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INTRODUCTION

“BARNEY”

Here. A place in the world. Proof that one exists. Barnett Newman spent a lifetime searching for confirmation of a simple idea.

After World War II, in various places around the world, there occurred a moment when a small number of artists were experimenting with paintings that were startling: more psychologically fraught, more abstract, on bigger canvases marked with signature motifs and gestures. One of the artists looked at an almost entirely uninflected field of paint, inscribed it with one vertical, and realized that it said all he wanted to say. “Here I am.” Just at the point when the culture was ready to accept as art something previously unimaginable, Barnett Newman stood poised as the person with the audacity to create it.

For fifty years, his example remained a touchstone for artists. “Barney,” as he was universally known, seemed unshakably installed in the most elite room of the pantheon of 20th-century American artists. For much of that time he was “widely thought of,” wrote the esteemed critic David Sylvester, “as the greatest painter to have emerged since the Second World War,”¹ and even now, in a radically recast history, scores of artists in each generation that followed his cite him as influential in one way or another—formally or philosophically, as a maker or as a model; an “ideal.” His works, often given pride of place in major museums all over the world, democratically deliver a heart-stopping experience to any viewers willing to let down their guards, to abandon preconceptions or defenses or rapid expectations, and give themselves over to the encounter. Though some pieces are among the largest paintings produced in the period in which he worked, even the small ones—as small as an inch and a half wide—can make a viewer feel the same being-penetrating aura that is felt in the presence of a primeval natural vista, a colossal remnant of an ancient civilization, or an individual soul in meditation: a *place* in the world, both a mystery and a metaphysical fact, that inspires in the sympathetic collaborator what the artist called the recognition of “his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality, and at the same time . . . connection.” Not every artist feels as exalted a calling. Yet, what higher ambition could an artist have? What other ambition would be worth pursuing?

This was the corner that Newman backed himself into, less by design—psychologically, he had no choice—than by standards, doubts, and superego. That he got where he was headed—eventually—is the story everyone learns at the Museum of Modern Art or the Stedelijk, the National Gallery or the Reina Sofia, Tate, Pompidou, or Metropolitan museums. But how—the particular labyrinth that he navigated—is something else. Often he would tell people, “it’s only after man knows *where* he is that he can ask himself ‘who am I?’ and ‘where am I going?’” Newman faced down these questions daily, and answered them. On the journey, he created a “character”

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with a vitality, style, and charisma that, while belying his turmoil, enabled him to find his way.

Everybody who ever met him in the 1950s and '60s has a Barnett Newman story that is related with delight and a smile, charmed by the opportunity to recall the dapper, avuncular and loquacious, perpetual presence. (Barney would attend the opening of an envelope, said Andy Warhol.) These stories have been passed down with surprising consistency—if not accuracy—to later generations of those inclined to talk knowingly about New York art or artists. He ran for mayor of New York City (how bold). He taught himself Yiddish so he could read the Anarchist newspapers (how committed). He sued fellow artist and friend, Ad Reinhardt (how appalling). He said, “If my painting were properly understood, it would mean the end of state capitalism.” He said, “Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds.” He stopped painting and “disappeared” after his second, poorly received show. He tried to make a living by playing the horses. He took on the esteemed art historian Erwin Panofsky in a battle over Latin grammar, and *won*. He designed a synagogue in the form of a baseball stadium. He, a Jew, shocked—shocked!—the cultural establishment by redefining a trope as canonical as any representation in history: the Stations of the Cross.

Most of the stories have their source in two biographical monographs that Thomas Hess, the editor of *Art News* magazine, wrote in 1969 and 1970. By that time, Hess, who had been the devil incarnate—“sinister” and “Stalinic”²—to Barney in the 1950s, the respected authority who threw every obstacle in his path, had become not just a champion of the artist, but an intimate, a pal, and adorer. And so the assumption is made that whatever appeared in his books had the blessing of Barney, and thus was true in substance and specifics.

