

Bruce Barber, Serge Guilbaut and John O'Brian, eds, *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, 210 pp., 2 colour illus., 54 black & white illus., paper

Joshua Heuman

Volume 23, Number 1-2, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073299ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073299ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Heuman, J. (1996). Review of [Bruce Barber, Serge Guilbaut and John O'Brian, eds, *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, 210 pp., 2 colour illus., 54 black & white illus., paper]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 23(1-2), 104-110. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073299ar>

These minor hesitations aside, *The Power of Place* should be commended for its inclusive stance, and for mining a decade of cultural studies' theorizing for a truly interdisciplinary methodology taken to its next step in the field. In short, Hayden is not just talking the talk, she is walking the walk. The stories in Part Two are always recounted against the backdrop of The Power of Place's efforts towards community involvement and commemoration. The Bidy Mason project, for example, was actualized on the very lot that had supported Mason's home and her sons' businesses. That space was, at the time of The Power of Place's involvement, a parking lot owned by the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, who approached The Power of Place to commemorate Bidy Mason's life. The works realized included a book project by artist Susan E. King, a public history workshop and an article by Hayden, an installation by artist Betye Saar, and an 81-foot wall by architect Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. This wall was inscribed with salient text describing the life of Mason, her struggles and triumphs, her gifts to the growing community of Los Angeles. The wall also sought to situate Mason's achievements historically: winning her freedom from slavery in court and owning property were events in a life and period in which freedom and ownership for African Americans were not rights but tenuous privileges.

Projects such as the Bidy Mason wall, the most elaborate and interdisciplinary endeavour mounted by The Power of Place within this particular commemoration, describe a process of learning and listening, and a respect for the past which recognizes, as Hayden points out, that success and historical greatness are not designations solely for the "great men" of a conquering history. Skeptics could ask, why put so much effort into these low-budget and local initiatives? To her credit, Hayden does not engage with a defense of her politics. Her book stands strongest at the point where she assumes that the labours and triumphs of working classes and marginalized peoples are the concern of all. And a quick comparison with the public response to Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* is sufficient to emphasize the need for public art which actually speaks to the needs and histories of a given community. Hayden has chosen her larger site well. Los Angeles is one of the most culturally diverse cities in North America and one that, as she notes in her epilogue, is clearly

in great need of a new urban paradigm. Not a paradigm that will replace the skyscrapers and freeways, but a paradigm that assumes that people are the building blocks of community, that buildings contain memory, and that even lost buildings, lost communities may be found through the collective, cooperative and indeed aesthetic work of commemoration. To return to the initial quotation, the essence of Hayden's project is the agency within self-representation. *The Power of Place* offers a new, sensitive and practical means towards celebrating public memory as a form of community identification, activism and pedagogy. This emphasis on community involvement is not rhetorical. Hayden repeatedly urges the reader to take stock of a community's special knowledge of their location, its apocryphal texts, the ways of travel through its facets. Far from writing from the ivory tower, Hayden's work is thoroughly engaged and seeks to further the productive dialogue between academy, urban administration and those who give life to space.

CYNTHIA HAMMOND
Concordia University

Notes

- 1 Herbert J. Gans was the social historian and urban sociologist, while Ada Louise Huxtable was the architectural critic. Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 2.
- 2 For discussions on the issue of disciplinary rigidity and the barriers that the notion of "specialization" puts around knowledge, see Cary Nelson and Dilip P. Gaonkar, "Introduction" to *Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies* (London, 1996); and Bruce Robbins, "The Insistence of the Public in Postmodern Criticism" in Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London, New York, 1993), 84-117.
- 3 See Elsa Levisseur, review of *The Power of Place* in *Architectural Review*, 198 (Sept. 1995), 97.
- 4 Hayden quotes Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York, 1990).
- 5 See, for example, Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal*, XXXVI, no. 3 (1993), 383-414; Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur" in Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson, eds, *Postmodern Cities and Spaces* (Oxford, 1995), 59-79; *idem*, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London, 1991).

