

Arnold Newman: Award Ceremony Remarks
Medal of Honor
The Photography Committee
National Arts Club

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by A. D. Coleman

I'm honored to have the opportunity to lead off this tribute to Arnold Newman, who was already a fixture on the New York City photo scene when I entered it in the late 1960s — so he knew me when, and I've known him since. Arnold contributed notably to 20th-century photography in many ways, and has continued his project into the new century. He's spent much of his life celebrating artists, so he in turn surely deserves this recognition from the National Arts Club. I might add that the NAC's historic connection to Alfred Stieglitz gives this award particular appropriateness, since Stieglitz made the mistake of encouraging the young Newman at an early stage of his career, and you all know what that led to — including tonight's event.

Many of Newman's images have sufficiently burned themselves into the neurons of those present that I only have to mention their subjects to evoke them in your minds' eyes. Instead of barraging you with them, I've prepared a small selection of pictures — some by Arnold and some of him, some familiar and some not — simply to affirm their presence among us this evening and remind us of why we're here. They're accompanied by some choice quotations from the mouth of our ever-loquacious honoree. All of this, I might add, I gathered from the internet, which tells us that Arnold has established quite a presence in cyberspace, without lifting a finger. A true 21st-century figure.

Before I go further, I should say without any prompting from Arnold that there's no real

tribute to Arnold that doesn't include a tribute to his wife Augusta. Known to just about everyone who had any connection to Arnold, Gus is loved by all of us. For more than half a century she has been frequently at Arnold's side in public, and always there in private, as helpmeet, best friend, life partner, and wife. Gus has kept Arnold in line, and has always had his back. Since they met when she was running guns illicitly for the Haganah in 1948, I'd say that Arnold made the wisest choice of accomplice and bodyguard of any photographer I've ever met.

Recently, during a lecture tour of Australia, I had the occasion to view works by two Aussie photographers, both of them in shows mounted by the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. One was a retrospective exhibit by Rennie Ellis, a paparazzo who seemed particularly respectful when portraying Aussie painters. The other was a smaller exhibit by Greg Weight, who has made something of a specialty of photographing artists. Both of them had made transactional portraits of artists from Oz (as they call their country) in front of their works, or in their studios or home environments, and inevitably I thought of Arnold Newman and compared their works to his.

This happens regularly enough that it's easy to slip into the assumption that Newman owns that idea. He doesn't, of course, because no one can. No doubt Arnold has had an influence down under, but posing the subject of a portrait with the tools of her trade or the fruit of his labor is a photographic tradition that begins with the daguerreotypists of the mid-nineteenth century, followed by the tintypists and the makers of cartes de visite. More specifically, posing artists, particularly visual artists, with their works goes back at least to Edward Steichen and his famous study of Auguste Rodin brooding before his masterwork "Le Penseur." But while Newman has no proprietary claim on this way of working, his oeuvre has unquestionably become a benchmark — perhaps *the* benchmark — against which all such efforts get measured.

And of course he has had an influence on the work of others, often acknowledged. That influence has spread internationally. For example, in 1990 the Swedish photojournalist Jouni Tervalampi created a series of images of the citizens of the Swedish town Västerås, specifically indicating "I have been inspired by Arnold Newman's book *One Mind's Eye*."

Newman has photographed people other than visual artists — from actors and writers and musicians and dancers to industrialists to Francisco Franco and Haile Selassie to a string of U.S. presidents. And he has made other kinds of pictures as well. As time goes on, the varied facets of

his full body of work will come under scrutiny, and its diversity will receive the thorough exploration it merits. Perhaps that will shift the way we understand his overall project; the future may in fact determine that another aspect thereof has greater relevance than his portraiture. Still, it's those images of the notable figures of his time — our time — that come to mind whenever we hear his name mentioned today; by his own decision, it's primarily as a portraitist that he's known to us all.

The question "What is portraiture?" is not easily answered. Simply put, once we move past mere likeness, there are two opposing theories of portraiture, one claiming that it evokes and explores the soul of the sitter, the other that it exposes the psyche of the portraitist. Arnold Newman's life's work provides evidence suggesting that both may be true.

Newman, arguably North American photography's greatest living portraitist, sprang almost full-blown from the head of Zeus. His earliest work — he began photographing in 1938 — consists of still lifes, documentary studies of rural black Americans reminiscent of Walker Evans (with perhaps a touch of Margaret Bourke-White), and collages that seem a bit Bauhaus and a bit Dadaist.

The dominant mode of photographic portraiture of notables at that time was a high-key, bravura, iconicizing approach developed by such image-makers as Edward Steichen and elaborated by such of his successors as Yousuf Karsh and Philippe Halsman. Generally produced in the studio, employing elaborate artificial lighting, it filled the frame with the subject and little or nothing else. Such portraiture sought to amplify the existing public image of the sitter, to reinforce the expected, rather than to inquire or delve.

There are traces of this style in Newman's first portrait work. But what is astonishing is the rapidity and apparent ease with which he broke the mold. For in 1942 — only four years after he began photographing — he made his remarkable portrait of Max Ernst, peering intently through a cloud of smoke from the lower right-hand corner of the frame.

