A photograph taken by Eric Pollitzer (page 80) makes it perfectly clear: the five untitled “skinny” paintings from 1950 (as they have sometimes been nicknamed) are closely related, and they belong to the same family as *The Wild* (CR 48) of the same year.¹ The photograph is not dated, and it would be tempting to assume that Pollitzer took it while the artist was preparing his second one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery (April 23 to May 12, 1951): *Untitled 1, 1950* (CR 39), *Untitled 2, 1950* (CR 40), and *Untitled 3, 1950* (CR 41) are already framed, ready to go, while a framing solution has yet to be found for *Untitled 4, 1950* (CR 42), *Untitled 5, 1950* (CR 43), and *The Wild*. (We know for sure that *The Wild* and the four first *Untitlés* were included in the show²: were the hypothesis correct, it would confirm that *Untitled 5, 1950* was also

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¹ The nicknam e “skinny paintings” first appeared in print in Philip Wofford’s contribution to the round of artists’ interviews edited by Jeanne Siegel and published in *Art News* as a posthumous homage at the time of the opening of Newman’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (“Around Barnett Newman,” *Art News* 70, no.6 [October 1971], p. 60). This nickname was often used in my conversations with Annalee Newman, which gave me the impression that it had been used by Newman himself.

² *The Wild*, which can be seen in many installation shots of the exhibition taken by Hans Namuth, is identified by its size and a brief description (“scarlet stripe”) on the checklist of the exhibition, where it bears the number 8. The indications concerning the untitled paintings are less precise.
exhibited, as is very likely.) However, the figures don’t add up, since Pollitzer did not begin working for Newman until 1961.3

The artist gave Untitled 1, 1950 to Alfonso Ossorio some time after the exhibition, but then recalled it from him in June 1953. The reasons for this odd withdrawal will be discussed below; suffice it here to say that Newman no longer wanted the painting, or its cohorts, to be publicly seen, particularly by the painters of his generation, many of them Ossorio’s friends, who had so cruelly bad-mouthed his 1951 show. His reluctance dissolved slowly, first with regard to The Wild, which he included in his retrospective at Bennington College in 1958 (though he did not repeat the gesture for the New York version of that show at French & Co. in 1959). He waited a couple more years for the untitled canvases, selecting Untitled 3, 1950 (along with The Wild) for his joint exhibition with Willem de Kooning at the Allan Stone Gallery in 1962, then Untitled 2, 1950 and Untitled 4, 1950 for a 1965 group show, again at the Allan Stone Gallery. (There might have been more of the skinny Untitl — these two last exhibitions—the records are imprecise.)4 By the mid-1960s, at any rate, the status of these works had changed dramatically—from best-kept secrets to groundbreaking forerunners of Minimalism. As early as December 1964, at the beginning of a catalogue preface, Lawrence Alloway would remind the viewers of “The Shaped Canvas,”

(hastily handwritten, no size given). Untitled 1, 1950 is obviously number 11 (“light red, dark red area with white stripe in it”); Untitled 2, 1950 is most certainly number 12 (“light red and black”); Untitled 3, 1950, which appears on an installation photograph by Hans Namuth (page 111), is number 14 (“light grey and light red [wavy]”); Untitled 4, 1950, also featured on a Namuth shot, is either number 13 (“dark red with wider lighter red stripe in center”) or number 16 (“light red center and dark red edges”). Since there is only one extant painting that matches the very similar descriptions for numbers 13 and 16, it is reasonable to assume that the same painting was counted twice, a mistake that would suggest that Untitled 5, 1950 was shown, albeit confused with Untitled 4, 1950 by whoever made the list. Number 15 is not a skinny painting but Untitled 6, 1950 (CR 45), the so-called “Study for Vir Heroicus Sublimes.”

3. According to Eric Pollitzer’s conversation with Heidi Colsman-Freyberger on December 21, 2001. Indeed, the first Pollitzer invoice to be found in the BNF archives dates from January 1961. Furthermore, according to James Strong, keeper of the Pollitzer archives, the number of the negative (3964) dates it back no earlier than late 1960. Finally, the baseboard and molding visible in the Pollitzer photograph are similar to those seen in the series of photographs taken by Ugo Mulas, during the mid-1960s, in the West End Avenue apartment into which Newman moved in 1958.

4. The Wild is reproduced in the catalogue of the 1962 show (given as “Collection: Mr. And Mrs. Robert Kulicke, N.Y.”), and Robert Kulicke confirmed having made this loan; Untitled 3, 1950, listed as “Untitled,” is identifiable by its size. Several known discrepancies between the exhibition and the catalogue (Uriel [CR 66] is reproduced but was not included in the show, for example) inspire caution, however. Indeed, a checklist bearing the title “Allan Stone Gallery”—handwritten by Annalene Newman, with annotations from Barnett Newman, shows little resemblance to the composition of the show as published in the catalogue. Written during the installation, the list reveals that certain unused works, such as Pagan Void (CR 2), were returned on October 28 (the show opened on October 23, 1962), and it also indicates that certain works are “hanging.” Among the latter, three are listed together, one after the other: “Young Eve,” which is a nickname for Untitled 2, 1950 (not in the catalogue); “Wiggly,” most probably Untitled 3, 1950; and “Black and Red Box,” which could only be Untitled 5, 1950 (not in the catalogue). There was no catalogue for the 1965 group exhibition, and no checklist has surfaced so far. Several installation shots are our only evidence.
an exhibition he curated at the Guggenheim Museum, that Newman’s skinny paintings represented a historical precedent: “Important here are several thin paintings by Barnett Newman, taller than a man but only a couple of inches wide, done in the early ’50s, to demonstrate that his bands were planes of color and not just lines or stripes.”

The Pollitzer photograph most likely registers the moment when the artist definitively changed his mind, after his 1958 and 1959 retrospectives and shortly before the 1962 show at Allan Stone. Indeed, given that *The Wild* is not yet framed in the photograph, and that it is precisely with regard to the challenge of framing this painting that Newman contacted Robert Kulicke (who acquired it before the 1962 exhibition), one can imagine that the photo session is the result of some retrospection: before parting with *The Wild*, Newman would have been reflecting upon its genealogy and decided to record it for himself. Shortly thereafter, the Allan Stone show would provide him with the occasion to lift the quarantine in which he had been keeping these works for too long.

But the fact that the five 1950 *Untitled* s and *The Wild* were photographed together at Newman’s request does not mean that they should only be thought of together. Perhaps to make this point clear, a second Pollitzer shot (page 97) breaks up the group, omitting both *The Wild* and *Untitled 1, 1950*. Rather than a sign of the artist’s lesser interest in these two absent paintings, this rearranging of the family portrait confirms that Newman conceived of his oeuvre as a deck of cards in which each work plays its role differently according to an ever-changing context. Each establishes its own web of kindred relations, so to speak, and these two photographs can be taken as an injunction to mentally pursue the game of substitution and see how each painting behaves within varied groupings.

5. Lawrence Alloway, *The Shaped Canvas* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1964), no pagination. The artists included in the show were Paul Feeley, Sven Lukin, Richard Smith, Frank Stella, and Neil Williams. It should be noted that not all skinny paintings match Alloway’s description (“taller than a man but only a couple of inches wide”). Leaving aside the so-called “Untitled” painting (CR 266), which Alloway could not have known (see note 7 below), only *Untitled 4, 1950; Untitled 5, 1950; and The Wild* are taller than a man. They are, respectively, 6 inches, 3 inches, and 1 1/2 inches wide and 74 inches, 77 inches, and 95 3/8 inches high.

6. The 1951 show is the only time they were all exhibited simultaneously during Newman’s lifetime (if indeed *Untitled 5, 1950* was exhibited), though not side by side. In an installation photograph taken by Hans Namuth during the 1951 exhibition, one sees *Untitled 3, 1950* and *Untitled 4, 1950* on two adjacent walls of the tiny office room of the Betty Parsons Gallery (page 111). Next to *Untitled 3, 1950*, Newman chose to hang not its vertical companion but the horizontal *Untitled 6, 1950* (number 15 on the checklist of the show). However, with the exception of *The Wild*, it seems that all the skinny works were packed in that room. In her negative review of the exhibition for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Emily Genauer states that the show consists of “eight canvases and a single sculpture,” which corresponds to the typed part of the checklist mentioned above (“Art and Artists: Super-Realistic Old and Nearly Blank Modern Art Both ‘Fool the Eye,’” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 6, 1951, sec. 4, p. 5). This checklist suggests that the inclusion of the skinny paintings was not initially planned and that they were added to the main body of the show as an annex (from number 10—*By Twos* [CR 21]—to number 16, all the works are listed manually). The skinny *Untitled* s are numbers 11, 12, 13, 14, and presumably 16 (see note 2 above).
And while the first photograph (with six works) conveys some sense of pyramidal progression (with *The Wild* as the apex), the second shot (with four works) underscores in absentia that the two deleted canvases—the tallest/thinnest of the group (*The Wild*) and the shortest/widest (*Untitled 1, 1950*)—are antipodal extremes. In so doing, it prompts us to wonder if the skinny family extends beyond these confines, and how. Two other vertical works come to mind, roughly contemporary to our group: *Untitled 3, 1949* (CR 35, page 116) (although its proportions are stubbier than those of *Untitled 1, 1950*) and, at the other end of the spectrum, a strip painting even longer than *The Wild*, which Newman did not consider part of his oeuvre but did not destroy. (Number 266 by Heidi Colsman-Freyberger in the catalogue raisonné of Newman’s work, it is labeled “Unfinished Painting” there; I shall keep this label for convenience, between quotation marks, even though I think that “Abandoned Painting” would be more appropriate.)

