

**Twentieth-Century Sublimes
The Turn from Modernism to Postmodernism:
Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, and Andy Warhol**

by

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ABSTRACT

TWENTIETH-CENTURY SUBLIMES THE TURN FROM MODERNISM TO POSTMODERNISM: BARNETT NEWMAN, AGNES MARTIN AND ANDY WARHOL

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This thesis is an investigation of historical notions of the sublime and their culmination in both the “modern sublime” (demonstrated in the work of Barnett Newman and Agnes Martin) and the “postmodern sublime” (particularly through the practices of Andy Warhol). It addresses the historical development of the concept of the sublime, and the redistributions of that concept among Newman, Martin and Warhol. It also considers the roles of gender and sexual identity within sublime aesthetics. The thesis works with Fredric Jameson’s theorization of the relationship between the postmodern and late capitalism, as well as Caroline Jones’ account of the modern “egotistical” sublime and the postmodern “performative technological sublime,” to argue that postmodern practice was a response to the rigidities of modernism and formalist criticism. Finally, it clarifies, through some elements of their personal histories, the connections of the three artists within the New York art world and with each other.

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Chapter I – Literature Review

Introduction

This thesis will explore historical notions of the sublime and their culmination in both the "modern sublime" (demonstrated in the work of Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin and other abstract expressionists) and the "postmodern sublime" (particularly through the practices of Andy Warhol). While changes from one so-called "period" to another (say, Renaissance to Baroque) can be slow and gradual, the turn from modernist (which by the 1950s had become abstract expressionism) to postmodern practice seemed to take a decade or less.

Beginning in the early 1940s, New York became the world centre of late modernist painting and then early postmodern artistic production. I will work with Fredric Jameson's theorization of the relationship between the postmodern and late capitalism, as well as Caroline Jones' account of the modernist "egotistical" sublime and the postmodern "performative technological sublime," to argue that postmodern practice was a response to the rigidities of modernism and formalist criticism. That response opened a twofold rift between modernism and postmodernism. Postmodern artistic practice flourished not just in New York, but also all around the world, reflecting the development of economic globalism. Moreover, as postmodern theory and philosophy took hold in Europe, and especially France, the New York-based critics who had championed American modernism began to seem irrelevant.

The concept of the sublime transects both modernism and postmodernism, renewing itself in the respective discourses. High modernists such as Newman, Clyfford

Still, Mark Rothko and others searched for a transcendent sublime based in nature. For Warhol and other early postmodernists, the “search” was really an ongoing process of immersion in something entirely different—the technological sublime, based not in nature but in the electronic world of late capitalist globalization. Somewhere in between we find Agnes Martin, a friend of Newman’s who defined herself as an abstract expressionist, yet also worked with grid formats that seemed to both align her with minimalism and speak to the seriality and repetition of the postmodern sublime.

To illustrate the differences in the modern and postmodern manifestations of the sublime, I will consider specific works by all three artists, along with the role that their studios played in its formations. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Newman worked alone in his private studio on canvases that sprang out of his interest in the natural sublime, including his self-pronounced “first” painting, *Onement I*—and later, *The Voice*, *The Wild*, and *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. From 1960 to 1967, Agnes Martin, who also worked alone, developed her mature style of delicate grids that seem now to speak of both the modern sublime and the postmodern sublime at the same time (e.g., *The Tree*, *White Flower*, and *Night Sea*, 1962-64). A decade later, Andy Warhol turned everything that was emblematic of high modernism (including the Burkean sublime), upside down and inside out with works such as *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, *Brillo Boxes* and early serial prints (e.g., *Marilyn Diptych*). As well, the *Death and Disaster* and *Electric Chair* silkscreens exemplified the postmodern pleasure/pain dialectic that would come to concern philosophers Jean-Francois Lyotard, Slavoj Žižek, and others.

Also during this period, communications theorist Marshall McLuhan explained how advances in technology were changing the world, from one based on print and

reading to one determined by media technologies. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* was published in 1964, and for the rest of the decade McLuhan stood like Janus at the gate looking backwards toward the old world and forward to what he called the “electric age” and would soon be known as the “postmodern condition.” In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan argued that the only people who could suggest safe pathways from one world to the other were creative artists in the course of their work. He warned that we must pay serious attention to artists in order to learn how to cope with the next “technological blow.” He believed that the postmodern tendency to turn artists into celebrities was a way of avoiding the prophecies embedded in their work.¹

Where modernism focused on the formal aspects of painting and on the individual artist, postmodern practice became diffuse and non-specific in terms of media and methods. In the 1960s, Pop Art was among the first to change the rules; it suddenly seemed that *anything* could be art. In the 1970s, a number of thinkers arose to reevaluate modernism and analyze its successors. For such postmodern writers as Jones, Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek, the terrain of exploration of the sublime moved from Burke and nature to the postmodern eclipse of nature and the neo-Kantian problems of “presenting the unrepresentable” and the “pleasure/pain dialectic.” The sublime became a complex tool for theorizing the postmodern condition.

In this chapter, I will present a brief history of the notion of the sublime, focusing on the writings of Longinus, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. I will also examine the

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (Cambridge: The

important place of the natural sublime in nineteenth-century painting, along with Karl Marx's analysis of the contribution of the machine and the factory to a natural/industrial dialectic that became central to the work of many postmodern philosophers. This dialectic played a role in the development of art and artists in the twentieth century, culminating in the complete turn away from figuration to pure abstraction in the 1940s and 50s—supported by formalist critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. In the 1960s there was a turn back again, when abstraction was rejected in favour of the representation of objects and people from “popular culture.” These were the beginnings of postmodernism, which by the late 1970s was increasingly theorized in terms of the sublime.

The Sublime in History

The concept of the sublime has a long history in Western thought on art, aesthetics, and philosophy, starting with Longinus as early as the 1st century CE. In the 18th century, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant wrote about the beautiful and the sublime in efforts to define both concepts and distinguish each from the other. Until then, an aesthetic of beauty, derived from the classical Greeks, was the chief criterion by which art had been judged. Burke and Kant both elevated the sublime over the beautiful, and their analyses influenced artists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, culminating in the “natural” modern sublime of abstract expressionism in post-war New York—a time when Barnett Newman exalted the sublime and called beauty “the bugbear of European art.”² The discourse around the sublime expanded in the last decades of the 20th century, when

² Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” in John O’Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 171.

many critics, scholars, and philosophers added to the development and understanding of a “technological” postmodern sublime.

In the Introduction to his 1963 edition of Longinus’ treatise *On The Sublime*, John Warrington points out that Longinus was writing about the sublime in speeches and in poetry (both of which were meant to be heard aloud, not read on a page). Warrington then adds, “Longinus defines the sublime in literature as an excellence and supremacy in language whose aim is to dumbfound the audience by simultaneous deployment of all the speaker’s power.”³ However, there are limits, for reason must always rule; Longinus anticipates discussions about reason in both Burke and Kant when he cautions against taking the sublime too far: “The great passions . . . without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let drive at random without ballast.”⁴

Longinus wanted his readers to move their audiences with the most exalted and most effective forms of rhetoric. “Sublimity,” he wrote, “is a kind of height and conspicuous excellence in speeches and writings. . . . What is beyond nature drives the audience not to persuasion, but to ecstasy. What is wonderful, with its stunning power, prevails everywhere over that which aims merely at persuasion and gracefulness.”⁵ The constituents of sublimity include elevated thought and strong emotion: “sublimity is the resonance of greatness of mind”⁶ and adds to speech “weightiness, strength, power, and . . . a kind of vocal soul in things.”⁷

³ John Warrington, ed., *Aristotle’s Poetics* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1963) ix.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵ Longinus, *On The Sublime* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985) 8-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

This was largely the last word on the sublime until 1756, when Edmund Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke echoes and expands on Longinus's notion of "vocal soul" as central to the sublime. To the sublime in speech and writing, Burke adds sight and the other senses, and explains that the sublime is based on combined feelings of delight and terror, but depends on a sense of distance or safety in order to be effective. "Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."⁸ Danger and pain are necessary components of the sublime, but only from a distance. "When danger and pain press too nearly, they ... are simply terrible; but at certain distances and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful."⁹ Kant later agreed. "It is impossible," he wrote, "to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained." However, if the threat of terror is removed, "the agreeableness arising from the cessation ... is *a state of joy*."¹⁰ This "state of joy" formed the basis of the transcendent, modern sublime.

Additionally, the dialectics of terror/joy or pleasure/pain were taken up late in the twentieth century by postmodern philosophers, who found in them a useful tool for theorizing the turn from modernism to postmodernism. Jean-Francois Lyotard points out, "It is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art ... finds its impetus and the logic of

⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33-4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91.

the avant-garde finds its axioms.”¹¹ However, “modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, *though a nostalgic one* (emphasis mine) ... [that does] not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.”¹² In other words, for Lyotard the *real* sublime (the sublime based on fear and its cessation) belongs not to the modern, but to the postmodern. The modern sublime is rooted in the Burkean (and later, Romantic) notion of the sublime as the ultimate emotional state—“the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” It exists in the mind, and accepts the infinitude of rationality—and is therefore nostalgic. One can imaginatively enter the space of a modernist painting because such entry into the sublime is controlled by reason.

While a postmodern work such as Andy Warhol’s *Electric Chair* (Figure 1) can be read with the pleasure/pain dialectic in mind, it forbids the kind of imaginative entry (which Caroline Jones refers to as “absorption”) afforded by a modernist work. This image can be seen as a pictorial embodiment of art that brings a kind of visual pleasure based on emotional pain: a barbaric pleasure in killing is presented within the civilized visuality of art. Jones argues that the electric chair image may seem to “resemble the individuating space of the Abstract Expressionist canvas,”¹³ but in fact the ability to enter the space of a Newman, say, is not possible here—in the Warhol, death would be the result of the “absorption.” “And yet,” she continues, “that very conjunction of absorption

¹¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answering the Question, What is postmodernism?” in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³ Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 216.

and death lies at the fearful nexus of sublimity itself. ... Warhol's electric chair's sublimity is, of course, technologically mediated: death by harnessed voltage is arguably the very instantiation of the technological sublime."¹⁴ To restate this with reference to Lyotard, the modern sublime is nostalgic while the postmodern sublime is more threatening and dangerous because it is based not in nature, but in technology.

This technological sublime stands in sharp contrast to the personal, transcendent sublime of the Abstract Expressionists. These artists wanted to express their deepest individual feelings through their painting, and that required solitary work and lonely struggles to find and express themselves. In 1947 Clement Greenberg described the "striving young artists ... who live in cold water flats and exist from hand to mouth ... and have no reputations beyond a small circle of fanatics."¹⁵ Sympathetic critic Harold Rosenberg wrote of them in the same year: "Attached neither to a community nor to one another, these painters experience a unique loneliness of a depth that is reached perhaps nowhere else in the world. ... Is not the definition of true loneliness, that one is lonely not only in relation to people but in relation to things as well? Estrangement from American objects here reaches the level of pathos. It accounts for certain harsh tonalities, sparseness of composition, aggressiveness of statement."¹⁶

Art created by these painters was *necessarily* abstract—there could be nothing pictorial, no figuration to contain the experience. Rosenberg explained in 1952 that an

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," *Horizon* 16, nos. 93-94, (October 1947), 29.

¹⁶ Harold Rosenberg, "Introduction to Six American Artists," *Possibilities*, no. 1, (Winter 1947-48), 75. Quoted in *New York School, The First Generation* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1965), 18.

abstract expressionist painting was an *act*—“not a picture but an event ... with a special motive for extinguishing the object.”¹⁷ In a way, the artist became the painting, and the painting became the artist. “A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. ... [It] is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s experience. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.”¹⁸ Marshall McLuhan believed that what Rosenberg called “the new painting” actually began with cubism. Cubism abandoned “the specialized illusion of the third dimension on canvas,” and instead presented “all facets of an object simultaneously.”¹⁹ “In other words,” McLuhan continues, “cubism, by giving the inside and the outside, the top, bottom, back, and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole.”²⁰

The abstract expressionist painter’s goal became transcendence over the quotidian, external world of objects and interactions—transcendence over mere pictures. Art had moved away from three-dimensional representation as the basis of beauty. In reaching for a personal transcendent sublime state, the artist hoped to express something universal. Burke first articulated this privileging of the sublime over the beautiful. He believed that beauty derives from pleasure, and the emotions it arouses are weaker than those aroused by the sublime. Beauty tends to reside in objects that are physically small, but vastness or “greatness of dimension [are] a powerful cause of the sublime.”²¹ Along with vastness,

¹⁷ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in *The Tradition of the New*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 25–26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

¹⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 59.

sources of the sublime can include the infinite, evidence of difficulty (e.g., Stonehenge), magnificence, darkness, extreme opposites, dark and deep colours, loud sounds (“the noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery”²²), or the angry cries of wild animals.

Another source of the sublime was succession and uniformity, which Burke called the “artificial infinite.” The character of infinity, Burke says, comes from a setting “where you can nowhere fix a boundary; turn which way you will, the same object still seems to continue, and the imagination has no rest.”²³ This sounds like the sublime of Warhol’s repetitive soup cans or Agnes Martin’s insistent, delicate grids. For example, Martin’s *The Tree* (Figure 2), with its finely drawn verticals and shaded horizontals, has penciled boundaries just inside the edge of the canvas, but as long as the eye is caught up in the “similar but different” lines, there is nowhere else to go—the eye, and the imagination, have no rest. Because the vertical lines have been hand-drawn individually, there are a seemingly endless number of differences between them. Each line is a boundary, and the boundaries multiply into an incessant multitude. This infinitude of repetition is one indicator of the modern sublime.

The Modern Sublime

The modern sublime of the abstract expressionists derived from both the eighteenth-century Burkean sublime and the nineteenth-century nature-rooted sublime of Romantics such as Friedrich and Turner. The Romantic artists created *depictions* of the sublime—vast mountain ranges or storms at sea, for example. These were imagined scenarios

²² Ibid., 68.

²³ Ibid., 61.

rendered on flat two-dimensional planes; they were paintings, not nature itself. However, there were attempts to create paintings that were meant to be in and of themselves sublime, due mainly to their great size and sublime natural subject matter. For example, British painter James Ward's *Gordale Scar* (Figure 3) of 1815 was eleven feet by fourteen feet, and Ward hoped that it would create a sublime reaction in viewers. Writing in 2007 about the "abstract sublime" for an exhibition catalogue, modernist critic Robert Rosenblum explained that the geographical Gordale Scar was a "natural wonder of Yorkshire and a goal of many Romantic tourists. ... [Ward's painting] is meant to stun the spectator into an experience of the Sublime."²⁴ While Burke did state that the sublime required grandness of scale, it is interesting that this idea could be transferred from an object or location in nature to a canvas in a studio.

The notion of scale became an important one for the abstract expressionists. Critic Lawrence Alloway argued in 1959 that the "intimate easel painting" had become "suffocating" by mid-century. "Newman's and Pollock's early big pictures, however ... are large enough to affect our perception of them in relation to their surroundings."²⁵ More recently, Lisa Frye Ashe has written about the interest among the abstract expressionists in increasingly expansive canvases: "Pollock, Newman and Rothko were ... filling [Betty] Parson's apartment-scale gallery with the increasingly large paintings

²⁴ Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime," in *The Abstraction of Landscape: From Northern Romanticism to Abstract Expressionism* (Madrid: Fundacion Juan March, 2007), 161.

²⁵ Lawrence Alloway, "The New American Painting," in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *The New York School: The First Generation* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1965), 10.

we now recognize instantly.”²⁶ One of these was Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, which stood at eight feet tall and over eighteen feet wide. In 1951, when the painting was first shown, Newman posted a sign advising visitors that the picture was “intended to be seen from a short distance,”²⁷ in order that viewers be overwhelmed and “exalted” by the work. As well, a very large canvas was an indication of an artist’s serious theme and intent, and a signal that the work was museum-worthy, at a time when museums were increasingly important purchasers of contemporary art.

However, critics agreed that dimensions alone could not be the exclusive marker of the sublime. Clement Greenberg offered an alternate, more plausible narrative: it was not the size of the canvas, but the development of abstraction (and its concomitant emphasis on colour)—beginning with the Impressionists—that made the transition from the Romantics to the Abstract Expressionists possible. Greenberg noted that by the end of the nineteenth century new ideas about colour were beginning to emerge, along with a desire to break free of traditional strictures around technique and subject matter that were part of the legacy of the Romantics. “Modern art” was beginning to define itself through the work of Cézanne and the other Impressionists. Greenberg argued that the Impressionists, rather than shading with gradations of dark and light to achieve an illusion of three-dimensionality, as the “masters” had done for centuries, saw “prismatic colors in shadows as well as lighted areas, and rendered them with dabs of raw color.”²⁸ Barnett Newman, criticizing the 1944 show at the Museum of Modern Art that traced the history of modernism but ignored the Impressionists, explained that “towards the end of

²⁶ Lisa Frye Ashe, “On Barnett Newman’s *The Wild*,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 73, no. 1 (2014), 34.

²⁷ Barnett Newman, “Statements,” quoted in O’Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 178.

²⁸ Clement Greenberg, *Henri Matisse* (New York: Harry N Abrams, Inc., 1953), 7-8.

the nineteenth century it was discovered that sunlight did not consist of a single ray but, instead, of a complex of wave lengths of light ranging from red to violet. [From then on, the Impressionists] devoted their lives to the problem of painting light.”²⁹

Greenberg and Newman knew each other personally, and were both convinced of the supremacy of contemporary American art (by which both meant *New York* art—Abstract Expressionism in particular). However, no matter how “American” modern art had become by 1945, both men believed that it began in Matisse’s Paris at the end of the 19th century. It then moved in a transatlantic arc that landed in New York during the War, where there began a flowering of work that was as uniquely American as it was important. For the next thirty years or more, colour and form replaced perspective and subject matter as the main concerns of modernist New York painters.

The use of flat planes of saturated colours that Matisse pioneered became a defining characteristic of the work of Newman and many of his fellow abstract expressionists. (Although Newman was often at pains to point out that his colours sat atop the canvas, and were not matte and absorbed, like Matisse’s.) Matisse was also among the first to abandon three-dimensionality, which had been a key aspect of painting since the Renaissance. Throughout Matisse’s long, prolific career, perspective and iconography were always beholden to colour; in Newman’s mature work after 1948, perspective and iconography did not exist. The idea that colour could carry the “message” of a painting was crucial to Newman, and given respectability by Greenberg. Greenberg coined the term “Colour Field” to describe the flat, two-dimensional planes of

²⁹ Barnett Newman, “On Modern Art: Inquiry and Confirmation,” quoted in O’Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 68.

colour that characterized much of Abstract Expressionism—a term that is still in use today.

The abandonment of figuration began with Matisse, who often placed his characters and figures in bright, flat interiors that referenced, but never replicated, real locations. Clement Greenberg called Matisse's 1911 work, *Red Studio* (Figure 4), “perhaps the flattest easel painting done anywhere up to that time. The uniform burnt sienna of floor and walls maintains the entire picture on a single frontal plane.”³⁰ He notes that the flatness is heightened because the paint is soaked into the surface, not coated over it. Linear perspective is implied only through the foreshortening of some of the objects (notably the predominantly pink painting on the left, which is placed “behind” the vase in order to give the illusion of depth).

In his introduction to a Newman retrospective, Greenberg asked viewers to look at Newman's work until they became “aware of shaped emanations of color and light. This kind of painting,” he added, “has more to do with Impressionism than with anything like Cubism or Modernism.”³¹ Greenberg had written earlier about the Impressionist influence on Newman, and on Matisse's influence in particular. “The more you came to ask of painting as sheer painting, the more you were stopped and held [by Matisse].”³² The Abstract Expressionists learned not only from Matisse's use of colour planes, but also from the ways he handled paint. Newman and the New York artists assimilated not only Matisse's “postprismatic” color, “but also his *touch*...

³⁰ Greenberg, *Henri Matisse*, 10.

³¹ Clement Greenberg, “Introduction to an Exhibition of Barnett Newman,” *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol.4*. Edited by John O'Brian. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 54.

³² Greenberg, *Henri Matisse*, 110.

Matisse laid on and stroked varying thinnesses of paint so that the white ground breathed as well as showed through.”³³ Matisse’s “touch” led to Newman’s “emanations” and Martin’s shimmering grids. Impressionism led the way to the modern sublime.

Barnett Newman began his seminal essay “The Sublime Is Now” with this paragraph:

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 aesthetic philosophies. Man’s natural desire in the arts to express his relation to the Absolute became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creation—with the fetish of quality—so that the European artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity.³⁴

According to Newman, only Edmund Burke insisted on a separation of beauty and the sublime. “Greek art,” says Newman, “is an insistence that the sense of [sublime] exaltation is to be found in perfect form ... in contrast, for example with the Gothic or Baroque, in which the sublime consists of a desire to destroy form, where form can be formless.”³⁵ Newman believed that the dialectic of the beautiful and the sublime set up by the Greeks and reintroduced in the Renaissance, was at the heart of the history of Western art. “The climax in this struggle between beauty and the sublime can best be examined inside the Renaissance and the reaction later against the Renaissance that is known as modern art.”³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” quoted in O’Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 171

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 172.

