

## Space, Time, and Architecture

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Mound City, Chillicothe, Ohio

*A film should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.*

Jean-Luc Godard

The sky is overcast with heavy clouds and snow is falling lightly--perhaps that's why I'm the only one here. The mounds rise up from the level field, over ten of them in different sizes, some so low that it's possible to see over them, others two to three meters high. One differs in shape, having an

oval base, somewhat like a ridge. The mounds seem to have no discernible order, symmetry, or astronomical code. Because the ground still a moment ago was bare, the oblique snowfall quickly replaces the shadow lines; the windward side of the mounds is soon white, while the sheltered side remains green. The almost-square field is delineated by a low wall. Only a few gnarled oaks remain within the perimeter, though on the outside begins a dense forest. The murmur of the Scioto River can be heard from beyond the trees.

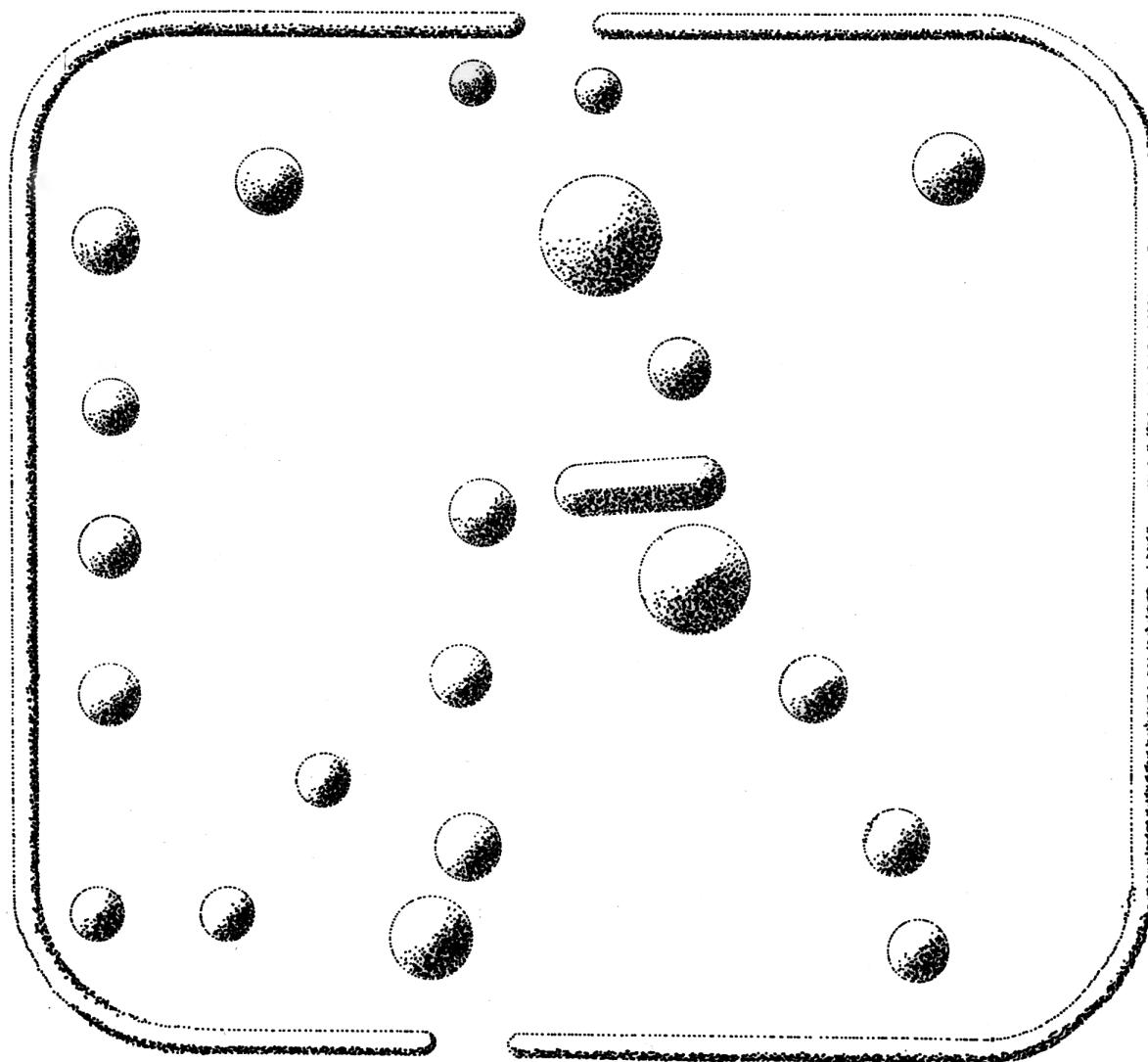


*The bodies were burned on a clay plinth in a crematorium built from logs. After ten to thirteen burials the building was dismantled and moved to a new location. The artifacts of the deceased were covered with earth, and the mound was then covered with gravel and round stones*

I'm in Mound City, one of the mystical monuments of earth architecture in southern Ohio, which was left by ancient peoples over a thousand years ago. When the Europeans first arrived the local Indians didn't know who had built the mounds or anything else about them. These long-vanished cultures were later named, like distant stars, after their discoverers. The Adena and Hopewell cultures had flourished along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers until the 8th century. Their trading routes stretched to the Pacific Ocean and Central America, which is why some people had even believed that these structures were built by the Aztecs. The major part of this earth architecture was built in honor of the dead, though it could also have been part of fortification systems. The "mystery" of the best known work, however, remains unsolved. No bones or jewellery have been found in the "Serpent Mound" near Locust Grove. Might it have been built to pacify the gods?

