In this study [fig. 1], both center colors are precisely the same color. However, being unable to actually see this, we demonstrate clearly, with colors, that we rarely see what we see.

—Josef Albers, *Search Versus Re-Search*

*My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there…. What you see is what you see.*

—Frank Stella, in Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd”

In 1958 Frank Stella made a crude object that was tucked within a rough strip frame, an assemblage of two scraps of cardboard conspicuously nailed to four wooden boards, two of which visibly protrude beneath the cardboard (fig. 2, plate 32). Slathered in pink, red, and orange paint, the thing bears what is arguably a pictorial composition, but like its support, it seems so casually put together that we wonder whether these areas of color have not been routinely assembled rather than artfully composed. We can clearly see a seam between the two individual pieces of cardboard and in the lower, larger section, notchlike cuts in what must have originally been an ordinary box, now folded flat. Two parallel vertical folds score the surface of both pieces of cardboard, which are arranged to preserve the continuity of these lines across the gap between the pieces: this precision seems at odds with the otherwise coarse, somewhat provisional manufacture of the piece. The painted forms cover both folds and seam, uniting the surface in a makeshift, unstable manner and turning the internal edges into different species of lines.

The upper register of this assembly consists of several sketchily rendered alternating orange and pink stripes, a symmetrical arrangement that is bracketed at top and bottom by orange. Below this is a vertically oriented red rectangle that appears to rest on a pink field. Or perhaps the area is simply another flat stripe pattern, rotated ninety degrees and magnified to a larger scale: two squat, pink stripes buttressing a red one. Or does the red block carry an allusive charge, suggesting a kind of doorway that promises a space behind the pink bands that frame it?


At the base of this off-center red rectangle the horizontal stripes resume, this time with alternating bands of red and orange. The spatial ambiguities of this set of stripes echo those of the upper set. We might read the upper orange stripes as resting on top of the pink field, yet the facture of the paint—its drips and brushwork—shows that the pink is physically layered over the orange. Likewise, in the lower striped segment, the orange stripes appear to slip behind red stripes, which stand out because they are contiguous with the large block of red. Yet these orange stripes also seem to come forward by virtue of having been painted over what were once light pink bands. (To complicate matters, the horizontal pink stripes at the top are painted over red bands, and the vertical pink areas in the middle are painted over a white ground, hindering our ability to recognize that they are the same pink and prompting us to imagine earlier but not fully obliterated color relationships.) Indeed, we begin to doubt whether the orange sandwiched between the pink and red stripes is even the same color. The whole painted surface thus becomes a play of simultaneous contrast (showing the way one color will change when it abuts different colors), which works against color change caused by material overlayering—or, more simply, it is a study of the way colors interact across a surface as opposed to the way they interact in physical depth.

The lower stripe pattern rests on a thick band of pink. This pink is richer and redder than that of the pink stripes above, so much so that using pink to describe these stripes could be called into question. This pink area can be read in two ways: as a lintel resting on two posts of the same color (the assembled nature of the support reinforces this reading, with the ‘lintel’ rendered in cardboard and the ‘posts’ made of wood) or as a single inverted U-shape framing a small, boxlike compartment containing four amorphous painted forms. These ill-defined forms are nestled on a plane that physically exists behind the painted cardboard surface, on one of the wooden trusses holding the construction together: no shifting play between figure and field is imaginable here. The forms consist of four smudgy circular patches of red, pink, and orange (with some daubs of blue), and they seem to illustrate the title Stella gave the object, Them Apples. This title raises the question as crudely put as these painted “apples” themselves: “How d’ya like them apples?” Both the implied query and the four dirty smears of paint challenge the viewer to make a judgment of taste about an object so unlike one of Cézanne’s signature still lifes of apples that it throws us into a kind of epistemological crisis: Is this thing a painting or a mere thing, a work of art or a useless object? Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. As we shall see the question of whether we should understand a painting as a work of art or as an ordinary object became a central topic of art criticism in the 1960s, shortly after Them Apples was painted. Certainly, Stella’s own most famous works—his Black paintings of 1958–60 and his various Metallic series (the Aluminum and Copper paintings of 1960–61 and the Purple paintings of 1963)—seemed to address this issue: the former with their austere monochromacy and the latter with their gaudy, repellent sheen and shaped canvases (figs. 3, 4). Such works could be equally convincing as traditional paintings that contained a measure of pictorial space and as objects that obdurately existed within the literal space of their beholders alongside other non-art objects. In his study of minimalism, James Meyer characterized Stella’s practice as “schizophrenic,” one that, for the period from his Black paintings from late 1958 to the Irregular Polygons of 1966–67 (his first series to abandon the allover stripe pattern; see fig. 5), was able to straddle the increasingly opposed purposes of pictorial illusionism and sculptural literalism. These series were enlisted both by critics who preferred to see such work as the apogee of a specific modernist tradition and by a new generation of artists who sought to claim it for a burgeoning literalist practice that treated this tradition as exhausted.

Fig. 5. Frank Stella, Jill, 1959. Enamel on canvas, 7 ft. 6 3/8 in. x 6 ft. 6 3/4 in. (229.6 x 200 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1962.

Fig. 6. Frank Stella, Six Mile Bottom, 1960. Metallic paint on canvas, 9 ft. 8 in. x 5 ft. 11 1/2 in. (299 x 180 cm). Tate Gallery, London.
Michael Fried, one of Stella’s closest friends at Princeton and afterward, reflected in 1987 on the difference between his own commitment to modernist painting as a young critic and the materialist sensibility of Stella’s erstwhile studio partner, the sculptor Carl Andre: “In a sense Carl Andre and I were fighting for [Stella’s] soul, and Andre and I represented very different things…. We have to see it as a conflictual time…when different possibilities were entertained, when the same body of work was seen in different ways.”

Yet Fried himself has noted that his position and Andre’s minimalism have common roots in the modernism of Clement Greenberg—suggesting that both sides were coming from the same place but going in different directions, that this “fight” was not so clear-cut.

Stella most famously expressed his literalist sensibility in a 1964 interview conducted by Bruce Glaser that also included Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. There he said that his ambition was to “keep the paint as good as it was in the can”—“to get the paint out of the can and onto the canvas” with as little intervention and infusion as possible. He found a receptive audience in Andre, who, at his urging, began to make sculpture by presenting or arranging combinations of raw materials rather than working them into something new.

Yet however literal Stella’s presentation of paint and canvas, he never went as far as not painting—he did not tack up a blank canvas or exhibit cans of paint. As Thierry de Duve argued, Greenberg, when confronted with Stella’s Black series, was forced to consider whether a blank canvas could legitimately lay claim to being a work of art, specifically a work of art in that sense, dead-on (I don’t like the angled views, the wide-angle lens shot)—when you see the painting the way you’re supposed to see it…that little bit of depth just gives you almost a shadow or some kind of breathing around the edge that gives you all of the surface. You don’t get so much of a sense of the thing hanging on the wall.”

As for Stella’s thick stretchers, many have argued that this device makes his works more objectlike. Stella claimed, however, that he appreciated the way offsetting a canvas from the wall emphasized its surface over its mass, making the painting flatter; he even suggested an ideal viewing position to enable the beholder to better appreciate the optical effect: “When it’s set up on the wall, it seemed to us [Stella and Walter Darby Bannard], rather than become an object… it actually emphasized more of the surface quality of it…. When you look at the painting—and this is the only way I like my paintings to be looked at, really dead-on, because they’re conventional works of art in that sense, dead-on (I don’t like the angled views, the wide-angle lens shot)—when you see the painting the way you’re supposed to see it…that little bit of depth just gives you almost a shadow or some kind of breathing around the edge that gives you all of the surface. You don’t get so much of a sense of the thing hanging on the wall.”

Illusion surfaces even in the Black paintings, works that would seem to disavow it entirely, suggesting that, despite the rhetorical conflict in Stella’s work between materialism (or literalism) and pictorialism, one is latent within the other. Gottfried Boehm, relishing the Black paintings’ hybrid nature as Bild-Dinge (image-things), points out that the material facture of Stella’s brushwork, following the direction of the stripe, affects the appearance of the single color, refracting it into matte and shiny areas and thereby suggesting pictorial depth in their surfaces. This effect is reinforced by the patterned compositions, which generate the optical illusion of diagonals that run through the angles of the repeating stripes, so that in the canvases that sport a rectilinear pattern we also see chevrons, and in the diamond-patterned paintings, cruciform gridlines.

Yet this mutual imbrication of materiality and illusion was not invented with Stella’s Black paintings. It was there from the start as the linchpin of Stella’s practice in 1958, in a way that cannot be accurately characterized as schizophrenic or conflicted. With renewed attention, the 1958 works can help us reconsider Stella’s Black paintings in more nuanced terms. Shortly after painting Them Apples, before an agonistic relationship between pictorialism and literalism had been fully articulated, Stella made another cardboard-and-wood assemblage (fig. 6, plate 33). The dimensions of this untitled work are not the same as those of Them Apples, but they are close, and here we find the same materials, the same hues, the same composition, the same assembly—but not exactly the same.
On first glance, the two works appear to be mirror images. Both display a relatively top-heavy banded area of alternating colors offset by a narrower register of a similar stripe pattern below. The central areas of both have a red “door” sandwiched between two thick pink areas. The red rectangle in Them Apples drifts toward the left edge of the support and its analogue in the untitled assemblage toward the right. But this mirroring is not carried through completely: whereas the pink and orange stripes appear at the top of Them Apples and the red and orange stripes at the bottom, the reverse is true in the untitled work, suggesting a 180-degree inversion. In other respects, the two works seem to be neither inversions nor reflections of each other but carbon copies: the untitled piece flaunts the same vertical cardboard folds slightly disrupting the smooth application of paint across the surface, and it has a cluster of dried drips in roughly the same spot in the upper striped register on the far right. Yet certain differences also work against our initial recognition of reflection, inversion, and copy. In Them Apples, for example, the parallel vertical folds in the cardboard divide the composition into roughly equal thirds, and the right edge of the rectangle is almost aligned with the right fold; in the untitled work, the same near-alignment occurs, but the folds and thus the rectangle have shifted to the right. These “found” folds in the recycled cardboard undermine the reflection between the two compositions and undo their mutual symmetry in the central section, where it otherwise seems strongest.

Until now, the only commentator to have invited a comparison between these two works is Stella’s college friend Sidney Guberman in his 1995 biography of the artist: “In lectures at Pratt in January 1960, Stella explained the scheme to achieve the appearance of flatness. The first part was symmetry, but that was not enough to achieve what he was after. If, for example, he were to paint Them Apples, twice identically, side by side, each one being the mirror image of the other, he would have had symmetry but not the flatness because there would remain the problem of the illusion of depth generated by all of the variations in color, value, and paint thickness. To achieve flatness use one color, one value, and apply the paint evenly over the entire surface. Hand in hand with symmetry would be the creation of paintings of parallel black stripes, all stripes basically the same in width and paint density.”

Rather than follow Guberman and see this pair as a failed expression of the “flatness” that Stella’s Black paintings would later achieve, I believe that these two works exhibit the beginnings of a corrective repetitiveness that underlies his later preference for working in series: what is being “corrected” is the relationship between the image and its material density, specifically as it was manifested in the early work of Jasper Johns. In their proximity to ordinary things, these works were both attractive to and traumatic for Stella. Although Stella’s 1958 paintings and constructions exhibit a clear debt to Johns, over the course of that year Stella took a number of corrective measures against his own works’ flirtation with their status as things. This is evident in the most striking difference between Them Apples and its untitled counterpart: the “apples” in their physical niche have disappeared in the untitled assemblage, where the wooden support is hidden from view by an additional piece of cardboard, painted a uniform orange. I suspect that Stella is resisting, even hiding, the assemblage mode that is so striking in Them Apples. How he does so, and what this means for his subsequent work and its contentious critical reception, lies at the heart of the story of Stella’s work in 1958.

I am proposing that Them Apples precedes the untitled work though in fact the exact chronology of the distinct yet unprogrammatic, unplanned, and fundamentally nonserial body of work that Stella produced in 1958 is impossible to reconstruct. Rather than mourn the loss of what would surely have been interesting information—particularly given the sheer number and stunning variety of paintings he made in this one year (more than thirty)—I shall consider these works in family groups. These groups and their proposed rough sequence are based on whatever hard evidence can be assembled in tandem with two guiding considerations: the relationship between the 1958 work and the Black paintings and Stella’s rapport with the work of Johns.