Compare Newman's rejection of beauty to this statement by his friend and contemporary Agnes Martin: "All art work is about beauty; all positive work represents it and celebrates it."³⁷ Martin happened to employ the tools of Minimalism—parallel lines, grids, repetition, and a muted palette—to express the emotional goals of Abstract Expressionism, which included wonder, awe, and a reaching toward the sublime. "My work is about emotion," Martin has said. "Not personal emotion, [but] abstract emotion ... It's about those subtle moments of happiness we all experience."³⁸ By "abstract emotion" she meant an idealized happiness. "That which takes us by surprise," she wrote, "—moments of happiness—that is inspiration. Inspiration which is different from daily care."³⁹ Martin also wrote that the "function of artwork ... is the renewal of memories of moments of perfection."⁴⁰ Critic and author Thomas McEvelley compares this to Barnett Newman's belief that art should evoke a "memory of the emotion of an experienced moment of total reality."⁴¹ In many ways, Martin's definition of beauty overlaps with Newman's notion of the sublime. Both artists work within an objective rational order that elevates internal experience for both artist and viewer—a transcendent, sublime experience that essentially pulls form beyond its own limit.

The Postmodern Sublime

Marshall McLuhan articulated the turn from the modern to the postmodern as part of the shift from a culture dominated by print media to one now at the mercy of a barrage of new electronic media. In this way, McLuhan also theorized the cultural upheavals of the

³⁷ Agnes Martin, *Writings*, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1991), 153.

³⁸ Quoted in Benita Eisler, "Profile: Life Lines," *The New Yorker* (January 25, 1993), 70.

³⁹ Martin, *Writings*, 61.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Thomas McEvelley, *The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 68.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

1960s that were often the symptoms of that turn. Lewis Lapham, in his Introduction to the 1994 edition of McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, includes a list of some of the "leitmotifs" that run through the book. They compare the "print age" (which lasted from Gutenberg to Thomas Edison) to "the sensibility now known as the postmodern."⁴² For example, *mechanical* is contrasted to *organic*, *continuous* to *discontinuous*, and *soliloquy* to *chorus*.⁴³ In terms of art, the last comparison highlights the need that modern artists felt to work alone, versus the postmodern tendency toward group effort, sharing, and collaboration.

Art historian Caroline Jones expressed the modernist "soliloquy" as the desire of Newman and the Abstract Expressionists to experience an *individuating sublime* through two complementary acts—the act of the solitary artist painting in his studio, and the act of the solitary viewer looking up-close at the resulting canvas in a sparse and sanitized art gallery. Andy Warhol reacted to the tendency toward solitude and heroic self-description by doing the opposite. According to Jones, "Warhol joined other artists of the 1960s in seeking a radical distance from the Abstract Expressionists' version of modernism—their conception of originality, their emphasis on the autographic touch, and their romance with the isolated studio."⁴⁴ At his studio, the Factory, he presented himself as a member of a busy collective, where he claimed that assistants actually did the work. He created his art in an atmosphere of what Jones calls the "performative technological sublime," which resulted in images that did not reflect the individual, creative soul of a heroic,

⁴² Lewis Lapham, "Introduction," quoted in McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, xii.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii

⁴⁴ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 189.

solitary artist, but instead tapped into the preoccupations and uncertainties of the early 1960s.

For Jones, the dilemma of the technological sublime lies in the ambivalences of a culture that would like to idealize nature even as it destroys it, while simultaneously dealing with “the real pressures of want and need, desire and coercion that drive culture’s awesome machines.”⁴⁵ Warhol appeared to adopt the methods of mass production as a counter to the singular introspective expressions of the late modernists, and chose to promote himself and his art within the cultural context of commercial design and popular culture. Jones calls this “a brilliant example of the performative technological sublime” and continues, “When we examine Warhol’s famously camp performativity, the psychological processes of sublimity ... can be located in the ambivalencies and oscillations of the icons he produced.”⁴⁶ If you flip the coin of Newman’s or Martin’s private and personal *individuating sublime*, you see Warhol’s very public *performative technological sublime*.

What transects the discourse around all three artists, however, is the sublime. Caroline Jones describes the overall atmosphere of mid-century America as “the darkly brazen, the threatening, and the powerful.” She attributes these terms to Edmund Burke, as the components of “the highest order of aesthetic experience: the sublime.”⁴⁷ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the threatening and the powerful had been found in nature—in lofty peaks or rough seas. At the same time, however, a transformed sublime was beginning to develop indoors, in the factories and sweat shops of the Industrial

⁴⁵ Ibid., 191.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 203.

Revolution, crowded with what Marx called “mechanical monsters” with the “vast and furious whirl of [their] numberless working organs.”⁴⁸

Fredric Jameson writes that it was Andy Warhol’s “flatness” that announced the arrival of the postmodern. In a discussion that contrasts the modern with the postmodern through a comparison of Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Boots* with Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* (Figure 5), Jameson says that the Warhol is evidence of “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms.”⁴⁹ This superficiality marks one of the turns from the modern to the postmodern sublime. Instead of the deep and often anguished existential search for the inner self that obsessed Newman and the other abstract expressionists, there was Andy Warhol’s comment about his role: “An artist is somebody who produces things that people don’t need to have.”⁵⁰ From the formal flatness of Greenberg’s Matisse, we come to Warhol’s flatness that allows no entry. There is nothing to enter—everything is there on the surface: the triumph of content over form.

Another turn from modern to postmodern came as a new, cynical view of nature itself. Newman may have moved himself beyond nature to a “home in the world of pure idea,” but Warhol moved to a world where nature was irrelevant. Jameson identifies this as the “moment of a radical eclipse of nature itself,” caused by the “development of capitalism into a globalized system.”⁵¹ For Burke, Jameson says, the sublime bordered on terror, but now terror no longer resides in nature, but in technology. “The other of our

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2013), 294.

⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 9.

⁵⁰ “BrainyQuote,” http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/andy_warhol.html

⁵¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34-5.

society is no longer nature, [but is instead] that enormous ... power of human labor stored up in our machinery.”⁵² He argues for “a return to older theories of the sublime”⁵³ to help us theorize the postmodern and therefore understand the space we move in. The only way “to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” is through a theory of the postmodern sublime.⁵⁴

“Older theories of the sublime” included the denigration of beauty as a value in art, and the inclusion of the fear of violence as a necessary component of sublime feeling. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant states that the beautiful in nature is “connected with the form of the object,” while the sublime “is to be found in an object devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves ... a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality.” Beauty “is bound up with the representation of *quality*,”⁵⁵ and the sublime with *quantity*. The sublime arouses us “without indulging in any refinements of thought, but simply in our apprehension of it ... and [if] it were to do violence, as it were, to the imagination ... it is judged all the more sublime on that account.”⁵⁶

Warhol’s *Electric Chair* comes to mind. Warhol followed Newman and the modernists in their break from beauty—traditional notions of beauty, other than the parodic images of the “quotationally ‘beautiful’”⁵⁷ female cultural icons such as Marilyn or Jackie, seem irrelevant to Warhol’s work. Doing “violence ... to the imagination,” however, is highly relevant. This sublime “violence” comes from several sources,

⁵² Ibid., 36.

⁵³ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 75.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 76

⁵⁷ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 216.

including the shock of Warhol's break with the familiarity of the modern, and the disturbing and sinister image in *Electric Chair*, for example—a photograph of an instrument of death. This notion of “violence,” which can range from discomfort to terror, is historically an important part of the sublime pleasure/pain dialectic. For Kant, as for Burke, the sublime always involves both comfort and discomfort, or pleasure and pain. The discomfort comes from the inability of the imagination to apprehend the limits of an object or experience, while the pleasure comes from the imagination realizing this very inability. For example, Kant says that for a first-time visitor to the huge and magnificent St. Peter's in Rome, “a feeling comes home to him of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of a whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself, but in doing so succumbs to an emotional delight.”⁵⁸ Unlike the beautiful, which always results in pleasure, the sublime results in both repulsion and attraction, or pain and pleasure.

In his 1978 deconstruction of the *Critique*, Jacques Derrida looks closely at Kant's distinction between the pleasure of the beautiful and the pleasure of the sublime. “The pleasure (*Lust*) provoked by the sublime is negative. ... In the experience of the beautiful there is intensification and acceleration of life. ... In the feeling of the sublime, pleasure only ‘gushes indirectly.’ It comes after inhibition, arrest, suppression ... that is all the more potent.”⁵⁹ Beauty provokes an acceleration of positive feeling that can only last as long as understanding will allow. The sublime is a concept of reason—the

⁵⁸ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 83.

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1987), 128.

feelings that it unleashes are delayed by the mixture of fear and delight. Delight is held back at first, as if by a dam, but then “gushes” forth when released.

Derrida also echoes Kant’s connection of the sublime with imaginative violence. He quotes Kant: “that is sublime which pleases immediately by its opposition (*Widerstand*) to the interest of the senses.”⁶⁰ This “opposition” is the violence done by the imagination, raised by the sublime, which “suspends play and elevates to seriousness.”⁶¹ Derrida then extends the image through imaginative (and violent) language that emphasizes the effect of the sublime on the imagination: “the violence is here done by the imagination, not by reason. The imagination turns this violence against itself, it mutilates itself, ties itself, binds itself, sacrifices itself and conceals itself, gashes itself and robs itself.”⁶²

While his language is less colourful, Slavoj Žižek makes a similar point. Explaining Kant’s concept of the feeling of the sublime as “a feeling of displeasure,” Žižek says, “We can see now why it is precisely nature in its most chaotic, boundless, terrifying dimension which is best qualified to awaken in us the feeling of the Sublime: here, where the aesthetic imagination is strained to its utmost, where all finite determinations dissolve themselves, the failure appears at its fullest.”⁶³ The failure of the imagination to adequately represent the terrifying is itself the cause of a kind of pleasure or delight. The scope of the sublime is thus well beyond that of mere beauty.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 130.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 130-131

⁶³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 230.

For Kant, however, part of both the terror and the joy of the sublime was the fact that it cannot be represented. While beauty is apprehended through the senses, it is the mind—reason—that instigates the experience of the sublime. “For the sublime ... cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself, which does admit of sensuous presentation.”⁶⁴ Paradoxically, we are unable to represent the sublime, but we *can* represent that inability, that very inadequacy.

In the words of Lyotard: “We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined ‘to make visible’ this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible.”⁶⁵ Derrida points out that the sublime is experienced in the mind of the viewer (subject), and is not held within the object. “The sublime cannot inhabit any sensible form. There are natural objects that are beautiful, but there cannot be a natural object that is sublime.”⁶⁶ Because the sublime relates only to reason, “it therefore refuses all adequate presentation.”⁶⁷ The postmodern sublime has become the opposite of its modernist predecessor.

Conclusion

The sublime has existed as the pre-eminent aesthetic value in Western art since at least the eighteenth century. It transects both modernist painting and postmodern artistic

⁶⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 76.

⁶⁵ Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?” 43.

⁶⁶ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 131.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

practice, and its transformation from natural to technological is a key marker in the quick turn from one set of understandings about art to a radically different set. The following chapter will consider the role of the artist's working style and studio in the development of the sublime, through an examination of works by Newman, Martin, and Warhol. Chapter Three will examine the role of the Romantic sublime in the formation of its modernist successor. The sublime was at the heart of the abstract expressionists' sense of their belief that they occupied a unique place in the development of art through their search for a modern American sublime. The final chapter will consider the role that Andy Warhol's work, methodology and projected persona played in the formation of the postmodern sublime, and how that formation led—in the 1970s and beyond—to an intense intellectual examination of the sublime as a tool for understanding the postmodern condition.

Chapter II – The Studio and The Sublime

Introduction

In this chapter, I will consider the role of the studio, and the ways in which the artist worked within that studio, in the formation of the sublime. The studio was the scene of the connection between identity (whether heroic male or queer) and the sublime. Barnett Newman and Agnes Martin both worked in solitude in studios that rarely saw visitors—a *métier* which Caroline Jones refers to as a function of the “egotistical sublime.” Newman strove for a transcendent sublime that had moved beyond nature, and Martin worked with a geometric sublime that would awaken emotional memories of perfect Platonic memories of nature. Andy Warhol ignored nature altogether, and modeled his studio ironically after the pre-war assembly line factories of his hometown Pittsburgh. He called it the Factory, and filled it with assistants and hangers-on—who all had a hand in creating his paintings, silkscreens, and films. Warhol replaced the focused unity of the modern studio with the dispersed multiplicity of his postmodern Factory.

The Studio

Andy Warhol, writing about the New York art world of the late 1950s, remarked, “Pollock came in from the country every Tuesday. That was part of the big out-of-the-city-and-into-the country trend that the Abstract Expressionist painters had started.... Right in the middle of the twentieth century, artists were still following the tradition of

wanting to get out there alone in the woods and do their stuff.... But the sixties changed all that back again—from country to city.”⁶⁸

Warhol’s account of an abstract expressionist emigration to the woods is somewhat exaggerated—even in 1960, most New York painters worked in lofts or other studio spaces in the city. The important differences between the studios of the “old” painters and the “new” ones were not where they were located, but who was allowed to work inside them. For Newman, Pollock, Martin and the rest of the abstract expressionists, the artist alone was permitted to work in his or her studio. (Occasionally an assistant helped with such ‘non artistic’ tasks as stretching or framing.) That changed in the 1960s—Warhol himself, for example, worked in a space populated with assistants, friends, clients, and assorted hangers-on.

What Warhol was describing was not literally a shift from rural to urban, but rather a shift in artists’ attitudes and outlooks. The turn was two-fold, from the creation of art as a singular activity to a collective one, and from a consciousness originating in the natural world to one rooted in technological development. At the same time, this was a move from the modern sublime to the postmodern sublime—although that aspect of the turn was not theorized until later in the 1970s. As consciousness changed, so did the sites where artistic production occurred in the first place—the studios. These sites were crucial to the enactment of artistic awareness, whether modern or postmodern, and were spaces that were conducive to their respective sublimines.

⁶⁸ Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 18.

In his 1902 painting, *L'Atelier sous les toits* (Figure 6), Henri Matisse presented a version of the artist's studio at the turn of the century—a dark, confined space, containing only the basic tools of the profession—easel, canvas, paint—and the simplest of furnishings or decoration. Light comes from the single attic window. Outside is bright sun, green trees and a building of pink and baby blue. On the floor, to the right of the window, is a yellow/white daub to indicate a triangular patch of sunlight. If the sharply sloping ceiling isn't enough to tell us that the studio is tucked tightly under the roof, then the title of the work makes it plain—we are looking at “the studio under the eaves.”

Whether the painting is meant to show Matisse's actual studio or not, it does provide a pictorial rendition of the trope of the artist's creative space at the turn of the twentieth century, during the early stages of modernist painting. The room is tiny, for only one person ever works there, and there is a sharp contrast between the stark, gloomy interior and the cheery brightness outside the window. There are no creature comforts, not even a chair—a Spartan rejection of bourgeois trappings that was thought to be an important part of the creative process. Matisse, like most “modern” artists of his day, felt that it was extremely important to separate himself from the bourgeoisie, for it was only outside the mainstream that an artist could create anything new. These artists were necessarily “bohemians,” part of an avant-garde that shunned conventionality. This attitude led to the stereotype of “the starving artist in a garret,” which was well enough known by the end of the nineteenth century that in the 1890s Puccini could base his popular opera *La Bohème* on it.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ *La Bohème* was first staged in 1896. This twentieth century version of its stage set (Figure 7) is not unlike Matisse's *Atelier*.

The Impressionists were united by a revolt against conventionality and the bourgeoisie; to threaten the status quo was always part of their program. This defiant trait defined modernist artistic practice for the remainder of the 20th century. In a low moment of creativity, Matisse wrote to fellow painter Pierre Bonnard, “I am paralyzed by some element of conventionality that keeps me from expressing myself as I would like to do in paint.”⁷⁰ This was not the lament of a young or beginning artist. Matisse wrote this in 1940, when he was 71—and still struggling to free himself from bourgeois ties and sensibilities. Barnett Newman, on the other hand, felt that he had succeeded in that difficult task. Newman wrote to art dealer Sidney Janis in 1955, “My struggle against bourgeois society has involved the total rejection of it.”⁷¹ The conventional and the bourgeois were the enemies, and this meant that the rules of the past had to be broken, and new rules discovered and applied. This process of rejection followed by discovery was necessarily one that individual artists had to go through on their own.

The notion of the solitary artist was a part of the definition of “modern” right from the start. In 1863, in the seminal essay that was one of the earliest articulations of modernism, the Romantic poet Charles Baudelaire described “the painter of modern life” as one who is “solitary, gifted with an active imagination.... He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory.”⁷² The solitary artist does not work collegially, because “to distil the eternal” one must necessarily express a personal, transcendent vision. The

⁷⁰ Quoted in Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 4.

⁷¹ Newman, quoted in O’Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 201.

⁷² Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. J. Mayne (London; Phaidon, 1964), 12.

modern painter does not seek to mimic life, but to express its essence. This kind of art requires inspiration, and inspiration requires solitude and time—two things best accessed in a studio that exists exclusively for one (usually male) individual.

All of this—the solitary artist, the individual studio, the rejection of the bourgeois, and the need to express a personal transcendent vision—was inherited by the post-war abstract expressionists, and then rejected by the next generation of young artists of the 1950s and 1960s. Regarding the older generation, Caroline Jones writes, “The concepts of the studio that operated in America during the 1940s and 1950s were inextricably tied to nineteenth-century Romanticism”⁷³ and its privileging of the idea of the artist as an individual genius. She uses Eugène Delacroix’s *Michelangelo in His Studio* (Figure 8)—a painting of the artist alone with his sculptures—to illustrate the Romantic (and still widespread) view of Michelangelo as “the solitary individual whose inspired touch constituted his genius.”⁷⁴ In Delacroix’s “re-reading” of history, Michelangelo becomes the first “modern” artist, the progenitor of all the soul-searching, expressive painters who followed. This studio then becomes the model for all serious artists, right up until the middle of the twentieth century. For the artist, the studio is the literal and metaphorical site of sublime expression—this is where genius is realized in paint. For both Barnett Newman and Agnes Martin, the studio was the physical and psychological site of the search for meaning through paint.

However, for the postmodern artist, the studio was not the site of one person’s existential angst and expression, but one of artistic production based on principles

⁷³ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

implied by the acceptance of the central place of technology in the world. According to Jones, two examples are Frank Stella's "use of assistants in producing his brand," and Andy Warhol's "conversion of studio into factory, use of assembly-line techniques on serial objects, and claims to delegate art production" to surrogates.⁷⁵ Warhol's exploitation of both the style and substance of mechanical reproduction, and his enthusiastic—if ironic—acceptance of America's bourgeois commercial products, was an abrupt and complete turn away from the existential avant-garde modernism of the abstract expressionists. In the rest of this chapter, I will examine the modes of production, of three different artists, along with their unique articulations of the sublime—Barnett Newman, an abstract expressionist who valorized the Burkean sublime; Agnes Martin, who expressed the abstract sublime through a geometric equilibrium of opposites; and, Andy Warhol, the Pop celebrity-artist whose Factory became "a primary source for the performative aspect of the technological sublime."⁷⁶

Barnett Newman

The ethos of the modern sublime involves a process of individuation that requires an artist to realize a personal vision in a unique way. The expression of this vision in individual works of art often takes years of study, soul-searching and experimentation. Artists routinely destroy their earliest paintings, created when they were still "finding their way." Barnett Newman struggled for years to discover a way to express the sublime through non-representational paintings. His breakthrough came in 1948, when he was 43 years old, with *Onement I* (Figure 9), where an orange vertical stripe or *zip* seems to both divide and unite a smooth reddish brown field. Critic Arthur Danto later called the zip,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 190.

which appears in one form or another in almost every Newman painting after this one, “the exclusive and definitive element in Newman’s vision.”⁷⁷ It enabled Newman to define the spatial structure of his paintings and was key to his goal, shared by the other abstract expressionists, to create *paintings* as opposed to pictures. Pictures represent objects in an illusory three-dimensional space. Paintings, however, *present* themselves as “objects to which the viewer relates without mediation.”⁷⁸ In the words of Clement Greenberg, the content of abstract art “is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work ... cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything other than itself.”⁷⁹ Abstraction is not about anything that can be shown pictorially; it is about that which cannot be shown—the transcendent, the exalted, the sublime.

Newman’s first two solo shows were at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950 and 1951. They included *Onement I*, along with a number of other “zip paintings.” Two of the best known of these now are the enormous *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 10) and the thin, tall *The Wild*, (Figure 11) which appears to be comprised entirely of a zip. For the 1950 show, Newman wrote the following short statement:

These paintings are not “abstractions,” nor do they depict some “pure” idea. They are specific and separate embodiments of feeling, to be experienced, each picture for itself. They contain no depictive allusions. Full of restrained passion, their poignancy is revealed in each concentrated image.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Arthur Danto, “Barnett Newman,” *The Nation*, (June 17, 2002), 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 6.

