ART INTERNATIONAL

A SPECIAL NUMBER

THE 33rd VENICE BIENNALE

EMILIO SCANAVINO

NEW YORK LETTER

LUCY R. LIPPARD

Since the late '50s, Barnett Newman has been the name most invoked as precedent for the newest abstraction; Still and Rothko, grouped with him at first, somehow dropped out of critical vocabularies after a while, and Reinhardt, whose prototypal position is still clearer, was never as influential, perhaps because his work is more specific. Newman, on the other hand, saw his color field and vertical scale become major components of contemporary painting. Due partially to Clement Greenberg's well-placed enthusiasm, but primarily to the stature of his work, Newman has been a seminal influence for a group of younger artists who have since taken his formal innovations into very different spheres than those for which he intended them; this influence has been overemphasized in recent years, but is substantially valid, at least in regard to *some* important younger figures. Yet there are still observers who do not consider Newman a painter, a premiss originating in the early '50s and pretty well scotched in the meantime. There is no question that he has been an uneven painter, in key with the romantic temperament, and he has bucked a much-changing decade with a non-developmental style; his oeuvre is not immense and he has done a lot of writing and talking. Newman's is not an art of equilibrium despite its simplicity. His single-minded devotion to its spiritual content rather than to its formal evolution runs counter to prevailing motives, for while Newman is clearly a prototype of the serial painters and structurists, he has used a sequential motif for more private reasons than his successors. His single image, for him, embraces all significant content.

"The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani" at the Guggenheim Museum by title alone is a surprising project that could also be called naive and pretentious. It is a nervy choice of subject, guaranteed to raise the hackles of many of Newman's colleagues and observers. Such a title makes the series less rather than more accessible to both general and specialized public. The former will balk at the improbability of the venture and the absence of signposts; the latter is queasy about "meaning" and would prefer to see the works non-objectively —that is, without any abstract associations. Lawrence Alloway notes in the catalogue that this "unit of 14 continuous parts . . . pays homage to the original content" rather than illustrating a particular program. In view of Newman's writings and well-documented search for the Sublime, or "man's natural desire for the exalted", it is possible for the spectator to experience a broad satisfaction that results from both the artist's intent and from his formal success. For the extraordinary thing about this series is its success. Fourteen variations on a constant module (basically a tripartite vertical division with a broad central area and bands at each side) could well have been a formal exercise, and in the hands of many artists it would have been. Newman has rendered his vision with passion as well as exactitude, and this passion—that of the artist, perhaps synonymously with that of Christ—is strongly communicated. While individual units may be found formally lacking, it is almost to the advantage of the whole. The stations are tremendously moving, serene and assured; as a group they evoke a powerful ambiance. Their "human scale" and unabashed beauty, at times elegance, will disappoint some viewers, but testing my reaction from the non-formal standpoint of immediate emotion felt, I would call them successful.

The 14 Stations are all black (and grayed blacks), white, and cream, the last being the raw cotton surface. They were executed, in order, from 1958–66, and can be subdivided into groups of 2, 3 or 4, important to the rhythm of the continuous whole. Numbers 1–4, black and grays on cream, consist of a black hard-edge band at the left, bare canvas middle area, with the band at the right complicated by brushwork or added lines. Numbers 5–8, black on cream, are one band, one line; 9–11, white on cream, are a band and a double line; 12–13 each a very different black on cream; 14 is all white, dazzling, with a single cooler band on the left edge. Their size, but not scale, are identical. Different paints have been used: oil, acrylic, Magna and Duco, to vary the surface and densities. They are hung low so that the enveloping quality, characteristic of Newman's larger canvases, is still present. Limitation to black and white means that the great density of the larger paintings in color is sacrificed, though he has compromised with the creamy cotton. None of these canvases singly has the overwhelming impact of the rich blue *Onement No. 6, 1953*, which provided one of the most memorable and intense color experiences I have ever had, but *in toto* the serenity and austere grandeur for which Newman is known came through. Unfortunately, all 14 panels could not be hung in one room; the first four were outside at the left of the entrance and the fifteenth, not one of the series, was outside at the right. This last, *Be II* (shown earlier as *Resurrection*), is a different size and format and has a sliver of orange at the left. Though a good painting, and perhaps necessary in terms of religious iconography (the pure white Station 14 was the Entombment), it is an anticlimax.