These works from 1958 have long remained in the shadow of the Black paintings, as many commentators, often encouraged by Stella himself, have insisted on an evolutionary development from these early striped works to his serial practice. While I am loath to view Stella’s 1958 paintings only as premonitions of his later series, there is a great deal that the Black paintings can tell us about these early pieces, and we should therefore include the later work in our investigations. The artist finished 1958, the first year of his mature work, with the first three paintings of his first series, each of which
has a claim to be the “first” Black painting. This indeterminate origin strikes at the heart of Stella’s mythic genesis, casting doubt on another accepted critical understanding of the Black paintings as constituting a radical break in the history of art. Keeping the seriality of the Black paintings in view, I shall consider the paintings of 1958 as twins or triplets and discuss their critique of singularity and, more broadly, of artistic originality itself, a critique that proved foundational for Stella’s serial work. In 1958 Stella sought artistic originality in the wake of the abstract expressionists and their followers; at the same time he consciously exposed this ambition as a vain one. By exploring this simultaneous affirmation and disavowal of originality, we can enrich our understanding of Stella’s serial work without marginalizing the early pieces.

William Rubin, writing on the occasion of the artist’s retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in 1970, astutely remarked on Stella’s ambivalence toward artistic originality. Rubin considered the repetitive character of Stella’s striped patterns a sign of this ambivalence, attributing his stripe motif to the stimulus of Johns’s Flag (1954–55; fig. 7). While Johns’s American flag is a notable example of an artist curbing his originality, Rubin identifies Flag as an influence purely because it, like much of Stella’s work, has stripes. Given the tendency of Stella’s critics to consider the 1958 work a mere preface to the Black series, the repetition embodied in Flag’s stripe pattern becomes the source for Stella’s suppression of a uniquely inspired gesture, rather than evidence of a shared interest of the two artists in “found” imagery. Furthermore, Rubin credits Johns with Stella’s total integration of his motif with the support (that is, “deductive structure”). This claim neglects not only Stella’s work before the majority of the Black paintings but also Johns’s own predilection for working in assemblage. How do the plaster casts that at times about his Targets exhibit “absolute identification of the motif with the shape of the field”? Indeed, how could this claim even hold for the Targets themselves, such as Green Target (1955), the first work by Johns that Stella saw firsthand, which is ensconced in a rectangular frame? Indeed, how could this claim even hold for the Targets themselves, such as Green Target (1955), the first work by Johns that Stella saw firsthand, which is ensconced in a rectangular frame?

Caroline Jones, in her survey of the 1958 paintings, intimates what Stella’s shift of emphasis could mean: “The dense materiality of these painted cardboard objects [for example, Them Apples] reminds the viewer that in this early period it was already crucial to Stella not to ‘be’ something but to ‘make’ something, and that John’s les-
sions were as much about making objects as designing images.” My aim is to carry this object lesson through the entire body of 1958 work, beyond the assemblages to which Jones refers, to show how Stella reworked his relationship to Johns and to the opaque materiality of his own paintings. Stella’s paintings from 1958, in addition to providing a critique of originality, exposed in advance what would soon become a commonplace critical fallacy—that art, and Stella’s art in particular, had to be either “modernist” or “literal,” pictorial or thingy.

Becoming an Artist

I have always felt it is much better to paint things that exist in themselves and do not carry the mind back to some object upon which they depend for their existence…. I would like to make something that is real in itself, that does not have to be explained—like the letter A for instance.

—Arthur Dove, in Barbara Haskell, Arthur Dove

Stella received his first formal art training between fall 1950 and spring 1954 at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, a private high school renowned for both its art program and its museum, the Addison Gallery of American Art. He studied painting and art history under Patrick Morgan, who, with his wife, Maud, had been a pupil of Hans Hofmann in Munich. Maud Morgan taught at Abbot Academy, then the sister school to Andover, and had shown with Betty Parsons Gallery and also worked with Alexander Archipenko before she and her husband were invited to Andover. While Stella recalls being impressed by the Addison’s collection, particularly The West Wind (1893) by Winslow Homer, Frederic Remington’s Moonlight, Wolf (c. 1909), and the gigantic portrait Professor Henry A. Rowland (1897; fig. 8) by Thomas Eakins, the Morgans’ private collection, which they regularly opened to students, had greater appeal, especially their works by Hofmann and Arthur Dove. Throughout his career Stella seems to have been fascinated by prewar American abstraction, particularly by what he later considered to be its struggle with European modernism. Under the sway of Clement Greenberg’s criticism, Stella would later subscribe

Fig. 5. Jasper Johns, Flag, 1954–55. Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, three panels, 42 ⅜ in. × 5 ft. 3 ⅛ in. (127.4 x 160.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.
to the thinking that abstract expressionism had successfully resolved its struggle with influence from Europe (that is, Paris) by developing a new approach to abstraction. How-
ever, Dove, whose sense of scale Stella especially admired, had also tried to develop an independent (Greenberg would call it “provincial”) mode of abstraction in both painting and assemblage (fig. 9)—and we can recognize the importance of his alternative precedent for a young painter anxious about how his work would measure up against the impressive accomplishments of both European and postwar American modernism. As Stella recalled: “European painting was a tremendous problem for American painters, for [Marsden] Hartley and Dove in particular, [and they] were the ones I most identified with and seemed to me I was most moved by.”

Although Stella had had some interest in making art before attending Andover, he became earnest about painting there, in the art program’s “oasis of self-indulgence and pleasure.” Studio space was generous and materials were free and readily available. Stella remembers that he “never had any qualms, for example, [about] building up a very large painting on a piece of cardboard,” and, indeed, much of his work at Andover followed Patrick Morgan’s method of working paint with a palette knife on board. He particularly liked the effect of the cardboard showing through the applied paint, which he organized in discrete blocks, and he continued working with various layers of paint to engage the support in strategies of concealment and revelation at Princeton and then in New York. The abundant resources at Andover encouraged Stella to produce without hesitation: “if I didn’t like the way it came out . . . I had no hesitancy in scraping it all off and throwing it away, and the sort of whole mechanics of waste, the whole mechanics of keeping working and getting what you wanted, sort of not nursing anything, not worrying about anything, which I think was the one thing which carried me . . . sort of helped me the most.”

Set the task of completing a still life assignment to qualify for the studio art major his senior year, Stella committed to a decidedly abstract mode of execution. The resulting painting betrays his study of Seurat in art history courses as well as his avowed interest in Hofmann’s paint handling (fig. 10). Reflecting on this work as a “solution to a problem,” Stella justified his lack of interest in working in a figurative mode as due to his having come of age during the heyday of abstract expressionism, as well as to his encounter with the collections of the Addison and the Morgans: “I believe that access to abstraction to anyone born after 1936 is direct and unencumbered. One wants to do it and one does; it is that simple. If a young person walks through a gallery of American painting in 1950 and confronts the work of Copley, Inness, Sargent, Eakins, Remington, Homer, Dove, Hartley, Hofmann, Pollock, and Kline, he will want to paint like Hofmann, Pollock, and Kline, admiring Hartley and Dove for their proximity to the former, and acknowledging the rest for their accomplishment and effort in facing the task of art.”

Although many critics consider his work a radical break with abstract expressionism, Stella himself insisted that his practice extended from it, self-consciously revisiting certain of its fundamental principles—gestural attack, all-over composition, large scale—in order to critique them. He considered this critical reevaluation of abstract expressionism necessary, even redemptive, given the numerous painters working in the 1950s who routinely copied the original “immediacy” of painters like Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, thereby rendering what was once radical “mannered” or “academic.”

During his freshman year at Princeton, Stella painted regularly on his own because the university did not have any art classes. The art history professor William C. Seitz, later the associate curator at The Museum of Modern Art responsible for the Art of Assemblage (1961) and Responsive Eye (1965) exhibitions, set up an informal extracurricular painting workshop in the existing studio for architecture majors, and Stella joined this his sophomore year. Seitz had recently received his Ph.D.
In art history from Princeton, writing his dissertation on abstract expressionism, which had required the outside endorsement of Alfred Barr to win over a department hesitant about a topic concerning living artists. It was in Senta's studio class that Stella became close friends with the painter Walter Darby Bannard, two years his senior. The two engaged in an intense debate about painting, and their friendship was crucial for Stella’s work at Princeton and during his first years in New York. 

During Stella’s junior year, in the fall term of 1956, Stephen Greene took up his position as Princeton’s first resident artist; he was a figurative painter working in New York who increasingly experimented in an abstract-expressionist mode. Stella’s own work had by then moved away from the more delicate cubist- and neo-impressionist-inspired palette-knife pieces he had been making and was instead heavily indebted to the work of Kline, as evidenced in the covers he had done the year before for Nassau Lit, Princeton’s student literary magazine (fig. 11). It was at a Nassau Lit meeting when Stella was a sophomore that Michael Fried remembers being introduced to the artist by Thomas Carnicelli, an editor of the magazine and Stella’s Princeton roommate and friend from Andover. Fried, a freshman at the time, was studying English and writing poetry, and he credits Bannard and Stella with initiating him into abstract art. 

Bannard graduated in the spring of 1956 and moved to New York, where Stella often visited him during his junior year. In the fall of 1957, Bannard returned to Princeton to work in a frame shop owned by Larry Munson, which also served as the Little Gallery, a space that had exhibited abstract-expressionist drawings and the art of many of Greene’s students. In this, his senior year, Stella became enamored of John’s work, and he developed an interest in assemblage. Bannard remembers Stella “coming around the gallery regularly for about two weeks because he was obsessed with buying 5¢–10¢ cent store trinkets for a huge ‘construction’ he was doing.” The two worked together on collages (fig. 12), and Stella made small assemblages, experimenting with the medium’s range of stylistic possibilities. Sometimes he privileged the geometric and abstract quality of the found material, as in Cricket/Kit Construction (1958, plate 30); at other times he gave precedence to the messy randomness of the material, as in an untitled assemblage affixed to a broken painting easel (plate 31). In addition, Stella was designing sets for Princeton’s Theater Intime; as Fried remembers it, Stella painted these in his gestural, Kline-inspired manner.

During Stella’s final year at Princeton, Fried became closer to Bannard, whose house was a regular meeting place for the three friends. As Stella recalls: “The basic thing that we did I think is something which is very common with art students or young people who are interested in art. We pretty much went through what you could euphemistically call contemporary literature I guess which would be essentially Arts and Art News. And issue by issue, cover to cover, word by word, we went through what was going on at that particular time. And that’s really all we had to go on. And what we did was we would check out essentially what we read against what we saw. We’d go and see the shows. And that’s when we first became conversant with the writings of such people as Clement Greenberg, Hess, Rosenberg and those kind of critical attitudes.”

Fried was also in Greene’s painting class during this year, and through Greene he contacted Clement Greenberg. In the fall of 1958, after Stella had graduated and moved to New York, Greenberg came to Princeton to deliver a series of six Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism, a prestigious forum open only to faculty and their guests. Greenberg invited Fried to attend and asked Fried to introduce him to other interested peers; Fried brought Stella and Bannard, and the three heard Greenberg’s theories on modernist painting, its immanent self-critique, and its privileging of “optical” sensation over tactility. Greenberg also provided a narrative of the historical development of abstract painting in Europe and the United States, later presented in the essays of his Art and Culture anthology, which he had been revising that year.
words, for an art that didn’t exist, so I had a very strong idea of what was absolutely the newest, most definite thing....I had never seen it, but yet it was a kind of palpable reality...that was in the air . It was interesting to see it...when I did first see it in my life....so it was also interesting to hear about something, to be strongly reputed to be good, and then actually to see it be good, was a little bit interesting.”

Stella first saw Johns’s work in photographic reproductions, and he “began to be interested in Jasper on the level of an idea.” Through such photographs, he was most struck by the stripe motif and its repetition in Johns’s Flag paintings; it was almost impossible for him to get a sense of how their surfaces were painted and the tactile effect of their encaustic and collage. The first work by Johns that Stella saw in person was Green Target (1955; fig. 13) in the 1957 group show Artists of the New York School: Second Generation at the Jewish Museum in New York, during his junior year.

When in 1958 Johns had his first solo exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, Stella promptly went to see it. In conjunction with a brief review of the exhibition by Fairfield Porter, Johns’s Target with Four Faces graced the cover of the January issue of Art News (fig. 14), and in the caption the editors compared the artist with his “better-known colleagues” Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Allan Kaprow, and Ray Johnson. This list reinforces Porter’s own attempt to use Johns’s work to articulate an alternative trend to abstract expressionism and its second-generation Tenth Street progeny, whose style, he charged, “seems more and more to be a kind of naturalism, as European abstract painting was a kind of rationalism.”

