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The Phenomenological Experience of Contemporary Painting in the Triangle of Artist, Artwork, and Viewer

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Abstract: This article explores the triangular relationship between artist, artwork, and viewer through a phenomenological analysis of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), positioning the painting as a dynamic site of embodied, affective, and cognitive exchange. Drawing from contemporary aesthetics, visual semiotics, and reception theory, the study argues that meaning in abstract painting is not transmitted unilaterally from the artist but co-constructed in an experiential encounter mediated by the artwork. Newman's formal strategies – monumental scale, chromatic saturation, and spatial segmentation through "zips" – are examined not merely as aesthetic choices but as deliberate mechanisms for activating perceptual and emotional immersion. The viewer is conceptualized as a co-creator whose embodied responses and interpretive acts contribute to the aesthetic event, transforming static visuality into a living, participatory field. The article engages interdisciplinary research, including neuroaesthetics and post-phenomenology, to illuminate how spatiality, cultural memory, and sensory modalities inform viewer reception. In doing so, it proposes a relational model of meaning-mak-

ing that reframes abstract painting as a shared ontological space rather than an autonomous object. The analysis ultimately challenges modernist assumptions of artistic autonomy, offering instead a dynamic structure in which affect, presence, and interpretation unfold simultaneously. This model is especially relevant in post-digital contexts, where the relational fabric of art continues to evolve across physical and virtual environments.

Keywords: Art history, phenomenology, contemporary painting, embodied perception, aesthetic experience.

Introduction

Contemporary painting, situated within an evolving landscape of visual culture, increasingly emphasizes dialogic encounters rather than static presentation. In contrast to the modernist conception of art as self-contained and autopoietic, contemporary works often seek to provoke relational, participatory, and interpretive experiences in the viewer (Kraner [2019]). This shift underscores the importance of aesthetic co-creation, where the artwork becomes a site for engagement rather than contemplation (Scott [2020]). Viewers are no longer passive recipients but become interpretive agents whose experiences, knowledge, and emotions shape the meaning of the artwork (Szubielska *et al*. [2020]). The transformation of the viewer's role corresponds with the emergence of new aesthetic frameworks that prioritize subjectivity, interactivity, and embodied perception (Sadia [2021]). In this respect, the meaning of a painting today is not produced in isolation but within a triangular dynamic among artist, artwork, and viewer – each an essential participant in the aesthetic process (Dolese, Kozbelt [2020]).

Recent studies in empirical aesthetics and art theory emphasize that aesthetic engagement is shaped by cognitive, emotional, and social factors, many of which are rooted in the viewer's interaction with contextual cues and the artwork's formal properties (Darda, Chatterjee [2023]). Empirical work reveals that artist background, biography, and perceived intention significantly influence the viewer's evaluation of artworks, especially when the visual language is abstract or ambiguous (Xu [2021]). These findings align with reception theory, which posits that the interpretation of art emerges from the encounter between the viewer's expectations and the artwork's cultural signs (Kuehn [2023]). Moreover, phenomenological and neuroaesthetic perspectives have highlighted how the bodily presence of the viewer – movement, spatial orientation, affective response – plays a critical role in shaping aesthetic experience (Kayser [2019]). Interactivity, in both digital and analog forms, further reconfigures this aesthetic triad by making the viewer a co-performer of meaning, especially in immersive or large-scale works (Szubielska, Imbir [2022]). Thus, the aesthetic experience

today emerges not merely from perception but from interaction, interpretation, and embodied cognition (Koblížek [2023]).

