Chance Encounters: Kelly, Morellet, Cage

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Let us start with a striking likeness, that of François Morellet's 1971 painting entitled *5 lignes au hasard* to the square sheets of transparent plastic, each inscribed with five randomly drawn lines, that are part of several scores by John Cage, dating from 1958 (most notably *Variations I* and *Music Walk*). We have here a perfect case of what Erwin Panofsky has termed pseudomorphosis, which he defined as "the emergence of a form A, morphologically analogous to, or even identical with, a form B, yet entirely unrelated to it from a genetic point of view."[1]

Let us look, first, at the genesis. To say that the two works are "entirely unrelated" from this point of view would not be entirely accurate, for, as we shall see, they do have in common the essential feature of being the product of chance. But neither artist knew what the other was doing when they produced them.

Morellet had never heard of Cage when he painted his canvas. At that time his musical interests were exclusively geared toward jazz, and he never went to a concert of "classical" music, finding this utterly boring ("classical" is the rubric under which Cage's music, just as that of Boulez, would have been, and still would be, announced in France). Much later, in the late eighties, he heard about Steve Reich's *Pendulum*, first performed in 1969 at the Whitney Museum, a piece about which the composer said: "It's me making my peace with Cage."[2] That is only then, while writing a short essay that had been commissioned on music and painting, that Morellet realized that his own works had some serious affinities with that of the American musicians.[3]

The case gets even more clear-cut as one learns that Morellet's *5 lignes au hasard* is based on a drawing dating from 1958, sketching the aleatory distribution of lines across a square whose edges are divided each into 24 numbered segments (1 to 24, 25 to 49, etc.), using the number pi. It belongs to a vast trove of such sketches dating from 1957 to 1960 (thus strictly contemporary to the height of Cage's invention of the indeterminacy model), and involving chance or other non-subjective

1. Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture* (New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1964), pp 26–27. The example he gave was the uncanny similarity between Punic sarcophagi and tombs of the High Gothic period some 1500 years later: in both types a human figure, apparently perfectly alive, eyes wide open, is placed horizontally on a lid, the position sometimes connoted as uncomfortable by the presence of a pillow under the head. The form is similar in both types but the historical process that led to it could not be more different: in the case of the Punic sarcophagi, "an effigy originally three-dimensional and recumbent had come to be precariously placed on the roof of a house-shaped sarcophagus"; in the medieval tombs, "an originally two-dimensional figure, depicted on a slab in the pavement but represented as standing, had subsequently acquired three-dimensional volume, the figure expanding into a statue, the slab raised upon supporting members or growing into what is known as a *tumba*."

2. Steve Reich, "On *Pendulum Music*," April 2000, http://www.furious.com/perfect/ohm/reich.html. Morellet wrote me: "I preferred Thelonious Monk to Boulez and Company. Steve Reich has been the first non-black American musician that ever interested me." (Letter to the author, June 2, 2009.)

3. See François Morellet, "Musique et peinture," in *Comment taire mes commentaires*, Paris: ENSBA, 1999, pp. 138–39.
I should add that perhaps intrigued by what he had belatedly discovered about Cage, he had accepted to participate with him in a three-men show in Prague, hoping to meet the composer, but the exhibition took longer than expected to materialize (it took place in December 1993 – January 1994, a year or so after Cage's death, at Galerie Hlavniho Mesta).

systems, of which very few were realized in painting at the time (nobody was interested in them).[4]

And what about Cage, himself? In 1958 he certainly knew nothing about Morellet.[5] Another example of pseudomorphosis involving the French artist's work, and which led to somewhat heated discussions in the early seventies – this time concerning the resemblance between the canvas entitled *8 trames 0°–22°5–45°–67°5–90°–112°5–135°–157°5–180°*, from circa 1958, with the 195th page of Sol LeWitt's 1972 book *Arcs, from Corners & Sides, Circles, & Grids and All Their Combinations* – demonstrates that Morellet's work was simply unavailable to an American audience until much later.[6]

Let us now look at the works themselves. Morellet's painting is an oil on canvas measuring 140 x 140 cm. Despite the fact that it is part of a series of canvases all done around the same time (using the same template) and comprising 5, 10, 20, or 40 black lines on a white ground, this work is autonomous.