Stella recalls that his last paintings at Princeton were “an amalgam of some kind of Jasper [Johns], [Adolph] Gottlieb and sort of [Mark] Rothko.” What he appears to have valued in the work of the latter two was their compartmentalized pictorial organization using repeating (but not necessarily identical) modules. Stella became less interested in the kind of line used by Pollock or Kline—a line that refused to function as a contour of some discrete form—preferring Gottlieb’s pictograms and Rothko’s floating rectangles of color: “That was the kind of thing I liked, which was sort of a big image, sort of softly painted and with stripes and repetitional elements, repeated boxes, semi-centered motifs, with sort of a lot of landscape type divisions of kind of bands across the horizon and blank below, or a blank area with bands and the boxes in the bands, and boxes with stripes in them, floating on [a] big area.” In this description, we find...
and his army physical was scheduled for September. Hollis Frampton, a photographer and filmmaker who had been Stella’s classmate at Andover, was sharing an apartment with Carl Andre and the composer Mark Shapiro on Mulberry Street, and during a visit to their apartment Stella met Andre for the first time. Andre, whose work would prove foundational for minimalism in the coming decade, had been a year ahead of Stella at Andover, yet they knew each other only by sight. In New York the two went to jazz clubs, frequented the famous Cedar Bar, and scavenged for materials together. Andre recalled that Stella’s small studio had been a jewelry shop, with a huge, cumbersome safe that limited the working space still further.

During the summer, presumably around the time of his army physical, Stella returned to Andover for a lengthy visit, repeatedly dropping in on Gordon “Diz” Bensley, Morgan’s former teaching assistant, who had taken over the art program after Morgan left earlier that year. Bensley recalls: “I had in the basement an easel set up with big poster paper . . . with lots of tempera paints there for our three-year-old, Jennifer. And I came down after Frank left and saw all these paintings that looked just like Jennifer’s, and I figured, naturally she’d never pick up, a three-year-old, so I just threw them out. And . . . there were dozens of them, just dozens of them, all over the place. . . . And the next time Frank came to visit I happened to ask him what he was doing—was he visiting people? And he said ‘no no, I was down in the cellar painting—I discovered your daughter’s easel and I was having a ball!’” What is remarkable about this story is that Bensley, who had trained at Yale University and the Institute of Design in Chicago and taught at Andover for nearly a decade, could not distinguish Stella’s work from that of his young daughter. The episode thus tacitly reiterates the trope of childlike execution that peppered accounts of Johns’s work as well, beginning with Porter’s Art News review. The story also illustrates the speed with which Stella worked—evidently generating a prodigious number of works on paper and canvas in a brief time.

The Limits of Painting

Stella, to his surprise, failed his army physical: his left hand, injured in a childhood accident, was unable to perform a simple opposable-thumb test. He returned to New...
According to Duve, the Black paintings came close enough to a literal presentation of raw material to prompt Greenberg to revise his aesthetic theory. In order to justify his disregard for paintings that appeared to conform to his criteria, Greenberg had to make a concession to the readymade—he had to allow the blank canvas to be a legitimate picture, not just a hypothetical limit for painting. The blank canvas could therefore function as a picture; what is more, it would be a picture without any illusion, entirely "literal." As Fried later recognized, "With respect to his understanding of modernism Greenberg had no truer followers than the literalists [that is, minimalists]."

For Fried the problem with minimalist objects, like the sculpture Andre was making when he described himself as under Stella's tutelage, was that they were not conflicted enough: "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 support that has been central to that development." Fried implies that a literal presentation of materials demands the presence or at least the threat of illusionism in order to be art, just as modernist illusionism demanded an acknowledgment of the material limits of painting as central to its development. Minimalist objects follow the same path as modernist paintings, but, like fallen angels, they have strayed from that path by being too much of one thing—too literal, to the exclusion of illusion.

While Stella never strayed so far as to follow the suggestion he gave to Andre, his Black paintings, especially, seem to come close to this goal. Yet they are never blantly literal, never completely exclusive of illusion. Stella's reluctance carries over, as we shall see, from his view from that of Stella in that he (with Judd) thought of "painting as [an] object, as a physical object, and I think Frank is the farthest from that of us" (figs. 16, 17).
If Stella expressed reservations about the object quality of paintings, he took equal issue with repetition. In a 1966 interview with Alan Solomon, he noted that his growing propensity for working with symmetrical arrangements of modular units indicated “not so much even repetition as a kind of directness.” Stella claimed to have learned the importance of repetition from his early exposure to photo reproductions of Johns’s Flag. The “directness” he sought in the 1960s banished any vestiges of compositional decision making, which still lingered even in Johns’s repetition. Whereas Johns had limited his choices most narrowly with Flag (the composition of the American flag is a given and, rare for Johns’s work, constitutes the entire image), the actual work betrays a myriad of decisions in his handling of the collage: the stars are cut carefully and appear embedded in the blue field, each stripe is an autonomous construction of newspaper pieces, and so on. The material effort of Johns’s masterful collage work on the iconic repetition of Flag could have struck Stella only after he saw this and other works in person—an experience, as we have seen, that prompted him to revise his previous understanding of Johns.

Stella continues to credit Johns with the lesson of repetition throughout his career, and latent within this lesson are traces of decision making in the art of assemblage and collage. Stella’s further revision of his position vis-à-vis Johns, away from repetition and toward directness, is an “antirelational” attitude that would fit well with Judd’s own views in the Glaser interview. Stella consistently described this directness as something that would go “right to your eye—something that you could see—that you could see and something that you didn’t have to look around. You got the whole thing right away….Once you saw it you understood it and it would have a direct effect on your eyes, on your eyesight. It was a kind of visual imprint.” This closely echoes the championing of “opticality” by Greenberg and Fried.

Opticality is a notoriously hallucinatory concept in Greenberg’s account of modernism, as evidenced in a passage in “Sculpture in Our Time” (1958). In this essay, the concept serves to modify Greenberg’s idea of medium specificity, allowing him to reject any evidence of the “sculptural” (that is, the illusion of three-dimensional space) within painting yet allowing sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases. Opticality, Greenberg suggested, puts an even higher premium on sheer visibility and an even lower one on the tactile and its associations, which include that of weight as well as impermeability. One of the most fundamental and unifying emphases of the new common style is on the continuity and neutrality of a space which light alone inflects, without regard to the laws of gravity….A related emphasis is on economy of physical substance. This manifests itself in the pictorial tendency to reduce all matter to two dimensions—to lines and surfaces that define or enclose space but hardly occupy it. Rendering 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. This kind of illusionism is stated in pictures whose paint surfaces and enclosing rectangles vibrate into the space around them; and in buildings that, apparently formed of lines alone, seem woven into the air.

What Greenberg appears to be describing is a generic art, one that transcends, by way of “the new common style,” the limitations of specific media at the very moment it is defined by them. This art is without mass; it is an art that almost appears to sublime into thin air.

This move from the specific to the generic anticipates Greenberg’s shift from demanding medium specificity to allowing a blank canvas to be art. Later Greenberg would also suggest that such a generic art be “taken in at a glance,” that it be so unified as “to be grasped only in an indivisible instant of time.” Hence, opticality—which begins as a means to describe art’s otherness from our mundane world of things in order to free it from the tyranny of both mimetic depiction and material density—becomes a condition for spectatorship. Not content to describe an alternative, autonomous aesthetic universe, Greenberg has the optical condition colonize the viewer’s body: “You are summoned and gathered into one point in the continuum of duration….You become all...
attention, which means that you become, for the moment, selfless and in a sense entirely identified with the object of your attention.\textsuperscript{43}

Fried has exposed the double valence of Greenberg’s opticality as both generic—that is, a condition of all modernist art from impressionism onward—and specific to a particular body of work by postwar American “colorists”; and this latter sense is the way Fried has used the concept in his own criticism. Because opticality for Fried is not essential to art in general, he is able to incorporate it as part of a passing phase that led to a new emphasis on shape and surface in Stella’s work in the 1960s. This critical gesture was crucial to establishing the terms of Stella’s relationship to minimalism, to his earlier material impulses, and to his debt to Johns in his 1958 work.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Titles and Chronology}

It is difficult to say with certainty which 1958 paintings Stella executed at Princeton, which at Eldridge Street, and which at West Broadway, though evidence exists to place some at specific locations and therefore to get a sense of roughly when they were made. Stella recalls that the only paintings from 1958 done at Princeton were \textit{Tundra} and \textit{Perfect Day for Banana Fish}. \textit{Colorado}, \textit{Requiem for Johnnie Stompanato}, \textit{Red River Valley}, \textit{Great Jones Street}, and \textit{Blue Horizon} are all inscribed with the Eldridge Street address, but this provenance must be taken with caution, as it was Stella’s common practice to work on multiple canvases at a time, return to an earlier canvas to rework it, and often date and inscribe paintings retrospectively.\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{Colorado} (plate 4) now lacks the roughly three-inch-deep stretcher that characterizes nearly all Stella’s canvases from his final months at Princeton and well into the 1960s.\textsuperscript{46} Barr had suggested the thick stretcher to Stella at some point in late 1957, as a “simple mechanical way to cope with the problem of stretchers for large paintings”—and, as Stella asserts, all the 1958 canvases had them, which suggests that \textit{Colorado} was restretched at a later date.\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Requiem for Johnnie Stompanato} (plate 6) is named after the abusive lover of the Hollywood “Sweater Girl” Lana Turner, who was shot to death by Turner’s fourteen-year-old daughter to protect her mother. The painting therefore can definitely be dated after April 4, 1958, the date of Stompanato’s death; it was probably done soon afterward and could have even been painted at Princeton—though it is possible that Stella titled the work later, which, as Brenda Richardson has demonstrated in her catalogue of the Black paintings, was his practice. \textit{Seward Park} (plate 10), referring to what was once a political rallying place for the immigrant community of the Lower East Side, may have been painted at Eldridge Street studio, since it is nearby. It is probable that \textit{Blue Horizon} (plate 21) was begun at Eldridge Street (with an entirely different composition) and given its allover signature color at West Broadway.\textsuperscript{48}

Given their titles, we can reasonably assume that \textit{East Broadway} (plate 17), named after the street where Frampton and Andre moved toward the end of the year, and \textit{West Broadway} (plate 18) were painted at the West Broadway studio. Christian Geelhaar has noted that \textit{West Broadway} was originally titled \textit{D Train}, after a subway line that terminates at Coney Island, and it is therefore logical to connect the painting \textit{Coney Island} (plate 20) with that studio as well; Geelhaar also cites Stella’s recollection that he painted \textit{Astoria}, \textit{Luncheon on the Grass} (plate 37), and \textit{Delta} (plate 26) at West Broadway too.\textsuperscript{49}

Additional evidence for the sequence of the works at the West Broadway studio comes from the 1966 interview with Solomon, in which the artist explains that his first studios were notoriously cramped, but this did not prevent him from working in a large format—a preference he attributes to the typically large size and scale of abstract-expressionist work:

\begin{quote}
I tried to work at the limits of the interior space that I’m in and I’ve always liked the things to fill the space up so I built the things as big as I could with cotton duck and the size and the scale all seemed right, but the…organization was like a problem, I mean, because it became very arbitrary or very fussy…[why I] placed a block at the top, placed a block on the one side, placed a block on the other side, placed a block at the bottom, placed a [block] in one corner or the other corner, you had the four corners and the middle part, you had a diagonal structure, this, that and the other, …they just didn’t seem to sit right, and so I did a couple of things which were painted over the blocks, but a couple of paintings had had just the
\end{quote}
bands on them, and that seemed interesting, so they're just a series of horizontal bands, but still there was a lot of underpainting, and the underpainting came through as it does with that kind of paint [on] the unsized duck, and I didn't like that, so then I decided to work with just the bands.

This inventory of the compositional decisions that Stella was increasingly less willing to make goes through every possibility for placing his “blocks.” It reads like an exegesis on what he called “relational painting”: a kind of carefully considered, balanced mode of pictorial organization that, in the 1964 interview with Glaser, he affiliated (rightly or wrongly) with Concrete art and thought of as “European”—detrimental to any artist who strongly identified with the American abstract expressionists.14

In this passage we can also read clear references to a group of later paintings from this year: Astoria, Blue Horizon (plate 21), and Criss Cross (plate 22) are three works in which horizontal bands obfuscate earlier compositions, and they are followed by Luncheon on the Grass, a work Stella elsewhere explicitly describes in such a way that it could be regarded as being “just the bands.” Finally, we know that Stella began work on the Black paintings at West Broadway, allowing us to place Marro Castle (plate 27), Reichstag (plate 28), and Arbeit Macht Frei (plate 29) there. He also recalls that he made Them Apples and his other cardboard and wood constructions at this studio, simultaneously with the first Black paintings.15 Save for these (rather imprecise) ideas of where and perhaps when certain paintings were executed, we do not know the sequence in which Stella painted his 1958 works.

Brenda Richardson’s catalogue of the Black paintings identifies recurring themes—death and suicide, Nazism, insane asylums, major disasters, urban blight, and housing projects—in what she calls Stella’s “depressing” titles for the series. Several of these already appear in the titles of the 1958 work. The tabloid fodder that inspired Stella to projects—in what she calls Stella’s “depressing” titles for the series. Several of these already appear in the titles of the 1958 work. The tabloid fodder that inspired Stella to projects—in what she calls Stella’s “depressing” titles for the series. Several of these already appear in the titles of the 1958 work. The tabloid fodder that inspired Stella to projects—in what she calls Stella’s “depressing” titles for the series. Several of these already appear in the titles of the 1958 work. The tabloid fodder that inspired Stella to projects—in what she calls Stella’s “depressing” titles for the series. Several of these already appear in the titles of the 1958 work. The tabloid fodder that inspired Stella to projects—in what she calls Stella’s “depressing” titles for the series. Several of these already appear in the titles of the 1958 work. The tabloid fodder that inspired Stella to projects—in what she calls Stella’s “depressing” titles for the series.