This article contributes to the expanding discourse on relational aesthetics and affective perception by focusing on a single painting – Barnett Newman's monumental *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51). Positioned at the intersection of abstract expressionism and phenomenological aesthetics, Newman's work exemplifies a shift in modern painting from the pictorial to the experiential. Its immersive scale and chromatic intensity do not merely demand visual attention but invite bodily and emotional engagement, positioning the viewer within the painting's spatial logic (Stefańska [2021]). This paper analyzes Newman's painting as a mediating object that facilitates emotional resonance, perceptual immersion, and conceptual reflection – demanding the viewer's presence as a co-creator of meaning (Na [2023]). By engaging with recent scholarship in aesthetics, art psychology, and visual semiotics, this study proposes that the meaning of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* arises from a triangular dialogue – an aesthetic event where artist, artwork, and viewer are continuously engaged in shaping affective and cognitive experience (Song *et al*. [2021]). In doing so, the paper aims to illuminate how the material conditions of painting, the intentionality of the artist, and the subjective constitution of the viewer coalesce into a dynamic system of contemporary aesthetic meaning.

To clarify the methodological focus, the decision to center the analysis on a single artwork – Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* – rests on its paradigmatic status within phenomenological aesthetics. This painting encapsulates key formal and experiential parameters – monumental scale, chromatic intensity, and embodied spectatorship – that typify the phenomenological condition of post-war abstraction. By closely examining one emblematic case, the study can trace how perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions coalesce in the aesthetic encounter with far greater precision than a broad survey would allow. Although the argument arises from this single work, the interpretive model developed here applies more generally to contemporary paintings that foreground spatial immersion and viewer participation. Thus, the case of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* functions both as an empirical anchor and as a theoretical lens through which the dynamics of the artist–artwork–viewer triad can be understood in wider contexts.

This study adopts a theoretical-interpretive methodology rooted in visual analysis, phenomenological aesthetics, and reception theory to investigate the dynamic relationship among the artist, artwork, and viewer in Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Rather than employing empirical or quantitative techniques, the paper engages in a close reading of the painting's formal and material features – color, scale, spatial tension – and interprets how these elements shape affective and cognitive viewer responses. The methodology is informed by recent interdisciplinary research emphasizing the centrality of embodied percep-

tion and viewer subjectivity in contemporary art experiences (Szubielska, Imbir [2022]), as well as scholarship advocating for the role of contextual knowledge and emotional resonance in shaping aesthetic judgments (Darda, Chatterjee [2023]). In line with reception-oriented frameworks, the viewer is approached not as a passive observer but as an active co-creator of meaning whose cultural background, psychological disposition, and spatial interaction with the artwork deeply inform the interpretive process (Dolese, Kozbelt [2020]). By integrating these frameworks, the paper develops a triangulated perspective on aesthetic experience, using *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* as a focused case to explore how visual language and viewer response intersect in contemporary painting.

1. *Artist as a subject*

In the evolving discourse of contemporary aesthetics, the artist is increasingly reconfigured not merely as a producer of objects but as a constructor of sensory, cognitive, and emotional experience. This paradigm shift stems from phenomenological aesthetics and affect theory, which recognize the artist's capacity to encode embodied meaning into material forms (Freedberg, Gallese [2007]; Magada-Ward [2019]). Barnett Newman's work offers a profound articulation of this framework. Rather than adhering to formalist abstraction for its own sake, Newman conceptualized the painted surface as a site of metaphysical encounter. His monumental *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51) exemplifies this approach through its commanding scale, chromatic intensity, and structured "zips," elements that are not mere compositional devices but portals to experiential immersion (Silver, Baskind [2024]; Zou [2025]). Newman himself insisted that his viewers stand close to his paintings to be "in" them, thereby reconfiguring the act of seeing as a spatial and psychological encounter (Gottschaller [2018]). This emphasis on bodily orientation and temporal immersion aligns with a broader redefinition of the artist as a dramaturge of presence and participation.