BRUCE BARBER, SERGE GUILBAUT AND JOHN O'BRIAN, eds, *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, 210 pp., 2 colour illus., 54 black & white illus., paper.

When the National Gallery of Canada announced that Brydon Smith, Assistant Director of Collections and Research, had negotiated the purchase of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967) from the American artist's widow, Annalee Newman, for \$1.5 million U.S. (approximately

\$1.76 million Canadian), who could have foreseen the hostile controversy which ensued, amplified by a media frenzy which democratized the criticism of art and Canadian cultural policy? With hindsight, we may conclude that this controversy left no permanent scars. However, the media sensationalism raised practical and theoretical concerns which affect those involved directly with cultural development in Canada: the museum professionals who collect, the art historians who chronicle, the art critics who evaluate, and the artists who produce that which is culture.

Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State is an explanation and analysis of these practical and theoretical concerns, which aims to transform the widespread and detrimental condemnation into a beneficial body of knowledge from which the Canadian and international art communities can learn. The intended lesson involves the description and historical account of the *Voice of Fire* controversy and its causes, as well as a discourse surrounding the difficulty of meaning in Newman's painting specifically, and in abstract art in general. This anthology, therefore, combines media documents (photographs, editorials, articles, cartoons, letters and public exchanges), critical essays and symposium papers. The critical essays and symposium papers – each presenting a particular facet of the history, controversy and meaning of Newman's art – were written by distinguished scholars at Canadian universities, an eminent Canadian sculptor (Robert Murray), and a key figure in the controversy, Brydon Smith, presently the National Gallery of Canada's Curator of Twentieth Century Art – and formerly, during March and April of 1990, a main target of the media.

On 7 March 1990, Dr Shirley Thomson, then Director of the National Gallery, released the official announcement of the annual acquisitions for the period between January and December of 1989. Though 411 works were acquired (226 purchases and 185 gifts), the only one to receive national attention was Newman's *Voice of Fire* (even though it had been on exhibition since the opening of the new building in May 1988, receiving absolutely no media attention). Within seventy-two hours of Thomson's announcement, newspaper, magazine and television reporters assumed the role as defenders of the public's right to accountability of expenditures by government agencies.

One must acknowledge that from the start the news media did not maintain the objectivity expected of journalistic writing (with the obvious exceptions of editorials, art criticisms and "Letters to the Editor"). This resulted in weeks of deceptive, half-true and inaccurate *reportage*. To paraphrase the most common questions asked by the multitude of news reporters: How could the National Gallery

have spent \$1.8 million for only one painting, when its annual acquisition budget was only \$3 million? Could it not have purchased many paintings for \$1.8 million instead of only one painting? If it wanted to spend \$1.8 million for one painting, why did it choose one by an American artist – and a dead artist at that – instead of choosing a painting by a Canadian artist? Why did it not buy a painting of something recognizable instead of an abstract painting with three stripes? Could the federal government stop the purchase, thereby breaking its traditional arm's-length policy of noninterference? Would the people responsible for this outrageous purchase – Dr Shirley Thomson, Brydon Smith, the National Gallery's acquisition committee – be fired or severely reprimanded?

Now, let the Canadian public demand accountability from the media. Why did the media not report that the National Gallery purchased according to a three-year schedule, setting aside \$600,000 of the annual budget of \$1.5 million, for each of three years (1987, 1988 and 1989), totaling \$1.8 million? (The annual acquisition budget had been raised to \$3 million in April 1990 whereas the previous annual acquisition budget was \$1.5 million.) Why did so many reports round up the purchase price to \$1.8 million from \$1.76 million? (The \$1.8 million set aside for the purchase was \$40,000 more than the final purchase price.) Why did reporters not explain that instead of spending \$1.76 million of a \$3 million annual acquisition budget – almost two-thirds of the annual budget – the National Gallery of Canada actually spent \$1.76 million of a \$4.5 million three-year budget – slightly more than one-third of total acquisitions over the three year period (1987-89)? Lastly, why did the media not report that in 1988, one year earlier, another painting by Barnett Newman – the same size as *Voice of Fire*, but oriented horizontally – was purchased by a private Japanese collector for \$3 million?

