

POINTERS

YARD BUREAU

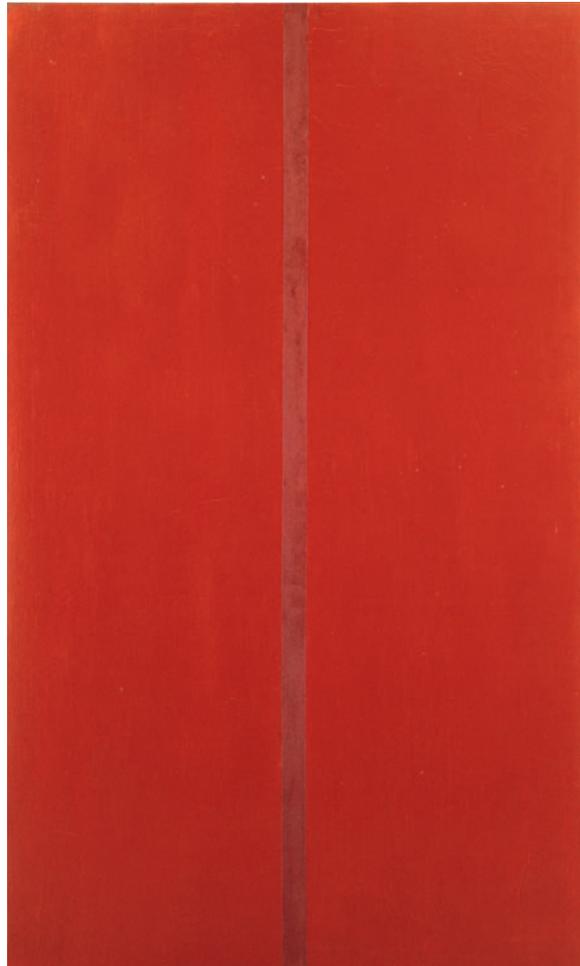
“As Pointless as a Yard Rule”: *Barnett Newman and the Scale of Art*

develop new concepts
+ explore new fields of pictorial possibilities
Barnett Newman, ca. 1950¹

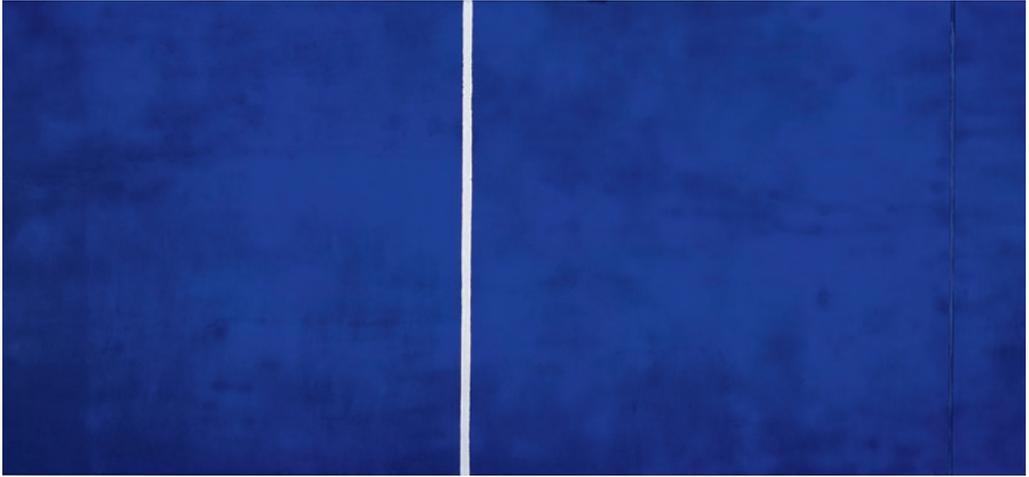
Art criticism doesn't need to be fair to be instructive. Even a misjudging critic can produce rewarding insights. *New York Sun* critic Helen Carlson's unforgiving review of *Onement II* (1948; 60 × 36 in.) (fig. 1) by Barnett Newman (1905–1970), included in a group show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in autumn 1949, is a case in point. One thin stripe, better known later as Newman's signature “zip,” runs symmetrically from the top to the bottom edge of the canvas. The ground is a light red-brown and the stripe a darker orange. “Every known type, from automatic writing to semi-abstract forms,” Carlson wrote about the show in general, “is here to be accepted or rejected according to the visitor's capacity for enjoyment.” While she expressed her admiration for the works of Sonia Sekula (1918–1963), Theodoros Stamos (1922–1997), and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), she disparaged Newman's endeavors in the last third of her review: “Barnett Newman's mural size canvas painted an unrelieved tomato red with a perfectly straight narrow band of deeper red cleaving the canvas neatly in two is something else again. It's as pointless as a yard rule, which at least has the advantage of being functional. Is Newman trying to write finis to the art of abstraction?”²

Barnett Newman,
Onement II
(detail, see fig. 1).

These words probably hit Newman hard. While the artist might have approved of Carlson's suggestion that he was venturing beyond abstract painting—he wrote and thought of himself and his contemporaries no longer as abstract painters but as “new painters”—he certainly must have disliked the literal and derogative equation of *Onement II* with a linear measurement tool. Carlson's simplistic and reductive reading notwithstanding, the critic did touch on two interlacing aspects that would mark all Newman's painterly work and practice: measurement and bigness, or in other words, size and scale. Paintings such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950, 1951; 95 ³/₈ × 213 ¹/₄ in.), *Cathedra* (1951; 96 × 214 in.) (fig. 2), *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (1967–1968; 96 × 214 in.), and *Anna's Light* (1968; 108 × 240 in.) have set a standard for the sheer size of modern art in a broader art-historical perspective.



1
Barnett Newman,
Onement II, 1948. Oil
on canvas, 60 × 36 in.
(152.4 × 91.4 cm).
Wadsworth Atheneum,
Hartford, Connecticut.
Anonymous gift, 1967.



2
Barnett Newman,
Cathedra, 1951. Oil
and Magna on canvas,
96 × 214 in. (243.8 ×
544 cm). Stedelijk
Museum Amsterdam,
The Netherlands.
Purchased 1975 with
support from the
Rembrandt Society,
the Theo Van Gogh
Foundation, and an
anonymous donor.

Indeed, in the criticism and scholarship of postwar art, the work of Newman has become tantamount to large-scale painting. The artist has been consistently portrayed as a pioneer of huge canvases, together with such contemporaries as Pollock, Clyfford Still (1904–1980), and Robert Motherwell (1915–1991).³ Newman’s bold statements on the relative measurements of art, moreover, have made the artist an oft-cited voice in discussions on size and scale in postwar painting and sculpture. Most popular is the artist’s declaration that “size doesn’t count. It’s scale that counts. It’s human scale that counts, and the only way you can achieve human scale is by content.”⁴ All too easily advanced as a mere boutade, the full complexity and at once puzzling nature of Newman’s words have remained unaddressed.

This essay aims to explore the artist’s intricate apprehension of the perceptually shifting dimensions of art. It will demonstrate how Newman’s contemplations of size and scale were first and foremost driven by his genuine interest in subject matter rather than by the broadly accepted concern for bodily experience. Newman was deeply invested in painterly abstraction. His art was one of abstract form. Yet he believed that abstract form, since it operates beyond the realm of aesthetic order, possesses the power to convey thought.⁵ If Newman wanted to drive one point home, it was that an artwork in its material manifestation could act as an expressive carrier of intellectual activity.⁶ As early as 1945, he declared in the diary-like essay “The Plasmic Image” that he was determined to “get back to the true nature of painting to understand that it involves thought, that it is the expression of intellectual content.”⁷ Carlson’s intimations on the alleged functionality of

the presented art then are doubly ill-advised. Newman himself rarely spoke or wrote about the effective “use” of art. His true concern was to address art’s capacity to provide an understanding of and a relationship to the world at large through visual and material objects—a scalar endeavor par excellence.

I will argue in this essay that in order to unpack Newman’s rather complex and often seemingly contradictory understanding of the role and meaning of scale in art, it might be instructive to look beyond what Newman achieved on canvas and on paper. It certainly is correct to portray Newman as “a thinker who chose to develop his ideas both in painting and in writing,” yet there’s another medium that served his purposes equally well on rare occasions, albeit far more indirectly and hitherto largely underexamined: photography.⁸

Portraits of the Artist Studying His Work

I have great admiration for raw, boundless energy, but I cannot work out of boredom, to keep myself busy or only to express myself—or to tell the story of my life—or to find my personality in painting by acting out some character. I paint out of high passion, and although my way of working may seem simple, for me it is difficult and complex.

Barnett Newman, 1962⁹

Newman was very aware of the role and importance of photography. Attentive to the public perception of his paintings and of himself as an artistic persona, he was determined to control the role photographs could play in conveying meaning about his painterly work and practice. While he enjoyed many often warm encounters with such famous photographers as Alexander Liberman (1912–1999), Ugo Mulas (1928–1973), Hans Namuth (1915–1990), and Arnold Newman (1918–2006), he remained very precise about how, where, and when he could be photographed.¹⁰ He kept his studio firmly off-limits for most everyone. He wished to keep his working methods and processes private, and he often referred to his studio as a “sanctuary.”¹¹ During his life, Newman never allowed anyone to capture him while painting or handling any painting tools.¹² The existing photographs of the artist within the confines of the studio do not show him working, but rather adopting peculiar poses toward his work, all the while either directly or indirectly addressing the photographer, and by extension the viewer.

