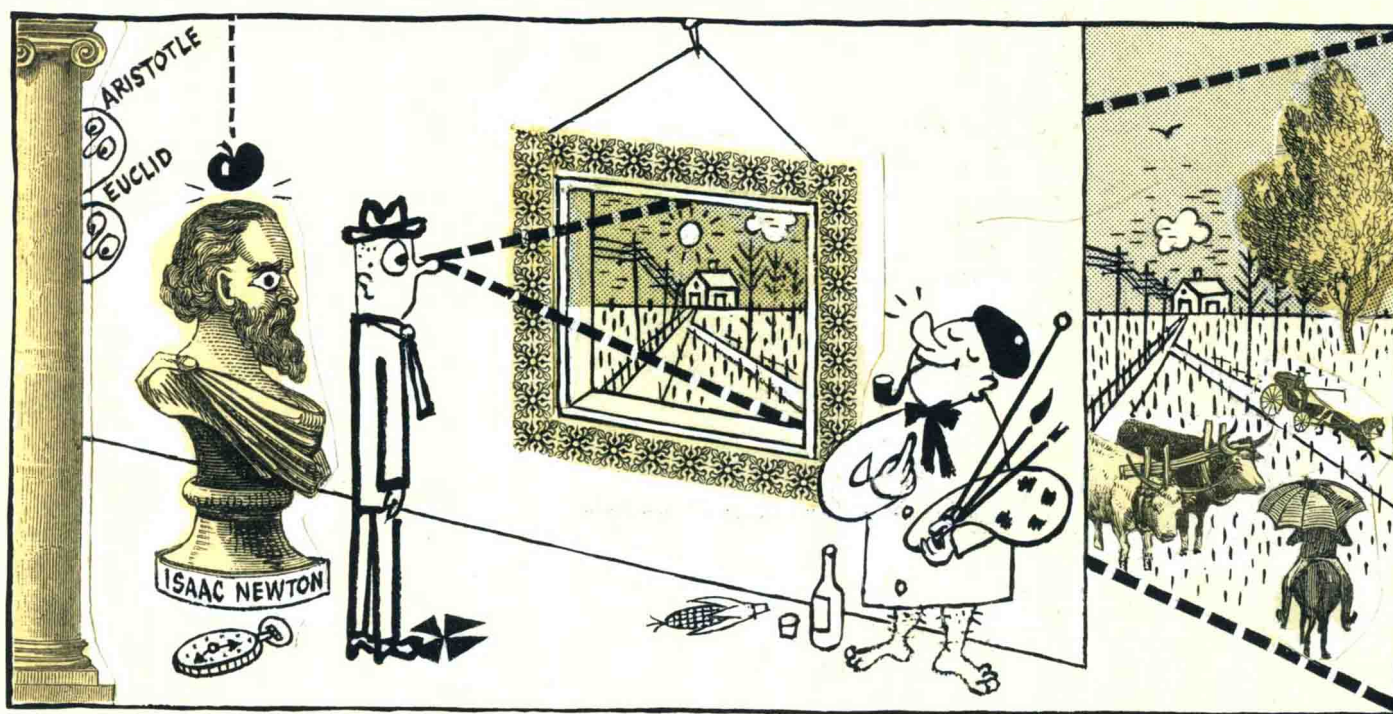


# HOW <sup>to</sup> LOOK

Ad Reinhardt  
Art Comics

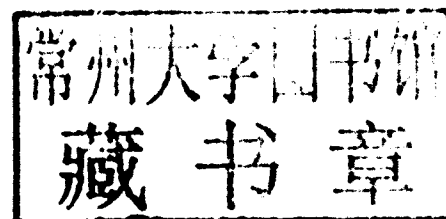


# HOW <sup>to</sup> LOOK

**Ad Reinhardt**

Art Comics

Essay by Robert Storr



David Zwirner

HATJE  
CANTZ

# HOW <sup>to</sup> LOOK

## Ad Reinhardt Art Comics

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Back cover: Letter to Ad Reinhardt from Sinclair Lewis (reproduced in *Hey, Look at the Facts*, P.M., September 8, 1946)

