

**PEELING BACK**

**ROBERT W.**

**NEWMANN**

**— NARRATIVE**

**PORTFOLIO**

by Antonia

Dapena-Tretter

**DROSTE EFFECT**

**— BULLETIN 3**

**PEELING BACK  
ROBERT W.  
NEWMANN  
— NARRATIVE  
PORTFOLIO 3**

**WASHINGTON  
COLOR SCHOOL  
ROOTS: THE EARLY  
ARROWS 7**

**EMBRACING THE  
LITERAL: ADDITIVE  
LAYERS 15**

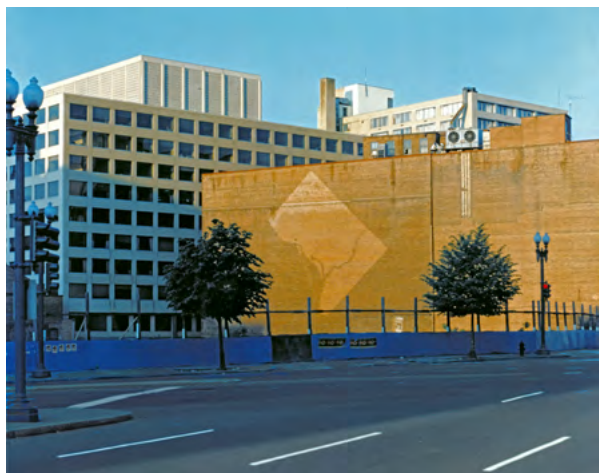
**INSTALLATION ART:  
SUBTRACTIVE  
LAYERS 24**

**IMMATERIAL  
SCULPTURES:  
CONCEPTUAL  
CONCLUSIONS 38**

# PEELING BACK ROBERT W. NEWMANN — NARRATIVE PORTFOLIO — by Antonia Dapena-Tretter

## Abstract

Unpacking Robert W. Newmann's portfolio requires a layered approach with equal attention paid to biography, aesthetics, and the larger art market of the 1970s to the present. These diverse methodologies intertwine to reveal the artist's surprising rejection of the Washington Color School tradition of ethereal stained canvases in favor of the real space of large-scale installations. Literal layers—taking the form of pigment added to the canvas or inches of substrate sandblasted away—separate Newmann's art from that of his teachers and serve as a common thread, tying together enormous shifts in practice and medium. Although each period of the artist's oeuvre reinforces his strong attraction to the experiential, the unexpected challenges of wedding an artwork to the space around it ultimately drove Newmann to accept and embrace the unavoidable nature of the immaterial.



1. Robert W. Newmann, *For Pierre L'Enfant*, 1978, subtractive process, sandblasted mural at 1328 NY Ave, N.W., 72 feet 6 inches x 93 feet 2 inches. Sponsored by the Washington Project for the Arts and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts Public Works in Public Places grant. Photo by Max Hirshfeld. All artwork images on this publication © Robert W. Newmann.

*Washington Post* critic Paul Richard theorized that 1960s D.C.-based artists such as Kenneth Noland, Thomas Downing, and Gene Davis «worked from a particular sensibility, nourished by the grids and circles of the original L'Enfant plan.»<sup>1</sup> If this is taken to be true, the hard-edged lines of the Washington Color School canvases were born from the same inspiration as Robert Newmann's *For Pierre L'Enfant* (pic. 1)—a sandblasted map of Washington D.C. on the side of a six-story building. Located at the intersection of New York Avenue and 13<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W., the piece was designed to morph over time with the build-up of air-borne pollutants produced by life in the city. As a result, the installation was expected to last no more than five years. However, rather than slowly fading, the work was lost abruptly when the building was torn down for new urban development. In its final documentation (pic. 2) the rigid contours of the sandblasted diamond—outlining the perimeter of the nation's capital—are

<sup>1</sup> Paul Richard quoted in Jean Lawlor Cohen, "Stars and Stripes: The 1960s,"

*Washington Art Matters: Art Life in the Capital 1940-1990*, 51.



2. Demolition of building at 1328 NW Avenue, N.W. in Washington, D.C. with *For Pierre L'Enfant* mural, April 1982. Photograph by Ray Kearns.

starkly juxtaposed next to the ragged edges of the crumbling building. Its temporary nature—oddly both intentional and not—reminds us that, despite Richard's assertion, *For Pierre L'Enfant* was at best distantly related to the similarly diamond-shaped canvases of Washington Color School painter Kenneth Noland.

Only one decade before completing his homage to the city, Newmann had been perfectly poised to follow in the footsteps of his Corcoran School of Art instructor, Color School painter Thomas Downing. As though passing the torch, Downing had invited his student to replace him in the classroom, and many years later Newmann still represented their relationship with fondness:

He was my mentor, good friend, and I eventually took over teaching his painting class at the Corcoran School. I stored his work in my studio, and I helped him install shows of his work. Ultimately, Tom asked me to be his son's godfather. We had an enduring friendship.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Newmann, email message to the author, September 26, 2013.

Warm memories ensure that the artist will never regret his bond with Downing, but their unique pupil/teacher relationship shaped public perception of Newmann's art more than it had his actual artistic production. Even as his practice revealed evidence of new interests, his connection to Downing led critics to lump him in with other followers of the Color School movement. When the aforementioned *Post* critic suggested that Newmann's success was a sign that there remained «life in hard-edge, geometric structured Washington color painting[,.]»<sup>3</sup> Richard failed to recognize the myriad ways the artist had deviated from the methods of his former teacher. With every change in technique or tweak in format, Newmann travelled further away from the Color School's singular focus on hue. His signature method of layering bridged his early and late career, even as he relocated his studio away from Washington in search of new artistic

---

**3** Paul Richard quoted in Elizabeth Tebow, "The Way We Were: The 1970s," *Washington Art Matters: Art*

*Life in the Capital 1940-1990*, Washington, DC: Washington Arts Museum, 2013, 89.

influences in Manhattan. Examining key pieces from each period of the artist's oeuvre, the following portfolio review traces incremental shifts in Newmann's art-making techniques from his geometric or non-figurative paintings tethered to a canvas to sandblasted installations in real space. After switching from additive layers of paint to subtractive layers of wall or floor, Newmann embraced a fully immersive art, thriving in the grey space between the sculptural and pictorial.



