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Figures **of the Unpresentable.** **The Dance-like Reception** **of Barnett Newman's Art**

I.

My article will focus on selected aspects of the postmodern model of reception of the color field painting, which I call figures of the unpresentable. Subsequently, I will demonstrate them in the changing history of the painting of Barnett Newman (1905-1970), one of the leaders of the trend in modern art of North America I am interested in. In my text, this reception will be shown in a new, dance-related context. The postmodern model results from a theoretical turn in the framing of Abstract Expressionism and the relevant historical and artistic discourses.¹ A major point of reference for the above turn, making it possible to transgress the modernist foundations of color field painting and to see them in terms of an unfinished historical, artistic and intellectual project, was the postmodern philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1988). In his texts dedicated to this art, the author invoked examples of US avant-garde painting, re-framing the fundamental descriptive category of Newman's art – the sublime.² In this respect, his accomplishments contributed to what

» 1 See E. Jarosz, *Figury nieprzedstawialnego. Ponowoczesny model recepcji barwnego pola*, a doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Prof. Anna Markowska in the Art History Institute of A. Mickiewicz University in Poznań, available at the Institute's Library.

» 2 Newman referred to this category e.g. in his essay *The Sublime is Now* (1948). He treated the sublime as an opposition to the expressive potential of beauty. The artist started his text with a statement on the moral struggle between the two notions: "The invention of beauty by the Greeks, that is, their postulate of beauty as an ideal, has been the bugbear of European art and European aesthetics philosophies. Man's natural desire in the arts to express his relation to the Absolute became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creations". *Idem, The Sublime is Now*, [in:] B. Newman: *Selected Writings and Interviews*, J.P. O'Neill (ed.), Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1990, p. 170-173. For more on the subject of the sublime with respect to the oeuvre of the artists I take interest in, see J. Golding, Newman, Rothko,

the German postmodern philosopher and art historian Wolfgang Iser called Lyotard's project of the unrepresentable.³ This project was formulated by the French philosopher in 1980-1990, not only for avant-garde art,⁴ but also for philosophy, politics and history.⁵

Within the dominant, modernist reception model, discourse on the painting oeuvre of Newman, an artist who used large-sized, expressive surfaces of colour in order to trigger specific emotional effect in the viewers, has been covered by a patina of patriarchal and essentialising narratives. These, in turn, have transformed an artistic image into a market tool in the form of institutional space, where the ideas of American imperialism are still going strong. Narratives on the cultural supremacy and power have fallen prey to the game of the market.⁶ Apart from the fact that commercial discourse draws heavily on the founding narrative on the enslaving sense of salvation in this world via sublime and heroic American post-war art. Its focusing around the tragic fate of the male hero after World War II contributed, as Ann Gibson mentions, an exclusive politics of identity, leaving out female artists, as well as authors of different ethnic background, not conforming to heteronormative moral framework.⁷

Still and the Abstract Sublime, [w:] *Paths To The Absolute Mondrian*, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still, Princeton University Press, London 2000, p. 195-231.

