Reading Art

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Image as a Situation: Tragedy, Subjectivity and Painting According to Barnett Newman

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> The fetish and ornament – blind and mute, impress only those who cannot look at the terror of Self. The self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture.
>
> B. Newman (1965)

> There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.
>
> (Statement placed by Newman in Betty Parsons Gallery during his exhibition in 1951)

Although Barnett Newman's (1905 – 1970) painting belongs to the current of abstract expressionism, the wide, monochromatic fields of his canvases are clearly different from the gestular expression of Pollock, or de Kooning, who are commonly associated with that movement. Truly, as shown by Michael Leja, his contemporaries perceived his works as rather cool, intellectual and devoid of spontaneity.[1] In the 1960s there even have been an attempt to pair his paintings with geometrical

1 Michael Leja, "Barnett Newman's Solo Tango," *Critical Inquiry*, 21 (1995): 568.

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and minimalist art, which was growing popular. Newman, however, strongly opposed such labeling. In 1962 he rejected John Gordon's invitation to participate in an exhibition entitled "Geometric Abstraction" in Withney Museum, and a year later he refused to show his works at the Gallery of Modern Art in Washington, at an exhibit entitled "Formalists." He justified his decisions by stating that such a context would "distort his work" and "confuse the issues."[2] Indeed, "formalism" was a perspective, which he vehemently opposed his entire life. He saw in it an attempt at reducing art to a level of sensual experiences and of trapping it within well-defined frameworks of description.[3]

His expressionistic attitude was in fact revealed in his aversion towards formalism, and rebellion against the idolatrous praise of "pure form." Many of Newman's texts express a belief that there exists a fundamental contradiction between a focus on the sensual beauty of forms, and art being a direct expression of an "idea" – an evocation of the radical and primary human experiences. Newman presented that opposition as an alternative between the need for expressing a "relationship to the Absolute," and the "absolutism of a perfect creation" – a plastic "fetish of quality."[4] In this way, with a single gesture, he separated himself from the entire aesthetic tradition of Western art, including the European avant-garde, which despite its rebellious nature in his view still remained "enclosed in the world of sensation," leaving behind a repertoire of innovative, but finite forms.[5] Following this argumentation, which displays a typical avant-garde attempt at ever-increasing radicalism, a step ahead was supposed to be a step back at the same time, towards the eternal source of all art, close to which the so-called primitive art. As Newman tried to convince us in his 1947 text, meaningfully titled *The First Man Was an Artist*, the metaphysical awe, and a need for its expression, constituted a primal human reaction, independent from utilitarian motives or communicational needs. Man's first expression – Newman wrote – was

2 Quted after: *Barnett Newman. Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Knopf, 1990), 221.

3 Newman did not agree with the formalist interpretation of modern art proposed by Clive Bell and Roger Fry, along with their conservative claim about the continuity of artistic development and scholarly habit of making art more approachable. He definitely valued a subjective and opinionated, poetic and fragmentary critique of Baudelaire, Apollinaire, or Harold Rosenberg over the ordered discourse of formalistic critique. See "The Anglo-Saxon Tradition in Art Criticism" (1944-45), in *Barnett Newman*, 83-86 and "For Impassioned Criticism," (1968), in *Barnett Newman*, 130-136.

4 Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now," (1948), in *Barnett Newman*, 171.

5 Ibid., 173.

"an outcry of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and his own helplessness before the void."[6]

That anthropological fantasy about the pure, entirely asocial and "non-utilitarian" expression, stemming from a metaphysical awe, shares certain kinship with a famous work by Wilhelm Worringer from 1908 entitled *Abstraction un Einfuhlung* [*Abstraction and Empathy*], which was well known to Newman. By referring to examples from the sphere of psychophysiology and primitive creations, Worringer attempted to prove that abstract art, despite seeming rational, grows from entirely irrational, psychological impulses. Whereas, according to Worringer, there was a "immense spiritual dread of space" at the foundation of that art – a sensation of powerlessness against the incomprehensibility and unpredictability of phenomena of the external world – Newman was eager to correct that attitude in one particular aspect: an "important truth," he wrote, "which lies at the foundation of creation of form of art of any kind, and defines an artistic style, is not a relationship between a man and the world, but with himself."[7]

That perspective, to a certain degree, fit into an intellectual milieu characteristic of the first generation of abstract expressionists. During the 1940s and 50s, questions of external and internal perils constituting the position of the modern subject were undertaken with a particular intensity, not only by philosophers, but also in popular psychological discourse in the press.[8] The positive American idea of an autonomous, internally integrated subject, who is conscious of his goals, was replaced by a vision the self that was divided, opaque and prone to unconscious, primitive drives – a concept which stemmed from psychoanalysis. Echoes of that concept within abstract expressionism overlapped with Marxism and existentialism, and derived statements about the reifying and dehumanizing influence that contemporary civilization has on an individual. In that pessimistic and intensely anxious, atmosphere, painting had to become an "arena in which to act" (according to Harold Rosenberg's famous metaphor), and simultaneously a bastion of subjectivity. According to the accepted interpretation of this artistic movement established by painters and critics, painting was treated as a direct recording, or a metaphor, of a subjective 'self' – that complex, internal space full of tensions

6 Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," (1947), in *Barnett Newman*, 158

7 Newman, "Painting and Prose," (1945), in *Barnett Newman*, 93.

8 Serge Guilbaut, *Jak Nowy Jork ukradł ideę sztuki nowoczesnej. Ekspresjonizm abstrakcyjny, wolność i zimna wojna [How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art]*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), trans. Ewa Mikina (Warsaw: Hotel Sztuki, 1992), 292; Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism. Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1993).

and contradictions.[9] This very striving for authenticity and spontaneity of expression was identified with the defense of the individual's internal freedom, which was endangered by the soulless automatism of contemporary life.[10]

When Barnett Newman wrote that "The self, terrible and constant," is a particular "subject" of his painting and sculpture,[11] he seemed close to that kind of thinking and distant from it simultaneously. He was not interested so much in the psychological dynamic, vitality and fluidity of one's self, of which a painting could be a record, but rather in the primary awareness of one's own existence in front of the picture – that elevated, and terrifying at the same time, moment of realization of one's own subjective separateness and presence in face of the world. I will attempt at analyzing the characteristic of that subjective 'self' in Newman's texts, its dramatic aspect and the experience of the image that corresponds to it. What I would like to show here, among other things, is the tension between a conspicuous tendency towards universalization, apparent in his vision of art and the human condition, and its conditioning by concrete historical experiences. In the end, I would like to reference Lyotard's interpretation of Newman's painting, which by concentrating on the question of experience and the ontology of the image, simultaneously goes beyond the framework of his authorial interpretation.

