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Barnett Newman’s series of fourteen paintings titled *The Stations of the Cross* have an undeniable allure [see figures 1–14 at the end of this text]. The attraction seems to come from their physical starkness, their serial nature, and most of all from their association with particular aspects of Christian religion despite their abstract appearance. Connecting Jesus and the end of his life on the Cross with abstract paintings has been taken by some to be extremely powerful and by others to be extremely foolish. Either way, one must admit that, in making this connection, Newman showed a great deal of daring and produced a series of paintings which are entirely unique.

Constructing a convincing understanding of the paintings has thus been a unique challenge for scholars, for doing so necessitates bringing their title, individual forms, and serial arrangement, as well as Newman’s intentions in painting, into a coherent synthesis. Scholars have addressed some of these issues, but never all in one interpretation, most frequently leaving out Newman’s stated aims and the paintings’ serial arrangement. This reluctance may well stem from the definitions of modernism which have structured conceptions of Newman’s career. The highly influential critic Clement Greenberg indeed wrote about Newman’s work, saying that “there is no program, no polemic, in these paintings. They do not intend to make a point, let alone shock or startle,” discarding the artist’s writings and statements on content and preferring to understand art as fully constituted in form alone.¹ Similarly, Michael Fried wrote that awareness of physical space creates “theatricality” and can be “merely interesting,” while only art which defeats theatricality can hold “conviction,”

make a strong statement, and be properly modern. ² This has discredited art which encourages viewers to move, including serial art with multiple objects.

There is good reason, however, to bring these aspects into discussions of Newman’s art. Newman was a prolific writer and used writing to formulate his purpose in making art, so his writings and statements must be considered. The *Stations* individual titles—First Station, Second Station, etc.—suggest a serial mode, their serial physical arrangement structures viewers’ understanding of them, and the series is titled after a Christian devotion which is also serial. As such, the paintings must be considered one by one and in order. If current definitions of modernism do not leave room for such important information, then they must be expanded. This paper will thus advance a new understanding of the *Stations* as concerned with destabilization of visual perception and the nature of human suffering, incorporating the elements of seriality and content which have previously been overlooked.

**Newman’s Writings and Statements**

Barnett Newman was born in 1905 to Abraham and Anna Newman, Jewish immigrants from Russian Poland who came to New York City in 1900.³ His early life included skipping out of high school classes to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art, taking classes at the Art Students League, studying philosophy at the City College of

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² Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 1967, in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, ed. Michael Fried (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 160–65. Though he does not mention Newman and primarily responds to Minimalist art, it seems noteworthy that Fried’s foundational essay was published so soon after Newman’s *Stations* were first exhibited (which was in 1966). This suggests at least some connection between Newman, Fried, and Minimalism, which deserves future consideration.

New York, and working for his father’s clothing manufacturing company. He went on to teach, publish a civil service magazine, study botany and ornithology, and marry Annalee Greenhouse.

Newman did not discover his mature style of abstract painting until 1948, at the age of 43, but before then he laid out his aims in writing and was revered by many American abstract artists for, as the critic Dore Ashton put it, “presenting a verbal accompaniment to a visual movement” during the 1940’s. Despite being unsatisfied with his own painting at the time, Newman was able to express his artistic interests in words before he could reach them in actual works. When Newman found his mature style he considered it successful because it fulfilled those earlier aspirations, meaning that his statements from the 1940’s are consistent with the objects that followed them. Examining Newman’s writings and statements about art, therefore, is essential to understanding his paintings.

Newman wrote to explain his vision of art that would overturn “the invention of beauty by the Greeks, that is, their postulate of beauty as an ideal,” which was “the

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4 Ibid., 318–19.
5 Ibid., 319–21. In addition to publishing about civil service and the rights of public workers, Newman was heavily involved in politics before his career as a painter took off. Among other things, he battled with the New York Board of Examiners over the qualifications necessary to teach art in schools and even ran for mayor of New York City under a manifesto titled “On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture” in a campaign hastily arranged weeks before elections were held (Ho, “Chronology,” 319–21).
7 Melissa Ho “Talk and the Untalkable,” in Reconsidering Barnett Newman: A Symposium at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, ed. Melissa Ho (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005), 2. Newman did write less once his career in painting began to gain momentum, but Melissa Ho notes that this was simply due to the artist being unable to devote as much time to writing. As such, Newman’s decreased writing should not be seen as an attempt to distance himself from previous written material, in fact he continued to explain his art in words through numerous lectures and interviews.
8 Since Newman wrote a great deal, it seems that one should avoid selective use of quotations, or the use of quotations as final evidence in making arguments about his work. Instead, Newman’s writing should be more of a jumping off point for understanding his work, and it will function as such here.
bugbear of European art and European aesthetic philosophies.” This was because a focus on beauty was too limiting, as “beauty here is nothing more than a manifest of taste, for the manipulation of good color, pure shapes, good composition can only affect the sensuous nature of man,” rather than any higher faculties. Such art was “a voluptuous art first, an intellectual art only by accident,” and was equipped only to deal with beauty, not with what Newman saw as truly significant issues. Beauty was not, for Newman, a virtue and an end in itself. It was only in the modern era that the artist became established as “a creator and a searcher rather than as a copyist or a maker of candy.” With this new opportunity, Newman predicted that “the art of the future will... be an art that is abstract yet full of feeling.”

It was this new art that Newman sought to create and define, and its chief concern was the expression of abstract thought and ideas. From this concern came a requirement for “new symbols, new images, and a new plastic language. This language has to be abstract so that it can express abstract thought.” Despite Newman’s interest in an abstract language, it was very important that this art be different from pure or geometric abstraction, for while a painter in those modes “is concerned with his language, the new painter is concerned with his subject matter,

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11 Ibid., 147.
12 Newman, “On Modern Art: Inquiry and Confirmation,” 1944, in SWI, 67. Newman’s understanding of previous art is clearly unique. It would be difficult to trace the sources of his opinions, and doing so would make for a compelling separate study. Here, however, it is sufficient to see that Newman had a particular and well articulated view of previous art, and forged a clear definition of his own efforts in opposition to it.
13 Ibid., 69.
with his thought.”\textsuperscript{15} The new painter was “therefore not concerned with geometric forms per se but in creating forms that by their abstract nature carry some abstract intellectual content.”\textsuperscript{16} Thought, rather than the means needed to express it, was to be the focal point. The visual qualities of a painting were to be determined solely by the thought which the painting was to express, and not by any direct concern for the particular visual aspects of the painting.\textsuperscript{17} The new artist would also avoid dealing with the opposite of “subject matter,” which Newman called “object matter,” meaning the physically apparent world that had been the interest of so many prior artists.\textsuperscript{18}

Given his desire to express abstract thought through an abstract plastic language, what were the particular ideas that Newman hoped that the new art would convey? Newman found an interest in “metaphysical understanding” and “awesome feelings,” and also said that, to the extent that an artist is concerned with the metaphysical, “his art is concerned with the sublime,” and from this the hope is to “catch the basic truth of life, which is its sense of tragedy.”\textsuperscript{19} The artist was also to “set down the ordered truth that is the expression of his attitude toward the mystery of life and death” and to “search for the hidden meanings of life.”\textsuperscript{20,21} He was also to

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 139–40.
\textsuperscript{17} Newman took Mondrian as the key example of what to avoid in this regard, saying that Mondrian focused solely on the form of his paintings and that “the geometry swallowed up his metaphysics” (“The Sublime is Now,” 173). This may be an unfair reading of Mondrian, but it allowed Newman to define himself by opposition.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 145.
depict “nothing that has any known physical visual, or mathematical counterpart.”  
The new art was thus “a religious art, a modern mythology concerned with numinous ideas and feelings.” Newman consistently pointed to these very high, mysterious, and broad ideas, but would not or could not define them more specifically in writings or interviews.

In a sense this is reasonable: why would the new artist’s visual works be necessary if their ideas could simply be written or spoken? On the other hand, abstraction might prevent these ideas from being expressed with any greater clarity. Newman acknowledged this, saying that the new painting is “a risky aesthetic, because the emphasis on feeling had a tendency to shut out intellectual content.” The art, therefore, is an “attempt to achieve feeling through intellectual content” and the “new pictures are therefore philosophic.” Newman was after man’s spirit and asked, sarcastically, “shall we express that spirit with artificially posed nudes amidst studio trappings under a theatrical spotlight?” Obviously not, as to do so would be incredibly insufficient. Clarity could not be had by means of realistic anecdotes or allegories, so abstraction was the only option.