# HOW <sup>to</sup> LOOK

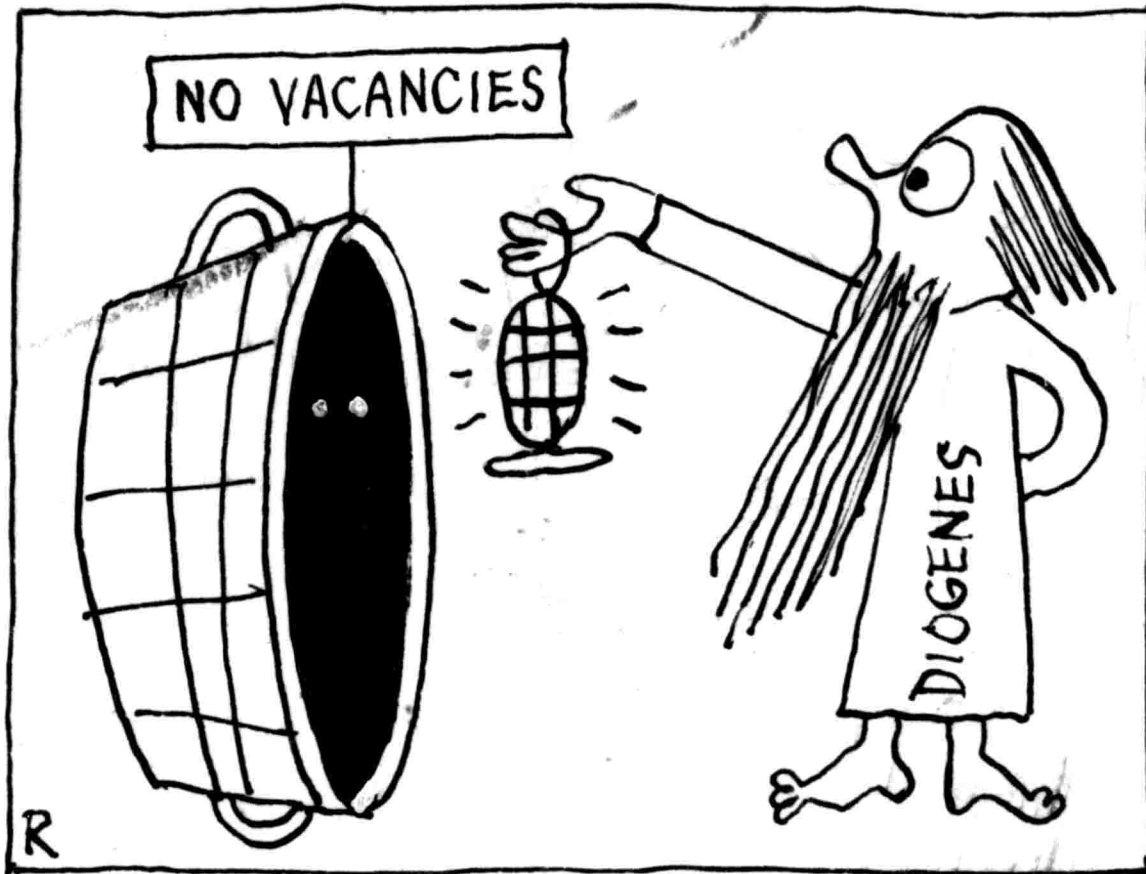


# HOW *to* LOOK

**Ad Reinhardt**  
Art Comics

Essay by Robert Storr

David Zwirner  
**HATJE  
CANTZ**



## Diogenes of the Funny Pages

Robert Storr

There is a semi-secret history of North American art in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s that has yet to be written. To be sure, some chapters have seen print as doctoral dissertations, and that scholarship is important. However, at best such work has remained a sidebar to the standard accounts of modern art in this country. True, major monographs may mention pertinent facts relating to this missing chronicle, facts that the authors hasten past—frequently at an artist's urging—to get to the main event: the works and ideas that earned that artist his, or, more rarely, her place in the pantheon. For the rest, most of this information is available only in the footnotes, bibliographies, and chronologies of these tomes or by close reading of paragraphs primarily devoted to other topics or by reading between the lines of scattered sentences pregnant with clues.

Still, the full story is there to be found in the pictures and accompanying bylines or initials of those same artists as they appear in brittle newspaper-morgue copies of ancient dailies and weeklies, in vintage magazines that are the stock-in-trade of Salvation Army outlets and trendy thrift shops, in bound copies of these publications moldering in library stacks and rare-book rooms or in clipping files culled from them, in microfilms and microfiches retained by but rarely consulted in the same research institutions, or in digitally transferred versions of all of the above. In the "Age of Mechanical Reproduction" heralded by Walter Benjamin, the color of the "aura" that emanates from the last archival example or examples of such mass media images is the amber spectrum of aging cellulose and celluloid.

The names that jump out from under these images are—or, in their day, were—marquee quality:

Stuart Davis, William Gropper, Philip Guston, Edward Hopper, Willem de Kooning, Richard Lindner, Reginald Marsh, and John French Sloan to cite just a few. Those who belonged to this quasi-secret modernist fraternity worked by day as vanguard painters and sculptors but moonlighted as illustrators for the popular press. In some cases that meant left-leaning broadsheets, tabloids, and journals such as *The Masses* and *The New Masses*, in others it was news outlets and glossies owned by right-wing tycoons such as Henry Luce, overlord of the *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* empire, whose coverage of the arts was sometimes favorable but more often skeptical of, if not hostile toward, the ideals and achievements of the artists who nonetheless freelanced for him.

Of those who found gainful employment as illustrators during the early to mid-twentieth century when North American modernism was emerging, just a handful ever employed their cartooning skills in the service of their primary artistic aims. One was Philip Guston, whose rarely seen mid-1950s caricatures of fellow members of the New York School recall his youthful imitations of Sunday supplement strips such as *Gasoline Alley* and *Mutt and Jeff*, while prefiguring the raucously tragicomic figuration of his paintings and drawings from 1968 to 1980 [FIG. 1]. The other was Saul Steinberg, whose work was entirely cartoon-based [FIG. 2]. Yet, only one person transformed that bread-and-butter occupation into a full-fledged but at the same time separate dimension of his larger aesthetic enterprise: Ad Reinhardt.