Not so for Cage's. The sheet of transparent plastic reproduced here, also square, is in fact not a work in itself – it is not even part of a work per se: it is part of a score out of which multiple performances, each one different from the other, would emerge. The term *score* is actually not conveying the particular use to which this sheet of plastic is destined – *tool*, suggested by James Pritchett, is much better. ("In the pieces composed from 1958 to 1961," notes Pritchett, Cage "ceased making musical scores in any sense of the term, and began making what I refer to as 'tools': works which do not describe events in either a determinate or an indeterminate way, but which instead present a procedure by which to create any number of such descriptions or scores."[7])

In both *Variations I* and *Music Walk*, the sheets of transparent plastic adorned with 5 randomly drawn lines are to be superimposed on a sheet bearing dots, which represent sound events – and it is the measurement of the perpendiculars from each of these dots to the random lines that will determine the nature or quality of the sound.[8] In the "score" of *Variations I*, these dots are of four different sizes, the smallest one for the smallest sounds or single notes, the largest one for the largest sounds or four notes, and there are six transparent sheets altogether, all of the same size and square format, including the one with the dots. In that of *Music Walk*, "written" for piano and radio, the points are of equal size but the system is actually more intricate. First, the sheets are of different sizes: eight square ones (again, each with five random lines), ten rectangular sheets with

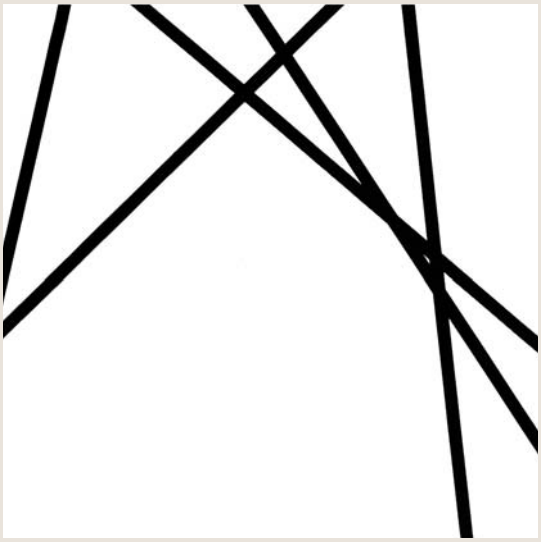
4. "From 1951 to 1961, I had no success whatsoever: a single one-man show (but I had to contribute to the expenses), three works sold (but to other painters: Fontana, Gerstner, Vasarely). So I realized very few of these paintings, cumbersome and useless, but I did many projects. To realize one of these from time to time, neatly and exactly enlarged, allowed me to imagine all the others without having to build yet more shelves to store them in my studio." François Morellet, "Pourquoi, 30 à 40 ans après," in *François Morellet: Dessins*, Musée de Grenoble, 1991, p. 45. The 1958 drawing in question here is reproduced on p. 137 (No. 213).

5. And one can easily speculate that if he ever did, this must have happened toward the end of his life, perhaps in connection with the Prague show (see note 3) to which his participation was posthumous.

6. See my essay "François Morellet/Sol LeWitt: A Case Study," in Thomas W. Gaehtgens, (ed.), *Künstlerischer Austausch/Artistic Exchange, Akten des XXVIII Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin, July 15–20, 1992, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993, pp. 305–18.

7. James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 126.

8. The system actually derives from a slightly earlier composition, the *Solo for Piano*, itself only the portion of a vast work called *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, of 1957–58. See Pritchett, pp. 135–36.



François Morellet, *5 lignes au hasard*, 1971

points, and an oblong sheet with five parallel lines looking pretty much like a musical staff (it is this last sheet that is essential, since it determines the kinds of sound that are at stake – four different kinds for the points within the intervals of the "staff" and another for the points that fall outside).[9] In *Variations I*, each of the random lines stand for a particular sound quality (lowest frequency, greatest amplitude, least duration, simplest overtone structure, and earliest occurrence within a decided upon time), but their specific attribution is left to the performer's discretion – furthermore, in the case of points that represent more than one note, "different sheets of lines, or different orientations of the same sheet are used to make measurements for each separate note of the event."[10] In *Music Walk*, perhaps not so surprising given that the work is already complicated enough without the introduction of these new variables, the sheets with random lines are "optional," the published "score" tells us: "They may be used at any time or not at all for all the determination of 1) number of sounds in an aggregate; 2) occurrence (earlier, later); 3) frequency; 4) duration; 5) amplitude."[11] What is particularly important to notice about these discretional notations with random lines, however, is that their values are almost similar to those of the

9. For piano, these categories are: "1) plucked or muted strings, 2) notes played on keyboard, 3) external noises, 4) internal noises, and 5) auxiliary sounds (all other sounds)." For radio, these categories are "1) 'kilocycle glissando' [whatever that is!], 2) radio speech, 3) radio static, 4) radio music" – and of course again "auxiliary sounds." See Pritchett, p. 126. As examples of "auxiliary sounds," the published score gives "including voice, piano preparations, etc." (See Rebecca Y. Kim, *In No Uncertain Musical Terms: The Cultural Politics of John Cage's Indeterminacy,* PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2008, p. 184.)

