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Ellsworth Kelly: Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Reliefs, and Sculpture, Vol. 1, 1940–1953

Yve-Alain Bois.

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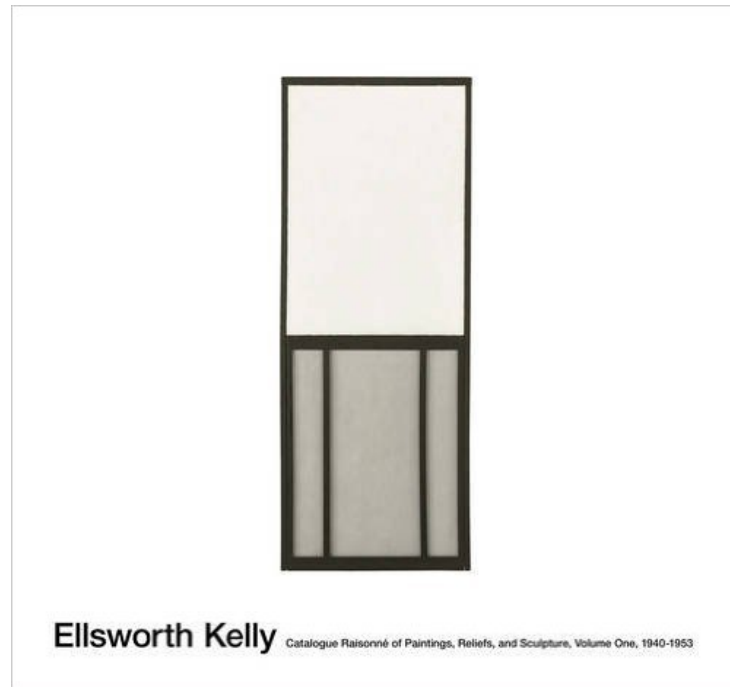
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Geography, Photography, Art History: Toward a Transnational Ellsworth Kelly

In the wake of Ellsworth Kelly's death at the age of ninety-two, and with major reappraisals of his work no doubt on the horizon, what, we might ask, is the American master's legacy in our global age? A constellation of recent publications on the artist, highlighted by the first volume of the catalogue raisonné by Yve-Alain Bois, reveals that Kelly's widely studied early career, spent in France on the GI Bill, still remains ripe for analysis. Between the historical terms of these expatriate years, the formal aesthetics developed therein, and the art historical stakes of their reception—taken on with different emphases by the five texts under consideration—we can begin to construct a transnational Ellsworth Kelly.

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Fig. 1. Installation view of *Other Primary Structures* at The Jewish Museum, New York, March 14–May 18, 2014. Foreground: Rasheed Araeen, *Sculpture No. 1*, 1965, and *First Structure*, 1966–67; background: archival photographs from *Primary Structures*, 1966, including Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue Disc*, 1963, on the far left. Photo: David Heald/The Jewish Museum.

Four recent exhibitions reveal geography to be a common concern in twenty-first century Kelly scholarship. The varied treatment of the artist in these exhibitions, however, also indicates that much remains to be determined about his work and its place in our histories of postwar art. In the 2014 Jewish Museum exhibition *Other Primary Structures*, a wall-sized black and white archival photograph featuring Kelly's 1963 relief *Blue Disc* served as a backdrop to Pakistani-English artist and theorist Rasheed Araeen's steel construction *First Structure*, 1966–67, in the vivacity of its own painted blue surface (fig. 1). Our new histories of postwar art, this juxtaposition implies, will have to replace the canonical American artists represented in the 1966 Jewish Museum exhibition *Primary Structures* with their "other," formerly marginalized historical peers from Africa, Asia, Eastern and East-Central Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. A year later, the Museum of Modern Art's own revisionist postwar art exhibition, *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America*,

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1960–1980, opened with a gallery devoted to work by artists who participated in the 1961 exhibition *Art Abstrait Constructif International* at Galerie Denise René in Paris. There, Kelly’s painting *Running White*, 1959, was the sole work by an American-born artist.¹ Its immediate neighbor to the left was *Active Object*, 1961, by Brazilian Neo-Concretist Willys de Castro (fig. 2); another of de Castro’s *Active Objects*, this one dated 1960, directly faced the installation shot of Kelly’s *Blue Disc in Other Primary Structures*.



