

The American connection

'For twenty years or more almost all of the best new painting and sculpture has been done in America...'¹ Such was the opening sentence of Michael Fried's *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland: Jules Olitski: Frank Stella*, 1965, a book Killeen bought in 1973. The complete cultural confidence of the Americans in the 1950s and 60s, their profound certainty that it was they -- and they alone -- who could provide the historically necessary consummation of 100 years of European modernism, is perhaps hard now to recall or believe. But it must be recalled, if we are to understand the formal imperatives to which Killeen's 1970s painting responds.

Likewise, now that its imperatives are not ours, the precision, subtlety and power of American formalist criticism is often forgotten. But it too must be recalled if we are to see the ideas to which Killeen's painting of the 1970s came increasingly to respond. To read, or re-read American formalist essays by such as William S. Rubin and Michael Fried, essays which Killeen himself read in the 1970s, is to bring powerfully alive again all the formal imperatives of the time.

Fried, like his mentor Clement Greenberg, characterises modernism as 'an art of constant formal self-criticism' -- an internally-propelled and perpetual critique engaged in by modernists from at least Manet on. Nor is this because of an infatuation with formal problems for their own sake, but because 'it is one of the prime, if tacit conventions of modernist painting -- a conviction matured out of painful experience, individual and collective -- that only an art of constant self-criticism can bear or embody or communicate more than trivial meaning.'² We may perhaps see an effect of the Greenbergian and Friedian vision of such a self-critique in Killeen's constant dissatisfaction with each achievement; in his endless radical break from each series, no matter how successful; and in his claim that it is

Necessary that all style traits

¹ Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland: Jules Olitski: Frank Stella*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965, p. 4.

² Fried, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

*are questioned continuously so
that they do not continue to be used
longer than they are needed.
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 150)*

For Killeen, as for his erstwhile teacher McCahon, the experience of American art was fundamental. One might say, almost as emphatically of Killeen as of McCahon, that it was the tradition of the perpetually new in American art which allowed him to escape from the reactionary stasis of New Zealand regional realism -- itself, in part, American derived.

A number of the more specific pronouncements of American formalist discourse, in both its painted and written forms, are clearly reflected in Killeen's formal/political concerns of the 1970s and later; and they are crucial, we will see, in pushing Killeen to invent the cut-outs. Killeen's realisation, for instance, that 'modern painting derives its structure from the edge of the board'³ -- a realisation which impelled him, in the end, to get rid of the board -- derives both from American painting itself and from a widely influential analysis by Michael Fried. This analysis famously characterised edge-derived composition as a 'deductive structure' -- 'deductive', that is, in 'relation to the framing edge'.⁴

It is significant that Killeen should have owned Fried's *Three American Painters*, rightly described in William S. Rubin's *Frank Stella*, 1970 -- a book also owned by Killeen -- as 'one of the essential documents in any discussion of the aesthetics of painting in the present decade.'⁵ It was in *Three American Painters* that the term 'deductive pictorial structure' was first introduced, initially to describe what are now commonly known as Newman's 'zips'. In Fried's account, these vertical bands 'amount to echoes within the painting of the two side-framing edges; they relate primarily to these edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas. They demand to be seen as deriving from the framing edge -- as having been "deduced" from it'.⁶

³ Killeen, the black notebook, p. 10.

⁴ Fried, op. cit., p. 23.

⁵ William S. Rubin, *Frank Stella*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, p. 60.

⁶ Fried, op. cit., p. 23.

