E. C. Goossen

ELLSWORTH KELLY

The Museum of Modern Art

New York

Distributed by New York Graphic Society Ltd.

Greenwich, Connecticut

John James Audubon, *American Redstart*, August 13, 1821
Watercolor, 19⅛ x 12 inches
The New-York Historical Society
not exh.

CHILDHOOD

Ellsworth Kelly, the second son of three, was born on May 31, 1923, to Allan Howe Kelly and Florence Githens Kelly at Newburgh, New York. His father, of Scotch-Irish and German descent, was an insurance company executive; his mother, a former schoolteacher, came from Welsh and Pennsylvania-German stock. Both families, in previous years, had been established in the area between West Virginia and southern Ohio. Kelly's paternal grandmother's name was Rosenlieb, and his other grandmother was a Stegner: a heritage on the whole that has perhaps some bearing on the Northern character of his art.

When Kelly was born, his family moved to New Jersey, where they lived in a number of places in and around Hackensack. Kelly recalls that his mother moved the family to a different house every year. Some of his strongest memories, however, center in Oradell, a town of about 7,500 inhabitants situated near the Oradell Reservoir. It was on the shores of this body of water that Ellsworth, having been introduced to bird-watching by his grandmother Rosenlieb, was able to train his eye and to develop a passion for form and color. He had learned the names, colors, and shapes of local birds very early, at about eight or nine, a study he continued in later years with the help of the works of Louis Agassiz Fuertes and John James Audubon. The latter in particular has had a strong influence on Kelly's art throughout his career. It was probably also on the lake shore, among the reeds and weeds, that his accurate eye for nature's shapes was sharpened (later to be directly exploited in his plant drawings) and his appreciation of the physical reality of the world was born.

It is worth speculating that close acquaintance with the black-throated blue warbler and the redstart and all the other two- and three-color birds is traceable in the two- and three-color paintings Kelly is best known for; and that as a kind of boy naturalist, out of doors all the time, almost constantly alone—he was, he says, a "loner" who did not talk early or very much and even had a mild stutter into his teens—Kelly's independent character, both as a person and as an artist, was formed well before puberty.

What he was doing in art during this early period is not well documented; in his family's moves from

house to house, most of the evidence has disappeared. There are recollections, mostly of visual experiences: for example, a vivid memory of a dark summer evening when he was drawn toward a lighted house window because for the first time he saw it in terms of areas of light and color; a crushing (but perhaps strengthening) rebuff by a teacher in the third grade who found him rubbing crayons on a piece of rough manila paper in order to get the exact color of blue he wanted so that he could cut out his drawing of an iris and paste it on another sheet. She said: "We're not here to make a mess. Go stand in the corner."

The elementary grades and high school were apparently conventional experiences. Art classes, such as they were in the late-1920s and 1930s, were undoubtedly conducted along the lines of an Arthur W. Dow–influenced curriculum.[1] Kelly was, in fact, during his high school years divided as to whether to go into theater or art. His talent was to some degree recognized by his art teachers, particularly Evelyn Robbins in high school. On graduation his parents, confronted with the theater-or-art problem, accepted a practical solution. They would support, financially and ideologically, solid technical training in the applied arts at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

Kelly went to study and live in Brooklyn in the fall of 1941. He recalls only one instructor, Maitland Graves,[2] who he felt gave him some of the training he wanted. After a year and a half at Pratt, the Second World War took precedence. Having volunteered for the Army, he was inducted on New Year's Day, 1943.

Art Abrams, 1944
Ink on paper, 5¼ x 8¼ inches
not exh.

THE ARMY YEARS: 1943–1945

When Kelly entered military service, he requested assignment to the 603rd Engineers Camouflage Battalion, as it was perhaps natural for an artist to do. Inducted at Fort Dix, New Jersey, he was permitted to wait there several weeks for transfer orders; none came, so he was summarily sent off to Camp Hale, Colorado, to be trained with the mountain ski troops! Kelly, who had never been on skis in his life, made the best of it; and when his transfer to the Engineers finally came through six or eight weeks later, he actually left for Fort Meade, Maryland, with some regrets. He had rea-

Janny, 1944
Gouache, 12 x 8¾ inches
not Exh.

ning—in a necessarily crude way—of the organization of an exotic, natural scene into an art idea. But the portrait of *Janny* (at left), a friendly adolescent girl, done on Thanksgiving Day, 1944, is prophetic of a transition from a learned, illustrational style to the equation of form with feeling that would preoccupy him from then on.

The 603rd Engineers Camouflage Battalion was no longer needed for deception operations after the Allies broke the German defenses and raced for Berlin. The war was essentially over. The unit was assigned to administer several displaced persons' camps in the area between the Moselle and the Rhine near Idar-Oberstein. Here Kelly made pencil and pen-and-ink drawings of a number of the camps' inmates, people from Central Europe who had been used by the Germans as forced labor.[7]

In early summer 1945 the 603rd was shipped back to America and ultimately disbanded. One of the most important things that had happened to Kelly during these two and a half years at war was his exposure to military camouflage, which is, after all, a visual art. This involvement with form and shadow, with the construction and destruction of the visible, was a basic part of his education as an artist. In various ways it was to affect nearly everything he did in painting and sculpture a few years later, though at the time it must have seemed totally unrelated. (See Appendix: *Kelly and Camouflage,* page 115.)

THE BOSTON YEARS: 1946–1948

Because he had been in a camouflage unit and in the company of a number of artists of varying propensities and interests, Kelly had been closer to his prime concerns than many other soldiers. Moreover he had served in France, and something of its artistic culture had touched him, however lightly. Yet, having no real knowledge of what was going on in New York, how vital a scene had begun to develop there, and wanting something more educationally substantial than the Art Students League but having been disappointed with Pratt, he selected the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

The benefits of the G.I. Bill were of course available to him as a returning veteran ($75 each month

plus tuition and supplies). He was also able to augment this amount by obtaining a studio and a room rent-free at the Norfolk House Centre, a settlement house, in exchange for teaching two evenings a week. These classes were composed of elderly as well as young people from the Roxbury section of Boston. Settlement-house teaching is very much alike everywhere: a combination of social therapy and the satisfaction of a longing on the part of most students to add a little color to otherwise drab lives. Kelly recalls only one student vividly, a middle-aged woman whose work was thought totally inept by the others because it was naïve, but which he found most imaginative.

The curriculum at the Museum School was of the usual sort, drawing and life classes, painting, design, and sculpture, as well as the compulsory two hours a week of art history, resented as ever by most of the student body. Kelly, however, got A's in all his courses, including art history, which he really enjoyed. In fact he spent every spare hour in the Museum collections and became a regular weekly visitor at the Fogg Museum at Harvard and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum on the Fenway.[8] Some of this seriousness may be attributable to the maturity brought about by his years in military service, an interruption in the progress toward life's goals felt so deeply by many ex-G.I.s. Making up for lost time, the pure joy of serving one's own ends, and the added years of age were the beneficial by-products of an otherwise unfortunate experience. As an example of this seriousness, when asked in design class to pick a scene from Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* and to create a set or a costume for it, Kelly stayed up several nights and completed designs for the entire ballet, which he laid out on a folding screen. For someone who had spent many winter nights without sleep, setting up dummy tanks, trucks, and guns in front of the German lines along the Moselle in Luxembourg, such a sustained task (setting aside the difficulty of making the inherent aesthetic decisions) was hardly a new or impossible idea of self-discipline.

The Boston Museum School was dominated by the personality of the German-born-and-trained artist Karl Zerbe (1903–1972), who was the head of the painting department. Zerbe was an expressionist who had come to the school in 1937 after periods in Mexico and Paris. Even before he had arrived, however, the school was known as the cen-

Self-Portrait, 1947
Oil on canvas, 39½ x 27½ inches
not exh.

73.357

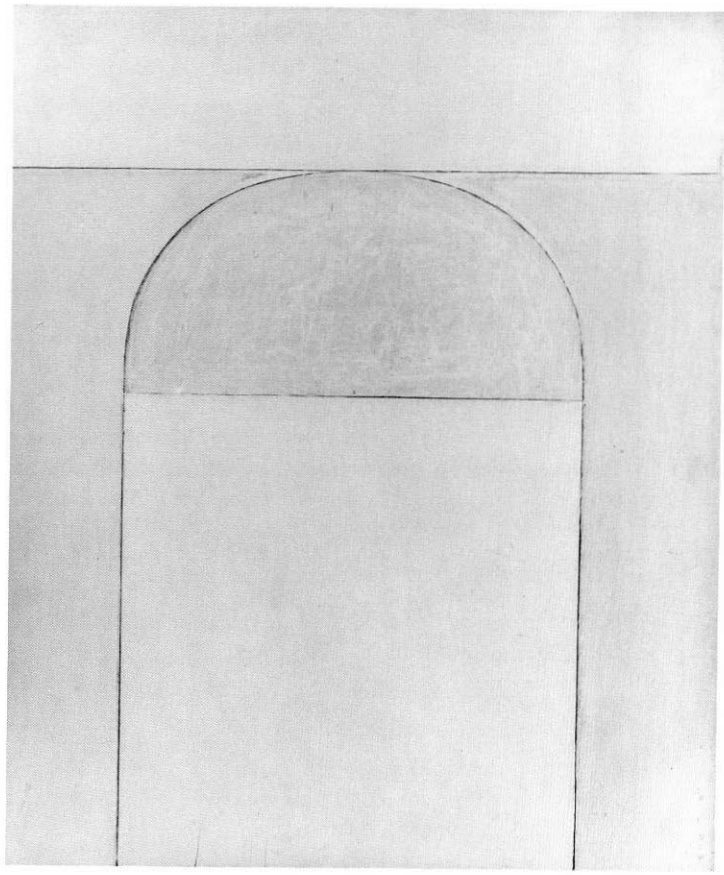
Kilometer Marker, 1949. Oil on wood, 21½ x 18 inches.

This little picture bears the same relation to the formal characteristics of Kelly's whole body of work as a course in Basic English does to the English language. Its subject is taken from the visual environment, but that subject is so simple in itself, and so essentialized in the painting, that we need not identify it in order to know its qualities. It could be the arch of a doorway or window as easily as a kilometer marker. The top of the marker has been made tangent with a "horizon" line, which is like the bottom of a lintel over an arch, and so the same visual tension appears. And since the tops of markers in France are painted down to a point where curved and straight lines meet, creating an effect like that of the tympanum, Kelly has not distorted the truth for ambiguity's sake. And regarding the horizon, in Belle-Ile the flat line of the sea might well meet the crest of the curve of the marker when such a marker is drawn from a sitting position.

The people who see only the geometry in Kelly's painting make a mistake. He is a "pre-Euclidean." The formalities of geometry and its abstractness are of no consequence to him either at the inception of an idea or in the final result. It does not take a geometrician to see the curves and straight lines in nature. The moon does not belong to mathematicians, and architects built buildings long before Euclid. Indeed, the special freshness in Kelly's art lies in his reliance on his own vision, and the only "system" he refers to is the one he has devised himself by simply looking at the world. It includes straight lines, angles, regular and parabolic curves, flat planes, and pure colors. The closest he has come to systematizing his ideas about how these things work "abstractly" is in a series of studies he made for a book project in 1951 (Waldman, plates 49–54); he later abandoned it, apparently because it was leading him into a kind of thinking he actually deplored.

Kilometer Marker has certainly been a prophetic picture. One has only to compare it with *Rebound,* 1959 (page 70), and *Red Blue Green,* 1963 (page 55), to see how it initiates both forms and circumstances: the tension between curve and straight line, the precise clarity of the shapes, including the "negative" spaces on either side of the central shape, the horizontal panellike rectangle at the top and the vertical rectangle of the lower part of the marker. *Kilometer Marker,* although it belongs to the grayish-white pictures of this period, is essentially a two-color painting, pale yellow and white. Two-color combinations make up the greatest part of Kelly's work over the years.

Kelly has stated that he had studied Paul Klee during his early years. *Kilometer Marker* has a parallel in *The Mask of Fear,* 1932 (Fig. 17, page 107). Klee may have also used one of these ubiquitous distance markers as the source of his basic image. A comparison of the two is revealing. Klee plays with the shape, moving it toward humanization in anthropomorphic terms, Freudian, religious (the arrow to heaven), and surreal. Kelly, however, seems interested only in those visual properties of the subject that can become visual properties in the painting.

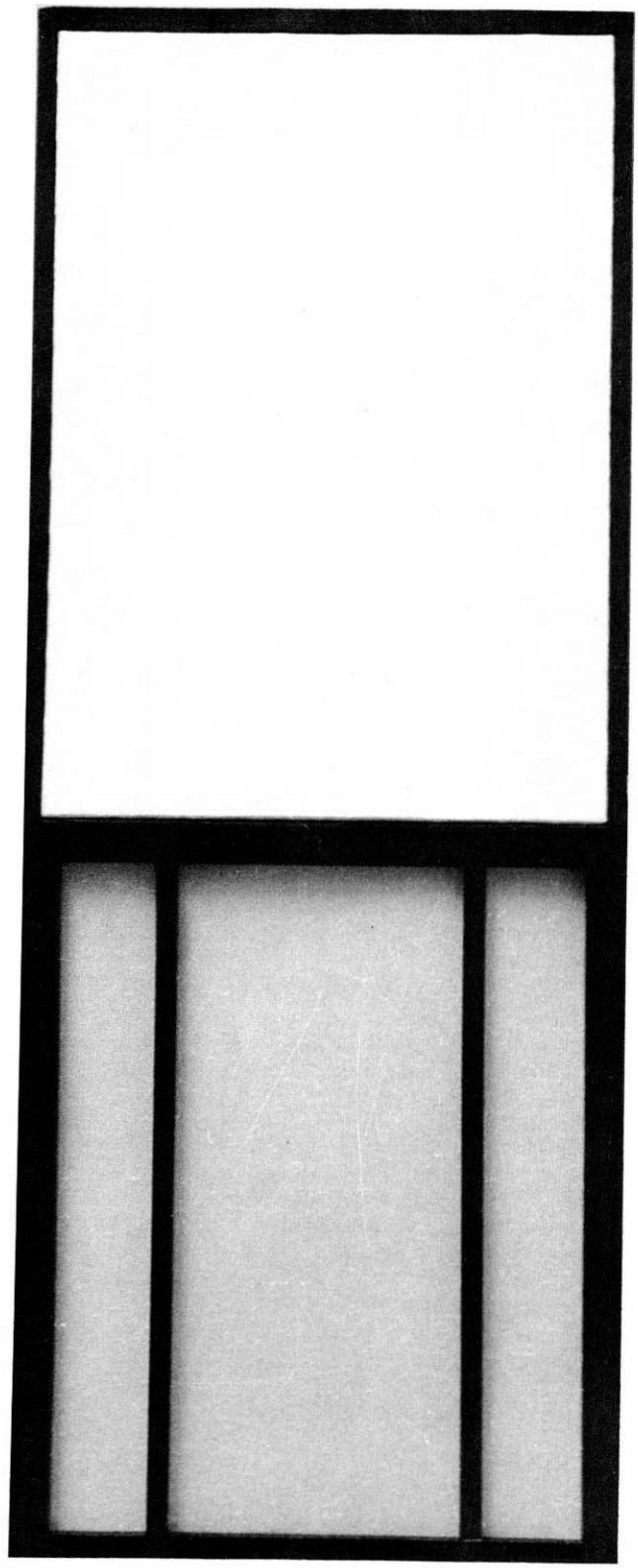


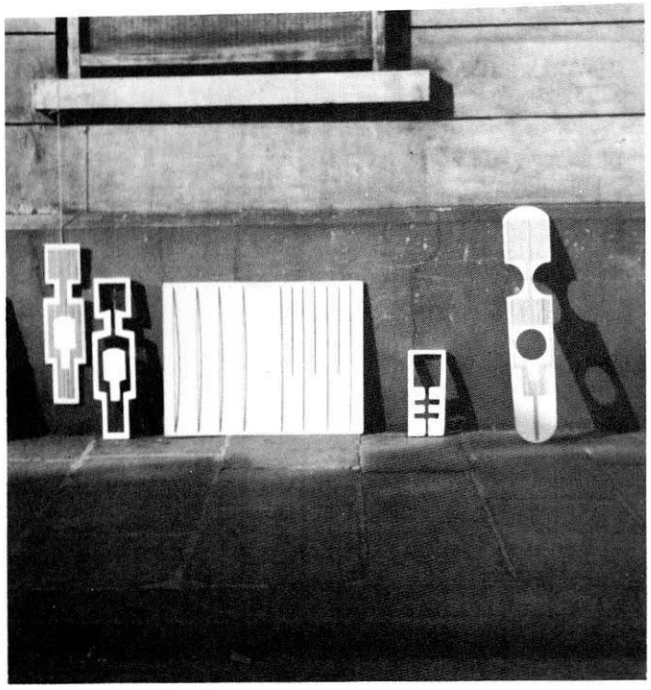
opposite: *Window I,* 1949. Oil on wood, 25½ x 21 inches. not exh. 73.375
right: *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris,* 1949. Oil on wood and canvas, 50½ x 19½ inches.

Windows are frequent subjects in Kelly's early work and are structurally paralleled in his later work. A sketch in gouache preceding *Window, I,* 1949 (Waldman, plate 23), is a literal rendering of the six panes of a typical French casement window, emphasizing the black framing of the sash. The gouache and a sketch (Fig. 16, page 106) were done in Belle-Ile during the summer of 1949; the painting, a modification to the point of symbolism, was done in Paris in the fall. In 1949 and early in 1950, Kelly wavered between recording exactly what he saw and seeing his subject in terms of something else, most often the figure. His wood and string cutout reliefs (page 24) and works derived from a French floor-toilet are conceived, Picasso-fashion, as "figurative." Yet he also made a number of paintings and objects that were direct translations of the subject in a kind of ultra-realism. The most spectacular of these, even in its miniaturization of the subject, was *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris.* It is virtually an architect's mock-up in scale even though Kelly never seems to have actually measured the original (Fig. 33, page 110). It has some of the flavor of the fake tanks and trucks built by his wartime camouflage battalion to deceive the enemy.

Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris, a "construction," is prophetic, not only of the development of Kelly's own work in panels, reliefs, and sculpture, but also of Pop art and primary structures of the 1960s.

This work is also a kind of "ready-made," not in the Duchampian sense, where the original object is simply taken out of context and given the aura of "art," but in the sense that the subject apparently offered all proportional and compositional interest in and of itself. Moreover the work and his manner of making it eliminate the problem of illusion. A low-relief subject is given a low-relief treatment. It predicts Jasper Johns's Flags and Targets, in which the subjects' real dimensions are totally compatible with the flatness of the canvas surface.





above: Group of string reliefs, 1949–1950. Photograph by the artist.

opposite: *Saint-Louis, II*, 1950. Oil on cardboard mounted on wood, 22 x 39¼ inches.

In 1950 Kelly occupied himself largely with reliefs based on the sketches he was accumulating in his notebooks. His eye was obviously directed toward some of the most unlikely places for subject matter, and he was discovering things he could use all around him. Fascinated with a wall near his hotel-studio in Paris, he made a kind of replica of it. The revetted stone surface, so common in Paris, was simulated by gluing strips of thick cardboard on a wood panel, spacing the pieces just far enough apart to create real shadow lines like those on the actual wall. He painted it white and called it *Saint-Louis, II*. The picture is a combination of abstraction and an ultra-realism like that of William B. Harnett.

patterns provided by shadows and stains, by changes of color from one material to another,[25] of openings in walls, of doorways and windows, and of chimneys on the outside of walls.[26] Many of these would wait a year or more for exploitation in paintings or constructions, and others provided themes that would be reworked again and again in years to come.

Coburn had gone south when his room in the Parisian suburb of Saint-Germain-en-Laye had become untenable because of dampness. At his invitation, Kelly went to visit him over Christmas in Sanary, a resort town of 2,700 inhabitants on the Côte d'Azur, thirteen kilometers from Toulon, a site in earlier days favored by D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, and Aldous Huxley. This trip was just a taste of the south of France, to which Kelly was to return in 1951 for a longer stay. It included a pilgrimage to Cap d'Antibes to see Picasso, but once again, perhaps, Kelly's shyness intervened. The nearest he got was a short exchange with Picasso's companion, Françoise Gilot. However, several sketches of the harbor at Antibes resulted in paintings the following year.

In the spring of 1950, his G.I. Bill used up, Kelly survived as best he could with some help from home, living on his high floor in the Hôtel Bourgogne on the Ile-Saint-Louis. Here he designed his first reliefs, cutouts in wood, made for him by an *ébéniste*. Their internal patterns are laced with string and thus related art historically to early Constructivist practice (Naum Gabo's translucent thread pictures and sculptures) but strangely enough even more related to the punched-card-and-yarn pictures made in every kindergarten class in America in the 1920s. The latter seems a likely latent source since Kelly had at this time very little direct experience with Constructivist art.

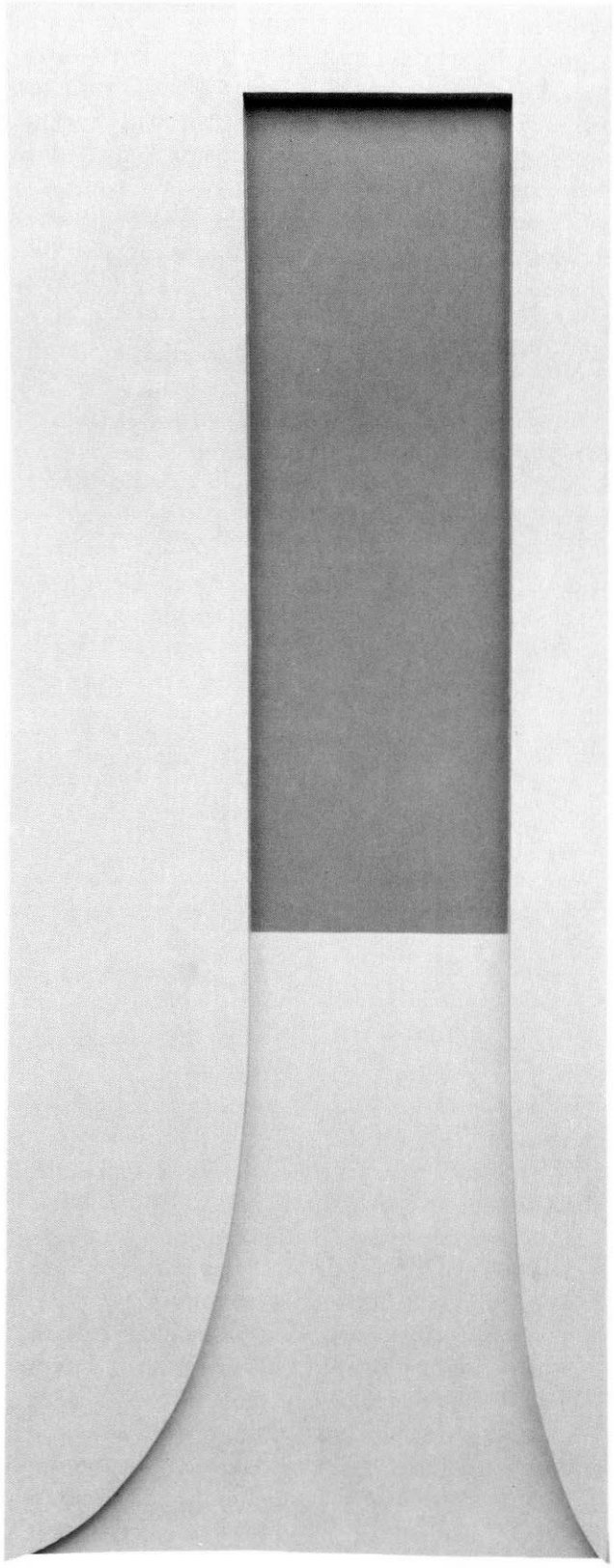
During the same period he made several pieces with twine laced through holes or sewed on canvas, using the conventional rectangular field; one was taken from the window pattern, and another was based on a driveway gate that had vertical metal stiffeners welded to its solid iron sheets.

This fascination with the literal presentation of the drawn pattern led to other methods. In *Saint-Louis, II* (opposite), for example, strips of cardboard were bevel-cut and pasted on board and painted, letting the "incised" lines with their depth and shadow create the image. This was actually a re-

73.373
opposite: *White Relief,* 1950. Oil on wood, 39¼ x 27½ inches.
73.367
right: *Relief with Blue,* 1950. Oil on wood, 45 x 17½ inches.

The design for *White Relief* came from a *pochoir* (stencil) he had found in a shop. The idea for the cutout pieces of wood glued to the panel undoubtedly came out of Arp, but the blunt grid organization came from the *pochoir.* It is probable that he was drawn to the latter because of his experience as a stencil-cutter in the camouflage corps. By lopping off the peaks of the top row of the protruding pieces, he has given the relief an orientation without juggling things around. If viewed with eyes half-closed, the shadows become flat planes and recall certain shapes he was to use in the late 1960s.

