

Can a Genuine Picasso be a Fake?¹

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Just about an hour into *F for Fake*, the movie that Orson Welles dedicated in 1973 to the life and tribulations of the famous—or rather infamous—forger Elmyr de Hory, the filmmaker, in a booming voiceover, tells a story about Picasso while on screen a monitor shows the wriggling hands of de Hory as he talks to his biographer. The Spanish artist, we are told, was brought three of his own paintings by a friend, one work at a time, but he declared them all to be fake. The third time around, the friend had exclaimed: “But Picasso, I watched you paint that with my own eyes!” Here is the response: “I can paint false Picassos as well as anybody.”

As you might know, Welles’s film is half documentary, half fiction—or rather two thirds, one third. At the beginning of the movie, Welles makes the promise that everything in it will be true, and for an hour and ten minutes or so, the film follows the rules of the documentary genre: de Hory is abundantly interviewed, as is the then highly respected journalist Clifford Irving, whose 1969 book, *Fake: The Story of Elmyr de Hory: The Greatest Art Forger of Our Time*, had just been published by McGraw-Hill to great critical acclaim; clips show de Hory at work and catch him boasting about his unfailing capacity to fool the experts or uttering a few blatant lies (such as the fact that he never signed any work). Of course, Welles takes great advantage of the fact that between the time the interviews were conducted and the final editing of his movie, Irving himself was denounced as a forger for the “autobiography” of Howard Hughes he had sold to his gleeful publisher in the immediate wake of the commercial success of his biography of de Hory. Throughout the film, Welles makes sure we understand that what we are watching is a variation on the liar’s paradox, even though it is not the words uttered by the old Cretan sage Epimenides that he invokes but rather Picasso’s famous claim that “art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”²

1 Read on 24 April 2015 as part of the symposium *Fabrication, Verification, Authentication*.

2 From a statement to Marius de Zayas, published in 1923 as “Picasso Speaks.” Reprinted in Dore Ashton, ed., *Picasso on Art* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 3.

At the end of the movie, Welles refers to the promise he had made at the outset—that everything in it would be true—and reveals that he had kept this promise until around the time the fictional character of Oja Kodar was introduced (played by the real Oja Kodar, Welles's companion during the last 24 years of his life), at which point the film switched to an amusing fable involving Oja's grandfather, a *de Hory* look alike, as yet another forger of Picasso. "For the past 17 minutes," declares Welles, "I had been lying my head off," and to authenticate his confession, he has Oja Kodar come to the screen and testify that her real grandfather had never held a paintbrush in his life.

Now, the Picasso anecdote I quote at the beginning belongs to the documentary part of the movie, so we are urged to believe it as true. Welles does not give any source, but my bet is that he gleaned it in the thick book immodestly titled *The Art of Creation* that the writer Arthur Koestler published in 1964, nearly a decade before the film came out. Actually, the punchline in Welles's version is a marked improvement on that provided by Koestler, in which the friend was a dealer. Here is Koestler's rendition of the third round:

"But *cher maître*," expostulated the dealer, "it so happens that I saw you with my own eyes working on this very picture several years ago." Picasso shrugged: "I often paint fakes."³

Unfortunately, Koestler does not give any reference either—and for all we know, the story might be entirely apocryphal, although I must admit it sounds utterly plausible to me.⁴

In any event, both Koestler and Welles ask a not so trivial question: Could Picasso actually paint a fake Picasso? A self-parody, certainly, but a fake? Would not any work made by Picasso be a genuine Picasso no matter what—even a work intended by him to be a fake? And, to widen the problem, does any "work"—that is, any image produced by any artist—belong to this artist's *oeuvre*? For the most part, historians of art have chosen to be inclusive, at least when dealing with dead artists. Posthumous publications of complete works and *catalogues raisonnés* are replete with items that were thrown away by their creator but that have unexpectedly ended up being rescued from the trash bin of history.

And one need not even deal with the work of a dead artist to face this issue. Another anecdote, this one personal, will help me illustrate the point. It so happens that I was in Basel in the summer of 2008 during the week of this city's annual art fair. This was purely

3 Arthur Koestler, *The Art of Creation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 82.

4 At the end of our session on forgery, a member of the audience told me that the anecdote originated in one of David Douglas Duncan's many books on Picasso—but so far, I have not been able to find where.



