After “The Wild”: Contemporary Art from The Barnett
and Annalee Newman Foundation Collection
highlights artworks made between 1963 and 2023 by
forty-seven international artists. The exhibition title
is inspired by the Jewish artist Barnett Newman’s
1950 painting The Wild. Standing eight feet tall and
a mere one and a half inches wide, The Wild con-
sts of a dark orange “Zip,” a line that typically in-
rupts a field of color, set against razor-thin bands
of black. Though similar in composition to other
Newman paintings, The Wild’s proportions stand
out by the artist’s account. The Wild tested wheth-
er the strength of a painting might lie in its scale
rather than its size. The Wild proved that the Zip’s
buzzy energy was present no matter the breadth
of the landscape it traversed; it was a moment of
intensity as well as a place to rest, a remnant of a
past event as well as a suggestion of a distant
horizon. The notion of the horizon—fundamental
to landscape painting—resonated philosophically
within Newman’s practice. The horizon represents
the outer limits of possibility, a thin and restless
boundary which gives form to the field it produces
but can never be reached.

Within the Abstract Expressionist movement,
Newman was active among the color field artists,
a group that pivoted away from expressive gesture
and individual subjectivity. He helped usher in a
conception of contemporary art as a field defined
precisely by its continual expansion. In the seven
decades since The Wild was created, our defi-
nition of art has become ever more capacious.
Artists use new methods, materials, and subjects
to create a multiplicity of intersecting, parallel,
and at times contesting discourses and practices.
After “The Wild” underscores artists’ perpetual
ability to find new territories to stake out, construct,
unravel, and build again.

At the time of his sudden death in 1970, Newman
was lionized by critics and widely sought after by
museums and collectors. Throughout most of his
career, however, he went without critical acclaim or
financial success; Annalee Newman, his wife, sup-
ported the household as a teacher and administra-
tor in the New York City public schools, ensuring
Newman’s practice continued. Though intermit-
tently and often seriously discouraged, Newman’s
dedication never faltered: he remained, from be-
ginning to end, an impassioned champion of art’s
value to humankind.

Newman was also a stalwart and generous sup-
porter of his colleagues, befriending and mentoring
countless other artists. To them, he was not an el-
der but a peer—curious, engaged, and as eager to
delve into technical nuances as art’s philosophical
underpinnings. Annalee Newman established The
Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation in 1979
to encourage the study of her husband's life and
work; in subsequent decades, the foundation di-
rectly extended the couple’s commitment by award-
ing grants to young artists. Diverse in style, training,
background, and age, the foundation’s grantees—
whose works make up this exhibition—share
Newman’s independent spirit and his seriousness
of purpose. After “The Wild” illuminates the varied
ways in which artists reach toward the unfamiliar
and untested. They experiment, as Newman wrote,
“with forms that are unknown in a true act of dis-
covery in the creation of new forms and symbols
that will have the living quality of creation.”

The exhibition continues on Floor 3.
Works by the artists in gold are shown on this floor, those in black on Floor 3.
Barnett Newman (American, born in 1905, died in 1970) made three, eight-foot-tall artworks in the same year: The Wild, his first wall-sized painting; Vir Heroicus Sublimis; and Here I, his first sculpture. They were shown alongside one another in Newman’s 1951 exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. Newman was intimately familiar with Parsons’s apartment-sized gallery, which had been designed by the artist Tony Smith. The space was a foil against which Newman and other artists—including Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, who had shows there in the same year—presented some of the largest and most inventive works they had made to date. Aided and spurred on by each other, they strove to shift paradigms and expand the possibilities for the art of their time.

The Wild remains palpably radical seven decades after it was made. Critics discuss its enduring importance, noting its innovative use of scale, its straddling of the boundary between painting and sculpture, and its direct address of the body, among other things. Newman argued that physical closeness to his work was essential to appreciate both its scale, which he said was “a felt thing,” and its full force, which carried an ethical dimension. As an anarchist, he hoped that his paintings might be understood as open-ended, their wildness signaling open societies to come, free from coercive authority. Projecting The Wild into the present is an opportunity to meditate on the role of artists and artworks in helping us to imagine new and better worlds.
After "The Wild": Contemporary Art from The Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation Collection is organized by Kelly Taxter, Guest Curator, with Shira Becker, Leon Levy Associate Curator, the Jewish Museum.

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