck as a field on which to float vertical as well as concentric stripes. One of the effects achieved was that of boundlessness, of anonymous and ambiguous space, and the particular triumph of Noland's painting is the way in which it specifies and at the same time generalizes off-white (or, for that matter, brown or yellow or red) "space," making it seem both very literal and very abstract.[19]

This is doubtless true. It is also true that the emphasis Louis places on the bare canvas in the unfurleds, the sheer primacy he gives it, has no equivalent in the work of any other painter, and that what one registers, however obscurely, as the meaning of that emphasis, that primacy, is something utterly and profoundly personal. It is as though what throughout the veils had been Louis's deep but ultimately private involvement with the canvas on which—more accurately, with which—he painted is in the unfurleds made fully manifest for the first time; as though that involvement *alone* takes the place of what I have described as the medium of his initial breakthrough and of the veils generally, the superimposition of successive waves of thinned pigment. At the same time, it is above all the character and placement of the figuration in the unfurleds that both establish the primacy of the bare canvas and articulate its significance. For example, the slight but reiterated undulations of the banked rivulets of color are experienced as a kind of *billowing,* not just of the rivulets, and not of the entire canvas exactly—the latter is not seen as other than taut and flat (indeed, that the canvas is not just flat but stretched taut becomes meaningful in a new way)—but of the breadth and depth of everything, or of the nothing, the blank canvas opens onto. It is as though in the unfurleds tautness and flatness themselves billow in a wind whose source and nature remain wholly mysterious. This is, I want to claim, the vision of the unfurleds, one which, for all its metaphysical reach and power, Louis achieved only

on the strength of, only within, his ongoing involvement with canvas and its various properties and qualities. In this sense the billowing I have remarked is at bottom that of canvas as such, *Louis's* canvas as such, though it is also, I have wanted to suggest, something more.

The primacy of the bare canvas is also established by the grouping of the rivulets of color in facing banks at the sides of the unfurleds, not simply because that arrangement leaves the central portion of each painting blank, but, more important, because it obstructs one from being able to focus one's attention on all the rivulets simultaneously. One can, of course, bear down with the utmost concentration on either bank of rivulets; what one cannot do is bear down with that intensity on both banks at the same time. (This is especially true of the unfurleds with a large number of narrow rivulets in each bank, which is perhaps why the strongest of these seem the purest realization of the unfurled conception.) And because one cannot, each bank enjoys a special autonomy relative to the other as regards color. There are, for example, unfurleds like *Theta* (1960) in which each of the two banks contains a different range or family of colors; and there are others like *Pi* (1960) in which both the colors and their ordering are the same in the two banks. But the first are not perceived as divided or contrasting any more than the second are experienced as symmetrical or balanced. Rather, it is only by a distinct act of comparing one bank against the other that whatever differences and similarities between them there are become salient. One might even say that it is impossible to see both banks at the same time; one might, that is, if there were not a clear sense in which this is not true—namely, the sense in which everything a given unfurled contains is seen when one's attention is brought to rest on the painting *as a whole.* In other words, experiencing the unfurleds means seeing but being unable to bear down on the rivulets of color: as though one were physically too close to the unfurleds to be able to bring everything they comprise into simultaneous focus—as though one were compelled by that closeness to focus, to look, infinitely beyond them. And yet stepping back changes nothing. The illusory closeness of the unfurleds—which is what *makes* the blankness of the canvas seem like that of an enormous page—as well as the vertiginous "beyond" they open onto, belong not to one's actual situation viewing them, but to the paintings themselves. For example, that the two banks of rivulets slant in opposite directions is instrumental in obstructing one from bearing down on both at the same time. And here again I suggest that that closeness is at bottom *Louis's* closeness to

the large expanses of unsized and unprimed canvas which he wielded and mastered—not, one imagines, without enormous difficulty—in a room smaller than them.

In his stripe paintings (1961–62; pl. 5), which Louis moved to after the unfurleds, and on which he worked until just before his death, the relation to drawing shifted once more. Instead of banked rivulets there are vertical, perfectly straight paths, belts, bands, or—as they are generally called—stripes of color, often of somewhat different thicknesses, grouped in bunches or stacks at least some distance from the sides of the picture. To describe the stripes as perfectly straight is not to deny that a single stripe may vary in width at different points on its trajectory: it is the trajectory itself that counts, and *that,* one feels, could not be straighter (or, one might say, shorter). Except in rare cases, which appear to have been accidental in origin, adjacent stripes touch down their entire lengths. In the early paintings the stripes have a tendency to overlap, and therefore to partly blend into one another. But after a while Louis chose to prevent this from happening and found the means to do so. Unlike the rivulets in the unfurleds, the stripes are the focus, almost the subject, of these paintings. They do not open the picture plane so much as cauterize it, and one is not, as in the unfurleds, precipitated beyond them so much as transfixed by them: the precipitousness which, in the unfurleds, looms in the relation between the rivulets of color and the blank canvas is, in the stripe paintings, virtually embodied in the stripes themselves. Like the rivulets, though perhaps even more emphatically, the stripes are not seen as circumscribed by a cursive gesture, as bounded by an outline or contour.[20] In this sense, a crucial one, they are not drawn. But whereas in the unfurleds the rivulets seem the manifestation of natural forces—one sees them as having flowed across or broken through from behind the blank canvas—in the later series one experiences the stripes as in some important sense intentional, as issuing from a distinctively human and not just natural action. They are wholly abstract embodiments or correlatives of human will or impulse—specifically, the will or impulse to *draw,* to make one's mark, to take possession, in characteristic ways, of a plane surface. In this sense they *can* be seen as drawn: not, however, as the fruit of any imaginable act of drawing—the sheer apparent velocity of their paths across the canvas precludes that possibility—but as the instantaneous, unmediated realization of the drawing impulse, the will to draw.

This is largely but not entirely the work of color. For example, it

is above all because the stripes are *of* color that one is forced to speak of their apparent velocity, and therefore of them as having trajectories. Moreover, the very contiguity of the stripes would be not just technically unattainable but literally inconceivable if it were not for the fact that they are of different colors. At the same time, the nature of that contiguity, even of what one experiences as contiguous, depends intimately on the breadth of the stripes in a given painting: whereas the relatively broad stripes are seen as touching one another along their limits, the narrow stripes are perceived as touching in their entirety, so to speak—as though all of each narrow stripe were contiguous with all of each of the stripes on either side of it. Put slightly differently, it is as though what one experiences as contiguous in the narrow-stripe paintings are, if not exactly lines, at any rate vectors of color. One might say that the nature or essence of a line or vector—that it has no breadth—is what enables these particular paths of color to be made laterally contiguous with one another as never before, while the nature of color—that it is irreducibly multiple and spatially absolutely specific—is what enables these lines or vectors to be made contiguous, and moreover allows them to *have* width, up to a point, and still be seen as touching in their entirety. All this, I suggest, constitutes in turn an unprecedented relation between colors. It is not a relation between the *colors* of the colors, so to speak—which is expressible in terms of hue, intensity, contrast, and so on—but between the sheer and simultaneous *occurrences* of colors. The significance of that relation is that it releases a response to two of the logical features of the concept of a color: first, to the fact that there should be *different* colors (i.e., to the fact that if there is something that we call color in the world at all, there must be more than one of them); and second, to the fact of the infinite and absolute *identity* of colors (e.g., if *this* color is *here,* then no other color can be—where, of course, the "here" is defined by its color). One might say that in the stripe paintings both the multiplicity of colors and the identity of colors are made the medium of painting as never before.

Again, exactly how Louis executed these paintings is not known. Noland has suggested that he may have dripped a thin ribbon of paint, about the consistency of syrup, down the center of the intended stripe and then have spread the ribbon to the desired breadth with a putty knife.[21] In any case, once the stripes were laid down Louis was faced with the related problems of where to place the limits of the support and how to hang the otherwise final painting. According to Greenberg, Louis originally wanted the stripes to be

cut off by the framing edge both at the top and at the bottom but allowed himself to be persuaded to leave a few inches of blank canvas between the apparent "end" of the stripes, which seems to be where they were begun, and the edge of the support. (There are, however, a number of pictures which Louis went ahead and marked to be framed as originally intended.) Greenberg now feels that Louis's original intentions were invariably correct, and that he was always in advance of his admirers. He describes Louis's attitude to the hanging of his pictures in the following terms:

> The decision as to which side of a portable painting is top, bottom, left or right is not irrevocable, and Louis felt that his particular kind of art allowed for a new kind of latitude here. . . . He was always ready to allow for the possibility that further acquaintance might lead him to change his mind about the direction in which a picture was to go. He was willing even to allow others to experiment with his pictures in this respect; in any case he felt that if a painting of his was good enough it would stand up no matter how it was hung.

Greenberg goes on to remark:

> Towards the end of his life he began to think of hanging some of the narrow-striped [pictures] sideways, that is with the stripes running horizontally; and in certain of these he decided to leave the stripes unanchored on either side, that is with their tips stopping short of the edge of the canvas. But there too he was prepared to leave the matter undecided.[22]

When the physically narrowest of the stripe paintings—those with the least raw canvas to the sides of the stripes—are hung vertically they risk seeming too literal or objectlike, almost as if they were a kind of wall sculpture; hanging them sideways, it turns out, eliminates this risk at a stroke. As for the horizontally hung paintings in which the stripes, always gathered in two stacks, stop short of the edge of the support, they are the first in Louis's oeuvre in which he seems to have been wholly comfortable suspending anything in an expanse of blank canvas. Even in these, however, one feels that each stack of stripes suspends the other by a kind of mutual attraction or repulsion rather than that both are suspended, as if by an outside force, in the blank field.

Louis's involvement with drawing underwent one further development. Just over a month before he died Louis gave James Lebron the precise dimensions to which the eight stripe paintings posthumously exhibited at the Emmerich Gallery in October 1962 were to be stretched. The format of five of these was the normal one—the

stripes vertical, the canvas itself a vertical rectangle. But in three paintings—*No End, Equator,* and *Hot Half* (pl. 6; all 1962)—Louis chose to have the stripes run diagonally across the canvas and the canvas itself stretched as a square. Louis's decision to depart from his previous norm in these respects had several consequences. To begin with, the division of the canvas by the diagonal stripes (in *No End* and *Equator,* grouped in two stacks) compels an awareness of these pictures as composed. Throughout the stripe paintings, of course, Louis determined the placement of the stripes and the dimensions of the canvas with great exactness. But whereas in most of the stripe paintings that exactness is not felt as such in the works themselves, in the three late diagonal paintings the fact that the canvas is actually divided into several segments makes the viewer acutely aware that the slightest change would alter everything. Moreover, the relations that obtain among the different segments within each painting are essentially drawing relations: the areas of bare canvas are seen as shapes, and each picture is experienced as constituting a compound, almost plastic unity. The stripes themselves are more like lines of color than ever before, and allude to a plasticity foreign to the stripe paintings generally. *These* stripes, one feels, are beams of color or colored light, somehow frozen or congealed into weightless, highly tensile elements that span the canvas like a kind of bridge. It is as though the square shape of the canvas came first, and was only later divided and composed, as well as made securely rigid, by the diagonal stripes.[23]

There is no sense in which Louis's final paintings strike one as late works, in which they seem to mark a close. Louis died, one feels, not only at the height of his powers but also no more than part of the way through the natural unfolding of his genius. We can have no idea what Louis would have done next. The more one studies his development, the more profoundly unexpected each stage, even each moment in it is seen to have been. This is to say more than that Louis was an extremely original artist. It is also to claim that he was a deeply personal one, and that at every moment his art is to be understood in the most personal of terms. Here it is vital to recognize, however, not merely that such an understanding of his art may be a long time coming, but that it is not at all clear what that understanding would consist in. For example, it would be wrong to think that an account of Louis's art that sought to discover its meaning for Louis must necessarily be psychological in character or, for that matter, to think that a psychological account of his art must concern certain classes of relationships and feelings (e.g., those associated with his "private" life) rather than others (e.g., those connected with

painting itself). It is as though all of Louis's life was equally private—and, by the same token, equally accessible to painting. Louis's insistence on working in complete privacy, and on keeping secret even from friends the means by which his art was made, ought, I think, to be seen partly in this light. When Leonard Bocour, astonished at the effects Magna had been made to yield in the stripe paintings, asked how they had been achieved, Louis replied, "You have something to say, you say it," and dropped the subject.[24] And in general there is no evidence in Louis's work of any conflict, indeed of any felt distinction, between the demands of life and those of art. This is perhaps the most important difference between Louis and Pollock, whose development seems to have involved a continual struggle between the literalness and specificity of urgent personal feeling and the impersonal, and in that sense abstract, demands of painting itself. It was above all the depth and ferocity of that struggle that, in his work of the years 1947–50, drove Pollock to dissolve or revoke traditional drawing and thereby to divest himself of probably the most rudimentary, direct means of specifying feeling he had had; that inspired him to accomplish figuration by acts of excising in *Out of the Web;* that impelled him, when he abandoned the allover drip technique, to return both to traditional drawing and to the affect-charged imagery of his earlier work. In contrast, Louis's imagination strikes one as radically abstract in a way that not just Pollock's but that of any modernist painter before Louis, except perhaps Matisse, does not.

One consequence of this is that Louis's art may strike one as extraordinarily impersonal. In fact Louis's eschewal of traditional drawing amounted to the refusal to allow his hand, wrist, and arm to get into his paintings; and this, I suggest, amounted to the refusal to allow himself to get into his paintings in what he felt was the wrong way. Indeed, Louis's paintings, more than those of any previous painter, give the impression of having come into existence as if of their own accord, without the intervention of the artist.

It is tempting, and perhaps not beside the point, to connect this aspect of Louis's work with Symbolist poetic theory and practice as they arose in France during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Here for example is Mallarmé:

> The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields place to the words, immobilised by the shock of their inequality; they take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones, replacing the old lyric afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase.[25]

There is in Louis's painting precisely the "elocutionary disappearance" of the artist, amounting to the illusion of a sovereign impersonality, that Mallarmé called for in poetry. I am, of course, not suggesting that Louis consciously adhered to Symbolist doctrine and sought to realize it in his art. But I am suggesting that Louis's imagination, by virtue of what I have called its radical abstractness, has significant affinities with the imaginations of certain modernist poets for whom Symbolist theory and practice were of fundamental importance. It is revealing to consider Louis's work in the light of the following passages from the American poet Hart Crane's "General Aims and Theories," written in 1925:

> It may not be possible to say that there is, strictly speaking, any "absolute" experience. But it seems evident that certain aesthetic experience (and this may for a time engross the total faculties of the spectator) can be called absolute, inasmuch as it approximates a formally convincing statement of a conception or apprehension of life that gains our unquestioning assent.[26]

> It is my hope to go *through* the combined materials of the poem, using our "real" world somewhat as a spring-board, and to give the poem *as a whole* an orbit or predetermined direction of its own. I would like to establish it as free from my own personality as from any chance evaluation on the reader's part. (This is, of course, an impossibility, but it is a characteristic worth mentioning.) Such a poem is at least a stab at a truth, and to such an extent may be differentiated from other kinds of poetry and called "absolute." Its evocation will not be toward decoration or amusement, but rather toward a state of consciousness, an "innocence" (Blake) or absolute beauty. In this condition there may be discoverable under new forms certain spiritual illuminations, shining with a morality essentialized from experience directly, and not from previous precepts or preconceptions. It is as though a poem gave the reader as he left it a single, new *word*, never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward.[27]

Crane's notion of the ideal independence of the poem from the personality of its maker is essentially the same as Mallarmé's, and bears the same intimate relation to the illusive impersonality of Louis's art. More important, the "evocation" of Louis's paintings is not toward decoration or amusement but rather toward what Crane seems to have meant by "absolute" experience, even toward what he seems to have meant by "illumination." In fact, Crane's vision of the "absolute" poem as present to consciousness and memory not as something

which has duration but as a single, new, unsayable "word" is, I suggest, a vision of it as somehow attaining to the nontemporal, as it were instantaneous, presentness of *paintings:* as though it were to the condition of painting, rather than to that of music, that Symbolist and Post-Symbolist poetry had been aspiring all along.

Within the past several years, roughly since Louis's death, that presentness has for the first time become an issue for painting. It is no longer something which the ambitious painter is able to take for granted, which he need never think about or even recognize. Rather it is something which he must, if not actually intend, at any rate secure—for example, through the medium of shape—if his paintings are to compel conviction *as* paintings. Otherwise they will be experienced as a kind of object, and as having, rather weakly at that, the essentially theatrical kind of presence that exhibited objects have. These remarks are perhaps impenetrably obscure, but I cannot here provide the account of modernist painting since about 1960 which they require to be made clear. For present purposes what is important is that Louis was the last major painter who did not have to deal explicitly with these issues, who did not have to confront the risk that his paintings might be seen as objects,[28] for whom shape was not yet the medium of painting that it subsequently became for Noland, Olitski, and Stella. This is largely what makes Louis's last paintings, in which the stripes are stretched diagonally across square canvases, especially haunting: they suggest that just before he died Louis may have begun to move in the direction of an explicit involvement with the shape of the support.

What is nakedly and explicitly at stake in the work of the most ambitious painters today is nothing less than the continued existence of painting as a high art. Louis's death in September 1962 at the age of forty-nine deprived us not only of the paintings he would have made had he lived longer, but of the now unimaginable possibilities for the future of painting they would have opened up.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow and London, 1959), p. 108 (in the original the word "forming" is italicized). [A more recent translation by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton renders the sentence in question as "The *cultivation* of the five sense is the work of all previous history" (Karl Marx, *Early Writings* [New York, 1975], p. 353).—*M. F., 1996*]

2. The paintings in question were shown at the Martha Jackson Gallery in November 1957.

3. This was said in conversation. On a visit to Washington in April 1955 Greenberg urged Louis to come to New York more often on those grounds.

4. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International* 4 (May 25, 1960): 28.

5. Quoted by Gerald Nordland in the catalog to the exhibition *The Washington Color Painters* at the Washington, D.C., Gallery of Modern Art (New York, 1965), p. 12.

6. One might say that the relation between Pollock and Louis goes too deep for the notions of influence and style. Familiarity with Louis's work does not merely color one's experience of Pollock's art; it comes close to determining it. Louis's paintings do more than underline or point to aspects of Pollock's canvases which otherwise one might not have noticed; there is an important sense in which Louis's paintings *create* the aspects in question—in which they give significance to aspects of Pollock's art that otherwise could not be experienced as significant, or as having that particular significance. At the same time, the fact that Pollock's paintings, not those of some other painter, are the ones which Louis's paintings invest with meaning in this way testifies to the fecundating power of Pollock's achievement and makes that investment seem, or be, a revelation of what was already there. The paintings of Noland and Olitski stand in an analogous relation to Louis's work, and in general the unprecedented depth of relationships of this kind is one of the characteristic, even defining, features of modernist painting.

7. The pages that follow condense and rephrase the more detailed account of Pollock's art in the introduction to *Three American Painters* (reprinted in this book).

8. Greenberg's remarks on Olitski's spray paintings in the catalog to the American pavilion at the 1966 Venice Biennale are surprising in this way. "In the first sprayed paintings," Greenberg writes, "linear drawing is displaced completely from the *inside* of the picture to its *outside,* that is, to its inclosing shape, the shape of the stretched piece of canvas. Olitski's art begins to call attention at this point, as no art before it has, to how very much this shape is a matter of linear drawing and, as such, an integral determinant of the picture's effect rather than an imposed and external limit" (Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," in *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969,* vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* ed. John O'Brian [Chicago, 1993], p. 229).

9. This is said apropos of Louis's use of staining in a Postscriptum, dated November 1966, to Appendix II, "Excerpts from the Writings of Clement Greenberg," in the catalog to the retrospective exhibition of Louis's work, *Morris Louis 1912–1962,* shown in Los Angeles, Boston, and St. Louis in 1966–67. In Greenberg's words, "One of the very most important reasons why [Louis] took to staining paint into raw canvas was that this permitted him to describe a firm and regular edge without having it become a *cutting* one as it would on a nonabsorbent surface: the slight, hardly visible bleed left by soaking serves to deprive an edge or contour of sharpness but not necessarily of clarity or firmness. Louis was perhaps the first to exploit this property of soaked or stained paint with full

consciousness" (p. 84). [Greenberg's Postscriptum does not appear in O'Brian's collection of his writings.—*M. F., 1996*]

10. Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," p. 28.

11. Ibid.

12. In the original text I said erroneously that he did this just once, in *Breaking Hue* (1954), in which, however, bare canvas is discernible near the perimeter of much of the painting.—*M. F., 1996*

13. I was mistaken when I wrote this. As Diane Upright explains in her catalogue raisonné on the painter,

> Early in 1958 Louis returned to painting Veils. . . . In comparison to the 1954 Veils, this second Veil series was painted on a much larger rectangle, with a significant increase in the proportion of width to height. In order to support the canvas, Louis attached it to a work stretcher that measured about 8 by 12 feet, a dimension ascertained by measuring between the staple marks still evident along the edges of many Veil paintings.
>
> At least one work stretcher had a center vertical brace and another placed about three feet to its right. The traces of these braces show as dark vertical striations in fifty-seven Veil paintings. . . . Although it was once thought that the reason for these two vertical lines was that Louis, due to the small size of his studio, was compelled to fold the canvas during the painting process, this is not true. Many Veils equal in width to those with divisions are not divided. More important, on all fifty-seven Veils with the divisions, the two vertical lines are always equidistant from one another and always located in the same position with regard to the whole image. Obviously, such regularity was not a product of folding. (Diane Upright, *Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New York, 1985], p. 54)--*M. F., 1996*

14. Pollock said this in "My Painting," published in *Possibilities 1* (New York, winter 1947–48), quoted in Bryan Robertson, *Jackson Pollock* (New York, 1959), p. 193.

15. Much of the obscurity has been cleared up by Upright in *Morris Louis;* I have followed her in dating Louis's return to the veils in January 1958.—*M. F., 1996*

16. In my original text I wrote: "These pictures . . . may, for all we know, predate *Saraband.*" But they don't: Upright places *Saraband* in 1959 and *While* and *Where* in 1960 (*Morris Louis,* catalog nos. 188, 287, and 288, respectively).—*M. F., 1996*

17. Greenberg said this in conversation.

18. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1966), p. 73.

19. Greenberg, "Introduction to an Exhibition of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski," in *Modernism with a Vengeance,* p. 152. The exhibition was held at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Canada, in Jan.–Feb. 1963.

20. Robert Rosenblum in his brief entry on Louis in the catalog for the exhi-

bition *Toward a New Abstraction,* shown at the Jewish Museum, New York, May 19–Sept. 15, 1963, wrote: "Without drawn contours, these straight paths of color sing across the open plane of the canvas. At times, their parallel edges overlap (a glowing yellow over a burning vermilion), an effect that enriches further the atmospheric density generated; elsewhere, they run exactly contiguous courses, like two bullets speeding together through space without colliding. In the upright verticals, these streaks of color speed toward, but seldom attain, the lower edge of the canvas, as if we were just catching a path of movement that will continue; and in those aligned diagonally, we likewise seize the fragment of a trajectory that implies swift energies beyond the lateral edges of the canvas" (p. 18).

21. Upright, however, suggests that Louis directly poured the earlier, broader stripes but switched to a more deliberate technique in the later paintings with narrower stripes, one which enabled him to control the ends of his stripes (i.e., to eliminate the irregular drips at one end that resulted from pouring) (*Morris Louis,* p. 57). She also reports that Louis's widow "recalls finding 'daubers' in Louis's studio, long sticks with cheesecloth wrapped around one end," and suggests that these may have been used to "draw" the late stripes (ibid.).—*M. F., 1996*

22. See Greenberg's Poscriptum.

23. In a letter to André Emmerich dated August 6, 1962, Louis gave to the quarter-inch the dimensions to which the eight paintings would be stretched. It is hard to know how much, if anything, to make of the fact that in that letter Louis mentioned that three of the paintings would be square but not that in them the stripes would be run diagonally. This may have been simply because the squareness of the paintings had immediate relevance to the space of the gallery while the diagonal orientation of the stripes did not. But it raises the possibility that their squareness may have been the most important thing about these paintings for Louis—indeed, that he might have arrived at the orientation of the stripes as a means of securing the shape of the support.

24. This was told to me by Bocour in conversation.

25. Quoted in translation by Arthur Symonds in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York, 1958). [The passage comes from Mallarmé's great essay "Crise de vers"; for the French original see Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes,* ed. Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945), p. 366.—*M. F., 1996*]

26. Cited in Philip Horton, *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet* (New York, 1957), Appendix I, p. 325.

27. Ibid., pp. 326–27.

28. The physically narrowest of the stripe paintings are, I have said, an exception to this. But the fact that Louis was able to eliminate the risk of their being seen as a kind of object simply by hanging them sideways indicates that the risk was not yet the deep one it has since become.

Jules Olitski

It is as if this expressed the essence of form.—I say, however: if you talk about *essence*—, you are merely noting a convention. But here one would like to retort: there is no greater difference than that between a proposition about the depth of the essence and one about—a mere convention. But what if I reply: to the *depth* that we see in the essence there corresponds the *deep* need for the convention.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

1

THE PRESENT exhibition of paintings by Jules Olitski is far from a full retrospective.[2] The pictures it comprises were chosen by him from less than four years' work, and most of them have been made since the spring of 1965, when he began painting with the spray gun. His decision to emphasize the spray paintings is not surprising: although the best of Olitski's previous pictures equal the finest spray pictures in quality, the latter are unquestionably the more momentous achievement. At the same time, by representing two distinct phases of Olitski's art prior to his taking up spraying, the exhibition insists on the importance of seeing the spray paintings in relation to these. And this, I suggest, means acknowledging both the

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sheer unexpectedness of the spray paintings and the depth of their connection with his previous work. It is as though on the one hand they are without precedent in Olitski's oeuvre, while on the other they bring his previous work to a fruition or culmination that, in retrospect, seems almost inevitable. They are simultaneously that original and that rooted in what Olitski has already done.

More than any modernist painter before him Olitski has been willing—indeed he seems to have found it necessary—to change the look of his art frequently and sweepingly. (On one level, it is possible to see in this an unwillingness to be recognized publicly as a master, if not an unwillingness to succeed publicly at all.) But it is also true that, as Clement Greenberg has remarked, none of the phases through which Olitski's art has gone since the late 1950s remains as distinct from the rest as each felt at the time.[3] From the vantage points provided by successive phases, above all by that of spray paintings, those aspects of previous phases that at first may have struck one as idiosyncratic or arbitrary have tended to drop away, or rather to be absorbed by the paintings in question. And as this has happened, the continuity between the earlier phases and the spray paintings has become manifest.

But the spray paintings demand understanding in a wider context than that of Olitski's development alone—one provided by the development of modernist painting generally since the late 1950s. Only in this context does the momentousness of the spray paintings become fully intelligible: they are momentous not so much because they abandon the look of immediately antecedent paintings by Olitski as because they revoke, or refuse to accept, conventions of fundamental importance to the work of painters otherwise as different from one another as Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella. And since what gives those conventions their importance is nothing less than the entire history of painting since Manet, the spray paintings will need to be seen in a context as long and as deep as that of modernism itself.

2

OLITSKI'S SPRAY technique could hardly be simpler. [See pl. 10.] He lays a length of unprimed and unsized canvas on the floor and sprays into it acrylic paint of different colors from as many as three spray guns powered by an electric air compressor. (In his first spray paintings he began by drawing the canvas through a

trough filled with paint, but after a while stopped preparing it in this way.) By the time he stops working, often with two spray guns simultaneously, the raw canvas itself is no longer visible, except in rare cases toward the edges. In some paintings the surface of the canvas consists of small flecks of different colors which, depending on the wetness of the surface at the moment they were sprayed on, are distinct or slightly blurred or almost dissolved into adjacent flecks, and depending on the size of the droplets in a given burst of spray, fluctuate in size from extremely fine points to larger though still minute splashes or beads of pigment. In other paintings the droplets seem to have flowed into one another completely and there are no flecks at all.

Differences of this kind are experienced as differences of facture rather than of color. Throughout the spray paintings the actual character of the picture surface varies enormously while the import of spraying for color remains roughly the same. Above all, spraying makes possible the interpenetration of different colors, the intensity of each of which appears to fluctuate continuously, independently of the intensity of the others. The different colors, one might say, inhabit not merely the same space but the same points in space. The originality of the spray paintings in this respect is striking. In "After Abstract Expressionism," Greenberg described Still's and Newman's color in these terms:

> It no longer fills in or specifies an area or even plane, but speaks for itself by dissolving all definiteness of shape and distance. To this end—as Still was the first to show—it has to be warm color, or cool color infused with warmth. It also has to be uniform in hue, with only the subtlest variations in value if any at all, and spread over an absolutely, not merely relatively, large area. Size guarantees the purity as well as the intensity needed to suggest indeterminate space: more blue simply being bluer than less blue.[4]

The first two sentences are true of the spray paintings as well, but the last two are not. Olitski exploits fluctuations of value, often of a quite dramatic sort. More important, intensity of color in these paintings is not proportional to its two-dimensional extension. Instead, it is a function of the concentration or density of a given color at any point—what might be called that color's *intension.* (This is the case whether or not the painting in question consists of discrete flecks.) It is as though Olitski has found himself working in another dimension from that of lateral extension. Or as though he has discovered in spraying another direction for color to take—not out but *in.*[5]

It is, finally, as though by atomizing color Olitski has atomized, even disintegrated, the picture surface as well. Depending partly on the colors used and partly on facture, the spray paintings establish to different degrees an illusion of depth whose power and richness are without precedent both in Olitski's previous work and in recent modernist art. This has to do largely with the difference between spraying and staining. The latter "identifies" color with its canvas ground,[6] whereas in his spray paintings Olitski seems intent on driving color back into its ground, both literally and illusionistically. But precisely this makes the actual character of Olitski's picture surface important in a new way. Greenberg was the first to recognize the almost paradoxical character of this state of affairs:

> The grainy surface Olitski creates with his way of spraying is a new kind of paint surface. It offers tactile associations hitherto foreign, more or less, to picture-making; and it does new things with color. Together with color, it contrives an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture's surface; it is as if that surface, in all its literalness, were enlarged to contain a world of color and light differentiations impossible to flatness but which yet manage not to violate flatness.[7]

Surface and depth, literalness and illusion, are, in these paintings, inextricably mixed.

In some of the early spray paintings Olitski had added streaks of pastel along, or very near, their perimeters. Then, during the winter of 1965–66, he began to mask already sprayed canvases except for a partial "frame" around two or three sides, spray some more, and then remove the masking. [See pl. 11.] This procedure, which he has used more or less regularly since its invention, produces both a clear difference and an unprecedented continuity between the previously masked and unmasked areas. One experiences the abruptness of the transition from one area to the other as something like linear drawing, while at the same time one is gripped and carried by the continuity of sprayed color across that transition—a continuity that, in effect, makes these pictures just as seamless and integral as the spray paintings in which no masking had taken place. Throughout both types of paintings color flows continuously into color, individual colors being isolated or differentiated from one another only by their specific identities. Put another way, the emphasis in both is on the continuity of color as such and the uniqueness or autonomy or isolation of individual colors. This is true as well of the recent paintings, most of whose formats are horizontal rectangles, in which Olitski has worked

both in pastel and with brush and paint up close to the framing edge: the nearness to the limits of the support of the pastel streaks and protracted, fraying brushstrokes of bright color keeps the streaks and brushstrokes from being seen as disrupting the continuity of sprayed color within those limits, while at the same time they are experienced as specifying particular colors with great intensity. [See pl. 12.]

In most of these respects the spray paintings have deep roots in Olitski's previous work. For example, in a number of paintings made during 1963–64 by rubbing and staining acrylic paint into unsized and unprimed canvas Olitski modulated from one color to another without leaving a sharp boundary between them. At first, as in the exquisite *Fatal Plunge Lady* (1963; fig. 19), the modulation occurs between two colors extremely close to each other in hue, in this instance between rose brown and orange brown; but in *Hot Ticket* (1964) the broad vertical curtain of color which occupies most of the canvas inflects dramatically from intense green down through deep blue to bright red—three colors, incidentally, that occur frequently in the spray paintings. In these works color flows into color in a way that clearly anticipates the continuity of color that is so salient a feature of the spray paintings. *Hot Ticket,* especially in the zone of transition between the blue and red segments of the curtain, anticipates the interpenetration of different colors as well. There is even a sense in which the flow of color in these pictures is felt to extend across, or at least to implicate, portions of the canvas that in fact are bare—as when, in *Fatal Plunge Lady,* the colored areas seem to participate in a single descent of color from the top of the canvas toward the lower right.

What I have described as an emphasis on the uniqueness, autonomy, or isolation of individual colors in the spray paintings is manifest also in Olitski's previous work. Olitski has always been concerned with what in the introduction to *Three American Painters* (reprinted in this book) I called the mutually repulsive rather than attractive relations among colors; his aim has always been to distinguish individual colors rather than bring them together. Paintings like *Fatal Plunge Lady, Hot Ticket,* and *Flaubert Red* virtually compel one to experience the individual colors they comprise far more intensely than if each color were confronted in actual isolation from the others. One is forced, that is, to bear down on each color with unaccustomed intensity, as though each color *competes for presentness* with every other. Moreover, bearing down on each color means bearing down on *each bit* of it, as though it were subtly and continuously changing from

point to point, from present moment to present moment. What sustains one's attention is both the spread of color across a particular area and the particularity of color at every point.

Because of this, the intensity of a given color in Olitski's 1963–64 paintings is not proportional to its extension. Nothing is initially more surprising, even disturbing, about these paintings than the extreme disparity in size between the areas occupied by different colors,[8] yet the colors themselves are not experienced as differing in intensity. Or rather, what is at stake is not so much the relative intensity of different colors as their ability to sustain the kind of attention I have tried to describe—as though what one means by the intensity of a color in these paintings is precisely its ability to sustain being borne down on by the beholder.

Finally, the 1963–64 paintings in this exhibition represent two distinct stages in what seems to be an ongoing struggle between color and drawing. In earlier paintings—for example, those exhibited at the Poindexter Gallery in the spring of 1963—the tension between the two is relatively extreme: on the one hand, the colored areas are experienced as clearly, even sharply, shaped or contoured; on the other, the color tends to dissolve its own limits, or at any rate to direct attention away from them.[9] Drawing and color mainly work autonomously, even against one another. By 1963, however, Olitski begins to minimize the drawnness of the limits of the colored areas. For example, in *Fatal Plunge Lady* those areas are experienced as having just this moment assumed their final configurations after having flooded down from the top of the painting toward the lower right. This frees color from the compulsion, labored under the year before, to oppose and in effect to nullify drawing. In these paintings color is dominant from the start, and as a result can be much subtler, much lower keyed, much more concerned with internal inflection. In paintings done in 1964—for example, *Hot Ticket, Flaubert Red,* and *Flaming On*—the minimizing of drawing is carried still further; it reaches an extreme in the first spray paintings, in which, as Greenberg has pointed out, "linear drawing is displaced from the *inside* of the picture to its *outside,* that is, to its inclosing shape, the shape of the stretched piece of canvas." (He adds: "Olitski's art begins to call attention at this point, as no art before it has, to how very much this shape is a matter of linear drawing and, as such, an integral determinant of the picture's effect rather than an imposed and external limit.")[10] In this sense the spray paintings can be seen as realizing to the limit of possibility what Greenberg has characterized as

"Olitski's urge to escape from incisive drawing."[11] But it is consistent with Greenberg's observations to see those paintings as realizing, in a wholly unexpected way, a passion to draw as well. That is, Olitski's development during the past five years expresses not so much an urge to escape or even to minimize drawing as a desire to find a place for it in his art. In this connection it is significant that, almost at once, Olitski reintroduced various kinds of drawing inside the picture (a fact that Greenberg has discussed). The crucial point is that for Olitski, color and drawing are antagonists: every stage in his development during the past five years, including the spray paintings, has constituted a specific settlement of their conflicting claims.

3

THE WIDER context in which Olitski's spray paintings are to be viewed is constituted by the discovery around 1960 by Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella of a new mode of pictorial structure, grounded in, and lucidly evincing, a more acute awareness of the shape and size of the picture support than had been the basis of any previous painting. The shape of the picture support has played an important role throughout modernism. Cubism in particular, by adjusting the elements within a painting to a rough congruence with the framing edge, showed an awareness of the shape of the support which, although less exacerbated than that evinced in Noland's and Stella's paintings, was nevertheless considerable. In fact there is an important sense in which the structural mode of their paintings can be said to reaffirm Cubism's implicit but decisive interpretation of the half-century of painting between Manet's seminal pictures of the early 1860s and the late works of Cézanne in terms of a growing consciousness of the literal character of the picture support and a draining of conviction in traditional illusionism. Cubism's interpretation of that painting consisted chiefly in its increasingly perspicuous acknowledgment of the flatness of the support. But flatness is a tactile characteristic, and the denial of tactility manifested in the most advanced painting prior to that of Noland and Stella—notably in the work of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Morris Louis—meant that flatness was no longer something an ambitious painter had to, or even could, establish positively. But neither could it be violated, however ambiguously, by illusionistic incursions into a fictive tactile space. Rather, Newman's and Louis's paintings—as well as, from our present vantage, Pollock's allover drip paintings of 1947–50—estab-

lish what I have elsewhere described as a depth or space accessible to eyesight alone. This constitutes a new illusion, one in which the integrity of the picture surface remains intact at the same time as its flatness is dissolved or anyway neutralized. More than any other factor, the emergence of this purely visual or optical mode of illusionism crystallized the new and more acute awareness of the shape of the support, including its exact proportions and dimensions, that becomes the basis of the structure of Noland's and Stella's paintings.[12]

Roughly, Noland and Stella became painters of major importance when they began to relate the elements within their paintings to the shape of the support in such a way that the structure of their paintings could be said to *acknowledge* that shape more lucidly and explicitly than had ever been the case.[13] For Noland this meant centering concentric rings and radiating armatures of color in square canvases, while in Stella's stripe paintings—for example, the aluminum and copper series of pictures on shaped supports executed in 1960 and 1961, respectively—2½-inch-wide stripes begin at the framing edge and repeat themselves inside the painting until the entire canvas is filled. In subsequent paintings, consisting of stacked chevrons, Noland found that running the lower edge of the bottom chevron into the upper corners of the canvas enabled him to dispense with lateral symmetry as well as with the square format; more recently he has worked with diamond-shaped canvases in which several bands of color of equal width are aligned with one or the other pair of parallel sides, and with very long horizontal rectangles in which parallel bands of color run their entire lengths. Because Noland, unlike Stella, has never been interested in structure in its own right but rather has always been chiefly concerned with color, his development is more revealing. Specifically, the fact that Noland's ambition to make major art out of color has compelled him to discover structures on which that ambition can rely—structures in which the shape of the support is acknowledged lucidly and explicitly enough to compel conviction—reveals the depth of the need for such structures in a way that Stella's exclusively structural preoccupations do not. (It was not until 1964, with the appearance of his first paintings containing asymmetrical chevrons, that that revelation was complete, not until then that the structural significance of his previous work, as well as its affinities with what Stella had done, became evident.)

If Olitski's spray paintings are seen, as I believe they ask to be, in the light of this development, one thing is clear: they cannot be described in terms of the conception of pictorial structure that I have

claimed has been central to the work of Noland and Stella. They are, in fact, profoundly opposed to that conception, though the grounds of that opposition are coloristic as much as structural. By the time Olitski made the first of his spray paintings he seems to have come to regard the division of the canvas into clearly delimited areas of color—without which the structures of Noland's and Stella's paintings would be inconceivable—as incompatible with his own aspirations as a colorist. This is not to say that in Noland's paintings color plays a role of secondary importance. On the contrary, the urge toward color is central; the problem at any moment is how color must be organized within the picture shape—as well as what that picture shape must be—in order that his paintings compel conviction. Structure is at the service of color; color, one might say, is the instrument of nothing—nothing beyond feeling itself.

But whereas the structure of a given painting by Noland can be represented schematically, and in that sense at least can be detached or at least distinguished from the color, Olitski's spray paintings, by refusing clearly delimited areas of color, rule out from the start the very possibility of such a distinction.

In the previous section of this essay I tried to show that the spray paintings are rooted in Olitski's previous work. This means that it was his desire to realize his deepest pictorial aspirations as completely as possible, rather than antipathy to Noland's and Stella's work, that brought him to a position of fundamental opposition to the structural mode of their paintings. But this desire was both informed and inflamed by his growing awareness not only of the importance of the shape of the support to the structure of their paintings, but of the significance of that aspect of their work for modernist painting generally. And this, it seems to me, amounted to the recognition that his previous paintings did not realize his aspirations as fully or perspicuously as he now saw to be possible.

In paintings like *Fatal Plunge Lady, Hot Ticket, Flaubert Red,* and *Flaming On* structure is subsumed by color in that the first can be grasped only in the experience of the second. And in general the desire to make paintings whose structures appear to have been determined by, to consist in, nothing but the interaction of individual colors and the overall flow of color as such seems to have been a powerful force in Olitski's art during the years 1963–64. At the same time, however, the fact that those paintings contain discrete shapes and clearly delimited areas of color—in short, drawing—makes them vulnerable, or answerable, to the demand that they acknowledge the

shape of the support. In this sense they do not oppose the structural mode of Noland's and Stella's paintings so much as they are opposed by it. The result is that each of the paintings in question is compelled to overcome, by the sheer intensity of its color, what one cannot help but perceive as its failure or refusal to acknowledge the shape of the support—a perception, it should be noted, that takes an essentially diagrammatic view of the areas and shapes they contain. That the finest of those paintings succeed triumphantly does not erase the demand, or make their structures as significant for modernist painting generally as those of Noland's and Stella's paintings. What I want to suggest is this: Olitski's growing awareness of the inescapability of the demand (corresponding to the depth of the revealed need) to acknowledge the shape of the support incited him to try to make paintings that would defeat that demand completely—paintings in which it could find no handhold, in which there would be nothing that could be diagrammed, in which color would assume the full burden of pictorial structure. At that moment, if I am correct, realizing his deepest pictorial aspirations and opposing the structural mode of Noland's and Stella's paintings became for Olitski one and the same enterprise. And this suggests that while it is true that the spray paintings bring his previous work to an astonishing fruition, Olitski might never have come to make them—he might never have gone that far—if it had not been for Noland's and Stella's discovery of a mode of pictorial structure that ran counter to those aspirations and yet answered so profound a need that it could not be ignored.

4

NOTHING, MOREOVER, lays bare the depth of that need more dramatically than the fact that the spray paintings depend for their success upon an awareness of the shape and size of the support equal to that which Noland and Stella were the first to embody in their paintings. There are, of course, important differences between the ways in which this awareness is evinced in their pictures and in Olitski's spray paintings. For example, it would not make sense to say that the spray paintings acknowledge the shape of the support. (They don't fail or refuse to acknowledge it either; a demand for acknowledgment is empty in the face of them.) But it can be claimed, I think, that in the strongest early spray paintings the entire contents of a given picture relate as an integral entity to the limits of the support experienced as a whole, as a single shape. One's

conviction in front of such paintings is that the framing edge has been arrived at by the colors themselves: as though the paintings in question only happen to end up rectangular and of a certain size. Furthermore, when two paintings very similar as regards facture and color (perhaps having been cut from the same length of sprayed canvas) but different in size and shape strike one as unequal in quality, it is always because in the less successful picture Olitski has, so to speak, failed to possess the framing edge as completely and convincingly as he has possessed the picture surface. (In such instances the sprayed canvas feels to me like background in traditional painting.) No paintings, Noland's and Stella's included, have ever been put under greater pressure by considerations of shape or, more accurately, have ever put those considerations under greater pressure. Greenberg, writing in the Biennale catalog, remarked: "The degree to which the success of Olitski's paintings depends on proportion of height to width in their inclosing shapes is, I feel, unprecedented. Because they attract too little notice as shapes, and therefore tend to get taken too much for granted, he has had more and more to avoid picture formats that are square or approach squareness. He has also had to avoid picture formats that are long and narrow, simply because these tend to stamp themselves out as shapes less emphatically than formats that are tall and narrow do."[14] This can be verified in one's experience. The narrow verticals are the strongest of Olitski's early spray paintings, largely because of the perspicuousness with which they stamp themselves out as shapes. (The question of *why* the narrow vertical paintings tend to make themselves felt as shapes with such force is one of the most interesting raised by recent modernist painting.)[15] I have argued elsewhere that their perspicuousness as shape—the fact that their shapes are experienced as pictorial, not merely literal—is what secures their identity as painting.[16] Either the support stamps itself out as shape or the painting is experienced as nothing more than a kind of object. (The demand that the paintings in question *hold* as shape plays a role in Olitski's spray paintings equivalent to the demand to acknowledge the shape of the support in Noland's and Stella's work. It is, one might say, the demand that has to be faced when color assumes the full burden of structure.) This inescapably puts the shape of the support under enormous pressure, and it is questionable whether any pictorial convention, not to say one apparently as central to the entire enterprise of modernist painting as the shape of the support, will stand up under pressure of that kind for long.

In a number of paintings executed in early 1966—*Prince Patutsky's Command* (pl. 11) and *Thigh Smoke* among them—the pressure is suddenly and unexpectedly off. This is also true of more recent paintings—for example, *C+J+B, Maximum, Patutsky in Paradise,* and *Heightened* [also *End Run,* pl. 12]—in which for the first time Olitski has attained mastery over the horizontal rectangle as well as, in the superb *Sleep Robber,* the square (or near square). To claim that in all these paintings the pressure is off is to say more than that their quality does not depend on their efficacy as shape, though that is in fact the case. It is also to say that the question of whether or not they stamp themselves out as shape does not really arise. One doesn't sense that the paintings just mentioned succeed despite not making themselves felt as shapes. Rather, the issue of whether or not they do so has been eluded or staved off, if only for the moment, by the paintings themselves. This I believe is what has enabled Olitski to extend his authority—that of a major painter at the height of his powers—to include the horizontal and square formats which had, until recently, proved intractable.

The eluding or staving off of the issue of pictorial versus literal shape is accomplished largely by the sprayed bands (the partial internal "frame") or long brushstrokes of color that run along two or three sides of a given painting. The limits of the support are no longer simply and nakedly juxtaposed to the rest of the painting, as in the early spray pictures. Instead, the bands or brushstrokes are experienced as belonging simultaneously to both, hence as mediating between the two—with the result that any qualms that arise about a given picture no longer concern its shape but tend to focus on the bands or brushstrokes instead. At the same time, the recent paintings mark a new stage in Olitski's exploration of the framing edge—specifically, the discovery of the immediate vicinity of that edge as a terrain of extraordinary freedom and possibility. It is as though as long as he remains close to the limits of the support Olitski can do whatever he wants: repossess the square, use the horizontal rectangle without alluding to the horizon, even resurrect Abstract Expressionist brushwork. What is almost incredible is that in paintings like *C+J+B, Maximum,* and *Heightened,* such brushwork is made to serve the ends of color. (In the most recent paintings this chiefly means close values of livid, sour hues—principally yellows, greens, pinks, oranges, and an almost phosphorescent violet.) The freedom Olitski seems to enjoy in the immediate vicinity of the edge has its corresponding constraints, above all that of not being able to place his bands and brush-

strokes anywhere else. Even at the edge, of course, not just anything goes. But the best of the recent paintings, although in one sense imageless, provide an image of an achieved freedom that is nothing less than exalting.

5

THE PAST twelve years have seen the emergence of three painters—Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski—who rank with the supreme masters of color in modern art. Each broke through to his proper work when he discovered in color something that he had been looking for all along and had been able to find nowhere else: a way to make paintings whose quality could stand comparison with the art of the museums.

The precise content of that discovery, what exactly it can be said to have consisted in, differs radically in the three cases. This is to claim much more than that each painter's feeling for color, or even his use of it, is different from the others'. When each of these painters found in color a way to make paintings in which he could believe, he found in it his own artistic identity as well. Similarly, while there is a clear sense in which all three may be said to use color—roughly, the sense in which they all use paint—there is another, less obvious sense in which they do not use color so much as exploit its resources or realize its possibilities for the making of high art.

That color in our time has been found to possess such resources and to contain such possibilities has made it, perhaps more explicitly than ever before, a *medium* of painting.[17] But the particular resources and possibilities whose exploitation and realization have established color as a medium of painting for Louis, Noland, and Olitski are different in each case—indeed they are internal to the uniqueness of their respective achievements. The question with which I close is this: What is it that Olitski has found in color that establishes it for him as a medium of painting?—that makes color something within which he can work?

He has found in color a way, perhaps the only way now open, to a primordial involvement with the sensuous nature of paint itself. His aspirations as a colorist have been determined, even dictated, by this involvement. In Olitski's paintings color *is* paint—not because in painting all color is produced by paint in the first place (in this sense all lines or shapes are produced by paint in the first place), but because Olitski's color is the instrument of an overriding passion for the physical, one might say the defining, properties of paint. The

continuing conflict in his work between color and drawing is at bottom a conflict between *paint* and drawing; and this in turn (within the inescapable demand that drawn shapes acknowledge the shape of the support) is a conflict between paint and the *support.* It is this struggle between a material substance and a material entity—the one volatile, formless, spreading, penetrating, varied, and fluctuating, the other passive, definite, delimited, ineluctable, unitary, and constant—that lies at the heart of Olitski's development, and whose resolution, on shifting terms, lies at the heart of Olitski's painting. It is a conflict in which the ultimate condition for the existence of painting in the world (that there be paint) is held against the ultimate condition for the existence of the world itself (that there be objects). Philosophy asked: What is an object of art? Now painting asks: Why should a color be *of* an object at all, why can't color escape objects altogether? But it equally asks: Why should objects "have" a color (or set of colors) at all, why can't objects escape color altogether?

NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1956), p. 23e (pt. 1, par. 74).

2. In this essay I make use of some of my own previous writing about Olitski, mainly the articles "Jules Olitski's New Paintings" (*Artforum* 4 [Nov. 1965]: 36–40) and "Olitski and Shape" (*Artforum* 5 [Jan. 1967]: 20–21).

3. Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," in *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969,* vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1993), pp. 228–30.

4. Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* 6 (Oct. 25, 1962): 29.

5. In fact, the spray paintings make the concept of a color's "extension" or "quantity" problematic as never before. For example, whereas from a distance the color blue may appear to be confined to a small portion of a given canvas, on closer looking it may turn out that most of the surface contains tiny flecks of blue paint. The "extension" of the color blue might then be taken to mean either its apparent restriction to and continuity across a small area of the canvas (viewed at a distance), or its actual but discontinuous dispersal across most of the canvas (viewed at close range). Neither interpretation, however, equals what the concept of the "extension" of a color means in the work of Still or Newman, and in the end we are I think forced to regard it as inapplicable to Olitski's art.

6. See Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International* 4 (May 25, 1960): 26–29.

7. Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," p. 230.

8. It might be more accurate to say that what is disturbing is the conspicuousness of this disparity—the way in which Olitski seems to be making a point of it. In contrast, in Noland's concentric-ring paintings it never occurs to one to re-

mark the fact that an outer ring contains a lot more color than a ring of comparable thickness near the center.

9. For a discussion of the differences between Olitski's 1962 and 1963 paintings see my "New York Letter: Olitski, Jenkins, Thiebaud, Twombly" (reprinted in this book).

10. Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," p. 229.

11. Ibid., p. 229.

12. It's worth emphasizing that Noland and Stella did not simply decide to base the structure of their paintings on the shape and size of the support. On the contrary, the sense of something having been decided for him vibrates in Noland's remark that, after making accomplished but finally derivative paintings for several years, he broke through to what he had been after all along when he "discovered the center" of the canvas. (In practice this resulted in his coming to locate the central point of concentric or radiating elements at the exact center of a square canvas.) He does not speak of having decided to do this, though there may be sense in saying that he must have done so: perhaps the sense there is in saying that the center was there before it was discovered. What Noland found when he discovered the center of the canvas was nothing less than how to make paintings in whose quality and significance he could believe, and this was not something he can be said to have had a choice about. We are speaking here of modernist painting as a special kind of cognitive enterprise, one whose success, in fact whose existence, depends on the discovery of conventions capable of eliciting conviction—or at least of dissolving certain kinds of doubts. (What at any moment those conventions are is in large measure a function of what they have been.) It is above all the nakedness of that dependence—the immediacy as well as the depth of the need for such discovery—that distinguishes modernist painting from the traditional painting of the past. For more on the kind of cognitive enterprise I believe modernist painting to be, see my "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" in this volume. Cf. also Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," especially the section called "Decision," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York, 1969), pp. 52–56.

13. The concept of acknowledgment is meant to displace the notion of "deductive structure," which I have used in the past to describe the structural mode of Noland's and Stella's paintings and which now seems to me inadequate. One trouble with that notion was that it could be taken to imply that any structure in which elements are aligned with the framing edge is as "deductive" (more or less) as any other. Whereas by emphasizing the need to acknowledge the shape of the support I mean to call attention to the fact that what, in a given instance, will count as acknowledgment remains to be discovered, to be made out. (For example, I would want to claim that Reinhardt's paintings, while repeating or echoing or copying the shape of the support, do not acknowledge it.)

14. Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," pp. 229–30. [See Fried, "Jules Olitski's New Paintings," where in addition to making some of the points repeated here I claim that structural considerations of the sort discussed in that essay "must lie behind Olitski's extraordinary success in

a number of paintings (e.g., *Hidden Combination* [pl. 10]) whose dimensions—roughly, between six and eight feet high by no more than two feet wide—have never until now been made to yield work of comparable quality" (p. 40).—*M. F., 1996*]

15. This seems to have to do with the naturally restrictive character of the narrow vertical format, as opposed to the naturally expansive character of the horizontal rectangle. Not that in the narrow vertical paintings the limits of the support are felt to contain the contents of the painting; rather, they are themselves experienced as contained by those contents, as being of a piece with them. One of those paintings turned on its side becomes not merely a less successful but phenomenologically a different painting. Even the colors seem to change! (This was remarked by Greenberg in conversation.) And in general the importance in the spray paintings of axiality or directionality can hardly be overestimated. It is as though what is appealed to is not our ability in locating objects (or failing to) but in orienting ourselves (or failing to).

16. See my "Shape as Form."

17. See Fried, "Shape as Form" and "The Achievement of Morris Louis." In the first of these, *shape* is called a medium of painting and in the second *the staining into canvas of successive waves of paint.* For more on the notion of a medium of art understood in these senses, see Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say?,* pp. 220–21; and idem, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge and London, 1979) [the latter reference added in 1996].

Art and Objecthood

Edwards's journals frequently explored and tested a meditation he seldom allowed to reach print; if all the world were annihilated, he wrote . . . and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same. Therefore, because there is continuity, which is time, "it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed." The abiding assurance is that "we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first."

—Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*[1]

1

THE ENTERPRISE known variously as Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures, and Specific Objects is largely ideological. (See figs. 59–64.) It seeks to declare and occupy a position—one that can be formulated in words and in fact has been so formulated by some of its leading practitioners. If this distinguishes it from modernist painting and sculpture on the one hand, it also marks an important difference between Minimal Art—or, as I prefer to call it, *literalist* art—and Pop or Op Art on the other. From its inception, literalist art has amounted to something more than an episode in the history of taste. It belongs rather to the history—almost the natural

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history—of sensibility, and it is not an isolated episode but the expression of a general and pervasive condition. Its seriousness is vouched for by the fact that it is in relation both to modernist painting and modernist sculpture that literalist art defines or locates the position it aspires to occupy. (This, I suggest, is what makes what it declares something that deserves to be called a position.) Specifically, literalist art conceives of itself as neither one nor the other; on the contrary, it is motivated by specific reservations or worse about both, and it aspires, perhaps not exactly, or not immediately, to displace them, but in any case to establish itself as an independent art on a footing with either.

The literalist case against painting rests mainly on two counts: the relational character of almost all painting and the ubiquitousness, indeed the virtual inescapability, of pictorial illusion. In Donald Judd's view,

> When you start relating parts, in the first place, you're assuming you have a vague whole—the rectangle of the canvas—and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite *whole* and maybe no parts, or very few.[2]

The more the shape of the support is emphasized, as in recent modernist painting, the tighter the situation becomes:

> The elements inside the rectangle are broad and simple and correspond closely to the rectangle. The shapes and surface are only those that can occur plausibly within and on a rectangular plane. The parts are few and so subordinate to unity as not to be parts in an ordinary sense. A painting is nearly an entity, one thing, and not the indefinable sum of a group of entities and references. The one thing overpowers the earlier painting. It also establishes the rectangle as a definite form; it is no longer a fairly neutral limit. A form can be used only in so many ways. The rectangular plane is given a life span. The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements possible within it.

Painting is here seen as an art on the verge of exhaustion, one in which the range of acceptable solutions to a basic problem—how to organize the surface of the picture—is severely restricted. The use of shaped rather than rectangular supports can, from the literalist point of view, merely prolong the agony. The obvious response is to give up working on a single plane in favor of three dimensions. That, moreover, automatically

> gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art. The several limits of painting are no longer present. A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be. Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.

The literalist attitude toward sculpture is more ambiguous. Judd, for example, seems to think of what he calls Specific Objects as something other than sculpture, while Robert Morris conceives of his own unmistakably literalist work as resuming the lapsed tradition of Constructivist sculpture established by Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, and Georges Vantongerloo. But this and other disagreements are less important than the views Judd and Morris hold in common. Above all they are opposed to sculpture that, like most painting, is "made part by part, by addition, composed" and in which "specific elements . . . separate from the whole, thus setting up relationships within the work." (They would include the work of David Smith and Anthony Caro under this description.) It is worth remarking that the "part-by-part" and "relational" character of most sculpture is associated by Judd with what he calls *anthropomorphism:* "A beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image. The space corresponds." Against such "multipart, inflected" sculpture Judd and Morris assert the values of wholeness, singleness, and indivisibility—of a work's being, as nearly as possible, "one thing," a single "Specific Object." Morris devotes considerable attention to "the use of strong gestalt or of unitary-type forms to avoid divisiveness"; while Judd is chiefly interested in the kind of wholeness that can be achieved through the repetition of identical units. The order at work in his pieces, as he once remarked of that in Frank Stella's stripe paintings, "is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another." For both Judd and Morris, however, the critical factor is *shape.* Morris's "unitary forms" are polyhedrons that resist being grasped other than as a single shape: the gestalt simply *is* the "constant, known shape." And shape itself is, in his system, "the most important sculptural value." Similarly, speaking of his own work, Judd has remarked that

> the big problem is that anything that is not absolutely plain begins to have parts in some way. The thing is to be able to work and do different

> things and yet not break up the wholeness that a piece has. To me the piece with the brass and the five verticals is above all *that shape.*

The shape *is* the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of the shape. It is, I believe, that emphasis on shape that accounts for the impression, which numerous critics have mentioned, that Judd's and Morris's pieces are *hollow.*

2

SHAPE HAS also been central to the most important painting of the past several years. In several recent essays I have tried to show how, in the work of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Stella, a conflict has gradually emerged between shape as a fundamental property of objects and shape as a medium of painting.[3] Roughly, the success or failure of a given painting has come to depend on its ability to hold or stamp itself out or compel conviction as shape—that, or somehow to stave off or elude the question of whether or not it does so. Olitski's early spray paintings are the purest example of paintings that either hold or fail to hold as shapes, while in his more recent pictures, as well as in the best of Noland's and Stella's recent work, the demand that a given picture hold as shape is staved off or eluded in various ways. 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 it 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.