FIGURE 1. Ellsworth Kelly, *Kite*, 1979. Pencil, thread & paper collage. 41 1/2 x 34 1/2 inches. Private collection. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

coincidental as I had made the trip to see an exhibition at the Beyeler Foundation, dedicated to Fernand Léger and the impact of his work on a younger generation of American artists, among them Ellsworth Kelly. I was then just beginning to work on the *catalogue raisonné* of Kelly's paintings and sculpture—which is to say that his production was very much on my mind. My surprise was intense, then, when I came across one of his “works” on paper in one of the booths at Art Basel, the most successful worldwide of all such fairs devoted to the market of contemporary art (Figure 1).

Stumbling upon one of Kelly's works of paper that was previously unknown to me is nothing out of the ordinary, since his graphic output counts in thousands. What was puzzling is that this work had to be “genuine”—no dealer would be crazy enough to put up a fake for sale in something as public as Art Basel, with its uninterrupted stream of museum directors, curators, critics, and collectors visiting the booths. It had to be “genuine”—yet nothing in it matched what I knew about

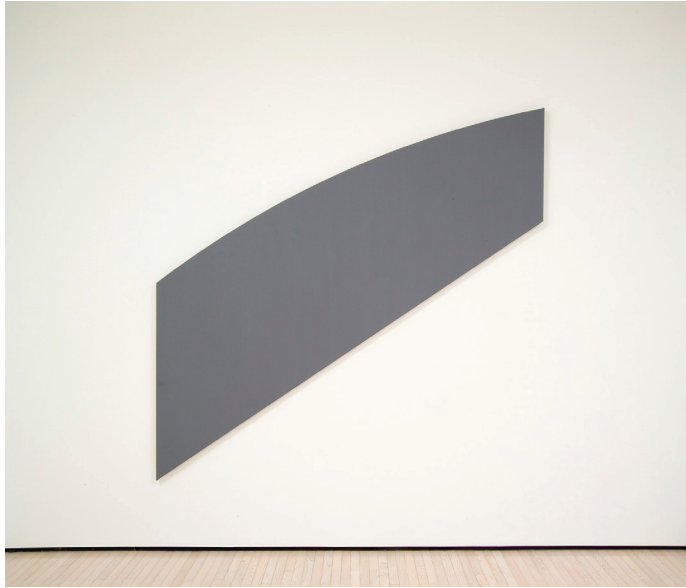


FIGURE 2. Ellsworth Kelly, *Diagonal with Curve II*, 1978. Oil on canvas. 95 1/2 x 97 1/2 inches. Baltimore Museum of Art. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Kelly's works on paper (I would even say that almost everything in it contradicted what I knew).

First, it was a cutout shape that had been mounted on paper, most probably by the seller or the dealer who had obtained the work in consignment. Kelly does occasionally paste cutout shapes on paper but only at a much smaller scale and for purely internal use (as a study for a painting). None of the collages of such sort I had ever seen in his studio were white on white, and none approached even half the size of that "work."

Second, it was neither signed nor ascribed with an inventory number, as it would have been if Kelly had deemed this good enough to be a "work" that could leave the confines of his studio (even if only as a gift to a friend).⁵

Third, an internal contour (a curved line) was traversing the silhouetted shape—which happens only very rarely in his work, only during a brief period in the mid-'70s, and never in this fashion. This "work" on paper was said to date from 1979, thus around the time when Kelly was working on a whole series of monochrome shaped canvases (Figure 2). In them, the job of drawing is solely taken up by the edges of the support—indeed from 1977, any internal contour had been absolute taboo in his art.

⁵ The gallery that had put up this work for sale recently informed me that it was signed and dated 2.7.1979 on the reverse. I have not seen the inscription.

