

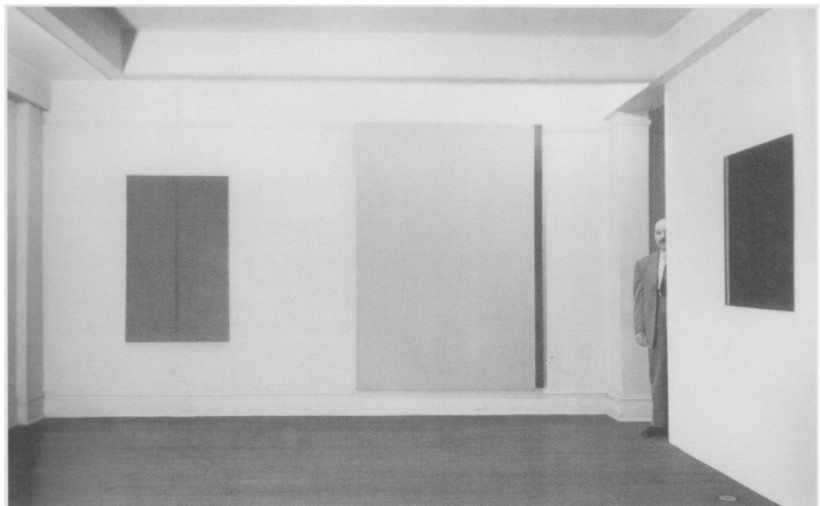
An artist paints so that he will have something to look at; at times he must write so that he will also have something to read.

Barnett Newman¹

So this is it, the first issue of our new collaborative venture in creating this journal. Quite a project when you think about it – three editors roaming different parts of the earth, two offices in cities 5000 miles apart. This is either the future of arts journalism or a soon-doomed exercise in hubris. The excitement of the idea is in that uncertainty. Can we bring our various stories into close enough rapport to enable us to produce a viable, on-going discussion that will throw some useful light onto current art practice? The challenge will be both institutional and personal. CalArts and Central St Martins have a decent amount in common, but there are huge differences also – differences in scale, financial structure, even academic calendar. We'll push past all that, not only because we want to, but also because we must; for the bald truth is, it is near impossible to find anything interesting to read about current art. So much of what is out there is badly written, either clogged with undigested academic theory or filled with unformed enthusiasm, or worse, unexamined spite. In short, we have a mission, and that is to find us something good to read, even if, as Barnett Newman noted, it means we sometimes have to do the job ourselves.

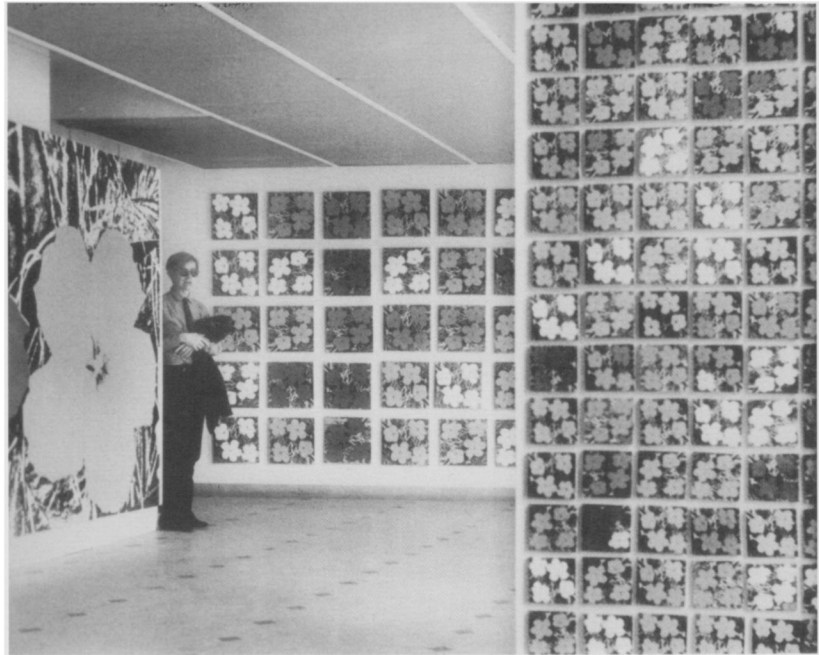
For me this is a return of sorts, picking up a dropped thread. It seems once again important to state the case from the point of view from one who makes art – a more engaged take than the disinterested arguments of one trained to analyse the big picture. The professionalization of the discourses surrounding art, through the ever-widening circulation of an international curatorium has undoubtedly brought great benefits. There is now greater access to more diverse art and ideas than ever, held together with ever more convincing narratives. While this may widen the public for contemporary art, it does not help the individual artist. Theorising a practice, writing a history, takes on very different meanings when coming from direct engagement with the ongoing problems of the studio. The broader disciplines of politics and economics, say, are less presently useful when you are struggling with the problem of what to do. We already know we live in a