In his essay "Recentness of Sculpture" Clement Greenberg discusses the effect of *presence,* which, from the start, has been associated with literalist work.[4] This comes up in connection with the work of Anne Truitt, an artist Greenberg believes anticipated the literalists (he calls them Minimalists):

> Truitt's art did flirt with the look of non-art, and her 1963 show was the first in which I noticed how this look could confer an effect of *presence*. That presence as achieved through size was aesthetically extraneous, I already knew. That presence as achieved through the look of non-art was likewise aesthetically extraneous I did not yet know. Truitt's sculpture had this kind of presence but did not *hide* behind it. That sculpture could hide behind it—just as painting did—I found out only after repeated acquaintance with Minimal works of art: Judd's, Morris's, Andre's, Steiner's, some but not all of Smithson's, some but not all of LeWitt's. Minimal art can also hide behind presence as size: I think of Bladen (though I am not sure whether he is a certified Minimalist) as well as of some of the artists just mentioned.[5]

Presence can be conferred by size or by the look of nonart. Furthermore, what nonart means today, and has meant for several years, is fairly specific. In "After Abstract Expressionism" Greenberg wrote that "a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one."[6] For that reason, as he remarks in "Recentness of Sculpture," the "look of non-art was no longer available to painting." Instead, "the borderline between art and non-art had to be sought in the three-dimensional, where sculpture was, and where everything material that was not art also was."[7] Greenberg goes on to say:

> The look of machinery is shunned now because it does not go far enough towards the look of non-art, which is presumably an "inert" look that offers the eye a minimum of "interesting" incident—unlike the machine look, which is arty by comparison (and when I think of Tinguely I would agree with this). Still, no matter how simple the object may be, there remain the relations and interrelations of surface, contour, and spatial interval. Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper. . . . Yet it would seem that a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art could not be envisaged or ideated at this moment.[8]

The meaning in this context of "the condition of non-art" is what I have been calling objecthood. It is as though objecthood alone can, in the present circumstances, secure something's identity, if not as nonart, at least as neither painting nor sculpture; or as though a work of art—more accurately, a work of modernist painting or sculpture—were in some essential respect *not an object.*

There is, in any case, a sharp contrast between the literalist espousal of objecthood—almost, it seems, as an art in its own right—

and modernist painting's self-imposed imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood through the medium of shape. In fact, from the perspective of recent modernist painting, the literalist position evinces a sensibility not simply alien but antithetical to its own: as though, from that perspective, the demands of art and the conditions of objecthood were in direct conflict.

Here the question arises: What is it about objecthood as projected and hypostatized by the literalists that makes it, if only from the perspective of recent modernist painting, antithetical to art?

3

THE ANSWER I want to propose is this: the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater, and theater is now the negation of art.

Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art "what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]," the experience of literalist art is of an object in a *situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder:*

> The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.

Morris believes that this awareness is heightened by "the strength of the constant, known shape, the gestalt," against which the appearance of the piece from different points of view is constantly being compared. It is intensified also by the large scale of much literalist work:

> The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object. Space between the subject and the object is implied in such a comparison.

The larger the object, the more we are forced to keep our distance from it:

> It is this necessary, greater distance of the object in space from our bodies, in order that it be seen at all, that structures the nonpersonal or public mode [which Morris advocates]. However, it is just this distance between object and subject that creates a more extended situation, because physical participation becomes necessary.

The theatricality of Morris's notion of the "nonpersonal or public mode" seems obvious: the largeness of the piece, in conjunction with its nonrelational, unitary character, *distances* the beholder—not just physically but psychically. It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that *makes* the beholder a subject and the piece in question . . . an object. But it does not follow that the larger the piece, the more securely its "public" character is established; on the contrary, "beyond a certain size the object can overwhelm and the gigantic scale becomes the loaded term." Morris wants to achieve presence through objecthood, which requires a certain largeness of scale, rather than through size alone. But he is also aware that the distinction is anything but hard and fast:

> For the space of the room itself is a structuring factor both in its cubic shape and in terms of the kind of compression different sized and proportioned rooms can effect upon the object-subject terms. That the space of the room becomes of such importance does not mean that an environmental situation is being established. The total space is hopefully altered in certain desired ways by the presence of the object. It is not controlled in the sense of being ordered by an aggregate of objects or by some shaping of the space surrounding the viewer.

The object, not the beholder, must remain the center or focus of the situation, but the situation itself *belongs to* the beholder—it is *his* situation. Or as Morris has remarked, "I wish to emphasize that things are in a space with oneself, rather than . . . [that] one is in a space surrounded by things." Again, there is no clear or hard distinction between the two states of affairs: one is, after all, *always* surrounded by things. But the things that are literalist works of art must somehow *confront* the beholder—they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his *way*. None of this, Morris maintains,

> indicates a lack of interest in the object itself. But the concerns now are for more control of . . . the entire situation. Control is necessary if the variables of object, light, space, body, are to function. The object has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important.

It is, I think, worth remarking that "the entire situation" means exactly that: *all* of it—including, it seems, the beholder's *body.* There is nothing within his field of vision—nothing that he takes note of in any way—that declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience, in question. On the contrary, for something to be perceived at all is for it to be perceived as part of that situation. Everything counts—not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.

4

FURTHERMORE, THE presence of literalist art, which Greenberg was the first to analyze, is basically a theatrical effect or quality—a kind of *stage* presence. It is a function not just of the obtrusiveness and, often, even aggressiveness of literalist work, but of the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder. Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it seriously—and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being aware of the work and, so to speak, in acting accordingly. (Certain modes of seriousness are closed to the beholder by the work itself, i.e., those established by the finest painting and sculpture of the recent past. But, of course, those are hardly modes of seriousness in which most people feel at home, or that they even find tolerable.) Here again the experience of being distanced by the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation *as subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person;* the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example, in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way.

There are three main reasons why this is so. First, the size of much literalist work, as Morris's remarks imply, compares fairly closely with that of the human body. In this context Tony Smith's replies to questions about his six-foot cube, *Die* (1962; fig. 63), are highly suggestive:

> Q: Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?

A: I was not making a monument.
Q: Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?
A: I was not making an object.[9]

One way of describing what Smith *was* making might be something like a surrogate person—that is, a kind of statue. (This reading finds support in the caption to a photograph of another of Smith's pieces, *The Black Box* (1963–65; fig. 64), published in the December 1967 issue of *Artforum,* in which Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., presumably with the artist's sanction, observed, "One can see the two-by-fours under the piece, which keep it from appearing like architecture or a monument, and set it off as sculpture." The two-by-fours are, in effect, a rudimentary pedestal, and thereby reinforce the statuelike quality of the piece.) Second, the entities or beings encountered in everyday experience in terms that most closely approach the literalist ideals of the nonrelational, the unitary, and the holistic are *other persons.* Similarly, the literalist predilection for symmetry, and in general for a kind of order that "is simply order . . . one thing after another," is rooted not, as Judd seems to believe, in new philosophical and scientific principles, whatever he takes these to be, but in *nature.* And third, the apparent hollowness of most literalist work—the quality of having an *inside*—is almost blatantly anthropomorphic. It is, as numerous commentators have remarked approvingly, as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life—an effect that is perhaps made most explicit in Morris's *Untitled* (1965; fig. 60) a large ringlike form in two halves, with fluorescent light glowing from within at the narrow gap between the two. In the same spirit Tony Smith has said, "I'm interested in the inscrutability and mysteriousness of the thing."[10] He has also been quoted as saying:

> More and more I've become interested in pneumatic structures. In these, all of the material is in tension. But it is the character of the form that appeals to me. The biomorphic forms that result from the construction have a dreamlike quality for me, at least like what is said to be a fairly common type of American dream.[11]

Smith's interest in pneumatic structures may seem surprising, but it is consistent both with his own work and with literalist sensibility generally. Pneumatic structures can be described as hollow with a vengeance—the fact that they are not "obdurate, solid masses" (Morris) being insisted on instead of taken for granted. And it reveals

something, I think, about what hollowness means in literalist art that the forms that result are "biomorphic."

5

I AM suggesting, then, that a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice. The concept of presence all but says as much, though rarely so nakedly as in Tony Smith's statement, "I didn't think of them [i.e., the sculptures he 'always' made] as sculptures but as presences of a sort." The latency or hiddenness of the anthropomorphism has been such that the literalists themselves, as we have seen, have felt free to characterize the modernist art they *oppose,* for example, the sculpture of David Smith and Anthony Caro, as anthropomorphic—a characterization whose teeth, imaginary to begin with, have just been pulled. By the same token, however, what is wrong with literalist work is not that it is anthropomorphic but that the meaning and, equally, the hiddenness of its anthropomorphism are incurably theatrical. (Not all literalist art hides or masks its anthropomorphism; the work of lesser figures like Michael Steiner wears anthropomorphism on its sleeve.) *The crucial distinction that I am proposing is between work that is fundamentally theatrical and work that is not.* It is theatricality that, whatever the differences between them, links artists like Ronald Bladen and Robert Grosvenor,[12] both of whom have allowed "gigantic scale [to become] the loaded term" (Morris), with other, more restrained figures like Judd, Morris, Carl Andre, John McCracken, Sol LeWitt and—despite the size of some of his pieces—Tony Smith.[13] And it is in the interest, though not explicitly in the name, of theater that literalist ideology rejects both modernist painting and, at least in the hands of its most distinguished recent practitioners, modernist sculpture.

In this connection Tony Smith's description of a car ride taken at night on the New Jersey Turnpike before it was finished makes compelling reading:

> When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the fifties, someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and col-

> ored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art.
>
> The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. Later I discovered some abandoned airstrips in Europe—abandoned works, Surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with any function, created worlds without tradition. Artificial landscape without cultural precedent began to dawn on me. There is a drill ground in Nuremberg large enough to accommodate two million men. The entire field is enclosed with high embankments and towers. The concrete approach is three sixteen-inch steps, one above the other, stretching for a mile or so.

What seems to have been revealed to Smith that night was the pictorial nature of painting—even, one might say, the conventional nature of art. And *that* Smith seems to have understood not as laying bare the essence of art, but as announcing its end. In comparison with the unmarked, unlit, all but unstructured turnpike—more precisely, with the turnpike as experienced from within the car, traveling on it—art appears to have struck Smith as almost absurdly small ("All art today is an art of postage stamps," he has said), circumscribed, conventional. There was, he seems to have felt, no way to "frame" his experience on the road, no way to make sense of it in terms of art, to make art of it, at least as art then was. Rather, "you just have to experience it"—as it happens, as it merely is. (The experience alone is what matters.) There is no suggestion that this is problematic in any way. The experience is clearly regarded by Smith as wholly accessible to everyone, not just in principle but in fact, and the question of whether or not one has really had it does not arise. That this appeals to Smith can be seen from his praise of Le Corbusier as "more available" than Michelangelo: "The direct and primitive experience of the High Court Building at Chandigarh is like the Pueblos of the Southwest under a fantastic overhanging cliff. It's something everyone can understand." It is, I think, hardly necessary to add that the availability of modernist art is not of that kind, and that the rightness or relevance of one's conviction about specific modernist works, a

conviction that begins and ends in one's experience of the work itself, is always open to question.

But what was Smith's experience on the turnpike? Or to put the same question another way, if the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground are not works of art, what are they?—What, indeed, if not empty, or "abandoned," *situations*? And what was Smith's experience if not the experience of what I have been calling *theater*? It is as though the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground reveal the theatrical character of literalist art, only without the object, that is, without the art itself—as though the object is needed only within a *room*[14] (or, perhaps, in any circumstances less extreme than these). In each of the above cases the object is, so to speak, *replaced* by something: for example, on the turnpike by the constant onrush of the road, the simultaneous recession of new reaches of dark pavement illumined by the onrushing headlights, the sense of the turnpike itself as something enormous, abandoned, derelict, existing for Smith alone and for those in the car with him. . . . This last point is important. On the one hand, the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground belong to no one; on the other, the situation established by Smith's presence is in each case felt by him to be *his*. Moreover, in each case being able to go on and on indefinitely is of the essence. What replaces the object—what does the same job of distancing or isolating the beholder, of making him a subject, that the object did in the closed room—is above all the endlessness, or objectlessness, of the approach or onrush or perspective. It is the explicitness, that is to say, the sheer persistence with which the experience presents itself as directed at him from outside (on the turnpike from outside the car) that simultaneously makes him a subject—makes him subject—and establishes the experience itself as something like that of an object, or rather, of objecthood. No wonder Morris's speculations about how to put literalist work outdoors remain strangely inconclusive:

> Why not put the work outdoors and further change the terms? A real need exists to allow this next step to become practical. Architecturally designed sculpture courts are not the answer nor is the placement of work outside cubic architectural forms. Ideally, it is a space, without architecture as background and reference, that would give different terms to work with.

Unless the pieces are set down in a wholly natural context, and Morris does not seem to be advocating this, some sort of artificial but not quite architectural setting must be constructed. What Smith's re-

marks seem to suggest is that the more effective—meaning effective *as theater*—a setting is made, the more superfluous the works themselves become.

6

SMITH'S ACCOUNT of his experience on the turnpike bears witness to theater's profound hostility to the arts and discloses, precisely in the absence of the object and in what takes its place, what might be called the theatricality of objecthood. By the same token, however, the imperative that modernist painting defeat or suspend its objecthood is at bottom the imperative that it *defeat or suspend theater*. And *that* means that there is a war going on between theater and modernist painting, between the theatrical and the pictorial—a war that, despite the literalists' explicit rejection of modernist painting and sculpture, is not basically a matter of program and ideology but of experience, conviction, sensibility. (For example, it was a particular experience that engendered Smith's conviction that painting—that the arts as such—were finished.)

The starkness and apparent irreconcilability of this conflict are something new. I remarked earlier that objecthood has become an issue for modernist painting only within the past several years. This, however, is not to say that before the present situation came into being, paintings, or sculptures for that matter, simply *were objects*. It would, I think, be closer to the truth to say that they *simply* were not.[15] The risk, even the possibility, of seeing works of art as nothing more than objects did not exist. That such a possibility began to present itself around 1960 was largely the result of developments within modernist painting. Roughly, the more nearly assimilable to objects certain advanced painting had come to seem, the more the entire history of painting since Manet could be understood—delusively, I believe—as consisting in the progressive (though ultimately inadequate) revelation of its essential objecthood,[16] and the more urgent became the need for modernist painting to make explicit its conventional—specifically, its *pictorial*—essence by defeating or suspending its own objecthood through the medium of shape. The view of modernist painting as tending toward objecthood is implicit in Judd's remark, "The new [i.e., literalist] work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting, but is nearer to painting"; and it is in this view that literalist sensibility in general is grounded. Literalist sensibility is, therefore, a response to the *same* developments that

have largely compelled modernist painting to undo its objecthood—more precisely, the same developments *seen differently,* that is, in theatrical terms, by a sensibility *already* theatrical, already (to say the worst) corrupted or perverted by theater. Similarly, what has compelled modernist painting to defeat or suspend its own objecthood is not just developments internal to itself, but the same general, enveloping, infectious theatricality that corrupted literalist sensibility in the first place and in the grip of which the developments in question—and modernist painting in general—are seen as nothing more than an uncompelling and presenceless kind of theater. It was the need to break the fingers of that grip that made objecthood an issue for modernist painting.

Objecthood has also become an issue for modernist sculpture. This is true despite the fact that sculpture, being three-dimensional, resembles both ordinary objects and literalist work in a way that painting does not. Almost ten years ago Clement Greenberg summed up what he saw as the emergence of a new sculptural "style," whose master is undoubtedly David Smith, in the following terms:

> To render substance entirely optical, and form, whether pictorial, sculptural, or architectural, as an integral part of ambient space—this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage.[17]

Since 1960 this development has been carried to a succession of climaxes by the English sculptor Anthony Caro, whose work is far more specifically resistant to being seen in terms of objecthood than that of David Smith. (See figs. 32–55, pls. 13, 14.) A characteristic sculpture by Caro consists, I want to say, in the mutual and naked *juxtaposition* of the I-beams, girders, cylinders, lengths of piping, sheet metal, and grill that it comprises rather than in the compound *object* that they compose. The mutual inflection of one element by another, rather than the identity of each, is what is crucial—though of course altering the identity of any element would be at least as drastic as altering its placement. (The identity of each element matters in somewhat the same way as the fact that it is an arm, or this arm, that makes a particular gesture, or as the fact that it is this word or this note and not another that occurs in a particular place in a sentence or melody.) The individual elements bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition: it is in this sense, a sense inextricably involved with the concept of meaning, that

everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at is in its syntax. Caro's concentration upon syntax amounts, in Greenberg's view, to "an emphasis on abstractness, on radical unlikeness to nature." And Greenberg goes on to remark, "No other sculptor has gone as far from the structural logic of ordinary ponderable things."[18] It is worth emphasizing, however, that this is a function of more than the lowness, openness, part-by-partness, absence of enclosing profiles and centers of interest, unperspicuousness, and so on, of Caro's sculptures. Rather, they defeat, or allay, objecthood by imitating, not gestures exactly, but the *efficacy* of gesture; like certain music and poetry, they are possessed by the knowledge of the human body and how, in innumerable ways and moods, it makes meaning. It is as though Caro's sculptures essentialize meaningfulness *as such*—as though the possibility of meaning what we say and do *alone* makes his sculpture possible. All this, it is hardly necessary to add, makes Caro's art a fountainhead of antiliteralist and antitheatrical sensibility.

There is another, more general respect in which objecthood has become an issue for the most ambitious recent modernist sculpture, and that is in regard to color. This is a large and difficult subject, which I cannot hope to do more than touch on here. Briefly, however, color has become problematic for modernist sculpture, not because one senses that it has been applied, but because the color of a given sculpture, whether applied or in the natural state of the material, is identical with its surface; and inasmuch as all objects have surface, awareness of the sculpture's surface implies its objecthood—thereby threatening to qualify or mitigate the undermining of objecthood achieved by opticality and, in Caro's pieces, by their syntax as well. It is in this connection, I believe, that a recent sculpture by Jules Olitski, *Bunga 45* (1967; fig. 21), ought to be seen. *Bunga 45* consists of between fifteen and twenty metal tubes, ten feet long and of various diameters, placed upright, riveted together, and then sprayed with paint of different colors; the dominant hue is yellow to yellow orange, but the top and "rear" of the piece are suffused with a deep rose, and close looking reveals flecks and even thin trickles of green and red as well. A rather wide red band has been painted around the top of the piece, while a much thinner band in two different blues (one at the "front" and another at the "rear") circumscribes the very bottom. Obviously, *Bunga 45* relates intimately to Olitski's spray paintings, especially those of the past year or so, in which he has worked with paint and brush at or near the limits of the support. At the same time, it amounts to something far more than an attempt

simply to make or "translate" his paintings into sculptures, namely, an attempt to establish surface—the surface, so to speak, of *painting*—as a medium of sculpture. The use of tubes, each of which one sees, incredibly, as *flat*—that is, flat but *rolled*—makes *Bunga 45*'s surface more like that of a painting than like that of an object: like painting, and unlike both ordinary objects and other sculpture, *Bunga 45* is *all* surface. And of course what declares or establishes that surface is color, Olitski's sprayed color.

7

AT THIS point I want to make a claim that I cannot hope to prove or substantiate but that I believe nevertheless to be true: theater and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such—and to the extent that the different arts can be described as modernist, with modernist sensibility as such. This claim can be broken down into three propositions or theses:

1. *The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater.* This is perhaps nowhere more evident than within theater itself, where the need to defeat what I have been calling theater has chiefly made itself felt as the need to establish a drastically different relation to its audience. (The relevant texts are, of course, Brecht and Artaud.)[19] For theater has an audience—it exists for one—in a way the other arts do not; in fact, this more than anything else is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in theater generally. Here it should be remarked that literalist art too possesses an audience, though a somewhat special one: that the beholder is confronted by literalist work within a situation that he experiences as his means that there is an important sense in which the work in question exists for him alone, even if he is not actually alone with the work at the time. It may seem paradoxical to claim both that literalist sensibility aspires to an ideal of "something everyone can understand" (Smith) and that literalist art addresses itself to the beholder alone, but the paradox is only apparent. Someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to become that beholder, that audience of one—almost as though the work in question has been waiting for him. And inasmuch as literalist work depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it *has* been waiting for him. And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone—which is to say, it refuses to stop con-

fronting him, distancing him, isolating him. (Such isolation is not solitude any more than such confrontation is communion.)

It is the overcoming of theater that modernist sensibility finds most exalting and that it experiences as the hallmark of high art in our time. There is, however, one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely—the movies.[20] This helps explain why movies in general, including frankly appalling ones, are acceptable to modernist sensibility whereas all but the most successful painting, sculpture, music, and poetry is not. Because cinema escapes theater—automatically, as it were—it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality. At the same time, the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge—more accurately, the fact that what is provided is a refuge from theater and not a triumph over it, absorption not conviction—means that the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art.

2. *Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater.* Theater is the common demoninator that binds together a large and seemingly disparate variety of activities, and that distinguishes those activities from the radically different enterprises of the modernist arts. Here as elsewhere the question of value or level is central. For example, a failure to register the enormous difference in quality between, say, the music of Elliott Carter and that of John Cage or between the paintings of Louis and those of Robert Rauschenberg means that the real distinctions—between music and theater in the first instance and between painting and theater in the second—are displaced by the illusion that the barriers between the arts are in the process of crumbling (Cage and Rauschenberg being seen, correctly, as similar) and that the arts themselves are at last sliding towards some kind of final, implosive, highly desirable synthesis. Whereas in fact the individual arts have never been more explicitly concerned with the conventions that constitute their respective essences.

3. *The concepts of quality and value*—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within *the individual arts. What lies* between *the arts is theater.* It is, I think, significant that in their various statements the literalists have largely avoided the issue of value or quality at the same time as they have shown considerable uncertainty as to whether or not what they are making is art. To describe their enterprise as an attempt to establish a *new* art does not remove the uncertainty; at most it points to its source. Judd himself has as much as acknowledged the problematic character of the literalist enterprise by his

claim, "A work needs only to be interesting." For Judd, as for literalist sensibility generally, all that matters is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) *interest*. Whereas within the modernist arts nothing short of *conviction*—specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt—matters at all. (Literalist work is often condemned—when it is condemned—for being boring. A tougher charge would be that it is merely interesting.)

The interest of a given work resides, in Judd's view, both in its character as a whole and in the sheer *specificity* of the materials of which it is made:

> Most of the work involves new materials, either recent inventions or things not used before in art. . . . Materials vary greatly and are simply materials—formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, plexiglass, red and common brass, and so forth. They are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific. Also, they are usually aggressive. There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material.

Like the shape of the object, the materials do not represent, signify, or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more. And what they are is not, strictly speaking, something that is grasped or intuited or recognized or even seen once and for all. Rather, the "obdurate identity" of a specific material, like the wholeness of the shape, is simply stated or given or established at the very outset, if not before the outset; accordingly, the experience of both is one of endlessness, or inexhaustibility, of being able to go on and on letting, for example, the material itself confront one in all its literalness, its "objectivity," its absence of anything beyond itself. In a similar vein Morris has written:

> Characteristic of a gestalt is that once it is established all the information about it, *qua* gestalt, is exhausted. (One does not, for example, seek the gestalt of a gestalt.) . . . One is then both free of the shape and bound to it. Free or released because of the exhaustion of information about it, as shape, and bound to it because it remains constant and indivisible.

The same note is struck by Tony Smith in a statement the first sentence of which I quoted earlier:

> I'm interested in the inscrutability and mysteriousness of the thing. Something obvious on the fact of it (like a washing machine or a

> pump) is of no further interest. A Bennington earthenware jar, for instance, has subtlety of color, largeness of form, a general suggestion of substance, generosity, is calm and reassuring—qualities that take it beyond pure utility. It continues to nourish us time and time again. We can't see it in a second, we continue to read it. There is something absurd in the fact that you can go back to a cube in the same way.

Like Judd's Specific Objects and Morris's gestalts or unitary forms, Smith's cube is always of further interest; one never feels that one has come to the end of it; it is inexhaustible. It is inexhaustible, however, not because of any fullness—*that* is the inexhaustibility of art—but because there is nothing there to exhaust. It is endless the way a road might be, if it were circular, for example.

Endlessness, being able to go on and on, even having to go on and on, is central both to the concept of interest and to that of objecthood. In fact, it seems to be the experience that most deeply excites literalist sensibility, and that literalist artists seek to objectify in their work—for example, by the repetition of identical units (Judd's "one thing after another"), which carries the implication that the units in question could be multiplied ad infinitum.[21] Smith's account of his experience on the unfinished turnpike records that excitement all but explicitly. Similarly, Morris's claim that in the best new work the beholder is made aware that "he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context" amounts to the claim that the beholder is made aware of the endlessness and inexhaustibility if not of the object itself at any rate of his experience of it. This awareness is further exacerbated by what might be called the inclusiveness of his situation, that is, by the fact, remarked earlier, that everything he observes counts as part of that situation and hence is felt to bear in some way that remains undefined on his experience of the object.

Here finally I want to emphasize something that may already have become clear: the experience in question *persists in time,* and the presentment of endlessness that, I have been claiming, is central to literalist art and theory is essentially a presentment of endless or indefinite *duration.* Once again Smith's account of his night drive is relevant, as well as his remark, "We can't see it [the jar and, by implication, the cube] in a second, we continue to read it." Morris too has stated explicitly, "The experience of the work necessarily exists in time"—though it would make no difference if he had not. The literalist preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the *duration*

of the experience—is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical, as though theater confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time;* or as though the sense which, at bottom, theater addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, *simultaneously approaching and receding,* as if apprehended in an infinite perspective. . . .[22] That preoccupation marks a profound difference between literalist work and modernist painting and sculpture. It is as though one's experience of the latter *has no* duration—not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because *at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.* (This is true of sculpture despite the obvious fact that, being three-dimensional, it can be seen from an infinite number of points of view. One's experience of a Caro is not incomplete, and one's conviction as to its quality is not suspended, simply because one has seen it only from where one is standing. Moreover, in the grip of his best work one's view of the sculpture is, so to speak, eclipsed by the sculpture itself—which it is plainly meaningless to speak of as only partly present.) It is this continuous and entire *presentness,* amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness,* as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. (Here it is worth noting that the concept of interest implies temporality in the form of continuing attention directed at the object whereas the concept of conviction does not.) I want to claim that it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theater. In fact, I am tempted far beyond my knowledge to suggest that, faced with the need to defeat theater, it is above all to the condition of painting and sculpture—the condition, that is, of existing in, indeed of evoking or constituting, a continuous and perpetual *present*—that the other contemporary modernist arts, most notably poetry and music, aspire.[23]

8

THIS ESSAY will be read as an attack on certain artists (and critics) and as a defense of others. And of course it is true that the desire to distinguish between what is to me the authentic art of our time and other work which, whatever the dedication, passion, and intelligence of its creators, seems to me to share certain charac-

teristics associated here with the concepts of literalism and theater has largely motivated what I have written. In these last sentences, however, I want to call attention to the utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility or mode of being that I have characterized as corrupted or perverted by theater. We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace.

NOTES

1. Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (1949; rpt., New York, 1959), pp. 329–30.

2. This was said by Judd in an interview with Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard and published as "Questions to Stella and Judd" in *Art News* in 1966 and reprinted in *Minimal Art,* ed. Gregory Battcock (New York, 1968), pp. 148–64. The remarks attributed in the present essay to Judd and Morris have been taken from that interview; from Donald Judd's essay "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook,* no. 8 (1965), pp. 74–82; and from Robert Morris's essays, "Notes on Sculpture" and "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," published in *Artforum* in Feb. and Oct. 1966, respectively, and reprinted in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art,* pp. 222–35. I have also taken one remark by Morris from the catalog to the exhibition *Eight Sculptors: The Ambiguous Image* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Oct.–Dec. 1966. I should add that in laying out what seems to me the position Judd and Morris hold in common I have ignored various differences between them and have used certain remarks in contexts for which they may not have been intended. Moreover, I haven't always indicated which of them actually said or wrote a particular phrase; the alternative would have been to litter the text with footnotes.

3. See Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons"; idem, "Jules Olitski"; and idem, "Ronald Davis: Surface and Illusion." (All these essays are reprinted in this volume.)

4. Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," in the catalog to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1967 exhibition *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (see Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957–1969,* vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* ed. John O'Brian [Chicago, 1993], pp. 250–56). The verb "project" as I have just used it is taken from Greenberg's statement, "The ostensible aim of the Minimalists is to 'project' objects and ensembles of objects that are just nudgeable into art" (*Modernism with a Vengeance,* p. 253).

5. Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 255–56.

6. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* 6 (Oct. 25, 1962): 30. The passage from which this has been taken reads as follows:

> Under the testing of modernism more and more of the conventions of the art of painting have shown themselves to be dispensable, unessential. By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced

as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a *successful* one.

In its broad outline this is undoubtedly correct. There are, however, certain qualifications that can be made.

To begin with, it is not quite enough to say that a bare canvas tacked to a wall is not "necessarily" a successful picture; it would, I think, be more accurate [what I originally wrote was "less of an exaggeration"—*M.F., 1996*] to say that it is not *conceivably* one. It may be countered that future circumstances might be such as to *make* it a successful painting, but I would argue that, for that to happen, the enterprise of painting would have to change so drastically that nothing more than the name would remain. (It would require a far greater change than that which painting has undergone from Manet to Noland, Olitski, and Stella!) Moreover, seeing something as a painting in the sense that one sees the tacked-up canvas as a painting, and being convinced that a particular work can stand comparison with the painting of the past whose quality is not in doubt, are altogether different experiences: it is, I want to say, as though unless something compels conviction as to its quality it is no more than trivially or nominally a painting. This suggests that flatness and the delimitation of flatness ought not to be thought of as the "irreducible essence of pictorial art," but rather as something like the *minimal conditions for something's being seen as a painting;* and that the crucial question is not what those minimal and, so to speak, timeless conditions are, but rather what, at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction, of succeeding as painting. This is not to say that painting *has no* essence; it *is* to claim that that essence—i.e., that which compels conviction—is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past. The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, *alone* are capable of establishing his work's identity as painting.

Greenberg approaches this position when he adds, "As it seems to me, Newman, Rothko, and Still have swung the self-criticism of modernist painting in a new direction simply by continuing it in its old one. The question now asked through their art is no longer what constitutes art, or the art of painting, as such, but what irreducibly constitutes *good* art as such. Or rather, what is the ultimate source of value or quality in art?" But I would argue that what modernism has meant is that the two questions—What constitutes the art of painting? And what constitutes *good* painting?—are no longer separable; the first disappears, or increasingly tends to disappear, into the second. (I am, of course, taking issue here with the version of modernism put forward in the introduction to *Three American Painters* [reprinted in this book].)

For more on the nature of essence and convention in the modernist arts see my essays on Stella and Olitski cited in n. 3 above, as well as Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," and "Rejoinders" to critics of that essay, to be published as part of a symposium by the University of Pittsburgh Press in a volume entitled *Art, Mind and Religion.* [For those essays see Cavell, "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York, 1969), pp. 180–237.—*M. F., 1996*]

7. Greenberg, *Modernism with a Vengeance,* p. 252.

8. Ibid., pp. 253–54.

9. Quoted by Morris as the epigraph to his "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2."

10. Except for the question-and-answer exchange quoted by Morris, all statements by Tony Smith have been taken from Samuel Wagstaff, Jr., "Talking to Tony Smith," *Artforum* 5 (Dec. 1966): 14–19, and reprinted (with certain omissions) in Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art,* pp. 381–86.

11. This appears in the Wagstaff interview in *Artforum* (p. 17) but not in the republication of that interview in *Minimal Art.*—M.F., 1966

12. In the catalog to last spring's *Primary Structures* exhibition at the Jewish Museum, Bladen wrote, "How do you make the inside the outside?" and Grosvenor, "I don't want my work to be thought of as 'large sculpture,' they are ideas that operate in the space between floor and ceiling." The relevance of these statements to what I have adduced as evidence for the theatricality of literalist theory and practice seems obvious (catalog for the exhibition *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors,* shown at the Jewish Museum, New York, Apr. 27–June 12, 1966, no page numbers).

13. It is theatricality, too, that links all these artists to other figures as disparate as Kaprow, Cornell, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Flavin, Smithson, Kienholz, Segal, Samaras, Christo, Kusama . . . the list could go on indefinitely.

14. The concept of a room is, mostly clandestinely, important to literalist art and theory. In fact, it can often be substituted for the word "space" in the latter: something is said to be in my space if it is in the same room with me (and if it is placed so that I can hardly fail to notice it).

15. In a discussion of this claim with Stanley Cavell it emerged that he once remarked in a seminar that for Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* a work of art is not an object.—*M. F., 1966*

16. One way of describing this view might be to say that it draws something like a false inference from the fact that the increasingly explicit acknowledgement of the literal character of the support has been central to the development of modernist painting: namely, that literalness as such is an artistic value of supreme importance. In "Shape as Form" I argued that this inference is blind to certain vital considerations, and that literalness—more precisely, the literalness of the support—is a value only within modernist painting, and then only because it has been made one by the history of that enterprise.

17. Clement Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), p. 144.

18. The statement that "everything in Caro's art that is work looking at—except the color—is in its syntax" appears in my introduction to Caro's 1963 exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery (reprinted in this book as "Anthony Caro"). It is quoted with approval by Greenberg, who then goes on to make the statements quoted above, in "Anthony Caro," *Arts Yearbook,* no. 8 (1965), reprinted as "Contemporary Sculpture: Anthony Caro," in *Modernism with a Vengeance,* pp. 205–08.) Caro's first step in that direction, the elimination of the pedestal, seems in retrospect to have been motivated not by the desire to present his work without artificial aids so much as by the need to undermine its ob-

jecthood. His work has revealed the extent to which merely putting something on a pedestal confirms it in its objecthood, though merely removing the pedestal does not in itself undermine objecthood, as literalist work demonstrates.

19. The need to achieve a new relation to the spectator, which Brecht felt and which he discussed time and again in his writings on theater, was not simply the result of his Marxism. On the contrary, his discovery of Marx seems to have been in part the discovery of what that relation might be like, what it might mean: "When I read Marx's *Capital* I understood my plays. Naturally I want to see this book widely circulated. It wasn't of course that I found I had unconsciously written a whole pile of Marxist plays; but this man Marx was the only spectator for my plays I'd ever come across" (Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*, ed. and trans. John Willett [New York, 1964], pp. 23–24).

20. Exactly how the movies escape theater is a difficult question, and there is no doubt but that a phenomenology of the cinema that concentrated on the similarities and differences between it and stage drama—e.g., that in the movies the actors are not physically present, the film itself is projected *away* from us, and the screen is not experienced as a kind of object existing in a specific physical relation to us—would be rewarding.

21. That is, the actual number of such units in a given piece is felt to be arbitrary, and the piece itself—despite the literalist preoccupation with holistic forms—is seen as a fragment of, or cut into, something infintely larger. This is one of the most important differences between literalist work and modernist painting, which has made itself responsible for its physical limits as never before. Noland's and Olitski's paintings are two obvious, and different, cases in point. It is in this connection, too, that the importance of the painted bands around the bottom and the top of Olitski's sculpture *Bunga* becomes clear.

22. The connection between spatial recession and some such experience of temporality—almost as if the first were a kind of natural metaphor for the second—is present in much Surrealist painting (e.g., De Chirico, Dali, Tanguy, Magritte). Moreoever, temporality—manifested, for example, as expectation, dread, anxiety, presentiment, memory, nostalgia, stasis—is often the explicit subject of their paintings. There is, in fact, a deep affinity between literalist and Surrealist sensibility (at any rate, as the latter makes itself felt in the work of the above painters) that ought to be noted. Both employ imagery that is at once holistic and, in a sense, fragmentary, incomplete; both resort to a similar anthropomorphizing of objects or conglomerations of objects (in Surrealism the use of dolls and manikins makes that explicit); both are capable of achieving remarkable effects of "presence"; and both tend to deploy and isolate objects and persons in "situations"—the closed room and the abandoned artificial landscape are as important to Surrealism as to literalism. (Tony Smith, it will be recalled, described the airstrips, etc., as "Surrealist landscapes.") This affinity can be summed up by saying that Surrealist sensibility, as manifested in the work of certain artists, and literalist sensibility are both theatrical. I do not wish, however, to be understood as saying that because they are theatrical, all Surrealist works that share the above characteristics fail as art; a conspicuous example of major work that can be described as theatrical is Giacometti's Surrealist sculpture. On

the other hand, it is perhaps not without significance that Smith's supreme example of a Surrealist landscape was the parade ground at Nuremberg.

23. What this means in each art will naturally be different. For example, music's situation is especially difficult in that music shares with theater the convention, if I may call it that, of duration—a convention that, I am suggesting, has itself become increasingly theatrical. Besides, the physical circumstances of a concert closely resemble those of a theatrical performance. It may have been the desire for something like presentness that, at least to some extent, led Brecht to advocate a nonillusionistic theater, in which for example the stage lighting would be visible to the audience, in which the actors would not identify with the characters they play but rather would show them forth, and in which temporality itself would be presented in a new way:

> Just as the actor no longer has to persuade the audience that it is the author's character and not himself that is standing on the stage, so also he need not pretend that the events taking place on the stage have never been rehearsed, and are now happening for the first and only time. Schiller's distinction is no longer valid: that the rhapsodist has to treat his material as wholly in the past: the mime his, as wholy here and now. It should be apparent all through his performance that "even at the start and in the middle he knows how it ends" and he must "thus maintain a calm independence throughout." He narrates the story of his character by vivid portrayal, always knowing more than it does and treating "now" and "here" not as a pretence made possible by the rules of the game but as something to be distinguished from yesterday and some other place, so as to make visible the knotting together of the events. (*Brecht on Theater,* p. 194)

But just as the exposed lighting Brecht advocates has become merely another kind of theatrical convention (one, moreoever, that often plays an important role in the presentation of literalist work, as the installation view of Judd's six-cube piece in the Dwan Gallery shows), it is not clear whether the handling of time Brecht calls for is tantamount to authentic presentness, or merely to another kind of "presence"—to the presentment of time itself as though it were some sort of literalist object. In poetry the need for presentness manifests itself in the lyric poem; this is a subject that requires its own treatment.

For discussions of theater relevant to this essay see Stanley Cavell's essays "Ending the Waiting Game" (on Beckett's *End-Game*) and "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp. 115–62 and 267–353.

New Work by Anthony Caro

ANTHONY CARO'S recent show at the André Emmerich Gallery concentrated on four sculptures (two more were in the back room), each of which was superb and no two of which were alike.

Horizon (1966; fig. 38) exploits contrasts of scale, chiefly among the four vertical cylinders, more explicitly than any other piece by Caro that I know. The aptness of the hollow cylinder for this kind of exploration is striking, and constitutes one of the numerous incidental discoveries of which his oeuvre, like Kenneth Noland's, is full. There is also a contrast between the cylinders and the unusually cursive (for Caro) linear elements that connect them—a contrast that makes for an extraordinarily intense experience as of abstract *detail.* (See for example the near disjunction between the two linear elements just to the left of the middle cylinders.) The hollowness of the cylinders is important as well: one sees their rims as circles—that is, as linear, cursive—not as discs.

In *Red Splash* (1966; fig. 39) four vertical cylinders support two rectangular pieces of rather coarse steel mesh which cross diagonally. On top of their crossing a flat steel rectangle lies parallel to the front and back of the sculpture. Everything about *Red Splash* is elusive, refractory, arbitrary; nothing is perspicuous, nothing makes obvious sense, structural or otherwise. The pieces of mesh do not rest on the tops of the cylinders but barely touch them several inches down; the planes of the mesh are not parallel to each other, to the ground, or to anything else; the view we are offered is from underneath, and

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perhaps for that reason seems to be from the rear as well; the steel rectangle seems simply, even baldly, put where it is; and so on. Caro's growing willingness to explore arbitrariness has its roots, I believe, in his experience of the work of David Smith. But whereas arbitrariness in Smith's work always makes itself felt as something personal, as expressing an aspect of his nature, one senses that to Caro it is a basically alien if not actually repugnant resource which, nevertheless, he is determined to explore. This perhaps explains the depth or radicalness of arbitrariness in *Red Splash:* the sculpture does not refuse to answer certain demands of sense and perspicuousness so much as establish a situation in which the demands themselves are rendered nugatory.

In *Carriage* (1966; fig. 40) the use of mesh enables Caro simultaneously to delimit—almost to enclose or box in—a tract of space and to assert its continuity with the rest of the sculpture's immediate environment. How one ought to describe the mesh itself is a nice problem: for example, although there is an obvious sense in which one can see through it, there is another, perhaps less obvious (or obviously important) sense in which one cannot. It is not transparent, but opaque; one looks both at and past it—as opposed to the way one looks through a pane of glass. By partly superimposing at an angle two meshes of different degrees of openness, Caro establishes a plane of variation, not of transparency exactly, but of visual density. It is as though the mesh is seen as cross-hatching—as literal but disembodied shading or value. In this respect *Carriage* is intimately related to Jules Olitski's spray paintings, in which fluctuations of value are divorced from their traditional tactile associations. More generally, an adequate discussion of Caro's use of mesh would relate it to the opticality both of his own work since 1959 and of the most important painting since Jackson Pollock, whose *Number 29* (1950), a painting on glass, deploys mesh in the interests of accessibility solely to eyesight achieved by his allover paintings as early as the winter of 1946–47.

Span (1966; fig. 41) consists of eight seemingly rather disparate, individualized parts—including a heavy grid—connected to one another with what one experiences as disconcerting freedom. Here as in *Red Splash* the parts feel juxtaposed rather than connected, though the relations among contiguous parts are nowhere near as unperspicuous as in that piece. It is as though nothing in *Span* is attached to anything else—as though anything could be moved or disarranged. For all its size and weight, the piece as a whole represents the achieve-

ment, not of a perilous or delicate balance, but of a rather opposite state of openness, fragility, vulnerability. . . . No two elements are parallel, or for that matter at right angles, to one another in the ground plan. This too is unusual in Caro's work, and is at first disorienting; with familiarity, however, *Span* discloses a coherence based on the acceptance (though not really the stating) of horizontal and vertical axes, the establishment of different levels (the ground being only the lowest of several), and the individual character of each almost disjunct part. *Span* exemplifies Caro's occasional tendency to arrive, inadvertently, even reluctantly, at something like an image—I keep seeing the hollow rectangle at the upper left as a painting or mirror, and in general I am struck by the somewhere Surrealist flavor of the work as a whole—without detriment to the abstractness, or strength as abstract idea, of the sculptures in question. Whatever images one finds in Caro's work come last, not first; when the piece is done they simply are there. But they do not help organize the piece, even when one is most aware of them. Sculptures like *Span* and *Horizon* are held together not by the images they may be seen to constitute, but, I want to say, by the meanings they make. It is as though Caro's art essentializes meaningfulness as such—as though the possibility of meaning what we say and do *alone* makes his sculpture possible.

Ronald Davis: Surface and Illusion

RON DAVIS is a young California artist whose new paintings, recently shown at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, are among the most significant produced anywhere during the past few years, and place him, along with Frank Stella and Darby Bannard, at the forefront of his generation. In at least two respects Davis's work is characteristically Californian: it makes impressive use of new materials—plastic backed with fiberglass—and it exploits an untrammeled illusionism. But these previously had yielded nothing more than extraordinarily attractive objects, such as Larry Bell's coated glass boxes, or ravishing, ostensibly pictorial effects, as in Robert Irwin's recent work. (In the first instance illusion is rendered literal, while in the second it dissolves literalness entirely.) Whereas Davis's new work achieves an unequivocal identity as painting. That this is so is a matter of conviction. One *recognizes* Davis's new work as painting: in my case, with amazement—and, at first, distrust, even resentment—that what I was experiencing as paintings were, after all, made of plastic. Not that Davis's paintings are what they are in spite of being made of plastic or presenting a compelling illusion of solid object in strong perspective. On the contrary, it is precisely Davis's refusal to settle for anything but ambitious painting that, one feels, has compelled him to use both new materials and two-point perspective. What incites amazement is that that ambition could be realized in this way—that, for example, after a lapse of a century, rigorous perspective could again become a medium of painting.

Davis's paintings are, I suggest, the most extreme response so far

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to the situation described in my essay "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (reprinted in this book). Roughly, Davis has used perspectival illusion—the illusion that the painting as a whole is a solid object seen in two-point perspective from above—to relieve the pressure under which, within that situation, the shape of the support (or literal shape) has come to find itself. The limits of Davis's new paintings present themselves as the edges of a three-dimensional entity rather than of a flat surface, and in fact it is virtually impossible to grasp the literal shape of paintings like *Six Ninths Blue* (fig. 56) and *Six Ninths Red* (both 1966) just by looking at them. (One is forced, so to speak, to trace their limits and then see what one has.) As a result, the question of whether or not the literal shapes of Davis's new paintings hold, or stamp themselves out, or compel conviction—a burning question within the situation referred to—simply does not arise. More precisely, it does not arise as long as the illusion of three-dimensionality remains compelling: if in a given painting, for whatever reason, the illusion is felt to be in jeopardy, that painting's ability to hold as shape is rendered questionable as well. (Something of the kind may happen in *Two Ninths Grey* [1966; fig. 57], in which the projected "object" is not, to my mind, sufficiently comprehensible. What, for example, is the precise relation of the two grey blocks to the larger red slab on which they seem to sit? In general Davis cannot afford much ambiguity or indeterminacy, both of which compromise his paintings' illusory objecthood.)[1]

A great deal, then, depends upon the power of the illusion; and it was, I believe, in order to achieve that power that Davis gave up working in paint on canvas and began to explore the possibility of making his new paintings in plastic. In any case, the fact that in his new paintings color is not applied to the surface in any way, but instead seems physically to lie somewhere behind it, makes the illusion of objecthood infinitely more compelling than would otherwise be the case. In this respect Davis's new paintings represent not only an inspired resuscitation of traditional illusionism but also a deep break with it: instead of paint on the surface of the canvas creating the illusion of objects in space, in Davis's paintings whatever makes the illusion is not, it seems, situated on or at the surface at all. (The illusion of objecthood is intensified still more by the way in which the colored plastic—in which Davis has also mixed mirror flake, aluminum powder, bronze powder, and pearl essence—not merely represents but imitates the materiality of solid things.) Conversely, the surface of these paintings is experienced in unique isolation from the illusion.

It has been prized loose from the rest of the painting—as though what hangs on the wall is the surface alone. In Davis's new paintings a detached surface coexists with a detached illusion. (In this respect his paintings are the opposite of Olitski's, in which there is "an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture's surface.")[2] Indeed, the detached surface *coincides* with the detached illusion, which is why the question of whether or not the shape of that surface holds or stamps itself out does not arise. Davis deliberately—and, I think, profoundly—heightens one's sense of the mutual independence of surface and illusion by rather sharply beveling the edges of his paintings from behind. This means that even when the beholder is not standing directly in front of a given painting, no support of any kind can be seen. The surface is felt to be exactly that, a surface, and nothing more. It is not, one might say, the surface of anything—except of course a painting.

Moreover, Davis's surface is something new in painting: not because it is shiny and reflects light—that was also true of the varnished surfaces of the Old Masters—but because what one experiences as surface in these paintings *is* that reflectance and nothing more. The precise degree of reflectance is important. If the painting is too shiny the surface is emphasized at the expense of the illusion, and this in turn undermines the independence of both. At the same time, Davis's paintings make transparency important as never before: not because their surfaces are experienced as transparent—one does not, I want to say, look through so much as past them—but because the layers of colored plastic behind their surfaces vary in opacity. The relation between the surface and the rest of a transparent object is different from that between the surface and the rest of an opaque one: in the former case it is as though the beholder can see all of the object, not just the portion that his eyesight touches. In Davis's new work, this difference becomes important to painting for the first time, by making possible, or greatly strengthening, the relation between surface and illusion I have tried to describe.

Finally, I want at least to mention the character of the illusionism in these paintings. Despite its dependence on the rigorous application of two-point perspective, it too is new in painting. Roughly, the illusion is of something one takes to be a square slab (some portions of which have been removed), turned so that one of its corners points in the general direction of the beholder, and seen from above. What seems to me of special interest is this: the illusion is such that one simply assumes that the projected slab is horizontal, as though

lying on the ground; but this means that looking down at it could be managed only from a position considerably above both the slab itself and the imaginary ground plane it seems to define. Moreover, the beholder is not only suspended above the slab; he is simultaneously tilted toward it—otherwise he would not be in a position to look down at the slab at all. In Davis's new paintings the illusion of objecthood does not excavate the wall so much as it dissolves the ground under one's feet, as though experiencing the surface and the illusion independently of one another were the result of standing in radically different physical relations to them. Davis's illusionism addresses itself not just to eyesight but to a sense that might be called one of *directionality*. There have been strong intimations of such a development in recent painting, notably that of Noland and Olitski; in fact, I recently claimed of Olitski's spray paintings that what is appealed to is not our ability in locating objects (or failing to) but in orienting ourselves (or failing to).[3] This seems to me dramatically true of Davis's new paintings as well.

The possibilities Davis has been able to realize in his first plastic paintings still seem to me scarcely imaginable. The possibilities those paintings open up belong to the future of painting.

NOTES

1. At the moment I wrote this article, I had evidently not yet arrived at the argument of "Art and Objecthood" (reprinted in this book); had I done so, I probably would have found a way to characterize Davis's paintings other than in terms of an illusion of "objecthood," a loaded notion in the essay I was soon to begin.—*M. F., 1996*

2. Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," in *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957–1969*, vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1993), p. 230.

3. In "Jules Olitski" (reprinted in this book).

Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro

Deep Body Blue (1967; fig. 42), the smaller of the two pieces in Anthony Caro's recent show at the Kasmin Gallery, is open as widespread arms and then as a door is open. The two contrasting elements that run along the ground, a length of tubing and a flat sheet standing on its long edge, *gather* the beholder into a far more compelling embrace than could be achieved by literally embracing him—the way, for example, one is embraced by Bernini's colonnades in front of St. Peter's—while the two uprights are experienced as a kind of abstract door on the other side of which two similarly contrasting elements converge, touch, and go their ways. Like several recent sculptures by Caro, *Deep Body Blue* explores possibilities for sculpture in various concepts and experiences that one would think belonged today only to architecture: for example, those of being led up to something, of entering it, perhaps by going through something else, of being inside, of looking out from within. . . . Not that Caro's work is architectural in look or essence. But it shares with architecture a preoccupation with the fact, or with the implications of the fact, that humans have bodies and live in a physical world. This preoccupation finds a natural, and inescapably literal, home in architecture. The same preoccupation no longer finds a *natural* home in painting and sculpture: it is the nearly impossible task of artists like Caro to put it there, and this can only be done by rendering it *anti*literal or (what I mean by) *abstract*. The heart of Caro's genius is that he is able to make radically abstract sculptures out of concepts and experiences which seem—which but for his making are and would

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remain—inescapably literal and therefore irremediably theatrical; and hy so doing he redeems the time if anyone does. Not only is the radical abstractness of art not a denial of our bodies and the world; it is the only way in which they can be saved for high art in our time, in which they can be made present to us other than as theater.

In the course of his enterprise Caro makes discoveries as sudden and imperative as any in modern philosophy. For example, it is essential to our experiencing the two uprights in *Deep Body Blue* as a kind of door that they stand in the same plane. It doesn't matter that they are no more than four feet high, that they lack any sort of lintel, that we are not tempted nor even able to pass between them: the fact that they stand several feet apart in the same plane is enough to make us experience them as an abstract door (and a large, or wide, one at that). By the same token, if they are moved even slightly out of alignment their "doorness" disintegrates and the sculpture as a whole begins to fall apart, to become arbitrary and therefore meaningless as art. This aspect of Caro's achievement may be described in different ways. One can say that he discovered what constitutes an *abstract* door, or that he discovered the *conventions*—corresponding to *deep* needs—which make something a door. Caro did not consciously set out to discover anything of the kind. On the contrary, it is because *Deep Body Blue* began in a preoccupation with particular modes of being in the world that its very success as sculpture came to depend on the making of the above discovery in, or by, the piece itself. It is as though with Caro sculpture has become committed to a new kind of cognitive enterprise: not because its generating impulse has become philosophical, but because the newly explicit need to defeat theater in all its manifestations has meant that the ambition to make sculpture out of a primordial involvement with modes of being in the world can now be realized only if antiliteral—that is, radically abstract—terms for that involvement can be found. (At the risk of seeming to overload the point, I will add that the cognitive enterprise in question is related, in different ways, both to European phenomenology and to the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. It isn't only modernist *art* that has found it necessary to defeat theater.)

The larger sculpture, *Prairie* (1967; fig. 43, pl. 14), consists of four long poles of aluminum tubing suspended parallel to one another about eleven inches above a sheet of corrugated metal—more exactly, a flat sheet with four channel-like depressions in it—which runs north-south to the poles' east-west and is itself suspended about twenty-one inches above the ground. If we approach *Prairie* from ei-

ther end of that sheet, the physical means by which these suspensions are accomplished are not apparent; but as we move around the sculpture it becomes clear that the sheet is held up by two sharply bent pieces of metal plate, one on each side, which spring out and down from the underside of the sheet until they touch the ground, whereupon they angle upward and outward until they reach the height of the poles, which they support also. Two of the poles are supported at only one point, about twenty inches from the end; a third is supported about twenty inches from both ends, that is, by both of the bent, upward-springing metal plates; while a fourth is not supported by these at all but is held up by a large upright rectangle of metal which stands somewhat apart from the rest of the sculpture and in fact is not physically connected to it in any way. But grasping exactly how *Prairie* works as a feat of engineering does not in the least undermine or even compete with one's initial impression that the metal poles and corrugated sheet are suspended, as if in the absence of gravity, at different levels above the ground. Indeed, the ground itself is seen not as that upon which everything else stands and from which everything else rises, but rather as the last, or lowest, of the three levels which, as abstract conception, *Prairie* comprises. (In this sense *Prairie* defines the ground not as that which ultimately supports everything else, but as that which does not itself require support. It makes this fact about the ground both phenomenologically surprising and sculpturally significant.)

The result is an extraordinary marriage of illusion and structural obviousness. Once we have walked even partly around *Prairie* there is nothing we do not know about how it supports itself, and yet that knowledge is somehow eclipsed by our actual experience of the piece as sculpture. It is as though in *Prairie,* as often in Caro's work, illusion is not achieved at the expense of physicality so much as it exists simultaneously with it in such a way that, in the grip of the piece, we do not see past the first to the second. This is mostly due to the nature of the relationships among the various elements that compose *Prairie,* relationships which make a different kind of sense to the mind and to the eye. For example, that three of the long metal poles are held up at only one end is *understood* to mean that the full weight of each pole is borne by a single support far from its center; but the poles are *seen* as being in a state of balance as they are, as if they weighed nothing and could be placed anywhere without support. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the two poles supported at one end by a bent, upward-springing metal plate are held up by different

plates and at opposite ends. Similarly, the one pole supported at both ends is held up by the far corner of the nearer plate and by the near corner of the farther one; and this deliberate staggering, while perfectly understood by the mind, disconcerts the eye enough to make it see that pole as if it were not truly supported at all. That all four poles are parallel to and equidistant from one another, and that three of them are the same length, are other factors which obstruct the eye from giving weight to the specific means by which each is supported. (It should also be said that the fact that the four poles are an almost imperceptibly lighter shade of sandy yellow than the rest of the sculpture gives them an added suggestion of lift.) In these and other ways Caro on the one hand has frankly avowed the physicality of his sculpture and on the other has rendered that physicality unperspicuous to a degree that even after repeated viewings is barely credible. This is not in itself a new development in his work; it has been a steady feature of his art since his conversion to radical abstraction around 1959. But it reaches in *Prairie* an extreme that may also be a kind of culmination. More emphatically than any previous sculpture by Caro, *Prairie* compels us to believe what we see rather than what we know, to accept the witness of the senses against the constructions of the mind.

Finally, Caro has never before sought openness through abstract extension as explicitly as here. For the first time the openness Caro achieves is above all a lateral openness—with the result that we are made to feel that lateralness as such is open in a way that verticality or obliqueness or head-on recession are not. This is a point of deep affinity between *Prairie* and the superb paintings in Kenneth Noland's last show at the Emmerich Gallery, in which the lateral extension of the canvas and its colors accomplished, among other things, an unexpected liberation from the constrictions of the picture shape. In both *Prairie* and Noland's recent paintings the decisive experience is one of instantaneous extension, roughly from somewhere in the middle of the poles or canvas out towards both ends. In each the exact dimensions of what is extended laterally are of crucial importance: if either the poles or the canvas were too long or short, the result would be a flaccid or blocky objecthood. (Objecthood of one kind or another is the aim of literalist work, which does not begin or end so much as it merely stops, and in which an indefinite—by implication, infinite—progression takes place as if in time.) Caro seems to have faced the further risk that *Prairie* might be too open, at any rate that the eye might be compelled away from the piece itself

into the space around it, in which case it would strike one less as open than as merely insufficient. That this does not occur is partly owing to Caro's use of the solid rectangle of metal which supports the fourth pole: placed largely beyond the previous limits of the sculpture, it actually extends the sculpture at the same time as it helps contain is energies by giving the eye something flat, vertical, and opaque to come up against. The lack of physical connection between the rectangle-and-pole and the rest of the piece has been made as unperspicuous as the precise character of the connections among the other elements: this is largely why *Prairie* is by far the most successful sculpture in two or more parts that I have ever seen.

I believe that *Prairie* is a masterpiece, one of the great works of modern art and a touchstone for future sculpture, and that *Deep Body Blue,* while less ambitious, is nevertheless beyond the reach of any other living sculptor. In the radicalness of their ambition both have more in common with certain poetry and music, and certain recent painting, than with the work of any previous sculptor. And yet this very radicalness enables them to achieve a body and a world of meaning and expression that belong essentially to sculpture.