The majority of media reports lacked integrity because of the abandonment of journalistic objectivity, stumbling into this Manichean, pro-versus-con quarrel, as Bruce Barber notes:

The objective gloss which many of the authors attempted to sustain was often undermined severely by the ironic headlines accompanying their reports, possibly the result of an intervention from those with editorial power from within the newsroom hierarchy (p. 101).

The editors of *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State* present a selection of these biased articles, editorials, criticisms and graphic satires (cartoons) in the Documents section (pp. 33-78), providing the reader with a sense of equilibrium with which to approach the critical essays and

symposium papers that follow. Those who defended Barnett Newman, the National Gallery of Canada, or both, included John Bentley Mays and Allan Gottlieb (of *The Globe and Mail*) and Robert Fulford (for *The Financial Times of Canada*). Their opposition included Bronwyn Drainie (of *The Globe and Mail*), several reports by unidentified authors, "Letters to the Editor" from members of the public, and several cartoons. (Though some news items appear at first to be fair and impartial, one should make careful note of connotations, inaccuracies and omissions.)

Barber's contribution, "Thalia meets Melpomene: The Higher Meaning of the *Voice of Fire* and *Flesh Dress* Controversies" (pp. 96-120), is a consideration of the fusion of comedy and tragedy in the media's coverage of the 1990 *Voice of Fire* controversy. This text unfolds around the numerous cartoons from Canadian news publications reproduced in the Documents section. Barber cites the catalyst of the controversy as the "struggles over the meaning of the sign(s) [which] represent attempts by various constituencies to either accommodate and sustain, or resist, the hegemony of the dominant culture" (p. 97). These "struggles over the meaning" were caused (or perhaps intensified) by the free-for-all interpretation by the perpetually fault-finding members of the media's cartoon community, as well as the hopelessly idealistic brochure written by Brydon Smith, issued by the National Gallery in April 1990 in the attempt to respond to condemnation of the purchase of *Voice of Fire*. To demonstrate the unstable relation between Barnett Newman and political concerns, Barber includes two revealing statements by the artist about his political beliefs. In addition, the 1991 *Flesh Dress* controversy at the gallery is included as a secondary, reinforcing case study of misconstrued meanings. In an otherwise analytically sound essay, Barber also describes several cartoons, attempting to put into words that which is better encapsulated in the comedic one-liners, innuendoes and situations of the compartmentalized cartoons. It is futile to explain a joke to someone who just does not understand it. Barber's essay concludes powerfully, though abruptly, with a categorization of nine motives which underlie attacks against the avant-garde (pp. 118-19). This categorization is comparable to, though more extensive than, the four causes of controversies about modern art offered by John O'Brian in the introduction (p. 7).

The members of the news media who opposed the purchase discovered a number of allies. As John O'Brian observes in his essay "Who's Afraid of Barnett Newman?" (pp. 121-36):

In the terminology of post-colonial discourse, [...] the National Gallery of Canada stood accused of complicity with the language of the dominant centre, which is

to say New York. In Canada, the result of the National Gallery's perceived acquiescence brought it face to face with an unlikely 'coalition of left-wing anti-Americans and right-wing anti-artists' – two constituencies that normally could be expected to occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum (pp. 133-34).¹

The opposing forces were led by Felix Holtmann and Don Mazankowski, representing the right-wing anti-artist faction. Felix Holtmann – Conservative Member of Parliament for Portage-Interlake (Manitoba), Standing Chair of the House of Commons Committee on Communications, Culture, Citizenship and Multiculturalism, and a "pig farmer by trade" (p. 85) – ridiculed Newman's painting with his oft-quoted quip, "It looks like two cans of paint and two rollers and about ten minutes would do the trick." Don Mazankowski, the Conservative Deputy Prime Minister, expressed his dissatisfaction with the National Gallery's acquisition process, suggesting the purchase would be scrutinized by the expenditure review committee. He and his spokesperson, Tom van Dusen, suggested the possibility of halting the purchase. However, National Gallery spokesperson Helen Murphy explained (10 March 1990) to *The Ottawa Citizen* reporter Graham Parley that *Voice of Fire* was purchased in August of 1989, "So it can't be stopped. It's acquired" (p. 58).²