Newman, Noland and Stella, according to Fried, are those most especially 'concerned with deriving or deducing pictorial structure from the literal character of the picture support'. As such, they are the consummation of a great heritage. Their 'pioneering exploration of "deductive" structure represents an important new development in the evolution of one of the chief preoccupations of modernist painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Matisse -- namely, the increasingly explicit recognition of the physical characteristics of the picture support'.⁷ But the triumph was reserved for Stella's Black Paintings of proffering, for the first time, an 'exaltation of deductive structure as sufficient in itself to provide the substance, and not just the scaffolding or syntax, of major art'.⁸ Finally, according to Fried, Stella's metallic stripe paintings 'came to be generated *in toto*, as it were, by the different shapes of the framing edge'.⁹ [fig. 165]

However, Fried's claim may easily be reversed. One may claim that it is the *image which leads to the picture shape*, rather than the reverse -- that the picture shape is 'deduced' from the image, rather than the other way round.¹⁰ And it is just such a reverse reading of the Americans' shaped canvas which the cut-out proclaims.

Though one might plausibly speak of a deductive reflection of the framing edge in Killeen's Grids on Aluminium, in Killeen's cut-outs, it is the reversal of the Friedian claim which clearly holds true. With the cut-outs, the shape of the ground is clearly deduced from the image, rather than the other way round. No one, not even Fried himself, could imagine a butterfly-shaped canvas, pre-existing as it were, into which a butterfly might then be painted as a merely deductive reflection.

⁷ Fried, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁸ Fried, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁹ Fried, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ In fairness to Fried it must be admitted that there are two sentences in whose subtle tortuosity Fried comes himself some way towards realising the reversability of his claims. These are the sentences, bracketted off by Fried from the rest of his argument, as if to contain their danger to it. '(Though there is also an important sense in which Stella's ambition to make paintings whose patterns appear to be generated by the different shapes of the picture-support exerted a strong influence upon the character of the shapes themselves. That is, although the shapes appear to generate the stripe patterns, the prior decision to achieve deductive structure by means of this particular relation between the stripes and the framing-edge played an important role in determining the character of the shapes.)' Fried, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

Since Killeen read deductive structure *negatively* -- as a mark of an intolerable restraint imposed by the framing edge, he had good reason to prefer to read -- or to 'misread', in Fried's terms -- the images of Stella's and Kelly's shaped canvas as images which *refused* to be impelled by edge, and to assume, contra Fried, that their image impelled their edge rather than vice versa. Killeen's long maintained objections to the composing effects of the frame were themselves quite sufficient to impel this creative 'misreading'. Furthermore, Killeen would have been familiar with such a contra-Fried reading from Rubin's *Frank Stella*, which he had owned since 1973. There Rubin had, as he said, 'taken exception' to Fried's theory.

'The implication of the theory, simply stated, is that the character and the shape of the picture support came first, the internal structure second.' But rather, so Rubin would have it, in Stella, 'the canvas shape ... follows from the serial progression of the bands, rather than being an a priori shape that generates them... and the framing edge was, in fact, deduced from the surface pattern rather than vice versa.' (Doubtless Rubin's 'in fact' refers to the material and procedural fact that in the earliest of Stella's shaped canvases, the image was painted first, and the remainder was later cut away.) In the last resort, says Rubin, there can be no question at all of the primacy of edge over image or of image over edge. 'The pictures ask to be read not from the framing edge inward, nor from the centre outward, but in a single simultaneous perception of the total image.'

Perhaps this is all beginning to sound, or has for some time sounded, like some medieval theologians' dispute over such niceties of distinction as may hardly matter today. But that last sentence from Rubin -- 'The pictures ask to be read not from the framing edge inward, nor from the centre outward, but in a single simultaneous perception of the total image' -- might perfectly characterise the individual pieces of Killeen's first cut-outs, as too, in all fairness, might Fried's further claim of the most radically new American painting of the 60s:

It is as though depicted shape has become less and less capable of venturing on its own, of pursuing its own ends; as though unless, in a given painting, depicted shape manages to participate in -- by helping to establish -- the authority of the support, conviction is aborted and the painting fails. In this sense depicted shape may be said to have become dependent on literal shape -- and indeed

*unable to make itself felt as shape except by acknowledging that dependence.*¹¹

'Depicted shape dependent on literal shape' so that figure and ground, image and surface, are entirely coincident, and are read as 'a single, simultaneous total image' -- how better to describe the single pieces of the early cut-outs?

