

Ad Reinhardt and the Dialectics of Pure Art

By Matthew J. Bach

Abstract painter, illustrator, and activist Ad Reinhardt provokes voluminous scholarly discourse with his paintings of (what many classify as) nothing. This paradox of Reinhardt's approach to fine art incites scholars such as Jed Pearl to suggest that "Reinhardt described art in such exalted terms that it was in danger of vanishing entirely."¹ Pearl's point illuminates the source of a variety of problems in interpreting Reinhardt, particularly his 'black' paintings, which are commonly accepted as the artist's greatest achievement. The contemplative nature and conceptually provocative engagement inherent to the work encourages scholarly interpretations not always aligned including phenomenological, formalist, religious, and political analysis. Lucy Lippard, one of the earliest Reinhardt scholars, says "One of the virtues of [Reinhardt's] art is that it makes people look harder than they are accustomed to looking, but it also can be overstimulating,"² so multiple, and sometimes diametrically opposed assessments of the work seem inevitable. Reinhardt did, in fact, employ the spiritual, aesthetic/materialistic, and political on account of society's fluency in these structures (langue), but his intentions- and reception as a pivotal modern artist for that matter (parole)³- render the art and artist incompatible with what has come before in art history as well as incompatible with capitalist/consumer culture within which Reinhardt created his paintings. He disrupts the fetish of the object and artistic persona by deliberately exploiting a dialectic crisis⁴ in art production. Subsequently, Reinhardt initiates a new material relationship between artist, art, and consumer of art which decenters adherents to traditional structural paradigms. A critical look at the religious and aesthetic/formalist interpretations of Reinhardt reveals a consistent struggle to define his work, but also insinuates a transcendent quality in Reinhardt's painting; a reconciliation between what could be referred to as an ethereal, pure, incorruptible art, and a Marxian recognition of the materialistic nature of the superstructure of art objects. Therefore, the truth of Reinhardt's painting, emerges- not so much as an aspect of the fraternal associations with religious or aesthetic/formalist principles- but in the tensions, or dialectics Reinhardt's paintings so belligerently, and steadfastly traverse.

First, an analysis of the religious categorizations of Reinhardt's 'black' paintings demands acknowledgement of the artist's lifelong associations with friends Thomas Merton and Robert Lax. Even in the context of this attachment to a Trappist monk and a Catholic hermit, the contradictory gravities of Reinhardt's identity seem to inform his friends more than their religious affiliations Reinhardt's artwork: "Merton noted in his journal in 1940: 'Reinhardt sticks with the communists. Certainly understandable: a religious activity. He believes, as an article of faith, that "society ought to be better", that the world ought to be somehow changed and redeemed."⁵ Merton attempts to characterize Reinhardt's Marxist leanings in religious terms, yet he seems to mistake the communist tendency to imagine different relationships within a

¹ Jed Pearl. *New Art City*. (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005) 21.

² Lucy Lippard. *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings*. (New York, NY: The Jewish Museum, 1966) 12.

³I am using the biblical terms "langue" and "parole" which are originally associated with abstract art by Joseph Masheck in "Abstract Art and Religious Belief." *Catholic Visions* (Sept. 5, 1992):114-119.

⁴ The crisis of Marxist Dialectical Materialism; How can art negate material commodification when art objects are material commodities?

⁵ Joseph Masheck. "'Beat' to Beatific: Joseph Masheck Discusses the Influence of Thomas Merton on the Art of Ad Reinhardt." *Art and Christianity*.67 (2011): 5.

material world with “faith.” Later, when Merton had joined the order, he requested that Reinhardt provide him with a small ‘black’ painting for his room at the monastery and acclaimed the gift “...a very ‘holy’ picture- helps prayer- an ‘image’ without features to accustom the mind as once to the night of prayer- and to help one set aside trivial and useless images that wander into prayer and spoil it”⁶ However, when Merton initially made the request for the painting he engaged Reinhardt in a letter that highlighted their mutual interest in Eastern Philosophies, citing Suzuki and a lyric poem that more appropriately compliments Reinhardt’s ‘black’ painting:

I studied it and it taught me nothing
I learned it and soon forgot everything else
Having forgotten, I was burdened with knowledge
--the insupportable knowledge of nothing.⁷

Again, Reinhardt’s embodiment of the dialectic, or inherent contradictions within systems of contemplation, seems to rub off on Merton more than Merton’s Christian Mysticism leaves traces on Reinhardt. Eventually, Reinhardt even turns down his friend’s request that he illustrate the cover of a prayer book Merton had been preparing, admitting that “I’m afraid what exactly I get in painting (plattdeutsch) is exactly what gets lost in photography, reproduction, or in a designing for something else...”⁸ The fact that Reinhardt decisively identifies Merton’s work as “something else” from his own artistic endeavor clarifies (notably within the frankness of personal correspondence) a reluctance to see his art in official service of religion.