Newman's painterly practice cannot be divorced from the existential and cultural traumas of his historical moment. Positioned in the wake of the Holocaust and amidst the ideological flux of postwar America, his abstract language was laden with spiritual and political resonance. Rather than retreat into purely formal abstraction, Newman engaged with Jewish mysticism, especially the Kabbalistic concept of *ẓimẓum*–a divine contraction that makes space for creation (Maza [2021]). This metaphysical scaffolding transforms *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* from an aesthetic object into an ontological statement. The "zips," which punctuate the expansive red field, are thresholds through which viewers enter a dialogic space – neither entirely self nor other, but a mediated field of potential meaning (Hoványi [2024]; Neofetou [2019]). Newman's intention, as Zou ([2025]) elabo-

rates, was to offer not illustration, but an "event," a moment in which primal emotion, memory, and abstraction converge to create new modalities of perception. Thus, the artist's role becomes epistemic: not simply crafting form, but facilitating aesthetic cognition.



Figure 1.** Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51. Oil on canvas, 242.9 x 543.6 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image source: [https://redflag.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Barnett-4.jpg] (Accessed: 25.08.2025)

Moreover, Newman's claim that "the viewer should stand close enough to feel immersed" is not a rhetorical flourish but a phenomenological imperative (Cernuschi [2021]). In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1), the scale resists distant, detached viewing; instead, it compels a proxemic involvement that enlists the viewer's body as a perceptual organ. This spatial dynamic renders the artist an architect of somatic affect, echoing theories of embodied simulation in neuroaesthetics (Freedberg, Gallese [2007]). As Potter ([2018]) argues through Maritain's lens, Newman's goal was not to express personal sentiment but to mediate the encounter with the sublime – a condition of being beyond language, where affect becomes primary. This interpretation is reinforced by recent pigment analysis, which reveals Newman's active revision of color formulas to achieve exact psychological effects (Rogge, Epley [2023]). In this sense, Newman emerges not just as a maker of art,

but as a choreographer of contemplative experience – one who constructs affective architectures that both reflect and shape our ontological orientations.

2. *The Artwork as Phenomenological Space*

Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51) stands as a paradigmatic case of phenomenological art – an artwork that does not merely represent but embodies experience. The monumental scale and chromatic intensity of the canvas are not supplemental features but central to the way the viewer is drawn into a participatory encounter. The large red surface, punctuated by Newman's iconic "zips," transforms the visual field into an existential terrain where the boundaries between observer and object dissolve. In the context of Newman's oeuvre, the sublime is not an abstract concept but a felt intensity, conveyed through proportion, spatiality, and material presence. Recent scholarship suggests that such large-scale abstraction cultivates a bodily and affective immersion that transcends cognitive analysis (Magada-Ward [2019]); instead, it roots experience in «firstness», a Peircian term denoting pure feeling or immediacy. The phenomenology of the artwork, in this regard, is not merely an aesthetic matter but a structural invitation for the viewer to inhabit, rather than decode, its surface.

This embodied interaction is especially foregrounded when considering the phenomenological role of color and material in Newman's practice. As noted by Rogge and Epley's pigment analysis, Newman manipulated his paints with unique chemical mixtures, indicating a deliberate authorship of both tone and texture (Rogge, Epley [2023]). Paint, in this context, is not merely vehicle but medium-of-thought – a material epistemology. Such an approach echoes Geczy's argument that the phenomenology of paint collapses the distinction between medium and meaning, allowing paint to perform its own ontology (Geczy [2025]). In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, this becomes evident as the saturated reds and thin vertical bands invoke a perceptual rhythm – what Merleau-Ponty might describe as a «flesh of the world», wherein visibility itself is constituted through interrelation (Young Park [2022]). The viewer, then, is not outside the painting but inside the perceptual structure it unfolds, their attention guided not by composition but by felt presence.

