

Ohio, 1949

Newman insisted that a trip to Akron, Ohio, in August 1949 to visit his wife's family include an excursion to the Indian mounds in the southwestern corner of the state. In these notes (entitled "Prologue for a New Aesthetic" in an early draft), he attempts to capture and analyze his awed response to the site. Confronting the earthworks, Newman later recounted, he experienced a staggering epiphany of self against undefined space: "Looking at the site you feel, Here I am, *here* . . . and out beyond there [beyond the limits of the site] there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes. . . . But here you get a sense of your own presence. . . . I became involved with the idea of making the viewer present: the idea that 'Man Is Present.' "* Newman's discovery of this vitalizing sense of presence occurred felicitously during his most productive year, when he was consolidating the revelations of *Onement I* and fathoming the effects of changes in scale upon his prototype.

Standing before the Miamisburg mound, or walking inside the Fort Ancient and Newark earthworks, surrounded by these simple walls made of mud, one is confounded by a multiplicity of sensations: that here are the greatest works of art on the American continent, before which the Mexican and Northwest Coast totem poles are hysterical, overemphasized monsters; that here in the seductive Ohio Valley are perhaps the greatest art monuments in the world, for somehow the Egyptian pyramid by comparison is nothing but an ornament—what difference if the shape is on a table, a pedestal, or lies immense on a desert? Here is the self-evident nature of the artistic act, its utter simplicity. There are no subjects—nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed; [it is] a work of art that cannot even be seen, so it is something that must be experienced there on the spot: The feeling [is] that here is the space; that these simple low mud walls make the space; that the space outside, the dramatic landscape looking out over a bridge one hundred feet high, the falling land, the chasms, the

*Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York, 1971), p. 73.

rivers, the farmlands and far-off hills are just picture postcards, and somehow one is looking out as if inside a picture rather than outside contemplating any specific nature. Suddenly one realizes that the sensation is not one of space or [of] an object in space. It has nothing to do with space and its manipulations. The sensation is the sensation of time—and all other multiple feelings vanish like the outside landscape.

What is all the clamor over space? The Renaissance deep space as a heroic stage, the impressionist flat space, cubist space, shallow space, positive and negative space, trompe l'oeil enigmatic space, the pure space—the space of "infinity"—of Mondrian's universe. There is so much talk about space that one might think it is the subject matter of art, as if the essence of musical composition were the question of whether Mozart wrote in $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{8}$ time.

The love of space is there, and painting functions in space like everything else because it is a communal fact—it can be held in common. Only time can be felt in private. Space is common property. Only time is personal, a private experience. That's what makes it so personal, so important. Each person must feel it for himself. Space is the given fact of art but irrelevant to any feeling except insofar as it involves the outside world. Is this why all the critics insist on [space], as if all modern art were an exercise and ritual of it? They insist on having it because, being outside, it includes them, it makes the artist "concrete" and real because he represents or invokes sensations in the material objects that exist in space and can be *understood*.

The concern with space bores me. I insist on my experiences of sensations in time—not the *sense* of time but the physical *sensation* of time.