I haven't the space to explore the formal subtleties, successes and failures, but two things did strike me in the context of Newman's previous work. First, I have never seen him look so well in such small size (78 ×60″). Since a little painting at the Whitney this fall was pure parody of Newmanesque scale, and only a few of the drawings I have seen approach the strength of the paintings, I did not expect the Stations to be so grand. Some are obviously less grand than others and most of them are less grand than his best large work in color, but the soaring verticals and coherent, disciplined painterly touches—glorifications rather than remnants—are most effective. Secondly, the ragged, or ruffled edge has often seemed fussy and decorative, serving to diminish rather than open up the scale. In this series, probably because the size is better suited to sophisticated detail, the edge has been both controlled and varied in a virtuoso performance. It runs like a line of melody through the pulsing expansion and contraction of the whole series. The individual paintings range from extreme lyricism verging on prettiness to the monumental clarity for which Newman is deservedly known. These are some of the most *luscious* minimal paintings ever executed, and this aspect, expectedly, backfires at times.

The first four Stations are the most detailed. They become increasingly simple as they move toward ultimate purification. This may have been determined by Newman's own style changes at the time, but in retrospect the progression seems virtually Dantean. The final, all-white panel is the only one in which there is no raw canvas (with its flecks and imperfections), and it is the only one with knife-edge rather than hand-wrought line. Yet there is nothing of self-denial in this series, nor purism. It does not celebrate loss of the self in some great encompassing spirit so much as realization of the self; it represents a modern Passion. Newman's importance is rooted in his will, or ambition, to transcend the ordinary in all spheres. His mysticism is militant rather than meditative. The subject matter of art, for him, is "the Self, terrible and constant". Incidentally, the ego is clear enough in Newman's painting without having the full signature and date blazoned across a corner of each painting. This is the sort of belligerent overstatement that has destroyed several of his paintings for me. The artist's identity, the artist's hand, above all the artist's *anima* is so compelling in the best of his work that such a gesture is redundant.

See illustrations page 110—111

The esthetic sensation one gets from Frank Stella's paintings is often very close to what one gets from Newman's. Their underlying attitudes and their specific intentions may diverge sharply, but they seem to share a conviction about the way paint should look on canvas. For all his antisensitivity talk, Stella's *touch* has always been highly sensitive, his manner of applying paint far from mechanical. One of the things that has distinguished him from his followers and/or colleagues is the negative line of raw canvas in the "striped" work—doubly unmechanical because it takes *two* strokes of the solid color to delineate it, allowing twice as much deviation. This same negative area appears between color bands in the new work, shown at Leo Castelli in March. Now the stripes have been so enlarged that they are no longer really stripes. Two colors are separated by that same autographic negative line of raw duck. The premiss here is a good deal more complicated, however, than it was in the insistently repetitious black, aluminum, copper, violet or green-striped paintings. The canvases are shaped, but not symmetrically; parallelograms and triangles are superimposed on squares, or vice versa. The effect is one of dazzlingly logical illogicality. The colors, discussion of which I shall reserve for a longer article, are bright Day-glo tones. This is not a departure for Stella, who used primary colors in the labyrinthine series of 1962 and Day-glo in the two-color striped works of 1963–64. The only change is that he is now using more than two hues at a time. The contours of these new canvases are based on combinations of shapes he used before; the solid or open center and striped or banded edge are also familiar. The new work looks ambiguous because these shapes are juxtaposed in an "arbitrary" manner, new forms are created and the painted schemes work skillfully between the shape of the support and the shape of the components. Altogether, Stella settled on eleven shapes and did four variations of each, so a large part of the new work has not been shown.

Word was going around at the time of the exhibition that Stella was finally catching up with his followers—provoked, apparently, by the fact that he is developing an idea which not only comes out of his own work, but has had parallels and precedents in that of other artists, good and bad, among them Valledor, Bladen, Hinman, Myers, Melcher, Williams, Fleming and, especially, the extraordinary canvases done some three years ago by Larry Bell. It is an idea involving pictorialization or flattening of an essentially three-dimensional space, and it has had more currency in Los Angeles than in New York. Bell has been treating similar illusions in three-dimensional structures for some time; Ron Davis is exploring them in rigorous near-monotone shaped canvases; Robert Irwin's approach to illusion and physical presence can also be related to this concept. Elsewhere it has been dehydrated into dull academic illustrations of scientific phenomena.