10. Pritchett, p. 136.

11. Kim, p. 184. The work's structure was so intricate at the time that Cage enlisted his friend the pianist David Tudor, for whom *Variations I* was written, to premiere it.

John Cage, *Music Walk*, 1958. Detail

mandatory ones in the score for *Variations I*: in other words, the qualities that defined the musical character of the sounds in *Variations I* (and such qualities are pretty standard) are now conceived as elective.

To sum up: yes, the crisscrossing of five random black lines on Morellet's canvas looks like that of Cage's similarly random lines on one of the transparent sheets, but they do not have the same function in any sense. This is so despite the fact that Cage's "scores" for (that is, tools for) both *Variations I* and *Music Walk* can be, and have been, exhibited in museums and galleries, as have other similarly elegant "scores" by Cage. (These belong to a group of nine scores using transparent plastic sheets, dating from 1958 to 1961, each tagged by Cage as a "composition indeterminate of performance" in the first catalogue raisonné of his work established by Robert Dunn in 1962, all of which would be perfect candidates).[12] Conversely – an absurd but interesting hypothesis – it is also true even that, had Morellet made a sketch of his canvas on transparent plastic and of the same size as that of Cage's sheets, it could have been used just as well by Cage's interpreters of the two pieces discussed here.

12. Ibid., p. 67. The advantage of the graphic means used by Cage over the consultation of the *I Ching*, his preferred method of using chance up to 1958, was speed. ("I also wanted to have a very rapid manner of writing a piece of music. Painters, for example, work slowly with oil and rapidly with watercolors." Quoted in idem, p. 112).

Is the case closed, then? Is it just a matter of statistical coincidence? Should we stick simply to the old divide (Oh Laocoon!) between the "arts of time" and the "arts of space" and forget about any attempt to bridge the gap?

Not quite. It is true that the growing preeminence of performance in Cage's aesthetic, and its central role, from 1958 on, in the constitution of his concept of "indeterminacy" (conceived as a radical upgrade of chance), would eventually restrict the label "Cagean" to those art forms involving duration or present-tense action – foremost in the visual arts the Fluxus project, Happenings and so forth. Properly speaking, this would pretty much exclude painting altogether from the Cagean canon, even that of artists most commonly associated with Cage, such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg – but at the moment of 1958 we are not there yet. Furthermore, the simultaneous and independent use of chance as a method of organization by an American composer and a French painter does tell us something about the state of avant-garde culture in the West in the decade or so following the Second World War. To put it in a nutshell, the reason both Morellet and Cage resorted to chance is that it is one of the most efficient ways of producing non-intentional results and of absenting the self. There might be different motives of this desire for impersonality, each field (music, painting) carrying different baggage of tradition, each author having a different formation or mode (both Morellet and Cage were steeped in Dada, but Morellet's humor comes as much from the nineteenth-century absurdist writer Alphonse Allais, a friend of his father whom he admired since childhood, and Cage's ascetic detachment results in great part from his initiation to Zen Buddhism through the lectures by D. T. Suzuki that he attended at Columbia University in the early fifties). But both reacted against the arrogance of scientific rationality – which had produced such monstrosity as Hiroshima, for example – and the arrogance of artistic irrationality then posited as the force behind artistic creation and as a warranty of self-expression (and both have unequivocally stated their distaste for Surrealism). Cage's cultural field of reference was broader than Morellet's. He was always well-informed about contemporary developments in the visual arts, while Morellet, as we have suggested, had a very limited knowledge of the same in music. Cage was perfectly aware of the work of Abstract Expressionist painters, for example, through his friend and peer Morton Feldman.[13] Indeed, it is in part in reaction to their conception of automatism (derived from Surrealism) and to the ego-inflationism of their concept of expression that Cage was drawn to chance operations.[14] As far as Morellet is concerned, he had a similar repulsion with regard to what could be called (for brevity's sake) the French version of Ab. Ex., that is *Art Informel*.[15]

13. Although Cage gave several of his most important lectures at the Abstract Expressionist base, the Artists Club between 1949 and 1951, Feldman was closer to the artists. Still, Feldman and Cage spent the years 1950–54 as regulars at the Ab. Ex. hangout, the Cedar Bar, probably more at Feldman's instigation than Cage's.

