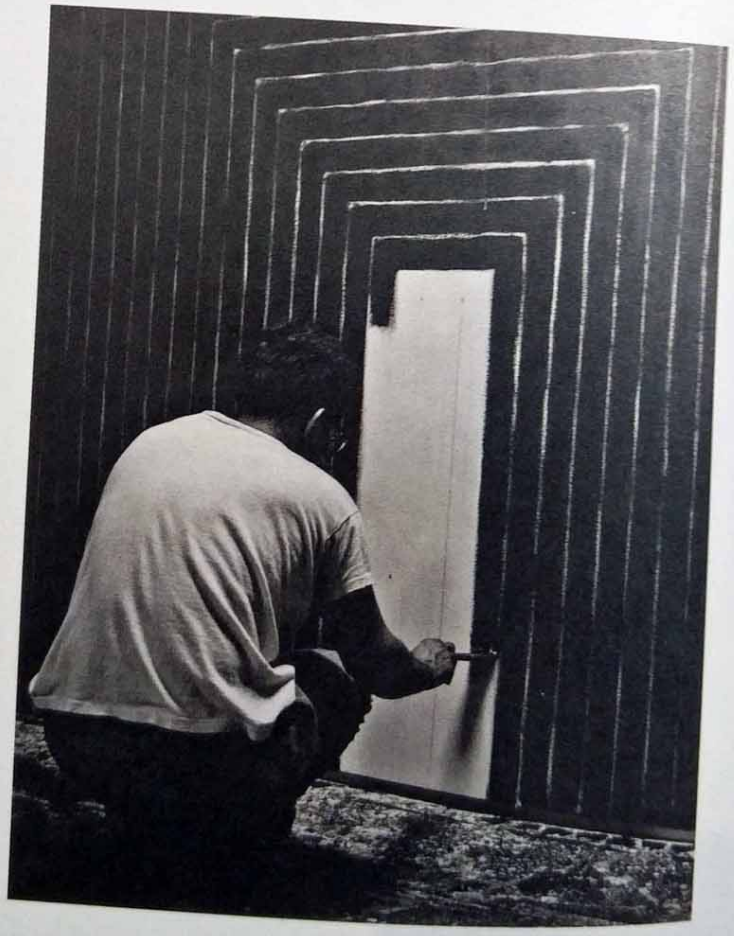
The Force of the Impersonal Brush

Reflections on Frank Stella's Early Work



Hollis Frampton, *#3 (Painting Getty Tomb)*, from the series "The Secret World of Frank Stella," 1958–62

The Laconic Painter

With his "Black Paintings" (1958–60), composed of broad stripes of black paint on white-primed canvas, Frank Stella is said to have opened the way for Minimalism more than any other artist.[1] A number of features of the paintings, including "their monochrome flatness, their mechanical execution, and the unusual thickness of their frames," were indeed taken up by Minimalists.[2] However, as well as a reduced formal language, Stella was also substantially responsible for a new kind of artistic self-conception. In the following pages, I take artistic self-conception to mean the image artists have of themselves *as artists*, taking the form of self-representations staged across a variety of media. While there are thus distinctly imaginary and performative components to this artistic self-conception, it's also communicated through the artistic work and sometimes appears in aestheticized form.

With this in mind, Stella's self-conception can be characterized by his break with the conventional view of the artist that Caroline A. Jones describes as a "terrifically sensitive person."[3] Rather than appearing to be an artist who enriches his work with his ego, Stella adopted the attitude and habits of an industrial worker, and sought to free his work of "human touch."[4] Hollis Frampton's legendary photo series "The Secret World of Frank Stella" (1958–62) shows Stella, his self-conception vividly palpable, painting in his studio: Stella's performance is that of the laconic painter, casually and mechanically doing his work, without visible internal participation, sometimes with one hand in his pocket. Like a dutiful housepainter, he evenly fills the canvas with black stripes, as if to advertise his artistic self-conception with absolute clarity. But at the same time, the "Black Paintings" also do justice to the specific format of canvas painting, since the white-primed canvas between the stripes remains visible, almost as if to point it out. To the same degree that Stella portrays himself as a purely implementing agent—as an "executive artist"[5]—his "Black Paintings" also point toward the particularity of their medium. It was this characteristic that won the approval of modernist art critics, with figures like Clement Greenberg attesting to the