The majority of the 1958 paintings were titled after personally significant places in New York City, summertime retreats near Stella’s hometown of Malden, Massachusetts, or places he visited during a cross-country trip he took the summer after his sophomore year in college. Stella’s enthusiasm for jazz is reflected in titles for two paintings from 1958, both of which were included on undated lists he made with Andre bearing titles for the majority of the Black paintings: Criss Cross is named after a piece by Thelonious Monk (first recorded in 1949), and Yugoton (plate 25) is the name Stella remembers of a club in Harlem. The jazz references link the 1958 works to Black paintings from 1959–60 such as Club Onyx, Turkish Mambo, and Tuxedo Junction. Likewise, titles for later works such as Tomlinson Court Park, Arundel Castle, and Clinton Plaza refer to sites near Stella’s house—painting jobs during his first fall in New York, as does the 1958 painting Astoria.13

A detail from Andre’s biography is later reflected in the title of the Black painting Seven Steps (1959), named after a lesbian bar “to which men were not admitted without a female escort” that Stella claims retained a special fascination for his friend. Richardson, in her discussion of the titles of the Black paintings, groups the more personally significant titles referring to jazz joints and gay and lesbian nightclubs with the “dawn-beat” titles that allude to Nazism, disasters, and death. This conflation is problematic, yet given Stella’s early willingness to let friends like Andre and Frampton speak on his behalf, one wonders whether he did not consider artistic autobiography itself a kind of “disaster” that could inspire its own version of yellow journalism, namely, the kind of criticism celebrating the Romantic cult of the genius-artist he abhorred in the pages of Art News and Arts. Indeed, in the “Art 60” symposium held at New York University on April 21, 1960, Irving Sandler vividly recalls Stella’s autobiographical statements as evidence that Stella was seeking an alternative to the uniquely inspired gesture: “He claimed that his own painting aimed for unoriginality—originality gone dead. What interested him most was a good idea rather than the process of painting; he could not see why it was bad for an artist who had a good idea just to paint it….He said he would welcome mechanical means to paint his pictures, that is to translate ideas into painting….He also said that his idea of a picture was one that was the same all over and the same in the next painting, one in which only paint was used and none of himself. Stella concluded by saying that he did not know why he was an artist, or even if he was one.”16
Emily Genauer, reviewing the exhibition for the New York Herald Tribune, called Stella’s paintings “unspeakably boring” and described them as “huge black canvases lined with white pin-stripes.” Stella chose to respond to Genauer with a letter to the editor ghostwritten by Frampton, “An Artist ... and Explain.” Printed among the reviews in the arts section rather than with other letters, the missive reads like a manifesto: “I did not invent the term ‘stripe paintings,’ but rather the paintings themselves....I concede it is sufficiently accurate. My paintings are what I do, not what I omit. In fact, I paint black stripes about 2½ inches wide. Therefore the unpainted white spaces between them are not the stripes, but what you call the ‘background.’” Frampton presents Stella’s aesthetic as anything but reductive (“my paintings are what I do, not what I omit”). In addition, he denies a mutually defining relationship between painted figure and physical ground—there are black stripes and nothing more, and even to acknowledge the white of the bare canvas as “background” is suspect.

Whereas Stella’s earlier selection for the Three Young Americans exhibition at Oberlin College (May 11–30, 1959) had included the now-lost Luncheon on the Grass from 1958, for his more conspicuous debut at moma Stella was represented exclusively by a group of Black paintings: Arundel Castle, The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, Tomlinson Court Park, and “Die Fahne Hoch!” were all painted in 1959, yet their titles, as we shall see, came out of Stella’s interests and practice of 1958. New York audiences had seen examples of such work—Club Onyx and Clinton Plaza (both 1959) were in group shows at, respectively, Tibor de Nagy (April 7–25) and Leo Castelli (October 6–17)—yet, as Rubin remarked, comparing the moma installation with what he had experienced at Castelli: “Seeing a roomful of them at the Museum, I was almost mesmerized by their eerie, magical presence” (figs. 18, 19). (Rubin later ascribed this “eerie” quality to their facture, the different way the black paint absorbed and refractions light.) Miller had seen Club Onyx at Tibor de Nagy and with Castelli had visited the West Broadway studio in the summer. All the works on loan to moma were courtesy of Castelli, who, after the studio visit, had added Stella to his impressive roster of artists (which included Johns and Rauschenberg) and consented to postpone the artist’s first one-man show so that a large selection of the Black paintings could be included in Sixteen Americans.

When we consider the autobiographical function of Stella’s titles, so prevalent in the 1958 works, together with Andre’s coauthorship of the lists of titles for the Black paintings, we cannot say whose life is signified in any given title, and the deeply anti-autobiographical gesture that unites the Black paintings and the 1958 works is thrown into relief.

One of Sixteen Americans

And so each stripe gradually became more autonomous. That was “one thing at a time” instead of “one area of the painting next to each other.”

—Frank Stella to Alan Solomon, 1966

The order is not rationalistic or underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another. A painting isn’t an image.

—Donald Judd on Stella’s shaped canvases, in “Specific Objects” (1965)

Stella’s first big break came with the group exhibition Sixteen Americans at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (moma), curated by Dorothy Miller and on view December 16, 1959, through February 14, 1960. This exhibition followed the format of a series of shows moma had staged since its founding in which a curator selected a group of contemporary artists and gave each of them a separate gallery. Unlike the recent Fifteen Americans (1952) and Twelve Americans (1956), which showcased the work of older, more established artists like Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Clyfford Still, about half of the artists in Sixteen Americans were “newcomers” whose work could not easily be assimilated into a particular style or movement. They were “presented simply as individuals and Americans.” Stella’s work was singled out from that of the other unknown artists in the exhibition by William Rubin, writing for Art International, as seeming “to measure up to the majority [in the exhibition] who have shown more or less widely,” namely, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Alfred Leslie, Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Stankiewicz, and Jack Youngerman. This was high praise, particularly as Stella’s work, indeed his very inclusion, was decried by most other critics.
In the catalogues for both the Oberlin and the MoMA exhibitions, Stella submitted an artist statement penned by Andre on his behalf, the succinct “Preface to Stripe Painting” (which was reprinted a third time as part of Frampton’s letter to the \textit{Tribune} editor): “Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his painting. Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity. He is interested in the necessities of painting. Symbols are counters passed among people. Frank Stella’s painting is not symbolic. His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting.” Stella was not the only artist to enlist a fellow artist to write his statement for \textit{Sixteen Americans}—Grace Hartigan was a less astute scribe for Alfred Leslie, an artist Rubin considered one of the better “second-generation Abstract Expressionists.” “Second generation” was the vague appellation given to those whose “Tenth Street touch,” long championed by \textit{Art News} under editor Thomas B. Hess, was increasingly perceived as rendering the authentic achievement of de Kooning badly “decorative.” However, Leslie’s work, more than that of de Kooning or Pollock, particularly impressed Stella during his years at Princeton; the second generation initially had more influence on the young artist because “they were the ones that were most active, were getting the most kind of publicity in general.”

Thierry de Duve describes Andre’s “Preface” as “utterly Greenbergian”: its overstatement of painting’s necessity reflects Greenberg’s avowal in “Modernist Painting” that each artistic medium “had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself.” While Greenberg’s enormously influential collection of essays \textit{Art and Culture} was not published until 1961, Andre would probably have been familiar with his theory of the essentialism of artistic media, especially as Greenberg was Stella’s favorite critic. On the other hand, Andre’s call to avoid the disembodied exchange of symbolic “counters passed among people” (right away one thinks of allusions to money and language) in favor of the obdurate materialism of paint has led James Meyer to label the “Preface to Stripe Painting” the “clarion call of literalism”—that is, of minimalism, Greenberg’s bête noire. This overlap between Greenberg’s theoretical position (at least as it stood in the early 1960s) and a nascent “literal” discourse—an overlap rooted in the material thing, the stuff of painting—should by now be no surprise. What remains
to be seen is how this overlap has its first manifestation not in the Black paintings, as Duve argues, but in Stella's 1958 works.

Typologies

Taken together, the Black paintings constitute Stella's first series per se. Yet it was a series unlike all the others in that Stella did not consciously begin it by making programmatic sketches. The Black paintings became a series, evolved into a discrete body of work, once he was well into them. It is no surprise, then, that there are several “first” Black paintings whose “firstness” can only be ascribed retrospectively. According to Richardson, Stella named Delta “the first black painting” and said that making Morro Castle was the first time he “consciously set out to make a black painting.” She also notes that Reichstag was the first “all black” painting: it does not exhibit any underpainting in a different color. This is a reversal of Stella’s initial idea that these paintings emerged from his polychromatic work earlier in that year, marking the end of his 1958 practice, not the beginning of his penchant for working in series.

This former idea is made explicit in a sketch Stella made for a lecture he gave at the Pratt Institute in January or February 1960, while his paintings were still on view at MOMA (fig. 20). This sketch and the text of the Pratt lecture were rescued from the rubbish bin by André and included in his autobiographical artist book Passport (1960). Several schemata for the 1958 paintings are recognizable in this sketch, which shows them lined up in a kind of narrative progression, roughly divided into four groups, in a manner that vaguely mimics a single-row museum installation of paintings on a wall. The drawing thus has a marked affinity with another sketch, Exhibition of Twelve Paintings by Frank Stella (1958–59; fig. 21), executed on the back of stationery from the Little Gallery in Princeton. This unsolicited exhibition installation was wishful thinking: it was never brought to fruition, as Stella recounted to Christian Geelhaar for a catalogue of his “working drawings,” one of the few books to dwell at any length on the 1958 works.

Geelhaar commented that the drawing “is only partly a resumé of the pictures that had at that time been painted; in some of the sketches, later compositions already announce themselves.” The Pratt sketch, on the other hand, is all resumé; it functions as Stella’s first retrospective.

The Pratt sketch will serve as our guide through Stella’s 1958 oeuvre, allowing us to recognize how Stella worked out problems in color and structure in small constellations of works. It is important to remember that he provided this first account of his own development after he had already created the serial logic of the Black paintings in 1959. The sketch’s systematic, linear cataloguing of what was a far more improvisational practice established the terms by which these early paintings have been received ever since. While these paintings were crucial to the development of the Black paintings, their status as independent works has been subsumed by the teleological insistence of Stella’s sketch. It is not my intention to cordon off the Black paintings from consideration in order to grant the 1958 works the attention they deserve. But the 1958 paintings show Stella working out a number of concerns that would not be recognizable if we...
simply saw them as immature attempts leading to the start of his serial practice. I shall follow the Pratt sketch in roughly reverse order, both to resist the teleological impulse and to render the boundary between an ending and a beginning more permeable, less historically overdetermined.

The “Nazi” Paintings

Reichstag (plate 28) was the first of a trio of paintings—along with Arbeit Macht Frei (plate 29) and “Die Fahne Hoch!” (1959; fig. 22)—that Stella titled with overt reference to Germany’s Third Reich. At the far right of the Pratt sketch are two images: the top represents Reichstag and the lower is a square-shaped amalgam of Arbeit Macht Frei and “Die Fahne Hoch!” bearing the notation “the final solution.” In 1945 Barnett Newman reflected that the horrors of the recent world war raised the problem of subject matter, of “what to paint,” yet Stella’s baldly direct references to Nazism could not fail to shock late 1950s audiences who preferred to focus on Germany’s rehabilitation as an American ally against communism. Characteristically for Stella, these deadpan, hermetic paintings are in no way illustrative of their titles.

Reichstag, Arbeit Macht Frei, and “Die Fahne Hoch!” maintain a group identity through their structure: Arbeit Macht Frei and “Die Fahne Hoch!” are structurally the same painting (though their dimensions are slightly different). They are bisectally symmetrical around the central point of intersection that divides the surface into quadrants, but Arbeit Macht Frei is oriented horizontally and “Die Fahne Hoch!” vertically. Very little of the bare canvas that yielded what Genauer called the pin-stripes of the painting can be seen in Arbeit Macht Frei. The paint bleeds into these interstices and leaves only incidental hints of the canvas peeking through. The overall effect is of a black-on-black painting with dark velvety lines between the thick, more reflective stripes. The paint looks slightly brown, characteristic of Stella’s earliest Black paintings, a quality Richardson attributes to his mixing white enamel into the cheap black enamel he used, “producing what he then called a ‘no-color.’” (He would later abandon this practice to paint directly from the can of black enamel.) “Die Fahne Hoch!,” however, displays the increasing regularity of stroke and increase in the gap between the painted bands that would characterize the later Black paintings, executed after Stella had decided he was painting a series.
Richardson, adding to the anxiety over “firstness” that appears to plague a series rich with second versions, states that Arbeit Macht Frei is “the first of the Black paintings to assume the basic character of all the later works in the series.” Yet she is also quick to note that the cruciform pattern in both Arbeit Macht Frei and “Die Fahne Hoch!” is described as “the final solution” in Stella’s Pratt sketch. This overt allusion to the Holocaust and the Third Reich sounds a note of finality. It suggests that Stella considered the Black paintings— their patterned configurations and the technique employed to make them—both a culmination and a near obliteration of what came before, rather than, as has often been suggested, a radical break coming from nowhere.