Paradoxically, for someone who fervently believed and caustically insisted that the ultimate criteria for art were "timelessness" and disengagement from the world outside of art, most of Reinhardt's illustrations



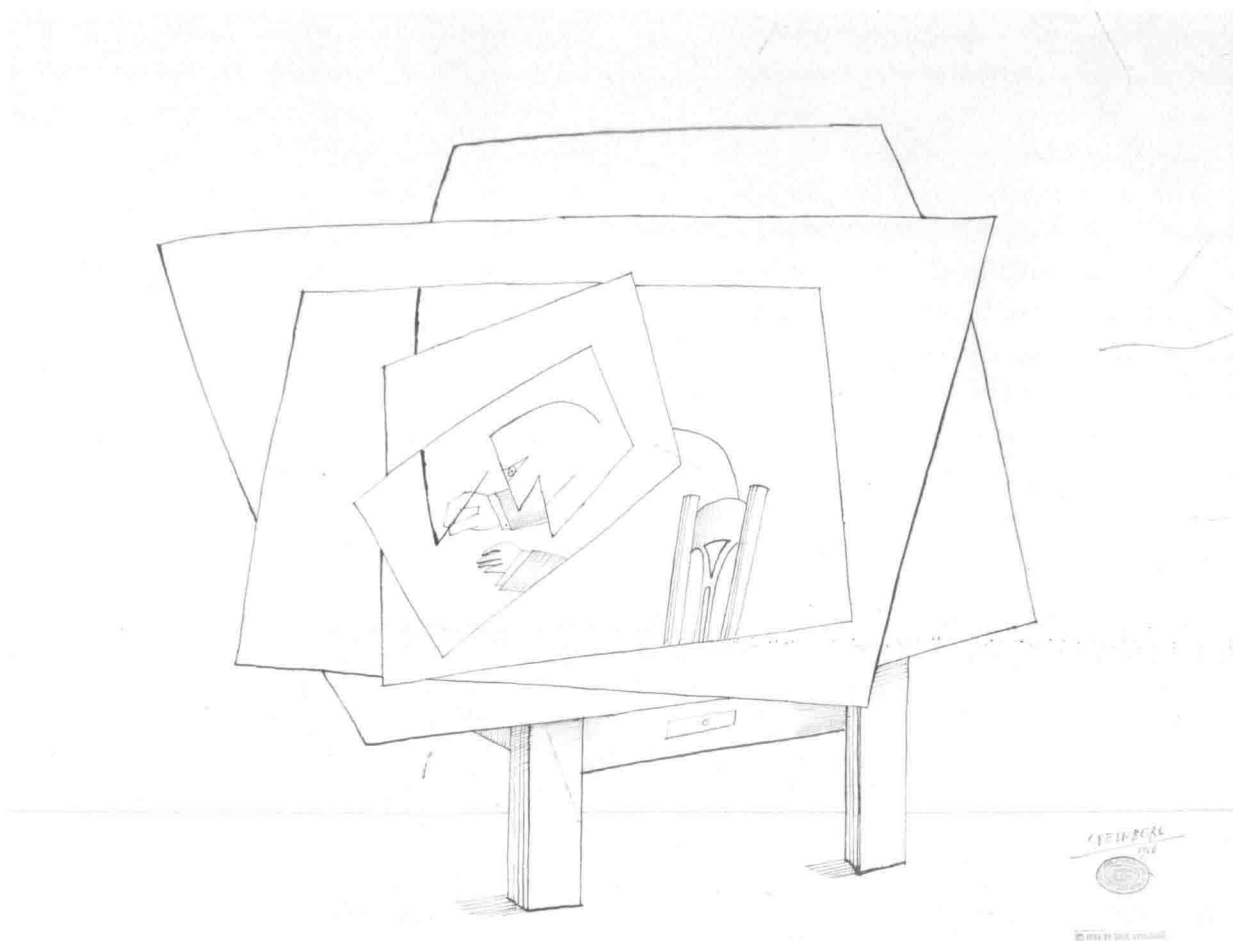
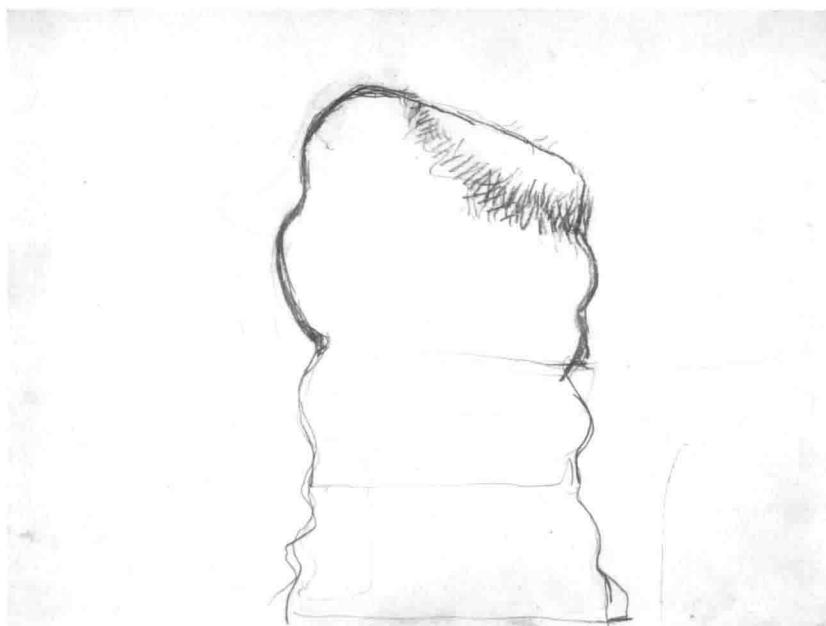


Fig. 1: Philip Guston, *Ad Reinhardt*, 1955. Pencil on paper.  
9 7/8 x 11 inches (23.8 x 27.9 cm). Courtesy Estate of Philip Guston.

