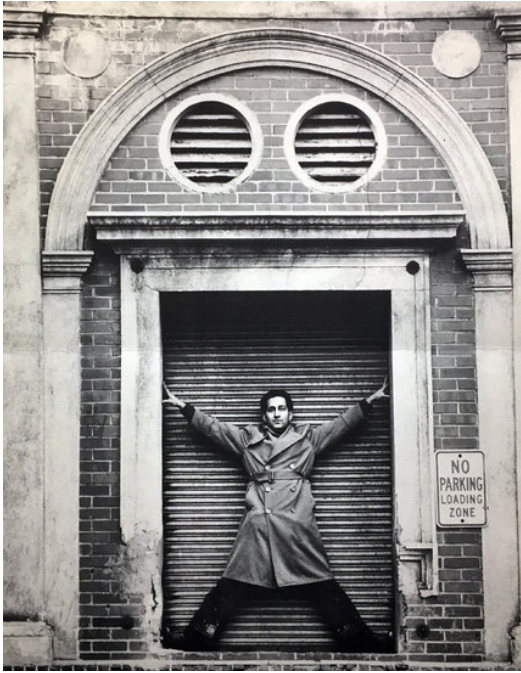


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ART & DESIGN

The Other Side of Stella

By BRETT SKOKOL
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The Vitruvian Frank Stella, in a photograph from 1963.

Credit

2015 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, and Alden Projects, New York

An unorthodox look at the commercial side of Frank Stella’s 50-year career arrives on Dec. 11 at the Lower East Side gallery Alden Projects, featuring an array of rarely seen 1960s exhibition invitations and gallery posters.

Timed to complement the Whitney’s Stella retrospective, the work in “Frank Stella: Early Traces” was personally designed by Mr. Stella to promote his seminal shows at the Leo Castelli and Ferus galleries, and it’s a fun reminder that an artist’s intimate engagement with the market — even back when the art market was still small — doesn’t have to be staid and publicist-driven. The results at Alden Projects offer insight into how he perceived his own art and how he in turn wanted the contemporary art world — then still in its infancy — to perceive him.

An elaborately die-cut invitation to a 1962 Castelli show unfolds into one of Mr. Stella’s mesmerizing geometric creations, with the text repeating in an equally hypnotic fashion, thereby placing one of his then-radical “shaped canvases” directly into the mailboxes of skeptics and fans alike.

But subtlety wasn't always part of Mr. Stella's agenda. The director of Alden Projects, Todd Alden, points to a 1963 invitation to a Ferus Gallery show: In a poster-size photo, Mr. Stella has perfectly framed himself within a warehouse doorway and below circular vents and a proscenium-like archway. With his limbs splayed symmetrically, he evokes da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man."

"There's a personal dimension that you don't see when you look at, for example, his 'Black Paintings,'" Mr. Alden said of the image. "It sings out."

Early on, Mr. Stella spoke of wanting to fuse Renaissance-era aesthetics with modern abstractionism. His intense facial expression practically dares critics to question whether, at 26, he was up to that task. "There aren't many other artists who considered the apparatus of publicity with such poignance," Mr. Alden added. "Yet the attention he paid to his posters wasn't well documented, because it's ephemera, which is considered marginal — the stepchild of the art world. But if you want to really get to know an artist, to see what they're most passionate about, look at their ephemera."

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