

The Sublime was Yesterday. Latest news about Barnett Newman

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REFERENCES

Newman, Barnett. *Ecrits*, Paris : Macula, 2011, (Vues)Introd. de Richard Shiff. Trad. de Jean-Louis Houdebine

- 1 Twenty years after the American publication of Barnett Newman's writings, they are now appearing in a French translation by Jean-Louis Houdebine. Borrowing the organization and part of the contents of the American edition, the French version, for which we are indebted to Jean Clay, adds a concluding section made up of texts which have mostly been already published and, above all, an impressive critical apparatus which, as J. Clay's foreword mentions, acts largely as commentary—a euphemism, given that the monumental footnotes (some of essay size) form nothing less than a book within the book. Let us make reference, in no special order, to the brief but decisive evocation of the relations between Newman and Clement Greenberg (p. 255, fn. 22), specifications about the contribution from Newman and Meyer Schapiro to the Monet-Seurat debate in a historiography dominated by Roger Fry's theses (p. 100, fn. 45), about Newman and Minimalism (pp. 432-436, fn. 99), about Newman and the social issue (pp. 412-414, fn. 34), about the prescriptive pictures (pp. 415-416, fn. 47), and so on.
- 2 With regard to this mass of hitherto unpublished work, the rest is of less interest, or already well known. There is not much to say about the introduction, which lies somewhere between paraphrase and hagiography. Yve-Alain Bois's essay, published in *Painting as Model* (MIT Press, 1990), reminds us above all that this trans-Atlantic reference book has still not been translated into French. Winding up the compilation, Pierre Schneider's thoughts—penned in 1969—stand out for their topicality.

- 3 The thematic and typological organization of the writings, properly so-called (“I. THE ARTIST AS CITIZEN”, “II. THE ARTIST AS CRITIC”, “III. THE ARTIST AS THINKER”, “DECLARATIONS”, “V. CORRESPONDENCE”, “VI. INTERVIEWS”) is happily avoidable thanks to the circulation permitted by the notes between the different sections and texts accompanying them. These potentially endless references sometimes take readers quite a long way from the initial idea. But this explosion caused by references, encouraging a discontinuous reading, is at once topical and pleasant.
- 4 The foreword explains the book’s intent to “attune it to our debates, our contemporary knowledge”. From this viewpoint, the book is an overall success, apart from two pitfalls. The trenchant formalism of the captions (especially in the central section of colour illustrations), the technical considerations outpoured in the final section (Carol Mancusi-Ungaro and Suzanne Penn), and Yve-Alain Bois’s (1988) essay referring to the “zip”, the relations between figure and ground, field, symmetry, scale, perception, and the like, are *per se* less contemporary than exemplary of issues raised by painters such as Newman, critics like Greenberg and art historians like Meyer Schapiro, and conveyed by way of the criticism and historiography of the 1970s and 1980s. The same goes for the sublime, needless to say effectively at the core of the painter’s œuvre (terror, Hiroshima, the tragic), but which was also, in France, the great affair of the 1980s (and beyond)—something which comes across in certain commentaries. As Richard Shiff puts it in the introduction, with regard to a postmodern public, Newman can pass for the “vestige of a romantic metaphysics”. This probably explains why so many commentators are philosophers (Jean-François Lyotard, etc) and why they straitjacket Newman in a sublime and an “inhuman” befitting a deathly boredom, like Tom Hess who, in his time, had straitjacketed him in the Cabbala.
- 5 So what the book reinstates here, especially in the declarations and the correspondence, is a Newman who goes considerably beyond the formal issue and the sublime, through the diversity of his culture, the quality of his analysis, his intelligence, his insincerity, his wit, which is as dark as it is destructive when he wants to offer Georges Mathieu some solid silver roller skates, for example, “so that he can redo for us his dance number ‘Bouvines, j’y étais’, but this time, in the style of ‘Blitzkrieg en superproduction’”. The book’s interest lies precisely here. When it juxtaposes serious and tragic writings with more contingent and less starchy texts, it gives Newman back a more complex and contradictory personality than might be supposed by the technicity of the formalists, the compunction of the hagiographers, and the tragic nature of the philosophers.
- 6 On reading his writings, we realize to what extent Newman, generally described as the painter of silent and tragic confrontation *vis-à-vis* the painted work, is a *literary* painter. It is a fact: he wrote a lot, but above all because his œuvre is underpinned by a poetics which is, in reality, a philosophy and a theory of writing. The titles of his pictures thus illustrate this, as, not without awkwardness, does the header presenting the famous article “The Sublime is For Now” (1948): “Once the most suitable and developed verbal form has been found to express his thought, the next challenge, quite logically, had to consist in equalling it and transcending it in his painting.” (p. 243). Another less well blazoned avenue, and one that is less expected, too, is Newman’s on-going interest in historiography. He makes a noteworthy analysis of it with his sights set on the history and theory of modernity coming from Roger Fry. We read about this interest in an essay on Jules Laforgue (which he translated), in another on “the question of the

subject”, and on “Anglo-Saxon art criticism”, in his review of a book by Tom Hess (pp. 172-177), in a letter to William A.M. Burden, president of the MoMA about the acquisition of a Monet, and again in this remarkable preface on Pierre Kropotkine, written in 1968 (pp. 86-94), which ends with singularly current—or postmodern—words: “Because the dogmatics who are everywhere among art historians and critics do not know that they are operating on a mirage and that the ‘history of art does not exist.’” Then comes, echo-like, an interview with Neil Levine (pp. 359-366) which starts from the commentary of an exhibition and quite quickly arrives at a masterly lesson on the work of the art historian, here again, arrestingly topical. In it—in 1965—he refers to “the appearance of a new type of art historian” who “is assuming a new role: transforming his discipline, abandoning the quest for truth for a new profession, the management of the enormous cultural machinery that has been put in place.”

- 7 Lastly, the question of the “subject”. Of paramount importance for Newman, it remains extremely relevant today: “what to paint?” Otherwise put: “what to do?” This question situates art fairly clearly in the political arena, as is shown by Newman, the “artist as citizen”. And the answer today is none the surer.