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Barnett Newman's "Sense of Space": A Noncontextualist Account of Its Perception and Meaning

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FUZZY STUDIES

A Symposium on the Consequence of Blur
Part 5

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LITTLE REVIEWS

BARNETT NEWMAN'S "SENSE OF SPACE"

A Noncontextualist Account of Its Perception and Meaning

Michael Schreyach

Dorothy Seckler: How would you define your sense of space?

Barnett Newman: . . . Is space where the orifices are in the faces of people talking to each other, or is it not [also] between the glance of their eyes as they respond to each other? Anyone standing in front of my paintings must feel the vertical domelike vaults encompass him [in order] to awaken an awareness of his being alive in the sensation of complete space. This is the opposite of creating an environment. . . . This is the only real sensation of space.¹

Some of the titles that Barnett Newman gave to his paintings are deceptively simple: *Here* and *Now*, *Right Here*, *Not There* — *Here*. Straightforwardly, they seem to announce that the content of his work—its meaning—is available to anyone, to any viewer, who feels him- or herself positioned, in space and time, while behold-

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York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 249–50, hereafter cited as *BN:SWI*.

1. Barnett Newman, "‘Frontiers of Space’: Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler" (1962), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New

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ing Newman's art.² The artist often spoke of his desire to establish for viewers of his paintings a tangible sensation of space, one that would give them a feeling of being present at a particular time and place. That "sense of place, a sense of being there" was integrally related to Newman's sense of *scale*, a term he used to designate "the real problem of a painting."³ "Size doesn't count," he explained. "It's scale that counts. It's human scale that counts, and the only way you can achieve human scale is by content."⁴ For Newman, space, (human) scale, and content were bound to each other. Together, they constituted the "totality" of painting that he strove to create.⁵ This totality is not simple either to apprehend or to interpret. The totality of a painting is not given (as if automatically conveyed by the canvas to a passive viewer) but must be achieved (as if consummated by a viewer's act of acknowledgment). It comes as no surprise that Newman believed strongly in the ethical component of this reciprocal engagement between painting and beholder. What is surprising, though, is the tendency of scholars to *generalize* about this structure of beholding. Lacking are specific accounts about how each individual painting technically works (or does not work) to establish the assumed relationship. Additionally, interpreting in each case the precise *mode* of that relationship—determining its qualitative outlines, finding out what it is like and how it creatively determines one's experience of oneself and others—is an important part of interpreting the meaning of Newman's art.

While contemporary scholarship on Newman continues to offer valuable interpretations of his ideas, explores his influence on a younger generation of artists, and investigates his technical processes, a significant challenge remains in developing more precise accounts of how particular works of art realize the perceptual experiences that the artist intended them to realize and that he so passionately insisted on.⁶ This undertaking will surely be galvanized by the recent

2. See Richard Shiff, Carol C. Mancusi-Ungaro, and Heidi Colman-Freyberger, *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Barnett Newman Foundation; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), hereafter *BNF*. Newman often chose titles that suggest this aspect of the viewer's felt experience of being located, in the present, facing his works: *Moment* (1946 [*BNF* 7]); *Be I* (1949 [*BNF* 34]); *Right Here* (1954 [*BNF* 65]); *Not There — Here* (1962 [*BNF* 81]); *Now I* (1965 [*BNF* 96]) and *Now II* (1967 [*BNF* 102]); *The Moment I* (1962 [*BNF* 82]) and *The Moment II* (1962 [*BNF* 113]); and *Be I (Second Version)* (1970 [*BNF* 116]).

3. Newman, "The Case for 'Exporting' Nation's Avant-Garde Art: Interview with Andrew Hudson" (1966), in *BN:SWI*, 273, 272.

4. Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio" (1970), in *BN:SWI*, 307.

5. Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," in *BN:SWI*, 306

6. Much recent scholarship was stimulated by the Newman retrospective exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2002. See Ann Temkin, *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), which includes Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition" (18–75), and Richard Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect" (76–111). A group of scholarly essays from a symposium on the occasion of the retrospective are assembled in Melissa Ho, ed., *Reconsidering Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002). Although I am critical of aspects of his account, Yve-Alain Bois's work stands as a model for those attempting to describe the look and effects of Newman's work. See "Perceiving Newman" in Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 186–211; "Newman's Laterality," in Ho, *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, 29–45; and "On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman [*Abraham* and *Galaxy*]," *October* 108 (2004): 3–34. Mark Godfrey has recently offered a close account of facing a group of

publication of Newman's catalogue raisonné, an authoritative resource and reference point for those wishing to supplement their descriptions and interpretations of actual canvases with details from Newman's exhibition history and materials, and in light of additional items from his oeuvre.⁷ Indeed, it might be argued that it is primarily by descriptively clarifying the perceptual experiences solicited by Newman's paintings that we can be more precise about their intended effects—about what Newman wanted us to perceive.

When I write of Newman's intentional modes of pictorial address, I include the viewer's participation in being addressed—the viewer's willingness to acknowledge the ways or modes by which the paintings solicit one's attention and constrain one's responses en route to conveying the meanings that Newman intended to convey. My assertion that the meaning of Newman's art is a matter of his intention will be met with skepticism on the part of readers who have come to doubt the heuristic value of intentionality in establishing art historical understanding. Some readers have come to believe that meaning is produced through the contingent contexts in which individuals encounter an artist's work or else that meaning is to be found in experiences that result from such encounters. Here, the problem is not only one of deciding between what is of interest in the interpretation of art (a particular viewer's experiences in some context, or what an artist intended a viewer to experience regardless of context) but also, and more importantly, one of determining what is methodologically relevant in making claims about what artworks mean.

In Newman's case, scholars have ample access to the artist's own views about the meaning of his art, and much interpretation has been guided by finding a match between what Newman claimed he was after and what his paintings mean as a whole. The tendency to privilege and to defer to Newman's statements as the normative ground of interpretation has in some respects impeded attempts to educe his intentions by other means: we should attend instead, or first, to how his paintings appear to the beholder that the artist anticipated.⁸ It may very well

Newman's paintings ("Barnett Newman's *Stations* and the Memory of the Holocaust," *October* 108 [2004]: 35–50), as Sarah K. Rich does throughout her dissertation ("Seriality and Difference in the Late Work of Barnett Newman" [PhD diss., Yale University, 1999]).

7. See Shiff, Mancusi-Ungaro, and Colman-Freyberger, *BN:SWI*. The catalog includes a substantive essay by Shiff, "To Create Oneself" (2–115), as well as groundbreaking technical analyses by Mancusi-Ungaro, "The Paintings of Barnett Newman: 'Involved Intuition on the Highest Level'" (116–42).

8. The problem is not limited to Newman's case but is pervasive in the field of art history, where there has been for some time a tendency to focus on the viewer

or beholder as the source of meaning, at the expense of the author (one thinks of Roland Barthes's crucial essay of 1967, "The Death of the Author," as partly inaugurating this shift). What seems to matter is not what the author or artist intended some text or painting to mean but what kinds of experiences a text or painting creates for the reader or viewer. And because, from this point of view, meaning is found in the individual's particular experience, what also begins to matter is who that individual is and where or when it is that he or she encounters the work. Which is to say that the meaning of the artwork becomes a matter of identity and context rather than authorial intention. (Recent panels dedicated to these issues have been held at the 2010 College Art Association annual meeting ["Intention/Identity/Interpretation," chaired by Todd

turn out to be the case that Newman's modes of pictorial address convey the kinds of content or meaning that he articulated in his writings and interviews (indeed, I think they do), but the account of *how* they do so should rest on a close examination and analysis of how the paintings in question address a viewer and not, or not simply, on the artist's testimony.

Moreover, such a phenomenological approach to describing modes of pictorial address may help correct the frequent overreliance on context (whether social, cultural, biographical, political, or intellectual) as the determining framework for interpretation.⁹ The complexity of perceiving Newman's works, as well as that of his contemporaries (one thinks especially of Jackson Pollock), is not always acknowledged with a depth and thoroughness commensurate to individual paintings. Their works are often presented as mere tokens—any “Newman” or “Pollock” will do to illustrate a general point—rather than as the irreducibly unique paintings that they are. From an art historical perspective that acknowledges the specificity of artworks, the works themselves constitute the most compelling form of primary evidence available to ground interpretation.¹⁰ Methodologically, this approach would mean stemming the general drift of scholarship in art history toward belief in *context* as the final authority for telling us anything about artworks (and consequently away from finding out what artworks tell us about any particular context).¹¹

Cronan and Charles Palermo] and the 2010 Southeastern College Art Conference [“Who Cares Who Sees?” chaired by Cronan with a response by Palermo]. For the general orientation adopted by these organizers, see Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp, *Against Theory 2: Sentence Meaning, Hermeneutics* [Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1986], and Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004], esp. 1–18.) In the present argument, I am attempting to say something about Newman's intentions not just by citing his writings and statements (although I do so repeatedly) but by educating them through the particular ways his paintings appear to a beholder.

9. Newman (1905–70) and the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) were of the same generation. Without making any claims for influence, I would note that both attempted, in their own ways, to resist and negate the conventional conceptions governing our understanding of perception and representation. For Merleau-Ponty, doing so meant bracketing our “natural” or “scientific” attitude, which he thought was generated by powerful, but suspect, theoretical presuppositions about how we perceive the world. For Newman, doing so meant suspending powerful cultural presuppositions about how paintings represent the world, and it meant as well investigating the nature and content of representational practices as they had been established in the history of painting.

