

# SUM MA RY

**Leszek BROGOWSKI**

**TO BE OR NOT TO BE OF ART: AD REINHARDT'S  
POLITICAL CARICATURE AND THE IDEA OF PAINTING  
FOR ONESELF**

Leszek Brogowski's book *Ad Reinhardt. Peinture moderne et responsabilité esthétique* [Ad Reinhardt. Modern Painting and Aesthetic Responsibility], published in 2011 (on line: hal.science.hal-01320528), delves into the abstract - monochromatic, black - painting of this artist, stressing the relationship it has with history; however, the book is illustrated with his satirical drawings 'explaining' modern art. This essay aims at rethinking the relationship between the artist's black, non-reproducible paintings from the years 1950-1960 and the 'illustrations' which he continued to create until nearly the end of the 1950s. According to Ad Reinhardt, it is not one's life experience, but history that constitutes the founding reality of modern art: such is the purpose of desubjectivizing creative procedures and the role of interpreting history in his work. The painter does not put the inexpressible on the canvas, and his caricatures remain elements of the interpretation - in their tongue-in-cheek manner they complement Reinhardt's poetic manifestos which attribute a crucial role in the creative process to language. The 2011 book revealed surprising analogies between these texts and the way George W. F. Hegel understood history, as well as between them and texts by some anarchist authors. An artist must position themselves in relation to history being an indivisible whole, and describe "art-as-art" in the words of other artists in order to practice art differently than all of them, to interpret the past and replace the outdated methods of creation. This is the pattern of modern art, the age of reason and ethics: to recapitulate history, as it gives meaning to its parts and components (Hegel), in order to finally say "no" to what art used to be in the past (anarchists). The second, main thesis of the book concerns the aesthetic responsibility of the artist. How to practice art using rational freedom, the freedom that accounts for historical conditions, as described by Hegel, and not the freedom

stigmatized by Leibniz as a whim? Any artist's freedom is their autonomy. They should neither be an epigone drifting with the currents, nor a professional seeking perfection in its rules, or a genius arbitrarily imposing their choices. Since, while each artist is autonomous, being the only foundation for their artistic choices, works of art are not autonomous as they remain related to the evolution of painting processes throughout history. This dualism - artists' autonomy and the historical conditioning of artworks - gives rise to the most subversive and nonconformist aspects of Reinhardt's art, which often remain overlooked. "There is no mindless working or mindless non-working." Reflection and painting are more important than producing artistic objects - artworks, paintings or illustrations.

Reinhardt's texts are consequently marked by negations and rejections, starting with ["Abstraction vs. Illustration"] from 1943, or "Abstract Art Refuses" from 1952, and they describe the evolution of his own painting practice - starting in 1930 - towards black paintings being "as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms." In 1960 the artist described them as "a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting." So how can we explain the fact that at the last stage of his painting's evolution the artist continued to create his *comics* until 1956?

Reinhardt devoted last six years of his life to painting the black canvases. Various forms of negation in his texts (rejections, refusals and refutations, condemnations, expressions of contempt, oppositions and antitheses, etc.) refer to what art used to be, so as to express what his own art will not be, and all this in order to mark out a new creative field allowing the artist to create work free from alienation - thought through entirely and subject to no random or unwanted limitations. To fully assess how coherent his concept of art is, one must grasp the connection between his latest declarations on this subject and some of the earlier texts - when the effect of the process remained solely a project, and recognize the intuitions expressed twenty years earlier. Referring to Marx and Mondrian, who announced that works of art would dissolve within our surroundings that would itself become 'aesthetic reality,' Reinhardt distinguishes between painting and illustration, and their different purposes.

To me there is nothing more pathetic than an artist who, with his 'pictures in frames', tries to compete with pictures in magazines and movies and at the same time attempts to keep pace with an enormous free and stimulating abstract painting, which year after year, becomes increasingly less private, involving more and more people actively, in more and more democratic creative activity.