Before examining *The Wild* in detail, let us consider further the common properties of the works assembled in Pollitzer’s pho-

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7. That is: Newman might have temporarily considered this painting finished, but if so, at some point he stopped thinking of it as a work of his: as far as he was concerned, it did not yet or no longer belonged to his oeuvre. He kept it somewhere in his studio but devoted no more thought to it than if it had been a piece of hardware. The canvas was rudimentarily stretched (wrapped around a 1 x 2). He never showed it to anyone. He never mentioned it, even though he would have had plenty of occasions while proudly boasting about the extreme dimensions of *The Wild*. Did he forget about it? That would explain why he did not destroy it. It was found by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro in August 1992 while she was going through a closet of Annalee Newman’s apartment to find a sample of Newman’s canvas. “I saw what I at first thought was bare canvas wrapped around a plastic bottle,” Mancusi-Ungaro states in her conservation report dated May 1997. “When I presented it to Annalee, she told me that it was a painting that she unstretched because it was too tall for her rooms at River House, her current address. It apparently hung in her old apartment but was stored wrapped around the bottle for the sixteen years she had resided at River House. I, of course, was reluctant to cut fabric from an actual painting, but Annalee insisted. So, I cut two rather small pieces from the tacking edges and returned the painting to the closet.” The excised fragments would later be put back in place by Mancusi-Ungaro herself when the painting was entrusted to her care in the conservation studio of the Menil Collection in Houston, where she was working at the time, but the story was worth quoting in full because it underlines how for Annalee Newman the picture had little or no importance—she explicitly said so when questioned again about it. If my memory serves me well, she kept only things she thought had little or no monetary value in the West End Avenue apartment after her husband’s death. I remember the jolt I felt when seeing what must have been this canvas, during a visit I paid in 1978, hung next to a doorway. It could not have been less conspicuously installed: as a keepsake.
tographs—and above all their format: a width/height ratio of between 1:6 (for Untitled 1, 1950) and 1:64 (for The Wild), which was completely unheard of in the history of Western painting. Even when tipped horizontally, such proportions were extremely rare. To be sure, there was the long tradition of elongated predellas sprawling below altarpieces beginning in the trecento, but these horizontal panels were often divided up into several narrative scenes (or, in the Northern countries, into a row of repetitive motifs such as the heads of the apostles). Furthermore, on the exceptional occasions when they offered a single image—as in the deposition of Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, so cherished by Newman—these works were not conceived as independent paintings but as marginalia. The only major exception seems to be Holbein’s Dead Christ in Basel, which startled Newman when he saw it in May 1964, and whose predella status is being presently questioned by specialists in the field.

There is no reason to doubt Alloway’s claim, made after Newman’s death, that his comment in the aforementioned Guggenheim catalogue, according to which the artist made his skinny paintings in order “to demonstrate that his bands were planes of color and not just lines or stripes,” came directly from the horse’s mouth. It is perfectly in keeping with the artist’s previous remark on The Wild, which he discussed in terms of color and the reduction of the color-field expanse:

As a matter of fact, after I did the large paintings I had to almost test myself as part of my own education . . . and I am involved in my own education. . . . I tested myself to see whether I was just being beguiled by these big expanses of color. I did a painting eight feet high by one and a half inches wide to see if I could make that narrow space—and by the way, that painting was a stretched painting—to see if I could contain the sense of scale I was involved in and also that it could have the feeling that my big paintings have.

8. I thank Joseph Koerner for sharing his knowledge with me. He pointed out that in the North, “the long format is also used for Tree of Jesse representations, where the lineage of Christ is stretched out horizontally rather than vertically.”

9. Holbein’s painting measures 12 x 73 3/4 inches (the ratio [1: 6.15] is close to that of Untitled 1, 1950). Even more than the format itself, it is probably the way in which the corpse fully inhabits the painting, as if it were surveying its whole surface, that impressed Newman. Before Neil Levine left for Europe in the summer of 1966, Newman insisted that he go see Grünewald’s altarpiece in Colmar and Holbein’s Dead Christ in Basel, among other things. In one of the postcards Levine sent from Europe to Newman, he writes: “Thank you for the advice. We went to both Basel and Colmar—both were fabulous. The Holbein and the small Grünewald crucifixion in Basel were, as you said, incredible!”

10. Lawrence Alloway, “Color, Culture, The Stations: Notes on the Barnett Newman Memorial Exhibition,” Artforum 10, no. 4 (December 1971), p. 32. The explanation is repeated even more assuredly in Alloway’s “Notes on Barnett Newman,” for which he conducted extensive interviews with the artist, and which was published in the summer of 1969 (Art International 13, no. 6 [Summer 1969], p. 37). If Newman had disapproved of the 1964 comment, it is likely that he would have said so to Alloway, and unlikely that the latter would have used it again.

11. Transcript of a NET TV program dedicated to Newman in a series called “U.S.A. Artists.” It was produced and directed by Lane Slate (who had already interviewed the artist in 1963 for a CBS
Furthermore, Alloway’s phrase would be served to Newman by David Sylvester in 1965, and be greeted by the artist with a nod of quiet approval:

Sylvester: Let’s consider the paintings with the narrow lines. You never think of this vertical as a line; you think of it as a narrow band of color. This, I take it, means that among other things you don’t think of it as a line traversing a field but as a field between two other fields.

Newman: Yes. A field that brings life to the other fields, just as the other fields bring life to this so-called line (SWI, p. 256).

The matter is a bit different when it comes to the notion of “shaped canvas,” which Alloway had applied to these works. Later in life, when it had become a critical commonplace, Newman would rather reluctantly concede that he had been an early pioneer of the “shaped canvas.” A certain acceleration of this process of acknowledgment occurs around his one-man show at Knoedler & Co. in March and April of 1969. In her elaborate preview of this exhibition, published in Art News (February 1969), Elizabeth Baker justly links the concept of “shaped canvas” to those of “object painting” and “deductive structure” but then dismisses them all with regard to Newman.12 Quoting the artist, she writes:

Newman has said, “My paintings don’t fit their format. They have nothing to do with it.” His various formats rarely call attention to them—

program: see SWI, pp. 251–4). It consisted mainly of an interview with Newman in his studio and at home, with occasional shots of the installation of his works in the Washington, D.C., venue (January 27–March 6, 1966) of the U.S. selection for the 8th São Paulo Bienal, and comments by the “narrator,” Norman Rose. The interview itself, or part of it, took place on March 20, 1966, and Slate was aided in his task by Alan Solomon. The full transcript of the unedited rushes is in Solomon’s papers in the Archives of American Art. In an interview conducted at the same time (March 1966) by Andrew Hudson, Newman would reiterate this statement almost verbatim: “In 1950, to test myself to see if I were really able to handle the problem of scale in all its aspects, to challenge myself against the notion that I could be beguiled by the large masses of color, I did the very narrow one-and-a-half-inch painting. I think it holds up as well as any big one I have ever done” (SWI, p. 272).

12. “The 1960s concept of the painting as an object with preconceived internal elements has resulted in, among other things, an emphasis on ‘deductive structure,’ which has little to do with Newman. His verticals have been interpreted by certain critics as deriving from ‘the shape of the support,’ but a rationale is hardly necessary for such a basic entity as a vertical. (Newman’s sculptures re-emphasize this point.)” Elizabeth C. Baker, “Barnett Newman in a New Light,” Art News 67, no. 10 (February 1969), p. 61. As is well known, the notion of “deductive structure” was coined in 1965 by Michael Fried in Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella, the catalogue of the celebrated exhibition he curated at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts (reprinted in Fried, Art and Objecthood [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998]). In that essay, Fried posited Newman as the essential pioneer of the “deductive structure” further explored by artists of a younger generation. The zips, wrote Fried, have a “‘deductive’ relation to the framing edge. That is, the bands amount to echoes within the painting of the two side framing edges; they relate primarily to those edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas” (pp. 233–34). Though Fried does not explicitly refer to it here—most probably because it was perfectly obvious for a 1965 reader—his reading of Newman’s zips as echoing the framing edge of the canvas directly responds to Greenberg’s assertion, discussed below, that Newman’s “lines . . . do not echo those of the frame, but parody it.”
selves. An exception is the radically shaped painting *The Wild*, 1950, 8 feet high and 1 1/2 inches wide; but even this is less akin to object-like '60s work than it would seem because it operates as a vertical element to inflect whatever field surrounds it—more or less as one of his painted bands in a painted space.\(^{13}\)

And alluding to *Chartres* (CR 112) and *Jericho* (CR 111), the two triangular paintings soon to be displayed at Knoedler but on which the artist was still at work at the time of her writing, Baker adds: “[Newman] says his intent is nothing like shaped canvas or object painting, but rather ‘to destroy the format,’ by means, presumably, of an even stronger vertical.”\(^{14}\)

The tone is slightly less diffident in the first monograph on the artist, by Tom Hess, published at the time of the Knoedler show, which Newman himself probably ventriloquized to a large extent (and, in any case, certainly approved of). There, the notions of “shaped canvas” and “deductive structure” are not totally dismissed, but deemed anachronistic and limiting.\(^{15}\)

In his last statement on the matter, a little text on *Chartres* and *Jericho* that was printed in *Art News* (April 1969) while the canvases were on view at Knoedler, Newman admits the existence of the “shaped canvas” (even if he uses the qualifier “so-called”), but only as a device to be used against itself:

> I must explain that the triangle had no interest for me either as a shape in itself or because it has become stylish to use shaped canvas. After all, I had done the so-called “shaped canvases,” or what is more correct in my case, “no shape” canvases, as far back as 1950. . . . Could I do a painting on the triangle that would overcome the format and

\(^{13}\) Baker 1969, p. 61.  
at the same time assert it? Could it become a work of art and not a thing? . . . After all, format as format can be a trap (SWI, p. 194).  