And this was perfectly appropriate: Barnett Newman, a haberdasher's son, fanatical about tailoring, insisted on inhabiting a bespoke world, made to his measure. “Barney preconceived Barney Newman,” William Rubin, the late scholar and director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Painting and Sculpture, said almost twenty years after the painter's death. “That is, the man I knew didn't simply paint these pictures. The pictures were painted by a painter conceived by the man I knew He conceived what Barney Newman should look like, what Barney Newman should do, and what he should not do.”³ It wasn't sufficient to be the maker of paintings that have come to be acknowledged as almost perfectly embodying and reflecting their time, the art works that, for many, crystallized the statement that in retrospect seemed to be required in America in the 1950s and '60s. Everything about those paintings—the way they could be discussed, described, handled, and sold—and especially the man who made them, was to be expertly fit, sometimes shoe-horned, to his specifications. In this way Newman, with either instinct or pre-science, created during his lifetime something that had previously taken centuries to develop: a coherent avatar—the congruent, un-parsable artist-art-mythology. If this wasn't unique during the postwar years—think Pollock or de Kooning—it was uniquely self-conscious, with enduring implications.

Barney was, eponymously, the "new man" (like Henry James's Christopher), a name to which, when he was about 15 or 16, he added a blessing by attaching as his first—or sometimes middle—name "Benedict" (or "Baruch"), possibly under the influence of an infatuation with the godfather of apostate Jewish intellectuals, Spinoza, possibly because in Genesis, God told Abraham he would make his name a blessing. By that age, Barney, born in 1905, could be forgiven for judging himself blessed, having, as a first-generation citizen, experienced in its wondrous immediacy New York's momentum and progress at the beginning of the 20th century—in housing, education, transportation, communication—and, linked to that, the rise of his family's fortunes. In this new world, this "America," he not only understood that anything was possible, he refused to accept that anything was *impossible*. The immigrant's son would run for mayor of the country's largest city; he would challenge, on intellectual terms, a variety of authorities high and low and personally engineer public notice for it; he would correspond with luminaries in fields that ranged wide; and he would conceive of, and become recognized as, the "artist" he always felt himself to be—one of a tiny number of those who invented (in the public's imagination) the most "American," the most *not-immigrant*, art.

But even while he identified with the progressive, he idiosyncratically wore the habit of the conservative—literally: immaculately tailored tweeds and hound's-tooth checks, silk bow ties, brushed fedoras or squire's weekend caps, brigadier's mustaches—and a *démodé* monocle. Neither passively nor actively would he accept standard operating procedure; customizing was his forte, from his name and his image (the monocle became, in effect, a trademark), to Jesuitical, anomalous interpretations of everyone else's actions or words, or experiences (baseball, for example). He developed uniquely "Newman" definitions of common terms: "color," "subject," "scale," "shape," "series," "variation," "uniqueness," "drawing," "painting." The things and concepts that artists considered daily for hundreds of years were, to Barney's mind, generally misconceived. And he could tell you why.

You could easily understand how a person born at the beginning of a new century, to parents only recently emigrated from the "Old World" to an America that itself was being born as modern society, a world in which almost everything was different and filled with possibility, would feel propellant ambition to create a shining self in that world. But what form would that self take, and in what arena? Ultimately, as the story goes, on his 43rd birthday (the lateness was always to rankle other artists of his generation) he found the work that he was, he often said, "compelled" to do.

"One of the things that Barney Newman basically decided was that you have an image," said Rubin. "Decided" or "compelled" (as Barney would say)? At a particular moment in American art, everything turned on that question: "compelled" was authentic, "decided" was counterfeit, feigned. And then, ten years later, it didn't seem to matter so much. The next generation wanted him, learned from him, claimed him. Was Barney an aesthetic freeloader or a seer? A cynic among his peers, or too advanced for them to see? Was he, as Sylvester thought, "The Ugly Duckling": "the character who appears on the scene when a member of a different species is expected"?

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“All the artists of [his] generation talked about ‘my image.’ And what they meant by ‘my image’ was the picture that established your style and that people got to know you by If you repeat the same thing enough, the public and the art public identify that with conviction: that this man must have had a vision because nobody would sit there day after day painting this kind of picture unless it was really part of them in some way. I don’t think that Barney’s repetition of [the] zips was just a strategy. I think that Barney had a vision. But that the vision was also a function of a strategy. In other words, he might have had other visions. And cancelled them out. Because this one, he felt, was sufficiently him, and that it was possible for him to grow in it. And that it’s better not to have too many visions.”