In a rather mirthful series taken by Liberman in the late 1960s, we see the artist, sporting a checked jacket and a dotted bow tie, performing a set of odd and unintelligible acts in his studio. In a sequence of four pictures, he mounts a movable ladder to watch over *Onement VI* (1953; 102 × 120 in.) laterally and from above (fig. 3). In a famous sequence taken by Mulas in 1965, the artist appears once again in the studio. He stands in front of a primed yet empty canvas, now in suit and tie, intensely talking and gesticulating to the Italian photographer.¹³ Such series are certainly amusing and some even illuminating.¹⁴ Yet they first and foremost portray Newman as the clever dandy and the vivid orator that came to define his public image in the final decade of his life. When recognition and approval had finally been bestowed on him, Newman played with the camera.¹⁵ Here, however, I would like to focus on two distinct photographic sessions that Newman commissioned in the decade that preceded his fame. Each session produced a photograph in which Newman turns his back to the camera to look at his own work. The photographs willfully stage the bodily presence of the artist in relation to the material object of the painting as they share the same space — an art gallery and the artist’s studio,

3
 Alexander Liberman,
*Barnett Newman in
 His Studio, New York,*
 1961. Photograph. Getty
 Research Institute
 Library, Los Angeles.
 On the wall is *Onement*
VI (1953).



4

Aaron Siskind, *Barnett Newman at His First One-Man Exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1950*. Photograph. The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York. *Left to right: Be I (1949), Yellow Painting (1949), and End of Silence (1949)*.

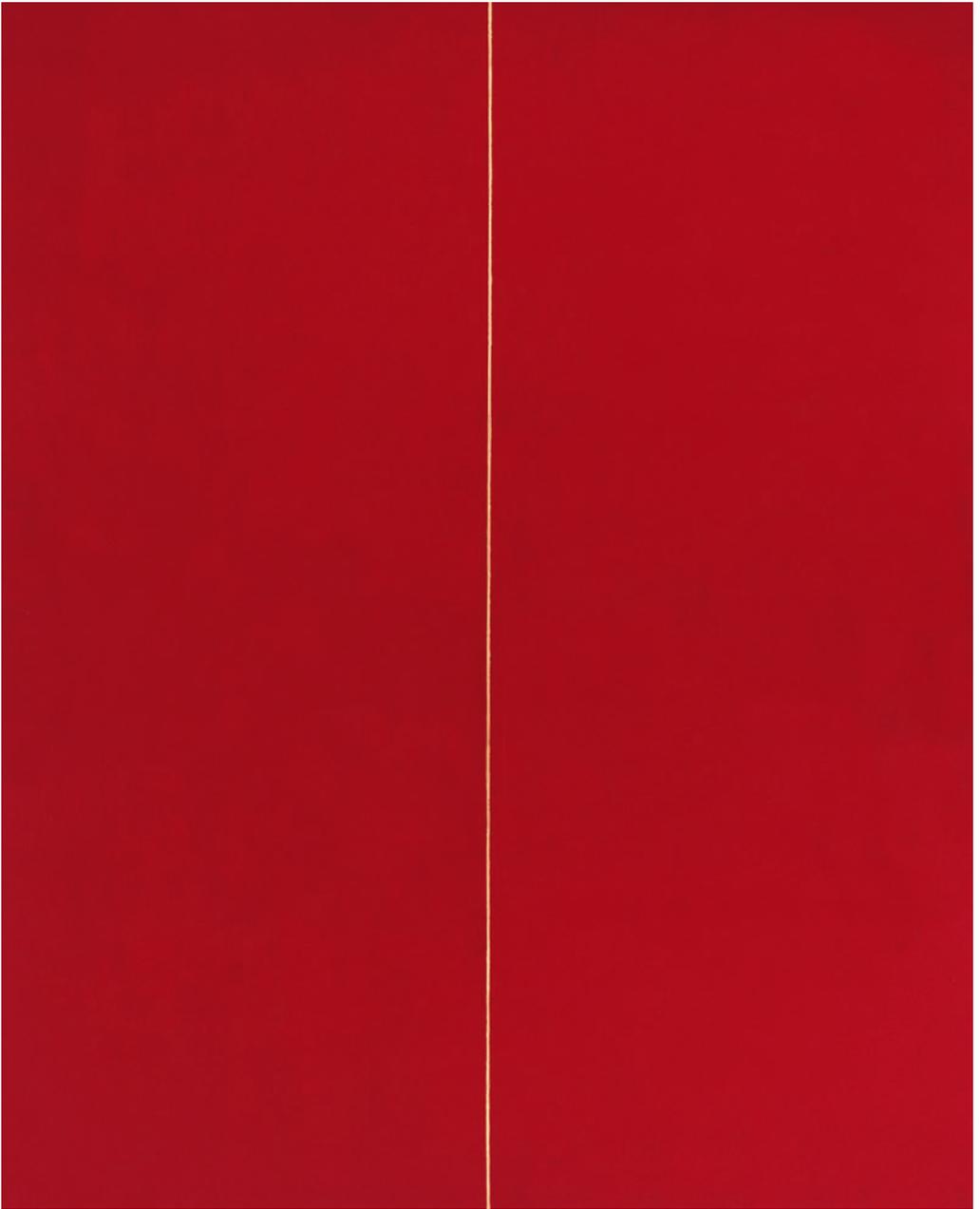


respectively. Since Newman attempted to govern every aspect of the (public) reception of his work, we might attempt to tackle some of the photographs as discursive entities, that is, to evaluate them as critical arguments sanctioned by the artist, even though both photographs were only published posthumously.¹⁶

The first photograph shows Newman, dressed in a dark suit, as he stands at the center of his first one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York in January 1950 (fig. 4). The photograph was made by Aaron Siskind (1903–1991), a childhood friend of Newman, and is part of a larger series of photographs Siskind took at the exhibition.¹⁷ The gallery is a brightly lit and neat space, and four paintings are visible on the walls. The artist looks straight at a painting on the wall in front of him at a distance of some eight feet.¹⁸ He strikes an identifiably pensive pose: while his left hand musingly rests on his chin, his right hand supports his left elbow. He is looking at the painting *Be I* (1949; 93 1/8 × 75 1/8 in.) (fig. 5), the largest painting in the show.¹⁹ A thin white line symmetrically bisects the surface painted in cadmium red. The other works fully discernible in the picture are the paintings later known as *Yellow Painting* (1949; 67 1/2 × 52 1/2 in.) and *End of Silence* (1949; 38 × 30 in.). For the exhibition, Newman had selected eleven paintings that he had made in the past two years. At that time, none of the paintings had yet been given a title, only numbers.²⁰ The works on display differed significantly in format, composition, palette, texture, and scale. Yet by the standards of the recent Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Pollock exhibitions at Betty Parsons, the sizes

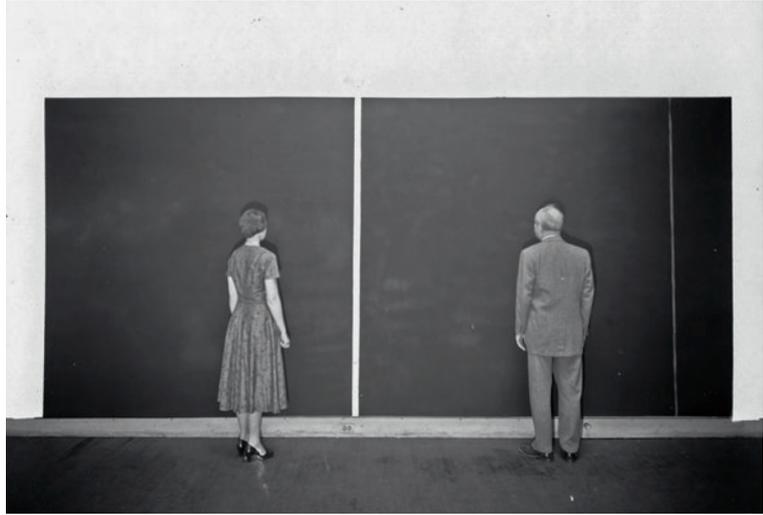
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Barnett Newman, *Be I, 1949*. Oil on canvas, 93 1/8 × 75 1/8 in. (236.5 × 190.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas. Gift of Annalee Newman, 1986.



6

Peter A. Juley & Son,
*Barnett Newman and
Unidentified Woman
Standing in Front of
"Cathedra" (1951) in
His Front Street Studio,
New York, 1958.* Photo-
graph. Peter A. Juley &
Son Collection, Smith-
sonian American Art
Museum, Washington,
DC, J0112534.