Moreover, Newman's spatial strategies enact what phenomenologists have termed «epoché» – a bracketing of habitual modes of seeing, which allows for a renewed encounter with the visible world (Novák [2020]). This disruption is integral to aesthetic perception as described by Fielding, who argues that artworks can "cultivate perception" by disorienting it from its functional routines and opening it to embodied reflection (Fielding [2021]). Newman's

expansive canvas thus becomes a "place of appearing," or in his own Kabbalistic terms, *makom* – a site carved out of otherwise undifferentiated space to host sacred confrontation (Silver [2019]). The vertical "zips" are not merely formal devices but ruptures in perceptual expectation, marking divisions of temporal and spiritual experience. Almog extends this further by theorizing visibility in painting as always shadowed by the invisible, framing phenomenological aesthetics as a dialectic between concealment and revelation (Almog [2024]).

A complementary philosophical interpretation is offered by Pietro Conte (2015), whose essay *The Panofsky-Newman Controversy: Iconography and Iconology Put to the Test of 'Abstract' Art* re-examines the famous exchange between Erwin Panofsky and Barnett Newman in order to reassess how meaning and empathy operate when representation dissolves. Conte situates *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* within a phenomenological framework in which empathy (*Einfühlung*) and immersion are the very means through which the viewer re-enters the field of abstraction, experiencing the painting as both presence and event. According to Conte, Newman's chromatic expanse abolishes the iconographic distance presupposed by Panofsky's method and replaces it with a dialogic relation where perception becomes affective participation. This view resonates with the present study's emphasis on embodied spectatorship yet extends further: the triangular model proposed here interprets empathy not merely as a receptive disposition but as a relational process co-constituted by the artist's intentional structuring of affective space, the artwork's mediating agency, and the viewer's embodied response. In this sense, immersion functions as a dynamic and reciprocal act of meaning-making that transforms Newman's painting from a self-contained object into a phenomenological event.

Finally, the phenomenological encounter is never neutral but shaped by the cultural, historical, and emotional dispositions the viewer brings. Studies have demonstrated that even non-representational artworks elicit rich interpretative frameworks based on lived experience and embodied cognition (Chistopolskaya *et al*. [2023]). Jasmin ([2023]) similarly finds that artists infuse color and form with autobiographical meaning, inviting viewers to decode not through symbols but resonance. In Newman's case, Zou ([2025]) highlights how national memory, trauma, and Jewish mysticism converge to structure the emotional register of his canvases. These registers interact phenomenologically with the viewer's own inner world, thus enacting a dialogical space of mutual unfolding. Marion's theory of the artwork as "idol" – something that looks back at the viewer – aptly captures this reversal, where *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* ceases to be a passive object and becomes an active gaze (Zhang, Zhang [2024]). In sum, Newman's painting is not only a visual field but a site of ontological negotiation, where the viewer's very modes of perception are tested, altered, and intensified.

3. *The Viewer as Co-Creator of Meaning*

In the landscape of contemporary painting, the viewer is no longer cast as a passive recipient but emerges as a co-creator of meaning. This interpretative agency hinges on both cognitive and affective engagement with the artwork, particularly in abstract compositions where representational cues are minimized. Johnson-Laird, Oatley ([2021]) argue that abstract art stimulates emotional simulation through internally generated narratives, enabling viewers to project personal experiences onto the visual field. Sarkar, Blaney ([2023]) further emphasize the reflexive potential of contemporary painting, wherein the ambiguity of form invites interpretative plurality and personal resonance. In the case of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1), this interplay between affective response and open-ended form becomes central. The viewer is challenged to construct meaning not from iconographic content, but through visceral proximity, bodily alignment, and perceptual immersion. These processes align with Iser's reception theory, which asserts that the «gaps» in a text – or artwork – are precisely where the viewer's imagination enters, activating a dialogic co-creation of meaning.