Still, although Newman claimed this new art would give viewers everything, he ultimately presented paint abstractly arranged on canvas. How might this

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25 Ibid.
27 Many things can be counted as allegorical in this sense, and are thus to be avoided. Newman would never, for example, take a human figure, a landscape, or even a line to represent an idea, when an idea is so much more than what is visually apparent. This is why, as will be discussed later, his zips cannot themselves be taken to represent ideas, for ideas are not non-objective arrangements of paint any more than they are posed nudes. For Newman, to say that a line can stand for an idea is not an abstract statement, it is simply incorrect or insufficient.
seemingly meager offering lead to greater understanding of the artist’s ideas, of “the basic truth of life,” and everything else discussed above? Newman did not touch on this point often, but he did at times invoke the presence and role of the paintings’ viewers to solve this problem. He wrote, for instance, that “the effect of these new pictures is that the shapes and colors act as symbols to [elicit] sympathetic participation on the part of the beholder in the artist’s vision.”²⁸ Similarly, the artist “is anxious to act as a medium for the muse to link the beholder with essences.”²⁹ As such, the new paintings were not themselves to contain everything; their shapes and colors alone could not possibly be expressive enough to represent subject matter directly, so they would instead connect viewers to actual metaphysical forces and ideas. At the same time, the paintings need their viewers to function, for without this connection they would remain as nothing more than paint on canvas.

In this way, the paintings can express everything that Newman hoped they would. They chiefly require a viewer who is willing to look at them not though “the nostalgic glasses of history” with their attendant concern for beauty, but with an open mind.³⁰ Still, since viewers are working from paintings, the content or meaning they receive should not be any less abstract than the works themselves. As the paintings are not explicit in their message, nothing explicit can be taken from them. This, however, only prevents meaning from being specific; it does not prevent it from being powerful.

²⁹ Ibid., 145.
Newman’s Paintings and Their Titles

The beginnings of Newman’s artistic production are difficult to trace, as he destroyed many of his early works. Indeed only thirteen of his paintings from before 1948 survive, though numerous ink, crayon, and watercolor works on paper are available.\(^{31}\) Newman’s earliest surviving works on paper display a style of surrealism and biomorphic abstraction [figures 18–19]. Though no distinct objects are apparent, the works’ colorful and curvilinear lines seem to correspond to the shapes of plants and animals. Titles include *The Blessing*, *The Song of Orpheus*, and *Gea*, but most of the earlier drawings are untitled.\(^{32}\)

In 1945 Newman’s work took a significant turn, as vertical bands began to dominate his images [figures 20–21]. The vertical bands can be blank areas of paper or paint differentiated from a background. They often taper from top to bottom and are sometimes angled. Some works include multiple bands, while others have just one. None of the works has a solid background, as all include some modulation around the bands. Again, most of the drawings are untitled, with exceptions including *Untitled (The Moment)* and *Untitled (The Break)*, while most of the surviving paintings have titles, including *The Beginning*, *The Word I*, and *Moment*.\(^{33}\)

Beginning in 1948, Newman’s style changed yet again as it assumed its mature form. The first painting done this way was *Onement I* [figure 22].\(^{34}\) There the

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32 Ibid., 373, 376, 380. There is no apparent reason to consider Newman’s earlier untitled works less finished, as they are often visually similar to titled works from the same period.
33 Ibid., 154, 158, 160, 404, 418.
34 Ibid., 172. The canonical description of this, Newman’s most important moment of inspiration, comes from writer Thomas B. Hess, who was also a friend of Newman’s. Hess relates that Newman painted *Onement I* somewhat by accident on his forty-third birthday in 1948. He had prepared the canvas with a base of deep red paint, fixed a piece of tape down the center, and smeared a (continued)
main element is once again a vertical band, but it is not tapered or angled and, most
different of all, the areas around it are barely modulated. Newman would continue
making paintings with these characteristics until his death in 1970 [figures 23–25].
Some deviations into more modulation, horizontal bands, shaped canvases, and other ideas were briefly experimented with, but for the most part Newman’s mature paintings feature one or more vertical bands against a solid background. Within these parameters he produced works with various colors, arrangements of bands, and physical dimensions. Titles range from the poetic and grave End of Silence and Primordial Light to the biblical Abraham and Covenant, the classical Argos and Dionysus, and even the playful Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I.35 Clearly, despite the austere and abstract nature of his paintings, Newman used his titles to associate them with well-known concepts, and often very serious ones at that, making solid connections to his grand subject matter.

It is also important to note that the vertical bands in Newman’s paintings came to be known as “zips,” a term used a great deal in scholarship on the artist. Despite this ubiquity, Newman did not publicly debut the term until 1966, well into his career.36 Given this timing, Susan Rich astutely notes that “zip might best be understood as an ambivalent term in Newman’s lexicon. Although the artist was

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lighter color over the tape as a test, intending to do much more work. Instead, according to Hess, Newman stopped there and “looked at the picture for a long time. Indeed he studied it for some eight months. He had finished questing” (Thomas B. Hess, Barnett Newman, exh. cat., (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 51.).

35 Ibid., 180, 258, 190, 194, 208, 210, 328.
36 Susan K. Rich, “The Proper Name of Newman’s Zip,” in Reconsidering Barnett Newman, 99. Newman’s first recorded use of the term came in his “Conversation” with Thomas Hess about the Stations (cited above), though Rich suggests that he may have already tried using the term among friends. The term appeared again in an interview with Newman in 1969, shown on film in the 1972 documentary Painters Painting by Emile de Antonio, and has since been used in almost all scholarship on the artist.
trying out a new language with his *zip*, the term was primarily a means of conveying an older artistic message,” the one which was already present in Newman’s paintings and was merely being given a more enticing and specific label. Following Rich’s lead, the term “zip” shall be used here at times, as it is directly connected to Newman’s mature style and the resulting scholarship. In examining particular paintings, however, the more literal word “band” will be given preference when Newman’s vertical elements are discussed to avoid unnecessary association or confusion.

**Newman’s Stations of the Cross Series**

This paper focuses on a particular set of Newman’s paintings; his series of fourteen works made between 1958 and 1966 titled *The Stations of the Cross* as a group and *First Station*, *Second Station*, etc. through *Fourteenth Station* individually [see again figures 1–14]. These paintings were first exhibited as a group in 1966 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, and now hang in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., though they are owned by Robert and Jane Meyerhoff. Notably, they have been associated with another painting by Newman, *Be II*, which hung with them in the Guggenheim and now hangs with them in the National Gallery [figure 15].

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37 Ibid., 100.
38 Many scholars indeed place undue emphasis on Newman’s zips as separate objects within his paintings, or even reduce discussion of the paintings to the zips alone. Thomas Hess, for example, writes that “Newman’s first move is an act of division, straight down, creating an image. The image not only re-enacts God’s primal gesture, it also presents the gesture itself, the zip, as an independent shape—man—the only animal who walks upright, Adam, virile, erect” (Hess, 59). Since Newman took his zips to relate to subject matter (thought) rather than object matter (Hess’s Adam) and envisioned his canvases as more unified, it is my hope that avoiding the term zip in descriptions of paintings will allow for a more visually rigorous analysis of Newman’s mode of abstraction.
The series’ title refers to the Christian Stations of the Cross, a series of fourteen parts of the Passion of Jesus, the final events of his life from his condemnation to death through his crucifixion and burial. The title of the series is sometimes lengthened to *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. The additional words are Aramaic for “why have you forsaken me?”, and are Jesus’ last utterance on the cross as reported in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. The subtitle first appeared with the paintings at the Guggenheim in 1966 under Newman’s direction, and has since had an ambivalent relationship with the series, as not all sources include it. Here the subtitle will be respected, for if Newman wanted it to apply to the paintings at their debut, it should be accounted for in any interpretation of them.

The paintings themselves are all the same size and all have zip compositions typical of Newman’s mature style. Furthermore, all but the fourteenth include bare canvas and only one type of paint, either black or white. As such, the *Stations* have a fairly stark appearance, especially when compared to Newman’s more colorful paintings.

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40 Mt. 27:46 and Mk. 15:34 RSV (Revised Standard Version Bible). The entire phrase is “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani,” meaning “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is also notable that this is a direct quotation of Psalm 22, verse 1, which is attributed to King David. It is not uncommon for Jesus to reference the Old Testament in the Gospels, so Newman’s connection to Jesus, not David, remains clear because of the title *The Stations of the Cross*.

