

Pixel, Abstraction, Narration

Maxim Rayskin

Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV is the title of a work by Barnett Newman that the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation acquired in 1982 from the artist's widow, Annalee Newman. This large-format canvas (more than six meters wide and almost three meters high) was Newman's last work and the fourth and final part of the eponymous series, which he managed to complete before his death in 1970.

The painting consists of two intensely red and yellow color fields separated by a blue stripe. As they confront one another, the color fields (each around nine meters square) evoke in the viewer feelings exactly opposite those we usually associate with aesthetic pleasure. "It is only with great effort that the eye adjusts to the pain this picture causes," wrote one art critic.

When it was hung in Berlin's Nationalgalerie in 1982, the painting set off a major scandal. Public opinion condemned the museum's purchase of the work, Newman was labeled a "painter's apprentice" in the press, and the Nationalgalerie's director, Dieter Honisch, received several threatening letters. On April 13, the scandal reached its apogee: a veterinary student disfigured the painting with a bar used to keep museum visitors at a distance from the work. The student's lawyer would cite Newman's own statement about his work's hostility to its surroundings in his defense of the young man. This type of argument — that the criminal was provoked by his victim (in this case, inciting him to commit an act of vandalism) — is often used in rape cases. The Newman case never went to trial: the student was declared mentally incompetent, and the painting was restored and rehung in the Nationalgalerie.¹

The Language of Art Has to Be Abstract ²

By entitling his exhibition *Who Is Afraid*, George Pusenkoff takes pains to refer the critic to the work of Barnett Newman. This reference is not something that should be taken for granted. Despite the fact that over the past ten years Pusenkoff has produced at least five completely different paintings entitled *Who Is Afraid*, it would be utterly wrong to identify him as Newman's heir. My thesis is that there is nevertheless a connection between them, but that it doesn't have to do with aesthetic resemblance or an exclusively cultural-historical succession. This connection is, rather, polemical in nature. It arises through an aesthetic difference (not a similarity) over the question of whether narrative is possible in contemporary art.

In minimalism and the movement that Clement Greenberg dubbed Color Field painting, the abstract painting reached its ultimate logical culmination. According to Newman, the experience of the visible shouldn't be mediated by anything other than the experience itself. This is precisely why the viewer is confronted with a dilemma when he stands before Newman's paintings: he can say nothing about them for the simple reason that not only do they not call for such utterance, but also actively resist it.

A canvas by Newman draws a contrast between stories and its plastic nudity. Everything is there — dimensions, colours, lines — but there are no allusions. So much so that it is a problem for the commentator. What can one say that is not given? It is not difficult to describe, but the description is as flat as a paraphrase. The best gloss consists of the question: what can one say? Or of the exclamation 'Ah'. Of surprise: 'Look at that'. So many expressions of a feeling which does have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition (and in the work of Newman): the sublime. It is a feeling of

‘there’ (Voilà). There is almost nothing to ‘consume’, or if there is, I do not know what it is. One cannot consume an occurrence, but merely its meaning. The feeling of the instant is instantaneous.³ Newman’s aesthetic is primarily realized in color. Geometry — the last bastion of composition, to which Malevich and Mondrian still resorted — must fall so that the picture’s idiom becomes absolute in its abstraction. In his late works, Newman rejects the use of mixed and pure color, limiting himself to the primary colors: red, blue, and yellow, applied in several layers to make the paint luminescent. The abstract painting turns into a color field, which then expands into a color space. This space is unsurveyable when the visitor (which Newman counted on) approaches the painting so closely that he is unable to see it as a whole. As an expression of the requirement for absolute abstraction, the picture must not give the viewer the possibility of seeing it whole or interpreting it.

We might say that by making this requirement a categorical imperative, Newman (unlike many of his contemporaries⁴) reanimated in the most consistent manner the discourse of “art’s end” whose founding father is customarily identified as Kazimir Malevich. Newman’s paintings short-circuit the currents of abstractionism in the same way that the Black Square did. According to all the rules, after the Black Square the history of art should have been consummated. If nothing more can be said about it, art ends.

Unlike the modernistically serious and existentially complicated Malevich and Newman, George Puskoff is postmodernistically ironical and uncomplicated. It suffices to recall his *Twice Erased De Kooning Drawing* or the fact that he’s the only man to have succeeded in measuring the volume of the Black Square, which had until then been considered a symbol of infinity. Caged in a computer frame, the square weighed in at twenty-eight kilobytes. No more, no less. We can adduce many similar examples of a Puskoff’s “light-minded” attitude to art history. It is rather hard here to separate the “serious” from the “ironic,” just as it is with many other artists who came of age in the eighties and nineties. One thing, however, is clear. Independently of how serious or “frivolous” he might want to appear, Puskoff’s entire artistic evolution — from square to erased square to abstraction — has taken place *after* this already-completed end of art. It is the abstract painting in Puskoff’s oeuvre that demonstrates the seriousness of this claim.

