

Introduction

Riding on a plane from New Delhi to Bombay in 1958, during one of his frequent trips to view the art treasures of distant cultures, Ad Reinhardt opened a magazine and found the following poem, which he copied in the carefully measured calligraphy that covers the many pages of notes on art he made during his lifetime:

THE MORE LOVING ONE BY W.H. AUDEN

LOOKING UP AT THE STARS, I KNOW QUITE WELL
THAT, FOR ALL THEY CARE, I CAN GO TO HELL;
BUT, ON EARTH, INDIFFERENCE IS THE LEAST
WE HAVE TO DREAD FROM MAN OR BEAST.

HOW SHOULD WE LIKE IT WERE STARS TO BURN
WITH A PASSION FOR US WE COULD NOT RETURN?
IF EQUAL AFFECTION CANNOT BE,
LET THE MORE LOVING ONE BE ME.

ADMIRER AS I THINK I AM
OF STARS THAT DO NOT GIVE A DAMN,
I CANNOT, NOW I SEE THEM, SAY
I MISSED ONE TERRIBLY ALL DAY.

WERE ALL THE STARS TO DISAPPEAR OR DIE,
I SHOULD LEARN TO LOOK AT AN EMPTY SKY
AND FEEL ITS TOTAL DARK SUBLINE,
THOUGH THIS MIGHT TAKE ME A LITTLE TIME.

By his own admission, Reinhardt was no great reader of poetry; his library was made up almost exclusively of books on religion, philosophy, and art history. Yet there was something in Auden's poem, about which we may only speculate, that corresponded to his own thought. Perhaps it was the stoical pessimism of Auden's tone; perhaps it was the analogy between Auden's description of "the total dark sublime," a heavenly void empty of incident, and Reinhardt's own mysterious black paintings.

Like the poet, Reinhardt had learned that "indifference is the least / we have to dread from man or beast." For during his own lifetime, he had faced far more hostility than indifference. His works were mocked in speech and print; he was called a "fake" and a fraud by a spokesman for the Art Dealers Association. Indeed he was one of the last artists whose work continued to shock a public that grew increasingly blasé toward the possible outrage of art. In the sense that they continue to shock, his paintings are among the last indigestible manifestations of the traditional avant-garde. Although he is today acknowledged by scholars, critics, and fellow artists as one of the giants of American art, Reinhardt remains for the general public a virtually inaccessible artist. His work is "difficult," in the true sense of the word. Conceding nothing to the decorative impulse of much recent abstraction, Reinhardt's paintings remain aloof and remote, the expression of an individual sensibility that cared nothing for the taste of the crowd. Even now, his paintings are regularly defaced when they are exhibited—a proof of their ability to provoke strong reactions despite their ostensible reticence.

Because he had few if any defenders during most of his career as an artist (younger critics did not begin writing favorably about him until the sixties), Reinhardt was forced to become his own polemicist, explicating and defending an aesthetic only recently beginning to be understood. His auguries have proved prophetic. Much that he feared and prophesied regarding the incursions of mass culture and popular taste has come to pass. Because he was isolated and misunderstood, Reinhardt's writing is devoted to explaining his own point of view and the way in which on one hand it continued the purist tradition, while on the other hand rejecting the tenets of geometric art to explore new possibilities of form and function. The only member of the first generation of New York School painters to start as an abstract artist in the

thirties and never deviate from abstraction, Reinhardt defended abstract art both as an aesthetic and as a moral cause. At a time when many American artists were still confusing abstraction with various kinds of representational art including illustration, Reinhardt spoke, as always, against any sort of compromise. For him, ethics and aesthetics were one.

Reinhardt's background and education—he studied art history with Meyer Schapiro and philosophy with Irwin Edman as an undergraduate at Columbia College—were sounder than any art-school training. By the time he began to paint, his mind was already highly disciplined, structured by a classical education, which allowed him to escape the provincial mentality that has plagued generations of American artists. Throughout his life, he broadened his culture; his thought never stopped evolving. From European civilization, he proceeded to study world art, ultimately conceiving his final black paintings as a synthesis of the polarities of Eastern and Western art.