⁸⁰ Newman, in O’Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 178.

This statement about what Newman thought his paintings were and were not is perhaps his most succinct description of the sublime, emotional intent of his art. Each painting is a passionate expression of this one artist's feelings.

For his second show at Parsons, Newman's direction to the viewer was terser:

There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance.

The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.⁸¹

The two statements together reveal Newman's intentions for both himself and the viewers of his work. As an artist, he has worked alone to fill his paintings with "restrained passion," which needs to be experienced first-hand and up-close by each individual viewer. In the case of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, the painting is so red and so wide (18') that it seems to bathe the viewer in a red glow. Its horizontality asserts itself through its five vertical zips—as critic Michael Schreyach explains, the zips "structure what might otherwise dissolve into the impression of an amorphous red expanse."⁸² Schreyach says that there are three stages (which may be simultaneous) of spatial perception as one beholds *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. One is the sense of being surrounded by or subsumed within "the painting's sheer physical size and chromatic extent." The second is the sense of self-awareness that Newman intends—the viewer "is separate from the painting yet in dialogue with it." The third involves the zips. When focusing on one of them the viewer

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Michael Schreyach, "Barnett Newman's 'Sense of Space'" *Common Knowledge* (19:2, October 2015), 367.

experiences a visual stretch that induces Newman's feeling of being "full and alive in a spatial dome of 180 degrees going in all four directions."⁸³

On the other hand, *The Wild*, which is a band of red paint 8 feet tall and 1½ inches wide, creates a feeling of going in only two directions—up and down. Schreyach explains how this vertical band "produces a longitudinal visual stretch that creates a concentrated feeling of space."⁸⁴ In its rejection of the conventional horizontal plane, it forces the viewer, in Newman's own words, "to know he's there ... [to be] aware of himself." Newman said this in connection with *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, which provides the same sort of existential awareness as *The Wild*, but through means that are both oppositional and complementary. Oppositional because one painting is wide (horizontal) and the other is tall (vertical), and complementary because humans require both axes in order to stand up in and move through the world.

There are a number of photographs of Newman at those first Parsons Gallery shows, many by the noted portrait photographer Hans Namuth. Namuth is best known for his "action photos" of Jackson Pollock painting in his studio, but his pictures of Newman are quite different—they do not show the artist at work, but posed formally with his finished paintings. Newman often preferred to be photographed in the gallery, rather than in his working space. He often stood with his back to the camera, in order to illustrate to viewers the best way to view his works (see Figure 12). Newman did agree to be part of two documentary film series: *USA: Artists* in 1966 and Emile de Antonio's *Painters Painting* (c. 1970). In the first film, Newman allowed the cameras into his

⁸³ Ibid., 369.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 361.

studio, but not to watch him paint. “I’m willing to have a camera photograph me mixing paints, washing the canvas, stretching ... in *preparation* for a painting,”⁸⁵ but he insisted that the act of painting itself must be a private one. In the second film, he comments, “We artists each worked alone in our studios.”⁸⁶ As Caroline Jones observes, “Painting will remain private and inviolate for [Newman], thus preserving the heroism of the Abstract Expressionist generation while suggesting how far from the contemporary studio it had come.”⁸⁷

Interestingly, the 1946 painting *Pagan Void* (Figure 13) forms part of the background behind Newman in both films. Painted before his discovery of the zip in 1948, biomorphic shapes and surrealist-like symbolism (and clear reference to sperm and ovum) make it entirely unlike Newman’s “mature” work. Yet to come were the grand gestures of enormous canvases, whose very physicality, unmediated by representation, was meant to both express the deepest feelings of the painter and awaken feelings of the sublime in the viewer. Art critic and poet Frank O’Hara, writing about Jackson Pollock, captured this key intention of abstract expressionist painting, when he said that it united the physicality and spirituality of the artist into “a oneness that has no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol. It is Action Painting.”⁸⁸ Unlike Agnes Martin, who destroyed almost all her work before she developed her “mature” style, Newman did not disavow the symbolic *Pagan Void*. In allowing the painting to appear with him on film, he seems to be acknowledging the developmental nature of his art.

⁸⁵ Newman, in Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 82.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁸ Frank O’Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954 – 1966* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1975), 35.

At the opposite end of Newman's developmental spectrum was the series *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (Figure 14)—four paintings with the same name, differentiated by number. Newman painted them between 1966 and 1970—his final works. In them, Newman consciously confronted what he called Mondrian's "dogma, which had reduced red, yellow and blue into an idea-didact."⁸⁹ He wanted a complete victory over all forms of representation, over anything that was abstracted from natural reality. He was determined to reclaim the primary colours from the "purists and formalists who have put a mortgage on red, yellow, and blue."⁹⁰ His lifelong effort to express the heroic and the sublime through size and colour culminated in these exceptionally strong and assertive works. When complimented on the dominant and brilliant reds in these newer paintings, Newman said, "I wanted them as rich and red as possible. I was after, you might say, *reditude*."⁹¹

'Reditude' was part and parcel of Newman's break from antiquity, the Renaissance, the Romantics, and even what he saw as European modern art. Long before *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, he had believed that he and the other mid-century abstract expressionists had a historical mission to fulfill. In response to a 1947 essay by Clement Greenberg in *The Nation* about the abstract expressionists, Newman wrote "the images of even the most original of the abstract European painters, Miró and Mondrian, have always had their base in sensual nature. . . . The American painters under discussion [Gottlieb, Rothko, Newman, etc.] create an entirely different reality to arrive at new unsuspected images. They start with the chaos of pure fantasy and feeling, with

⁸⁹ Newman, in O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 192.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Ann Temkin, ed., *Barnett Newman*, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 70.

nothing that has any known physical, visual, or mathematical counterpart, and bring out of this chaos of emotion images which give these intangibles reality.”⁹²

Newman believed that through their search for the sublime, he and the other Abstract Expressionist painters had liberated form from the visible worlds of classicism and Romanticism, and taken it to a place loftier than mere beauty or grandeur. As critic and author Harold Rosenberg pointed out in 1978, in the mid-1950s “excellence [was] presumed to subsist not in the character of what is pictured but exclusively in the artist’s interpretation of the formal possibilities of his medium. To expose grandeur as a value in painting is to arouse suspicion of being either an aesthetic reactionary or a crank.”⁹³

Newman was obviously neither. However, through his reliance on the flat colour field and vertical zip, he may have theorized himself into a dead-end. The basic format of Newman’s work remained essentially the same from 1948 until his death in 1970. In 1984, Paul Crowther wrote a negative analysis of Newman’s overall artistic development, focusing on Newman’s “theory-determined repetition of a minimal visual format” that led him to the over-use of “the paradigm structure of *Onement I*... [which] effectively reduces the expression of the transcendent sublime to a formula. ... Newman’s obsessive pursuit of the transcendent sublime”⁹⁴ was ultimately self-defeating.

⁹² Newman, quoted in Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Walker and Company, 1969), 37.

⁹³ Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978), 23.

⁹⁴ Paul Crowther, “Barnett Newman and the Sublime,” *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1984) 57

“By coming up with a formula for sublimity,” says Crowther, “Newman tends to inhibit the possibility of a complete experience of it.”⁹⁵

Whether Newman’s search for the sublime was formulaic or not seems beside the point. A new generation was rejecting the certainties of modernism were, and the world—and the sublime with it—was moving on. Pop Art and Minimalism were the first waves of what would soon be called the postmodern condition. While Agnes Martin clearly had little in common with the Pop sensibility, her work played an important transitional role in the turn from modernist to postmodern. Her grids were at times considered to be part of the new Minimalist movement, and one of the first showings of a grid painting was in the seminal group show curated by Robert Smithson in 1966. As her work became better known, though, it became clear that her grids were not part of the pared-down materialism of the Minimalists, but were much closer to Barnett Newman’s world of pure abstraction. And as Minimalism gave way to conceptual art and many other postmodern expressions, Martin’s work remained consistently modernist throughout her entire long life.

Agnes Martin

Agnes Martin lived and worked in New York City for ten years starting in 1957. This was where she developed her own expression of the modernist abstract sublime. Martin was a unique woman whose experience led her to a deep and solitary exploration of the idea that transcendence in painting could be achieved through variations on a single format—the grid. She was first shown with early Minimalist painters, although she herself always identified with abstract expressionism. Martin (1912 – 2004) came rather

⁹⁵ Ibid.

late in life to painting, and was well into middle age before she hit her stride as a mature artist. She was variously an athlete, teacher, traveller, Zen enthusiast, and—not least significant—a closeted lesbian. She was also a diagnosed schizophrenic who had to be hospitalized a number of times as a result of her disease.

Martin was born in Macklin, Saskatchewan in 1912. Her father died when she was two, and at seven her mother moved the family to Vancouver. At sixteen, she qualified for the Canadian Olympic swimming team (although ultimately could not afford to travel to Amsterdam for the competition), and three years later moved to the United States. She studied to be a teacher, and taught in different public schools in Washington State. In 1941 she moved to New York to study Fine Arts and Arts Education at Teachers College at Columbia. She taught part time while painting, and at age thirty she realized that she wanted to be an artist. To that end, she moved to Albuquerque and studied fine art at the University of New Mexico, while at the same time studying the teaching of reading in primary school. In 1950 she became a U.S. citizen.

In 1951 she returned to New York, where she both studied in the Master of Arts program at Columbia and taught school in Harlem. Here (along with John Cage, Ad Rinehardt and a number of other artists) she attended the public lectures of influential Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki, and became deeply interested in Eastern philosophy. After receiving her Masters degree, she moved back west and taught art at Eastern Oregon College, then back east for more work at Columbia, and finally settled in 1955 in Taos, New Mexico, where she built her own home and studio, in order to paint full time. By that time, Taos was a significant artistic outpost where, according to a chronology created for Martin's recent Guggenheim retrospective, “ her paintings became more abstract and

biomorphic, reflecting cubist, surrealist and abstract expressionist influences.”⁹⁶ Here she met agent and gallery owner Betty Parsons, who offered to represent her work in New York, but only if Martin would move to the city. Martin agreed and in 1957 she moved into an abandoned sailmaker’s loft in Coenties Slip in lower Manhattan.

This was where Martin developed her mature style, working with the grids that characterized her painting and drawing for the rest of her life. Jonathan Katz, a scholar who writes from the point of view of sexuality, has noted that in those years Coenties Slip “was then one of America’s only largely queer artistic enclaves. . . . Martin was with her then partner, Lenore Tawney, and within a few blocks lived a contingent of the early post-Abstract Expressionist queer avant-garde, including artists she knew glancingly (such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly) and those true intimates who made up her immediate circle. Among the latter, we know of Ellsworth Kelly (with whom she breakfasted daily), of her affection for Robert Indiana (Kelly’s partner at the time), of her abiding closeness and understanding with Ann Wilson and of course, most centrally, with Tawney herself.”⁹⁷

Katz notes that “it was here, among this quasi family of (mostly) other queer artists, that Martin made work that satisfied her.”⁹⁸ It should also be noted that Betty Parsons was a lesbian, which might help account for the quick development of both the personal and professional relationship between the two women. None of this is to say

⁹⁶ Lena Fritsch, “Chronology,” *Agnes Martin*, eds. Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell (London: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers Inc. in Morris & Bell, 2015), 238.

⁹⁷ Jonathan D. Katz, “Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction,” *Agnes Martin*, eds. Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schroder (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 176.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

that sexuality overtly influenced Martin’s artistic output—or anyone else’s, for that matter. Hidden sexuality was a fact of life in mid-century America; homosexuality was still illegal, and open displays were not possible. However, while it must have provided emotional relief to be among like-minded artists who understood each other, sexuality did not seem to play an overt role in the overall group dynamic. Generally speaking, the Coenties Slip artists kept to themselves and worked hard at their art.

Martin spoke many times about her Coenties Slip lofts (she occupied two different spaces over the ten years she was there), and it was always clear that the location suited her perfectly. In a 1993 *New Yorker* profile, Martin recalled that her loft was one hundred feet long, with “two skylights and fourteen foot ceilings with great beams.”⁹⁹ Here she worked alone, but surrounded by a loose-knit community of fellow-artists who held key values in common, including the primary importance of work, and the individual’s need for solitude. In an interview about this community for *Cue* magazine, Martin offered, “when you paint, you don’t have time to get involved with people, everything must fall before work. That’s what’s wonderful about the Slip—we all respect each other’s need to work.”¹⁰⁰

When Betty Parsons first met Martin in Taos in 1957, Martin was working (in the words of biographer Nancy Princenthal) with “biomorphic abstractions in bleached shades of sand and sky,”¹⁰¹ and while the paintings for her first show at Parsons in December 1958 were created in New York, they were consistent with her Taos output.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Eisler, “Profiles: Life Lines,” 75.

¹⁰⁰ Agnes Martin, quoted in Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 68.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

The Spring (Figure 15) is an example: the two monochrome rectangles floating above each other and separated by three horizontal bars, all in pale neutral shades, are reminiscent of both early Rothko and Newman. Like them, Martin was searching for a way to express transcendent values through non-representational abstraction, but had not yet developed a unique style. In her next show, one year later, Princenthal continues, “the palette deepened, and small circles and rectangles dominated the compositions; titles included *Wheat, Tideline, Earth, and Buds*. Her third and final exhibition at Parsons, in 1961, featured the early grid works.”¹⁰² That show included a number of highly detailed and repetitive small drawings (Figure 16) that prefigured the larger paintings that followed, including the shimmering *Night Sea*. (Figure 17)

It is the grid works, of course, that became Martin’s hallmark. Through them, she explored the full range of what she called “abstract emotions”—perfect Platonic memories of moments of positive feeling. While Rosalind Krauss once observed that the grid “is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature,”¹⁰³ Martin did not use the grid to turn her back on nature; she used it to transcend nature, to express an idealized nature—something more like a meditation on nature than any direct reference to it. The key to this was not through form, but formlessness. Like Newman after 1948, Martin strove to eliminate metaphor and symbol from her work, by seeking to eliminate form altogether. “My paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything—no forms. They are ... about formlessness, breaking down form.”¹⁰⁴ For her, spiritual perfection lay in memory, particularly memory of the natural world. Asked by a viewer about the fact

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Grids,” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 9.

¹⁰⁴ Martin, quoted in Eisler, “Profile: Life Lines,” 76.

that there are no geese in the painting *Grey Geese Descending*, she replied, “I painted the emotions we have when we feel grey geese descending.”¹⁰⁵ Many of Martin’s titles guide the viewer to look at the work the way she intended—as a reference to feelings experienced in nature, but not in any allegorical or symbolic fashion. Allegory requires form; like Newman, Martin strove to bring form to a point of formlessness.

Rosalind Krauss wrote, “The terrain of [Martin’s] work ... is that of the abstract sublime, behind which, underwriting it as its field of relevance, is the immensity, the endlessness, the ecstasy, the *terribilitá* of nature.”¹⁰⁶ Another name for this endlessness, ecstasy or *terribilitá* is the formlessness that is at the heart of the sublime. Kant felt that it was formlessness that separated the sublime from the merely beautiful. In the *Critique of Judgment*, he states that the beautiful in nature is “connected with the form of the object,” while the sublime “is to be found in an object devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves ... a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality.” Beauty “is bound up with the representation of *quality*,”¹⁰⁷ and the sublime with *quantity*. The sublime arouses us “without indulging in any refinements of thought, but simply in our apprehension of it.”¹⁰⁸

Martin’s abstract sublime was dependent almost entirely on line and colour. Her hand-drawn lines are individually unique—some straight, some wavy, some painted, some penciled, some etched, and so on. Often her lines meet at right angles to form grids.

¹⁰⁵ Martin, quoted in McEvelley, *The Exile’s Return*, 71.

¹⁰⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/,” *Inside The Visible: an Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher, 330 – 339 (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 332.

¹⁰⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 75.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

Sometimes they connect two points; sometimes they appear to extend indefinitely. It is as if Martin's lines are involved in a perpetual replaying of Euclid's first two postulates: you can always connect two points with a straight line; and, you can always make a line segment longer. The second postulate means "that we never run out of space; that is, space is infinite"¹⁰⁹—a position that the potentially never-ending lines within all grids seem to imply. Sometimes Martin's grids end with a finite margin at the edge of the canvas; sometimes they extend beyond the margin, more clearly implying something never-ending or infinite. Martin's paintings and drawings embody a mathematical sublime—a constant demonstration of the beauties it is possible to express through simple geometry. In Jonathan Katz's words, Martin's work shows that "geometry can become a vehicle of expression of the most personal kind."¹¹⁰ Martin's geometry is not about landscape (horizon lines and verticals as trees) but about the infinite variation and perfection of idealized nature itself.

Andy Warhol

All of the works in Andy Warhol's first solo show in New York, in 1962, were about as far from "idealized nature" as it was possible to get. In his own words, the show included "the large Campbell's Soup Cans, the painting of a hundred Coke bottles, some Do-It-Yourself paint-by-numbers paintings, the Red Elvis, the single Marilyns, and the large gold Marilyn."¹¹¹ Mostly silkscreens, they were created in a work area in the living room of Warhol's home, which he shared with his mother. At this time, Warhol was

¹⁰⁹ John D. Norton, "Euclid's Fifth Postulate" (University of Pittsburgh, on-line paper) http://www.pitt.edu/~jdnorton/teaching/HPS_0410/chapters/non_Euclid_fifth_postulate/index.html.

¹¹⁰ Katz, "Agnes Martin," 172.

¹¹¹ Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 31.

transitioning from a highly successful commercial artist and designer to a full-time professional artist. His career and ambition were growing, and he needed a larger studio space, so he sublet part of an old hook and ladder firehouse on East 87th Street. As well, he hired his first assistant, Gerard Malanga, and together they prepared for Warhol's next show, in Los Angeles. Warhol later recalled that the firehouse "was pretty scary. You literally had to hopscotch over the holes in the floors. And the roof leaked." Warhol arrived one morning after a thunderstorm to discover that "the Elvises were sopping wet—I had to do them all over again."¹¹²

Such conditions were not sustainable, and Warhol soon moved again, this time down to 47th Street, with Malanga and a second assistant, Billy Name. Warhol rented a huge space that had originally been a nineteenth-century hat-making factory, and his first move was to cover every surface in either silver tinfoil or silver paint. His second, along with Malanga and Name, was to christen the space the "Factory." That name, says Caroline Jones, "was clearly intended to displace the time-honored trope of the isolated studio ... [and] suggested wider operations of the modern world, rather than the narrow (if romantic) ivory tower of the studio."¹¹³ The silvered interior created an ironic faux-factory feeling, and Warhol spread workstations around the floor. Four spaces were dedicated to silkscreen production (including one for canvases and another for boxes). Another three were given over to film production and projection, and there was a large space where Lou Reed's band, Velvet Underground, could rehearse.

¹¹² Ibid., 34.

¹¹³ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 198.

A complete turn from modernism was reflected in the Factory's name, and in the "products" created there—not old-fashioned paintings, but very contemporary silkscreens, underground films, and rock music. The silkscreens were put together assembly-line style, much like commercial silkscreens used on packaging or posters. Silkscreen was a technique whose mechanical origin was obvious: "I tried doing them by hand, but I find it easier to use a screen." said Warhol. "This way, I don't have to work on my objects at all. One of my assistants or anyone else, for that matter, can reproduce the design as well as I could."¹¹⁴ Whether he worked on them himself or not, Warhol laid authorial claim to his "objects." The Factory was not a hippy commune or collective; Warhol was the boss. While he overthrew most of the touchstones of the abstract expressionists, (including the goal of transcendence, the abandonment of figuration, and the idea of the solitary artist in his individual studio) Warhol tacitly retained the trope of "artist as genius." His assistants didn't sign his "objects," nor did they receive cheques from galleries when the works were sold.

Caroline Jones makes a connection among Warhol as "boss" of his Factory, the power of the idea of "factory" itself, and his unacknowledged homosexuality. "The name 'Factory' also tapped into the power of the technological sublime," she writes. "From the seductive terrors of Blake's satanic mills to the awesome attraction of Henry Adams's Dynamo, Warhol's silvered factory aimed to possess the public imagination and draw on all the ambivalent appeal of postwar industry itself."¹¹⁵ The masculine sounding word 'factory' may also have helped hide Warhol's suppressed homosexuality, which contained within it the same necessary conditions for the sublime—the "darkly

¹¹⁴ Warhol, in Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 100.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

brazen, the threatening, and the powerful.” Hidden sexuality was an important component of 1960s America—public attitudes were softening, but escaping the closet was not an option for a public figure as ambitious as Warhol.