Tragedy and History

Newman stated on numerous occasions that the Second World War had been for him a period of "moral crisis" in painting. "During World War II it

9 Leja, "Barnett Newman's," 569.

10 As Robert Motherwell, one of the creators of the movement stated: "process of painting ... is conceived as an adventure, without preconceived ideas on the part of persons of intelligence, sensibility, or passion. Fidelity towards what occurs between oneself and the canvas, no matter how unexpected, becomes central... The major decisions in the process of painting are on the grounds of truth, not taste... no true artist ends with the style that he expected to have when he began... it is only by giving oneself up completely to the painting medium that one finds oneself and one's own style." (from an introduction to *The School of New York* exhibition catalogue, Perls Gallery, Beverly Hills, California, 1951, cited after: Irving Sandler, *The New York School. The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties* (New York: 1978), 46). This notion of "discovering one's self" in the process was often expressed by other artists as well; Ray Parker, an artist of a second generation of abstract expressionists stated: "The painting is both a thing and an event ... an 'aesthetic' object and behavior in the form of significant record. While the painter's subject is the painting, the painting's subject is the artist himself as his experience is consummated in the making." (R. Parker, "A Cahier Leaf. Direct Painting," *It is,* 1 (1985), cited after: Sandler, *The New York School*, 47).

11 Barnett Newman, "Statement," in *Exhibition of the United States of America* (São Paulo, 1965), in *Barnett Newman,* 186-7.

became nonsensical to get involved in painting men playing violins or cellos, or flowers."[12] The tradition of abstract art also seemed like something closed and deprived of meaning at that time – there was no way of entering the "paradise of pure forms," without having a sensation of emptiness and hollowness of such undertaking.[13] While before, without agreeing to reduce art to the role of illustrating political ideas, Newman supported modernism, and strongly separated himself from "regionalism," as well as the social realism of the New Deal era, now he decided that nurturing aesthetic autonomy and understanding art in a purely formal way was not possible anymore. That moment of doubt marked itself in a direct way on Newman's path as a painter: he stopped painting between 1940 and 1944, and in 1944 he destroyed all of his previous works. The first extant paintings and drawings, dating from 1944--46 are expressive bio-morphic abstractions, often painted in intense colors, whose titles refer to ancient myths (*Orpheus Song, Murder of Osiris, Gea*). Even though non-representational, they were, with their dramatic character and telling titles, an answer to a need for a "theme"; an answer to a basic question of that time: "what to paint?"[14]

Known at the time more as a critic, and a friend of artists, than as a painter, Newman paid particular attention to the kinship between works of American painters he was close with, and primitive art. Therefore, he supported the program included in earlier declarations by Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, who talked about the internal, spiritual connections between their art and myth.[15] He himself was an organizer of two exhibitions of pre-Columbian art: *Precolumbian Stone Sculpture* in 1944, and *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1946. Ancient objects presented at these exhibitions were taken out of their ethnographic context, and treated as fully legitimate works of art. In an introduction to the first show Newman wrote about the meaning the presented works should hold for contemporary artists:

> While we transcend time and place to participate in the spiritual life of a forgotten people, their art by the same magic illuminates the work of our time, of our own sculptors. The sense of dignity, the high seriousness of purpose, the sublime plane of "moral state," evident in this sculpture makes clearer to us why our modern sculptors were compelled to discard

12 "A Conversation. Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess," in *Barnett Newman*, 274.

13 Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio," in *Barnett Newman*, 302.

14 Ibid., 303.

15 See Guilbaut, *Jak Nowy Jork ukradł*, [*How New York Stole*], 116.

> the mock heroic, the voluptuous, the superficial realism, and exercise of virtuosity that inhibited the medium for so many European centuries.[16]

In an introduction to the *Ideographic Picture* exhibition (1947), where he gathered works of several contemporary artists, Newman stated: "Here is a group of artists, who are not abstract painters, although working in what is known as the abstract style."[17] What is important in their works – he noted – is not a specific approach to space, formal composition and style, but "the idea-complex that makes contact with mystery – of life, of men, of nature, of the hard, black chaos that is death, or the greyer, softer chaos that is tragedy."[18] Similarly as for the Native American artist from the Kwakiutl tribe, painterly forms were supposed to be a direct embodiment of an idea. For such an artist, Newman wrote, "shape was a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable. The abstract shape was, therefore, real rather than a formal 'abstraction' of a visual fact with its overtone of an already-known nature."[19]

Following that interpretation, analogies with "primitive" art did not include form, or iconography, but an attitude, and when used to describe works of a group of artists close to Newman, they granted them a mark of timelessness and significance. These analogies aimed to convince that their art is not merely an arbitrary, formal experiment, but an expression of fundamental experiences that move beyond personal, psychological states. "The new painter," stated Newman, "is in the position of the primitive artist, who since he was always face-to-face with the mystery of life, was always more concerned with presenting his wonder, his terror before it or the majesty of its powers, rather than with plastic qualities of surface, texture, etc."[20] Such an interpretation of primitive art as an individual gesture expressing metaphysical terror was a slightly anachronistic description, which did not match the conclusions of contemporary anthropologists, such as Franz Boas, or Margaret Mead, who paid more attention to the social functions of myth and ritual: the roles they played in organizing the tribal community, as well as their cognitive meaning as forms of explaining and ordering the world. Despite knowing their work,

16 Newman, "Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture," (1944), in *Barnett Newman*, 65.

17 Newman, "Ideographic Picture," in *Barnett Newman*, 108.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Newman, "The Plasmic Image," (1945) in *Barnett Newman*, 145.

