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Annika Marie

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The Most Radical Act:

Harold Rosenberg, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt

Committee:

Ann Reynolds, Supervisor

Richard Shiff, Supervisor

Michael Charlesworth

Linda Henderson

Paul Mattick

Cherise Smith

The Most Radical Act:

Harold Rosenberg, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt

by

Annika Marie, B.A., M.A.

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The Most Radical Act:

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The problematic of art and politics, of cultural form and ideological motive, the political dimension of the aesthetic and vice versa, is at the root of many of studies of post-war American art. Depending on the author, this is the moment of the avant-garde's complete depoliticization, or its politicization in the wrong direction; it is the moment when emancipatory politics is lost from art, or when it simply merges, along with art, into the rest of everyday life. This dissertation addresses this problem as well, but it suggests a vantage point and an example in which the energies of progressive Leftism at this moment are neither lost to conservative reaction nor hidden in increasingly exotic counter-cultural forms or in dense academic theorizing but staged, almost transparently, in the classic forms and traditional terms of socialist debate: anarchism vs. communism, the division of labor, self-alienation vs. self-realization, etc. The vantage point is located by the culture critic Harold Rosenberg. In the first half of this dissertation I focus on Rosenberg, particularly his concept of Action Painting. Against its common reading as referring to unbounded painterly spontaneity, I take Action Painting, informed by Marx's philosophy of action, as outlining a materialist aesthetic grappling with the outstanding conundrums of revolutionary dialectics. It is with this re-vamped conception of

Rosenberg's criticism that I frame and enter the second part of the dissertation, a sustained comparison of Barnett Newman's and Ad Reinhardt's paintings and writings. Action Painting provides the theoretical arena in which to examine these two painters's negotiations of artist and worker, art and labor, artwork and commodity, process and thing, theory and practice, freedom and necessity. It is within such a framework that I am able to indicate how political commitments and painting practices cohere in Newman's and Reinhardt's work. The socialist struggle over true revolutionary identity is here, both figured and grounded in the very act of painting, in Action Painting.

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Introduction:

Revisionist Historiography of Abstract Expressionism and the Cultural Turn in Materialist Aesthetics

The Problematic

In the late summer of 1952 Barnett Newman, speaking at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference on the conference's theme of "Aesthetics and the Artist," alluded to the "great problem of art."¹ This reference was made within the context of Newman's fiery opposition to those *professional* aestheticians—such as fellow conference attendees George Boas and Suzanne Langer—whose specialized aesthetic systems and theories, in Newman's view, were steeped in scientific pretension, paved the way for what he deemed a dangerously "irresponsible position" towards art, one which calamitously validated "lack of commitments and lack of values."² The conference itself had been described by its organizers as an opportunity to bring "distinguished artists and thinkers" together so that they might "develop better understanding between themselves in order to establish a more significant relationship between *theory and practice* [emphasis added]."³ This prospectus, as innocuous as it might seem, was precisely what riled Newman and led to his refusing to attend the conference as an "artist" but participating instead in the role of "citizen." What he rejected was the conference's very framing of the problem. To the theme of "Aesthetics and the Artist" he replied: "I consider the artist and the aesthetician to be mutually exclusive terms."

One way to misconstrue Newman's pronouncement is to take it as a rejection of the conference's stated premise of bringing theory and practice together. Such a reading depends upon one's aligning practice with the artist and theory with the aesthetician—a fairly typical presumption but one fundamentally at odds with Newman's conception of how these terms worked. It was not the union of theory and practice that Newman rejected—in fact, as I will explain later, this was an especially central preoccupation of

his. Rather the aesthete and the artist were mutually exclusive precisely because the artist, in Newman's understanding of the term, embodied this very unity of theory and practice, while the aesthete, in contrast, typified the treacherous professionalization that splits apart the theoretical and practical, exemplified, here, for Newman in 1952, by Boas and Langer with their dispassionate theories. In Newman's colorful imagery, they were "going up the mountain," "assuming this holy, theoretical attitude towards art" while "practicing aestheticians, the museum directors and newspaper critics," instrumentalize at the level of the agora the theoretical dictates sent down from the acropolis.⁴ Implicit in Newman's rejection of the conference, therefore, was criticism of the failure of others—primarily the aestheticians—to recognize the artist as figuring precisely the identity of theory and practice. Had the conference organizers understood the significance of the artist in terms closer to Newman's, the absurdity of the proposition for calling together "artists *and* [emphasis added] thinkers" to "develop better understanding between themselves in order to establish a more significant relationship between theory and practice" would have been clearly, and comically, manifest. This failure was the earmark to Newman that the great problem of art was indeed being falsely conceived.

In another lexicon, one developed out of nineteenth century class struggles, the proposed identity of theory and practice took on social revolutionary coloring and went by the appellation praxis. It came to signify, in a manner of summarizing image or master figure, the liberatory promise of socialism, as the triumphant moment of a self-realizing dialectic between self and the world, between culture and nature, between word and deed, between subject and object, between agency and structure in which individual identity would be manifestly synonymous with true humanity, an authentic sense of self. But just as praxis stood, as it were, in the role of protagonist for this old dream of reconciliation of disembodied thought and disarticulated body, it also served, just, if not more, recognizably, as antagonist as well. That is, the unity of theory and practice locates both the Desideratum of the socialist imagination as well as its central conundrum, its pivotal crisis, its mark of failure. How did one reach that state of social, humanist achievement

which is the glorious, redemptive union of theory and practice as communist utopia? Through revolutionary theory? Revolutionary practice? Furthermore, to bifurcate in this manner or even to imagine this separation—is this not analogous to Newman’s compliant? Here the great problem of humanity is being falsely conceived.

That the great problem of art, to which Newman referred, and the great problem of humanity, to which revolutionary socialism refers, share on a profound level as their image of reconciliation the dialectical one of praxis is the point from which I find discussion of the “art and politics” relation most compellingly begun. This master figure works both in the historical materialist’s enquiry into the possible forms of an emancipatory, critical-creative aesthetic and in the social historian of art’s enquiry into the ideological and political content of artistic forms. For the antithesis to praxis considered in this way is, in the modern period, from both the aesthetic and the social-political vantage-points, *labor*, human activity as alienated and marked precisely as the ruinous disunion of theory and practice. As the critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno explains, the “relations between art and human labour” are the central contradiction of modern bourgeois conceptions of art. The realm of art, the ideal practice, the mode of free self-realization, is both posited through and posited against the wider world of far from ideal productions of the work-a-day world, the necessary, the “perennial unfreedom of the whole.”⁵ Here the figure of the artist and the figure of the worker stand to be mutually misrecognized as if from separate universes rather than as dialectically intertwined facets of human activity. That the concept of artistic creation exists but that it exists in largely mystified form (a special, even superhuman agency, the largely unaccountable domain of the genius); that what has not been democratized is the figure of the artist as the figuring of the subject and object of self-realizing dialectic; that what has not yet been negated is the historically-specific idea of art as a privileged mode of self-expression for the few; that what has not been de-naturalized is this division in the quality of activity between the praxical and non-praxical—these are some of the difficulties that surface both as the tragedy of modern art and as the failure of modern socialism. To be blind to this relation, in which art passes as the estranged form by which the image of

non-estranged labor operates under the economic and productive conditions of modern capitalism is to miss something grave in both a materialist aesthetic and a socialist politic. Indeed, taken in this light, the matter of Marx's lost, or "missing," aesthetic—that volume on the aesthetic that Marx never produced, along with the ensuing debate generated around that aporia between official Soviet aesthetic programs and Western Marxism—is unexpectedly shut down. *Capital* itself becomes something of a materialist aesthetic, writ backwards, of course: the narrative of alienation played out by the worker and the commodity is the reverse script for the narrative of the freely creative self-realization of the artist and artwork.

The point is that there are moments in history that flesh this out, when something like a transparency between the artist and the worker is argued for, when critical discourse is centered around this schema of the dialectic of praxis, when the distinction "artist" and "worker" is seen as generated through the bifurcated modes of objectification of the self or subject—realization and alienation. The moment of recognition between the artist and worker that I will be concerned with in this dissertation falls within the space of the following bookends: a "thirties" bookend, captured perhaps in Irving Marantz's photograph of members of the Artists' Union in a picket line and bearing signs that read "Artists Union Jobs for All Unemployed Artists" and "We Demand the Right to Organize on Job!" (fig. 1); and a "sixties" bookend, captured perhaps in two photographs taken of Frank Stella by Hollis Frampton in 1959, one the portrait of the artist used in the exhibition catalogue for the Museum of Modern Art's (New York) "Sixteen Americans," and the second of Stella at work in his West Broadway studio (figs. 2 and 3). The space that the thirties bookend locates and delimits is one in which, under the special conditions generated by the massive economic crisis known as the Great Depression, the figure of the artist is proletarianized. Through government relief programs, artists become employed as workers—whose activity and products come to resemble common abstract labor, wage labor. These are the conditions under which something like the Artists' Union begins to make sense: artists recognizing themselves as laborers, taking on the identity of workers—an immiserated form, but of possibly revolutionary substance—but

thus in a position to work through the contradiction between “art and human labor.” The two photographs of Stella aptly indicate the termination point of this artist/worker moment associated with the thirties. In the photograph for the Museum of Modern Art catalogue Stella, at a youthful twenty-three, stands, as one critic described him, “against an Avedon-white background, wearing a button down shirt and a stockbroker’s suit. His posture was nonchalant Madison Avenue contrapposto, one hand resting casually in his pocket.”⁶ What is presented is the artist as executive, professional, businessman, upper management, and it sits in contrast to the second photograph taken of Stella at work in his studio, pictured as a laborer. Here the artist wears a T-shirt, well-worn dungarees, stands on a paint-splattered floor and faces his work surface, a canvas. With brush in hand, he is seen in the (mindless? repetitive?) process of applying one of a series of black stripes. As a pair the Stella photographs would appear to illustrate the turn from envisioning the modern artist as a figure of social emancipation by his/her association with free praxical activity, creating out of the integration of theory and practice. Where the mimesis of artist and worker spoke to possibly revolutionary ends in the thirties, the mimesis of the sixties—seen through the Stella photographs—is that of internalizing the division of labor relations. These images of Stella exemplify the contradiction and separation: he is management, he is labor; he is theory, he is practice; but missing is the motor of dialectic.

In broad strokes, the problematic of this dissertation is framed by these two moments. The preoccupations and questions that will be developed in the following chapters are generated from a nexus of concerns: the processes of recognition/misrecognition between art (artist) and labor (worker) as episodes in a dialectic of theory and practice towards the attainment of the identical subject-object of knowledge; the misrecognition by which capitalism makes a fetish of artists and artworks; the recognition by which socialism turns to an aesthetics as a framework through which to articulate social revolutionary concerns. Both “cognitions” have their place and their representatives within the period roughly demarcated by the Artists’s Union photograph and the pair of Stella photographs, and a great deal of attention has been paid to this area. That is, for the period witnessing the rise of Abstract Expressionism or the New York

School, two primary critical trends have attempted to address questions of the relationship of art and politics: a “Cold War” thesis studying how art figures within capitalism primarily as capitalism’s figuring of art; and a “Cultural Turn” thesis studying how art figures socialism, albeit, from within capitalism. Before presenting my own thesis I first will explore the arguments that have shaped this most contested terrain.

The Perfect Storm: Cold War Debates Over Base and Superstructure

In the face of the era of wars and revolutions which is drawing near, everyone will have to give an answer: philosophers, poets, painters as well as simple mortals.

Leon Trotsky⁷

Culture for Marxism is at once absolutely vital and distinctly secondary: the place where power is crystallized and submission bred, but also somehow “superstructural,” something which in its more narrow sense of specialized artistic institutions can only be fashioned out of a certain economic surplus and division of labour, and which even in its more generous anthropological sense of a “form of life” risks papering over certain important conflicts and distinctions. Culture is more than just ideology, but it is not a neutral or transcendent entity either; and any Marxist criticism worth the name must thus adopt a well-nigh impossible double optic, seeking on the one hand to take the full pressure of a cultural artefact while striving at the same time to displace it into its enabling material conditions and set it within a complex field of social power. What this means in effect is that one will find oneself bending the stick too far towards formalism and then too far towards contextualism, in search of that ever-receding discourse which would in allegorical manner speak simultaneously of an artistic device and a whole material history, of a turn of narrative and a style of social consciousness.

Terry Eagleton⁸

In 1983, one art historian began his study of the social history of Abstract Expressionism by asking himself: “Why have I thought it necessary to take a fresh look at a subject

studied so many times before?”⁹ Close to twenty years later, another art historian began a similar venture by requiring: “Any justification for yet another study of an already well-known and widely discussed group of artists should generally entail the disclosure of new material along with a novel approach to it.”¹⁰ As these two instances should suggest, the topic of post-war American culture in general and in particular Abstract Expressionism and its relationship to Cold War political ideologies of U.S. capitalism is not only a topic highly examined, but perhaps one excessively so. Indeed, to scan the scholarship in this area of the last quarter century is to consistently encounter justifications, sometimes apologetic, at times defensive, for having supplied the field with yet another reworking, yet another entry for the ever-expanding bibliography. Obsessive might also be another way of likening these returns, which would mark the issues associated with this period as a site of trauma, with each revisitation a renewed attempt to finally come to terms. We have not, as another scholar has suggested, been able to make Abstract Expressionism “a thing of the past,” not been able “to lose it and mourn it and if necessary revile it”: we have yet to get over it.¹¹

But what really is it in this history that so resists closure and that sustains such continued and heated investigation? “[T]here is of course,” as one observer put it, “a lot at stake [in these] theoretical wars [over] this most contentious ‘movement’ of the twentieth century . . . not just tenures, ambition and intellectual status, but also the broader empowerment that attaches to narratives themselves.”¹² As an attempt to point in the general direction of an answer, let me try the following. Not only do the discourses in and around Abstract Expressionism focus an histrionic spotlight on the conjoining of the terms “art” and “politics”; they also put pressure on the very means of construing relationships between those terms, of the styles of narrative construction: they frequently question the sorts of ideological investments inhabiting those methodologies for correlating artistic and political signifiers and signifieds. What is put on the dock, to open this out by way of broadly inclusive terms, is a classic perturbation over issues of form and content, of the nature of the Sign, of the processes of signification through the ideational and material, and of what secures those bonds of meaning. Nor would it seem

particularly relevant to raise this sort of epistemic-ontological meta-crisis—whose capacity to stir genuine alarm surely ended with the advent of postmodernism—were it not for the power still available, or, alternatively, the aesthetic myths still operating for some in the interwar and early post-war periods, in the notion of the authenticity of artistic labor as generating the true Sign and as the bearer of an exceptional humanism transcendent of the grossest manipulations of political ideology. Or, as Newman offered in 1950: “I think the possibility of finding language still exists. . . .”¹³

In a manner of speaking, what this describes is a perfect storm, a moment where and when elements appear simultaneously to both come together to a point of unprecedented focus and destructively, ruthlessly unravel. The issues that converge at this moment are ones that put into question some of the most cherished and redemptive notions of modern aesthetic avant-gardism, the tropes of cultural redemption and artistic exceptionalism. Indeed it appeared that the avant-garde’s very efforts at maintaining (as well as decrying) this critical and crucial difference between its mode of productive activity and that of capital’s modes of labor was what could so usefully serve and reinforce the interests of the status quo. Thus challenged in this is the validity of positing an avant-garde as oppositional, as critically negationist, as operating as a counter-force to hegemonic systems, as marking a hold-out space of expressivity as non-alienated agency, and thus as possessing access to a transformative subject-object dialectic. These challenges and reversals were just some of the disquieting features of the landscape left in this storm’s wake. In response to that question of why Abstract Expressionism has not become a thing of the past, I would hazard the guess that those thinkers who have yet to get over it, those scholars who continue to investigate the field through this rubric of questions, remain because they sense the nature of what is at stake: to come to terms would mean to resign oneself to the merely mythic, ideologically-degraded status of the artistic as the cultural receptacle of creative realization; one would stop dreaming of the good life in lands of milk and honey; and accept as permanent an exile in the barren regime of abstract labor.

The Cold War Thesis

Though there had appeared a number of earlier studies putting forward theses suggesting complicity between the American avant-garde and the political motives of the U.S. State Department in thrall to the ideology of American capitalism in the post-war period, Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* is now easily recognized as the apex of this argument. Guilbaut's critical social history of this period is a narrative written against the idealist accounts provided by—in Guilbaut's litany—Clement Greenberg, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Irving Sandler and William Rubin, to list the most prominent. In aiming to illuminate the ideological conditioning, Guilbaut's methodology treats these accounts as both expression and distortion of the material base. Thus, where formalist accounts have striven to “neutralize” this art in “aesthetic and stylistic considerations” by removing it from its context, by severing its links to history, politics, economics and thus barring a “critical analysis of the ideology that underlies the images and texts produced in this period,” Guilbaut's project is precisely to work towards the “‘deneutralization’ of [this] art, the unearthing of its roots, the laying bare of its hidden mechanisms and contradictions.”¹⁴ The upshot of Guilbaut's deneutralization might be called, for brevity's sake, the Cold War thesis. Providing crucial elaboration to the earlier and far less detailed and researched 1970s arguments proposing links between State Department politics and ideological investments to the success and value of Abstract Expressionism, such as those made by Max Kozloff and Eva Cockcroft among others, Guilbaut continues the work of supplanting idealist narratives of the “victory of an American super-avant-garde” with a critical, materialist history of Abstract Expressionism, which tells not the tale of heroic opposition one expects as the badge and banner of avant-gardism but, if not exactly or openly a complicity, then what Guilbaut more delicately phrases “ideological resonance” between the American post-war avant-garde and Cold War liberalism.¹⁵

Avant-garde art succeeded because the work and the ideology that supported it, articulated in the painters' writings as well as conveyed in images, coincided fairly closely with the ideology that came to dominate American political life after the 1948 presidential elections. This was the 'new liberalism' set forth by Schlesinger in *The Vital Center*, an ideology that, unlike other ideologies of the conservative right and the Communist left, not only made room for avant-garde dissidence but accorded to such dissonance a position of paramount importance.¹⁶

How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art works as an extended and contentious footnote to Greenberg's 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" which presents the famous image of the "umbilical cord of gold" connecting the advanced culture of an avant-garde to a social and economic base, the cultured and enlightened of a bourgeois elite.¹⁷ What Guilbaut, in statements like the one above, is keen to stress, however, is that this "umbilical cord of gold" was far from a moment of *noblesse oblige* on the part of a disinterested patron class but rather serves to underscore within a materialist analysis the answerability of superstructure to base. The umbilical cord was never cut, the gold comes with strings fully attached, so to speak.

The bluntness of Guilbaut's "reestablish[ment] of the link between art and politics" has led his detractors to fault him for a methodological primitivism associated with a crude Marxist orthodoxy, and to accuse him of a continued subscription to what by post-structuralist standards appears to be a highly outmoded base-superstructure model relatively free of micro-mediations.¹⁸ Guilbaut oversimplifies; or, he sees in black-and-white, and he is unwilling to support third-term speculation—all of which factors into what is taken to be Guilbaut's lack of sensitivity to and sympathy for the particular complexities of the American avant-garde's political situation. For, if there is any fallen or turned hero in Guilbaut's narrative, it is the American intelligentsia in the process of a willing self-delusion, confusing base and superstructure, imagining that their mandate of radicalism could find resolution in art, and thus forgetting the basis of a true political practice. "Radical intellectuals," Guilbaut charges, "unable to situate themselves in relation to contemporary political events or even to interpret those events in a satisfactory way, deserted politics altogether. The individual became the sole focus of interest, a

symbolic vestige of days gone by when radicals still had a definite function.”¹⁹ Or, elsewhere, “What I argue is this: that from compromise to compromise, refusal to refusal, adjustment to adjustment, the rebellion of the artists, born of frustrations within the left, gradually changed its significance until ultimately it came to represent the values of the majority, but in a way (continuing the modernist tradition) that only a minority was capable of understanding. The ideology of the avant-garde was ironically made to coincide with what was becoming the dominant ideology. . . .”²⁰ However, Guilbaut is mindful of the pitfalls of too voluntarist an account of these political shifts, and this begins to describe what might be the true crime by Guilbaut’s account. The real failing of the radical intellectuals and avant-garde artists was not that, faced with a seemingly impossible political situation, they “deserted politics,” but rather that instead of maintaining the critical tension and willed awareness between “is” and “ought”—however unsatisfactory or painful consciousness of that gap might be—they allowed themselves to believe in their having filled it. They allowed themselves the luxury of certain comforting myths, not least of which was the one that theirs was an art of “freedom” miraculously beyond the grasp of ideology.²¹

If the fall from grace in Guilbaut’s account is the avant-garde’s relinquishing a consciously political role and in allowing themselves a convenient naïveté about the politically instrumentalist value of their art, then Michael Leja’s account makes this point moot. Indeed, within his argument for the thorough ideological interpellation and political instrumentalization of subjectivity to an agentless pulp, no subject to speak of remains and certainly not an avant-garde subject in a position to consciously relinquish its politically oppositional roles. Leja’s *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* carries forth the Cold War thesis generally but professes to advance it through a more methodologically sophisticated approach to ideology and its critique. As Leja sets out, the difference and distance between Guilbaut’s work and his own “concerns the way the crucial term *ideology* is defined.”

For Guilbaut *ideology* designates an explicit, consciously held set of beliefs and commitments organized around a political affiliation. . . . As used in the present study, however, *ideology* has little to do with

consciously held beliefs or political affiliations. It is meant to designate rather an implicit structure of belief, assumption, and disposition—an array of basic propositions and attitudes about reality, self, and society embedded in representation and discourse and seemingly obviously true and natural. . . . [T]hese propositions are incessantly restated, resecured, and naturalized; they are woven into the fabric of experience by virtue of their structuring all representation, including perception, analysis, argument, interpretation, and explanation.²²

Leja's adoption of such an expanded notion of ideology does indeed open the field to the extended range of material culture.²³ His specific set of concerns—the construction of a “new form of subjectivity” during the 1940s and 1950s, the discourses of the anxious and angsty post-war “Modern Man” to which both “mainstream” culture and Abstract Expressionism contributed, and the primacy of a psychology of the primitive, unconscious and irrational within this new subject type—pictures precisely the deep reach of ideology formation.²⁴ The older framework in which ideology is primarily restricted to political ideology, seen from Leja's vantage, is misleadingly idealist in its tendency to view the ideological as something so cleanly compartmentalized. Leja's operations through an expanded field of ideology venture very close to the tautology ideology-as-culture/culture-as-ideology. Although Leja sets out to perform a more sophisticated and subtle explication of base and superstructure mediations, as an improvement over reductive Marxist-inspired analyses, his method ironically also becomes insistently reductive. In a perversion of motives, one might even argue that Leja's reduction outstrips Guilbaut's. For in taking “ideology” so broadly and inclusively, Leja's “agency” means little more than the means by which structure reproduces itself through the vehicles of subjects fueled on delusions of semi-autonomy. In Leja's rendition ideology reduces to a single, unrelenting term. No space exists for the kind of subject that Guilbaut maintains despite the overall bleak political thrust of the latter's work. At the very least Guilbaut held on to the notion, if with a bitter grasp, for something like the ability to register one's complicity. What Leja's account appears to remove is precisely the space for this kind of dialectical thought, that part of consciousness that would be able to think against itself, and thus, able to become self-

critical and self-exposing. In sum, if Leja's account, unlike Guilbaut's, seems to produce far fewer fallen heroes of the Left, it is because the fabric of ideology is so tightly woven as to already serve as a shroud-like membrane, suffocatingly impermeable to revolutionary heroics *per se*.

Third-Way Scholarship

A new set of related positions in this debate can be organized around the notion of a "third-way," an approach which adheres neither to the older formalist orthodoxies of the 1950s and 1960s nor to the revisionist "new orthodoxy" of the 1970s and 1980s by which Abstract Expressionism was a "monolithic expression of Cold War ideology."²⁵ To make some general characterizations of these third-way approaches, one notes first and most obviously this explicit desire to go beyond the rigid polarities that have so powerfully structured the field, a manner of methodological thaw between bourgeois idealist aesthetics and Marxist criticism, or between formalism and social history, and to temper some of the harshness and bleakness by which earlier revisionists (including Guilbaut and Leja) have pronounced the failure of revolutionary agency within the creative intelligentsia of the period. Although equally adamant in not subscribing to idealist and formalist narratives of this art, they distance themselves from their immediate social history forbearers in their countering of earlier arguments that held that leftist radical energies, or any meaningful form of dissidence or challenging of the corporate capitalist system were wiped out completely with the mounting tally of progressive leftism's "failures."²⁶ A significant part of this alternative scholarship involves the careful maneuver of redefining political agency largely along critical-culturalist lines. Such accounts share a willingness to see signs of political resistance in less overt and traditional political forms explaining, in part, this less obvious and marked avant-garde resistance as an appropriate development, perhaps the only one possible given the highly

repressive political climate of the post-war period. Within this there is an implicit criticism of what might be designated as idealist notions of political agency, of which the 1930s—the “red” decade of U.S. history—serves as standard-bearer. What this suggests is that acting upon thirties notions of political agency in the forties and fifties would have been a species of gross romanticism, a suicide mission at best.

Below, I will describe briefly several of these third-way approaches, specifically, Daniel Belgrad’s *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (1998) and David Craven’s *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (1999). As I believe will become apparent, a certain flip-side symmetry exists between the Cold War theses and these third-way approaches. Craven will answer Guilbaut’s work using the older senses of ideology as consciously held political positions; Belgrad will answer Leja’s work by taking ideology to be the substance and texture of everyday life. Last, I will introduce the position held by Nancy Jachec in her recent study *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (2000), as important work done on the trope of a “cultural turn” from political agency to artistic agency.

In *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*, American Studies scholar Daniel Belgrad detects political resistance in the multiple instances in which “spontaneity,” “the spontaneous gesture,” and “spontaneous improvisation” surfaced in a notable number of cultural forms in the post-war U.S.—including jazz music, pottery, poetry, dance, and painting. Certainly one of the strengths of Belgrad’s work is its inclusiveness, this ability to survey a variety of art media; indeed, Belgrad argues that these individual artforms participated in the broader “aesthetic of spontaneity” to such an extent that to “study each of these media in isolation is to miss the general importance of the spontaneous gesture as a sign of the times.”²⁷ The “cultural stance” of spontaneity and improvisation, Belgrad insists, was the means by which many creative individuals in the United States during the politically repressive and socially conformist decades of the 1940s and 1950s expressed resistance, a countercultural sphere, and opposition to mainstream values. What a “culture of spontaneity” amounts to

for Belgrad is the sign that the spirit of avant-garde negation survives. Not unexpectedly, control is the term to which spontaneity is opposed here and more specifically, as Belgrad makes explicit, a new mode of appearance for control, one far more pernicious and dangerous than the “‘technological control’ of industrial capitalism (exemplified by Henry Ford’s moving conveyor belt)” of the earlier twentieth-century.²⁸ This newer, more surreptitious appearance of control Belgrad designates “bureaucratic control,” an increasingly interior form of control, akin to brainwashing or the internalizing of ideology; it becomes the advanced means of “ensuring [the] social cohesion” necessitated by the corporate liberal ideology of the United States’s post-war identity as a colossal military-industrial complex.²⁹ Belgrad’s “bureaucratic control” is not a new item in the lexicon for historical characterizations of this vexed period in American history. One sees its close relatives in, for example, William H. Whyte, Jr.’s *The Organization Man* or C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* and *The Power Elite* or Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd*.³⁰ However, the point that Belgrad is able to capitalize on is the one for which an aesthetics of spontaneity—as it describes an attitude of give-and-take, the dialogical, mutuality, “democratic interaction,” lack of established hierarchy, non-rationalized acts, the playful, mind-body awareness, being in the moment—becomes a critical stance, an opposing set of values to those of the rationalized order and regulation embodied by the mainstream culture of corporate liberalism.

Belgrad’s thesis takes on animation precisely when viewed as a sparring text to Leja’s. “[M]y empathic divergence from the perspective offered by Michael Leja,” as Belgrad lays it out, “will be evident throughout this work.”

Although we treat some of the same themes, such as primitivism, myth, and subjectivity, he insists that abstract expressionism furthered, rather than challenged, the dominant post-war culture. While I distinguish ‘highbrow’ culture, ‘middlebrow’ or mass culture, and the culture of spontaneity as three cultural formations engaged in a struggle for hegemony, Leja employs a more Foucauldian paradigm in which all dissent is superficial and circumscribed.³¹

Here, once again, Leja’s image of post-war American culture and politics draws detractors who reject his deeply pessimistic view on the futility of cultural resistance. But

if Leja's project is a shade past demoralized gray, Belgrad's is a too liberally infused rose. Something sounds vaguely suspicious when Belgrad finds the "social significance" of the "aesthetic practice" of spontaneity to be a "crucial site of cultural work."³² At its least convincing the culture of spontaneity argument degrades, much to the detriment of a third-way position in general, to a nebulous mish-mash of general humanist assertions posed along with what begins to sound like a reassuring satisfaction that a person's natural, unconscious playfulness will prove an adequate force against pernicious systemic rationalization. Belgrad fails to substantially address the specific ways in which aesthetic spontaneity intersects more cogently with political meaning beyond a liberal pluralism in which cultural avant-gardes operate as the pressure valves for machinery of the status quo.

The limitations of Belgrad's politically non-explicit and non-committal aesthetic of spontaneity are offset in part through the rigor provided by another third-way approach, David Craven's *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period*. Craven's text, as its title suggests, also works on the issue of a Cold War cultural politics and attempts to dislodge Guilbaut's "Stalinist" and "reductive" account of an alleged complicity between avant-garde art, artists and intellectuals and the intentions of the Cold Warriors; however, he takes a tack opposed to Belgrad's.³³ The political dimension, cultural critique and dissent are reasserted in Craven's account as explicitly, consciously held positions. In a move that bypasses Leja and Belgrad and returns to the grounds laid by Guilbaut, Craven argues for a third-way position while, however, employing ideology in its more traditional guise as an articulate set of political commitments.

Where Guilbaut sees "starting in the 1940s, U.S. conservative forces entirely succeed[ing] in sponsoring a 'de-Marxization' and capitulation of its own left-wing intelligentsia," with the collapsed Left too easily and willingly accommodating itself to a Schlesingerian "vital center" of pro-capitalist new liberalism, Craven argues for the continuing presence, if reduced and altered from its 1930s appearance, of viable leftist positions despite political repression and the seeming victory of new liberalism in

winning over prominent intellectual converts.³⁴ “The social bleakness and repressive politics of this period in U.S. history notwithstanding, though, there was never a total capitulation by the U.S. Left—whether in the art world or outside it, although there certainly was a ‘de-Stalinization’ (but not a de-Marxification) of the intelligentsia in the art world.”³⁵ Craven is able to make the case against Abstract Expressionism’s identification with political conservatism in several notable ways. First, rather than taking Clement Greenberg as the most relevant critic for engaging the Abstract Expressionists’s aims and motivations, Craven points to Greenberg’s increasingly neo-liberalist, nationalist, McCarthyist tendencies as being simply at odds with the political orientation evidenced by the activities and writings of many of the Abstract Expressionist artists. In place of Greenberg and his “cold-war formalism,” Craven suggests instead “largely underappreciated” and “little understood” Meyer Schapiro as a far better critic and theorist for elaborating the conjoining of political and aesthetic aims of these artists. Schapiro, unlike Greenberg, maintained a recognizable leftist political stance his entire life—a stance, in Craven’s view, much more in keeping with the political orientation of the actual artists themselves. Furthermore, Schapiro’s criticism and scholarship actively problematized the relationship between social content and modernist form, a central concern, again, for many of the Abstract Expressionists as they attempted to work on the dilemma of, on the one hand, creating and sustaining serious, socially meaningful art without it becoming social realist or socialist realism and, on the other, of using an advanced visual language of abstraction without becoming mere formalism. Secondly, Craven rebuts Guilbaut’s thesis through elaborate detailing of the politically-inflected public activities the artists participated in, what kinds of manifestos and statements they signed, which (leftist) publications they supported. Overall, as a group portrait, they come out as being fairly engaged, involving themselves quite substantially in various forums of public dissent. And, finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, further evidence of these artists’s Left-leaning tendencies has surfaced in the form of secret F.B.I. files kept on several of their numbers: Adolph Gottlieb, Lee Krasner, Norman Lewis, Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko. These files, recording the F.B.I.

surveillance of artists considered security risks during the McCarthy era, were made available to the public through the passing of the Freedom of Information Act in 1966. Craven's access to these files has given him material proof of the inappropriateness of aligning certain of these artists with the political values of a more conservative-leaning mainstream. Clearly, at least as far as covert government agencies were concerned, they were the opposition.

At any rate, the point of Craven's fastidious gleaning of counter evidence is not that Guilbaut's reading of Abstract Expressionist painting as U.S. Cold War capitalist imperialist propaganda is never true. For as high as these particular stakes may have become in twentieth-century art history, the heatedness and intensity of the scholarly exchanges might be suggestive of another, a second and underlying battle being fought here and over something even more contentious. That is, the validity of certain prominent methods and models of social historical art scholarship are being contested—namely those older, more “orthodox” Marxist methods which still interpret art as a superstructural element beholden to the ideological needs of the base or the dominant economic class. Against this explanation of art through the “dominant ideology,” Craven proposes a “more subtle and sophisticated conceptual framework,” a newer, more refined materialist methodology in which art is “dialogical”:

[A]n artwork is not a unified whole but rather a *decentered and open-ended site* of contestation wherein various cultural practices are temporarily combined. . . . Any visual language in the arts should thus be understood as a locus for competing cultural traditions along with diverse aesthetic concerns and divergent ideological values. Hence, any artwork, regardless of how much it is publicly identified with one class or society, also signifies not only for dominant sectors but also for dominated classes and different class factions. Consequently, artwork such as that by Abstract Expressionists should be approached as an *uneasy locus*—more or less stable but not conclusively resolved—of competing values, some of which are hegemonic and others subaltern, out of which broader signification constructed.³⁶

Another way of conceptualizing Craven's more open-ended dialogical art, of which Abstract Expressionism is here Craven's prime example, is by visualizing a gap or

distance existing between the superstructural domain of art and a basis of economics. As Craven states,

My aim is to restore a sense of the period asymmetry [emphasis added] between the New York School and mainstream U.S. values of the 1950s, while also registering a renewed sense of the polyvalent, dissident, and paradoxical side of Abstract Expressionism.³⁷

So far so good. One understands that a dialogical art, as well as a dialogical conception of art, such as Craven proposes, is a site of polyvalence, and that this means it can contain or register both messages of U.S. imperialist power *and* the individual artists's own often contrary meanings, ones beyond the Pale of State Department sanction. However, no more than three paragraphs later there is this:

My aim is to restore a sense of the historical unevenness [emphasis added] of economic and ideological developments in this period, in relation to which the Abstract Expressionists produced their own tensely paradoxical artworks.³⁸

Is this an instance of the well-worn rhetorical device of *repetitio* by which repetition serves to underscore, to reinforce a point? Yet, one may also suspect in the proximity of these passages in Craven's text and the semantic closeness of the passages not a robust underscoring of the author's argument but rather an indication in tell-tale fashion the very spot in the text most needing reinforcement, the weak point, the place of least security. Indeed, a bit of nervousness becomes understandable when his carefully phrased "asymmetry" and "unevenness" begin to sound nothing so like Marx's "Greek" question—just dusted off and nominally brought up to date.³⁹ Methodologically, it appears that Craven has circled back to the same old contentious spot of materialist aesthetics: what is the "place and 'special character' of art as a social practice in relationship to the economic base"? What should be made of that famous gap opened up by the elusive notion of a "relative autonomy" of superstructures from economic bases, albeit one determined "in the last instance" by the basis?⁴⁰ The lurking concern perhaps in Craven's methodological commitments to the dialogical nature of art, to the sign as polyvalent and paradoxical and to base-superstructure asymmetry, is that it draws too

near to an attitude of liberal inclusiveness by which the playfully unruly sign or artifact steps over into a meaningless plurality. How much “give” can be allowed the base-superstructure relation before a materialist analysis becomes an idealist one?

Far from being a dismissal of Craven’s work, if anything the above discussion should highlight the difficulties of writing social histories informed by Left criticism and the serious and continuing conundrum of materialist methodologies: how to characterize art’s production and reception between the interpretive poles of reflection as object-determined structure and expression as voluntarist subjective agency. Though the dualisms may be facilely set out—reflection vs. expression, structure vs. agency, object vs. subject—these pairs continue to describe high methodological stakes. Craven’s third-way project is being written in large part in confrontation with Guilbaut, with Guilbaut standing as a figurehead (or strawman) for an older notion of how materialist scholarship is to be performed. As such it is being written against the methodological limitations associated with a materialist method *à la* Guilbaut: at its most vulgar, its lack of subtlety resulting from a bare-bones mechanistic model of the relationship between material basis and superstructural effects; an economic reduction and abstraction that turns paradoxically idealist and removed in its flattening of the material dimension of the sign; its blindness to the materiality of form. It is a viewpoint that does not allow for very many options, and it has the often disconcerting underlying message that revolutionary change and critical, meaningful engagement’s primary residence is not, in fact, the realm of art and literature and in its academies and salons but with a more traditionally conceived productive base and in the form of a class politics of mass agency and movement. Compared to this, Craven’s embrace of asymmetry, though problem-ridden, opens the field to a variety of possibilities; it freshly outfits the toolbox, so to speak, with a wealth of options for probing relations and studying social constructions. Indeed, he rehabilitates that gap between base and superstructure as the very space in which vital social options are preserved: riding on the question of this “gap” is the very possibility of critical, resistant consciousness able, at least, to *think* beyond the descriptive “is” to a normative “ought.” The challenge in all of this is to exploit the possibilities of asymmetry

without tempting the question: how much of a gap can occur before one effectively stops doing social history of a Marxian-inspired materialist variety? How much of this polyvalent “give” does one permit the sign before it ceases to mean very much at all?

Finally, the last of the third-way positions I want to explore is the one argued by Nancy Jachec in *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*. What immediately stands out in Jachec’s approach is the force of her challenge to the Cold War paradigm of rigid, static political polarities of Left and Right, and the care by which she tracks and describes ideological nuances along the political spectrum. Between the radical leftism of the pre-war 1930s (upholding the orthodox line on social revolution as total overturning of the status quo through the political activism of a collective agent in order to realize communism) and the official state liberalism of the post-war period (aligned with official government policy, upholding the dominant ideology and accepting of international corporate capitalism), Jachec complicates this familiar narrative by firmly inserting a crucial intervening episode that she labels post-war new liberalism.

Disentangling this third-way new liberalism from state liberalism is far from splitting hairs; rather, Jachec insists that the persistent tendency within the field to treat liberalism monolithically has led to faulty constructions of cause and effect and erroneous ascriptions of political motive. This other “new” liberalism—which Jachec identifies by a number of names: new radicalism, pessimistic pragmatism, post-dialectical socialism, and new realism—develops out of prewar radicalism’s attempts to salvage what it could of socialism under the pressure of severe historical and ideological blows: namely, the totalitarian state, a recipe with two key ingredients, a fascist dictator (Stalin as an instance) and a mass-identified populace that is brainwashed and lacking any resources for independent thought. What emerges from the other side of this process of redefinition and ideological transformation, Jachec contends, is still recognizable as a critical “independent left,” one that has not capitulated to the Right, one that has not blatantly sold its soul to the Cold War State Department, but equally one that has seriously suspended any advocacy of revolutionary activity and has weighed the possible dire consequences of not offering at least critical support to certain U.S. policies. It is with

this complex process of ideological migration from pre-war radicalism to post-war liberalism that Jachec identifies the Abstract Expressionists and the New York Intellectuals.

What is key to Jachec's argument is the notion of a cultural turn. To try for a summarizing definition, the cultural turn for Jachec signifies the "swapping of leftism's political means of expression for the cultural act," or a relinquishing of "radical political activity in favor of cultural critique," in a "reconceptualization of Marxism as an aesthetic, utopian ideal as opposed to a theory of class struggle, and concomitantly, the reassigning of radical agency to the artist instead of the working class."⁴¹ What this redefinition allowed for was the insurance that the "United States' fundamentally sound democratic institutions would not be jeopardized by any actively political form of dissent, while holding open the possibility for the revival of a socialist politics at a later, unspecified date."⁴² The aesthetic act was a "safe form of leftist dissent" because it substituted Marx's traditional socialist agent—the revolutionary mass or collective working class taking the struggle, so to speak, to the streets—with the artist in a studio performing isolated "radical" acts of "creative imagination" in the process of realizing authentic, unique subjectivity and one potentially at odds with dominant values. It offered a bracketed "as if" space for staging "actions" that would in no way truly challenge the state or threaten its security; and that provision in itself might be a very important contribution towards the anti-totalitarian effort. But, as the argument goes, art still remained a "repository of socialist values" because it gave room to the notion of human activity as self-realizing acts, human creativity as an end in itself, the ideal of a non-instrumental form of labor.⁴³ The artist, as creative laborer, stepped in when the political activism of a proletarian collective was discredited, effecting the sequestering of radical energies into the realm of creative imaginings—a maneuver *à la* Trotsky whereby art as a creative act is taken as innately critical of reality in its very process of positing an ulterior reality.⁴⁴ The cultural turn became a way of surviving.

There are several key points to Jachec's cultural turn thesis and which further distinguish her version of the Cold War argument. For one, Jachec argues that Abstract

Expressionism “emerged not only alongside but in direct dialogue with the independent left during the period of its ideological realignment.” She places the art of the New York School as intimate players in the American independent Left’s process of ideological transformation in the late 1940s and 1950s. In other words, Abstract Expressionism was not an object appropriated as a useful illustration of postdialectical socialism’s new culturalist stance, *a posteriori*, but rather it participated directly in these theoretical reformulations. This assertion goes a great distance in tempering tendencies within the Cold War argument to collapse any eventual use of Abstract Expressionism as a political signifier—for either Right or Left—with a do-nothing, know-nothing passivity on the part of the artist. For another, Jachec researches the sources for cultural turn discourse from which the American independent Left drew. The relevant connection that Jachec makes and that others have overlooked is that the discourses of the cultural turn came from European socialist thought on the problems and issues of a postdialectical Marxism, from their own experiences of reconceptualizing radical theory in the face of their own, slightly earlier, experience with socialist shipwreck and revolutionary failure. Jachec provides persistent and thorough documentation of both the printed presence of such European voices as Leo Lowenthal, Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus and the high level of American writers’s engagement in these European texts in the American independent Left press throughout the 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁵ These were the significant pre-established models for rethinking revolutionary praxis as cultural practice, within the aesthetic realm and in the individual artist’s creative act.

It is with these two refinements that Jachec is able to propose a Cold War thesis that can argue that Abstract Expressionism was used as a propaganda vehicle abroad but, importantly, for reasons at odds with the motives isolated by previous revisionist scholarship. In dramatic opposition to Guilbaut, Jachec argues the reasons for Abstract Expressionism’s promotion abroad lay precisely in its intimate connection with cultural turn theorization, or in its ties to revisionist socialism, and in its negationist mandate. Abstract Expressionism was exhibited in Europe, in other words, not for the reasons

upheld by the Cold War thesis—because it read as a triumphant signifier for the values of the American capitalist system—but for the exact opposite because it could act as a *critical* signifier of a reworked socialism. It was used as a cultural bridge to connect the politically nonaligned European intelligentsia to the U.S. through promoting Abstract Expressionism as an existential art (engaged with European philosophical developments), one resonant with abstract developments in Europe (i.e., *Tâchisme* and *Art informel*) and thus suggesting the sophistication of American culture—as one whose arts are self-critical, reassuringly capable of standing at odds with U.S. institutions and mainstream values be they economic, social, political. The initial selling point, therefore, in exporting American Abstract Expressionism was precisely its connotations as an art critical of America and not as an art expressing the glory and the power of the “American Century.” Had it been packaged in the latter manner, as Jachec sharply points out, this art certainly would have failed as cultural propaganda with the targeted European audience. Jachec, in essence, locates in the history of Abstract Expressionism’s reception a far more subtle and sinister moment of its recuperation, a phase preceding and to be distinguished from the later overtly pro-American and vulgar promotion of Abstract Expressionism by the State Department in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, at a time when, Jachec explains, the need for subtleties had dematerialized along with any significant threat of a communist Europe. What made this earlier, 1940s and early to mid-1950s promotion of Abstract Expressionism more sinister was the precociousness with which a group of Cold Warriors honed in on avant-gardist “negation”—a stance of principled refusal and criticism of the status quo, typically bourgeois capitalist—spotting in its style and rhetoric and ideological connotations a clever vehicle through which to affirm indirectly by negating directly. If there was a lesson to be had, or so it appears in Jachec’s account, it was that displays of criticality and negation feed the machine as well.

Thus, though by different means, Jachec ends her work by returning to the familiar conclusion of the Cold War argument—the post-war Left’s negligible identity and the recuperation of avant-garde art to the ultimate interests of the new corporate liberalist base. What marks her project as different from a Guilbautian complicity is her

scholarly care in slowing down the pace of the narrative, refining the terms of the dilemma, not speeding off to the dismal conclusion which is now more or less expected, but sustaining the difficult series of moments marking the independent Left's attempts to save not only itself but something of the historical project of socialism.

Cultural Turn as Return

In part it throws itself into doctrinaire experiments, exchange banks and workers' associations, hence into a movement in which it renounces the revolutionizing of the old world by means of its own great, combined resources, and seeks, rather, to achieve its salvation behind society's back, in private fashion, within its limited conditions of existence, and hence inevitably suffers shipwreck.

Karl Marx⁴⁶

[T]he abominations of McCarthyism, the crudities of the Cold War were jarring to sensitive people: it seemed best to pull away and dig in. . . .

What remained was culture, culture as a surrogate faith, enclave of sensibility, sign of distinction, refuge for the nerves. For sensitive people . . . culture became a secret home. They sought in art and literature what they were seeking in "personal relations," a world more attractive (as Trotsky had once said), a realm of purity that might shield one a little from the ugliness of the public world.

Irving Howe⁴⁷

[I]t is precisely the path through the aesthetic question that we are obliged to take in any ultimate solution of the political question. . .

Fredrick Schiller⁴⁸

In these accounts, whether Cold War or third-way, present, in one form or another, is the trope of the cultural turn, used to help articulate the problematic of art and politics during this Cold War/High Modernist period. It is used to describe the relation of aesthetic ideology to U.S. Cold War imperialism and political propaganda; the projects of

reconstructing post-war subjectivities fraught with crisis and contradiction; the positing of non-revolutionary practices of cultural resistance; the transformations in the socialist imagination and reorganizations of Left political culture in the U.S. But looming over all these uses of a cultural turn paradigm is the alternating fascination and worry over the “aestheticization of political radicalism,” to use a phrase of Jachec’s. Even in the most optimistic of these accounts—Belgrad’s by far—the cultural turn as an aestheticization of political radicalism betokens something of a twilight gesture, variously indicating, and to various degrees, compromise, failure, decadence, retreat, a heroic-but-doomed last stand. This ultimate directional valence is one turned *away* from the political in an “authentic” and older fashioned revolutionary activist sense. Indeed, aestheticization as depoliticization could well serve as the cultural turn’s cynical shorthand version. For instance, one senses this mood as early as 1936 in the pages of the *New Masses* in Mike Gold’s vigorous attack on the “Phi Beta Kappa Trotskyites in New York” who “elaborate projects for inner reform” in their “bookish minds” and contentedly celebrate their “wonderful victories on paper.”⁴⁹ “It suggests,” as Eugene Lunn, a scholar with particular interest in the intersections of Marxism and modernism in the early twentieth century, has described, “a form of narrowly cultural revolt which facilitates the absorption of art, as fashion, into advertising or into ‘shocking’ entertainment and new consumer products for the well-to-do.”⁵⁰ Although, as in Jachec’s argument, the cultural realm can serve as a place by which a Left identified by the commitments of socialism and anti-totalitarianism can rethink itself during periods of insecurity, this move is also a slippery slope leading to the degradation of political commitments to an insular, sterile and self-satisfied academicism or culturalism. “[W]hen cultural revolution is understood as a *substitute* for social revolution, as is frequently the Western conception,” one should worry, as Fredric Jameson intimates, what function is being served.⁵¹ The cultural turn, accented either way—whether as straight-out abnegation of Left political commitments or as the tactical retreat for a socialism-in-waiting—spells a crisis in revolutionary socialism. These shifts or ideological transformations occurring in the post-war period begin to suggest only too well Marx’s dour description of the frustrated course and dissipated energies of the once

revolutionary Paris proletariat in the aftermath of those infamous June days. Here then is another shipwrecked Left, now in New York, not Paris, and not in the mid-nineteenth century but a hundred years later, once again renouncing “revolutionizing” “by means of its own great, combined resources,” and seeking “to achieve its salvation behind society’s back, in private fashion,” in little and limited (and one should possibly add “cultural”) “experiments.”

I am not arguing that this is not largely very much what happened—summarized, in one of its noted versions, by Clement Greenberg as “‘anti-Stalinism,’ which started out more or less as ‘Trotskyism,’ turn[ing] into art for art’s sake.’”⁵² Certainly evidence of the bad legacy of the cultural turn can be read in those later twentieth-century rallying calls by cultural avant-gardes for a merging of art into life—naïve and ill-begotten, showcasing the penitenti of revolutionary sensibility but minus any particular concern with the logistics of social revolution, and dissolving, as Jameson has suggested, into the postmodern present as commodified hyper-culturalism. Or, as Hal Foster is apt to point out: “Beware of what you wish, runs one moral of modernism as seen from the present, because it may come true—in perverse form. . . . [T]he old project to reconnect Art and Life . . . was eventually accomplished, but according to the spectacular dictates of the culture industry, not the libratory ambitions of the avant-garde.”⁵³ Harsh criticism has even been leveled at those more clever versions of the cultural turn argument that defend its seeming heterodoxy on the issue of base and superstructure relations with the claim, such as that made by André Breton, that culture is the “ideological basis of the social order” and thus necessarily a vitally important realm of revolutionary effort. But, in O.K. Werckmeister’s sour retort, “Marxists in the twentieth century strive for a revalidation of culture, because they have been forced to abandon the goal of revolutionary change, and instead accept a politically stabilized, static socioeconomic order.”⁵⁴ As Jameson recalls, there is an older revolutionary tradition, upheld by those who adamantly refuse the “utopian substitution of cultural politics for politics proper, the vocation to transform the world by transforming its forms, space or language.”⁵⁵ The orthodox comeback

apparently still stands: the radical transformation of social and productive relationships must precede any radical transformations in culture.

Only a species of bald denial could argue that the trope of the cultural turn simply gets wrong the relation between aesthetic and political discourses in the post-war period. In general, this figure possesses a good deal of explanatory power. Nonetheless I would insist on adding that something very significant indeed is overlooked in this historical problematic when the cultural turn is only taken as a sign of approaching decadence. Rather, the possibility that I would like to suggest and the sense that I would like to preserve are those that emerge when the cultural turn is thought out along the lines of a “return” as well. By this I mean to reinforce those senses of the aesthetic and dialectic brought up at the opening of this introduction in which they share in the conceit of modern revolutionary socialism. Thus, to investigate the aesthetic is to inhabit the same concerns of the dialectic, to structure an “ultimate Utopian instant” analogously: the articulation of identity, a self-realizing at that moment of interpenetration between the mediations of part and whole and the mediations of theory and practice: “the adequation of subject and object, and of the possibility of reconciliation of I and Not-I, of spirit and matter, or self and world.”⁵⁶ It is through this sense of a cultural return that I suggest another possibility existing under the cultural-turn umbrella, one that was not a retreat from politics into merely liberal-friendly forms of cultural criticism or soft-edged cultural activism; not solipsism nor a facile existentialism; not a defensive holing up in ivory towers and reinforcing canons of elite cultures; not a form of art therapy; not a seeking of “individual salvation only in the midst of the collective shipwreck”; not a form of denial; and not a shoring up of defenses; not even a stoic bearing witness to events over which one is powerless. Rather, the cultural return that I will describe was an attempt to do work at the very heart of the matter: it was not a backing-down but an attack, head-on. It was radical, to paraphrase Marx, by grasping things at the root, precisely by working on the level of the mechanics of mediation, by riding that edge between work and labor and for seeing in that difference the central defining moment and meaning of both art and politics.⁵⁷

The cries prompted here are easily heard. What art or criticism in this period would satisfy the conditions of such a “cultural return?” Further, given that the theoretical object proposed by this re-worked term—that is, a substantial, coherent and dedicated mutuality or identity between modernist painting and socialist politics—would seem to answer the potent, if unspoken, desire haunting the field of post-war American art history for a reconciliation of the aesthetic with the political, for the identity of painting and politics manifested as the concrete idea—the second cry might be, why has not such a case been made earlier?

My argument is that such a politically critical cultural return did exist within the Abstract Expressionist, post-war and Cold War milieu—that it structures and animates the argument described by these three individuals: Harold Rosenberg (1906-78), the writer and culture critic associated with the New York Intellectuals and Abstract Expressionism, and the two abstract painters Barnett Newman (1905-1970) and Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967), both affiliated to greater and lesser degrees with mid-century Abstract Expressionism in New York. But this is an unlikely configuration, a bizarre triangulation. And this in itself already provides some good indication for why such a case as I shall attempt has remained far from apparent. For, indeed, what organizing rubric could possibly make sense of all three?

The awkwardness of this triangulation and this thesis is four-fold, and my argument will require that I contend with these four aspects: (1) reading Rosenberg’s criticism, especially his concept of Action Painting, as a Marxist-engaged aesthetic; (2) opening up Action Painting’s reference beyond the gesturalist painters to the color-field painters (such as Newman and Reinhardt); (3) making a case for pairing and comparing Newman and Reinhardt, two painters not usually thought to make a relevant, productive pairing; (4) a connecting of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s politics to their paintings, of their theory to their practice.

But now let me immediately revisit these four again and in this begin suggesting how this triangulation of figures actually does work, how Rosenberg and Newman and

Reinhardt describe a historical instance of the cultural return as the dialectical co-articulation of the aesthetic and the political.

Starting with Harold Rosenberg, I will consider his criticism and with this Action Painting, the primary term by which he is identified, as an engagement with and articulation of socialist theory and politics. This will be a dramatic turn indeed, especially in the face of Action Painting's all-too-typical simplifications by which it becomes the unavailing "theory" for an inscrutable painting practice, the meaning of which, if any, is hermetically sealed between painter and canvas. Contrary to its usual functioning as the mystifying apologist for an inarticulate, incommunicable, mysterious condition of art and artists, it will be read as a political aesthetic borne out of Rosenberg's larger engagement with Marx's philosophy of action. The radical philosophical and political content of this term is what will be argued for, so that, in the end, Action Painting can be addressed as an aesthetic about and conceived on the problematic of revolutionary dialectics.

Going along with this re-reading of Rosenberg's criticism and Action Painting is the opening up of Action Painting's object of reference. That is, when taken to describe the style of post-war American painting in which physical gesturalism, bold spontaneity, immediate paint handling dominate, the term would seem to be relevant to, as well as limited to, such artists as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Working with a fresh understanding of the "action" of Action Painting removes the unquestioned priority of precisely those painters and generates the room for considering Action Painting with other artists of the period, such as the color-field painters, who were once easily thought to be irrelevant to the term. For, as one historian has described the situation, the "color-field" wing of American mid-century painting was a "quiescent art of inaction" whose artists were "[m]ore given to reflection than action," and who were "[m]ore systematically intellectual and certainly more literary than the Action painters."⁵⁸ Specifically, here, Newman and Reinhardt, two typically color-field identified painters, can now be considered within the Action Painting rubric, and with the possibility of Action Painting's offering a fresh, relevant perspective by which to comprehend these artists.

Rosenberg's Action Painting taken as a concept of dialectical painting/painting as dialectic provides a framework in which to compare the projects of Newman and Reinhardt and in a way that facilitates questions of the political content and import of their art practices. Of course, given their outspoken views on politics and aesthetics alike, both artists would seem ideal characters for a Cold War/Third Way/Cultural Turn drama. If their canvases appeared to their New York School milieu most resistant to discourse because of the extreme pictorial reductivity, they themselves "discoursed" quite frequently, often elegantly, as well as polemically, as substantiated in each artist's volume of collected writings. Both generated extensive bodies of writing that suggested that their projects were intelligently constructed engagements with political form and socialist ideals. The persistent stumbling block has been precisely how to determine the relation of their politics and their painting—that is, how to read their formal painting languages as the convincing embodiment of such politically meaningful content. Exacerbating the issue is the fact that, with Newman's and Reinhardt's monochromatic and near-monochromatic paintings, there seems pictorially so little to work with. How does one read a message when so little in the painting has been articulated in the first place? The challenge, for layperson and art historian alike, has been to find a way in which their work makes sense, particularly the sort of sense that would justify the artists's own claims. This situation often has the frustrating quality of either taking their word for it or not. What results are often stock assessments: if one takes the former position, the "blankness" and "nothingness" of their canvases are hastily subsumed by the umbrella of modernist negation, where the not-picturing of the world as it stands signifies as condemnatory refusal and as the defiant gestures of autonomy of a pure creativity unwilling to submit to any outside system, a turning one's back. If one takes the latter stance, the work means nothing, or could mean anything, and one falls into the nihilism of the arbitrariness of signification. With such minimal surfaces, the problem becomes all the more stark of how to connect the artwork and political content, the painting to the politics, the theory to the practice.

My contention is that the revolutionary problematic signed for by Rosenberg's Action Painting frames a way for addressing these very problems. It highlights the terms and clarifies the stakes, indeed sets the arena, according to which Newman's and Reinhardt's projects can be understood in terms of a cultural return; and when understood in this way the artists's theory and practice do indeed appear to form articulate, coherent wholes. Further, such a frame makes sense of my insistence that Newman and Reinhardt be viewed together, as a dialectical pair generating a critically constructive tension. Their mutual antagonism (among other things, attacking each other in print, refusing to speak to each other after 1954) highlights more the proximity than the distance between their positions; what they often argue over is precisely shared concerns for which they hold the utmost passionate commitment: the identity of their painting and politics. And it is this identity that a revised concept of Action Painting frames in a compelling way. Moreover, with Action Painting as the frame and mediator, what becomes far easier to see is the directness, even bluntness of Newman's and Reinhardt's arguments. In other words, what they were engaged in was not some loosely conceived aestheticization of political radicalism, or the bracketing of their political wishes within art world culture, or the exploration of exotic forms of politicality, or any overly subtle or dense academic theorizations of cultural and political agency. Those academicizing and aestheticizing refinements of political engagement and discourse were not yet part of their game. But neither were their arguments so stark as to be relegatable to the sheer obduracy, the inarticulate refusal of the blank monolith of modernist negation. Rather their arguments become transparent when set to the political scale and philosophical tone of classic socialist debates. The political content of Newman's and Reinhardt's paintings is self-referentially centered on precisely their struggles with the "act" of making, and with all that implies—the articulation of self-identity, and all the mediations staged through the dialectics of theory and practice, art and labor, necessity and freedom, alienation and realization, individual part and communal whole. This is once again the passage of a cultural return from the aesthetic through the dialectic to the good politic: the artists, their art-making and the work of art all stand for the good dialectic, for unalienated being, and

as an image of the social as utopian fulfillment. Their politics, in other words, is configured in and through the very matter of painting's formal articulation, as a *process* of articulating identity and as a *thing* of articulated identity. The politics is in the making—or, in other words, Action Painting.

Chapter One:

Harold Rosenberg: Reading “Action Painting”

An Introduction to Marginalization

I’ve read a lot of his criticism and I appreciate it for what it offers, but I never read any of it that proved to me that he was capable of understanding a picture in visual terms. He always had a largely sociological or sociocultural orientation, which I find very useful and very informative, but by itself, inadequate.

Sidney Tillim⁵⁹

We don’t have an ideological stand, at least I don’t feel that I have an ideological stand in the sense that Rosenberg had in the fifties.

Barbara Rose⁶⁰

The above pair of statements come from a 1970 radio panel discussion, organized and moderated by Bruce Glaser, on the topic of modern art and its criticism.⁶¹ I have pulled these two quotations, Tillim’s and Rose’s, both of which speak in reference to Harold Rosenberg, not because they help illuminate directly Rosenberg’s critical project but rather because they instantiate typical ways of processing—and indeed faulting—Rosenberg’s work. What appears to be happening is not real processing in the sense of grappling with another’s language and concepts for an eventual coming to terms, but a manner of pre-treatment—of the sort used on difficult, resistant, unseemly stains—in order to facilitate their eventual removal. For, one may ask, what better way of effectively dismissing an art critic than Tillim’s damaging charge that Rosenberg failed to see a picture in *visual terms*? To this Rose’s comment performs a nice extension. Seeing and speaking of history and social relationships in the work of art is to slide over into the ideological and thus the kind of critic who performs art criticism from an “ideological stand.” Although Rose does not elucidate the problems she finds with the ideological when connected to evaluations of art, in a sense she hardly need bother. The tone of

evolutionary superiority is difficult to miss. The ideological as a contaminant to art criticism has, one presumes by Rose's statement, been safely purified out of the system.

Tillim's and Rose's complaints describe more or less the basic template for the kind of dismissive reception given Rosenberg as the century progressed. Here is a sampling of that template's earlier formulations. In 1959, responding to the publication of what would become Rosenberg's first volume of collected essays, *The Tradition of the New*, Paul Goodman announced frankly in the pages of *Dissent*, "He is a lousy critic, for he does not concentrate his intelligence on the object before him."⁶² This, coming from a somewhat sympathetic colleague (Goodman and Rosenberg were friends of sorts), and published in a venue also generally sympathetic to Rosenberg (who held an open invitation from the editors for submissions), is soft compared to the responses from his unsympathetic readers.⁶³ Hilton Kramer, for one, in *Arts Magazine* that same year calls Rosenberg a "sloganizing" polemicist made of "rhetorical dough."⁶⁴ Six years later, in a review of *The Anxious Object*, Kramer repeats the earlier charges of "extravagance of rhetoric" and adds a jibe towards Rosenberg's "blindness:" "But it was, of course, precisely on the question of form that Mr. Rosenberg had nothing to say."⁶⁵ In 1965 a number of other art world figures voiced similar complaints against Rosenberg's apparent inadequacies in the fundamentals of visual arts criticism paired with his excessive "rhetoric." Even Max Kozloff, in many ways diametrically opposed to Kramer, held that "one never gets the impression that his fascination for personalities and philosophical schemes has ever led Rosenberg to examine individual pictures, or that they exist for any other purpose than to illustrate a rhetorical field theory."⁶⁶ More than a decade later, in 1979, the *New York Times* art writer John Russell registered the same complaint, that Rosenberg was unable to "focus on a single canvas."⁶⁷ As late as 1994 Paul Brach was repeating that "Harold . . . always want[s] to talk about the 'situation'" and not, presumably, the "single canvas."⁶⁸

From the tenor of the discussion above, one might easily supply the name of the person who fills Rosenberg's lack. That, of course—the shadow figure not openly spoken but clearly present—is Clement Greenberg. It is Greenberg who makes good on all that is

found missing in Rosenberg's variety of art criticism: it is he, Greenberg, who as a prime exemplar of formalist criticism is able to focus on a single canvas without getting caught up in the situation. Although he is not officially named as the antidote to the apparently noxious—ideological and rhetorical—stuff Rosenberg tries passing off as criticism, one might easily read back through the above and find most of it operating under this umbrella formulation: it is the not-Greenbergness of Rosenberg that is the real problem. It was probably in irritated awareness of how his own critical position was being not merely overshadowed but in fact damagingly deformed and misconstrued by perpetual comparison to Greenberg's (Greenberg's terms and Greenberg's problematic), and thereby reduced to the negative position of "not-Greenberg," that prompted Rosenberg, when speaking at a 1968 conference in Paris celebrating the hundredth anniversary of Charles Baudelaire's death, to flaunt this father of modern criticism's claim "to have written about the Salon of 1859 without having seen it."⁶⁹ Rosenberg's Baudelaire eschews formalistic minutia because he well understands that real criticism rests not in the "attempt to analyze each work minutely" but rather his aims lie in "penetrat[ing] deep into the temperament and activating motives of each artist," thereby discovering in and through art the truth of contemporary life, of the "situation."⁷⁰

At the same time, neither has Rosenberg been the favored authority to whom to turn when seeking serious scholarly investigation of the "situation" of art, as in a social history of art. For that type of work and still drawing from the New York Intellectual milieu, Meyer Schapiro has typically been the choice. Indeed, this is precisely David Craven's strategy for countering the hegemony enjoyed by Greenberg, modernist formalism and aesthetic apoliticism. "It is Schapiro's largely underappreciated, as well as little understood, interpretation of Abstract Expressionism (along with his concomitant lifelong commitment to 'unorthodox Marxism') that will form the cornerstone of my own approach to that movement."⁷¹ And it is largely through Schapiro's writings on the relationship of art and politics, his development of a thesis on the social nature of art through a consequential series of essays in the 1930s and his 1957 essay on Abstract Expressionism, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art," that Craven builds his case

for the existence of a vital critical tradition butting heads with Greenbergian formalism.⁷² Which is to say that Rosenberg has fallen between the cracks. Developing neither a highly applicable formal system of art criticism as in Greenberg's case, nor operating with the full regalia and solid academic disciplinary credentials of art history as in Schapiro's, Rosenberg's work frequently has been dismissed as insubstantial, of little ultimate consequence and of far less seriousness. Rosenberg is the odd man out.

This chapter aims towards redressment. The preliminary step will be to examine the ways in which the case has been made against Rosenberg as a serious critic, specifically how readings of his work's more provocative and very possibly radical political content have been side-stepped, in particular the compromising of his concept of Action Painting through successive generations of misreading. Just as a key performs the dual functions of both locking and unlocking, if Action Painting has been the primary tool for misreading and shutting out important aspects of Rosenberg's project, turned in the opposite direction it can also open up to a critical vista. The next step will be to turn to the critical re-readings and reevaluations of Rosenberg already underway. By building on this previous work and incorporating newly available primary materials (namely the Harold Rosenberg Papers at the Getty Research Institute), I will further develop the thesis that Action Painting is a significant modeling of revolutionary dialectic within the critical tradition of Marxism, as well as suggest what in the past has made pursuit of this direction in Rosenberg's criticism so unlikely. Indeed, the testament of the fortitude of these engrained readings of Rosenberg's Action Painting concept is in the generations of scholars who have purveyed the field of post-war American art and its criticism without seeing in Action Painting an indication of the critical, emancipatory, materialist aesthetic for which so many of them have pined. The failure to engage Rosenberg's thought through this rubric has both unnecessarily smoothed the way for the Cold War thesis and unfortunately impoverished third-way accounts.

Mis-Reading Action Painting

Like a venerable statue in a busy square, Harold Rosenberg occupies a curious spot—at once memorialized and ignored.

J. Hoberman⁷³

Ironically, one of the biggest factors working against serious treatment of Rosenberg has been the popularity of Action Painting. This term, to which Rosenberg is now primarily identified, first officially appeared in “The American Action Painters,” an essay published in the December 1952 issue of *ARTnews*. Rosenberg’s marginality, then, is of a paradoxical nature: it is not due to lack of representation—he shows up regularly in the expected places, art history survey books, anthologies of art criticism, exhibition catalogues, etc. (as Phyllis Rosenzweig noted in her summarizing volume on 1950s painting in New York, the Action Painter’s essay was “perhaps the single most controversial piece of critical writing to come out of the fifties, and certainly the most quoted”). He suffers instead from a marginality bound to the overpopularity of his coinage.⁷⁴ As Elaine O’Brien, who wrote her dissertation on Rosenberg and who is also the scholar responsible for organizing Rosenberg’s papers, remarked, “The outstanding paradox of Rosenberg’s reception is this tragic and comic irony of misinterpretation and influence that made him a force in creating the situation he condemned.”⁷⁵ Though, one need add, had Action Painting been taken seriously, had the politically dissident and subversive content of the term been traced back to the Marxian well-spring of revolutionary dialectics from which it sprang, it certainly would not have attained its popular currency. Rather, the three main modes (often overlapping) by which Action Painting has been thought to signify are: as painting technique; as a visual style; and as romantic existentialist posturing.

The identification of Action Painting with the painting technique that Jackson Pollock used after 1948 and that resulted in the artist’s canonical “drip” paintings was one persistently made but one Rosenberg fiercely and equally as persistently denied. This attribution, or misattribution, was the source of highly contentious debate. In one version Pollock is the genesis of the Action Painting idea itself. During a 1961 symposium on

Pollock sponsored by *ARTnews*, Bryan Robertson claimed that in 1949 a conversation had taken place between Rosenberg and the artist in which “Pollock talked of the supremacy of *the act of painting* as in itself a source of magic,” a discussion whose direct result was the critic’s “coin[ing] the new phrase: Action painting.”⁷⁶ In 1979 Barbara Rose elaborated Robertson’s claim for Pollock’s centrality to Action Painting but suggested that Rosenberg had gotten the idea not from a discussion with the painter but from looking at Hans Namuth’s black-and-white photographs of Pollock at work in his Long Island studio. Rose unfolded the following sequence of dates as proof positive that Rosenberg’s idea for Action Painting directly derived from Pollock’s gesturalist painting technique. Namuth’s photographs first appeared in *Portfolio* in early 1951 and in May of that year also accompanied Robert Goodnough’s “Pollock Paints a Picture” in *ARTnews* (fig. 4). Just a month later the Museum of Modern Art (New York) screened Namuth’s 35mm color film capturing the painter in his dance-like motions around the perimeter of his canvases.⁷⁷ According to Rose, “The initial response of the art world’s reception of the Pollock photographs was felt in an article published the following year in *ARTnews*, Harold Rosenberg’s essay ‘The American Action Painters,’ which gained world fame as the manifesto of Abstract Expressionism.”⁷⁸

What the majority of viewers saw in both looking at Namuth’s photographs of Pollock in the act of painting and looking at Pollock’s actual paintings was the process, the unconventional technique by which Pollock had gotten the paint from can to surface. Pollock’s process and paintings when read through Rosenberg’s “The American Action Painters” got coded, fairly typically and quickly, as a novel type of emphatically bodily spontaneous painting, a brash American version of the automatism cultivated by the European avant-garde of Dada and Surrealism. “From the beginning Action painting has been more or less equated with automatist gesture and thrown paint,” O’Brien surmises after a long investigation of the reception of Action Painting, “Most commonly Action painting has been interpreted as an emotion-laden expressionism.”⁷⁹ To give an example of how ingrained this pairing of Pollock and Rosenberg’s essay have become, April Kingsley, writing a layperson’s history of Abstract Expressionism in the early 1990s,

defined Action Painting as “another name for this movement” which spoke to “its physicality, its base in the process of making, rather than an intellectual esthetic position. The paintings have an improvised, rough-and-ready, almost haphazard look. An Abstract Expressionist approached the canvas head-on, in direct, unpremeditated confrontation, and left it strewn with drips and splatters, accidental gestures and studio debris.”⁸⁰ Indeed, it is difficult not to suspect that the author had an image of Pollock in mind when writing the last line; a line that almost reads as a crib of Pollock’s own description of his working methods: “I prefer . . . dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass, and other foreign matter added.”⁸¹ Kingsley’s assessment well illustrates that little has changed in Action Painting’s reception. Certainly the tenacity of this sensationalist rendition of the “mindless” but still fully emotion-wrought painter allows one to sympathize more readily with this bitter complaint against the licenses permitted by Action Painting: “The worst excesses of self-indulgence and inept art . . . result[ing] from the elevation of mindless ‘action’ over self-conscious and critical deliberation were encouraged by [Rosenberg’s] approach. . . . It strikes me now as difficult to exaggerate how much art was produced under its influence.”⁸²

Perhaps even more irksome was how this manner of painting drifted so swiftly and effortlessly beyond the confines of high art production into the technique of the amateur painter, leisure artist or hobbyist. “Amateur Standing,” a regular column in *ARTnews*, was addressed specifically to the concerns of that part of its readership. In its March 1961 issue the column featured a discussion on the “Uses of spontaneity,” which was prefaced by the scenario of amateur art students “restrict[ing] themselves to a mechanical rote imposed by their teachers.” “[F]orget everything you have learned,” is the solution resolutely proposed, “Call it doodling if you like, but just go ahead and paint.” The continuation of this discussion bears quoting at length.⁸³

“But I don’t know what to do,” the amateur complained. He was advised to “go ahead and paint, with brushes, palette knife, anything. Don’t deliberate. Most students spoil pictures by ‘knowing what they are doing.’ . . . We must penetrate to an innate sense of correctness . . . and reach for those areas of intuitive selection and taste where the real person hides.”

The student was thus pushed into what appeared to him a chaos of the inarticulate. Warned not to “think” or to remedy mistakes, nor to be self-conscious about results but to let the picture happen, he plunged. The results at first appeared chaotic—novel colors and shapes emerged and possibly for the first time he penetrated the restraints of convention and let his intuitive self take over.⁸⁴

What makes the “Uses of spontaneity” so unsettling—beyond its very title, apparently meant so earnestly here and seemingly unencumbered by cognizance of misalliance between the values of utility, pedagogy, and spontaneity as a purported realm of the unregulated—is the ghostly echo of “The American Action Painters.” The “Uses of spontaneity” relates to Rosenberg’s essay as in the children’s game of relaying an original message by whispering it ear-to-ear in a chained sequence until the last receiver says aloud the now highly distorted and often humorously nonsensical message. Only with one major difference. In the case of “The American Action Painters” and the “Uses of Spontaneity” the distortion of the original message occurs as a cleaning up and streamlining of Rosenberg’s prose: the noise is cut out. For example, those momentous, almost epic announcing lines in the 1952 essay such as “The big moment came when it was decided just to paint . . . just TO PAINT” become “just go ahead and paint.” In another instance, the straightforward advice to the amateurs to “forget everything you have learned” recalls the more woolly lines of Rosenberg’s, “The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value—political, esthetic, moral.”⁸⁵ And again, Rosenberg’s “exhilaration of an adventure over depths in which he [the artist] might find reflected the true image of his identity” becomes that reaching for the “intuitive” for where the “real person hides.”⁸⁶ The *ARTnews* amateur column edits out the ambiguity, the hesitation, the counterpoint found in the original. Everything has become sharper, clearer, more functional, ready to be incorporated into curricula and taken into the classroom as neatly packaged, pedagogy-friendly sound-bites.

Response to this new intuitive and spontaneous approach to art was not always as positive and advocacy as in the example above. To the other side, one hears in Katherine Kuh’s editorial in the winter 1958-59 issue of *Art in America* an attempt to rein

in the emotional and painterly anarchy let lose by action paintingist rhetoric while at the same time preserving the validity of the authentic Abstract Expressionist painters.⁸⁷ The Abstract Expressionists “recognize only one reality, the validity of their own emotions expressed directly. The issue is confused, however, by hordes of imitators for whom the act is little more than cathartic. New schools of art have customarily attracted blind disciples, but in a movement where the initial impulse is of the utmost importance, imitation can become emptier than usual. For it takes more than impetuous verve to invent methods vital enough to merge the act of painting with the feelings which impelled the act.”⁸⁸ If technique were divorced from “self-conscious and critical deliberation” and performed not with the mediation of thought but with the existential immediacy of “pure” emotion, then Action Painting really would reduce, and horribly so, to a mere gimmick of technique resulting in sublime quantities of “inept art.” Taken from either direction, whether from the positive and promoting stance of the “Amateur Standing” column, as a technique for getting in touch with one’s intuitive, naturally (unschooled) creative being, or the negative and deterring stance in the *Art in America* editorial, as an ominous de-skilling that turns the practice of the fine arts into a free-for-all resulting in inchoate messes, in both cases Action Painting is rendered empty and the critical intent of Rosenberg’s project overlooked.

Another major misinterpretation develops out of defining Action Painting as a visual style possessing specific identifying formal qualities. Given that Action Painting is usually half-correctly recognized as addressing “process” on some level, the presumption here is that the Action Painting-process should produce results that look a certain way. Typically it is supposed to look like a Pollock or Willem de Kooning or Franz Kline. The irony is this: if an Achilles’s heel of Action Painting is that its over-emphasis on free-form process fails to give the formal elements of the painting their proper due, what sense does it make to think that Rosenberg’s prime art concept would then still work at a visually stylistic level? One runs into difficulty in arguing that Action Painting is just about process and the individual painter’s own act of creation (both highly unrestricted) but then also suppose that Action Painting works as a visually descriptive term. Indeed,

when reading back over those parts of “The American Action Painters” in which Rosenberg works out the broad parameters for Action Painting, one notes the conspicuous lack of formal prescriptions. “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” “The painter,” Rosenberg continues, “no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be a result of this encounter.”⁸⁹ There are, however, certain assumed proscriptions. For instance, one might infer that Action Painting belongs to the general category of abstraction rather than representational painting, because the latter might easily involve reproducing an object and creating a “picture.”⁹⁰ But that is an enormously broad statement and does not permit the move to something like the actual positive terms that would tell us what Action Painting is supposed to look like. There is a marked reticence in this essay (and elsewhere), where Rosenberg could have provided more literal clues for how one visually recognizes an “event” on canvas. Furthermore, this silence is highlighted by the fact that Rosenberg does not identify any Action Painters by name. Nor do the pages of the essay’s original publication aid in determining the proper look of Action Painting through accompanying reproductions. In fact the pages of Rosenberg’s essay are distinguished by a marked lack of illustrative matter.⁹¹ Surely this adds up to a considered silence on the writer’s part, though one, to be sure, that from the beginning was ill tolerated by the art community. If Rosenberg was not going to name names there were others who would: Action Painting became Pollock’s drip, the thick paint ooze indexing de Kooning’s gestural brush or Kline’s stark, bold calligraphy. This is not to argue that Pollock or de Kooning or Kline could not be Action Painters, but that calling them Action Painters because their paintings look like “acts” is the wrong criterion by which to make that judgment. It results in flat-footed and ultimately distorting identifications. Action Painting does not work as formalist criticism, nor was it ever meant to; consequently, attempts to make it work cogently and adequately as a

formal system will be frustrated and, in turn, will lead to the usual pronouncements of ineptitude in Rosenberg's criticism and of the overall silliness of the Action Painting fad. In short, the disparaging clichés will persist, as in this, authored not so long ago, in the late 1980s, and by an art historian whose purported area of expertise is Abstract Expressionism: "the artists theatrically expressed their personal anguish on a blank canvas with little attention to form, style, and subject matter."⁹²

If these two common readings of Action Painting begin the process of reducing the content of the term, the third reading, in purportedly giving Action Painting philosophical content, effectively denies it of any serious capacity to embody content, leaving Action Painting to become yet another cliché of artistic anarcho-romanticism. This is what happens when Action Painting is superficially referred to as so-called "existentialist" painting, in which the lone individual confronts timeless questions of existence, the eternal drama of an angst-ridden "self" facing the ultimate void. This was the kind of message reinforced by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in his introduction to the catalogue essay for the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "The New American Painting," in which he named the uniting principles for the show's seventeen artists to be an uncompromising individualism, the "religion of Kierkegaard whom they honor," and the "stubborn, difficult, even desperate effort to discover the 'self' or 'reality', an effort to which the whole personality should be recklessly committed: *I paint, therefore I am.*"⁹³ This is not, however, to argue that there are no reasons for linking Rosenberg and Action Painting to certain despairing attitudes in the post-war period and to existentialism. But careful attention need be paid to the brand of existentialism to which Rosenberg sympathized. In other words, if a connection can be made between Rosenberg and existentialism, it is to be with a French Marxian third-way existentialism associated with Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir and not with refunctioned, far less philosophically rigorous versions popularized in mass culture. For instance, one might note here that de Beauvoir and Rosenberg met in 1947 during the former's first trip to the United States. In her correspondence to Sartre detailing her New York experiences she describes a series of occasions on which she and Rosenberg discussed art, politics and

philosophy and all of this within the politically-charged milieu of Bernard Wolfe (Trotsky's ex-secretary), Lionel Abel, Dwight Macdonald, Nicola Chiaromonte, among others.⁹⁴ Additionally, when Sartre himself visited the United States, Rosenberg made efforts to befriend him.⁹⁵ Perhaps most important is the long correspondence Rosenberg kept with Merleau-Ponty as well as Rosenberg's publishing relationship to *Les Temps Modernes*.⁹⁶ The point is this: the French Marxist existentialism *contra* romantic existentialism was *politically* Marxist and very much falls into the category of post-war revisionist socialism's reworking of Marxist theory.⁹⁷

When one fails to distinguish popular romantic versions of existentialism from the socialist-political version associated with the French strain of Western Marxists (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, De Beauvoir, among others) one easily loses the politically progressive and critical social-mindedness sustained in that body of thought. In romanticized existentialism, in what gets pegged as both a retreat from and a glorification in bourgeois individualism, the life of the emotions, psychology and its expression through individual subjects become paramount, taking precedence over considerations of community or collective agency. In this version, what is left is the highly idealist notion of an apolitical and ahistorical interiority of the human subject—a timeless realm of the interior truths of the human psyche. In Action Painting the violent marks, slashing, and so on, of paint on canvas are then read as expressions of this eternal human struggle. Importantly, however, throughout his long career, Rosenberg insisted on distinguishing the principle of the Action Painter from its caricatures, from all the obscuring “clichés of art journalism.” “[A]n action is not a letting go, a surrender to instantaneity, except as a ruse. Painting that is an action is a struggle against limits, those within the artist himself, those which he finds in the situation of art, those which he deliberately sets up on the canvas. Mere stroking and slopping of paint resulted in tiresome caricatures of Action Painting that marked its phase of mass acceptance.”⁹⁸ “[E]xistential theology,” Rosenberg complained in a tirade against the many manners in which Action Painting had been recuperated, was one of the false “[a]rtificial analogies . . . drawn between features of Action Painting and prestigious cultural enterprises.”⁹⁹

What is remarkable is that these “tiresome caricatures” and “artificial analogies” have persisted in such unquestioned form in the work of some of the field’s most respected scholars. Thierry de Duve, for example, in writing about the reception of Frank Stella’s black paintings in 1959 at the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and the ascendancy of Greenberg’s criticism, explains:

it is clear that [Stella’s] show crystallized a new sensibility which had hitherto expressed itself only negatively, as a sheer lassitude with Abstract expressionism. It also offered the possibility of rereading Abstract Expressionism, and Pollock’s ‘all-overness’ in particular, in formal rather than existential terms. Harold Rosenberg’s concept of ‘Action Painting’ became suddenly trite and hopelessly romantic, whereas Clement Greenberg’s understanding of ‘American-type Painting’ in terms of formal results, historical conventions, and flatness of the medium gained momentum and credibility. . . . “Modernist Painting”. . . offered a bold yet simple reading of the history of modern painting, one that gave painting renewed intellectual credibility and the avant-garde a new sense of direction. In the forties and the fifties, there was a revival of the late-romantic cliché of the artist as instinctive resource of creativity, with no ties to history and no cultural function beside his (never her) sacred vocation.¹⁰⁰

Leja as well—though certainly not in the service of promoting Greenberg—reiterates the familiar refrain: “Rosenberg’s later existentialist interpretation of the New York School action painting was rooted in Surrealist principles: emphasis on the creative process, attention to what the work of art reveals of the artist’s interior dynamics, and antiaestheticism, to name just a few.”¹⁰¹ Rosenberg’s “account of Abstract Expressionism as action painting,” Leja continues, “made the drama of self-discovery the heart of its accomplishment.”¹⁰² If this last description hardly seems the grounds for undue fretting, one need only be reminded how easily this “drama of self-discovery” signed for the far from politically neutral expression of American freedom. Indeed, Guilbaut quite unambiguously lines up Rosenberg’s Action Painting with Schlesinger’s vital center liberalism. “Victorious liberalism, ideologically refashioned by Schlesinger, barricaded itself behind an elementary anticommunism, centered on the notion of freedom. . . . Individualism would become the basis for all American art that wanted to

represent the new era—confident and uneasy at the same time. Artistic freedom and experimentation became central to abstract-expressionist art.”¹⁰³ Footnoting this section, Guilbaut remarks, “The ideology of individualism would be codified in 1952 by Harold Rosenberg in his well-known article ‘The American Action Painter [sic].’”¹⁰⁴ What is most pernicious in this is how Rosenberg’s concept is folded into a politics with which he was very much at odds and how Action Painting is turned into precisely the sort of handy aesthetic by which to escape the political.

This outlines the most common ways in which simplistic interpretations and identifications of Action Painting have misrepresented the concept, thereby effectively emptying the term of complexity and certainly minimizing the traces of politically radical content it might once have held. In its clichéd version, as Rosenberg himself was all too aware, it becomes a technique and style of painting to be associated with such gestural Abstract Expressionists painters as Pollock, de Kooning or Kline, as a way of describing the types of canvases they produced and their technique as the “act” of spontaneously spattering paint, the “act” of impassioned marking up of canvas with the result being an existential remainder of the artist’s performance in front of the void. The artist, according to this equation of release and containment, benefits from the release of pent-up feelings, explosive creative energies. The artist gets to “let go” on canvas, a release that signifies self-healing, unspecified manners and realms of personal therapy, all contained within the arena of the canvas, a zone safely buffered from the evils and complications of the outside world but also, significantly, containing the release of this explosive act by preventing it from reaching beyond the confines of the aesthetic and imaginary, or beyond the cultural institutions of the art world. In the end the personal is produced as inchoate expressionism through an ultimately confining rhetoric that prevents any sense of alignment with social content or import. Undoubtedly, when viewed in this fashion, Action Painting does come off badly, as a shallow vision of an all too ideologically suspect artistic freedom for a fashionably tortured, incoherent subject. Taken in these lights Action Painting is perfectly primed for deployment by the State Department as Cold War cultural ideology. An important question remains, however: if Action Painting

is taken neither as a painting technique, nor a visual style, nor a quasi-philosophical aesthetic correlating to romantic existentialism, what indeed should it be taken to describe?

Recent Reinvestigations of Rosenberg

In the recent past there has been indication of modest adjustments made in the appreciation of Rosenberg's critical oeuvre. Barbara Cavaliere in the early 1980s protested the "imminent put-down and wipe-away of Harold Rosenberg, the 'other' critic of Abstract Expressionism." She based her case on what she perceived as the critic's poetic sensibility and the special importance of his proximity to the artists themselves. "A poet at heart and an art critic by association with broad cultural issues, Rosenberg offers many clues on the issues and his prose on Abstract Expressionism is couched in metaphors similar to those of the artists' writings. . . ." ¹⁰⁵ A few years later and in response to the posthumous publication of *Art and Other Serious Matters*, a volume of previously uncollected and some never before published writings of Rosenberg's, Adam Gopnik noted that the "anxious critic" deserved a second look: the "sheer audaciousness of Rosenberg's criticism makes *it* significant: what he wanted to do was to wrest the established canon of high modernist taste away from the whole notion of 'canon' and 'taste.'" ¹⁰⁶ In the place of canon and taste (here, words flagging Greenberg's domain) Gopnik asserts that Rosenberg—now more flatteringly the "Tenth Street Ruskin"—sought morality in art and that his motive was ultimately to develop "philosophical criticism." ¹⁰⁷ While these 1980s indications of reviving interest in Rosenberg deserve mention, it is hard not to detect a flimsiness in their belated nods. One may suspect the emergence here of a kind of pendular refrain: Rosenberg, Greenberg, Rosenberg, Greenberg. Recalling Rosenberg seems to be about fashioning a satisfying companion piece to the Greenberg (already so clearly set in place), thus balancing out the so-called

objectivity and cold empiricism provided by Greenberg with Rosenberg's more poetic sensibility, his access to the creator-side and artist's personality—the sorts of flavors that may have been lacking in a critical diet of strict Greenberg.

