

Zips and Slashes

English original of "Streepen aan repen," trans. Jan Willem Reimtsma, *Nexus*, 1998, no. 20, pp. 146 - 163.

1

My first reaction when I read in a New York Times report that Gerard Jan van Bladeren, an artist in his early 40's who, so he says, likes to slash his own paintings for aesthetic effect," had returned to the Stedelijk Museum, where in 1986 he had already slashed Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III?* to attack a second work by Newman, this time "the majestic" *Cathedra* from 1951, was not shock or surprise, as a diffuse and confused sadness: sadness, not so much because this particular work should have been mangled — there are paintings whose loss would have touched me rather like the death of a dear friend, but not one of Newman's works has befriended me in quite that way. But whether one likes a work or not scarcely matters in cases such as this. Words by the painter Frank Badur, included in the *Hommage a Barnett Newman*, published by the Nationalgalerie Berlin in 1982 on the occasion of its acquisition of the last and largest of Newman's variations on the theme *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?*, came to mind: "The tolerance and freedom that a society grants its art and artists are a measure of its own tolerance, its own freedom."¹ The space granted to freedom seemed to have become just a bit less.

What saddened me was less the fact that this work of art had been violated, but rather that yet another work of art should have been mangled and, even more, that yet another self-proclaimed artist should, in the name of art, have chosen to violate the

¹ *Hommage a Barnett Newman*, Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1982.

distance that I continue to feel should protect art from the world and its violence, a distance museum and concert hall have institutionalized. I find it liberating to know that, despite all the chaos and suffering in the world and notwithstanding the progressive commercialization and politicization of art, there are still places where individuals are free and allow themselves to become totally absorbed in, say, a string quartet by Haydn — or a painting by Newman.

My reaction was confused in many ways, but first of all because I know very well how easy it has become to defend such acts of vandalism as attacks on an elitist understanding of art that today has lost whatever legitimacy it once may have had; confused because my own convictions about art are called into question, not by occasional acts of violence perpetrated by a few notoriety-craving individuals, but by the current state of what has come to be called the art-world, including artists, patrons, critics, galleries, museums, and various institutions that support art — including perhaps even vandals. Today's art-world itself has challenged the distance that once was thought to separate art and the world, as it plays, and at times not just plays, with the idea that art today gains its significance first of all as a testing of the boundaries of art, even as a violation of what art came to be.

Perhaps a hundred years ago the art-world would have dealt with an act such as this without feeling a need to spill much ink over it, deploring to be sure the damage done to an important painting and condemning the vandal in no uncertain terms, but able to treat the affair as some unhappy individual's lashing out at society and values that remained unchallenged — and be done with it. How things have changed: that today presumably thoughtful observers of the art scene would have us discuss van Bladeren's destructive act as itself an aesthetic action deserving serious discussion, perhaps even an important step in a progress leading art out of its self-imposed isolation from the public at large, calling into question that money-centered elitism that for too long had ruled the art world, was as predictable as that there would be those — dare we still call them

philistines? — who felt that works such as the to them all but meaningless abstractions created by Newman almost deserved their fate.

Indeed: how can one justify spending public funds on art such as this and on institutions like the Stedelijk Museum? What stake does society have in such art? Widespread hostility has long shadowed the progress of modern art. Often it has expressed itself in nothing more damaging than some cutting comments of the sort: "my three--year-old son paints better pictures." Here in New Haven a story went around, inevitably told with a certain amused glee, that during a snow storm some janitor, not realizing that Duchamp's snow-shovel hanging in Yale's Art Gallery was more than just a snow shovel, used it actually to shovel snow, returning the ready-made to its original function. The distance from such glee to open hostility is not very great.