- » 3 W. Iser, *Narodziny filozofii postmodernistycznej z ducha sztuki modernistycznej*, transl. J. Balbierz, [in:] *Odkrywanie modernizmu: przekłady i komentarze*, R. Nycz (ed.), Universitas, Warszawa 2004, p. 429-461.
- » 4 J.-F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. E. Rottenberg, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1994; *idem*, *Filozofia i malarstwo w epoce eksperymentu*, transl. M.P. Markowski, [in:] *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów*, R. Nycz (ed.), Baran i Suszczyński, Kraków 1998, p. 62-80; *idem*, *Wzniosłość i awangarda*; *idem*, *Newman: The Instant*, [in:] *The Lyotard Reader*, A. Benjamin (ed.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford and Cambridge 1989, p. 240-249.
- » 5 Lyotard wrote about: "Ideas of which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience); they also prevent the free union of the faculties which gives rise to the sentiment of the beautiful; and they prevent the formation and the stabilization of taste. They can be said to be unrepresentable". *Idem*, *Odpowiedź na pytanie: co to jest postmodernizm?*, [in:] *Postmodernizm dla dzieci. Korespondencja 1982-1985*, transl. J. Migasiński, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 1998, p. 19-23; *idem*, *Wzniosłość i awangarda*, transl. M. Bieńczyk, "Teksty Drugie", 1996, no. 2/3, p. 173-189. See also: J. Rogucki, J.-F. Lyotard. Piękno w obliczu wzniosłości i "nieprzedstawialnego", "Dyskurs. Zeszyty Naukowo-Artystyczne Akademii Sztuk Pięknych we Wrocławiu", 2004, no. 3, p. 4-27.
- » 6 C. Cockcroft, *Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War*, "Artforum", vol. 12, no. 10, June 1974, p. 39-41; D. Robson, *The Market for Abstract Expressionism: The Time Lag between Critical and Commercial Acceptance*, "The Archives of American Art Journal", 1985, vol. 25, no. 325, p. 19-23. D. Robson, *The Avant-Garde and the On-Guard: Some Influences on the Potential Market for the First Generation Abstract Expressionists in the 1940s and Early 1950s*, "Art Journal", vol. 47, no. 3: *New Myths for Old: Redefining Abstract Expressionism*, Autumn 1988, p. 215-221; S. Guilbaut, *Jak Nowy Jork ukradł ideę sztuki nowoczesnej: ekspresjonizm abstrakcyjny, wolność i zimna wojna*, transl. E. Mikina, Wydawnictwo Hotel Sztuki, Warszawa 1992.
- » 7 See A. Markowska, "Tylko to jest ważne, co tragiczne" *Malarstwo Barnettta Newmana*, [in:] *Komedia sublimacji. Granica współczesności a etos rzeczywistości w sztuce amerykańskiej*, DiG, Warszawa 2010, p. 38-62; see also A. E. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, Yale

However, I am supremely confident that the spontaneous color field painting, based on emotions, intuitions and personal experience, oftentimes expressive of leftist and anarchist elements of the worldview of its authors, conducive to experiments with the theory of historical representation, prevents us from too hastily dismissing the work by Newman and his colleagues. This is what was done by numerous emancipatory narratives accompanying postmodern art, which saw in Newman's oeuvre an outdated aesthetic hallmark of a quasi-tribal community of privileged white males, expressing their creative aspirations in the language of abstraction.

II.

The postmodern theory of reception proposed in this article appreciates the elements of the art trend I am interested in which escape ossifying structures of triumphant history of American modern art. I therefore focus on what helps me to formulate a counter-narrative with respect to its today's market impasse. Contrary to the preferred narratives of the establishment, glamorising the quality, innovativeness and idiomatic nature of color field painting as well as the post-romantic, performative, masculinist martyrdom of a genius individual, the figures of the unpresentable offer a concept of restorative deconstruction, opposing stereotypical thinking about the relationship between modernism and postmodernism.⁸ Starting from the revision of the characteristics of color field painting, bringing out the fact that its postmodern theme is the negligibility of representation patterns, the concept helps open up the painting I am interested in to subjects previously excluded from its modernist discourses and, paradoxically, tie them with emancipatory minority discourses. Focusing attention on such negative categories as abyss or void, this revision bridges irreconcilable oppositions, contributing to a steady liberation of color field painting from structures of historical time, expressive of the experience of modernity: the vertical axis, associated with the spiritual aspirations of Americans and the straight line of progress, referring to the importance of perfecting art forms.⁹

University Press, New Haven 1997.