Fig. 2: Saul Steinberg, *The Spiral*, 1966. Ink on paper.  
19 x 25 1/4 inches (48.2 x 64.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/ARS, NY.

were topical cartoons keyed to issues of the moment. That these piecework parodies should still be significant today, whereas those of his mentor Stuart Davis and Davis's contemporary Edward Hopper survive as more or less charming anachronisms incidental to our appreciation of their enduring paintings, is the question I want to address—but only after a few cautionary, and, in the spirit of Reinhardt's own, polemical words.

In a period such as ours, when painting is so often taken for granted as inherently old-fashioned if not actively disparaged as retrograde, Reinhardt's total commitment to the medium may seem inexplicably contradictory, or worse, quaintly perverse. At any rate, it may seem that way to those who mistake his cartoon send-ups of painterly pieties of another era as a harbinger of current cynicism about painting, if not about art in general. That his cartoons are *not* paintings makes things easier for this constituency by rendering the things said in them palatable to putative post-modernists eager to get art's embarrassing past behind them. But the fact remains that Reinhardt was an unapologetic believer in art, especially painting. His work was the incarnation of that belief. Or, to paraphrase another of modernism's inveterate contrarians, Gerhard Richter, it was his daily practice of a contested devotion.

In that context, Reinhardt's art cartoons—and he penned and pasted many that focused on other aspects of human folly while eschewing mid-twentieth-century American "humanism" as a moralizing aesthetic dodge—were the weapons with which he defended his faith in art's purity against any and all who would gussy it up, drag it down, or mock it when art was true to itself. So let's not confuse the occasion of these cartoons being treated as major works for one that licenses a smug disregard for the medium that mattered most to the artist. Instead, consider them painting's bodyguards; show disrespect for painting and you'll have to deal with them. For burning bright in each is the white-hot blaze of his conviction.

The weapon with which Reinhardt's graphic guardians of the flame were armed was a fearlessly anarchistic, sometimes wounding wit. Its components were manifold and visually and verbally dialectic, such that, from the slightest sight gag or one-liner to the most elaborately constructed maze of words and pictures, all register as being greater than the sum of

their parts. The scope of the sensibilities and faculties that Reinhardt brought to the task encompassed the cheekiness of college humor magazines—as a student Reinhardt served his apprenticeship editing *The Jester* at Columbia University—a profound learnedness acquired during roughly a decade of graduate study at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University; an unerring bullshit detector combined with an innate distaste for self-serving evasiveness and compromise; an equally acute ear for both the American vernacular and the arcane jargon of his professional Guild; the freedom available to those who are unafraid to offend friends as well as foes—for example, Robert Motherwell was among his favorite targets even though they had jointly edited *Modern Artists in America* (1951), one of the very first compendia of information on the burgeoning New York School that Reinhardt would caricature so mercilessly—and a knack for egregious visual and verbal puns—bringing us back to the first component by way of the second.<sup>1</sup> To this amalgam must be added the pugilistic skills of a counterpuncher who, long before Muhammad Ali coined the phrase, could dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

In all, Reinhardt was a card with intellectual capacity galore and an unshakable aesthetic and ethical code, making him the most formidable of satirists. Not that modern art had failed to attract a host of jeering know-nothings or snickering semi-sophisticates. Indeed, cartoons mocking everything from Duchamp's Dada to Picasso's Cubism to the Abstract Expressionism of Pollock and de Kooning were a regular feature of the popular press, with the urbane but middle-brow *New Yorker* devoting considerable space to the sport of following artistic trends in order to make fun of them. But, Reinhardt was the only committed modernist to tease out-of-school, as well as the only jokester to crack wise on the subject in a wide-circulation evening newspaper, and, more remarkably still, the only one who used these occasions to teach average readers how to look more intelligently at and think harder about the things they were being invited to laugh at.