"hightened sensitivity of the picture plane."[6] Michael Fried, too, celebrated Stella for the way his pictures acknowledged the flatness and two-dimensionality of painting.[7]

But unlike Greenberg and Fried, who in the 1960s saw their modernist ideal of painting confirmed by Stella's later "Shaped Canvases" above all, I will interpret the dynamic of stripes in the "Black Paintings" as a procedure that lends painting an aura of greater originality and assured authority. The pattern of stripes does not, in my view, primarily reflect the rectangular shape of the canvas, as modernist readings would claim. Rather, it extends painting's spatial sphere of authority, revitalizing the medium. *Getty Tomb* (1958), from the "Black Paintings" series, is an example of this: stripes extend dynamically across the canvas, as if moved from inside to out by some centrifugal force within the painting. However, in unfolding these centrifugal forces, as it were, the painting seems to emit an aura of independent action. The stripes are clearly not so much generated by the painting's format, as Fried claims; instead, they form an iterative structure covering and exceeding the painting's surface, a structure that appears to have created itself.[8] In this way, Stella's early work is seen in a different light—it in no way aims to "overcome painting with the methods of painting," as Gottfried Boehm and others have claimed.[9] Rather, by breaking with a series of traditional ideas of painting, Stella's work tends to strengthen painting, painting understood as a changing and specific formation.

The Persistence of Illusionism

The impact Stella's early work (from the late 1950s and early '60s) had on Minimal art was also emphasized by his artistic peers—especially by Carl Andre. Andre went so far as to explicitly trace his own artistic methods, for example, with the repeated layering of identical elements in his 1959 "Pyramid" objects, to Stella's approach: "But the method of building it with identical, repeated segments of two by four *derives* from Stella."[10] In other words, Andre confirmed that Stella was the figure to whom he ultimately owed his modular system, based as it was on serialism and repetition. No trace

of anxiety of influence to be found here! Even today, Stella's "Black Paintings" are regarded as prototypical of the new paradigm. In these works, serialism and modularity are just as significant as the way their visual structure—a pattern of stripes—derives from a basic geometric form that is simply repeated and extended within the pictorial space. Of course the artist had first to make a decision on that basic geometric element, in this case stripes, thereby ensuring the continued significance of authorship. But the resulting patterns are also the product of a system created quasi-automatically by the stripes themselves. For this reason, Stella's early work is often credited with undermining the principle of authorship.[11] The black enamel paint also contributes to the impersonal impression of the "Black Paintings," giving their surface the rich, glossy texture of an industrial product. Moreover, the symmetry of the stripes' arrangement, along with the uniformity of the pattern produced, has encouraged the belief among Stella's anti-modernist viewers that the "Black Paintings" stood for an abandonment of the illusionism of painting.[12] Admittedly, Stella himself encouraged this viewpoint: in his well-known 1959 Pratt Institute lecture, he insisted that he wanted to "force" illusionistic space out of his painting "at a constant rate."[13]

On the basis of statements like this, the literature on Stella has long held that these pictures marked a point in abstract painting at which it could no longer create "any form of illusion."[14] However, some critics have objected to this anti-illusionist consensus, led by Boehm: as early as 1977, he suggested that Stella's "Black Paintings" did not, in fact, abolish the figure-ground relation at all.[15] And as long as a difference could be discerned between figure and ground, between black stripes and white canvas, illusionism was not far away. According to Boehm, a distinction can also be made between the glossy and matt black on the canvas, which creates an additional effect of depth.[16] In addition, he suggests that the stripes have "frayed edges" that are readable as traces of the painting process, which remain quite present in the pictures.[17] Examined more closely, Stella is revealed as neither a mere "executive artist" nor a pure "machine in the studio," as argued by Jones—although both claims are frequently asserted. Instead, the early Stella should be regarded

as an artist who attempted to use his brush in the most impersonal way possible. This became his personal signature style, which had both a mechanical aspect and, at times, quite a painterly effect.[18]

