

Barnett Newman

Craig F. Starr

Barnett Newman was the least compromising of artists. After conceiving the so-called zip format for his pictures on his birthday in 1948, he apparently saw no reason to depart from the habit of separating vast expanses of color with vertical divisions of one sort or another. Indeed the language he concocted around his art was couched in moral rather than esthetic terms, suggesting that any departure from the simple formula he had uncovered would amount to a failure of responsibility.

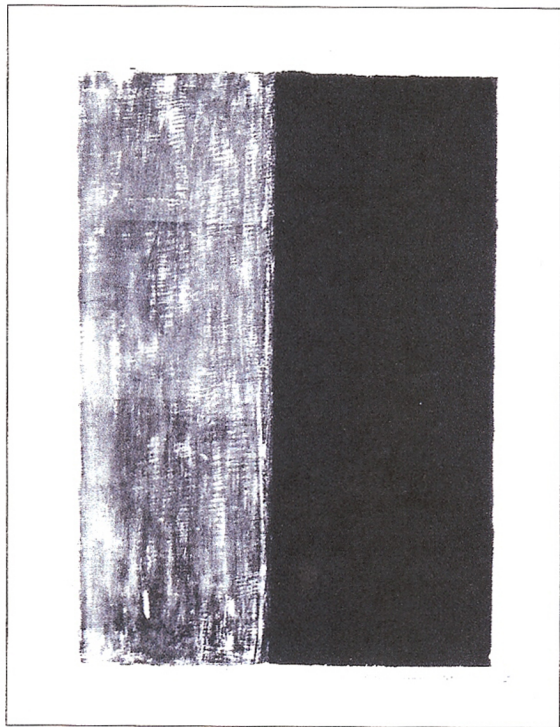
What this two-part exhibition, titled "Playing This Litho Instrument: The Prints of Barnett Newman," furnished, however, was an opportunity to consider one of the very few moments when Newman seriously questioned his belief.

As the gallery's excellent little catalogue informs us, Newman was 56 years old and had just experienced a heart attack and the death of his brother. He was looking mortality square in the face when he decided to try printmaking. No wonder his customary self-confidence deserted him.

To create the beautifully colored lithographs of 1963–64 that he called "Cantos," he worked with images that were the same proportions in inches as his earlier works were in feet. Then, for the 1968 etchings "Notes," he not only re-

duced the size again—the actual images are often little bigger than postcards—but also abandoned color entirely and replaced his featureless expanses with ones enlivened by cross-hatching, and, unbelievably, polka dots. The results are murky, claustrophobic, and hopelessly flawed. But these etchings are probably among the most genuinely courageous things that Newman ever made.

—Robert Ayers



Barnett Newman, *Untitled*, 1961, lithograph, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Craig F. Starr.