Another bloc opposed to the purchase, representing the left-wing anti-American (or pro-Canadian) faction, was Canadian Artists' Representation/Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC), a national artists' lobby group. Greg Graham, director of CARFAC, objected to the high-priced purchase of an American artist's painting, demanding that more be spent on contemporary Canadian art (pp. 57-58). Jane Martin, head of CARFAC, expressed support of the arm's-length policy that grants museum curators independence from parliamentary interference. Thus, their synthesized opinion may be summarized as follows: the National Gallery should not be accountable to the Federal government; rather, the National Gallery should be accountable to Canadian artists.

However, as Dr Shirley Thomson explained, forty-two percent (approximately \$1.9 million) of the National Gallery's \$4.5 million acquisition budget from the three-year purchasing cycle ending in the spring of 1989 was spent on Canadian art. Furthermore, the official "Purposes" of the National Gallery of Canada, as stated in Chapter 3, Part 1, Section 5 of the *Museums Act* (Federal parliamentary bill C-12), assented to on 30 January 1990, reads as follows:

The purposes of the National Gallery of Canada are to develop, maintain and make known, throughout Canada

and internationally, a collection of works of art, both historic and contemporary, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, and to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of art in general among all Canadians.³

This wording permits a flexibility in the acquisition of Canadian and foreign art, allowing the National Gallery of Canada to participate in the world art market.

One should not take lightly the National Gallery's acquisition process, which involves numerous boards and committees. Well aware of the intricacies of finalizing and announcing such potentially problematic acquisitions, John O'Brian addresses the issue of how the National Gallery could have better announced the purchase in its official news release.⁴ The announcement, once filtered through the biased news media, outraged the public, and what little damage control was attempted failed. As O'Brian observes in the introduction, entitled "Bruising the Public Eye" (pp. 3-21): "Admonitions to enjoy *Voice of Fire* served only to strengthen the view that the gallery functioned as a bureaucratic enclave, an institution less interested in public service than in its own regime of specialization" (p. 7).

Among O'Brian's suggestions are the admission of the difficulties posed by abstract art, the explanation of the material relationship of *Voice of Fire* to Canada (it was first exhibited in the United States pavilion at Montreal's Expo 67), and the important influence of Barnett Newman upon Canadian artists (his leadership of the 1959 Emma Lake Artists' Workshop in Saskatchewan; his role in inspiring the formal innovations of Montreal's *néoplasticiens*; etc.) (p. 134). Though O'Brian's recommendations are legitimate and sensible in academic hindsight, realistically they could have neither appeased nor pleased a hostile news media servicing an even more hostile public, outraged by the mere mention or sight of *Voice of Fire*.

Thierry de Duve's essay, "Vox Ignis Vox Populi" (pp. 81-95), clarifies the motives of two (dis)similar reactions protesting the purchase of *Voice of Fire*.⁵ He weaves a clever tale of heroism and ignominy by two copyists – the "hero," John Czupryniak, and the "bad guy," Antoine Corege – each of whom produced his own version of *Voice of Fire*; this marks their similarity. Their motivations, however, mark their dissimilarity. Though both are painters, only the latter is an artist – or is he?

