

## *Testing the Limits*

---

*Remarks at the Opening of the Ellsworth Kelly Exhibition  
Sackler Museum, March 4, 1999*

I WOULD LIKE to make a few remarks, from a purely personal point of view, about Ellsworth Kelly's work.

I am not certain that I know any art that is more demanding or more difficult than Ellsworth's – notwithstanding the fact that it is so often radiant, so full of invitation, and seems (sometimes) to be so disarmingly accessible.

But when we consider the infinite repertoire of worldly and otherworldly objects that one might draw or paint or sculpt; the range of techniques one might use; the kinds of gesture and illusion one might create – when we think of this entire array of capacities that has been available to artists throughout much of history – then Ellsworth's work seems like a marvelously radical and continuing exercise in self-denial. So much of his art depends on everything that he has *eliminated* from the work, including any of the ordinary traces of the artist as a presence who clearly “creates” either as interventionist, composer, image-maker, or magician.

The journey that I feel I am asked to take with Ellsworth is in one sense a journey of deliberate renunciation and deprivation –

## *The Arts and Humanities*

granted that what we ultimately discover more than compensates for all that he has sacrificed. For me, at least, the rewards of his art reflect the enormous achievement of a visual sensibility and intelligence that have been purified to the point where every nuance and inflection, in each new piece, every shade and tone and value, matters absolutely. Every move that might all too easily lapse into something familiar or merely imperfect, or into an imitation of previous moves – all that has been avoided. As a result, we are forced to try to “see,” with each new revelation, what we are actually looking at: what a particular new juxtaposition of shapes and colors, or the silent presence of a new solitary object, seems to indicate; what seems to have shifted since the previous chapter of Ellsworth’s work; what readjustment of nearly indiscernible weights and balances has occurred, demanding that we respond – testing the limits of our capacity – to the differences we sense, or the meanings that have suddenly been discovered.

T. S. Eliot once remarked that we can only get the better of words for those things we no longer want to say. For Ellsworth (as for Eliot) the constant effort is to find “objective correlatives” for those new perceptions that one’s intuition and sensibility have somehow grasped, but that one is still struggling to articulate and clarify in art, using whatever equipment – whether words, or shapes and colors – one has available.

Ellsworth, we celebrate all that you have given us over many years – for helping us to see what we had missed, or what had simply never existed before you brought it into being. Most of all, we toast your presence among us, your friendship, and your unwillingness to tolerate – whether in work or in life – anything less than what has been purified, perfected, and only then “presented.”