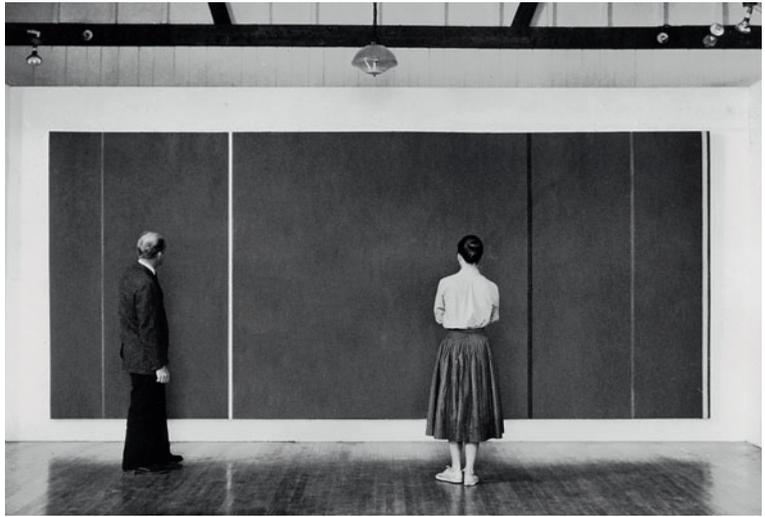


of Newman's paintings were unexceptional.²¹ As if to secure a proper reading of his work, Newman provided a written statement for the visitors: "These paintings are not 'abstractions,' nor do they depict some 'pure' idea. They are specific and separate embodiments of feeling, to be experienced, each picture for itself. They contain no depictive allusions. Full of restrained passion, their poignancy is revealed in each concentrated image."²²

The second photograph under consideration here shows Newman in a position analogous to the 1950 Siskind photograph, looking at one of his own paintings (fig. 6). The photograph was taken in 1958 by Paul P. Juley (1890–1975) from Peter Juley & Son, one of the largest and most respected fine-arts photography firms in New York, operative since the late nineteenth century.²³ Newman is pictured while contemplating *Cathedra*, formally displayed on the walls of his Front Street Studio just above a base plinth. Among the largest paintings Newman ever painted, the subtly undulating ultramarine surface of *Cathedra* is bisected by a bold white zip a little left of the center and intersected by a barely perceptible pale blue zip at the far right. The artist, here dressed in a light-colored suit, is no longer alone. Not unlike a public display situation, someone else is looking as well. On his left, a woman in a flowery dress is inspecting the same large-scale painting from roughly the same close distance.²⁴ Indeed, both the artist and the woman are standing very near to the surface of the painting, almost touching the canvas with their noses. Reportedly, Juley was commissioned when Newman came across the anonymous photograph taken

7

E. C. Goossen and Unidentified Woman in Front of "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" (1950–51), Bennington College, Vermont, 1958. Photograph by Matthew Tarnay. The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York.



some months earlier on the occasion of his first retrospective at Bennington College, showing the curator E. C. Goossen and an unidentified woman standing very close to the painted surface of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, finished a few months prior to *Cathedra* (fig. 7).²⁵ Goossen had put to practice the advice that Newman had given to the visitors of his second solo show at Parsons in April 1951.²⁶ By means of a typed announcement tacked to the gallery's arched entrance, Newman had then instructed the viewers: "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."²⁷

At the 1951 show, the hefty painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* took pride of place. *Cathedra* was not included in the show, since Newman did not finish the painting until after it had closed.²⁸ Displayed on the north wall of the gallery, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* was the first work visitors encountered when entering the room through the small doorway at the corner. The eight-foot-long expanse of cadmium red, interrupted by five narrow bands in different shades of white and red, took up the entire stretch of the very wall that had already displayed such a massive work as Jackson Pollock's *Number 30 (Autumn Rhythm)* (1950; 105 × 207 in.) in November–December 1950 and Mark Rothko's *No. 2* (1951; 116 ¼ × 101 ⅞ in.) in April 1951.²⁹ In this space, it was actually impossible for visitors to back up and take a distanced view of the painting; a freestanding wall stood across the center of the space, designed by architect Tony Smith for the show by Rothko.

Of Small and Large Paintings, and of Titles and Clues

My titles sometimes attack what the paintings are against.
Barnett Newman, n.d.³⁰

The 1950 and 1951 exhibitions were dramatic failures both critically and monetarily. Newman sold only one painting in 1950 and none in 1951. Moreover, critics condemned the second show, and the majority of his colleagues turned their backs on him as they thought he was mocking them. As with the 1950 show, Newman once again faced charges of having carried abstraction to its extreme conclusion with the 1951 exhibition. In a review for the *New York Times*, Stuart Preston complained that “art has finally been emptied of content.” The critic no longer discerned any expressive quality or intellectual value in the paintings. If anything, Newman’s paintings demonstrated the exhaustion of subject matter: “These canvases are of interest because they put the challenge of extreme, abstract theory so cleanly. They point to arguments that have more to do with philosophy than with art criticism. For works of art are not made with theories but with paint and stone.”³¹

As is well known, out of disenchantment, Newman removed all his work from the Betty Parsons Gallery and withdrew from gallery activities.³² One year later, he would leave the art world at large. In 1956, he even quit painting altogether for two years.

In 1953, however, the artist took some measures that disclose that his indignation was also fueled by the public misunderstanding of his complex play with scale. In a letter addressed to Alfonso Ossorio (1916–1990), dated June 22, 1953, Newman informed the artist and collector that he had decided “to withdraw all of my ‘small’ canvases at this time from public view.”³³ Next, Newman asked Ossorio if he could buy back *Untitled 1, 1950* (1950; 36 × 6 in.) (fig. 8), one of the slender paintings that the artist made in 1950 and some of which had been included in the 1951 show at the Betty Parsons Gallery. In his second one-man show at Betty Parsons, he showed the large *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–1951) and *The Voice* (1950), but also the significantly smaller *The Wild* (1950; 95 3/8 × 1 5/8 in.) and *Joshua* (1950; 37 × 26 1/2 in.). *Untitled 1, 1950* is a small yet intricate painting. Against a dark-red background, drenched with a haze of black, Newman painted an ample zip of vivid red pushing from the left border of the canvas toward the right, and a thin yet taut white zip

8
Barnett Newman,
Untitled 1, 1950, 1950.
Oil on canvas, 36 × 6 in.
(91.4 × 15.2 cm).
Collection Judy and
Kenneth Dayton,
Minneapolis, Minne-
sota, purchased 1983.



on the right side. As the artist felt that his smaller paintings were as misunderstood as his larger ones, he decided to remove them from public view. The overall reception of his work, he disclosed to Ossorio, just did not allow having them properly understood, neither in terms of material setting nor in terms of theoretical framework:

The conditions do not exist for me, either physically or in the realm of ideas, that can make possible a direct, innocent attitude toward an isolated piece of my work, particularly one of my “small” ones. Without the proper context, the larger issues in my work are lost or, what is worse, become distorted to be just tours de force—from the tiny to the immense. I have, of course, done both sizes, but I have never been involved in tour de force—in size for its own sake—and although I do not care what may be said about my work (I am not interested in whether or not it is liked), I do care intensely that it be seen for what it is and for what it is not.³⁴

At that particular moment in his career, Newman felt, however, that the presence of *Untitled 1*, 1950 among the vast paintings of Still and Pollock in Ossorio’s collection would not do justice to the particular painting, and by extension to his larger artistic concerns as articulated by the material object. Nonetheless, it remains surprising that Newman decided to specifically withdraw the small paintings. In the long run, the artist never privileged the large paintings, and neither did he ever renounce his “small” paintings. He clearly deemed both equally successful in constituting the kind of image he was after.³⁵ When *Washington Post* art critic Andrew Hudson asked him some thirteen years later whether he was the first to make “really big paintings,” the artist did not deny but rather nuanced the claim: “Pollock and I were the first (and it’s interesting that it happened in the same year) to move our paintings into a sense of large scale.” Very few other painters, so he continued, succeeded to strike a proper balance: “I know some who do large paintings, yet no matter how large they are, they are fundamentally small in scale, and there are others who do large paintings that are never large enough.”³⁶ Expansiveness could never be an objective in and of itself. Rather, he had set for himself the task of exploring the relative power of the large and the small. Newman indeed developed a method of working in opposite size relationships.³⁷

He consistently balanced out the large and wide paintings with small and narrow ones: “In 1950, to test myself to see if I were really able to handle the problem of scale in all its aspects, to challenge myself against the notion that I could be beguiled by the large masses of color, I did the very narrow one-and-a-half-inch painting. I think it holds up as well as any big one I have ever done.”³⁸

It might explain why the artist continued to get infuriated by myopic judgments of the sheer size of his work. When *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* was included in the exhibition *American Paintings 1945–57* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in June 1957, *New Republic* critic Frank Getlein loutishly discarded the painting as “the most asinine thing on board . . . in the Design Division.” Yet what troubled the critic most were the painting’s bulky dimensions: “Eight feet high, ‘Vir’ is damn near 18 feet across and is painted a flat red.”³⁹ Newman wrote a furious letter to the editor asserting that “it was unnecessary for Mr. Getlein to swear at the ‘damn’ size of my pictures when a glance at the exhibition catalogue would have given him the exact size.”⁴⁰ The critic had been blinded by the allegedly colossal dimensions of the canvas and hence had failed to grasp to what extent the scale of the painting corresponded with the conceptual ambitions of his work. The actual measurements of a painting were a mere factual given for Newman. They were not an end in and of itself, but the cogent outcome of his unremitting attempt to convey his intellectual aims through the material object of the respective painting.