In *Union I*, a square is inserted into a truncated equilateral triangle; in *Conway I*, a flat horizontal rectangle has a parellelogram moving diagonally off the lower edge. The fusion of perspective and frontal form is disguised by the painted bands which knit the two into a third shape. The most telling detail is the way a continuous band following the edges is beveled off whenever it leads away from an edge. That is, it does not end flatly, parallel to the picture plane and the edge from which it springs, but becomes part of another form, a directional indication and a bridge. The new paintings are still as rigorously deductive as the older ones, if more subtly so. They take their cues from the support, but the support is less unequivocal in geometrical terms. There has been a rising interest in the New Math, in the *rapprochement* of science and art these last few years; it had its first, most obvious and least interesting outlets in the optical rage and in some of the more prosaic Park Place work, wherein scientism rather than science is exploited. I don't know where Stella stands as far as knowledge of these fields is concerned, but it is clear that he has not been overcome by the impedimenta of technology. His use of such principles is imaginative and fresh, sharing an element of perversity, of "hyperformalism" that can be discerned in the exaggerated formats of Noland's new work as well as in some of the structures in the Jewish Museum Primary exhibition (to be covered in the next issue). Despite their closed contours, Stella's new paintings are "endless" in a way the striped work was not. To escape the cul-de-sac he found himself in toward the end of the last series of striped paintings, Stella had to take one decisive step. The two-shape-in-one format is consistent with his previous record and the possibilities are multiple.

If Stella is operating in an ambiguous area between anti-illusionism and illusion on a flat surface, Philip King, at Feigen, is making related comments in his two newest structures. Sculpture, being three-dimensional, does not have to imitate depth, but it can employ a Mannerist principle of exaggeration in imitating flatness. *Slant*, a large green piece in the current show, is "streamlined" like Stella's paintings. Six forms made of two planes each, one on the floor and one standing up in an open angle, are laid across each other to form a complex overlapping of planes within a relatively restricted space. The floor sections are angled off in one direction, then turned and angled in another, providing an effect of speed and distance where a straight plane might have been static. Here a pictorial device has been used to enlarge the scope of an object existing in space. Illusionistic space is added to real space. King, billed as one of the most amazing of the amazing young British sculptors, deserves his reputation. His wit and oblique viewpoint is backed up by a strong and serious formal sense. The two latest works, *Slant*, and a smaller red and white version of the same scheme, combine the impassive structuralism of the younger Americans with the sophisticated imagination that seems to be a current British characteristic. His earlier pieces are more humorous than the planar ones. *Through* is an eminently solid cone sliced neatly into sections, inner and outer surfaces painted, respectively, a somber green and dull red. King says he wants to create a sculpture that is "open, without definite centers, whose surfaces don't necessarily describe a possible core. I want to create an experience by positioning, not shaping". He deals in contour directly, unlike many of the English sculptors, forcing it to submit to an overall conception rather than becoming cute. The new pieces, made of formica, look as though they would retain their scale out of doors, since the shifting surfaces are architecturally expansive and move, by suggestion and by perspective, into infinite distance. They are frontal, but offer various viewpoints within that frontality, the many-faceted directional alterations allowing fixed form to be continuous. King's was one of the best and most mature shows in the non-sculptural sculpture genre this season.

The ranks as well as the surfaces of the shaped canvas are swelling this year. One of last month's newcomers uses the medium in a strictly sculptural manner. Herbert George's work at Stable is canvas stretched over wooden armatures, sometimes over all of it, sometimes leaving structural sections visible. They immediately evoke natural images—shells, dolphins, birds, though from another point of view the forms could recall parts of an airplane. The materials are light and strong, but the taut skin over clear-cut framework is more organic than industrial. The pieces were shown on very low bases and were for the most part yellow, white, beige and orange. Construction problems have given George trouble; the seams are often rough and obtrusive, as though the object should have been cast in a light, opaque plastic for its final version. I liked the monochrome ones best, the yellow better than the white because the off shade seemed to soften the shadows somewhat. Some of the surfaces are matte, some shiny, and the technical idea is a good one. The form is not so advanced, tending to be overcomplicated with too many hooks and protrusions.

