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## Barnett Newman

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# AESTHETICS

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MICHAEL KELLY

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JEANNINE JOHNSON

**NEWMAN, BARNETT** (1905–1970), American artist. Revealing his characteristically incisive wit, Barnett Newman often quipped, "Aesthetics is to artists what ornithology is to birds." He meant that the activity of artists, like the behavior of birds, was not bound by any external system devised to explain or categorize it. Just as ornithology has no bearing on a bird's life, aesthetics—insofar as it is treated as a science—is irrelevant to an artist's creative work. Newman rejected the idea that theoretical aesthetics, if narrowly construed as an investigation of the rules that supposedly govern art or as an inquiry into what constitutes the essence of beauty, could provide a guide for original content.

And it was indeed the problem of art's *content*—its most authentic subject matter—that preoccupied Newman. What would that content be, and what would it mean? The infamous answer Newman gave to the critic Harold Rosenberg's challenge for the painter to explain his works is second in its frequency of citation only to his wisecrack about ornithology. The context of the exchange was a social gathering in 1948. Newman—displaying the seriousness, even radicalism, of his

intentions—claimed that to understand one of his paintings properly would mean "the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism." Somewhere in between the two quotes—between the insistence on the art's autonomy and the responsive viewership it aims to solicit—lies Newman's truth.

Newman was philosophically minded—he majored in philosophy at the City College of New York (1923–1927)—but he wasn't a professional philosopher. Unlike other artists in his cohort who were reticent to speak about issues of aesthetics (at least in public), Newman broadcast his views to anyone who would read or listen. Essays, articles, interviews, lectures, reviews, political pamphlets, private correspondence, letters to the editor: he issued them all. The wide range of Newman's erudite writing (stylistically levied by his earnest tone and brilliant humor) poses certain difficulties to synopsis. Each essay, like each of his paintings, is an abundant world. Rather than singling out his more famous statements and trying to key them to select paintings, this introduction proceeds in sections matched to certain recurrent motifs of Newman's thought and practice, including isolation and tragedy; individualism and the self; autonomy and relationship; and politics. Grasping these structural themes will provide the reader with a framework for better assessing the relationship of Newman's ideas to his art.

**Isolation and Tragedy.** Many of Newman's writings thematize his dissatisfaction with what he took to be a retrograde historical and cultural situation. His 1947 article "The First Man Was an Artist" employs the imagery of an atomic blast to figure the destructive tendencies of recent science: "In the last sixty years, we have seen mushroom a vast cloud of 'sciences' in the fields of culture, history, philosophy, psychology, economics, politics, aesthetics, in an ambitious attempt to claim the nonmaterial world" (Newman, 1990, pp. 156–157). Newman railed against the dominion of a positivist mentality that quantified all human experience but was incapable of addressing the central metaphysical issues of human existence. But the critic was too astute simply to oppose science and art. Newman, ever adept at beating the opposition on its home turf, took the position that scientists had simply misunderstood the role of science. Setting himself the task of winning true science back from the number crunchers, he accused them of abdicating their responsibilities by forgetting the proper nature of their activity, which was to discover not just facts, but the truth of human being. Scientific *method*, he argued, misleadingly identified truth with proof. This was a distortion of genuine scientific *inquiry*—which Newman aligned with creative artistic inquiry—and the relentlessness with which his culture pursued the former and thus magnified the distortion constituted more than just professional failure. It amounted to a moral weakness that prevented the culture from confronting its tragic state in the proper terms. But poetry and art, Newman thought, could express the metaphysical truth of the historical moment, and hold meaning for the future. He prized art over the limited instrumentalism of his contemporary world. Humanity's

truest act was above all else aesthetic—a poetic outcry of “awe and anger...before the void” rather than “a request for a drink of water” (p. 158).

