

SEAN KELLY

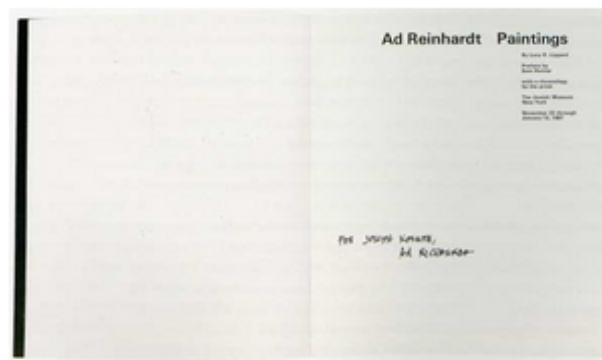
"Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Joseph Kosuth," *The Brooklyn Rail*, January 16, 2014.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Joseph Kosuth

Felix Gonzalez-Torres: I wanted to ask you about [your work in comparison to that of] Ad Reinhardt. Sometimes it seems like two different styles of subject matter. Well, in a sense, you put them side-by-side. It has almost a kind of formal quality. They are very similar. They're both, in their own area, extremely radical in terms of the artist and the artistic practice. Completely radical. You know, Reinhardt as a "painter" at that specific time in history, not only in art history but in that particular cultural moment. And with your work in the late '60s, which was a time in which America was going through a complete upheaval, a complete shift in morality and economics, and the Vietnam War was going on, suddenly you had an art work that people could not even depend on as something to hang on the wall. The work you were doing in 1968 refuses to look like art. Culture was changing so much; it was in such a state of upheaval, that one could not even count on the vital artistic drive to produce easily recognizable art work. You were dealing with a resemblance on the wall, which even today doesn't feel comfortable with the label of art.

Joseph Kosuth: You see the passage of those works within a history of the middle of this century. Perhaps it's about that period of transition from the original ideas of modernism that were formed through to where we are. Reinhardt went through it, he was that passage, and the work really was a development of a voice of art as it was understood at that time, and in some ways, it could even look conservative. But what's interesting is that he took that "passage" with such severity and such single-mindedness that finally when you get to his important work, the black paintings, there is this incredible totalizing force. And by being so full, they appear to many as being empty, which is one of the delicious paradoxes of Reinhardt. And for me, as I've said, when you get to that "emptiness," the fullness of it is clear in all the other aspects of Reinhardt's signifying activity. In those cartoons, in his teaching, in all the panel discussions that he participated in, in those incredible slide shows, in his writing. I mean, all that history makes one realize the important responsibility of the artist, the moral agency of the artist. And this, for me, was important and taught me much as a young artist. Artists have a special responsibility. Our activity must make a difference. As Reinhardt said, "art is not the spiritual side of business." This is central to a shift from the artist being a decorator concerned with forms and colors to being a cultural activist concerned with meaning. Reinhardt's total signifying activity was my source to identify the need for this shift. There's a difference between what artists do, and there has to be that kind of moral agency behind the activity of the artist. Without it being simply moralistic, however, at the same time. We have to, as a practice, mean something. This is always a political act.



Ad Reinhardt Paintings, The Jewish Museum. New York, catalogue signed by the artist.

FGT: Art is like an antenna of what's going on in culture, what's really going on and what's going to come out of it. After those years of conceptual art that demanded so much from the viewer, so much of a participation, so much of an intellectual involvement, we had a return in the '80s to the expensive home decorations, you know? Big paintings to fill those now empty office spaces downtown. That was a very scary time for me, because I saw this as a very ahistoric artistic practice. It was not like Reinhardt's painting in which there's an intellectual demand on the viewer about accepting and engaging this painting that's just black on black. And you even need a few minutes to

see that the blacks in the painting are different. It's very different to what was requested from the viewer with those huge paintings with a lot of splattered color and tacky figures doing something in the East Village, gentrifying this neighborhood and doing paintings late at night.

JK: Reinhardt did "empty" paintings, but the difference is what else he did. Unlike Ryman, he didn't passively let the critics create the meaning of his work. Reinhardt was radical.

FGT: Reinhardt is a very specific voice, a very special voice. Very unique, and in a way, very effective. The book you have of Reinhardt's, when he showed at the Jewish Museum, I was very impressed by the biography, how he mixed historical events with his life. I've never seen that so thoroughly done. That touches me because I believe social, political and historical issues should be part of the "studio," the same way that these issues shape who we are.

JK: I remember standing at the opening, looking at that and thinking, what a brilliant thing to do. It was considered a very, you know, wild thing to do at the time. I remember everyone was thinking, how come he's bringing all this stuff into his biography?

FGT: The last 30 years, with psychoanalysis and Marxist analysis and feminism more than anything else, studying how subjectivity functions, this division between private and public becomes very questionable.

JK: You've dealt with that so well in your work.

FGT: Some of the works I've been doing for the last few years have been portraits in which I asked a person to give me a list of events in their lives, private events, and then mix those up with public events, more or less relating the public to these so-called private events. At this point in history, how can we talk about private events? Or private moments? When we have television and phones inside our homes, when our bodies have been legislated by the state? We can perhaps only talk about private property. It was very revealing for me to see how Reinhardt included the independence of India in his biography. Because such things affect who we are in private- our most private practices and desires are ruled by, affected by the public, by history.

JK: What I was referring to was how the younger neo formalist critics are distorting well, really missing the point. They look at Reinhardt's black paintings and they don't realize that the biography you're talking about is as much about Reinhardt as those black paintings. You can't separate the two. The man who had that as his biography in his retrospective in 1966 is the same man who made the black paintings. The problem with the critics I'm referring to is that they don't see the total signifying production as one large work. They look only at those nominate "art works" because that's what the market recognizes as the production. They're still leaning on the market to provide the meaning for the activity. But we, as artists, understand that it's on large process, that you can't somehow prioritize specific, given forms in that way. They inform each other.

