

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

IN CONVERSATION

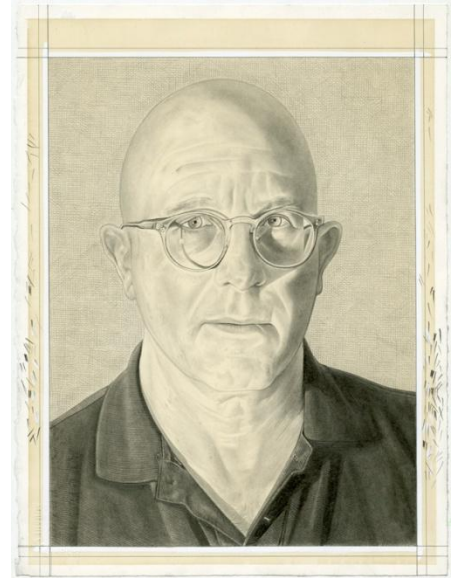
JOHN NEWMAN with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui

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A few days after the opening reception of his solo exhibit *John Newman: New Work* at Tibor de Nagy Gallery (March 15 – April 21, 2012) the sculptor paid a visit to the *Rail*'s headquarters to talk with *Rail* publisher Phong Bui about his life and his recent body of work.

Phong Bui (Rail): I like Marc Mayer's description of Tom Nozkowski's painting as "solidarity in difference" in their "democratic sublime." Many aspects of your work—modest size, intimate yet immersive sense of scale, unrestricted use of materials and techniques, solitary in its reference to domestic space—evoke Tom's paintings, as well as Chardin's.



John Newman: My earliest work starting in the mid-'70s was always on a large scale. In 1977, I received a large public commission for the CUNY Graduate Center Mall on 42nd Street, as the community service for a CAPS grant that I was awarded. Actually, Ronnie Bladen was on the selection committee, and he picked me, which was an honor because he was, and is, a very important artist to me. I like your observation, but I never thought of this body of work as being the product of a solitary practice. Undoubtedly, the shift from large to small works began in the early '90s when I was teaching at Yale. I observed how many of my students and many artists at that time were involved in these huge, research-driven installations, which wasn't exactly the sort of thing I was interested in. Plus, I felt that I wanted to make a radical change in my life, so I basically just gave up teaching and went to India with the painter Bob Moskowitz, which was a wonderful trip. I also went to Africa for a few months and Japan a couple of times during that period. Although, it's a good word you refer to—solitary—because it's close to how I see my working process now, in the studio alone, without having to deal with assistants, trucks, cranes, or engineers, never mind imploring dealers to cover fabrication costs. My work, right after I returned from those trips, became what I would like to call "studio driven." I

like to refer to working in the studio as “deskwork,” like an architect or a mathematician. Although, many components of the sculptures are collected during my travels or are produced according to my instructions by artisans or fabricators outside the studio. When I was traveling, I saw people had this very intense relationship to handmade and intimate objects. And I thought this was something missing from the contemporary sculptural lexicon. The experience of someone taking a Japanese teacup and holding it up to their nose while thinking about the meaning of the universe, or dressing an Indian stone with flowers and honey was a way of seeing how objects of small size could have huge significance. There are very few things we can become that intimate with—that physically close to—babies, food, a lover on occasion, a book. I also thought that by working on a smaller scale, working close up, I could generate a more emotionally charged form and a content that was without a narrative basis—and that was very important to me. I understand your reference to Chardin, in that Chardin was making modest still life paintings as opposed to the spectacle in, say, Boucher. But as for Tom’s paintings, what I feel our work shares is a strong, autonomous identity and a hard-won unity. Lately I’ve been thinking about Calder a lot, partly because of the intensity of his genius in terms of engineering and his use of materials. He was the first person to make a sculpture float; that’s a radical move, a paradigm shift, really. It’s a radicality that, like Ornette Coleman (whose innovations in the free jazz movement are very influential to my thinking) I liken to a kind of buoyancy or rather—joy.

Rail: I couldn’t agree with you more. Why did you go to Oberlin College instead of art school?

