Albuquerque Lecture / February 12, 1989

Following the introduction mentioning my residence in England and the United States, I will be discussing my geographical roots, as I think they have some bearing on my work; actually, they're intertwined with it. What I would like to do today is concentrate on two phases of my work that connect very well. In fact, I have recently completed what I consider to be a kind of circle. And I would like to give this lecture a title, the first time I've done so: "High and Low, or the Sublime and the Ordinary."

These are two paintings from 1971; *Backcloth* is ten feet wide and *Bridge* is nine feet high. It is very important when one is looking at my work or relating my work to other people's work to bear in mind that I do come from Europe, which gives my evolution its own particular character. And my work, for a very long time, has been based on the grid: the interaction of the horizontal with the vertical and the vertical with the horizontal. And I use those two forms, those primary directions that we can describe. When I made these paintings I was trying to resolve two very important influences. On one hand, I was powerfully impressed by the work of Mondrian. To me he represented the Old World and the aspirations of an artist trying to make work that is spiritual and profound through the use of the horizontal and the vertical. On the other hand, there was another artist that I was very impressed by, and that was Jackson Pollock. Pollock represented the New World and a kind of freedom. I knew he came from Wyoming and it seemed to me that all the cowboy movies I had ever seen and everything that I had up that point found out about art somehow intersected in the work of Jackson Pollock. So I tried, in a single work, to locate myself in relation to these two artists.

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It might be worth mentioning at this point that when I made these paintings I lived in Newcastle, which is a shipbuilding town circumvented by a river. The river is crossed by nine bridges made up of overlapping steel girders, and as you look out you see overlapping grids as you go across. Another, though secondary, influence on my work at this point was Bridget Riley, who did paintings that have a low optical hum to them.

The primary issue for me with these paintings, as I said, was in resolving Mondrian and Pollock. Mondrian, as mentioned, represented the values, the conscience and the integrity of the Old World (Europe) as opposed to the New World (America), whose values have been expressed in loud, brash terms. There was a kind of materialism, a literalism, about American art that very often led an excess of scale and spatial light effects. However, the work of each of these two artists contains a contradiction inherent in itself. Mondrian's paintings appear to be compositional, but when one looks at his relentless façade there is no possibility for spatial hierarchy. So in a sense, the composition in his work is leveled out by the power of the surface. Now, Jackson Pollock represented all-overness, and what this was about was a kind of anarchy, or leveling of order, knocking down hierarchies, of knocking down the values of the Old World where I lived. The contradiction in Pollock's work is that it resolves itself into an even harmony; as they are very calm works despite the anarchy. Even though the chaos is very apparent in the method, the overall effect is one of sublime harmony. In any case, at this point I sensed the thrill of a dangerous truth, and that truth turned out, of course, to be my truth, my own, the thrill of me confronting what would become the base and foundation of my own work. These paintings are frankly illusionistic. And like Pollock's they are built up in layers; but like Mondrian's they are strictly geometric, only horizontals and verticals.

I cut the corners from the bottoms of some of these paintings was because I wanted the structures of the paintings to relate to the picture edge. I did a number of paintings like *East Coast Light #1* (1973). That's a very important impulse in my work. It is something I've never given up – that is, to always work from the literal fact of the picture edge, to always relate to it. I did do some of these paintings as squares (e.g., *Overlay*, 1973), and although they were not less satisfactory to me as paintings they were further from the most serious impulse, the closest impulse to me. These paintings jump forward! The last painting you saw was from 1973, and now we go up to 1980-81. The one on the left is *Heart of Darkness* (twelve feet wide and eight feet high) and the one on the right is called Catherine (eight feet wide and nine feet high). They're oil paintings, made up of three panels each, and flat.

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I should say something here about abstraction, about why I make abstract paintings. I agree with Kandinsky's view that the depiction of the appearance of the real world somehow obstructs access to the spiritual domain. And it is that domain that I am trying to gain access to with my paintings. That is what I am always trying to address. And that's why I paint abstractly. A second reason is that abstraction has become the basis for other art forms. Carter Ratcliff, a very fine critic, just wrote an essay on my work in which he said that the reason that I chose to paint abstractly is because I wanted to work on the foundation on art. And that's true. I wanted to work on its primary structure, its primary emotions, and I wanted to get as deep into its heart-center as I could. And that's why I've never done anything but abstract paintings since I began to paint them, even though I started out as a figurative painter.