Painting as Self-Conception

However, this focus on the painterly is not without problems. Most recently, the major Stella retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York (2015–16) made a point of discussing his early work with a greater emphasis on questions of painting. Michael Auping noted, as Boehm had before him, the "slightly feathered"—in other words, frayed—quality of the edges of the lines in the "Black Paintings." For Auping, this impression of "spatial depth" was amplified by the fact that the stripes are not in straight lines, creating an illusion of "soft vibration."[19] So he, too, finds illusion and optical effects in Stella's early work. But however correct this sort of observation, it tends to relegate Stella's "Black Paintings" to a conventional conception of painting—possibly even a conservative one. I believe this misses what was specifically at stake with these paintings in historical terms; moreover, it allows what was at stake in them to be forgotten, which to my mind seems fatal. There is certainly no doubt that the pictures, most basically by being *painted*, deploy a painterly rhetoric, and for this reason have not entirely broken with traditional ideas of painting. It's also true that in looking at some of the "Black Paintings," such as *Delphine and Hippolyte* (1957), the eye can lapse into a kind of "labyrinthine imprisonment" (the phrase is Boehm's)—the picture actually seems to pull the viewer in, in a way reminiscent of the effects of Op art.[20] However, the decisive fact is that Stella's "Black Paintings" mark the appearance of a new and different artistic self-conception, one that, amid the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1950s, was regarded as radically novel and provocative.[21] In place of the affect-charged process the art historian Harold Rosenberg termed "Action painting," there appeared an artist who was (apparently) emotionally uninvolved, who aimed at an impersonal, industrial aesthetic. Although artists' statements should not be taken at face value, and should

not be confused with the real meaning of their art, it's nonetheless significant here that Stella himself drew an inner connection between an artist's painting and his self-conception. For Stella, to be a painter meant "to profess one's own self-conception."[22] Self-conception here does *not* refer only to something individual, he added, but rather to an identity "big enough that everyone can participate in it." Obviously other people should also identify with this self-conception he limns. It's not so much the creator's own self-conception that's at stake in Stella's pictures—this would be a reductively biographical position. Instead, the pictures articulate a larger identity, something bigger than ourselves. This calls to mind the divine force that began to be associated with painting in the early modern era.[23] Self-conception in Stella's work means a particular conception of painting, one with echoes of sixteenth-century personifications of painting.[24] Through its personified representation, painting is compared with an act of creation, lending it agency. I would argue that an echo of this early modern idea of a quasi-automatic painting is palpable in Stella's pictures. But the afterlife of the trope is clearly also present in many statements by modern artists, from Francis Bacon to Stella, all of whom ascribe a subject position to painting itself, as if it had an independent will, and the agency that goes with that.[25] Certainly in the "Black Paintings" Stella opts to use an apparently impersonal, serial procedure. But examined more closely, the process actualizes the early modern trope of auto-generative image creation: the picture seems to have produced itself.[26] To a certain degree, this displacement—the move away from a sole focus on the artist's agency toward painting as a quasi agent—is the very point of Stella's early painting. For example, his programmatic declaration, "My pictures are pictures about 'being painting,'"[27] makes a claim for a "being" of painting with its own form of existence and aliveness. In the midst of Stella's industrial aesthetic, the early modern ideal of aliveness enjoys a surprising renaissance.[28] Stella's "being painting" refers to a being that necessarily surpasses the painter's own singular, temporally limited being. References to this larger identity also suggest that Stella's attempts to remove traces of himself from his paintings fuel a vitalistic projection that painting

has a life of its own. In this context, it's revealing that Stella's works from the early 1960s were often compared to the creation of a commercial brand.[29] The point of a brand is to surpass its singular creator even if it bears his name. Precisely because its significance goes far beyond its creator, a brand can develop a force of attraction that remains bound up with its creator's name.

High Impact through Symmetry

A central aspect of Stella's brand, his impersonal-personal style, was that, like Barnett Newman before him, he sought to free himself from compositional deliberation.[30] In any case, for artists like Stella and Donald Judd the idea of composition was associated with the European tradition of "relational painting," which they felt should be completely abandoned.[31] For them, relational painting referred to an obsolete idea of painting, one still striving for balance between pictorial elements to create illusionistic pictorial space. In his famous lecture at the Pratt Institute, Stella attempted to clearly distance himself from this idea: "The painterly problems of what to put here and there and how to make it go with what was already there," he said, were ultimately "unsatisfactory" and thus worn out. To find a "better way" he argued for the idea of symmetry: "Make it the same all over."[32] Through symmetry, regular patterns could be created, thwarting the emergence of illusionistic space. But artists like Newman, Stella, Andre, and Judd not only prized symmetry as the antidote to composition, but more importantly it allowed for an intensification of the affective "impact" of the work by creating an impression of "wholeness." In other words, these artists regarded symmetry as an appropriate means to attain pictorial force and directness.[33] In fact, a symmetrical pattern leaps immediately to the eye, as if directly pressing forward, precipitously forcing itself on the spectator.