3. *Untitled (Arrows)*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 66.5 x 66.5 inches. In the Central Intelligence Agency Vincent Melzac Collection. Image courtesy of the Central Intelligence Agency.

### **WASHINGTON COLOR SCHOOL ROOTS: THE EARLY ARROWS**

One of Newmann's early polychromatic arrow canvases (pic. 3) hangs in the halls of the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters, on display as a part of the Vincent Melzac Collection. Representing opposed and interlocking arrows in five different colors, the painting was purchased for the collection along with numerous pieces created by Washington Color painters—Alma Thomas, Thomas Downing, Gene Davis, Paul Reed, and Howard Mehring. As a part of one of the

nation's most representative installations of Washington Color School paintings, Newmann recognizes that his tableau is in good company, noting in particular:

I looked long and hard at the Color School. I liked the Color School. [Morris] Louis is a God, and Downing and Mehring never got the attention they deserved. I taught color at the Corcoran School of Art for eight years, and when I mix or need a color today it's based on that experience.<sup>4</sup>

Given that Newmann's color sensitivity is tied to his training under Downing, his polychromatic arrow series has the most in common with the Color School art trends.

With so-called second and third generation Washington Color School painters, it is difficult to pin-point a definitive end for the movement. A 1974 exhibition presented by the Norton Gallery in Palm Beach—*The*

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Newmann, email message to the author, October 2, 2013.



*Vincent Melzac Collection, Part One: The Washington Color Painters*—narrowly confined the first generation to the years of 1958 to 1962.<sup>5</sup> This range is likely not accurate, as the first formally recorded instance of the term did not occur until 1965 when it was used in relation to an exhibition, *Washington Color Painters*, held at the no-longer existent Washington Gallery of Modern Art. However, an informal usage can be traced to a postcard from critic Clement Greenberg to Washington Colorist Gene Davis on August 5, 1961. Greenberg wrote: «I’m tickled by the idea of a “Washington School” in art.»<sup>6</sup> The critic’s choice of words reveals a reluctance to consider the District as capable of producing a bonafide art movement. One is *tickled* by naivete, but despite Greenberg’s doubts,

---

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Melzac, *The Vincent Melzac Collection, Part One: The Washington Color Painters*, Palm Beach Florida: Norton Gallery and School of Art, 1974, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Sue Scott, “Toward a New

Aesthetic,” *Washington Color: The First Generation Painters—Gene Davis, Thomas Downing, Morris Louis, Howard Mehring, Kenneth Noland* (eds. Sue Scott et al.), Orlando: Orlando Museum of Art, 1990, 15.

Washington had birthed a new school of painting.

Reacting against the reigning gestural stylings of the New York school, the six artists chosen for the *Washington Color Painters* exhibition—Gene Davis, Morris Louis, Howard Mehring, Kenneth Noland, Paul Reed and Thomas Downing—sought to eliminate the painterly in favor of large fields of color unencumbered by texture. This became possible with the invention of magna—an early version of acrylic paint. Once thinned, it would bond with the surface of the raw painting support. A passage taken from the catalogue for the Washington Gallery of Modern Art show described this revolutionary development:

The absence of oil, and the practice of staining the color deeply into the very fiber of the canvas, omits the oil sheen, produces a velvety surface and gives the eye a sense of seeing the fabric texture *above* the paint stain or as a part of, a welding together.<sup>7</sup>

Absorbed into the canvas, contrasts exist only within pure color relationships. In the

interest of further optical clarity, Washington Color Painters avoided thick paint; tactility was minimized through staining onto unsized, unprimed canvas. This small group of painters were «technique-driven,» as is often the case with movements characterized by a formal aesthetic.<sup>8</sup> While not stained, the colors of Newmann's 1967 *Arrows* canvas were flatly painted in acrylic with minimal texture. Masking tape, sealed with a matt medium to insure that pigment would not bleed, was used to contain a particular color within its designated area. With utter crispness at color junctures, the sealant was clearly effective, and the resultant contrasts in the C.I.A.'s painting—yellow against red and white against dark green—pop.