The “First” Black Paintings
The penultimate group in the Pratt sketch, signified by the sketch of Reichstag, is captioned “turning the corner” and “the left over areas.” And as with “the final solution,” with its intense play between allusive and literal meanings, “turning the corner” implies a move toward an impending climax as much as it illustrates Stella’s first incorporation of the right angle in his work.

The three paintings that lay equal claim to being the “first” Black painting— Reichstag, Delta (plate 26), and Morro Castle (plate 27)—constitute a group because each offers a treatment of the “left over” area, a problem that Stella believed plagued abstract expressionism, particularly in the work of its epigones, who often got “into trouble in the corners.” Delta’s entire structure is affected by the “left over” area that Stella refuses to trace with the repetitive stripe pattern. Jutting in from the right side of the painting is a triangular form that emphasizes the asymmetrical placement of Delta’s chevron pattern. Likewise, in Reichstag, Stella did not continue his striped pattern but rather filled in relatively large blocks in the top corners. No matter how far he might extend this nesting pattern of concentric right angles, the actual limit of the rectangular support would always ensure that small rectangles remain deposited in the corners. The large “left over” areas in Reichstag can be considered an exaggerated acknowledgment of this inevitability—whereas a different response to this condition was removing them from the shaped canvases of the Aluminum series, another innovation suggested by Bannard. In Reichstag, however, the pattern, despite the monochrome scheme, is destined to read as figure against a ground, with the figure delimited by the outermost thin lines generated by the exposed ground of the canvas and the ground provided by the painted leftover areas in the corners.

The vertical, rectangular margins of Morro Castle yield the same effect, framing what we can almost imagine are “two symmetrical parts of an inverted mirror image”—a doubled pattern of nested frames that open out onto the edge of the canvas. Franz Fedier has shown that this symmetry is specious: if we were to try to follow the central horizontal line, we would discover that one of the stripes, amid the many bearing a boxy U-shape, is a zigzag that runs from the upper left down to the lower right of the canvas (à la Stella’s later Copper painting Ophir, fig. 23). Fedier goes on to make the liminal nature of this particular canvas within Stella’s oeuvre explicit, elucidating its importance as a Black painting and as a work from 1958: “Morro Castle seems to me to be a key painting in Stella’s work, because it contains everything that becomes important...
in the following paintings of the black series. It also combines what was separated in two pictures from the transitional period, Coney Island and Grape Island (both from 1958): the striped ground and the thing in the middle. The thing in the middle is a dark rectangle—the actual and unmediated message that the paintings contain.43 The union of the zigzag with the striped pattern in Marro Castle is so complete that we have to make a conscious effort just to apprehend it—and yet this zigzag stripe is for Fedier the essential element, the “thing in the middle,” rather than, as we might expect, the entire labyrinthine pattern, itself wedged between two broad margins.

Stella chose to repeat the pattern of Marro Castle the following year in Arundel Castle (fig. 24), with two major modifications: not only have the left over margins been removed, but the thing in the middle, the figure against a ground, has disappeared, leaving a corrected, mirror–image composition in which figure and ground are now fully integrated. Even the stripes that fill in the leftover areas at the centers of the two U-shapes do not generate residual figure–ground relationships as do the corners in Reichstag. Here Stella successfully exploits the a priori affinity that the rectilinear edges of these innermost stripes have with the U-shaped pattern itself. But more than the illusion of spatial depth on a flat pictorial surface is suppressed in Arundel Castle. Fedier’s invocation of the earlier works Coney Island and Grape Island (plates 20, 19) suggests that the thing in the middle has also disappeared, leading us to assume that Stella also expunged the difference between two fundamentally different elements—material thing and optical pattern.

The Delta Group

The repeating chevrons of Delta hark back to an earlier work, Luncheon on the Grass (plate 3). Along with Yugoton (plate 25), Delta and Luncheon on the Grass suggest another duster of paintings that together work out a single concern, namely a centralized triangular form. Jones considers this form an allusion to recessional, perspectival painting. If so, these three works certainly flaunt their underlining of such representational depth: Yugoton is so loaded with paint that its triangular form is nearly invisible; Delta’s alternating shiny and matte stripes keep the form on the surface of the painting similarly, the rivulets of paint dripping down the funnel reinforce the emphasis on surface rather than depth; and Luncheon on the Grass (today known only through black-and-white reproduction) presents a triangle that appears to be generated by stacking stripes creeping up, rather than into, the canvas. Both Robert Rosenblum and Michael Fried remember Luncheon on the Grass—one of the “last color paintings” according to the Pratt sketch—as being blue and green. It was comparable in palette to two diminutive ink-on-cardboard pieces: one glued, without comment, in the pages of Andre’s Passport (fig. 25), and the other, Portrait of Michael Fried Standing on His Head Far Above Cayuga’s Waters (1959), reproduced as the frontispiece to Fried’s compilation Art and Objecthood.44

Whereas the monochromatic works Astoria and Blue Horizon are typically considered prophetic of the all-black works, it is Luncheon on the Grass that in the Pratt sketch immediately precedes the Reichstag configuration and “the final solution.”45 Under the diagram of Luncheon, Stella wrote: “image/no more/repainting/reworking/start to finish/one operation/in 4 parts/coats.” This suggests that Luncheon is the first painting Stella made by planning rather than reworking, by a priori ideation rather than composition directly on the surface of the canvas, a process that yielded the heavily encrusted surfaces of both Astoria and Blue Horizon (and, indeed, nearly all the 1958 paintings). This process, rather than monochromaticity or even repetitive, modular design, became the hallmark of Stella’s future work, as demonstrated in the Frampton photographs showing Stella working on a Black painting by filling in already penciled lines (fig. 26).
Gone would be the back and forth of Pollock’s method of painting from the floor to the wall and back to the floor to ponder and rework; gone would be Newman’s considered placement of his “zips” on colored fields at the moment of painting. Instead, in an effort to suppress the (at best) intuitive or (at worst) arbitrary composition of the work, Stella’s painting process would be limited to “one operation,” which would require the utmost concentration on the accuracy of his hand rather than an ongoing aesthetic judgment.

Stella never considered Reichstag the first Black painting, but it is certainly the first all-black painting. The gaps between the black stripes in Delta and Morro Castle reveal partially obscured layers of colored paint. These gaps yield little information as to what those now-hidden layers might have looked like. Calvin Tomkins reports that Delta was initially intended to be a red-and-black painting, but Stella found the task frustrating—hence the near obliteration of the red by ever-widening bands of black. This account fails to acknowledge that there is a great deal of green paint in Delta or that Stella had already made a “red and black” painting, Great Jones Street (plate 8).

Toward the end of 1958 Stella was apparently preoccupied with limiting his palette to black and one other color. This ambition yielded a small trio of works: Delta, Great Jones Street, and Green Grate (plate 7), a green-and-black painting (as the unusually descriptive title indicates). If Great Jones Street and Green Grate toy with monochromaticity—the block acting less as another color than as the mark of a censor deleting an unacceptable text—then Delta collapses their respective color schemes together onto its surface, and in addition to the canceling effect of the black that threatens to overwhelm all evidence of any other color, there is suggested the conceptual cancellation of the two complementary colors, green and red, a hue and its afterimage.

The Coney Island Group

Included in the Pratt sketch with Luncheon on the Grass under the category “last color paintings” are monochromatic works, signified by a diagram of uninflected horizontal bands filling the frame and labeled “one color,” resembling Blue Horizon (plate 26) and Astoria (plate 21). As if in answer to the Delta subgroup’s color, Astoria and Blue Horizon engage the primary colors yellow and blue. In the group of paintings in the Pratt sketch labeled “wanderings,” which comes before these “last color paintings,” we find reference to Coney Island (plate 20), composed of the three primary colors, two of which seem to be extracted, so to speak, into Astoria and Blue Horizon. And in Criss Cross (plate 23), hints of yellow, red, and blue come through what is perhaps Stella’s most thoroughly masked painting. Although Coney Island and Criss Cross both employ all three primary colors, in the former they retain their identities before mixing, and in the latter they seem to merge into a black that is an “all-color” (as opposed to the “no-color” that Stella sought for his later Black paintings).

In Coney Island, Stella experimented with the stripes’ lateral expansion within and against a near-square support; Astoria and Blue Horizon are both exact squares. The blue block overlaying the center of Coney Island’s canvas, displaced above the central point of symmetry, echoes in shape the edges of the actual support. The stripes that border this block on either side refuse to correspond across it, interrupting the illusion of a smooth continuity beneath the blue form. The block anchors the work, and the striped pattern, while at first appearing to be deduced from the limits of the support alone, accumulates in sections around this interior disturbance—a disturbance that is veiled by a single color in Astoria and even more fully obliterated in Blue Horizon. In Coney Island the interior, “depicted shape” of the blue block holds the privileged position Fried later accorded to “literal shape” (the physical shape of the support) in the Irregular Polygons of 1966–67: “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.”

The slightly off-center blockage in Coney Island generates an enormous amount of tension within the composition, for it rests heavily on a red stripe but invades the yellow stripe above, barely avoiding a connection with the red stripe beyond. (It is clear that the artist changed his mind, painting over part of the blue with yellow to create this gap.) The blue block, by appearing to jar the continuity of the stripes, interrupting their even flow like a scar, is the pivot of the composition and, indeed, of our perception of the literal boundaries of the painting’s edge. Our experience of the painting’s materiality—in this instance, the edges of its support—is therefore governed by the image of the blue block, beginning there and working outward, piece by piece, stripe by stripe.
The structure of *Coney Island*—block against striped field—suggests another sub-group, which includes *East Broadway* (plate 17), *West Broadway* (plate 18), and *Grape Island* (plate 19). In *Grape Island*, named after one of the islands in Boston Harbor, the tension provided by the gap between the stripes and a central block is absent; taking this together with the better alignment of the stripes on either side of the block, we can more easily see how the depicted shape is here anchored by the literal shape. The piecemeal composition around the central block affirms the material unity of the painting, rather than works against it, as it did in *Coney Island*, where we could imagine Stella handling discrete compositional elements as though they were so many pieces of patchwork. Whereas the paint handling in *Coney Island*, with its thin strokes of dry paint, yields little impasto or material disturbance on the surface, in *Grape Island* the paint is thickly applied and the surface is heavily textured. We can easily see that the yellow bands are laid over a field of brick red and the central block is a section of this field that has been spared the yellow paint but then incompletely covered with green, giving the impression of an object whose surface has been worn away. Whereas *Coney Island’s* composition gives it the look of material disjunction, of an alien block lying over or against a striped field, its actual materiality (that is, its relative uniformity of facture) works against this impression. In *Grape Island*, conversely, the composition appears more regular, more unified, and yet the handling of the paint flaunts its materiality and suggests a state of degradation. These two works achieve what I shall call a collage effect, manifested in the complementary ways they assert and deny material discontinuity within the image.

This collage effect is more negated than affirmed by the vaguely complementary colors of *West Broadway*, a work whose block is now a broad, symmetrically placed field of color offset by an even larger area overrun by stripes. Although we can see that the stripes bordering the green field do not line up, this is only clear at the top of the canvas, at the point farthest from our view. Were we to focus on the field itself, its impressive width would prevent us from readily seeing any misalignment, and the overall effect is one of increased continuity.

Over the course of the year, Stella would reconsider his rapport with Johns’s work, which informed how he handled paint to suggest a collage effect. Although he ended the year with his cardboard-and-wood constructions, thus continuing his early interest in assemblage, in his canvases, at least, we see a progressive sacrifice of material discontinuity in favor of an increasingly unified image. A concomitant shift is the gradual ascendancy of literal over depicted shape, the increasing integration of the composition with its support from the edges inward rather than from a central block outward.