14. Both Jonathan D. Katz, in "John Cage's Queer Silence; or How to Avoid Making Matters Worse" (*GLQ* Vol 5, No. 2, pp. 321–52) and Caroline A. Jones, in "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego" (*Critical inquiry*, Vol 19., No. 4, Summer, 1993, pp. 628–65) convincingly relate this aesthetic of self-effacement, directly opposed to the macho heterosexual social habit of the Abstract Expressionist group as a whole, to Cage's closeted homosexuality. As Katz admits, it would be wrong, however, to posit a gay man's strategy of survival during the McCarthy years as the only cause of Cage's espousal of silence. A good counter example would be Ad Reinhardt, whose womanizing was well known, but whose art was similarly opposed to the rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism and constitute just as well a plea for silence, or at least whisper. Cage said of Reinhardt, "The work was so appealing that it tended to resist its appeal." (Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, (ed.), *Conversing with Cage,* New York: Limelight Editions, 1988, p. 176.*)*

15. Morellet records a nightmare that he was repeatedly having in the 1950s: he would pull out a canvas for a visitor, and would be horrified to find out that it looked like an Informel work; he would pull out a second, but to the same effect, and so on. He would then realize that as he had been working on his own, without exhibiting, he had a completely fraudulent perception of his art, and that it was, indeed, as "subjective" as that of the clownish Georges Mathieu, something which was seemingly obvious to his fantasmatic visitor (at which point he would wake up). Morellet, "Sur la fragmentation, la gravure, et l'art de ne rien dire," *Comment taire mes commentaires*, p. 86.

For both Cage and Morellet, thus, it is clear that chance was above all a means for avoiding constant decision making, for avoiding the traditional authorial model of "invention" (and thus for deflating the status of the author): you set up a few parameters and then let the dice roll – the result is unforeseen, independent of your personal taste. (Not totally independent, of course, since taste has played a role, consciously or not, in your determination of the parameters – or, as Cage would say, in the questions you ask the dice or the *I Ching* to answer). Although apparently innocuous, the method is amazingly efficient as a weapon against the imperial power of the author – and the stance of non-choice that it professes is often perceived as a threat: read, for example, the hysterical attack against Cage's use of chance (though the American musician remains unnamed) in Pierre Boulez's famous essay "Aléa," published in November 1957 (I am quite certain that Morellet had to face a similar scorn at some point).[16] And both Morellet and Cage faced the same ethical issues: what to do when one finds the result of chance operations unpleasant or boring (non-intervention is ethically de rigueur, and they stuck to this vow most of the time – Cage calls this an ethics of "accepting" –, though both admit to have occasionally discarded works or aborted processes). Or else: how to cope with that phenomenon, rare but always statistically possible, by which a work produced through chance looks exactly like one produced by traditional (subjective) modes of composition? To this conundrum they both answered similarly: the trick is to make your device known, to lay it bare. For the premiere of *Variations I* in March 1958, Cage insisted that it would be performed three times (as well, in fact as would the other works programmed in the concert, by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown), and he spelled this out to the audience before the concert began: "I had to explain the purpose of having something be purposeless," he later said.[17] As far as Morellet is concerned, the titles of his works usually give away the method employed – the clearest example being perhaps that of *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone*, of 1961, to which I shall momentarily turn.

A lot has been written on Cage's debt to Duchamp (and to the early use of chance by the French artist, particularly in the 1913–14 *3 stoppages étalon*, and the 1915–23 *Le Grand Verre*), but one of Cage's comments seems to have been overlooked, made in passing while discussing *Étant donnés* (1946–66). Noting that this work, one of Duchamp's last, is opposite in almost every way to the *Le Grand Verre* (no chance, no transparency, no abstraction: it is not an open structure but a closed box whose erotic content is to be seen through a peep-hole), Cage seems to have suggested that Duchamp reversed course because he had exhausted the possibilities chance could afford him: "Music is

16. See Pierre Boulez, "Aléa," reprinted in *Relevés d'apprenti*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966, pp. 41–55. Cage's reply was the no less famous lecture on indeterminacy that he delivered in September 1958 in Darmstadt – where, ironically, he was replacing Boulez who had cancelled his class (published in John Cage, *Silence*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, pp. 35–40).

17. Kim, p. 123.

more complex, I think, than painting, and that's why chance operations in music are just naturally more complicated than they would be for painting."[18] This is undoubtedly why Morellet did not only use chance as a non-intentional mode (though several of his favorite operations, while utterly planned and involving absolutely regular elements, do yield utter surprises, as in the case of his superimpositions of grids). For him, as for Cage, chance was a means. Morellet was not wedded to it; he never felt he had to be limited by it (but kept imagining new systems of voiding the subjective authorship of the artist. Cage, on the other hand, developed chance operations into fully-fledged indeterminacy).

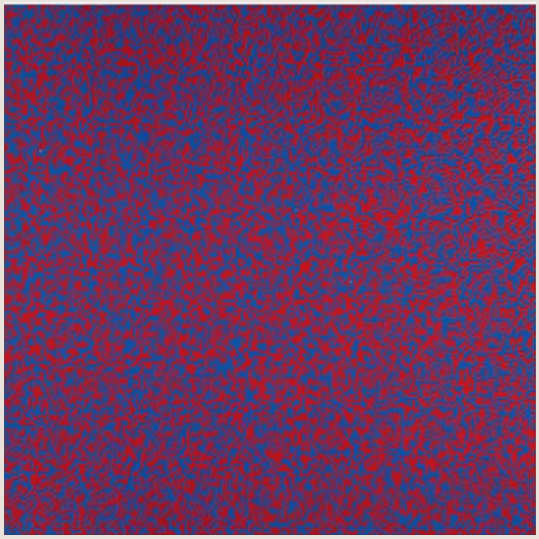
18. Kostelanetz, (ed.), p. 180.

