

## Books *Reviews*

# Flavour in the grain and on the surface

How Ellsworth Kelly's art came of age. By **Pac Pobric**

**Ellsworth Kelly: Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Reliefs and Sculpture: Vol. 1, 1940-53**  
Yve-Alain Bois  
Cahiers d'Art, 383pp, \$395 (hb)

"He thought you learnt more by looking at something in detail rather than looking at a huge amount of things." The art historian Yve-Alain Bois once had this to say about his former teacher, the literary theorist Roland Barthes, whose guidance is everywhere present in Bois's magisterial first volume of the catalogue raisonné of paintings and sculpture by the American artist Ellsworth Kelly (1923-2015). The book comes close to realising a dream Bois once had about Barnett Newman's work: "that of writing an independent essay, not your usual catalogue entry, on every single painting".

The clearest theme that emerges throughout the 99 essays on the 141 works Kelly made between 1940 (when he was a high-school student in New Jersey) and 1953 (by which time he was a mature artist living in France) is the artist's prescience. Bois warns against "observations made in hindsight" which can "pluck a work from its original context" and attribute to it qualities that in fact only emerge later. But he cannot help indulging the thought that Kelly was always headed in a single direction. "It would be far-fetched," he writes, to claim that a 1940 landscape depicting a grain elevator, with its "concentration on large masses and elimination of architectural details" anticipates "the mature Kelly – but, just as well, it is almost impossible to refrain from the thought". Yes, the specific truths of an artist's development are often lost "when the vague category of the 'pre-cursor' is invoked into accounts of historical developments". But "one cannot but be struck, in hindsight" by the "near-perfect lozenge shape" of the handkerchief held by Anne Child in Kelly's 1947-48 portrait, as if the picture already prefigures "the radical simplification of means that would later be at the core of Kelly's art".

The two Kellys of Bois's catalogue – the prophetic artist whose logic develops ceaselessly and the cursory painter who is always grasping, along with his audience, towards something neither can yet see – come together most closely in the essays on Kelly's years in France, which are the focus of the catalogue. It was here, between the fall of 1948 and the summer of 1953, that Kelly came upon his greatest realisation: that art did not

have to be creative. In 1949, he finished the first painting borne of this major discovery, *Window*, Museum of Modern Art, Paris (1949), which precisely replicated a window in the museum that Kelly found more interesting than the art inside.

