

FRANK STELLA TALKS TOO MUCH
National Arts Club Artists Award, Medal of Honor, to Frank Stella
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I fear I must begin with the confession that I have a problem about awarding this honor to Frank Stella as a painter, and I intend to spend the five minutes at my disposal explaining why. When I last saw Frank a couple of weeks ago we had, as usual, a lively and very stimulating conversation. Among other things, we agreed that one of the pioneers of American abstract painting, whose work we greatly admired, talked too much. Better had he stuck to painting. I then cited a famous *obiter dictum* of one of the great innovators of the so-called reform of Italian painting around 1600, Annibale Carracci, the leader of the modern Bolognese school and reputed founder of what came to be known as the classical, Academic tradition. Responding to the extremely conventionalized and elaborately theoretized work of his predecessors, the Mannerists, Annibale was said to have exclaimed, *Noi altri dipintori habbiamo da parlare con le mani*, "We painters have to speak with our hands." Frank Stella, the arch abstract painter, is Italian and he certainly understood the subtlety of Annibale's brilliant putdown, which expressed not only his disregard for highbrow art theory, but also his appreciation of the familiar gestural language that, then as now, gives emphasis to the rhetorical speech of Italians.

My problem is that Frank Stella also talks too much. We all know that from the moment he burst on the New York scene fresh out of Princeton, until now, Frank's painting—for it is always painting, no matter what form it takes—has been unnerving. If you want to be comfortable, and "enjoy" what you see, Frank is not your man—whatever Stella touches becomes a star exploding in your face, emotionally and intellectually—emotionally because you have never felt that before, intellectually because you have to think about why. And we also know that true abstract art was truly 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 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.

Here I must quote another remark by another of the great magicians of the Baroque, Gianlorenzo Bernini, who said that the measure of the true artist consists in finding ways to surpass the rules without breaking them. That is exactly what Frank Stella has been doing, from the beginning, at breakneck speed, non-stop, all along. His exuberant fantasy is austere structured by his ferrous adherence to the basic principles of abstraction—the surface is never broken, the material is always evident, the forms are always abstract, and his pictures never illustrate a subject. Yet, like God on the very first day, in the very first verse of Genesis, Stella has succeeded in creating—daily, without interruption—the verymost fundamental thing that abstraction was meant to deny: space, working space.

That phrase alone, *Working Space*, the title of Stella's book about the history and nature of abstraction, speaks volumes about what his conception of his metier has in common with that of Annibale Carracci. They are both workers in the fields, painter's painters. But that book, which is only the largest star, so far, in the galaxy of Stella's critical writing, is part of what I mean when I say he talks too much. For his writing about art is just as unhinging as his painting. I have studied and written about Baroque art all my life, yet I cannot turn a page of that book without feeling abashed by my own obtuseness. It's just too much. But—and this is the other part—it is nothing compared to the expanding universe of meaning Stella has encapsulated in the names he has given to his pictures. I venture to say that no other artist in history has so faithfully and lovingly married words and images. 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. By contrast, Stella is an inveterate name-dropper, and the titles are always significant—often inscrutable, but referring to “real” places found in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, New York, 1980. By now, thousands of names. I am convinced that they all make sense, and that Stella has devoted as much care and thought to them as he has to the paintings they accompany. To be sure, the paintings do not in any ordinary sense illustrate the words, and the words do not literally describe the paintings. And yet, and yet, the relationship between them is profound, disturbing, uncanny beyond words—which is surely the point. So much so, in fact, that the relationship between Stella's works and their titles is a leading growth industry in the field of contemporary art—odd for an abstract painter, to say the least.¹ Future generations will probe the space of elusive and allusive associations Stella has created about his life's work, seeking to decipher his visual-verbal code, to receive his message. With every deeper penetration they will discover more, only to wonder more. What I finally mean when I say Stella talks too much, is that I cannot tell whether he deserves this award as painter or as a poet.

¹ The literature is endless, and there is no comprehensive treatment of Stella's titles; but I want to single out among recent studies the heroic monographic effort devoted to the vast series of works named after the chapter titles of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, by the literary historian Robert K. Wallace: *Frank Stella's Moby-Dick: Words and Shapes*, Ann Arbor MI, 2000. Recently Joachin Jager has provided a perspicacious and compelling “reading” of Stella's great two-sided painting *Michael Kohlhaas (A Tale from an Old Chronicle)* (acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 ft. long, 15 ft. high, 2008) in terms of the tragic novella by Heinrich von Kleist after which it is named.