Embodied engagement constitutes a crucial dimension of this aesthetic experience. Sarkar ([2022]) outlines how viewers navigate painted spaces through bodily orientation, noting that proximity, posture, and eye movement modulate perception in profound ways. Newman's instruction to stand "so close that you become a part of it" is emblematic of this principle, transforming viewership into spatial immersion. Cox, van Klaveren ([2025]) empirically demonstrate that abstract artworks engage mirror neuron systems, especially when scale and color intensity suggest physical dynamism. This echoes Husbands' ([2018]) theorization of «fantastical empathy» – a process by which viewers imaginatively inhabit the formal structures of non-representational compositions. As such, Newman's vertical «zips» may be understood not merely as visual markers but as axes of embodied navigation, rhythmically dividing space in a way that mirrors internal affective flows. These sensory affordances heighten the immediacy of the viewing experience and allow the artwork to be felt as much as it is seen.

The interpretive process is also conditioned by the viewer's cultural background, cognitive frameworks, and prior knowledge. Studies in art perception confirm that knowing an artist's context significantly enhances emotional depth and comprehension (Tkachuk [2019]). Jasielska ([2023]) notes that even subtle cues, such as the artist's biography or intention, can modulate affective engagement, suggesting a fusion between rational and emotional interpretation. Nakamura, Nagayoshi ([2024]) advance this idea further, demonstrating how viewers tend to fill in «absent information» in abstract art through internal schemas and narrative construction. These interpretive acts are not passive but intentional and

active, reflecting Jauss' notion of a «horizon of expectations» shaped by cultural literacy and perceptual readiness. In this light, Newman's work becomes a site of active projection – its emptiness not a void but an invitation for experiential filling, allowing different viewers to derive distinct meanings from the same image.

Finally, viewer interaction is increasingly recognized as a dynamic feedback loop that reconfigures the artwork's perceived essence. Anikina, Abelentseva ([2023]) demonstrate that color choices alone can significantly influence both semantic and emotional reception of a painting. In parallel, Ganczarek *et al*. ([2020]) reveal that perceived cognitive difficulty in abstract art increases visual fixation duration, suggesting deeper aesthetic processing. These findings support the idea that meaning in contemporary art is not inherent but co-constituted – emerging from the interaction between perceptual input, embodied cognition, and cultural memory. In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, the simplicity of form belies a complex interactivity; the longer one looks, the more emotionally charged and semantically fertile the experience becomes. Jammal ([2024]) proposes that light and spatiality in abstract art produce «phenomenal atmospheres» that envelop the viewer and act as emotional environments rather than representational surfaces. Thus, viewers do not merely decode or interpret–they inhabit, co-create, and in turn, alter the affective field of the artwork itself.

4. *The Triangular Dialogue: Artist, Artwork, Viewer*

The aesthetic experience of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1) unfolds not in isolation, but through an active dialogue between the artist, the artwork, and the viewer. This triadic structure positions the viewer not as a passive receiver, but as an essential co-creator in the unfolding of meaning. Newman's artistic labor, often misunderstood as reductive abstraction, is more accurately conceived as an intentional act of perceptual activation – a catalyst for aesthetic reflexivity. As Kirk ([2018]) argues, painting today is best understood as an emergent cognitive process, one situated in social and embodied interrelations. Newman's monumental format and spatial dynamics compel the viewer to negotiate the painting physically and perceptually, reinforcing what McClelland ([2022]) identifies as the necessity of embodied cognition in visual reception. The viewer's movement, perspective shifts, and perceptual oscillations mirror the labor of the artist, thus forming a closed loop of expressive gesture. This «relay structure» dissolves boundaries between sender and receiver, making aesthetic meaning a co-authored phenomenon rather than a fixed transmission (Sarkar, Blaney [2023]).

The artwork, as the material mediator in this exchange, performs a double role: it is both a residue of the artist's intentionality and a site of projection

for the viewer's embodied imagination. Newman's vertical «zips» exemplify this duality. Far from decorative motifs, they fragment the chromatic field into rhythmic temporalities that prompt viewers to slow down, reorient, and introspect. This aligns with Neofetou's ([2019]) reading of Newman's work as a «world-for-us», wherein the painting prefigures subjective reconciliation through its otherness. The abstract form does not depict but evokes – operating on what Gonigroszek, Szmigiero ([2021]) call primary metaphors: emotionally charged associations emerging from color, space, and bodily perception. Here, metaphor is not linguistic but material. Newman's manipulation of scale and hue produces affective registers that the viewer navigates in the act of looking, enacting what Iosifyan *et al*. ([2022]) term cross-modal embodiment – where perception bridges across sensory domains to produce meaning beyond the visual. The viewer, in turn, internalizes these formal provocations, generating new interpretations that are grounded in experience rather than representation.