Rubin was talking about Barney’s vivid presence among artists, and the mythology of an iconic, revelatory, self-contained, and abiding art. But Rubin was on to something even more interesting, something that emerges after piecing together historical evidence that significantly torques the official autobiography. The familiar Barnett Newman, Harold Rosenberg’s artist of “Spiritual Grandeur,” was not created suddenly out of whole cloth in 1948. He was in no sense a fraud, nothing significant is exactly untrue, and he was by no means cynical about his art or the mid-20th-century notion of art’s high purpose. On the contrary, so confirmed was he in the conviction that art-conceiving and -making was nearly sacramental, that he was virtually paralyzed by the calling. And yet, he was certain he had been “called” and spent over half of his adult life consciously incubating, cerebrating, preparing himself for the act. There’s no evidence that he was motivated by any crass desire for money or fame. Rather, while he was producing the art that he believed was necessary, he also created a creator that he believed was worthy of that art: a thoughtful, savvy, and disciplined unity in the service of his vision. It was almost in concept Baroque theater, an auteur-encompassing *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He may have had the not entirely rare (among artists) qualities of grandiosity and narcissism, but he imagined them into a cohesive vision of an art and an artist that seemed to be exactly what his culture called for, as much in the early years of his career, when he was underappreciated—when the art community required someone to exist “beyond the pale” to be able to lionize those just inside it—as in the later years when he became the next generation’s favorite father figure.

Thomas Hess, Barney’s Boswell, certainly had an inkling of his role. Writing an anecdote about a time, in 1959, that Barney visited Meyer Schapiro’s famous Columbia seminar on Abstract Expressionism, Hess checked the facts with Schapiro himself. “If that’s the way Barney remembers it,” Schapiro said with a smile, “that’s the way to write it.”⁴

Endless words have been written “revising” Barney’s contribution from different points of view, every writer selectively dependent on incomplete views: Newman said this, or Newman said that (or, didn’t say that). Formalist or expressionist? Kabbalist or existentialist? Minimalist or American romantic? Much has been made by critics of Barney’s Anarchism, and it’s understandable: *he* made much of his Anarchism, attributing his fluency in Yiddish to his hunger to read Anarchist journals, and

writing, toward the end of his life, an introduction to the memoirs of Prince Peter Kropotkin. But although his sympathy was genuine—in *his fashion*—his adherence was belied by the way in which he spent the first half of his life aggressively working *within* the system. Verbally challenging it yes, but not executing an end run around it. (This was something Barney himself winkingly acknowledged: “The glory of knocking the other fellow down [in football] involves too many chances of being knocked down yourself. That is why we always preferred baseball. There, at least, you can slide.”⁵) Retrospectively, in 1968, when students the world over were taking to the streets, it was safe for Barney to write, as the foreword to Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs*, “The True Revolution Is Anarchist!”, and satisfying for him to speak to young activists. At the same time, he saw the Broadway production of *Hair* over and over and extolled the Dionysian in so much of the youth culture, but it didn’t make him a hippie. Regarding his political pacifism—again, he was true to it in his fashion; life would have been so improved *if* it were possible to live that way. He knew what he believed, but he was too much involved in and too buffeted by real life as it existed to be philosophically faithful. From the internal pressure of this conflict came the outcry, came *lema sabachthani*, came his paintings.

America in the 1960s and ’70s enjoyed a good Olympian narrative for its art and artists; and so there is the mythology of Barnett Newman. On the other hand, we have the story of the man’s life. And it’s not the story of a figure inhabiting the rarefied ether of art-historical Valhalla, but of a vivid human being with a ravenous appetite for experience and agency, embedded in a specific time and place in the world. The art he created, of categorical contraction, was not the antithesis of the life he lived but a response to it: a kind of intense reduction, a black-hole compression, a *demi-glance* concentration, that consolidated, compacted, and consumed the multifariousness of that life in a statement of *presence*: “something, where if you stand in front of it, you know you’re there.”⁶



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Note: Page numbers in italic type indicate illustrations. Barnett Newman's life and work are distributed among several main entries beginning with "Newman, Barnett": architecture project for a synagogue; art and the art world; drawings; insults and wrongs felt and addressed by; life; paintings; prints; sculpture; statements and theories about art; studios; watercolors; writings.

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