10. My orientation to the specificity of intended effects is deeply informed by Charles Harrison, “Disorder and Insensitivity: The Concept of Experience in Abstract Expressionist Painting,” in *American Abstract Expressionism*, ed. David Thistlewood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 111–28.

11. Newman himself often questioned the authority of context, and regularly asserted the creative power of the artist over any constraints of culture or even language, as his famous exchange with Erwin Panofsky over the title of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* makes clear. The title translates roughly as “man heroic and lofty,” by which Newman meant “that man can be or is sublime in his relation to his sense of being aware” (Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester” [1965], in *BN:SWI*, 258). Panofsky had written a letter to the editor of *Art News* complaining about the classical education of modern artists after coming across what he thought was a misuse of the word *sublimus* (spelled with a “u”) in the caption for Newman's painting. (For the exchange, which took place between April and September 1961, see Newman and Panofsky, “Letters to the Editor [Replies to Erwin Panofsky],” *Art News* [1961], in *BN:SWI*, 216–20.) Even though the misspelling had been the result of a typographical error, Newman—with characteristic confidence—responded by correcting Panofsky's Latin. In his reply to Newman, Panofsky rehearsed the rules of

Accordingly, what I offer here is a close account of three paintings—*The Wild* (1950 [BNF 48]), *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950 [BNF 47]), and *Untitled 2, 1950* (BNF 40)—in an effort to describe how, perceptually, Newman conveys his “sense of space.”¹² Investigating the mode of pictorial address established by Newman in *The Wild*—one of a series of narrow paintings he made in 1950, and his most insistently “vertical” work—can illuminate substantially the dynamics of apprehending the artist’s sense of space in general but particularly with regard to what many consider to be his most significant painting, and one of the most “horizontal,” *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Ultimately, my aim is to interpret what that space means—what kind of value it is meant to have or to hold. First, though, we need to determine, broadly in phenomenological terms, how *The Wild* appears to a viewer. Accounting for the way the painting is perceived is a necessary component of discerning the intentionality behind Newman’s mode of pictorial address. I assume that there are certain relationships that an artist intends to establish between the beholder of a painting and a painting (I agree with Michael Fried that the primordial convention of paintings is that they are made to be beheld).¹³ The artwork is the occasion neither for open-ended “experience” nor for unwarranted subjectivity, and *The Wild* functions to radically undermine indeterminate responses and projections.

Because *The Wild* achieves a high degree of independence from conventional notions of the pictorial field as a phenomenon of lateral extension, it resists a viewer’s customary expectation to enter imaginatively into that field. Instead, the complex visual and kinesthetic dynamics created for the viewer by the painting—combined with the palpable sensation of the work’s integrity as an object distinct from the viewer—establishes a mode of pictorial address that I will refer to as “facingness.” (Newman often drew an analogy between seeing a painting and meeting or facing another person for the first time, an important

usage concerning *sublimis* and *sublimus*, noting that the latter should be used only literally, while the former (the word in Newman’s title) could also be used metaphorically. According to Panofsky, *sublimus* properly applies to “concrete objects or phenomena occupying an elevated position in space,” such as on a mountain summit or in the sky. Although Panofsky essentially apologized to Newman for criticizing the painter on the basis of an editorial typo, Newman thought he did so disingenuously by changing the basis of his criticism from grammar to style and so continued to debate Panofsky, arguing that *sublimus* was a legitimate alternate spelling for *sublimis*. While noting that *sublimus vertex* could mean “the lofty crown of a man’s skull,” he blasted Panofsky for “attempt[ing] to deny the artist’s right to create poetic language.”

12. Color images of this painting and all of the other works of Newman discussed in this article are available online at www.moma.org (*The Wild*, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, *Onement I*); www.centrepompidou.fr (*Jericho*); www.stedelijk.nl (*Cathedra*, *Wbo’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*); www.kawamura-museum.dic.co.jp (*Anna’s Light*). They can be found with a basic image search on www.google.com as well.

13. In terms of its emphasis on the ontological specificity of such relationships, Fried’s work is exemplary. Among his works, see *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and *Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a helpful elucidation of the philosophical stakes of Fried’s project, see Robert Pippin, “Authenticity in Painting: Remarks on Michael Fried’s Art History,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 3 (2005): 575–98.

relation to which it will be worth returning.) *Untitled 2, 1950*, another of the thin vertical works, is meant to convey an impression of “fittingness” that contributes to the viewer’s sense of integrity and autonomy as a subject, encountering the painting as if it were another subject to which he or she may respond. As for *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, it offers an occasion to consider competing interpretations to my own of Newman’s mode of pictorial address and to evaluate their implications for understanding some of his primary concerns, including individuality (or “self-evidence”) and the relationship of self and other.

Newman’s Verticality

In 1950, Newman made a series of six paintings of unusual dimensions. None of the works is wider than six inches, but the canvases range from three to nearly eight feet in height.¹⁴ In Newman’s catalogue raisonné, the untitled paintings are listed numerically according to a scheme (suggested by Thomas Hess after Newman’s death) that orders the canvases according to height, from shortest to tallest. Their ratios of height to width range from 6:1 to an extreme of 64:1.¹⁵ At just over an inch and a half wide but eight feet high, *The Wild* most exaggerates the dimensional disparities shared by the group. Newman maximized its vertical dimension to create a format that compromised all but the most minimal notions of lateral or horizontal extension. There are at least two consequences of Newman’s strategy. First, when confronting *The Wild* (and to a lesser extent the other five narrow vertical canvases), viewers are asked to abandon their conventional notions of a pictorial “field” understood either (1) as the lateral dimensions of an upright plane parallel to the viewer’s standing body or (2) as a fictional or metaphorical space oriented to the viewer as a horizontal expanse and imaginatively accessible to a penetrating view.

Newman’s motivation for vertically elongating the format of these six works may be inferred from comments he made in 1966. When an interviewer, referring specifically to *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*—which measures eight feet high and nearly eighteen feet wide—asked Newman about the large size of his works, the artist explained that he had “never been involved in size for its own sake.”¹⁶ He then suddenly recalled that the same year as he made *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*

14. The works under discussion are *Untitled 1, 1950*: 36 × 6 in. [BNF 39]; *Untitled 2, 1950*: 48 × 5-1/8 in. [BNF 40]; *Untitled 3, 1950*: 56 × 3 in. [BNF 41]; *Untitled 4, 1950*: 74 × 6 in. [BNF 42]; *Untitled 5, 1950*: 77 × 3-1/2 in. [BNF 43]; and *The Wild* (1950): 95-3/8 × 1-5/8 in. [BNF 48]. The title *The Wild* was given to the painting much later, in 1962 (see n. 24 below).

15. The exception is *Untitled 4, 1950*, whose ratio of height to width is about 12:1, less than that of the preced-

ing painting. The ratios of the whole sequence of works are approximately 6:1, 10:1, 19:1, 12:1, 22:1, and 64:1. It is possible, of course, that Newman worked on two or more of the paintings simultaneously.

16. Newman, “The Case for ‘Exporting’ Nation’s Avant-Garde Art,” 271.

he also had painted *The Wild* (as well as his other narrow canvases). The central issue, Newman explained, was not one of size—how large or small something was—but instead one of scale, that significant quality Newman considered paradoxically independent of physical dimensions yet integrally related to a person's sense of space and feelings of place. Size, a matter of measurements, was a problem to be "overcome" (272). The establishment of scale, on the other hand, would convey to artist and viewer alike the "tangible" sensation of space. As Newman said of the thin vertical works:

In 1950, to test myself to see if I were really able to handle the problem of scale in all its aspects . . . I did the very narrow one-and-a-half-inch painting [*The Wild*]. I think it holds up as well as any big one I have ever done. The issue is one of scale, and scale is a felt thing. . . . The scale of a painting in the end depends on the artist's sense of space . . . [and] the feeling of space involves all four horizons. That is why I have described my idea of space by calling it the "space dome." . . . I try to declare the space so that it is felt at once. (272)

Drifting from scale, to a sense of space (the "four horizons" of a "space dome"), to the instantaneous declaration of space as a felt thing (a feeling that occurs "at once"), Newman's characteristically indefinite yet suggestive explanation yields a set of terms and ideas that sanctions an investigation of the relationships between them.

Visual and Kinesthetic Stretch in *The Wild*

Newman claimed that, in painting the vertical works, he passed his self-test for handling scale. That test seems to have consisted of creating a tangible, domelike sense of space, using a dimensional format that at first would seem to obviate or even negate that possibility. A large painting with a sizable surface area tends to fill the visual field, diminishing the distance conventionally maintained between a viewer and the artwork, perhaps even facilitating an experience of a spatial kind. Concerned that viewers would restrain themselves from such an experience of space during his second one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951, Newman tacked a note of instructions to the wall, which read simply: "There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance."¹⁷ Newman later explained that he wanted viewers to feel "full and alive in a spatial dome of 180 degrees going in all four directions."¹⁸ But compared with a painting like *Vir Heroicus*

17. Newman, "Statement" (1951), in *BN:SWI*, 178. The show took place between April 23 and May 12, 1951, and included *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* as well as five, and possibly all six, of Newman's narrow canvases.

18. Newman, "'Frontiers of Space,'" 250.

Sublimis—the expanse of which fills the visual field of those standing close—the thin vertical stretch of *The Wild* might initially be judged incommensurate with such a spatial experience (even if, as Newman thought, it established or achieved scale).