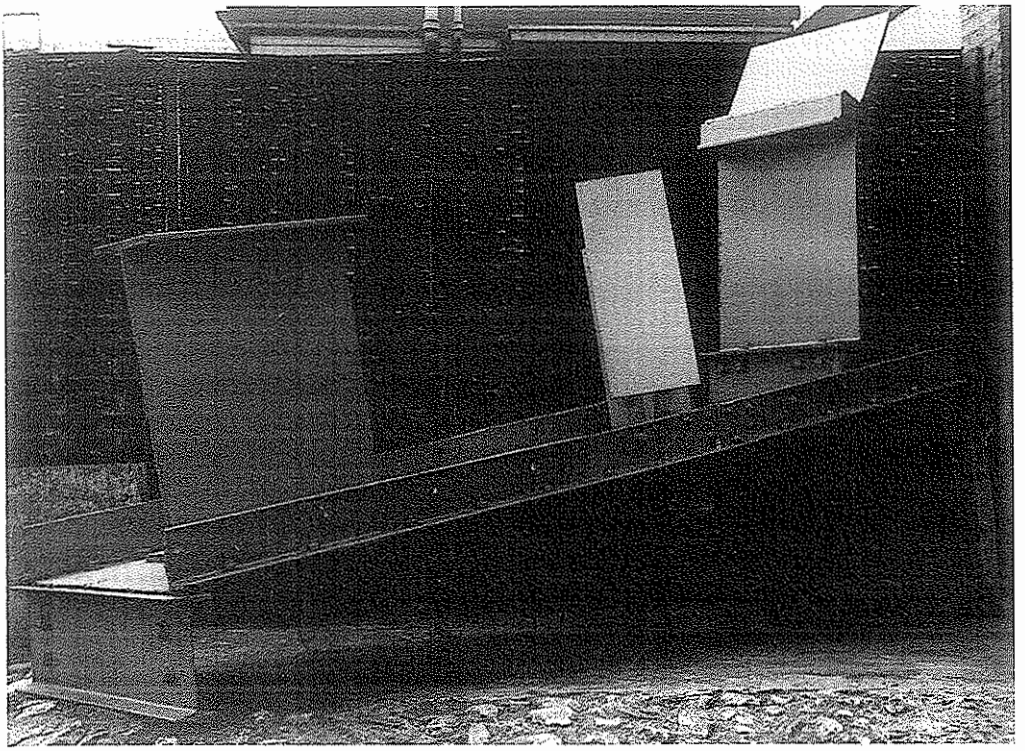


Figure 32. Anthony Caro, *Midday*, 1960. Painted steel, 7' 7¾" x 37⅜" x 12' 1¾". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Wiesenberger Fund. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Kim Lim.

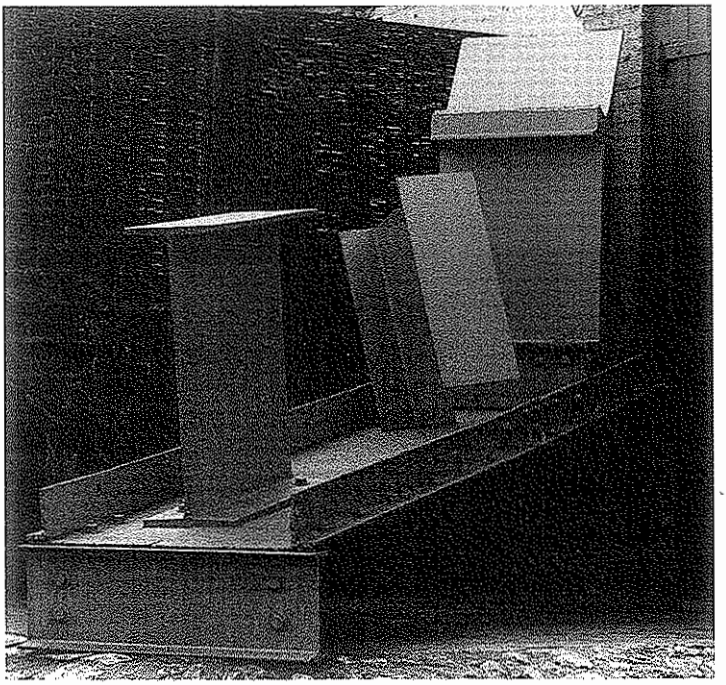


Figure 33. Anthony Caro, *Midday*, 1960. Painted steel, 7' 7¾" x 37⅜" x 12' 1¾". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Wiesenberger Fund. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Kim Lim.

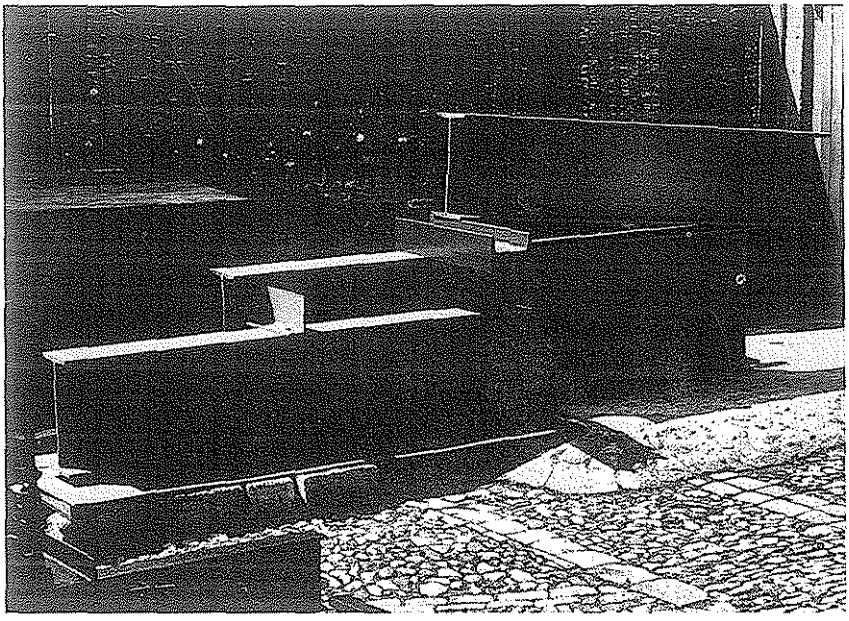


Figure 34. Anthony Caro, *Sculpture Seven,* 1961. Steel painted green, blue, and brown, 70 x 211½ x 41½ inches. Private collection, London. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Robert Newman.

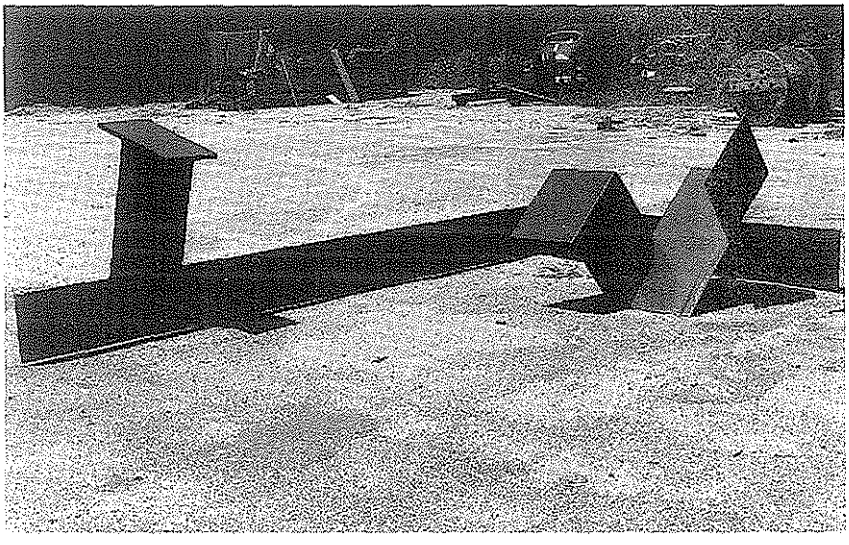


Figure 35. Anthony Caro, *Titan,* 1964. Steel painted blue, 41½ x 144 x 114 inches. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Gift from the Volunteer Committee Fund, 1983.

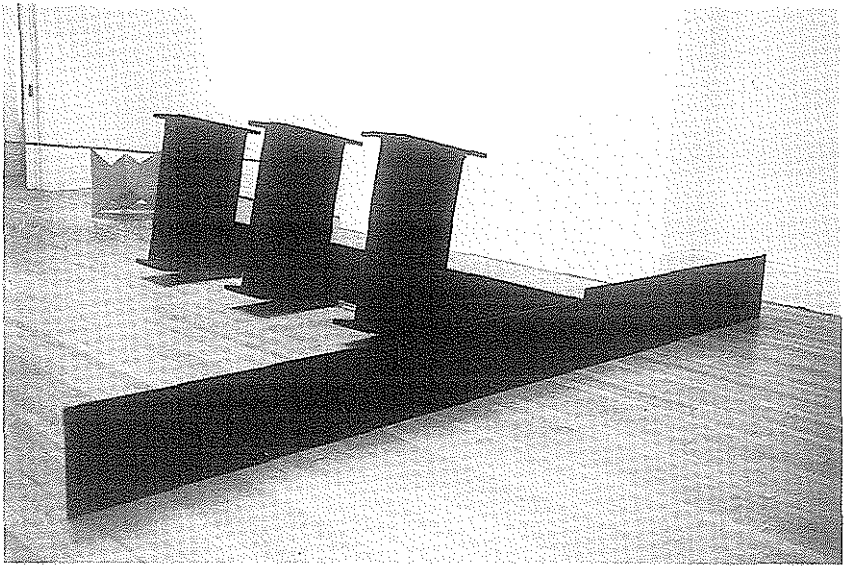


Figure 36. Anthony Caro, *Bennington,* 1964. Steel painted black, 40 x 166 x 133½ inches. Private collection, U.S.A. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts.

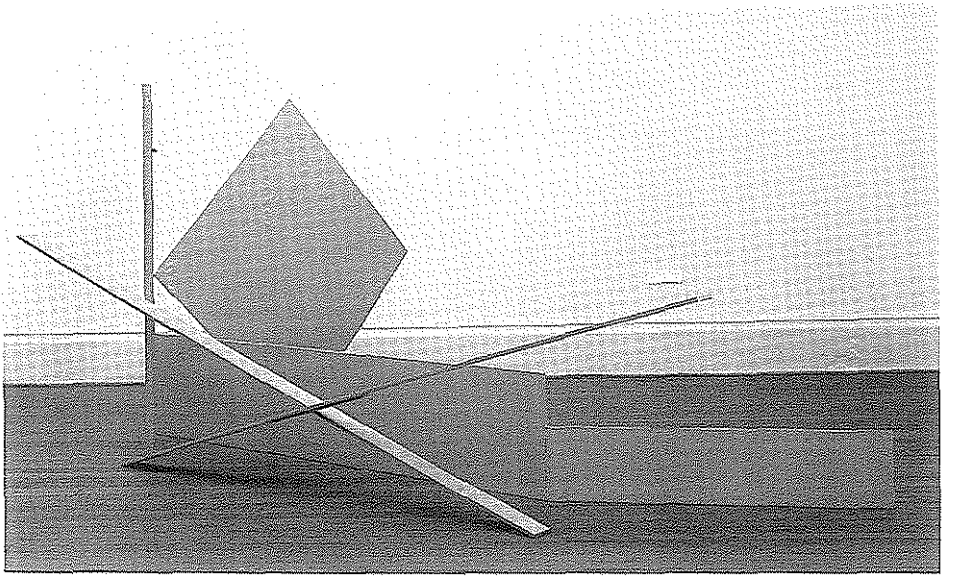
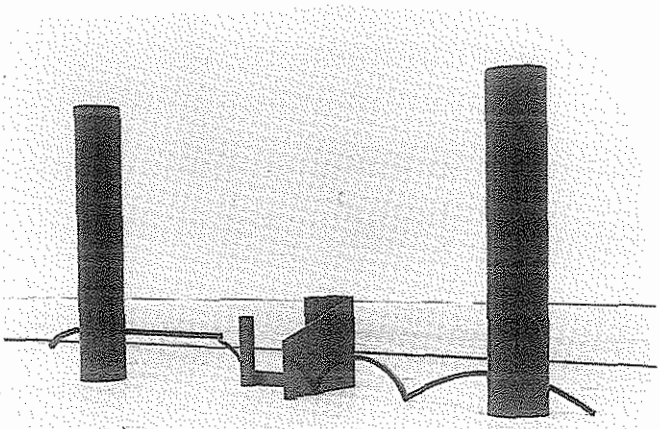


Figure 37. Anthony Caro, *Yellow Swing,* 1965. Painted steel, 74 x 73½ x 160 inches. The Tate Gallery London. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Tate Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.

Figure 38. Anthony Caro, *Horizon,* 1966. Steel painted brown, 69½ x 165 x 33 inches. Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.



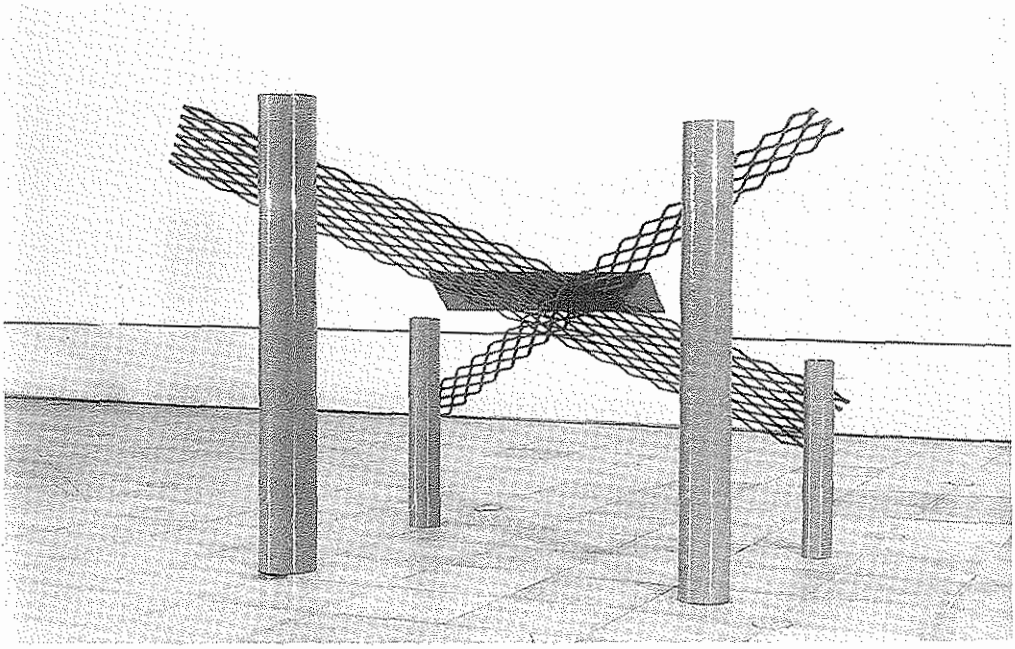


Figure 39. Anthony Caro, *Red Splash,* 1966. Steel painted red, 45½ x 69 x 41 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Mirvish, Toronto. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Webb.

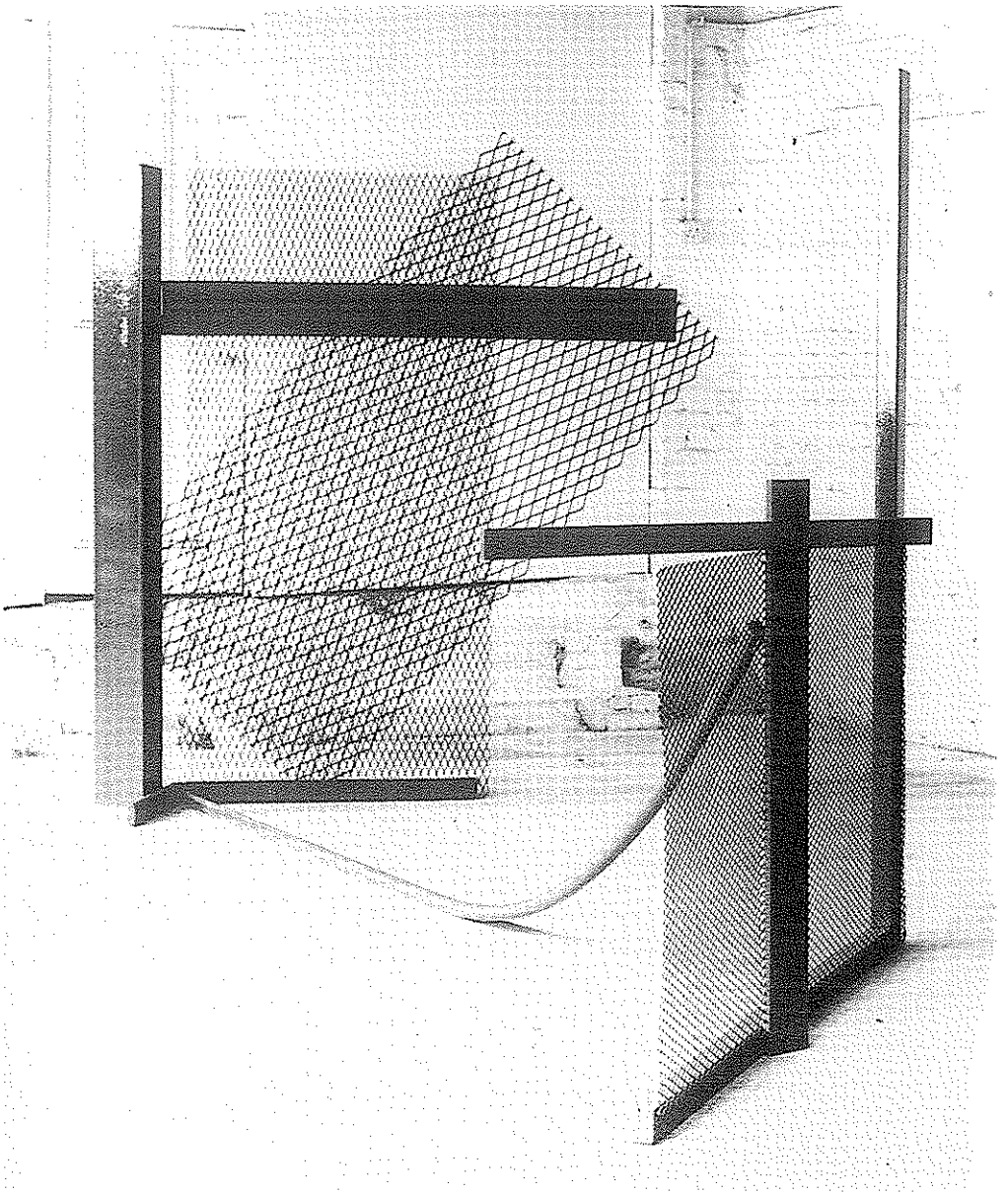


Figure 40. Anthony Caro, *Carriage,* 1966. Steel painted blue green, 77 x 80 x 13 inches. Collection of Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher, Dallas. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

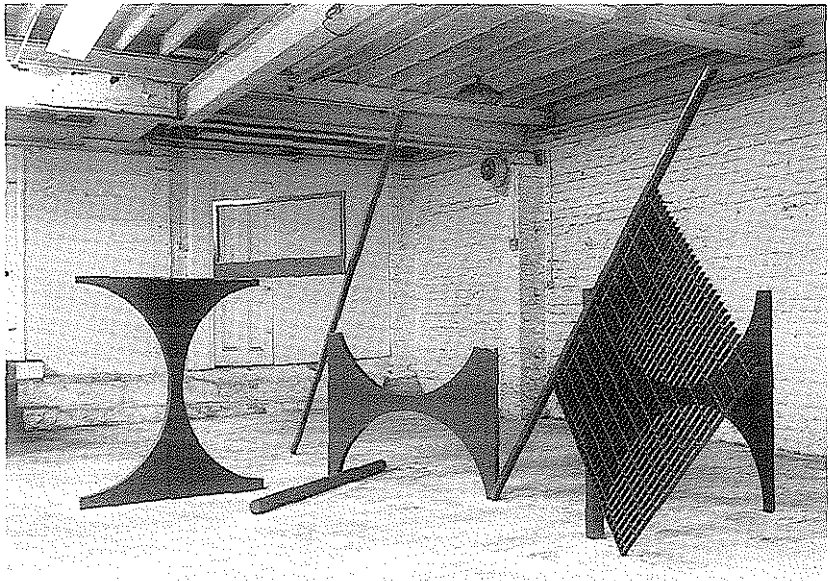


Figure 41. Anthony Caro, *Span,* 1966. Steel painted burgundy, 77½ x 184 x 132 inches. Private collection, Harpswell. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

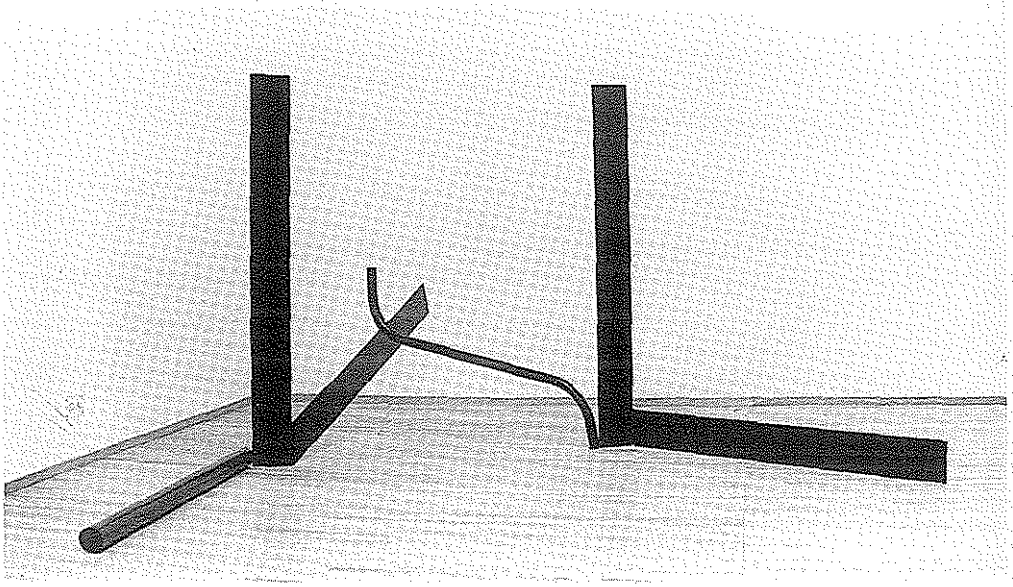


Figure 42. Anthony Caro, *Deep Body Blue,* 1966. Steel painted dark blue, 48½ x 101 x 124 inches. Private collection, Harpswell. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

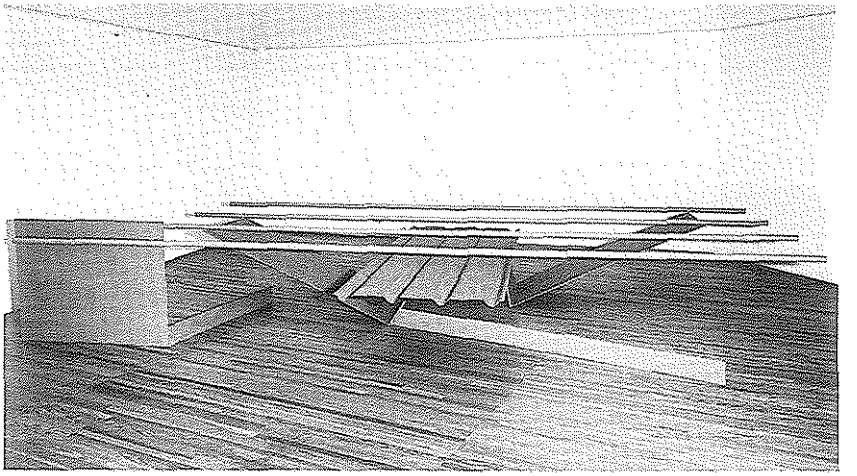


Figure 43. Anthony Caro, *Prairie,* 1967. Steel painted matte yellow, 38 x 229 x 126 inches. Collection of Lois and Georges de Menil, on extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

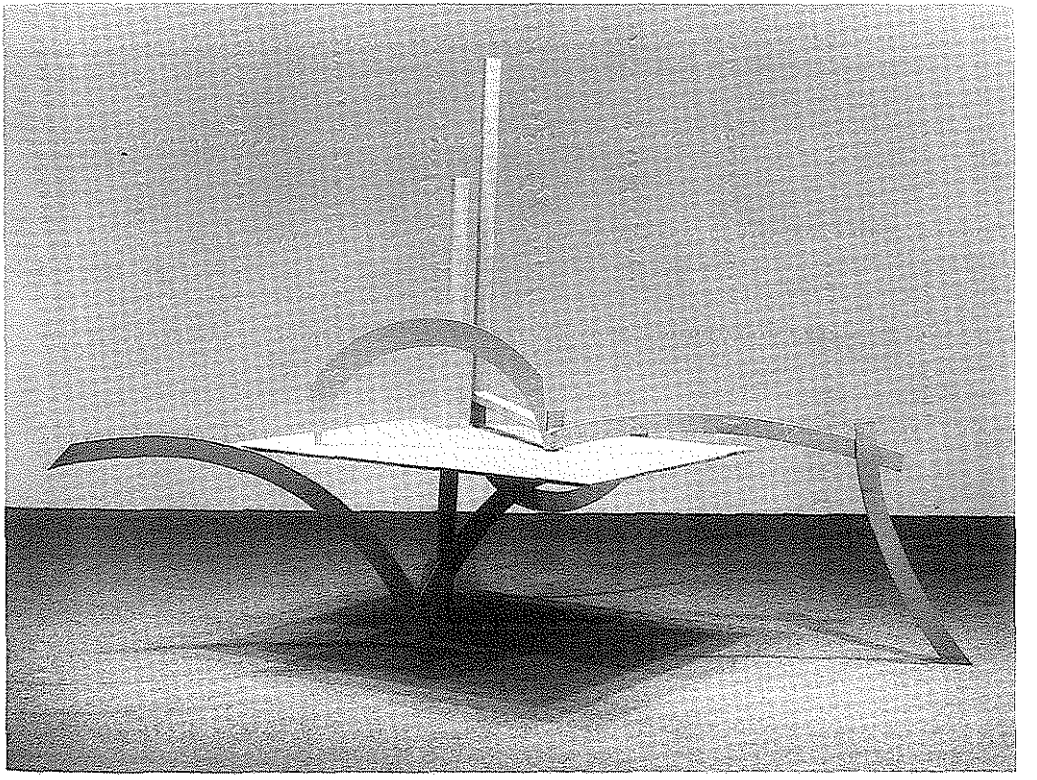


Figure 44. Anthony Caro, *Trefoil,* 1968. Steel painted matte yellow, 83 x 100 x 65 inches. David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

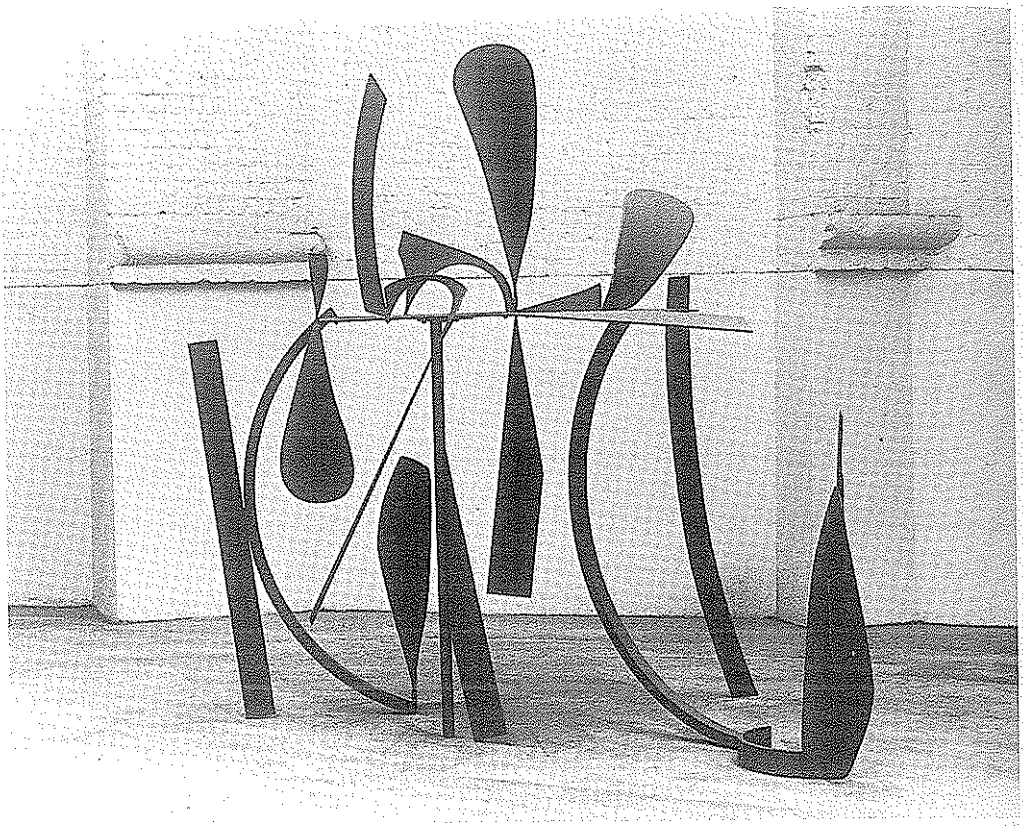


Figure 45. Anthony Caro, *Orangerie*, 1969. Steel painted Venetian red, 88½ x 64¼ x 91 inches. Collection of Kenneth Noland, North Bennington, Mass. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Guy Martin.

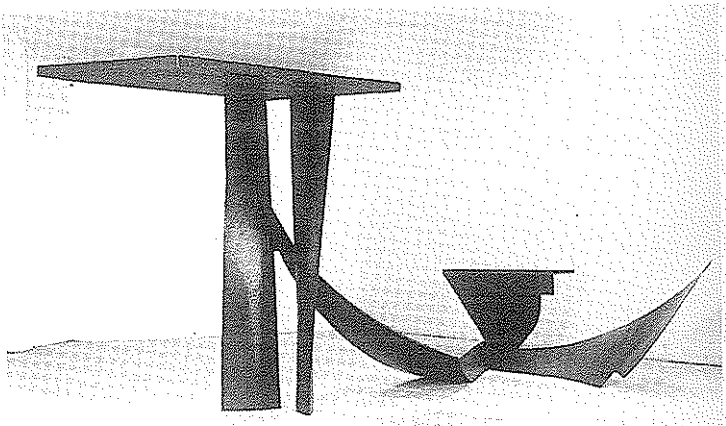


Figure 46. Anthony Caro, *Deep North*, 1969–70. Steel, cadmium steel, and aluminum painted green, 96 x 228 x 114 inches. Collection of Kenneth Noland, North Bennington, Mass. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

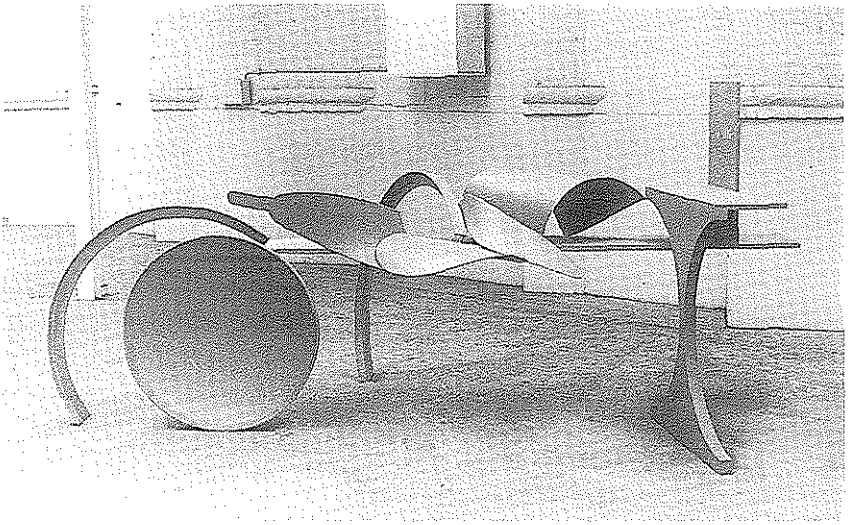


Figure 47. Anthony Caro, *Sun Feast,* 1969–70. Steel painted yellow, 71½ x 164 x 86 inches. Private collection, Harpswell. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

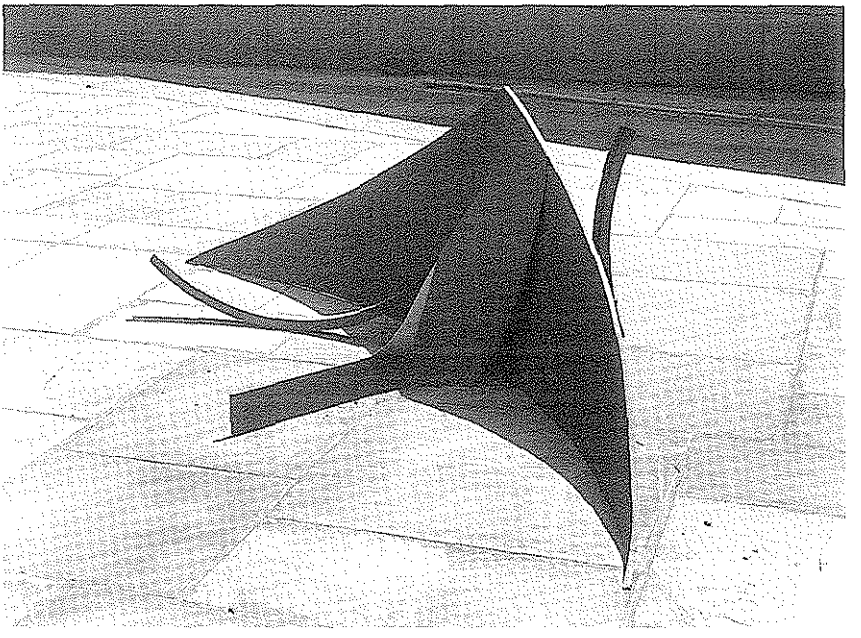


Figure 48. Anthony Caro, *Wending Back,* 1969–70. Painted steel, 190.5 x 320 x 154.9 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: © 1997 Contemporary Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1970.29.

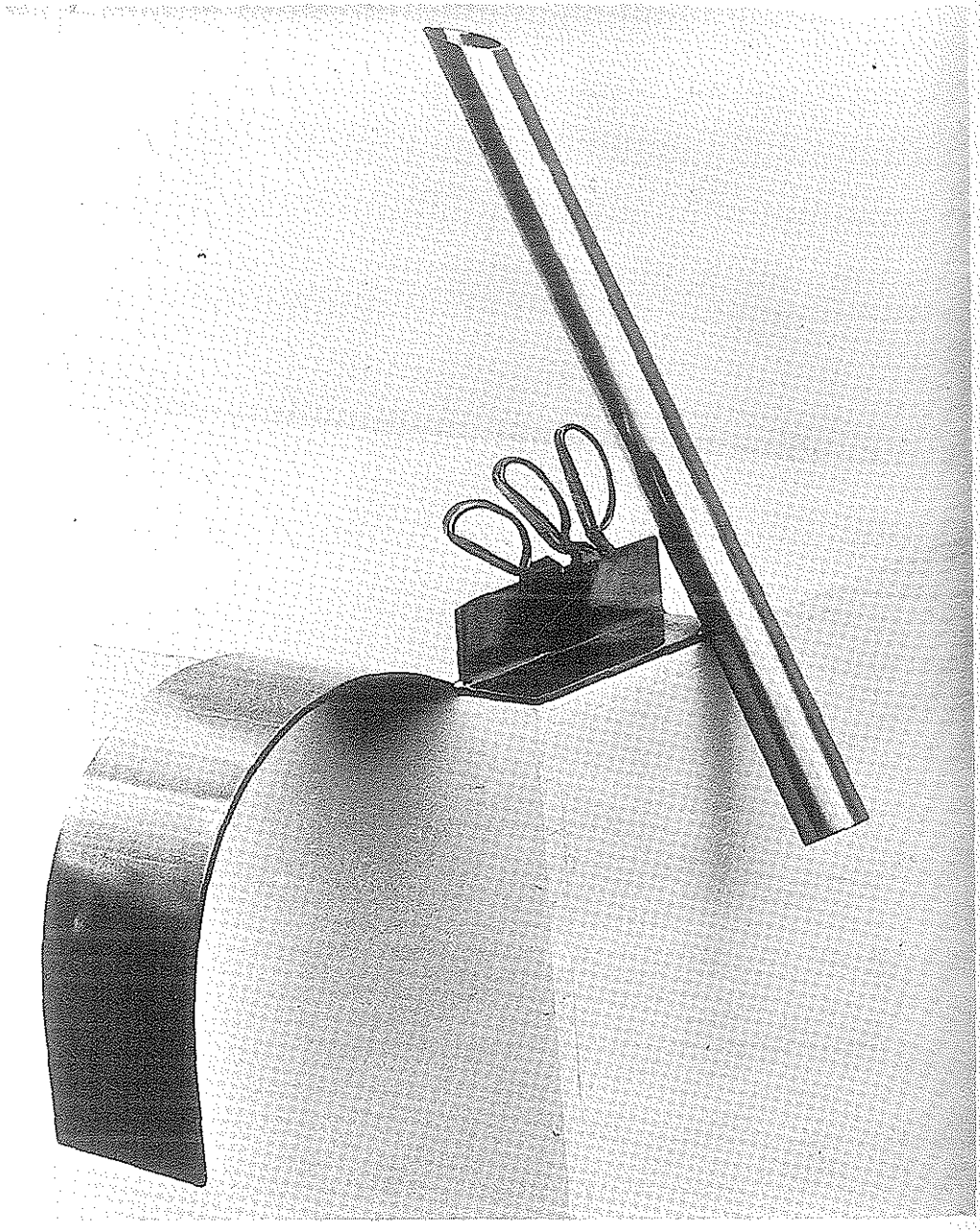


Figure 49. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece VIII*, 1966. Polished steel, 27 x 13 x 20 inches. Private collection, London. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Guy Martin.

Figure 50. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece XXII,* 1966. Steel sprayed jewelescent green, 10 x 31½ x 27 inches. Private collection, London. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Guy Martin.

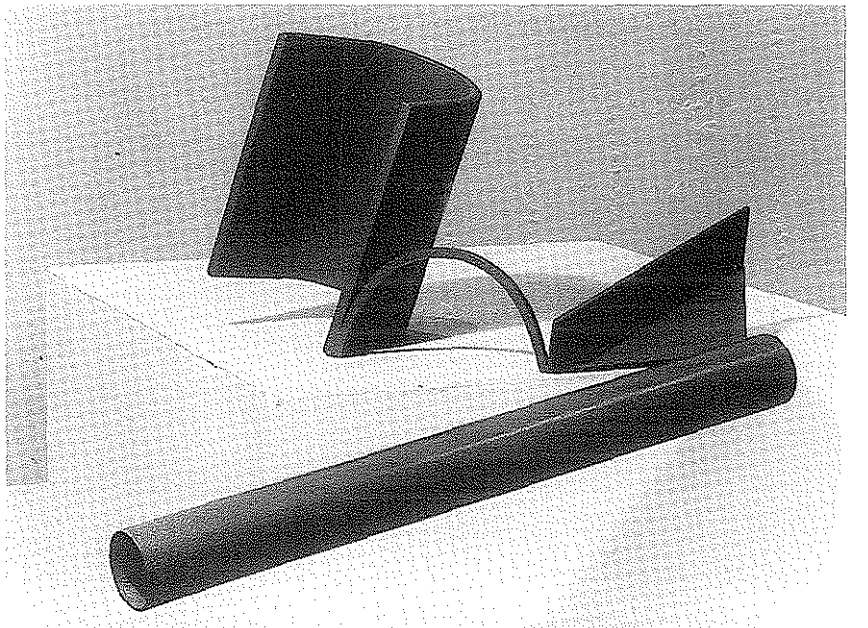
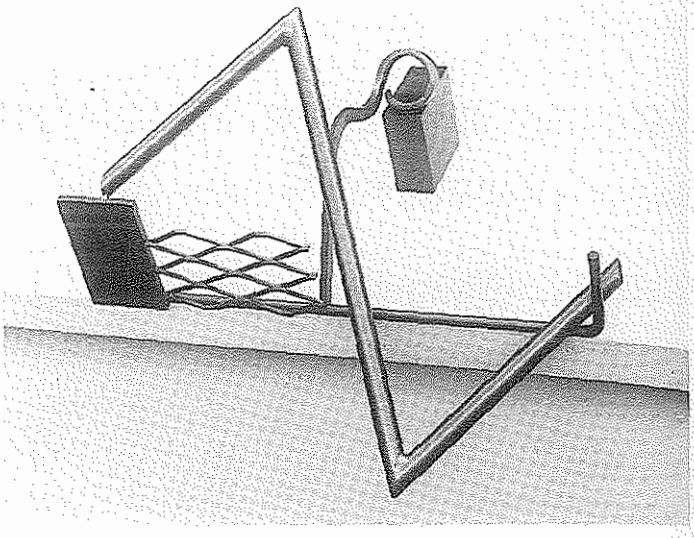


Figure 51. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece XLIX,* 1968. Steel painted green, 20½ x 32 x 25 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Webb.

Figure 52. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece LIX,* 1968. Steel painted silver gray, 11½ x 17 x 19 inches. Private collection, London. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Guy Martin.



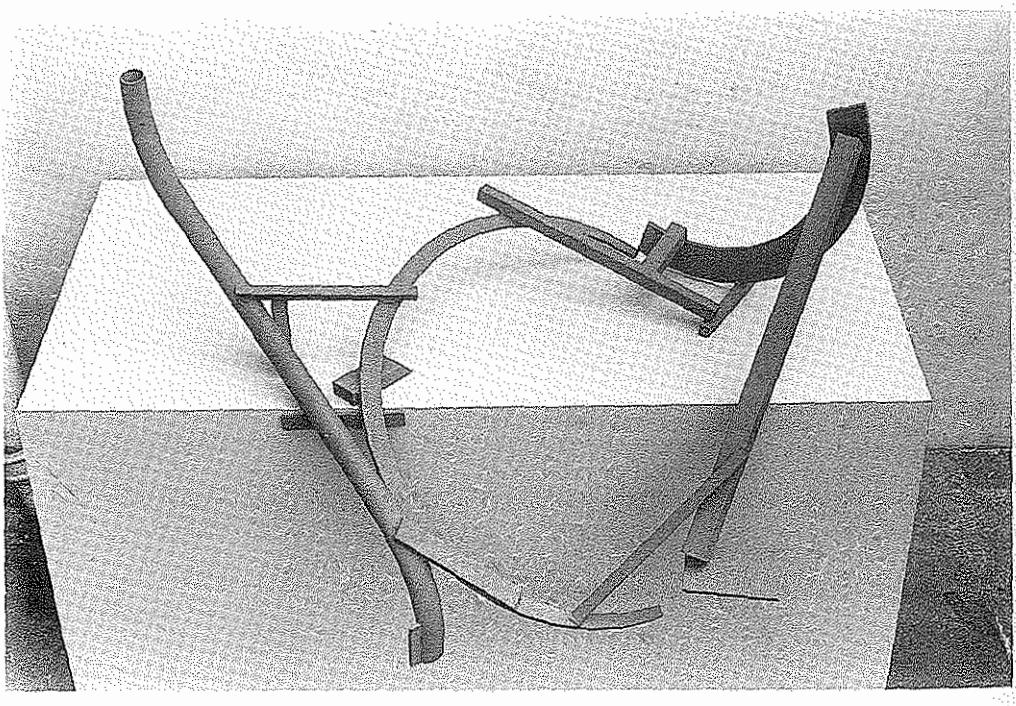


Figure 53. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece LXIV (The Clock),* 1968. Steel painted yellow, 30 x 51 x 32 inches. Private collection, Paris. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Guy Martin.

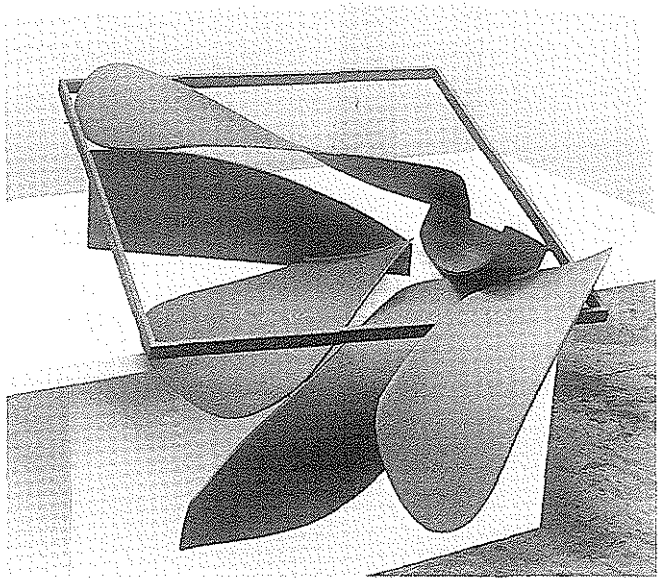


Figure 54. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece XCVII,* 1969–70. Steel painted brown, 25 x 53 x 44 inches. Private collection, London. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

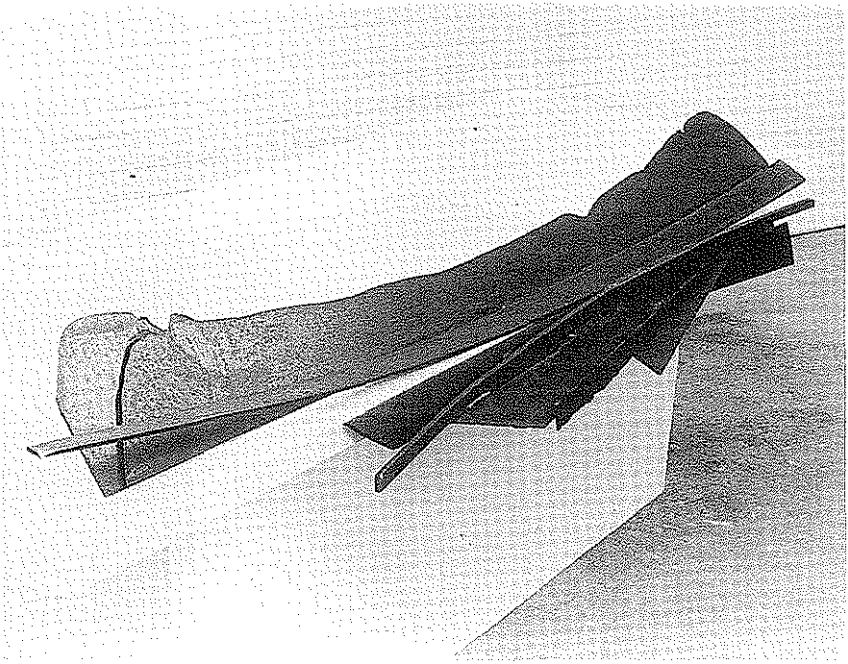


Figure 55. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece CLXXXII,* 1974. Steel rusted and varnished, 14 x 14 x 74 inches. Private collection, U.S.A. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

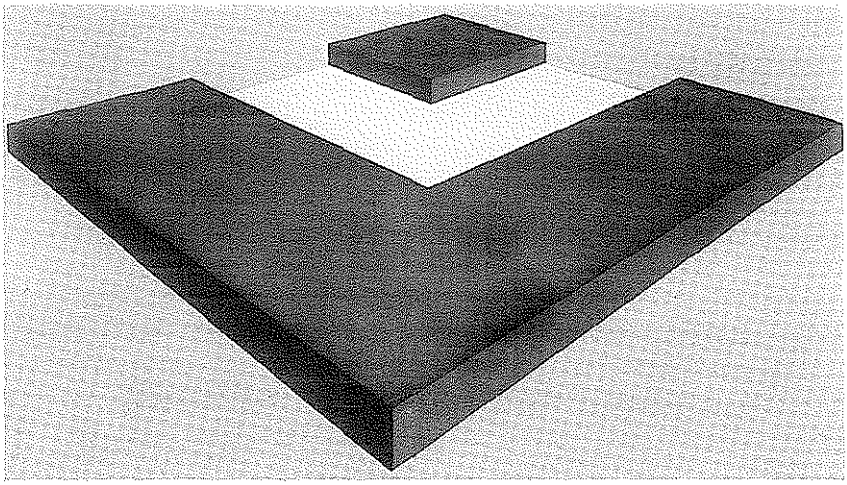


Figure 56. Ron Davis, *Six Ninths Blue,* 1966. Plastic, fiberglass, and wood, 72 x 131 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist.

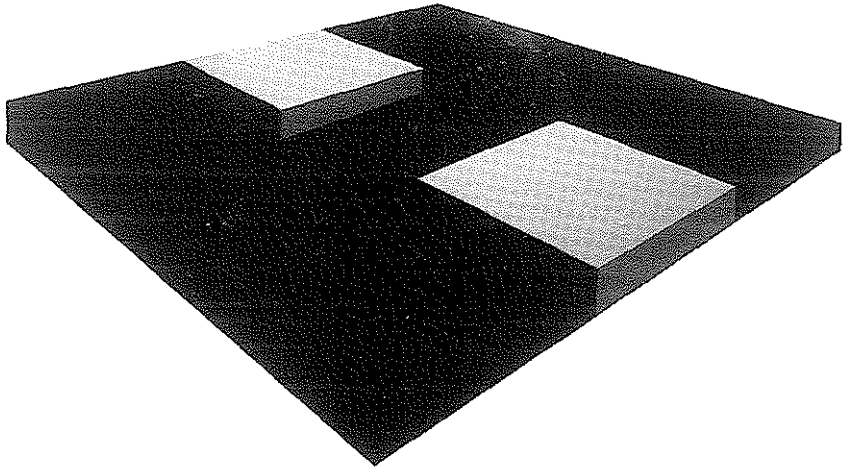


Figure 57. Ron Davis, *Two Ninths Grey,* 1966. Plastic, fiberglass, and wood, 72 x 131 inches. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist.

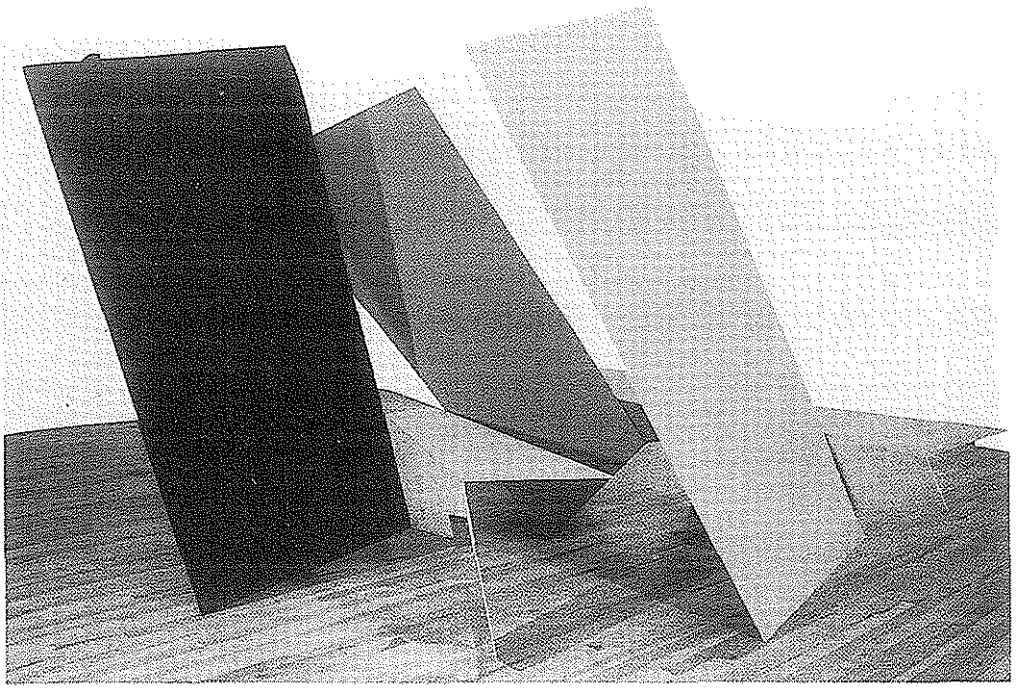


Figure 58. Michael Bolus, *Untitled,* 1971. Painted aluminum, 96 x 136 x ? inches. Whereabouts unknown. Courtesy of the artist.

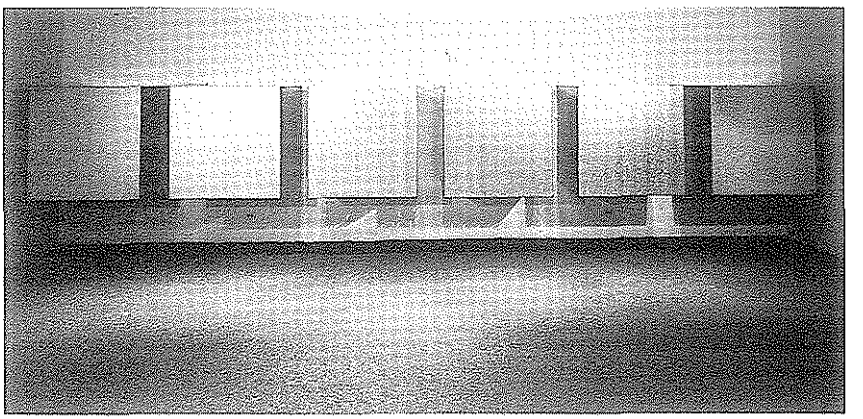


Figure 59. Donald Judd, *Untitled,* 1966. Galvanized iron, six units, each unit 40 x 40 x 40 inches with 10-inch intervals. Private collection. © 1997 Estate of Donald Judd / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

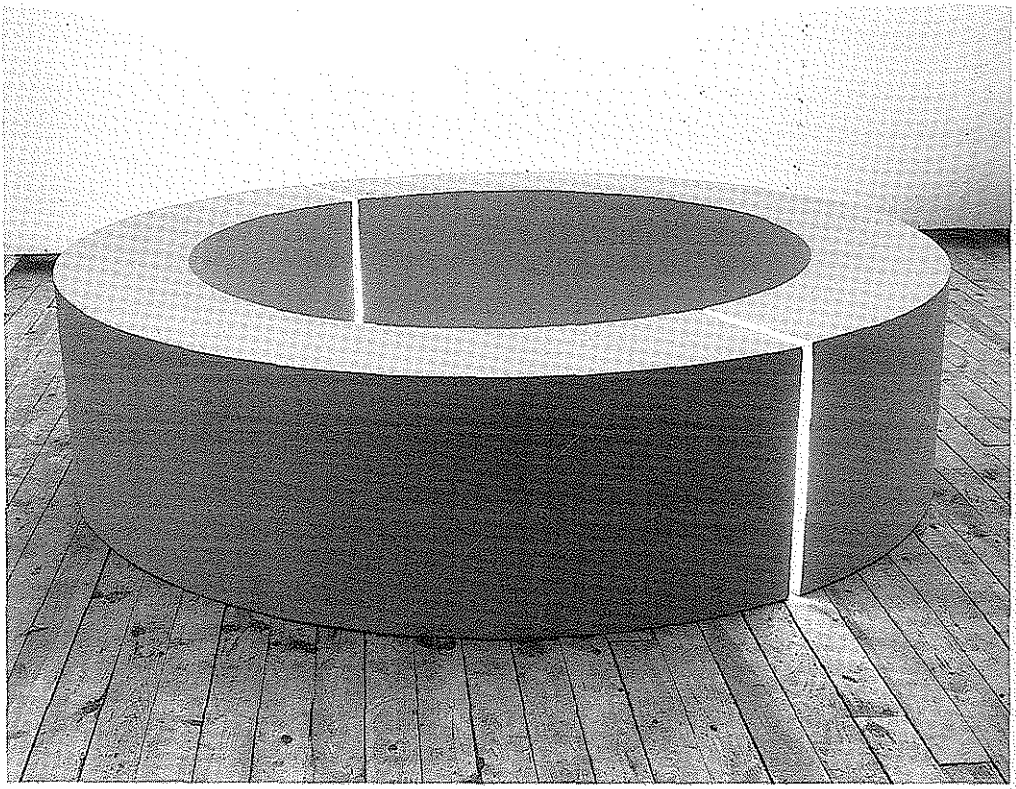


Figure 60. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Ring with Light),* 1965–66. Painted wood and fiberglass and fluorescent light, two units, each 24 inches high, 14 inches deep; overall diameter 97 inches. Dallas Museum of Art. General Acquisitions Fund and a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. © 1997 Robert Morris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

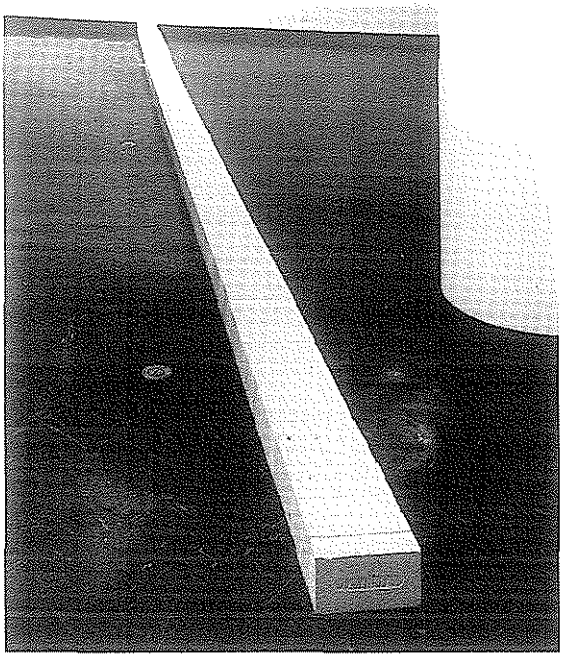


Figure 61. Carl Andre, *Lever,* 1966. Installation from *Primary Structures,* Apr. 27–June 12, 1966, Jewish Museum, New York. © 1997 Carl Andre / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Jewish Museum/Art Resource, New York.