View of Newman's second exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1951, with the artist. Photograph by Hans Namuth



¹ Barnett Newman, 'Why I Paint', *The Tiger's Eye*, 1947.

View of Warhol's exhibition at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, 1965, with the artist. Photograph by Phillips/Schwab (courtesy Gagosian)



fucked-up world, what we want to know is, how can we make art for such a world? And in the end, what really drives the answer is the experience of previous solutions, the confrontation with real, significant achievement.

Editorial meetings so far have been intense, with all of us engaged in a passionate debate concerning the current situation of art production. On some fundamental level it appears that we are in agreement about the broad scope of contemporary art, yet we find gulfs and chasms in our mutual understanding, for this is a debate that inevitably draws on different understandings of history as well as different preferences and tastes. One issue that has emerged is a difference between American and European takes on what is important. This is perhaps to be expected, considering the separate histories, and thus separate views, of two interlinked cultures. The surprise for me is the discovery that my long residence in the US has led to my having become naturalised to some extent. I find I have internalised the New York position to a greater degree than I had realised. I look forward to examining and unravelling this more in future issues – but first, let's get some history straight.

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Frank Stella: Well, Yves Klein was no doubt a radical artist, but he didn't do anything very interesting.

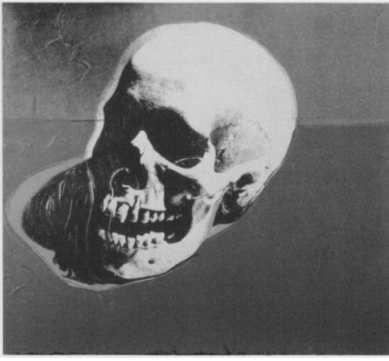
Don Judd: I think he was to some extent outside of European painting, but why is he still not actually radical?

Stella: I don't know. I have one of his paintings, which I like in a way, but there's something about him... I mean, what's not radical about the idea of selling air? Still, it doesn't seem very interesting.

Judd: Not to me either. One thing I want is to be able to see what I've done, as you said. Art is something you look at.²

This brief exchange between two of the hotshots of 60s New York provides a succinct version of the attitude I find I have internalised. I mean by this something more interesting than the rather naïve nationalism expressed by the two artists. After all, this was simply a product of an inferiority complex of a sort – New York then felt towards Paris something like what London and Los Angeles now feel towards New York. What is more telling is the bald declaration of a purely visual aesthetic. In making this declaration Judd and Stella are signalling their distance from two models of art – 'European painting' and Klein's version of the avant-garde. For them the problem with painting was that it had become too anecdotal and caught up in a connoisseurship of fussy paint application. The problem with the avant-garde model was that it seemed too precious, too clever. The counter-

² Bruce Glaser, 'Questions To Stella and Judd', *Art News*, September 1966.