Jean-Louis Barrault was offering *Hamlet,* in Gide's translation, in his repertory at the Théâtre Marigny in 1948–1950. The stage set was very simple, using virtually nothing but black and gray curtains that were opened and closed in various depths and widths for changes of scene while colored lights changed the mood. One arrangement in particular caught Kelly's attention when he went to see Barrault's production. He made a little sketch and later translated it into *Relief with Blue.* The stylized and truncated curves of the "drapery" at the bottom appear in any number of subsequent works. The bright, light blue of the rectangle on the plane back of the white area is the first appearance of this kind of color, so typical in later years.



Hyacinth, 1949
Ink on paper, 16½ x 12 inches
not exh.

presentation of the facts: the stone face of the subject wall was creased in exactly the same fashion.

He had, in this period, moved a long way from the brushwork technique of his school days. The expressive textural qualities of manipulated thick paint had been translated into literal renderings with thread and incised lines of nature as it exists. Collage also began to interest him as an intermediate step toward finished paintings. In one painting he reproduced a collage he had made from *objets trouvés:* a gas-bill receipt, a pink handbill, and some green paper, all found in the gutter. While these creations cannot be considered new additions to modern art, the processes he was selecting and personalizing were consistent with his development, and all were employed with originality and finesse. In the early spring of 1949, perhaps because of these moves toward greater abstraction and the abandonment of the human figure as a subject, he had begun to make drawings—formally such, not sketches—of plants. The first of these were of a hyacinth (page 28) he had brought home to his hotel-studio. For many years thereafter, plant drawings appeared as a regular part of his work. (See *The Plant Drawings,* pages 96–97).

Kelly was still primarily a loner even though there were many American artists in Paris.[27] His closest friend in those years, aside from Coburn, was the young American painter, Jack Youngerman, whom he had met during his first term at the Beaux-Arts. Youngerman describes Kelly as even then "a person of great probity and concentration," whose ideas about art were always impressive and serious. But while Kelly never did get French under control, his friend, who was much more socially involved (he was soon to marry Delphine Seyrig, a budding actress who eventually played in *Last Year at Marienbad*), became thoroughly at home with the language.

Some more temporary friendships nevertheless helped to bring about a modicum of contact with the inner circles of the French art world. The Swiss artist Jürg Spiller, whom he met by chance and who perhaps had mistakenly read Kelly's painting of the moment as more closely related to Constructivism than it actually was, brought him along on a visit to Georges Vantongerloo. Kelly's account of this first encounter indicates fully his lack of rapport with the principles to which the Belgian artist had devoted his life (1886–1965). Vantonger-

not exh.
Study for *Seine: Chance Diagram of Light Reflected on Water,* 1951. Ink and pencil on paper, 4¾ x 15⅞ inches.

73.370
Seine, 1951. Oil on wood, 16½ x 45¼ inches.

Seine, a *tour de force,* is one of the most successful pictures ever made incorporating the use of "the laws of chance." While it remains true to its subject-source—reflections and shadows on water—it expands both the meaning of the subject and the minimal means by which it is achieved. Even if one had no knowledge of the title or the subject, and even though it is a totally abstract picture, *Seine* conveys a sensation of light and dark that is a true objective correlative (T. S. Eliot's term) for the artist's original sensation.

Though it is a most highly structured picture, the rational processes that went into its making are not as compelling as the vision that produced it. *Seine* is a prime example of the back-and-forth play between the selection of a subject adaptable to abstraction and an abstract method suited to the subject. The best subjects and the best pictures are those like this one, where the two dovetail exactly.

The sketches leading to *Seine* vary from realistic pencil drawings of reflections on water to stylized versions made with the squared strokes of a broad-nibbed pen (Figs. 21–26, pages 108–109). Kelly obviously searched for a rhythmical balance between light and dark, white and black, space and form—form being the shadow cast from the shape of a solid object. Or, if it is considered as a night scene, then the light thrust into the darkness is "form" and the black is the void. This second reading is less likely, however, since the light area is divided and dispersed to the sides.

Seine was a challenge to the chance method, to see if it could render images from life with some verity. Chance in this instance was given only the most restricted of roles, that of making decisions only after all the really important decisions had been made. One of the latter would seem to have issued from an old school problem assigned in nearly all design classes: ". . . take a rectangle of a certain size and make something visually interesting using fifty percent black and fifty percent white."

The idea of employing a grid was perhaps as much suggested by the results of trying to catch the flickering reflections with the square-ended pen as it may have been, for example, by Mondrian's 1917 grid compositions or his late (1942–1943) *Broadway Boogie Woogie.* In any case, to insure a "fifty percent" solution, the best way to go about it would be to have an exact way to measure the areas devoted to black and to white. In addition, a grid would allow placement to be taken over by some numerical system. But what system?

Study for *Seine: Chance Diagram of Light Reflected on Water* (1951) was made some months after the sketches drawn directly from the waterside. A grid of little rectangles was laid out on paper, forty-one units high by eighty-two long. The shape of the overall graph is an elongated horizontal, somewhat similar in proportion to what the French call a *marine* (to differentiate it from the fat, vertical *figure* and the squarish rectangle called a *paysage*). Forty-one numbered slips of paper were put into a box and mixed up. Then, starting with the second vertical row, having left the first row blank, a number was drawn and its corresponding space filled in, and the number put back into the box. For the next row two numbers were drawn, filled in, and returned; the next, three, and so on. When the center was reached and all forty-one rectangles were blackened, the operation was reversed. Obviously coagulation at the center was foreseen, as was symmetry. The system assured (1) equal areas of black

(*continued on page 32*)

such as *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Law of Chance,* 1916–1917 (which had been on view in The Museum of Modern Art in New York since the late 1930s), and others using the same chance approach. Actual contact with the artist in Meudon may have stimulated Kelly to revaluate the possibilities of a procedure which, like automatic drawing, could banish the compositional congestion induced by academic training.

Besides the fact that Kelly would soon try the use of "the laws of chance" to solve compositional problems, there seems to have been a subtler and more important result, one affecting how and what he saw. Most of us see nature and objects, compositionally at least, as we are trained by art to see them. Thus, if torn or found pieces of paper are allowed to exhibit *au naturel* their accidental shapes, and are permitted to fall or otherwise decide their own placement on a surface, as was Arp's practice, then it follows that the accidental way nature lets things fall is complementary to this kind of art. The trick was to see things and the relationships between them before they organized themselves into conventional "pictures." Kelly had already in a sense thrown out relational composition by concentrating on the singular presence of an object. He had made such paintings as *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris,* 1949 (page 23) and *Saint-Louis, II,* 1950 (page 25), wherein he had re-presented physical realities more or less as they appeared. He now began to see that it was possible to abstract the accidental aspects of objects and present these instead. The approach was still literal, in the sense that the shadow of a thing is as real and objective as the thing itself and can be presented as such even without its cause. By shifting one's attention away from the cause one could concentrate on the result, such as a shadow shape, the rectangles formed by a paned window, or the space created between several objects by their accidental juxtaposition.

All these phenomena, for the most part fleeting or impermanent, appear to the eye only by chance because we normally and necessarily organize the world hierarchically and intellectually, forcing it into rational compositions even before we have *seen* it. We reject the dumb look that first and instantaneously occurs. The artist usually practices the dumb look in order to analyze, but ordinarily he too succumbs to normal habit, placing the emphasis on rational effect rather than on dumb fact.

and white, (2) an overall, principled organization, and (3) minimum subjectivity in the manner of execution. When the drawing plan was copied exactly in black and white paint on board, the actual technique was as impersonal as a house painter's, characteristic of Kelly's work since 1950.

There are similarities between *Seine* and Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean,* 1914 (Fig. 27, page 109), painted at a time when Mondrian was working his way out of pointillist impressionism. His approach, however, was symbolic. Kelly has, on the contrary, sought the equivalence of impressionist sensation in an entirely objective way, cooled by both the use of chance and by the rigid structure of the grid. His work, strangely enough, ends up as more realistic and true to the visual source than Mondrian's.

73.371

Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance, 1952–1953. Oil on wood, 60 x 60 inches.

Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance is a testament to Kelly's seriousness and patience in his search for knowledge about art. It is composed of 1,444 squares of color, painstakingly laid in a grid, and based on a 1951 collage of colored papers equally painstakingly made. It is only one of several such laborious studies made in an effort to discover the effective principles that underlie abstract art. His turning away from imposed "composition" and drawing at this time was essential to an exploration of the limits of color and how it functions.

Spectrum Colors is related to *Seine*. In the latter he had confined himself to black and white and had succeeded by a calculated method in achieving a peculiar and relevant painting halfway between realism and pure abstraction. *Seine,* of course, had begun with an observation from nature. The grid pictures such as *Spectrum Colors* are abstract in origin, or at least are only distantly related to sensations produced by natural sources.

A more or less chance method was used as before; basically, the picture is a slightly structured but random assortment of spectral colors. Kelly made similar studies using white as the field color. In these efforts he exhausted the methodical approach and wisely turned back to structures that had more meaning for him, such as fenestration and panel pictures, weighted by his own taste and choices.

The idea of understanding the world in terms of chance, the way things "fall" and the way we look, with our heads bobbing all the time, shifting the angle of vision, does not account for the particular selections from it that Kelly made and makes. This method of seeing *does* imply that one would need only the average cluttered living room or landscape to find enough subjects for a lifetime of painting. Kelly of course selects only situations that attract him, primarily those involving distinct qualities of shape. Exceptions to this occur between *Seine,* 1951 (page 31) and its drawings[31] and the painting of *Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance,* 1952–1953 (opposite), when, paradoxically, he often applied chance methods literally. When he began to let his eye pick out subject matter as it by "chance" appeared to him, the predilection for shape was, nevertheless, consistent with all his former preoccupations, such as the *mandorla* on a medieval church façade, the religious figures crowded into a pendentive, the flat and contoured garments in a Byzantine icon, and even Audubon's shapely cutout birds.

In the summer of 1950 he was introduced to Youngerman's father-in-law, Henri Seyrig, an archaeologist from Beirut, and was later invited by Mme Seyrig to the family villa, La Combe, near the little town of Meschers on the river Gironde, which is really a wide bay. He returned to Meschers the following year; the two summers he spent there were, he says, among the most productive periods of his life. He made thirty or forty collages there and any number of drawings, many of them later converted into paintings. (The dates of his paintings are usually a minimum of one year—sometimes five or six years—later than that of the preliminary sketches or collages.) He drew everything—except people and landscapes. He drew the shadows cast on the wall by his balcony, and on a staircase by a railing; he drew the patterns on the striped canvas of the cabanas on the beach, the tree branches against the sky, and the twisted and rusting reinforcing rods exposed by the wartime shelling of German bunkers along the coast.[32] Some of these were done with the automatic drawing method. And he made brush-and-ink drawings purposely to cut up and paste on another sheet upon which he pushed the pieces around without looking at what was happening. Later he copied a few of these exactly in paint (see *November Painting,* 1950, page 36).

73.356
opposite: *La Combe, I,* 1950. Oil on canvas, 38¼ x 63¾ inches.

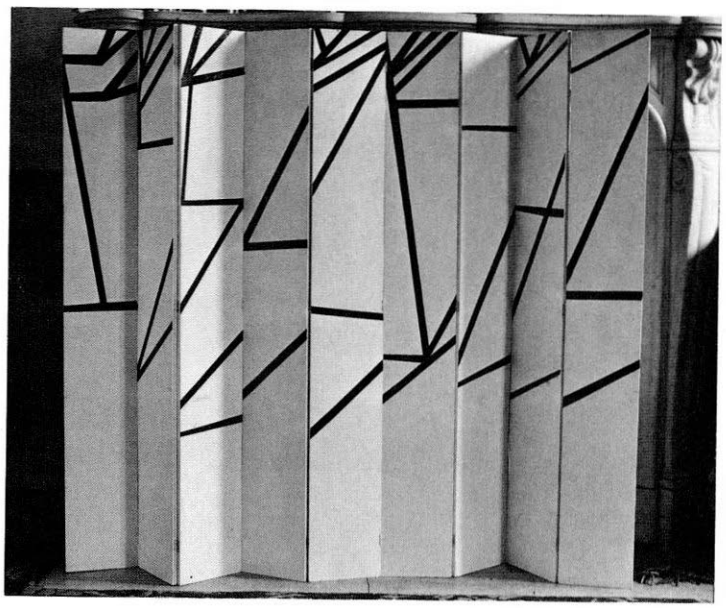
right: *La Combe, II,* 1950. Oil on wood folding screen, nine panels, each 39⅛ x 5⅛ inches; overall, 39⅛ x 46⅛ inches. not exh.

While Kelly was staying in France at the villa La Combe during the summer of 1950, his eye was drawn to the way the shadow of a handrail broke on the iron treads of the stairway leading down from his balcony room. His attraction to this phenomenon probably goes back to his experience of the camouflage nets woven with strips of oznaberg in random patterns to disrupt the tell-tale shadows of guns and tanks (see Appendix: *Kelly and Camouflage,* page 115). Since the railing was trussed in X-fashion, the shadows on the nine steps were very complex. As the sun's angle changed, the network of shadows also changed. Like Monet in the Haystack and Rouen Cathedral series, Kelly made sketches of his ever-changing subject several times during the day (Fig. 28, page 109). These sketches, however, do not deal with the stairway as it appeared in perspective, narrowing as it descended, but give to each step its true dimensions (in scale, of course). Thus each step becomes, in the drawings and subsequent paintings, a panel that is brought together with the others on one plane, forming a complete and regular rectangle.

La Combe, I is the first of Kelly's pictures to exhibit this kind of close-packed panel construction. Later he made a version of *La Combe* with separate panels, hinging them together like an oriental screen (at right). Over the next few years he made a number of pictures comprised of joined panels or squares. In the mid-1960s he returned to this method and has used it frequently since.

The gouache drawing *Awnings, Avenue Matignon* (page 37) of the same year clearly indicates, however, that it was not just *La Combe, I* that gave birth to the panel idea, but that fenestration systems also intrigued him.

La Combe, I points up some other characteristics of Kelly's way of seeing and working. He sees things in polarities: light and shadow, window and wall, shape against surface, color versus color; and he finds these polar situations where most of us do not bother to look. Here he has seen a shadow, not as an aspect of its cause, the object from which it issues, but as an independent shape in tension with the surface on which it occurs.



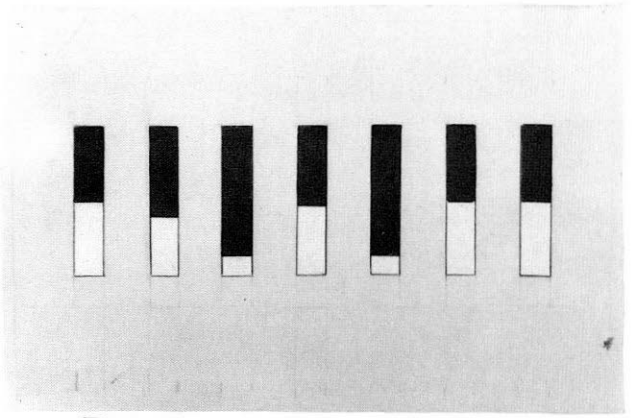
That fall, needing money, he took a job teaching classes in art at the American School in Paris. He found that teaching the well-heeled daughters and sons of diplomats and businessmen was quite different from dealing with students in a settlement house back in Boston. The latter came to class because they wanted to study art; the Paris group, because they had to. They were largely a discipline problem, and he had to go out of his way to invent exercises that were both amusing and instructive. Many of these were directly related to his own concerns, and so closely did some of the work touch upon the core of the problems that he saved the results for reference. One young lady, Elizabeth Huffer, gave such an inventive solution to a set problem that he reproduced a painting from it and called it *Collaboration with a Twelve-year-old Girl.* Other lessons were rather classic. One, for example, involved dribbled and spattered watercolors on absorbent paper and was intended to make the students aware of how materials work, how they could be manipulated and coordinated into effective images. Some of the soak-stain experiments call to mind the later paintings of Morris Louis; of course most of the work, like these and the cut-paper projects, had been common practice in children's art classes for fifty years. The leftovers from these projects often provided Kelly with *objets trouvés* from which he made collages. One of them, *Children's Leftovers Arranged by Chance,* 1950,[33] comprises a prophetic vocabulary of shapes that would appear in many contexts in his work in the 1950s and 1960s. One thing is curious about what is now left from these classes: the free use of color in papers and in paints is evident in the materials he supplied his protégés; yet, in his own work, color in such variety does not manifest itself until more than a year later. He had painted both in Boston and in these first three years in Paris primarily in subdued tones of brown, green, and gray, all related to the approved colors used in the camouflage corps; Kelly used them, however, to *express* volume rather than to eliminate it. The pure white of the cutouts and reliefs of early 1950 was a breakthrough into brilliance. Along with white, he began that year to use one other color, either bright blue, as in the gouache drawing *Awnings, Avenue Matignon* (at right) and *Relief with Blue* (page 27), or bright red, as in the first version of *La Combe* (page 34). Green, black, and red, in clear hues, appear together in

73.361

opposite: *November Painting,* 1950. Oil on wood, 25½ x 34 inches.

November Painting is the first in which Kelly used Arp's chance method of composition. (He had already made some collages in this fashion.) A gessoed wood panel, prepared sometime before, happened to be handy when he was tearing up an unsatisfactory wash drawing. He scattered the torn pieces over the panel to see how they would fall and liked what he saw. He held each one in place, traced its outline, and then copied the bits of image from the drawing in paint. The title came about not only because the painting was made in November, but also because it reminded him of the way the leaves in Paris were blowing and falling through space.

This turned out to be a seminal picture, full of retrievable shapes and images. In New York in the late 1950s, many of these shapes inspired other paintings and drawings.



73.315

above: *Awnings, Avenue Matignon,* 1950. Pencil and gouache on paper, 5¼ x 8¼ inches.

This little gouache drawing is, like a number of other works from 1949–1952, based on the observation of Parisian windows. Kelly has noted here the sensuous variables possible in a mundane situation, providing a pleasing rhythm through the differing divisions of the rectangle. He uses two colors, blue and white, the blue descending from the tops of the "windows." The spaces between the odd number of elements are exactly one and one-half times the width of the rectangles. Whether or not they were actually observed in the architecture or devised, they bear a comfortable proportional relation familiar to us in Greek columniation. The original drawing shows erasures shortening the lengths of the window rectangles, indicating a precise but intuitive decision and a desire to render exactly the essence of a remembered visual sensation clarified by abstraction.

Awnings, Avenue Matignon is a forerunner of the later panel pictures, and it points up the very specific sensations obtainable through careful, though non-Euclidean, divisions of rectangles into two-color areas. (Turn it on its side.)

73.355

Cité, 1951. Oil on wood, 20 joined panels; overall, 56½ x 70½ inches.

In the spring of 1951, while he was still teaching children's classes at the American School in Paris, Kelly stayed overnight with a friend at the Cité Universitaire. The Cité is a large complex of buildings, including dormitories, where many students attending various units of the University of Paris live. During the night he had a dream in which he saw all of his pupils up on a scaffold painting stripes, similar to an assignment he had given them. At breakfast in a café, he drew a sketch of what he had seen in his dream on the back of the coffee bill.

At Meschers that summer, recalling the orderly but random effect of the dream picture, he painted a number of black stripes freehand on a sheet of white paper. Ruled into squares, this was cut up into twenty panels and arranged into a collage. This he copied almost exactly on wood panels. Standing on his balcony at the villa La Combe, he had Alain Naudé rearrange the squares on the grass below, trying out different combinations and orientations. In the end he went back to the arrangement of his first collage and built the panels into a single unit.

The vertical sections, comprising four panels, tend to distinguish themselves from each other because of the disruption of the horizontal stripes. They even have a tendency to appear on different planes, grouping themselves into two forward and three back, or vice versa. This is perhaps one of the pictures that more obviously reflects the effects of his camouflage training in the Army (see Appendix: *Kelly and Camouflage,* page 115).

In *Cité,* though the black stripes were painted simply as abstract pattern, the basic idea was derived from shadows on a surface, disrupted as in *La Combe, I. Cité,* by breaking into verticals, recalls the earlier picture, and at the same time predicts many other vertical paintings composed of horizontal units. The grid construction seems to have been more of a necessity for the elementalization of the field than a compositional end in itself.

The slightly optical effect of *Cité* may remind us of the much later works of Victor Vasarely, but where the Hungarian almost always energizes his gridded field by creating a sudden shift of direction—a point or area of interest—Kelly's sensibility follows the American preference for blunt statement and an overall, consistent rhythm, as in the grid pictures of Agnes Martin and Sol LeWitt. It is notable that even in Paul Klee's *Variations,* 1927 (Fig. 32, page 110), which Kelly undoubtedly knew, there is the same European need to supply a focused visual interest; that is, a content quite separable from the overall form.

some of the collages from that summer but not in the paintings.

In the spring of 1951, just before his twenty-eighth birthday, Kelly got his first chance to show his work to the public in a one-man exhibition at the Galerie Arnaud. The gallery, later characterized in the *Arts Yearbook* of 1959 as "one of the best Parisian galleries specializing in abstract painting," showing "young painters of many different nationalities,"[34] was then an adventurous little enterprise occupying rather scrubby quarters.[35] Perhaps because of this one-man show he was included in an article about young American artists in Paris in a special issue of *Art d'Aujourd'hui* devoted to recent art in the United States (one of the paintings on the cover was a Jackson Pollock). The author, Julien Alvard, prefaced his very short critique of the seven young Americans he had chosen to cite with a lengthy apology for Paris.[36] The discouraged, existentialist mood of the piece, however, probably had no effect on Kelly, who was just beginning to work with greater confidence. Indeed, later in the year, in October, Louis Clayeaux, director of the Galerie Maeght, selected four paintings of 1951, *Meschers* (page 41), *Cité* (opposite), *Green and White,* and *Yellow and White,* for his annual "Tendance" exhibition in the rue de Téhéran. It was reported to Kelly that Georges Braque, who was regularly shown at the gallery, admired *Meschers,* finding that Kelly had solved a problem he was working on in a painting in progress (*La Bicyclette,* 1952). This recognition by the famous artist considerably strengthened Kelly's position in the gallery.

Meanwhile, the exhibition at the Galerie Arnaud had another effect. Kelly's tenure as a teacher at the American School, where some of his students had criticized him because he always wore the same (his only) suit, was ended by this exposure as an avant-garde artist. The only distress he suffered was in the pocketbook, but another invitation to La Combe near Meschers helped out for a time.

At Meschers he was able to complete some paintings from the hundreds of notes he had put down in the sketchbooks over the winter. *Cité* (opposite)[37] was accomplished this summer, as well as more collages and drawings. Back in Paris in the early fall, with money still a problem, he applied for a job with the United States government's Marshall Plan program. He got one, after an F.B.I. investi-

73.359

Meschers, 1951. Oil on canvas, 59 x 59 inches.

It is clear that *Meschers* was devised in somewhat the same way as its predecessor, *Cité* (page 39). This picture, however, is not composed of wooden squares but is painted on a single stretched canvas. Since it is square, the implications are that it was based on an original drawing, divided into a grid of twenty-five equal segments, then cut along the grid lines and rearranged, the resultant scheme being copied more or less exactly.

On the higher ground along the wide river Gironde near Meschers, France, as Kelly looked through the pine trees there was often nothing more to see than the green of the pine needles and the blue of the sky and water. Like an Impressionist, but without having to rationalize his sensation of color filled with light by attaching it to a recognizable landscape image, Kelly repossessed the abstract qualities of the scene. There is even a sense of flickering, of the branches moving in the breeze.

Unlike *Cité,* where the black "shadows" appear as if cast from a rigid grill or screen, *Meschers*'s shapes are nearly organic; enough irregular curves are included to assure this. And just above center, significantly placed where the eye will not find it a compositional conceit, is a pointed leaflike shape, which provides a clue to the painting's origins.