**Grids**

Stella explored the integral relationship between surface and support in another pair of paintings done earlier in the year, most likely at Eldridge Street. In *Colorado* (plate 4) and *Requiem for Johnnie Stompanato* (plate 6) he experimented with the historical effectiveness of the grid as a sign of both the material surface of the canvas and an incipient pictorial image. A work like *Arbeit Macht Frei* (or, indeed, the majority of the Black paintings)—whose central, perpendicularly intersecting lines quarter the canvas and appear to generate the rippling cruciform pattern—is an important precedent for a flurry of works in the 1960s that obsess over the grid as a device to banish, alleviate, or control the peculiarities of artistic subjectivity. The grid made its appearance very early in Stella’s work, though not in a manner that asserted a look of empirical “objectivity.” Rather, Stella’s employment of the grid in these early canvases exposes it as an inherently faulty mechanism for signifying what remains the fundamentally obscure materialism of surface and support—a materialism that, as we have seen with *Grape Island and Coney Island*, might not cohere with the image.

For the sake of brevity, I shall limit my analysis to *Colorado*, whose gentle organization on a nine-block grid is more subtle than that of *Requiem* and perhaps at first more difficult to see. The grid divisions are here most evident in the lower register at the far right, a pink area was imperfectly painted over patches of indigo and aqua-marine; at the far left, a yellow layer was applied as a general covering; in the central zone, yellow has been applied in four distinct vertical stripes. In the middle register of *Colorado*, which is dominated by striking red horizontal bands, the continuation of the grid is less conspicuous. The brushwork maintains this structure, however, though its loose, almost careless appearance also works against it. Two of the red stripes are reinforced by narrower streaks of yellow. The uppermost of these appears to have begun with a brush dripping paint at the far left edge of the right third of the painting, at
an imaginary border that extends up from the right edge of the vertical pattern below. This deliberate beginning with a fully loaded brush occurs at a crucial point that reinforces the division of the painting into thirds along vertical axes. Likewise, the central area of this nine-block grid is defined on its left, where all four red stripes go from barely present to forcefully reiterated. Indeed, to the left of the lowest red stripe is a segment of indigo–pink–yellow, continuing the lateral extension of the stripe but rudely erasing the red so as to align roughly along the vertical axis staked out below, about where the yellow field and the yellow verticals meet.

Thus Stella divided his canvas using two distinct techniques to create his grid: the horizontal registers are designated by color and pattern, the vertical by facture. This latter method is most evident in the top register, where the color and pattern of the indigo and pink–over–blue stripes appear at first to extend seamlessly, transgressing the vertical axes. Whereas the color and pattern of this top area is uniform from side to side, its material surface is not. The disruptions under the surface rendered visible by facture allow us to see the extension of the verticals to the top of the canvas.

Indeed, rather than function as a readymade, ideated form grafted onto a material body (the stretched canvas), the grid in Colorado and Requiem depends on the tactile differences of paints handled in a number of ways—the grid is implied, rather than declared, through a process akin to collage, a material juxtaposition of brushwork and color, rather than a purposeful inscription of line. In Requiem, this collage effect plays off of thick, dark outlines that both incompletely define the grid and reduplicate within some of its compartments. As in Coney Island, in which the stripe pattern adjusts itself bit by bit around a field of blue, or Them Apples, with its patterns intersecting the material folds of its cardboard support, the blocks of the grid in Colorado and Requiem generate an image through disturbances in the paint and painting process.

Collage Effect in the “Door” Paintings
Stella continued to play with the traditional materials of paint and canvas to mimic or suggest the effects of collage. In the Pratt sketch, the Coney Island–like diagram is followed by an image resembling Red River Valley (plate 16), positioned as the last of the “wanderings” before the “last color paintings.” Under these two diagrams, he notes:

1. color + depth
   2. psycho–color
      the city–yellow +
      black –enamel
   its quality

With its “door” motif—also articulated in Them Apples and its untitled mate—Red River Valley belongs to another subgroup that includes East Broadway and Green Grate. East Broadway has the yellow–and–black color scheme that Stella calls “psycho–color.” Yet it is most remarkable for the ways in which he consciously experimented with the different effects of black enamel. The painting appears to have been a black field that yellow stripes were painted over. The yellow thus takes on a somewhat greenish cast—especially apparent in the door motif. Stella then went back over these stripes with yellow, generating highlights that appear to sit atop the stripes. The effect of the yellow and black interaction is by no means uniform, and, indeed, in the striped area to the right of the “door,” Stella worked with distinctly alternating stripes, instead of bands lying on a fairly uniform field. The striped area above the door and to its left exhibits the sheen and drip of black enamel that has been painted in several layers (recall Delta’s shiny stripes), whereas in the far right area of the canvas, the paint appears to have soaked into the fabric.

Again, as in Coney Island, the stripes as image initially appear continuous; at first glance, the composition seems to be unified “behind” the door. Yet the varied behavior of the enamel paint gives the surface the patchwork texture of collage, visible only after more prolonged study. The door figure, which appears to jut insolently into the regularly repeating bands, calls attention to this appliqué effect (particularly with its heavy black outline). We see a door, perhaps even orient ourselves to it, but soon realize
that the stripes do not line up and the vertical outlines of the door extend to the top of the canvas, veiled and ghostly behind overlaid bands of color. The surface of the canvas is an intricate warp and woof; what is offered to our vision in one part of the canvas is hidden in another. This collage effect offers another kind of tactile illusionism, the opposite of trompe l’oeil (what Greenberg called “sculptural” illusionism). Paint and canvas are not manipulated to deny their actual materiality in order to make an image more “real.” Rather, Stella enlists facture to establish the image. The power of the collage effect lies in its ability not only to constitute an image but also to disrupt it, to work against its promise of continuity and coherent unity.

Vandalizing Motherwell: Against Autobiography

Included with the Coney Island- and Red River Valley-type drawings in the “wanderings” group in the Pratt sketch is a diagram for an additional subgroup. This image is captioned with the notations “1. variations/writing/Motherwell” and “2. Diebenkorn/stripe.” (It is striking that in retrospect, on the occasion of the Pratt sketch, Stella should accord to the Bay Area artist Richard Diebenkorn the provenance for his stripe work and not to Johns, who is still considered the clear source.) In several canvases from this year, Stella took on certain abstract expressionists directly, alluding, for example, to Mark Rothko’s atmospheric color fields in Tundra, Perfect Day for Banana Fish, and Plum Island (Luncheon on the Grass). His rather insolent response to the members of the “triumphant” New York School is best expressed in his parodies of Robert Motherwell’s Je t’aime paintings from 1955–56, such as Mary Lou Loves Frank (plate 11) and Your Lips Are Blue (plate 12); the drawings Mary Lou’s Cunt Is Blue, Dwight D. Eisenhower Has Trichomonas, Fuck You (fig. 21), and Fuck You Bannard (fig. 28); and the lost canvas Mary Lou Douches with Pine-Scented Lysol (plate 35). Although Stella’s favored compositional strategy of alternating stripes of color around a rectangular blockage has a blatantly morphological, if not conceptual, analogue in Motherwell’s The Little Spanish Prison from 1941–44 (fig. 29), William Rubin notes that Stella did not see this work until 1965. Your Lips Are Blue offers a chilly antidote to Motherwell’s sentimentality, prompting Rubin to remark, “Although Stella had a high opinion of Motherwell’s ‘Je t’aime’ paintings, he was put off by what he considered...
the romantic pretentiousness of the French inscriptions painted across the surfaces of the paintings" (fig. 30). 74

More important, however, Stella adopted Motherwell's painterly script, not so much as a gesture of mockery in some oedipal rebellion but rather to vandalize his own paintings. He desecrates paintings that would otherwise have been very similar to the other 1958 works we have considered. Without the lettering, Mary Lou Loves Frank has an obvious compositional affinity with Seward Park and Zara (plate 9), not to mention a coloristic similarity to Delta, with its combination of red, green, and black; Your Lips Are Blue, with its stripe pattern amid fields of atmospheric colors, recalls Colorado, Perfect Day for Banana Fish, and even Tundra and Plum Island; and the massive Mary Lou Douches, with its thick door figure against an empty field, especially relates to Red River Valley.

Graffiti came into play in two crucial pedagogic encounters Stella had with Stephen Greene, his art teacher at Princeton. While Greene was convinced of his young student's "genius," teacher and student had an intense and at times antagonistic relationship. In one instance, Greene, noting the overt similarity of sections of the unfinished Perfect Day for Banana Fish with Johns's Flag, scrawled "God Bless America" in blue paint across the top of the canvas. 75 Tensions erupted between teacher and student again when Stella, who had been painting regularly since his sophomore year at Andover and was determined to work in an abstract mode, refused to participate in Greene's figure drawing lessons. When Greene brought in a model to pose for life drawings, Stella scrawled, "I Can't Draw," in large letters across his canvas. As Stella remarked, regarding his student behavior, "I was cast in the role of rebellious student by chance. In other words, if I had been studying, say, with somebody like Bob Motherwell, then there wouldn't have been any problem." 76 In his "script" paintings, then, we can see Stella using Motherwell's technique not so much as a gesture of mockery in some oedipal rebellion but rather to vandalize his own paintings. He desecrates paintings that would otherwise have been very similar to the other 1958 works we have considered. Without the lettering, Mary Lou Loves Frank has an obvious compositional affinity with Seward Park and Zara (plate 9), not to mention a coloristic similarity to Delta, with its combination of red, green, and black; Your Lips Are Blue, with its stripe pattern amid fields of atmospheric colors, recalls Colorado, Perfect Day for Banana Fish, and even Tundra and Plum Island; and the massive Mary Lou Douches, with its thick door figure against an empty field, especially relates to Red River Valley.

Objecting to Things

The difficulty of identifying an "original" Black painting allows us to recognize that Stella developed that first series almost seamlessly out of an earlier practice that, while not serial as such, was structured around small subgroups of paintings, pairs or trios of works. We do not need the Black paintings to tell us that Them Apples and its unti...
strongly suggest a painterly abstract composition. In Stella’s later, untitled triptych, however, the found object (the wooden molding) already has a striped pattern, and its repeated use in the central panel yields a relief pattern that reinforces the composed pattern on the left and right panels (themselves constructions of cardboard nailed to cardboard). Yet even here, the material insistence of the central panel and the refusal of its “stripes” of moldings to line up exactly with the painted cardboard blue stripes reinforce the impression that the panel has interrupted or blocked the even, lateral flow of the patterned composition. Physical materiality, here exhibited by extra-artistic detritus, operates in a tense, unresolved relationship to painterly image.

The wooden moldings in the untitled assemblage, oscillating between thingly materiality and compositional element, have their echo in the blue block of Coney Island and in the many paintings from 1958 that exhibit a similar motif, such as Zara and, perhaps most explicitly, Seward Park (plate 10), where a pattern of alternating horizontal stripes continues across the central block in a manner that recalls the “already striped” central panel of the Johnsian triptych. Though the blockage in Coney Island is rendered in the same kind of house paint as the stripes it abuts, its ultimate function is to disrupt the unification of the picture plane into a stable pictorial composition. All these painted blockages can be read as traces of the missing material thing, the wooden construction in the center of the untitled assemblage. I suggested the same replacement or erasure of things by images in the shift from Them Apples, with its evocations
in paint of Johns’s incorporation of real objects into his works, to its untitled partner. Stella’s assemblage practice moved from his apprehension of a work like Johns’s Target with Four Faces to his first experiments in assemblage at Princeton to Them Apples and its less obdurately materialist reprise. Likewise, in his painting practice, his canvases made increasingly fewer concessions to their own collage effect (Grape Island and Coney Island as compared to West Broadway, or Morro Castle versus the later Arundel Castle, for example). Over the course of 1958, Stella acknowledged and effectively repressed the facticity of the thing in art—a disavowal repeated by those on both sides of the minimalist polemic as it would escalate in the following decade.

We have seen Fried’s anxiety when faced with what he felt were the brute, opaque, or, at worst, mere things that constituted minimalist art. The autonomy and alterity of the thing, as that which is wholly other to the human, perceiving subject, was cause for critical corrective measures by Fried and many minimalist artists, measures that would assert or restore the subject’s position in its encounter with the art object, and by extension, the world of things. In 1965, the year his exhibition Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella opened at the Fogg Art Museum, Fried was already grappling with the central question of his negative manifesto “Art and Objecthood,” a question Stella’s work particularly provoked: Is a painting a thing like any other?

[Stella’s] 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 certain conventional characteristics (such as their tendency to consist of canvas stretched across a wooden support, itself rectangu- lar 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. The “version of modernism” to which Fried refers is, ultimately, Greenberg’s own, and precisely the one that allowed him to consider a blank canvas a picture. That nexus of undifferentiated things that Fried recognizes Stella’s paintings as courting (and from which he wishes to redeem them) threatens to dissolve their singular identity into their ambient setting or situation (as Fried called it in “Art and Objecthood,” emphasizing the theatrical charge of such a mise-en-scène) or, worse, into an unspecified, infinite array of still other, equally opaque, equally unknowable things. What is it that painting, specifically Stella’s painting, must hide, lest its affinity to other things or objects become illegible?