More and more often such hostility gives birth to destructive action.² Such vandalism is easy to understand if not therefore to condone when the art-work is perceived to cross the boundary of what is socially acceptable, for instance by exploring too explicit erotic imagery: such art has become an obvious battle ground for free speech activists on the one side, crusaders against pornography on the other.³ Political correctness has demanded its own victims: at the University of North Carolina, for example, students formed a Committee Against Offensive Statues. Their target was Julia Balk's \$65,000 statue *The Student Body* — somewhat disturbingly it has become almost *de rigeur* to begin discussions of vandalism with the dollar value of the vandalized work, as if to vindicate those vandals who take themselves to protest the commercialization of art, such as the Russian performance artist Alexander Bremer, who, also in the Stedelijk Museum, spray-painted a dollar sign on one of Malevich's suprematist compositions only months before van Bladeren struck there for a second time. Julia Balk's sculpture managed to offend quite an array of concerned student activists: feminists because it

² See John Dornberg, "Art Vandals: Why Do They Do It?" *Art News*, March 1987, pp. 102-109.

³ See Liza Mundy, "The New Critics," in Kathleen M. Higgins, *Aesthetics in Perspective* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996), pp. 213 - 221.

included a couple, the man reading a book, the woman — in the image of Eve? — holding an apple; blacks because it included a black basket-ball player and a black woman carrying a book on her head as if she were still in the bush, the book a basket; and Asians because the figure with Asian features was shown carrying a violin-case. Pulled not just the left and the right, but in many different directions, today's politicized students are all too ready to sacrifice tolerance to whatever cause they have embraced. Small wonder the statue was overthrown. The university's chancellor decided to have it moved to a less conspicuous and therefore less offensive spot.

In this case it was not difficult to understand abstract art that offended. Quite the opposite: had the work not been so representational and therefore legible it would scarcely have provoked the student vandals. One would like to agree with William Massey, a graduate of the university, that "the further you get from realism, the less likely a piece of work is to be vandalized" and with Liza Mundy when she suggest that what Happened at the University of North Carolina "will surely encourage art committees to stick with the abstract stuff."⁴ Irrelevant to the concerns of most people, that "abstract stuff" would seem to be protected from the vandal's wrath by its irrelevance, at least as long as its size and placement or its price tag did not render it too conspicuous: in that case perceived irrelevance becomes an affront to good sense.

The vandals here were students, not quite adults, easily politicized, and ready for a prank. Much more difficult to understand is what led some, I assume grown-up, local politicians in the Rhineland to use for a wine cooler an enamel bathtub that Josef Beuys, in the spirit of Duchamp, had transformed into a ready-made-aided, and that then was awaiting exhibition in some castle. What made these presumably busy representatives of the people make the effort and take the time to scrub and clean this tub in which the artist as baby had once been bathed? They claimed that they did not recognize that what they were dealing with was a work of art — the claim itself a statement on behalf of the many

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

who feel somehow left out, even mocked, or put down by such art. Did some of the culprits suspect that the publicity the act was bound to generate would work in their favor? If so, they would have been proven right: public opinion was more with the vandals than with the vandalized art-work, more outraged by the court's award of DM 80,000 in damages plus DM 15,000 in interest than by what the owner termed the destruction and desecration of an important art work: desecration indeed!

And public opinion was also with the vandal when Josef Kleer, a 29 year-old student of veterinary medicine, decided to punch holes into Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue? IV* that Berlin's New National Gallery had just acquired for one million dollars, the same painting that had occasioned Frank Badur's words on tolerance and freedom. The large painting, Kleer claimed, had indeed made him afraid, while the large sum spent for it scandalized him. Indeed: how can such a purchase be justified, as long as there are persons who go hungry, who lack adequate shelter and medical care? And the claim that the painting made him afraid cannot be simply dismissed. Did not Newman himself like to invoke Burke on the sublime in discussions of his art? And did not Burke insist on the connection between the sublime and fear? "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."⁵ The painting's very title played with the idea of fear. To be sure, played with fear as art plays with reality and Kleer could be accused of having failed to preserve the proper aesthetic distance that according to Burke, too, separates the sublime from what is simply fearful. But how today are we to reconcile tired sounding demands for aesthetic distance with calls for a more engaged art? The public response was predictable: who here is crazy: the vandal or those willing to pay one million dollars for a painting any house painter's apprentice could have

⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 39.

produced at a fraction of the cost? That the Berliners should have elevated Kleer into a minor hero cannot surprise. Such elevation demonstrates that these acts of vandalism, whatever the vandal's intention, possess a social significance. A significant part of the public today will embrace these vandals as defenders of a good sense they see betrayed and mocked by an arrogant self-appointed artistic elite.

