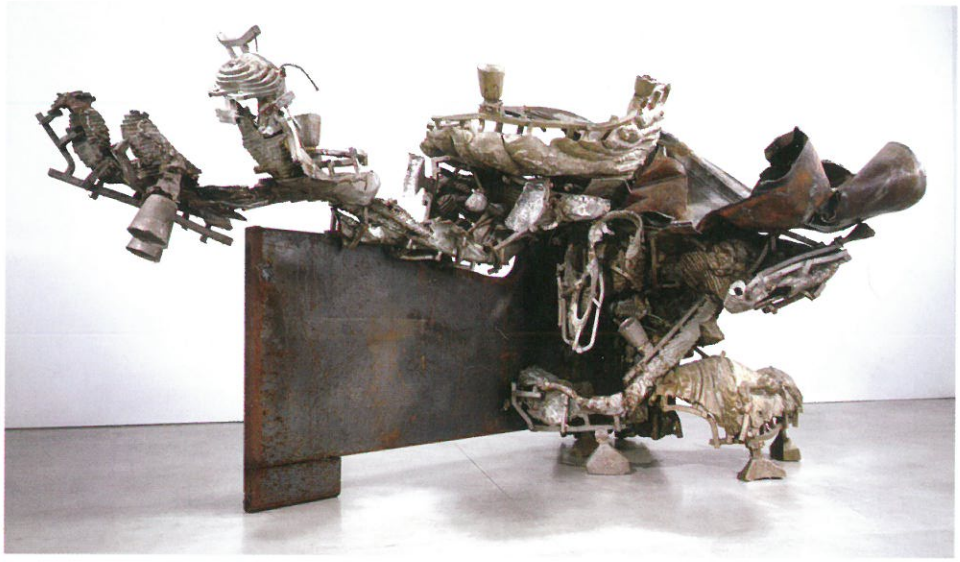


A Conversation with

Frank Stella

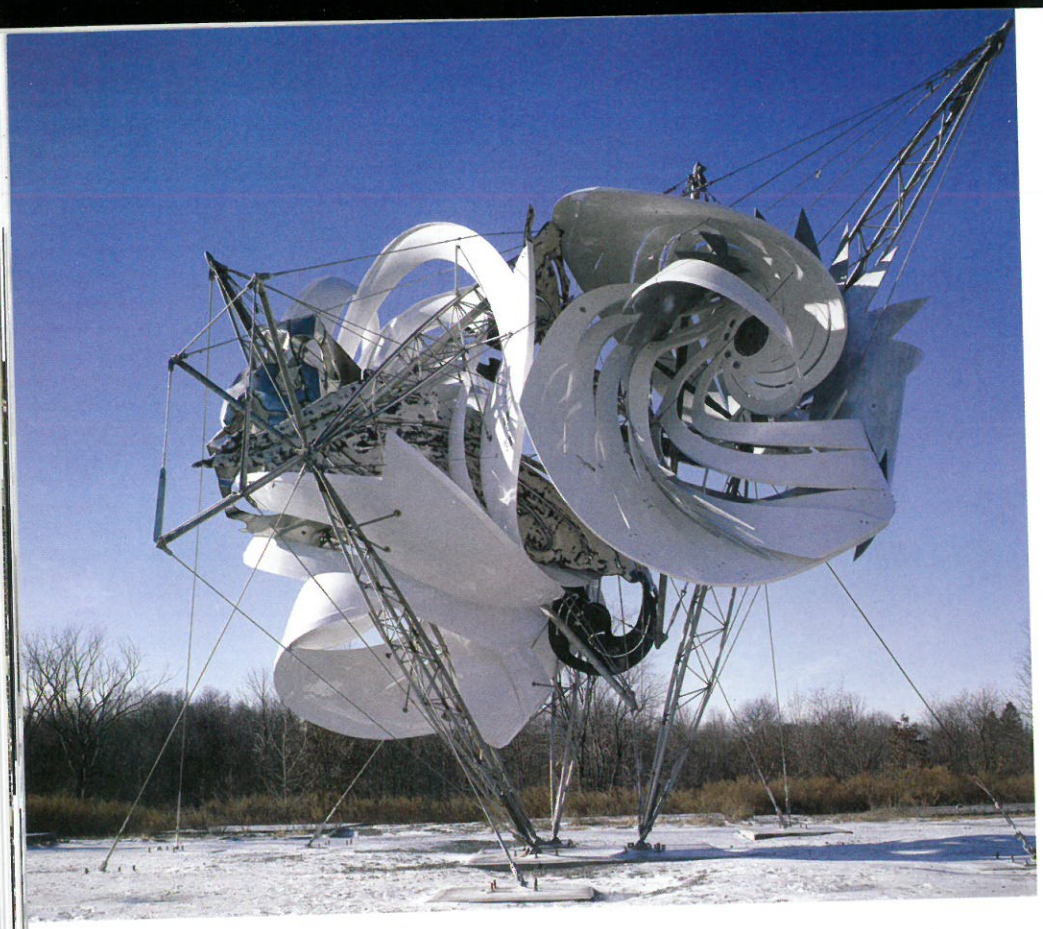
Action and Spatial Engagement

BY KLAUS OTTMANN

Frank Stella, who is honored this year with the International Sculpture Center's 2011 Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award, will always be best remembered for his radical Black Paintings (1958–60), which consist of symmetrical bands of black paint separated by narrow interstices of unpainted canvas. When they were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art's pivotal "16 Americans" (1959–60), they enraged many a critic. Almost absurdly reductive and non-relational, the Black Paintings have been credited by Irving Sandler with single-handedly dealing the death blow to American gesture painting.[1] Today, they are universally considered seminal works of 20th-century American art.

In time, Stella moved from his starkly Minimalist work of the late 1950s and early 1960s to shaped canvases and polychrome reliefs in the 1970s, and eventually into full-blown three-dimensional, maximalist pictorial space with his polychrome sculptures, beginning in the mid-1980s. Ironically, he has always insisted that his three-dimensional works are paintings, not sculptures: "They're paintings because they function in a pictorial way... They are organized in a pictorial way."[2]