Tracing the development of Reinhardt's thought, one finds it can be broken down roughly into four periods:

1. His student years of the early thirties, during which he studied classical aesthetics, especially Plato, and read the early formalist critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry
2. His first contact with the theories of modernist abstraction, in the late thirties and early forties, including the writings of Malevich and Mondrian *
3. The late forties and fifties, when Reinhardt became progressively interested in Chinese and Japanese painting, Islamic decoration, and Oriental thought in general **

* It is interesting in this connection that Reinhardt did not take these theories of modernist abstraction secondhand, as they were interpreted by his neighbor, the American cubist Stuart Davis, but was obviously acquainted with the primary sources. Indeed in an essay on Davis (published in *New Masses*, November 27, 1945) Reinhardt castigates him for his introduction of figurative elements into abstract art. One should not, however, discount the influence of the painter and critic George L. K. Morris, whom Reinhardt knew as a fellow member of the American Abstract Artists during the late thirties and forties. During his later studies in art history, begun under Alfred Salmony, he read the standard texts on modern aesthetics, which were cited in the bibliography of a paper on "The Spiral Form in Modern Architecture," written by Reinhardt.

** In 1952, Reinhardt gave several lectures at Studio 35 on comparisons between Eastern and Western Art. Apparently he became interested in Eastern thought through his friendship with the poet Thomas Merton. A close friend of Reinhardt's from Columbia College days (along with poet Robert Lax), Merton had become a Trappist monk and later one of the principal writers in English on Zen Buddhism. Reinhardt continued corresponding with Merton until his death in 1967.

4. The sixties, during which he painted exclusively black paintings conceived as a culminating synthesis of the polarities of world art. During this period, Reinhardt, influenced by the conclusions of George Kubler (in *The Shape of Time*) regarding recurrent form patterns, began to sketch out a world history of art, which remained unfinished at his death.

Reinhardt's writings touched on many matters beyond abstract art. He wrote on architecture, education, ethics, and the social role of the artist, as well as on aesthetics. A lifelong socialist and political activist in causes involving social justice, Reinhardt carefully separated his human commitments from his dedication to the values of a pure art divorced from the mundane preoccupations of everyday life. During the forties, his political cartoons for the socialist newspaper *PM* were renowned for their wit. Other cartoons, satirizing the follies of the art world, published in *PM* and elsewhere, exposed the hypocrisy of critics, curators, and artists themselves. Apparently Reinhardt used these cartoons, as well as his writings, as a way of purging his art of any matter extrinsic to the concerns of painting itself. Yet he wasted nothing, and all that he banished from art as adulteration found its expression elsewhere. For example, although he would tolerate no surrealism in art, considering it a form of literature, his cartoons were based on Max Ernst's photo collages; and he often used the "automatic" technique of free association in notes for his articles and talks, which were full of Joycean puns.

Surveying Reinhardt's thought over the period of thirty-odd years during which he wrote on art, one finds a remarkable logic and consistency, an uncompromising clarity and stubborn unwillingness to confuse one thing with another. This obsession with clarity led him to repeat his messages in similar if not identical versions of the same texts, which might be published in several places. Like the black paintings, which were nearly identical in their square versions, the later essays stress the same themes over and over: the reconciliation of the traditional polarities, the need for the artist to separate himself from the market place and its values, the discipline of art-for-art's sake and its moral value as a pure, disinterested activity requiring specialized training and education. Because the later essays exist in related versions, it was difficult to edit a collection of Reinhardt's writing. In instances of similar versions, I chose the most complete text. Because

of space limitations, I have omitted some previously published material in favor of unpublished manuscripts. The fragmentary notes, although undated, appear to have been written in 1966–1967, the last years of Reinhardt's life, a time when he became increasingly reflective, introspective, and concerned regarding the survival of high art in a mass society.

If Reinhardt repeated himself, becoming increasingly insistent, it was because he saw, more clearly than anyone else, that the values of aesthetic detachment and moral integrity, of rationality and civilized awareness to which his own life was dedicated, were besieged on all sides by the rising pressures of commercialism and media culture. (It is no accident that Reinhardt's paintings are not reproducible.) As a writer, Reinhardt was a teacher of moral lessons, just as he always earned his living as a teacher in order to remain free of the values of the market place he scorned.