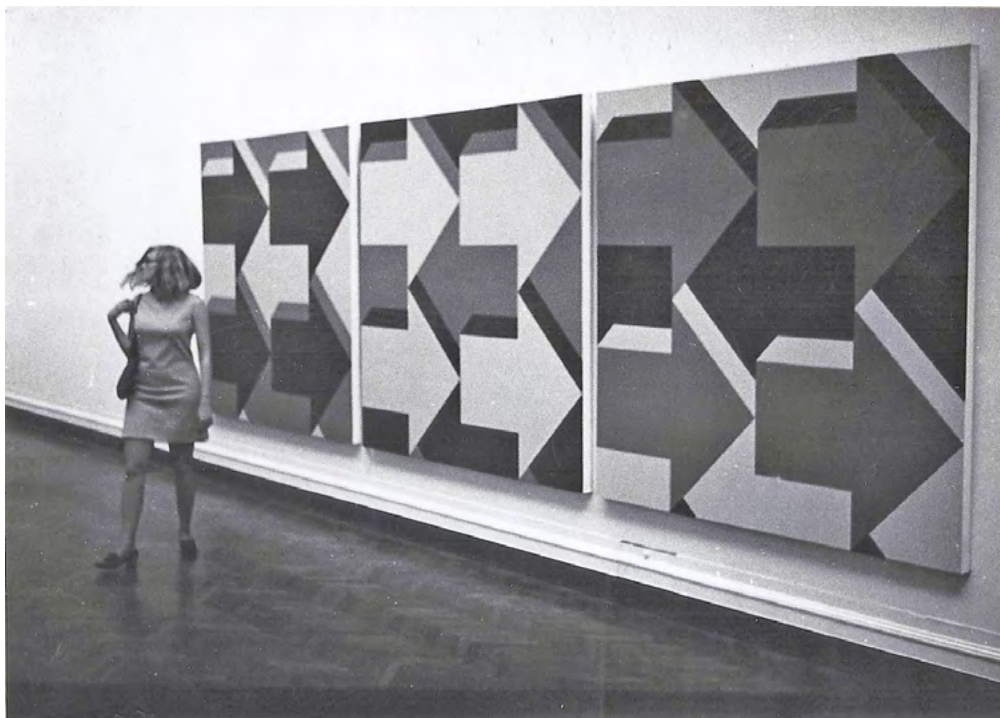
In 1968, Newmann reduced the complexity of his arrow compositions, dropping the number from twenty-five small arrows depicted within the borders of the canvas

---

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Norland, *The Washington Color Painters: Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Thomas Downing, Howard Mehring, Paul Reed*, Washington,

DC: Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 1965, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, "Toward a New Aesthetic," 10.



4. Photograph of 1968 Corcoran Gallery of Art installation of the triptych *Three Separate Realities*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 79.5 x 244.5 inches. Photo by Burliegh Muten.

to five much larger, complete arrows. The format was otherwise unchanged, but as a result of the fewer number of arrows on the canvas, the opportunity for color exploration was also necessarily reduced. Newmann's emphasis had changed ever so slightly from complicated color compositions to a greater interest in the underlying structure of the grid. After seeing the new paintings, Downing recommended Newmann for inclusion in an upcoming Corcoran show—*Washington 1968*

*New Painting: Structure*—meant to highlight a shift in painting methodology.

One of two triptychs displayed in the *New Painting* exhibit, *Three Separate Realities*, was a three-color progression beginning with a hot, deep red, transitioning to a medium red, and ending in yellow (pic. 4). By choosing to replicate rows of interlacing arrows, the artist experimented with color structure rather

than composition. Because the overall layout no longer changed, his preparatory studies could be made on a simple xeroxed black and white template. He was then able to explore the various hue possibilities with crayon, prior to actually mixing paints, as can be seen by one study for the second triptych in the

Corcoran exhibition; dabs of paint around the exterior illustrate the artist's careful color-mixing process (pic . 5). This exhibition ultimately inspired Ramon Osuna, owner of the Pyramid Gallery, to offer Newmann coveted gallery representation. Never before had a D.C. artist been offered such

a contract, and it proved to be an important break for the young painter making a name for himself in the city.

As Newmann began to prepare for his upcoming Pyramid Gallery opening, he finally broke away from the brightly colored aesthetic



5. Study for *Untitled Triptych* to hang at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1968, crayon on paper, 6.25 x 19.25 inches. Collection of the artist.

of the Washington Color School. Hues that popped became muted, mere shades away from their neighboring pigments. As a point of contrast, Downing continued to espouse the all-important nature of disembodied color. In 1972, he typed a nineteen-page doctrine on the importance of his medium and methods and mailed a copy to his former pupil. Newmann read: «There is no better way to get full benefit of the resonating depth of a color than by saturating a piece of cloth with it. Any color which is soaked into a fabric will be much more luminous than if it is painted on top of the fabric.»<sup>9</sup> He kept the essay in his files, perhaps for further consideration. Nonetheless, it appears that Newmann was not influenced by his teacher's essentialist statements about color or paint application. The paintings of the early 1970s deviated deliberately from Downing's formula, introducing layers of pigment *onto* the canvas, rather than color absorbed *into* the weave.

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Downing, "Andevorante and Vatomandry," unpublished

artist statement mailed to Robert Newmann, November 1972.

## EMBRACING THE LITERAL: ADDITIVE LAYERS



6. *Untitled* from Middle Period Arrow Series, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 79 x 79 inches. In the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine.

Newmann's paintings at the Pyramid Gallery were composed of dark, natural colors layered into a smooth, matte finish. With hues that did not overwhelm, the viewer could appreciate the understated, non-optical qualities of the artwork—the tactile. Instead of embracing the weave of the canvas, he hid the support beneath thick, smooth layers of paint, rendered matte through the addition of dental pumice. An untitled arrow canvas (pic. 6) donated by collectors Emily and Burton Tremaine to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, demonstrates this new technique. There is a purposeful tension represented in the shifts from dark browns and forest greens to electric blue strips running strictly along the top of four of the five complete arrows. It is the close values and chroma of the muted palette that oppose the sharp blue accents and highlight the artist's purposeful orthogonal projections. Against mostly dim pigments, these bright strips of color break away from the illusionistic third dimension and read as flat

parallelograms against a dark field. Viewed from across the room, they float unattached from the rest of the arrow composition, and it is only as the viewer approaches that they rejoin the grid. The imperfect fifth arrow, positioned squarely in the center, reads as a void created by the volume of the lower two arrows but is also impossibly two-dimensional where it meets the arrows above.