However, sexuality was certainly part of Warhol’s break from the heteronormative modernists. Warhol learned second-hand about the lives of the New York painters in the 1950s from gay friend and sometime abstract expressionist Larry Rivers, who had frequented the older painters’ favourite hangout, the Cedar bar. Rivers told Warhol, for example, that Jackson Pollock “was always at the Cedar on Tuesdays ... and he always got completely drunk, and he made a point of behaving badly to everyone.”¹¹⁶ Warhol knew that “the world of the Abstract Expressionists was very macho. ... The toughness was part of a tradition, it went with their agonized, anguished art. They were always exploding and having fist fights about their work and their love lives. ... The art world sure was different in those days.”¹¹⁷ That different world was no place for a young gay man from the field of commercial art. Agent and filmmaker (and close friend) Emile de Antonio told Andy that Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg didn’t like Warhol because “you’re too swish, and that upsets them. ... The *major painters* try to look straight; you play up the swish—it’s like an armor with you.”

But Warhol wasn’t interested in playing down whatever outward homosexual characteristics he may have had—quite the opposite. “You’d have to have seen the way all the Abstract Expressionist painters carried themselves ... to understand how shocked people were to see a painter coming on swish. I certainly wasn’t a butch kind of guy by

¹¹⁶ Warhol & Hackett, *POPism*, 16.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16 – 18.

nature ... but I went out of my way to play up the other extreme.”¹¹⁸ Implicit gayness was an important part of what Caroline Jones calls Warhol’s “performative technological sublime” or his “famously camp performativity.”¹¹⁹ While his technological sublime was dependent upon the eclipse of nature and the use of machines to create art, it also depended on subject matter that celebrated events, materials, and “personalities” understood to be part of a widespread (if not ubiquitous) “popular culture.” The products of this culture, whether labeled “kitsch” or “camp,” were part and parcel of the gay male sensibility of the time.

Clement Greenberg, in his first article for *The Partisan Review* in 1939, defined “Kitsch,” separated it from Art, and vilified it as the unwanted product of an urbanized and overly commercial industrial society.¹²⁰ However, these were the very products that Pop artists like Warhol wanted to celebrate—elevating images of comic strips, print ads, and Coke bottles into high art along the way. A more contemporary term, ‘camp’, implied taking an ironic pleasure in the products of the technological society, and had arisen from the queer subculture to help define the emerging new performative sensibility. Twenty-five years after Greenberg brought kitsch into the intellectual limelight, Susan Sontag did the same thing for Camp. In her seminal essay, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (also her first in *The Partisan Review*), she said that Camp is a “sensibility that ... converts the serious into the frivolous.”¹²¹ She could have added that at the same time it can just as easily turn the frivolous into the serious. “Today’s Camp taste,” she

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁹ Jones, 191

¹²⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3.

¹²¹ Susan Sontag, “Notes On ‘Camp’”, *Partisan Review* (1964), reprinted on <http://pages.zoom.co.uk/leveridge/sontag.html>, 1.

asserts, in an almost textbook description of the postmodern technological sensibility, “effaces nature, or else contradicts it outright.”¹²² She explained that “homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp.”¹²³ In effect, she turned Greenberg’s kitsch into Warhol’s camp, and took part in—wittingly or not—the elevation of popular culture as a suitable source of subject matter for high art.

In 1962, shortly after Marilyn Monroe’s suicide, Warhol chose her as his subject matter. He created a mock-venerable diptych of Monroe—the ultimate commodity. (Figure 17). Her death made Monroe the most famous victim of capitalist “success” in America—for her, fame and wealth had turned into a self-imposed death sentence. Marking her death with *Marilyn Diptych* allowed Warhol to signal his complete break with modernism. Its ironic title referred to religious altarpieces; millions, after all, *worshipped* Marilyn. The image is repeated fifty times—fifty non-abstract representations of a bourgeois heroine. The images are all slightly different, and half are garishly coloured and half are black and white. They are all based on a single publicity photo from the 1953 movie, *Niagara*, in which Marilyn had her first starring role. The black and white images on the right hand side, which fade away almost to nothing, clearly allude to her death. They seem to say that this is what happens to commodities—they die and fade to nothing. The move from colour to black and white is the pictorial reverse of Judy Garland’s whirling tornado ride from black and white Kansas to the Technicolor Oz of the film, *The Wizard of Oz*.

¹²² Ibid., 4.

¹²³ Ibid., 12.

To complement the diptych, Warhol created an icon, *Gold Marilyn* (Figure 18), a single silkscreened image (based on the same publicity photo) floating in a 5' x 7' plane of gold. As with its byzantine ancestors, there is an implicit invitation to stare and experience an inner reverence and spirituality. However, in an inversion of the modernist search for deep feeling, we are more likely to stare and feel nothing. Despite (or because of) the gold, the painting is flat and vacuous, garish and tacky. All of which, of course, is the point.

Critic and author Carter Ratcliff says that the fact that we already have “deep feelings for (or at least familiarity with)” Warhol’s subjects, makes him “an extremely ‘literary’ artist, one who expects us to bring a great deal of associated knowledge and feeling to the viewing of his subjects.”¹²⁴ Whether we want to call Warhol ‘literary’ or not, it is self-evident that his viewers will recognize many of his subjects because they come from a common culture that we all share. Andy Warhol tapped into that culture at many different levels—he understood the society’s ever-increasing acceptance of popular subject matter, the gay/camp sensibility, and technology as central to postmodern life. Wyndham Lewis once wrote; “The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present.”¹²⁵ Andy Warhol always seemed to have a firm grasp on both the future and the present.

Conclusion

Warhol created his art in an environment that was similar to (or a parody of) a pre-war factory with its predetermined assembly line tasks and replaceable workers. Newman

¹²⁴ Carter Ratcliff, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), 85.

¹²⁵ Wyndham Lewis, in McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 65.

and Martin, on the other hand, created only in solitary spaces that permitted intense work. All three developed identities, ranging from queer to heroic male, that were created within and informed by their studios—which meant that the studios were the scenes of the connection between those identities and their respective sublimes. Agnes Martin—consciously or unconsciously—was forced by societal pressure to take on the identity of the heroic modernist abstract painter in New York’s male-controlled art world. In the following chapter I will examine the character of the abstract sublime, which can be seen as the resolution between the modernist experience and the rise of industrial technology.

Chapter III – The Modern Sublime

Introduction

This chapter begins with Barnett Newman’s resuscitation of Burke’s concept of the sublime, particularly as viewed through the lens of Jean-François Lyotard’s study of Newman’s paintings. Kant’s emphasis on formlessness prefigured the culmination of the sublime in the art of Newman and Agnes Martin; by mid-century, the sublime had become a medium of modernism itself. For the abstract expressionists, the sublime was an operation of modernist painting—it was the way they related to one another, and it now allows us to see the particular character of their respective stylistic interventions. The modern sublime was first theorized in the work of the eighteenth-century philosophers, which in the nineteenth century was continued in the European Romantic sublime, along with the concomitant spread of industrialization. The modern sublime can be seen as the resolution between the modernist experience and the rise of industrialization. I examine Caroline Jones’ articulation of the modernist “egotistical sublime” and its effects on women and queer artists. Finally, I discuss how critic Leo Steinberg considered how Robert Rauschenberg’s constructions captured a moment of transition from the modernist sublime to the postmodern, and how Agnes Martin’s grid paintings helped usher in the industrial perspective of postmodern artists. The sublime is the concept that joins the modern and the postmodern.

Newman and Martin: The Abstract Sublime

While a number of abstract expressionist artists and critics (including Mark Rothko and Robert Rosenblum) wrote about the sublime as having aesthetic virtue, it was Barnett Newman who brought the concept fully into modernist discourse—most forcefully through his 1948 essay, “On the Sublime,” in which he articulated clear goals for modernist painting. Newman believed that painting had to move beyond the outmoded concept of beauty as the highest value in art—an idea that originated with the Greeks, and was redeployed during the Renaissance. He had a loftier goal for painting: a sublime that was no longer rooted in nature or the visible world. The abstract expressionist sublime would not express anything felt or seen, but what Newman called “pure idea.”

“On The Sublime” begins with this paragraph:

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 aesthetic philosophies. Man’s natural desire in the arts to express his relation to the Absolute became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creation—with the fetish of quality—so that the European artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity.¹²⁶

Newman believed that the dialectic of the beautiful and the sublime set up by the Greeks and reintroduced in the Renaissance, was at the heart of the history of Western art. “The climax in this struggle between beauty and the sublime can best be examined inside the Renaissance and the reaction later against the Renaissance that is known as modern art.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” in O’Neill, 171.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

In 1991, in his book *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Jean-François Lyotard declared, “The work of Newman belongs to the aesthetic of the sublime,” and illustrated the ways that Edmund Burke anticipated Newman and “put his finger on an essential feature of Newman’s project.”¹²⁸ Burke labeled “the negative pleasure which ... characterizes the feeling of the sublime” as *delight*. It arises, says Lyotard, “from the removal of the threat of pain ... or *terror*: shadows, solitude, silence and the approach of death may be ‘terrible’ in that they announce that the gaze, the other, language or life will soon be extinguished. ... What is sublime is the feeling that that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void.”¹²⁹ Burke felt that the only art that could accomplish this task was *poetry*, through the unlimited power of language. He was forced to think of painting as an art of representation, whose images, in Lyotard’s words, “can never be in excess of what the eye can recognize.”¹³⁰

Lyotard explains that Newman’s solution to the “problem” of expressing the sublime through paint “does not take the form of transgressing the limits established for figurative space by Renaissance and Baroque art, but of reducing the event-bound time ... in which the legendary or historical scene [was replaced by] a presentation of the pictorial object itself. It is chromatic matter alone (the canvas, which is sometimes left unprimed) and the lay-out (scale, format, proportion), which must inspire the wonderful surprise, the wonder that there could be something rather than nothing.”¹³¹ The sublime

¹²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 84.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

does not lie in a *picture* of anything; it lies in the very matter of the *painting* itself—paint, canvas, and the “lay-out” that the artist chooses to employ.

Newman wrote “On The Sublime” just after he completed *Onement I*, the painting with which he believed he had conquered the metaphysical problem of the sublime. It was dated by the artist on January 20, 1948, his own 43rd birthday. He called its creation “the beginning of my present life, because from then on I had given up any relation to nature, as seen.”¹³² For Newman, this painting was his first truly successful artistic exploration of the “metaphysical problem of part and whole.”¹³³ The “whole” consisted of the brown/orange areas of colour taken together, and the “part” consisted of the same two areas taken separately. The vertical zip was Newman’s unique contribution to the “lay-out” in modernist art. In his own words, the zip “both divide[s] and reunite[s] the two halves of the picture like a zip-fastener.”¹³⁴ It is “a field that brings life to the other fields, just as the other fields bring life to this so-called line.”¹³⁵ Lyotard rephrases Newman with more dramatic language: “Chaos threatens, but the flash of the *Tzim-tzum*, the zip takes place, divides the shadows, breaks down the light into colours like a prism, and arranges them across the surface like a universe. ... There is something holy about line in itself.”¹³⁶

¹³² Barnett Newman, quoted in Barbara Hess, *Abstract Expressionism*. (London: Taschen, undated), 40.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 86. Newman sometimes referred to the zip as the “Tzim-tzum,” a kabbalist concept meaning “the contraction of God to allow room for creation.” See Glenda Abramson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Modern Jewish Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 635.

Clement Greenberg wrote in a review in *The Nation* (December 6, 1947) that Newman was part of a new “indigenous school” of painting. Like Piet Mondrian and others before him, Newman attributed importance to the “metaphysical” content of his art. In his response, Newman disagreed, and answered by saying that Mondrian’s art was *not* metaphysical, but in fact rooted in nature, like all European painting. Mondrian’s squares and rectangles were “the geometric equivalent for a seen landscape, the vertical trees on a horizon.”¹³⁷ The new American artists that Greenberg was writing about, however, had moved beyond this, and were “at home in the world of pure idea.”¹³⁸

Newman’s notion of art as an expression of pure idea owes as much to Immanuel Kant as to Burke. In his *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790, Kant wrote that it is not possible to represent the sublime through any traditional means. Lyotard summarizes: “One cannot, [Kant] writes, represent the power of infinite might or absolute magnitude within space and time because they are pure Ideas. But one can at least allude to them, or ‘evoke’ them by means of what [Kant] baptizes a ‘negative presentation’. As an example of this paradox of a representation that represents nothing, Kant cites the Mosaic Law which forbids the making of graven images. This is only an indication, but it prefigures the Minimalist and abstract expressionist solutions painting will use to try to escape the figurative prison.”¹³⁹

For Kant, the most important distinction between the sublime and the beautiful is that beauty in nature displays a purpose in its form (one that seems to pre-exist in our

¹³⁷ O’Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 163.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 85.

judgment) while the sublime in nature is “to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it . . . provokes a representation of limitlessness.”¹⁴⁰ The fact that, in Kant’s view, art is “always restricted by the conditions of an agreement with nature”¹⁴¹ makes it impossible for the beautiful and the sublime to co-exist in art—a position that is close to Burke’s observation that something is lost when the beautiful and the sublime blend. Art historian Arthur Danto, writing in a 2002 review of a Barnett Newman retrospective, made the same point. “Since Kant was constrained to think of art in terms of mimetic representations, there was no way in which painting could be sublime. It could only consist in pictures of sublime natural things, like waterfalls or volcanoes. While these might indeed be sublime, pictures of them could at most be beautiful.”¹⁴² Newman was insistent that artists in his time and place had to move beyond this dialectical dead-end and create art that was free of “the outmoded props” of antiquity and the Renaissance, and reassert “man’s natural desire for the exalted.”¹⁴³ Newman wanted an art that would not represent the sublime pictorially, but would awaken an *experience* of the sublime.

Agnes Martin found her own solution to the problem of the “figurative prison,” not by rejecting beauty, as Newman did, but by embracing it: “When I think of art I think of beauty,” she wrote. “Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not in the eye it is in the mind. In our minds there is an awareness of perfection. . . . All art work is about beauty; all positive work represents it and celebrates it.”¹⁴⁴ While Martin did not reference the

¹⁴⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 75.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴² Arthur Danto, “Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime.” *The Nation* (June 17, 2002), 25.

¹⁴³ Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” in O’Neill, 173.

¹⁴⁴ Agnes Martin, “Beauty Is The Mystery Of Life,” *Writings*, 153.

sublime directly, she often valorized an idealized happiness that seemed to encompass the emotional goals of abstract expressionism, which included wonder, awe, and a reaching toward the sublime. Martin also wrote that the “function of artwork ... is the renewal of memories of moments of perfection,”¹⁴⁵ just as Barnett Newman once stated that art should evoke a “memory of the emotion of an experienced moment of total reality.”¹⁴⁶ In this way, Martin’s definition of beauty overlaps with Newman’s notion of the sublime. Martin often referred to the lack of form in her work, to the same formlessness articulated by Kant (and eventually, Newman and Lyotard). “My paintings ... [are] about merging, about formlessness, ... A world without objects without interruption.”¹⁴⁷ Many of Martin’s titles are taken from nature, and guide the viewer to look at the work the way she intended—as a reference to feelings experienced in nature, but not in any allegorical or symbolic fashion. Allegory requires form; Martin strove to bring form to a point of formlessness.

Critic Lawrence Alloway wrote that “both by inference from [Martin’s] imagery and from judging her titles we recognize a form of nature imagery. Typical titles include: *The Beach, Desert, Drops, Earth, Field ... Night Sea, Orange Grove, Wheat, White Stone*. Although these titles are not openly descriptive, they are persistently evocative.”¹⁴⁸ They are also emotionally positive, without any overtones of angst or the violence of nature—unlike the works of Caspar David Friedrich or J.M.W. Turner, say. Robert Rosenblum was among the first critics to connect the landscapes of Friedrich, Turner and the rest to

¹⁴⁵ In McEvelley, *The Exile’s Return*, 68.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ In Princenthal, *Agnes Martin*, 132.

¹⁴⁸ Lawrence Alloway, “Agnes Martin,” quoted in *Agnes Martin* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1973), 10.

the sublime intentions of the abstract expressionists. “During the Romantic era,” he wrote in 1961, “the sublimities of nature gave proof of the divine; today such supernatural experiences are conveyed through the abstract medium of paint alone.”¹⁴⁹

For both Newman and Agnes Martin (and for all the abstract expressionists), the way out of Newman’s dialectical set-up was through “the abstract medium of paint alone.” If one forgoes all forms of figuration, one *can* represent the unrepresentable. Writing late in the century about Agnes Martin, Rosalind Krauss said, “the terrain of her work is that of the abstract sublime, behind which ... is the immensity, the endlessness, the ecstasy, the *terribilità* of nature.”¹⁵⁰ Newman was relying on Burke for the idea that it was possible to represent the sublime, to make paintings that, in Arthur Danto’s words, are about “something that can be said but not shown,”¹⁵¹—something without form. By definition, the sublime requires a distinction between aesthetic experience and representation or figuration. Without that distinction, without a sense of formlessness in the painting, one is left with mere beauty. For Newman, the abandonment of figuration was an avenue into producing a sublime experience through colour and an expansive or expanding composition. In Martin’s work, bypassing figuration (which was never in her repertoire, even in her earliest work) was a way to express a sublime idealization of nature through colour and line—the grid was Martin’s “lay-out.”

¹⁴⁹ Robert Rosenblum, “The Abstract Sublime,” in ed. Clifford Ross, *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990) 277.

¹⁵⁰ Rosalind Krauss, “Agnes Martin: The /Cloud/,” 332.

¹⁵¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Unnatural Wonders: Essays From the Gap Between Art and Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 192.

Nineteenth-Century Sublimes

At the time that Kant was writing about formlessness as a necessary condition for the sublime, painters were still bound by the laws of the “figurative prison.” However, by the early 19th century the sublime had taken hold within the Romantic imagination, and many artists sought to present the sublimity of nature through painting. At the same time, wealthy (usually British) citizens were making a “Grand Tour” of the Continent that included travel through the Alps, and accounts of the mountains’ awe-inspiring grandeur returned with them. Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg was a Franco-British naval painter, theatre set designer and traveller, whose *Avalanche in the Alps* was painted in 1803. Rocks, mountains and the power of the crashing snow dwarf the human figures. The image of tiny humans dwarfed by the overwhelming power of nature became a trope in nineteenth-century painting—a Romantic reminder at the beginning of the industrial age that God (through Nature) still held the upper hand over the machine.

As in *Avalanche in the Alps*, the figures in J.M.W. Turner’s *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (Figure 19) are relatively tiny—all but swallowed up by the curving black snowstorm above and the cascading white avalanche on the right. Hannibal’s elephant is just visible in the distance, and even this enormous animal is dwarfed by the landscape. Burke would certainly have agreed that the scene depicts the sublime: “Sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; ... beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even

massive.”¹⁵² Kant’s views about representation were too new to have taken hold at the time that Turner and the other Romantics were painting, and so Burke’s general ideas about the sublime held prominence.

Perhaps one of the most famous attempts to capture the Northern Romantic idea of the sublime in paint came from the German landscape painter, Caspar David Friedrich in 1818. In *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Figure 20) a solitary man gazes out over a majestic scene in the mountains, in a clear pictorial representation of the man of taste and education “enjoying” a sublime scene.¹⁵³ The man’s face is turned away from our view, so his feelings are hidden. However, we can see the wind blowing through his hair, and it is as if we are invited to take his place high above the mist. Author Joseph Leo Koerner, in summarizing some of the characteristics of German Romanticism, also delineates the elements of the sublime in the paintings from this period: “a heightened sensitivity to the natural world; ... a passion for the equivocal, the indeterminate, the obscure and the faraway; valorization of night over day, emblemizing a reaction against Enlightenment and rationalism; ... and a melancholy, sentimental longing or nostalgia.”¹⁵⁴

Inherent in Friedrich’s evocation of the sublime is the notion of obscurity or lack. We cannot see the landscape beneath the fog, and so part of our delight in the painting is a kind of internal, imaginative vertigo—the lack of specificity in the scene helps us

¹⁵² Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 100-101.

¹⁵³ Recent research indicates that the ‘Wanderer’ was real person—a Prussian soldier named von Brincken, killed in the fight against Napoleon. If true, this adds a nationalistic political dimension to the painting, and suggests the possibility of War as sublime subject matter. See Julian Jason Haladyn, *Friedrich’s Wanderer: Paradox of the Modern Subject*, RACAR 41 (2016), 55-56.

¹⁵⁴ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 29.

imagine the feeling of being so high, leaning on a walking stick against the cold wind. *Fog* (Figure 21) achieves its effects in a similar way, through obscurity. It is less famous than *Wanderer*, painted about a decade earlier, and uses slightly different techniques to achieve its effects. There is no figure for the viewer to identify with, but Koerner points out that the barren strip of beach in the foreground, “rendered in focused detail and contrasting therefore with the blurring of sea and sky beyond, serves to situate us within the represented space.”¹⁵⁵ Just as the Wanderer (and the viewer with him) stares down at the mists below, in *Fog* it is as if we stand on the beach and peer into the dimness beyond, trying to make out the shapes of the ships and rocks that are not-quite-invisible in the mist.

