



The End of Art

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## The End of Art

Susan Howe

Art in art is art.
The end of art is art as art.
The end of art is not the end.

AD REINHARDT, 1966

I should say—however hard I find it to justify this theory—that "concrete" by its very limitations offers a tangible image of goodness and sanity; it is very far from the now fashionable poetry of anguish and self. . . . It is a model, of order even if set in a space full of doubt.

IAN HAMILTON FINLAY, 1963

How needful it is to enter into the darkness and to admit the coincidence of opposites, to seek the truth where impossibility meets us.

NICHOLAS OF CUSA NOTE IN AD REINHARDT'S DAYBOOK

A lot of the background of this book is in the Mount Athos tradition that an icon is so alive that if you cut it it will bleed.

> Thomas Merton Letter to Ad Reinhardt

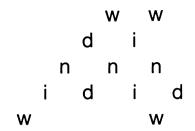
So bird, so spirit so uplightly flies That what before That what behind The bright bird knows not, lies.

ROBERT LAX, 1939

In 1953 the Swiss poet Eugene Gomringer published his first book of CONSTELLATIONS.

silencio silencio

Susan Howe, a poet, is the author of two books, Hinge Pictures and the Circumnavigator. Her word drawings have been exhibited at the Komblee Gallery and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. She presently is producing a series of poetry readings for WBAI in New York City.



The following year FROM LINE TO CONSTELLATION, which was to become the basic definition of a concrete poetry aesthetic, was printed. Gomringer had come to concrete poetry through his association with concrete art, which seemed to offer specific solutions to problems of line, surface, and color. Until 1950 he had been writing sonnets.

In New York in 1953, Ad Reinhardt had chosen to paint geometrically. A geometry of balance and monochrome that reduced abstraction to its barest essentials. By 1956 he had reduced his materials even further, using only dark colors. Here were truly simple paintings; simplicity was their mystery. Paintings that offered no compromises. Paintings that forced the viewer to search for what was offered.

The ideas of these two men, one an artist, one a poet, were not original. What ideas ever are? As early as 1921, a new kind of poem was being called for by Mondrian, among others. Just after World War I the *De Stijl* Manifesto proclaimed:

the duality between poetry and prose

can no longer be maintained

the duality between form and content can no longer

be maintained

Thus for the modern writer form will

have a directly spiritual meaning it will not describe events it will not *de*scribe at all but ESCRIBE

it will recreate in the word the common meaning of

events

a constructive unity of form and content . . .

Leiden, Holland, April 1920. theo van doesburg piet mondriaan anthony kok.<sup>1</sup>

FROM LINE TO CONSTELLATION, when it appeared, helped to give focus to work that poets in many countries had been exploring. Gomringer saw a universal poetry. The languages of the world were moving toward unity. Abbreviations used in slogans and advertisements had brought about a new sensibility. Now the idea of a sentence could be stated and understood in one word. This simplified use of language seemed to mark not the end of poetry but a begin-

ning. New words, freed from the baggage of past associations and restored to their primitive simplicity, would recapture the power they had lost. The new poet could be concerned with clarity and conciseness. "Restriction in the very best sense—concentration and simplification—is the very essence of poetry. In the constellation something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other. The constellation is an invitation." <sup>2</sup>

For Reinhardt there were sources, too. In 1919 Malevich had painted his white on white works, and in the same year Rodchenko answered them with a black on black painting. Georgia O'Keeffe had painted *Black Cross* in 1929, which Reinhardt had admired, and more recently Newman and Rauschenberg had both made black paintings. But as Lucy Lippard has pointed out, the historical interest in Reinhardt's work "lies in the formal possibilities also raised by Turner, Manet, Monet, Vuillard, and Bonnard rather than in the choice of blackness or darkness as a vehicle." <sup>3</sup>

Reinhardt was both a student and a teacher of art history. An expert on oriental art he spent a great deal of time traveling throughout Europe and the Middle and Far East. In the jet age the world seems smaller-easier, therefore, to see art in. For a man with a few thousand dollars in his pocket, the world was, in fact, a museum. He was impressed with the ideas of Henri Focillon and George Kubler, who emphasized formal relationships in art history, not subjective ones. The review Reinhardt wrote for Art News of Kubler's book. The Shape of Time, is central to an understanding of Reinhardt's work.4 He saw himself as a logical development in that Shape. The black paintings were to be an end to the easel tradition in western Europe.

