

FRANK STELLA AND A CRISIS OF NOTHINGNESS; A New Form of Artful Non-Art Makes A New Philosophical Statement

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FOR years people have been complaining that much modern art is about nothing. Frank Stella's new paintings at Castelli's, 4 East 77th Street, are so much about nothing they turn lack of meaning into a thesis.

They look like nothing at all—merely triangles, hexagons and rhomboids of canvas, colored a grainy purple, with concentric yellowish lines repeating these shapes inward to where a triangle, a hexagon or a rhomboid is cut out of the center of the canvas, revealing the wall on which the pictures hang. The paintings thus frame, surround and focus on — nothing, a rather obvious metaphor. They are done in a neat, clerkish sort of way.

A hypothetical mass man invited in from the street would have no difficulty ignoring them. To one aware of the dialectical footwork and history of modern esthetics, they could mean a lot. Which goes to show that modern art (in some of its forms) is a matter of a simple stimulus throwing a switch on the vast invisible superstructure of ideas the artist's ideal audience has to carry around with it. Art like Mr. Stella's is a matter of initiation, a sort of conundrum. Once you get you get something out of it.

Thus it is blankly exclusive to a degree that would be contemptuous if contempt were the aim of these works—which it isn't. Their main characteristic is total indifference. Valueless as art, they are of interest because of the slightly Oblomov awesome paradoxes they imply, paradoxes relating to a way of art and a way of individual existence. For these paintings are sophisticated refinements of the anti-art (and anti-life) trend that has manifested itself in modern art by sporadic attempts at suicide ever since Dada. Such crudities as indignation and protest—because they recognize something to protest against—are passé. Meaninglessness is an absolute, not a relationship.

Part of the paradox of these pictures is that they seem to affirm the value of art while in fact they destroy it. They have a pallid semi-iconic air, a slight visual impact, a slight easily satisfied Euclidian curiosity, like etiolated examples of the chart-painting in the galleries, of which Stella was a distinguished pioneer. These pictures purposely use a knowledge of art for a sort of selfsterilizing operation. By cutting a void into the center of each canvas, the eye's natural point of focus, they induce a sort of Pavlovian frustration.

At this stage one would be quite entitled to dismiss them as perversions of feeling, as forced emblems of an emotional neutralism. Indeed, when looked on as art, that is exactly what they

are: a perversion of the function of art by using its formal repertoire to deny the possibility of feeling.

The point is, however, that these works, like an increasing body of modern art, have ceased to have esthetic significance, but are significant as a social symptom—something that parallels the breakdown of formal criticism's capacity to deal satisfactorily with art of this nature. As a social symptom one could call these works expressions of disgust at the system that consumes them, condemnations of the people who buy them on the basis of ideas that they (the pictures) no longer support. However, to my mind, these works are expressions of a new spiritual position that is of great interest, even if (paradoxically) the art that transfers it is not. Which, by the way, would make Mr. Stella a sort of philosophical journalist expressing ideas in visual terms.

These paintings are semi-icons for a spiritual blank. They make Mr. Stella the Oblomov of art, the Cezanne of nihilism, the master of *ennui*. An excess of objectivity turns his pictures into mere objects, the artist into a conditioned reflex, transforming heaven and hell into a new sort of spiritual vacuum that is modified only by his willingness to share it. Art apparently has nowhere to go but down. What is fascinating about Mr. Stella is that, while apparently elevating its powers, he has found a way to depress it further, which is not as easy as it sounds.

Thus his new paintings are unimportant. What is important is that they announce that a new kind of human animal is around, a new response to living life—one that is anti-emotion, anti-human, anti-art (by transgressing its limits of expression or non-expression) and that is even anti-anti. His pictures illustrate a sort of existential crisis that refuses even the action—or commitment—that will reveal its condition to the self. Mr. Stella has used modern art to make the supreme nonstatement. In the midst of the confusion and inverted values of art right now, I suppose that's an achievement of a sort.