One must go back to the two plates of William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) [FIGS. 3 & 4] and his *Satire on False Perspective* (c. 1754) for a comparatively hilarious and didactic debunking of art's formal conventions. In truth, Reinhardt's cartoons owe much to Hogarth's tongue-in-cheek but

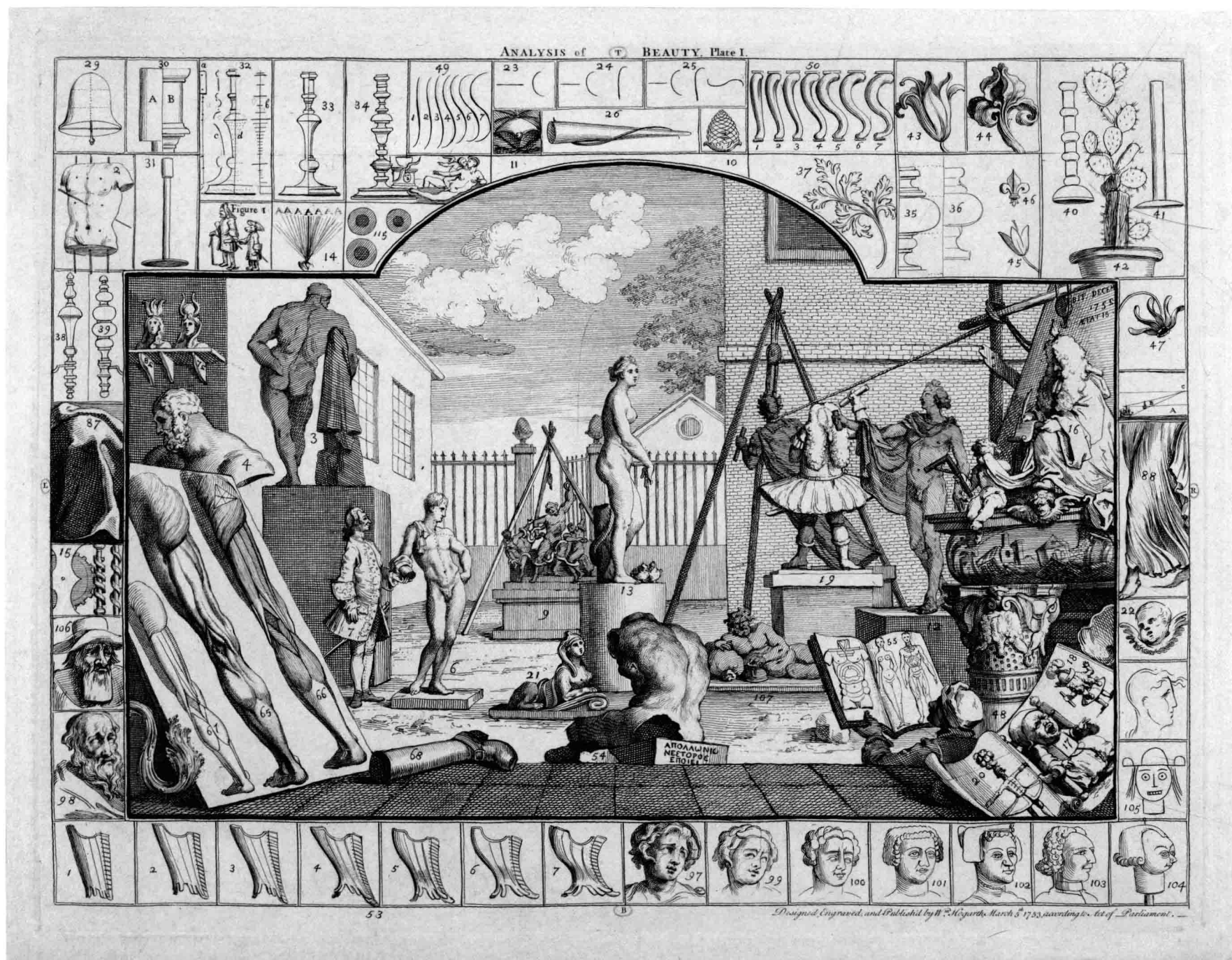


Fig. 3: William Hogarth. *Analysis Of Beauty* Plate I, 1753.  
 Etching and engraving. 15 1/4 x 19 3/8 inches (38.7 x 49.9 cm).  
 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

never-wholly-dismissive examination of the academic tradition. And, so far as Reinhardt was concerned, modernism's traditional nemesis—The Academy—was not the villain of the piece. Instead, it was the false academy that modernism was in the process of becoming, and the betrayal of modernism's ostensible principles by members of that new academy, that drew his ire. Against which Reinhardt saw fit to lay down his own ironic guidelines for how modernism might return to its core beliefs while consolidating its achievements in barbed texts such as "The Artist in Search of an Academy, Parts I and II" (1953–54), "Twelve Rules for a New Academy" (1957), and "Is There a New Academy?" (1959), all available in Barbara Rose's indispensable collection of the artist's writings.<sup>2</sup>

From Hogarth's densely packed picture puzzles with their heavily annotated margins, Reinhardt also learned how to cram immense amounts of visual data into a single comic force field that was operatively—here comes that old Marxian term again—dialectic in the sense that one is never dealing with a single idea, image, or witticism but always with an inextricably bonded matrix of all three or more that fire off like a string of Chinese firecrackers exploding dichotomies and shibboleths like so many bibelots on the reader's mental mantelpiece. Thus, for example, along the bottom and right-hand borders of Plate I of *Analysis of Beauty* we find a metamorphic cavalcade of heads beginning at one extreme with the fully modeled face of a young woman and at the other with that of a winged cherub. However, in the corner where the two sequences meet we discover the simple line drawing of a wigged man's decapitated head on a pike (a premonition of the French Revolution?) and, just above this, the likeness of a man in a hat that looks like a scrap of eighteenth-century graffiti in the *avant-la-lettre* mode of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Comparably sudden changes in graphic register appear throughout Reinhardt's cartoons as well. For instance, take the margins of *How to Look at Low (Surrealist) Art* [FIG. 8]. And while we are at it, consider the elegantly derogatory use of punctuation, which deploys many of the same sly, syntax-fragmenting devices as the textual work of Lawrence Weiner, not forgetting that Reinhardt was a beacon for many conceptual artists, notably law-giver Sol LeWitt and linguistic conjuror Joseph Kosuth, who became

Reinhardt's pen pal and posthumous champion.