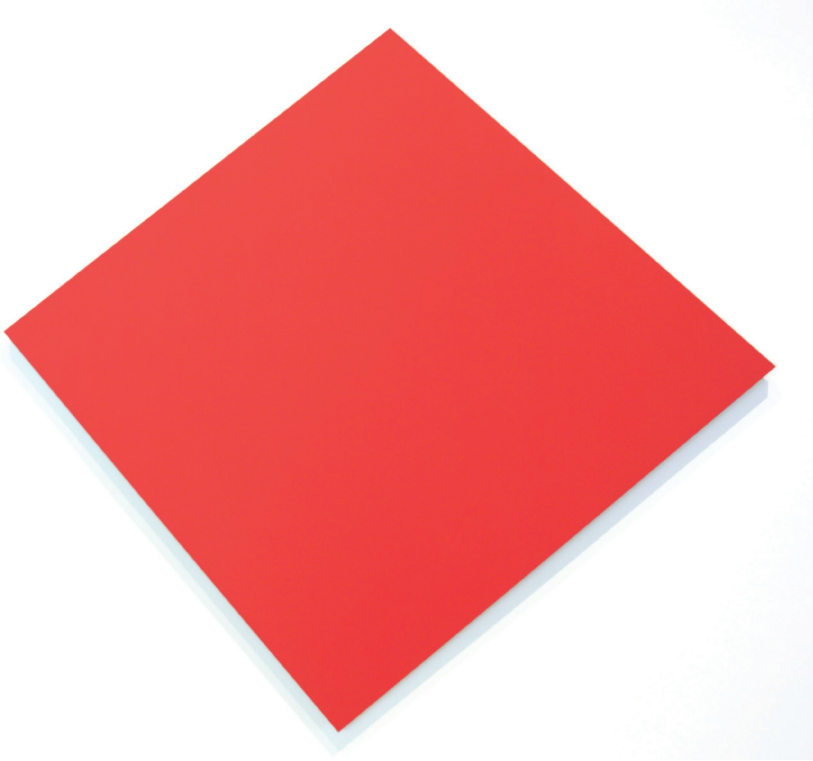


FIGURE 3. Ellsworth Kelly, *Red Panel*, 1980. Oil on linen canvas. 118 1/2 x 130 1/4 inches. Dallas Museum of Art. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Fourth, the shape of the Basel cutout was symmetrical, a rarity in Kelly's corpus of single shapes (in fact, I know of only two occurrences before the mid-'80s—*Yellow Piece* [1966], his first "shaped canvas," and *Green Angle* [1970]). What he favors is to play on symmetry, to court it, and tease us with its near occurrence—as in *Red Panel* (Figure 3).

Fifth, and most conspicuously delinquent, were the little holes one could see in each corner of the cutout shape (apologies for the bad photograph—that's the only image Kelly could obtain from the dealer who offered it for sale at Art Basel).

Resolved to find out about this enigmatic "work," I did as Picasso's friend in the Welles/Koestler story (that's the advantage of working on a living artist)—I asked Kelly about it, as he also happened to be in Basel then (and, in fact, had just seen the mysterious "work" when I questioned him). His answer was both reassuring in the sense that my doubts were warranted, but almost as puzzling as Picasso's response: yes, indeed he had done it, but this was not a work per se. That was a kite he had designed impromptu, while on vacation by the sea, for the

son of a friend of his. He was hurt that the friend in question, or someone in her household, had put it up for sale. He would see what he could do to have it removed from the market. Either he did not follow suit or he was not successful at that; the kite was sold, and it is currently in a private collection.

Now, before I speak of two other examples of such genuine “non-works” (I mean items produced by an artist but not considered works of art proper by their maker), I want, by way of yet another anecdote, to discuss a bit the current conundrum faced by art historians such as myself. In his movie, just before telling the story of Picasso qualifying a work of his making as a fake, Orson Welles has us hear another voice-over (female, this time). I quote: “As long as there are fakers, I guess there’ll have to be experts. But what if there weren’t any expert; would there be any fakers?” Well, the situation of today is not so much that there are no longer any experts, but that they are condemned to silence. A little more than a year ago, I learned from the French newspaper *Le Monde* that my friend Friedrich Teja Bach, the leading expert, indeed, on the work of Constantin Brancusi, was sued for €300,000 because he was refusing to authenticate and include in his *catalogue raisonné* of Brancusi a work that its owner wanted to put up for sale.⁶ In the end, the plaintiff lost—but the whole affair had dragged on for nearly a year; cost my friend a lot of time, energy, and money; and sent shivers down the spine of every author of a *catalogue raisonné*.