The one direction in fine or abstract art today is the painting of the same one form over and over again. The only intensity and the one perfection comes only from long and lonely routine preparation and repetition. The one originality exists only where all artists work with the same tradition and master the same convention.<sup>5</sup>

AD REINHARDT

To look at his paintings—really to look—would require time and silence and a careful search for the point where line or shape begins or ends. Forward, or back:

The higher we rise, the more concise our language becomes, for the Intelligibles present themselves in increasingly condensed fashion. When we shall advance into the Darkness beyond Intelligible it will

be no longer a matter of conciseness, for the words and thought cease altogether. When our discourse descends from the higher to the lower, its volume increases, the further we move from these heights.

PSEUDO DIONYSIUS 6

Pleasures reside in silence and darkness; monotony not of boredom, but of Calm.

Ian Hamilton Finlay, the Scottish writer and publisher of Wild Hawthorn Press, is one of the concrete poets who has been and continues to be most inventive in his use of image and model. name and what is named. Like Reinhardt, his work has always been concerned with something far more than simple subtraction. For Finlay, the esthetic of concrete art is only valid insofar as it is the manifestation of the eternal classical spirit. When Rapel, his first book of concrete poems, was published in 1962, it was clear that Finlay was a spiritual descendant of Gomringer. But Gomringer, although closely associated with painters and sculptors, particularly with Max Bill, has continued in his commitment to the printed word. Finlay has always used or evoked the plastic arts in his work. He has brought poetry off the page and out into the environment. He has made poems in stone, wood, glass, and concrete. Now the land he owns and lives on in Scotland has become his poem. The current notepaper from Stonypath, printed by Wild Hawthorn, has an epigram at the top:

#### PAN

incorporated PICK

Society of Scottish Garden Poets Stonypath Dunsyre Lanark Scotland and at the bottom:

The PICK is mightier than the PEN

It is both humorous—and serious. In his excellent essay on Finlay, Stephen Bann wrote that what Finlay has done at Stonypath is "to irradiate the area with meaning, through the exactly gauged installation of inscriptions, constructions and other types of poetic work. In this way, the enclosing area has come to seem hardly continuous, in any but the most literal sense with the surrounding hill-side." <sup>7</sup>

To Reinhardt the ideas of Focillon and Kubler were crucial. To Finlay the long essay by Gombrich in his book, *Symbolic Images*, called "Icones Symbolicae," which discusses the platonic idea of images as instruments of mystic revelation, has been a key influence. Particularly that section on the "Philosophy of the Impresa." The joining together of a picture with a poem or title (emblem), or with a short motto (impresa), pro-

duced, during the 16th and 17th centuries, a mass of books on the subject. Now it is a lost art. Far from being an empty intellectual exercise, Gombrich feels that this matching of image to picture led back to such basic concerns as mystery, metaphor, and metamorphosis. In 1665, Emanuele Tesauro, in his Cannocchiale Aristotelico (Aristotelian Telescope), looked at the Universe of metaphors, emblems, symbols, puzzles, and riddles, etc., and then set them down for composers, artists, teachers, and preachers to use; he noted that the first fundamental for the art of the Impresa reads, "The perfect Impresa is a metaphor." 8 Over two hundred years before the De Stijl Manifesto, we find Pere le Moine saying in De L'Art des Devises:

Were I not afraid of rising too high and of saying too much I should say that there is in the Device something of those universal images given to the Higher Spirits which present in one moment and by means of a simple and detached notion what our minds can only represent in succession and by means of a long sequence of expressions which more frequently get into each other's way rather than help by their multitude.<sup>9</sup>

In 1966 Ian Hamilton Finlay wrote to the poet Robert Lax asking for an introduction to Ad Reinhardt, whose work he had seen and admired. Finlay wanted to have Reinhardt and Bridget Riley collaborate on an issue of his magazine, *Poor Old Tired Horse (POTH)*. The letters concerning this project can be found among the Reinhardt papers in the Archives of American Art.