Every painting at the Pyramid Gallery sold before the exhibit opened to the public—something that had never before happened in Washington, D.C. Spurred on by the unprecedented success of his experimental paintings, Newmann then sought to eliminate *all* color contrasts, even the most subtle. Due to the monochromatic nature of his new arrow canvases, the long-standing concern to differentiate figure from ground disappeared completely. With no variation in color, differences between depicted arrows could only be observed through light and shadow, visible exclusively through the human eye's binocular vision. Articulating the subtleties of process and resulting product in more detail, the artist added:



A perceived difference between painted shapes was achieved by varying the number of painted layers within shapes, where you were in the room in relation to the painting, and the available light. Perception ranges from the absolute blank monochrome square of the canvas to a fully detailed surface. They are slow paintings that change with the time of day and require time for the viewer's eyes to adjust. They shift with the viewer's vantage point, and they are not photogenic.<sup>10</sup>

Should Newmann have hoped to share these pieces with an audience outside his studio or gallery, a photograph would simply not be sufficient. Responding to the new dilemma, he noted of a 1972 monochromatic canvas titled *White Squall*: «Study made in order to send to collectors, museums, etc. because this series could not be photographed.»<sup>11</sup> The work made it no further than collector Vincent Melzac, who

---

**10** Robert Newmann, email message to the author, July 5, 2014.

**11** Robert Newmann, "White Squall Artist Record," unpublished file in artist's personal archive, 1972.

promptly purchased it for his wife. Newmann painted backups, all slightly different shades of off-white. As can be seen in *White Squall II* (pic . 7), his layering technique is best observed on a smaller scale where the height of the ridges is proportionally greater, as compared to the width, than in a considerably larger canvas, for example *Flash Paradise* of The Kreeger Museum collection. With the development of digital photography, the nuanced layers of Newmann's monochromes can be amplified using computer software to heighten their subtle contrasts. Two photographs of *Flash Paradise*—one with digital enhancement and the other without—simulate the range of visual possibilities, depending on the the reflective, environmental qualities of light and/or shadows and the viewer's proximity to the painting (pic . 8). As the viewer moves away from the painting, the textured arrows are at risk of vanishing completely; as (s)he moves closer they reappear in whole or in part. Intrigued by this compositional evolution, fellow Washington artist Bill Dutterer commented quite astutely that what was perhaps most



7. *White Squall II*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 19.5 x 19.5 inches. Collection of the artist.



8. *Flash Paradise* (digitally enhanced on right), c. 1971, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 inches. In The Kreeger Museum collection, Washington, D.C.



experiential variables of the viewing process captured by the two photographic states: «Both are but opposite moments of experience for the viewer, and of course there are many more in between. It's not possible to capture [via photograph] all the moments these paintings offer by walking around them or looking at another time. You have to live with them.»<sup>13</sup>

interesting about the three periods of arrows was that over time Newmann had, inadvertently or not, painted the arrows out of existence.<sup>12</sup> Newmann embellished, making reference to the

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Newmann, unpublished, hand-written note emailed to the author as an attachment, May 8, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Newmann, email message to the author, May 8, 2015.

A similar dependence on environmental change is noted by installation artist Robert Irwin. In his seminal book *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, Irwin wrote: «Most critically, change is the key physical and physiological factor in our being able to *perceive* at all» (emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> While Irwin's thoughts on the subject were not published until the 1980s, his artworks reveal a budding interest in audience perception dating back to 1970. In the spring of 1971, Irwin was installing *Scrim Ceiling—Acoustic Point—Ambient Light* in the Corcoran Gallery of Art rotunda and had just finished painting the walls what Newmann termed a «dense dead green that was so atmospheric you could cut the air with a knife.»<sup>15</sup> Initiating a conversation with the older artist, Newmann sat with Irwin on the Corcoran rotunda floor, surrounded by

---

**14** Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstances: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (ed. Lawrence Weschler), Culver City, CA: Lapis Press in conjunction with Pace Gallery and San Francisco

Museum of Modern Art, 1985, 9.

**15** Robert Newmann, unpublished, hand-written note emailed to the author as an attachment, May 8, 2015.

filtered light. They discussed their individual art-making practices for a full ninety minutes and had a surprising amount in common due to their mutual interest in the experiential qualities of art-making. This chance encounter left an impression on Newmann who would eventually abandon his work as a painter for larger installation projects. Given his newfound attraction to real space and its variable conditions, the subtle illusionism contained within the arrow format bothered him.

Leaving behind the geometric composition that had captivated him for more than five years, Newmann took the final plunge away from optical illusionism—a departure toward the literal represented in two concurrent series. Both involved carefully controlled pigment absorption, but not toward the immaterial aims of the Washington Color School. In the case of the *Split Monochrome* canvases, paint was saturated into the weave in precise areas (these read as darker) and built-up to reflect light in others. One color could be split into two, and thusly a dichotomy was established between the layer that



9. *Limelight F3*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 54.5 x 54.5 inches. In the Asheville Art Museum collection. Gift of Constance and Fred Harris.

absorbed light and the opposing surface that reflected it. *Limelight F3* (pic . 9), in the Asheville Art Museum collection, is an ideal example from this series, showcasing lime green in two distinct saturations. However, it was the *Double-Sided* paintings that were by far the most literal of Newmann's canvases. Technically, these paintings are also *Split Monochromes* with only one color applied to the canvas, split by the canvas itself. While using acrylic paint almost exclusively since 1963, the artist now reverted to oil which allowed for more control in the bleeding process.

Paint was applied to both the front and back of the canvas, and by carefully controlling its viscosity, the pigment bled through partially so that the forms on one side could be viewed as a trace, backwards, on the other. By highlighting the canvas verso, he mocked the very idea of an illusionistic space beyond the canvas, forcing his viewers to literally see *through* to the other side. He had purposefully emphasized the thin, finite surface, and the depicted imagery itself traps the picture plane, fixed in space.