» 8 My proposal is linked here with the assumptions of a research project of "restorative history" of Ewa Domańska. It involves, among others, "creating knowledge of the past oriented towards the future and taking into account the changes taking place in the contemporary world; fostering inter-generational bonds; promoting a perception of history which sees it as a kind of performative knowledge, i.e. one which has a value for the individual and the community of both surviving in particular situations and initiating ethical behaviour". See *Zegar z martwymi wskazówkami*. Z prof. Ewą Domańską rozmawia Maria Rybicka, "Życie Uniwersyteckie", no. 12, December 2011, p. 13. Information on the principal ideas of the project can be obtained at the researcher's website: <http://ewadomanska.pl/projekt-mistrz/o-projekcie> [access: 27.06.2016].

» 9 ... therefore I call the dominant, modernist model of reception the progressive and transcendental model. It is connected both with the tradition of American art criticism, mainly

Two notions, that of the “figure” and “the unrepresentable”, proved helpful in the polemic with the model of reception supported by the temporal framework, resting as to the world-view on the foundation of a combination of rationalising elements of Enlightenment philosophy and affective mental constructs of Romanticism. First, the two notions are deeply ingrained in the vocabulary of color field painting as proposed by art history. They were taken advantage of in the description of the process of a gradual rejection by avant-garde US artists of figurative imagery and focus on objects for the sake of colour, supposed to create a sensual suggestion of illusionist space of consciousness. The notion of the “figure” evoked the direct presence of the viewer in front of the painting in terms of a comprehensive impact of an artistic image. However, since colour field painting was originally identified primarily with the ideological order of symbolic culture expressed in the language of the fathers, its subject matter was linked to the consciousness of the artist-prodigy, where motifs like: woman, being, cosmos, absolute, etc. found their abstract expression. In the grand modernist narrative, this very concept of abstraction contributed to a rise of modern American painting in international art. The notion of “the unrepresentable”, in turn, does not operate in the original discourse of art history used by Abstract Expressionism. It emerged with Lyotard’s re-orientation of the sublime towards the indeterminate, thus foreshadowing a renewed interest in nothingness, chasm and void, which although articulated by Abstract Expressionists, were largely left out in the narrative of success and succession. In Lyotard’s reading, the metaphysical awaiting of fullness, event, and a culmination of history, characteristic of modernism was replaced by the primacy of the historical awareness of non-events.¹⁰ It moreover questioned Greenberg’s linear teleology with its culmination in Abstract Expressionism, which gave rise to more heterogeneous concepts of time.

The shift from modernity towards postmodernity is therefore the most evident at the interface of philosophical discourse and the discourse of art history: in Lyotard’s philosophy of art. In postmodernity, the “figure” becomes subsequently a term opening up reflection on the shift towards poststructuralist and interdisciplinary discourse, proposing the rejection of thinking about a painting in terms of cultural essentialism,

represented here by Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg and with the history of art with such authors of the triumphant narrative on the colour field painting, such as e.g.: Alfred Barr, William Rubin, Irving Sandler, Robert Rosenbaum, Dore Ashton, and John Golding.

» 10 Lyotard writes as follows: “Nothing happens. There are no words, colours, forms, or sounds. The sentence is the last and the bread is not daily. The painter deals with the absence in art, the musician with sounds, the thinker when faced with a desert of thoughts, etc. Not only then they find themselves in front of a white canvas or a white page, at the ‘beginning’ of a work, but each time something requires that they wait and becomes an issue that each time poses the question, ‘and what now?’”. J.F. Lyotard, *Wzniosłość i awangarda*, p. 175.

enclosing the experience of art within selected systems representation, treated as systems of clear-cut boundaries. In turn, the Unpresentable in Lyotard's approach, reconstructed by Welsch in his project of defence of modernist art in the role of inspiration for the birth of postmodern philosophy¹¹ – construed also as a defensive unpresentable, silence or presence of avant-garde art.¹² According to Lyotard, through the artists' pursuit of the unpresentable and the invisible, it manifests resistance to the threat of capitalism and ideological misappropriation. My position emerged as a result of the polemical continuation of Lyotard's project, the shift of focus from a defensive unpresentable of colour field painting towards its inexhaustible semantic potential, linking categories of significant void or nothingness with affirmation. As a result of restorative dialogue with the traditions of the past, led form the position of leaning towards open future, it was possible to see the painting of interest to me in the context of the present.