The statement still smacks of dismissive irony, and Newman’s ambivalent attitude needs to be read in the context of his growing fear of being hailed as a precursor of “formalist” art. The harsh letter he wrote to Walter Hopps in 1965, after reading in the New York Times that the curator’s selection for the Sao Paulo Bienal had been conceived as representing the “new American ‘formal’ painting,” is a case in point. A friend of several of the younger artists to be included in the show (Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Larry Poons), the always supportive Newman was happy to be the “locomotive” of Hopps’s train. He was enjoying the recognition from the younger generation (though it could never make up for the lack of recognition from the artists of his own), but he was furious at being presented in the press as the founder of an art movement: “I had no idea . . . that you had chosen me and the others because you felt that we were practitioners . . . of a stylistic idea . . . Instead of


16. During the last year of his life, probably not too long after uttering these lines, Newman stretched a canvas of a most peculiar format: a large asymmetrical right triangle (the longest of the orthogonal sides measures 118 1/4 inches, the shortest 95 7/8 inches). One wonders what he would have imagined in order to overcome this very assertive format, and which side of the triangle, if any, he would have chosen for its base. Occasionally nicknamed “The Sail,” the canvas is number 269 of the catalogue raisonné (p. 533), where it is listed as unfinished (it is only thinly whitewashed and has no inscription on the back giving any indication with regard to the orientation Newman was considering).

17. The passage that irritated Newman in Grace Glueck’s article reads as follow: “The show, with no thematic title, will be keyed to what Mr. Hopps has called ‘the new American “formal” painting,’ as opposed to ‘symbolic’ and ‘narrative’ art. It takes in what he describes as ‘optical,’ ‘hard-edge,’ ‘color field,’ and the whole new area of ‘emblematic’ painting. Head man in Mr. Hopps’ line-up is a ‘major practioner’ of the new painting, 60-year-old New Yorker Barnett Newman.” Although Glueck wrote of the six younger artists also selected that they “tend to regard Newman as their ‘senior colleague,’” Hopps was quoted as cautiously noting that “there’s a very strong individuality in each,” but this proviso was not sufficient to satisfy Newman. Glueck, “Seven for São Paulo,” the New York Times, May 23, 1965, sect. 2, p. 18.
a locomotive, I have become a cog in a formalist machine” (SWI, p. 186). Contrite and begging Newman not to withdraw, Hopps re-wrote his introduction and press release to make sure that such an image of the artist as guru of a new school would not filter through again, but Newman took supplementary measures, writing a virulently anti-formalist manifesto for the catalogue (SWI, p. 187). And though this incident apparently did not play any role in his emphatic choice of title for the series of black and white canvases he exhibited a year later, one senses his satisfaction when he declared to Hess: “When I call them The Stations of the Cross, I’m saying that these paintings mean something beyond their formal extremes” (SWI, p. 280).

Newman’s anti-formalist position, he reminded Hopps, dated from at least “‘The Ideographic Picture’ in which in 1947 [he] declared [himself] against formal art”18—hence his growing annoyance at witnessing his would-be defenders labeling his work as formalist. By the early 1960s, he was particularly infuriated with Greenberg—with whom the very term “formalism” had become primarily associated in the U.S.—even though for the most part, perhaps out of gratitude for the role that Greenberg had played in his career with the show he had organized at French & Co. in 1959, he kept his irritation private.

Object

A passage that Greenberg added in the revised version of “American-Type Painting,” published in Art and Culture in 1961, is particularly relevant here. Of all works, the critic selected Newman’s skinny canvases as the chief evidence in favor of his assertion, by then already dogma, that the two constitutive conventions of painting are “flatness and the delimitation of flatness”:

[Newman’s straight lines] do not echo those of the frame, but parody it. Newman’s picture becomes all frame in itself, as he himself makes clear in three special paintings he has done—paintings three to four feet long but only two inches wide, that are covered with but two or three vertical bands of color. What is destroyed is the Cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine; with Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and makes the picture, instead of merely being echoed. The limiting edges of Newman’s larger canvases, we now discover, act just like the lines inside them: to divide but not to separate or enclose or bound; to delimit, but not limit. The paintings do not merge with surrounding space; they preserve—when they succeed—their integrity and separate unity. But neither do they sit there in space like isolated, insulated objects; in short, they are hardly easel pictures—and because they are hardly that, they have escaped the “object” (and

luxury-object) associations that attach themselves increasingly to the easel picture. Newman’s paintings have to be called, finally, “fields.”

As Sarah Rich has observed, Greenberg—who had already received an angry letter from Newman in response to the original version of this essay when it was published in the spring 1955 issue of Partisan Review—is particularly guarded here. In fact, though the gist of it would have undoubtedly annoyed Newman, there is little that the artist could have pointed to specifically as a legitimate source of discontent, except for the use of the term “parody,” which refers to one of the most formalist stylistic devices ever. But the statement needs some unpacking, for it is both denser and more convoluted than it seems at first. It is as if the critic, sensing that the skinny paintings represented a limit case, was pointing to their peculiar nature as a means to approach the rest of Newman’s oeuvre. For Greenberg, these works addressed head-on formal issues that were essential to Newman’s art, even if the painter was reluctant to publicly discuss them—and indeed the writer’s insistence on bringing them to the fore would force the painter out of his silence on the matter.

The last claim made by Greenberg in the passage (that Newman’s paintings have escaped the status of object) contradicts the first (that “Newman’s picture becomes all frame in itself,” a feat that is made especially clear, Greenberg notes, 19. Clement Greenberg, “American-Type Painting,” revised version, Art and Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 226–27. It is interesting to note that the dimensions given by Greenberg (“three to four feet long but only two inches wide”) do not correspond to any of the skinny paintings, even though he can only be referring to them here, despite the choice of the word “long” instead of “high” (for all his “formalism,” Greenberg was often surprisingly negligent). “Three to four feet” is the height of both Untitled 1, 1950 and Untitled 2, 1950, but none of the skinny works except The Wild is less than 3 inches wide (and it is not two inches, but one and a half). Given Greenberg’s overall argument, it might come as a surprise that he did not refer to the dimensions of The Wild, not even implicitly. On the other hand, this does confirm that the exceptional format of this painting was hard to swallow.

20. Rich writes of this passage: “If Greenberg claimed that the Zips had in fact echoed the frame, he would have no doubt received yet another angry letter from Newman complaining about the critic’s insistent reduction of his work to a banal formalism. Instead, Greenberg chose to flatter, by crediting the artist with a cunning dissimulation of (but not surrender to) the frame. It was, in the end, a rather good argument in keeping with Newman’s beliefs. The Zips, for Greenberg, worked like frames in that they suggested the notion of limitation. But just as Newman never used physical frames to provide boundaries to his work, his Zips also did not actually bound the interior spaces of the painting—he claimed they unified them. Greenberg shrewdly made the Zip and the frame companion compositional elements within Newman’s work,” (Sarah Rich, “Seriality and Difference in the Late Work of Barnett Newman,” Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1999, p. 212). On Newman’s 1955 letter to Greenberg, see my essay on Abraham, October 108 (Spring 2004), pp. 19–21.

21. It is not by chance that parody was a major preoccupation of the literary school of Russian Formalism. Dostoyevsky and Gogol: Remarks on the Theory of Parody (1921) was Yuriy Tynyanov’s first book, and Viktor Shklovsky’s major Theory of Prose (1929) contains chapters on Lawrence Sterne’s, Cervantes’s, and Dickens’s uses of parody. For an overview of parody as a modernist device, see Linda Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Artforms (New York and London: Methuen, 1985).
in the skinny canvases). Today, long after the heated discussions surrounding Minimalism and the notion of artwork as object—one thinks in particular of such famous essays as Donald Judd’s “Specific Objects” (1963) or, at the other extreme, Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” (1967)—Greenberg’s enigmatic conclusion that Newman’s work has “escaped the ‘object,’” just after he had written that they were nothing but “frame,” might seem coy. But the critic’s ambivalence was prescient in 1961.