In this text by Reinhardt, two purposes of art are outlined. One seems to be related to his expectations concerning a future aesthetic revolution in which everyone would participate, contributing in a creative way to defining the forms of their surroundings. To Reinhardt, painting was to become an increasingly popular practice that anyone could take up, bringing joy and fulfilment. Here we propose to look at the work of Claude Rutault and Bernard Bruno as continuing these ideas. The second direction outlined by Reinhardt in 1943 sets painting against illustration; and we combined them in our book without analysing this choice in detail. It is, therefore, necessary to present the reasons behind this juxtaposition more clearly. What is their nature: artistic? historical? political? cultural? The artist analyses 'illustration' according to the potential power it gains by being applied in the press and, more broadly, in the image industry: so, does juxtaposing illustration and

abstraction concern only the issue of the presence versus the absence of figurative forms, or is it related more to the ways the society makes use of art? Figurative representation in painting - illustration - has historically been an important field for building sensory knowledge, formal inventions and signifying systems. But what kind of illustration could still, in the second half of the twentieth century, be legitimately framed in a gilded frame and displayed in an art museum, when it had already become 'matter' for various industries, such as the press, advertising and film? Here we will reflect upon illustration in art by analysing examples from the practice of contemporary artists - Taroop & Glabell on the one hand, and Laurent Marissal on the other - in order to better understand the tension between paintings and pictures marked in Reinhardt's work.

Reinhardt is known primarily for the black paintings being the sign of his artistic radicalism, but he has also been increasingly recognized as the creator of a series of comics / drawings / collages tackling the issue of modern art. This was proven, among others, by the exhibition *Hard to Picture. A tribute to Ad Reinhardt*, opened on June 17, 2017, lasting till January 28, 2018, at the Museum of Modern Art (Mudam) in Luxembourg (also presented at Malmö Konsthall in Sweden, 2015, and at the Espoo Museum of Modern Art, EMMA, in Finland, 2016) where only one black painting was displayed next to art comics and travel journals, and in the context of a projection comprising two hundred travel slides. Witty and mischievous, his cartoons explaining modern art form a striking counterbalance to his own painting, and a commentary on art present in social space. But these works, produced alongside abstract paintings, did not emerge out of nowhere; they were a continuation of

over 1,500 political satires and illustrations to the daily New York newspaper *PM*, where he also published the *How to Look* series. Reinhardt contributed illustrations and cartoons to a great variety of publications (from student-run Popular Front publications to fashion magazines), but *PM* was the only daily newspaper to which Reinhardt contributed cartoons and illustrations. (...) The Reinhardt Foundation has located 2,796 published illustrations and cartoons created by Ad Reinhardt, in 64 different publications. Images of most of these published illustrations and cartoons are available on the Reinhardt Foundation website: [www.adreinhardt.org](http://www.adreinhardt.org) (E-mail from Lisa Cherkerzian, Ad Reinhardt Foundation, to Leszek Brogowski, February 29, 2024).

One needs to be careful not to immediately call them works of art, since even if they are, it is not for the same reasons his abstract paintings are; they are not 'framed paintings,' but materially modest prints. Reinhardt should not be considered an artist possessing numerous talents: a painter, a graphic artist, a calligrapher, a draughtsman, a photographer, a writer, etc. His comics remain, first and foremost, artistic documents. Reinhardt believes that the artist's mission consists primarily in thinking about art in a new way, in developing its understanding in accordance with the current context, in interpreting the history of artistic practices; and all this intellectual work should constitute a theory for practising art freely chosen - that is, constructed - by the artist. The radical attitude allows Reinhardt to formulate critical reflections concerning the art world, that revolve around the concept of 'ethical responsibility.' Ethics should incite actions illuminated by reason, also when it forces one to act against social norms, and the artist proclaims that art and history, freedom and dignity, reason and ethics, etc. are inextricably linked, he also stresses the corruption

that stems from the art market and art institutions, as well as the artists' ignorance and naivety towards these evils. This reflection is concluded by the concept of "art conscious of its own evolution and history and destiny, toward its own freedom, its own dignity, its own essence, its own reason, its own morality and its own conscience" (1962). In Reinhardt's work humour is also a form of critical thinking, the effectiveness of which comes from the fact that provided one remains tactful, one can laugh at anything. In *How To Look at Modern Art in America*, for example, Reinhardt interjects taunts about the cynicism of financial institutions that want to do business out of art, about regionalist ideologies in art, about advertising preying on artistic ambitions, etc.; and all this as part of the quite serious and detailed analysis concerning the situation of art perceived from the American point of view. Seriousness is not the logical opposite of wit, and a sense of humour contains the ability to think critically, which appeals to sensuality and provokes laughter or smiles. Note that the leaves of the modern art family tree drawn by Reinhardt are strangely similar to those of hemp; smoking them results in laughter. Indeed, someone has to express surprise while confronted by the nonsense and idiocy of ideological discourses, the deceptions and blatant lies of marketing, the frauds and hypocrisy in politics, the untruths and follies of science, etc.

