

*John Miller and Bob Nickas*

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*An Introduction*

Over the years, Bob Nickas's writing has appeared in – but has not always been meant for – various art magazines and catalogues. Quite surprisingly, only two of the texts he chose for this book – *Private Collection and "C"* – have been made in relation to the numerous exhibitions he has curated in his career. Even though I had encountered some of these texts at the time they were published, I never thought of him as a writer independent of his more well-known – at least to me – activity as a curator. Nonetheless, after having read these essays one after the next, and in their given chronological order, I have to admit that I still don't see him as a writer on one side and as a curator on the other. There is (fortunately) an overlap between the two. Not only do both activities seem to be done with the same intention – to understand through its contextualization a work of art – they appear to challenge and blur the accepted notions of exhibitions and writing.

The texts which I am invited to introduce are not so much directed towards a global theory on art as they are fragments and

investigations of thoughts written along the way. They take different forms: interviews (real or contrived), essays (sometimes found and altered), an index (to a non-existent book), and letters to friends. They have different statuses: usually commissioned, sometimes unpublished or even rejected. They share different concerns: commenting on the work of an artist, reacting to a particular moment, testing an idea. They play different roles: the “hard to get” (Olivier Mosset), the “endlessly quoted” (Haim Steinbach), the “almost last” (Andy Warhol). Strangely, what they don’t have in common is a lot easier to define than what they do. However, one thing which pervades these writings is the belief that there are bridges between different generations of artists, that each generation cannot be correctly understood without the knowledge of its immediate past.

Take an essay like *The Sublime Was Then (Search for Tomorrow)*. In this piece, Nickas has excerpted reviews and subsequent letters related to Barnett Newman’s first show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950. Through this use of quotations, he not only gives us an understanding of the critical context at that time but redirects it toward our own, as if art history could only make sense – and be fun – if grounded in the present. (In the texts that follow, we come to realize that for Nickas the beginning of the ’80s was not really “a life of complete dissolution. Because [he] was also going to the Museum of Modern Art Library at least twice a week [...] mainly poring over books and catalogues from the ’60s to the mid-’70s”.)

This collection has its roots in the art and music scenes of late ’70s/early ’80s New York, in galleries and clubs in the East Village and below Canal Street – most of which have long since disappeared. Artists Space, Nature Morte, International with Monument, the Mudd Club, the Pyramid, and Tier 3 were a few of the places where artists and critics interacted by day and by night. Some of these artists were soon to be associated with Neo Geo and

become well-known beyond the New York art world. But Nickas wasn’t only interested in what was “new.” His first texts are an attempt to link the scene he was in with the generation from the ’60s that he had come to know in his research. For instance, his interview with Andy Warhol seems to yield as much information about the artist’s methods as Warhol himself gets in return – about younger painters working at the time, as well about his own *Rorschach Test* series. From these first essays, little by little, text after text, Nickas is consciously piling up the artists he is attracted to. Over fifteen years, we are able to follow through on his discoveries, and – what is always amazing to me – without having to give up the earliest encountered figures (as is often the case for many art critics). As we are brought to consider the works of Cady Noland or Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for example, artists such as Dan Graham and Robert Smithson are still central to his discourse. Thus, a collection of writings which at first appeared scattered gradually comes to resemble a construction which builds purposely upon itself. More and more, these texts seem self-explanatory and less and less to have ever needed an introduction.

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At the end of *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann reflects on the fate of writers:

“The magisterial poise of our style is a lie and a farce, our fame and social position are an absurdity, the public’s faith in us is altogether ridiculous, the use of art to educate the nation and its youth is a reprehensible undertaking which should be forbidden by law ... we are not capable of self-exaltation, we are merely capable of self-debauchery.”



Olivier Mosset, *N. G.*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24"  
Rubell Family Collection

### Olivier Mosset: Some Thoughts About Values

When we exhibit something the supposition seems to be that what is being exhibited is of some *value* or *importance*. The art of explaining that importance is the *position* of the critic. To determine value or importance *rests necessarily* in knowing about that which *portends* to be of value through being exhibited. Value seems to *occur* regarding rarity or uniqueness. Rarity or uniqueness *seem important* in the proper amounts, and with some *regularity of appearance*.