In all of Newman’s subsequent statements where the word “object” appears, one clearly senses his desire to distance himself from the concerns of the young generation of Minimalist artists who were hailing him as a forefather (the literalist partisans of “objecthood” in the rarefied culture war of the ’60s art world). “One of the things that I feel I’ve done . . . is that I have removed the emphasis on a painting as an object,” he wrote. Or, warning of the danger of “falling in love with the material,” because the result would “inevitably be aesthetic, so that instead of creating a work of art one makes, at best, only a beautiful thing, an art object,” he added: “I hope I’m not doing that” (SW I, pp. 252–53).

As in the document from which this last quote is excerpted (an edited version of his 1963 TV interview with Lane Slate), Newman’s dismissal of the art “object” would always end up as a plea for the “subject.”22 If he sometimes thinks of his painting as an object, he told Slate, it is “only as an object in a grammatical construction . . . a predicate,” adding:

I am the subject who paints it. The process of painting is the verb. The finished painting is the entire sentence, and that’s what I’m involved with. Those who emphasize the world of objects and insist that an object can be art must, it seems to me, in the end make man himself an object . . . but I think man is more than an object. Anyway, I’m not interested in adding to the objects that exist in the world. I want my painting to separate itself from every object and every art object that exists (SW I, p. 253).

Needless to say, Newman was particularly anxious about the possible interpretation of his skinny canvases as art objects, and he would return to this issue in his second interview with Slate three years later. Immediately after having alluded to The Wild and remarked that it was a “stretched painting,” in the passage quoted above and ending with “to see if I could contain the sense of scale I was involved

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22. There is one essay in which the word “object” does not have negative connotations: Newman’s preface for the 1963 exhibition “Amlash Sculpture from Iran” at the Betty Parsons Gallery (in this text the villain is “thing”): “these sculptures are also objects,” admits Newman, “they are vessels. . . . They have utility. But, here is the point, they are never—things” (SW I, p. 130). The distinction between “object” and “thing,” dictated by circumstances, was at best fragile—as Newman knew very well. Not surprisingly, the end of the essay revolves rather around the usual and much more philosophically secure opposition of object and subject, which provides Newman with the opportunity to launch another anti-formalist attack: “It is refreshing to see artists for whom art is not an exercise in formal pattern, for whom a work of art has the more important subject matter—the declaration of man’s nature as against Nature” (SW I, p. 130).
in and also that it could have the feeling that my big paintings have" (see note 11 above), Newman continued:

I’ve done quite a number of them in those years. And, well, I never thought of them as shaped canvases. I was not interested in that as, as a notion. Although now I . . . those paintings are being with . . . naturally it’s the most radical shape you can make—only an inch and a half wide. But it’s specifically a painting; it’s not a sculptural construction or anything like that. The, the whole painting rests on the, on that narrow surface. 23

It is not difficult to imagine why Lane Slate would have thought that these halting words could not be used in a TV broadcast (they were edited out). Too many blanks, which we are now left to fill as best we can. One of the most startling remarks is that The Wild (or any member of its cohort) is “not a sculptural construction or anything like that.” Though no one actually ever wrote that this painting was a “sculpture,” most commentators asserted, one way or the other, that it was “sculptural,” and all stressed its physicality. With the exception of Alloway, whose remark on the “shaped canvas” had come earlier, they were encouraged to do so by the famous Hans Namuth photograph of the initial presentation of that painting on the wall of the Betty Parsons Gallery, initially published (with the assent of the artist) in the Hess monograph and reproduced on countless occasions ever since. 24 Just a few feet away from the original wood-and-plaster version of Here I (CR 252), seen protruding from the blank wall whose vast area it commands—or that it guards as a sentinel—The Wild

24. Hess, p. 65. The image is reproduced on page 89 of this volume.

Barnett Newman (and Betty Parsons, right) during his second one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery, April–May 1951. Photograph by Hans Namuth.
looks like the colored twin brother of the thin whitewashed wooden rod planted on the right side of the sculpture.

Barbara Reise—an early advocate of Minimalist artists—was the first to call this canvas a “material zip,” adding that “from The Wild, it is not a surprising jump to an urge to work in free-standing sculpture.” An anecdote told by Tony Smith and reported by Hess after Newman’s death provides more grist for the mill: irritated by the formalist interpretation of Vir Heroicus Sublimis (CR 47) by a “museum curator” as “just a relationship of planes,” the painter supposedly “growled that the only things in the picture that ‘count’ are the stripes, and to prove it he made paintings just of them.” The authenticity of the story is extremely dubious, given Newman’s persistent denial that he was interested in lines or stripes as such, or even that he ever used lines, but the idea that in order to paint The Wild Newman just had to “lift” a zip


from Vir Heroicus Sublimis was at least credible insofar as the two canvases are of the same height (as any visitor to the 1951 Parsons show would have been able to assess). In this convenient scenario, The Wild is the midpoint in a trajectory that goes from the large multi-zip canvas to sculpture.

There can be little doubt that Newman would have disapproved of this script, even if it might contain an element of truth (see note 51). One could even

27. “I am a painter who paint pictures—not lines,” Newman wrote to Betty Parsons in 1955 (SWI, p. 206). And in the catalogue of the first major museum show in which his work was included, the epoch-making exhibition “The New American Painting,” which toured all over Europe and ended at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from May to September, 1959: “My work, they say, is involved in line, when it is obvious that there are no lines” (SWI, p. 180).
say that his numerous anti-object statements are an anticipated response, as if he had seen it coming—all the more since it was going hand in hand with another cliché about his large paintings’ being “environmental,” concerning which he was even more virulently dismissive (he was very proud of his friend Gerome Kamrowski’s comment to the effect that his paintings are “hostile to the environment” [to Dorothy Seckler, 1962, SWI, p. 250]). He saw the two terms (environmental art, object-art) as two sides of the same coin, both involving spatial “manipulations,” “the sensation of space or [of] an object in space,” which he found “boring.” And he was not impressed by the argument, rather disingenuously embraced by Greenberg in the text quoted above, according to which a painting’s being very large or very narrow is sufficient for it to escape “the ‘object’ (and luxury-object) associations that attach themselves increasingly to the easel-picture” (see notably Newman’s 1970 interview with Emile de Antonio, SWI, p. 307).

Frame

If he ever gave any thought to Greenberg’s formulation that his paintings are “all frame” and that the skinny paintings prove this point, Newman must have disliked the claim’s implications, which concerned not only the deductive structure but also its opposite, the act of painting as framing something that is already given, defining the pictorial “field” by cropping (the practice had become common by the early ’60s, and Newman loathed it). The artist’s remark to Baker, quoted above, that his “paintings don’t fit their format” seems disingenuous at first, or at least counterintuitive, until one realizes that what Newman resents is the idea of a match between separate entities (the format and the image), one conceived before the other. That said, Greenberg’s point, no matter

28. Newman also said, “People always keep talking about ‘environmental art.’ I hope my work is free of the environment” (to Andrew Hudson, 1966, SWI, p. 272).
29. See the short text he wrote in 1949 after his visit to the Ohio Indian mounds in the wake of painting Onement I (SWI 174–75). Newman’s statements against “space manipulations” are in abundance.
30. “I know that other painters work differently. They make their marks and use their brushes and then decide, by measuring off a section of the painted or unpainted surface, what their painting is. To me this is cropping and related to photography and to advertising. I don’t work that way” (1963 Lane Slate interview, SWI, p. 252). Given his friendly support to the young Larry Poons—he persuaded Poons’s father to let his son be an artist—one wonders how Newman would have taken the long section of Emile de Antonio’s film Painters Painting where one sees this artist tacking a canvas (onto which latex paint had been poured) on a wall and cropping it. Painters Painting, to which Newman contributed a lengthy interview, was released two years after his death.
how misguided, rightly underscores the fact that the frames of several skinny paintings are unusually conspicuous.

In fact, these frames are absolutely exceptional. Indeed, Newman was vehement on this issue: “I, as one of the first painters to reject the frame, feel that any presentation of my own pictures in a frame would, in effect, mutilate them” (letter to the New York Times, 1954, SW I, p. 41). He was furious when an overly prudent curator would exhibit a painting of his in its packing frame, and he would insist, once he had learned about the situation, that the packing frame be removed—he only changed his mind about this at the very end of his life, after many works had been damaged in transport or by careless art handlers. Why, then, did he feel that the group of skinny paintings deserved such special treatment?

The first thing to be noted—at least for the first three 1950 Untitleds, which bear their original frames—is that the frame is flush with the surface of the painting and only a quarter of an inch deeper than the strainer (at most). (Conservators prefer “strainer” to “stretcher” when describing any kind of auxiliary support that is inert and cannot be further expanded to increase the tension of the canvas.) The frames, made of lathes 2 3/4 inches wide and 1/4 inch thick, are not doing much more than covering the tacking edges, as a piece of tape would do (the solution Newman usually preferred and to which he would temporarily have recourse, in fact, for Untitled 4, 1950, and most probably for Untitled 5, 1950, and The Wild). Thus the issue is the strainer’s depth more than anything else—or rather this depth in relationship to the width of the painted surface—since by 1949, Newman had already developed a fondness for deep stretchers, even for mid-size canvases (such as Abraham [CR 23] and Yellow Painting [CR 27]).

