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Understanding Visual Culture (UVC)

My feelings: When I have seen it first I felt bored. Looking deeper now I feel nearly overwhelmed by that large painting (still have to imagine that as I see it only a screen very small scale).
There is something ineffable about it, pure experience and sensation. Hard to grasps although on the surface it looks very formal and simple.

What attracts me? When I have seen Newman's paintings first during my research in the POP course unit and comporing them with Mark Rothko I was not so impressed. But looking now longer and more intense at it, I find the painting fascinating as it looks so simple, like a painted interior wall. But the fee stripes are adding layers of spatial depth, optical illusion and pulsing rhythm. I only see this painting as a digital small image on screen, but I can imagine how impressive it would look like when standing in front of it. That one only see the red area in with the naked eye.

What do I see? A large red flat painted area with vertical stripes separating the red area, The stripes do have different colors, some are light in value and some are darker than the red. I the middle there seems to advance a square, with top and bottom edges at the limit of the canvas, to the right a darker strip, and to the left a light strip.

Associations : It very much reminds me of three things
1.) our home where we painted the large living room wall with orange (one wall) and green (other wall) Looking at the height and width of Newman's painting it very much comes close to scale of large residential rooms.
2.) It reminds very much of my paintings exploration during POP1 on the sublime and the uncanny. I had a look at Newman's article on 'The Sublime is Now (Morley, 2010) and contextualized that in my own painting approach - exploring sensational and emotional responses (attached two of mine monochrome abstractions)
3) The red as red barns in the Mid-West in the USA

Description

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Barnett Newman ' Vir Heroicus Sublimis', 1950-1 Oil on canvas (242 x 542 cm)

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A pure geometric shape, asymmetric distribution of the sub-planes on the support. All are physical flat, although optically there is the illusion of advancing and receding shapes.

There are only a few edges, the vertical edges, lines that simulate the left and right edge of the canvas. The far right line is very close to the canvas edge. By that it seems that the picture plane may extend the canvas shape. The edges seem from a distance quite hard, from close distance one can see rather blurred egdes from bleeding paint from the juxtaposed color area.

Shapes

Lines

The bright red is juxtaposed with colored stripes, Newman called them 'zips', in lighter, darker and nearly same value. The same value 'zips are conveying a pulsing sensation when looking longer. The lighter and darker 'zips' are enframing a square where the other two edges are formed by the edge ot the support. The lighter far right 'zip' is unique, it seems o lay on top of the red.

Tones

Look at composition

Analysis

Colours

Patterns, Texture

Process and technique

Newman applied a saturated bright Cadmium red. The zips appear bright or muted or dark. All colore do have a warm hues.

Rather flat painting without texture and patterns. The only pictorial **distinguishing factors are shapes and** tones difference.

Type and artist movements

Context

Newman applied the saturated Cadmium red in smooth layers in red to avoid any visible brushstrokes and traces of his hand-movements. Those would have appeared as gestural marks that he distinguished from the gestural Abstract Expressionism.
The 'zips' were painted with use of masking tape, some are painted underneath and some above the red. A the edges paint was bleeding underneath the tape. By that the vertical 'zips' are optically advancing or receding in space, giving the illusion of depth, similar as traditionally one would paint a figure and a ground. (MoMA, 2010)

Newman found his non-gestural , minimalistic painting approach with his breakthrough 'Onament I'. 1948. He destroyed all his previous works and due to bad response from critics he didn't exhibit till his new 'zip' paintings ' Vir Heroicus Sublimis'; Also that one was misunderstood and received negative feedback. Often because of superficial evaluation and non understanding of Newman's underlying idea or pure transcendent sensation of the sublime. A theme that he continued to work further on for the rest of his life.
Those smooth application was criticized as boring or something that everyone could do.

Newman's abstract painting works with the embodied experience of the viewer in front of the painting. The large red area with its saturated color is setting the scene for the viewer's eye. The high saturation make the human eye tired and other sensations in connection with the 'zips' can occur. A sense of optical depth and pulsation is going in the areas of juxtposed shapes. The non-interrupted areas then act as a calm ground. This interplay is giving a transcendetal sensation. A sensation of the sublime as Newman is stating.

Newman worked in New York as a member of the New York School, an avant garde group of the Abstract Expressionism. That was a response to WWII and the social realism that appeared in 1930s after the Great Depression. New York was already become the new center of modern art, as many avant-garde escaped Europe during WWII. Paris was no longer the place to find the new art. Also the creation of MoMA in 1929 and the milestone exhibition curated by Alfred Barr established a new area for the modern and 'best' art.

