

FRANK STELLA: *UT PICTURA POESIS* *

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My purpose in this paper is to focus on Frank Stella, not primarily as a painter, but as creator of works of art in a larger, I mean to say, intellectual sense. I venture to say that to a degree, or at least in a way, unparalleled in our time, and perhaps unprecedented in the history of art, Frank Stella uses words to convey the full import of his message. I hasten to say that I am not speaking of words in works of art, as in collage, or as works of art, as in the work of Joseph Kosuth and Jennie Holtzer, which is a purely modern development. I refer to the use of words in the much more traditional sense of defining and explaining works of art, in this case the artist's own. In fact, one of my main purposes is to relate Stella, the arch-modernist-abstractivist, to the long defunct tradition of the artist as humanist, the intellectual artist, the literate artist, the learned artist, *Pictor Doctus Redivivus*, as I am tempted to call him, whether he likes it or not. I refer, in short, to the ideal of the artist as humanist that arose in the Renaissance and reigned more or less supreme in Western culture until it was, as many hoped and believed, killed and buried by modernist iconoclasm.

I mean to discuss this seemingly paradoxical aspect of Stella's work in two contexts that are in themselves paradoxical in that they may seem ancillary, even incidental, to his work as a painter, while they are in fact, as I believe, integral to a full understanding of his work as an artist. I refer in the first instance to the titles of his paintings. The paradox here lies in the very nature of modernist abstraction. People of my generation (I am a decade older than Stella, who was born in 1936) knew for sure that true abstract art was truly, rather than just aesthetically, art for art's sake because it was true art, the one, the only. Canvas was just that, its flat surface was just that, any trace of illusion was banished because it was by definition a lie, and any trace of subject, let alone narration, was anecdotal and contingent, unworthy of an honest man of the unprimed cloth aiming for universal and permanent values. Painting, in other words, had to stand, or hang, on its own, without illusion, without representation, without subject, and, above all, without those bewitching sirens of sinful seduction, words.

Frank Stella at the very beginning of his career, espoused the austere and exclusive maiden virtue of abstraction, and, unlike many of his contemporaries, never betrayed her—the surface is never broken, the material is always evident, the forms are always abstract, and his pictures never “illustrate” a subject. But no less single-minded and tenacious has been his espousal of and devotion to the principle of encapsulating an, or even, the essence of his images in the names he has given them. I do not know as much as I would like about the history of the titles, as distinguished from the subjects of works of art. Michelangelo wrote poetry, but his poems are not directly related to his art. Blake filled his compositions with words, but not as epigrammatic, titular equivalents. I suspect that the custom of artists giving names to their works in the modern sense developed in relation to the art market and public exhibitions, notably the Salons. And of course many abstract artists have titled their works. Whatever the antecedents and analogues, I venture to say that few others have so faithfully and lovingly married words and

* Presented at a Symposium at the University of Jena, Germany, March 24, 2001, in conjunction with an exhibition of Stella's Heinrich von Kleist series; see Franz-Joachim Verspohl, et al., eds. *Heinrich von Kleist by Frank Stella: Werkverzeichnis der Heinrich von Kleist-Serie*, Jena and Cologne, 2001; a companion volume was devoted to Stella's writings: *The Writings of Frank Stella. Die Schriften Frank Stellas*.

images. I do not suppose Stella has ever left an image without a name. Moreover, and perhaps more important, the titles are always significant in a particular way: although the works are always abstract, the titles never are. That is to say, he never calls a work “Untitled,” or “Opus Number One” or “Composition in Black and White.” By now, thousands of names, often strange and exotic but real names, not made up (many borrowed from *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, New York, 1980). I am convinced that Stella has devoted just as much care and thought to them he has to the paintings they accompany. And I am convinced that they all make sense, although I would not pretend for a moment to be able to say systematically how and why. The paintings do not in any ordinary sense illustrate the words, and the words do not in any ordinary sense describe the paintings (**Fig. 1**). And yet, and yet, the relationship between them is profound, disturbing, often uncanny beyond words—which is surely the point. So much so, in fact, that the relationship between Stella’s works and their titles has become a leading growth industry in the field of contemporary art—odd for an abstract painter, to say the least. Future generations will probe the space of elusive and allusive associations Stella has created about his life’s work, to decipher his visual-verbal code, to receive his message. With every deeper penetration they will discover more, only to wonder more.