As a matter of fact, several paintings exhibited along with the skinny canvases at

31. He was not opposed to frames in general, but to their use for his own work. The letter to the New York Times is in fact a protest about the decision by James Johnson Sweeney, newly appointed director of the Guggenheim Museum, to strip the paintings in the collection from their frame. The passage I quoted goes on: “However, I feel that it is just as mutilating to show Cézanne without a frame.”

32. As far as I know, the first sign of this change of mind occurs in a January 13, 1969, letter to Doris Shadbolt, curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery, to which Newman had agreed to lend White Fire IV: “The painting is in a travelling frame and it is my wish that the painting always be exhibited in this frame for its protection.”

33. This is a thorny issue. With regard to Untitled 4, 1950, things are very straightforward: we know its tacking edges were covered by masking tape because, in an installation shot by Hans Namuth of the Betty Parsons Gallery’s office room in which Newman hung several of his small paintings during his 1951 exhibition, one can see the tape getting loose at the top of the right tacking edge of the canvas (page 111). This happened frequently to Newman’s paintings in the early 1950s—either because the tape he was using at the time was stiffer and not as sticky as the kind available today (per the suggestion of Carol Mancusi-Ungaro) or because he was using Kraft paper tape (per the suggestion of Brad Epley, conservator at the Menil Collection). The exact same thing happened to Yellow Painting and to Be I, as can be seen in the old black-and-white professional (frontal) photographs of these works in the albums so carefully organized by Annalee Newman (my thanks to Brad Epley for mentioning these photographs to me). Furthermore, one can also observe that the tape of Yellow Painting is coming unglued in a photograph taken by Hans Namuth in 1951, in Newman’s apartment—the painting is behind a grand piano (page 112). And, in an installation shot of the 1950 exhibition by Aaron Siskind, one sees that the tape is coming loose along the left tacking edge of the first, 1949 version of Be I as well. Photographs in Annalee Newman’s album also reveal that End of Silence, By Twos, and Galaxy had masking tape, and several photos
Newman and gallery assistant Monica Lockwood with, from left, Untitled 4, 1950; Untitled 6, 1950; and Untitled 3, 1950 at the Betty Parsons Gallery, 1951. Photograph by Hans Namuth.
the 1951 Betty Parsons show had a stretcher of the same depth (2 1/2 inches), for example *The Voice* (CR 37) and *The Name II* (CR 38)). Could it be that in wanting to “test” the viability of the skinny format—and to measure this viability against that of the large canvas—Newman decided to make his task even harder by taking for a starting point the common condition of a deep strainer or stretcher? This is the way a scientist conducts an experiment, changing only one variable at a time—not a very usual mode of thinking for Newman, admittedly.

Hand-made by the artist, the strainers of the three first *Untitled*s become increasingly noticeable as their depth (around 2 1/2 inches) gradually approaches the width of the canvas (6 inches for *Untitled 1, 1950*; 5 1/8 inches for *Untitled 2, 1950*; 3 inches for *Untitled 3, 1950*), almost equaling it in the case of the third painting.34 To

by Hans Namuth in Newman’s studio clearly show masking tape on the tacking edges of *Abraham*. Installation shots in gallery spaces are often harder to read because they tend to be overexposed or have too much contrast, thus the fact that one cannot perceive the presence of masking tape on a visible tacking edge does not mean there was none. In the late 1990s, when I examined the skinny works with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, fragments of brown masking tape were still visible on the tacking edges of *The Wild* (on the bottom); *Untitled 4, 1950*; and *Untitled 5, 1950*. Incidentally, this tends to indicate, once again, that *Untitled 5, 1950* was shown at Betty Parsons in 1951.

34 Those handmade strainers are unique to Newman. Here is the very precise description provided by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro: “Typically he constructed a strainer from four pieces of 1 3/4-inch wood stock and then added 3/4-inch quarter-round molding at the interface of the fabric and the strainer. This number 75 molding, which he purchased throughout the 1950s from Dykes Lumber
guess what was troubling Newman, one just has to play devil’s advocate for a moment. The strength of his art is in great part built upon a simple rule of perception: the fewer pictorial elements included in a painting, the more weight these elements have. But if the face of a painting consists “only” of two juxtaposed vertical planes of different colors and widths, as in the case of Untitled 2, 1950, an uninformed viewer might be tempted to look at its vertical tacking edges just as much as at its face (they are also, after all, vertical planes). Indeed, given the apparent “emptiness” of Newman’s paintings and that in these particular works the tacking edge becomes almost as deep as the picture is wide, to leave visible the canvas that wraps around the tacking edge would have created an insuperable confusion. The main difference between the surface of the vertical tacking edges and that of the picture proper would have been their orientation in space (perpendicular as opposed to parallel to a beholder looking at the painting frontally), particularly if the canvas on the tacking edge was not immaculate, being partially smeared with paint splashes that might look just as intentionally accidental as any other spatter favored by his fellow Abstract Expressionists. It is my contention that, on this score at least, Newman remained, just as Greenberg had, within the bounds of Kant’s Analytic of the Beautiful (rather than of the Sublime) and was not ready to deconstruct the opposition between ergon (the work per se) and parergon (the best example of which, in Kant’s Critique of Judgment, is the frame), to use the dichotomy highlighted by Jacques Derrida in his work on the German philosopher.35

Newman did not insist on a frontal view of his paintings—in fact, he rather encouraged an oblique, lateral view, as is recorded in staged photographs of various beholders (including him and his wife) looking at large works such as Vir Heroicus Sublimis, The Name II, and The Voice—all works included, as noted above, in the 1951 Betty Parsons show.36 But it is on the picture plane that he wanted the gaze to fall sideways, not on the tacking edges of the canvas. It is not that he felt all his life that the tacking edges had to be masked—he would not mask those of The Stations of the Cross, for example (though this is more the exception than the rule)37—but the skinny paintings pose a unique problem because of the unusual ratio of depth to width.

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35. See Jacques Derrida, “The Parergon” (1974), translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod in The Truth in Painting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 37–82. A partial translation of this essay by Craig Owens appeared as early as the summer 1979 issue (no. 9) of October, with a postscript by Owens. Since then the literature on it has mushroomed.
37. See Mancusi-Ungaro in Newman CR, p. 127. One should note that The Stations of the Cross is exceptional in another regard as well: the conspicuous size and placement of the signature. Allowing splashes to be seen on the tacking edges might be part of a deliberately and uniquely “expressionist” intent on the part of the artist with regard to these works.
It was Jackson Pollock, according to Annalee Newman, who devised the solution of having the 1/4-inch-thin, 2 3/4-inch–deep frames for the first three *Untitled*s. Waiting for his friend in Newman’s studio one day, and feeling that these works needed to be properly framed in order to be exhibited at Betty Parsons, Pollock quickly sawed and nailed lathes he found in situ into small coffin-like boxes for two of the three canvases. Presumably Newman was pleasantly surprised, for a third frame was designed later on according to exactly the same model.\(^{38}\) The question remains, however, why he did not adopt the same simple device for *Untitled 4, 1950; Untitled 5, 1950;* and *The Wild.*\(^{39}\)

This is best answered by considering *Untitled 5, 1950,* though the problem, if less acute, is of the same nature for the two other paintings. If one leaves aside the painting’s flames of white paint, which are irrelevant here, it consists of a black plane bordered symmetrically on each side by a 1/4-inch-wide red zip adjacent to the edge of the canvas. Should these red “lines” be bordered by a wooden frame—which would also appear frontally as a line, especially if it is flush with the surface of the painting—a visual confusion between the painted “line” and the 1/4-inch wooden lathe (equal in width) would be almost inevitable. Everything that Newman held true with regard to the way his paintings resist the environment would be in jeopardy. The situation is not as crucial in *The Wild,* because the lateral zips are rather irregular and thus less in danger of looking like a framing lathe (though their average width is 1/4 inch), and it is even less so in *Untitled 4, 1950* (where the lateral maroon zips are 1 5/8 inches wide). But the fact that the only thing sharply distinguishing these three skinny paintings from the others is that they are flanked with very narrow symmetrical zips at their left and right edges—narrower than any other lateral band to be found in the three first *Untitled*s—is very plausibly the reason why they were not encased in a Pollock-devised box.

As noted above, *Untitled 4, 1950; Untitled 5, 1950;* and *The Wild* were still unframed when Pollitzer photographed the group, and we know for sure that at the 1951 show the tacking edges of *Untitled 4, 1950* were covered with some tape. All we can say with certainty is that those of both *Untitled 5, 1950 and The Wild* were also covered with brownish masking tape at some point. I am inclined to

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38. This is what Annalee Newman told me in the 1990s. However, she told Charley Stuckey over the telephone (on May 25, 1988) that Pollock had made the wood frames of the three paintings. (My thanks to Heidi Colsmann-Freyberger for sharing with me Stuckey’s notes about this conversation.)