John Czupryniak, from Nepean, Ontario, is a professional (house) painter. He painted *Voice of the Taxpayer* to represent his dissatisfaction with the National Gallery's acquisition. He opposed neither the purchase of an American painting nor the purchase of an abstract painting; rather, he felt that the National Gallery had overpaid. He did not

consider his "work of art" to be a work of art at all. It was intended as a political, economic and cultural condemnation of what he believed to be its exorbitant price. He had sincerity on his side. Antoine Corege, on the other hand, is a professional artist (painter and sculptor) living in Toronto (though from France originally). He, too, painted a copy of *Voice of Fire* to protest the National Gallery's purchase of "the 1,800,000 dollar rip-off of the Canadian artiste [sic]" (pp. 86, 92). His intention was to demonstrate that, due to his superior aesthetic judgment, he was rejecting Newman's painting which he described as "garbage" (p. 86). De Duve explains:

In order to show the contempt in which the artist [Corege] holds Barnett Newman, the painter [Corege] had to despise himself and devalue his métier to the point where it ceased to exist, since, as he said, 'any seven-year-old could do the same thing' (p. 88-89).

For the artist Corege to critique Newman's efforts within the métier of painting, the painter Corege devalued his own métier. Therefore, Corege lacked sincerity.

While the essays by Barber, O'Brian and de Duve present important arguments and ideas, any attempt to analyse or decipher meaning in Newman's work should be preceded by the presentation of Newman's stated position on the matter. It is unfortunate that only scattered reference is made throughout *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and the State* to Newman's writings about the intended meaning of abstract paintings by him and his colleagues. Yet, throughout his painting career Newman adhered to the statement he wrote at the time of his first solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery (23 January to 11 February 1950):

The 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.⁶

Newman was exceedingly articulate in both written and spoken communication; therefore, the semantics and context of these words is of utmost importance. Newman stated that his paintings are not "abstractions," which means in common usage that which is simplified from nature. His paintings do not "depict," or represent, ideas. Instead, he intended his "concentrated images" to be "embodiments of feeling" – a presence or an incarnation – which he hoped viewers would experience. Though the foundation of his painting is discovered through intellectual reasoning, the result is clearly intended to be the expression of an emo-

tional content. Newman understood that few critics or criticisms were formed properly or properly informed, as he wrote to Betty Parsons in 1955:

I am not [trying] and never have tried to confound the wise. It is the wise guys themselves who have confounded each other. It is they, critics and artists, art officials and art 'intellectuals,' who have tried to typecast me for their own purposes⁷

This is the most appropriate introductory warning for a discussion of meaning in Newman's *Voice of Fire*, specifically, and Newman's oeuvre in general.

The National Gallery of Canada organised a symposium, called "Other Voices," six months after the controversy (October 1990). The papers were presented by Serge Guilbaut, Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin, Robert Murray and Brydon Smith. A "General Discussion" period concluded the symposium and, appropriately, concludes the book (pp. 181-92).

Serge Guilbaut, in his symposium paper entitled "Voicing the Fire of the Fierce Father" (pp. 139-51), made a disturbing assertion of what constitutes a subjective supposition. He writes, "Meaning, as we now agree, is multiform, not unique. It is sometimes contradictory, and certainly not concentrated solely in the artist's intentions" (p. 140). However, I would assert – and Guilbaut recognizes, but dismisses – that meaning becomes multiform in reaction and in relation to the artist's intentions which form an immutable infrastructure of meaning.

Guilbaut presents Newman as the culturally insensitive, masculinist American. Newman's painting, we are told, appropriates form and concept from Northwest Coast Indian cultures.⁸ Newman's painting, we are told, is meant to evoke a powerful male presence to parallel a larger ideology within the United States of revirilization against Communism (p. 143). The zips – which Newman believed served to unite the areas of colour of his paintings – are likened to the totem pole and the phallus. Like a totem pole, the zip mediates between the land and the metaphysical sphere of the sky (p. 143). Guilbaut's casting of the zip in the role as masculine, erect phallus is never stated, only implied, as in the following: "In the voluptuous geodesic dome of the United States pavilion at Montreal's Expo 67, Newman's verticality impregnated the curved space with a political signification that could be felt by many Canadian fair-goers ..." (p. 140). Guilbaut yields to another art critic, Hubert Crehan, quoting from a review of Newman's 1959 solo exhibition at French & Company, which candidly incited this supposed phallic association. This is certainly the ugliest means of analyzing the painting of Barnett Newman.