Newman preferred to stand by a romantic, expressive understanding of primal art, which was closer to Worringer and Nietzsche.[21] Thanks to such an approach, he was able to present it as a fundamental form of creativity, also available for contemporary artists. "The present painter," he wrote, "is concerned not with his own feelings or with the mystery of his own personality but with the penetration into the world-mystery. His imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent his art is connected with the sublime. It is a religious art which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life, which is its sense of tragedy."[22]

The notion of tragedy, interpreted here clearly from the perspective of Nietzsche's readings, refers to the primal sensation of life in the context of its pain and cruelty. It is tied to a state of Dionysian ecstasy, with abandonment of one's individual self, and direct insight into horrors of existence. On the other hand, aligning himself with existential thought, Newman connected the sense of tragedy with the deep contradiction which exists between one's separateness and individual freedom, and determinism associated with belonging to the entirety of existence. That was the way he described the "sense of tragedy of existence," in his comment on the works of Adolph Gottlieb:

> Man is a tragic being, and the heart of this tragedy is the metaphysical problem of part and whole. That dichotomy of our nature, from which we can never escape and which because of its nature impels us helplessly to try to resolve it, motivates our struggle for perfection, and seals our doom. For man is one, he is single; and yet he belongs, he is part of another. This conflict is the greatest of our tragedies.[23]

The notion of tragedy understood that way and the identification with the primitive would seem to suggest a vast distance from contemporary reality. However, Newman stressed several times that they remain in close relationship with the current state of affairs. "The reason primitive art is so close to the modern mind," he wrote "is that we, living in times of the greatest terror the world has known, are in a position to appreciate the acute sensibility primitive man had of it."[24] A position of distance towards modern civilization came hand in hand with a conviction that art was supposed

21 See Leja, *Reframing,* 62-63.

22 Newman, "The Plasmic Image," in *Barnett Newman*, 140.

23 Newman, "The Painting of Tamayo and Gottlieb," in *Barnett Newman,* 76.

24 Newman, "Art of the South Seas," in *Barnett Newman,* 100.

to reflect the awareness of its own time.[25] However, in Newman's texts allusions and lapidary mentions of the experience of the Second World War were transferred onto a much more universal plain, and treated as an actualization of the unchanging laws of the human condition. One can observe in his writings a tendency, characteristic for that period, to universalize that experience; a way of explaining the war through the prism of the immanent, human propensity to evil and violence, or man's helplessness in his fight against irrational powers, instead of searching for more concrete historical and social explanation.[26] Nevertheless, one could state that the war and the Holocaust were according to Newman transformatory events – they marked an end of the "economy of beauty" that guided Western art, and demanded its inner transformation.

Newman expressed that view in his introduction to a catalogue, which accompanied an exhibition of Teresa Żarnower's works organized in Peggy Guggenheim's gallery in the spring of 1946. After a few words of introduction, in which he introduced the artist to the American audience – as a war émigré, an important representative of the constructivist movement in Poland, and a pioneer of functionalistic design – Newman pointed out the transformation visible in her latest works, created already after arriving in the United States. He wrote:

> She now, in her first exhibition of work done here, feels that purist constructions in a world that she has seen collapse around her into shambles and personal tragedy are not enough, that an insistence on absolute purity might be total illusion. Art must say something. In this she is close to many American painters who have been no less sensitive to the tragedy of our times.[27]

Żarnower's example was supposed to confirm that "abstract language" should be replaced by "abstract thought," and that, rather than "abstract discipline," it is the "abstract subject matter" that is important.[28] Once again, Newman was employing his own differentiation between "abstract art" – concentrated on the plastic form, and the "art of the abstract," being an expression

25 Leja, *Reframing*, 43.

26 Leja, "Barnett Newman's," 569 and *Reframing*, 52-67. On the subject of Gottlieb's, Rothko's and Pollock's work in that context see also S. Zucker, "Confrontations with Radical Evil. The Ambiguity of Myth and the Inadequacy of Representation," *Art History*, 24 (3) (2001).

27 Newman, "Teresa Zarnower," (1946) in *Barnett Newman*, 105.

28 Ibid.

of an "abstract" idea, impossible to be enclosed by ready-made notions and representations.[29]

From the perspective of war, Newman looked also on the work of surrealists finding in it not so much a willingness to shock or escape from reality, but rather an unconscious forecast of future events. "It is natural that surrealism died with the advent of the war," he wrote in an unpublished essay from 1945, titled *Surrealism and the War*. Photographs from the liberated death camps, which the world saw in the spring of that year, in Newman's eyes constituted a final realization of a surreal terror, against which all attempts of imagination were exposed as flat and irrelevant:

> We can now see much more: that the subject matter of surrealism was the most important of our time and definitely linked to our time. The surrealists;' work was in the nature of prophecy. For the horror they created, and the shock they built up were not merely the dreams of crazy men, they were prophetic tableaux of what the world was to see as reality. They showed us the horrors of war; and if people had not laughed at the surrealists, if they had understood them, the war might never have been. No painting exists [that is better surrealism] than the photographs of German atrocities. The heaps of skulls are the reality of Tchelichtev's vision. The mass of bone piles are the reality of Picasso's bone compositions, of his sculpture. The monstrous corpses are Ernst's demons. The broken architecture, the rubble, the grotesque bodies are the surrealist reality. The sadism in those pictures, the horror and the pathos are around us.[30]

In his text from 1948, Newman returned to that theme once again, anchoring it in a broader reflection on tragedy. "Surreal art under its realistic and ideal surfaces contains all the weird subject matter of the primitive world of terror."[31] Strictly speaking, there is no "tragedy" in it, because it would have to assume not only a sense of hopelessness against the impenetrable forces running life, but also a conscious confrontation with them. Surrealists, Newman claimed, "identified the tragic with terror" – similar to primitive art, they expressed a sensation of a powerful, external force alien to man.[32] However, contemporary history removed the accompanying aura of obscurity from that sensation:

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29 Newman, "Memorial Letter for Howard Putzel," (1945) in *Barnett Newman*, 98.