Fig. 2. Installation view of *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 5, 2015–January 3, 2016. Far wall: Julije Knifer and Gorgona Artists Group, *Gorgona No. 2*, 1961; Willys de Castro, *Active Object*, 1961; Ellsworth Kelly, *Running White*, 1959; Victor Vasarely, *Ondbo*, 1956–60. Digital image © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Thomas Griesel.

Two exhibitions curated by Kelly in Western Massachusetts took place between the closing of *Other Primary Structures* and the opening of *Transmissions: Monet/Kelly* at the Clark Art Institute and *Matisse Drawings Curated by Ellsworth Kelly from the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation* at the Mount

¹ See Alexandra Alisauskas’s discussion of *Art Abstrait Constructif International*, and Kelly’s place in its restaging at MoMA, in her review of *Transmissions* in *Afterimage* 43, no. 4 (January/February 2016): 26–28.

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Holyoke College Art Museum.² The lineage suggested by these exhibitions places into relief the competing Kellys of the two revisionist, global-oriented New York exhibitions, namely the American proto-minimalist Kelly and the internationalist one that could hang alongside Lygia Clark and members of the Croatian anti-art group Gorgona at a late moment of the international Constructivist exhibition model and in the twilight of its universalizing utopianism. In the Western Massachusetts exhibitions, we encounter Kelly as the implied legatee of French modernism. At stake here is another kind of universality, in which Kelly—and not a French artist such as his friend and contemporary François Morellet—is heir to Monet and Matisse, and wherein American and specifically New York art succeeds its Parisian predecessor as the universal paradigm in the postwar period.

The first volume of the Kelly catalogue raisonné shared a release date—October 26, 2015, two months and one day before Kelly’s death—with a full-career monograph by curator and art historian Tricia Y. Paik. Paik’s monograph deftly interweaves the artist’s oeuvre with his biography, beginning with an opening chapter about his early life, military service, and education up to his departure for Paris in 1948. Paik continues by dividing his career geographically: the now-legendary years in France, New York City from 1954 to 1970, and his time spent thereafter in Spencertown, in upstate New York. Punctuating these four chapters are short thematic essays by Gavin Delahunty, Gary Garrels, Richard Schiff, and Robert Storr. This monograph comes with many treats and surprises; for instance, Paik unearths Kelly’s little known costume and set designs for choreographer Paul Taylor in 1958 and 1968, and convincingly suggests an imagined synthesis between the lyricism of Kelly’s free curve paintings and the seriality of his multi-panel spectrums. Her account is expertly

² Both Western Massachusetts follow a 2008 exhibition pairing Kelly with Paul Cézanne at the Musée D’Orsay, Paris, in seeming to display the American artist’s affinity with an older French modernist master. *Correspondances: Cézanne/Kelly*, Musée D’Orsay, Paris, October 8, 2008–February 1, 2009.

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researched and synthesizes forty-five years of scholarship on the artist to provide an excellent introduction for researchers as well as casual audiences. However, Paik does not especially build upon the horizons of that scholarship so much as she consolidates them. Although the monograph geographically frames the artist's career, Kelly remains here the unmarked, American Ellsworth Kelly of art historical canon.

Centering primarily on Kelly's years in France, the stunningly exhaustive catalogue raisonné also does not propose a new legacy for Kelly. Instead, Bois, who has already entirely rewritten the terms of scholarship on the artist once in his career, revisits terrain on which he previously innovated, now armed with almost a decade of unlimited access to the artist's meticulous archive and to Kelly himself as a sustained interlocutor for the duration. In his 1992 essay "Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in its Many Guises," now widely considered the critical Rosetta Stone to the artist's work, Bois systematically articulated four aesthetic strategies developed by Kelly in short succession between September 1949 and December 1951 that sustained the rest of his career: the transfer, chance, the grid, and the monochrome panel.³ For Bois, these anti-compositional strategies (since renamed non-composition) share at their core what he calls motivation, each motivated by something other than the arbitrary forces of the artist's subjectivity. Bois retains this