Opposite: *The Mat-Maker (D-13, 2X)*, 1990. Mixed media on cast and fabricated aluminum, 139.5 x 101 x 43.5 in. Above: *Wappingers Falls*, 1995. Cast stainless steel, aluminum, bronze, and carbon steel, 81 x 159 x 114 in.



Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3X, 2001. Stainless steel, aluminum, carbon fiber, and paint on fiberglass, 31 x 39 x 34 ft.

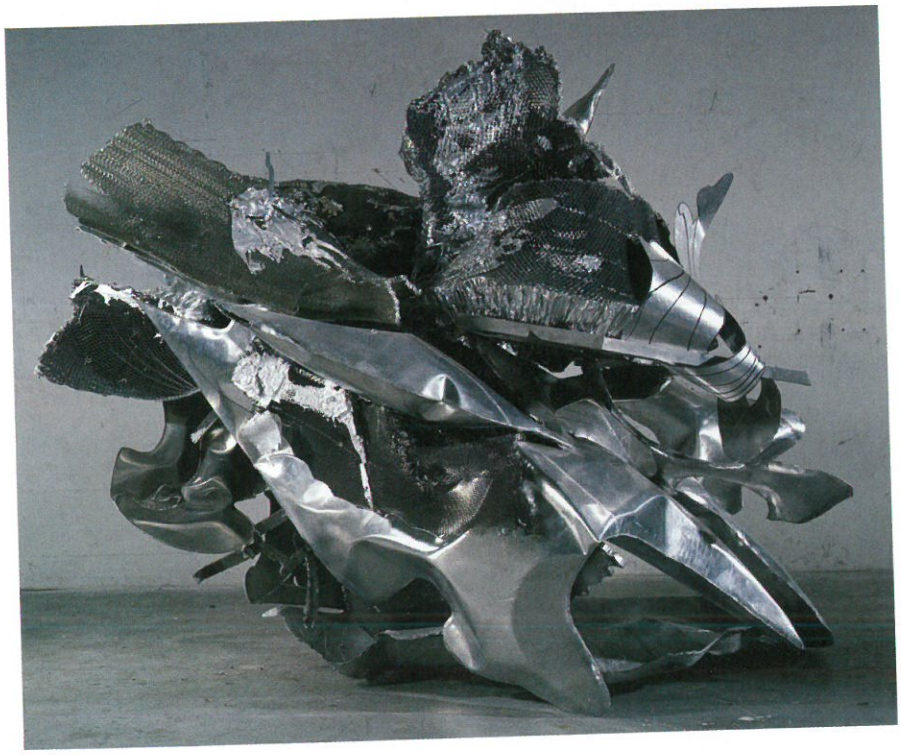
Stella's non-relational paintings of the '60s responded to a crisis of meaning that found its most exemplary intellectual expression in Susan Sontag's 1964 book *Against Interpretation*. Stella's works were directed against the "confusion" of traditional European painting rooted in rationalist philosophy. As Donald Judd said in a 1964 radio broadcast with Stella, "All that art is based on systems built beforehand, *a priori* systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world's like."[3] In a complete departure from "humanistic values" in art, from the assertion "that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas," Stella proposed that, in his paintings, "only what can be seen there *is* there...All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without confusion."[4]