So extreme did Newman's exaggeration of the vertical dimension of *The Wild* appear that Thomas Hess called the painting "a red line surrounded by nothing at all."¹⁹ Actually, the painting is a one-inch-thick, cadmium-red band bracketed on either side by quarter-inch strips of blue-gray running from top to bottom. The edges of the central band or stripe are clearly visible at close range, the result of Newman's technique of using tape to mask out the linear elements of his paintings. In making *The Wild*, the artist first taped the surface along its length, then painted a grayish slate blue over the masked portion (including over the tacking margins). After the tape was removed, Newman filled in the band with red, either freehand or with supplementary tapings over the gray-blue. Frequently, the artist's multiple applications of paint over or between layers of masking tape leave a slight build-up along tape edges, even after the strips are removed, and sometimes—as in the case of *The Wild*—it produces distinct tactile limits between band and field. Even so, Newman obviously intended to integrate them, since he applied irregular patches of cadmium over the blue-gray borders along the length of the zip. The procedure reduces the visual independence of each element, forging instead a sense of interdependence between "band" and "field," or "figure" and "ground," an integrity that is only fortified by the felt compression of the canvas's literal narrowness.

The significance of this whole, which for Newman exceeded the achievement of mere formal unity, can be gleaned from a statement he made in 1969 concerning his triangular "shaped works" *Jericho* (1968–69 [BNF 111]) and *Chartres* (1969 [BNF 112]). Discussing the meaning of those later works, Newman's thought again jumped to the narrow works he had made nearly twenty years earlier. The issue confronting an artist who chose to work with an oddly shaped format, he explained, was to "transform the shape into a new kind of totality." Could the painting, he asked, "overcome the format and at the same time assert it? Could it become a work of art and not a thing?"²⁰

How does *The Wild* simultaneously assert and overcome its format to become a totality, in Newman's sense of the term? Assume, for a moment, that a viewer follows the direction of Newman's 1951 exhibition note and stands at a "short distance" from *The Wild*. As evidence of what Newman thought this distance should be, consider two well-known documentary photographs that can help us estimate it. The first shows the art critic E. C. Goossen and an unidenti-

19. T. B. H. [Thomas B. Hess], "Newman," *Art News* 50, no. 4 (1951): 47.

20. Newman, "Chartres and Jericho" (1969), in *BN:SWI*, 194.

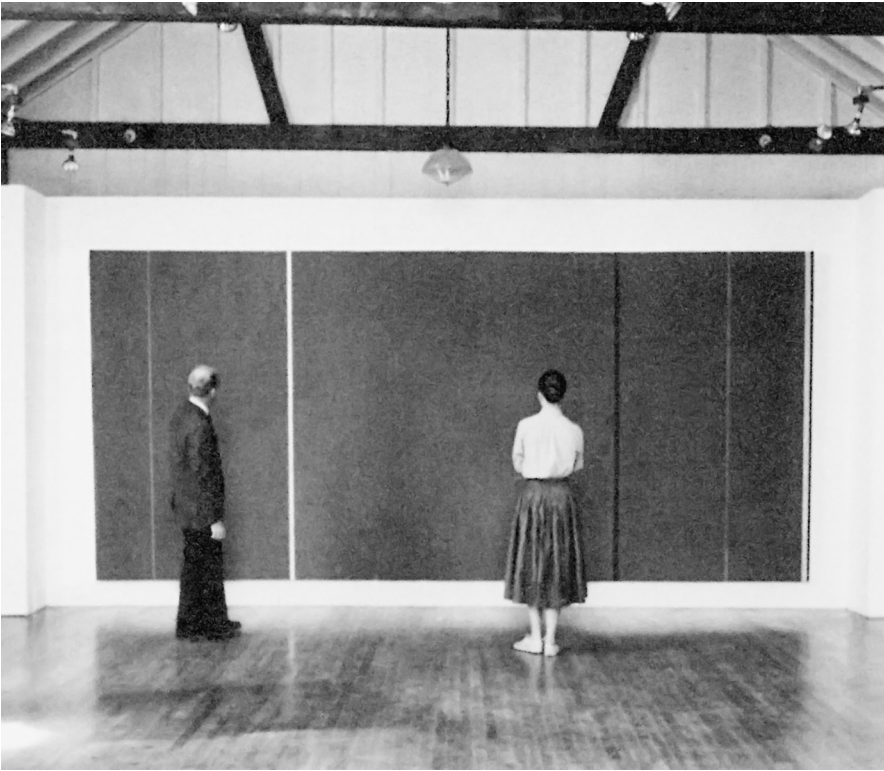


Figure 1. Viewers in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* at Bennington College, Vermont, 1958. The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York. Photo: Matthias Tarnay

fied woman posing in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* at Newman's retrospective exhibition at Bennington College, Vermont, in 1958 (fig. 1).²¹ The woman stands close and looks straight ahead, while Goossen stands even closer to the painting—my estimate is three or four feet away—and looks at the surface obliquely. Ann Temkin suggests that Newman responded so positively to what this photograph suggested about the intimacy between viewers and his paintings that he imitated the pose for a photograph taken soon after by Peter A. Juley at Newman's studio. The image shows Newman and a woman, possibly Dorothy Miller, in front of *Cathedra* (1958 [BNF 51]). Both look at the surface obliquely yet this time stand no more than twelve inches away.²²

Consider an adult viewer standing a foot away from *The Wild* and looking at it frontally. From this vantage point, the viewer's eyes would coincide with an

21. Goossen arranged the show. I thank Heidi Colman-Freyberger, director of the Barnett Newman Foundation, for confirming to me Goossen's identity in the photograph, as well as for permission to reproduce both of the illustrations used in this essay.

22. See Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 41. Bois draws attention to the staged character of the poses, as well as of those seen in additional photographs by Juley showing Annalee Newman in her husband's studio, standing close to *The Voice* (1950 [BNF 37]) and *The Name II* (1950 [BNF 38]) while looking sidelong at their surfaces ("Newman's Laterality," 42–44).

area just above the center of the painting, between four and five feet up from the bottom edge of the canvas—adjusting, of course, for the position of the artwork hanging on the wall, which might vary between, say, eight inches from the gallery floor (as it was hung at Betty Parsons in 1951) and one and a half feet (as it is currently installed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York). Given such a position—but allowing for some leeway in curatorial practices, as well as some variation in the height of individuals—it is this midlevel zone that will attract the viewer’s scrutiny. However, if a viewer wants to limit her focus to that area while inspecting minute variations in surface features (such as the ridges left by Newman’s tape, or the paint handling along the central band’s edges), she will be required to resist—almost willfully—the most conspicuous feature of the canvas: its physical extension both above and below her frontal viewpoint. This vertical stretch competes for the viewer’s attention, diminishing concentrated foveal vision (the aspect of our vision that, centered on the densest area of retinal cones within our eyes, is particularly suited for discerning fine details up close) and concomitantly heightening the work of peripheral vision (suited to organizing the broad spatial scene in front of us).

We usually associate peripheral vision with the horizontal dimension, right and left, but *peripheral* is a term that also properly applies to the zones above and below our central focus, zones in which our foveal perception of fine detail yields to the apprehension of coarser information about phenomena, such as movement or changes in brightness.²³ With regard to *The Wild*, it is as if the painting calls for a mode of viewing that holds the tendencies of each aspect of our vision, the foveal and the peripheral (though they cannot strictly be separated), in equilibrium. This effect is one result of its mode of pictorial address. Viewers are induced to look closely at the painting, straight on, as well as encouraged to perceive its extension above and below their eyes. Once this delicate balance is achieved, however, an interesting perceptual consequence presents itself. The viewer will become aware that, from his vantage point, he can perceive neither the upper nor lower edge of the canvas, even if he rolls his eyes upward or downward. Those edges cannot be seen without stepping back or else changing one’s head position by arching the neck to look at the top of the canvas or bending it to look down—movements that would, of course, disrupt the equilibrium estab-

23. Our habitual association of peripheral vision with the horizontal field, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, is the result of the functionality of that field with respect to our motor tasks. Simply, our bodily directionality extends more acutely outward and laterally to our physical situation, rather than upward (see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith [1945; repr. London: Routledge, 1962], 303–4, esp. n. 1). The “visual field” describes that aspect of the visual world that we see in a limited angle out from the left and right (about 180

degrees), and in a more limited angle upward and downward (about 150 degrees). The boundaries between what we see clearly and what we see vaguely within this oval visual cone are not sharply defined, but it possesses a central to peripheral gradient of clarity (see James J. Gibson, “The Visual Field and the Visual World,” in *The Perception of the Visual World* [Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1950], 29).

lished between foveal and peripheral vision by totally disrupting the operations of the former since they are focused on the frontal view.²⁴

The Wild's extreme visual ascent, combined with its severe narrowness, renders its vertical limits remote, so much so that they are neutralized or made to stop counting in the beholder's visual experience. In extending the painting so far upward, and doing so between two edges so close together, Newman gives the onlooker access to an accelerated sense of their convergence as they rise, as if to reestablish the vanishing point over the viewer's head as the framing edges' implied destination.²⁵ The sensation of this reorientation of perspective partly accounts for the impression that, at its upper range, the painting curves over the head of the viewer, as if peeling away from the wall to form an arc that is sensed, however indeterminately, to continue up above the viewer's visual range before vaulting over him or her to posterior space. (Significantly, this arc is not mirrored by a corresponding one in the lower range, which is to say that the groundedness of the body holding its vantage point in front of the canvas is not undercut by a curve that would sweep under the viewer's standpoint.)²⁶