Some succeed and some fail; when all the parts fall into place the effect is pleasant and sometimes instructive. The most impressive was more symmetrical than the others. Dark blue, green and yellow, it was set up in the hall where the light was poor and the technical faults didn't distract from the silhouette. I understand George is quite young; probably he should have surmounted some of these obstacles before showing.

E. V. Rankine at Betty Parsons is a less interesting addition. The canvases and painted wood plaques are flat (except that the edges of the latter are painted) and vary only slightly from the rectangle, mainly in an I or T shape, with none of the stringency produced by Stella, who comes to mind because these are usually striped, in black and reds, pinks, oranges, or blues and greens, like an illegitimate offspring of Stella and Gene Davis. The effect is *cravatic*. The execution is not knife-edge and is sometimes very free-hand, contradicting rather than enhancing the strict rectilinear scheme. The plaques are more successful—*Sergius* in particular—because of the edges being painted a contrasting color, emphasizing the support as contour and end of surface. A second room showed red and blue pieces with triangular shapes and split surfaces like wide open books.

Paul Reed is, like Rankine, from Washington, and has been included for no good reason in the shows and articles intended to outline Washington's contribution to contemporary art. His big, but seldom large-scale, bright-colored, but seldom colorful canvases at the Easthampton Gallery share, with one exception, a four-shape, four-color plan: a disc in the center, the solid ground sliced off at two opposite corners, each triangle a different color. Lime green is a favorite hue for the disc; it makes it jump off the ground. The discs do not expand, especially those constricted by vertical formats, and for the most part color is employed to provoke optical sorties into and out of depth rather than to equalize surface tensions. The exception excerpted the general motif by placing an enlarged detail in the upper left corner of a raw cotton field with bands of new color around the edge. Most of the canvases were stained, though one disc had an irregular surface, green-brown and grainy. There is not much more I can say about this show, since I reacted minimally to its formal and chromatic premiss and had no sense whatsoever of there being any other involved. Some of the paintings were better than others, but not enough so to provoke interest as to what makes this difference.

Also geometric, hard-edge, self-restrictive, Doug Ohlson's paintings at Fischbach are quite another story. They are totally non-exhibitionist. He is not concerned with formal advance in general, public terms, but in specific, personal terms, demanding less of the future than of himself. There is nothing radical about his work, but it is pushing gently at the barriers, and could not have been done by anyone else. It looks, somehow, sincere and hard to do. The palette—somber, considered, including dark reds, greens, blues, chalky browns, grays, olives, used occasionally in close-values though never with "invisibility" in mind, will inevitably be traced to Reinhardt. Still, Ohlson uses it to his own ends. The muted scheme serves both to restrain and to point up the distinction between form and ground, that is, the edges of the square image (or rectangular forms made up of square units) and the edges of the canvas. The placement of the units is refined to a hair's breadth. The compositions, sometimes asymmetrical, sometimes logically centered, act to relieve tension and replace it with a strong equilibrium resulting from neutralization of potentially dynamic forces. I preferred those in a square space, since in this sort of controlled and subdued painting any other format is likely to seem somewhat extravagant. One of the most beautiful canvases had a dark, intense red ground with two equal squares: a green one beginning not quite half way up the left side and a few inches from the outer edge, and a dark gray one in bottom center, closer to the right than the left. Some of the paintings were on two or three canvases, attached, one of which was often solid ground. There are never more than two elements on that ground, so that spatial manipulation is of utmost importance and openness. Placement is entirely intuitive, unless some logical plan escaped me. The ensuing calm is rigorous rather than flaccid, disciplined and assured but not overly demanding. Ohlson's basic premiss is familiar in the better work of the 1960's, but his attitude seems to be more stubbornly poetic, if that word can still be used meaningfully and abstractly. Retaining relational, private values, what Judd calls "old" values, Ohlson also implies, despite the reductive scheme, a sense of struggle. This is refreshing in view of the plethora of miserably limited imitations derived from the best in cool art. From the evidence in this show Ohlson confronts a different problem of space and relationships between surface, support and figuration in each canvas, rather than working it out serially. There was a point a few years back where we lost track of quiet painting, but now that the clamour has died down, whispers can be heard again.