Given the negative and at times even hostile reception of his work in the dismal years of the early 1950s, Newman might have felt a need to engineer a proper, or at least a more beneficial, reading and appreciation. As his paintings were perceived as mute and inexpressive and his writings as dense and idiosyncratic, the artist certainly pondered whether and how other measures, either linguistic or photographic, could indicate to people how to look at his paintings and to grasp their content.⁴¹ It is telling that none of his works at the time of his first and second shows at Parsons bore the both expressive and instructive titles they are known by nowadays. Newman gave titles to his paintings only retroactively, namely, in the second half of the 1950s. In 1950, during one of the Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35, Newman had conceded that it would be “very well” to “title pictures by identifying the subject matter so that the audience could be helped.” The question of titles nevertheless was “purely a social phenomenon,” a mere indulgence to satisfy the public need for verbal enlightenment. Back then, Newman still firmly believed that he and some of his colleagues were “arriving

at a new state of painting where the thing has to be seen for itself.”⁴² Yet after nearly half a decade replete with critical fallacies and affronts, the artist doubtless realized that, to his own dismay, very few managed to grasp the true stakes of his work—a situation that only started to turn to his favor in the early 1960s. So one might justifiably wonder whether Newman’s new, potent titles were issued out of either self-protection or mordant defiance instead, since he never ceased to believe that the work had to speak for itself. As Richard Shiff has argued, Newman indulged more in declaring what he did *not* mean than what he meant.⁴³ He abhorred direct explanation and maintained that “each work of art produces its own unique sensation and requires a unique response.” The artist remained wary of those who failed to see with their own eyes and who needed pointers to formulate an argument. “I suppose it is as presumptuous for a painter to tell art critics what criticism is or what kind of criticism they ought to write,” he mused in 1968, “as it is for a critic to tell a painter what painting is and what to paint.”⁴⁴

Newman’s defiance, I would like to contend here, not only applies to his titling habits. His witty predilection for paradox and contradiction, polemics and verbal skirmishes, also pertains to the two photographs under discussion here. Not unlike the dramatic titles, they are to be treated with just as much caution.⁴⁵ Rather than providing us with expedient clues, the photographs burden us with an intriguing conundrum about Newman’s work in general, and about his understanding of scale in particular. Both images mark different yet equally decisive moments in Newman’s career: the artist’s first public emergence in 1950, on the one hand, and his public reappearance in 1958, on the other.⁴⁶ Not unlike the Siskind photograph, the Juley photograph is staged. The two images serve as a photographic performance of the statement and the instruction that Newman provided to the visitors of his first and second solo exhibitions in 1950 and 1951, respectively. The Siskind photograph was taken at the time of Newman’s first exhibition and directs attention to a work that was painted a few moments earlier; the Juley photograph, however, was taken seven years after the artist’s second exhibition and depicts a work that was painted seven years before and not even included in the latter. Yet to fully understand Newman’s understanding of scale advanced by his willfully adopted bodily postures and physical rapports to his work in the respective photographs, we need to revisit the established narrative of Newman’s early artistic development and ensuing painterly discoveries.

9

Barnett Newman,
Onement I, 1948. Oil
on canvas and oil on
masking tape, 27 ¼ ×
16 ¼ in. (69.2 × 41.3 cm).
The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.
Gift of Annalee
Newman, 1992.



Operative Painting

On his birthday, January 29, 1948, he prepared a small canvas with a surface of cadmium red dark (a deep mineral color that looks like an earth pigment—like Indian red or a sienna), and fixed a piece of tape down the center. Then he quickly smeared a coat of cadmium red light over the tape, to test the color. He looked at the picture for a long time. Indeed, he studied it for some eight months. He had finished questing.

Thomas B. Hess, 1971⁴⁷

A key painting in Newman's oeuvre, about which opinions differ regarding whether it was included in the 1950 exhibition at Betty Parsons, is *Onement I* (1948; 27 ¼ × 16 ¼ in.) (fig. 9). The advent of this "first" painting in January 1948 is the subject of what Ann Temkin has appropriately termed a "parable." As recounted by the critic and Newman's friend

Thomas B. Hess in 1971, the small yet powerful painting marked a decisive “breakthrough” for Newman. Allegedly, the artist had undergone a fundamental “conversion” when he made the work. It took him months to fully apprehend his accomplishment. In the following two decades, Newman would often return to the life-and-career-changing nature of this moment and experience, as the advent of *Onement I* made him understand that he was no longer making pictures but paintings.⁴⁸ With *Onement I*, Yve-Alain Bois has argued, Newman indeed managed “to dismiss altogether . . . the structure figure/ground, which constitutes, as much as our being situated, the basis of our perception.”⁴⁹ The radically symmetrical juxtaposition of three areas of color prevents any emergence of a dominant figure against a recessive ground. The cadmium red light vertical in the middle does not stand out against the cadmium red dark zones on the left and right. All three seem to hover in the same pictorial field, without any one arriving at prominence. The artist Donald Judd, a close friend of Newman, attentively noted that this very quality of mutual assertion between the different elements of the painting was intimately connected with the sense of scale in Newman’s work: “It’s important that Newman’s paintings are large, but it’s even more important that they are large scaled. His first painting with a stripe, a small one, is large scaled. The single stripe allowed this and the scale allowed the prominence and assertion of the stripe and the two areas.”⁵⁰

Onement I materially performs, as it were, its own striving toward the manufacturing of an image—yet an image that is not conclusive but somewhat vital, or to use the guiding metaphor of Newman’s essay “The Plasmic Image”: “plasmic.” In this twelve-part essay, which the artist wrote over the course of the spring of 1945, he stated that the task for the new painter was to make work that did not merely represent but actively develops an understanding of and a relationship to the world at large, just as much as ideas, thoughts, and concepts allow us to:

To the new painter, the taken-for-granted qualities of plasticity, the “good” in the color, the “significant” in the form, are the real issue. Color, line shape, space are the tools whereby his thought is made articulate. They are not pleasure elements that the artist should dote over. To him, then, it is not the plastic element that is important; [it is not] the voluptuous quality in the tools that is his goal, but what they do. It is their plasmic nature that is important. Here is the real difference between the traditional abstract

*painter and the new painter. Whereas the abstract painter is concerned with his language, the new painter is concerned with his subject matter, with his thought.*⁵¹

Dissatisfied with American realism, yet finding solace in neither surrealism nor abstraction, Newman reported, the new painters were determined to find proper artistic means to respond to the graveness of the situation: “In the one case they felt it was no solution for the painter dissatisfied with cheap subject matter to deny it entirely—that is like curing a case of chilblains by cutting the leg off. These men considered that the artistic problem was not whether they should or should not have subject matter; the problem was, What kind of subject matter?”⁵²

Onement I marked a decisive moment in Newman’s pursuit to find out what he could meaningfully convey as an artist, that is, what his painting(s) could *do* in a world already full with other objects, on the one hand, and bewildered by the horrors of World War II, the Holocaust, and the atom bomb, on the other—an intellectual struggle that he shared with his colleagues and friends Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), Pollock, and Rothko.⁵³ *Onement I* did not so much announce a new style or formal language but rather a new type of image that in its very material constitution addressed the relative agency of art in a world that is replete, cruel, hostile, and inhospitable.⁵⁴ The painting provided a singular response to his main quest. It declared its own capacity to defy what he designated in the first sentence of “The Plasmic Image” as the subject matter of creation: “chaos.”⁵⁵ Rather than representing the bedlam, Newman was in search of an image that in its very mode of pictorial address would actively speak to the worldly turmoil it fully partakes in yet wishes to differ from.

“I’m not interested in adding to the objects that exist in the world,” Newman declared in 1963 to the journalist Lane Slate. “I want my painting to separate itself from every object and every art object that exists.”⁵⁶ Newman fully realized that art inevitably adds to the world at large, and yet that the very merit of his painterly practice and output would reside in the larger issues he would be able to address. “For me the challenge is the canvas,” Newman asserted in one of the many edits of the transcribed interview with Slate, “which by its size is a part and which I hope to make a whole.”⁵⁷ In these two aforementioned quotations—which inevitably bring to mind later iterations by both minimalist and conceptual artists—Newman set out the theoretical program of his painterly practice, calibrating as it were both its material and conceptual incentives.⁵⁸ “For me, the size is a challenge,”

Newman admitted to Slate. “It is the challenge of its finiteness that I have to contend with and overcome.” The amount of canvas he would use as painter, he then further explained, was not unlike the choice a writer had to make: “My feeling about a painting is that I have to confront this particular size the way a writer confronts a piece of paper. If he has a novel in him, he needs a lot of paper; if he’s writing a lyrical poem, he might not need so much paper. And so I do not predetermine the size. . . . Size is only a means to me to involve myself in what I think is a painter’s problem—that is, a sense of scale.”⁵⁹ An artwork is a singular entity, yet it always partakes in the material totality of the world by which it is eventually subsumed. By its size, it is a fragment, yet the artist should strive to endow it with a totality or wholeness of its own.

From the Studio to the Gallery and Back Again

I suppose I have a heightened sensibility. But sometimes I get the heightened sensibility in relation to when I am not working. I don't know when I'm working, when I'm not working. It's like the person who tried to explain to his wife that when he is looking out the window, he's working.