If Reinhardt exhibits little influence from Christian Mysticism, another religious argument potentially draws a clear path from apophatic theology to his ‘black’ paintings. Reinhardt’s friend Robert Lax provides a closer parallel when considering the way “negative theology” may have guided Reinhardt’s work. Paul Spaeth writes on Lax’s extremely truncated prose and poetry in comparison with Reinhardt’s ‘black’ paintings, which he classifies “...as pictorial representations of apophatic, or negative theology... Because of the incomparable nature of God, we can never speak of him directly or positively, but rather we can only say what he is not... God becomes the abyss or the dark cloud...”⁹ This concept of negative identification appears in Reinhardt’s own declarations- referred to as his “Art-as-Art dogma”- but he speaks so austere in stripping art of any corrupting influence that he edits out religion and spirituality as well: “A religious object that becomes a work of art in a museum loses all its religious meanings. No one in his right mind goes to an art museum to worship anything but art, or to learn about anything else.”¹⁰ Critical assessment also follows this reductionist process when Patterson Sims indicates, in the Whitney Museum exhibition catalogue on Reinhardt, that “Since all explanations are at odds with the works’ intentions, Reinhardt’s notes suggest that these

⁶ Merton qtd. in Michael Corris. *Ad Reinhardt*. (London, England: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2008): 88.

⁷ Roger Lipsey. “Do I want a small painting? The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt: An Introduction and Commentary.” *Merton Annual*; v. 18 (Nov. 2005): 266-267. <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/Reinhardt260-314.pdf>

⁸ *Ibid*, 269.

⁹ Paul Spaeth. “The Road to Simplicity Followed by Merton’s Friends: Ad Reinhardt and Robert Lax.” *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000) 248.

¹⁰ Qtd. In Clare Farrow, ed. *A Reinhardt J Kosuth F Gonzalez-Torres: Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility*. Spec. issue of *Art & Design Magazine* 9. ½ (1994) 21.

paintings might best be defined by what they are not...¹¹ Likewise, later in life, Lax reduced his poetic verse to one word lines, and Spaeth states that “Each word can be seen as a moment in time... The word speaks by the image of itself... when we center our attention on the moment we eliminate much that is superfluous,”¹² developing an interpretation of Lax that parallels interpretations of Reinhardt’s simplicity. However, this may also serve as a case where Lax was possibly following Reinhardt’s path since Lax’s earlier work- his best known *Circus Days and Nights*- recognizably designs a metaphorical relationship between Judeo-Christian creation myth and Lax’s travels with the circus.¹³ Although Reinhardt’s ‘black’ paintings follow a strict 5’X5’ format divided evenly by tonal regions often referred to- out of convenience- as a “Greek Cross,” the art is hardly ever classified as metaphorical- even by proponents of religious iconographic interpretations of the art.

Other scholars, such as Christopher Evan Longhurst, also offer eloquent descriptions of Reinhardt’s work in the context of apophatic theology, but these efforts rely heavily on formal descriptions of the two-dimensional image (or lack thereof), or tenuous connections to medieval Christian theology¹⁴ rather than looking at Reinhardt’s life and philosophical statements. So, what aspect of Reinhardt, outside of his relationships with Merton and Lax, sustains this religious or spiritual approach to his paintings? Joseph Masheck offers another association, John Dewey- teacher of Meyer Shapiro (who in turn taught Reinhardt at Columbia)- who wrote in a 1934 book titled “...*Art as Experience* that ‘A work of art elicits and accentuates... [the] quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger... This fact, I think... explains... the religious feeling that accompanies intense aesthetic perception...’”¹⁵ Masheck’s article does proliferate the religious connotation in Reinhardt’s work, but his quote of Dewey verges more on identifying transcendent qualities rather than western-centric religious ones. Mike King explains the religious associations succinctly and adequately when he states that “... Reinhardt, for example, was a friend of the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton, read Coomaraswamy and attended Buddhist Scholar D. T. Suzuki’s talks on Zen Buddhism, all of which points to an interest in the transcendent rather than in the occult.”¹⁶ So, in Reinhardt’s case, the transcendent often evokes feelings which- when confronted by his paintings- the scholarly audience has difficulty expressing without reliance on comfortable, familiar structures (religion, aesthetics...etc.). Yet, the material nature of art objects also transcends cultures and time, and in response to this reality, just as the desire to release high art and the theological from material anchors is transcendent, the dialectical materialism that exposes the tensions and crisis in this endeavor must also be transcendent. The relationship between the religious, aesthetic, and political interpretations of Reinhardt’s paintings pivots on this notion of a transcendent dialectic or tension.