Given such a context, you will easily understand why such authors—but also every art historian—are more inclined to keep whatever doubt they have to themselves, which is exactly what I had done, almost 10 years ago, when asked my advice about a painting claimed to be a work by Barnett Newman. The painting in question was put up for sale by the Knoedler Gallery in New York, along other works whom the dealer attributed to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and other abstract expressionist artists. That all these were blatant fakes would later become public knowledge, once again at the occasion of a lawsuit that prompted Knoedler, one of the oldest and most respected galleries in New York (founded in 1846), to suddenly and definitively close shop in November 2011, vacating overnight its booth in an art fair—the American offspring of Art Basel, actually, called Art Basel Miami Beach.

But back to 2006: as I just noted, I had not told Knoedler what I thought about the painting, and neither did my friend, the conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, with whom I had gone to the gallery. We had been advised by the Barnett Newman Foundation, for which we had both worked, not to say anything, for fear of a lawsuit. (I should

6 “Vrai Traffic de Faux Brancusi,” (unsigned), *Le Monde*, 28–29 December 2014.

mention in passing, so that you know how very real fears of a lawsuit have become in my neck of the woods, that I specifically requested from the American Philosophical Society that it does *not* videotape or broadcast the present talk).⁷ Two years after my silent rejection of the Knoedler fake, and during the same visit to the Beyeler Foundation that I mentioned earlier, I was walking through the galleries of this museum with the curator of the Léger show when I was suddenly stopped in my track: there, as a borrowed painting supplementing the two very genuine Newman canvases owned by Beyeler, *Genetic moment* (1947) and *The Way II* (1969), hung the Knoedler “work.” Caught off guard, I let out a cry: “What’s this doing here? It’s a fake!” Needless to say, this made an impression, especially when I told my host that I thought his museum was being used by Knoedler as a legitimizing instrument. I did not think at the time of quoting one of Elmyr de Hory’s *bons mots* in Orson Welles’s movie—“If you manage to show a fake enough times in museums, it becomes real”—but the curator got the message: his face was ashen. An appointment with Ernst Beyeler was scheduled for the next day—which, unfortunately, had to be cancelled as Mr. Beyeler was sick. I left for the United States. A week or so later, I received an email from the curator asking me if there was any written statement from the Barnett Newman Foundation declaring that this work was a fake. I responded that no, no such statement existed and would ever exist, for the reason alluded to a moment ago, and I told him that the only three people who had seen *all* existing paintings by Newman (i.e., John O’Neill, now deceased but who was then the director of the Barnett Newman Foundation; Carol Mancusi-Ungaro; and myself) had felt immediately and unequivocally that this “work” was a fake.⁸ I also told him of other historical and material arguments backing our assessment as connoisseurs. Nothing happened after that—until a journalist named Patricia Cohen, whose queries I had never answered, told the whole story of my visit to the Beyeler Foundation in an article she published in the 2 May 2014 issue of *The New York Times*, where she extensively quoted my email to the curator. How she had obtained this email, by then 6 years old, I have no idea—maybe she has a deal with the National Security Agency. In any event, it is only because my private email has been publicly exposed, and also because Knoedler’s reputation is by now so

7 The problem was not my talk itself but the photograph of this particular painting, as well as another one discussed at the end of this presentation, photographs which I showed on the screen as I was talking but did not want a potential litigator to be able to identify.

8 I have to correct myself here: when I submitted to her the present communication to make sure I was not misrepresenting anything, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro pointed out that she had not yet seen three paintings by Newman at the time (from a total output of 118, most of which we had seen together).



FIGURE 4. Barnett Newman, *Abandoned* painting, ca. 1949-50. 109 3/4 x 1 7/8 inches. Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard University Art Museums. ©2015 The Barnett Newman Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

tarnished that (hopefully) no one would dare come to its rescue, that I allowed myself to mention this event.

But this story also allows me to segue to the final section of my talk, which is once again laden with anecdotes. The first of those concerns something that had definitively been painted by Newman but that, at some point, he decided was not a painting (Figure 4).