2

I can only assume that van Bladeren, too, standing in 1986 in a different museum before another of Newman's variations on the theme *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?* felt challenged and provoked, not just by what he saw, but also and perhaps especially by the title. Newman had chosen the title when, working on the first painting in that series, he became aware that he was up against Mondrian and the art he stood for. "Just as I had confronted other dogmatic positions of the purists, neoplasticists, and other formalists, I was now in confrontation with their dogma, which had reduced red, yellow, and blue into an idea that destroys them as color."⁶ In this particular variation on his chosen theme Newman showed that he was indeed not afraid of Mondrian's red, yellow, and blue. He met his precursor's challenge with a gloriously alive red surface, stretched out between yellow and blue bands.

Newman thought of the titles he gave his paintings as metaphors "that will in some way correspond to what I think is the feeling in them and the meaning of it."⁷ If so, the four paintings that make up the *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?* series are well named. They do suggest an artist caught up in a heroic agon. And Newman himself cultivated the hero's posture, liked to present his art as the heroic self-assertion of that

⁶ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

"one real man"⁸ needed to create great art. "My work, they say, is more advanced than Mondrian's, when what they mean is that I have broken the barrier of his dogmas."⁹

Imagine now an artist, impressed by Newman as Newman was by Mondrian, struggling to advance beyond him. Is it not possible to consider van Bladeren's action as another such self-assertion, as an agon with his precursor Newman, an attempt to break the barrier of his dogma? Newman himself gave succinct expression to what he thought he had achieved: "My paintings physically declare the area as a whole from the very beginning. They are not a construction. With Mondrian the whole is the sum of its parts. With me, the wholeness has no parts."¹⁰ More self-consciously than his precursor Newman embraced the dogma that the art-work should be a seamless self-sufficient whole, a dogma that for so long had presided over and given direction to the progress of modern art — not only embraced it, but with such single-minded conviction that it becomes difficult to envision a further advance. Hands off such art, this dogma proclaims, as it also raises a barrier to further progress in that direction.

Van Bladeren was not afraid of the seeming finality of Newman's red, yellow, and blue, meeting their challenge with his knife. The museum to be sure failed to recognize aesthetic value in what had been achieved and decided to restore the mangled painting, thereby judging the work of this would-be artist to be no more than an act of vandalism, to be undone to the extent that this was possible. Attempting to restore the painting, it also reaffirmed the idea of the museum as the ideal home for works of art that were not to be touched, an idea that van Bladeren apparently found offensive. If he took himself at all seriously as an artist, it is easy to understand his outrage, his decision to return to the Stedelijk to ensure that his work would not be so easily dismissed, undone, and forgotten. Not finding the restored painting that so offended him, *Cathedra* offered itself as a ready

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

substitute. It took this action artist, who had substituted a Stanley knife for a brush, no more than 20 seconds to execute his de-constructive work.

Should we honor the result of this last action, the now mangled *Cathedra*, as a work of art in its own right that breaks the barrier established by the dogma that the artwork should be an inviolable whole and thereby opens up a new arena for art? Has the breaking of such barriers not long been associated with originality and artistic genius? Defenders of the aesthetic significance of van Bladeren's action can thus cite a long prehistory, including countless futurist and dada actions. Kant knew about the troubling proximity of artistic creativity and nonsense and for that reason insisted that art must be more than the original self-expression of "one real man," that the creation of art presupposes not only individual genius, but taste and taste binds the individual into the community. Iconoclasts lack taste.