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Robert Lax and Ad Reinhardt had been students at the same high school. During that time, says Lax, he was writing poems (some fat, some vertical) and Reinhardt was already developing a geometric, cubist style of his own. As time went on, the vertical poems predominated until he wrote one about birdscompletely vertical in shape-for the valedictory address. Both men went on to Columbia University where they met and became close friends with Thomas Merton. Merton and Lax later converted to catholicism and, although he never joined an organized religion, Reinhardt was intrigued by their reasons for doing so. Merton's decision to join the Trappist monastery was an important enough event for Reinhardt to have listed, in his biographical resume, the day he tried to talk Merton out of it. There is a remarkable and probably coincidental similarity between Reinhardt's description of his black paintings and the description of the holy city of Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation.

A square (neutral, shapeless) canvas, 5 feet wide 5 feet high, as high as a man, as wide as a man's outstretched arms (not large, not small, sizeless), trisected (no composition), one horizontal form negating, one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless), three (more or less) dark (lightless) noncontrasting (colorless) colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, a mat flat, free hand painted surface . . . which does not reflect its surroundings - a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self conscious (no unconsciousness) ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but Art absolutely (no anti-art).10

Ad Reinhardt

And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth. And he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel. And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass.

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.<sup>11</sup>

SAINT JOHN THE DIVINE

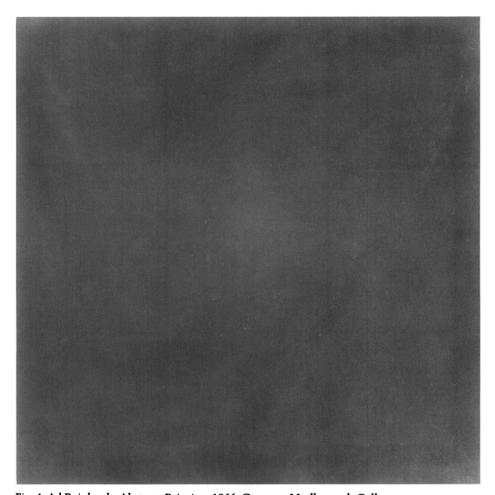


Fig. 4. Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Painting, 1966. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

The same John, of course, who wrote "I am Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end the first and the last."

Robert Lax says that Poem, 1939. which Mary Ellen Solt included in her anthology, Concrete Poetry: A World View, was the first he had written that was vertical in both form and feelingan echo of a time in childhood when he first saw Brancusi's Bird in Space. In 1941, while working for *The New Yorker*, he wrote long poems in a private journal. Here the verticality of the writing was starting to become obsessive, one word below another, one syllable below another. "A form composed by an inner necessity with nothing so cool as a form to guide it." 12 Slowly the theory began to shape itself, and he saw the advantages in such a form:

the look of the poem: i've always like the idea of a poem or a word as a single (arp-like) alone on a page

(an object of contemplation)

but i've done few poems in the shapes of pears, wings, altars, stairs, or doors ajar (after manner of george herbert, dylan thomas or i h finlay) i like white space &
i like to see a verticle
column centered
sometimes verticality helps in
another way

image follows image as frame follows frame on a film

verticality helps the poet withold his image until (through earlier images) the mind is prepared for it.<sup>13</sup>

During the time Lax lived in New York, he and Reinhardt often discussed their work, each leaving the other to follow his own inclinations. Reinhardt read all the poems Lax wrote in the two or three years before he left for Greece, and, though he preferred the more abstract ones, he was fond of *Circus of the Sun*, Lax's least abstract book. Reinhardt even considered illustrating it and worked out some preliminary drawings, but decided against it feeling that a poem on a page facing an illustration put poet and painter into a competitive relationship. It is interesting that when Reinhardt finally did

enter into such a collaboration for Finlay's magazine, *POTH*, he did so as a writer not as a painter! Robert Lax says that rather than looking to the de Stijl group or later to the concrete poets for theoretical guidance, his constant move toward simplification has been influenced by Haiku and Bansho poems, as well as by Norse and Icelandic ones. That economy is of the essence in art was a tenant supported not only by Reinhardt but by their close friend, painter, sculptor, prose writer, and theorist Robert Gibney, and by Mark van Doren as well in his lectures on Shakespeare.

The 1966 summer issue of the Lugano Review contained work by Lax, Reinhardt, Merton, and Finlay. The spiritual affinity that bound the three Americans together allowed them to remain close intellectual companions for all their adult lives, and, of course, had an effect on the work they produced. Most interesting is Merton's translation of Nicholas of Cusa's Dialogue between a Christian and a Gentile. At one point in the discussion the Christian says to the Gentile:

Truth is but one. For there is but one unity, and truth coincides with unity. Therefore just as there is found in number only one unity, so in many there is found but one truth.