When he introduced the computer frame into his works in 1995 and began decomposing existing images into pixels, Puskoff discovered a new dimension of the abstract — the pixel, the simplest unit of any image. To make an abstract picture, you no longer have to reject the realistic subject and image making as such. Puskoff’s painting is abstract by definition because it consists of picture elements. In this type of painting, the viewer doesn’t encounter the usual images, but the abstract digital reality that underlies them.

The innovation of the Russian avant-garde and De Stijl consisted in their discovering the fact that the painting depicts nothing but itself. Remaining within the genre of painting, the Color Field painters and the American expressionists employed the all-over compositional mode and large formats in their drive to free the painting from its limits. In Puskoff’s pictures, this abstract space is deconstructed not via outward movement, but via inward movement — namely, through the infusion of new picture elements: the computer interface and the pixilated line.

As a two-dimensional image, any painting always already confronts us with finitude, with the absence of perspective. Puskoff’s paintings do this insofar as they are images of the computer interface. Using the interface, we can turn the image, shift it in one direction or the other, invert it, decrease or enlarge it, and examine its every detail. Nevertheless, even inside the computer there is a limit beyond which enlargement doesn’t add anything to the picture or provide us with any new information. The image remains unchanged, only the pixels get bigger. This maximally enlarged image lacks spatiality. It is merely a digital magnifying glass with its own maximum magnification coefficient.

Attempts to view Pusenkoff's paintings are doubly illusory because their endpoint is the very instrument designed to carry out such image manipulations. Everything is there — the scroll bar, the task bar, the status bar, the traces of the computer mouse — but all of it is motionless. Thus, when he wants to correct a pencil drawing on paper, today's artist reflexively reaches not for his eraser, but for his mouse — so that he can click *Undo*.

Virtual reality is ideal and universal because it satisfies three requirements: unity, simplicity, and communicability. By handing back to the viewer his own digitalized notions about the nature of the visual, Pusenkoff abolishes illusions of the omnipotence, infinity, and realistic perfection of mass media realism.

Dynamic of Art Has to Be Ritual Will

It is customary to view Pusenkoff's work as a kind of communicative project centered on the history of art. This interpretation appeals first of all to the obvious fact that already-existing images from art history are the raw material for his pieces⁵. Pusenkoff encourages this interpretation by continuing to appropriate images and insisting on an "art after art" stance.

This critical viewpoint pigeonholes the artist into a particular framework. In particular, into the frame of an art-historical narrative whose continuity he must perpetuate if he wants to maintain his "image." The critic's expectations, however, are essentially self-fulfilling and utterly rational; they totally deny the possibility that anything new can happen. All movement, all development that might, in his opinion, happen, happens no longer *after*, but *inside* the end of art. This reduction, division, and search for limits go on until you hit your head against the wall. The artist-as-author must be made to disappear, to dissolve in tradition.

One has to give the intellectualism and honesty of this approach its due. However, the flipside of this approach to the history of culture (as opposed to the flagrant "anti-culturalism" of Malevich and Newman) is its total dependence on this history. In this case, the artist has no chance to fill our hearts with hope: his fate is to become another PowerPoint in the history of art. In this scheme, there is no room for an obsession with the Kabbalah or Native American art, two of Newman's passions. There is no room for the irrational decisions, happy finds, and serendipities which are the only things that make culture alive.

Moreover, an interpretation is merely an interpretation. The artist is the author of his pictures because he is the infinite source of the meanings that fill them. According to Jean-François Lyotard, one of the most significant experiences in Barnett Newman's life was his visit to a Native American burial mound in Miamisburg, Ohio. In his own account of the experience, Newman talks of how he was dumfounded by the absolute nature of what he found, by its immediately comprehensible simplicity. In his letter to the art critic Thomas B. Hess Newman writes: "Looking at the site you feel, Here I am, here . . . and out beyond there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscape . . . But here you get a sense of your own presence." It was this experience that suggested to him "the idea of making the viewer present."⁶

Just like Newman at Miamisburg, Pusenkoff stands before all those things that modernism has left in its wake: ruins, crypts, and crumbled monuments. He is not an archaeologist who attempts to reconstitute historical dimensions and traditions but doesn't notice that his version of antiquity has all the earmarks of a theatrical production. When set over against the age of "high culture," Pusenkoff is a barbarian. He asks himself what gods could have populated these empty temples. He understands only one thing clearly: he is here in this place, surrounded by someone else's scenery. Unless you count those cultural monuments he has created himself.

He doesn't construct a line of succession. On the contrary, he makes visible all the ruptures and discontinuities that crisscross within him. He is a shaman trying to do the impossible: to resurrect

what, from the archaeologist's point of view, isn't amenable to resurrection, what can only be described and analyzed. He wants to turn history into anti-memory by releasing a completely different form of time inside it.

