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“Incongruities” Abstract

Ad Reinhardt: Black Paintings, White Privilege

Ad Reinhardt, a white, academically trained painter defiantly asserted that his ‘black’ paintings dealt not with “the color of skin” but with the “negation of color.” Not surprisingly, the artist’s last series remains lodged within the narrative of formalist art historical interpretation, and is most often aligned with the ‘black’ paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella and Barnett Newman—contemporaries who also investigated the limits of perception through the use of black pigment and abstraction. In hindsight, however, Reinhardt’s tautological confrontation of ‘blackness’ could not have transcended the storm of cultural and racial connotations surrounding blackness by the mid-1960s. Several incongruities arise from this point of contention, of which my paper will specifically address two: the discrepancy between Reinhardt’s artistic intentions and the inescapable connotations of racial blackness in the 1960s; and the disjunction between mainstream critics’ spiritualistic and perceptual apprehension of the paintings in contrast with the response of African American artists, such as Norman Lewis and Faith Ringgold, who saw racial meaning embedded within these paintings. In consideration of these conflicting objectives, the incongruity between artistic intention and reception provides a framework for the re-interpretation of Reinhardt’s black paintings as signifiers of racial and social import.