3

That van Bladeren, like many a vandal before him, should have been called an iconoclast is hardly surprising, especially not given the title of the vandalized painting: *Cathedra*, naming the throne occupied by God. Must this very name, which would put a painting, a mere aesthetic object, in the place of what is most sacred not provoke those who still believe? It is easy to understand why such believers should have found in the vandal's action a significance he may not at all have intended. I was not at all surprised to learn that the archbishopric of Utrecht should have seized the opportunity provided by the publicity surrounding van Bladeren's return to make posters with the title *Who's Afraid of God?*, showing a version of the Newman painting, slashed now in the form of a cross, creating an ambiguous metaphor.

"Who's Afraid of Red, Blue, and Yellow?" — that meant also: who is afraid of any dogma, including the dogma of the church? More was at stake than just the liberation of color from Mondrian's deadening dogma: Newman sought to make

cathedrals out of his own feelings, "reasserting man's desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions."¹¹ Given Newman's own self-understanding as a builder of sublime cathedrals to the self-elevation of the American male, that "one real man" needed to create art, it is difficult not to understand the church's poster as inviting us to think the vandal an iconoclast, calling us away from the false idol of the self-centered abstract art celebrated by the godless Newman to the true faith. Newman's art and even more the claims he made for it, do indeed raise the question whether the church, and not only the church, must not judge such art in the image of the golden calf. Must we not question such fetishizing of the art object which makes abstract paintings into icons on which, as Malevich put it, "the holy is a zero"? Malevich wanted his suprematist compositions to silence all meanings, all words, attributing an evangelical significance to his gesturing towards whiteness, the void: "The essence of God is zero salvation. In this essence lies at the same time salvation zero... If the heroes and saints were to become aware that the salvation of the future is zero salvation, they would be confused by reality. The hero would let his sword drop and the prayers of the saint would die on his lips."¹² Newman had a similarly exalted opinion of his art: "Almost fifteen years ago Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes."¹³ Newman, too, understood the artist as a prophet, carrying into "the chaos that is society" "a living myth for us in our own time," the myth that "Each man is, or should be his own hero," wresting, godlike, "truth from the void"¹⁴: *vir heroicus sublimis*. But is this not to understand the artist in the image of Aaron, who, in the absence of Moses, took the gold of his people to fashion a calf, putting what he had

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173,

¹² Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematismus -- die gegenstandslose Welt*, trans. and ed. H. von Riesen (Cologne: Dumont, 1962), p. 57.

¹³ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 251.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 111, 140, 169, 173.

wrought in the place that belonged to the sacred? Are Newman's paintings with their often evocative titles such golden calves, or as we might say today, abstract kitsch, for is not kitsch a reoccupation of the genuine with the counterfeit?

Newman to be sure presents himself to us the prophet of a very different, a humanist faith. The church's poster thus invites also a similarly different response: the crucified painting invites us to think the vandal as belonging to the party of those who again and again, crucifying freedom, crucify true humanity.

4

But are such reflections even appropriate, given what happened? Do they not attribute an importance to and thus dignify the vandal's action in a way it does not deserve? One reason I find the poster troubling is precisely because it invites such reflections. I wish I could brush it aside as simply in poor taste, just as I wish I could rest content with characterizations of van Bladeren as a psychopath, as claimed by the director of the Stedelijk museum Rudi Fuchs, a madman like Laszlo Toth, who insisting he was Christ, attacked Michelangelo's *Pietà*, or that Dutchman who claimed Jesus had made him attack Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. Destructive actions by psychopaths are a bit like natural catastrophes: we should take precautions to avoid them in the future, take whatever steps we can to make a repetition less likely. There will of course be repetitions; that cannot be helped. But this is no reason to endow these with a deep significance they do not deserve. Some actions are best buried in silence. To talk endlessly about such acts may serve only to encourage their repetition. Committing an outrageous act such as destroying a great work of art is after all a time honored way to become famous. How many acts of vandalism were committed only because the vandal was able to count on publicity to reward him? Van Bladeren's destruction of *Cathedra* thus brought to mind Erostratus, who in 356 B.C. burned down the magnificent temple of Artemis the Ephesians had built with the help of king Croesus's gold. This act of

vandalism was sufficient to assure Erostratus a minor, but lasting place in history. Not that I had thought of Newman's *Cathedra* as deserving to be compared with the Ephesians' temple, one of the seven wonders of the world, despite the about twelve million dollars the painting was said to be worth.