³ The groundbreaking and now foundational work on Kelly by Bois that I refer to is his essay "Ellsworth Kelly in France: Anti-Composition in its Many Guises," trans. Gregory Sims, in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954* (Munich: Prestel Verlag), 9–36. As Madeleine Grynsztejn writes in her catalogue for an San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition to debut their large acquisition of Kelly works, highlighted by a number of major works from his French period: "Any discussion of Kelly's early work, including this one, owes a debt to Yve-Alain Bois' writing on the subject." Grynsztejn, "Clear-Cut: The Art of Ellsworth Kelly," in *Ellsworth Kelly in San Francisco*, exh. cat. (San Francisco, Berkeley, and Los Angeles: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and University of California Press, 2002), 17, n9. Johanna Burton summarizes the goal and impact of the essay: "In large part to dispels the myths and misreadings that describe Kelly's work from this period as moving in all manner of seemingly unrelated directions, or as responses to artists or movements to which he in fact had no real connection [Matisse, Mondrian, and others being his supposed precursors; the Color Field painters his peers; and the Minimalists his presumed legatees], Bois carries out what he calls 'a step-by-step analysis' of Kelly's work as it evolved during the artist's years in Paris. Key to this corrective approach, then, is a recasting of art-historical assumptions." Burton, "Ellsworth Kelly: Changing Parameters," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Diagonal*, exh. cat. (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2009), np.

origin story in the catalogue raisonné, building up to the revelation of the transfer in *Seaweed*, 1949, after several near-misses; narrating Kelly's realization of the transfer as a methodology in *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, 1949, soon after; and climaxing with the combination of all four non-compositional strategies in *Colors for a Large Wall*, 1951. Bois attributes this watershed period of discovery to an artistic crossroads: "What is there left to do in the wake of someone [Pablo Picasso] who has invented *everything*?"⁴

It is difficult not to see the crossroads Bois diagnosed for Kelly, circa 1948 and 1949, as a displaced anthropomorphosis of the condition of painting itself after Picasso. Not coincidentally, in the course of his own career since 1992, Bois has developed from his original articulation of what he reluctantly calls "Kelly's system" nothing less than a theory of abstract painting.⁵ However, where Bois' original contribution to Kelly scholarship was to lay out its systematic foundations, in the catalogue raisonné, he explores its minutiae, devoting an essay to each work, or occasionally, to a group of related works. In sum, the catalogue boasts ninety-seven entries for one hundred and forty-one total works, ranging from a paragraph for minor works (mostly those he produced while still a student in the United States) to nine pages for the pivotal *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*. The traditional function of a catalogue raisonné rests in an uneasy space between the final word on a career—a tombstone, as Bois jokes—and as a resource to future researchers.⁶ Bois does not address what this American master's career could contribute to the horizontal, proto-global revisionist

⁴ Bois, "Ellsworth Kelly in France," 16. Emphasis in the original. Bois meant "invent" in the multi-faceted sense of *invenzione* in Renaissance art theory.

⁵ For Bois' treatise for this theory, see his untitled essay in "Abstraction, 1910–1925: Eight Statements," in *October* 143 (Winter 2013): 7–18; previously delivered as a lecture entitled "The Difficult Task of Erasing Oneself: Non-Composition in Twentieth-Century Art," at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, May 7, 2007. The two non-compositional strategies in Bois' separtite matrix of abstract painting that do not appear in Kelly's oeuvre are deductive structure and process, most closely associated with Frank Stella and Robert Ryman, respectively.

⁶ "Yve-Alain Bois on Ellsworth Kelly," in *The Iris: Behind the Scenes at the Getty* (June 29, 2016), <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/audio-yve-alain-bois-on-ellsworth-kelly>, accessed July 2016.

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histories of postwar art currently being written. However, he introduces a formal point that might be key to that discussion.

