

Some Thoughts on a Sculpture
by Barnett Newman

Standing at the crosswalk, I looked at the obelisk whose silhouette, looming above the maze of traffic on Place de la Concorde, stood out sharply against the luminous grey of an autumn sky. I was on my way to the Louvre. Flashing beyond the obelisk, eastward, was the glass of the pyramid that provides access to the museum. I had to think of *Broken Obelisk*, that astounding sculpture by Barnett Newman in which the tip of an inverted broken obelisk is poised on the tip of a pyramid.

fig. 1

Imagine life as a pilgrimage. Man as a traveller, a walker. He is headed somewhere. Lodged in his mind is an imaginary map that he uses to orient himself. That helps him to determine his location and to find his way. It is baggage that gives direction to his life. The map has been shaped by the time and place in which he was born, the qualities and the origins that he has been given. Of just as much importance are the events that he encounters along the way, as well as the fellow pilgrims with whom he walks for brief or longer periods. That baggage is memory. Aside from names of places, people and events, there can also be artworks on this map. It can be seen as a mental diagram, like that painted by René Daniëls in the form of a geometric tree. Against a yellow background, white and light-blue blossoms sprouted from its still leafless branches. The spring bloom is depicted by titles of his previous paintings, which collectively make up a network of meanings that share a common root. In another painting the branches have become jetties in a harbor where paintings lie anchored like ships. By this the painter Daniëls seems to be saying that art, not only that of predecessors but even one's own, generates art. Gradually the map takes shape and gives rise to insight – a kind of insight that provides life with meaning and coherence. That can suddenly be noticed at times.

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fig. 2

The entrance to the Louvre was designed by the Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei during the early 1980s. Pei is the owner of two very narrow paintings by Barnett Newman. These are part of a group of highly sculptural 'shaped canvases' from 1950, which heralded the freestanding sculptures of the 1960s – *Broken Obelisk* (1963–67) being the most striking of all. The work is made of

Cor-Ten steel, measures roughly seven-and-a-half meters in height and has been produced in an edition of three. One stands in front of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, another in New York – in the MoMA's sculpture garden – and a third is currently on view outside the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The sculpture is a simple geometric construction of triangles and a beam. The archetypal symbolism of its elements and the act of inverting as well as breaking have resulted, however, in a dramatic twist.

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I couldn't avoid the impression that Pei had thought of *Broken Obelisk* when conceiving his design for the entrance to the Louvre – that his decision to create a pyramid in the vicinity of an obelisk had been influenced more by this mysterious sculpture than by any reference to ancient Egyptian culture. Via Pei's entrance, now linked with Newman, I made my way into the museum, to the room with nineteenth-century French Romanticists. Newman visited the Louvre in 1968. One of the paintings that struck him most profoundly was

fig. 3 Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. Its composition is based on two shifting triangles. One triangle is formed by a group of castaways on the raft; the other by a mast and its sail. Not only the immense size of the work (among the largest in the museum's collection) and the drama of this shipwreck, but the composition, too, must have sparked off something in Newman. On returning to his studio, he had two canvases stretched in the shape of triangles. This was the first time that he deviated from the rectangular format.¹ In the one painting, titled

fig. 4 *Chartres* (1968–69) he introduced a vertical division of the two red and two yellow planes with three bands of dark blue. The other was divided into two black triangles, between which a narrow red stripe appears slightly off center.

fig. 5 He gave this the title *Jericho* (1969).

Although Newman wrote a great deal and was a passionate speaker, he spoke about his work only in guarded terms. His writings are generally philosophical and contemplative in character; but they do focus on specific formal aspects of his painting. The concern for words is moreover evident from the importance that he attached to ascribing titles. There is an entire network of names given to

paintings, all covertly interrelated. Newman was very cautious about attributing meaning to his artworks. On the one hand, as abstract contemporary works, they needed no explanation to reflect the phenomenological aspects. In this respect his work shared an affinity with the Minimal Art generation, which regarded the painting as an object that refers only to itself: "What you see is what you see." But on the other hand, the material was supposed to bring about a metaphysical experience on the part of the viewer. To Newman, the sublime lay with the creation of art in order to become acquainted with 'the Self', as he put it. By looking at the work of art as a person, the viewer comes to know himself by way of the other, the artwork. As does Newman himself, being the first viewer. Though Newman made use of a purely abstract language of colored lines and planes, the origins of many titles are quite specific and can be traced back to his Jewish identity. For years his work was considered from the perspective of formalist modernism, partly due to the influential critic Clement Greenberg. Since the retrospective held in 2002, however, it has been pointed out that the painting, as an object, cannot be dissociated with the intricate and refined network of connotations suggested in titles and through visual rhyme.²