Andy Warhol, *Skull*, 1976, silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 336cm x 381cm, Dia Art Foundation (courtesy The Menil Collection, Houston)

proposal was of a radical formalism, in which all over-determined readings would be banished from sight. This was the astonishing breakthrough of the New York School and it has been under attack ever since – from the right as insufficiently respectful of tradition, a hoax perpetuated by oafs who could not draw, and from the left as insufficiently inclusive, a hoax perpetuated by CIA moles and high-flying salesmen.

There are a number of things one can say to telegraph what this idea of art is about, and all of them strike with a singularity of ambition, a supra-personal claim to the authority of inevitability. The most potent sign for this is 'Greenberg', where this means a version of the modernist project that calls for an aggressive search for the essentials of any art form. (Thus painting is understood as being about a flat rectangular surface, separated from its surroundings by a framing edge, and filled with coloured pigment.) There is no room here for the quirky, for the particularity of individual narratives of making. Indeed there is no room for narrative at all, which is seen as the trivialising enemy of the visual.

The thing is, no matter where you look within contemporary Western culture, there is very little art produced that is radically purposeless. There is plenty of formalist art, of course, but much less that is produced as a rejection of conventional values rather than an elaboration of them. Most artists, and most of the public for art, feel quite strongly that there should be a benefit beyond the aesthetic. In 'puritanical' America as much as in 'decadent' Europe this tends to mean either a social benefit or a personal one. Art may serve one vision or another of political improvement, or it may express the emotions of the artist in a cathartic release that helps the viewer with her emotions. It is thus relegated to the role of social therapy, something that improves our collective mental health. As such it loses any claim to autonomy, becoming subject to the whims of intellectual fads and aesthetic fashions. Arguing against such a state of affairs is arduous, a matter of marshalling difficult ideas, sticking with unpopular positions, and finding a convincing working method. Few have managed.

Two artists who are exemplary in this struggle are the incompatible bookends to late 20th-century art, Barnett Newman and Andy Warhol. Newman and Warhol – the master of the 'zip', and the one famous for saying everyone should be famous – spoken in the same breath? The anarchist and the capitalist mime? Improbable as it may seem, I think so. Both championed an idea of art as an unfathomable discourse, one set apart from daily life. Both struggled to find a way to make the art that they wanted to make, and when they found a way, it turned out to be based on a radical rejection of conventional ideas of appropriate content. Both, in their wildly divergent ways, found what they needed in repetition and surface, in different kinds of heroic blankness.

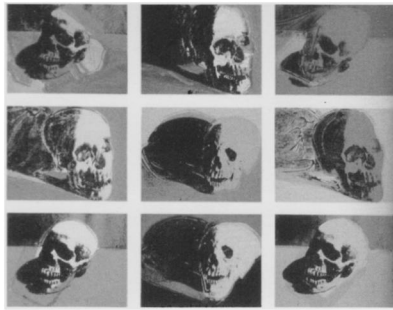
If you want to know about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it.
Andy Warhol³

This rejection of depth, of history, is what separates the American avant-garde movements from their European counterparts, such as the Independent Group, Fluxus, CoBrA, the Situationists and Arte Povera. All these may reject aspects of their home cultures, but they do so knowing the weight of their various pasts, and tend to use various ideas about chance operations as a mechanism to navigate this peril. They are defined by the distance they can place between themselves and their history. But Newman and Warhol saw refusal as a point of origin; refusal of the established idea of 'art,' a new beginning beyond the constraints of an already written history. Each artist sought a simple, regenerative gesture – the zip for Newman, the capture and reproduction of familiar imagery for Warhol – and made meaning from repeating the gesture with improvised variation. Thus a structure of meaning unfolds across space and time, beyond the confines of the singular work.

³ Gretchen Berg, *Andy: My True Story*, East Village Other, NY, 1967.