In wondering about these things or conditions called values it seems that they fall into two areas. The first and prime value is associated with the *conception* and continued *production* by the author. This includes all the *struggles* involved, particularly the so-called mistakes of “bad” sculpture or painting, for here the problems are *engaged* and development takes place much like, in more *social terms*, the necessary relationship of what is called “awkward adolescence” to *adulthood*.

This prime value is constant and *must be* honored. In it there is no right or wrong, good or bad; there is only the constant asking and answering *questions*. Answers seem particularly to *blend unnoticed* into new questions and the actual process is without beginning or end. Much the way a *plant* proceeds in making its

way. (The warm months of growth towards eventual flowering and *bearing*, to seemingly die but, more accurately, to enter a different *state of being* in preparation for a sort of *rebirth* of one sort or other.)

Prime values relate solely to *the author* and cannot be shared even with the closest and most knowledgeable *acquaintance*. These values are *unending* and are one with the state of being. Their existence is *symptomized* by the constant production of evidence. Evidence being sculpture, painting, poetry, physics, etc. at a conceptual *level*. All this *by nature* is beyond criticism, except by the self.

The second value is the relationship of what *has been done* to society at large. This is subject to criticism by *everyone*. Great *things* are written about what *others* have done. Then *even greater things* are written about what others have written about others have done. This now has become its own game with its own *rules and regulations*. The museums and critics and historians and collectors and many others *pry and probe and twist* within the framework of these secondary values. Within it the artist has no prime *purpose*. That is not to say that museums and critics and historians and collectors are not *serious* and *dedicated*, but their seriousness and dedication is related to *secondary* values and not to primary ones.

In the study of art it seems necessary to view works by *other men*, much the way one would walk through the woods waiting for the *impression* of that *adventure* to take its position in the *scheme* of things having been experienced, in the hopes that from being *exposed* while being *receptive*, an added condition may enter the author's process. We tend often to cherish the *blossoms* of experience, we collect *any number* of things. Even in sport it is becoming increasingly important *to win*, as is evidenced by the

fantastic growth of *professionalism* and subsequent *spectatorship*.

To be an artist is to participate, to be active and to *cherish* and *guard* those values which relate to activity, i.e., prime values. The process of growth or art includes *equal concern* for the roots as for the blossoms. Neither are "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong," but all are *necessary*.

1 + 1 = 3 is not good or bad, right or wrong; it is *an experience*.

Originally written in 1985, but not specifically for or about Olivier Mosset's work, the artist asked that it be published as his text in the catalogue for a group show curated by Wilfried Dickhoff, "What It Is," at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York, September 13 to October 12, 1986.

### **The Sublime Was Then (Search for Tomorrow)**

“[The *Brillo Box*] appears to make a revolutionary and ludicrous demand, not to overturn the society of artworks so much as to be enfranchised in it, claiming equality of place with sublime objects. For a dizzy moment we suppose the artworld must be debased by allowing the claim; that so base and *lumpen* an object should be enhanced by admission to the artworld seems out of the question. But then we recognize that we have confused the artwork – “Brillo Box” – with its vulgar counterpart in commercial reality.”

-Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

“The technology of contemporary society is... mesmerizing and fascinating, not so much in its own right, but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp – namely the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself... It is therefore in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that in my opinion the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized.”

-Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

“It seems that there’s almost a hope for disaster you might say. There’s that desire for spectacle. I know when I was a kid I used to love to watch the hurricanes come and blow the trees down and rip up the sidewalks. I mean it fascinated me. There’s a kind of pleasure that one receives on that level. Yet there is this desire for something more tranquil – like babbling brooks and pastorals and wooded glens. But I suppose I’m more attracted toward mining regions and volcanic conditions – wastelands rather than the usual notion of scenery or quietude, tranquility ... though they somehow interact.”

-Robert Smithson, *Entropy Made Visible*.

