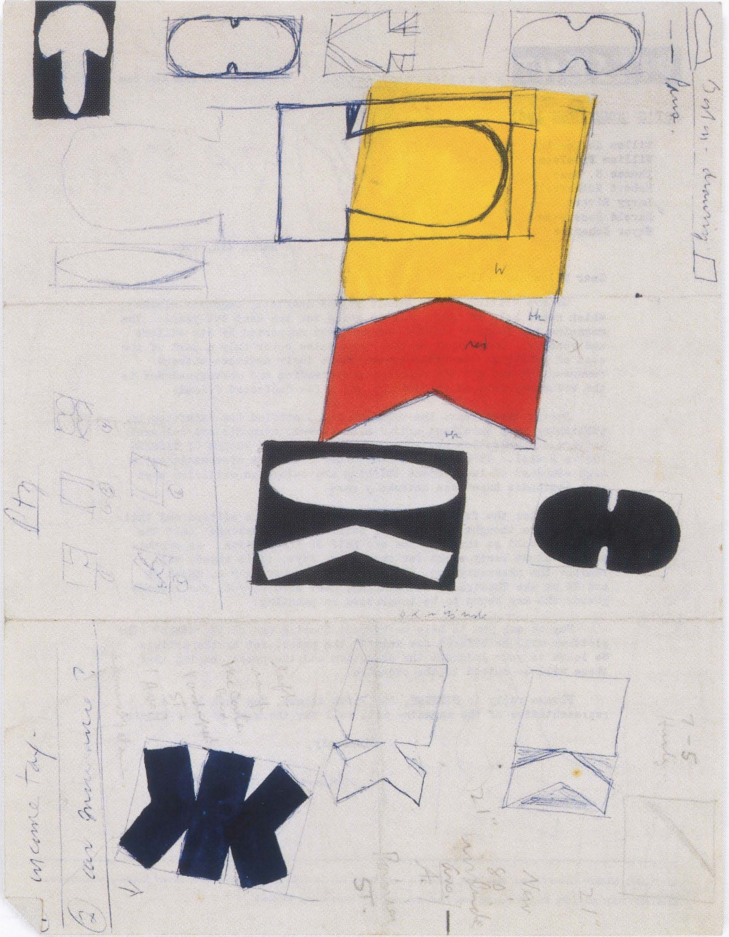
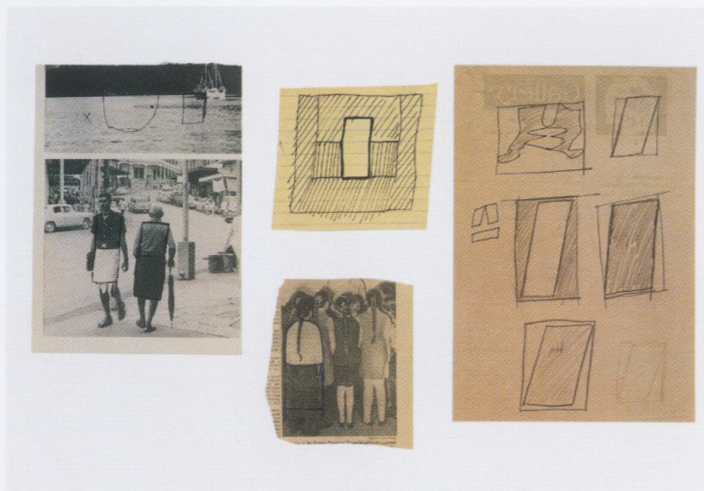


ELLSWORTH KELLY: TABLET





Tablet #54, 1960s. Ink and pencil on paper mounted on mat board, 15½ x 21 inches. The Menil Collection, fractional interest gift of Louisa S. Sarofim in honor of James A. Elkins, Jr.

Since emerging in the 1950s, Ellsworth Kelly has developed a unique approach to abstract art. Attempting “to get figure and ground separated, to get shape to stand alone and edges to become as quiet as they need to be,”¹ he concentrates exclusively on the physical characteristics of a medium, producing works in painting, drawing, relief, and sculpture with uninflected colors independent of their sources. At once intimate and accessible, geometric and figurative, his work stems from the reality of the object, evoking a “voluptuous experience.”²

Although often contextualized within Minimalism or “Hard Edge” abstraction, Kelly’s art is organic in nature, derived from his uncanny ability to distill pure form from the most unlikely of sources in everyday life. Throughout his early years in Paris and those that followed in New York, Kelly drew on whatever he found—from envelopes and newspapers to airplane menus—in order to explore the many ways he could liberate the negative spaces or fragmented shapes of the world surrounding him. As explained by the artist, “I like to work from things that I see whether they’re man-made or natural or a combination of the two. . . . The things I’m interested in have always been there.”³

Born in Newburgh, New York, in 1923, Kelly studied applied arts at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, from 1941 to 1943. He then served in the United States Army before enrolling at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, under the G.I. Bill in 1946, where he was greatly influenced by German Expressionist Max Beckmann. From 1948 to 1954, Kelly attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and first experimented with monochrome panels. Essential to that Paris education