Not until the last decade or so, starting in the 1990s, have serious reinvestigations and more sophisticated perspectives of Rosenberg been attempted. Possible contributors to this shift have been the ever-increasing historical distance from Greenbergian formalism, but also, and in a complex relationship, the passing of conceptual practices, both of which—as the opposed framing paradigms of art object and post-object—have added to a sense of need for reevaluation of the major models. Also helpful for contextualizing Rosenberg's work has been the increasing familiarity with Western Marxism as its concepts and representatives become academic commonplaces; and, finally, the release of Rosenberg's papers in 1999 to the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities.¹⁰⁸

The new arguments, all of which reassess Rosenberg through recognition of the “social and political” content of his criticism, are these: Elaine O'Brien's doctoral dissertation, “The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg: Theaters of Love and Combat”; the substantial role Rosenberg plays in Jachec's *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*; and Fred Orton's short but absolutely key essay on Rosenberg, “Action, Revolution and Painting.”¹⁰⁹

The outstanding virtue of O'Brien's dissertation is its basis in intense amounts of primary research, including interviews with many of Rosenberg's friends and colleagues as well as his daughter (a longtime childhood friend of O'Brien's). Most notable, however, is her truly unique access to a resource not formerly available to scholars: it was she who initially prepared Rosenberg's papers for their present residency at the Getty.¹¹⁰ Consisting of sixty-five boxes and three flat file folders, this body of material physically extends to thirty-three linear feet and includes, among a host of other things, journals, correspondence, manuscript drafts and lecture notes, ranging from the 1930s to Rosenberg's death in 1978. Beyond this obvious contribution, several points should be noted concerning the nature of O'Brien's reevaluation of Rosenberg. Unarguably her

stance is one of advocacy, and this primarily in opposition to what she regards as his unfair evaluation with Greenberg and a shallow rejection of him made by proponents of sixties formalism. Describing the disjunction between Rosenberg and this younger generation of Greenberg adherents, she writes: “It seemed as if Rosenberg had arrived from another intellectual world to cause resentment and confusion”; and again, elsewhere, “Rosenberg and the new art critics and curators were working with contradictory sets of principles. . . . Rosenberg’s art criticism was constantly mismeasured against his opponents’ criteria.”¹¹¹ Importantly, she recognizes (as does Orton below) that the crux of this butting of heads owes to the tenacity of the “myth” of Action Painting.¹¹² In trying to break through the popularized, mythic form of Rosenberg’s central proposition, O’Brien makes the highly significant connections between Rosenberg’s notions of action and praxis, dialectic and dialectical critique.¹¹³ That acknowledged, however, there is a marked unwillingness on O’Brien’s part to extend that connection much further, or towards too aggressive a political identity. In other words, although she flags “praxis” and “dialectic” as appropriate terms through which to frame Rosenberg’s interpretation and use of “action,” she appears far more comfortable in associating these to a general stance of criticality, of the kind signified by “bohemian modernism,” “cultural crisis,” battles against the “institutionalization of contemporary critical-creative production,” and to the defense of “independent critical culture in America.”¹¹⁴ Indeed, the overall narrative framework suggested by O’Brien’s dissertation, tending towards the intellectual biography, organizes Rosenberg’s life and work through “theaters of love and combat” in which Rosenberg’s desired object is a community of creative companions. The “ideal world” of “Plato’s Socratic dialogue, the *Symposium*” is the theater of love whose survival he must fight for in the theater of combat, where he contends with all those forces—professionalization, institutionalization, commodification—threatening this ideal bohemia.¹¹⁵ Framing Rosenberg’s motives this way as nostalgia for golden-era philosophizing also tends to cast Rosenberg’s project within the domain of a general, unspecific and inoffensive humanism. While one may detect, as O’Brien freely admits, a “negative dialectic” in

Rosenberg's thought, it is present only by grace of Rosenberg's desire for the "bonhomie" of "his intimate community of artists" (with these last—"bonhomie," "intimate community of artists"—forming for O'Brien the synonyms for Rosenberg's sense of socialism).¹¹⁶ More pointedly, O'Brien's curbing of too intensive an interpretation of Rosenberg's relation to revolutionary politics is indicated in her criticism of Orton's thesis: "Orton's conclusions (and it seems his attitude toward interpretation) are different from my own. I would argue, for example, that Rosenberg's 'marxism' was inextricable from his 'existentialism' and 'humanism.' And overall I believe that the need is to allow Rosenberg's criticism to display its own unique shapes—its perpetually transforming dialectics—rather than to replace one 'ism' with another."¹¹⁷

Caution is needed here. It is precisely through "existentialism" and "humanism" that one is able to place Rosenberg within the construction of a new post-war liberalism, as active in that "cultural turn" as a turning away from Marxist politics. This is Jachec's argument. Indeed, it is an interesting exercise comparing the differences in O'Brien's and Jachec's positioning of Rosenberg. While O'Brien wants to capture Rosenberg's politics—his 'marxism' (O'Brien always uses a lower-case "M" in reference to Rosenberg)—holistically, or, as she puts it, as "inextricable" from his existentialism and humanism, the other "ism" that she would like to avoid is "liberalism" and any subsequent suggestions that Rosenberg accommodated himself to its feeble post-war varieties. In this sticky spot, the sort of allowance O'Brien advocates for Rosenberg—"the need is to allow Rosenberg's criticism to display its own unique shapes—its perpetually transforming dialectics"—is not one to which Jachec is temperamentally disposed.

Rather than allowing Rosenberg to occupy this more ideology-neutral free-form space, Jachec sees him playing an easily recognizable role in her cultural turn thesis: Rosenberg's art writing is a prime exemplar of the transformations of the Left from radicalism to liberalism through the mediating discourse of culture. Jachec writes, as one of the "chief critical links between the independent left and the avant-garde in the mid- to late 1940s," Rosenberg, along with Greenberg, "frequently used art as a tool for political

analysis.”¹¹⁸ It is Rosenberg’s penchant for existentialism and a vague humanism that makes him fit the “profile of the typical American independent leftist intellectual in the immediate postwar years.”¹¹⁹ For although Rosenberg “focused on the work of art as an act of radical critique” and “related this to Marxist theory” as part of a leftism grounded in avant-garde negationism, what marks him as such a key character in Jachec’s narrative is what she perceives as his surrender to the rising tide of existentialism, romantic humanism and aesthetic avant-gardism, all of which eventually drowns out his earlier commitment to political Marxism.¹²⁰ As she views it, this shift begins as an attempt to define an ethical Marxism through existentialism in reaction to fears of totalitarianism, thus arguing for the individual agent against notions of mass agency and collective identity. The artist, and eventually more specifically the American Action Painter, fits this bill as the image of an exemplary subjectivity—the “creative, self-determining individual”—playing out his or her radical challenge to the system through artistic or cultural agency. And if this individual cultural agency appeared somewhat paltry and ineffectual for the task of changing social reality (to which the earlier collective political agency of revolutionary socialism set itself), one shrugged and pointed to the unfathomable depths of the interior: as Jachec writes, “recognition of the self as subjectivity was tantamount to assuming a tragic worldview, the ‘intrasubjective’ artist, Rosenberg maintained, began with this ‘nothingness,’ or this ‘void’ present in every individual, and developed his or her own ideas freely within it.”¹²¹ The unhappiness and alienation of the modern artist would be naturalized. The artist was a visionary whose workplace was in the imagination and whose specialized challenge was to confront the interior void. The artist’s role was to envision other worlds, not to change this one.

In keeping with this general picture, Jachec reads the Action Painters essay as a major demonstration in the U.S. Left’s cultural turn from Marxism. Rosenberg here “swap[s] his concern for the survival of Marxism for the survival of the avant-garde as the custodian of the former’s values.”¹²²

The abnegation of political responsibility that Rosenberg invested in Abstract Expressionism in ‘The American Action Painters’ was . . . and in his own words, a recuperation of ‘the progressive consciousness of the

epoch' via a distinctly apolitical form of existentialism, one that arrested agency in the creative act. . . . Rather than an example of postdialectical Marxist thinking, 'American Action Painters' can be seen more appropriately as a requiem for Rosenberg's ideals of 1948.¹²³

So although Rosenberg, along with those of the "independent left in general," might have started out with Marxism, or something more orthodoxly so, and only turned to subjectivism and existentialism as part of an attempt to redefine socialism in the face of crisis, what comes out the other side is "apolitical"—both a requiem for lost ideals and a reconciliation with the present system.

Finally, here now is Orton's argument. Though Orton's essay predates both O'Brien's and Jachec's work—and both refer to Orton's work as well as register their disagreement with him—I have reserved him till last because his thesis sets the foundation for my own continued investigation of Rosenberg. What distinguishes Orton's reading of Rosenberg, in contrast to the previous two characterizations, is the firmest insistence on engaging Rosenberg's criticism and in particular Action Painting as operating within the problematic of revolutionary politics. "My concern," the author states at the beginning, "is to offer a political reading" of the "American Action Painters."¹²⁴ It is a concern squarely posed as a challenge to the "triumph of a depoliticized art practice, apolitical painting and art for art's sake," though—and this is the crucial point—it is exactly not about recuperating Rosenberg through a "lazy existentialist-humanist reading" (possibly O'Brien) and certainly not as a reconciliatory post-war liberalism or a cultural turn away from politics (Jachec) but, rather, to look at Rosenberg expressly through the lens of a substantial Marxist commitment.

The core component in Orton's critical exhumation of the revolutionary political dimension of Rosenberg and Action Painting is "action." The aspect of "action" that Orton must uncover is the one which is obscured when attributions of either post-war liberalism or neo-liberalism are applied to Rosenberg, or when "action" is taken strictly to mean gesturalism, bodily emphatic modes of applying paint to a surface or any such variant thereof. "Rosenberg's idea of 'action,'" Orton insists, "came out of the very particular way he read Marx's writings."¹²⁵ The pedigree of Rosenberg's "action" needs

to be traced back to its revolutionary source, a move that will “enabl[e] a rereading of ‘The American Action Painters’ as a text situated in and inscribed by a particular Marxist tradition.”¹²⁶ The effective shift of reference for Action Painting is from a “studio-act” of the kind classically pictured in Namuth’s “in-the-act” photographs of Jackson Pollock creatively applying paint to canvas to a “street-act” of the kind referred to in Leftist discourses of direct action. But already this points to a familiar and contentious spot: avant-garde studio-acts are not the same as vanguard street-acts, or are they?

In addressing this last question, Orton importantly extends the reading of the “action” theme beyond the 1952 Action Painters essay, showing how Rosenberg’s earlier “writings on drama and the proletariat, which focus on issues of action and agency” are “relevant to understanding his characterizations of action painting.”¹²⁷ Specifically, the essays Orton calls attention to are “Character Change and the Drama” (1932); “The Resurrected Romans” (1948); and “The Pathos of the Proletariat” (1949). This happens to be a remarkably prescient grouping of essays. In the Rosenberg Papers at the Getty Research Institute (and this is a matter to which I will return), there is strong evidence that Rosenberg very much wanted these essays collected into a single volume whose overarching theme would be Marx’s drama of history. However, when Orton was writing “Action, Revolution and Painting” (published in 1991), this material was not yet available. It stands then as a powerful endorsement of Orton’s thesis that he was able to arrive at this larger theme through close textual analysis of the individual essays.

The question to return to then is what comes out of this extended understanding of “action”? In what way does Rosenberg’s “action” derive from Marx? As Orton would answer, Action Painting “was painting about the possibility of a radical change that had not happened in the 1930s and 1940s . . . and could not happen in the 1950s”; its politics “were determined by the failure of the proletarian revolution.”¹²⁸ “Action,” Orton argues, becomes the lynchpin by which Rosenberg designs a sympathetic alignment between the American Action Painter and the proletariat. The painter and the prole were characters of the same type: embodying a stance of revolutionary negativity, both exist in situations

where they are forced *to make themselves*, in which the only identity available to them is the authentic one of a self-identity forged from their own direct actions.

To unpack this a bit, Orton calls attention to two conspicuous and interrelated characteristics shared by Marx's proletariat and Rosenberg's American Action Painter. One is their homelessness within the social order. Pastless and without sustaining myth, with neither institution or ideology, what they each lack is stable, grounded identity and what they both verge on is being nothing. Given this, one of Orton's tasks is to explain why the adverb "American" modifying the "Action Painter" is not hugely contradictory. "One thing which needs to be immediately established is what it is that Rosenberg thought was 'American' about 'American action painting.' He was obviously trying to write something about a kind of *collective identity* [emphasis added]," Orton writes, "but there is nothing nationalistic, patriotic or chauvinistic about his use of 'American' or his idea of what kind of person the 'American' action painter might be. 'American' has to be understood as meaning a kind of ethnic diversity and cosmopolitanism," as well as referring to "displaced persons, immigrants, the sons and daughters of immigrants."¹²⁹ "In 'The American Action Painters' the artist is figuratively and literally a pioneer and an immigrant."¹³⁰ Similarly (and as Rosenberg was well aware), Marx's proletariat is pastless ("The proletariat, called into existence by the bourgeoisie and a product of modern industry, is without a past."), is as yet contentless ("The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing"). Merely a personification ("called into existence by. . .," "a product of. . ."), the proletariat is nothing.¹³¹

The second shared quality develops out of the previous. Tethered by no ideological stakes within the system, negatively formed by the values of the status quo, both the proletariat and the American Action Painter occupy a unique and potentially revolutionary position within the social order. To become anything, they must forge themselves, they must be self-creators, self-made men. They are the ones in the position to realize new form, to trans-form, because the form they have under present structural conditions is marked so negatively—as nothing. But crucially, they must enact all of this directly, through their direct action, without taking outside direction, orders from above,

or any assumed consciousness. To this end, both the proletariat and the Action Painter “must exercise in himself a constant No.”¹³²

My own investigation of Rosenberg’s political aesthetic through the central concept of Action Painting will owe a considerable debt to Orton. Indeed, this applies to O’Brien’s and Jachec’s work on Rosenberg as well: all three excavate components that will be important in my own construction of Rosenberg. That said, however, there are several provocative extensions left to explore. What seems to remain unarticulated might best be described as a synthesis of aspects of Orton, O’Brien and Jachec. Beginning with Orton’s foundational proposition that Action Painting needs to be engaged as a concept seriously in dialogue with Marxism—and specifically with the problems of revolutionary consciousness, agency and action, reciprocating identities of the American Action Painter and the proletariat—what appears underdeveloped is the philosophical component of dialectic as praxical activity, as all those intersecting moments of theory and practice, mind and matter, subject and object. It is in fact O’Brien who, though in a tone resisting more exacting political implications, explores the parallels between Action Painting and praxis. This describes an interesting scenario. Orton is able to show the deep political dimension of Rosenberg’s “action” as a foundational attribute of the revolutionary proletariat and the Action Painter but does not fully explore it as signing for praxis as well. O’Brien, while quite comfortable in discussing Action Painting as a praxical model, is unwilling to extend that discussion too far towards the realm of radical politics. Furthermore, had Orton’s and O’Brien’s theses been synthesized what might have been arrived at is something like a flipped version of Jachec’s argument. The image is flipped or reversed because instead of Jachec’s cultural turn from politics to aesthetics it would be a return of politics to aesthetics. The hypothetical Orton-O’Brien synthesis is this: the dialectical model that Rosenberg elaborates in the concept of Action Painting is already figured in Marx’s meditations on the ideal dream-image of praxis as self-realizing activity, as a creative dialectical process, all towards the identical subject-object of history which itself participates in the larger dialectical composition of individual part and social whole.

Chapter Two:

Harold Rosenberg: Action Painting Revisited as Philosophy of Action

Rosenberg's Politics

Not surprisingly, confusion over the nature of Action Painting's political content has been tied to confusion over its author's own political identity. To be sure, there is a good deal of murkiness and conflicting opinion about the direction and depth of Rosenberg's political commitments. For background the typical characterizations of Rosenberg's political stance are rehearsed below but with this forewarning. Although the issue of Rosenberg's political affiliation needs to be addressed, the overall fruitfulness of this type of inquiry is limited. Quite simply, the hard evidence that would indisputably secure Rosenberg's political coordinates may not exist. Indeed, the release of the Rosenberg Papers is a good case in point. Searches made through this material looking for evidence on the order of a Party membership card are bound to disappoint. In fact, a letter from the archive itself explains why this order of evidence is unlikely to surface. In a 1940 letter to Nancy Macdonald, Dwight Macdonald's wife, the Washington, D.C.-bound Rosenberg, then working as the national arts editor of the American Guides Series of the Federal Writers Project of the W.P.A., requested that Nancy purchase (with funds that Rosenberg had included) a copy of *Labor Action*, a leftist periodical published in New York. Obviously this was a roundabout way of obtaining this publication and seemingly senseless except that Rosenberg's motive in this maneuver had been to avoid being added to *Labor Action*'s subscription list. He would later explain his rationale to Dwight Macdonald: "For all lists in their time, if not at once, fall into the hands of investigators—and the way things are going now, with spies already reported in most divisions, a name on a list is as good as a hammer in the fist."¹³³ Given the subsequent history of McCarthyism it is hard not to congratulate Rosenberg for a healthy dose of paranoia at this relatively early date, but, more broadly, the incident warns of how cautiously people,

especially leftist intellectuals, could monitor their behavior. Precisely what many were trying to avoid was a “name on a list”—the sort of evidence that can either sit in archives for future scholars, or be confiscated by government agencies. What this means practically is that a good deal of the work for altering (or sustaining) given characterizations of Rosenberg’s politics will be borne by textual analysis of Rosenberg’s work.

There are two interrelated complications to Rosenberg’s political picture: the fate of the 1930s Old Left in U.S. history and the identification of Rosenberg as a New York Intellectual. Let me begin with the latter. Broadly, the New York Intellectuals can be described as a loose affiliation of radical writers and intellectuals, many of them from Jewish immigrant backgrounds, many educated at what was then the College of the City of New York (now City College), who came of age in the 1930s and participated in that decade’s dream of overcoming capitalism, realizing Communism, finally bringing to a close humanity’s pre-history. Neil Jumonville’s study of this group offers a generational breakdown of its members:

The first generation includes members born between 1900 and 1915 who came to political maturity in the 1920s or early 1930s: Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling, Dwight Macdonald, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Meyer Schapiro, Harold Rosenberg, Lewis Coser, Clement Greenberg, and Mary McCarthy. The second generation was born between about 1915 and 1925 and came to political maturity during the Depression: Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset, Norman Mailer, and William Barrett. A third generation arrived on the scene after World War II and included Norman Podhoretz, Susan Sontag, and Michael Walzer.¹³⁴

Rosenberg’s place within this group is further secured when one finds his name on the New York Intellectual roster provided by such diverse thinkers as Irving Howe and Hilton Kramer. Howe, also identified as a central member of the group, recollected that Rosenberg, along with Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Lionel Trilling, Lionel Abel and Alfred Kazin, were the “leading critics” of “[t]he intellectuals of New York who began to appear in the thirties, most of whom were Jewish.”¹³⁵ Hilton Kramer, the polar opposite of Howe and certainly speaking from an outsider’s point of view, also made the

identification of Rosenberg with the New York Intellectuals: “formidable and combative—in many respects the quintessential New York intellectual,” Rosenberg was “resourceful in polemic and sometimes dazzling in style. . . . His style, both in conversation and in writing, was nurtured on that special mixture of Marxism and modernism that came to constitute the distinct *Weltanschauung* of the New York intellectuals.”¹³⁶

But it is the political trajectory of this group generally that complicates the issue of Rosenberg’s politics. For the New York Intellectuals, while credited with an “early mastery of Marxism in the 1930s,” are then seen as abandoning “Marxism after the war, and adopt[ing] . . . a pluralistic liberalism,” which for some of this group delineated a path further to the Right, to increasingly conservative brands of Cold War liberalism and ending, in the most notable cases of Sidney Hook, Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, in neo-conservatism.¹³⁷ The question then has been, to what extent does Rosenberg’s political course flow with this general political current away from radicalism and heading to conservatism?

Certainly there is plenty of evidence and a good deal of consensus that Rosenberg aligns with this early position of 1930s radicalism. For Rosenberg, this “red” decade, at least up until about 1937, was dramatically navigated by the Communist star and a potent dream of a socialist revolution. The early part of the 1930s Rosenberg spent in intense and serious study of not only Marx but other Marxist thinkers as well, including Rosa Luxemburg and Georg Lukács among others.¹³⁸ The fruits of Rosenberg’s early study of Marxism—critical essays fluent in the marxian problematic alongside his own proletarian-inspired verse—appeared in the major Communist-oriented and -directed periodicals of the day. He also participated in workers’s rallies and parades; he marched; he wrote; he reported and he organized—all of which presents the picture of somebody seriously motivated by his political commitments. Even O’Brien—always wary of any colorations on Rosenberg’s political position that could shade into doctrinaire Marxism—allows that during this period Rosenberg took the highly activist stance of one who believed Marxism to be a real possibility for world revolutionary change. “In the mid-

thirties,” she writes, “the appeal of Marx to Rosenberg was not merely about serious culture critique; it was about the possibility of transforming the real conditions of life . . . between 1934-1937 he held almost magical hopes for a revolution.”¹³⁹

The tricky part of the task has never really been the securing this early, “youthful” revolutionary identity but with determining the effect on his Marxism by what happens in the later part of the 1930s, through the demoralizing events of the Moscow trials (1936-38), the Russian-German Non-Aggression Pact (August 22, 1939), and the Soviet invasion of Finland (November 30, 1939), and on throughout the Cold War with its ever increasing bifurcation of “us” and “them.” The continuing problem for historians has been in getting a clearer picture of both the subtle and not-so-subtle political and ideological divisions that fractured American leftism after the disillusionment with the “Russian experiment,” with the increasing alarm over totalitarianism and as the United States came to seem ever more the sole defender against barbarism. The task of composing Rosenberg’s political portrait has been no exception. Take the following comparison as an indication. First, listen to Sidney Hook’s charges against what he took to be Rosenberg’s hypocritical revolutionary pretense. According to Hook, Rosenberg, far from being a true radical, “was a shameless political opportunist,” one always ready to criticize others but never himself willing to take real political “risks.” Hook found additional ammo for his attack by pointing out that Rosenberg “headed public relations for the Advertising Council of America, celebrating the virtues of American business, and at the same time was ‘a closet revolutionist’ or a ‘parlor social nihilist’ attacking everyone for selling out.”¹⁴⁰ Of course, given that this is Sidney Hook, one of neo-conservatism’s founding fathers, one can hardly bypass certain (admittedly *ad hominine*) ironies: it is after all Hook who will receive honorific recognition from Ronald Reagan during the latter’s presidency.¹⁴¹ But, the contrasting position to Hook’s disparaging view of the authenticity of Rosenberg’s political radicalism can be developed from a number of other reports. Take for example the one provided by Alfred Kazin in 1993. During an interview he spoke of a photograph of Rosenberg that he kept pinned to his bulletin board. Kazin said he kept it there because Rosenberg was the only one of the Old Left to

have remained radical his entire life. That photograph served as a daily reminder, for encouragement.¹⁴² Here is a grab-bag of other instances: Ben Halpern, who would become Rosenberg's editor at Horizon Press, addresses Rosenberg as "Dear Comrade" in a postcard from 1946¹⁴³; Irving Kristol in 1948 criticizes Rosenberg for his recent essay on Marx, "The Resurrected Romans," in which Rosenberg is "too faithful to the master."¹⁴⁴ In 1957 Rosenberg happily boasts to Maurice Merleau-Ponty that his essay "Marxism: Criticism and/or Action" has been translated into Polish and distributed to Communist Party leaders in Poland.¹⁴⁵

Switching to the secondary scholarship, there is still lingering confusion over what to call Rosenberg's political position and over how close that ever came to party politics. Belgrad, for instance, wants to call Rosenberg either a Trotskyite or former Trotskyite art critic; Jumonville refers to him as a "former Marxist"; Craven devises the appellation "democratic, non-Leninist socialist" to describe the class to which Rosenberg and the likes of Irving Howe and Meyer Schapiro belong; and Orton, among others, has suggested that Rosenberg was most probably a fellow-traveler.¹⁴⁶ Far less likely, though an option that Orton does not fail to mention, is the possibility that Rosenberg had shared a much closer affiliation with the C.P.U.S.A. Could he not have been one of those unspoken, officially unrecognized members of the Party, under one of its strategic policies that certain party members should be unlisted, remain unofficial and thus better serve the Party's interests precisely for *not* being openly identified as a card-carrying member? As Orton indicates, "Considering the secrecy which continues to surround membership and which was deliberately fostered by the C.P., it's very difficult to know who was and who was not a member of the C.P.U.S.A." The more likely scenario, Orton suggests, is that Rosenberg was not a member of the C.P. but a highly invested sympathizer. "It seems that being a member demanded a kind of discipline that most writers and artists would not be able to accept," Orton notes. "Because it [the Party] could not accommodate any criticism from members at local levels of organization, it would not accept into its ranks any really independent figures, and they, in turn, would not accept its dictates."¹⁴⁷

The general thrust of more recent accounts is that Rosenberg maintained a fairly consistent independent Marxist position, and therefore he might better be placed with a minority subset of the New York Intellectuals that would include figures like C. Wright Mills, Howe and Schapiro, all of whom remained life-long socialists, never renounced Marx, but kept a critical engagement with Marxism and fought fiercely to maintain the integrity of their minority position against a steadily encroaching “couch liberalism” among their former politically socialist peers.¹⁴⁸ Jachec, for example, although she later sees a lessening of this stand, describes Rosenberg as “a committed socialist since the 1930s, and a key figure in the effort to define an ethical Marxism in the 1940s,” who *contra* Greenberg “more consistently related” his art theory and criticism to “Marxist theory.”¹⁴⁹ This view fits with the political outline generated by O’Brien’s study of Rosenberg. According to O’Brien, the coordinates by which Rosenberg’s independent Marxist position can be located are: that he is an independent intellectual staunchly affirming the value of independent marxian critique of society; that he fought against anything that seemed to threaten the basic proposition of independent critique, any form of coercion and therefore was not a party political of either the Stalinist or Trotskyist camps.¹⁵⁰ Rosenberg “never disavowed his radicalism,” insists O’Brien.¹⁵¹ For him “Marx would always be ‘the master’” and this was largely because “Rosenberg’s Marx was a radical democrat like himself.”¹⁵² Indeed, one could mention here a small, torn-out scrap of blue paper in Rosenberg’s papers. Dated from 1945, and in Rosenberg’s script, the author quotes Marx: “To win the fight of democracy, that is socialism.”¹⁵³ It was, O’Brien argues, because Rosenberg took from Marx not the rigid set of historical prophecies developed under the name of Marxism-Leninism; rather Rosenberg’s Marx signified more a radical critical methodology, Marxist analysis meant a level of critical thinking in which values are always in question and in which the one absolute bowed to is the “absolute need for the tensions of dissent.”¹⁵⁴ His admiration and use of Marx was lifelong, and Rosenberg “would always acknowledge his large intellectual debt to Marx.”¹⁵⁵

To reiterate, nonetheless, I believe that a more valuable sense of the substantive meaning of Rosenberg's political identity can be more compellingly worked out in close textual analysis of his writings. As I see it, the first and most obvious indication that Rosenberg had not forgotten the Marxist project is attested to by the centrality of Marx's first term within Rosenberg's own formulation for emancipatory painting at mid-century, Action Painting.

Action Painting at an Inactive Moment & The Demise of Dialectic

10 November 1837

Dear Father,

There are moments in one's life which are like frontier posts marking the completion of a period but at the same time clearly indicating a new direction. . . .

In accordance with my state of mind at the time, lyrical poetry was bound to be my first subject, at least the most pleasant and immediate one. But owing to my attitude and whole previous development it was purely idealistic. . . .

Poetry, however, could be and had to be only an accompaniment; I had to study law and above all felt the urge to wrestle with philosophy. . . .

When I got better I burnt all the poems and outlines of stories, etc., imagining that I could give them up completely, of which so far at any rate I have not given any proofs to the contrary. . . .

*Your ever loving son,
Karl¹⁵⁶*

H was unable to play his part in life, even in an imagined life. He had dared to conceive the idea of certain possibilities, but he did nothing to carry out these possibilities; he did not even imagine himself carrying them out. He was neither an actor nor a novelist. Was it because he was too "busy"? Or was he afraid of what he might get himself into? On the surface it would seem that the actual pressed him too hard with its immediate questions, to which he devoted himself out of early-acquired sense of duty and without

any hope of reaching a relevant solution. This gave him the appearance of being both lazy and indifferent to real events.
Harold Rosenberg, 1939

In the passages quoted above, two relatively young men—both, at the time of their writing, juggling commitments to poetry, philosophy, and law—are captured in moments of intimate revelation: one writes a letter home to his father, the other writes an entry in his journal, and each reminisces on choice and resolve, on taking action or not. The specter haunting these two passages is not, as in Shakespeare’s tragic drama, the slain king of Denmark but rather that of the son, the spirit of Hamlet.¹⁵⁷

For all that similarity there exists a crucial difference between the two narrators. The first, Karl Marx, and the second, Harold Rosenberg, enact, as it were, the duality of Hamlet: they instantiate the structural dichotomy of the opposing halves of the drama. Marx’s “Hamlet” is the Hamlet of resolve and action, the Hamlet of the second half of the play, the Hamlet who having had already embarked on that fateful sea voyage where he would both confront and escape death, returns empowered. He now stands ready and poised to take up his duty-bound task. A biographical correlation is worth noting here as well. The letter young Marx, recently a student at the University of Berlin, writes to his father comes after a confrontation with Hegel’s philosophy and a spell of “madness” (“For some days my vexation made me quite incapable of thinking; I ran about madly in the garden by the dirty water of the Spree. . . .”; as his biographers have noted, he had indeed been arrested for “nocturnal noisemaking”), a subsequent illness from which he returns to life transformed, beyond his youthful idealism and romanticism (“All the poems of the first three volumes I sent to Jenny are marked by attacks on our times, diffuse and inchoate expressions of feeling, nothing natural, everything built out of moonshine, complete opposition between what is and what ought to be. . . .”) and resolutely beyond his “first subject,” lyric poetry.¹⁵⁸ Thus, one finds this Marx/Hamlet at the crucial juncture of turning away from the creative arts and of turning towards the realm of action (“I arrived at the point of seeking the idea in reality itself”) by committing

to law and philosophy, two subjects that will be important in his development of historical materialism, his revolutionary philosophy of action.

If Marx can be said to exemplify this Hamlet of determined resolve and action then Rosenberg's Hamlet—where "H" stands ambiguously as the initial for both "Harold" and "Hamlet"—appears the melancholic Hamlet of the first half of the drama, the one incapacitated by doubt, "unable to play his part" though instilled with—and one imagines tormented by—an "early-acquired sense of duty."¹⁵⁹ But if Rosenberg's Hamlet appears excessive, burdened by even more morose futility than the title character, one might try to explain this in terms of the distance in revolutionary history separating Marx's "commitment" and Rosenberg's "laziness," a distance chalked by the scar-like failures and disappointments of revolutionary socialism, many of them freshly incurred for those of Rosenberg's 1930s generation. Indeed, to revise the image slightly, Rosenberg's brooding, inactive, theory-heavy Hamlet appears paralyzed because he is already too familiar with the play, he knows the tragic, annihilating resolution and baulkingly refuses that end as a "relevant solution." He is the repeat-performance Hamlet, the actor who cannot quite rally the energy to take on the second half of the play because he resists the reaching its blood-soaked conclusion(s). Indeed, by 1939, Rosenberg's "H" unfortunately was more than qualified for the role of the damaged, disillusioned, and incapacitated actor: in that year the earlier blows of Stalin's show trials, the anguish of the Spanish Civil War, the Soviet state's official rejection of modern art were all critically compounded by the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland. Therefore, it is not without irony that this "H," who designates himself unable to act, even to "imagine himself" doing so, should eventually come to theorize Action Painting.¹⁶⁰

I bring up this image of Hamlet and of the bifurcated structure of the title character and the play because it helps encapsulate the terms and relations of Rosenberg's problematic as one addressing the issues of a materialist aesthetic and the cultural turn/return as engagements with the problems of theory and practice. Rosenberg himself would come to analyze more explicitly the structure of Hamlet in these very terms, as a

split between theory and practice: the first Hamlet who melancholically broods in inactivity and waxes poetically (“The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite/That ever I was born to set it right!”) is the Hamlet of theory; the second Hamlet who engages in a tragically destructive and blood-thirsty practice is the Hamlet of practice. Rosenberg would return to this dramatic split-image repeatedly; indeed, it stood as an emblem of the problem and the stakes.

Remarkably, what is commonly overlooked is the sharp irony and political poignancy in Rosenberg’s appellation “Action Painting,” for it was coined in a situation in which action was not only a heavily weighted term, one that in certain milieus strongly suggested a charged political orientation, but also came at a moment when the activity (or rather inactivity) of the Left was very much at issue. In 1960 Robert Goldwater would at least hint at this context when he mentioned that “For the artists, at the time, the unspecified suggestion of political, or at least social concern contained in the word ‘action’ had its importance,” but he leaves the subject at that.¹⁶¹ This is a provocative place to stop, for taken one step further would verge toward reanimating the political charge of Action Painting by acknowledging something of the perversity of its being offered in a milieu and time in which action was the very thing the Left felt increasingly most incapable of; this was the period of the Left’s post-war quieting, taken as a sign of Leftism’s being caught between the horns of a dilemma, a sign of lethargy, a sign of failure. Any way one reads this inactivity, one may be sure that Rosenberg, as a self-proclaimed “man of the thirties,” was fully cognizant of the loaded political connotations of “action.”¹⁶² The explicit point here is that the political import and meaning of the “action” of Rosenberg’s Action Painting is revealed when examined within the context of a crisis of political action, at a time of *inactivity*.

But inactivity is, of course, that which is furthest from one’s mind, when Action Painting is illustrated, as it typically is, by a Pollock-esque drip or spatter. Both O’Brien and Orton have observed how Action Painting’s significance is reduced to Pollock and that this reduction has been facilitated by decontextualizing “The American Action Painters” essay from Rosenberg’s larger body of writing. For indeed, and again as both

authors have noted, Rosenberg's concept of action predates and exceeds what has become its canonical appearance in 1952. It is a sustaining and sustained theme developed throughout Rosenberg's long career. As Rosenberg himself argued heatedly with Bryan Robertson in 1961 at a symposium on Pollock:

The aim of this statement [Robertson's] is, obviously, to present Pollock as the originator of Action painting in theory and in practice, if not in name. . . . The statement, is, of course, entirely false. . . . Pollock never spoke to Rosenberg about the "act of painting." . . . The concept of Action painting was first presented in the December 1952 *ARTnews* . . . Rosenberg had *published* writings on the subject of action as constitutive of identity as far back as 1932; in 1948, a year before the alleged tip-off, he further elaborated the topic in an essay in *The Kenyon Review* entitled "The Resurrected Romans." . . . Rosenberg had told Pollock, in the presence of a witness, that the article was not "about" him, even if he had played a part in it.¹⁶³

What makes Rosenberg's response illuminating is not so much his denial of Pollock's centrality to understanding the "action" of the Action Painter but that he has provided the key for breaking out of this misidentification by telling Robertson, as well as the rest of the audience, to look back to 1932 (which would doubtless have been to "Character Change and the Drama") and to the 1948 essay "The Resurrected Romans"—an essay whose very title reaches deep into the Marxist dilemma of revolutionary action.¹⁶⁴ As one should recall, this is precisely the tack taken by Orton in his groundbreaking work on Rosenberg, arguing that Action Painting is a political concept and one coming from Marxist discourse. However, despite the emphaticness of Orton's argument, the strength of Rosenberg's Marxism has, for the most part, remained difficult to perceive. The clichés about Action Painting still stand. But since the time of Orton's essay's publication, Rosenberg's papers have become publicly accessible, and these new primary materials do indeed augment Orton's initial thesis.¹⁶⁵

The new material—including personal and professional correspondence, notebooks, annotated copies of books from Rosenberg's personal library, and lecture notes—all start to suggest a different orientation for viewing Rosenberg's problematic. Instead of seeing a Marxist political idea couched in the concept of Action Painting, it

may be that Action Painting is an aesthetic idea couched in Marxism. This prompts a provocative shift in perspective, one that recommends even further the need that Action Painting be reconceptualized to cohere with the dominant terms of Rosenberg's larger project. What is made increasingly apparent by the new material is that Rosenberg's central focus was not on devising art criticism for abstract expressionism, gestural, or of any other variety. Rather, the sustaining problematic—of which his interest in art and culture were expressions—was Marxism, and it was as an emblem of social praxis that Action Painting figured so importantly, so centrally.

In stark contrast to the resounding success of the piquantly phrased "Action Painting" one finds tucked away in the Rosenberg archive, in fragments here and there, clues to the nature of Action Painting's missing "other," Rosenberg's project on Marx's drama of history. Based on the evidence of Rosenberg's Papers this study of Marxism was a central project to Rosenberg that spanned from the very beginning of Rosenberg's writing career to the very end. From his professional correspondence one can surmise that Rosenberg began to seriously push for a new volume of his previously published essays on Marx in the late 1940s and at least three of the essays that Rosenberg wanted collected in this volume were his 1932 *Symposium* essay "Character Change and the Drama," his 1948 "The Resurrected Romans," and his 1949 "The Pathos of the Proletariat," the latter two both published in *The Kenyon Review*.¹⁶⁶ Although all three essays had been published in respected intellectual journals of the day, it is manifest from Rosenberg's correspondence that he greatly desired the published appearance of all the essays together—and that he so strongly felt the content of the essays, their meaning as sustained work on "Marx's Drama of History" (this was the title Rosenberg suggested to publishers for the proposed volume) was diluted, even lost, in not being read together.¹⁶⁷ This was an even more freighted concern for a writer of Rosenberg's epigrammatic prose style, whose texts, as a number of readers have observed, easily can require multiple readings. Irving Howe described his writing as "not immediately transparent," and certainly not "journalistically 'clean.'"¹⁶⁸ "As an essayist with a predilection for ambiguity, paradox, irony, and polemic," O'Brien suggests, Rosenberg "clearly did not

aim to be universally understood.” Further, in contrast to Greenberg’s modernism, Rosenberg’s “did not take hold because its principles could not be so easily synthesized.”¹⁶⁹ Looking at the issue from a slightly different angle, and a less generous one, Bernard Bergonzi criticizes the writer’s style—all of “Rosenberg’s gnomic words”—for leading to the troubles in understanding the Action Painting essay.¹⁷⁰

Given Rosenberg’s reputation as a writer of difficult prose, as well as his own acknowledgement of his work’s tendency to opacity, his push to collect the essays together—with the hopes that coherence could be arrived at through theme and variation—makes good sense. On this point, Rosenberg seems to have been all too prescient. Certainly one outcome of this project’s failure to have materialized is that Rosenberg’s Marxist commitments have appeared negligible. As it was, however, Rosenberg’s tentatively titled *Marx’s Drama of History* was unpalatable to publishers from the very start. In a 1949 letter to Rosenberg, Herbert Weinstock, of the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house, rejected the proposal reasoning that the subject was “too recondite and intellectualized to make a book for a general trade publisher.”¹⁷¹ However much disappointment this might have carried for Rosenberg, there is little surprise that American publishing houses at mid-century instinctively hesitated and stalled and finally outright rejected a volume of that topic; it never saw the light of day, or an audience beyond the committed few who read Rosenberg’s Marx manuscript and encouraged him to keep at it.

For the record, Pantheon Books, in 1950, also rejected the same manuscript because the publishers were “scared” of the topic, and Beacon Press responded similarly to the proposed volume a year later.¹⁷² The eventual rejection is almost painfully evident in a Beacon Press letter to Rosenberg, one that diligently explains the press’s policy to seek out many outside opinions on manuscripts being considered for publication and that emphasizes how this was “particularly true of manuscripts that might give rise to controversy.”¹⁷³ On the other hand, this excuse rings slightly false as it was at this very moment that “controversial” accounts on the subject of Marxism were quite popular and especially at this moment, examples being Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1941)

and *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945), Leslie Fiedler's *An End to Innocence* (1955) and R. H. Crossman's edited anthology, *The God That Failed* (1951).¹⁷⁴ The telling distinction, however, that separates Rosenberg's "unpublishable" Marx text from these other quite publishable ones, is that although all of them, more or less, treat a common subject—the failure of Marx's revolutionary narrative—Rosenberg was not writing from the perspective of newly anointed ex-Marxism and ex-Communism. Nevertheless, if the commercial publishing houses were unwilling to publish material on the subject from a not-ex-Marxist—someone perhaps still too faithful to the "master"—there is also evidence, in Rosenberg's papers, of the support of intellectual peers who repeatedly underscored to Rosenberg the value of his thesis, the tremendous importance of the volume. Among these peers, Irving Howe and Maurice Merleau-Ponty stand out for their unflagging moral and intellectual encouragement to Rosenberg to stick with the rejected Marx project.¹⁷⁵ Paul de Man wrote encouragingly to Rosenberg in 1949, "This book of yours on Marxism is an event of first importance and let no publisher tell you otherwise. I mean it."¹⁷⁶

A sharp and very telling contrast forms between the countless invitations and not uncommonly immodest pleas to the critic who coined Action Painting and the dry rejections dismissing the Marx project. Again it should come as no shock that Rosenberg was easily able to sell a seemingly depoliticized notion of Action Painting but ultimately not able to publish his ideas on Marx, a project whose realization would most certainly have jeopardized the marketability of Action Painting itself. There is no denying the damage done to Action Painting as an attempt to work out a radical political aesthetic by rending it from Rosenberg's work on Marx's drama of history. Despite all of this, nevertheless, the tenacity of Rosenberg's commitment to both his doomed book project and to Marxist criticism is demonstrated up through his final projects. Tellingly, the last seminars Rosenberg taught at the University of Chicago as a professor within the Department of Art and the Committee on Social Thought, were on Marx, with a specific focus on the early writings, the texts, significantly, where Marx struggles to come to terms with revolutionary failure.¹⁷⁷

The tragic but fitting conclusion to Rosenberg's attempts to realize his Marx project came at the time of his death, when Rosenberg was working with Dick Howard on finally assembling and publishing the long desired collection of essays that had been rejected three decades earlier. That volume, once again, failed to materialize.¹⁷⁸ All this forms a situation of the kind of tragic ironies and dramatic reversals that so fascinated Rosenberg: that Rosenberg's failed project and the one he kept alive by persistent, almost dogged, reinvestigation was his work on Marxist revolutionary failure. His great success, Action Painting, was something that could only ever be a success with the kind of audience for which action could never signify more than gesturing with a brush and who would never dream of it taking place beyond the arena of the canvas. His great success marked, as well, a haunting failure.

What can be understood from the disparity between the reception of Action Painting and that of the Marxist drama of history is the conscious refusal of or unconscious resistance against a dialectical understanding of action. In other words, the conceptual equipment needed to put into play the political significance of "action," and thus to see Action Painting as a serious political aesthetic, is lacking. The pivotal notion by which action turns either toward mindless or empty performance of activity or towards the dramatic act of self-realization is the *dialectic*.

The following, and particularly vicious, attack on Rosenberg makes a sharp example of this point. Returning to 1965, the year in which Rosenberg suffered such rough handling in the art press generally, Amy Goldin's attack on the critic in the pages of *Arts Magazine* stands out particularly. Titled "Harold Rosenberg's Magic Circle" and illustrated throughout with alchemical diagrams, the organizing insult of Goldin's article was of Rosenberg as a deluded alchemist working with a long dead and refuted logic (fig. 5). Goldin acidly complains that because Rosenberg lives in his own delusional cosmos, one which follows his own self-made logic, both of which indicate a "denial of the function of intelligence" and a "refusal to be fully present," he is incapable of doing the work of art criticism. In fact, with his esoteric and mystifying methods, using the "entrails of the artist" to "divine the nature of the historical present," he is a "menace" to

artists.¹⁷⁹ Studying Goldin's caustic metaphor one detects that familiar refrain: Rosenberg has made a tremendous error by mistaking the task of true art criticism. Instead of choosing to be "fully present" or modern—something which, in Goldin's limited sense, implies properly keeping to the modern, rational, empirical methods of formalist criticism—Rosenberg has taken the madman's path whereby the six key terms that Goldin identifies—"HISTORY, REVOLUTION, ACTION, THE NEW, THE ARTIST, and IDENTITY"—make interplay within a highly suspect "magic circle."¹⁸⁰

What is fascinating is how these terms, when read within the context of Goldin's essay—rather than suggesting the worthy and relevant (and by and large certainly not *that* exotic even within the realm of art criticism)—begin to sound like an ominous incantation of forbidden words. Even further, Goldin alludes to Rosenberg's "shifty" methodology by which these terms interact; they are constantly transforming ("alchemically" as Goldin herself might have put it) into their opposite, where identities are not cut-and-dried but appear as the momentary outcome of a conjurer's mystical processes. "[F]or all his key terms," as Goldin warns, "have a dark underside," forming a "set of satanic doubles."¹⁸¹ Goldin's admittedly colorful reactions to Rosenberg's thought would hardly seem to deserve this much attention, except that she has, despite her obvious loathing, provided a description of Rosenberg's methodology as a properly dialectical one. Thus, in a twisted way, Goldin should be given her due. What this also suggests is that the reason for the unavailability of the dialectical model through which to articulate the action principle of Action Painting was perhaps not so much that dialectical methods were not recognized but that they were reviled. For the record, Rosenberg's correspondences reveal two additional attacks on his use of dialectic. Clyfford Still berated Rosenberg after the publication of "The American Action Painters," for his "conspicuous dialectical slanting to collectivist premises," something which in the context of Still's letter appears to go right along with a slew of other faults: "patent psychological errors. . . . ignorance of even recent Art History . . . [and] unfamiliarity with the most common data of aesthetic and philosophic contributions."¹⁸² In another instance, Irving Kristol of *Encounter*—not one of Rosenberg's comrades by any means—

reacted to what he perceived as Rosenberg's dialectical sensibility. In a 1953 letter responding to one of Rosenberg's essays Kristol complained that Rosenberg wrote through "counterpoint," which Kristol continued "is alright for the frogs," but was not "suitable to English."¹⁸³ This takes one back to the complaints against Rosenberg as an art critic: he does not focus on one "thing" but is constantly rattling off about the "situation."

It is worth noting as well that while Rosenberg's investment in dialectics would hardly have raised an eyebrow in the early and middle part of the 1930s when the Marxian dialectic was enjoying a brief vogue in radically-inflected intellectual circles, starting towards the latter part of the 1930s and on up through the Cold War period, dialectics came increasingly under attack and from a number of directions. More and more suspect and shunned, dialectical methods were cast off either as a relic of the failed Marxist utopia or quarantined like a form of highly dangerous and especially noxious mental contagion. Nor does it fail to make sense that "dialectic" and "dialectical methods" would get swept aside as Marxism itself was vilified at the onset of the Cold War. Dialectic was marked negatively by a Marxism now irremediably linked to the dread threat of Communism: the totalitarian nightmare of Stalin's dictatorship; the Soviet Union as the incomprehensible and reprehensible other to the democracy, freedom, enlightenment and general humanity of the United States and the rest of the civilized Western world; and Marxist theory as the pernicious body of dogma used for brainwashing and mystifying otherwise reasonable human beings. What accounts for some of this reaction is the eliding of the crucial distinction between Marx's "historical materialism" and a Leninist "dialectical materialism"—an elusion out of which both now signify devastating hocus-pocus acts with History. As testament to how powerfully "dialectic" still connotes the sense of an erroneous path or a substance to be shunned and the seriousness of the degree to which this term is under erasure, note Jachec's strict and insistent qualification of the independent Left's redefinition of Marxism as a "variant of *postdialectical* [emphasis added] socialist thought."¹⁸⁴

In all fairness, however, one should add that the negative reception of dialectics was not limited to the specifics of the outcome of the Soviet Union. The demise of dialectic was far more general. For, admittedly, even those mostly sympathetic to Marxism had difficulty with this mysterious notion said to be at the core of Marxist theory. “[T]he art of reconciling opposites through hocus pocus” was how George Sorel famously described it in 1950.¹⁸⁵ Earlier, in a fiery exchange that took place 1938 in the pages of *Partisan Review*, Edmund Wilson and William Phillips dueled over the “myth” and “devil theory” of Marxist dialectic.¹⁸⁶ Wilson’s contention in the “The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic” was that Marxist socialism suffered a fundamental flaw by the presence of the dialectic. “From the moment that they [Marx and Engels] admitted the Dialectic into their semi-materialistic system, they had admitted an element of mysticism.”¹⁸⁷ In various other places in the essay Wilson indicts the dialectic as “pure incantation,” as “religious myth” and as one of those “abstractions of German philosophy” which Marx and Engels, however “materialist” they tried to be, never shook. Wilson’s charge recalls the academic commonplace that Anglo-American thought, preferring the empiricist’s hard facts, the social scientist’s chart of statistics and clean categories all around, has never been particularly hospitable grounds for dialectical conceptualizations and Germanic idealist philosophy in general.¹⁸⁸ In another example, Wolfgang Paalen, in his March 1942 “Inquiry on Dialectical Materialism” issue of the magazine *Dyn*, asked “Is Dialectical Materialism the science of a verifiable ‘dialectic’ process.”¹⁸⁹ Last, but not least, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sartre heatedly debated the contentious issue of dialectics. The concluding chapter to the former’s *The Savage Mind* aggressively posed analytic reason against Sartrean dialectical reason. All of this seems to corroborate the reflection Bertell Ollman, a noted scholar of Marx’s dialectical methodology, made on the supreme unfashionable-ness of dialectics: “Is there any part of Marxism that has received more abuse than his dialectical method?”¹⁹⁰

In light of the historical reasoning that the demise of dialectic is interwoven with the failure of the “Russian Experiment,” as well as the essentialist reasoning that dialectical thought simply has never been at home with the Anglo-American

commonsense nature and analytic mind, it might be constructive to briefly indicate what which would stand opposed to dialectics, as well as to discuss the kinds of political alignments made with non-dialectical approaches. In the commonsense approach (or, what Ollman also refers to as the “social science view”), the basic category is the “thing”—static, independent, immediate—the “supposedly independent part.” As Ollman explains, “things exist *and* undergo change. The two are logically distinct. History is something that happens to things; it is not part of their nature.”¹⁹¹ These are the conceptual groundings of formal logic and analytic reason, the basis for the commonsense approach. On the one hand, there are discrete things or units, commodities or atomized individuals and, on the other, discrete acts and processes. Hailed as a return to rationality and clear-headed thinking, the political alignments of this approach—as they were delineated in the Cold War period—was with piece-meal liberalism and “postsystematic theory” as against dialectical totality.¹⁹²

Certainly this puts an interesting spin on Rosenberg’s rejection of liberalism and his outspoken contempt for couch liberals. It hints that his irritation with liberals and with that phenomenon that he linked with liberalism, professionalization (another version of the piece-meal), went far deeper than hostility towards old comrades whom he suspected of selling out or that his tirades against professionalization were simply the complaints of an older generation generalist who turns bitter as he finds himself without a place in a system of specialization. Rather, his antagonism stemmed from a very deep source: his overarching commitment to a dialectical methodology.

And, in a way, Rosenberg could assume this admittedly unpopular method in no less obvious form than by fashioning Action Painting as his subject. The ur-mechanism of Action Painting is the dialectic as the active mediations between subject and object through which identifying forms are realized. It is, most emphatically, through the framework of dialectic that Action Painting makes sense within the larger picture of Rosenberg’s critical political project; by the same token, it is when action is taken undialectically—that is, as mere activity—that Action Painting is misread.

While versions of this point surface in both O'Brien's and Orton's work, what I want to add more explicitly to such accounts is this. There are two primary abstractions of dialectic, or, two primary ways in which the mediations of subject and object operate in Rosenberg's problematic. One aspect is the structural sense of parts and wholes and their interactive relation. This dialectical aspect captures systemic qualities, the identity of parts based on their location within a larger context. It fashions the individual and social as relational moments of totality. A second aspect is that of process, of activity, of theory and practice unity, of individual praxis. It focuses on the sense of making, and indeed changing, identity. Though both abstractions of dialectic are evident in O'Brien's and Orton's work, the important qualification is that O'Brien's determination of Rosenberg as a dialectical thinker has been made primarily in this latter sense, as a matter of individual confrontation between subject and object; and that Orton's work, on the other hand, has focused primarily on Rosenberg as a dialectical thinker in the former sense, in the sense of structure, and part and whole relations.

Consciously or not, have both thinkers here downplayed that "other" aspect of dialectic in order to avoid determinations of Rosenberg that they felt improper or irrelevant in the overall characterization of what his work was about, its real content? For O'Brien the "other" dialectic, that of part and whole relations and the construction of social totality, too strongly suggested a militant, dogmatic, unreconstructed political identity for Rosenberg. For Orton the "other" dialectic, that of the subject-object encounter, too easily smacks of the kind of "naïve, romantic, quasi-philosophical, theatrical," and "lazy existentialist-humanist" paradigm in which Rosenberg gets trapped.

In continuing the task of Rosenberg's re-reading, then, I will insist on this addendum: Rosenberg's project needs to be read in light of dialectics but, critically, with a dialectical dialectics jointly articulating the two axes of dialectic described above. What remains is to make explicit how these two senses of dialectic work within and work together in Rosenberg's system: those will be the tasks of the following sections of this chapter.

Marx's Revolutionary Drama: Act, Actor & The Question of Agency

Technically: In Marx, the essential conflict takes place on the stage.

Harold Rosenberg¹⁹³

The above comes from a note written sometime in 1939 by a Rosenberg deep in the study of Marx, in the middle of working out the structural-dynamic drama which will serve as the critical scaffolding for his assimilation of Marx. As Orton draws one's attention to, his was a particular (and, at moments, a seemingly peculiar) way of reading Marx but, nevertheless, it was a consistently held one as well, dating as far back as Rosenberg's initial encounter with Marx in the 1930s and extending through his last seminars at the University of Chicago in the 1970s. There is ample evidence of the long-standing importance of this model to Rosenberg's understanding of Marx. For instance, in a 1936 letter to Harriet Monroe, then the editor of the Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine to which he contributed, Rosenberg defended his engagement with Marx precisely on this issue: "I could name a long list of writers who have acquired through marxism an understanding of social forces, whereas before they became aware of marxism they were completely innocent of what caused movement in society."¹⁹⁴ Or later, in 1957, in a reflection back on the 1930s and the popularity at that time of Marxism with the bohemian intelligentsia, he offered this: "Like everyone else, I became involved in Marxism, but from the start my Marxism was out of date. I was interested in Marx for the sake of something else. . . . I found in his writings an image of the drama of the individual and the mass. . . ."¹⁹⁵

A problem Rosenberg would encounter was in the troubling lack of distinction made between drama and theater. All too typically, Rosenberg's drama would be allowed to slide into mere and artificial theatrics. For certainly "drama" locates another of those clichéd handles by which Rosenberg is all too easily understood for espousing art as theatrical performance. As Hilton Kramer complained, Rosenberg is a "writer who tends to see everything . . . as 'drama'," and thus Action Painting turns into theatrics on canvas.¹⁹⁶ The distinction that needs to be reinforced is that of the theatrical and the

dramatic. The theatrical is performance in the sense of superficial acting, in the sense of acting as untruth, a false immediacy, a false sense of the concrete. It is all surface and surface effects. By drama, however, Rosenberg refers to something markedly different, indeed something opposed to the theatrical, that negates it as superficial appearance. Drama is a device for critical abstraction, for perceiving the underlying structural logic, for seeing abstract relation. Drama operates, for Rosenberg, as a dialectical schema for mapping relations of part and whole, individual and social. Finally, drama is Rosenberg's metaphor for totality.

To reiterate, Rosenberg's work takes on the appearance of being undialectical and lacking in critical clout when perceived as being constructed around the metaphor of theater rather than drama. The displacement of drama by theater has been the central route by which Rosenberg's thought is reduced to a mushy, romantic, naïve proposal for hyper-individualism. Rosenberg's irritation at being mistaken for actually advocating theatrical displays of the artist's personality is heard in the following complaints. "In contrast to the meagerness of art, the artist is blown up to gigantic proportions," Rosenberg chaffed in 1971, "The artist has become, as it were, too big for art."¹⁹⁷ And, in the draft-notes for a letter to Lionel Trilling in 1974, Rosenberg proclaimed, "I have never wanted to argue for individualism as a value."¹⁹⁸ As another example, in the contentious exchange between Rosenberg and his interviewer, a Mr. Hole, Rosenberg hotly refuses the interviewer's reductions of his work. Mr. Hole has Rosenberg pegged as a critic invested in "ideology, social influences," and "psychic processes," all of which apparently means that Rosenberg is advocating the position of the art critic as some kind of "psychoanalyst," concerned with "private dream activities, his [the artist's] affirmations of will, his psychic activities."¹⁹⁹ It is at this point, with the most blatant of Mr. Hole's blurring of critique of ideology and social influence with some manner of popular, unschooled psychoanalyzing of the artist, that Rosenberg cuts in to make a "very important . . . distinction." "[W]hat we're interested in is not the personality of the artist. . . It has nothing to do with his divorcees or his sex habits."²⁰⁰ Rather, Rosenberg asserts the interest in the artist is not in and for the idiosyncrasies of his personality—something

which Rosenberg elsewhere noted were increasingly used as marketing ploys for artists—but far more structurally, in terms of the artist as a “model . . . of the creator.”²⁰¹ Or again, Rosenberg insists: “For Marx the actor is not a ‘pure’ creator whose difficulty is a subjective one only. For Marx the actor is an intermediary between a reality that is both changing yet resistant to change. . . .”²⁰² O’Brien has also cautioned against easy readings of Action Painting as an art espousing uncritical individualism. Returning to Rosenberg’s political roots in the 1930s she finds evidence of Rosenberg’s opposition towards “bourgeois individualism,” which accompanies the “self-fascination of personality” and usually means nothing more than the limited bourgeois notion of individual freedom mapped solely by the coordinates of money, property and career with little or no concern for the social totality.²⁰³ As O’Brien maintains, Rosenberg’s wary attitude toward conceptions of the individual posited within capitalism and by the bourgeoisie remained with him up through and beyond his writing of “The American Action Painters,” leaving him troubled with misgivings that the essay might be misread as an argument for “solipsistic bourgeois individualism.”²⁰⁴

Returning again to de Beauvoir’s accounts of her stay in New York one finds a highly interesting description of a dinner party that took place on May 7, 1948, hosted by Bernard Wolfe. Rosenberg (here referred to as S. K.) was in attendance and evidently quite vocal on the subject of action. De Beauvoir writes:

An intense discussion on the question of action is under way, and it lasts well into the night. This subject is of great interest to me, since among young people at universities and New York intellectuals. . . . I have consistently observed a penchant for inertia, which at first stunned me. By contrast S. K. is stunned by what he calls our “action complex.” He thinks Saint-Exupery, Malraux, and Koestler suffer from this malady, among with Camus and Sartre, to say nothing of Louis Aragon. Of course, he’s not preaching a yogi’s attitude. Throughout history, there have been moments when action has been possible. Lenin is an example of this. But today, the objective situation allows no effective individual intervention in France or in America either. The will to action is not just a subjective attitude, a maladjusted attitude that begs to be psychoanalyzed—especially among intellectuals, given that, for the moment, they have no role to play. . . . Certainly, there is always a gap between the subjective truth and the objective reality of an action; every agent is also an actor, and he cannot

know what kind of figure he is cutting in the world of other men through the role he is playing on his private stage. To the extent that this is what S. K. maintains, I agree.²⁰⁵

What De Beauvoir's account underscores is how "action" thought of as a possibility situated structurally—at the intersection of personal "subjective truth" of the individual agents and social totality. It further draws attention to the serious sense of qualification surrounding "action" for Rosenberg. He is no voluntarist, he is not preaching revolutionary action, he is not attempting to rouse to arms through fiery rhetoric, he is not caught up in an "action complex." And why? Because the underlying qualification is this: one must locate the individual, its possibility and its limitation, within the "objective situation." Or, to rehearse the lines Rosenberg frequently called upon: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."²⁰⁶

A concrete example of Rosenberg's adherence to this position can be drawn from an argument he had with Paul Goodman, a longtime peer and colleague. The argument took place in 1962 over Rosenberg's monograph on Arshile Gorky and Goodman's highly critical review of that book.²⁰⁷ Rebutting that review, Rosenberg promptly attacked Goodman's flippant dismissal of history: Goodman's criticism of Rosenberg's work was that the picture of Gorky, the man, the artist, becomes too caught up in the historical situation. The monograph, according to Goodman, faltered on the point of not being able to keep the artist and history separate. For Rosenberg, the so-called criticism of not keeping the artist and history separate worked like a red flag: "I wrote of Gorky as a man stuck with the history and the art of our time and conscious of being stuck."²⁰⁸ "Gorky was responding to historical actuality with historical consciousness and intention."²⁰⁹ The very indication that artists and history were things that could be kept separate, that objective history had no effect on art and/or artists, were signs of Goodman's utopian, anti-historical delusion. History was not an optional ingredient to be added or abstained from based on one's personal tastes; treating it so lead to some

alarming consequences. “He [Goodman] wishes to deny as unreal any power not emanating from within the individual and which cannot be controlled by inner movements—you relax and things relax. This assumption of total freedom is not only Utopian, it leads a daring soul to primitive magic.”²¹⁰ Pointedly, it is precisely the popular romantic existentialistic stance of Goodman, of the kind that is typically assigned to the author of Action Painting, that Rosenberg so vigorously attacks. “*They* [artists] live in situations made up of details, including the nutty ones. *They*—dammit—live in determinism; *they* have to fight it out with imposed limitations.”²¹¹ Rosenberg’s individual, Rosenberg’s actor is the dialectically fashioned one, existing in a “personal-historical complex.”²¹² For Rosenberg actions, of necessity, take place in situations and situations are always historical: artists can not but act in historical situations. In this argument Rosenberg attempted to extricate his version of artistic agency as very much lived within and limited by the objective situation from that variety of agency suggested by Goodman which—and increasingly so as the 1960s progressed—appeared to suggest subjective autonomy and support a definition of freedom as an anarchistic “letting go.”

Indeed a rather remarkable passage from an article titled “Life and Death of the Amorous Umbrella,” published in 1942 in the American surrealist magazine *VVV*, serves as a prescient indication of Rosenberg’s wariness of the creative anarchism Goodman would later advocate.

This ability to combine spontaneously has been taken as a sign of dermal alertness characteristic of those born of the spirit who, like the wind, blow where they list. The embrace of the umbrella and the sewing machine has thus become the device on the banner of absolute freedom.

In our admiration for the free, pure, beautiful and revolutionary, we must take care not to overlook the pathos of the umbrella’s quick-fire romance. Though his act is perfect in its moment, a distinct psychological malady is implied by his unpremeditated leap. . . . Everything points to frantic impulses and the absence of critical spirit.

The anarchism of the amorous umbrella does not change the conditions of his existence. . . . He is still himself, the slave that society made of him, and the force and duration of his embrace are not really as unconditioned as they seem.²¹³

The above could almost stand in for a description of the aspirations and problems that Action Painting would later accrue when taken in the “absence of critical spirit.” The language and images of this passage—the “dermal alertness,” of “free, pure, beautiful and revolutionary” spirits who “blow where they list” and who risk taking that “unpremeditated leap,” in an “act” which “is perfect in its moment”—eerily prefigure the Action Painter. And from this one can surmise that whatever Rosenberg’s notion of Action Painting would eventually be (and not publicly and in print at least for another ten years)—because it is by his own definition, a critical form and process—it could not be pure anarchism or uncritical spontaneity. As Rosenberg makes very clear the Action Painter, or any other revolutionary vanguard artist, would need to do something other than merely blow where he or she listed if “absolute freedom” was to be more than a mere banner. For, to slightly rephrase Rosenberg here, mere anarchism—that breed of free spirit *minus* critical spirit—does not tally up, in the end, to revolutionary spirit. It is possible for one to be supremely dermally alert, aware of every slightest nuance of body and mind, in connection with one’s interior and allowing one’s creative spontaneous juices to flow, without changing an iota the conditions of existence, still being the “slave that society made of him.” To make that kind of assumption is “a distinct psychological malady,” delusion. Ominously, Rosenberg warns that spontaneity, the miscellany that falls into the category of the free, unconscious, anarchistic, is “not really as unconditioned as [it] seem[s].”

The displacements that Rosenberg sees happening in stances of creative anarchism, both in his 1962 disagreement with Goodman and in his 1942 wariness of surrealism, are those which interiorize crisis, keeping it squarely in the non-rational, merely inexplicable realm of the artist’s creative personality. The force of Rosenberg’s irritation even led him to sympathize with the anti-modernist Georg Lukács. “In the postwar novel and theater, despair, the ‘void,’ ‘loss of self,’ have become clichés used to organize episodes, language, images. One can hardly help sharing Lukács’ impatience with glib intimations of an underlying ‘human condition’ that turns real events into mere illustrations of an irresistible sickness.”²¹⁴ As Rosenberg will insist on a number of

occasions, Action Painting was situated at a crisis point—one should not dismiss the “crisis-nature of Action Painting.” “To forget the crisis—individual, social, esthetic—that brought Action Painting into being, or to bury it out of sight (it cannot really be forgotten), is to distort fantastically the reality of postwar American art.”²¹⁵ The mistake is made by linking up Rosenberg’s Action Painting to a narcissistic version of crisis in which the nature and shape of the crisis experienced is confined to the minuscule scale of one’s private emotional ailments, leaving unaddressed any connection between the crisis-ridden individual and the objective crisis-ridden social whole. In other words, Rosenberg’s sense of crisis was not abstract; it was crisis understood as explicitly defined and informed by history. The crisis—the “*social* [emphasis added] crisis”—that Action Painting was responding to was that of figuring a way to act, to formulate a praxis, or an “opportunity for a doing that would not be seized upon in mid-motion by the depersonalizing machine of capitalist society, or by the depersonalizing machine of the world-wide opposition to that society.”²¹⁶

But how then did this play out? What is the drama? How is it revolutionary? How are structure and agency reconciled? And how can the act of Action Painting be said to fit this provocatively grand bill? To answer these questions I will return to Orton’s argument. Specifically, Orton has begun the process of highlighting “personality” and “identity” as the two key poles by which Rosenberg’s dramatic metaphor operates. First articulated in 1932 in “Character Change and the Drama”—an essay whose importance is further corroborated by O’Brien: “Rosenberg always pointed to [that essay] as the ‘basic piece’ that identified his lifelong critical position”—here Rosenberg sets up the structure of personality and identity as the two primary terms through which to conceptualize dramatic character change.²¹⁷

The vantage point of personality, or the “organic point of view,” brings into focus the individual specificity of the “felt.” It is about an “entity enduring in time,” a continuity of being: it is “naturalistic,” “biological,” and the changes that occur—its personality development—are part of this fabric of continual psychological transformation and mutation, of organic unfolding.²¹⁸ Its actions are read within a

narrative of development as expressions of individual psychology. These observable overt acts, however, are merely clues, the “excess” spilling over from the subjective interior. Attempting to grasp individuals as personalities means accepting a concrete, lived specificity that “can be grasped only by a non-rational operation.”²¹⁹ Rosenberg associates biographies and the modern novel, with a finger pointing to Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, with the organic point of view, the naturalistic personality. But this richness of being found in the personality also has to be acknowledged as a sort of unbounded concreteness and specificity of being that as such is formless and nonconceptual. Personalities are essentially unworkable. They quite literally cannot get out of themselves. They are immediate. Certainly they feel, they suffer deeply, but they simply cannot act on the level of the world-historical, of the epic. The nerve endings are too close to the surface. Personalities are unable to abstract enough to get a sense of the larger picture, totality, or get a grip on the social articulation of their situation, or recognize shared commonality with others. How could, after all, the concrete specificity of an individual’s interface with experience be reduced to any common denominator? Personalities tend towards the incommunicable and the asocial, and what personalities lack is the quality of self-consciousness that would allow them to recognize themselves as inhabiting positions within a larger system. They fail as signs because they resist abstraction, they are all extension. Personalities, in a sense, have too much presence, there can be no structure and no sign-operation because there is no absence, no structuring absence. In short, personalities fail to grasp themselves as *objects*.

Identities, in contrast, are abstract ordering constructs, attempts to rationalize the chaotic and endless specificity of personalities into a “thing,” something identifiable because bounded, possessing outline, delineated in those ways that makes matter graspable. As Rosenberg explains, it is by reduction to an identity that legal and other social systems define the human being. The legalistic identity is measurable, comparable, classifiable, rational. It is concerned with “overt acts,” with the exterior as that which can be processed by the system, and therefore judged; and not as clues to the person’s

interior, his or her realm of feeling and emotions. Systems of law, social institutions, drama and religious fabula are concerned with individuals as identities. Identities belong to the social, the communicable and the recognizable. This is the law, the name, the Logos.

The emblematic figure that Rosenberg will come back to again and again is Hamlet. It is in the figure of Hamlet that Rosenberg sees his two terms, personality and identity, played out. The Hamlet of the first half of Shakespeare's tragedy is presented as a personality: the organic, naturalistic self, the nebulous singularity of an existence. Hamlet's suffering is very much that of a personality. He is emotion-wrought, he whines, he mopes, his narcissism is evidenced by his inability to take Ophelia (though fully available to Hamlet) as a love object; what the audience witnesses is the nearly schizophrenic texture of his mood swings, of his emotional interior. The problems with this first Hamlet are easily evident; he lacks suitable or stable form. "The argumentative, self-analytical, naturalistic Hamlet of 'non-action,' describing himself in every speech he utters and using speech as a substitute for deed, is very much the figure of a personality, of a being insufficient for, because irrelevant to, the dramatic rôle offered him."²²⁰ His formlessness, his being a/as personality, means he cannot act—he cannot perform his role, respond adequately to the situation, honorably (or heroically) answer the call to duty.

All this reverses in the second half of the play. Hamlet transforms from a personality to an identity. This second Hamlet, possessing a keen sense of form, a grasp of the larger picture, a "new self-assured identity," also possesses something "dangerous"—"an ability to act."²²¹ He becomes in Orton's words "a character relevant to and able to perform the role required by the plot in which he is located."²²² This second Hamlet, with a strong sense of identity ("This is I, Hamlet the Dane!") knows what he must do; he takes up his sword. As Rosenberg observed, "His action hustles the play to its tragic close, and the apparently accidental character of his revenge merely serves to emphasize that he is controlled at the end not by the limits of his person but by the forces of dramatic movement. Transformed from the image of a personality into a dramatic

identity, he has found at last his proper place in the drama.”²²³ But the crucial question to be asked is what has happened to Hamlet between the third and fourth acts? What has effected the transformation of Hamlet from the emotionally excessive, narcissistic, formless and incapacitated personality to “Hamlet the Dane,” the distilled, defined, active identity to whom all becomes crystal clear? One way of describing the change is to say that Hamlet has gained consciousness, even revolutionary self-consciousness—“active character shaping spirit”—and this happens through a confrontation with death. Let me clarify by situating this narratively. The bifurcation of Hamlet (Hamlet as personality in the beginning and Hamlet as identity at the ending) occurs when he is ordered abroad and is forced to defend his life against the assassins his uncle/step-father has hired. The transformation from personality to identity comes from the consciousness gained through the ultimate confrontation with the limits of one’s subjectivity (and dialectically interwoven with that a sense of one’s objectivity as well): an encounter with death, with that absolute structural limitation of being. From this symbolic death he is reborn into an identity. “[T]he multiple incidents in the life of an individual may be synthesized,” Rosenberg explains, “by the choice of the individual himself or by the decision of others, into a scheme that pivots on a single fact central to the individual’s existence and which, controlling his behavior and deciding his fate, becomes his visible definition. Here unity of the ‘plot’ becomes one with unity of being and through the fixity of identity change becomes synonymous with revolution.”²²⁴

These last lines reengage with Orton’s argument, and this particularly so on the issue of what becomes “synonymous with revolution.” To remember back, a key component to Orton’s argument was the alignment of Marx’s proletariat with Rosenberg’s Action Painter. More precisely, Orton sees the distinction of personality and identity introduced in the 1932 essay carried through to and further developed in Rosenberg’s 1948 essay, “The Pathos of the Proletariat.” Like Hamlet, the proletarian actor must somehow become one with his role, must realize his place within the plot, the logic and law of the reigning social structure. “[T]here will come a moment,” Orton writes, “when the proletariat, as the first condition of historical action, must surrender its

given character and function under capitalism. It will then act to fulfill its historical role, develop a form of revolutionary consciousness and ‘identity’, and come to exist at the level of political struggle.”²²⁵ Once again, as with Hamlet, the moment that separates Hamlet the personality and Hamlet the Dane, also separates the proletariat as the industrial slave army of capital who suffer in their “daily and hourly thralldom to the machine” from the proletariat as revolutionary hero who will realize equality for all humanity.²²⁶ The moment is that confrontation with nothingness, death, that liminality of subjectivity/objectivity.

I follow Orton’s arguments in essentials. However, I believe that a third coordinate in the personality-identity model needs to be explored. As a way of approaching this third coordinate let me begin by laying stress on an ambiguity and limitation in the personality-identity model. “Identity” occupies a highly awkward situation. For although “identity”—as one learns from Rosenberg’s writing as well as Orton’s retelling of it—is necessary for “action,” this is not an unqualified good. For Rosenberg, in 1932, Hamlet’s rebirth into his second role as an identity possessing single-minded determination (alternatively one-dimensional fanaticism) to take action is also what makes the play a tragedy. The ending is, after all, a bloody massacre, and the hero is sacrificed. Nor is Rosenberg unsympathetic to the first Hamlet. For it was this first Hamlet that Rosenberg mimed in 1939 in his journal pages when he bemoaned his own inability to act. The sense of hesitation and qualification that remains in Rosenberg’s text, and that is somewhat lost in Orton’s reading of it, is an accounting for the violence involved in the formation of identities, a bleak reckoning with the costs. For example, at the beginning of “Character Change and the Drama,” Rosenberg emphasizes the nature of identity as an abstraction and thus as a sort of violence. He calls the law (social) as “shaping personae with a hatchet.”²²⁷ The abstraction is always a reduction, something is cut out, parts are amputated, the focus must be keen in order for a clear picture to emerge, for the figuring of an “emblem” as Rosenberg puts it.²²⁸ The organic tendril-like extensions must be eliminated. The law, operating as an ultimate signifier of social order, “stands ready with its systematic chopping-block to execute come who may on the basis

of his most easily definable acts and without consideration of the finer points of his feeling or motive. . . . The law is forever fixed to that last edge of individuality where the particular is caught in the web of the abstract and is shifted against its will into a position where it can only suffer and be tortured by the contradiction between its own direction and the rules of the place in which it finds itself.”²²⁹

One is tempted to dramatize the point by adding that Rosenberg is, in quite noted ways, anti-identitarian. Some of his most willful, heated tirades against contemporary society and culture came in the form of condemning the system of rationalized identities of technological and bureaucratic modernism. He was against identity as packaging, as formula, as “institutional formatting.”²³⁰ So, indeed, while Rosenberg may have criticized the formlessness of personality he was also and perhaps better known as the anti-formalist, despising formalisms in both politics and art. The ambiguous status of “identity” in Rosenberg’s criticism therefore needs to be addressed. Or, put another way, what needs to be developed is the semantic space that would allow “identity” to operate more complexly and ambiguously (which it cannot do in the personality-identity dualistic model). This can be achieved by elaborating the model to include “personification” as a location to the right of “identity.”

The term “personification” surfaces briefly but is left unexplored in Orton’s discussion of the proletariat and his analysis of the common mechanism by which “character change”—the assumption of an “identity”—occurs both for Hamlet and for the proletariat. The point worth underscoring is that while both Hamlet and the proletariat may be trying to arrive at a similar destination of the full, authentic identity of a self-conscious actor/agent, they certainly do not start from the same place. Schematically, Hamlet is the personality trying to realize identity; the proletariat is a personification trying to realize identity—and this is a highly significant difference, one that asks for a more complex rendering of the personality-identity dualism.

Hamlet as a personality, as witnessed above, is, in a manner of speaking, weighted with too much “subject.” Narcissistically taking himself as his object (“describing himself in every speech he utters”), he thus fails to get out of himself, is

unable to objectify himself, to assume meaningful, social form, to play his part. The proletariat as personification, quite in contrast to the romantically incapacitated Hamlet, marks the other extreme. It is weighted with too much objectness and thus also fails at a good dialectical identity. Its problem is not the excessive fullness of its organic and psychological being but its emptiness, its lacking an interior. Although it objectifies it is always engaged in the process of objectifying something else, not one's own self; its form is always given from without, imposed. It exists as a structural possibility and structurally necessary component within modern economies of capitalist production, as the personification of capital, or, as things and as objects who make other objects. Rosenberg's description in 1955 is apt: he describes "the utter futility of the daily acts of the factory laborers in conferring individuality upon themselves. They exist as an incorporation of generality. . . . [H]is product [is] not a self but an interchangeable commodity."²³¹

What the added component of "personification" gives room to is some interesting shifting in the emerging schematic. "Personality" and "personification" now locate the extreme, undialectical poles of subject and object, and "identity" assumes a middle position, and as a complex term possessing both good and bad aspects. To summarize: the hyper-subjective Hamlet, the narcissistic personality as the sheer run of unaccountable organic process, is a bad non-identity; the hyper-objective proletariat, the alienated personification of capital as the rationalization of things, is bad identity. The synthesis would be the identity of identity and non-identity, the realization of the identical subject-object, the process-thing, the noun-verb, the *event* of the American Action Painter.

Revolutionary Conundrum: Between Identity and Non-Identity

What, if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which makes the totality of this evolution—i.e., the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any previously established yardstick—an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?

Karl Marx²³²

The new wants nonidentity, yet intention reduces it to identity; modern art constantly works at the Münchhausean trick of carrying out the identification of the nonidentical.

Theodor Adorno²³³

The revolutionary conundrum: how to stop repeating oneself, repeating history, falling into the old patterns, the fixed habit or the familiar routine, saying and doing the same thing over and over again? This is to be limited forever by what has been, never glimpsing a moment of the new, of the completely unprecedented. By the same token, it is the very nature of repetition, an “again,” the repeat performance and a return, that turns stuff into recognizable things, that lays the ground for the transformation from cognition to recognition, all the figuring in and of consciousness, for language, communication, shared meanings. It is therefore also the primary operation for positing self and social identity.

Within modern socialist thought, the revolutionary new has been gestured to as that never before realized state of radical social equality, a new phase of human history completely unmarked by class power hierarchies, indeed, the end of pre-history. “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” as Marx and Engels famously wrote in the “Manifesto of the Communist Party.” “Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight. . . .”²³⁴ The negation of class society would be the non-

identical of classless existence, something presumed never to have before existed in human society, and a state of being that so many social revolutionaries have named the true identity of humanity, humanity's moment of redemptive reconciliation with itself. This is the social revolutionary *new*, the non-identical to all previous social identities.

But Marx himself, writing in the bleak aftermath of 1848, began to register the seeming impossibility of such a feat. In a text that was focal for Rosenberg, here is Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* describing the returns and repetitions that haunt the revolution.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.

Slightly farther in this same paragraph, Marx concludes, "In like manner the beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his other tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can produce freely in it only when he moves in it without remembering the old and forgets in it his ancestral tongue."²³⁵ These two potent images described the painful, maddening relationship between revolution (towards the non-identical, the new, the unknown) and repetition (return to identity, tradition, the known), something that Jeffrey Mehlman pointedly calls attention to through "an elementary bit of philology: the primary meaning of 'revolution,' our term for inaugural change, is astronomical—the action . . . of moving around in an orbit or circular course; the return or recurrence of a point or period of time."²³⁶ How did one forget the old languages, stop the process of translating everything back into the familiar forms; how did one learn articulations on a whole other order? The double movement possesses inescapable cruelty, a punishment for one's efforts. For the very energies that reach out, striving to exceed the present and articulate a new, the non-identical, are the

precise energies that process everything one manages to grasp back into the same old identities. If one strives to articulate the non-identical how does one keep it revolutionary, new, with an emancipatory content that both elicits the recognition of others and yet also escapes the fate of being just a repetition of language, falling into the abyss of mindless, ever-same identity? In this section I want to work once again at describing Rosenberg's dialectic, extend upon the personality-identity-personification model and hopefully unpack what was left earlier as the very Hegelian proposition for the identity of identity and non-identity.

In approaching this task, however, it might be provident to first supply a little more flesh to this rather stark theoretical model, and in doing this, possibly as well, give some grounds for invoking it with Rosenberg's criticism. The text of the period in which the terms of identity and non-identity were most dramatically and importantly put forefront is *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Co-written in 1947 by the two Frankfurt School intellectuals Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno during their exile from Germany in New York and later, in California, this volume damningly analyzed the failure of Western modernity. The two authors of this text shared with Rosenberg similar sets of concerns, addressed the same problematic encompassing the issues of revolutionary failure, the totalitarian threat, the relation of art and politics, and the viability of critical dialectical methods.²³⁷ They were working, as well, in the same time frame, writing within similar intellectual milieus, and even appropriated each other's terms: Rosenberg will write of the "culture industry" and Adorno will write of "action painting."²³⁸ The advantage of indicating Horkheimer and Adorno's use of this theoretical model is that it provides an illuminating example of this dialectic in play and helps prepare the way for seeing this dialectic in Rosenberg's own criticism.

The identity principle operates in formal logic, and formal logic, Horkheimer and Adorno state, "provide[s] the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world." "Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities."²³⁹ It is fungibility, "universal interchangeability," and "universal mediation" that Horkheimer and Adorno sum up in

the concept of the *ratio*. It is abstraction that “tool of enlightenment,” wielding the “power of repetition over reality,” and thus producing the return of the ever-same.²⁴⁰ What principles of identity work upon, level or liquidate is difference, non-identity, nature as that which initially seems other and impregnable and “terrifying” to the subject. Enlightenment as rationalizing civilization tames primitive chaos with the imposition of its universal law— “[t]he identity of everything with everything else”—so that, in the end, “[w]hat was different is equalized.”²⁴¹ In the realm of the primitive and mythic, those “earliest known stages of humanity” in which Horkheimer and Adorno situate their vision of the unfolding of the dialectic of Enlightenment, non-identity is *mana*. “Everything unknown and alien is primary and undifferentiated: that which transcends the confines of experiences; whatever in things is more than their previously known reality.”²⁴² Horkheimer and Adorno make clear that from very early on, this relation between identity and non-identity is one tensely mediated, marked and powered by fear or terror. The intensity of the subject’s will to dominate, to control utterly Nature and to allow nothing to escape or stand beyond the grid of its system of recognitions and relays— “Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear”—is generated from the subject’s fear of losing itself, its identity, the “primordial fear of losing one’s own name.”²⁴³ The subject must constantly rearticulate itself and retrace its boundaries. It abstracts—from the word *abstrahere*, “to pull from”—from the non-identity of Nature, and this process of abstraction is the active assertion of figure from ground, a perpetual resistance against disintegration into a nameless, terrifying whole, by vigilantly drawing and re-drawing the line.²⁴⁴ “For civilization, pure natural existence, animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger.”²⁴⁵

Men had to do fearful things to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, and virile nature of man, was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood. The strain of holding the I together adheres to the I in all stages; and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it. The narcotic intoxication which permits the atonement of deathlike sleep for the euphoria in which the self is suspended, is one of the oldest social arrangements which mediate between self-preservation and self-destruction—an attempt of the self to survive itself.²⁴⁶

Identitarian thinking uses categories, concepts, ideas, generalizations, language, systems, representation, processes of abstraction, rationalization, equivalence, reproduction, recurrence, repetition to create closed, stable meanings and to organize experience. “Meaning” is cognitively available, or recognizable, because of sameness, returns, repetition, a trajectory—as the authors of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggest—that degenerates into the pursuit of meaning as a truly pointless counting game, where rationalization becomes the supreme rule and a value in itself, where quality is lost in the systems, regimes, languages that can only ever process the homogenized, the already familiar and readily identifiable. Adorno’s protest against the identitarian is against this violent circumscription of existence in which the potential new is extinguished at its very moment of conception and made over into “identities,” as it is brought in line, set into preformed categories, aligned with preexisting ideas.

But the fullness, the promise of richly qualitative meaning more than evades one on the other side, too. As identity’s “counter-image,” non-identity (the Real, Other, otherness, heterogeneity, radical particularity, non-stop change, that which is beyond representation, conceptualization and language, an openness designating that without borders, frames, outline or form) ends up offering everything but *meaning* nothing, lacking the social dimension by which any sort of exchange or recognition would be possible. For without identity’s “markers or signposts” the radical particularity of sheer quality is, quite literally, beyond the possibility of cognition.²⁴⁷ Alas, despite such wealth of quality, these riches will never “count” for anything.

There are a number of places in Rosenberg’s work to see this dialectically posed opposition of identity and non-identity (and now given more bearing through an elaboration via Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) operating as the theoretical template for his critical project. One is in a 1950 introduction Rosenberg wrote to Marcel Raymond’s *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*.²⁴⁸ Although the title of Rosenberg’s contribution, “French Silence and American Poetry,” suggests only two entities or positions—one, French, the other American—there are in fact three; and this

third is occupied by the English. To lay this out quickly and schematically, America lines up with “silence,” the French with “poetry,” and the English with the worst aspects of “tradition” as cliché, doctrine, academicism. The two extremes are the American and English positions. American silence, as Rosenberg illustrates, is the silence of the “Kansas farmhand.” Existing without culture, without tradition, the Kansas farmhand just sits “on a rail and wait[s] for something to show up. Whatever it is, it will be something totally real.” His “silence just is, an emptiness coming from American space and time.”²⁴⁹ To translate this through the Adornian metaphor, the Kansas farmhand is non-identity—everything is new and totally real but both incomprehensible and uneventful as well. Opposing the Kansas silence is the tradition of the “English,” or identity in its worst, most confining aspects. It is the “commonplace,” the given formulas for processing and production; it means always having language spoken for one, never finding oneself occupying uncharted semantic space but instead always “held by a web of vocabulary.”²⁵⁰ As if to indicate that these modes were not nationalistic, Rosenberg uses not just the Missouri-born Eliot but also the French poet Paul Claudel as his two examples of “English” identity. Claudel’s poetry fails because he begins with the *idea*: “His doctrine tells him that God and His universe are on the side of man, and he tries to feel and express this in poetry. But there is no verbal alchemy. . . .”²⁵¹ And it is precisely this alchemical moment that is important. “Alchemy”—or the “great leap”—is Rosenberg’s term for the dialectical movement that achieves the level of poetry and thus to the “French” position. French poetry and poetic alchemy occur when the “belt-line of rhetoric that keeps automatically pounding away in his [the poet’s] brain twenty-four hours a day” is “turn[ed] off,” when the “cultural clatter” is stopped. It is struggle, conflict, experimentation and risk. It is all the activities that keep something alive, truly responsive. “Lifting up a word and putting a space around it has been the conscious enterprise of serious French poetry since Baudelaire and Rimbaud. With this ‘alchemy’ poetry dissolves traditional preconceptions and brings one face to face with existence and with inspiration as a fact. Or it re-makes the preconceptions and changes the known world.”²⁵² Poetic alchemy is that which forges *new language*. Creation at this level means

“getting along without the guidance of generalizations,” which, as Rosenberg adds, “is the most difficult thing in the world.” “The Frenchman has to will his silence, he struggles for it, in it he purifies himself of the past, makes himself ready for a new word, a round word, that can be his own and which will open to him a continent of *things*.” By this the old identities, the commonplaces are turned to “dust” as the “acid of poetry . . . burns each word away from the old links,” leaving the “not-to-be-duplicated word emerging from the unknown.”²⁵³ Although Rosenberg does not spell it out explicitly, the understanding is that it is not the silence of the Kansas farmhand Rosenberg is after but rather the dialectically wrought experience of French poetry. The obvious antagonist is English tradition; but perhaps the less obvious failure is silence, for the Kansas farmhand’s silence could just as easily be taken for “dumbness,” having nothing to say, the inarticulate and asocial, which is something probably safely discounted as a Rosenbergian ideal. On the other hand, French silence has all the pathos of being a determinate, willed negation, of being a silence or space made *within* language, and by that also made *within* the social. There is an important difference for Rosenberg, in other words, between being an inarticulate blank (a nothing) and being a word with space around it (a negation).

Moving four years forward, to 1954, Rosenberg’s oppositional terms were laid out not as the tripartite of English tradition, American silence and French poetry but as redcoatism and coonskinism in the “Parable for American Painters.” Again, though the terms were slightly changed, the tale was one of difference and repetition, about the adventure of forging new expressive identities and the danger of identities established on self-repeating patterns.²⁵⁴ Redcoatism represents high formal training and regimentation. The redcoats possess disciplined technique, they know how to follow orders and obey rules, they have superb “military art,” refined style, they are, in a word, professionals of their craft, infused with its Tradition. Their antithesis are the coonskins; individual, untrained, following no previously set order or organization or regimented way of seeing things, they adapt—“improvise”—moment-to-moment to changed situations, to the rawness of the new. The redcoats suffer defeat because they cannot experience the new or

difference. Their “eye sees through a gridiron of style and memory,” they “hallucinate” known identities, projecting their canons of craft and their traditional principles of intelligibility onto the New World wilderness. Interestingly, rather than let this settle easily into a form of adulation for the sharpshooting coonskinism of post-war American Abstract Expressionism, Rosenberg indicates that coonskinism has already become redcoatism. “Today, Coonskinism itself in the form of ‘free’ abstract expression is in danger of becoming a style . . . the new man does not automatically stay that way. With most of the pioneers of 1946, the transformation of the Coonskinner into a Redcoat has already taken place.”²⁵⁵ This parable and warning for American painters—“the new man does not automatically stay that way”—lays out, with remarkable clarity, the very dilemma of identity and non-identity, of how the new (identities forged out of non-identity and in resistance to previous forms of identity) is easily recuperated or rationalized back into tradition. The coonskinner is transformed into a redcoat, coonskinism becomes a form of redcoatism, the good new identity turns into the bad old identity, which in a dizzying twist becomes a form of bad non-identity—the state of identitylessness, of everything being the same, which finds its modern expression in mass identity. One can take this type of thinking about the paradoxical dialectic between identity and non-identity and reasonably hear its resonance in the title for Rosenberg’s 1959 collection of essays, *The Tradition of the New*. The title itself can be interpreted as hopeful, evoking a sustained, remembered practice of battling through systems of false identities; the continued fight and the perhaps reassuring idea of a critical presence in history and society, one able to think itself to the second degree where identity indicates the self-conscious and self-critical. Oppositely, it could also be taken as the sign that vanguardism is already defeated, since as with the coonskin once the name was applied and the tendency recognized rigor mortis had all but set in.

Marxist Praxis: Action Painting as Dialectic

Communism . . . is the genuine resolution of the conflict between . . . objectification and self-confirmation. . . .

Karl Marx²⁵⁶

The act . . . is the outstanding riddle of the twentieth century.

Harold Rosenberg²⁵⁷

The dilemma of identity and non-identity, its triple articulation through personality-identity-personification, the possibility of the new subject, Marx's "new men," the identity of identity and non-identity, the identical subject-object—these were scenarios Rosenberg persistently engaged. The crucial problem, as Rosenberg points out, has rested on the figure of the revolutionary actor/hero as the fulcrum between the old and new, the being that exists as that impossible "moment" between past and future, that bridge between identity and non-identity, who acts as the social bearer of a consciousness of difference existing within sameness, "an inverted mental image," and "a dream living-in-the-present."²⁵⁸ This section will look at why action, activity and the "act" are given such prominent, indeed, defining places within Rosenberg's aesthetic, as the key motion by which the radical new could emerge, the great leap occur or the lightning of thought strike. This will entail an analysis of Rosenberg's concept of Action Painting through the other abstraction of dialectics, where the identity of subject and object is not mapped spatially as part and whole relations, but where the identical subject-object is located in the interactive process of theory and practice, mind and matter. Reinforced in all of this is the connection between Rosenberg's meaning of action and Marx's use of the term, thus securing the political dimension of Rosenberg's aesthetic.

To start at the obvious place, action, was, of course the central term by which Marx meant to distinguish his project of political emancipation in method and content from all previous contemplative (and thus complacent) philosophies.²⁵⁹ Indeed, as a number of commentators would insist, failing to recognize the pivotal status accorded this term in Marx's system is to grossly misunderstand Marxism. As one writer remarked, "Praxis is the central concept in Marx's outlook—the key to understanding his early

philosophic speculations and his detailed analysis of the structure of capitalism. It provides the perspective for grasping Marx's conception of man as 'the ensemble of social relationships' and his emphasis on production; it is the basis for comprehending what Marx meant by 'revolutionary practice.'"²⁶⁰ Perhaps most famously the eleventh of the "Theses on Feuerbach" voiced Marx's outstanding criticism: previous philosophies had "only *interpreted* the world, in various ways," when in fact the real "point is to *change* it."²⁶¹ Criticism had to become active. The revolutionary imperative was for theory to become a material force. His own aptly called philosophy of action was radical because it got to the root of the problem, to man ("the root of man is man") and to man's defining essence, self-activity or praxis. Praxis as the "unifier of the dialectical terms" consciousness and nature was the heart of Marx's dialectic. It was the essential mediator, the dynamic structure "underlying all history and knowledge."²⁶² Human activity was the creative act by which the subject creates itself (self-realization or self-realizing activity) through its dialectical relation/opposition to nature. Praxis is the term that describes the interdependent join and mutual articulation of subject and object, of consciousness and materiality. It is the double transformation through which both subject and object become identities, take on social form as bearers of human meanings. Through work, praxis, or "conscious life-activity," as Marx argued in *Capital*, humans develop both the world and themselves: in this "process between man and nature . . . man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. . . . Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power."²⁶³ It is the image of the self-creator.