Stella was viewed as the most prominent representative of this new idea of painting, which claimed "directness" and "anti-illusion" as its virtues. However, Stella and his peers (Judd and Andre) ignored the fact that the Russian constructivists in the early twentieth century had already declared composition to be the enemy:

famously, artists like Aleksandr Rodchenko attempted to abandon composition in favor of construction.[34] But Stella always strongly contested any suggestion that European geometrical abstraction had played a role in his work. He went so far as to emphasize his dislike for the work of artists like Rodchenko or Kazimir Malevich.[35] Instead of considering historical predecessors as influential on his approach, he sought to inscribe the "Black Paintings" into the history of Abstract Expressionism, although they in fact marked a break with the self-conception of that movement. In one interview, he insisted that the "Black Paintings" merely represented a version of Abstract Expressionism.[36] A particular concern was to underscore Willem de Kooning's influence: he emphasized that de Kooning, like himself, worked with a "house painter's brush" using a "house painter's technique." [37] Stella clearly did everything he could to situate his work within recent American painting, but this came at the cost of dismissing all European influences. However, the principle of Stella's modular system is already visible in Rodchenko's work, as the art historian Maria Gough has convincingly argued.[38] In a work like *Spatial Construction no. 12* (ca. 1920s), Rodchenko also derived the pattern from an originally geometric form, in this case the ellipse, which is repeated and made three-dimensional. As Gough sees it, even Stella's famous dictum, "What you see is what you see," is a revenant of Rodchenko's ideal of *faktura*, according to which the work should present nothing more than its constitutive elements, its own mode of construction. Just as Rodchenko's *Pure Red Color* (1921) consists exclusively of canvas and paint, Stella also insisted that there was nothing more to see in his paintings than paint on canvas.[39] However, if Stella, almost in the same breath, insisted on the object-like quality of the "Black Paintings"—"every picture is an object"—he did not mean that the work should be turned into a functional object, as was the aim of the Russian constructivists. Of course, Stella was far from producing utilitarian objects. His idea of the object is quite different: in calling his pictures *objects*, I believe he was aspiring to the force and dynamism associated with the term, from the Latin for something thrown in the way.[40]

Module with Human Force

Thanks to the anti-compositional rhetoric of artists like Stella or Judd, it's easy to overlook that they do, in fact, preserve a remnant of composition in their artistic process. Simply by choosing a particular element as the basis of their serial structure, they are making a compositional decision. There is clearly no getting away from some residual element of composition, even in anti-compositional painting. Ultimately, even the pictures' impression of auto-generative image creation can be traced back to a decision made by the artist. In this way, Stella is ultimately responsible for the way the stripes in *Turkish Mambo* (1959–60) seem to bend, as if intending to move in a different direction on their own. He remains the author of the suggestion of self-motivated activity—he was its initiator. The suggestion is even clearer in his 1960 aluminum series in which the stripes have the power to impose their external form on the canvas. The pictures have holes or indentations, as seen in *Averroes* (1960), as if yielding to the force of the stripes and making room for them. In other works, like *Kingsbury Run* (1960), it appears as if the corners of the picture plane have been trimmed on account of the dynamic pattern of stripes. Thus, as Stella correctly observed, the stripes in these aluminum pictures possess "more individuality."[41] In fact, the sheer willfulness of their "behavior" is on par with that of individuals. One might say the "shaped canvases" of Stella's aluminum and copper pictures (1960–61) present an idea of painting reaching beyond its own support medium, the painted canvas, forcing it to change its form, as for example in *Ophir* (1960–61).[42] To put it another way, a *shape* is imposed on the canvas, which is the result of the dynamism of the pattern of stripes. In this way, the canvas mutates. Also contributing to this process of dynamization is the enormous thickness of the stretcher frame: in a painting like *Ileana Sonnabend* (1963), the sheer distance between the painting and the wall creates the impression that its trapezoid shape is aggressively bursting outward. The picture pushes out into the room, asserting a greater authority.[43]