Next, the aesthetic qualities of his ‘black’ paintings asymptotically serve Reinhardt’s endeavor to release art from its materialism, despite the indisputable truth that art is inherently

¹¹ Patterson Sims. *Ad Reinhardt: A Concentration of Works from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.* (New York, NY: Whitney Museum, 1980) 27.

¹² Paul Spaeth. *Robert Lax: what does a stone mean, further episodes, the sunset city, photographs: self portraits.* (Pamphlet produced for the Lax Archives, St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University, 2001) 43.

¹³ See Paul Spaeth’s introduction in- Robert Lax. *Circus Days & Nights: Poems.* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2000) 11-22.

¹⁴ Christopher Evan Longhurst. "Approaching the Divine through Form and Colour: A Theological Reflection on the Pictorial Apophasis of Malevic and Reinhardt." *American Theological Inquiry* 5.2 (2012): 67-82.

¹⁵ Masheck. "'Beat' to..." 6.

¹⁶ Mike King. "Concerning the Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art and Science." *Leonardo* 31.1 (1998): 25-26.

materialist. Indeed, Reinhardt's dialectical materialism restricts the point of the paintings to a particular format, but, on the other hand, encourages tremendous speculation about the possibility of releasing art from the painting/picture material. For instance, describing his experience with a 'black' painting, Lawrence Alloway hints at the aesthetic contradiction, suggesting that "... a reluctant visual tremor animates the paintings... the drive toward an art of low visibility has a covert iconography despite Reinhardt's program of 'no symbols, images, or signs,'" and that Reinhardt's "...insistence that the image be the whole painting and not something within the painting..." forces a "...delayed visibility."¹⁷ Art criticism often reads like poetry more than prose, but when reading about Reinhardt- as is the case with Alloway above- one may feel as if the text is algebra homework in which the solution of a quadratic equation sums up zero.

However, Alloway merely instructs us on the paradox and dialectic that Reinhardt provides: a painting of nothing that could be everything. Lippard says as much when supporting Reinhardt's statement that he was painting the "ultimate" or "last" painting (even though he numbered them) when she ponders that "... it may well be that his black paintings have marked the end of that particular position, possibly even the end of an 'Art for Art's sake' position since younger artists are pursuing art for nothing's sake, or, more precisely, the thing, the Visual sight, for its own sake rather than Art's."¹⁸ Lippard introduces the possibility that the art experience may, in fact, be bifurcated from the actual material object after Reinhardt. This hypothesis appears often in Reinhardt's own statements, and multiple accounts of seeing the 'black' paintings echo similar feelings of appreciating the process of looking, experiencing the passage of time, and contemplating the art without looking for a picture of *something*. Often, viewers describe confronting a 'black' painting as period of adjustment, as the eyes slowly translate minor tonal differences into geometric shapes and then allow these shapes to recede back- the ebb and flow of the image swelling and shrinking as if the painting is inhaling and exhaling. Sam Hunter mentions this effect in the preface to Lippard's catalogue: "Reinhardt's severe ascetic orders link them [the 'black' paintings] to sensation...as a moment in the process of consciousness."¹⁹ Arne Glimcher also points to the way Reinhardt forces a viewer to recognize the passage of time and commit to the act of looking, saying that "It ['black' painting] was about the will to see deeply, extend visual perceptions past the immediate, and integrate time itself as an interdependent element of the painting's experience."²⁰ Despite the lack of visual complexity or composition, the 'black' paintings require time and labor, expressing another aspect of the dialectical nature of the art. Finally, the 'black' paintings refuse complimentary references from historical or contemporary art even though Reinhardt's comprehensive awareness of art history and mid-century abstraction led to their creation. Lippard points out that "The black paintings demand a different lighting from other paintings and are incompatible with almost anything in group exhibitions, their invisibility seeming to cast aspersions on the bright color and surface activity of other work."²¹ Many of Reinhardt's contemporaries considered him a purist, and a scold, referring to him as the "Black Monk," so his paintings' refusal to be hung side-by-side with other contemporaries seems appropriate.

