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YOSHIDA, Yuri. Barnett Newman's Bird's-Eye View of His Contemporaries: An Analysis of Several November 1959 Drafts

In this essay I examine how Barnett Newman (1905–1970), a representative artist of Abstract Expressionism, viewed himself and the ongoing historical positions of his fellow artists from a bird's-eye position in the late 1950s when he began to gain recognition in the art world. To this end I analyze five letters that were never sent.

The following drafts from November 1959 are on deposit at the archives of the Barnett Newman Foundation: One addressed to the art critic Dore Ashton, three to an editor of *Life*, and one to Alfred H. Barr Jr. of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Newman seems to have written these as a critique of Ashton's review on Clyfford Still's exhibition, articles on Abstract Expressionism published in *Life*, and exhibitions organized by the museum, respectively.

Newman often sent letters to art critics and historians, and museum curators and directors to correct erroneous historical statements, as he was concerned that they were constructing false art-historical narratives. This tendency is more evident in his letters and interviews, especially in the late 1960s, when Abstract Expressionism was being historicized. The contents of these drafts are therefore not exceptional in their own right, but they contain two distinctive features. First, Newman refers to himself not in the first person singular but as "Newman," as if speaking from an objective viewpoint that insists on the originality of his works as against that of fellow Abstract Expressionist artists, such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. Second, the folder containing these drafts includes a note by Newman's widow, Annalee, that reads, "Letters Newman wrote to himself—(of course never sent)." This suggests that Newman never intended to send these letters and raises the question of why he made typescripts and preserved them.

In my analysis I note that when Newman began to gain recognition and receive praise from young artists, he viewed himself for the first time as being part of art history by re-contextualizing his practice retrospectively and positioning himself in his time. Furthermore, I argue that his adopting an objective perspective is evidence of his awareness of having gained a bird's-eye view of contemporary art as part of art history. These drafts, therefore, demonstrate a shift in his historical awareness, allowing him to position himself as an arthistorical subject.

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