A classic taken from this series, figure 10

playfully relates the canvas to a vinyl record with an A and B side. The letters are arranged in a ring, alternating between the «A» painted on the front surface and the ghost image of the letter «B» painted on the reverse. Formally, the composition echos one of Downing’s favorite formats—a large ring of dots centered on the canvas—but by exaggerating the literal qualities of the painting’s support, the artist created instead an «aggressive painting... a necessary break from the Color School.»<sup>16</sup> The very techniques used by artists of the Washington Color School had been put to work toward different aims. In a sense, calling these paintings *Double-Sided* is misleading. It suggests two separate images that might be flipped over on the wall from time to time to change a room’s décor. However, side B cannot be ignored when viewing side A. The two have



10. *Untitled (A/B Painting)*, 1975, oil on canvas, 54.5 x 54.5 inches. Collection of the artist.

---

<sup>16</sup> Robert Newmann, in discussion with the author, February 7, 2015.

merged, and Newmann's *Double-Sided* canvases are not two-dimensional but three, having width, breadth, and an undeniable, albeit slight, depth—the thickness of the canvas itself.

## **INSTALLATION ART: SUBTRACTIVE LAYERS**

Irwin struggled in the late 1960s when he pushed the medium of painting to its terminal point, asking: «What kind of a “reality” was this that allowed itself such abstraction as to demand that the world end at the edge of my canvas? Yet what kind of a world would it be if there were no such limits?»<sup>17</sup> Finally leaving behind the canvas with its restrictive edges, in search of the unlimited world described by Irwin, Newmann's next artistic ventures would transform the space *around* his viewers. This new art was no longer contained by any box other than that of the room's dimensions. While Newmann may have been subconsciously inspired by the contemporary art scene, he

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstances: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, 12.



acknowledged a surprising affinity with ancient Mayan culture.<sup>18</sup> It was in 1974, while studying in the Yucatan, that the artist was profoundly inspired by archeologists digging through the earth's strata. The result was an astounding shift from his customary additive layers—paint on canvas—to its opposite—a subtractive process of removing layers to reveal a history beneath. So, in 1975, when Alice Denney, founder of the Washington Project for the Arts, invited the artist to do «something» for the W.P.A.'s inaugural show at 1227 G Street, N.W., Newmann envisioned the «large ramshackle old building» as a site for artistic excavation, remembering: «I could selectively subtract layers to make a work of art that incorporated the building's history. I could borrow the process of an archeological dig from sites I had visited in Mexico to make something new, something relevant to the W.P.A.»<sup>19</sup>

Using a hand-held utility scraping

---

**18** David Margolick, "Manhattan Wall Spurs a Test Case Over Art," *New York Times*, March 3, 1984, 12.

**19** Robert Newmann, email message to the author, October 26, 2013.

device, the artist peeled back wallpaper, paint, and plaster, reaching a depth of approximately

three quarters of an inch.

The rectangle embedded in the wall, an astounding 276 inches long, revealed in patches the history of the building, its original bricks and supportive arches, long ago buried beneath a decorative exterior (pic. 11). While the finished product resembled a canvas in shape and even composition—with a sharp, irregular settlement crack



11. 1227 G Street NW, 1975, subtractive process, 156 x 276 inches. Supported by the Washington Project for the Arts. Photo by the artist.

down the center, contrasting the even tones of the building's wall construction on the left with a variety of decorative patterns from the previous occupants's wallpaper or paint choices on the right—the process had changed dramatically. In a project description, the artist elaborated: «In appearance, the "mural" resembles a large, painterly abstraction. In contrast to its initial appearance and to the

additive-layering concept of painting, it is a work derived from the sculptural process of subtraction or removal of layers.»<sup>20</sup> Maintaining the formal characteristics of non-objective painting within his new practice allowed Newmann to slowly ease away from the canvas, beyond the limits described by Irwin, with less discomfort. In this transitional work, he balanced his exploration of color and shape with a new-found interest in the history of a site altered by human contact.

A similarly transitional artwork from 1976 demonstrated a unique attempt on the part of the artist to reflect a particular site within the confines of a two-dimensional structure. Covering over forty feet of the wooden floorboards of his Euclid Market studio with paper, Newmann and his assistants made a giant rubbing, recording the texture of the grain and the diagonal orientation of the boards in relation to the room's edges—a map in full scale

---

**20** Robert Newmann, "Project Description for 1227 G Street, NW," unpublished file in artist's personal archive, 1975.



12. Installation of *Euclid Market*, 1976, paint stick on paper and Roplex, 504 x 276 inches. Photo by the artist.



13. *Euclid Market*, 1976, scaled study of studio using paint-stick on paper and Roplex, 96 x 177 inches. Collection of the artist. Photo by the artist.

(pic . 12). These large strips of paper were then to be pieced together so that the lines of the floor boards would appear uninterrupted. However, given the sheer immensity of the project's dimensions and the possibility that it may never been shown in full, the artist later scaled the footprint to approximately one-third the size of the original floor plan. This reduction was then laid on a large piece

of glass and immersed in clear liquid Roplex. A second piece of glass was used to cover the other side, and Roplex was again pressed against the rubbing. Once dry, the glass was easily removed, but the paper was encased in, and protected by, the transparent Roplex surface. While the Roplex has yellowed with time, the visual interest created through the use of precise lines and repetition—a result of the two-and-one-half-inch bands consistently running parallel to each other throughout the rubbing—remains starkly contrasted with nuanced clusters of spots, smudges, scars and other signs of wear on the surface of the floor (pic . 13).