Newman's own statements pertain to part of what I have been trying to describe as the perceptual effect of *The Wild*, but they do not match exactly. My contention is that *The Wild* does not generate a mode of spatial experience that is characterized by encompassment or enclosure in 180 degrees (a "space dome"). Rather, the painting produces a longitudinal visual stretch that creates a concentrated feeling of space as it extends vertically upward and vaults over the viewer. In addition, this visual stretch has its kinesthetic correlate in an intensified sense

24. My description of *The Wild* includes the claim that the painting seems to hold two aspects of our vision—the foveal and the peripheral—in equilibrium. There is another piece of evidence that lends itself in tangential support of this claim: the title of the painting. Shiff has incisively pointed out that *The Wild* may derive as a title from Newman's association of wildness with the freedom of birds. Shiff's research reveals that in Thomas Hess's typescript interview notes for his book *Barnett Newman* (1969), he records that Newman was "drawn to ornithology by the 'wildness of birds'—the idea of freedom" (Thomas Hess Papers, Archives of American Art, 1968 [quoted by Richard Shiff, "To Create Oneself," 106n58]). If so, then it is interesting to consider the role played by peripheral and foveal vision in bird-watching, an activity to which Newman was famously drawn. Birds are often glimpsed in flight, which is to say they are caught peripherally in the watcher's glance. The peripheral aspect of vision is best suited to draw one's attention to coarser information about the bird, leading the watcher to make increasingly finer discriminations concerning the bird's wing shape, wingspan, its manner of aerial navigation, and the like. Such information can be useful for classifi-

cation, and it supplements those aspects of bird-watching that depend upon more detailed viewing, such as studying the bird's shape, color, bodily structure, manners of nesting, feeding, and preening. In addition, then, to the connotative associations of *The Wild* with Newman's personal interest in the "vertical" freedom of birds, there is a phenomenological correspondence between the mode of pictorial address experienced in viewing *The Wild* and the modes of visual perception that are brought to bear in bird-watching.

25. I thank Charles Palermo for helping me to formulate these points.

26. Bois notes, apropos of *Onement I*, that Newman's vertical zips, especially as they are seen to mirror the symmetry of the standing human figure, imply a "nonreversibility of top and bottom" ("Perceiving Newman," 196), and he quotes Newman on the point: "All my paintings have a top and a bottom" (198; original citation in Newman, "'Frontiers of Space,'" 249).

of the body's upright posture. The progression of the sequence of narrow canvases to dimensions of increasing disparity between width and height can thus be understood to narrate a progression of both visual sensation and a certain kind of bodily feeling. As a viewer's vision is increasingly stretched, so too are intensified the kinesthetic sensations associated with posture—with the skeletal and muscular structure of the human body that serves to hold it upright. Understanding how both aspects, visual and kinesthetic, function in *The Wild* sets a foundation for determining how *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* conveys a feeling of space (and, indeed, for interpreting the values associated with it).²⁷

Thus, the verticality of *The Wild* performs two important functions. First, it demands a beholder's recognition that the pictorial field—the conventional conceptualization of which depends on the suggestion of an upright plane parallel to the viewer's body and extending laterally—can also be instantiated as a matter of an upright plane extending vertically into the space above and below the customary focal point of foveal vision, a longitudinal pictorial field that thus can be understood to exist in relation to the midline, or mesial, plane of the body. Second, the extreme verticality of *The Wild*, combined with its attenuated lateral dimension, makes obsolete any consideration of a pictorial space that is oriented to the viewer as a horizontal expanse and accessible to penetrating view.²⁸ Judging from *The Wild*, Newman—in his quest to rid painting of the “props and crutches” of the Western pictorial tradition—was looking for a way to make a painting that resisted the viewer's unchecked projection into an imaginary space or fictive world (which is tantamount to saying that he wanted to give the paint-

27. My claims for the “verticality” of *The Wild* have little in common with Rosalind Krauss's theorization of the term. Krauss equates verticality with sublimation and criticizes Clement Greenberg's putative sublimation of Jackson Pollock, arguing against the tendency to see Pollock's work as fulfilling a retrospectively conceptualized trajectory from the disordered and wild (the horizontal) to the ordered and transcendent (the vertical). See Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 242–320. Other scholars who have focused on verticality in ways different from mine include Matthew Rohn and Claude Cernuschi. In his *Visual Dynamics in Jackson Pollock's Abstractions* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984), Rohn adopts the approach of gestalt psychology in his account of upright visual fields (an approach, it bears mentioning, that Krauss singles out for criticism), arguing that since visual activity “counts differently in the upper reaches of our gravity-influenced perceptual world than in the lower realms,” viewers have an “innate potential” to discern “varying dynamics within the visual field as a whole” (3–4). Cernuschi elaborates a somewhat parallel idea in his book “*Not an Illustration but the Equivalent*”: *A Cognitive Approach to Abstract Expressionism* (Cran-

bury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997), where he utilizes the concepts of cognitive science to explain how abstract painting conveys meaning to viewers. Cernuschi argues that the cognitive meaning of abstract paintings can reliably be discerned by attending to the kinds of physical adjustments and their attendant mental operations that are stimulated by the artwork under view. He explains: “Meaning emerges from the structure of embodied experience and from the associations spectators attach to that structure” (89).

28. My analysis here shares something with Fried's suggestion that in looking at large canvases by Newman (Fried's example is *Cathedra*), “We have the sensation of entering a medium with a certain specific density, a medium that offers an almost measurable degree of resistance to eyesight itself.” See Michael Fried, “Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella” (1965), reprinted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 213–65, at 232. In the case of *The Wild*, that “measurable degree of resistance” is exponentially higher than in Newman's other works.

ing, as an object, a coherence and integrity that prevented its being merely a stimulus for a beholder's subjective projections). He created a mode of pictorial address that maintained the positions of both painting and viewer as discrete entities or even subjects facing each other.²⁹

"Fittingness" and "Facingness" in *Untitled 2, 1950*

When Newman first exhibited *The Wild* in 1951, it was the only painting installed on the gallery's center wall, directly opposite *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Visitors entering the room walked into the middle of a dramatic face-off between the latter painting—a 144-square-foot expanse of brilliant red, punctuated at various intervals by five top-to-bottom bands—and the thin vertical canvas, with an area of just 144 square inches, that Ann Temkin has called its "inverse."³⁰ Although the pairing was suggestive—were they complements or opposites?—reviews of the show (predominantly negative) did not catch on to how Newman's curatorial choice was meant to guide interpretation of the canvases in relation to each other. The pairing stands as evidence for the contention that the mode of pictorial address that *The Wild* fixes for a viewer relates definitively to the visual and kinesthetic dynamics of Newman's sense of space, specifically as that space is created for a viewer by *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Perceptually, *The Wild* creates a kind of anamorphosis of the visual field, in the vertical dimension, while it simultaneously elicits a kinesthetic feeling of stretch: this claim is not just about brute facts of the painting as a material object. Rather, the claim concerns how a beholder recognizes or acknowledges the intentional structure of the work in question. The claim depends for its fittingness upon the reciprocity of artwork

29. The criticism might be made that the account I am proposing here proceeds from a decontextualized phenomenology—that is, from a general perspective that does little to facilitate context-oriented, art historical scholarship. Insofar as the aim of such scholarship is to reconstruct what Newman's contemporaries thought were the meanings of his paintings, or else to track the changing interpretations of those meanings over time and in different contexts, the endeavor is usually accomplished, if not always made entirely convincing, by reference to documentary source material or evidence of a textual nature. In part, I rely on the testimony of the first viewer of the paintings: Newman. But this kind of evidence is not necessary to verify the points I am making about a viewer's perception of *The Wild* (or any other painting). Once it is accepted as a painting—that is, as belonging to a set of artifacts with a history, and responsive to the conventions established in and through that history—the object of regard frames or, better, *is* the condition of its being beheld in a certain way: a way that, moreover, is entirely

the result of the artist's intentionally making it one way and not another. Thus, the relation between Newman's intentional mode of pictorial address and the viewers' perceptual experience is not only, or even primarily, to be determined by investigating the historical contexts of those encounters. Instead, that relation—and more precisely, the meaning of that relation—is discerned, or potentially discerned, every time a viewer beholds the work.

30. Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, 42. Bois discusses this instance of Newman's curatorial logic in "1951," in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, vol. 2 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 362–67.

and viewer.³¹ It is not that the painting merely determines or causes the beholder to experience it in a certain way, but rather that its mode of address allows for the possibility that the viewer will honor that address with a proper response. Since the character of this relationship is the condition for Newman's alternative modes of pictorial address, it may be helpful to consider one of those alternatives.

Untitled 2, 1950 (fig. 2) is scaled quite differently than *The Wild*. It, too, was shown at Betty Parsons in 1951. Measuring four feet high by just over five inches wide, the painting consists of an impenetrable matte black band, about one-third the width of the whole, which runs parallel to the entire length of the right edge. A visibly brushed veil of tomato-soup red fills the other two-thirds of the painting's surface area. An integral part of the work is the simple wooden frame, constructed by Jackson Pollock, that surrounds it. At an eye-catching three inches deep, the frame gives the painting a boxlike aspect and calls attention to the relationship between the surface image, on the one hand, and the object's physical construction, on the other. How do these two aspects of the work—painting as image, painting as object—contribute to its meaning? *Untitled 2, 1950* fits the frame made especially for it and faces the viewer.