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In a statement he simply says the following about *Jericho*: "The title *Jericho* explains itself."³ That could be interpreted as an obvious refusal to elaborate on it. What you see is what you see, and what you read is right there. But Newman regarded his paintings as people who 'speak' for themselves. His friend and biographer Thomas Hess established a phonetic link between the painting *Jericho*, likewise the name of the biblical city whose walls fell, and the name Géricault⁴, the painter of *The Raft of the Medusa*. Hess moreover wonders whether it might be far-fetched to trace the origins of the color black in Newman's painting back to the dark-skinned man poised at the tip of the raft. Whatever the case, it is a wonder that – merely by way of its color, its form and its title – a simple image of a triangular black surface, with a red stripe running through it, can evoke a world of meanings. A world that goes back, via art history, to legends about faith and hope.

As far as the color in the painting *Jericho* is concerned, I see yet another connection. A black plane containing a red stripe does emerge at an earlier point in Newman's body of work, namely in the small painting *Joshua* (1950). In the Old Testament book of the same name, *Joshua* (the successor to Moses) leads the people of Israel, after their forty years of desert wanderings, into the Promised Land by conquering the city Jericho. The prostitute Rahab, who offers a hiding place to the Israelite spies, hangs a scarlet cord from her window as a signal and thereby manages to save herself and her family from death. This red cord represents an important moment in the history of the people of Israel. It seems as though Newman has wanted the painting *Jericho* to relate, in terms of color and form, to *Joshua*. This is why the work assumes, for those who wish to see it, an added layer of meaning. Through the name Joshua, which means 'salvation', the moment of rescue for the castaways shown in *The Raft of the Medusa* resounds with the story of Rahab and the fall of Jericho. Géricault's portrayal of a tragedy which actually took place has been given, albeit in very concealed manner, a biblical parallel in Newman's painting.

fig. 6

The paintings *Chartres* and *Jericho* have many similarities: their shape, size, their 'French' references. Each has been named after a place and represents an idea. But the characters of the two works are entirely different. *Jericho* evokes the image of a black sail, the vertical just off center resembling a mast.⁵ *Chartres* stands proudly, held up by three bands of dark blue. They serve as a sturdy armature within a symmetrical order, in which the red surfaces at either side buttress the yellow surfaces in the middle. The viewer can make a connection with Gothic architecture and with the cathedral's famous stained-glass windows, which allow beams of red, yellow and blue light to cut through the cathedral. These primary colors also let him seek a connection with the series *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, Newman's comment on Mondrian's ideas about color.⁶ The vertical orientation of the painting's composition also lends itself to a comparison with Mondrian's frontally situated church towers of Zeeland. In the previously mentioned statement, Newman speaks about "the evenness of northern light" in the painting *Chartres* – "a light without shadows." In relation

to Mondrian's planes of bright color and black lines, Newman's remark about light and shadows might be quite significant. His initial criticism of the Dutch painter may have changed in the aftermath of his trip to Northern Europe. On contemplating Mondrian and Newman, I come back once again to that strange sculpture of triangles pointing upward and downward.

Newman said that the sculpture *Broken Obelisk* is about life. To this he adds, "...and I hope that I have transformed its tragic content into a glimpse of the sublime."⁷ His sculptures lead to even greater speculation as to the content than his paintings do. They prompt us to ask questions. Art is not a form of logic, however, not some code that has to be deciphered. It arises from the artist's imagination by way of intuition. Being the first to see what has been produced, he himself is surprised by it. The process of insight comes later. What the maker has learned from the work of art is reflected in the title.

Broken Obelisk refers to an ancient Egyptian culture in which the idea of death had great importance. A pyramid is not only a pharaoh's tomb; it also symbolizes a stairway by which he can ascend to heaven. An obelisk is a monument placed in front of a temple and symbolizes, among other things, a ray of sunlight. In our culture obelisks can be found at burial sites – along with cypresses, which are similar in terms of line and proportion – as well as in modern cities such as Paris and Washington. The Book of Exodus tells the story of Moses, who leads the Israelites away from Egypt and to the new Promised Land by crossing the Sea of Reeds and the rust-colored sand of the desert. It is not unrealistic to see the triangular works, both the sculpture and the paintings, within this context. They could even be interpreted from a Zionist perspective. Newman's father was a committed Zionist. In 1967, the year in which the sculpture was completed, an Egyptian attack on Israel was averted during the Six Day War. Also worth mentioning is the broader political climate of that time which led to protest demonstrations and civil rights movements. There were a few critics who discerned a connection between these events of the day and *Broken Obelisk*.⁸ Here the line of reasoning had to do with a belief in the reversal of fate, that the