¹⁷ Lawrence Alloway. "Art." *The Nation*. (April 6, 1970): 413.

¹⁸ Lippard, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

²⁰ Arne Glimcher. "*Mondrian and Reinhardt: Influence and Affinity*." (New York, NY: PaceWildenstein, 1997): 11.

²¹ Lippard, 22.

Ultimately, the Religious and aesthetic arguments and interpretations surrounding Reinhardt's 'black' paintings return to the transcendent quality of the work. The anti-materialist, material object projects its inherently contradictory existence onto the viewer, and the whole entire concept of viewing and acquiring art objects is subjected to the dialectic. Reinhardt's own Marxist views inform his undeniable contribution to art since his earliest illustrations for Columbia University's literary magazine *Jester*, or his work in the *New Masses* and *PM*. Plates 1 and 2 in the appendix offer examples of his dissatisfaction with the commodification of art. The first, "How to Look at Modern Art in America," a satirical tree metaphor, posted the names of the artists he felt were sellouts and blights on the purity of abstract art. The second, "How to Look at an Artist," accused the general public as complacent in the manufacturing and sale of art, artist personas, and an art superstructure. What Marx was to capitalism, Reinhardt was to the art world. Although these cartoons seem distant from Reinhardt's later abstract work, Michael Corris, in the most comprehensive monograph on Reinhardt, says that the artist's satirical work, his political activism, and his communist positions all led to an integrated art form in the 'black' paintings: "Above all, they [Reinhardt's closest friends] saw the 'black' paintings as profoundly rooted in everything Reinhardt had done as a painter since the 1940s"²² Corris, although having written the longest, most in-depth piece on Reinhardt to date, reproduces none of Reinhardt's paintings in his book. Reinhardt's oft-mentioned desire to prevent his art from becoming a commodity factors into Corris's deliberate omission:

...he [Reinhardt] idealistically framed his 'black' paintings as works that would compete for the attention of the spectator without falling prey to the corrupting influence of having to function as a commodity among a sea of others... His insistence on the link between public demeanor of the artist and the conceptual nature of the work of art itself is supposed to remind artists what they lose when their production is alienated and their aesthetics no longer insinuate an ethical position.²³

Corris also mentions the hostility towards commodity culture when describing Reinhardt's intentional de-acceleration of the viewing process, saying "the perpetual delay of his 'black' paintings exemplified anything but the brisk, soulless transactions of the marketplace or the certainties of ownership."²⁴ Certainly, one could argue that Reinhardt's communism had evolved into an iconoclastic approach to religion, a hostility toward idolatry that would befit his Lutheran upbringing, or even his friendly relationship with Dutch Calvinist Piet Mondrian.

Masheck addresses Reinhardt's own religious background in the context of his political development stating that he was brought up a Lutheran and a socialist, "In his lower middle-class German-American experience Christianity sponsored leftism."²⁵ So, even in an essay proposing religious interpretation of Reinhardt's work, Masheck associates Lutheranism and leftism. Mondrian, on the other hand, was not so sympathetic to red politics, as Mashek explains "Mondrian accuses 'Nazism and Sovietism' of taking (mere) daily life as religion... he says; but a 'new religion without churches is the old religion free of all oppression... the new religion is for those capable of abstraction.'"²⁶ What Mondrian does seem to favor is a deconstruction of the

²² Corris, 168.

²³ Ibid, 102.

²⁴ Ibid, 96.

²⁵ Masheck. "'Beat' to..." 5.