Consider the possibility, first, that Newman accentuated the physical depth of *Untitled 2, 1950* in order to draw attention to its relatively exaggerated projection out from the wall, a projection that diminishes the distance traditionally maintained between a viewer and a painting. Second, consider that he may have done so to prevent a viewer from taking the content of the work to be identical to the visual perception of the image alone. Put differently, Newman instinctively avoided reducing pictorial content to the virtual coincidence of the image and the flatness of its supporting canvas. Instead, *Untitled 2, 1950* generates its content by means of its “fittingness.” The painting *fits* into its frame in a manner that utterly suspends our seeing the frame as a decorative border that brackets a view; it rather seems to support—or perhaps to hold—the image within it. The

31. My use of the term *reciprocity* has an affinity with that of Paul Crowther, whose approach to Newman otherwise contrasts with my own. (Crowther published his account of Newman twice: first in 1984 [“Barnett Newman and the Sublime,” *Oxford Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (1984): 52–59] and then, in revised form, thirteen years later [in *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 149–63]). Crowther clarifies philosophically the distinct versions of the sublime offered by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, showing how their respective versions compared with Newman's ideas about sublimity. In his revised version, Crowther situates his account of Newman in a larger argument about iterability—that is, about a sign's capacity to be recognized *as* a sign independent of any particular context. That recognition,

originating in the basic reciprocity between body and world, plays a key role, according to Crowther, in “organizing human consciousness” (9). The aesthetic object reveals this principle of reciprocity to be the fundamental condition of human cognition, intelligibility, and (self-)reflection. Crowther's approach to Newman's art depends on theory first, often ignoring the perceptual effects of individual paintings. To understand *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, for instance, Crowther says we need “a thoroughgoing knowledge of Newman's theoretical propositions. . . . [The painting] depends on a matrix of aesthetic theory in order to be read authentically” (158). I disagree with this assertion.



Figure 2. Barnett Newman, *Untitled 2, 1950*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 13 cm (48 x 5-1/8 in.). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Adam Baker

mutual reinforcement, or the intrinsic complementarity, of image and support is palpable in this fitting. With it, Newman decisively challenges the convention of framing a spectacular view, whether illusionistic or abstract. That is to say: the painting, because its surface is faced to the viewer within a frame that reinforces the integrity or cohesion of the whole, delivers a sense of being fit both *to* itself and *for* a viewer.³²

Untitled 2, 1950 consolidates artwork and subject. By combining image and support into a manifestly coherent whole, the painting simultaneously allows

32. It might be useful to consider Newman's emphasis on flatness—at least, as far as *Untitled 2, 1950* is concerned—as driven more by his desire to create the effect of “facingness” than by the modernist concern, expressed most rigorously during Newman's lifetime by Clement Greenberg, in the self-reflexive investigation of the medium's specificity (particularly as it coincides with the flat-

ness of the painting surface). Both for the origin of this point and for an explanation of how it relates to “frontality” in the work of Miró, see Charles Palermo, *Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 244n6.

a viewer to recognize his autonomy (he discovers his own fit as mirrored or matched by the fittingness of the painting before him) and to fortify his position as a subject who may choose to acknowledge it.³³ This mode of pictorial address depends for its value (or in Newman's terminology, its *scale*) on the extent to which the viewer finds himself—indeed, discovers himself to be—facing an other. Additionally, it is important to observe that this consolidation has a kinaesthetic correlate. If in perceiving *The Wild*, by far the most proportionally extreme of the narrow paintings, a viewer feels a vertical stretch or elongation, then in confronting *Untitled 2, 1950* she may feel a converse feeling: one of bodily cohesion or containment, of shortening or tightening of the posture, of bodily “fit.” (The connotations of the term as it relates to personal attire are apt.)

The Dynamics of Spatial Experience in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*

At the 1951 Parsons show, “the materially defiant narrowness” of *The Wild* (as Richard Shiff has called it) faced the visually absorbing lateral expanse of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*.³⁴ Since that time, the emphasis in accounts of the latter painting has been on its embracing scale and color. Allan Kaprow wrote of it in 1963 that “the vast sea of intense red . . . fills the space in front of the canvas, surrounding the viewer, almost ‘dyeing’ him with the relentless hue.”³⁵ Lawrence Alloway in 1969 called that experience an “‘advancing space’ effect, a kind of expansion of the painting’s threshold into the area occupied by the spectator . . . [who] become[s] implicated in the irradiating surface.”³⁶ Newman’s close friend, the artist Robert Murray, may have had *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* in mind as he remarked that “when you stand close to one of Newman’s paintings you become enveloped in the whole aura of color, and it becomes a wonderfully sensory kind of experience.”³⁷

As these descriptions, with their emphasis on being surrounded or enveloped, suggest, viewers of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* become *involved* in its color (the

33. My understanding of acknowledgment derives broadly from the work of Stanley Cavell but is even more indebted to Michael Fischer’s explication of Cavell’s thought in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). There, Fischer examines the “other minds skeptic” (for example, a person who questions whether we can really know if other people are in pain) as one who lapses into a “disturbing human possibility, or temptation” to doubt the capacity of others to express themselves (61). That avoidance is a kind of violence against acknowledgment, which he and Cavell describe as the positive moment of accepting that it is our responsibility to make decisions regarding our knowledge of others and our relationships with them. Although these decisions are always made on a contingent basis, they nonetheless proclaim generally our attunement with

others. I have also learned a great deal from Aron Vinegar’s discussion “Of Ducks, Decorated Sheds, and Other Minds,” in *I Am a Monument: On Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 49–92. See also the essays “Knowing and Acknowledging” and “The Avoidance of Love” in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1969), 238–353.

34. Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” 86.

35. Allan Kaprow, “Impurity,” *Art News* 61, no. 9 (1963): 30–33, 52–55.

36. Lawrence Alloway, “Notes on Barnett Newman,” *Art International* 13, no. 6 (1969): 35–39, at 38.

37. Robert Murray, “Remembering Newman,” in Ho, *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, 16.

stress is on the word's etymological meaning: to be enfolded). A halation of red seems to permeate and fill the "empty" space in front of the surface. (Newman explained, "My canvases are full not because they are full of colors but because color makes the fullness").³⁸ Yet, as Donald Judd perceptively pointed out, this fullness does not cause the color to appear to extend beyond the left and right edges of the canvas, an effect that would imply a continuum that spreads laterally.³⁹ Rather, the viewer's chromatic experience is secured by five top-to-bottom stripes, ranging in width from about one to three inches and placed at irregular intervals across the surface. A few feet from the left edge is a stripe of red that is of a lighter tone than the rest of the surface; followed by a stripe of crisp white; then a thicker one of dark brown; another of light red; and finally, along the right edge, a darkened yellow. The bands structure what might otherwise dissolve into the impression of an amorphous red expanse.

The vertical length of the bands measures Newman's colored field in height, and their lateral placement helps demarcate its breadth. What would be the effect of their absence? Without the zips, the broad area of the field would overwhelm any sense of its being modulated or differentiated, resulting in an overall homogeneity. Staring into a painting with attenuated visual relief, a viewer would perceive a nonoriented space, and the painting might induce a sense of placelessness. Yet Newman avoided precisely this effect by carefully arranging the bands so that viewers, when standing at a short distance from the surface and looking at it either frontally or obliquely, will—to greater or lesser degrees—perceive one or more of the zips in their field of vision.⁴⁰ The possibilities of what can or cannot be perceived play out differently across the canvas surface, depending on where the viewer stands and on the angle of her vision relative to the picture plane. But in all cases, as Yve-Alain Bois has pointed out, the bands constantly "solicit" our gaze, securing our sense of a perceptual experience that, however open to fullness it may be, nonetheless has structure.⁴¹

38. Newman, "Frontiers of Space," 249.

39. For Judd's precise description, see "Barnett Newman" (1970), in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings, 1959–75* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 200–2.

40. For instance, if a viewer positions herself closely to the painting between the first and second zips from the left edge and then looks obliquely toward the right edge of the canvas, she will firmly perceive those two zips (one a lighter tone of red, the other a brilliant white), as well as a third zip (the strip of maroon brown), but will be unable, without moving her head position dramatically, to perceive the limit of the canvas (that is, its literal right edge). E. C. Goossen made an observation not dissimilar to my own concerning the effect of indeterminate space and its control by the bands: they "catch the eye just enough to allow the expanse of vermilion to sink in (in the Air

Force, pilots are trained never to look at anything directly, particularly at light, in order to see it more fully)." See Goossen, "The Philosophic Line of B. Newman," *Art News* (1958), reprinted in David and Cecile Shapiro, eds., *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 332–35, at 334.

41. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," 203 (with regard to *Concord*) and 212 (with regard to *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*). Bois makes the point that the "singularity" of the modulations performed by the zips is ultimately "denied by the lateral spread of our perception," preventing us from fixing them securely as a figure against a ground (212). Peter de Bolla offers an admirable description of his affective response to *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, by keying it to the "modes and modalities of reception and understanding" he thinks Newman intended to convey. Central to his account is

Bois argues that the content of Newman's paintings derives from the way they address a fundamental condition of embodied perception, a condition that he takes to be marked by an essential ambiguity. To Bois, Newman's artistic production is a "radical attack against any kind of assurance that we might falsely attribute to our perception."⁴² For instance, in *Abraham* (1949 [BNF 23]) the "subdued lateral displacement" of the darker band weakens the power of the exact symmetrical division of the canvas by the band's right edge. The discrepancy between what we see and what we can measure and know creates a perceptual uncertainty that is matched by another one: the indeterminacy between figure and ground. The relatively close values of the midnight blue-black band and the deep green-black field impede a viewer's confident assertion that one is figure and the other is ground. Instead, there is an oscillation between those categories.