Does the price matter? While a greater price tag has long been equated with greater aesthetic worth, aesthetics would dispute any such equation: if the greater work of art fetches a higher price, this is not because we can put a price on aesthetic quality, but rather because we value aesthetic experience precisely because it puts us in touch with what is beyond any price. As Kant might have put the matter: we are interested in having experiences that allow for that entirely disinterested satisfaction that is the gift of beauty, and so we are willing to put a price on what is really priceless. But this should not lead us to forget that to put a price on an art-work is to obscure that aura of a meaning deeper than reason can grasp that belongs to every genuine work of art.

It is of course quite easy to determine what a certain painting is likely to sell for, given the present art market, and to accept this as a mark of greatness. The pearl without any price has a price after all. Would our outrage have been the same had van Bladeren attacked an inexpensive, but beautiful landscape by a minor Dutch master of the seventeenth century? Certainly, the publicity would have been much less, although my outrage might well have been greater because I would find such an act more difficult to rationalize: the action of a madman indeed. But such a work would of course be much less likely to provoke the vandal's wrath — a fact that should let us pause before we call van Bladeren a madman: whatever its aesthetic merit, a twelve million dollar price tag is sufficient to establish an art work's place in a very select circle and all but guarantees public interest in its violation. And those who believe that all publicity is good publicity, but have no other way to satisfy their craving to see their names in newspapers, may well see in such acts one way in which they, too, can be famous, if only for a short time — too short a time apparently to have satisfied van Bladeren after he had attacked his first

Newman: small wonder that he returned to the Stedelijk Museum: the craving for notoriety needs to be fed.

A sober utilitarian might well point out to us that such a craving is by no means mad; today notoriety translates readily into money: every important public scandal thus generates a spate of television appearances and books and sometimes it seems that the commission of some outrageous act has become the easiest and shortest road to fame and therefore wealth. I can well imagine a book, co-authored by van Bladeren and some truly up-to-date critic armed with the most recent theory, bearing the zippy title: *Zapping the Zip or the Emperor has no Clothes*. The proceeds might even be sufficient to set up a small Gallery for Engaged Art — although to suggest this is probably to exaggerate public interest in art. Not that van Bladeren would be the first art vandal to set up a gallery having committed his destructive act; and I was surprised to read in the newspaper how small in Holland the punishment is for such an act, no more than two years in prison and a fine of at most 15,000 dollars: are these sufficient to deter someone who soberly weighed financial gain and loss? After his first slashing van Bladeren served a mere five months in jail and three on parole before "fading into obscurity," while attempts were made to undo the damage he had done.

5

Just as I can understand those who insist that, instead of attempting to rebuild what the violence of war has destroyed — say some bombed church such as Dresden's Frauenkirche — we should preserve the pathetic ruin as a guardian against the recurrence of just such violence, so I can understand those who argue that we should preserve the slashed *Cathedra*, not to honor the vandal, but as a guardian against a recurrence of just such violence. Although this is hardly what he had in mind, Paul Cliteur must be taken seriously when he suggests that now that the work has been slashed, the director of the Stedelijk Museum Rudi Fuchs, instead of calling on three Newman experts to help decide

how to best save the work, would have done better to consult with legal experts concerning the possibility of preserving the work in its present ruined state. Like architectural ruins, the ruined Newman has its own aesthetic appeal, and if many a building has become a more moving presence because ruined, could one not argue something of the sort in this case?

I can imagine yet another scenario: instead of repairing the damaged and precisely because of its seemingly so simple, not quite monochromatic, abstract quality, difficult to restore painting, to reproduce it as it was, drawing on everything technology now has to offer. Might such a reproduction not come closer to matching the appearance of the original than any attempt to patch and repair it? This simulacrum of Newman's *Cathedra* could then be exhibited in its proper place, perhaps together with the mutilated original. And suppose the reproduction were all but indistinguishable from the original, what would have been lost? The unique aura that is supposed to magically surround every original work of art? But is that aura more than a phantasm?