Despite its internal consistency, Reinhardt's thought underwent certain crucial modifications as he matured. His "conversion" to Eastern aesthetics (it is hard to speak of it as less since it involved embracing a new philosophical system) began with his rejection of the hard-edged geometry of cubism in the early forties. Unwilling to become merely another of Mondrian's circle of American admirers, he sought the "pure idea" elsewhere. But he did not find this alternative to cubism, like most of his contemporaries, in surrealism, expressionism, or any form of primitivism. He found it rather in the great art of other "high" civilizations: in the all-over patterning of Islamic art, in the mysterious abstract space of Chinese landscape, and in the ascetic discipline of Zen academies of painting with their repetition of formulas.

One reason Reinhardt ultimately became committed to a long view involving cycles and repetition was his knowledge of civilizations older than our own, which have discovered how little things change despite outward appearance. His own personal disillusion with the notion of "progress" in art, of the rhetoric of "breakthrough after breakthrough" characteristic of recent American art criticism permeates his late writings. These consist mainly of fragments, aphorisms, and visionary notes on the survival of high art—spiritual art—in a secular mass culture.

In these later writings, Reinhardt made it clear he had begun to feel that the survival of "elite" or high art depends on its absolute with-

drawal from the world of commerce and mass communication, and its institutionalization in academies of art where dedicated professionals may practice the traditional crafts. This of course has been the conservative Eastern way for millennia. Against the notion of “perpetual revolution,” which had degenerated into a cliché of spurious vanguardism in the sixties, Reinhardt posited an art based on formula and repetition. Refuting the idea that art should emulate the rate of scientific innovation—an idea central to all of the futuristic modern art movements—Reinhardt repeated his black-square paintings with infinitesimal variations for the last seven years of his life. The result is that the difference between one black-square painting and another is a matter of the most minute discrimination, a barely perceptible nuance.

Reinhardt began his career as a rationalist and left the world a visionary. His spiritual progress is obvious in following his thought processes. Reinhardt’s last writings are eschatological: he saw abstract art as a fully mature tradition, demanding no further innovation, requiring instead protection from adulteration and vulgarization in the hands of the “many” who did not have the commitment to understand the “happy few.” At the same time, he paradoxically posited the democratization of art by painting an image so simple anyone who wished theoretically could imitate it.*

Reinhardt’s views on art history are complex statements regarding the current state of modernist painting and its ambivalent and difficult relationship to its origins in romanticism and classicism. Like the romantics, who first proclaimed the independence of the artist, Reinhardt viewed art as the essential manifestation of human freedom. But he did not define that freedom in the way his colleagues, the abstract-expressionist heirs of romanticism, did—as the liberty to purge the self or to express the individual ego. He saw freedom finally in Eastern rather than Western terms: as the liberation from self and from the shifting flux of the everyday world. For Reinhardt, freedom was found in discipline, not permissiveness and subjectivity. Ultimately his view of the Absolute was more Vedantic than Kantian, which separated his thought utterly from that of his generation.

The self-proclaimed “conscience of the art world,” Reinhardt was undeniably a moralist. For example, he objected to surrealism and

* In the essay on the black paintings, Reinhardt freely gives his concept to the public, announcing, “This is your painting if you paint it.”

expressionism not on aesthetic but on moral grounds. He thought of both as forms of *primitivism*, which he detested. Throughout his life, he believed that man's greatest task was to raise himself from his origins in primordial chaos to reach the furthest heights of the human spirit, which expresses itself through order. He believed that civilization was worth the discontents it brought with it. If our own civilization had fallen into the decadence of materialism and sensationalism, he looked for spiritual values in other civilizations, older and perhaps wiser than our own.

The importance of Reinhardt's thought for the decade of the seventies is obvious. He understood his own historical context while others merely fell victims to its contradictions and delusions. For this reason, his importance as a precursor of the reductionist styles of minimal art is nowhere near as relevant today as is his philosophy of art, and especially the embodiment of that philosophy in his paintings. At this difficult moment, Reinhardt appears a prophet of the realization that high art can only endure as spiritual art, even if this requires a return to medieval monasticism. His conclusion that a new basis for the survival of an art of moral and spiritual worth, resting on the traditional views of the East, must be found to preserve quality may point the direction to the continuing integrity of art in the West.

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