Most of Stella’s paintings from 1958 exhibit in paint the same anxiety toward the thing that Leo Steinberg expressed after his initial encounter with Johns’s early work at Castelli that same year. The source of this anxiety for Steinberg, when faced with Target with Four Faces, was an “uncanny inversion of values,” particularly of spatial relationships between viewing subjects and things. In Steinberg’s 1962 account, the target, which according to its actual use should be placed at some remove from the shooter, instead fills the picture plane and is inescapably “here.” The human face, to be recognizable as such, demands intimacy and closeness (“as soon as you recognize a thing as a face, it is an object no longer, but one pole in a situation of reciprocal consciousness”), but the four faces sequestered in a boxed compartment at the work’s upper margin are far away, “there.” And yet those who might have expressed outrage over the disfigurement of the faces, their expressionless repetition, monochrome masking, and equation with the impassivity of the bull’s-eye “just weren’t around.” This “thing” (the artwork in question) was able to exist by virtue of some kind of neglect: “I felt that the leveling of those categories, which are the subjective markers of space, implied a totally nonhuman paint of view. It was as if the subjective consciousness, which alone can give meaning to ‘here’ and ‘there,’ had ceased to exist. In the end, these pictures by Jasper Johns

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come to impress me as a dead city might—but a dead city of terrible familiarity. Only objects are left—man-made signs which, in the absence of men, have become objects. And Johns has anticipated their dereliction....I am alone with this thing.”

The shifters that locate the subject’s place in the world—“here” and “there”—have become unhinged, producing a “subject that’s got out of control”—that is, a subject that has lost its bearings or feelings of mastery, its certainty of its place in a given situation.

And without any means to express his or her relationship to the thing, the perceiving subject is shut out: Johns’s systems or “single things,” as Steinberg calls them, are total and impenetrable.

Johns’s refusal to mitigate the discomfort and imagined threat that the thing posed for the self-conscious human subject was not just a cause for concern to modernist critics like Steinberg and Fried; it also contradicted the minimalist desire for objects that a subject could interact with. This desire is articulated most explicitly by the early minimalist objects of Robert Morris. Morris designed simple, unitary forms of subdued monochrome colors devoid of textural incident or complex part-to-whole relationships in order to better communicate a holistic gestalt impression (fig. 32).

For Morris the perceptive, peripatetic human body was the constant against which his objects were measured, whereas for Johns the body was severed from its ability to serve as such a standard.

Morris’s objects eschew intimacy, a fact that Fried found particularly objectionable: “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, it is important to distinguish, make it a thing. Proximity and distance, here and there, are rendered meaningless by things. For the purposes of this discussion, we might imagine an object to be that which implies or begs interaction—indeed, is defined by the promise of such a mutual relationship. A thing, on the other hand, is a material entity that can exist autonomously, independent of any relationship to the body or perception. Although Johns’s artworks were obviously created with the idea that someone would see them, they nevertheless make uncomfortable allusions to things, as Steinberg’s anxious response might suggest.
Morris cannot allow the thing into his practice any more than Fried can articulate it in his essay, and this repression is all the more striking in Morris’s blatant early misreading of Johns’s work as “scientistic.”

But one of the worst and most pretentious of these intimacy-making situations in some of the new work is the scientific element that shows up generally in the application of mathematical or engineering concerns to generate or inflect images. This may have worked brilliantly for Jasper Johns (and he is the prototype for this kind of thinking) in his number and alphabet paintings, in which the exhaustion of a logical system closes out and ends the image and the picture… 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 esthetic… 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. Every internal relationship… tends to eliminate the viewer to the degree that these details pull him into an intimate relation with the work and out of the space in which the object exists.

It is as though Johns’s works, as opposed to minimalist objects, were black holes, vacuums that would tease the viewer into coming closer only to “eliminate” him or her. The minimalist object, on the other hand, can engage in a relationship with the viewer; more important, it can engage in a relationship the viewer can control, can “establish.” Hierarchical relations still exist, though this time between subject and object. Morris masks this hierarchy and his anxiety about the Johnsian thing by accusing Johns, in the same passage, of employing science in the service of “Cubist esthetics,” that is, relational, “European” painting.

In his deft reconfiguration and reinterpretation of Johns’s practice, in his maneuvering from “thingness” to “objecthood” (two conditions Fried conflates but that it is crucial to distinguish), Stella assuaged anxiety about the threat of the thing by sublimating that threat. For what an object restores is the subject that the thing had cast out, retaining the thing’s materiality in order to redeem it. Boehm’s designation of Stella’s Black paintings as Bild-Dinge (image-things) is useful here, though I believe the term could also apply to the 1958 works: “The impenetrability of the Black paintings… evokes an experience in which the emptiness of pictorial profundity topples in the face of the positivity of something simply given. Stella’s artifacts are Bild-Dinge, images in transition over and away from themselves toward the object.” The vacuity of Stella’s abstraction flirts with the kind of emptiness that Steinberg accords to Johns’s thingly constructions, yet in their approach to a positive objecthood—never fully consummated—they pass over this chasm. It is the experience of the viewer, as Boehm avers, that keeps these works from becoming pure things: “The singleness of the picture as a sole thing is for this reason not easy to assert given the experience of the viewer.”

The 1958 works by Stella function as a Freudian fetish, one that would mask (even while expressing) the trauma Johns’s work seemed to provoke for his audience. If the human subject is being figuratively rendered impotent by the utterly incomprehensible things that constitute Johns’s work at this time, then Stella’s paintings enable a fundamental repression necessary for Fried, and indeed for diverse minimalists like Judd or Morris, if the sovereignty of the perceiving subject is to be preserved. In Freud’s conception, “Both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration have found their way into the constitution of the fetish itself.”

The Johnsian thing implies a cancellation of the human subject that both Fried and minimalist avatars must disavow. Stella’s work can operate as a fetish because it both denies Johns’s cancellation of the human subject and affirms that it has already happened (in his initial encounter with Johns’s assemblage in 1958). The ambiguity that is central to Freud’s formulation of the fetish—that it contains both disavowal and affirmation—permeated the reception of Stella’s work, which was seen as both minimalist object and modernist painting from the debut of his Black paintings.

Freud’s discussion of the pathology of the fetish can explain the critical neglect of Stella’s 1958 works, that is, those most engaged with Johns. Nearly all discussions of Stella’s first 1958 works stress the impact of Johns’s example on the young painter.
William Rubin, reviewing Stella’s work in 1970, chides Fried for “omitting the crucial influence of Jasper Johns” in favor of a misleading relationship between Stella and Barnett Newman in his “Three American Painters” essay of 1965. For Rubin, Fried is able to repress Johns precisely because he begins his account of Stella’s history with his first series of paintings, the Black paintings. To acknowledge the 1958 works would be to acknowledge the specter of Johns and the anxiety of the thing that his works held for viewers like Steinberg. Yet Rubin is no more willing to do this than Fried, for he calls attention to Johns only in order to distance Stella from the legacy of abstract expressionism, which after Johns seemed exhausted. Steinberg had also suggested that Johns permanently undermined the abstract-expressionist ethos by demonstrating that the brushwork of de Kooning, for example, was “after all a subject matter of a different kind” and that the ambitions of abstract expressionists to banish what Greenberg called “sculptural” illusionism had failed. It is remarkable how these sentiments resemble Judd’s 1962 estimation of Stella’s own accomplishment on that score: “The absence of illusionistic space in Stella, for example, makes abstract expressionism seem now an inadequate style, makes it appear a compromise with representational art and its meaning.”

Only Jones, in the first study published of the 1958 works, had begun to understand Stella’s encounter with Johns: “The stripes, the serial motifs, the repetition—these are the aspects of Johns’s work that would last in Stella’s work, and they were the qualities that Stella and his historians would valorize, reinforcing his historical position as progenitor of Minimalism rather than as epigone of Neo-dada. . . .” But there are strong indications that at first it was the object quality of John’s work that most affected Stella. Another commentator who suggested that Stella is closer to the world of things than he would admit was Philip Leider, who, in his review of Stella’s first retrospective at MOMA in 1970, questioned the artist’s rationale for his proclivity for his deep stretchers: “What then is Stella really liking about the effect of that deep stretcher? It is the object quality they give to the picture, and if he does not say so it would seem to be again because of his hesitation about the ultimate quality of any literalist innovation, even his own.”

Perhaps the fundamental difference between Johns and Stella, despite their undeniable connection, is the difference between a “sign-painter” and a “house-painter.” Johns’s signs, his targets and flags (“a single thing”) or his maps and alphabets (“a full set”), by virtue of their hermetic completeness divorced from any context of actual use, lack the situational, anthropomorphic allusion contained in the word house—an allusion that suggests that Stella is domesticating the Johnsian thing. Stella opened his Pratt lecture by observing: “There are two problems in painting. One is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting. The first is learning something and the second is making something.” He claimed to have accomplished this by looking at paintings and imitating other painters but then admitted that he had encountered another pair of problems, one “spatial,” and the other “methodological”:

In the first case I had to do something about relational painting, i.e., the balancing of the various parts with and against each other. The obvious answer was symmetry—make it the same all over. The question still remained, though, of how to do this in depth. A symmetrical image or configuration symmetrically placed on an open ground is not balanced out in the illusionistic space. The solution I arrived at, and there are probably quite a few, although I only know of one other, color density, forces illusionistic space out of the painting at constant intervals by using a regulated pattern. The remaining problem was simply to find a method of paint application which followed and complemented the design solution. This was done by using the house painter’s technique and tools.

Illusionistic space within painting, especially the “relational painting” that Stella and Judd explicitly denigrated as essentially European, is a metaphor for real space, where things and human subjects collide. By banishing this metaphor from his work, Stella follows Greenberg and makes his painting more true to its medium (that is, more flat, superficial, two-dimensional). In doing so, like all modernist painters, he risks declaring that painting is an object itself, not something that presumes in some way to contain or signify other objects within its frame. Modernist painting as examined by both
Greenberg and Fried walk a fine line in that it must resist spatial illusionism within its frame without fully collapsing into the real space of the viewer. The modernist painting is thus alienated from the viewer, but this is not to say that it threatens to throw the beholder into the kind of crisis Johns’s inscrutable, closed things do. Real space, while separate from the modernist painting, nevertheless belongs to the viewing subject, as Fried avers. It does not belong to painting (which exists, according to Fried, in a state of grace), nor, as Steinberg implies, does it belong to things. It is their immersion in this space of the beholder that Fried objects to in “literalist” works: “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 if 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 confronting him, distancing him, isolating him. (Such isolation is not solitude any more than such confrontation is communion.)” Fried suggests that it is in the processual nature of their “waiting” in space that these objects both rely on and berate the subjectivity of the beholder. In their refusal to shut the viewer out completely, they prolong the interaction between subject and object, an interaction that makes the beholder aware of his or her isolation amid alien objects. Fried does not deny the priority of the perceiving subject in real space and in this respect, at least, finds common ground with the minimalists he criticizes. Yet it is precisely because he is aware of the quotidian inevitability of this kind of priority that he seeks to locate modernist painting somewhere else.

However, Fried’s “somewhere else” also reserves a place for viewer subjectivity: Fried is far from consigning modernist painting to the realm of Johns’s works, where the thing is in control and proximity and distance have collapsed. Stella would have the viewer locate his paintings in either the real space of the literalist object or the rarefied stratum of modernist painting. But both these locales make room for the human subject, which the assemblages of Johns will not allow. As hotly debated as the “fight for Stella’s soul” was, his Johnsian works from 1958, with their assumption and subsequent dissipation of the traumatic thing and the inhuman world it threatened to portend, engendered future possibilities for both modernist painting and minimalism. If Johns’s work touched the void—the “death of painting” in a “dead city”—then Stella’s painting ingested its lesson, taking one protective step back from the edge so that debates over paintings and objects could continue under watchful human eyes.
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1. During our examination of this painting, Harry Gupker called to my attention red holes puncturing the bottom of the boards at the base of the work [the physical “punts” in the post-and-lintel maling], sug-
gest ing that if they were not there when Stella began making the piece, then perhaps the strip frame once
continued around the whole work, which would suggest an impression of the compartment for the “apple” form.

2. Stella could not be further from the Ginzberg described in Meyer Schapiro’s 1956 essay “The Applique of
Ginsberg: An Essay on the Meaning of Still Life.” Schapiro upholds the primacy of the artist’s subjectiv-
ity, reading applique as both deeply personal for Ginsberg [at times signifying his frustrated erotic desire]
and a habitual motif that belongs to the artist, so that every apple in any subsequent painting must refer
back to his work. But Schapiro’s recognition of the apple can “satisfy a multitude of requirements” —
that one’s own still life of apples could read as “extra-
tary assemblages” or that stil l life is more generally
“a contemplation of a tendency to view the painting
itself as a material thing” and “in a sense, timeless,”
“the space...no labeled locality” (Schapiro 1978,
13, 14, 23)—can usefully be applied to Stella’s use of
character, or materials in their appliques. Schapiro’s
comment also recalls Leo Steinberg’s estimation of
Jasper Johns’s assemblages, which I discuss at the con-
clusion of this essay. If Stella is referencing Ginsberg
and still life, it may be for these reasons. For other
readings of this piece, see Jones 2001, 133.

cusses Stella’s attention to Jackson Pollock’s use of
metallic paint, which Stella described as “repellent” in his interview with Emile de Antonio for the 1955 film
Pointers Painting. Krauss posits that the material
repugnance of the paint is associated with Stella’s
visual, brilliant light, noting that Stella’s materialist
reading of Pollock “went in large part unremarked,” and
his own use of metallic paint would itself be read as
“a homage to his work.” For an elaboration of the
con-
…Pounder’s recognition of “innocence” helped lay the groundwork for such later artists as Johns’s detach-ment and formally-rooted refusals to evoke meaning.”