Newman: Like a lot of ’60s kids, I wanted to be a poet. I joke about being involved with the four P’s: poetry, philosophy, protest, and pot. My poetry teacher at Oberlin, a good poet named David Young, who was a kind of buttoned-up academic, hated me and gave me an F- as a kind of lesson to make me work harder. I remember clearly having trouble writing—prosody and structure versus content. I suppose I was doing that adolescent, generic Prufrockian style although hoping for more of the avant-garde. And then a friend showed me some early conceptual and minimal art in magazines. I had never seen anything like it. Also, to my great luck, Oberlin had this program where you could sign up as an assistant to an artist in New York and get credit for it. At the time, I thought I was a real hotshot, so I said I was interested in Sol LeWitt—although he wasn’t on the school’s list. They claimed that they called Sol and that he said he wasn’t interested in having a student assistant. Soon enough, I went home (I’m a New York-born kid) for winter vacation. One day I was in the Union Square subway station and I impulsively decided to call up



John Newman, “Ask the fact for the form (indigo and of itself),” 2011, extruded aluminum, wood, steel, Japanese paper, papier-mâché, wood putty, acqua resin, acrylic paint, 16 ½ x 24 x 15”. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Information at the phone booth. I asked for a number for Sol LeWitt, they told me they had a LeWitt on Hester Street, and I said that sounded right. So I called the number and said to Sol, “I’m the kid from Oberlin you said you didn’t want to have as your assistant, but I really want to talk to you.” He said, “Where are you?” I said, “I’m in Union Square.” He said, “Come on over.” So I went over and we drank a beer and talked. He was being very sweet. His girlfriend came in at some point and she asked if I wanted to smoke a joint. And I said, “Sure.” There were works of art hanging all over the walls that I had only ever seen in reproductions—Arte Povera, minimalism—and I knew my stuff really well—I knew all of them. By then I had been bitten by the bug; I was obsessed. Sol’s girlfriend said, “Give the kid a break and sign his paper so he can get the credit. Maybe Andre or Ryman need some help.” Eventually, when John Weber Gallery opened, Sol got me a job sweeping the floors, and he also suggested that I sit in on Mel Bochner’s class at SVA. So I met Mel Bochner, who became a really important influence, a mentor, and continues to be a very good friend.



John Newman, “Ask the fact for the form (throughline),” 2011, extruded aluminum, two way mirrored glass, wood, steel wire, Japanese paper, papier-mâché, wood putty, aqua resin, epoxy paste, pearlescent paint, 20 × 18 × 20”. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Rail: So we’re talking about maybe ’71?

Newman: Yes. I remember when I first saw Mel’s work, the thing that really excited me so much was that it wasn’t part of any conventional order. It wasn’t painting or sculpture; it was this new mode and a new experience. It was both intellectually rigorous but it was also something else. There was a phenomenal, experiential aspect to looking at Mel’s work, particularly something like the stone pieces “Seven Properties of Between” or the penny pieces like “Axiom of Indifference.” It was something I had never really seen before or thought about. Mel also introduced me to all kinds of ethnographic art, and it

was always great fun to hear him tell stories and talk about Picasso, for example. He continues to be a very special figure for me. At that time, I remember helping Dorothea Rockburne with her installation at Finch College, as well. I used to go to the Spring Street Bar on Saturdays after the galleries in SoHo closed. There I would see Mel, Dorothea, Barry Le Va, Smithson, and other artists and basically got my education on the street.

The irony is that later when I went to Yale for graduate school, David von Schlegell, who was then the head of the sculpture department, used to tease me and tell me I didn’t know how to make anything. He would say, “You don’t even know how to use a hammer!” My father was a theoretical linguist; I always joke that when I went to graduate school I didn’t make sculpture, I read Wittgenstein. Now the idea of actually making sculpture seems wildly radical to me. I still hold that as a goal. I want that level of radicality. I love that reversal, that unconventional method of training, almost self-taught. I remember at Yale, being at a faculty meeting and discussing how we

could raise money from alumni and William Bailey said, “Impossible, all artists think they are autodidacts!”

Rail: I remember seeing your exhibit at Jeffrey Hoffeld in 1986, as well as reading Michael Brenson’s glowing review in the *New York Times* while I was a student at the New York Studio School. Since we spoke about painting earlier, I wonder if you were ever trained as a painter or made paintings early on?

Newman: I was never trained as a painter and I never made a painting. I once took Al Held’s drawing class at Yale but that basically meant you just stood around and argued with Al; you didn’t really draw. It was great fun. At the time I was more invested in the idea that advanced art was not connected to these older traditions—I was interested in something like the far-reaching work of Ornette Coleman who was able to break from traditional jazz. Of course I read Don Judd’s writing. And I have always been attracted to esoterica. I became obsessed with ferreting out obscure conceptual artists in Germany like Hanne Darboven. It was all very thrilling. I also recognized that artists like Mel, Dorothea, Barry, Lawrence Weiner, Richard Tuttle in particular, weren’t making paintings or sculptures. They were all invested, in each of their own ways, in ideas that became manifest through drawing. Because of the way they all thought through drawing I began to make my own works at that time. It was actually only a few years ago that I started adding different modalities of representing space to my drawing. It was quite fun and seemingly irreverent for me since I was never trained in a traditional way. I’m fascinated now with classical traditions and many years later they still seem very fresh to me; I never had to rebel against them.