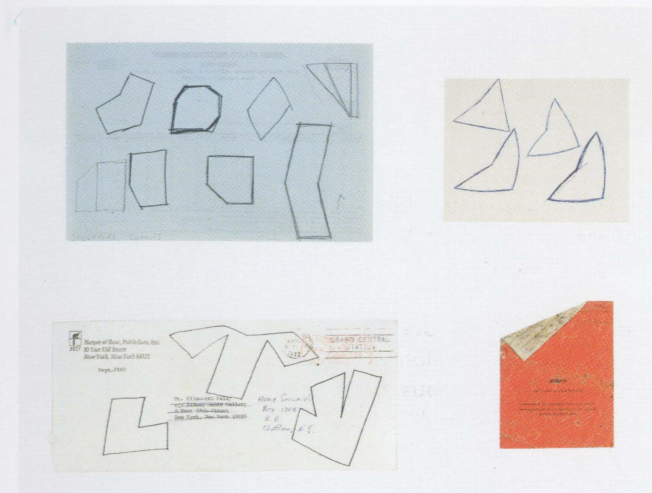
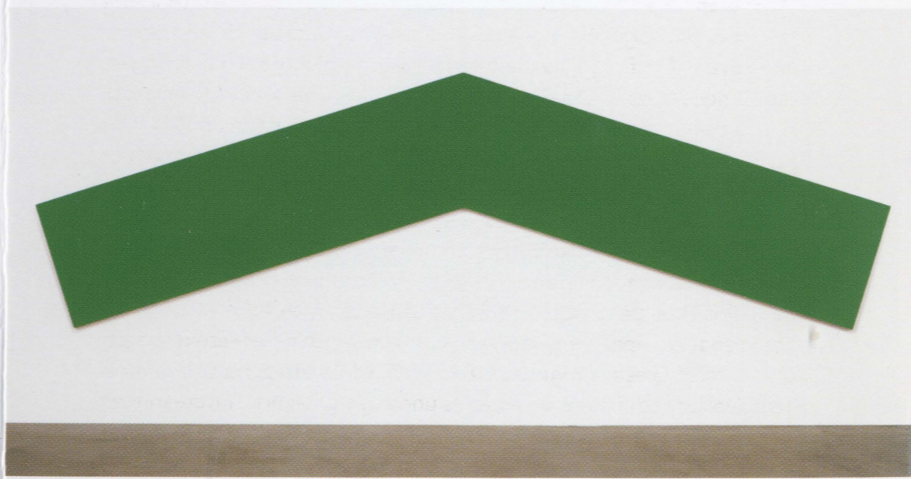
was the companionship of Jean Arp, Constantin Brancusi, Alexander Calder, and Francis Picabia.

Kelly returned to the United States in 1954 and moved to Coenties Slip in lower Manhattan in 1956, where his neighbors included Agnes Martin, James Rosenquist, and Jack Youngerman. His first solo show in New York was held at the Betty Parsons Gallery in this year and in 1959 Kelly was included in the “Sixteen Americans” exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, establishing him as one of the key artists of his generation.

In 1973, as he prepared to move his studio out of New York, the artist began sorting through his belongings and happened upon an archive of hundreds of miscellaneous sketches accumulated over nearly two and half decades. The result is *Tablet* (1948–1973), an extraordinary body of works on paper in various media—collage, pencil, ink, and oil—that map the artist’s ever-evolving experimentations with form and color, born from his inventive observations of the world around him, over a twenty-five year period. Kelly organized the sketches in 188 framed compositions, each containing between two and eleven sketches. Last year Louisa Stude Sarofim, Menil Foundation president, donated this rare body of work to The Menil Collection in honor of trustee James A. Elkins, Jr., making it the largest donation of art to the museum since founder Dominique de Menil’s bequest in 1997.

Tablet has been shown only twice in its entirety, in 2002, at New York’s Drawing Center and at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland. Organized by Chief Curator Matthew Drutt, “Ellsworth Kelly: *Tablet*” is arranged around a small but key group of paintings and sculpture—from an early figurative work *Plant II* (1949)

Green Angle, 1970. Oil on canvas, 70 x 231 inches. The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection



Tablet #3, 1955, 1970, 1973. Ink and pencil on paper mounted on mat board, 15½ x 21 inches. The Menil Collection, fractional interest gift of Louisa S. Sarofim in honor of James A. Elkins, Jr.

to the later, more abstract, sculpture *Curve XII* (1974)—that show the evolution of Kelly’s thinking. In this way, the exhibit examines the earliest inspirations for what would eventually become this major American artist’s signature paintings and sculptures.