Suppose van Bladeren had bought "Cathedra" for many millions only to then destroy it, exhibiting the slashed painting in some respected gallery, now as his work of art, with the title "Zips and Slashes: Tearing the Emperor's New Clothing"? He could have claimed Rauschenberg, who erased a de Kooning he owned, signed it, and named it *Erased de Kooning Sketch*, for a precursor. How would that change our judgment of his action? The object resulting from that action, we can stipulate, would have been exactly the same as the slashed painting we now have, but the different context would have endowed it with a very different meaning. The subsequent discussion would now have centered more on the mutilated art-work than on the mutilated art-world. To be sure, questions would have been raised whether anyone has the right to destroy a cultural treasure of such importance. Regardless of what the legal situation may be in a particular country, few of us doubt that ownership of a work of architecture or a piece of land does not give the owner an unrestricted right to do whatever he wants with what he owns.

Rights of ownership must be weighed against what is in the public interest. And if owning some architectural treasure does not give you the right to do with it whatever you please, should there not be similar restriction on works of art? There is a sense in which every great work of art belongs not just to whoever happens to own it, but to all of us. The vandal's knife cuts not just a painting, but violates our sense of community.

6

The image of the slashed canvas shown in the newspaper, the central whitish vertical zip now unsteady, broken, traversed and given a pathetic life by the vandal's violent strokes, brought to my mind the cover of Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, showing one of the great works of western architecture, the cathedral of Rheims in flames,¹⁵ showing it, not as an example of something that should never happen again, but as a fitting fate for an edifice Bataille had come to experience as representative of a spiritual architecture that imprisons and therefore should be destroyed, even if such destruction threatens chaos and bestiality. The violence of the flames here appears as expression of a sublime freedom that refuses to be assigned its place by any architecture, a refusal that has come to be fashionable, as the continuing popularity of the term "deconstruction" testifies.

To be sure, what we see on the book's cover is only an often reproduced photograph, the pictorial and academic distance rendering quite unreal the once very real violence represented, just as the jargon of violence found between the book's covers is rendered harmlessly titillating, bound as it is by its academic setting. But like artists, academics, too, have long chafed at this distance that would have them purchase their freedom at the price of reality. Is it not time to eliminate such distance, to allow the world to burst open the doors of both ivory towers and dusty museums in which scholars

¹⁵ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT Press, 1989).

and artists have found a refuge only at the cost of relevance? Academics, too, like to play with fire.

Along these lines it is easy to construct an apology for van Bladeren: should the five long and two shorter strokes that mutilated the Newman not be considered aesthetically significant expressions of a fearless freedom that refuses to respect the stifling architecture of Newman's *Cathedra*? And did van Bladeren not give Newman's by now already a bit dated art a new life, a new actuality. We might even credit the vandal, as Paul Cliteur appears to do, with actually having improved the original work of art by making it more worthy of discussion? Can van Bladeren not claim to have created a work that goes significantly beyond the comparable, but much more feeble slashings of Lucio Fontana? Such suggestions can no longer simply be dismissed. But whether the destruction will in fact some day be celebrated as some sort of milestone or deplored and soon forgotten as just another act of vandalism, the last in a long chain of such acts, will depend not so much on van Bladeren's intention, whatever it may really have been, as on the reception his action is accorded, both by today's art-world and by the larger public. By that reception that art-world will judge itself; and that reception will help determine just how much more was mutilated by van Bladeren's Stanley-knife than just this one painting.

