(rev. 3/15/99)

Ellsworth Kelly, American, b. 1923
Blue-White, 1962
Oil on canvas, 103-106 in.
Gevirtz-Mnuchin Purchase Fund

"Soft meets soft (like the pressurized curve of two balloons) but it is designed hard and crisp,"[1] remarked an astute observer of *Blue-White*, a seminal early 1960s painting by Ellsworth Kelly.[2] The tension is palpable--push literally comes to shove with the outcome unclear. Of course nothing's moving but Kelly's genius lies in transforming a fragment of something he has seen and remembered (perhaps two balloons, perhaps several square inches of the human body) into an abstract composition of shape and color.

Kelly has always insisted on the connection between abstracton and nature. Assigned to the Army Engineers' camouflage division during World War II, which sent him to France, his eye was trained by the rules of camouflage--color, shape, shadow, texture--in a way art school had not. After the War and two years at Boston's Museum School, he returned to France for six years of further study on the GI Bill of Rights, and by 1954 had established the visual vocabulary he has used ever since.

"Don't forget nature. . . . Learn the forms of nature by heart, so you can use them like the musical notes of a composition. . . . The impression nature makes upon you must always become an expression of your own (feelings) and consequently in your own formation of it, it must contain that transformation which only then makes art a real abstraction."[3]

During his years in France, Kelly honed his perception, searching out the elemental aspects of things within things--the geometry of a single window mullion, the arcs and orthagonals of a kilometer marker, the undulating reflections of bridges and boats on the Seine--and his sketchbooks and studies from those years document the transformation he learned to bring about. Unaware of the explosion of abstract expressionism in New York, he worked on his poetic geometries in the milieu of Paris, where Brancusi and Arp were producing their singular biomorphic abstractions, Mondrian and others were painting geometric abstractions, and the Americans Merce Cunningham and John Cage, encouraged by Marcel Duchamp, experimented with the laws of chance. Yet, Kelly stuck resolutely to his own search to see and transform.

When he returned to New York in 1954, ill and discouraged, Kelly

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[1] E, C, Goossen, *Ellsworth Kelly*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1973, 73.
[2] Kelly painted an earlier, smaller black and white version of the composition in 1959, *Rebound*. (Collection D. Franklin Konisberg, Los Angeles, 68 x 71 1/2 in., reproduced in Goossen, 70)
[3] *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948-54* (exhib cat.). Washington, DC, The National Gallery of Art, 1992. Kelly's recollection of letters read by Max Beckmann to an art student, during his Boston years. Quoted in Chronology by Nathalie Burnet, 178.

found himself out of touch with the art world, both abstract expressionism and the incipient pop and minimal movements. "Older, respcted artists would tell me I wasn't painting, I was just determining a shape and filling it with color," he remembered. "because in those Abstract Expressionist days, it was not thought valid to plan a painting. You had to face the canvas as a battlefield."[4] A meeting with Robert Rauschenberg, who was making enormous collages of everything from bedspreads to stuffed animals, increased his feelings of isolation.

As the decade progressed, Kelly's work attracted increasing critical attention (Betty Parsons gave him a one-person show in 1956, the Whitney Museum included him in Young America 1957, and he was in the Museum of Modern Art's *16 Americans* two years later) but, unlike the other pop and minimal stars of his generation, Kelly's work remained elusive. He was impossible to classify: his "hard-edge" paintings weren't about edges, his geometries weren't about a fixed system, his "chance" was the result of countless observations.

Kelly paints, draws, and sculpts only that which he has observed and distilled. The body of work in his recent retrospective was unique, independent of other artists and movements. He remains "resolutely inner-directed, neither a reaction to abstract expressionism nor the outcome of a dialogue with his contemporaries."[5] For Kelly, the most pleasurable thing in the world is to <u>see</u> something and then to translate that observation into something that no one else has ever seen before.[6]

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[4] Kelly in *Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective* (exhib brochure). New York: The Guggenheim Museum, 1996, unpaged.

[5] William S. Rubin, "Ellsworth Kelly: The Big Form." ArtNews 62 (November 1963). 32-5, 64-5.

[6] Elizabeth Baker, *Ellsworth Kelly* (exhib. cat.). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979, 7.