Vision, then, which is without color, is unnameable in the realm of color, since there is no name of any color that corresponds to it . . . Now God is to all things as vision is to color.

The piece by Reinhardt in the same issue, "Art in Art is Art as Art," is written in blank verse. One of the stanzas reads:

A color in art is not a color. Colorlessness in art is not colorlessness. Blue in art is blue. Red in art is red. Yellow in art is yellow.

Dark gray in art is not dark gray. Matt black in art is not matt black. Gloss black in art is gloss black. White in art is white.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Lax's long poem Black & White, also in this issue, is one of his sparest. In fifteen pages he uses only three words and one sign—black, white, stone, &. These are placed in twenty-one different groups or combinations. Group 1:

black black stone stone and, finally, group 21 reads:

white white & & black black black black & & black black black & black white & black black & black black & black16

The same issue carried Mike Weaver's article, "Concrete Poetry," one of the best to have been written on the subject. In it, several poems by Finlay were reproduced and discussed at length. Most interesting in this context, was *Homage to Malevich*.<sup>17</sup>

It was during this same year that Finlay wrote to Lax, "I am amazed that you know Ad Reinhardt. I only discovered his paintings this year and am very keen on them. . . . Ad Reinhardt struck me by reason of the great dignity of his work . . . that cool quality but by no means cold, by no means. The only thing really like Malevich I've ever seen. Really like, I mean. Anyway I thought, there is a man I would really like to talk to . . . and there aren't many people I feel like that about nowadays. Your own poetry has—or often has—that kind of gravity I'm talking about. Not a heavyness, its a gravity, and its not a seriousness, its a gravity. . . . I have a real hunger for it just now. I used to use humor to make a distance and keep it art but now I feel this as being an inadequate means." 18 When he wrote this Finlay cannot have been aware that Reinhardt had himself been a humorist for years. At one time a cartoonist for PM and a lifelong admirer of Krazy Kat, Reinhardt's frequent attacks on the "Art Establishment" were often coated with humor, masking a deep and passionate concern for the seriousness of his battle, which was rarely personal but always esthetic. The man who called himself The Great Demurrer in a Time of Great Enthusiasms hid his own en-

There is Just one painting everytime. there is Just one direction, one directionlessness, one form, one formlessness, one Formula, one formulalessness. one FOR MULATION. THERE IS JUST ONE IMAGE. ONE IMAGELESSNESS. one plane, one depth, one flatness, one color, one colorlessness, one light, one space, one time.

Fig. 5. Poor Old Tired Horse, page 7.

thusiasm for the "One Art" under a mask of irony.

In a letter he later wrote to Reinhardt, Finlay carried this concern still further. "There is a problem with concrete poetry, I mean my own - that they are grave pictures. In Scotland there is a lot of heavyness that is something quite different from gravity, something quite unartistic and this made me feel that humor was a very important thing in so far as it makes a distance, a space, and art needs that sort of space. . . . But I have started to feel that humor is not a way of doing things-that there ought to be evening poems as well as afternoon ones and your pictures please me very much by having this distance, they are absolutely art and not by being funny. But that they are grave, anyone can see. Not heavy but grave. I wrote everyone about them with a sense of awe for I reckoned that anyone who is not thick, and who can have that distance, and yet be grave, is remarkably an adult." <sup>19</sup>

Finlay's proposal for the way this issue of POTH should be done was to have Bridget Riley do the drawing and layout on cards-eight pages-and then send the cards on to Reinhardt. He would write in the spaces in his own careful and beautiful script and the completed package would then be sent back to Finlay who would have Wild Hawthorn print it. Finlay says, "I recall that Bridget Riley sent a very neat parcel (containing the layout), and I have often used it as a standard for parcels; in my experience with POTH the best artists did the best parcels, but Bridget Riley's was unique in that it was not only superior, but democratic: it was held together with a safety

It is easy to see what attracted Finlay to Reinhardt's work—in a way he was seeing his own reflection. Both men liked to be thought of as unsentimental classicists—classicists who had purged their work of all biographical revelation—yet they brought to their work sensi-