Bois' major new contribution to Kelly's years in France is the unlikely proposition that perhaps Kelly was not an abstract artist after all. The historical project of abstraction, Bois reminds us—from Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian to Max Bill and Victor Vasarely—envisioned the possibility of a universal artistic language. By contrast, Kelly's work, much of it made using his transfer method, is an art of specifics. In choosing a visual motif observed in the world—"already made," in Kelly's own words—and transferring it "exactly as it was, with nothing added" to the scale of a painting, Kelly collapses image and field, flat surface observed in the world transferred both to and into the flat surface of a painting.⁷ Take the last works that Kelly produced in France, accordingly also the subjects of the last entry of the catalogue: a pair of paintings entitled *White Square* and *Black Square*, both 1953, identical in dimension and composition but featuring opposing color schemes (the former featuring a white square on black ground, the latter black on white). Bois juxtaposes these with their likeliest, albeit as he illustrates incorrect, reference point, Malevich's *Black Square*, 1913/15, itself of course also on white ground. While Malevich proposed his *Black Square* to be the "zero of form," and as befitting its status as an absolute, repeated it a number of times over his career (a black square eventually even being added to his tomb by his former student Nikolai Suetin), Kelly's *Black Square* and its counterpart were composed from the exact dimensions of a window in a Parisian café that he frequented. Among the many transfer works of this period, these last two completed in France are anomalous in their exactitude: not only is neither painting scaled from the visual motif from which they both derived, Kelly went so far as to measure the dimensions

⁷ The quotations are from John Coplans, *Ellsworth Kelly* (New York: Abrams, 1971), 28. The then-unpublished statement provided by Kelly from which Coplans quotes was later revised and published as "Notes of 1969," in *Ellsworth Kelly: Paintings and Sculptures, 1963–1979*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1979), 30–34.

of this window—all four sides, presumably—instead of working as he usually did from a sketch produced from memory. Bois brilliantly explains that this extra exactitude was necessitated by the universal scalar logic of the regular square, all too readily abstractable as geometry: “If [Kelly] is struck by a square it is by *this* square only, of *that* particular size” (CR 354).

The year following Kelly’s arrival in Paris, the Bureau of Technology and Productivity at the United States Department of Labor initiated a program to send American management professionals to reshape the infrastructure of the French economy.⁸ Hundreds of these “productivity missions” took place in the 1950s. In Serge Guilbaut’s words, as “America was now [in the late 1940s] on the point of making the transition from colonized to colonizer . . . American art moved first from nationalism to internationalism and then from internationalism to universalism.”⁹ Two so-called triumphs of American painting—Abstract Expressionism and Pop art—would follow, the second also marking, as announced by Jewish Museum director Alan R. Solomon in 1964, “the demise of the School of Paris.”¹⁰ Kelly was also implicated in the global rise of American art, as part of the 1968 Museum of

⁸ See Luc Boltanski, “Visions of American Management in Post-War France,” trans. Alexandra Russell, in *Theory and Society* 12, no. 3 (May 1983): 375–403.

⁹ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 174. Guilbaut is speaking here specifically about cultural colonialism, but the political and economic subtexts are unmistakable.

¹⁰ In the wake of the grand prize award that Rauschenberg received at the 1964 Venice Biennale, American curator Alan R. Solomon was heard to declare “the demise of the School of Paris and the triumph of American painting.” “Oral History Interview with Peter Howard Selz,” July 28–October 12, 1982, Archives of American Art; quoted in Paul J. Karlstrom with Ann Heath Karlstrom, *Peter Selz: Sketches of a Life in Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 26. That demise was echoed by French poet and critic Alain Bosquet, who described the 1964 Biennale as in fact the murder of the École de Paris. Bosquet, “Désarroi à Venise,” in *La Côte des Peintres* 2, no. 18 (July–August 1964): 50; cited in Hiroko Ikegami, *The Great Migrant: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 51. Six years later, American critic Irving Sandler would backdate that “triumph of American painting” by one generation in his landmark study on Abstract Expressionism of the same name. Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970). In the recollection of Paul Facchetti, whose gallery hosted Jackson Pollock’s first Parisian solo exhibition in 1952, the situation in the late 1940s and 1950s was not quite so unidirectional: “For us [French, the discovery of Abstract Expressionism] Godfre Leung. “Review of Ellsworth Kelly: *Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Reliefs, and Sculpture, Vol. 1, 1940-1953*, by Yve-Alain Bois.” *Panorama: Journal of the Historians of American Art* 2 no. 2 (Fall, 2016). <http://journalpanorama.org/ellsworth-kelly-catalogue-raisonne-of-paintings-reliefs-and-sculpture-vol-1-1940-1953/>.