I am confident that neither Buckminster Fuller, designer and architect of the geodesic dome, nor Barnett Newman, painter of *Voice of Fire*, considered the dome to be feminine ("voluptuous," "curved space" in Guilbaut's vocabulary), or the painting to be masculine. Recall that *Voice of Fire* (17'10" x 8') is the only painting of its size by Newman to be vertically oriented, this orientation being specifically required by Alan Solomon, the art critic and historian commissioned by the United States Information Agency to curate the exhibition of contemporary American painting at Expo 67.⁹

If we are to accept Newman's verticality as a potent masculine symbol, how are we to interpret other paintings exhibited in the American pavilion at Expo 67?¹⁰ For example, Andy Warhol's pompous *Self-Portrait* (1967), is eighteen feet tall. Or, James Rosenquist's *Firepole* (1967), with its provocative title, is thirty-three feet high. And should the sole woman's contribution – Helen Frankenthaler's *Painting for Expo* (1967), which is thirty feet tall – be interpreted as the expression of her desire to be masculine? Extremes of dimensions cannot fully embody either gender.

In "Tightrope Metaphysics" (pp. 153-64), Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin classifies Newman's subject as "syncretic," combining the tragic and the sublime, science and anthropology, religion and philosophy. Newman intended, Dubreuil-Blondin suggests, to neutralize the motif, the zip. In this way, he created an aesthetic of vacillation, where meaning became the problem, not the solution. "This leaving of a universe of symbolic figuration, and moving to an unbounded pictorialness occupied Newman's whole generation" (p. 158). In this way, Newman's paintings resist specific meaning, becoming an inseparable totality.

Dubreuil-Blondin then attempts to explain the meaning of Newman's paintings and the zip – isolating one element of the "inseparable totality." According to Newman, the zip does not designate the edge(s) of a shape, as does the classical silhouette; rather, Newman intended to unite the picture plane, declaring a space and creating colour.¹¹ Dubreuil-Blondin strays from this factual framework into an unfounded interpretation, linking Newman's vertical compositions, originating with *Onement I* (1948) and extending to *Voice of Fire*, to an "inscape" rather than a "landscape," by suggesting that the horizon was raised to the vertical (p. 158).

So how does *Voice of Fire* fit into this syncretism? According to Dubreuil-Blondin, the title alludes poetically to the voice of Jehovah from the burning bush as described in the Bible (p. 159). Newman, according to tradition, devotes a large canvas to an important subject. His tripartite

composition “evokes the triptych composition of old church paintings” (p. 160). The zip becomes

a kind of archetype, a figure of the sacred, the transcendental presence in the burning bush, but also a figure of immanence, that of the upright man (*vir erectus sublimis*), facing his fate alone, whether as a biblical prophet or a witness to Hiroshima, the disenchanted and emaciated *kouros* who is not very comfortable here on Earth (p. 161).

Lastly, Dubreuil-Blondin describes the present site for the painting in the National Gallery: “In fact, the great subject corresponding to Newman’s aspirations is addressed by its new context: standing at the end of a hall whose inclined roof suggests the basilicas of old, the painting is presented to the spectator in an atmosphere of silence and reflection favourable to epiphanies of all kinds” (p. 164).