Born in 1905, Newman was twenty-four when the 1929 stock market crash bankrupted his father’s thriving clothing company. In the 1930s, he experienced the Depression and witnessed the rise of fascism in Europe. In the 1940s, he lived through a world war, learned about the atrocities of the Holocaust, and was distressed by the unprecedented destructive powers of the atomic bomb. And in the 1950s, he observed the consolidation of a postwar consensus culture—fueled by an aggressive McCarthyism—that seemed as effective in the United States as dictatorship was in the Soviet Union in extinguishing Leftist hopes of meaningful, collective social action. Newman interpreted the historical situation in moral terms. In a 1970 interview with the director Emile de Antonio, he put it this way:

About twenty-five years ago [in 1945] for me painting was dead. Painting was dead in the sense that the situation, the world situation, was such that the whole enterprise as it was being practiced by myself and by my friends and colleagues seemed to be a dead enterprise....What it meant for me was that I had to start from scratch as if painting didn’t exist....What [was I] going to paint? The old stuff was out. It was no longer meaningful. These things were no longer relevant in a moral crisis, which is hard to explain to those who didn’t live through those early years. I suppose I was quite depressed by the whole mess....We couldn’t build on anything. The world was going to pot. It was worse than that. It was worse than that.

(Newman, 1990, pp. 303–304)

Newman’s generation asked the question of what to paint without any assurance that an answer would be forthcoming. Nor could it be assumed that art’s new subject matter—whatever it turned out to be—was enough to ensure the quality of the art produced. In this tenuous situation, the query itself carried the weight of a moral decision. Answering it—*deciding*—would entail acting in the face of doubt. Writing about Newman and his contemporaries in 1947, the critic Clement Greenberg had expressed that “their isolation is inconceivable, crushing, unbroken, damning. That anyone can produce art on a respectable level in this situation is highly improbable” (Greenberg, 1986, Vol. 2, p. 170). A year later, again surveying the terrain of recent art, Greenberg put it bluntly: “Isolation, or rather the alienation that is its cause, is the truth—isolation, alienation, naked and revealed unto itself, is the condition under which the true reality of our age is experienced” (Vol. 2, p. 193). Although both Newman and Greenberg downplayed their connection to existential philosophy, sentiments such as these echo certain motifs found throughout the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Heidegger (whose works Newman collected in his library).

Newman confronted the situation Greenberg described. His hope was to create art that would be relevant to the world situation, even if it meant “creat[ing] an entirely different reality” (Newman, 1990, p. 163). American painters, as he as-

serted in “The Sublime Is Now” (1948), were freeing themselves of the “impediments” of European art in order to produce “self-evident [images] of revelation, real and concrete” (p. 173). *This* reality, generated by the artist’s “metaphysical act,” would respond to, without imagining away, the conditions of isolation and despair experienced by him and his peers (p. 164). It would thus provide for art an appropriately “tragic subject matter” (p. 165). As he argued in the unpublished “The New Sense of Fate” (1948), modern man was “by his acts or lack of action” as open to the consequences of an intimate, all-pervading fate as was the hero of a Greek tragedy (p. 169).

**Individualism and the Self.** The metaphysical act was individual. It also carried political and existential meaning. In Fred Orton’s view, Harold Rosenberg believed that the artist, finding the canvas “an arena in which to act,” could maintain, on an individual level, the revolutionary political ideals that recently had failed on a larger, mass scale. For Rosenberg, their struggle to create credible art was authentic because it was “associated with risk and will.” While political action was forestalled, the studio harbored agency. In action painting, the critic asserted, the “artist’s struggle for identity took hold of the crisis” of depersonalization within capitalist society. Individual action, in the form of what Rosenberg came to identify as a kind of existential “self-creation,” compensated for the impossibility of collective action.