²⁶ Mashek. "Abstract Art..." 116.

traditional in favor of the transcendent- in his case complete abstraction in painting. In discussing Wassily Kandinsky and Mondrian as precursors to artists such as Reinhardt, Pamela Schaeffer highlights abstract artists' devotion to the transcendent: "A strong believer in the theosophical doctrine of human evolution from a lower, materialistic stage toward spirituality and higher insight, Mondrian wrote that the hallmark of the New Age would be the 'new man' who 'can live only in the atmosphere of the universal.'"²⁷ Reinhardt definitely took inspiration from Mondrian, and logically seems to embody the stage of abstract evolution that followed Mondrian. He praised Mondrian's paintings:

Consider the recent Mondrian exhibition. These paintings, sensuous and concrete manifestations of a certain kind of thinking and understanding which pretended to be architecture and sculpture too, and conceivably biology and engineering... demanded in their limited and concentrated area direct, first-hand experience for its appreciation... for if anything 'looked' what it 'did,' here it was.²⁸

Reinhardt's use of the words "sensuous" and "first-hand" elude to his intentions to extract art from the material relationships and factory reproduction imbedded in the capitalist market. Mondrian gave Reinhardt an example from which to imagine a new material relationship between artist, art, and consumer. This new relationship, however, depended upon viewers beholding Reinhardt's 'black' paintings, which were material manifestations of Reinhardt's repetitive labor- an almost unresolvable dialectic.

As indicated above, Reinhardt made use of the historical linguistic structures to produce utterances (the 'black' paintings) that he would typically categorize as "post-historical." Mashek argues that both religion and abstract art sought to evade capitalist penetration during the 20th century in parallel struggles: "It [abstract painting] knows how to stand against the frustrations and deceits of contemporary langue, in ways not alien to the uttering of the Gospel's parole."²⁹ Again, the transcendent nature of Reinhardt's paintings comes into focus while contemplating the dialectical materialism his paintings represent; the use of art objects to free art from objects resembles Mashek's statement regarding "langue" and "parole." Ironically, an earlier modern painter seems to prophesize Reinhardt's arrival as a messiah of contradiction according to Mashek: "It seems that... [Albert] Gleizes had a very strong feeling what we were going toward without knowing it was plastic, or palpable, religious expression..."³⁰ In this prediction, Reinhardt holds a position of convergence by exploiting the dialectical materialism of the painted surface to a point where transcendence of the materialist and Hegelian seems possible. Few academics could construct a fantasy where religion and Marxist philosophy find reconciliation, but Antonio Negri comes close. Alberto Toscano discusses Negri and abstract painting in his "The Sensuous Religion of the Multitude" and provides an explanation for how abstraction and an artist like Reinhardt have the ability to reimagine the material relationships of our society. For Toscano, the periods of successive abstract movements in art, from the post-war through Reinhardt's time and to the present "post-modern" era, have inextricably linked "mass

²⁷Pamela Schaefer. "Spirituality in Abstract Art." *The Christian Century* (Sept. 30, 1987): 820.

²⁸ Glimcher, 10.

²⁹ Mashek. "Abstract Art..."119.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 117.

art” to the “mass worker.”³¹ He even suggests that this long period of abstraction is- in fact- a reduction to meaninglessness in art which sacrifices art itself in the process. Toscano indicates that the reduction is so severe to our collective “meaning” that it serves as a “passion” or “authentic Christian moment”³² because we have to sacrifice something important to provoke the next level of Marxist radical change.

If the synthesis of the many layers of thesis and antithesis in Reinhardt’s painting is a “Sensuous Religion of the Multitude,” then the solution is suitably paradoxical. Susan Buck-Morss, in her exhaustive analysis of Walter Benjamin, says that “under the conditions of modern technology, the human sensorium changes from a mode of being ‘in-touch’ with reality into a means for blocking out reality.”³³ If this is the case, then Reinhardt and Reinhardt’s dialectical materialistic contradictions may indeed help subvert the technological superstructure in favor of a sensuous religion. At the very least, his intense focus on the inherent contradictions regarding the art object, artist persona, and art production will continue to spark confusion and scholarly discourse as it sparked befuddlement and amusement for his friends. Upon Reinhardt’s death, Merton sent a letter to Lax in which the monk imagined the artist disappearing into one of his paintings as if it were the ultimate void.³⁴ He referred to his late friend as “oldlutheranreinhardtcommiepaintblack,”³⁵ an endearment Corris dismisses as splintering Reinhardt into “separate selves.”³⁶ Yet, it may also encapsulate Reinhardt as if he were an incarnate utterance of the totality of material reality.

³¹ Alberto Toscano. “The Sensuous Religion of the Multitude: Art and Abstraction in Negri.” *Third Text* 23.4 (2009): www.tandf.co.uk/journals. 474.