30 Newman, "Surrealism and the War," (1945) in *Barnett Newman*, 95.

31 Newman, "The New Sense of Fate," (1948) in *Barnett Newman*, 169.

32 Ibid.

> The war the surrealists predicted has robbed us of our hidden terror, as terror can exist only if the forces of tragedy are unknown. We now know the terror to expect. Hiroshima showed it to us. We are no longer, then, in the face of a mystery. After all, wasn't it an American boy who did it? The terror has indeed become as real as life. What we have now is a tragic rather than a terrifying situation.[33]

"The new feeling of destiny" that is born of war seems closer, according to Newman, to the Greek notion of tragedy:

> We have finally arrived at the tragic position of the Greeks, and we have achieved this Greek state of tragedy because we have at last ourselves invented a new sense of all-pervading fate, a fate that is for the first time for modern man as real and intimate as the Greeks' fate was for them. [...] Our tragedy is again a tragedy of action in the chaos that is society [...] and no matter how heroic, or innocent, or moral our individual lives may be, this new fate hangs over us.[34]

While in primitive awareness terror was induced by an impenetrable world of nature, "for modern man, the source of terror is himself."[35] "Our century," Newman concluded, "achieved the high point of stability and power over nature. We are at piece with the universe; we are not at peace with ourselves."[36]

If art is supposed to make sense, it has to confront us with that state of affairs – not as a tool of any given political, or social agenda, but on the far more primary level, which establishes its own, separate order of experience. Commenting on the title of his painting – *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51) – Newman said that "man can be, or is, sublime in his relation to his sense of being aware."[37] That kind of "feeling of one's own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality" was supposed to be awakened by his paintings.[38] These formulations could seem pathetic, but they gain another dimension, if one remembers their historical background. Direct references to war, and to the Holocaust, appeared rarely in Newman's texts, and were usually veiled, short

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Newman, "Art of the South Seas," 100.

36 Newman, "Painting and Prose," 92-93.

37 "Interview with David Sylvester," in *Barnett Newman*, 258.

38 Ibid., 257.

and full of generalizations. However, they have simultaneously – as I have attempted to show – made a lasting impression on his thinking about art. The closing remark in his text on Teresa Żarnower seems meaningful in this context. The choice of "abstract subject matter" instead of "abstract discipline," he noted, "gives her work its strength and its dignity. The truth here is mutually inclusive, for the defense of human dignity is the ultimate subject matter of art. And it is only in its defense that any of us will ever find strength."[39] If such subjective awareness and "dignity" became a central theme of his paintings as well, it should be noted that it was still something lacking firm support, merely a moment of autonomy, which appears only alongside the sense of its fragility.

Form and Action

> These paintings are not "abstractions," nor do they depict some "pure" idea. They are specific and separate embodiments of feeling, to be experienced, each picture for itself. They contain no depictive allusions. Full of restrained passion, their poignancy is revealed in each concentrated image.
>
> (Statement placed in Betty Parsons Gallery during Newman's first solo exhibition in 1950)

Like many artists of the abstract expressionist movement, Barnett Newman derived his work from surrealism and abstraction – however, he mentioned those currents mainly to highlight how outdated they were, and to stress the necessity to transgress the limitations which characterized them. He claimed that surrealism's achievement was to go beyond formal attitudes and cold abstraction, but the source of its weakness remained its illusionary style, taken as if from 19th century academism. Comparing surrealist painting with the "primitive" art of Oceania, an exhibition of which he was able to see at MoMA in 1946, Newman paid attention to their emotional kinship: in his view both expressed an analogous sensation of fear in the face of ungraspable forces impossible to understand, the sense of magic, and a similar way of experiencing space. Surrealists, who operated on a Renaissance understanding of space and body, however, in interpreting the meaning of magic "comprehended only its superficial aspects" – they "mixed the prevailing dream of the modern artist with the outworn dream of academism."[40] What is more:

39 Newman, "Teresa Zarnower," in *Barnett Newman*, 104.

40 Newman, "Art of the South Seas," 101.

> This realistic insistence, this attempt to make the unreal more real by an overemphasis on illusion, ultimately fails to penetrate beyond illusion; for having reached the point where we see through the illusion, we must come to the conclusion that it must have been illusion for the artists themselves, that they practiced illusion because they did not themselves feel the magic. For realism, even of the imaginative, is in the last analysis a deception. Realistic fantasy inevitably must become phantasmagoria, so that instead of creating a magical world, the surrealists succeeded only in illustrating it.[41]

This critique shows, from a negative side, in what direction Newman's expectations were headed: he was interested in the realness of experience and expression going beyond an established, artistic vision, or style, and working directly in an individual artistic form.

Newman found that kind of directness in the landscapes by the "American fauvist," Milton Avery, among others - landscapes which came close to abstraction. He did not agree with a popular opinion about the sensual beauty and decorative character of Avery's works. Instead, he characterized them in a way that seems to fit his own, later paintings. The meaning of Avery for American art, according to Newman, stemmed from the fact that he opened up a path

> for the free exploration of the painting medium in order to discover its expressive powers, its possibilities for evoking emotion, and to make the medium function within itself [...] He has learned to get rid of personal sentiment, personal feeling, to arrive at a level of statement where his achievement is more universal. His work has an abandon, a nihilist explosiveness, a Dionysian orgy of freedom that is overwhelming. In front of an Avery canvas one no longer participates in a communion with the personal reaction of one human being toward nature. It is no longer a question of reaction; it is a question of participating in the moment of communion. To achieve it, Avery creates a world of his own.[42]

His paintings don't open a fictional, three-dimensional space in front of the viewer anymore, they no longer allow him to remain "outside," in a position of aesthetic distance:

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41 Ibid., 102.

42 Newman, "Milton Avery," (1945), 79.

> Avery's work is tragic in the Greek definition of tragedy, an orgiastic display of color and forms that express his love of freedom. Those who, looking at his work, can see only its charm and its sensuous display, missing its more deeply felt connotations, are like the early Christians who, looking on at the primitive expressions of tragic ceremonies typified in Western Europe by the bacchanale, saw in the bacchanale only an irreligious exercise of lust.[43]