The Goal of Art Must Be Vision and Enlightenment

Any abstract painting deals with the estrangement of narrative. However anti-discursive the painting might be, whatever ban on utterance it might contain, narrative is preserved in it all the same because man is simply not capable of doing something about which nothing can be said. Narrative acquires different forms in the abstract painting: from the most elementary forms of viewer perception and hermeneutic attempts to explain what the author really had in mind to retellings of the quite real stories of what happened to the painting after it left the artist's studio. (This, in particular, is what we do with Newman's last work or de Kooning's erased drawing.) The experience of the avant-garde tells us that the most unanticipated and discursively problematic works provoke the greatest number of interpretations. Pusenkoff's abstract painting proves this hypothesis in the most consistent fashion.

In the series *Erased Painting*, the viewer encounters an expressive painterly gesture that summons up definite associations with Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Sam Francis. In any case, the viewer is not destined to contemplate these splotches of paint too long because he immediately brought up short by traces of erasure — the pixelated computer line that has destroyed the authorial gesture of dripping. Drawing on his resourcefulness, which he situates between himself and the thing he is creating, the artist erases the signs of individuality. It would appear that the author is dead and destroyed, and that the machine has triumphed.

The white lines really do form the skeleton of the picture. Through them, the eye sees the structure of the picture. It unconsciously tries to distinguish figure from ground, to determine what color is in the foreground and what color is in the background. To the degree that the white lines are a pictorial element, they are the form that is most fragile and distant from reality. On the contrary, to the degree that they are banished into an invisible existence and perceived as a form of absence (of color, of expressive gesture), the entire image is organized around them. They are exactly what gets looked at and makes heads turn. The entire composition and the expressive drippings are at their command.

Gathering together all the colored patches, the color white is neutral and airy. If we stick to the logic of visual perception, then it should be located on the surface. Which, however, obviously contradicts the fact that the white lines are traces of erasure and they consequently expose what is under the colored bits. The picture thus reproduces what the gaze lacks, what is passed over in silence.

As the Impressionists noted, a period's atmosphere is produced by a certain quality of light — for example, the foggy light we peer through in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Or the sun-drenched and airy light of nineteenth-century Languedoc that we find in Cezanne's works. Or the local, disharmonic reds and blues — presaging global cataclysms — that characterize the pre-Revolutionary Russian avant-garde.

Pusenkoff affirms that our age is likewise characterized by a certain quality of light, a light that permeates our entire existence and respects no national frontiers. This is the light generated by monitors, light boxes, and electronic message boards. This light abolishes the distance between Moscow and Tokyo, Tokyo and New York. By creating a constantly illuminated artificial reality, it turns night into day and makes the human environment uniform.

One of the centerpieces of the current exhibition at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art is the twenty-meter panel entitled *Who Is Afraid*. It is composed of 145 picture modules, each of which is an image of the scan lines on a computer monitor. This image (we should note in the most schematic way) is a series of horizontal white and thickly applied colored stripes. The Op art technique

employed here (alternating colored and white lines) produces an effect of vibrant color and the impression that a hundred and fifty plasma screens are flickering. The viewer has no way to step away and get his gaze around the twenty-meter picture wall that hangs at a tilt above him: the work's super-charged light field wholly encompasses him. The eye, blinded by this flickering, wanders along the boundaries of color and whiteness, submerging into the state of "cultural amnesia". It does not notice the presence of computer frames, it is not aware of the presence of the "twenty fifth frame" (from each of the 145 paintings it is addressed with the concrete missive "Who is afraid"), it is no longer capable of reining in contextual connections. It is located in the radiation range of this wall of light, emitting a perpetual and steady energy. The painting – the source of this radiation – transforms into an immediate reality, devoid of narrative and interpretation. A reality, existing for the eye as unconditional reality, experienced visually.

¹ Felix Gmelin "Vandals and Art" translated by Anna Matveeva in *Maximka Art Magazine*, Nr. 3, St. Petersburg, 1999.

² Hereinafter in the names of subtitles three formulas of "categorical imperative" by Barnett Newman are cited. Karl Ruhrber, Martin Schneckenburger, Christiane Fricke, Klaus Honnef, edited by Hugo F. Walter *Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Vol. 1, Taschen, Koeln, 2005.

³ Jean-François Lyotard «Der Augenblick, Newman» in the book *Philosophie und Malerei im Zeitalter ihres Experimentierens*, Merve Verlag, Berlin, 1986. English version - Jean-François Lyotard, "Newman: The Instant", in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford, 1989).

⁴ Meaning, Jackson Pollock, Marc Tobey, Cy Twombli, Sam Francis and in a certain sense Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still.

⁵ Boris Groys, «Ready-made Realism», in: *George Pusenkov, Simply Virtual*, Mannheimer Kunstverein, Das Wunderhorn, Heidelberg 1998.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard «Der Augenblick, Newman» in the book *Philosophie und Malerei im Zeitalter ihres Experimentierens*, Merve Verlag, Berlin, 1986. English version - Jean-François Lyotard, «Newman: The Instant», in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford, 1989), pp. 241-2. See also Barnett Newman, «Ohio, 1949», in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P.O. Neill (New York, 1990), p.175