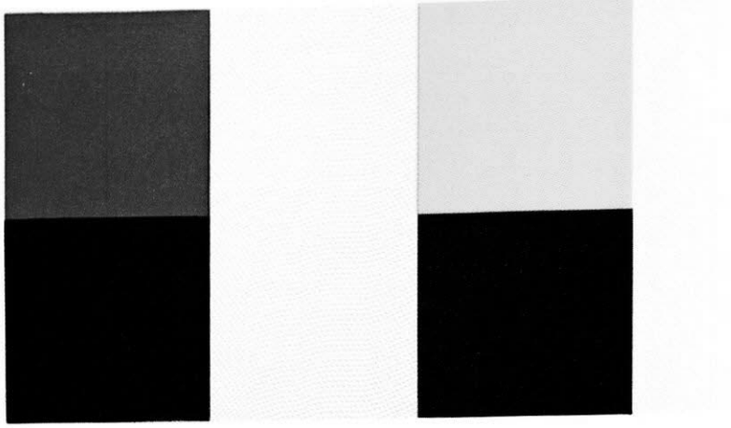
Again there is a vertical, paneled organization, with the second and fourth sections admitting more blue than is permitted the other three. It seems possible that Kelly was somewhat influenced (or encouraged) by Matisse's long and slender groups of colored glass windows in the nave of his Chapel of the Rosary in Vence. *Meschers* could certainly have been translated into similar glass windows. The mock-ups and designs for Matisse's Chapel had been exhibited in Paris at the Maison de la Pensée Française (ironically, as Alfred H. Barr, Jr., describes it in *Matisse, His Art and His Public,* 1951, p. 281, a kind of "Communist culture center") from July to September the previous year (1950). The Chapel itself, however, was not opened until June 25, 1951, just about the time Kelly was working on *Meschers.* But without being specific about a relation to the Vence Chapel as such, one can see that Matisse's messages about shape and color were never lost on Kelly.

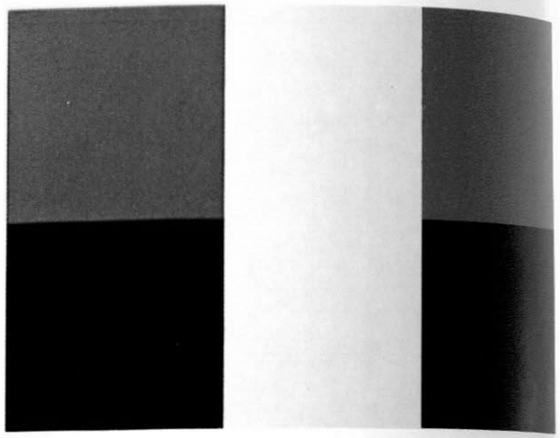
Indeed, Matisse himself wrote in his short essay on the Chapel: ". . . simple colors can act upon the inner feelings with all the more force because they are simple. A blue, for instance, accompanied by the shimmer of its complementaries, acts upon the feelings like a sharp blow on a gong. The same with red and yellow; and the artist must be able to sound them when he needs to" (Barr, p. 288). Kelly has shown over and over again that he can ring that gong, even without the "complementaries" and in black and white as well.

gation that reached all the way back to New Jersey and Boston. He was employed as a security guard. Since it was night work, he had the days for painting. A bit of luck, however, delivered him from such work after a couple of months. A Swiss textile manufacturer and art collector, Gustav Zumsteg, had seen *Meschers* at the Galerie Maeght and invited Kelly to submit some designs for translation into fabrics. Seeing an opportunity to earn his way through his art rather than by guard duty, he accepted; in late November, with a little cash in his pocket, he was able to return to Sanary with Ralph Coburn.

In Sanary that winter and spring Kelly could count on the company of several good friends. Anne Child Cajori (later Anne Weber), a former classmate at the Museum School, had come to France from Boston a few months earlier and now had a studio in Sanary. Alain Naudé, a South African who was in the process of shifting his career from music to art, and whom Kelly had befriended earlier that year, also came down to the edge of the Mediterranean. Each found a studio-living arrangement near the sea.

Kelly's move to Sanary and the light-ridden Riviera had an immediate and lasting effect on his art. One is reminded of van Gogh's progress when he moved from the north to the south, of how the dark and heavy painting he produced in the gloomy atmosphere of the Borinage, a mining district in Belgium, grew lighter and more colorful in the silvery air of Paris and then burst into full radiance in Provence. Kelly's work in Sanary, on the edge of a light-reflecting bay full of fishing boats, contrasted sharply with works from overcast Paris in December. Almost immediately Kelly began to think as well as work in terms of color. The notebooks suddenly burgeoned with designs for paintings, with the names of a great variety of hues written in. Many of these notations on the sketches also identified instances where physically separate panels were to be joined, a practice he had begun with *Cité;* he was now to extend it by painting each such tile in its own color. The sharpness of the chunks of color may well have been suggested by similar chunks of color afforded by the typical Mediterranean village of Sanary, where, if the buildings are not painted in bright hues, the doors and window shutters are, and the whiteness of the general landscape stands out.





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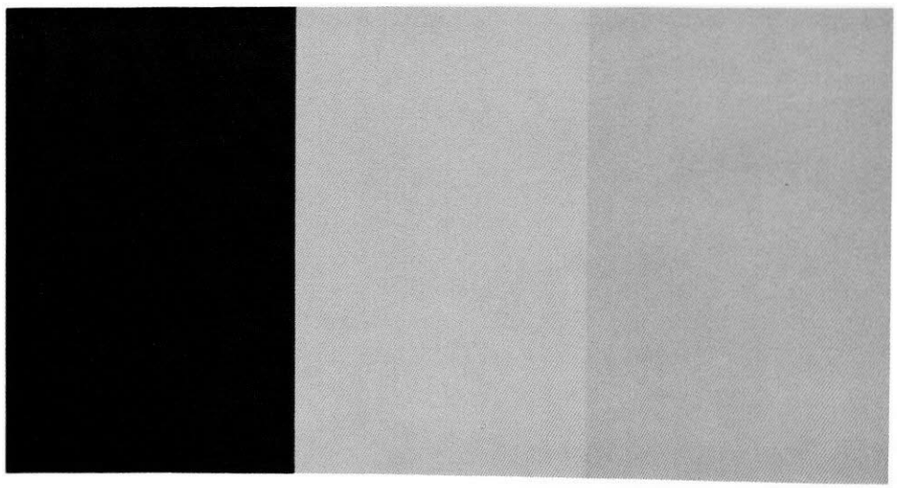
above: *Kite, II,* 1952. Oil on canvas, 11 joined panels; overall, 31½ inches x 9 feet 2 inches.

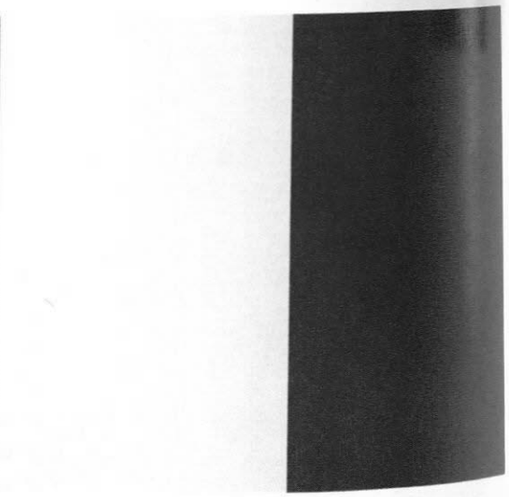
73.364
below: *Painting for a White Wall,* 1952. Oil on canvas, five joined panels; overall, 23½ x 71½ inches.

opposite: *Red Yellow Blue White,* 1952. Dyed cotton, 25 panels, each 12 x 12 inches; overall, including space between sections, 60 inches x 12 feet 4 inches. not exh.

Kite, II and *Painting for a White Wall* are pictures that Kelly quite obviously drew on for his panel groups in the late 1960s. *Kite, II* has close affinities with *Awnings, Avenue Matignon* (page 37). It repeats the periodic rhythm of fenestration, while abandoning the counterrhythm found in the unequal divisions of the dark and light areas. As in *Sanary* (page 53), he has used an odd number of vertical sections, exchanging dark for light. In *Red Yellow Blue White,* 1952, he actually separated the panels in space. The latter picture is made of dyed cotton rather than oil on canvas.

The colors, besides black and white, in *Kite, II,* are the primaries plus green. In *Painting for a White Wall* the selection is far more arbitrary. He keeps the pale orange and pink and white from tapering off into the wall by enclosing them between a purplish blue and a bright, strong blue. This painting has a lyricism and openness unusual in his work.





Kelly had given up painting the human figure and had put his plant and nature drawing into a separate category, and so he began again to pursue his fascination with architecture. His association of the flat façade with the flatness of the canvas, his sketches of walls articulated by chimneys and shadows, and his subtle use of architectural fenestration to devise acceptable rhythms and spacing lie behind much of his abstract work between 1950 and 1953. From his representation of the *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris* (page 23)[38] to the Kite pictures of late 1952 (see *Kite, II,* page 42) and even up to the panel pictures of the 1970s, his preoccupation with these architectural sources is evident.

It is not surprising then to learn that Kelly took a trip to Marseilles just to see Le Corbusier's apartment house, Habitation, while it was still under construction. He had already studied the architect's Swiss Pavilion at the Cité Universitaire in Paris and had even used one of what Peter Blake called the "viewing slots" in the parapet wall atop the slab as an idea for a painting.[39] Unquestionably Corbu's punctured fenestration and his regular but articulated panels on the end walls had an influence on Kelly. Habitation, which he managed to climb around, offered something more—a use of color in modern building Kelly had not seen before. The walls between the balconies were painted bright pastel shades. Corbu was obviously using color to connect his new building form with local tradition. But for Kelly it was something of a shock. He felt that in some way Corbu's scheme diminished his own painting.

Despite Kelly's debts to Le Corbusier and perhaps owing to his continued shyness and modesty, he never made an effort to meet the master architect. But his friend Naudé, who had a slight connection with Corbu, showed him slides of some of Kelly's paintings along with his own and returned with a message that the master had said: "Young people have it so easy these days." Evidently Le Corbusier was thinking of his own early difficulties and what his legacy had cost him. Le Corbusier also observed: "This kind of painting needs the new architecture to go with it."

A tiny sketch in the Sanary-period notebooks ties Kelly's involvement with architecture, particularly fenestration and the organization of panels of color, into a much earlier experience. Upon arriving in France he had gone to Colmar to see the Isenheim

1067.69

Colors for a Large Wall, 1951. Oil on canvas, 64 joined panels; overall, 8 x 8 feet. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist.

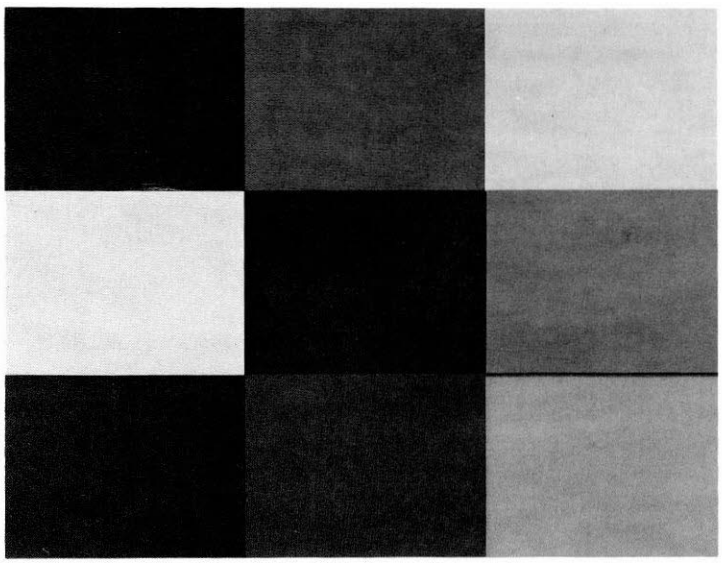
This picture is one of the largest Kelly made in France. The organization, aside from its square panels joined in a grid, is totally arbitrary; the juxtaposition of colors was a matter only of taste. It began, as was Kelly's custom at this time, with the creation of a collage. Using the exact number of leftover squares of colored paper from which the collages for the series of Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance had been composed, he made the study for *Colors for a Large Wall* and that for *Sanary* (Waldman, plates 60 and 61). The hues of the colored papers, bought in art stores, were precisely matched in oil paints, and the final, full-sized panels arranged in strict adherence to the paper model.

ited three pictures: *Colors for a Large Wall,* 1951, *Méditerranée,* 1952, and *Sanary,* 1952 (the last two under other titles; see right and page 53).

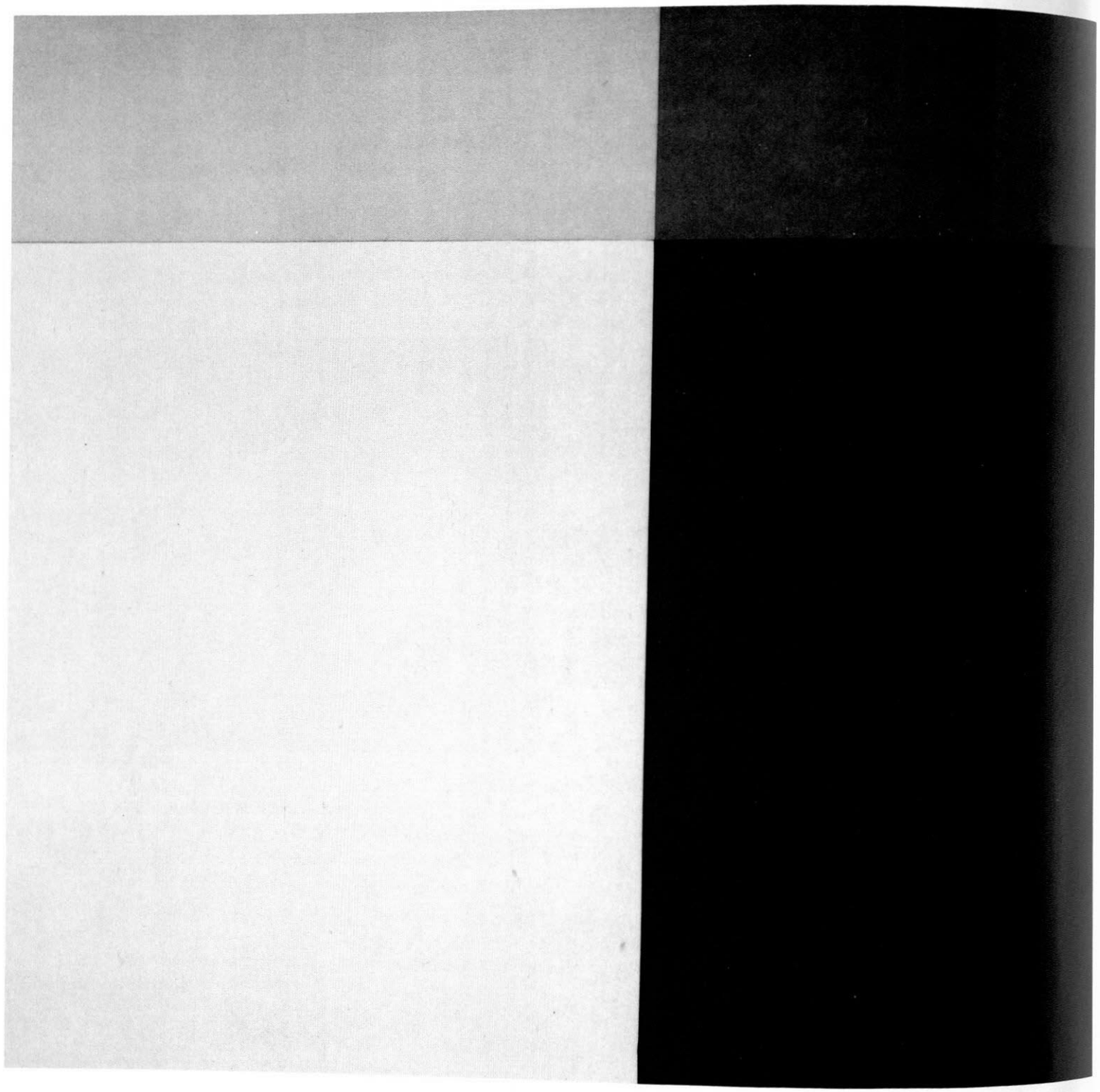
In September he had gone with Alain Naudé to Monet's former home in Giverny, some 45 miles northwest of Paris. Kelly was thoroughly familiar with Monet's painting of the 1880s and 1890s; the Boston Museum owned over thirty pictures of that vintage. Although he had seen some of the large *Nymphéas* (Water Lilies) at an exhibition in the Kunsthaus, Zürich, before going to Torcy in May, he had not seen the Clemenceau installation in the Orangerie in Paris at this time. This last is not as peculiar as it might sound. Monet's reputation was at a low ebb in Paris, since his work appeared to be structureless in the Cubist and post-Cubist climate. In fact the real revival of Monet, based largely on the *Nymphéas,* was brought about by American Abstract Expressionism and subsequent developments in color-field painting.

Kelly and Naudé were shocked by the condition of the studio at Giverny. Windows blown out during the war had not been replaced; huge paintings from the 1920s were carelessly stacked and in some cases had been rained upon.[43] But the experience of these works, especially in juxtaposition to the gardens where they were painted, the evident ambition of the old man, and their size and scale, had a lasting effect on Kelly; though their influence did not occur, perhaps, until his own large Spectrums and separated panel pictures of the 1960s.

After four years of almost continuous development, the period between the spring of 1953 and early summer of 1954 seems to have been one primarily devoted to executing ideas laid out in the sketchbooks. There also seems to have been a growing feeling that Europe had little more to contribute to his vision. The only recognition he was granted in 1953 was the inclusion of one picture in a group show at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Santander, Spain. At Christmas time he went to Holland with Geertjan Visser, a young Dutchman he had met in Zürich, who took him to see Solomon Slijper's Mondrian collection. It was Visser's family, living in Papendrecht near Rotterdam, who later took him in to recuperate after a five-week hospitalization for jaundice in Paris the following spring. Being too weak to go out or to do anything very strenuous, he had his nurse bring him materials to make collages. Dutch



Méditerranée, 1952
Oil on wood, nine joined panels;
overall, 59¼ inches x 6 feet 4¼ inches
not exh.



73.372

Tiger, 1953
Oil on canvas, five joined panels; overall, 6 feet 9 inches x 7 feet 1½ inches

73.345
White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection, 1952–1955. Oil on wood, 64 x 48 inches. Private collection, London. (Fraser)

White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection is full of implications, iconographical and formal. The Pont de La Tournelle in Paris spans the Seine from the Quai de La Tournelle to the Ile Saint-Louis (Fig. 42, page 112), not far from where Kelly had his hotel-studio. The original bridge was constructed in the fourteenth century, but it has been rebuilt a number of times. Now there is a broad central arch, but along the quai-side there is a kind of tunnel-span that gave rise to *White Plaque.* In a peculiar light one day Kelly noticed that the latter arch formed a black shape and that its reflection on the water was also black. He held the vision in his head and upon returning home cut out the total image, shadow plus shadow, from dark paper (Waldman, plate 55). In the winter of 1954/55, after his return to New York, he made a full-sized version in wood. This version is pure white because Kelly liked the way it looked after he had covered it with a coat of gesso.

Actually *White Plaque*'s shape derives from two non-things: the hole under the bridge and the reflection of the hole on the water. If one can legitimately speak of the planes of non-things, it is clear that Kelly took two images whose apparent planes were at right angles to each other and flattened them into a single surface. (He does just the reverse in his sculpture of the 1960s.)

In the collage he used a darker piece of paper for the horizontal division between the mirrored halves to provide an optical equivalent of the darker area immediately under the bridge. In the white version he accomplished this effect with a clearly differentiated strip of wood, translating it into an actual shadow—a rather appropriate solution for this problem. Visually it operates like the revetted lines in *Saint-Louis II,* where the same type of simulation of fact was employed (page 25). It would seem that in the *White Plaque* he used considerable license in converting black shadow into white light (or at least its white-paint equivalent), but the decision to paint the entire surface white was made in terms of the work of art as such, and not in terms of its likeness to its subject. Yet, paradoxically, since light and shadow are Siamese twins within the same phenomenon, each exists as a paradigm of the other. On a dark day, or at night, for example, the bridge and the atmosphere could have been drowned in darkness, and the same double image could have appeared as lighted areas of shape. The emphasis was thus placed on shape, as such, without belying its primary source. That source was only a fragment of the environment, a chunk of reality taken out of the usual context in which it is viewed. Without a title and an explanation we would be unable to divine its origin. But the insistence of Kelly's shapes, and the obvious integrity in the drawing and the workmanship, push mere curiosity aside and instill confidence in the work for its own qualities.

White Plaque was a very early forerunner of what later came to be known as the shaped canvas. Though Kelly's *Window, V,* 1950, has often been cited as the first such instance, the latter, equally true to its source (the shadows of telephone wires on a wall, made by light streaming through an odd-shaped window), is nevertheless more arbitrary pictorially in the final piece. The linear elements in *Window, V* are contradistinctive to the external shape. In *White Plaque* the purity of the field of white and the billowing, symmetrical radiation from the horizontal axis find a perfectly logical and sensuous completion at the perimeter.

73.369
Sanary, 1952. Oil on wood, 51½ x 60 inches.

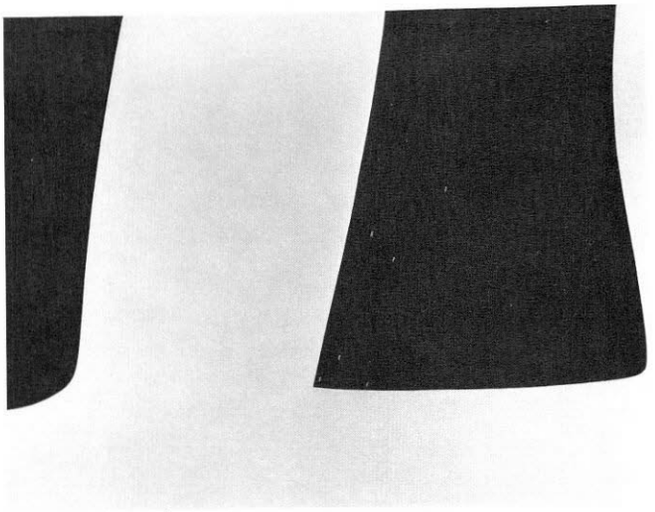
Like other pictures produced or designed in Sanary during the winter of 1951/52, this one began as a collage (Waldman, plate 61) made of chips of colored papers. Like *Colors for a Large Wall* (page 44), its color arrangement is arbitrary, except that the darker hues are placed in three vertical rows separated by rows of lighter colors. Unintentionally, perhaps, owing to the close values of colors here and there, a slight plaid effect occurs, weaving a few strips of the image in and out like chair-caning. The horizontal orientation, of course, differs from other pictures and color studies made at this time.

the wildest of French *tachisme* and *art informel*. Kelly felt even more lonely after this encounter, but he did not back away from his own kind of art. (Five years later Dorothy Miller, in her "Sixteen Americans" show at The Museum of Modern Art, included both of them, along with Frank Stella, Jack Youngerman, Jasper Johns, and Alfred Leslie.)[45]

Kelly found a studio at 109 Broad Street, at the southern end of Manhattan. Around the corner on State Street was the Seamen's Church Institute where, passing for a sailor in his dungarees, he was able to eat for virtually nothing. To support himself he got a night job in the Post Office.

During his last year in Paris he had turned to black and white more frequently. Whether or not this was related to his illness and its concomitant depression is hard to say. The last pictures in color, such as *Colors for a Large Wall*, 1951 (page 44), *Painting for a White Wall*, 1952 (page 42), and *Tiger*, 1953 (page 48), evidence a drift away from primary sources. In retrospect, it is clear that whenever such a drift carried him too far toward the realm of pure abstraction, he made an effort to reestablish connections with the world around him through subject matter. Sometimes these connections were maintained outside painting—by such means as the plant drawings (pages 96–97)—but sooner or later his painting seemed to require a more direct relation to literal visual experience. At the same time, there was a need to simplify, to get back to two colors and single images. The sequence seems to follow a consistent pattern: white with black; then white with one other color; and eventually two or more colors without white.

The violence done to his psyche by New York nearly paralyzed him at first. Most of the pictures executed in the first year were projects planned or begun abroad, some from drawings made two years or more before. *White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection*, 1952–1955 (page 51), was finished the first winter on Broad Street from a collage of 1951.[46] New sketches and collages slowly emerged but they were based not on the more recent color panels like those of *Sanary* but on visual experiences similar to those of his first years in Paris. He was seeing specific "things" again; a loose wire hanging curvaceously against a wall, the reflection of his window on another window across the street (see *42nd*, 1958, page 54), the changing shadows on his book while reading in the bus (see *Atlantic*, 1956, page 56),



73.346
above: *42nd,* 1958. Oil on canvas, 60½ inches x 6 feet 8 inches. Galerie Maeght, Paris.

73.383
opposite: *Red Blue Green,* 1963. Oil on canvas, 7 feet x 11 feet 4 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert Rowan, Pasadena, California.

Five years separate the painting of *42nd* and *Red Blue Green,* but the procedure Kelly followed in arriving at the ultimate images was similar and one he has often used.