*

"Contemporary American Sculpture, Selection I", work contributed by the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation to the Whitney Museum, included a lot of minor and a few major pieces. Emphasis this year or two in New York has been on the primary structure and space sculpture styles; if this much broader cross section of sculptural developments is any indication, such emphasis was eminently just, with the usual exceptions. The outstanding large pieces are by Robert Morris, Don Judd and Mark di Suvero (all of whom recently participated in a symposium at the Jewish Museum wherein their respective dissimilarities emerged clear and strong). The Morris is one of his recent pale gray fiberglass trapezoidal boxes, split lengthwise in half allowing a slice of light to escape from the fluorescent-lit interior space. The light is something new in his work; instead of opening up the compact volume it adds to the closed quality of its secrecy, specifically alluding to the hollowness of the shell while continuing to deny direct experience of that inner space, referring the viewer back to the impassive exterior. Morris's work, despite its conceptual stringency, has always had this air of mystery and subtlety, first evident in the more accessible lead reliefs. Judd's Lipman piece once more stresses the differences between him and Morris, although these are clearer when two "boxy" pieces are juxtaposed. This one is less involved with volume than interval. The long (253″) rectangular aluminum tube on the wall surmounts purple anodized aluminum-box units which differ mathematically as to size and space between. The parts are not obviously progressive in arrangement but are seen as subsidiary elements in a quietly altered whole. Di Suvero's contentions are directly in opposition. During the recent panel discussion he said that Judd didn't qualify as an artist at all since he has been sending his work out for construction. Di Suvero's *New York Dawn (for Lorca)* has an abstract bull figure made of raw wooden beams, iron, steel, and two chains held up (not invisibly enough) by nylon threads. None of the post-euclidian principles di Suvero talks about were in evidence; freed from the rather trite allusions, title, and anthropomorphic image, the spatial positions might have been more radical. The sculpture stood out for its vigour and assurance anyway, because di Suvero is a good sculptor.

The collection also included an interesting free-standing neon piece by Stephen Antonakos, a 1956 relief by Ferber, an Indiana construction; good, if not superb examples of Oldenburg, Bell, Higgins and Chamberlain; two disturbing Samaras boxes, a highly eccentric Kiesler *(Landscape: The Saviour has Risen)*. From Los Angeles there was a small bronze *Dome*, recalling a phallic hydrant, by George Baker, and one of Kenneth Price's enigmatic egg-stone sculptures, small, protectively colored in brilliant hues, initially hostile and ultimately moving.

With a few exceptions, the rest ranged from ordinary to low in quality. Such a windfall is never without its disadvantages, but on the whole the Whitney is lucky to get this gift horse.

Love is the theme of Robert Indiana's new exhibition at Stable, and it is an apt one for such an unabashed romantic. Appropriately, he treats it with less asperity than he previously treated the American Dream, Eat, Die and Err. Love is a longer word, an elusive and allusive one. Split in two with the VE forming the base and the L and an outward-leaning O on the top, Love is the basis of the four major paintings and single shiny metal sculpture. The canvases are red, blue and green, very close-valued, but dense enough to avoid vibration in most cases. The letter forms, often turned upside down or backward, become abstract signs forming closely packed surface patterns. Only the warm glow refers obliquely to the subject matter. Otherwise these are exuberant, exquisitely rendered works, decorative in the good sense and the products of a sophisticated innocence. The second room contained the single numbers 0–9, in groups of three canvases in diminishing size. The color is a Kellyesque and pretty standardly "optical" combination and the configurations are not new, but I doubt if Indiana is concerned with formal advance so much as formal honesty and, perhaps, perfection. What distinguishes his work from the run-of-the-mill geometric abstraction is its strongly moral tinge and the application of such unemotional means to such a tenderly virtuous end.

