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The Museum of Modern Art

MOMA LOOKS AT THE RADICAL SIMPLIFICATION OF PAINTING FROM THE 1940S THROUGH THE 1960S

How Simple Can You Get?

April 30-September 26, 2000

Third Floor

How Simple Can You Get?, organized by Robert Storr, Senior Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, examines the radical simplification of painting to its most basic terms in works from the 1940s to the 1960s. The exhibition comprises some 12 paintings that emphasize compositional austerity, unitary forms, and the materiality of the work's support and surface, by artists such as Lucio Fontana, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Yves Klein, Yayoi Kusama, Piero Manzoni, Barnett Newman, and Robert Ryman, among others. *How Simple Can You Get?* is on view from April 30 through September 26, 2000, as part of *Making Choices*, the second cycle of MoMA2000.

The exhibition takes its name from an anecdote that demonstrates that while these works appear simple to the casual observer, upon close consideration they reveal themselves to be deceptively and beautifully complex. An art collector in the 1950s once complained about a show of abstract paintings by Newman, whose only compositional elements were flat colored grounds cross-cut by single lines. "How simple can the artist be and get away with it?" the collector protested to his friend Franz Kline. In response, Kline reflected upon the actual complexity of these simplified works, noting details such as color, technique, direction of the lines, and the size and proportion of the canvases.

The distillation of painting in the 1940s through the early 1960s was not the product of any coordinated movement, as had been the case with the avant-gardes of the 1910s through the 1930s. Instead, it was the result of many artists working separately in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Newman's *The Wild* (1950) is an early example of this far-flung trend.

By 1955 Johns, Kelly, and Ryman had independently arrived at even more reductive conclusions in their paintings, and their investigations pointed the way for others. Like Newman, Kelly bisected his painting *White Plaque: Bridge Arch and Reflection* (1952-55) with a single line. The two wooden panels flanking the horizontal line are elegantly curved, marking the beginning of shaped canvas or panel abstraction. Johns's *Green Target* (1955), with its concentric design, richly textured surface, and enigmatic presence, derived from Dada procedures and ideas and simultaneously heralded Pop art, neo-Dada, and conceptual art. With *Untitled (Orange Painting)* (1955 and 1959), Ryman steers monochromatic painting in yet another direction—toward Minimalism.

Parallel with the work done by Americans were the efforts of artists pursuing their own intuitions in other parts of the world. In France, Klein originated his own neo-Dada approach with mesmerizing monochromes such as *Blue Monochrome* (1961). The Italian artist Manzoni transformed

painting into relief in *Achrome* (1960) by pleating fabric and fossilizing the folds in chalky pigment. The Japanese artist Kusama knit together a near infinity of painted curls in *No. F* (1959), creating a mesh of white-on-white marks that anticipated an entirely new kind of graphic allover abstraction.

SPONSORSHIP

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