But let us examine once again the origin of Morellet's interest in chance, for it will bring about another artist – this one often directly, and sometimes exaggeratedly, associated with Cage. The chance operations that are involved in the work in question are indeed far less complex than those used by a composer like Cage. Although the painting itself dates from 1960, the study upon which it is based dates from 1957. I quote Morellet:

> The catalyst for the idea of the painting *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone* (1961) came about after a conversation with Ellsworth Kelly, who at the time was living in France. He had recently visited Jean Arp's studio and talked about one of Arp and Sophie Taeuber's joint collages, *Collage avec carrés disposés selon les lois du hasard*, made in 1917. From an early stage in my career I looked for ways to take the fewest possible subjective decisions in the process of the creation of a painting. I wanted to be radically different from the lyrical abstraction of the École de Paris, which was the mainstream trend at that time, represented by popular artists such as [Georges] Mathieu. With *Répartition aléatoire*, the purpose of my system was to cause a reaction between two colors of equal intensity. I drew horizontal and vertical lines to make 40,000 squares. Then my wife or my sons would read out the numbers from the phone book (except the first repetitive digits), and I would mark each square for an even number while leaving the odd ones blank. The crossed squares were painted blue and the blank ones red.[19]

19. François Morellet, "65, 38, 21, 4, 72..." in *Tate Online* [search: June 2009].

The conversation, or rather conversations, for there must have been many, took place around 1952, when the two artists became very close (with two other painters, Jack Youngerman and Alain Naudé, they formed a closed-knit group united by their distaste for what they saw in the galleries at the time, not only *Art Informel* but also what was put forward as its antidote, post-Cubist geometric abstraction, whose compositional mode seemed to them utterly academic). By the time Morellet started working with chance, Kelly had left Paris and was back in the US (since the summer 1954). The fact that it took Morellet about five years to admit chance into his working process is not so surprising. When he met Kelly, he was still an apprentice in the tradition



François Morellet, *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone*, 1961

of Max Bill, whose work he had recently discovered, and though the eradication of subjectivity was part and parcel of his program, the only means available to him then were rational a-priori systems. (The idea that one could systematize chance or that chance was computable through a determination of probabilities had not yet occurred to him). It is particularly interesting in this context, that in coming to chance a few years earlier Kelly had a slightly different target in his struggle against subjective choice: that is, it is not so much a rebellion against the *Informel* or gestural abstraction that had motivated his quest for non-compositional strategies in painting, since he had not been exposed to much of it at the time, but the feeling that one could no longer invent anything that could be considered one's own because all had already been invented by the grand masters of the School of Paris, Picasso above all. For Kelly, the best way to bypass such a massive obstacle was to find means of not having to invent.

I have written extensively on Kelly's years in France (beginning in October 1948), his extraordinarily rapid exploration, in more or less successive order, of four different non-compositional strategies – so that I shall only offer a brief summary here.[20] His first months in

20. See Yve-Alain Bois, "Kelly in France: Non-composition in all its Guizes," *Ellsworth Kelly: The French Years*, Washington, D. C.: National Gallery, November 1992, pp. 9–36, and "Kelly's *Trouvailles*: Findings in France," *Ellsworth Kelly: The Early Drawings 1948–1955*, Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum and Harvard University Museums; Winterthur, Switzerland: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1999, pp. 12–35.