impossible can take logic by surprise. In that sense *Broken Obelisk* is a moral image. Newman's art was, to a great extent, influenced by World War II and particularly by the Holocaust. His first prototypical painting, *Onement I* from 1948 – the small reddish brown canvas with a scarlet stripe running through the center of it – initially bore the title *Atonement*. In Judaism this has the connotation of a fresh start, a tabula rasa.⁹ Mondrian's developed style has its origins in World War I. When faced with the collapse of human spirit, with violence, ugliness and indifference, these two artists manage to come up with an act of defiance through their succinct, abstract and idealistic art. The inverted broken obelisk on top of the pyramid can also be seen as a symbol of victory over death.¹⁰ As a symbol of death, the obelisk is broken and turned upside down, literally toppled. Directed downward, the point of this shaft touches the very apex of the upwardly directed pyramid. A sublime moment: one that actually could last only a fraction of a second. Heaven meets earth.

fig. 7

This makes me think of Mondrian's triptych *Evolution* (1910) which, unlike Newman's sculpture, is more the illustration of an idea. In this he attempts to portray a development of spiritual enlightenment and insight. Here, once again, triangles play a significant role, specifically above the shoulders of the meditating woman. On the left panel they appear as hearts of the red amaryllis, pointing downward; in the center they point upward, and on the right they have synthesized into the form of a Star of David. For Mondrian, at that time, this work signified an attempt to render ideas, fostered by theosophy, about oppositions of the male and the female, of heaven and earth. These have to do with a gradual development of unifying oppositions, which ultimately leads to a permanent state of enlightenment.

fig. 8

In Newman's art, on the other hand, the 'moment' was the key focus: the moment between union and division. That is, in fact, the function and connotation of the 'zip', the vertical stripe which constitutes the leitmotif of his work. In a formal sense it connects and divides the surfaces of the painting like a zipper. But in a more profound way it represents a division and connection

between the profane and the sacred, the secular and the religious. This is the realm with which Newman's universal art is concerned. He commits himself to establishing a connection between the modern painter and the scribe. His cautiousness stems from a wish to allow the two areas to remain intact, to be reconciled, within an artwork. The great strength of his extreme art lies with this very aspect. The more remote the opposites, the greater the tension placed on the span that connects those extremes. And the greater the emotion experienced by the viewer.

Newman aimed to incorporate the great philosophical issues into a contemporary language. His interest in Michelangelo can be understood from that perspective. Newman saw Michelangelo as a model, an innovator, who was able to give shape to the Renaissance ideal, which sought a connection between the culture of classical antiquity and that of Christianity. Perhaps that famous image *The Creation of Adam* was also on his mind – that eternal moment of the two fingers, a breath away from touching each other. In the article 'The Sublime is Now', from 1948, Newman redefines art history according to his own views. Michelangelo, he argues, made a cathedral out of man (Christ). Now, he goes on to say, we are making cathedrals out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. "The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history."¹¹ For the articulation of this abstract expressionist creed, Newman drew, to some extent, on the Jewish tradition from which he came. The anarchist Newman was not interested in following that tradition, but in employing it as a strategy, with new insights, for the renewal of art.

After the 1960s the decided tone, the manifesto, subsided in discussions about art. A general 'anything goes' relativism emerged and has continued to predominate to this day. By way of travel, reproductions and the Internet, we have easy access to artworks from the past. Today's huge quantity of information can lead to confusion, but it enables us, on the other hand, simply to look, to contemplate and to make distinctions. In this world the works of prophetic

fig. 9

artists from the twentieth century – those of Mondrian and Newman, but also of Malevich and Judd – remain our shining beacons. Together they make up a constellation of simple timeless images, charged with universal ideal meaning which progresses through the course of time like a steady line. Still available to the artist, as long as he relies on his own intuition and experience, are oceans of potential for developing that line and extending it.

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From the opposite shore I took in Hong Kong's skyline. Every evening, after dark, the big banks were putting on a light show. Lines of colored neon light flickered along the edges of densely built office towers, designed by famous architects. Together they formed an imposing organ of light, and within this whole the characteristics of the individual buildings could still be discovered. I was particularly focused on Pei's recently designed Bank of China, of which his father (perhaps not entirely coincidentally) was once director. That building stood out by way of its singularly figurative-looking form. A slender angular tower rejuvenated itself at mid height with diagonally rising surfaces, as though it were a tree ravaged by natural disaster, the trunk being all that remained. Across this sculptural form lay a grid of diagonal lines, similar to that of the glass pyramid in Paris. Along these lines, downward and upward, neon light flashed on and off at irregular intervals. Though it may have been my imagination, I happened to discern, once again, Newman's pyramid and obelisk in this building. Now, however, it had fused into a single form, as though it had been struck by lightning. The sublime moment was confirmed by a divine ray of white light.