39. It should be noted that the strainers of *The Wild* and of *Number 4, 1950* are less deep than those of the other canvases (which are around 2 1/2 inches deep, as noted above). That of *Untitled 4, 1950* is 1 5/8 inches deep, and the “original” strainer of *The Wild* was no more than 1 1/4 inches deep (1/8 of an inch less deep than the inside of the frame designed by Kulicke, which is 1 3/8 inches deep). I have put “original” in quotation marks, as there might have been several stretching/unstretching/restretching operations: there are what looks like two faint vertical creases in the paint along the tacking edge on both sides, at around 7/8 of an inch from the face of the canvas, and at around 1 1/16 inches, which could indicate that at some point the canvas was on a 7/8-inch strainer.
think that it was already the case at the time of the 1951 exhibition, but the jury is still out on that score, and might remain so forever.40

Around Christmastime in 1960, perhaps just a few weeks before Pollitzer took his shots, a year or so before the Allan Stone exhibition—thus without any direct connection with it—Robert Kulicke received a phone call from Newman (whom he did not know personally). The painter, who had just heard Kulicke speak about various frames of his invention on TV, explained that he had a “framing problem.” Intrigued by the “problem” (Newman had mentioned the exceptional dimensions of The Wild), Kulicke went to see Newman right away. Even more intrigued after seeing the painting, he asked if he could bring the painting home and live with it for several days—“I’ll find something,” Kulicke remembers saying. (Little did he know that he would fall in love with the canvas and end up owning it.)41

Obsessing about it, Kulicke indeed found an elegant solution fairly soon: the painting is slightly recessed and floating within a very thin metallic frame about 1/8 of an inch deeper than the canvas’s strainer. This discreet protrusion, together with the fact that the metal is coated black on the inside (white on the outside), ensures that the interval between the painting and the frame, a little less than 1/4 of an inch, is filled with shadow. This was apparently to Newman’s satisfaction, since he handed the painting over to its framer and commissioned a frame on the same model for Untitled 4, 1950 (this painting was exhibited in its metallic frame as early as 1965).42 But such a frame was inadequate for Untitled 5,

40. In several Namuth photographs showing Barnett Newman and Betty Parsons flanking The Wild, the left tacking edge appears very dark, almost black (page 107). Given that the two lateral bluish-gray stripes also appear surprisingly dark, and that Newman painted the tacking edge with the same bluish-gray color, one might be tempted to conclude that the painting was exhibited with bare tacking edges. Should this have been the case, however, multiple staples on the tacking edges would have been visible, something Newman profoundly disliked—which is why he usually wrapped a canvas around its stretcher and stapled it on the back. In fact, even if Newman had stapled the canvas on the back of a strainer that was less deep than the current one, quite a few staples would still have been visible, and particularly conspicuous ones at that, since the staples in question had been fastened in the middle of the tacking edges and slanted (see more on this in the discussion of The Wild below). The staples that were originally on the tacking edges were removed at some point, and their ghost emplacement is visible—whoever removed them did not use the same holes when putting in the replacement staples.

41. This is based on a phone conversation I had with Kulicke on December 26, 2001. He also told me that he purchased The Wild for $5,000. Around the same time, Heidi Colsman-Freyberger also called him, and during this conversation Mr. Kulicke told her that Newman had promised to give him “first right of refusal” with regard to the painting if he found a way to frame it. This is very much in keeping with Newman’s appetite for legalese and corresponds with Annalee Newman’s memory. She told Carol Mancusi-Ungaro (on January 8, 1998) that she remembered her husband telling Kulicke at some point, “If you can make a frame for it, you can buy it.” There is a particularly strange element of this puzzle in the Barnett Newman archives: a bill from Kulicke for three stretchers of different sizes and an aluminum frame measuring 96 3/8 by 2 inches, which can only be for The Wild. What is most peculiar about it is that this bill is dated October 23, 1962, which is, as noted above (note 4), the opening date of Newman’s joint exhibition with de Kooning at the Allan Stone Gallery, in the catalogue of which the painting is reproduced and already listed as in the Kulicke collection.

42. This can be seen in an installation shot taken at the aforementioned group show at the Allan Stone Gallery.
1950: a black void bordering the canvas, although immaterial, would possibly have been even worse than a wooden lathe in that it would have interfered with the central black plane of the painting.43

_Edges_

As always with Newman, an issue that seems at first purely technical is intertwined with much more complex theoretical considerations. Not only the decision to frame these paintings, but the difficulties that the painter faced in carrying out this decision bring us back to Greenberg’s remarks according to which “the notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine” is destroyed in Newman’s paintings and their limiting edges “act just like the lines inside them.” In short, the edges of the painting do not have a delimiting, “framing” function (they act like the zips inside the painting). And, even more important, the zips are not “lines,” strictly speaking (in the sense that they are not contours), but edges.

It is this essential idea—that his “lines” are edges—that Newman tested above all in

43. One does not exactly know when the tacking edge of _Untitled 5, 1950_ was covered with adhesive black cloth, but it was most probably after Newman’s death, in preparation for the 1971 retrospective. A condition report by Orrin Riley dated May 29, 1972, while the painting was being packed at the end of the Amsterdam leg of the retrospective in order to be sent to Paris, indicates that the tacking edges were covered with “black cloth velvet tape, 3” deep.” It is almost certain that Newman would have disapproved of such interference. On August 19, 1959, he wrote to Alfred Barr with regard to his black-on-black canvas _Abraham_ to criticize the way it was exhibited at MoMA: “However, the use of a black frame for ‘Abraham,’ I think is wrong, since it brings a third black element into the painting, which I did not intend. Since painting it in 1949, I have always been careful to show it unframed.”
his skinny canvases, though he had explored it before in Untitled 3, 1949, which is not quite as skinny (CR 35). But its first seed can be found in Euclidian Abyss (CR 12).

Having emphasized his radical invention in this work (that of moving the zip to the edge of the painting), Newman declared to David Sylvester in 1965: “I think in the painting Euclidian Abyss I removed myself from nature, but I did not remove myself from life” (SWI, p. 255). The opposition (nature/life) is slippery, and Newman often struggled with it. In the Woodstock Art Conference of 1952—during which he famously declared that “aesthetics [was] for [him] like ornithology must be for the birds”—he tried to pin down the appropriate vocabulary, this time opposing nature to reality:

Aestheticians have made the false identification of reality with nature. The artist, it seems to me, has nothing to do with nature. As a citizen, I would like to say that what I think the artist does is to create reality, and that what seems to be reality is really an imitation of art, of what the artist has made. By “reality,” I mean human reality. The artist does not make the hills and the rivers, but whatever reality we have as human beings has been created by the artist and only by the artist. It seems to me that by identifying art or reality with nature, the aesthetician has reduced the artist . . . to a performer (SWI, p. 245).
What is interesting for our purpose is that in grappling with the notion of line-as-edge, Newman was led to embark upon these philosophical investigations. On April 23, 1950 (thus soon after he had painted *Untitled 3, 1949* and perhaps as he was already working on the skinny paintings), during the course of a discussion held among a vast group of artists at Studio 35, Newman challenged de Kooning’s “original position that straight lines do not exist in nature” by saying, “But the edge of the UN Building is a straight line. If it can be made, it does exist in nature. A straight line is an organic thing that can contain feeling” (SWI, p. 241). “Line” and “edge” are interchangeable at this point, but so are “reality” and “nature,” which signals that Newman is not yet fully in command of the problem he is tackling. A year later, in his review for *Partisan Review* of Tom Hess’s book *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (a review so disparaging that it was not printed), Newman returned obsessively to the issue:

The other impressionists felt that edges on objects are illusory, since there are no lines in nature, and that they therefore should avoid marked breaks in going from one area-volume to another. Cézanne admitted that this was true of nature but that, despite this truth, he did experience the sensation of edge. It might have been an illusion, but he insisted on painting this illusion—not, however, as illusion in old-master museum style, but in the impressionist style, as sensation. Has no one ever looked at his watercolors, where the entire picture is a study of the *sensation* of an edge? . . . His was a life spent trying to transmute illusion, the illusion of the old masters, into the reality of sensation. But the scholars and critics hate this reality; they yearn for a world of illusion. One has to remind them that they cannot reclaim Cézanne by being more old-fashioned than he was (SWI, p. 122).

Like Cézanne, Newman now admits that lines are an illusion, but insists that the *sensation* of an edge is real. Nowhere is this paradox better expressed than in a passage of his 1966 interview with Lane Slate, unfortunately edited out from the TV broadcast—and what is particularly interesting here is that the discussion of this issue is directly connected, in Newman’s mind, with that of “objecthood.” Immediately after having contested a cliché he often heard in relation to his work, according to which painting flat planes of color would be easy, Newman declares:

There’s also the notion that in relation to the idea that painting is a thing, that I am the most . . . the furthest removed from nature. Well all I can say is that nature has no lines in it; neither straight lines nor round lines nor curved lines. Nature has edges, and since I do not work with lines, but do handle the problem of edges, in that sense I’m closer to nature than the painter who is involved in calligraphy. But I’m not optimistic about the situation. I know that in the end most people want to see the unnatural lines on a canvas. Space is understood in painting as being depicted rather than a true feeling.44

44. Alan Solomon Papers, AAA, first part, take 2, p. 3.
Fearing he had been misunderstood and that such a statement could lead to the dreaded association of his paintings with landscape, Newman would reaffirm, at the very end of the same interview, that his work is

away from nature. Has nothing to do with nature in that sense. Nature meaning landscape. I think to the extent that it’s something that I do in relation to human feeling, that man is in nature, and therefore I’m not trying to say that these things are unnatural. But the sense of nature as an image out there doesn’t exist in this work.⁴⁵

No natural image out there to be framed in a painting, no illusion (we are beyond Cézanne), but the reality of edges: that is what, in so many words, the skinny paintings had been made not to depict but to assert.