In Kelly's work the window has played a major role both as a motif and as an idea. He has also found it a helpful tool for isolating an intriguing image, as in the Knickerbocker Beer sign pictures (see *Paname,* page 66). One day, looking from his studio at Coenties Slip, he noticed the shadowy reflection of his windows on another across the street. The glass in the other window was poorly made and dirty—so much so that the reflection was badly distorted. What was actually straight was reflected as curved or bent. Moving around in his room, using the shape of his window to frame portions of the scene, he made a number of sketches from different angles. One of them became *42nd.* The title refers to no place, though it would seem to derive from the street in New York. In the first couple of years in New York Kelly simply named pictures categorically in order to distinguish them from paintings done in France.

The source of *42nd,* of course, does not account for its compositional elegance, but knowing the source may help to dispel any notion that Kelly's images come from the work of other painters and may help to explain why there is always a freshness and individuality in his paintings. With Kelly the visual takes precedence over the conceptual. Although a few years later he would depend less and less on such natural sources as light, shadows, and architectural elements, his years of "drawing from the model," so to speak, would leave him with an extraordinary ability to "draw from memory." In the proportions, for example, of his works from the late 1960s and early 1970s, when his pictures had become panels of pure color, the sizes were determined not by any geometric formulas but by a taste and experience developed during the period when original sources predicated certain kinds of decisions.

Red Blue Green was painted in 1963 when he was working with a vocabulary of more arbitrarily selected shapes, less close to observed sources. This picture has affinities, however, to *Relief with Blue,* 1950 (page 27), but is hardly derived from it. *Red Blue Green* utilizes two shapes that had preoccupied him for a long time, the rectangle and the ovoid. The picture is the result of an image cropped from these two shapes by overlays on the original sketch. In two other paintings different versions were made, and the theme also appears in a suite of twenty-seven lithographs published in 1964 by Maeght Editeur in Paris (Waldman, cat. no. 6–32).

Red Blue Green is a fine example of a relatively rare type of canvas: that constructed of three colors with distinctly different-shaped areas. Kelly's forays into three or more colors have almost always been of the panel variety and are usually composed of equal-sized panels. It would seem that he has backed away from the problem expressed in *Red Blue Green* not because he cannot handle it—this picture is positive proof of that—but because he had to have a neutral, nonassociative shape as a vehicle for the colors in order not to set up competitive figurative or landscape spaces and objects. He was committed to shape first; color second. When a single shape is seen against a ground, or lies *in* that ground-space, the surface tension across the whole field is controllable. Three colors, however, imply three levels, and the whole thing is apt to drop back into the illusionistic world of foreground, middleground and distance. *Red Blue Green* very nearly does that. He has, however, so carefully adjusted the values of the colors and the sizes of his shapes, as well as the scale of the whole—seven feet high by nearly twelve long—that he avoids the illusionist trap. The green, for example, is so brilliantly present and its own shape so clearly positive, even though competing with two far simpler shapes, that it does not melt into space.

It is probable that in solving the problems of such three-color pictures, Kelly discovered the kind of color he is most known for. The clarity, brilliance, and intensity he had achieved in black and white (the touchstones for all his work) were instrumental in—indeed were indispensable to—his success in *Red Blue Green.*

opposite: *Atlantic,* 1956. Oil on canvas, two joined panels; overall, 6 feet 8 inches x 9 feet 6 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. not exh.

right: *Black and White,* 1955–1958. Oil on canvas, two joined panels; overall, 45 x 60 inches. not exh.

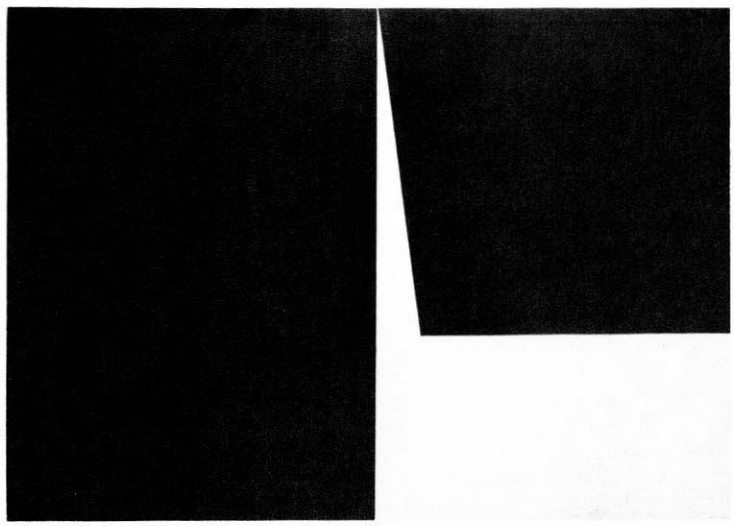
In the fall of 1954, shortly after returning to New York from Paris and getting settled in his new Broad Street studio, Kelly went to Staten Island to visit a friend. After the ferry-ride he took a bus. He was making an effort to read a paperback book on his lap, but black shadows from the lampposts and telephone poles kept breaking across the white pages as the bus drove on. Inspired, he took out his pencil and as fast as he could, recorded the outlines of the shadows, flipping the pages as each image disappeared. Later, at home, in a blank-page dummy for a forthcoming book by Siegfried Giedion, the Swiss architectural historian, given him by his friend, Hugo Weber, he copied the twenty or so shadow-images he had limned in the paperback. These images were filled in solid with black ink. They became a notebook of pictorial ideas.

The painting *Atlantic,* 1956, was retrieved from two facing pages in the Giedion "book." It is apparent that the pages in the paperback were not flat when the image was recorded but swelled roundly as such books do. The curves are thus not arbitrarily designed but follow a natural cause, which endows them with vitality. The tension point, too, where the two white forms meet, at what was the seam of the book, has a rightness about it that one suspects could not have resulted simply as a matter of taste.

Chance had once again provided the stimulus, but the particular recognition of the image and the concept of a shadow as concrete go back to *La Combe, I* (page 34) and to Kelly's training in camouflage (see Appendix: *Kelly and Camouflage,* page 115). Throughout Kelly's work in painting and sculpture there is a curious mixture of bending and flattening, reminiscent of Paul Feeley's aphorism: "Art is always about turning two into three or three into two." Here the ray of white, bent over the original book page, is reproduced on a flat surface; yet it retains the characteristics of its initial state, giving rise to a kind of visual speculation often encountered in Byzantine icons and Japanese prints. Illusion is both offered and denied.

The diptych associations in *Atlantic* and in *Black and White* cannot usually be shown in reproductions. The actual separation down the center between the two panels of stretched canvas is too subtle for the camera and the printing process. Nevertheless it is an affective part of the original pictures. In *Atlantic* it reduces the sense one may get in the reproduction of a perspective leading to the point where the curves meet on the central axis, because the physical presence of the edges of the canvases is too apparent. Similarly, in the other picture, derived from the same "shadow" book, the swinging back of the shape in the right-hand panel is stopped by this recognition of the physical truth.

Besides being one of the first pictures that reintroduced the curve into his work, *Atlantic* is the first of Kelly's black-and-white paintings that can be called a "night" picture. The last is defined as one wherein the white is the shape and the black is space. Most of us, probably by a habit derived from reading black print on a white page, associate form or shape with the black, seeing white as space. This is also corroborated by daytime visual experience, objects usually being darker in value than the sky. At night, when all is more or less black, it is the limning of objects by the remnants of light that makes them stand out. In Kelly's black-and-white pictures, and his two-color pictures also, there is no ambivalence. One area is always shape; the other, space, even though occasionally there is an intentional tension between them. The latter is particularly apt to confuse that spectator who is visually addicted to the black = form, white = space formula.



73.366

opposite: *Gaza,* 1952–1956. Oil on canvas, four joined panels; overall, 7 feet 6 inches x 6 feet 7 inches.

Throughout his career Kelly has tended to prefer relatively pure colors in or near the standard spectrum, but on occasion he has softened the hues and harmonized the values. Even in this type of painting, however, there is usually one color that asserts itself so strongly that it must be balanced by large areas of the weaker colors. The interaction between intensity and area is nowhere more evident than in *Gaza.*

A small amount of hot red usually dominates any situation into which it is introduced, unless it is equally balanced in every way by the other two primary colors. Red also seems to get hotter when juxtaposed with only one of the other two colors. *Gaza* proposes to confront this visual problem.

Kelly's solution is first to state the possibility of a stand-off in the top two panels, equal areas of the same value. Then, as a kind of test, he adds a wider panel of a yellow that has a little red in it. At this point the painting would develop a forward-backward orientation, with the colder yellow in the middle slipping back into space. The addition of an even larger panel of the cold yellow at the bottom is a master stroke. Since we usually think of the bottom of a picture as the foreground, everything that happens above is apt to be read as recedent. But the cold yellow at the bottom of *Gaza* plays havoc with this conventional reading. It equates itself with the aggressive red at the top, and the intermediate steps between are caught up in the contest. Ultimately all win and the picture settles down in a kind of radiative way, full of life, but acceptably apprehensible as a unified experience.

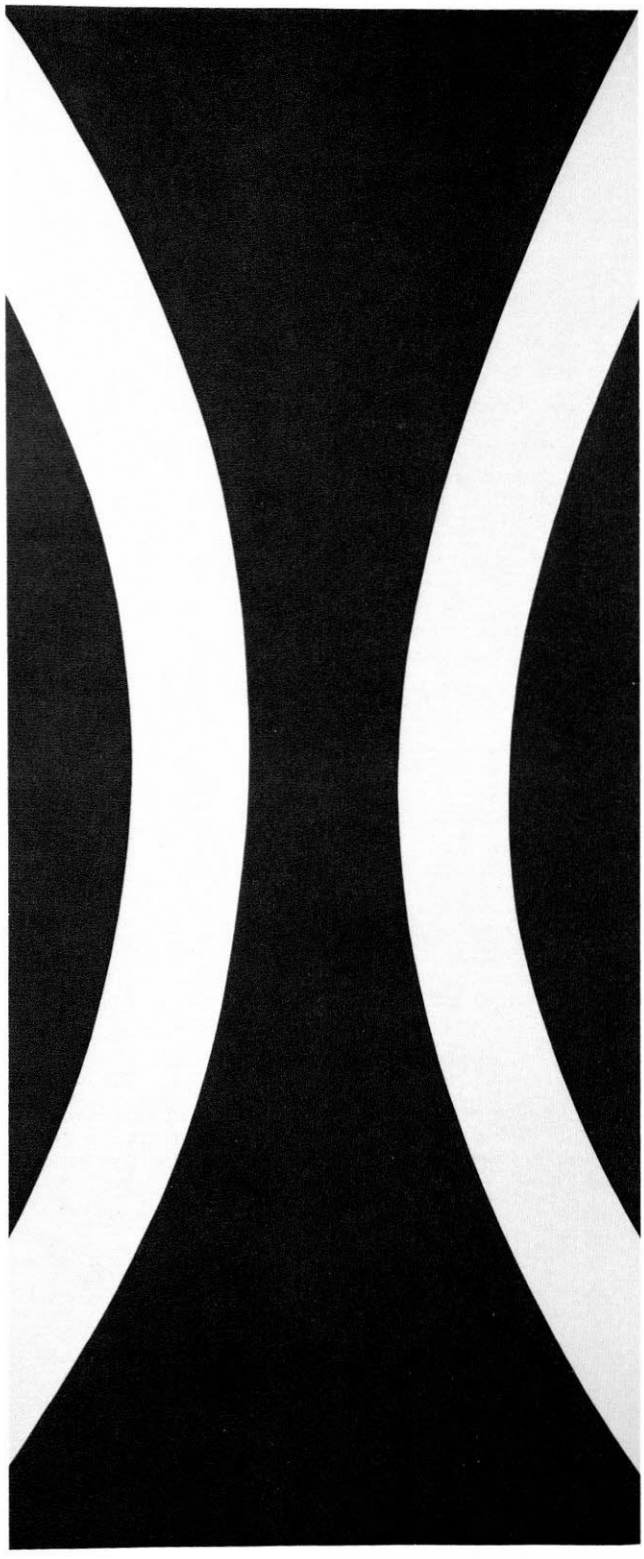
The title *Gaza* occurred to him because it was a time of war between the Israeli and the Arabs along the Gaza strip, and the blinding light of the sun and the color of blood seemed to be symbolized in the painting.

73.385

right: *Brooklyn Bridge, VII,* 1962. Oil on canvas, 7 feet 8 inches x 37½ inches. Collection Solomon Byron Smith, Lake Forest, Illinois.

Brooklyn Bridge, VII was not painted until 1962, and its title is somewhat misleading. In 1955–1956 Kelly had made numerous sketches of the bridge, which was only a few blocks from his Lower Manhattan studio. There is a certain nostalgia for Paris connected with this subject going back to the Pont de La Tournelle and the *White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection,* which he had just finished in New York. He had walked over the bridge to Brooklyn many times and was especially affected by the way the light broke through the gothic openings in the end pylons (Fig. 43, page 112) and the great sweep of the curves formed by the suspension cables. He made a number of small paintings based on this theme.

But at this time, in the early 1960s, Kelly was arbitrarily titling his pictures with New York place names (*42nd, City Island, Manhattan,* et al). The titles, more often than not, had nothing to do with the real subject. Although *Brooklyn Bridge, VII* looks as if its source were the bridge, it was actually based on a drawing of a sneaker; the white piping on the dark-blue canvas at the lacings had appealed to him.



the light through the pylons of the Brooklyn Bridge.[47] The store of such material for future paintings was thus replenished.

Alexander Calder, whom he had met in France through the Seyrigs, came down to see him. Calder generously paid his rent for a month, besides writing notes about him to Alfred Barr, James Johnson Sweeney, and others. Sweeney, then Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, came to look, and Dorothy Miller came down and borrowed *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris* to show to The Museum of Modern Art's acquisition committee (they did not buy it, however). In the fall of 1955 David Herbert stopped by and later advised Betty Parsons to give Kelly a show. In May of 1956 he received his first New York exhibition at her gallery.[48]

A chance meeting with Richard Kelly, the lighting designer (no relation), brought him a commission for sculptural space-dividing screens in the new Transportation Building designed by the architect Vincent G. Kling for Penn Center, Philadelphia.[49] Working with the company of Edison Price, Kelly had his first chance to develop some of his ideas in metal and in conjunction with an architectural setting. Although the screens for the restaurant area are more successful functionally, the tympanum over the lobby entrance (page 62), partly painted in solid colors, has more relation to his later work. Models were ready in September 1956, and installation of the works was completed the following February.

Meanwhile he had moved to a larger loft at 3–5 Coenties Slip, a few blocks from Broad Street, where he was to remain for seven years. In the fall of 1957 Betty Parsons gave him his second exhibition at her gallery.[50] But earlier three pictures, *Atlantic* (page 56), *Bar* (page 63), and *Painting in Three Panels* (page 64), all from 1956, had been selected for the "Young America 1957" show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Of the thirty artists in the exhibition, Kelly stood out as unrelated to the rest. Most of the sculpture and painting that were not from the "action-painting" school were close to the Boston expressionism he had long since left behind.[51] His *Painting in Three Panels* was actually the most radical entry and was viewed by some as a joke and by others as a maneuver to get more than his share of space. The idea of several separate canvases constituting a single

73.362.

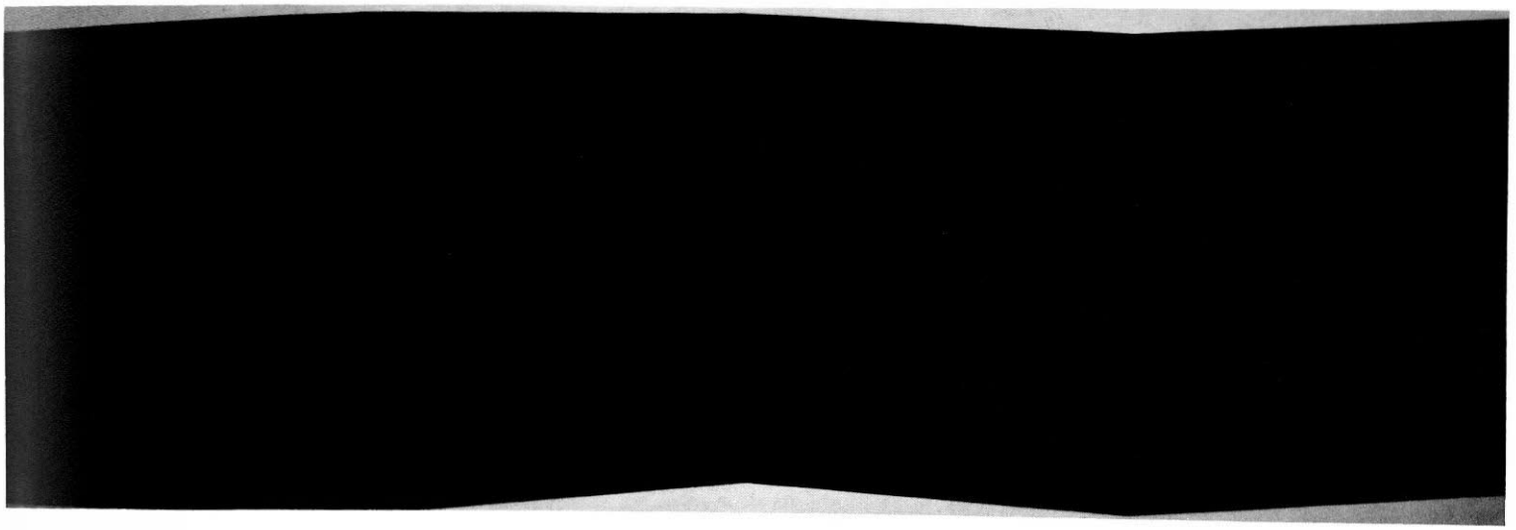
Orange Red Relief, 1959. Oil on canvas, two joined panels; overall, 60 x 60 inches.

In Kelly's sketchbooks of 1951–1952 there are numerous drawings in pencil and in color of proposed pictures in which a portion of the surface was to be in higher relief than the rest. This was usually in the form of a panel. These ideas were, of course, related to the earlier string reliefs (page 24) and *Relief with Blue* (page 27), and to his whole preoccupation through the years with the physical presence of his work. *Méditerranée,* 1952 (page 47), was actually constructed with a relief panel, as were several other pictures of the period.

In 1955 Kelly made a small painting, *Yellow Relief,* in which the left-hand panel of two was an inch or so thicker than the one on the right side. The whole rectangle was painted the same yellow, and the painting's "sole articulation was the slight literal projection forward of half of the surface" (noted by William S. Rubin in *Frank Stella,* 1970, p. 118). This use of a real shadow to activate the surface subtly and change ever so minimally the color along the seam recalls *Saint-Louis, II,* 1950 (page 25), as well as the indentation in *White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection,* 1952–1955 (page 51).

In *Orange Red Relief,* 1959, he has placed together two closely allied colors, as he had juxtaposed pink and orange in *Painting for a White Wall,* 1952 (page 42). The raised surface here not only accentuates their subtle difference but prevents any optical mixture that would have occurred along their common frontier had they been painted on a single canvas. This distaste for optical mixture goes to the heart of his quest for making all parts of his pictures equally "real" and devoid of uncontrollable illusions.

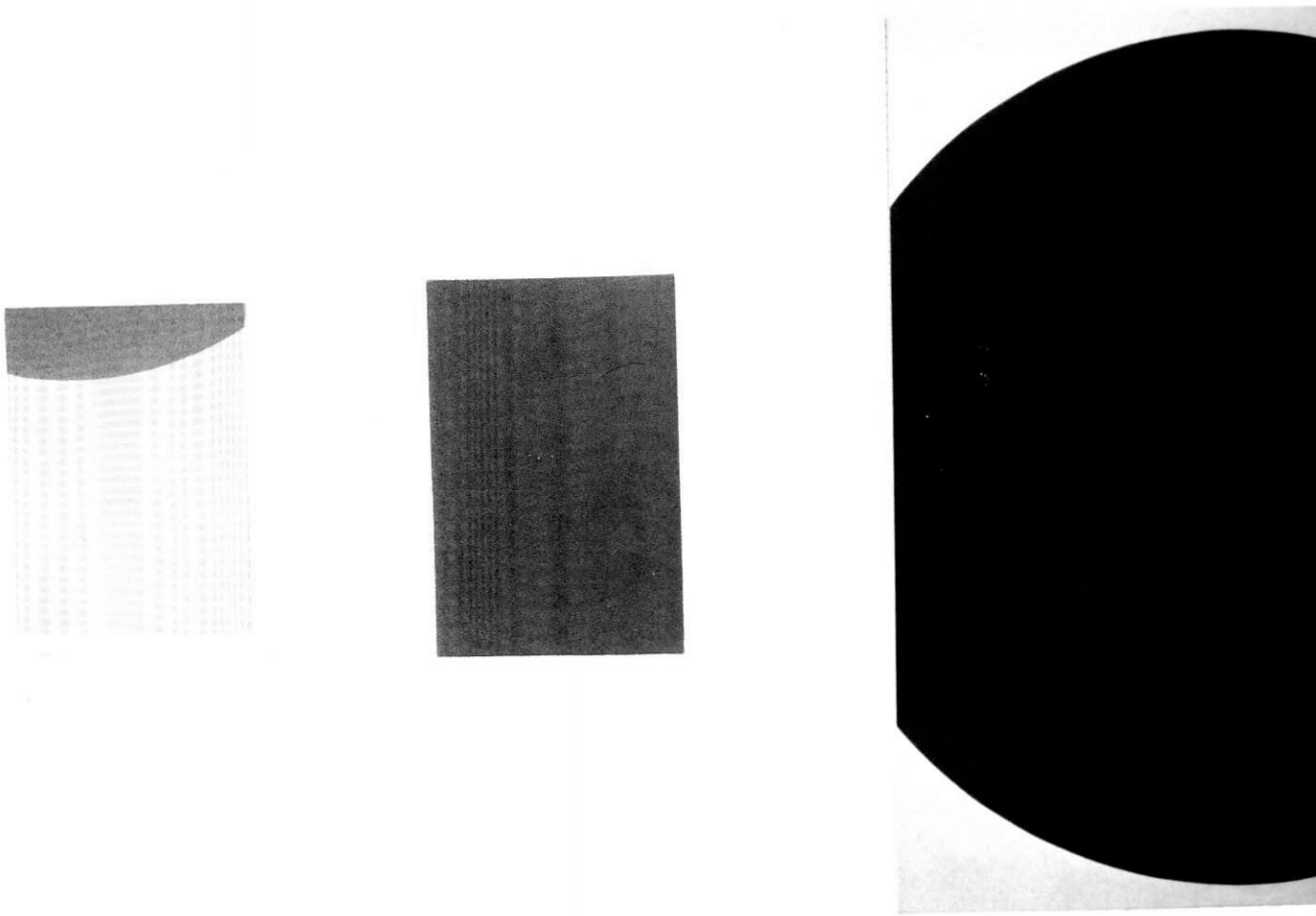
Another and larger version, *Blue Tablet,* is again a monochrome like the little yellow relief and was made in 1962. Shortly thereafter Kelly returned to the single-colored joined panels as his prevailing mode of procedure.



opposite above: Lobby Sculpture, 1956–1957
Anodized aluminum, 12 x 65 feet x 12 inches
Transportation Building, Penn Center, Philadelphia not exh.