41 Newman, “Statement,” in *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966), 9. For two prominent examples, Shiff’s *Catalogue Raisonné* includes the subtitle (pg. 269) while Temkin’s *Barnett Newman* catalogue does not (pg. 228). There is no clear reason for these discrepancies, so it seems fair to assume that including the subtitle is simply taken as optional, as is often the case with subtitles for any works of art.
Problems in Previous Scholarship on the Stations

A fair amount has been written about the Stations, which is not surprising, as they are Newman’s only series of paintings. Furthermore, that there are fourteen Stations relates directly to the fourteen canonical Christian Stations of the Cross, adding a physical correspondence to the paintings’ title that is not present in Newman’s other works. Still, previous scholarship has failed to adequately assess Newman’s Stations. Across issues of religion, history, and visual interpretation, scholars have either erred in discussing the Stations, or failed to apply the best of their conclusions to the series. As discussed earlier, many of these problems come from misapplication or lack of application of Newman’s writings, or a lack of consideration for the Stations arrangement as a series. Much of this paper will thus be informed by the successes and failures of earlier scholarship on the Stations.

Given that The Stations, as well as many other paintings by Newman, have religious titles, and that Newman came from a Jewish background, some scholars have sought to view the artist’s career in religious terms. This thinking began with a catalogue written by Newman’s friend Thomas B. Hess in 1971, which includes the statement that Newman “was as proud of his Jewish background as the du Ponts are of the French or the Kennedys of the Irish.” This leads Hess into a reading of Newman’s paintings, and particularly their titles, with respect to the Jewish discipline

42 Some of Newman’s other paintings have common titles ending in different Roman numerals, for example there are Onement paintings from Onement I to Onement VI (Shiff, 250). These, however, are treated only as runs with some commonality, and need not be displayed together like the Stations. Newman also did a lesser-known series of eighteen prints titled 18 Cantos in 1963–64 (Shiff, 455).
of Kabbalah, supported by numerous quotations of rabbis and Jewish scholars regarding Jewish tradition.\textsuperscript{44}

Hess loses credibility, however, for having written his catalogue after Newman’s death and with little regard for Newman’s published writings and statements. Hess’s reading has since been discredited, particularly by Newman’s wife Annalee, who pointed out that “the only connection that exists between Barnett Newman and the Kabbalah is that Newman used kabbalistic language for the titles of several of his works. He did so, I am certain, because the language was poetic and fanciful.”\textsuperscript{45} She adds, “let’s not forget that Newman also used language from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Greek epic and myth, and he made reference to numerous other sources such as American transcendentalism in his titles.”\textsuperscript{46} Indeed Newman was no more a Kabbalist than he was a Christian or a Greek. Furthermore, it would have hardly been in keeping with Newman’s pursuit of abstract and general ideas to have made paintings that would only be accessible to the followers of one relatively esoteric religious tradition.\textsuperscript{47} In looking at \textit{The Stations of the Cross}, then, it seems wrong to assume that Newman took a strictly religious approach to the paintings, despite their religious title. There should thus be little worry about Newman misappropriating or distorting particular Christian themes as a Jewish artist, for his approach was more broad and secular.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 56, 83.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} For more on this issue see Matthew Baigell’s article and response to Annalee Newman listed in the bibliography which follows this text. Baigell connects Newman’s zips to a particular facet of the Kabbalah’s description of creation. This account remains unconvincing for its reliance on Hess, who in turn relied too much on Newman’s titles. Neither explains how a connection to esoteric religion would be supported at all by Newman’s own writings and statements.
It has also been common for scholarship on Newman to examine his career with a focus on historical context. For example, Harold Rosenberg wrote in 1978 that Newman “knew that events equal to the greatest happenings in history and legend were going on… If credible pictures of these were no longer possible, their essence could be made present through ideas—this would be accomplished in his paintings,” tying Newman’s abstract work directly to the events going on around him. More recently, Mark Godfrey’s 2007 book *Abstraction and the Holocaust* takes a more specific view by emphasizing Newman’s “problem of what I can really paint” after World War II and concluding that “Newman’s work emerges as a serious attempt to rethink painting in the aftermath of the Holocaust.”

Godfrey takes the *Stations* as his chief example, as their title allowed Newman “to partake in an established metaphor that had been used to address the suffering of Jews and other groups under Nazism for almost thirty years.” The original installation of the series at the Guggenheim was, according to Godfrey, “a place where memory was activated, a place of starkness, a place of loss.” Loss, he says, was felt in “the loss of the rich chromatic content” of Newman’s other paintings, as well as loss in “the paring down of viewing possibilities offered by the paintings.”

Godfrey’s interpretation suffers because nothing in the *Stations* or Newman’s statements on them points directly to the Holocaust and because, as this paper will

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48 Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1978), 37. Rosenberg fails to make enough direct connections between Newman and his time, and may leave readers wondering why most of Newman’s contemporaries didn’t adopt his style if broad conditions led so directly to it.
50 Ibid., 63–64.
51 Ibid., 70.
show, the paintings are more active than stark. Still, the connection he describes is important and merits further consideration.

The most central and difficult problem for Newman scholars, however, has been finding a proper way to look at the artist’s difficult abstract paintings. One approach has been outright rejection, typified by Dore Ashton’s review of the *Stations* in *Arts and Architecture* magazine, which found that “the specific form Newman gives me is ludicrously inadequate” to relate to the series’ weighty title.\(^{52}\)

Another approach has been to reach very broadly and enthusiastically for associations in Newman’s abstract idiom. Jane Dillenberger, for example, wrote in 1969 that the *Stations* celebrate “the preciousness of the minutely finite in the vast theater of the cosmos and the immeasurable, unending reaches of infinity.”\(^{53}\) Finally, many scholars emphasize Newman’s zips and largely ignore the other spaces of his canvases. In this manner, Hess looked for “secret symmetry” and mathematical relationships in Newman’s arrangements of zips, and also compared them to abstracted human figures, while Rosenberg said that the zip was “recognized by Newman as his Sign; it stood for him as his transcendental self.”\(^{54,55}\)

These methods are quite diverse, but the common quality among them is that they do not truly consider what it is like to look closely and thoughtfully at Newman’s paintings.

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54 Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, 51. This interpretation comes from an over reading of Newman’s statement that “the self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting,” which is included as a heading for Rosenberg’s text (pg. 21). Rosenberg appears, incorrectly, to take Newman’s “the self” to mean “my self.” Rosenberg thus provides a cautionary tale, suggesting that one cannot use quotations as final justifications for interpretations of Newman’s work, particularly because the artist wrote so much.
Nothing in the paintings suggests that they represent Dillenberger’s cosmos, Hess’s precise geometry, or Rosenberg’s abstract autobiography, or that they should receive Ashton’s harsh dismissal without further examination.

Godfrey provides some improvement in his examination of the Stations, wherein he notes that “paintings already seen were recalled as new ones were viewed, and the differences between previously viewed canvases were also called to mind as new contrasts were intuited.”56 This insightfully relies on the physical and serial nature of the works to lead to comparisons between paintings. Still, Godfrey’s discussion merely sees the paintings in terms of the “similarities and differences” that would be compared, and does not pick up on many essential details. This is because Godfrey begins to describe the paintings by paying good attention to the first four, but then speeds up into disastrously abbreviated discussion of the final ten canvases.57

The only writer to truly take perceptual experience as the most vital aspect of interpreting Newman’s paintings is Yve-Alain Bois, who is best represented in Barnett Newman: Paintings, a catalogue for an exhibition at the Pace Gallery in 1988. Bois looks at Newman’s paintings in chronological sequence so as to ask why the artist went in various directions, and why some aspects of his approach were sustained, while others were discarded. This leads Bois to find that in Newman’s works the figure and ground, that is the zip and the background, are “irreconcilable… we cannot both fix the zip and look at the painting at the same time, and it is precisely upon this impossibility that Newman based the dazzling effect of his canvasses.”58

56 Ibid., 68.
57 Ibid., 68–69.
This is to say that without any means to measure the spaces to either side of the zips, viewers cannot simultaneously place the zips in space and see the entire painting. As such, viewers’ perception of the paintings changes constantly as the relations between the paintings’ uncertain elements continue to vacillate. This allows Bois to conclude that “a whole range of Newman’s production seems to have been involved in a radical attack against any kind of assurance that we might falsely attribute to our perception.”59 Hence, Newman’s career “pursues a sort of phenomenological inquiry into the nature of perception,” by testing how perception works and how it can be destabilized.60 Bois’ work is thus absolutely fundamental, but it must be expanded upon. By being solely concerned with visual analysis, his method does not immediately equip him to deal with the kind of meaning that Newman hoped to provide in his paintings. Furthermore, Bois has yet to apply his approach to the Stations, and thus does not answer the formal questions that they raise in being a series, rather than more of Newman’s single-panel paintings.