The most noticeable of the marks trace two footprints, delineating the precise location where a cashier stood, processing payments for market customers until the corner-store was closed for business after the 1968 Martin Luther King riots. Its former sign, visible above the door until the building was torn down to make way for condominiums (pic. 14), reminded Newmann of the building's unique past. The space had witnessed much, including the artist's slow artistic progressions from 1971 to 1976. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the *Euclid Market* site-plan embodied elements of both his former paint and new site-specific techniques



14. Exterior photograph of the Euclid Market building in Washington, D.C. taken on April 6, 2008 before demolition. Photo by Ron Roberson.

that would singularly come to dominate his artistic attention moving forward. Having been created through the application of black paint-stick pigment on paper, *Euclid Market* represents the positive layers of his earlier paintings, but those same marks also trace the negative space between the floorboards. The finished product became a two dimensional record of the past, incorporating real time,

space, and human activity, including the artist himself, and highlighted Newmann's new subtractive process—an archeological record—despite a lack of obvious, tactile depth.

While restoring an Austin-Healey, the artist considered the process of sandblasting—used to remove old paint from the car's exterior before refinishing—as a tool to sculpt other surfaces. It was simple: «knowing that it could be done and then doing it,» stated the artist matter-of-factly.<sup>21</sup> This would considerably speed up the artist's subtractive process and allow for larger areas to be etched. An outgrowth of this new technique, his next installation was created on the walls of the short-lived Gallery 641 near the National Gallery of Art at 641 Indiana Avenue. Caught in the midst of construction for the new Metro subway system, the gallery only lasted a year. The site-specific piece was composed of two twelve-inch bands spaced one foot apart, essentially large squares nested within the gallery's

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert Newmann, in discussion with the author, February 7, 2015.

parameter (pic . 15). The smaller square fit within the confines of the floor, but the larger outside band did not. One side wrapped from the floor up the gallery wall, changing planes. The wide lines etched into the floor were created by sanding through the floor's wooden finish, but the strip that folded up the adjacent wall was chiseled through the baseboard and sandblasted through the white paint covering the brick wall. The shallow relief, although flat, «was sculptural in nature, because it was integrally attached to the space it inhabited, became inseparably part of the



15. Robert W. Newmann sandblasting *For the Ancient and the Urgent*, 1976, subtractive process, 300 x 300 inches, at Gallery 641, Washington, D.C. Photo by Ray Kerns.

room, and could be walked around and through, penetrated, if you will,» explained Newmann.<sup>22</sup>

Titled *For the Ancient and the Urgent* (pic . 16), the piece sought to express the conflicting temporal influences at work in

---

**22-24** Robert Newmann, email messages to the author, 2013-2015.



16. *For the Ancient and the Urgent*, 1976, subtractive process, 300 x 300 inches, at Gallery 641, Washington, D.C. Photo by Max Hirshfeld.

the process—a dichotomy of traditional and cutting-edge art-making methodologies. The two halves of the title taken together express an oxymoron. Something ancient is at odds with the very concept of «urgency,» which would seem to express an awareness of a future condition. After all, a situation is not urgent unless there is an opportunity to change the outcome. Therefore, Newmann’s appreciation of things to come—the urgent—joined together with his deep respect for that which had already past—

ancient lingering traces. Aware of this paradox, the artist articulated: «Scratching through the surface to make a mark is indeed an ancient way to make art. Directly incorporating the room into the art itself by using the materials and the architecture of the gallery was the new.»<sup>23</sup> Beginning with an ancient art-making technique, he claimed it as his own, and the outcome was entirely contemporary. Painting,



too, is an established method of art production, and before etching, Newmann had used that ancient practice as an opportunity to innovate and change our expectations of the medium. Ancient or urgent, old or new, Modernist or Post-Modernist, sculptural or pictorial—Newmann’s art is purposefully difficult to quantify, but in each case, dating back to his 1970 departure from the flat painting techniques of the Washington Color School, «The physical edges [created through his laying process] evolved into the *raison d’être*.»<sup>24</sup>

Layers would remain central to the artist’s practice as he said goodbye to the District and made a new home in New York City. The artistic constant of physical layers merged with fresh influences, reflecting his new home in Manhattan and seen in his 1984 installation at The Queens Museum (pic. 17). Loudly declaring itself as belonging to a new camp of artworks, the installation was inspired, at least in part, by Newmann’s SoHo neighbors—Donald

---

**22-24** Robert Newmann,  
email messages to the  
author, 2013-2015.



17. *ABC's*, 1984, subtractive process, gypsum board, 108 x 312 inches, installation at Queens Museum, New York for *Activated Walls* exhibition. Photo by the artist.

Judd and Carl André—for there can be little doubt that the title *ABC's* makes reference to a popular but alternative terminology for Minimalism known simply as ABC art. This installation, a part of the *Activated Walls* exhibition, was a straightforward example of the subtractive process but deviated from the sandblasting techniques utilized in *For Pierre L'Enfant* and *For the Ancient and the Urgent*.

Newmann knew from experiments in his studio that he could easily peel back the layers of paint and paper on drywall to reveal the cotton brown subsurface underneath. In practice, it was a laborious, slow process that took several days for a crew of two to accomplish. As layers of drywall accumulated at their feet, the edges of the pealed sheetrock became rigidly defined, birthing a simple silhouette of art's primary geometric forms—the triangle, circle, and square. Their depth was real, carved from the

wall, and wed to the environment. They shared the same space as their viewer, as had been the case with even the earliest subtractive works, but a breakthrough was on the horizon.