This is the nature of the American sublime, a desperate sense of presence carved out of the desolation of a repeating absence. The structure that makes it visible is built of a few simple cords, the majesty of it brought out in improvisational riffs. This is an architecture of thought, as familiar as country blues music, as arcane as a large monochrome canvas bisected by a vertical strip of colour. Here is a real sense in which Newman's paintings made Warhol's possible. These soaring, abstract fields in which beauty is deployed as a negative force to create a sublime of negation is the progenitor of Warhol's studied blankness, his repeated 'No'. Warhol's discovery was that the mass media provide a bigger void than imagined nothingness.

Newman loved life, but had little time for contemporary culture. As a result he made an art that rejected the values of that culture, in the name of another, better one. Warhol claimed to 'like' everything, and in doing so he tore down the barriers between art and life with a shocking finality. In laying claim to a populist aesthetic, he demonstrated an intuitive grasp of the semiotics of power in a capitalist society, for by liking everything, he made it clear that he found everything to be alike. For Warhol, all cultural objects, high and low, share an identifying similarity: they are merely tokens of exchange, endlessly reproducible signs of wealth and power. Both artists lived as social outsiders, haunted by the idea of failure, and both gained strength from embracing that failure as a sign of their value.

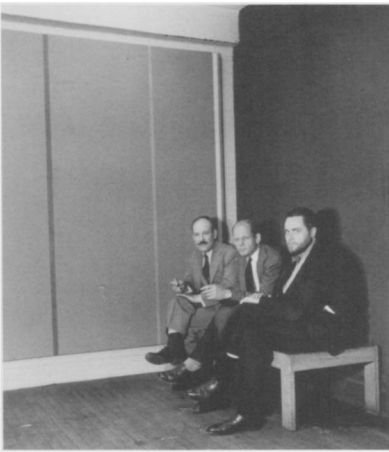


Andy Warhol, *Skull*, 1976, silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 336cm x 381cm, Dia Art Foundation (courtesy The Menil Collection, Houston)

In Warhol's work images are repeated over and over, until they grow pale. Coke bottles, soup cans, dollar bills, Elvises, Marilyn Monroes, Troy Donahues, car crashes, electric chairs, Jackies, Maos, skulls – all rolled out of the rather rickety production line of Warhol's Factory like so many imperfects headed for the bargain basement of a souvenir store. However, while all are so much the same, so hopeless, they are somehow also alluring. For despite what he said, Warhol had discovered that all images are not the same; some are much more likeable than others. In the democracy of 'all is pretty', some images separate out, become more distinct, more valuable. These are the ones to which is attached the *frisson* of glamour, the ambience of power, the smell of death. Marilyn, headless, floating on a field of tacky gold paint, is hyper-real, a spectral goddess shimmering in the ether, visible to all, available only to men of power; her premature death ensures that her sexuality transcends its physical limitations and becomes pure vision, a feast for the eyes.

In the oscillations of Warhol's work as a whole, the repeating Marylins and Maos served to routinise glamour while the soup cans and Brillo boxes and cow wallpaper glamourised routine (as did the films and screen tests). In all these cases the routine comes across as a ritual of despair, the result of an unyielding alienation. The relentlessness of the work has a macabre quality, an obsession with the power of the inanimate. Death itself, from the *Disaster* and *Electric Chair* series to the *Skulls* and *Shadows*, further provided Warhol the opportunity to investigate the ghoulish downside of the hypnotic stare of fascination that is the depleted pleasure of the victimised consumer in a society sated with the spectacle of successful consumption.

There is a succinct elegance in the way in which Warhol suggests a critical intervention in the seamless world of the mass media, but ultimately withholds it, simply offering nothing. Recall our extended gaze as time passes across the face of the Empire State Building or our becalmed observation of the enervating lives of the Chelsea Girls. We are offered seemingly secret access to what turns out to be nothing at all. This is a glamorous negativity in the face of the self-consciously fake imaginings of consumerism. He countered the everyday of modern America with schlock horror, replayed, continuously, as the melodrama of the living dead. Ultimately Warhol's liking is not likeable, but scary; it illuminates too much for comfort. He gives the spectacle of the modern American landscape as a virtual space of instantaneity; high-speed movement, going nowhere.



Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Tony Smith at Newman's second exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1951.

Photograph by Hans Namuth

When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the fifties, someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike ... It was a dark night and there were no lights of shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and coloured lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art.

The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognised. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.

Tony Smith⁴

The architect-turned-sculptor Tony Smith told this story to Sam Wagstaff while they were preparing Smith's first museum show at The Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford in 1967. Smith has always been understood as a seminal figure in the development of Minimalism, someone who brokered the aspirations of the Abstract Expressionist generation into the cooler but more imposing and overwhelming aesthetic of that group of younger artists. In his important essay 'Art and Objecthood', also of 1967, Michael Fried argues that the Minimalists betrayed the modernist impulse, and he quotes Smith to show what he means.

For Fried the big issue is an idea of irreducible essence, something he calls opticality. I think what he means by this is that art should simply be something to be looked at, something that is resistant to all methods of explanation. Yet it is important to him that this experience remains embedded in the gallery or museum context. The gesture works because it is recognised as such within the conventions of art. Which is to say that he is hostile to the avant-garde practice of attacking these conventions. He is appalled by Smith's story-telling, by his invocation of direct experience. He calls this theatrical and, therefore, inimical to visual art. Fried wants the art object to be the centre of attention, he does not want us considering the setting or context.

Now, one of the seminal figures in this discussion, and in many ways the most radically pertinent, is Barnett Newman. After all, Newman asserted the painting as a whole, something that had to be seen as one, not made up of smaller parts. In his paintings there are no compositional problems, no illusions, no stories. The total field of the painting is the unit of meaning. As Greenberg wrote: 'Newman's picture becomes all frame in itself. The picture edge is repeated inside, and makes the picture instead of being merely echoed.'⁵

In some way this view holds as self-evident, and tends to be the basis of our understanding of the work and of its place. But Tony Smith, along with Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, helped install Newman's shows at Parsons. Could there be something more at stake here? Might we learn something from this particular context?

It was something of a gallery tradition at Betty Parsons that Smith and other members of the stable did the installations with neither the dealer nor the showing artist taking a direct role. But Newman was always concerned with every detail and he must have participated. At any rate, his first show contained eleven paintings in a spare, deliberate hang in which one gets the sense that nothing was left to chance. It was not merely a show of recent work, but an orchestration, playing out variations on centeredness. The key to the show was *Onement I*, Newman's 1948

⁴ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum*, June 1967.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, 'American-Type' *Painting, Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, p.226

breakthrough work, a modestly sized vertical painting with a red stripe down its centre. Newman always saw this one as a new beginning, the act of creation that made the rest of his work possible, precisely because it was an act that could be repeated as it was varied. Four other paintings in the show followed this format; two contained a double zip, also centred, and the remainder played to the edge. Seen together, with little extra distraction, one would be forced to consider the counterpoints of placement, colour and texture between the paintings and within them. Each painting was given enough space to be clearly unique, yet each is vitally connected to the others. They are each different from one another, but so similar that divining the difference becomes the point.