Under my approach, the unrepresentable becomes linked to a broad minority and emancipatory discourse. This reading counters the grand metaphysical narratives of Abstract Expressionism, re-orienting Lyotard's philosophical project to the need for filling the void, whose sense emerges with the exhaustion of the progressive and transcendental narrative. I called the patterns of inclusion into historical time the subjects which were initially excluded from it, weakening the vectors of historical time, pointing upwards at different acute angles, expressive of the experience of modernity, the figures of the unpresentable. Out of the three time concepts built within the postmodern model, I will focus on the one that helped me to transcend the dominant reading of Newman's art, with its cultural hierarchies and maculine prerogatives.

III.

The choreographic figure of dance performs the meandering process of revising the exclusive patterns of Western modernism. On the one hand, it offered narratives that glorified progress, originality and development of modern abstract form of Newman's painting, and on the other hand it offered stories where the spiritual aspect was conveyed by categories such as instantaneous experience, the sublime or abyss. The choreographic figure of dance includes topics sidestepped by history, facilitating an effective use of old narratives to show the readiness of Newman's painting to the change of the time-space of art history. This readiness is inherent in his

» 11 W. Welsch, *Narodziny filozofii postmodernistycznej*, [in:] *Odkrywanie modernizmu...*, p. 441.

» 12 J.F. Lyotard, *Wzniosłość i awangarda*, p. 176 and 181.

painting, once we notice that apart from descriptions of this artist's paintings, focusing on his fetishized metaphysical verticality; another equally important feature of this painting is its duality, which helps see it in horizontal, i.e. historical and cultural terms.

This characteristic is revealed by Newman's breakthrough painting, *Onement* (1948), part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The canvas, painted early in the artist's career, is relatively small: 69.2 × 41.2 centimetres. It contains an element which under the modernist model gained the status which is binding on both the concept of teleological fulfilment of the history of modernity of Western modern painting and the spiritual advancement of modern American culture. The element in question was a vertical, fiery strip of cadmium red, led across the centre of the painting by a decisive stroke; the artist called it a zip.¹³ Rather than form, it was something ambivalent – “non-streak”, “a so-called line”, since Newman did not believe in straight lines in art.¹⁴ Important from the point of view of the interpretation of a painting and of the development of relevant discourse is, as I am trying to demonstrate, not only the vertical line, articulated as zip, expressive of the artist's ahistorical aspirations connected with light, but also division into two identical halves. The ambivalence helps to shift the meaning of *Onement* from an iconic modernist work to a work that belongs with the post-painting and post-media era, leaning towards varied conceptualisations and forms expressed in an interdisciplinary language of various artistic disciplines – not only prints (*Eighteen Cantos*, 1963-1964) and sculptures (*Here series*), but also dance, as I will demonstrate further on in this text.¹⁵

The artist's self-commentary clearly indicates that in the modernist stage of reception of his art, dance was virtually non-existent. This is clearly indicated in an interview Newman did at the end of his life:

“[With a painting – my addition, E.J.] there's nothing to walk into. It's not a window leading you into a situation where you walk through some either interior or exterior world from which you then come to a conclusion. The beginning and the end are there at one. Otherwise, a

» 13 I mention only some of the zip definitions from the interviews by Emile de Antonio and David Sylvester. See Interview with David Sylvester, p. 254-259. In his last interview before death for de Antonio, the artist saw zips as “streaks of light”, deliberately not defining precisely the nature of these elements, but also refusing to see them in the context of an “arbitrary and abstract decision”.