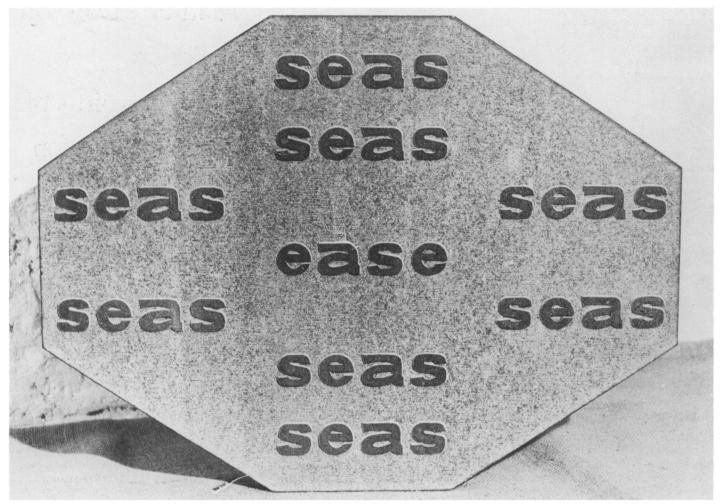


Fig. 6. Ian Hamilton Finlay, Fisherman's Cross.

bilities that are romantic and even religious. Reinhardt in particular viewed painting as a ritual process. What the color black meant to him—all the infinite power of suggestion it held. What the sea (both word and thing) meant to Finlay. And perhaps the implications in the word and color have really been arrows pointing to the same mystery which for both men is Art.

Ian Hamilton Finlay's Fisherman's Cross-again the cruciform, icon of redemption in continuity—is a poem whose visible form is identical to its structure. A concrete poem in concrete. No longer print on white paper, no longer the Universe of the blank page as in Mallarme, but the silent voice of stone on stone. Form and content are one. Like the black paintings, the edges – demarkations—are blurred but definite, either/or. The two words, seas and ease, are as close in value as two slightly different blacks are close. Here the words are close visually and rythmically. The ea combination in the middle is in my memory as the ea in eat, ear, hear, cease, release,

death, and east, where the sun rises. These are open words and the things they name are open. There are no vertical letters, just as there are no sharp sounds to pull the ear or eye up or down. Life (seas) rhymes with Death (ease). The cross made by the words has been placed inside a hexagonal form which blurs the edges. The eye wanders off toward the borders until ease (almost seas backward), in the center, draws it back as does sleep, or death, or the sea.

Death is a Crosse, to which many waies leade, some direct, and others winding, but all meet in one center.

Henry Vaughn

Finlay's poem *Homage to Malevich* requires a search for solution on the part of the reader/viewer exactly similar to that required by Reinhardt's later paintings. The poet has made an exact arrangement with complete economy.

lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lockblackblockb
lockblackblockb
lockblackblockb
lockblackblockb
lockblackblockb
lockblackblockb
lockblackblockb

First I see a group of letters in a rectangle—then the words lack, block, and black. The b running down the right hand column seems arbitrary. Is this to be read horizontally, vertically, or all at once? Unlike Robert Lax, whose poems do read vertically, this poem has so many

ways of being read that it is really up to the reader to bring meaning into it, just as one is finally left to find one's own meaning in a Malevich (white) or Reinhardt (black) painting. If you give this poem time and thought, you begin to see that there are tightly linked elements here. Tightly linked, and at play. The two words lack and lock, look alike, but mean opposite things. Modified by a variable (b) they form two new words, block and black. The b at the end which at first seemed arbitrary now makes perfect sense. An extra that has created something else. Carry it over to the left and begin with black. The vertical letters l, k, and b, positioned as they are, make vertical lines that pull the eye up and down, and that pulls the o, a and c letters apart (the o's and a's are the only ones that vary). The round short letters give a horizontal tug which prevents the poem from being read up and down. The black (figure) and block (ground) balances with lock (stability) against lack (instability). Something open versus something closed. Are lack and black one and the same image, or exactly opposite? Are block and lock alike? All this is exactly what the title or subject suggested -Malevich's search for formal invention. Do black and white open or close? Are they absence or presence? Sense or nonsense? Here, just as in Reinhardt, it is hard to separate color from color, shape from shape. Here form and content are completedly bound (locked) together.