Rail: That makes sense. Also, in the same review Brenson mentioned a piece in the show titled “Trumpeter’s Case,” made in memory of your mother, who was a trumpet player. What kind of music did she play?

Newman: My mother was in high school band. She was never a professional musician, but in the old days she played the bugle at summer camp. She used to play “Reveille” to wake up all the kids. It was always a family joke that my mother was a trumpeter, partly because it’s not the kind of instrument you associate with women. I think the real story of “Trumpeter’s Case” was my own struggle to find some approach to emotional content in my work that at the same time was not primarily based pictorially or representationally. This was at a time when I was also very interested in artists like Bob Moskowitz, Joel Shapiro, and Jennifer Bartlett who were trying to take the rigor and strictures of what they had inherited from minimalism and throw in this other recognizable component which would allow for a different kind of experience of subject matter. When I made “Trumpeter’s Case” my mother had recently died. And, at the same time, I realized that I had never really made sculpture—meaning freestanding sculpture. My early pieces were always on the wall, like paintings or rather reliefs. When I visited my mother in the hospital I remember looking down at her and seeing how small she was—how

compelling that space was. There seemed to be an irreconcilable contradiction in bridging my previous interests in contemporary art with a desire for a greater range of personal expression. To put it mildly, I was in a serious crisis. I had this strong desire to go back to things that I had been interested in as a kid, like medieval armor, dinosaurs, and at that time I was watching a lot of Kurosawa movies. I love those helmets the samurais wear in Kurosawa movies. They look like they are from another planet. I remember looking again at dinosaurs' skeletons. They seemed to appear to me wildly exciting like Anthony Caro or David Smith's sculptures, with this other component of awe and fear. I was also interested in topology, which has to do with the mathematics of deformation, and coincidentally relates in form to medieval armor. The trumpet is a topological form, a Lobachevskian model. I began to wonder about the challenge of making a form that was neither modeled from viscous material nor constructed out of perpendicular and parallel planes. And yet, I also wanted to engage another dimension of meaning that pointed to a more emotional content, at the same time. To me, these topologically complex, curved forms resulted in bizarre shapes that had associative possibilities that I was really interested in. They allowed a new door to open in my work that people could enter into in a very democratic—even populist, meaning accessible—way. Now, I see the idea of materials-as-metaphor being another possibility for opening doors of associative reading and this is important to my newer work. To put it more concisely: How can I make something that can bridge both the intellectually engaged formal rigor that I was so taken with from the Spring Street Bar and Yale days, and my desire to embrace and elicit an emotion without irony or without merely depending upon art historical precedence, to tackle something that was real, like my mother dying? Actually, Victor and Sally Ganz came into the gallery one day without knowing me and bought "Trumpeter's Case." Sally told me later that as soon as she walked in the first thing she thought about was *As I Lay Dying*.

Rail: Faulkner's book?

Newman: Yes. And I just thought that Sally Ganz's association really reaffirmed the emotional aspects that lay embedded in my hopes for that work.

Rail: So while traveling in India, Japan, and Africa, you not only learned how to recognize people's rapport with objects, not only in terms of their various functions, but also their intimate, spiritual, or sensual connection to them. This reminds me of several artists we both know. Martin Puryear's Peace Corps experience in Sierra Leone taught him how to use hand tools, as well as all kinds of cabinetry techniques from local craftsmen.



John Newman, "Fitting disks in powder blue," 2010, extruded aluminum, pumice stone, wood, handmade Laotian paper, starch, acrylic paint, stove-blackening, 10 1/2 x 12 x 6". Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Joel Shapiro's experience in the Peace Corps is revealed in a body of amazing photographs he took of traditional handcraft practice in Andhra Pradesh, as well as in his early terracotta pieces.

Newman: Yes, yes, I know, I love those pieces.

Rail: Sarah Sze, having studied Ikebana while she was in Japan for some years, learned to work with both man-made and natural objects, and aspects of awkwardness and the grotesque, in order to create different kinds of beauty. In your case, you were able to take specific materials and techniques you had viewed firsthand, such as Calcutta basket weaving, Bengali brass casting, and *hariko* techniques, and mix them up with practices from the West.