Barnett Newman, n.d.⁶⁰

The painting *Be I*, the object of Newman’s attention in the Siskind photograph, was the largest work Newman had ever painted at the time of the show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950. With a height of 93 ¼ inches, it towered above visitors of the show and hence induced a radically different rapport to viewing subjects. Invariably, the Siskind photograph of Newman resonates with the extensive art-historical image tradition of artists immersed in deep thoughts or caught in a reflective state of mind, from Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 etching *Melencolia I* to Eugene Delacroix’s 1849 painting *Michelangelo in his studio* to Brassai’s famous photographs of Henri Matisse in his studio in Paris in 1939 (fig. 10). Such pictures of artists contemplating within the confines of the studio were made to emphasize that the act of meditation involves just as much work as the actual deed of painting, sculpting, or photographing.⁶¹ The staged photograph by Siskind, however, significantly shifts the situation. Newman is captured in formal attire. He is contemplating his work within the confines of the gallery. Any signs or traces of work are absent. Work tools are not present. The painting is on display.⁶²

10
Brassaï [Gyula Halász],
*Henri Matisse in Deep
Concentration in His
Studio in Villa d'Alésia,
Paris, ca. 1939*. Silver
gelatin print. Gilberte
Brassaï Foundation, Paris,
A.286.



The photograph, I would like to contend, formally reiterates the slow and intense process of understanding that followed the advent of *Onement I*. It restaged Newman's intellectual fortunes in the post-*Onement I* period, yet no longer within the secluded space of the studio. Siskind photographed Newman while the artist was scrutinizing the workings and effects of *Be I* within the profane precincts of a commercial gallery. The situation of protracted private contemplation and pensive assessment that was the outcome of the confrontation between the artist and his painterly makings was restaged, as it were, *in public*. The implicit suggestion, however, is that the struggle was not over when the painting was put on exhibition. Yet as the artist was no longer in the capacity to deliver any additional work on the painting he was studying, the second implicit suggestion on the rebound is that

even within the gallery the work was allowed to remain unfinished. The particular temporal order of the story of Newman's conversion by *Onement I*, as pointed out by Ann Temkin, is of added relevance here: "Newman's anecdote conforms to age-old parables of inspiration, in which a work of art is done *to*, more than *by*, an artist. Yet it inverts the usual creation story, in which an artist or his or her interlocutor invariably describes how he or she reflected for a long period and then made the work in one fell swoop."⁶³

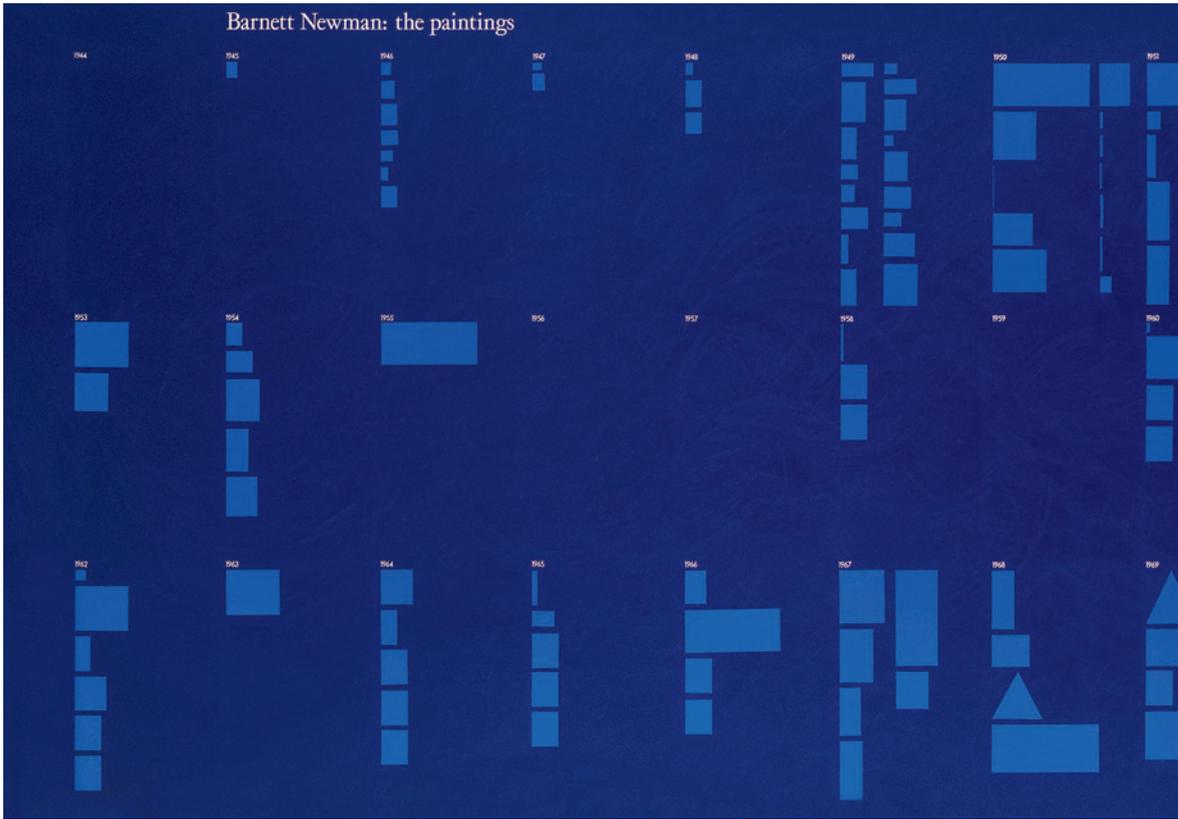
After Newman made *Onement I*, he no longer felt the necessity to change the painting: during his eight months of studying *Onement I*, the artist must have realized that the painting was changing him, as it were. No longer a picture but a painting, *Onement I* performed its own painterly process of becoming-an-image, that is, it materialized the very likelihood to ever arrive at an image in painting. To formulate it differently, with *Onement I*, Newman managed to make a painting that never turns into a definitive image, as it enacts the very process of becoming one, over and over again. To use a favorite verb of Newman's: it *declares* its own pictorial probability. The very ambition to ever make a conclusive work, the artist proclaimed as early as 1950, was pointless anyway: "I think the idea of a 'finished' picture is a fiction. I think a man spends his whole life painting one picture or working on one piece of sculpture."⁶⁴

In the case of *Onement I*, Ann Temkin has convincingly argued, the unfinished nature is not only to be taken literally; the painting first and foremost revealed to Newman the conceptual possibility of future reiteration without repetition.⁶⁵ *Onement I* instituted a pictorial principle that allowed the artist to address the very potential of the material and conceptual practice of painting—a task he would never cease to perform in the following two decades and in all the works that were to result from it. Siskind, in his turn, captured Newman at a moment that he was inspecting one of these subsequent results, verifying as it were the workings and effects of a new iteration of the same principle. The photograph and its obviously staged nature, underscored by the firm posture of the artist, his ceremonial attire, and the institutional setting, however, no longer expresses private doubt: rather it makes an indubitable claim for public sanction.

Yet it was precisely public recognition and critical approval that Newman remained deprived of for at least another decade following his first solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery. By 1958, Newman could count on very few supporting voices. His work still met with misunderstandings and critical retorts. Retrospectively, then, it is

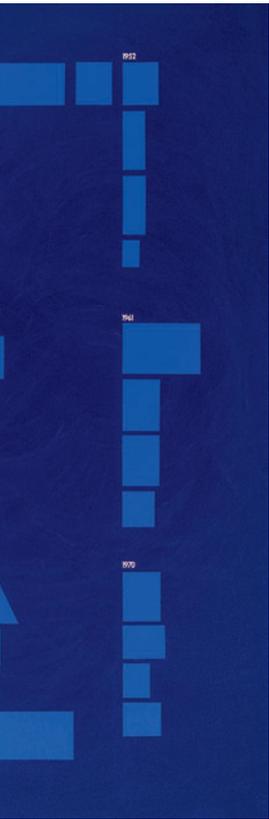
tempting to understand the Juley photograph as a willful exercise of Newman to set the record straight once and for all. Even though it seems at first that the artist literally reiterated the advice he had formulated for the visitors to the 1951 exhibition at Betty Parsons, a closer scrutiny of the photograph demands a far more complex reading. Given the artist's enduring refusal to provide direct explanation or advice, we might read the photograph for the manner in which one should *not* relate to the painting rather than for the manner in which one should. Instead of understanding the photograph as a considerate attempt on behalf of Newman to give directives about the conditions that should exist for viewers, both "physically and in the realm of ideas," the artist might just as much have established the contrary. By advising viewers not to look at large pictures from a distance, Newman certainly aimed to avoid reducing them to the bourgeois format of the easel painting—the small ones, admittedly, would never occur as conventional pictures anyway. Yet how close to the painting's surface did the artist effectively envisage viewers to stand?