Stella's "Irregular Polygons" (1965–67) are reliefs whose geometric forms seem wedged together as if by their own free will. The pictures drew much criticism from devotees of Minimalism, while their modernist advocates—above all Michael Fried—were enthusiastically in favor.[44] In his history of Minimal art, James Meyer explains that an important reason why Stella's literalistic colleagues felt betrayed by the "Irregular Polygons" series (1965–66), was the way the spatiality of the colored reliefs created optical illusions.[45] Even today, criticism of the "Irregular Polygons" claims they mark a sharp break with the principles of Stella's previous pictures, akin to a fall from grace. However, I would argue the contrary: that the pictures extend the logic of the "Black Paintings," even taking it to the extreme. In place of apparently self-acting, dynamic patterns of stripes, the "Irregular Polygons" feature geometric forms (triangles, squares, trapezoid forms) wedged together in similarly dynamic constellations. At times, the shapes even look to be locked in a struggle against each

Frank Stella, *Chocorua IV*, 1966

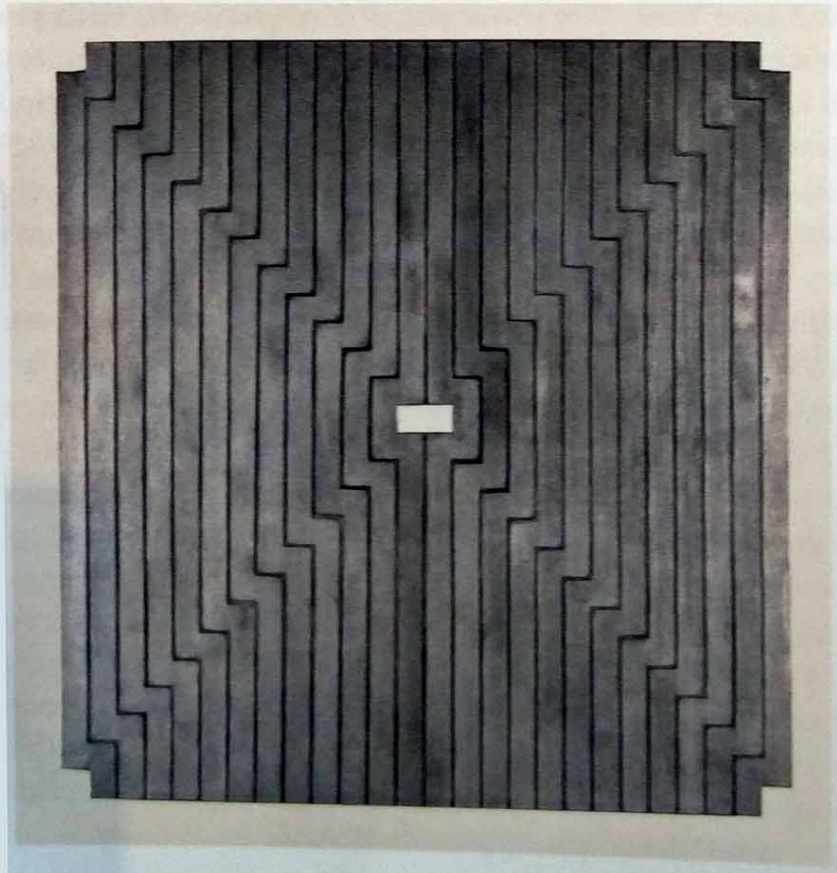
other. Significantly, Stella himself went so far as to attribute human force to the forms, as in his commentary on *Chocorua IV* (1966): "It's like you took a plane and stuck a triangle into it, and you felt that the rectangle could fight back and shoot the triangle back up."[46] According to Stella, the geometric forms in "Irregular Polygons" are engaged in a kind of battle, as if possessed of human force, as if living an independent life.