» 14 From “*The New American Painting*”, [in:] B. Newman: *Selected Writings...*, p. 180. The interview of David Sylvester with the artist in this book is in large measure dedicated to the question of the line. The subject of the zip appears here in the context of the difference generated by Newman's art with respect to Piet Mondrian's painting. *Ibidem*, p. 254-259.

» 15 This feature, noticed by Newman himself (in *Northwest Coast Indian Painting*, 1946), was first pointed out by Ive-Alain Bois. See *Idem*, *Painting as Model*, exhibition catalogue, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., London 1990, p. 187-215.

painter is a kind of choreographer of space, and he creates a kind of dance of elements, and it becomes a narrative art instead of a visual art".¹⁶

Showing the process of transforming temporal coordinates of discourses of the modern history of American art should, therefore, start with identifying an absence in the modernist reception model, starting from a reflection that the visual experience of an autonomous painting totalised in this model offset the participation of body and motion, both in the creative process and in the preferred, contemplative reception vis-à-vis abstract representation.¹⁷ Another constant element of the dominant reception model was moreover a gender-specific concept of the creative act, often demanding a depreciation of the female element and the rejection of the idea of partnership in art.¹⁸

In the postmodern reading, sensitive to context and the cracking of the dominant manner of reception, Onement helps to see that dance operated parallel to and independent of painting. The distinguished female representatives include Mary Weigman, Thelma Johnson Streat and Martha Graham. In the centre of Graham's solo filmed in 1943, *Lamentation*, there is a single female figure, whose solo dance highlighted by the purple costume expresses choreographic figures of pain and suffering.¹⁹ We could observe post factum that her work corresponds with the visual structure of Onement, consisting in isolating a single motif and optimising its semantic field. The interdependencies between Graham's dance and Abstract Expressionism was indicated by Stephen Polcari, who observed as follows:

"she [Graham – addition mine, E.J.] demonstrated dance as a model of psychological, ritual, historical and cultural self-analysis, parallel to Abstract Expressionists' beliefs, partly influenced by the Surrealists, explored in their paintings and sculptures at the same time".²⁰

Along with the emergence of a revisionist narrative, ushered in by artists and critics around the 1960s, dance changes its status. It becomes articulated explicitly in Huber Crehan's review of a Newman exhibition inaugurating the operation of the French & Company Gallery: Newman

» 16 Interview with Emile de Antonio, [in:] *B. Newman: Selected Writings...*, p. 306.

» 17 Crucial for this aspect is Greenberg's idea of sight-oriented modernism. See C. Greenberg, "American-Type" Painting, [in:] *Reading Abstract Expressionism. Context and Critique*, E.G. Landau (ed.), Yale University Press, New Haven, London 2005, p. 198-214. The text was originally published in the "Partisan Review", Spring 1955.

» 18 H. Rosenberg, *The American Action Painters*, [in:] *Reading Abstract Expressionism...*, p. 189-198. The text was originally published in "ARTnews", vol. 51, no. 8, December 1952, p. 22-23; continuation p. 48-50. See also N.L. Kleeblatt, *Greenberg, Rosenberg and Postwar American Art*, [in:] *Action/Abstraction. Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976*, N.L. Kleeblatt (ed.), New York 2008, p. 135-145.

» 19 A performance with the music composed by Zoltán Kodály premiered on 8 January 1930 at the Maxine Elliott Theatre, NYC.

» 20 S. Polcari, *Martha Graham and Abstract Expressionism*, "Smithsonian Studies in American Art", vol. 4, no. 1, Winter 1990, p. 19.

believes in a masculinist environment and expresses this idea in his paintings. [...] Newman expresses a proud, inflexibly archaic, male sensitivity resembling that of the Old Testament. But in truth we live in a different world, which no doubt needs the male energy, yet a man of a new type, I imagine, would be aware that we should have more music in dance. It takes two to tango.²¹