Interpretation

Purpose?

Happening?

Influences

Historical context

Artist life

Barnet Newman (1905 - 1970) was an US American artist, son of a Jewish immigrant and grown up in a blue collar family and a leading figure in Modernism and Abstraction in painting and color field painting. Before finding his personal abstraction style he painted first in an expressionistic and than in a surrealistic style. He was a member of the New York School. After his breakthrough painting ' Onament I', 1948 he devoted his life completely his paintings and till his works were selling he lived together with his life from her income as art teacher.
After he found his 'zip' style, Newman never really departed from that for the rest of his life. It seems as if he found a formula that worked and didn't develop further. By that his self could be seen as his subject matter in his paintings.

Newman's purpose was to find a visual form to convey the 'spiritual transcendence towards the unknown'. (Crowther , 1984, p.53) A way to embody sublime in pure form.

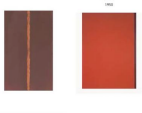
Comparision and contextualization

Newman was influenced by E. Burke and I Kant and their exploration of the sublime. Starting point for him was the human's capacity to 'affirm itself rationally' when faced with terrifying phenomena. (Crowther , 1984, p.53)

Newman made in this style with ' Onament I', 1948 his first and groundbreaking painting addressing sublime content. All works following were made in similar style. One can say that there was not further artistic development. His strong foundation on his idea restricted in the words of Greenberg not only the discipline of painting but even his personal approach to painting came nearly to a dead end. (Crowther, 1984, p.57)
Other examples are:
- ' Onament I', 1948
- 'Eve', 1950
- Who is afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III', 1967
Other major artists were Clifford Style (1904-1980) with a rather gestural painting style and Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970). Both lived the same time and same place and created after WWII those color field paintings. Newman is working on rather bright dense color with mostly hard edges with bleeding effect from paint embracing the rectangular form of the support and embracing the optical illusion of depth by juxtaposed form and tone. Rothko worked mostly on translucent layers of washes and with fuzzy, blurred edges contradicting at times the support form, and working with optical depth illusion inside the areas with multi layered washes.
Example:
- Mark Rothko 'Light Red over Black', 1957

Newman influenced the later Post-Painterly Abstraction and the Minimalist artists.

Mark Rothko 'Light Red Over Black', 1957



'Onament I', 1948 and 'Eve', 1950

'Who's afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III', 1967

I think changes in the painting especially concerning the 'zips' would make a great difference. If one would paint all zips above the red paint, With different tones the optical illusions of depth could disappear and swop. If one would change the red towards a muted light color the physiological impact on the human eye could also change.

This painting has no subject matter and not really a narrative. There is no story to tell, no memory to relate to. It exists merely of form and content. The experience of the painting at the moment of looking at is what matters. According to Greenberg a Modernistic painting that is aesthetically good without the need of narrative or subject matter. (Duve, Greenberg, 1996, p. 128)
Reflecting on Newman's artistic life after his breakthrough with 'Onament I' one could consider the self as the subject matter. The self, the personal encounter with the unknown and Newman's (and the viewer's) task to 'affirm itself rationally'.

Differences when changed

Subject matter, narrative

One could envision to extend the painting to left and right, but it would remain the same, perhaps a repetition of existing pattern

Extending

Evaluation

Meaning?

In reference to the Sublime context of Burke and Kant and as articulated by Newman himself in his essay of 'The Sublime is Now' (Morley, 2010) his painting is his personal approach on a concept of pure idea and 'spiritual transcendence' to embody the sublime and convey a timeless encounter.
For Newman the sublime is a 'rational self comprehension that arises from a confrontation of a overwhelming phenomena' (Crowther , 1984, p.54). The optical illusion of the 'zips' can be seen as an expression of transcendent nature.

Classification

Without a subject matter the present moment and experience is what matters and the 'content is ineffable' in the words of the American philosopher Suzanne Langer . The self-referentiality of the 'zip' painting alongside the uncomprehensibility could be interpreted as a reflection of the outside social reality.

An geometric abstract painting build on Barnett's idea of a personal encounter with the sublime and the self. Pure abstraction, painted on very large scale. The work was supposed to be looked at from a short distance to get absorbed with the painted support.

Part 2: 2.0 - The Modern in Painting and Sculpture