I

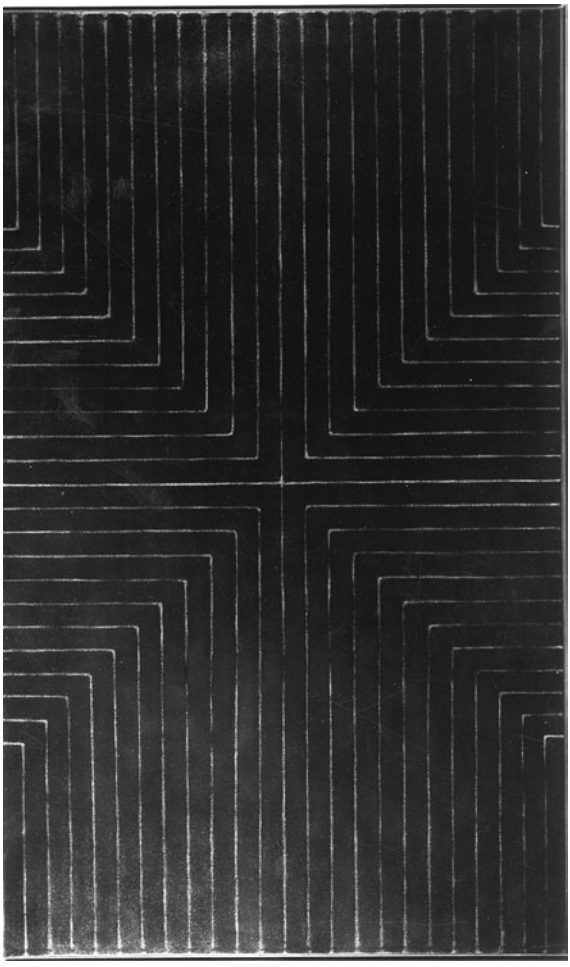
THE CHANGING OF THE ART GUARD

In May 2001, Frank Stella, one of the luminaries of American abstract art, told Glenn Lowry, the Director of the Museum of Modern Art, "that 'Modern starts' might just as well have been called 'Masturbatory insights'."[7] "Modern starts" was the Museum of Modern Art's way of revisiting, through an exhibition of select works from its collection, the history of twentieth century art. More important, it was a critique of Alfred Barr's famous conceptualization of twentieth century art. Although it first appeared in 1935 as a diagram on the jacket of the catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art* – an exhibition that Barr, the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art, organized – Barr's hierarchical scheme, which gave pride of place to Cubism as the most innovative and influential movement of the twentieth century, had remained gospel, not to say dogma. Instead of organizing their exhibition in terms of movements, which is the prevailing way of classifying art, Barr's curatorial successors organized "Modern starts" in terms of "People, places and things." "A more apt subtitle," Stella declared, "would have been 'Pointless, clueless and soulless'." Certainly, compared to "The Age of Modernism" exhibition held in Berlin in 1997, another attempt to re-think twentieth century art, which also dispensed with movements (four broad categories or leading ideas, "Reality – Distortion," "Abstraction – Spirituality," "Language – Material," and

"Dream – Myth," replaced them[8]) "people, places and things" seem banal, not to say conceptually shallow.

Why did Stella angrily condemn the exhibition as "bad . . . disgraceful . . . disagreeable?" Why did he say that "there are no temperate words to describe the way 'Modern starts' manhandles the collection of the Museum of Modern Art?" He is worth quoting at some length, for the attitude to art he attacks suggests, no doubt unintentionally, that what used to be called high art no longer exists, perhaps not even in name. Indeed, to use the term "high art" these days is to suggest some elitist, exclusive, inaccessible phenomenon, different in kind from everyday phenomena, and as such self-privileging and beside the point of everyday life, which is to survive it, and, if one can, flourish in it, disregarding the fact that it is inherently tragic, just because it is everyday.

High art may speak to the happy few, but it doesn't speak to the unhappy many. It certainly seems too obscure to help them understand the people, places, and things they encounter in their everyday lives. Lacking the common touch, it lacks what seems most human. What's the everyday point, after all, of the aesthetic experience – a so-called higher experience (an altered state of consciousness, as it were, and thus an abnormal or at least non-normal and unconventional consciousness of reality), in contrast to everyday experience (with its convention-respecting, and thus supposedly normal, "realistic" consciousness) – high art professes to offer? What's the use of high art's subtleties and refinements in the low, practical, demanding world of everyday life? It lays claim to all of one's being, as though there was no alternative to it, which might offer a measure of detachment – a certain uncanny aloofness and serenity, giving one the illusion that one is above it and can hold one's own against it, without denying its implacable givenness – and thus a different kind of sanity than the kind of sanity necessary to live in it.