However, before the motif of a solo tango gets developed in the 1990s as a metaphor of Newman's anti-partnership attitude, artists representing pop-art, minimalism or earth art differently impact the diversified reception of his oeuvre. The artist's zip in sculpture or prints, taking place in the 1960s, points to his opening up to the interdisciplinary. As Anna Markowska showed referring to the aforementioned series of prints titled *Eighteen Cantos*, the unison of Newman's language was transgressed; this language became diversified not only through a weakening of dependence on a selected medium, but also as a result of use of the strategy of repetition and of a series, typical of that decade, which enlivened interest in the inherent qualities of printmaking.²² Since the very strategy of repetition contains both refinement and critique of artistic perfection of a single form, we can say that works in series undermined the perception of Newman's art in terms of one-sided development; they co-created a decentralising frame, introducing at least a second, equivalent direction countering the time axis. It offset the dominant modality of reception of his art in terms of immediate experience through a temporal process, a horizontal and historical perspective.

The necessity to compete against pop artists or minimalists brought about a change in Newman's image – from a patriarchal father and creator to an artist, who proposed an inspiring formula of an abstract painting, not limited to the hot programmatic assumptions of Abstract Expressionists, but interesting especially for the minimalists. Donald Judd, as Jeanne Siegel observes, stressed the adaptability of his art to the criteria of ABC art. Judd, the eulogist of minimalist reduction expressed in a new language of succinct and recurrent forms, whose genesis must be sought in modernism, wrote that Newman's painting is a statement on the theme of a rectangle, helping him to reflect on the importance of geometry, i.e. an aspect which Newman demonstrably rejected.²³ The pluralisation of the dominant art paradigm is best seen in the crack of the modernist paradigm, visible in Newman's sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963-1967), located

» 21 After: M. Leja, *Barnett Newman's Solo Tango*, p. 559.

» 22 A. Markowska, *Intruzje i manipulacja. Problem powtórzenia w grafice Barnetta Newmana i Andy'ego Warhola*, [in:] eadem, *Komedia sublimacji. Granica współczesności a etos rzeczywistości w sztuce amerykańskiej*, DiG, Warszawa 2010, p. 126-136.

» 23 J. Siegel, *Around Barnett Newman*, [in:] eadem, *Artwords. Discourse on the 60s and 70s*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor 1985.

in a swimming pool designed by Philip Johnson in front of the Rothko Chapel in Houston. It consists of an upturned obelisk, broken off in its upper section, whose pointed tip rests on a pyramidal base of four steel walls. Philip Wofford, an author of lyrical abstractions, was appreciative of it, noticing that the Broken Obelisk: is one of the most magnificent American sculptures, not only due to its monolithic quality, but also thanks to its absurd obviousness, a combination of an obvious gesture carried to the extreme. The cutting off of the obelisk and its being turned on its top is almost grotesque, but at the same time the scale and correct proportions of form make it a classical, very peaceful work. It is ambivalent, an exciting combination of comedy and tragedy²⁴.

Interestingly, creating the sculpture, the artist used two forms well-established in culture. In the architecture of ancient Egypt, the pyramid was principally a monumental tomb, while an obelisk was an iconic statue of the god of sun Ra or a symbolic gate.²⁵ Breaking the obelisk in its upper section also indicated its duality as the fundamental structural feature of the sculpture, directly undermining the integrity of form, so important for Newman earlier; in incomplete, it required concretisation in the viewers' imagination. A change of the mode of engaging the viewers' attention, combined with the scale of the artist's unprecedented acceptance of an awareness of the conventional character of art and an awareness of reference, typical of the postmodern, make the artist mover to a more open model or creation, rooted in history and culture.

Larry Poons, in turn, was not only moved by Newman's paintings, but also admitted that it was them that gave him an "impression of being able to paint".²⁶ At a party in Barney's home, the painter admitted to having problems with his father, who did not accept his chosen profession. Newman, who painted Abraham (1949), a painting that used the language of abstraction to depict a history of a near dedication of a son by his father, interfered. Indicating to Poons' sceptical father, a businessman, the soundness of the artistic profession, Newman confirmed the painter's serious identity. The younger painter was so thankful to his senior colleague, that he defended in him the feature denied to him by others, maintaining that "what was beautiful about Newman was that he treated you as a colleague rather than an elder artist".²⁷ Andy Warhol, the king of the then gay society of a new generation of pop artists, paid little heed to the patriarchal image of the author of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. A creator of

» 24 *Ibidem*, p. 52.