Friedrich and Turner were painting in the historical moment when steam power was replacing both horse and sail, and labourers toiled at enormous steam-powered machines in the “dark Satanic Mills” immortalized by William Blake.¹⁵⁶ Nature was on the cusp of being eclipsed by technology (a process that continues to the present day), and Turner caught the spirit of the turn in what is arguably his most famous painting, *The Fighting ‘Temeraire’, Tugged to her Last Berth to be Broken Up, 1838*. (Figure 22). This sailing ship, which played a decisive role in Nelson’s victory at Trafalgar, is being towed by a steamboat into the sunset, to be broken up and discarded. The spectacular setting sun can be read as symbolic of both the decline of British naval power and the passing of the era when ships were driven by nature, not machines. Here is a dramatic depiction, with its sweeping abstract brushstrokes, of the advent of the technological sublime—bright yellows and oranges in both sky and sea, reflected even in the steam from the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵⁶ William Blake, from *Milton, A Poem*, c. 1804–8.

compact tug. The certain glories of the unmechanized, “natural” past give way to the uncertain efficiencies of the “technological” industrial future. Here we can see a synthesis of the natural and the mechanical, as well as perceive the origin of the postmodern turn from the natural to the technological sublime.

In his book, *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell argues, “landscape is best understood as a medium of cultural expression, not a genre of painting or fine art. ... [It is] a fetishized commodity, ... what Marx called a ‘social hieroglyph,’ an emblem of the social relations it conceals.”¹⁵⁷ Assuming that we can see *Temeraire* as a landscape in the broadest sense, we can sense the complex social relations—the effects on people’s lives—at stake behind the urgent brushwork. They include—but are certainly not limited to—technological change, war, power, and patriotism. As in *Snow Storm*, Turner uses the abstraction of natural elements as an indicator of the massive power—and therefore, the sublimity—of all the forces at play here. Mitchell also argues that a landscape painting is a safe way for the viewer to experience such forces. “Even if,” he writes, “the features [of the depicted scene] are sublime, dangerous, and so forth, the frame is always there as a guarantee that it is only a picture, only picturesque, and the viewer is safe in another place—outside the frame, behind the binoculars, the camera, or the eyeball, in the dark refuge of the skull.”¹⁵⁸

At the same time, the forces of the Industrial Age were beginning to dawn in Europe, and the anxieties raised by the new technologies and industrial production were reflected in the writings of a number of historians and philosophers. Many efforts were

¹⁵⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 14-15.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

made to both analyze the present and to visualize a better future. Philosopher and essayist Henri de Saint-Simon, for example, believed that a noble class that included scientists, artists, and “all men of liberal ideas . . . who devote [their] power and resources to the progress of enlightenment”¹⁵⁹ could best lead a society more and more dominated by scientific discovery and its resultant industrialization. Charles Fourier was a utopian socialist who imagined a society based on “positive attraction” rather than on economic need. Fourier wanted to reverse the effects of industrialization, by stressing, for example, “agricultural production rather than . . . industrial production.”¹⁶⁰ Such Utopian schemes dominated the discourse in the early part of the century, and it was another half century before Karl Marx would elaborate and theorize the consequences of industrial capitalism.

Marx wrote in great detail about the effects of the Industrial Revolution, including the replacement of skilled artisans (men using tools to create goods) by unskilled labourers (machines using *men* to create more and more goods). Marx articulated the reasons behind and the effects of technological development and the concomitant rise of the factory system, which meant increased wealth for capitalists, and decreased wealth for everyone else. With decreased wealth came ever more labour and misery. In the factory, Marx says, “every organ of sense is injured in an equal degree by artificial elevation of the temperature, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention the danger to life and limb among the thickly crowded machinery.”¹⁶¹ Factories, Marx continues, engage in “systematic robbery of what is necessary for the life of the

¹⁵⁹ Keith Taylor, ed., *Henri Saint-Simon* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1975), 71.

¹⁶⁰ Charles Gide, ed., *Design for Utopia: Selected Writings of Charles Fourier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 27.

¹⁶¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, 294.

workman, ... space, light, air, and of protection to his person.”¹⁶² About the mechanization of the factory, Marx says, “In the place of the individual machine, we now have a mechanical monster whose body fills the whole factory, and whose demon power, hidden from our sight at first because of the measured and almost ceremonious character of the movement of his giant limbs, discloses itself at length in the vast and furious whirl of his numberless working organs.”¹⁶³

Marx’s ideas about the quasi-animate nature of nineteenth-century machines and factories now make them seem monstrous and sublime. He offered compelling descriptions of soul-less industrialism and its damaging effects on everyone except the capitalists who profited from it. Nature was no longer the source of the terror that lay at the root of Burke’s sublime—the machine was now in the threatening position. In Marx’s concerns about the dangers of capitalism we can detect the seeds of the fearsome technological sublime that came much later to help define the postmodern. In spite of—or perhaps because of—industrialization, the Romantic preoccupation with nature continued to dominate the discourse of painting well into the twentieth century.

Friedrich and Turner often used expressive brushwork to convey the formless sublimity of nature: Friedrich’s fog, for example, or Turner’s roiling storms. These early moments of abstraction referenced nature directly, while with the abstract expressionists the references are only implied. Clement Greenberg believed that Turner’s atmospheric references were not really abstractions at all: “Clouds, steam, mist, water and atmosphere were not expected to have definite shapes, and so what we now take for daring

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ in Otto Ruhle, *Karl Marx: His Life and Work* (New York: Viking Press, 1935), 337.

abstractness on Turner's part was then accepted in the end as another feat of naturalism."¹⁶⁴ Rosalind Krauss said that it is the "covert allusion to nature that the category *abstract sublime* has come to imply." By applying titles that referenced nature directly, but making her paintings and drawings purely abstract, Agnes Martin seemed to be making exactly these sorts of "covert allusions."

Newman moved the abstract sublime forward in another way with his own version of an inherited idea—that colour carries inherent meaning and therefore affects experience. For example, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* used a broad expanse of red to achieve a sense of the "heat and blaze" of sublimity. Although there are many differences between them, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* could claim Matisse's *Red Studio* as its earliest direct precedent. The scales are different, but the core of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is its field of red—a concept that might have been impossible in 1950 if not for Matisse's expansive planes of color earlier in the century. This notion of historical development (from Impressionism to the colour field, for example) was a keystone in the architecture of Clement Greenberg's criticism. In his words, "abstract expressionism' makes no more of a break with the past than anything before it in modernist art has."¹⁶⁵

The "Egotistical Sublime"

Caroline Jones quotes Clement Greenberg's characterization of the public for abstract expressionism in the 1940s and 50s: "a small circle of fanatics, art-fixated misfits who are as isolated in the United States as if they were living in Paleolithic Europe."¹⁶⁶ The same words could be used to describe the artists who were painting for this audience.

¹⁶⁴ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 222.

¹⁶⁵ Clement Greenberg, " 'American Type' Painting," in *Art and Culture*, 210.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 218.

Early in their careers, the post-war New York abstract expressionists worked alone in their studios, with only each other (and the occasional gallery owner, art dealer, or formalist critic) to talk with. They were almost all men, and they privileged a male-centered, heterosexual, and homosocial view of the artist—the lonely man struggling in his studio to turn his deepest feelings into non-representational art, whose social life consisted of drinking and talking shop with other male artists. Even their wives, many of whom were also painters, were denied entry into the deep (and often alcoholic) all-male discussions, arguments, and occasional fistfights about art. Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman were prototypes, helping to perpetuate a mid twentieth-century American version of the “starving (male) artist in a garret” myth that went all the way back to nineteenth-century bohemianism.

Jones also examines the connections between the masculinization of mid-century American art and the spike of interest in the sublime. She describes the experience of the abstract expressionist artists “as an individual, selective sublime (the “egotistical” sublime, as some term it) ... personified in the artist himself. The sense of terror in the Burkean model was wedded ... to the isolation of existential struggle.”¹⁶⁷ Jones notes that Burke diminished the beautiful, in comparison to the sublime, by feminizing it. The properties of beauty, Burke says, include being “small ... smooth ... [and] of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength.”¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime.”¹⁶⁹ *Mere* beauty is contrasted to the grand terror of the sublime—to which the abstract expressionists added their personal

¹⁶⁷ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 44.

¹⁶⁸ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 95.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

post-war existential angst. Kant also made it clear that genius and the sublime were available only to males: “The fair sex has as much understanding as the male, but it is a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime.”¹⁷⁰

Even before Barnett Newman wrote “On the Sublime,” he made it clear that the sublime artist could only be masculine. In “The Ideographic Picture,” a statement written in 1947 for an exhibition he had organized of “painters working in the abstract style,” he cites the noble (and imaginary) Northwest Coast artist:

“The Kwakiutl artist painting on a hide did not . . . renounce the living world for the meaningless materialism of design. The abstract shape he used, his entire plastic language, was directed by a ritualistic will toward metaphysical understanding. The everyday realities he left to the toymakers; the pleasant play of nonobjective pattern, to the women basket weavers. To him a shape was a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex. A carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable.”¹⁷¹

Newman dismisses the decorative designs of the “women basket weavers” in order to elevate and celebrate the truly sublime artist—the male. He likens the “ritualistic will” of the hide-painter to himself and his male colleagues, all standing strong in the face of “the terror of the unknowable.”

Later that same year Newman consolidated his belief in the primacy of the male artist in the essay “The First Man Was an Artist.” The article is a plea for the acceptance of art over science, and of the personal creative act over the social. However, Newman’s

¹⁷⁰ In Jones, 44.

¹⁷¹ Barnett Newman, in O’Neill, 108.

use of the generic term “man” does nothing to hide the fact that the essay starts and ends with the assumption that artists are men. “Man’s first speech was poetic before it became utilitarian,” Newman argues. “The artistic act is man’s personal birthright.” The essay concludes with, “For the artists are the first men.”¹⁷² Caroline Jones comments: “In this concluding phrase lies a worldview: that the making of art—nonutilitarian, gratuitous objects that contained only the artist’s feelings—was what made one a man. ... The American sublime, in the developing mythology of Abstract Expressionism, was uncontaminated by ‘civilization’; it was accessible only to men on the mythic, internalized frontier.”¹⁷³

The results of such internalized and unquestioned sexism, apparently shared by most of the male abstract expressionists, were manifold. They made it doubly difficult for female artists to be acknowledged and to achieve success, while at the same time ensuring that homosexual artists, fearing to expose a “feminine side,” (e.g., an interest in “the meaningless materialism of design”) stayed firmly in the closet. Newman and his colleagues could not acknowledge that their exclusivity was a form of psychological terrorism—a (conscious or unconscious) effort to maintain supremacy over women and by extension, gays. The ultimate expression of American post-war repression was happening at the same time—McCarthyism and the so-called Lavender Scare, when thousands of homosexuals were discharged from the military or government employment on the assumption that they were either communist or susceptible to blackmail by communist agents. A 1950 Senate investigation resulted in the report, “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Perverts in Government” and in 1953, President Eisenhower

¹⁷² Ibid., 159-160.

¹⁷³ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 46.

issued an Executive Order that made homosexuality grounds for dismissal from federal employment.

The overall political atmosphere provided fertile ground for misogyny and prejudice to grow at the personal level. One clear example from the art world of the personal diminution of women can be seen in Jackson Pollock's comment to Lee Krasner, upon first seeing one of her paintings in her studio (a moment made famous by Ed Harris in his 2000 film *Pollock*): "That's a damn good picture. That works. You're a damn good woman painter." As if "women painters" were a breed apart from men, the *real* painters.

Agnes Martin was also a "woman painter." However, she saw herself simply as a "painter"—an abstract expressionist, just like Newman and Pollock. A closeted lesbian, Martin was reclusive by nature, and lived hand-to-mouth, close to a number of other artists (including the also-closeted Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Indiana) in an abandoned loft on Coenties Slip in Lower Manhattan. She lived in New York for a decade (1957 – 1967) and during that time her friends tended mainly to be other queer artists, both women and men. Interestingly, Barnett Newman was an exception, and his brand of condescension did not seem to play out in their relationship. Martin was the same age as Newman, but she was certainly his junior in terms of New York art world experience. His studio was close to hers, and they became good friends. Martin valued their relationship: "I considered that I was very good friends with Barnett Newman, or he was a very good friend to me I should say, because he used to hang my shows for me."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ In Princenthal, *Agnes Martin*, 125.

Newman, Pollock and Martin were all shown by Betty Parsons—apparently the men had no objection to a woman *selling* their paintings.

Martin defined herself with clarity in a statement written to introduce Lenore Tawney's first solo show: "Agnes Martin, Painter, Parsons Gallery, New York."¹⁷⁵ Being a "Painter" as opposed to a "woman painter" meant that Martin also had to reject attempts to feminize her work. Nancy Princenthal writes, "[when an] interviewer suggested that the grid works have an affinity with weaving, Martin became angry: 'Oh, don't give me that,' she retorted. Obviously it was not a subject on which she chose to dwell."¹⁷⁶ Martin showed little sympathy for feminists throughout her life; in 1993 she told an interviewer, "The women's movement failed. They aren't any freer than they ever were."¹⁷⁷ She felt that art was a gender-free undertaking, and that she had never been held back because she was a woman. "I've had very good reviews of my work. It seems as though it was always seen and appreciated. ... I'm for keeping the field of art as it is, neither masculine nor feminine."¹⁷⁸

Unlike Newman and Pollock, Martin's metaphysical interests seemed to lie, not in questions about the sublime, but in something seemingly as far from abstract expressionism as you could get—Zen. She had encountered D.T. Suzuki—the popular writer who had introduced Zen to America after the war—at Columbia, where he regularly lectured about Zen Buddhism. Many gay artists, including Allen Ginsberg and John Cage, were confirmed followers of Suzuki. Jonathan Katz argues, "For closeted

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 75.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ In Eisler, 82.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

homosexuals such as Martin, at the height of the Cold War, Zen offered a distinctly different and far more salutary relation to a proscribed identity than did any of the dominant Western traditions.”¹⁷⁹ When talking about her own work, Martin often spoke of stillness, beauty and closeness to nature as essential characteristics of her practice. “The grid,” says Katz, “with its equilibrium of verticals and horizontals [and] its inherent limitlessness ... is almost a metaphor for Zen’s pursuit of [a] meditative, liminal state.”¹⁸⁰

Katz connects Martin’s sense of her own sexuality directly to her attraction to the inner-directed search for a *quiet* abstract sublime—in contrast to Newman’s “terror of the unknowable.” Her “spiritual and pictorial pursuit,” says Katz, “can [be seen] as a form of queer self-realization, wrought (paradoxically) through an anti-identitarian, Zen-informed idiom.”¹⁸¹ Martin’s search for idealized beauty was as individuated and personal as Newman’s search for the sublime. Newman found what he was searching for with the zip; for Martin it was the grid. Lyotard’s summary of the abstract expressionist sublime “surprise” can apply to both artists equally: “It is chromatic matter alone (the canvas, which is sometimes left unprimed) and the lay-out (scale, format, proportion), which must inspire the wonderful surprise, the wonder that there could be something rather than nothing.”¹⁸² That something was the sublime, whether rooted in Martin’s nature or Newman’s “pure reason.”

¹⁷⁹ Katz, 178.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 173.

¹⁸² Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 85.

Leo Steinberg and the Shift from Nature to Culture

Critic and author Leo Steinberg, writing in 1968, made a striking observation that seemed to overturn Newman's notion that the abstract expressionists were working on a plane that was elevated above nature. Steinberg's theory also opened the possibility of a new view of Martin's work—as a step away from the modern sublime, in the direction of the technological sublime. Writing about Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet, Steinberg raised the possibility of changing a picture's "orientation to human posture." This represented an overturning of the one axiom that had remained constant in Western art through the centuries: "the conception of a picture as representing a world, some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture."¹⁸³ A painting hangs on the wall top to bottom, just as vertical as the viewer who is standing upright in front of it. Even a very flat, very abstract Barnett Newman painting has a recognizably vertical orientation, paralleling what Steinberg called our "visual experience of nature."¹⁸⁴

However, around 1950, Rauschenberg and Dubuffet began to create pictures with a horizontal orientation—what Steinberg named "the flatbed picture plane," after the horizontal flatbed printing press. While we still hang Dubuffet's *Olympia* (Figure 23) on the wall, the image does not depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with upright human posture. This *Olympia* has been flattened, as if on an ironing board. In Steinberg's words, "the painted surface is no longer the analogue of the visual experience of nature

¹⁸³ Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 82.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

but of operational processes.” Steinberg said this was “expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.”¹⁸⁵

One of Rauschenberg’s earliest entries into this oeuvre was “Erased Drawing by William de Kooning,” for which he laid a de Kooning drawing on a table and rubbed it out with an eraser. Steinberg writes that Rauschenberg tilted “de Kooning’s evocation of a worldspace into a thing produced by rubbing down on a desk.” In 1955, Rauschenberg picked up his own bed, smeared paint on it and hung it on the wall. (Figure 24) Steinberg says that this gesture, the literally horizontal flatbed, should “be understood as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer.” Speaking of all of Rauschenberg’s work in the 1950s, Steinberg says, “Though they hung on the wall, the pictures kept referring back to the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work and sleep.”¹⁸⁶

In delineating this “shift from nature to culture,” Steinberg identified a moment of transition from modernism’s natural sublime to the technological sublime of postmodernism. At the same time, he overturned Newman’s notion that the abstract expressionists worked in “a world of pure idea,” categorizing their painting as having a vertical, *natural* orientation. This put Newman among the last of a long line of “naturalists” going all the way back to antiquity. Newman believed that his paintings, unlike those of the European abstractionists, were not abstract in the sense that they were “extracted” from nature;¹⁸⁷ they were deep, expansive expressions of spiritual and

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸⁷ Jackson Pollock, when once urged to look for the sublime in nature, replied, “I am Nature.” See Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 44.

philosophical ideas. Loftier than any representation of nature or quotidian reality, they were filled with “the intense heat and blaze”¹⁸⁸ of something sublime. With the hindsight of Steinberg’s perspective, however, we see in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (for example), not a metaphysical glimpse into a world beyond nature, but a picture that represents a world: “some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture.”¹⁸⁹

If Newman was among the last of the naturalists, then Agnes Martin was one of the first to help usher in the industrial perspective of the early postmodern painters. Her insistence on the grid as the best way (for her) to express the inexpressible emotional power of nature solidified the position of the grid generally as an appropriate tool for both modernist and postmodern art, and her influence was felt in many ways. Some of the connections with the postmodern were direct—for example, Robert Smithson included her (along with Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and others) in his groundbreaking Dwan Gallery exhibition of minimalist art in 1966. Others were indirect: through seriality and repetition, Andy Warhol’s use of the grid became ubiquitous, although where Martin tied the grid to late modernist abstraction and the quiet geometry of Zen, Warhol denied abstraction in order to produce grids that reflected the mechanistic nature of his industrial modes of production.

Martin’s grids can be seen to have the same horizontal orientation as the “flatbed” works of Dubuffet and Rauschenberg, and therefore form part of Steinberg’s “shift from natural to cultural.” However, Martin proscribed imagery and employed a version of the

¹⁸⁸ in O’Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 249.

¹⁸⁹ Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 82.

abstract expressionist “colour field.” Her grids were penciled and/or painted over an unprimed canvas or carefully applied one-colour wash. During her years in New York in the 1960s, these background colours tended to be “earthy,” and within the range of nature—generally blue, brown, grey, green or black. They were always muted, as if to reinforce the “Zen” orientation of her work. Later in her life, she began to use horizontal bands of pastels that were within the range of the colours of the high desert where she lived—peach, yellow, off-whites, and in particular, the unique blue of the New Mexico sky. Biographer Nancy Princenthal remarks about *Untitled #22* of 2002 (Figure 25): “[it] features two blue vertical stripes at the margins and a field of very warm off-white between them: this wall-eyed composition, a kind of inside-out Barnett Newman, creates the sense of a field too big to see at once.”¹⁹⁰ While her use of “natural” colours and the colour field seems to locate Martin within modernism, her grids, with their horizontal orientation and industrial/cultural perspective, place her at the same time on the cusp of the postmodern.

Conclusion

Rauschenberg and the rise of Pop Art overturned the formalist rules presumed by the modernists—suddenly it seemed that *anything* could be art. In the next chapter I will consider Andy Warhol’s place in this shift, particularly the role of what Caroline Jones calls the *performative technological sublime*: “a mode of production that aspires to, or structurally resembles, an industrial process, and/or a self-presentation on the part of the artist that implies a collaboratively generated technological solution or mechanistic

¹⁹⁰ Princenthal, 245.

goal.”¹⁹¹ The strategies that Warhol employed as part of his enactment of a performative technological sublime (although he would never have categorized himself or his work in such terms) included the rejection of nature, using the grid to eliminate emotion, and the commodification of subject matter. After Warhol and the 1960s, a number of thinkers arose to reevaluate modernism and analyze its successors. For such postmodern writers as Jones, Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and Slavoj Žižek, the terrain of exploration of the sublime moved from Burke and nature to the postmodern eclipse of nature and the neo-Kantian problems of “presenting the unrepresentable” and the “pleasure/pain dialectic.” The sublime became a complex tool for theorizing the postmodern condition.