But back to Reinhardt's headline: an adroit use of parentheses in *How to Look at Low (Surrealist) Art* succinctly confounds the two but adds insult to injury so far as Surrealism is concerned even as those parentheses effectively reduce Surrealism to a mere subset of "Low Art." Of course, Surrealism was a key source for Abstract Expressionism, albeit one much lamented and whenever possible conveniently ignored by Clement Greenberg and his cohort of worldly "academics" who, nevertheless, also managed to ignore the standard set by Reinhardt's strict view of abstraction because it rendered their ideological expediences all too obvious.

Paradoxically, Reinhardt's marginal illustrations are pure Surrealism, if Surrealism can ever be said to be pure. Although Reinhardt loved pigeonholing imagery as much as Hogarth did, here shape-shifting elisions of material from disparate sources prevails: a Renaissance engraving of a monk faces off against a tracery version of a medieval illumination of several royals; a frog in nineteenth-century swimming trunks carries a framed, twentieth-century cartoon portrait of a grinning man; another engraving of a Roman oil lamp morphs into the animal-derived leg of a neoclassical table or sideboard; and so on. All of this scissors-wielding sleight of hand frames a grid of nine equally hybrid tableaux. Two of them repeat Reinhardt's trademark cartoon in which an "average" viewer points at a generic abstract painting and sarcastically says, "Ha ha, what does this represent?" in turn provoking the painting to point at the cringing viewer and shout back "What do you represent?" All comedians have a signature laugh line.

The third of Reinhardt's series on modern art—the second unit of the grid on the top row of *How to Look at Low (Surrealist) Art*—zeroes in on the questions just posed. The caption reads: "After you've learned how to look at things, and how to think about them, clear up the problem of what you personally represent . . ." Above this verbal challenge is a picture of a bound-and-gagged Everyman with a compartmentalized brow and spinning eyeballs, around whose head the following words punctuated by question marks buzz like so many wasps: "dope?" "money grubber?" "wise guy?" "reactionary?" "rich man?" "poor man?" "beggar?" "Indian chief?" "progressive?" "good guy?" "trade unionist?" and "professor?" The daunting