Scale

But how? By what means, since “objecthood,” “shaped canvas,” and “deductive structure” seem to be red herrings as far as Newman’s works are concerned? The painter’s answer was “scale”—at least this is what is implied in an undated eight-point summary of his accomplishments, found in his papers. The first three points are general (subject matter; scale versus size; symmetry as non-relational); the next three concern specific paintings, including this: “6. The question of scale led me to the Wild.”

Indeed, every time he mentioned The Wild (and with it, almost invariably, the other skinny paintings as well), it was to illustrate his oft-stated point that scale has nothing to do with size, that “scale is a felt thing, and one has to overcome the size,” as he said to Lane Slate, or that “size is not enough” and that the “real problem of a painting lies in the painter’s sense of scale,” as he told Andrew Hudson.⁴⁶ There are paintings that are large but “fundamentally small in scale,” Newman notes, just as there are small works that are “large-scaled,” to use Donald Judd’s paraphrase.⁴⁷ Size is absolute; scale is relative, depending on perception. Scale is determined by both internal and external relationships, as Newman was perhaps the first artist after Matisse to understand. The axiom “fewer pictorial elements equals more weight,” mentioned above, concerns internal relationships and could also be written “fewer color planes equals larger scale.” As for the external relationships—the spatial context of the work—Newman always paid an enormous amount of attention to them (he preferred to see reproduced installation shots of his large works rather than the usual scale-

⁴⁵. Ibid., second part, take 8, p. 24.
⁴⁶. Both quotes are extracted from passages where The Wild is specifically discussed. The first comes from the transcript of the 1966 TV interview with Slate as it was broadcast, the second, dating from 1966, is from an interview with Andrew Hudson reprinted in SWI, pp. 271–72.
⁴⁷. The first quote is again from the interview with Hudson (SWI, p. 272); the second comes from Donald Judd’s essay on Newman, “Barnett Newman,” Studio International 179, no. 919 (February 1970), p. 68.
But he paid particular attention to that part of the context that is we the beholders—which is why Newman always spoke of scale as human scale. “In the end, size doesn’t count. Whether the easel painting is small or large, it’s not the issue. Size doesn’t count. It’s scale that counts. It’s human scale that counts” (to Emile de Antonio, 1970, SWI, p. 307).

In terms of internal relationships, Newman’s work is always “large-scaled,” but he knew that such a largeness could be sabotaged by context: a large painting seen from afar might end up looking “small-scaled,” for example, which is why Newman wanted us to look at his large works up close, as he explicitly wrote in a statement pinned on the wall during the 1951 show at Betty Parsons (SWI, p. 178). The skinny paintings represent an attempt to eliminate that risk: with a maximum of three colored planes entirely filling the picture plane, they are “large-scaled” in terms of internal relationships—and there is no real danger that, if we want at all to look at them, we will be prompted to step back. If we admit that The Wild is the latest of the series (not taking into consideration the so-called “Unfinished” painting [CR 266]), it is the final test: how tall can an edge be without forcing the beholder away? Maybe that is why it is the most colorful of all: Newman took no chances; he wanted to make sure that we would be drawn to it like a magnet.

Even so, the catastrophic response to his 1951 exhibition, where The Wild and most (or more likely all) of its cohorts were shown, clearly proved to Newman than no one was getting his point. He took his paintings back from the gallery (he had sold none) and decided not to publicly display his work anymore. As noted

48. Newman’s concept of scale is thus very different from the common use of the term (as when we speak of the scale of a map or of a model, for example), which refers to “the proportion which the representation of an object bears to the object itself” or to “a system of representing or reproducing objects in a smaller or larger size proportionally in every part” (OED). In this traditional sense, “scale” is a projective device of measurement (it long governed the academic practice of squaring up a small drawing in order to realize a large painting, a practice Matisse had specifically to repudiate, around 1905, in order to develop his own concept of scale). Newman is wholly Matissean in this respect: his notion of scale eschews squaring up (or down). For him, anything that one could proportionally enlarge or reduce (like a diagram) is “scale-less” because it has no stable relationship to human scale. Lacking this stable relationship, it could not generate a feeling of expansion (or contraction) since dimensionality would be irrelevant to it. Curiously, in the extraordinary essay where he discusses Pollock’s small paintings shown at the Betty Parsons Gallery in November–December 1950 (and their dialectical relationship to his largest-ever canvases, hung next to them), Tim Clark sticks to the geometric definition of scale as it is used in cartography, which leads him to assert that Pollock (and Matisse) were artists “of sizes,” not “of scale.” This might only be a question of vocabulary, but given that Clark was led to his inquiry after having experienced Pollock’s Number 6, 1950 as “the smallest painting [he had] ever seen,” this is unlikely (Tim Clark, “Pollock’s Smallness,” in Jackson Pollock: New Approaches, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel [the Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1999], pp. 15–31). Needless to say, I beg to differ on this particular canvas as well as its cohorts at the Parsons’s show, but Clark’s essay helps us see that Newman’s own exhibition at Betty Parsons a few months later was, in some ways, an answer to Pollock (who, incidentally, helped him hang the show). At the very least, Pollock’s stupendous juxtaposition of very large and comparatively small canvases must have been in Newman’s mind when he decided to show his own small canvases in a separate room.
above, the only canvas allowed to leave his premises was *Number 1, 1950*, acquired by Alfonso Ossorio after a visit arranged by Jackson Pollock.\(^{49}\) But even though the work was being looked after by such a friendly and generous host, and even though, of all the canvases that had been displayed at Betty Parsons, this was the least “minimal” (or the least “large-scaled”), Newman still feared that it would be misconstrued and ridiculed. He was particularly weary of his Abstract Expressionist friends—not Pollock, of course (whom Ossorio, a neighbor, avidly collected), but artists coming to see him in East Hampton, who were bound to pay a visit next door, or Clyfford Still, from whom Ossorio, according to Annalee Newman, was then acquiring a large painting.

The letter Newman sent to Ossorio on June 22, 1953, is one of the strangest he ever wrote (this is no mean feat, given the volume of his correspondence and the half-burlesque, half-paranoiac tone of many of his polemical missives). “I have decided to withdraw all of my ‘small’ canvases at this time from public view,” writes Newman. Not because they would be inauthentic, not because he disavows them, but because:

> The conditions do not yet exist for me, either physically or in the realm of ideas, that can make possible a direct, innocent attitude toward an isolated piece of my work, particularly one of my “small” ones. Without the proper context, the larger issues in my work are lost or, what is worse, become distorted to be just tours de force—from the tiny to the immense. I have, of course, done both sizes, but I have never been involved in tour de force—in size for its own sake—and although I do not care what may be said about my work (I am not interested in whether or not it is liked), I do care intensely that it be seen for what it is and not for what it is not (SWI, p. 198).

The “I don’t care” line probably did not fool Ossorio any more than it fools us today. But Newman was certainly right in thinking that “in the realm of ideas” very few people at the time could understand what he had to propose. Note the suggestion that it is because the work is “isolated” that it would be more vulnerable. That is in part wishful thinking—for Newman knew too well, after the cumulative fiascos of his first two one-man shows, that for the time being, at least, nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, he seems to have been ready

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49. According to Annalee Newman, Pollock wanted to come along with Ossorio, but Newman asked the latter to come by himself because he did not want his judgment to be impaired by the presence of his friend. It is not certain that Ossorio actually bought the painting—the terms of the deal might have been vague. In July 1952, Ossorio financially helped Newman secure a new studio (on Front Street), into which he had moved by September 8 and which he kept until 1968. It might be at this point that Ossorio took *Untitled 1, 1950* with him. On June 18, 1953, a few days before writing the letter in which he asks for the painting to be returned, Newman writes to Ossorio: “Dear Alfonso: It is almost a year since you so generously sent $200 to help me move my studio. I have just received some money and am now able to return it. I realize that you may feel that it ought to stay as a payment on a future painting. I, however, have always considered the money a loan, given spontaneously as an act of friendship and I would like to keep it that way. I’m sorry it took me so long to pay you back but I wish to thank you again for your kindness.”
to close up shop entirely, and thus to prevent even the possibility of two of his works’ ever being hung side by side: “I may perhaps have to do the same with my large ones—but that must wait for some thought.” The first work to come out of storage, in 1955, would be the smallish (30 x 72 inches) *Horizon Light* (CR 31) at the tenth-anniversary exhibition of the Betty Parsons Gallery, gingerly followed, two years later, by *Abraham, Omen III* (CR 19), and *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (at the exhibition “American Painting 1945–1957” organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Art). It is only after one of his largest canvases had been shown again that he began to think anew about the potential of its smallest siblings.