Clement Greenberg famously dismissed Minimalism for its lack of power to "move and affect," retaining his belief in the precedence of aesthetics over phenomenology: "There is hardly any aesthetic surprise in Minimal Art, only a phenomenal one... Aesthetic surprise hangs on forever—it is still there in Raphael as it is in Pollock."[5] By the 1970s, Stella's works became increasingly more aesthetic and less phenomenological—first by combining brightly colored, circular-shaped canvases and later by constructing the surface of the paintings to project outward from the wall.

Stella's "paintings" also became more aleatory—their forms and compositions characterized by chance and re-organized through indeterminate, unpredictable means. Guided by the pictorial inventions of Caravaggio, whose paintings he began to study intensely, Stella at last realized new compositional and structural elements.

In his Norton Lectures at Harvard University, delivered in 1983–84, Stella posed the paradigmatic question that provides the key to understanding his radical move toward representational abstraction: "Can we find a mode of pictorial expression that will do for abstraction now what Caravaggio's pictorial genius did for 16th-century naturalism and its magnificent successors?"[6] Calling himself "a pragmatic classicist," he set himself the urgent task to establish a tie between Cubism and Renaissance classicism in order to overcome the "dilemma of abstraction."

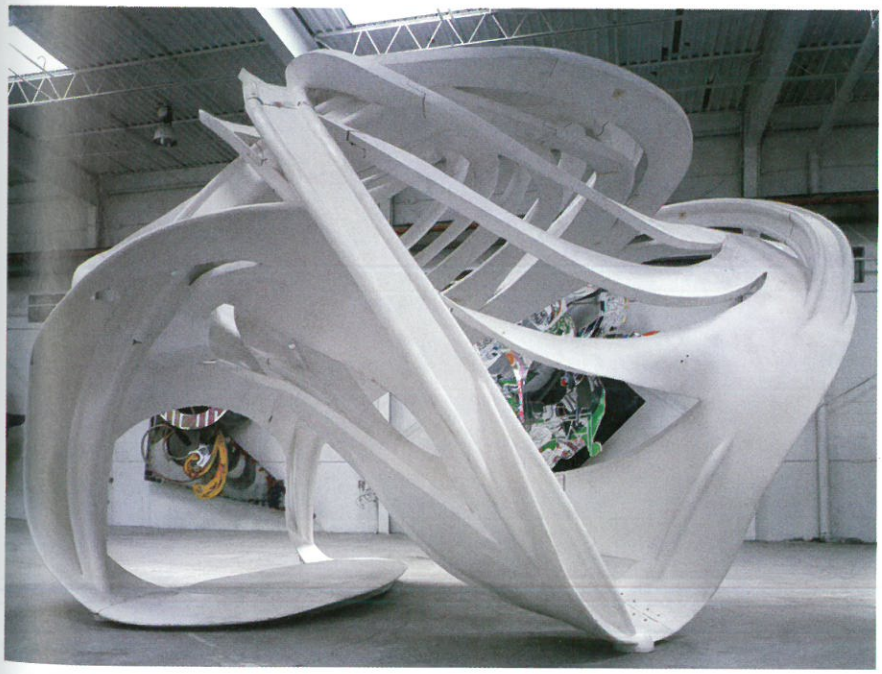
Stella praised Caravaggio for creating a spherical pictorial space "capable of accommodating movement and tilt," within which



Extracts (Q-13), 1990. Mixed media on aluminum, 110 x 138 x 102 in.