4. Frank Stella, *Die Fahne Hoch*, 1959. Enamel on canvas. $12\frac{1}{2}'' \times 73''$. Whitney Museum of American Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene H. Schwartz and purchase, with funds from the John I. H. Baur Purchase Fund; the Charles and Anita Blatt Fund; Peter H. Brant; B. H. Friedman; the Gilman Foundation, Inc.; Susan Morse Hilles; The Lauder Foundation; Frances and Sydney Lewis; the Albert A. List Fund; Philip Morris Inc.; Sandra Peyson; Mr. and Mrs. Albrecht Saalfield; Mrs. Percy Uris; Warner Communications Inc., and the National Endowment for the Arts. © 2004 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements.

5. Pablo Picasso, *Guitar*, 1912–13. Construction of sheet metal and wire, $30\frac{1}{2}'' \times 13\frac{3}{4}'' \times 7\frac{5}{8}''$. Gift of the artist. © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. © 2004 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

"This exhibition," Stella asserts, "neither re-evaluates nor re-interprets; it simply plays around with the collection in the spirit . . . of some fashionable act of de-legitimisation of the ideas of greatness, genius, and uniqueness that the collection embodies. What the

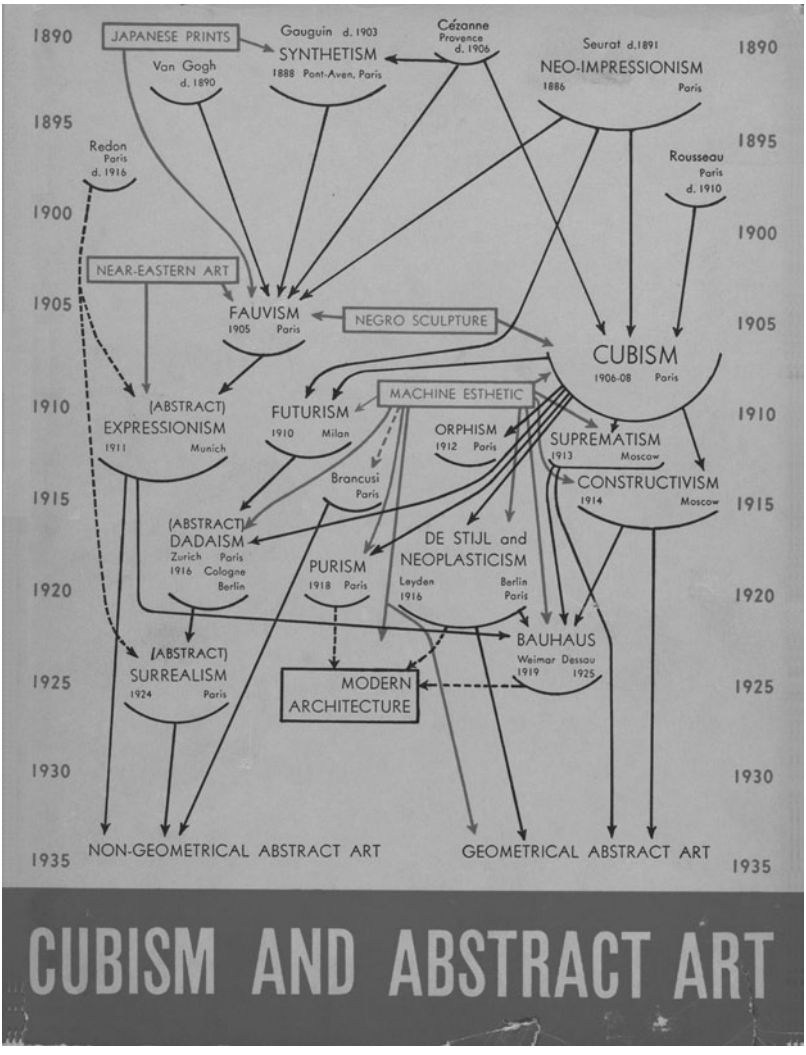
curators, [John] Elderfield & Co., seem to have in mind is a levelling out of quality, the replacement of judgement with the non-judgemental." Examining the installation in detail, Stella sardonically observes that

