

## ELLSWORTH KELLY Notes of 1969

In 1949, I ceased figurative painting and began works that were object oriented. The drawings from plant life seem to be a bridge to the way of seeing that brought about the paintings in 1949 that are the basis for all my later work.

After arriving in Paris in 1948, I realized that figurative painting and also abstract painting (though my knowledge of the latter was very limited) as I had known it in the 20th century no longer interested me as a solution to my own problems. I wanted to give up easel painting which I felt was too personal.

All the art since the Renaissance seemed too men-oriented. I liked (the) object quality. An Egyptian pyramid, a Sung vase, the Romanesque church appealed to me. The forms found in the vaulting of a cathedral or even a splatter of tar on the road seemed more valid and instructive and a more voluptuous experience than either geometric or action paintings.

Instead of making a picture that was an interpretation of a thing seen, or a picture of invented content, I found an object and "presented" it as itself alone. My first object was "Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris" done in 1949.

After constructing "Window" with two canvases and a wood frame, I realized that from then on painting as I had known it was finished for me. The new works were to be objects, unsigned, anonymous.

Everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something to be made, and it had to be exactly as it was, with nothing added. It was a new freedom; there was no longer the need to compose. The subject was there already made, and I could take from everything. It all belonged to me: a glass roof of a factory with its broken and patched panels, lines on a road map, a corner of a Braque painting, paper fragments in the street. It was all the same: anything goes.

I felt that everything is beautiful but that which man tries intentionally to make beautiful, that the work of an ordinary bricklayer is more valid than the artwork of all but a very few artists.

The form of my painting is the content.

My work is made of single or multiple panels: rectangle, curved or square. I am less interested in marks on the panels than the "presence" of the panels themselves.

In "Red, Yellow, Blue," the square panels present color. It was made to exist forever in the present, it is an idea and can be repeated anytime in the future.

I began to draw from plant life and found the flat leaf forms were easier to do than thighs and breasts. I wanted to flatten. The plant drawings from that time until now have always been linear. They are exact observations of the form of the leaf or flower or fruit seen. Nothing is changed or added; no shading, no surface marking. They are not an approximation of the thing seen nor are they a personal expression or an abstraction. They are an impersonal observation of the form. When I applied the procedure to other things such as the vaulting of Notre Dame or a patch of tar on the road, the subject of the drawings and the subsequent paintings were not recognizable even though they were exact copies of the thing seen. I wanted to use things that had no pictorial use.

My work is about structure. It has never been a reaction to Abstract Expressionism. I saw the Abstract Expressionists for the first time in 1954., My line of influence has been the "structure" of the things I liked: French Romanesque architecture, Byzantine, Egyptian, and Oriental art, Van Gogh, Cezanne, Monet, Klee, Picasso, Beckmann.

I admired and felt the anonymous structure of the work of Brancusi, Vantongerloo, Arp, and Taeuber-Arp whose studios I visited. Their work reinforced my own ideas for the creation of a Pre-Renaissance, European type art: its anonymous stone work, the object quality of the artifacts, the fact that the work was more important than the artist's personality.

Audubon, the Pre-Columbian Indians, and Calder. Of the Europeans, I most admired the way Picasso, Klee, and Brancusi "made" their art. Contrary to what has been said about me, Mondrian and Matisse did not interest me when I was in Paris. Mondrian could not be seen in Paris and when I did see them [his paintings] in Holland in 1963, I thought their structure too rigid and intellectual.

When I left Paris in 1954, I saw no art that was being "made" like mine and returning to the US. I found no one "making" art that way either.

In my own work, I have never been interested in painterliness (or what I find is) a very personal handwriting, putting marks on canvas. My work is a different way of seeing and making something and which has a different use.

In my painting, negative space is never arbitrary (I believe lithographs to be colored marks printed on a ground--the paper and the measure of the ground and the marks are to be considered of equal importance). In my painting, the painting is the subject rather than the subject, the painting.

When I was a child, I spent all my spare time looking at birds and insects (beetles). My color use, and the object quality of the "painting," and the use of fragmentation is closer to birds and beetles and fish than it is to De Stijl or the Constructivists.

Looking through an aperture (a door or a window) is a way that I have been able to isolate or fragment a single form. My first memory of focusing through an aperture occurred when I was around twelve years old. One evening, passing the lighted window of a house, I was fascinated by red, blue, and black shapes inside a room. But when I went up and looked in, I saw a red couch, a blue drape and a black table. The shapes had disappeared. I had to retreat to see them again.

Making art has first of all to do with honesty. My first lesson was to see objectively, to erase all "meaning" of the thing seen. Then only could the real meaning of it be understood and felt.

Ellsworth Kelly, "Notes of 1969," in *Ellsworth Kelly* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1980), 30-34. Text slightly revised by the artist in 1993.