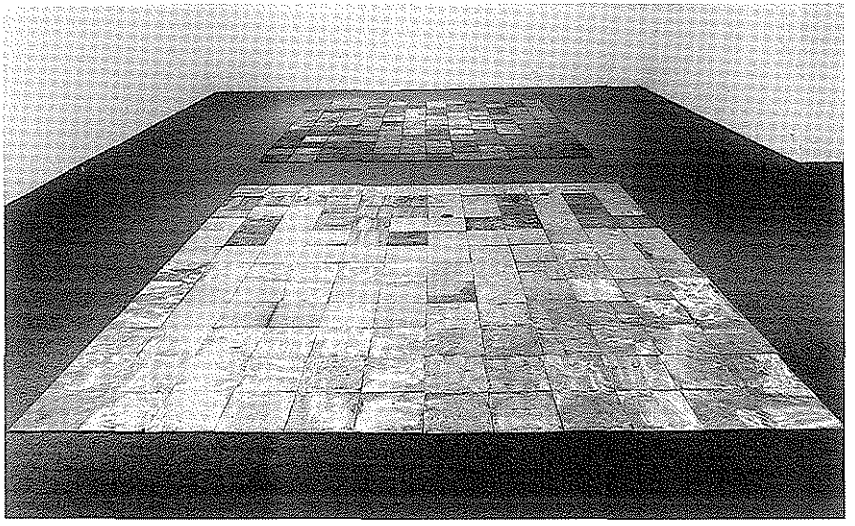


Figure 62. Carl Andre, two floor pieces. Front: *144 Magnesium Square,* 1969. Magnesium, 144 unit squares, ⅜ x 12 x 12 inches each; ⅜ x 144 x 144 inches overall. Back: *144 Lead Square,* 1969. Lead, 144 unit squares, ⅜ x 12 x 12 inches each; 144 inches overall. Installation at Dwan Gallery, New York. © 1997 Carl Andre / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: John Weber Gallery; courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

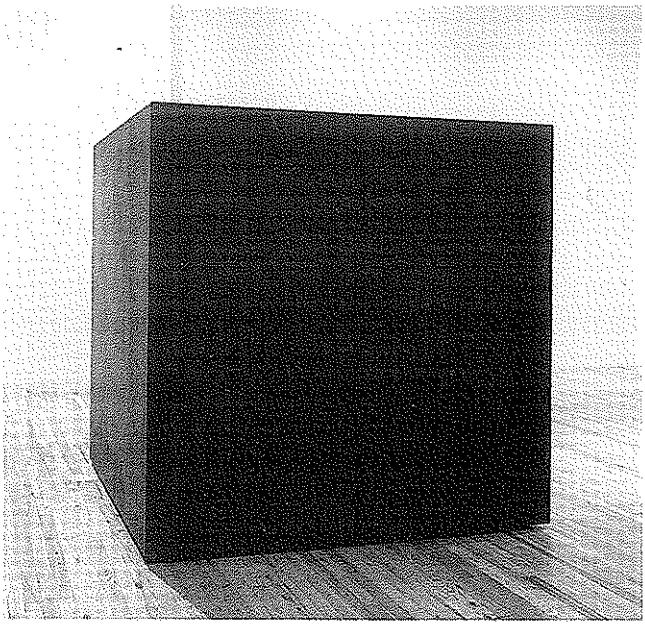


Figure 63. Tony Smith, *Die,* 1962. Steel painted black, 72 x 72 x 72 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Estate of Tony Smith / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Geoffrey Clements, New York, © 1992; courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

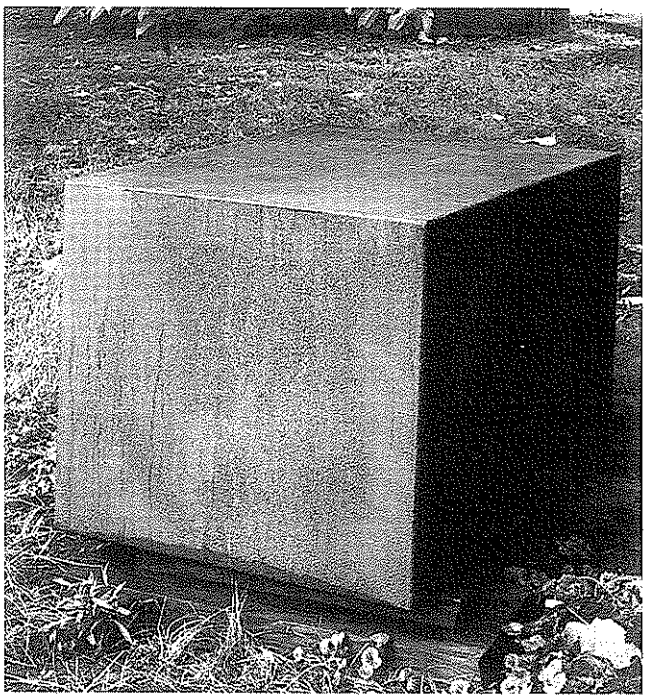


Figure 64. Tony Smith, *The Black Box,* 1963–65. Steel painted black, 22½ x 33 x 25 inches. © 1997 Estate of Tony Smith / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Eric Politzer; courtesy Estate of Tony Smith.

Figure 65. Vasily Kandinsky, *Painting with White Form*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 47⅜ x 55 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: David Heald © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, FN 37.240.

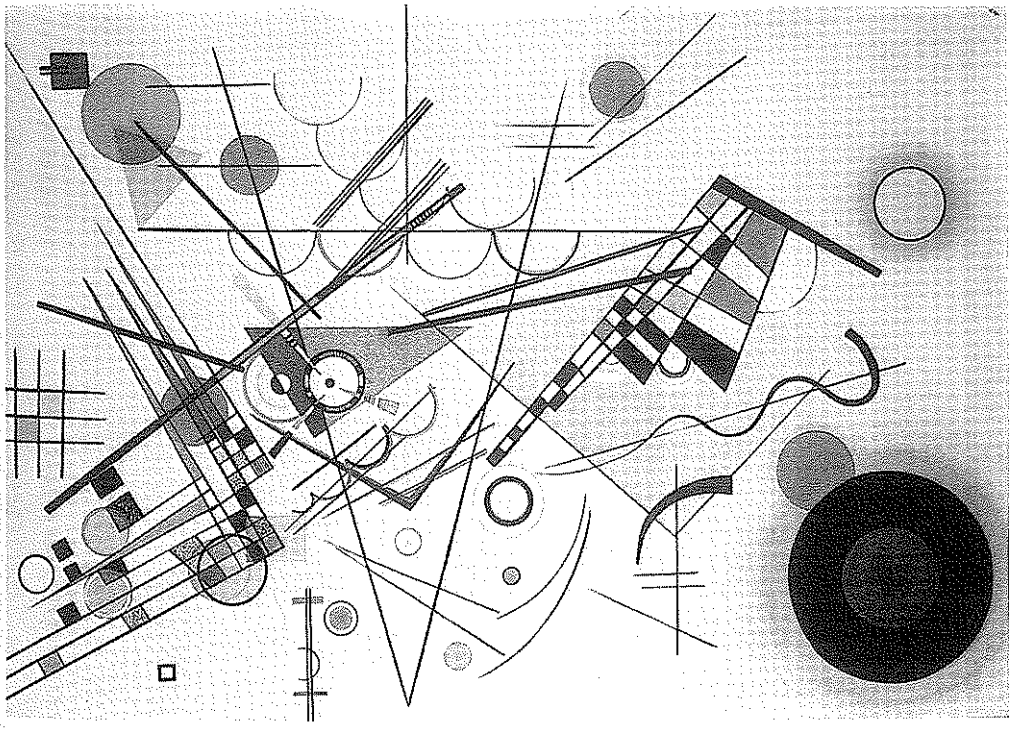


Figure 66. Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition 8*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 55⅛ x 79⅛ inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: David Heald © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, FN 37.262.

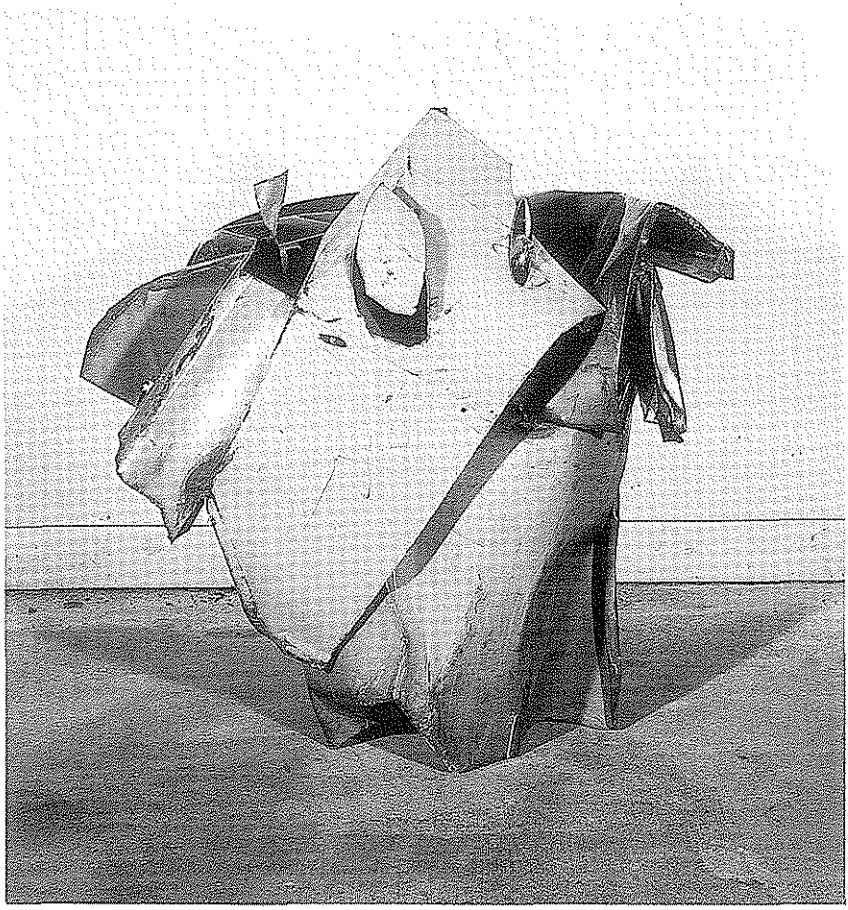


Figure 67. John Chamberlain, *Miss Lucy Pink,* 1962. Painted steel, 47 x 42 x 39 inches. Private collection. © 1997 John Chamberlain / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Courtesy the Pace Gallery, New York.

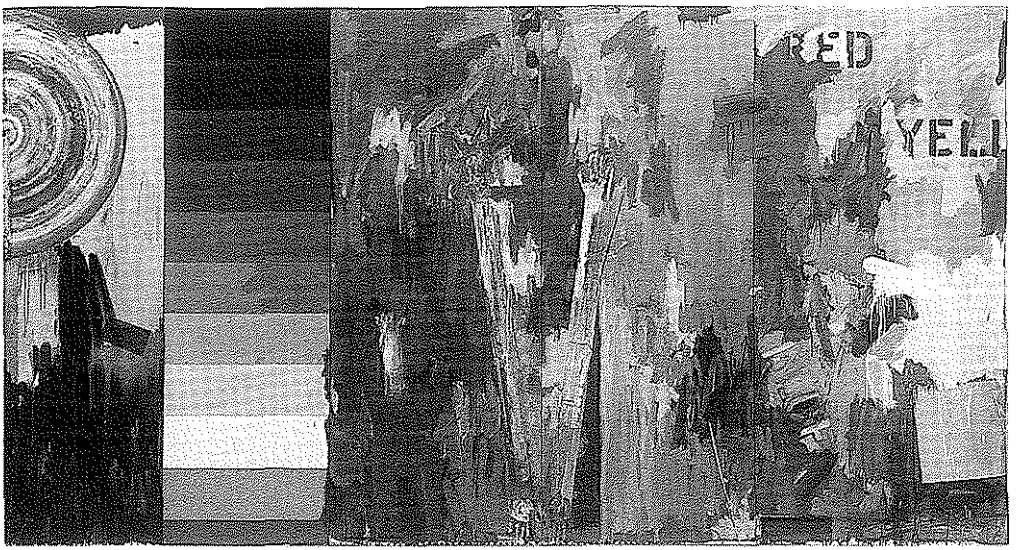


Figure 68. Jasper Johns, *Diver,* 1962. Oil on canvas with objects, 90 x 170 inches; five panels. Collection of Norman and Irma Braman. © 1997 Jasper Johns / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt; courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.

Figure 69. Hans Hofmann, *Memoria in Aeternum,* 1962. Oil on canvas, 84 x 72⅛ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Estate of Hans Hofmann. Photo: © 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

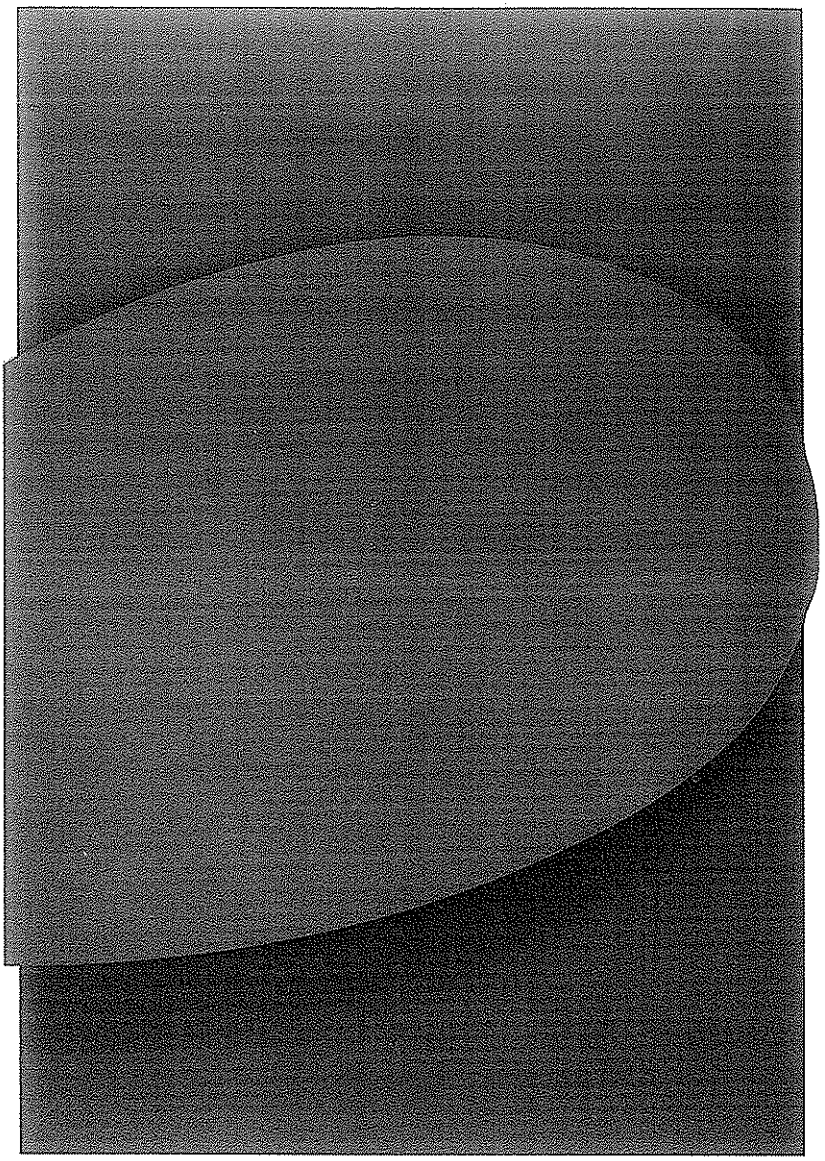


Figure 70. Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue on Blue,* 1963. Aluminum relief painted blue, 80 x 60 x 7½ inches. Los Angles County Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R. Weismain in honor of Richard E. Sherwood, Esq.

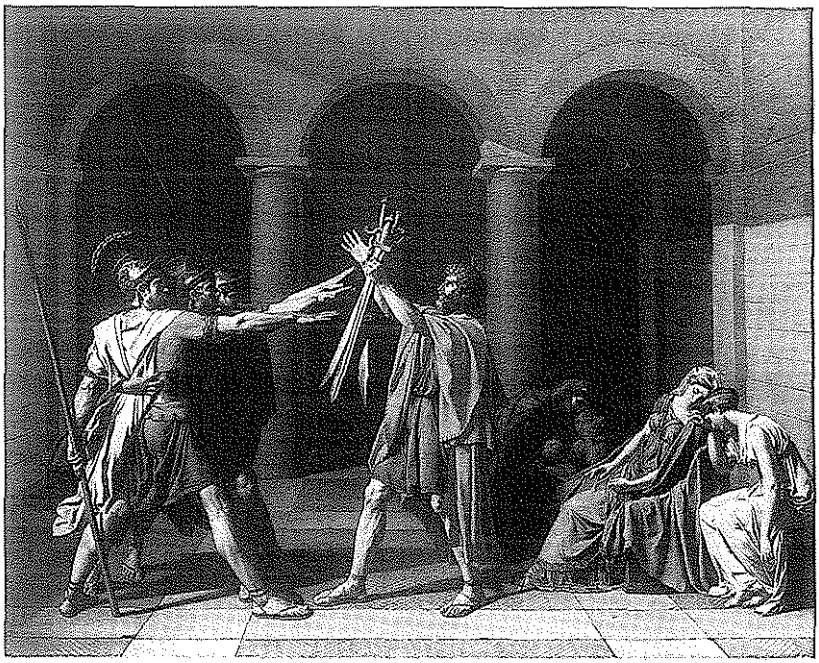


Figure 71. Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii,* 1785. Oil on canvas, 130 x 167¼ inches. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées nationaux.

Figure 72. Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women,* 1799. Oil on canvas, 150¾ x 205½ inches. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées nationaux.

Recent Work by Kenneth Noland

FOR ABOUT two years now Kenneth Noland has been making paintings which consist of a number of horizontal bands of color, usually of different thicknesses, suspended above one another—almost always with intervals of raw canvas between them—within rectangular formats whose height-to-width ratios are rarely less than one to two and are sometimes as much as one to twelve or even more. A selection from among the first such paintings was shown at the Emmerich Gallery in November 1967, while five superb canvases recently on view at the Lawrence Rubin Gallery exemplify some of the directions which Noland's work has taken during the past year and a half.

The most remarkable of the Rubin Gallery paintings is probably the largest, *Via Token* (1969; fig. 17). A broad expanse of light ocher fills the entire canvas except for two nine-inch-high tracts at the top and bottom, each of which is occupied by three equal bands of (reading away from the ocher middle) purple, pink, and red. (It goes without saying that all color notations given here are approximations.) What in particular is remarkable is that we are made to see the ocher expanse itself as a further, seventh band—one which like the others is twenty feet long but which unlike them is almost seven feet high. By "band" I mean not a type of shape so much as another kind of entity altogether, one which is both naturally unenclosed and essentially directional in ways that a shape, any shape, simply is not. There is of course a plain sense in which the ocher expanse in *Via Token* just is a certain shape, a particular horizontal rectangle. But my point is

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that we are made to see that solid rectangle of color as something else: a radically abstract entity whose essence consists not in its boundedness, and not in the portion of the painting's surface which it covers, but in its unimpeded lateral extension across the plane of that surface. The sense in which the relatively narrow bands of color in this and other paintings are not (or not essentially) shapes is, I think, apparent, at least in front of the paintings themselves: it is as though they essentialize lateral extension as such, as though they are nothing but that lateralness, that extension. The special triumph of *Via Token* is that we are made to see an expanse of color which taken alone could hardly be more inert or wall-like in exactly those terms.

Via Token is not the only recent painting by Noland in which a relatively very broad central band occupies almost the entire canvas. *Streak* (1968), also in the Rubin Gallery show, is another instance of this, though the actual proportions of that picture make the salmon reddish middle seem more naturally bandlike from the start. Both paintings exemplify a new level of engagement with the great "decorative" painting of the past and perhaps with that of Matisse himself: as if in pictures like these the qualities of unbrokenness, uniform intensity, and sheer breadth of color that one finds within shapes and areas in Matisse's art are recreated by, or as, lateral extension alone. And because they are recreated—made radically abstract—in this way, the paintings that result are profoundly anti-"decorative" in effect.

Noland's bands of color would not be what they are—they would not have the properties here attributed to them—if they were not made of color. And by virtue of those properties, which is to say by essentializing lateral extension as I have claimed they do, Noland's bands make color present to us in a new way. One might say that they make color present to us, not just as lateral and extended, but as a new abstract *modality* of lateralness and extension: a modality which we are almost—but not literally—able to describe in terms of differences in direction or relative velocity or strength of flow among the bands of color that compose a given picture. At any rate, differences of color, like differences of breadth, among the bands make themselves felt in something like those terms. And that is felt in turn as reinforcing the differentness or separateness or apartness of one color from another—if not as establishing difference of color on new and so to speak more physical grounds—with the result that each color in a given picture assumes what I think of as unprecedented autonomy relative to all the others. In the first of his horizontal band

pictures, such as those shown in 1967, Noland often emphasized the fact of that autonomy by using large numbers of distinct and, it seemed, disparate colors in a single canvas. One was continually struck, first, by the sheer multiplicity of the colors in a given picture—a multiplicity which might have been no greater numerically than that of a Morris Louis stripe painting but which because of the felt autonomy of all the colors was far more perspicuous—and second, by what can perhaps be called the abstract arbitrariness of the individual colors, by which I mean the felt depth of that autonomy.[1] (It is tempting to compare this aspect of Noland's art with the kind of freedom from certain paradigms of rightness, absolute economy, and internal necessity which Jackson Pollock achieved through and for line in his allover drip paintings of 1947–50.) The above may be summed up by the claim that in these paintings the *singularity* of colors—a singularity as absolute, in Noland's hands, as that of persons—was insisted upon, made self-evident, as never before.

All this carried special risks, above all the risk that the colors in a given picture might make themselves felt as too disparate, autonomous, arbitrary—as disruptive, almost explosive—and the picture as a whole be virtually torn apart by the concurrence within its limits of irreconcilable energies and events. The most emphatically anarchic of Noland's early horizontal band pictures opened themselves to the danger of being seen less as paintings than as spectacular, if in an obvious sense pictorial, phenomena.

Noland may or may not have consciously recognized this danger, if in fact I am right that it was one. But his paintings of the past eighteen months—those I have seen—escape it completely. In pictures like *Via Token* and *Streak* this is owing both to the use of relatively few colors and to the broadening of the middle band, which together quiet or "slow down" the painting as a whole. (These steps carry their own risks—that the picture may become inert, "decorative," "minimal," an equivocal object instead of a convincing painting. And between the literalness of an object and that of a phenomenon, which may be thought of as a special sort of object, there is nothing to choose. In my remarks on *Via Token* it is aspects of the overcoming of objecthood I have tried to describe.) In other recent paintings, among them the Rubin Gallery's *Via Love Leap, Via Flow,* and *Via Shadow* (all 1969), Noland has employed a wide range of hues in an extremely narrow range of values very near white, thereby securing certain kinds of pictorial coherence—or avoiding certain kinds of incoherence—through the traditional resource of close valuing,

while establishing that coherence or avoidance of incoherence where (with the exception of a few paintings by Monet) it had never before been located. The result is something like a new world of color: as though the separateness or apartness that characterizes the relations among individual colors in the early horizontal band paintings now also characterizes Noland's use of "white" color generally.

NOTES

1. On the notions of the autonomy and multiplicity of colors, see respectively the section on Jules Olitski in the introduction to *Three American Painters* (reprinted in this book as "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella") and the discussion of Louis's stripes in "Morris Louis" (reprinted in this book).—*M. F., 1996*

Caro's Abstractness

Orangerie (1969–70; fig. 45), one of the most ravishing sculptures Anthony Caro has ever made, is also one of the most nearly pictorial. Unlike most of his pieces it appears to comprise a number of discrete and rather highly characterized shapes, whose mutual juxtaposition, while not actually establishing a single plane or a succession of planes, seems nevertheless to imply the kind of planarity we associate with painting. (It's right that Matisse has been mentioned in connection with Caro's recent work. The affinity between *Orangerie* and the work of Morris Louis—for example, the *Aleph* paintings of 1960—might also be noted.) And yet how unpictorial *Orangerie* finally is. The chief rounded shapes delineate themselves above all by twisting in space. Its seeming planarity is in the end decisively subverted by the angling and arcing—the rapid, curved-versus-straight cursiveness in depth—both of individual elements and of the ground plan as a whole. Most important, *Orangerie* must be seen in relation to Caro's table sculptures, which he has been making more or less steadily since the summer of 1966 (figs. 49–55), and as a step beyond the superb *Trefoil* (1968; fig. 44), in which he first physically included the plane of the table in a sculpture that stands on the ground.

Briefly, the ambition behind the table sculptures was to make small works that could not be seen merely as reduced versions of larger ones—sculptures whose smallness was to be secured abstractly, made part of their essence, instead of remaining simply a literal, quantitative fact about them. That ambition led Caro, first, to incor-

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porate handles of various kinds in most of his early table sculptures, in an attempt to key the scale of each piece to that of graspable, manipulable objects (partial precedents for this include Picasso's *Glass of Absinthe* and a few sculptures by Giacometti); and second, to run or set at least one element in every piece *below* the level of the tabletop on which the sculpture was to be placed, thereby precluding its transposition, in fact or in imagination, to the ground. It at once turned out that by tabling, or precluding grounding, the sculptures in this way Caro was able to establish their smallness in terms that proved virtually independent of actual size. That is, the distinction between tabling and grounding, because determined (or acknowledged) by the sculptures themselves instead of merely imposed upon them by their eventual placement, made itself felt as equivalent to *a qualitative rather than a quantitative* difference in scale. (Not only has the abstract smallness of Caro's table sculptures proved compatible with surprising largeness of actual size; it soon became apparent that a certain *minimum* size was required for their tabling to be experienced in those terms.) In these and other respects Caro's table sculptures mark the emergence of a sense of scale for which there is no precedent in earlier sculpture and no clear parallel in our experience of the world. The incorporation in *Trefoil* of a table, or tabletop, may be seen as merging largeness and smallness as both had come to be defined in and by Caro's art. And in *Orangerie* Caro has extended and refined the implications of such a merging of abstract scales by raising the already thin and narrow tabular plane almost to eye level and by angling a second plane into it from the front, which together largely attenuate its ostensible normativeness. The result is altogether more delicate and less obviously tablelike (more shelflike?) than in *Trefoil*. But once again it is to the tabular plane even more than to the ground that the other elements chiefly relate.

The exploitation of different levels, basic to Caro's abstract sculptures from the first, is also crucial to the other indisputably major work on view at the Emmerich Gallery last May, *Deep North* (1969–70; fig. 46). In that sculpture a rectangular piece of heavy grid is suspended parallel to the ground at a height of about eight feet in a way that allows, but does not compel, the beholder to position himself beneath it. This may appear to break with what has been one of the fundamental norms of Caro's art: the refusal to allow the beholder to enter a given work, to step or stand inside it. That refusal has been striking both because of the general openness of Caro's sculptures and because of the manifest preoccupation of certain pieces (I do

not say of Caro himself) with experiences such as entering, going through, being enclosed, looking out from within, and so on, which one might have thought would virtually have entailed a kind of environmentalism. Moreover, the obduracy of Caro's sculptures on this score has been only one aspect, albeit an important one, of their antiliteral, antisituational character; and *that* has been an index at once of their radical abstractness and of their deep antagonism to the theatrical in all its current forms and manifestations. So that by allowing us actually stand beneath a portion of itself, *Deep North* may appear to call into question, perhaps even to renounce, what has been until now the essence of Caro's art.

But the facts of experience do not bear this out. Even when we place ourselves directly below the massive grid, we do not feel that we have entered or are inside the sculpture. Partly this has to do with the nature of something *overhead:* if we were compelled to step over or across some sort of boundary, however low or slight, the sensation of entering would, I think, become inescapable—though once again the exact basis of this in our experience of the world remains obscure. Partly too it is a function of the way in which every element in the piece seems to twist, turn, face, point, or open away from every other. And partly it stems from the fact that *Deep North*'s vital center, from which the sculpture as a whole is felt to originate, is located far from the grid and its supports, at the ground level juncture of the three other principal elements, and that our view from beneath the grid both of that juncture and of the relations among those elements (in particular the inspired rhymes among them), if not actually privileged, is at any rate profoundly satisfying. We are of course aware of not seeing all of the sculpture—specifically, of not seeing the grid itself—when standing beneath the latter. But this is experienced as nothing more than a special instance of the limitations inherent in any point of view. In this respect *Deep North* belongs with *After Summer* (1969), which partly because of its great size conspicuously resists being seen in its entirety from any single position. None of this is to deny that an apprehension of the grid as overhead, as a kind of roof or ceiling under which we can stand, dominates our experience of the sculpture as a whole. What must be insisted upon is that this is true whether or not we choose to station ourselves beneath the grid: it is a function not of any literal or architectural relationship between structure and beholder, but of the internal relations (or syntax) of the sculpture alone, relations which, however, are deeply grounded in the nature and potentialities of the human body.

The large yellow *Sun Feast* (1969–70; fig. 47) may be more complex and at bottom more difficult of access than either *Orangerie* or *Deep North.* There are, in any case, at least three types of order at work in it. First, that of Caro's table sculptures and their subsumption in pieces like *Trefoil* and *Orangerie.* The long horizontal plank that runs almost the full length of the sculpture serves as the "table" on top of which various elements are placed and off of which these and other elements depend or spring or otherwise make their way. Second, the play of elements along and against a dominant axis or track, also identified with the long horizontal plank. This organizing principle appeared in Caro's work as early as the great *Midday,* a piece that has much in common with *Sun Feast.* And third, a kind of sensuous, disheveled, almost certainly "feminine" though not quite figural sprawl, as if the sculpture were displaying itself for its own delectation. The combination of intellectual rigor and intense sensuality again recalls Matisse. But it is also wholly characteristic of Caro's Blakean imagination. If *Sun Feast* has a fault, and it may not, it is perhaps too much reliance on the curvilinear, which tips the balance toward an almost rococo elegance and in effect disguises the sculpture's underlying difficulty—the difficulty, for example, of the coexistence of several modes of order, no one of which is entirely satisfying, or of the contrast between the thickness of most of the piece and the unnerving thinness of the twisting, plowsharelike elements disposed along the horizontal plank.

Wending Back (1969–70; fig. 48) is the smallest and in obvious respects the least ambitious of the sculptures discussed here. But it could not be better and ought to be recognized for what it is, a small masterpiece. No less inert, more energized, in abstract terms more kinetic sculpture can be imagined. It is as though Caro constructed *Wending Back* directly out of brief but articulate segments of trajectories, vectors, torques. Everything sweeps, scoops, slices, and is sliced. Even the triangular shape of the largest element seems the result of three shearing arcs whose full dimensions we can only guess. And in general *Wending Back* implies magnitudes of energy and extension that far exceed its physical limits. Perhaps because of this, the stabilizing, grounding normativeness of the narrow rectangular element that stands on edge is vital to its success. The dark gray color, too, resists the dematerialization implicit in *Wending Back*'s kinetic syntax, and by so doing further collects the sculpture as a whole while making the abstract nature of its energies all the more self-evident.

Problems of Polychromy: New Sculptures by Michael Bolus

Two of the three recent sculptures by Michael Bolus on view at London's Waddington Gallery engage with problems of color and in particular of polychromy, the use of more than one color in a single piece. The issue of polychromy for modern abstract sculpture might have been raised by the work of David Smith but wasn't, probably because both choice and application of color remained throughout his career the least resolved and therefore the least generally significant features of his art. Polychromy as a general concern became felt during the 1960s, mainly in response to Caro's early steel pieces, which demonstrated as never before the potential, as well as something of the difficulty, of color as a resource for sculpture. Within the past several years Olitski's adaptation of the sprayed color of his paintings to sculptural ends has produced works of great strength and originality. In England, where Caro's influence has been enormous, problems of polychromy have tasked two of the best sculptors of their generation, Bolus and Tim Scott. (Of course, other sculptors of various nationalities have used two or more colors in a single piece. But only Bolus and Scott, along with Olitski, seem to me to have carried color other than where Caro took it in *Sculpture Seven* and *Month of May*.)

Specifically, Bolus's polychrome sculptures, such as the two untitled pieces at Waddington's (both 1971), exploit, and in the process make perspicuous for the first time, what appears to be a deep, as it were natural affinity between applied color and planarity—between single colors and single planes (fig. 58). It is as if, under condi-

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tions of sculptural abstraction, a single plane emerges as the strongest, most direct, most convincing bearer or vehicle of a single applied color; or as if a single applied color turns out to declare a plane more strongly, directly, and convincingly than it is able to declare anything else. (As if indeed applied colors can't be said to "declare" other things so much as merely help distinguish them from yet other things or kinds of things.) The affinity between applied color and planarity has its source in the phenomenologically absolute relationship, which in "Shape as Form" I have claimed is central to problems of color in sculpture, between applied color and surface as such—a flat plane being in effect the sheerest, most straightforward, altogether most powerful statement of surface that lies to hand. Both Olitski and Scott engage with, and in different ways strive to overcome, the limitations for polychrome sculpture implicit in this situation: Olitski by seeking to free applied color from planarity through spraying, that is, by projecting the nonplanar surfaces of his sculptures as convincing vehicles of an everywhere modulating continuum of pulverized color; and Scott, whose entire undertaking expresses a primary involvement with materiality, by freeing color from surface, or at any rate from appliedness, through the use of materials—sheets of colored Perspex in which color literally inheres. (Nothing like this sort of concern with issues of surface can be found in the work of either Smith or Caro.) Bolus on the other hand accepts those limitations from the start. Hence the severely restricted, it may even seem anti-sculptural, vocabulary of form with which in his colored pieces he is prepared to work. And hence also the apparent conventionality of his use of color in comparison with Olitski's or Scott's. For Bolus, the making of polychrome sculptures simply means the juxtaposing of planes, or rather of plane surfaces, each of which is identified with the applied color it bears. But the depth of that identification in his work—the conviction it is made to compel—is something new.

Our conviction stems in the first place from the internal consistency of the limitations themselves, which at a glance come across as anything but accidental, mechanical, or merely conventional. And it is further, more importantly compelled by specific acknowledgments not just of the appliedness of the individual colors but of the relationship between applied color and plane surface that I have tried to characterize. For example, Bolus's decision to place different colors on opposite faces of the same planar element—contrasted with, and given emphasis by, the use of the same color on parallel faces of different elements—promotes the recognition that the planar elements

are far less important in their own right, as physical entities of a particular type, than as carriers of surface and color. Similarly, his decision to leave a thin margin of raw aluminum down the middle of the edges of each planar element underscores the discontinuity between opposite faces of that element and between the applied colors they bear. Even more strikingly, the cutting of narrow slots into those elements along their angled bends at once signals the importance in this context of an abrupt change of plane and stresses, by throwing into relief, the continuity of color and surface across that change. The character of the spray-painted surfaces, which somehow inflect an almost machinelike uniformity with what can only be described as a warm, personal, above all deliberate modality of feeling, contributes to our sense of the radical identification of plane surface and applied color. And in general an impeccable craftsmanship seems throughout to have been at the service of an intense will to achieve the strongest possible expression of that identification. In any case, the disparity between the pieces in question as they are and as they would be in the absence of color is fundamental. Our experience of each—in particular the larger, more ambitious, finally more successful of the two—is essentially an experience of colored surfaces and of their subtly calculated interaction as seen from different or changing points of view. This amounts, I suggest, to a profoundly sculptural conception of applied color, one that goes a long way toward compensating for the restrictedness of Bolus's vocabulary of physical form. The weakest aspect of both sculptures is however not that restrictedness but something else, a conventionality of structure—of the way in which the planar elements are stood or poised—which almost painfully belies the ultimate originality of their color. Moreover, the contrast in the larger of the two pieces between the painted elements the juxtaposition of whose surfaces is the point of the work and the unpainted ones whose function is chiefly supportive conveys a sense of makeshift that is not offset by the frankness of the distinction. These are not quite minor troubles and neither sculpture is more than a partial success.

The third sculpture on view (1971) consists of a long, gently curving lattice made out of semitubular elements riveted together back to back (concave sides facing outward), intersected at different heights and from opposite sides by two long thin tubes or poles—the entire work painted a uniform aluminum and so circumventing the problems of color discussed above. The basic idea seems to be that of a fence or barrier, more than twenty feet long and five and a

half feet high, which on the one hand divides in two any space in which it is placed and on the other contrives a heightened access to all of itself, and by implication to the spatial realms it differentiates, from either side. Our experience is one of separation or spatial division and at the same time of an abstract transparence, not just to eyesight but to feeling, that is a function of far more than the interstices in the lattice. The distinction of Bolus's sensibility is evident throughout the piece—for example, in the quiet play of oppositions (between straight and curved, front and back, left and right, riveting and interlacing, etc.) and in the use of gaps in the lattice as cadences at both ends. What remains in doubt, I feel, is whether the sculpture as a whole is physical enough to secure a convincing sculptural identity or whether it is finally too unassertive and attenuated to establish itself other than as a kind of shimmering mirage.

Larry Poons's New Paintings

In my essay "Art and Objecthood," published in this magazine more than four years ago, I argued that the present success and future survival of the modernist arts have come to depend on their ability to overcome the theatrical; and that in the case of painting this means the ability of individual works to suspend or defeat their own objecthood—to establish their identity as paintings in opposition to, as distinct from, their nature as objects. Throughout the early and mid-1960s the struggle against objecthood was fought out chiefly through the medium of shape. But starting in the late 1960s and guided principally by the work of Jules Olitski, there has been a shift of pressure away from issues of shape toward issues of picture surface. I view that shift as a further stage of the same struggle. For some time now it has seemed that probably the fundamental difference between paintings and objects is that a painting is so to speak *all* surface, *nothing but* surface, whereas no ordinary object, however thin or flat, can be described in those terms.[1] And I see some of the most ambitious pictorial art of the past several years as having found itself compelled to declare its identity as painting largely through an implicit appeal to that difference, by continual acknowledgment not merely that paintings have surfaces, or that those surfaces are flat, resistant to touch, and face the beholder, but that paintings consist in or are limited to their surfaces in ways that distinguish them, as it were absolutely, from other kinds of objects in the world. That is how I understand what has seemed to me the compulsion of certain recent painting of major ambition to affirm that the entire surface,

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which is to say *every bit* of it, is spread out before the beholder—that every grain or particle or atom of surface *competes for presentness* with every other. The emphasis on surface in these paintings is not so much on its expansion as on its concentration; not so much on its extension as on its *in*tension. Perhaps more accurately, it is an emphasis on the second of each pair of terms as a vehicle of the first: as if the convincingness of the "outward" spread of surface across the picture as a whole depended ultimately on the convincingness of its "inward" spread across the same expanse.[2]

The progressive abandonment during the past several years of the flat, fairly thin, and texturally uniform (or "atextural") color of the best painting of the first half of the 1960s in favor of a new involvement with tactility, in particular with the tactile properties of paint, must be seen in this light. So for that matter must the almost complete exhaustion during the same period of the bare canvas ground, the canvas without sizing or paint, as a resource for ambitious painting. By that I mean not just that the strongest painters have come increasingly to eliminate bare canvas from their pictures, but also that whenever sizable areas of it have been allowed to remain they have tended more and more to bring the level of the picture down. In fact it has sometimes seemed that the authority of the canvas was giving out, becoming depleted, right before our eyes. (Like all judgments of the viability of artistic media, this is at bottom a question of conviction, not phenomenology.) Neither the spread of color alone nor the spread of bare canvas plus color is now able to provide the spread of surface that I have tried to characterize, and tactility has become important as a means to that end. On the other hand, tactility alone, or tactility that overwhelms color, produces merely a kind of colored relief whose surface is experienced as sculptural or literal rather than as essentially pictorial. Something like that seemed to happen in the so-called elephant-skin pictures Larry Poons exhibited at the Lawrence Rubin Gallery more than a year ago. But the paintings he has been making since, six of which were recently on view at the same gallery, show a renewed emphasis on color without any diminution of tactility—and the gain in quality has been enormous.

In *Shivering Night, Firstwild,* and *E'Special* (all 1971), the last and by far the best of the elephant-skin pictures, large quantities of Aquatec lumped and thickened with gel have been allowed to build up physically above the canvas in successive layers, making a strongly tactile skin or crust whose thickness and layeredness the eye continually probes. But while the paint substance tends for the most part to-

ward separateness, stratification, and the suggestion of temporal sequence, the paint color tends on the contrary toward unity, immediacy, simultaneity. The result is a contest between the heightened, or deepened, tactility of the picture surface and the warm, mostly intense color that seems everywhere to lie beneath that surface and to erupt through it into visibility. And the result of that is an unprecedented, because multiplex, declaration of surface: as if the different layers, brought forward by color and comprising the total material contents of the painting, themselves compete for presentness across its entire expanse. To take just one example: in *Firstwild,* a really fine painting, our experience of the principal orange area and of the numerous small lumps and pieces of sky blue pigment that seem to adhere to it like remnants of a stripped upper layer is primarily of a single lurid greenish orange flush, a simultaneous eruption of complementaries that in effect wholly subsumes the manifest physicality of that portion of the work. (Actually, the bits of blue pigment poke up through the orange from below; they belong to a lower, prior level despite their tactile prominence. Contradictions of this sort, often involving Poons's characteristic ellipsoid shapes, play an important though mostly subliminal role throughout these paintings.)

In three other paintings on show, the first of a new "drip" series made by throwing buckets of Aquatec and gel against lengths of canvas stapled to the wall, the paint buildup is less and there is almost no sense of layering. There is, however, a general tension between the strong, and again strongly tactile, up/down orientation of the throws and drips and what seems in contrast the natural expansiveness of the color, a tension that makes possible both the large size and the lateral extension of the superb *Railroad Horse* (1971; pl. 15). At the same time, the extreme viscosity of the paint enables Poons to intermix individual colors with extraordinary closeness without actually blending them. (In *Ly* [1971; pl. 16], perhaps the strongest painting in the show, this takes place within individual drips.) The effect is of a wide range of colors straining almost physically to merge—in that sense to spread "inward"—and being held apart by the physicality of the pigment, which seems to spread if not in a different direction at least at a different rate. Finally, the strands and skeins of clear and colored gel that figure prominently in *Ly* make themselves felt in terms of pure viscosity or resistance to being spread, and thereby slow or impede still further—make still more intensive—the spread of surface. Nothing could be more misleading than to see Poons's drip paintings in terms of a return to Abstract

Expressionism. The presiding influence is, inevitably, Olitski. The throws of paint have an ungestural directness of attack comparable to that of spraying and altogether beyond the reach of the elephant-skin pictures, which in comparison feel worked, almost worked up. And no recent paintings, not even Olitski's, have been less dependent for their success on gradations of value. Gradations of warm and cool, or simply of warmth, seem to take their place. (None of these remarks fully applies to the last of the drip pictures, *See Robin,* the one relatively unsuccessful work in the show.)

To sum up: in both the elephant-skin and the drip pictures color and tactility contend with one another for possession of the picture surface. The ultimate triumph belongs to color—this is true even in *E' Special,* whose surface has been glossed over with several coats of acrylic varnish—and is further evidence of its continuing primacy in modernist painting. But the fact of contention suggests that the primacy of color is no longer allowed to go uncontested. This is another point of contact between Poons's recent work and Olitski's paintings of the past few years, in which the use of acrylic gel has resulted in a milky, almost skinlike surface that denies the immediacy though not ultimately the intensity of color in the interests of presentness. I don't mean to imply that Poons's paintings are at all derivative; they aren't. The point is rather that they demand to be compared with Olitski's, and moreover that they are able to sustain the comparison. Five of Poons's pictures at the Rubin Gallery were first-rate, and the show as a whole seemed to me the strongest by him I have ever seen. It was also compelling proof, if more were needed, that modernist painting and sculpture at their highest level continue to provide touchstones of conviction for the arts in general.

NOTES

1. See, for example, part 4 of "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons," and part 4 of "Art and Objecthood" (both reprinted in this book). This difference not only was laid bare but was virtually brought into being by the development of modernist painting. It was not something that previous critics and historians simply failed to notice; rather, it was not fully there to be noticed until a relatively short time ago. As for the shift of pressure away from issues of shape, it is still imperative that the literal shape of a painting declare itself to be precisely that, the shape of a painting and not merely of an object. But the fact that that imperative is now chiefly met by *cropping* signals an easing, or at least a simplification, of the kind of problem shape seemed to present as recently as four or five years ago. There may even be a sense in which the opposite of crop-

ping, the use of predetermined formats (whether rectangular or "shaped"), has begun to feel disturbing, as if that in itself were enough to tip the balance toward objecthood.

2. Louis's veils, Olitski's spray paintings, and Noland's recent vertical pictures with crisscross stripes and bands on washed-looking or "smoky" grounds belong to this development. I first used the notions of competing for presentness and intension contrasted with extension in connection with Olitski's paintings of the early and mid-1960s; see "Jules Olitski's New Paintings," *Artforum* 4 (Nov. 1965): 36–40 (omitted from this book); and "Jules Olitski" (reprinted in this book).

Anthony Caro's Table Sculptures, 1966–77

A GREAT deal has been said and written about Anthony Caro's decision, in his first abstract sculptures of 1959–60, to do away with bases or pedestals of any kind in favor of placing the sculptures directly on the ground. The implication in much of the discussion has been that taking that step amounted to a decisive advance in its own right, and it has even been suggested that Caro's achievement in those early pieces consisted largely in the liberation of sculpture from the base. By the same token, it might be argued that the significance of the table pieces Caro has been making since 1966 is that in them he has restored to sculpture the base he had earlier eliminated. Both formulations, however, seem to me misguided. As regards the former, it should be noted to begin with that Caro was not the first to place a sculpture on the ground; Alberto Giacometti had done as much with his *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932), and there are other at least partial precedents besides.[1] More important, it hardly matters who was the first to present sculpture in this way if presentation alone is at issue. If all Caro did was take sculptures which might otherwise have stood on bases and place them on the ground, the decision to do so would have been artistically trivial. But in fact Caro's early abstract pieces involved a fundamental transformation of sculptural form as compared with the work of his older contemporary, David Smith. And it was precisely the depth of that transformation that all but compelled Caro to do away with the base.

This is the introduction to a catalog for the traveling exhibition *Anthony Caro: Table Sculptures 1966–1977*, organized by the British Council, 1977.

From this perspective we may define Caro's originality with respect to the question of the base by saying that he was the first to make sculptures which demanded to be placed on the ground, whose specific character would inevitably have been traduced if they were not so placed. But this in turn is not to say that Caro liberated sculpture from anything, in the sense of casting off or rendering inoperative once and for all a convention that had been revealed as inessential.

As for the notion that Caro's table pieces restore the base to sculpture, it too misses the crucial point, which concerns the issue of scale. Briefly, as Caro's art evolved in the course of the first half of the 1960s, it became apparent that almost all his most successful sculptures were large, or at least above a certain size. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, the overriding emphasis in his work throughout those years on a mode of sculptural composition in which discrete elements that in themselves could hardly have been more anonymous, even characterless (e.g., I-beams, flats, lengths of tubing, lengths of angle iron), acquired formal and expressive significance solely by virtue of their mutual juxtaposition—an approach I have called "syntactic" and Clement Greenberg has remarked is tantamount to an emphasis "on abstractness, on radical unlikeness to nature"[2]—promoted the dispersal or separation rather than the close gathering of elements, which in turn worked against smallness of scale. Furthermore, Caro's strong desire throughout the period to make the plane of the ground play an active role in his sculptures reinforced that tendency by calling for the considerable extension of elements along one or more horizontal axes. (Both factors are present in a sculpture like *Titan* [1964; fig. 35], in which two rectilinear elements, an I-beam segment and a swastika-like configuration, have been placed canted against opposite sides and toward the far ends of a low-lying L-shaped wall of thin steel. The drama of the piece resides largely in the interplay of the first two elements across that double separation as well as in the enlivening of the ground plane brought about by the syntax of the sculpture as a whole.) [See also the masterly *Bennington* (1964; fig. 36).—*M. F., 1996*] Finally, there is an intimate connection between the size of Caro's floor sculptures and that of the viewer. In his study of Caro published on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition of 1975 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, William Rubin draws a distinction between representational sculpture and Caro's work as regards scale. Representational sculptures, Rubin writes,

> establish an autonomous scale. Whether a figure is two feet or ten feet tall the eye accepts it as an illusion of human form and scales all its parts accordingly. In Caro's work, scale is not just a matter of internal aesthetic relations, but is fixed by the height of the human being and relates to his size in a literal way. Unlike most figurative and abstract sculpture, which is capable of enlargement and reduction—and has often been so treated—Caro's works are fixed in rapport to the height of the eye and the viewer's perception of the floor. Enlarged so that their centers of gravity would be at or above rather than below eye level, they would cease to be the same pieces. Indeed, they would largely cease to be visually comprehensible.[3]

Rubin's chief point is that Caro's sculptures could not be enlarged without disastrous consequences. But as he acknowledges in passing, they are equally resistant to the possibility of reduction.

It's hard to say just when Caro himself became fully conscious of this state of affairs, or, more important, began to feel that it imposed limitations he was no longer prepared to tolerate. But by the summer of 1966 he had begun actively to seek a way to make *small* sculptures, which virtually from the start he understood to mean sculptures that would tend to be placed on a table or other raised surface rather than on the ground. The basic problem he had to solve may be phrased quite simply: How was he to go about making sculptures whose modest dimensions would strike the viewer as intrinsic to their form—as an essential aspect of their identity rather than as merely a contingent, quantitative fact about them? Put another way, by what means was he to make small sculptures that could not be seen either as models for or as reduced versions of larger ones? In an obvious sense the task he faced involved overcoming the implicit logic of his art, which as I have said tended to compel a certain largeness of size. But in another, fundamental sense his task involved remaining faithful to that logic, according to which a sculpture's scale—indeed all its features, including its mode of presentation—needed to be secured abstractly, made part of its essence, in order to convince the viewer of their necessity (or, at the very least, of their "rightness," their lack of arbitrariness).

Writing in 1970 I observed that Caro took two distinct steps to meet this imperative.[4] First, he incorporated handles of various sorts in a number of his early table sculptures in an attempt to key the "feel" of each piece to that of graspable and manipulable objects. The crucial precedent for that device, present to Caro's mind at the time, was Picasso's *Glass of Absinthe* (1914), a small painted bronze

sculpture which incorporates a real silver sugar strainer in a manner that suggests to the viewer the possibility of taking hold of the latter as one might under ordinary circumstances. Second and more important, Caro ran at least one element in every piece *below* the level of the tabletop on which it was to be placed (figs. 49–55). This had the effect of precluding the transposition of the sculpture, in fact or imagination, to the ground (as I wrote in "Caro's Abstractness")—of making the placement of the sculpture on the tabletop a matter of formal necessity. And it at once turned out that by tabling or precluding grounding the sculptures in this way Caro was able at a stroke to establish their smallness in terms that were not a function of actual size. That is, the distinction between tabling and grounding, determined as it was by the sculptures themselves, made itself felt as equivalent to a qualitative as opposed to quantitative, or abstract as opposed to literal, difference in scale. (Not only did the abstract smallness of Caro's table sculptures subsequently prove compatible with surprising largeness of actual size, as in several pieces in the present exhibition; it soon became apparent that a certain minimum size, on the order of feet rather than of inches, was required for their tabling to be experienced in these terms.) In these respects Caro's table sculptures mark the emergence of a sense of scale for which there is no precedent in earlier sculpture. And although it seems clear that our conviction on this score relates intimately to the fact that in everyday life smallish objects such as we would be inclined to grasp and handle tend to be found on tables—within easy reach—rather than on the ground, it is also true that we encounter nothing quite like the abstract smallness of Caro's table sculptures in our ordinary experience of the world. From this point of view, an ontological one, it is as though Caro's abstract sculptures, large and small, grounded and tabled, inhabit another world from the literal, contingent one in which we live, a world which so to speak everywhere parallels our own but whose apartness is perceived as all the more exhilarating on that account.[5]

Since the summer of 1966 Caro has made more than three hundred table sculptures. Very early it became clear to him that going off the table was enough in itself to secure the abstract smallness he sought, and that it was therefore unnecessary to continue using handles as well. Accordingly, only two of the pieces in this exhibition, *VIII* (1966; fig. 49) and *XXII* (1967; fig. 50), include handles among their constituent parts. Even they, however, are oriented to the table edge in the way I have described, and one of the most valuable op-

portunities afforded by the present exhibition is that of seeing how a major artist has exploited a single formal idea to produce works of extraordinary range and variety. It should also be noted that within the past few years Caro's command of what might be called table scale has allowed him to make a number of pieces which remain wholly above the plane of the tabletop but whose abstract smallness is not in doubt. *CCXL* (1975) is an instance of such a piece, one which can be placed either on the table or on the ground without detriment to its convincingness as art. In a brief introductory essay it is of course impossible to describe even cursorily each of the eighteen sculptures on view. But a few general remarks citing some of those works as examples may prove useful.

First, making small sculptures has allowed Caro to shift the balance of the attention that may legitimately be brought to bear on his art. Specifically, it has made possible, even encouraged, a close scrutiny of surfaces and a concentration on details that would have been inappropriate as a response to his larger pieces. Standing before *CXVI* (1973), for example, our attention lingers on the deliberately rough and intermittent welds that bind together its parts, on the slightly uneven or freehand character of many of its edges, and on the rusted and burnished surfaces of the steel itself. The same characteristics in larger works of the same moment are experienced in somewhat different terms—more rapidly or summarily, with something less like delectation, and only incidentally in comparison with considerations of overall form. Another table sculpture, *LIX* (1968; fig. 52), has the character of a close-up, almost of an enlargement, by virtue of its isolation of elements—above all a bit of diamond-shaped grid—which we are not accustomed to looking at so closely or to giving this sort of perceptual weight. An identical bit of grid in a larger sculpture would tend to be lost; and where in certain floor sculptures of the mid-1960s—for example, *Carriage* (1966; fig. 40) and *The Window* (1966–67)—broader expanses of grid have been employed, their effect is altogether different from that of the grid element in *LIX*.

Second, a number of the table pieces give full play to Caro's special genius for juxtaposing—simply bringing together—a few ordinary elements in ways that no one before him could have imagined, thereby making sculptures of breathtaking originality. Perhaps the most striking example in the exhibition is one of the earliest pieces on view, *XXII* (fig. 50), which comprises no more than three elements: a section of curved, broad-diameter pipe; a longer section of

straight, narrow-diameter pipe; and a handle. As in the case of *Titan,* the syntax of the piece asserts the separation of elements, in this case the two sections of pipe, which we are made to feel are not so much connected to as disjoined from one another by the handle that runs between them. One consequence of this impression is that far from feeling tempted to grasp the handle, we sense that we are being invited to grasp a gap or hiatus, formally speaking, and draw back. In other words, the literal function of a handle, to enable us to get a better grip on a physical object, is in *XXII* eclipsed by *this* handle's abstract function of enforcing a separation, and we are led to take hold of the sculpture imaginatively instead of corporeally, as an artistic entity and not as a material object. In fact, most of Caro's sculptures with handles work in something like these terms. The viewer is simultaneously invited to make use of the handle (or handles: cf. *VIII,* an early masterpiece) and deflected from doing so, in accordance with the primacy of abstractness as against literalness or objecthood that has been basic to Caro's art from the outset.[6]

Third, there is a sense in which the table pieces allow Caro to give free reign to a pictorialism which has never been entirely foreign to his art—and what is more, to do so in a way that claims that pictorialism for sculpture at every turn. This is evident, for example, in *LXIV (The Clock)* (1968; fig. 53), in which the ultimately self-enclosing play of curved versus straight, rounded versus flat, and long versus short is seen—almost framed—against a "background" (the tabletop and the side of the table) which itself undergoes a most unpictorial ninety-degree change of direction at the table edge. A frame of sorts is actually included in *XCVII* (1969–70; fig. 54), and of course its delimiting power is dramatically contravened by the broad tongues of steel that refuse to be confined by its borders. There is also to my mind an analogy between the slowed perception of detail and surface elicited by pieces like *CXVI* and the close, prolonged attention that we customarily bring to bear on the surfaces of paintings. But perhaps the most pictorial sculptures of all in the present exhibition are those such as *CXLII* (1973) and *CLXXXII* (1974; fig. 55) which make use of end pieces of rolled steel, whose irregularly curving, seemingly "natural" silhouettes inevitably evoke suggestions of much larger natural forms. Our experience of these pieces therefore involves a sense of illusionistic scale such as we associate with easel painting; but the pieces themselves have been firmly anchored in the realm of sculpture, not least by the elements in both that descend below the level of the tabletop.

Finally, on a somewhat different note, there is a suggestive parallel between Caro's table pieces and one of the traditional genres of painting as practiced by perhaps its greatest master. I am thinking of the frequency with which Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin in his still lifes drops or suspends at least one element in his compositions—often a cloth napkin or a bunch of grapes—below the edge of the table or the stone shelf along the top of which are arranged the domestic objects, fruit, dead game, and so on, that make up the ostensible subject matter of his paintings. There is no question here of Chardin's influence on Caro. My point is rather that, viewed in the light of Caro's table sculptures, Chardin's tendency to use the table edge in much the same way that Caro went on to do emerges not simply as a strategy for insuring compositional richness and variety but as a means of underscoring a sense of scale specific to the genre. This is also true of Chardin's depiction of utensils with handles directed toward the beholder and in that sense inviting his grasp, a device that by the 1730s and 1740s had a long history. May we then say, anachronistically, that our experience of Caro's table pieces enables us to discern a sculptural dimension in Chardin's still lifes? In any case, the comparison between the two bodies of work with respect to sheer artistry is not out of place.[7]

NOTES

1. See William Rubin, *Anthony Caro* (New York, 1975), pp. 32–34.

2. Clement Greenberg, "Contemporary Sculpture: Anthony Caro," in *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957–1969*, vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1993), p. 206.

3. Rubin, *Anthony Caro*, p. 75. But see n. 5 below.

4. See "Caro's Abstractness" (reprinted in this volume).

5. In this connection let me note that although I agree with the general point Rubin makes in the passage quoted earlier, I am troubled by the language of his claim that in Caro's work "scale . . . is fixed by the height of the human being and relates to his size in a literal way." I have similar objections to his statement immediately preceding the quoted passage that Caro's sculptures "occupy a purely literal space" whereas "in representational sculpture—and indeed much abstract vertical sculpture—the space established by the base and inhabited by the figure is immediately perceived by the viewer as *other* than his own" (*Anthony Caro*, p. 75). Rubin's use of the notion of literalness in these contexts seems to me misconceived. Certainly the scale of Caro's floor sculptures relates intimately to that of the human body. But that relationship, I want to say, is built into the sculptures; it has been made a matter of internal relations, ones which themselves are grounded in the nature and potentialities of the human body. As for

the claim that Caro's sculptures occupy a purely literal space, I would counter by saying that the viewer never feels that his relation to a Caro sculpture is literal in the sense of situational in character: it is never essentially a function of the specific and inclusive conditions of their encounter. Much so-called Minimalist art has been based on the deliberate exploitation of those conditions, and it is such art that deserves to be characterized as literalist (see "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood," both reprinted in this book).

