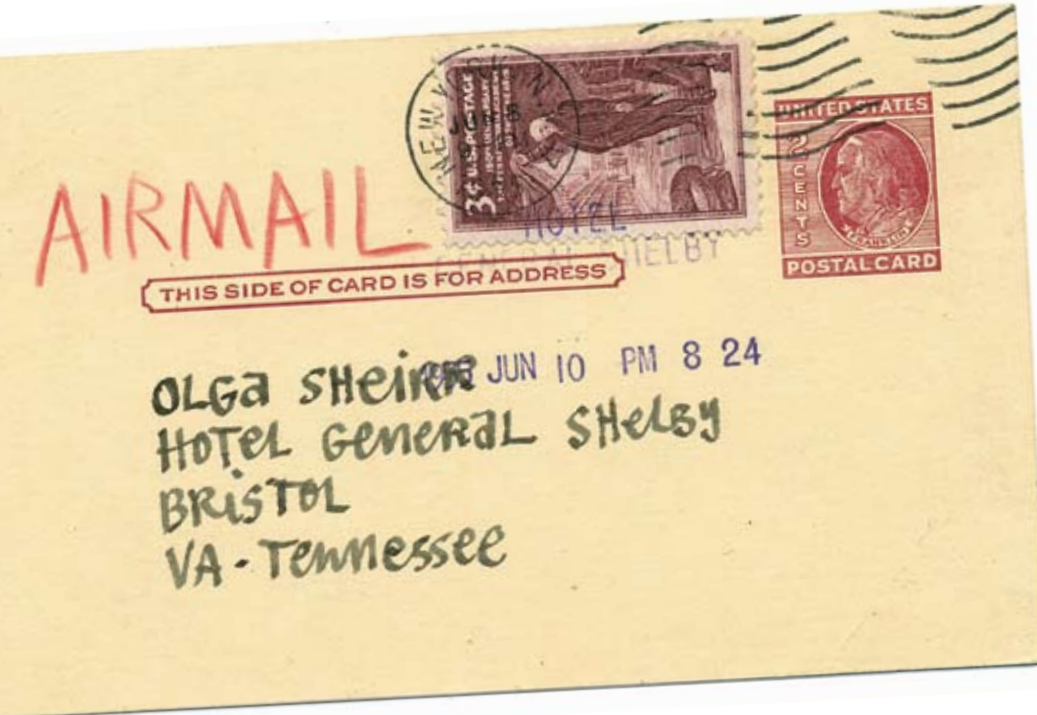


# Reinhardt's Heart

A CACHE OF LETTERS SHOWS A PLAYFUL, EMOTIONAL SIDE OF THE FAMOUSLY AUSTERE "BLACK SAINT" OF MODERNISM. BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ



SOME FOUR DECADES after his death at the age of 53, Ad Reinhardt remains an enigmatic figure. His famous "black paintings," which he produced toward the end of his life, are still some of the most mysterious creations ever made in the long, multifaceted history of modern art. As a teacher, Reinhardt propagated the idea of "art as art." ("Art is art," he wrote. "Everything else is everything else.") As he put it, the black paintings—each of which was actually made up of nine color-inflected black squares forming a barely perceptible cross—embodied a kind of "pure, abstract, nonobjective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting." Of each of these hermetic creations, he observed, "I'm just making the last painting ... anyone can make."

Some fresh light on Reinhardt is being shed by a group of personal documents that have recently come to the attention of the

art world. From 1947 until his death in 1967, Reinhardt taught at Brooklyn College in New York, where he was known as a stimulating educator and an original thinker. He traveled to Japan, India, Iraq and other far-flung destinations to see and photograph other cultures' art forms first-hand. He brought back and showed his students and his fellow members of New York's famed Artists' Club, which he helped establish in 1948, thousands of slides at a time in marathon talks about art's history and purposes.

At Brooklyn College one of Reinhardt's avid students was a young woman named Olga Sheirr. "No one thought or talked about art like he did; I took every course he offered," recalled Sheirr, who is now in her 70s, in an interview in New York this past summer. Late last year she went public with a collection of nearly 90 handwritten love notes, illustrated cards, postcards and found-paper scraps Reinhardt had sent her from the early 1950s until the end of his life, during which period the artist and his former student enjoyed an on-again, off-again intimate relationship.