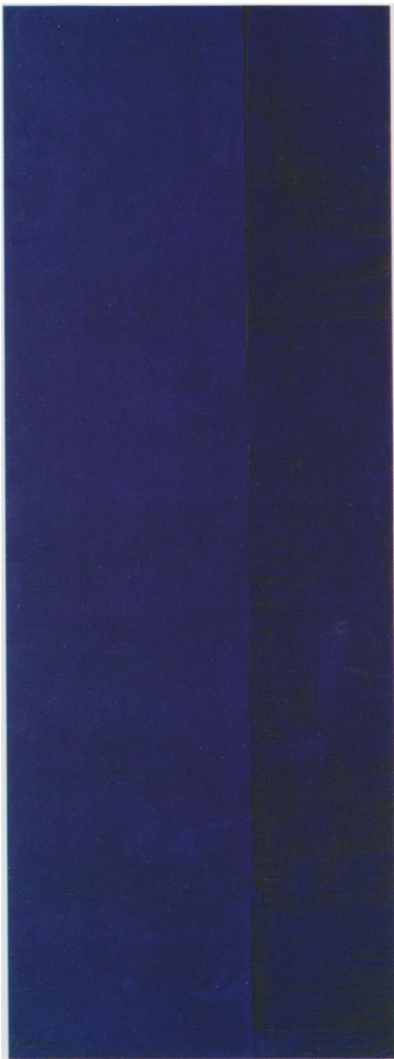
The show was a disaster. Few got it, many hated it. Nevertheless, Newman came back the following year and did the same thing, only more so. This time he hung only eight paintings, along with a strange, seemingly unfinished sculpture. One of the paintings was eighteen feet long, however, while another was only 1 5/8 inches wide. The show was an arrangement in reds and white, as well as a play of centre and edge, width and its lack. Again, viewers tended to see nothing and leave offended. Trained to look for incident and detail, they were unable to see the complexity of Newman's painted surfaces. The multiplicity of application, the layering of surface, the use of transparency and opacity, the way the paint bleeds and seeps, or is held fast by the crisp line of tape – none of this was apparent. Nor was the fact that the tape was there sometimes, and sometimes not, that paint covered tape sometimes, other times colour was revealed by the removal of the tape. The paintings were simply seen as flat and blank, an insult to the sensitivities of art lovers.

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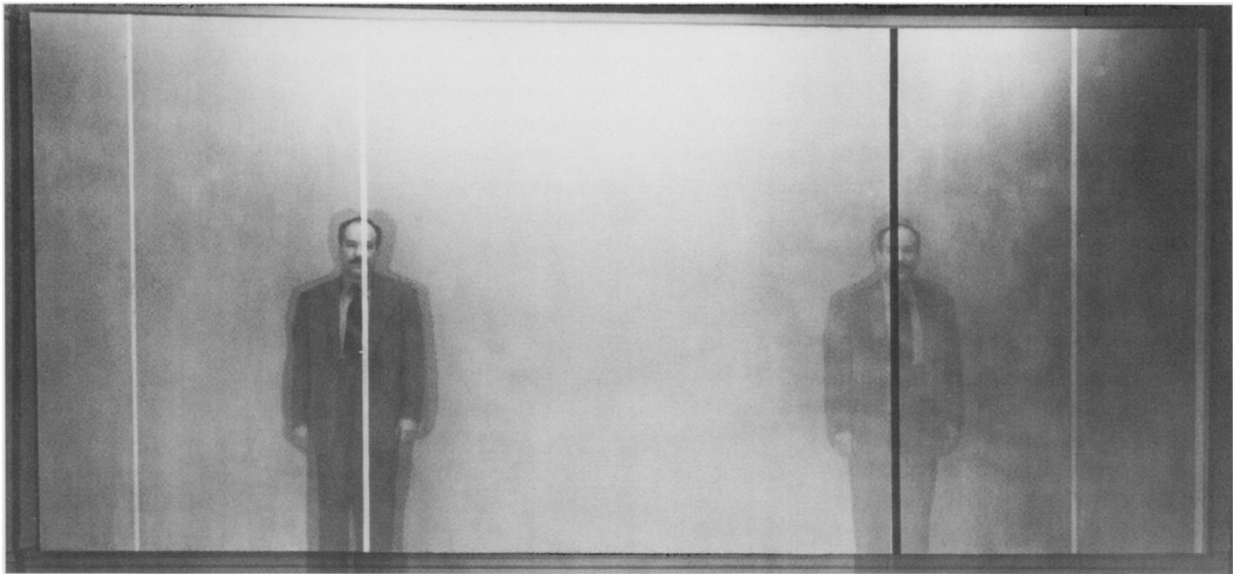
Early this summer Susan Morgan and I drove to Philadelphia to see the great Newman exhibition organised by Ann Tempkin for the Philadelphia Museum of Art (at Tate Modern, Autumn 2002). We drove down the New Jersey Turnpike, now a drearily efficient transportation axis. On the trip, we listened to the *Odyssey* on tape, read by Ian McKellan. It was quite fantastic. We were transported far beyond the roaring trucks, the worn emptiness of The Meadowlands, the belching power stations of Elizabeth, and into a dream-like space woven from the incantations of oral poetry, read by a master of the art.