6. Caro's use of handles to "distance" the viewer—more accurately, to compel an abstract, not a literal reading of the piece—is only one instance of many such in his art. For example, he has always refused to allow the viewer to enter his sculptures, to step or stand inside them, even when, as in *The Window,* a piece may be said to be "about" the experience of being enclosed. To take just one other example, I remember seeing in Caro's studio a cluster of diamond-shaped plates of stainless steel that had been welded together to form a single compound unit not unlike a giant brooch. They were clearly the basis for a sculpture; but just as clearly they were far too inert and literal as they lay, and it was hard to imagine by what means the difficulties they presented could be overcome. Eventually Caro added two long, narrow rods (with square cross sections) that crossed one another to form a flattened X between the viewer and the plates. The product of this and a few related operations is *Cool Deck* (1970–71), a singularly beautiful work.

7. The last two sentences have been recast for the present book.—*M. F., 1996*

PART TWO:

1965

Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella

. . . vous n'êtes que le premier dans la décrépitude de votre art.

—Baudelaire to Manet, *1865*[1]

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FOR TWENTY years or more almost all the best new painting and sculpture has been done in America, notably the work of artists such as Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Morris Louis, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, David Smith, and Clyfford Still—apart from those in the present exhibition—to name only some of the best. It could be argued, in fact, that the flowering of painting and, to a much lesser degree, of sculpture that has taken place in this country since the end of World War II is comparable to that which occurred in American poetry in the two decades after 1912, as regards both the quality of the work produced and what might be called its intrinsic difficulty.

The new poetry, however, found the criticism it deserved relatively soon, in the work of men like R. P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and others, while the critical essays of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, although not dealing with the new poetry itself, expounded

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many of its fundamental assumptions. It is one of the most important facts about the contemporary situation in the visual arts that the fundamental character of the new art has not been adequately understood. This is not altogether surprising. Unlike poets, painters and sculptors rarely practice criticism; and perhaps partly as a consequence of this, the job of writing about art has tended to pass by default to men and women who are in no way qualified for their profession. Moreover, the visual skills necessary to come to grips with the new painting and sculpture are perhaps even more rare than the verbal skills demanded by the new poetry. But if the inadequacy of almost all contemporary art criticism is not surprising, it is undeniably ironic, because the visual arts—painting especially—have never been more explicitly self-critical than during the past twenty years.

The first section of this essay attempts an exposition of what, to my mind, are some of the most important characteristics of the new art. At the same time it tries to show why formal criticism, such as that practiced by Roger Fry or, more to the point, by Clement Greenberg, is better able to throw light upon the new art than any other approach.[2] To do this, the development over the past hundred years of what Greenberg calls Modernist painting must be considered, because the work of the artists mentioned above represents, in an important sense, the extension in this country of a kind of painting that began in France with the work of Édouard Manet.[3] Sculpture is, to a certain extent, another story, and for reasons of space and simplicity will not be considered here.

Roughly speaking, the history of painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Henri Matisse may be characterized in terms of the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality—or of reality from the power of painting to represent it[4]—in favor of an increasing preoccupation with problems intrinsic to painting itself. One may deplore the fact that critics such as Fry and Greenberg concentrate their attention upon the formal characteristics of the works they discuss, but the painters whose work they most esteem on formal grounds—for example, Manet, the Impressionists, Georges Seurat, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Matisse, Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian, Vasily Kandinsky, Joan Miró—are among the finest painters of the past hundred years. This is not to imply that only the formal aspect of their paintings is worthy of interest. On the contrary, because recognizable objects, persons, and places are often not entirely expunged from their work, criticism which deals with the ostensible subject of a given painting can be

highly informative; and in general, criticism concerned with aspects of the situation in which it was made other than its formal context can add significantly to our understanding of the artist's achievement. But criticism of this kind has shown itself largely unable to make convincing discriminations of value among the works of a particular artist, and in this century it often happens that those paintings that are most full of explicit human content can be faulted on formal grounds—Picasso's *Guernica* is perhaps the most conspicuous example—in comparison with others virtually devoid of such content. (It must be granted that this says something about the limitations of formal criticism as well as about its strengths. Though precisely what it is taken to say will depend on one's feelings about *Guernica,* etc.)

It is worth adding that there is nothing binding in the value judgments of formal criticism. All judgments of value begin and end in experience, or ought to, and if someone does not feel that Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe,* Matisse's *Piano Lesson,* or Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* are superb paintings, no critical arguments can take the place of feeling it. On the other hand, one's experiences of works of art are always informed by what one has come to understand about them, and it is the job of the formal critic both to objectify his intuitions with all the intellectual rigor at his command and to be on his guard against enlisting a formalist rhetoric in defense of merely private enthusiasms.

It is also imperative that the formal critic bear in mind at all times that the objectivity he aspires toward can be no more than relative. But his detractors would do well to bear in mind themselves that his aspirations toward objectivity are given force and relevance by the tendency of the most important current in painting since Manet to concern itself increasingly and with growing self-awareness with formal problems and issues. When Hilton Kramer, in perhaps the most intelligent and serious review of Greenberg's *Art and Culture* that has appeared, complains,

> In Mr. Greenberg's criticism, the impersonal process of history appears in the guise of an inner artistic logic, which has its own immutable laws of development and to which works of art must conform if they are not to end up on the historical ash heap. This inner artistic logic is purely a matter of the relations that obtain among abstract forms arranged in a decorative pattern.[5]

it is not entirely clear whether he is objecting more to a style of argument or to the modernist painting that Greenberg admires. In any

case, his characterizations of both seem mistaken at several crucial points.

Nowhere in *Art and Culture* does its author appear to have forgotten that history, works of art, and essays in art criticism are all made by men who live at a particular moment in history and whose perceptions and values are, therefore, no more than relative. There is, in a sense, "an inner artistic logic" in Greenberg's view of the history of modernist painting in France and America, but it is a "logic" that has come about as the result of decisions made by individual artists to engage with formal problems thrown up by the art of the recent past—decisions and formal problems that Greenberg has done more than any other critic to elucidate. Moreover, the element of internal "logic" in the development of modernist painting can be perceived only in retrospect. It is hard to think of a single passage in *Art and Culture* that so much as hints at the existence of "immutable laws" that govern its unfolding. If a critic thought such laws existed, he would surely use them to predict what the modernist art of the future is going to look like. But there are no predictions in Greenberg's book, only repeated attempts to objectify his experience of painting and sculpture in terms that derive from those media alone.

Elsewhere in his review Kramer maintains that Greenberg has employed "a principle of historical development drawn from Marx" to defend "a point of view which is completely hostage to the New York School."[6] My own impression is rather that, starting from his experience of the works of Pollock, de Kooning, Newman, and others, Greenberg has come increasingly to perceive their relation to the modernist painting that preceded them. But there is an insight in Kramer's reference to Marx which deserves some discussion.

Ever since the publication in 1888 of Heinrich Wölfflin's first book, *Renaissance and Baroque*, many critics of style have tended to rely on a fundamentally Hegelian conception of art history, in which styles are described as succeeding one another in accord with an internal dynamic or dialectic, rather than in response to social, economic, and political developments in society at large.[7] One of the stock objections, in fact, to exclusively stylistic or formal criticism of the art of the past—for example, of the High Renaissance—is that it fails to deal with the influence of nonartistic factors upon the art of the time and as a result is unable either to elucidate the full meaning of individual works or to put forward a convincing account of stylistic change. Such an objection, however, derives the real but limited validity it possesses from the fact that painting and sculpture dur-

ing the Renaissance were deeply involved, as regards patronage and iconography, with both church and state. But by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the relation of art—as well as of church and state—to society appears to have undergone a radical change. And although the change in question cannot be understood apart from a consideration of economic and other nonartistic factors, by far the most important single characteristic of the new modus vivendi between the arts and bourgeois society gradually arrived at during the first decades of the present century has been the tendency of ambitious art to become more and more concerned with problems and issues intrinsic to itself.[8]

All this has, of course, been recounted before. But what has not been sufficiently recognized is that in the face of these developments the same objections that are effective when directed against exclusively formal criticism of High Renaissance painting lose almost all their force and relevance. In comparison with what may be said in precise detail about the relations between High Renaissance art and the society in which it arose, only the most general statements—such as this one—may be made about the relation between modernist painting and modern society. In a sense, modernist art in this century finished what society in the nineteenth began: the alienation of the artist from the general preoccupations of the culture in which he is embedded, and the prizing loose of art itself from the concerns, aims, and ideals of that culture. With the achievements of Cubism in the first and second decades of this century, if not before, painting and sculpture became free to pursue concerns intrinsic to themselves. This meant that it was now possible to conceive of stylistic change in terms of the decisions of individual artists to engage with particular formal problems thrown up by the art of the recent past, and in fact the fundamentally Hegelian conception of art history at work in the writings of Wölfflin and Greenberg, whatever its limitations when applied to the art of the more distant past, seems particularly well suited to the actual development of modernism in the visual arts, painting especially.[9]

I am arguing, then, that something like a dialectic of modernism has in effect been at work in the visual arts for roughly a century now; and by dialectic I mean what is essential in Hegel's conception of historical progression, as well as that of the young Marx, as expounded in this century by the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács in his great work *History and Class Consciousness*[10] and by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in numerous books and essays.[11] More than anything

else, the dialectic in the thought of these men is an ideal of action as radical criticism of itself founded upon as objective an understanding of one's present situation as one is able to achieve. There is nothing teleological about such an ideal: it does not aim toward a predetermined end, unless its complete incarnation in action can be called such an end. But this would amount to nothing less than the establishment of a perpetual revolution—perpetual because bent on unceasing radical criticism of itself. It is no wonder such an ideal has not been realized in the realm of politics, but it seems to me that the development of modernist painting over the past century has led to a situation that may be described in these terms. That is, while the development of modernist painting has not been directed toward any particular style of painting, at any moment—including the present one—the work of a relatively few painters appears more advanced, more radical in its criticism of the modernist art of the recent past, than any other contemporary work. The chief function of the dialectic of modernism in the visual arts has been to provide a principle by which painting can change, transform, and renew itself, and by which it is enabled to perpetuate virtually intact, and sometimes even enriched, through each epoch of self-renewal, those of its traditional values that do not pertain directly to representation. Thus modernist painting preserves what it can of its history, not as an act of piety toward the past but as a source of value in the present and future.

For this reason, if for no other, it is ironic that modernist painting is often described as nihilistic and its practitioners characterized as irresponsible charlatans. In point of fact, the strains under which they work are enormous, and it is not surprising that, in one way or another, many of the finest modernist painters have cracked up under them. This tendency toward breakdown has been intensified in the past twenty years by the quickening that has taken place in the rate of self-transformation within modernism itself—a quickening that, in turn, has been the result of an increase in formal and historical self-awareness on the part of modernist painters. The work of such painters as Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella not only arises largely out of their personal interpretations of the particular situations in which advanced painting found itself at crucial moments in their respective developments; their work also aspires to be judged, in retrospect, to have been necessary to the finest modernist painting of the future. "History, according to Hegel, is the maturation of a future in the present, not the sacrifice of the present to an

unknown future, and the rule of action according to him is not to be effective at any price, but above all to be fecund," Merleau-Ponty has written.[12] In this sense the ultimate criterion of the legitimacy of a putative advance in modernist painting is its fecundity. But if one seeks to test this criterion against the art of the recent past, one must bear in mind that the finest contemporary painting testifies to the fecundity not only of the art of Barnett Newman around 1950 but to that of de Kooning as well, and that this is so because of, not in spite of, the fact that Newman's art amounts to the most radical criticism of de Kooning's one can imagine.

One consequence of all this is that modernist painting has gone a long way toward effacing the traditional distinction between problems in morals and problems in art formulated by Stuart Hampshire in his essay "Logic and Appreciation" as follows: "A work of art is gratuitous. It is not *essentially* the answer to a question or the solution to a presented problem." Whereas "action in response to any moral problem is not gratuitous; it is imposed; that there should be some response is absolutely necessary. One cannot pass by a situation; one must pass *through* it in one way or another."[13]

Hampshire's distinction holds good, I think, for all painting except the kind I have been trying to define. Once a painter who accepts the basic premises of modernism becomes aware of a particular problem thrown up by the art of the recent past, his action is no longer gratuitous but imposed. He may be mistaken in his assessment of the situation. But as long as he believes such a problem exists and is important, he is confronted by a situation he cannot pass by, but must, in some way or other, pass through, and the result of that forced passage will be his art. This means that while modernist painting has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of the society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure, and complexity of moral experience—that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness.

The formal critic of modernist painting, then, is also a moral critic: not because all art is at bottom a criticism of life, but because modernist painting is at least a criticism of itself. And because this is so, criticism that shares the basic premises of modernist painting finds itself compelled to play a role in its development closely akin to, and potentially only somewhat less important than, that of new paintings themselves. Not only will such a critic expound the signifi-

cance of new painting that strikes him as being genuinely exploratory, and distinguish between this and work that does not attempt to challenge or to go beyond the achievements of prior modernists, but in discussing the work of painters he admires he will have occasion to point out what seem to him flaws in putative solutions to particular formal problems; and, more rarely, he may even presume to call the attention of modernist painters to formal issues that, in his opinion, demand to be grappled with. Finally, just as a modernist painter may be mistaken in his assessment of a particular situation, or having grasped the situation may fail to cope with it successfully, the formal critic who shares the basic premises of modernist painting runs the risk of being wrong. In fact it is inconceivable that he will *not* be wrong a fair amount of the time. But being wrong is preferable to being irrelevant; and the recognition that everyone involved with contemporary art must work without certainty can only be beneficial in its effects. For example, it points up the difficulty of trying to decide whose opinions on the subject among the many put forward deserve to be taken seriously—a decision about as hard to make as value judgments in front of specific paintings.

This may seem an intolerably arrogant conception of the critic's job of work, and perhaps it is. But it has the virtue of forcing the critic who takes it up to run the same risks as the artist whose work he criticizes. In view of this last point it is not surprising that so few critics have chosen to assume its burdens.

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IN RECENT years it has become increasingly clear that the great flowering of American painting that took place during the 1940s and 1950s was very far from being stylistically uniform. It is, however, important to bear in mind that most of our still severely limited ability to make meaningful stylistic discriminations within this flowering derives from our knowledge of the development of modernist painting during the past ten or twelve years: since the early work of Helen Frankenthaler perhaps, or the first stain paintings executed by Morris Louis in 1954. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that we are able to make meaningful stylistic discriminations among the oeuvres of the painters generally included under the blanket misnomer Abstract Expressionism only where subsequent modernist painting has directed our attention to various differences among them. Our familiarity with the work of Louis, Noland, Olitski,

and Stella has made it imperative that we try to characterize significant differences among that of Pollock, de Kooning, and Newman, while the fact that subsequent painting has not founded itself on a stylistic distinction between, say, de Kooning and Kline has meant that we are unlikely to feel that such a distinction is of major importance. In this sense the development of modernist painting determines, to a degree that we must be on our guard never to underestimate, our stylistic analyses of the art of the recent past; and we must be careful not to take our analyses of the latter, however self-evident they may seem, as possessing more than a relative objectivity without precedent in its precariousness.

This situation is part of the complex burden of modernism in the visual arts, both for the painters themselves and for their critics and historians. It is not merely that, in Meyer Schapiro's words, "the development of new viewpoints and problems in [contemporary art] directs the attention of students to unnoticed features of older styles."[14] Such a formulation presupposes prior agreement as to the basic character of the older style, and it is precisely this agreement which is lacking in the case of the so-called Abstract Expressionists. The relation of Louis, Noland, Olitski, and Stella to the painting of the recent past is not simply one of directing our attention to unnoticed features of it, but of enabling us to make those basic formal discriminations that underlie the concept of style in the first place.[15]

Probably the most important such discriminations concern the respective achievements of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Broadly speaking, modernist painting since Morris Louis has been antagonistic to de Kooning's work and to the kind of painting produced by followers of his, often men and women of considerable ability, all through the 1950s. At the same time recent modernist painting has revealed profound affinities with Pollock's work, especially his allover drip paintings executed between 1947 and 1950, and a number of pictures made in 1951 by staining thinned black paint into unsized canvas. This is the case despite what Pollock and de Kooning have in common on the level of technique; for example, the descriptive epithet Painterly Abstraction, which Clement Greenberg proposes ought to replace Abstract Expressionism, concerns itself chiefly with technique and so includes them both.[16] But the differences between Pollock and de Kooning lie deeper than the similarities between their respective ways of handling paint, as Greenberg himself was the first to make clear. In the remainder of this section I intend to summarize very briefly (and perhaps, for that reason, un-

fairly) what seems to me the core of de Kooning's achievement; I shall then consider in detail aspects of Pollock's work between 1947 and 1951; finally I shall look briefly at the respective enterprises of Louis and Newman, in the hope of providing the beginnings of a meaningful context—of paintings as well as of ideas—in which the pictures in the present exhibition may be seen.

De Kooning's great achievement was to combine a handling of paint that looked back to Rubens and the Venetians and a passion for modeling that owed much to the plastic tradition stemming from Michelangelo with the complex spatial syntax of Late Cubism, based on the ambiguous location of planes for the most part parallel to the picture surface. The basic pictorial structure of de Kooning's paintings is built up out of contrasts of value among different planes, often consisting of no more than a single broad, charged, gestural brushstroke. This structure of value contrasts both articulates the surface of the canvas and implies the juxtaposition of fragmented but powerfully contoured forms in a dense, tortured, unmistakably shallow space. The force of de Kooning's best work is generated by the struggle between full-blown painterliness, heroic modeling, and abortive contour drawing on the one hand and the restricted, Cubistically ambiguous space in which these are constrained on the other. It ought not to be regarded as a denigration of de Kooning's achievement that the different elements brought together in his art derive self-evidently from the great plastic and painterly traditions of Western painting since the High Renaissance, and that only their amalgamation with Late Cubist syntax is essentially new. But in light of this, and in light also of the widespread exploitation and debasement of de Kooning's technique by countless followers during the 1950s, it is not surprising that the most ambitious modernist painting of the past decade has opposed the stylistic premises implicit in his work, and that in so doing it has turned elsewhere, most of all to Pollock and Newman, for its inspiration.

The almost complete failure of contemporary art criticism to come to grips with Pollock's accomplishment is therefore all the more striking. This failure has been due to several factors. First and least important, the tendency of art writers such as Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess to regard Pollock as a kind of natural existentialist has served to obscure the simple truth that Pollock was, on the contrary, a painter whose work is always inhabited by a subtle, questing formal intelligence of the highest order, and whose concern in his art was not with any fashionable metaphysics of despair but

with making the best paintings of which he was capable.[17] Second, in the face of Pollock's allover drip paintings of 1947–50—the finest of which are, I believe, his masterpieces—the vocabulary of the most distinguished formal criticism of the past decades, deriving as it does chiefly from the study of Cubism and Late Cubist painting in Europe and America, begins to reach the furthest limits of its usefulness. Despite Pollock's intense involvement with Late Cubism through 1946, the formal issues at stake in his most successful paintings of the next four years cannot be characterized in Cubist terms;[18] and in general there is no more fundamental task confronting the formal critic today than the evolution and refinement of a post-Cubist critical vocabulary adequate to the job of defining the formal preoccupations of modernist painting since Pollock. What makes this task especially difficult is the fact that the formal issues with which Pollock and subsequent modernists such as Louis, Noland, Olitski, and (perhaps to a lesser degree) Stella have chosen to engage are of a phenomenological subtlety, complexity, and richness without equal since Manet. The following discussion of Pollock's work will concentrate on a nexus of formal issues which, in my opinion, are central both to Pollock's art after 1947 and to some of the most salient characteristics of subsequent modernist painting. These issues concern the ability of line, in modernist painting of major ambition, to be read as bounding a shape or figure, whether abstract or representational. The discussion will begin with an attempt to describe the general nature of Pollock's work between 1947 and 1950 and will move on to consider several specific paintings which illustrate the virtually self-contradictory character of Pollock's formal ambitions at this time.

The Museum of Modern Art's *Number 1, 1948* (1948; fig. 1), typical of Pollock's best work during these years, was made by spilling and dripping skeins of paint onto a length of unsized canvas stretched on the floor which the artist worked on from all sides. The skeins of paint appear on the canvas as a continuous, allover line which loops and snarls time and again upon itself until almost the entire surface of the canvas is covered by it. It is a kind of space-filling curve of immense complexity, responsive to the slightest impulse of the painter and responsive as well, one almost feels, to one's own act of looking. There are other elements in the painting besides Pollock's line: for example, there are hovering spots of bright color, which provide momentary points of focus for one's attention, and in this and other paintings made during these years there are even handprints put there by the painter in the course of his work. But all

these are woven together, chiefly by Pollock's line, to create an opulent and, in spite of their diversity, homogeneous visual fabric which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives the eye nowhere to rest once and for all. That is, Pollock's allover drip paintings refuse to bring one's attention to a focus anywhere. This is important. Because it was only in the context of a style entirely homogeneous, allover in nature, and resistant to ultimate focus that the different elements in the painting—most important, line and color—could be made, for the first time in Western painting, to function as wholly autonomous pictorial elements.

At the same time, such a style could be achieved only if line itself could somehow be prized loose from the task of figuration. Thus, an examination of *Number 1, 1948,* or of any of Pollock's finest paintings of these years, reveals that his allover line does not give rise to positive and negative areas: we are not made to feel that one part of the canvas demands to be read as figure, whether abstract or representational, against another part of the canvas read as ground. There is no inside or outside to Pollock's line or to the space through which it moves. And this is tantamount to claiming that line, in Pollock's allover drip paintings of 1947–50, has been freed at last from the job of describing contours and bounding shapes. It has been purged of its figurative character. Line, in these paintings, is entirely transparent both to the nonillusionistic space it inhabits but does not structure and to the pulses of something like pure, disembodied energy that seem to move without resistance through them. Pollock's line bounds and delimits nothing—except, in a sense, eyesight. We tend not to look beyond it, and the raw canvas is wholly surrogate to the paint itself. We tend to read the raw canvas as if it were not there. In these works Pollock has managed to free line not only from its function of representing objects in the world, but also from its task of describing or bounding shapes or figures, whether abstract or representational, on the surface of the canvas. In a painting such as *Number 1, 1948* there is only a pictorial field so homogeneous, overall, and devoid both of recognizable objects and of abstract shapes that I want to call it *optical,* to distinguish it from the structured, essentially tactile pictorial field of previous modernist painting from Cubism to de Kooning and even Hans Hofmann. Pollock's field is optical because it addresses itself to eyesight alone. The materiality of his pigment is rendered sheerly visual, and the result is a new kind of space—if it still makes sense to call it space—in which conditions of seeing pre-

vail rather than one in which objects exist, flat shapes are juxtaposed, or physical events transpire.

To sum up: in Pollock's masterpieces of 1947–50, line is used in such a way as to defy being read in terms of figuration. I hope it is clear that the opposition "figurative" versus "nonfigurative," in the sense of the present argument, stands for a more fundamental issue than the opposition between the terms "representational" and "nonrepresentational." It is possible for a painting or drawing to be both nonrepresentational—what is usually termed "abstract"—and figurative at the same time. In fact until Pollock that was the most that so-called abstract painting had ever been. This is true, for instance, of de Kooning, as well as of all those Abstract Expressionists whose work relies on Late Cubist principles of internal coherence. It is true also of Kandinsky, both early and late. For example, in Kandinsky's *Painting with White Form* (1913; fig. 65), a heroic attempt has been made to allow line to work as freely as color. But one senses throughout the canvas how the line has been abstracted from various natural objects, and to the degree that one feels this, the line either possesses a residual but irreducible quality as of contour, so that one reads it as having an inside and an outside—as the last trace of a natural object that has been dissolved away by the forces at work in the pictorial field—or else it possesses the quality of an object in its own right: not merely as line, but as a kind of thing, like a branch or bolt of lightning, seen in a more or less illusionistic space. In his later work—*Composition 8* (1923; fig. 66) is a case in point[19]—Kandinsky tried to overcome his dependence upon natural objects by restricting himself to geometrical shapes that could be made with compass and ruler, and he chose to emphasize or heighten the quality which his line possessed from the start, of being another kind of thing in the world. In paintings such as this, Kandinsky's line seems like segments of wire, either bent or straight, which are somehow poised in a space that is no less illusionistic than in the earlier paintings. Both canvases by Kandinsky could be called nonrepresentational, but both are clearly figurative, if we compare them with Pollock's allover paintings of 1947–50.

Pollock, however, seems not to have been content with the nonfigurative style of painting he had achieved, and after 1950 returned to figuration, at first in a series of immensely fecund black-and-white stain paintings which I will discuss later in connection with Morris Louis, and afterwards in works which tended to revert to something

close to traditional drawing. These latter paintings probably mark Pollock's decline as a major artist. But it is important to observe that Pollock's involvement with figuration did not cease entirely between 1947 and 1950.

For example, the painting *White Cockatoo* (1948; fig. 2) was made by dripping black paint in a series of slow-moving loops and angular turns which come nowhere near covering the brown canvas; but instead of trying to create the kind of homogeneous visual fabric of paintings like *Number 1, 1948,* Pollock chose to fill in some of the areas accidentally circumscribed when his black line intersected itself, with gouts of red, yellow, green, blue, and white oil paint, either knifed onto the canvas or squeezed in short bursts directly from the tube. It is significant that Pollock was careful not to fill in only the most conspicuous of these areas. Some of the most positive contours are left almost completely devoid of painted fill-in, whereas areas that seem to lie between more positive contours have been filled in. The result is that the painting leaves one with the strong impression that the black line, instead of retaining the nonfigurative character it possesses in the optical paintings made at the same time, works to describe shapes and evoke forms seen as if against a colored background. By filling in certain areas isolated by his black line as it looped and angled back upon itself, Pollock restored to the latter some measure of line's traditional role in bounding and describing shapes and figures. And the fact that in *White Cockatoo* he filled in both predominantly convex and concave (or positive and negative) areas does not work to counteract the figurative character of the line. Rather, it creates a rough equivalent to a Synthetic Cubist ambiguity of figure versus ground, but without the rigor and strict consequentiality of Synthetic Cubism itself. *White Cockatoo,* then, represents an awkward compromise among three stylistic modes: first, Synthetic or Late Cubism; second, what might be called naive abstract illusionism or naive abstract figuration, in which an abstract shape or figure is seen against a background situated an indeterminate distance behind it; and third, the allover, optical, nonfigurative abstraction of Pollock's best contemporary work. *White Cockatoo* is not a successful painting. But it is an important one, because it suggests that as early as 1948, when Pollock was realizing masterpiece after masterpiece in his optical style, he could not keep from chafing at the high price he had to pay for this achievement: the price of denying figuration, of refusing to allow his line to describe shapes, whether abstract or representational. It is significant, however, that *White Cockatoo* does not

try to repudiate the techniques of paintings such as *Number 1, 1948*. Instead it suggests that Pollock had begun to cast about for some way to do what seems, on the face of it, impossible: to achieve figuration within the stylistic context of his allover, optical style.

There are other paintings, such as *The Wooden Horse* (1948; fig. 3) and *Summertime* (1948), which reinforce this interpretation. In all of these Pollock seems to have been preoccupied with the problem of how to achieve figuration within the context of a style that entailed the denial of figuration, or to put it another way, with the problem of how to restore to line some measure of its traditional figurative capability, within the context of a style that entailed the renunciation of that capability. Only if we grasp, as vividly and even as painfully as we can, the contradiction implicit in what seems to have been Pollock's formal ambition in these works—to combine figuration with his allover, optical style—will we be able to gauge the full measure of his achievement in two other paintings of these years.

The first of these is *Cut-Out* (ca. 1948–50; fig. 4). Either before he came to paint it or, more probably, in the course of painting it, Pollock arrived, almost certainly through intuition rather than through rational analysis, at the realization that the only formally coherent way to combine his allover, optical style with figuration was somehow to make the painting itself proclaim the contradiction implicit in that ambition. This sounds more paradoxical than in fact it is. It has been observed how Pollock's allover style entailed the negation of figuration, and how figuration in turn entailed the negation of that style. In *Cut-Out* these negations become the fundamental means by which the painting is made. That is, in *Cut-Out* Pollock achieved figuration by negating part of the painted field—by taking something away from it—rather than by adding something as in *White Cockatoo, The Wooden Horse,* and *Summertime*. Here Pollock actually cut away the figure or shape, which happens to be roughly humanoid in outline, from a piece of canvas on which an allover painted field had previously been dripped, and then backed that piece with canvas board.[20] The result is that the figure is not seen as an object in the world, or shape on a flat surface—in fact it is not seen as the presence of anything—but rather as the absence, over a particular area, of the visual field. This enhances, I think, the force of the word "optical" with which I have tried to characterize Pollock's allover style. Figuration is achieved in terms of eyesight alone, and not in terms that imply even the possibility of verification by touch. The figure is something we *don't* see—it is, literally, *where* we don't see—rather

than something, a shape or object in the world, we do see. More than anything, it is like a kind of blind spot, or defect in our visual apparatus; it is like part of our retina that is destroyed or for some reason is not registering the visual field over a certain area. This impression is strengthened if we ask ourselves where, in this painting, the cutout area seems to lie in relation to the painted field. For me, at any rate, it does not lie behind the field, despite the fact that where the field is cut away we see the mostly blank canvas board behind it; and it does not seem to lie on the surface or in some tense, close juxtaposition with it, as in the shallow space of Synthetic Cubism. In the end, the relation between the field and the figure is simply not spatial at all: it is purely and wholly optical, so that the figure created by removing part of the painted field and backing it with canvas board seems to lie somewhere within our own eyes, as strange as this may sound.[21]

In *Cut-Out* Pollock succeeds, by means of the most radical surgery imaginable, in achieving figuration within the stylistic context of an opticality almost as unremitting as that which characterizes paintings such as *Number 1, 1948*. But there are two important respects in which *Cut-Out* remains inconsistent with Pollock's allover, optical style. The first is its tendency to focus our attention on the figure created where Pollock cut away the painted canvas. This figure is emphasized as no single visual incident or cluster of incidents is ever emphasized in those allover pictures in which the painted fields are left intact. And the second has to do with the proportion of the total canvas occupied by the cutout figure. In *Cut-Out* it is large enough to deprive the visual field of the sense of expansiveness, of sheer visual density, that we find in a painting such as *Number 1, 1948*. Both these qualifications disappear in the face of the last painting I want to consider in detail, *Out of the Web* (1949; pl. 1).

Again in *Out of the Web* Pollock achieved figuration by removing part of a painted field, which in this case had been dripped onto the surface of a piece of brown Masonite. This time, however, the figures that result do not occupy the center of the field; they are not placed so as to dominate it and to focus the spectator's attention upon themselves. Instead, they seem to swim across the field and even to lose themselves against it. In *Out of the Web,* as in *Cut-Out,* figuration is perceived as the absence, over a particular area, of the visual field. It is, again, like a kind of blind spot within our eyes. But unlike the figure in *Cut-Out* the sequence of figures in *Out of the Web* is almost as hard to see, to bring one's attention to bear on, as a sequence of actual blind spots would be. They seem on the verge of dancing off

the visual field or of dissolving into it and into each other as we try to look at them.

Out of the Web is one of the finest paintings Pollock ever made. In it, for the first and only time, he succeeded completely in restoring to line its traditional capability to bound and describe figures within the context of his allover, optical style—a style I have argued was largely founded on the liberation of line from the task of figuration. It is, however, not surprising, if one is at all familiar with Pollock's career, that he did not repeat his remarkable solution throughout a whole series of works; among the important American painters who have emerged since 1940 Pollock stands almost alone in his refusal to repeat himself. And having solved the problem of how to combine figurative line—the line of traditional drawing—with opticality in *Cut-Out* and *Out of the Web,* Pollock abandoned the solution: because it could not be improved upon, or developed in any essential respect, and because to repeat the solution would have been to debase it to the status of a mere device. In this sense Pollock's solution was both definitive and self-defeating, and from 1951 on his work shows the strong tendency already mentioned to revert to traditional drawing at the expense of opticality. But in a series of remarkable paintings made by staining thinned-down black paint into unsized canvas in 1951, Pollock seems to have been on the verge of an entirely new and different kind of painting, combining figuration with opticality in a new pictorial synthesis of virtually limitless potential, and it is part of the sadness of his last years that he appears not to have grasped the significance of what are perhaps the most fecund paintings he ever made.

The man who, more than any other, explored and developed the new synthesis of figuration and opticality sketched out in Pollock's stain paintings of 1951 was Morris Louis. Roughly, the essence of that synthesis resides in the fact that thinned pigment soaked and stained into unsized canvas can be made to assume configurations which appear not to be bounded by anything like a drawn outline (see fig. 6). The perimeter or outer limit of such a stain image may be precise or blurred or haloed with a slight bleed of thinner, as the painter desires, but it conveys the strong impression of not having been circumscribed by a cursive, draftsmanlike gesture. It resists being read as *drawn.* This is important because as soon as the periphery, or part of the periphery, of one of Louis's stain images strikes us as drawn—as soon as we are made to feel that the painter's wrist, and not the relatively impersonal process of staining itself, determined the configu-

ration—the image tends to come detached from its ground and to be perceived in tactile terms. That is, it tends to be seen as possessing a contour that invites one's touch, and to be perceived spatially according to what was referred to earlier as naive abstract illusionism.

At the same time, the stain technique identifies the painted image with its woven canvas ground, almost as if the image were thrown onto the latter from a slide projector. The actual weave of the canvas shows through everywhere. Discussing Pollock's allover, optical paintings of 1947–50 such as *Number 1, 1948,* I observed that one tends to read the raw canvas in these works as if it were not there. In the best of the stain paintings of 1951 as well as in virtually all of Louis's work after 1954 this is not the case; instead, the stain image and its raw canvas ground are indissoluble one from the other. In fact, the stain image may be regarded as nothing more than the ground itself under different conditions of seeing, and vice versa. Like Pollock's allover canvases of 1947–50, Louis's stain paintings are optical in that they address themselves to eyesight alone. But the basis of their opticality is a visual homogeneity even more radical and integral than one finds in the best allover Pollocks.

It is, I think, worth remarking that the modernist synthesis of figuration and opticality achieved in Louis's best work amounts to the transcendence of the traditional dualism between line and color—an ambition that has haunted painting since Eugène Delacroix. In Louis's hands, the stain technique results in paintings that are both optical and figurative, at the expense of traditional drawing. Line, or at least the line of traditional drawing, not only is no longer essential to figuration; it must be avoided at all costs if the visual context of opticality is to be preserved. But the disappearance in the modernist synthesis of traditional drawing means that *color itself*—liquid pigment actually stained into the raw canvas to make the image—becomes the fundamental instrument of figuration, to a degree never remotely approached by the great colorists of the past. Louis's use of staining not only synthesizes figuration and opticality; it also, equally importantly, identifies figuration with color. Color, then, plays a role of unprecedented importance in Louis's work precisely because it, and not line, is the means by which figuration is achieved. But the initial significance of the stain technique was to synthesize figuration and opticality, not to provide a more intense experience of color—though this came about almost at once, in Louis's stain paintings as well as in those of Noland and Olitski; and it is impossible to grasp

the full significance of staining without reference to the formal issues at stake in Pollock's work between 1947 and 1950.

Finally, it has been observed that the stain technique entails relatively depersonalized execution.[22] Because the liquid pigment is for the most part either poured onto the horizontal canvas, rubbed into it with sponges, or rolled on with commercial rollers, the technical virtuosity and bravura touch associated with painterliness from the Venetians to de Kooning is renounced from the start. It has also been recognized that this aspect of staining relates to a reaction that began within Abstract Expressionism itself, in the work of men like Still and Newman, against both the hard-won conventions of painterliness that were beginning to emerge during the late 1940s and the conventions of response that were emerging with them.[23] But it has not been sufficiently remarked that staining, as in the work of Louis and Olitski, can achieve the *illusion* of painterly effects and even of different textures within a context of unremitting opticality. Put another way, the radical opticality of their best work enables them to achieve an illusion of painterliness or of textural variation far exceeding the degree to which painters like Still and Newman could (or can) allow themselves the real thing.

Newman's paintings, executed by conventional means, are particularly interesting in this connection, being even more antipainterly in technique and stripped down in format than Still's. For example, *Cathedra* (1951; fig. 7)—a painting characteristic of Newman's best work—is large, about twice as wide as it is high, and consists of a deep blue field divided by two thin vertical bands of different widths, one white and the other bright blue. The field itself has a bare minimum of internal variation—variation of saturation rather than of value; painterly effects are avoided within it, though not within the bands, as much as possible. Now painterliness and value contrast are conventional means by which painting since the Renaissance has embodied the experience of tactility and the relation of objects to one another in tactile space. So that by founding his art on the virtually complete avoidance of them, Newman serves notice of his determination not to address the sense of touch if he can help it. Clement Greenberg has written that "the ultimate effect sought is one of an almost literal openness that embraces and absorbs color in the act of being created by it."[24] Moreover, the colored field "has . . . to be uniform in hue, with only the subtlest variations of value if any at all, and spread over an absolutely, not merely relatively, large area. Size

guarantees the purity as well as the intensity needed to suggest indeterminate space: more blue simply being bluer than less blue."[25]

This "indeterminate space," or "color-space," as Greenberg calls it elsewhere in the same article, addresses itself to eyesight alone; and Newman's best paintings, like Louis's, may for this reason be considered optical. But unlike Louis's, Newman's paintings eschew figuration, and concentrate instead on rendering spatiality itself sheerly optical. This is a hard notion to grasp, and its difficulty at first seems to increase in the light of one's actual experience of Newman's work. For example, as we gaze at the blue field in *Cathedra* we feel it begin to give way, to yield—palpably, as it were—to the probings of the eye; we have the sensation of entering a medium with a certain specific density, a medium that offers an almost measurable degree of resistance to eyesight itself; in short, we are driven to characterize our visual experience by means of tactile metaphors. But if this is the case, what sense can it make to speak of spatiality itself having been rendered sheerly optical in Newman's most successful paintings?

The difficulty of conceiving of a space to which eyesight gives access but which somehow denies even the possibility of literal, physical penetration of it by the beholder increases when one reflects that individual senses such as sight and touch do not open onto separate spaces, hermetically isolated from one another, but that, on the contrary, they open onto the same space. If that were not the case, the things with which eyesight brings us into contact would exist only for the sense of vision and not for any of the others. But if that were so, they would lack the fullness of being, the complex, ponderable reality which objects in the world self-evidently possess as we encounter them in experience. What, then, can it mean to speak of a space addressed to eyesight alone?[26]

The answer to both these questions is perhaps surprisingly simple. Newman's best paintings address themselves to eyesight alone in that they comprise an *illusion* of spatiality itself rendered sheerly optical—that is, of space experienced in sheerly visual terms—much as the paintings of the Old Masters comprise the illusion of space rendered in a largely tactile pictorial vocabulary. Newman's paintings are objects in the world, accessible to touch as well as to sight. But the illusion they seek to create is of a space accessible to and addressed to eyesight alone, of an experience of spatiality that is purely and exclusively visual. But if opticality is the illusion aimed at, and sometimes achieved with remarkable force, tactility remains an unavoidable—and, if handled with caution, extremely useful—metaphor for char-

acterizing the illusive opticality of space in Newman's best work. Because the space of ordinary experience is a composite of the spaces opened onto by the different senses—much as two fields of vision are combined into one in binocular vision—our verbal vocabulary for dealing with spatiality in general is loaded with tactile connotations, which cannot be got rid of by linguistic fiat, but which must not be allowed to determine one's experience of the paintings in question. In a painting such as *Cathedra* the eye explores the colored field not by entering a traditional illusionistic space full of conventional clues to the tactility of objects or their relations to one another in tactile space, but by perceiving nuances, fluctuations, and properties of color alone, which together create the different but closely related illusion of a space addressed exclusively to eyesight—an illusion which tactile metaphors may help to describe.

Finally, the thin vertical "zips" in Newman's paintings have several functions which ought to be considered before moving on to Noland, Olitski, and Stella.[27] First, they play at least a double role with regard to color alone: by helping to define the color of the painted field seen as a whole, and by inflecting those areas of it in their immediate neighborhoods with subtle overtones arising out of the simultaneous contrast, both of hue and value, between themselves and the field. Second, their often unabashed painterliness serves to make the field itself appear even less painterly by comparison than in fact it is. Moreover, it implies that the "zips" may be grasped in tactile terms, as if they mark the farthest limit within the painting of tactile space. But the spatial relation of the "zips" to the colored field is anything but precisely definable, and the beholder is faced with a complex situation in which his responsiveness to tactility and tactile space has been aroused but not allowed to come to a definite conclusion, as the illusive optical space that seems to lie beyond the vertical bands also, in some way or other, effectively subsumes them. Third, the "zips" provide a crucial element of pictorial structure, by means of what I want to term their "deductive" relation to the framing edge. That is, the bands amount to echoes within the painting of the two side framing edges; they relate primarily to those edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas. They demand to be seen as deriving from the framing edge—as having been "deduced" from it—though their exact placement within the colored field has been determined by the painter, with regard to coloristic effect rather than to relations that could be termed geometrical. Newman's pioneering exploration of "deductive" pictorial

structure represents an important new development in the evolution of one of the chief preoccupations of modernist painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Matisse: namely, the increasingly explicit recognition of the physical characteristics of the picture support. In general, this has tended to mean the assertion of flatness—essentially a tactile characteristic—though the shape of the picture support has also been taken into account, for example, by the Cubist practice of truing and fairing forms to a rough congruence with it. But as the phenomenological center of modernist painting has shifted from tactility in the direction of an increasing appeal to vision alone, the flatness of the picture support—though never contradicted by an illusion of tactile depth—has tended to be dissolved in the illusion of optical space I have tried to characterize; while the shape and even the precise dimensions of the picture support, because such tactile connotations as they possess do not compete with opticality, have come to play a role of great importance in the determination of modernist pictorial structure since Newman.

It would be hard at this point to decide whether Newman's best paintings of around 1950 have proved more fecund in the demonstration they provide of how an embracing illusion of optical space may be achieved by means of broad expanses of color, or in the emphasis they place on a new kind of pictorial structure based on the shape and size, rather than on the flatness, of the picture support. In any case, Newman stands alongside Pollock as one of the two most seminal figures of Abstract Expressionism, without whom much of the finest modernist painting of the past ten or twelve years would have been inconceivable, while from 1954 until his death in 1962 Morris Louis created large numbers of stain paintings equal to their best work in sensuous beauty and depth of feeling. These three men, more than any others of their generation, have provided their modernist successors with a pictorial legacy of immense, though difficult, richness—a legacy whose influence may be felt throughout the present exhibition.

3

IT IS hard to know exactly how to begin discussing the work of Kenneth Noland. (See figs. 13–15, pls. 7–9.) There can be little doubt, for example, that Olitski's paintings demand to be seen and discussed first of all in terms of color, and Stella's in terms of structure, but in Noland's paintings neither color nor structure

seems to come first, to subsume or generate the other. This does not necessarily mean that Noland's paintings are harder to look at than theirs, and it implies nothing about the relative value of the three painters' achievements—although it does say something about the kind of problem Noland presents to the formal critic. At any rate, I want to begin with the observation that the structural aspect of Noland's paintings, especially since the first chevrons of 1962, may be discussed with a kind of precision and logical rigor that his use of color resists. This is, of course, partly explicable by the generalization that color tends to be much harder than structure to characterize precisely. But the danger in this explanation is that it might easily lead one to overlook the particular source of the difference between the kinds of statement that can be made about structure and color in Noland's work: namely, the fact that structure, rather than color, bears the brunt of Noland's modernist ambitions. That is, despite the importance of color in his work—which led Greenberg, in his fundamental essay on Louis and Noland, to describe him as a "color painter"[28]—it is chiefly through transformations of pictorial structure based on an act of perpetual radical criticism both of his own art and what he takes to be the art of his time most relevant to his own situation that Noland's commitment to modernism expresses itself most powerfully.

This means that the development of pictorial structure in Noland's work is far from arbitrary, and that the structure of a given painting embodies something far more urgent than a desire to achieve striking design. In fact, as regards both individual paintings and the development of his work as a whole, structure represents the crux of Noland's response to the crisis of meaning that brought modernism into existence in the first place—a crisis which, in its present form, undergoes continual change as painters take up what seem to them the most important formal problems posed by the finest modernist painting of the recent past, and in grappling with them raise others or open up a range of formal possibilities which may be rigorously explored. Noland has seen that crisis change in the course of the past seven years largely as a result of paintings made by him during this time. But whereas many modernist painters before him had found the experience unnerving, and responded to it by ceasing to develop, Noland has been emboldened by it to exert renewed and even stepped-up criticism against his own best prior achievements. Perhaps more than any painter in the history of modernist painting, Noland has been both driven and vitalized by the awareness that the

essence of modernism resides in its refusal to regard a particular formal "solution," no matter how successful or inspired, as definitive, in the sense of allowing the painter to repeat it with minor variations indefinitely. This is tantamount to the realization that if the dialectic of modernism were to come to a halt anywhere once and for all, it would thereby betray itself; that the act of radical self-criticism on which it is founded and by which it perpetuates itself can have no end. Noland demands of his work that it constantly challenge not some abstract notion of general taste—it is hard to imagine that someone unfamiliar with modernist painting since the war would feel that his chevrons are more advanced or harder to take than his concentric circles, or vice versa—but his own sensibility and the sensibilities of those others who have been most deeply educated, influenced, and moved by his own prior work; and he makes this demand of his art and of his public not because he or they are infatuated with formal problems for their own sake, but because it is one of the prime, if tacit, convictions of modernist painting—a conviction matured out of painful experience, individual and collective—that only an art of constant formal self-criticism can bear or embody or communicate more than trivial meaning.

It is important to realize, however, that to argue that the development of pictorial structure in Noland's work is not arbitrary but based on a perpetual act of radical self-criticism does not imply that the self-criticism necessarily precedes a given painting, or that the painting is nothing more than the illustration of a particular formal idea. The self-criticism *may* in fact precede the painting—that is to say, the painter may sketch or otherwise determine a particular painting or series of paintings, and be able to put into words roughly what formal issues the projected work will deal with—but it very well may not. The precise constitution of the act of making the paintings, even if such could be determined, is not what matters. What matters is that the paintings themselves manifest a high degree of formal self-awareness, and this may come about as the result of decisions the painter himself insists on calling intuitive. (Noland in conversation has spoken of the need for the artist today to have "smart instincts.") Moreover, there is nothing certain or final about the particular formal development that Noland's paintings, or any other paintings for that matter, appear to follow. At another time, from another point of view, to eyes educated in a different world by different painting, radically different formal issues—or, conceivably, none at all—might appear to be at stake in his work. So that even if it were known precisely

what Noland himself felt were the most important formal issues engaged with in his work, this would amount to nothing more than an extremely interesting historical fact, to be kept in mind and used, if necessary, as a kind of counterweight to how the paintings actually look.

How Noland's paintings actually look will be the subject of the remainder of this section. More exactly, I want to put forward an account of what seems to me the development of pictorial structure in Noland's work since the late 1950s, in an attempt to make clear in what sense he is a formal innovator of great resourcefulness as well as in the hope that by giving an account of that development I will in effect be pointing at an aspect of his work roughly analogous to that of syntax in a verbal language: an aspect, that is, which has to do with how the colored elements in Noland's paintings are juxtaposed to one another with the result that they make sense, and which, if grasped, may increase the likelihood that the spectator will come to experience them as the powerful emotional statements I believe they are. The analogy at work here, between modernist painting and a verbal language, is drastically inexact and deeply problematic. But it is also potentially highly instructive, even (or perhaps especially) where it breaks down, and I hope to see it pursued further elsewhere.[29]

Noland's first wholly individual paintings date from 1958–59. They are executed in a stain technique deriving ultimately from Pollock's black stain paintings of 1951 by way of Helen Frankenthaler; but an even more important source—not so much of pictorial ideas as of reinforcement for his own growing convictions—seems to have been the then largely unappreciated work of another Washington painter, Morris Louis. Noland had known and admired Louis for several years, and in fact had brought him to New York in 1953 to meet Clement Greenberg. On that visit both painters saw and were deeply impressed by a painting of Frankenthaler's, *Mountains and Sea* (1952; fig. 8), and on their return to Washington they determined to explore possible alternatives to the Abstract Expressionist mode of painting then dominant in New York.[30] For Louis, already in his forties, the experience seems to have been decisive. By 1954 he had succeeded in adapting Frankenthaler's stain technique—which in her hands has always retained a strong element of traditional drawing—to his oven unique vision, founded in part on the eschewal of drawing, and had begun making paintings of astonishing beauty by staining acrylic paint into (for the most part) unsized canvas. This became Noland's technique as well, and in general it seems to have

been the case that Louis's achievement gave important impetus to Noland's own breakthrough in the late 1950s. But it cannot be stated too emphatically that the exchange of impetus and inspiration that went on between the two men up until Louis's death in 1962 at the height of his powers appears to have been mutual.

Noland's paintings of the late 1950s differed from Louis's in at least two fundamental respects apart from color. First, Noland tended to leave much more of the raw canvas untouched by the stain image than Louis, who preferred at that point to spread thin layers of pigment across most of the picture field; second, Noland favored a precisely centered image—either armature-like or, more usually, of concentric rings—that avoided making contact with the framing edge, while Louis worked chiefly with vertically oriented, veil-like images that often ran off the canvas along at least one of the framing edges (generally the bottom). The first of those differences meant that from the start of his career as a modernist painter Noland was even more radical than Louis in his rejection of the packed, tactile space of de Kooning's kind of Abstract Expressionism. Aspiring at once toward a virtually elliptical economy of means and effect, Noland made the raw canvas in his paintings function as an essential part of the overall image—something that does not quite occur in Louis' work until the splendid unfurleds of 1960, which may have come about partly in response to Noland's prior achievements in that vein. In other words, the stain technique not only helped to ensure the opticality of Noland's paint image, by identifying the thinned pigment with its woven canvas ground, as in Louis' work; it also allowed him to make the raw canvas itself work as optical space with unprecedented intensity. In a sense, the raw canvas in Noland's concentric-ring paintings of the 1950s and early 1960s fulfills much the same function as the colored fields in Newman's large pictures of around 1950; more generally, Noland in those paintings seems to have managed to charge the entire surface of the canvas with a kind of perceptual intensity which until that time only painters whose images occupy most or all of the picture field—Pollock, Still, Newman, Louis—had been able to achieve.

The significance of the second difference between Noland's and Louis's paintings through about 1960—the fact that Noland's stain images are centered in square canvases and avoid making contact with the framing edge, while Louis's vertical images appear fairly casual about such contact—is perhaps not immediately apparent. It may seem at first that Louis, because of his willingness to run images

Plate 1. Jackson Pollock, *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949,* 1949. Oil and enamel on Masonite, cut out, 48 x 96 inches. Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart. © 1997 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.

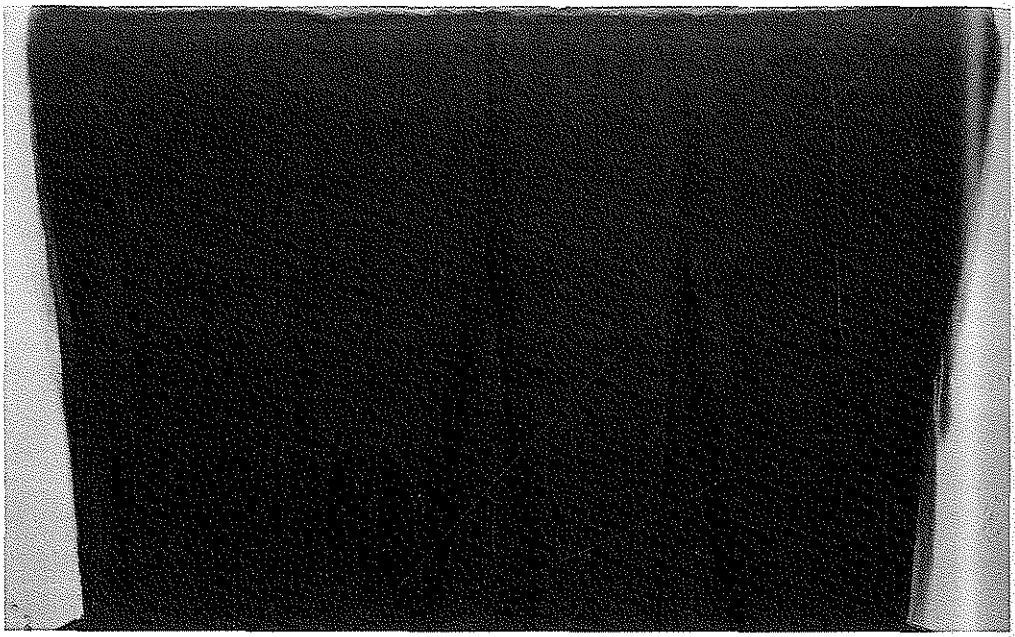


Plate 2. Morris Louis, *Terranean,* 1958. Acrylic resin on canvas, 90 x 146 inches. Collection of Kenneth Noland, North Bennington, Mass. Estate of the artist.

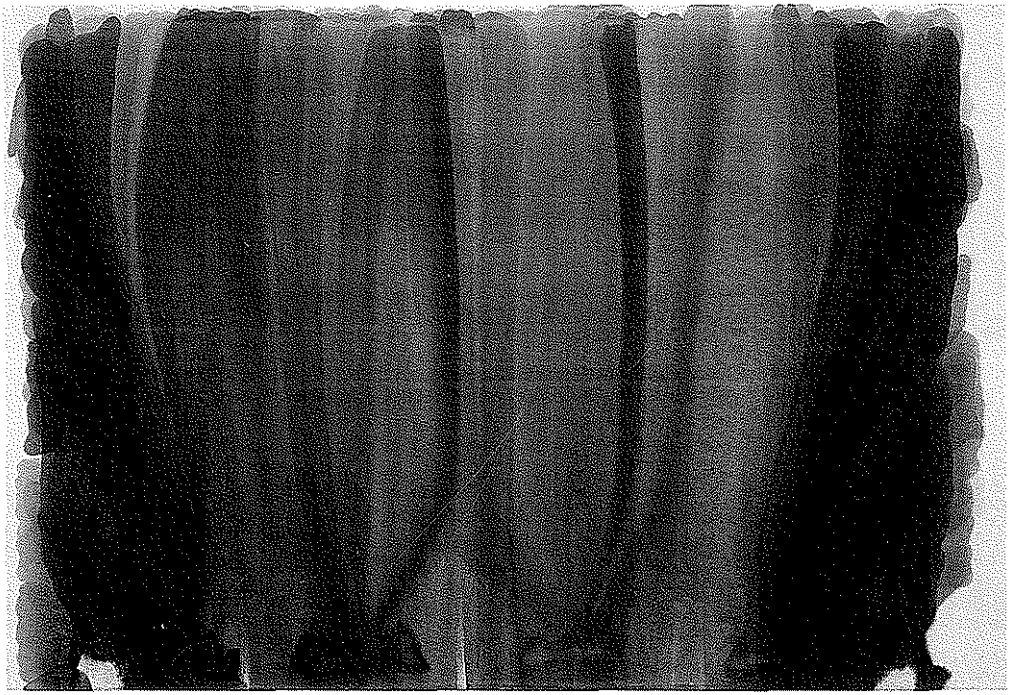


Plate 3. Morris Louis, *Saraband*, 1959. Acrylic resin on canvas, 101⅛ x 149 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Estate of the artist. Photo: by David Heald © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, FN 1685.

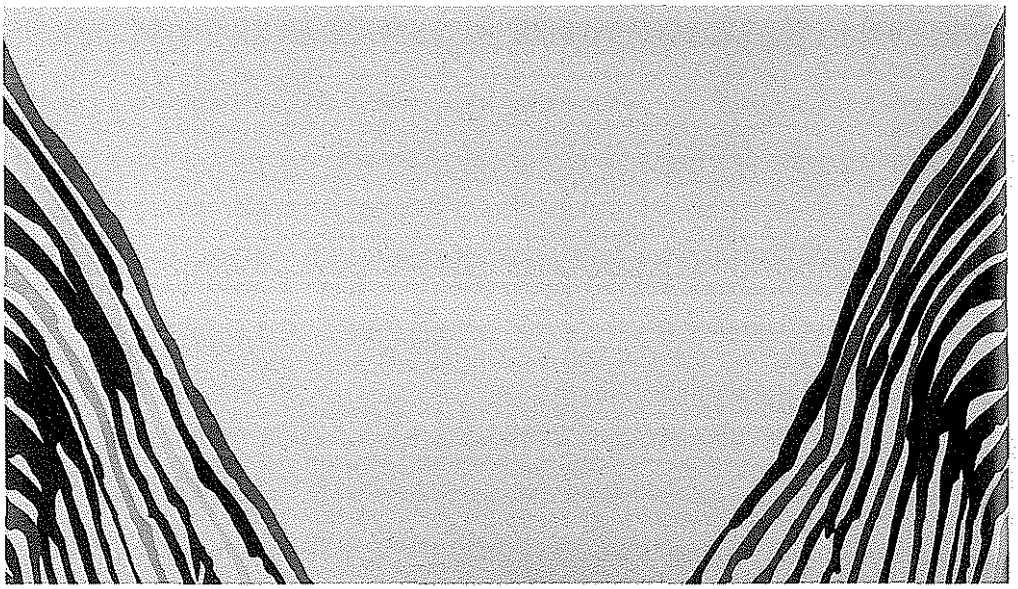
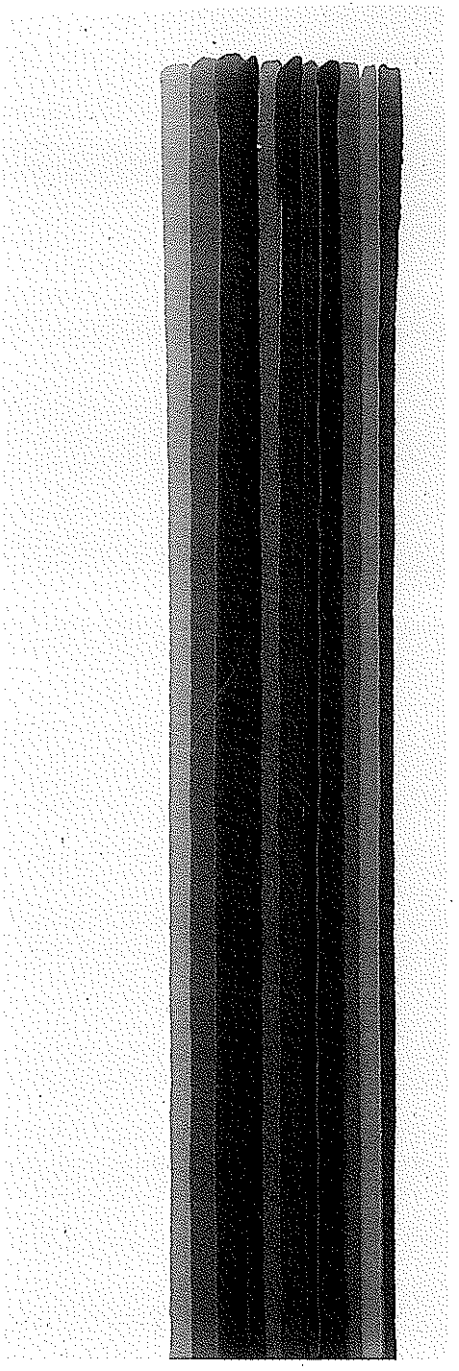


Plate 4. Morris Louis, *Alpha Pi,* 1960. Acrylic resin on canvas, 102½ x 177 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Estate of the artist. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund.