France were essentially devoted to visiting museums and monuments of Romanesque architecture, a period of intense cultural stockpiling during which he realized that he was more interested in shapes than in imagery (the shape of a ceremonial copper plaque from a North-West Coast native American tribe seen at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, that of the grid on the façade of Notre-Dame-la-Grande of Poitiers, or of its Mandorle, etc.). Although he toyed with Surrealist automatism in the spring 1949 (making "exquisite corpses" with his friend Ralf Coburn), he was not satisfied with the outcome and began rather to think of ways to register those "found" shapes per se – shapes that most of the time had been ignored precisely because the imagery that covered them, or which they framed, was getting the lion's share of the attention. His first experiments on that score were somewhat timid – he still did not dare to simply record a found shape, still felt it had to be at least minimally transformed to belong to the sphere of art. *Toilette* painted in May 1949, belongs to this initial phase: a *toilette à la turque*, the kind one could then use in every French café, is recorded as seen from above. The black hole and the emplacement where one's feet would have to be positioned while crouching or squatting are clearly recognizable but anthropomorphized by the addition of a "neck" and small arms that alter its pentagonal overall shape into a monstrous face. The entire summer, spent at Belle-Isle, would be geared to shedding this compulsion to transfigure the *found* or *given*. By the fall, Kelly had fully established his first non-compositional mode, which I call the *transfer*, and which remained active in his arsenal for years to come. The most spectacular and successful work in that vein is *Window*, *Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, which dates from November 1949, and is the miniature replica of the very object mentioned in its current title (that is a window of the Musée national d'art moderne, then located Avenue du Président Wilson, in the Palais de Tokyo in Paris). From then on, all transfers were made according to the same process: Kelly would chose a pattern in the fabric of the world at large and not "represent" it so much as copy or map it in the most mechanical manner, just as one does a rubbing of a gravestone or as an archeologist records the crack and lacunae of an ancient relief. (The pattern was always extracted orthogonally – in plan or elevation – from a field that was already flat, in order to avoid any intrusion of a subjective point of view, and to insure that there would be a rigorous congruence of image and field). Such an exacting facsimile is as foreign to representation as a "flag" by Jasper Johns is from one Claude Monet depicted flying in the breeze. The only difference between Johns's flags (or the targets and other similar flat objects he depicted) and Kelly's transfers is that Kelly's sources were not usually revealed to the beholder – the young artist fearing that his non-inventive mode would immediately be demeaned as a joke or as the sign of a lack of inspiration.[21]

21. He soon realized that the capacity of his fellow men to spot resemblances was limited. *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, was first exhibited at the Salons des Réalités Nouvelles – a yearly show devoted to abstract art – under the title *Construction: Relief en blanc, gris et noir* (Construction: Relief in White, Grey and Black), which remained its title until 1968. Although this work is a miniature but literal rendition of one of the windows of the Palais de Tokyo, which ensures that most visitors to the Salon would have been familiar with its source object (especially since these kind of sash windows are so uncommon in France), no one seems to have identified it or even remotely suspected the existence of such a source.

Ellsworth Kelly, *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, 1949

Ellsworth Kelly, *November Painting*, 1950

An unexpected problem arose – the same one upon which Cage and Morellet would stumble with regard to chance operations: what if the result of a transfer ("objective," non-intentional, non-compositional, in the sense that it is not based on the subjective arrangements of parts into a whole) ends up looking like a perfectly intentional composition? *Neuilly*, based on the meticulous transfer of a flagstone arrangement in the courtyard of the Hôpital Américain where Kelly received medical treatment, looks as if it had been painted by Georges Vantongerloo during his De Stijl years (Vantongerloo, whose work Kelly would soon discover when he visited the older artist a few months later).

It is at that point that an exploration of chance (as the supreme non-subjective device) picked up the torch. Encouraged by Jean Arp (as Morellet reminds us, confirming multiple interviews given by Kelly), the American artist engaged in collages in which bits of some of his own drawings that he had cut up into pieces were fixed as they had fallen on a sheet of paper on the floor (there are many collages

done that way, but the only painting – the exact transfer on canvas of one of these collages, is *November Painting*). The results still looked like abstract compositions, still looked perfectly intentional (and who could prove, indeed, that his hand had not been guided in secret by his mind?). The modular grid provided the answer to this conundrum: a grid does not look like anything but itself; a grid is, so to speak, a self-referential object, it maps the field that it covers and measures, it duplicates itself. Looking at the 1,600 units of *Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance* of 1953, the only painting that emerged from a series of collages made in 1951, we instantly know that the placement of all these little colored squares was determined by the most implacably non-mimetic system there is, that of randomness. All danger of resemblance (to a deliberate composition, to geometric abstraction as metaphor of order) was dodged, all thought of similitude was avoided.