» 25 See *Słownik terminologiczny sztuk pięknych*, S. Kozakiewicz (ed.), Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1969, p. 250.

» 26 *Ibidem*.

» 27 *Ibidem*, p. 45.

objects criticised for an absence of emotional engagement, Warhol was provocatively tender towards him, observing that Newman “had always been sweet. He would always ask me how I was. He was really good”.²⁸

However, since as Michael Leja, a revisionist of key importance for Newman’s reception in the 1990s, the artist’s language did not keep up with the changes taking place, he was partly excluded from the ongoing debates concerning art. The painter, who debuted precisely in the 1960s, joined that very decade the ranks of those excluded from the historical and artistic discourse of women, people of colour or gays. Leja saw Newman as invariably a “soloist in the tango”, someone who holds absolute power over the significance of his art.²⁹ Similar conclusions are drawn by Sarah K. Rich. The author of *Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman’s “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?”* (2005) indicates that the eponymous series of works, drawing on the aesthetics of hard-edge painting and made in the period 1966-1970, Newman expressed a fear, even though he “tried to put it in quotation marks”.³⁰ Analysing the at least dual nature of the artist’s language of painting, Rich notices that this was not so much a fear as one of fundamental sensations, expressed by the Abstract Expressionists, by one concerning the status and position of a particular artist in a decade of a “cold, matter-of-fact characteristics of the contemporary art scene”.³¹ In that decade Newman’s paintings were an example of good form, but the ideas underlying them were not approved of.

The awareness of the exclusion of dance from Newman’s abstract art at the moment of its birth, followed by its gradual restoration in a revisionist discourse, provokes us to reach out to the future, beyond the boundary of theoretical speculations, and to propose a dancing approach to a story about this artist in the new millennium. An opportunity to supplement the choreographic dance figure appears in the field of curatorial strategies of displaying the artist’s paintings, so far invariably revisionist. As a result, the postmodern construction of time, patterning on avant-garde art, articulates its open ending through the design of the “Newman” exhibition. It stresses the shift from the concept of the artist’s biographical “I” of the artist, who “stressed the singularity and uniqueness of his own existence, its tragedy and loneliness”, towards its contextualising, taking into account Newman’s negotiating of his own position in the art of the 1960s; finally, in the 21st century, it recognised the status of “Newman’s” cultural text, i.e. a reading effect of acceptable intrusion and manipulation of the

» 28 *Ibidem*, p. 51.

» 29 This is pointed out by Michel Leja. *Idem*, *Barnett Newman’s Solo Tango*, “Critical Inquiry”, vol. 21, no. 3, Spring 1995, p. 556–560.

» 30 S.K. Rich, *Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman’s “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?”*, “American Art”, vol. 19, no. 3, Fall 2005, p. 17.

» 31 *Ibidem*, p. 19.

historical shape of the field of the discourses dedicated to his art.³² As an authorial culture text, a result of a choreographic modulation of historical and artistic sources within the postmodern reception model, “Newman” proves a trickster of the progressive and transcendental narrative.³³

