

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

self-imposed rather than the product of external assault; in others, sexuality has reverted to a kind of primal androgyny that precedes the segregation into the two distinct states, male and female. In either case an overwhelming feeling of devastation, a loss of all sense of oneness and wholeness, reigns. Since this haunting and ghastly vision is unremittingly lugubrious, it is far more disturbing than the black irony which informed so many of Picasso's previous confrontations with the horrors of old-age. Now that many of the most immediate issues surrounding these paintings have been aired through this trio of shows and catalogues, the way is open for a broader and more fully elaborated examination of the nature of the erotic in late Picasso.

The third issue that warrants substantial discussion arises out of the very *raison d'être* of the show. According to Marie-Laure Bernadec, the selectors' aim was to place Picasso in the present, to situate him as a contemporary artist. Yet a *Spätstil* is almost by definition solipsistic, the product of an inward-turning that separates the artist from his immediate matrix. Nevertheless, as noted above, the resurgence of a figurative expressionism in vanguard painting did contribute to the reassessment of these works. Late in his career Picasso expressed his ambition to be central to whatever painting should follow: *'Qu'est-ce qu'elle fera la peinture quand je ne serai plus là? Il faudra bien qu'elle me passe sur le corps! Elle ne pourra pas passer à côté, non?'* While Scarpetta makes a spirited case for the superiority of Picasso's work over that which he calls somewhat inaccurately 'Bad Painting', he misrepresents much of this recent work – and fails to address the central problem. Must a reading of Picasso as a key contemporary figure entail an interpretation of his art that is necessarily superficial and tangential? Does the assertion of the centrality of any *Spätstil* to its contemporary moment involve at the least a paradox, and possibly even a revision in our terms of reference?

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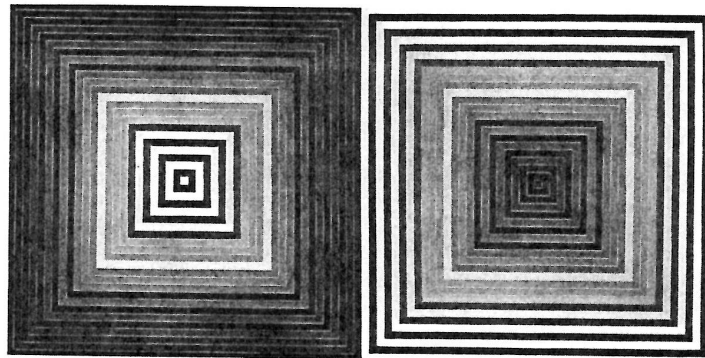
<sup>1</sup> *Le Dernier Picasso: 1953-1973* continues at the **Musée d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou**, until 16th May; it will be shown at the **Tate Gallery, London**, from 23rd June to 18th September.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Dernier Picasso: 1953-1973*. 390 pp. + approx. 100 col. pls. + numerous b. & w. ill. (Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1988), FF.290. ISBN 2-85850-441-5.

**Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum  
Frank Stella: Works 1970-1987**

William S. Rubin ends his second MoMA retrospective monograph on Frank Stella by saying that no other painter has ever been more committed to trying to 'make it better' – but how can an artist who has already made 'the best' (as Rubin has so often stated), the greatest paintings of his generation, improve on perfection?<sup>1</sup> Many people still prefer the Black paintings that made Stella famous when they were shown at Leo Castelli and The Museum of Modern Art in 1959. And now-

69. *Le rêve de d'Alenbert*, by Frank Stella. 1974. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 360 by 721.4 cm. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam).



adays, these early, extremely reduced paintings are being praised for more than their formal qualities, so valued by Rubin. A post-formalist drive to read content into Stella's abstractions has recently been spearheaded by art historian Robert Rosenblum. In his introduction to the first volume of the catalogue raisonné of Stella's 1958-65 paintings he sees the Black paintings as imbued with a 'kind of sanctified mystery associated with a shrine or private revelation.' Citing references made in the titles of these paintings to a Manhattan tenement (*Arundel Castle*), a funerary monument (*Getty Tomb*), and to Nazism (*Die Fahne Hoch* and *Arbeit Macht Frei*), Rosenblum asserts:

Such elucidations helped to deny the usual early response to these paintings – that they were thoroughly hermetic and cerebral – and to confirm the growing revelation that they reflect an awareness of such universal gloom that they may even end up as younger-generation counterparts to the somber, life-denying mood of many of Rothko's own late series paintings.<sup>2</sup>