Lewison, Robert Rosenblum (1971, 10) refers to this trope of childlike conception in connection with the initial reception of Stella’s black paintings: “They seemed to defy interpretation. To most eyes they appeared monotonously simple and inane, a belitting-dereverting impoverishment of art in which the only unit was a regular black stripe and the only compositional principle a naming symmetry as obvious as a child’s idea of a formal garden.”

35. Summers 1975, 186, 190; Greenberg 1959, 13–32.

36. Wessel Lied,” an o”Hoch!” entrance to the Auschwitz camp; and Arbeit Macht confession. The Reichstag is the German parliament building;’s own “left over areas,” which I discuss below.


80. Stella, conversation with author, March 7, 2005; see Sandler 1978, 284. The other participants in the panel, moderated by Robert Goldwater, included Johns, Alfred Leslie, The Marriage of Reason and Squalor black paintings is named after the Seven Steps Café, but I didn’t hang out there; it was a dyke bar. I only walked by it, but it was big in Carl Andre’s imagi-nation.”


41. Du Lorch on the nurses, see the notes accompa-nying the sketch Stella made for a lecture at Pratt Institute (fig. 20, transcribed in Richmond 1976, 79) and my discussion of this painting below. Then Apple’s is inscribed in Stella’s hand, “West Broadway, D.K.” Stella’s inscription on the back of the untitled assemblage from the Weener Center for the arts, “Stella fen AD MCMLIX,” suggests that he finished the work in 1959 while he was immersed in his Black paintings series. Although this is a possibility, Fried dismisses it given his revelation of Stella’s practice at the time (conversation with the author, January 20, 2005).

42. Stella, conversation with author, March 3, 2005. Jones does not include Red River Valley on her list of Edgell Street works though it also bears an Edgell Street inscription. 43. See Solomon 1986, take 6, p. 5, where Stella talks about the thick stretcher in the context of his final months at Princeton (at the same time that Stephen Greene suggested he start using cotton duck). The title Golconda probably comes from Colorado Springs, the hometown of Stella’s college friend and biogra-pher Sidney Guberman. In the summer of 1956, after his sophomore year, Stella hitchhiked from his parents’ summer house in Spencertown, Massachusetts, intending to go to Los Angeles; he got as far as Colorado, where he stayed with Guberman, before returning home via New Dowers (Guberman 1955, 22). The title Red River Valley, referring to a place on the borders of North and South Dakota and Minnesota, could come from this trip at all.

45. Stella, conversation with the author, March 3, 2005, and Bannard, letter to the author, January 6, 2005. Bannard rejects the notion that the thick stretcher makes the paintings more objective.

46. Richardson 1976, 6, Glaser 1980, 32; Jones 1996, 156.


41. Fried 1996, “An Introduction to My Art Criticism,” 41–72. In this group of “romantics,” Fried specifically mentions Barnett Newman, Clifford 308, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and their heirs: Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Nolan. On Stella’s opticality, see Solomon 1986, take 6, p. 5. See also Stella’s explicit mention of opticality in Lederer 1962, 25: “I want to make the paintings as direct as possible. I want to make them simple and I want to make them clear. And one of the reasons I want to do that is to realize that there is no visual illusion or opticality or whatever you want to call it—the direct sort of visual experience.”


52. Du Lorch 1990, 4f–5f, 9f.

53. Richardson 1976, 1–4, for detailed commentary on the titles of the black paintings, which Richardson 1976, 31.

54. Richardson 1976, 39. “One of my late ‘50s black paintings is named after the Seven Steps Café, but I didn’t hang out there; it was a dyke bar. I only walked by it, but it was big in Carl Andre’s imagi-nation.”

55. Fried 1998, “An Introduction to My Art Criticism” (1966), 88. For an essay that demonstrates Greenberg’s groundwork for such later claims as Johns’s detach-ment and formally-rooted refusals to evoke meaning.” Likewise, Robert Rosenblum (1971, 10) refers to this trope of childlike conception in connection with the initial reception of Stella’s black paintings: “They seemed to defy interpretation. To most eyes they appeared monotonously simple and inane, a belit-
Stella created his “no-color” by mixing an assortment of colored paints purchased at surplus hardware stores on Canal Street. These paint cans had lost their labels and therefore were discounted to one dollar a gallon (telephone message to Harry Cooper, April 22, 2005).

6a. Richardson 1995, 10, Stella painted second versions of Gute Fahne Hoch! and Arbeit Macht Frei. Tomkins 1984, 77. Residual figure-ground relation of These bands defining an interior cruciform shape. It is precisely the fact that these corner areas, no matter how remote, activate an illusionistic ground for the right-angled figures they also that led Stella to cut away the corners in his Aluminum paintings.

67.中超 2013, 32 (translation mine).

68. Jones 1996, 421; see Rosenberg 1971, 15. Fried’s piece is inscribed, “Painted by Frank P. Stella willingly 4-3-56 West Broadway New York City.” Fried dismisses the possibility that Stella continued to paint in this colorful mode after working on the Black series for some months and avers that this work was an exception made for him as a sort of souvenir (conversation with the author, January 21, 2005). However, Barnard owns a small piece on canvasboard consisting of alternating red and purple stripes, dated 1956. While Stella may have continued using color in this, yet in these two he duplicated (presumably earlier pieces that he believed he had lost (Barnard, conversation with the author, March 24, 2005). The orientation of fugalism as reproduced in this volume differs from that in previous publications and exhibits, and reflects Stella’s present conviction about how the work was originally intended to be viewed.


70. Tomkins 1984, 62.


72. Jones 1996, 157; see Stella’s association of the color yellow with New York continues into his “fast color paintings” with Antonia. He was prompted to rework that painting in a monochrome mode when, commending to Queens for a house-painting job during his first year in the city, he was struck by sunlight diagonally streaming in through a subway car as it emerged from a tunnel. Geelhaar 1966, 26, also affirms that Stella closely associated the yellow-and-yellow combination with the “composition” of New York City.

73. In the first group of diagrams on the sheet [on which I suppose perfect Day for Banana Fish and Plum Island belong], before the “newness,” “Stella uses emphasis ‘REPEITION’ as the means for getting to ‘the thing itself/how a stripe/works,’” a quality he repeatedly averred he learned from Johns. Indeed, the stripe might have another, more obvious source than either Dudenhefner or Johns for this particular work: Barnard remembers seeing the 1955 exhibition The New Decade with Stella at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the two were particularly struck by Hofmann’s Fishes with Red Eyes (1954), an oblong prototype for the compositional layout of Your Lips Are Red (letter to the author, January 26, 2005). It is as Stella remarked, “I held Rothko’s softness, slickness, the one image—the presence and power of one thing, but at the beginning, I didn’t realize the full implications of his paintings.” (Br. Barnard 1970, 10). On Plum Island and Rothko, see Rosenberg 1971, 15. Your Lips Are Red was one at time entitled Story (considerations of American Art, Frank Stella, Pp. 8, series §). For reference to Mary Loes Douthon, see W. Rubin 1970, 70, n. 10, and Geelhaar 1966, 20, for Stella’s opinion of Hofmann’s W. Rubin 1970, 15, n. 32.

74. Geelhaar 1966, 21. In conversations with the author both Stella (March 7, 2005) and Barnard (March 14, 2005) confirmed this episode. In our examination of Plum Island, Harry Cooper and I see what appears to be some paint test next to the top of the painting, now hidden by green overpainting, suggesting that perhaps this work may have also been delayed (though not by Green). A technical study would be required to confirm this, however.

75. Tomkins 1984, 62. See also Solomon 1966, pake 5, p. 5; Tillem 1959, 9.

76. A parallel with Robert Rauschenberg’s Factum i and ii (1954) might be tempting here. Yet this pair by Rauschenberg does something that, while analogous, is different in kind: each of its constituent paintings asserts an inevitable singularity that surfaces despite an initial perception of repetition (or replication) between the two works. They were painted simultaneously, so that neither Factum is a copy of the other. This virtue, while at first appearing to undermine the singularity of the abstract-expressionist gesture, actually affords a singularity for (particularly) a different sort—one rooted not in a mythic genius or master-piece but in the certainty of accident, or perhaps in an uncontrollable unconscious (see Joseph 2003, 91-93). Then Apples and the Yale untitled piece could never be mistaken for replicas of each other; nor is repetition or simultaneous construction an issue here. Each is already “unique,” but divided they tell only half the story of what problems in composition, color, and materiality Stella was working out between them.


79. Morris 1995, “Notes on Sculpture, Part I” (1965), 11. Fried 1968, “Art and Objecthood” (1969), 146-147 makes a similar distinction between a thing and an object in “The Thing” (1960): “An independent, self-supporting thing may become an object if we place it before us, whether in immedi- ate perception or by bringing it to mind in a reci- lative re-presentation: however, the thingness character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object, nor can it be defined in any way in terms of the objectness of the object.”

80. Morris 1995, “Notes on Sculpture, Part I,” 14-15. Morris later makes the distinction between “struc- ture,” “objects,” and “sculpture” in “Notes on Sculpt- ure, Part II,” but this does not contradict what I have been arguing about the difference between thing and object for Morris. “Structure” is his direct response to the publicity generated by the Jewish Museum’s Primary Structures exhibition in 1966, whereas “sculp- ture” describes the works he is most interested in, and “objects” designates smaller, more “decorative” works. These categories, however, are by no means exclusive, and it is possible to imagine works conforming to two or three of them simultaneously.

81. Boothe 1972, 14. Steinberg makes the point that Stella’s paintings could be objects in transition (a term used by nearly all commentators to describe the 1958 works, though simply to describe a teleological progress toward the Black paintings) is most neatly expressed in Boothe’s oversize Heideggerian gesture in calling the work “Das Ding geworden Bild” (the becoming—a thing image, 93). I am exploring the difference between Ding and Objekt in German as well as English, and while Boothe does not always distin- guish between the two, his covertures to Heidegger especially make clear that he uses “das Ding” in a manner fundamentally different from “das Objekt.” But while at first, given my reading, it would make more sense to think of Stella’s works as “Ding—Objekte,” because they are the presence of the “thing” in his hybrid construction serves to reveal the ghost that haunts these paintings.

82. Fried 1976, 197.

83. W. Rubin 1970, 64. Steinberg 1972, “Jasper Johns,” 22. See also Fried’s review of Johns’s 1975 show at Castelli for his opinion of Johns’s relation to the “de Kooning problem,” namely, “given one’s predilection for ‘painterly’ brushwork, how to organize the sur- face of the canvas so as not to yield a Gabo space” (Fried 1998, “New York Letter” [1963], 289). Fried refuses to see Johns’s assumption of de Kooning’s painterly gesture as a critique, preferring to dwell on the pathos of his belatedness, “in that the historical moment to which his style belongs is past” (1998, 186).


85. Fried 1968, “Art and Objecthood” (1969), 146-147 makes a similar distinction between a thing and an object in “The Thing” (1960): “An independent, self-supporting thing may become an object if we place it before us, whether in immedi- ate perception or by bringing it to mind in a reci- lative re-presentation: however, the thingness character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object, nor can it be defined in any way in terms of the objectness of the object.”

86. Fried 1975, “In the Galleries: Frank Stella” (1962), 57. On Stella’s association of de Kooning with Johns (as Fried would have it), who enables us to recognize the pastness of de Kooning’s style. For Judd on Stella: Judd 1975, “In the Galleries: Frank Stella” (1962), 57. Fried refuses to see John’s assumption of de Kooning’s painterly gesture as a critique, preferring to dwell on the pathos of his belatedness, “in that the historical moment to which his style belongs is past” (1998, 186).

87. See also Fried’s review of Johns’s 1973 show at Castelli for his opinion of Johns’s relation to the “de Kooning problem,” namely, “given one’s predilection for ‘painterly’ brushwork, how to organize the sur- face of the canvas so as not to yield a Gabo space” (Fried 1998, “New York Letter” [1963], 289). Fried refuses to see Johns’s assumption of de Kooning’s painterly gesture as a critique, preferring to dwell on the pathos of his belatedness, “in that the historical moment to which his style belongs is past” (1998, 186).