Current understanding of Newman’s Stations thus demands two things if it is to be corrected. Firstly, the actual process of viewing the Stations must be considered. Viewers in front of the Stations cannot take them all in at once, and will instead look at each individual painting, relating what they have seen already to what is in immediately front of them, as well as to what may be to come. Such a process is, in fact, encouraged by their title and relation to the Christian Stations, as will be discussed later, and must be accounted for. Interpretations which treat the Stations as if they were more of Newman’s single-panel paintings or rush through their

59 Ibid., 6.
60 Ibid., 5.
discussion of each of the series fourteen canvases can in no way be seen as conclusive. It is very surprising, and even exasperating, that previous authors have considered their discussions of the *Stations* complete, while failing to provide in-depth inspection of each of the series’ paintings.

Secondly, it must be acknowledged that the *Stations*, as well as Newman’s other zip paintings, are nothing more than bands of paint on canvas. Newman’s zips are not people, light, souls or any other particular “thing” because there is nothing in them that says so. Furthermore, any meaning that viewers are to take from Newman’s paintings cannot be exact because the paintings are not exactly about anything as specific as religious, historical, or philosophical ideas. They are still only bands on canvas, even if they are very deliberately arranged. Newman’s titles certainly point the way to meaning, but to say, as Godfrey does for example, that bands on canvas and the title *The Stations of the Cross* point necessarily to a particular way of remembering the Holocaust can be nothing other than an overreaching reading of what is available to viewers.61 As such, the process of viewing the series must be invoked again. Any meaning that is to be read into the *Stations* must come from this process, from the things that actually happen to viewers as they examine the paintings. It will be shown that this meaning is quite powerful, even if it can by no means be specific.62

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62 It should be mentioned that Rosenberg gets this right for a moment when he says “one thing *Onement* I could not stand for was a specific idea—its vertical orange stripe does not symbolize man or earthbound Adam or the deity; nor do the neighboring fields of darker red represent the earth.” This is a very impressive statement, and seems to take a jab at Hess’ account of the zip as Adam. Sadly, Rosenberg reverses this breakthrough in the very next paragraph, as he beings to discuss Newman’s zips as standing for the artist’s “transcendental self,” as discussed earlier (Rosenberg, 51).
This paper will therefore seek a new interpretation of *The Stations of the Cross* by ensuring that these demands are met. This will be accomplished by focusing on the process and experience of viewing the *Stations*. Each of the *Stations* will thus be given thorough visual examination from the perspective of a viewer looking at them in sequence. By this method it will be found that the *Stations* render visual perception uncertain, along the lines of what Bois described but in an even more comprehensive way. Perception of individual zip paintings is insecure to begin with, but is made even more unstable as viewers are encouraged to compare the paintings of the series. It will further be explained that the *Stations* use this visual uncertainty to make viewers’ understanding of the subject matter associated with the series by its title—Jesus’ suffering and thus suffering in general—uncertain as well.

**The Christian Stations of the Cross**

When viewers examine *The Stations of the Cross*, the first information which becomes available is the series’ title. Thanks to these few words, Newman’s suite of paintings is sure to be associated with the religious subject of the same name. While not all viewers will be familiar with the particulars of this feature of Christianity, each is likely to have at least some grasp of it, especially because the word “cross” points clearly to Jesus’ crucifixion. As such, the Christian Stations of the Cross will be examined here to aid in understanding what meaning might be held by Newman’s paintings, or at least suggested by their title.

After the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, his followers wished to maintain a connection with him, and achieved this in part by retracing the final steps of his
life. This was fine for some, but religious scholar Megan McKenna identifies a problem for others, as “many couldn’t get to Jerusalem, or if they could, only once in a lifetime on pilgrimage. They desired to follow literally in the footsteps of their Crucified Master and Risen Lord, stopping along the way to reflect on his life, on his sufferings, and his death by crucifixion.” This desire then led to the creation of the Stations of the Cross, a devotion where worshippers would move through a series of depictions of the last moments of Jesus’ life [figures 26–28]. The Stations have alternatively been known as the Way of the Cross (or in Latin the Via Crucis) and the Way of Sorrows (Via Dolorosa).

The number of Stations varied before they were taken up by the church and codified in the seventeenth century. Their number was ultimately fixed at fourteen by Pope Clement XII in 1731. Lawrence Alloway listed the canonical Stations in the Guggenheim’s catalogue for Newman’s 1966 exhibition as “Christ condemned to death, Christ carrying the Cross, the First Fall, Christ meets Mary, Simon helps to carry the Cross, Veronica hands Him the face-cloth, the Second Fall, He comforts the women, the Third Fall, He is stripped of His garments, the Crucifixion, the death of Christ, the Deposition, the Entombment.” It is also of note that although the

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63 Newman indeed mentions this in his statement regarding the Stations in the Guggenheim’s catalogue for their exhibition: “the first pilgrims walked the Via Dolorosa to identify themselves with the original moment” (“Statement,” 9).
65 Ibid., vii.
66 Jane Dillenberger, Secular Art with Sacred Themes, 99.
68 Ibid. As their origins were in popular practice rather than actual scripture, the Stations included a number of extra-biblical moments, such as Christ’s three falls, before an altered version was presented by Pope John Paul II in 1991 (McKenna, viii).
Stations may be more familiar to Catholics than Protestants, they are generally well known.69

Worshippers following this canonical narrative not only move from one Station to the next, they also say a prescribed prayer at each. These vary significantly, but one example for the second Station goes as follows:

“My Jesus, Lord,
I take my daily cross.
I welcome the monotony
that often marks my day,
discomforts of all kinds,
the summer’s heat, the winter’s cold,
my disappointment, tensions, and setbacks.
Remind me often that
in carrying my cross
I carry yours with you.”70

Like all parts of the Stations, these prayers are meant to relate the worshipper to the life of Jesus and seek to bring them closer to him. The prayers, and indeed progression through the Stations generally, are thus likely to give worshippers a sense of comfort by providing this connection to Jesus, by demonstrating that they are not alone in their personal suffering, by portraying the familiar narrative of Jesus’ life, and by encouraging the slow and simple repeated actions of movement, prayer, and contemplation.

From their association with this Christian devotion, Newman’s paintings gain a number of aspects. They most clearly become linked to Jesus and the end of his life, and thus with suffering, death, God, a sense of religious gravity, and the interplay among all of them. All of these subjects are present in his series, though Newman ultimately emphasized some more heavily than others. This is especially true if the

69 Dillenberger, Secular Art with Sacred Themes, 99.
series’ subtitle, *Lema Sabachthani*, is considered, as the question “why have you forsaken me?” seems to focus on Jesus’ suffering during the Passion, and also on God’s relationship with suffering in general. The Stations also gave Newman the number of paintings to include in his series, and similarly inform viewers that they can expect to see fourteen works.

It is noteworthy, however, that Newman did not use the canonical events of the Christian Stations as the titles for his individual paintings, and instead only titled them with numbers as *First Station, Second Station*, etc. This makes sense, as it would be difficult to see particular events in Newman’s abstract works, but it also suggests that one should mostly disregard the individual events and narrative, and instead consider the Stations or the Passion as a whole. Newman found this move quite important, as will be discussed later on. For now, it is clear that the general content of the Stations became associated with Newman’s paintings, providing the kind of “subject matter” described in the artist’s writings.

**Movement and Expectation in The Stations of the Cross**

While subject matter was all-important for Newman, it is not the only thing that his *Stations of the Cross* gain from their association with the Christian Stations. Indeed, further information is gained from the particular title chosen by the artist. Had Newman merely wished to link the paintings to the subject matter of the end of Jesus’ life, he could have named them more directly after the Passion. Instead, he associated them with that subject matter, but also with a particular devotion and its particular practices. Hence, from the title, viewers should understand that they ought to view Newman’s *Stations* in the same manner as their Christian counterparts: both
individually and as a linear series. This is further reinforced by the paintings’ individual, numbered titles. More specifically, viewers should walk from one to the next, stopping long enough at each to appreciate, contemplate, and internalize it, just as they would do with the Christian Stations.

In addition, viewers of Newman’s Stations should expect that the paintings form a coherent group, since the Christian Stations certainly do. Considering Newman’s artistic idiom, this means that they should have common subject matter, but also common visual characteristics, since Newman clearly believed that these two aspects were related and even codependent. Therefore, if the Stations are viewed linearly, the first few paintings should set up visual expectations for what this kind of coherence would mean for the rest of the series. As they look at each successive painting, viewers will know what variations they have seen so far, and thus anticipate what is to come, basing their expectations for paintings yet to be seen on what has already been established by those seen previously.\(^7\)

While viewers are strongly compelled to build this kind of structured understanding of the series, it is no easy task given the uncertainty of visual perception discussed by Bois. If viewers cannot come to a secure understanding of the individual Stations, then it will be immeasurably more difficult to make comparisons among them. Furthermore, to the extent that Newman is able to set up expectations he is able to break them as well, putting viewers even further off balance. To understand

\(^7\) The National Gallery’s open installation of the Stations might thus seem somewhat disappointing. Indeed their original installation in the Guggenheim, over which Newman had a measure of control, was somewhat more linear (see Temkin, “Barnett Newman on Exhibition,” in Barnett Newman, 60–65).
how Newman sets up and destabilizes viewers’ expectations, a rigorous analysis of the series is necessary.