Paint Lives

For this suggestion of self-acting forms to work, color comes to play a greater role in Stella's work after 1965. As mentioned, in the "Black Paintings" Stella used viscous black enamel paint, which he said he wanted to leave in its original condition: "I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can."[47] When taken from the can, this paint is akin to a ready-made, but this does not reduce paints potential for affective, psychological, and bodily experience in any way.[48] On the contrary, it could be argued that industrial paint only displays its intrinsic affective-bodily potential when seen its pure state: unmixed and undiluted. Left untouched by Stella, the paint's rich gloss texture is visible, just as it would be, say, on a freshly painted radiator. He is clearly concerned with the tactile appeal of these surfaces to increase painting's force of attraction. In later works, like one version of *Moultonboro* (1966), fluorescent paints and materials create an enormous luminescence of color: at times, they shine so intensely they seem to reach out from the wall into the space.[49] Color incidentally also played this role—as vitality-producer—in the eighteenth century when Denis Diderot declared color to be the "divine breath" that brought a drawing to life, giving it the appearance of being animated.[50] With industrial paint, of course, the divine breath has a quite different character. Unlike oil paints and their pigments, which retain a connection to earth and nature, paint from a can is artificially created: it is thus the breath of industrial society that blows through Stella's pictures.

Painting as a Self-Determined Being

Using Stella's early work as an example, I have demonstrated how the break with certain painterly traditions (expression, composition) has given the impression that a painting acts of its own accord, and perhaps even has a life of its own.[51] Gottfried Boehm, who intuited early on this sudden shift from critique of painting into a return of pictorial essentialism, observed that the "Black Paintings," in dispensing with conventions immanent to the image, brought forward "new kinds of being."[52] Interestingly, Boehm became convinced that the pictures dealt with subject-like forms. Stella's contemporaries also had a keen sense for the way his pictures—in particular the aluminum paintings like *Avicenna* (1960)—appeared to have the force of a living being. In 1964, the critic Bruce Glaser said of Stella's aluminum pictures: "You can feel it behind you even when you've



Frank Stella, *Avicenna*, 1960

got your back turned."[53] Quite possibly this is what modernist critics like Fried meant by their ideal of "presence" or "presentness"—an effect of presence, analogous to that set off within us by another person, a human counterpart. But how can a painted image compare with a person's presence? Through the suggestion of self-activity. To the degree that the "Black Paintings" dispense with tasks specific to painting, such as composition or expression, they have the appearance of self-determination modeled on that of the modern subject. However, this kind of analogy is predicated on understanding the work of art as a "rhetorical figure of the subject."[54] Of course, works are *not* subjects, but they appear as *representatives* of the subject. In other words, a certain understanding of the subject appears within them, entering into tense reciprocal relations with the self-conception of the artist. Thus, on the one hand, Stella's early works are indebted to an ideal subject, controlled by unknown drives but nonetheless ultimately self-determining (and always seen as male): in postwar New York, this was a popular response to a growing sense of precariousness of the subject.[55] On the other hand, these works deploy a kind of subject-critical method, reminiscent of the loss of self-assurance also experienced by the subject in the 1950s.[56]

Intellectuals and authors in the postwar period ultimately tended to see themselves as being confronted by anonymous structures and processes, to which they believed themselves powerlessly in thrall.[57] Interestingly, these social structural processes, in a way comparable to Stella's system of stripes, were ascribed characteristics like autonomy or momentum: for this reason, they were regarded as only minimally subject to control.[58] Analogously to a political attitude of resigned withdrawal in the face of over-powerful social structures and pressures, Stella's "Black Paintings" can be read as allegories of autonomously guided, all-powerful systems that curtail any subjective room for maneuver.[59] Some of their titles—*Arbeit macht frei* or *Die Fahne hoch!*—also contribute to a sense that the paintings have been, as it were, transformed by history, or to be more precise, by the history of totalitarian extermination in the concentration camps, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has convincingly argued.[60] Traditional bourgeois subjectivity has been obliterated.

Then again, to the same degree to which the "Black Paintings," even on the level of process, relativize the meaning of their creator's subjectivity, they can also be read as modeling an ideal of self-determined subjectivity. Ultimately, they give up the articulation and relationality immanent to the picture only in order to do something that is more and more demanded from contemporary social subjects: to become agents of their own transformation.[61] Paradoxically, the suggestion of a self-acting subject in the "Black Paintings" would thus contain both an echo of a resigned attitude—typical of postwar intellectuals, who invoked all-powerful systems to justify their own withdrawal—and a look forward to the contemporary economic subject, obliged to take responsibility for itself, to take its life into its own hands. In this way, structural and systemic problems are today transformed into individual inadequacy. Here, perhaps, is the ultimate source of the actuality of Stella's early work: it conjures up contrarian conceptions of the subject that are both historical and absolutely contemporary.