³² *Ibid*, 377.

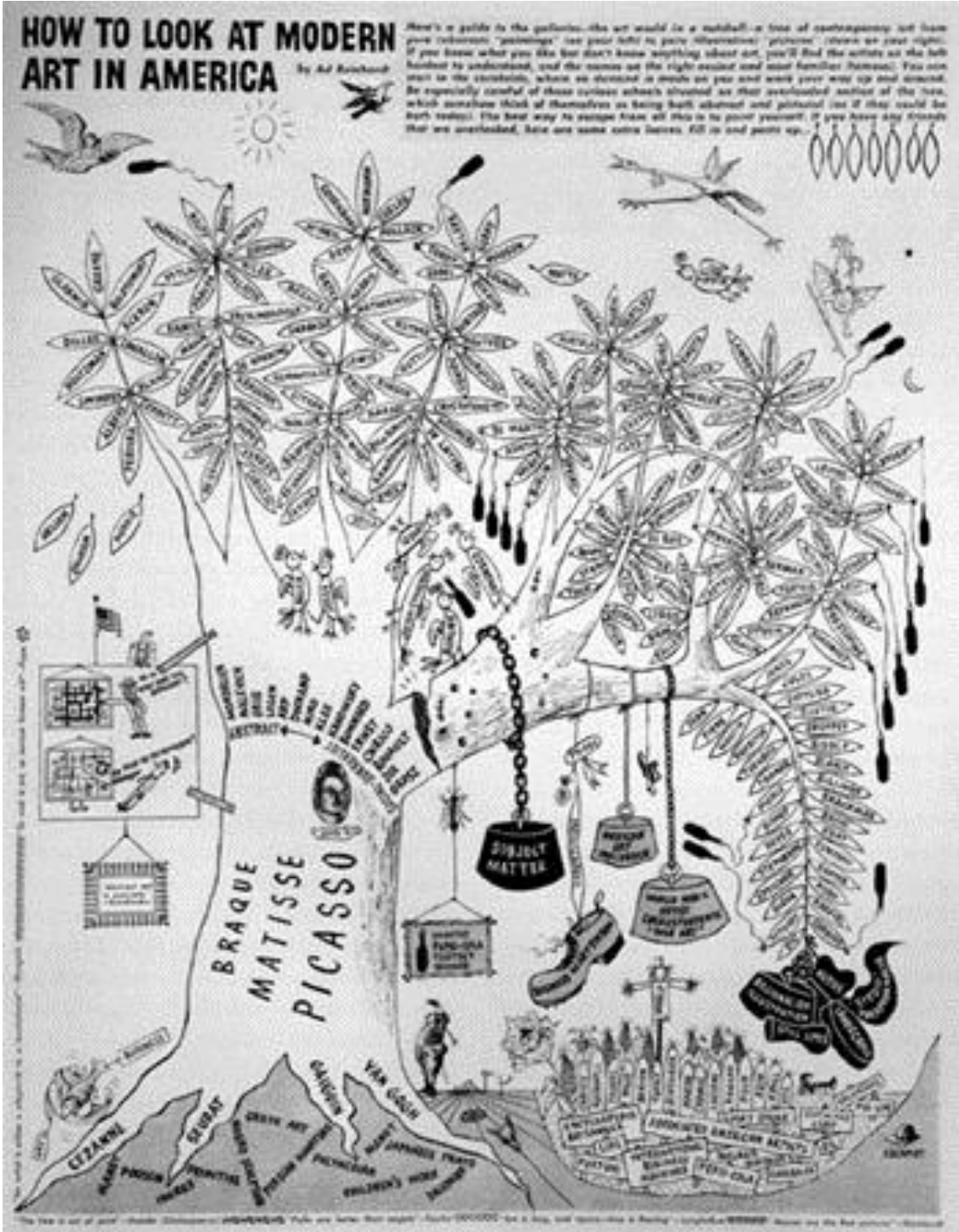
³³ Susan Buck-Morss. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000): 104.

³⁴ Correspondence between Thomas Merton and Robert Lax upon news of the death of Ad Reinhardt. August, 1967; Robert Lax Papers; Box 1, Merton Folder; Rare Books and Manuscript Library at Butler Library, Columbia University: Accessed 10/17/14.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ Corris, 167.

Appendix



“How to Look at Modern Art in America,” 1946. For *PM* magazine.

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