Taking a more skeptical viewpoint, this heroic narrative would seem to harbor a less ideal interpretation. It might be argued that as artists sensed the real conditions of and possibilities for collectivism ebbing away, they responded by clinging to *ideological versions* of individuality—to narratives of identity—that variously marked the artist as creative, expressive, or rebellious. Although expedient, such narratives remained abstract and dogmatic, mere labels of individuality. They were not adequate to a deeply felt sense of an experientially self-forming, and therefore more “real,” self. And, while they may have been well suited to the burgeoning iconography of the brooding and recalcitrant artist (witness *Life* magazine’s 1949 photo essay on the denim-clad Jackson Pollock, “Is he the greatest living artist in the U.S.?”), such normative social categories domesticated Abstract Expressionist artists by subordinating whatever might be regarded as their genuine or authentic selves to ready-made identities. On this account, individuality or identity, in their ideological forms, prevents the realization of the self, a process Newman and some of his contemporaries regarded as of primary significance for the content of art. “We are making [art] out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete,” Newman declared in “The Sublime Is Now” (Newman, 1990, p. 173). Painting—at least the type of painting Newman aspired to realize—contested in its structures of beholding the problematic nature of modern “individuality,” with its ready-made (and thus depersonalized) narratives of identity. Instead, it became a metaphysical endeavor

to discover the true self and to express a sense of self to a viewer.

Newman worried about identity, and reflected on the problem of achieving one's self under the pressure to accept a ready-made, artificial model of selfhood determined by culture at large. As Richard Shiff has noted of modernity in general, when external culture, not internal drive, seems to regulate what personal desires are before they are felt, the situation implies a commodification of feeling (or, to put it in existential terms, a destitution of feeling). Alternatively, Newman wanted—as paradoxical as it might sound—to create his own self, “terrible and constant,” as he once described it (Newman, 1990, p. 187). But how would he know when he'd done so?

During a three-day symposium in April 1950 that was intended to bring artists and critics together to discuss pertinent issues of aesthetics and practice, Robert Motherwell, a moderator, proffered three names for the group of artists we now identify as the New York School: “Abstract-Expressionist; Abstract Symbolist; Abstract-Objectionist.” Newman counter-proposed his own name, “self-evident” (Newman, 1990, p. 241). The term designates objective truth recognized; figuratively, it implies a reflexive subjective relationship. It might be suggested that both senses of the term apply most meaningfully to a canvas Newman regarded as particularly important: *Onement I* (1948).

Although this small painting measures only twenty-seven by sixteen inches, and appears to be just a single, cadmium red band (or “zip”) bisecting a darker, slightly modulated, cadmium ground, it is difficult to overestimate the critical status of this canvas in Newman's body of work. “What it made me realize,” Newman said 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.

(Newman, 1990, p. 256)

“It was full,” he explained (p. 306). It was also a rebirth, the “beginning of [his] present life,” fittingly completed on an anniversary of his own origin, his forty-third birthday (p. 255). So significant was this occasion that Newman claims to have stopped working for nine months—coincidentally, the duration of human gestation—in order to contemplate what he had achieved. It would be fair to agree with Ann Temkin that Newman “equated the creation of this painting [with] the creation of [his] self” (Temkin, 2002).

Arguably, *Onement I* acquired significance for the artist because as it took on a life of its own (as a consequence both of Newman's creative act as well as his practical or technical activity as an artist), the meaning of his act in relation to it became increasingly evident to him. Newman's act produced a meaning that was self-generated, but not imposed by fiat. It was metaphysical in the sense that it disclosed an

unknown, open world—not an already known, determined one. The speculative aspect of this insight was grounded by Newman's practice as an artist, which taught him that just as no technical plan was necessary to make a painting, no template of human action necessarily determined its course (“I don't paint in terms of preconceived systems,” the artist told David Sylvester in 1965). Perhaps, too, as the unanticipated meaning of his act—and the new relationship that act now sustained—became visible to him, Newman arrived at another insight. In a world in which the results of one's acts are unpredictable, the meaning of any and each act acquires a moral dimension. In painting, as in life, doing something might be better than doing nothing (alternatively, it might be worse). Newman's act is metaphysical also because it transcends this potentially debilitating conundrum, moving things forward under varying conditions of uncertainty and in doubt of an unknowable future.