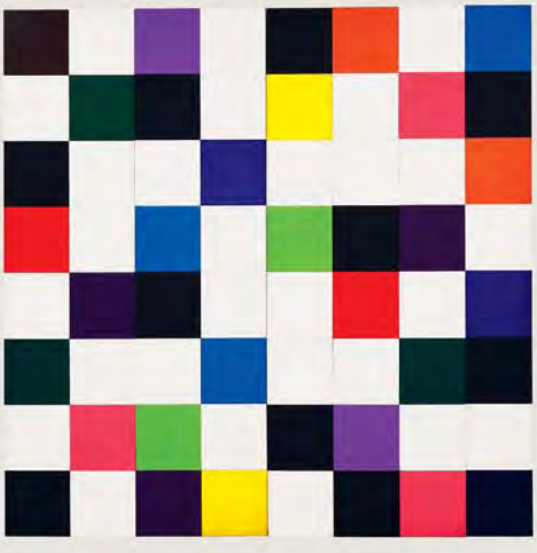
But it is with his next move that Kelly arrived at his boldest solution, one upon which many further developments would be built, particularly after 1965, a date that marks his deliberate return to his French years after an interruption of ten years. The move I am alluding to here is initiated by the fusion of color and surface into a single unit in his *Sixty-Four Panels: Colors for a Large Wall*, 1951 (now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York). Based on a collage done in the same manner as those of his *Spectrum* series that immediately preceded it, but now with a drastically reduced population of units (64 units instead of 1,600), the work consists of juxtaposed monochrome panels, one per color unit.[22] The radical reduction of the number of units, their physical independence, was in part prompted by the project of a "visual alphabet" that Kelly had just submitted with his application for a Guggenheim fellowship: in the "manuscript" of this curious little book, besides crosses, squares, circles, grids, and other elemental figures, one finds six monochromatic full pages (black, white, red, yellow, blue, green).[23] With *Sixty-Four Panels: Colors for a Large Wall*, the monochrome panel becomes a combinatory unit, as indivisible, as atomistic, as the letters of the alphabet.[24]

It is this renewed wedding of the world of language and that of painting that was fully celebrated in *Painting for a White Wall* of 1952. Kelly likes to tell an anecdote that he took it as a sign that he had at last reached his goal since a child could understand what he was up to: walking in the street and glancing at that painting on the balcony where it had been let to rest, a little boy cried "black-pink-orange-white-blue-blue-white-orange-pink-black!" The letter has become a word (a name); each panel has become the sheer affirmation of that very name, and each exists for its own sake, just as any sound could and did in Cage's conception of music. With his concept of the monochrome

22. The fact that Cage also used a structure based on 64 units (that of the *I Ching*) for the chart system he developed while working on *Music of Changes* in 1951 is an amusing coincidence. 64 is also the number of squares in a chess-board and, though Kelly could not have know this at the time, that of planes in the modular grids painted by Mondrian in 1918-19.

23. Under the title *Form Line Color,* this "manuscript" has been published in facsimile by the Harvard University Art Museums, 1999, with an introduction by Harry Cooper.

24. Kelly's insistence on the physical autonomy of each color plane is very similar to Cage's demand, several years later, that each sound should be treated independently (thus his horror of harmony and his criticism of the kind of dialog enacted by jazz performers during a session).



Ellsworth Kelly, *Colors for a Large Wall*, 1951

panel as a combinatory unit (that is, with the linguistic model of the alphabet), the artist justifiably felt that he could relax with regard to the issue of non-composition: words are composed, but they are not subjective: anyone can find them in the dictionary. Dictionaries have their poetics, their own peculiar charm, but who reads them in search of an author? The grid was no longer necessary as a backup either, nor chance, nor, a fortiori, the transfer – or at least such reasoning allowed him to loosen his rule about not tampering.

So, in bad health and pretty much at the end of his rope financially (he had only sold two works during his entire stay in France), Ellsworth Kelly sailed back to America in July of 1954. The artist himself and all his commentators have emphasized the cultural shock of re-entry and the accordingly radical departure of his new American works. This should certainly not be underestimated. Ironically, though, Kelly's sense of being a foreigner in his own country (having entirely missed Abstract Expressionism, and being mistaken for a follower of European geometric abstraction) meant that his new situation had much in common with the exotic estrangement he had experienced in Paris. But that is another story.

Ellsworth Kelly, *Painting for a White Wall*, 1952

And what about Kelly's relationship to Cage, then?

This might be the occasion to deflect a few clichés with regard to the impact that his encounter with the musician had on the young Kelly. They met in June 1949 in Paris, where Cage had come mainly to visit Boulez, with whom he had engaged in an intense exchange of letters for several months. At that time, Kelly was only at the very beginning of his search for means of non-composition (or, as Cage would term it, non-intentional modes of composition). He showed Cage *Toilette*, which was highly praised by the composer, as well as other works of the same vein, in which an object (or any mark on a flat surface) was copied straight on – sometimes enlarged – without any involvement of a subjective point of view but was still somewhat transformed by a few additional marks (here, as noted above, into an anthropomorphic figure). It is rather unlikely that chance was ever discussed at the time of this first meeting, given that at that point the musician was still quite far from thinking of resorting to it in his own work (as Pritchett remarks, until 1950, Cage still believed in "expressivity" as an important component of any musical piece, calling it the "freedom element").[25]