When Andy Warhol deals with an emotion he does so with great and chilling purity, plus imagination. The Disasters *were* disastrous, their heavy repetition of fact both deadly and monotonous, like the news stories covering such events. Now he is pursuing enjoyment with equal diligence. The back room of his show at Leo Castelli is faultlessly wallpapered with the repeated silkscreen image of a cow's head, black on glowing magenta on a Day-glo chartreuse ground: not quite purple cows. Light switches and wall plugs were professionally papered as well. The front room is occupied by a flock of silver plastic pillows filled with helium. They float indolently around in various levels of mid air, some high, some low (depending on the weighted corners), nudging their dreamy way through doorways now and then, hovering ecstatically near the lights. Plump, glittering, complacently amusing, they are what they are. Their only relationship to formal developments is the fact that more and more people are working with balloon formats, attracted by the weightlessness, transparency and piquancy of plastic shapes hanging or loose in space, an idea emerging simultaneously from Oldenburg and, maybe, Judd, or Park Place sculpture. Peter Forakis made a floating clear plastic "pillow" containing a sculpture a couple of years ago, but never perfected it technically; last month Philip Orenstein's free form inflated sculpture was at Graham in a group show, and a young Canadian named Baxter will exhibit inflated landscapes at Rolf Nelson in Los Angeles. In any case, the current show gives us a fond Warhol, full of bovine benevolence and sweet dreams.

Warhol was initially responsible for the trend that has now reached a new low with *Hybrid*, an *objet dard* constructed for Gerald Laing and Peter Phillips after they had interviewed some 137 art consumers and applied standard consumer research methods of investigation. It is being shown at Kornblee in two incarnations—large and small. I don't like it much, but then I was apparently not in the majority of the interviewees; very little I chose was included. There should have been a booby prize too; it might have been less bland. Given the premiss of mass-production methods applied to "fine art" conceptions, not too much could be expected. Collective endeavours tend to be remarkably weak. This thing is more bastard than hybrid, out of Laing's sculpture by Phillips's. The blood strain of the multiple idea is watered down more each month, with hybrid a real idiot sibling. It is slick, sleek, composed of neon, shiny metal, light and plexiglass, red and blue stripes, a wavy contour on top, a boxy one on the bottom, and inconceivably dull. I had hoped the idea (and the ingenious little kits that demonstrated all the choices of color, pattern, texture and material) would result in something more—a truly frightful compendium of last year's taste, rather like Phillips's custom paintings. Instead, *Hybrid* is humorless, not a comment on the livelier aspects of the Scene, but a bought vote for low standards.

Hybrid has too many rules. The best games are those without any rules at all, as any child knows, and Nicolas Calas knows. He has united a group of "Games Without Rules", since he feels that the "avant-garde critic's role is not to legislate but to unsettle". Much of the work, some made especially for the show, has the dislocated or frenetic air that is peculiar to Calas's manifestations, peculiar and refreshing. It is largely, conspicuously offbeat, moving in from areas around the mainstream, suppressing literate chuckles behind gloved hands. Ferro contributed a dart board with bands of color made up from collage reproductions of eminent modern art, but one wasn't allowed to exercise one's prejudices because the purchaser didn't want holes in his product. Spectators with lewd or embarrassed miens were likely to have a finger in one of the holes of an unobtrusive Ay-O box, each hole containing a different blind tactile or sensuous experience. Babette Neuberger contributed an oversize collage variation on the Exquisite Corpse, D'Arcangelo paradoxes of perspective, distance, color, grisaille in block forms, Fleminger an involved Jungian (tongue in archetypal cheek?) bead game. Joe Jones's *Jazz Set*, an electronically mined miniature pool table with shiny ball bearings in play, was hooked up to a four-piece band which plays piece by piece or together when the balls pass over unseen controls. Completely without rules as far as the music produced goes, it is an elaborate, ingenious and amusing entertainment, down to the hanging tin-shaded light over the table. A legitimate game of pool accompanied by squeaks, tinkles, honks and booms is a fine upstanding idea. I also liked Les Levine's multicolored pile of bright-colored rectangular slabs on a giant checkerboard.

Jennett Lam, at Grand Central Moderns, recently showed a series of oils collectively titled "Banners of Absence", repeating the image of an empty beach chair on the sands. Sometimes a clumsy silhouette of a large dog peoples the loneliness, but on the whole the entire iconography of the empty chair is brought to bear on these simple, unobtrusive and unassuming pictures. They would be better off without so much implication. The pale colors and delicate touch are reminiscent of Boudin, while the bold stripes of the chairs inject a touch of sixties modernity to the overall quietude. Pleasurably evocative, but lacking the space and scale of convincing silence, Lam's work belongs to a sensitive substrata of contemporary painting which owes its poetic strains to Surrealism, its lyricism to a conventional wistfulness.