If one stands as near to a large painting by Newman as the artist stands to *Cathedra* in the Juley photograph, essentially a mere few centimeters, two particular effects occur. The physical proximity prevents the viewer from being overwhelmed by the enormity of the canvas, and she or he cannot experience the painting as a tour de force. At this position, the viewer first and foremost sees, even if looking laterally, a field marked by painterly incident.⁶⁶ The very proximity perturbs if not effectively cancels both of the distinct phenomenological experiences that are commonly ascribed to Newman's massive color fields: the distance between the object and the body is at once too close for the perceiving subject to be absorbed by the painterly space, on the one hand, or to gain bodily awareness, on the other. Standing so close to the surface of a Newman painting, one apprehends that one is not looking at an abstract field of color, but rather at a concrete surface marked by distinct material occurrences.⁶⁷ Just as the artist changed the formats of his paintings, he granted every single painting a distinct painterly treatment. Newman never ceased to deploy different variations in texture, tonal gradations, and the depth of layered color applications, as well as the diverse edge variations effectuated by masking tape. The artist knew that these seemingly small details had a great effect on the final painting. If anything, his insistence that a viewer should stand so near to the painting's surface was a way of encouraging him or her to apprehend the specificity and particularity of each painterly surface—its very "workings," as it



11
 David Diao, *Barnett Newman, The Paintings in Scale*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas, 79 × 127 in. (200.66 × 322.58 cm). Collection of the artist, New York.

were.⁶⁸ Yet this apprehension is fundamentally and primarily of cognitive rather than phenomenological nature. Many viewers might feel overwhelmed and absorbed by Newman’s paintings, but that sensation can never have been the prime goal of Newman’s work. Newman despised any overemphasis on the bodily sensation supposedly procured by the sheer size of his work. The artist’s larger intellectual ambitions in painting could never be subjugated, let alone reduced to, a mere “environmental” sensation ascribed to the largeness of a canvas. The very physical position that Newman advanced in the Juley photograph effectively undermines any attempt to uphold this reading anyhow. The near presence of the other observer, on his left further underscores this: she literally breaks the spell of any potentially sublime experience.⁶⁹ Correspondingly, I would like to argue, the very physical stance taken up by Newman eight years earlier during the session with Siskind contradicts just as much any blissful encounter with his painting. The formal disposition of the artist and his measured bearing suggest an intellectual rapport with the artwork instead — one of sincere artistic assessment.



The somatic sense of scale or place that many ascribe to Newman's painting, I therefore contend, is subordinate to the cognitive assessment of art's relative capacity as a material object to address one's relative position in the world at large. When Newman stated to David Sylvester that he hoped that "the onlooker in front of [his] painting knows that he's there," it's unlikely that he was hinting at an individual bodily sensation. A little later, he states most cogently: "I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did to 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."⁷⁰ Newman here expressed the hope that his work had the capacity to address the human condition, that is, to procure painterly images that allow viewers to gain mental awareness of what it means to be one among many.

Coda: The Paintings in Scale

The discovery of a new idea is intoxicating.

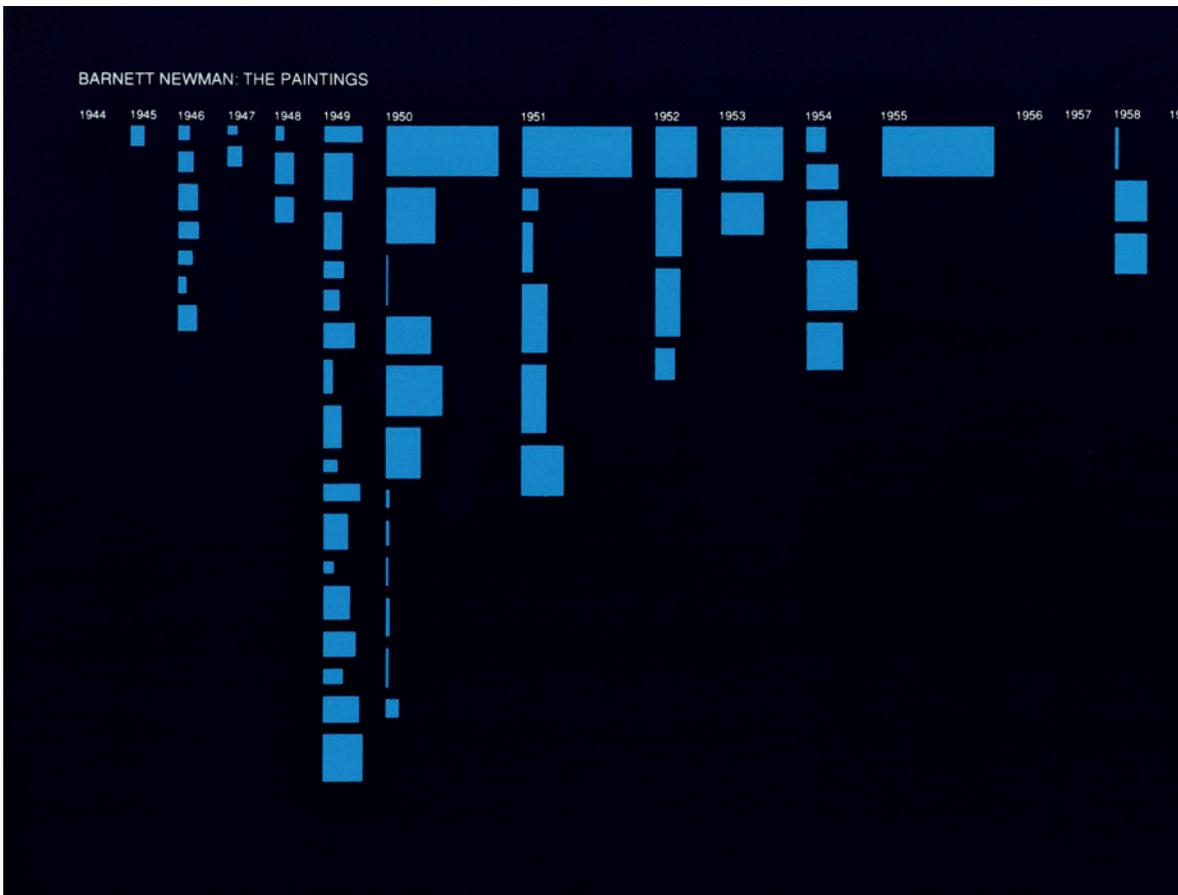
Barnett Newman, 1944–1945⁷¹

For Barnett Newman, *The Paintings in Scale* (1991; 79 × 127 in.) (fig. 11), American artist David Diao (b. 1943) depicted all existing paintings by Newman on a long stretch of canvas. The paintings are listed by year, running from left to right, from 1944 to 1979. They are merely represented as abstract, evenly colored shapes against a background of the same marine blue as *Cathedra* and with the correct proportions in relation to each other. Reducing the paintings to mere emblems, formal vignettes as it were, Diao paradoxically shows both the constraints and the wealth of Newman's practice. In total, Newman did not paint all that many works. Some years he even did not make any or only a few. The mere parataxis of the diverse shapes, leaving out the painterly differentiation between the distinct surfaces of the consecutive works, reveals the true endeavor firing Newman's work and practice. The formal variety of shapes and the painterly diversity of surfaces are two mutually enforcing forces within the oeuvre at large. Diao's 1992 silk-screened version of the work, now entitled *Barnett Newman: Life and Career (blue)* (22.8 × 42 in.) (fig. 12), further drives this point home. Whereas the visual diagram remained the same, the subtle change of title indicates that the assortment of paintings not only defines Newman's career but also denotes his lifework. During a time span of a little more than two decades, the artist deployed a

project in painting that marked a lifelong quest. Whether large or small, thin or wide, tall or short, each and every canvas was deployed to materialize the pictorial mode of address that Newman continued to explore until the very end of his life.⁷² Newman never explained why he decided to make either large or small canvases. He painted both. His sole concern was to explore when either one stopped being convincing, or in his words, would no longer “hold up.” The true challenge of Newman’s practice then was not how large or small a painting could or had to be, but rather to what extent a painting in its material formation permitted him to address the question that defines our being in the world. Newman explored the possible exchange between plastic and plasmic, or as Richard Shiff has formulated it, “between creative thought and the material form it can assume.”⁷³ Art, for Newman, acted as a dynamic yardstick to measure one’s relationship to the world and the objects it accommodates.

12

David Diao, *Barnett Newman: Life and Career (blue)*, 1992. Silkscreen, 22 7/8 × 42 in. (58 × 106.5 cm). Collection of the artist, New York.



The artist's commitment to subject matter, in other words, was intimately connected with his concern for scale. Both interests entwined on a material as well as conceptual level. Art, and painting in particular in Newman's case, was a lively vehicle to articulate in both matter and ideas a possible rapport between oneself and world: his interest lay in art's power, in what it could *do*. "The self, terrible and constant," Newman famously declared in 1965, "is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture."⁷⁴ Which brings us back to Newman's strikingly elliptical statement: "Size doesn't count. It's scale that counts. It's human scale that counts, and the only way you can achieve human scale is by content."⁷⁵



I wish to thank Heidi Colman-Freyberger and Shawn Roggenkamp for their generous assistance and kind help during my research stay at the BNFA in May 2014 and for answering all my questions and queries during the following months. I also wish to thank Veerle Thielemans and the Terra Foundation for American Art for generously providing travel funds to New York, Richard Shiff for sharing his knowledge, and Stefaan Vervoort and David Raskin for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this essay.

1 Barnett Newman, notes on invitation card, undated (ca. 1950), Barnett Newman Foundation and Archives, New York, NY (hereafter cited as BNFA).

2 Helen Carlson, "Diversity of Style and Media," *New York Sun*, Oct. 14, 1949, 27.

3 For an early example, see E. C. Goossen, "The Big Canvas," *Art International* 2, 8 (Nov. 1958): 45–47, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *The New Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), 57–65.