25. Pitchett, pp. 61–62.

Nevertheless, Cage's encouragement was undoubtedly very precious to the young Kelly, then full of doubts and pathologically shy. But one could venture the hypothesis that these encouragements, their very utterance, were just as important for the man who uttered them, and that it is while applauding Kelly's first and still rather unsophisticated attempts at recording the already made that Cage began the thought process that would lead to his inaugural use of chance in the 1950–51 *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* as well as to the fundamental concept of the equality or interchangeability of sound and silence. (A concept both amplified and simplified in the wake of the famous epiphany in an anechoic chamber at Harvard a year later, from which Cage concluded that "there was no such thing as silence, but rather that there were only sounds: what he had referred to as silence [when speaking of his own music] was simply the sounds he had not intended.")[26]

26. Ibid., p. 75.

In September 1950, Kelly sent Cage a long letter accompanied by photographs of his recent work, including *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris*, and *White Relief* (though without titles and without revealing to Cage how they had been made). The latter is based on the pattern of a Japanese decorative stencil similar to those Cage had bought from street vendors on the Seine banks – he had showed his acquisitions to Kelly, who had gotten the bug. The only transformation Kelly made is that of a change of format (the source-image is enlarged) and the elimination of any color opposition: the silence of the found object is dimmed further by an overall whitewashing. (Appropriately, the painter would later dedicate this work to Cage.) Kelly's well-known letter is full of enthusiasm (it contains what could be described as a manifesto in favor of public wall painting and against the art market). "The problem is the new ideas which are marching so quickly. I have hardly time to finish up old things," writes Kelly (and as someone who has been perusing his archives, I can attest that nothing could be truer). But one can also discern some anxiety: Kelly's GI. bill money would dry up in a few months and he was wandering if he should come back to the US and live in New York after that: "I would prefer to stay on here & work. How do you enjoy N.Y. – are you happy there? Here there is sense – In N.Y. I have doubts whether anything makes sense at all. You must write me. I will listen to your advice. I have great respect for you."[27]

27. The letter is partially published in the chronology section of Bois, *Ellsworth Kelly: The French Years,* p. 187.

Cage did not answer. Kelly was neither surprised, nor hurt. "He is busy," he wrote to his friend Coburn in December 1950, urging him to go and see the composer in New York.[28] Three and a half years later, having stumbled upon an issue of *Art News* with a reproduc-

28. This letter contains an enthusiastic report on Cage's music for the film on Alexander Calder, which Kelly had just seen in Paris.

tion of a work by Ad Reinhardt on the cover, finding himself unable to "resist its appeal" (unlike Cage) and wrongly assuming that this kind of painting, for which he felt a deep affinity, must be successful in the US since it was so preeminently advertized, Ellsworth Kelly headed back home. One of the first people he sought out was Cage, but he had matured and was no longer in need of a big brother. In the meantime, Cage had found his sibling in the person of Rauschenberg. He sent Kelly to see him, thinking, rightly, that the two had much in common. (The similarity between Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and Kelly's numerous sketches for multi-panel monochromes that were made in France at the same time proves Cage right – and many works dating from Rauschenberg's early years could, indeed, have been signed by Kelly).[29] But by the time Kelly visited him, Rauschenberg was beginning to move in a totally different direction, that of the *Combines,* whose syntactic idiom was utterly foreign to Kelly's anti-compositional impulse.

Nothing came out of this. Kelly and Cage remained friends, of course, but would never be close.

Is this to say that apart from an early encounter there is not much of a connection between the two men? No, but we are dealing more with a meeting of the minds than of everything else (even if their *actual* meeting in the hotel they shared in Paris during the spring of 1949 was of consequence). For one could say that Kelly has been (unknowingly) the most Cagean of all artists, in the sense that both his and the composer's strategies constantly paralleled each other over the years (which is not the case for Cage's elected pantheon). Transfer, chance, grid, monochrome: it would not take a lot of energy to establish that Cage, conversely, has been the most Kellyan of all composers.[30]

In response to the anxious question: "If musical process 'strips' the mind of its 'right to control,' what does the mind do, having nothing to do?" Cage answered that it would turn its attention to listening.[31] Kelly, if asked the same question about the painterly process, would have said "it would turn its attention to looking."

29. Another astonishing example of the convergence between Kelly's and Rauschenberg's work is their interest in tire prints as a form of drawing – the only difference being that Rauschenberg *made* the print himself (with Cage's help) while Kelly *collected* papers or pieces of cardboard soiled with tire prints in the streets and pasted them (as ready mades) in his albums. On this, see my essay, "Winks of Recognition," in *Fernand Léger: Paris-New York*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008, pp. 139–46.

30. An amusing anecdote is worth recalling at this point. In the summer 1951, while still in Paris, Kelly sent the painting titled *La Combe III,* from a series of works based on the shadows cast by a railing onto an outdoor staircase, to the "75th Anniversary exhibition of the Boston Museum School." He asked Cage to keep the work for him at the end of the show. When Kelly came to pick it up upon his return to the United States, a little less than four years later, he was heartened to see it hanging above Cage's piano.

31. Kim, p. 172.