Hearing that great saga proved a useful introduction to the paintings. And not just because of the general desire of the Abstract Expressionist generation to locate a mythic quality in their work. Understanding the structure of the Homeric cycle has been important to the project of modernism – think only of Joyce – by providing a model that uses repetition and improvisation in order to free narrative from anecdote and simple story-telling.

Homer's heroic cycle is the product of an oral tradition, which implies that the work, in order to be heard and understood, is structured on tropes of repetition and improvisation. A simple armature is erected and maintained through the incantatory use of formulae around which the poet improvises his tale. Whole lines, perfected over the years in performance, become part of a repertoire, describing recurring events like sacrifice, eating and drinking, the launching of ships, arming for battle. Scholars now believe that Homer's composition of the *Odyssey* extended over many years. Episodes from the journeys – the tale of the Cyclops or of Circe, for example, or, from the return to Ithaca, the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus, or the final battle in the hall – would be honed to perfection in oral performance. Over the years the poet would combine these episodes, with the overall idea of a complete work emerging as the parts are assembled. Towards the end of this process he may have then used the new technology of writing, to produce a text, which then allowed for the final edit, the addition of refining detail and final gloss. The story is thus something to be understood as an encompassing edifice, not as a



Barnett Newman, *Ulysses*, 1952, oil on canvas, 337cm x 127cm. The Menil Collection, Houston



Barnett Newman embedded in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, at the Betty Parson Gallery, 1951.
 Photograph by Hans Namuth

cliffhanger. The listeners enjoy the whole unfolding of the work, and are not simply looking to find out what happened next.

The lesson for the modernist artist was: get past the small confines of story into the bigger realm of subject matter.

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Which brings us back to Newman. The show in Philadelphia, after a quick inspection of early work, hit its stride with restagings of the Parsons shows. Then came astonishing rooms of blue, all painted between 1951 and 1953, followed by another series of aqua paintings. One of the blue paintings is called *Ulysses* – a tall, imposing painting, eleven feet high. The verticality delivers an explosion of vision after the expansions and contractions of the previous years. It is painted in ultramarine, cobalt blue and black, with a sliver of white and fragments of tape creating the dividing line. On the left, the larger rectangle has a mottled, watery effect, while the right side, with its horizontal brush strokes, seems denser and more present. The painting is a monolith, yet the dynamic between the two parts is unstable, with the painting threatening to peel asunder as we look.

Around the time of his third and fourth shows, in 1958 and 1959, when he recapitulated the first two and introduced a few of these later blue paintings, Newman began work on what was to develop into a series. This series, worked on intermittently over eight years, came to be called *Stations of the Cross*. In terms of Newman's work as an entirety, the series works as the play within the play, in which we see an encapsulation of the work as a whole, a reduction to its essence. A theme is stated by the use of the title, a reference to a liturgical narrative and an art-historical tradition; but the paintings are non-iconographical. The meaning of the whole develops from the collective presence of the work, not from the artist's ability to render absent events or values as in traditional religious paintings. As the group was first installed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1966, the paintings were arranged on the first ramp and in the offset space called the High Gallery. As a result of this hang, the kind of linear reading often imposed by the Guggenheim's ramp is interrupted. The paintings could be seen, and indeed demanded to be seen, from various points of view – from below, from above, and from across the Rotunda. This multi-faceted viewing allowed for a syncopated view that reiterated the ultimate stasis envisaged in the work. The rhythms first established in the two exhibitions at Parsons – the rhythms of colour, line and form – are here reduced to line.