Nine feet tall but less than two inches wide, it is of an even more astounding format than Newman's masterwork in MoMA's collection *The Wild* (1951), which is eight feet tall and an inch and a half wide. Newman had worked on it a lot—it has more traces of labor than any of his six "skinny" paintings, all from 1951 (Figure 5). The problem seems to have been color, not formal configuration—he radically

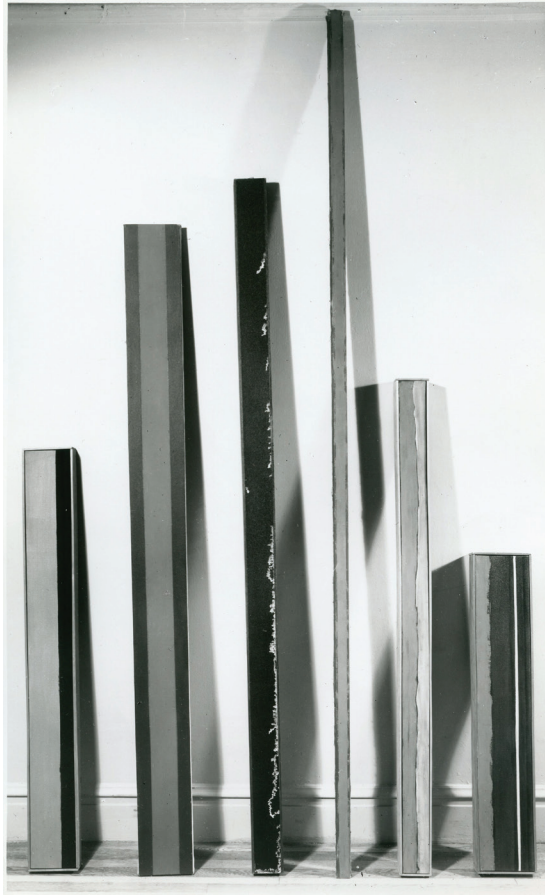


FIGURE 5. Barnett Newman, the six “small” paintings of 1950, including *The Wild* (95 3/8 x 1 5/8 inches), which is the tallest. Photo: Eric Pollitzer. ©2015 The Barnett Newman Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

changed the chromatic chord at least five times before giving up. Convinced that he could never make a painting out of it, he abandoned it in a corner of his studio “as is,” rudimentarily stretched on a 1" x 2" wood stud, and devoted no more thought to it than if it had been a mere piece of hardware. He never showed it to anyone except his wife, Annalee. He never mentioned it even though he would have had plenty of occasions while proudly boasting about the extreme dimensions of *The Wild*. It does not figure in any of the lists he meticulously established of his works. Did he forget about it? That would explain why he had not destroyed it by the time of his death in 1970.

It was discovered by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro in August 1992 while she was going through a closet in the apartment of Annalee Newman to find a sample of Newman's canvas. "I saw what I at first thought was bare canvas wrapped around a plastic bottle," she states in her conservation report dated May 1997. I quote again from this report:

When I presented it to Annalee, she told me that it was a painting that she had unstretched because it was too tall for her rooms at River House, her current address. It apparently hung in her old apartment but was stored wrapped around the bottle for the sixteen years she had resided at River House. I, of course, was reluctant to cut fabric from an actual painting, but Annalee insisted. So, I cut two rather small pieces from the tacking edges and returned the painting to the closet.⁹

(The excised fragments would later be put back in place by Mancusi-Ungaro herself when the painting was entrusted to her care in the conservation studio of the Menil Collection in Houston, but the story was worth quoting in full as it underlines that for Annalee Newman the picture had not the least importance—she explicitly said so to me when questioned again about it. She kept only things she thought had little or no monetary value in her West End Avenue apartment after her husband's death—she would never have kept there a real work by him).