The primary complication to this Marx laid out schematically: in order to realize oneself as a human subject one must of necessity objectify; however, objectification is bifurcated. The process of objectifying can go in two directions: towards (self-) realization (transformation) or (self-) alienation (deformation). It was in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that Marx made the clearest distinction between

these two modes of objectification. Praxis, in its good or positive form, as self-realization or *eupraxia*, meant quite a bit more than what commonly is designated in the word “activity.”²⁶⁴ Far from mindless action or a mere doing, in the stronger sense of the word praxis means total interaction of theory/ideality/subject and practice/materiality/object. “[F]ree, conscious activity,” Marx asserted, was more than just a component of human life, it was the outstanding feature of humanity, it was “man’s species character.”²⁶⁵ “[I]t is only when the objective world becomes everywhere for man in society the world of man’s essential powers—human reality, and for that reason the reality of his own essential powers—that all objects become for him the objectification of himself, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become his object: that is, man himself becomes the object.”²⁶⁶ And here, slightly later, is Marx in *Capital*:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.²⁶⁷

Praxis, “man’s essential powers” or free, conscious life-activity was the dialectical generator by which an alien reality, an exterior nature was transformed into a humanized, hospitable environment. This was, as Marx asserted, the “*real mode of affirmation*” of the subject. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, the Mexican Marxist theorist, concisely summarizes Marx’s discussion of praxis in the 1844 manuscripts as the double articulation by which the subject is objectified and the object subjectified: “Man becomes man only by objectifying himself, by creating objects through which he externalizes himself. We can thus say that man is subject and object at the same time, and that he becomes a human subject only to the extent that he objectifies himself. This objectification, far from depleting the subject, as Hegel believed, is precisely what humanizes man.”²⁶⁸

What Marx recognized as well, nevertheless, was that this creative, transformative mechanism, when flipped, became *dyspraxia*, an alienating mode of activity destroying, deforming, and dehumanizing the subject—a condition in the foreground of modern capitalist production. For Marx, needless to say, the distinction between good and bad praxis was a monumental one that meant the difference between freedom and the creative development of human possibility or its bleak opposite in unfreedom, barbarism, oppressive limitation, inhumanity. Marx's discussion of estranged labor in the 1844 manuscripts describes this form of alienating activity in mortifying terms:

[T]he object which labour produces—labour's product—confronts it as *something alien, as a power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour. Labour's realization is its objectification. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labour appears as loss of reality for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object* and *object-bondage*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.²⁶⁹

And later, in *Capital*, the image of the damaged worker is just as vivid. "Within the capitalist system,

all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process . . . they deform the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time."²⁷⁰

The question to ask is what was the crucial determinant between activity that is self-realizing and self-affirming and that which is alienating and self-negating? How could one resolve the conflict between "objectification and self-confirmation"?

"Free" and "conscious," Marx's own frequent descriptors, offer a place to begin. Praxis is activity that is both free and conscious. First, as free activity, it is not forced labor responding merely to the crudest manifestation of necessity. It is a production

beyond bare physical necessity, beyond the simple reproduction of daily existence; it is the excess of activity that Marx pointed to when he stated, “man produces even when he is free from physical need.” But Marx extended this reflection—the line continues—”and only truly produces in freedom therefrom,” thus defining unnecessary labor as not simply a curious and irrational “excess” but in fact the only true production. What might at first seem marginal is shown to be central, marking the point where genuine human possibility begins.²⁷¹ Free activity is antithetical to forced production in which one follows orders, implements rules, does as one is told. Free activity is not controlled by theory (or any directives) given from above.

The second qualifier, beyond free activity, is that this activity be conscious. The element of consciousness in praxis can be read in several related ways. In the first sense, consciousness is the product or is generated out of the connective activity between subject and object. Subjects possess consciousness only by having “consciousness of” something, or, having an object of consciousness. In the second sense, conscious activity is activity propelled by theory, ideas, mental images. This was how Marx distinguished human activity as different from animal activity. Marx’s discussion of the labor process in *Capital* explains what stamps labour as “exclusively human”: “A spider conducts operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally.”²⁷² In other words activity of a mindless, automatic, repetitive type, as endless process with no beginning, middle or end, without the imaginative moment of attempting to realize an idea substantively does not count as praxis. A totally immediate labor in which an activity is either forced or unthinking does not allow for the possibility of change, or realizing something new, of creative transformation, of exceeding the present limits of knowledge, consciousness or society. In sum, what distinguished Marx’s sense of good

praxis was that it was the unity between theory and practice, the free mutual realization of thinking and doing.

What is of primary interest here is how the modern artist is cast as a model for praxis. For the answer to the problem of objectification-as-realization opposed to objectification-as-alienation is suggested in some of Marx's comments on the figures of the artist and the artwork. That is, they can be said to serve as the complementary halves of a model act for unalienated labor. The modern artist's work or "creation" is the very expression of the subject's ability to transform objects from a mute, passive, alien other into something which appears to communicate to the subject, affirm the subject as its recognizable exteriorizations. The world is made habitable. The senses of fulfillment and happiness then result from this putting into effect one's creative powers, this supreme experience of having something outside confirm oneself. Louis Dupré, one of Marx's twentieth century commentators, has summarized it thus in his description of the "positive transcendence of private property": "the object of man's activity again becomes a *human* object. Man appropriates the world in a human way: his relation to it is no longer one of *having* but of *being*. His work is no longer a means to an end outside himself but an expression of his entire being, in which he objectifies *himself* without losing himself."²⁷³ Posited at the center of Marx's project, as the utopian dream image of dialectical praxis one finds the model of the artist's creative act: self-realizing, self-affirming, self-objectifying.

This was not a point lost on Rosenberg. Quite the contrary, the artist as a model of praxis, as a plenipotentiary of what unalienated activity might be like, was precisely what Rosenberg took up in his figure of the artist, in his Action Painter. The Marxist grounding to Rosenberg's definition of an artist came out particularly in those situations—of which there were quite a few—in which Rosenberg found himself needing to explain the paradoxical situation of the artist's "alienation" in modern society. Yes, the modern artist is alienated, Rosenberg acknowledged, but the layperson mistook the cause of that alienation as stemming from some psychological malady accompanying "creative" types—the popularized archetype of the tormented creative soul—or as some quirk of

personality. “[T]he psychological dimension of alienation,” as Richard Bernstein has pointed out, used “to designate some sort of psychological condition in which the individual feels frustrated, unsatisfied, and fulfilled. . . . is not primary for Marx, it is secondary and derivative.”²⁷⁴ This was a point that Rosenberg followed. “The artist,” he explains, “is the only figure in this society who is able not to be alienated, because he works directly with the materials of his own experience and transforms them.”

Accordingly, if one were to talk about the modern artist’s alienation, it would have little to do with exotic, bohemian personalities, alternative life-styles, or theatrical acting out against bourgeois cultural norms. Rather this alienated state originates from the artist’s insistence upon the performance of a kind of work in which he is not actively alienating himself. “Art alone,” Rosenberg asserted, “has been in the realm of the free act.” Or, more cautiously, art “contains the outline of a free act” because “the composition of a work of art . . . contain[s] a point of beginning and an interval of choice.”²⁷⁵ In 1968, when returning late in his career to the concept of “action in painting,” Rosenberg wrote: “The outlines of art as action began to emerge in the nineteenth century. Marx speaks of the liberation of work, and defines free work as work for the sake of the worker, as distinguished from work for the sake of the product. In this idea, which puts creation above the object, whether artifact or commodity, Marx anticipates the thought of . . . the Action Painter.”²⁷⁶ Just a year later in 1969 during the question-and-answer period of a seminar of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, Rosenberg continued along these same lines with observations on the artist as a figure with the “possibility of being a whole man” and thus as a model for a full and emancipated humanity: “This is the idea that Marx had too, that the model of the whole man was the artist, and therefore we could always see him as a kind of ideal.”²⁷⁷ Again, because the artist’s mode of working was self-affirming, Rosenberg explained, “Marx therefore conceives the artist as the model of the man of the future,” or, one might deign to translate, one of the “new men” of communism.²⁷⁸ Thus, like Marx, Rosenberg argued that artistic production was the place to look for models of free, unalienated production. With the artist, “work has passed over into its most intense form—into creation.”²⁷⁹ Nor

was this a point to take lightly. Again, this “excess,” that which is displaced to the margins, or taken as the frosting on the cake of human society, so to speak, ends up locating the vital essence of humanity. For as Marx did in the nineteenth century, so in the twentieth century did Rosenberg see the explanation to “our present crisis” centered on the denial or affirmation of human self-definition through praxis. This is a point Rosenberg bore down on in a 1964 lecture: “the practice of the crafts is the activity by which the human creature is defined. Man is a maker, *homo faber*, an artist. Put this proposition in reverse—when man ceases to be a maker he is no longer man—and our present crisis is explained.”²⁸⁰

To extend the point, Rosenberg did not simply acknowledge his awareness of this aesthetic interpretative possibility in Marx but actively engaged it by seeking to maintain and elaborate that dialectical image in his own concept of Action Painting: it formed the core notion of his critical aesthetic. As in Marx’s good form of labor, “conscious life-activity” or praxis, the act in Rosenberg’s Action Painting participates in the dialectical motions of locating a self—self-identity—at the intersecting relay of the poles of subject-object, theory-practice, mind-matter, through free and conscious activity.

Action Painting as Event

“You cannot hang an event on the wall, only a picture.”²⁸¹ So went Mary McCarthy’s wry pronouncement in her book review of *The Tradition of the New*. Rosenberg, nonetheless, took McCarthy’s “admonishment” with apparent good humor. If the line had been intended as a point of criticism, Rosenberg still considered the review overall a “generous” one (certainly by no means had she been alone in posing such a criticism—“One or two other friendly critics sounded related objections,” Rosenberg admitted).²⁸² Even so, what should be taken note of is perhaps not only the genial manner in which Rosenberg responded to his critics but the prominence with which he displayed this

particular opinion. For, in fact, Rosenberg appropriated McCarthy's lines to serve as the lead into his preface for the 1960 Da Capo edition of *The Tradition of the New*. I think the flagrant display of McCarthy's quip has much to do with setting out certain methodological ground-rules. When turned into the question, "the thing on the wall—is it a picture or an event?"—the criticism operates like the Sphinx's riddle, making fatally clear who is in and who is out. One's answer to the question determined one's affiliation with either the dialectical—with reality as "event," as the interactive relation and mutual identity of process and thing—or the commonplace—reality made up of separate processes and things, fitted out to the ontologically autonomous categories of verbs and nouns. By McCarthy's admonishment one already knows her fate. She is incapable of passing through for hers is the commonsense reaction *par excellence*: a picture is a thing, it hangs on walls.

The identity of a thing could never be this clear-cut in Rosenberg's dialectical conception of painting as an event. Indeed, what stands out, over the years, in Rosenberg's descriptions of Action Painting is the constant drive to emphasize the dialectical quality of his aesthetic. "What matters always is the revelation contained in the act. It is to be taken for granted that in the final effect, the image, whatever be or be not in it, will be a *tension*."²⁸³ The tension was the tension of dialectic, and the revelation contained in the act was that dialectically forged identity, a moment of the "trans-formal."

This identity was dialectically forged between ideas and materials. For instance, listen to Rosenberg in 1967 insisting on this vital relationship between ideas and their working out. While "[t]he idea has no existence apart from the mode of working," equally, "*the mode of working without the idea is a mere cliché or routine*."²⁸⁴ Again in 1969, Rosenberg explained, "In art, ideas are materialized, and materials are manipulated as if they were meanings. This is the intellectual advantage of art as against disembodied modes of thought, such as metaphysics."²⁸⁵ Four years later in a 1973 interview with Lee Hall, Rosenberg put it this way: "Intellectually, art is a very strange thing, and today all art is intellectual. . . . It is a situation in which the activity of the hand is part of the

thinking, and you cannot think a particular idea without doing it. Nor can you do it in more than a mediocre manner without having an idea that transcends the mere activity. This dialectic is very difficult for artists to grasp.”²⁸⁶ And then finally two years later in an interview with James and Caryn Walker, Rosenberg formalized his basic ideas again, “There’s a reciprocal, or dialectical activity that takes place in regard to all valid responses to painting,” he wrote. “That’s the trouble with pure conceptualism—that there is no backward play from the object to the ideas, and ideas very often need a manual confirmation, because when we use a medium, we add to our thinking.”²⁸⁷ In another interview of the same year, in which he was asked what the basic issues in art are, Rosenberg answers, “The basic issue in art in the 20th century continues to be the relation between doing and thinking, between the ideas in art and the practice of art, or the making of objects. All developments in art since the war have revolved around this issue. A desirable balance has been reached by certain artists between thinking and doing, or thinking and action, as I have called it. . . . The tendency, however, is for this balance to be lost. Artists begin to overemphasize the conceptual aspect of art.”²⁸⁸

Painting for Rosenberg worked in an immanently dialectical fashion and it was a form of concrete thinking. The centrality of a dialectic between mind and matter is one that O’Brien further emphasizes. “[T]he creative dialectics between making and thinking” she calls the “sine qua non of Rosenberg’s art theory.”²⁸⁹ “Only the dialectical tension between ideas and materials—the creative process itself—could mature the mind as it simultaneously discovers and creates itself.” Further, as O’Brien writes, “thinking must be realized in a concrete art making process. . . . The dialectical necessity of the material object is at the crux of Rosenberg’s art criticism, and the basis of his idea of Action painting.”²⁹⁰

Rosenberg also indicated how thoroughly this balance between thinking and doing was interwoven in the dialectic of artist and artwork. “By fixing his idea in matter,” the artist, Rosenberg argued, “exposes either the crudeness of his thought or the clumsiness of his art; thus he is led to experiment and refinement. In time, he becomes so adept in materializing his hypotheses, and in manipulating his materials as if they were

meanings, that the problem itself is transformed. He has translated it into a unique set of terms; besides, he, the investigator, has through his efforts remade himself into a different man.”²⁹¹ Here emerges a second major aspect of this dialectical approach, which further underlines how explicitly, and one might add simply, Rosenberg’s concept of Action Painting falls in line with Marx’s notion of praxis, as the defining characteristic, the essential component, of one’s species being. The revelation contained in the act, or the tension or dynamic interaction occurring between subject and object, had the “aims of penetrating reality or changing the artist’s self.” By Rosenberg’s definition, Action Painting, that is, “serious” and “good” painting, must be dialectical, and thus it “leaves no doubt concerning its reality as an action and its relation to a transforming process in the artist. The canvas has ‘talked back’ to the artist . . . to provoke him into a dramatic dialogue. Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new question.”²⁹² The point is one he repeated often. “Whoever undertakes to create soon finds himself engaged in creating himself.”²⁹³ “[I]n the course of engagement a mind is created. Apart from that, every kind of excellence can be copied.”²⁹⁴ “A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a ‘moment’ in the adulterated mixture of his life—whether ‘moment’ means the actual minutes taken up with spotting the canvas or the entire duration of a lucid drama conducted in sign language. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.”²⁹⁵ The canvas was “an arena in which to act,” a sort of stage set for the dialectical intercourse between artist-subject and materials-object, process and thing. This is the concrete thought, the noun-verb.

Discussing Rosenberg’s assimilation of Marx’s philosophy of action and of Marxist praxis through the concept of Action Painting, and suggesting that Rosenberg transposed Marx’s revolutionary subject-object of history to the Action Painter, is to open Rosenberg’s project up to the attendant criticisms made of any perceived aestheticizing of radicalism. One is back at the contentious issue of a cultural turn taken in Marxist theorization (usually said to have been undertaken by “Western” and non-Soviet Marxists) and the suspicions over the intent and commitment of cultural critics who,

while professing sympathy with Marxism, apparently remained whether from armchair, university, museum or art gallery, loftily superstructural in their concerns. In Rosenberg's case the added insult is that the type of artwork he appeared to champion (modernist) seemed the farthest cry from anything with recognizable significance to the worker's movement.

The objections might be phrased like this: Action Painting might well be named a site of good dialectical interaction (the authenticity of the Action Painter in his studio working out his free expression) but this stands in contrast to the other dialectical sense of part and whole relations. The "event" has to be fed back into the overall drama. The sense of dialectic as process has to be coordinated with the structural sense of dialectic. Or, it might be put like this: can art possess any critical, emancipatory potential when it is a luxury form whose very conditions of possibility are established by the productive excess generated out of capitalist modes of exploitation? How can one talk of art as a free, self-realizing and genuinely self-expressive form of work when it exists by the graces of a system of unfree labor? How can a cultural expression tied both historically and materially to the elite classes of social hierarchy ever be said to speak for or express the revolutionary desires of the underclasses? With the division of labor, the severing of mind and hand, of mental and manual labor, and especially with the intensification of this in the modern bourgeois period through rabid professionalization of all activity, Marx argued that "From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory."²⁹⁶ With mind/theory so etherealized, on what grounds can one posit art as possessing the possibility, the likelihood, even the desire, of this radical re-membering of mind and hand, theory and practice? Provided one were even aware of the contradiction posed by labor, would not one still be more likely to take an easier path, to be lulled by the comforts of this reified form of practice (the safety of one's tidily circumscribed

“projects” and “investigations”) rather than taking up arms and actively negating one’s own historical and material basis?

One way of addressing this brutal contradiction has been to posit art as inhabiting a special situation. Such thinkers as Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Ernest Bloch, and I would add Rosenberg here, speak of the truth and untruth of art’s situation in capitalist society. “Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world,” Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*; but at the same time art “is the *social* [emphasis added] antithesis of society,” meaning it is indelibly constituted by that to which it opposes itself. “It exists only in relation to its other.”²⁹⁷ On the one hand, artworks are a moment of truth, they speak to the emancipatory, to the liberation of the human subject, but they themselves are not it. As Rosenberg described the “International” of the Paris Modern: “It was an inverted mental image, this Modern, with all the transitoriness and freedom from necessity of imagined things. A dream living-in-the-present and a dream world citizenship—resting not upon a real triumph, but upon a willingness to go as far as was necessary into nothingness in order to shake off what was dead in the real. A negation of the negative.”²⁹⁸ The moment of truth in artworks is a reminder, a sidelong glimpse of the basis in human activity or praxis understood as dialectical engagement of mind and matter. As such it outlines Marx’s utopian dream-image of human creativity self-consciously transcending the limitations of its old forms, extending its possibility, realizing new human content.

The untruth of things like artworks, on the other hand, lies in the fact that it is built from the possibilities and sufferings developed and produced out of the sundering apart of praxical creativity—of theory and practice, of mind and matter, of intellectual and physical labor, out of the excess afforded by alienated production. “With the increasingly sharp division of labor,” as Sánchez Vázquez summarizes, “the mind and the hand draw further apart, as do the project and the execution, the goal and its realization. In this way, labor loses its creative character while art becomes a distinct, substantive activity, an impregnable stronghold of the creative capacity for man, and forgets its

remote and humble origins. What is forgotten is that work, the conscious activity through which man transforms and humanizes matter, has made artistic creation possible.”²⁹⁹

Far from being blind to or dismissive of the issues and contradictions involved in the positing of art as self-realizing praxis existing within its opposed member and supported by a larger productive realm of alienated labor, Rosenberg counted authentic art as that which self-consciously bore witness to its contradictions. Indeed, one might even argue that the very formulation of an “action” (or indeed “praxis”) painting at this moment was the most obvious sign of this bearing witness, not forgetting the ghastly price at which its “free” self-realizing acts had come, that its sense of good praxical unity was secured through the very division of theory and practice in social reality. In a 1973 interview Rosenberg made clear that the realm of artistic production was not some pristinely untouched realm separate from the realities of capitalist commerce. The artist’s “role is to be unhappy. He is obliged to think how awful it is that the moment the work leaves the studio it is falsified by the milieu in which it finds itself. . . . The situation of the art work vis-à-vis the artist and his public is one that goes to the root of modern culture and that is not going to be improved until a new set of relationships are established throughout the whole of society.”³⁰⁰ Rosenberg designated “anxiety” and the “anxious object” as the terms indicating the artist’s and the artwork’s full registration of its real predicament. “The anxiety of art is a philosophical quality perceived by artists to be inherent in acts of creation in our time. It manifests itself, first of all, in the questioning of art itself,” Rosenberg wrote in the foreword (titled “Toward an Unanxious Profession”) to his 1966 collection of essays in a volume aptly titled *The Anxious Object*. “Anxiety is thus the form in which modern art raises itself to the level of human history.”³⁰¹ Authentic art for Rosenberg was not some craftsman’s contentment of playing around with art materials—of a kind that exhausts or extinguishes its consciousness through its mere activity and mere materiality—but was art that bore witness to its moments of truth and untruth as they unfolded within the social totality.

The anxiety of art is a peculiar kind of insight. It arises, not as a reflex to the condition of artists, but from their reflection upon *the role of art among other human activities* [emphasis added]. Where this anxiety is

absent, nothing that befalls the artist as a person, not even the threat of physical extinction, will bring it into being. There is a craftsman's pleasure in doing, and delight in the work of one's hands, that some people find entirely adequate to satisfy their minds. The world may fall apart, it will interest them less than the discovery of a new brand of crayon.³⁰²

This delight in new brands of crayons or art supply what-not may appear insignificant, or at least harmless, but for the particular example Rosenberg draws up to illustrate the "craftsman's pleasure." The example is Josef Albers. Towards the beginning part of the essay from which these passages come, Rosenberg had, half-humorously, quoted a message the artist had sent to him. The message read, "*Angst* is dead."³⁰³ One gets the joke, which Albers, "the master of painting conceived as calculated sheets of color," has written well into the sixties to Rosenberg, the popularly identified critic and defender of all those angsty Abstract Expressionists. The tone becomes sharper as Rosenberg begins to delineate the real implications of Albers' "faith in the self-sufficiency of art that excludes from painting everything but the statement and solution of its own technical problems." "In a recent interview in *ARTnews*," Rosenberg recounts, "Albers was asked about his frame of mind during the rise of the Nazis—did he, for example, feel impelled to join in the demonstrations of his fellow artists in Germany? "*Nein*," exclaimed Albers. "I was determined not to follow anything. For me it was glass [the material he was then working with]. I was completely one-sided. I never went when the Constructivists and Surrealists assembled. It was for me just glass."³⁰⁴ It seems likely that this anecdote served for Rosenberg as a painful sign of how fully art could forget its exalted status as a mode of genuine praxis, how easily this privilege degenerated into the thoughtless, asocial and ahistorical. Such fetishization of craft-like, non-industrial activity, as somehow inherently more wholesome, was very far from what Rosenberg had in mind in discussing a nonalienated form of work. There needed to be a distinction between the craftsman's "pleasure in doing," the "delight in work of one's hands," and the Action Painter's going up to the easel "with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him."³⁰⁵

One way of addressing this, if from an oblique angle, is by returning once again to Rosenberg in the 1930s and thinking about the sort of context in which his radicalism developed. What stands out is the coordination of these two elements: (1) the particular milieu in which Rosenberg interacted at this moment—radicalized intellectuals, unionized artists; (2) the kinds of activities he was engaged in—critical-creative work as well as wage labor. Out of this coordination one could put forth the probability that this condition provided a special vantage onto the social revolutionary problematic described by the relations of labor and art and politics and revolutionary possibility. It is this vantage onto those relations that is sustained in Action Painting, and sustained precisely as a re-membering of creative artistic work and alienated production, a re-membering of the artist and laborer.

What this moment offered Rosenberg was the opportunity to engage in what might be called art-labor politics: it was a particular historical formation in which there was a marked closeness between what, at least in the modern period, are the traditionally segregated realms of art and labor, and this was something broadly recognized by the government, by artists and writers, by social critics at large and party politicians as well. This period in the thirties was characterized by a deeply and widely felt awareness of a crisis in capitalism, a crisis vividly marked by all the ways in which labor seemed to become more and more, and alarmingly, visible—through the sheer mass of the unemployed, the increasingly aggressive movements to organize labor as a unified body, the growing consciousness of capitalist naturalizations of labor and worker exploitation. Further, a commonality between the laborer and the artist was glimpsed: the artist and the laborer became, to an extent, transparent onto each other and in this sense there was not the need to theorize “Action” Painting *per se*. This can be heard, for instance, in the pages of *Art Digest*, in 1936, when the painter and illustrator Rockwell Kent aligned the artist with the worker in the language of revolutionary incendiarism: “Since the artists as a class are propertyless, their basic interests are very closely allied with the workers in general.”³⁰⁶ And in the pages of *Art in America* several decades later in the 1970s Abe Ajay reminisced about the W.P.A./F.A.P. days as ones in which the experience of

economic leveling was accompanied by an unprecedented camaraderie. Although Ajay warns, “Nostalgia is a specious editor,” he recalls the period as one in which “artists of such mixed persuasion were . . . gentle and generous with each other on so many levels.” This quality of unity, Ajay continues, was in part the result of “everyone receiv[ing] the same paycheck twice each month.”³⁰⁷

This was Rosenberg’s milieu as well. In the mid-thirties Rosenberg joined the Mural Division of the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration. During this time he worked, along with Lee Krasner, as a studio assistant to the openly Communist artist and political organizer-activist Max Spivak. The charged political environment of Spivak’s studio has been duly recounted by Krasner as one in which Rosenberg would frequently read aloud political tracts or argue the differences between Stalin and Trotsky with her and Spivak. According to some accounts it was during this time shared with Rosenberg in Spivak’s studio that Krasner became radicalized, coming to embrace Trotsky’s views on art and politics and eventually taking up an active leadership role in the Artists’ Union.³⁰⁸ This tableau is an historically fascinating one in which a number of interesting components come together in the “artist’s” studio/workshop: a Communist activist, a Marxist socialist theorist and critic, a modernist painter, and all at a moment when many thought the capitalist system was on the verge of irremediable failure. Art and politics were converging, and the language of that convergence appeared to be labor, both organized labor and artistic labors.

While working on the Project Rosenberg became active in the Artists’ Union, a unionizing effort begun in 1933 as the Unemployed Artists Group meant to organize artists on the model of the modern laborer and known for its aggressive direct action tactics in the fight for government recognition of artistic labor.³⁰⁹ Indeed the Artists’ Union itself had been very active in the fight to establish the Works Progress Administration in the first place. That the Artists’ Union and its organ, *Art Front*, which ran for three years (1934-37), was by most accounts closely influenced, possibly even controlled, by the Communist Party, and yet this unionizing effort worked directly with the U.S. government to provide “stopgap” relief measures for “starving” artists, the kind

of historical anomaly that can only be written off as one of those bizarre congruencies produced by the Popular Front.³¹⁰ However, Rosenberg was very much at the forefront of this strange mixture. In December 1935, not long after the establishment of *Art Front*, Rosenberg joined the communist-dominated editorial board.³¹¹

There have been a number discussions about the nature and importance of this publication. Gerald Monroe, a scholar specializing in the relationship in the 1930s between Left politics and the arts, has called *Art Front* “probably the liveliest art periodical of the time.”³¹² This is an opinion that has been fervently seconded by Patricia Hills. Listing off the frequent contributors and staff writers and editors, including Meyer Schapiro, Charmion von Wiegand, Clarence Weinstock, Louis Lozowick and Rosenberg, Hills proclaims, “*Art Front* the most intellectually stimulating magazine of art and politics in the mid-1930s.”³¹³ Orton, too, has emphasized the singularity of this publication: “*Art Front* was the New York communist and left art community’s public conversation about art and politics. Moreover, it was at that time the only periodical in the United States which was primarily concerned with art and politics.”³¹⁴

The above biographical summary presents Rosenberg with solid thirties credentials. As a way of weaving together the concerns described above I want to draw attention to a short piece of writing Rosenberg did during his spell in Washington, D.C. while working for the Works Progress Projects Administration. In 1941 Rosenberg served as editor for the small volume *Men at Work: Stories of People at Their Jobs in America* produced by the Works Projects Administration as part of its American Life series.³¹⁵ This series and many other projects instigated by the Works Projects Administration (especially through the Federal Writers’ Project) aimed at documentary production, resulting in hundreds of books and pamphlets recording aspects of American life, a great historical archive and cultural inventory of America’s past and present. Fitting into this larger mandate, the theme of Rosenberg’s particular volume—almost certainly inspired by the over-a-decade-long crisis in American labor and economics—is the variety of types of labor performed by the American worker, spanning a range from traditional domestic handicrafts to the modern industrial assembly-line. Rosenberg

organized this volume in a format according to which a different type of labor was taken as the subject for both a writer of the Writers's Program and a photographer from the Art Program. Rosenberg also authored the volume's preface, simply and appropriately titled "Men at Work."³¹⁶ Though short and virtually unknown, this statement of Rosenberg's provides a provocative indication of how the critic was formulating the relation of art and labor and Marxist praxis.

This piece begins and ends on dramatically different notes. No doubt in a manner and tone befitting the interests of the government agency from which the author drew his paycheck, Rosenberg opens the essay on a positive and fairly innocuous note by first drawing attention to the side-by-side appearance of very old methods of labor and very new, "completely revolutionized" labor in the United States. "[B]y the side of the most advanced techniques of the twentieth century, men still work in ways that have descended from the beginnings of human history." This is, Rosenberg affirms, "[o]ne great source of America's social and cultural variety," to which the newer professions, in management, advertising and in radio and the movies, have contributed significantly. In contrast to this fairly idyllic picture of the multitude of types of human labor, both the age-old and the new-fangled, creating positive possibilities for individual fulfillment and promisingly expansive "creative life," Rosenberg turns quickly and harshly to the much more prevalent regressive quality in the mass of industrial forms of labor which he calls a "historic trend towards simplification and automatism," where "some small portion of the human organism moves in tight fidelity to the pace and turnings of a machine, whose process it helps to complete," and "away from the skillful self-sufficiency of the shepherd or artisan."³¹⁷ To make his point Rosenberg thumbs through the U.S. Department of Labor's *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* from 1939. He quotes at length the entry given for "Key-Crimping-Machine Operator." "Attaches can-opening keys to metal containers of preserved foods by means of an automatic or pedal operated key-crimping machine: feeds cans one at a time into machine; presses pedal to actuate crimping mechanism; removes cans with keys attached; loads key magazine at regular intervals."³¹⁸ Indeed, at this point it becomes apparent that Rosenberg conceives of his project as the direct

antithesis to the Labor Department's rationalizing and lifeless *Dictionary*. The writing selections in Rosenberg's volume describe forms of labor and laborers with specificity, with eyes open to the "worker's delight in touching things and changing them handily," as well as to the "special kind of suffering and crippling that comes from toil that is tiresome and infinitely repetitious, and in which the instinct to workmanship is reduced to beggary."

With a touch of cruelty for its pointed contrast, Rosenberg inserts a description of ideal praxis: "A man's work, say the philosophers, is the means by which he stamps his image on nature, and also gives form to his own character." But of course the image still lingering is that of the key-crimping-machine operator who far from stamping his image on nature suffers rather the reverse, the machine's image and process and necessity stamped on him. Rosenberg here tells us to take heed, because the "manner of his [the worker's] daily doing is an influence interacting deeply with the future of society and with political ideas and social theories."³¹⁹ After a brief pause, Rosenberg then comes back to the poverty of the representation of labor itself. The stuff of the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, "statistical tables, vocational surveys," all take part in a kind of blindness to labor, functioning as part of an inability to actually see it. These rationalized forms for representing labor, "cannot convey the immediate living quality, the human 'tone,' of the individual at work."

It is the realm of art that Rosenberg next proposes as the "representer" of labor. "This [labor] can find full expression only in the arts, which concern themselves with such values as the skill used in the task, its tensions, color, and formal and dramatic appeal. . . ." However, although the arts are equipped with the right material sensibility to capture a true representation of labor, up till now, Rosenberg reflects, they have left this subject sadly neglected. "Literature and painting, however, are not rich in descriptions of modern work. Passages crop up in a few great novels and poems, but these usually introduce the labor process as an incident in some moral or social argument, or as a detail in the landscape, rarely for itself, as human action worth looking at. . . ."³²⁰ Rosenberg is getting closer to the heart of it, but he first criticizes the "work tradition" found in

American literature, or that which would appear to come closest to answering his call for an authentic representation of modern labor.

Even writers who deal with contemporary social problems often ignore the basic relation a man's work bears to his being as a whole. Concentrating on the *conditions* surrounding his labor and his emotional life, they commonly neglect his acts in making things. "Social" novels of the past few years have shown the worker's home life, his food, his clothing, his struggle to meet his needs, his organizations, and his friends, but rarely the productive and hence powerful and dynamic core of his existence.³²¹

But Rosenberg is not blaming literature for its apparent blindness or neglect. Modern labor, as Rosenberg surmises, is almost invisible.

One reason, of course, that actual work has frequently played so small a part in those writings most zealously dedicated to the modern workingman is that the operations performed in the factory appear to be so minute and trivial as to offer very little to the writer. The labor activity can be described in a few sentences, and the same task is performed day after day until broken up by unemployment. To the extent that the action has lost its personality, it ceases to have meaning for the onlooker. The writer turns aside from the monotony of his subject's labor, thus rendering a negative verdict on his creative life.³²²

But the difficulty of this representation goes beyond the fact that modern labor is almost invisible because monotonous, and beyond the problem that a language and technique has not yet been found for "dealing with the new men and women who each day stand emptily alert for hours within a rigid construction through which incomplete and changing objects keep streaming." The further problem is that writers and artists—makers of representations—are themselves often unfamiliar with physical labor. Authors, "[i]n the main," Rosenberg writes, "have belonged to aristocratic or commercial milieus." Even the realist Zola is criticized for "superficial" reporting. He only "paid flying visits to the scene for the purpose of gathering material, but did not stay long enough to learn labor from the inside."

Ostensibly, the volume that Rosenberg is introducing and which he has organized and edited will try to redress this problem of seeing modern "Men at Work." The writers and artists working on this project presumably did more than the flying visit—they

attempted to learn labor *from the inside*. However, despite this care, this conscious goal of rendering authentic images of modern labor, and despite the opportunity this project afforded for bringing creative laborers side by side with industrial and craft laborers, Rosenberg ends by summarizing the experience and volume as a “negative judgment on labor.” Despite the title and aim of the project, “men at work” was precisely what eluded representation. His concluding line reads: “In the pictures of large industrial plants there were rarely to be seen any *men working*, and when human figures did appear, they were too small to be reproduced.”³²³

I have analyzed this short essay at length because it offers a highly important clue to how Rosenberg begins thinking through the problematic of art and labor. It is especially significant in framing this problematic through the issue of labor’s representability. The problems of representing labor—taken in a variety of senses, whether in union representation of labor, the Communist Party’s claim to represent it, the commodity as a (failed) representation of it, and also the debates surrounding socialist realism in the visual and literary arts as representations of labor—was a salient theme at the time. As part of this project Rosenberg had engaged in his own quest to represent labor, but what he located instead was a lack, an impoverishment—to repeat, a negative judgment on labor. Significantly, this impoverishment is registered in the two aspects of a dialectic. The sense of dialectic as process is given its negative judgment when Rosenberg quotes from the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*. This is a description of completely rationalized labor, of formulaic process, of commodity production and alienating activity. This certainly could not be taken as a vision of labor from the inside. But the structural sense of dialectic is equally thwarted as well. He had wanted a picture of men at work, men working, but he came away empty-handed. It had been impossible to see men working in the “large industrial plants,” to get an adequate picture of the part working within the whole.

There is a sense, however, in which Rosenberg had set himself an awesome, even philosophically impossible, task. How does one picture (and thus capture) the *relation* between process and thing? How could any representation succeed in capturing this

dialectical relation without also, as an act of representation, violently splitting and re-abstracting it back into rational process and separate thing? But had not Marx, in a sense, called for this very procedure, required this impossible task? For was not the unveiling of labor, grasping its condition, seeing labor from the inside also fundamental to the critical consciousness that is able to break out of reification, penetrate through mystifications, the primary one being the commodity form—that “very strange thing”—that is the embodiment of a labor that perpetually and tragically misrecognizes itself?³²⁴

The theorization of Action Painting can be taken as Rosenberg’s answer to the problem posed by “Men at Work.” Action Painting located a way of representing the dialectical complexity of process and thing—a picture of the dialectic—and in such a way that the differing outcomes of activity, the unified process-thing or the disarticulated process versus thing, or art and labor, are shown as implicated in each other’s representations. A clear indication of this is found in a statement Rosenberg wrote in 1957:

If the ultimate subject matter of all art is the artist’s state or tension . . . that state may be represented either through the image of a thing or through an abstract sign. The innovation of Action Painting was to dispense with the *representation* of the state in favour of *enacting* it in physical movement. The action on the canvas became its own representation. This was possible because an action, being made of both the psychic and the material, is by its nature a sign—it is the trace of a movement whose beginning and character it does not in itself ever altogether reveal . . . yet the action also exists as a ‘thing’ in that it touches other things and affects them.³²⁵

This would be the concrete thought, the event, the vantage point that would be able to see the act within the drama, men working and at work at the same time.

Dialectics at a Standstill: The Identity of Personality and Personification

Action Painting was the last “moment” in art on the plane of dramatic and intellectual seriousness.

Harold Rosenberg³²⁶

One learns a good deal about the nature of Rosenberg’s commitments, the structure of his sustained and sustaining problematic, from finding woven throughout his late projects the return to the revolutionary dilemma—how to bring together consciousness and materiality, how to make the leap into emancipatory identity. In 1970, for instance, Rosenberg was invited by Paul de Man and Clifford Geertz on the behalf of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, to attend a conference and planning session for a future issue on the “Structures of Meaning” that would address “the systematic study of meaningful forms” in the humanities and social sciences.³²⁷ Although Rosenberg ultimately was unable to attend the three day conference in Paris he had prepared for the event and written a “Preliminary Memo,” a short document sketching out his intended contribution to the discussion. The key terms in Rosenberg’s text are, once again, duality, hybridism, the transformatal, and the material and imaginative modes. And, once again, the setting for these terms is Marx. Rosenberg points to Marx’s discussion of class as a “complex example of this duality,” where a class is both a “socio-economic abstraction representing persons who perform specific functions within a given *system* of production” but also “something else,” a “collective actor in the drama of history,” “a living agent that *changes* [emphasis added].” The “something else” has to do with the imaginative moment of this dualism—it is the great leap, that spark of imaginative “self-delusion” that allows the historical actor to think beyond the flat-footed materialism of objective existence, of the given situation. While Marx had roughly described the ingredients needed for concocting this new reality, Rosenberg reflected, the great aporia in contemporary Marxism was the result of Marx’s failure to explain how to combine them. “Marx failed to develop a theory of the class as collective actor,” Rosenberg writes in the “Preliminary Memo,”

Volume III of *Capital* breaks off at the point where he was about to begin this analysis. The problem of the transformation of a class from a socio-

economic abstraction into a fighting collectivity—a “mass-I,” as Rosa Luxemburg called it—is the problem of revolutionary class-consciousness, which has divided Marxists for the past hundred years. From Marx’s own belief in the spontaneous generation of class consciousness through the pressure of material conditions, through Sorel’s theory of the proletarian myth, the revisionist notion of Socialist education, to Lenin’s conviction of the inherent limitations of proletarian revolutionary consciousness, and therefore of the need to superimpose upon the class the party of “professional revolutionists,” the origins of class self-identification have remained indistinct. This is another way of saying that the gap between the findings of Marx’s sociology and the vision of Marx’s drama of history has not been bridged.³²⁸

And in this one hears the echoes of all the old questions: what is to be done? where to begin? how does one stop repeating oneself? How does one start enacting the revolutionary movement towards the richness of self-identity without always performing a circular motion of repetition, of coming back to the self-same, the status quo, the unnerving stasis of formal identity, of $A = A$, but instead progressing towards genuinely *new* identity, to what Marx famously described as “the absolute elaboration of his [man’s] creative dispositions . . . unmeasured by any previously established yardstick. . . . Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?”³²⁹ How does one trans-form?

The cast of the question was a shade different in Rosenberg’s thinking about revolutionary dialectic later in his career, not so much how does one transform but what is it that persistently keeps this from happening in the revolutionary socialist sense? Why does the revolutionary dialectic fail? The problem, as Rosenberg would develop in the 1970s, stemmed from Marx’s picturing the proletariat as a blank, a void, a mere personification of abstract forces, and thus occupying a place of special possibilities, in a position to recognize itself for what it was—nothing. In the Marxist narrative the result of this encounter, the shock of recognition, was the “lightning of thought” which would power the proletariat to action. For, as Marx had vividly described a number of times, the nineteenth century industrial proletariat was the negative of humanity.³³⁰ “His time is a wage-rate, his product not a self but an interchangeable commodity.” “Since his work

assumes the form of capital which is taken away from him, he is constantly drained of his 'life content'; his acts produce no accretion of individuality, not even an illusory one."

"In the proletariat capitalism has created the very personification of self-loss. . . ." ³³¹ The key to revolutionary consciousness and agency as Rosenberg read in Marx is precisely this lack of content. "Only the proletariat of the present day, who are completely shut off from all self-activity," Marx wrote of how the dramatic and unexpected reversal appears, "are in position to achieve a complete and no longer restricted self-activity." ³³² For unlike the members of the bourgeois class, the proletariat does not have a "socially constructed self" that might obstruct or soften its direct confrontation with the reality of its lack, the true poverty of its existence. For Rosenberg this meant a profound ability to feel one's own alienation, to be present to it, to witness it, to suffer the recognition of one's "vacuity," to feel "revulsion against the void within." It was this defining/identifying moment when one becomes truly self-conscious, taking oneself dialectically as both subject and object, that was the lightening of thought. It meant finding a way through these two lines: "The working class is either revolutionary or it is nothing" and "I am nothing and I should be everything." ³³³

However, the problem, as Rosenberg increasingly saw it, was that this revolutionary "nothing" was being filled with specious content, the easy, illusory, pre-packaged identities of a mass culture industry. Not surprisingly the text that Rosenberg will return to is Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In the lecture notes for a seminar he taught in the early 1970s on this text at the University of Chicago, he explains:

Now, you could say that what has happened is the proletarianization culturally of the entire society; that is, everybody is turned into a proletariat by means of mass media. The only trouble with that is that there's no emptiness, you know, there's the Marx thing about the appendage of the machine like some Bauhaus creation, but you think of the mass media—it may be full of garbage, but it's certainly full, you can't stop it for a minute. It keeps going on and on. ³³⁴

In another place in these notes Rosenberg comes back to the idea with some modifications and additions.

But when the worker doesn't become revolutionary Marx says he is nothing. Well, this of course is not true. This is a very basic idea of Marx, that a working man is simply an appendage of the machine—until he becomes revolutionary. Therefore, in order to be a human being you had to be a revolutionary, otherwise you're just an attachment or another wheel, or a lever or something; the machine can easily be replaced by a computer. He's nothing, he's simply an organ of production, machine production. This is one of the really crucial points with which Marx goes over the edge; because—he goes over the edge and he doesn't go over the edge—because obviously the working class is not that empty. And this has been the cause of great problems for Marxism, that not only that the working man gets ideas about himself from socialist literature, from unions, from all sorts of sources, and it's never that empty.³³⁵

To summarize, Rosenberg started realizing a problem—possibly the enormity of the challenge, to paraphrase the author from 1952—of exercising a constant No.³³⁶ On what should have been the revolutionary path from “nothing” to “everything,” the revolutionary actor had stalled out somewhere in-between, at “something.” Significantly this failure in revolutionary dialectic had happened on two fronts, with the worker in the Soviet Union and the artist in the United States: both had been turned into “something.” What stood in the wake of this failed dialectic was the *professional* and *performance*.

The failure in the case of the political development of the Soviet Union and the revolutionary worker was easy to see, and this happened fairly early for Rosenberg in his references to Leninism.³³⁷ The key to Rosenberg's criticism of Leninism is that it installs a division between theory and practice as the very possibility of any communist future. Consciousness is brought in from the outside (a “vanguard . . . guided by an advanced theory”); the worker, now, is filled with revolutionary content, a content dispensed through a bureaucratic agency and agenda.³³⁸ Lenin professionalizes the revolution through the “leadership” role his elite band of Party theorists assumes, becoming the consciousness, the brain, the thinking organ for the worker's revolution, which thus reinscribed the division of labor between intellectual and worker within a social doctrine and movement, albeit with a professed goal of healing this rift. In an essay written in 1956, aptly titled “Marxism: Criticism and/or Action,” Rosenberg acknowledged, “In

place of resistance to deprivation converting itself into political action through an expansion in self-consciousness, inter-communication and comprehensiveness of program, acceptance of the Party leaders' decisions by individual workers becomes the basis of working class unity. With the lifeless discipline of the machine and the appropriation of his action extended into the political realm, the worker remains set fast in his abstractness, a personification of nullity with Marxist slogans as his ideal content."³³⁹ Thus to Rosenberg's understanding the attempt to bring the proletariat to "correct" consciousness by cattle-herding it through the teleologically appropriate next step was a gross deformation of Marx. Where the revolutionary "repulse from the unreal" was to free the proletariat from the "lifeless discipline of the machine," to create the conditions through which it could possess its own actions, achieve praxis, and transcend itself as an abstract personification, here the Communist Party commandeers the revolutionary "act" and bifurcates it into theory versus practice.

An interesting indication of how Rosenberg was processing the Leninist model of revolutionary action can be found in the marginal notations in Rosenberg's copy of *What Is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, a short and important volume of Lenin's addressing the issue of organization versus spontaneity.³⁴⁰ "Action" is a term that keeps surfacing in these notes. Towards the end of a longish note on the relationship of consciousness to material conditions, Rosenberg writes of "Action as a form of discovery and self-discovery," and a little further on he describes Marx's notion of action as specifically opposed to an acting that was a carrying out of formulas. Forms of action that carried out formulas were "Utopian" and, in Rosenberg's words, "Opposed to Marxism," and not the kind of action that would be truly revolutionary. "No putting of idea into effect. Action-and-idea arise out of living. Consc[iousness] springs out of material conditions—Becomes a human power."³⁴¹ Form and content have to come together at once, and denying this was the grievous flaw of Leninism. "The mold of man is to be set from above rather than be the product of man's own actions," and this failed Marx's own definition of praxis; it was merely following commands, carrying out a formula.³⁴² This was not the free act, this was mere performance. And as Rosenberg warned, "you must be

able to recognize the difference between a genuine uprising and a simulated uprising, that is, one fabricated according to the revolutionary ‘craft’ by professionals who deliberately design it to resemble a spontaneous upheaval.”³⁴³

This last line, though written with social revolutionary failure in mind, could be put to art as well. For possibly even more alarming to Rosenberg was that the modern artist’s “opportunity” to realize the free act/”free labor” had also faltered. As Rosenberg was all too aware, it was not the dialectical concept of Action Painting that animated the art world of the 1960s and later, but rather one-dimensional abstractions of art—as pure form in formalism, as pure process in happenings, as pure idea in conceptualism and “dematerialized” practices. The dialectically achieved self-identity that the Action Painter modeled was circumvented, perverted egregiously, with the rise of the artist as superstar, a figure that functioned in the system as a personality. Such an artist had become the personification of personality. Rosenberg related the value invested in personality as consistent with a society concerned with the loss of individuality. “In this age so often felt to be one of deindividualization, there is a great tendency to make an ideal of ‘the individual.’ Such an ideal is no less abstract and unreal than any other ideal and the living individual can only be reduced by it.”³⁴⁴ The problem with the artist as personality was that it was the formation of a bad identity, an ill-begotten subject-object by which the two poles join—as formless irrationality (personality) is given form and rationalized (personification)—to create the *sign* of authentic identity. The narcissistic subjectivity of personalities took on form and social being not through a dialectically wrought process, the “dialectical tension of the genuine act”—an act that necessarily entailed a real defining encounter with the world, with the materiality of the given, with objects and limits (death)—but rather through the rationalization of the “formless” personality into the pre-formed personification of free, creative subjectivity. What was being performed was the personality of the artist, or the artist-as-personality, a theatricalized persona.

As Rosenberg wrote in 1971, “In contrast to the meagerness of art, the artist is blown up to gigantic proportions. . . . The artist has become, as it were, too big for art.”³⁴⁵ The artist as persona is fashioned not through the labor of historical dialectic but through

costume change and fashionable attitudes. As Rosenberg complained with some bitterness, “Must one remind budding art historians that the uneasiness of art in the face of its own situation was not adopted by artists as a manner, in the way that one adopts a leather jacket or a hair-do that covers the eyes. Anxiety was forced upon art as the experience that accompanies the rejection of shallow or fraudulent solutions.”³⁴⁶ As in Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, this was about revolutionary activity taken as performance, become inanely repetitious. There was a tremendous difference between action as transformation on the one hand—an enacting realization of self through the tension between “nothing” and “everything,” achieving at last the revolutionary new—and, on the other, action as process, as the performance of the pre-formed, as the disjunctive falsity of mere acting a part or the mindlessness of repetitious activity, the tensionless repetition of “something” again and again.

The following chapters begin to address how this reading of Rosenberg and Action Painting might relevantly apply to actual art practices. However, before venturing towards this more practical application, I offer as a concluding image for this chapter one last return to Hamlet as an articulating structure for highly loaded discussions of theory and practice relations. And, once again, the most obviously critical moment (though one occurring “off-stage”) is Hamlet’s encounter with death. It is the turning point in the play, the bridge between Hamlet the personality and Hamlet the identity, between Hamlet the theoretician and Hamlet the practitioner. There is, nonetheless, another mediating device between theory and practice in Shakespeare’s drama. The device is the play within the play; and within Shakespeare’s tragedy this device appears when Hamlet himself authors a drama to be performed to the audience of his mother, Queen Gertrude and his uncle, newly become step-father and usurper King of Denmark, Claudius. To this unsuspecting audience, what is performed is a representation of the murderous and incestuous acts of the King and Queen—it is a representation of the truth of their crimes. Indeed, Hamlet could not have asked for a more appropriate reception of his work: the Queen and new King receive this representation with due conscience and horror—the villain becomes sick and is unable to continue to face his representation. The play within the

play would appear then to figure and perform some manner and degree of joining theory and practice. The limitation of these mediations of the imagination and the aesthetic is that they are situated on the side of theory: it is the dream-image of theory imagining itself having become practice. The problem lies precisely in it being an ideal resolution and an ideal one only. This was a matter Rosenberg summed up concisely when he wrote: “No substantial problem of art is soluble by art alone.”³⁴⁷ The danger posed by the play within the play (and art for art’s sake) was that of the fatal mistaking of theater for the actual drama, of operating only on the plane of theatrical performance and never passing on to dramatic enactment.

Chapter Three:

(In)Scription (& Out): Writing By and About Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt

The Judgment of Harold

identity

[ad. F. identité (Oresme, 14th c.), ad. late L. identitās (Martianus Capella, c425), peculiarly formed from ident(i)-, for L. idem 'same' + -tās, -tātem: see -TY.

*Various suggestions have been offered as to the formation. Need was evidently felt of a noun of condition or quality from idem to express the notion of 'sameness', side by side with those of 'likeness' and 'oneness' expressed by similitās and ūnitās; hence the form of the suffix. But idem had no combining stem. Some have thought that ident(i)- was taken from the L. adv. identidem 'over and over again, repeatedly', connexion with which appears to be suggested by Du Cange's explanation of identitās as "quævis actio repetita". Meyer-Lübke suggests that in the formation there was present some association between idem and id ens 'that being', whence identitās like entitās. But assimilation to entitās may have been merely to avoid the solecism of *idemitās or *identtās. However originated, ident(i)- became the combining stem of idem, and the series ūnitās, ūnicus, ūnificus, ūnificāre, was paralleled by identitās, identicus, identificus, identificāre: see identic, identic, identity above.]³⁴⁸*

Here is an obvious question to begin with: why choose the painters Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt to think through the meaning and implications of Rosenberg's "Action Painting"? What relation could link Newman's and Reinhardt's minimally incidental expanses of canvas to painting as *action*, as embodied gesture willfully asserting its nature as such? As general opinion would have it, this role should have been properly assigned to Willem de Kooning, an Action Painting exemplar, as its star performer. Indeed, in 1975, Lawrence Alloway made explicit this very point when he boldly presumed that the "artist central to the article ["The American Action Painters"], though

unnamed was de Kooning.” Needless to say, Alloway was far from alone in insisting on this identification.³⁴⁹

Demonstrated in the previous chapter, however, was a nuancing of Rosenberg’s critical project for painting that begins to suggest why an out-of-hand identification of de Kooning as the “artist central” to Action Painting potentially bleeds the concept of its richness. The point is that de Kooning’s work is not the place where Action Painting becomes most profitably dissonant. Rather, the critical complexity that belied Rosenberg’s concept emerges with figures ostensibly marginal to Action Painting. As I argue in this chapter, Action Painting is made explicit as critical praxis not by seeing the drama performed with the familiar cast—de Kooning, or Pollock, or Franz Kline—but rather, through Newman and Reinhardt, the most unlikely of players. With the revision of Action Painting that was outlined in my previous chapter, one can return productively to a question long presumed answered: who exactly counts as an Action Painter? and on what grounds? Not only will the process of mapping the relationship of Newman and Reinhardt to Action Painting help illuminate key issues of Action Painting and of Rosenberg’s project in general but, as with any triangulation device, the enigmatic relationship between Newman and Reinhardt will be clarified as well.

In 1952 Rosenberg named no names. Although titled “The American Action Painters,” not a single one of these newfangled Action Painters is designated by proper name. One may speculate on this curious point: had the author simply switched out the plural noun for the gerund-noun, this absence might have registered less. But Rosenberg did not make this change and “Painters” stands in the title to an essay markedly devoid of the names of specific painters. Already, however, this requires some qualification. For indeed, in one spot, the author *almost* gives away a name and, significantly, this happens at the very point in the essay in which questions of parameters, the defining limits clarifying who is in and who is out, are raised. Rosenberg recounts, “One of the leaders of this mode said to me, ‘B— is not modern.’” Why? “‘He works from sketches. That makes him Renaissance.’”³⁵⁰ From here, Rosenberg goes on to defend this enigmatic “B—” against the Action Painter’s charges. The critic’s defense is drawn from

discriminating between working from sketches in the old conception (preliminary plan and then execution on canvas) and sketching as an activity in itself. He explains: “If a painting is an action the sketch is one action, the painting that follows it another.”

Overall, this is a peculiar moment in Rosenberg’s text, one that almost feels like a detour—or at least a point strangely drawn out, and verging as close as Rosenberg ever gets in this essay to stuff that sounds like Tenth Street shop-talk. He ends his discussion of sketches with what has the tone of a counter-reprimand against the accusations of the Action Painting “leader.” “Of course, the painter who spoke had no right to assume that his friend had the old mental conception of a sketch. There is no reason why an act cannot be prolonged from a piece of paper to a canvas. Or repeated on another scale and with more control. A sketch can have the function of a skirmish.”³⁵¹

What these passages indicate is that the contest over Action Painting had surfaced already in 1952. Already Rosenberg is struggling to disrupt the emerging Action Painting formula. When the Action Painting “leader” accuses “B—” of failing to be modern, Rosenberg sees “the principle, and the difference from the old painting . . . made into a formula.”³⁵² Still, the issue of sketches is an odd place for Rosenberg to carry out the task of defining Action Painting. One might even be more ready to assume, like the reprimanded Action Painting leader, that sketches and the activity of sketching form the obvious antithesis of Action Painting. For could one not assume the difference between the sketch and the canvas was one that signified the division of action into separated theory (“A sketch is the preliminary form of an image the *mind* is trying to grasp”) and practice (“nothing would get in the way of the act of painting”).³⁵³ The sketch—as mind, plan, or pre-existing theory—should surely be that thing most recognizably *outside* Action Painting, yet this is precisely the reasoning that is thwarted by Rosenberg’s championing of “B—,” and what in turn makes the identification of the Action Painter a complex task. Indeed, this difficulty is markedly present from the essay’s very first lines. “What makes any definition of a movement in art dubious is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement—certainly not as well as, if successful, it does the others. Yet without the definition something essential in those best is bound to be missed.”³⁵⁴

Rosenberg is well aware of the trouble brewing ahead for “Action Painting,” but this is a battle he is prepared to engage.

What would happen if Newman (and by extension the difference between Newman’s and Reinhardt’s abstractions) were nominated as that very figure who challenges Action Painting’s limits and simultaneously establishes them; who paradoxically escapes the definition best and yet is at the same time one of its “deepest” members. For if one were allowed to draw out the essay’s single tempting clue to a proper name, that unknown “B—,” and extend it into “Barney,” would this not illuminate profoundly the complexity of the Action Painting concept and, as well, identify “B—,” “Barney,” as finally belonging?

It is tempting to read this incident as Rosenberg’s coming to the defense of a beleaguered friend. Certainly, in 1952, the year the essay was published, Newman would have felt very much on the outs of the emerging New York art world. Things had begun to look up generally for the Abstract Expressionists—as de Kooning told it, Pollock had “broken the ice” with his November 1949 show at the Betty Parsons Gallery, so that (as Rosalind Krauss later described it) “collectors and museum people formerly known only for snubbing American painters now flocked to his [Pollock’s] openings,” and began to attend the openings of others of his milieu. But 1952 was a year in Newman’s professional chronology that has been called the “sensitive point.” It marked the beginning of the eight-year hiatus (1952-1959) during which he did not exhibit in New York City.³⁵⁵

Just two years earlier the picture had looked brighter for Newman. In January, 1950, the artist held his first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery where the public got its first taste of his radically reduced “zip” paintings. By most accounts the reception was cool; some viewers were hostile and many more were dismissive. Not to be deterred by just a single attempt, Newman tried once more the following spring, in 1951. His second solo exhibition was again at Parsons’s gallery, and again the reception was cool, hostile, dismissive. The exhibited works in the second show, as Anne Temkin has

suggested, “heightened the austere effect that had flabbergasted viewers the year before, leaving them to wonder if he was truly incompetent or just pulling their leg.”³⁵⁶

The second show surely acted as confirmation. Newman had “repeated” himself in order to make sure that he was being clear. Indeed, he had even gone so far as to heighten the “austere effect”—for more clarity. After all, one of the promises of the second Parsons’s exhibition was in its doubling of the first (in being the second it could no longer have the startling effect of the totally new and unfamiliar). It now had, although only recent, a precedent. Presumably, the works were in a position to be looked at seriously, beyond the shock of the startlingly and possibly blindingly new. But this doubling went both ways. If Newman made sure he got his point across, so did the audience, by repeating its first reactions, rejecting, in David Sylvester’s clever designation, the “ugly duckling.”³⁵⁷ Thus, by 1952, Newman’s rejection had been doubly confirmed. He had gotten the message. And so the poetic allowance of extending “B—” into “Barney” opens up “The American Action Painters” to an uncharacteristic perspective: as an inclusion, a “yes” sounded in Newman’s direction at the very moment when many others failed to see him as an artist, let alone imagine him as an American Action Painter.

Yes and no. The incident of “B—” and the issue of sketches stands out for other reasons too. It is a relatively affirmative moment in Rosenberg’s 1952 essay, a piece of writing otherwise given to fierce negatives. The rhetoric of modernist negation permeates its frequently referenced lines: “To maintain the force to refrain from settling anything, he [the artist, the Action Painter] must exercise in himself a constant No.”³⁵⁸ Action Painting is a series of refusals—of tradition, of taste, of easy solutions, of markets and cashing in on the new cultural fad of Modern Art on North American shores, of Art and of Society. Or, as in one of the essay’s emphatic subtitles, “It’s Not That, It’s Not That, It’s Not That.”³⁵⁹

This pattern of insistent repetition of negative mandates in Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” also evokes a second artist, Ad Reinhardt. For it is Reinhardt who fits, at least on the face of things, this stance of refusal identifying the Action

Painter. It is Reinhardt who will most literally take up this exacting ascesis of exercising in his work a constant “No.” Indeed, 1952 was the very same year that saw the first public and published version of what would become Reinhardt’s signature lists of negative imperatives. In Reinhardt’s aptly titled “Abstract Art Refuses,” submitted as his artist’s statement for the catalogue accompanying a group exhibition of contemporary painting at the University of Illinois, Urbana, he initiated the negativist style and stance that he would elaborate over the next fourteen years in writings, interviews, and in the art-as-art statements.³⁶⁰ “In painting, for me,” the artist demanded, “no fooling-the-eye, no window-hole-in-the-wall, no illusions, no representations, no associations, no distortions, no paint-caricaturing, no cream pictures or drippings, no delirium trimmings . . . no gallery gimmicks . . . no entertainment business, no vested interests, no Sunday hobby in America of ashcan-regional-WPA-Pepsi-Cola styles. . . .”³⁶¹ Fittingly this 1952 published record of refusal was matched in his painting practice of this time, as the artist seriously began paring down the elements of his formal language, “making geometrically composed, symmetrical, monochrome paintings in either red or blue.”³⁶² Nevertheless, however much Reinhardt might seem to literalize one of the outstanding characterizations of Action Painting—exercising that constant No—it is precisely Reinhardt whom Rosenberg rejects. Reinhardt’s negation was not Action Painting’s negation. Increasingly, as Reinhardt’s work became ever-more minimalist in its negationist pose, it became for Rosenberg the ominous emblem of something terribly wrong with the project of serious painting (and art in general) in the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s.

The year 1963 offers a tidy historical marker for illustrating this critical fork in Rosenberg’s judgment pro Newman and contra Reinhardt. In this year Rosenberg wrote and published pieces about both artists which were tellingly different in tone. In a *New Yorker* review of the Museum of Modern Art’s “Americans 1963” (which included Reinhardt and not Newman) and the Jewish Museum’s “Towards a New Abstraction” Rosenberg condemned the assortment of new anti-Abstract Expressionists, the producers of *mahler-frei* paintings, all the “emblem-makers” represented in the exhibitions. This

included the Pop variety represented at the Museum of Modern Art—Richard Anuszkiewics, Sally Hazelet Drummand, David Simpson, Chryssa and Robert Indiana among others—and the formalist/purist variety at the Jewish Museum—Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, George Ortman and Paul Brach, among others.³⁶³ The brunt of the attack was directed significantly towards Ad Reinhardt, the sometimes member of the Abstract Expressionist generation, whom Rosenberg describes in almost turncoat language as the “intellectual pivot of the new art offered as a replacement for Abstract Expressionism.”³⁶⁴ Scanning through Rosenberg’s review one can string together a whole list of highly unflattering phrases directed at Reinhardt. Reinhardt is the “dogma-ridden” “neo-esthete” who carries on with “fanatical persistence and moral malevolence a program of exorcising the artist from his work and destroying the social and intellectual communion among artists,” the “would-be executioner of Abstract Expressionism,” the most extreme representative of “art dominated by ideology” and ruled by the “spirit of absolutism.” By Rosenberg’s analogy, he is the Lenin of the art world.

Contrast this to Rosenberg’s treatment of Newman. If Rosenberg by 1963 had come to see Reinhardt as a bogus claimant to serious art, locating in him the evil seeds of the new art, Newman in that same year basks in the critic’s high praise. Rosenberg’s *Vogue* feature, tellingly entitled “Barnett Newman: A Man of Controversy and Spiritual Grandeur,” speaks of Newman’s paintings as living rectangles, “real and living shapes,” vehicles of the metaphysical and of “cosmic emotions.”³⁶⁵ The powerful impact of this essay on the artist can be heard in Newman’s personal response written back to Rosenberg.

Dear Harold:

Now that I have overcome the embarrassment of reading about myself I want to tell you how deeply moved I am by your article.

Not only have you presented my work with succinct clarity and on the highest level, but you have moved from my work to me with great style to show that I and my work are one. . . .

What touches me most is the feeling that I get that you wrote the article with some affection for me personally—and that you enjoyed, that you had fun in the writing.

Nothing I shall ever read about myself will, I am certain, move me any more deeply.³⁶⁶

This indicates a rather special sympathy between the artist and critic. The 1963 *Vogue* essay was only one of a number of pieces (along with a substantive monograph) Rosenberg devoted to Newman.³⁶⁷ Seven years later, Rosenberg eulogized “Barney,” his “old friend,” naming him as equally “indispensable to his friends” as he was to American art. He was the artist who had continued the project of “metaphysical effort” in painting, who had the courage to keep the stakes up at the level of seriousness designated by the will to attain the sublimity of reality, to make and re-make in “metaphysical substance.”³⁶⁸ Rosenberg’s eulogy marked the conclusion of a very close friendship between the artist and the critic, one that had spanned from the early years of the 1930s and one whose depth Annalee Newman, the artist’s widow, attested to when she told an interviewer, “It would be right to say they loved each other.”³⁶⁹

Before moving forward I want to caution against a facile reduction of Rosenberg’s acceptance of Newman and rejection of Reinhardt as a judgment stemming from personal history alone, explainable by the circumstance that Newman and Rosenberg shared a particularly close friendship and that Reinhardt and Rosenberg did not. Dismissing the significance of the difference Rosenberg read between Newman and Reinhardt in this way, simply does not work. Although Rosenberg and Newman may have been very close friends this did not translate into automatic and uncritical support of each other’s work. Annalee Newman provides an animated illustration: “Harold and Barnett Newman talked a lot. Both of them were great talkers. Barnett would say, ‘Well, I met Harold. We disagreed a lot but what a lot of action!’”³⁷⁰ This is complemented by the anecdote recounted by many (including Annalee Newman) of an “endless” discussion the critic and the artist got into one time at a dinner party. Here is O’Brien summarizing the incident as told to her by Annalee Newman.

The Newmans had been to a dinner party at the Rosenbergs’ on Tenth Street. It got late and time to go, but Barnett Newman and Rosenberg were too deeply into a discussion to stop, so Rosenberg walked the Newmans home. The verbal exchange as they walked the eight blocks or so to the

Newman's place was noisy and impassioned, and far from over when they got to the Newmans'. So Newman walked Rosenberg back to Tenth Street. Unable to end their possibly interminable dispute, they continued to walk each other home—back and forth—for hours longer; there are those who say it continued throughout the entire night. Finally, someone along the route, obviously exasperated with the ceaseless peripatetic polemic, opened a high window and threw a pail of water on their heads.³⁷¹

These incidents suggest that the friendship between Rosenberg and Newman, though an obviously close one, did not mean the unquestioning acceptance of the other's ideas.

Far less considered, however, is the relationship between Rosenberg and Reinhardt. The reigning assumption that they were hostile to each other is not altogether incorrect, but the private correspondence between them suggests a relationship far more complex than merely antagonistic. In the Rosenberg Papers at the Getty, the two years just before Rosenberg's damning 1963 pronouncement on Reinhardt are represented by a high volume of postcards from Reinhardt to Rosenberg, the contents of which provide a more nuanced picture of their interaction.³⁷² One gleans from the tone and the subjects broached a sense of familiarity, of shared histories, and even camaraderie. In one letter Reinhardt fills Rosenberg in on what occurred at a Friday evening at the Club.

Great stuff at the club last Friday, you don't know what you missed, social tension in the air, angry old men, shouting attacks, bitter beatniks, screeching idiots, sober exchanges, wild togetherness, good jokes, corny questions, young blood, bad taste in the mouth afterward, Sidney Janis yelling in the New Yorker "Why fight it," Larry Rivers crying "We're just creatures of fate," Nick Marsicano (after Kiesler) "We're all in this together, onward, upward" (to victory?), Carl Holty outbeating the Beats, Resnick and Reinhardt from the floor, holy cats, like the good old days, were was you?³⁷³

Other correspondence also suggests a far easier, more homey acquaintance, with more frequent social interaction than is usually imagined for these two. For instance, writing in the summer of 1961 to "Harold and Mae" while traveling abroad, Reinhardt expresses his personal concern over Rosenberg's health after a leg operation and wishes the couple the best, hoping they get back into the "Baroque swing of things."³⁷⁴ Perhaps more surprising (because written after 1963, and thus after Rosenberg's highly critical assessments of

Reinhardt) one finds Reinhardt's reply to Horizon Press's publication party for *The Anxious Object*, to which Reinhardt jestingly answers: "I'll wear a good shirt and suit but I'll be damned if I'll shave for it."³⁷⁵

Thus, although there was solidarity in their relationship, this in no way precluded criticism of each other. For example, a 1961 postcard from Reinhardt reprimands Rosenberg for not attending various activist events and protests such as two Y.P.S.L. (Young People's Socialist League) events, asking "Don't you like folk-singing and the Cuban Revolution?" and "Are you still dancing in the streets all night with abstract-expressionists, shirking all responsibilities?"³⁷⁶ A more pointed message to Rosenberg, postmarked October 23, 1962, is addressed to "Harold Mr. Hairstylist"; accusations of coiffed decadence and complacency are made in the terse three sentences that follow:

You're beginning to sound like an old N.Y. Times-Book-Section
Reviewer.

What happened to the old jokes and slogans?

You need orders from headquarters to sound off?³⁷⁷

If a pattern can be detected in Reinhardt's more critical correspondences to Rosenberg, it is this. Reinhardt sharply criticizes what he perceives as the new cozy alliance between the critic and the "establishment," the art world "millionaire and analyst collectors." In one letter, he lumps Rosenberg with Thomas Hess and Clement Greenberg: "I'd like to haul in my criticisms of Hess and Greenberg too, you guys are all alike you know, all you fellows."³⁷⁸ Alternatively, Reinhardt makes an exception for Rosenberg (as distinguished from Hess and Greenberg), professing kinship with Rosenberg because they still shared the bond of 1930s commitments. "[Y]ou belong to the slicks now," Reinhardt acknowledged, "yet you still talk to working class stiffes like me, you're ok."³⁷⁹

One may or may not call this friendship. By no means did it come close to the intimacy between Rosenberg and Newman, but it is also a good distance from a blind hostility that would disallow communication or that could fuel the critic vindictively to reject Reinhardt. Indeed, if anything, Rosenberg appeared an ideal receiver for Reinhardt's edgy banter. Certainly he could give as well as he could take, and he took most of Reinhardt's jabs with humor and the proverbial grain of salt. "Dear Conscience"

was how Rosenberg addressed a response to one of the artist's more haranguing missives.³⁸⁰ Finally, Rosenberg's homage to Reinhardt after his death suggests that beyond their differences Rosenberg still regarded Reinhardt's efforts as highly important. He was, as Rosenberg writes, "the negative space in the composition of American art since the war. . . . His bellicose postcards were an affectionate reminder to his friends of his constantly hostile presence. They will be missed."³⁸¹ Ultimately, he was a presence to be missed.

One comes back, then, to the question of Rosenberg's judgment, one informed by something more than mere personal like and dislike. Newman belonged—more rather than less—to the Action Painting concept. In a 1960 essay titled "Icon Maker," Rosenberg indicates that Newman's conception of the "rectangle of the canvas as an active entity to wrestle with has led him to rank himself among the Action painters."³⁸² Eight years later, in 1968 and in "The Concept of Action Painting," Rosenberg's description remains much the same: "Jackson Pollock was an Action painter, and so was Hans Hofmann, and so is Willem de Kooning. But so also, or very close to being one, is, in his own view, Barnett Newman."³⁸³ Reinhardt, by contrast, as the emblem of the emblem-makers, was excluded from Action Painting; indeed, he stood for the very thing working in opposition to Action Painting's principles. Reinhardt was, in Rosenberg's phrase, the "would-be executioner of Abstract Expressionism."³⁸⁴ But what was the difference Rosenberg saw between Newman's and Reinhardt's projects that allowed him to draw such an exactly fine line?

Hilton Kramer more or less posed the same question when, in 1965, he criticized Rosenberg on what he took as both a glaring contradiction and troubling instance of a critic playing blatant favorites. How could Rosenberg's aesthetic stance, his Action Painting, have any meaningful coherence if it could accommodate both gestural painting (like de Kooning's or early Guston's) *and* the reductive fields of color and minimal gesture of Newman's painting? If Newman was to be accepted, Kramer argued, what made his reductive abstractions so fundamentally different from the younger 1960s generation of color field painters—the "emblem-makers" (and, of course, their precursor,

Reinhardt)—that Rosenberg so adamantly rejected? Kramer marks the breakdown of any pretence to coherence in Action Painting precisely by Rosenberg’s inclusion of Newman. Reading the chapter on Newman in *The Anxious Object*, Kramer discovers the most “flagrant” evidence of the critic’s spurious “reliance on non-visual, non-formal, extra-artistic criteria. “[T]his evasion of pictorial analysis clearly has its uses,” Kramer continues,

it enables the critic to accept Newman—he belongs, after all, to the beloved fifties—and reject the artists favored by Mr. Greenberg without confronting a single one of the concrete artistic issues that unite them. . . . The ease with which Mr. Rosenberg accommodates Newman’s art to his Existentialist outlook, and the vehemence with which he bans younger artists pursuing similar—and, in my view, more interesting—objectives, betrays his criticism as being, essentially the performance of a rhetorician.³⁸⁵

Much of what follows in this chapter is premised on a fundamental disagreement with Kramer’s charge. Nevertheless, his diatribe serves as an excellent expectorant for the nagging problems lodged within Rosenberg’s judgment, problems that are typically too quickly written off, like Kramer does here, as simply meaningless contradiction, as a failure to confront “concrete artistic issues,” as rhetorical performance, and as blunt favoritism.

Working against these dismissals, I will argue that Rosenberg’s judgment does work well within the substantive logic of Action Painting, and that the dividing line generated in Rosenberg’s act of including Newman and excluding Reinhardt both captures the vitally defining issues of Action Painting and confronts dead-on the concrete artistic issues of both Newman’s and Reinhardt’s projects. Keeping in mind the argument made in the previous chapter concerning Action Painting, and now carried over into Rosenberg’s reception of these two artists, it follows that Newman’s alignment with Action Painting means also that his project is an instantiation of good praxis, of healthy subject-object dialectics and is thus about forging authentic identity and revolutionary possibility. By the same token, Reinhardt’s misalignment with Action Painting—in fact, his identification by Rosenberg as that which directly opposes it—means his project is

one of bad praxis, of ailing dialectic, of inauthentic identity, as that which makes authentic revolution impossible.

The relevant questions are: What exactly did Newman's abstractions possess in Rosenberg's eyes that made them radical, an evocation "out of nothing" that cleared the space for new possibilities of being and thus answered the critic's call to revolutionary practice? What fine line is Rosenberg drawing between Newman and Reinhardt, according to which Newman's reductive abstraction points to utopia and Reinhardt's "doctrine of great emptiness" leads to dystopian "apocalyptic wallpaper?"³⁸⁶

What heightens the quality of suspense in this question—why Newman, why not Reinhardt, and why these two for the critical delineation of Action Painting—is that for many, and not just laypeople viewers but for art world professionals as well, there has seemed so very little by which to distinguish them. In certain lights, Newman and Reinhardt have, in fact, seemed very much alike, perhaps even, the same.

A Paradoxical Pair: The Two Fathers of the Sixties

[We] spent all day looking at art. . . . I saw Ad Reinhardt's black canvases, the blacks and the blues. Then I went on down the ramp and rounded the corner and . . . saw the paintings of Barnett Newman.

I looked at them, and from that point on I was home free. \
Anne Truitt³⁸⁷

Could it be that simple? Merely down a ramp and around a corner to locate Reinhardt and Newman. Then home at last? And free? The Minimalist painter and sculptor Anne Truitt's account of a day in 1977 spent looking at art in the National Gallery contains shades of Dorothy in Oz—of having followed a proverbial Yellow Brick Road, unmasked a wizard (or rather two) and found one's way gloriously home. But, as a number of accounts of 1960s post-Abstract Expressionist art developments relate,

looking to and finding something in Newman and Reinhardt was not Truitt's artistic narrative alone. After 1959—a year useful as marking a turning point against the “new academy” of the gesturalism, existentialism, romanticism and “hot” emotions associated with de Kooning and the artistic currents of the preceding two decades—both Newman and Reinhardt entered into a period of much altered and improved reception.

The story, as it gets told again and again, is this. Both are viewed as outside the primary artistic currents during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s, at a time when painterly gesturalism—canvases “buried under an avalanche of furiously slathered oil”—were taken by the advanced crowd as authentic expression.³⁸⁸ Later critics will peg Newman and Reinhardt as “before their time”—usually implying that they suffered doubt, rejection and neglect in their own day, only to be redeemed Cassandra-like by the next generation of artists—modernist color-field painters, minimalists, and conceptualists—who will trace in varying degrees and means, and some by quite perverse routes, their artistic lineage back to them.

So do Newman and Reinhardt belong to the 1940s-50s or to the 1960s-70s? Problems adhere to either claim. To be called a symbolic father figure to the 1960s artistic generation is not the same as being “in” it.³⁸⁹ This designation, as much as it gestures at an inclusion and connection, also signifies an outside-ness, existing at some remove, namely, a generational one. And for all of Newman's and Reinhardt's being on the “outs” with Abstract Expressionism they showed up far too frequently “in” it to be considered uncomplicatedly *outré*.

There are two points of emphasis I want to develop here. The first is the trouble over Newman's and Reinhardt's placement: where do they belong or not belong based on their aesthetic commitments? Second, this difficulty over their identity is a shared condition: pointedly similar narratives of reception can be told for both.

From the perspective of the 1940s-50s, several instances thwart both artists' placement firmly and confidently inside or outside Abstract Expressionism. An iconic moment is the famous 1950 *Life* magazine group photograph taken by Nina Leen of the “Irascibles” (fig. 6)—the name given to the eighteen artist signatories protesting the

conservative “regional” exhibition policies of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s show “American Painting Today—1950.”³⁹⁰ Both Newman and Reinhardt are most definitely present in this photograph, which has subsequently—and perhaps inaccurately, as some scholars have hinted—served like a yearbook picture of the Abstract Expressionists.³⁹¹ At any rate, one hardly need rely solely on it for making a case for Newman’s and Reinhardt’s inclusion in the movement. Both lectured at the short-lived “Subjects of the Artist” school and then at its successor, “Studio 35.”³⁹² Both of them were vocal participants in the three-day closed artists’s sessions held in April 1950, the transcript of which was published two years later as the volume *Modern Artists in America*, edited by Motherwell and Reinhardt. They both, as well, were represented by the increasingly consequential Betty Parsons Gallery. These moments, for better or worse, serve as key markers of an Abstract Expressionist “identity,” and one finds Newman and Reinhardt not only prominently placed in them, but at times centrally so.

There are other places to look as well for support of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s belonging with Abstract Expressionism. In 1971, in a commemorative article published just a year after Newman’s death, Barbara Rose affirmed his status as one of the “New York School.”³⁹³ Likewise, in 1977, Kenworth Moffett had no difficulty categorizing Newman as an Abstract Expressionist who sat among the ranks of Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still.³⁹⁴ A slightly more complicated attempt to rope Newman’s identity firmly to that of the 1940s-50s generation occurs in a 1962 typed dialogue between Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre. The discussion centers around the “Newman-De Kooning” exhibition at the new Allan Stone Gallery—an exhibition whose theme was to provocatively juxtapose the two stylistically divergent painters as the founding fathers of Abstract Expressionism.³⁹⁵ Frampton argues for the appropriateness of the pairing: “Newman is an Abstract-Expressionist painter because his work subsists as significant painting largely in an Ab-Ex-context.” Andre, however, argues in the opposite direction, attempting to counter-position Newman towards the 1960s and to make analogies between the older painter and Frank Stella, both of whom are “stripe painters, neither is an Expressionist.”³⁹⁶ My sense is that the majority opinion of art critics, historians and

curators invested in the period have tended to lean more heavily towards Frampton's view—that is, Newman as stripes *with* symbolism, within an expressionist tradition and not, as Andre would have liked, as *just* stripes. Indeed, looking at a *Nation* review of the most recent exhibition of Newman paintings, the 2002 Philadelphia Museum of Art show, one finds Arthur Danto calling him simply and unequivocally the “Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman.”³⁹⁷

Admittedly, in Reinhardt's case, the search is much harder for anything approximating such boldly assured designation. Some of the resistance towards calling Reinhardt an Abstract Expressionist no doubt stems from the artist's own well-known diatribes against the movement.³⁹⁸ Expression, autobiography, “laying bare of oneself” was “obscene,” and those artists “who peddle wiggly lines and colors as representing emotion should be run off the streets.”³⁹⁹ As Yve-Alain Bois remarks, “One of the critical labels that stuck to Reinhardt for a while (although it was dropped after his final show) was that of ‘Abstract Expressionist.’ As is extremely well known, he resented this affiliation immensely. He became more and more virulent, from 1954 on . . . against the histrionic poses assumed by his alleged colleagues (he was disgusted by the action painting mythology), but also by the grandiose claims regarding ‘subject matter.’”⁴⁰⁰ This, however, should be tempered with a far more level evaluation Reinhardt made in 1966. “Even though socially I was extremely friendly with people like Clyff Still and Rothko and [Robert] Motherwell and others, I was, I guess, a little uncomfortable with the mixture of both abstraction and expressionism.”⁴⁰¹ Yet even this more moderate assignation of distance between Reinhardt and Still, Rothko and Motherwell, belies the fact that in the late 1940s and early 1950s he was making paintings that very much appeared to mix both abstraction and expressionism, works, “so explicitly calligraphic,” in one curator's opinion, “as to be almost paradigms for a painting of gestural signs” (figs. 7 and 8).⁴⁰² Even more fascinating is a journal entry Reinhardt made sometime in the early 1940s which suggests that this was not merely a formal “phase” his work went through. “Of painting, at present, abstract expressionism alone, it seems to me, indicates an aesthetic potential of a free future. It is a direct and profound challenge to disorder and

insensitivity everywhere.”⁴⁰³ Furthermore, during the 1940s and the early 1950s, according to Thomas Hess, “Reinhardt was devoted to de Kooning,” helping the struggling painter and Abstract Expressionist *par excellence* by offering his studio and using some of de Kooning’s paintings for *P.M.*⁴⁰⁴ To Lynn Zelevansky, a scholar who has explored the tricky issue of locating Reinhardt’s artistic affiliations in the post-war period, Reinhardt is the “active if dissident member of the Abstract Expressionist circle,” whose work ended up receiving “less attention than that of many of his New York School colleagues” because in the 1950s he chose to follow a “course independent of Abstract Expressionist concerns.”⁴⁰⁵ Even Rosenberg could not get away from admitting that Reinhardt possessed features that aligned him with Abstract Expressionism. “Like Rothko or Newman, Reinhardt conceives an art of one idea, which may be repeated with miniscule variations from painting to painting. . . . In this respect, Reinhardt is an Abstract Expressionist, and the fact is that his work has been appreciated in the Abstract Expressionist context.”⁴⁰⁶ The inclusions are not always as cautious as those of Zelevansky nor as resistant as Rosenberg’s. In contrast, for Gilbert H. Kinney’s—an important collector of Reinhardt’s work—Reinhardt stands as “central to that creative generation known as the New York School,” as “a member of one of the greatest art movements of all time.”⁴⁰⁷

For all that, one need not dig too deep into period accounts to understand why that too sounds off, offering equally as strange a fit as that of placing Newman and Reinhardt simply and indisputably outside the movement. Indeed, one of the strongest themes of Rose’s article cited earlier is that of Newman’s awkward placement. He was “always part of the New York art scene,” yet “he was not taken seriously as an artist for the most part.”⁴⁰⁸ He was both there and not there: at the center of things but in a blind spot. One senses—both reading between the lines and in other cases not needing to—that the difficulty and level of tension surrounding the placement of Newman and Reinhardt in relationship to something approximating a 1940s-50s artistic identity became even more attenuated and pronounced as Abstract Expressionism took off on the cultural market of the post-war art boom.

“While the fifties brought fame and fortune to many pioneer New York artists,” Rose laments, “it was largely a depressing and discouraging decade for Newman, who was, for the moment, left out of the winner’s circle.”⁴⁰⁹ Another critic, writing in 1991, hints at Newman’s contradictory status when he describes the artist as both “well-known,” but also “much ridiculed.”⁴¹⁰ For Peter Schjeldahl he was the “late bloomer . . . not promptly recognized.”⁴¹¹ For David Sylvester, Newman was “generally ridiculed or ignored until the end of the 1950s,” which Sylvester thinks may explain Newman’s central position in the *Irascibles* photograph. “[H]is [Newman’s] published writings had given him the role of the group’s spokesperson or guru or fool. One thing is certain: he was not put in the center because he was thought to have a central position as an artist. As an artist he was deemed by his peers—Pollock apart—to be a dud.”⁴¹² The dud, as such, was not included in the Museum of Modern Art’s highly important “Fifteen Americans” exhibition in 1952, a show with particular historical importance for the labeling and identifying of Abstract Expressionism. As Hess (who himself several decades earlier had followed the majority opinion in ousting Newman from the ranks of serious painting), noted in the 1970s, Newman’s omission from this exhibition had “hurt him deeply; he felt he had been excluded with the consent if not the advice of his friends: he had been betrayed.”⁴¹³ “In short,” as Newman himself reflected on his unaligned, and sometimes problematically so, position, “they find me too abstract for the abstract expressionists and too expressionist for the abstract purists.”⁴¹⁴

The other “dud” of the generation, also smarting from the indignity of being outside the winner’s circle, was Reinhardt, the “black monk,” the “conscience of the art world.” “In the context of developing Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s,” the critic Richard Martin in 1974 put frankly, “Reinhardt, of course, stood in isolation. . . .”⁴¹⁵ He was, Hess wrote, “[o]ne of the last artists of his generation to receive the recognition he deserved (sales, exhibitions, articles),” whose peers “used to say bitchily, if only Ad could sell one small painting and two watercolors a year, he’d be happy.”⁴¹⁶ But whereas Newman’s marginalized importance to the group was marked by his role as spokesperson and advocate, Reinhardt’s was frequently marked, as Lippard describes, as

that of an “irritant.”⁴¹⁷ His highly outspoken antipathy toward many of the attitudes associated with Abstract Expressionism and his personal antagonism to quite a few of their number has been read as a simple, uncomplicated rejection of his artistic generation. But, as accounts of the period show, he was in fact so much a part of things, present at the formal symposia, present at the informal gatherings—even if as irritant. Indeed, at least one curator and one art historian have already attempted to formulate a more complicated picture of Reinhardt’s relationship to Abstract Expressionism. In 1968, John Coplans, writing as the curator for the exhibition “Serial Imagery” at the Pasadena Museum of Art, argued for the strength of Reinhardt’s identity with the 1950s painters, “by virtue of the length of his painting life which began prior to World War II,” and because “he was a close friend and associate of painters of that group and an original contributor to this phase of American painting.”⁴¹⁸ A decade later, in 1978, the art historian Robert Hobbs situated Reinhardt in this way: “Formally, his works belong with early Abstract Expressionism even though Reinhardt separated himself from the attitudes that intrigued so many of his peers. He viewed art as a tautology and found the Abstract Expressionist emphasis on angst-ridden brushstrokes melodramatic. Perhaps, his position can be most clearly elucidated if one regards him as both a participant and the conscience of Abstract Expressionism, who pursued in painting what he rejected in words.”⁴¹⁹ Or, finally, as Lippard puts it, “Through the fifties, Reinhardt’s ideas had seemed highly eccentric; he was outside the circle despite his prolonged participation.”⁴²⁰

Hess’s study of the art comics and satires by Reinhardt performs some interesting footwork in positioning Reinhardt as well. Hess, probably most profoundly identified as the art writer of Abstract Expressionism, as the editor of *ARTnews* during its tenure as organ for the New York School, opens the 1975 text on a personal note. The reason for this is perhaps the unspoken question lurking underneath the text: why is he, Hess, writing on Reinhardt at all? Hess states simply: “Ad Reinhardt was a good friend; we had lunch together weekly for over 15 years; when he couldn’t make lunch or drinks he sent a postcard. He upbraided me. I upbraided him. But we had many more likes and dislikes in common.”⁴²¹ A little later on Hess—under the sign of recalling “New York Abstract-

Expressionism, the movement (was it ever a movement?), the years (when did they begin, when end?)”—tries to paint a picture of Reinhardt’s location within it.

Of course, Ad’s air wasn’t exactly anybody else’s. He moved in his own atmosphere and observed events and colleagues . . . through its distortions. Like all great satirists, he was very much his own man, and a man apart. For example, I can see Ad Reinhardt clearly, at the Artists Club on Eighth Street, with his Ivy League air, a touch of Faculty Club sports clothes and crew-cut, his protective colorations, his uniform, among working-man’s jeans and sweatshirts, with the neck and face of a Roman boxer, bob a bit and swivel his shoulders, ask a mean question, and then shrug and with an uneasy laugh turn aside arguments before they got nasty or personal.⁴²²

“He was,” Hess concludes, “a man with a difference—an insider without a peer-group, without a pigeonhole, regular, but odd.”⁴²³ Hess offers a nuanced account of Reinhardt’s conflicted relationship to Abstract Expressionism that helps one in grasping why the artist’s openly critical stance towards Abstract Expressionism did not preclude his possessing a keen, sometimes bitter, awareness of his exclusion. Bois, as well, has suggested that the “virulence of his attacks against Abstract Expressionist painters implies a deep wound. Reinhardt insists time and again on what separates him from these artists, but he also writes: ‘Traitor, betrayal. Abstract-expressionists acted as if I were betraying them. But they were betraying me for two decades.’”⁴²⁴ “I guess,” Reinhardt told an audience in London at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in the spring of 1964, “I’ve been outside and I’ve been an outcast, or at least not a howling success.”⁴²⁵ Or, take this admission, made to Rosenberg in a private letter: “of course I have ‘personal’ beefs . . . complaints about being ‘left out’ of things, important social or historical events.”⁴²⁶ Included in that list of important social and historical events from which Reinhardt had been left out, one would find the 1952 “Fifteen Americans” show, the same one Newman had bemoaned, and also MoMA’s highly important and world-traveling 1958 exhibition “New American Painting,” an exhibition which, by the way, did include Newman, though just barely.⁴²⁷ Most recently and quite explicitly, in 2000, the persistence of the Reinhardt problem surfaced in Craven’s critical history of Abstract Expressionism. Notably, by Craven’s sense of the categories, Newman belongs to Abstract Expressionism and

Reinhardt does not. This is a separation undeniably indicated throughout Craven's text by the consistent reference to the "Abstract Expressionists *and* [emphasis added] Reinhardt."⁴²⁸

Book Versus Paint Rag: The Difference A Degree Makes

What I want to do now is explore the degree to which Newman's and Reinhardt's marginal and sometimes antagonistic relationship to Abstract Expressionism can be critically illuminated through a focus on theory and practice issues. Specifically the "rejection" of the two artists by their peers can be seen as based on the suspicion of their work failing to be praxical, of their having split apart theory and practice and open themselves up to the damning charge that their practice, their paintings, served as mere post-scriptive *illustrations* to their preconceived theories. In registering this charge, one should take into account the particular way praxis, as the authentic act of making, was accented. Typically, notions of good painting praxis, at this moment and with this milieu, meant granting a higher visibility to a practice in which the component of theory developed spontaneously—a theory so immediate to practice as to be just barely there, a mute presence, an article of faith.⁴²⁹ In a special issue of *Arts Magazine* devoted to looking back at the 1950s, Kim Levin wrote that the "fifties may not have wanted to think about anything but it did want to feel, to experience, to be absorbed by immediacy."⁴³⁰

If there is any doubting the simplicity and tenacity of these characterizations, one has only to look to James H. Beck's retrospective account of Reinhardt in 1980.