The New York artist Barnett Newman (1905-1970) also visited this site. When visiting his wife Annalee's family in Akron, Ohio, in 1949 he insisted on seeing the grave mounds in the southwestern part of the state. Newman wrote down his impressions, titled "Prologue for a New Aesthetic," just after he had painted the first canvas in the "Onement" series.

"Looking at the site you feel, Here I am, here...and out beyond there [beyond the limits of the site] there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes...But here



*The mound field could be some kind of miniature landscape, a scale model which mimics the typical natural landscape formations of the Ohio River valleys*

you get a sense of your own presence... I became involved with the idea of making the viewer present: the idea that 'Man Is Present.' In Newman's opinion, it is a question of "the self-evident nature of the artistic act, its utter simplicity." Compared to these modest earth mounds "the Mexican and Northwest Coast totem poles are hysterical over-sized monsters" and "the Egyptian pyramid by comparison is nothing but an ornament..."

I walk along with a camera in my hand,

just like all my colleagues always do. I begin to compose 35mm-framed views of the grass mounds, until I feel Barnett's hand on my shoulder: "There are no subjects--nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed." I understand his point and give it up as a hopeless case. Even an innocent photograph seems like a wise aleck directing how one should perceive. I'm unable to find that single truth, the Kodak spot from where I could bear witness with a photograph. There is no obligatory circulation route, only the unpleasant

ubiquitous signposts which restate the history of the place. Walk your own way and the landscape differs at every step; and the light...today I can only imagine the shadows of the clouds that move over the area. Newman wrote: "Suddenly one realizes that the sensation is not one of space or [of] an object in space. It has nothing to do with space and its manipulations...What is all the clamour over space? The Renaissance deep space as a heroic stage, the impressionist flat space, cubist space, shallow space, positive and negative

space, trompe l'oeil enigmatic space, the pure space--the space of 'infinity'-of Mondrian's universe. There is so much talk about space that one might think it is the subject matter of art, as if the essence of musical composition were the question of whether Mozart wrote in 3/4 or 4/8 time."