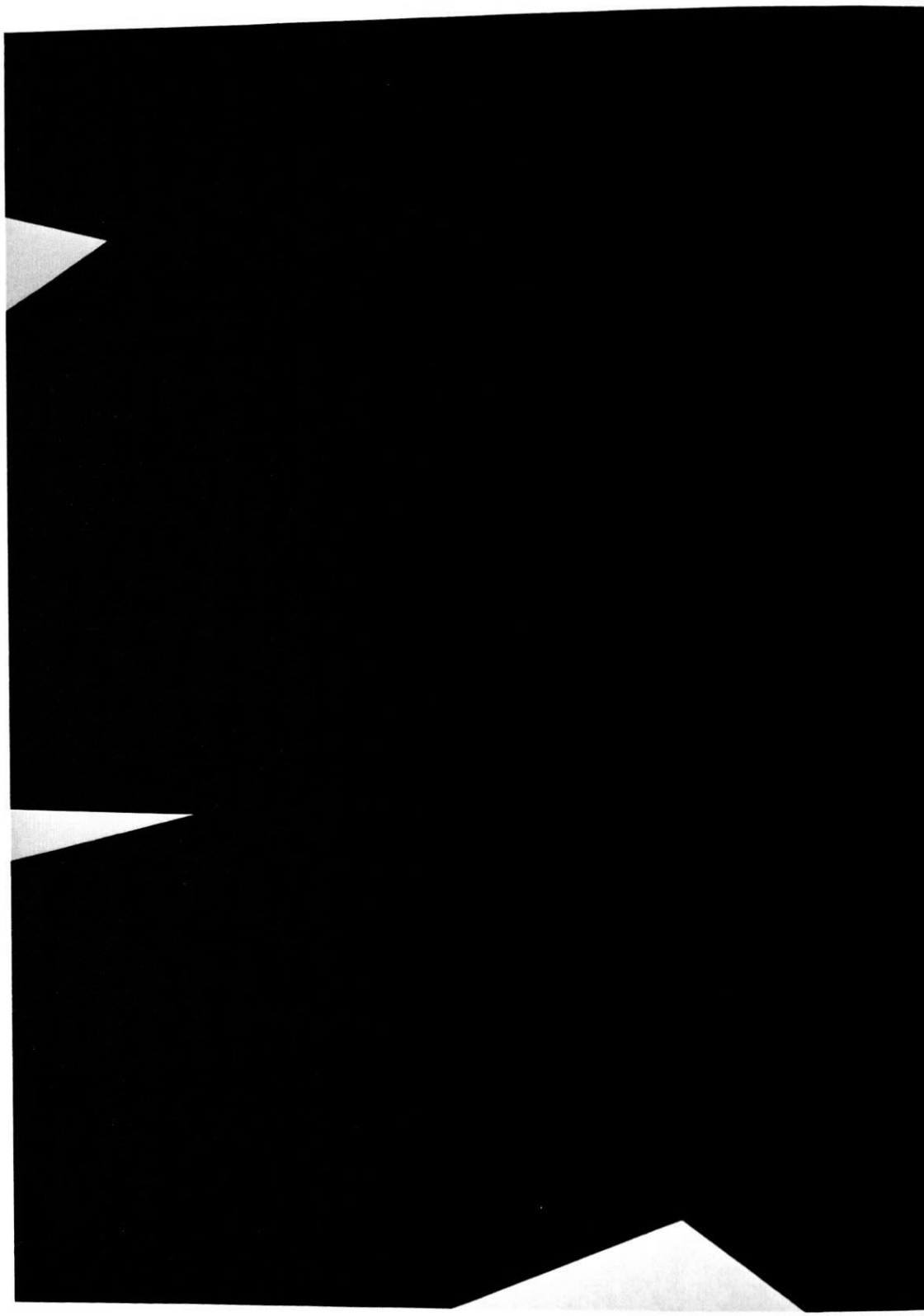
opposite below: Section of brass space divider, Restaurant,
Transportation Building, Penn Center, Philadelphia

above: *Bar,* 1956
Oil on canvas, 32¾ inches x 8 feet
not exh.



above: *Painting in Three Panels*, 1956
Oil on canvas in three parts:
30 x 22 inches; 34 x 22 inches; 6 feet 8 inches x 60 inches;
overall, including space between panels, 6 feet 8 inches x 11 feet 7 inches not exh

opposite: Kelly, third from right,
with Delphine Seyrig, Robert Indiana, Duncan Youngerman, Jack Youngerman, Agnes Martin,
and Kelly's dog Orange on roof of No. 3–5 Coenties Slip, New York, 1958.
Photograph by Hans Namuth



Paname, 1957 not exh.
Oil on canvas, 6 feet 5½ inches x 60 inches
Collection Richard Kelly, New York

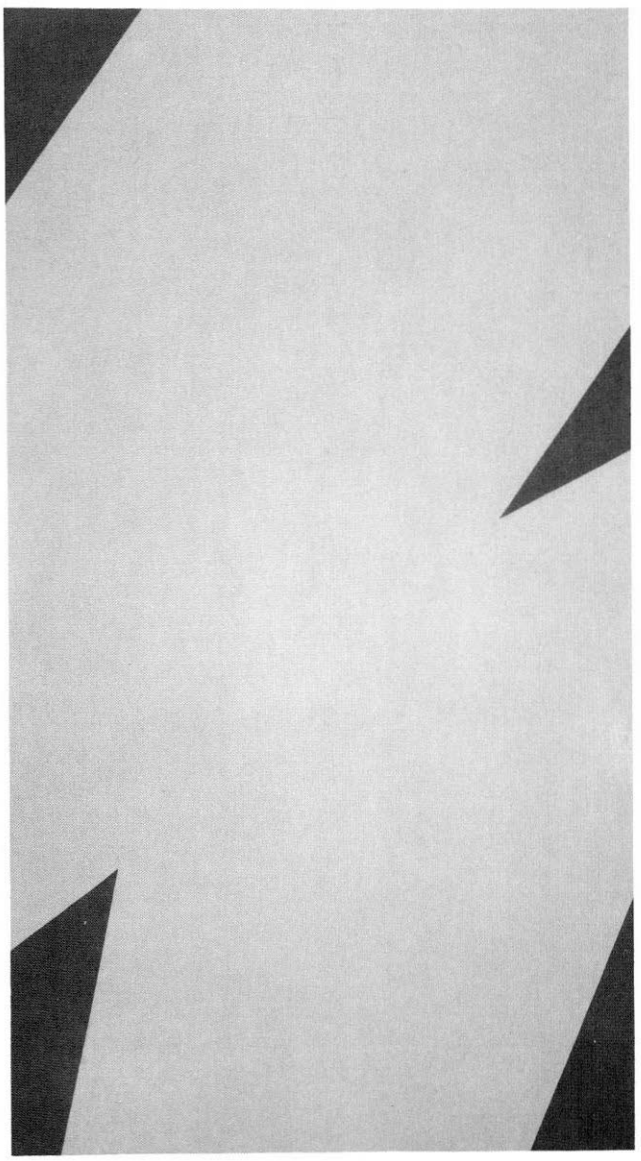
picture was not new to his work but was new to New York in 1957.

A number of paintings and images developed from visiting his friend Robert (Clark) Indiana, whose studio was just down the block. Sitting around with Indiana, he often made sketches, some of the artist and some out of his window. Attracted as ever by the way windows frame fragments of the landscape, Kelly found that the lettering on a Knickerbocker Beer sign on a nearby wall presented any number of usable patterns. Large colorful letters appeared as fragments; their curved and angular shapes made innumerable abstract images. He exploited this phenomenon many times, and most of the "notched" pictures, where the large central figure is created by smaller acute-angle insertions from the sides, issue from it (see *Paname,* 1957, opposite, and *Yellow with Red,* 1958, right).

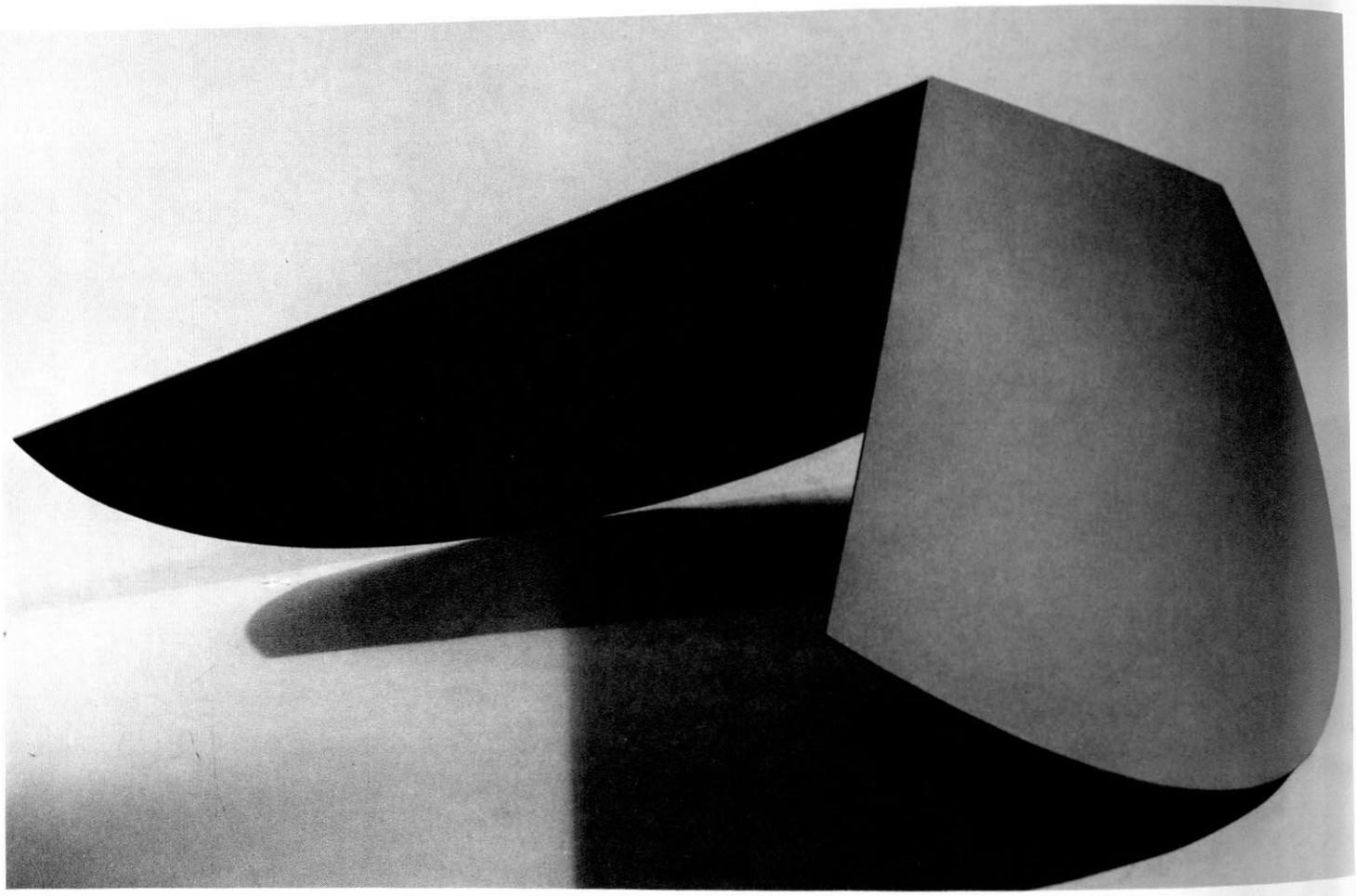
In 1958 things began to pick up somewhat. Gordon Washburn invited him to submit a picture to the Carnegie international exhibition, and that institution acquired *Aubade,* 1957.[52] And the Galerie Maeght in Paris, where he had shown in 1951 and 1952, offered him a one-man exhibition and published a handsome catalogue illustrated with his designs.[53] Lawrence Alloway, then Director of the I.C.A. gallery in London, saw the show and advised the British collector E. J. Power to buy; Power bought eight works.

The painter Agnes Martin had recently moved into his building on Coenties Slip. One morning when sharing coffee with her, he had bent a round can-lid and let it rock on the table. She suggested that he "make that." He had already made some sketches of sculptural ideas, mostly related to the Transportation Building sculptural mural, but this can-lid was the origin of a new set of ideas closely related to the shapes he was using in his paintings (see the 1959 sculptures *Pony,* page 68, and *Gate,* page 71).

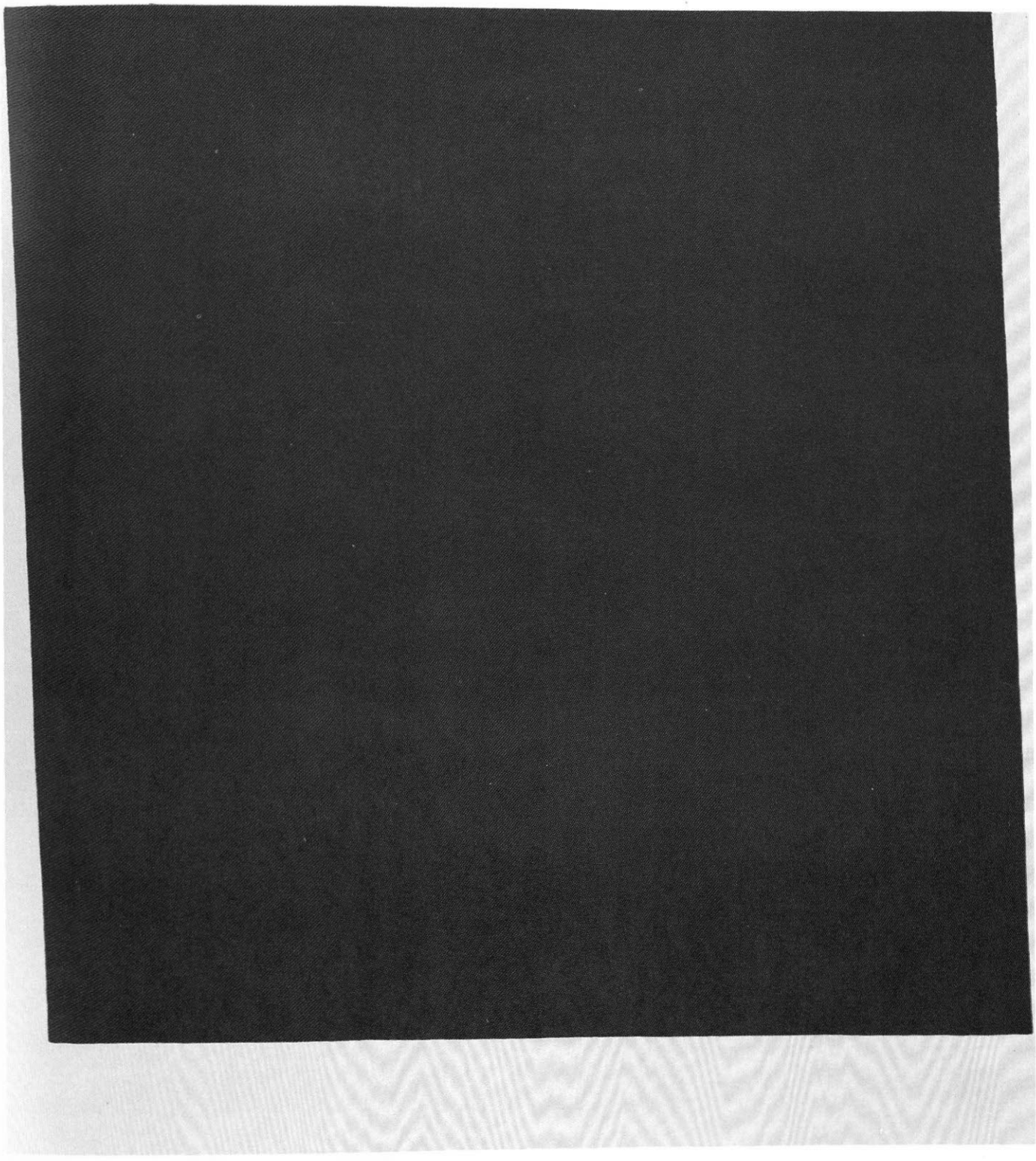
By 1960 Kelly was an established New York artist, showing regularly and receiving growing public attention. His general direction was now clear, and he could call freely upon a rich body of work, and ideas for work, from his past—ideas he was also well prepared to extend as far as he cared to. Sources as such became less important in the formation of new directions, but the attitudes and the characteristics of his art have always been consistent even as it changes outwardly.



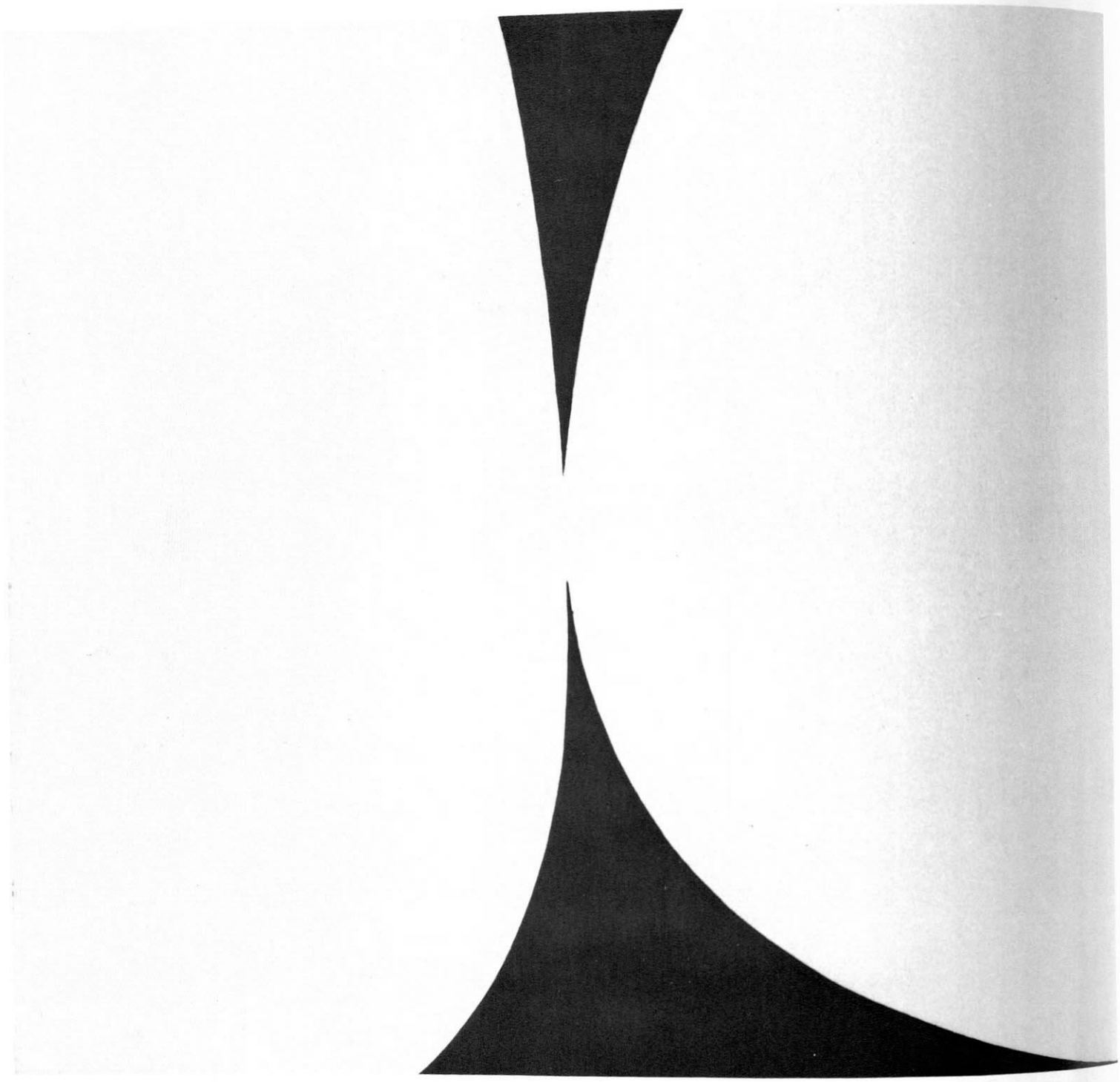
Yellow with Red, 1958 not exh.
Oil on canvas, 6 feet 8 inches x 44½ inches



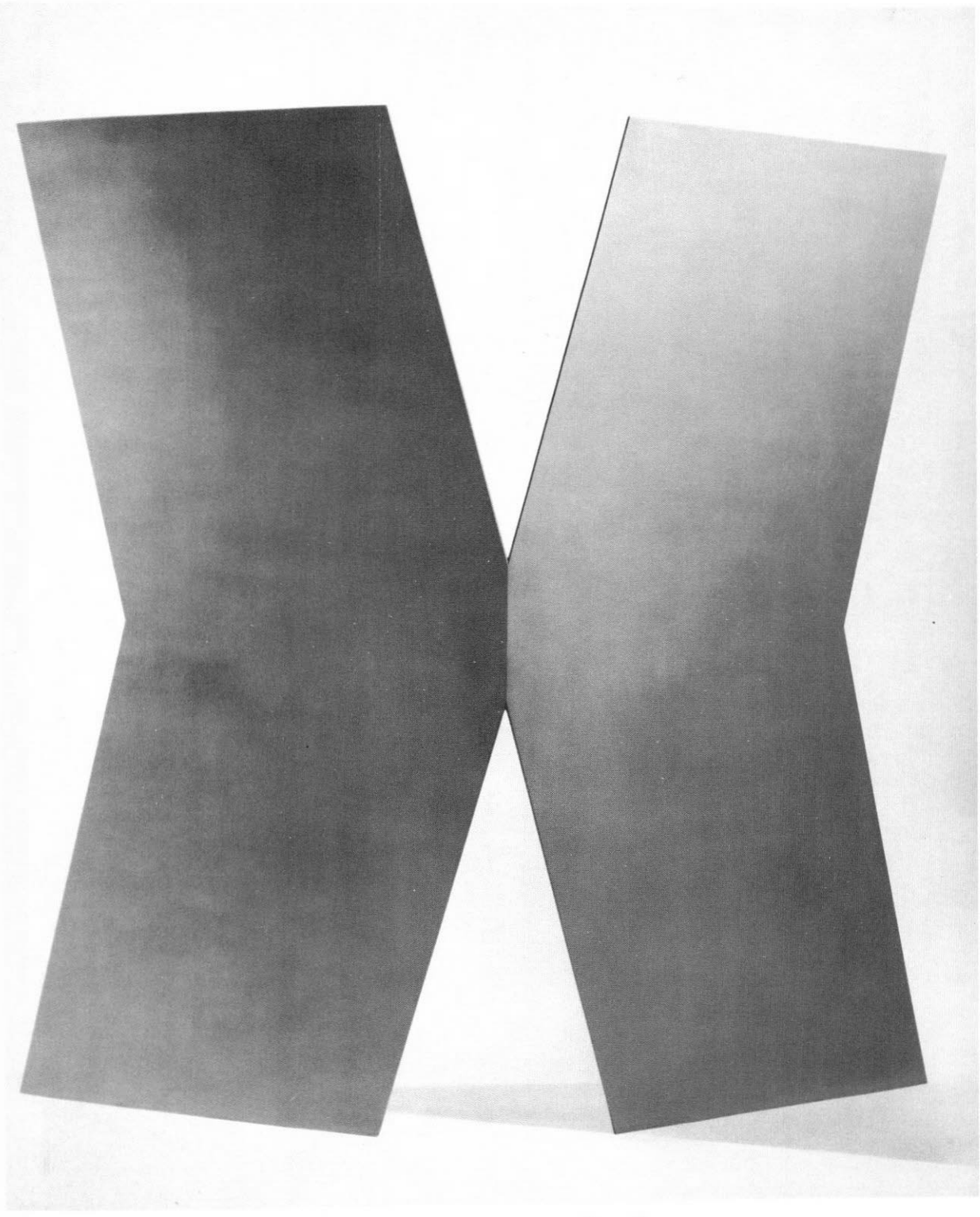
Pony, 1959 not exh.
Painted aluminum, 31 inches x 6 feet 6 inches x 64 inches
Dayton's Gallery 12, Minneapolis



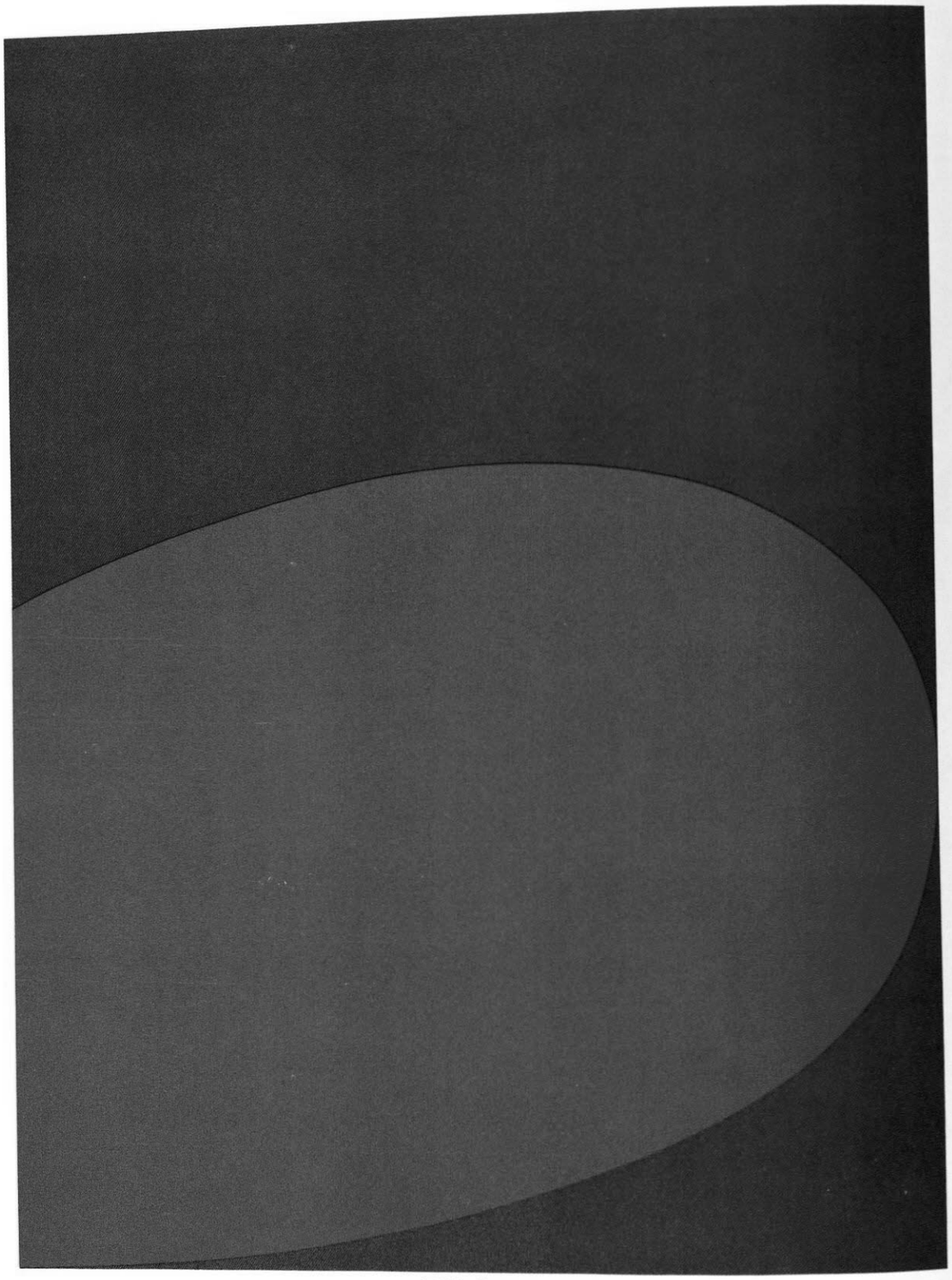
73.360
North River, 1959
Oil on canvas, 6 feet 6 inches x 70 inches