Since neither figure nor ground is given to us absolutely, we must, according to Bois, "preconsciously construct [what each is] differently each time we are solicited to perceive."⁴³ This is a strategy to "emphasize the intentional nature of the perceptual field by urging us to shift from our preconscious perceptual activity . . . to a conscious one, and at the same time to prevent this consciousness from crystallizing in any definite way." In the case of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, Bois likewise argues that we are "constantly in the process of adjusting and readjusting the fundamental figure/ground opposition" because its zips continually solicit our attention as we scan the canvas. This indeterminacy is compounded by the sheer fluctuation of its chromatic expanse, which "renounce[s] the possibility of [our] ever controlling [the painting] perceptually." Bois proposes that "the only factual certitude that we [can] grasp [is] the lateral expanse of the canvas, the pictorial field as such."⁴⁴

In accounting for the dynamics of spatial experience in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, I take my cue from Bois's emphasis on the bluntly factual nature of a lateral expanse that demands our attention but is punctuated (or perhaps held together) by zips that simultaneously solicit our gaze. However, I am unconvinced of the endless fluctuation of figure and ground—and the indeterminacy at the heart of our perceptual experience—that this oscillation supposedly inaugurates. In my view, the spread of vision across the horizontal expanse of the canvas is checked by the vertical zips, just as the stretch of a singular zip is parried, but not canceled, by the magnetic draw of the painting's laterality.

the idea that the painting encourages our apprehension of "a sense of community, of belonging to a shared space, inhabiting a communal experience." See his "Serenity: Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*," in *Art Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 23–55, 38–39.

42. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," 199.

43. Quotations from Bois here and in the remainder of this paragraph are from "Perceiving Newman," 203–4.

44. In a subsequent essay, Bois argues that this laterality "forc[es] the beholder to appeal to his or her peripheral vision" and thus "catches us in the process of perceiving." See "Newman's Laterality," 34 and 36, where Bois writes specifically about *Abraham* but implies that the point applies to many of Newman's works.

A triple movement of perception governs this mutual dynamic. I would divide, though for explanatory purposes only, the perception of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* into three stages (even if they are interdependent and occur simultaneously). First, Newman radically challenges a viewer to maintain his sense of bodily position and optical viewpoint when beholding the painting. The sense of being surrounded by color, absorbed by it, or subsumed into it by the painting's sheer physical size and chromatic extent, is difficult for the viewer to resist. One might be tempted to drift into a reverie or to lose oneself in the potentially amorphous effects of color alone. Yet a second stage intervenes in this process. A conscientious viewer will be struck by how the zips attract him, restoring to him—against the lateral dissolution of his gaze and against his corresponding kinesthetic feeling of corporeal dispersion—a momentary sense of psychic and bodily integrity that constitutes him as an independent entity, separate from the painting yet in dialogue with it. (This effect is the same as the one I have described in relation to the way that *Untitled 2, 1950* consolidates the subject as fit to face the artwork. The equilibrium relates to Newman's sense of scale: recall that *scale* can also designate a device that balances two disparate objects.) Third and finally, when the viewer attends to or fixes on one of the five bands in his visual field, he experiences the visual and kinesthetic stretch that I described with regard to *The Wild*: a verticality that the viewer may experience as feeling placed, "full and alive in a spatial dome of 180 degrees going in all four directions."⁴⁵

This last is the moment ("felt at once") when a viewer rightly experiences *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*—when, feeling a dome of space declare itself around her, she apprehends a "sensation of complete space." This resulting sense of place, sense of space, is achieved in the midst of a struggle between the viewer's temptation to lose herself in the colored field and the painting's palpable resistance to letting her do so unimpeded. The struggle is for the ontological primacy of art's scale over its literal material. The failure into which beholders might lapse, indeed have lapsed, is refusing to acknowledge its mode of pictorial address, attempting to defeat the painting, and even, in the extreme case, attacking the canvas. In 1986, a man slashed *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III* with a knife.⁴⁶

45. Newman, "Frontiers of Space," 250.

46. Gerard Jan van Bladeren knifed Newman's painting at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in April 1986. He returned in November 1997 and repeated his attack, this time on *Cathedra*. These are not isolated instances. Ann Temkin notes that Newman's work "bears the grim distinction of being perhaps the most often vandalized in the history of art, not for political or other purposes but purely on the basis of what it is, or is not" (*Barnett New-*

man, 16). For the connection between violence and the refusal or avoidance of acknowledgment, see "Othello and the Stake of the Other," in Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays by Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 125–42. I thank Aron Vinegar for discussing this point with me.

The Affective Mode of Pictorial Address

What are the implications of Newman's mode of pictorial address, and of how it has been interpreted? In Bois's analyses of Newman, there are three themes concerning the relationship of viewer to artwork that govern his interpretation of particular paintings. All three may be operative at any one time, but, as I hope to show, one holds sway over the others. The first might be called the theme of exchange, in which the viewer faces the painting as if it were another entity or subject to be engaged with reciprocally. Take Bois's interpretation of *Onement I* (1948 [BNF 14]). Bois understands the painting to be "an attempt to address the spectator directly, immediately, as an 'I' to a 'You,' and not with the distance of the third person that is characteristic of fiction."⁴⁷ The relationship of viewer to painting seems at first to be one of conversational equals, even if it is curiously lacking in intimacy (not "we" to "each other," but "I" to "You"). It may be worth pondering what motivates Bois's insistence on this moment of direct address. As I read Bois, the intensity of the dialogic relationship implied by this scenario underwrites a desire for a bonding between the subject and the other, as if the sheer existence of the painting as a separate entity creates an unbearable gap that only "direct address" will bridge.⁴⁸ Thus, it may not be surprising that overcoming this distance is Bois's second theme. Newman's canvases overwhelm the subject position that a viewer would otherwise maintain. The irresistible appeal of Newman's color facilitates this compulsory union. When we look at *Anna's Light* (1968 [BNF 107]), Bois claims, "we cannot even attempt to focus on anything but are constantly obliged to deal with the mere vastness of the whole red field, as a whole chunk of color."⁴⁹ Even the slight modulations in the color of *Anna's Light* "function as a sort of internal respiration of the field of color that has become as indivisible as one's own body"—phrasing that seems to suggest a psychophysiological continuum binding viewer to painting.⁵⁰

The third theme is somewhat like the inverse of the second. Instead of exchange or union, opposition and confrontation characterize the relationship of viewer and painting. Bois's phenomenological analysis of Newman's work is forceful; I understand his account, indeed, to harbor certain extreme implications. One of Bois's concerns is the degree to which the beholder, in succumbing to the lateral spread of his or her perception (unwillfully, it seems, since he or she is "forc[ed]" to do so), is unable to maintain not only his or her physical feeling

47. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," 193.

48. My point here parallels one made by Michael Fischer concerning the general tendency of deconstructionist critics to adopt a skeptical position with regard to the validity of knowing any literary text. In Fischer's view (following Cavell), the skeptic, dissatisfied with ordinary ways of knowing, is motivated to establish a more rigorous con-

nection to objects in immediate consciousness. But since this connection is not established within the ordinary forms of life in which it can be secured, it fails to hold, and the skeptical quest for certainty ends in doubt. See Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, esp. 31–32.

49. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," 212.

50. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," 213.

of being positioned before the painting (the viewer's literal placement) but also his or her sense of personal integrity, or well-being, in facing the artwork. Even though Bois explicitly sympathizes with Newman's intent to establish for his viewers a sense of place, a "Here I am" that is an "affirmation of existence," there is a lurking severity to the encounter of painting and viewer.⁵¹ Concerning *Anna's Light*, Bois writes: "The colored field seems to move with us, to follow our gaze as a dog follows his master or the shadow our walking body. . . . [I]t 'moves' without ever leaving its base, reaffirming its instantaneous blast each time we try to distance ourselves from it."⁵² A viewer, apparently, cannot help but surrender to the affective power of this chromatic stalker (even if, as its "master," one is entitled to enslave it). Instead of facing the painting on terms of reciprocity, Bois has us pacing back and forth in front of it, haunted by an anonymous and vaguely threatening presence. The mutually beneficial exchange characteristic of acknowledgment yields to a situation distinguished by danger and confrontation. Looking at a painting such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, we are, according to Bois, "solicited by the vibrating ocean of violent color, never able to survey the whole and yet forced to acknowledge its existence[;] we experience it as 'here—not there,' full in our face."⁵³ We will feel present, it seems, even when—perhaps especially when—we get punched.

In my view, the implication in Bois's account of violent confrontation between viewer and painting negates the spirit of Newman's enterprise (although I make this criticism in full acknowledgment of Bois's obvious respect for Newman's art and life). Arguably, the best paintings by Newman ask their viewers to understand their implications in terms of mutual relationships: "I think you can only feel others," he said, "if you have some sense of your own being."⁵⁴ His paintings make a viewer aware of her specific individual self, as distinguished from her constructed identity, or her personality type as culturally assigned. Recognition of self is the first step in understanding mutual relationships. Bois does recognize the beneficial result of experiencing Newman's sense of space and place, not to mention his sense of scale: one feels the security of being where one is and faces the ethical dimension of relationships. But, at the same time, Bois conjures an affective aggression induced by Newman's canvases. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* "force[s] [us] to relinquish our mastery over the visual field."⁵⁵ Looking at *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III* (1967–68 [BNF 106]), Bois reiterates his metaphor of fisticuffs: "The engulfing red is overwhelming: one cannot dodge its blow."⁵⁶ Newman's large paintings make us submit, after we have fought for our lives. The model of viewer on offer here does not seem to be the same as the one

51. Bois, "Newman's Laterality," 42.

52. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," 212.