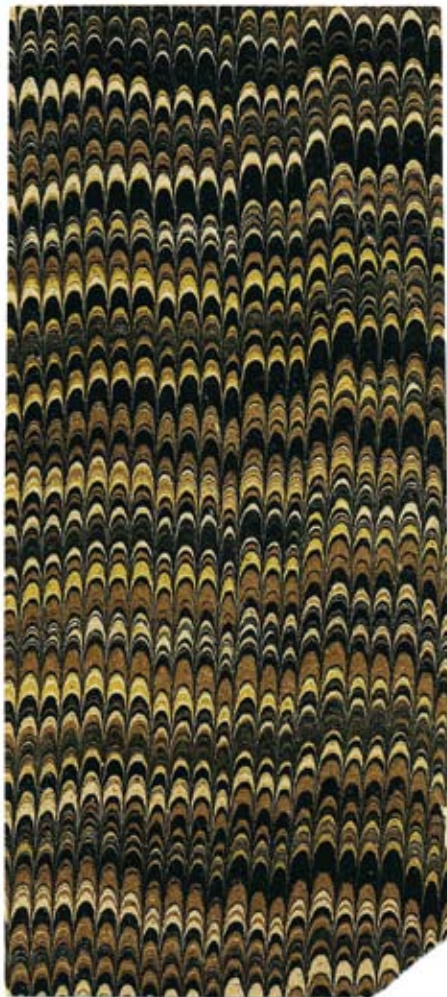
Their romantic friendship began after Sheirr had graduated from college, she said. About two years later Reinhardt married another woman, and his relationship with Sheirr became an affair. Apparently, however, it was no secret to those who knew the artist well that he had numerous girlfriends even while he was married. Judging from the items he mailed to Sheirr, which were shown at Woodward Gallery in New York last winter in an exhibition titled *In the Mind of Me*, his former student had been a special object of his affection. (*In the Mind of Me* will be shown again May 6–July 31, 2010 at the Pollock-Krasner House & Study Center in East Hampton, N.Y.)

Because she often traveled in her work for a retailer, Sheirr spent many nights alone



WOODWARD GALLERY

From left: Back of *Happy Birthday Faces*, June 5, 1955, postcard; front and back of four clippings back to back, April 30, 1955, letter.

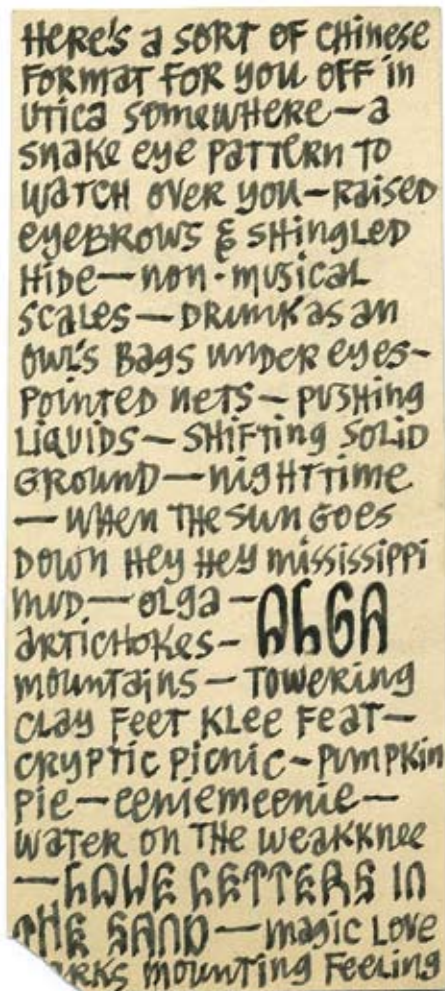


Front and back of *Chinese Format*, November 13, 1954, postcard.

“Are such pieces of personal correspondence really works of ‘art’? Can they be presented in and offered for sale in an art-gallery context—or should they be?”

on the road. Reinhardt routinely sent cards and illustrated notes to her at the hotels where she stayed around the U.S. “If you’re in my mind, and I lose my mind, do I lose you?” he wrote her in 1955, in the neat, calligraphic letters he used for all his personal correspondence and notes about art. It was written on the back of a card with a reproduction of a Renaissance painting of youthful lovers. In a melancholic note posted to Sheirr about 18 months before he died, Reinhardt cooed, “I love you. ... I wait for you. ... Don’t worry about me. I’ll get along. Somehow.”

If Sheirr’s vivaciousness counterbalanced Reinhardt’s intense intellectuality, she also savored his wit and his sharp mind. “He was always learning, always finding new relationships between different kinds of art,” she recalled, adding, “He had a great sense