“[Schopenhauer] thought of the sublime as the will contemplating itself.”

-John Rajchman, *Foucault, or the Ends of Modernism*.

“Sublimity in art is not sublimity.”

-Ad Reinhardt, *Art-As-Art Dogma, Part 5*.

The society of artworks, and it is a society, with its social register and “debutantes,” its *social contract* and climbers, is filled with what Danto refers to as “sublime objects.” Now this suggests what could be called categorically, and fashionably, a generic class bordered on all sides by the base and lumpen, and that would shift the question somewhat away from sublimity towards baseness and lumpenness – as in what is base and what is lumpen in this high society? Specifically, what, if anything, is disenfranchised in the post-Brillo Box, post-Cornflakes Box, post-Turkey Noodle Soup Can Painting, post-Hot Dog Bean (Tender Beans and Little Frankfurter Slices) Soup Can Painting society? (And what of all those other members which weigh like nightmares or cupcakes on the brains of the living?) Because this society exists within a concept of time as condensed as those “Stout Hearted” soups, as encased as those boxes are encasing (though in truth they contain nothing, least of all giant-size soap pads or cornflakes), there is only an ever-present Now, in lumpen terms: “This magic moment,

when your lips are close to mine, will last forever, forever ‘til the end of time.” Condensed time, then, further shifts the question away from sublimity towards nowness and “the increasing primacy of the neo,” and to delusions of immortality. This eroticized, frozen moment is the commercial zone, where everything on display is new and improved (what Gene Swenson might have called new-fangled), where everything is happening now, where every room is a chamber of commerce. And it is here where we must time travel in order to discuss the business of the day.

The paintings in Barnett Newman’s first one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950 were not taken seriously by most critics, or, sadly, even by his artist-friends. The reviews, with but one exception, ranged from the unsympathetic to the wholly antagonistic. And his mind, which had often been at the service of much of the New York School, was somehow suspect in his own painting, and it was ridiculed as such. A review in *The Art Digest*, titled “Newman’s Flat Areas,” proclaimed, “His pictures demonstrate what happens when art becomes an intellectual game instead of an adventure in communication.” (Now one might wonder, understandably, just what that would be? Vulgar as it may sound, would that call for a lot of paint to be splashed around?) The reviewer, Judith Kaye Reed, continued, “This is the kind of *reductio ad absurdum* art that may have refreshed some people back in the days when no advertising layout man had ever heard of Mondrian. Today, however, it is rather shocking for another reason: that a presumably serious and well-trained painter should find absorbing material in so sterile and played-out a game is surprising.” Which is to say, for the Miss Reeds at least, that pictures are defined by how they can be described, by what they are pictures *of*. In her case, the sterility with which she described Newman’s paintings – “Large rectangular canvases... covered with a single flat color and divided into two or more areas by one or more lines in one or two colors” – suggests that the “played-out game” was hers alone.

The only sympathetic review, and the one which anticipated the hostile reception of Newman's paintings, was Aline Loucheim's in *The New York Times*:

"There are many who will jeer mercilessly when confronted by the canvases in this debut. But I wonder if they will remain unmoved. These pictures have, for me at least, an undeniable attraction — vibrancy, mood, impact, wholly direct and visually induced. Newman believes that line, intensely concentrated upon, can become a pure means of conveying emotion. This work has nothing in common with Mondrian, no reasoned probing of structure, no logical investigation of relationships in space. Space as such is not defined; it is as if the colored surface were simply part of a continuum in which the sharp or wavering line exists as an emotive element, without frame of reference, without objective meaning. I cannot tell after one viewing whether these pictures will quickly wear themselves out. But this is serious work which does evoke genuine response."

Two weeks after this review appeared, and a few days after Newman's show had closed, it was quoted, minus the final line, in a commentary by Peyton Boswell in *The Art Digest*, titled "Too Many Words:"

"Unlike the Chinese who define a painting as worth 10,000 words, our art critics often conceal their ignorance and confuse the collector by employing meaningless jargon to give profundity to some shallow abstract painting that honestly only claims decorative value. Faced by such false profundity, the prospective collector retreats from the barrage of aesthetic cliché and seeks safety among the reproductions. With no intention of singling out Barnett Newman, I would like to use an unsigned review of his work in *The New York Times* as a perfect example of this kind of thing. Falling in love with one's words is part of what's wrong with art criticism today."