Modern Art exhibition *Art of the Real: USA, 1948–1968*, which was highly contested and widely perceived to be nationally chauvinistic when it traveled to Europe.¹¹ However, even as Kelly’s work would become a cross-continental battleground for the fate and historiography of abstraction, it is clear from the catalogue raisonné that he did not think in terms of the European avant-garde pursuit of abstract universals, nor that of the coming of an unmarked American artistic universality.¹² It is also clear that while the United States government underwrote his living expenses while in France, which can be viewed alongside a reconfiguring world system that tilted the balance toward American

was an extraordinary adventure: we discovered a painting triumphant with the freedom of color and rhythm. There was a great impulse given by Pollock. The American painters, on the other hand, those who came to Paris after the war with their famous GI Bills, they were impressed by European culture, and they all rushed like flies to one place: the Orangerie, to look at the *Nymphéas* by Monet, those colored rhythms with no beginning or end.” Cited in Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 181.

¹¹ In the catalogue for *Art of the Real*, curator E. C. Goossen goes out of his way to explicitly claim the work of Kelly’s France period for the United States, denying the influence of the European modernists (Georges Vantongerloo and Hans Arp) that Kelly met in Paris, and from whom he was inspired to pursue, respectively, multi-panel painting and chance-based composition, instead situating Kelly confoundingly alongside Georgia O’Keeffe. Goossen, *Art of the Real: USA, 1948–1968*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 8. For an excellent account of the European reception of this exhibition, roundly negative, see the chapter “‘Art of the Real: USA, 1948–1968’ and the Reception Abroad” in James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 252–60. “Chauvinistic” is Meyer’s preferred adjective to describe reactions to the exhibition by European commentators and audiences.

¹² On that battleground, to quote a French review of *Art of the Real* whose accompanying illustration was Kelly’s Parisian 1951 multi-panel painting *Colors for a Large Wall*: “Through his sojourn in Paris, his associations with South American artists ([Jesús Rafael] Soto, [Alejandro] Otero, etc.) and his knowledge of the Swiss theoreticians [Max Bill and Richard Paul Lohse], [Kelly] has amalgamated parallel methods, and it is not an accident that today, a Stella or a Noland, who owe much to him, have preoccupations very similar to Soto in 1951, or Morellet in 1952 and of the Groupe de Recherche [d’Art Visuel—also often known by its acronym GRAV] in 1960 . . . All of this, one might say, the secret history of modern painting. It is just beginning to be understood and Mr. Goossen does not help us to understand it by forgetting the part that Europe has played in it.” Christiane Duparc, “Blizzard au Grand Palais,” in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (November 18–26, 1968): 48; quoted in Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, 258. Meyer convincingly contests the centrality of this “secret history” to most of the Minimalists and hard-edge painters in Goossen’s exhibition. However, Kelly, who perhaps did not belong in the exhibition in the first place, would be an exception; Morellet and Otero were both friends of Kelly’s during his last years in Paris, and Soto at least knew him, having complimented Kelly at the opening of the 1951 *Tendance* group exhibition at the Galerie Maeght, Paris, in which Kelly exhibited (CR 251), although Bois also hypothesizes that the pair had likely met several months earlier, at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles of the same year, in which Soto exhibited (CR 221, n2).

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universality, Kelly's anachronistic decision to begin his artistic career in Paris went against this historical grain of America "taking the lead."¹³

While it now seems incredible that Paris could still be a destination for an ambitious young American artist in 1948, six years after the German occupation forced the closure of Shakespeare and Company and two years after the death of Gertrude Stein, Robert Rauschenberg also moved to Paris in 1948 on the GI Bill.¹⁴ However, as Calvin Tompkins wrote of Rauschenberg's dissatisfaction with the Académie Julian: "By the end of their second week they [Rauschenberg and Susan Weil] were pretty sure that you didn't have to study in Paris to be an artist," quickly returning to the United States and enrolling at Black Mountain College.¹⁵ What ensued is another story—one that is central to familiar narratives of the postwar migration of the avant-garde from Europe to the United States and the foment of a homegrown American experimental art.¹⁶ Kelly enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in order to receive his GI Bill stipend, but rarely attended; however, unlike Rauschenberg, he stayed in France. Beginning with Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* in Colmar, a territory newly repatriated to France in 1945, Kelly spent his expatriate years availing himself of the artistic treasures of Western Europe.

¹³ I am borrowing this expression from the title of Clement Greenberg's article "America Takes the Lead, 1945–1965," in *Art in America* 53, no. 4 (August–September 1965): 108–9.