Plate 5. Morris Louis, *Number 2-76*, 1962. Acrylic resin on canvas, 84½ x 27¾ inches. David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto. Estate of the artist. Photo: David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto.



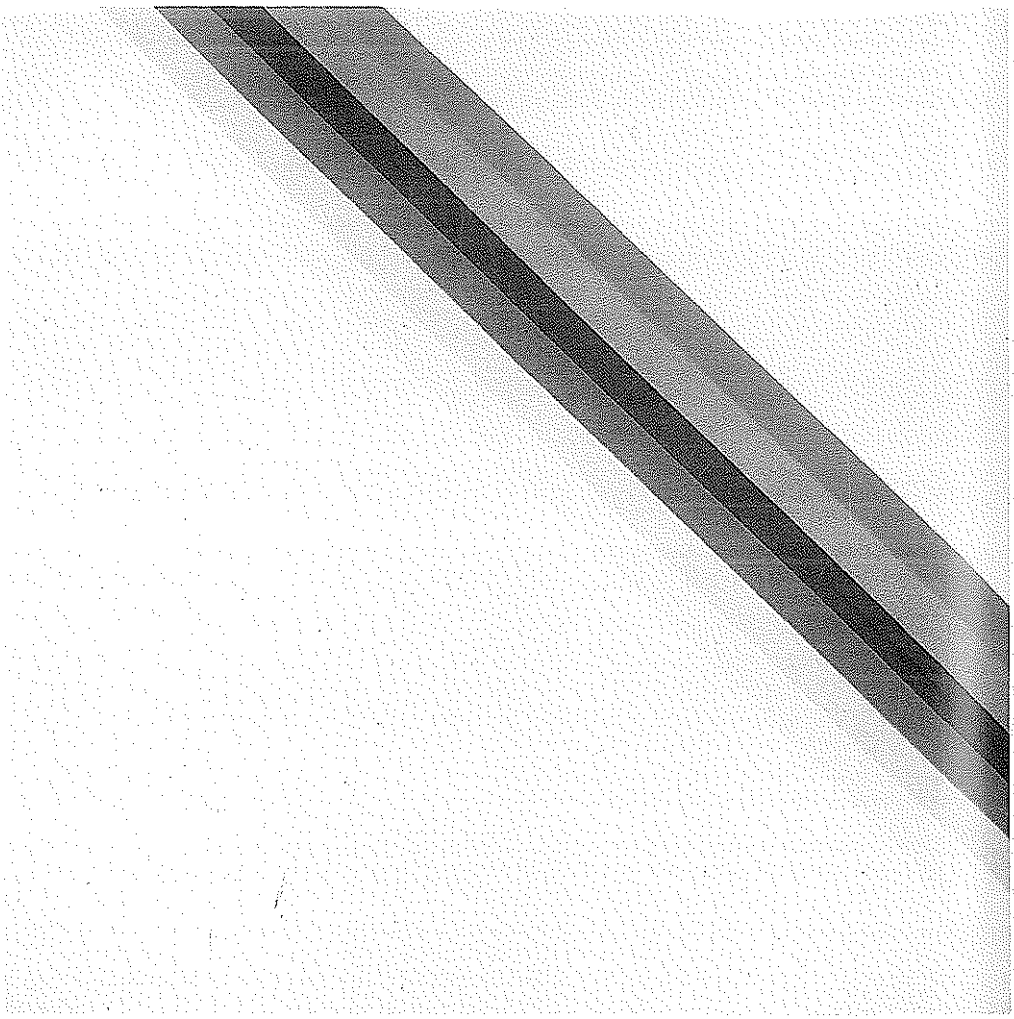


Plate 6. Morris Louis, *Hot Half,* 1962. Acrylic resin on canvas, 63 x 63 inches. Estate of the artist.

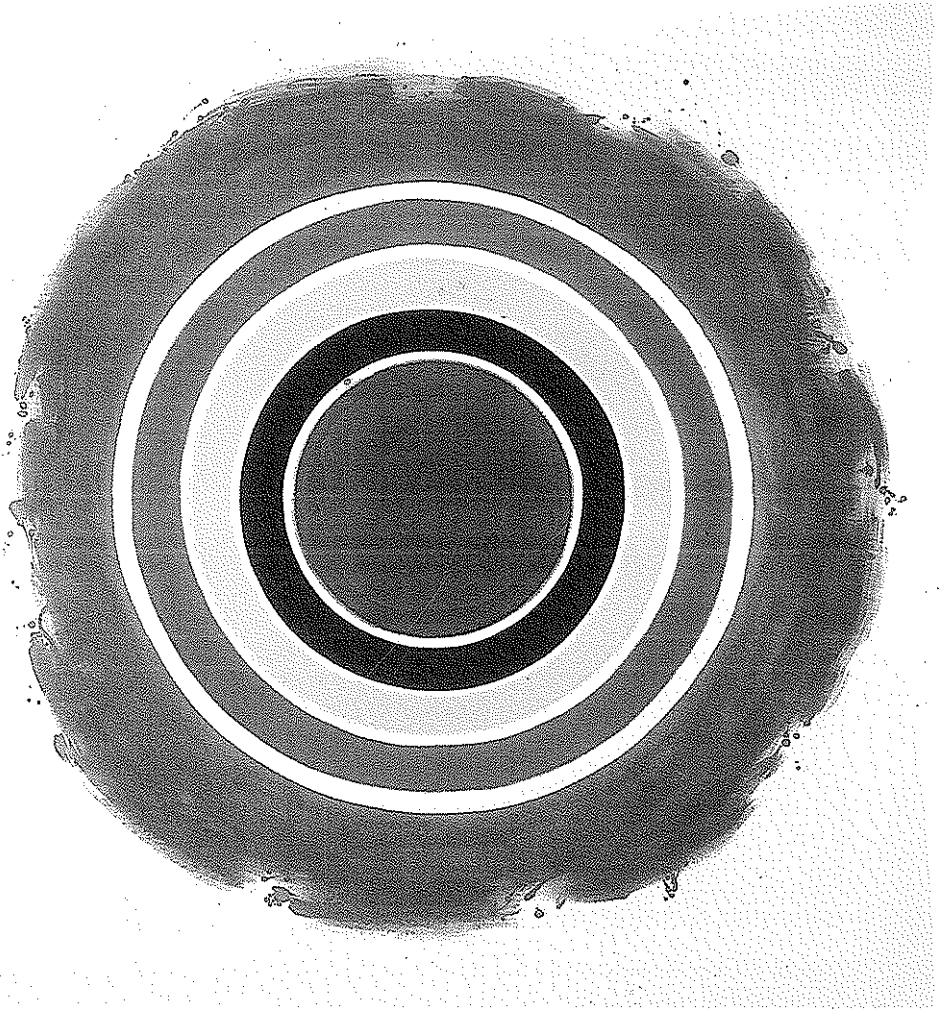


Plate 7. Kenneth Noland, *That,* 1958–59. Acrylic resin on canvas, 81¾ x 81¾ inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Mirvish, Toronto. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

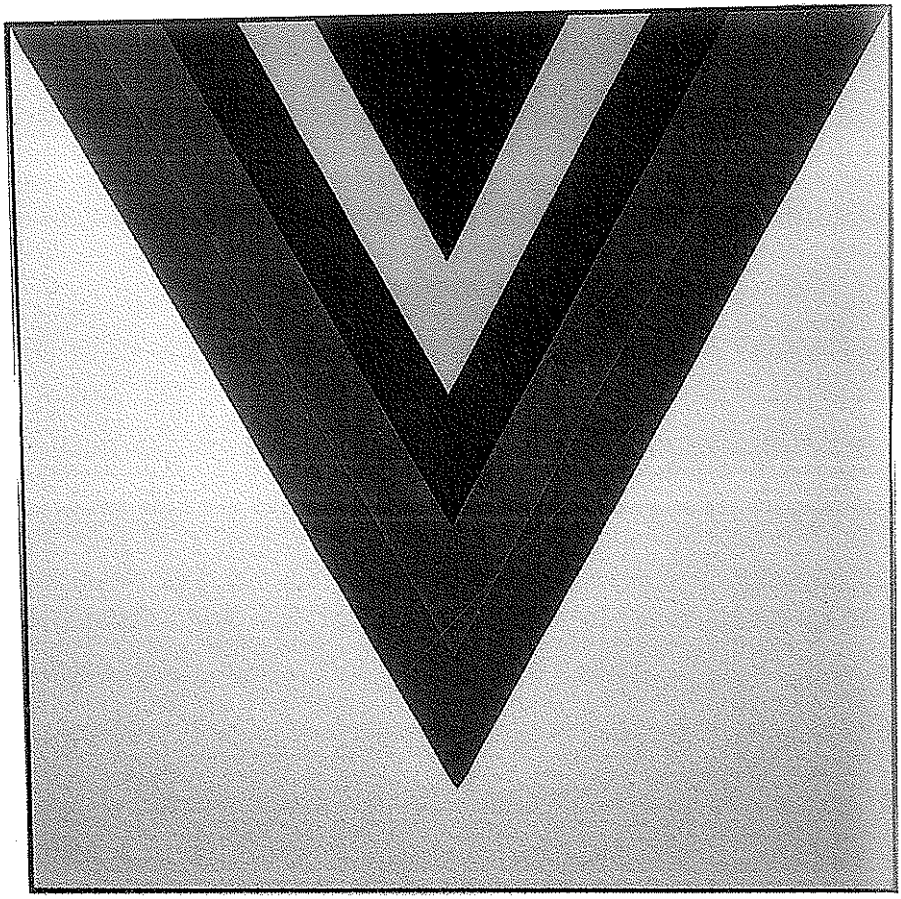


Plate 8. Kenneth Noland, *Golden Day*, 1964. Acrylic resin on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

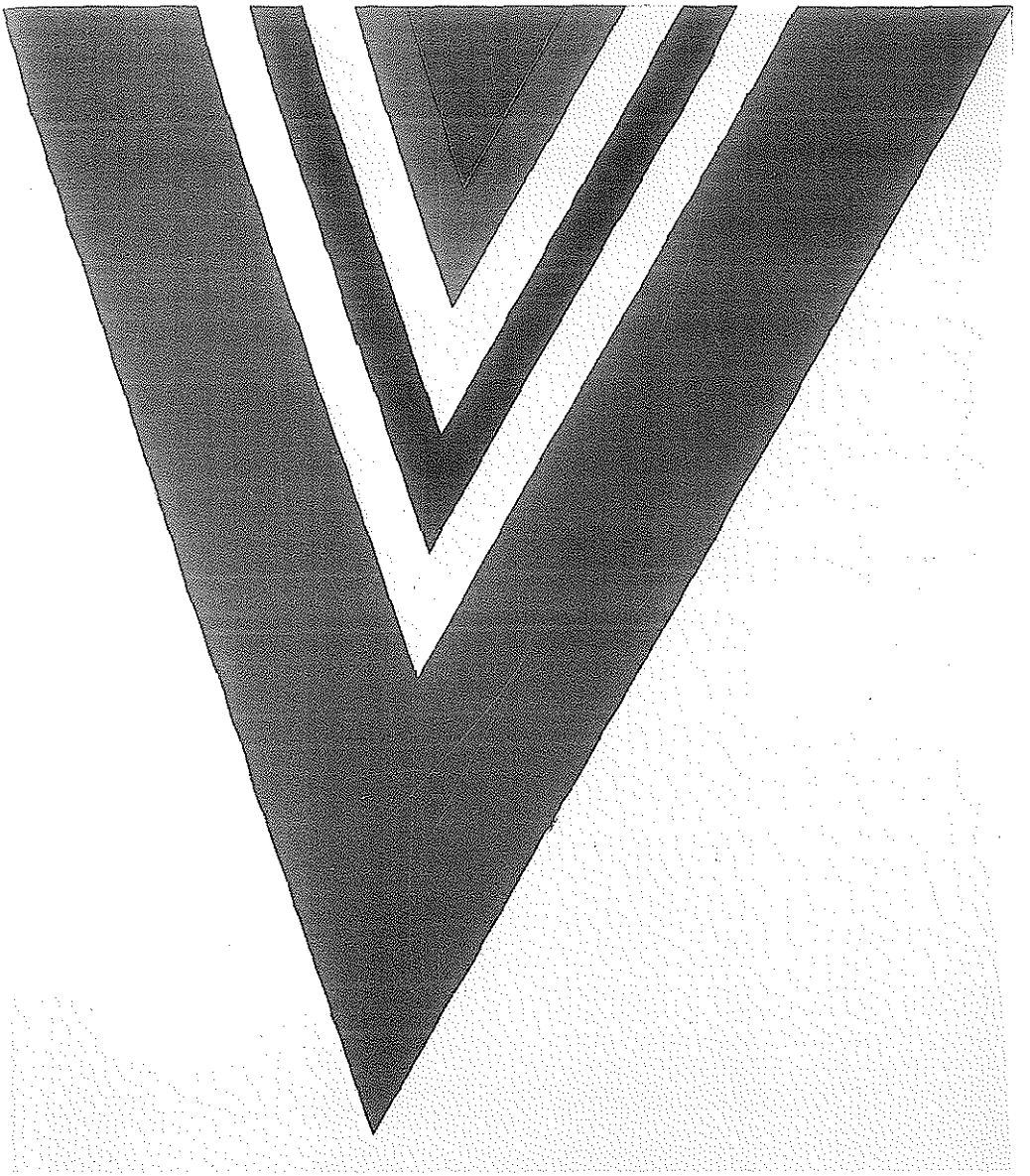


Plate 9. Kenneth Noland, *17th Stage,* 1964. Acrylic resin on canvas, 93½ x 80½ inches. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis. © 1997 Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA, NewYork, N.Y. Photo: Ron Jennings, © 1997 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

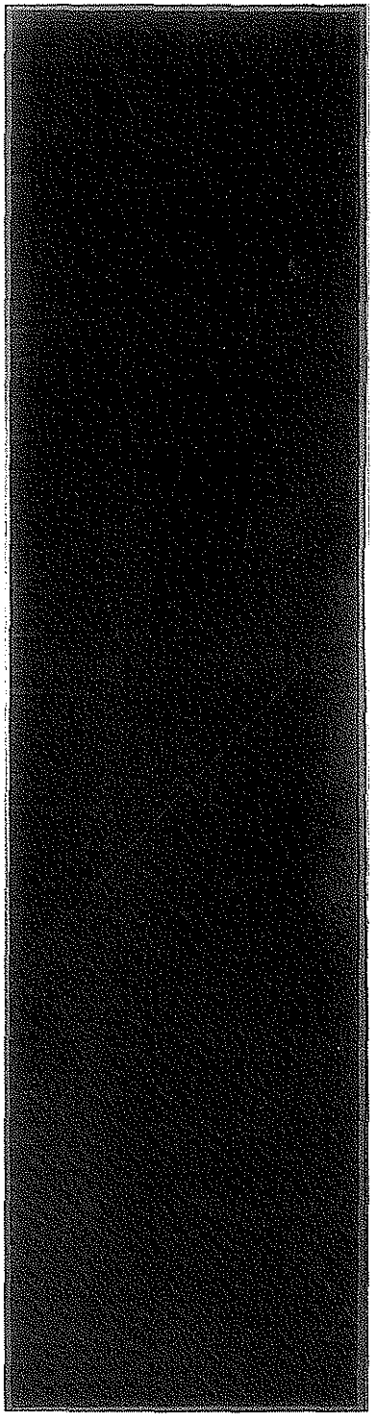


Plate 10. Jules Olitski, *Hidden Combination,* 1965. Water-miscible acrylic on canvas, 85 x 21 inches. Private collection. © 1997 Jules Olitski / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

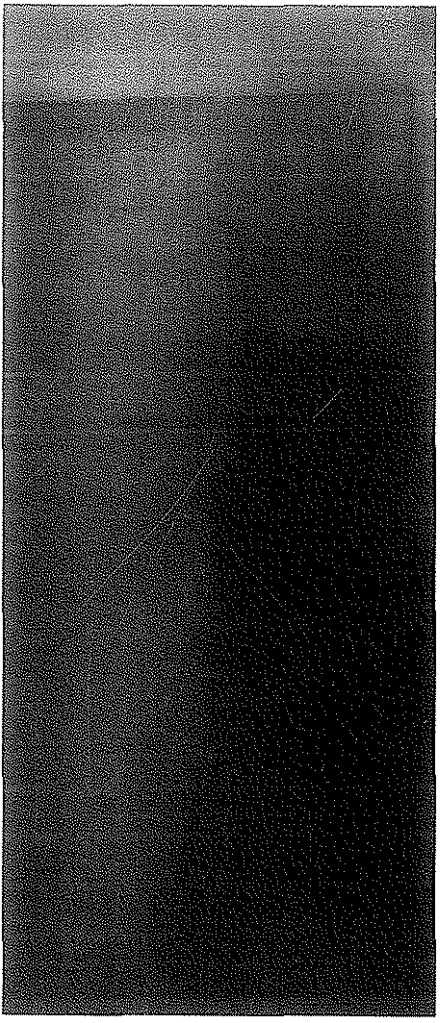


Plate 11. Jules Olitski, *Prince Patutsky's Command,* 1966. Water-miscible acrylic on canvas, 7●½ x 164½ inches. Private collection. © 1997 Jules Olitski / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

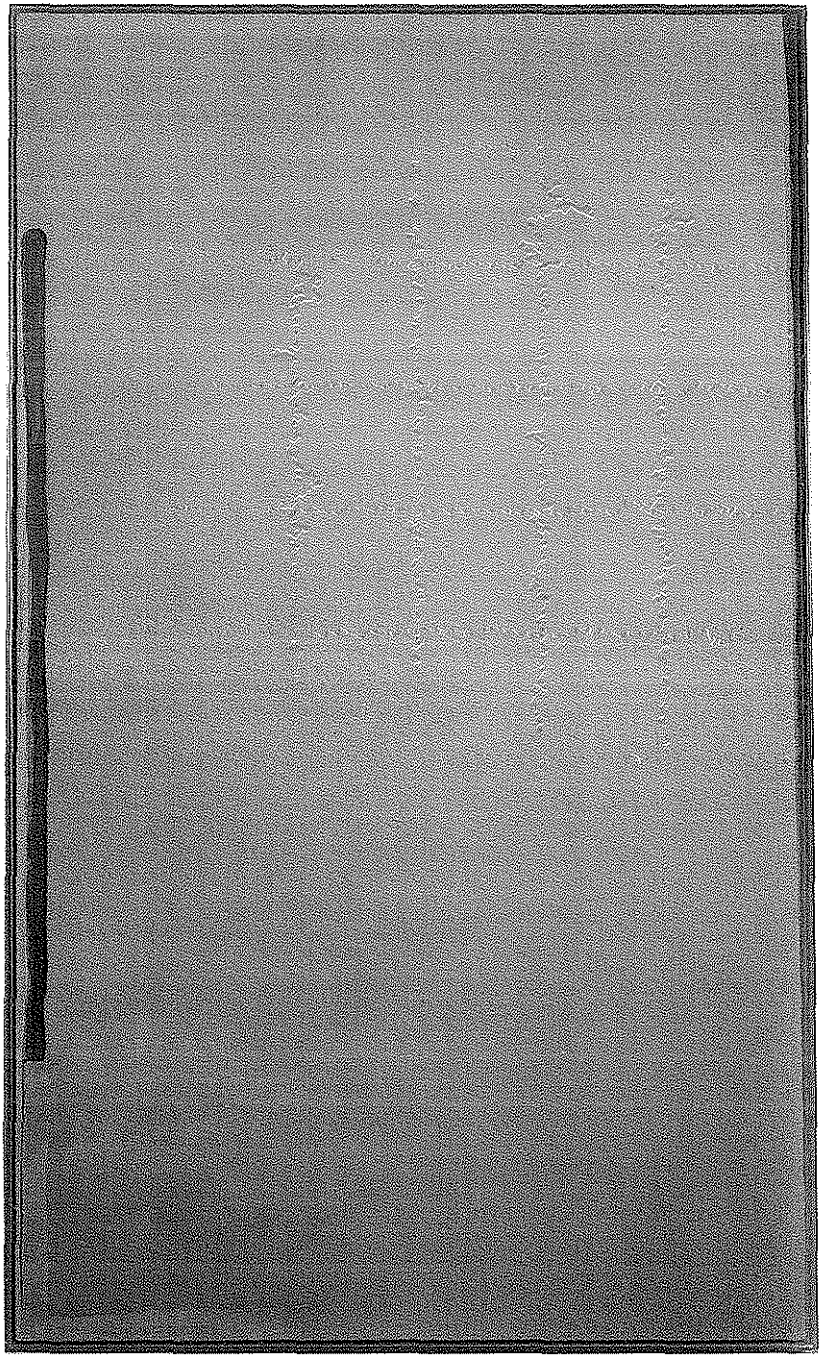


Plate 12. Jules Olitski, *End Run,* 1967. Water-miscible acrylic on canvas, 81 x 48 inches. Collection of the artist. © 1997 Jules Olitski / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

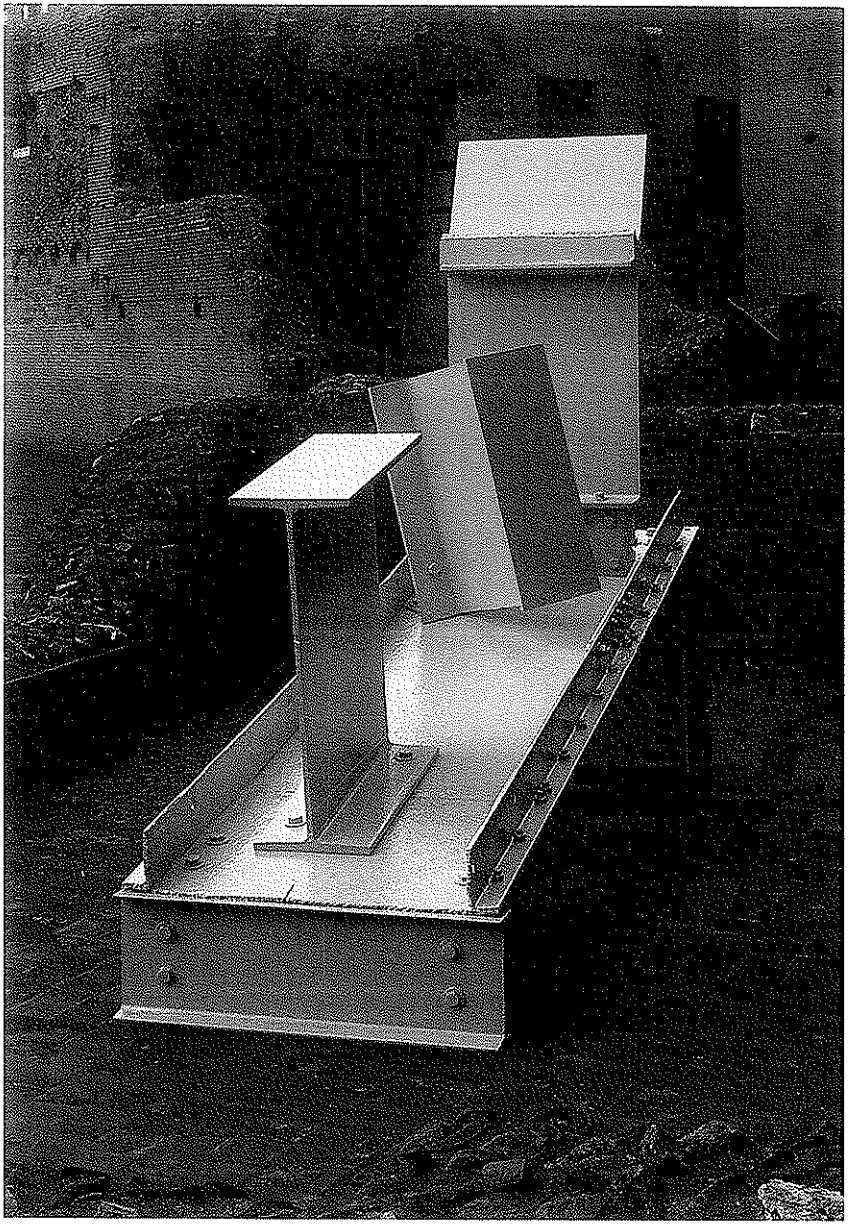


Plate 13. Anthony Caro, *Midday*, 1960. Painted steel, 7' 7¾" x 37⅜" x 12' 1¾". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Wiesenberger Fund. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: Shigeo Anzaï.

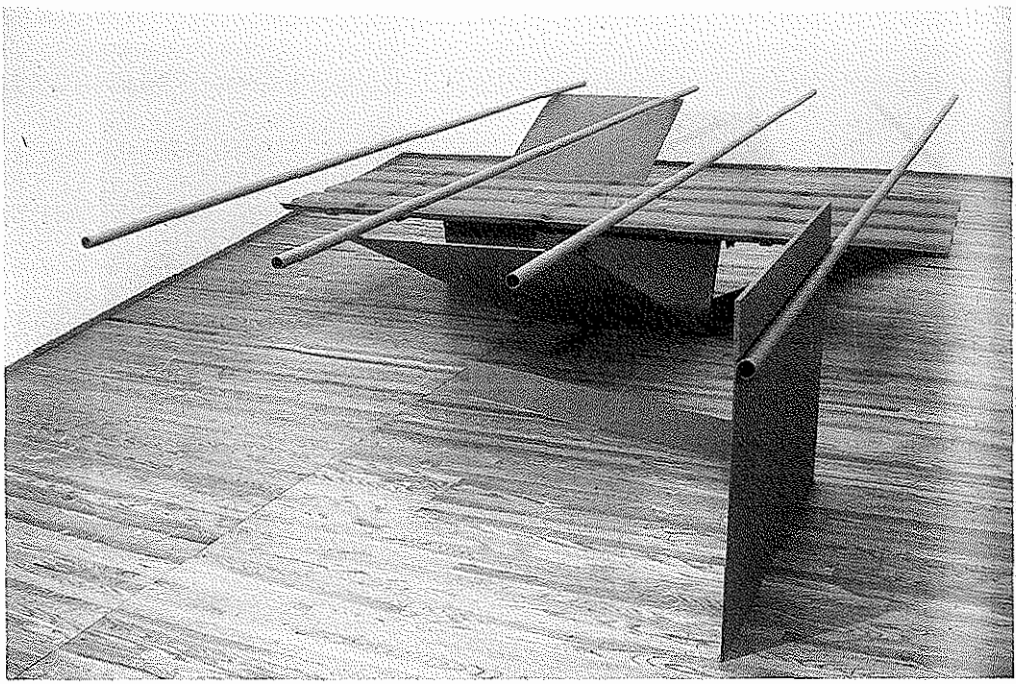


Plate 14. Anthony Caro, *Prairie,* 1967. Steel painted matte yellow, 38 x 229 x 126 inches. Collection of Lois and Georges de Menil, on extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Arts. Photo: John Goldblatt.

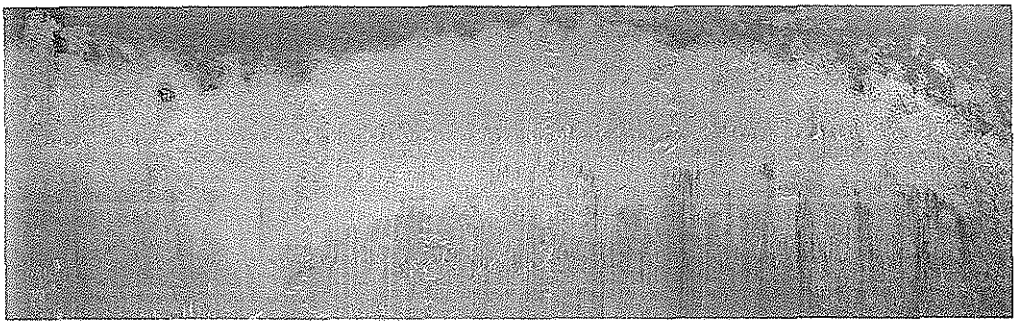


Plate 15. Larry Poons, *Railroad Horse*, 1971. Acrylic resin on canvas, 94¼ x 303 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Charles H. Hayden Fund. © 1997 Larry Poons / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

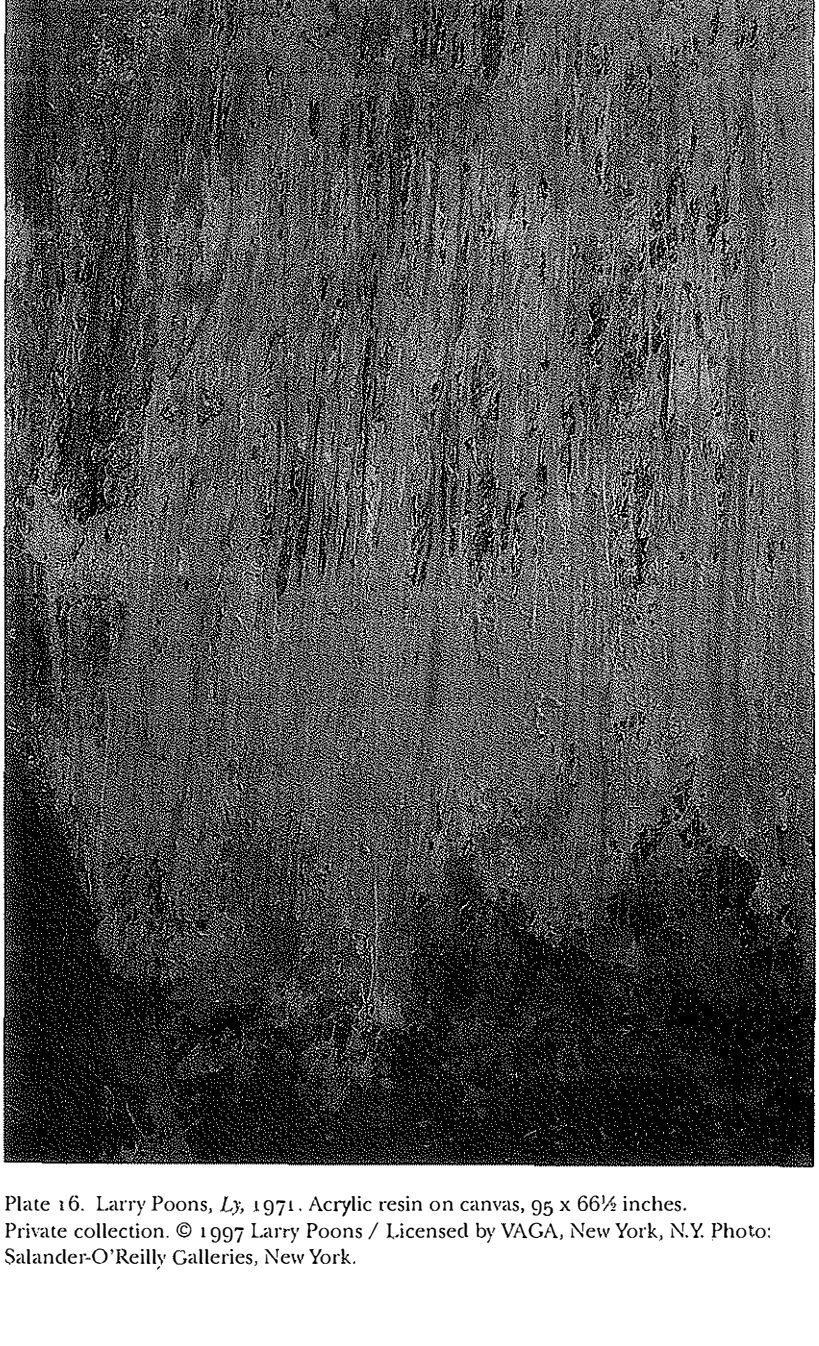


Plate 16. Larry Poons, *Ly*, 1971. Acrylic resin on canvas, 95 x 66½ inches. Private collection. © 1997 Larry Poons / Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photo: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York.

off the canvas, was more concerned than Noland to derive or "deduce" pictorial structure from the literal character of the picture support. But I think this would be mistaken. Until 1960, when he made the unfurleds, Louis's attitude towards the framing edge seems to have been much the same as Pollock's and nowhere near as advanced as Newman's: that is, he appears to have made an image and then framed it so as to leave, if possible, a roughly symmetrical border of raw canvas around three sides of it. The shape and size of the picture support were not factors that influenced the character of the paint image, apart from giving it its generally vertical orientation. Noland, on the other hand, broke through to his mature style only when, in his words, he "discovered the center" of the canvas[31]—when he at last came to locate the central point of concentric or radiating motifs at the precise center of the canvas—thereby relating his stain images deductively to the shape, though not yet to the specific dimensions, of the picture support. In the light of that "discovery" Noland's avoidance of the framing edge in those early paintings may be seen to signify not indifference to deductive structure, but acute awareness that, given his own drive toward a deductive mode of pictorial organization—a drive that was, and still is, at bottom expressive in intent, having to do with the search for a set of formal constraints in which Noland himself could believe and under which his feelings could find release—making contact with the framing edge would inevitably have raised more problems than he was prepared to cope with at that point. (Or perhaps it was that the developing logic of his feelings did not yet impel him to make contact with the framing edge, whatever the problems.) This interpretation is reinforced by Noland's progressive elimination during those years of whatever was not absolutely essential to the lucid deductive structure towards which he seems to have aspired. Thus his eschewal of the last vestiges of traditional drawing and painterliness, such as the wavering armature motifs themselves and the ragged surges of color which sometimes appear as if cast forth by the rotation of the outermost concentric ring in his early pictures; and thus also his increasingly explicit reliance on radical symmetry—often achieved by a few narrow concentric rings of pale color, spaced rather widely apart, whose center is also the center of the square canvas—for the determination of pictorial structure.

But Noland has always been as much concerned with freedom as with formal constraint, and has constantly scrutinized his own work for formal limitations that no longer correspond to his coloristic ambitions or seem to him true to his feelings. At the same time, he has

constantly sought to evolve new formal solutions to the same basic problem of deductive structure, chiefly in order to achieve relations among colors of a kind precluded by the constraints implicit in previous solutions, but also in response to contemporary developments in modernist painting other than his own. And having explored with considerable ingenuity and great breadth of effect the concentric-ring format described above, Noland seems to have come to feel that the rings could be replaced by ellipsoid motifs, their long axis parallel to the top and bottom of the picture support, as long as their location at the exact center of the square canvas was maintained. Shortly thereafter Noland appears to have decided that the ellipsoid motif could be moved somewhat above or below the center of the canvas without loosening the picture's structural coherence—the elongation of the motif along its own horizontal axis balancing, as it were, its spatial displacement along the central vertical axis of the painting, as well as making explicit the tension, resulting from Noland's aspirations toward deductive structure, between the shape of the motif and its placement in the picture field.

This double departure from radical symmetry and concentricity had the important result of allowing Noland to juxtapose motif against colored field much more effectively than within a concentric-ring format. Such a judgment is necessarily subjective and may not agree with others' experience of the works in question. But, to my eye, whereas the concentric rings function as both color and structure, the stained field (when it appears in those paintings) plays at most a coloristic role. Far from reinforcing the structural logic by which the rings appear to have been generated in the first place, the colored field threatens to subvert this logic by merely and equivocally filling in the space between the outermost ring and the circumference of the canvas. In the paintings built around ellipsoid motifs, however, the colored field plays an active, structural role by helping the motif remain poised either at or above the center of the canvas and by seeming to bring to bear on it intense coloristic pressure that might account for its deformation. In such paintings Noland succeeded for the first time in bringing the main motif and the colored field into a truly active, mutually reciprocal relation in regard to both color and structure—with the consequence that it is sometimes hard, if not actually impossible, to determine where in an individual painting coloristic effects leave off and structure begins. In itself, the integral relation among all the elements in those paintings as regards both color and structure represents an enormous achievement; and

the pictures in question include some of the strongest in Noland's oeuvre. But the fact remains that the structurally extremely important role played in them by color throws into question the primacy of deductive structure, which depends on nothing besides the literal character of the picture support.

Hence the particular significance of the first chevron paintings of 1962, in which for the first time Noland abandoned a centered or just above- or below-center motif for an attempt to organize the entire surface of the canvas into zones of color related to the shape of the picture support and to one another by an explicitly deductive structural logic. It is perhaps legitimate to conjecture that Noland may have been encouraged in this by the diagonal inclination of the banked rivulets of color at the sides of Louis's "unfurled" paintings of the previous year, as well as by the strong focus thrown upon the framing edge as a prime object of modernist concern by the stripe paintings of Frank Stella, who since 1958 had been exploring with great rigor a range of formal problems associated with the literal character of the picture support. But it is important to bear in mind that Noland had been concerned from the start to relate his stain images deductively to the shape, if not to the specific dimensions, of the picture support, by means of exact centering and then of lateral symmetry; and the chevron paintings may be seen as an entirely consistent, but nonetheless daring, exploration of problems raised and possibilities suggested by his own previous work. In fact, despite the seemingly radical difference in structure between the first chevrons and the earlier paintings based on concentric-ring and ellipsoid motifs, the relation of image to framing edge is essentially the same in them all: namely, one of symmetry. So that in the first chevron paintings the chevron motifs are made to relate to the framing edge chiefly by being aligned with a vertical axis running through the center of the painting, as in the ellipsoid motif pictures described above. And probably the largest single difference between the chevron paintings and Noland's previous work is that the most important point within the painting is no longer the precise center of the canvas, or a point somewhat above or below it, but the midpoint of the bottom framing edge. It is to this point that Noland moors the bottom tip of one of his chevrons, and it is from this chevron that the others appear to have been generated.

To my eye, the strongest of the first chevron paintings are those in which the boundary between two of the chevrons runs into the top two corners of the canvas; while in others, in which the upper

corners are not intersected by a chevron boundary, the relation between the chevrons and the picture support comes to seem perhaps not quite rigorous enough—as if symmetry alone were not sufficient to provide the explicit structural logic which the paintings themselves, viewed in the context of Noland's development, seem to demand. Whether or not Noland himself felt that the cornered chevrons were more successful than the rest, he appears to have moved quickly to the conclusion that the two upper corners of the canvas were, for his purposes, far more important structurally than the midpoint of the bottom framing edge—for the simple but compelling reason that whereas the latter relates the chevrons to the picture support only by dint of symmetry—that is, at one remove—the corners are nothing short of firsthand, immediate, physical features of the picture support itself. In any case, this or something very like it seems to me the formal meaning of Noland's decision to hang or suspend the chevrons from the upper corners of the canvas, instead of anchoring them to the midpoint of the bottom framing edge. It is worth adding that, although the decision may appear almost trivial, in actual significance it is one of the most profound in Noland's entire development. To begin with, it allowed him to prize the bottommost chevron loose from the bottom framing edge, because there was no longer any structural reason to pin it there. This meant that a considerable expanse of raw canvas could now be left between the wedge of chevrons and the bottom of the picture, with the result that Noland was able to combine the remarkable openness, optical space, and perceptual intensity of his concentric-ring paintings with a much more explicitly deductive relation of image to framing edge than he had ever before achieved. Moreover, the new relation between the two enabled Noland to dispense, at last, with lateral symmetry, in the realization that as long as the chevrons were suspended from the upper corners, the points of the chevrons could be moved literally anywhere within the picture—not only up from the bottom but off the central vertical axis as well. Finally, the points of the chevrons could be made to fall on an axis which is no longer perpendicular to the bottom framing edge, thereby introducing an even more radical element of dynamic asymmetry into his work.

I hope it is clear in what sense all this amounted to a formal advance of the first importance within modernist painting, to an exemplary act of radical criticism of his own best prior work, and to the attainment by Noland of a wholly new dimension of formal and expressive freedom for his art. What is much harder to understand is

that within a relatively (though characteristically) short time Noland's hard-won freedom seems to have begun to pall on him, which is perhaps roughly equivalent to saying that he began to doubt whether this particular formal solution could continue to bear or embody or communicate the kind and degree of emotion that all painting, modernist or otherwise, must bear or embody or communicate if he was to care about it. More specifically, his dissatisfaction with the asymmetrical chevron format may have made itself felt as a desire to bring about relations among colors which that particular format seemed to him to preclude. It is, however, important to be clear about one point. Noland's refusal to remain content within the asymmetrical chevron format, or any other, does not in itself indicate that he came to believe the solution in question was imperfect or no more than partial. On the contrary, it seems much more likely that his continual dissatisfaction is rooted in the fact that, within modernist painting, a particular format may amount to a *wholly* adequate, lucid, and repeatable solution to a particular formal problem. Thus, Noland's subsequent criticism of his asymmetrical chevrons has not been directed at supposed weaknesses in that format, but against its strengths. And the greatest danger facing a modernist painter such as Noland is not that he may rest content with a partial or imperfect solution to a formal problem, but that his solution of it may be both so total and so perfect that he will not know how to go on. This is, I think, one of the most significant differences between modernist painting and the painting of the premodernist past; the sense in which even Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* may be said to provide the solution to a problem is vague and metaphorical in comparison with the force that attaches to the same words when applied to Noland's asymmetrical chevrons. And this difference has to do with what are recognized as problems in the first place. In any case, it is as if modernist painting is for Noland a language whose rules of syntax must constantly be transformed by its users—who are also its makers—in order for it to remain capable of making significant sense; as if otherwise it becomes what its detractors often blindly and unjustly accuse it of being, mere decoration. And after having executed no more than a few large-scale asymmetrical chevron paintings, Noland gave up the solution and began to make the remarkable diamond-shaped paintings, three of which may be seen in the present exhibition.

I want to break off my discussion of Noland's work at this point, not in the belief that I have dealt adequately with it, but in the hope that perhaps enough of a formal context has been sketched for the

spectator to be able to come to grips on his own with the recent, and to my mind superb, diamond-shaped paintings just mentioned—paintings which provide a radical critique of the asymmetrical chevrons discussed above at the same time that they manifestly emerge from them. I am of course aware that my decision not to try to cope with Noland's color means that the account I have given of his development is seriously incomplete. On the other hand, there is the obvious danger that, presented with work as coloristically exciting as Noland's, the spectator might fail to give the structure of his paintings the close scrutiny it deserves. What I have tried to do in this section is to follow Noland's development in regard to modernist pictorial structure alone, in the conviction that if a rigorous conceptual grasp of the transformations it has undergone could somehow be incorporated as a vital factor into the act of perception itself, one would be a long way toward experiencing Noland's paintings in all their passion, eloquence, and fragile power.

4

NOLAND IS a tense, critical, almost hurting presence in his work. Jules Olitski comes across as ebullient, openhanded, inclined to be more concerned with the expression of an overmastering feeling than with the chastening of that expression in the name of formal rigor. (See figs. 18–20.) Where Noland's use of the stain medium is puritan in its self-discipline, Olitski's love for the stuff of painting often manifests itself as a kind of handling that approaches self-indulgence. Where Noland's work tends to keep the same basic appearance over a period of time, however profoundly its formal and expressive content may have changed during that period, Olitski's paintings tend to alter their appearance from series to series if not from painting to painting. But the governing sensibility remains the same throughout, and the different vocabularies are means to the single end of affording that sensibility the pleasure of seeing its own expansive embodiment in works of great sensuous beauty. Noland cuts, often into his own prior achievements; Olitski pushes hard but does not actually cut on several fronts at once. Those fronts are not concerned with formal problems so much as with what might be called issues of sensibility. That is, Olitski is chiefly intent on proving how much of his own sensibility can be made valid in terms of modernist painting. Both Noland and Olitski are modernist painters. But whereas Noland appears to be driven by the conviction that only an

art of constant formal self-criticism, and hence of constant formal advance, is capable of embodying the kind of expressive content he cares most about, Olitski seems rather to be concerned with finding out how much of what he does on the strength of what he feels can come out looking acceptable, not to say ravishing, to eyes which, like his own, have been educated largely by the best modernist painting of the past twenty years. This suggests that Olitski is involved with taste in a way that Noland, among others, is not: and by taste I mean both "advanced" taste, the expectations of those who admire and support modernist painting, and also—something which from the point of view of "advanced" taste would be regarded as "bad" taste—the exploitation of effects that, for better or worse, are no longer permissible. More exactly, Olitski continually defies the expectations of the most "advanced" segment of the public just as those expectations are on the verge of hardening into something as clear-cut, limited, and arbitrary as taste; and he does this by forcing one to recognize that entire ranges of effects not provided for by one's expectations are in fact valid in terms of a more generously felt and imaginatively inspired conception of modernism than one's own. Olitski's involvement is with taste conceived of as a potentially creative force, not as the arbiter of fashion. And nothing prompts the accusation of tastelessness faster than taste used creatively.

Olitski's involvement with taste has to do, both as cause and effect, with the preeminent role played in his paintings by color. It is, I think, no exaggeration to say that he is already one of the finest and most resourceful colorists of the century; and in view of the identification of figuration with color made possible by the stain technique, it is not surprising to find that his paintings are just as radically inventive in regard to structure as they are in regard to color—though the distinction between the two in his work is never clear-cut, and the use of the term "structure" in connection with his paintings will require further elucidation.

In general Olitski's aims in a given picture appear to be directed toward bringing about a particular situation, recognized when achieved, involving colors; indeed, what one may provisionally call the structure of the finished painting is one aspect only of a more comprehensive, essentially coloristic whole. This is why Olitski's paintings never rely on the deductive mode of pictorial organization I have tried to characterize in the work of Newman and Noland and which I will return to in discussing Stella. Although Olitski's finest paintings manifest a high degree of awareness of the framing edge,

this awareness functions as nothing more (and nothing less) than the most important noncoloristic factor taken into account in the making of a comprehensive color situation, whose character it cannot determine but can at most influence—sometimes by provoking informed defiance of the framing edge itself.

The particular color situations vary from picture to picture and are the result of intuitive decisions made by the painter in the act of painting. But two basic ambitions appear to lie behind most of the color situations in Olitski's paintings since 1963, and perhaps in his earlier work as well. First, he seems to want to confront us with individual colors more intensely than we have ever been confronted by them before—to make us encounter, say, a blue lozenge in one of his paintings as if it were a kind of color sample in comparison with which our previous experiences of blue will seem to have been no more than pale anticipations. Or to put it another way, the kind of apprehension of individual colors elicited time and again by Olitski's paintings is not unlike the shock of recognition we might feel suddenly meeting in the flesh someone previously seen only in news photographs or in the movies. Neither of these similes exactly fits the case. But they have in common the notion of confronting the beholder with something more real—in that sense more intense—than his previous experience had given him; and together they suggest the possibility that Olitski's paintings may relate to those of the past in an unexpected way. Despite the fact that Olitski's paintings are nonrepresentational, the actual experience of individual colors elicited by his recent work seems to me similar in kind to my response to those paintings of the past that appear most intent on representing reality as objectively as possible. By this I mean to suggest not that there is a special sense in which Olitski's paintings are, after all, representational, but rather that one's intense perception of individual colors in them may be related to one's experience of the depiction of reality in Jan Van Eyck's paintings, for example, or Jan Vermeer's.

The second ambition at work in Olitski's canvases seems to be to prove that any colors—literally, *any* colors—can be combined to produce major art. Toward this end he often employs combinations of colors which at first sight appear vulgar, overpretty, or garishly sentimental; and when a painting of his fails, it most often does so by failing to overcome the banality of its constituents. But it is far more usual for Olitski to succeed in constructing color situations of great originality, subtlety, and force, thereby both discovering and exploit-

ing expressive resources which would not otherwise have been suspected to exist.

These two ambitions—to make the beholder see individual colors more intensely than ever before, and to prove that literally any colors can be combined successfully—are not unrelated to one another. Any colors whatever can be combined if the beholder can be made to see them one at a time, sequentially, in time, and not all at once as in an instantaneously perceived format or design. And seeing the individual colors sequentially may compel the beholder into a more intense confrontation with each of them in turn than could be achieved either by relating the same colors to one another in a design that, as it were, had no temporal dimension, or by isolating each of the individual color elements on its own otherwise empty canvas. It would be fruitless to speculate as to whether the coloristic ambitions in question are realizable only if duration is made to play a crucial role in the experiencing of the work of art; what matters is that most of Olitski's paintings executed since 1963 that I have seen virtually demand to be experienced in what may perhaps be called visual time. Again, the nearest equivalent among the paintings of the past to this aspect of Olitski's work is provided by Van Eyck and the Northern Renaissance painters in general. Putting aside for a moment their obvious differences, what the paintings of Van Eyck and Olitski have in common is a mode of pictorial organization that does not present the beholder with an instantaneously apprehensible unity. And just as the miscellaneous objects represented in a painting like Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* participate in an experiential unity different in kind from the instantaneous compositions of the Italian Renaissance, so the colors in individual paintings by Olitski hang together, but not in a chromatic and compositional ensemble that can be instantaneously perceived and enjoyed.

Unlike the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait,* however, Olitski's paintings are often characterized by a directional flow or impulse from one portion of the canvas to another and in this respect may be compared to music, the time art *par excellence.* But the analogy is inexact. For example, although it takes time to experience any painting by Olitski in the present exhibition, precisely how long it takes is no more measurable than the precise depth to which one's gaze penetrates a particular illusion of optical space in paintings by Newman, Noland, or Olitski himself. Moreover, while music cannot be experienced instantaneously—a musical performance *must* take time—Olitski's paintings can be seen instantaneously, though not, I would

argue, seen correctly, not really seen. There is nothing one can point to in proof of the contention that a given painting demands to be experienced sequentially or directionally, though one will almost certainly point or gesture in an attempt to trace the action of the color forces at work in it. In the end, however, here as elsewhere, the critic can do nothing more than appeal to the spectator's experience of the painting in question, after having suggested both what to look for and how to look for it. Where Olitski's work is unique, and presents unique frustrations to the critic, is in the ratio of "how" to "what" descriptions which the paintings themselves seem to demand.

It is as if his paintings make themselves under one's gaze; or again, as if the beholder makes the paintings by perceiving them; or perhaps most precisely, as if the act of perception itself makes the paintings by entering, as it were empathically, into the alien, impersonal, yet incomprehensibly moving life of the colors within them. More than in the case of any painting I can think of, Olitksi's recent work identifies the act of seeing with the making of the painting. But this identification is not between the act of seeing and the making of the painting as it actually occurred. We do not know and are not made to feel how Olitski applied the paint to the canvas, and there are no tactile or kinesthetic clues by which we are invited to participate vicariously in the act of painting itself. Rather, the identification aimed at by Olitski's recent work is between perception and the purely visual character of the thing perceived. And the purely visual character of the thing perceived—namely, the kind of color situation that, since 1963, has constituted a representative Olitski—is such that it cannot be experienced all at once, but requires the participation of the spectator in the act of seeing over a certain period of time. Finally, because the structure of Olitski's recent paintings is one aspect of such a color situation, it too, can be seen only in time; in fact, it tends to be the last aspect of a given painting to emerge when the latter is seen as I believe it should be. Even then it will defy characterization in noncoloristic and nondurational terms.

Like Pollock, Newman, Louis, and Noland, Olitski addresses himself to eyesight alone, but color is for him a more essential instrument of opticality than for any of the others, with the exception of Newman—and there are vast differences between Newman's use of color and his own. Like Louis and Noland, Olitski makes magnificent use of staining. But whereas they achieve opticality above all by their control of the stain medium and only secondarily by relations among colors, the opticality of Olitski's work is grounded chiefly in his han-

dling of color; the staining only helps. Moreover, the fact that in his paintings opticality is brought about chiefly by color means that Olitski is able to relax the discipline by which Louis and Noland, in different but related ways, hold the stain medium in check. The opticality of a given painting by Louis, at least prior to the unfurleds of 1960, depends on whether or not the limits of the stain image resist being read as drawn; and this depends in turn on whether or not the character of the stain image as a whole appears to have been determined by the physical forces at work in the process of staining. There is, however, no question but that the geometrically precise color elements in Noland's paintings have been determined by the painter and to this extent may be regarded as drawn. But their determination is always felt to have been made in accordance with the relatively impersonal considerations of deductive structure, with the result that the limits of the stain image in Noland's work, as in Louis's, bear the stamp of necessity: they appear to have been compelled or dictated, rather than to have been described by a cursive, freehand gesture. The stain image appears to have come into existence as a whole, and to have assumed its ultimate configuration in response to impersonal forces—in Louis's work the forces of capillary action, in Noland's the demands of deductive structure. And since deductive structure concerns the relation of the image to the framing edge, the configurations assumed by the stain images in Noland's paintings tend to be regular shapes of one kind or another: circles, ellipses, chevrons, right angles. Finally, while the opticality of Louis's work up to the unfurleds depends largely upon the resistance of the stain image to being read in tactile terms, Noland's exploitation of blank canvas has consistently enabled him to create an illusion of optical space positive and compelling enough to subsume the bare minimum of drawing one finds in his work.

In contrast to Louis and Noland, Olitski has always shown strong reluctance to suppress traditional drawing. Paintings made as recently as 1962 often consist of colored shapes whose contours seem to have been drawn with the wrist, organized around a core of color or blank canvas. In many of these pictures two or even three such contours are played off against one another at close quarters, leaving thin, pinched, undulating ribbons of raw canvas between them. Considered apart from color, as in a black-and-white photograph, the paintings in question bear unmistakable tactile connotations; and it is by way of being a *tour de force* that the actual works manage, much of the time, to drown these connotations in the sheer vibrance with

which the colors within them interact. But the compulsion under which color labors in these paintings—to oppose and, in effect, to dissolve the drawn contours in the beholder's instantaneous perception of the work—often leads to a choice of extremely high-keyed, even aggressive combinations of colors. While this may not have militated against the success of individual pictures, it does seem to have limited the range of coloristic effects Olitski was able to achieve.

Starting around 1963, Olitski began softening the contours of his colored shapes, thereby allowing his color to become much lower keyed, much subtler, much more concerned with internal inflection and nuance than ever before. It is this liberation of color from the task of opposing drawing that seems to have enabled Olitski to achieve a mode of pictorial organization that requires the cooperation of the spectator over a period of time. Having achieved that mode of pictorial organization, however, Olitski seems to have found that a surprising amount of contour drawing could be retained without having to key his colors high to oppose it: when the paintings are seen in what I have called visual time, the individual color elements appear to assume their contours, more or less gradually, before one's eyes, in response to the forces at work in the total color situation to which the elements belong. In the end, the shapes of individual color elements in Olitski's paintings do not appear to have come about in response to the forces of capillary action in the stain process (as in Louis's work), or to the demands of deductive structure (as in Noland's). Instead, each painting is an attempt to achieve a unique and highly precarious equilibrium of shapes and colors, related to that achieved in traditional painting by the resolution of tactile forces and the juxtaposition of tactile shapes in an instantaneously perceived compositional whole. But the forces at work in Olitski's paintings are color forces and can be perceived only in visual time, and the paintings themselves are addressed to eyesight alone. So that while Louis was forced to eschew traditional drawing completely throughout most of his career as an artist of the first rank, and while Noland's paintings contain no more than the bare minimum of drawing their deductive structures demand, Olitski is able to enjoy as much drawing as his handling of color and his noninstantaneous mode of pictorial organization allow. In fact, although he seems to have broken through to the latter at least partly as a result of relinquishing the hard-bitten contour drawing that marks his paintings up through 1962, Olitski has managed since then to get back more than he gave up in the first place. In recent paintings he has even been able to

work with drawn line in its own right, by deploying *colored* line in situations that emphasize its coloristic function rather than its linear character.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that both Noland and Olitski are primarily painters of feeling, and that what I take to be their preeminence among their contemporaries chiefly resides not in the formal intelligence of their work, which is of the very highest order, but in the depth and sweep of feeling which this intelligence makes possible (though feeling and intelligence play dissimilar roles in their respective oeuvres). Instead of calling the usefulness of the concept of modernism into question, this should indicate that it is not so constricting in its demands as might at first appear. And it suggests that only a painter who, like Noland or Olitski, manages to come to grips with the contemporary situation of modernist painting stands a chance of achieving significant individuality, to say nothing of making paintings of the same essential quality as those of the Old Masters.

5

FRANK STELLA is the youngest of the three modernist painters represented in the current exhibition, and it is perhaps no mere coincidence that his paintings are more exclusively formal in their concerns than either Noland's or Olitski's. (See figs. 22–26.) Like Newman and Noland, Stella is concerned with deriving or deducing pictorial structure from the literal character of the picture support; but his work differs from theirs in its exaltation of deductive structure as sufficient in itself to provide the substance, and not just the scaffolding or syntax, of major art. As early as 1958–59, partly in reaction against Abstract Expressionist painting such as that of Kline and de Kooning—both of whom he strongly admired—and partly in direct response to the work of Barnett Newman, Stella began to make paintings in which parallel stripes of black paint, each roughly 2½ inches wide, echo and reecho the rectangular shape of the picture support until the entire canvas is filled. Those first black paintings, shown as part of the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of *Sixteen Americans* in 1960, amounted to the most extreme statement yet made advocating the importance of the literal character of the picture support for the determination of pictorial structure—despite the fact that, for the most part, the relation of the different stripe patterns to the framing edge is one of variation and inversion rather than of strict reiteration. In subsequent series of paintings executed

in aluminum, copper, and purple metallic paint[32]—in 1960, 1961, and 1963, respectively—Stella's grasp of deductive structure grew more and more tough minded, until the paintings came to be generated in toto, as it were, by the different shapes of the framing edge, and variation occurred only within the series as a whole rather than within a particular shape of canvas. (There is, however, an important sense in which Stella's ambition to make paintings whose stripe patterns appear to be generated by the different shapes of the picture support exerted a strong influence upon the character of the shapes themselves. That is, although the shapes appear to generate the stripe patterns, the prior decision to achieve deductive structure by means of that particular relation between the stripes and the framing edge played an important role in determining the character of the shapes.) But despite their lucidity—the paintings in question are, after all, nothing but structure—and despite the presence of the same solution to the problem of deductive structure in all of Stella's work to date, I think it is fair to say that art criticism, even when approving, has shown itself unable to comprehend his paintings in formal terms, as well as unaware of the significance—and probably the existence—of deductive structure itself.

The extreme dependence upon the literal character of the picture support that constitutes deductive structure represents the culmination of a tendency visible in the work of Manet if not earlier—a tendency which first manifested itself as an emphasis upon the flatness of the picture surface but which, in Cubism, made itself felt as well in the truing and fairing of the various pictorial elements to a rough congruence with the framing edge. In this respect Stella's work may be regarded as a logical development from Cubist truing and fairing, in a contemporary context of modernist pictorial concerns that, in effect, precludes the tactile spatial ambiguities through which Cubism asserted the flatness of the picture surface. The danger of such a formulation, however—quite apart from the force that threatens to attach to the word "logical"—is that it might lead one to minimize the difference between pictorial structure in Stella's work and the surface structure of Cubist painting. And this in turn would be to detract unjustly from Stella's originality as well as, what is perhaps more serious, to fail to give sufficient consideration to one of the most significant and least discussed characteristics of Cubist pictures.