The last time I saw this piece, about 15 years ago, it was hanging on a wall of the Menil Collection—installed next to such great works as *Ulysses* (1952) and the plaster version of *Here I* (1950)—with no indication whatsoever of its ambiguous status as work. I was absolutely horrified that the then very unscrupulous brand new director had singlehandedly decided to make a coup in showing this hitherto unknown painting, which he called "untitled." Needless to say, this could only have happened after the death of Annalee Newman, who had acted as a ferocious guardian of her dear Barney's memory and had trusted this "work" to only Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, when she was working as head-conservator of the Menil collection, as part of an archive she was organizing. It would eventually be entrusted to the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art that she founded a few years later at Harvard (where, I am happy to report, Newman's nine foot piece is now stored). I should also report that the Menil Collection has long healed from its malady—the unscrupulous director I just mentioned did not stay long enough to

⁹ I should confirm that I did see the piece in Mrs. Newman's West End Avenue apartment when I visited her there in 1978. My memory of this is particularly vivid because I only became aware of the piece's presence on the wall at the very end of my visit—while I should have noticed it all along. It was hung next to a doorframe, and the room was packed, which is probably why it was visually so inconspicuous.

completely wreck the place. It has just opened an exhibition devoted to Newman's late and unfinished works—which, appropriately, did *not* include the strange object I have been discussing, as it is an abandoned work rather than an unfinished one.¹⁰

I cannot go into the details of why I think that Newman not only abandoned it but abandoned it *definitively*—that is, discarded the possibility that it could ever be included in his corpus. Doing so would require much more explanation than my quick dismissal of the Kelly kite. Rather, I'll conclude with another Newman example. Once again shortly after Annalee Newman's death, in fact within a few weeks, another previously unknown Newman appeared on the art market. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro and I were asked to go see it, which we promptly did. The person who had put this work on consignment in a New York City gallery was a conservator, whose name was familiar to us for he had worked on several damaged paintings by the artist.

We were dumbfounded. Unlike the Knoedler fake, it had all the material characteristics of a small Newman painting, including the makeshift stretcher that no forger would have been able to produce so exactly (unless he had gone to study the dozen or so small works by Newman that are dispersed in various collections worldwide, public and private, and had been able to, like us, upturn them and examine their back). It had everything right—the brush strokes, the signs of a masking tape having been used, the bleeds, everything—except the color pair of a purplish blue and a yellowish orange.

Carol and I left the gallery extremely perplexed. The story we were told—that Newman had given this work to the conservator as a “Thank You” note for his repairing a ruined canvas—was absolutely not convincing (Newman did not readily give his paintings away, which is understandable when you know that he produced less than 120, and that his entire *oeuvre*, including drawings, prints, and sculpture, amounts to only 260 works!).¹¹ More importantly, we could not fathom the chromatic crudeness of that “work”—a mere contrast of complementary colors, so foreign to the subtleties we had come to expect after

10 *Barnett Newman: The Late Works 1965-1970*, curated by Michelle White and Brad Epley, March 27–August 2, 2015.

11 To my knowledge, if one leaves out those offered to his wife, Newman gave only four canvases away, and each time the beneficiary was someone who had supported him in important ways. He gave *Galaxy* (1949) to the sculptor Tony Smith, a close friend who helped him mount his first two one-man shows and also bought *Onement II* (1948); he gave a small untitled painting to Ben Heller, who bought several major works by him, including *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950 and 1951), his most famous work; he gave *The Promise* (1949) to Clement Greenberg, who organized his important 1959 show in New York and defended him critically; and he gave the small painting *Treble* (1969) to the critic Tom Hess as a “Thank You” note for the first monograph he had written on him.

years of probing Newman's canvases around the world. And yet, at the same time, we felt that none other than Newman could have produced such an object.

The enigma was solved a few months later when Carol visited the conservator in question and spent an afternoon with him, exchanging conservation stories and probably making fun of the art world and its experts. Inadvertently, the conservator noted that this "work" was a paint sample that Newman had indeed given him, so that he could try on it a treatment for a damaged painting, which no other conservator had so far accepted to take on. In other words, not only was it not a work *per se*, but it might not even be an "abandoned" work, just the rejected tryout of a chromatic chord, akin to the scribbles one jots down on a piece of paper to try a new pen. Not a fake if considered as part of a process that it documents, but a fake, yes, as soon as it is sent into the world at large and is entered on the market as a Newman painting. The particularity of such a "fake" is that its maker is not the forger.