¹⁴ Tellingly, in the summer of 1949 Kelly cold-called Alice B. Toklas and ended up visiting her at her 25 Rue Christine apartment, where he was enthralled with the Picassos he saw, as recounted in Tricia Y. Paik, *Ellsworth Kelly* (New York: Phaidon, 2015), 30–31, and CR 358.

¹⁵ Calvin Tompkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 22.

¹⁶ Rauschenberg has also become a key figure in the critical revision to this now-familiar narrative. Hiroko Ikegami's trailblazing 2010 study, *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art*, whose methodological influence is already undeniable, traces the genesis of postnational, global art as we know it today—via the building of international artistic networks—alongside the "American triumph" of Rauschenberg's 1964 travels to Paris, Venice, Stockholm, and Tokyo.

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Kelly's naïveté, if one wants to call it that, was to believe that the grand tour still could be—perhaps that it still should be—the basis of an artistic education. This belief was in contrast to a triangulation of geography, photography, and art history that resulted in an epistemic shift in the capacity of art to serve as a cultural custodian of memory.¹⁷ Several months before Kelly left Boston for Paris, the American critic Clement Greenberg foresaw in the approach of decoration by Jackson Pollock's all-over composition a "crisis of the easel picture" in which the lineage of autonomous painting, whose "form is determined by its social function, which is precisely to hang on a wall," would soon end.¹⁸ The previous year saw the first publication of *The Museum Without Walls* by French novelist and statesman André Malraux, which proposed photographic reproduction to have democratized art by eliminating the necessity of travel to see world masterpieces, therefore de-privileging the museum wall as the assumed site of aesthetic experience.¹⁹ At the core of Kelly's aesthetics was a contrary conviction to Malraux's celebration of the museum wall's dematerialization and Greenberg's mourning of the waning of its idealism. For Kelly, no less than the primacy of truly seeing—in this case, actual works of art in brick and mortar museums—would be worthy to occasion a new work of art.

But Kelly also de-reifies the colonialist and predatory nature of the modern museum, and likewise that of Malraux's super-museum: "I could take from everything; it all belonged to me: a glass roof of a factory with its broken and patched panes, lines of a roadmap, the shape of a scarf on

¹⁷ For the more familiar implication of Kelly's exact contemporary Rauschenberg in this epistemic shift, see Douglas Crimp's still-vital "On the Museum's Ruins," in *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 41–57.

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in *The Partisan Review* 15, no. 4 (April 1948); reprinted in Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 154. Kelly knew nothing of Greenberg, Pollock, or Abstract Expressionism then and would not until he returned to the United States in 1954, although he would later seek out Monet's mural-scale *Nymphéas* while in France.

¹⁹ André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire* (Paris: Skira, 1947), usually translated into English under the title *The Museum Without Walls*.

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a woman's head, a fragment of Le Corbusier's Swiss Pavilion, a corner of a Braque painting, paper fragments in the street."²⁰ Most famously, in *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, he also took from a museum window. Like the café window he would later transfer, the Parisian museum window is specific, not generic; as such, it counters the easel painting whose anticipated passing Greenberg mourns (and which it of course slyly references). It is tempting here to make an analogy between Kelly's deictics—to paraphrase Bois' characterization of the 1953 window, *this* window only, of *that* particular shape—and the fragmentary aesthetics of photography that so appropriately suited its role in extending the fragmentary logic of the museum. The distinction between Kelly and Malraux, however, is crucial: the attention and care of Kelly's transfer method to what he had seen, and the intuitive and, as per Bois, unsystematic nature of his methodology, make up the core of a project to resist the flattening impulse of idealisms such as Malraux's.

Traditionally, Kelly's own photographs have acted as a support in his carefully self-managed reception. In 1967, in the lead up to two monographic studies on his work and his first retrospective exhibition, he returned to Paris to take photographs of his paintings' visual sources—including the now-famous museum window.²¹ Unlike his prints, collages, drawings, and even the compendium of sources and ephemera that he exhibited and published as *Tablet* in 2002, the photographs have rarely

²⁰ Coplans, *Ellsworth Kelly*, 28–30. "Super-museum" is Douglas Crimp's coinage to describe *The Museum Without Walls*. Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 50.