Finlay has written a poem-booklet entitled Homage, dedicated Robert Lax. The cover in red (crimson) has two black crosses in white squares at the top right hand corner. One is Richtofen's German aeroplane cross, the other is Reinhardt's compositional cross form. The two cross shapes echo a similarity between the two names: Richtofen/Reinhardt. Both men have come to be associated with a color. Black-Reinhardt, red-Richtofen. Other connections, the pilot alone, the artist alone, air/sky, air/picture plane, are here for the reader to add. As in the Impresa, an image has been transferred eliptically

yet exactly. The last word in the poem is "black" but the cover is red. Again a balance between variables. The poem is written vertically, in the manner of Robert Lax.

The work of these three men-two poets, one painter-is classical and romantic, impersonal and personal, a reconciliation of opposites. Always there is a sense of Order and Repose. They tell us that to search for infinity inside simplicity will be to find simplicity alive with messages. In my end is my beginning. Finding is the first act.

One color, one colorness, one light, one space, one time.

#### Notes

- 1. From De Stijl, 3rd year, 1919-20, pp. 45-54 (trans, M. Weaver).
- 2. E. Gomringer, From Line to Constellation. trans. M. Weaver, in M. E. Solt, ed., Concrete Poetry: A World View, Bloomington, Indiana, p. 11

- 3. L. Lippard, "A. Reinhardt. Part 1," Art in America, September October, 1974, p. 69.
  4. A. Reinhardt, "Art vs. History," Art News, January 1966.
- 5. Idem, "Art as Art," Art International, December 20, 1962.
- 6. Dionysius, ed., p. 182, in E. Gombrich, Symbolic Images, London, 1972, Icones Symbolicae.

7. S. Bann, Ian Hamilton Finlay: An Illustrated Essay, Edinburgh, 1972, p. 23.

8. E. Tesauro, Il Cannocchiale Aristotelico,

- Venice, 1655, II p. 161 in E. Gombrich, Symbolic Images.
- 9. Pere Le Moine, De L'Art des Devises, 1666, in E. Gombrich, Icones Symbolicae.
- 10. A. Reinhardt, "Art as Art," Art News, November 1966, p. 72. 11. *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, Reve-
- lation xxi.
  - 12. R. Lax, letter to the author, July 1975.
- 13. R. Lax, letter to the author, July 1975.
  14. T. Merton, trans., "Dialogue about The Hidden God, Nicholas of Cusa," Lugano Review,
- Summer 1966, pp. 68, 70.
  15. A. Reinhardt, "Art in Art is Art as Art,"
- Lugano Review, Summer 1966, p. 86.
- 16. R. Lax, "Black & White," Lugano Review,
- Summer 1966, pp. 36, 50.

  17. M. Weaver, "Concrete Poetry," Lugano Review, Summer 1966, pp. 100-125. This article is crucial for a full understanding of concrete poetry. 18. Letter from I. H. Finlay to R. Lax, 1966,

Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art. 19. Letter from I. H. Finlay to A. Reinhardt,

1966, Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art. 20. I. H. Finlay, letter to the author, March 1975.

## Manierre Dawson:

### A Fix on

# The Phantoms of The Imagination

#### Kenneth R. Hey

Of the Chicago artists working between 1909 and about 1914, only Manierre Dawson embodied completely the modernist spirit for innovation. One searches in vain for an artist who more vehemently defended artistic experimentation in a city still quibbling over the dangers of impressionism. He was the first Chicago artist, and probably the first American artist, to paint nonobjective works, and he was adamant in his separation of painting from the perceptual world. He removed art from the social theorists, suggested that certain patrons were frauds, and consistently favored the total freedom of the painter to pursue answers to purely esthetic problems.

Like most turn-of-the-century Chicagoans, Dawson was the son of an immigrant. He was born in Chicago in 1887 to parents whose artistic passion was classical music. This exposure as well as his own sketches of athletes completed at the age of three marked the beginnings of his fascination for the arts. Many years later. Dawson was to compromise between a parental wish that he become a sanitary engineer and his own desire to become an artist; he decided to become an architect. Pursuing this decision, young Dawson entered the Armour Institute of Technology. Details of these years of maturation and study are scarce, but in 1908 he began keeping a journal, information from which illuminates his thoughts and actions. This journal and numerous personal letters are on microfilm in the Archives.1

In one of his earliest entries, while still attending Armour Institute, he wrote that he was beginning to grasp something new in painting, something he believed would be helpful to both himself and others. This "something

Fig. 8. Ian Hamilton Finlay/Albrecht Durer, The Great Piece of Turf.



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