Reducing works of art to their phenomenal, formal dimension, and identifying them with combinations of lines and colors, words, rhythms, images, or sounds, according to Newman, "manifests a nominalistic attitude toward art which makes of art an accidental, almost arbitrary phenomenon, void of significance. [...] The artist emphatically does not create a form. The artist expresses in a work of art an aesthetic idea which is innate and eternal."[44] The form of expression itself is impossible to differentiate from an "idea," which, in turn, cannot be communicated in any other way, or translated into any other language. This question was further extended in "The Plasmic Image" one of Newman's longest texts, written in 1945. Referring to the juxtaposition of the words p l a s t i c and p l a s m i c, he attempted to develop a notion of image which while freeing itself from objective references, would also go beyond the strictly formal definition that focuses on "plastic" shape. He thus attempted to sketch a proper theoretical perspective for contemporary painting (including his own), which would simultaneously align it with "primitive" art, which "is not concerned with geometric forms per se" but creates "forms that by their abstract nature carry some abstract intellectual content."[45] "Color, line, shape, space are the tools whereby his thought is made articulate"; "[it is not] the voluptuous quality in the tolls that is his goal, but what they do,"[46] he writes. Later on, he continues: "The intention is for the color, the stone to carry within itself that element of thought that will act purely on the onlooker's sensibility to penetrate to the innermost channels in his being."[47] Such an approach towards image excludes, according to Newman, any craftsmanship, or aesthetic focus on play between colors and shapes. "Shapes [created by the painter] must contain the plasmic entity that will carry his thought, the nucleus that

43 Ibid., 79-80.

44 Newman, "Concerning Objective Criticism," (1926), in *Barnett Newman*, 58.

45 Newman, "The Plasmic Image," in *Barnett Newman*, 139-140.

46 Ibid., 143.

47 Ibid., 144.

will give life to the abstract, even abstruse ideas he is projecting. [...] The effect of these new pictures is that the shapes and colors acts as symbols to [elicit] sympathetic participation on the part of the beholder in the artist's vision."[48]

Newman's juxtaposition of a finished, "plastic" form – an object of aesthetic delectation – and artistic expression experienced through direct participation, directs one to the opposition between Apollonian plastic art and Dionysian music as it was presented in *The Birth of Tragedy*.[49] Although Newman did not refer to Nietzsche directly at that point, his dependency on Nietzsche's philosophy, especially his notion of myth, tragedy and the Dionysian element can be observed in many of his texts, similar to the echoes of Nietzsche among his artist friends.[50] Analogous to Nietzsche, Newman stressed the internal duality of the Greek world as a home of classical beauty, as well as of archaic myths and rituals. He wrote: "Greece named both form and content: the ideal form – beauty, the ideal content – tragedy."[51] By categorically rejecting the "Greek form," and the nostalgia for it, which endured in Western art in a sentimental expression of tragedy meant as "depicting one's self-pity over the loss of the elegant column and the beautiful profile"[52] – Newman looked for inspiration in ancient drama. However, he had a different hypothesis concerning the genesis of Greek beauty. According to Newman, Greek works of art stemmed from the fascination with Egyptian forms – from an ambition to match their formal perfection. "The rigid figure in death, the absolute repose, the silence of the Egyptian all find their counterparts in the caryatids, the Apollos."[53] Yet, while Egyptian monuments have been an embodiment of metaphysical fear – symbols of necessity and the inevitability of fate, the Greek plastic arts find their matured, emotional elevation in the perfect form. That mimetic genesis of Greek beauty, and its particular

48 Ibid., 141–142.

49 Frederick Nietzsche, *Narodziny tragedii, albo Grecy i pesymizm [The Birth of Tragedy]*, trans. and intro. Bogdan Baran (Kraków: Inter-Esse, 1994), 119.

50 Fragments of *The Birth of Tragedy* were quoted in the *Tiger's Eye* magazine, edited by the artists of the abstract expressionist movement (3 (1948)). It is possible that it was Newman, who decided about including them in the magazine. See Jackson Rushing, "The Impact of Nietzsche and Northwest Coast Indian Art on Barnett Newman's Idea of Redemption in the Abstract Sublime," *Art Journal,* Fall (1988), 189. Nietzschean concept of tragedy was particularly important for the work of Mark Rothko. However, contrary to Newman, Rothko avoided theoretical declarations and rarely spoke about his own art.

51 Newman, "The Object and the Image," (1948), in *Barnett Newman*, 170.

52 Ibid.

53 Newman, "The New Sense of Fate," 168.

"secondary character," as a reflection of Egyptian art, seems to be partially in accordance with the Nietzschean characteristic of beauty as pure appearance, a veil which hides the tragic core of being. Newman, however, was far from the "pagan" affirmation of the "Greek dream," that veil which misleads the senses. He rejected it with an iconoclastic violence, seeing it as an empty shell, a closed fetishistic form.

In Greece, along with the elevation of formal beauty and the transformation of art into a sphere of "ideal sensations," the primary sense of tragedy were supposed to be replaced by aesthetic satisfaction, a sense of pride in one's own civilization, and the following sense of mastery over the world. Newman projected a similar interpretative mechanism on modernist abstraction and geometric art, which he associated with a modern, scientific worldview and faith in the power of human mind. Works of Piet Mondrian, who also stressed his commitment to overcoming the tragic, which characterizes all existence, were perfect examples of that kind of art for Newman. He believed that, regardless of metaphysical theories that accompanied his painting, Mondrian managed to "raise the white plane and the right angle into a realm of sublimity, where the sublime paradoxically becomes an absolute of perfect sensations. The geometry (perfection) swallowed up his metaphysics (his exaltation)."[54]

Newman, who, despite everything else, highly valued Mondrian's work, and – as historians all agree – was highly influenced by him in his own painting, disagreed with its rigor and "systematic theology." A planned "search for that, which is elemental" lead, according to Newman, only to a theoretical dogmatism[55]. When he used red, yellow and blue – Mondrian's basic colors – in his works, Newman stressed that his wish was to free them from paying mortgage to Neo-Plasticism, which by "turning them into ideas, destroyed them as colors."[56] He wanted to make them expressive, not didactic – extract them from the "cage of geometry," but without falling into subjectivism and expressive mannerism. As he claimed:

> A new beginning cannot be found in the dead infinity of silence; nor in the painting performance, as if it were an instrument of pure energy full of hollow biologic rhetoric. Painting, like passion, is a living voice, which – when I hear it – I must let speak, unfettered.[57]

54 Newman, "The Sublime is Now," 173.

55 *Interview with David Sylvester*, 256-257.