73.378
Rebound, 1959
Oil on canvas, 68¼ x 71½ inches
Collection D. Franklin Königsberg, Los Angeles



Gate, 1959 not exh.
Painted aluminum, 67 x 63 x 17 inches
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Hall James Peterson, Petersham, Massachusetts



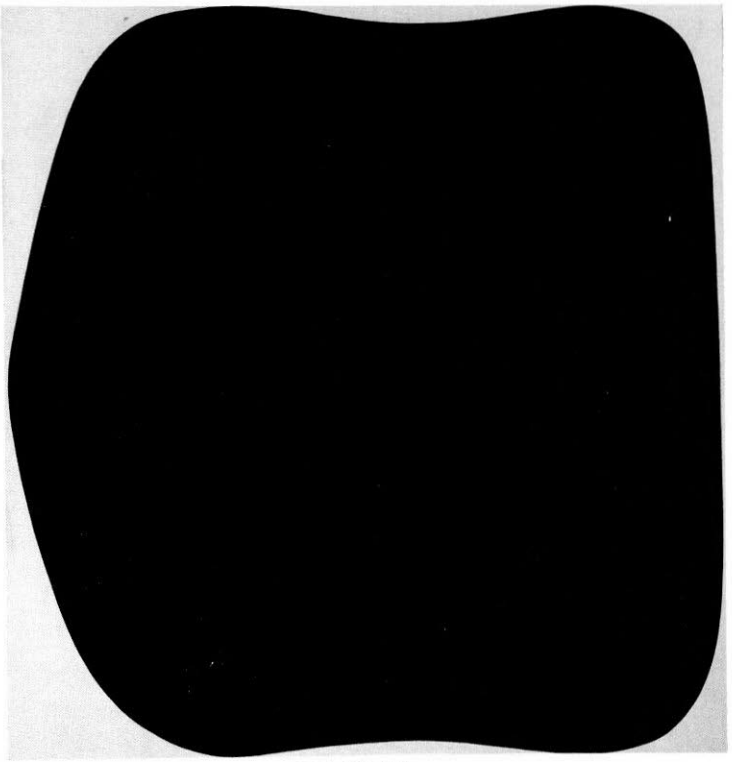
73.347
Red Blue, 1964
Oil on canvas, 90 x 66 inches
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Morton J. Hornick, New York

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

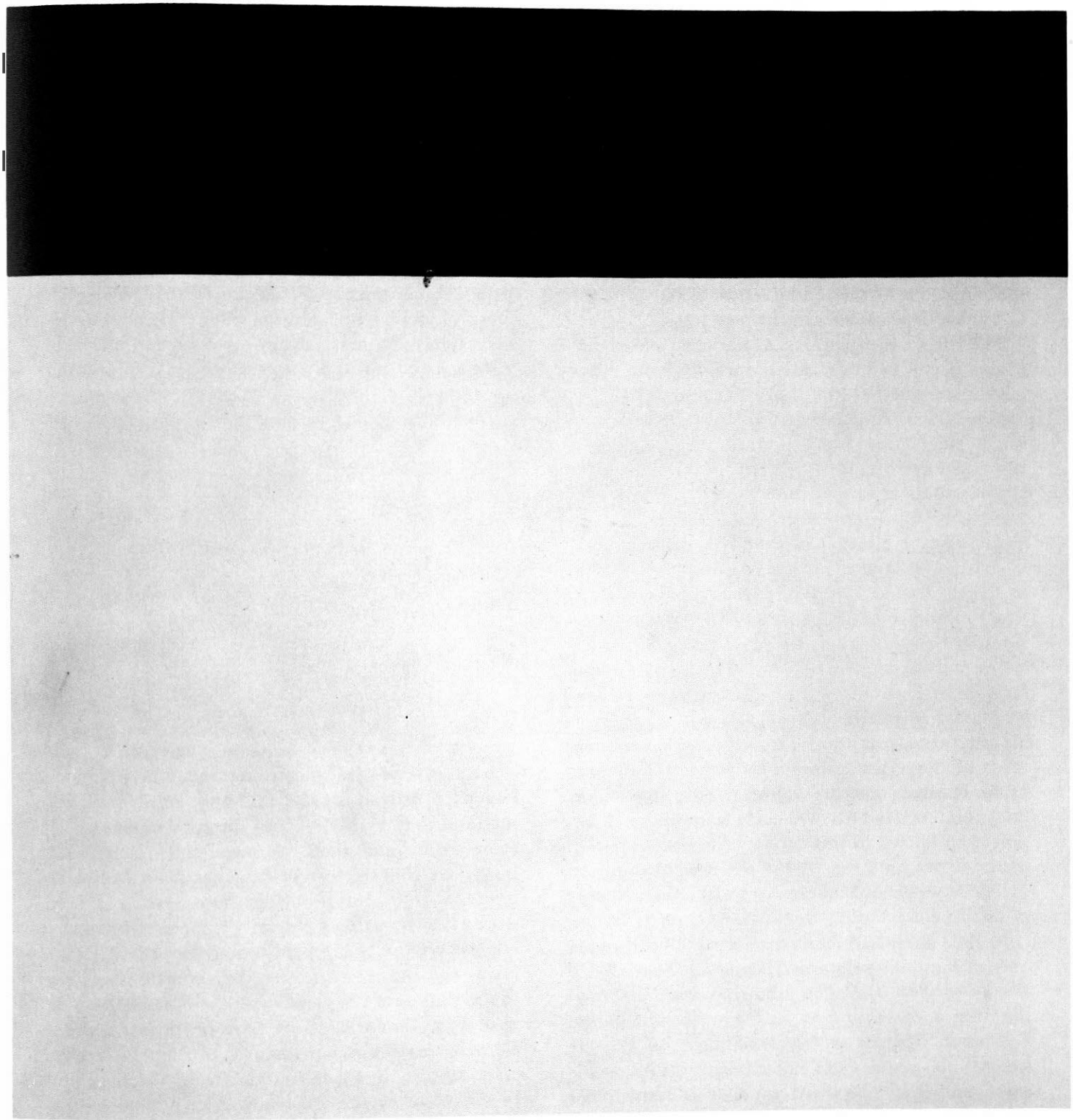
ONE OF THE most dominant characteristics of Kelly's work through the years, other than his almost total preoccupation with shape, has been the way he consistently calls upon tension to achieve pictorial interest and vitality. It is also a large part of the content of his art. Tension, inevitable in life, is of course necessary to art. The artist's problem is how to create it and at the same time control it.

In the earlier work, and until about 1965 or so, Kelly relied mainly on variations of two kinds of tension-producing situations: one, in which the shapes within the space of the picture act against one another, and the other in which the shapes put pressure outward against the constrictions of the space in which they are trapped. The earliest example of the first mode was *Kilometer Marker,* 1949 (page 21), wherein the pressure of an aggressive curve upward meets the equally insistent downward pressure from the horizon line (reinforced as it is by its spatial weight above). When round and straight meet—the ball on the floor, the egg on the table—precariousness and unpredictability come into the picture. The artist's solution then must turn back toward quiescence, or at least balance. In such a picture as *Rebound,* 1959 (page 70), where soft meets soft (like the pressurized curves of two balloons) but is designed hard and crisp, it is difficult to tell which way things will go. Unlike the curved and the straight above, it is not a clear stand-off; the black space could expand or contract depending on future events. But Kelly, through the precision of the drawing, the surface tension across a texturally undifferentiated field of canvas, and perhaps because he has made this a "night" picture (where white is form and black is void), succeeds in suggesting the possibilities without leaving us in doubt about the outcome.

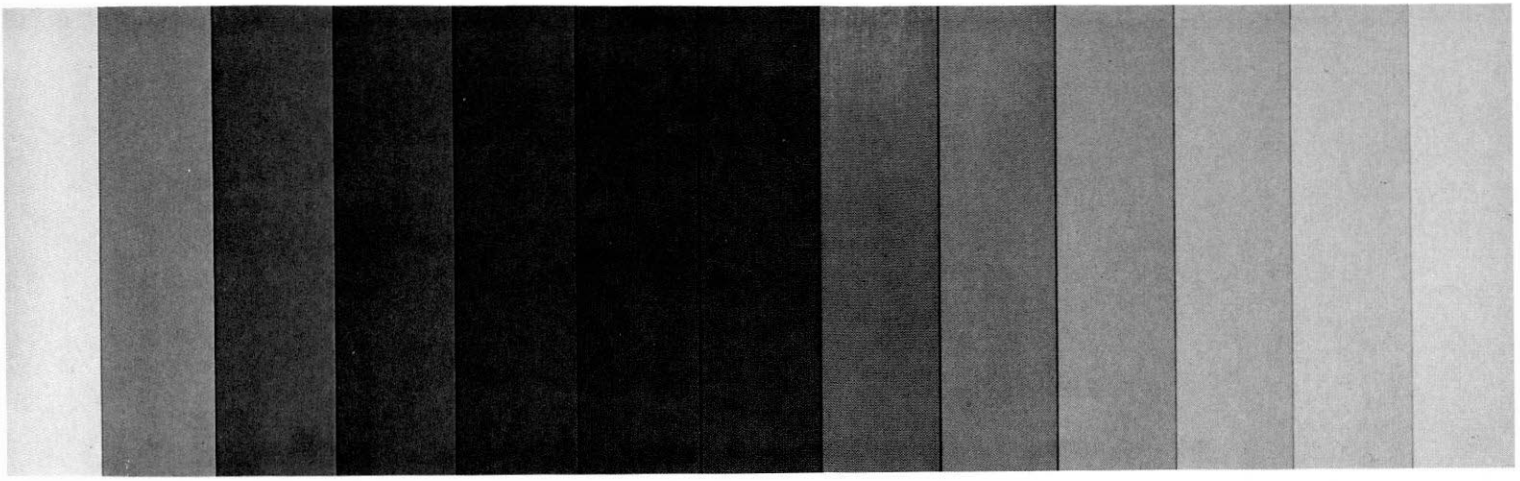
In his *Red Blue,* 1964 (opposite), round curve again meets straight line, this time the edge of the canvas, a more forceful conclusion perhaps than the gravity implied in *Kilometer Marker*'s horizon. Here Kelly breaks an old rule laid down in the days of representational illusionism: "A shape must be either in the rectangle or convincingly mostly out of it—but never tangential to a side." The rule and Kelly's exception to it are exactly the difference between the old and the new schools. The old rule was based on the experience of a fact; if a form



73.389
Black Ripe, 1956
Oil on canvas, 63 x 59 inches
Collection Mme Raymonde Zehnacker, Paris

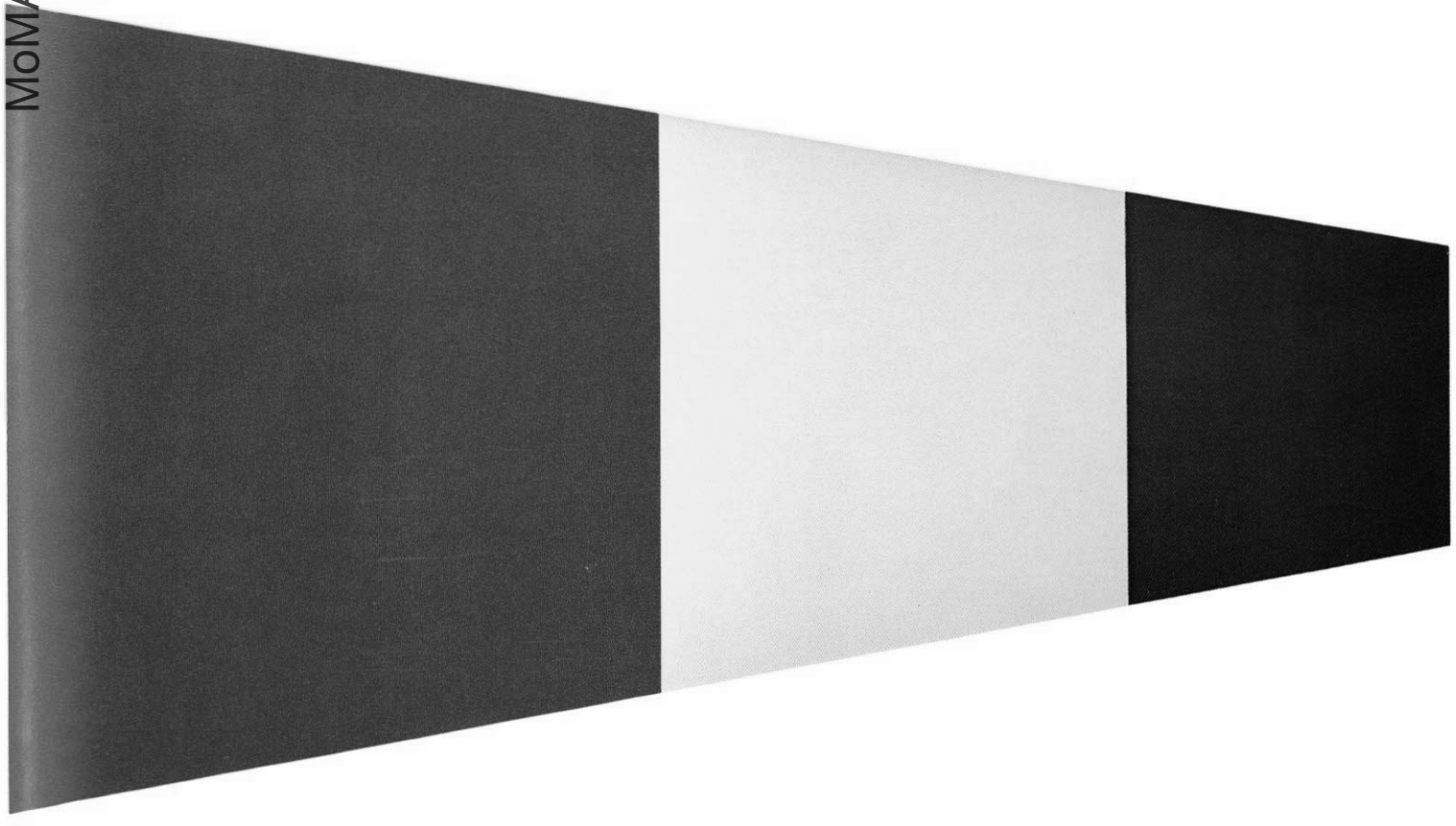


73.341
Black over White, 1966
Oil on canvas, two joined panels; overall, 7 feet 2 inches x 6 feet 8 inches
Collection L. M. Asher Family, Los Angeles



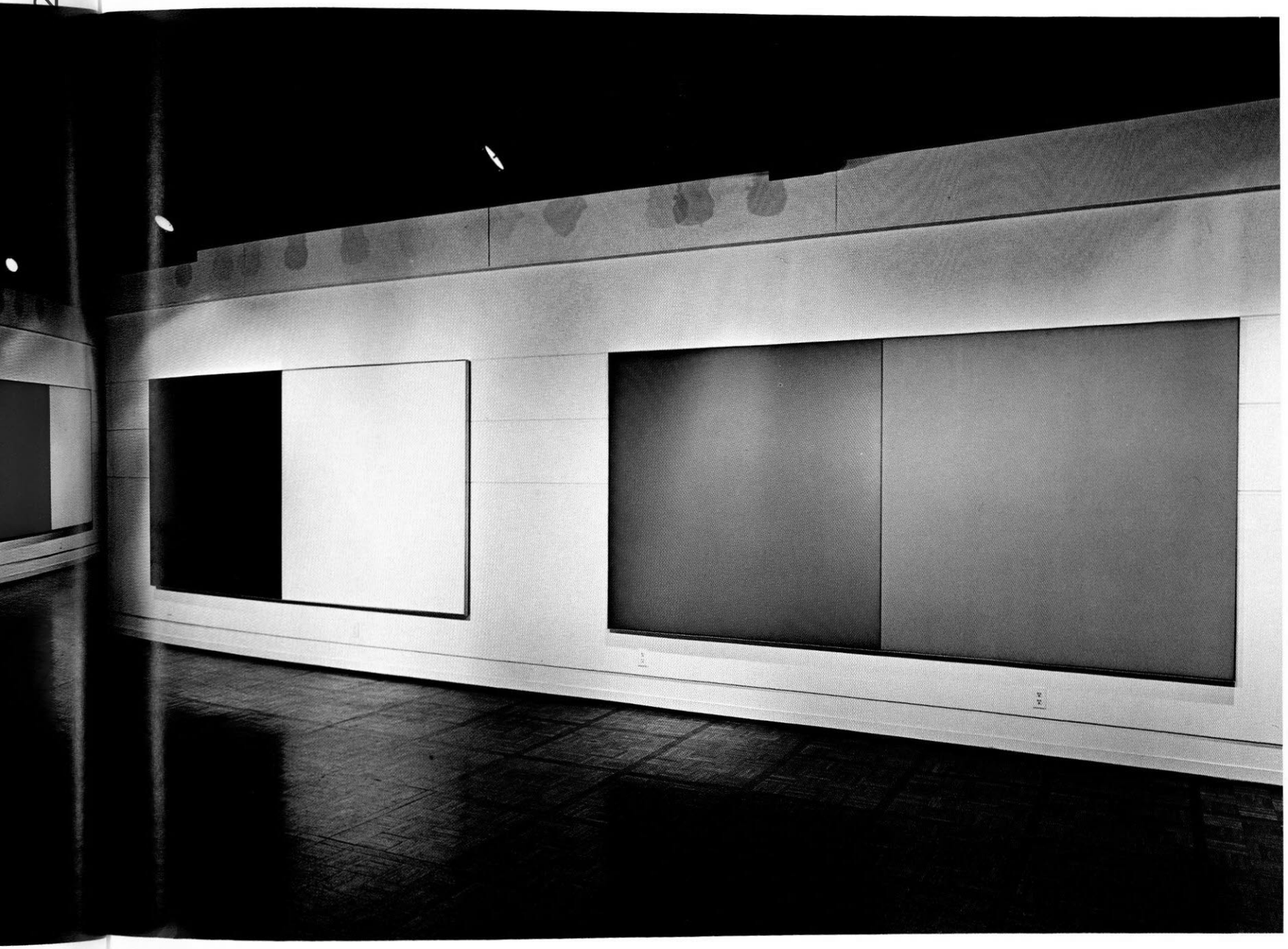
Spectrum, III, 1967 not exh.
Oil on canvas, 13 joined panels; overall, 33¼ inches x 9 feet ⅝ inch
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, 1967

above: *Painting in Five Panels*, 1956 not exh.
Oil on canvas in five parts; overall, 36 inches x 12 feet
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Carpenter, New Canaan, Connecticut
73.388
opposite above: *Blue on Blue*, 1963
Painted aluminum, 7 feet 4 inches x 60 x 6 inches
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R. Weisman, Los Angeles
73.387
opposite below: *Blue Disk*, 1963
Painted aluminum, 70 inches x 6 feet
Collection the Wasserman Family, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