It may at first seem perverse, but I suspect there may be more meaning than meets the eye behind the fact that the nearest conceptual precedent that comes to my mind for this aspect of the Stella phenomenon is the veritable word-picture mania that flooded Europe in the seventeenth century, the great age of what is often called Baroque allegory, in the form emblem books—thousands of books on thousands of subjects containing thousands of images in which pictures were accompanied by words in such a way as to challenge the viewer-reader to grasp the truth veiled by their mysterious relationship. Baroque emblems were normally rather unpretentious in that the picture and the text were schematic and abbreviated in order to epitomize the underlying thought. To illustrate my point I have chosen not a true emblem but a great work of art that is profoundly emblematic and embodies in principle the kind and depth of latent meaning the emblematic tradition served to convey. The work in question is an astonishing and unique engraving—insofar as an engraving can be unique—by the great French print maker, Claude Mellan, who worked for many years in Rome before returning ultimately to Paris and the service of the king (**Fig. 2**). The engraving depicts the famous Volto Santo, or Holy Face of Christ, the most venerable relic preserved in St. Peter’s, a miraculous linen veil which Saint Veronica, who followed the procession to Calvary, used to wipe the face of the Lord as he stumbled under his burden. This almost unbearably inscrutable image of human suffering, is created by one continuous spiral line which, beginning at the tip of the nose moves in parallel, faintly undulating and slightly expanding and contracting curves to create everything that meets the eye—the face, the upturned cloth with its inscription, the artist’s signature, the date, 1649, and the accompanying text. Note that the cloth and the engraved plate are identical, so that Mellan’s infinite spiral line could be described as literally woven into the fabric of the Volto Santo, which at the bottom is lifted as if by some magical waft of inspiration to reveal the name and message of its creator. We could write a book about the two inscriptions which, so far as we know, are not quotations from any source but are as unique as the image itself. *FORMATVR VNICVS VNA* (the One, or the Unique, is formed by one) may be said to refer to Christ himself, the unique one, God’s only begotten son, who alone embodied both the divine and the human, and who alone was formed by a single human progenitor, the Virgin Mary (*una*, from the feminine Latin noun *virgo*); but *unicus* may also refer to Christ as the subject of the image, the Volto Santo itself, in which case *una* also refers to the single line (from the feminine Latin noun *linea*) of the artist

who created its engraved counterfeit. The heart of Mellan's work is thus paradoxical: its theme is uniqueness—the uniqueness of its double subject, Christ man and God, and the *Volto Santo*, Christ's one, true portrait, unique in that it was *achieropoetos*, that is, not made by human hand, as it was termed—and the uniqueness of Mellan's own image which consists of a single continuous, all-defining line, in itself a miracle of art, one might well say. This artistic paradox is actually defined in the text accompanying the signature, *NON ALTER* (no, or none, other), which says that it was made by Mellan alone—that is, free-handed—and that there is no other image like it; indeed, it has often been imitated but never equaled. Yet, with all their uniqueness, Christ is ubiquitous in spirit, and Mellan's image of Him is ubiquitous in prints. What relates Mellan's concept to the Baroque emblem in particular is the fact that the words and the picture are related to each other in a special way. Both the words and the picture have perfectly obvious meanings in themselves, yet the words do not describe the picture, as the face of Christ, for example; and the picture does not illustrate the words, as would, for example, a representation of the numeral One. Most importantly, however, when taken together the words and the picture bring forth new meaning, as if from behind the veil of their separateness, by some mysterious process we call, for want of a better word, understanding.

Stella's 1959 painting *Tomlinson Court Park II*, also consists, in its way, of a single line, although it is difficult to say if it is broad and black or narrow and white. The line also moves in tandem with itself, forming parallel stripes and filling the entire field of vision. I say "field of vision," rather than "surface of the canvas" because in the mind's eye the line suggests more than what the physical eye sees. This is why I think of it as ultimately a single line, rather than many lines. The line is also absolute in that it traces an axially symmetrical pattern consisting of straight horizontals and verticals that form an endless series of concentric rectangles contiguous with the edges of the canvas, and therefore also infinitely repeatable into the universe beyond. Studying its permutations, one finds Stella's line no less intoxicating than Claude Mellan's, although it is purely abstract and geometric, whereas Mellan's is organic and figurative. We have seen, however, that Mellan also thought of his line abstractly, as pure line, since his text refers not only to its singularity, but also to its uniqueness—there is only one line and there is no other. Stella's painting also has a text and signature of sorts, that is, its title, *Tomlinson Court Park II*. The combination of words and number tells the painting's story, as it were. They provide the work's particular coordinates in our universe of persons (Tomlinson), places (Court, an enclosed space; Park, an enclosed landscape), and things (a sequence of paintings by Frank Stella), measured and ordered in regular intervals. The coordinates are those of this work alone, no other. No less important than these external facts are the internal ones: in our hearts we inevitably yearn to solve the deep enigma in black and white that confronts us: know who is this Tomlinson, where is this Court, what does this Park look like, to ask nothing about *Tomlinson Court Park I*? If, as has been suggested, the title refers to a park in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a poor, overwhelmingly African-American section of Brooklyn, the relation between the title and the image (both in its color division and its sense of confinement), may have an ethno-sociological dimension, as well.¹ Seen in this way, Stella's line creates an effect quite the opposite of what it