A Perceptual Account of The Stations of the Cross

Each of Newman’s fourteen Stations of the Cross is 78 inches in height. The first two are 60 1/2 inches in width, while the rest are 60 inches in width. This difference in size amounts to less than one percent of the width of the paintings, so there is virtually no chance that it would be noticed by viewers of the works. As such, the paintings can all be taken to be in the same, vertical rectangular format.

This particular format was new for Newman, but this is not surprising, as few sets of dimensions recur during his career. The artist had done paintings of similar proportions, with End of Silence from 1949 (38 x 30 inches) and Eve from 1950 (67-1/2 x 52-3/8 inches) being the best examples. He had also done paintings of similar height, such as Onement III from 1949 (71-7/8 inches tall) and L’Errance from 1953 (86 inches tall). Newman had not, however, combined these two particular features

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72 As an opening note to this section, it should be mentioned that other descriptions of Newman’s paintings very often contain more colorful language than that which will be used here. For example, one critic described the thin canvas band in the First Station as seeming “to screech like fingernails up and down a blackboard of dry-brushed edges, as if in terror of the solid vertical band which seems to move with ominous slowness into the painting’s space” (Rosenberg, 26). New York Times critic John Canaday, on the other hand, related the bands to Jewish religious dress and described them as “like unraveled phylacteries,” which led Newman to accuse him of anti-Semitism (John Canaday, “Art: With Pretty Thorough Execution” New York Times, 23 April 1966, p. 26). Neither of these approaches to description is productive for, as has been said already, Newman’s zips are not people and they are not things. A few viewers might also see the zips as screeches or phylacteries, but it is hardly guaranteed that all viewers will understand them likewise. As such, it seems far better to constrain one’s analysis to that which can be confirmed by visual evidence.

73 Shiff, Catalogue Raisonné, 270–73.

74 Ibid., 180, 227.

75 Ibid., 182, 252.
of height and proportion until the *Stations*, and he would repeat them only in *The Way II* in 1969 (78 x 60 inches).\(^76\)

The dimensions of the *Stations* are thus notable for their uniqueness. Furthermore, the area occupied by each canvas is noticeably similar to that occupied by the body of an adult standing in front of it. This is particularly true when one considers that the paintings would not be hung with their bottom edges along the floor, but would instead be higher on the wall. They would thus appear at least somewhat shorter than 78 inches by foreshortening, and seem closer in height to an average person. The *Stations* can, then, be said to have a rather human scale.\(^77\)

Another feature of the *Stations* that was new to Newman’s work was the use of raw canvas, which is present in each of the paintings except the fourteenth.\(^78\) The canvas is a light tan and is read by viewers as another color next to the other elements of the paintings, though its different texture is easily evident. That this is not paint, but rather the color of bare canvas, gives the paintings a sense of starkness.

The color that Newman used was limited largely to black for the first eight *Stations*, with some subtle areas of tan different from the natural color of the canvas appearing in the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth paintings where the vehicle, the agent carrying the pigment, bled into the nearby unpainted areas.\(^79\) This bleeding was apparently not an accident, or was at least acceptable, as Newman allowed it to happen multiple times. The twelfth and thirteenth *Stations* are limited to black, while for the ninth, tenth, and eleventh *Stations* Newman used only white paint. The

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\(^76\) Ibid., 354.
\(^77\) This is a common point in scholarship on the series. Jane Dillenberger even includes a diagram comparing the height of a six-foot-tall man to the height of the *Stations* (Dillenberger, 100).
\(^78\) Ibid., 270–73.
\(^79\) Dillenberger, *Secular Art with Sacred Themes*, 104–5.
fourteenth canvas is entirely covered by two different white paints, leaving no bare canvas. Such a limited palette was not entirely new for Newman, who had already done paintings in black on black (*Abraham*, 1949), white on white (*The Volice* and *The Name II*, 1950), and black and white (*Onement IV*, 1949). This austerity gives the *Stations* a very distinct look and unifies the series. Newman also used at least four different types of paint in the *Stations*, but it is difficult to predict how apparent this will be to viewers.  

One last general aspect of the paintings is Newman’s signature [figures 16–17]. The artist signed each canvas along the bottom with the year that the painting was completed. Each signature was applied with the same paint used for the rest of the painting, black or white, and placed in an area of exposed canvas. The *Fourteenth Station* is an exception, as it has no exposed canvas, so the signature appears in one white on top of the other. Many writers have criticized the inclusion of these signatures, especially Dore Ashton who claimed that they “[stand] out,” that they “destroy the unity of the field; they intrude a note of three dimensionality,” and that they show a “tremendous lack of tact.” While it might seem presumptuous to sign any representation of Christ’s passion, these accusations are overblown, as the signatures are small enough to be quite unobtrusive. They may lack some tact, but they should be no more offensive than many revered religious paintings from the Renaissance which include portraits of their patrons, or other signed religious works.

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80 Shiff, *Catalogue Raisonné*, 270–73. Those types are Magna (first, second, and tenth *Stations*), oil (third through eighth *Stations*), acrylic (ninth and eleventh through fourteenth *Stations*), and Duco (*Fourteenth Station* only). Oil is only used for black, acrylic and Magna are used for black and white, and Duco is only used for white. Duco was manufactured by DuPont and used primarily for automobiles. Newman may have also used a polymer emulsion on the fifth and tenth *Stations*, but this is not at all apparent when looking at them.

such as Albrecht Dürer’s prints. Furthermore, as with other signed paintings, it is easy enough to see Newman’s signatures as separate from the composition of each of the Stations.

Turning now to the Stations as individual paintings, the First Station includes two principal elements painted on the exposed canvas [figure 1]. Flush with the left side of the canvas is a solid vertical band of black paint, stretching the entire height of the painting and extending across about one tenth of its width. The right side of this band is entirely straight and uniform, suggesting that Newman painted over a strip of masking tape and then removed it to create the edge. This is indeed known as a common technique in Newman’s work. Approximately three quarters of the way across the canvas to the right, brushy vertical strokes of black paint surround a thin band of canvas that seems to have been protected by tape as well. These strokes cover a horizontal area slightly wider than that of the solid black band. While each of these features appears fairly wide in proportion to its height, the majority of the canvas remains untouched.\(^\text{82}\)

The Second Station includes a solid black band flush with the left side of the canvas that seems to be identical to the band in the same place in the First Station. The Second Station also includes the same apparent use of masking tape in the creation of a right-hand element, placed where it was in the First Station [figure 2]. However, instead of brushed marks around the right-hand tape, full black bands of equal, very thin width are applied down either side. Outside of those are another set

\(^{82}\) Readers may note that exact horizontal measurements of the placement of the elements in the Stations are not presented here. Leaving them out was a conscious decision, as the focus of this discussion is on how the paintings are perceived by their viewers, who will hardly examine them with yardsticks in hand. Instead of thinking of exact measurements, it seems far better for readers to examine the paintings themselves, either in person or through the images provided with this essay.
of equal bands, this time not quite as thin and in modulated gray. The result of this is a symmetrical group of five bands; from left to right they are gray, black, canvas, black, and gray. To the right of this group is another modulated gray band, slightly thicker than the group of five as a whole. This thicker band causes two effects. First, it is similar enough in tone and modulation to the rightmost gray band from the symmetrical group to blend into it in places where the modulation happens to coincide. This puts the symmetry of the group of five bands into tension, as the rightmost of them seems to expand and contract along the height of the canvas. Second, the thicker band, in not being offset by an equivalent band to the left of the group of five, causes the group to appear pulled towards the right side of the canvas. Additionally, the masked band of canvas has been moved very slightly to the left relative to the placement of the equivalent band in the First Station. This puts the Second Station in tension with the first, as the masked band of canvas in each is of the same thickness and in about the same place, but viewers will be unable to say this for certain, as the band in the Second Station appears as if it may be moved slightly to the right because of the thick gray band, but is actually slightly to the left. There is only an expanse of canvas to either side of these elements, and no means to get an exact measurement of placement is offered. The Second Station also includes a faint tan band running along the right edge of the black band on the left. This tan area is mostly uniform, though it becomes slightly thinner in two places. Its effect is less certain, but it is very subtle and does not alter viewers’ sense of the left-hand band.