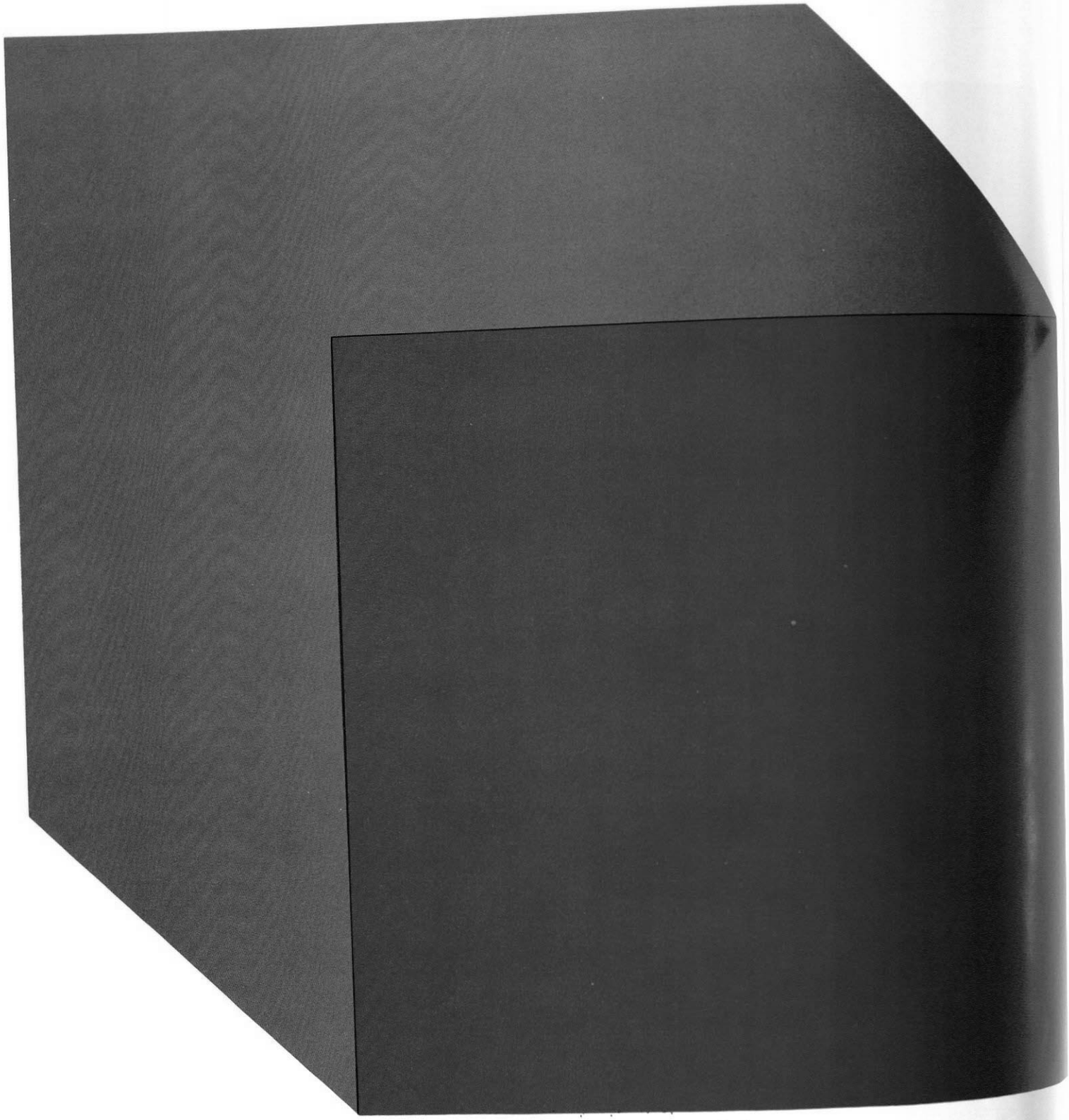


73.386 a-d

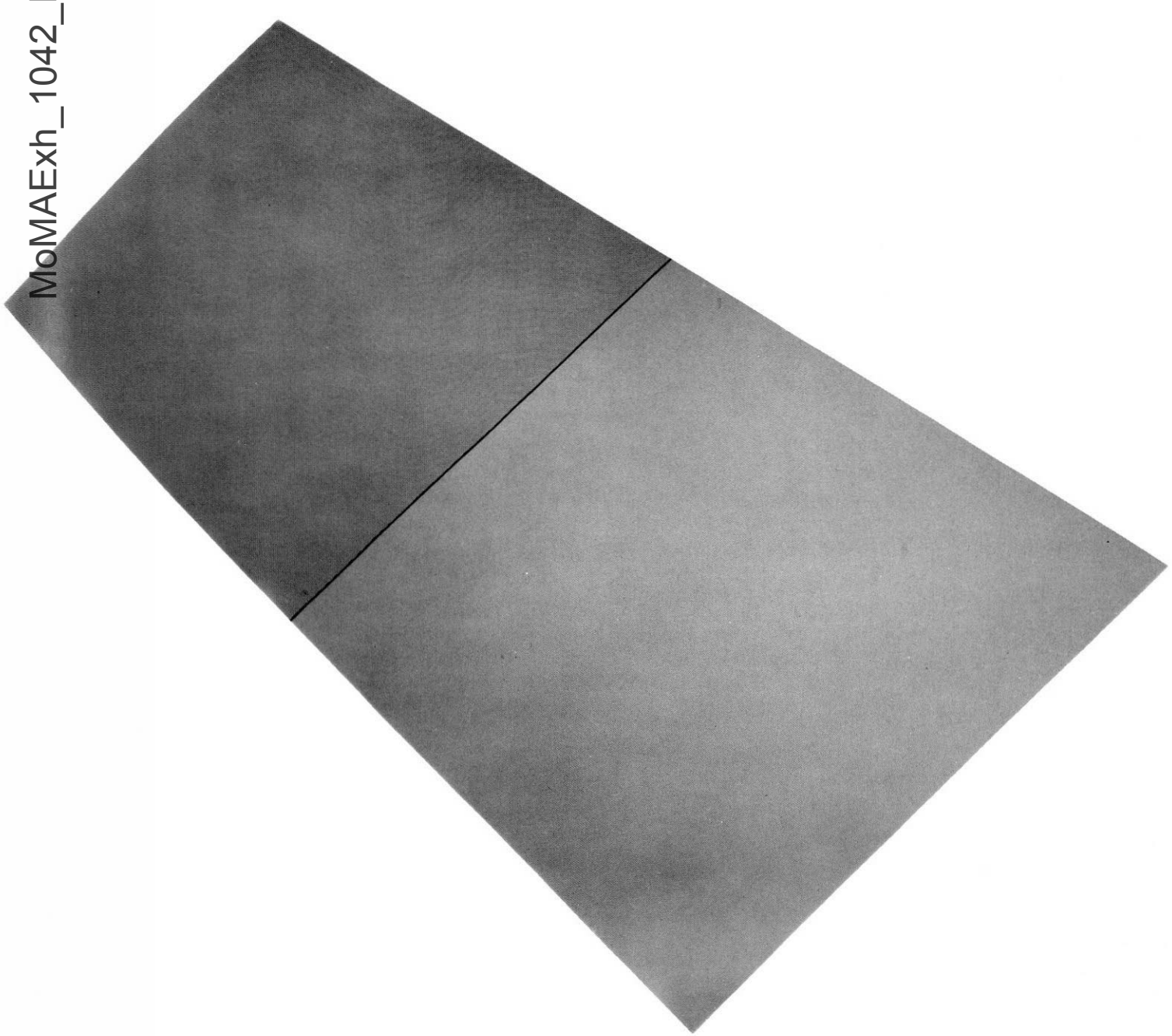
Red Yellow Blue, V, 1968
Oil on canvas, three joined panels; overall, 7 feet 5 inches > 36 inches x 13 feet 10 inches
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Porter, Chagrin Falls, Ohio



Series of Five Paintings, 1966 not exh.
Oil on canvas in five parts: each, 70 inches x 11 feet 8 inches
Collection Geertjan Visser, on loan to Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, the Netherlands



Blue Green, 1968 not exh.
Oil on canvas, two panels; overall, 7 feet 7 inches x 7 feet 7 inches
Private collection, New York

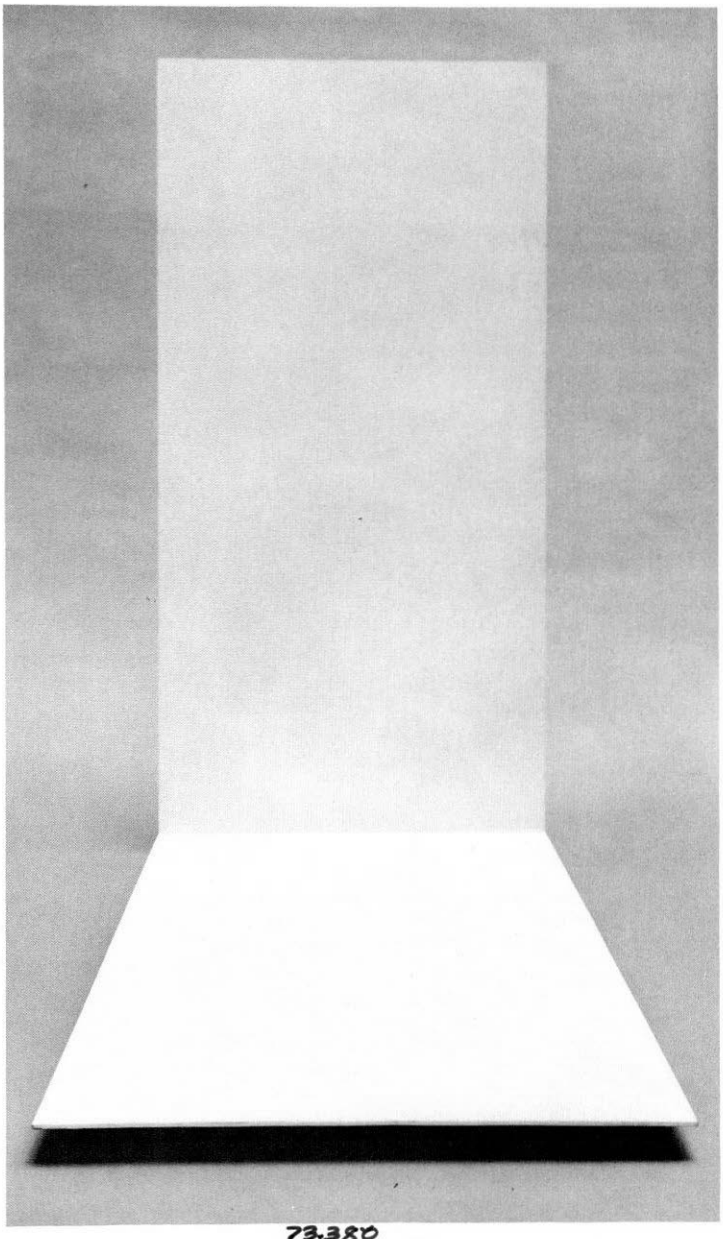


73.343 a,b.

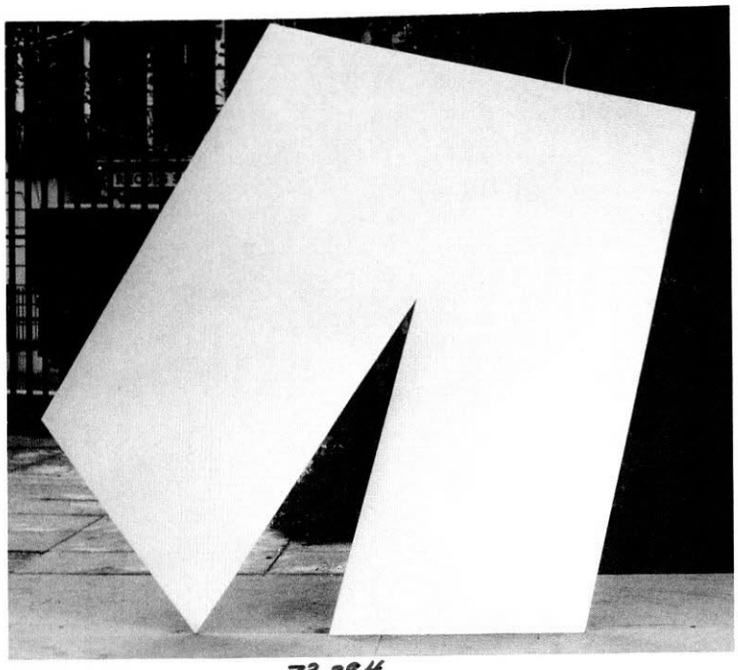
Red Green, 1968
Oil on canvas, two joined panels; overall, 9 feet 4 inches x 10 feet 10 inches
Collection James Dugdale, London

Bending and flattening, as Kelly uses them, are not intended to set up illusionistic conceits but to engage the viewer in a dialogue with the work, to make it a participatory experience involving discovery. This goes back to his own discoveries: how surprising shapes and patterns are created by shadows and reflections, how the truth of a phenomenon is often withheld by an appearance that has its own equally valid truth, how something that is normally bent (the shadow of the bridge arch) when flattened (*White Plaque,* page 51) presents a new face, and how a thing that is normally flat when bent does the same. This becomes clearer perhaps in the later work and particularly when seen in conjunction with his sculpture.

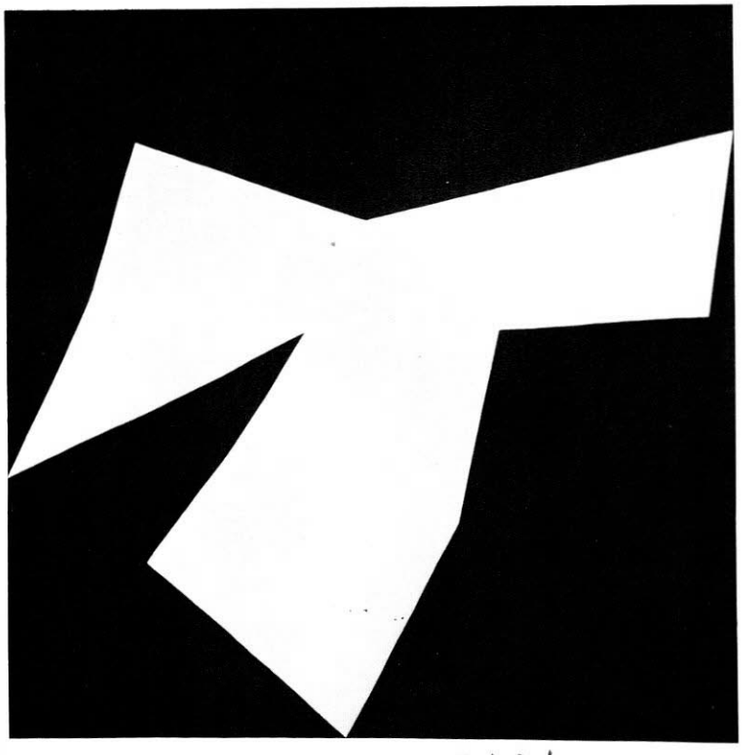
The earlier free-standing pieces such as *Gate,* 1959, and *Blue Disk,* 1963 (pages 71 and 79), were lifted out of their figure-ground context, and a few of the more recent pieces have been retrieved from collages and paintings of the late 1950s; compare, for example, *White Sculpture,* 1968, with *Cowboy,* 1958 (opposite page). But having thoroughly abandoned ground in the process of making these sculptures, and having entered upon the creation of such things as the color panels, which in a sense are both figure and ground at the same time (unless one considers the wall as the ground), Kelly was both logical and ingenious in his move to bend a flat panel into actual space. He tried it in canvas first, but the cumbersomeness and the fragility of the result quickly led him to the more permanent and lightweight aluminum. *White Angle,* 1966 (at right), and a blue and white companion piece were the first of these. Meanwhile, having begun making pictures with triangular and rhomboidal shapes, as well as variations on the rectangle, often suggesting that the flat was bent, he made sculptures that suggested just the opposite. From any one position these sculptural pieces (see *Green Blue,* 1968, and *Yellow Blue,* 1969, pages 100 and 88) appear totally flat, totally camouflaged as to what they literally are. And as Barbara Rose has noted: "Since the surfaces are painted a matte color, light does not reflect from them; similarly, because a plane is flat and unbroken, shadow cannot accumulate in any indentations. Compensating for the lack of light and shadow contrast is the very strong and specific sensation of color, which is as brilliant and forceful in its impact in the sculpture as it is in the paintings."[58] When one moves past they remain frontal,



73.3800
White Angle, 1966
Painted aluminum, 6 feet x 36 inches x 6 feet
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Gift of the artist



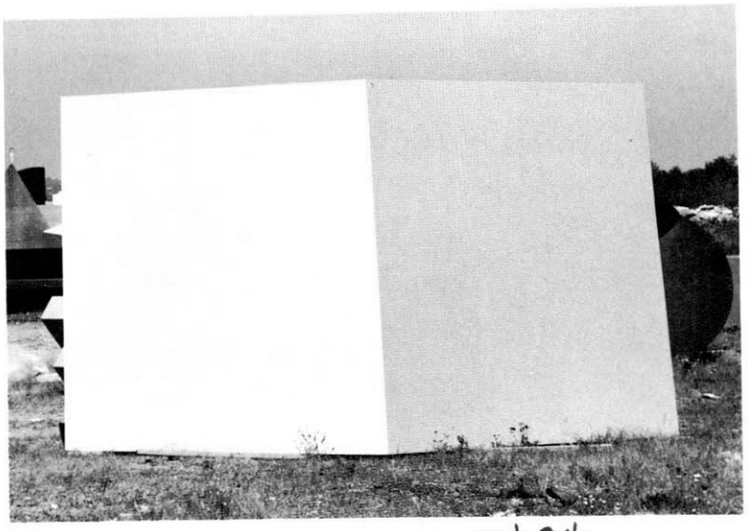
73.384
White Sculpture, 1968. Painted aluminum,
8 feet 4½ inches x 12 feet 2½ inches x 38⅜ inches
Private collection, New York (Rubin)



Cowboy, 1958 not exh.
Oil on canvas, 45 x 43 inches
Collection Jacques Neubauer, Paris

neutral squares paired in rectangles of two colors. Each unit is an easel painting in itself and could function as such, but when the group is properly installed, the individual paintings speak to each other across space in such a way that a total environment is handsomely achieved.

Tensions in this series were purposely kept to a minimum so that the overall environmental experience could take place. In other, single pictures, however, Kelly continued to seek situations wherein the individuality of the experience would be specific and leave the viewer with a distinct afterimage. A few of these test the possibilities of seemingly exotic shape, "seemingly" because upon inspection they are discovered to be based on the same general principles of bending and flattening that lie behind so much of his work from the beginning. In *Red Green,* 1968 (page 85), for example, the perspectival implications are frustrated by the insistence of the flat planes of color and even more by the factuality of the joint. How clearly this last functions in destroying otherwise inherent illusionism has been demonstrated by Kelly in other ways. In the process of making several two-color pictures based on isometric extensions of a large square, some of the smaller preliminary canvases were painted on a single stretched surface, the external shape of which conformed to the perimeter of the silhouette of the face and two sides of a cube. In these the illusionism is nearly total, despite the fact that two sides are painted in one continuous flat color. His use of strong and projecting color contrasts did little to allay the illusion of three-dimensionality. But when, in constructing a larger version, as in *Blue Green,* 1968 (page 84), the square was one actual panel and the area conforming to the sides of a cube was another panel, the imaginary diagonal where the bend would occur was largely erased by the recognizable carpentry of the two areas. The two solutions each evoke a different type of response. When the illusion is total and unavoidable, the viewer is so involved in the cleverness of the conceit that his sensuous reaction to the shape and the colors tends to distract from rather than add to his experience. In the instances where the quasi-illusion is balked because the colors and the shapes loom first in the eye, the latent aspects of the picture's geometry form a kind of reservoir of potential material to be called upon, like iconography in religious painting.



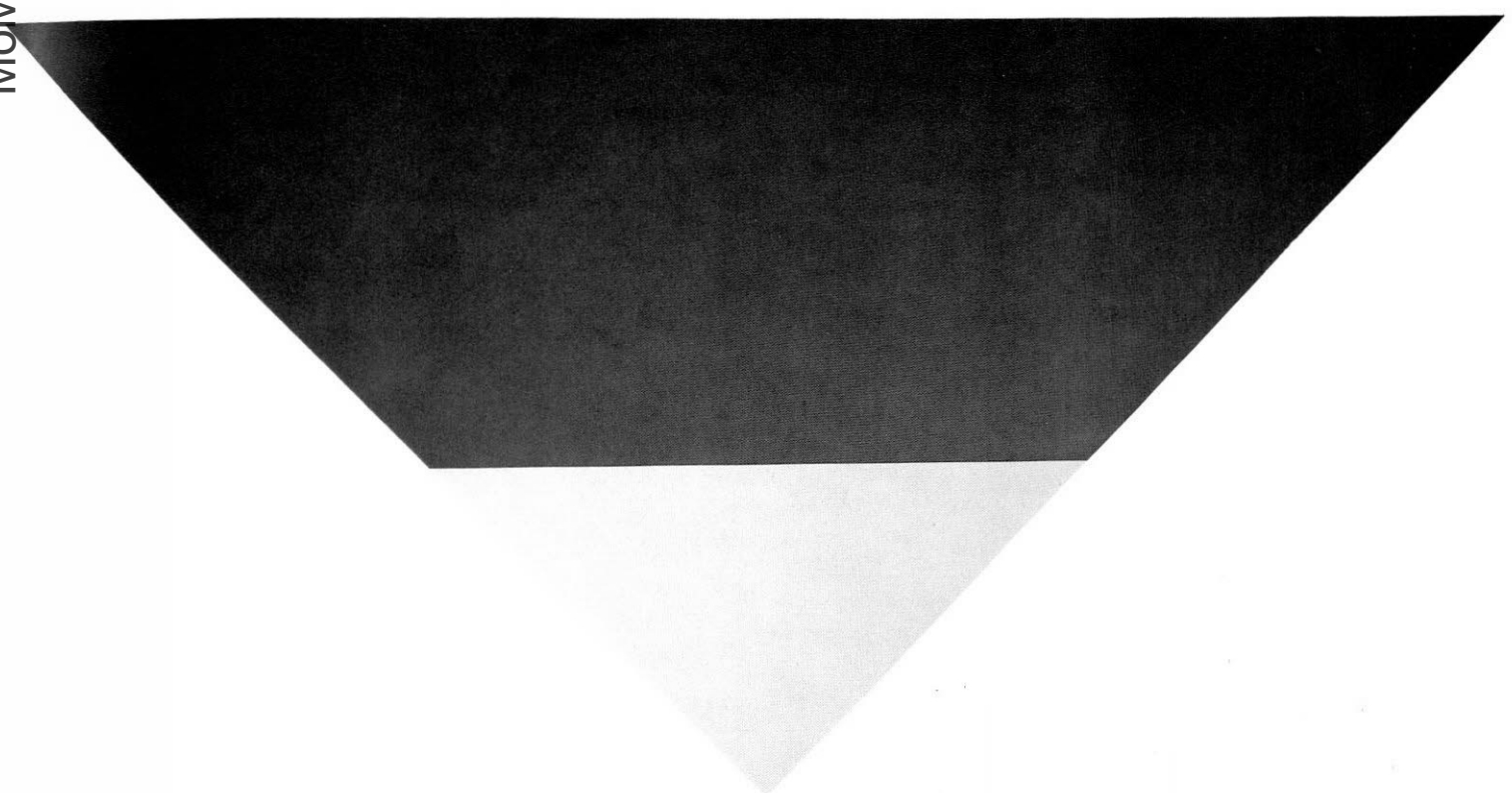
Yellow Blue, 1969 not exh.
Painted steel, 9 feet 6 inches x 16 feet x 8 feet 6 inches
State of New York, Albany South Mall

with a maximum visual life of one hundred eighty degrees, and are meant to be positioned against a backdrop of wall or foliage. The true shape of the whole piece is never available, any more than one can see a sculpture-in-the-round in the round.

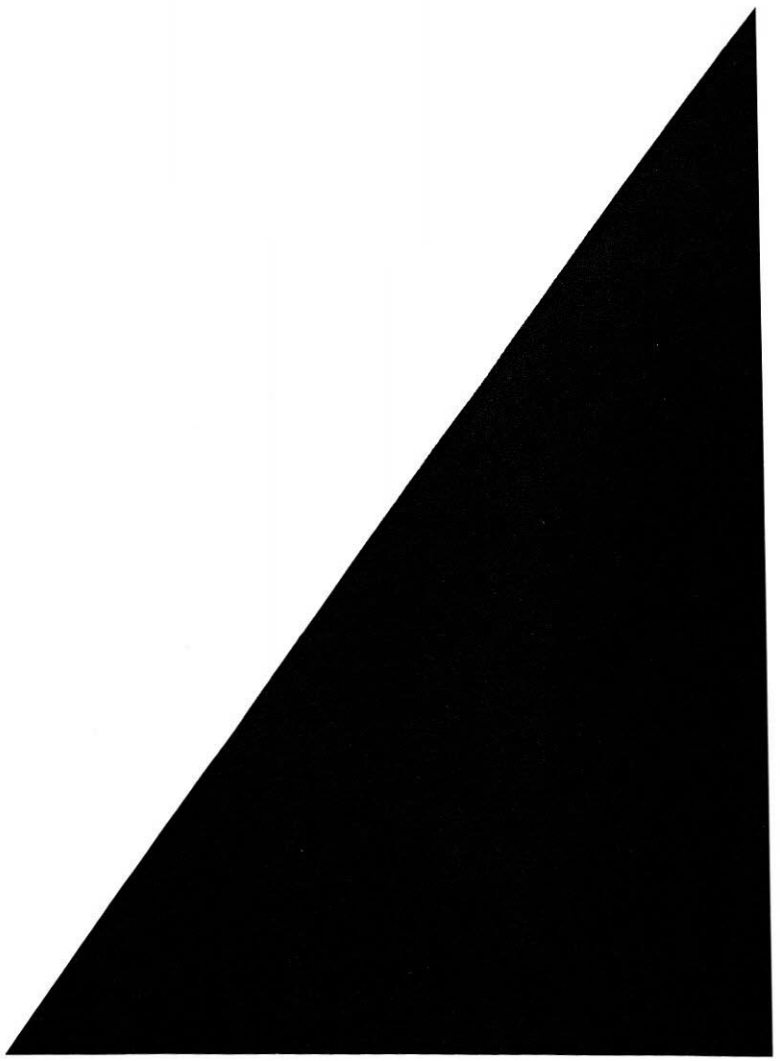
The bending in these sculptures along divisions that correspond to the joints between panels in the paintings tells us something about the latter. They almost always contain a suggestion of the possibility of bending, even to the point of a breaking or separation of the parts. It is hard not to recall Kelly's early involvement with swinging altarpiece panels, with French windows and shutters, with potential movement or displacement. And just as the bent planes of the sculptures pull their surfaces into tautness (they are rarely turned a full ninety degrees; thus the adjacent planes stretch like skin from one to the next), the bending potential in the paintings heightens the sense of tautness in a way consistent with the tightness of his colors and canvas surfaces. But the bending potential remains just that; it is a kinesthetic projection, not an illusion, and the very factuality of the joints aids in making that clear.

Kelly's introduction of triangles and diamond-shaped canvases into his vocabulary of forms in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not represent a major innovation on his part. These shapes were being used for various kinds of painting by any number of artists: Liberman, Newman, and Noland, among others. Since shape had always been Kelly's province, he would have got around to these sooner or later, regardless of any stylistic milieu. In any event, Kelly's vocabulary of forms has its own dictionary. He enlarges upon it, as has been noted above, in a reflexive way; or he is stimulated to add a form from something visually new to him in the environment. For example, *Green White,* 1968 (opposite), resulted from an encounter with a young lady walking in Central Park and wearing a scarf on the nape of her neck. He followed her for some distance until he had memorized the exact areas of the green and white in the triangle of silk. After this developed into a pictorial idea, the triangle began to appear in other contexts and modifications (see *Black White,* 1968, and *Black White,* 1970, pages 91 and 90).