In Stella's shaped canvas too, as in the pieces of Killeen's first cut-outs, there was the effect, as Stella would say, of a 'stamp', or a 'cookie cut-out'. Killeen might well repeat Stella's remark of his shaped canvases: that 'their entire shape stamps itself out'.¹²

So Stella clearly counted for Killeen. Yet, of all American artists, it was Ellsworth Kelly who most fundamentally affected the cut-outs. Killeen had bought E.C. Goossen's catalogue, *Ellsworth Kelly*, in 1974,¹³ and John Coplans' enormous *Ellsworth Kelly*,¹⁴ probably in the same year; and doubtless, through reproductions in international art magazines, he already knew Kelly's work in the 1960s and early 1970s.

There was, perhaps, as much recognition as 'influence' in Killeen's coming to Kelly -- a seeing of himself as already present in the apparent mentor. Perhaps such a recognition of oneself in another is an invariable precondition of 'influence'. Certainly, anyway, there was much in Kelly which might attract Killeen.

Kelly combined a study of plant forms (if only clearly in drawings) with a formal abstraction, and this when a painter was meant to be *either* an abstractionist *or* a figurationist, and preferably the former. His early abstractions were often based on Nature -- on reflections in water, on shadows, or on architectural forms. His 'mixture of the geometric and the organic',¹⁵ and

¹¹ Fried, quoted in Rubin, op. cit., p. 56.

¹² Stella, in indirect quotation, Rubin, op. cit., p. 30.

¹³ E.C. Goossen, *Ellsworth Kelly*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1973.

¹⁴ John Coplans, *Ellsworth Kelly*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, no publ. date.

¹⁵ Coplan, op. cit., p. 63.

his occasional figurative references, in which the principles of formal abstraction are brought to bear on some naturalistic genre, would also have allowed Killeen to feel at home. (Kelly's *West Coast Landscape*, [fig. 170] for instance, particularly in its title and in its black and white reproduction, might have seemed McCahon revisited.)



fig. 170. Ellsworth Kelly,
West Coast Landscape

There is a passage in Killeen's black notebook which specifically responds to Kelly's naturalistic aspect -- that side of Kelly most particularly stressed in the text and comparative illustrations of Goossen's 'Moma catalogue':

Ellsworth Kelly & shadows

Use of shadows partly results in naturalistic effect of his work. Painting less arbitrary less of a pushing around just to arrive at a pleasing (Euclidean) arrangement.

Kelly Moma catalogue.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 108)

To read and to see in Coplans' *Kelly* that Kelly's art is 'open ended, heterogeneous',¹⁶ and that 'it is based on a non-tautological structure of equally viable alternatives, of one possibility not excluding another',¹⁷ could only have further pleased the pluralist Killeen. Kelly's 'predisposition for a non-linear development' was in accord with his own, as also was his 'disinclination to

¹⁶ Coplan, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁷ Coplan, op. cit., p. 16.

compose in the traditional manner', and his investigation, in his early works, of 'the notion of indeterminacy'.¹⁸