Çatal Hüyük (level III) Shrine III A. 13, 2001. Cast aluminum, aluminum pipe, ceramic, steel, and polyurethane paint, 125 x 104 x 53 in.

the viewer experiences "the moment and motion of painting's action...the sensation of real space within and outside of the action of the painting." And he concludes that "Caravaggio created...something that 20th-century painting could use: an alternative both to the space of conventional realism and to the space of what has come to be conventional painterliness."[7]

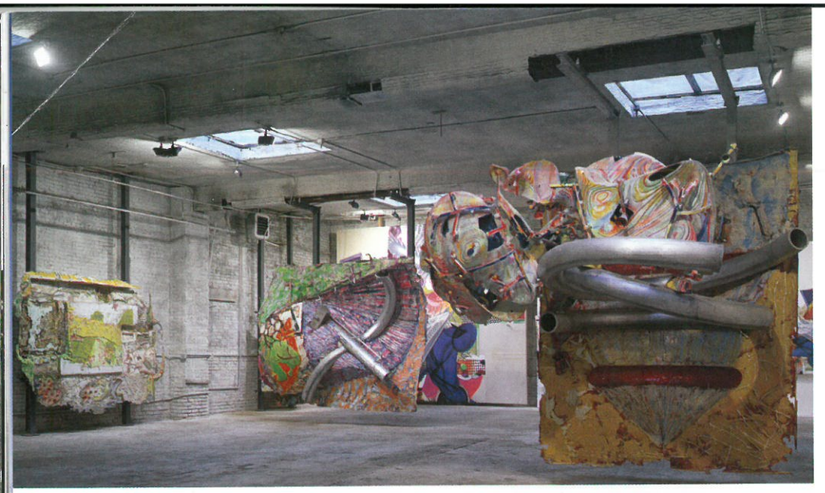


After the starkly Minimalist stripe paintings, Stella's works became increasingly relational: the "Polish Village" series relates to the destruction of Polish synagogues during the Nazi occupation, and many of his more recent sculptures have been inspired by Melville's novels and Kleist's plays. Yet Stella insists to this day that his work first and foremost is about "the apprehension of the sense of spatial containment and engagement."

Kleist's statement that "grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness" seems to be a fitting motto for Stella's works.[8] Stella has praised the richness of action and information in both Melville and Kleist. His monumental sculpture *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3X* (2001), constructed primarily of curved aluminum, fiberglass, and carbon, reverberates the entropic archway in the town of Würzburg, about which Kleist wrote to Wilhelmine on November 16, 1800: "There I went, pondering, back into town through the arched gate. Why, I thought, does the arch not collapse, since it has no support? It stands, I answered myself, because all of its stones want to tumble down at once."

Like Kleist's archway, Stella's large-scale polychrome sculptures appear to combine the two fundamental forces of the universe—inertia and energy—in almost perfect balance. They illustrate Stella's belief that "art must be communicable whole, and perception tends to be fragmented and self-serving. In the most obvious and fundamental way, the artist wants to see what is going on around himself. His paintings, almost by definition, should have a spherical sense of spatial containment and engagement...The artist should strive to encourage a response to the totality of pictorial space."[9]

The Broken Jug [D#3] 1x, 1999. Painted fiberglass and wood, 12 x 14.5 x 15 ft.



Installation view with *Çatal Hüyük (level VI A) Shrine VI A.8*, 2001. Cast aluminum, aluminum pipe, steel, ceramic, and polyurethane paint, 130 x 134 x 125 in.

Werner Herzog eats his shoe, 1994. Stainless steel and aluminum, 324 x 312 x 288 in.