Ad Reinhardt belongs to a limited number of painters and, really, artists of every medium whose influence on their peers is far greater than the quality of their art. He, and I suspect I should add to this category others from the New York School, such as Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell, who, in diverse ways and through somewhat different channels, had deep impact upon the art world in the 1950s and 1960s on all levels from the

universities to the art magazines, from the art market to the museums. On the other end of the spectrum are the less verbally articulate painters—Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, and Tomlin—whose works speak exclusively for their aesthetic. Their art, apparently only coincidentally, is more painterly, that is to say, more ostensibly dependent upon the brush, finger or stick, and consequently characterized by a pictorially vital surface.⁴³¹

Though almost insultingly crude, Beck's characterizing division rehearses the scheme broadly offered by Hess. According to Hess, one could subdivide Abstract Expressionism. There were the "'downtown' artists, the ones who might be called 'bohemians,'" against the "uptown 'intellectuals.'" "Among the former were artists such as Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock, Kline, David Smith. They had gone through the disciplines of art schools and academies, not to universities. Their social life was centered around Greenwich Village. . . . Among the 'intellectuals' were Newman, Rothko, Still, Motherwell, Reinhardt, and, by temperament if not with a college diploma, Gottlieb. Their social life gravitated uptown. They lived in apartments. When talking and writing about art, their language was clearer, more analytical. Many of them, and their wives, had taught in established schools."⁴³²

Certainly these last lines of Hess's appear to implicate Newman—especially if one knows a few things of Newman's and his wife Annalee's biographies. Newman's outsider status was further aggravated even within the already marginalized "uptown intellectuals" by the fact that he, unlike a number of them, had not worked in the 1930s on the Project. "[M]uch of the substructure of the New York art community," Hess reminds, "was based on friendships made while the artists worked together on the various mural and easel projects of the 1930s." "Because Newman had been conspicuously absent from the scene, and because it was known that he had made his living as a teacher, it was assumed that he was some sort of an intellectual, a theoretician and, as far as painting was concerned, an upstart."⁴³³ Indeed, Hess's articulation of this split and his relegation of Newman and Reinhardt to the "uptown intellectuals" re-surfaces in a variety of accounts. The painter Jack Tworkov, one of the "downtown Cedar Bar set," tagged Newman a "kibitzer."⁴³⁴ He was a talker (even an "exceptional talker"), a social gadfly

coming in from outside to hang out with the artists but he didn't seem to count as an "active participant."⁴³⁵ Motherwell, oddly enough given his own learned pedigree, seconded this sentiment in a 1987 interview. He referred to "good ol' Barney" as the "artist's friend," someone who was good at talking, joking, and entertaining but whom "no one took . . . seriously."⁴³⁶ "Barney couldn't paint at all," Adolph Gottlieb told interviewer John Gruen, "He just wrote."⁴³⁷

Although, unlike Newman, Reinhardt had in fact worked in the government art project in the 1930s, Hess still found much need to talk through the issue of Reinhardt's apparently excessive, and thus suspect, level of higher formal education. "His background as a student and his dedication to teaching also separated him from the others," Hess noted. The "faculty club" look that Hess mentioned earlier went along with a pronounced penchant for academic erudition. "He was always studying and was proud of having taken classes in Oriental art from prof. Alfred Salmony and at the Institute of Fine Arts, N.Y.U. (he attended graduate courses there, off and on, in 1946-50. He went to lectures by art historians whenever he could, preferring the drier pedantic ones, who could supply factual data and the field he was interested in. . . ." Perhaps oddest of all, according to Hess, was that Reinhardt "enjoyed giving talks at College Art Association meetings."⁴³⁸ What is particularly interesting in Hess's apologia for Reinhardt's cutting the figure of the academic amidst all that workingman's denim of the Artists' Club is that Hess suggests that the eccentricity of Reinhardt's educational background exceeded even that of Newman's. Although Newman had attended liberal arts colleges just as Reinhardt had, Newman had also "attended art schools simultaneously." Reinhardt, on the contrary had "spent four years as an undergraduate at Columbia," and had "entered art school full-time only after his graduation," and even then he had attended the National Academy of Design, and not the Art Students' League.⁴³⁹ Budd Hopkins, as well, pointed to Reinhardt as the "quintessential outsider," and described among the reasons for this—and note how similar these are to those given for Newman's—that "[h]e was originally trained not as a painter but as an art historian and esthetician." Indeed, for Hopkins the "fact that

[Reinhardt] appeared more comfortable with a book than a paint rag served later on to distance him from Cedar Bar shop-talk and professional camaraderie.”⁴⁴⁰

One alignment between Newman and Reinhardt is already now set in place. Both have questionable credentials in the eyes of the Cedar Bar crowd. They both attend liberal arts colleges, earn bachelor’s degrees in philosophy—Newman from City University and Reinhardt from Columbia University—and go on to pursue various forms of post-graduate studies. They write and lecture frequently, they articulate themselves well in words, they appear brainy, and one suspects they might be equally as comfortable in the study as they are in the studio. As late as 1980, James Beck, writing in *Arts Magazine*, was still making the point about the special “nature of Reinhardt’s training,” that his was a liberal arts education as “opposed to what he may have lost in those crucial four years that might otherwise have been spent in the studio.” Beck lumps Motherwell and Newman along with Reinhardt as college graduates “rather than the product of an art school, which apparently was the [sic] very different orientation of de Kooning, Gorky, and Gottlieb.”⁴⁴¹ Ultimately, he questions the adequacy of Reinhardt’s training as an artist (and thus, by extension, Newman’s and Motherwell’s also), that in tending to the liberal arts rather than the studio arts, Reinhardt more accurately ought to be considered a “self-taught painter,” because “in the 1930s the distance between Columbia College and the Art Students League was much greater than 59 blocks.”⁴⁴² What this comes down to, in these accounts, is the book versus the paint rag, the seeming abstractness of theory versus the real direct practice of painting.

Certainly Newman’s and Reinhardt’s detractors would not be overly taxed if asked to produce proof of their “theorizing.” Both wrote a good deal and both of them ended up justifying their activity of writing and publishing in notably similar ways. In “How to Look at the Record,” a *P.M.* art satire from November 1946, Reinhardt included in an editorial box: “The world and our local situation is not much good for painting (or creative activity) (or decent living) and good artists try, in their ways, to change it. The level of art-criticism and art-writing is so low in this country and so removed from artists’ art-talk that painters themselves must do something about this, too (sometime) (soon).”⁴⁴³

This sentiment is echoed, just a year later, in Newman's terse response to a *Tiger's Eye* query. Newman wrote: "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."⁴⁴⁴ But one hardly needs reminding that Newman's and Reinhardt's stance—their active engagement with the need for intelligent, informed art-writing—was not a common one. A telling incident occurs in a letter from 1950 from Mark Rothko to Newman. In this correspondence Rothko complains about the many demands made of him to write statements. "As to the *Tiger's Eye*," Rothko writes, "I have written them two long letters explaining [to] them just why I do not wish to write anything now. . . ." Rothko goes on to explain that he is refusing the *Tiger's Eye* as he is refusing the *Magazine of Art*, as well, because "I simply cannot see myself proclaiming a series of nonsensical statements . . . which ultimately have no meaning whatsoever." "The real reason," he continues, "is that at least at this time I have nothing to say in words which I would stand for. I am heartily ashamed of the things I have written in the past. This self-statement business has become a fad this season, and I cannot see myself just spreading myself with a brush of statements, everywhere, I do not wish to make."⁴⁴⁵ It is hard not to read between Rothko's lines an assertion of the author's elevated and prior position in a hierarchy in which artists possess greater authenticity than the critic, curator, editor or art writer. In actuality, Rothko is writing to Newman as a kind of editorial intermediary between himself and John and Ruth Walgreen Stephan, the editors of *Tiger's Eye* (a publication in which a number of Newman's own writings appeared and to which Newman provided editorial assistance).⁴⁴⁶ Also, one wonders, what of that most famous, inflammatory and history-marking statement, the 1943 letter to Edward Alden Jewell, the conservative art editor of the *New York Times*, signed by Adolph Gottlieb and Marcus Rothko, but composed, as many suspect, under the careful guidance of Newman?⁴⁴⁷ How could Rothko's flippant dismissal of the "self-statement business," his avowed shame over "things I have written in the past" (or merely signed?) not have registered awry with Newman? For Newman did, and regularly so, have things to say, important things—in statements that he labored over through successive drafts, carefully choosing his words,

taking the “self-statement business” seriously, in writing as well as painting.⁴⁴⁸ Or, as Rosenberg asserted, “he believed in the reciprocal influence of paint and words.”⁴⁴⁹ But for his penchant for being vocal and verbal, Newman like Reinhardt, would pay. E. C. Goosens’s presumably celebratory review of Newman’s 1958 Bennington exhibition, one heralding the artist’s re-emergence after a seven-year hiatus from exhibiting, takes on a double edge as the author describes the artist as the “philosopher and gadfly of the New York School,” who during his years of not exhibiting still “remained sufficiently in evidence himself, producing a stir occasionally with an open-letter suggesting the incompetence of various members and institutions of the ‘art-world’ and making frequent sorties into vanguard art society where his wit, aggressive concern with principle, and his poetically enigmatic pronouncements seemed to be headed toward placing him permanently as a personality. . . .”⁴⁵⁰

As suggested earlier, the abstracting dualism of theory and practice provides an interesting lens by which to consider the shift from the “outsider” status of the 1940s-50s to the “insider” status of the 1960s and beyond. It acts as a pivot by which direction and identity are reversed. Newman and Reinhardt turn out not to be the ugly ducklings, or the artist-imposters, after all, but the real thing; they are simultaneously cast as the two fathers of the 1960s. The pay-off for the rejection, insults, mockery came with the dawn of the 1960s, and with a much altered accenting of praxis. Where previously Newman’s and Reinhardt’s “talk” had been taken as indication that something was awry, or lacking, with their art making, it now found sympathetic admirers in a younger generation revising conceptions of good praxis by up-ending the apparent priority given to practice over theory by the older Abstract Expressionists. This younger generation of artists were proficient in the artist’s “self-statement business” and displayed little, if any, of Rothko’s shame for things written “in the past”; they appeared not at all reluctant to pick up the pen, peck on keyboards, have a byline.

Certainly the impact of Reinhardt on Joseph Kosuth stands out as a good example of this reversal. Kosuth has spoken forcefully of his “debt” to Reinhardt. “Ad Reinhardt’s paintings, for many of us, were a kind of passage.”⁴⁵¹ But key to this notion of a debt

owed to Reinhardt and a passage made through Reinhardt is the crucial framing of Reinhardt's project as including both his painting and his writing. In Kosuth's estimation, Reinhardt worked on his definition of art through his painting "practice and in his writing."⁴⁵² Reinhardt's polemic, as Nancy Spector saw it, had been the great inspiration behind Kosuth's call for an "explicit merger of criticism, or writing about art, and art making. In Conceptualism, he [Kosuth] foresaw the annexation of the critic's function by an art form dedicated to a theorisation of its own existence. His goal was to establish a new hybrid art premised on the fusion of theory and practice." Thus Kosuth's reference to Reinhardt as "the artist-as-critic" or as "a major intellectual presence" carried none of the derisive connotation such a designation bore at mid-century.⁴⁵³ Indeed, the force of Kosuth's position can be felt in his recent tirade against the academic art historians—particularly against Bois who authored "The Limit of Almost," the catalogue essay for the Reinhardt retrospective in 1991. In Kosuth's opinion Bois grossly misunderstands Reinhardt's work by separating the writing from his painting, a separation which subsequently allows for the reclamation of Reinhardt into the Greenbergian narrative of modernist painting. "[Y]ou cannot separate Reinhardt's paintings from his 'theoretical' works; they inform each other," Kosuth challenges. "The experience of one would not be the same without the experience of the other. If Reinhardt was, indeed, our 'guru', it was precisely because of what this taught us."⁴⁵⁴

In a similar vein part of Newman's appeal to many of the younger generation was his willingness to talk and in his skill at forcefully and coherently arguing through the issues that most impassioned him. Rose alludes to this shift in attitudes about artistic authenticity and the new value that was placed on "theory" in her accounting of Newman's late career status as "patriarch of the art world." "By the time he died in 1970 . . . Newman had won international acclaim and had been adopted as a father figure by a younger generation of American artists who were impressed rather than frightened by his intelligence as a painter."⁴⁵⁵ This shift in mentality is also detected in Barbara Reise's attempt in a 1970 article to clarify the importance of Newman. In her closing paragraph she calls for the "long over-due" major retrospective and announces that such a

retrospective would “be a concrete *refutation* of cherished art-world clichés like: ‘Painters are verbally inarticulate,’” or “‘Conceptual art requires the negation of objects,’” or ‘A sense of history inhibits creativity.’”⁴⁵⁶ Perhaps it was a combination of Newman’s verbal fluency and his status (in the eyes of many of the younger artists), as part of “history,” plus the older artist’s willingness to engage with the younger artists that made such a strong point. “[U]nlike others in his heroic generation,” Carter Ratcliff described, Newman “enjoyed meeting younger artists (sometimes he even looked at—and respected—their work).”⁴⁵⁷ Likewise, another critic, Douglas Davis eulogized Newman as “seem[ing] to befriend everyone he met, especially younger artists, whose openings he alone of the senior artists attended.”⁴⁵⁸ Some of the very same qualities that marked him an outsider and ugly duckling with the Cedar Bar crowd came in handy in convincing Larry Poons’s father that a future as an artist was not an ignoble or silly one. In a much recounted incident, sometime in the summer of 1959, Larry Poons confessed to Newman that he was having “a rough time with my father with what I was doing.” As Poons narrates,

Barney said very quickly, “Oh, let me talk to your father.” So we set up a luncheon date at Sloppy Louie’s—my father, myself and Barney. Barney was a pretty impressive figure to my father, a businessman with a practical frame of mind, and I guess even the very sight of Barney impressed him in a way that he would be impressed. Barney came around to saying, “Look, your son wants to be an artist—that’s a noble profession; you ought to get off his back about it.” My father got interested in Barney’s painting *Abraham* because it was Abraham who was willing to slay his son, which made the point. . . .

The impact of this gesture on Poons was profound. He ends, “That was, at that time, and is still now, one of the most important things that anybody has ever done for me.”⁴⁵⁹

The Problems of Dual Paternity: Logos Canceling Logos

The paternal topos is worth spending some time considering, in part because it has been called upon with frequency to negotiate the relationship between Newman and Reinhardt and the younger artists of the 1960s. Here are a few examples. In Rose's 1965 essay "ABC Art," in which she describes the new minimalist direction in art, both Newman and Reinhardt are acknowledged as highly important forbearers. Her discussion of Reinhardt and of his significance for the new minimalists is given an entire section (one tellingly titled "Art for Ad's Sake"). "His dicta, as arcane as they may have sounded when first handed down from the scriptorium, have become nearly canonical for the young artists."⁴⁶⁰ Rose further registers the apparent twist in Reinhardt's fate when she states bluntly, "No one, in the mid-fifties, seemed less likely to spawn artistic progeny and admirers than Ad Reinhardt."⁴⁶¹ Newman, though not given the same amount of space or attention in this essay, is pointed to (along with Jasper Johns) as one of the artists this younger generation turned to in the "shift toward a new sensibility," a part of which was a turning away from an increasingly unconvincing Action Painting. The "young artists" were looking to the "static emptiness of Barnett Newman's eloquent chromatic abstractions"; the "new sensibility . . . preferred Newman and Johns to Willem de Kooning or his epigoni."⁴⁶²

This positioning of Newman and Reinhardt Rose would repeat in subsequent years. In 1971, shortly after Newman's death, she designated Newman, the now-senior artist, as the "moral support of young artists, whose openings he faithfully attended." Not only had Newman "enjoyed his role as patriarch of the art world," but Rose contends hyperbolically that "in many respects he *was* the art world."⁴⁶³ But also, in 1975, writing in the introduction to the volume of Reinhardt's collected writings she had edited, Rose emphasized the artist's "importance as a precursor of the reductionist style of minimal art," "whose prescient ideas enlightened an entire younger generation."⁴⁶⁴ Nor was Rose the only one keyed to this "father complex" for Newman and Reinhardt. The artist Dan Christensen spoke of being able to "see where many of the Minimal sculptors came from Newman, from that kind of physicality, of completeness."⁴⁶⁵ Hess, too, wrote of a

paternal tie between Reinhardt and the Minimalists, of Reinhardt's becoming "with mixed pleasure, a hero to younger painters and critics—a father of Minimal Art."⁴⁶⁶

Hess has hinted at an important ambiguity here, one that colored both artists' reactions to being assigned this paternal role. When Bruce Glaser questioned Reinhardt on how he felt about "the younger generation of so-called cool artists" looking up to him as a "kind of predecessor," the artist shied away, out of resistance or disbelief, from assuming that kind of authority: "I don't know about the artists looking to me as a predecessor."⁴⁶⁷ If it was with "mixed pleasure" that Reinhardt acknowledged this fatherhood, it was a situation equally ambiguous for Newman as well. Dan Flavin, one of the rising stars of the younger generation, and one who shared a close relationship to Newman, reminisced: "I came to sense that Barney reservedly desired, obtained and enjoyed the esteem of young artists, particularly from those whose arts he could respect somehow. . . ."⁴⁶⁸ When Newman himself spoke of the situation, he added a touch more sting to what Flavin characterized as reserve. Queried about how he felt about being hailed the father of these new tendencies, he countered: "If I am the father, then who's the mother?"⁴⁶⁹ While this quip is generally appreciated as a dose of the artist's wit, it also, underneath the chuckles, continues to ask an important question. For, and in keeping up the metaphor, if one takes fathering as one aspect and mothering as the other, with a synthesis of these two parts creating a third, then Newman, in his role of fathering, is being mixed with something else to produce the next generation.

Newman was smart to think to ask about what that other thing was, to ask for the identity of that with which he was being paired or coupled. The more apropos (though arguably unavailable) question would have been to ask the identity of the other suspected father. The contradictions that arise from 1960s reception narratives owe to the problem of dual paternity. For some of the weight and baggage that comes along with this figure of speech are the feudal ones regarding lines of proper succession—or however else one wants to put it, as purity of blood, authenticity, legitimacy, inheritance, all these "true" identities—as opposed to the bastard, the false, illegitimate claimant, the simulacrum, the copy. There is perversity, indeed, in claiming both Newman and Reinhardt as father.⁴⁷⁰

One wonders if their liberal “fathering” philosophies are not to blame in part for this messy situation, for both Newman and Reinhardt, when confronted with the “fatherhood” question and their relationship to these younger artists, similarly attributed their esteemed status to their openness, their leaving the situation “free.” Listen, for instance, to both artists in 1966 responding in interviews to the question of their influence. “I think [my influence],” Newman told Alan Solomon, “is precisely because I have not insisted on a dogmatic situation. Somehow what I’ve done has, I think, inspired . . . other people to free themselves from these conventions.”⁴⁷¹ Newman’s sentiment is significantly similar to Reinhardt’s, who explained to an interviewer that his policy towards younger artists—a stance he had taken when he was forty years old—was never to say anything about younger artists: “What has bothered me is that the older painters who preceded me made troubles for me that they shouldn’t have. Now I don’t want to make any troubles for the young artists, but leave them free.”⁴⁷² Neither artist, then, if they were to be hitched to the designation “father of. . .,” were going to play the part paternalistically. There would be no dogma, no conventions, no rules, no law from on high. Confoundingly, they were the Logos (father); with Logos (theory, talk); without Logos (rule, law).

This policy of leaving things free may well have backfired, for it opened the door to the most excruciating problems of mistaken identity, of confusing the identities of Newman and Reinhardt in a way that could only have deeply disturbed them both. It was a confusion of identity that radically put into question the foundations of their respective projects. A telling instance of this tendency to switch Newman and Reinhardt for each other, without apparent ideological qualm or unease, can be witnessed in the 1983 catalogue statements for an exhibition whose theme was a retrospective look back to 1960s abstraction. One contributor found Newman “more authoritative at that moment in terms both of critics’ consciousness of painting and the desires of the young painters, than anyone of the newer generation. . . . He was even more important than Pollock.” Another contributor, however, sensed the “iconoclastic ghost of Ad Reinhardt lurk[ing]

behind the show and dominat[ing] [her] 1960s.”⁴⁷³ The examples below will show how Newman and Reinhardt play out this dual paternity.

Frank Stella, a prominent figure within the younger post-Abstract Expressionist generation, provides an interesting, if complex, instance of this. In 1960 Stella buys the first of the two Reinhardt black paintings that he will eventually possess.⁴⁷⁴ In 1967 Stella asserted, “Ad can’t play the game anymore, but nobody can get around the paintings anymore either. If you don’t know what they’re about you don’t know what painting is about.”⁴⁷⁵ Just a year prior to purchasing the Reinhardt black painting Stella had attended and been keenly impressed by Newman’s exhibition at French and Company, and one could argue that in Newman Stella had found another artist whose paintings could not be gotten around, whose paintings one had to come to terms with in order to “know what painting is about.” It had been, as Stella recounted, a “tremendous show,” and Newman’s paintings were “tremendously good, and tremendously convincing.”⁴⁷⁶ Stella’s response to Newman has been a topic examined by Caroline Jones, who explains, “before Newman’s death, Stella had been more willing to compare himself with the older painter, and even to aspire publicly” to Newman’s achievement.⁴⁷⁷ What this statement suggests, and, indeed, what Jones goes on to elaborate, is Stella’s conflicted framing of the older artist’s influence, that Stella suffered an anxiety of influence and felt ambiguously towards Newman’s paternal role. In 1966, while Newman was still alive, Stella said of Newman’s paintings that “that’s what I would like to get.” As Jones again points out, however, in 1970, after Newman’s death (indeed as part of a Newman memorial event) Stella misdates the French and Company exhibition to post-date his own Black Paintings, and “dances on the head of a very small pin” when responding to an interviewer’s question about Newman’s influence. “When you’re sort of praising someone,” Stella begins, pauses, then laughs and picks up again with a different tack: “I would say that Barney had very little influence, if any at all.”⁴⁷⁸ As Jones charts, Stella’s framing of his response to this question will fluctuate over the years. By 1989, however, when Stella offers a favorable analogy between Newman and Velasquez—“Newman was able to depict the modern artist’s internal world with the same clarity that Velasquez brought to

the external world of Old Master painting”—one imagines that Stella’s anxiety has subsided. Newman’s paternity has been safely distanced into the realm of an Old Master.⁴⁷⁹

Donald Judd, another highly significant artist of the younger generation, expressed admiration for these “older contemporaries.”⁴⁸⁰ In 1964, in a highly flattering assessment, Judd wrote, “Barnett Newman’s paintings are some of the best done in the United States in the last fifteen years.” This assessment is given further force by the fact of Judd’s desire to purchase Newman’s *Shining Forth (to George)*, which was, in Judd’s words, “a spectacular painting.”⁴⁸¹ Further indication of the almost reverential status Newman possessed in Judd’s regard can be inferred again from the latter’s eventual coming into possession of the older artist’s chairs.⁴⁸² At some point after Newman’s death, Annalee presented these chairs to Judd, presumably because she knew of a special bond between him and her husband, and that her husband would have approved of this bequest and, even further, that Judd would duly appreciate them.

The significance of this gesture requires some unpacking. First off, these were not any old chairs. They were, obviously, Newman’s chairs, the ones he is seen frequently sitting in, as in Hans Namuth’s 1951 black-and-white photograph of the artist smoking a cigarette in his Wall Street studio (fig. 9), or in Alexander Liberman’s 1961 color photograph of the artist in his Front Street studio (fig. 10), in Lane Slate’s 1963 CBS-televised interview with the artist for the “Contemporary American Painters” series, in Ugo Mulas’s 1965 photograph of the artist in his apartment sitting in front of two of the paintings from *The Stations of the Cross* (fig. 11), and also in Emile de Antonio’s filmed interview with the artist a few months before his death. The force of the metonymic slide between the artist and his set of chairs—chairs distinctive in a peculiar sort of way, of smooth, worn wood, polished through familiar wear, with a sturdy rounded back, prominent armrests, and gently swelling concave back-supporting slats; overall, a bit heavy, with something slightly old-fashioned about them, comfortable but not cushy, upright but not rigid, consistent somehow with Newman’s starched shirts but slightly off-kilter bow-tie, the tweed with only one button done up, the monocle, the mustache—is

made most poignant in de Antonio's panning of the artist's studio just after his death, with its unfinished canvases and Newman's chair, now empty. The chairs very much assume the aura of Newman, and very much in an *ex cathedra* sort of way.

The second element of the situation that should be elaborated is that of the recipient Judd. Hardly indifferent to his living and working environment, he ordered his spaces with almost fanatical precision, intention and authority. His dissatisfaction with prefabricated furniture led to his decision to begin designing his own.⁴⁸³ The pieces that Judd designed—for example, in his Spring Street building, the dining room table and chairs and the daybed/sofa of the second floor and then later, at his complex in Marfa, Texas, the long library table—are (not unexpectedly) minimalistic, spartan, unadorned, constructed of flat planes of naked pine, with straight edges and right angles.

With the particularities of the gift of Newman's chairs elaborated, it becomes easier to weigh the significance of Newman's chairs' presence—at both Spring Street and Marfa—in terms of homage and perhaps, of continuation, of legacy. One must return to Judd's 1964 review now in order to reach the crux of this anecdote. After writing of Newman's work, Judd goes on to mention Reinhardt. His work, Judd states, is “considerably better than the European painting evident in the magazines and that shown in New York.”⁴⁸⁴ In comparison to the incontestable praise given to Newman, this compliment to Reinhardt sounds somewhat understated, diluted. Yet any suggestion of lukewarmness on Judd's part towards Reinhardt's work must be tempered by the fact that Judd came to possess a painting by Reinhardt, a fairly large red canvas that hung in the prominent location of the east wall of Judd's Spring Street dining room.⁴⁸⁵ As with his furniture, Judd was infinitely particular about the artworks with which he surrounded himself. Furthermore, the placement of the Reinhardt red painting on the second floor meant that it was on a floor a notch less public than the ground floor, thus gaining in degrees of domesticity and privateness. It also meant that unlike the artworks Judd displayed on the ground floor, a space that he used for changing installations, the red painting had a more permanent status. And certainly one must not fail to mention the rather obvious: that the Reinhardt painting hung above the famous square dining room

table, a table that, according to Peter Ballantine (Judd's long-time studio assistant and presently the caretaker of the Spring Street building), was a central location for activity—thinking, talking, sitting, gathering, eating.⁴⁸⁶ The Reinhardt painting had both permanent and prominent status: Judd would have done a lot of living with it. In synthesizing Judd's relationship to Newman and to Reinhardt, the hypothetical image one can compose is this: Judd assumes Newman's vacated chair, his *cathedra*, in order to contemplate a Reinhardt. That he could possess both objects and have them so intimately a part of his hyper-conscious, particular and reasoned domesticity and not feel a disabling contradiction locates the opposing inclusive position to Rosenberg's dividing judgment.

But in a sense one can hardly blame a Stella or a Judd, or any number of other artists of the younger generation, for failing to make a distinction—of the crucial, one or the other, kind—between Newman and Reinhardt. Listening to the Andre/Frampton dialogue, one surmises that what binds Newman and Reinhardt as alike is that they hail from the Abstract Expressionists and yet the comparative minimalism of their paintings distinguishes them from the pervasive gesturalism of that generation.⁴⁸⁷ This bleeds into the other difficulty built into the task of keeping Newman and Reinhardt clearly and separately defined. Their radically reductive paintings appear to give the viewer very little by way of handles.

What Is There To Write About

Newman and Reinhardt share obdurateness, near inscrutability, minimalism of event or incident, riding the edge of pictorial visibility which disallows an easy generation of words by which to grasp them or obvious terms by which to categorize and dissect, distinguish and differentiate. By way of a generalized characterization of the reception, criticism and scholarship on Newman and Reinhardt one might say that the recurring and central problem has been one of figuring the path that could possibly take the viewer

from these apparent visual “nothings”—so minimal, bare of incident—to the Ultimate or Absolute that both artists professed to be the real import of their work: how to figure the meaning of paintings which seemingly only minimally figure at all.

“What is Reinhardt up to?” is how Priscilla Colt baldly addressed these issues, “The black squares come as close to nothing as painting can. Shrouded, exasperatingly hermetic, they skirt the edge of invisibility and unintelligibility, rebuffing both eye and mind.”⁴⁸⁸ Lippard, who authored Reinhardt’s monograph, also rehearsed and commented on this central trouble: “Art like Reinhardt’s . . . largely evaded critical attempts to come to terms with its non-relational and non-referential qualities, relation and reference being the critic’s chief supports.”⁴⁸⁹ Indeed, to slightly rephrase this, relation and reference are the basis of any language: the ability to discern like and dislike, similarity and difference are the mechanisms by which signs operate. Newman’s work also generated similar responses. One of the more interesting ones comes in the summer of 1959 in the form of a letter from a June D. M. Sand of Stateline, Pennsylvania, to the editor of *ARTnews*. The one-sentence letter is remarkable in its simplicity. It follows: “Sir: It is a sacrilege and worse to call these abortions art.”⁴⁹⁰ The “abortions” to which the letter refers (as the editor’s parenthetical remark informs) are indicated by two cut-out reproductions which were found scotch-taped to the original letter. The source of these reproductions the editorial staff recognized as an earlier issue of *ARTnews*. One of these scotch-taped images was a reproduction of a Mark Tobey painting and the other is a Newman. What stands out in this is not that in 1959 there was hostility towards the reductive abstractions of Tobey or Newman. Not even the strength of the language—not just unfinished paintings but “abortions”—is all that remarkable. Rather, what seems most telling about this letter is the author’s special way of referencing them which I think stems from a very literal inability to come to terms with the paintings. Not only are neither artists nor titles of works named, but beyond the designation “abortion” and “not art” nothing is said of them. Their “aborted” presence is pointed to through the scotch-taped reproductions but there is no actual attempt to describe them—they are, in this instance, beyond the reach of language.

It is this shared condition, the non-relational, non-referential, seeming beyond the bounds of language, that factors into the ease with which the reductive abstractions of Newman and Reinhardt could be misidentified, their projects and works could be confused and apparently exchanged. “Barnett Newman’s art is obsessive, ritualized, mystical,” Hess wrote in a 1962 review of the artist’s joint show with de Kooning at the Allan Stone gallery. He continued, “Here the very act of repetition, over a span of years, creates of itself an object beyond the limitations of the initial actions. Rational means and ends both are transformed into mysteries. The picture turns into something different, a new antagonist, a dark mirror. . . . The Universal is hooked by the Banal. He makes a multitude of radiant negations.” Except for the use of the adjective “radiant,” Hess might as well be describing Reinhardt.⁴⁹¹ Much the same case can be made for Max Kozloff’s 1966 review of the “United States Exhibition at the VIII Sao Paulo Bienal” as it traveled to Washington, D.C. This was an exhibition in which Newman had been fore-fronted as a kind of elder precursor, or again, father figure, to the younger generation abstractionists included in the U.S. contingency (Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Donald Judd, Larry Poons, and Frank Stella). The paintings as a whole, Kozloff announced, were antithetical to any form of “content”; they were not “not afraid to look rigid, dogmatic, even uninventive.”⁴⁹² But the critic’s language is, as will become more explicit later on, all wrong for Newman and far better suited to Reinhardt. After all it is in Reinhardt’s collected writings, not Newman’s, that one finds statements like this: “Content is nothing, nothing at all,” and it was Reinhardt who made a notorious trademark of *dogma*, where things like *rigidity*—“the strictest formula,” “Endless repetition of infinite sameness”—and the *uninventive*—“the completely conventional,” the “stereotyped image”—were given repeated sanction.⁴⁹³ Given how well Kozloff’s description could have fit Reinhardt, several questions are raised: why was Newman chosen as the elder representative of the new abstraction and not Reinhardt for the 1966 São Paulo Bienal? How is it that Kozloff, not an unintelligent critic, could make such a mistake, assign, as it were, paternity to the wrong figure?

I am going to treat these questions rhetorically and turn to a more recent instance of the confusion of Newman for Reinhardt and vice versa as a manner of reply, which will serve all the more to underscore the difficulty in making and maintaining a distinction between these two artists. The example of the contemporary misidentification comes from 2000 but, importantly, was pre-figured almost half-a-decade earlier in 1951. That year should stand out as the one in which Newman, for the second time, exhibited his severely reductive canvases at Betty Parsons. Among the works exhibited were two almost completely white paintings, *The Voice* (1950)(fig. 12) and *The Name II* (1950)(fig. 13), the extreme reduction of these canvases further highlighted by the exhibition's white-on-white announcement card.⁴⁹⁴ The exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery immediately following Newman's was that of a twenty-six year-old Texan, Robert Rauschenberg.⁴⁹⁵ One of the works exhibited, as Rosenberg later described it, was "four unpainted canvases joined together," or Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (fig. 14).⁴⁹⁶ Rosenberg's anecdote of Newman's irritable response to the inevitable though wrong-headed comparison between his metaphysical painting and the "easy" uninvested surfaces of rolled house paint was, "Humph! Thinks it's easy. The point is to do it with paint."⁴⁹⁷ What Newman was insisting on was that there was a "point," an all-important distinction that had to be made between his white paintings and Rauschenberg's white painting. They were not identical.

That was 1951. Here is the story forty-nine years later:

The painted subtleties of the square that so fascinate art historians (variations in size, texture, and design features) do not lend themselves to photographic reproduction, the major form of art's contemporary propagation. Overuse has caused the square to lose the mystical power that it had for Malevich in 1915. It has become a cliché, if not itself kitsch, and Robert Rauschenberg's parody hit a sore nerve when he painted his own square with house paint and a paint roller—leading Ad Reinhardt to scream in protest: "Does he think it's easy?"⁴⁹⁸

These lines are from the concluding section—"A Short History of the Square"—of a chapter in Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (2000). In this chapter she revisits the challenges and failures of

Bolshevik revolutionary culture and politics, that “temporary convergence of political and cultural avant-gardes,” from the perspective of a Left-committed Western scholar after the fall of the Soviet Union, or, in Buck-Morss’s words, after the “passing” of “mass dreamworlds.”⁴⁹⁹ The page-and-a-half of text preceding the passage quoted above gives a concise account of the square’s demise from its promising appearance on the revolutionary stage around 1915 on to the “second half of the century,” and to its final decline as a tired, old, ineffective actor, one who has made “so many public appearances.”⁵⁰⁰ Thematically, then, Buck-Morss’s misattribution to Reinhardt, rather than to Newman, of the “thinks it’s easy” Rauschenberg anecdote, unwittingly underscores her argument. For it is very difficult to see a distinctive “point” securing and separating the proper identities of monochromes. And in this mistaking Newman for Reinhardt and vice versa, Rauschenberg for Newman and vice versa, Reinhardt for Rauschenberg and vice versa, is all too forgivable. The Rauschenberg anecdote works, damningly well, with Reinhardt just as well as it did for Newman.

What is notable here is the collapsing of the difference between Newman and Reinhardt, a reduction performed by both artists and critics of the 1960s but also persisting into the present. Rosenberg’s vital and all important dividing line separating the projects of Newman and Reinhardt boiled down to a choice: If one were truly aware, really knew what was going on in their paintings, support for one would mean automatically rejection of the other. But the anti-theticalness by which Rosenberg marked the relationship between Newman and Reinhardt was, as subsequent generations have proven, a difficult difference to actually see. It is a difference that disassembles; for they become the *two* fathers of the 1960s; they become one and the same.

I want to elaborate upon this provocative notion of Newman and Reinhardt figuring as one and the same—to work out an excuse for why (against Rosenberg’s adamant distinction) this sort of conflating identification could happen. Later, I will return to this odd phrasing—“one and the same”—to suggest in fact that the crucial *difference* between Newman and Reinhardt is caught, ironically, within that very phrase meant to signify perfect equivalence, the perfectly self-evident. In the following chapter I

will reconstruct Newman's and Reinhardt's projects by articulating one against the other. Through the friction generated by this exercise I hope to find the relevant terms by which their minimally inflected canvases can be seen as embodying the meanings the artists professed for their painting—Newman's Absolute and Reinhardt's Ultimate—a reconciliation of form and content by which what looks like nothing could mean everything. What needs to be thought out next is how one goes about defining this difference between Newman and Reinhardt. Is it a distinction of no difference? Or it is a difference that means the world?

Chapter Four:

Between One and the Same: Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt

Between Pictures and Paintings

It is always desirable to have two notions—one to demolish the other.

Georges Braque⁵⁰¹

A sign can be illuminated only with the help of another sign.
Valentin Nikolaevich Vološinov⁵⁰²

[I]dentity can arise only out of opposition.
Louis Dupré⁵⁰³

There is a fourth quotation that could be added to the pithy three above to help round them out and bring them more directly to the subject of Newman and Reinhardt. In 1962 the art historian George Kubler wrote: “The most valuable critic of contemporary work is another artist engaged in the same game. Yet few misunderstandings exceed those between two painters engaged upon different kinds of things.”⁵⁰⁴ The lines come from *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, Kubler’s attempt to present a totalizing conception of historical processes as embedded within the morphology of objects. One can guess fairly well that these lines registered with Reinhardt. He refers to the book and its author in an “autointerview” for his March 1965 *ARTnews* “Reinhardt Paints a Picture”; soon after, in the January 1966 issue of the same magazine, he writes a flattering review of Kubler’s book.⁵⁰⁵ These same lines also registered several years later with Lippard. In her catalogue essay for Reinhardt’s 1966-67 Jewish Museum retrospective, Lippard boldly sets them off from the body text.⁵⁰⁶ What Lippard does not do next, however, is quite interesting given that the Kubler quote so tantalizingly compels it. She does not (operating on the assumption that the primary artist for Lippard in the context of an exhibition catalogue for Reinhardt is Reinhardt) name who that other artist

might be (i.e. the “most valuable critic” to Reinhardt). Of course, Lippard’s reticence on this point could be attributed to her having paid heed to the cautionary lines that immediately follow in the Kubler text: “Only long after can an observer resolve the differences between such painters, when their games are all out, and fully available for comparison.”⁵⁰⁷ Needless to say, in 1966, Lippard was not Kubler’s ideal “long after” observer, nor does one easily imagine her endorsing the notion that Reinhardt’s game was “all out.” Be that as it may, these come to seem a bit academic in the face of the very precise and quite real legalistic pressure acting on Lippard’s text and to which she and the Jewish Museum and its director Sam Hunter most certainly paid heed.

What is revealed in the 1967 correspondence between Hunter, the director of the Jewish Museum at the time and Newman’s lawyer, Richard Marlin of Mnuchlin, Moss and Marlin, is that in an earlier version of Lippard’s text, Newman indeed had played a part in her analysis of Reinhardt’s work, and that the former’s “omission” in the final catalogue text was one of scoring out, a site of contestation. The contest at least anchored itself to the issue of this pair of quotations, the first Newman’s from 1947 and the second Reinhardt’s from 1958: “The basis of an aesthetic act is the pure idea. But the pure idea is, of necessity, an aesthetic act. Here then is the epistemological paradox that is the artist’s problem. . . . For it is only the pure idea that has meaning. Everything else has everything else,” and “Art is Art. Everything else is everything else.”⁵⁰⁸ Were these statements too close? Did they mean the same thing? It is Newman who, via his lawyer, will suggest that the statements are too close, indeed the same and thus that Reinhardt’s position is derivative, his statement a plagiarism of Newman’s. In his letter to Newman’s attorney, Hunter will write, “I was sorry to see that Barnett Newman felt Ad Reinhardt’s well-known ‘art dogmas’ encroached on his own ideas and formulations of the purity-in-art concept sufficiently to enlist the formal support and defense of an attorney” and will argue that the “repetition of the phrase ‘everything else’” was merely “coincidental.”

[T]here seem no grounds for claiming one statement derives directly from the other, or constitutes plagiarism. There are substantial differences in phrasing content, tone and application; the point of view is itself as old as the “art-for-art’s-sake” doctrine, and common property available to

anyone who wishes to use it. The important point is how the doctrine is applied, stated or given an individual inflection.⁵⁰⁹

Newman's (improbable) request appears to be that proper acknowledgement be made to him in Lippard's text—that he be acknowledged as the first, prior, the originator of an aesthetic position that Reinhardt “stole.” Newman wanted “‘amends’ to be made” by Reinhardt, Lippard, Hunter, the Jewish Museum. At the very least, it seems Newman would have been satisfied with “amends” in the form of a footnote—despite any petty academic connotations this form of citation might have, it is the place for locating the text's sources, and qualifications. For without this corrective amendment the Jewish Museum document was an “incomplete, unscholarly record,” an “inaccurate view of history.”⁵¹⁰ Again, as the Jewish Museum document stands, none of these concessions are made to Newman, and the whole matter is left at a rather abrupt and unsatisfactory end. This may very well have had something to do with Reinhardt's state of health at the time of these exchanges. For Hunter will explain to Newman's lawyer why he is not forwarding the correspondence to the artist: “If Reinhardt were in good health—and unfortunately, he is in the hospital at the moment with angina, and needs a period of prolonged rest—I would eagerly pass on your letter. . . .”⁵¹¹ And, indeed, Reinhardt will die of a heart attack before the Jewish Museum show even comes down and before the exhibition catalogue goes to press.

This incident raises a number of interesting issues: it does a good job of foreshadowing the thorny relation between the two artists that will be examined in the rest of this chapter. For now, however, it is enough to acknowledge how dramatically, how perfectly—and, indeed uncannily, the incident illustrates Kubler's text. Lines from Hunter's letter to Newman's lawyer run practically parallel to lines of Kubler's quotation. “It is a futile task to try to assign individual priorities for the shared and developing ideas in American vanguard art during the forties and early fifties, and a problem best left to the future historians and critics to resolve,” Hunter writes. And slightly later in the correspondence: “the only ‘amends’ to be made in this instance will be those of posterity and future historians, possessing more calm and objectivity than we do at this point in

time.”⁵¹² Perhaps, with Kubler’s warning in mind, and now Hunter’s as well, enough time has passed for revisitation, for a serious reckoning of these two artists. Naturally the question to begin with is this: were Newman and Reinhardt playing the same game, or were they playing different games, seeking different things altogether?

Broadly, working out an answer to that question will be the remaining task of this dissertation. In the bluntest formulation my answer is yes, that Newman and Reinhardt were indeed playing the same game and that an increased sense of their identities can be gained—indeed, a far richer sense of the difficulties of what they were attempting, the very fineness of the line they walked—by mapping their projects as two maneuvers on the same playing field, through the Vološinovian route of a sign illuminating another sign. The answer becomes more complicated when Kubler’s quotation is parsed somewhat differently. While Newman and Reinhardt were playing the same game (they serve as each other’s most valuable critic), at the same time there is room for an immense amount of misunderstanding between them, a gap that surfaces most glaringly in the fierce refusal of each artist to recognize the validity of the other’s project. Before exploring the dissonant moment in this comparison, I first will attend to the consonance between Newman and Reinhardt and indicate the ways in which the two artists sought the same ends.

This task can be organized through the distinction between *pictures* and *painting*. It was a distinction signally important to both artists, used by both as the poles, the limiting terms framing their projects, articulating the parameters of what was good and bad, valid and invalid. The stakes—and they were high—marked the difference between creating the true, the “Ultimate” (in Reinhardt’s language) or the “Absolute” (in Newman’s language) painting versus the false path of pictures and picture-making.⁵¹³ What is key is that Newman and Reinhardt defined the terms of pictures and painting along analogous lines. Painting, as the ultimate or absolute, was the object for both. It motioned toward a realm of freedom and authenticity transcending instrumental communication and decorative function, ideology and exchange value. Pictures, forming the opposing pole, were the perversions of the ideal values of painting; they were servile

instruments to reigning ideologies, pandering to the status quo in images easy on both eye and brain.

In two lectures titled “Abstraction vs. Illustration” and “Paintings and Pictures” Reinhardt presented—at the fairly early date of 1943—the distinction he made between paintings and pictures. Pictures, in Reinhardt’s formulation, are illustrative. They possess recognizable subject matter, they tell stories, they are concerned with communication with a mass public. Although “[o]nce upon a time, a painting was a ‘picture,’” Reinhardt explains, with the modernization of picture production (industrial technologies), painting was “[r]elieved of its ‘picture purpose.’”⁵¹⁴ That Reinhardt burdens pictures negatively and regressively as easy transmitters of ideologies, as the perfect tokens of a culture industry instrumentalism, is indicated in his suggestion that with greater human liberation— “[j]obs with shorter hours and better pay”—the need for pictures, as substitutes for experience, would be eliminated. “A landscape picture became no substitute for a day in the country. More leisure, more education, more direct and complete participation of all people in aesthetic activity was what had been needed, not more ‘pictures.’”⁵¹⁵ What was needed, in other words, was a social order that could sustain and nurture *painting* and painters over the kind of social order that required for its ideological sustenance *picture* production and consumption. Painting was individual, free aesthetic activity; it was a “new object,” heralding a “democratization of art,” one which “disturbed and disrupted traditional values.” Reinhardt linked this new object to the “cubist, abstract tradition,” whose theme, he argues, was “creation itself—creation of things, objects, images that didn’t exist before they came into being. An abstract painting was not a rearrangement or distortion or re-creation of something else. It was a totally new relationship.”⁵¹⁶ Or, as Reinhardt put it several years later, “We saw that pictures these days are only imitations and substitutes of real things and therefore not ‘high’ art. . . . We saw that an abstract painting is not a window-frame-peep-show-hole-in-the-wall but a new object or image hung on the wall and an organization of real space relations. . . . A modern painter’s worst enemy is the picture maker. . . .”⁵¹⁷ One can see a line of continuity running from Reinhardt in 1943 (setting out the parameters of his aesthetic stakes through a valorized

notion of painting) to his later ultimate painting formula, the classic five-foot square black paintings (fig. 15), and to the more frantically pitched, “art-as-art dogma” where the earlier term “picture” slides into “life,” “everyday life,” or “art and life” and, the picture maker becomes the “philistine” and the businessman. In 1962 Reinhardt explicitly repeated: “The art of ‘figuring’ or ‘picturing’ is not a fine art.”⁵¹⁸ In a late interview, Reinhardt testified to the deep roots of his aesthetic stances: “I had these ideas all the way through pretty much. I inherited them from the thirties.”⁵¹⁹

Although Newman would not get his formalization of a paintings/pictures split on record until some twenty years after Reinhardt, he did mark the transition between his own picture-making to painting back to the forties, and specifically to the creation of his all important *Onement I* (1948)(fig. 16). Here he “felt that for the first time for myself there was no *picture making* [emphasis added].”⁵²⁰ In 1963 Newman would elaborate this distinction in a televised interview with Lane Slate as part of an attempt to summarize his contribution to the field of painting. He told Slate, “I have removed the emphasis on a painting as an object. . . . Anyway, I’m not interested in adding to the objects that exist in the world. I want my painting to separate itself from every object and every art object that exists. . . . It is hard to say what one has accomplished. The work speaks for itself. However, one of the things that can be said is that I helped change painting from the making of pictures to the making of paintings. I never use the word ‘picture.’ Those who make pictures, whether realistic or abstract, are not making paintings.”⁵²¹

As with Reinhardt, the difference between pictures and paintings for Newman was one worth getting contentious about. Having one’s paintings discussed, as Newman alleged William Rubin did in the exhibition catalogue for the 1968 MoMA exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, as if they were pictures was no small deal. In Newman’s mind, it amounted to nothing less than “personal injury.”⁵²² “[A]s early as 1947, I had moved painting beyond picture-making,” Newman asserted in a heated letter to the curator in which he further challenges Rubin to “[e]xamine the show in your mind and tell me how many other painters in that show, including Miro, carried painting

beyond the making of pictures. . . .”⁵²³ Doubtless, Reinhardt too would have made the identical claim of having moved painting beyond picture-making.

The importance of this distinction for Newman is further underscored by the treatment and attention it has received in Newman scholarship. Notably, Richard Shiff has characterized Newman’s version/vision of painting as the “unique, immediate situation” and whereas picture-making is the “artificial world of reference and type.”⁵²⁴ “A “painting” was not a “picture.” To Newman, as Shiff explains, a picture had to be of something, even if it was a picture of nothing but itself—a picture of an established type, exemplifying that type.”⁵²⁵ Pictures, once again, as fabrication, as abstractions of experience, as operations through “types,” become the umbrella term for all variety of falsification. Or, Arthur Danto offers a more recent confirmation of this point in his review of the 2002 Philadelphia Museum show. Danto explains that other artists of Newman’s milieu “had been struggling to make beautiful pictures, whereas” Newman, in contrast, “considered himself as having transcended beauty and picturing alike. . . . *Onement I* was a painting whereas what he had done before were merely pictures.” Danto elaborates, “In a painting by contrast, the surface is opaque, like a wall. We are not supposed to see through it. We stand in a real relationship with it, rather than in an illusionary relationship with what it represents. . . . A picture represents something other than itself; a painting presents itself. A picture mediates between a viewer and an object in pictorial space; a painting is an object to which the viewer relates without mediation.”⁵²⁶ Or, to point this back to Reinhardt’s 1943 statements, what has been effectively removed or negated is “picture-purpose.”

These texts indicate Newman’s and Reinhardt’s mutual use of the painting/pictures dualism in framing their projects. The point ought be taken further, however, for the coincidence runs deeper. Both artists defined their painting projects (as against picture-making) by using the same constellated network of concerns. Their conjoint arguments for the identity of true painting share these points: (1) art as an enactment of ethics; (2) art as an embodiment of the realm of freedom; (3) art as transcending commodity status and resisting the culture industry; (4) art maintaining a

negationist stance of refusal; (5) but as a negation differentiated from the nihilism of anti-art; all of which coalesce in (6) the normative desire for the One, unity, self-identity.

That both artists took authentic art as a figuring of ethics, as forming an “ethical statement,” and as the enactment of good action, falls in line with the elevated register on which they took painting’s meaning to be played out. Equally, this offers insight into the serious nature of the consequences for what a failure of that project might mean.⁵²⁷ The prominence both artists gave to the ethical dimension in their life and work is highly notable. In their protesting, boycotting, posting fiery missiles, both had acquired colorful reputations as outspoken critics, constantly drawing a line between right and wrong. Newman had a “legendary reputation for integrity,” as one art historian noted. More recently, a critic has found in Newman’s art “the vivid conviction about art’s ability to convince, the forceful argument against the futile speediness and fretfulness of contemporary society, the summons to training for larger spiritual and intellectual life,” by which “we are given a vision of the human life worth living as profound as any this century has to offer.”⁵²⁸ Newman satisfied his own often quoted summation of the artist’s calling—“to wrest truth from the void.”⁵²⁹

If Newman’s ethical commitment evokes the artist (and points to himself) as a truth-seeker, Reinhardt’s tends to veer, deprecatorily, towards the moralistic fervor of a fanatic. This reputation, nonetheless, indicates how thorough was Reinhardt’s identification with extreme ethical conviction. After all, he had nominated himself the “conscience of the art world,” a nomination easily substantiated in his rants about the contemporary artist’s responsibility and his colorful denunciations of fellow artists for “selling-out” to the evils of the commercial art world.⁵³⁰ Interestingly, in the preface to the 1991 Museum of Modern Art (New York) and Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles) Reinhardt exhibition, William Rubin cautioned, “Ethical probity in life is not the same as ethos in painting,” although he goes on to make an exception for Reinhardt. In Reinhardt’s case, Rubin clarifies, “there is, I think, some sense of direct crossover in [his] mature painting—an ethical stamina that recalls his uncompromisingness, his moral fervor in life.”⁵³¹

The prominence of the ethical question in Reinhardt's thinking is testified to by the devotion of an entire section of his collected writings to the topic of "Art and Ethics." Echoing Ludwig Wittgenstein's similarly phrased sentiment, Rose writes of Reinhardt, "For him, ethics and aesthetics were one."⁵³² In Rose's summation Reinhardt was, without a doubt, a "moralist" who "defended abstract art both as an aesthetic and as a moral cause."⁵³³ Indeed, whether comparing early or late statements, public assertions or private journal entries, one finds Reinhardt's consistent pursuit of an ethic embodied within painting. In his 1943 lecture "Abstraction vs. Illustration," referred to earlier, it is abstract painting that manifests "dissatisfaction with ordinary experience, the impoverished reality of present-day experience," and thus "stands as a challenge to disorder and disintegration. Its activity implies a conviction of something constructive in our time."⁵³⁴ A little over twenty years later, now within the context of the highly polemical and contentious art-as-art statements, the sentiment is much the same: "Art-as-art is always a battle cry, polemic, picket sign, sit-in, sit-down, civil disobedience, passive resistance, crusade, fiery cross, and non-violent protest."⁵³⁵

I would take Rubin's exception and extend it to Newman as another instance in which ethical probity in life comes very close to ethos in painting. For Newman also described his project of painting in utopian terms when he affirmed that his painting "represented an open world," and that "in terms of its social impact," it denoted "the possibility of an open society, of an open world, not of a closed institutional world."⁵³⁶ Alexander Lieberman, Newman's friend, fellow painter and the editorial director of *Vogue*, speculated after Newman's death, "I think, frankly, Barney was trying to put painting in to the highest form of human endeavor and put it on the level of philosophy or religion."⁵³⁷ Equally, Shiff writes in his introduction to Newman's selected writings: "To create oneself through making (either writing or painting) is an ethical act of decision and passion: you become formed, differentiated from other; you feel your place in the world and find your wholeness, integrity."⁵³⁸ In his notes Reinhardt, too, would express similar sentiments about the vital link between integrity (oneness) and identity. It was "[c]rucial

in [the] artist's sensibility," Reinhardt maintains, to have "integrity, critical sense of [one's] own identity."⁵³⁹

The alliance of art with the ethical is implicated in the notion of art as a special realm of freedom. The "true creative artist," as Newman put it, is one who is "free and *insists* upon freedom."⁵⁴⁰ The activity of art, true creation, was the "good action" of ethics. This was a connection made explicit by Newman in his 1948 memorial tribute for his friend and fellow painter Arshile Gorky. "The only moral act is the useless one, and the only useless act is the aesthetic one. The artist is the only man who performs an act for no useful purpose; he is, indeed, opposed to its usefulness. His behavior is completely, unalterably, and profoundly futile."⁵⁴¹ Reinhardt echoes this sentiment when he announced in 1962 at the First Conference on Aesthetic Responsibility sponsored by the American Institute of Architects, "Painting has been the freest and purest fine art in this century," and it was abstract art that Reinhardt wrote of as "art of maximum freedom."⁵⁴²

Painting—abstract painting as Reinhardt doubtless means—was free because it was pure, because it was "detached from all forms," because it was a "place apart," "unmanaged," "unexploited," where it could "be itself and nothing else."⁵⁴³ It was a "fine art." This emphasis on a fine art is one that Newman carried as well. "Now this may be an old-fashioned idea," Newman told his audience in Woodstock in 1952, "but I'd like to raise the issue that painting is a fine art. The word 'fine' means 'end,' and I feel that painting is an art which is an end in itself. It isn't something that can be reduced to a fact in order to find some greater truth; it is its own end."⁵⁴⁴ Or, again, for Reinhardt, the "fine-art process" by definition was a "free process," and not a job.⁵⁴⁵ Taking this another way, compare these statements: "The basis of an aesthetic act is the pure idea. But the pure idea is, of necessity, an aesthetic act. Here then is the epistemological paradox that is the artist's problem. . . . For it is only the pure idea that has meaning. Everything else has everything else."⁵⁴⁶ The second statement, more concisely: "Art is Art. Everything else is everything else."⁵⁴⁷ The first is Newman's from 1947 and the latter is Reinhardt's from 1958.⁵⁴⁸ To open up art's equation to "everything else" (or merely something else) was to

begin, to borrow Reinhardt's refrain, making a business out of it.⁵⁴⁹ True painting was antithetical to business-making, it frustrated attempts at capitalization, of spinning gold, of turning a this into a that. It was pictures that were guilty of always equaling something else, of performing the function of a link in a signifying chain, entering with fecund ease into systems of symbolic exchange.

The antithesis to the free object and creative activity freely realizing ethical value can be summarized as the commodity. Both artists openly named the commodity as painting's enemy. "No art as a commodity or jobbery," Reinhardt stated in clear terms, adding the acerbic pique: "Art is not the spiritual side of business."⁵⁵⁰ "A painting is changed and transformed when it leaves the studio," Reinhardt explained in the Glaser interview. "It takes a labeling and a beating when it is out in the world where it is bought and sold and handled like a commodity. This is ridiculous."⁵⁵¹ A similar sentiment can be surmised for Newman. That he found the commodity situation for art equally ridiculous is evident from a late statement made to Emile de Antonio for the 1971 documentary film *Painters Painting*: "There's no question that my work and the work of the men I respect took a revolutionary position, you might say, against the bourgeois notion of what a painting is as an object. . . ."⁵⁵² Literally—and this was something Newman was fully aware of—the phenomenal size of many of Newman's paintings, the sheer dimensions of these "objects" prevented them from fitting into the bourgeois domestic interior, thus preventing them from becoming bourgeois objects, commodities.⁵⁵³ In a move reminiscent of Reinhardt's own anti-commodity tactics, the size of Newman's work—while making them (at least hypothetically) unavailable for consumption in the space of private bourgeois ownership—suggests the "open" public, civic and communal shared space of the museum where art objects, at least ideally, are supposed to transcend private ownership.⁵⁵⁴ It was the progressive social content of museum space that Reinhardt highlighted when he traced the origins of the museum back to revolutionary action. "Art museum," Reinhardt jotted down in an undated note, "born—French Revolution Royal collections declared property of the people. . . ."⁵⁵⁵ The fine art museum was one of the two spaces (the other was the academy) that Reinhardt designated as safe-holds against

the “ridiculous” fate of art as market commodities. The museum was where art could be “protected,” it was the “one place for art-as-art” because it was “dead” to business and entertainment interest. “A fine-art museum is a treasure house and tomb, not a counting-house or amusement center.”⁵⁵⁶ Also interesting to note is that, though Reinhardt did not work on the gargantuan scale of Newman—a tactic which by Newman’s logic steered his painting away from the bourgeois interior as commodity-form and presumably toward the public museum as social property—he did propose this parallel: “My making a painting that can’t be seen may be like making a work too large to move in and out of place.”⁵⁵⁷ Thus, both an “invisible” painting and one “too large” thwart ease of consumption and share kinship in negating the commodity hallmark of easy in-and-out movement stamped on the tradition of easel painting as a whole.

For both Newman and Reinhardt positing a fine art realm as an ethical practice and as a free space against the increasingly apparent intrusions of commodification was based on the assumption of a generally negationist stance. There was nothing cavalier or light-hearted in their negationism. The stance of refusal, Reinhardt wrote in a personal note, was for nothing less than the “sake of self-preservation.”⁵⁵⁸ One had to vigilantly refuse the values of the system, the mandates of the status quo in order to authentically pursue the true project of painting. “Art-as-Art,” Reinhardt pronounced, “judges itself by its destructions. Artists-as-artists value themselves for what they have gotten rid of and what they refuse to do.”⁵⁵⁹ Indeed Reinhardt’s famous lists of negatives performed the very task of cataloguing what to get rid of and what to refuse to do. Although Reinhardt is more typically associated with dramatic stances of refusal, Newman too, as Shiff has indicated, possessed his own “characteristic negative mode” and authored his own list of “nos.” For instance, when asked to comment on his teaching experience in the summer of 1959 at the Emma Lake Artists’ Workshop in Saskatchewan, Newman “stated everything he had *not* done” (“The first thing I did not do was to bring my work with me. . . . Neither did I bring canvas. . . . Neither did I try to show how to make the right ‘kind’ of paintings. . . .”).⁵⁶⁰ Each artist, as Irving Sandler observed, had “adopted negation as a means of achieving his absolute.”⁵⁶¹

Their negation, however, was not an anti-art position. This difference between the negation of their ethical painting practices and the nihilism of anti-art—a critical, all-telling one for both artists—was one they repeatedly clarified and emphasized (many times in response to repeated misidentification of them as anti-art proponents). Not surprisingly, this issue is played out in both artists’ explications of their antithetical relationship to Duchamp. In a 1957 letter to John I. H. Baur, then the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Newman wrote pointedly against Motherwell’s proposition that Duchamp was the “father” of contemporary American art. “[I]f Motherwell wishes to make Marcel Duchamp a father,” Newman railed, “Duchamp is his father and not mine nor that of any American painter that I respect.”⁵⁶² Equally as vehement against any Duchampian lineage, Reinhardt’s negation meant he was “anti-anti-art, non-non-art . . . non-ready-made.” There was to be “no dadaism . . . no duchampism.”⁵⁶³ Or, again, in the Glaser interview, to the interviewer’s prompt that “[s]ome critics have seen in your all-black paintings some kind of relationship to the negative acts of the dada artists such as Duchamp,” Reinhardt responds, “There may be a relation to Malevich and Mondrian, but it would be the *exact opposite* [emphasis added] of Duchamp.”⁵⁶⁴

This was a difference that hinged, once again, on the distinction between negation and nihilism, a distinction operating equally as importantly in both Newman’s and Reinhardt’s projects. Where negation was an act that secured identity, nihilism, taken as an anything goes attitude, destroyed the grounds for any form of self-critical identity. Properly or improperly, it was to nihilism that Reinhardt linked Duchamp as the destructive permissiveness, “free-for-all art” (versus free art) that confused art’s true identity, and that amounted to art’s most devastating “corruption.”⁵⁶⁵ Duchampianism was the bad limitlessness, whereas for both Newman and Reinhardt art was about identity and thus, as well, about critically maintained limits.⁵⁶⁶ It was precisely this limitlessness, this art-into-life and vice versa—art that is “too available, too loose, too open . . . so that at some point almost anything goes”—that Reinhardt spoke of in his contribution to “What Is Corruption,” a panel discussion with Milton Resnick.⁵⁶⁷ And, indeed, one finds

a similarly shaped complaint in Newman's statement for the 1952 Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference.

The best example of this situation is Marcel Duchamp, who identified art or tried to destroy art by pointing to the fountain, and we now have museums that show screwdrivers and automobiles and paintings. [The museums] have accepted this aesthetic position that there's no way of knowing what is what. Well, if there is no way, I feel that it's time for the Museum of Modern Art, for example, to put on an exhibition of machine guns. After all, they're beautiful [in] function, they have wonderful forms, they're full of content, and they actually make noise. Will the modern aesthetician who takes this position, if he's confronted with the parchment lamps that were made from the skins of Jews killed by Nazis, just criticize [them] on the grounds that it's pretty good work?⁵⁶⁸

It is an acute example Newman ends with—human-parchment lamps now ushered into the galleries—but it, like Reinhardt's complaint, starts with the Duchampian gauntlet opening onto the senseless, meaningless limitlessness of anything goes, the “too available, too loose, too open,” and a situation in which there is “no way of knowing what is what.” Or, as Reinhardt put it, “The art work itself doesn't seem to have a limit to that which can be read into it.”⁵⁶⁹ What anti-art heralded for both artists was a highly troubling evasion of the perplexing question of art's identity. Newman's and Reinhardt's position was not a nihilistic one in which the very questions of authentic identity are surrendered but, a determinate negation willed precisely as a refusal to give up on these very concerns.

For both Newman and Reinhardt, the summarizing “image” for these sets of commitments—the ones that crucially distinguished painting from pictures—was that of unity, or the state signified in the former's neologism as “onement.” “‘Onement,’” as Rosenberg pointed out, “is not really a word; and though its meaning is quite clear—the state of being one—it designates a condition that is ineffable and without qualifications. ‘Onement’ adds an aura of indefiniteness to ‘oneness,’ the word that comes closest to its meaning.”⁵⁷⁰ An interesting thing that occurs in Rosenberg's attempt to clarify Newman's term “onement” is that Rosenberg also, and probably only inadvertently, names the term Reinhardt would use, “oneness.”⁵⁷¹ The achievement of authentic painting meant having

arrived at onement/oneness, which, in turn, meant having met all of the criteria set above. It was painting as ethics, truth, freedom, the anti-commodity, a determinate negation. This achieved state of integrity and identity was the arrival at the Absolute onement in Newman's painting and by Reinhardt making the one painting, Ultimate Painting.

The figure of "one" worked both diachronically and synchronically for both artists. Synchronically and formally and in terms of painting composition, the work had to be whole and of a piece—whether in the way Newman had described as the experience of space declared "so that it is felt at once," or taken in Reinhardt's "all-over painting idea" where each painting is realized as "one over-all uniformity."⁵⁷² Newman had chastised none less than Greenberg for failing to properly describe the "sense of the single, total image" his paintings made.⁵⁷³ It was a point Newman would repeatedly drive home: he was dealing with the "whole image." Mondrian "builds a painting by using related areas . . . a series of parts," but Newman's paintings, the artist maintained, were involved with the "wholeness of the area." His zips did not divide his paintings, but rather they "unit[ed] the thing," they "creat[ed] a totality"; he was "concerned constantly in doing painting that would move in its totality," in which the "beginning and end are there at once."⁵⁷⁴

This does not sound all that distinct from Reinhardt, whose almost mantric intonations of the "one" would become an identifying feature of his. An early art-as-art statement began with an announcement: "The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing." In order to make painting that one thing, the "one painting" had to be an achievement of wholeness of surface through a "grand uniformity," "the single-scheme," of "one formal device, one color-monochrome, one linear division in each direction, one symmetry, one free-hand brushing, one rhythm, one working everything into one dissolution and one indivisibility," to end with "each painting into one over-all uniformity."⁵⁷⁵

Both artists' repetitions seem to have paid off: the emphatic point of the formal unity, the visual onement/oneness of their paintings becomes a critical staple in art writing on Newman and Reinhardt. Lippard, for instance, would speak of the latter's

work as a kind of “equalization” and insist that his black paintings “must be seen whole” and as a “confrontation of the whole.”⁵⁷⁶ Likewise John Elderfield would write that in order “to be successful Newman has to prevent us from seeing a painting as anything else but one thing.” Newman’s “best pictures” possess this “one-glance unity.”⁵⁷⁷ And Rosenberg’s posthumous monograph on Newman was liberally infused with references to “Newman’s holism.” His work had to be engaged in terms of the “idea of singularity,” and “experienced as an undifferentiated whole.”⁵⁷⁸

The meaning of “one,” I argue, extended beyond the desire to achieve formal unity in the single canvas. It was also realized along a diachronic axis, through what Rosenberg pegged “one-idea painting.” Both Newman and Reinhardt had been recognized by the critic as its prime exponents.⁵⁷⁹ By this concept, Rosenberg meant that the painter had found his “image,” that is, the artist had found a way of working on his one single problem. “The basic format of Newman’s work for the remainder of his career,” Danto observes, “is that of one or more vertical bands, which run from the top to the bottom of the panel, in colors that contrast with a more or less undifferentiated surrounding field.”⁵⁸⁰ Likewise, Reinhardt described his own solution to the “one single grand original problem” of abstract painting by a formula to which he famously persisted: the “one work for a fine art, the one painting, is the painting of the one-size canvas—the single scheme, one formal device, one color-monochrome, one linear division in each direction, one symmetry.”⁵⁸¹

This gesturing towards a “one” manifest through space and time point to a philosophical threshold where Newman’s and Reinhardt’s states of onement/oneness become the proper noun of metaphysics, the Absolute/the Ultimate. This figure for Reality and Identity from ancient dialectic had come to mark for both Newman and Reinhardt the ends of their painting, the meaning of their projects. Reinhardt repeatedly, both in private notes and in published pieces, alluded to ultimate forms, to an absolute art, of that which is “indescribable,” “One” and “oneness” as “undifferentiated unity,” of “no divisions, no multiplicity”—as “totality, unity, finality.”⁵⁸²

Newman, for reasons that will be discussed later, was far more circumspect in actually pronouncing the term of the Absolute. As he indicated in 1948 in “The Sublime Is Now,” although “Man’s natural desire in the arts [is] to express his relation to the Absolute,” the dire mistake was that this “became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creations.”⁵⁸³ But his commentators had no difficulty recognizing the identity of Onement as the Absolute. Perhaps the best indicator can be found in Rosenberg’s eulogy for Newman, a writing situation in which Rosenberg needed to hone in on what was most significant in Newman and, do no injustice to the dead—and especially so in this case, to a dear friend. Given these requirements, the prominence with which Rosenberg discusses the absolute in relation to the motivation and significance of Newman’s project stands out especially. “The prime attribute of Newman’s absolute,” Rosenberg read, “is an absence of qualities—which in terms of experience is the overpowering presences of *ONE* quality. It was ONE-NESS that intrigued him. . . .” “Yet,” he asks rhetorically, “how can the absolute be sought except absolutely?” “Newman was determined to push beyond . . . to an absolute reality.”⁵⁸⁴ More recent has been David Sylvester’s declaration that Newman’s “foremost imperative was the need to deal with ultimate things,” and John Golding’s inclusion of Newman as a primary artist within the thesis for his work, *Paths to the Absolute*, in which he writes of *Onement I* as the artist’s “absolute both in terms of its content and the forms that convey it.”⁵⁸⁵

Arriving at the metaphysical plateau at which the meaning of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s projects is revealed as the achievement of Onement/Oneness, the Absolute/Ultimate, Identity, Presence, Truth, is a move that in achieving everything, reveals nothing. Its profound uselessness stems from this logic: Absolute/Ultimate being transcends differential identity and thus it is beyond description, analysis, and signification altogether. This is the dead-end of the non-signifying Absolute, the indescribable One. But all is not lost. It is by a return to the Kubler-inspired question posed at the beginning of this chapter that the situation is opened. In answering that question, with a “yes” and affirming that they were indeed playing the same game, their onement/oneness is fissured by a productive contradiction. For the trouble brewing for

the two artists is, of course, what universe—by the very terms of its definition—could allow for *two* Absolutes? could admit both Newman and Reinhardt? could tolerate the notion that they had both achieved onement/oneness in painting but that these were two different versions, a Newman version *and* a Reinhardt version? This contradiction—which opens up an allowance for differential identity and the fact that both artists were exceptionally (and paradoxically) articulate about what were and were not the qualities of their “one”—will make them each other’s “most valuable critic.”

Although I have angled for Kubler’s first clause (“most valuable critic”) as the appropriate one by which to capture the nature of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s relationship, this goes markedly against the grain. It would have been to Kubler’s second clause (“few misunderstandings exceed those between two painters engaged upon different kinds of things”) that Newman and Reinhardt no doubt would have placed themselves. They were fiercely antagonistic and, in this light “misunderstandings” falls somewhat flat, missing the pointedness of their antipathy. A forced misrecognition might be a better way to characterize it, for one might surmise, in a sense they understood each other’s projects only too well (they were two painters engaged upon *similar* kinds of things) and they were savvy to the fatal contradiction that each posed to the other, thereby making it fundamentally necessary for their mutual rejection, their joint refusal to grant the other recognition.

This point can be broadly indicated through a quick examination of how the opposition romantic and classic was dealt with by both of the artists. For better or worse, the overall sensibilities of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s projects can be templated through the well-worn clash between the romantic and the classic. “[T]here is no doubt,” Rose pronounced, that Reinhardt’s was a “classic art,” and her characterization would seem to have accorded with Reinhardt’s own favored self-descriptors: “classicist, classicistic.”⁵⁸⁶ Although Newman was loathe to pigeon-hole himself into any kind of reductive classification, he did deign in a 1962 interview to cast his lot in with the romantics: “I don’t consider myself in terms of labels, but if I am anything, I am romantic.”

What is of primary interest here is not that Newman and Reinhardt were aligned, by others and also by themselves, as romantic or classic but that for each artist his decision to identify with one of these terms meant the avid, dogmatic refusal to recognize its conventionally opposed member. In identifying himself with the romantics, Newman challenged the very idea of the classical: “There is no such thing as the classical,” Newman declared, “The Greek artists were a bunch of romantics.”⁵⁸⁷ Newman’s maneuver—the reduction of the opposing term to his—is echoed in reverse by Reinhardt. “The word ‘human’ is not only disreputable, it’s fake. . . . It is something that hangs around, I supposed, in the romantic. If you have a strict aesthetic system, you have to cut out all romantic work. But the romantic work becomes classic on the basis of its becoming good art.”⁵⁸⁸ Reinhardt’s “Plank” seventeen from his “39 Art Planks” calls for “The re-neo-classicisticization of neo-romanticisticization,” and is another instance of this canceling operation.⁵⁸⁹ Each artist assigns not only priority to their chosen term but, adamantly refuses to recognize any substance to the secondary term.

Two of Reinhardt’s “How to Look at Modern Art in America” art world cartoons offer another example of this refusal to recognize and give recognition to the other. The first cartoon dates from April 1946 and was published in *P.M.* (fig. 17).⁵⁹⁰ What Reinhardt represents is the family tree of modernism. The four post-impressionist roots of this tree, “Cezanne,” “Seurat,” “Gauguin,” and “Van Gogh,” sink into a ground of “Manet,” “Poussin,” “Negro Sculpture,” and “Japanese Prints,” among other influences. The stout trunk of the tree is made up of Braque, Matisse and Picasso and the two major directions—the fork of the tree—separate out into the “Abstract” and the “Social-Surrealist” branches, or “pure (abstract) ‘paintings’” and “pure (illustrative) ‘pictures’.”⁵⁹¹ From there, smaller branches lead to clusters of leaves with each leaf representing an individual contemporary artist. The right-hand side of the tree foliated with artists of the “social-surrealist” or illustrative tendencies looks as if on the verge of breaking off. Fatally loading it down is “subject matter” and “business as art patron,” among other things. When this branch of contemporary art finally breaks off it will fall into a culture-industry-like abyss, the “cornfields,” “where no demand is made on you.”

Among the artists inhabiting the cornfields already are Norman Rockwell, Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh, and Paul Cadmus. It is an area damningly staked out with advertisements for “Life” and “Fortune” magazines, “Pepsi-Cola,” and “International Business Machines.”

One of the initially striking aspects of Reinhardt’s cartoon tree is the fullness of its heavy foliation. It appears that Reinhardt has done a thorough-going job. Indeed there is something of excessive, possibly obsessive, fecundity as one registers—dispersed alongside “Pollock” and “Motherwell” and “de Kooning”—the leaves of those artists who have become third and fourth tier in art history’s annals: “Slobodkina” “Spruce,” “Bemelmans,” “Blanch,” “Gwathmey.” Prefacing the diagram is a short statement by Reinhardt which both indicates Reinhardt’s desire to generate inclusive picture but also nods to the difficulty of capturing and categorizing everybody: “If you have any friends that we overlooked, here are some extra leaves. Fill them in and paste up. . . .” True to word, immediately following the statement are seven blank leaves. Pointedly, two omissions stand out. The not unexpected omission is the author’s own; the far more interesting omission is that of Newman.

There are several ways of trying to account for Newman’s absence. Possibly Reinhardt excluded Newman out of friendship, or some form of respect which precluded him from pinpointing and potentially trivializing Newman’s developing aesthetic position, a position that perhaps Reinhardt himself felt akin to. The problem with this explanation is (and as many of his peers have commented upon) that Reinhardt’s cartoons and writings appear to make no distinction between friend or foe: everybody participating in the field of the art world is equally a potential target for one of Reinhardt’s critical jibes. However, this does bring up a second possible solution that Newman in 1946 was simply not much of a participant in the New York art scene, his status as an artist too marginal and not yet established enough to be included and therefore he was a figure easily “overlooked.” Certainly this is a possible accounting for Newman’s absence in the 1946 schema but it seems improbable. Newman was visible and active in the New York artists community during this time. He helped Betty Parsons organize events and wrote

catalogue essays and although his exhibition history in 1946 was limited to only two shows (both of them group exhibitions), he was still very much within the community and those within that small community, especially that surrounding the Parsons's gallery (which was also Reinhardt's gallery) would have acknowledged his presence.⁵⁹²

Not much explanatory headway would seem to have been made here; yet, the situation is helped substantially by adding as a coda Reinhardt's revisiting and remaking of the cartoon, fifteen years later in 1961.⁵⁹³ For this double page spread in *ARTnews* the original 1946 *P.M.* version was reproduced alongside the updated revision (fig. 18). The 1961 version is similar in overall format but the major differences are that the left side of the tree reserved for those coming out of pure (abstract) paintings has simply disappeared. This leaves a rather puzzling blank space and the right side of the tree reserved for illustrative pictures (contrary to what one might have predicted given its fragile condition in 1946, when its major limb was cracked and weighted down by heteronymous concerns) is the only part of the tree that remains. Another major difference is that many of the artists who were formerly on the progressive "paintings" side in 1946—such as Rothko, Tobey, Motherwell, de Kooning, Hofmann, and Gottlieb—are, in 1961, damningly switched over to the illustrative "pictures" limb, which as in the first version, dangles precariously over the "cornfields." Given Reinhardt's penchant for condemning artists for selling-out, there is little surprise that in the 1961 revision so many of Reinhardt's former colleagues should now find themselves on the fateful bough of sell-out, degraded picture-making, or equally, that the space formerly occupied by painters is an unoccupied blank.⁵⁹⁴

Unlike in 1946, however, one cannot attempt to explain away Newman's omission by suggesting Reinhardt's unfamiliarity with Newman as an artist. By the time of the second cartoon, Newman had under his belt the two solo exhibitions at Betty Parsons in 1950 and 1951; and, more recently, in 1959, he had made his come back to the New York exhibition scene with the solo show Clement Greenberg had organized to debut French & Company's new contemporary art program. All of these events unquestionably would have registered with Reinhardt. Even so, Newman is once again

absent from the picture; Reinhardt has, for the second time, failed to recognize Newman. To this now repeated silence on Newman's place, the questions remain: is the placelessness of Newman within Reinhardt's schema a special exemption allowed to Newman as a respectful nod to an artist whose work defied easy classification? Or, oppositely, was it a disrespectful silence? Once again Newman had not made the cut, even though the cut had been in a doubled-edged way a generous one, widely inclusive of all the art trends Reinhardt condemned. Or could all of this be explainable as the protracted inability of Reinhardt to see Newman properly? To come to terms with him? Did Reinhardt understand that to give any recognition to Newman was to challenge the authority of his own project?

If from Reinhardt's side the visibility/placement of Newman seems muddled, from Newman's direction the picture is a tad clearer. He will, in an incident that I will discuss later on, attempt to sue Reinhardt. Further, in 1955 Newman had an opportunity for his own screed, performing some categorizing himself, clustering Reinhardt with Mark Rothko and Georges Mathieu.⁵⁹⁵

I am not going to Rothko's show for the same reasons that I did not attend those of Mathieu and Reinhardt. I am frankly bored with the uninspired, or to put it more accurately, I am bored with the too easily inspired. It was Rothko who said to me that it does not matter that an artist "looks" at other painters. It is not what he 'sees' but what he "does" with what he "sees" that counts. This is the credo of a virtuoso, of the salon painter, of the social and public man, and whether it be Mathieu, Reinhardt, or Rothko, this easy ability to be inspired not only reduces the concepts that form his sources, not only distorts the act of painting itself, but it is so at variance with my own point of view that I can only reject everything it involves.⁵⁹⁶

One of the undercurrents of this passage pulls to the notion of "looking" at other painters and one suspects—reading between the lines—the charge that Rothko (and by extension, Reinhardt) was copying his work, albeit, superficially.⁵⁹⁷

Newman's letter indicates both the very difficult nature of the line he had to walk and the absoluteness of it. On the one hand, Newman is making (and probably responding to) comparison of likeness between his own work and Mathieu, Reinhardt and Rothko.

On the other hand, he has to assert that this likeness is merely a superficiality that obscures crucial differences. If these other artists were doing too much “looking” at him, his contrary response was to refuse to look their way at all. Thus, Newman had boycotted Reinhardt’s solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery (January 31-February 19, 1955), he had not seen the increasing force and insistence of Reinhardt’s uniform black paintings in that show and presumably had not read the accompanying statement on the black paintings—the first such statement Reinhardt makes concerning the black paintings. Newman’s stance was firm and absolute: “only rejection.”

Summarizing and rehearsing, there is a problem and a question here. The problem is this: Newman considered himself a creator of paintings and considered Reinhardt a maker of pictures. Reinhardt, in turn, saw the exact opposite; he was doing the proper work of painting, where Newman was in the category of the corrupt, of pictures. How is it then that they could have both defined the stakes of the game in such similar, or even arguably identical terms and yet come up with a scoreboard of inversed identities?

The Name of the Game: Before and After the Moment of Identity

1. The Ideographic Picture

In early 1947, “The Ideographic Picture” opened at the recently established Betty Parsons Gallery. The eight-person group exhibition was curated by Newman and included works by Hans Hofmann, Pietro Lazzari, Boris Margo, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still and also by Newman and Reinhardt—all artists who at that point were represented by Parsons.⁵⁹⁸ Each of the eight showed two paintings apiece. Newman himself exhibited the modest-sized oil crayon on cardboard drawing from 1944-45 *Gea* (fig. 19) featuring a white ovoid surrounded by biomorphic insect-like shapes on a red background and *The Euclidian Abyss* (fig. 20), another modest-sized work, this time an oil and gouache painting on canvas board, dating to 1946-47, and stylistically contrasting

to the earlier drawing with two vertical, more angular yellow elements (as “zip”-prefigurations possibly) against a darkish background. Reinhardt was represented by *Dark Symbol* and *Cosmic Sign* (figs. 21-22).⁵⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, given the negative current of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s pre-1960 (or thereabout) reception histories, both artists shared the dubious honor of having both their submissions marked at \$200, the lowest price being asked.⁶⁰⁰

Despite some recent speculation about the inclusion of Reinhardt—reasonable suggestions that he was perhaps not Newman’s choice, implying that Newman had felt pressure to include Reinhardt—there is still the strength of Newman’s language in the catalogue statement to contend with it and it is language that boldly speaks of the eight individuals as a community of artists, sharing certain aesthetic intentions.⁶⁰¹ The closing two-line paragraph of Newman’s statement drives this home: “Mrs. Betty Parsons has organized a representative showing of this work around the artists in her gallery who are its exponents. That all of them are associated with her gallery is not without significance.”⁶⁰² But even beyond this—whether or not one believes Newman would have written so forcefully about the integrity of the artists selected had he truly believed Reinhardt to be such a misplaced black sheep or whether one believes he wrote those last lines in order to squelch his own bad faith for having included something heterogeneous to his concept—one could argue that the appropriateness of Reinhardt’s inclusion in “The Ideographic Picture,” is suggested, at the very least, by the titles to Reinhardt’s two entries—“Dark Symbol” and “Cosmic Sign”—titles which appear more engaged with the named theme of the exhibition than say, *The Fury I* and *The Fury II*, Hofmann’s titles or *Burnt Offering* and *The Firmament*, Pietro Lazzari’s, or even, one might suggest, Newman’s own titles of “Gea” and “Euclidian Abyss.” The fact remains that both Newman and Reinhardt participated in this early, highly seminal exhibition and it can serve to mark a noteworthy instance in which to see, in a more concrete fashion, the convergence of their projects.

The theme of this 1947 Parsons’s exhibition, the kinds of problems and motives it framed, plays a highly significant role in both Newman’s and Reinhardt’s developments

of the pictures/painting problematic and it provides a compelling starting point from which to navigate future comparisons of the artists. The exhibition's theme was addressed in the short statement Newman produced for the catalogue. It opens with three definitions of the ideograph/ideographic:

IDEOGRAPH A character, symbol or figure which suggests the idea of an object without expressing its name.

IDEOGRAPHIC Representing ideas directly and not through the medium of their names; applied specifically to that mode of writing which by means of symbols, figures or hieroglyphics suggests the idea of an object without expressing its name.

Century Dictionary

IDEOGRAPH A symbol or character painted, written or inscribed, representing ideas.

Encyclopedia Britannica⁶⁰³

All three definitions aim at the notion of figuring a meaning, or marking significance, but to do so without the “name,” without the very tool by which “something is known or designated.”⁶⁰⁴ But it is evident—both from the definitions rehearsed above and the expanded context of Newman's statement—that what is desired here is something that exists both without the name but also without being “nameless,” or anonymous, unknown, without proper identity, something “impossible to specify or describe.”⁶⁰⁵ That was the trick. Reinhardt himself explicitly arrived at this same paradox through the notion of the “ideogram.” In an unpublished note the artist wrote of the ideogram as standing “for what is beyond utterance, unutterableness.”⁶⁰⁶ In a similar vein and in another unpublished note Reinhardt wrote of the “Sign which refuses to signify.”⁶⁰⁷ Another way of saying this is to suggest that what both Newman and Reinhardt desire is identity but without the name.

This contradiction, I believe, can be thought about in relation to the sets of terms introduced in chapter 2, of Rosenberg's setting up of the actor/artist as the engagement between identities, personalities and personifications, or the Adornian dialectic in which authentic art is the identity of identity and non-identity. All are expressions of the desire for the good form of identity (selfhood, the actor, the special sign) wrested from non-identity (Nature, the formless, inarticulate being) but against the bad form of identity

(*ratio*, the name). Indeed, the vexatious nature of this battle for the special sign, for painting as ideograph/ideogram is registered already in Newman's epigraph quoted above. The very form in which Newman prefaces his statement is the definition, material procured through lexic—dictionaries and encyclopedias—domains of the "name" or the rationalized, categorizing of knowledge if there ever were ones. Though, in no way do I take this glitch in Newman's statement as really undermining the aim of "The Ideographic Picture." The paradox is too obvious not to be taken as a reinforcement of the frame of the problematic. What I believe is located in this exhibition—its thematic premise, Newman's and Reinhardt's participation in it, and in the contradictions suggested above—is the desire to articulate a problematic about articulation itself.

2. The Possibility of Language: Painting & Iterability

One of the ironies of the general reception histories for Newman and Reinhardt has been that both were seen as having produced works that seemed inarticulate—inscrutable; objectless or subjectless; obdurate, or just plain nothing.⁶⁰⁸ When Thomas Hess panned Newman's first one-person show in 1950, he complained that "there was almost no interest here for the average spectator," an observation I am tempted to extend beyond the "average spectator" to other critics and artists as well.⁶⁰⁹ Even so enlightened and art-savvy a figure as Allan Kaprow writing in 1963 and with the distinct advantage of slightly over a decade to acclimate to the new austerity, proclaimed that with Newman's works "we are left to contend with their opaque mysteries."⁶¹⁰ Barbara Reise, as well, in an article praising Newman's accomplishment had to admit that his zip paintings demanded "a sort of ontological agnosticism for full comprehension."⁶¹¹ This need for "ontological agnosticism" could be extended to Reinhardt's work, described as "mute," "taciturn" with a "non-declamatory presence," or "as close to nothing as painting can."⁶¹² One critic remarked on how successfully "Reinhardt's austere reductionism" kept "the critic and criticism at bay." With "no subject, no reference, no symbol, and no sign," Reinhardt's work stood "most defiantly aloof of analysis."⁶¹³ Another viewer has called his work the "most imperturbably self-referent objects," and has taken Reinhardt's

project to be one of insisting on the “object in itself.”⁶¹⁴ In a manner of speaking, what Newman and Reinhardt negated was the very possibility of recognition.

The ironic twist, then, comes when listening to the other side of reception, those who identify Newman’s and Reinhardt’s primary concern as one of articulation itself, in which their painting becomes a highly self-reflexive project about iterability, the processes of figuring, marking out the grounds for utterance, for sign-making and meaning-making, about, if one were allowed to press this to the grand scheme, the possibility and nature of language and communication, and thus, ultimately, in the even grander scheme, gesturing to concerns of the social as well.⁶¹⁵ The absolute or ultimate of their painting then is its meta-figuring for figuration itself, it stages the very—the ultimate—grounds for meaning at all. This patently runs against the apparent figurelessness of their canvases: how to have figuration without figures; how to have significance without signs; how to say something but with seemingly nothing; how to give determinate, concrete identity to the One, and (to borrow from Reinhardt’s notebook) the One that “Differentiat[es] itself yet remain[s] in itself undifferentiated”? And this, as one may well recognize, re-states the classic paradox of dialectical resolution.⁶¹⁶

This challenge was played out in Newman’s and Reinhardt’s concerns with formal unity in their surfaces. Both strove to articulate the entirety of the canvas’s surface (wholeness, or Newman’s “totality” and Reinhardt’s “all-over”) without relying on figure/ground relationships. Given the centrality of figure/ground relationships for perceptual possibility, that to see is largely to see shapes in contradistinction to each other, one grasps a sense of the difficulty, if not the near impossibility, of this operation. The point was to achieve this unity, transcend the convention of figure/ground, and still to be making a painting. The indication of failure for Newman was the spread of an environment and for Reinhardt the sculptural.