The Third Station retains the solid black left-hand band, but the right side is altered even further [figure 3]. Instead of one horizontally continuous group of bands
or strokes, there are two. One is a thin black band whose edges appear to be mostly straight but not quite filled out in some places. In some of those places it appears that thin outlines of the band were painted first, but elsewhere these outlines are not visible, confusing the effect and making this element hard to describe. Slightly to the right is a masked band of canvas surrounded by brushy marks similar to those in the First Station, but confined to a narrower area. Again there are no markers by which to locate the bands in the bare canvas, so they pull each other from side to side. The final sum of this relationship might tempt viewers to say that the black band lies where the canvas band did in the first and second Stations, but in fact neither element does; the black band is to the left of that spot, and the canvas band is to the right of it. The difficulty of comparing the composition of one Station to that of the ones before it thus continues.

A black band flush with the left side of the canvas and of the same width as in the first three Stations appears yet again in the fourth, while to the right the canvas band has been moved back to a point only imperceptibly left of its position in the First Station [figure 4]. The canvas band is surrounded on either side with solid black that fades into the canvas to the left and right. The black to the left of the canvas band is thicker than that on the right, causing a similar pulling effect as in the Second Station. By now viewers of the paintings will surely be unwilling to trust that these right-hand elements have all been placed at the same point. The Fourth Station also includes drips of black paint near the black band in the lower left part of the canvas. These are long and thin, suggesting that they were thrown with some speed. They provide markers in the space of the exposed canvas, but are not nearly enough to give
viewers a sense of measurement. The fourth canvas also includes a tan band along the right edge of the black band on the left, similar to and slightly more visible than the tan in the Second Station, but again this element does not significantly affect viewers’ understanding of the painting’s composition.

The Fifth Station constitutes the most obvious rearrangement thus far, as the black band to the left reappears, but is also unevenly brushed outward to the right, over the same kind of tan band from the second and fourth Stations [figure 5]. Conversely, the only element to the right is a very thin black band with uniform edges, apparently placed at the “usual” spot, which is to say the approximate location of the right-hand bands in the first and subsequent Stations. The painterly aspect of the canvas is thus removed from the right and included on the left for the first time in the series. This rearranges the space of the canvas, as the left-hand band occupies more physical space, but also more perceived space by suddenly changing after having been so continuous and by being non-uniform and thus more difficult to take in all at once. The black band on the right, of course, renews viewers’ struggle to compare the placement of the right-hand elements in each panel of the series.

The Sixth Station continues this change in the use of painterly aspects, but this time they are removed entirely [figure 6]. The sixth canvas thus includes the straight-edged left-hand band of the first four Stations with the accompanying tan of the second, fourth and fifth, along with a right-hand band similar to but thicker than that of the Fifth Station. The latter is flanked by very faint tan bands which are very difficult to distinguish from the canvas in most areas. Though the painterly aspects have disappeared, viewers have no easier time fixing the right-hand band in the space
of the canvas. It is still about three quarters of the way across the canvas from left to right, but it is hard to say more than that without using a tool for measurement.

The *Seventh Station* brings about an even more significant rearrangement than the two before it, as it includes only a thin black band on the left and a very thick black band flush with the right side, with a very thin canvas band to the left of it, followed by a slightly thicker black band [figure 7]. Though the more solid area is now on the right and the thinner element is now on the left, the spaces of the canvas are still divided in the same way. The thin band to the left is placed where the previous left-hand bands ended, and the very thick band to the right ends where the previous smaller right-hand elements had been placed. The struggle to compare these placements to those that came before them thus begins again, but this exercise in perception must work against the sense that the canvas has been mirrored, since the thick and thin areas have switched places.

The *Eighth Station* is arranged more like the first six to the extent that the common left-hand band has been restored and another, somewhat thick band has been placed with its left edge at the “usual” spot on the right side of the canvas [figure 8]. But the change brought here is more insidious; viewers will soon realize that the band to the right is actually the same width as the band to the left. It is thus one of the previous left-hand bands, but it has been “misplaced” and put at the right-hand location. The viewer’s sense of order is thus dealt another severe blow, as Newman once again undermines an aspect of the paintings that was taken as secure. Not only that, but if there can be open canvas to the left of this misplaced band, what is to say that there might not be open canvas to the left of any of the bands of this size, even
the ones flush with the left of their respective paintings? Furthermore, the *Eighth Station* suggests a pattern of black band, canvas space, black band, canvas space, etc. While the boundaries of the painting limit how much of this pattern is actually seen, viewers will have a sense that the pattern could extend further to the right and to the left. In this way the very most secure aspect of the canvases, their uniform size, is called into question. However, this is done so subtly that their size need not actually be changed, as the change happens in the perception of the viewer.

In the *Ninth Station* black paint is replaced with white, drawing attention to another common characteristic of the previous paintings by showing again that seemingly constant aspects of the series can be altered [figure 9]. Indeed there had been no reason for viewers to consider the possibility that the *Stations*’ color might change, in fact, there had been no reason for the presence of black paint to be consciously taken as a common characteristic at all. As such, the switch to white paint has the potential to be somewhat startling. This process for viewers is fascinating as it seems to show that the only way, or at least the clearest way, to describe visual commonality without words is to break it. The arrangement of the paint in the *Ninth Station* is fairly standard, with a band of “usual” width along the left edge of the canvas and two thin bands on either side of the “usual” location on the right. Having two bands to the right was seen in the *Third Station*, though in that case one was a canvas band inside of brushed paint, while in the *Ninth Station* the bands are both white and firmly defined, similar to the band in the *Fifth Station*. In other words, while the *Ninth Station*’ particular arrangement is new, the elements that compose it are not. The white paint, however, is more than enough to make the *Ninth Station* the
most visually distinct so far. Additionally, the white does not stand out from the exposed canvas nearly as much as black, making the elements a bit harder to fix in the space of the canvas.

The use of white paint continues into the *Tenth Station* [figure 10]. To the right it includes a thick band that begins at the “usual” point and ends at the right edge of the canvas, similar to the large black area in the *Seventh Station*, but with a straight left edge. On the left the *Tenth Station* has a “usual” band along the edge of the canvas, a masked canvas band to the right of that, and then paint brushed out to the right, perhaps reminding viewers of similar brushing in the *Fifth Station*, though that painting did not have a canvas band between its left band and brushing. The *Tenth Station* is also notable for showing the least amount of bare canvas of any of the paintings so far; around one third of its surface appears to be covered with paint. Still, this doesn’t threaten any of the previously held notions of the series, making the *Tenth Station* a potentially “boring” canvas. In a way, however, this could keep viewers off balance, preventing them from “expecting the unexpected” in every one of the *Stations*. The struggle to compare the placement of “usual” spots also continues.

The *Eleventh Station* continues in white paint with a “usual” band along its left edge and two very thin bands, analogous to those in the fifth and seventh *Stations*, on either side of the “usual” spot on the right [figure 11]. These two bands are spaced farther apart than the dual bands of the *Ninth Station*, but the bands of the *Third Station* are similarly spaced. The *Eleventh Station* is perhaps more “boring” than the tenth, as the right-hand element is new but the left-hand one is entirely standard. It
might thereby give viewers a feeling that they may have seen every variation that
Newman will try, but such a feeling can hardly be certain. As with the Tenth Station,
even a lack of subversion adds to the tension accompanying viewers’ movement
through the series.

Staying on one’s toes would be just as well, for the Twelfth Station is quite
different [figure 12]. The use of black paint returns, and indeed most of the canvas is
covered with it. A masked canvas band marks the point on the left where the “usual”
left-hand bands ended, and another canvas band marks the “usual” point on the right,
but the area between them, as well as the area to the left of the left-hand canvas band,
is entirely black. More black is brushed out to the right of the right-hand canvas band,
leading into an area of exposed canvas with two drips as well as other smaller specks
of black paint along it. The expectation that each panel of the Stations should be
predominantly composed of exposed canvas is now overturned as well, and the
surprise of seeing so much of the canvas covered with paint is surely heightened by
the return to black paint from white. The “usual” left and right locations are kept and
no new elements are employed, but, as with the semi-mirrored Seventh Station,
viewers must work to remind themselves that the spatial arrangement hasn’t changed,
even though the painting looks very different.

In the Thirteenth Station this inversion of painted and canvas areas is carried
to its fullest possibility, with the presentation of an arrangement that looks like the
Eighth Station, but with black where there was once canvas and canvas where there
was once black [figure 13]. While the Eighth Station had two equally sized bands,
and in the Thirteenth Station the right-hand band is somewhat thicker, the comparison
is still easily made. The entire concept of “bands,” however, is called into question.