56 Newman, "Statement. Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue," (1969) in *Barnett Newman*, 192.

57 Newman, "The New American Painting," (1959) in *Barnett Newman*, 179.

In consequence, as he remarked, his own painting was "too abstract for the abstract expressionists and too expressionist for the abstract purists."[58]

Beginning with his breakthrough *Onement I* from 1948, Newman separated from the bio-morphic expressions of his earlier paintings. In this relatively small painting – according to his own standards – on an almost homogenous, dark-red ochre plain, there appears for the very first time a vertical strip of intense, lighter red running across the middle of the painting, which was to become characteristic of Newman's painting. Commentators interpreted that ascetic form as the fundamental equivalent of a primal act of creation, as an act of division: the separation of light and darkness,[59] or of a single, lone figure of man; Newman, however, rejected such symbolic interpretations. He would refer to narrow, typically vertical stripes separating his canvases, ironically, as zips. He stressed that it was not a line, but a separate lane of color, which was neither "behind," or "ahead" of the primary color plain. It did not count as a separate part of composition, but as a factor of an indivisible whole. His reluctant, almost dismissive comments turned away from any formal, as well as iconographic interpretations by referring to painterly concreteness, a direct experience. Despite the rigorous limitation of resources, reduced to homogenous, monochromatic plains of color, and enlivening stripes, Newman's paintings do not fall under any clear compositional schema. Rules of symmetry, present in some of them, become disturbed in others. The number of stripes, their location and character do not fall under any predictable set of rules. Sometimes they are distinguished by sharp edges, although far more often the visible traces of the brush, thinning in the paint's coating or its thicker layer discretely contradict that strict, linear character of divisions. As a result, Newman's works uphold a particular tension between regularity and irregularity; there is both a sense of primary discipline, an "internal law" of an image, and a tangible individualism of the voice. Independently from the repetitive character of formal techniques, separate paintings seem more like individual, singular situations than variations on a motif. To a certain extent, Newman manages to fulfill his own postulate about uniqueness and singularity in every painting, its complete separateness from the world of objects.[60] By distancing himself from a systematic approach and

58 Ibid.

59 Leja, "Barnett Newman," 576.

60 In one of the interviews Newman stressed that he is: "Not interested in adding to the objects that exist in the world. I want my painting to separate itself from every object and every art object that exists." ("Interview with Lane Slate," in *Barnett Newman*, 253).

plastic "dogmas," Newman treated his work and the experience of it as an unpredictable, open situation. On the creation of his key painting – *Onement I* – he stated:

> That painting made me realize that I was confronted for the first time with a 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. 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]

It was an extremely simple painting, but – as Newman recalled – you needed to be around it for a year to understand it.[62] Titles of the paintings typically appeared after the work was done, and instead of pointing to a "theme," they constituted more of an evocation of certain emotional state, a clue about a painting's meaning.[63] In case of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (1958-66), for example, the concept of the title appeared only during the work on the fourth canvas, when Newman realized that their content was about Christ's Passion – understood not as a series of episodes of sacred history, but as an experience of agony. That was the genesis of the subtitle: an expression of a borderline, unspeakable moment of suffering. "This overwhelming question that does not complain, makes today's talk about alienation, as if alienation were a modern invention, an embarrassment. This question that has no answer has been with us so long since Jesus – since Abraham – since Adam – the original question."[64]

In respect to his cycle *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* Newman stressed: "I didn't have a preconceived idea that I would execute and then give a title to. I wanted to hold the emotion, not waste it in picturesque ecstasies.

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61 *Interview with David Sylvester*, 256. Richard Shiff elaborates on the primacy of experience over theory, and openness of the creative process in Newman's work in his "Criticism at Odds with Its Art. Prophecy, Projection, Doubt, Paranoia," *Common Knowledge*, 9 (3) (2003): 455-456. Shiff claims that this approach was analogous, or even more radical than Cezanne's valuation of direct experience, described by Merleau-Ponty.

62 Jackson Rushing, "Decade of Decision," *Art Journal*, 54 (1) (1995): 90.

63 See *Interview with David Sylvester*, 258. Short, symbolic titles, based on proper names such as *Adam, Eve, Jericho*, do not indicate any narrative content and it is difficult to see their illustration in the paintings themselves. Isolated from any context, similarly to paintings, they work like a calling. They do not encourage us to make associations, but rather force the viewer to stand upright in front of the painting.

64 From the exhibition catalogue "Barnett Newman. The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani," (Solomon: R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966), in *Barnett Newman*, 188.

The cry, the unanswerable cry, is world without an end. But a painting has to hold it, world without end, in its limits."[65]

That last sentence invites a reflection. If one were to refer at this point to the Nietzschean dialectic of the Dionysian and Apollonian once again – a dialectic which defines the essence of ancient tragedy – it seems to describe fairly well the mechanics of those abstract, seemingly orderly paintings according to how their author perceived them. If all limiting form – a form that confers its order and boundaries – is by definition Apollonian, then under the pressure of Dionysian forces, which are expressed through it, form becomes necessarily bend out of shape, negating its clear, Apollonian visibility, and revealing instead a presence of that which exceeds all concepts and images. That way, according to Nietzsche, "Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, and vice versa."[66]

When we try to describe the visual shape of Newman's paintings, to a certain degree we separate things which according to him should remain entirely inseparable. These paintings themselves seem to be independent wholes, separated from the surrounding space, but their "self-sufficiency" is not based on a drama of forms taking place within the boundaries of abstract composition. Nothing suggests their "internal life" in the spirit of vitalist, or organicist theories, which often used to accompany modernist abstraction. The picture's "life," its expression, lies here in the way it addresses the viewer. The painting creates a sensation of a particular "now" – an awareness of a concrete, individual "place" that it establishes by itself.

Sublime and the Avant-Garde – Newman and Lyotard

> The love of space is there, and painting functions in space like everything else because it is a communal fact – it can be held in common. Only time can be felt in private. Space is common property. Only time is personal, a private experience [...]. The concern with space bores me. I insist on my experiences of sensations in time – not the s e n s e of time but the physical s e n s a t i o n of time.
>
> Barnett Newman, *Ohio*, 1949

Gradually, Newman began to pay more attention in his comments to the perception of the viewer, the viewer's awareness of his or her own presence in the face of a painting. He was not referring to the sensation of the tragic, despite

65 Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross," (1958-1966) in *Barnett Newman*, 190.