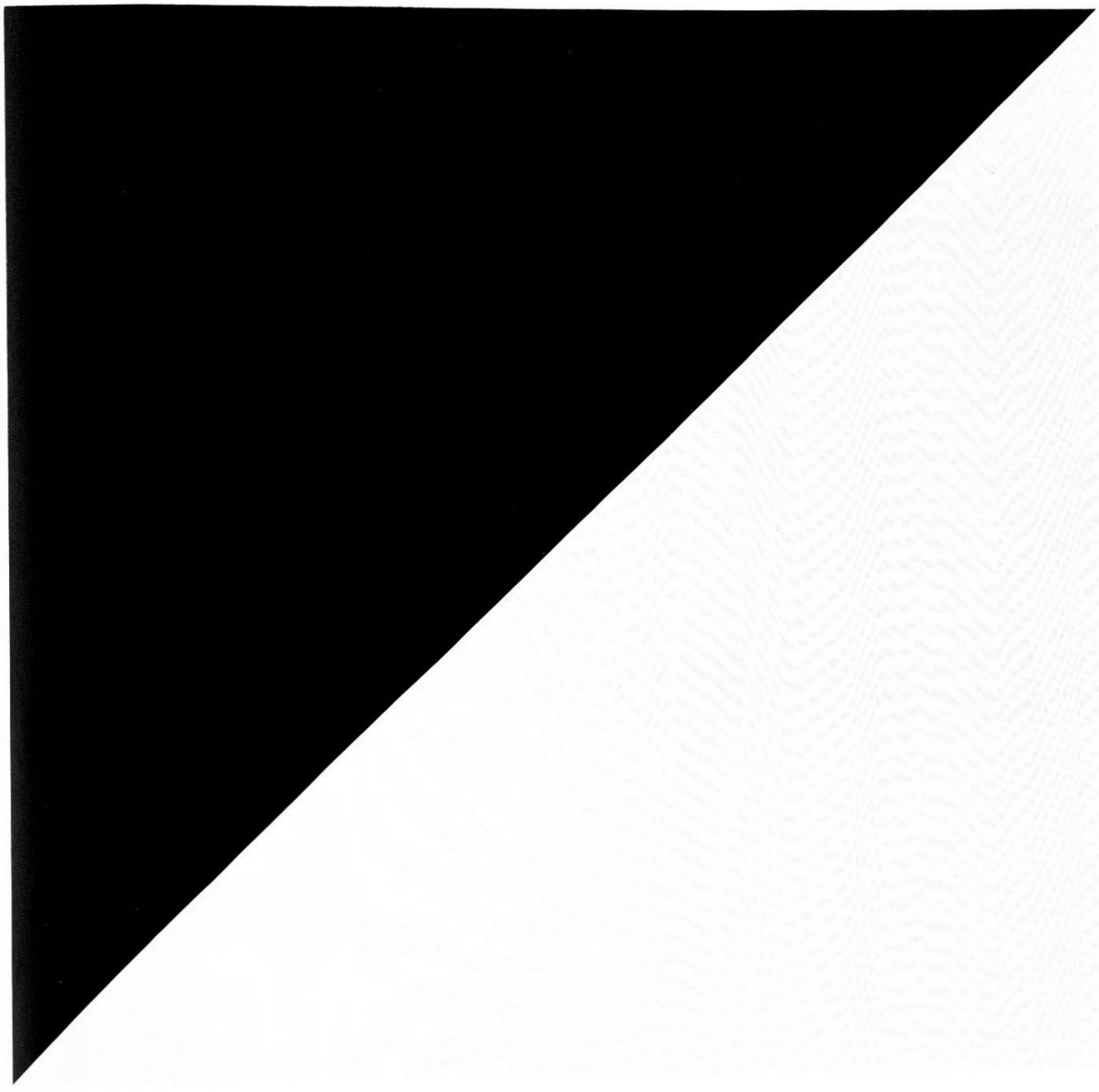
The small shape versus the large, as separate but joined entities, appears as a theme in the 1970s. In some instances, these follow the horizontal formats



Green White, 1968 not exh.
Oil on canvas, two panels, 71 inches x 11 feet 9 inches
Galerie Françoise Mayer, Brussels



Black White, 1970 not exh.
Oil on canvas, two panels, 70 inches x 9 feet 1 inch



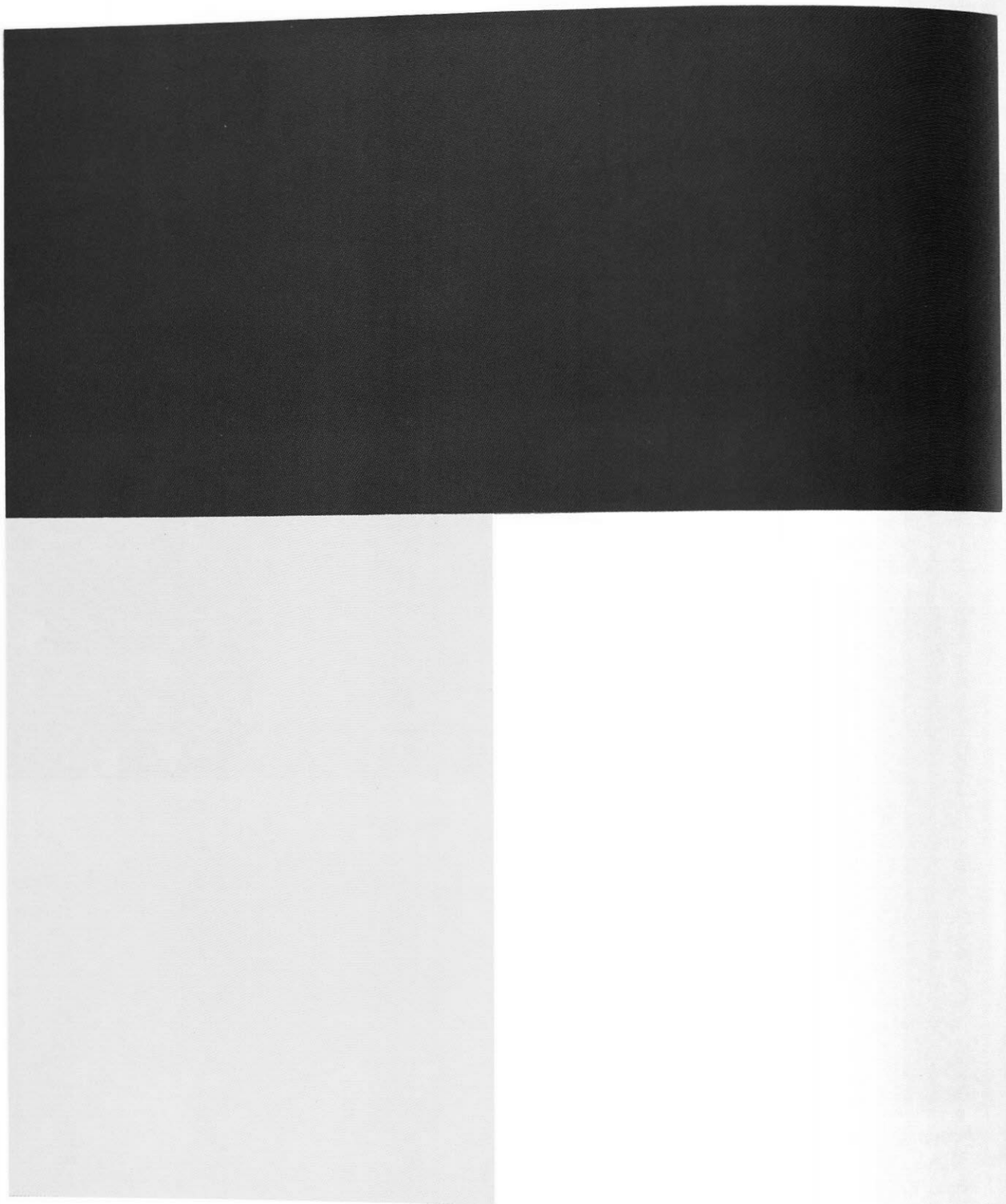
Black White, 1968 not exh.
Oil on canvas, two panels, 8 x 8 feet

73.350

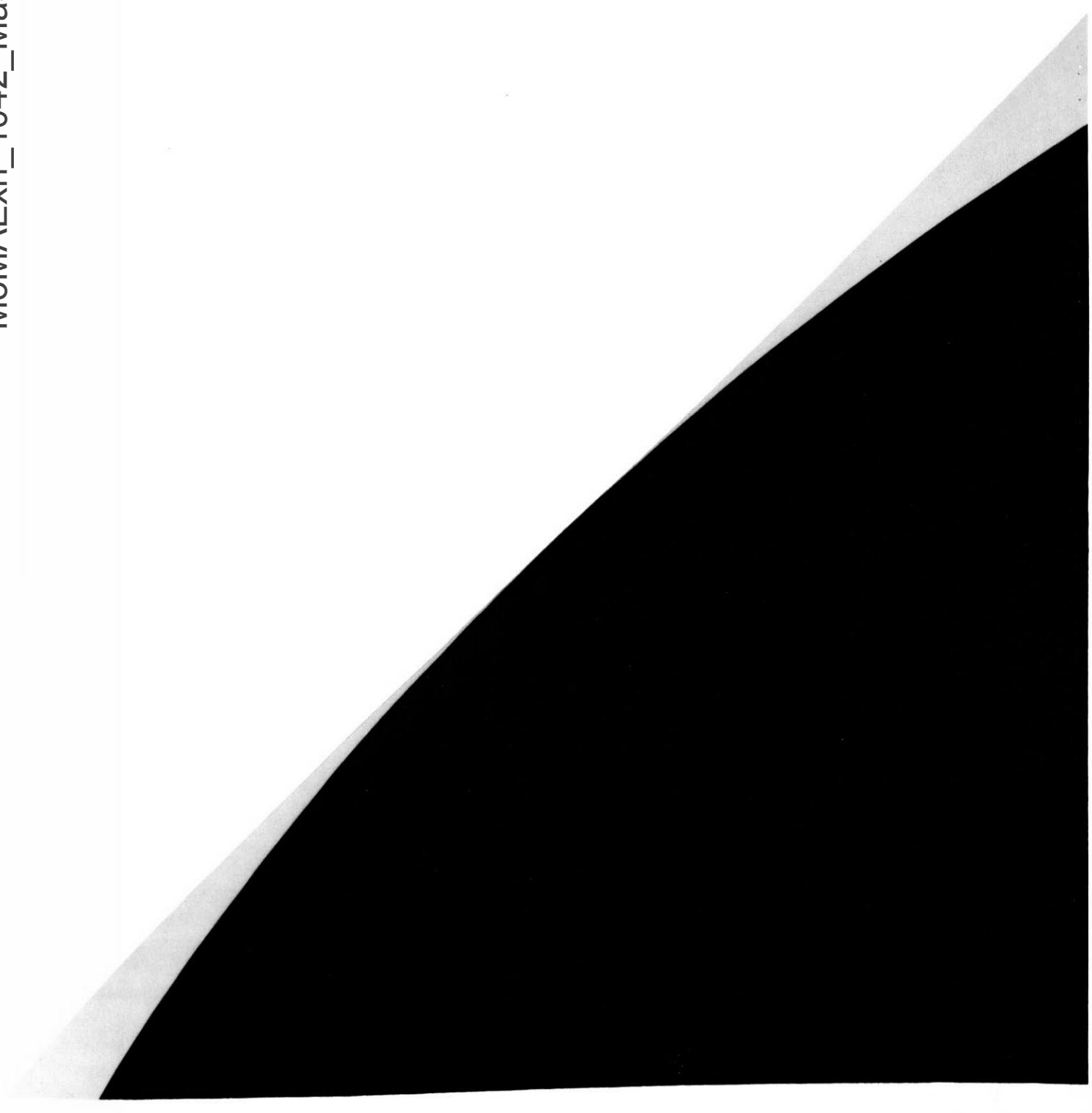
Black Square with Red, 1970. Oil on canvas, two panels, 6 feet 6 inches x 7 feet 7¾ inches.

within the classic rectangle familiar from the early 1950s (*Awnings, Avenue Matignon,* page 37, for example). But a real departure occurs when neither of these areas conforms to the other in such a way as to allow them to be fitted together to complete a conventional rectangular figure (*Black Square with Red,* 1970, opposite).[59] There is a tendency for the eye to make an imaginary completion, but it is hard to hold this fictional perimeter for long, because the colors and the shapes themselves are so insistently discrete. The formula looks simple, particularly in reproductions of the work, where they may be mistaken for graphic images. Perhaps here, even more than in previous paintings, physical size and relation to human scale is of major importance. The same is true of the 1971–1972 Chatham series (for example, *Chatham XI: Blue Yellow,* 1971, page 94), in which their great breadth and towering heights are the most affective aspects of them as paintings, quite aside from their brilliant colors. There is a strange quality, however, in the latter; because they are in essence portions of an imaginary rectangle, they have, despite their size, a lightness of feeling, a kind of April freshness about them that belies the severity of their shapes. It is as if they had been liberated from long confinement.[60]

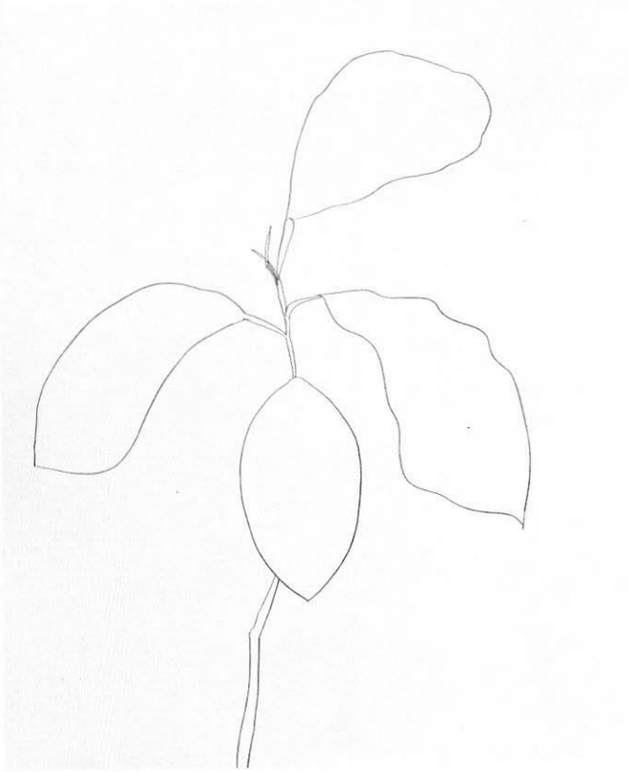
Possibly because Kelly had pushed rectangular and paneled sequences as far as he could—and the tensions upon which so much of his content had been based had become too abstract—the long, taut, but graceful curve reentered his painting. It is not the curve of the biomorphic pictures, or the overblown curve of the *White Plaque,* or the parabolic curve of *Atlantic,* or even that of the Brooklyn Bridge group. It is more like the curve only lately familiar to us in the Gemini photographs taken from about a hundred miles out in space showing a segment of the earth's circumferential horizon. Long, flat, it describes a circle, the center of which is far outside the frame of the photograph, or in this case, far outside the frame of the canvas. It began to appear in Kelly's work in 1968. Having added the rhomboid to his set of overall shapes as an alternative to the rectangle, and having bent it on a line drawn between two opposite corners, as in the sculpture *Green Blue* and in a couple of pictures, he tried joining the corners with a curve. This meant giving up panel construction temporarily, because the idea of more complicated carpentry tended to freeze into geometry what he wanted to



Chatham XI: Blue Yellow, 1971 not exh.
Oil on canvas, two panels, 7 feet 6 inches x 6 feet 5½ inches
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. Gift of Seymour H. Knox

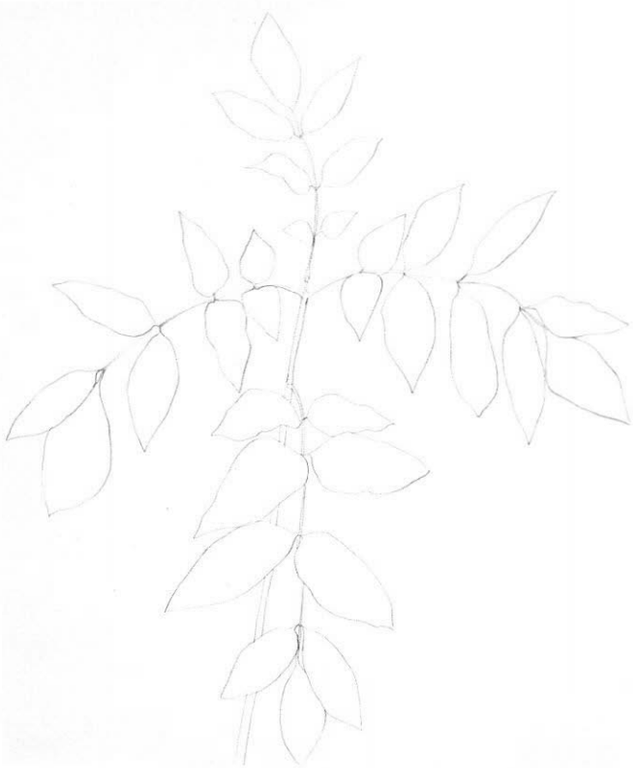


73.348
Black Curve, II, 1971, 1973
Oil on canvas, 8 feet 4 inches x 8 feet 4 inches



Orange Leaves, 1968
Pencil on paper, 29 x 23 inches not exh.

Branch of Leaves, 1970
Pencil on paper, 29 x 23 inches not exh.



remain free-hand and speculative. Moreover the physical joint employed in the panel pictures worked as an accessory to the implied bending possibilities, a major source of vitalizing tension; actual bending along a curve requires soft materials. The contradiction would either visually explode the picture or turn it into a jig-saw puzzle. In other words, panel construction would defeat rather than enhance the visual content of the paintings involving curves. But the curve, in turn, made up for the loss of the panel by introducing other sources of tension and vitality.

Curves produce a sense of volume and/or perspective when they are the edges of shapes; in essence they bend into space, either as flat and receding planes or expanding volumes. Given the kind of taut surface and flat color areas Kelly uses, his curved shapes (for example, *Black Curve II,* 1971, 1973; *White Curve,* 1972; and *Red Curve, II,* 1972; pages 95, 98, and 99) lie in an ambivalent limbo between spatial and volumetric expressions, even as they assert their actual flatness. Beginning with the external shape of the rhomboid, and painting the areas in two colors as in the past, he went on to bannered triangles, right-angle triangles, and that slightly squashed rhomboid, the diamond. In the best of these, the external shape supports the curve; in others, the curve supports the shape in a process that renders each more visible and real and creates a living dialogue that does not fade after first viewing. Others seem somewhat unsteadier; but as with all work in progress, questions arise that can only be answered by time and further developments.

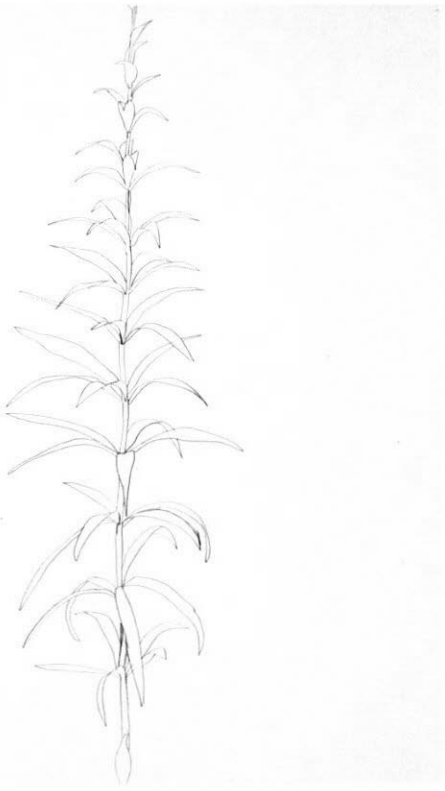
THE PLANT DRAWINGS

IN THE SPRING of 1949, Kelly, then living in Paris, bought a potted hyacinth and took it home to cheer up his room. It became a subject for drawing (page 28). It was, in a sense, a surrogate for the portrait drawings that no longer interested him, probably because the human figure, no matter how abstractly handled, asserts a personality over which the artist has no control. From that time forward, though he filled his sketchbooks with drawings of architectural elements, reflections, and shadows, gathered as ideas for paintings, he would occasionally make careful, composed line drawings of plants, not intended as sources but as works of art

in themselves. A steady stream of these drawings began to appear about 1957 and continues to the present.

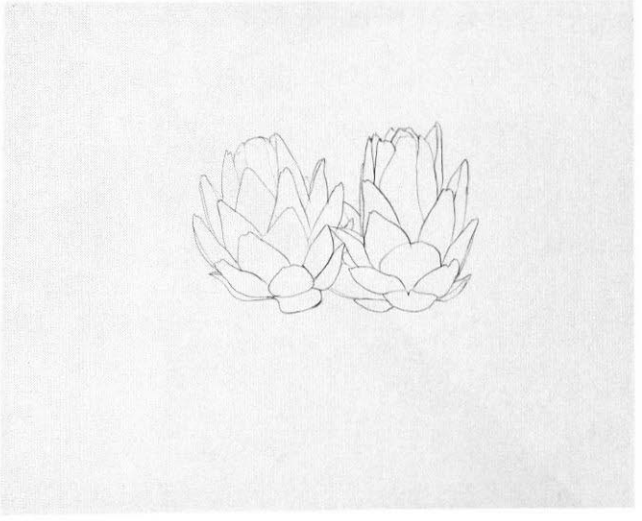
At the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston he had been exposed to "contour" drawing, which in Paris he would sometimes practice in its purity; but in the Paris years, such simplified clarity of shape was for the most part expressed in his reliefs and paintings. It was in New York, where he kept a studio corner filled with potted plants, that the style of drawing for which he is known developed with consistency. This subject matter appears to have been a foil for the increasing abstractness of his paintings, as Barbara Debs Knowles has pointed out.[61] The same critic also places strong emphasis on the influence of Matisse's line drawings and the French artist's late cutouts. But if one recalls Kelly's early passion for Audubon and, later, that for the Russian Rublev, it is possible to see that a strong predilection for contour had persisted for many years. In his first months in Paris, for example, he recalls returning again and again to the Louvre to look at the Egyptian *Stele of the Serpent King*.[62]

It is also probable that his short foray into the surprises of automatic drawing in the summer of 1950 freed him even more from any need to deal with shading, or indications of it such as fattened and emphasized lines, to capture that degree of space and volume requisite for naturalistic rendering. Their economy of means is, of course, the first most noticeable thing about these drawings; their seeming accuracy in the horticultural sense is next (though in fact the naturalist's eye has been thoroughly subjected to that of the artist). But it is ultimately the ordering of the shapes, their placement on the page, and the tension between the line and the shapes it describes that bring us to recognize the combination of toughness and sensuousness in Kelly's work that is rare in drawing. In the late, shaped canvases the perimeters are hard and tough, as are the curved edges of the shapes; sensuousness is achieved by color. Here both are achieved through line. This combination is probably really a definition of all that we call elegance.

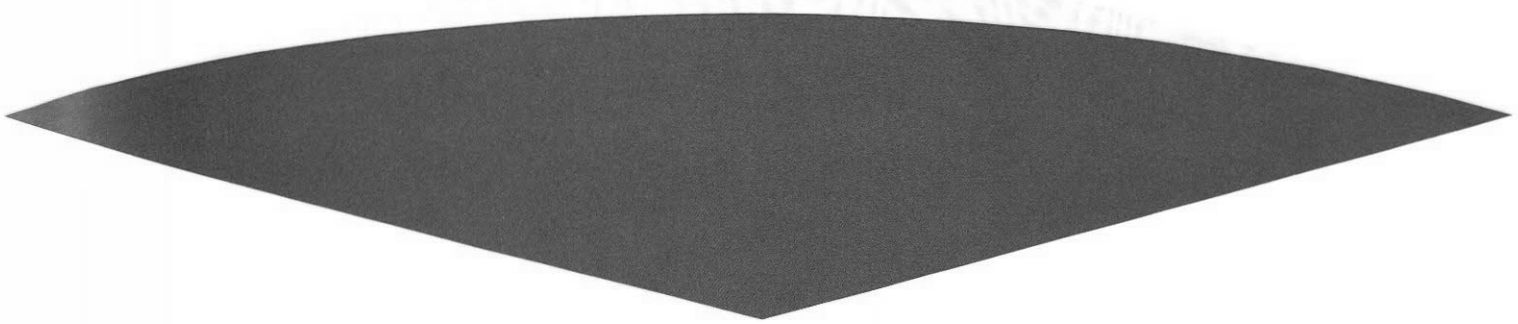


Lily, 1960
Pencil on paper, 28½ x 22½ inches not exh.

Artichokes, 1961
Pencil on paper, 22½ x 28½ inches not exh.



White Curve, 1972 not exh.
Oil on canvas, 8 feet 4 inches x 8 feet 4 inches
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



73.403
above: *Red Curve, II,* 1972
Oil on canvas, 45 inches x 14 feet
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

1573.68
overleaf: *Green Blue,* 1968
Painted aluminum, 8 feet 7½ inches x 9 feet 4½ inches x 68½ inches
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Susan Morse Hilles Fund