Previously the paintings seemed to consist of painted bands on canvas backgrounds; the bands were called bands because they were smaller, while the background was called a background because it was larger. Now, with the painted areas being the larger ones, they read as background, while the canvas areas become the bands. But is this true? Which is actually behind the other, given that the canvas areas were always in back before, but are now smaller (and vice versa for the black areas)? Viewers cannot know, and are forced to disregard any previous assumptions about depth that they might have held while looking at the earlier canvases. In relation to the others, the Thirteenth Station thus seems to be a statement by Newman that his zips are not concrete bodies or forms that are to be the focal points of his paintings. Instead, as Bois said, the figure and ground are irreconcilable.

The fourteenth and final Station contains a number of changes [figure 14]. First, it contains no exposed canvas, and is instead done in two different kinds of white paint, acrylic and Duco. 83 Most of the painting is a brighter white, while the “usual” band to the left is duller. Despite the confusion of figure and ground in the Thirteenth Station, viewers might be tempted to read the brighter area in the Fourteenth Station as a background, as this is a conventional mental process. At the same time, they now know to mistrust stable perceptions of depth when dealing with Newman’s paintings. This struggle creates spatial tension as viewers examine the Fourteenth Station. The second major change is that there is no right-hand element. The brighter white extends all the way from the edge of the left-hand band to the right side of the canvas. Had such a change been made early in the series it would have

83 Shiff, Catalogue Raisonné, 326.
been of little consequence, as no expectations would have been built up yet. Now, after thirteen canvases that drew attention to the “usual” right-hand location, the right half of the canvas is suddenly empty. It is notable, therefore, that the series ends not with one of the more “boring” yet tense canvases, such as the tenth and eleventh, but rather with yet another significant break from the series’ established commonality. The series does not end with clear punctuation, but rather with continuing change and tension.

**The Inclusion of Be II with the Stations**

In both the 1966 exhibition and in today’s display at the National Gallery, Newman’s painting *Be II* has appeared with the *Stations*. At the Guggenheim it was hung at the end of the exhibition on a wall by itself. In the National Gallery *Be II* is still set apart, though on a wall that faces the rest of the series. At 80-1/2 inches high by 72-1/2 inches wide, *Be II* is more square in shape and a little larger than each of the *Stations* [figure 15]. It is mostly white, with a thin black band with a straight edge flush its right side and a slightly thinner orange band with a messier edge flush with its left side. Newman began the painting in 1961 and finished it in 1964, so its creation postdates his conception of the *Stations* as an entire series, though it is not known if he always intended it to appear along with the series.\(^8^4\) *Be II*’s arrangement and inclusion of color set it far apart from the expectations created by the *Stations*; had it been titled “Fifteenth Station,” it would be a very startling or strange painting. As it was not given that title, however, *Be II*’s relationship with the *Stations* is somewhat ambivalent.

\(^8^4\) Ibid., 308.
Still, for being associated with and displayed alongside the *Stations*, most importantly at the Guggenheim exhibition which was under Newman’s direction, *Be II* must be addressed. After seeing the fourteen *Stations*, viewers coming to *Be II* would likely find it a stronger punctuation mark for the end of the series. It would indicate that, while the *Stations* led to rather strict expectations, there are other ways to paint; color can be reintroduced and other arrangements can be used. *Be II* thus allows viewers to break away from the grip of the series.

**Newman’s Statements on the *Stations***


Newman continues by reinforcing the importance of this question, writing “this is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer.”86 The artist further describes this as “the original question” and “the unanswerable question of human suffering.”87 This is, of

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
course, a departure from other understandings of the last moments of Jesus’ life, which sometimes efface such doubt with an answer to this very same question. One might, for example, offer a much more hopeful interpretation by subordinating Jesus’ last words in Matthew and Mark to his last saying in Luke: “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!”

Christian tradition indeed points to the Seven Last Words of Christ, which are compiled from all four gospels and include both the passage from Matthew and Mark and the passage from Luke. The latter is placed as the seventh and final saying, giving it emphasis and providing optimism. For the non-religious Newman, however, the Passion represents suffering without any certainty of a greater purpose. Under this understanding the Passion, despite its inclusion of multiple events, is ultimately nothing but suffering and the question of “why?”

The Passion thus carries powerful “subject matter,” but why did Newman choose it over other stories of suffering? This is explained as he goes on to say that “the first pilgrims walked the Via Dolorosa… to stand witness to the story of each man’s agony.” In this way, Jesus’ suffering stands as a perfect exemplar of all human suffering. As such, any explanation of suffering must stand up to the terrible events of the Passion. This is why Newman turned to the story of Jesus in his paintings, because one cannot really speak of suffering, even in a non-religious context, without speaking of the Passion.

Newman’s other main statement about the Stations appeared in ARTnews magazine during the paintings’ exhibition at the Guggenheim. In this article he reviews the history of the series, saying that he began working on it in 1958 with the

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88 Lk. 23:46 RSV.
intention of doing a series, but that he discovered the final meaning and title only while making the fourth of the paintings.\textsuperscript{90} From then on, he says he knew he would do ten more. Newman adds that, in conceiving of the series’ theme, he relied not upon orthodox Christianity, but upon his own interpretation, as the paintings “concern themselves with the Passion as I feel and understand it.”\textsuperscript{91}

Newman also comments on his approach to the “plastic challenge” of making the paintings. He says that he “felt compelled” to “use only raw canvas and to discard all color palettes” in order to “maintain this cry in all its intensity and in every manner of its starkness.”\textsuperscript{92} The artist additionally justifies the size of the works as “human scale for the human cry.”\textsuperscript{93} Newman also emphasizes the idea that both the paintings and content from the events of the Passion “all together form a complete statement of a single subject.”\textsuperscript{94} Not only that, but it would be impossible to make the same statement with just one painting, for “only the fourteen together make clear the wholeness of the single event” of the Passion.\textsuperscript{95}

These statements point to a number of issues that must be taken seriously in \textit{The Stations of the Cross}. For one, the paintings deal with Jesus as Newman understands him and need not accord with Christian tradition. Hence, though the paintings are many, they are to make a single statement which will relate to the singular statement of the Passion as understood by the artist. That statement deals with the “original question” of human suffering, which is said to be an unanswerable

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\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.\\
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.\\
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\end{flushright}
question. Finally, the plastic approach of the paintings is not in any way arbitrary, and is directly related to the content that they carry.

Meaning in *The Stations of the Cross*

With this in mind, the *Stations* are not empty. As viewers move from one painting to the next, they will be struck by the significance and surprise of variations and thus by the series’ formal complexity, despite its fairly strict parameters. These positive aspects carry more weight than the *Stations*’ stark palette and large areas of blank canvas, as those features become part of the viewers’ expectations, rather than remaining as mere emptiness. This is to say that the *Stations* are far from visually empty, but does that mean that they are full of meaning?

Recall that a central point in this discussion has been that Newman’s paintings cannot have very specific meanings because they consist only of bands of paint on canvas, along with a title. In finding meaning in a particular work, viewers have only these aspects to deal with, and only Newman’s writings to guide them. Deeper meaning must come from a synthesis of these aspects by the viewer, for it cannot come from any one of them alone.

What would such a synthesis involve? Primarily, it would involve the realization that Newman’s titles must relate to his paintings and give them content. Though the paintings are not literally images of *Abraham, Achilles, White Fire*, etc. they must relate to those things. Indeed they relate to them in terms of “subject matter” or metaphysical content, as Newman’s writings suggest. The paintings cannot relate to their titles on more specific grounds because nothing more specific is given. Viewers must, therefore, hold the emotional or metaphysical subject matter of the title
in their minds and allow their consideration of it to be conditioned by the painting in front of them.

The *Stations* are thus extremely compelling, for they are the clearest example of how this synthesis of abstract form and content can be constructive. Viewers begin with the title *The Stations of the Cross*, and thus consider Jesus, the Passion, God, life and death, and all that goes with the Christian Stations. Most of all, however, they will consider suffering and the question of “why?” particularly if they are given the subtitle *Lema Sabachthani* or are familiar with any of Newman’s discussions of the paintings. What this means initially will be different for different viewers. Some may themselves be Christians and believe in a divine plan that includes and justifies suffering, others may bring secular philosophical explanations to the topic, while still others may not have any particular answer. Regardless, each will have suffering and the question of its purpose or justification in mind.