There are too many historical facts, stated intentions or further possibilities which deny validity to Dubreuil-Blondin’s interpretation. First, the title may or may not originate in the Bible, for Brydon Smith suggests as possible sources either Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York, 1968), for which Newman wrote the preface, or the escalating tensions between the United States and the Communist forces in North Vietnam (p. 179). Second, canvas size could not convey, according to Newman, the importance of the subject.¹² Third, would Newman – a knowledgeable, though secular Jewish artist – have based his composition on the triptych arrangement of an altarpiece for a Christian church?¹³ Dubreuil-Blondin inappropriately contextualizes Newman’s painting within a Catholic setting – “the basilicas of old” – by framing her subjective reaction with the all-too-powerful “In fact”. Last, the generic zip is initially described as originating in Newman’s raising of the horizon line of landscape to the vertical of an “inscape” which “turns the picture plane into surface colour” (p. 158); however, the zip in *Voice of Fire* is anthropomorphised as Man – prophetic, existential or ideal (in the classical sense, as opposed to the “real”). (In her comments during the general discussion, Dubreuil-Blondin assumes a stance similar to Guilbaut’s implication that the zip originates in the phallogentrism of the modernist tradition, p. 184.)

Robert Murray, in his brief essay “The Sculpture of Barnett Newman” (pp. 165-71), provides an anecdotal and technical accounting of Newman’s efforts in three dimensions. Murray provides the human, practical element which art critic Harold Rosenberg could not provide in his *Barnett Newman: Broken Obelisk and Other Sculptures* (Seattle, 1971). He maintains historical accuracy without resorting to unsubstantiated, subjective musings.

Brydon Smith’s contribution to the symposium, “Some Thoughts about the Making and Meaning of *Voice of Fire*” (pp. 173-79), describes Newman’s technique and potential motivation. The intricate process of painting is highlighted to demonstrate the technical complexities involved in producing *Voice of Fire*. This painting, we are reassured, is worth the price paid by the National Gallery of Canada to Newman’s widow, Annalee. However, Smith’s rhetoric had changed between the time of the publication of the April 1990 brochure, which aimed to discharge the controversy, and this symposium. Whereas his first effort was hopelessly idealistic – an invitation for skeptical viewers to lose themselves in the lofty realm of universal spiritual aspirations – six months of hindsight allowed for a more rational, historical approach. His symposium paper neither eliminates nor favours the spiritual/metaphysical or historical/technical basis for analysis. He had by then learned the hard way that government officials and the public are not open-minded and that they prefer proof of monetary value, rather than intellectual or spiritual enrichment.

Each of the symposium papers presents an idiosyncratic interpretation of Newman’s painting or sculpture. The problem with such interpretations, however, is that the idiosyncrasies are those of the art historians and art critics and not those of the artist. The distillation of meaning – the subject and content – of non-representational and abstract art must first and foremost hinge upon the artist’s stated intentions. This is the only constant – even if riddled with contradictions. Art historians and art critics approach art work with their own issues – intellectual or emotional – which are not necessarily less interesting, but which may be either irrelevant to the artist’s work or indefensible within the context of the artist’s stated intentions. If there are conflicting interpretations of meaning offered by art historians, art critics and an artist, who is right?

JOSHUA HEUMAN
York University

Notes

- 1 John O’Brian quotes from John Cruickchank, “Newman: A Canvas of Strong Opinion,” *The Globe and Mail*, 16 March 1990.
- 2 This appeared in an article entitled “Cabinet to Review \$1.8M Art Purchase,” quoted in its entirety, 58-59.
- 3 O’Brian, 16, seems to quote from the *Museums Act* (1990), that the National Gallery is to collect and present works of art as it sees fit “for the benefit and enjoyment of Canadians.” This quotation appears in neither the official *Museums Act* (1990) nor the annual reports distributed by the National Gallery of Canada.

- 4 O'Brian is listed in the National Gallery of Canada's Annual Report 1995-1996 as a "Special Advisor" to the Acquisitions Committee for the period between 1 April 1995 and 31 March 1996.
- 5 De Duve's essay appeared previously in *Parachute*, LX (October-December 1990) in English and French (translated from the original French by Donald McGrath); see 194, n. 1.
- 6 John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York, 1990), 178.
- 7 O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 206.
- 8 Guilbaut (and I) use the term "Indian" instead of "First Nations," "indigenous peoples" or "natives" within the context of Newman's world view and writing.
- 9 It is not clear when *Voice of Fire* was painted. O'Brian (p. 103) refers to Thomas B. Hess who, in the 1971 Newman retrospective catalogue, writes that *Voice of Fire* was painted before Solomon asked Newman to exhibit a painting in the United States pavilion at Expo 67. According to Hess (p. 141), Newman realized *Voice of Fire* could never be exhibited, as no museum or gallery could accommodate such a tall canvas; however, by "happy chance," Solomon asked Newman to participate by contributing a vertically oriented painting.