fig. 1
Barnett Newman looking at his sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963–67) outside the foundry that fabricated it, Lippincott, Inc., North Haven, CT, 1967 (photo: Barnett Newman Foundation)



fig. 2
René Daniels, *Spring Blossom*, 1987
oil on linen, 100 x 120 cm
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam



fig. 3
Théodore Géricault,
The Raft of the Medusa, 1819
oil on linen, 500 x 750 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

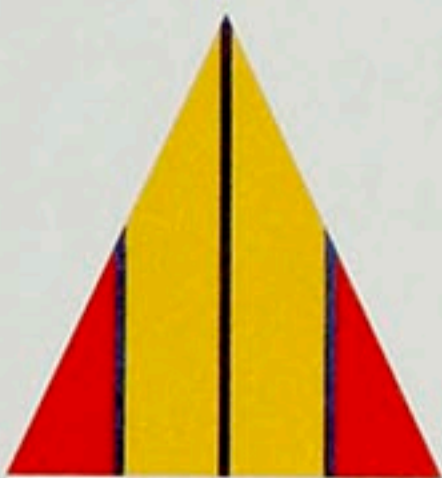


fig. 4
Barnett Newman, *Chartres*, 1969
acrylic on canvas, 300 x 285 cm
private collection



fig. 5
Barnett Newman, *Jericho*, 1968–1969
acrylic on canvas, 285 x 265 cm
National Museum of Modern Art,
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



fig. 6
Barnett Newman, *Joshua*, 1950
oil on linen, 90 x 62,5 cm
private collection



fig. 7
Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948
oil on linen, 69 x 41 cm
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York



fig. 8
Piet Mondriaan, *Evolution*, 1910
oil on linen, triptych, 178 x 84 cm,
184 x 87 cm, 178 x 84 cm
Gemeentemuseum Den Haag



fig. 9
Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*,
1508–1512, the Sixtine Chapel,
480 x 230 cm
Vatican, Rome (detail)

Notes

1. During the construction of *Broken Obelisk*, when the steel plates of the pyramid had not yet been welded together and were leaning against the wall, Newman wondered whether a triangle could also function as the basis for a painting, as a vehicle for a subject. Could the image rise above its peculiar triangular form? See: Barnett Newman. *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Edited by John P. O'Neill, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1992, p. 194.
2. See article by Yves-Alain Bois, 'Here to there and back', in *Artforum*, March 2002 and Franz Meyer, *The Stations of the Cross*, Richter Verlag, 2005.
3. Barnett Newman. *Selected Writings*, p. 194
4. Phonetic rhyme occurs with some frequency in Newman's titles. The title *Here* sounds like the word 'hear', which refers to the call of Moses at the burning bush.
5. The association with a sail is not an isolated occurrence. After his death in 1970, an unfinished triangular painting bearing the tentative title *The Sail* was found in his studio.
6. In this title Newman expressed his criticism of Mondrian. He believed that Mondrian had hijacked the primary colors, had robbed them of emotion and used them as dogma for an idea. (See Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings*, p. 192)
7. See Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1978, p. 77.
8. See Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, p. 77. Later, on being placed in front of the Rothko Chapel, *Broken Obelisk* was dedicated to Martin Luther King.
9. The tabula rasa can only take place after the covering of sin ('the wound'). This occurs during the feast of Yom Kippur, when the priest sprinkles ram's blood on the cover of the ark: a ritual that goes back to the smearing of blood on the doorpost during the eve of the exodus from Egypt, which would cause the angel of death to pass by the door of the Israelite. This is the origin of the feast called Pesach, which means 'pass over'. Newman translated these ideas in his paintings by covering the wound, the 'zip', the unpainted canvas, with tape (a bandage) and then smearing it with red paint (blood). Newman mentions in his essay 'Revolution, Place and Symbol', which can be read in the report of The First Congress on Religion, Architecture and the Visual Arts in New York and Montreal in 1967, that Pesach lies at the heart of his aesthetics. See also, in relation to this, the article 'Read Full Text' by Joseph Semah, in his catalogue for the exhibition at Museum van Bommel van Dam in 2006.
10. To the series *The Stations of the Cross*, from the early 1960s, Newman added a fifteenth station called *Be II*, also titled *Resurrection*. For all of the works by Barnett Newman, see: *A Catalogue Raisonné*, The Barnett Newman Foundation, Yale University Press, 2004.
11. See Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings*, pp. 172/173.