¹⁹¹ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 55.

Chapter IV — The Postmodern Sublime

Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine four constitutive features of the postmodern sublime, and their particular expression in Andy Warhol's art and practice. These include the rejection of nature and the concomitant valourization of the un-natural, the use of the grid as a tool for eliminating affect, the commodification of subject matter, and the pleasure/pain paradox. The first three features arose out of the opposition of a younger generation of artists in the 1960s to the modernist natural sublime, and out of a desire to embrace the world of global capitalist technology. The fourth, the pleasure/pain dialectic, was theorized in the 1970s as a way to understand the postmodern condition.

In the words of Caroline Jones, Warhol and the other artists who came to be called postmodern were “attempting to offer a kind of sublimity in both the technological look, and the quasi-industrial production, of their art.”¹⁹² Warhol undid all the tropes of modernism by embracing Newman's anathema—“the meaningless materialism of design.” As a young man he built a highly successful career as a commercial illustrator, who “implied his queerness via fanciful, feminized drawings of consumer goods like women's shoes and perfume.”¹⁹³ Warhol carried the values and tools of that trade into his career in fine art. He privileged acrylic paints and silkscreen over oils, chose quotidian objects as subject matter, abjured abstraction, and worked with many media, not just paint and brush. “I think everybody should be a machine,” he once said. “I think somebody should

¹⁹² Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 55.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 175.

be able to do all my paintings for me,”¹⁹⁴ offering an ironic technological alternative to what Jones calls “the auratic mechanisms of modern art.”¹⁹⁵

Valourizing the Un-natural

The sublime inherited from the eighteenth century by the post-war New York painters was based in nature—the awesome nature of mountains, chasms, and storms at sea.

However, as Caroline Jones writes, by the middle of the twentieth century “machines, not nature, would provide the terrible forces to be encountered, engulfed by, and transcended in the studio.”¹⁹⁶ Andy Warhol embraced these new forces, and adapted the metaphor of the machine/factory to his studio and methods of artistic production. His Factory worked in the manner of the pre-war factories of his hometown Pittsburgh, designed for mass production. His choice of silk screening meant that various components of the “production process” of a painting could be separated out in the manner of a factory assembly line. He lived and worked in midtown Manhattan, right in the centre of one of the largest and busiest cities in the world, where “Nature” for many people meant Central Park.

For Caroline Jones, however, this rejection of nature in favour of the machine gave rise to a dilemma. This is the dilemma of the technological sublime, which lies in the ambivalences of a culture that would like to idealize nature even as it destroys it, while simultaneously dealing with “the real pressures of want and need, desire and coercion that drive culture’s awesome machines.”¹⁹⁷ Warhol dealt with this dilemma by

¹⁹⁴ In *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

ignoring the natural world altogether. Unlike the abstract expressionists, he had no interest in Nature, either as inspiration or foundation. Warhol did not want to “get out there alone in the woods”¹⁹⁸ to create art, nor did his work have the upright “natural” orientation that Leo Steinberg identified. Instead, within his windowless, silver-lined Factory, Warhol produced art objects on an assembly line that resembled the pre-war factories of his hometown Pittsburgh. To Jones, “Warhol’s affectless adoption of the methods of mass production appears ... as a brilliant example of the performative technological sublime. ... The psychological processes of sublimity (which must initially seem distant from the cool machines of his production) can be located in the ambivalencies and oscillations of the icons he produced.”¹⁹⁹

Some of the ambivalence in Warhol’s work came from his detachment from the objects of his artistic desire—the commercial products he repeatedly pictured in his art. He assumed an air of irony toward his subjects, whether they were Coke bottles, pop stars, or wealthy patrons—a stance undoubtedly required of anyone who wanted to project a “cool” persona. Many of his “campy” statements about life and work (“Love and sex are business.”²⁰⁰ “I never met a person I couldn’t call a beauty.”²⁰¹) are like his paintings—flat and empty of meaning, and intended to be that way. Warhol embraced the subject matter of commercial advertising that his early career as a designer and illustrator had bequeathed to him. His only major turn away from the world of commercial images was with the *Death and Disaster* series. These were photographic scenes of crimes, riots and

¹⁹⁸ Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 18.

¹⁹⁹ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 191.

²⁰⁰ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 43.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

electric chairs—as far removed from nature as women’s shoes, and broadly hinting at the apocalypse to come.

The last work in this series came from an unlikely commission—the 1964 World’s Fair. Warhol was invited, along with several other emerging artists, to display a large work on the outside wall of the circular Theaterama, part of the New York State pavilion. He created a grid of enlarged F.B.I. mug shots of thirteen notorious New York state criminals, titled *13 Most Wanted Men* (Figure 26)—“a pun on their being ‘wanted’ for their crimes and for their rough, sexual appeal.”²⁰² Black and white silkscreens were printed on twenty-two five-foot square Masonite panels. Before the fair opened, the organizers ordered it removed, and all the panels were covered with silver aluminum paint. Explanations for the censorship vary, and later Warhol himself claimed that the work was removed from view for “some political thing that I never understood.”²⁰³ Author Elisa Glick writes that the mural was an image “of the American dream gone wrong—a far cry from the intended celebration of ‘man’s achievements’ set forth by the World’s Fair publicity literature.”²⁰⁴ Curator and author Donald Albrecht suggests a darker motive: “The work’s homoeroticism fed rising social fears about homosexuality.”²⁰⁵ Whatever the reasons for the censorship, it marked the end of the *Death and Disaster* silkscreen paintings.

²⁰² Donald Albrecht, *Gay Gotham* (New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc., 2016), 178.

²⁰³ Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 90.

²⁰⁴ Elisa Glick, *Materializing Queer Desire: Oscar Wilde to Andy Warhol*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 151.

²⁰⁵ Albrecht, *Gay Gotham*, 178.

After this, Warhol turned away from monochromatic images, and began work on his large *Flower* paintings of 1964-5. (Figure 27) Nominally from nature, his flowers represented a sharp change from soup cans, electric chairs, and race riots. However, except for their general shape, there was nothing realistic or “natural” about them. In sharp contrast to his black and white “wanted men” for the World’s Fair, he now worked with colours that were bright and, in the jargon of Marshall McLuhan’s 1960s, “electric.” As well, the *Flowers* can be seen as a safer way for Warhol to project his sexuality, which was still mostly hidden from the general public. If it was true that the *13 Most Wanted Men* mural was censored because of perceived homoeroticism, then the unnaturally bright and stylized *Flowers* provided an oblique and safe vehicle through which to express a gay sensibility.

According to writer Angela Ledgerwood, “Warhol's flower paintings ... were initially inspired by a photograph of several hibiscus flowers taken [from] *Modern Photography* magazine. Warhol appropriated the image, cropped, copied, [and] enhanced the contrast.”²⁰⁶ He used deep saturated shades that were far removed from anything in nature—fluorescent red, yellow, orange, and blue. Warhol continued over the next few years to privilege these “electric” colours: in 1967 he began publishing screen print portfolios—starting with ten large garish portraits of Marilyn Monroe, (Figure 28) all taken from the same publicity photo that was used as the basis of *Marilyn Diptych* and *Gold Marilyn Monroe* earlier in the decade.

²⁰⁶ Angela Ledgerwood, “Andy Warhol’s Flower Power,” *Interview Magazine*, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/andy-warhols-flower-power/#>

The “flowers” are flat and child-like, and, as if to belie their lack of reality, set atop a field of slashes meant to suggest grass (sometimes green, sometimes white). The colours in the *Flowers* and the *Marilyns* run the gamut from black to neon pinks, oranges and greens. Warhol often screened them in grids with multiple images repeated in varieties of colours. He experimented widely with the possibilities offered by the silkscreen process, combining colours and overlapping images in unexpected ways. In both colour and design, the flowers in particular fit in well with the bold patterns and bright colours of contemporary fashion—something in which Warhol never lost his interest. These works had the same “flatbed” industrial/cultural perspective identified by Leo Steinberg, but taken to a further extreme. The acrylic paints were bright neon shades, and the industrial orientation determined within his Factory led to colours outside the range of nature—they became “chemical” instead of natural. This was unlike Newman, whose colour field expanses of red, blue or black always stayed within the imaginable range of colours in nature. Warhol brought colours to their chemical basics, as the logical end-point and conclusion of the colour field that had to a great extent defined abstract expressionist painting.

Most of the abstract expressionists were straight white men, enmeshed in the heteronormative world of presumed straight white male superiority and power. However, the industrial orientation of Warhol’s Factory was entwined with a queer orientation as well. Artists, socialites, drag queens—all were welcome, and this was the period of such implicitly queer films as *13 Beautiful Boys* (the first of about 500 films in his *Screen Tests* series), *Blow Job* and *My Hustler*. The Factory was Andy Warhol’s home, and he felt safe there with his many friends and friends-of-friends. The chemical

colours of the *Flowers* and the *Marilyns* can be seen as expressions of and stand-ins for queerness itself—at the time, homosexuality was considered to be as “unnatural” as pink neon paint.

Commodification: Commodities as Subject Matter

One of the first public showings of Andy Warhol’s paintings took place in 1961—not in a gallery, but in a Bonwit Teller department store window on Fifth Avenue. (Figure 29).

Five large canvases sat on easels behind five mannequins dressed in shades of red, cream and blue that more often than not matched the art behind them. Donald Albrecht writes, “Representing Warhol’s first foray into what would become Pop Art, these paintings depicted commercial imagery from ads and comics, overlaid with the gestural drips and blotches of Abstract Expressionism.”²⁰⁷ Warhol had arrived in New York from Pittsburgh in 1949 at age 21, and by the time of the Bonwit’s window he had established a highly successful career in the fashion/design industry. The commodification of subject matter in Warhol’s fine art arose naturally out of his work as a designer. In Fredric Jameson’s words, “Andy Warhol’s work ... turns centrally around commodification, and the great billboard images of the Coca-Cola bottle or the Campbell’s soup can ... explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital.”²⁰⁸

Karl Marx wrote about commodity fetishism in the first chapter of *Capital*. According to the O.E.D., after 1760 a “fetish” referred to “an inanimate object [with] supposed inherent magical powers, or as being animated by spirit.” This would have been Marx’s understanding of the word in the middle of the nineteenth century, as he

²⁰⁷ Albrecht, *Gay Gotham*, 177.

²⁰⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9.

applied it to commodities—objects that meet human wants and are produced by human labour. According to Marx, commodities are not straightforward things, but are wrapped in layers of mystery, which he sets about to unravel. Their value in use does not come from the human labour required to produce them, or from the social relationships among the workers who performed the labour. Nor is the value inherent in the objects themselves—their value is a product of our minds. Instead of commodities taking on the value of the work that went into them, it is the other way around—labour takes the form of value embodied in the commodities. This is because a commodity’s value “does not show itself except in the act of exchange.”²⁰⁹ A commodity is worth something only in relation or comparison to what all the other commodities in the world are worth. Marx imagined that “a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common”²¹⁰ could operate without commodities, assuming that the total production of the community was distributed to all its members “in accordance with a definite social plan.”²¹¹

Fredric Jameson compared the role of the commodity within both modernism and postmodernism in the context of Marx’s fetishism of commodities: “Modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.”²¹² In “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” Jean-Francois Lyotard connects Marx’s analysis of capitalism to the rise of the avant-garde: “The force of skepticism and even of destruction that capitalism has brought into play, and that Marx never ceased

²⁰⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, 48.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²¹² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, x.

analyzing and identifying, in some way encourages among artists a mistrust of established rules and a willingness to experiment with means of expression, with styles, with ever-new materials. There is something of the sublime in the capitalist economy.”²¹³

In their efforts to create a sublime experience through paint, Newman and the other abstract expressionists had removed figuration, and therefore subject matter, from their work. In a 1962 interview in *Art in America*, Newman said that he believed that “the central issue of painting is the subject matter. ... For most people, subject matter makes the painting seem full. For me both the use of objects and the manipulation of areas for the sake of the areas themselves must end up being anecdotal. My subject is antianecdotal.”²¹⁴ Later in the interview he elaborated: “I paint out of high passion. ... Instead of using outlines, instead of making shapes or setting off spaces, my drawing declares the space. Instead of working with the remnants of space, I work with the whole space.”²¹⁵

However, Warhol and the other Pop artists were tired of the “high passion” of abstract expressionism. Instead of “working with the whole space,” they restored subject matter with the mundane objects of late capitalism itself. Warhol’s subjects were commodities, mass media, and consumer life: soup cans, Coke bottles, car crashes, comics. Warhol wrote later that the Pop artists “did images that anybody walking down Broadway would recognize in a split second—comics, picnic tables, men’s trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, Coke bottles—all the great modern things that

²¹³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Inhuman*, 105.

²¹⁴ In O’Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 250.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

the Abstract Expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all.”²¹⁶ The embrace of bourgeois artifacts marked another turn away from modernism, but the embrace was ironic. Andy Warhol did not celebrate commercial culture because he liked it; his intent was more complex than that. In Susan Sontag’s terms, he took an essentially campy view of his world—Warhol wanted to “convert the serious into the frivolous.”²¹⁷ He followed Newman and the modernists in their break from beauty— notions of beauty (other than the parodic images of the “quotationally ‘beautiful’”²¹⁸ female cultural icons such as Marilyn or Jackie) seem irrelevant to Warhol’s work. Doing “violence . . . to the imagination,” however, is highly relevant. This sublime “violence” comes from several sources, including the shock of Warhol’s break with the familiarity of the heteronormative modern, and his recontexting of often familiar, but disturbing and sinister, images.

Subject matter aside, works of art are commodities themselves, of course, whether of the direct physical sort (a painting or a CD) or the oblique kind that we can experience but never own for ourselves (a church fresco or a live symphony performance). The labour required to produce them takes its value from their exchange-value as objects, and this is a value relationship that can shift an infinite number of times over the life of a work or its reproductions. How much was Giotto’s time worth in the early 1300s as he worked on the Scrovegni Chapel? What value have viewers and worshippers added over the centuries? How much work was it for Damien Hirst to put a shark into a big vitrine? What relationship did that work have to its eventual value in the marketplace? How

²¹⁶ Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 3.

²¹⁷ Susan Sontag, “Notes On ‘Camp,’” 1.

²¹⁸ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 216.

much labour went into Andy Warhol's *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*? (Figure 30) Was it enough to make it worth \$105 million at auction in 2013? These are unanswerable questions that only serve to highlight the relative value of the relationship between human labour and commodities.

Jameson writes that in our “contemporary world system,” the image has been replaced by the simulacrum, and reality by the pseudoevent. In terms of culture, we have lost the “critical distance” that modernism presumed—we no longer have “the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital.”²¹⁹ “Aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally.”²²⁰ In Warhol's Factory, aesthetic production *became* commodity production. The Factory was rather like the pre-automated factories of his hometown Pittsburgh—Caroline Jones refers to it as a “pre-Taylorized collective.”²²¹ As well, Jones continues, “The name ‘Factory’ also tapped into the power of the technological sublime. From the seductive terrors of Blake's satanic mills to the awesome attraction of Henry Adams's Dynamo, Warhol's silvered factory aimed to possess the public imagination and draw on all the ambivalent appeal of postwar industry itself.”²²² The notion of a factory that produces works of art was still novel, and piquing public interest was part of Warhol's strategy, and an important aspect of the performative technological sublime.

We might say that just as Barnett Newman came to the colour field by way of Matisse, Andy Warhol came to ‘commodity as subject’ by way of Manet's *A Bar at the*

²¹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²²¹ Jones, *Machine in the Studio*, 197.

²²² *Ibid.*, 198.

Folies-Bergère (Figure 31). Scholar Carol Armstrong believes that *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* was one of the first modern paintings for which commodities are the subject matter. She observes that the objects on Manet's bar, the objects and people in the reflection in the background, and the barmaid undertake a mirror-play of the spectacle of commodities.²²³ The display on the bar is a still life, but not a domestic array of food or flowers, as in many of Manet's earlier still lives. The liquor bottles and the oranges are in public view and have been consciously presented to appeal to consumers. The crystal and glass, the gold foil on the bottles, and even the oranges glisten—just as a display of luxury goods for sale should. One expects that the Bar would sell the flowers in front of the barmaid, or even those at her bust, if they had an offer. In addition to all this, the painting itself is a commodity—a fact that Manet plays with by signing his name on the label of a bottle of aperitif, as if he were a trademark or logo, advertising himself and his work.

One hundred years after Manet, Fredric Jameson argued that this sort of content is implicit in all postmodern art: “Every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today.”²²⁴ Whatever we might assume that Andy Warhol thought about Campbell's soup cans, for example—whether nostalgic, critical or neutral—it seems inevitable that he picture them, or something like them. This is the nature of the technological sublime, at least in part because it is a reaction against the modern natural sublime. The modern sublime is

²²³ Carol Armstrong, “Counter, Mirror, Maid: Some Infra-thin Notes on *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*,” in *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, ed. Bradford R. Collins (Princeton University Press, 1996), 42.

²²⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 3.

essentially formless, and insists on abstraction. The technological sublime demands to be expressed through subject matter. To the extent that the technological sublime is entwined with capitalism (and Jameson argues effectively that the entanglement is total), its artistic expression will centre on the representation of things—commodities. While Barnett Newman strove to picture Nothing, Andy Warhol always wanted to picture Something (or Someone). For Fredric Jameson, this is part of “the logic of the simulacrum ... which does more than merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it.”²²⁵

It would appear from looking today at bourgeois western society (and perhaps its art and fashion markets in particular) that the fetishism of commodities is gaining ground exponentially. For example, Louis Vuitton recently released a line of high fashion bags designed by the contemporary artist Jeff Koons. Each bag features a detail from a painting by an “old master”—Da Vinci, Titian, van Gogh, and others. (See Figure 32) The name of the artist is placed in reflective type in the centre of the “painting.” In a video interview advertising the products, Koons concludes with “I wanted [them] to become art. I believe that these bags are art.”²²⁶ Koons has taken the commodification of art that Warhol started to a new extreme, repurposing historical artworks for the decoration of handbags. Generally speaking, we are now a long, long way from being “a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in

²²⁵ Ibid., 46.

²²⁶ <http://ca.louisvuitton.com/eng-ca/stories/masterscampaign#section-the-story>

common.”²²⁷ We might think of the current postmodern era not as Late Capitalism, but as ‘Too Late Capitalism.’ It seems that we need Marx more than ever.

The Schizophrenic Grid

Mark Rothko once said, “If a thing is worth doing once, it is worth doing over and over again—exploring it, probing it, demanding by this repetition that the public look at it.”²²⁸

This was a modernist view—repetition was seen as a tool that could engage viewers, spark an emotional reaction, and make people “look at it.” Repetition and the grid were ubiquitous in the twentieth century, not because of the grid’s impersonality or essential materialism, but for precisely the opposite reason. In her 1977 essay, “Grids,” Rosalind Krauss points out that Mondrian and Malevich, for example, were less interested in the mechanics of painting than in the more elevated concerns of “Being, or Mind or Spirit. From their point of view, the grid is a staircase to the Universal and they are not interested in what happens below in the Concrete.”²²⁹ It was through her ineffable grids that Agnes Martin expressed perfect memories of emotions. A work like *Gray Geese Descending*, for example, commands attention through subtlety—it insists that viewers “look at it.”

Andy Warhol, however, was not much interested in subtlety, or in using the grid as a staircase to anything. He clearly felt that repetition was important—not because he wanted viewers to explore or probe anything, but because he wanted the opposite of involvement or engagement. Speaking about the seriality and repetition in his Marilyn Monroe screen print folios, he said, “The more you look at the same exact thing, the

²²⁷ Marx. *Capital*, 48.

²²⁸ in Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 8.

²²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” 52.

more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.”²³⁰ His goal was to empty his works of meaning, and to achieve an emotionless reaction in the viewer that was far from the abstract expressionist goals of wonder, awe, and sublimity. Much of Warhol’s work with repetition was happening at the same time that Minimalism—in part, another expression of the desire to separate affect from art—was on the rise. Also at the same time, Agnes Martin’s work was beginning to become known within the New York art world. Thomas McEvilley, in his essay “Grey Geese Descending,” notes that Martin’s “characteristic work began to appear at a moment when the tradition of the abstract sublime ... was on the verge of giving way to Minimalism.”²³¹ Along with Pop Art, Minimalism was at least in part an expression of the postmodern desire to be “anything but” the modern sublime.

In the same essay, Krauss points out that the grid holds a dual power:

“The grid’s mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction). The work of ... Agnes Martin would be [an instance] of this power.”²³²

Later she adds, “Because of its bivalent structure (and history) the grid is fully, even cheerfully, schizophrenic.”²³³ Martin employed the tools of Minimalism—parallel lines, grids, repetition—to express the emotional goals of Abstract Expressionism. However,

²³⁰ Andy Warhol, in <https://www.moma.org/slideshows/36?locale=en>

²³¹ McEvilley, *The Exile’s Return*, 65.