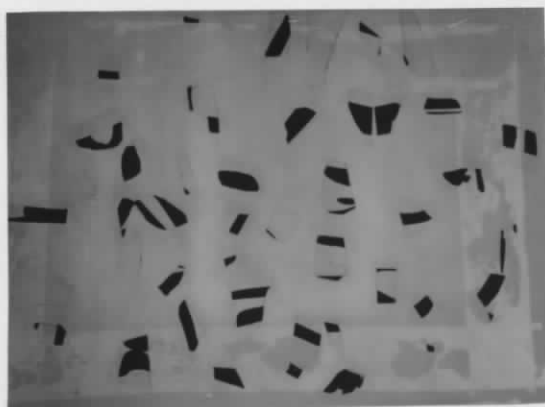


fig. 171. Ellsworth Kelly, *November Painting*, 1950

Like Killeen's major chance performance, *One foot twelve inches*, Kelly's first major chance piece, *November Painting*, 1950 [fig. 171] 'turned out to be a seminal picture, full of retrievable shapes and images'.¹⁹ Here, Kelly, in somewhat Arpian fashion, had cut up an abandoned wash drawing, and scattered it over a panel, allowing the pieces to fall where they might, and had then stuck the pieces down. In later chance works, Kelly was to use numbers drawn from a hat -- a protocol not dissimilar to Killeen's use of cards and dice.

November Painting -- particularly in reproduction, as Killeen saw it -- looks, in the scattering, multiplicity, irregularity and cut-out nature of its shapes, remarkably akin to the cut-outs. It is not that Killeen took the idea of chance from Kelly -- John Cage's musical use of indeterminacy was better-known in the 1960s and 70s, since it was a contemporary practice, as was Richard Serra's thrown, molten lead, and Robert Morris's falling felt. Doubtless, too, Killeen would have known of Arp's famous *Collage with squares arranged according to the laws of chance*, 1916-17, and Duchamp's equally famous *Standard stops*, and the chance effects of the *Large Glass*. So Killeen would hardly have needed Kelly to introduce him to chance. Rather, Killeen would have recognised in Kelly's use of chance yet another commonality of interest.

¹⁸ Coplan, op. cit., p. 17. Also, Killeen's negative usage of the word 'Euclidean' doubtless reflects its repeated use by Coplan as a kind of negative description -- to show what Kelly's art is not.

¹⁹ Goossen, op. cit., p. 37.

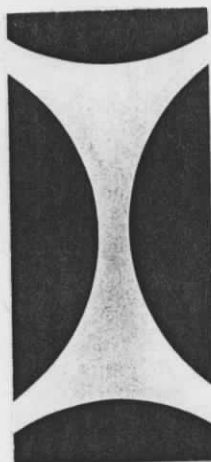


fig. 172.
Ellsworth Kelly,
Brooklyn
Bridge V, 1959

The fact that 'from the beginning Kelly's art reveals a basic concern with the total surface of the picture and with devising methods of controlling it evenly', would further have appealed to Killeen, who too had long sought 'democratic', 'all-over' compositional effects. He would also have recognised in some works by Kelly the same desire he knew in Walters and himself: to equalise, through ambiguity as to which was which, the relationship between figure and ground. [fig. 172] And he might have found a likeness to himself even in such details of development as the fact that Kelly had increased 'the size of his units', 'so that the discrete units' become 'more apparent', whereas *en masse* they had tended to read 'not as discrete entities but as pattern'.²⁰ Hadn't he done the same thing with the triangles of his *Grids Various*, enlarging them into the *Grids on Aluminium*, and the same with the images of the *Birds and Beasts on Sand*, enlarging them into the cut-outs, increasing their size, in both cases, precisely to avoid (mere) pattern?

'None of my pictures are arrangements', so Kelly proclaimed. That claim, and Kelly's following pronouncement, might as easily have been made by Killeen of his cut-outs. 'My intention has been to divide the space and not to arrange the form. I am not interested in composing.'²¹

²⁰ Coplan, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²¹ Kelly, cited by Coplan, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

In the black notebook, Killeen remarks Stella and Kelly as exemplars of the 'single, shaped canvas'. Their rationale, says Killeen, is 'to get away from formal relationships'; they are 'Trying to relate the pieces in less of a formal compositional way.'²² And so it was they, I would say, who had provoked Killeen to proclaim two pages before:

*... it is not the formal
compositional balance & relation between parts
that is important anymore but the
association of feeling and idea between the parts.
The idea is not the relationship between the
parts but the overall bringing together
of the parts to make something which is
not necessarily a whole...'*
(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 104)

Though Killeen's remarks concern Stella as well as Kelly, if we were to personalise with a proper name the propelling effect the American genre of the shaped canvas had on Killeen's cut-outs, that name would have to be Kelly's.