The Wild

Even if one wished to consider the five skinny *Untitled* s as mere prolegomena—which would be absolutely wrong—nothing quite prepares us for the quantum leap of *The Wild*. Almost literally a quantum leap: this 95 3/4 x 1 5/8–inch canvas is more than a foot and a half taller than *Untitled 5, 1950*, the most elongated of the *Untitled* s, yet it is not even half as wide. The proportional ratio jumps from 1:25 to 1:64—a format that, to this day, has not been emulated in painting. Even that humorous paragon of linear extension, Robert Rauschenberg’s horizontal *Automobile Tire Print* of 1953, a work on paper, does not come close to approaching such a ratio (at 16 1/2 x 264 1/2 inches, it yields a timid 1:16). More important, it is stored as a scroll and has seldom been unrolled. This condition of invisibility is shared by the only works of art that match *The Wild*’s improbable stretch, and this time as an explicit requirement: Piero Manzoni’s numerous “lines,” which have joined Rauschenberg’s indexical print as early forerunners in the pantheon of Conceptual art, announcing in particular the reductio ad absurdum its proponents of the ’60s so eagerly, and brilliantly, practiced. Dividing lengthwise rolls of paper of various sizes, each individually stocked in a black cardboard tube and carefully labeled with its date of execution and its length, Manzoni’s “lines” kept lengthening. But even Manzoni’s lines rarely attain the proportions of *The Wild*. In the end, however, Manzoni resorted to a trick in order to escape from the logic of one-upmanship into which he seemed to have trapped himself: the last lines would be labeled *Linea di lunghezza infinita* (line of infinite length), while the correct name should have been “of indefinite length.”

*The Wild* is nothing if not finite in length, and it is meant to be seen. It is not a conceptual gesture, but a painting, and Newman insisted that he painted it on a “stretched canvas,” as he did any other picture, with only one or two exceptions at the end of his life (it is probably because he mistook this insistence for pride that Tom Hess got carried away when speaking of the painter’s ingenuity as a cabinet-maker with regard to this work). When Newman mentioned *The Wild* in interviews, he usually noted its dimensions (he’d proudly say “8 feet by 1 1/2 inches,” never

50. See Hess 1971, p. 73. *Anna’s Light* and *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV* are among the rare works that Newman painted unstretched (see Mancusi-Ungaro in CR, p. 129).
bothering with the depth of the strainer)—and put them in correlation with those of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, which is of the same height (in fact, both canvases are short of eight feet: 95 3/8 inches, and *The Wild* is actually a fraction wider—1 5/8 inches—than accounted for). Though ill-conceived, the critical cliché according to which *The Wild* is merely a zip lifted from the huge canvas has the property of spelling out the direct link between the two works, a relationship of both similarity and difference that the visitors to the 1951 Parsons show had been invited to perceive, but had failed to do so. After all, among the five zips in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, several are of the same width as the red core of *The Wild*, and the cream-colored zip on the far right, which Newman added after painting *The Wild*, is exactly as wide as that whole canvas. In 1965, he made a point of sending the two works among his selection of eight paintings and a sculpture to the São Paulo Bienal.

The current 1 3/8–inch-deep strainer of *The Wild* was put in place by the conservator Orrin Riley after the canvas’s return from São Paulo, in 1966 (the painting had come back with mold and was badly in need of treatment). The exact depth of the original strainer is unknown, but if Kulicke’s memory served him well, it was no more than 1 1/4 inches, perhaps much less (see above, note 39). At present, the canvas, roughly cut and frayed near the back end of the tacking edge, does not even cover the whole depth of the strainer in certain areas. Multiple marks left by a row of staples that were removed at some point (in 1966?), near the back end of the current tacking edges, as well as faint traces of creases in the canvas on these tacking edges, suggest that Newman might have initially stapled the canvas on the back. (A few other staples, now also removed, were much less neatly applied—obliquely, in the middle of the tacking edge—as if it had been necessary to roughly secure the canvas in place on the strainer before attaching it firmly to its back.) The most surprising fact is that the staples that were removed seem to have been affixed on or above the paint layer (once the canvas had been painted) and not, as would normally be the case, on the bare canvas (the ghosts of these removed staples are not negative imprints). This could suggest that, when he insisted that *The Wild* was a “stretched canvas,” Newman was partly disingenuous: it was indeed so when he exhibited it, but at least the bluish-gray paint layer seems to have been painted before the canvas was stretched in its current configuration.

To sum up the process: without applying any white ground, which is very unusual, Newman placed a 1-inch tape in the center of the canvas and painted it whole (including the tacking edges, or rather, it seems, the lateral areas of which the largest portions would end up on tacking edge) with a bluish grey. After removing the masking tape, he brushed (either freehand or between two tapes placed on the gray bands on each side of the area reserved by the tape) a first, thin layer of fiery bright red. Then he covered (and enlarged, in places) this red zip with an impastoed coat of the same red, loosely applied with a palette knife. The impastoed daubs are ostensibly rough, and conspicuously reminiscent of the barbs of the plaster *Here I* next to which *The Wild* was hung in the 1951 Parsons
show (as noted above and by nearly all commentators, aided in that by Namuth’s installation shot).\textsuperscript{51}

However, the rugged stripe of \textit{The Wild} is perhaps closest to the vibrant red zip of \textit{Joshua} (also at Betty Parsons, on the other side of the wall in the adjacent room). The two zips were in fact painted in the exact same manner, with a second coat of red applied with a palette knife and widening a previous, smooth layer of the same color. But while in \textit{Joshua} the very strong value contrast amplifies the clamor of the zip’s solo piercing of the overall darkness, in \textit{The Wild}, the unassuming bluish gray onto which the red spreads seems almost an optical afterimage. \textit{The Wild} shimmers, a chromatic tour de force given the small amount of space it occupies. Unlike the vast redness of \textit{Vir Heroicus Sublimis}, it does not engulf us in an oceanic field our gaze cannot control, but its quivering is just as restless.

Newman knew perfectly well that he had accomplished something out of the ordinary, and the title he finally chose for this work tells it well. As is often the case, “The Wild” was not his initial thought: the first time the canvas was exhibited with a title, at Newman’s 1958 Bennington retrospective, it was called “End of Silence #1” (while the canvas entitled \textit{End of Silence} was exhibited nearby under this very name). Was the duplication a mistake of the show’s organizer, Eugene Goossen? (There are several such flaws in the exhibition’s catalogue.) Should this be the case, it would not be a bad slip, reminding us that, no matter how unusual its format, \textit{The Wild} partakes of the group of symmetrical paintings initiated by \textit{Onement I} and to which \textit{End of Silence} very much belongs.

\textsuperscript{51} The fact that Newman did not put any white primer on the canvas of \textit{The Wild} before painting it is exceptional—all the other skinny paintings, even the so-called “Unfinished” painting, have a white ground. This, combined with the facts that the grayish-blue paint was applied before the canvas was stretched and that the original strainer might have been of the same dimension as the thin rod of \textit{Here I}, prompts Carol Mancusi-Ungaro to suggest that the work started as a mere experiment and became a work proper when the artist realized that it was perfect as is. This would not have been the first time that a major work by Newman was the result of such an ex post facto decision: as is well known, his breakthrough canvas, \textit{Onement I}, is the result of an interrupted process.
But while he might have wanted to stress the continuity of his accomplishment in 1958 (and this is perhaps why he decided to leave out *The Wild* from the New York version of the Bennington show in 1959), by 1962, when he exhibited his eight-foot pole again, Newman was certainly feeling that its sheer boldness had to be properly baptized. “Wild” is not often used as a substantive, but in choosing this form of the word, Newman knowingly avoided the negative connotations attached to the adjective, all turning around the idea of “lack of control, lack of restraint,” which would not have suited his purpose. What he is referring to is what Jack London termed “the call of the wild,” and to which one of Newman’s great literary passions, Henry David Thoreau, had so willfully responded. As noted by Francine Koslow, on November 16, 1850 (a century before Newman painted *The Wild*—maybe to the dot?), Thoreau had written in his diary: “In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is only another name for tameness.” Even if Newman had not yet read the massive two-volume reprint of the diaries when he entitled *The Wild* in 1962 (published that same year, the book figures in his library), he probably knew the quote, which seems to have been widely circulated at the time. Furthermore, “wild” came with a strong art-historical pedigree, looming back to the Fauve scandal of 1905. In choosing such an expressive name, Newman reminds us once again that his art has nothing to do with geometric abstraction, with which it was so often associated—to his constant irritation. It tells us that it is “full of restrained passion” (his words, much maligned in a review of the 1951 Parsons show) and, as such, on a par with the work of his Abstract Expressionist peers who had overshadowed him for so long.

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52. Koslow points to the elliptical allusion made to the passage by Robert Goodnough, a young artist friend and admirer who interviewed Newman at some point, in a statement published in the first issue (Spring 1958) of the journal *It Is*, which is in Newman’s library (the journal was edited by Philip Pavia, a friend of Newman’s as well and an early defender of his). Goodnough had written, without giving any precise reference: “Thoreau’s belief that dullness and tameness are the same, that it is ‘the wild’ that attracts us in literature, seems also to apply to painting.” See Francine Amy Koslow, *Henry David Thoreau as a Source for Artistic Inspiration*, exh. cat. DeCordova and Dana Museum and Park, Lincoln, MA, 1984, p. 9.

53. “So now we know. White on white and maroon on maroon are the expression of restrained passion (the big red one [*Vir Heroicus Sublimis*] with several stripes is presumably passion less restrained)” (Genauer, the *New York Herald Tribune*, May 6, 1951).