66 Nietzsche, *Narodziny tragedii [The Birth of Tragedy]*, 157.

the fact that the term earlier epitomized his description of one's awareness of one's limits and individual separateness. Maybe it is a testament to a new, less pessimistic understanding of the human condition, not so conspicuously shaped under the pressure of the catastrophic developments of World War II. Instead of talking about the primal terror of man, who realizes his own presence against the powerful and incomprehensible forces of the outside world, Newman talked about an overwhelming epiphany of the 'self' in the face of infinite space.

He attempted to describe this experience, among other attempts, in an essay from 1949, entitled *Prologue for a New Aesthetics*, which was inspired by his impressions of earth mounds of the Native Americans he saw in southwestern Ohio. "Looking at the site you feel, Here I am, h e r e... and out beyond there [beyond the limits of the site] there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes... But here you get a sense of your own presence... I became involved with the idea of making the viewer present: the idea that «Man is Present»."[67] Climbing the enormous mounds in the Ohio Valley, the visitor has a view of an endless space around him. It is not that, according to Newman, which decides the particular dimension of that experience: the space itself is not the issue, nor is it any other external, perceived form. What is truly important in that situation is "the sensation in time," the "physical s e n s a t i o n in time," which is an intense primary experience of oneself – of one's own presence in a singular moment. On a different occasion, while speaking on the subject of that experience, Newman recalled a Hebrew term – *Makom* – "the place of God,"[68] thinking exclusively about the e x p e r i e n c e d "sanctity of the place," regardless of its religious context. In that way, again – in accordance with his "plasmic" concept of painting – he stressed direct experiences and participation, as a counter to reifying interpretations based on formal categories and the homogenous, quantitative understanding of space. In a commentary to one of his exhibitions he wrote: "The freedom of space, the emotion of human scale, the sanctity of a place are what is moving – not size (I wish to overcome size), not colors (I wish to create color), not area (I wish to declare space), not absolutes (I wish to feel and to know at all risk)."[69]

Ultimately unfinished, *Prologue for a New Aesthetics*, left in the form of a short text under a much more humble title, could be treated as *counterpart* to the

67 Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 73. Newman's commentary quoted in the introduction to the later edition of the text entitled "Ohio," *Barnett Newman*, 174.

68 Newman, "Response to Thomas F. Mathews," (1969) in *Barnett Newman*, 289.

69 Newman, from *Exhibition of the United States of America* (São Paulo, 1965) catalogue, in *Barnett*, 186.

much older *The Sublime Is Now* (1948), a text in which Newman questioned the aesthetics of beauty dominant in the Western tradition by confronting it with a competing search for sublimity. Greek art, dominated by a desire for beauty, "is an insistence that the sense of exaltation is to be found in perfect form, that exaltation is the same as ideal sensibility – in contrast, for example, with the Gothic or baroque, in which the sublime consists of a desire to destroy form, where form can be formless."[70] Contemporary art appeared to Newman in that context, as a firm rebellion against the classic heritage of Antiquity and the Renaissance. According to him, its main impulse "was this desire to destroy beauty," and its very effort of breaking free from the past and rejecting forms, which were already in place, had a sublime quality.[71] Sublimity, according to Newman, could not be based on calculated, aesthetic effects, which could include the sensation of vastness, physical power, or suggestions of something being impossible to represent. It required rejecting all "associations with old images, both sublime and beautiful."[72] It does not stem from a sublime "theme," as the ancient, mythical themes are dead already; one should focus rather on "ultimate emotions." Newman claimed:

> We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend... We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making c a t h e d r a l s out of Christ, man, or "life," we are making [them] out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.[73]

As a spokesman of new American painting, Newman attempted to differentiate between the negating movement he observed in his avant-garde predecessors, and the sublimity felt through the experience of a single work, a concrete painting, his own work being at stake, as well as that of his artist friends. The attempts of the European avant-garde – he argued – despite their elevated, revolutionary energy, lead to an aesthetic sublimity of simple, banal objects, or to a formal perfectionism of geometric art. Hence, they remained closed within the framework of the question of beauty – between an act of its

70 Newman, "The Sublime is Now," in *Barnett Newman*, 171.

71 Ibid., 172.

72 Ibid., 173.

73 Ibid., 173

negation, and an involuntary restitution. In the works of American painters, on the other hand, a gesture of commencing was shifted from the scene of history, to the single act of painting. "A naked, revolutionary moment," Newman wrote, is based on "beginning with a line, and painting as if the art of painting never existed before."[74]

It seems understandable that in a well-known text by Jean-Francois Lyotard, entitled *Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, Newman holds an important position. Not only is he the first one, even before the French philosopher, to reach for that slightly outdated category in order to associate it with aspirations of contemporary art, but also the first one to create its interpretation which in many respects could have been an example for the latter. In Lyotard's interpretation, the sublime of avant-garde works relates to their anti-formal attitude, the freeing movement of self-cleansing and beginning, or rejection of established norms of taste and exploring the unknown. In texts by both authors the stress falls not on complete, avant-garde programs, but on singular actions and experiences which do not count on *sensus communis,* and are contradictory to all communicative and utilitarian practice.[75] The sublime is not considered by them through its objective aspect, but primarily as a mode of experiencing temporality that exceeds causal order, and narrative continuity.

Lyotard, although well acquainted with Nemwan's work and with its existing interpretations, allowed himself to expand a partially independent, separate interpretation, one closer to his own philosophical interests. Therefore, he omitted the question of the tragic, present in the early works of Newman, and treated the recurring theme of subjective presence as an unfortunate expression of metaphysical fundamentalism. Newman's comments referring to the realization of one's own subjective "self" in the presence of a painting, according to Lyotard, do not deliver an accurate description of Newman's paintings. What struck and fascinated Lyotard in Newman's work was a particularly

74 Barnett Newman in "Jackson Pollock. An Artists' Symposium" (*ARTnews* debate, 1967), 192. Understanding of painterly act as a free, pure gesture, and unpredictable event associated with a popular in the 40s and the 50s existential philosophy used to be a kind of common good of abstract expressionism. The artist, when standing in front of the canvas, was supposed to free himself from any assumptions and calculations of effect. The most influential commentators of abstract impressionism, such as Harold Rosenberg and Robert Motherwell, stressed its authenticity, and spontaneity of painterly expression. One can spot a different distribution of accents in Newman's attitude: instead of talking about the immersion of an artist into the creative process, and direct experience of painterly matter, he stressed the primary sensation of one's separateness, and being alien to the world within the gesture of a painter – it was what he described as awareness of the tragic.