If the artist applied his subtractive etching process to a clear glass medium, could he introduce even the bodies of his viewers into his composition—a grand immersive

performance? *Silicon Shuffle* (pic. 18), commissioned by Bell of Pennsylvania for its new Corporate Computer Center at Temple University, took approximately one year to complete from proposal to final installation. The image depicted on the glass resembled the interior patterning of a microchip exploded and related directly to the building's technological function. Initially, Bell of Pennsylvania proposed an opaque security wall onto which a mural might be painted, as the vertical partition was meant to function practically to separate the main lobby from the rest of the building.

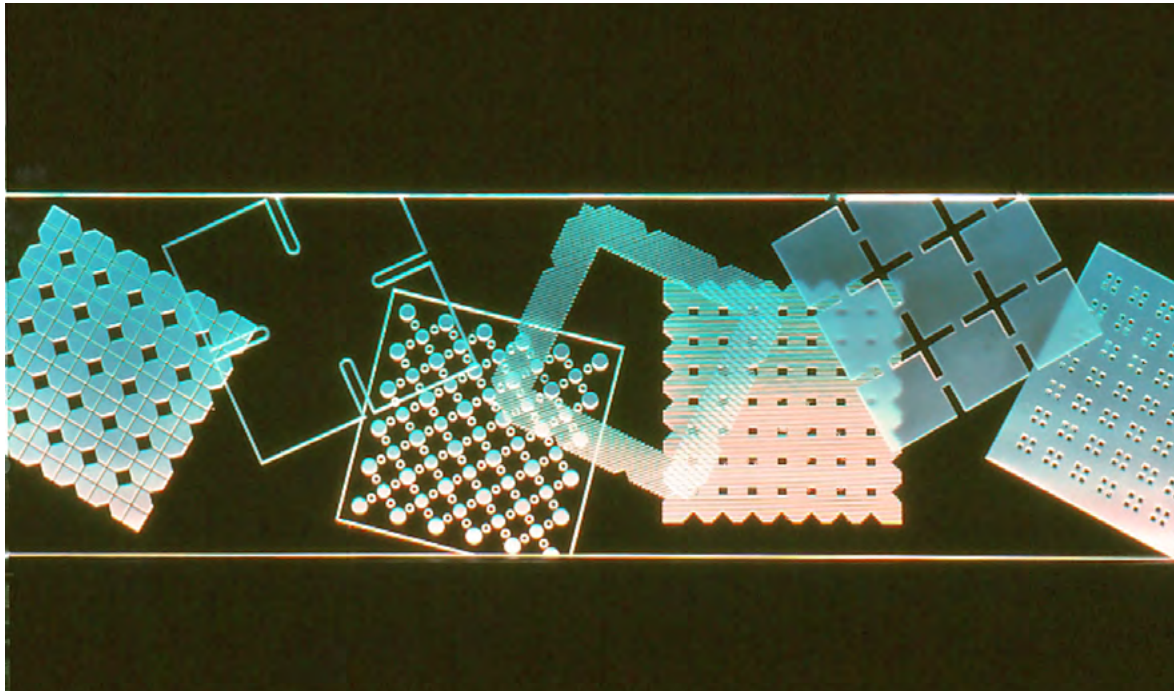


18. *Silicon Shuffle*, 1986, subtractive process, glass, 108 x 592 inches, installation at Bell of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Photo by Karen Krause.

Ultimately, Newmann's client was thrilled by the increased visibility of the proposed glass wall which they saw as enhancing the security of the building. After securing their approval, the artist set about securing enough safety glass for eight separate four-foot by eight-foot glass panels. Like a car's windshield, safety glass contains a thin layer of plastic embedded within the otherwise fragile material, and this allowed Newmann to etch as deeply into his chosen substrate as possible while maintaining structural integrity.

From an artistic standpoint, this transparency ensured that people shuffling past would become part of the installation. It also demonstrated tangibly Newmann's developed attention to anthropomorphic relationships in space. Even as his monochromatic arrow canvases required movement on the part of the viewer to fully appreciate their sculptural qualities, his audience consisted of subjects to his object. His silicon shufflers, on the other hand, melded with the artwork, changing the visual experience for other passersby, and in figure 18, his wife Mary Carol models the

effect. Whether bodies on either side of the partition, or the etchings themselves, the glass picture plane was sandwiched as if by the carefully employed letters of Newmann's *A/B Painting*. This impressive subtractive installation combined the environmental



19. *Silicon Shuffle* maquette, 1986, subtractive process, glass, 8 x 24 inches, installation at Bell of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Photo by Jay Nadelson.

interest of Newmann's monochromatic arrows, the transparency of his double-sided paintings, and the site-awareness of *Euclid Market*. A careful observer might also note that the third dotted square from the left, dipping ever-so-slightly below the bottom of the wall, and quite visible in the maquette (pic. 19), takes its imagery from a Thomas Downing dot painting. It was a subtle tribute to Newmann's Washington Color School teacher who had passed away during the early stages of design.

