

Ellsworth Kelly, *Red Yellow Blue, V*, 1968. Oil on canvas: 3 joined panels, 75' x 36½' x 10½'. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Norris, Chagrin Falls, Ohio. At The Museum of Modern Art.

## NEW YORK

APRIL KINGSLEY

Ellsworth Kelly once said that he "never wanted to do anything that was open to everybody". His current retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art proves that he has accomplished that goal. While occupying a position outside the mainstream of "post-painterly abstraction" (which much of his work predated and predicted) he has consistently worked within an experientially derived form world arrived at through intuition, not intellect. I always thought Kelly's work simple, and easily likeable, but I find, on seeing it in a body, that his contribution is considerably more substantial than I had given him credit for. Eugene Goossens' detailed analysis of Kelly's life and work in the accompanying catalogue is responsible in large measure for this shift in estimation. I must admit, Thanks to Kelly's frankness about his sources (which extends to supplying photographs of his visual source material) the catalogue is refreshingly informative in a specific way.

Mr. Goossens' writing style is lucid, and unpretentious—a perfect match both for Kelly's biographical openness and his unadorned painting style. The installation of the more than 75 paintings, sculptures and drawings was not nearly as instructive, however, due in large part to the disjunctive separation of his early work from the main body of his production, and of that in turn from his sculpture and a few "extra" paintings located in the lobby. Since Kelly's development hardly seems to have proceeded in a linear fashion, the viewer would be better served by being able to make visual cross-references between works. There is a need to measure the small scale of the early work against large recent paintings with related imagery.

In general, I find Kelly's experimental paintings less interesting than those in which he is handling familiar materials with ease. Many of the Mondrian- or Sophie Tauber-Arp-derived paintings in which he explores the interactions of colored rectangles with one another lack the inventiveness that shaping demands and seem emotionally flat when compared with paintings like *Afasié*, 1966 or *Red Blue*, 1964. The black and white canvases of the middle fifties following his return from Paris still seem to be his most tense, carefully adjusted paintings. They overlap the concerns of Myron Stout who, working independently, strives to obtain maximum volumetricity within the two dimensions of a black and white painting through minutely adjusting surface apportionment. For both artists shaping is the primary concern—Stout with organic curved shapes, Kelly with those as well as with conventional geometric shapes.

I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Goossens that "A conventional formalistic study [of Kelly's art] was . . . not enough". It never is. His analyses of Kelly's shapes in terms of physical phenomena seen by the artist went far to illuminate and enliven the expressive content of Kelly's art. Kelly's way of seeing windows, railings, bridges, architectural facades and shadows verges on the poetic. It is interesting that this proto-Minimalist found so much of his inspiration in architecture, both ancient and modern, in the light of Minimal sculpture's quasi-architectural nature. It is also fascinating that Kelly's simple geometry and clear shapes can have resulted from his use of the collage technique which is usually associated with complex multiplexed imagery.

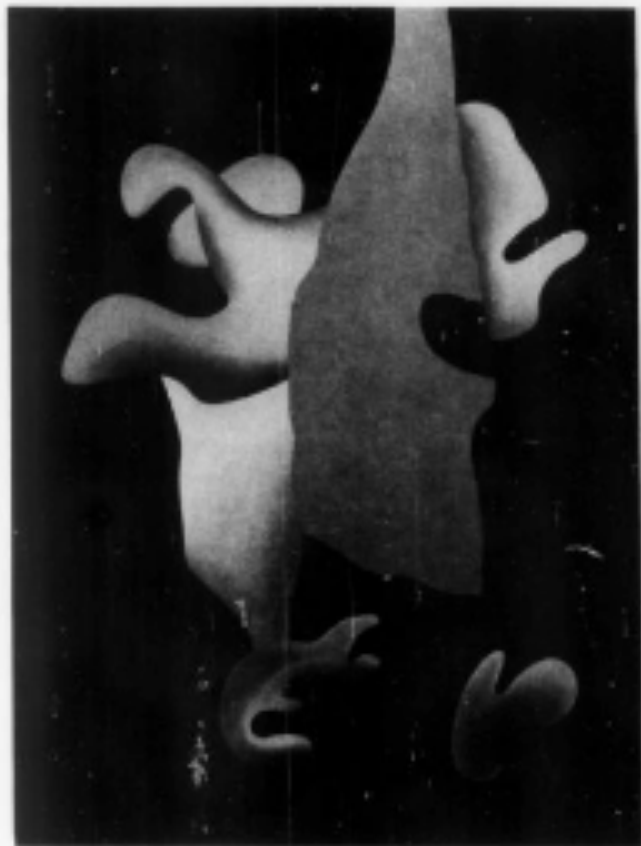
Mr. Goossens' forte is his ability to balance biographical insights with pure formal analysis, but occasionally he fails to be careful enough with the latter. He says, for instance, that *Red Yellow Blue V*, 1968 doesn't "give the impression of a perspectival illusion" despite the fact that it tapers toward the right and that the smallest unit is blue, a color "normally considered receding". I find the illusion of perspective unavoidable. In reproduction the immediate impression given is that the painting has been photographed at an angle. In the flesh, so to speak, the blue area is too small to read equally against the brighter hues to its left and the picture plane fails to hold itself flat. Kelly's ability to adjust color to maintain flatness works best when the receding color is given added weight through increased area (as in *Red Green*, 1960); when it is located beneath the earthy or precedent color (as in *Blue Green*, 1960); or when the two hues are treated equally (as in *Series of Five Paintings*, 1966). The same holds true for bipartite black and white paintings. In *White Green*, 1972 black is reduced to a slender reserve left by an upward swelling white plane and reads like night sky above an illuminated earth. A landscape reading is even more inevitable when the colors are reversed, but when the swell of the curve is reversed so that it is concave to a convex reserved area or "sky" as it is on the cover of the catalogue, this literal reading is impossible and surface flatness is maintained. Vertical divisions don't carry the landscape implications inevitable with horizontal divisions, but the latter are more challenging.