75 See Jean Francis Lyotard, "Wzniosłość i awangarda," ["The Sublime and the Avant-Garde"] trans. Marek Bieńczyk, *Teksty Drugie*, 2/3 (1996): 185.

epiphanic experience of a moment – an "event" which, as he stated, exceeds all meaning.[76] That "event," according to Lyotard, is not something that the awareness establishes and confirms, but on the contrary – it is something which surprises and baffles.[77] That is why, as he tried to convince everyone, all formulations pointing to some totality, identity or personal presence in respect to canvases are mistaken, because they point to something that appears in one's thoughts only *post factum*, and in no way legitimates their epiphanic character.[78] The notion of subjective presence inevitably directs Lyotard towards reflections about the search for some metaphysical basis, an ontological foundation, or a movement of establishing identity, which he himself juxtaposes with openness to events and the exploration of the unknown. Complete rejection, or omission, of that question by Lyotard is therefore based on a clear simplification in respect to the interpretation of a problem, which we have followed in the case of Newman.

In Lyotard's rather "heretical" interpretation of the sublime, the particular experience, which is brought by the avant-garde work (including the work of Newman), is based on the feeling of powerlessness and the humiliation of our imagination as a power of forms. It is a sensation, which is not compensated by an awareness of the existence of some higher, beyond-the-senses dimension: God, or a transcendental order of ideas, but – at best – can be a momentary sensation that the "non-representational" exists, and "happens" contrary to any rational calculations and expectations. Sublimity is identified here with an ecstatic experience of an "event," which contradicts the superior power of a subject. Paul Crowther, interpreting it in a contradictory way, while focusing on the question of the sublime in Newman's work, attempts at proving that the painter remained faithful to Kant in the most basic outlines of his thinking.[79] Experience of a sublime work of art was supposed to be a moment of a subject becoming aware of his transcendental calling. Numerous comments made by the artist on the subject of one's own self-awareness awakening in the process of confronting the painting, one's separateness and the feeling of being alien to the world, of fear and terror, but also of dignity through confronting them, speak in favor of that interpretation. Crowther rightfully brings back and highlights a thread, disregarded by Lyotard, of a subjective self-awareness. Despite everything else, however, one should not forget that Newman,

76 Jean Francis Lyotard, "Newman. The Instant," in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 247.

77 Lyotard, "Wzniosłość i awangarda" ["Sublime and the Avant-Garde"], 174.

78 Lyotard, *Newman*, 247-248.

79 Paul Crowther, "Barnett Newman and the Sublime," *Oxford Art Journal*, 7 (2) (1984): 52-56.

when he mentioned "absolute emotions," for example, did not employ Kant's language systematically. Such comparison has its limitations, and bringing attention to an assumed transcendental, legislative dimension of human self-consciousness present in Newman's texts does not have to explain in any definitive way the actual power of his paintings.

Which one of the philosophers is right here – which definition of the sublime is more adequate in case of Newman's work? Crowther seems to be a more scrupulous reader of Newman's theoretical manifestos than Lyotard, but vehemently attempts to liken the sense of Newman's views to Kant's concept of the sublime. Lyotard, on the other hand, takes out of Newman something with which he himself identifies, partially going astray from the painter's interpretation, but also providing a great characterization of the paintings' power. On the problematic question of the subjective "self" which – according to Newman's words – was supposed to be located at the core of his painterly practice, one thing seems certain: subjectivity should not be imagined to be a transcendental, metaphysical base, an embodiment of the principle of unity and identity. According to such an understanding, it is not assumed as a condition for the emergence of a painting, nor of its reception. Newman himself spoke only of experience, in which the awareness of one's individual self emerges, and any characteristics of that self refers only to its phenomenological dimension. As he said in a conversation with David Sylvester:

> One of the nicest things that anybody ever said about my work is when you yourself said that standing in front of my paintings you had a sense of your own scale. [...] This is what I have tried to do: that the onlooker in front of my painting knows that he's there. To me, the sense of place not only has a mystery, but has that sense of metaphysical fact. I have come to distrust the episodic, and 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.[80]

The individual self, imagined by Newman, in its autonomy and secret tensions, the "self" standing for a firm decisiveness in his paintings ruling over their space, is – as many authors observed – an extremely "male" construct.[81] It does not have too much in common, however, with the Cartesian subject – a rational, bodiless transparency overcoming reality, or with the metaphysical

80 *Interview with David Sylvester*, 257-258.

81 Leja develops on that subject "Barnett Newman's Solo Tango".

principle of identity questioned by Lyotard. The "self," spoken about by Newman, appears to itself in the moment of confronting the other, in a realization of a relationship with that which is different from it. Lyotard himself grasped it well by observing that, as a form of transferring messages, in their "pragmatic organization" Newman's paintings are closer to ethics than aesthetics. It seems as if there is no rhetorical triad of speaker, addressee and object of reference in them. His paintings "don't 'say' anything, they are not somebody's message. It is not Newman who speaks to us, it is not him employing painting to tell us something. [...] The message itself takes the form of presentation. But presentation does not present, does not actualize, but rather is the presence itself."[82] Newman "grants the color, line, or rhythm a bounding power of a face to face relationship." It is a commitment formulated in the second person – not according to the model: "Look at that (there)," but: "Look at me," or more precisely: "Listen to me."[83] Newman would be happy with such description. Moving as far away as possible from thinking about a painting as a beautiful object, it simultaneously evokes a feeling of immersion in that painting – a consummate directness and establishing of distance. Lyotard's words – an expression of a deep appreciation for Newman's work – prove the existence of an analogous transition from a critique of Western metaphysics, meaning Greek ontology (and consequently, in case of Newman, Greek aesthetics), towards an ethical perspective that connects the position of the painter and philosopher. However, while for Newman the experience evoked by his paintings was supposed to ground the subject in his ethical foundations, Lyotard's nomadic vision of subjectivity evades such "fundamentalism," replacing for good "place," in which the subject can appear, with "moment."

Translation: Jan Pytalski

82 Lyotard, *Newman*, 244.

83 Ibid., 242.