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In regard to Kandinsky, however, I agree with Greenberg's view that the depiction of space in abstraction leads to a kind of illustration. The overt depiction of picture space, to my mind, gets in the way of the high ideals of abstraction, which has to be realized more frontally, more physically. I see Kandinsky and Mondrian as presenting the two dynamic possibilities from which abstract painting has developed up until the present time. And because of that I have always related to Mondrian. Mondrian's facades are greatly preferable to me over Kandinsky's spatial compositions, though I consider Kandinsky's theories on the spiritual in art profoundly important.

Here are some paintings (*Installation*, *Maesta*, *Blame*, and *Come In* of 1982) that relate somewhat to the paintings in the show. These have projections. The reason that I make a painting project is because I want it to have more physical mass. I want the paintings to be more real, as objects. At the time I made these there was a lot of painting being shown in New York that was called "neo-expressionist." Neo-expressionism was a resurgence of large-scale graphic figurative and expressionistic painting. And I found it very, very good for abstraction. It gave abstract painting a kick in the pants, which it needed. And abstraction is now giving figuration a good kick in the pants. But that's the way it goes; that's how we keep ourselves alive in art.

So, what I did at this time was to violate the picture plane – that sacred picture plane led to the problem in the first place. I'll talk about that a bit later, how it has something to do with Greenberg's formalism. Anyway, I wanted these paintings to have a physical bulk so that they could be viewed like the sides of buildings.

It might also be helpful now if I explained why I have painted with stripes for twenty years up to this point – in ten years it will probably by thirty years. I think that it is because I am an obsessive artist, not a formalist. By that I mean that I am interested in content, or depth, subject matter rather than experimentation – which means I would like to follow the examples set by Rothko and Mondrian. Even though my paintings have changed, the changes have come from a desire to address my views on content and subject matter. Changes have never come about because of play or from pure experimentation; I am not particularly interested in that. What I've done with the stripe is to reinterpret it over and over and over again. Yet, I don't work automatically. I don't accept my obsession with a particular form without subjecting it to a lot of criticism. Thus, I don't paint over and over again in the same way for many years without making radical changes (as somebody like Agnes Martin). I try to subject my obsessive nature to a criticality so that I am always questioning it; and by doing that I force myself to constantly reestablish my relationship with the work. In other words, I have a scepticisim about that obsessiveness that results in formal change, rather than being an interest in pure experimentation. And I think in the main that there are two kinds of abstract painters. One can have a varying amount of one kind or the other in oneself; I'm not saying you're either this or that. But the two extremes are on one hand the kind of abstract painter who looks for composition and new forms and the kind who looks for content on the other.

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This is from the same exhibition. The painting on the right is called *Angel*, and it's made of two panels, one painted heavily with thick oil paint and the other is flat and white with black lines drawn on it. I wanted to paint a picture that was very light and airy. I actually thought of this painting while I was on an airplane, and then I just went back to the studio and painted it. It was a very easy painting to make because the idea for the painting was so clear: it was about the contrast between being clothed and being naked, or between body and spirit. I

wanted to make a painting that involved a suspension of meaning, where neither the left side nor the right side of the painting provided a static truth. The painting is always in flux since both sides are presented with equal force.

The painting on the right is much longer – it is twelve feet long and called *By Night and By Day*. Sometimes I give my paintings longer titles. The reason I would do that is because I see the painting as a kind of narrative, traveling from left to right and back again; so then I will give the work a title that takes longer to read. That's also a flat painting. This painting is called *Maesta* and is an homage to Duccio's painting of the same name. The central panel, the panel that juts forward and has physical bulk, is the panel that has a lot of color in it. It is red and blue. The surrounding panels are black and white – opposite, of course, in their orientation, vertical and horizontal. They hold in the central panel, or they represent a grounding for it, which in this painting represents body. The other panels are more empty of color and, I think, make an allusion to world of the spirit.