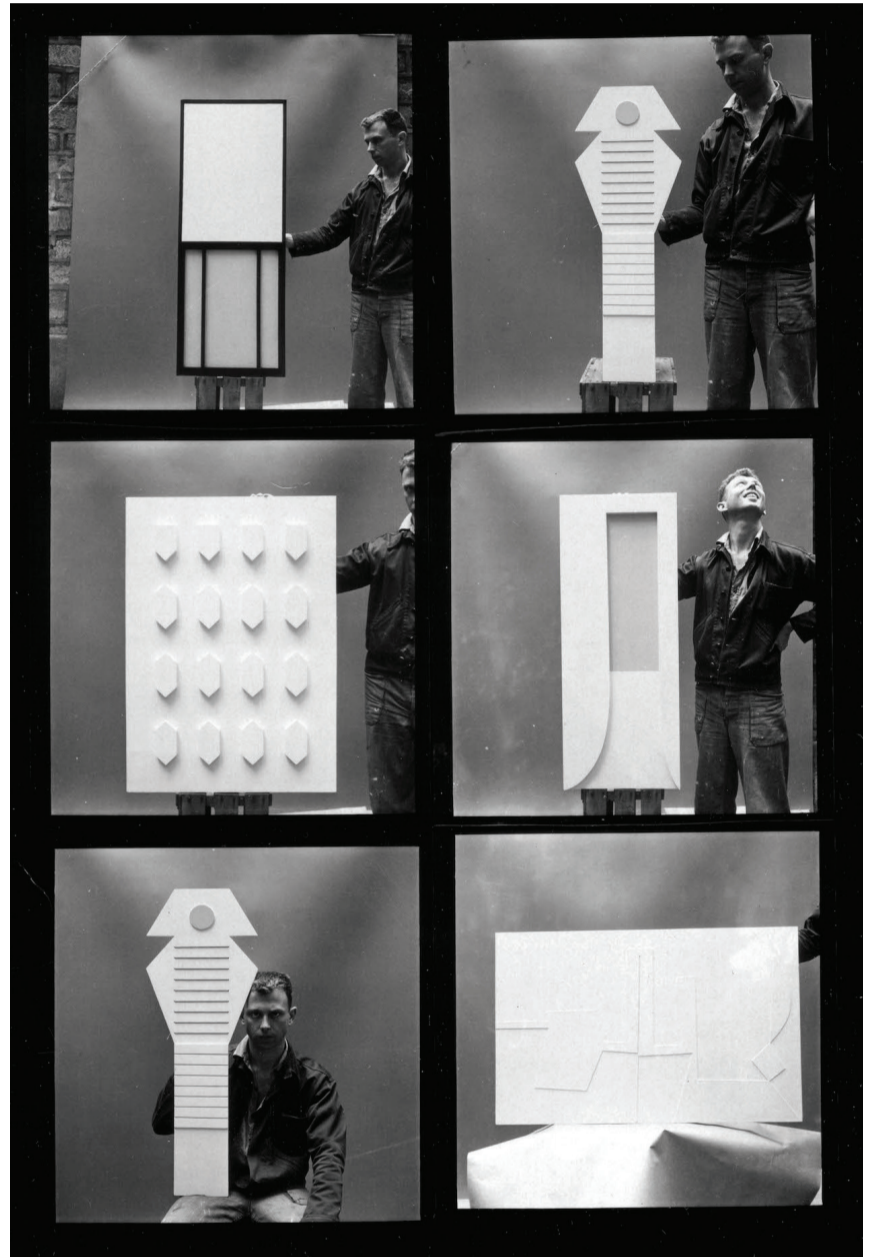
"By his own admission," Bois writes, "it took a while for Kelly to understand what he had accomplished in this work" – a full year, by the artist's reckoning. Several works made immediately afterwards look back to earlier, less potent ideas. Only in 1969 did Kelly note, privately, that *Window* signalled the end of "painting as I knew it". Only then did Kelly understand the depth of his innovation: "Instead of making a picture that was an interpretation of a thing seen, or a picture of invented content, I found an object and 'presented' it as itself alone." He added: "It was a new freedom: there was no longer any need to compose."

Since then, scholarship on Kelly's work has become a widespread affair. Most of the catalogue's greatest critical insights have therefore already been made, many by Bois in his landmark catalogue essay for Ellsworth Kelly: *The Years in France, 1948-1954*, which was held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1992. The current book consolidates and deepens that work and the earlier writing of scholars like John Coplans, Diane Waldman and Ann Temkin. It brings together the various pieces and puzzles them out into the biggest picture of Kelly we have ever seen.

Bois once wrote in an obituary of Barthes that his teacher taught him to "look at things very closely, at the ends of our noses, as materially as possible" and his work on Kelly has always been advantaged by his proximity to the art. Of the works included in the present catalogue (four more volumes are currently planned), he personally saw 140 of them. But Barthes had an even bigger lesson for Bois: that pleasure must come first. The joy of Bois's work is the luxury of his formalism, which always begins with a commitment to the art. Bois knows, as he wrote of Barthes, that "the real flavor is found in the grain, on the surface of things".

• Pac Pobric is *The Art Newspaper's* assistant editor of exhibitions and reviews

**The photographer Sante Forlano took these photographs of Ellsworth Kelly with work he made in France between 1948 and 1954. Top left: Kelly stands with *Window*, Museum of Modern Art, Paris (1949), the first work he made after realising that his art need not be creative. The fact that Kelly posed with this work for Forlano speaks to his pride in the picture**



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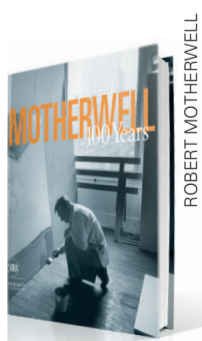
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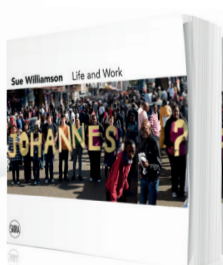


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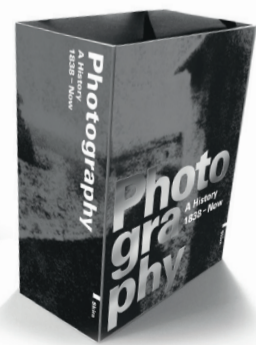
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