The characteristic I am referring to is the tendency for pictorial elements in both Analytic and Synthetic Cubist paintings to pull away from the edges of the canvas, especially from the corners, and to

gravitate toward its center. The densest area, and structurally speaking the strongest, in a Cubist painting is almost always the neighborhood of its center; the painting often simply fades out, becomes insubstantial, toward its circumference. That the individual pictorial elements are trued and faired means that they have been adjusted or modified to comply, roughly, with the shape of the framing edge—but only at a safe remove from it. Where there are few elements to adjust or modify, as near the framing edge, both structure and substance become problematic. And when Synthetic Cubist paintings do not literally fade out toward their circumferences, they tend to fall back on a rendering of space that can only be termed traditional. Perhaps the most important difference between the Cubists and Stella can be summed up as follows. The Cubists appear to have built their paintings out toward the edge, and the nearer to it they came the less consistent with their treatment of the main motif their handling seems to have become. Whereas in Stella's paintings structure is generated from the framing edge in toward the center of the canvas—with the result that if any portion of his pictures tends to be problematic it is the center, rather than, as in Cubist works, the perimeter.

The problematic relation of forms in Cubist paintings to the framing edge seems to have been recognized and made explicit in the superb paintings and drawings executed by Piet Mondrian in Paris during the critical years 1912–14. What is perhaps most remarkable about Mondrian's work of those years is not the rapidity with which he assimilated those aspects of Cubism that concern the organization of the picture surface, but the acute critical analysis to which he seems to have subjected them almost from the first. For example, in his paintings of this period Mondrian's awareness that the pictorial elements in Cubist pictures tended to pull away from the framing edge, and especially from the corners, led him to exaggerate the tendency with apparent deliberateness by painting out the corners of the canvas and disposing his forms only within the rough ovoid that remained. (Picasso and Braque also worked with ovoid formats during these years; but either their canvases tended to be literally ovoid in shape, or else the corners were not *painted* out explicitly within the painting, as in Mondrian's work, so much as they were *masked* out by means of either a real or an implied framing mat. That is, Picasso and Braque seem to have conceived of the ovoid as merely another usable format, while Mondrian appears to have seized on it as a means of making explicit the tendency of forms in a rectangular

painting to draw away from the circumference.) He also came to grips with the structural limitations of truing and fairing, by decisively giving up representation in favor of an abstract vocabulary largely consisting of horizontal and vertical segments of line, which reiterated much more succinctly and explicitly the dominant axes of the framing edge.

By the end of the second decade of the century Mondrian began to grapple with the problem of making the corners of the canvas (and in general that portion of it nearest the framing edge) function on a par with the rest, by siting rectangles of bright color—red, yellow, blue—along the circumference and often in corners while leaving the middle of the picture relatively "empty" in comparison. But those paintings, which remain Mondrian's most famous and characteristic works, encounter a difficulty which the painter himself may or may not have been aware of: the colored rectangles are bounded on as many sides as lie within the picture by black lines which provide the most important structural element in it, while no such black lines run between the colored rectangles and the framing edge. This is understandable, in that otherwise the canvas would be framed by thin black lines whose pictorial status would be highly equivocal. But their absence between the colored rectangles and the framing edge implies the continuation of the former beyond the canvas—as if the picture represented a rectangular cut into a continuous field, instead of being a rectangular surface covered with paint.

The point of discussing Cubism and Mondrian in relation to Stella is not to provide him with a needed pedigree, but to sketch a small but crucial portion of the formal context in which, to my mind, Stella's paintings ought to be seen, in the hope of elucidating not merely the relation of his work to that of prior modernists, but the extent to which his paintings represent a significant advance on theirs in regard to pictorial structure. For example, what I have called the deductive structure of Stella's paintings is both less equivocal and less arbitrary than Mondrian's framing edge siting of colored rectangles: less equivocal in that the stripes in Stella's aluminum, copper, and magenta metallic paint series, and in some of his early black paintings as well, appear to emanate from the framing edge in toward the center of the canvas, while Mondrian's color rectangles compromise the integrity of the edge by seeming to continue beyond it; and less arbitrary in that the location of a given stripe in Stella's paintings appears to have been dictated by the deductive structure of the whole, while the different elements in Mondrian's pictures seem to

have been placed in one relation or another to the framing edge by the painter himself. This is not an argument to the effect that Stella's paintings are superior to Mondrian's. It does suggest, however, that they are more consistent solutions to a particular formal problem—roughly, how to make paintings in which both the pictorial structure and the individual pictorial elements make explicit acknowledgment of the literal character of the picture support—but it does not touch at all upon what pictorial qualities Stella may have had to sacrifice in order to achieve superior consistency.

More important, though, than whatever traditional pictorial qualities the spectator may feel Stella has sacrificed are the pictorial values he has consistently asserted—sometimes in the teeth, so to speak, of the apparent logic of his own development. For example, his progression from black to aluminum to copper metallic paint in his first three series of paintings, in conjunction with his use of shaped canvases in the latter two series, can be fitted neatly into a version of modernism that regards the most advanced painting of the past hundred years as having led to the realization that paintings are nothing more than a particular subclass of *things,* invested by tradition with certain conventional characteristics (such as their tendency to consist of canvas stretched across a wooden support, itself rectangular in most instances) whose arbitrariness, once recognized, argues for their elimination. According to this view, the assertion of the literal character of the picture support manifested with growing explicitness in modernist painting from Manet to Stella represents nothing more nor less than the gradual apprehension of the basic "truth" that paintings are in no essential respect different from other classes of objects in the world; only misguided respect for a moribund pictorial tradition obscures that "truth" from the public at large and prevents more artists—if that term makes sense in this context—than have already done so from acting upon it.

Perhaps I ought to make clear that the position I have just adumbrated is repugnant to me, but I am not now interested in trying to refute it. Instead, I want to point out two things. First, that it makes adequate sense as an interpretation of the formal development of modernist painting—and that even if it did not, this would matter less than the actual quality of work produced by its adherents. I do not mean to suggest that ideas play a negligible role in the making of art: Stella's paintings themselves provide evidence to the contrary. But I am arguing that only one's actual experience of works of art ought to be regarded as bearing directly on the question of which

conventions are still viable and which may be discarded as having outlived their capacity to make us accept them, in the face of our awareness of their precariousness, circularity, and arbitrariness, as essential and even natural. And second, that Stella's work effectively refutes the antipictorial interpretation of modernism stated above. It is important to observe that something more than logical refutation and intellectual conviction is operative here. Stella's belief in the continued viability of certain pictorial conventions would be no more than touching if it were not objectified in paintings whose density of vital presence testifies that these conventions are not in fact exhausted. At the same time, the vital presence of Stella's paintings cannot be understood solely in terms of their physical and formal characteristics. It *could* be merely anachronistic or irrelevant that Stella's paintings remain flat, that their seemingly mechanical execution is entailed by his desire to achieve rigorous deductive structure, that the shaped formats that have been a recurring feature of his paintings since 1960 have served to make the latter's deductive structure all the more explicit, and that deductive structure itself is meaningful only in a context of problems and considerations intrinsic to the making of paintings and not to the manufacture of any other kind of thing. "A man is judged neither by his intention nor by his act," Merleau-Ponty has written, "but by whether or not he has been able to infuse his deeds with values."[33] The values in Stella's case are pictorial values; they are to be found, or found wanting, only in one's firsthand experience of the paintings in question.

It is on the basis of my own experience of Stella's paintings that his use of metallic paint, rather than seeming to signify "thingness" or materiality pure and simple, seems instead to be his way of achieving something like the opticality brought about by staining and color in the work of Louis, Noland, and Olitski. More precisely, the gentle play of finely granulated reflected light off the metallic stripes has the effect of dissolving one's awareness of the picture surface as a tactile entity in a more purely visual mode of apprehension. The painting is felt to be no less flat for this: both the deductive structure of the whole and the absence of value contrast among the stripes (except in the multicolored pictures of 1962 and their monochrome equivalents) strongly imply the flatness of the picture surface. But flatness is implied rather than experienced in tactile terms; and the metallic paint, despite its implications of materiality, in fact renders Stella's paintings curiously disembodied.

The multicolored paintings of 1962, executed with house paint

rather than with metallic pigment, represent a reaction against the increasing rigor of his own work as well as a response to recent achievements by Louis and Noland in the realm of color. For the first time Stella deliberately built up illusionistic structures in depth—rather like the inside of a camera bellows—by means of precise gradations of value among the colored stripes: structures in radical opposition to the flatness of the picture surface implied by the regularity of the stripe patterns. Also, the repetition of the same color at regular but not equal intervals has the effect of making the stripes work as pulses of color emanating from the center of the canvas out toward the periphery, thereby opposing the centripetal pressure of deductive structure. In a painting like *Cipango* (1962; fig. 24) in the present exhibition, for example, value contrast, with its connotations of tactile depth, has been set working against the flatness of surface implied by the stripe pattern, and the centrifugal impulse of the colored stripes has been made to counter their generation from the framing edge in toward the center of the canvas. Despite its seemingly uncomplicated, even disingenuous appearance, *Cipango* provides both an explicit critique of the basic formal premises and aspirations behind Stella's previous work and a triumphant demonstration of the capacity of these premises and aspirations to sustain, or rather to subsume, such a critique.

That Stella found the demonstration reassuring is suggested by the fact that his next series of paintings, executed in metallic purple paint on shaped canvases with open centers (see fig. 26), comprises the most radical and internally consistent assertions of deductive structure he has made to date. In subsequent series, however, Stella has chosen to relinquish the complete self-containment of the purple paintings, in what seems to be an attempt to focus attention on the arbitrary character of some of the decisions that can be made within a deductive format: for example, the decision as to which edges of a shaped canvas generate the stripes and which merely and obliquely cut across them.

Finally, it is worth remarking on the importance for modernist painters of thinking and working in terms of *series* of paintings—an institution that arose during Impressionism in concomitance with the exploration throughout a number of pictures of a single motif, but which has come increasingly to have the function of providing a context of mutual elucidation for the individual paintings constituting a given series. The mutual elucidation is both formal and expressive. On the one hand, seeing a number of paintings all of which

represent essentially the same approach to the same formal issue makes understanding the issue much easier than it would otherwise be; on the other, the differences among the paintings within a given series serve to bring out the particular expressive intonation of each. For Noland, individual series tend to mark significant alterations of pictorial structure; in the linguistic analogy touched on earlier they signify related transformations of syntax in the interest of saying something new (or perhaps in the interest of saying something at all). In Olitski's work, the series is a more amorphous grouping than for either Noland or Stella, mostly because his close involvement with "inadmissible" color combinations, and with taste in general, means that the formal self-definition encouraged by the series is less urgent for him than for the others. Several paintings executed by Olitski at approximately the same time will often be related to one another by a shared pictorial vocabulary, shared colors, and even shared feeling rather than by a common preoccupation with the same formal problem. In this respect as in others Olitski and Stella represent polar alternatives within contemporary modernist painting. Stella's individual series amount to variations on the same basic solution to the problem of deductive structure. That is, throughout his career the solution has remained essentially the same but the pictorial factors with which it has been called upon to cope have been altered from series to series, in an attempt to demonstrate—to Stella himself as well as to the beholder—both the perfectibility and the flexibility of the solution in question.

The series, then, has become one of modernist painting's chief defenses against the risk of misinterpretation—a risk that has grown enormously during the past twenty years in direct proportion to the success of modernism itself. And by success I am referring not to financial success, but to what is probably the most important single aspect of modernist painting's impact on the general sensibility. This aspect has been characterized by Clement Greenberg as follows:

> Under the testing of modernism more and more of the conventions of the art of painting have shown themselves to be dispensable, unessential. By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exist as a picture—though not necessarily a successful one.[34]

One consequence of this has been the expansion of the possibilities of the pictorial; in Greenberg's words, "much more than before lends itself now to being experienced pictorially or in meaningful relation to the pictorial: all sorts of large and small items that used to belong entirely to the realm of the arbitrary and the visually meaningless."[35] Moreover, the situation has been complicated still further by the calling into question, first by Dada and within the past decade by Neo-Dada figures such as John Cage, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, of the already somewhat dubious concept of a "work of art." In this connection it is important to bear in mind that, at bottom, Dada in any of its manifestations and modernist painting are antithetical to one another. Where the former aspires to obliterate all distinctions between works of art and other kinds of objects or occurrences in the world, the latter has sought to isolate, assert, and work with what is essential to the art of painting at a given moment. It would, however, be mistaken to think of Dada—the most precious of movements—as opposed to art. Rather, Dada stands opposed to the notion of value or quality in art, and in that sense represents a reaction against the unprecedented demands modernist painting makes of its practitioners. (It is, I think, significant that Marcel Duchamp was a failed modernist—more exactly, a failed Cubist—before he turned his hand to the amusing inventions for which he is best known.) But there is a superficial similarity between modernist painting and Dada in one important respect: just as modernist painting has enabled one to see a blank canvas, a sequence of random spatters, or a length of colored fabric as a picture, Dada and Neo-Dada have equipped one to treat virtually any object as a work of art—though it is far from clear exactly what this means. Thus, there is an apparent expansion of the realm of the artistic corresponding—ironically, as it were—to the expansion of the realm of the pictorial achieved by modernist painting.

As we have seen in Stella's case, the expanded realm of the artistic may come into conflict with that of the pictorial; and when this occurs the former must give way. But even apart from that particular complication, the expansion of the realm of the pictorial is at best a mixed blessing for the modernist painter: at the same time that the spectator may have gained the ability to see a length of fabric as a potential painting, he may also have acquired the tendency to regard a modernist painting of the highest quality as nothing more than a length of colored fabric. Because all sorts of large and small items

that used to belong entirely to the realm of the arbitrary and the visually meaningless may now be experienced pictorially or in meaningful relation to the pictorial, the risk is greatly increased that first-rate modernist paintings will appear arbitrary and visually meaningless. It is in this sense above all that modernist painting presents unique difficulties to the beholder. Despite its rejection both of representation and traditional tactile illusionism, and, paradoxically, because of its concern with problems intrinsic to itself, modernist painting today is perhaps more desperately involved with aspects of its visual environment than painting has ever been. It is as though there isn't the room any more that would be needed for modernist painting to be pure, to immure itself, even relatively, from its environment. "What replaces the object [in abstract painting] is not the subject, but the allusive logic of the perceived world"[36]—in a world as copiously full and visually sophisticated as our own, Merleau-Ponty's insight is true with a special vengeance. But it is important to recognize that the aspirations of modernist painters such as Noland, Olitski, and Stella are not toward purity, but toward quality and eloquence. These inevitably resist both prescription and paraphrase, and can be found only in one's experience of the best paintings of one's time, or of any other.

NOTES

1. Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance,* 2 vols. (Paris, 1973), 2:497.

2. See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), a selection of his essays on the painting and sculpture of the past hundred years.

3. Although Manet is probably the first painter whom one would term modernist [throughout this book I spell the word with a small *m*—M.F., 1966], some of the problems and crises to which his paintings constitute a decisive and unexpected response are present in the work of Jacques-Louis David, Théodore Géricault, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, and Gustave Courbet. Any account of the genesis of modernism would have to deal with these men.

4. This is more than just a figure of speech: it is a capsule description of what may be seen to take place in Manet's paintings. Manet's ambitions are fundamentally realistic. He starts out aspiring to the objective transcription of reality, of a world to which one wholly belongs, such as he finds in the work of Diego Velásquez and Frans Hals. But where Velásquez and Hals took for granted their relation to the worlds they belonged to and observed and painted, Manet is sharply conscious that his own relation to reality is far more problematic. And to paint his world with the same fullness of response, the same passion for truth, that he finds in the work of Velásquez and Hals, means that he is forced to paint

not merely his world but his problematic relation to it: his own awareness of himself as *in* and yet *not of* the world. In this sense Manet is the first post-Kantian painter: the first painter whose awareness of himself raises problems of extreme difficulty that cannot be ignored, the first painter for whom consciousness itself is the great subject of his art.

Almost from the first—surely as early as the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*—Manet seems to have striven hard to make that awareness function as an essential part of his paintings, an essential aspect of their content. This accounts for the *situational* character of Manet's paintings of the 1860s: the painting itself is conceived as a kind of *tableau vivant* (in this respect Manet relates back to David), but a *tableau vivant* constructed so as to dramatize not a particular event so much as the beholder's alienation from that event. Moreover, in paintings like the *Déjeuner* and *Olympia*, for example, the inhibiting, estranging quality of self-awareness is literally depicted within the painting: in the *Déjeuner* by the unintelligible gesture of the man on the right and the bird frozen in flight at the top of the painting; in *Olympia* above all by the hostile, almost schematic cat; and in both by the distancing calm stare of Victorine Meurent.

But Manet's desire to make the estranging quality of self-awareness an essential part of the content of his work—a desire which, as we have seen, is at bottom realistic—has an important consequence: namely, that self-awareness in this particular situation necessarily entails the awareness that what one is looking at is, after all, merely a painting. And that awareness too must be made an essential part of the work itself. That is, there must be no question but that the painter intended it to be felt, and if necessary the spectator must be compelled to feel it. Otherwise the self-awareness (and the alienation) Manet is after would remain incomplete and equivocal.

For this reason Manet emphasizes certain characteristics which have nothing to do with verisimilitude but which assert that the painting in question is exactly that: a painting. For example, Manet emphasizes the flatness of the picture surface by eschewing modeling and (as in the *Déjeuner*) refusing to depict depth convincingly, calls attention to the limits of the canvas by truncating extended forms by the framing edge, and underscores the rectangular shape of the picture support by aligning with it, more or less conspicuously, various elements within the painting. (The notions of emphasis and assertion are important here. David and Ingres rely on "rectilinear" composition far more than Manet, and some of Ingres' forms have as little modeling as Manet's. But David and Ingres are not concerned to emphasize the rectangularity or the flatness of the canvas, but rather make use of these to insure the stability of their compositions and the rightness of their drawing.)

No wonder Manet's art has always been open to contradictory interpretations: the contradictions reside in the conflict between his ambitions and his actual situation. (What one takes to be the salient features of his situation is open to argument; an uncharacteristically subtle Marxist could, I think, make a good case for focusing on the economic and political situation in France after 1848. In this note, however, I have stressed Manet's recognition of consciousness as a problem for art, as well as the estranging quality of his own consciousness of

himself.) Manet's art represents the last attempt in Western painting to achieve a full equivalent to the great realistic painting of the past, an attempt which led, in quick inexorable steps, to the founding of modernism through the emphasis on pictorial qualities and problems in their own right. This is why Manet was so easily thrown off stride by the advent of Impressionism around 1870, because his pictorial and formal innovations of the preceding decade had not been made for their own sakes, but in the service of a phenomenology that had already been worked out in philosophy, and had been objectified in some poetry (e.g., William Blake), but which had not yet made itself felt in the visual arts. It was only at the end of his life that Manet at last succeeded in using what he had learned from Impressionism to objectify his own much more profound phenomenology, in the *Bar aux Folies-Bergère.* I intend to deal with all this elsewhere as soon as possible. [Needless to say, this account of Manet's art now seems to me both simplistic and bizarre: I'm thinking of the insistence on Manet's "post-Kantianism," the remarks about the estranging quality of self-awareness (hardly a Kantian trope), the concept of "merely a painting" (as opposed to what?), the distinction I draw between Manet's emphasis on flatness and rectilinearity versus David's and Ingres's use of these, the parallel with Blake. For my current views, see Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 186os* (Chicago, 1996).—*M. F., 1996*]

5. Hilton Kramer, "A Critic on the Side of History: Notes of Clement Greenberg," *Arts Magazine* 37 (Oct. 1961): 62.

6. Ibid.

7. See Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York, 1959), pp. 117–276, for a discussion of Wölfflin's methodology.

8. This is dangerously oversimplified. I am convinced that something of the sort did in fact occur, and that it makes sense to speak of painting itself having become increasingly self-aware, both formally and historically, during the past century or more. But a lot of careful work would be required to give this notion the substance it requires. Moreover, the notion that there are problems "intrinsic" to the art of painting is, so far as I can see, the most important question begged in this essay. It has to do with the concept of a "medium," and is one of the points philosophy and art criticism might discuss most fruitfully, if a dialogue between them could be established. Similarly, an examination of the "grammar" (in the sense Ludwig Wittgenstein gives to this word in the *Philosophical Investigations*) of a family of concepts essential to this essay—problem, solution, advance, logic, validity—would be more than welcome.

9. There are, however, major differences between Wölfflin's and Greenberg's basic assumptions. For example, Wölfflin believed the progression of styles (e.g., from plastic-linear to painterly) to be irreversible, to happen always in that order. This gives his writings a predictive, law-seeking aspect which is absent from Greenberg's.

10. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Berlin, 1923). I have read the French translation, *Histoire et conscience de classe* (Paris, 1960).

11. Perhaps the most important among these is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les Aventures de la dialectique* (Paris, 1955). English translation, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston, Ill., 1973).

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence," in *Signes* (Paris, 1960), p.90. [A translation, *Signs,* was published in Evanston, Ill., in 1964, but my references are to the French edition and the translations are my own.—*M. F., 1996*]

13. Stuart Hampshire, "Logic and Appreciation," in *Aesthetics and Language,* ed. William Elton (Oxford, 1954), pp. 162–63.

14. Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in *Aesthetics Today,* ed. Morris Philipson (New York, 1961), pp. 84–85.

15. It is, however, far from clear whether or not such basic formal distinctions finally amount to something equivalent to the traditional concept of style. Here is Schapiro's formulation of the latter:

> Style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of a group are visible. It is also a vehicle of expression within the group, communicating and fixing certain values or religious, social, and moral life through the emotional suggestiveness of forms. It is, besides, a common ground against which innovations and the individuality of particular works may be measured. ("Style," p. 81)

Schapiro's definition seems to imply a much greater degree of stability of forms and form relationships than modernist painting, especially during the past two decades, has tended to exhibit. In light of modernist painting's drive to transform and renew itself through radical criticism of its own achievements, this is hardly surprising. But it means that the notions of innovation and individuality have themselves become problematic. The question raised by a putative advance in modernist painting is not the degree of its variation from a relatively unchanging common ground, but the much more difficult question of its legitimacy or validity. This is not an argument to the effect that the term "style" ought to be avoided in discussions of modernist painting. But is does suggest that the relation of the traditional concept of style to modernist painting—both to its development considered as a whole and to individual moments in that development—is far from simple, and that the task of defining that relation will not be easy.

16. See Clement Greenberg, "Post Painterly Abstraction," *Art International* 8 (summer 1964): 63–65. This was first published as the catalog introduction to an exhibition of the same name assembled by Greenberg and shown at the Los Angeles County Museum, Apr.–June 1964.

17. See Clement Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," *Encounter* 19 (Dec. 1962): 67–71.

18. For example, in his essay, "'American-Type' Painting," Greenberg remarks on what seems to him the close visual relationship between Pollock's all-over paintings and Analytical Cubism. "I do not think it exaggerated to say that Pollock's 1946–50 manner really took up Analytical Cubism from the point at which Picasso and Braque had left it when, in their collages of 1912 and 1913, they drew back from the utter abstractness for which Analytical Cubism seemed headed" (*Art and Culture,* p. 218.) One is always ill at ease disagreeing with

Greenberg on visual grounds; however, I cannot help but see Pollock's allover paintings of these years in radically different terms.

19. At this point in the original text, I referred to another Kandinsky, *Yellow-Red-Blue* (1925).—*M. F., 1996*

20. Obviously I was guessing when I wrote this. The catalogue raisonné gives the medium as "oil on cut-out paper mounted on canvas" (Francis Valentine O'Connor and Eugene Victor Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawing, and Other Works,* 4 vols. (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1978), 4:104.—*M. F., 1996*

21. In *The Blue Book* Wittgenstein writes, "We don't say that the man who tells us he feels the visual image two inches behind the bridge of his nose is telling a lie or talking nonsense. But we say that we don't understand the meaning of such a phrase. It combines well-known words but combines then in a way we don't yet understand. The grammar of this phrase has yet to be explained to us" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* [Oxford, 1960] p. 10; quoted by Stanley Cavell in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York, 1969), p. 54. Does this hold for my statement that "the figure created by removing part of the painted field . . . seems to lie somewhere within our own eyes"? Or can the description of *Cut-Out* given in the text, together with the discussion of formal issues at stake in Pollock's work during the period 1947–50, count as an explanation of its "grammar"?

22. See Greenberg, "Post Painterly Abstraction," p. 64.

23. Ibid., p. 63.

24. Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* 6 (Oct. 25, 1962): 29.

25. Ibid.

26. These remarks lean heavily on Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris, 1945), in particular the chapter "Le Sentir." An English translation, *Phenomenology of Perception,* was published in London in 1962.

27. In the original essay I used the term "bands" instead of "zips," Newman's term for the thin vertical elements in his paintings.—*M. F., 1996*

28. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International* 4 (May 25, 1960): 26–29.

29. Pursuing it further would mean trying to come to grips with some of the implications for esthetics in Wittgenstein's later writings, in particular the *Philosophical Investigations.* See in this connection Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," originally in *Philosophy in America,* a volume of essays edited by Max Black (Ithaca, N.Y., 1965), and more conveniently in *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp. 73–96.

30. Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," p. 28. See also Lawrence Alloway, "Notes on Morris Louis," in the catalog for the exhibition *Morris Louis, 1912–1962: Memorial Exhibition: Paintings from 1954–1960* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1963, no page numbers.

31. This was said in conversation.

32. Originally I described the purple paintings as magenta, but was rightly

criticized for it by William S. Rubin in *Frank Stella* (New York, 1975), p. 154 n. 82. Oddly, I thought that Stella himself called them that; but as Rubin states that the color purple "was consciously chosen [by Stella] from the range of six primaries and secondaries, the methodically limited color scheme Stella used through that date," I must have been mistaken.—*M. F., 1996*

33. Merleau-Ponty, "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence," p. 90.
34. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," p. 30.
35. Ibid.
36. Merleau-Ponty, "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence," p. 71.

PART THREE:

1962–64

Anthony Caro

THE PURPOSE of this introduction is to put forward a way of looking at Anthony Caro's sculptures that I hope will prove useful to those meeting his work for the first time. (See figs. 32–34, pl. 13.) Let me begin as directly as I can, with the following analogy:

I want to suggest that our situation, or predicament, in the face of the present exhibition is roughly analogous to that of a small child, at most on the verge of speech, in the company of adults conversing among themselves. It is often clear enough, in such circumstances, that the child grasps something of what is going on around it—much as we ourselves may be moved by Caro's sculptures. Here the question arises, to what does the child respond, if it is still ignorant of the meaning of individual words? And the answer must be, to the abstract configurations in time made by the spoken words as they are joined to one another, and to the gestures, both of voice and body, that accompany, or better still, inhabit them. To the child the language he hears spoken around him is both *abstract* and *gestural:* here is the crux and the high-water mark of our analogy. Whatever eloquence, whatever capacity to move or excite him, or merely to command his attention, the language may possess resides solely in its character as configuration. But at this point our analogy starts to break down.

There are two important and obvious differences between our situation and the child's. The first is that we, the spectators, command a language and are at home in its conventions. The second is that

This is the introduction to a catalog accompanying the exhibition *Anthony Caro: Sculpture 1960–1963,* held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in September and October 1963; the catalog is unpaginated. The essay was also published in *Art International* 7 (Sept. 25, 1963): 68–72.

Caro's sculptures are not compound signs in a conventional language, put together from individually meaningful elements according to known rules of grammar. They are, as has been implied, abstract and gestural. But their abstractness does not derive from a want of linguistic resource on our part. Rather, it is probably the most important objective fact about the works themselves, and has its roots in the artist's awareness of and way of looking at what has happened to sculpture since Auguste Rodin. I shall return to this later on.

As for the gestures bodied forth in Caro's sculptures, it is impossible to say whether they precede language and its related social institutions or whether they crown them. In one sense (the sense of our analogy) their trajectories have their place of origin in a realm of experience that is both primitive and prelingual; but there is another, no less important sense in which they presuppose all the conventions we have, all the civilization of which we are the increasingly uneasy masters. This is true in regard to those of language itself: it was the labor of the late French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to show how the institution of language arises out of primitive gesture; and it is the special excruciation of the American critic R. P. Blackmur to demonstrate, in masterpieces of sympathetic analysis, how language that has been wrought to its uttermost in great poetry may reach the condition of consummate gesture.

It is, further, important to recognize that gestures such as those bodied forth in Caro's art cry out for something more than the appreciation of their merely formal properties, or, rather, that the cry is *in us* for something more and that works of art such as Caro's sculptures answer, or at least cry back to it. Stuart Hampshire has written, "We have less and less need of poetry, fiction, and the visual arts for the exploration of social realities, as we have more and more need of them for questioning the advertised claims of those realities upon us, for indirectly revealing disavowed forms of experience that are in conflict with social roles."[1] An art which presupposes all the conventions we have may not only crown, but may—however indirectly—challenge or undermine the validity of those conventions. In the face of the increasing specialization of interests, standardization of behavior, and banalization of emotion imposed on us by modern civilization, Hampshire argues, it is nothing less than "a condition of sanity that the unsocialized levels of the mind should be given some ordered, concrete embodiment, and thereby made accessible to intelligence and enjoyment."

I suspect that this task came to be laid on art only fairly recently,

but this is beside the point. What matters is that there have been artists working both in representational and abstract styles who have, with varying degrees of self-awareness, taken it up. It is in this respect that Caro has more in common with certain representational artists of the past—for example, Rodin—than he has with some of the finest abstract painters working now in the United States, whose paintings are more concerned with the solution of formal problems than with the making of expressive gestures. Rainer Maria Rilke's vast admiration for Rodin was largely founded on his recognition of the sculptor's power to make gestures that broke not only with the conventions of his art but with deeper, and more deeply imprisoning, conventions of thought and feeling. Hence Rilke's characterization of one of Rodin's sculptures, perhaps the striding *Saint John,* as "that walking figure, which stands like a new word for the action of walking in the vocabulary of [the spectator's] feeling."[2] And it is in the first part of his *Rodin-Book* that Rilke writes, in connection with one of the master's armless figures, "One recalls Duse, how in one of D'Annunzio's plays, when left bitterly alone, she attempts to give an armless embrace, to hold without hands. This scene, in which her body learns a caress far beyond its natural scope, belongs to the unforgettable moments of her acting. It conveyed the impression that arms were a superfluous adornment, something for the rich and self-indulgent, something which those in the pursuit of poverty could easily cast aside. She looked in that moment not like a person lacking something important; but rather like someone who has given away his cup so that he may drink from the stream itself, like someone who is naked and a little helpless in his absolute nakedness."[3]

In painting and sculpture our notions of what is important and what may be cast aside have undergone radical change since Rilke wrote the above words. This has come about through developments within those arts that may be described in purely formal terms, as in Clement Greenberg's collection of seminal essays, *Art and Culture.* His argument is very roughly that, starting with Édouard Manet, there has been a strong drive within each art toward the elimination of what does not strictly belong to it. This is the burden and meaning of modernism in painting and sculpture: "to avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium. . . . The arts are to achieve concreteness, 'purity,' by acting solely in terms of their separate and irreducible selves."[4] In painting this has entailed renouncing all illusion of the third dimension and throwing emphasis instead on the flatness and

the shape of the canvas; while in sculpture it has led—by way of Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, Cubism, and the Constructivist[5] tradition sparked off by Picasso and including Jacques Lipchitz, Julio González, the earlier Alberto Giacometti, and David Smith, to name only the major figures and a long and complex chain of events described by Greenberg in his essay "The New Sculpture"—to the kind of abstract, open idiom one finds in Caro's work:

> Space is there to be shaped, divided, enclosed, but not to be filled. The new sculpture tends to abandon stone, bronze, and clay for industrial materials like iron, steel, alloys, glass, plastics, celluloid, etc., etc., which are worked with the blacksmith's, the welder's and even the carpenter's tools. Unity of material and color is no longer required, and applied color is sanctioned. The distinction between carving and modeling becomes irrelevant: a work or its parts can be cast, wrought, cut or simply put together; it is not so much sculptured as constructed, built, assembled, arranged.[6]

Greenberg maintains that this drive toward "purity" in the visual arts—called by him the "modernist 'reduction'"—stems ultimately from the positivist ethos of modern civilization, which, to his mind, demands the immediate, the concrete, and the irreducible. I am not at all convinced that this explanation is right or that it goes deep enough; but again, in the context of the present essay, this hardly matters. It remains undeniable, I think, that the visual arts have, over the past century, performed upon themselves the "modernist 'reduction'" summarized in barest outline above, and that Greenberg's writings dealing with it are by far the finest and most intelligent we have.

Caro accepts this "reduction" as a fait accompli—an acceptance that would be shallow, and unlikely to issue in major art, if it were not founded upon his sure grasp, at once intuitive and intellectual, of the internal logic of the "reduction." But unlike some of the most important paintings in America today, his sculpture is in no sense a solution to formal problems posed—with terrific urgency, it should be understood—by the art of the immediate past. It would be a mistake to think that one could adequately describe his work in formal terms, or to believe that because one had noted the formal structure of his pieces one had fully experienced them. In fact it may happen that one of Caro's pieces fails to "carry its intentions"—his phrase in an interview with Lawrence Alloway[7]—even though it is flawlessly composed. This happens when the spectator is made to feel that a

particular element in the sculpture, despite its formal integration within the whole, somehow obtrudes upon or gets in the way of the nascent emotion—when that element seems superfluous to the gesture which the work itself seeks to release. In the same interview Caro is quoted as saying, "I know that when I work on a sculpture out of doors I have room to stand back and that only encourages me to worry about the balance and that sort of thing; and that invariably ruins it. Working indoors in a restricted space and close up all the time my decisions don't bear on the thing's all-round appearance. They're not compositional decisions."[8] Similarly, when Rodin struck the staff out of the left hand of the original figure later called *The Age of Bronze* it was not a compositional decision, but it marked, as Rilke saw, the first appearance of nonconventional expressive gesture in his work.

Caro's sculptures, then, if I am right, are the result of an attempt to use the materials and techniques arrived at by the "modernist 'reduction'" as basic elements in the construction of expressive gestures. Herein lies the major difference between his art and that of Rodin: for the latter, the language of gesture was the human body; while in Caro's work gesture is evoked, and at his best liberated, through configurations made by assembling lengths of steel girder, aluminum piping, sheet steel, and sheet aluminum, and through the colors these are often painted. There is another difference worth remarking on as well. In Caro's sculptures, unlike Rodin's, the spectator is not made to feel that the artist has been closely or passionately involved with his materials. Where Rodin in his bronzes makes one aware of what must have been the texture of clay between his powerful fingers, and in his marbles alerts one to the subtlest nuances of light and surface which that material could be made to yield, in Caro's sculptures one's attention is made to bear only upon the gesture itself. Everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at—except the color—is in its syntax. That this is not the case with regard to the bronze figures sculpted by him up until his brief American visit in the autumn of 1959 makes his subsequent achievement all the more remarkable. It is as if in his first abstract sculptures Caro deliberately rejected as beside the point—or worse, as a potential distraction—the kind of involvement with materials one finds in his early pieces, and chose instead to work *through,* not *in,* his means, as through a resistant medium.

As for Caro's color, it too does not come easily to him. Nevertheless, it is the natural concomitant of his aspirations toward openness

and weightlessness—modalities which are of no special value in their own right, but which alone make possible the construction of expressive gestures that are not simply "abstracted from" those of figurative art. Here I want to point out a relation, which is also a distinction, between his early figurative works and the later abstract ones: in the early sculptures an almost Impressionist handling of surface tends to compromise, if not actually to dissolve, the mass of the figure; while the later works aspire toward a more fundamental mode of opticality—one which does not emphasize the texture, hence the substance, of surfaces, but which attempts to divest substance itself of tactile associations. There is precedent for these ambitions in the work of David Smith, as well as in Constructivist sculpture in general. But even more important to Caro, I feel, have been the paintings of contemporary Americans such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and, most of all, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. Louis and Noland, for example, obtain sheerly optical images by staining plastic paint into unsized canvas. This has the result of identifying the bright color with its ground, of weaving paint and canvas into the same optical fabric. In their work—which incidentally deserves to be much better known in England—it is the paint whose substance is destroyed, largely through the agency of color; while in much of Caro's sculpture color is used to help render substance itself—and what could be more substantial than his massive girders?—mostly optical.

I want to stress again that, considered solely in its own right, such opticality is not necessarily desirable. It becomes a desideratum of great importance for Caro because it makes possible the construction of a kind of gesture—founded on achieved weightlessness—which figurative art can no more than gesture *toward*. But it is crucial to observe that the opticality of Caro's sculpture is, at bottom, an illusion. Whereas in painting the "modernist 'reduction'" has thrown emphasis upon the flatness and shape of the picture surface, it has left sculpture as three-dimensional as it was before. This additional dimension of physical existence is vitally important—not because it allows sculpture to continue to suggest recognizable images, or gives it a larger realm of merely formal possibilities—but because the three-dimensionality of sculpture corresponds to the phenomenological framework in which we exist, move, perceive, experience, and communicate with others. The corporeality of sculpture, even at its most abstract, and our own corporeality are the same. Modernist sculpture—but not modernist painting—can create configurations and liberate gestures which, in their fundamental physicality, are

analogous to those on which all language, all expression are ultimately founded—and which, in their illusive opticality, may overcome the customary limitations inflicted upon physical gesture by gravity.

The potential for expression in such an art is clearly immense. It is also largely unrealized: within the past decades there have been no more than two sculptors whose achievements, at their best, seem to me major—David Smith and Anthony Caro. It is remarkable—but irrelevant, really, except as an indication of his intelligence and the force of his passion—that Caro's entire abstract oeuvre is the result of less than four years' work. The work itself, however, is more remarkable than its biography. I don't think that an introductory essay is the proper place to attempt an assessment of individual pieces, and I hope that such an attempt will not be missed. What I have tried to do, as I said at the outset, is put forward a way of looking at Caro's sculptures, because it would be tragic if, though exhibited, they were not *seen;* but the task and the responsibility of seeing belong to the spectator alone and ought not to be alienated by him or preempted by others.

Let me close, then, with a few general remarks. Caro's sculptures are bitten both by their knowledge of the beauty of the human body—which they cannot demonstrate directly—and by intimations of those cataclysmic gestures made, in the throes of love or grief or self-hate, by the naked spirit. For all their abstraction one can imagine a gifted dancer dancing Caro's sculptures. Merleau-Ponty, in a splendid phrase, wrote that what replaces the object in nonrepresentational art is "the allusive logic of the perceived world."[9] In Caro's most successful sculptures one discovers the allusive syntax of our own purest and most passionate gestures used to construct gestures even more pure and anonymous and passionate—and armed, besides, with what one hopes it still makes sense to speak of in our time as the durability of art.

NOTES

1. Stuart Hampshire, "A Ruinous Conflict," in *Modern Writers and Other Essays* (New York, 1970), p. 196.

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Rodin-Book: Second Part (1907)," in *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose,* trans. G. Craig Houston (New York, 1978), p. 135.

3. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Rodin-Book: First Part (1903)," in *Where Silence Reigns,* p. 104.

4. Clement Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), p. 139.

5. I would have done better to say "constructionist" in the sense that Greenberg speaks of "the new construction-sculpture" (ibid., p. 142).—*M. F., 1996*

6. Ibid., p. 142.

7. In *Gazette*, no. 1 (1961).

8. Ibid.

9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," in *Signes* (Paris, 196•), p. 71.

Frank Stella

FRANK STELLA's paintings arise out of an unprecedented awareness of their perimeters as well as out of the painter's conviction of just how relevant this awareness is to the contemporary situation in New York. (See figs. 22–25.) The grounds on which his conviction rests are, ultimately, not beyond question; but one must recognize that to challenge them necessarily entails challenging an implicit interpretation of the entire dialectic of modernist painting from Manet to the present. This is what Stella's paintings are "about," and unless this is seen there is at least one important sense in which the paintings have not been seen at all.

Roughly, what Stella has done is to extend the painter's domain of self-awareness, and hence of decision and control, from the flat picture surface to the boundary of the canvas. This was true even in the earliest, black paintings, where the different right-angled configurations of stripes amounted to variations within the relatively unchanging rectangle of the canvas. In the aluminum and then the copper paintings that followed Stella's logic grew more and more tough-minded: the paintings came to be generated in toto, as it were, by the different shapes of the framing edges, and variation occurred only within the series as a whole rather than within a particular shape.

One result of this development was that the thing-nature of the paintings came to be emphasized, bringing them close to the orbit of Constructivism. The progression of paint colors—from black to

From the catalog for the exhibition *Toward a New Abstraction* at the Jewish Museum, New York, May 19–Sept. 15, 1963.

aluminum to copper—in the first three series further reinforced such an interpretation. It is only in his most recent paintings employing a full spectrum of bright colors and in their monochrome equivalents that Stella, perhaps under the impact of recent work by Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, has chosen to question certain of the initial premises of his art. For example, the avoidance of any pictorial organization or handling of paint that might possibly be read as yielding a Cubist space is a less pressing matter now than it was five years ago, when the black paintings were first conceived. At that time value differences among the stripes within a single painting were, given Stella's formal ambitions, unthinkable, whereas in his recent work Stella has demonstrated (to himself as well as to the spectator) that his kind of self-consciousness about the framing edge is in fact compatible with the use of bright colors and even of value differences in monochrome.

It is important to remark that this last is in large measure a statement about what has happened to "advanced" sensibility over the past five years, as a result of paintings made and shown during that period. Hence the noninevitability of our acceptance in the long run of what may seem at the time of its appearance an "advance" upon what has gone before, and hence also the nonfinality of any formulation in words of either a broad stylistic dialectic or a particular formal problem. In general one may say that an advance in painting is never forced on us as an advance in science is, relatively speaking. Rather, the ultimate criterion of the legitimacy of a putative advance is its fecundity: whether in fact it proves to have been the road to the future. In Stella's case it is too soon to tell.

New York Letter: Oldenburg, Chamberlain

THE WORK of Claes Oldenburg, whose hallucinatory, prosaic environment threatens to overflow the Green Gallery this month, seems to exist merely or chiefly in order to pose questions of a conceptual nature. Everything depends on what we make of it, on the conceptual framework that we, looking at it, bring to bear. What makes criticism difficult is that Oldenburg seems to be embarked on at least three related projects at the same time. The first has to do with making works of art out of everyday objects, either by fiat or imitation, in the imperious manner of Marcel Duchamp. This is not to say that Oldenburg is concerned with the Surrealist opposition of signs to things signified, of intellectual categories to protean reality, or, as he puts it, illusion to reality. In fact, Oldenburg's work suffers next to Duchamp's, say, from the lack of just such firm philosophical purpose: if there is an intellectual principle common to his giant, stuffed-sailcloth hamburger, stuffed calendar, outsized trousers, plaster of Paris fried eggs, and plaster cigarettes in a real ashtray, I haven't found it. And I can't shake the conviction that work like Oldenburg's either has to have such a principle or else be put down as mostly or wholly arbitrary and subjective.

It is here that Oldenburg's second project comes into play, as if to compensate for his philosophical slackness and redeem his work from subjectivity by the sociological or, rather, the archetypal significance of the objects for imitation, presentation, fetishization, and hyperbole. They are all common items and so share the trivial passion of the completely mundane. But what is probably more important,

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they are for the most part distinctively American, which I assume is meant to rescue them from merely *personal* subjectivity. This is the familiar melodrama of one kind of American artist, whose naive esthetic founds itself on the conviction that if only he can involve himself with America profoundly enough the objects he will cathect onto can't fail to have archetypal force and significance. There isn't space to discuss whether in general such aspirations inevitably doom works of art to parochial success at best—though it is hardly surprising that *Paterson* goes unread in England. But I will add that nothing of Oldenburg's forced me to ignore how shaky the thought behind his pieces was, and, often, how slapdash their execution.

Finally, there is in much American painting by young artists today clandestine or open rebellion against the living edge of that dialectic that seems to have governed the recent development of their art—almost a nostalgia for the good old days of drip and drag and Cubist space. This is evident, I think, in the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, and I query whether it isn't to be found everywhere in Oldenburg's environment as well, which might account for some of the slapdash painting mentioned above. Moreover, aren't the calendars strikingly like stuffed versions of Johns's number paintings, and don't the Popsicles, for example, owe something to Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly at the same time? But if this is the case, it only serves to add a third kind of sentimentality to the two already cited.

At Castelli's a casual but impressive group show comes to focus on John Chamberlain's large sculpture in welded automobile metal, *Miss Lucy Pink* (1962; fig. 67). Within the past few years Chamberlain has made himself one of the best sculptors working anywhere in the world and it is only a matter of time before this becomes a commonplace, if it isn't one already. In *Miss Lucy Pink,* a standing figure whose dimensions are 45 by 50 by 40 inches, it is fascinating to watch how Chamberlain articulates a subtle, changing volume that seems almost to breathe, the equilibrium between the curve and buckle of his materials and the space they enclose is so perfect. Then too the sculpture is pierced undramatically in a few places, and this leads to a sense of the space within it circulating effortlessly across its surface also: as if the distinction between inside and outside were not much more useful than in talking about a Klein bottle. Moreover, for all the rather Cubistic adjustment of parts to each other, the piece radiates the kind of quietness only completely achieved things can afford. And all this is to say nothing of its color, a subtle and moving play of commercial roses and pinks whose intensities and connotations are in complete harmony with the formal character of the work.

New York Letter: Louis, Chamberlain and Stella, Indiana

It is especially shocking when a man dies at the height of his powers. The current show of eight splendid paintings by Morris Louis at the André Emmerich Gallery, put together by him shortly before his death on September 7, leaves one with no doubt that this was the case. Louis was only forty-nine when he died, and had been working in his characteristic manner of staining raw canvas with transparent veils or belts of color for no more than ten years. He had not begun to exhaust the possibilities of his means.

In all the paintings currently on show Louis ran his paint in long parallel belts [or stripes—*M. F., 1996*] of brilliant color. He often allowed the belts to overlap slightly, yielding an effect as of bright silks superimposed, but his control over his medium was such that he could lay the belts alongside each other so that they touched along their entire length but nowhere overlapped (as in *Hot Half* [1962; pl. 6]). In five of the eight paintings the belts hang vertically, ending in cusp shapes several inches above the lower edge of the canvas, while in the remaining three they run diagonally and tend not to show their ends. And in a number of paintings a gap of raw canvas is left in the pattern of belts.

My favorite painting among these is the one called *Equator* (1962), in which a broad series of belts runs from upper left to lower right. Reading across—that is, from bottom to top—the individual belts are red, ocher, orange, green, red, red orange, brown, gold, raw canvas, yellow, blue black, light green, and green. The order of the colors reveals Louis's tendency to lay close values of warm hues against

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each other, maybe punctuating them by one belt (often green) from the other half of the spectrum. All the belts run off the canvas at both sides, and the raw canvas gap—which in the vertical paintings seems a kind of background (in spite of how closely Louis's technique identifies color with ground)—is here coerced into acting as a colored belt. Most important, the diagonal bias gives the painting as a whole a kind of strength and dynamism which the vertical-belt paintings choose to forego. The direction of the diagonal plays a part in this: it tends to thrust the beholder's gaze down toward the lower right, forcing him to fight his way across in order to read the colors in sequence. Finally, by laying belts of gold and yellow to either side of the canvas gap, the raw canvas is made to work not only as a color but, quasi-illusionistically, as the brightest highlight on a tubular form—at least it does so for me. Of all the paintings on show, *Equator* seems most to combine the sheer colorism that has always distinguished Louis's mature work with an almost plastic strength that one might have thought his means precluded.

It is, I think, this strength, possessed to a slightly lesser degree by the two other diagonal paintings, that marks Louis's greatest single advance over his previous work—though I had better add that I have seen only reproductions from his last show. Writing about Louis in this magazine three years ago, Clement Greenberg observed: "The suppression of the difference between painted and unpainted surfaces causes pictorial space to leak through—or rather, to seem about to leak through—the framing edges of the picture into the space beyond them."[1] This has, for me, been a source of uneasiness before Louis's veil paintings and, even more, before the vertical-belt paintings now at Emmerich's. Even in the diagonally organized canvases one isn't made to feel that *just this* and no other relation of the diagonal to the framing edge is intrinsic to them, but some such approximate relation between paint and framing edge is more nearly intrinsic to them than in Louis's previous work. Perhaps this was a direction he would have chosen to explore had he not died so young.

Maybe before long some enterprising museum will take a respite from trying to entice the figure back into painting long enough to stage a full retrospective of Louis's work. Until then one can have only a dim sense of his stature and of the loss to American painting which his death represents.

AT CASTELLI'S this month two large pieces of sculpture by John Chamberlain and four paintings by Frank Stella make

a compelling two-man show. Both the paintings and the sculptures are in black and white, a restriction which mostly serves to throw their respective strengths into sharpest focus. Apart from this initial accord they would seem to have nothing in common—nothing, that is, except their uncommon excellence. I wrote about Chamberlain's *Miss Lucy Pink* (1962) last month in terms of how it articulated a volume and of how at the same time the space it enclosed was made to flow across its changing surface. The pieces now at Castelli's are after something else. Their effects are of mass rather than of volume, and they are far more dynamic than the earlier work. Where *Miss Lucy Pink* stood in complete repose while suave volumes circulated within her and across her surfaces, the present sculptures are at once more massive and in the grip of far more violent forces that keep the space they enclose pent up in them. In the large white *Uncle Bob* (1962), for example, an immense torsion threatens to decapitate its upper section; but this is fought against by the masterful handling of broad, dented, undulating expanses of white metal in the lower section, into which the torsion is made to dissipate itself. The effect is one of triumphant mass attained through the articulation of a surface, and the sculpture has a kind of essentialized *contrapposto* that looks back to Renaissance and Baroque forebears; or rather, it simply has such forebears and doesn't bother to look back. It is, I think, quite simply a monumental work, probably the best by Chamberlain I've seen yet.

The second sculpture, *Baby Jane* (1962), is perhaps less successful because of a section of twisted steel sheeting that sweeps back (or reaches out) like drapery whipped by a sea wind. Again, the articulation of broad surfaces is magnificent, and I don't want to minimize the piece's impact. But I'm bothered by the raggedness of the "drapery," which seems to make the kind of concession to contemporary notions of what sculpture in scrap metal should look like that *Baby Jane* makes nowhere else—and by the possibility of reading this section in a quasi-literal way. But these are qualms about one small section of one piece. The present exhibition reinforces my conviction that Chamberlain is one of the two finest sculptors working in America today [along with David Smith—*M. F., 1996*], and that it is only a matter of time before this is generally recognized.

The four paintings by Frank Stella take up, deliberately and with the rigorous conceptual grasp one has come to expect from him, a number of elements that he had, until now, chosen to eschew, within the overall syntax of a style that founded itself partly upon the es-

chewal of just those elements. The effect is not one of détente—there is nothing wistful about these paintings—but of the willed exploitation of certain ideas as if in an attempt to exhaust them for good at one go. From the start (the first large black paintings in the Museum of Modern Art's *Sixteen Americans* exhibition) Stella's work has contained an implicit rejection both of tonality and of Cubist space. The development of his stripe paintings—from black through aluminum to copper paint and shaped canvases that determine the stripe pattern—represented the pursuit of an esthetic that owed its basic aspiration to Constructivism: to make a painting that looks like a thing, in which the thing-nature of the gestalt (involving the pattern, shape of canvas, and handling of paint) is deliberately emphasized.[2] But the thinglike gestalt is, in turn, made with paint, and from the start also the painterly nature of Stella's talent has shown through, both in the flat brushing of the stripes (where the talent seeks to efface itself) and even more in the thin areas of raw canvas between the stripes, where the stripe edges have come to bite into the canvas more sharply in every show. At any rate, the current paintings take up the previously rejected elements of tonality and Cubist space and carry them, by dint of a logic characteristic of Stella's work, to the verge of illusionism.

Two of the paintings, *Sharpeville* (fig. 25) and *Cato Manor* (both 1962), can be described in terms of expanding squares, sixteen in all, the last of which is flush with the canvas edges, or else in terms of stripes making fifteen concentric circuits of a square canvas with a small square in the center. Each circuit is one of six tones from white to black, and the progression from one to another is always gradual—in *Sharpeville* (reading from edge to center) from white to black to white to black, and in *Cato Manor* from black to white to black to white. It is an idea which could have been sentimental if it were not handled with such rigorous logic, if the application of paint were less expert, and if the paintings that resulted were less effective. They hover, flickering, moving the eye constantly from the edge to the center and back again. Their play of tones is evocative of the full spectrum ranged in an infinite depth, yet at the same time the stripes assert their essential nature as flat tracks of paint on raw canvas.

Line Up and *Maze* (both 1962) are likewise tonal, but in these Stella works with the maze idea he has used hitherto (so far as I know) only in small paintings. One "enters" these at the top right and travels down a vertical white stripe along the right-hand edge, then goes on reading clockwise along a squared spiral toward the center. The

stripes darken a tone at each corner until they reach black, at which point they start again at white. The sole difference between the two paintings is that the first goes from white to black in nine tones, and the second in six. In order to go from one tone to another at the corners, there are two diagonals of raw canvas the width of the thin areas between the stripes, one of which (running from lower left to upper right) is broken at the middle because of the spiral nature of the design. The result is that the paintings can also be read as four isosceles triangles not quite meeting at a point in the center of the canvas; they seem continually to overlap one another at different points, depending on the respective tonalities of the triangles at that particular point: the same triangle seems to lie under and over another triangle depending on the particular point of contact between them one looks at—which is the Cubist illusionism mentioned earlier, carried to a remarkable extreme.

AFTER LOOKING at fourteen paintings by Robert Indiana at the Stable Gallery it is hard to hold back a few general remarks about the style called "sign painting," insofar as it is exemplified by his work. First, it seems clear that sign painting is chiefly a pretext for getting the artist to the point of actually applying paint to canvas. That such a pretext should be needed is one indication of crisis in American painting today. Second, whether it is regarded as having its source in archetypal American experience or in the experience of one man, the pretext is not only literary but sentimental. Third, the paintings that most succeed do so in the same terms and by the same lights as paintings that are devoid of sign imagery. But they can never be as good as a good non-sign-painting because they will always contain material extrinsic to the problems of painting that has been brought in partly as a solution to, or way of getting around, those same problems. And fourth, a rough rule of thumb for sign painting would seem to be, the better the sign, the worse the painting.

One reason for this last point is obvious: the better the sign, the more the painting is subordinated to the verbal element and the more that element comes to stand for the painting—as in *Eat* and *Die* (both 1962). Paintings such as these could work only if the words could be bled dry, if they could be deprived of all their force as bearers of meaning; but this is an impossible aspiration, and instead they wreck the paintings by dominating them. A second reason is less obvious and has more to do with Indiana's particular strength as a painter. The better the sign, the greater, in general, the difference

in tonality between the message and its ground (again, as in *Eat* and *Die,* which consist of black and orange red letters respectively on white grounds); while Indiana's characteristic strength—when he chooses to exercise it—seems to be the ability to work in broad areas of close-valued, high-keyed color, as in the best paintings in the show, *The Calumet* (1961) and *The Year of Meteors* (1962). In fact, these large canvases no longer function as signs at all; the lettering is relatively unimportant and one has to make a certain effort to read it. A third large painting, *Loftiest Trucks* (1961), fails badly because Indiana is at pains—inexplicably—to separate the areas of color (red, blue, and green) from each other by the bands of white which contain the lettering. *The Year of Meteors* is the finest single painting in the show, I think. The number of elements—two circles, two superimposed squares forty-five degrees out of phase, and two colors (blue and green)—is reduced to something near an absolute minimum, and the handling of paint is of high quality throughout. Compared to it *The Calumet* seems overcomplicated, full of too many gradations of red and orange, and besides, is inconsistent in its handling of paint (in the watery lettering especially). The general impression I get from Indiana's work is of a debilitating reluctance simply to let shapes and colors work in their own right, perhaps based on an intuition that his aren't interesting enough, most of the time, to sustain close attention. Moreover, I would argue that the sign-nature of Indiana's art has tended to obscure the true nature of his gifts even from him.

NOTES

1. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International* 4 (May 25, 1960): 28.

2. Needless to say, this sentence reflects an imperfect grasp of the esthetics of Constructivism.—*M. F., 1996*

New York Letter: Warhol

OF ALL the painters working today in the service (or thrall) of a popular iconography, Andy Warhol is probably the most single-minded and the most spectacular. His current show at the Stable Gallery appears to have been done in a combination paint and silk-screen technique; I'm not sure about this, but it seems as if he laid down areas of bright color first, then printed the silk-screen pattern in black over them, and finally painted in certain details. The technical result is brilliant, and there are passages of fine, sharp painting as well, though in this latter respect Warhol is inconsistent; he can handle paint well but it is not his chief, nor perhaps even a major concern, and he is capable of showing things that are quite badly painted for the sake of the images they embody. And in fact the success of individual paintings depends only partly (though possibly more than Warhol might like) on the quality of the paint handling. It has even more to do with the choice of subject matter, with the particular image selected for reproduction—which lays him open to the danger of an evanescence he can do nothing about. An art like Warhol's is necessarily parasitic upon the myths of its time, and indirectly therefore upon the machinery of fame and publicity that markets those myths; and it is not at all unlikely that the myths that move us will be unintelligible (or at best starkly dated) to generations that follow. This is said not to denigrate Warhol's work but to characterize the risks it runs—and, I admit, to register an advance protest against the advent of a generation that will not be as moved by Warhol's beautiful, vulgar, heartbreaking icons of Marilyn Monroe as I am.

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These, I think, are the most successful pieces in the show, far more successful than, for example, the comparable heads of Troy Donahue—because the fact remains that Marilyn is one of the overriding myths of our time while Donahue is not, and there is a consequent element of subjectivity that enters into the choice of the latter and mars the effect. (Epic poets and pop artists have to work the mythic material as it is given: their art is necessarily impersonal, and there is barely any room for personal predilection.) Warhol's large canvas of Elvis Presley heads falls somewhere between the other two.

Another painting I thought especially successful was the large matchbook cover reading "Drink Coca-Cola"; though I thought the even larger canvas with rows of Coke bottles rather cluttered and fussy and without the clarity of the matchbook, in which Warhol's handling of paint is at its sharpest and his eye for effective design at its most telling. At his strongest—I take this to be in the Marilyn Monroe paintings—Warhol has a painterly competence, a sure instinct for vulgarity (as in his choice of colors), and a feeling for what is truly human and pathetic in one of the exemplary myths of our time that I for one find moving; but I am not at all sure that even the best of Warhol's work can much outlast the journalism on which it is forced to depend.

