

THE CONTENT OF STRIPES

One day while the show “Three American Painters” was hanging at the Fogg Museum at Harvard, Michael Fried and I were standing in one of the galleries. To our right was a copper painting by Frank Stella, its surface burnished by the light which flooded the room. A Harvard student who had entered the gallery approached us. With his left arm raised and his finger pointing to the Stella, he confronted Michael Fried. “What’s so good about that?” he demanded. Fried looked back at him. “Look,” he said slowly, “there are days when Stella goes to the Metropolitan Museum. And he sits for hours looking at the Velázquez, utterly knocked out by them and then he goes back to his studio. What he would like more than anything else is to paint like Velázquez. But what he knows is that that is an option that is not open to him. So he paints stripes.” Fried’s voice had risen. “He wants to be Velázquez *so he paints stripes.*”

I don’t know what the boy thought, but it was clear enough to me. That statement, which linked Velázquez’s needs to Stella’s in the immense broad jump of a single sentence, was a giant ellipsis whose leap cleared three centuries of art. But in my mind’s eye it was more like one of those strobe photographs in which each increment of the jumper’s act registers on the single image. I could see what the student could not, and what Fried’s statement did not fill in for him. Under the glittering panes of that skylight, I could visualize the logic of an argument that connected hundreds of separate pictorial acts into the fluid clarity of a single motion, an argument that was as present to me as the paintings hanging in the gallery—their clean, spare surfaces tied back into the faint grime of walls dedicated to the history of art. If Fried had not chose to give the whole of that argument to the student, he had tried to make the student think about one piece of the obvious: that Stella’s need to say something through his art was the same as a seventeenth-century Spaniard’s; only the point in time was different. In 1965, the fact that Stella’s stripes were involved with what he wanted to say—a product, that is, of *content*—was clear enough to me.

—[Rosalind Krauss](#), “A View of Modernism,” *Artforum*, September 1972