²³² Krauss, “Grids,” 54.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 60.

her vehicle for the expression of deep feeling was not Newman's large blocks of colour, or Pollock's sweeping gestural brushwork and drips, but the unadorned grid—and this made her *look* like a Minimalist. As her spare, square paintings and drawings began to be shown in New York in the 1960s, people began to think she *was* a Minimalist. However, the Minimalists, like Rauschenberg and Warhol before them, were using the grid to eliminate emotional expression from their work, and Martin was doing the opposite.

Lawrence Alloway, writing of Martin's work in the early 1960s, says that when Martin uses the grid, it accumulates "sufficient differences to suggest, for all its regularity, a veil, a shadow, a bloom."²³⁴ McEvelley says that Martin's grids seem "to accumulate in a series of thin filmy layers of elusive intention," and are "saturated with the expression of feeling and emotion that the Minimalists formally abjured."²³⁵ Curator Cindy Richmond says that Martin's drawings "gradually envelop us, drawing us into their beauty and simplicity.... They elicit in their audience a profound emotional experience."²³⁶ To Ned Rifkin, her paintings are "evocations of light, each an individual issuance of ethereal rhythms."²³⁷

It is difficult to imagine a critic using such words—*bloom*, *elusive*, *ethereal*—about Andy Warhol's work. The repetition in Warhol's grids serves a different purpose than Martin's. They are not "evocations of light," although they may be said to be evocations of irony. To begin with, they are not abstract—they are pictures of objects

²³⁴ Alloway, *Agnes Martin*, 9.

²³⁵ McEvelley, *The Exile's Return*, 65 – 66.

²³⁶ Cindy Richmond and Lawrence Rinder, *Agnes Martin* (Regina: The Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1995), 26.

²³⁷ Ned Rifkin, *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2002) 28.

(including people). Warhol began his first grid paintings in 1962, using a rubber stamp to impress each individual image. For *S&H Green Stamps* (Figure 33), he stamped an image of each green stamp “in three successive layers (light green, dark green, and red) using silkscreen ink.”²³⁸ He soon dropped this process in favour of screenprinting, but not because the rubber stamps were labour-intensive and inefficient, but because the process was too authorial and personal—not mechanical enough. “The rubber stamp image I’d been using to repeat images suddenly seemed too homemade; I wanted something stronger that gave more of an assembly-line effect.”²³⁹

The *Flowers* of 1964 are one example of the new technique of silkscreen print on canvas. Author Carter Ratcliff points out that Warhol was replacing the modernist conception of the painting as “a highly particularized reflection of the artist’s personal state” with a depersonalized and mechanical model for which Warhol invented “a new kind of object—the multiple painting, which permits the same image to be repeated time and time again. ... [and] throws traditional ideals of originality into a relentlessly ironic light.”²⁴⁰ Warhol used repetition and the grid—key tools in the abstract expressionists’ quest for transcendence and individuated expression—to subvert modernism itself. For example, Agnes Martin’s grids are painted or drawn by hand, and every line is in some small way different from every other line. In the red ink drawing *Untitled, 1963*, for example, there are natural variations in the thicknesses of the ink, and tiny puddles of ink at the terminus of each line—all slightly different in terms of size and proximity to the

²³⁸ Museum of Modern Art gallery label,
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79885?locale=en>

²³⁹ Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 28.

²⁴⁰ Carter Ratcliff, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), 115.

margins. Briony Fer argues that in all Martin's grids "the balance between regularity and irregularity, precision and imprecision, accent and interval, is precariously maintained, just. . . . The differences are endless; the grids are repetitive but never mechanical."²⁴¹

Warhol's grids, on the other hand, are repetitive and *very* mechanical—they aim not to raise emotion, but to obliterate it. "Martin's work [was] incompatible with that of a younger generation," says Fer, "except that younger generation of minimalists saw in her work something that resonated with theirs, that played into their concerns with the infinite repetition of a serial procedure."²⁴² Warhol shared those concerns, and the "cheerfully schizophrenic" grid seemed able to contain and express the concerns of both modernist Martin and postmodern Warhol.

The Pleasure/Pain Paradox

The notion of violence, which can range from discomfort to terror, is historically an important part of the sublime pleasure/pain dialectic. For Kant, as for Burke, the sublime always involves both comfort and discomfort, or pleasure and pain. (Although this pain is not physical, for the sublime is not experienced bodily, "but only in our own ideas."²⁴³)

The discomfort comes from the mind—the inability of the imagination to apprehend the limits of an object or experience, while the pleasure comes from the imagination realizing this very inability. For example, Kant says that for a first-time visitor to the huge and magnificent St. Peter's in Rome, "a feeling comes home to him of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of a whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself, but in doing

²⁴¹ Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 51.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁴³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 80.

so succumbs to an emotional delight.”²⁴⁴ Unlike the beautiful, which always results in pleasure, the sublime results in both repulsion and attraction, or pain and pleasure.

In his 1978 deconstruction of Kant’s *Critique* in *The Truth in Painting*, Jacques Derrida looks closely at Kant’s distinction between the pleasure of the beautiful and the pleasure of the sublime. “The pleasure (*Lust*) provoked by the sublime is negative. ... In the experience of the beautiful there is intensification and acceleration of life. ... In the feeling of the sublime, pleasure only ‘gushes indirectly.’ It comes after inhibition, arrest, suppression ... that is all the more potent.”²⁴⁵ Beauty provokes an acceleration of positive feeling that can only last as long as understanding will allow. The sublime is a concept of reason—the mixture of fear and delight delays the feelings that it unleashes. Delight is held back at first, as if by a dam, but then “gushes” forth when released.

Derrida also echoes Kant’s connection of the sublime with imaginative violence. He quotes Kant: “that is sublime which pleases immediately by its opposition (*Widerstand*) to the interest of the senses.”²⁴⁶ This “opposition” is the violence done by the imagination, raised by the sublime, which “suspends play and elevates to seriousness.”²⁴⁷ Derrida then extends the image through imaginative (and violent) language that emphasizes the effect of the sublime on the imagination: “the violence is here done by the imagination, not by reason. The imagination turns this violence against itself, it mutilates itself, ties itself, binds itself, sacrifices itself and conceals itself, gashes

²⁴⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 83.

²⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1987), 128.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

itself and robs itself.” However, Derrida continues, despite this self-mutilation, “the imagination gains by what it loses.... [It] organizes the theft of its own freedom.”²⁴⁸

This paradox leads to another: the sublime can only be presented through the unrepresentable, because it exists only in the mind, and not in nature or any object. For example, a work of art might try to express an infinite sublime, but at best it “inadequately presents the infinite in the finite and delimits it violently therein. ... Presentation is inadequate to the idea of reason but is presented in its very inadequation, adequate to its inadequation. The inadequation of presentation is presented.”²⁴⁹ This is an expression of Derrida’s overarching argument that Kant disembodies the sublime through a painfully embodied formulation of the sublime experience.

While his language is less colourful than Derrida’s, cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek makes a similar point. Explaining Kant’s concept of the feeling of the sublime as “a feeling of displeasure,” Žižek says, “We can see now why it is precisely nature in its most chaotic, boundless, terrifying dimension which is best qualified to awaken in us the feeling of the Sublime: here, where the aesthetic imagination is strained to its utmost, where all finite determinations dissolve themselves, the failure appears at its fullest.”²⁵⁰ The failure of the imagination to adequately represent the terrifying is itself the cause of a kind of pleasure or delight.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 130-131.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 131.

²⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 230.

Further, Žižek argues that the sublime dilemma is animated by a sexual dynamic. In his essay “Kant with (or against) Sade”²⁵¹ he explores the work of both Kant and the Marquis de Sade (who both wrote in the late eighteenth century), addressing their respective understandings of pleasure and pain in relation to thought. Kant might presumably represent the rational, “enlightened” aspect of the Enlightenment, and Sade is “in the long tradition of the orgiastic/carnavalesque reversal of the established order.”²⁵² Žižek begins with the statement that the position of modern ethics equates two radical opposites: “that the sublime, disinterested, ethical attitude is somehow identical to, or overlaps with the unrestrained indulgence in pleasurable violence.”²⁵³ If this is the case, Žižek wonders if Nazi torture was an outcome of “the enlightened insistence on the autonomy of Reason,”—and is there perhaps a line “from Sade to fascist torturing?”²⁵⁴

There is a dialectic between Sade and Kant’s positions that can be seen as a model for the postmodern sublime. Pleasure through pain would seem to summarize Sade’s sadomasochistic position, but Žižek points out that Sade understood that the price for “the full assertion of earthly pleasures [is] the radical intellectualization /instrumentalization/ regimentation of the (sexual) activity intended to bring pleasure.”²⁵⁵ Sade takes it into account that sensual pleasure and spiritual love are dialectically intertwined: “there is something deeply ‘spiritual’, spectral, sublime, about a really passionate sensual lust.”²⁵⁶ So it may be that while the definition of the sublime

²⁵¹ in Elizabeth and Edmond Wright, eds. *The Žižek Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 283 – 301.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 285.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

comes from Kant (via Burke), the postmodern implications of the sublime come from Sade—or from some dialectical intertwining of the two. Not simply pleasure/pain, but also love/lust, desire/duty, sensuality/Reason, or even human understanding/genocide.

Part of the task of the postmodern artist is to grapple with the murderous mess that modernism made (or at least failed to unmake) of the twentieth century. This is akin to Jameson's thought that all postmodern art is one way or another a statement about global capitalism. One way of understanding the last half of the twentieth century is through the dialectics of the sublime. Whether conscious on his part or not, this was always Andy Warhol's implicit position. Once again, *Electric Chair* provides a good example. The silver silkscreen is from his *Death and Disaster* series from 1962 – 1964, whose subjects include suicides, car crashes, and scenes of civil unrest. The electric chair image comes from a 1953 newspaper photo of the instrument used to execute Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in Sing Sing Prison in New York. The “vagueness” of the flat surface image creates uncertainties for the viewer; one has to peer closely to see such details as the power cord on the floor or the ‘Silence’ sign in the top right corner. No emotion is suggested—how is one to feel about an outdated electric chair in an empty room?

Marshall McLuhan labeled this general lack of affect in the “electric age” as a form of numbness in response to the repeated onslaughts of new technologies. We can read it now as the way we cope with rapid change in the postmodern age—our way of sublimating the sublime, hoping that we might experience only the pleasure half of the pleasure/pain dialectic. McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was published in 1964; this was around the same time that Warhol was creating his *Death and Disaster* series, and

the *Flowers* and *Marilyn* grids. McLuhan set out to expose the pain caused on both a societal and personal level by technological change that was being wrought upon a world that was still print-based. He refers to the “numbing or narcotic effect of new technology that lulls attention while the new form slams the gates of judgment and perception.”²⁵⁷ While McLuhan never saw one, the smartphone offers a good example: we scan news sites or Facebook robot-like while walking down the street, without ever giving a thought to how this device might be changing us. “Technical change,” says McLuhan, “alters not only habits of life, but patterns of thought and valuation.”²⁵⁸ However, “the area of impact and incision [of the new technology] is numb. It is the entire system that is changed.”²⁵⁹ And our perceptions of the effects of the change are narcotized by the very thing (e.g., the smartphone) that has impacted us.

According to McLuhan, the artist is the only exception to the numbing effects of technological change. “Just as higher education is no longer a frill or luxury but a stark need of production and operational design in the electric age,” McLuhan writes, “so the artist is indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms and structures created by electric technology.”²⁶⁰ McLuhan believed that the postmodern electric age desperately needs the artist’s ability “to sidestep the bully blow of new technology ... and to parry such violence with full awareness.”²⁶¹ However, instead of paying serious attention to artists, in order to learn how to cope with the next technological blow, we turn them into celebrities. “To reward,” says McLuhan, “and

²⁵⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 63.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

make celebrities of artists can also be a way of ignoring their prophetic work, and preventing its timely use for survival.”²⁶²

This was written in 1964, a few years before McLuhan himself became a celebrity and was befriended by the likes of Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Woody Allen. He was the subject of articles in the *New York Times* and a profile in the *New Yorker*. Warhol later wrote—only half ironically—that McLuhan had discovered that “the way to be counterculture and have mass commercial success [at the same time] was to say and do radical things in a conservative format. ... Like ... write a book saying books were obsolete.”²⁶³ In a way, McLuhan predicted his own fate: the prophet was co-opted into the world of the rich and famous, and while many of his predictions came true, we did not pay enough serious attention to ameliorate the effects of the worst of them. (For example, the “dumbing down” that is a result of over-use of television, or the potential health dangers of cell phones.) We bypass the pain of the postmodern by simultaneously lionizing and ignoring the very people who might offer a solution.

Abstract *expressionists* were so called because they wanted to explore their emotions and interior lives and then *express* them in an outward trajectory. Warhol’s *Electric Chair* may not express anything about its artist, but it is expressive of the oppositional forces of the technological postmodern sublime. The image is painful, yet there is a sublime pleasure in the very failure of the imagination to understand what one is looking at. Is there an answer in this picture to Žižek’s questions about a possible line from Kant, Sade, or Kant/Sade to violence and torture? What is the lineage of the

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, 315.

postmodern sublime, and can understanding that help us understand anything about the place we now find ourselves?

Author Timothy Engström, writing about this question, argues that Jean Francois Lyotard doesn't want "our narratives to be capable of normalizing horror ... and the sublime [because it is unrepresentable] offers a way out."²⁶⁴ We must be careful, Engström says, for "the horrific and the sublime may be quite nonchalantly normalized: a death camp here, the odd effort at genocide there, a quick napalm run over some distant peasants down below."²⁶⁵ His concern is that Lyotard's valourization of unrepresentability might amount to allowing the narratives of horror to "subjugate and overpower ... because they are simply the most powerful, functioning narratives in the field."²⁶⁶ We inherit from Kant's notion of the sublime that it is "the natural, sensible, and conceptual world exceeded"—the source of a "sanitized pain."²⁶⁷ When carrying this eighteenth-century concept forward, we must take the realities of the twentieth century—including world wars, the Holocaust, and the threat of nuclear destruction—into account.

Like Jameson, Lyotard believed that under capitalism, "realism" actually calls forth the unrealistic—the images that the political apparatus or the economic apparatus decree to be "real." "So-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction."²⁶⁸ (For example, Warhol's portraits of Marilyn and Jackie, or his *Death*

²⁶⁴ Timothy H. Engström, "The Postmodern Sublime?: Philosophical Rehabilitations and Pragmatic Evasions," in *boundary 2* Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), 193-4.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁶⁸ Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?" 40.

and Disaster silkscreens.) Postmodern artists must continually question the rules of conformity and ask the question, “What can be said to be art?”²⁶⁹

Modern art, says Lyotard, devotes its ‘little technical expertise’ to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists. The mature works of Newman and Martin provide good examples—they use abstract forms to represent, through painting, an unrepresentable sublime. The postmodern, however, “denies itself the solace of good forms” by attempting to *actually* present the unrepresentable. The postmodern “searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.”²⁷⁰ The postmodern artist is a *philosopher* who has no familiar categories to apply to the work. “The artist ... [is] working *without rules* in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done.”²⁷¹ Lyotard posits a postmodern sublime that retains Kant’s paradoxical notion of simultaneous pleasure and pain. An artwork, for example, “will enable us to see by making it impossible to see.” As with the sublime, *it will please only by causing pain.*

Conclusion

Pleasure through pain, presenting the unrepresentable, the technological sublime—the postmodern condition itself is a matter of living with impossibility. For Jameson, it is the “impossible totality of the contemporary world system.” For Lyotard, it is the death of the real and the triumph of the simulacrum. From his place and time, Andy Warhol was able to create his own “contemporary world system” that held all sorts of possibilities, including the opportunity to create a new kind of art. If the “real” was abstract

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 41

²⁷⁰ in Engström, “The Postmodern Sublime?” 190.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

expressionism, then Warhol was delighted to offer the simulacrum of grids of repeated silkscreened images of soup cans and movie stars in its place. Barnett Newman put his faith in the philosophy of Burke and the natural sublime. Agnes Martin explored memories of nature through a personal geometry, and took comfort in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. Andy Warhol didn't study philosophy (although he created a faux philosophy of his own²⁷²), but he knew that modernism was ending. Through collaborative practice in his silver Factory, his chemical colours, his ironic use of consumer culture and the repetition of images, and his implicit understanding of the need for art to cause pain if it was going to create pleasure, he could be considered to be both herald and instantiation of the postmodern.

²⁷² Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*.

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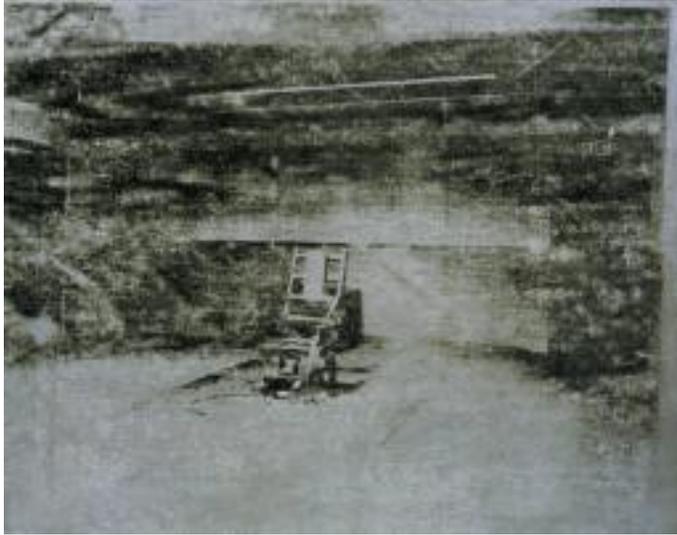
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FIGURES

Figure 1



Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair*, 1964, Screenprint and acrylic on canvas, 22" x 28".

Figure 2



Agnes Martin, *The Tree*, 1964, Oil and pencil on canvas, 6' x 6'.

Figure 3

James Ward, *Gordale Scar (A View of Gordale, in the Manor of East Malham in Craven, Yorkshire, Property of Lord Ribblesdale)*, c. 1812-14, Oil on canvas, 11' x 14'

Figure 4



Henri Matisse, *The Red Studio*, 1911, Oil on canvas, 5'3" x 4'3".

Figure 5

Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes*, c. 1965, screenprint (detail).

Figure 6

Henri Matisse, *L'Atelier Sous les Toits*, 1903, oil on canvas, 55 cm. x 46 cm.

Figure 7



Reginald Gray, Stage design for Act 1 of *La bohème*, 2010.

Figure 8



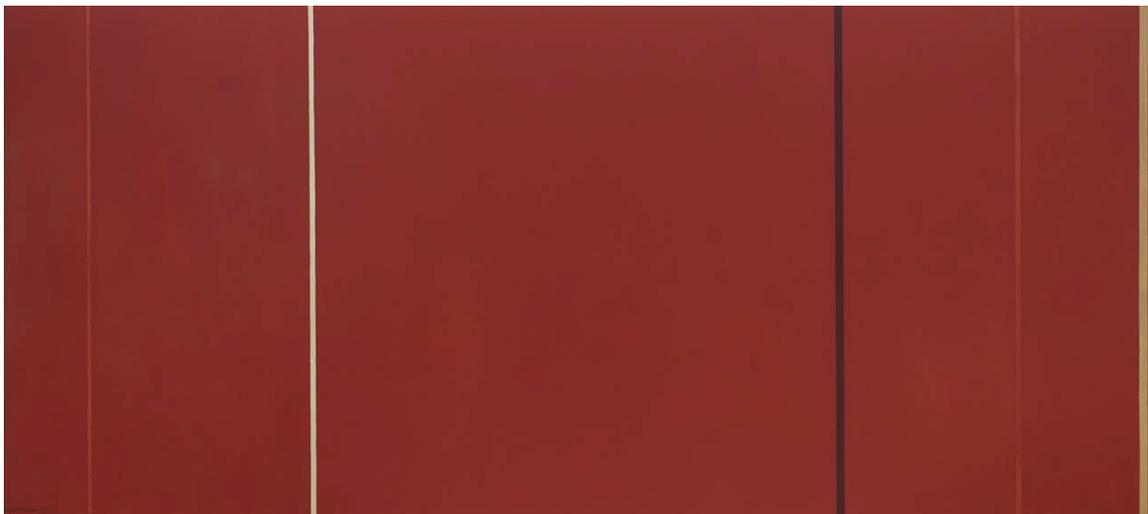
Eugene Delacroix, *Michelangelo In His Studio*, 1849-50, Oil on canvas, 32 x 40 cm.