Two details in a letter dated 9 December 1966 from Milton Freedman, Deputy Commissioner General of Expo 67, to Solomon serve to discredit Hess's assertion. Freedman reports that Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Motherwell were willing to lend existing paintings but would not produce paintings especially for the occasion. Therefore, one can suppose that had Newman painted *Voice of Fire* before Solomon's request, he could have offered it without consequence. Freedman also writes that Newman was "just recovering from [a] back injury but will start

work soon" [Alan Solomon Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 3921]. Therefore, there is no reason to believe Newman's painting was started or completed three months before Expo 67 was to open.

- 10 *American Painting Now*, exh. cat. (Boston, 1967), n.p.
- 11 These intentions are well documented in Newman's writings and interviews. See, for example, the 1959 statement and preface Newman wrote for "The New American Painting" exhibition (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 179-80), the 1961 interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 249) and Newman's statement for the 1965 Sao Paulo Biennale (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 186-87).
- 12 For example, during a 1966 interview with artist/critic Andrew Hudson, Newman explained that in 1950-51, the year he painted *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, with dimensions of 8 feet high and 18 feet wide, he also painted canvases that were 8 feet high and 1½ inches wide (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 271).
- 13 Newman's involvement with Jewish theology is well documented, from his reference to the medieval French Jewish scholar Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, called Rashi, in "The First Man was an Artist" of 1947 (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 159), to his statement and architectural model included in the "Recent American Synagogue Architecture" exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1963 (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 181), to his participation in a 1967 symposium ("The Problem of Religious Content in Contemporary Art") during which Newman referred to the "Jewish medieval notion of Makom is where God is" (O'Neill, *Barnett Newman*, 289). Some titles of works by Newman refer directly to Hebrew biblical narrative or Kabbalistic concepts, for example *Cathedra* (1951), *Zim Zum I* (1969) and *Zim Zum II* (1992, posthumous).

CHARLES HILL, *The Group of Seven: Art For A Nation*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1995, 375 pp., 159 black-and-white illus., 101 colour illus.

Charles Hill's catalogue for the exhibition, "The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation," is a wonderful resource for the study of Canadian art; it is also a model of how not to write art history, and its weak point is to be found precisely where its value lies. For Hill, art history is an accumulation of "facts" – the minutiae of who said what to whom and when, the oh-so-troubling sequence of events, the precise ambiguities of every artist's stated intentions – and his considerable bibliographical energies are dedicated to getting all those pesky details in their places. His mission, in the great Canadian art historical tradition, is to avoid interpretation at all costs, so the book is not critical in any meaningful sense, but it does offer rich material for any number of future studies, some of which are bound to call up the most partisan of readings. If we do not hear any harrumphs ema-

nating from the clubrooms of Canadian culture, for the critical reader at least the book is a definite eyebrow raiser.

First the positive side, by which of course I mean "the facts." The book includes many beautiful drawings and prints by members of the Group that have not been widely seen with little known works by Lismer and Macdonald in particular. It is a major addition to the richness of the Canadian canon and is bound to provoke new assessments of the latter two artists. Excellent material is included on many crucial exhibitions – at Wembley, Buffalo, Boston, Ottawa, Paris, Atlantic City – documented with useful and interesting installation photographs. There are also detailed lists of exhibitors in the Group's shows, the 1931 exhibition being especially important, and accounts of the critical controversies surrounding the Group, certain of which are quite significant, such as the response to Jackson's Montreal exhibition of 1913. But here is a good place to call Mr Hill up short, for the main effect of the catalogue is to render even the most inflamed aesthetic debates of a piece with its