

Ad Reinhardt

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Lee Krasner and Ad Reinhardt: Notes on a Friendship

BY GAIL LEVIN

On August 30, 1967, Lee Krasner's friend Ad Reinhardt died of a heart attack. Widowed since Jackson Pollock's death in 1956, she held a wake for her him at her home on the East End of Long Island. Reinhardt was buried in the same Springs cemetery as Pollock. This unusual gesture on Krasner's part marked her long affection for a painter who stood out among his male contemporaries for the respect which he showed for her work.

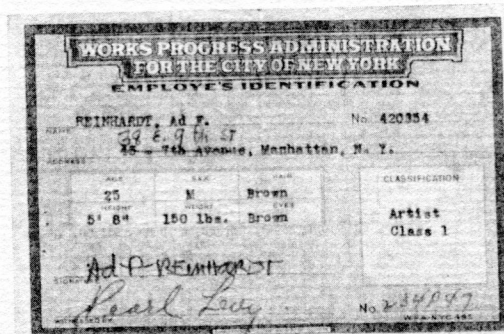
Krasner had known Reinhardt while both worked on the WPA, though he was in the Easel Division while she worked on murals. Reinhardt was already an active member of American Abstract Artists (AAA) when she joined. With other members of that organization, they both appreciated the work of Piet Mondrian and had an opportunity to get to know the Dutch painter after he took refuge in New York during the war and socialized with members of the AAA.

Unlike the later group known as "The Club," the AAA was reasonable in its treatment of women and had many active artist-couples. In fact, there can be no doubt that what Krasner appreciated most in Reinhardt was his high regard for her work and his willingness to express it.

When Reinhardt was illustrating for *PM* he included Krasner on a "tree" of artistic descent in one of the cartoons in his now famous "How to Look at Art" series: "How to Look at Modern Art in America," published in *PM* on June 2, 1946. Captioned "Here's a guide to the galleries—the art world in a nutshell—a tree of contemporary art from pure (abstract) 'paintings' (on your left) to pure (illustrative) 'pictures' (down on your right). If you know what you like but don't know anything about art, you'll find the artists on your left hardest to understand, and the names on the right easiest and most familiar (famous)."

Krasner was on the left side of the cartoon. Reinhardt's recognition of her achievements was especially significant because he created this cartoon at a time when so many other men in the art world found it more convenient to ignore Krasner's painting and dismiss her as just Pollock's wife. For his tree of artists, Reinhardt put the names of the American artists on leaves of their own and grouped the leaves on branches according to his perception of their aesthetic. He placed Krasner near some of the women with whom she had shown in the American Abstract Artists' group shows—Slobodkina, Alice Trumbull Mason, Ray Eames, and Suzy Freylinhuysen. But he also placed Krasner close to "de Kooning," presumably Willem not Elaine, as well as men such as Werner Drewes, John Ferren, Charles Shaw, Carl Holty, and Stuart Davis. Pollock, misspelled "Pollack," was on another branch along with such names as Arthur B. Carles, George McNeil, Hans Hofmann, and Arthur Dove. From Reinhardt's perspective, both Krasner and Pollock were clearly avant-garde.

By this time, Reinhardt and Krasner also shared a background of political activism. Both were outspoken, though her protests were mostly verbal and his were often graphic. They had both joined the AAA, which supported "Peace," "Democracy," and "Cultural Progress." According to George L. K. Morris, an abstract artist and ideological leftist, the organization opposed the social realist art supported by the American Artists Congress.¹ From 1937 to 1943, Morris wrote for *Partisan Review*, which he helped fund and edit and for which he was the first art critic; The *Review* became identified by many as espousing "Trotskyism," since, like Morris, it was anti-Stalinist.



Ad Reinhardt's WPA Identification card. Image courtesy the Archives of American Art.

Krasner took action with the AAA on April 15, 1940, when the organization picketed the Museum of Modern Art, which had rejected the AAA's request to show the group's abstract art. "We were picketing the Museum of Modern Art and were calling for a show of American paintings and George L. K. Morris and I, when we knew that there was a trustee meeting, were given the task of handing [each] one of them, as they left the building, a leaflet saying, 'Show American Paintings.'"

Krasner would have known that these handouts were designed by Reinhardt, a fellow member of AAA. The leaflet asked "How Modern is the Museum of Modern Art?" It was a slogan that the *New York Times* called the "battle cry" of the "Avant Garde." The pamphlet proclaimed, "In 1939 the museum professed to show art in our time—whose time—Sargent, Homer, Lafarge, and Harnett? Or Picasso, Braque, Léger, and Mondrian? Which Time?"

The *Times* reporter also described "a handbill passed out to about a thousand artists who, by invitation, entered the museum at 11 West 53rd Street for a preview. Even the curlicue type in which the challenge was set expressed the contempt of the rebels, for it conjured up the velvet antiquity and the theatrical posters of the Gay Nineties." The show that set off the protest was called *PM Competition: The Artist as Reporter* and ran from April 15 to May 7, 1940. Organized by *PM*, "a projected afternoon tabloid newspaper," the show was meant to attract publicity by searching for "new talent in the great tradition of Daumier, Cruikshank, Rowlandson, Winslow Homer, Nast, Luks, and Glackens."

Many bystanders mistakenly thought that the museum's show of Italian Renaissance painting, which had been sent to the United States because of the war, had caused the artists' protest, but Morris explained the picketers' motive, "What they really were angry about was the show of drawings from the newspaper *PM*; Marshall Field, [heir to the department store fortune and] a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, wanted them shown. American Abstract Artists felt that if the Museum of Modern Art had space for newspaper sketches it certainly wasn't true that they had no space for abstract American art."

Reinhardt's willingness to include Krasner in his cartoon and his recognition of her talents explains the basis of their friendship. Responding to Pollock had brought a major change in her art. But she had already achieved a measure of recognition among her peers. ■

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