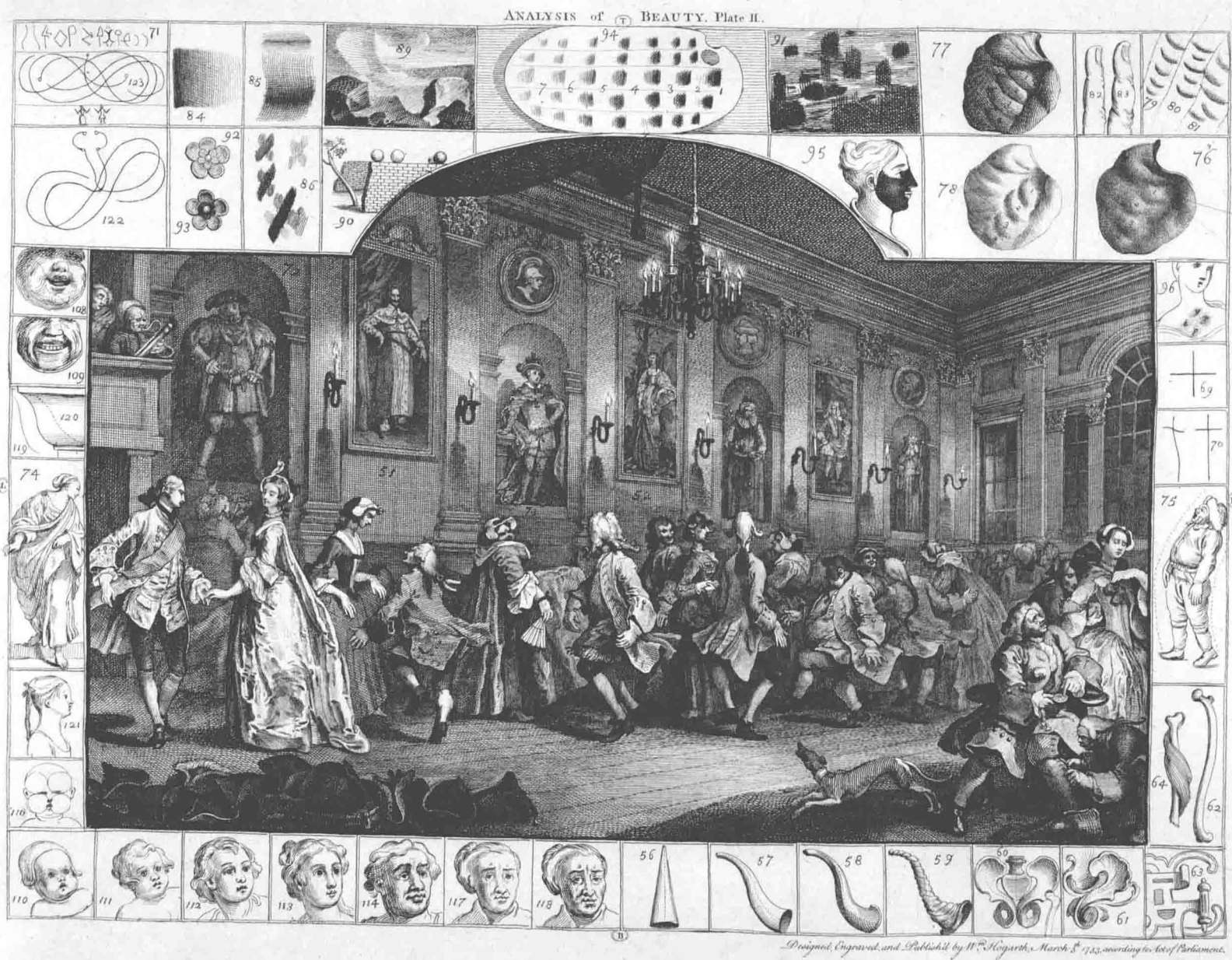


Fig. 4: William Hogarth. *Analysis Of Beauty* Plate II, 1753.  
Etching and engraving. 16 2/5 x 20 7/8 inches (42.3 x 53 cm).  
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

imperative to answer remains in effect today, and the list of options needs little modification and has lost none of its sting.

With allowances for generally incidental changes in social and artistic parameters, other pages in the series are just as current and offer as much to learn for aesthetic novices as they deliver in cold comfort to self-satisfied initiates. *How to Look at Things* contains a systematic stylistic taxonomy of modern art from Neoclassicism to Naturalism, to Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism on down to Abstraction à la Kandinsky; *How to Look at a Spiral* contains delightful asides on science, Greek columns, and political cartooning at which Reinhardt had long since proven himself a dab hand; *How to Look at Art-Talk* features pearls of received wisdom inscribed in thought balloons that echo the seminar room of today with scant historical time lag. Other works from the series include *How to Look at an Artist*, *How to Look at a Gallery*, *How to Look at Art & Industry* (which concludes with the parting shot "What's YOUR theory of looking?"), *How to Look at Iconography* (at the Institute of Fine Arts, Reinhardt studied with Erwin Panofsky, a Warburg Institute-trained master of that discipline), *How to Look Out* (which includes a frame in which a plucky lad tagged Abstract Art rescues a damsel in distress tagged Art from a train track with an oncoming locomotive trailing labels that read Banality, Prejudice, Linguistic Stereotypes, Drink, Inferiority Complexes, Corruption, Money-Grubbing, and Sin, and finally, as though in retort to *How to Look at Low (Surrealist) Art*, the artist offered *How to Look at High (Abstract) Art*). In addition to the ten examples mentioned here, Reinhardt made fifteen other *How to Look* pieces for a total of twenty-five.

For *ARTnews*, Reinhardt composed a suite of four tour-de-force omnibus spreads. Three others were done for fellow Abstract American Artists member Harry Holtzman's magazine *trans/formation* and one for the humor magazine of Brooklyn College where Reinhardt taught from 1947 onwards, bringing him almost full circle back to a venue similar to the one where he started out at Columbia's *Jester*. But before embarking on a brief exegesis of their contents, permit me to digress for a moment on the politics of paste-up before examining the manner in which Reinhardt's newspaper and magazine work was made.

Or rather, permit me to comment on its "faktura," shifting for the sake of argument to the critical terminology preferred by academic historians when discussing the twentieth-century art of montage. In the self-inflating/self-deflating chronology Reinhardt created for the catalog to his 1966–67 retrospective at the Jewish Museum—opening just nine months before his untimely death at 53, it gives his defense of timeless art a unique existential poignancy—one of the six items listed for the year 1944 reads: "Is first artist to use Collage in a daily newspaper (after Max Ernst)."

Given Reinhardt's well-posted aversion to all things Surrealist, this statement stands out both for its verifiable art-historical claim and for the artist's probity in conceding a debt to his adversaries. On that score it is worth reminding ourselves that in the late 1930s the Italian Fascist cartoonist and Futurist exhibition-maker Mario Sironi likewise acknowledged his admiration for the Russian Communist designer El Lissitzky. All too often these days the selectively moralizing "histories" of twentieth-century political art are written as if ideological enemies were not intimately familiar with each other's work, the better to avoid the hard truth that, like craftspersons in less militarized cultural zones, the "best" practitioners of the period were able to recognize talent wherever it showed up and were eager to make use of ideas regardless of the causes they had previously served. Aside from quasi-Constructivist magazine covers and incidental illustrations done in 1937 and in 1947 for *Soviet Russia Today*, Reinhardt never ventured very far into the murky, snake-infested waters of propaganda. Except for what he avowedly owed Ernst, his "collaboration" with Surrealism was even more limited. Nevertheless, his sardonic idea of a joke in some ways accorded with André Breton's taste for "black humor," although Breton was incapable of laughing when the joke was on him and Reinhardt's regular roasting of Bretonian sacred cows must have made the Trotsky-tailgating Francophony wince.