**Autonomy and Relationship.** Self-evidence specifies. It refers to that which is actually present, conspicuous, or manifest. Something that is self-evident requires no proof: it is axiomatic, indubitable, certain, and conclusive. *Onement I* was the painting by which the fact of Newman's self was established as true. And that experience might also hold for its viewers, should they acknowledge the structure of beholding Newman intended to create. The painter often analogized the experience of beholding his paintings to the experience of facing another person. And like that experience, facing his art created a totality. Newman expressed it this way:

When you see a person for the first time, you have an immediate impact. You don't have to really start looking at details. It's a total reaction in which the entire personality of a person and your own personality make contact. To my mind that's almost a metaphysical event. 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. (Newman, 1990, p. 306)

At the same time, his paintings made viewers aware of their *specific* individual selves (in contradistinction to their constructed identities, or their personality types named by culture). Recognition of self was the first step in understanding mutual relationships:

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.... I think you can only feel others if you have some sense of your own being. (pp. 257–258)

In Newman's thought, autonomy and relationship were reciprocally determined.

**Politics.** That reciprocity was the basis of Newman's anarchic social ideal. Interested in politics throughout his life, he ran in 1933 for mayor of New York on a cultural platform that opposed doctrinaire forms of socialism and communism. In his 1968 foreword to Peter Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1899), Newman expressed that anarchism

embodied the “creative way of life that makes all programmatic doctrine impossible” (pp. 45–46). This would be a true form of collective life that did not homogenize or dissipate individual interest. To the contrary, genuine collectivism, based on the anarchic idea of the “direct formation of social communities” nourishes the freedom of the individual (p. 51). Autonomy facilitates the creation of “spontaneous, self-organized communes, now fashionably known as participatory democracy, based on mutual aid and respect for each person’s individuality and person” (p. 46).

Autonomy and relationship—the alternatives to isolation and identity—mean freedom, and freedom is maximized under conditions of social accord and psychological equilibrium. A harmony of inner and outer needs may be achieved in collective life. From this viewpoint, the term “collectivism” is best understood as more than just a type of social organization or ideology; it is rather a mode of comportment to one’s self and to others. Only autonomous individuals can experience meaningfully their social relations with others. Recall Newman’s unflinching retort to Rosenberg about the meaning of his paintings. Newman seemed to imply that the only way to fully recognize the debilitating consequences of any form of political or ideological control (or even dogmatic self-rule) over the individual, and the alienation and isolation he feels, is to experience its opposite, the interdependence of autonomy and relationship. Only then could an alternative to Newman’s tragic historical reality become visible.

[See also Sublime.]

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MICHAEL SCHREYACH

**NEW MEDIA.** See Computer Art; Computing, Aesthetic; Curating; New Media; Digitization; and Information Theory.

**NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH WILHELM.** To treat the thought of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, this entry comprises five essays:

*Survey of Thought*  
*Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Disinterestedness*  
*Nietzsche’s Literary Style*  
*Nietzsche and Visuality*  
*Nietzsche on Tragedy*

The first essay is an overview of Nietzsche’s thought in general as the background for his aesthetic theory; the author discusses many of the ways Nietzsche has been interpreted and how these interpretations affect our understanding of his aesthetics. The second essay is on Nietzsche’s relationship to a philosopher who was pivotal in the development of his thinking about art: Schopenhauer; it also explains Nietzsche’s critique of aesthetic disinterestedness. The third essay concerns the apparent unity between Nietzsche’s ideas about style and his aesthetics, whether in relation to literature, music, or any of the arts. The fourth essay examines Nietzsche’s aesthetics in connection with the visual arts, and the final essay addresses his important views on tragedy. For further discussion, see Postmodernism; Tragedy; and Wagner, Richard.