²¹ The monographs are Coplans, *Ellsworth Kelly*; and Diane Waldman, *Ellsworth Kelly: Drawings, Collages, and Prints* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971). The retrospective was curated by E. C. Goossen at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1973. We have long known the visual sources of many of Kelly's most famous paintings, including *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*; *White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection*, 1952–55; and *Red Blue Green*, 1963, by these photographs. There has often been confusion about whether Kelly painted from photographs, as was first misreported in Waldman's catalogue, but the paintings themselves were derived from sketches, or in the case of *White Plaque* a collage-study, usually made from memory though sometimes also from direct observation or occasionally indexical tracing, as in the case of *Atlantic*, 1956. The photographs merely document visual motifs already recorded through other means.

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received attention as a body of artistic work.²² The recent posthumous exhibition *Ellsworth Kelly: Photographs*, at Matthew Marks Gallery, 2016, begins to remedy this omission. Kelly was heavily involved in the planning of the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue before his death. *Ellsworth Kelly: Photographs* refrains from including any of the familiar Parisian photographs of 1967; instead, Kelly begins with a suite of photographs from 1950 taken in Meschers-sur-Gironde in the south of France.²³ Here, one views another side of Kelly's ethics of seeing, in which the shapes viewed by Kelly seem to properly belong to photography—or at least they belong outside of painting, as two of the photographs included in the exhibition document motifs that Kelly had sketched but ultimately deemed untransferable.²⁴ *Ellsworth Kelly: Photographs* then jumps almost two decades to rarely seen photographs, mostly taken between 1968 and 1977. The most revelatory of these feature white shapes that pop from their mid- and dark-tone settings, the shapes of freshly white-painted New York state barn doors and roofs inverting the logic of the silhouette on which so many of Kelly's best known paintings are based (fig. 3).

²² The major exception is the 1997 Kelly retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, curated by Waldman, in which the photographs ascended from supporting documents to the status of works on paper.

²³ These 1950 Meschers photographs are the peers of several photographs not included in the exhibition that documented motifs that eventually became paintings.

²⁴ The sketches that predated *Shelled Bunker, Meschers, 1950* and *Beach Cabana, Meschers, 1950* are reproduced in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France*, 53 and 55. Bois discusses why the cabana sketch was never executed as a painting at length in his essay "Kelly's *Trouvailles*: Findings in France," in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Early Drawings, 1948–1955*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 1999), 14–17. While the *Shelled Bunker* motif was never directly transferred to painting form, Kelly's 1950 multi-panel painting *Royan* (one of only two works in the catalogue raisonné whose whereabouts are unknown) was composed from it. Bois explains this anomaly in Kelly's oeuvre, and the crucial distinction between its traditional composition and the non-composition of Kelly's transfer method, in his entry on that painting (CR 230–31).



Fig. 3. Ellsworth Kelly, *Barn, Taconic*, 1974, Gelatin silver print, 8 1/2 x 12 7/8 in. (22 x 33 cm). © Ellsworth Kelly,

Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

One cannot, however, discuss these photographs, self-sufficient as they are, without the paintings. “Often when I draw I close one eye,” Kelly stated in a 1991 interview on his photographic practice that is reproduced in the *Photographs* exhibition catalogue.²⁵ This statement takes Kelly’s treatment of shape away from the stereoptic vision of *flânerie*, and therefore also away from Parisian modernism, and instead proposes a kind of painterly seeing, continuous with photography, that falls

²⁵ *Ellsworth Kelly: Photographs*, exh. cat. (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery and Aperture Foundation, 2016), 4.

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outside the art historical binary of gaze and glance.²⁶ The 1950 photographs, the first he had ever taken, came curiously in the middle of Kelly's breakthrough—to be precise, exactly as he was discovering chance, the second of his four non-compositional strategies. While his photographs have never been a tool with which to create paintings, as has sometimes been incorrectly reported, what Kelly's first encounter with the camera did add to his ethics of seeing remains to be studied.