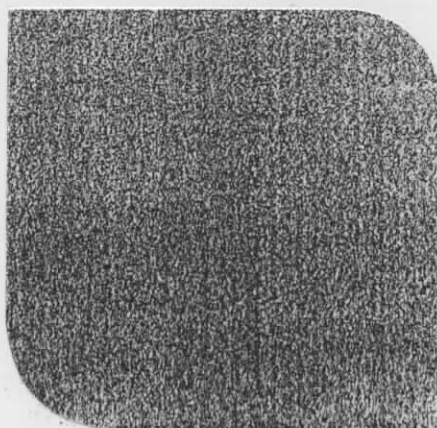


fig. 173. Ellsworth Kelly, *Yellow Piece*, 1966

Kelly alone among the Americans painted *monochrome* shaped canvases. And he alone made combines of a number of separate, monochrome panels. Symptomatically, Coplan's description of Kelly's *Yellow Piece*, 1966, [**fig. 173**] would, with the necessary adjustments for the difference of ground, well describe the individual pieces of the cut-outs between 1978 and 1980. 'The shape

²² Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 106.

of the canvas, the image, and the colour are one and the same; they share boundaries and surfaces.'²³ Coplan's remarks of the colour relations between Kelly's *Four Panels: Green Red Yellow Blue*, 1956, would equally apply: 'The colours ... run from edge to edge, flat, unmodulated, and possessing a high intensity of hue. Yet the degree of their optical interference with each other is minimised by the spacing; each panel exists separately, discretely.'²⁴

Interestingly enough, Kelly's paintings look far more like Killeen's early cut-outs when they are seen as Killeen first saw them: not in the matte presence of their material, painted fact, but in the high sheen and tightening shrinkage of printed reproduction. In reproduction, the canvas weave is rendered invisible, as are the workmanlike but unconcealed traces of the brush. Also, though one would not want to push this additional point too far, the *thickness* of Kelly's shaped canvas and support is reduced in Coplan's book to that of the paper of the shaped and tipped in plate -- a thinness of projection from the supporting ground which is curiously close to the effect of Killeen's cut-outs on the wall, and far from Kelly's paintings on theirs. (Title for an as yet unwritten but necessary study: 'The Effects on New Zealand Painting of Studying Art Only in Reproduction'.)

With Kelly's reliefs and sculptural works, however, the effect even of the originals is close to Killeen, since, like Killeen's *Grids on Aluminium*, and like the cut-outs themselves, they are formed of cut-out and monochromed aluminium sheet. Furthermore, whereas Kelly's paintings 'proper' remain geometrically regular in their shape, and this even when they avoid rectangularity, many of his reliefs are close to the cut-outs in their irregularity and organicism. Such reliefs, 'freestanding, thin, and relatively two-dimensional objects' are 'more or less intended to be seen against a wall'. [fig. 174] There are also reliefs akin to the pieces of the cut-outs in that Kelly has 'lifted the shapes literally out of the field and positioned them a few inches out from the surface'.²⁵ [fig. 175]

²³ Coplan, op. cit., p. 78.

²⁴ Coplan, op. cit., p. 82.

²⁵ Goossen, op. cit., p. 79.