To quote again from Carter Ratcliff's article: he says that my paintings are not compositions that are messages to decipher. That's right; that's not the right way to look at them. A more helpful way to look at them would be to try and see them as personalities – the way you might see a personality or a person that needs to be understood in conflicting ways. I'm not trying to make paintings that are decipherable and "understood," because I don't think that's what is needed; that becomes a dead thing. I try to make paintings that are not conquerable, that can be reused over and over again, that are not merely designs – which brings me to this painting called *Tiger*. The part that sticks out at the top makes it look very top heavy and dangerous. In fact, this painting jumped on him. In fact, I had to put the top panel on to make the painting more physically aggressive.

Following from what I just said about paintings being decipherable, it might be interesting now to talk about imperfection in my work and about surface and emotion. Going back just momentarily to Mondrian: Mondrian's bridge to spirituality is a bridge that is about near-perfection. Things aren't actually perfect, but they are about near-perfection. Mine are not. My paintings are about flaws and about life (street life). There's an interesting line for me

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that has a strong relationship to this painting and runs between Jasper Johns' "flag" paintings, which are very object oriented (as my paintings are), rather than spatially oriented. Of particular help to me with Johns' flag paintings (in relation to this objectness) was the brush stroke. The irrefutable object in minimal painting very quickly became, for me, the inert object, the lifeless object. The tautology in Johns' painting, was however, that it alleviated the tedium of the "objectness" of the painting and the banality of the image (through the surface, through connecting the painting to the history of painting), so in that sense they go back to European painting because of that very beautiful brush-stroked structure.

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This is called *Cradle*. Now, paint strokes are very crucial to an understanding of my work. The paint strokes do a number of things, but they do not simply describe the form in my work: they affirm the human spirit, the involvement of the human spirit. What is particularly moving to me about this idea, and what is also very dynamic about it, is that a paint stroke that describes a form also describes a gesture. That means that it stands outside technological development and can never be subjected to mechanization or technology. It is always about renewing the primitive impulse in order to make the gesture. I find it very powerful in relation to the rest of the world. Obviously, if one is going to be an artist one has to try to find how to make one's particular art form, whatever it is, relevant or necessary in its own time. I think that this relationship can make painting a very powerful and humanizing art form right now. That means that one has to then deal with the issue of style, which is of course a real problem. What you have to do is find a way of painting something that embodies all of your aspirations – which is why painting is so difficult, because it is a very narrow art form. My painting style, of course, is based on a very simple form: they don't go across, against the form, but go with it and can be seen differently as individual strokes. So that while making a pictorial structure, a surface structure, they also follow the direction of the form, which means that the band has a kind of speed to it that varies from painting to painting.

I think it is also helpful at this point to mention that the reason I always use separate panels in my work is because I don't like to paint the ends of the stripe. Now, that's a funny thing to say, but it is also a serious things to say, and it has a lot to do with (again) the same issue:

with style and with reality. The reason I don't like to paint the end of the stripe is because I don't like to be in a position where I feel that I am describing something, where I have to take into account things that might somehow interfere with the velocity of the painting of the form. What I do is to let the stripe, or rather the way it is painted, go off the end of one panel, and I abut that with the end of the band or stripe that goes off from another panel. So there's a collision. Joe Maschek of ArtLife calls it "car crashes" in my work. The surfaces crash into each other because I don't slow down when I get to the end of the stripe; I just paint right off. So they have the immediacy of sculpture whether they're in relief or not (that doesn't matter). The fact that they're on separate panels connects them to the real world and also gives them a physical urgency. That's why I paint that way.

I'll show you how this painting was made. And just to say something about my own art historical tradition: I would say that Velásquez, obviously Duccio and Giotto, figure into it very strongly. Flat painters figure strongly, surface painters. But Velásquez is a painter that I greatly admire because his work has a dignity and a very beautiful narrative surface structure. That is, if you look at a Velásquez painting you will see that its different parts are painted in different ways. The brush strokes are always very evident, and those of course led to a lot of things that Manet did in his paintings. The surfaces are very subjective and intense – all the way through a Velasquez painting – and with that one can follow a kind of story, an essential narrative. It's picked up again very explosively in Van Gogh's paintings and again in Mondrian. It is clear that Van Gogh leads to Mondrian's early work.