By contrast, Kelly was, by Bois' account, already fully formed when he encountered Monet in 1952, although that encounter serves as the pretext for the *Monet/Kelly* exhibition and its art historical emplotment. In his short essay in the *Monet/Kelly* catalogue, Bois makes clear that all but one of Kelly's own works in the exhibition, picked to accompany the Monet paintings he also chose, were exceptions within his oeuvre.²⁷ Curator Sarah Lees' longer essay concentrates on the Monet paintings, the circumstances of their creation, and their place in the French painter's oeuvre, only tacking on an unconvincing nod to what Kelly might have learned from them. This suggests that despite what Kelly himself has stated of his pilgrimage to Giverny in 1952—where Monet's stepson showed him the then lesser known late works, and he declared: "Seeing the *Nymphéas* affirmed what I was doing"—the contribution of this exhibition and its catalogue is to have us see Monet through Kelly's eyes.²⁸ So from the ethics that accords the proper place to the primacy of truly seeing, Kelly offers a selection of works from the second half of the 1880s (the seascapes of Belle-Île), one interstitial water lilies study, and another group from the last years of Monet's life, a swath that reveals the artist's flirtation with allover composition, well before he was losing his eyesight. The

²⁶ This would counter the tempting impulse to pose Kelly's transfer method, fragmenting from things incidentally seen, as a late variant of the Impressionists' aesthetics of mobile city life. For one recent example, see Jed Perl's account of Kelly's years in France in *New Art City: Manhattan at Midcentury* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 325–30.

²⁷ Yve-Alain Bois, "Retracing Monet," in *Monet/Kelly*, exh. cat. (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2014), 51.

²⁸ *Monet/Kelly*, 9.

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differences between these paintings and Kelly's, the latter formally and epistemologically about the clarity and precision of seeing, are obvious; the inclusion of rarely-seen drawings made by Kelly from the same Belle-Île sites as Monet's paintings also marks the distance, not continuity, between these two artists. Perhaps Kelly was an "other" all along; by his curating, this is how he seems to have seen himself.

Similarly, the exhibition catalogue *Matisse Drawings Curated by Ellsworth Kelly*, which includes plates from a small concurrent exhibition of Kelly's plant lithographs, also held at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, is more about Matisse himself than establishing a debt to him.²⁹ The catalogue features an interview between Kelly and John R. Stromberg, then director of the museum. Instead of narrating his early encounters with Matisse and what he learned from them, in one stroke, Kelly teaches us how to see both Matisse's drawings and his own: "Matisse evoked space. For instance, when he would do leaves or fruit or still lifes, he would leave openings. . . . But my drawings are about shapes; the forms are closed."³⁰ And here again, Kelly's exhibition delights in what he cannot quite understand, at least not systematically: the play of positive and negative space in the Matisse drawings Kelly chooses, a majority of them portraits, superficially resemble aspects of his own plant lithographs. However, three 1942 drawings of a woman with a veil reveal that vision in Matisse is porous, and space amorphous, as opposed to the specific one-eyed point of view of Kelly's lithographs and their deep concern with the spatial overlap of leaves.³¹

²⁹ *Plant Lithographs by Ellsworth Kelly, 1964–66*, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, MA, August 30–December 14, 2014.

³⁰ John R. Stromberg, ed., *Matisse Drawings: Curated by Ellsworth Kelly from the Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation Collection*, exh. cat. (South Hadley, MA: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2015), 14.

³¹ Kelly also comments on Matisse's use of color with astonished awe: "Matisse is a fantastic colorist. I mean, sometimes you can understand Picasso's colorings because very often he uses opposites, but with Matisse, I've never understood how he uses color. It's his own." Ibid., 15.

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Historically and art historically, the period of Kelly's early career in France was marked by rupture: the Yalta Conference, the Marshall Plan, the end of modernism, the death of painting, the triumph of American painting, John Cage, Rauschenberg, the *Museum Without Walls*, and the list goes on. Increasingly, we are narrating these ruptures geographically.³² Kelly's own place in this history is not as an agent of rupture, nor as an articulator of historical rupture, as art history has conscripted Pollock and Rauschenberg at various points. Formally, Kelly's work envisions an alternative position within these ruptures that accords due respect to specificity. While the two revisionist exhibitions I previously discussed reveal that geopolitical art history does not yet know quite what to do with Kelly, Bois' catalogue raisonné might suggest that in a time of rupture it can be more rewarding to go the "wrong way" in a geographic realignment. A consequence of Kelly's transnationality, as evidenced by the Western Massachusetts exhibitions, is to resist our reflexive art historical narratives. The legacy of his years in France may be the challenge to rewrite them.

³² Key texts on the geographic nature of these shifts include Golan, *Muralnomad*; Ikegami, *The Great Migrator*; and Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009).

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