Newman: I want to be very careful *not* to be a cultural tourist! I'm the filter of all of those experiences, which only occurs after I am back in the studio. Basket weaving got me thinking about making forms that were more complex topological deformations that I couldn't make out of steel, for instance. When I was in Santiniketan, north of Calcutta, I visited villages that made dogra: a method of casting brass strings from tree sap. They specialize in making toys and small ritual objects. As an experiment, I had them cast in beeswax the smallest thing I had ever made—and it was actually the largest thing that was ever made in the village! When I was in Japan I worked with a papermaker through Tyler Graphics. He told me about the folk technique *hariko* which is how they make toys and puppets out of papier-mâché. I loved the notion of simply making complicated forms out of lightweight-non-toxic-easy-to-handle materials and that got me on to my "home brew" technique, which is an adaptation of *hariko*. And again, traveling allowed me to step out of the concealed contradictions that are embedded within a system; in this case the system is the art world, where so many of my contemporaries were making art about art, or how art connects to larger spheres of contexts, meaning the gallery space, the gallery system, or art's possible social relevancy. Having recognized the Duchampian idea these spheres had to expand from the object to the space that it sat in, sculpture then became not an object: it became an environment, a spectacle you entered. Then eventually it didn't just become an environment, it involved a critique of the art world, and then how the art world connected to a larger political sphere. I think Jeff Koons is a very interesting artist in this regard because his work is about stretching these limits of context. As for me, I'm going in an opposite path, pushing it inward—trying to make something I have never seen before!



John Newman, "Counting backwards from clear to blue," 2010, lead crystal ball, braided galvanized steel wire, museum board, Japanese paper, wood, wood putty, papier-mâché, acqua resin, acrylic paint, 33 x 18 x 8".
Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

Rail: Maybe Koons can be Boucher and you, Chardin.

Newman: I certainly won't mind being Chardin [*laughs*]. Even though my works could be seen as still-life objects—to follow your logic—I'm actually more interested in the idea that things can't be named, in things which compel you to look close, and stay with you as an image—again, an unnameable image [*laughs*]. Anyway, I'm much less interested in commenting directly on the art world than in expanding some notion of the unknown. The intimate scale in sculpture had long been eliminated by the time card-carrying third generation minimalist zealots like myself, as a student coming up in the late '70s, took on that idea: The pedestal was considered illusionistic,

hierarchical, and above all sinful. But I can't help but think "Why can't I put it back on the pedestal?" "Why can't it be about illusion or enliven the imagination?" "Why shouldn't we get nose-to-nose with it?"

Rail: Which brings us to the subject of scale, which as we know, means different things to different artists. I am aware of your two-dogs-feeling-each-other-up-close analogy, as well as your notion of scale being intuitive and therefore emotional. But at this moment I'm thinking of Richard Wollheim's wonderful hypothesis of how sensation plays tricks upon scale. He once gave an example of a person standing on top of the Himalayas, looking at the immense vista, when all of a sudden a twinge of pain emerges and overwhelms the vista and the mountain for the person. There is no literal ratio between the pain and the landscape, of course, yet the pain can tower over the Himalayas. Do you agree?

Newman: Absolutely. I like that Wollheim analogy, and I also understand how a small object can generate a monumental sense of scale, and vice versa: A big object can give off an intimate feeling. I've been interested in this notion I like to call "scaleless-ness." My example par excellence of a scaleless object is the globe of the world, or in another way Chinese scholar's rocks; they are instruments of reverie. A globe of the world is an object not only chock full of information but also capable of bringing up all kinds of fanciful thought: "Where is Antarctica? What would it be like to go to Islamabad?" We can embrace the thing wholly and know full well that it represents something so much greater than what is presented to us in material form. A scholar's rock is both mundane and of the highest aestheticized presentation. It is an instrument of meditation and allows us to access an infinite imaginative realm.

Rail: From nameless to scaleless you sure are elusive [*laughs*]. The word “imagination” is often used when referring to your work, although in the contemporary art world such a word is considered old-fashioned, if not obsolete.

Newman: Well, I take it as a compliment, especially when people say to me, “I don’t really know how to look at your work.”

Rail: That’s terrific!

Newman: That’s my goal. Another word, which 10 years ago was considered a dirty word, is “invention.” And I perfectly understood that in terms of the rhythmical sequence that was going on in the reductivist inevitability tumbling towards post-Conceptual art (Sherrie Levine, for example). But something else is going on now.

Rail: Well, Alfred North Whitehead once said, “Fools act on imagination without knowledge, pedants act on knowledge without imagination.”