As viewers move to the *First Station*, the synthesis of form and content described above will begin. The first painting in the series and the subject matter suggested by the title will be held together in the mind of the viewer. If Newman is taken seriously, and the “nostalgic glasses of history” are removed, whatever these two things mean to the viewer must come together, abstract as they may be. The paintings and the subject matter associated with them must become contingent upon one another in the mind of the viewer.

As they go on to the subsequent *Stations*, however, viewers encounter significant turbulence. Visual expectations are created and then broken, as discussed above. The certainty of visual perception itself is called into question, in the manner
discussed by Bois for individual canvases, and even more so by the vacillations of the Stations in relation to each other.

The brilliance of the Stations, however, is that they extend this uncertainty from the domain of visual perception into the realm of subject matter by tying one’s conception of the Christian Stations’ subject matter to visual perception. As long as the paintings and the subject matter associated with them are contingent upon one another, Newman’s ability to destabilize visual perception of the paintings becomes an ability to destabilize perception of their subject matter.

The meaning of the Stations is thus just what Newman described. It is a single statement, and it is one that cannot be made in just one canvas. This statement is that any conception of suffering, any justification of it or meaning found in it, must be held in tension and be shot through with uncertainty.

This statement is not specific—it does not make any particular argument or address any particular way that suffering has been previously understood. Different viewers will bring different approaches to the question of “why?” with them to the paintings, yet all of these approaches can be addressed by Newman’s abstract series. Furthermore, the Stations are not likely to convince anyone to change their particular understanding. For example, it would be quite a presumption to suggest that these paintings could force a devoutly religious person to question the existence of a divine plan. At the least, however, the series can add a degree of tension to that understanding, for perhaps suffering is too great a problem to be entirely understood. The example of the Passion is indeed present throughout the Stations, forcing viewers to decide if it is truly possible, or even appropriate, to explain away the horror of such
suffering. Newman’s series suggests that, while one might get close, such an understanding cannot truly be achieved.

When included with the series, Be II also has a role to play. After the Stations envelop viewers in the issue of suffering, Be II releases them from this question of subject matter through a visual break. It reminds them that there are other ways to paint and to see, and thus other ways to think and indeed to Be. Godfrey’s description of Be II as a re-beginning thus applies quite well. He wrote that “Holocaust memorial… requires the subject’s repositioning of themselves with regard to the demands of memory,” but in the less specific reading presented here Be II can be understood to ask viewers to reposition themselves with regard to the issue of suffering.\(^9^6\) The painting allows viewers to step out of the profound engagement which marked their experience with the series, but also to continue to be affected by that experience.

A Reassessment of Yve-Alain Bois and Mark Godfrey

In light of this new interpretation of the Stations, the contributions of Bois and Godfrey can be reevaluated. The discussion of the Holocaust provided by the latter, as was said above, must factor into any understanding of the Stations, as Godfrey’s description of the connection between the Holocaust and the Passion at the time the paintings were created seems largely convincing. As such, the Holocaust can function as another example of suffering that the paintings force viewers to consider. Just as viewers must ask if the suffering of the Passion can be justified, they might also ask if the suffering of the Holocaust can be justified. Newman’s series has the potential to

add tension and depth to viewers’ stances on each of these issues. It still seems, however, that the Holocaust cannot be taken as the central theme of the *Stations*, as it is not directly addressed in either their title or any of Newman’s statements about the series. Furthermore, nothing in Newman’s writings suggests that meaning in any of his paintings should be restricted to specific historical events.

As for Bois, the perceptual uncertainty that he described in Newman’s single-panel paintings exists in each of the *Stations*, but the series also expands upon this effect. By encouraging viewers to compare the already uncertain paintings in the series, and then foiling their expectations, the *Stations* constitute an even stronger attack against the supposed certainty of visual perception. Bois might see the individual *Stations* as shaky foundations, but when the paintings are placed together Newman asks viewers to build a house on those foundations while he simultaneously pulls out some of the more important building blocks. When faced with the series, visual perception does not merely shake, it tumbles down. The *Stations* thus represent the fullest possible realization of the “phenomenological inquiry into the nature of perception” that Bois saw in Newman’s career.

How easily the assessment of meaning presented above might be applied to Bois’ understanding of single-canvas paintings is unclear. The *Stations* present subject matter through their title and destabilize visual perception through their execution on canvas, and the two combine to add tension to any understanding of the subject matter. Does this mean that every one of Newman’s mature paintings similarly provides subject matter through its title and destabilizes perception, as described by Bois, through its visual execution, leading necessarily to an introduction
of tension into viewers’ conceptions of the subject matter? For example, does this mean that Newman’s *Achilles* [figure 24] necessarily suggests that one must hold their conception of the subject matter of Achilles, an exemplary tragic figure, in tension? Ultimately, does this indicate that Newman’s aesthetic of destabilized visual perception necessarily suggests the destabilization of all subject matter, or of all understanding, be it visual or mental?

Such a sweeping conclusion seems impossible without a great deal of further analysis. It is one thing to read the introduction of tension into a particular series, and thus find a particular concern over a short period of Newman’s production. It is quite another thing to say that the same concern existed, with consistency, over the entirety of the artist’s career. Saying so is particularly difficult when the artist never explicitly spoke of holding *all* subject matter in tension. Newman’s statement that the question of “why?” has no answer presents ambiguity and allows for the above interpretation of the *Stations*. Newman did not, however, make similar statements about the rest of his paintings, so for now the implications of the foregoing discussion must be constrained to the *Stations*.

**Conclusion**

The interpretation of *The Stations of the Cross* presented here is hardly the only way that viewers will react to Newman’s series. This is made clear by the simple fact that other, dramatically different interpretations have been formulated before this one, and that they have come to entirely different conclusions. Does this mean that, from the standpoint of this paper, those conclusions are “wrong”? It might be better to say that they are not as persuasive, and it would be foolish to tell someone who has
had a meaningful encounter with the *Stations* that they were “wrong” to feel as they did unless they had the experience described above. Newman’s paintings are indeed more than abstract enough to allow for many different responses.

What this paper can do, however, is provide the most reasonable interpretation of the *Stations* possible. “Reasonable” here means that this interpretation is not based on any information which is unavailable to viewers of the paintings. It thus means that Newman’s abstraction is not to be taken as anything more than it really appears to be. “Reasonable” further means that this interpretation takes Newman’s writings, statements, and intentions seriously. It thus means that, insofar as he said he was concerned with metaphysics and “subject matter,” viewers should approach his paintings with those things in mind. Additionally, “reasonable” means that this interpretation comes from actually considering the paintings themselves and what it is like to look at them. Given that the *Stations*, and all works of art for that matter, exist as objects which are known only through experience, the number of scholars and critics who avoid this sort of empathetic process is a continuing source of bewilderment. “Reasonable” thus implies that central concerns have not been avoided, even when they do not accord with previously defined notions of modernism.

With these tenets in mind, this paper has found that the *Stations* can provide viewers with a mode of viewing and a particular set of concerns regarding the nature suffering, that is, the question *Lema Sabachthani*. Within this mode of viewing *The Stations of the Cross* can make visual perception uncertain, and thereby can make perception of the nature of suffering uncertain. The paintings’ message is thus simple
and singular, but powerful as well. It has bearing upon the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Holocaust, and indeed the lives of all people.
Figure 1.
Figure 2.
Figure 3.
Third Station, 1960. Oil on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 4.
Fourth Station, 1960. Oil on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 5.
Fifth Station, 1962. Oil and pigmented polymer emulsion on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 6.
_Sixth Station_, 1962. Oil on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 7.
*Seventh Station*, 1964. Oil on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 8.
_Eighth Station_, 1964. Oil on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 9.
*Ninth Station*, 1964. Acrylic on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 10. 
*Tenth Station*, 1965. Magna and polymer emulsion on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 11. 
Eleventh Station, 1965. Acrylic on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 12.
*Twelfth Station*, 1965. Acrylic on exposed canvas, 78 x 60 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 13.
Figure 14. 
Figure 15.
Figure 16.
First Station (detail).

Figure 17.
Thirteenth Station (detail).
Figure 18.  

Figure 19.  
_Gea_, 1945. Oil and oil crayon on cardboard, 28 x 22 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 20.  

Figure 21.  
_Moment_, 1946. Oil on canvas, 30 x 16 inches. Tate, London.
Figure 22.  

Figure 23.  

Figure 24.  

Figure 25.  
Figure 26. Mission San Rafael Arcangel interior with Stations of the Cross, Eleventh through Fourteenth Stations, 1822. San Rafael, California.

Figure 27. Señor del Sacro Monte, Walkway to Stations of the Cross, 18th century. Amecameca, Mexico.

Figure 28. Señor del Sacro Monte, Stations of the Cross, Thirteenth Station, 18th century. Amecameca, Mexico.
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