53. Bois, "1951," 362–67, at 365.

54. Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester" (1965), 257–58.

55. Bois, "1951," 365.

56. Bois, "1951," 366.

imagined by Newman when he associated the impact of his paintings with meeting another person: “There’s a metaphysical thing in the fact that people meet and see each other, and if a meeting of people is meaningful it affects both their lives,” he told David Sylvester in 1965.⁵⁷ Instead, the model of a viewer implied in Bois’s account is that of a vandal being provoked to attack: “Presumably,” Bois writes, “the man who knifed [*Who’s Afraid . . . III*], furiously slashing it three times across, could not bear the heat.”⁵⁸ On this account, instead of Newman’s metaphysics of relationship, we have trauma.

Newman’s Mode of Pictorial Address

What are the implications of Newman’s sense of space for understanding how his paintings establish “human scale,” the aspect of painting that mattered most to him? Understanding scale is not merely a matter of defining the term; scale is a quality that must be experienced to be interpreted. I have used the phrase “mode of pictorial address” here primarily to designate this aspect of the painting-viewer relationship. Newman’s mode of pictorial address is a complex exchange that is inaugurated by his creation of a painting and is consummated by a viewer’s acknowledgment of it (and thus also of the artist’s intentions). Newman said as much when, in 1957, he criticized Frank Getlein, who had disparaged *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* in the pages of the *New Republic*.⁵⁹ Newman wrote a letter to the editor in which he stated that his paintings “embody a vision and a way of looking that never existed before.”⁶⁰ Both sides are necessary for a mode of pictorial address: the paintings have or embody a vision (that of the painter) and also a way of looking (which is the responsibility of the viewer).

When he embarked on the vertical works in 1950, Newman had just completed what was and would remain his most productive year of work; he had completed eighteen paintings. That productivity, many scholars have suggested, was partly a consequence of his creation of *Onement I*. “What it made me realize,” Newman said of that painting in 1965, “is that I was confronted for the first time with the thing that I did, whereas up until that moment I was able to remove myself from the act of painting, or from the painting itself. [Before], the painting was something that I was making, whereas somehow for the first time with this painting the painting itself had a life of its own.”⁶¹ Regarding the light cadmium

57. Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” 259.

58. Bois, “1951,” 366. Newman told an anecdote about another viewer who could not stand the heat: “I remember an incident during my first show, in 1950, where a friend of mine, a painter, got terribly upset and had tears in his eyes and began to abuse me. And I said: ‘What’s the trouble?’ He said: ‘You called me names, you made me aware of myself.’ I said: ‘Well, take it easy. I mean, everything is

going to be alright.” See Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” 258.

59. Frank Getlein, “Review of *American Paintings, 1945–47*” (1957), included in *BN:SWI*, 209–10.

60. Newman, “Letter to the Editor, *New Republic*” (1957), in *BN:SWI*, 211.

61. Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” 256.

red band that he painted along its central axis, he said: "I realized that I had filled the surface. . . . I felt that for the first time for myself there was no picture making. That stroke made the thing come to life for me."⁶²

Why was avoiding or canceling "picture making" so important to Newman? Recall that, when asked about his motivations for making such oddly proportioned works as *Untitled 2, 1950* and *The Wild*, Newman answered that he was testing himself, trying to establish a human scale. But for him, scale was "a felt thing," rather than "something that you can build up or develop by relating parts."⁶³ "Picture making" referred to those traditional compositional strategies of relating parts. Because his paintings were not composed of meshed parts, of shapes pushing and pulling against each other to establish either a sense of dynamism or one of equilibrium, Newman thought that his works transcended the closed systems of aesthetic compositional rules found in conventional painting and thus achieved totality: "I was constantly concerned in doing a painting that would move in its totality as you see it. You look at it and you see it. . . . Otherwise, a painter is a kind of choreographer of space, and he creates a kind of dance of elements, and it becomes a narrative art instead of a visual art."⁶⁴

Discussing the work of Kenneth Noland and Anthony Caro in 1965, Michael Fried expressed in his own terms what I take to be the ultimate significance of Newman's circumvention of composing or choreography. When we compose, Fried suggests,

we step back, see how it looks, worry about its appearance—above all we put it at arm's length: *this* is what composing, seeing it in compositional terms, means. We distance it. And our inclination to do this amounts in effect to a desire to escape the work, to break its grip on us, to destroy the intimacy it threatens to create, to pull out. And one doesn't step back or pull out just a little, or more or less. (The relevant comparison is with human relationships here.) One is either in or out: and if one steps back, whatever the grip of the thing was or may have been is broken or forestalled, and whatever the relationship was or may have been is ended or aborted. There is even a sense in which it is only then that one begins to see: that one becomes a spectator. But of course the object (or person) now being seen for the first time is no longer the same.⁶⁵

62. Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," 306.

63. Newman, "The Case for 'Exporting' Nation's Avant-Garde Art," 272.

64. Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," 306.

65. Michael Fried, "Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland: Some Notes on Not Composing," *Lugano Review* 1 (1965): 206 (the essay is not reprinted in Fried's book of selected

art criticism, but the paragraph cited appears in an endnote to "An Introduction to My Art Criticism," in *Art and Objecthood*, 64n46). Fried's account of Newman's painting has been important for my own thinking, in particular because he subtly considers the values at stake in Newman's handling of formal problems.

Likewise, it was with an analogy to human relationships that Newman explained the meaning of not-composing:

When you see a person for the first time, you have an immediate impact. You don't really have to start looking at details. It's a total reaction in which the entire personality of a person and your own personality make contact. . . . If you have to stand there examining the eyelashes and all that sort of thing, it becomes a cosmetic situation in which you remove yourself from the experience.⁶⁶

Examining eyelashes is like seeing things in compositional terms: the result is cosmetic, a worry about appearances, a mask over the real thing that distances you from the subject (not object) of your regard. On Newman's terms, a painting "move[s] in its totality" when it entails relationships analogous to those of intimacy that (sometimes) obtain between individuals. Although a painting like *Onement I* is not literally another individual, its totality both solicits a viewer's attention (as another person might), while also maintaining its separateness as an integral object that is closed to us. The simultaneity of openness and closedness is the condition for any process of self-discovery or self-creation that is grounded in reciprocity. Scale is this balance between self and other.⁶⁷

To highlight the stakes of this analysis, consider two competing, if not antithetical, positions about how to view Newman's work. The first is provided by the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, who, in a discussion of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, suggested that the bodily "poise" of the artist's zips "invades and displaces our sense of ourselves, and the effect is a brief but intense experience that begs to be called the sublime: loss of selfhood to something bigger and nobler than we are."⁶⁸ (This account is exactly opposite to the one I have labored to produce, in which the bands establish the integrity and cohesion of the body despite the lateral dispersion of the gaze.) The second position is offered by the artist Mel Bochner, who on seeing a viewer bathed in a red glow in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, recounted: "I realized [that the color on the viewer] was the light shining on the painting reflecting back, filling the space between the viewer and the artwork that created the space, the place. And [I realized] that that reflection of the *self of the painting*, the painting as the subject reflected on the viewer, was a wholly new category of experience."⁶⁹ Because Schjeldahl allows himself to identify so

66. Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," 306.

67. Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," 306. I thank Todd Cronan for conversations that helped me understand more fully the implications of my analysis for the interpretation of Newman's mode of pictorial address in this and the next section. See also Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

68. Peter Schjeldahl, "Lord Barney: Barnett Newman's Majestic Abstractions," *New Yorker*, April 15, 2002, www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/04/15/020415craw_artworld.

69. Mel Bochner, discussion session, symposium on Barnett Newman, Harvard University, May 15, 1992, audiotape, Harvard University Art Museums, as quoted in Shiff, "To Create Oneself," 85–86; emphasis added.

completely with the painting that he loses his sense of himself, as if merging with it, there winds up being no difference between the two. Schjeldahl's powerful identification—does it indicate a disdain for autonomy?—contrasts sharply with what Bochner has to say. As an artist, Bochner recognizes the separation between the viewer and the artwork (“the self of the painting”) and thus acknowledges his position as one facing an other. And it is only this sense of separation that can secure any notion of pictorial *address*.

There is another way to interpret the experience of a viewer who, as represented by Schjeldahl, loses himself in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*—who in beholding it claims to experience a moment of union with the painting. It might seem that such a moment is underwritten by an authentic belief in the power of art to produce the kinds of sublime or transcendent experience often claimed for Newman's work generally. (These claims have done much damage to the critical evaluation of what Newman was really after.) But consider an alternative interpretation. Consider that such a belief, or desire for union, may be generated to compensate for a more difficult realization or truth: the other *really is* other, and so unmediated access is impossible. The dream, or the illusion, of seeing Newman's canvases as obliterating the divide between viewer (subject) and painting (object) is an evasion or avoidance; it is an expression of willful resistance to the responsibility that is entailed whenever one's subject position—the sense of one's separateness—is not lost, but rather maintained, while facing another. For, in that position, the viewer must necessarily acknowledge that the painting does not open itself up automatically to our understanding, any more than another person would, and that it must instead be interpreted and understood, by us, from within our present contingent circumstances.⁷⁰ A viewer's wish for immediacy, her desire to bridge the gap between self and other, is in effect a reaction to, and an avoidance of, the more demanding recognition that it is our separateness that generates the possibility of our communication. Newman's own statement bears quoting on this point:

I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality, and at the same time of his connection to others, who are also separate. And this problem of our being involved in the sense of self which also moves in relation to other selves . . . the disdain for the self is something I don't quite understand.⁷¹

70. Cf. Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, 77.

71. Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester” (1965), 257–58, ellipsis in original.