> random placement would have been better, certainly more interesting and more beautiful than this flip trivialisation. The arbitrariness of the whole affair challenges the viewer to find a worse place for Picasso's "Guitar" of 1912–13 than the one Mr. Elderfield has hit upon. Even a toilet stall would do more for Picasso's "Guitar." Of course, the door might not be as spatially "privileged" as a commissioned mural animated by a "urinal" motif [Stella is referring to a work in the exhibition], but I'll bet that the "Guitar" would look better on the door. Trapped in a wall-mounted plexiglass cover, his "Guitar" cannot escape being the ugliest display of a masterpiece in 21st-century museum history.

Continuing his complaint and lament, Stella argues that "Elderfield's merciless churning of the collection in order to shake out questionable benefits, such as the ability 'to avoid the definitive and the comprehensive' and 'to shun a consensus'," is a "debasement of the collection and the . . . demeaning of Alfred Barr, Jr, as well as three of his most beloved artists, Cézanne, Picasso and Malevich, is a soulless act – and shameful. Under the guise of academic inquiry, 'Modern starts' attacks Barr's heroic accomplishments. His pioneering historical . . . study of Modernism, *Cubism and abstraction* (1935) is summarily dismissed. . . . Barr is further belittled for failing to see how important it was 'to attempt a non-historical study of early modernism.' This attack on a great and ground-breaking figure is relentless. Barr is criticised for creating a diagram of modern art that 'far too much has been written about'." Noting that the Museum of Modern Art has "completely obscure[d]

its accomplishment, its original identity and its original and admirable purpose," Stella quotes Lowry's remark that "art is entertainment," suggesting that he should be replaced by Michael Eisner, who "knows how to make entertainment pay. He would not even have to change the logo: MoMA would simply become the Museum of Mickey's Art."

Stella goes on and on, seemingly ranting at will. With biting irony he notes that Elderfield "had solved the problem of what to do with the museum's dated collection. Rather than give it to un-hip historical museums like the Met or the National Gallery, MoMA would give its collection to today's new ecology-conscious generation of artists who really know how to use the art of the past, who recycle it directly into their own work. I wonder if it is really going to be 'all right' when Craig-Martin decides if he wants to take his Picasso and Malevich home, if only to be able to work on them a bit more comfortably in his studio." Turning on the museum rather than the hip postmodern artists it invited to participate in "Modern starts" – a show of trendiness intended to demonstrate that it is not outdated (similar to its merging with the hip P.S. 1) – Stella delivers the coup de grace: "a department store of modern art has emerged to replace a museum of modern art." "'Modern starts' rivals the weekly promotions at Macy's," Stella nastily remarks, emphasizing the commercial degradation of modern art – the confusion of commercial and artistic values, which is an ethical failure, however unwitting – that is a sign of its death throes. Moving in for the kill, Stella writes: "A wall of Cézanne landscapes is totally convincing as a display of framed reproductions ready to be charged to your Visa card and taken home. Rodchenko's 'Spatial Construction no. 12' could be a new colander borrowed from the Williams Sonoma Collection. And poor Picasso is trivialised again as his 'Glass of absinthe' (1914), one of the most original sculptures of the 20th century, second only, perhaps, to his own 'Guitar' of 1912–13, is humiliated in a tableware display."



6. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1936. © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

In a final caustic outburst, Stella remarks that "'Modern starts' has a good start toward becoming the most philistine, most anti-art exhibition of the new millennium," and concludes by remarking, in a last statement of despair, that "MoMA has become a Center of Cultural Studies." Lowry, with a "benign smile," agrees. From Stella's perspective, which no doubt seems quaint from Lowry's, this pseudo-Mona Lisa smile is the handwriting on the wall of art, the catastrophic whimper that signals its end. Art has been subtly poisoned by social appropriation, that is, the emphasis on its commercial value and its treatment as upscale entertainment, turning it into a species of social capital. Co-opted by the commonplace, it loses its uncommonness. It has also been undermined by the belief that all one has to do is have a "concept" to be an artist, which suggests that the concept of artist, as well as of art, has lost clear meaning. This is why so many people think of themselves as artists, for everyone, after all, has a favorite "concept," especially about some person, place, and thing they know.