The Daugavpils Mark Rothko Culture Centre in Latvia, occupying the premises of a former tsarist arsenal, could be an imaginary venue of the curatorial performance of Newman’s dual painting.³⁴ The curatorial projects could show the resistance of this young institution to the colonising Western discourse of power and authority, which its architectural context seems to predispose it to. The exhibition, which will not involve an expensive show of the US painter’s originals, will epitomise an idea of his art being open to a truly partner-like dialogue with the oeuvre of artists expressive of the emancipatory minority narrative.³⁵ In one wing of the arsenal, “Newman’s” tango partner would be Marina Ambamović, a figure of the feminist women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, in another Félix Gonzáles-Torres, whose art takes account of the discourse of homoerotic minorities. On the one hand, then, we would deal with a performance of the traps of the emancipatory discourse on the basis of documents of works from the artist’s great retrospective show at the MoMA, Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present (2010), helping to bypass the mirror repetition of The Same – echoes of the oppressive discourse in the phallic art of the Balkan-based artist. On the other hand, we would deal with a factual transgression with respect to earlier limitations of modernist narratives. The transgression would be contingent on the work by the Cuban artist, Untitled (Double Portrait) (1991), consisting of a pile of blank sheets of paper which the visitors could take away with them. Each of the sheets of paper features a symmetrical couple of identical, black rings, a symbol of a homosexual couple. Furthermore, the cooperation of an art theoretician and the choreographer Magdalena Przybysz, intending to create a choreography related to colour field painting, would lead to the creation of a choreographic discourse of Newman in a work with a group

» 32 See A. Markowska, *Komedia sublimacji...*, p. 125.

» 33 I started discussing this issue in an earlier text. See E. Jarosz, ‘Newman’: *Trickster in Every Sense of the Word!*, [in:] *Trickster Strategies in the Artists’ and Curatorial Practice*, A. Markowska (ed.), *Polish Institute of World Art Studies*, Warsaw – Toruń 2012, p. 189–195; on the strategy of putting names of master painters in inverted commas see M. Bal, *Reading ‘Rembrandt’: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Cambridge University Press, New York and Cambridge 1991, p. 11.

» 34 When writing this article, the curatorial endeavour is purely an intention of a project. The choice of the venue has not been consulted with the organisers of the Mark Rothko’s Art Centre in Dyneburg.

» 35 See H. Foster, *Artysta jako etnograf*, [in:] *Powrót Realnego...*, p. 199–233.

of local dancers/performers.³⁶ The exhibition design stresses carnal and temporal relations as well as the relations between the exhibits and the space and context of the institution.

The return of dance to Newman's reception, starting from the links between the modern and the postmodern, was contingent on the reformulation of the category of the sublime, which was linked for American modernism with the dominant culture of making sacrifices of fathers and brothers. In Newman's case, the symbolic patricide, the subject matter of his early painting *Death of Euclid* (1947), concerned both Euclid and Piet Mondrian, whom he abhorred the way scholars interested in his art do. Since the individualistic stance did not allow these men to share public space, which they were gaining in order to introduce avant-garde art into public institutions, its revision in the new millennium led to a definition of relations between the cultural text of "Newman" and its author as a tango with "Newman". At the extremes of the new temporal story brave curatorial strategies emerged, which embodied the shift in the established exhibition scenario of Newman's painting in the project of particular practices. The shift from the design stage to the implementation one calls for waking up from the vicious dance of contemplation of Newman's large-sized paintings, hibernating in a market discourse. Perhaps this kind of proposal decentering the Western paradigm, arising from the need to transcend the limitations of modern experience, will allow us to break free from the inferiority complex towards the Western centre? ●

» 36 The artist pointed out in an interview: "I love Mark Rothko's paintings. When I consider his route from realism to narration, I feel elated. It is great art to be able to belittle yourself and skilfully dissolve in the composition. This pleasure of focusing on a series of impressions – the moment where only what is counts can be likened only to my favourite game of car racing, which I can play for hours on PlayStation simulation gear (laughter)". See M. Przybysz: z szumu informacyjnego wylania się tożsamość, [in:] A. Królicza, *Pokolenie Solo*. Choreografowie w rozmowach z A. Króliczą, K. Lemańska, K. Steńczyk (ed.), Ośrodek Dokumentacji Sztuki Tadeusza Kantora Cricoteca, Kraków 2013, p. 211.

