

From Motherwell's Tragedy, Newman's Alienation,  
and Reinhardt's Isolation to the Minimalists' Renown: On the Reception of Artist-Writers

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Motherwell deemed the fact that he wrote as much as he did as the “tragedy” of his life. Not including artist's statements, he published nearly forty essays and articles between 1942 and 1965 alone. Newman faced suspicion and hostility when he began exhibiting because colleagues considered him first and foremost a theoretician; he had published five essays for *The Tiger's Eye* and written letters and catalogue forewords for artist friends and gallerist Betty Parsons before his first solo exhibition, at her gallery in 1950. Reinhardt too was isolated, although as the self-proclaimed conscience of the art world, it is unlikely that he was troubled by the idea that writing might thwart, or at least stall, his art world success.

Remarkably, by the mid-1960s, this situation changed drastically. Guaranteed hostility became guaranteed canonicity. Minimalists Judd and Morris were quickly identified as progenitors of a new movement thanks to their writings. While there remained some animosity amongst the Minimalists (Judd famously wrote a letter to the editor of *Artforum* consisting of a single sentence: “Smithson isn't my spokesman”), this was because they were each endeavouring to speak for themselves and not because they thought artists should not write. By contrast, the Abstract Expressionists' urgency, seriousness, and commitment to the arena of paint on canvas meant that artist-writers were seen to lack devotion and determination, as having opted for the less difficult route of part-time painter and mere mouthpiece. Moreover, theirs was a program that supposedly did not need theorizing, as Ann Gibson's scholarship has demonstrated. My paper investigates why a shift in the reception of artist-writers took place at this time. My strategy is to move beyond the “evasion” of language by the Abstract Expressionists and instead to analyze the essays of those who did write. Recent scholarship has mined the artists' statements for insight into the movement; Newman's and Judd's writings have been compared (Temkin 2009); and, individually,

Motherwell, Newman, and Reinhardt have been discussed as writers in the introductions to their collected writings and elsewhere (Bochner; Shiff 2005). However, this paper considers the three together to assess the practice of the artist-writer in the moment of Abstract Expressionism.

Given that the majority of essays by artists throughout this period were solicited by magazine editors or gallerists, I propose that the eventual acceptance of artists' writings was constituted by, and mutually constituted, the growth of the New York art scene from a community of artists into an industry to be navigated with the aid of art magazines, an expansion largely precipitated by the gains of the Abstract Expressionists themselves. In foregrounding the reception of the Abstract Expressionists' writings, I also analyze the conditions of production attending these writings, the artists' own reflections on the practice of writing as an artist, and the discursive frames on which the writings are predicated. This research contributes to the history of a practice of increasing relevance, as the capacity to write critically about one's work has become vital to a rising number of contemporary practitioners.