¹ In her catalogue entry for *Tomlinson Court Park I*, Brenda Richardson identifies the place as "a park in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn" (*Frank Stella: The Black Paintings*, Baltimore, 1976, No. 14, p. 50). I have not been able to verify the existence of such a park, whereas there is a Tompkins Park in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant, where Stella says he was working as a house painter (near a park) and which he insists was the locale he had in mind. A development called Tompkins Houses is some distance away. Tomlinson Court apartments are to be found on Tomlinson Road in Philadelphia. In my view, the place named by the title occupies, as usual, the same "working" space as the painting itself.

seems; in its absolute flatness and linearity, it defines a vast topographical and emotional map that is at once an expanding and contracting and a rising and receding universe, a multi-dimensional optical illusion of existence, one might say—not unlike the spiral line in Mellan’s print, where earth and heaven, the human and the divine, meet.

If I have labored this comparison my point has been to emphasize that Stella is no less a master of words and ideas than he is of paint and brush, and that the closest analogy I find to his use of both media, that is, words and pictures together to give new meaning to both, is in the visio-conceptual world of the Baroque. This seemingly unfathomable historical relationship between the most literal-minded, arch-abstractionist of modern American painting—I think by now it is safe to speak of Frank Stella in those terms—and what was surely the most figurative, in the sense of both illusionistic and allusionistic period in Western culture, does make sense, at least it makes Stellar sense. This brings me to the second part of my argument, that for all his literal-mindedness, Stella belongs in the tradition of the *Pictor Doctus*. My evidence here is his book, called *Working Space*, published in 1984, in which he turned the art-historical world upside down by arguing that the way toward modern abstraction was blazed in that very period, the Baroque: most especially by Caravaggio, the great master of hard-edge illusion, on the one hand, and by Rubens, the great master of painterly allusion, on the other hand. I hasten to observe here parenthetically, that Stella was not the first to think of the Baroque as the beginning the modern era; he was preceded, no doubt unawares, by two notable thinkers, Erwin Panofsky and Walter Benjamin, both of whom who regarded the Baroque as modern, but for what might be called equal and opposite reasons—Panofsky because he believed the period brought many lasting innovations in both form and content, Benjamin because he believed it was essentially the vacuous elaboration and outmoded epigone of authentic socio-cultural values.

I will not here rehearse how Stella performs his extraordinary intellectual leap of the imagination, except to make two brief comments. The first is a simple and somewhat rueful confession: as an historian of Baroque art the book depresses me; I will tell you later why. My second point concerns what might be called the historiographical context of the book. Stella attacks head-on the chief problem posed by the absolute aesthetic honesty that gives abstraction its modern, moral, force and integrity, but deprives it of the familiar, easy, articulate visual rhetoric of traditional representation. How can abstraction achieve on its own terms the kind of humanistic values we have a right to expect from that special kind of human being we call “artist.” Stella starts (and I might add ends) at the beginning, by creating—without the meretricious artifices of linear and atmospheric perspective—the prime prerequisite for all further creation, *Working Space*. Just as God did on the first day, when he created heaven and earth (**Fig. 3, Fig. 4**). Again the words and the images explicate and augment one another. His paintings even breach the working space of Stella’s studio. It is important to realize that in this case the words are not his own; he found them—as if God-given—in that bible of all true modernism, the streets of New York (**Fig. 5**). In fact, I think he knew that they were God-given since as the very next illustration he reproduces just such a miracle from the Lower East Side (**Fig. 6**). [N.B.: Stella told me that the word “working” in the “Working Space” graffito reproduced here from Plate 30, p. 140, of his book was added by his crew; see also the arrow and inscription above in white paint, “we all tried.” He said nothing was changed in the “MILAGRO de LOISAIDA” (Lower East Side) graffito, from Figure 41, p. 142—Feb. 12, 2003.] In the matter of creating space we have seen that the striped paintings already did a pretty good job of suggesting that the entire universe was at his disposal. What he found in Baroque art, notably

Caravaggio, was a kindred spirit in dissatisfaction with the distance from the viewer imposed by the traditional effects of linear and atmospheric perspective (**Fig. 7**). Caravaggio, instead, suggested that the special world his images inhabited extended not only behind but also in front of the picture plane, and abstraction allowed Stella to carry this thought out beyond the duplicitous, mythic ambiguity of cubism into true reality. What he found in Baroque art, notably Rubens, was a kindred spirit in providing abstraction with the energy and power of color and form that did not destroy the surface but instead helped the working space literally to explode into an expanding universe (**Fig. 8**).