Klaus Ottmann: *The International Sculpture Center is honoring you with its Lifetime Achievement Award. Yet you have always maintained that your two-and-a-half- and three-dimensional structures should be considered paintings, not sculptures, because "they are organized in a pictorial way."*

Frank Stella: I should have kept my thoughts about fractional dimensions to myself. They don't make any sense. I make polychrome reliefs and polychrome sculpture. Even when some of these works are unpainted, the sense of form and forms that emerges is essentially pictorial, that is, the sense of form and forms seems to exist in a pictorial space.

KO: *In 1964, you declared that your work was not really radical because there were no new compositional or structural elements. What do you regard as your most important contribution to art?*

FS: By 1965, I was working on the irregular polygon paintings. They looked radical then and now. The effort to expand the possibilities available to abstract art has been worthwhile.

KO: *In your Harvard lectures, you praised Caravaggio for his invention of spherical pictorial space and asked if a new mode of expression could be found "that will do for abstraction now what Caravaggio's pictorial genius did for 16th-century naturalism." Have we found a way around the problems of abstraction yet?*

FS: The answer is that, 25 years later, we still haven't found any new modes of expression that build on 20th-century abstraction.

KO: *Your infamous insistence, referring to your 1960s Black Paintings, that "only what can be seen there is there" has been interpreted as an abandonment of humanistic values, the quest for meaning that defines the human condition and lies at the core of all religious, philosophical, scientific, and artistic pursuits—the basic questions of "What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for?"*

Above: *Calendar Thoughts [E]#8]*, 1999. Painted aluminum sandcasting, 32 x 39 x 27 in. Below: *Severinda*, 1995. Mixed media on fiberglass, 118 x 331 x 154 in.

Your later works, however, including Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3X, *which materializes a web of ethical, aesthetic, and political issues into a sense of spatial containment and engagement, seem to perfectly illustrate Wittgenstein's declaration that "ethics and aesthetics are one."*

FS: The quest for meaning on the superficial "humanistic" level gets in the way of looking at painting. I don't understand Wittgenstein. It is the apprehension of the sense of spatial containment and engagement that counts. The web of issues is superfluous.

KO: *Can you talk about your interest in Kleist?*

FS: In Kleist, there is a lot happening all the time. He is amazingly artless. It is all action and information. Not so different from Melville, maybe.

KO: *You have said that the "Polish Village" reliefs of the 1970s were a turning point in your move toward three-dimensional structures. Would you agree with William Rubin's assessment that these works and the subsequent "Exotic Birds" series constituted a "second career," or should all of your works be considered as variants of the same life-long, Minimalist/structuralist concern: the engagement and interaction with existing space and the fabrication of meaning?*

FS: By the late '60s, I seemed to hit a wall with the very large protractor paintings. I didn't think I could take color and surface flatness any farther. Looking at the beginnings of 20th-century abstract art in Russia, I had the desire to go back and start all over again, because that's what I really loved.

KO: *What was Minimalism's most important contribution to sculpture?*

FS: I think that Minimalism emphasizes the possibilities of the basic geometries of abstract art. It worked better for sculpture than anything else.

KO: *What do you see to be the future of art in the digital age?*

FS: Right now, it looks a bit dim. But I suppose it will become something like a new charcoal stick.

KO: *Do you continue to search for the elusive promise of art, which condemns artists to certain failure in their quest to represent the non-representable and, in Beckett's words, allows artists to merely "fail better"?*

FS: I'd be happy to fail better. There is no substitute for improvement.

Notes

[1] Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 281.

[2] Franz-Joachim Verspohl, editor, *Heinrich von Kleist by Frank Stella* (Jena: Walther König, 2001), p. 250.

[3] Gregory Battcock, editor, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.D. Dutton, 1968), p. 151.

[4] Ibid., p. 158.

[5] Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," in *Minimal Art*, op. cit., p. 184.

[6] Frank Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 4.

[7] Ibid., p. 11.

[8] Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," 1810. The next sentence clarifies the nature of that human form: "That is, in the puppet or in the god." Kleist's text is available at <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>.

[9] Stella, op. cit., p. 9.

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