

## Reviews

---

CORRIS, Michael , *Ad Reinhardt* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), pp. 240. ISBN 978-1-86189-356-7 (cloth). \$39.95.

"Do I want a small painting?," Merton wrote to his friend, the painter Ad Reinhardt, in the fall of 1957. "You inquire if I want a small painting. What you wish to know: do I desire a small painting.... Well, it is clear at least to me that I desire a small painting since I am in point of fact crazy mad for a small painting. They have to keep me chained to the wall day and night and a gag in my mouth because I roar continuously that I am dying for lack of a small painting.... I am consumed with a most ardent thirst for a small painting." In due course the object of desire reached the Abbey. It was a perfect Black Painting, a miniature version of the five-foot by five-foot canvas which, by that time and for years to come, was Reinhardt's exclusive concern. Painted in tones of black only, the image was of an equal-armed cross. It was a pure abstraction—yet Merton could "read" it with unerring good judgment as a shy work of sacred art. "It has the following noble features," he soon wrote to Reinhardt, "namely its refusal to have anything to do with anything else around it, notably the furniture etc. It is a most recollected small painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is true, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting." In his comments Merton was not drawing on a body of established art criticism; there was scarcely any at the time. Yet even now, when Reinhardt is universally admired and the critical enterprise has looked long and hard at his work, Merton's comments—burning with sincerity, lucid and felt—are among the most penetrating we shall have about the Black Paintings.

For us Merton people, stubbornly preserving the memory of Thomas Merton's life and works, his example of spirituality and engagement, his grand use of language to touch mind and heart, the exchange of letters between Merton and Reinhardt may be all we need or wish to know of his friend since college days, the painter Ad Reinhardt. It is a rich exchange, very much a part of the Merton legacy. But for students of art the situation is different.

For them the Reinhardt legacy—the works themselves, the artist's numerous intriguing writings, and the performance as artist turned in by Ad Reinhardt—calls for close attention.

Michael Corris, professor of fine art in Great Britain, greatly advances the understanding of Reinhardt's work and person through his new book. He explores and documents the heretofore least-known zone of Reinhardt's activity, as a political cartoonist in his youth and middle years supporting left-wing causes and publications in the United States. He guides us through the complex body of art commentary generated by Reinhardt's own writings on art and, more specifically, on his own art; by the perspectives of Reinhardt's contemporaries, artists and critics; and by critics active since Reinhardt's death in 1966, who have naturally contributed still more insights and puzzles. He clarifies Reinhardt's stance among his artist contemporaries as a severe critic, a polemicist, yet a loyal participant in art world forums where his wit and wisdom were anticipated and valued. He was the ultimate curmudgeon, the growl, the doubt—yet loved. Everyone knew he was unique. And behind the public performance, which was often entertaining in the way that Diogenes and the Cynics were entertaining, his peers recognized the utter seriousness of his engagement with art.

In his complex explorations, Corris moves well past Merton's relatively simple, heartfelt response to Reinhardt's art, and turns back to question it. "...The point of intersection," writes Corris (p. 89), "of Merton's theological concerns and Reinhardt's aesthetic concerns is surely an uneasy place for the 'black' paintings to reside. While Reinhardt shared Merton's enthusiasm for religious doctrines and precepts, the artist chose to consider them in terms of a matrix of social and ideological concerns. In Reinhardt's mind this may have blunted the wayward spirituality that Merton was prepared to project onto the 'black' paintings." Undoubtedly true, the context should be broad and varied. But the term "wayward" sets off an alarm. Why would the negative theology, the rigorous path of Meister Eckhart, the experiential reports of St. John of the Cross, the notion of kenosis, the acknowledgment of the need to empty oneself of nonsense in order to know the truth, be in any sense "wayward"? All of these things were points of reference for Reinhardt as for Merton; Reinhardt drew on them in the dry but compelling poetry of his critical writings. Reinhardt belongs to art, not to the Abbey, and the art world must and will fight its battles in its own terms. But so much in Reinhardt's writings from the period

of the Black Paintings connects directly or obliquely with Merton's concerns. Reinhardt's aesthetic, social, and ideological positions, brilliantly and painstakingly set before the reader by Corris, do not erase his perfectly evident concern to explore in the Black Paintings a visual correlative or embodiment of the *via negativa*.

Reinhardt's paintings should be seen. Please do what you can to see one. Reinhardt's writings should be read in enough depth to know and remember their unique perspective and rhythm. The best are litanies inserted into our very modern world, which scarcely knows or cares what a litany might be. Under the combat conditions of the art world of his time—not so unlike the art world of our time—Reinhardt was a religious artist.

Roger Lipsey

POKS, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: a Consonance of Voices* (Katowice: Wyzsza Szkola Zarzadzania Marketingowego, 2007), pp. 288. ISBN 978-83-61061-00-7. n.p. (paperback).

At this point in time, four decades after Thomas Merton's death, few studies of his work could be said to break new ground, but Malgorzata Poks' new book on Merton and Latin American poets, a revision of her doctoral dissertation, written, in English, at a Polish university, can legitimately lay claim to do precisely that. One might suppose that it is rather peripheral ground, but of course the later Merton emphasized that wisdom is often discovered at the margins, and Poks makes a strong case that Merton's determination to become "a man of the whole hemisphere" is a central aspect of his project to discover and participate in that hidden sapiential wholeness he so memorably describes in "Hagia Sophia."

Poks' opening chapter provides the most thorough account yet written of the importance of Latin America and its culture to Merton, and the reciprocal importance of Merton's interest in and support for the lively literary awakenings throughout Central and South America in the mid-twentieth century. Drawing on letters, journals, articles and poems, as well as on previous studies of Stefan Baciu and Robert Daggy, along with Christine Bochen's introduction to *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, the author makes the case that Merton found to the south a "more spiritual, concrete, hieratic, intuitive, affective" alternative to the "rationalistic, pragmatic, aggressive" European and North American post-Enlightenment culture, "isolated from the natural world and