Newman: Beautiful! I would follow up with the little that I know about Gödel’s proof, which says that the only way you can possibly know that you’re not stuck in the concealed contradictions of the system is by hopping outside of it to look into it. That takes a certain degree of knowledge and consciousness, or maybe pedantry because you have to be willing to study. On the other hand, it also requires a certain degree of risk because you have to say: I have to look at this from a point of view so far from a given condition that I haven’t actually even figured out what that point of view is yet. So I don’t find imagination to be a dirty word or a corny thing. And yet, I understand how it could be [*laughs*] in the wrong hands! God forbid, I don’t want to sound ridiculously earnest!

Rail: But at the same time you’re not a maximalist.

Newman: But neither am I a minimalist.

Rail: Let me ask you something more practical about your work process: Do you start with a drawing first before realizing different steps that each sculpture requires?

Newman: That’s a really good question, and sadly a difficult one for me to answer, partly because in the early ’80s when I started to do these metal pieces and these big drawings, I did always make a drawing first. I then built the sculpture up on the drawing, literally, if you will. It’s almost like I pushed the sculpture out of the drawing plane.



John Newman, “Green and white and hanging on,” 2012, hot sculpted glass, tulle, patinated and flocked cast bronze from eucalyptus bark, forged iron, 28 × 10 × 5”. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

That's why the sculptures were on the wall—because they were kind of extensions of the drawing. In my new, second wave of work, since leaving Yale in the early '90s, I no longer have an orderly system, and I'm not interested in one, though I can say that the works seem to generate from different materials laying around the studio, some found, some collected, some made, while others are fabricated, and so on. I also make all kinds of scratchy, doodly drawings and write out words and phrases that sometimes become titles. It's all wildly improvisational—it's my version of Ornette Coleman's dissonant fanfares in rhythm, in touch. I have been doing this for a long time now. I no longer feel I need to rationalize. I just feel like, I'm gonna step up to the mic and blow my horn. It's very exciting. And then, there is the pondering—and I wonder about "fit." How does it all work together. What I call my "kidney transplant theory." Will this component be accepted by the larger system or will it be rejected and kill the whole organism?

Rail: Well, take any piece in this show, whether "We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship," or "Primaries' retort," which vary in materials, and you will detect the organic in contrast to the geometric. Depending on the choice of materials, you can also recognize the collision between the willfulness and the playfulness.

Newman: Yes, I'd agree. Now I'm reminded that in Don Judd's seminal essay "Specific Objects," he mentions that if any artist could find something that was neither organic nor geometric it would be a great discovery. I took that seriously and yet began to think that those binary relationships always get us into trouble. I am interested in that hovering third thing that is yielded from the collision of opposites and is stubborn to language. And in that I have begun to incorporate accident as a way of widening my sculptural vocabulary.

Rail: Which you allow and work with, like the extruded aluminum in "Ask the fact for the form (throughline)."

Newman: Yes. I had a show many years ago in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and the curator Emily Kass's husband, Chuck Weinraub, had a company that made wire through the extrusion process. He invited me to come to the factory and said: "Oh here's how we do it, with a heater and a hole—like pasta!" Meanwhile, I saw this pile of stuff in the corner and I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Oh those are the mistakes." They were what happened when the machine got backed up. As the material cooled and was pushed away from the hole, it was like sped-up geology, a fractal, a record of time, a total accident, both industrial and natural. And completely anonymous as a form and as to how it might have been made. They looked like parts of Bernini sculptures. In "Ask the Fact for the form (throughline)" I had the extruded aluminum welded together to form the scaffolding, then from there I built up this bubble-like surface that is like a topologically deformed surface, a möbius strip. The surface of the piece was generated by accident, and yet after that everything was wildly purposeful in its reference back to that initial accident. That is the key to title. This is why if you view the piece from the other side it's so radically different. You can't even imagine how the back fits into the front. There is a

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peculiar detail—because there is a two-sided mirror, there is this slight optical conceit à la Borromini, where when you look inside of the skewed tube and both see yourself and see through it, it also makes the tube look like it is twice as long as it is. But that was sheer accident.

Rail: I would say that in this piece there is a relationship between irrationality and humor that evokes a strong sense of eroticism. It's fairly demonstrative [*laughs*].

Newman: I have said in the past that my work is about something between sex and science. Somehow this came from thinking about the entanglement that reductivism got us into. In the early '70s there was a lot of talk about making art that disappears. About reaching the zero degree! After so many examples of zero-degree art making I began thinking, "What's on the other side of zero?" The other side of zero is irrational numbers, negative numbers, Alice's whacky world, the unconscious, quantum mechanics and probability, and even wilder as-yet undiscoverable things. And the whole idea of what to do after the zero degree is reached—what is on the other side of the mirror—in a sense has always been the basic premise of my work.