For Stella the Museum of Modern Art has become a hip, fashionable venue of commercial entertainment, although modern art hardly seems as slick, ingratiating, and instantly comprehensible. But "Modern starts" tries to make it as popular and succeeds in doing so by making it seem as trivial – an amusing diversion rather than an aesthetic revelation. "Modern starts" makes modern art seem postmodern in spirit, as Trilling suggests, for it makes advanced, esoteric art seem popular and obvious and popular commercial art seem advanced and innovative, blurring their difference – to the extent that there seems to be no reason or need for it – which makes all art seem "significant" and leads to an unprecedented (and uncritical) proliferation of art. Anyone can become a "serious artist," for there are no longer serious critieria for determining seriousness in art.

For Stella modern art loses its seriousness in "Modern starts," becoming indistinguishable from non-art. This is the point of his cynical observation that Cézanne's landscapes are more tolerable and palatable

as reproductions than as paintings. As reproduction, the painting enters the domain of the everyday. It is almost impossible to escape. The painting can be liberated from the prison of everyday consciousness its reproduction imposes on it only by a defiant act of aesthetic perception. The serious spectator's aesthetic re-affirmation of the painting is a kind of re-creation of it, serving the same spiritual purpose as the artist's creation of it: creativity is the means of escaping from – even decisively breaking with – everyday consciousness of the life-world. The artist keeps one foot in the everyday through his subject matter – Cézanne's landscape – but transcends it by re-creating it in aesthetic terms.

In postmodernity we no longer see the painting, only the reproduction, or, at best, the painting through the reproduction, so that painting and reproduction become identified and seem virtually the same to the popular(izing) eye. Tamed by being reproduced, the reproduction seems more real than the real thing and more acceptable, that is, more comprehensible and familiar: the viewer seems in charge, not the artist. The reproduced Cézanne is reassuring and appealing because it seems everyday – confirms that everyday consciousness is the only legitimate consciousness – where the real Cézanne is intimidating and discomforting because it disrupts everyday consciousness. We become sentimental about normalizing reproductions but not the de-normalizing real thing, which grates on our nerves and unsettles our consciousness. Thus, reproduction is a double castration: it castrates the work of art and consciousness of it – consciousness in general.

Rodchenko's and Picasso's abstract sculptures have also been reduced to familiarity by being presented as household products, however malfunctional. They are made to seem more everyday and commonplace than they are, thus stripping them of their aesthetic aura and strangeness, indeed, estranged state, aesthetically coded. They become material artifacts like any other, no longer different in kind but only in appearance, and that by not very much, at least to the everyday eye that has grown accustomed to them. For Stella the whole point of

"Modern starts" is to habituate the public to modern art, suggesting that it is not as bizarre and disturbing as it has often been thought to be, but continuous with everyday life, if a bit more entertaining and exciting, perhaps only because it has no clear use.

Lowry's comfortable smile suggests that modern art has surrendered to its fate – accommodated itself to inevitable assimilation into everyday life, as though that was its wish all along – as though, from the first, all it wanted to do was to be understood in everyday terms and loved, however unlovable it looked. Modern art was an ugly frog waiting to be kissed by the princess of public acceptance, magically changing it into a charming prince – a social star. Thus prettified – its act cleaned up by showing that, after all, it is just about such familiar everyday things as people, places, and things – it is no longer what Trilling called "serious art, by which we mean such art as stands, overtly or by implication, in an adversary relationship to the dominant culture," and thus signals the "alienated condition" of "social reality" itself.[9] In "Modern starts" it seems to jump at the chance to be institutionalized, forfeiting its adversarial alienation – the source of critical autonomy – even if the only institution willing to have it is the museum. But of course it has an important place in the marketplace, which is the decisive institution – the deus ex machina – in capitalist society. For Stella, Lowry's attitude is the signature symptom of art's death. It is proof that high art – traditional as well as modern – is over and done with. High art has become simply another sample of visual and material culture, losing its privileged position as a source of aesthetic experience, which, from the perspective of cultural studies, is beside the ideological point.

Indeed, it is socially and politically incorrect just because it seems to be a unique, "higher" experience, not available for the asking by everyone – not for sale in the store of cultural entertainment and as such priceless, indeed, inherently unmarketable. It is not a common experience, and thus not democratic; popular and commercial art do