When we finally consider the distance Stella traversed from the flat, regular parallel stripes that recall the streets of New York where he started, to the wild jungles of exotic and Romantic persons, places and things he has visited in his later work, one comes to two realizations. The first is that no other artist of his time has traveled so far so fast as Stella, no other, non alter. The second realization is that he has replicated in his lifetime essentially the same development that Heinrich Wölfflin described in the immortal book which, as its title proclaims, laid the very foundation of the modern discipline of art history, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of Style in Later Art*, first published in German in 1915 and in English in 1932; my copy dates from 1950, my first year as a graduate student in art history. Wölfflin defined five categories of human perception between the extreme poles of which all artistic development must inevitably oscillate. He illustrated his principles by the contrast between the historical periods of the Renaissance and Baroque, but the categories have been also been applied to French painting of the nineteenth century and to the development from Classical to Hellenistic in ancient Greece. And, *mirabile dictu*, Wölfflin's categories fit Frank Stella's development like a finely tailored Italian suit of clothes: linear to painterly, planarity to spatiality, closed to open form, multiplicity to unity, clarity to unclarity (**Fig. 9, Fig. 10**)—all have their Stellar counterparts. (Wölfflin had a very subtle and sophisticated mind, needless to say, and if you want to know how a late Stella can be seen as *more* unified than an early one, Wölfflin can tell you.) Consider even the subcategories Wölfflin includes under Closed versus Open Form: Geometric versus Organic structure, Symmetry versus Asymmetry; frame controls composition versus “accidental” relationship between composition and frame. The “flat,” rectilinear, parallel lines of the early stripe paintings reappear in the recent “smoke ring” motifs, transformed into looping skeins that remain parallel but now define intricate, looping, transparent planes (**Fig. 11**). The graphic system uncannily recalls that of Mellan, except that Mellan models form by varying the thickness of the line, whereas Stella's computer-generated filaments are uniform and modulate space by expansions and contractions of the intervening distances. You would think that Stella had read Wölfflin; I never asked him, and I don't want to know. If he did not, then he certainly proves that Wölfflin was right: his categories are indeed innate modes of perception and Frank Stella was merely and inevitably following the dictates of a kind of world psyche that we all share. If he did read Wölfflin then I can make a good guess when and where. The “when” part is easy because Wölfflin was brought to America by the refugees from Nazi Germany from whom I learned my art history in the early 1950's. My professor was Walter Friedlaender, who had studied with Wölfflin and for whom I worked as assistant when he wrote his famous book on Caravaggio, which Stella knows very well. Friedlaender had been responsible for extending Wölfflin's analysis to a quite different period, in a book whose very title, *David to Delacroix* (Cambridge MA, 1952), gives you the essential idea. Friedlaender had also been responsible for the first major studies of the period intervening between Renaissance and Baroque, which it is often said, first in a review by Erwin Panofsky as far as I know, that

Wölfflin neglected (English edition: *Mannerism and Anti-mannerism in Italian painting, two essays*, New York, 1957). Friedlaender divided this critical period into two phases, which he called Mannerist and anti-Mannerist. In fact, Wölfflin did not quite overlook those artists; he fitted them into his scheme as “transitional.” As a matter of fact, the notion of Mannerism, now largely outmoded in our field, plays a rather large role in *Working Space*, and it is astonishing to find, on the one hand, that Stella refers to Noland’s offset chevrons as Mannerist (**Fig. 12**) while he was himself doing things like *Chocorua III* (1966) (**Fig. 13**), and on other hand that Wölfflin, discussing the antipodes of planarity and spatiality, illustrated the transitional phase between the planarity of Leonardo’s Last Supper and the spatiality of one by Tiepolo, with the offset wedge composition of Pieter Brueghel’s Peasant Wedding (**Fig. 14**).