Lippard understood Reinhardt’s paradoxical articulate all-over-ness when in 1966 she pointed out that the “trisection” of Reinhardt’s classic black paintings (1960-1967)—symmetrical with one vertical and one horizontal—was “not important as form” (fig. 15). “Form *per se* has never been his prime concern,” Lippard argued, his reduction did not

stem from formalist doctrinarism, the resulting cruciform had nothing to do with a love of pure form. “I try to lose the forms,” Reinhardt insisted, “the color, and the overlappings are irrelevant.” Nor was the repeated use of the cross iconological in intent, it was not a religious symbol. Rather the trisection was “important as armature,” Lippard affirmed, as a way of articulating something. The grid-like structure perceived through the subtle color modulations in a black painting was not relevant as a particular shape to look at—as Lippard informs, “He does not expect the viewer to retain the vertical-horizontal division,” and as Reinhardt explains “The intention is that it’s eliminated”—but for what they did; they grid, they did the job of making a space a space as it were, a conceptually available thing, or, an identity. It was as if Reinhardt were attempting to articulate the “ground” of the figure/ground relationship but in a way that bypassed the “figure.” The trisection or cross-shape is crucial, as Lippard pointed out, in this extremely delicate operation because it “deliver[s] it from amorphousness and stat[es] the fact of neutralization, equalization.” “It makes the painting a painting and not a black relief”—it kept it from being sculpture.⁶¹⁷

With a similar sort of intent, Yve-Alain Bois has described the special perceptual phenomenon of a Newman zip painting (fig. 16). Newman’s “strategy,” Bois writes, “was to emphasize the intentional nature of the perceptual field.” Newman engages the viewer in an “intended” looking “by urging us to shift from our preconscious perceptual activity (or the ‘normal’ preconscious level of perception) to a conscious one.” “At the same time,” however, Newman wants to “prevent this consciousness from crystallizing in any definite way.”⁶¹⁸ Slightly later Bois describes the process of looking in this intentional way (i.e., the kind of looking that seeks a figure or object located in a visual field) as one in which the viewer is “constantly in the process of adjusting and readjusting the fundamental figure/ground opposition, never finding a moment of repose when this structure could coalesce.” What this leaves the viewer with, “the only factual certitude that we will be able to grasp,” is the “lateral expanse of the canvas, the pictorial field as such.”⁶¹⁹ Or, take Allan Kaprow, writing in 1963 in the pages of *ARTnews* describing Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* as, “strik[ing] us as a whole, rather than a part-to-part-

to-whole conception.” This occurs, Kaprow explains, through the paradoxical relationship between the vertical zips (what Kaprow refers to as the “stops”) and the color field.

How strongly the whole works upon us can be deduced by the relation of the stops to the field. We look at it, either from the right side or the left, along the dominant horizontal axis of the canvas. Although nearly all of Newman’s paintings have vertical stops, it is the total shape of the format which tells us whether we should move *with* the direction of the stops (up and down) or *across* their flow. Since they possess no substance *per se*, we cannot feel that they function singly, or as an aggregate, in *contradistinction* to the whole. There is, therefore, no real object-ground exchange.⁶²⁰

Newman himself tried to explain it in a 1962 interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler when he brought up the topic of drawing and indicated that though it had gone unrecognized drawing was central to Newman’s “whole concept.” “I don’t mean making *drawings*, although I have always done a lot of them,” he clarified, “I mean the drawing that exists in my painting. Yet no writer has ever confronted that issue. I am always referred to in relation to my color. Yet I know that if I have made a contribution, it is primarily in my drawing. . . . I hope that I have contributed a new way of seeing through drawing. Instead of using outlines, instead of making shapes or setting off spaces, my drawing declares the space. Instead of working with the remnants of space, I work with the whole space.”⁶²¹

Contrary to homespun reason, the end result of the above is neither Newman’s or Reinhardt’s paintings as figureless (without meaning) or groundless (without possibility). Rather, if their paintings can be said to picture anything it would be the enacting of the possibility of language itself. What the “figureless” and “groundless” canvases of Newman and Reinhardt end up articulating is the space of painting itself *as* the place for both the figuring and grounding of meaning-making. Paradoxically, however, as one arrives at this deeper coherence between Newman’s and Reinhardt’s projects, one also draws closer to the juncture at which the two part ways.

3. Two Possibilities of Language: Individualistic Subjectivism & Abstract Objectivism

Compare these two statements. “Man’s first expression . . . was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication.”⁶²² Newman wrote those lines in 1947. “The first word of an artist is against artists.”⁶²³ Reinhardt wrote those lines in 1966. The contradictory directions of these lines tells in condensed form much of the story of where and why and how Newman’s and Reinhardt’s problematic diverges. For the moment I want to elaborate the nature of that divergence by turning to the debates on language associated with the Russian Formalists of the early part of the twentieth century.⁶²⁴ While this may not appear a likely place to turn for further illumination on the meaning of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s painting practices, I would suggest that these debates provide an important template by which to shed light on the vital difference animating their projects. Specifically, I want to look to the work of a Russian linguist Valentin Nikolaevich Vološinov and sections of his 1929 work *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. In this work, and more precisely the first chapter of Part II “Toward a Marxist Philosophy of Language,” one finds a schema which remarkably well describes the kinds of arguments about the processes of articulation that Newman and Reinhardt made and made against one another.

The relevant chapter, “Two Trends of Thought in Philosophy of Language,” describes, as its title suggests, what Vološinov locates as the two predominant theories of language. They are, as the author terms them, individualistic subjectivism and abstract objectivism.

“The first trend,” or individualistic subjectivism, Vološinov states, “considers the basis of language . . . to be the individual creative act of speech. The source of language is the individual psyche.”⁶²⁵ He goes on to outline the three fundamental aspects of language conceived as individualistic subjectivism. The first two are:

1. Language is activity, an unceasing process of creation (energeia) realized in individual speech acts;
2. The laws of language creativity are the laws of individual psychology.

The third is of particular significance:

3. Creativity of language is meaningful creativity, analogous to creative art.⁶²⁶

It is highly important that this trend in the philosophy of language, a trend that the Russian linguist will also refer to as romantic creationism, is posed as “analogous to other ideological phenomena, in particular to art—to aesthetic activity.”⁶²⁷ Vološinov cites two adherents of this view of language in which aestheticism is highly pronounced. Karl Vossler, for instance, maintains a “purely aesthetic conception of language.” For Vossler, as Vološinov summarizes, “the basic manifestation, the basic reality, of language should not be language as a ready-made system, in the sense of a body of inherited, immediately usable forms—phonetic, grammatical, and other—but *the individual creative act of speech*.”⁶²⁸ What mattered, where real language occurred was at the level of *style*, as opposed to the level of *grammar*.⁶²⁹ Or, as Vossler wrote in 1910: “Linguistic thought is essentially poetic thought; linguistic truth is artistic truth, is meaningful beauty.”⁶³⁰ It was to the Vosslerian school of thought that Vološinov placed the Italian philosopher of language and art, Benedetto Croce. “For Croce,” too, Vološinov wrote, “language is also an aesthetic phenomenon. The basic, key term in his conception is *expression*. Any sort of expression is, at the root, artistic.”⁶³¹

In dramatic contrast to the creationism of the first trend with its foundational belief that language, any meaningful expression, is a generative activity centered or originating in the individual creator/subject/speaker, the second trend that Vološinov introduces, abstract objectivism, locates the truth of language in completely reversed terms: that is, grammar over style. This opposing trend is neoclassicist and rationalist, and Vološinov will associate it with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.⁶³² In this second approach, although it is allowed that “[e]ach individual creative act, each utterance, is idiosyncratic and unique,” what is significant (and quite literally so) is that “each utterance contains elements identical with elements in other utterances of the given speech group.” “And it is precisely these factors—the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical factors that are *identical* and therefore *normative* for all utterances—that insure the unity of a given language and its comprehension by all members of a given community.”⁶³³ In

other words, language-ness truly and only happens at the level of grammar, of that which is communal, of that which precisely can transcend the stylistic quirkiness, the non-rational density, of the individual. It is the very grounds of possibility for the social. “[F]rom the standpoint of language . . . all these idiosyncratic peculiarities,” or what the individualist subjectivists thought of as style, “are totally unimportant.” “What is important is precisely . . . *normative identity*.”⁶³⁴ Vološinov explains this position further:

It is clear that the system of language in the sense characterized above is completely independent of individual creative acts, intentions, or motives. From the point of view of the second trend, meaningful language creativity on the speaker’s part is simply out of the question. Language stands before the individual as an inviolable, incontestable norm which the individual, for his part, can only accept. . . . The individual acquires the system of language from his speech community completely ready-made. Any change within that system lies beyond the range of his individual consciousness. The individual act of articulating sounds becomes a linguistic act only by measure of its compliance with the fixed (at any given moment in time) and incontestable (for the individual) system of language.⁶³⁵

Where the first approach seemed fuzzy on the question of how authentically individual expressions could work on the level of communicative (shared) language, this second approach shows an anemia towards the individual and individual content by simply discounting the realm of individual expression. With abstract objectivism, as Vološinov states, there is simply no “access to the problem of expression.”⁶³⁶ Language, in this theory, has a “compulsory nature,” it stands outside of or “exterior to the individual consciousness.” It is, “as a system of forms . . . completely independent of creative impulses or activities on the part of the individual” a “product of collective creativity,” it is a “social entity.”⁶³⁷

Neither of these two models are Vološinov’s. Both are faulted by the Russian linguist for not being situated materially—or dialogical—and so both models remain two very different but nevertheless equally idealist explanations of language. “[T]he theory underlying individualistic subjectivism must be rejected,” Vološinov argues, because the,

organizing center of any utterance, of any experience, is not within but outside—in the social milieu surrounding the individual being. Only the

inarticulate cry of an animal is really organized from inside the physiological apparatus of an individual creature. . . . Yet, even the most primitive human utterance produced by the individual organism is, from the point of view of its content, import, and meaning, organized outside the organism, in the extraorganismic conditions of the social milieu.⁶³⁸

But, equally, in rejecting abstract objectivism, Vološinov cautions against taking language as organized outside the organism undialectically, without some creative agency on the side of the individual speaking subject. “[T]he logic of language is not at all a matter of reproducing a normatively identical form.”⁶³⁹ For what is achieved with this is just as without meaning as the individualistic subjectivist’s “cry.” The reproduction and recognition of normatively identical form results merely in the repetition of the “signal” as opposed to the true (and thus meaning-laden) sign. As Vološinov explains: “The process of understanding is on no account to be confused with the process of recognition. These are thoroughly different processes. Only a sign can be understood; what is recognized is a signal. A signal is an internally fixed, singular thing that does not in fact stand for anything else, or reflect or refract anything, but is simply a technical means for indicating this or that object (some definite, fixed object) or this or that action (likewise definite and fixed).”⁶⁴⁰

Vološinov states the difference and the dilemma summarily:

The difference between the first and second trends is very graphically brought out in the following contrast. The self-identical forms comprising the immutable system of language represented for the first trend only the inert crust of the actual generative process of language, i.e., of the true essence of language implemented in the unreproducible, individual act of creation. Meanwhile, for the second trend, it is exactly this system of self-identical forms that becomes the essence of language; individual creative refraction and variation of linguistic forms are, for this trend, only the dross of linguistic life or, rather, of linguistic monumentality, only the mercurial and extraneous overtones of the basic, fixed tone of linguistic forms.⁶⁴¹

The dilemma remains: “What, then, is the true center of linguistic reality: the individual speech act—the utterance—or the system of language? And what is the real mode of

existence of language: unceasing creative generation or inert immutability of self-identical norms?”⁶⁴²

4. Newman’s Self-Evidence & Reinhardt’s Ruse

As with Vološinov’s two opposing schools of language theory, so Newman and Reinhardt desired identity as a moment of articulate being or self, an articulate present. But, as with the individualistic subjectivist stylists and the abstract objectivist grammarians, they came at the “true center” and “real mode” from different directions. To synthesize, this true center, this moment of articulation that both Newman and Reinhardt desired, might be described as the liminal join between identity and non-identity, or the identity of identity and non-identity. What is sought is neither pure identity (the *ratio*, the already known, the Name), nor pure non-identity (the never knowable, the void, nameless Nature) but the mutually realizing moment of the two, self-realization as forged out of that dialectical crucible. The difference, as in Vološinov’s opposing models, is that Newman will start from “pure” non-identity and Reinhardt from “pure” identity.

The now famous anecdote that begs to be mentioned here is the one of Newman’s debate with the art historian Erwin Panofsky in the letters to the editor section of *ARTnews* in 1961. Here is a quick summary of that correspondence: In the April issue of that publication Panofsky (writing from The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey) complains of finding it “increasingly hard to keep up with contemporary art.” His “signal example” turns out to be Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, the reproduction of which Panofsky had encountered in the pages of *ARTnews* a few months previous. Ostensibly, Panofsky’s complaint issues from a grammar mistake, in Latin. The “sublimus” in the title of Newman’s painting had been incorrectly declined, the scholar pointed out. Panofsky then offered three possibilities for this error: (1) sloppiness: that it is a printing mistake the fault of *ARTnews*; (2) ignorance: that Newman, the artist, suffers from “plain illiteracy”; or (3) arrogance: that he, “as Aelfric says of God, is ‘above grammar.’”⁶⁴³ It is hard not to imagine a face-off between two highly distinct figures,

Panofsky as the celebrated scholar, saturated in European learning and culture, admonishing the combined ignorance/arrogance of an upstart like Newman, an American and *bête comme un peinture* and, moreover, pretentious enough to title his works in the ancient *lingua franca* of the learned. In the very next issue, however, Newman comes back with a remarkable “reprimand” to this “august don.” First he points out that “sublimus” was in fact a misprint. The actual title of Newman’s painting employs the “correct” spelling. This both exonerates the quality of Newman’s Latin and puts into question the quality of Panofsky’s own reading skills. For Newman does not fail to point out that it is only the painting’s caption that carries this misprint. The implied criticism is that Panofsky did not bother to read the article. Not leaving things at that, Newman goes on to demonstrate that “sublimus”—the form of the word that Panofsky alleges is incorrect—is in fact, equally as correct. The “stupid painter” turns out to be more agile in his Latin etymologies than the professor. But what is perhaps more at issue—not nit-picking over the grammatical form of a dead language—is indicated in the closing lines of Newman’s letter. He writes, “As for the matter of Aelfric, the tenth-century monk had a greater sensitivity for the meaning of the act of creation than does Panofsky. One would think that by now Prof. Panofsky would know the basic fact about a work of art, that for a work of art to be a work of art, it must rise above grammar and syntax—*pro gloria Dei*.”⁶⁴⁴ Thus, to go back to the Vološinovian paradigm and to the claim of the abstract objectivists that the basic fact of language is what is identical, normative, grammatical, and rule-bound, here, in this example, Newman speaks the part, perfectly, of its opposite, of individualistic subjectivism: the *basic fact* of a work of art, its essence (“that for a work of art to be a work of art”) is to “rise above grammar and syntax” for the glory of the Creator’s/creator’s high purpose.

Here is an elaboration. If one could tell (or rather repeat) a creation/articulation story for Newman it would begin with the artist forging himself and his work out of the primal substance of non-identity, as pure inarticulate being pulling itself together, summoning itself up, in the manner of an Old-Testament patriarch, calling upon the entirety of its metaphysical force in order to generate self-identity, in order to “wrest truth

from the void.”⁶⁴⁵ This is akin to the conception of language as unceasing creative generation. Self expression is genuine, authentic—and inimitable because it is forged each time, for the first time. Identity as self-evidence and self-realization occurs without the aid of interlocutors, mediators, pregivens, ready-mades, without any previous and thus conventional forms of identity, and thus as well uncontaminated by duplicity, uncomplicated by the possibility of being anything other than itself. Newman’s self-evidence is the *ex nihilo* miracle of non-identity coming to identity. He is the “intuitive painter,” the “direct painter.” As he remonstrated in 1962: “I have never worked from sketches, never planned a painting, never “thought out” a painting. I start each painting *as if I had never painted before* [emphasis added]. I present no dogma, no system, no demonstrations. I have no formal solutions.”⁶⁴⁶ In this Newman acted as “an exemplary ‘first man,’” as Richard Shiff has pointed out, he “made decisions in his writing and painting as if there were no precedents; the products of his thought were ever new, as if emerging from primeval chaos.”⁶⁴⁷ Each and every painting had to be generated out of this non-identity “as if I had never painted before.” And thus, coherence had to be immediate, had to come together at the “moment of creation” and not at any time before. Nothing could be set out in advance. True identity had to be singular. Newman’s self-evidence was self cognition *without* re-cognition, without the repetition of an “over and over again.” It could never be the “repeat act.”⁶⁴⁸

Reinhardt took this to be sheer nonsense. Assertion of *ex nihilo* coming to oneself was mere romantic subjectivism, an illusion hopelessly faltering in the untenable myth of access to some realm of the communicable outside the *ratio*, as if paintings really could be made on Newman’s supposition—“as if I had never painted before.” This Reinhardt emphatically denounced and to which he responded: “Art is always made by craftsmen—it’s never a spontaneous expression. Artists always come from artists and art forms come from art forms. . . . Expression is an impossible word.”⁶⁴⁹ It is precisely with the “over and over again,” the “repeat act” that Reinhardt’s story begins. He comes to the moment of articulation from grounds thoroughly, inescapably mediated by identitarian forms, from the “inert immutability of self-identical norms.” Articulation for him can exist only

logically as language—form given socially; recognized communally; spoken intersubjectively. Reinhardt, the rationalist, believes one starts out with form, with identities, with systems. The *ratio* is already there. It speaks first. Repetition, geometry, symmetry, *ratio* are the very grounds of articulation. Only when a space is already gridded out, made regular, given some form of measure is there possibility for being. For Reinhardt only blindness or utopianism buys into myths of an anterior state where the *ratio* is not already pre-forming or pre-articulating the space of experience.

If Rosenberg took Reinhardt's entire project with a sense of the dire—the infamous “black, square trapdoor” that the critic imagined so much of 1960s art descending through—then one might do well to temper this judgment with a reminder from Adorno: “Artworks, no less than reason, have their cunning.”⁶⁵⁰ And it is by this suggestion, the possibility of the artwork's cunning, that I hope to indicate how Reinhardt's project was still one of championing painting over pictures.

What keeps Reinhardt's articulation from being merely instances of the bad forms of identity—mindless repetition, commodities, products of the culture industry, cells in the dread prison-house of language—is that although the artist travels through what appears to be the most relentless, pernicious and deadening logic of modern, bureaucratized identity, he uses identitarian form in reverse, as a passage towards the non-identical. Reinhardt's ruse, in other words, is to set the identitarian mode against itself. In a double movement, he both presents the blankness of the sign as formal identity, and unmasks the presence of otherness. The non-identical emerges as something also produced in any moment of identity-formation-repetition. Thus Reinhardt, as does Newman, harbors a moment of utopian possibility, of the union of identity and non-identity. The difference in his version is that this comes to fruition after one is made explicitly aware of the *ratio*, of identity, of form. The sign-form is drained of its “life,” voided of content, until it is perfectly hollow, an empty “as such.” It is through this dogmatic insistence on identitarian form that one finds the secret revolving door. With a turn, what is revealed is the passage to an enriching non-identity, to a quality of presentness that is essentially non-translatable and thus victoriously transcendent of the

ratio itself. Posed as if it were an answer to Jameson's call and question, "But we must reach this experience of the new and of the other through conceptuality. . . . Is it possible to do something to the concept, which otherwise tendentially locks us into sameness, in order to use it as a mode of access to difference and the new?," the sign is Reinhardt's ruse.⁶⁵¹ It represents the only possibility really existing within the present situation, the only viable route to the destination of a utopian outside to the system, of the good congruence of identity and non-identity. This cunning passage alone offers that ability to "unshape itself."⁶⁵² One can, in Reinhardt's story, only arrive at the void as a passage taken *through* the forms of language to the underside of the sign: it is a paradoxically articulate void. He smuggles in non-identity via the very forms of the identity reign.

Dialectics of Identity and Non-Identity: Dogma and Freedom

More detail and specificity, a firmer grasping of the quality of Newman and Reinhardt's difference is gained by examining how their arguments for painting may be plotted through a series of oppositional pairs. Out of such an exercise, the notion of pairing Newman and Reinhardt takes on aspects of perversity and, oddly, suitability. For what could be more perfectly opposed than this: Newman, the romantic, the "artist's friend," who valued his paintings for achieving fullness and for marking a new beginning, coming out of an early surrealist-organic abstraction, believing in a living, plasmic art of originality, spontaneity, creation along individualistic subjectivist lines, in the quest for singular expression and contact with the new, the unknown, while shunning symmetry, geometry, dogma, repetition, formalism, objectivism, academicism, rationalism; and, Reinhardt, the "classicist," the bullying "conscience of the art world," who thought of his paintings as achieving emptiness and as the end, the final, the last paintings, coming from a cubist/constructivist abstraction along A.A.A. lines, propagating for a dead, lifeless, plastic art of repetition, reproduction, tradition, dogma, order, who sought an impersonal

“contentless” form of geometry against expressionism, asymmetry, primitivism? The importance of these and other related oppositional sets (plastic/plasmic, beautiful/sublime, place/space, primitive/European, known/unknown, size/scale, creation/performance, living entity/geometric form, tradition/the new, classical/romantic, chaos/order, form/content, dogma/freedom) for clarifying an understanding of Newman’s commitments and antitheses has already, and on several occasions, been discussed by Richard Shiff.⁶⁵³ An obvious debt will be owed to Shiff’s previous work on the structuring oppositions operating in Newman’s conception of painting. My deviation will be in opening up a dialogue in which Reinhardt becomes the prolocutor for all the terms banished to the underside of Newman’s truth in painting; revealing how the flip-side of Newman’s argument does the work of articulating Reinhardt’s version of the “truth in painting.” What will become quickly apparent is that the multitude of oppositional pairs through which Newman and Reinhardt speak against each other are rearticulation of old, familiar struggles over how and where to locate the moment of truth (of onement/oneness) in a dialectic of identity and non-identity.

“In one of the memorable formulations for which he was noted,” Rosenberg recounted, Newman had “summed up the intellectual predicament of the artists of his generation.” The formulation and predicament was this: “The history of modern painting has been the struggle against the catalogue.”⁶⁵⁴ Certainly a provocative enough a statement coming from an artist surely aware of the kinds of functions artists’ catalogues come to perform: playing a key role in the recognition and identification of works, as an exercise in organizing an oeuvre, a quite literal taking stock—all things important to marketability, for the art market’s mechanisms for making its evaluations. Newman’s antipathy to the catalogue provided an encapsulation of his larger problems with regimented “identity” altogether. On one level, Newman’s struggle with the catalogue is one against modern technologies of image reproduction when applied to works of art. This sort of reproduction was a supreme instance of a rationalization of artworks—it processed artworks into an abstraction, a sign founded on absence rather than the kind of unique Sign grounded in presence that Newman so sought. It violated at the core the

nature of the identity of artworks, replacing the good identity of self-presence for the bad identity of brand recognition and bureaucratic order (“based,” in Newman’s words, “on nonexperience”). It was for reasons like these, one assumes, that Newman took such a fierce stance against Andre Malraux’s “museum without walls,” and refused, on principle, to possess any reproductions of artworks.⁶⁵⁵ Experience of art had to come from “In Front of the Real Thing,” as Newman suggested in his title to an *ARTnews* centennial celebration of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “[A]nything that I knew or studied about ‘art history,’” the artist claimed, “came from my encounter with the original works. It was not through photographs, reproductions or from slides. I have always had a distaste—even a disdain—for reproductions and photographs of artworks. . . . That is why I do not own a collection of books of reproductions.”⁶⁵⁶ Reproductions only abstracted the work, reduced it to the sort of entity—a “mirage” in Newman’s words—more easily processed in systems of information, including the “placeless” system of capitalist exchange. Art reproductions and catalogues only managed identity on the order of generic recognition where values or meanings were derived differentially from their position within a structured system.

In the foreword to a reissue of Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, published in 1968, a year that no doubt echoed for Newman’s older Left generation with revolutionary choices and failures they had faced three decades earlier, Newman wrote that he “felt destroyed by established institutions.”⁶⁵⁷ This leads to the second accent on Newman’s rejection of the catalogue. Catalogues are by definition of the nature of registers, series, lists. To catalogize is to tally up, to enumerate, to deal in numbers, with the countable. It is as the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, “(a) The giving of form or order to a thing; orderly arrangement; regulation. (b) The established order by which anything is regulated; system.”⁶⁵⁸ Most definitely this is the territory of Adorno’s *ratio*, the key to reductive identitarian systems and all that Newman felt “destroyed” him—institutions, outside authority, heteronomy, standardized (and thus abstract) systems of measure, tools for imposing general identities. Newman’s lifelong argument will be with identity as *ratio*, and against any outside imposition of identity.

In this however, it is vitally important to keep distinct Newman's rejection of rationalized identity from an embrace of formlessness, a rejection of identity, of forming. After all, he himself spoke of the true painter's process as one of giving form to chaos. "All artists," Newman wrote in 1945, "have been involved in the handling of chaos." One did this, one formed or handled chaos, however, not through a concern with "geometric forms *per se* but in creating forms that by their abstract nature carry some abstract intellectual content."⁶⁵⁹ The danger and threat that Newman detected in all institutionalisms was the distortion of forming-as-generation into formalism-as-regulation: the problem, as it might be put, lies within the compound predicate of the first entry of the *OED* definition: to give form without order. Newman's biography offers plenty of examples of his protests against identitarian forms. For example, in 1937 Newman contested the New York City Board of Examiners over the qualifying examinations required of all full-time high school art teachers (Newman, as were a number of his friends, had been working at the level of substitute high school art teacher, a lesser position that did not mean less working hours but significantly less pay and no benefits or job security). Newman's charge against this institutional board would be made on two counts: (1) the absurdity itself of measuring artistic ability through a system of grades, through any system of quantification; and (2) the patent exploitability of a situation in which costs were kept down by limiting the number of "full-time" instructors through an impossible exam, thereby keeping the majority of instructors within the system at the reduced-pay "part-time" status. To make his point Newman even went so far as to interview Thomas Hart Benton on the matter. In the *New York Times* article from September 19, 1938, Newman emphasized Benton's amazement when told that the "board uses a numerical scale to mark drawing ability."⁶⁶⁰ To this Benton responded: "I know of no method that can properly evaluate artistic expression mathematically or mechanically. . . . Any scale attempting such a thing is ridiculous. . . . A false mathematical scale may eliminate the progressive, the individual, the inspired. . . ."⁶⁶¹ In 1967 at the First International Congress on Religion, Architecture and the Visual Arts, in lines that sound remarkably similar to the ones Newman quotes in his interview with

Benton, Newman stated, “I find it sort of embarrassing to talk on the title of ‘Spiritual Dimensions of Contemporary Art.’ I had no idea that the spirit could be so easily measured—I wonder who is holding the ruler?”⁶⁶² It is a statement, like all of Newman’s best, that manages with an impressive concision and simplicity to make its point provocatively clear.

The strength of Newman’s resistance to generic identity is met and answered by Reinhardt’s embrace of regularity, repetition, recognition, the “completely conventional, formalistic.”⁶⁶³ In contrast to Newman’s proud abstention from possessing any reproductions of art, Reinhardt obsessively collected and categorized images of “types,” amassing what became a famed slide collection. As Dale McConathy relates, “During his travels, Ad Reinhardt began to take centered, frontal photographs of architecture, paintings, sculpture, and other artifacts, which became his vast collection of slides. When these slides were shown, either informally at home or as part of a lecture series, they were organized by motifs, patterns, forms—sometimes buttocks, breasts, doorways, faces, windows—with often witty cross references. Soon, the collection became encyclopedic—a system of signs that leaped cultures and times.”⁶⁶⁴ Reinhardt was the meta-cataloguer, seeing identity articulated across types, in genera, and banishing with his categories the incoherent, chaotic, inhuman mire of non-identity, of formlessness. It is the opposition of these basic positions that play out below.

One way to begin is with this question: what was the appropriate comportment for a work of art? Should it be a living shape or lifeless and cold; should it be dead or alive? An art “lifeless, breathless, cold, empty, sterile, dull, monotonous, repetitious, rigid . . . dehumanized . . . uninteresting” was what Reinhardt demanded.⁶⁶⁵ Lippard, in the catalogue essay for the 1966-67 Jewish Museum retrospective, discussed the significance of Reinhardt’s formal choices in the black paintings as devices that neutralized the sense of action and movement, all in order to achieve an inactive, static surface. The square, for instance, was the obvious choice over the circle, because the circle, “while perfect, and cornerless,” was an “active, organic shape with connotations of rolling, spinning, the sun, the moon, and other natural and symbolic impedimenta,” whereas the “square is patently

static, man-made, lifeless, inert and inactive.” Relatedly the symmetrical, the completely even, all-over incident (or incidentlessness) maintained equilibrium, a static nothingness. Color, likewise, had to be rejected because it had “come to represent the vulgarities of ‘life.’” “Colors are barbaric,” Reinhardt noted, they were “unstable, primitive” and too thoroughly “woven into the fabric of life.”⁶⁶⁶ The negationist solution for Reinhardt was black—a black so seeped of oil that it did not shine or reflect any light. One of Reinhardt’s “Twelve Rules for a New Academy” from 1957 read: “There should be no shine in the finish. Gloss reflects and relates to the changing surroundings.”⁶⁶⁷ A reflective surface would be dynamic, lively. Reinhardt’s success in achieving this static deadness is suggested in the propensity in descriptions of the quality of Reinhardt’s blacks to evoke images like empty stages or timeless voids, sucking the life out of the room, leaving a profound breathlessness.⁶⁶⁸ The registration of inert, dead surfaces was such that Lippard nominated Reinhardt as “unquestionably the first painter to resolve these regions of lifelessness into a strong esthetic program.”⁶⁶⁹ The relentless morbidity of Reinhardt’s propositions would lead Rosenberg, with far from congratulatory intentions, to refer to “the black extinction of Reinhardt” and to describe his paintings as possessing a “dead fish eye glint.”⁶⁷⁰

Furthermore, for Reinhardt it was not a matter of simply stating that “Art is always dead,” but of calling its opposite, “living” art, a deception.⁶⁷¹ But how, by what system of values was Reinhardt able to argue that dead art should be valued and living art disparaged? I want to answer this question by turning to Reinhardt’s thoughts on the role of museums. Museums were institutions of high importance to Reinhardt. He idealized them as akin to tombs or shrines, “quiet respectful place[s]” for “dead” things.⁶⁷² Museums were the preserve of a “kind of owlish, introspective person.” “It was a musty, dusty place,” a “void,” a place for “remains.”⁶⁷³ Reinhardt uses the death motif to speak of a kind of autonomy for art, as of things left alone, either out of the sanctity of dead things, or out of their uselessness, as things beyond the capacity to transform. What was improper to the true museum were the living arts. They turned the museum into a “three-ring circus,” into a place of “popular entertainment activity.”⁶⁷⁴ “Now,” Reinhardt

lamented of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1958, “the Museum has glass walls, a garden, a cafeteria, movies, commercial and industrial art, arts and crafts, textiles, posters, children’s art, Surrealist and Expressionist art. A museum of fine arts should be separate from everything else.”⁶⁷⁵ Kitsch, entertainment, culture industry products, the truly living arts of late capitalism were now incorporated into the museum, enlivening them, making them of “interest.”⁶⁷⁶ As Reinhardt had warned, “If somebody is interested there is already something wrong. They are interested for the wrong reasons.”⁶⁷⁷ This was, as I read Reinhardt’s warning, a comment on the perversion of human interest whereby interest refers not to gratuitous curiosity but rather to appetitive interest—the to-have-and-to-multiply of capitalism’s all-devouring consumer subjects.⁶⁷⁸ Pandering to that appetite was a mistake. “There is nothing less significant in art, nothing more exhausting and immediately exhausted,” he wrote in an art-as-art manifesto from 1962, “than ‘endless variety.’”⁶⁷⁹ It is by this understanding of “interest” and variety that one can glimpse the sort of contrarian’s logic by which Reinhardt placed value on the boring, on creating objects generating no interest and therefore, theoretically at least, working in a region “dead” to capitalism. The argument for an art of deadness, lacking life, beyond the Pale of interest of the fecund processes of business, entities passed over by the living, dynamic processes of capitalist transformation, signifies, for Reinhardt, the realm of art’s truth, the realm of art as art.

Newman, as one recalls, had been anti-capitalist as well. Against the arts of capitalism, he had set his version of painting in opposition to the bourgeois object and to bourgeois activity. However, in contradistinction to Reinhardt’s framework for counter-capitalist strategy, Newman saw the “living”—a living art, living form and living shape—as precisely that which escaped the reign of capitalism’s dead forms and its mortifying logic of standardization and exchange. Furthermore, it was geometry and its ontological effectuation—“space”—that served so well within capital’s mordant regime. It was in 1959—a triumphal year for Newman with his one-person French and Company show (organized by Clement Greenberg) and his inclusion in MoMA’s highly traveled, publicized and discussed exhibition, “The New American Painting,” and all of this

shortly after his Bennington exhibition in May 1958—that he came out with perhaps his strongest statement condemning the mentality of geometry. “It is precisely this death image, the grip of geometry,” Newman proclaimed in his catalogue statement for the latter exhibition, “that has to be confronted.” Geometry, the art of space, was dead. In contrast, “Painting like passion, is a living voice, which, when I hear it, I must let speak, unfettered.”⁶⁸⁰ To arrive at a better sense of how the living/dead opposition worked for Newman one can look to a lengthy but unpublished twelve-part essay that Newman worked on in 1945. Entitled “The Plasmic Image,” and written, not insignificantly, with Mondrian’s MoMA retrospective fresh in Newman’s experience, this essay marked his theoretical working out of the distinction between plasmic entities and plastic objects.⁶⁸¹ The difference separated the “new painter” from the “traditional abstract painter.” The new abstract painter engaged and created the *plasmic*, a term that, according to Newman, “implies the creation of forms that carry or express abstract thought, a presentation in tangible symbols of some inner idea or concept.”⁶⁸² It meant the presence of what Newman will refer to in this essay variously as subject matter, the subjective element, of intellectual content, of idea, of the mind’s expression. This contrasted thoroughly, in Newman’s mind, with the limited intentions of the traditional abstract painter, proponents of the old “plastic attitude,” an attitude which, much to the danger of serious, high art, has been the “dominant postulate of modern art.”⁶⁸³ “Art critics and aestheticians have been constantly concerned with the plastic elements in painting and sculpture. This attitude, based on the scientific approach, treats pictures and sculpture as if they were objects.”⁶⁸⁴ Or, as one might amend, as if they were *merely* objects—inert things. What was egregiously ignored by this aesthetic approach (Newman’s term for it is scientific but it might also be called formalist and objectivist) is the “spiritual content of a work of art,” the animating agency of the subject, that which invests nature with consciousness, with intention, desire, or will. The plastic orientation—the scientific, rationalizing attitude—not only ignored spiritual content and refused to engage in “philosophic language” but its “analysis of art has been so intensely objective that the prevailing point of view has transformed art into objects, a collection of gadgets. The attitude toward pictures has

been to reduce them to the objective elements that make them up.”⁶⁸⁵ Richard Shiff has articulated this difference between the plastic and plasmic in very clear and useful terms. “Newman chose his terms ever so deliberately,” Shiff explains. “[P]lasma” (or ‘plasmic’) connotes an organic fluidity; it also suggests the more familiar word ‘plastic,’ which refers to an organic quality in materials. Semantically, ‘plasmic’ and ‘plastic’ are closely related (both derive from the Greek word for molding or forming); but they are also inversions of one another, with the one term oriented to living organisms and the other to inert matter. Simply put, the plasmic is lively and active (like the movement of thought, it gives form to things), whereas the plastic is passive (it is the form that thought and other forces produce).”⁶⁸⁶ Put into the terms of dialectic, the plastic is more object-like, inert and static and the plasmic more subject-like, animated, enlivened. Enlivened “organic fluidity” would be the target of Reinhardt’s intense program of eradication. Newman’s plasmic entity was precisely what Reinhardt found so corrupting of high, serious, fine art; it belonged, damnably in Reinhardt’s lexicon, to the category of “expression.” But equally contrarily, Newman would pitch his battle against the plastic, against Reinhardt’s lifeless geometries, against his “death image.”

Thus Newman’s and Reinhardt’s opposed stances are schematized: Reinhardt seeking an end through geometry, Newman seeking a beginning in an “art of no-geometry” but both attempting to articulate identity, to arrive at the proper measure of man, whether as with Reinhardt through the rational geometry of space and size or as with Newman through the expressive no-geometry of place and scale.⁶⁸⁷

The challenge for Newman was to achieve identity, the Name, truth wrested from the void and chaos, while circumventing all the modes of geometric identity: the ratio, dogma, institutions, systems, sketches, models, a prioris.⁶⁸⁸ Newman did not equate this rejection of geometry with wishy-washiness, an inability to take an identifiable stand, or with an acceptance of vagueness or ambiguity. In a 1951 review of Hess’s *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, Newman vocalized, with a certain sharpness, his trouble with this facile embrace of non-identity. He warned against the author’s praise of Willem de Kooning’s pictorial ambiguity: “To talk about the

ambiguous man or the ambiguous poetic image has become fashionable, but it is a bit too simple.” Additionally, Newman warns, “man may have become in current philosophy the figure of ambiguity, but a man conscious of his ambiguous nature may also only be muddled and have very little to offer of profound wisdom. . . . One thing is certain: ambiguity as a deliberate act, as a program for either art or life, is an anomaly and an evasion that can lead only to some form of slavery. Clarity alone can lead to freedom.”⁶⁸⁹ The trouble was: to achieve clarity (an identity, meaning, a sense of self) but in some other way other and outside of the kind declared by institutions, to do it without “geometry.” For, as Newman suggests above, mere ambiguity was not an adequate stance from which to struggle against dogma. An important distinction had to be made. Being simply without an identity was not a valid way to combat the systems of identity that destroyed personal freedom. As such, readings of Newman’s work as a meditation on the “void” and nothingness profoundly disregard one of the artist’s most important claims: that he wanted his paintings to give a person a sense of fullness, presence, a sense of place and a sense of scale.

Newman’s most intense grappling with the problem of achieving identity as an authentic sense of self (neither the preformed identities of the institutional world nor the formless non-identity of Nature, the void) are performed over a series of statements in which he differentiates place from space and scale from size. As a number of scholars have indicated, written evidence of Newman’s specific engagement with this problem dates to his 1949 visit to the prehistoric earth mounds in Akron, Ohio, an experience that had a profound effect on him. The short but forceful statement “Ohio” resulted from that trip. What comes out of Newman’s description of his experience with the earth mounds is an early attempt to discount one type of space and valorize another of a wholly different order, one that he will eventually distinguish as “place.” Newman writes: “There are no subjects—nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed. . . .” Indeed, these are things that “cannot even be seen.” Put slightly differently, there are no easy identities. There is no figure, no image: missing is that element that would announce closure, that some properly delimited unit had been in fact properly “seen.” Rather what

the mounds do is “make the space”; and the experience which “must be experienced there on the spot” is “[t]he feeling that here is the space.”⁶⁹⁰ It was that qualitatively enriched experience of space that made obvious the paucity of quantitatively given notions of space. This new order of space had nothing to do with the kind of space that contains objects, that is amenable to figure/ground relationships; “It has nothing to do with space and its manipulation,” Newman insisted. It was not, in other words, the space of formalist composition.⁶⁹¹ *Space* was that generic substance with which formalism dealt. *Space* could be cut up (or divided as Newman would say), or measured and arranged, a little here, a little there—responsive, in short, to the twin evils of decorating and cuisine, and to which one might easily add a significant third, administrating.⁶⁹² Newman was completely antithetical to space—space was always administered from outside, it was bureaucratic, preconceived, regulated, given form through harsh geometries.

What Newman would oppose to all of this was a qualitatively new experience of space that, by the late 1950s at least, would stand in Newman’s lexicon as “place.” “Place means everything,” he wrote in 1959 to Alan Power, “but place is created—and it is created by men with vision, with courage, and with the desire for freedom.”⁶⁹³ Space, in contrast, had nothing ethical to it: it was bureaucratically impersonal. The experiential focus to Newman’s notion of place would develop more fully in subsequent elaborations of the concept. In 1965 he could summarize authoritatively: “One thing that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows he’s there, so he’s aware of himself.” Similarly, a few years later, he writes, “The artist . . . is still involved if he is a true artist in the basic issues of a work of art. And to my mind the basic issue of a work of art, whether it is architecture, painting or sculpture, is first and foremost for it to create a sense of place, so that the artist and the beholder will know where they are. . . . What matters to a true artist is that he distinguish between a place and no place at all; and the greater the work of art, the greater will be this feeling. And this feeling is the fundamental spiritual dimension. If this doesn’t happen, nothing else can happen.”⁶⁹⁴ Doubtless, statements such as these have helped foster the understanding of Newman’s work as fundamentally engaged in the matter and process of

self-identity. “In the place defined by a Newman painting,” Carter Ratcliff announced, “one defines oneself.”⁶⁹⁵ Or, as Shiff has argued, “the artist’s self had to realize its place, becoming self-aware, grounded in the painting.”⁶⁹⁶

The relevance and relatedness of Newman’s notion of place to a sense of oneself (to a self and to a self identity) is reiterated in the oppositional pair of scale and size. Shiff has explained that the difference between size and scale was for Newman “analogous to that between ‘place’ and ‘space’; size was generalized and measurable, whereas scale was not only specific to a situation but also escaped all standard means of description and could only be felt, subjectively.”⁶⁹⁷ Just as he did with space and place, Newman would discount size in favor of scale. As he put it succinctly to de Antonio just before his death: “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.”⁶⁹⁸ No doubt part of what Newman is speaking against is the receptive tendency to focus on the large size of many of his canvases. It was a mistake, as Newman saw it, that a sense of grandeur, or of a sort of existential fullness and expansiveness, had been too simply correlated with bigness in terms of sheer yardage. As Newman was quick to point out, even his extremely narrow zip paintings, though small in actual area, possessed a commanding scale. And it was scale that was felt, experienced through the specificity of encounter. Thus, to put Newman’s statement slightly differently, in the end, size only *counts* (as enumeration) and that is precisely the problem with it. It is scale that counts in the sense of mattering, of registering significance.

Had Newman lodged a complaint against Reinhardt’s dogma based on these pairs of terms it might have run something like this: Reinhardt’s paintings take up *space* and insistently so—again and again and again—but precisely without ever generating that all vital sense of *place*—as unique, individual, unrepeatable. What appears to count in them is precisely counting—measure as size and space, for the generalized, standard, generic, abstract means of articulating identity. This was a flat reversal of Newman’s own set of priorities. If a sense of place and a sense of scale were privileged notions in Newman’s aesthetic—tied to an authentic sense of self, of good and true identity, as modes of

identity not amenable to the abstracting, generalizing, homogenizing regime of the “ruler” mentality—it is the reverse, generic space cut to a formula that are clearly and insistently prioritized in Reinhardt. Contrast Newman’s not-measuring to what Reinhardt insistently reiterates after 1960, a formula for his black paintings which is explicitly framed by that very system of measure Newman found so pernicious and contrary to the liberatory, self-realizing politico-aesthetic potential within true painting. What one hears in Reinhardt’s pronouncements is the insistent style of the *ratio*: “The one direction in fine or abstract art today is in the painting of the same one form over and over again.” “The one work for a fine artist, the one painting, is the painting of the one-size canvas—the single scheme, one formal device, one color-monochrome, one linear division in each direction, one symmetry . . . each painting into one over-all uniformity and non-irregularity.”⁶⁹⁹ And for the explicit formula: “A square (neutral, shapeless) canvas, five feet wide, five feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man’s outstretched arms (not large, not small, sizeless), trisected (no composition), one horizontal form negating one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless). . . .”⁷⁰⁰ Indeed, beginning in 1960, Reinhardt would stick to this plan by limiting his painting production to the “one painting” (the black five foot square of canvas) and by repeating the formula “over and over again” until his death seven years later. Further underscoring this emphasis on uniformity and anonymity are those instances where the title of a black painting includes the canvas’s dimensions, “sixty by sixty inches square.” Here an explicit alignment is made between the name/title/identity of a work and, prosaically, its standard measure.⁷⁰¹ It is with this formula in mind—this intrusive reminder as one stands in front of a black painting that one is dealing with a token of a type, a painting made out to a checklist of precise specifications—that the anonymity of Reinhardt’s cut-outs of gridded space stand in such contrast to Newman’s concept of place. The space that Reinhardt delimits is, in effect, placeless.

Posing Reinhardt’s choice of means (space and size) against Newman’s (place and scale) in this manner tends to cast Reinhardt’s project as grossly anti-humanist, as embracing or at least paving the way for the annihilation of the subject, as ushering in the

nightmare of technocratic sublime, a one-size-fits-all reduction of individual personality and experience. But I want to offer another way of taking Reinhardt's seemingly perverse insistence upon the impersonal, generic, uniform that in fact places him very much within humanist tradition. For Reinhardt too, though armed with the seemingly antithetical quantifying tools of size and space, will take his ultimate aim to be the articulation of identity, of a sense of self, and of the human. In other words, if for Newman the so-called measure of man came through an innate sense of scale (each man standing for himself, in front of the real thing) for Reinhardt it came from size, from the identity conferred from within a communal and communicable system and scale of measures stemming from traditions and conventions both pre-existing and outlasting any individual appearance. It is precisely a standard, generic system of measures that figures the human. This point can be illustrated when one recognizes in Reinhardt's formula for the black paintings—"A square . . . five feet wide, five feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms"—the image of Vitruvian Man (fig. 23), the ideal, proportionate male human rendered with arms outstretched, circumscribed by a square and circle. Inspired by passages in *De Architectura*, the famed architectural treatise of the classical Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius, "Vitruvian Man" comes to summarize the ethos of Classical and Renaissance humanism in which man is taken as existing within a rational universe of symmetry, proportion and balance, and in which reason governs form through the universal language of geometry.⁷⁰² In referencing this humanist canon what Reinhardt seems to be suggesting is that human identity—a sense of self—comes precisely through one's relation to an ideal, a standard measure, a set social form, through recognition of an order outside privatized experience. This characterization of space as not addressing "private experience," as being anonymous and impersonal was exactly what lead to Newman's "boredom" with it. The problem of space, as Newman dismissively put it, was that it was "common property."⁷⁰³ For Reinhardt, however, the alignment of space with common property (shared social convention, as social being) was the very thing of redeeming significance.

Newman's and Reinhardt's disagreement over the merits and demerits of space and place can be extended and spoken through another oppositional pair: rationalism versus expressionism. "Apes and birds, I think, do a decorative, expressionist kind of art, but in no case abstract art, which is always rational."⁷⁰⁴ This, just one of many charged pronouncements in Reinhardt's long-standing battle against expressionists satisfies the cliché by killing several birds with one well-aimed stone. For in this statement Reinhardt makes the highly unusual pairing of expressionist art with the decorative. This is a particularly pointed re-coupling for the "decorative" was a term of persistent irritation for Reinhardt, a continual reminder to him of how little abstract art was understood. The supposed decorativeness of abstract art commonly meant the assumption of a vacuity and servility (in contrast to expressionism's authentic content). Abstract art's pointlessness was indeed misrecognized. Things are flipped remarkably by Reinhardt's statement. Expressionism, usually taken as an authentic and singular exteriorizing of an individual subjective core is neutralized by its preceding adjective, putting into question all the high sounding rhetoric of expressionism. The other bird, figuratively speaking, is the notion that there is something "inhuman" (possibly "plastic") about rational, abstract art. To that sort of misbegotten logic Reinhardt suggests that it is animals that are aligned with the expressionist. Abstract art is rational and human and "non-expressionist."⁷⁰⁵

Reinhardt's basic stance against expressionism and its variants will surface early and remain constant through his career. From a 1943 statement one can see the artist avidly rehearsing and reworking the division between surrealism and cubism. "The main current of surrealism is chaos, confusion, individual anguish, terror, horror—in the decay, aimlessness, discontinuity, unrelatedness, and inexplicableness [of the world], in the accidental, unconscious, amorphous, and irrational. In surrealist painting, man is overwhelmed, lost, unable to dominate his space and time. The world and life itself are a prisonlike enigma one moves about in without any understanding, direction, or rest. Its relation to a world of war, destruction, insecurity, formlessness is obvious." In contrast, Reinhardt explains, "The theme of cubism was just the opposite; it stressed unity, totality, connectedness of things in its single, one world. In cubist paintings one finds a discipline,

a consciousness, an order that implies man can not only control and create his world, but ultimately free himself completely from a brutal, barbaric existence.”⁷⁰⁶ The expressionist element of surrealism meant for Reinhardt not a failure stemming from an over-assertion of the “I”/ego but precisely the opposite; the problem was in the “I”/ego’s inability to locate itself, because unable to secure a rational framework or inhabit a form-order that would allow for the structuring of human space (a totality, a sociality). These, of course, were precisely what Reinhardt saw cubism providing. The cubist “I”/ego makes a stab at an image of totality, it articulates itself through “discipline, a consciousness, an order” and in that articulation generates the space, as the separation from Nature, from immediacy, formlessness, “brutal, barbaric existence.” It keeps Nature at bay.

The terms will shift only nominally through Reinhardt’s career—surrealism will be invoked in “expressionism,” “abstract expressionism” and so on, while cubism be referenced in Mondrian and Malevich, pure abstraction and the like—but the basic schema remains in tact. In 1957, the third of Reinhardt’s “Twelve Rules for a New Academy” reads: “No expressionism or surrealism. ‘The laying bare of oneself,’ autobiographically or socially, ‘is obscene.’”⁷⁰⁷ A year later one of the “44 Titles for Articles for Artists Under 45” announces: “Expressionism. Unadulterated cheek. Bedlam of half-baked philosophies and cockeyed visions. . . . Barnumism.”⁷⁰⁸ Or Barneyism. In 1960, as part of “The Artist in Search of a Code of Ethics”: “Artists who peddle wiggly lines and colors as representing emotion should be run off the streets.”⁷⁰⁹ Similarly two years later at a conference on aesthetic responsibility: “Primitivism, irrationalism, anti-intellectualism in art are ugly. Surrealism and expressionism in art are ugly.”⁷¹⁰ And, up to the last, in 1967: “Expression is an impossible word.”⁷¹¹ The ideology of expressionism was mired in a sinister hubris (“unadulterated cheek”) of imagining that “human” content could be properly discussed in terms of the sole (almost autistic) individual; of imagining it spoke itself, as if from some primal fount; or of imagining a special access to an authentic non-identical, the mysterious unknown of which it alone is magically capable of “knowing.” This hubris went hand-in-hand with blindness. It was an

inability to see the conventionality underwriting the availability of “wiggly lines” as marks of “authentic” expressive language.

Newman’s hostility to rationalism has already been shown to be fully in evidence in his call for an “Art of No Geometry” and in his overarching rejection of dogmas of rationalized identity and rationalistic meaning. This hostility took on another or extended appearance in his rejection of “Western European aesthetics”—which Newman takes more specifically as the doctrines of beauty formulated by the Ancient Greeks and more generally as any traditions of academicism. And again, the pernicious aspect in these was that of reiterations of bad forms of identity, as ideological mechanisms for ensuring the production and reproduction of the ever-same: it amounted to a Newmanesque (and Adornian) nightmare of formula writ large. For what were the canons of beauty, the traditions of Western European aesthetics, the discipline of the academy, Newman might have questioned us, but a set of rules, laws, ideals that demanded the conformity of the artist to a preformulated plan and system in order to produce comfortable, known, unchallenging, decorative, vapid objects? In a grand reduction, the content of Western civilization is bureaucratic rationalism, scientific order, pure formalism, a bad self-reflexivity, a tautological *mise en abyme*. What had been lost, according to Newman, was subject matter—the human subject, man, self-presence.

The way out of this prison-house of formal identity was through expression. Newman’s belief in expressive possibility (of the kind that Reinhardt found untenable) implied the achievement—somehow—of a raw moment before identity, before pre-figured identity, and thereby working up authentic identity. This emphasis on rawness, before-ness, unmediatedness slides easily into Newman’s express valuation of the “primitive.” The opposition between expressionism and rationalism can be coordinated with a discussion of Newman’s embrace of the primitive and Reinhardt’s anti-primitivism as another way of defining their difference.

In the mid-forties Newman would start deploying the “primitive” (and primitive art) as the challenger to “geometry.” His interest in primitive art will be made publicly manifest in September 1946 when the exhibition of Northwest Coast Indian painting that

Newman curates inaugurates Betty Parsons's new gallery. In the short statement for the exhibition Newman will assert, without qualification, that a proper understanding of modern art had to be premised on an "appreciation of the primitive arts."⁷¹² Even earlier, however, Newman had done some serious thinking on the subject. In the unpublished essay "The Plasmic Image" (written approximately a year before the Northwest Coast Indian painting exhibition at Parsons's), he had already begun to locate the "primitive" as a term central to his problematic. In this essay Newman argues that a gross misunderstanding of primitive art is to blame for the "failure of abstract painting," or "the abstract and nonobjective art of the last thirty years," mere, though deadly, "puristic design."⁷¹³ The root of the problem that disastrously confused the identities of true, authentic abstraction with its deceptive simulacrum lay there within primitive art traditions. It was in the artifacts produced by primitive culture that Newman could begin to describe the ontological schism existing between good and bad abstraction, or once again, between painting and pictures. "[T]here always existed in the majority of primitive cultures even from prehistoric times," Newman explained, "a strict division between the geometric abstraction used in the decorative arts and the art of that culture."⁷¹⁴ Newman goes on to elaborate the difference between this decorative, geometric abstract design which Newman pointedly associates with the mundane, the domestic sphere of "weaving, pottery, etc.," and the exalted realm of symbolic abstraction which expressed the truths of religion, the spirit, ultimate meanings.

I want to try to quickly summarize what Newman valued in his notion of the primitive and to indicate why this could so effectively serve as the all-significant wedge by which to split apart the conceptual domains of good and bad abstraction. What the notion of the primitive offered to Newman was a way of entering the dialectical encounter, raw, fresh, as an absolute beginning, before the social and its mediations. This was, as Newman had dramatically described, the moment of "Original man" yelling in "awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void." "Man's natural desire in the arts" was the metaphysically charged one—"to express his relation to the Absolute."⁷¹⁵ The primitive subject-object dialectic, as

Newman valued it, is a moment of authentic speech, when language bears real content, where meaning is forged out of a naked subject-object encounter of facing the world immediately and confronting the unknown. This primitive sublime was Newman's attempt to locate a place of identity outside western identitarian systems and beyond (or before) all its evils (i.e., ideological bondage, institutional preforming of subjectivity). The identity wrought from this originary experience was pure cognition, being.

This was not an argument Reinhardt bought. Cognition was always recognition, repetition, convention, tradition—civilization. “Art is always made by craftsmen,” Reinhardt wrote in 1967, “it’s never a spontaneous expression. Artists always come from artists and art forms come from art forms.” The role of the artist was to “[s]can our past for our present.”⁷¹⁶) To this Newman's suggestion that the artist could operate out of a “primitive,” unadulterated moment before identity was pure mischief.

One of Reinhardt's cartoons offers a concise and explicit account of his problems with Newman's location of a moment of authenticity within the primitive. On the upper right-hand side of Reinhardt's *P.M.* cartoon “How To Look at the Record” (November 3, 1946) (fig. 24) one finds a separate section under the heading “Timeless Picture” (fig. 25).⁷¹⁷ A simple stick-figure drawing shows two figures and a teepee. The caption reads: “A figure with empty hands hanging down helplessly, palms down, as an Indian gesture for uncertainty, ignorance, emptiness, or nothing, means ‘no.’ A figure with one hand on its mouth means ‘eating’ or ‘food.’ It points toward the tent, and this means ‘in the tent.’ The whole is a message stating, ‘(There is) no food in the tent.’” The first figure is almost certainly Reinhardt's character spoof on timeless, existentialist man, who faces the sublime “uncertainty” of the void. Indeed, one is tempted to plug in here Newman's “first man” expressing his “helplessness before the void.” In general, the direction of the humor seems to be that of a wry materialism against idealism's grand content. For what Reinhardt does in this cartoon is force the negation to take a specific object. This is not the timeless “nothing” of popularized existentialism but now, in contrast, the comically material and mundane: no food in the tent, a nod to the “base,” the material grounds for existence as the first term. But Reinhardt takes it a notch further. Immediately below the

text box and image is an additional note. The pseudo-anthropological exegesis is formatted in italicized font typically used by Reinhardt to signify his own editorializing commentary or explanatory text, and it reads: “A pictorial message scratched on wood by Alaskan Indians. The signs convey ideas without expressing exact words. For example, while one man might read ‘No food in the tent,’ another might see ‘Lack of meat in the wigwam,’ still another ‘Without sugar in tepee.’” What Reinhardt’s comical, pedantic text shows up is the nagging problem of ambiguity in the relation of sign to meaning. These glorified “absolute” signs associated with the primitive arts, become, under Reinhardt’s manipulation a primer in structuralist semiology: identity (meaning) is differential, it is articulated through the grid of paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes.

Newman did not back down. If anything, he became even more explicit in his stance. Reading Newman’s “The First Man Was an Artist,” which appeared in October 1947 in the inaugural issue of *Tiger’s Eye*, one hears an almost direct rebuttal to Reinhardt and a reversal of Reinhardt’s deflating materialism. In line with the essay’s namesake, Newman prioritizes the aesthetic to the social, and to the socially instrumentalist forming (or processing) of material; the first man was not “a hunter, a toolmaker, a farmer, a work, a priest, or a politician,” but an artist.⁷¹⁸ Indeed, one can use the first stick-figure in Reinhardt’s cartoon—the one with “empty hands hanging down helplessly,” sign-gesturing for “uncertainty, ignorance, emptiness, or nothing”—to illustrate Newman’s “first man.” Listen here to Newman describe the artist as this first man: “Man’s first expression, like his first dream, was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void.” Summarily, aesthetic emotion precedes utilitarian need. Just a short paragraph further, Newman writes, “The human in language is literature, not communication. . . . Man’s first address to a neighbor was a cry of power and solemn weakness, not a request for a drink of water.”⁷¹⁹ Whereas Reinhardt’s first stick figure appears in line with Newman’s point, the second stick figure critically alters

the direction of the message towards something much more in line with asking for a drink of water and as such with concern over material sustenance.

If Newman and Reinhardt share the prime motive of articulating the good, authentic identity, then the major difference between them can be said to manifest itself in the former's investment in a moment of originary cognition occurring before or outside of social articulation (a figure before ground) and the latter's investment in a moment of rehearsed recognition, occurring after or within social articulation (the ground before figure).

This difference can be drawn out through certain formal expectations and restrictions in their canvases that relate to issues of viewer orientation. Schematically, the mode of orientation typically associated with Newman's painting is that of a one-to-one encounter—of the singular, upright viewer surveying a field. For Reinhardt it is an aerial view, with the viewer looking down upon a map or reading a plan. Initially, this proposition can be supported through statements and suggestions both artists made concerning orientation of viewer-ship. When Reinhardt enumerated the elements of his black-square painting formula in 1963, i.e. that the square should be “five feet wide, five feet high,” with “one horizontal form negating one vertical form,” he included in this description that the canvas should have “no top, no bottom,” thus becoming “directionless.”⁷²⁰ The perfect squares of Reinhardt's black paintings, possessing neither top nor bottom—no proper orientation—thus open themselves, theoretically, to endless rotation. Indeed, the toplessness and bottomlessness of the black square paintings begin to corrode one of the deep conventions of the easel painting tradition—that paintings hang upright on walls, because they, like their viewer, have tops and bottoms, a necessary, proper orientation in space. This gives the hanging of Reinhardt's black square paintings on walls something of a gratuitous quality that undermines the sense of the privileged and authorized view of the single viewer. However, it does this not by implying that any one view or orientation is the wrong one, but each view/orientation must factor into any sense of its rightness, three other equally valid orientations. That is to say, the awareness of these canvases as directionless makes it difficult when viewing a

black square painting not to have one's viewing haunted by three other equally "proper" viewers/orientations. The result is vertiginous. The major re-orientation that would seem to answer the situation of toplessness and bottomlessness is that of laying the canvas down flat along a horizontal surface. Interestingly enough, this was the arrangement Reinhardt used when painting, as shown in a number of studio shots and which his wife, Rita, has corroborated (figs. 26 and 27).⁷²¹ Situated thus, each side hypothetically becomes equally available to viewers. Within the logic of the painting, one cannot grant one's own upright viewing encounter with the painting the privilege of the proper. For haunting the edges of the canvas is the possibility that each edge might serve as a ground-line, a ground-line that could in turn be used to suggestively posit the situation of another viewer; and another ground-line and another viewer, and so on all the way around. This play with orientation opens out onto the social, and suggests already a multiplicity.

Contrast this directionlessness and all it implies to Newman's paintings: they always have tops and bottoms ("all my paintings have a top and a bottom") and, thus, there is always, and insistently so, a proper orientation to them.⁷²² Newman had a lot to say about the experience, or what he hoped for as the viewer's experience, of *standing in front of* his work. Already by the time of his second one-person exhibition in 1951, Newman explained what he believed to be the proper viewing relationship for his paintings. "There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance," the artist had written in a notice attached to a gallery wall, "The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance."⁷²³ A short distance implies a fairly intimate, direct encounter—the one-to-one experience of two entities facing each other. The classic image associated with this is the 1958 photograph (taken by Peter A. Juley) of Newman and a woman standing in front of *Cathedra*, facing the canvas, with their backs to the photographer (fig. 28). Looking at this photograph one is typically reminded of the emphatic verticality generated by Newman's zips. For although *Cathedra* (along with, to name a few more in this category, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* [1950-51]; *Uriel* [1955]; *Anna's Light* [1968]) is well over twice as long as it is high there is no sense of reclining.⁷²⁴ The

overriding sensibility not just of this painting but for the majority of Newman's body of work, is of uprightness, of standing tall and looking out.⁷²⁵

This orientation and stance had a lot to do with Newman's sense of place. One can look to a number of Newman's statements for elaboration. Describing his experience of the Ohio earth mounds and how this experience gave him important insight into a sense of place, Newman explained to Hess: "Looking at this site you feel, Here I am, *here* . . . and out beyond there [beyond the limits of the site] there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes . . . but here you get a sense of your own presence. . . . I became involved with the idea of making the viewer present: the idea that 'Man Is Present.'"⁷²⁶ This was an idea that Newman had further opportunity to explore in his submission of an architectural model for an ideal synagogue. In his statement he referred to the synagogue as a place in which one had the "subjective experience" of the "exalted," of *Makom*, of place. In Newman's model "each man sits, private and secluded . . . waiting to be called . . . to go up on the mound, where, under the tension of 'Tzim-Tzum' that created light and the world, he can experience a total sense of his own personality before the Torah and His Name."⁷²⁷ But perhaps one of Newman's most powerful and clear articulations of this idea came in a 1965 interview with David Sylvester.

One thing that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself. In that sense he relates to me when I made the painting because in that sense I was there. And one of the nicest things that anybody ever said about my work is when you yourself said that standing in front of my paintings you had a sense of your own scale.

This experiencing a sense of scale, Sylvester's reaction to the paintings was perfect, and Newman continues: "[T]his is what I have tried to do: that the onlooker in front of my painting knows that he's there. To me, the sense of place not only has a mystery but has that sense of metaphysical fact."⁷²⁸

These concerns have been dealt with provocatively by Yve-Alain Bois in his essay "Perceiving Newman."⁷²⁹ Bois's essay attempts to unpack Newman's idiosyncratic, though all-important, sense of place through a framework of perception theories. Bois,

too, first sets up the viewer's situation with a Newman zip painting (*Onement I*, to be specific) as an encounter in which the painting "addresses the spectator directly, immediately, as an 'I' to a 'You,'" thus giving a "'sense of place' to its beholder."⁷³⁰ In *Onement I*, Bois argues, Newman achieves this goal "by the conspicuous use of symmetry." For it is symmetry, as an "essential condition of our perception," that "presupposes the vertical axis of our body as the dividing vector of our visual perceptions, of our situation in front of what we see. It thus implies the irreversibility of a top and a bottom as much as our being situated in or engaged with the world implies our erect human posture."⁷³¹ What is at stake is a description of the perceptual act by which the self and world are constituted, the "birth of the self to the world."⁷³² Newman, Bois reminds us, will be compelled to find a solution beyond that of biaxial symmetry for achieving the "sense of place." Nor should this come as a surprise. Symmetry, after all, was geometry, Mondrian, the pure abstractionist school of painting.⁷³³ It is through asymmetry that Newman ends up achieving the exalted sense of place, of identity "orienting" itself through the perceptual act of lateral scannation of an unarticulated (ambiguity of the figure/ground relationship) field. In perceiving this irregular, identityless field (which denies perception defined as the perception of figures against grounds) perception self-reflexively turns back on itself, thus beginning to describe the sensation of the perceiver, the upright viewer as "I" (a "You-I/I-You")—the singular organizing pivot, the originary locus, the center of creation.

What I want to suggest now is that these differences in orientation between Newman and Reinhardt can be used to suggest two very different worldviews. Later, these differences will serve as the armature by which to construct Newman's and Reinhardt's political differences. Once again, Reinhardt's implied orientation is that of the plan, amenable to the aerial view. Newman's implied orientation is that of the single, upright and centered viewer scanning a lateral, frontal field. The question then, is by what common axis can these two orientations be brought into dialogue with one another? The imagery and metaphor that I believe can serve as this third relating term in the concept of the *axis mundi*.

From “the most primitive tribes,” as Mircea Eliade has explained, the *axis mundi* (world axis), sometimes called the universal axis, has been the central component in mythic consciousness.⁷³⁴ Within the mythic cosmographies of a broad range of primitive and ancient traditions the *axis mundi* is the link or pathway connecting earth and the heavens, marking the navel of the universe, the center of creation. This concept has been imagined variously as mountains (Mt. Meru), mounds or burial mounds (stupas, pyramids, ziggurats), trees (the tree of life in Eden, the tree of knowledge, the ephiotic tree of the Kabbalah, the bodhi tree), as well as in pillars, crosses, temples or towers and special natural geological formations. The significance of the *axis mundi* for many of these mythological traditions has been that of the first mark or the primary designation that must be made in order for the universe (space or place) to exist. It is the initial spot, a starting point, a position that has first to be conceived in order to conceive: a generative source, the *logos*, the moment for setting up a universe, the point central to creation.⁷³⁵ In many ancient traditions the *axis mundi* is thought of as the central point of a mandala, or a representation, map or diagram of the universe, laying out the cosmic order, a spatialization of being. Formally, the mandala is usually a combination of a square circumscribed or circumscribing (sometimes both) a circle, articulated into quadrants through horizontal and vertical bisection, the intersection of which locates the center of the cosmos, the *axis mundi*.

In comparing the general formula and format of the ancient mandala and Reinhardt’s formula for the black square paintings it is indeed difficult not to see the black paintings—what Reinhardt himself called the “ultimate diagram”—as mandalas. Their cruciform shape (with neither top nor bottom) both asserted an order (a universe, a oneness) and served potentially as a meditative device (the viewer is forced to stand in front of them a long time in order to see them, it becomes trance like, very meditative)—both important traditional mandalic operations.⁷³⁶

What is of further interest, as Hess has drawn particular attention to, was that Reinhardt’s final art world satire bore the loaded title, “A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala” (fig. 29). This satiric mandala would resonate on a number of levels.

On one level it served as the artist's pre-emptive strike leveled precisely at faddish and facile interest in Asian art and Eastern philosophy, especially the art world's apparent interest.⁷³⁷ But in this Reinhardt unsparingly implicates himself as well. By the level of detail and the logic of construction of Reinhardt's art world mandala, however, the extent of Reinhardt's own genuine knowledge of mandalic traditions is revealed. In other words, a spoof this sharp surely requires a sense of the real thing. Hess has cautiously suggested a further importance for this art satire. In "A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala" Hess will see a way of linking the Eastern mandala and the ultimate format of Reinhardt's black square paintings.⁷³⁸ "In his last complete satire, the 'ultimate' 'Mandala' of 1956, there is a simplification process at work that may, or may not, parallel his pictorial interests," Hess writes. "By 1956, he had achieved his 'ultimate' format, the square, symmetrically trisected image, even though he would not bring all his pictures to their 'ultimate' color, black, and 'ultimate' dimensions, five foot square, until 1960. The mandala, a square in a circle, meant for contemplation, relates to Reinhardt's simplifying pictorial development."⁷³⁹

I, too, find it of interest that Reinhardt's concluding art satire is a mandala (comic or not) and that the basic formula for the articulation of space in the signature black square paintings is so neatly prefigured in it. I want to go further, however, and propose that the concept of the *axis mundi* (the mandalic scheme) offers a powerful summarizing image of Reinhardt's creative philosophy. This in turn goes back to the place/space antagonism between Newman and Reinhardt; and it further shows the differences in how the two artists orient the subject within the dialectic of subject and object.

Here it might be constructive to consider some of the social-material motives animating the concepts of the *axis mundi* and the mandala. Reaching through the religious, esoteric membrane of these concepts, one finds oneself handling far more mundane terms, specifically terms having to do with the organizing social space. It is believed that the origins of the *axis mundi* and the mandala stem from the ancient Aryan civilization and served as a model of social planning.⁷⁴⁰ Ancient Aryan villages were organized through the coordinates of the centrally located Tree of Knowledge or Tree of

Life or *axis mundi*, which in turn marked the intersection of a community's two main thoroughfares, one east-west, one north-south. As one Asian art scholar explains, "Where they crossed, at the center of the village, a small square contained in its center a Tree of Knowledge. Under this tree the village elders (or leaders) met to legislate and to discuss religion and matters of council."⁷⁴¹ It existed by and as social fact—by the mechanisms of committee, consensus and social recognition. It was a method for marking out space as social space, a way of dealing with the shapeless chaos of space. Giving it location, a center and boundaries was thus forming space into something socially inhabitable. Ultimately what was generated was the rationality of the grid, and as such, it was completely conventional. Like language, it existed by social convention alone.⁷⁴² Certainly one of the troubling apparent contradictions this helps to explain is how the replicability of the *axis mundi* (every village possessed one) did not undermine its definition as a singularity, as the unique point of entry and connection between earth and the heavens. Knowledge was communal. What existed was a social plan, a repeatable conceptual apparatus, the traditional tools for ordering chaos, the template for setting up parameters—all for establishing identity. The condition of identity was social through and through; its very grounds for existence were inescapably so.

For Reinhardt Newman had erroneously granted priority and significance to a sense of place—as almost inarticulately personal and individual (the ideology of a pre-articulate reality, the auto-generative moment of self-cognition). Newman's "sense of place," by Reinhardt's logic, had to be put in its proper place, or proper order: it existed within and secondary to the social, impersonal, communal and generic articulation of *space*. Thus, when I suggest that the toplessness and bottomlessness of Reinhardt's black square paintings is a way of putting into question the necessity of their installation as objects hanging vertically on walls and thus opening up the possibility of other potential orientation—one acknowledging the lack of top/bottom priority, as a horizontal orientation, the aerial view of looking down upon a map or plan—one can extend this as an "orientation" to the social and its concept of space. The orientation of reading a map—say, in order to find out where you are—is one in which the viewer is forced into a more

totalizing vision, having in effect to see the whole picture in order to locate oneself. One's own position is radically relational, formulated through measuring proximities and distances within a gridded social matrix.

To return one last time to the “Yhung Mandala,” almost certainly the title is playing off of James Joyce's autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Joyce was a literary staple within the Abstract Expressionist milieu and his popularity with them likely stemmed from felt kinship over notions of the romantic subject and artistic creativity.⁷⁴³ The story, as Joyce's title so tellingly announces, is that of the development of the artist-genius's unique subjectivity and sensibility. It is the *Bildungsroman*.⁷⁴⁴ But, of course, the “Portrait” is given in appropriately Joycean language—idiosyncratic, singular, the wrought expression of a subjective interior whose content struggles against the limits of conventional language. The classic problem with Joyce and Joycean language is its tendency to be so idiosyncratic, so singular, so much about being a vehicle for an unmappable personality, that it becomes a private language, turns into an opaque substance. The butt of Reinhardt's joke, as Hess has indicated, is the artist who draws upon orientalism, esoteric mysticism, Eastern philosophy as the fitting cultural accouterment for the life of the spiritual and creative interior signifying an outside to conventional identity, something off the charts, the realm of private language. The ironic reversal, however, is that the universe of Reinhardt's mandala is far from that of the spirit. It is neither a sacred diagram of the cosmos, nor can it be used as a meditative device the contemplation of which would help the viewer to reach a blissful state of both non-identity or oneness with the universe. Cynically, Reinhardt's mandala maps the art world, diagramming its major directions (“Art and Government,” “Art and Education,” “Art and Business,” “Art and Nature”) and categories (“Artist as Recorder,” “Artist as Explainer,” “Artist as Cathartic,” “Artist as Commodity”). The target of this pointed joke is the romantic construction of the artist as the locus of an expressivity so profoundly original that its coordinates presumably cannot be found on any social, conventional grid (Newman's sense of place). But, of course, Reinhardt's mandala does that precise pinpointing: everything exists within, achieves identity through social space.

Remembering back, of course, it was precisely this sort of pinpointing—when Reinhardt positioned Newman as an “identity” within a (art world) system in 1956—that had incited Newman’s rage. For it was Newman who believed that identity, a sense of self, could be self-evident, that it came out of expressive originality. The moment Newman was invested in was the beginning, the *before* to forming, identifying, systematizing, before the grid.⁷⁴⁵ And Newman’s difference from Reinhardt on this essential point can as well be visualized by going back to the concept of the *axis mundi*—but coming to it from a conspicuously different orientation. Combining Newman’s thematic of the Origin and Bois’s reading of Newman’s canvases in terms of consciousness scanning a field of potentiality before realization, one can arrive back at the *axis mundi*. But it is seen not as Reinhardt’s aerial shot, as the center within a mandalic plan but as a vertical shaft (with a top and bottom). The viewer, standing in front of an expanse of Newman’s canvas—presumably, much like the artist himself did—assumes the position and function of an *axis mundi* as, to repeat once more, the central organizing pivot, the creative origin, the first mark out of which a universe is created. The difference in Newman’s conception of this originary moment/position is that it is radically individual, achieved singularly, each man for himself, by himself—not by committee or institution. This achievement of a sense of place is thus also a location of identity but the vital condition of that identity are that it come out of nothing, without relation, without a semiotic, without social measure. What I hope this comparison has suggested is the beginnings of a path by which differences in formal orientation open out to differences in social orientation. The next section will serve as an important transition to a fuller elaboration of this social difference by looking at series and seriality as a preliminary way of figuring the social as, among other things, the *agon* of part and whole, the individual and the multitude, the one and the One.

Question of Series: Is It One or the Same?

I think a man spends his whole lifetime painting one picture. . . .
Barnett Newman⁷⁴⁶

There Is Just One Painting
Ad Reinhardt⁷⁴⁷

At series one arrives at a great reckoning. It is with the question of series that things come to a head. In trying to sort out the various ways to map the possible differences and similarities of intention set out by Newman's statement, "I think a man spends his whole lifetime painting one picture" and Reinhardt's statement, "There Is Just One Painting," one reaches a fragile, but totally charged, nexus. "Is it one and/or the same?" could serve as shorthand for the range of questions raised by painting in series/seriality in painting. Are Newman and Reinhardt realizing the one and ultimate painting or, are they performing the same painting, over and over, again and again, merely repeating themselves? The question(s) of series lays great stress on both Newman's and Reinhardt's painting projects. The critical test of series is where things threaten to fall apart or promise to come together.

In this section I will focus primarily on just two sets of series, one by each artist, and both bodies of work created over a substantial period of time, between seven to eight years. They are Newman's *Stations of the Cross* of 1958-66 (fig. 30) and Reinhardt's black square paintings of 1960-67 (fig. 31).⁷⁴⁸ In 1958 Newman began what would eventually become the *Stations of the Cross* as the first new work after his heart attack in 1957 and prolonged six week recovery in the hospital. He would continue to work, off and on and not exclusively, for another eight years on this project up to 1966, the year when the series of fourteen canvases (plus a fifteenth member, the canvas *Be II*) premiered at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.⁷⁴⁹ In 1960 Reinhardt's so-called classic black square paintings became his exclusive object of painting production. These starkly reduced paintings were a culminating moment to Reinhardt's previous aesthetic negations—over the years, giving up color, asymmetry, irregularity, etc. For the next six years, until his death in 1967, Reinhardt continued to make the

“same” black square painting with perhaps their most important exhibition (during Reinhardt’s lifetime) occurring in late November of 1966 at the Jewish Museum, New York, less than half a year after Newman’s *Stations of the Cross* at the Guggenheim.⁷⁵⁰

Why, one might ask, take the issue of series to be of such importance. Why would an examination of series in relation to these two artists reveal interpretive riches? Why would this shed light on the relentless opposition structured by the binaries described in the previous section?

The fact is both Newman and Reinhardt have complicated relationships to the notion of series and there has been notable disagreement over the appropriateness of discussing these artists in connection with the term at all. For instance, John Coplans, curator of the 1968 exhibition “Serial Imagery” at the Pasadena Art Museum, included Reinhardt, unquestionably embracing him as a *bona fide* serial artist. “Apart from Albers who had been working in Series since 1931,” the curator wrote in the exhibition catalogue, “the first American painter to adopt the Serial format was Ad Reinhardt, in the mid-fifties.”⁷⁵¹ Although Coplans would name and credit several other serial artists (Yves Klein among them, though Reinhardt is still considered “more important for a number of reasons”) it is clearly Reinhardt whom Coplans views as the “key figure in the evolution of Serial Imagery in the United States.”⁷⁵² No such claim would be made for Newman and the distinctness by which the curator separated Reinhardt from Newman is belied by the latter’s non-inclusion in the show. Coplans’s explanation for this absence is both informative for the reasons he gives and suggestive by the mere fact that Coplans feels the need to make it. The “New American Painters,” he asserts, were in fact antithetical to the use of “Serial structure.” He elaborates: “Essential to the morphology of Serial Imagery is the abandonment of the conspicuous uniqueness of each painting. The New American Painters, on the contrary, were extreme individualists who asserted, as a central part of their esthetic, the unique identity of each individual painting. Small changes in the overall size of a canvas—even an inch or two—as well as differences in degree of color saturation, changes in hue or texture or density of paint, were used to avoid standardization and to enhance singularity.” Unsurprisingly, the artist Coplans finds

exemplary of this is Newman. “Many paintings by Newman, for example, are similar to one another—yet at the same time each painting is vastly different from any other. Each asserts a different solution and expresses a different mood. . . .”⁷⁵³ Again, not particularly surprisingly, Coplans has in mind the artist’s series of quasi-series *Stations of the Cross*. “Although it is true Newman . . . painted in series at one time or another, to paint in series is not necessarily to be Serial. Newman’s series of *Fourteen Stations of the Cross* [sic] are all painted in black and white—but they are linked by a narrative theme. . . . Newman’s paintings are classical instances of theme and variation.” The marginality by which Coplans views Newman’s nominal and narrative series is palpable: Newman is not a properly Serial artist because he merely exploits formal similarities in order to enhance the visibility, as it were, of the unique, individual identity of each painting. This is in marked contrast to the purity of Reinhardt’s serial propositions: equality, standardization, a theme minus any variation and thereby the unproblematic ease by which Reinhardt appeared to inhabit series, to be a Serial artist. What Coplans’s characterizations begin is a sketch of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s opposed relations to series, how the two artists react very differently to the questions put into play by series. In both paradoxical and fitting ways, the “cross” figures—literally and symbolically—in both of these series. Series locates, as an “X” that marks the spot, for Reinhardt the solution to the problem of figuring oneness (one is achieved through the same). Quite oppositely for Newman, series becomes a cross to bear, the true test of onement (how to have one but never the same?).

1. Reinhardt’s Parable: the Weaver & Tailor

In several obvious ways series is precisely the solution Reinhardt desired and needed: it is absolutely what he had been asking for, it is his long sought confirmation. Serialization was “Repetition as the first idea of form, identical, interchangeability,” “Endless repetition of infinite sameness,” “Grand sameness,” “Regularity, repetition, reminder, recognition.”⁷⁵⁴ Or, as a 1962 “Art-as-Art” manifesto announces explicitly: “The one direction in fine or abstract art today is in the painting of the same one form over and

over again. The one intensity and the one perfection come only from long and lonely routine preparation and attention and repetition. . . .”⁷⁵⁵ These qualities (or what Reinhardt sometimes will refer to as “non-qualities”) of series: repetition, standardization, stereotype, formula, sameness—qualities considered by the romantic wing of aesthetic modernism, and indeed by those of the Abstract Expressionist milieu to be highly inappropriate descriptors for a serious and authentic work of art—Reinhardt will repeat again and again, as dogma, art dogma, art-as-art dogma. This is his signature repetition. Nevertheless, by this seriality Reinhardt hardly intended to pull off a mere sophomoric negation of his peers’ values. Far more was at stake. For repetition was not merely a ploy, a way of not doing what the others appeared to be doing—merely a facile negation of the rhetoric of uniqueness and authenticity that had come to typify Abstract Expressionism—but operated in Reinhardt’s understanding as the very ground by which form (language, consciousness) existed at all. Repetition was the absolute necessity for recognition, the key for identity. Without it one was imprisoned in the non-identity of continual flux, of formlessness.

The question to ask is how more specifically did Reinhardt’s logic work? By what manner of reasoning did he come to see the endless repetition of infinite sameness—or “series-ness”—as the “one” liberating path to “ultimate” painting? The apparent contradiction lies in this: For an artist who quite openly opposed the exchange-principle (“Everything into irreducibility, unreproducibility, imperceptibility. Nothing ‘usable,’ ‘manipulatable,’ ‘salable,’ ‘deable,’ ‘collectible,’ ‘graspable’”) as part and parcel of his professed hatred of the commodity-form (“no art as a commodity”) as a corruption of artistic work (“no art as . . . jobbery”), who sought spaces free of the market (“I tried to oppose the academic to the market place.”), who riled at any confusion of culture industry products and high artistic production and who warned bitterly against the violence of modern rationalism (of “consciousness in danger of being crushed by [its] own constructions, conventions, systems”)—for all of this, his embrace of seriality seems frankly untenable.⁷⁵⁶ For what the black painting series of 1960-67 looks and what its programmatic descriptions sound nothing so like is painting made over into the kind of

formulaic identity amenable to processes of capitalist production and consumption, into absolute commensurability. The fetish of modern art as a repository or remembering of creative, non-alienated labor—the incommensurable expression of the artist—becomes the fetish of the commodity as Reinhardt standardizes his own mode of production, thereby perfectly assimilating the identity principle of capitalist exchange. Everything will be reduced to an identical unit, the “sameness” of “sixty by sixty inches, square”: “The one work for a fine artist, the one painting, is the painting of the one-size canvas—the single scheme, one formal device, one color-monochrome, one linear division in each direction, one symmetry, one texture, one free-hand brushing, one rhythm, one working everything into one dissolution and one indivisibility, each painting into one over-all uniformity and non-irregularity.”⁷⁵⁷ This is the formula, the disclosed trade recipe or Reinhardt’s signature product line, for Art-as-Art.

This contradiction is the setting for Reinhardt’s artful ruse, his moving from identity toward non-identity. The maneuver is to unravel the commodity structure, to subvert its logic through a critical mimesis of that very same structure and logic. Reading further through the 1962 Art-as-Art statement quoted above one finds a remarkable revelation. Reinhardt writes: “Only a standardized, prescribed, and proscribed form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless, only a formularized art can be formulaless.”⁷⁵⁸ This suggests a paradoxical passage by which the newness of non-identity emerges from the regiment of identity. The movement toward the imageless, the formless, the formula-less passes through the standardized, prescribed, proscribed, stereotyped, formularized image/form. Perhaps it was possible to work through the logic of the same in order to reach the one, the ultimate. Or, to arrive at, as Reinhardt succinctly posed it, “Not sameness but oneness?”⁷⁵⁹ But how in fact might that be achieved? How does one describe this maneuver beyond the charge of dialectical hocus-pocus, inflated-sounding nonsense? I suggest the place to begin is the tautology, with Reinhardt’s art-as-art. This tautological construction served the artist as both a way to state an identity *and* to frame an experience of non-identity.

A tautological statement is an assertion of identity *par excellence*. The form of the tautology is repetition, a repeat of the same on both sides of the equation, a doubling that confirms the first, which sets the scene for recognition. A discussion that might helpfully be recalled here is one from Rosalind Krauss's essay, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism."⁷⁶⁰ Doubling, Krauss writes, "marks the first in the chain as a signifying element: it transmutes raw matter into the conventionalized form of the signifier. Lévi-Strauss describes the importance of pure phonemic doubling in the onset of linguistic experience in infancy—the child's dawning knowledge of signs." The example from Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked* that Krauss offers is the difference between the meaningless phoneme—the "wild sound"—"pa" and how its status changes with repetition or its doubling into "papa." "Repetition," Krauss continues, "is thus the indicator that the 'wild sounds' of babbling have been made deliberate, intentional; and that what they intend is meaning. Doubling is in this sense the 'signifier of signification.'"⁷⁶¹ Or, to return to Reinhardt, "Repetition is the first idea of form." It is the sign and process of identity: repetition is the cognitive template through which lies the realm of possibilities offered by symbolic exchange—language, communication, the social. This is identity established and secured through repetition, readied and groomed, as it were, to become a social object.

In a second sense, however, the tautological form can also be said to be that which silences, freezes, shuts-down identity processes, that which precisely cannot think outside itself, cannot communicate, cannot imagine or speak itself in any other terms, cannot, as it were, get beyond its perfect equivalence, its absolute self-evidence. I turn, for an illuminating example of this, to Marx's legendary discussion of the nature of the commodity form in *Capital* (chapter 1, Book 1, Part 1, Volume 1). The text opens by both identifying the commodity as the "elementary form" of the capitalist mode of production and also by cautioning that though the "commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing, its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."⁷⁶² The commodity's apparent simplicity falls away by the unveiling of its "dual character" as both use-value

and exchange-value. As use-value it possesses a specific quality able to satisfy a specific human want and, as such, it is directly oriented to oneself. As an exchange-value, in contrast, it operates as an expression of homogenous quantity, and, as such it possesses the ability to command other commodities in exchange, relating to other things by speaking a common language, in a dialogue oriented not to oneself but played out laterally across other commodities. The commodity, then, is an object shown to be split between its real content and its surface appearance, between use and exchange.⁷⁶³

One of Marx's classic illustrations of this split within the commodity is his comparison between yards of linen and a coat, between the labor of the weaver and the labor of the tailor. He explains that the coat and linen are "qualitatively different use-values" and that, "If the use-values were not qualitatively different, hence not the products of qualitatively different forms of useful labour, they would be absolutely incapable of confronting each other as commodities. Coats cannot be exchanged for coats, one use-value cannot be exchanged for another of the same kind."⁷⁶⁴ A little later Marx expands on the necessity of this difference—"qualitatively different use-values"—for the expression of value. "I cannot, for example, express the value of linen in linen. 20 yards of linen = 20 yards of linen is not an expression of value. The equation states rather the contrary: 20 yards of linen are nothing but 20 yards of linen, a definite quantity of linen considered as an object of utility. The value of the linen can therefore only be expressed relatively, i.e., in another commodity."⁷⁶⁵ In other words, the commodity needs something else and other in order for the reduction to exchange-value to work. It gets stuck in its asocial singularity, its concrete sensuousness, if it cannot form a relation to something other than itself. If it cannot establish a relationship its social identity, its identity as exchange value, cannot be expressed.⁷⁶⁶ The processes of calculation and abstraction are shut down in the equation "20 yards of linen = 20 yards of linen." The tautology dead-ends in a state of expressionlessness; either, depending on how one imagines it, in the fullness or emptiness of its being.

The importance of this second reading of the tautological form for Reinhardt is not difficult to gauge. "Art as something else is always a fake," and "Art as a thing to be

used for some other end is ugly.”⁷⁶⁷ Art-as-art meant $x = x$, it meant no translating x into y terms, no x commodity $A = y$ commodity B . It was the “translator” (or the expressionist) who, always caught up in the process of substituting one thing for another, was the “traitor.”⁷⁶⁸ Substitution, translation, transferring, exchange were all operations of “business”: spinning gold, turning a profit, transforming something into something else. As early as 1952 Reinhardt had proclaimed: “no reality-reducing . . . no abstracting from anything . . . no confusing painting with everything that is not painting.”⁷⁶⁹ Ten years later the message was fundamentally the same: “The one, eternal, permanent revolution in art turns over art from art-as-also-something-else into art-as-only-itself.”⁷⁷⁰ The point was to stop the process, to “Succeed in breaking the endless chain,” to not be “part of the flux.” The tautology in this second aspect provided the very means for posing the incommensurability of the artwork, for shorting out the circulatory paths of transfer. What was offered in this resultant stasis and inexchangeability was the utopian possibility of a thing being nothing but itself, of possessing at long last self-identity. Fittingly enough, the translator-traitor was also in Reinhardt’s terms the “sell-out,” the person who made a business out of his or her work, transforming it into Marx’s “strange thing,” the commodity.

What series offers Reinhardt is a means for working together these two readings of tautological form in order to create the anti-commodity situation, or a situation in which total exchange results in a paradoxical inexchangeability, in which the logic of interchangeability is made to serve the antithetical ends of incommensurability. And, vitally, series allows Reinhardt to fathom the artistic expression of incommensurability precisely *not* as a romantic idealist but as a materialist. His solution had to be worked out as an expressive possibility existing within present reality. To bring back the Vološinovian language problematic by which I first began to describe the disjuncture in Newman’s and Reinhardt’s projects, Reinhardt, unlike Newman, refused to imagine any manner of pristine grounds. There could be no artist as god-like creator with special access to previously unarticulated regions and possessing the ability *sui generi* to bring new reality into being, there was no speaking miraculously outside of all previous social

articulation. The “New,” Reinhardt insisted, is “formed on dead ground”—not from new ground.⁷⁷¹ In other words, the critically maintained limitation on Reinhardt’s project was precisely that any image or possibility of utopian difference would have to be set in and wrought from its antithesis in the present or, more precisely, in the commodity logic of capitalism. If the situation was one in which the commodity—its structure, its logic—prevailed totally and everything existed by and through the logic of exchangeability then those were the very conditions, means, tools and language by which he would have to work up an expression of difference. Reinhardt, at base, afforded himself no luxury in fanciful positing of redemptive “others” and “outsides” and “difference” (a “New”) to the situation at hand. This meant, quite strictly, that if Reinhardt desired the special sense of identity that he called “oneness” he would have to figure out a path towards it through the sense of identity that goes by the term “sameness.” The possibility the artist held out for himself, he succinctly referred to as the “[o]ne concept escaping concept.”⁷⁷²

One can concretize some of these points by looking at the installation photographs of the black paintings in exhibition.⁷⁷³ Gretchen Lambert’s photograph of the black square paintings in 1966 at the Jewish Museum is the classic, iconic installation shot and it goes far in capturing the severity of Reinhardt’s proposition for the “same” painting, an endless repetition of the same form again and again (fig. 31). The cropping of the Lambert installation view cuts off sections of black paintings on both left and right-hand sides as well as taking in the architectural corner or lip in the right of the gallery. All of these visual cues by intensifying the terrific sense of endlessness. These are the black square paintings bearing down in their most ominous aspect: an infinite sameness, as the totalitarian identity regime, as the violence of the concept, a thing punched out in brutal, inhuman repetition providing an awful glance into the sublime of endless reproducibility. Nothing so much as a progression suggests itself: with no place to begin and no place to end, there is no backwards or forwards, no right or left, no up or down, not a thread by which to hang. Without handles, without a here or there, there seems no way of particularizing one’s position, marking one’s own space, of grounding oneself—and all

of this offers itself in such contrast to Newman's efforts to provide the viewer with a sense of place, of groundedness.

The photographic reproduction performs a further degree of leveling by eliminating even the pretense of looking with the connoisseur's eye, attempting to pinpoint or delectate over minute variations, hunting for that special mark of distinction that would signal unique identity. In this vein, I agree with Coplans's assessment that "in Reinhardt's Serial Imagery the threshold of difference between each painting is so low as to finally deny difference, though it is true each painting occupies a different space," and disagree with the attempts to treat the viewings of these paintings as visual hunting exercises in which finding accidents, imperfections, anything suggestive of nuance or that might serve to particularize any one black square painting from all the others, indicates the keen perception of the viewer.⁷⁷⁴ One should consider this: Reinhardt not only spoke of his painting as "anti-accident," "no personality-picturesqueness, no texturing-gesturings," "no brushwork-bravura," but he also committed to a practice of eliminating these conventionally given indexes of particularity, individuality, singularity. Thus, straining to see the ever-slightest modulation in paint surface seems a very perverse direction indeed.⁷⁷⁵ Similarly misguided in my view are those who approach the paintings as an entertaining optical game in which the reward for persevering with a black square canvas is a glimpse of the hidden treasure, the cruciform shape. But all the avid effort put into these visual exercises as ways of viewing a Reinhardt black square painting (having something to look for) seem to speak more to a stubbornness, a willed myopia perhaps, and even a blind faith, that if one could just fathom some sign of singularity, some differentiating imperfection, something, anything to grasp on to, one could be steadied against the impending vertigo threatened in the sideways glance. What these blinders, devices for looking straight ahead, work to prevent is actually seeing and in that fully registering the regime of the black paintings, and the experience of being neither here nor there in the double sense of not being able to ground oneself and of meaninglessness: this is the placeless and the arbitrary. While the fetish of a detected surface irregularity or of the perceived cross-shape might work to anchor one's vision for a moment—to pretend

as if there were really only one—these blinders in the end, I would think, fail in shutting out the recognition of insistent sameness, fail in convincing the viewer that the relevant mode of experiencing the black square paintings is through the particularities of an individual canvas over their experience as seriality.⁷⁷⁶ This is to drive home identity as articulated through class and type, through the logic of sameness and repetition, and to challenge notions of singular identity. A Reinhardt black square painting is a token of type and as such it participates in the nightmarish monstrosity of all rationalizing modernisms: this is identity formulated as non-entity, things bearing identity but lacking proper self-identity. This is the first move Reinhardt's ruse: fully establishing the terror of dystopian identity, the reign of the concept as brutal uniformity.

That said, however, it should be noted that it is in fact quite rare to have the opportunity afforded by the 1966-67 show. To see more than one Reinhardt black square painting at a time does not happen frequently, if at all, outside of specifically identified "Reinhardt" exhibitions. The last major one of these occurred over a decade ago in 1991.⁷⁷⁷ This observation activates important tensions of quantity and quality: one can either have a lot—the innumerable, the endlessness suggested by the Lambert photograph—or just one. Although a great deal of the significance of a Reinhardt black square painting is precisely in this seriality, typically, one finds just a single canvas on display (fig. 32) Here the museum mobilizes all its powers to endow the object with the auratic privilege of a masterpiece, of a singularity—to shift the semantics of the black square paintings from "one of a kind" (merely one token of a type) to "one of a kind" (originality).

The possible motivations for this type of shifting relate, I believe, to a certain impossibility built into the logic of Reinhardt's project, and which Reinhardt exploits to potentially expressive, purposive ends. There is a pointed pointlessness to acquiring more than one Reinhardt black painting. Indeed one might venture to put it in these terms: it is impossible to *collect* Reinhardt black square paintings, rather one can only *accumulate* more of the same. More than one of this type of object displaces the situation out of the realm of quality into the blunt counting house of quantity. It shows up that aspect of

collecting which looks more like accumulating, like stock-piling, certainly an activity for merchant warehouses not marble-floored museums. In this sense, one can possess as many Reinhardt black paintings as one can afford, but no matter how many one accumulates/collects, in the end, one will still possess only one—that is, possess only one quality. In this sense, the black paintings do act as Reinhardt had suggested, as an “effigy against [the] business world.”⁷⁷⁸ Once again, the systematic interchangeability of the paintings (all Reinhardt black paintings are made according to an absolute formula) turn into the conditions for absolute inexchangeability. The logic of equivalence has preempted the logic of exchange. Marx’s tailor cannot exchange coats for coats. Within the system of his series Reinhardt’s paintings are “incapable of confronting each other as commodities,” as exchange values.

This can be put differently: in posing a system of an interchangeability that results in a paradoxical inexchangeability, Reinhardt realizes a stasis from out of the conditions of flux and exchange. Because Reinhardt’s series is a static one in which there is no forward or backward, no progression, no development, no change, they are, in a sense, without temporality. The beginning and end are there at once, they are timeless, they are “Timeless” paintings.⁷⁷⁹ In other words, one finds oneself in the present. What this answers is that ultimate dream of dialectical resolution: it is a situation in which cognition of a single black square painting rather than marking a loss of totality, is simultaneously a recognition of the whole. One has the particular and the whole at once. It is the achievement of Oneness.

2. Newman’s Passion: The Stations of the Cross

There are some obvious reasons for Newman’s unease with series (and the question of it poses). For where series apparently provided Reinhardt with a manner of final solution in the form of the “concept escaping concept,” it presented Newman, quite in contrast, with a powerful challenge threatening to undermine the authority of his project, the very grounds of his argument for what properly separates painting from pictures. The qualities and ideas associated with series—as an idea (plan, sketch, theory) set out in advance of

the process/implantation, a model of repetitive production, the negation of individuality and singularity, the part being governed by rules, parameters set up above and beyond the reality of the particular instance—were all qualities of the bad identity regime against which Newman struggled. “The history of modern painting,” he insisted, “has been the struggle against the catalogue.” And, if one is allowed to dig just slightly into the etymological turf of “catalogue” one unearths the synonyms “list,” “register,” “enumeration,” and, not least of all, “series.”⁷⁸⁰ Thus, in another incarnation, the statement might have read, and suggestively so, like this: “The history of modern painting has been the struggle against the series.” But repetition (as examined in the discussion of Reinhardt above) was also the very mechanism by which identities are set up—by asserting and reasserting, by articulating the I against the non-identity of mere existence. Mere existence—chaos and formlessness—were not adequate solutions, as Newman had explained. Nature still had to be kept at bay. The problem with non-identity as the “unpresentable vision of the ceaseless flow of the absolutely new,” as Jameson describes it, as the Deleuzian flux of “perpetual change, in which neither subject nor object can yet be imagined, but only the terror and exhaustion of radical difference without markers or signposts,” was precisely that it was “unpresentable.”⁷⁸¹ The bind Newman found himself in was this: he understood that recognition (identity) needed, indeed cognitively necessitated, repetition, but that the very processes of repetition generated the kinds of non-originary, inauthentic, fabricated identities Newman so detested. Repetition dispersed and flattened identity into the terrible logic of the ever-same. How did one go about gaining the recognition of self-identity, a sense of self and of ultimate meanings, without succumbing to repetition? Was it possible to achieve One and *not* the Same? A sense of Onement but without a trace of sameness?

That Newman should stage his most dramatic confrontation with series through the highly loaded and potentially explosive theme of Christ’s Passion deserves, in this regard, our particular attention. Perhaps the first and most obvious point to consider is the apparent incongruity between the artist and his particular choice of subject matter. For Newman, a Jew who had lived during an era freshly fraught with the horrors of modern

anti-Semitism, the Passion might appear either an unlikely choice in subject matter or one exceptionally charged with tension, or both. For the Passion of Jesus was a prominent wedge used in anti-Semitic ideology by which to harshly articulate the difference between Christian and Jew. It was a powerful rallying point in the argument for the condemnation of Jews.⁷⁸² Certainly Rosenberg thought summoning up this controversial material was a bad idea and he had given Newman his cautionary advice against it. “To my mind, the title *The Stations of the Cross* was a mistake, and I argued against it with Newman on the ground that an event held sacred by a cult and standing for it as a symbol ought not to be appropriated by outsiders and given changed meanings. . . . The harm of the title lay, it seemed to me, not so much in invoking the impenetrable concept of the ‘why’ of human suffering as in associating the question with Christian lore, to which the artist was essentially alien.”⁷⁸³ Rosenberg who was no stranger to the heated debates of the post-war period on Jewish identity, the issue of exceptionalism or assimilation and on understanding the roots of modern anti-Semitism, probably saw this as a needless opening of the proverbial can of worms. This series, in Rosenberg’s opinion, functioned perfectly well without the assignation of this particular title; in appropriating the title *The Stations of the Cross* the artist only took upon himself a perverse burden and left himself exposed to countless, possibly violent, misreading. As it was, Rosenberg’s advice was not heeded, which leaves open the question: what then was the necessity between the theme of Christ’s Passion and Newman’s attempts to come to terms with series?

I would like to think that Newman’s stubborn insistence upon sticking with this difficult material came, in part at least, from Newman’s acknowledgement of the intriguing thematic interpenetrations between the challenge of Series and the tragedy of the Stations and from his recognition of how perfectly, if damningly so, Series and Stations signed for each other. The relationship is a tidily self-reflexive one: Newman made a series of the Passion, but also as well made a passion—a struggle, a suffering, an agonistic moment—out of the Series. The paintings operate both as a series of the Passion and a passion of the Series. In this vein I think the referent to Newman’s *Stations* is neither the religious fabula of the Christian savior nor a more esoteric one of

Kabbalistic symbology but is a third and prior point, a generic source that when stripped bare of these sectarian guises, reveals itself to be the motor of philosophical dialectic—the question, why? (*lema*).

In establishing, and adamantly so, the theme of this series of fourteen canvases as the Passion, Newman retells the ancient story of dialectical struggle: the philosophical crisis of metaphysical dualism, with the fateful coming to self-cognition in the act of distinguishing between subject and object and subsequently with its implication of division, difference, distance between part and whole, between man and Absolute Being, the cognizance of not being one and the same. This was the tragedy at the heart of dialectical narratives. The human condition meant contingency, alienation, never being at one with oneself, never being present. Identity could never be the authentic identity of immediate self-presence but always was the contrived and belated identity of systematic substitutions. “Finite and conditional beings,” as one philosopher summarized, “are constantly moving from a past that has ceased to be into a future that does not yet exist; they are obliged to see themselves in terms of memory or anticipation; their self-knowledge is not direct, but mediated by the distinction of what was and what will be. They are not self-identical or ‘all of a piece’: they live in a present that vanishes even as it comes to be, and can then only be revealed through memory.”⁷⁸⁴ It is consciousness of this tragic flaw (“The ones who are born are to die”) that propels the question—the “question that has no answer” and the “original question”—as Newman put it in his short statement for the *Stations of Cross* exhibition catalogue: “Lema Sabachthani—why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why?”⁷⁸⁵ This is the agony, the suffering, the passion. And still one seeks meaning and identity and presence, seeks the reunification of subject and object. Still there is the desire for that ultimate reckoning by which our singularity, particularity and contingent existence and the One are reconciled, our at-one-ment.

There is, however, another narrative harbored within Newman’s *Stations*. This other narrative returns to the second part of my proposal, that this is also a passion of the series, a struggle with seriality as the logic of sameness and the dangers of its absolutist

threat—to homogenize human singularity and particularity into a single universal identity. If above, the Passion was read through a Neoplatonic lens in which the Christ figure makes the redemptive journey from part (human) to whole (divine), it can also be read through the dark lens of primitive magic and superstition. Seen thus, the Christological narrative is one of sacrifice and the Christ figure is one of substitution, operating as a token in a process of exchange, a this-for-a-that.

It is interesting to return again to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and listen to Horkheimer and Adorno on the topic of sacrifice. In the process of working out their thesis of the barbarism of Enlightenment principles and the catastrophe of modern bourgeois rationality, one of the notions the authors refuse is the potentially comforting retreat to imaginings of a primitive world, of a prehistory in which humans had access to a more authentic being and in which the troubles of the modern world held no account. The authors quickly unhinge this possibility by arguing that the sacrificial practices of primitive magic are the early templating of the “modern” logics of substitution and representative identity. “Substitution in the course of sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic,” they proclaim. “Even though the hind offered up for the daughter, and the lamb for the first-born, still had to have specific qualities, they already represented the species. They already exhibited the non-specificity of the example.”⁷⁸⁶ Primitive magic’s ritual sacrifice—already an action in a universe demanding of the reckoning or settling of cosmic balance sheets—sets the foundation stone for future economies of symbolic exchange. Thus, the high pitch of Newman’s agon is belied by his choice of figure: Christ, the exemplary figure of the dialectical resolution of part and whole as the beatific realization of self-identity and self-presence but, also, the exemplary substitute, the token of a type.

The textual traces of Newman’s struggle with series are found in several statements that accompanied the public exhibition of *The Stations*. The difficulty of the problem of series is suggested by the artist’s repeated forays into defining and defending what he was doing. He would attempt to work it out several times: there would be an interview with *Newsweek*, a statement for *ARTnews*, and a statement for the exhibition

catalogue, all in 1966, plus several related passages from slightly earlier statements dating to 1962 and 1963-64. Perhaps the most openly aggressive and tense of these is the one that appeared in *ARTnews*. The prose has a tight, fists-held-close-to-the-body stance of a fighter on the defensive, anticipating heavy criticism, and it is a tone conspicuous in its difference from Newman's far more characteristic verbal presence: expansive, filling space with confident assertion. Already the defensive turn is heard clearly in the opening sentence: "No one asked me to do these Stations of the Cross."⁷⁸⁷ It is a forceful, blunt reassurance that Newman's principled work ethos remains in tact still, despite the subject matter and despite that subject matter's traditional association with the institution of the church. As the very next line begins, "They were not commissioned," they were not the result of an outside demand. This lack of predetermination is highlighted in the following paragraph, as Newman writes, and again in what I take to serve as reassurance: "I began these paintings eight years ago the way I begin all my paintings—by painting." The particular theme, the Stations of the Cross, in other words, rather than having preceded—stood before and outside as an idea to which practice must serve and implement—Newman is careful to note that it was only "while painting them that it came to me (I was on the fourth one) that I had something particular here. It was at that moment that the intensity that I felt the paintings had made me think of them as the Stations of the Cross."⁷⁸⁸ The very next paragraph drives home this point about the dialectical fluidity of Newman's process, whether in the case of one painting or in the case of a serial grouping of paintings. His process is the balanced interpenetration of theory and practice, idea and matter, subject and object. This dialectic is palpable in the artist's famous lines: "It is as I work that the work itself begins to have an effect on me. Just as I affect the canvas, so does the canvas affect me."⁷⁸⁹ Nevertheless, this return to Newman's more familiar voice—concise, powerful, without apology—is a mere lull in the storm as uneasiness surfaces again in the following lines.

From the very beginning I felt that I would do a series. However, I had no intention of doing a theme with variations. Nor did I have any desire to develop a technical device over and over. From the very beginning I felt I had an important subject, and it was while working that it made itself clear

to me that these works involved my understanding of the Passion. Just as the Passion is not a series of anecdotes but embodies a single event, so these fourteen paintings, even though each one is whole and separate in its immediacy, all together form a complete statement of a single subject. That is why I could not do them all at once, automatically, one after another. It took eight years. I used to do my other work and come back to these. When there was a spontaneous, inevitable urge to do them is when I did them.⁷⁹⁰

The tension in this prose is perspicuous. Strikingly, it is because one knows something of Newman's project (what was at stake) that one appreciates the significance of Newman's description of how and why he made a series. For the contradiction is plain: how does one reconcile a knowledge, a plan, "from the very beginning" of series with the image of the painter acting on, and only on, the authentic, spontaneous urge, between knowing something (that it would be a series, that it had an important subject matter) "from the very beginning" and figuring something out while in the process, "while working" ("I was on the fourth one.")? How does one reconcile each "part" as "whole and separate in its immediacy" but also that those autonomous parts are a unity as well? As Newman would write in his statement for the catalogue, "Can the Passion be expressed by a series of anecdotes, by fourteen sentimental illustrations? Do not the Stations tell of one event?"⁷⁹¹ A series of anecdotes, the episodic, was precisely the pitfall Newman had to avoid. He spoke in the summer of 1962, when already well into the Stations series, of the necessity of being "antianecdotal."⁷⁹² Painting that was episodic, "call[ed] for a sequel."

This must happen if a painting does not give a sensation of wholeness or fulfillment. That is why I have no interest in the episodic or ecstatic, however abstract. The excitement always ends at the brink and leaves the subject, so to speak, hanging there like the girl in *The Perils of Pauline*. The next painting repeats the excitement, in a kind of ritual. One expects the girl to be saved finally, but she is again left hanging on the brink, and so on and on. This is the weakness of the ecstatic and the episodic. It is an endless search for a statement of personality that never takes place. The truly passionate exists on a different level.⁷⁹³

In other words, it described a series of deferrals, where presence, "wholeness or fulfillment" is held out as a promise but endlessly put off. Krauss, once again, though she

had in mind a generation of artist's younger than Newman, expressed these concerns succinctly when she questioned the "viability of the very notion of painting in series" when dealing with paintings presumably explicitly concerned with "singleness-or wholeness-of-aspect." With serialization, she wrote, "we feel that we are not copresent with the 'picture,' that indeed the idea of it and the multiple serial developments which support the burgeoning of that idea, are somewhere else." A painting "suddenly appears" to possess "several facets or aspects, not all of which face the viewer, so that the painting in some way is not everywhere equally open and simultaneously available to the viewer."⁷⁹⁴ In other words, to be "copresent" with one painting of a known series is equally to be absent from all the other members belonging to that series. All of this is to register something seemingly counter to the notion of "onement." The question that remained for Newman was how to reconcile the apparent contradiction between series and its character of being parceled out and the "single event" of experiencing it all at once?

There was a lot of hesitation in associating Newman so closely with the notion of series. Newman took on a huge risk: he had to demonstrate that his participation in series was not an outright reversal of his professed aesthetic commitments. This unease can also be observed in the statements made by Lawrence Alloway, the curator responsible for the exhibition of *The Stations* at the Guggenheim. Alloway made several attempts to buttress Newman's claim that it was possible to work in series and to still also speak of the "one event." An examination of the curator's statements has the benefit not only of highlighting where both the artist's and curator's arguments ran parallel but also Alloway's statements tend to reveal more clearly the perplexity of the situation. Where Newman had the benefit of a dose of poetic logic to get past snags, Alloway, as both the curator and as a critic, was left with the task of explaining to the public—without recourse to the artist's license—the mechanics of the operation.

Before tracing Alloway's struggle with reconciling Newman and series, I first would like to rehearse briefly the chronology of events surrounding the Alloway-Newman-*Stations* congruence, as the sequencing of plan and execution will play a

significant role. The advent of what would become the canvases for *The Stations* occurred sometime around February 1958, several months after Newman's debilitating heart attack of November 1957. In the spring of 1958 Newman had his highly consequential Bennington College exhibition, a show to which Alloway traveled and saw in person. Presumably what Alloway saw at Bennington piqued his interest for, soon after, he would visit Newman's New York studio. During that studio visit he saw the first two canvases of what would become the *Stations* series.⁷⁹⁵ In 1960 Newman would complete the next two canvases of the series, and according to the artist, it was at this stage—and only at this stage—that he realized the theme of his series was (had been/would be) the Passion of Christ. Over the next several years Newman will experiment with “series” in media outside of painting: a series of twenty-two ink drawings of 1960 and a lithographic series, *18 Cantos*, from 1963-64. By 1964 he will have made significant headway in the *Stations*, and importantly, plans will be hatched with Alloway (now a curator at the Guggenheim) for the series's exhibition. These plans come to fruition on April 20, 1966, when “The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani” opens at the Guggenheim.

As curator and chief organizer of the exhibition, Alloway contributed the catalogue essay. Before examining that essay, I want to turn first to an article Alloway wrote and published earlier, in June 1965, in *Artforum*. What stands out in this piece is the author's attempt to dissociate Newman's project from serial work. From the chronology above, it is clear that Alloway is not only well aware of Newman's own engagement with a painting series but that the curator also is well along in preparing and organizing an exhibition of this series for the upcoming year. Alloway opens the essay with the suggestion: “One way to approach the painting of Barnett Newman is by raising the question, do you believe in masterpieces?” Alloway's own implied answer is that Newman's work is still very much within the masterpiece mindset. This stands against what Alloway locates as two current anti-masterpiece trends, serial work and the “spontaneous sketches and unfinished works” of “diaristic notation.”⁷⁹⁶ Alloway's Newman, to phrase this differently, belongs neither to the spontaneous gesturalism of

1940s and 1950s Abstract Expressionism nor to the serial, system-like minimalism of the 1960s. It is to the latter of these anti-masterpiece traditions that I want to focus. First, listen to Alloway's description of this trend: "Artists who work in open-ended series of the same image and the same size . . . tend to confer equal validity on all the works executed as a group, with the result that it is the whole series that counts as the expressive unit. Under the conditions of serial painting, as we may call it, the continuity of sequels tends to outweigh the determinate form of any one of the works in isolation."⁷⁹⁷ The part, in other words, is swallowed up by the whole; collective, mass identity overwhelms individual, singular identity, all of which stands antithetically to the idea of a masterpiece as excellence, remarkability, singular achievement, and originality.⁷⁹⁸ Alloway is quick to assert a distinction between Newman and serial painting practices. "Newman's paintings are opposed to work which follows . . . serial form." But here Alloway obviously needs to tread mindfully. He has already put his full support behind *The Stations*. Newman's paintings, he admits, do possess a "central image"—the vertical zips with minimally inflected color fields—an image that is sustained through all of Newman's mature graphic work. Doubtless, Alloway is aware of how close this sounds to some manner of seriality, what a tight spot he is finding himself in, for his very next move is to argue that the artist's "extraordinary sense of scale," is able to "diversif[y] his central image so that none of the run-on effects of serial painting blurs the identity of individual works." It sounds as if Alloway is pegging the argument vaguely on the suggestion that there is just enough difference between Newman's canvases that the integrity of the individual works is maintained. Although Alloway is able to avoid a collision here, it is a narrow miss, a hair's breath.

This 1965 essay was a mere skirmish compared to the work Alloway would need to do a year later for his catalogue essay to *The Stations*. If earlier material had hinted at the relevance and proximity of issues of seriality to Newman's painting production, the year 1966 with its public unveiling of Newman's series brought the troublesome issue to its full-blown state. The tone of Alloway's essay, as the tone had been in Newman's statement, borders on the tense and defensive. In what feels like a preemptive move, he

concedes to the seeming misfit between Newman's aesthetic and the conceit of series. "The production of series by Newman," the curator readily admits, "is an unexpected development in his work. Unlike other artists of his generation, given to numbering their paintings and to production in runs, he has consistently defined his work by separate titles, a verbal statement of autonomy of each work."⁷⁹⁹ But, now, the task set out for Alloway, was to develop strategies for defending Newman's use of series.

Alloway's first strategy is indicated in the following two lines: "Newman did not begin these paintings with The Stations in mind," and "The discovery of a subject that proposed fixed limits did not mean that Newman could now work easily by filling in a given schema." What these statements serve to guarantee is the status of the artist's praxis. Despite the "production in runs" quality of series, here, with Newman's series, theory did not precede practice. There was no preexisting schema or predetermining plan dictating what Newman did in front of the blank canvas.⁸⁰⁰ Quite the contrary in fact, and again in a reiteration of Newman's statement but also with elaboration, Alloway asserts that, "Newman's Stations were arrived at through a process of *self-recognition* [emphasis added]," and that "Newman worked, first, without pre-knowledge of group or cycle; then, as a result of developing possibilities within the work itself, he accepted a definition that partially determined the future course of the series."⁸⁰¹ "It became a project, a speculative extension into the future, demanding paintings for its realization. This method of learning from the initial stage of work is parallel to the kind of responsiveness that Jackson Pollock revealed in single paintings. He would make a mark and then develop or oppose it by other marks until he reached a point at which he had exhausted the work's cues to him to act further. Newman had demonstrated the possibility of such awareness operating not in terms of visual judgment and touch within one painting, but as a source of structure for a series."⁸⁰²

The parallel to Pollock that Alloway is proposing is a fascinating one. One hears some of Rosenberg and American Action Painting echoed in its lines. "There is no reason why an act cannot be prolonged from a piece of paper to a canvas. Or repeated on another scale and with more control," or, one might add, from one canvas to another. Also, these

lines seem to fit as well: “The canvas has “talked back” to the artist . . . to provoke him into a dramatic dialogue. Each stroke had to be a decision and was answered by a new question,” or, again, the artist had to be responsive to the work’s cues, a process of marks “develop[ed] or oppos[ed] . . . by other marks.”⁸⁰³ To this last statement, I would include also an elaboration of the point made some years later by Rosenberg in his Dallas Museum catalogue on Action Painting in which he writes: “Action Painting has extracted the element of decision inherent in all art in that the work is not finished at its beginning but has to be carried forward by an accumulation of “right” gestures.”⁸⁰⁴ Thus, to take Alloway’s explanation and read it along with Rosenberg what one has in Newman’s series is an interesting accord between the Action Painting principle of theory and practice in total dialogue but, in an expanded arena: the dialogue now extends through a series of canvases. The surprising twist comes in this: where one thought with serial practice there would be a productionist mentality there is the ethos of the Action Painter. There could be no charges that Newman’s work was “finished at its beginning,” for the theme, as one is repeatedly reminded was arrived at somewhere in the middle, *in medias res*, when Newman was already well into his process, already acting on the canvas, with enough of a dialogue in progress that the work could talk back to him, reveal to the artist his theme. To rephrase Alloway, the possibility of the Passion developed out of the work itself.

Unfortunately, one problem may have been tended to but another troubling issue surfaces immediately. For, to come to an understanding of this theme—the Passion, the *Stations of the Cross*—is also to register (on some level, at least) its identity as a *set* series, that part of its identity is indicated in its formal structure of fourteen units, events, “stations.” Therefore, even if Newman came to the realization that he was working on a series of the *Stations*, as he insisted, well after he began the project, it means that the end, at some point, had to be predetermined. Somewhere near mid-way Newman decided that the “conversation” would stop, that the back-and-forth, question-and-answer period would end, or, as Alloway carefully, almost legalistically, couches it, the artist had “accepted a definition that partially determined the future course of the series.” Alloway

attempts to work out of this bind in two ways, neither of which, to my mind, is completely successful in blotting out our knowledge of this series's predeterminations or "partial" determinations. On the one hand Alloway appears to congratulate Newman for imposing a limit to his series. "One problem of working in serial form is knowing when to stop," the curator warns. In the face of serial endlessness, Newman's possession of a definite ending point is vaunted as a redeeming quality. Secondly, Alloway reminds the reader of the particular symbolic importance of fourteen in this situation. "The number fourteen is both an absolute limit and a symbol; more or less than this number would make it impossible to recognize any connections with the declared iconography. Thus Newman's series embodies an order inseparable from the meaning of the work." As Alloway would have it, the number of units in the series is an expression then, of the perfect marriage of content and form. Nonetheless, the reassurances about the outstanding virtues of Newman's series—not an endless number and not an arbitrary one—fall somehow short of the task of sorting out what feel like serious contradictions in Newman's decision to work in series. Indeed, given all that is known of the commitments involved in Newman's argument for painting, that Alloway concludes this first part of his argument by remarking that Newman is "working with a subject which is personal but *regulated by number* [emphasis added]" should raise flags indeed.⁸⁰⁵

The second main point in Alloway's argument—which again is a revisitation of one made by Newman—concerns the unity of the fourteen canvases. Newman had written, and problematically so, "each painting is total and complete by itself, yet only the fourteen together make clear the wholeness of the single event."⁸⁰⁶ Alloway's line is essentially the same though the curator's thoughts on the topic place even less emphasis on the notion of each painting being total and complete by itself, thus reducing the potentially perilous separation between part and whole semantically allowed for in Newman's statement. Alloway's work at closing this gap occurs in the passage below.

Newman has emphasized that he regards the Stations as phases of a continuous agony and not as a series of separate episodes, in which he is basically at one with traditional iconography. . . . One consequence of this view is that it would be a serious misreading of the work to consider it in

formal terms as a theme and variations. Theme-and-variation readings are applicable neither to the subject matter nor to the restriction of means to black or white paint on raw canvas, because such a form assumes a first statement (giving a theme) accompanied by modifications. In fact, there is no such key to the Stations of the Cross, which have to be experienced as a unit of fourteen continuous parts.⁸⁰⁷

This point is one that Alloway continues to labor upon in the every next paragraph, and again, emphasizing, at all costs, the “unity of the Passion.” “Indeed so strong is Newman’s sense of the unity of the fourteen paintings that he regards the group as a cry,” he writes. The unifying cry will replace “duration by spreading the climax of the Passion over its earlier phases.”⁸⁰⁸ Slightly later, Alloway reinforces his argument for the essential unity of the fourteen parts through a discussion of their spatial arrangement. “Although Newman’s Stations have no obligatory arrangement (something of the flexibility of easel painting is retained), they need to be adjacent, so that repetitions and cross-references can perform identifying and expressive roles. Flexible as the paintings are, their spatial unity, as a group, is essential to their meaning.”⁸⁰⁹ This prompts the question: where does onement then lie? Is it in the separate parts (“each painting is total and complete by itself”) or the communal whole (“only the fourteen together make the wholeness of the single event”)?

These were, are still, monumentally difficult questions. What should be pointed out here is that these were challenges Newman had confronted before *The Stations*. He had rehearsed, in a manner of speaking, the problem and practiced his justification earlier and in situations far less charged. Many of the same perplexing issues that nagged at the *Stations* had already been posed with the artist’s lithographic series, the *18 Cantos* of 1963-64.⁸¹⁰ In the statement that accompanied the boxed edition of the lithographic series Newman was at pains to point out the individuality of each print. Formally, this was expressed by the individualized margins for each print. “[E]ach canto has its own personal margins,” Newman explained, “Each print and its paper had to be decided by me, and in some cases the same print exists with two different sets of margins, because each imprint means something different to me.” Then, in language that sounds very much

like the kind of justification he will eventually use for the *Stations*, he writes, “These eighteen cantos are then single, individual expressions, each with its unique difference. Yet since they grew one out of the other, they also form an organic whole—so that as they separate and as they join in their interplay, their symphonic mass lends additional clarity to each individual canto, and at the same time each canto adds its song to the full chorus.” Although this serves as a prefiguration of the issues of the *Stations*, an important difference was in scale. Newman continues: “I must explain that I had no plan to make a portfolio of ‘prints.’ I am not a printmaker. Nor did I intend to make a ‘set’ by introducing superficial variety. These cantos arose from a compelling necessity—the result of grappling with the instrument.”⁸¹¹ Again, the familiar refrain, the artist did not intend to make a set (or a series) but the set evolved out of a necessity within the process of working. Theory did not dictate practice. However, the stakes, compared to those of the *Stations*, were far lower. His anxiety about working in series and in an explicit medium of reproducibility was reduced by the simple declaration that he was not a “printmaker,” and that the series/set was the result of working with a new “instrument.” The diminutive connotations are hard to miss in Newman’s description of lithography. Not a “medium” proper, lithography was but an instrument. “For me,” Newman states, lithography “is an instrument that one plays. It is like a piano or an orchestra; and as with an instrument, it *interprets*.”⁸¹² Those familiar with Newman’s writings will catch the particular connotations of “playing” and “interpreting”: these were both things Newman found completely antithetical to the pursuit of painting proper.⁸¹³ Nevertheless, despite this difference in scale of importance—the lesser realm of lithography, the higher pursuit of painting—there is not a marked change between the *Cantos* and the *Stations* in the type of justification Newman would present for his implementation of series. The relationship between part and whole is marked in each accompanying text as a site both troublesome and vital but one would be pressed to say that the later text had in fact come any closer to reconciling being “of a piece” with being of a series.

The strategist’s question here might be, if the qualities of series carried such potential to undermine the qualities that Newman held to be of supreme value in painting,

why then would the artist put himself in a position to have to confront it? Why attempt a non-serial series at all if one could avoid it? Why, given the option, willingly assume this cross to bear? Just for a moment let me return to Alloway's discussion as a way of situating the problem and to indicate that the issue of series and seriality were far from unnecessary to Newman: they were not merely the late career whimsy of an already established master with nothing to lose, nor could one say Newman was merely experimenting, out of curiosity, with an idiom to which the younger generation of 1960s abstract painters seemed particularly drawn. Immediately after commenting on the unexpected arrival of a series by Newman, Alloway states: "The fact that Newman has now painted a series does not, in fact, dissolve the compactness and solidity on which his earlier work seems predicated." This sounds like an attempt to nip in the bud what Alloway might have imagined as a dangerous recursive logic: to imagine that Newman had just possibly been doing series all along, that the layperson's initial suspicions had in fact been right on: he had been doing the same thing, over and over again, since day one.⁸¹⁴ What Alloway is trying to protect against is the perception that would take Newman's identity—the one of the miraculous rebirth in 1948, the Newman of the startling zip paintings—as an identity predicated on or articulated through sameness. But arguably Alloway was in no position to avoid the question, for in a sense the dilemma of series had in fact been born simultaneously with *Onement I* itself. *The Stations* only brings out to the open a contradiction already present in *Onement I*. Series, repetition, the sense of having or revisiting a moment again, once more and another time—the episodic—are already implied within the title to the inaugural work. And, indeed, the numerical addendum proves to have been useful, for *Onement I* would eventually be followed, series-like, with *Onement II*, *Onement III*, *Onement IV*, *Onement V*, and *Onement VI*.⁸¹⁵ Which of course, raises a perplexing but interesting question: what quality of Onement (singularity, absoluteness, identity, presence) could Newman possibly be referring to if there were to be more and others?

This perplexing moment in *Onement I* goes far beyond an issue of titles. The question of seriality in Newman's work pops up not just in the *Onement* series proper but

indeed extends as a general query to be posed to all of Newman's zip paintings. In her recent essay for the 2002 Philadelphia Museum of Art Newman retrospective, Ann Temkin provides a succinct account of this issue. Though she does not mention "series" by name, she does suggest that the special quality of *Onement I*, its originality, was linked "paradoxically," to its "repeatability."

Onement I appeared sufficiently independent to persuade its maker that it was, so to speak, an orphan. Then what it needed was siblings, to produce a totality of paintings that would be recognized as such by their family resemblance. . . . What was it about *Onement I* that would have struck Newman as an act of origin, rather than a depiction of it? The answer lies, paradoxically, in its repeatability. . . . *Onement I* is open to repetition precisely because it sets out a template for a language that can regenerate itself; it resolves the paradox of how to be original, again and again. . . . a road map for a way of painting that could last a lifetime. This is what Newman had needed.⁸¹⁶

She continues:

This is the amazing tightrope that Newman's paintings walk. On the one hand, each is sufficiently alike to forge an identity as a "Newman," something that was of infinite importance to him. On the other hand, each is sufficiently different to be recognized, individually, as an original. It is their close connection to one another, crucially, that underscores the uniqueness of each. Were they a group of very different paintings, the question of uniqueness would not arise; one would take it for granted. Newman's development of a visual language that is so sharply pared down raises the question he badly wanted raised: How am I, this painting, different, original, all to myself, despite many apparent signs to the contrary?⁸¹⁷

Temkin highlights in these passages the importance—and very likely necessity—of series and seriality as the backdrop or ground(s) for the appearance, visibility and recognizability of the individuality of each *Onement's* individuality. This complicates the understanding of Newman's immediacy and presence. It asks that one imagines some manner of interpretative route, whereby meaning and identity and presence can be articulated across relational entities but all this accomplished beyond the semiotic operation presence/absence. In such a universe the registration of an other's presence neither reduces nor infringes upon the fullness of one's own being.

“They seemed to move through time—a kind of sense of the evolution of a process unfurling itself so that each individual unit within the whole reflected the whole and in order to see the whole one had to relate all the paintings together. I thought of Bach in the feeling of the separate notes working in and out of each other in a fugal way to make up a oneness again.”⁸¹⁸ This was how the artist Philip Wofford in 1971 described his reaction to *The Stations* at the Guggenheim. One wonders if this was the sort of understanding of series that Newman hoped to effect, where the problem of identity incarnated in the tension between part and whole is worked out “fugally” and finally resolved in oneness. Nor should one fail to notice in Wofford’s appreciation a classic description of dialectical resolution. It is a rehearsal of how to have oneness, unity, identity, how to possess something beyond the fleeting, ungraspable, instantaneous flashes of pure difference, and how to have it not as the impoverished sameness of perfect homogeneity but how to go out into the world of difference, and embody the heterogeneous richness that enriches identity (fig. 33).⁸¹⁹ Or, as Reinhardt put it, not sameness but oneness. But where Reinhardt’s approach to the problem meant working out a path to oneness through the very mechanisms of sameness, here in contrast, sameness was precisely what Newman’s notion of authentic identity, true oneness, was both threatened by and was forced to struggle against. An early piece of Newman’s writing dating to 1945 speaks to how deeply this dialectical narrative informed his project. “Man is a tragic being, and the heart of this tragedy is the metaphysical problem of part and whole. This dichotomy of our nature, from which we can never escape and which because of its nature impels us helplessly to try to resolve it, motivates our struggle for perfection and seals our inevitable doom. For man is one, he is single, he is alone; and yet he belongs, he is part of another. This conflict is the greatest of our tragedies. . . .”⁸²⁰ I would argue that Newman’s engagement with the theme of the *Stations of the Cross* is strong evidence that his position had not changed much in almost twenty years. For, as Newman indicated with poetic force, this series was the cry, the suffering beset by the tragic consciousness of the part-and-whole situation describing humanity’s ancient alienation.⁸²¹ *Onement I* had been that act of articulation that miraculously created

identity as wholeness, oneness, unity (there was no having a “piece” of it, no fragmenting the “image,” one took it all in at once or one took nothing) without having that identity articulated through part/whole relations, without the separation into figure/ground. Even so, as I mentioned above, the solution of *Onement I*, already opened out to the problems of series. Series became the arena where the problems of figure/ground and part/whole were displaced. The victorious wholeness, the long-desired and utopian of-a-pieceness revealed to Newman in *Onement I* was a short-lived one. With series the achieved wholeness of the single canvas became but a part, a piece, a figure articulated through and against the whole, the ground, the community, the language of series. The seriality puts into question the integrity of the part. Returning to Krauss’s perplexed questions, how does one speak of wholeness, the experience of full presence when a painting is part of a known series? What it appears to introduce is absence, the lack of self-presence or the fully self-evident. It admits to identity articulated differentially, thus paradigmatically and therefore not of speaking and mastering one’s own self-identity but having identity spoken through the conventionality of a system, of a social order. In this light *The Stations of the Cross* is a crystallization of Newman’s dilemma: how to forge authentic identity given the tragic part/whole, individual/social “dichotomy of our nature.”

To draw this discussion to a close I will turn to the mysterious case of the “Fifteenth” station. This is a canvas appended to the series but differing from the fourteen other canvases in both dimensions (several inches taller and approximately a foot wider) and in the use of color (a deep red zip). There has been disagreement on how exactly to place or think about this canvas in relation to the rest of the series. Alan Stone, when he first showed this work, made the mistake—and one can hardly blame him—of calling it “Resurrection,” but this was a title Newman “disavowed.” Instead, Newman thought of it as a “conclusion” to the series and titled the painting *Be II*. This anecdote leaves one to wonder, what is the difference between concluding the *Stations* with a “Resurrection” and “Be II”? Does not the latter also signify the former? Cannot one read “Be II” as “to be” again, once more, as in a “resurrection”? But obviously Newman felt the difference strongly. Stone’s title had been disavowed. My suggestion is that a “Resurrection” would

have made the series into a tidy package. The “Resurrection” scene conventionally is the redemptive and promising conclusion, the happy ending. For Newman to insist that his conclusion not be taken as a resurrection but is “Be II” is to upend any neat cathartic closure. It is, in an oddly poignant maneuver of Newman’s, an acknowledgement of series, a reminder of returns and doublings. It is also to juxtapose quite plainly the competing aspects of identity with which Newman’s series grapples: first, the self-evidence of “to be” as that which is “immutably and absolutely,” is “undifferentiated and outside time” and secondly, the appending “II” which is already to suggest dualism, differentiation, mutability, secessionality. If Newman’s relationship to series does not resolve itself cleanly, then one might turn to the idea of Newman’s keeping things at the level of the tragic. Tragic self-awareness is perhaps the most pointedly human moment of the dialectic, for *Be II* is “to be” but also—fatally and tragically—not to be, as well.

A Political Allegory

Throughout the history of our civilization, two traditions, two opposed tendencies, have been in conflict: the Roman tradition and the popular tradition, the imperial tradition and the federalist tradition, the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition.

Peter Kropotkin⁸²²

Marxists can march here hand in hand with anarchists, provided both parties uncompromisingly reject the reactionary police-patrol spirit represented by Joseph Stalin. . . .

Leon Trotsky, Andre Breton and Diego Rivera⁸²³

Thus far I have structured the comparison of Newman and Reinhardt as a movement from sameness towards difference. As I have outlined, the similarity of their ultimate aims for painting, once established, fork out into two highly contrary paths. But though these paths appear to be heading in opposed directions, Newman and Reinhardt both arrive at seriality as the critical crux in their arguments for painting/identity. What I intend to do

now is to return to the earlier suggestion that the comparison of the two artists' painting projects also engaged and elaborated political ideals as well.⁸²⁴ In this section I will attempt to more explicitly address those political claims by showing that the difference developed between Newman's and Reinhardt's arguments for "true" painting (and how this plays out in series) simultaneously articulated a vital philosophical difference within the political problematic of "true" socialism.

Before taking this on, however, something should be said about the resistance to making claims like the above. One of the most obvious ways of mounting this kind of resistance traces back to the artists' own dissociations of art and politics on occasion. Take, for instance, Newman in 1943 condemning a situation in which art serves as the "plaything of politicians." According to Newman, the present conditions (in 1943) could only improve, the "new America" that is the "cultural center of the world" could only come about by "free[ing] the artist from the stifling control of an outmoded politics."⁸²⁵ Two years later the art-for-art's sake tone is even more pronounced: "Art is a realm of pure thought. As such, it, like all other realms of pure thought, must be concerned with its own problems. Art is self-contained. Politics is not only unnecessary, it is irrelevant."⁸²⁶

Reinhardt, likewise, generated a slew of statements deterring the art-and-politics question. He told an audience, in 1960, during a symposium on art and morality that "in the thirties, it was wrong for artists to think that a good social idea would correct bad art or that a good social conscience would fix up a bad artistic conscience. It was wrong for artists to claim that their work could educate the public politically or that their work would beautify public buildings."⁸²⁷ Social realism's error of mixing politics with art was a mistake shared with surrealism and abstract expressionism, both styles considered by Reinhardt to be two other "achievement[s] in romancing." All three "dumped together . . . painting with politics. . . ."⁸²⁸ Even more potent fuel for the apolitical reading of Reinhardt's work is culled from the artist's art-as-art dogma. The art-as-art formulations appeared to argue straightforwardly for a pure art—a state in which the aesthetic has nothing to do with "life," and thus, presumably with matters social, historical, political.

Finally, if there were any question remaining, Reinhardt squelches it in this: “Art has never ruled the world./ Art-as-art cannot win the world without losing its soul.”⁸²⁹

Supplied with testimony like this, there is little difficulty in imagining the surge of confidence in those who see any questions of political content in Newman’s and Reinhardt’s painting as muddying and misleading. Bruce Barber, for instance, indicates that after 1950, Newman was careful in his writings not to suggest overt political meanings. “In fact,” Barber writes, “to be successful in Newman’s terms, the work of art had to acquire some transcendent condition over politics.”⁸³⁰ Lippard as well found Reinhardt to be “one of those people” described in Rosenberg’s and Motherwell’s editorial statement for *Possibilities*, who “h[u]ng around in the spaces between art and political action” in the aftermath of political disillusionment. By Lippard’s reasoning, Reinhardt did this “by rigorously separating the two.”⁸³¹

Those are the disclaimers. However, one needs to factor in the claims as well, for both artists issued remarkably bold and insistent revolutionary mandates for their work. At the relatively early career point of 1943, Reinhardt wrote that “Mondrian, like Marx, saw the disappearance of works of art when the environment itself became an aesthetic reality. In its dissatisfaction with ordinary experience, the impoverished reality of present-day experience, an abstract painting stands as a challenge to disorder and disintegration. Its activity implies a conviction of something constructive in our time. . . .”⁸³² These sentiments are rehearsed and repeated in his later art-as-art statements: “Art-as-art is always a battle cry, polemic, picket sign, sit-in, sit-down, civil disobedience, passive resistance, crusade, fiery cross, and non-violent protest.” Art-as-art can be linked to these forms of political expressions because it gets to the heart of the matter: “Art-as-art is a creation that *revolutionizes creation* [emphasis added].”⁸³³

Remarkably, the underscoring through repetition (something typically associated with Reinhardt), characterizes Newman’s classic line on art and politics. For when in 1962 Newman went on public record with the following assertion, he was already repeating himself: “Almost fifteen years ago Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and

others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes.”⁸³⁴ But then listen once more in 1969, Newman repeats himself a third time. He reiterates: “There is no question that my work and the work of the men I respect took a revolutionary position. . . . Some twenty years ago in a gathering, I was asked what my painting really means in terms of society, in terms of the world, in terms of the situation. And my answer then was that if my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism . . . and I still believe, that my work in terms of its social impact does denote the possibility of an open society, of an open world, not of a closed institutional world.”⁸³⁵

The obvious problem is this: these two sets of statements appear openly to contradict each other. The first set suggests that both Newman and Reinhardt denied any valid access between the political and the aesthetic. The second set suggests that both artists conceived of their projects as very much speaking to a social revolutionary dimension. Whether one is arguing for a reading of political disengagement or of political engagement, the existence of these two sets of contrary statements poses a challenging problem. The way out of this stalemate is to return to the earlier pictures/painting distinction (discussed in chapter 3) and to use it to distinguish between two different registers of the art-and-politics relationship. The resulting difference would be the highly significant one between a political *picture* and political *painting*.

As a step towards examining what this difference between a political picture and the political on the level of painting means concretely, one can look at an attempted—though to my mind inadequate—route out of the bind presented by the artists’ seemingly contradictory statements. The proposed solution has been to take up examples of explicitly political productions made by Newman and Reinhardt and to locate (and ultimately contain) in those heterogeneous examples the substance and execution of each artist’s political claims and thereby absolving the need to address this issue at deeper levels of the artists’ practices. In other words, it has been far more convenient to reconcile Newman’s and Reinhardt’s political stances and statements with areas of their production regarded as marginal to their central projects. As Craven noted, “Reinhardt

and the Abstract Expressionists did in fact produce several works of this period that were more explicitly political, or at least much more topical in orientation, than was generally consistent with the basic premises of their aesthetic.”⁸³⁶ Certainly, two late career pieces—both done shortly before each artist’s death—Reinhardt’s lithograph *No War* and Newman’s sculpture *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley*, fit Craven’s description.

In 1967 Reinhardt produced *No War* (fig. 34) a 26 1/4 x 21 1/4” poster lithograph to be included in the *Artists and Writers Portfolio* (1968), a project that was part of the larger anti-Vietnam War movement.⁸³⁷ The lithograph mimed the form of an airmail postcard, and it was addressed to the “War Chief, Washington, D.C., USA.”⁸³⁸ One side of this “postcard” listed off twenty-four negatives:

NO WAR
NO IMPERIALISM
NO MURDER
NO BOMBING
NO NAPALM
NO ESCALATION
NO CREDIBILITYGAP
NO PROPAGANDA
NO BULLSHIT
NO LYING
NO IGNORANCE
NO GRAFT
NO DRAFT
NO FEAR
NO SLAVERY
NO POVERTY
NO HUNGER
NO HATE
NO INJUSTICE
NO EVIL
NO INHUMANITY
NO CALLOUSNESS
NO CONSCIOUSLESSNESS
NO CONSCIENCELESSNESS⁸³⁹

The “stamped” and addressed side included a shorter ten-line list of negatives:

NO ART OF WAR
NO ART IN WAR

NO ART TO WAR
NO ART ON WAR
NO ART BY WAR
NO ART FROM WAR
NO ART ABOUT WAR
NO ART FOR WAR
NO ART WITH WAR
NO ART AS WAR

Ironically, given that this is presented as an example of Reinhardt's "political art," the general gist of the poster appears instead to lend support to the argument that Reinhardt was against political art, art-and-politics. The simple and insistently repeated syntactical pattern of all ten statements (on the postcard's "stamped") seems to bear this out. Two terms—art and war—are presented and their relationship is given through the negative "no." The only variable in this pattern is in the choice of preposition (of, in, to, on, by, from, about, for, with, as). Reinhardt employs the classical orator's device of *symploce* here for emphatic vehemence, to make oneself absolutely clear, and to make a statement impregnable to the kind of tooling around associated with a bureaucratic legalism, in which the loophole may very well rest on the choice of preposition.⁸⁴⁰ Reinhardt has separated out these two terms, art and war, and has insistently hammered home his point: there are no "and's, if's, why's or but's" about it—there exists no prepositional link that could possibly bridge the two. But, of course, the lithograph is doing exactly and emphatically that, bringing art and war together by making an artwork against war. That "against," however, is precisely the prepositional loophole through which Reinhardt, as an artist dismissive of "political art," makes a space for himself. After all, what is cleverly missing from Reinhardt's list is "NO ART AGAINST WAR."

Nevertheless, while Reinhardt may have carefully and cleverly fashioned this loophole for himself—one may make art *against* war—he hardly needed it in this instance. *No War* did not require this defense because it was already so marginal to Reinhardt's conception of serious, fine art. This is not to say that there is not quite a lot of "Reinhardt" here. For, of course, by the time of this work and indeed much earlier in fact, the "classic negative" list in the artist's "carefully handprinted Gothic script" was a well-

recognized Reinhardt signature move. And, indeed, *No War* reads, more or less, like an art-as-art statement and those in turn relate to Reinhardt's pre-1956 art comics and broadsides. It was in these—manifestos, written statements, and the media of the applied arts—that Reinhardt expressed “extraneous” content, where he offered commentary on the events, controversies and issues of the day. Reinhardt maintained, as Michael Corris has well studied, a rigorous separation between a fine art and an applied art. “There was,” as the artist had written, “an achievement in separating fine art from other art.”⁸⁴¹ Rose, as well, made careful note of this separation between Reinhardt's “pure art” and his other activities and she read this division as a way of purging his art—his painting—of anything extraneous.⁸⁴² Even more to the point, Lippard spoke specifically to Reinhardt's choice in submission to the Protest portfolio when she described his position as “a model for socially conscious abstract artists who chose not to change their art but at times assigned a slightly different function or title to it. . . . Occasionally they made an object like Reinhardt's postcard that was seen strictly as ‘propaganda’ and bore no relation to their normal, stylistically recognizable work.”⁸⁴³ In other words, this was a production marginal to Reinhardt's oeuvre, a production outside Ultimate painting. What I would add is that Reinhardt achieves this distance in part through the fact of *No War's* representational quality. The lithographic poster is presented as a likeness of a postcard. The representationalism runs through the dashed-border edge of the poster miming the design of an airmail postcard, as it does through to the careful figuration of an eagle-bearing six-cent U.S. postage stamp.⁸⁴⁴ Clearly, what Reinhardt had produced was a *picture*, not painting.

Newman's work dates to a year later, 1968. Like Reinhardt's lithograph, *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley* (fig. 35) comes out of an engagement with highly specific political situations. Responding to the Chicago police force's brutal treatment of anti-war protesters at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention, the Richard Feigen Gallery organized a protest exhibition which included artworks whose content specifically engaged the incident.⁸⁴⁵ *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley* was Newman's submission. Made of lines of barbed wire organized into a grid within a heavy steel frame, the *Lace Curtain*

is for, or “addressed to,” Chicago’s Mayor Richard J. Daley. This addressee functions in much the same way as the “War Chief” did in Reinhardt’s poster-postcard but with a pointed difference: Newman, uncharacteristically, has decided to name names. Nor is this the only uncharacteristic element of the work. The “lace curtain” reference has been taken as an ethnic and classist slur upon urban Irish immigrants to the United States and thus as something of a low blow aimed at Mayor Daley. The work also evokes a social realist tone, a quality which again stands out because social realism was something Newman so deplored. The barbed wire—the “Devil’s Rope” and a “ubiquitous instrument of oppression”—seems too crude a cliché for brutality, violence and injustice.⁸⁴⁶ Even so, the flat-footedness of the barbed wire pales comparatively to the spray of dark red paint—the “blood”—flecking parts of the barbed wire and accumulating in larger, more visible drops along the base of the steel frame (fig. 36).

A number of critics, artists and art historians have commented upon the bizarreness by which *Lace Curtain* stands in relation to the rest of Newman’s work. Rosenberg acknowledged this piece as having a “frankly political purpose” and described it as possessing an exceedingly “literary flavor.” He also spoke of Newman’s sculptural production in general, though it may seem “paradoxical,” as more “pictorial” than the paintings, with *Lace Curtain* serving as a prime example.⁸⁴⁷ Rosenberg got it right, I think, in pegging all these uncharacteristic elements evidenced in *Lace Curtain* “pictorial,” and in this in such marked contrast to Newman’s arguments in painting. Like the *trompe l’oeil* representationalism of the eagle-stamp in Reinhardt’s *No War* “postcard” the literary and literal flavor of *Lace Curtain* aligns Newman’s sculpture with the realm of pictures. And, one might add, lace curtains are made, after all, for windows . . . picture windows.

As I suggested above, looking to these two works is a relatively uncomplicated way by which to account for the political content of Newman’s and Reinhardt’s projects. Both *No War* and *Lace Curtain* become convenient containers for any alleged Left political meanings suggested by the artists’s second set of statements (art = politics) without putting into serious question the first set (art ≠ politics). It is a facile, and to my

mind, an extremely unsatisfactory reconciliation. The works chosen as bearers of this political content are marginal enough, outside the artists' normative production as to not truly matter much. Placing the burden of Newman's "if my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism" and of Reinhardt's "Art-as-art is a creation that revolutionizes creation" upon these selections, to imagine that the radical political content suggested by these two statements is adequately covered or accounted for by *No War* and *Lace Curtain* is to mistakenly and myopically settle for a political picture—a mere illustration of a theme, when the real engagement should be on the scale of political painting. To argue, as I will, that the political claim, to be of any serious relevance, must be dealt with on the level of painting will entail looking at Newman's and Reinhardt's politics and political differences as woven into the very fabric of their problematics and their contrasting arguments for the achievement of "One" in painting. The political on this level, on the level of painting, means a politics embedded in praxis and thus engaged with the dialectic of form-giving and identity-making itself—situated at and operating on what that join between theory and practice might be imagined or felt as, with how a critical and libratory moment between identity and non-identity might be achieved.

Despite what I have argued to be the insufficient account for the radical claims the artists made for their projects, *No War* and *Lace Curtain* are helpful in beginning to sketch the artists' political portraits and to fill in the details of their specific political commitments. For *No War* and *Lace Curtain* situate both artists in the political scene of the late 1960s and attest to their active engagement within it. Both Newman and Reinhardt were, as others have previously researched and documented, generally supportive of those causes associated with the New Left: anti-racism and the civil rights movement (Reinhardt was a supporter of the Congress of Racial Equality, donating his work in 1963 to a benefit sale at the Martha Jackson Gallery and he was also associated with the Civil Rights Congress); anti-nationalism, pro-internationalism, pro-disarmament, anti-war (Reinhardt was an active supporter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and served as vice-chair for its Artists Committee, he is a signer of the 1965

New York Times “Declaration to Ambassador Adlai Stevenson” and of “End Your Silence,” appearing in the same publication several months later. Newman helped write an anti-Vietnam protest letter). When *Dissent: A Quarterly of Socialist Opinion*, an important Left publication, was ailing financially, both came to its support. Newman would donate work to “The Dissent Art Show” in 1961 and both Newman and Reinhardt donated works to “The Second Dissent Art Show” in 1963.⁸⁴⁸ However, rather like their situation artistically—being both inside and outside two generational identities—politically, as well, they find themselves once again spanning the gap. Their mutual appearance in the political arena of the New Left was not merely a late efflorescence of social conscience and activism but issues from far deeper histories of leftism, those grounded in their radicalized youths with the Old Left of the 1930s.

On the biographical level to begin, both Newman and Reinhardt bear the suspect marks of New York’s Old Left: both were born into poor, recently emigrated families (Newman’s mother and father arrived in New York in 1900 from Lomza, Poland, and Reinhardt’s father emigrated to Buffalo, N.Y., from East Prussia in 1907 and his mother from Germany two years later) and spent their earliest years in working-class communities.⁸⁴⁹ Newman spent his first decade as a resident of Cherry Street on the Lower East Side, which was then one of the poorest streets in Manhattan, while his father, Abraham Newman, supported the family by selling “sewing-machine heads to garment workers.”⁸⁵⁰ Lippard observed that Reinhardt had grown up poor and socially conscious in a family strongly identified with Left politics. A draft version of Reinhardt’s chronology offers a description of his father as a “member and organizer in [the] Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and [a] life-long socialist.”⁸⁵¹ As young adults Newman and Reinhardt were further politicized during their college years in which both continued to examine ideas of radical social reconstruction.⁸⁵² Later, after college, both would play active roles in labor organization. In the mid-30s, during a period in which he himself was struggling with the New York public school system as a substitute teacher, Newman published *The Answer—America’s Civil Service Magazine* in an effort to rally the “sleeping” civil servants out of their exploitation.⁸⁵³ Likewise, during this period,

Reinhardt worked as a labor organizer, joins the Artists' Union (Local 60 of the CIO) helping the "trade union movement's organization of graphic designers and newspaper staff artists."⁸⁵⁴

Taking these snapshots of late and early moments in the political narratives for Newman and Reinhardt do a lot towards suggesting a high degree of political commonality. Before becoming too comfortable with the idea of their kinship in political commitments, I want to offer the wedge by which this apparent likeness sharply divides into political opposition. That wedge is the episode now referred to as the Siqueiros Affair.

Briefly, in 1960, the radical Mexican artist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, took part in a violent, insurrectionary demonstration in Mexico City. The Mexican government sentenced the aged, and to many, venerable, Siqueiros to eight years imprisonment. Concerned artists in the United States gathered to the famous Mexican muralist's cause, demanding his release from what they perceived as an unfair and harsh retaliatory sentence. Reinhardt numbered among those of the Artists Committee to Free Siqueiros of the U.S. Friends of Mexico, a stylistically diverse group of artist-activists including Rudolf Baranik, Philip Evergood, Adolph Gottlieb, Jacob Lawrence, Jack Levine, Mark Rothko, Ben Shahn, David Smith, Isaac and Moses Soyer, and May Stevens.⁸⁵⁵ The actions of this group included the signing and publishing of statements defending Siqueiros and a benefit exhibition in January 1962 at the A.C.A. Gallery.⁸⁵⁶

These open, public acts of support given by the U.S. Friends of Mexico to Siqueiros quickly generated hostile denunciations. Siqueiros, the opposition claimed, should neither be defended nor supported; he is a subject of the law like others, and as such, his actions were deemed criminal. Newman was among those, like Robert Motherwell, Norman Lewis, Elaine de Kooning, Willem de Kooning, Meyer Schapiro and Harold Rosenberg, who took this counter-stance to the Artists Committee to Free Siqueiros.⁸⁵⁷ Reading the hostile letters back and forth (mostly printed in the pages of *Dissent*) one might be misled to conclude that the issue at stake was either: (a) whether or not a famous artist should be granted special treatment or (b) whether or not art and

politics should openly commingle. I would suggest, however, that the really divisive issue rested on what brand of leftist politics. Meyer Schapiro's reaction to the Siqueiros issue, printed in *Dissent*, reveals quite a lot. Schapiro will not let be forgotten Siqueiros' "sinister political role." "In 1940, he organized and led an attack on the house of the Russian Revolutionist, Leon Trotsky. . . . He was also accused of a part in the assassination of Trotsky. Siqueiros never denied this role in the attack on Trotsky's house and boasted of this action as 'one of the greatest honors of my life.' . . . He has never been tried for his crimes."⁸⁵⁸ One of the important reminders that comes out of Schapiro's comment, if obliquely, is that the question of Siqueiros's identity—is he a revolutionary hero in danger of becoming a martyr or is he a criminal and traitor to the revolution?—is tied inextricably to the question of how one sorts out Trotsky's identity as well, and again, as either revolutionary hero-martyr or traitor to the revolution. Siqueiros as the revolutionary hero is the fiery leader in the Mexican Communist Party, an active believer in the revolution whose commitment is demonstrated in his attempts to overthrow the Mexican government. His commitment is further revealed in his staunch protecting of revolutionary purity; he will purge the Left of contaminant bourgeois remnants and traitors to the revolution, namely, in this case, the founder of the heretical so-called Fourth International, Trotsky. Siqueiros as the traitor-criminal is a hard-core doctrinaire Stalinist, a brain-washed agent for the Comintern, the would-be murderer of Trotsky who was a precious beacon of hope, and who in founding the Fourth International heroically rescued humanist socialism from the Stalinist Third. The question posed by the Siqueiros Affair is this: Who is the hero? Who is the traitor? Wherein lies the true revolution? With Newman and Reinhardt standing on opposite sides of the Siqueiros Affair, one infers that they came up with different answers. The forking provided by the Siqueiros incident sets up the template by which to examine the split in Newman's and Reinhardt's political identities.

By the blunt logic of the Siqueiros Affair, Reinhardt's political alignment is with the Communist Party, the U.S.S.R., and through an associative chain, with Stalin. This was precisely the conclusion that Lippard—and I think for understandable reasons—did

not wish to reach in her monograph of the artist. The subject of Reinhardt's politics has not been an easy one for period scholarship. Needless to say, the sort of political portrait that would allow for the artist's political affiliation with anything like Communist orthodoxy, is the least popular of all. One senses in Lippard's characterization of Reinhardt's politics and in the positioning of those politics in relation to his aesthetics a bit of hedging. "[W]hen his [Reinhardt's] own aesthetic crystallized, Reinhardt saw his work as materialist and historical, and related his interest in the synthesis of opposites to the Marxist concept that contradictions are inherent in every phenomenon. Marxists considered the material primary and the idea of it secondary, or derivative; Reinhardt evolved his paintings-as-paintings with the idea, or anything else, distinctly secondary."⁸⁵⁹ But Lippard is equally able to describe Reinhardt's desire for a "pure art" as part of being drawn to a "talisman of an ideal society. This last aspect is most clearly felt in Reinhardt's own writings from the thirties and early forties, and relates, in turn, to what Harold Rosenberg (who sees action painting as an unexpected result of the previous decade's desire to say something—a way of being inversely political, by getting out of politics) remembers as 'endless discussions about how to get a Marxist aesthetic.'"⁸⁶⁰ Finally, again, within the same text, Lippard seems to resolve her opinion: "His own Marxism leaned heavily on purely aesthetic utopianism."⁸⁶¹ While Lippard finishes her political portrait of Reinhardt with the image of the cultural turn of the type that Nancy Jachec describes, other scholars have been far less willing to cede Reinhardt's politics to a cultural turn thesis. Corris's work on Reinhardt, for one, has pushed for the image of a far more seriously politically engaged artist. "Reinhardt's involvement with the American Communist Party (CP-USA) during the thirties and forties was far more extensive and has far more relevance to his development as an artist than previously thought." Disagreeing with Lippard, he argues that Reinhardt's "relationship to Marxism and the Party was not merely 'intellectual' and 'aesthetic' but rather political, as demonstrated by, among other activities, his production of more than 350 editorial illustrations, advertising designs, full-page cartoons and magazine covers for *New Masses* and *Soviet Russia Today*."⁸⁶² Others also have started more readily accepting this view of

Reinhardt's far more developed and exacting political presence. Terry Atkinson, for example, referred to Reinhardt as a "political obsessive" whose "constant stream of work . . . made for various left-wing magazines is vehement testimony to [his] deep involvement with political issues."⁸⁶³ David Anfam, as well, positions Reinhardt as the closest of all the Abstract Expressionist/New York School milieu to being a "doctrinaire radical" who never abandoned his socialist principles.⁸⁶⁴

But what has been the most important development in filling out the picture of Reinhardt as a political radical is Craven's work in the field. Looking at the artist's union activity in the early part of his career, his editorial and illustrational work for radical publications, and his association with organizations and institutions that would later be targeted as subversive by the United States Attorney General and his later activism in the 1960s, Craven describes a radical whose commitment remained remarkably consistent even though sustained at such a high pitch. What has seemed the cinch to Reinhardt's identity as a life-long socialist, who in Craven's opinion was a "probable member of the Communist Party USA during the 1930s and 1940s, eventually to come to a position very close to Leon Trotsky's pro-Soviet Union but anti-Stalin stance," has been Craven's uncovering of the F.B.I. file monitoring Reinhardt as a communist security risk.⁸⁶⁵ Craven obtained this new material through the 1966 Freedom of Information Act which opened to the public the files the F.B.I. kept of the agency's secret surveillance of "security risks." What is clear from both the very existence of Reinhardt's F.B.I. file and from the file's specific content is that the artist's politics were taken very seriously by the U.S. government. A long file, kept from 1941 to 1966 (just a year before the artist's death), running to a sizeable 123 pages, and still not totally declassified—twenty-three pages, as Craven indicates, have not yet been released and further, "a sizeable portion of those [pages] that were released being blotted out for reasons of 'national security'"—Reinhardt's FBI classification is "Security Matter-C." This means, as Craven explains, "According to the F.B.I., along with other government agencies, the subject constitutes a national security threat and is a subversive because of his or her sympathies for communism and/or socialism make him or her a 'potential' collaborator with foreign

agents.” The gravity of this charge is further underscored by reports in the file: Reinhardt’s travels abroad were carefully monitored by the government; at least one attempt was made to revoke his U.S. passport; at one point the State Department was considering trying him for perjury (for denying that he was a Communist); and there were even thoughts of putting him into “custodial detention.”⁸⁶⁶ According to the F.B.I., at least, Reinhardt was indeed a Communist “doctrinaire radical.”

It was of course Newman who loathed the doctrinaire radical, who in evoking the “true revolution,” wrote unequivocally that “sacred” and “programmatic” doctrine were its antithesis. What then was the “true revolution?” Newman’s answer comes in the title to the foreword he wrote for the 1968 Horizon Press reissue of Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*: “The True Revolution Is Anarchist!”⁸⁶⁷ Against the “shouting dogmatists,” the “Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist, and Trotskyite alike,” Newman’s own radical politics were openly anarchist.⁸⁶⁸ His sympathy with anarchism, and particularly with Kropotkin’s social ideals, has been well-rehearsed in the Newman literature. Like Reinhardt, Newman became involved in radical social doctrine during his college years. However, but unlike many of that 1930s generation Newman would embrace not the Comintern’s collectivist rhetoric of individual self-sacrifice in the name of a mass-movement but the far less popular vision of anarchist social restructuring.⁸⁶⁹

The basic principles of anarchism are clearly in evidence in Newman’s personal ethos and in the ways in which that ethos bears upon his aesthetic positions. No institutions (“I said that I felt destroyed by established institutions.”), nothing that infringes upon personal freedom, no one controlling anybody else. Pointedly, it was Communism, as Newman saw it, that broke all three anarchist principles. “Anarchism,” he wrote “is the only criticism of society which is not a technique for the seizure and transfer of power by one group against another, which is what all such doctrines amount to—the substitution of one authority for another. What is particular about anarchism is not its criticism of society but the creative way of life it offers that makes all programmatic doctrine impossible.”⁸⁷⁰ This sat in almost perfect contrast to the social ills he located in Russia. “In Russia, a group of ‘idealists,’ idealistic enough to use every

fascist tool and weapon, invoking the name of the ‘working-class revolution’ and the ‘classless society,’ have found the holy excuse to seize every human activity and liquidate its membership for the benefit of its own party members. The Communist party has destroyed Russia’s internal capitalistic creditors to become, for the good of the worker, of course, the country’s sole creditor. They hold the mortgage and they make everybody pay.”⁸⁷¹ The Bolshevik revolution, in other words, rather than truly realizing something new, was merely one in a series of static historical repetitions: the pattern of seizing and transferring power, the substitution of one thing for another all composed within the overriding system of state. As with Reinhardt, scholars have come up with a number of appellations for trying to summarize Newman’s political profile. Jonathan Harris describes the artist as committed to socialist politics and to the idea of a non-capitalist U.S. in the 1930s.⁸⁷² Anfam remarks that Newman’s anarchism was a life-long commitment: his politics, unlike those of many of his peers, did not change dramatically from the 1930s through the 1960s.⁸⁷³ Certainly the fact that Newman could endorse the same text—Kropotkin’s *Memoirs*—in the 1930s and still in the 1960s serves as good proof of this. And Craven has called the synthesis of both Newman’s rejection of capitalism and his staunch defense of individualism, anarchist communalism. As a form of romantic anti-capitalism, anarchist communalism (as Craven summarizes it) upholds the ideals of participatory democracy in communes that both operate through mutual aid but are also spontaneously self-organized. All of this is premised on an ethos of the individual’s unalienable right: to be an untrammled person. As a model for this type of social organization, Newman, as did his anarchist mentor, Kropotkin, looked to the mir of the Russian peasants, as that closest to the ideal of a community developing “spontaneous order” where its members freely associate to form a co-operative whole.⁸⁷⁴

Having now sketched Newman’s and Reinhardt’s political profiles, one sees how heavily overdetermined is their difference. This is a rehearsal of the bitter tale of socialist schism and a reenactment of the feud between the Communist and the Anarchist. The point of origin of this split some trace back to September 1872, a year after the blood bath of the Paris Commune, at The Hague congress of the First International when Marx so

dramatically expelled Bakunin and his Anarchist Federation from the ranks of the International.⁸⁷⁵ Others push the beginning even further back, to 1848 and Paris and the young socialist movement's coming to terms with the failure of the "bloody June days" and the difference in conclusions the defeated revolutionaries marking the "starting point of the two-fold development of European socialism, anarchism and Marxist." The historical fact of the intense antagonism between these two groups, the bitterness of their mutual denunciations, has often tended to obscure their common denominator as socialist doctrine.

The suggestion of a moment of Communist and Anarchist coherence was present in the name Kropotkin gave his program—"anarchist *communism* [emphasis added]." Though many subsequent anarchists have been careful to make the verbal rearrangements so that the adjective becomes the noun, and "communism" is dropped altogether, Kropotkin's use of the word does much to remind one of common ground between Marx's communism and Kropotkin's anarchism. Both, as forms of revolutionary socialism (equally scornful of the revisionism embodied in the Second International), share these mandates: the criticism of existing society, the repudiation of capitalism and the system of commodity-exchange, the negation of class society and the dissolution of private property, the principle of mutual cooperation and the ideal of creating the conditions for the free development of human possibility, for, ultimately the "emancipation of man."⁸⁷⁶

The divisive wedge is a methodological one and can be summed up in a word, the "state." The anti-statism of anarchism is one of its prime attributes. Anarchist communism, as Kropotkin described, was the "no-government system of socialism." No central organizing mechanism would exist, no state authority would rule over the individual.⁸⁷⁷ "You cannot modify the existing conditions of property," Kropotkin reasoned, "without deeply modifying at the same time the political organization. . . . To each new economic phase of life corresponds a new political phase." He continues, "in a society where the distinction between capitalist and laborer has disappeared there is no need of such a government; it would be an anachronism, a nuisance. Free workers would

require a free organization, and this cannot have any other basis than free agreement and free cooperation, without sacrificing the autonomy of the individual to the all-pervading interference of the State. The no-capitalist system implies the no-government system.”⁸⁷⁸ This was a point that Kropotkin was quite obviously at pains to repeat: “We are communists. But our communism is not that of the authoritarian school: it is anarchist communism, communism without government, free communism. It is a synthesis of the two chief aims pursued by humanity since the dawn of its history—economic freedom and political freedom.”⁸⁷⁹ The state and statist mentality were precisely what fatally turned communist doctrine towards the “authoritarian school,” features which it damningly shared with capitalism. What distinguished Kropotkin’s anarchist communism was the total absence of statism and this made it the “free” communism, true communism.

On the other side of the divide is Marx and Lenin and the Marxism-Leninism of what would become the Third International. These are the so-called “state” socialists or communists. Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, a concise volume composed in 1917 in the thick of the momentous Bolshevik drive to realize the world’s first workers’ state, serves as an illuminating rebuttal to anarchism’s criticism.

To begin, Lenin accuses the anarchist critics of falsely polarizing the positions over the issue of the “state” and of thoroughly distorting the Marxian view of it. “Marxism has always taught,” Lenin reminds the reader, that “together with the abolition of classes, the state will also be abolished.”⁸⁸⁰ In other words, it is a gross mistake for anarchists to characterize Marxism as a doctrine of state communism. A Marxist-inspired version of communism, just as much as anarchism, means and envisions a stateless society. To further make his case, Lenin refers to a letter of Engels’s from 1875, whose contents in Lenin’s opinion and had the letter been brought to light earlier, would have squelched the anarchist confusion-making on the question of state. In this letter Engels writes: “it was stated definitely that, with the introduction of the Socialist order of society, the state will dissolve of itself and disappear. . . . The state is only a transitional phenomenon which must be made use of in struggle, in the revolution. . . . As soon as it becomes possible to speak of freedom, then the state, as such, ceases to exist. We would,

therefore, suggest that everywhere the word ‘state’ be replaced by ‘community’ [Gemeinwesen], a fine old German word, which corresponds to the French word ‘commune.’”⁸⁸¹ Of course, replacing “state” with “community/commune” does a good deal, at least on the symbolic level, to collapse the difference and reassert the commonality of these two rival factions.

Next Lenin turns to what he believes is the real locus of contention between these socialist programs—the phrase “transitional phenomenon.” For while the Marxist believes that communism does ultimately define a stateless society, the state is still—as Engels suggested in the letter above—a “transitional phenomenon which must be made use of in struggle, in the revolution.” The state is a social form and organization to be addressed and exploited. As Lenin summarizes: “Marx purposely emphasizes the ‘revolutionary and *transitional* form’ of the state necessary for the proletariat. The proletariat needs the state only for a while. We do not at all disagree with the Anarchists on the question of the abolition of the state as an aim. We maintain that, to achieve this *aim*, temporary use must be made of the instruments, means, and methods of the state power *against* the exploiters. . . .”⁸⁸² The state becomes a tool, and a necessary one, of the revolution.

According to the Marxist narrative, as communism is successfully realized there will occur a “withering away of the state.” The argument that Marx, Engels and Lenin had with the Anarchists was not one directed against them “for being in favour of the abolition of the State, but for preaching that the state can be abolished ‘within twenty-four hours.’”⁸⁸³ As Lenin writes elsewhere, “We are not Utopians, we do not indulge in ‘dreams’ of how best to do away immediately with all administration, with all subordination,” which are but “Anarchist dreams.”⁸⁸⁴ The bourgeois state—all its mechanisms, organizations, hierarchies, orders, rationalizations and social efficiencies—were to be taken as necessary elements in a dialectical sublation. Working with the reality of the situation, the known, the already situated and situating forms of the social, political, economic, speak to a level of pragmatic reckoning that has notably been the weakest register in Anarchist doctrine. Critics of Anarchism have pointed out that what

Kropotkin's anarchist communism sorely and crucially misses is a mediating term, or, a way of describing and communicating the passage between the present and the future, between the bourgeois capitalist state and the ultimate co-operative body.

To summarize, Lenin's argument in this volume, as elsewhere, was that although Communism meant a stateless society (as did Anarchism), its negation had to be wrought from the very forms of State. As dialectical reversal, one worked through the state-form in order to reach to something beyond it; one worked through the forms of the old in order to realize the new. The revolution progressed "from the state . . . into something which is no longer really the state in the accepted sense of the word."⁸⁸⁵ This is the argument for the "transformation of quantity into quality," from identity to non-identity, from bourgeois rationalism to the end of pre-history, and the beginning of that which the world has never known. The realization of true identity, of the truth of free human potential and the non-identical as that which has never existed before in human history—classless society, a completely new human nature—is only spoken through the old forms of identity (the state). Complementing this line of reasoning, the mir which Lenin so hated and Kropotkin held as exemplary (and Newman deeply admired), was a naïve myth whose delusional supporters believed one could achieve socialism by attempting a return to the "primitive" moment of the peasant commune, a return that meant as well a denial of the reality, the concrete form and content, of the present moment. The delusion was in thinking one could go back to a condition prior to the systems of rationalized identity—without first "pass[ing] through the fires of Capitalism."⁸⁸⁶

What Anarchists and mir proponents appeared to endorse was the belief of a spontaneously realizable goodness and rightness, a belief, as it were, in authentic, originary expression. Furthermore, this spontaneous expression was the only answer; the state was dismissed out of hand. "State organization," as Kropotkin argued passionately, "having been the force to which the minorities resorted for establishing and organizing their power over the masses, cannot be the force which will serve to destroy these privileges . . . the economic and political liberation of man will have to create new forms for its expression in life, instead of those established by the State." The logic parallels the

idea that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, but only build more of the same. For the Anarchists the bottom line of an authentic revolutionary situation was this: "everything would have to be remade at once."⁸⁸⁷

It is hard not to hear in Kropotkin's call for the immediate re-birth into authentic identity and into a new revolutionary society Newman's call for a new art. When in 1948 Newman saw a potentially revolutionary situation for art in America, the outstanding quality of the new painters was their refusal of "obsolete props and crutches," and that they "creat[ed] images whose reality" was 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."⁸⁸⁸ Rosenberg referred to this as Newman's "ideology of creation-out-of-nothingness." The artist conceived of painting as "an act that generates new substance" and the profound importance of this creator/creation image can be gauged by how often it is repeated.⁸⁸⁹ Listen to Newman's famous and stirring statement made in 1967 as part of a symposium on Pollock: "In 1940, some of us woke up to find ourselves without hope—to find that painting did not really exist . . . painting . . . was dead. . . . The awakening had the exaltation of a revolution. It was that awakening that inspired the aspiration—the high purpose—quite a different thing from ambition—to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before. It was that naked revolutionary moment that made painters out of painters." Three years later, he stated with more concision: "We couldn't build on anything."⁸⁹⁰ Indeed this refrain—the naked revolutionary moment, starting from scratch—is something that is heard in the artist's much recounted narrative of his coming to his mature artistic identity and finding his ultimate image. Newman's famous "breakthrough" of 1948 with *Onement I*, was a dramatic rebirth—all at once, immediate, a totally new paradigm. What had happened on this modest burnt orange canvas was, as Newman would recall in a late interview, his "first painting." It was "where I felt that I had moved into an area for myself that was completely me," and the doubling of the event with his birthday added dramatic reinforcement: it had been "painted on my birthday in 1948."⁸⁹¹ Or, listening closely, one might even hear a faint echo of Rosenberg and specifically this passage from the

“American Action Painters.” “[M]ost of the artists of this vanguard found their way to their present work by being cut in two. Their type is not a young painter but a reborn one. The man may be over forty, the painter around seven. The diagonal of a grand crisis separates him from his personal and artistic past.”⁸⁹²

While Rosenberg’s description sounds virtually tailor-made for Newman, it fails completely in describing the coming-to-be of Reinhardt’s artistic identity. No diagonal of grand crisis separated an old identity from a new in Reinhardt’s case. “No painting . . . can be established as *the* turning point” Lippard reflected as she outlined Reinhardt’s stylistic development. There could be no “breakthrough” for Reinhardt, Lippard further suggested, because the notion of the artistic breakthrough was “in itself a romantic concept with no place in an art as classical as Reinhardt’s.”⁸⁹³ “His one-color decision was not a gesture, but a plastic development, a refinement rather than an abrupt reversal of previous work.” “There was no sudden element” in his decision to move towards black, rather, “Each exhibition moved closer to monotone.”⁸⁹⁴ Part of what this meant was the stylistic co-presence of the old and the new. Lippard acknowledges, “The years from 1949 to 1952 are confusing chronologically, for Reinhardt was working simultaneously in several transitional manners.”⁸⁹⁵ This fits with Reinhardt’s conception of change and transition on a larger historical scale. For had not Reinhardt asserted that we “[s]can our past for our present,” that the new was “formed on the dead ground,” and that “Historical awareness” was “part of artistic creation itself.” He had described the work of art as “loaded,” carrying “traditions, conventions, [the] history of forms.”⁸⁹⁶ All of this implies a view fundamentally at odds with Newman’s. Indeed, this point is further borne out in a comparison of Newman’s dramatic account of his founding moment (with *Onement I*) with Reinhardt’s description of his evolution to the classic black paintings. In the artist’s self-authored “Five Stages of Reinhardt’s Timeless Stylistic Art-Historical Cycle” he enumerates:

- a. Late-classical mannerist post-cubist geometric abstractions of the late thirties
- b. Rococo-semi-surrealist fragmentation and “all-over” baroque-geometric-expressionist patterns of the art

- c. Archaic color-brick-brushwork impressionism and Black and white constructivist-calligraphic of the late forties
- d. Early-classical hieratical red, blue, black monochrome square-cross-beam form symmetries of the fifties
- e. Classical black-square uniform five-foot timeless trisected evanescences of the sixties⁸⁹⁷

Opposed to Newman's singular breakthrough Reinhardt's narrative reads more like a sequence of five-year plans. How fitting, in this light, is Rosenberg's wry tag for Reinhardt: the art-world Lenin.⁸⁹⁸

To summarize, in suggesting these alignments, on the one hand, between Kropotkin's and Newman's anarchist vision of the miraculous and immediate rebirth to new identity ("everything remade at once") and, on the other, between Marxism-Leninism's and Reinhardt's Communist vision of the progressive stages by which the ideal state is achieved through the negation of the old ("withering away") the methodological dilemma of revolutionary agency is posed: spontaneity versus organization. How did one move from the old identity to radically new identity, to the fully human self-realizing subject? The status of the "state" in Kropotkin's and the Marxist-Leninist argument over spontaneity versus organization functions much like the status of "geometry" in Newman's and Reinhardt's argument over spontaneity versus organization. Attendant in both the "state" and "geometry" are the notions of identity structured as generic and rationalized measure operating within systems of social language and larger institutional articulation. Does one imagine that some miraculous leap is possible by which wholly new substance—new being—spontaneously realizes itself, or does one premise revolutionary possibility as imbedded precisely and only-ever in the old forms and patterns and languages and organizations? How is the dialectical resolution of form and content performed? Where does priority lie: in genesis or normativity? Does one ground new figure or figure new ground?

At-One-Ment, or, The End of Dialectic

There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language cannot be mythical.

Roland Barthes⁸⁹⁹

The basic shapes and directions of the dilemma are posed in almost allegorical fashion (and in a certain irony to the Barthes quote above) by Newman's and Reinhardt's names. There exists a remarkable fittingness of Newman's name to Newman and Reinhardt's name to Reinhardt by which, if not saying all, the name foretells much. For instance, many have noted how perfectly Newman's name signifies for an artist attempting to generate new substance, totally new being. Newman was, of course, Newman, the "new" man.⁹⁰⁰ This image, certainly, though not directly stated, served as the unspoken refrain underlying Rosenberg's monograph on Newman. (Newman had to "start from scratch," "The true beginning lay in the visual, aesthetic, and cultural chaos of the modern situation, which for Newman was to be the plangent prelude to renewal, to acts of origination modeled on the Book of Genesis.")⁹⁰¹ And though Newman's name is perhaps the pun more readily acknowledged, Reinhardt's name was no less appropriate as a shorthand for his painting program. Indeed, Rosenberg had worked out and played upon just this appropriateness. On a small postcard written to the artist (but apparently never sent), Rosenberg addresses Reinhardt as "Brother Adtonius Purehardt." "Adtonius" breaks down easily into "atone" and "at-one-ment" and thus suggests a probable reference to Reinhardt's dogma of the "one painting" and his search for the Ultimate. But given that these were also important qualities that Rosenberg discussed in his firm support of Newman, this cannot be exactly what perplexed Rosenberg, what shades the appellation towards insult rather than praise. The distinction, rather, is carried in the last name: it qualifies the goals of the first (one, at-one, atone) by suggesting something about the manner or methodology through which that quality is sought; it remarks on the way in

which that atoning is being performed. That Rosenberg substitutes “pure” for “rein” is indication enough of his cognizance of how the artist’s name translates in German. “Rein” is “pure” and so effectively names Reinhardt the purist, who is clean and clear, unadulterated, undiluted. With equal appropriateness, “hardt” is hard, difficult, troublesome, laborious, harsh, rough, severe, austere, inflexible, adamant, pitiless, unfeeling.⁹⁰² The at-one for Reinhardt is achieved as a purity, a clarity of identity but at a potentially devastating price—through a means severe, rigid, unfeeling, and as Rosenberg added, inhuman, dead.⁹⁰³ These qualities point to the name and reference underlying the extension of “Ad”—not to the semi-playful “Adtoniuus”—but to the totalitarian, the dictatorial “Adolph.”⁹⁰⁴ The dilemma was summed up in the name: On what grounds would the “Newman” ever be able to begin? How would the “Reinhardt” ever be able to break to new ground and figure anew?

That question, in its various forms—grounding new figure, figuring new ground—is agonizing. And my posing it here has less to do with any real motivation to try to present something like a tidy answer, but rather to exploit its structuring of the profound political dilemma that both Newman and Reinhardt struggled with—gave form and content to—in painting. This question and its structure takes us back to Rosenberg and Action Painting. For, loosely, the question of how Newman’s and Reinhardt’s paintings can be said to embody serious engagement with socialist ideas can be answered through the Action Painting dialectic. And, so, in the manner of a good dialectical tale, one has followed Newman’s and Reinhardt’s “sameness” through its difference and opposition and now come to the spot at which that opposition might be resolved, made “one” again.

To lay this out more concretely, as in Rosenberg’s Action Painter, the artist for both Newman and Reinhardt is a political figure—more specifically a “socialist” figure—in positing the mode of the free, praxical, self-realizing subject. But this has been seen before: naming the artist already invokes its inverse as well—the worker, commodification, alienation, the system of capitalism—and that dialectical pairing itself

already sums up much of the politics involved. One can look to a number of interesting places in both artists's writings where this alignment explicitly and passionately occurs.

Take, for instance, Newman's "cultural turn" political position in 1933. "We must spread culture through society," Newman declared during the height of the Great Depression, "Only a society entirely composed of artists would be really worth living in."⁹⁰⁵ This particularly potent statement, which captures with admirable concision the ideal of a society of unalienated producers, was one used by Newman and his friend (and running mate) Alexander Borodulin for their campaign for mayor of New York City. Their political platform is a decidedly cultural one, one being put forth by, as Newman and Borodulin describe themselves, intellectuals—an artist-teacher and a writer—with three outstanding issues: education; the arts; cultural life in general. Their address is to the intellectual, to "all creative workers," and to "all men who pretend to any culture whatsoever," and *not* to the worker, the proletariat, the masses. The reason underpinning their decision for this emphasis of address is conveyed in the following passage from the candidates' aptly titled campaign manifesto, "On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture":

[T]he intellectual who assumes that since he is himself a worker he therefore can afford to be invisible as a member of a labor party is blind to the metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality. Though it is true that the artist labors and suffers like a worker, in his nature he is profoundly opposed to the principle of the worker. The worker creates for use, but the artist definitely does not. It is only the slave psychology of masses in chains, given expression in the Marxian parties, that insists that art must be useful. The worker recognizes the true creative artist as his enemy, because the artist is free and *insists* upon freedom.⁹⁰⁶

Significantly, this was a thesis that Newman would continue to work on in the 1940s and particularly in "The First Man Was an Artist." He would bring to a high pitch the emphatic difference between the worker and the artist by lodging his argument in Biblical proportions, literally. "The artistic act is man's personal birthright," Newman declared. "The earliest written history of human desires proves that the meaning of the world cannot be found in the social act. An examination of the first chapter of Genesis offers a

better key to the human dream. It was inconceivable to the archaic writer that original man, that Adam, was put on earth to be a toiler, to be a social animal. The writer's creative impulses told him that man's origin was that of an artist, and he set him up in a Garden of Eden close to the Tree of Knowledge, of right and wrong, in the highest sense of divine revelation." This is exceptionally strong language and powerful imagery. The essence, the origin, the truth and meaning of human activity is the artistic, creative act. Man's ultimate self-identity is that of a creator, an artist, a maker of worlds. Free creation is the human birthright. Toil, activity dictated by sheer necessity, is the meaning of alienation and the metaphysical exile. "In our inability to live the life of a creator can be found the meaning of the fall of man."⁹⁰⁷ The "raison d'être" of the present artist was to defy the alienating productive logic of the worker and to return to the "Adam of the Garden of Eden."⁹⁰⁸ The paradise, utopia, the true home of man would be the conditions by which all objectifications of the subject became moments of the self-realizing artist.

Additionally, in Newman's naming the artist as the figure of a genuine humanity, one should keep in mind the breadth of Newman's vision in order not to confuse his intention as a recommendation along the lines of revamping society with an army of professional artists, or as boosterism for the modern profession of the artist. The professional artist was not a solution but a hypostatization. As Newman explained in a late interview, "I'm as much against Art with a capital A as anybody else," and, "I'm also very unwilling to assume the role of Artist with a capital A. I think a man's painting is a matter, as I once said, of his birthright, and if a man thinks of himself as an Artist with a capital A, he think of himself the way a lawyer thinks of himself as a Lawyer. It seems to be that the problem of painting has to relate to me as a person, as a man, rather than as an artist."⁹⁰⁹

Compare to the above several of Reinhardt's statements from the 1940s. Returning once again to the 1943 "Painting and Pictures" lecture one finds an equally concise and pointed articulation of the argument for the social revolutionary content of a culture turn. Here Reinhardt speaks, in positive terms, of the "democratization of art" as a condition entailing the "realization that the artist was not a special kind of human being,

but that every person was a special kind of artist.” As with Newman, the concept of the artist is not reduced to a specialized professional, but is taken globally, as the figure signifying the true achievement of humanity in the universalization of activity as self-realizing praxis.

The notable difference that stands out in Reinhardt’s account, however, is in his discussion of the interrelation between the principle of the artist and the principle of the worker. Specifically, the artist is bound to that which it negates, to toil. What Reinhardt acknowledges is a process and movement from pictures to paintings. “Once upon a time, a painting was a ‘picture.’” Pictures, which here Reinhardt generally associates with the representational function, are the product of a pre-modern period when the images artists made had specific tasks to perform; while the picture-painter might have been “considered a special kind of human being” on one level, on another, the very fact of his productive activity resulting in pictures complexed his objectifications as a form of unfree, necessary labor. And here is the specific key divergence. Pictures and a society of workers evolve towards paintings and a society of painters/artists in a process of liberation through modernization. As representational technologies develop along industrial and mass mechanical lines (“New inventions like the printing press and the camera”), better, more efficient forms of picture-making take over the traditional picture-function of paintings—(“[M]agazines and movies began to make better pictures and cheaper. They gave people more entertainment and more information.”) But, obviously, modernization’s impact extends far beyond simply freeing painting of its representational function. Modernized productivity sets up the necessary material conditions for the democratization of art (praxical activity) through an increased effectivity of labor. Or, more succinctly, it creates the possibility for more artists, less workers.

Aesthetic values were found to be around in all activities. Jobs with shorter hours and better pay permitted many apparently artless people to lead a richer aesthetic life than the picture-artist, who was still trying to restrict a visual experience to arbitrary and special aspects of it on canvas. A landscape picture became no substitute for a day in the country. More leisure, more education, more direct and complete participation of all people in aesthetic activity was what had been needed, not more

“pictures.” Painting which functioned as a picture prevented people from seeing its basic meanings and reduced painting eventually to a wall decoration.⁹¹⁰

In his own way Reinhardt is likewise describing a return to a figurative Garden of Eden, a realm without toil. “Working toward a synthesis of the arts, to an eventual absorption of the imaginative artist in a more collective and anonymous job of creating better places for people to live in, this thinking, aware of the implications and potentialities of scientific knowledge, projected with a democratic political philosophy the possibility, ultimately, of every individual being his own artist, his own architect.”⁹¹¹ Elsewhere in Reinhardt’s notes one finds lines very closely echoing Newman’s 1933 cultural platform: “the central problem in art, too, will be one of democracy and education, of direct and complete social participation of all the people in cultural and creative activities.”⁹¹²

Once again, as with Rosenberg’s Action Painter, what made the artist this special figuring of socialism, what separated the worker and the picture-maker from the painter/artist or the special principle of the artist and the basic meaning of painting, was the artist’s unique access to a mode of objectification/realization, his or her praxis. The artist enacted the ideal dialectic between subject and object, theory and practice, mind and matter. The artist’s labor was an undivided one, his work represented the whole act. And this is a point that can be illustrated in both artists’ adamant resistance to having their work fabricated. Even though Newman opposed the artist to the worker and Reinhardt saw the artist as the negation of the worker, both artist harbored much of the “laborer” in their practices: the mind would not be allowed to forget the hand. They insisted that they could not simply phone in orders for their work; they persisted in the notion that the artist had to be present at the moment of making in order to be “present” in the work. In 1966, for instance, part of Reinhardt’s complaint against the “lousy” “Present Situation in Art,” was that “Artists make telephone directions for making art instead of making it themselves.” This mode of production makes them “like businessmen.” Subsequently, “Artists are selling themselves like hot cakes. . . . Artists are jobbing.”⁹¹³ Newman’s hostility to these modes of production is evident as well, not

only in the strength of his rhetoric of painting as the acts of self-creation but also in his insistence on being physically present and as physically-engaged as possible in his sculptural pieces that required outside “fabrication.”⁹¹⁴ Thus, no matter how simple Newman’s or Reinhardt’s work appeared, nor how amenable their signature styles seemed to fabrication at a plant or commercial workshop, what they could not do was call in orders. For here was the great ambition of their projects: precisely to mend the division of labor.

This point came up in the Glaser interview with Reinhardt. Not without reasonable logic, Glaser asks, if the artist has already worked out the formula for the perfect painting, if he knows what he wants in advance, “Why don’t you have someone paint them for you?”

REINHARDT: Someone else can’t do them for me. they have to do their own for themselves. But I’m not quite sure why. It’s a little like asking why I paint. I certainly don’t believe in having someone else carry out my painting. It’s not really that kind of idea. And also, just as I still use a brush and oil on canvas, I wouldn’t go into blowguns or new materials or anything like that. Those would be unnecessary—though I’m not maintaining an old handicraft-do-it-yourself idea either. I’m merely making the last painting which anyone can make.

GLASER: Your painting, then, seems to be more about ideas than it is about materials?

REINHARDT: Well, it has nothing to do with materials any more than it has to do with ideas. Whatever I do has come from doing and only relates to what’s done.

GLASER: That almost sounds like the process of “action” painting.

REINHARDT: I suppose there is always an act or action of some kind. But the attempt is to minimize it. There are no gymnastics or dancings over paintings or spilling or flinging paint around.

GLASER: On the other hand, you have said that a painting should be thought out beforehand. Doesn’t thinking it out imply an idea?

REINHARDT: You get the thought from having done something first and the thought is the painting anyway.⁹¹⁵

A number of interesting and unexpected things happen in this exchange. Glaser’s understanding of Reinhardt’s project is challenged and not at some peripheral point but fundamentally. It is flummoxing, for how does one coherently synthesize the Reinhardt

of dogma, pre-conceived systems of identity, geometry, the repeated plan where “theory” is set out in advance of practice, and who explicitly insisted that “Everything, where to begin and where to end, should be worked out in the mind beforehand,” with the Reinhardt who could be mistaken for an “Action Painter”?⁹¹⁶ One might dismiss the artist’s surprising response to Glaser as an instance in which Reinhardt was being simply contrary, a quality for which he was well enough known. But, in fact, there are other instances that similarly undermine the security of the antagonism of the spontaneous realization of the Action Painter and the planned performance of art-as-art. Take for instance a note written sometime around 1962-63, during the period of the classic black square paintings. “These paintings and comments present no clear understanding, no precise ground plan for our labors to follow. They represent only bricks and mortar materials awaiting use in the shaping of our own individual understanding. Until that time they remain but random comments.”⁹¹⁷ Again, in this, one finds that odd, unexpected opening in Reinhardt’s dogma. Exchanging Reinhardt’s architecture metaphor for a culinary one, one might even see in Reinhardt’s statement a kinship to Engels’ discoursing on the relation of revolutionary theory and practice: the proof is in the pudding.⁹¹⁸ Even so, one need not only cull from these more exotic, atypical sounding statements to catch a whiff of this rupture. At around the same time Reinhardt announced—in a line composed in the typical art-as-art tone—“The one way in art comes from art-working.”⁹¹⁹ Drawing out this line, I would jump to a very straight-forward distinction Reinhardt made between the “fine-art process”—what I would argue is synonymous with art-working—and its opposite, with coerced forms of making. “I don’t want the fine-art process, which to me is a free process, in which you didn’t have a job to do, confused with something else. It was not unconscious or automatic, it was free. If you were painting, you had a lot of painting to do; if you stopped, you didn’t have any to do. You didn’t have some idea yourself or somebody else had an idea and then you carried it through and then somebody could tell you if you did it right or not. That’s the commercial or industrial process.”⁹²⁰ Thus, art-working as a free process meant refusing to occupy either pole of a “job”: neither did one make a job (send out specifications for

work), nor do a job (fill out an order). This locates the heart of Reinhardt's revolutionary claims for his project, for painting, for art-as-art.

The way to enrich or socialize painting is to get more and more people to paint, to use and handle colors—not to acquire skills of illustration. Mondrian, like Marx, saw the disappearance of works of art when the environment itself became an aesthetic reality. In its dissatisfaction with ordinary experience, the impoverished reality of present-day experience, an abstract painting stands as a challenge to disorder and disintegration. Its activity implies a conviction of something constructive in our time. It is more difficult to write or talk about abstract painting than any other painting because the content is not in a subject matter or story, but *in the actual painting activity* [emphasis added].⁹²¹

Reinhardt, an artist always reluctant to speak of content, names it, and indeed, names it achingly close to Action Painting.

But this unexpected reversal is not only Reinhardt's. Likewise, on closer inspection, any simple formulation of Newman's project as prioritizing practice to theory has to be questioned. The resistance to this is strong and stems from the foundation myth of the making of *Onement I*. As Newman recounted to de Antonio on the creation of the zips, "I really don't know how I actually thought of them exactly. The reason that I say this, when I painted this painting, which I call *Onement*, my first *Onement*, so to speak, I stayed with that painting about eight, nine months, wondering to myself what had I done. What was it?"⁹²² There existed eight, nine months of gestation *before* conception, before figuring out what he had done, before coming to terms with its identity. Elsewhere Newman drove the point home by insisting, "The fact is, I am an intuitive painter, a direct painter. I have never worked from sketches, never planned a painting, never 'thought out' a painting. I start each painting as if I had never painted before."⁹²³ But this spontaneous realization was a difficult moment to specify. One had to be particularly careful and walk an exceedingly fine line between not knowing and knowing what one was doing. In a highly critical review of Hess's book *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, Newman complained that the author had equated "art" with "the act of painting—i.e., the manipulation of the paint itself." When art is conceived this way, "as a playing instrument, an immense grand piano, the art of painting is reduced from a fine art

to an interpretive one, the artist's role from that of a creator to one of a performer.” Newman further elaborates on the problems of this position. “This view is not as eccentric or isolated as it may seem. During the last few years, it has become popular among social theoreticians, particularly ex-Marxists, pseudoexistentialists, psychiatrists, historians, and literary men in general (Malraux is typical), when they refer to painting. The artist is approached not as an original thinker in his own medium but, rather, as an instinctive, intuitive executant who, largely unaware of what he is doing, breaks through the mystery by the magic of his performance to ‘express’ truths the professionals think that they can read better than he can himself.”⁹²⁴ Thus, although painting should not be “thought out,” it still had to contain thought—though “original” thought. Nor was this a new position for Newman. As in Reinhardt's case, the tendency is to polarize the theory and practice debates, to misrecognize them as a set of positions arguing for the priority of either a theory before practice or practice before theory, rather than as an attempt to describe a moment of mutuality between theory and practice. For instance, Newman, already with “The Ideographic Picture,” had indicated this as a major feature of his problematic, when he wrote in the short exhibition statement: “The basis of an aesthetic act is the pure idea. But the pure idea is, of necessity, an aesthetic act. Here then is the epistemological paradox that is the artist's problem . . . the idea-complex that makes contact with mystery.”⁹²⁵ Later and elsewhere the language will shift nominally but the crux of the dilemma will remain recognizable, as when in 1965 he tells Sylvester, “The problem of a painting is physical and metaphysical, the same as I think life is physical and metaphysical.”⁹²⁶ Painting had to be a manifestation of the thought-act and one of Newman's most profoundly pointed indications of this comes out in the Gees Seckler interview. “In 1951, at the time of my second one-man show,” he related, “I was asked by a viewer how long it took me to paint *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. I explained that it took a second but the second took a lifetime.” He further elaborates, “The conception and execution have to work together at the exact same moment. Impulse and control have to join. This is obviously unscientific and illogical, since theoretically one follows the other. But physically this is what *has* to happen. This is the paradox of the miraculous event.

Somehow the two things get joined.”⁹²⁷ Or, in language close to Reinhardt’s, he told an audience at Hunter College, “content has to be determined at the very moment [the painting] is being made.”⁹²⁸ This is the *infrathin* moment of painting as dialectic.

For both Newman and Reinhardt the achievement or state of theoretical practice and practical theory—of dialectical praxis—was described by the equally nebulous figure of the identical subject-object. Reinhardt’s penchant for impossible contradictions—as what Lippard described as his “fusion of polarities”—accesses both an appropriate tone of conceptual perplexity to this idea and the mechanism of using polarities to express each other’s identity.⁹²⁹ The point or the “End,” as Reinhardt indicated in his journal, was to “Not distinguish knower from known/Not ‘see’ it, but ‘oned’ with it.”⁹³⁰ The absolute, miraculous, mutual realization of theory and practice in the identity of subject and object was the “Path of the razor’s edge,” a “balancing,” on the “sharpest, thinnest line.”⁹³¹ “Paintings,” Reinhardt wrote, “are the end of the beginning, beginning of the end, the unknown of the known, known of the unknown/ Threshold.”⁹³² Again, the figure of the artist—the “one who works upon forms and whom forms work upon”—was the primal site for this dialectical tension.⁹³³ Newman also, in a 1963 interview, provides an image of his painting process in the bare-bone terms of dialectic. “I’m the subject,” Newman explained to Lane Slate, “I’m also the verb as I paint, but I’m also the object. I am the complete sentence.”⁹³⁴ Or, here is Newman in an expanded and elaborated version of that response.

One of the things that I feel that I’ve done [if I’ve done] something at all is that I have removed the emphasis on a painting as an object. . . . At the same time, it doesn’t mean that I’m ignorant of the fact that the painting inevitably is a physical object, and today there is an emphasis in painting on creating new kinds of objects. . . . I’m trying to make a distinction between an aesthetic object and a work of art. In this regard, I think of my painting as an object, but only as an object in a grammatical construction. When I was a young kind studying French, I studied with a man, Jean-Baptiste Zacharie, who used to teach French by saying, ‘*Moi, je suis le sujet*, I’m the subject; *vous, vous êtes l’object*, you are the object; *et voic le verbe*,’ and he’d give you a gentle slap on the face. The empty canvas is a grammatical object—a predicate. I am the subject who paints it. The process of painting is the verb. The finished painting is the entire sentence,

and that's what I'm involved in. Those who emphasize the world of objects and insist that an object can be art must, it seems to me, in the end make man himself an object. Now, this attitude is okay for generals, for politicians, for professional patriots, and for pagan aestheticians, who make man into so much material; but I think man is more than an object. Anyway, I'm not interested in adding to the objects that exist in the world. I want my painting to separate itself from every object and every art object that exists."⁹³⁵

And, as Newman would explain in another interview two years later, this is what *Onement I* participated in. "[W]hat 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. . . ."⁹³⁶

Obviously some shifting occurs through these three different self-accounts. Though they do not tell exactly the same story they tell enough of a similar account to indicate that Newman and Reinhardt were both working on figuring this image of the dialectical moment while suggesting as well the difficulties, perplexities, contradictions involved in attempting to describe this very image. For if Newman and Reinhardt can be said to share as their ultimate/absolute moment of identity—of onement/oneness—as the interpenetration of part and whole and of theory and practice that is given notation in the figure of the identical subject-object, they share in the image/process of praxis that Marx described when “all *objects* become for him the *objectification of himself*, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become his objects: that is, *man himself* becomes the object.”⁹³⁷ And, further, they share in it the quality or promise of change. The identical subject-object “mediates, regulates and controls his material interchange with nature by means of his own activity. . . . [A]cting upon nature outside of him, and changing it, he changes his own nature also.”⁹³⁸

Conclusion:

Divisions of Labor

Ho, here we have our two heroes and which side to choose? Fire or water? Progress or romance? Apollo or Dionysius? The city of God and the light of reason and the cold white peaks of art? Or the fires of hell and dark passions and muddy waters and old times?

Ad Reinhardt⁹³⁹

Neither the spontaneous non-identity of Newman's argument nor the organized identity of Reinhardt's argument holds up at this level. Instead, qualifications have to be made for both, and what had been posed earlier as differences lose their effective edge. For, does not Reinhardt's contradiction ("You get the thought from having done something first and the thought is the painting anyway") and Newman's paradox ("The conception and execution have to work together at the exact same moment") describe rather the same perplexing spot? Rehearsed in this is the familiar pattern: if Newman and Reinhardt are the same here, how come they are not one? Where again is their vital, defining difference?⁹⁴⁰

The key might be in taking a step back. The divide is not about the joining of theory and practice in the artist but the divisions in the theory and the practice of making that join. Or, put differently, Newman's and Reinhardt's argument is not over the figure of the artist but over the artist's very figuring or grounding. For Newman the artist precedes the laborer and for Reinhardt the laborer precedes the artist.

To recall from the 1947 issue of *Tiger's Eye*, this was an order of priority that Newman had forcefully announced in his statement's title—"The First Man Was an Artist." I have already dealt with earlier sections of this essay arguing against materialist and utilitarian origins of speech ("The purpose of man's first speech was an address to the unknowable. His behavior had its origin in his artistic nature. . . ."). But now traveling a little farther into the statement, Newman writes, "The God image, not pottery, was the first manual act. It is the materialistic corruption of present-day anthropology that has

tried to make men believe that man fashioned pottery before he made sculpture. Pottery is the product of civilization.”⁹⁴¹ The God image versus pottery. But as pedestrian and secondary as Newman makes it sound, a lot can be read into this “pottery.” For it is in Neolithic cultures with the invention of pottery that one could argue “time” was created, time for consciousness to grow, expand beyond the immediate, the positing of the future tense. It represented the grounds of possibility for planning, rationalization—as an excess, something held beyond the present, immediate need, a gleaning and a hoarding. Pottery as a vessel allowed for a delay, a removal, a distancing of the tyranny of the immediate.

This was an accounting Reinhardt had performed and come to terms with. It was, as already examined, the increased efficiency of labor through modernization whose byproduct was time, leisure-time that generated the horizon of possibility for the artist. His counter proposition to Newman’s first man, something that might easily be dubbed “The First Man Was a Laborer,” was spelled out in the following note.

→ *One paints when there is nothing else to do. After everything else is done, has been “taken care of,” one can take up the brush*
After all the human, social physical needs, pressures have been accounted for, only then can one be free to work.
There is nothing worse than a fine artist who has something to do, a “job” or “commission,” thinks he has a “job” to do.

.....

After the mail has been read and answered, bills paid, the place, studio cleaned and swept, children packed off to school or camp, wives released for shopping, after one has eaten, gone to the john, has taken a morning, noon or afternoon nap, free from any anxiety, all pains, pleasures, all distractions, obstacles, hindrances

.....

Pension, income, *when finally one has absolutely no reason not to work, is the exact ideal time to begin*⁹⁴²

What is apparent is that Reinhardt makes the same division between necessary work and free labor, but that the artist’s freedom was unquestionably predicated, as it were, on all that the “pottery” made possible. Painting, poetry, art-making were all posterior extensions of pottery. Indeed, Reinhardt was only too well aware of this order of priority.

As he notes in a draft for what would become the chronology for his 1966-67 Jewish Museum show, in 1946, his newspaper “day jobs” mean that he “paints nighttimes, midnights to mornings—is irritated and becomes extremely tired.”⁹⁴³ Reinhardt had from the beginning of his career and all the way to the end steadily worked jobs. He was, as he referred to himself in a postcard to Rosenberg, “a working class stiff.”⁹⁴⁴

Historically, the formal line dividing Newman and Reinhardt, the one that serves to announce their famous schism, is drawn in 1954. In that year Reinhardt presented a text, “The Artist in Search of An Academy, Part Two: Who Are the Artists?,” at the annual conference of the College Art Association. The text subsequently appeared in the organization’s publication, the *College Art Journal*.⁹⁴⁵ There is nothing spectacular or unusual or special about this text. Simply, it is classic Reinhardt, his combination of fantastic screed and dark humor from the “conscience of the art world,” performed in his characteristic mode of satiric categories and lists. Here, specifically, Reinhardt sets out a number of types of artist. The fourth and final type, is “the latest up-to-date popular image of the early fifties, the artist-professor and traveling design salesman, the *Art Digest* philosopher-poet and Bauhaus exerciser, the avant-garde huckster-handicraftsman and educational shopkeeper, the holy-roller explainer-entertainer-in-residence,” artists such as (and true to form, Reinhardt provides a list of names), “Albers, Bolotowsky, Chermayeff, Diller, Ferren, Greene, Holtzman, Holty, Morris, Motherwell . . . Wolff, Vytlačil, etc.”⁹⁴⁶ It was to this category, this type that Reinhardt assigned Newman.

What stands out in this incident is Newman’s remarkable response to Reinhardt’s art world jest. Newman attempts to sue Reinhardt for libel and for the astoundingly improbable sum of \$100,000. Had Newman won the case, this undoubtedly would have spelled Reinhardt’s financial ruin. It would have been his end. But the threat of ruination exists on another level too, and this is one which Annalee Newman herself raised in a very late interview. As she recalls the event, “Now, I always thought that Reinhardt didn’t want to get on the stand in the worst way. You never know why people don’t want to get on the witness stand. . . . And my feeling was that he [Reinhardt] might have been a communist. . . . And afraid that that might come out.”⁹⁴⁷ Speculating on this far more

sinister punitive possibility, taking Reinhardt to court could well have spelled his loss of political freedom as well. Legally, however, nothing so extreme happened. The libel suit is eventually thrown out, though only after two years and after two full days of court hearings. And some sense of symmetry is restored when one hears Sam Hunter's explanation for the judge's decision for dismissing the case: he found out Newman was an anarchist, bearing his own notable "history of agitation and writing crank letters to public officials."⁹⁴⁸ "Barney never got over it," Annalee reflected; after this incident the two artists never speak to each other again.⁹⁴⁹

Several questions are immediately raised by this incident. To begin, one wonders about Newman's heated reaction, why he took such personal offense. From most accounts of the New York School milieu, this was a rather tough verbal community and one imagines its inhabitants developing thickened skin. As a whole, name-calling and insult-making and heated challenges were not infrequent in the Cedar Bar Tavern, at their various symposia, or in the pages of *ARTnews*. Furthermore, by the mid-50s Reinhardt's comic-critical interventions in the art world were a well-established mode for him. The potential sting of being the object of a Reinhardt satire could be alleviated by the fact that practically *everybody* was one at some point or another. That indiscriminateness and all-inclusiveness in Reinhardt's rants make it very hard for them to be at all pointed. Most accepted their harmlessness. Rosenberg, for one, took his with the proverbial grain of salt, withstanding Reinhardt's references to him as both the "howling rosen-bird," and as a "hairstylist."⁹⁵⁰ Betty Parsons, a long-time dealer of the artist, "laughed at Ad Reinhardt's humorous jibes," such as in his satire on art galleries:

ParsongiftShoppe
antiquesjewelry
workesofarte
for the
upperlowbrow⁹⁵¹

By this time as well, the joke was fairly evidently on Reinhardt, the outsider and sore-loser, casting aspersion on the sell-outs from his position of phenomenal lack of success. That is, much of the sting was taken away by simply looking at the source.

Another point is this. Newman interpreted Reinhardt's 1954 text as a personal assault, a slanderous act meant to harm his being, but the fact remains that Newman's name is just one in a series of artist's names associated with a type. That type, one might add, included artists to whom Reinhardt had had quite close and important friendships. Carl Holty was an early "sympathetic and respected mentor" for Reinhardt and it was through Holty that he was introduced to the American Abstract Artists.⁹⁵² The same is true of Harry Holtzman, who is also included in this list, also prominent in A.A.A. and an important friend and teacher of Reinhardt's. Indeed, the company that Newman finds himself with is not all that bad. In other words, although being called a "traveling design salesman" and a "huckster-handicraftsman" might be cutting, overall Newman finds himself in good company. Of the categories described, this last one appears to be the best, the one Reinhardt would be most sympathetic to, and the one that would be closest to describing his own predicament of artistic identity. Finally, this proviso should be acknowledged: Reinhardt ends his statement by putting into serious question the validity of "artist names." "I've been called a great many artist names myself," Reinhardt admits, "romantic abstractionist, geometric expressionist, classicist, purist, abstract impressionists, sensationalist, decorative cubist, fauvist, surrealist, Mondrian disciple, avant-gardist, experimentalist, Orientalist, neo-Platonist, religious painter (Protestant), witty cartoonist, critic, writer, Indian-blanket designer, painter of window frames, waterfalls, autumn leaves, railroad signs, neon signs, and empty spaces, anarchist, gangster, cynic, escapist, negativist, ivory towerist, etc."⁹⁵³ And, indeed, the list—enumerating insults, half-truths and absurdities—certainly shows up the absurdity of this name-calling.

Indeed there exist several indications that Reinhardt himself was quite puzzled by Newman's severe reaction. In a postcard to Betty Parsons from October 1954 Reinhardt lays out a short defense of his actions. Although he opens by saying "its easy for me to understand the thing [Newman's reaction]," the rest of the letter makes clear that he does not.

But for pulling it into the legal world, making it a vulgar act that's not easy to forgive, and a fantastic fluke—I can explain to you perhaps why I listed names (to avoid the ambiguity of general statements) and I made ④ groups, for ④ decades (no one younger than ④① my age) for ④“general ideas” about artists ①③ artists in each group, all of them my friends and colleagues, all of them distinguished—But how explain the listing of BN's name as a way of “including” him as a way of “not excluding” him in my consideration of influential artists?—how in my “tongue-in-cheek” writing as a kind of self-questioning? Which BN knows? and knew?⁹⁵⁴

One might sympathize with Reinhardt's dilemma here. Obviously, by including Newman Reinhardt had taken a grave, unforgivable misstep in Newman's eyes. Annalee claims that Newman was “horrificed” by the *College Art Journal* piece and that this stemmed from Newman's hating to be grouped or called names, to having been identified as it were in this manner. “What Barney resented was being grouped with the kind of abstraction that he was fighting . . . to have grouped him—what he resented the most, I think was that he was grouped with Albers, Bolatowski, Diller.”⁹⁵⁵ On the other hand, as one who had definitely felt similar pains of exclusion from the art world as Newman, Reinhardt needed to “not exclud[e]” Newman as well. The postcard to Parsons quoted above was indeed found in Newman's papers. At some point, whether before Newman decides to take legal action or after, he was familiar with this justification presented by Reinhardt. Indeed, in all likelihood Reinhardt himself had attempted to explain his actions and innocuous motives to Newman. Even by the fact of Newman's difficulty in securing a witness—someone to second his claim—for the official court hearing, something of the lack of support for Newman's position is suggested.⁹⁵⁶ In the end, as a last resort, Annalee is put on the witness stand, even though, as she puts it, “I was the wife . . . I couldn't be a real witness.”

In an interview that transcribed runs to over sixty pages, Annalee's response to this incident stands out as one of the very few instances in which she registers anything less than absolute conviction in her husband's right and rightness. She explains her poor performance as a court witness on not devoting proper attention to the affair because she was very busy working, but what seems the more compelling excuse is what she adds

next: “But I suppose my heart wasn’t . . . I didn’t want Barney to do it.”⁹⁵⁷ How could Newman not know, not have known, not have understood?

This begs the question: was there something else motivating Newman’s reaction to Reinhardt’s gimmick in 1954? It hardly makes sense that this could have fomented such life-long ire in Newman.⁹⁵⁸ It would have taken a lot of effort on Newman’s part to read Reinhardt’s text as a malicious personal assault. It would necessarily have been a quite willful reading, and more so when one realizes that this was an event that developed out of the context of a long friendship, not only between the artists but between their wives as well. In an interview throughout which Annalee is quite diligent in insisting on a remove, a distance between herself and her husband’s friendships with artists and artist’s wives, her tone is markedly different when talking about Rita Reinhardt. With Rita, Reinhardt’s widow, the tone carries respect, even approval, and especially when contrasted to Annalee’s censure of Lee Krasner. “She [Rita Reinhardt] is not like Lee Pollock,” in acting “instrumental[ly]” for her husband’s art career. “No. Not at all,” Annalee emphasizes, and in fact, “She has her own life,” and “She’s remarried.”⁹⁵⁹ Further, Annalee suggests that she herself was the matchmaker for Rita and Ad’s marriage, an act or position that suggests some degree of intimacy with both the future wife and husband, and this prior to the couple’s official union. And though it is unclear whether this is limited to her relationship with Rita or extended to the relationship of the two couples, the Newmans and the Reinhardts, Annalee states, “We were sort of friendly.”⁹⁶⁰ Surely this much at least is gestured towards in the photograph in the Barnett Newman Foundation papers taken just a year earlier, in 1953, which shows the two couples, the Newmans and the Reinhardts—Ad, Barney, Annalee, Rita—after hours, gathered around a table, at a Harlem nightclub (fig. 37).⁹⁶¹ What had truly happened between 1953 and 1954?

Michael Corris, a scholar and artist with a long-time interest in Reinhardt, has thrown out the provocative suggestion that the 1954 split between Newman and Reinhardt had far less to do with the College Art Association piece than with the fact that Rita Reinhardt became pregnant in that year. What Corris is suggesting is that the social

split between Newman and Reinhardt stemmed from possible guilt Newman might have felt towards his wife: that he had not provided Annalee with a child, that they had made no family, they had not, in essence, reproduced.

As a way of ending, I want to make a speculative extension on Corris' comment and use it as an illustration of the political problem involved. The speculation is this: Newman's bitterness in 1954 came from a very pointed recognition. For what Rita's pregnancy highlighted was Annalee's sacrifice. From Annalee's own account and from accounts of the material hardship the Newmans faced, it seems likely that Annalee's childlessness had much to do with material limitations of both time and money. When one looks at the facts of Annalee as the breadwinner—supporting her husband and herself on her salary, including periods that demanded the supplementation of income by working two jobs—one realizes that a child and a family were very much out of the question.⁹⁶² The paintings were the substitution, and Annalee will indeed refer to her late husband's paintings as his "babies, his children," ones that she became responsible for, that become hers only after his death. "But once he was gone, then I had to take over." "[T]he paintings are like children to me," she states, and the process of carefully placing them in museums throughout the world "like getting your children married off," something from which she derives "pleasure" and a "sense of joy" by placing/marrying them well: "I want them to have homes and good homes. And so everytime I place a painting it has to be in a good home. But I feel I've taken care of it."⁹⁶³ Annalee's childlessness could be taken as a sign of the much larger sacrifice she had made in her husband's stead. Indeed, in the same interview again, she speaks of marriage as surrender, that this was how Newman thought of it, and of the clear understanding she and Newman had before their marriage.⁹⁶⁴ "Now, what he [Newman] said was that he had to be an artist. And if he couldn't be an artist, he couldn't live. And that was the understanding. There was no possibility that we could have a family. And I understood that completely."⁹⁶⁵

In a prosaically material sense, the grounds of possibility for Newman's art—his career, his high passion, his life's work, all of his moments of and monuments to

individual self-realization—were premised upon the performance of Annalee’s diligent labor, upon a social relation in which certain priorities had been set and specific sacrifices had been made. Although Newman would work as a substitute teacher in the New York public school system for the first several years of their marriage in 1936, and on occasion would have temporary employment, it was significantly Annalee who in 1938 would eventually pass the public school examination board, and it was she who a year later would come up with the regular job—teaching stenography and typewriting in a high school in Queens (skills, one might note, of bureaucratic modernizing and rationalizing communication, if there ever were any) . “[W]hen I got my permanent job,” Annalee recalls telling her husband, “Allright now. . . . Now I have a job. . . . So now I want you to be free. I said I don’t want you to have to work. I don’t want you to have to teach. I want you to be free so that you can be an artist. . . . I want to be like the rock of Gibraltar for you. So that he could work and not have to worry about how we were going to live.”⁹⁶⁶ After 1939 Newman was supported by Annalee’s salary. This was the financial arrangement that would hold for the next seventeen years. “[T]his was just a job to . . . make a living to make it possible for him [Newman] to achieve what he had to achieve. . . . For me it was no career. It was just a job. A job to earn a living so I could *free* [emphasis added] my husband. . . . We were two people who had a single cause.”⁹⁶⁷

In other words, Newman’s freedom had come at a price, and his wife had picked up the tab. It all comes back with terrific irony, and one that could not but have been felt, one imagines quite poignantly, by Newman. The first *man* might have been an artist but that figure was preceded by another figure, a woman, and a laborer (“It was just a job”). Newman’s precious creative work was inextricably bound with and premised on a division of labor and one far from subtle. Nor would the ironies stop there. Certainly Newman would have been aware of the anthropological thesis that the first division of labor is thought to stem from sexual reproduction and a separation of tasks based on child-bearing.⁹⁶⁸ For Newman the anarchist having the good immediacy of his practice (that glorious self-affirming at-once) shown to be mediated by all of Annalee’s unfree labor, which kept the bad immediacy of nature and necessity at bay, could only be a

demoralizing blow: this was the necessity of the social act (all that “pottery”) predating and underwriting the “freedom” (the good immediacy) of the artistic act. But nor does this speculative narrative let Reinhardt off the hook so easily. The productive (or re-productive) Reinhardt, the “statist,” can in a sense only ever reproduce, only keep repeating himself, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*.

Notes

1. Barnett Newman, "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference" (statement made at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference, sponsored by the American Society for Aesthetics and the Woodstock Artists Association, Woodstock, New York, August 22-23, 1952), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 243. Hereafter cited as *BNSWI*.

2. Ibid., p. 243.

3. See Mollie McNickle, text notes and commentary to *BNSWI*, p. 242.

4. Newman, "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference," p. 243. For a sampling of the kinds of attacks professionalization received in the post-war period—and from an art world vantage—see Harold Rosenberg, "Everyman a Professional," *ARTnews*, vol. 55, no. 7 (November 1956), pp. 26-27, 65, 66, 67; Fairfield Porter, "Class Content in American Abstract Painting," *ARTnews*, vol. 61, no. 2 (April 1962), pp. 26-28, 48-49.

5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 1; Terry Eagleton, "Introduction Part I," in *Marxist Literary Theory*, ed. Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), p. 7; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.

6. Budd Hopkins, "Frank Stella's New Work: A Personal Note," *Artforum*, vol. 15, no. 4 (December 1976), p. 59.

7. Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics," *Partisan Review* (August 1938), reprinted as "Art and Politics in Our Epoch," in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, ed. Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 112. This was written in the form of a letter (dated June 18, 1938) addressed to the editors of *Partisan Review*.

8. Eagleton, "Introduction Part I," p. 7.

9. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 5.

10. David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 2.
11. T. J. Clark, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," *October* 69 (summer 1994), p. 23.
12. David Anfam, "Of War, Demons and Negation," review of *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith; *Jackson Pollock*, by Ellen Landau; *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut; *Abstract Expressionism*, by David and Cecile Shapiro; *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*, by Clifford Ross; *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: from Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, by Erika Doss; *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, by Stephen Polcari, *Art History*, vol. 16, no. 3 (September 1993), pp. 479-480.
13. Barnett Newman, remarks from "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)," April 22, 1950, in *Modern Artists in America*, ed. Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1952), p. 15.
14. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, pp. 2, 6, 14.
15. Ibid., pp. 5, 2. Though her focus is towards a different aesthetic tendency and later artistic generation (Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns), Moira Roth's 1977 essay "The Aesthetic of Indifference" (*Artforum*, vol. 16, no. 3 [November 1977], pp. 46-53) is another significant inquiry into the development of new aesthetic modes within the context of McCarthyism and the Cold War.
16. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, p. 3.
17. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, vol. 1, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 10-11.
18. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, p. 9.
19. Ibid., p. 142.
20. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

21. Ibid., p. 201.
22. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, p. 6.
23. Leja has been keen to underscore the difference between his own and Guilbaut's utilization of "ideology." Successive commentators have as well focused on this point as the crucial one for understanding the differences of their arguments. See Andrew Hemingway, "The Two Paths," review of *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, by Michael Leja; *Making the Modern: Industry, Art and Design in America*, by Terry Smith, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1996), p. 114-115.
24. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, p. 2.
25. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 10. Anfam also writes critically of the "fossiliz[ing] [of] the debate" by the "ideological framework to which revisionism has too easily fallen hostage" (Anfam, "Of War, Demons and Negation," pp. 479-80).
26. Of course, what counts as the shortcomings and failures of the left depends to some degree on where one locates oneself on the political spectrum. However, some of the more obvious, most frequently repeated ones are: Leninism, the Popular Front, Stalinism, the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, and the Moscow trials of 1933, among others.
27. Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, p. 1.
28. Ibid., p. 4.
29. Ibid., p. 3.
30. William H. Whyte Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).
31. Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, p. 264, n. 35.
32. Ibid., p. 1.
33. "Stalinist" and "reductive" are Craven's characterizations (Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 43).
34. Ibid., p. 41.

35. Ibid., p. 54.
36. Ibid., p. 17.
37. Ibid., p. 26.
38. Ibid., p. 27.
39. The “Greek” question has come to serve as shorthand for the slew of issues raised in attempts to describe the relations between cultural expression and the historical societies out of which it comes. Marx raises some of these problems when in the *Grundrisse* he confronts his own deep admiration for ancient Greek art, finding in it a profound expression of humanity and his knowledge of ancient Greek society, its social and economic basis operating through vast inequalities of gender, class and race. How is it then that a society of such inhumanity generate an art of such deep humanity? For further discussion of the relevance of the “Greek” question in debates over a Marxist, materialist aesthetic, see Margaret A. Rose, *Marx’s Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 83-91.
40. Dave Laing, *The Marxist Theory of Art* (Sussex: Harvester Press; New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978), pp. x, 13.
41. Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, pp. 4-5.
42. Ibid., pp. 1, 4.
43. Ibid., p. 5.
44. What is frequently taken as Trotsky’s statement endorsing a “cultural turning” in revolutionary politics is his June 18, 1938 letter to the editors of *Partisan Review* that was published in the August 1938 issue of that periodical as “Art and Revolution.” Also see Andre Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky, “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (fall 1938), pp. 49-53. Although the two names originally signed to this piece were those of Breton and Rivera, it is generally considered to be the product of Trotsky and Breton’s joint authorship. According to Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, “it was considered expedient by Trotsky that Rivera’s name should be substituted for his own” (Harrison and Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* [Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1993], p. 526).

45. Jachec's research also shows up the important fact that these European third-way thinkers were being published by the American left independent press in magazines and reviews that were popular with many of the Abstract Expressionists. *Partisan Review*, *Politics*, *Possibilities*, *Tiger's Eye* and *Instead* were among them (Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, p. 18).
46. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1972, 1978), p. 601.
47. Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Bibliography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 173.
48. Fredrick Schiller, *Philosophische Schriften* (Leipzig: Inselverlag, 1906), quoted in Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 86.
49. Mike Gold, "Migratory Intellectuals," *The New Masses* (December 15, 1936), quoted in Patricia Hills, "1936: Meyer Schapiro, *Art Front*, and the Popular Front," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1994), p. 38.
50. Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 2-3.
51. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p. 91.
52. Clement Greenberg, "The Late Thirties in New York," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 230.
53. Hal Foster, "Design and Crime," in *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 19.
54. O. K. Werckmeister, "Marx on Ideology and Art," *New Literary History*, vol. 4 (1973), p. 509.
55. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, p. 27.
56. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, pp. 143, 44.

57. Ibid., p. 112; Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddatt (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1967), p. 257.

59. Sidney Tillim in “Modern Art and the Critics: A Panel Discussion,” moderated by Bruce Glaser, WBAI-FM, New York, published in *Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 2 (winter 1970-71), p. 155.

60. Barbara Rose in “Modern Art and the Critics: A Panel Discussion,” p. 155.

61. The third critic participating in “Modern Art and the Critics: A Panel Discussion,” moderated by Bruce Glaser, was Max Kozloff.

62. Paul Goodman, “Essays by Rosenberg,” review of *The Tradition of the New*, by Harold Rosenberg, *Dissent*, vol. 6, no. 3 (summer 1959), p. 305.

63. See the correspondence between Rosenberg and Irving Howe in the Rosenberg Papers.

64. Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 33, no. 10 (September 1959), pp. 56-59.

65. Hilton Kramer, “The Strange Case of Harold Rosenberg,” *The Lugano Review*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1965), p. 124.

66. Max Kozloff, “Critical Reception of Abstract-Expressionism,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 40, no. 2 (December 1965), p. 33.

67. John Russell, “The Action Critic,” *The New York Times Book Review* (April 22, 1979), pp. 3, 28, quoted in Elaine O’Brien, “The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg: Theaters of Love and Combat” (Ph.D. diss., City University New York, 1997), p. 328.

68. Paul Brach, interview by O’Brien, telephone conversation, September 20, 1994, quoted in O’Brien, “The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg,” p. 112.

69. Harold Rosenberg, “Discovering the Present” (1968), in *Artworks and Packages* (New York: Horizon Press, 1969), p. 173.

70. Charles Baudelaire, quoted by Rosenberg, “Discovering the Present,” p. 173.

71. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 8.
72. Meyer Schapiro, "The Social Bases of Art" was first delivered as a paper to the American Artists's Congress in February 1936; idem, "Public Uses of Art," *Art Front*, vol. 2, no. 10 (November 1936); idem, "Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April-June 1937); idem, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art," *ARTnews*, vol. 56, no. 4 (summer 1957), pp. 36-42.
73. J. Hoberman, "Harold Rosenberg's Radical Cheek," *Voice Literary Supplement* (May 1986), pp. 10-13.
74. Phyllis Rosenzweig, *The Fifties: Aspects of Painting in New York* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), p. 15.
75. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 30.
76. Harold Rosenberg, "The Search for Jackson Pollock," *ARTnews*, vol. 59, no. 10 (February 1961), pp. 35, 58-60.
77. Barbara Rose, "Hans Namuth's Photographs and the Jackson Pollock Myth: Part One: Media Impact and the Failure of Criticism," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 53, no. 7 (March 1979), pp. 112-116. Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" was not published in *ARTnews* until the December 1952 issue.
78. Rose, "Hans Namuth's Photographs and the Jackson Pollock Myth: Part One: Media Impact and the Failure of Criticism," p. 113.
79. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," pp. 24-25.
80. April Kingsley, *The Turning Point: The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 11.
81. Jackson Pollock, "My Painting," *Possibilities*, vol. 1 (winter 1947-48), p. 79.
82. O'Brien attributes this quote to Barbara Rose in the essay "ABC Art." I have not been able to locate this statement in this essay, but I leave it in, however, because it so tellingly summarizes the criticisms against Rosenberg.
83. "Amateur standing," *ARTnews*, vol. 60, no. 1 (March 1961), p. 23.
84. Ibid.

85. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" (1952), in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), p. 30.

86. Ibid., p. 31.

87. Katherine Kuh, "Abstract and Real," *Art in America*, vol. 46, no. 4 (winter 1958-59), pp. 16-7.

88. Ibid., p. 17.

89. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," p. 25.

90. But even that is not entirely correct. Rosenberg also discussed such artists as the figurative painter Lester Johnson and the photographer Aaron Siskind as possessing important Action Painting aspects. Rosenberg writes, for instance, of Johnson as having "chosen to build his art upon Action Painting" and as an "heir of de Kooning, Kline, Pollock, Hofmann, Guston" (Rosenberg, "The Image as Counterforce," *ARTnews*, vol. 64, no. 10 [February 1966], p. 48), and several years later Rosenberg more directly refers to the "Action paintings of Lester Johnson" (Rosenberg, "Art and Words" [1969], in *The De-definition of Art*, p. 64). For his introduction to a volume of Siskind's work, he praised the photographer for being "[l]ike the best of his painter contemporaries," because "he ha[d] simplified his means in order to concentrate on the act of choice." The painter contemporaries whom Rosenberg has in mind are the Action Painters (Rosenberg, "Aaron Siskind: The Camera and Action Art," *ARTnews*, vol. 58, no. 6 [September 1959], p. 22).

91. Nor, again, does the magazine's cover help. Though Rosenberg's essay ("Is there a new American art?") is one of the two cover stories, it is to the other feature, something of a grab-bag ("Christmas: Byzantines, El Greco, Matisse") that the cover image, a Byzantine mosaic of "The Creation of the World" taken from an interior cupola of St. Mark's in Venice, correlates (fig. 5).

92. Stephen Polcari, "Abstract Expressionism: 'New and Improved,'" *Art Journal*, vol. 47, no. 3 (fall 1988), p. 174.

93. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., introduction to *The New American Painting: As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958-1959* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), p. 15. This traveling exhibition of American painting was organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art and under the auspices of the International Council at the Museum of Modern Art.

94. Excerpts of this correspondence appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1952. The entire correspondence from de Beauvoir's United States trip was later published as *L'Amerique au jour le jour* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1954). Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day By Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 29-31.

95. See Jachec, *The Philosophy of Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, p. 20.

96. Indeed, "The American Action Painters" essay originally had been commissioned by Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre for *Les Temps Moderne*. *Les Temps Moderne*, begun in 1944, was a publication identified with French existentialism and third-way politics. The main figures on the editorial board were Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Paulhan. "The American Action Painters" ended up not being published in *Les Temps Moderne* because of an argument between Rosenberg and Sartre. Rosenberg had disagreed with the way Sartre had represented his views on Marx and Sartre had refused to publish a correction to this in the magazine (O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," pp. 46-7, n. 7).

97. Martin Jay's study of Western Marxism, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984, p. 3), includes and examines Sartre and Merleau-Ponty as twentieth-century Western Marxists.

98. Rosenberg, "Image as Counterforce," p. 48.

99. Harold Rosenberg, "Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion" (1962), in *The Anxious Object* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 42. This is a revised version of an essay that was originally published under the title "Action Painting: A Decade of Distortion" in *ARTnews*, vol. 61, no. 8 (December 1962), pp. 42-45, 62-63. All subsequent citations are to the 1962 version.

100. Thierry de Duve, "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas," in *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 201-202.

101. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, p. 36.

102. Ibid., p. 39.

103. Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center,'" trans. Thomas

Repensek, in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, second edition, ed. Francis Francina (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 205.

104. Ibid., p. 205, n. 28.

105. Barbara Cavaliere, "Possibilities II," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 56, no. 1 (September 1981), p. 105.

106. Harold Rosenberg, *Art and Other Serious Matters* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Adam Gopnik, "The Anxious Critic," *Art in America*, vol. 73, no. 9 (September 1985), p. 19.

107. Gopnik, "The Anxious Critic," pp. 21, 17.

108. What can be read as an index of Rosenberg's gradually shifting status is the way in which Craven lays out the field for post-war cultural criticism. In Craven's study, specifically directed at the critical and dissenting aspects of Abstract Expressionism, Greenberg gets quickly dismissed as a political conservative sell-out holding a "view fundamentally at odds both with the avowed artistic intention of the artists themselves and with the assessments by their astute defenders, namely, Meyer Schapiro, Elaine de Kooning, and Harold Rosenberg." Thus by the year 2000, the publication date of Craven's work, a critical reversal had been marked (see Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 124).

109. Fred Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1991), pp. 3-17; O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg."

110. These papers have since been archived by O'Brien and donated by Rosenberg's daughter to the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles. In 1999 these papers were opened for study to the wider scholarly community.

111. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 329.

112. Ibid., p. 3.

113. Ibid., p. 12.

114. Ibid., pp. iv, 38, 28, 45.

115. Ibid., pp. iv, v.

116. Ibid., p. iv.
117. Ibid., pp. 7-8.
118. Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, p. 19.
119. Ibid., p. 30.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid., p. 144.
122. Ibid., p. 139.
123. Ibid., p. 142.
124. Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," p. 3.
125. Ibid., p. 10.
126. Ibid., p. 6.
127. Ibid., p. 3.
128. Ibid.
129. Ibid., p. 8.
130. Ibid.
131. Ibid., p. 9.
132. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," p. 32.
133. Harold Rosenberg to Dwight Macdonald, June 6, 1940, Dwight Macdonald Papers, quoted in Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 135.
134. Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, p. 8.

135. Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," in *Decline of the New* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 215.
136. Hilton Kramer, quoted by Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 5.
137. Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, pp. 9, xiii.
138. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 181.
139. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
140. Sidney Hook, interview by Neil Jumonville, Wardsboro, Vermont, July 15, 1985 (Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, p. 140).
141. Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 4.
142. Alfred Kazin, interview by O'Brien, telephone conversation, September 1, 1993 (O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 264, n. 50).
143. Ben Halpern to Rosenberg, postmarked October 25, 1946, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
144. Irving Kristol to Rosenberg, October 14, 1948, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
145. Rosenberg to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, February 28, 1957, Harold Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 5. "Marxism: Criticism and/or Action" was published in *Dissent*, vol. 3, no. 4 (fall 1956), pp. 366-375. The essay was distributed in Poland under the auspices of *Dissent*.
146. See Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, p. 105; Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, p. 135; Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 45; and Orton, "Action, Revolution, Painting," p. 13.
147. Orton, "Action, Revolution, and Painting," p. 13, n. 11.
148. One of Rosenberg's better known essays outside of "The American Action Painters" is his "Couch Liberalism and the Guilty Past" in which he condemns the

political cowardice of many of the New York Intellectual milieu. This essay was originally published in *Dissent*, vol. 2, no. 4 (autumn 1955), the journal edited by Irving Howe and on whose board Meyer Schapiro sat for many years.

149. Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, pp. 19, 30.

150. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," pp. 188, 221, 280.

151. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

152. *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 146.

153. Rosenberg Papers, Box 21, Folder 6.

154. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 218.

155. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

156. Karl Marx to his father, November 10, 1837, Berlin, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 7-8.

157. Marx's daughter, Eleanor, has written of her father reciting and knowing all of Shakespeare by heart, and passages from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*—especially the opening of the seventh section—suggestively evoke *Hamlet*. For example, Marx writes of "the blood of the Paris proletariat . . . haunt[ing] the subsequent acts of the drama like a ghost" (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 603).

158. Marx to his father, November 10, 1837, pp. 7-8; Dick Howard, *The Development of the Marxian Dialectic* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), p. 5.

159. The context of this note is quite rich. The passage quoted comes from a page of notes made by Rosenberg on the assorted themes of the actor, history as stage, drama and Shakespeare. Rosenberg Papers, Box 20, Folder 19.

160. In capitalizing Action Painting and Action Painters I have chosen to follow the precedent laid by Rosenberg in the initial publication of "The American Action Painters" in the December 1952 issue of *ARTnews*.

161. Robert Goldwater, "Reflections on the New York School," *Quadrum*, no. 8 (summer 1960), p. 29.

162. According to O'Brien, Rosenberg always considered himself "a man of the thirties" (O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 175).

163. Rosenberg, "The Search for Jackson Pollock," pp. 59-60.

164. Marx makes reference to the "resurrected Romans" in his famed pamphlet, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, a text with which Rosenberg was highly engaged throughout his career.

165. See note 111.

166. Harold Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," *The Symposium*, vol. 3, no. 3 (July 1932), pp. 348-369, all subsequent citations of this essay are to the reprint version in *The Tradition of the New*; idem, "The Resurrected Romans," *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 10, no. 4 (autumn 1948), pp. 602-620; idem, "The Pathos of the Proletariat," *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 11, no. 4 (autumn 1949), pp. 595-629. These are the three essays that Orton also points to as being central to understanding Rosenberg's concept of Action Painting (see Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting").

167. For the most part, later reception history has borne this out. Ironically it is the conservative critic, Hilton Kramer, who seems most able to detect or most willing to call out the Marxist language and material in these essays. In a 1959 review of the just published *The Tradition of the New* Kramer described Rosenberg's essay "The Resurrected Romans" as the "sharpest analyses of the ideological view of history" found in Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and a "searching rumination on the relation of revolutionary action to historical self-consciousness" (Kramer, "Month in Review," p. 57).

168. Howe, who worked as an assistant to Dwight Macdonald on the journal *Politics*, notes that Macdonald was "insensitive" to difficult, not perfectly explicit prose, such as Rosenberg's (Howe, *A Margin of Hope*, p. 115).

169. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," pp. 98, 325.

170. Bernard Bergonzi, "Thoughts on the Personality Explosion," in *Innovations: Essays on Art and Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 195.

171. Herbert Weinstock to Rosenberg, November 7, 1949, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.

172. Jacques Schiffin (of Pantheon Books) to Rosenberg, June 1, 1950, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.

173. Beacon Press to Rosenberg, January 17, 1951, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 8.

174. R. H. Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London: Hamilton, 1950); Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar* (London: J. Cape, 1945), *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (London: J. Cape, 1940); Leslie Fiedler, *An End to Innocence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). More examples are: Sidney Hook, *Heresy, Yes—Conspiracy, No* (New York: John Day, 1953); Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (London: Methuen and Company, 1936); Arthur Koestler, *Arrival and Departure* (London: J. Cape, 1943).

175. See the Rosenberg Papers Box 1, Folder 15.

176. Paul de Man to Rosenberg, November 5, 1949, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.

177. See the Rosenberg Papers, Box 49, Folder 7.

178. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 55.

179. Amy Goldin, "Harold Rosenberg's Magic Circle," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 40, no. 1 (November 1965), pp. 37-39.

180. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

181. *Ibid.*

182. Clyfford Still to Rosenberg, December 14, 1952, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 7.

183. Irving Kristol to Rosenberg, August 18, 1953, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 12.

184. Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, p. 3.

185. George Sorel, *Reflexions sur la violence* (Paris: Marcel Riviere, 1950), quoted in Bertell Ollman, "Putting Dialectics to Work: The Process of Abstraction in Marx's Method," *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 3, no. 1 (spring 1990), p. 26.
186. Edmund Wilson, "The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic," *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (fall 1938), pp. 66-81; William Phillips, "The Devil Theory of the Dialectic (A Reply to Edmund Wilson)," *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (fall 1938), pp. 82-90.
187. Wilson, "The Myth of the Marxist Dialectic," p. 73.
188. The easy formula might run something like this: if one wants smart formal theory, one looks to Clement Greenberg; if one wants smart social theory, one looks to Meyer Schapiro.
189. Wolfgang Paalen, "Inquiry on Dialectical Materialism," *Dyn 2* (March 1942), pp. 49-52. For a more detailed discussion of this see David Craven, "Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch, and the Emergence of Critical Theory," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1994), pp. 42-43.
190. Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 59.
191. Ollman, "Putting Dialectics to Work: The Process of Abstraction in Marx's Method," p. 32.
192. Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, p. 119.
193. Rosenberg Papers, Box 20, Folder 19.
194. Rosenberg to Harriet Monroe, 1936, Rosenberg Papers, quoted in O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 217.
195. Harold Rosenberg, "Death in the Wilderness" (1957), in *The Tradition of the New*, pp. 250-51.
196. Kramer, "Month in Review," p. 59.
197. Harold Rosenberg, "On the De-definition of Art" (1971), in *The De-definition of Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 11.

198. Rosenberg, draft of a May 28, 1974 letter to Lionel Trilling, Rosenberg Papers, quoted in O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 144.
199. Rosenberg, interview by Mr. Hole, transcript, 1967, Rosenberg Papers, Box 3, Folder 7.
200. Ibid.
201. Ibid.
202. Rosenberg to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1955, Rosenberg Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.
203. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 144.
204. Ibid.
205. De Beauvoir, *America Day By Day*, pp. 343-44.
206. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 595.
207. Harold Rosenberg, *Arshile Gorky: The Man, The Time, The Idea* (New York: Sheep Meadow Press/Flying Point Books, 1962).
208. Harold Rosenberg, "Gorky and History" (1962), in *The Case of the Baffled Radical* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 17.
209. Ibid.
210. Ibid., p. 21.
211. Ibid.
212. Ibid., p. 20.
213. Harold Rosenberg, "Life and Death of the Amorous Umbrella," *VVV* 1 (June 1942), pp. 12-13, quoted in Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, p. 37.
214. Harold Rosenberg, "The Third Dimension of Georg Lukács" (1964), in *The Case of the Baffled Radical*, p. 46.

215. Rosenberg, "Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion," pp. 42-45, 62-63.
216. Ibid., p. 39.
217. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 175.
218. Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," p. 135.
219. Ibid., p. 136.
220. Ibid., p. 146.
221. Ibid., p. 148.
222. Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," p. 8.
223. Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," p. 149.
224. Ibid., p. 152.
225. Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," p. 160.
226. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 479.
227. Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," p. 137.
228. Ibid., p. 138.
229. Ibid., p. 137. Rosenberg explored some of the tensions of personality and identity through his treatment of two different real world revolutionaries. In 1936 Rosenberg was able to point to John Reed as a real living example of this positive transcendence of personality to identity. "The vastest event of the modern world, the Bolshevik seizure of power in October," the revolutionary moment "when the world of personalities was transformed into a world of historical forces," transformed Reed from a personality—the salon bohemian of the "Little Revolt—Little Magazines, Little Theaters"—into the revolutionary hero, as one who possesses historical self-consciousness, and awareness of acting within a "world of historical forces" (Rosenberg, "The Education of John Reed," review of *John Reed*, by Granville Hicks, *Partisan Review*, vol. 3, no. 5 [June 1936], p. 28). Although, of course, the problem cuts the other way too. This is what Rosenberg alludes to when he talks about the revolutionary

impersonality of a hero-figure like Lenin, of Lenin in a sense having so identified with objective history, and his objective role within it, that as a subject, as an interior, he was a bit of a blank. A footnote to "Character Change and the Drama" draws attention to the fact that the biography of Lenin written by D. S. Mirsky presented a "man who had almost no personal life" (Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," p. 152).

230. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 319.

231. Rosenberg, "Marxism: Criticism and/or Action," pp. 369-70.

232. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (1939/1941). This translation taken from Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art* (1973; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 57.

233. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 23.

234. Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," pp. 473-74.

235. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 595.

236. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition: Marx/Hugo/Balzac* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1977), p. 2.

237. To suggest the appropriateness of comparing Rosenberg and Adorno (and Horkheimer) is also to raise the extended concern of the compatibility of the cultural and social criticism of the New York Intellectuals and the Frankfurt School (or those members of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung), the two groups to which Rosenberg and Adorno are associated, respectively. Obviously it is beyond the scope of this study to substantially address the significance of the interactions between these two groups; however, one might mention that both intellectual milieus were debating many of the same issues: among them, the relation of art and politics, the failure of Marxism, anxiety over mass behavior, mass culture, and the dangers of the culture industry, the possible extinction of high culture and any justifications for high art. The other tantalizing aspect about these two groups is that beyond sharing similar intellectual concerns they also shared, for briefer and longer spells depending on the individual in question, a geographic region, New York City, many on the Upper West Side around Columbia University from the mid 1930s through the 1940s. Columbia University served as a joint institutional affiliation for many but so did the New School for Social Research. The American Jewish Council sponsored work done by members of both groups. A number of issues of the Institut's journal were produced during its New York exile, and those Frankfurt School affiliates who ended up staying on in the United States through

the 1950s and 1960s were frequently published in the pages of *Dissent*, the unofficial journal of a slightly younger generation of New York Intellectuals. Jachec, notably, has supported the view of these two groups's proximity and especially by challenging the suggestion that the writings in German of the Frankfurt émigrés—especially the magnum opus of critical theory, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—would have been unavailable to the New Yorkers because of the language barrier. Jachec has pointed out that many of the New Yorker group read German and that the general thrust of their argument would have been available through the pages of the English language *Commentary* (Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, p. 44). However, even beyond questions of the New Yorker's level of proficiency in German, presumably in order to read the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the published organ of the Frankfurt Institut, is the fact that in 1939 the journal took a new title, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, and its new title significantly reflected the fact that it was now being published in English and it was done so until 1941. Craven has been another force on the side of arguing for a significant connection between the Frankfurt Institut members and the New York Intellectuals. The 1957 Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White edited anthology, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, that Jumonville quickly dismisses above, Craven examines in more detail. Bernard Rosenberg, as Craven points out, was an editor at *Dissent*, and the anthology included two highly important essays by Institut members, Leo Lowenthal's "Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture" and Theodor Adorno's "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture." Furthermore, as evidence of mutual engagement at least on the level of ideas, the volume also contained Irving Howe's "Notes on Mass Culture," an essay addressing Adorno's own mass culture theories (Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 58). The circle closes even more tightly around Rosenberg and Adorno if one looks at the art historian Meyer Schapiro. A New York Intellectual, with significant connections to *Dissent* (he was a founding member of its editorial board) and an incredibly important intellectual role model for Rosenberg, he was an important liaison for the Frankfurt Institut during its New York residency, not least of all being Schapiro's "mission" in the summer of 1939 to Paris to convince Walter Benjamin to relocate with the other Institut members to New York City (See Thompson and Raines, "A Vermont Visit with Meyer Schapiro [August 1991]" *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 [1994], p. 7). During several interviews that Schapiro gave in the early 1990s he spoke of his interaction beginning in 1934 with the Institut members, especially Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. Of Adorno during this period, Schapiro remembered, "I saw [him] constantly and he was very friendly with me. We usually discussed the situation in Germany, which greatly disturbed him. Since he lived on the Upper West Side near Columbia, Adorno would drop in on me quite often. . . ." (Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 63). So, Adorno in fact lived in New York City and associated with individuals within Rosenberg's milieu from 1938-41. However, temptingly close as this is, Adorno and Rosenberg just miss each other during Adorno's

New York exile. In late 1937 Rosenberg leaves New York and moves to Washington, D.C. when he accepts the position of national arts director for the W.P.A. American Guides Series. Although the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung had officially relocated to New York City as part of an arrangement (sponsored in part by the Rockefeller Foundation) as adjunct to Columbia University in Manhattan and many of its most significant members were already in residence there in 1934, Adorno on escaping Nazi Germany first went to England as a post-doctoral student and visiting lecturer at Merton College, Oxford, before his eventual arrival in New York in 1938. By the time Rosenberg came back to New York in 1942, Adorno had just the year before relocated to the West Coast where he would co-author, with Institut director, Max Horkheimer, the famed masterpiece *Dialectic of Enlightenment* before his 1947 return to West Germany and the project of reconstructing the original Frankfurt Institut.

238. Rosenberg writes: “In its attack on the ‘culture industry,’ the uprising of the students touched an essential nerve of contemporary culture—the alienation of the creation from its creator and his ideas, and the consequent emptiness of the relation between the artist and his audience. No sooner does the painting, the musical score, the script leave its author’s hands than it becomes a commodity of the culture industry.” And, Adorno writes: “Artistic spirit raises itself above what merely exists at the point where the imagination does not capitulate to the mere existence of materials and techniques. Since the emancipation of the subject, the mediation of the work through it is not to be renounced without its reversion to the status of a thing. . . . On the other hand, only stubbornness could deny the productive function of many “surprise” elements in much modern art, in *Action Painting* and aleatoric art, that did not result from being passed through the imagination” (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 38).

239. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1998), p. 7.

240. Ibid., pp. 9, 12.

241. Ibid., p. 12.

242. Ibid., p. 15.

243. Ibid., pp. 16, 31.

244. See Ollman’s discussion of abstraction in “Putting Dialectics to Work: The Process of Abstraction in Marx’s Method,” p. 27.

245. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 31.

246. Ibid., p. 33.
247. For Marx the social, upon which all individual existence is based and supported, is only possible through shared (exchanged) meanings (among other things obviously). Language is key for this communication, for the development and maintenance of the social and indeed for consciousness. In particular see, Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Part I* (1932), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 154-158.
248. Marcel Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, trans. G. M. (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1950); Rosenberg's essay "French Silence and American Poetry," was reprinted in *The Tradition of the New*, pp. 87-95.
249. Rosenberg, "French Silence and American Poetry," p. 89.
250. Ibid., p. 88.
251. Ibid., p. 89.
252. Ibid., p. 88.
253. Ibid., pp. 88-89, 94.
254. Harold Rosenberg, "Parable for American Painters" (1954), in *The Tradition of the New*, pp. 13-22.
255. Ibid., p. 21.
256. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 84.
257. Harold Rosenberg, "The Diminished Act," in *Act and the Actor: Making the Self* (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1970), p. 6.
258. Harold Rosenberg, "On the Fall of Paris" (1940), in *The Tradition of the New*, pp. 212-213.
259. As Dick Howard has noted, Marx's "critical theory has a twofold nature: it is a theory *for* practice, and a theory *of* praxis" (Howard, *The Development of the Marxian Dialectic*, p. x).

260. Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 13.
261. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" (1888), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 145.
262. Dupré, *The Philosophical Foundations of Marxism*, pp. 216, 218.
263. For an extended discussion of the idea of "double transformation," or the transformation of both subject and object in the process of human activity, see Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Maro Riofrancos (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1965, 1973), pp. 54-55; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (1867; trans. Ben Fowkes, with an introduction by Ernest Mandel, London: Penguin Books and New Left Review, 1976), p. 283.
264. See Gajo Petrovic, "Praxis," in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, second edition, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1983), pp. 435-40.
265. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 76.
266. Ibid., p. 88.
267. Karl Marx, "The Labor Process and the Valorization Process," in *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 283.
268. Sanchez Vázquez, *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics*, p. 54.
269. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 71-72.
270. Marx, *Capital*, p. 799.
271. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 76.
272. Marx, *Capital*, p. 284.
273. Dupré, *The Philosophical Foundations of Marxism*, p. 132.
274. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, pp. 48-49.

275. Harold Rosenberg, "The Herd of Independent Minds" (1948), in *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 16; idem, "Towards an Unanxious Profession," p. 18.

276. Harold Rosenberg, "The Concept of Action in Painting," *The New Yorker*, vol. 44, no. 14 (25 May 1968), p. 122.

277. Rosenberg, question-and-answer session, Committee on Social Thought Public Seminar, University of Chicago, audio tape and transcript, Rosenberg Papers; quoted in O'Brien "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 140.

278. Rosenberg, "The Herd of Independent Minds," p. 16.

279. Rosenberg, "Leisure and the Split Man" (1966), in *Discovering the Present*, p. 56.

280. Rosenberg, "Art and Work" (1965), in *Discovering the Present*, p. 62.

281. Mary McCarthy, "An Academy of Risk," *Partisan Review*, vol. 26, no. 3 (summer 1959), p. 480, quoted by Harold Rosenberg, preface to *The Tradition of the New*, p. 3.

282. Rosenberg, preface to *The Tradition of the New*, p. 3. Indeed, there is even something of a genial levity to Rosenberg's mood. He is put in mind of the chestnut, he relates: "It reminds me of the old joke about the herring: 'you can hang it on the wall.'"

283. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," pp. 26-27.

284. Harold Rosenberg, "Means for the Critical Evaluation of Art Performance in the Visual Arts" (1967), p. 4, Rosenberg Papers, 1967, Box 32, Folder 12. This is a 5 1/2 page typed manuscript written, presumably, as a report for the Advertising Council of New York City.

285. Rosenberg, "Art and Words," in *The De-Definition of Art*, p. 68.

286. Rosenberg, "Harold Rosenberg Says. . .," interview by Hall, p. 64.

287. Harold Rosenberg, interview by James and Caryn Walker, January 1, 1975, Rosenberg Papers, quoted in O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 27.

288. Harold Rosenberg, "All About Everything," interview by Howard Conant, in *The Case of the Baffled Radical*, p. 218.
289. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 26.
290. Ibid., pp. 96-97.
291. Rosenberg, "A Guide for the Unperplexed" (1966), in *The Anxious Object*, p. 19.
292. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," p. 33.
293. Rosenberg, "The Tradition of the New," in *The Tradition of the New*, p. 10.
294. Rosenberg, "Toward an Unanxious Profession," in *The Anxious Object*, p. 20.
295. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," pp. 27-28.
296. Marx, *The German Ideology: Part I*, p. 159.
297. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 1, 8, 3.
298. Rosenberg, "The Fall of Paris," pp. 212-213.
299. Sánchez Vázquez, *Art and Society*, p. 5.
300. Rosenberg, "Harold Rosenberg Says. . .," p. 65.
301. Rosenberg, "Toward an Unanxious Profession," p. 17.
302. Ibid., p. 16.
303. Ibid., p. 13.
304. Ibid., p. 16.
305. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," p. 25.
306. Rockwell Kent, "Kent Protests," *Art Digest*, vol. 10 (April 15, 1936), p. 14, quoted in Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *New Deal for Art: The Government*

Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City and State (Hamilton, New York: Gallery Association of New York State, c. 1977), p. 9.

307. Abe Ajay, "Working for the WPA," *Art in America*, vol. 60, no. 5 (September-October 1972), p. 73.

308. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 46.

309. This organization was the outcome of an informal gathering of artists that took place during the summer of 1933 at the John Reed Club. After signing a manifesto demanding government support of artists, the group of approximately twenty-five New York artists called themselves collectively the Unemployed Artists Group. In February 1934 this group officially changed its name to the Artists' Union and survived as an independent entity until January 1938 when it became the United American Artists, Local 60 of the United Office of Professional Workers of America (U.O.P.W.A.). It survived in that guise until May 7, 1942, when it was disaffiliated with the U.O.P.W.A. and assumed the new title, Artists League of America. For an account of this history, (see Monroe, "Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," pp. 7-10).

310. *Art Front* began as the art bulletin for Herman Baron's socially conscious A.C.A. gallery. In 1934 The Artists's Union begins publishing it as its printed organ. Oversized, it was convenient for sales at political rallies and also converted easily into posters. Herman Baron remained the managing editor until the second or third issue when Clarence Weinstock came on board as managing editor. For issues 2-10 Stuart Davis was editor-in-chief.

311. According to O'Brien, Rosenberg along with his friend Max Spivak were the only two non-Communist Party members on the editorial board (O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 225).

312. Gerald M. Monroe, "Art Front," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1973), p. 13.

313. Hills, "1936: Meyer Schapiro, *Art Front*, and the Popular Front," p. 31.

314. Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," p. 5.

315. Harold Rosenberg, ed., *Men at Work: Stories of People at Their Jobs in America*, 1941, Rosenberg Papers, Box 20, Folder 21.

316. Rosenberg, "Men at Work: A Preface."

317. Rosenberg, "Men at Work," pp. 1-2.
318. U.S. Department of Labor, *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (1939), quoted in Rosenberg, "Men at Work," p. 2.
319. Rosenberg, "Men at Work," p. 2.
320. Ibid., p. 3.
321. Ibid., pp. 3-4.
322. Ibid., p. 4.
323. Ibid., p. 7.
324. Marx, *Capital*, p. 163.
325. Rosenberg, "Hans Hofmann: Nature in Action" *ARTnews* 56 (May 1957), quoted in Max Kozloff, "The Critical Reception of Abstract-Expressionism," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 40, no. 2 (December 1965), p. 30.
326. Rosenberg, "Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion," pp. 46-47.
327. The relevant correspondence between Rosenberg and Paul de Man and Clifford Geertz regarding this conference can be found in the Rosenberg Papers, Box 37, Folder 3.
328. Rosenberg, "Preliminary Memo," for the "Structures of Meaning," conference sponsored by *Daedalus, The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, October 29-31, 1970, rue Leonard de Vinci, Paris 16e, France, Rosenberg Papers, Box 37, Folder 3.
329. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 488.
330. But this identity was dialectical. It was both the absolute negation of humanity but also it was the possibility of realizing absolute humanity.
331. Rosenberg, "Marxism: Criticism and/or Action," p. 370.

332. Marx, *The German Ideology: Part I*, p. 191, quoted in Rosenberg, "Marxism: Criticism and/or Action," p. 370.

333. Marx to Johann Baptiste von Schweiter, February 2, 1865, quoted in Rosenberg, "Marxism: Criticism and/or Action," p. 370; Marx, "Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right: Introduction*" (1844), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 63.

334. Rosenberg, lecture notes for University of Chicago seminar on *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1972-73, Rosenberg Papers, Box 49, Folder 7.

335. Rosenberg, handwritten notes and typed transcript of class discussion for University of Chicago seminar on *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Rosenberg Papers, Box 49, Folder 7.

336. Rosenberg, "American Action Painters," p. 32. "To maintain the force to refrain from settling anything, he must exercise in himself a constant No."

337. See Harold Rosenberg, "The Pathos of the Proletariat" (1940), in *Act and the Actor*.

338. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, p. 28.

339. Rosenberg, "Marxism: Criticism and/or Action," p. 374.

340. Rosenberg's personal, annotated copy of this volume is included in his papers, Rosenberg Papers, Box 20, Folder 1.

341. Rosenberg's marginal note in Lenin's *What Is To Be Done*, Rosenberg Papers, Box 20, Folder 1.

342. Rosenberg, "The Third Dimension of Georg Lukács," p. 53.

343. Harold Rosenberg, preface to *The Tradition of the New*, p. 4.

344. Harold Rosenberg and Thomas B. Hess, "Some Points About Action Painting: A Conversation between Thomas Hess and Harold Rosenberg," quoted in O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," p. 144.

345. Rosenberg, "On the De-definition of Art," p. 11.

346. Rosenberg, "Toward an Unanxious Profession," p. 15.

347. Rosenberg, "Toward an Unanxious Profession," p. 19.

348. *Oxford English Dictionary*, CD-ROM version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The "explanation" as it turns out proves to be similarly troublesome in that of Du Cange's suggested "quævis actio repetita" while "actio" and "repetita" translate easily into a repeated doing, performance or action, the verb "quævis" is peculiarly formed. According to Deena Mauldin of the University of California, Riverside, a Latin specialist I consulted, it is most likely a form of the verb "quæro" meaning to seek or ask. The confusion, however, rests with the strangeness of its form, it appears to be without precedent. Professor Mauldin's educated guess, taking the verb's form as an imperative, translates the phrase into something like, "To seek a repeat performance (or action)." Email correspondence, January 25, 2004.

349. Lawrence Alloway, "De Kooning: Criticism and Art History," *Artforum*, vol. 13, no. 5 (January 1975), p. 46.

350. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," p. 25.

351. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

352. *Ibid.*

353. *Ibid.*

354. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

355. Rosalind Krauss, "Chapter Six," *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 269; Anne Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," in *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), p. 55. An exception to this eight-year exhibition hiatus is the inclusion of Newman's *Horizon Light* (1949) in the group exhibition "Ten Years," celebrating the decade anniversary of Betty Parsons Gallery. This occurred from December 19, 1955 to January 14, 1956.

356. Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," p. 40.

357. "Ugly Duckling" is the appellation David Sylvester gave to Newman in his essay on Newman of the same title. See David Sylvester, "The Ugly Duckling," in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, ed. Michael Auping (New York: Abrams; Buffalo: Albright-Knox, 1987), pp. 137-143.

358. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," p. 32.
359. Ibid., p. 29.
360. Ad Reinhardt, "Abstract Art Refuses" (1952), in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 50-51. Hereafter cited as *AA*.
361. Reinhardt, "Abstract Art Refuses," p. 50.
362. Lynn Zelevansky, "Ad Reinhardt and the Younger Artists of the 1960s," in *American Art of the 1960s*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), p. 18.
363. Harold Rosenberg, "Black and Pistachio" (1963), in *The Anxious Object*, p. 50.
364. Ibid., p. 52.
365. Harold Rosenberg, "Barnett Newman: The Living Rectangle," in *The Anxious Object*, p. 173.
366. Barnett Newman to Harold Rosenberg, January 21, 1963, in *BNSWI*, p. 222.
367. See Rosenberg, "Barnett Newman: The Living Rectangle," pp. 169-174.
368. Harold Rosenberg, "Barnett Newman Eulogy," Rosenberg Papers, Box 37, Folder 2.
369. Annalee Newman, interview by Elaine O'Brien, telephone conversation, November 28, 1995 (O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg," pp. 86-87).
370. Ibid., p. 87.
371. O'Brien, "The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg" pp. 87-88, from a telephone interview with Annalee Newman, September 13, 1995.
372. See Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5. There are some twenty-four of Reinhardt's postcards to Rosenberg, and on occasion addressed to Rosenberg and his wife Mae, preserved.

373. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, c. 1960-62, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
374. Reinhardt to Rosenberg and Mae Tabak, postmarked June 21, 1961, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
375. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, c. 1960-62, n.d., Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
376. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, postmarked May 16, 1961, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5. Y.P.S.L. or the Young People's Socialist League, was the first radical youth organization in the United States and served as the youth resource officially for the socialist party but unofficially for Trotskyites and Schachtmanites as well. It was active from 1913-54. In 1954 Y.P.S.L. merged with the Socialist Youth League (S.Y.L.) and became the Young Socialist League (Y.S.L.). Reinhardt in this postcard still refers to this radical youth organization by its pre-1954 name.
377. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, postmarked October 23, 1962, New York, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
378. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, postmarked 1962, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
379. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, c. 1960-62, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
380. This was added to the postcard in Rosenberg's handwriting. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, postmarked October 23, 1962, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
381. "Homage to Ad Reinhardt," c. 1967, Rosenberg Papers, Box 32, Folder 6.
382. Harold Rosenberg, "Icon Maker," *The New Yorker* 19 (April 1969), p. 140. This point of inclusion he made on a number of occasions: in a late interview in 1973 with Lee Hall where Newman's name slides right into that category of Action Painter including de Kooning, Pollock Hans Hoffman, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Adolph Gottlieb, and Robert Motherwell (Rosenberg, "Harold Rosenberg Says. . .," p. 66).
383. Rosenberg, "The Concept of Action in Painting," p. 116.
384. Rosenberg, "Black and Pistachio," p. 53.
385. Kramer, "The Strange Case of Harold Rosenberg," p. 128.

386. Rosenberg, "Purifying Art," in *Art and Other Serious Matters*, p. 78. It should be noted that Rosenberg was not alone in seeing a need to critically distinguish between Newman and Reinhardt. Several later critics were alert to problems in collapsing that difference. "Reinhardt," Lippard writes in his catalogue raisonné, "is done a disservice by continuous comparison with Rothko and Newman, not because they did not share some common goals in about 1950, but because he was involved with a very different aesthetic; after his work matured there was no longer any reason to compartment him with these colleagues. . . ." (Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* [New York: Abrams, 1981], p. 116). And Budd Hopkins has written: "An abiding problem was his [Reinhardt's] need to separate himself from a few other painters who critics had associated with Reinhardt's own aesthetic. Thus, as early as 1954 he described Barnett Newman as a 'traveling design salesman' and an 'avant-garde huckster-handicraftsman and educational shopkeeper'" (Budd Hopkins, "An Ad For Ad as Ad," *Artforum* [summer 1976], pp. 62-63).

387. Anne Truitt, Washington, D.C., 1977, quoted in Eleanor Munro, "Anne Truitt," in *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 314.

388. David Bourdon in "Abstract Painting: 1960-69," Donald Droll with Jane Neal (New York: P.S. 1 and the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Incorporated, January 16-March 13, 1983), n.p.

389. In terms of Newman's newfound status in the 1960s see E. C. Goosens, "The Philosophic Line of B. Newman" (*ARTnews*, vol. 57, no. 4 [summer 1958], pp. 30-31, 62-63). Goosens talks of Newman's 1958 Bennington exhibition as a "reconfirming" of Newman the artist (as opposed to mere art world personality) and remarks on how timely Newman's work from the 1950 and 1951 Parsons shows now appear. "The most astonishing thing about the Bennington retrospective was the freshness of the pictures. time often works to an artist's disadvantage, especially if he is an original. . . . But time, in Newman's case, seems to have worked to his advantage. The pictures of 1950-51 might have been painted this morning."

390. The open letter of May 22, 1950, protesting the Metropolitan Museum of Art appeared as a front page article in *The New York Times* and the letter itself was reproduced in *ARTnews*. The Nina Leen photograph of the "Irascible 18" was taken on November 24, 1950 and appeared in *Life* magazine with the caption, "Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight Against Show," in the January 1951 issue.

391. See the argument put forth by Ann Gibson (primarily in her introduction), *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

392. Robert Goodnough, introduction to *Modern Artists in America*, p. 9.

393. Barbara Rose, "The Passing and Resurgence of Barney Newman," *New York* (8 November 1971), p. 81.

394. Kenworth Moffett, *Kenneth Noland* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), p. 42. This assignation occurs in a paragraph in which Moffett describes the work of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland as "much closer to such Abstract Expressionists as Gottlieb, Rothko, Still and Newman," a statement which he concludes—significantly for the topic being discussed here—by adding, "none of whom were action painters."

395. "Newman-De Kooning," Allan Stone Gallery, October 23-November 17, 1962.

396. Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton, "On Painting and Consecutive Matters," November 4, 1962, in *12 Dialogues 1962-1963*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, (Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 1980), p. 33.

397. Arthur Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime," *The Nation*, vol. 274, no. 23 (April 17, 2002), p. 25.

398. For instance, see Ad Reinhardt, "The Next Revolution in Art (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part II)" (1964), in *AA*, pp. 59-63.

399. Ad Reinhardt, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy" (1957), in *AA*, p. 205; idem, "The Artist in Search of a Code of Ethics" (1960), in *AA*, p. 163.

400. Bois, "The Limit of Almost," p. 22.

401. Ad Reinhardt, "Monologue," interview by Mary Fuller, April 27, 1966, in *AA*, p. 27.

402. Jane Livingston, *Ad Reinhardt: Seventeen Works* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1984), n.p.

403. Ad Reinhardt, journal entry c. early 1940s, quoted in Rose, "Editor's Note," *AA*, p. 171.
404. Thomas B. Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt* (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf; Rome: Marlborough Rome, 1975), p. 10.
405. Zelevansky, "Ad Reinhardt and the Younger Artists of the 1960s," p. 16.
406. Rosenberg, "Black and Pistachio," p. 53.
407. Gilbert H. Kinney, preface to *Ad Reinhardt: Seventeen Works*, n.p.
408. Rose, "The Passing and Resurgence of Barney Newman," p. 81.
409. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
410. Carter Ratcliff, "Barnett Newman: Citizen of the Infinitely Large Small Republic," *Art in America*, vol. 79, no. 9 (September 1991), p. 96.
411. Peter Schjeldahl, "Lord Barney," *The New Yorker* (April 15, 2002), p. 82.
412. Sylvester, "The Ugly Duckling," p. 139.
413. Thomas B. Hess, "Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross—Lema Sabachthani," in *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist*, ed. E. A. Carmean, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1978), p. 192.
414. Newman, unpublished draft of a Preface to his statement for *The New American Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), in *BNSWI*, p. 180.
415. Richard Martin, "Red in Art is Red," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 48, no. 7 (April 1974), p. 40.
416. Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, p. 11.
417. Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1967), p. 19.
418. John Coplans, *Serial Imagery*, Pasadena Museum of Art, September 17-October 27, 1968, p. 9.

419. Robert Carleton Hobbs, "Early Abstract Expressionism: A Concern with the Unknown Within," in Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, c. 1978), p. 11.

420. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 193.

421. Hess, preface and acknowledgments, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, p. 5. Lawrence Alloway refers to Hess's periodical as the "Action Painting-oriented *ARTnews*" (Lawrence Alloway, *Systemic Painting* [New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966], p. 15).

422. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

423. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

424. Bois, "The Limits of Almost," p. 23.

425. Ad Reinhardt, "Art as Art Dogma" (lecture presented at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, May 28, 1964). An edited version was published with the title "Ad Reinhardt on His Art," *Studio International*, vol. 174, no. 895 (December 1967), p. 265.

426. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, c. 1960-62, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.

427. Irving Sandler explained Reinhardt's exclusion on the sentiment during the 1950s that Reinhardt's paintings were merely a "throwback to the thirties" through passé geometric abstraction, and equally his "programmatic thinking" was a "reversion to the thirties love of ideology" (Irving Sandler, "Reinhardt: The Purist Backlash," *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 4 (December 1966), pp. 46, 45).

As Ben Heller, a relatively early supporter and collector of Newman's work recounts, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the exhibition's organizer, had initially dismissed the thought of including Newman because he was not an Abstract Expressionist. Only after being encouraged to take another look at the artist's work (a viewing facilitated by Heller) did Barr change his mind—both adding Newman to the "New American Painting" roster and making the purchase of *Abraham* for the Museum of Modern Art (New York). See Ben Heller et al., "Remembering Newman," in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, ed. Melissa Ho (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 13.

428. See Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, pp. 26, 45, 54.

429. Regarded in an orthodox light, I realize the logical absurdity of speaking of a prioritizing of either of the terms—theory or practice—of praxis. However, this aside, what has animated the discussions of praxis for the last century and a half has been speculation and conjecture on the very disjuncture of theory and practice.

430. Kim Levin, “Fifties Fallout: The Hydrogen Juke Box,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 48, no. 7 (April 1974), p. 29.

431. James H. Beck, “Ad Reinhardt in Retrospect,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 10 (June 1980), p. 149.

432. Hess, “Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross—Lema Sabachthani,” p. 189.

433. Ibid.

434. Kingsley, *The Turning Point*, p. 71.

435. As Shiff remarks, Newman was “universally regarded as ‘an exceptional talker’” (Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” p. 96, n. 102).

436. Robert Motherwell, interview by April Kingsley, summer 1987, in *The Turning Point*, p. 79.

437. Adolph Gottlieb, interview by John Gruen, c. 1971, in John Gruen, *The Party’s Over Now* (New York: Viking, 1972), pp. 258-59. For an extended discussion of this quote and the issues it raises, see Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” pp. 18-26.

438. Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, p. 10. For a further discussion of the tensions between the aspects of “artist” and “writer” in Reinhardt (and others), see Lawrence Alloway, “Artists as Writers, Part Two: The Realm of Language,” *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 8 (April 1974), pp. 30-35.

439. Ibid., p. 9.

440. Hopkins, “An Ad For Ad as Ad,” p. 62.

441. Beck, “Ad Reinhardt in Retrospect,” p. 150.

442. Ibid. In Newman’s defense, it should be noted that he had indeed taken art studio classes at the Art Students League as well as attended a four-year liberal arts

college. In this sense he was able to span Beck's metaphoric distance between an art school and a liberal arts college.

443. Ad Reinhardt, "How to Look at the Record" (November 3, 1946), in Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*.

444. Barnett Newman, "The Ides of Art: The Attitudes of Ten Artists on Their Art and Contemporaneousness" (1947), in *BNSWI*, p. 160.

445. Mark Rothko to Barnett Newman, 1950, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives.

446. Molly McNickle, text notes and commentary to *BNSWI*, p. 156.

447. Adolph Gottlieb and Marcus Rothko to Alden Jewell, *The New York Times*, 13 June 1943, section 2, p. 9, in *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics, An Anthology*, ed. Clifford Ross (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), pp. 205-207.

448. See Shiff, Introduction to *BNSWI* for a discussion of the seriousness by which Newman approached his writing.

449. Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Abrams, 1978), p. 42.

450. Goosens, "The Philosophic Line of B. Newman," p. 30.

451. Joseph Kosuth, "Eye's Limit: Seeing and Reading Ad Reinhardt," *Art and Design*, vol. 9, nos. 1-2 (January-February 1994), p. 46; idem, "On Ad Reinhardt," *Art and Design*, vol. 9, nos. 1-2 (January-February 1994), p. 44.

452. Kosuth, "Eye's Limits," p. 47.

453. Nancy Spector, "Negativity, Purity, and the Clearness of Ambiguity: Ad Reinhardt, Joseph Kosuth, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *Art and Design*, vol. 9, nos. 1-2 (January-February 1994), p. 10; Kosuth, "On Ad Reinhardt," p. 45; Kosuth, "Eye's Limits," p. 46.

454. Kosuth, "Eye's Limits," p. 48.

455. Rose, "The Passing and Resurgence of Barney Newman," p. 80.

456. Barbara M. Reise, "The Stance of Barnett Newman," *Studio International*, vol. 179, no. 919 (February 1970), p. 63.

457. Ratcliff, "Barnett Newman: Citizen of the Infinitely Large Small Republic," p. 96.

458. Douglas Davis, "Death of an Artist," *Newsweek*, vol. 76 (July 20, 1970), p. 48. For an extended discussion of the issues of Newman's "fathering" a younger 1960s generation of artists, see Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect."

459. Larry Poons, "Around Barnett Newman," interview by Jeanne Siegel, New York, in *Artwords: Discourses on the 60s and 70s* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press, 1985), p. 45.

460. Barbara Rose, "ABC Art" (1965), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 285. The currency of this assignation of leader status to Reinhardt is further indicated by Kynaston McShine (though the author himself will disagree) when he writes: "It has been suggested that Reinhardt is the forerunner and major influence on the younger group of artists who have been described as 'rejective,' 'minimal,' 'systemic,' 'structural,' and even 'boring'" (Kynaston McShine, "More Than Black: The Positive of Negative Art," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 41, nos. 2-3 [December 1966-January 1967], p. 50).

461. Ibid.

462. Ibid., p. 281. I will treat Rose's characterization of Newman's "static emptiness" in a later section of this chapter. Needless to say, it is a provocative description because it would have no doubt grated Newman as a mis-reading or mis-characterization. Reinhardt, on the other hand, very likely would have embraced such a description.

463. Rose, "The Passing and Resurgence of Barney Newman," p. 80.

464. Barbara Rose, ed., *AA*, pp. xvii and dedication. The allusions to the prominent status of Reinhardt to the younger generation are plentiful. For example, Richard Martin sees "Reinhardt . . . frequently hailed as a leading progenitor of minimal painting" (Richard Martin, "Red in Art is Red," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 48, no. 7 [April 1974], p. 40).

465. Dan Christensen, "Around Barnett Newman," interview by Jeanne Siegel, New York, in *Artwords*, p. 44.

466. Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, p. 11. Also see Priscilla Colt in "Notes on Ad Reinhardt" in which she writes of the "recognition of Reinhardt's historical significance and artistic quality," by the younger 1960s artists. "Increasingly his work appears as one of the genuinely formative and unifying influences in the melee of styles of the last decade—the post-abstract expressionist era. This was startlingly clear in a recent (and motley) exhibition in a New York gallery called 'The Artist Collects.' Here, along with Duchamp and Magritte, Reinhardt was an elder in a group of younger artists (Arman, Dine, Dzubas, Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Yves Klein, Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, Warhol)" (Priscilla Colt, "Notes on Ad Reinhardt," *Art International* [October 1964], p. 32).

467. Ad Reinhardt, "An Interview with Ad Reinhardt," interview by Bruce Glaser, winter 1966-67, in *AA*, p. 22.

468. Dan Flavin, "Around Barnett Newman," interview by Jeanne Siegel, correspondence, in *Artwords*, p. 61.

469. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, p. 26.

470. Shiff has argued forcefully to explain Newman's reasons for resisting the name "father": "He didn't believe he was acting as father; others chose to see him that way. If he had inadvertently imposed authority or order on a family of artists, they were not progeny he acknowledged. It was interpretation, Newman thought, that produced influence; and the notion of influence turned his art and even himself into a category, a concept, an institution, a dogma. Influence created the Newmanesque. Nothing was farther from Newman's own ethic and intended effect than to serve as a model for a reduced version of himself" (Shiff, "Whiteout: The Non-Influence Newman Effect," in *Barnett Newman* [Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002], p. 79).

471. Newman, interview by Alan Solomon, 1966, quoted in Shiff, "Whiteout: The Non-Influence Newman Effect," p. 83.

472. Reinhardt, "An Interview with Ad Reinhardt," p. 22.

473. Jane Livingston in "Abstract Painting: 1960-69," n.p.

474. As Lippard notes, the 1960 purchase is the first of two acquisitions by Stella of a Reinhardt black painting (see Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 192). Carl Andre relates that he lived for a year, in 1960, with this first of Stella's black painting purchases, and that "Reinhardt was quite an influence" (Carl Andre, "Carl Andre: Artworker,"

interview by Jeanne Siegel, p. 137). Also see Lynn Zelevansky, "Ad Reinhardt and the Younger Artists of the 1960s," p. 26.

475. Frank Stella, "A Tribute to Ad Reinhardt," *artscanada* (October 1967), p. 19, quoted in Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 116. After Reinhardt dies, Stella makes the following somewhat double-edged tribute to the artist: "Ad was his own man. He saw things his own way. But he didn't keep it to himself. He said what was right about what he did and what was wrong about what other people did. People tolerated his work and polemics, but nobody liked it. The only way to deal with Ad was to make an ultimate evaluation. And it was severe—a gifted minor artist. This kind of vicious game-playing at the heart of the matter was right down Ad's alley. He can't play the game anymore, but nobody can get around the paintings anymore either. If you don't know what they're about you don't know what painting is about" (Stella, quoted in Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 197, n. 2).

476. Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 155.

477. Ibid. For another brief discussion of the relationship between Stella and Newman, see William S. Rubin, *Frank Stella* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), pp. 26, 53-54.

478. Frank Stella, interview by Claire Loeb, c. 1970, Pacifica Radio Archives tape BB5218, quoted in Jones, *The Machine in the Studio*, pp. 155-56.

479. Frank Stella, "How Velasquez Seizes the Truth That Is Art," *New York Times*, quoted in Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, p. 331.

480. Walter Barker, "The Passion Without the Image: Barnett Newman Paints Metaphors of Stations of the Cross," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 12, 1966, p. 5C.

481. Donald Judd, "Barnett Newman," *Studio International*, vol. 179, no. 919 (February 1970), p. 67. Although written initially for publication in *Das Kunstwerk* in November 1964, the review was not published at the time; idem, "Around Barnett Newman," interview by Jeanne Siegel, New York, 1971, in *Artwords*, p. 47.

482. James Meyer, "Donald Judd's Domesticity" (paper presented at the Art Institute of Chicago, September 9, 2004).

483. Ibid.

484. Judd, "Barnett Newman," p. 67.
485. The preciousness of the selection of artworks, especially paintings requiring wall space, is emphasized by the particular exhibition limitations of the Spring Street building. Judd's cast-iron building occupies a corner lot, with both a longer and shorter wall glass.
486. Peter Ballantine, conversation with the author, New York, May 2002.
487. Andre and Frampton, *12 Dialogues 1962-1963*.
488. Priscilla Colt, "Notes on Ad Reinhardt," *Art International* (October 1964), p. 32.
489. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 139.
490. June D. M. Sand, Letter to the Editor, *ARTnews*, vol. 58, no. 4 (summer 1959), p. 6.
491. Thomas B. Hess, "William de Kooning and Barnett Newman," *ARTnews*, vol. 61, no. 8 (December 1962), p. 12.
492. Max Kozloff, "São Paulo in Washington," *The Nation*, vol. 202, no. 9 (February 28, 1966), pp. 250-51. Shiff discusses this review and also suggests that Newman would have received this sort of description badly (see Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," p. 81).
493. Reinhardt, "[Government and the Arts]," unpublished, n.d. notes, *AA*, p. 181.
494. At the time of these paintings's exhibition at Parsons in 1951 both works were left untitled.
495. "Bob Rauschenberg," Betty Parsons Gallery, May 14-June 2, 1951. See Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," in *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 73.
496. Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches, collection of the artist.

497. Rosenberg, "Icon Maker," p. 91; see Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," p. 45.
498. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2000), p. 95.
499. Ibid., pp. 51, x.
500. Ibid., p. 89.
501. Georges Braque, quoted in Ad Reinhardt, "[Art-as-Art]," unpublished notes, 1966-67, in *AA*, p. 78.
502. Valentin Nikolaevich Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik, (1929; Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 36.
503. Dupré, *The Philosophical Foundations of Marxism*, p. 65.
504. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, p. 26.
505. Ad Reinhardt, "Reinhardt Paints a Picture" (1965), in *AA*, pp. 11-12; idem, "Art vs. History" (1966), in *AA*, pp. 224-227.
506. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings*, p. 19. For some unexplained reason the Kubler quotation is reprinted in the Lippard text with ellipsis dots separating the first and second sentences as if original content had been edited out. In the original text the second sentence follows the first immediately without an ellipsis.
507. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, p. 26.
508. Newman, "The Ideographic Picture," catalogue foreword, January 20-February 8, 1947, Betty Parsons Gallery, in *BNSWI*, p. 108; Ad Reinhardt, "25 Lines of Words on Art" (1958), in *AA*, p. 51.
509. Sam Hunter to Richard Marlin, January 12, 1967, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives.
510. Richard Marlin to Sam Hunter, April 4, 1967, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives. Marlin, Newman's lawyer writes to Hunter: "In our telephone conversation at

the end of January, I indicated to you that the very least Barnett Newman was entitled to was a footnote reference in the catalog for the Reinhardt Exhibition” (Marlin to Hunter, April 4, 1967)

511. Hunter to Marlin, January 12, 1967.

512. Ibid.

513. Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now” (1948), in *BNSWI*, p. 171.

514. Ad Reinhardt, “Paintings and Pictures” (1943), in *AA*, pp. 118, 120.

515. Ibid., p. 119.

516. Ad Reinhardt, “Abstraction vs. Illustration” (1943), in *AA*, p. 48.

517. Reinhardt, quoted in Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings*, p. 14.

518. Ad Reinhardt, “Art-as-Art” (1962), in *AA*, p. 55.

519. Reinhardt, “Monologue,” p. 28.

520. Barnett Newman, interview by Emile de Antonio, New York City, 1970, film; transcript published as *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the Modern Art Scene, 1940-1970*, eds. Emile de Antonio and Mitch Tuchman (New York: Abbeville, 1984), in *BNSWI*, p. 306.

521. Barnett Newman, interview by Lane Slate, for the CBS television series “Contemporary American Painters,” televised on March 10, 1963, in *BNSWI*, p. 253.

522. Newman to William S. Rubin, May 28, 1968, in *BNSWI*, p. 235; William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, distributed by New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1968). The exhibition was shown from March 27-June 9, 1968, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; from July 16-September 8, 1968, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; from October 19-December 8, 1968, at the Art Institute of Chicago.

523. Newman to Rubin, May 28, 1968, p. 237.

524. Shiff, “Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect,” p. 84.

525. Ibid., p. 82.
526. Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime," p. 26.
527. Rose, Editor's Note, in *AA*, p. 147.
528. W. Jackson Rushing, "Decade of Decision," *Art Journal* (spring 1995), p. 88; John Bentley Mays, "National Gallery Should Tune Out Static Over Painting," *Globe & Mail*, 14 March 1990, in *Voices of Fire*, p. 62.
529. Barnett Newman, "The Plasmic Image" (1945), in *BNSWI*, p. 140.
530. Ad Reinhardt, "The Artist is Responsible. . . ," unpublished, n.d. note, in *AA*, p. 136.
531. William Rubin, preface to *Ad Reinhardt* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Museum of Modern Art and Rizzoli, 1991), p. 7.
532. See, section V. "Art and Ethics," in *AA*, pp. 147-167.
533. Rose, introduction to *AA*, pp. xvi, xiii.
534. Reinhardt, "Abstraction vs. Illustration," p. 47.
535. Reinhardt, "The Next Revolution in Art (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part II)," p. 59.
536. Newman, interview by Emile de Antonio, p. 159.
537. Alexander Liberman, "Around Barnett Newman," interview by Jeanne Siegel, New York, 1971, in *Artwords*, p. 58.
538. Shiff, introduction to *BNSWI*, p. xvi.
539. Ad Reinhardt, "The First Paintings. . . ," n.d., unpublished note in *AA*, p. 111.
540. Barnett Newman and Alexander Borodulin, "On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture" (1933), in *BNSWI*, p. 8.

541. Barnett Newman, "Arshile Gorky: Poet and Immolator" (1948), in *BNSWI*, p. 112. Newman composed this after Gorky's July 21, 1948 suicide, at the request of Lionel Abel, then the editor of *Instead*. However, it was not published.

542. Ad Reinhardt, "Aesthetic Responsibility," paper delivered at the First Conference on Aesthetic Responsibility, sponsored by the American Institute of Architects, 3 April 1962, in *AA*, p. 164.

543. Ad Reinhardt, "[Imageless Icons]," unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 109; idem, "To Be Part of Things. . .," unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 127.

544. Newman, "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference," p. 246.

545. Reinhardt, "Monologue," pp. 27-28.

546. Newman, "The Ideographic Picture," catalogue foreword, January 20-February 8, 1947, Betty Parsons Gallery, in *BNSWI*, p. 108. Both Newman and Reinhardt had two works apiece in this Parsons exhibition.

547. Ad Reinhardt, "25 Lines of Words on Art" (1958), in *AA*, p. 51.

548. Then there is the either tantalizing or hairsplitting difference between the choice of verb, between the states of having or being: how is everything else *having* everything else different from everything else *being* everything else? I am not above attempting to attribute value to this difference but what I am more interested in and focused on, for the moment at least, is the shared move to relinquish this "everything else" to an outside in order that the pure idea, the aesthetic act, or art, keep its integrity.

549. Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 21.

550. Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," p. 56.

551. Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 20.

552. Barnett Newman, interview by de Antonio, p. 71. The hinge here is how one might say differently what or how the "bourgeois notion of what a painting is as an object." I would translate this ontology of the bourgeois object as the *commodity*.

553. Ibid., pp. 71-72.

554. This is in contradiction to William Rubin's understanding of the "wall-sized picture introduced by certain Abstract Expressionists around 1950," and their reception. Rubin argues that the "large works" of Newman, among others, "were essentially private," despite their grand scale: "They were intended for the private home rather than the public building, gallery, or museum. To some extent, this reflected the fact that during their pioneering years the Abstract Expressionists had no public. . . . Their 'public'—aside from each other—consisted almost entirely of friends or people associated with avant-garde circles: these were the *amateurs* (in the French sense of the word) who formed their audience" (Rubin, *Frank Stella*, p. 40).

555. For example, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950, 1951) is 95 3/8 inches tall x 213 1/4 inches long; Reinhardt, "Museum," unpublished, n.d. note, printed in *AA*, p. 133.

556. Ad Reinhardt, "Black as Symbol and Concept" (1967), in *AA*, p. 88; idem, "Art-as-Art," p. 54. One might also turn to the 1966 Bruce Glaser interview with Reinhardt. The artist answers quite simply, "Yes," to Glaser's question: "Then, ideally, the public museum is the only safe place for a work of art to be in" (Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 20).

557. Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 23.

558. Ad Reinhardt, "[The Role of the Artist]," unpublished, n.d., note, in *AA*, p. 140.

559. Reinhardt, "The Next Revolution in Art (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part II)," p. 63.

560. Shiff, "To Create Oneself," p. 33; Newman, "On Emma Lake" (1959), in *BNSWI*, p. 185. Also see Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," in which Shiff further emphasizes this construction: "By the time Newman finished listing things he had not done, there were thirteen negatives; in their stead, a single positive: 'What I did bring was myself'" (p. 80).

561. Sandler, "Reinhardt: The Purist Backlash," p. 41.

562. Newman to John I. H. Baur, October 20, 1957, in *BNSWI*, p. 208. See also Rosenberg's brief dismissal anti-art as a concern for Newman in "Icon Maker: Barnett Newman": "Newman was never interested in anti-art; indeed, he could logically have conceived his work as an antidote to it, and attributed anti-art to the Europeans as a final stage of sensibility." *The New Yorker*, reprinted in *The De-definition of Art*, p. 97.

563. Reinhardt, "[On Negation]," unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, pp. 102-03.

564. Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 17.
565. See Reinhardt's responses at the "What is Corruption?" panel discussion with Milton Resnick, c. 1961, in *AA*, p. 154.
566. It is interesting to bring this back to a more formally dialectical framework and be reminded of Spinoza's dictum: "omnis determinatio est negatio" (all determination is negation). See István Mészáros, "Negation," in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, second edition, ed. Tom Bottomore with Laurence Harris, V. G. Kiernan and Ralph Miliband (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 400.
567. Reinhardt, "What Is Corruption?," p. 154.
568. Newman, "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Art Conference," pp. 245-46.
569. Reinhardt, "What Is Corruption?," p. 154.
570. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, p. 51.
571. See Reinhardt, "[Art-as-Art]," p. 78 and "[Oneness]," pp. 105-07. Also see Reinhardt's note, "Not 'see' it, but 'oned' with it," in *AA*, p. 113.
572. Newman, "The Case for 'Exporting' Nation's Avant-Garde Art," interview by Andrew Hudson, *Washington Post*, March 27, 1966, in *BNSWI*, p. 272; Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 21; idem, "Art-as-Art," p. 56.
573. Newman to Clement Greenberg, August 9, 1955, *BNSWI*, p. 203.
574. Barnett Newman, "Critic or Commissar?," Letter to the Editor, *New Republic*, vol. 137, no. 19 (October 28, 1957), p. 23, in *BNSWI*, p. 211; Barnett Newman, interview by David Sylvester, New York, spring 1965, in *BNSWI*, p. 254; Newman, interview by de Antonio, p. 306.
575. Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," p. 56.
576. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 22; idem, "Excerpts: Olitski, Criticism and Rejection Art, Stella" (1966-67), in *Changing*, p. 205; idem, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 22.

577. John Elderfield, "Mondrian, Newman, Noland: Two Notes on Changes of Style," *Artforum*, vol. 10, no. 4 (December 1971), p. 52.

578. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, pp. 59-61.

579. As Rosenberg writes in this essay, "Like Rothko or Newman, Reinhardt conceives an art of one idea, which may be repeated with miniscule variations from painting to painting" (Rosenberg, "Black and Pistachio," p. 53).

580. Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime," p. 26.

581. Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," p. 56.

582. Reinhardt, *AA*, pp. 191, 187, 90, 93.

583. Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," p. 171.

584. Rosenberg, eulogy for Barnett Newman, 1971, n.p., Rosenberg Papers, Box 37, Folder 2.

585. Sylvester, "The Ugly Duckling," p. 137; Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p. 195.

586. Rose, "ABC Art," p. 286; Reinhardt, "[On Negation]," p. 102.

587. Barnett Newman, "Frontiers of Space," interview by Dorothy Gees Seckler, 1962, in *BNSWI*, p. 248.

588. Reinhardt, "Monologue," p. 29.

589. Reinhardt, "39 Art Planks: Programs for 'Program' Painting (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part VII)" (1963), in *AA*, p. 69.

590. For additional information see Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, especially pp. 31-34. Among the other interesting connections and explanations Hess makes are precursors to the June 2, 1946, cartoon being a Miguel Covarrubias tree cartoon that had appeared in *Vogue* and Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s famous chart of modern art. *P.M.* was a publication that Reinhardt was frequently associated with in the 1940s.

591. Reinhardt, "How to Look at Modern *Art in America*" (1946), reprinted in *ARTnews*, vol. 60, no. 4 (summer 1961), p. 36.

592. The year before Newman had begun renting a studio in the lower east side of Manhattan and had started doing some proto-zip work. He had also written the catalogue essay to the American Modern Artists January 1943 exhibition held at the Riverside Museum protesting the primarily social realist thrust of the Metropolitan Museum's "Artists for Victory" exhibition. In September 1946 Newman curates "Northwest Coast Indian Paintings," the debut exhibition of Betty Parsons new gallery. The two exhibitions were "Can We Draw? The Board of Examiners Says—No!" at the A.C.A. Gallery in 1938 and "Art Teachers Association: First Membership Exhibition," at the Uptown Gallery in 1940 (see Melissa Ho, "Chronology," *Barnett Newman* [Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002], p. 322).

593. *ARTnews*, vol. 60, no. 4 (summer 1961), pp. 36-37.

594. See Reinhardt, "The Artist in Search of an Academy, Part II: Who Are the Artists?" *College Art Journal* (summer 1954); reprinted in Barbara Rose, ed., *AA*, pp. 199-202. Rose's editorial note also mentions that Reinhardt reads this statement in August 1954 in Woodstock, New York, at a symposium focused on the anti-abstract art statement issued by the "Reality" artists.

595. Interestingly this is the Betty Parsons show in which Reinhardt will include some of his black paintings.

596. Newman to Sidney Janis, April 9, 1955, in *BNSWI*, p. 201.

597. This issue of influence, or rather of over-influence, of copying among in this milieu has been speculated on a good deal. Barbara Reise provides a good gloss on it when she writes: "It seems to me that the quarrel about who influenced whom amongst Rothko, Still, Reinhardt, and Newman is a tempest in a tea-pot. Each is too good an artist to have sprung from someone else's pocket. A blow-by-blow analysis of individual works between 1947 and 1951—even just those in the 'New American Painting and Sculpture: The First Generation' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1969—would show that everyone learned from everyone, but that each artist maintained a continuity of interest and style throughout. A someday Ph.D. thesis on this problem would have to focus on Newman as the centre of controversy, although the lack of institutional attention to Newman in the early 1950s masked his integral importance amongst the artists during this period" (Reise, "The Stance of Barnett Newman," p. 55, n. 8).

598. The exhibition ran from January 20-February 8, 1947, Betty Parsons Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art.

599. I was unable to locate these two works or their reproductions. However, a loose estimation of what those images might have been like may be suggested by looking at other paintings and drawings of Reinhardt's from the same period. See, for instance, *Black and White* (1947, Art Institute of Chicago); *Abstract Drawing* (1947, private collection) (figs. 21-22).

600. The highest price being asked were for Hans Hofmann's two paintings, *The Fury I* and *The Fury II*, both at \$750 each, for Boris Margo's *Astral Figure* also at \$750. The second highest was \$600, the price being asked for Pietro Lazzari's *Burnt Offering* and also for Clyfford Still's *Quicksilver* (see "The Ideographic Picture," exh. cat., Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, January 20-February 8, 1947, Betty Parsons Papers, Archives of American Art).

601. See Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," p. 31. Reinhardt, with Newman, was a regular exhibitor with Betty Parsons at this date.

602. Barnett Newman, "The Ideographic Picture" (Exh. cat., Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, January 20-February 8, 1947), in *BNSWI*, p. 108.

603. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

604. *The Random House College Dictionary*, revised edition (New York: Random House, 1984), s.v. "name."

605. *Ibid.*

606. Reinhardt, "One," unpublished, n.d. note, in *AA*, p. 93.

607. Reinhardt, "The First Paintings. . .," p. 111. Yve-Alain Bois has also paid special attention to this statement. See Bois, "The Limit of Almost," in *Ad Reinhardt* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Museum of Modern Art and Rizzoli, 1991), p. 11.

608. One takes the story of Franz Kline's great defense of Newman's paintings after Newman's disastrous first exhibition in 1950 at the Betty Parsons Gallery as working on this irony. As Hess relates the anecdote:

Franz Kline and Elaine de Kooning were sitting at the Cedar Bar when a collector Franz knew came up to them in a state of fury. He had just come

from Newman's first one-man show. "How simple can an artist be and get away with it?" he sputtered. "There was nothing, absolutely nothing there!"

"Nothing?" asked Franz, beaming. "How many canvases were in the show?"

"Oh, maybe ten or twelve—but all exactly the same—just one stripe down the center, that's all!"

"All the same size?" Franz asked.

"Well, no; there were different sizes; you know, from about three to seven feet.

"Oh, three to seven feet, I see; and all the same color?" Franz went on.

"No, different colors, you know, red and yellow and green...but each picture painted one flat color—you know, like a house painter would do, and then this stripe down the center."

"All the stripes the same color?"

"No."

"Were they the same width?"

The man began to think a little. "Let's see. No. I guess not. Some were maybe an inch wide and some maybe four inches, and some in between."

"All all upright pictures?"

"Oh, no; there were some horizontals."

"With vertical stripes?"

"Uh, no, I think there were some horizontal stripes, maybe."

"And were the stripes darker or lighter than the background?"

"Well, I guess they were darker, but there was one white stripe, or maybe more. . . ."

"Was the stripe painted on top of the background color or was the background color painted around the stripe?"

The man began to get a bit uneasy. "I'm not sure," he said, "I think it might have been done either way, or both ways maybe. . . ."

"Well, I don't know," said Franz. "It all sounds damned complicated to me."

(Hess, "Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross—Lema Sabachthani," in *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist*, ed. E. A. Carmean, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1978), p. 190).

609. Hess, "Barnett Newman," p. 48. Hess was later to become a strong supporter and defender of Newman's work.

610. Allan Kaprow, "Impurity," *ARTnews*, vol. 61, no. 9 (January 1963), p. 54.
611. Reise, "The Stance of Barnett Newman" p. 51.
612. Livingston, *Ad Reinhardt: Seventeen Works*, n.p.; Robyn Denny, "Ad Reinhardt," *Studio International*, vol. 174, no. 895 (December 1967), p. 265; Priscilla Colt, "Notes on Ad Reinhardt," *Art International*, vol. 8, no. 8 (October 20, 1964), p. 32.
613. Martin, "Red in Art is Red," p. 40. Part of the problem with exhibiting Reinhardt black paintings, however, has been that this pictorial aloofness has not, in fact, kept the audience at bay, not literally, not physically. As Lynn Zelevansky has recounted, when Reinhardt's gallerist Virginia Dwan moves to a new space in 1963, she decides to prepare a special exhibition room specifically for displaying Reinhardt's work. A "narrow platform of white marble," was installed, "along the baseboard to keep visitors at a distance from the extremely fragile paintings, whose inscrutability seemed especially capable of provoking the public" (Zelevansky, *Ad Reinhardt and the Younger Artists of the 1960s*, p. 19).
614. Livingston, *Ad Reinhardt: Seventeen Works*, n.p.
615. The irony also lies, as Jane Livingston pointed out, in Reinhardt's case, that he insisted "on the primacy of the uninterpreted, non-editorialized, uncontextualized, non-signifying, object in itself," yet, "nevertheless proceeded restlessly for most of his adult life, to write and teach and speak about art, his own and others. . . ." (Livingston, *Ad Reinhardt: Seventeen Works*, n.p.).
616. Reinhardt, "One," p. 93.
617. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings*, p. 22. Faye Hirsch, reviewing the 1991 Museum of Modern Art (New York) exhibition also has made similar observations. "What struck me," she writes was a "diffident facticity in which what minimally must exist in order to be called an image becomes increasingly difficult to see, simply to see." A little further on, she continues, "Where 'figures,' if I can call them that, are still quite legible, say in the colored rectangles of the early fifties, they tell me nothing—nothing about themselves, nothing about the frame, and nothing about their relationship to each other. They are simply articulation, and feel both absolutely arbitrary and absolutely necessary as a result" (Fay Hirsch, "Ad Reinhardt," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 66, no. 3 [November 1991], p. 81).
618. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," p. 203.

619. Ibid.

620. Kaprow, "Impurity," p. 55.

621. Newman, interview by Seckler, p. 251.

622. Barnett Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist" (1947), in *BNSWI*, p. 158.

623. Reinhardt, "Art vs. History," p. 227.

624. A very important indication of the possible ways of relating Newman's philosophy of creative action/articulation to the work and models of language theory can be found in p. xvii, n. 9 of Shiff's introduction to the volume of Newman's selected writings and interviews. In that footnote Shiff writes: "Newman's sense of 'original' imagery or language thus corresponds to that developed in various philosophical discussions of expression during the 1930s and 1940s. (e.g., R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Oxford 1938). It corresponds also to aspects of expressionism central to Roger Fry's "formalist" aesthetic, which, for other reasons, Newman rejected. But it runs counter to the argument (in recent years associated with Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida) that systematic language must precede the formation of a self and its expression" (Shiff, introduction to *BNSWI*, p. xxvii).

625. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 28.

626. Ibid., p. 48.

627. Ibid., p. 28.

628. Ibid., pp. 48, 51.

629. Ibid., p. 51.

630. Karl Vossler, "Grammar and the History of Language," *Logos* 1 (1910), p. 170, quoted in Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 51.

631. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 52.

632. With Vološinov's schematization and, in particular, his nomination of Vossler and Saussure to represent the opposing views of language, one should take into account precisely that the schematic is Vološinov's—and as such it both reduces

Vossler's and Saussure's positions as well as stages their comparison from Vološinov's own particular vantage.

633. Ibid.

634. Ibid., p. 53. Vološinov speaks of normative identity rather than factual identity because, as he tells us, factual identity is nonexistent.

635. Ibid.

636. Ibid., p. 58.

637. Ibid., pp. 61, 54.

638. Ibid., p. 93. In another place in the same text Vološinov writes: "The animal cry, the pure response to pain in the organism, is bereft of accent; it is a purely natural phenomenon. For such a cry, the social atmosphere is irrelevant, and therefore it does not contain even the germ of sign formation" (p. 22). It is difficult not to be reminded of Newman's own vivid statements on the "cry." Specially, there are two moments that are elicited. The first, occurs in October 1947 in Newman's essay for *Tiger's Eye*, "The First Man Was an Artist": "Man's first expression . . . was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void. Philologists and semioticians are beginning to accept the concept that if language is to be defined as the ability to communicate by means of signs, be they sounds or gestures, then language is an animal power" (Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," p. 158). The second moment occurs in Newman's statements in 1966 for his Guggenheim debut exhibition of his series "The Stations of the Cross." A *Newsweek* article on the exhibition quotes Newman on the "idea for the cry." "It occurred to me that this abstract cry was the whole thing—the entire Passion of Christ" (*Newsweek* [May 9, 1966], p. 100, quoted *BNSWI*, p. 189). And, in a statement for *ARTnews* Newman writes: "could I maintain this cry in all its intensity in every manner of its starkness?," and concludes the statement with the lines: "The cry, the unanswerable cry, is world without end. But a painting has to hold it, world without end, in its limits." ("The Fourteen Stations of the Cross," *ARTnews*, vol. 65, no. 3 [May 1966], pp. 26-28, 57, reprinted in *BNSWI*, p. 190).

639. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 56.

640. Ibid., p. 68.

641. Ibid., pp. 56-57.
642. Ibid., p. 63.
643. Erwin Panofsky, Letter to the Editor, *ARTnews*, vol. 60, no. 2 (April 1961), p. 6.
644. Barnett Newman, Letter to the Editor, *ARTnews*, vol. 60, no. 3 (May 1961), p. 6.
645. Newman, "The Plasmic Image," p. 140.
646. Newman, interview by Seckler, p. 248.
647. Shiff, introduction to *BNSWI*, p. xvii.
648. See Bois's highly relevant discussion in "Perceiving Newman," pp. 189-90.
649. Reinhardt, "Black as Symbol and Concept," pp. 87-88.
650. Rosenberg, "Black and Pistachio," p. 53; Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 187.
651. Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 17.
652. Reinhardt, "[Imageless Icons]," p. 109.
653. See Shiff, Introduction to *BNSWI* and "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect."
654. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, p. 26.
655. This is in marked contrast to Reinhardt's own interest in Malraux's concept. See, for example, Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 19 and "Time," unpublished, n.d. notes, published in *AA*, p. 99.
656. Barnett Newman, "In Front of the Real Thing," *ARTnews*, vol. 68, no. 9 (January 1970), p. 6.
657. Newman, "The True Revolution is Anarchist," *BNSWI*, p. 51.

658. *Oxford English Dictionary*, CD-ROM version 2.01, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), s.v. "catalogue."
659. Newman, "The Plasmic Image," pp. 139-40.
660. Newman, "Interview with Thomas with Thomas Hart Benton," *New York Times* (September 19, 1938), in *BNSWI*, p. 17.
661. Thomas Hart Benton, quoted in Newman, "Interview with Thomas Hart Benton," p. 17.
662. Newman, Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews, First International Congress on Religion, Architecture and the Visual Arts, printed in *BNSWI*, p. 286.
663. Reinhardt, "Is Today's Artist with or Against the Past," *ARTnews*, vol. 57, no. 4 (summer 1958), pp. 56-57.
664. Dale McConathy, "Ad Reinhardt," in *Ad Reinhardt: A Selection from 1937 to 1952* (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 1974), p. 9.
665. Reinhardt, "[On Negation]," p. 102.
666. Ad Reinhardt, "Black," unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 97.
667. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 147. Although the publication date is 1981 the text for this book was written between 1966-69, to roughly the same time during which Lippard would have been formulating the ideas expressed in the Jewish Museum exhibition catalogue essay. For a note on the publication delay see Lippard's postscript to the Abrams book; Reinhardt, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy," p. 207.
668. For a more extended discussion of this subject, see Lucy R. Lippard, "Ad Reinhardt: One Work," *Art in America*, vol. 62, no. 6 (November-December 1974), pp. 95-101.
669. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings*, p. 11.
670. Rosenberg, "Black and Pistachio," pp. 53, 58.
671. Reinhardt, quoted in Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 12.
672. Reinhardt, "Is Today's Artist with or Against the Past?," p. 57.

673. Ibid.; idem, “[Art in the World],” unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 133.

674. Reinhardt, “Is Today’s Artist with or Against the Past?,” p. 57.

675. Ibid. The other “outstanding American artists” interviewed as part of this inquiry were Stuart Davis, Robert Goodnough, Grace Hartigan, Carl Holty, Willem de Kooning, Landes Lewitin, Reuben Nakian, Robert Rauschenberg, Milton Resnick, Herman Rose, and Esteban Vicente.

676. Reinhardt, “[Art in the World],” p. 133.

677. Reinhardt, “Monologue,” p. 24.

678. There is a parallel here, or perhaps a precedent for this type or figure for thinking the distortion of the subject under bourgeois capitalism. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* Marx discusses the primacy and domination of the sense of “having” over all other sensual relations the subject has with the world in systems of private property: “Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.,—in short, when it is *used* by us. . . . In place of all these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses—the sense of *having*” (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 87).

679. Reinhardt, “Art-as-Art,” p. 55.

680. Barnett Newman, catalogue statement for *The New American Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), in *BNSWI*, p. 179. This exhibition was organized by the International Program of the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art. It traveled to eight European countries in the span of a year. Its tour ended with a final destination at Museum of Modern Art from May 28-September 8, 1959.

681. Newman, “The Plasmic Image” pp. 139-155. McNickle points out that by the time Newman had started writing the second part of this twelve-part piece of writing, he had already visited the Mondrian exhibition which was up from March 21-May 13, 1945 (see McNickle, text notes and commentary, *BNSWI*, p. 138).

682. Ibid., p. 143.

683. Ibid., p. 151.

684. Ibid.
685. Ibid.
686. Shiff, introduction to *BNSWI*, pp. xviii-xiv.
687. Newman, "The New American Painting," p. 179.
688. Bois mentions that Newman titles at least two paintings "Name" (Bois, "Perceiving Newman," p. 192).
689. Newman, review of Thomas B. Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: Viking, 1951). This review was solicited by *Partisan Review* but was not used and remained unpublished until the publication of Newman's selected writings and interviews in 1990 (see *BNSWI*, p. 123).
690. Newman, "Ohio, 1949" (1949), in *BNSWI*, pp. 174-5. In the summer of this year Newman and Annalee took a trip to Akron, Ohio and visited the prehistoric Native American mounds.
691. Ibid., p. 175
692. Irving Sandler will use the term "cookery" by which he meant "facile manipulations of materials for decorative purposes" (Sandler, "The New Cool-Art," *Art in America*, vol. 53, no. 1 [February 1965], p. 97). Newman is a bit cavalier when he complains of this manipulated space "boring" him.
693. Newman to Alan Power, 1959, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives, quoted in Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," p. 102.
694. Newman, interview by Sylvester, pp. 257-58; idem, Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews, First International Congress on Religion, Architecture and the Visual Arts, 1967, *BNSWI*, p. 289.
695. Ratcliff, "Barnett Newman: Citizen of the Infinitely Large Small Republic," p. 95.
696. Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," p. 83.
697. Ibid., 87.

698. Newman, *Painters Painting*, p. 72.
699. Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," p. 56.
700. Ad Reinhardt, "[The Black-Square Paintings]," published as "Autocritique de Reinhardt," *Iris-Time* (June 10, 1963), in *AA*, pp. 82-83.
701. See Reinhardt's statement "Abstract Painting, Sixty by Sixty Inches Square, 1960" (1963), in *AA*, p. 84.
702. For an illustration of this see Gudrun Inboden and Thomas Kellein, *Ad Reinhardt* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie, 1985). The measure articulated by Vitruvian Man (24 palms or 4 cubits tall) becomes the fundamental or key unit in Vitruvius's canon. It becomes the unit by which architecture and city planning are composed.
703. Newman, "Ohio, 1949," p. 175.
704. Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 17.
705. Reinhardt, "[On Negation]," p. 102.
706. Reinhardt, "Abstraction vs. Illustration," p. 48.
707. Reinhardt, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy," p. 205.
708. Ad Reinhardt, "44 Titles for Articles for Artists Under 45" (1958), in *AA*, p. 151.
709. Reinhardt, "The Artist in Search of a Code of Ethics," p. 163.
710. Reinhardt, "Aesthetic Responsibility," p. 165.
711. Reinhardt, "Black as Symbol and Concept," pp. 87-88.
712. Barnett Newman, Foreword to *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* (New York: Betty Parsons Gallery, 1946), in *BNSWI*, p. 106.
713. Newman, "The Plasmic Image," p. 155; idem, "Painting and Prose/Frankenstein" (1945), unpublished essay, in *BNSWI*, p. 91.

714. Newman, "The Plasmic Image," p. 139. According to Ann Temkin, among others, Newman was a frequent and enthusiastic visitor to the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan where he studied cultural specimens from primitive societies. His interest in the subject is also indicated by his organizing two exhibitions of primitive art, the first was a show of Pre-Columbian stone sculpture for Betty Parsons while she was the director of the Mortimer Brandt Gallery and the second which was in fact the inaugural show for Parsons opening of her Betty Parsons Gallery in September 1946, "Northwest Coast Indian Painting."

715. Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," p. 158; idem, "The Sublime Is Now," p. 171.

716. Reinhardt, "Black as Symbol and Concept," pp. 87-88; idem, "[The Role of the Artist]," p. 140.

717. One might well note here how this sounds like Reinhardt's later "Timeless Painting," but how in fact "Timeless Picture" suggests quite the opposite.

718. Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," p. 158.

719. Ibid.

720. Reinhardt, "Autocritique de Reinhardt," p. 82.

721. Zelevansky, "Ad Reinhardt and the Younger Artists of the 1960s," p. 34, n. 15.

722. Newman, quoted in Bois, "Perceiving Newman," p. 198.

723. Newman, statement written for second, one-person Betty Parsons Gallery exhibition, April 23-May 12, 1951, in *BNSWI*, p. 178.

724. For reproductions of these paintings, see Shiff, Mancusi-Ungaro, Colsman-Freyberger, *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, plates 51, 47, 66, 107.

725. There are exceptions. *Dionysius* and *Horizon Light* (both 1949) are both paintings in which Newman experimented with horizontal zips. That Newman never again returned to this format has been read a sign of his dissatisfaction with it.

726. Newman, quoted in Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 73.

727. Barnett Newman, statement for *Recent American Synagogue Architecture* (1963), in *BNSWI*, p. 181.

728. Newman, interview by Sylvester, p. 257.

729. Bois, "Perceiving Newman," pp. 186-213.

730. *Ibid.*, 193.

731. *Ibid.*, 196.

732. *Ibid.*, 198.

733. Newman, "On Modern Art: Inquiry and Confirmation" (1944), in *BNSWI*, p. 69.

734. See Marcia Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: the Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Harvill Press, 1960), p. 58.

735. But an acknowledgment of the risk and the need to be especially mindful in calling upon esoterica from ancient traditions, as I will, to aid in my own efforts at distinguishing between Newman and Reinhardt should be made. Indeed the dangers associated with taking Reinhardt's orientalism as an interpretative tool for understanding Reinhardt's work appear similar to those associated with using Kabbalistic mysticism for Newman. One suspects the wariness is over allowing these to supply content for these artists's "empty" canvases, and in this way, reducing the work to the status of illustration.

736. Reinhardt, "One," p. 93.

737. Hess dates this to its original publication in *ARTnews* of May 1956. It is dated, however, in the catalogue for Reinhardt's 1991 Los Angeles MoCA and New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition to 1955. and a sign of Reinhardt's own level of self-consciousness about being too simplistically identified as an Orientalist. He was a prime target for this type of explication, for it was widely known that Reinhardt had a sustained interest in Asian art and philosophy. Like many of Manhattan's creative class in the 1950s, he had attended the legendary seminars of D.T. Suzuki at Columbia University. Reinhardt's investment went beyond this however. He also takes up the serious study of Asian art history with Alfred Salmony at the Institute of Fine Arts, gives lectures comparing Eastern and Western art to his peers at Studio 35, and travels extensively

through Asia. And yet, Reinhardt would repeatedly put a damper on things. He was not interested in creating religious art (“painting really has no relation to any of the religions nor ever has”) and in 1958 *ARTnews* could report that while Reinhardt had a longstanding enthusiasm for Oriental art, the artist did not “think that there is any clear relation between his paintings and his interest in the East” (Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, p. 14); idem, “Is Today’s Artist with or Against the Past?,” p. 28.

738. Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, p. 23.

739. Ibid., pp. 23-24.

740. See John D. La Plante, *Asian Art*, third edition (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1992), pp. 14-16. The Aryan presence in the Indus Valley area dates to about 1500-1200 B.C.E. They were Caucasian migrators from the northwest Caucasus Mountain region who displaced the indigenous Dravidian population.

741. Ibid., p. 16.

742. The parameters of Aryan villages were usually clearly delineated by a surrounding double fence.

743. See Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 22, 37, 90, 106, 178. Also see *BNSWI*, pp. 86-88, 90-91, 123, 136, 186.

744. Hess comments on Reinhardt’s famous chronology, done for his 1966-67 exhibition at the Jewish Museum, as a response, in part at least, to the pretentiousness Reinhardt detected in Robert Motherwell in general and in Motherwell’s own chronology in particular. “The chronology Reinhardt concocted for his retrospective at the Jewish Museum (1966),” Hess writes, “is a conscious, mordant take-off on all pompous artists’ autobiographies, but especially of the literary-poetical one Motherwell had helped produce for his Museum of Modern Art catalogue the year before.” Particular targets for Reinhardt in Motherwell’s chronology—which very much fit the artist-as-a-young-man convention—were, as Hess points out, Motherwell’s emphasis on the “context of childhood experience,” his historicizing of himself and the “significant” events that lead to his evolution as the artist he became. Compare, for instance, segments of Motherwell’s and Reinhardt’s chronologies. First Motherwell’s. It appeared in the exhibition catalogue for *Robert Motherwell: With Selections from the Artist’s Writing* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), p. 73.

1915 Born in Aberdeen, Washington, on January 24, to Robert Burns Motherwell II and Margaret Motherwell (née Hogan). . . .

1926 Receives fellowship to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles when eleven. (Because too young, not allowed in life classes, so paints from imagination: knights, armor, shields, battleflags, medieval heraldry.) Most summers after 1926 spent at seashore near Aberdeen, Washington, which gave the artist a lifelong bias for living near the sea. Meets there his first artist, Lance Hart, who encourages him. . . .

1940 . . . Enters Department of Art History and Archeology of Columbia University, New York City. As a graduate student he studies under Professor Meyer Schapiro (recommended to him by Arthur Berger, the composer). Schapiro introduces him to some of the Surrealist artists living in exile in New York City. . . .

Next Reinhardt's.

1913 Born, New York, Christmas Eve, nine months after Armory Show.

1915 Gets crayons for birthday, copies "funnies," Moon Mullins, Krazy Kat, and Barney Google.

1917 Cuts up newspapers. Tears pictures out of books.

1920 Wins water-color flower-painting contest.

1927 Wins medal for pencil-portraits of Jack Dempsey, Abraham Lincoln, Babe Ruth, and Charles Lindbergh.

1930 Makes drawings of knights, heraldry, shields, stars, battle-flags.

1932 Paints studies of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel figures for literature class of Raymond Weaver, who suggests courses with Meyer Schapiro, who suggests joining campus radical groups.

Hess points out as well that indeed Reinhardt possessed a "carefully annotated copy of Motherwell's 'Chronology,'" (Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, pp. 13-14).

745. Indeed, the very centrality of "beginnings" to Newman's overall thematic has been laid out in sophisticated explication and analyses. For instance, in Bois's study of the artist's "thematics of the Origin," the scholar is forced to open with a series of successive nods of acknowledgement: to Thomas Hess's regard of *Onement I* as "a complex symbol, in the purest sense, of Genesis itself" and not least of all to Newman himself who made his theme explicit (if not as he would have hoped in his paintings themselves) in a number of published statements and also through an undeniable thematic assertiveness, perhaps consistency, of Newman's titling. As Bois suggests, "Think first of the "automatic" drawings of 1944-45, with their imagery of germination (one of them is called *Gea*, i.e., earth), then of his canvases of 1946 and 1947: *The Beginning*, *Genesis—The Break*, *The Word I*, *The Command*, *Moment*, *Genetic Moment*: the titles of most of them refer directly to the dawn of the world as it is conveyed in the mythology of the Old Testament (the command, the word, the break that separated dark from light and gives rise to the possibility of life)." More recently, the cataloguers of the Philadelphia

Museum of Art and Tate Modern, London 2002 Newman exhibition also underscored the thematic of creation but with allusions to the titles to two other of Newman's early crayon on paper drawings also done in a surrealist biomorphic style, *The Song of Orpheus* and *The Slaying of Osiris* were able to discuss the extension of the genesis or origin theme to "Greek and Egyptian mythology," where the subjects of Orpheus and Osiris both refer to "myths of creation and regeneration." And, as with Bois, the 2002 cataloguers remark of the tight fit between form and content (or title). The titles serve as "telling clues to Newman's preoccupations and apt matches for the natural forms evoked in his work." Although the more obvious, or at least more easily read or conventionally illustrative approach to the origin thematic, the organicism of a biomorphic style, would soon be overshadowed by the more reductive and angular abstractions associated with the zip paintings much of this work of Newman's mature visual identity continued to carry titles suggestive of birth, creation, generation, and beginnings generally as in *Eve* (1950), *Adam* (1951-52), *Day Before One* (1951) to name but a few. And to get at the remarkable consistency of this theme—truly a career-long concern—we need only mention a work produced in his last years, the steel sculpture from 1969, titled undeniably within the creation problematic: *Zim Zim I*. The sculpture *Zim Zim I* carries us up through his final pieces and indicates, once again, that this theme of genesis has not in the least subsided. The title refers to the first moment of the "triple rhythm" or three-stage process of reality, as elaborated by the Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria in the tradition of Kabbalah. "Reality for Luria," Harold Bloom explains in *Kabbalah and Criticism*, "is always a triple rhythm of contraction, breaking apart, and mending. . . ." *Zim Zim*, the first moment or the contraction Bloom goes on to describe, "originally seems to have meant a holding-in-of-the-breath, but Luria transformed the word into an idea of limitation, of God's hiding of Himself, or rather entering into Himself. In this contraction, God clears a space for creation, a not-God." Thus a point or space is cleared, the limits of a very special arena are drawn, a "fundamental space" or *tehiru* is established so that creation may happen.

746. Barnett Newman, remarks from "Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)," April 21, 1950, in *Modern Artists in America*, p. 12.

747. Ad Reinhardt, "There Is Just One Painting (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part XII)" (1966), in *AA*, pp. 70-72.

748. For reproductions of *The Stations of the Cross*, see *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, plates 70-80, 86-88. For reproductions of Reinhardt's classic black square paintings, see Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*.

749. "The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani," organized by Lawrence Alloway, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, April 20-June 19, 1966. Newman was

approached by Alloway in the spring of 1964 with the proposal for a Guggenheim exhibition. At that time Newman was only halfway finished with the series.

750. There are of course other series or series-like productions that one might turn to for either Newman or Reinhardt. For instance, between 1963-64 Newman would generate his *18 Cantos*, a series of quite modest-scale color lithographic prints (limited to eighteen editions); his series of black and white etched "Notes" from 1968; his short four work series "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue" made between 1966-70. With Reinhardt, one might look to his vertically oriented rectangular black monochromes as another series. Certainly a provocative question that might be raised with Reinhardt's decision to settle with the square over the vertical rectangles is if this decision was affected by Newman's claim to have made the first black painting (and a vertically oriented one) in his painting *Abraham* from 1949. Newman, indeed, criticizes Barbara Rose in the draft of a letter from 1966 for writing an article on Reinhardt's black paintings "without mentioning my black painting, 'Abraham', the first and still the only black painting in history." Newman then makes the heated claim, "He [Reinhardt] never would have painted the black paintings if he had not seen my black painting. . . ." (Newman to Barbara Rose, October 25, 1966, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives). For the present study, however, I will restrict my focus to the series with which each artist is most obviously recognized.

751. John Coplans, *Serial Imagery* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968), p. 9.

752. Ibid., p. 12.

753. Ibid., p. 9.

754. Reinhardt, "[Imageless Icons]," p. 108; idem, "[Art-as-Art]" (1966-67), p. 77; idem, "[Imageless Icons]," p. 109; idem, "[The Role of the Artist]," p. 140.

755. Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," p. 56.

756. Ibid.; idem, "The Present Situation in Art," unpublished notes, 1966, in *AA*, p. 159; idem, "Monologue," p. 24.

757. Reinhardt, "Art-as-Art," p. 56.

758. Ibid. Reinhardt made formulations in a similar vein several years earlier in 1958 in his "25 Lines of Words on Art," for example, line 20 reads, "The strictest formula for the freest artistic freedom," line 22 "The most common mean to the most

uncommon end,” and line 23 “The extremely impersonal way for the truly personal” (Reinhardt, “25 Lines of Words on Art,” p. 52).

759. Reinhardt, “[Art-as-Art]” (1966-67), p. 78.

760. Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 87-118.

761. Ibid., p. 110.

762. Marx, *Capital*, pp. 125, 163.

763. Ibid., p. 127.

764. Ibid., p. 132.

765. Ibid., p. 140.

766. Of course, the other situation being reinscribed in this description is the one described between Newman and Reinhardt, each needing something else and other in order to become expressions of value.

767. Reinhardt, “The Artist is Responsible. . .,” p. 136; idem, “Aesthetic Responsibility,” p. 165.

768. Reinhardt, “[Art-as-Art]” (1966-67), p. 76.

769. Reinhardt, “Abstract Art Refuses,” p. 51.

770. Ad Reinhardt, “[Art-as-Art],” unpublished notes, 1962-63, in *AA*, p. 57.

771. Ad Reinhardt, “[Oneness],” unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 107.

772. Reinhardt, “[Art-as-Art]” (1966-67), p. 78.

773. I say this because, outside of the set museum or large gallery occasion, one rarely, if at all finds more than one Reinhardt black painting displayed at the same time.

774. Coplans, *Serial Imagery*, p. 13.

775. Reinhardt, "[On Negation]," pp. 102-103.

776. This is a point also expressed by Max Kozloff when he described both Reinhardt's and Andy Warhol's work as needing to be "seen, or thought of, in bulk. That is, one is made aware only through a *series* of art objects, that their rhetorical attack is tied up precisely with repetition, even replication" (Max Kozloff, "Andy Warhol and Ad Reinhardt: The Great Acceptor and the Great Demurrer," *Studio International*, vol. 181, no. 931 [March 1971], p. 114).

777. This was a joint exhibition project undertaken by the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. More recently, in 1993, and in what would appear to be an exception to the rule of only exhibiting one Reinhardt black painting at a time, several Reinhardt black paintings were part of the group retrospective exhibition, "American Art in the 20th Century," Martin-Gropius Bau, Berlin. However, as one can see from the installation shot taken by Susan Buck-Morss whose reproduction is included in her book, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, the classic black square painting is flanked on either side by the black paintings in Reinhardt's long, rectangular, vertical format. What this does, essentially, is compose in space, creates a center, sides (flanks), etc., etc. See Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, p. 93.

778. Ad Reinhardt, "[Creation as Content]," unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 192.

779. Reinhardt, "[On Negation]," p. 102. Also see, idem, "[The Context of Art]," pp. 120-21.

780. *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), CD-ROM version.

781. Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 16.

782. Indeed, although Newman and his immediate family lived in the relatively safety of the United States during the years of the Nazi regime, his relatives and his wife's relatives counted among the millions to suffer under European anti-Semitism. See Ho, "Chronology," p. 322.

783. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, p. 73.

784. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, p. 13.

785. Barnett Newman, "Statement," in *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966), p. 9.
786. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 10.
787. Newman, "The 14 Stations of the Cross, 1958-1966," in *BNSWI*, p. 189.
788. Ibid.
789. Ibid.
790. Ibid., pp. 189-90.
791. Newman, "Statement," *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, p. 9.
792. Newman was likely at work on the fifth or sixth Station.
793. Newman, interview by Seckler, p. 250. *The Perils of Pauline* was a 1914 American silent black and white serial of twenty episodes starring Pearl White as "Pauline" and directed by Louis J. Gasnier and Donald MacKenzie.
794. Rosalind Krauss, "Stella's New Work and the Problem of Series," *Artforum* (December 1971), pp. 41, 43.
795. See Ho, "Chronology," pp. 327-28.
796. Lawrence Alloway, "Barnett Newman," *Artforum* (June 1965), p. 20.
797. Ibid.
798. *Oxford English Dictionary*, CD-ROM version (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
799. Lawrence Alloway, "The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist," in *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, p. 12.
800. Ibid., p. 11.
801. Ibid., p. 12.

802. Ibid.
803. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," pp. 26, 33.
804. Ibid., pp. 33-34, n. †.
805. Alloway, "The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist," p. 12.
806. Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1958-1966," *BNSWI*, p. 190.
807. Alloway, "The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist," p. 13.
808. Ibid., p. 14.
809. Ibid., p. 15.
810. For reproductions of Newman's *18 Cantos*, see *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, plates 205-226.
811. Newman, preface to *18 Cantos* (1963-64), in *BNSWI*, p. 183.
812. Ibid., p. 194.
813. Further one should not fail to mention that the medium of lithography is already marked as a medium of reproduction and repetition. Seriality is a genetic part of its identity. This bottom line was both a comfort—it was already series and a challenge.
814. Alloway, "The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist," p. 12.
815. For reproductions of Newman's *Onement II*, *Onement III*, *Onement IV*, *Onement V* and *Onement VI*, see *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, plates 17, 19, 22, 58, 59.
816. Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," p. 39.
817. Ibid., p. 40.
818. Philip Wofford in Jeanne Siegel, "Around Barnett Newman," p. 51.
819. More recently, Thomas Lawson has offered this interesting approach to Newman's seriality and to the *Stations of the Cross* in particular. He describes how his

listening to the *Odyssey* during the car trip to see the 2002 Barnett Newman exhibition in Philadelphia was a perfect prelude to seeing Newman's work. "Homer's heroic cycle . . . 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. . . . The story is thus something to be understood as an encompassing edifice, not as a cliffhanger. The listeners enjoy the whole unfolding of the work, and are not simply looking to find out what happened next." Likewise did the *Stations of the Cross* work. "The meaning of the whole develops from the collective presence of the work. . . . 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" (Thomas Lawson, "Looking for Something to Read," *Afterall* 6 [2002], pp. 11-12).

820. Newman, "The Painting of Tamayo and Gottlieb," *BNSWI*, p. 76.

821. Newman, "Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani," Guggenheim Museum, reprinted in *BNSWI*, p. 188.

822. Peter Kropotkin, quoted in Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, p. 20.

823. Leon Trotsky, Andre Breton, Diego Rivera, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (fall 1938), p. 53.

824. The specific difficulty I will need to face is that of responding to how does one go about arguing the political meaning—in fact, more specifically, a clearly articulated political difference—of such minimally inflected a canvas surface as, say, one of Newman's *Stations* or one of Reinhardt's black square paintings, and further as something significantly beyond a catch-all program of modernist negation?

825. Newman, "American Modern Artists," *BNSWI*, p. 29.

826. Newman, "The Painting of Tamayo and Gottlieb," *BNSWI*, p. 72.

827. Reinhardt, "On Art and Morality," The Philadelphia Panel, ed. Irving Sandler and Philip Pavia, *It Is*, reprinted in *AA*, p. 152.

828. Reinhardt, "To Be Part of Things. . . ," p. 126.

829. Reinhardt, "The Next Revolution in Art (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part II)," p. 63.

830. Bruce Barber, "Thalia Meets Melpomene: The Higher Meaning of the *Voice of Fire* and *Flesh Dress* Controversies," in *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State*, eds., Bruce Barber, Serge Guilbaut, and John O'Brian (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 104.

831. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 25.

832. Reinhardt, "Paintings and Pictures," pp. 118-120. One might note as well remarkably similar quotes from Clement Greenberg and Rosenberg. Greenberg's lines read: "With Marx, he [Mondrian] anticipated the disappearance of works of art—pictures, sculpture—when the material décor of life and life itself had become beautiful" ("Review of an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann and a Reconsideration of Mondrian's Theories," [1945], in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986], p. 19). And Rosenberg writes in 1971: "Like Marx, Mondrian anticipated the end of the tragedy of history and the attainment of "the great purpose" of philosophy. A new type of man, selfless and indifferent to particulars, would see through the "capricious forms" of nature to the motionless center of being, abstract and universal" ("Meaning in Mondrian," *The New Yorker*, vol. 47, no. 40 [November 20, 1971], pp. 201-209; reprinted as "Mondrian: Meaning in Abstract Art I," in *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975], p. 40). Thanks to Lane Relyea for bringing the Greenberg quote to my attention.

833. Reinhardt, "The Next Revolution in Art (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part II)," pp. 59, 63.

834. Newman, interview by Seckler, p. 87.

835. Newman, interview by de Antonio, pp. 307-08.

836. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, pp. 91-92.

837. The Artists and Writers Protest Committee was an anti-war group organized in April 1966 in New York. Many of the artists of this group, although geographically based on the east coast, supported and contributed funds and artworks to the Los Angeles Peace Tower. Therese Schwartz recounts an incident in which the Artists and Writers Protest Committee, soon after its initial formation, sponsored a fund-raising loft party. Authorities (New York City Police, Fire and Buildings Departments) all got wind of the event and arrived at the event with summons and arrests were made. Ad Reinhardt was one among several artists and individuals at the event who went that night to City Hall to

argue their case and the cases of the artists arrested to the Night Mayor. See Therese Schwartz, "The Politicization of the Avant-Garde," *Art in America*, vol. 59, no. 6 (November-December 1971), p. 99.

838. Lucy R. Lippard, "In 'The World,'" in *A Different War* (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1990), p. 18.

839. One of the interesting things about this classic Reinhardt list is that beyond the simplicity of its format its historical bearings are still readable in it to a certain extent and possibly to certain historically conditioned ears. No to dwell on this point too much but, just as an example, the opening two lines, "no war, no imperialism" while sounding quite general pacifist statements of a universal order are also in fact localizable to Reinhardt's milieu between the wars as the slogans most commonly heard. The same applies to lines sixteen and seventeen, no poverty and no hunger being typical phrases used by Popular Front leftism during the 1930s, especially with the Communist Party-led John Reed clubs and their art exhibitions. A few lines down (lines 20 and 21) one finds in the words "evil" and "inhumanity" sentiments that were expressed in the 1940s by artists such as Rothko and Gottlieb, Still, and Reinhardt himself in their attempts to work out a semi-autonomous space of difference from world systems that they all felt were evil and inhumane. The closing lines, for those familiar with Reinhardt's negative lists, sound pure Reinhardt as the nicknamed "conscience" of the art world.

But while there is the language of an older leftism and also of was then the language of the older Abstract Expressionist generation of artists, there is also in this mixed list language, terminology which brings it up to date so to speak, which dates it as a protest document not from the 1930s but from the 1960s. These are found specifically in lines five through seven, with the words "napalm," "escalation," and "credibility gap" being the recognizable phraseology of the time. I'm not sure at this point what in specific terms this all means or says about Reinhardt, that his anti-war list in recognizable ways bridges the old left and the new. And interestingly it is what is found on the reverse side that is one of the issues or problems shared by the two.

840. Symploce is "repetition of one word or phrase at the beginning and of another at the end, of successive clauses, sentences, or passages; a combination of anaphora and antistrophe (Richard A. Lanham, *A Handbook of Rhetorical Terms*, second edition [Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1991], p. 190).

841. Corris, "The Difficult Freedom of Ad Reinhardt," p. 66. From his days as an undergraduate at Columbia up through the 1940s Reinhardt will support himself through commercial graphic design work.

842. Rose, introduction to *AA*, p. xiv.

843. Lippard, "In 'The World,'" p. 18.

844. Reinhardt's representation of a 6¢ U.S. Airmail stamp provides some interesting iconography. Reinhardt, working in his illustrational mode, has carefully reproduced the features of an authentic stamp of the period. The image on the is one of the bald eagle, totally resonant with U.S. patriotism and nationalism as it is and has been the official bird of the United States since 1782. Perhaps Reinhardt would have also wanted us to recognize that it is an image not only redolent of U.S. patriotism, U.S. notions of freedom, but also that this bird is one of the largest predatory birds of North America.

845. At the same time Newman also protested this city's mayor's actions by having his painting *Gea*, which had been part of the exhibition "Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage" removed from the Art Institute of Chicago (Ho, "Chronology," p. 333).

846. Alan Krell, *The Devil's Rope: A Cultural History of Barbed Wire* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003).

847. Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman: 'Broken Obelisk' and Other Sculptures* (Seattle and London: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington Press, 1971), p. 10.

848. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, pp. 83-89; Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect," p. 80.

849. In one of numerous drafts for his Jewish Museum chronology, Reinhardt writes "(Father leaves 'old country' East-Prussia, immigrates to America in 1907 after serving in Tsar Nicholas' army, ~~becomes life-long socialist.~~) (Mother leaves Germany in 1909, ~~meets father in Buffalo.~~) Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art. Hess wrote, "He came from a very poor family" (Hess, *The Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt*, p. 14).

850. Ho, "Chronology," p. 318.

851. Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art.

852. McNickle notes, "At the City College of New York, an institution renowned for the lively disputatiousness of its students, he [Newman] acquired both his determination 'never to lose by default' and his anarchist politics" (McNickle, text notes

and commentary, *BNSWI*, p. 3). Between 1931-35 while an undergraduate at Columbia University, Reinhardt was affected by Meyer Schapiro's radicalism and was encouraged by Schapiro to join campus radical groups (Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 11).

853. Barnett Newman, *The Answer—America's Civil Service Magazine* (1936), in *BNSWI*, pp. 9-13.

854. See Corris, "The Difficult Freedom of Ad Reinhardt," p. 66.

855. See Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, pp. 86-88.

856. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

857. *Ibid.*

858. Meyer Schapiro, "On David [Alfaro] Siqueiros—A Dilemma for Artists," *Dissent*, vol. 10, no. 2 (spring 1963), pp. 106, 197, quoted in Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 88.

859. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 23.

860. *Ibid.*, p. 22, n. 27.

861. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

862. Corris, "The Difficult Freedom of Ad Reinhardt," p. 63.

863. Terry Atkinson, "Rites of Passage," *Art and Design*, vol. 9, nos. 1-2 (1994), p. 12.

864. David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 55.

865. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, pp. 71, 81.

866. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, p. 81.

867. Newman, "The True Revolution Is Anarchist," foreword to Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Horizon Press, 1968), in *BNSWI*, pp. 44-52. According to Brydon Smith Newman's foreword to this volume developed out of a request made by Ben Raeburn of Horizon Press (Raeburn was also a good friend of

Harold Rosenberg's and it was Horizon Press that had published Rosenberg's *The Tradition of the New* in 1959). Raeburn had suggested to Newman sometime in the mid-1960s the idea of publishing the artist's collected writings. Newman, both arguing that he still had things to say, thus it was not yet time to put closure on his writing career with a collected volume and arguing that the new generation of radicals of the student movement and anti-Vietnam protests needed to be aware of the anarchist path, countered Raeburn's proposal with one of reissuing Kropotkin's memoirs (see Brydon Smith, "Some Thoughts About the Making and Meaning of Voice of Fire," in *Voice of Fire*, p. 179).

868. Newman, "The True Revolution Is Anarchist!," p. 44.

869. As Temkin explains, the anarchist position, while it had enjoyed some popularity at the beginning of the 20th century, especially within artistic and intellectual milieus in New York and especially around the figure of Emma Goldman, by the 1930s it had lost a great deal of its support and was flagging. "[B]y the 1930s anarchism was barely alive as a cultural or political force. Emma Goldman, the American movement's chief spokesperson, had been deported to Russia in 1919, and Bolshevism had replaced anarchism as the preferred radical position" (Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," p. 24).

870. Newman, "The True Revolution Is Anarchist!," p. 45.

871. Newman, "The Answer—America's Civil Service Magazine," p. 10.

872. Jonathan Harris, "Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960," in Paul Wood et al., *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 9.

873. Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, p. 55.

874. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique*, pp. 73, 39.

875. One might also note the dire consequences this expulsion ended up having on the First International and the socialist movement. Its ranks were split in two, and the two halves of the First International died within five years of the division (see Geoffrey Ostergaard, "Michael Bakunin," in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, p. 44 and Vaclav Cerny, "The Socialistic Year 1848 and its Heritage," *The Critical Monthly* 1 and 2 [Prague, 1948], quoted in Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, p. 17).

876. Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles," *Nineteenth Century* (1887), in Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Roger N. Baldwin (Minneapolis, New York: Dover Publications, 1970), pp. 52, 53.

877. "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles" was the title of one of Kropotkin's important pamphlets. Originally published in two articles for *Nineteenth Century* (London, 1887), revised by Kropotkin into pamphlet form, in Kropotkin, *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, pp. 46-113.

878. Kropotkin, "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles," p. 52.

879. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

880. V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (1917; New York: International Publishers, 1932), p. 51.

881. Friedrich Engels to Bebel, March 18-28, 1875, from Bebel, *Aus meinen Leben* (1911), pp. 321-22, quoted in Lenin, *State and Revolution*, p. 55.

882. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, p. 52.

883. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

884. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

885. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

886. R. N. Carew Hunt, *The Theory and Practice of Communism: An Introduction* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 144-45.

887. Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism" (1912), in *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, p. 170; *idem*, "The Spirit of Revolt" (1880), in *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, p. 37.

888. Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," p. 173.

889. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, pp. 47, 41.

890. Newman, "Jackson Pollock: An Artists' Symposium," *BNSWI*, pp. 191-92; Newman, interview by de Antonio, p. 302.

891. Newman, interview by de Antonio, p. 305.
892. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," pp. 29-30.
893. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 109; idem, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings*, p. 18.
894. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 109.
895. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings*, p. 17.
896. Reinhardt, "[The Role of the Artist]," p. 140; idem, "[Oneness]," p. 107; idem, "[Art-as-Art]" (1966-67), p. 77.
897. Reinhardt, "[Five Stages of Reinhardt's Timeless Stylistic Art-Historical Cycle]," unpublished note, 1965, in *AA*, p. 10.
898. Rosenberg, "Black and Pistachio," p. 53.
899. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), p. 146.
900. For a very recent instance of this, see Arthur Danto's review of the 2002 Newman retrospective. Danto opens with a discussion of the potency of "Newman"/"New Man" as an allegorical (and actual) name (Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime," p. 25). For earlier discussions of the significance of the artist's name, namely in reference to the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, see Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Walker and Company, 1969), pp. 7-11.
901. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, pp. 40-41.
902. *Cassell's German-English/English-German Dictionary*, revised by Harold T. Betteridge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1978), s.v. "rein" and "hardt."
903. Rosenberg writes: "You say the one subject of art is art's awareness of itself. Very good. But the one thing this awareness consists of is the awareness that art is not pure. You want to evolve toward purity. But that puts history into it. And nothing evolves toward purity. Purity is outside of evolution. Actually, you've speaking of death"

(Reinhardt to Rosenberg, c. 1962, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5). Rosenberg has written a note on the back of this letter from Reinhardt.

904. Rosenberg to Reinhardt, October 10, 1962, Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5. Although this postcard is dated it bears no postmark and it remains in the Rosenberg Papers.

905. See “Two Aesthetes Offer Selves as Candidates to Provide Own Ticket for Intellectuals,” quoted in Temkin, “Barnett Newman on Exhibition,” p. 22.

906. Newman and Borodulin, “On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture,” p. 8.

907. Newman, “The First Man Was an Artist,” p. 159.

908. Ibid., p. 160.

909. Newman, “A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess,” interview by Thomas Hess, *BNSWI*, p. 285.

910. Reinhardt, “Paintings and Pictures,” p. 119.

911. Ibid., p. 120.

912. Reinhardt, “[The Fine Artist and the War Effort],” unpublished notes, c. 1943, in *AA*, p. 173.

913. Reinhardt, “[The Present Situation in Art],” unpublished notes, 1966, published in *AA*, p. 156. For an in-depth discussion of Reinhardt’s facture, see Phyllis Rosenzweig, “Ad Reinhardt: Problems and Curatorial Ethics: Does It Matter Who Painted It?,” in *American Abstract Expressionism*, ed. David Thistlewood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1993), pp. 193-207.

914. According to Donald Gratz of the metal fabricating company Treitzel-Gratz (New York) with whom Newman did several sculptural projects, “Newman never wanted any actual work done on the sculpture [*Here II*] unless he was present, and he particularly hovered over the skilled craftsman who torched the irregular edges of the base, following an outline that Newman had drawn in black crayon on Kraft paper.” As Nan Rosenthal elaborates, Newman spent a “great deal of time at the firm adjusting the precise back-to-front placement of the plinths and columns of his sculpture,” and he “insisted on guiding each burn that created the rough-cut edge of the base so that it appeared to show the

trembling of something handmade, like many of his zips” (Nan Rosenthal, “The Sculpture of Barnett Newman,” in *Reconstructing Barnett Newman*, pp. 121-22). However, an exception that should be mentioned is the work *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley*. According to Rosenthal this work qualified as Newman’s single “telephone sculpture”—“Newman telephoned the dimensions and choice of materials to Don Lippincott, who then fabricated the piece” (idem, p. 127). But as Rosenthal notes (and others have noted this as well), *Lace Curtain* stands as something of a “special case,” made for a very specific project and in a number of aspects standing outside Newman’s more characteristic concerns and approaches (idem, p. 126). Shiff, as well, has discussed the “fabrication” issue in relation to Newman’s sculpture. “The project could only be accomplished at a foundry with skills developed by others. As Newman explained to an interviewer in 1967, with his necessarily collaborative work in sculpture he remained immediately involved in the creative process despite the physical distance: ‘I’m conceptual but I’m also pragmatic, and I have to sort of be there . . . although I may not do it specifically with my own hands.’ He added that he wanted the result to look ‘as if it happened rather than [as if it were] manufactured.’ Although his sculptural decisions involved others, the work ‘happened’ because the artist was present—he had to ‘sort of be there’” (Shiff, “To Create Oneself,” p. 55).

915. Reinhardt, interview by Glaser, pp. 13-14.

916. Reinhardt, “Twelve Rules for a New Academy,” p. 205.

917. Reinhardt, “[Art-as-Art]” (1962-63), p. 58.

918. “The proof of the pudding is in the eating” (Engels, “General Introduction and the History of Materialism,” Introduction to the 1892 English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/int-mat.htm>> (July 16, 2006).

919. Reinhardt, “Art-as-Art,” p. 56.

920. Reinhardt, “Monologue,” pp. 27-28.

921. Reinhardt, “Abstraction vs. Illustration,” p. 49.

922. Newman, interview by de Antonio, p. 306.

923. Newman, interview by Seckler, p. 248.

924. Newman, review of *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, *BNSWI*, pp. 121-22.

925. Newman, "The Ideographic Picture," p. 108.

926. Newman, interview by Sylvester, p. 259.

927. Newman, interview by Seckler, pp. 248-49.

928. Barnett Newman, lecture at Hunter College, November 16, 1962, audiotape, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives, quoted by Shiff, "Whiteout: The Not-Influence Effect of Barnett Newman," p. 85.

929. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 160.

930. Reinhardt, "End," unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 113.

931. Reinhardt, "The First Paintings. . .," p. 111.

932. Reinhardt, "[Art-as-Art]" (1966-67), p. 76.

933. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

934. Newman, transcript of interview by Slate (see Shiff, introduction to *BNSWI*, p. xii). Newman has indicated in print, on several occasions, his distaste for Hegel and Hegelian dialectic. One might attribute part of this to the association it with some branches of Marxist thought, in particular, and the closest to Newman's own milieu, would be Sidney Hook's early work on the "Hegelianized" Marx in *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950). For examples of Newman's criticisms of the Hegelian dialectic see, "Frankenstein," Newman's draft version of a response to Joseph Frank, "Spatial Forms in Modern Literature," *Sewanee Review* (1945), in *BNSWI*, pp. 92-93. Also see the c. 1944 manuscript in the Barnett Newman Foundation Archives in which Newman excoriates Hegelianist (and Marxist) "sciences of history": "The more we study the forces that have been motivating Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito, the more it becomes plain that they live and act by pseudo-science, racism, intrinsic destiny, the progress of mankind—and most false of all—the 'science' of history, with its [Hegelian] synthetics, etc. . . . The science of history is the curse of the world. . . . Hegel's 'science' of history and all his widespread prawn of historical interpretations have about as effectively delineated history [as did ancient astrology.] And if any book should have been burnt in our time, it should have been his." See Shiff, "To Create Oneself," p. 98, nn. 175, 176. Punctuation added and

paraphrasing suppressed by Shiff. Along similar lines, Newman included the books of Marx and Lenin as those that should be condemned as well (see Ho, "Chronology," p. 320; also see Shiff, "Newman's Time," in *Reconstructing Barnett Newman*, p. 170).

- 935. Newman, interview by Slate, p. 253.
- 936. Newman, interview by Sylvester, p. 256.
- 937. Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 88.
- 938. Marx, *Capital*, p. 283.
- 939. Ad Reinhardt to Barnett Newman, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives.
- 941. Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," pp. 158-59.
- 942. Reinhardt, "[Routine Extremism]," unpublished, n.d. notes, in *AA*, p. 127.
- 943. Reinhardt, draft of artist's chronology, Reinhardt Archive, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 944. Reinhardt to Rosenberg, n.d., Rosenberg Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
- 945. The first part was "The Artist in Search of an Academy, Part I," *College Art Journal* (spring 1953), the text of which was also read by Reinhardt at the College Art Association conference of 1953. The second part, "The Artist in Search of an Academy, Part II," *College Art Journal* (summer 1954), was also presented at a symposium on the "Reality" statement, in August 1954 at Woodstock, New York. Both statements reprinted in *AA*, pp. 197-202.
- 946. Reinhardt, "The Artist in Search of An Academy, Part II: Who Are the Artists?," p. 202.
- 947. Annalee Newman, interview by Dodie Kazanjian, 1989, 1991, unedited, typed manuscript, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives, p. 41.
- 948. Hunter, "Outrageous 'Irascibles': Ad Reinhardt and the Color-Field Painters," p. 138.
- 949. Annalee Newman, interview by Dodie Kazanjian, p. 41.

950. Reinhardt, "The Next Revolution in Art (Art-as-Art Dogma, Part II)," p. 61; Reinhardt to Rosenberg, postmarked October 23, 1962.

951. Reinhardt, "Foundingfathersfollyday," *ARTnews*, vol. 53, no. 2 (April 1954), pp. 24-25; Lee Hall, *Betty Parsons* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), p. 105.

952. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt*, pp. 15-16.

953. Reinhardt, "The Artist in Search of an Academy, Part II: Who Are the Artists?," p. 202.

954. Reinhardt to Betty Parsons, postmarked October 8, 1954, New York, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives.

955. Annalee Newman, interview by Dodie Kazanjian, pp. 41-42.

956. According to Annalee, at one point Clement Greenberg agreed to act as witness for Newman but then later backed out. Clyfford Still "who was very mad at Reinhardt" agreed as well but later also backed out "at the last minute," sending his wife "with a letter, which said he couldn't come because he had bursitis." "Well, Barney," Annalee recalls, "thought that was pretty lame. . ." (Annalee Newman, interview by Dodie Kazanjian, p. 41).

957. Ibid.

958. Henry R. Hope, the editor of *Art Journal*, brought up the topic of Newman's and Reinhardt's relationship in his obituary for Newman. Hope writes of the two having been close friends until the 1954 incident, after which "the coolness between those involved never ended." (Hope, "Obituary Notices: Barnett Newman," *Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1 [fall 1990], p. 84).

959. Annalee Newman, interview by Dodie Kazanjian, p. 40.

960. Annalee Newman, interview by Dodie Kazanjian, p. 42. And, indeed, with twisted irony, one learns from Annalee that Rita had in fact come to Annalee asking to borrow her typewriter to type Reinhardt's article.

961. This photograph is reproduced in *Barnett Newman*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, p. 326. There is also an 8 x 10 in. black-and-white photograph of Rita and Ad Reinhardt in the Barnett Newman Foundation Archives. On the back it is inscribed: "for Analee + Barney 1953 from Rita + Ad."

962. According to the chronology of the 2002 Philadelphia Museum exhibition catalogue, in 1954 Annalee worked at William Cullen Bryant High School in Queens as a full-time teacher of stenography and typewriting and started teaching in the evenings at Baruch School of Business, City College. In 1955, "Even with Annalee working two jobs, the Newmans' financial situation is precarious. The couple resorts to taking loans, pawning a few valuables, and, in Barney's case, trying to develop a winning scheme at the horse track" (Ho, "Chronology," p. 326).

963. Annalee Newman, interview by Dodie Kazanjian, pp. 43, 25, 26.

964. Ibid., p. 6.

965. Ibid., p. 54.

966. Ibid., p. 6.

967. Ibid., pp. 5-6. Another provocative suggestion of Newman's sense of women's roles and places is offered by Lee Krasner in a 1972 interview for the Archives of American Art. Krasner relates to Doloris Holmes, her interviewer, a series of discussions she had with Newman that started with Newman's model synagogue. Krasner states:

Barnett Newman and I had a long running battle which was never resolved since Barnett died last year. The argument or battle that we had going for some ten or twelve years was on my rejection of the position of the female in Judea. This he would not accept. His point of view was that I misunderstood it; mine was that I understood it too clearly and rejected it. And so from time to time we picked up the argument. It ran through a period of years. One day at a very large party, which was quite a traumatic party for me in many respects, in between one thing I had just gotten through with and before I hit the next thing, Barney appeared from some place and said, "Lee, have you seen my Synagogue?" I said, "Where is your Synagogue?" He said, "It's at the Jewish Museum." I said, "No, I haven't seen it. Why do you want me to see it?" He said, "It'll resolve that argument we've been having all these years." And I said, "In what sense?" He said, "You will approve of where I placed the women in the synagogue. It will end the argument." And I said, "Where did you place the women, Barney?" And he said, "On the altar." Whereupon I—well—used no uncertain terms about how I felt about it and said, "You sit up on the altar; I just want the next empty seat in the next pew that's vacant."

Slightly later in the interview she returns to the subject, further commenting on the “role of the female in Judea”:

Now, my own shattering experience in relation to this is that I was raised in an orthodox Jewish home and said a morning prayer every morning, only I said it in Hebrew, it was taught to me in Hebrew and I never knew the meaning; unfortunately only some thirty years later I read a translation of the Prayer, which is indeed a beautiful prayer in every sense except for the closing of it; it said, if you are a male you say, “Thank You, O Lord, for creating me in Your image”; and if you are a woman you say, “Thank You, O Lord, for creating me as You saw fit”. And this is when I had started long running battle with Barney Newman on the rejection of the female role in Judea, not to mention in Christianity which follows.

Lee Krasner, interview by Dolores Holmes, transcript, 1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

968. See Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 159. For example, the two quotes below, taken from *The German Ideology*, serve as clear instances of Marx talking about the relations between social life and reproductivity and productivity. “With these there develops the division of labour, which was originally nothing but the division of labour in the sexual act, then that division of labour which develops spontaneously or ‘naturally’ by virtue of natural predisposition (e.g., physical strength), needs, accidents, etc., etc. Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labor appears. . . . With the division of labour, in which all these contradictions are implicit, and which in its turn is based on the natural division of labours in the family and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, is given simultaneously the *distribution*, and indeed the *unequal* distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first form, of which lives in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property. . . .”

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Irving Marantz's photograph of members of the Artists's Union picketing, 1930s.



Fig. 2. Hollis Frampton, *Frank Stella*, 1959. This is the photograph of Stella used in the exhibition catalogue for “Sixteen Americans” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959.



Fig. 3. Hollis Frampton, *Frank Stella*, 1959. Photograph. Stella painting in his West Broadway studio.



Fig. 4. Hans Namuth photographs of Pollock from 1951, best those that accompanied Robert Goodnough's "Pollock Paints a Picture," *ARTnews* (May 1951).



For the series, the growing season is as defined in column (b). This is the value during which the cooling is the product of (long) statistical and temporal values.

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Fig. 6. Nina Leen, *The Irascibles*, *Life*, 1950. Photograph, "Irascible Group of Advanced Artists." printed in January 15, 1951.



Fig. 7. Ad Reinhardt, *Number 18*, 1948-49, 1948-49. Oil on canvas. 40 x 60 inches.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Fig. 8. Ad Reinhardt, *Untitled*, 1947. Oil on canvas. 40 x 32 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 9. Barnett Newman in his Wall Street studio, 1951. Photo: Hans Namuth.



Fig. 10. Barnett Newman in his Front Street studio, 1961. Photo: Alexander Liberman.



Fig. 11. Barnett Newman in his apartment, sitting in front of two paintings from *The Stations of the Cross*, 1965. Photo: Ugo Mulas.



Fig. 12. Barnett Newman, *The Voice*, 1950. Egg tempera and oil on canvas. 96 1/8 x 105 1/2 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 13. Barnett Newman, *The Name II*, 1950. Oil and Magna on canvas. 104 x 94 1/2 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 14. Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951. Oil on canvas. 72 x 72 inches.
Collection of the artist.

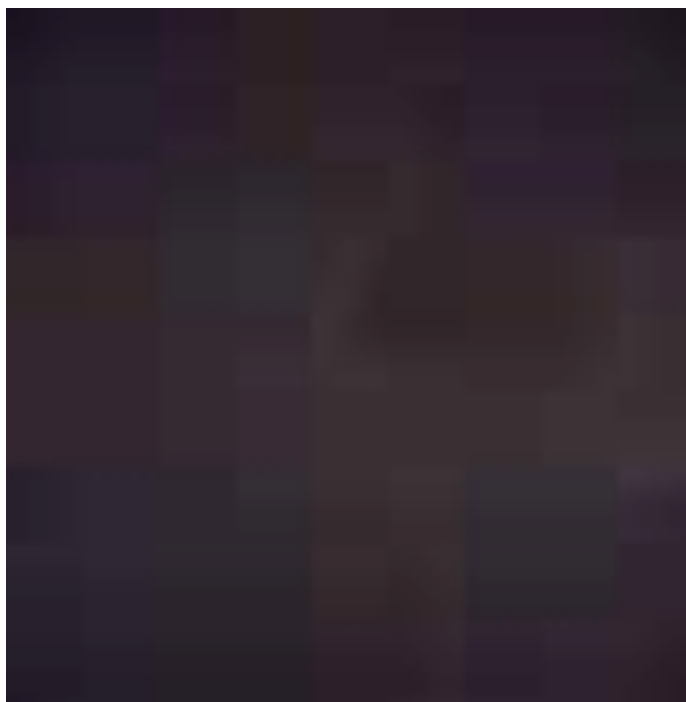


Fig. 15. Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 9*, 1960-66. Oil on canvas. 60 x 60 inches.
Minneapolis Institute of the Arts.



Fig. 16. Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948. Oil on canvas and oil on masking tape. 27 1/4 x 16 1/4 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 19. Barnett Newman, *Gea*, 1944-45. Oil and oil crayon on cardboard. 28 x 22 inches.
Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 20. Barnett Newman, *Euclidian Abyss*, 1946-47. Oil, oil crayon, and wax crayon on textured paperboard. 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Private collection, Atherton, California.



Fig. 21. Ad Reinhardt, *Black & White*, 1947. Oil on canvas. 60 x 40 inches. Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 22. Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Drawing*, 1947. Brush and ink collage. 24 x 18 3/4 inches. Private collection.

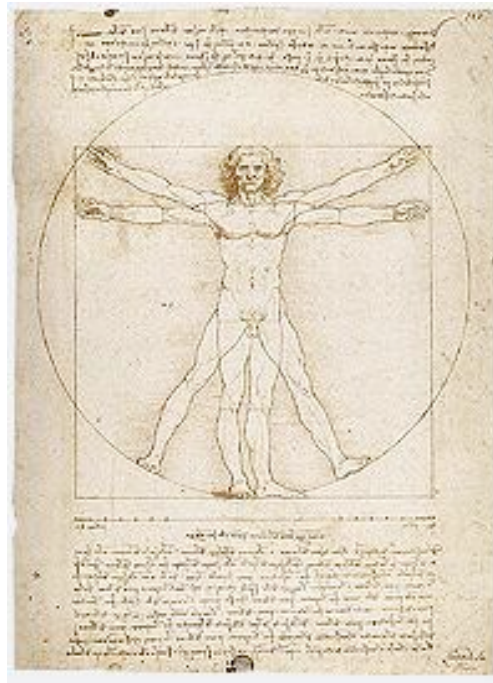


Fig. 23. Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, 1513. 25 x 19.2 cm.



Fig. 24. Ad Reinhardt, "How to Look at the Record," *P.M.* (November 3, 1946).

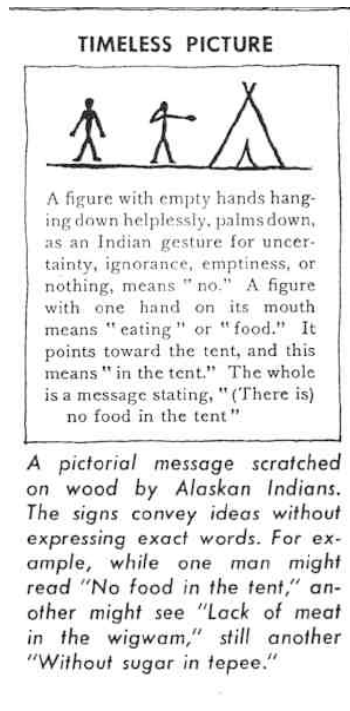


Fig. 25. Ad Reinhardt, "How to Look at the Record," *P.M.* (November 3, 1946); "Timeless Picture" detail.



Fig. 26. Ad Reinhardt painting in his studio, March 1962.



Fig. 27. Ad Reinhardt in his studio, 1966. Photograph by Marvin Lazarus. Pace Gallery, New York.



Fig. 28. Barnett Newman (and unidentified woman), with *Cathedra*, 1958. Photo: Peter A. Juley.



Fig. 29. Ad Reinhardt, “A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala” (1955), originally published in *ARTnews* (May 1956). Collage of ink and paper. 20 1/4 x 13 1/2 inches. Whitney Museum of Art, New York.

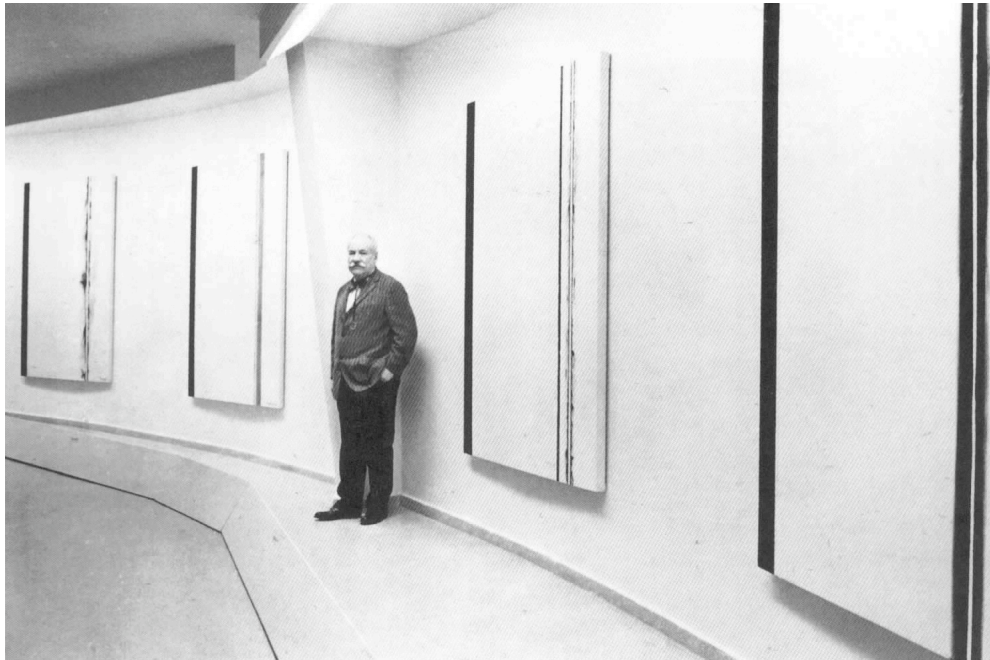


Fig. 30. Installation shot of the artist with *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1966. Photo: Robert Murray.



Fig. 31. "Ad Reinhardt: Paintings," exhibition installation shot, Jewish Museum, New York, 1966-67. Photo: Gertrude Lambert.

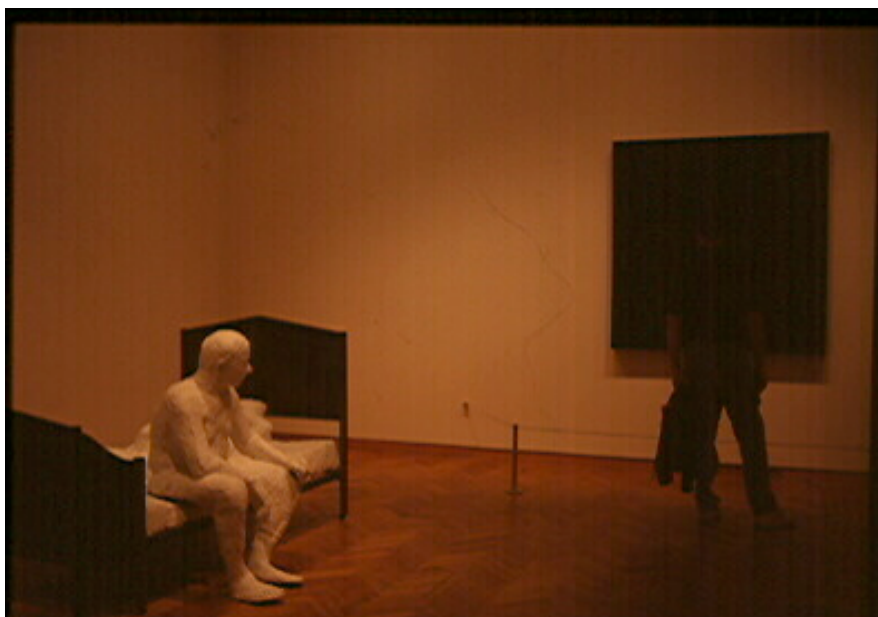


Fig. 32. Ad Reinhardt, *Black Painting* and George Segal sculpture, installation shot, Art Institute of Chicago. Photo by the author, 2001.



Fig. 33. Installation shot of *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1966. Photo: Robert Murray.

NO WAR
 NO IMPERIALISM
 NO MURDER
 NO BOMBING
 NO NAFALIM
 NO ESCALATION
 NO CREDIBILITY GAP
 NO PROPAGANDA
 NO BULLSHIT
 NO LYING
 NO IGNORANCE
 NO GRAFT
 NO DRAFT
 NO FEAR
 NO SLAVERY
 NO POVERTY
 NO HUNGER
 NO HATE
 NO INJUSTICE
 NO EVIL
 NO INHUMANITY
 NO CALLOUSNESS
 NO CONSCIENCELESSNESS

NO ART OF WAR
 NO ART IN WAR
 NO ART TO WAR
 NO ART ON WAR
 NO ART BY WAR
 NO ART FROM WAR
 NO ART ABOUT WAR
 NO ART FOR WAR
 NO ART WITH WAR
 NO ART AS WAR

WAR CHIEF
 WASHINGTON, D.C.
 U.S.A.




Fig. 34. Ad Reinhardt, *No War*, 1967. Lithographic poster. 26 1/4 in. x 21 1/4 in. From *The Artists and Writers Portfolio* (1968), compiled by Jack Sonenberg. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 35. Barnett Newman, *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley*, 1968. Steel, paint and barbed wire. 70 x 48 x 10 inches. Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 36. Barnett Newman, *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley*, detail showing red paint “blood” splatters.



Fig. 37. Photograph of Barnett and Annalee Newman, Ad and Rita Reinhardt, at a Harlem nightclub in 1953. Barnett Newman Foundation Papers.

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Vita

Annika Marie was adopted on May 27, 1976, at the age of three, by Linda and Richard Strahan of Southern California. After graduating valedictorian of her high school class in 1991, she went on to receive her B.A. in art history from Mills College (Oakland, California) in 1995 and her M.A. in art history from Columbia University (New York) in 1996. In the fall of 1996 she began course work towards a doctorate in art history at the University of Texas at Austin. She has been writing and teaching since 2000.

Permanent address: 1430 Wilder Street, Evanston, Illinois 60202

This dissertation was typed by the author.