Figure 9



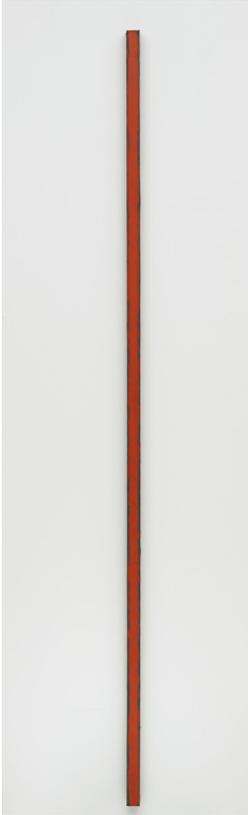
Barnett Newman, *Onement 1*, 1948, Oil on canvas, 27" x 16".

Figure 10



Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51, Oil on canvas, 8' x 18'.

Figure 11



Barnett Newman, *The Wild*, 1950, Oil on canvas, 1.5" x 96".

Figure 12



Barnett Newman (and unidentified woman), standing 18" from *Cathedra*, 1951.

Figure 13

Barnett Newman, *Pagan Void*, 1946, Oil on canvas, 33" x 38".

Figure 14



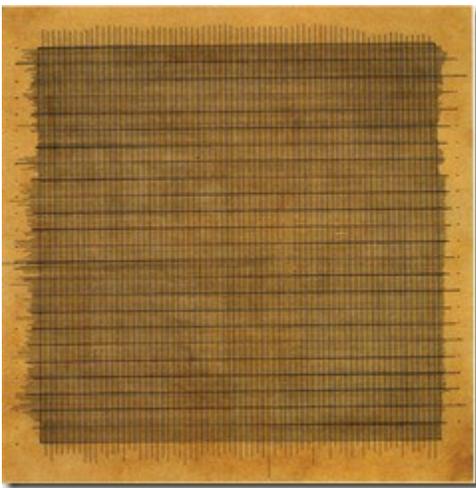
Barnett Newman, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*, 1966, Oil paint, 33" x 21"

Figure 15



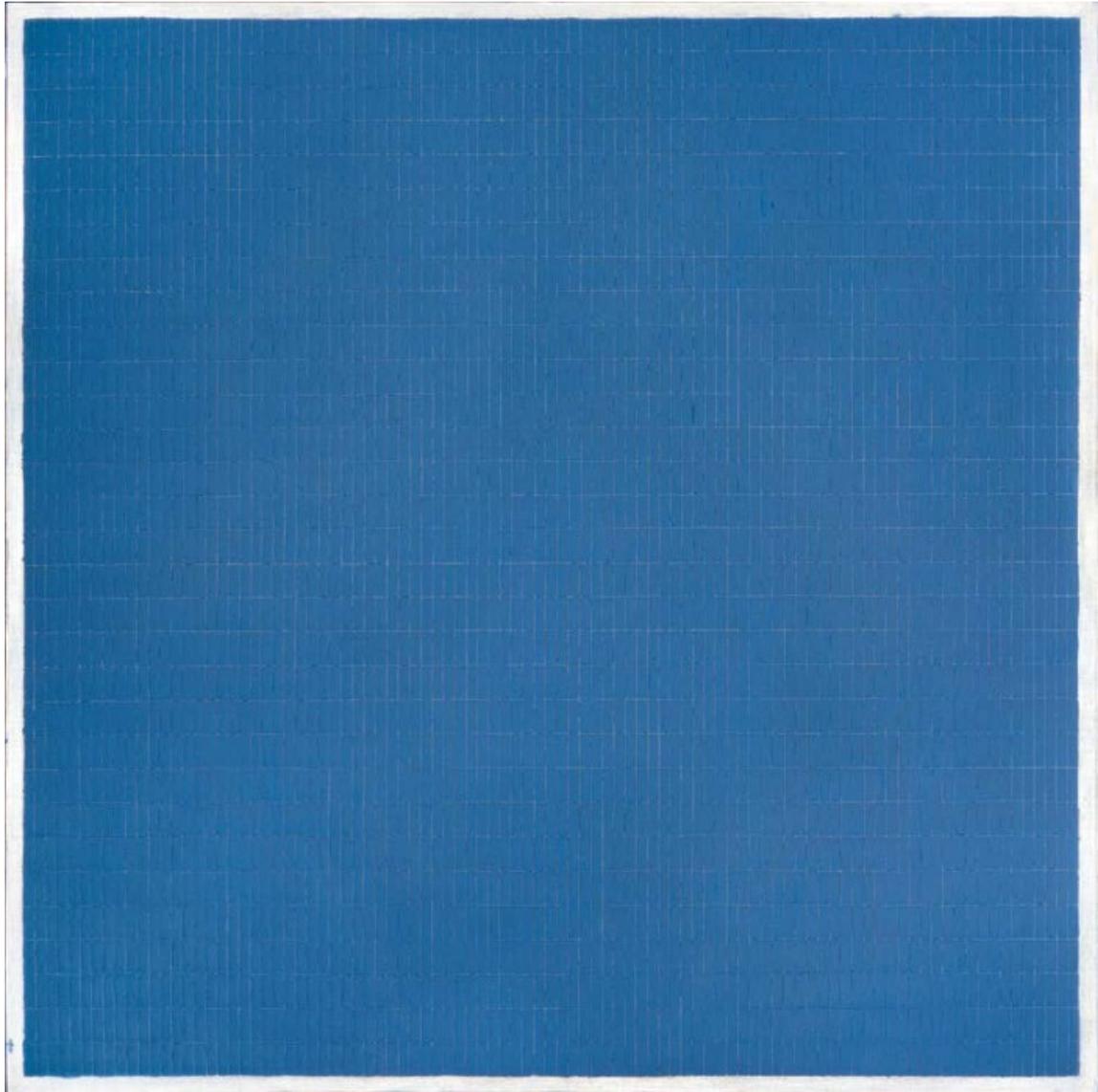
Agnes Martin, *The Spring*, 1958, Oil on canvas, 4' x 4'

Figure 16



Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, 1960, Ink on paper, 12" x 12".

Figure 17



Agnes Martin, *Night Sea*, 1963, Oil on canvas with gold leaf, 6' x 6'.

Figure 18



Andy Warhol, *Gold Marilyn*, 1962, Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 2.1 m x 1.45 m

Figure 19



J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*, 1812, Oil on canvas, 57" x 93"

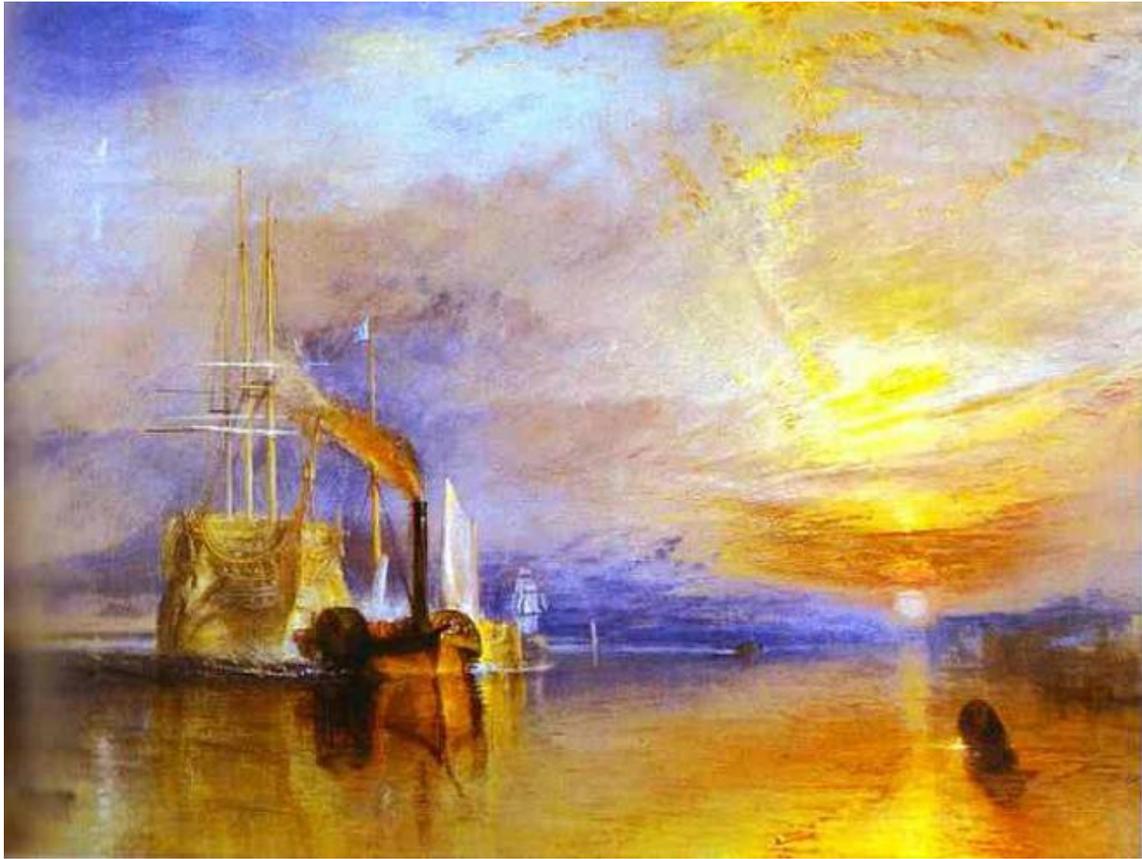
Figure 20

Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, Oil on canvas, 3' x 2.5'

Figure 21



Caspar David Friedrich, *Fog*, c. 1807, Oil on canvas, 13" x 20"

Figure 22

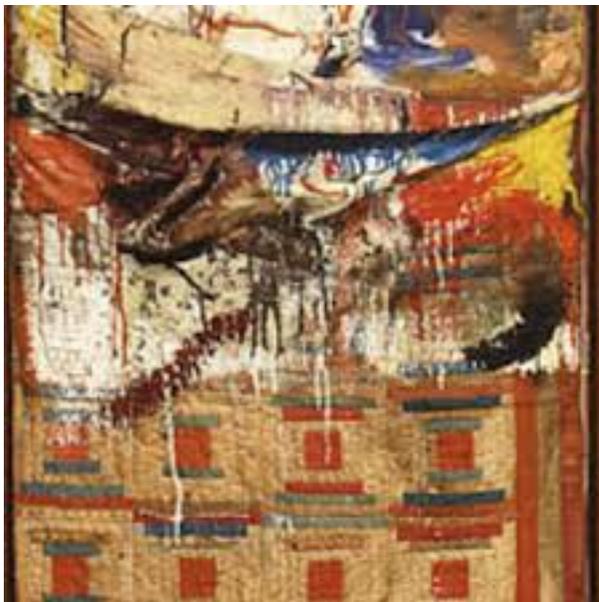
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Fighting 'Temeraire', Tugged to her Last Berth to be Broken Up*, 1838, Oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

Figure 23



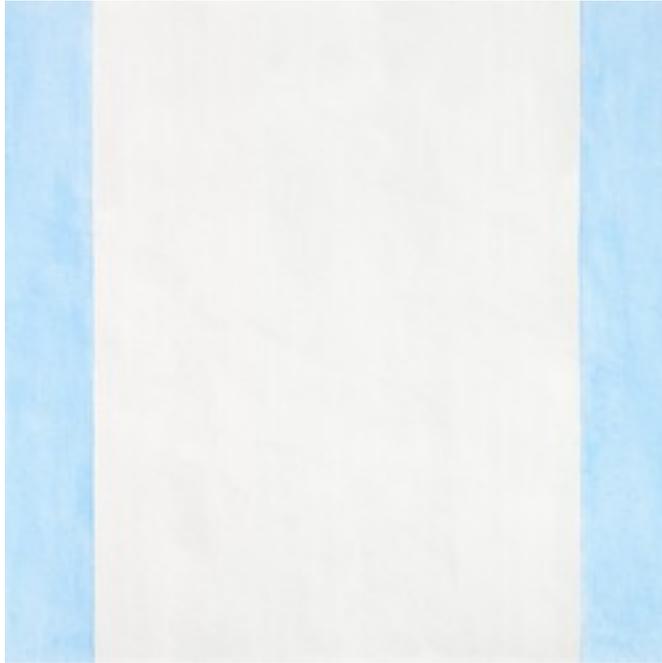
Jean Dubuffet, *Olympia*, 1950, Oil paint, sand and mud.

Figure 24



Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed* (Detail), 1955, Oil and pencil on bedding, 6'3" x 2'7" x 8".

Figure 25



Agnes Martin, *Untitled #22*, 2002, Acrylic and graphite pencil on canvas, 5' x 5'.

Figure 26



Andy Warhol, *13 Most Wanted Men*, 1964, Silkscreen ink on Masonite, 25' x 30' (overall).

Figure 27

Andy Warhol, *Flowers*, 1964, Silkscreen and acrylic paint, each panel 23" x 23".

Figure 28 – Andy Warhol, *10 Marylins*, 1966, Silkscreens, each panel 36" x 36".

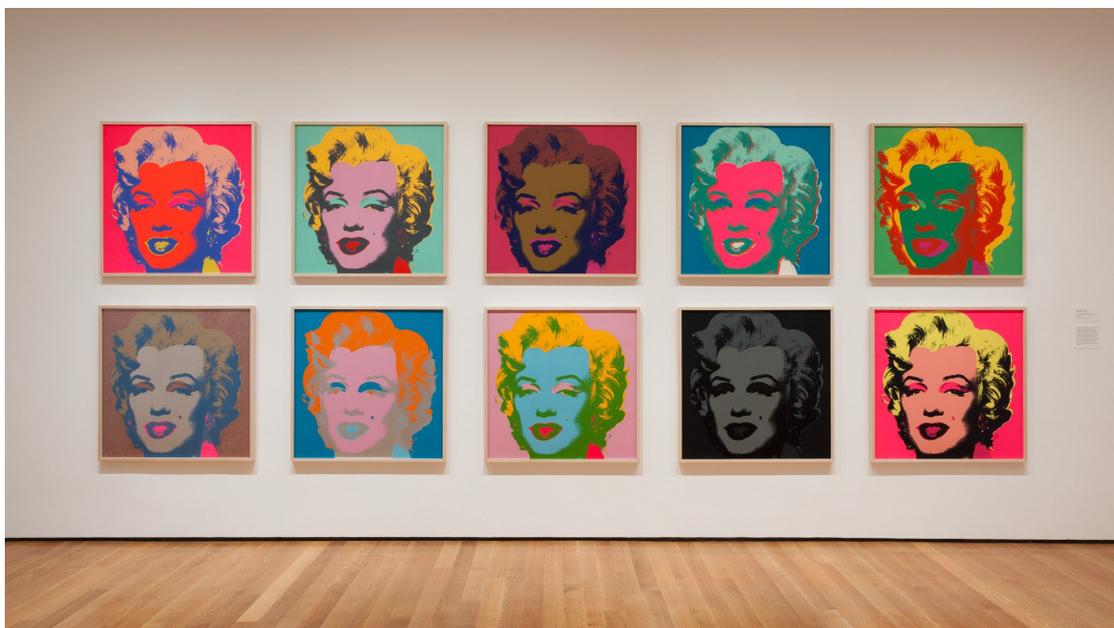
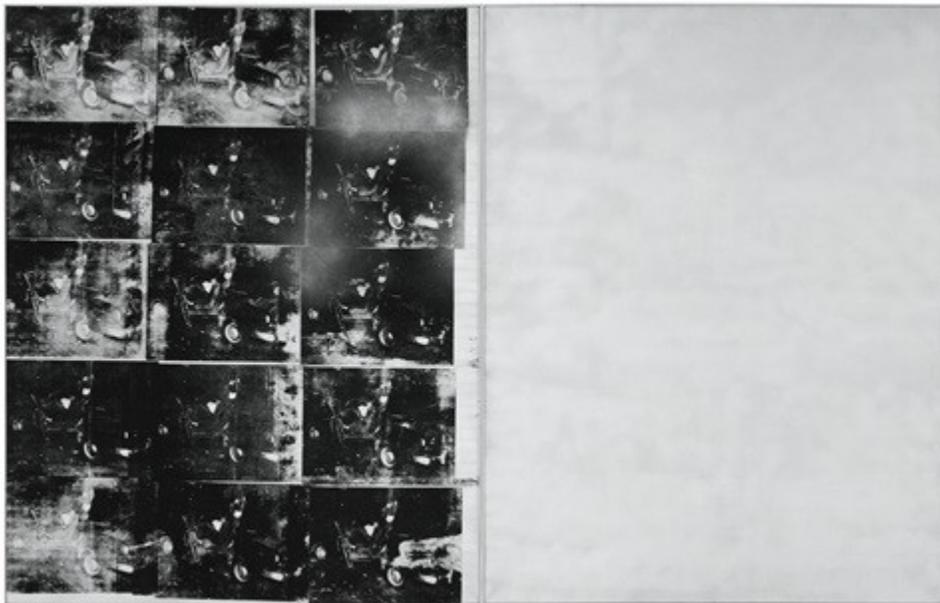


Figure 29



Andy Warhol, *Bonwit Teller window display*, 1961.

Figure 30



Andy Warhol, *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*, 1963, Serigraph, 8' x 13'

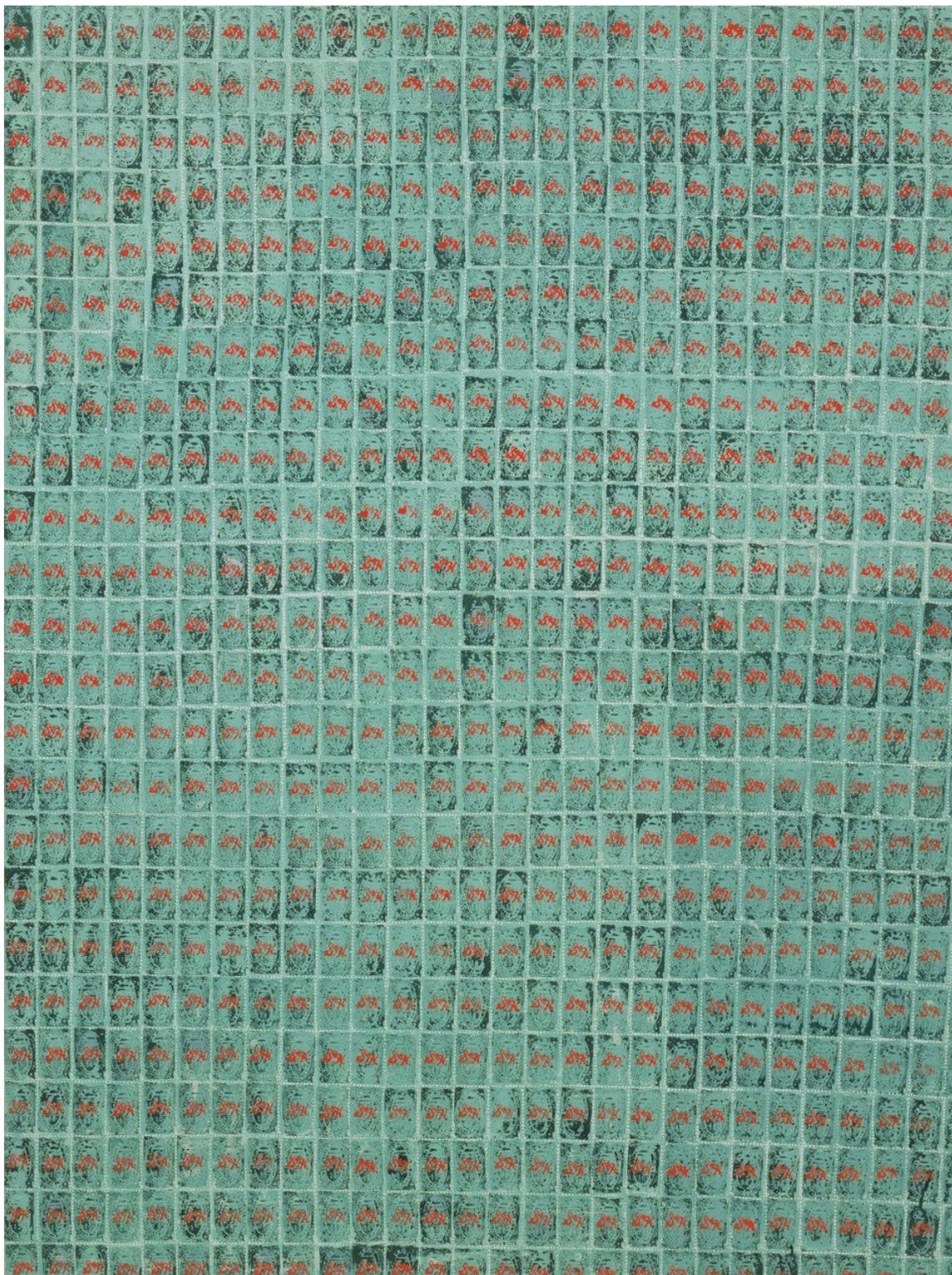
Figure 31

Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, Oil on canvas, 96 cm x 103 cm.

Figure 32

Jeff Koons, *Handbag for Louis Vuitton – "Mona Lisa"*, Hand-painted recreation, printed on leather, 2017.

Figure 33



Andy Warhol, *S&H Green Stamps*, 1962, Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 72" x 53".