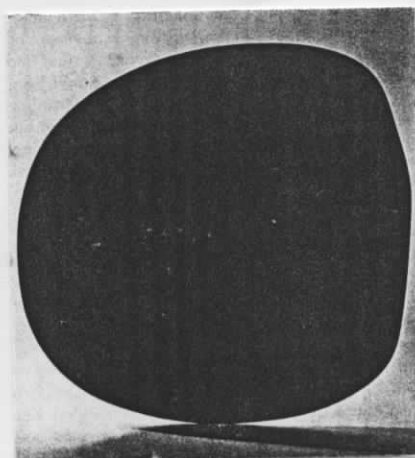


fig. 174. Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue disk*, 1963

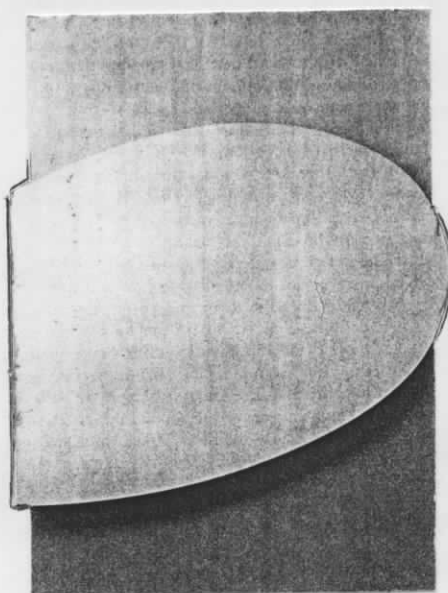


fig. 175. Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue On Blue*, 1963

Above all, perhaps, it is Kelly's idea of 'a group of paintings of various size to be hung together as one'²⁶ which provides the most exact and exacting precedent for Killeen's cut-outs. This idea apparently came to Kelly when, in 1956, he saw a group of 'various sized pictures displayed on a wall at a Gris exhibition', and they 'they formed a kind of gestalt'. Out of this experience came works like *Painting in five panels*, 1956. [fig. 176] One might well compare Kelly's idea of a 'group of paintings of various size to be hung together as one' with the idea Killeen considered at the time of the *Grids on Aluminium*: 'small

²⁶ Goossen, op. cit., p. 79.

paintings hung at different heights and positions'.²⁷ [fig. 164] In this respect too it is significant that, as I have said, 'small paintings hung at different heights and positions' might be a (slightly naive) definition of the cut-outs themselves.