However, in 1967 Reinhardt tells Bruce Glaser: "I haven't done cartoons or satire for a long time now as it doesn't seem possible any more. (...) The entire art world is whorish and no artist could any longer say of another artist that they are an old or young whore." These words are a testimony to discouragement, which is probably due to many factors: the commodification of art that no longer seems to have any meaning beyond commercial success, the simple-minded irresponsibility of artists, but also the helplessness felt in the face of the power held by illustration industries: "The best and most effective pictures can be found in magazines and movies," he had been repeating tirelessly since the 1940s. The discouragement allows us to unearth an unconscious element in the understanding of Reinhardt's attitude, namely his struggle to free himself from every form of alienation, a campaign he led on many fronts: as an artist, of course, but also as a political activist, teacher, writer and art critic. While "a wave of hot, loaded, compromised art that was to flood the markets and wash away, by the fifties, all lines of distinction, and make a quiet, dignified [artistic] profession into a rabble-rousing profit-making." He believed the artistic environment at that time got completely corrupted by art institutions which imposed – 'industrially' and financially - the concept of an artist as a professional and an engineer of consciousness (graphics, advertising, marketing, etc.); thus, destroying the notion of art being an intimate process of fulfillment and emancipation. Painting is a "profession of pleasing and selling."

Towards the end of his life, without giving up selling his paintings, Reinhardt focused on painting, which he experienced as an emancipatory activity, as it seemed the most liberated, yet by no means deprived of its critical power - precisely because it remained part of the abstract painting mainstream of his time. While invigorating, this activity was no less subversive for that reason.

A painting, however, is still a relatively private, individual activity, and its freest, most abstract form is not concerned with communicating specific information or subject matter. Because it is universal, unhistorical, and independent of everyday

existence doesn't mean it doesn't have any meaning. Some people think that if a painting doesn't have a subject or it isn't a picture, then it doesn't have meaning. This just isn't true.

In a lecture from 1943, Reinhardt admits that painting is a "relatively private, individual" practice, but he also expresses a belief that it will gradually become "increasingly less private" until it triggers a mass movement that will democratize it. Today we know that 'aesthetic reality' does not liberate us, but subordinates us to the organization of capitalist society: forms of urban planning adapted to its economy, and the commercial offer of the cultural industry. Therefore, the current context calls for rethinking the views of Reinhardt, and inventing new strategies for artworks to find their place in the aesthetic environment, since the horizons of the aesthetic revolution expected by many artists and philosophers at that time have receded. The 'disappearing' - dissolving - of artworks within reality should therefore be understood in the manner of active conquest, not passive reception.

Thus, we are making several assumptions relating to artistic continuations, which we find to be extensions of Reinhardt's work and reflection. The first two concern the possible 'absorption' of painting practice by reality, making it democratic and aesthetic (Claude Rutault and Bernard Brunon); the next two concern the conditions necessary for the use of illustration in art to retain meaning in the current situation of art (Laurent Marissal and Taroop & Glabel).

Claude Rutault leaves the realization of his paintings to 'subcontractors' who produce these works as if they were painting their apartment, the walls of an art gallery or some public building, according to a design / artwork made by the artist. It is he who determines the main conditions for the works' realisation, exhibition and exchange, leaving the painting itself to the 'subcontractors' - collectors, along with certain aesthetic decisions they can make in accordance with various definitions / methods that the artist was formulating from 1973 until his death in 2022. Last item of a 'de-definition / method' (d/m), number six hundred and fifty-seven in the catalogue published in 2016, says: "canvas on a stretcher, painted the same colour as the wall on which it is hung. All standard, commercially available formats can be used - rectangular, square, round or oval. The hanging method is traditional." The democratization of art, which Reinhardt expected, should be thought of in terms of art's accessibility; Claude Rutault's d/m remain part of it.