Frank Stella studied in the mid-1950’s at Princeton University (graduated 1958), where the faculty included Erwin Panofsky, who had written one of the first and most penetrating reviews of Wölfflin, and younger scholars like William Seitz and Robert Rosenblum who had been trained in precisely that nouvelle vague of largely Wölfflin-inspired art history. Although I would not dream of doing so in Stella’s presence, one could make a case that the entire structure of *Working Space*, and indeed the entire structure of his artistic career were conditioned, not to say determined, by a particular phase in the development of the formal, academic discipline of art history, namely the phase inaugurated by Hitler’s emancipation of the Jews from the thralls of Fascism to the freedom of America. *Pictor Doctus* indeed. But also *Pictor Magister*. I want to say now why *Working Space* is depressing for me, academic art historian sang pure, and one of the generation that taught Frank Stella. In fact, I have studied, written, and taught about Baroque art all my adult life, yet to this day I cannot turn a page of *Working Space*—the only sequel to *Principles of Art History* that matches its novelty, brilliance, insight, and perceptivity—without feeling abashed by my own obtuseness. With all my chagrin, I feel privileged to pay public homage to Frank Stella, picture-poet of the intellect, and to participate in the repatriation of that splendid humanistic achievement of German culture to which—however tragic the circumstances—our generation is deeply indebted, with this celebration here in Jena of Stella’s celebration of Heinrich von Kleist.

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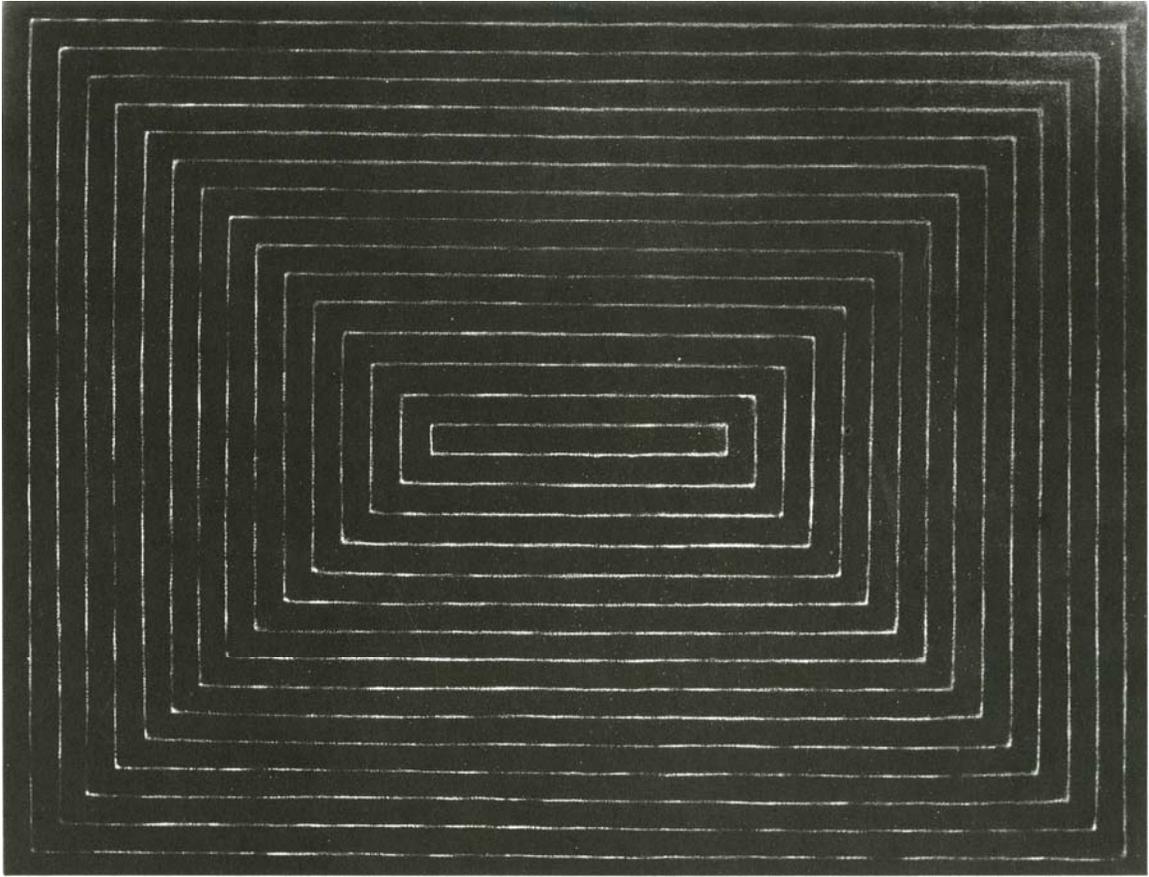


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WORKING SPACE



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