## **IMMATERIAL SCULPTURES: CONCEPTUAL CONCLUSIONS**

While regularly commissioned to work on other large installation projects for clients such as St. Joseph's University, Bristol Meyers Squibb, and the Albert Einstein Medical Center, the artist found it often difficult to collaborate with strong-willed clients and architects—both of whom had their own creative inclinations. The entire process was laborious, from the permissions and permits to the grant-writing, fundraising, and hiring of help. As a case in point, one year into fabricating an etched glass ceiling for Atlantic Financial, with a budget of nearly \$100,000, the Resolution Trust Corporation terminated the contract, and it took another year, working with the FDIC and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for the artist to get paid. After the sting of termination, the artist regrouped, enrolling in classes at both New York University and Pratt University to receive certificates in computer-aided design and three-dimensional computer modeling. Using these new skills, Newmann jumped into a cyber studio, and his virtual output has been prolific. Only

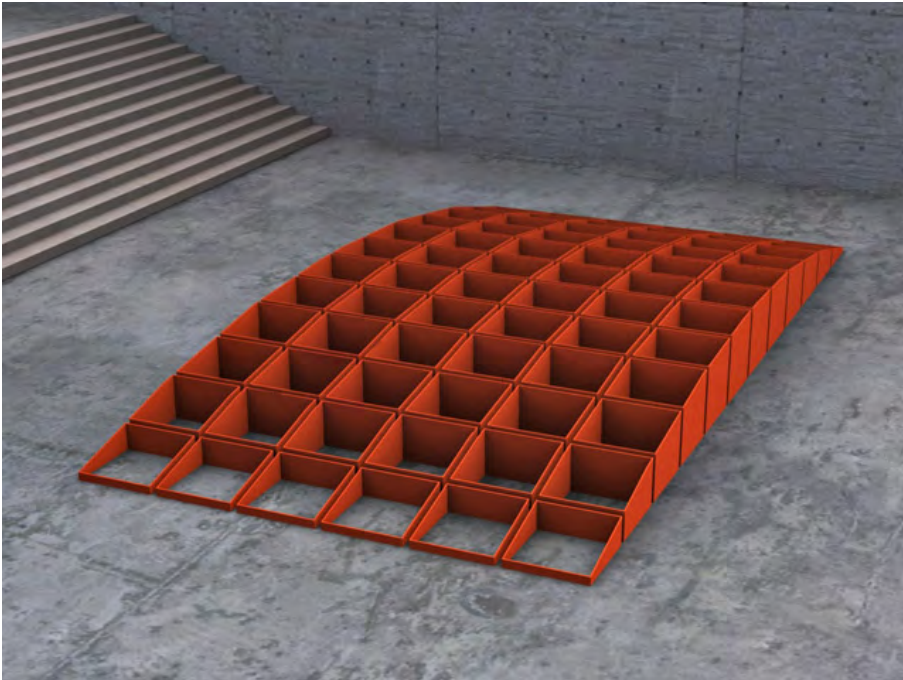
in the digital realm can he sample from several series at the same time, switch medium instantly, and never worry about storage. While a practical concern, space of the non-digital variety can be hard to come by, and physical art objects require a repository—whether stacked, hung, or on display. Aware of this fact, Newmann noted in an interview with David Tannous, «Paintings, in a way, are like puppies: you are always trying to find homes for them. The [installations] are a turn-around for me. Because these are site-related, I don't have to find homes for them. They have a place.»<sup>25</sup> However, almost every one of Newmann's large-scale installations has been destroyed (along with its place) and exists strictly in the realm of documentation. Literally attached to their home, were they destined to make impact with a future wrecking ball?

Ironically, experimentation with site-specificity may have subconsciously resulted in Newmann's final plunge into the immaterial. If art is temporary, why fabricate it at all? In

---

**25** Robert Newmann quoted in "Robert Newmann Recent Works Exhibition:

A Conversation with David Tannous," Gallery 641, 1976.



20. *Untitled*, 2013, plans for painted steel sculpture, 36 wide x 18 long x 3 feet tall.

response, Newmann postulated: «It has occurred to me that documenting the idea may be more important than actually building the work.»<sup>26</sup> Many of the recent intangible projects, ripe for conceptual consideration, reclaim the strong color and grid-like qualities of the 1970s arrow paintings (pic. 20). However, the early reliance on color differentiation is noticeably absent. The internal color contrasts of the Washington Color School compositions—represented in the C.I.A. canvas or Corcoran triptych—

remain a thing of the past for Newmann. Color is used minimally, as it had been in the monochromatic tableaus, to contrast with the object’s surroundings rather than with other colors found within the picture’s limited two-dimensional surface.

Comprehending painting as a layered activity clearly facilitated his eventual

---

**26** Robert Newmann, email message to the author, November 28, 2015.



move into sculpture—a snowball gathering speed—and more immediately differentiated his practice from that of the Color School: flat versus layered, optical versus tactile, disembodied color versus skins of pigment, compositional focus versus experiential, etc. With the build up of paint, there was no longer the possibility of color as abstract form; raised plateaus of pigment were a physical reality rather than an abstracted one. From additive layers on the canvas to subtractive layers of environment, he slowly transitioned away from Modernism altogether. Newmann's most successful installations use his signature layering technique to envelope the viewer—a controlled anthropomorphic, art-viewing experience, but even Newmann's paintings present an awareness of environmental elements beyond the picture plane. Despite shifts in medium, technique, and artistic influence, these are the constants that tie together Newmann's life work post 1970—an investigation of real depth rather than illusionary, an interest in the experiential, and a general exploitation of material until his

materials vanish, as had his arrows, painted or sculpted out of existence. Canvases, easily stored in a museum's warehouse, demonstrate a larger societal value placed on the contributions of a select few. Newmann's tableaux *are* thusly honored, as has been noted throughout, but his mature works cannot be hung on sliding racks or rotated out when a curator sees fit. The museum chapter is only half of the story, and it is up to art historians, critics, and scholars to tell the other half, working with artists to document site-specific art or installation innovations—beyond the tangible and permanent art of yesterday.

**Antonia Dapena-Tretter graduated summa cum laude with her BA from Dickinson College and her MA in Art History from the University of Toronto. While lecturing and publishing on contemporary art, she maintains a real passion for Colorfield painting which stems from her time working on the *Jack Bush Catalogue Raisonné*. Drawn to object-oriented scholarship, she has since made a career in the museum field at institutions such as The Kreeger Museum in Washington, D.C., and The Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco.**