A certain artwork could be materially the same, but its meaning and the experience it provides would be different for those who understand, embrace and accept its meaning, and for those who are unable or unwilling to identify with it. This is the path of reflection that Bernard Brunon spontaneously links to the work of Reinhardt. Inspired by the black paintings in the 1970s, he formulated a problem of "exploring the possibility of painting without representation" which led him, in the late 1980s, to combine the practice of a house painter with his work as an artist. "In 1989, Bernard Bruno's artistic practice took the form of a painting company called That's Painting," writes Jean-Baptiste Farkas. "Brunon explains this choice as follows: 'Gradually I realized that the sort of painting I had been trying to practice for seven or eight years in my studio - painting that does not represent anything, not even some abstract canvas - could actually be practised when I was painting a room.' (...) 'The less there is to see, the more there is to think about'". This type of economic structure corresponds to what Karl Marx called *Selbstbetätigung*, indirectly productive labor, spontaneous activity or self-manifestation being a free and autonomous practice, that

is, not alienated, but included in the general framework of economics. This is noteworthy in at least two respects: on the one hand, the reversal of alienation dynamics, the main source (yet by no means the only one) of which being the capitalist economy; and on the other hand, the simultaneous avoidance of the artist's status being professional. The paradox lies in the fact that the economic structure of an enterprise forms a framework allowing one to create the world as one would create art, that is, to render painting practice an action in the world; this lies among the possible ways to implement Reinhardt's ideas.

Laurent Marissal's approach is quite different. As "a painter deprived of painting, but not of painting activities," he combats alienation directly at his workplace, especially in *Pinxit* and *Pinxit II*. All traces of art, that is, of his painting activities, not only the struggle for disalienation (performance?) and painting, or texts, writings and prints, but also drawings, comics, etc. should be treated as artistic documents. In this way, Marissal realizes an expanded concept of painting. Painting becomes a pictorial activity that transforms space, or even reality, and this activity does not shy away from using illustration as one of its tools. In *Pinxit* radical freedom of action means refusing to sell the time of one's life for a miserable wage, using the activity of painting to break the limitations imposed by this model of labor, and thus giving it a completely different meaning: regaining the time usually sold to the employer in order to devote it to painting activities, organizing a labor union showcase to display documents in it, establishing a clandestine library of books to be read in secret, transforming the work space to have a staff toilet or a dining room etc. It is easy to understand why in this 'union-painting' struggle the distinction between figurativeness and abstraction sinks into the background: it is now merely a tactical choice in the whole strategy of disalienation.

The Taroop & Glabel collective's practice forms an extensive program of critical thinking in general, aimed at 'undermining stupidity,' a project where illustration is both a tool and a method. And there is still a lot to be done, four hundred years after René Descartes who, although educated by the Jesuits, laid the foundations for the critical method in philosophy. Indeed, as he recommended, we should once again critically reflect on everything we have learned at school, at home, in the media or at work, since between the naivety of childhood, the carefreeness of youth, the inertia of adulthood and the indolence of the autumn of life, there lies knowledge, opinions and beliefs that would not make us proud. The critical edge of Taroop & Glabel's drawings may touch on some scientific claims (God's gene) or philosophical extravagances (collectivist utopias of Charles Fourier), but it targets primarily the knowledge that guides us in everyday life, such as folk wisdom, our understanding of events being shaped by the media, consumer choices, religious miracles, marketing lies, etc. Contrary to what may seem, the essence of this approach should be considered Cartesian; however, it is also generalized criticism, taken to the extreme in the manner of Nietzsche, but without all his nonsense (anti-Semitism, misogyny, Victorian ethics, etc.). Although historians have begun to write the history of scientific error, there is still no study concerning stupidity. Yet someone should be able to point it out, wherever it offends us and distorts the thoughts of our fellow citizens, regardless of the form it may take. Taroop & Glabel fill in this gap, making art a critical instrument of thinking immersed in the bestial nature of the world. However, some would point out that neither stupidity nor bestiality can be considered traits of wild beasts.