4 Barnett Newman, in *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the Modern Art Scene, 1940–1970*, by Emile de Antonio and Mitch Tuchman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 72. The entire interview with de Antonio was included in John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990), 302–8 (hereafter cited as *SWI*). Newman made a relatively similar statement during his tour of the Louvre in Paris in 1969. See Pierre Schneider, "Through the Louvre with Barnett Newman" [1969], in *SWI*, 290–302: "The size is nothing. What matters is the scale" (301). What is most remarkable though is that the most demanding part of Newman's statement to de Antonio, namely, "the only way you can achieve human scale is by content," is mostly left out, let alone addressed. A notable example is James Meyer in his discussion of the scalar inflation of contemporary art ("No more scale: The Experience of Size in Contemporary Sculpture," *Artforum* 42, 10 [Summer 2004]: 220–28). As Meyer principally expounds Newman's understanding of scale as phenomenological—"scale denoted a somatic relation"—he negates the epistemological aspirations of Newman's words, and hence tellingly omits the latter part of the sentence. Even though size and scale are widely established as key concerns of Newman, to this day no scholarly articles have been specifically dedicated to this subject. While not directly addressing the issue of scale, major

sources are two articles by Yve-Alain Bois: "Perceiving Newman," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 187–213; and "Newman's Laterality," in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, ed. Melissa Ho (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005), 29–45. Even though I am largely indebted to Bois's insightful analysis for my own reading and understanding of the work of Newman, I don't follow his resolute emphasis on the embodied perception advanced by Newman's paintings. As I hope to demonstrate by my reading of the photographs of Aaron Siskind and Paul P. Juley, those very photographs and the two distinct physical relationships toward the paintings they establish radically undermine a mere phenomenological reading of Newman's understanding of scale.

5 Richard Shiff, introduction to *SWI*, xix.

6 Mel Bochner, "Barnett Newman: Writing Painting / Painting Writing," in Ho, *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, 22–23.

7 Barnett Newman, "The Plasmic Image" [1945], pt. 7, in *SWI*, 149.

8 Shiff, introduction, xv.

9 Barnett Newman, interview by Dorothy Gees Seckler, *Art in America* 50, 2 (Summer 1962): 83–87; reprinted as "'Frontiers of Space' Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler," in *SWI*, 247–51 (section epigraph taken from 250–51).

10 Some of these photographers put warm dedications in the books they gave to Newman. On the first page of his book *The Artist in His Studio* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1960), Liberman wrote: "To my dear Annalee and Barney who know the deepest meaning of Art and Creation—with admiration and affection, Alex." Ugo Mulas penned a similar dedication in *New York: The New Art Scene* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1967): "For Barney and Annalee with best wishes and all our thanks. Ugo Mulas." Both books are in the library of Newman, on deposit at the BNFA.

11 Robert Murray in conversation with the author, Apr. 29, 2014, at the BNFA.

12 In *New York: The New Art Scene* by Mulas there is a remarkable erratum on the page dedicated to Newman. The printed sentence is "Newman does like to be photographed when he works," whereas it should

read, "Newman does not like to be photographed when he works." Handwritten erratum in the copy in the library of Newman, on deposit at the BNFA.

Aside from his wife, Annalee, no one ever witnessed the artist painting. See Carol C. Mancusi-Ungaro, "The Paintings of Barnett Newman: 'Involved Intuition on the Highest Level,'" in *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, by Richard Shiff, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, and Heidi Colman-Freyberger (New York, NY, and New Haven, CT: The Barnett Newman Foundation and Yale University Press, 2004), 117–41. The rare exceptions that prove the rule are those photographs showing Newman at work, yet not while he was painting. Ugo Mulas captured the artist at the Treitzel-Gratz metal workshop, Long Island City, New York, when he was working on the vertical steel elements of *Here II* in 1965. Once again the photograph is obviously staged. Other notable examples are the photographs by Harry Shunk of Newman at work on the lithographs at the U.L.A.E. studio in West Islip, Long Island, in 1968.

13 For an insightful analysis of this photograph, I wish to refer to Ann Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," in *Barnett Newman*, ed. Temkin (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 47.

14 The series by Liberman depicting Newman mounting the ladder in his studio especially deserves further analysis within a discussion of Barnett Newman's understanding of size and scale, yet this fell beyond the scope of this essay.

15 At the end of his life, Newman fully enjoyed the fame and became a public celebrity. Warhol once famously quipped that "maybe he didn't have to work a lot if he just painted one line, so he had time for parties." See Andy Warhol, "Around Barnett Newman," in *Artwords: Discourse on the '60s and '70s*, by Jeanne Siegel (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 49. For an insightful analysis of Newman's ambiguous relationship with the art, artists, and artworld of the 1960s, see Sarah K. Rich, "The Proper Name of Newman's Zip," in Ho, *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, 96–114.

16 I follow Jeremy Lewison, here, who argues that these photographs should be studied as "key texts." See Jeremy Lewison, *Looking at Barnett Newman* (London: August, 2002), 36. An important note to be made here concerns the lack of color in the photographs. Both the Aaron Siskind and Paul P. Juley photographs are in black and white, which significantly

reduces a major quality of Newman's paintings, whereas some of the Liberman pictures are in color. I wish to thank Katja Kwastek for pointing this out to me following a first presentation of my research findings at the Studio for Immediate Spaces at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam on March 3, 2014.

The first publication of the Juley photograph, as known to me, is Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978), 82. The photograph taken at Bennington College in 1958, which inspired the Paul P. Juley photograph, was published earlier in Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Walker and Company, 1969), 50. The Siskind photographs were published for the first time in the Philadelphia exhibition catalogue (Temkin, *Barnett Newman*), 36

17 The exact number of photographs made by Siskind is hard to trace. At the BNFA, there are ten photographs remaining of the session, yet the numbers on the contact sheets indicate that there could have been more (the numbers of the archived photographs are 13–23). At the Aaron Siskind Foundation, New York, no other photographs were found. E-mail correspondence between the Aaron Siskind Foundation and the author, Jan. 23, 2014.

There are no written or printed records about the course of the session. When interviewed by Martin Gasser in 1988, Aaron Siskind had no memory of the event. See Martin Gasser, "Barnett Newman: Another Photographic Footnote," (unpublished paper, Princeton University, Sept. 1988), on deposit at BNFA.

18 Eileen Elizabeth Costello insightfully notes that the distance between Newman and the wall approximates the height of the painting *Be I*. This corresponds to calculations that are based on the body length of Newman, who was five feet nine inches tall. See Eileen Elizabeth Costello, "Beyond the Easel: The Dissolution of Abstract Expressionist Painting into the Realm of Architecture" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, Aug. 2010), 148, 161.

19 Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 58; Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, 314. Both Hess and Temkin stress the fact that the size of *Be I* pushed the physical limits of Newman's studio at 304 East Nineteenth Street to capacity.

20 For a detailed description of the show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950, see Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 35–40.

21 Ibid., 37.

22 Barnett Newman, handwritten statement, BNFA, reprinted under "Statements" [1950, Betty Parsons Gallery], in *SWI*, 178.

23 The session by Peter Juley & Son resulted in at least eleven pictures, half of which depict singular works. Newman appears only in one picture, while his wife, Annalee, is pictured in close watch of *The Name II* (1950; 104 × 94½ in.) and *The Voice* (1950; 96½ × 105½ in.), while the unidentified woman is photographed in close watch of *Cathedra* and *The Name II*. The photographs are generally credited to Peter Juley & Son. Yet Peter Juley died in 1937. His son, Paul P. Juley, took the photograph. See Costello, "Beyond the Easel," 148.

24 To this day, the woman in the photograph is referred to as unidentified, even though she has been repeatedly identified as the influential curator Dorothy C. Miller from the Museum of Modern Art, New York. A recent estimation that said she was the painter Jane Freylicher, was contradicted by the daughter of Jane Freylicher. I wish to thank Heidi Colsman-Freyberger for sharing this information with me (pers. comm., Apr. 28, 2014, BNFA; and e-mail conversation, Sept. 2, 2015).

25 It remains uncertain whether the idea came from Newman and whether he pushed E. C. Goossen to pose for the photograph at Bennington College, in Bennington, Vermont, in the summer of 1958. But it is known that the artist liked the result, since it inspired him to commission Paul P. Juley later that year to make a similar photograph, but now with *Cathedra* instead of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Both paintings were installed across from each other along the side walls in the New Gallery at Bennington College in 1958; see Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 41, 55.

26 The photograph taken at Bennington College, which is one of twelve installation shots of the show, indicates, however, that there *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* also almost fully covered a wall surface, yet the possibility to take a distance as a viewer remained. Unfortunately, *Cathedra* does not appear in the photographs.

27 Barnett Newman, unpublished typescript, BNFA, reprinted under "Statements" [1951, Betty Parsons Gallery], in *SWI*, 178.

28 For a detailed description of the show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951, see Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 40–46.

29 *No. 2* by Mark Rothko (also *No. 7* and *No. 20*; cat. 51) is alternatively dated 1950; see Jeffrey Weiss, ed., *Mark Rothko* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998), 114, 342; I wish to thank David Anfam for confirming this information with me. E-mail conversation between David Anfam and the author, Aug. 18, 2015.

30 Barnett Newman, as quoted in Hess, *Barnett Newman* (1969), 54.

31 Stuart Preston, "Diverse New Shows: Drawings by Modigliani—Newman, Foy, Wells," *New York Times*, Apr. 29, 1951.

32 Work by Newman was nonetheless included in group shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery, as checklists have pointed out. #4 (1948; an unidentified work, not for sale) was included in *Gallery Group*, May 12–31, 1952; #20 (undated and unidentified work) was included in *Recent Paintings*, Sept. 29–Oct. 11, 1952; Newman also participated with a work, almost certainly *Horizon Light* (1949; oil on canvas, 30½ × 72½ in.), in the group show *Ten Years*, Dec. 9, 1955–Jan. 14, 1956 (exhibition brochure with introduction by Clement Greenberg). I wish to thank Heidi Colsman-Freyberger at the BNFA for providing me with this detailed information.