New York Letter: Johns

WITHIN A short space of years Jasper Johns has put together one of the most handsome, intelligent, and amusing oeuvres in recent painting. One upshot of its intelligence, though, is the impossibility of writing about a show such as the one now at Castelli's, comprised of paintings made during the past two years, without trying to place it in the context of his work as a whole. This in turn involves one in speculations and even psychologizings of dubious value, but the alternative is journalism and the work itself demands something more.

In a recent article in this magazine, "After Abstract Expressionism," Clement Greenberg discussed Johns's achievement with the subtlety and intelligence characteristic of his criticism. After considering the Californians Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bischoff, Greenberg wrote:

> Jasper Johns, however, should not be classed with them, even though, strictly speaking, he too is a representational artist. His case is another exemplary one, for he brings de Kooning's influence to a head by suspending it clearly, as it were, between abstraction and representation. The motifs of Johns's paintings, as William Rubin pointed out in these pages a few years ago, are always two-dimensional to start with, being taken from a repertory of man-made signs and images not too different from the one on which Picasso and Braque drew for the stenciled and affixed elements of their 1911–1913 Cubism. Unlike the two Cubist masters, Johns is interested in the literary irony that results from *representing* flat and artificial configurations which in actuality can

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> only be *reproduced;* nonetheless, the abiding interest of his art, as distinguished from its journalistic one, lies largely in the area of the formal or plastic. Just as the vivid possibility of deep space in photographs of signs or house-fronts, or in Harnett's and Peto's paintings of pin-up boards, sets off the inherent flatness of the objects shown, so the painterly paintedness of a Johns picture sets off, and is set off by, the flatness of his number, letter, target, flag and map images. . . . The original flatness of the canvas, with a few outlines sketched on it, is shown as sufficing to represent adequately all that a picture by Johns really does represent. The paint surface itself, with its de Kooningesque play of lights and darks, is shown, on the other hand, as being completely superfluous to this end. Everything that usually serves representation and illusion is left to serve nothing but itself, that is abstraction; while everything that usually serves the abstract or decorative—flatness, bare outlines, all-over or symmetrical design—is put to the service of representation. And the more explicit this contradiction is made, the more effective in every sense the picture tends to be.[1]

Now there are a number of questions I would like to raise about this interpretation. To begin with, in Johns's early paintings (the first targets, flags, and numbers) the most relevant influences in point of *touch*—to my eye, at any rate—appear to be perhaps Jack Tworkov and almost certainly Philip Guston rather than de Kooning. Right from the start there is a resolute smallness and fussiness about Johns's brushwork that declares, within a more general accord of idiom, its opposition to de Kooning's, though there is something of a rapprochement on this score in the later work. This is not to minimize the importance of de Kooning to Johns's development. But I want to argue that this derives chiefly from a formal problem inherent in Abstract Expressionist practice but raised most forcibly in de Kooning's work: namely, given one's predilection for "painterly" brushwork, how to organize the surface of the canvas so as not to yield a Cubist space. The crucial element according to this account is the character of the brushwork, whether the individual strokes run into and over one another, on however small a scale. It is more or less irrelevant whether such brushstrokes exhibit value contrasts as well, though if they do—as Greenberg points out—gradations of light and dark like those of conventional shading result. The point here is that the character of the brushwork alone is sufficient to raise the formal problem in quite crushing form, and I tend to see Johns's early paintings as an attempt to solve this problem by wedding a Guston-type handling of paint to organizational schemata whose ex-

plicit two-dimensionality is intended to preclude reading the brushwork in terms of Cubist space.

Moreover, this attempt at a solution is straightforward and without irony of any kind. The fact that a large portion of the early paintings are monochromatic and without value contrast supports this interpretation, since, as Greenberg makes plain, the formal irony that he finds at the heart of Johns's work arises from the combining of two-dimensional schemata with a "de Kooningesque play of lights and darks." But in these paintings—which are, I feel, among the very finest Johns has done—the painter tends either to eschew value contrast almost entirely or to reproduce the original colors of the sign, as in the red, white, and blue American flag paintings. And neither of these approaches gives rise to the contradiction Greenberg discusses.

There is, however, another contradiction (one already hinted at) inherent in Johns's work from the beginning. It derives from the fact that the character of his brushwork alone is sufficient to imply a Cubist space—an implication which the sign character of his organizing motifs is at pains to deny. An artist with Johns's critical powers could not but be aware, sooner or later, that his putative solution was no solution of all, but rather a yoking of incompatibles. And it is from this moment of awareness on that he heightens the fundamental contradiction by reinforcing the plastic implications of his brushwork with value contrasts, thereby generating the contradiction that Greenberg has acutely characterized. It is from this moment also that his work begins to exhibit the literary irony from which the early paintings were largely free, and to mock, not in venom but in loving sadness, the mannerisms of Abstract Expressionism.

From being an attempt to solve a formal problem inherent in Abstract Expressionism, Johns's art becomes an exploiting, heightening, and showing off of the problem itself. Similarly, Italian Mannerist architects deliberately accentuated the ambiguities and begged questions inherent in the great achievements of the High Renaissance; but it was not until the generation of Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Francesco Borromini that those ambiguities and begged questions could be tackled directly. There is an added element of pathos in Johns's situation, in that the historical moment to which his style belongs is past, and in effect was past by the time he came on the scene. Already Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still had pointed the way past the de Kooning problem, which had either wrecked or hung up a number of painters during the early 1950s. But it is just this depth of commitment to a manner of working that

seems—by a process suggestive of Hegel's dialectic in its very imperiousness—to have been superseded, that puts Johns head and shoulders above merely clever manipulators of received contradictions such as Jim Dine. And it is this historical factor also that makes Johns's achievement more significant than that of *trompe l'oeil* painters such as William Harnett.

Johns's current show everywhere reveals, by handling of paint and deliberate irony, the pathos I have just referred to. In three of the paintings—*Diver* (fig. 68), *Passage,* and *Out the Window II* (all 1962)—there is a stick or wooden ruler attached at one end by a screw to the canvas so that it can pivot around. Paint is caked on its undersurface, and underneath it, on the canvas itself, corresponding exactly to the arc the stick or ruler would describe, is a broad disk or disk segment of smeared paint. The whole arrangement is clearly meant as a mechanical, ironic paradigm of de Kooning's dragging brush and smeared paint texture. In most of the paintings there is also that semiliterary playing with the conceptual, meaning-bearing nature of signs—as opposed to the exploitation of their formal character in the early work—which looks back rather casually toward Dada, Surrealism, and the kind of phenomenological awareness that inhabits Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée,* for example. An instance of this occurs in the far right-hand panel of *Diver,* where the stenciled words "RED," "YELLOW," and "BLUE" occur ("YELLOW" in fact runs off the framing edge midway through the second "L," introducing an ambiguity of expectation) in a context meant to exploit their denotative ambiguity, as follows: the word "BLUE" is lettered in blue; the word "YELLOW" in red over a broad yellow area; and the word "RED" in blue alongside a bright slash of red paint. The basic trouble with this sort of playing around is that it is old hat. Unless the painter is discovering new conceptual ambiguities he condemns himself and his work to the task of mere exemplification of an already articulated, and philosophically superseded, state of awareness. Where Johns's earlier exploitation of the formal character of signs was strikingly original, his later exploration of their conceptual ambiguities is witty but nothing more, though even here his concentration on signs that have to do with the elements of painting is a manifestation of his seriousness, compared with painters like Dine and Larry Rivers.

One of the paintings on show, a large *Map* (1962–63) of the United States mostly in grays, is a fine example of the kind of painting Greenberg describes as characteristic of Johns's best work. Most of the others are looser affairs, organized not by a single governing

two-dimensional motif but rather composed in more traditional Abstract Expressionist terms, which would seem to represent the artist's determination to work in a consciously *retardataire* manner, and to accept both the constricting of ambition and the loss of historical importance consequent upon such a decision. In light of all this it is hardly any wonder that Johns lavishes a somewhat heavy irony on the mannerisms of Abstract Expressionism. My own feelings about the paintings themselves are mixed. On the one hand, there is the pleasure they give through their beautiful handling of paint and consummate taste; on the other, there are the, to me, cheapening ironies, together with the decision (as it were, part of the content of every painting) to ignore certain probably insoluble formal problems. This is surely one of the handsomest and most intelligent shows in New York this season. But the paintings are undercut by an awareness of their relation to a particular historical state of affairs, and one's own doubts about the relevance of such an awareness to final judgments of quality chiefly serves to complicate things still further.

NOTES

1. Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Art International* 6 (Oct. 25, 1962): 26–27.

New York Letter: Hofmann

THE TWO finest shows in New York this month are those of Jules Olitski at Poindexter and Hans Hofmann at Kootz. Olitski's is discussed at length elsewhere in this issue by Barbara Rose, and I mention it here chiefly because, considered together, these two exhibitions demonstrate the overwhelming impact sheer color can have on contemporary sensibility. In Olitski's case the intensity and broad expanse of his colored areas force us to ignore the somewhat contrived or "arty" character of the spaces between them. The fields of color themselves are so saturated and so well painted, with only the most necessary and discreet internal inflections, that it is virtually impossible to register their limits as contours. Hofmann's intentions, if I read them right, are characteristically more concerned with the posing and solving of a particular problem. In many of the canvases in his current show it is as if the painter set out to determine just how large a tract of painting rejected by contemporary sensibility as weak or "corny" might be redeemed, and perhaps even given new usefulness, by dint of sheer color.

For example, in the extremely fine *Memoria in Aeternum* (1962; fig. 69), dedicated to Arthur Carles, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Bradley Walker Tomlin, and Franz Kline, the background consists of a surprisingly warm grayish brown which is comprised of streaks of more intense colors: yellow, red, and blue in particular. It is, I think, the kind of passage that a beginner might regard as beautiful but more sophisticated taste would be repelled by. Upon this Hofmann

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has placed two sharply cut rectangles of bright, thick paint: the smaller one, on the left, is bright yellow; the other, larger but placed slightly lower on the right, is red brown. Both of these are warm, autonomous colors, and the drama of the painting arises out of Hofmann's efforts to involve them with one another and with the background. Between them, flooding down through the center of the background, is a forceful streak of blue—itself a cold color but in this context vibrant with energy. To the left of and above the yellow rectangle are streaks of matching yellow that flare into resonant life and make the background seem an inseparable ambience of the rectangle. Above the yellow rectangle there is also a deep pulse of dark red which, with the blue, curiously becomes the most passionate note in the painting. At the right above the red brown rectangle is a streak of yellow that answers the yellows at the left. The end result is that the background and rectangles are integrated on the strength of color alone; not only is the "corny" painting of the background redeemed and made acceptable, the eye is wakened to recognize it as in fact quite beautiful. In other words, through Hofmann's immense self-awareness, of which the problem-solving aspect of his art is only one manifestation, both the painting and the perceiving eye recover a kind of naïveté that one might have thought was lost for good. (The concern for wholly self-aware naïveté relates Hofmann to Paul Klee. But Hofmann aspires to redeem certain paint qualities as such, rather than, as in Klee's case, particular modes of visualizing, conceptualizing, and representing.)

Moreover, the coloristic strength of the painting enables Hofmann to indulge in tactile effects that would be the ruin of most other painters: for example, he cannot resist emphasizing the slab nature of the rectangles by scoring the red brown paint with small horizontal incisions that evoke, in the context of the painting's dedication, the image of a cenotaph. Finally, the background stops short of the top of the canvas. This is important both because it asserts Hofmann's awareness of what I have called the background as a skin of paint that, although it evokes the feel of atmosphere and deep space, nevertheless remains not very far behind the picture plane, and because it gives the painting necessary space to breathe. The edging at the top is ragged and full of splashes, drips, and casual brushwork: here too Hofmann's sense of color enables him to get away with expressing an impatience with contrivance that is itself perhaps a bit contrived. I might as well add that although discussion of this sort is necessary, it is of course inadequate to an experience of the paintings

in question, whose power, delicacy, and subtle intelligence it cannot begin to suggest.

In large measure Hofmann's self-awareness is an awareness of the achievements and implications of Cubism and of more or less Cubist painting among the first American Abstract Expressionists. But there is in Hofmann's best work a loosening of Cubist logic—for the most part in the name of color—that is at once exploratory and liberating. As Clement Greenberg has written, "The moments of bis best pictures are precisely those in which his painterly gift, which is both pre- and post-Cubist, has freest rein and in which Cubism acts, not to control, but only to inform and imply, as an awareness of style but not as style itself."[1] The force of this remark may be seen at once if one compares Hofmann's *Memoria in Aeternum* or *Magnum Opus* (1962) with much of Vasily Kandinsky's work of the 1920s and 1930s. Time and again Kandinsky places certain shapes or forms in an atmosphere, but because those paintings are not informed by an awareness of Cubism, which is to say by an awareness of the picture plane as painted surface, they fail to come off. In Hofmann one senses an analogous desire; only instead of solid forms in an atmosphere Hofmann wants to place sharply cut colored areas in a colored ambience which, though often painted in a different manner from the areas, is yet essential to the full working of the painting. The differences between the Hofmanns and the Kandinskys are also the grounds for the superiority of the former: their primacy of color and their manifest awareness of Cubism.

NOTES

1. Clement Greenberg, "Hans Hofmann," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), p. 192.

New York Letter: Noland, Thiebaud

SOMETIMES ONE wants to pay at least lip service to the stock procedures and rhetoric of art writing. For example, nothing could be clearer than that the selection of recent paintings by Kenneth Noland now on display at the André Emmerich Gallery is one of the finest and most important shows to go up in New York this year, and I do not want to leave anyone in doubt as to my feelings on that score. At the same time, however, I am convinced that the critic has a more serious and potentially valuable job of work to do than simply to praise painters and paintings he admires with all the superlatives at his command. Rather, he must try to tackle the issues raised by the works themselves with an intelligence, sensitivity, and seriousness as nearly as possible equal to the artist's own. This is, in the case of the finest art, perhaps an impossible ideal to realize in practice. But perhaps it isn't, and at any rate is the only ideal worth striving for.

Putting aside for the moment the matter of color, it seems to me that the overriding merit of Noland's new paintings is that they confront one of the most crucial formal problems thrown up by the development of advanced painting over the past decade: that of finding a self-aware and strictly logical relation between the painted image and the framing edge. I don't believe that the paintings succeed, finally, in providing a generalizable solution, or in being themselves wholly satisfactory solutions, to this problem; but this is not meant as disparagement of what Noland has achieved. On the contrary, it is especially impressive that he has come to recognize and chosen to

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tackle the problem at all, since it was one that his manner of working had until now allowed him to bypass. Moreover, I suspect that in his new paintings Noland has acknowledged its relevance to the contemporary situation in terms that cannot hereafter be ignored. And this alone increases the likelihood of its solution in the near future.

The first awareness of the problem, or the creation of it, occurs in Barnett Newman's great paintings made during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1958 Newman wrote: "I realize that my paintings have no link with, nor any basis in, the art of World War I with its principles of geometry that tie it into the nineteenth century. To reject cubism or purism, whether it is Picasso's or Mondrian's, only to end up with the collage scheme of free-associated forms, whether it is Miró's or Malevich's, is to be caught in the same geometric trap. Only an art free from any kind of the geometry principles of World War I, only an art of no geometry, can be a new beginning."[1] Similarly, Clement Greenberg has written (in "'American-Type' Painting") that Newman's straight lines "do not echo those of the frame, but parody it. Newman's picture becomes all frame in itself. . . . What is destroyed is the Cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine; with Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and *makes* the picture, instead of being merely *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."[2]

There are two points, one general and the other more specific, that must be made here. The first is that without disputing Greenberg's characterization of Newman's art or Newman's own declaration of intentions, it is nevertheless arguable that from the works alone it is not immediately clear that Newman's lines repeat the framing edge rather than give rise to a set of geometrical relationships. Because of course they do give rise to such relationships. One needs either Newman's credo, Greenberg's explanation, or something of the kind to cue one in: as Ludwig Wittgenstein remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations,* conversation on esthetic matters often involves statements of the kind, "Look at it this way."[3] And once we do, the difference between Newman's art and Mondrian's or Malevich's or Miró's becomes evident. But it would be a mistake to think that Newman's great canvases bear their formal meanings in an entirely manifest and self-evident fashion. Rather, as Wittgenstein goes on to make clear, the concept of seeing works of art one way rather than another is deeply problematic, and in the case of what he calls "aspects of

organization" (surely what we are dealing with here) rests on our ability to visualize this transformation. "The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique."[4] Second, the fact remains that in Newman's work there is still an important zone of decision left that smacks of geometrical thinking: where exactly to place the vertical line or lines. And until this decision itself is somehow determined by a relatively manifest internal logic generated by the painter's awareness of the framing edge, an element of geometry persists, small but for the time being irreducible.

By and large the problem of the framing edge was ignored during the rest of the 1950s as "advanced" painters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Noland himself concerned themselves chiefly with the exploration of stain and spill techniques. This led to canvases that were more breathtakingly "open" than even Jackson Pollock's or Newman's; and in the work of Louis and Noland, both of whom chose early on to work in a plastic-base medium, it led to unprecedentedly intense color as well. Under the impact of the new "openness" and effects of color at their command, it was easy for Louis and Noland to put the consciousness of the framing edge out of mind—though it was always more nearly present in Noland's mind than in Louis's. The latter chose, for the most part, simply to ignore it; and his last paintings, shown at Emmerich's in the fall of 1962, revealed a kind of placement of the colored belts (especially diagonal ones) within the framing edge that marked a return to the geometry deplored by Newman. Noland on the other hand has always, so far as I know, centered his images. By not allowing the painted image to intersect with the framing edge the problem was, if not solved, at least not flouted. Rather, it was got round. It is important to add that these remarks are not meant to run down Louis's magnificent canvases but only to suggest that, at a given moment, the same paintings may be "advanced" in regard to a particular problem or development and neutral or even *retardataire* in regard to others.

There are two other painters whose work must be discussed in this connection before dealing with Noland's new paintings. The first is Ellsworth Kelly, whose position has always been hard to specify. To my mind, Kelly's work is remarkable for having incarnated and kept alive a profound sensitivity to the interaction of precisely contoured, brightly colored shapes. Kelly himself is not concerned with the framing edge and has always been content to work within it in a manner that owes much to Cubism. But I want to argue that the kind of sensibility that inhabits his best paintings may be seen as relevant to prob-

lems—including this one—other than those with which he has chosen to grapple. In fact, the only painter in whose work one finds an explicit and entirely self-aware confrontation of the problem is Frank Stella. This was true even in his early black paintings, where the different right-angled configurations of stripes amounted to variations within the relatively unchanging rectangle of the canvas. In his aluminum and then his copper paintings that followed, Stella's logic grew more and more tough minded: the paintings came to be generated in toto, as it were, by the different shapes of the framing edges, and variation occurred only within the series as a whole rather than within a particular shape. The crucial thing to observe is that the solution embodied in Stella's lucid art partly founds itself upon the eschewal of color and upon the deliberate emphasizing of the painting's nature as a material object. His own recent paintings in which the stripes are painted in bright colors make this point rather unmistakably: the mode of surface organization and the relationships that hold among the colors are antithetical to one another. And this suggests that Stella's solution, though entirely self-consistent in his copper paintings, cannot be married with bright color except through deliberate antithesis.

This brings us at last to Noland's new paintings at Emmerich's. I wrote at the outset that the problem they seemed to be tackling is that of finding a self-aware and strictly logical relation between image and framing edge. That isn't all, though. The new paintings set out to achieve such a relation in combination with the intense color got by spilling or staining plastic-base paint into raw canvas. That is, in his current show Noland seems to be trying to bring together the new color developed over the past decade by Louis, Jules Olitski, and himself with the particular awareness of the framing edge that began with Newman and that one finds most highly articulated in the work of Stella.

Most of the paintings in the current show consist of two or three inverted chevrons stained different colors and longitudinally centered. No raw canvas is left showing between the different chevrons, all of which intersect the framing edge at their extremities though not necessarily at their points. Finally, the areas cut off by the chevrons at the top center and in the two lower corners are with one exception painted in. The colors are subdued, and most of the combinations are quite beautiful. But in light of Noland's previous work one's attention is drawn from the start to the mode of organization itself and to what it implies. First, Noland has chosen to relinquish, for the

time being anyway, the extremely powerful optical effects he could achieve through floating concentric circles and cat's-eye motifs in bright colors on raw canvas. Second, the new paintings seem to want to emphasize their own flatness, to call attention to the fact that they exist on, or are stained into, a flat surface. This is opposed to the sense one often had of Noland's centered motifs hovering as if in a kind of atmosphere. And third, the paintings seem to relate, with varying degrees of success, to their framing edges.

Not surprisingly, it is this last and most important aspect of the new paintings that leads to trouble. In *Yellow Half* (1963; fig. 13), for example, the upper boundary of the bright yellow chevron runs into the upper corners of the canvas and the point made by its lower boundary intersects the framing edge at the bottom center. But there is still something at least seemingly arbitrary (and in Newman's sense "geometrical") in the placement of a red purple chevron below the yellow one, so that its point is truncated by the bottom of the canvas. It would not be more satisfactory if the second chevron were placed above the first, as occurs in several paintings (including an untitled one in mustard yellows, tans, and red orange), because it would still be placed only partly in relation to the framing edge. (In fact, I'm not entirely convinced by the way different bounding edges of the yellow intersect the canvas at its key points.) Even provisionally accepting the chevrons, however, it is hard if not impossible to see the upper center and lower corner segments as other than what is left over after chevrons are placed within a rectangular field. Or if they are to be regarded as parts of much larger chevrons the question arises why they have been cut off just so by the framing edge. These questions suggest that what one misses in the new paintings is the sense that a really strict internal logic is at work determining the placement of pictorial elements in relation to the framing edge. Such a logic would not have to be inspired by a greater awareness of the edge than these paintings show, and in fact it is the presence of just that awareness that makes one demand the stricter logic. I don't mean to imply that the paintings might have been strengthened by changes that are within the critic's power to propose. But it is at least possible that a wholly satisfactory integration of framing edge with pictorial motif is unattainable with the particular motif and shape of canvas that Noland in this series has tried to combine.

It is significant, I think, that the most satisfying painting on show, *Cadmium Radiance* (1963), ignores the problem of the framing edge almost entirely. In this large canvas seven wedge shapes, with wedges

of raw canvas between them, are spread out fanwise from a point just above the center of the bottom framing edge. Apart from being longitudinally centered the wedges or rays are not organized with regard to the framing edge: for example, the upper corners of the canvas fall somewhere inside a pair of orange rays rather than along their boundaries, and there is a thin wedge of raw canvas left at the bottom on both the left and the right. The two outside wedges or rays are yellow, the next two purple, the next two orange, and the one remaining is bright red. This mode of organization is much closer to Louis or to Noland's own earlier work, with its implication that the framing edge is only an arbitrary (and somehow unimportant) delimiting of what is really an infinite field or zone of radiance. The painting itself is more satisfactory because it is internally consistent whereas the chevron pictures are not. But the latter are, perhaps, more important in that they confront a problem which may very well prove crucial to modernist painting. It begins to seem as if the new vision of color brought about by Louis, Noland, and Olitski is going to have to be combined with an awareness of the framing edge through a logic as strict as Stella's but, because of the sheerly optical qualities of plastic-base paint, less mechanical. Noland's current show seems to me to represent the most important effort yet made toward such a synthesis, and it is hardly deprecatory of Noland's achievement, or of his intelligent, sensuous, beautifully painted canvases, to claim that he has not quite solved everything at one stroke.

AT THE Allan Stone Gallery Wayne Thiebaud is showing paintings of slices of cake, pie, sandwiches, whole dinners, dolls, cold cereal, flowers, cheeses, sardines in cans, shoes, a pinball machine, and an electric horse. Thiebaud paints in a bright, fatty manner that uses a deliberately flat, or combed, impasto with considerable effect. His realistic mode avoids atmosphere at all costs. The best paintings are those in which a single, standard object becomes a motif, either in isolation (I'm thinking now of a slice of pie under glass) or repeated across the width of the painting (as in *Seven Apples* [1962]). Thiebaud's characteristic mode is somewhere between representation and reproduction. This is why he is at his weakest when he tackles representation per se, as in his painting of a pinball machine or in the portrait of an electric horse called *Ride, Ride, Ride* (1962).

NOTES

1. Barnett Newman, "From *The New American Painting*," in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John O'Neill (New York, 1990), p. 179.

2. Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), pp. 226–27.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1958), p. 2•2e.

4. Ibid., p. 208e.

New York Letter: Hofmann, Davis

IT WOULD be hard to praise the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of forty paintings by Hans Hofmann too extravagantly. The paintings, dated mostly from within the past decade—though a few go back as early as 1940—have been selected with care and, equally important, hung with finesse. There is no artist whose paintings suffer as much as Hofmann's do when they are hung too close together. Even under the best of circumstances—and the present hanging creates those—the richness of his paint, the sheer gaudiness of his color, and the exuberance of his invention tend after a while to gorge the eye and lessen its responsiveness. (This is not a criticism.) But when a number of his paintings are presented in close opposition to one another, as in his last, splendid show at Kootz, for example, the result is murderous. What William Seitz has done is something that sounds, on paper, almost impossible: he has found a way of hanging individual paintings so that they may be studied in relative isolation from others in their immediate neighborhood, and yet be compared with other paintings without the spectator having to change his position. Seitz has done this by composing in terms of vistas through channels of space to other paintings at walls at varying distances from a given position, a solution as unobtrusive as it is satisfying.

The paintings themselves reveal Hofmann's prodigious variety as a painter, based on his overriding gift as a colorist. It is this gift which enables Hofmann to bring off paintings which no other painter I

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can think of could have saved from foundering in their own copious impasto or from being wrecked by areas painted in the most willfully sentimental fashion imaginable. (I tried to analyze Hofmann's fine *Memoria in Aeternum* from this point of view in a discussion of his last show at Kootz published in this space in April 1963 [reprinted in this book as "New York Letter: Hofmann"].) In fact Hofmann's tendency to court disaster and then try to pull the painting out of the fire gives his work a collective character that can perhaps be termed didactic. But there is an immense difference between Hofmann's didacticism and that of the academic painter. Hofmann's paintings take on their didactic, or exemplary, value precisely because they are almost always at bottom spontaneous and exploratory, and both the artists of our time and we ourselves are in serious need of paradigms of spontaneity that never descend into mere impulsiveness and subjectivity—the meaningless twitchings of Rosenbergian man. It is as if the didacticism, the willed attempt to solve a particular problem brought about in the initial stages of painting a particular work, and the spontaneity with which the finished work is shot through are each other's necessary conditions. This is true partly because the problems with which Hofmann chooses to engage are never generalizable: they arise within the act of painting a single canvas, and this means that if and when Hofmann succeeds in solving them the solutions are not generalizable beyond that canvas. Hence the perennial tentativeness of Hofmann's work—a characteristic which itself gathers didactic or exemplary force in light of the arbitrariness with which many painters within the past decade have fastened on a single motif and worked it to death. (Though there have been compelling formal reasons behind the choice by a few painters of certain motifs.) In a time when some of the most genuinely impressive achievements in painting—the work of Barnett Newman, for example—have been based upon a kind of formal absolutism, Hofmann has helped to keep alive a more esthetically anarchic set of attitudes toward his art. This is not to denigrate the achievements of absolutists such as Newman: their work at its most completely realized has an authority and a quality of inevitability which Hofmann's cannot, and perhaps does not, aspire to. What is distinctive, and profoundly heartening, about recent American painting are just these contrary, but not contradictory, propensities: on the one hand, toward a spontaneity informed by the most acute formal self-awareness; and on the other, toward a formal absolutism founded on a personal analysis of what is taken to be the situation of "advanced" painting at a given moment. It is between

these mutually fructifying extremes that the valid and important painting of our time lies.

I WISH I could admire Gene Davis's paintings at the Poindexter more than I do. Most of them consist of a large canvas divided into something like forty or fifty vertical stripes roughly two inches wide. Each stripe is painted a single flat, ungraded color. Davis tends to start out at the left-hand side of the canvas with a certain sequence of two or three fairly dull colors—light blue, dark blue, olive, mauve, and so on—which he repeats, often with internal variation, as he moves across the canvas—until, somewhere near the right-hand edge, he tries to startle us by breaking the sequence with a few stripes of bright, contrasting colors. Sometimes we meet jarring colors earlier on, nearer the left-hand edge, but either way the principle governing the work is the same.

The faults inherent in such a procedure are obvious: to begin with, the stripes have no structural function within the painting. This comes out when one compares Davis's paintings with Frank Stella's, for example, in which the stripes, generated by the framing edge, *are* the structure. In Davis's paintings, however, there is no internal logic governing the number or width of the stripes; the painting simply goes on until the artist decides it or he has had enough and breaks it off. Nor are the stripes elements in a primarily visual whole: it seems to me that we are encouraged to read them one at a time, or in small clutches, rather than to take them all in at a single glance—there are too many for that in any case. What matters to Davis is the fact of repetition followed by the fact of surprise; the precise nature of both is less important to him, and once we come feel this it is hard to give our full attention to the particular colors he uses or to the details of his execution. (This last is probably just as well: in most of the paintings on exhibition Davis's control of his medium is not as tight as it should be and in places the painting is slipshod.) Finally, there is a dependence in these canvases upon other orders of experience than painting, such as reading and music. But the dependence is not a profound or even an interesting one; on the contrary, what Davis is after is roughly equivalent to the repetition of two or three notes followed by the (virtually random) banging of a dissonant chord.

Three other paintings consist of five or six long canvases roughly a foot or foot and a half in height hung one on top of the other, with perhaps a few inches between them. In two of these several canvases

are left blank, while on the painted canvases Davis plays with the notion of a visual counterpart to musical counterpoint by means of his colored stripes. The purely notational, rather than structural or visual, function of the stripes could not be clearer, and it is hard to know how to read the blank canvases other than as the equivalent of completely silent musical voices.

New York Letter: Kelly, Poons

THE CURRENT show of recent work by Ellsworth Kelly at the Betty Parsons Gallery is the strongest by him I have ever seen. It is also hard to characterize. To begin with, it has none of the expressive force and openness to experience of, say, the Guggenheim's recent exhibition of paintings by the late Morris Louis. But it would be wrong to think that Kelly's paintings somehow arose out of a relative absence of feeling. Rather, this absence of feeling is something Kelly has had to work for; or, probably more exactly, it has come about as the result of fundamental changes Kelly has wrought upon his own art within the past few years. By far the most important of these seems to me his increasing avoidance of formal arrangements that can be read in terms of figure versus ground, which is how most if not all his prior work demanded to be seen. And this has, necessarily it would seem, entailed the virtual elimination of the biomorphic, vaguely evocative images—the "figures" just mentioned—which were the source of such emotion as one felt in Kelly's work until now. Up to the present exhibition Kelly's paintings have demonstrated his complete mastery of the tensions and ambiguities attainable between figure and ground, and image and framing edge. But there was always a sense in which that demonstration seemed, to me, the entire rationale for the paintings' existence—and this in turn seemed to imply a thinness in their conception. These were and still are qualms and reservations which I find it hard to translate into objective terms, and I am dogged by the possibility that I have simply failed to see his work as it should be seen. Be this as it may, individual

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pieces in the current show strike me as the strongest things of his I have ever seen: their force depends much less upon the balancing of separable, analyzable pictorial tensions than upon the unitary impact the new pieces make upon one.

In the paintings this impact mostly comes about, as I've already suggested, through our inability to read them simply in terms of figure versus ground. This is true in large measure even of the big red, green, and blue painting in which such a reading is still at least vestigially possible. But in the large, square *Red, Yellow, Blue* (1963) it is no longer tenable. This is a particularly informative example to look at closely, because our first impression tends to be that the painting consists of overlapping squares: first, a large blue one the size of the canvas; then a yellow one, two-thirds its size, fitted into the lower left-hand corner; and then a red one, half the size of the yellow, also fitted into the same corner. But on closer examination we come to see that the different color-areas are in fact painted on separate canvases that have then been fitted together; so that the red area is the only square canvas, and the impression that we got at first of overlapping squares was an illusion. What is striking here is the deliberateness of what Kelly has done: it is as if he has tried to lure us into the kind of reading his previous work has mostly demanded, in order to expose in the most unequivocal and dramatic fashion possible the inapplicability of such a reading to his current desires.

It is interesting, in this context, to observe that Kelly has attained a more unitary impact for his work not by blurring the distinctions already present in it but by heightening them, by strengthening the individual, self-sufficient character of *all* the elements involved. Until now, Kelly's paintings have seemed to take the limiting character of the framing edge for granted and to make whatever pictorial arrangements were necessary within it. But in the current show one has the sense of individual elements—pictorial simples—having been brought together into configurations that may or may not respect the regularity of the framing edge. And this is related in turn to what seems to me the most radical characteristic of Kelly's recent work, the nature of this bringing together: the elements are not merely overlapped, as the figure in his previous work is set on and against the flat ground, but *juxtaposed:* one is meant to feel the independent existence of them all. The work arises out of their juxtaposition, their proximity in space; and while this proximity may in some cases be extreme, as in *Red, Yellow, Blue,* in others it is only relative. This, for me, is the significance of Kelly's wall sculptures, the best

of which seem to me more successful, more completely realized and conceptually profound than either the paintings or the standing sculptures. My favorite piece in the exhibition is the wall sculpture in which a blue, roughly ellipsoid shape that bulges toward the right and is cut off at the left is attached to a rectangle behind and parallel to it and painted in the same shade of blue. (See *Blue-on-Blue* [1963; fig. 70].) The material is sheet aluminum, and the truncation of the ellipsoid coincides with the left-hand "framing edge" of the rectangle. Here the independent existence of the two elements is further emphasized by their having been painted the same color, which makes absurd any attempt to read them as figure with ground, and the lining up of the truncated edge of the ellipsoid with the edge of the vertical sheet underlines, for me, the arbitrariness of the framing edge itself and of the conventions associated with it. This is an enormously intelligent, deeply inventive exhibition; and it is further characterized by the literally flawless execution that has always distinguished Kelly's work.

AT THE Green Gallery the young painter Larry Poons knows what he wants and how to get it. My own reaction is more problematic, however. This is Poons's first show, and it is remarkable for its intelligence, certitude, and command of means. What Poons has done is carry the kind of optical flicker or beat one finds in certain Nolands with concentric circles to an extreme, through the placement of colored dots in difficult, nonperspicuous patterns on a colored field (often the complementary of the color of the dots). Under the gallery's bright lights the dots tend to flicker and jump and blink and flare until we begin to fear for our retinas if not our minds. The effect is literally irresistible—and it is this characteristic which finally seems to me to limit Poons's achievement, maybe severely. Precisely because these paintings are bound to have the same effect on all normal persons, they are much closer to those tests for color blindness in which colored dots form one number under normal vision and another number if the subject's vision is defective than they are to the optically intense stain paintings out of which they come and which they superficially resemble. Poons's work is, in this sense, literally experimental: it is an attempt to bring about a specific effect in all visually normal subjects. But its mode of address is precisely to us as subjects, not spectators. There is in Poons's canvases, therefore, an element of coercion that runs counter to art, or

at any rate to even the barest notion of individual sensibility. These are, I repeat, intelligent paintings that succeed in accomplishing what they set out to do, but it would be a pity if Poons were to rest content with repeating himself. On the strength of this show he appears to have the gifts, intelligence, and technical resources to do something finer and less coercive than the paintings in it.

New York Letter: Judd

AT THE Green Gallery, Donald Judd is showing a number of constructions made, for the most part, out of wood and metal. In all the pieces the wood is painted a bright, matte red and the metal is either left alone or painted blue (though it is possible the blue parts are plastic). As one might expect on the strength of Judd's monthly criticism in *Arts Magazine* it is an assured, intelligent show; it also provides a kind of commentary on the criticism and is doubly interesting on that account. In general I think one can say that Judd in his art writing has expressed strong suspicions that easel painting is more or less defunct and has championed artists whose paintings are on the verge of becoming objects, such as Frank Stella and Al Jensen. But what has not clearly emerged in the criticism—at least in my reading of it—is exactly how Judd means to discriminate between the objects he admires and those he does not. Most of my confusion on this point has survived my visit to the present show. On the one hand, there are several qualities it is clear enough Judd likes: overall rectilinearity, regularity of structural pulse, play between positive and negative spaces, and structural mirroring of all kinds. But on the other hand it is not at all clear *why* Judd values those qualities; that is, I find myself unable to discover a convincing internal rationale for the particular decisions of style and structure Judd has made. Such judgments as I might make about individual pieces are therefore halting; but it seems to me that, on the whole, the free-standing pieces are stronger than the wall pieces, in which I sense that an

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uneasy compromise has been made with certain norms of painting. For example, I experience their rectilinearity not as a particular decision on Judd's part but rather as a retention of the most conventional shape of picture support. This is Judd's first one-man show as well as one of the best on view in New York this month.

New York Letter: De Kooning Drawings

IN THE show of drawings by Willem de Kooning at the Allan Stone Gallery there are at least two that are nothing less than small masterpieces: an untitled drawing from 1949–50 and another called *Boudoir* which also dates from 1949. The late 1940s marked, in most respects, the high point of de Kooning's tremendous achievement—as they did of Jackson Pollock's—and this appears to have been nowhere more true than in his drawings. It is, I think, instructive to compare the function of line in a drawing such as the first of those mentioned above with the way line works in such great Pollocks of the same approximate moment as *Number 1, 1949* (1949) and *Lavender Mist* (1950). Earlier, in discussing Pollock's mature style, I argued that the allover line in his most characteristic and successful paintings of this moment does not delimit or evoke shapes or structure the space through which it moves, which is to say that it cannot be read in terms of figuration, however abstract.[1] The thousands of tiny areas into which his line seems to subdivide the canvas are neither positive nor negative in character: they work neither as figure nor as ground, and the paintings come to possess an overriding and profoundly original opticality largely because of this. In the de Kooning drawing in question line has a radically different function and character. In contrast to the "transparency" of Pollock's line, de Kooning's is "opaque": at every point in its trajectory it is tense and vibrant with the effort to delimit shapes and to define planes. This emphasis upon planes, together with the nature of the shapes themselves, attests to de Kooning's prior involvement with

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Synthetic Cubism. But there is this immense difference between de Kooning's drawing of 1949 and the masterpieces of Synthetic Cubism, in which one finds a carefully manipulated ambiguity between figure and ground: in the de Kooning almost every shape defined by his lucid, tensile line *is positive in character.* There is no ambiguity between figure and ground because there is no important part of the sheet that we are made to feel can be read as ground even for a moment. In this sense, de Kooning's line, like Pollock's, is allover. But whereas in Pollock our attention is made to bear upon the line itself, in de Kooning's best drawings of this moment virtually every square inch of the sheet is charged with the character as of a positive element of figuration; these in turn somehow intersect and interlock in a space whose shallow depth owes something to that of Synthetic Cubism, but in which an absolute lucidity, rather than a controlled ambiguity, governs the discriminations we are encouraged to make between individual forms. It seems likely that this mode of defining and relating forms must have required at least as exquisite a balance of formal and psychological factors as that which one imagines made possible Pollock's contemporary achievement, and it is no wonder that neither man could maintain this balance indefinitely. The wonder is that they achieved it at all. On the evidence of this exhibition, at any rate, de Kooning's drawing seems to have diminished in power and subtlety in the course of the 1950s, a series of nine studies of *Women* dated 1963 being, sadly, the weakest of all.

NOTES

1. My discussion of Pollock takes place earlier in this "New York Letter." I have omitted it here since it is recapitulated and developed in "Three American Painters" and summarized in "Morris Louis," both reprinted in this book. I have also rewritten the original sentence without changing its meaning.—*M. F., 1996*

New York Letter: Olitski, Jenkins, Thiebaud, Twombly

THE BEST current painting is perhaps harder to characterize than new painting, during the past hundred years, has ever been. This is the case both because of the radical emphasis placed upon color and color relationships in what amounts to virtual isolation from considerations of representation, illusionism, brushwork, and value contrast—our vocabulary is probably more inadequate to detailed appreciation of how color works than to any other aspect of painting—and because the formal terminology evolved to describe Cubist and post-Cubist painting begins here to reach the farthest limits of its usefulness. (For example, in the work of painters such as Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella, awareness of Cubism functions at most as a kind of negative check to keep them from giving in to the spatial tensions and modes of notions of Cubism itself.) It would be wrong, however, to think that the difficulty is merely one of words, and that the act of looking somehow manages to take care of itself, so to speak. If it is hard to know how to talk or write about paintings such as those currently exhibited by Jules Olitski at the Poindexter Gallery, this is a sure indication that it is also hard to know how to look at them. And it is no real solace for one's lack of certainty on this point to think that one is at least doing better than those who fail to see that Olitski is one of the finest painters working today.

Let me begin by trying to compare the best paintings in Olitski's new show with those shown at Poindexter's a year ago. Last year's paintings tended to consist of precisely contoured—and, in fact, of-

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ten artily drawn—lozenges and curved bands of color organized around a core, which might consist either of a large stained disk or an expanse of raw canvas (see fig. 18). The bands invariably intersected the framing edge, with the implication that they continued as shapes beyond the edge and that the painting as a whole represented a rectangular cut into a larger pictorial field. This impression was counteracted by the sheer intensity of the color, which in the best paintings tended, in the act of seeing, to dissolve the contours of the shapes and so both mitigate their possible artiness and make them work chiefly as zones of color on the canvas rather than as shapes running off it. This meant that there was a certain discontinuity in one's perception of these paintings: the drawing and color worked, in large measure, autonomously, and to the degree that the paintings succeeded despite the drawing, against one another; and their high-keyed color also enabled the paintings to survive a kind of structure that seemed almost self-consciously naive in its reliance on traditional modes of composition.

In the best new paintings—*Fatal Plunge Lady* (fig. 19), *Beautiful Bald Woman,* and *Half Chinese Patutsky* (all 1963)—this discontinuity of perception is replaced by a triumphant unity which, though superficially less exciting, probably represents a still higher plateau of achievement than that of a year ago. This unity is the result of several related changes:

1. Perhaps most important, the new work avoids the tense, undulating contours of the colored shapes in last year's paintings. In the canvases cited above there is in a sense no drawing at all. One no longer feels Olitski's wrist determining the contours, and there is none of the consequent artiness, or the emphasis which came to be placed on the raw canvas—for example, between colored bands—as shape in its own right. The colored areas seem to assume certain shapes as if in accordance with impersonal considerations, so that the disks of color with which Olitski still works are felt not as drawn or geometrical forms but rather as the most economical way of locating a certain quantity of color at a certain point.

2. Because drawing is eschewed, color is freed from the compulsion it labored under a year ago: to oppose and, in effect, to dissolve the drawing if the paintings were to succeed. Now color is dominant from the start, with the result that it can afford to be much lower keyed, much subtler, much more concerned with internal inflections than before. This is the main reason the new paintings are less immediately eye catching than those in last year's show.

3. Olitski has turned away from the core format as well as, by and large, from the use of colored bands that run off the framing edge. This too means that there is that much less that the color has to work against. Moreover, in paintings such as *Fatal Plunge Lady, Beautiful Bald Woman, Wet Heat Co.* (1963), *Doozhie Orgy* (1963), and *Upside Down Nude* (1963), Olitski has come up with a mode of organizing the canvas that seems to suit his particular gifts beautifully. The general format of these might be characterized as that of a heavy curtain of intense color, falling slowly from approximately the upper left portion of the canvas toward the lower right. The ponderable rate of fall is important. These are not paintings that can be seen all at once—as last year's paintings cried out to be seen—or that rely on the instantaneous impact they make on the viewer. Rather, the relations between colors, the placement of colored shapes in the lower portion of the canvas, and the amount of raw canvas left at the bottom right (in *Beautiful Bald Woman* at the bottom left) demand to apprehended in terms of an appreciation of the visual momentum gathered by the colored flood as it moves down the canvas; and I found myself seeing the paintings slowly, as if they were making themselves by a process of flooding and staining down from the top of the canvas as I looked at them. Thus, in *Beautiful Bald Woman* the three small disks of orange, green, and blue in the lower left corner seem to have been swept there by the downward flooding of the blue purple field which occupies all of the canvas except for the barest margin along the bottom left. Seen this way, there is nothing arbitrary or arty in the placement of the colored disks; in fact, they come to seem as if they have not been "placed" at all, but again, as if they have ended up where they are in accordance with impersonal considerations—in this case, chiefly the visual momentum of the descending curtain of intense color. Notions of time and momentum are also important for the appreciation of perhaps the finest painting in the show, *Fatal Plunge Lady,* in which the falling curtain starts out a kind of orange rose and inflects to orange brown along an axis roughly perpendicular to the direction of the flooding partway down. The change is both precise and intangible, as there is nothing to mark it but the change itself. (I think it can be argued that this inflection, along with others in the present show, realizes at last the coloristic implications of the vertical accents or "zips"[1] in paintings by Barnett Newman done as early as 1950: they actually *are* what Newman's accents represent schematically. Maybe this is too strong. At any rate, the color inflection in *Fatal Plunge Lady* seems to me to relate much more closely to

Newman's vertical accents than to the internal, and more traditionally painterly, variations one finds in his colored fields themselves or in the work of Mark Rothko.)

Not all the paintings in this rough format succeed, however. In *Upside Down Nude* the deep red curtain that descends from the upper left corner comes to seem not merely opaque but solid, as if it were the surface and profile of a planet seen from somewhere in space—an effect which unfortunately is intensified by the fact that the upper left corner has been brushed or rubbed over with deep blue as if to signify greater material density. In this painting the shapes and colors no longer work as strictly visual or optical presences, but instead ask to be read illusionistically, and the painting suffers as a result. *Wet Heat Co.* gets into similar trouble, again mostly at the top of the canvas, where Olitski has left a ragged margin of raw canvas showing above the orange curtain that falls toward the lower right.[2] It is not hard to see why Olitski might have done this: there is, after all, at least the possibility of a serious problem in running colored shapes off the framing edge, and by leaving bare canvas along the top, Olitski in effect declares the discontinuity of the image with what lies beyond the edge, at a place where such a declaration would be most felt. However, it also has the effect of compromising the sheerly visual momentum that the descending curtain of color builds up in *Fatal Plunge Lady* and *Beautiful Bald Woman.* Further, by having its momentum compromised in this way, the curtain tends to be read from the start as something that already has a shape instead of as something that will eventually reach or find or assume its final configuration. So that whereas in *Fatal Plunge Lady* and *Beautiful Bald Woman* the ultimate configurations of the descending floods of color seem to be the result of a balance or compromise among almost physical forces, the color curtain in *Wet Heat Co.* seems by contrast to have been shaped by hand, like the hull of a boat—a reading that the concave drawing of the right-hand contour does nothing to contradict.

Finally, it is worth remarking that Olitski's attitude toward the question of pictorial structure is highly equivocal, and that the issue of structure remains the most problematic aspect of his art. Nothing could be further from his intentions, as one grasps them in the paintings, than the explicit concern for deductive structure related to the framing edge which Barnett Newman was the first to evince and which one finds in Frank Stella's work as well as, to my mind, in Kenneth Noland's recent chevron paintings. But Olitski is not completely at ease about simply ignoring the framing edge, or treating it in a

more or less conventional manner, as if the painting were a rectangular cut into a larger visual field. His lack of ease on this score is hardly surprising: what is at stake in the work of Newman, Stella, and recent Noland is perhaps the most radical break to date with the conventions of easel painting, along with the possibility of replacing those conventions with new modes of organization and seeing—based upon an explicit recognition of the framing edge as the most important single factor in the determination of pictorial structure—which will somehow open up into a zone of freedom as large, in its own way, as that enjoyed by traditional painters during the past five centuries. However, it remains true that the problem of the framing edge is not yet one that inexorably forces itself upon painters of major ambition, and it is clear that first-rate paintings may still be made which do not explicitly attempt to come to grips with it. But there is no guarantee that this state of affairs will continue indefinitely, and in a number of paintings in his current show there is evidence that Olitski has tried to take the framing edge into account—but because his willingness to engage with the problem has remained partial and intuitive, the paintings have suffered rather than profited as a result. For example, there is his tendency, mentioned above, to leave strips or patches of raw canvas showing above the curtainlike areas in paintings such as *Wet Heat Co.* and *Doozhie Orgy,* as well as his more radical adjusting of the pictorial elements within a rectangular margin of raw canvas in *Demikovsky Green.* In that painting Olitski also fills in the lower left-hand corner with bright red so as to make a rough triangle out of it. If the painting is to succeed, it has to be possible to read that shape as an area on the canvas rather as part of a larger shape mostly off it, but the latter reading is in fact inescapable. There is also a disruptive equivocation between the way the red brown curtainlike shape at the top of the canvas has been set off from the framing edge by a margin of raw canvas, and the way the raw canvas and wine red bands below it run to the framing edge and, by implication, beyond it.

Given his at best partial engagement with the problem of the framing edge, it was almost inevitable that the strongest paintings in the current show are those in which Olitski has chosen to circumvent the problem almost entirely, as Louis mostly did, by placing colored areas on a field of raw canvas—as in *Half Chinese Patutsky*—or to cover most of the canvas, and as many as three out of four corners, with a curtain of one (perhaps inflected) color, and what looks like complete disregard for the framing edge. But this should not be taken to imply

that in paintings like *Fatal Plunge Lady* and *Beautiful Bald Woman* the pictorial structures are clear-cut and easy to characterize. On the contrary, when one confronts these canvases one becomes aware that not only is Olitski's overall attitude towards the question of structure equivocal, but also that the actual structures of these paintings are profoundly ambiguous and difficult to grasp in terms of the spatial and structural concepts available to us. For example, if one asks where the paint image seems to be located in relation to the picture plane itself, the answer is far from clear. On the one hand, the stained plastic paint becomes identified with the canvas ground, and there is no tangible brushwork to evoke illusionistic depth, however slight, by touch or value contrast. On the other hand, the pure, intense color that results from such staining evokes a new kind of space that is neither Cubist nor naively illusionistic in character: it seems to exist as an emanation from the stained color itself, and to resist definition in terms that are not strictly visual or optical. That is, it seems to be a space—if that term is still useful—in which conditions of seeing prevail rather than one in which physical events transpire. This is the space that first made its appearance in Jackson Pollock's great allover paintings of the late 1940s and is found also in the stained canvases of Louis and Noland. Moreover, the question of where exactly the painted image appears to situate itself in relation to the picture plane is not an unimportant one: it is only when it lies unequivocally upon the surface of the canvas, when there is no space at all within the painting—as in Stella's work—that the question of its relation to the framing edge becomes inescapable. The structural ambiguity of Olitski's best new paintings, then, derives in large measure from, or is made possible by, the nature of his pigment. But it is also powerfully abetted by the formats of the paintings. Descending curtains of intense hue may flood out to the framing edges of the paintings and, as mentioned above, to three out of four corners as well. But there is in this metaphor the implication that the curtain or flood begins its descent at the top framing edge, and that the other edges are reached as a result of the visual momentum gathered within the painting by the color curtain as it falls, rather than by anything transpiring off the canvas or by the kind of passive, directionless painting-in of the entire canvas behind certain main motifs as in the work of Edward Avedisian. Further, in Olitski's new paintings the flood never quite reaches the lower edge of the canvas. Even in *Beautiful Bald Woman,* the most extreme instance on view, the flood stops just short of the framing edge, as if in recognition that if that boundary were

gone past the splendid momentum built up by the flood would be dissipated immediately. In the face of this painting and of *Fatal Plunge Lady* it should not be necessary to add that the structural ambiguity I have tried to characterize is one of the most conspicuous strengths of Olitski's best new paintings, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that it seems to be an aspect of his work over which he is able to exert only intermittent mastery. Finally, one is simply grateful for the paintings that come off and for the enormous sense of possibility that even the relative failures in a show like the present one exude.

PAUL JENKINS'S present show of paintings at the Martha Jackson Gallery is the weakest by him I have ever seen. Given his stature—he is clearly a serious painter and, in the past, has sometimes been a good one—the new paintings declare their emptiness, prettiness, and lack of passion more blatantly than I would have thought possible. There is really nothing to commend them. Their use of color is souped up, metallic, and finally not truly coloristic at all; it reminds me of nothing so much as of bad color photos, in which the different tints have lost all relation to one another. The compositions are invariably arty and contrived, relying as they do upon hanging skeins of paint from the sides of the canvas to hold the images in place. When the image is isolated in the middle of a bright white field the arbitrariness of its presentation becomes even more apparent. There is also no sense whatever of scale, of a particular image demanding to be a particular size. The paint quality seems to have the worst qualities of both watercolor and color photography. In a few paintings, such as *Phenomena Reverse Spell* (1963), Jenkins seems to be making explicit reference to Louis. Whether or not this is the case, the juxtaposition underlines the emptiness of Jenkins's work. However, it is worth remarking that Jenkins's recent paintings suffer as a result of comparisons which in part at least they demand, and that at his worst he is a more interesting and challenging artist than most painters working now.

AT THE Allan Stone Gallery, Wayne Thiebaud is exhibiting recent paintings in which the human figure gets a much larger play than ever before in his work. The result is much less good than when he restricted himself to commodities, such as candied apples, seen close-up. Partly this is because Thiebaud's treatment of the human form gets sentimental in places (e.g., the feet of his women); his draftsmanship is simply not up to the job. But mostly it

is because Thiebaud's style—his color, his use of intense white lighting, his tendency to isolate forms against a white ground—was perfectly suited to the description of certain kinds of commodities. He could manage that with little or no reduction in actual scale within the compass of a small painting and the result was something close to an actual slice of cake, if not of life. His rich, creamy paint texture is much less suited to evoking flesh or clothing, and the large scale of his figure studies destroys the extremely tangible qualities his food studies possess. Instead, there is a facile illusionism, based on foreshortening, which in the context of the earlier work comes out looking tricky and shallow.

RECENT PAINTINGS by Cy Twombly at Castelli's seem to me disappointing also. They consist of nothing but cosmetically disingenuous licks and smudges of whites, pinks, and reds, bunched in meaningless clusters against a gray ground. A few drips are allowed to fall towards the bottom of the canvas, and the gray ground is divided here and there by horizontal pencil lines drawn with the help of a ruler. There are also discreet spatters and random blemishes. Twombly's work has always had its precious aspect, but now that seems to have gained the upper hand entirely. These paintings are arch, satisfied with their own cosmetic prettiness, and about as mannered as they can get.

NOTES

1. In the original review I refer to these as "stripes."—*M. F., 1996*

2. Olitski has subsequently restretched the canvas so as to remove that "margin," to the painting's advantage.—*M. F., 1996*

New York Letter: Brach, Chamberlain, Irwin

PAUL BRACH'S paintings at the Cordier-Ekstrom Gallery consist of dull, cerulean blue fields in which one or more cerulean blue circles, keyed for the most part just a bit darker than the fields, have been placed. In some canvases, though, the color of the circles or disks is exactly the same as that of the surrounding field, and we are able to distinguish them only because their confines are drawn in pencil. In others, the value difference between the circle or circles and the field varies slightly from place to place along their perimeters, so that at one point it may be slight but discrete while at another it may vanish altogether. In the catalog to last spring's exhibition at the Jewish Museum, *Toward a New Abstraction,* Leo Steinberg wrote about Brach's paintings: "They are very near invisibility. . . . Ask how much is renounced: Composition, incident, movement, color, focus, style, signature, painterliness—all drained in romantic renunciation, until even the figure-ground differential, the first and last requirement of figuration, is at the vanishing point. And there, at the threshold of visibility, your eye toils to see."[1] The comparison that inevitably suggests itself is with Ad Reinhardt—but it is a comparison that Brach's work cannot fully sustain, for the following reasons:

First, there is a richness of color in Reinhardt's work that is lacking in Brach's. Reinhardt is interested in what happens to different colors when they are brought to the same pitch of extremely dark value. Brach, on the other hand, works with minute value gradations of the same basic color: his paintings are fundamentally monochromatic. This is not necessarily damning, but I think it is partly responsible

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for the impression one gets of Brach's work being much thinner and less rich than Reinhardt's. Second, Reinhardt's paintings have always had something of the character of significant experiments within the context of artistic modernism; in fact, they were among the first paintings since Claude Monet's canvases in extremely light values to assert the importance of contrasts of color over those of value. (In this connection see Clement Greenberg's catalog introduction to the exhibition entitled *Post-Painterly Abstraction* currently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.) What Brach has done seems, in comparison, almost arbitrary and without importance to a broader context than the development of his art alone. And third, despite the fact that there are no value differences between the different rectangular zones in a Reinhardt canvas, the boundaries between the zones in fact are constant and unfluctuating. They may appear to tremble, or to dissolve and recompose themselves as we look at them, but this is merely an effect arising incidentally from the close, dark valuing of the colors. Brach, however, sometimes actually describes the dissolution of the perimeters of his circles—that is, he actually *illustrates* what in Reinhardt's work is nothing more than an incidental *effect*—and for that reason his work is sometimes tinged with sentimentality where Reinhardt's is not. Nevertheless, having said all this, it cannot be denied that Brach's work is handsome, and within the limits that the above remarks imply, successful as well. There is an integrity, a strength of purpose and a mastery of means in the present show that are both impressive and rare.

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN'S recent show of small sculptures at Castelli's was extremely disappointing. Chamberlain has always seemed to need to work on a large scale for his particular gifts to manifest themselves. His best work is plastically compelling in spite of his tendency towards artiness of detail: for example, individual ragged edges which read as bits of stylized drapery are often an embarrassment. And in general Chamberlain's sensibility is not the masculine, overpowering one his materials (and often, his mastery of those materials) might at first suggest. Rather, it is delicate, introverted, and prone to a perverse affection for a kind of finish that belies the seeming rawness of the smashed autos with which he works. In his recent show, the pieces were all small (roughly three feet in diameter, but they seemed even smaller), without plastic force or interest, and finished in high-keyed sprayed colors such as a gleaming gold that made them seem like ornaments for an immense

Christmas tree. Chamberlain ought to stay away from small sculptures. It probably reveals something about the limitations of his sizable gifts that he cannot master them, though perhaps it merely says something about the limitations inherent in his materials. In any case, Chamberlain is a far better sculptor than this show indicated and has never got the credit his best pieces deserve.

FINALLY, TWO group shows at Janis and Castelli provided little of interest apart from five paintings by the California painter Robert Irwin at Janis. Irwin paints large, even fields of a single color—yellow, orange, a kind of lavender pink—on which he then knifes two long, extremely thin horizontal lines of oil paint, also in high-valued color. My favorite was an orange canvas with two long lines of light green paint spaced rather far apart, but the other paintings were just about as impressive and it would be good to see a whole show of his work in New York soon.

NOTES

1. Leo Steinberg, "Paul Brach," in the catalog for the exhibition *Toward a New Abstraction* at the Jewish Museum, New York, May 19–Sept. 15, 1963, p. 12.

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