The new, broadened view of Stella's abstractions can provide a useful guide to viewing the paintings done between 1970 and the present in the current touring retrospective.<sup>3</sup> Although obliged every once in a while to accept the potential import of Stella's titles, Rubin remains here – as he was in his 1970 monograph for Stella's first MoMA retrospective – ever the formalist, mainly concerned with how the paintings were made and which ones function better than others. Rubin is thus able to declare his preference for one painting over another in purely pictorial terms while sidestepping the issue of content and minimising the plethora of art historical associations, sources and references in Stella's work – so numerous as to be positively staggering. Among the more relevant areas that remain to be explored are the influence of Islamic art and architecture<sup>4</sup> on his geometric illusionism (not only Celtic illumination), particularly on the Mitered Mazes series; the influence of Franz Kline, whose infusion of dynamism and muscular energy into Constructivism provides one model for Stella's own present work; and the possible cross-fertilisation among friends and other contemporaries, such as Ron Davis, John Chamberlain, Roy Lichtenstein, William T. Williams and, especially, Al Held. The parallels between Held's *auvre* and Stella's (the Cones and Columns paintings being a

current example), have been as consistently ignored as the similarities between Joseph Albers's nested squares and Stella's early paintings (Fig.69). Then too, Stella's recent hyper-enlargement of Picasso's and Léger's Cubism ought not to blind us to its presence behind all of his assembled work.

But a formalist does even less justice to his subject by slighting the biographical data that must bear heavily on the work at some points in an artist's life. For example, Stella's long commitment to banded imagery always bore some relationship, however distant, to roads among other things. One's eyes zipped along those coloured bands of 1958-65, jumping from one band to the next at the optical jogs where they crossed or switched to a different direction. The movement was swift, the illusions fleeting. Rosenblum points out in the *catalogue raisonné* that Stella's silvery 1960 painting, *Marquis de Portago*, was named for a Spanish racing driver who had been killed in a crash, the painting's four protruding corners being related in the artist's mind to the metal fenders of the Marquis's Ferrari. Given that, surely it is not too far fetched to see a connection between Stella's life at a time of intense involvement with racing cars and their drivers, and the explosively fragmented, high-impacted look of Stella's work after the mid-seventies. He lost one close friend, racing driver Ronnie Peterson, after a Grand Prix collision in 1978 and dedicated a series of graphics to him. Peter Gregg, the other racer with whom he often drove to various European racetracks or circuits, took his own life only a few months after he and Stella survived an auto-crash on route to the races at Le Mans.

The dizzying, parabolically-curved grid that replaced the straight lines which had dominated Stella's thinking up until then was first employed in the *Polar co-ordinates* prints dedicated to Peterson. Rubin points out the formal benefits of these crisscrossing parallel curves etched into the aluminium surfaces of the *Circuit* reliefs – Stella's largest and, Rubin feels, most successful series yet. He notes that Stella worked 'flat out' – a driver's term – between 1981 and 1984 with almost maniacal concentration on these paintings, but makes no connections between the artist's emotional life and the way the paintings look. The frenzied madness of the *Circuits* is sometimes constrained between the rigid borders of a rectangle, but at other times the wriggling Flexicurves burst out of the 'frame' to spill a profusion of elements over the 'ground'

the viewer with the most rewards. That is why *I* think they are 'the best.'

APRIL KINGSLEY

<sup>1</sup>*Frank Stella 1970-1987*. Text by William S. Rubin. 172 pp. + 74 col. pls. + 52 b. & w. ills. (The Museum of Modern Art, 1987), \$45.00 HB; \$22.50 PB. ISBN 0-87070-593-8 (HB); ISBN 0-87070-599-7 (PB).

<sup>2</sup>*Frank Stella Paintings 1958 to 1965. A Catalogue Raisonné*. Compiled by Lawrence Rubin; introduction by Robert Rosenblum. 280 pp. + 139 col. pls. (incl. 14 details) + 136 b. & w. ills. (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1986), \$75.00. ISBN 0-941434-92-3 (v.1).

<sup>3</sup>*Frank Stella 1970-1987* was at the **Museum of Modern Art, New York** from 12th October 1987 to 5th January 1988; it is at the **Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam** to 15th April and then at the **Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris** (joined by earlier works) from 16th May to mid-August. It continues into 1989 in Minneapolis, Houston and Los Angeles.

<sup>4</sup>Stella's first trip to Europe in 1961 included a stay in Spain and Morocco.

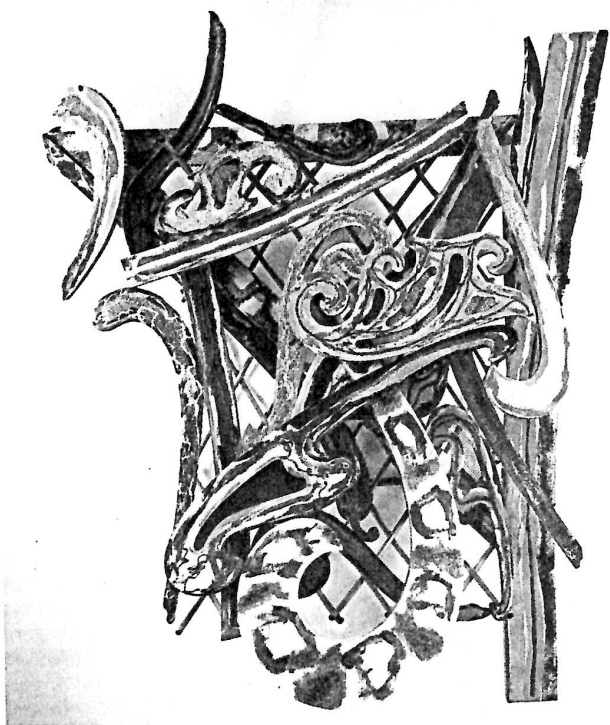
<sup>5</sup>A fact that is entirely in keeping with the paintings' source of inspiration in Stella's birdwatching activities during that period.