Stations of the Cross is a very austere piece, a muted orchestration of whites and blacks and raw canvas. It is an arrangement of fourteen canvases, all approximately the same size, but not all the same material:

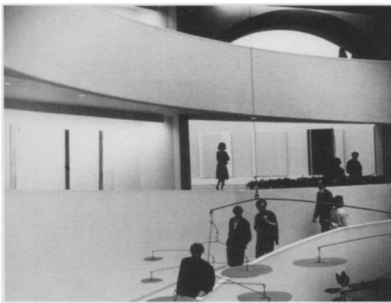
some use oil paint, some magna or acrylic. In them one senses a deliberate confrontation with chaos. The work is orderly and solemn, yet the order is intuited and often threatens to collapse in upon itself. It is built of subtle shifts and abrupt changes. A progression is implied, but not delivered. An understanding of the structure develops over time, as the viewer looks, eyes moving back and forth across the space of the exhibition. One is struck by both the likeness and the distinctness of and between each painting and also by the hammer-blow signatures, again the same, yet different in each. This signature, annoying in its specific lack of grace, deflates the grandiosity of the religious theme. For in the end, the piece is not about a bible story, it is not an abstract illustration of Christ's walk down the Via Dolorosa, but a reiteration of the final cry of alienation and abandonment. More, it is a cry from the heart of the artist from deep within a body of work that has deliberately eschewed the easy communicative gambits of conventional modern art.

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I've been quoted as saying, 'I like boring things'. Well, I said it and meant it. But that doesn't mean I'm not bored by them. Of course, what I think is boring must not be the same as what other people think is, since I could never stand to watch all the most popular action shows on TV, because they're essentially the same plots and the same shots and the same cuts over and over again. Apparently, most people love watching the same basic thing, as long as the details are different. But I'm just the opposite: if I'm going to sit and watch the same thing I saw the night before, I don't want it to be essentially the same – I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.

Andy Warhol⁶

The art of the past twenty years or so has often seemed in headlong flight from the astounding severity of the likes of Newman or Warhol, even when invoking their names. The discipline of looking, and looking again, seems alien in a cultural landscape that values the speediest edit, the quickest take. There has been a kind of impatient reaction against difficulty and, instead, we are mostly treated to instant replay one-liners. We appear to be trapped by an anxiety about meaning and its discontents, a fear in the face of apparent nothingness. We wonder what to look at, what to do with our bodies, eyes and hands, where to place the activity of our minds.



View of Newman's *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1966.
Photograph by Robert Murray

Of course this is only partly true; I am caught in the same negative glow that concerns me. Indeed, that glow has been an important aspect of my work during this same period. I am, no doubt, part of the problem. And yet there have been significant attempts to continue the work of representing the reality of life, without betraying the truth of it in the comforting codes of anecdote and cute game-playing. There has been the challenge of the allegorical discourse of appropriation, the argument that language is a visual system, not to tell stories, but to point to how stories are told. The discourse on originality and repetition still gathers momentum. I hope the following issues of *Afterall* will see further exploration of what has become of these and other efforts to make art worth looking at.

I want to end with a final word from Newman, astonishing in its hopefulness. Who could make a claim like this today? Let us hope there are many.

...if my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism. Because to the extent that my painting was not an arrangement of objects, not an arrangement of spaces, not an arrangement of graphic elements, was instead an open painting ... to that extent I thought, and I still believe, that my work in terms of its social impact does denote the possibility of an open society.'

6 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol 60s*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1980.

7 Barnett Newman, 'Interview with Emile de Antonio', 1970, reprinted in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings*, ed. John P. O'Neill, UC Press, Berkeley, 1992.