The artist's spatial phobia can be understood when peering into the waters that flowed when Newman himself crossed the river. Still in the 1940s, despite Pearl Harbor and the



political defeat of isolationists, the “American Renaissance” dominated the exhibitions of domestic art in the museums and galleries of the United States. The subject matter was “Yankee folklore”: cowboys, the wagons rolling west, and workers returning from the cotton fields. European art was also, in Newman’s opinion, at a dead end. The “problem” of the Cubists, Fauvists, Surrealists, and Purists was always the reality perceived through the senses. In Paris people were “unable to move away from the Renaissance imagery

of figures and objects except by distortion or by denying it completely for an empty world of geometric formalisms—a pure rhetoric of abstract mathematical relationships...” The new art was to free itself from this baggage of the old world. It could no longer have anything to do with the concepts of nature, space or even beauty for that matter.

I wouldn’t be here at the mounds if it wasn’t for Newman. But what importance ultimately does this landscape

carry for Newman or his “oneness”? What if Annalee Newman’s parents would have lived elsewhere...I turn back to the main road, and immediately behind the forest facade Ohio State Prison is revealed. The snowflakes fall in an unreal way, just like in the movies, and behind the barbed wire fence two black men are shooting a basketball at a hoop. Newman continues: “Only time can be felt in private. Space is common property...The concern with space bores me. I insist on my experiences of sensations in time—not the

sense of time but the physical sensation of time.”

We trudge through the soggy quagmire. The tops of the tussocks are bare but the “valleys” are thigh deep in snow, which is why Steve has acquired a pair of tall Viking brand rubber boots. The spring sun is blinding in a cloudless sky, and yet in the south I can make out Reykjavik harbor and the town silhouette. Directly ahead all the way to Greenland is the chilly Atlantic Ocean, to the north can be seen the



*Afangar* by Richard Serra



*Afangar by Richard Serra*

Esja Mountains, and somewhere in the distance are Sneffel and Scartaris, along the crater of which the expedition sent by Jules Verne descended to the center of the Earth. We are at the cape at Vesturey, which, over a narrow isthmus joins the Videy Island, where

in 1989-1990 the American sculptor Richard Serra (b. 1939) built the landscape sculpture "Afangar."

The National Gallery of Iceland and the Sculptors Association of Iceland invited Serra to make a sculpture for

either a museum or one of the parks of Reykjavik, but already the journey from the airport made such an impression on the artist that a place was sought for outside the city. "My first impression of the landscape...was one of stark, immense vastness. Piles of lava

strata extend to the horizon. There are no trees...I was completely taken by the strangeness of the land...to put it simply, it is 'another' space."

Nine pairs of stone pillars were erected on a treeless basalt base which at its highest point is eighteen meters above sea level. The placement of the stone pillars seems at first glance arbitrary, but they have their own precise geometry. One of the totem pairs is three meters tall, the other one four meters. The lower one is always on the ten meter contour line, the taller one on the nine meter contour line, so that the top surfaces of all the columns are at the same height. The stones radiate from the centre point of the island but at the same time they form a linear route, a series of gates that leads the viewer around the perimeter of the island.

The pillars are grey-black basalt, the same material as the island itself. This type of basalt is formed when a thick lava flow is cooled rapidly by water, such that significant contraction forces build up. The extensive fracture network that develops results in the formation of a columnar basalt. It is not quarried or cut to shape, but the ready "basalt columns" are lifted directly from the mountain and cut to the desired length.

We walk quietly from one checkpoint to the next and chew on hardfiskur, dried cod, the Icelandic equivalent to potato crisps. Even though at the highest point of the island all the pillars are outlined as part of the horizon, it's not possible to grasp the artwork from a single spot. I notice how I look at the breathtaking landscape demarcated and divided up by these landmarks, those mystical pillars which, like the prehistoric megaliths, have meanings soon to be forgotten.

#### **Afangar**

*Stations, stops on the road  
to stop and look: forward and back  
to take it all in*

Jón Helgason



*Videy Drawing II by Richard Serra*

#### **References:**

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Richard Serra, Dirk Reinartz, *Afangar*, Steidl-Parkett, 1991.  
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