That's a little painting on wood, two pieces of wood. I did a number of these. I would paint them and then slap them together. They're very small, twelve inches or fifteen inches (e.g., *Ridge*, 1982).

Now, I'd like to address the title of this lecture, "High and Low, or the Contradiction in Art." This means that when one is dealing with the domain of the spirit, with lofty ideas, one is dealing with High Art. The danger here, not just with abstraction but with any idealistic art, is that you get further away from life. The "higher" the art the further away from life you get. What I've tried to do with my work is to keep a line open, or rather to make a line

between the ordinary and the sublime. John Caldwell wrote an essay on my work and said that in the tradition of the sublime it is very unusual for paintings to be so overtly physical because most paintings that aspire to the sublime are very discrete physically – like Rothko, one of my favorite artists. Even though his paintings are huge they are very discrete, very physically on the surface; and they are very thin. However, I think that it is physicality in art that keeps it connected, affirms its connection and its dependence on the real world, on life, on ordinary life. I have chosen to confront two traditions in my work: the tradition of the sublime and the tradition of objects, which as a lot to do, of course, with minimalism. And it is because of this belief that I feel that the physicality of the surface is so crucial to the life of the painting, to the accountability of the painting; the painting can be used to constantly reaffirm that connection. That's why I won't let go of that.

This is a very nice photograph because it shows that there really isn't a whole lot of difference between my paintings and that wall (*Montauk*, Edward Albee collection). The difference, of course, is that some of the things that exist on that wall unconsciously exist in my paintings consciously. That's one of the differences. On this issue I take it that people know what Formalism is, by which I mean Greenberg and Formalism. The problem with that was that instead of the high feeding on the low, it was the high feeding on the high; and so it was a dead end, and that's not good. It became a kind of academy, and so the paintings lacked life. What they really were about was rules. They seem to me to be dead now, those pictures …

This painting, *Long Night* (1984), has a middle panel made up of wooden boards (they're real stripes), and I painted over the boards. It has some relief with that very large piece that comes forward just for the width of the board, no more. It makes a point of the material, of the fact that they are boards. I constantly try to bring my paintings back to reality, and then I try to make them soar through the use of color – overlaying the color and the emotive painting itself. So the paintings are based on a number of contradictions: like the opposition of horizontal and vertical, the opposition of the banality of the subject matter (stripes) and the lofty claims that I make for the paints (my intentions). The gesture in the surface constantly affirms and insists on the human presence.

The painting on the left (*Round and Round*, 1984) is another with painted boards in the middle. I found that interesting. This gallery, by the way, is very rough. It's in Dusseldorf (Schema Gallery) and is all concrete and brick walls. I liked the idea of showing the paintings in a very rough environment. It makes that connection very strong. *Any Questions* (1984) is a painting I did about three or four years ago in which I tried to break up the perfection of the form that I used. On the left side I reduced the color to black and white, and I saw that as a figure, like the eternal figure. And on the right side of the painting I painted the form as if that side had fallen apart and then had to be put back together again. It is very schizophrenic between one side and the other. The left side projects, and so, the sides have a strangely competitive physicality. The black and white side has the advantage of being projected forward, but the other side has the advantage of being a number of panels bolted together with a piece out.

These from the Santa Barbara series are monotypes and the closest I've gotten for a long time to pure experimentation. The reason that these come close to experimentation is because I was working with a group of people; and that's very difficult sometimes. The interesting thing that came out of this, which had already begun to happen in the work, is that the inset had gone from the side of the painting off to the corner where two sides were touching or where three sides were touching, to being taken into the field, where four sides are touching. In other words, it does quite frankly become a figure/ground relationship.

This is a six-foot square painting called *Vice*. There is an inset in the middle on which, in fact, the ends of the stripes are painted: here and on the separate panel, there and on the separate square. So it's really like a square with an inset that is physically pushed in, causing a great pressure. It is very important to mention that I painted them separately. I don't paint them together; I paint them apart and then I put them together afterwards. This painting is about painting things, for want of a better phrase, in a traditional sense by painting the ends of the stripes and so on and then sticking it in. *Precious* is another painting with a square put into the middle.