Newman's Self-evidence

Newman considered a painting to be “a very particular thing” and thought that the “impact” of facing an artwork for the first time was “no different, really, from one’s feeling a relation to meeting another person.”⁷² Relationships are important; at the same time, though, he hoped that a viewer’s experience of facing his paintings would yield her a recognition of her own autonomy. That recognition is produced by the onlooker’s sense of his or her place within the sensation of complete space that the artwork achieves: “He knows he’s there, so he’s aware of himself.”⁷³ Newman worried about the problem of achieving one’s self under the constant pressure to accept a readymade model of identity imparted by one’s culture. As part of their resistance to fifties’ conformism, many artists and art critics cultivated individual identities, along with the stories of struggle and anxiety that usually accompanied them.⁷⁴ But those identities tended to be group identities, just as the stories tended to be culturally determined, so much so that individuality might seem to be just another artificial construct.⁷⁵

As an alternative approach, Newman concerned himself with the discovery of his own “terrible and constant” self.⁷⁶ But how to distinguish the authentic constant self from one’s superficial social identity? During a three-day symposium of artists and critics held at Studio 35 in 1950, the conversation turned to naming the kinds of painting being done at midcentury. Robert Motherwell, the moderator, proffered three: “Abstract-Expressionist; Abstract Symbolist; Abstract-Objectivist.” Newman counterproposed “Self-evident.”⁷⁷ The term is used to denote unprovable yet undeniable axiomatic truths, but, in Newman’s usage, it connotes that which is actually present, conspicuous, or manifest, with no proof required. The name that he suggested also implies, though, that his works render the “terrible and constant” self of the viewer evident to him- or

72. Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” 259.

73. Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” 257.

74. Fred Orton interprets Harold Rosenberg’s identification of a group of “action painters” in these terms (see Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* [December 1952]: 22–23, 48–50). Orton notes: “Action painting, for Rosenberg, was painting about the possibility of radical change that had not happened in the 1930s and 1940s. . . . [Although] action painting could not compensate at the symbolic level for the fact that the political action which would redefine the proletariat did not, at that moment, seem to be available to it as a class[.] . . . the action painters glimpsed that that failure was not total” (Orton, “Action, Revolution, Painting,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 [1991]: 3).

75. On this point, Shiff, in his study of Brice Marden, notes: “Many cultural critics . . . regard the self as ideologically determined at its core, if it even has a core,

an essence. We have become inured to thinking that the self is constructed rather than experientially self-forming—or, if self-forming, that social institutions filter all experience and frame the process. If the individual is a product of social forces, an ‘expression’ of the patterns of behavior and emotional states those forces induce, then self-expression will have been compromised from the start. It can operate only within boundaries established by the social discourse. Each individual becomes a type, a social identity, an image for someone else’s eye.” Richard Shiff, “Force of Myself Looking,” in *Plane Image: A Brice Marden Retrospective*, ed. Gary Garrels (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 34.

76. Newman, “From *Exhibition of the United States of America*” (1965), in *BN:SWI*, 187.

77. For an edited transcript of the symposium, see Robert Motherwell, ed., *Modern Artists in America* (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1950), 9–22.

herself. Through their scale and modes of pictorial address, Newman's paintings both establish their own self-evidence and make evident to each viewer the self that is authentically his.

I have suggested that the achievement of self is a precondition for acknowledgment of the other. In his interview with Newman, David Sylvester suggested there might be an even more fundamental condition:

Newman: One thing that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself. In that sense he relates to me when I made the painting because in that sense I was there. . . .

Sylvester: I think that one does get the feeling in front of your paintings of valuing one's own being, a certain sense of exhilaration in one's own being. One also has a sense of the otherness of the painting, which is a separate presence from oneself. Obviously, people do find cause for resentment in the fact that there are other entities in the world other than themselves. And the acceptance of the otherness of others is an important step.

Newman: Yes.⁷⁸

Newman recognized, with some prompting from Sylvester, that separateness is also a condition for acknowledgment. His pictorial space simultaneously respects our condition of separateness and allows us to establish our places in relation to it. Recall the photograph of two people looking at *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, taken at Newman's retrospective in 1958: the image was so important to him that he soon restaged the pose, this time with himself and another individual looking obliquely at *Cathedra*. That picture shows each of us not only how to look at a Newman painting but also how to *look with others*.⁷⁹

Note that Sylvester emphasizes not just the "otherness of others" but the acceptance of its being so. That acceptance—the willingness to face a divide between the self and the other—is a positive step toward "valuing one's own being" and becoming "exhilarat[ed]" by it. Why? Perhaps the exhilaration results from the prospect of sharing our experience or world with others, of communicating or expressing it to them, once we have embraced the divide itself as constitutive of relationship. Along these lines, Charles Palermo, in a discussion of "presentness" in modernist art, poignantly suggests that

sharing a "here" and a "now" [which, recall, are titles of Newman paintings] would mean sharing a world—sharing even our finitude and our separateness. And sharing such things would mean more than merely

78. Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," 257–58.

79. I thank Mark Schlesinger for sharing this and other insights with me.

being subjected to them together—as we all are—but would also mean acknowledging them together, expressing our experience of them to one another.⁸⁰

The structure of such meaningful relationships is given in or expressed by the structure of acknowledgment evident in Newman's works generally. But, of course, different modes of acknowledgment occur in beholding various of Newman's paintings. It is not as if each instance of acknowledgment is the same. Each painting reveals or calls for a certain mode of acknowledgment, recognizable to us by virtue of its correspondence with some mode or form we have experienced in our lives with other people: in our suspicions of or openness to them, for instance, or in our excitement or apprehension toward them. Or else a painting may call for a new mode, one unanticipated by us and therefore deploying a creative power in our lives.⁸¹

Conclusion

When Harold Rosenberg in 1948 challenged Newman to explain the meaning of his paintings, the artist replied that to understand even one of his paintings properly would mean “the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism.”⁸² In another context, he added that his painting was “an open painting, in the sense that it represent[s] an open world—to that extent, . . . [it] does denote the possibility of an open society, of an open world, not of a closed institutional world.”⁸³ Adrian Lewis argues that Newman's work projects a “utopian image of freedom” through which artists become unwitting models for human possibilities in an era of concentrating state power.⁸⁴ I would add that coming to understand Newman's scale—think of it now as a form of life centering on modes of acknowledgment—might facilitate the end of any social organization that is based on dogmatic principles.

Newman thought that, on some level, *Untitled 2, 1950* and the other thin vertical works had not been well understood. His pessimism had its roots in his own professional failure—or rather, in the failure of professionals to recognize what he was struggling to achieve. In April 1952, Newman was excluded from *Fifteen Americans*, a Museum of Modern Art exhibition that included work by Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and other contemporaries. The

80. Palermo, *Fixed Ecstasy*, 187.

81. It might be suggested that modernism as a whole reveals the structure of acknowledgment that obtains in the beholder-painting relationship as a resource for its self-reflexive analysis, and that a crucial task remaining is to delineate the particular forms of acknowledgment that are created through this analysis.

82. Newman, “‘Frontiers of Space,’” 251.

83. Newman, “Interview with Emile de Antonio,” 308.

84. Adrian Lewis, “Barnett Newman, Abstract Expressionism, and American Cultural Conventions,” in *Representing and Imagining America*, ed. Philip John Davies (Keele, UK: Keele University Press, 1996), 160–69.

rebuff wounded him. Thomas Hess, not yet the champion of Newman's work that he would become, compounded the insult in a lengthy review of the show, in which he singled out Newman—despite his exclusion—as the chief theorist of contemporary “extremists” in painting.⁸⁵ Soon after, Newman bought back *Untitled I, 1950* (BNF 39)—the first of the sequence of narrow vertical paintings—from Alfonso Ossorio and wrote to him that “I have decided to withdraw all of my ‘small’ canvases at this time from public view. . . . The conditions do not yet exist . . . that can make possible a direct, innocent attitude toward an isolated piece of my work.”⁸⁶ Newman may have understood that their failure was a consequence of viewers not acknowledging the paintings’ modes of pictorial address. Simply put, it was the viewers who had failed, not the paintings.

Insofar as Newman's work is understood as an attempt to transform the possibilities for how viewers respond to a mode of pictorial address, his paintings can be seen to criticize our usual evasions of knowing ourselves (and others).⁸⁷ But if that critique is to take effect, if it is to lead to a beneficial transformation in behavior or thought or feeling—if, that is, it is to lead to authentic communication—the critique must be acknowledged as valid. To do so is more than just a matter of experiencing a sensation of space, although the various ways in which his paintings create space, and allow a viewer to establish a place within it, are important. “I want to make it clear,” Newman said, “that I never set out to paint space-domes per se. I am, I hope, involved in much more.”⁸⁸ That “much more” is what matters. The test of Newman's success in achieving it—or rather, our success in achieving it in the face of his paintings—lies in whether or not we, the viewers to whom the criticism is directed, accept its truth.

85. Thomas Hess, “Where US Extremes Meet,” *Art News* 51, no. 2 (1952): 16–19, 65–66.

86. Newman, “Letter to Alfonso Ossorio” (1953), in *BN:SWI*, 198.

87. Cavell notes: “The concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. A ‘failure to know’

might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank” (“Knowing and Acknowledging,” 263–64).

88. Newman, “‘Frontiers of Space,’” 250.