But had art not already been "mutilated" — and the term may well be challenged as unduly prejudicial — by modern art's by now time-honored tradition of challenging all sorts of tabus, especially those with which the custodians of what they consider good art would guard the established and accepted? Duchamp already had suggested the possibility of creating art by using a Rembrandt for an ironing board! Compare van Bladeren's slashing of the Newman to Duchamp's decision to disfigure Leonardo's Mona Lisa by giving her a mustache. There is, to be sure, this all important difference: Duchamp's mustache appears only on a cheap reproduction, leaving the priceless original quite undisturbed in its museum setting. "Priceless original" is of course just the sort of

cliché that invites deconstruction, claiming, as it does, to remove art works from a world where everything has a price. The cliché thus appeals to that boundary supposed to separate the aesthetic realm from the real world with its money and violence. This boundary van Bladeren refused to respect.

Had he respected it, he might have been content to slash some reproduction of *Cathedra*; but such an act would have attracted little attention: after all, after Duchamp that sort of thing has come to be almost expected and is unlikely to generate much interest. In different forms such use and abuse of the work of other artists has by now become an accepted artistic practice, where, given an ever more permissive art-world, where just about everything seems to go, artists find it ever more difficult to arouse much interest with such appropriations. An art-world infatuated with the unexpected and interesting, with what Lyotard celebrates as *negatio*, demands thus ever more outrageous action, and this demand has to push art towards its own self-de-construction. From this perspective we may want to consider van Bladeren an artist led by his pursuit of the ever more interesting from just playing with the idea of destroying what other artists had established to actual destruction, just as an individual pursuing the erotically interesting might be led from pornographic play with sado-masochism to increasingly violent attempts to push beyond imaginary explorations that lacked reality and for that very reason came to seem increasingly pale and boring.

Should van Bladeren's action then be understood as the all too predictable culmination of that pursuit of the interesting, first diagnosed by Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard and so brilliantly enacted by Duchamp? If so, one could also argue that van Bladeren did well to slash paintings by Newman, for no modern painter more vigorously rejected the aesthetic of the interesting, which was to become so important to post-modernism, than Newman, who declared that while a Robert Motherwell might wish to make Duchamp a father, "Duchamp is his father and not mine nor that of any

American painter that I respect."¹⁶ An artistic battle line is drawn here and drawn in a way that may suggest that Barnett Newman's place today is indeed in a museum, that he already belongs to a past removed from our post-modern world: to many artists and theorists Duchamp today seems more relevant. He has become much more of a father figure for the art of the nineties than Newman, as Newman would no doubt have admitted. But, cantankerous as he was, he would have lost little time to turn such an admission into an attack on artists corrupted by what he thought the false aesthetics that would blur the boundary between art and non-art. "In Europe the great aestheticians among the painters were the dada [artists], who said, 'We're against art because we really know what art is,' ... [insisting] that a piece of paper dropped, that a sound yelled, that anything was a work of art... The best example of this is Marcel Duchamp, who identified art or tried to destroy art by pointing to the fountain, and we now have museums that show screwdrivers and automobiles and paintings. [The museums] have accepted the position that there's no way of knowing what is what. Well, if there is no way, I feel it's time for the Museum of Modern Art, for example, to put on an exhibition of machine guns. After all, they're beautiful [in] function, they have wonderful forms, they're full of content, and they actually make noise."¹⁷ And why not stage an exhibition centering on the violated *Cathedra*? Newman fought for a conception of art that is under attack today, a conception that would have made it impossible for him to take seriously van Bladeren's claim. "I don't hate all art; I just hate abstract art and realism." That claim does leave room for an art of the interesting and from this vantage point it is indeed easy to construct an interpretation of his slashing of *Cathedra* as itself a significant aesthetic act, although I would rather consider it a *reductio ad absurdum* or self-de-construction that reveals the bankruptcy of every approach to art committed to a pursuit of the

¹⁶ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 208.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

interesting, of all attempts to divorce artistic freedom from responsibility. Newman would have insisted that today to hate abstract art is to hate art.

7

Newman deplored the way aesthetics had embraced and with its embrace crushed art. Today this embrace threatens to crush his own art. I am thinking now not so much of van Bladeren, who is reported to have been moved by an essay by Carel Willink, as of the way art today has been overtaken by philosophical reflection. As Arthur Danto has insisted, in agreement with Newman, but without the latter's nostalgia, when art comes to understand itself as a philosophical wrestling with the question, what is art? it ends as art. Here for Danto lies the importance of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol: the question, why is Warhol's Brillo-box art while that in the supermarket is not? could no longer be answered by art; it required philosophy.