Within this triadic configuration, the artist's role becomes less about controlling the artwork's message and more about structuring potentiality. As shown by Stubbs ([2020]), contemporary painting increasingly operates through a logic of «quasi-presence» – an indexical trace of the artist's being that remains open to reinterpretation through viewer engagement. In this sense, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* becomes a field of negotiation. Its chromatic saturation, vast proportions, and compositional minimalism do not declare meaning; they invite it. This is consistent with Novák's ([2020]) interpretation of abstract art as a phenomenological bracket – a visual epoché – that suspends preconceived frameworks and enables direct perceptual experience. Thus, the viewer and the artwork form a shared horizon of understanding, one that reflects Newman's desire to «paint the sublime», not as transcendence but as immediacy and immersion (Magada-Ward [2019]). The triangle artist, artwork, viewer is not static but cyclical, bound together in an ongoing aesthetic event. The painting is not an object of contemplation but a living interlocutor, enabling presence, empathy, and meaning to arise from the act of encounter.

5. *Conclusion*

In tracing the triangular interplay between artist, artwork, and viewer through the lens of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1), this study has revealed how contemporary painting functions not merely as a visual artifact but as a phenomenological event – a co-constructed space of perception, meaning, and affect. The artist emerges not as a distant maker but as an architect of embodied encounter, channeling metaphysical and emotional intensities through formal

choices of scale, color, and spatial rhythm. Newman's monumental abstraction resists passive looking; instead, it enlists the viewer in an active process of perceptual negotiation and emotional immersion. The artwork, in turn, is not a static object but a dynamic relay – a field of potentiality through which intentionality and interpretation circulate. Meaning, therefore, is not embedded in the canvas but generated in the lived exchange between bodies, gazes, memories, and gestures. By situating the painting within phenomenological aesthetics and reception theory, and grounding the analysis in both visual materiality and embodied cognition, this article has proposed a conceptual model of aesthetic experience that repositions the viewer as a vital node in a circular structure of meaning-making. This model dismantles the modernist illusion of artistic autonomy and replaces it with a relational ontology that accounts for the temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions of aesthetic engagement. Accordingly, the reading advanced here calls for a revision of aspects of the critical canon on abstract painting – shifting emphasis from iconographic legibility and authorial autonomy toward conditions of presence, proximity, and co-creation. As art increasingly navigates post-digital contexts and globalized visual cultures, this triangular dialogue acquires new relevance: it affirms that the value of art lies not in what it represents, but in what it activates – emotionally, cognitively, and existentially – in those who stand before it. In Newman's vision, the sublime is not elsewhere but here, unfolding in the charged proximity between human subjectivity and painted space. This also bears curatorial consequences: exhibition practices that privilege close viewing, sufficient wall time, and spatial arrangements that sustain immersion (rather than didactic over-scripting or excessive distancing) are more consonant with works whose meaning is co-constituted phenomenologically. Finally, while the present account arises from a single paradigmatic case, its relational framework generalizes to other large-scale and immersive abstractions; future inquiries may productively integrate targeted empirical methods (e.g., reception studies, eye-tracking, or affective reports) insofar as they illuminate – but do not displace – the phenomenological core of the aesthetic event. In sum, the paper argues for a recalibrated art-historical and curatorial discourse attuned to how artworks become sites of shared becoming – ephemeral yet enduring intersections of presence, perception, and poetic resonance.

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