Loucheim's review followed, but with the final line conveniently excised; it ended, "I cannot tell after one viewing whether these pictures will quickly wear themselves out," allowing Boswell to gleefully respond, "Neither can we!" This suggests, along with the phrase "shallow abstract painting that honestly only claims decorative value," that Boswell had every intention of singling Newman out, and it was not lost on the artist.

A month later, in March 1950, Boswell's column led off with a letter from Newman which railed:

"It seems to me very shabby journalism for you to use your feelings about a painter's work as a weapon against a critic expressing her free feelings — a right you claim for yourself. I advisedly call it shabby journalism, because to hit below the belt as you did cannot be called yellow journalism — it's just plain yellow. P.S. During the exhibition, one of my pictures was mutilated by someone who smeared some of the areas with paint — did you do it?"

Boswell's reply was that he did not intend to personally attack Aline Loucheim, that his attitude towards Newman's work was "thoroughly impersonal; I have no opinion, pro or con" (that, in itself, a telling remark), and that he does "not make a practice of improving an artist's pictures" (as if he was capable of doing so). Newman could not have been less appeased by Boswell's so-called, self-serving "rebuttal."

There was another review of Newman's show, written by Thomas B. Hess in that month's issue of *Art News*. He referred to Newman as "one of Greenwich Village's best known homespun aestheticians," and to his paintings as "the products of his meditations." He wrote:

"There were some terrific optical illusions; if you stared closely at the big red painting with the thin white stripe, its



bottom seemed to shoot out at your ankles, and the rectangular canvas itself appeared wildly distorted. It is quite like what happens to a hen when its beak is put on the ground and a chalk line drawn away from it on the floor. However, very few spectators actually became hypnotized. But then there was almost no interest here for the average spectator. Newman is out to shock, but he is not out to shock the bourgeoisie – that has been done. He likes to shock other artists.”

Because Hess and other critics, as well as Newman’s artist-friends, were shocked by everything about these paintings, they mistakenly believed that this was his intent: to shock. But it was Newman who was about to be shaken. As Hess recalled some twenty years later when he wrote the monograph for Newman’s Museum of Modern Art retrospective:

“The whole New York underground art world, just about, came to Newman’s opening at the Betty Parsons Gallery, January 23, 1950. That evening there was a party for him at the Artists’ Club on Eighth Street; the main decoration consisted of about a dozen card-table tops put against the walls with stripes made out of old feathers tied down their centers. It was a lighthearted, mischievous reconstruction of the show. When Newman saw the effect his pictures had made on his friends, tears came to his eyes. Did he realize they were poking fun at him? Or was he flattered, as he told the artists that evening, to see that his particular insignia had been recognized?

Years later, Newman implied that both interpretations are true. An artist who was then considered one of the spokesmen for the New York School came up to him at the opening and said: ‘I thought you were one of us, but I see you’re a threat to us all.’ He overheard two artists’ wives chatting. ‘What will Barney do next year?’ said one. ‘Easy,’ was the answer, ‘he’ll just hang the pictures sideways.’

... The whole of the New York art world, just about, stayed away from the opening of Newman’s second one-man exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, April 23, 1951.”

A little more than two and a half years after being confronted with the “lighthearted, mischievous” feathered “decorations,” Newman made his most famous, most quoted statement during a panel on “Aesthetics and the Artist:” “Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds.”

“It was ever a fault of epigones and interpreters of Longinus, who never himself used his quotations uncritically, to take his quotations at face value, and, in the hope of elevating the mind to repeat them, as so many allusions to a sublime feeling, but one incapable of being reinvented.”

Anthony Vidler, *“The Architecture of Allusion: Notes on the Postmodern Sublime.”*

*Arts Magazine*, March 1986