Such a philosophization of art is hardly a new development: neo-classical aesthetics already liked to distinguish between the "mechanical" and the "ideal" part in art, insisting that the former required only the skills of the artisan, while the latter called for philosophical talent. Here already art's embrace of philosophy threatened the death of art, as art tended towards the sort of illustration of ideas Newman protested with such vehemence. So understood neo-classical aesthetics points forward to Duchamp, with the important difference that the former remained oriented towards moral ideals, while Duchamp made of art a cerebral play with art. Duchamp wants to understand art as away of "recreating ideas in painting... I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. For me the title was very important. I was interested in making painting serve my purposes, and in getting away from the physicality of painting. For me Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis in the nineteenth century. I was interested in ideas, not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the

mind."¹⁸ Duchamp bequeathed to modern art his lack of interest in the physical object, which was to be no more than an occasion for the play of ideas. Such play, however, cannot satisfy in the long run unless tethered to a concern with reality. Small wonder then that the heirs of Duchamp should have demanded a politicized art, just the sort of attitude Newman rejected as wrong because it reduced the artist to an illustrator, an interpreter. He wanted to speak as an artist.¹⁹

But in his case, too, the philosopher threatened to smother the artist. Not in vain had he majored in philosophy in the City College of New York. Newman, too, wanted to put art at the service of "the pure idea"²⁰ and one is reminded of Duchamp's rejection of Courbet's physicalism when Newman asserts that "Abstract art in America has to a large extent been the preoccupation of the dull" and calls instead for philosophic pictures: "In handling philosophic concepts which per se are of an abstract nature, it was inevitable that the painter's form should be abstract."²¹ As Tom Wolfe observes, Newman was "one of the most incessant theoreticians of Eighth street and his work showed it."²² I find it impossible to dismiss Robert Hughes's caustic observation that "the rhetoric around Newman's work — his own and others' — became an intimidating force field which zapped all who doubted the Zip."²³ For most who look at some Newman in a museum today it is indeed this intellectual force field that gives the painting its special aura of significance and allows them to be quickly done with it, as the painting itself, this unique physical object, becomes quite unimportant. It is easy to understand those who take Newman, too, to illustrate Wolfe's thesis that painting has become a matter of illustrating words: there is this side to his art. But Newman's words cannot support his art, not

¹⁸ Marcel Duchamp, "Painting .. at the service of the mind," in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 393-394.

¹⁹ Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 246.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²² Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 61.

²³ Robert Hughes, *American Visions. The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 493.

because he was not a good philosopher, although he wasn't, but because the very attempt to put art at the service of the mind rather than the whole human being is misguided.

Fortunately there is also another and much more important side to Newman's art, more important precisely because philosophy is not enough. Newman claimed that "it is only the pure idea that has meaning."²⁴ But the purer an idea the less it means to us. To really touch us meaning must be incarnated, and not just illustrated, in matter. Without such incarnations of meaning in matter our lives cease to matter. This is one reason why art matters, why it is important to give an art-work the space and the time it takes for us to experience its mysterious life, why it is important to take the time necessary to experience, say, the way Newman saturated *Cathedra* "with blue to such an intensity that the divisions marked by two pale zips pass almost unnoticed. What you see is a vessel brimming with blue, brimming with a celestial radiance."²⁵

8

If art and the art-world were healthier we could bury van Bladeren's mutilation of the Newman in silence. Given the current state of both, and it has become all but impossible to disentangle the two, van Bladeren's action and even more the public response to that action demand serious discussion. But that this action does deserve such discussion, that we cannot simply dismiss it as the work of a psychopath or a publicity-craving egomaniac, yet another in a long list of vandals, saddens me.

Karsten Harries

Yale University

²⁴ Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 108.

²⁵ Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 78.