Reinhardt thought already in 1943, works of art, in the traditional sense of a fetish-object - one that is nearly sacred, separated from the world by a frame or a plinth, gradually

gave way to other types of experiments. The four artists briefly presented here make us believe that the dissolution of artworks, which Reinhardt imagined as being absorbed into or by reality, or rather the aesthetic reality, may concern both: painting understood as a painting practice as well as illustration. This calls for changing the concept of art, expanding it in such a way that artworks are replaced by documents, experiments, 'objects' - pieces of art or just works - with all these pieces of reality blending into it outside the specific context that transforms them into elements of art. By reaching the limit of modern art, Reinhardt contributes significantly to its absorption by reality: the act of painting now outweighs the artwork, while creation becomes rationalized thanks to the analysis of the historical, social and artistic contexts, through texts and drawings, artistic documents.

The second consequence which the inclusion of these four artists among Reinhardt's successors makes possible to understand is that the paintings / pictures dispute, in which Reinhardt opted for the former and against the latter, can be interpreted not in terms of figurative forms versus non-figurative ones, but in relation to their applications, applications we have divided into two categories, according to the type or degree of alienation which they may entail. Reinhardt fought alienation both as a political activist and a 'reporter' in his youth, and as an artist later: his illustrative work cannot be placed within the disalienating framework of capitalist industry, for which he did not yet have an established term: "communication (...), mass-publishing or picture industry" which under the pen of Guy Debord will become the 'society of the spectacle,' the new face of capitalism. Reinhardt consciously states that the cultural industry (press, cinema, advertising, etc.) assumes what used to be a prerogative nearly exclusive to artists, namely an image that illustrates.

Therefore, the problem lies in recognizing what conditions or contexts allow the practice of illustration to retain its emancipatory and liberating aspects today. In the light of the above analyses, several fragmentary answers come to mind. This practice must take place outside the procedures of the image industry, and, above all, reject its goals which are increasingly aimed at manipulating people's consciousness. The concept of an artist as an engineer of consciousness involves a misleading assumption that the meaning of an image is contained entirely in the image itself, that it resides within it, regardless of its application, the context of it being used, the way of looking at it, and the intentions lying behind its presentation or reception. We need to think about art differently, and change its understanding so that it no longer needs to be analysed solely through artworks that are separated from reality. Reinhardt contributes to this idea in various ways, but most notably by repainting his paintings.

Essentially, it is all about the organization of our societies, whether it remains compatible with individual freedom, enabling a liberating dynamic. Reinhardt asked himself this question in relation to the society of spectacle and mass media, but today we have a digital society that - starting with screens, moving on to ubiquitous monitoring - has been fundamentally changing our ways of life. How can one practice illustration in a cultural space saturated with images, and not become a cog in its alienating mechanics? Where in this context can Reinhardt's opposition between painting and illustration be placed? We must look for answers to all these questions in the extremely complicated situation of the world, in which overlapping crises make everything else seem so trivial compared to them, including art... which - no matter what - cannot change the course of events. That is true, but art shall always be where no one expects it to be, or it shall not be! Recently artists' creativity has been praised so much that it was to be put to the service of capitalism. A futile

effort! - because, as Reinhardt so rightly states, "art-as-art has always been and always will be a trouble for philosophers, priests, politicians, professors, patriots, provincials, property people, proud possessors, primitives, poets, psychiatrists, petit-bourgeois persons, pensioners, patrons, plutocrats, paupers, panderers, pecksniffs, and pleasure-seekers" etc. If art does not arouse the anxiety of liberal entrepreneurs who would like to imitate its imagination or its ingenuity, that is because it has become something other than art. In this respect, art constitutes an unparalleled model of critical thinking as it can only be thought and practised in the mode of refusal, and its attitude can only be emancipatory through disalienating negation. Reinhardt's pioneering stance helps us understand this.

But how do we know where art is truly not expected? Where to press so that it would hurt? According to Reinhardt, an artist is the one who interprets and who interprets himself: "It is not right for an artist to make believe that he doesn't know what he's doing, when everyone else knows what he's doing" (the notion of inspiration). An artist is never just an artist, but most of all a researcher and interpreter who is trying - and will always be trying - to understand where, when and how to act as an artist. Sometimes it is through great painting, sometimes through surprising texts, and sometimes through funny comics. Reinhardt chose painting as opposed to illustration; at least that is what he implied. But they both come together in one of his cheering drawings, since the artist adopts the attitude of a warrior not in a figurative painting, but behind an abstract one - as its author; and this is communicated to us by one of his comics.

\*

All quotations of Ad Reinhardt from: *Art-as-Art: The selected writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).