Kelly's achievement is highest when he faces the most difficult challenges with the simplest possible means. Despite its blatantly reduced, almost poster-like plainness, Kelly's art is sophisticated and yet highly idiosyncratic. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that he is a man virtually without followers. With the exception of some work by Jack Youngerman and Al Held in the early sixties which seem to reflect its concerns, Kelly's painting stands alone.

The relationships between Al Held's paintings and the man-made, architectural, and predominant urban world which surrounds us are more explicit than Kelly's. The huge black and



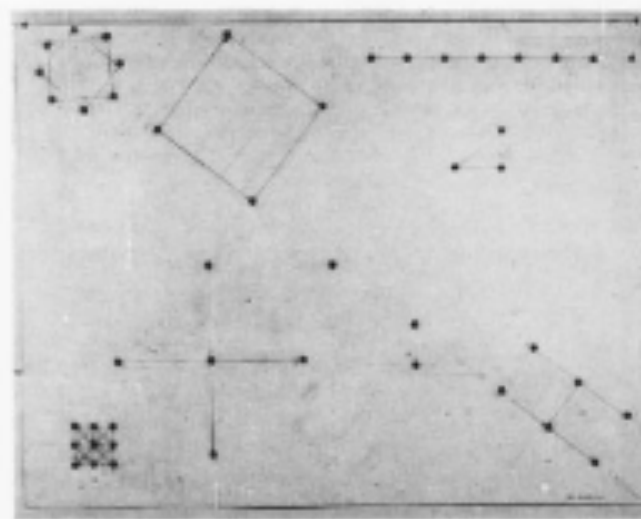
Claes Hill. *Dictionnaire*, 1973. Acrylic on fiberglass-covered canvas, 72" x 71", Zahradnik Gallery, New York



Harada. *Jewel with Moon and Cloud*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 91" x 65"



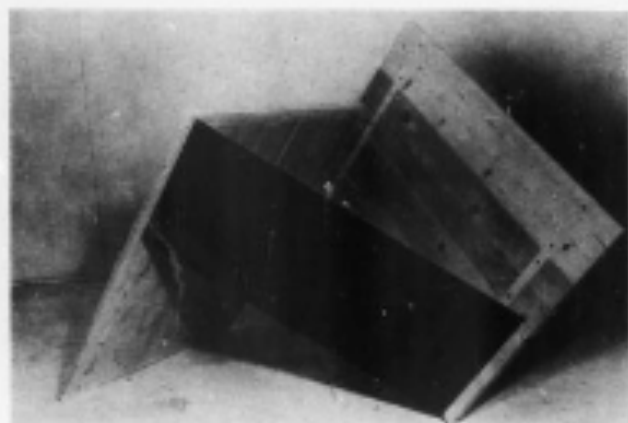
John Stahly. *Rose on a Hill, Africa, 3*. Oil on canvas, 26" x 29". Green Mountain Gallery



Mel Bochner. *Rules of Inference*, 1973. Charcoal and gouache on paper, 33" x 30". Susannah Gallery

Three views of Salvatore Romano's reusable *Prototype for a Sculpture*, 1973. Aluminum, water, polyurethane, height 14". Max Hachtman Gallery





Jim Harrington. *Wood/Steel*, 1973. Max Hachtman Gallery



Jackie Ferrara. *Stairway*, 1973. Cotton batting, glue, cardboard, 52" x 36" x 30". A.M. Sachs Gallery

white paintings that filled both branches of the Andre Emmerich Gallery recently almost seem like stacked skyscraper versions of an 18th-century geometrician-architect's dream city. The crowding of his forms (occasionally to the point of horror vacui) as they jostle one another for pictorial space seems very much in tune with New York. Some of the forms seem to float menacingly outward as if to attack the viewer, while others maintain a rigid stance somewhere in the picture space which they defend aggressively. No single perspective controls their configurations, which have undergone innumerable alterations. Held's surfaces are marked with the myriad decisions intuitively made in the process of constructing the formal relationships between the squares, circles and triangles which seem to obsess him. The rationality which one normally associates with solid geometry is contradicted by the transparency/opacity duality that informs Held's handling of them. To confuse the situation further, Held often varies the width of the defining lines in inverse proportion to our expectations. For instance, a smallish triangular box to the right in *Black Nile IV* that seems to project forward in front of many other forms has at the same time an implied location behind the whole network of interlaced forms due to its thinner, and therefore further, outlines. In fact, a major difference between the current show and Held's last one is the increase in the width variations of his lines.

Southwest, in the uptown gallery, seemed to have the thickest lines—a few stabilizing verticals which seemed to be located behind  
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Nora Speyer. *Men and Women, III*. Oil on canvas, 70" x 80". Landmark Gallery

Al Held. *Black Nile IV*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 11" x 20". Andre Emmerich Gallery