Moreover, in line with the previously noted contradiction of erstwhile Socialist Realist artists such as Philip Guston toiling for Luce's ultra-capitalist magazine *Fortune*, Reinhardt's main venue was *P.M.*, a liberal/leftist daily published between 1940 and 1948 by Ralph Ingersoll with money from drum-beating, red-white-and-blue-blood Chicago

A TRAVERS LES ATELIERS

Souvenirs d'Artistes

285



Imp. Bertaut, Paris

Fichtre !... Epatant !... Sapristi !... Superbe !... ça parle !...

Fig. 5: Honoré Daumier. *A travers les ateliers* (Around the Studios), no. 285 of the series *Souvenirs d'artistes* (Souvenirs of Artists), 1862. Crayon lithograph with scraping. Image: 9 x 8 inches (22.9 x 20 cm); Sheet: 13 x 11 inches (33 x 28 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Bruno and Sadie Adriani Collection, 1956.331.

department-store magnate Marshall Field III.<sup>3</sup> If anyone is scratching their head over the apparent conflict of politics and self-interest on either side of this equation, just remember that the irreverent television series *The Simpsons* and the occasionally “obscene” *Family Guy* both appear on Rupert Murdoch’s reactionary Fox Network, making money for him as he offers opportunity to their creators. Commercial artists get work where they can, and commercial enterprises accept “product” from those who provide the best work at the best price. That’s capitalism. The blackballing of Ring Lardner, Jr., Dalton Trumbo, and other successful Hollywood writers with Communist backgrounds during the McCarthy era was an aberration, not the norm. If, as conservatives supposedly believe, the market is always right, then purging radicals in the arts is just bad business. Yet on the other hand, if party-line-towing cadres are correct that no compromises can be made with capital, then only those who *have* capital—trust-funders—or its equivalent in guaranteed employment—tenured professors—can ever afford to lead the revolution.

For his part, after working full time for the WPA from 1936 to 1940, and parallel to a long teaching career from the late 1940s on, Reinhardt earned his keep as a commercial artist. That he was a total “pro” at paste-up is evident from even the most casual scrutiny of the work he submitted for reproduction. That he went far beyond Ernst in his exploitation of pictorial disjunction is also obvious. And, as with Ernst’s paradigm-setting Surrealist “novels,” *La femme 100 têtes* (1929) and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934), the printed page [FIG. 8] rather than the collaged “maquette” [FIG. 7] is the work of art. For in Ernst’s preparatory pages as in Reinhardt’s cartoons, the imagery is culled from disparate sources so that the variable aging of the paper on which the images first appeared, the uneven quality of their original printing, and other divergent factors all make for compositional disruptive differences muted or eliminated only when uniformly reprinted by photo-offset technology in the final stage of the work’s production. Like much of Surrealist art, Ernst’s dream-like pictorial narratives depend on the illusion that “unnatural” phenomena are in fact wholly natural, so that the artificial seamlessness of grafted vignettes achieved in this ultimate homogenizing phase is the predicate for the cognitive dissonance embedded in them.

They look just like the prosaic nineteenth-century steel-plate engravings from which the fragments that compose them were gleaned until the viewer is jolted by the “impossible” poetry of an anomalous detail into an awareness that he or she has passed through the looking glass into wonderland.

Reinhardt’s work, by contrast, makes no effort to disguise the heterogeneity of his sources. Quite the opposite, in fact: at every turn he calls attention to that heterogeneity. At each turn, moreover, his extraordinary visual erudition comes into play—or, more accurately, romps. Just imagine fellow Institute of Fine Arts alumnus Leo Steinberg doing graphic “improv”—and for what it is worth, late in life Steinberg wrote side-splitting scholarly parodies of contemporary Art Speak worthy of the slightly older Reinhardt. A quick perusal of Reinhardt’s *ARTnews* spreads reveals a hoarder’s wealth of materials from old newspaper advertising, encyclopedias, and school textbooks, as well as pictures from still older catalogs of antiquities. Also prevalent are direct borrowings from Albrecht Dürer’s *Apocalypse* woodblocks (c. 1497–98), Sebastian Brant’s woodblock *The Ship of Fools* (1494), Katsushika Hokusai’s woodblock mangas, engravings by Gustave Doré and William Hogarth as well as engravings by the men who illustrated Charles Dickens’s novels—the style is unmistakable, but I will leave it to connoisseurs to determine whether this one or that is by George Cruikshank, Hablot Knight Browne (aka Phiz), or someone else in his pictorial bullpen—plus etchings by Jacques Callot and more, much more.

As a rule, ravenous for visual nourishment of any kind, American artists of Reinhardt’s generation pored over many of the same sources in the second-hand book and print shops of downtown Manhattan or in the Bohemian quarters of whatever city in which they found themselves. Accordingly, they would have recognized these quotations for what they were and savored the deliberate anachronism of throwing them all together. Contemporary readers of *The New York Review of Books* may be familiar with some and will have the habit of such mordantly diverse juxtapositions, but rare will be the younger viewer who “gets it” right away, which is too bad since “getting it” without having to *study* it is the whole point. Still, anyone attuned to the basics of period styles can appreciate the cleverness with which Reinhardt cast the