<sup>6</sup>Except for the ones that contain closed three-dimensional volumes, as those are less visually and conceptually stimulating.

### Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller Henry van de Velde (1863-1957)

The **Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller**, which celebrates in 1988 its fiftieth anniversary, was designed by Henry van de Velde; it opened as a temporary museum which eventually became the permanent building we know now. Van de Velde's reputation is mainly based on his career as an architect and a designer of furniture, and other forms of applied art; however, he began his artistic activities as an Antwerp painter and the current exhibition of paintings and drawings (to 1st May) marks these early years.\* He was trained in the traditional course at the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts, with Charles Verlat as one of his main teachers. In 1883 he joined the artists' group '*Als ik kan*' ('If I can') consisting of Verlat's pupils.

The young Van de Velde had a strong penchant for *avant-garde* movements, but in that particular respect '*Als ik kan*' had little to offer. Three years later he resigned and became a co-founder of *L'Art Indépendant*, an organisation with its own



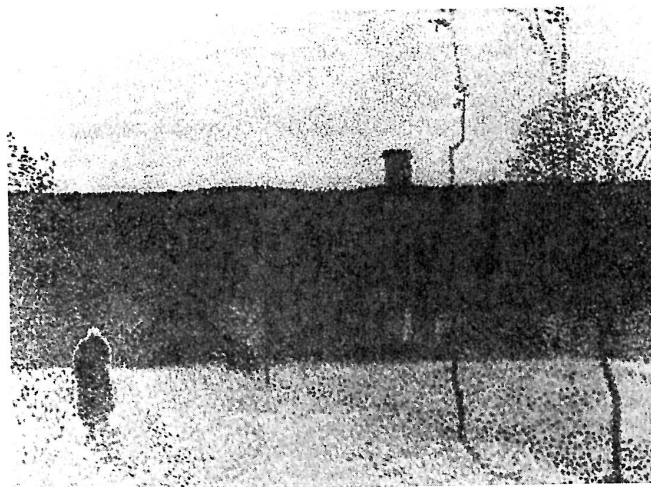
70. *Ram gangra*, 5.5x, by Frank Stella. 1978. Mixed media on aluminium, metal tubing and wire mesh, 292.2 by 230 by 110.6 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam).

of the white wall. In the *Circuits*, all named for race tracks, Stella comes as close as he ever has to incoherence, though even here patient study rewards one with a semblance of visual order.

To imagine oneself hurtling along Stella's new curving bands and just missing objects moving too fast to recognise is a strange experience – like flight through debris-ridden outer space in a rocket ship during an asteroid storm. Zipping in and out of space on the flashing optical vectors of Stella's pre-1970 bands was nothing like this. Then one could stop the visual vibrations by mentally returning to the certainty that the painting was actually flat. The streamlined movements of the deceptively deco-looking *Polish village* series of the early seventies, like those of the *Irregular polygons* of the late sixties, seem sedate, even oppressively constrained in comparison to the *Circuits*. But what a far cry, too, from the joyously Matissean florals and cloverleaves, fans and rainbows of the late-sixties *Protractor* series and their late-seventies counterparts, the lyrical *Exotic* and *Indian Birds* (Fig. 70) with their varicoloured tropical plumage. Straight line grids are mechanically curved here to support the cooing, preening forms of nested French curves and kissing protractors as Stella makes literal the 'spherical' or 'projective' space he so admires in Caravaggio's paintings. But the *Exotic birds* are not paintings about speed; rather they concern sensuous physicality.<sup>5</sup> Whatever velocity one senses here is optical, conceptual. Stella seems to have alternated between the two kinds of energy – optical and muscular – throughout his career.

Both kinds of energy come crashing together in the *Cones and pillars*. In fact, the post-impact look of the series as a whole, with broken columns falling over one another, scattering cones and shards of

matter in every direction, makes a compelling visual metaphor for Dionysian forces overwhelming Apollonian stability. Not everyone, however, will read these paintings the same way. We have learned from watching Stella for three decades, that his passion for clarity is equalled only by his need for complexity and ambiguity. Perhaps then, when we quote Stella's well-known line that 'what you see is what you see,' we ought to italicise the second 'you' to de-literalise the meaning and acknowledge our necessarily active rôle in his aesthetic process. Traditional illusionistic perspective and *faux*-modelling in addition to multi-levelled literal space; hard edges and loose, painterly brushwork; diagrammatic systems of black and white in conjunction with intense chords of colour; and the extremely complex interaction of hollows and voids – all these aspects of the *Cones and pillars*,<sup>6</sup> plus their emotional content, add up to paintings in which the artist has taken the most daring risks and provided



71. *Farm at twilight*, by Henry van de Velde. 1889. 45 by 60 cm. (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp; exh. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo).