

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

MALE 1

...these lectures. Before announcing today's program, I would like to inform you that two weeks from today, the last program will consist of a lecture delivered by Professor William Rubin on the subject of color in modern American painting. One further announcement: I think many of you came here today fully expecting to find Harold Rosenberg as the other participant with Barnett Newman in the conversation. Unfortunately, Mr. Rosenberg was unable to come; he is teaching in the Midwest and was making a special trip to New York for this program, but at the very last moment something arose which made it impossible for him to be here. And so we were very grateful that Thomas Hess volunteered to take Harold Rosenberg's place. And so [00:01:00] our subject today has been retitled, "Conversation with Hess and Newman." Thomas Hess, writer and editor of *Art News*, is very well known to all of us. He has held this position on that important publication since 1949, having joined the staff of *Art News* just a few years before. He has always been considered a leading spokesman for and about the movement of new American painting which emerged after the war. He is an author of two very popular, well-known books on American art, one entitled *Abstract Painting* and the other a monograph on the work of Willem de Kooning. Aside from his editorial work on *Art News*, he is a frequent contributor to the *New York* [00:02:00] *Times*, the *Saturday Review*, *Encounter*, and numerous other publications. Barnett Newman is a senior American painter whose work, unfortunately, has been very selectively shown in one-man exhibitions. Surprisingly enough, the only one-man exhibitions to have been presented were two at the Betty Parsons Gallery in the early 1950s; one at Bennington College, in 1958; another at French & Company, in 1959; and the last at the Allan Stone Gallery, in 1962. So we are very proud at the Guggenheim Museum to have the privilege of presenting Mr. Newman's current exhibition, now on view in the museum. And I would like to call your attention to the catalogue for that exhibition, which contains [00:03:00] a very interesting introduction by Lawrence Alloway and a most complete bibliography and history of Mr. Newman in an appendix at the back. Any lengthy introduction of Barnett Newman would be both superfluous and redundant, particularly in view of the presence of his exhibition in the museum at this time and the very nature of this program, which is a conversation. Perhaps more than any other artist I know, Barnett Newman is a true champion of articulation — not only in his work, but in his personal views as a man. It is, therefore, a privilege for us to be able to welcome him to this podium. Now I would like to present Thomas Hess and Barnett Newman. (applause) [00:04:00]

(break in recording; silence; off-mic conversation)

BARNETT NEWMAN

It's dark out there. (laughter) (applause) [00:05:00] (whispering; inaudible). Well, I think maybe I should begin by explaining that this is strictly a conversation, so to speak, in public, rather than an interview or a question-and-answer sort of thing. I think some people who have read [me?] know this sort of [fast?], and instead of a conversation they think that perhaps it's going to be a conversion, (laughter) (inaudible) try to convert anybody. And we'll try to do it as if, let's say, we were painting a painting, without any strict plan. And I hope that something will be said.

THOMAS HESS

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The conversion of Barnett Newman to the ecumenical spirit, [00:06:00] as represented by the exhibition titled *The Stations of the Cross*, I had always thought that you were a staunch atheist, a pragmatist.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I don't think that I have to be a believer, in that sense, to say something about a subject that has meant something to me all these years. I wasn't commissioned to do this by a church. And I felt free to express something that I had feelings about. I think when the pope asked Michelangelo to do the ceiling, he didn't give him [00:07:00] an examination to see if he knew the creed.

THOMAS HESS

Yeah, Michelangelo objected to having to do the job.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I was forced into it too. (laughs)

THOMAS HESS

Well, the title...

BARNETT NEWMAN

The work forced me, let's say.

THOMAS HESS

It forced you. The idea of subject matter and picking a subject matter this, I'd almost say, corny, appears to be an affront. And certainly a number of our journalists, critics in New York, have taken the affront and been howling about it. Did you mean this to be [00:08:00] accepted just as such a title as *Still Life* or *Number Two* or *Abraham* or [*The Deep*]?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I think, Tom, that the critics would've taken affront if I had any kind of paintings without any titles. I don't think it would have made any difference. I think everybody knows what you're referring to, and I think that in relation to that, no matter what I would have had on the walls, because I was involved in opposing the situation there, that the use of my work for personal vendetta would have occurred anyway. So I don't think that's an issue. I think the other issue of whether I'm involved in just making paintings as things and paintings that have something to say, I have always felt that a painting says something. [00:09:00] Even those paintings that are claimed not to say anything, by not saying anything say something. So their subject matter is primal in relation to a painting as the history of, you might say, of my generation begins with the problem of what to paint. During the war, it became sort of nonsensical to get involved in painting men playing violins or cellos or flowers. Well, to use [Marty?] Shapiro's phrase, it became very apparent that these things were really object matter. I mean, after all, we're not talking in relation to hindsight, but [the?] war and other things — [00:10:00] I'm no sociologist — made it impossible to disregard the problem of subject matter or object matter. And to the extent that this became an issue, the subject that one feels that's in the painting in relation to this abstract language that we're using seems to me vital. And I think that

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those who claim that they can do it without considering the problem are by that very fact making a statement about subject matter.

THOMAS HESS

Well, aren't you in effect saying that you felt, when confronting Cubism on the one hand and Surrealism on the other, that subject matter and content had tended to slip apart, and you wanted to bring them back together into a single unit?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes.

THOMAS HESS

Well, then, [00:11:00] why did you feel you had to continue the idea of abstract art? Why not [pursue?] the idea of realistic art, as Surrealism had been doing?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I think that the contribution the Surrealists made to — I mean, I'm speaking for myself — is that they brought back the problem of subject matter. The nature of the subject matter I think I was not in sympathy with THOMAS HESS that it was Freudian; it was doctrinaire in relation to the psychological attitudes toward man. It was doctrinaire in relation to the way it was done. It was, in that sense, also Marxist. So that their particular subject matter, I would say, that I found not very sympathetic, but there's no question that [00:12:00] the Surrealists did show that you could still say something and that you could still say something in the painting. And to that extent it encouraged us at that time to see if something could not be said in painting. And I suppose other Surrealists — Moreau — showed that it was possible to do in terms of sort of abstract forms. Still, from my point of view, the abstract forms were sort of cartoons of things and not really the means to say what I felt I had to say.

THOMAS HESS

But the Constructivists, like Malevich, they had abstract ideas [00:13:00] with very complicated subject matter, or equivalencies to complicated subject matter, like the blackness of the soul and the blackness of a square.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, the language that they spoke was mystical, but the actual result was very materialistic. It was a utopian notion, that by manipulating areas and colors and lines shapes and so on that you would be saying something. But actually what those men were always doing was creating a utopian world and, to that extent, was unreal.

THOMAS HESS

You think idealism is an unreal attitude for an artist.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, utopian idealism, yes.

THOMAS HESS

Mm-hmm. But isn't just the fact of being an artist in New York in the middle-1960s an idealistic and utopian stance? [00:14:00]

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BARNETT NEWMAN

I wouldn't say that. I would describe it, as I once did, as a kind of exile —

THOMAS HESS

From...

BARNETT NEWMAN

In a so-called utopia —

THOMAS HESS

[Exile?].

BARNETT NEWMAN

— in a so-called paradise. That is, the artist in New York at that time was a — well, people talked about him as if he were an underground man. He was outside society.

THOMAS HESS

And do you think that's changed?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I think things have gotten a little better. That is, the exile has some pleasures in it, but I think that fundamentally the same problem still exists.

THOMAS HESS

Well, don't you think that maybe it's gotten worse, in the sense that museums and other forms of mass communication have [hotted?] up and are —

BARNETT NEWMAN

I don't —

THOMAS HESS

— spreading [00:15:00] art as fashion and art as novelty and art as glamour?

BARNETT NEWMAN

— I don't think it's worse. I think it's different. I think the temptations then were, let's say, related to notions of poverty, so that if you had status in the poor society at that time, you were the one who created a sort of private myth and a private group, and you were adored in that very limited situation. I think that now I suppose the temptations are of a different sort, that you can have a sense of — well, I suppose the only way to describe it is self-deception, the sense that you are somebody in this society because your name is in the paper.

THOMAS HESS

In other words...

BARNETT NEWMAN

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The temptations are different. That is, there's money involved, let's say. There's also a certain amount of fame. [00:16:00] Maybe those things are worse. I think, though, that we should be tested on all levels.

THOMAS HESS

Yeah, you should have a right to every temptation.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yeah.

THOMAS HESS

There's no point just having bread and water. But in terms of the outside world from which you are exiled, do you feel that's changed in the sense that it's more or less hostile to the artist or the artist is more or less revolutionary in regards to it? Do you think your paintings are subversive?

BARNETT NEWMAN

I would redefine that. I would say that if my paintings were properly understood, the society would change. And if that's subversion, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

THOMAS HESS

But there's no [aversion?]. I mean, *The Stations of the Cross* is not meant to show [00:17:00] a materialistic, capitalistic, affluent society something about the proper idea of death or the proper idea of agony and the proper idea of art?

BARNETT NEWMAN

The Stations of the Cross is a series of paintings in which I tried to project something that I felt was very real in relation to the Passion. Now, whether this has implications in relation to any comments on the nature of society, I suppose it does, in the sense that the society, particularly in relation to the Passion, in the ecclesiastical situation, has always identified the Passion as the [00:18:00] crucifixion, either of a man who was God — and in my case I have felt that in terms of that kind of physical suffering, it's gotten almost universal. I was trying to call attention to that part of the Passion, which I have always felt was ignored and which has always affected me, and that was the cry of "*lema sabachthani*," which I don't think is a complaint but which Jesus makes and just sort of — I was always struck by the paradox that he says to those who actually persecuted him and crucified him, "Forgive them —" — says to God — "— forgive them, for they know not what they do." But to God, since he is [00:19:00] projected as the son of God, he says, "What's the idea?"

THOMAS HESS

You don't feel that this was just a...

BARNETT NEWMAN

So this, to me, is a kind of a very strange paradox, and I, in doing the work, began to feel that my paintings were sort of making that kind of a statement about that cry. And so I thought that if I could do 14 of them I would have a series of paintings that would, in some way, point to that cry. That's why I called them that.

THOMAS HESS

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Working within the paradox —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes.

THOMAS HESS

— within these two irreconcilable statements, you have a series of slippery paintings.

BARNETT NEWMAN

You mean the actual crucifixion? No, I don't [00:20:00] think that's correct. I only concentrated on that one issue. This is what the paintings meant to me, the cry, and so I ignored the actual anecdotes of the walk —

THOMAS HESS

No, I meant the paradox —

BARNETT NEWMAN

— and the...

THOMAS HESS

— between “Why has thou forsaken me?” and “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I think the paintings mostly concentrate on the cry.

THOMAS HESS

Mm-hmm. As a very...

BARNETT NEWMAN

As I'm explaining my concern with the cry in relation to the paradox, but I would have trouble reading that in the work.

THOMAS HESS

Yeah. Well, the paintings themselves have tremendous variety within a very limited reference. There seems to be a willful exclusion — [00:21:00] I mean, in your whole art, there's willful exclusion of figurative elements, chiaroscuro, etc., all those obvious things [of the path?]. And in these pictures there's an exclusion of the colors for which you are perhaps best known; and of the scale, which you are second-best known; and then going from picture to picture, there's a very careful — a variation or an attempt to push through one idea to its permutations.

BARNETT NEWMAN

I was deliberately trying not to make variations on a theme. My test to myself was could I really do [00:22:00] 14 different paintings that would stand each by itself and at the same time, in some way, move towards this particular subject? Now, the question of color is — it's interesting now, in terms of hindsight, to look at this. And I was compelled to do it in black and white, on raw canvas. I've been asked, for example, whether the yellowish light that comes out was done because I put some rabbit's glue on. I'd like to explain that all the glue on all the paintings are the same. They're plastic, white plastic, which dries absolutely colorless, and that the difference

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in light has to do with the things that I create. But if you examine this problem of color — it's interesting to me, for example, that in relation to a [00:23:00] large tragic theme of this kind, Picasso, when he does the *Guernica*, he cannot do it in color; he does it in black and white and gray. I couldn't make a green Passion or a red one. I mean, you wouldn't want to have me make a purple Jesus or something like that; it'd have to be black and white. So that the compulsion was absolutely that I was compelled to work this way. Now, the issue of color is that in terms of a practical test to myself, could I use the raw canvas the way I use, say, a colored canvas and make that canvas come into some kind of color so that it would have some sense of [light?]?

THOMAS HESS

Does it work with the (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

I can't be as eloquent as Mr. Calas was last week on the question of light that I created, but I did [00:24:00] feel that this was my color problem, whether I —

THOMAS HESS

Sure.

BARNETT NEWMAN

— could get the thing white, and my white stripes are the same canvas as the rest of the canvas. Could I get that large area to have what I suppose I would call the living quality of color without use of color?

THOMAS HESS

There's an illusion within the two black areas a white area caught between them, where this white area looks whiter than the rest of the...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes.

THOMAS HESS

That's a purely [illuse?] —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yeah.

THOMAS HESS

Because of the —

BARNETT NEWMAN

There's no —

THOMAS HESS

— (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) black.

BARNETT NEWMAN

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— there's no white paint except where I used the white paint. The black is black, and the white paintings are white.

THOMAS HESS

And there're grays.

BARNETT NEWMAN

There's one painting that is sort of a slate, and some painting I've used a little bit of —

THOMAS HESS

And some of [the?] lines are gray.

BARNETT NEWMAN

— I use a little bit of gray. I used the black as gray. I didn't use gray color. I used only one color on each station. [00:25:00]

THOMAS HESS

But in some paintings, because you used oil paint, the turp has bled through and there's a yellow —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, that...

THOMAS HESS

— bleeding effect.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yeah, that acts as sort of a shadow, I suppose. In some I was able to not have that because it would have been wrong. There I didn't mind it.

THOMAS HESS

Oh, in this very limited range, you have a tremendous variety. Is that a metaphor of what your art is concerned with? In other words, to sort of tie both your hands behind your back, like Houdini, and then come out, and in the emergence, is that the content of the painting?

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I may be a frustrated athlete, but I never tried it that way. (laughs) [00:26:00]

THOMAS HESS

Well, there —

BARNETT NEWMAN

I have no —

THOMAS HESS

— you don't feel as...

BARNETT NEWMAN

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— I have no desire to make a trick painting in that sense.

THOMAS HESS

Would you think (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

If I can, let's see, make an area of canvas come to life with the one line — we're not talking technically, of course — I'm satisfied with it. If I feel it doesn't work, I have to — of course, also the thing that becomes a challenge to me — and in my large paintings I did try to see if I could move in some symphonic way, rather than have just the one note, and I have as many paintings without stripes at all as I have with stripes, so to speak, if that's what you want to call it.

THOMAS HESS

“Zips.”

BARNETT NEWMAN

“Zips.” I prefer “zips.”

THOMAS HESS

Well, you're very ambitious. In fact, the artists of your [00:27:00] generation I think are distinguished from some of the — many — most of the younger artists in the scope of the ambition. In other words, the painting should come to life in a grandiose way. The word “sublime” has often been used, at your cue, about your work. You once said you thought that the dialogue of the art you were concerned with was carried on with Michelangelo, not with some minor Cubist theory.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I had a telephone call recently from a magazine in relation to the Turner show, and they were trying to make a link, in the sense that (laughter) Turner —

THOMAS HESS

[They're?] both English.

BARNETT NEWMAN

(laughs) Turner's the father of Impressionism, and people have said that Impressionism is the father of me, and so on. [00:28:00] [Would?] I consider or not? I said, “The only link that I can realize with Turner is that when Turner strapped himself to the mast in an attempt to paint the storm, he was trying to do the impossible. And to the extent that I feel that that's what a man's ambition should be (applause) that I'm [linked there?] in trying to paint the impossible.”

THOMAS HESS

Yeah.

BARNETT NEWMAN

And I think that the problem of ambition moves in all kinds of areas, but it seems to me that in relation to the ambition [in?] the studio is that he'd do the greatest painting that has ever been

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made. Not the greatest painting that he could make — the greatest painting that ever has been made. And to that extent the dialogue moves in relation to, let's say, Michelangelo or Cezanne or whoever it is, that somehow if they saw the work they would understand it, and they would understand that [00:29:00] you're making some kind of comment in relation to their work, and they would argue with you about it. This is purely a — well...

THOMAS HESS

Let's not say "megalomania."

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I don't think it's megalomania. I think that's the world we live in.

THOMAS HESS

But this idea of hitting the jackpot does seem not so evident in the works of a number of younger artists who have been connected, rightly or wrongly, with your pictures.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Oh, I don't know. I don't think we know enough about the younger artists. I've been trying to urge them to come forward and to speak for themselves so that the dialogue could include them. That is, in those years of '50, very little was written about us, and so we were forced, maybe — but I liked it — that we were able to talk about what we are talking about, [00:30:00] so that it wasn't only confined to the studio. To some extent, I suppose, you and I are doing it now. And if artists talk to each other, it makes it possible for writers and everybody else to join the dialogue.

THOMAS HESS

Well, certainly if (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

But if artists don't speak, and they depend on their lawyers to speak for them, it makes it impossible for anybody else to move into the conversation. And I'm not so sure that there isn't a kind of talk that goes on among the young people that we don't know about yet. I would say this, though: that the advocates have used the situation to defend an objective type of criticism. [00:31:00] And I'm not against objective criticism, but I think that one must make room for what I would call, say, projective criticism, where a critic projects something in relation to the content or lack of content. I noticed, for example, that many of the critics who are writing have no qualms in relation, say, to an old master or to a Byzantine painting to hear, say, the renowned art historians talk about the thing objectively, and then when those art historians bring in the philosophy of the era, the church history, whatever goes on, that there's no objection. But there seems to be some strong objection [00:32:00] now, in talking about present work, for anything to be done except an objective description of a painting. And I think I know why that is: because if you insist on having only an objective attitude towards work, you develop a doctrinaire situation and have the ammunition to conduct aesthetic war! But if you talk about the thing in terms of the artist and how he felt, there's no fight.

THOMAS HESS

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Also, you have an extreme historicity, a looking at art history as if it were taking place within an ivory tower as big as New York State, maybe, and lines converging down to a certain type of art that's being promoted at the moment by the promoter. And of course all he can promote with is the formalist element, because the only thing in his continuity will be formalist. You can't [00:33:00] pass on inspiration or obsession.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I think I'm just saying the same thing, that you have [material?] — for example, if we take Roger Fry, who had a big influence on my life to the extent that I had to reject him, and I rejected him when I found out I couldn't see the Barnes Foundation collection because in order to see it I had to take the courses, which were organized in relation to the Roger Fry system and the Clive Bell system of significant form. In order to see a painting, I had to see it through Barnes's eyes. Well, I thought that this was objective criticism moved to such an extreme that it was the end of freedom. Now, I have no objection to — we do it ourselves in describing a painting that is blue, it's 18 feet, it's 10 feet high —

THOMAS HESS

Doesn't have [00:34:00] rabbit's glue.

BARNETT NEWMAN

— so on and so forth — and doesn't have rabbit's glue (laughs) and so on. But it seems to me that to insist on this only can only lead to a doctrinaire position, and of course that is looked for by those who want to conduct aesthetic mores, say that, "Well, if it's got a drip, it's wrong; if it's clean, it's right," and so on. This to me is the opposite of what I feel is a free situation. And if I've created anything, I hope that I've made it possible on the basis of a free situation for anybody to paint, you might say, anything.

THOMAS HESS

But by calling your pictures *Stations of the Cross* — publicly =- because you might have done *The Stations of the Cross* privately and not titled them — you are, in a sense, taking part in this war, and you're saying there's an awful lot in these pictures which is not ascertainable [00:35:00] by careful measuring, deep looking, and conscientious [counting?].

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I'm saying that aesthetic war can only arise if you insist on a doctrinaire position in relation to the formal elements in the painting.

THOMAS HESS

But this is happening —

BARNETT NEWMAN

But when I call —

THOMAS HESS

— [right?]?

BARNETT NEWMAN

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— them *The Stations of the Cross*, I'm saying that these paintings mean something, beyond their formal extremes.

THOMAS HESS

So you're taking part in this war.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, how?

THOMAS HESS

By saying...

BARNETT NEWMAN

I'm not saying you can't use curved lines, that you have to —

THOMAS HESS

No, what I mean is...

BARNETT NEWMAN

— use black against yellow and so on, that you got to bounce color. I'm not saying any of those things.

THOMAS HESS

No, but there is, you say, a doctrinaire position which is assumed for warfare. That warfare is not generally thrown out in all directions; it's also directed against other positions. You mentioned a few yourself: [00:36:00] [using?] certain kinds of handwriting, certain kinds of brushing. Now, when you put your title on, you're saying that your paintings are not amenable to this kind of criticism, not exhausted by it —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well...

THOMAS HESS

— can't even be relevantly approached by it, I would think.

BARNETT NEWMAN

What I'm saying is that my painting is physical, and what I'm saying also is that my painting is metaphysical.

THOMAS HESS

Yeah.

BARNETT NEWMAN

What I'm also saying is that my life is physical and that my life is also metaphysical. Because if I were to ask somebody, "What is this girl you went out with; what is she like?" and he could go into a fantastic description, I still would have no idea of who she was if he told me she was blonde and she was six feet tall and all that. So that [00:37:00] the attempt to describe something which is alive is impossible. For the reason that I am willing to speak here is because I know

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that it's impossible to talk about my work. And since it's impossible for not only me or anybody else to talk about my work, I figure I might as well talk about it. (laughter) (applause)

THOMAS HESS

Well, at any point do you think that there's a congruence of what language is about and what the pictures are about? I think everybody expects language about art, and it's a very naïve expectation — I don't mean everybody, but many people expect a kind of revelation or an explanation, and that's it. But the point is that language can only make art more mysterious and more difficult to understand. But how about the possibility [00:38:00] of an accurate as against an inaccurate conversation? Would there be inaccuracies — or could anything be open in — I mean, I did not hear Nico Calas's talk, but I gather from you it was very good, and he brought up a number of things in your art which you had not known about.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, there were speculations which were sort of new to me. And they were poetic and eloquent expressions of his feelings about them. The question of knowing or not knowing is not relevant here because once he expressed them it was possible to feel that there was some understanding that I could agree with — or, even, disagree with, but it was something we could talk about.

THOMAS HESS

Isn't there an awful lot in a work of art which the artist keeps himself from knowing about, prevents himself [00:39:00] from understanding? You have to, otherwise (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

The only work of art that you can absolutely know is that work of art which a man sets out to make as a perfect work of art. And to make a perfect work of art it becomes, to that extent, a perfect aesthetic object that one can contemplate. But to the extent that the one is saying — doing a work that is the result of, you might say, strong impulse and, you might say, control meeting at the same time in some mysterious way, that work cannot be that perfect that you can nail it down. Because if it is, then you don't have to do any more. You're finished!

THOMAS HESS

Well, when —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Might as well quit.

THOMAS HESS

— when an artist works, that's one person. [00:40:00] Then when the artist stops — whether between strokes, between words, no matter how briefly — and looks at the work, he has to be a very different person. He can't be the same person; he couldn't work.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Mm-hmm.

THOMAS HESS

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Now, the artist at work, it would seem to me, would have to develop a whole series of ways to keep his work in progress hidden from himself. Otherwise it would continually solve itself and would just stop. As you say, it would be perfect. Well, in your paintings, there is, although a tremendous variety within the format, there is a tremendous similarity of format. In other words, you go to the studio [00:41:00] not knowing what you're going to do, perhaps. But after the picture has left the studio, it certainly looks like the other pictures. Does this bother you, or do you feel this is a deepening process?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Actually, I don't think that the paintings look all that much alike. To me they look altogether different, otherwise I wouldn't let them out of the studio. As I've said often, I'm at a disadvantage, actually, in relation to, say, a young painter going into the studio tomorrow, because I've got my own work on top of me, and shall I do another Newman, so-called, that people claim is a Newman, (laughter) and knock it out, and then I'll call it a day? Well, (laughter) this is a problem. And I move into the painting, and then my feeling is that there's something going on that's different that I didn't [00:42:00] know, or that I thought maybe I achieved in another painting but didn't, and carrying it through in this particular painting. Now, when I stop work, I look at the painting, and in that sense, having removed myself from the doing, the question is does it say something to me? And either it does, and I feel it isn't all said, and I have to fight the painting again, so to speak, or go to work, or else if I feel it has said something which I'd hoped for in a vague way but didn't really expect, or if it moves into a new area that is a surprise to me, I live with that painting until I understand it. And then go on. I don't know if this is a clear statement —

THOMAS HESS

Yeah, it's...

BARNETT NEWMAN

— of how I work. It's so difficult. [00:43:00] It's very difficult to express the actual process of working. If I were that clear, I could go, and I would just do it, but...

THOMAS HESS

That sounds to me like a highly intellectual, pragmatic process of —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Are you separa—

THOMAS HESS

— very nice, very exact judgment and extremely refined ideas.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, are you separating the intellectual from the emotional?

THOMAS HESS

I don't see how you could. Because you (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

Well, if by intellectual you mean that it's also emotional, I think that this is the process, that as you move into, let's say, this blank area, and [00:44:00] the [terror of?] that blank area is the whole issue. I mean, what is the most difficult thing about painting? The most difficult thing is sitting in that room by yourself. That's it. That's really terrible. You have to sit there by yourself. It's not like sitting at a place with a desk, and other people are talking to you, and the phone's ringing. You're there all alone with that empty space.

THOMAS HESS

Don't you have a phone?

BARNETT NEWMAN

I recently installed one, but I don't (laughs) talk to it.

THOMAS HESS

Desks don't talk back to you. No, but I was out in San Francisco recently, and I heard a younger artist who's been connected with you say that he planned his work, I suppose, on a small piece of graph paper, something like that, and then enlarged it to the finished work. And that seemed to be the most romantic idea, [00:45:00] sort of, like, magnificently...

BARNETT NEWMAN

I have no comment about that except to say —

THOMAS HESS

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

— that I never worked in sketches. I work directly. I move immediately to the canvas. And I've never worked from a sketch or built anything up or made a — I've never worked that way.

THOMAS HESS

Are you a connoisseur of your own work — I'm changing the subject now. Do you [say?], "This is a good Newman; that's not such a good one," or do you think everything's pretty much of a piece and can't be chopped apart?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I don't usually think that way.

THOMAS HESS

Which way?

BARNETT NEWMAN

The idea of saying, "Well, I've done six; this is a good one; I'll destroy the rest." This is kind of, to me, a haphazard, loose way of working, in which the editor [00:46:00] comes in; the artist becomes an editor, and says —

THOMAS HESS

[But?] the artist (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

BARNETT NEWMAN

— “This is a good work,” and the only criteria he can have — “This is a good work because I can sell it, or this is the work that I want to represent me in a collection” — this is a kind of attitude which I frankly don’t respect. That is, to the extent that I do something which I feel is meaningful to me, it’s possible to say that some things are more meaningful because it will lead to new work, as against that which possibly may lead to new work a year from now. But to sit down and mark myself according to, you know, A/B+, is kind of foreign to my nature.

THOMAS HESS

I was thinking the artist as a collector of his own work.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I thought that the way things are going, that the idea of the artist was that [00:47:00] he should get other collectors for his own work!

THOMAS HESS

Mm-hmm. Well, a lot of artists that I know, when the work is finished — that is, when it’s out of the studio — they don’t really care about it at all. It’s gone. I think they would care if someone burned it. But they’re really not too concerned where it is, what it’s doing, how it’s eating, [where?] it’s sleeping. Other artists, on the other hand — I suppose Still would be an extreme example —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I don’t know...

THOMAS HESS

— care terrible. (laughter)

BARNETT NEWMAN

I wouldn’t agree about Still, but I do care. I think he cares in a very special way, but let’s not get involved in that.

THOMAS HESS

Well, you went to a museum...

BARNETT NEWMAN

I care in the sense that I feel it’s a part of me, and naturally, if it’s bought and put in the closet, I’m not as happy about it if it’s bought and hung in the man’s room and [00:48:00] he lives with it.

THOMAS HESS

Isn’t it a true story that you went to a museum in Basel which was very proud of having a big Barnett Newman, and the director took you to this great gallery where it was shown, and you said, “That’s a very nice picture; it’s not by me”?

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, what happened there was that I said it was my painting but it looks unfamiliar. And...

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

THOMAS HESS

I thought you'd sold it on the spot.

BARNETT NEWMAN

What's that?

THOMAS HESS

I thought you just sold it — well, you know.

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I never just sold it. I was curious to know what happened. Because it looked different. I said, "It doesn't look like my painting," is what I said, actually. And they explained to me that the painting had been attacked, physically, by some woman — (laughter) and that she was seized and deported, and then that they cleaned the painting and they gave it a coat of dammar varnish, so it was shiny now. [00:49:00] (laughter) So I said, "It's still my painting, except I don't recognize it."

THOMAS HESS

So it had a guilty look in its eyes. And you went to...

BARNETT NEWMAN

I didn't disown it. It is my painting. And there's no question that it's my touch, except that it's dressed up a little differently. It's shiny now. (laughter)

THOMAS HESS

You went to the Tate, where they had the [Gulbenkian?] show. You withdrew your pictures from the show; you didn't like the way they were hung.

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I asked for them to withdraw [them?] because they hung one painting flush to the floor, and it was practically destroyed. As a matter of fact, it is absolutely destroyed. They put it on the floor in such a way that it got kick heels, and people — they did not protect it properly. And when I protested, they said, "Well, we have restorers." And my answer was, "I don't accept restored paintings. I think if you can't protect them any better, you might as well [00:50:00] take it out." I wasn't being temperamental.

THOMAS HESS

(overlapping dialogue; inaudible) —

BARNETT NEWMAN

I thought it was in absolute physical danger, and now it's a — dead painting. It's no use.

THOMAS HESS

— you don't feel that you're excessively concerned about your work after it's...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

No, I was raising a very simple issue there, that I didn't understand how they could have put a painting in a vulnerable spot. It's on the floor in a passageway, and it was actually physically destroyed. So I didn't think that I should be seen publicly with this kind of a work.

THOMAS HESS

But you —

BARNETT NEWMAN

So I asked for it to be removed because they couldn't protect it.

THOMAS HESS

— but you don't feel you're deeply concerned about your pictures after they've left the studio?

BARNETT NEWMAN

I am concerned, but I don't think that I'm temperamental about it, and I don't use the control or anything like that [00:51:00] to create a situation in relation to my paintings. I don't feel very good if my paintings — I think all of us are now involved partly in the preservation of our work. But that's due to the truck drivers and whoever else handles work; they think it's made out of steel.

THOMAS HESS

Well, I get the feeling with a different kind of artist — from you, a different temperament — is rather disgusted by art. There's a sense of disgust and of satiation with the whole idea of art and art itself is awful, and they don't want to get involved with their work after it's finished. They're through with it [after they?] (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

(inaudible) the art world.

THOMAS HESS

What?

BARNETT NEWMAN

You're raising the issue of the art world.

THOMAS HESS

I'm raising the issue of two types of relationship towards the man's own work. No. I'm not raising the question of the art world. I'm raising the question of the idea of two different [00:52:00] temperaments of artist, one who is very involved with art and his own art and the idea of art, and the other one who is more disgusted — or works under a kind of revulsion with the art...

BARNETT NEWMAN

With the situation.

THOMAS HESS

Yeah.

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, what are you asking me? Whether I agree with one or the other? I don't quite understand the point.

THOMAS HESS

Well, it comes back to the idea of the artist painting, the artist looking; the artist at work, and then the artist as the intellectual ruiner of his work. And you feel very strongly about that position. No?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I don't think I'm bad, if that's what you mean.

THOMAS HESS

No, I don't think it's bad. [00:53:00]

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I feel that man does his work, and when he goes out, he loses, to that extent, a good deal of the control. The laws of this country permit a man to buy your work in order to destroy it! He has total property rights, and he can take your work and decide that he [will?] hire somebody that if, it's a yellow painting, to paint it black! And there's nothing you can do about it. He can take your work and hang it upside down. Well, I haven't very much enjoyed having my painting hung upside down, so I've protested. Or a man can take your work and (sighs) do anything he feels like with it. Well, I feel that this is not a very, very good situation for art, or for the artist, or for the people who buy the work. And since [00:54:00] the problem of culture does involve responsibility, since the law does not protect you, then it seems to me that the artist in that sense becomes involved in that much in attempt to protect it. I mean, men can do anything to your work, once they've paid it. I think that if they don't, they do it out of a sense of kindness. Well, I don't think that the artist should be in that position, where a man in relation to your work is constantly involved in that type of, you might say, blackmail and bounty. Now, this happens to be a — I don't know how to describe it — a property society where, if you pays it, you keeps it. Well, in other countries, a man pays for the work, and the artist still has the feeling that it [00:55:00] is his work. And we all know the story of Whistler, who walked into a man's house and bought it, and felt that he had the rights to that painting, even though it was paid for! Well, this is purely an Anglo-Saxon situation. I think it's wrong for an artist to have his work, once it's bought, the victim of the buyer — as if it were, you know, an automobile.

THOMAS HESS

Well, it's an uncivilized state of affairs —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes, I —

THOMAS HESS

— but our whole legal system seems based on the idea that the one sacred thing is private property, and nothing seems to be —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yeah, so naturally, if you —

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

THOMAS HESS

— (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) being able to hinge (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

— I'm not that big a merchant in this regard, but if my painting is bought, I'd like to feel that it's somebody who is sympathetic towards the work sufficiently, not [00:56:00] to, let's say, adore it, but at least not to destroy it!

THOMAS HESS

Mm-hmm. About the series here, the 14 *Stations of the Cross*, is that to be kept together as a series? Do you want that to...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes, I can't see myself breaking that up.

THOMAS HESS

Mm-hmm. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)...

BARNETT NEWMAN

That's why I said in the piece I wrote for you in the *Art News* that I think the thing could exist without a church. That is, I am not doing this hoping that a church will buy it. I've done some paintings that I've called *Achilles* and *Ulysses*, and suppose I did a series, say, based on *The Iliad*. I mean, I don't consider them illustration. Of course, that I don't think I would do because there it moves in relation to illustrating a poem. That's why, for [00:57:00] example, in relation to *The Stations of the Cross*, I could have called them *The Twenty-Second Psalm*, but that would not have made the point that I think I want to make as well. Because although in the twenty-second psalm the psalmist does say, "God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and — he then moves into a lot of other areas. And even though in the psalm there are some of the same elements — that is, the pierced hands and the clothes sold and the throwing of the dice for the clothes and all that — I felt that I would be making a painting illustrating, you might say, a poetic expression, whereas even though I'm not commemorating the event, I felt that to the extent that Jesus was crucified and did physically [00:58:00] say it in relation to that drama, that it was more appropriate for me to be concerned with the *sabachthani* instead of the *azavthani*. Also, since there is a tradition of stations, as a painter I felt that I could make that point more viable within that framework. Otherwise I could have made one painting and called it *The Twenty-Second Psalm*.

THOMAS HESS

It's like doing a sonnet, in that sense. You have a number of lines and either you —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes.

THOMAS HESS

— fit or you don't fit into that form.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
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To the extent that the sonnet is an arbitrary poem, and to the extent that the stations form an arbitrary, you might say, painting, I felt that it was appropriate to do it. In relation to the *sabachthani* rather than the *azavthani*. [00:59:00]

THOMAS HESS

What are you going to do now? What's your next — when you go back to the studio?

BARNETT NEWMAN

I have no idea. I have no idea.

THOMAS HESS

You were doing sculpture.

BARNETT NEWMAN

I'm working on a piece of sculpture now that — actually, I've done the sculpture. I'm doing an edition of two, so I'm busy with that second piece, the second piece...

THOMAS HESS

[Are they?] the same...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes, I do not believe in the unique piece, so I'm doing an edition of two so that two will exist.

THOMAS HESS

(laughs) (inaudible) half-unique.

BARNETT NEWMAN

(laughs) I'll reduce the uniqueness.

THOMAS HESS

And...

BARNETT NEWMAN

[I'm at?] the single piece —

THOMAS HESS

Yeah.

BARNETT NEWMAN

— I think it's true of painting, but I don't think it's necessarily true of sculpture. And for my own private satisfaction, I prove it to myself by [01:00:00] showing to myself that I can make two pieces. And I think every piece of sculpture can be duplicated. So why insist on it?

THOMAS HESS

Well, David —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Whereas you cannot duplicate a — I know, I used to argue that with David.

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

THOMAS HESS

— David Smith felt that (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes, we used to argue that all the time.

THOMAS HESS

— sculpture was important — that was the ethos of sculpture.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes, but we once got involved in that whole issue, and then I once asked him what he did with his plasters, and he said he saved them. And I said, “For whom?” He said for his daughters. And I said, “What’s the idea?” And he said, “You’re always [getting into trouble?], taking a year to figure it out.” (laughter)

THOMAS HESS

But in your painting you’re not working on now, or you...

BARNETT NEWMAN

No, I’ve been busy with the deadlines, you know.

THOMAS HESS

In your show.

BARNETT NEWMAN

The deadlines of the show, yeah. So I hope to get back to work, as far as that goes.

THOMAS HESS

But when you start a new picture next year, next week, you have no idea what it will be or how it will [01:01:00] appear, what size or shape or...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I have a stretch canvas, in a variety of sizes. I have a canvas stretched that’s all kinds of sizes — you know, 8 feet, 11 foot — I mean, I have a variety of sizes. Which I’ll pick up I have no idea, at the moment. But I think that what’ll happen is I’ll most likely go into a very big size to get out of the size that I’ve been working on. You’ve got to remember that whatever I’ve been doing, that these things were done while I was doing other things. I didn’t just set out to do 14 *Stations*; I did them when I was impelled to do them. And I began them in ’58; I did two in ’60, some in ’62. And I did the final sort of wind-up in ’64/’65, and this year. [01:02:00] So that I didn’t do them automatically and then not do anything else. I did them while I was doing other things. I felt I had to move into them when I could, when I was forced to do it.

THOMAS HESS

There is a kind of what in the nineteenth century you might call inspiration —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes. Yes.

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THOMAS HESS

— [whereas basically?] the genius comes down and —

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes. The muse.

THOMAS HESS

— yells in your ear.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes. I think this.

THOMAS HESS

In other words, the art, as you practice it, is a rather traditional — you're an artist in this line of artists, and your art is art; it's not against art or — and the work in the [01:03:00] studio appeals to the same mystery...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I'm as much against Art with a capital A as anybody else. I think, though, that it's easy to be against art. I think the issue of being against art has to be very carefully thought, because there are a hundred million people who are against art. So one has to have a sense of difference between one's own attitude against art and the attitude against art. I'm also very unwilling to assume the role of Artist with a capital A. I think a man's painting is a matter of his, as I once said, his birthright. And if a man thinks of himself as an Artist with a capital A, he thinks [01:04:00] of himself the way a lawyer thinks of himself as a lawyer. And it seems to me that the problem of painting has to relate to me as a person, as a man, rather than as an artist. Because if I'm an artist, and I know I'm an artist, I'm what kind of an artist? It begins to intrude, and you begin to knock out work that relates to your self-image, rather than to your sense of self. And I think your question brings up that general question of identity.

THOMAS HESS

I was going to say, you have an identity problem.

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, I think we all do. I mean, this is the problem of the studio. Certainly my identity problem is not that I'm an Artist with a capital A.

THOMAS HESS

But how is...

BARNETT NEWMAN

Because if I were, I wouldn't be here talking with you. I would —

THOMAS HESS

If an artist...

BARNETT NEWMAN

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— I would stand in the background with magic hands [01:05:00] and say, “You know, I’ve got such terrific hands; I just do it.” (laughter)

THOMAS HESS

But isn’t...

BARNETT NEWMAN

“I’m the great artist.”

THOMAS HESS

Aren’t you having the best of both possible worlds? I mean, aren’t you saying, “Well, I’m not an Artist with a capital A — there’s a big A outside my door. When the muse comes down she knows where to come; she’s not going to go next door.”

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well...

THOMAS HESS

There’s the...

BARNETT NEWMAN

You know, I once wrote a thing in which I said that the first man was an artist. I feel that, in that sense, perhaps every man is an artist, but that if the muse comes to me, it’s that I (sighs) — that I caught her. (laughter)

THOMAS HESS

Chased. Well, I hope you always will. I think we’ve come to about an hour and some here. Do you have any more to [01:06:00] [provide?]?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Well, no, I’m...

THOMAS HESS

You’re responding to me?

BARNETT NEWMAN

Yes. (laughter)

THOMAS HESS

Well, I think it’s a good place to (inaudible), the muse outside the door.

BARNETT NEWMAN

(off-mic) Do you feel that you want to get involved in questions, or [you think?] it’s wrong?

THOMAS HESS

(off-mic) No, I don’t think so.

BARNETT NEWMAN

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Barnett Newman and Thomas Hess in Conversation, 1966

Well, I have nothing else to say, so...

THOMAS HESS

OK. (applause)

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