The configuration of individual tablets is not essentially narrative, but instead seems to reflect the artist’s intuitive thought—the numbers assigned to the tablets are not significant beyond chronology, and the arrangement of materials on one sheet investigate various compositional possibilities. Although seemingly random, the tablets and the fragments within them are engaged in constant interaction with one another. For example, although #65 restricts itself to 1960s newspaper photographs, the emphasis is on the diversity of the images, which reveal the formal similarities between objects such as bridges, beaded necklaces, and sailboats. Interestingly, the beaded necklaces (on two clergymen’s chests)⁴ are almost studies for *Curve XII* when juxtaposed with the lower left newspaper clipping in #89, in which Kelly outlines Luther’s stole.

By isolating fragments of his daily observations in drawing, Kelly has given us clues to the origins of his large-scale works. In #51 the two fragments cut out from some of the artist’s own prints seem to be studies for later paintings. In #54 the outlines of, and sketches based on, newspaper clippings reveal similarities between otherwise disparate works such as *Green Angle* and *Curve XII*, while attesting to the most often overlooked figurative aspects underlying his art. Interestingly, the origins of *Blue Curve* (1966) can be found in the bottom middle sketch of #54—here Kelly has outlined the form of a torso in the

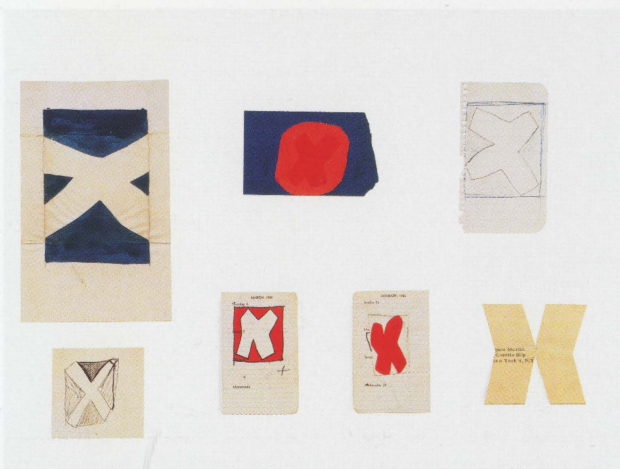


left: *City Island*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 78 x 57 inches. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums Anonymous Loan.

bottom: *Tablet #213*, 1950s. Ink, pencil, and oil on paper mounted on mat board, 15 1/2 x 21 inches. The Menil Collection, fractional interest gift of Louisa S. Sarofim in honor of James A. Elkins, Jr.

shape of a curve that closely resembles those found in #37, which is a study for the work.

Remnants of Kelly's personal history appear frequently in this body of work—notably in a collage from the 1950s, where an X-shape has been cut out from an envelope addressed to Agnes Martin at Coenties Slip. Kelly shaped the “X” during one of his ongoing exercises in automatic drawing (see #213).⁵ This experiment led to other sketches and doodles and became the basis for a number of his sculptures and paintings, represented here by *City Island*. Many works can be dated by written notes from friends or colleagues, as seen in #76, and some



provide straightforward references to his experiences through imagery. In #7 the paper clipping in the upper left of the composition recalls the artist's days in the U.S. Army; further, the outline of the officer's arm seems to directly relate to those of human figures in #54 (both of which are seeming studies of *Green Angle*).

Kelly once remarked that he liked “to bring [his art] only half way, not to make it a finished idea.”⁶ An endless number of clues to the origins of his works can be found within *Tablet*, from his distortions of letters and numbers to the recurrence of folded flaps on documents that he pastes on a given composition. In “Ellsworth Kelly: *Tablet*,” it becomes clear that his large-scale works and finished paintings are essentially “unfinished”—each borne from the same ephemeral source, that of everyday reality. By presenting *Tablet* in its entirety with a refined selection of other works, this exhibition not only attests to Kelly's distinctive working methods, but ultimately offers the spectators a sharpened sense of themselves in the act of perceiving.

—Susan Braeuer, *Project Curatorial Assistant*

1. Ellsworth Kelly, *Fragmentation and the Single Form*, exh. brochure (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), n.p.
2. Ellsworth Kelly, quoted in Diane Upright, *Ellsworth Kelly: Works on Paper*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams; Fort Worth: Fort Worth Art Museum, 1987), p. 7.
3. Ellsworth Kelly, quoted in Henry Geldzahler, “An Interview with Ellsworth Kelly,” in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Paris Prints, 1964–1965*, exh. cat. (New York: Susan Sheehan Gallery, 1992), n.p.
4. Yve-Alain Bois, *Ellsworth Kelly: Tablet 1948–1973* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2002), p. 199.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. Ellsworth Kelly, quoted in Dave Hickey, “The Literal Prophecies of Ellsworth Kelly,” *Ellsworth Kelly: Red Green Blue*, exh. cat. (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2002), p. 28.

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front: *Tablet #64* (detail), 1960s. Ink, pencil, and gouache on paper mounted on mat board, 15 1/2 x 21 inches. The Menil Collection, fractional interest gift of Louisa S. Sarofim in honor of James A. Elkins, Jr.

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