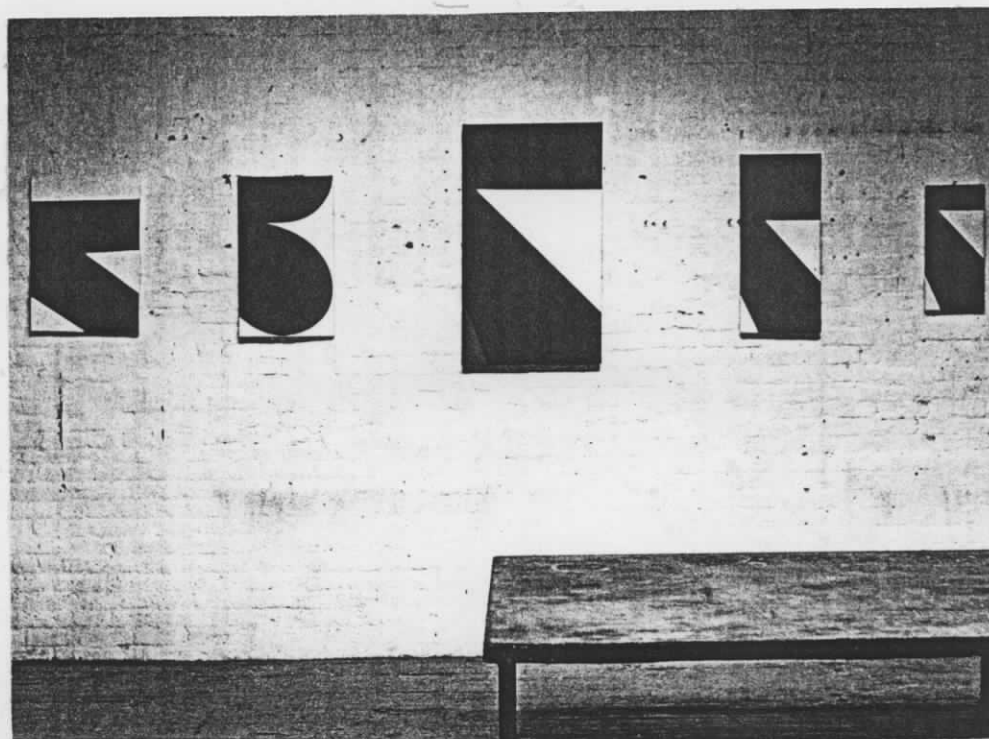


fig. 176. Ellsworth Kelly, *Painting in five panels*, 1956

What Killeen's cut-outs have inventively done, we are now in a position to say, is to combine the genre of the non-rectangular shaped work, as found in Kelly and Stella, with that of Kelly's multiple panels 'of various size to be hung together as one' -- *a combination never made by Kelly himself*. (The fact, however, that 'the panels of various size' are 'figurative', not 'abstract', is pure Killeen, and could never have been allowed in an American formalist discourse. Otherwise -- and had Killeen been an American -- one might imagine a Rubin or a Fried triumphantly announcing this Killeenian move as a consummation)

As I show in my chapter 'The first cut-outs', Killeen did once consider making a single 'shaped' canvas ('one shape very large painted one colour') in the manner of Kelly or Stella, but he rejected it since it 'Makes one shape "significant" as art'.²⁸ In other words, despite his sympathy for its reduction of

²⁷ Killeen, the black notebook, p. 29.

²⁸ Killeen, the black notebook, p. 28.

hierarchy, Killeen rejects Stella's and Kelly's single shaped work as intrinsically *still* hierarchical, in that it proclaims one thing, of all the things in the world, as 'significant', as if it alone were worthy of art's attentions. He wishes to *go further* with pictorial democracy than Kelly and Stella themselves. He seeks a pluralism unimaginable in formalist and modernist terms.

Curiously enough, though Kelly never combined his shaped canvases with his idea of hanging a number of panels as one work, an informal hanging of drawings and a poster on his studio wall, as illustrated in Goossen's *Ellsworth Kelly*,²⁹ [fig. 177] does come close, in both the smallness and variety of its parts, to the effect of Killeen's first cut-outs.



fig. 177. Ellsworth Kelly in his New York Studio, 1957

Another snapshot published by Goossen³⁰ is as suggestive in a different way: it includes, amongst Kelly's early works leaning or tacked on a wall, a very Matissean lobed image. [fig. 178] It was Matisse, of course, who first provoked in art discourse the common use of the word 'cut-outs'; and, as a somewhat misleading consequence of this, it is he who is usually claimed as the Killeenian cut-out's progenitor. I have argued elsewhere that Killeen's cut-outs differ markedly from Matisse's, in not being stuck permanently down on their ground,

²⁹ Goossen, op. cit., p. 49.

³⁰ Goossen, op. cit., p. 17.

and in a number of other significant ways.³¹ However, this snapshot allows us now judiciously to rephrase: if Matisse, it is Matisse *via* Kelly. If Matisse affects Killeen, it is Matisse as already absorbed in current American art. (Matisse *via* Stella, for a further instance. Stella's colourism, and constant device of leaving the white ground as a naked stripe between each colour, is ultimately derived from Matisse.)



fig. 178. Ellsworth Kelly in his Paris Studio room 1957

Significantly, in his note

6. 79 *Henri Matisse & Ellsworth Kelly*
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 80)

the only note where Killeen mentions Matisse -- he realises, rightly, that Matisse comes to him via Kelly -- as American absorbed in advance.

³¹ They do not, 'like Matisse, bear traces of the classical tradition', nor do they 'imply space by foreshortening and overlapping', and 'nor do they have lyrical outlines, or lyrically conjoin.' Rather: 'They are as abstract as a stamp, as unlyrical as signs, as logos, or definitions in a dictionary; their flat clarity is all that they offer.' (Francis Pound, 'Killeen', *New Image*, Auckland City Art Gallery 1983, p. 16.)