This painting is called *Dream Land*. It is an interesting painting, formally, for me. It comes quite close to the possibility of getting rid of repetition. It flirts with that. However, the panel, the inset that drops in at the top reaffirms it. The areas in my paintings are all, of course, "all-over" paintings. They're like bits of all-over paintings that are put together in competition with each other or in harmony with each other or in discord with each other. I don't necessarily try to harmonize the panels, or the areas, in my work. All the areas are made up of repeated imagery. They are compositional paintings that are made up of all-over paintings. There's another contradiction for you.

This is a painting that I thought of as either a barred window or as a figure/ground painting. It's called *Nostromo* after Joseph Conrad's novel. The yellow panel set into the painting is painted in a very dry way while the rest is painted heavily and very physically. I was interested in the fragility of that relationship, that the outside of the painting swamped the inset, the smaller panel, which is more intimate. This introduces another point that is interesting to me: how to make paintings functional on a number of different levels, from far away as signs (or emblems) and close up. I try to humanize my paintings through the physical layering of color, which can add surface complexity and mystery to a painting that has enormous size and bulk. Up close I would like the painting to be felt poetically and intimately.

This is an installation shot from an exhibition I had recently in London at Rowan Gallery (1988). And this is a painting called *Catherine* (1987). Here, I think that the issue of the wall is very clearly expressed. The painting is flat, is about eight-and-a-half feet high and very roughly painted. It has a calmness about it, but it also has a manual quality that undermines, works against, subverts its austerity.

This painting is called *Between You and Me*. The inset on the left is surrounded by a very rough wooden frame. The inset on the right is not; it is scraped out and fits very flatly within the painting. The wide vertical bands are all painted differently, by the way. It's not just a black and white painting; there are grays such that each band evolved very slowly and with great difficulty. The inset has a kind of isolated quality. I thought of this painting as being

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about that kind of situation where something is cut off from something else. And by framing it in wood it becomes very emphatically isolated. It also goes around and in on itself. As you can see, I can extrapolate from these paintings a kind of narrative.

This painting is called *White Window*. It is very important to me that it is a window. The windows in my recent paintings are a thing that I am very excited about: they are not an illusion, and they're not necessarily an allusion to another space, a physical space, as they might be if the paintings were to be interpreted literally or materially. They function as metaphors for either hope or disturbance, or for another kind of reality in what is an otherwise obsessive field. What I'm saying is that the paintings of the last seven years never give into the impulse to paint automatically. They beg the question, or they set it up so that the paintings could go that way, but there's always that fight for the reaffirmation of something else. This is my way of making the paintings human. The outside, as you can see, is made up of three panels, and they're huge -- very aggressively painted black and gray bars that don't quite comfortably fit with each other.

Why and What Yellow (1989) is the last painting I want to talk about. It is very interesting in relation to the first paintings that I spoke about because it seems that I've come, after all this time, full circle: still interested in Mondrian and Jackson Pollock. However, the paintings, instead of being illusionistic, are now much more physically overt. The panel on the right is a steel plate, and the panel on the left is a painting. So, it is a painting-in-a-painting which, of course, engages another tradition in art: the painting-in-a-paining and one that Velásquez dealt with very often. The metal plate is not just a color; it is a thing, another relationship with the paint surface. I didn't talk about the paint surface as flesh in this lecture, but it represents the flesh of the body, the skin of the painting. And that refers back through the tradition of painting, in itself a very delicate, fragile thing that always seems to be under threat. The metal plate is something that is made up of the same material, as it is just untreated steel as are buildings and tanks. So, it has a very threatening relationship with the painting. But then on the other hand, the panel on the right affirms color and the tradition of painting and so is a complex painting in the way it can be experienced. I think of my paintings as being hopeful, not pessimistic, not ironical or cynical. And I am particularly

interested in the metaphor of the window right now. That for me, as I said before, is a metaphor for hope.