33 Barnett Newman, "Letter to the Alfonso Ossorio" [1953], in *SWI*, 198–99.

34 Ibid., 198. A remarkable example of such a misreading can be found in the first review by Mel Bochner, who later would become one of Newman's most lucid critics. See Mel Bochner, "Arts Magazine Reviews (December 1965)," in *Solar System & Rest Rooms: Writings and Interviews, 1965–2007* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 1–2: "The small Newmans seemed didactic, like diagrams included to illustrate the 'idea,' and revealed the importance of his art of scale." Brian O'Doherty, another well-respected critic, also presented a rather blunt reading of Newman's small paintings. See Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973), 116: "After many years, Newman's narrow strip paintings, part polemic, part gesture, part absurdity, calmly assert

the idea of preposterous scale as radical material." For a sincere analysis of the stakes of the small paintings, see Michael Schreyach, "Barnett Newman's 'Sense of Space': A Noncontextualist Account of Its Perception and Meaning," *Common Knowledge* 19, 2 (Spring 2013): 351–79.

35 Further on in the letter, Newman did muse whether he would also have to withdraw his so-called "large ones" but decided that this had to "wait for more thought." Newman, "Letter to the Alfonso Ossorio," 198.

36 Barnett Newman, "The Case for 'Exporting' Nation's Avant-Garde Art: Interview with Andrew Hudson" [1966], in *SWI*, 271–72.

37 Gabriele Schor, "Art as Passion," in *The Prints of Barnett Newman, 1961–1969*, ed. Schor (Ostfildern Ruit bei Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1996), 25. For a brilliant analysis of the relationship between the large and the small paintings in the oeuvre and practice of Pollock, I wish to refer to T. J. Clark, "Pollock's Smallness," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999), 15–31.

38 Newman, "Case for 'Exporting,'" 272.

39 Frank Getlein, "Kidding the Id in Minneapolis," *New Republic*, Aug. 26, 1957, 21.

40 Barnett Newman, "Letter to the Editor, *The New Republic*" [1957], in *SWI*, 210.

41 Melissa Ho, "Talk and the Untalkable," in Ho, *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, 2; Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 46.

42 Barnett Newman, "Remarks at Artists' Sessions at Studio 35" [1950], in *SWI*, 240.

43 Richard Schiff, "To Create Oneself," in Schiff, Mancusi-Ungaro, and Colman-Freyberger, *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 39–40: "Newman was far more explicit about what he did not mean than about what he meant."

44 Barnett Newman, "For Impassioned Criticism" [1968], in *SWI*, 133, 131.

45 Ann Temkin ("Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 35) questions the extent to which Newman's a

posteriori title giving has "over time . . . greatly influenced interpretations of the paintings." She rightfully advocates that the "awareness of their belatedness" should help place them "in a proper perspective." Similarly, Gilbert-Rolfe warns against an all too eager adoption of Newman's words and writings. He expresses his suspicion about "the rhetoric that surrounds the work," since it has led to "misunderstandings about the work, some of them of the artist's own making." Peter Halley and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "On Barnett Newman: Peter Halley and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe Talk," *Parkett* 16 (1988): 19. My reading and understanding of Newman is deeply marked both by calls for caution and by the persuasion that Newman cherished the credo that one does not need to believe what artists say but definitely take it seriously.

46 The July session took place in the second half of 1958, the very year Newman's career finally started to take off. In this year, four paintings were included in the exhibition *New American Painting*, the retrospective at Bennington College in Vermont in May organized and installed by E. C. Goossen, which was then followed by the publication of the first magazine article fully devoted to Newman's work in the summer issue of *ARTnews*, also written by E. C. Goossen. It took until 1962–1963, however, for the critical tide to take a truly positive turn, when such influential critics as Thomas Hess and Harold Rosenberg wrote laudatory essays on his work. See "Chronology," in Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, 327–29.

47 Hess, *Barnett Newman* (1971), 51.

48 Newman, in de Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters Painting*, 67. During an interview with David Sylvester in the spring of 1965, Newman gave one of the most openhearted accounts of the discovery made with and by *Onement I*: "That painting called *Onement I*: what it made me realize, 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. 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 in a way I don't think the others did, as much." Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester," in *SWI*, 256.

49 Bois, "Perceiving Newman," 201.

50 Donald Judd, "Barnett Newman" [1970], in *Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art And Design, 2005), 201. Judd wrote the piece on Newman in November 1964 for the German journal *Das Kunstwerk*, but the latter never published it. Newman read it at the time. It was finally published in 1970 in *Studio International*, on the occasion of Newman's death. For an insightful analysis of Donald Judd's understanding of scale, I wish to refer to David Raskin, "Judd's Scale," in *The Writings of Donald Judd*, ed. Marianne Stockebrand and Richard Schiff (Marfa: The Chinati Foundation, 2009), 26–41.

51 Newman, "The Plasmic Image," pt. 3, 143.

52 Newman, "The Plasmic Image," pt. 12, 154.

53 This challenge can be clearly retraced in the artist's prolific writings during the mid to late 1940s, yet a few months before his untimely death, Newman recalled the situation in most illuminating terms: "People were painting a beautiful world, and at that time we realized that the world wasn't beautiful. The question, the moral question, that each of us examined—de Kooning, Pollock, myself—was: What was there to beautify? And so the only way to find a beginning was to give up the whole notion of an external world, so to speak, that one could glorify and to put oneself into the position of finding this possibility, which people call a medium, of saying something that would be important to oneself. And that's what I mean by beginning from scratch. The world was going to pot. It was worse than that. It was worse than that." Newman, in de Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters Painting*, 43–44.

54 Pierre Restany, "Barnett Newman: Une valeur de civilisation," *Domus* 519 (Feb. 1973): 47–48.

55 Newman, "The Plasmic Image," pt. 1, 139.

56 Barnett Newman, "Interview with Lane Slate" [Contemporary American Painters, CBS, Mar. 10, 1963], in *SWI*, 253.

57 Barnett Newman, handwritten notes on type-script of interview with Lane Slate, 1963, BNFA. Newman's notes invariably resonate with the statement by conceptual artist Douglas Huebler in the artist's book *January 5-31* (New York: published by Seth Siegelau, 1969): "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more" (n.p.).

58 I am thinking here of the language-based work of Lawrence Weiner, in particular his *A bit of matter and a little bit more* (1976), installed on the glass panes of an exterior door at P.S. 1 in New York; a more recent iteration is Martin Creed, *Work No. 232, the Whole World plus the Work is the Whole World* (2000), installed both on the front of Tate Britain and later in different iterations on the gallery walls of Tate Modern, as well as the exterior walls of the gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York.

59 Newman, "Interview with Lane Slate," 252.

60 Barnett Newman in an undated interview with Karlis Osis, transcript on deposit at the BNFA. I wish to thank Shawn Roggenkamp at the BNFA for pointing out this reference to me.

61 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Emblèmes ou lexies: Le texte photographique," in *Hans Namuth, L'atelier de Jackson Pollock* (Paris: Editions Macula, 1978), n.p. What is most important in the picture, Krauss argues, is the gaze, the act of visual concentration that turns the artist into a "mediating intellect," the reflective foundation of the work. Yet strikingly, in both the Siskind and the Juley photographs, Newman directs his gaze away from the camera.

62 Newman had delegated, as was the custom at the time, the hanging of the show to his friend and colleague Mark Rothko.

63 Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 34.

64 Barnett Newman, "Remarks at Artists' Sessions at Studio 35," 240.

65 Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 39.

66 Whereas Bois vindicates the material specificity of the surfaces of Newman's painting on the basis of the staging of the Juley photographs, he rather dramatically reads this as an affirmative address to the viewer by the painting—"Here I am, you cannot ignore me"—and vice versa. This type of attribution of conversational agency, on the one hand, and the ensuing experience of personal encounter with the artwork, on the other, I contend, is too personal to universalize it and is symptomatic of the manifold projections of "experience" to be had from a Newman painting. Bois, "Newman's Laterality," 44.

67 For a wonderful appraisal of the quality of Newman's painterly surfaces, see Halley and Gilbert-Rolfe, "On Barnett Newman," 18.

68 Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," 50.

69 In this essay I have consciously avoided reading Newman's work within the register of the sublime. I follow Yve-Alain Bois's assessment that the sublime is "a misnomer" when discussing Newman's work. See Yve-Alain Bois, "Barnett Newman's Sublime = Tragedy," in *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, ed. Richard Francis, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 138–39.

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

71 Barnett Newman, "The Problem of Subject Matter" [1944–1945], in *SWI*, 82.

72 Yve-Alain Bois presents us with a rather interesting metaphor for the totality of the oeuvre of Newman: "He is perhaps the only painter of this century who thought of his pictorial corpus as a structural totality. My contention is that Newman's pictorial oeuvre should be considered as something like a deck of cards." See Yve-Alain Bois, "On two paintings by Barnett Newman," *October*, 108 (2004): 4.

73 Shiff, introduction, xix

74 Barnett Newman, "From Exhibition of the United States of America" [1965], in *SWI*, 187.

75 Newman, in de Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters Painting*, 72.