In this image, and in others from those same early years, Newman established the hallmarks of his own style. Notably, most of his subjects — creators in all media, but also scientists, politicians, and other cultural figures — were photographed in their own living and/or working spaces. Hence the term "environmental portraiture," often applied to Newman's work and that of those he has influenced.

Typically, his subjects are portrayed in settings they know intimately, among things they hold dear. The resulting images are not informal, either in attitude or in structure; the subjects are consciously presenting themselves to the lens, the space they occupy in the image is thoughtfully constructed by the photographer. Yet they seem invariably comfortable, at their ease. Some of Newman's sitters worked with him at length — George Segal, Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, Picasso; all of them seem to have relished the engagement. There is in these images the sense of transaction, of mutual discovery.

Something that struck me in reviewing those works, and the circumstances in which they were made, is how often Newman used the occasion of an assignment or commission to produce an image that has endured as a resonant and sometimes definitive representation of that individual. In effect, this photographer found a way to get his commercial clients to subsidize his personal work — a substantial achievement in and of itself, in a time when too many depend on the grants system and other sources of institutional patronage for their survival. Newman has remained a working photographer since he began making department-store portraits almost 70 years ago; his survival as a professional in a highly competitive field is certainly part of his accomplishment.

At the same time, Newman evidences a restless curiosity, continually challenging his own tendencies — most dramatically, and provocatively, by experimenting with different approaches to collage as a device for portraiture. Sometimes these are very simple: a portrait of Claes Oldenberg with a vertical tear down its center that appears as a lightning bolt striking the artist's head, for example, or Picasso's eye alone, torn from a larger print. At other times they are elaborate -- as in what is, in effect, an assemblage of several different images of Andy Warhol, overlapped in a three-dimensional way. (The latter, produced back in 1973-74, reveal a deliberate application of those very same Cubist principles that David Hockney later claimed to have introduced single-handedly to photography.)

Major portraiture generates a curious symbiosis by which subject and image become linked inextricably in the public mind. Certainly many of Newman's studies have become the definitive image of their sitters. Henry Geldzahler, looking every inch the art-world power broker; Alfred Krupp, malignant and predatory in his factory; Igor Stravinsky, leaning on his piano; Brooks Atkinson in a bow tie, front row center in an empty theater, eyes agleam with

expectancy, hands clasped as if in prayer.

In addition to helping redefine the style of contemporary portraiture, Newman contributed to the shifting of its content — away from the heroic, the bravura, the larger-than-life, towards the intimate, the human-scaled, and the internal. His images do not reveal the inner lives of his subjects; no photograph can do so. But they insist that we speculate on their inwardness, just as they assert that humans are concrete phenomena in an abstract universe.

Of course any portrait is a collaboration. And of course we always have to factor into our interpretation of the results the effect on the subject of the presence of the photographer and his or her camera. Physicists refer to that as the perturbation effect, which we can sum up as "Observation changes the situation observed."

Moreover, we have to weigh the impact on the dynamic of the portraiture situation of the photographer's own personality. Different portraitists will evoke different responses from the same subject. Yousuf Karsh famously got a prototypical glower from Winston Churchill by snatching the British prime minister's cherished cigar from between his lips. I have often wondered if the owlish consternation of the painter Piet Mondrian in Newman's best-known portrait of him did not result from his encounter with the photographer's bustling, garrulous presence.

Newman's Mondrian looks just daft enough to match his legendary obsession with the geometric. Did Newman merely capture this aspect of his subject, or did he evoke it — or did he actually cause it? We'll never know. But we have to remember that toward the end of his life Mondrian refused to walk on grass because he considered it too disordered.

A former colleague of mine who taught art history and normally dressed in academic-casual clothing periodically altered his costume when presenting to his students those figures he considered eccentric and larger than life. He always wore a tie for his Mondrian lecture because, as he said, "When you teach Mondrian, you need all the credibility you can get."

I predict that when, in the future, academics teach Newman, as they surely will, they'll feel the need to wear ties. And smoke cigars.

So congratulations, Arnold. I speak for many both here and not here tonight when I say that this recognition has been earned the old-fashioned way — not just by moving a lot of furniture* in the real world, but by rearranging the furniture in people's heads.

And I leave you all with some of Arnold's own words — including the secret of his delicate handling of his portrait sessions.*

Thank you.

* Among the quotes from Newman sprinkled into the PowerPoint presentation were these: "Photography is 1% inspiration and 99% moving furniture" and "I say, 'Why don't you sit over here for a minute while I get set up.' I actually am set up — I've got the composition all worked out. I sit them down where I want, and they get bored and start looking around, and then suddenly I say, 'If you move, I'll kill you.'"

(This is the complete text of a talk delivered at the National Arts Club in New York City on the evening of May 18, 2006. The occasion was the awarding to Arnold Newman of the NAC's Medal of Honor, by decision of the NAC's Photography Committee. Both Newman and his wife Augusta attended. I accompanied the talk with a PowerPoint presentation including images of Newman — self-portraits and portraits by others — and images by him. This was his last public appearance; he died of a heart attack a few weeks later, on June 6.)