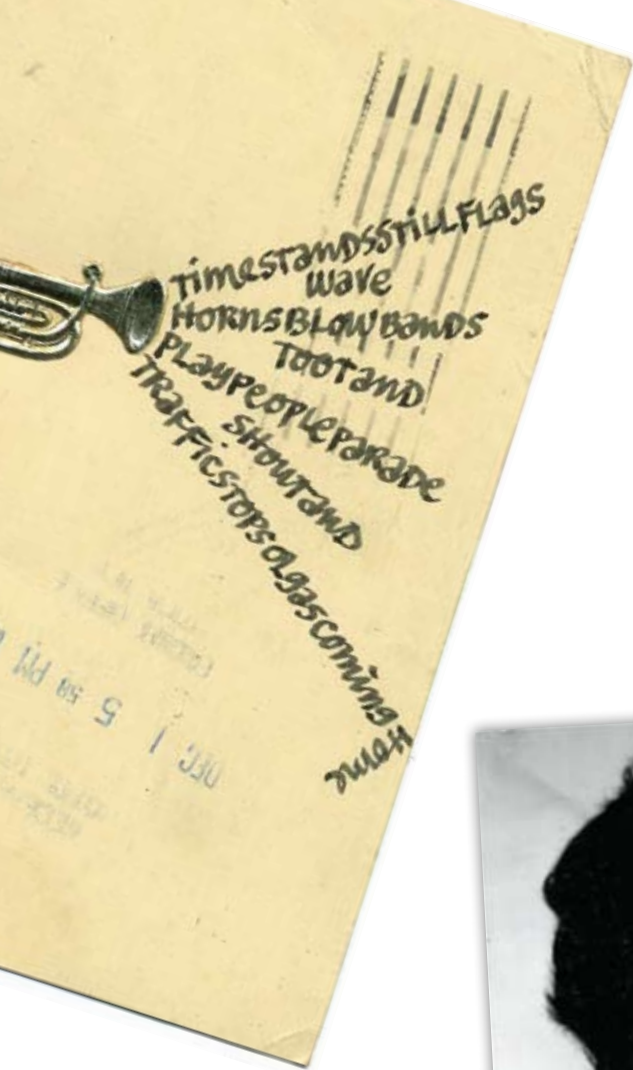


of humor and was very tender.” Many of his hand-illustrated postcards to Sheirr feature clever drawings of faces made up of only the letters of her first name. (“Olga” had been his mother’s name, too.) On the back of one scrap of paper he sent her, Reinhardt offered Sheirr a telegraphic lecture on the artistic affinities suggested by the brown, wave-like pattern printed on its front side. On a 1957 postcard the artist manipulated the letters of the phrase “Happy Halloween” with his calligraphy pen, spelling out that greeting in a symbol-code of his own creation. He sent Sheirr cards or magazine clippings showing a Matisse odalisque, a pair of cavorting Hindu deities and folk singers in jeans and sandals strumming their guitars in a park on the eve of the hippie-trippy Sixties.

Helen Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House & Study Center, says, “These items show a side of Reinhardt that is so human. His fellow artists called him ‘the black saint,’ but here, the other side of the purist or the theorist can be seen as playful and humorous.”

At least one person who was close to the late artist and who prefers to remain anonymous has asked, “Are such pieces of personal correspondence really works of ‘art’? Can they be presented in and offered for sale in an art-gallery context—or should they be?” As the recipient of the personal correspondence he sent her, Sheirr is its sole legal owner and may display or sell it piece by piece or collectively if she wishes to do so. For now, she holds copyright control over any photographic reproductions of any of the items in her Reinhardt mail collection.

Dealer John Woodward, who oversaw the museum-quality design of his gallery’s installation of the Sheirr collection, observes, “If this body of material were to be held back, so would a fuller understanding of the complexity and richness of Reinhardt’s art and thinking, and of who he was.” Considering, by comparison, the value to scholars of such documents as, say, Vincent van Gogh’s letters, Paul Klee’s diaries or the personal papers of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, which are housed at the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives



Front and back of Olga's Coming Home, December 1, 1954, postcard; photograph of Olga Sheirr.



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of American Art and are also available online, a strong argument can be made for the historical and aesthetic significance of Sheirr's holdings. Other such collections are known to exist, too. Woodward notes that another of Reinhardt's former girlfriends, who is still alive, has told him that she owns more than two dozen cards and notes from the artist. Sheirr said, unabashedly, about going public with her collection, "I did it for Reinhardt." Alluding to the longer shadows cast by certain other artists in modern art's canon, she added, "His art was just as good as De Kooning's or Rothko's."

Times have changed since Reinhardt was alive. In today's celebrity-obsessed culture, the media or public's desire for glimpses into the private lives of well-known cultural figures can seem gratuitously snoopy even when it is sincerely inquisitive. Still, the Sheirr collection does cast a fascinating light on a part of Reinhardt's creative self in which a playful personality, keen intellect and emotional charm were conjoined.

The late sculptor Philip Pavia, a cofounder of the Artists' Club, wrote in his journals that Reinhardt's behavior "was strange—he made an art of making enemies, which would be reversed because they ended up loving him. His negativity made him charming, and fighting him was like a lover's quarrel." Reinhardt, Pavia wrote, was a "great humanist" who "spoke like a visionary of the great emptiness or the great nothingness." Now, as the cards and notes he sent Sheirr affirm, it appears that, in some settings, he was also a seductive poet, whose messages filled with longing and joy gave enduring expression to an irresistible art of love. 