

## **GREENBERG, THE FBI, AND THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS**

A fundamental piece of the argument that the Abstract Expressionists were political creatures before they “sold out” is the assertion by Clement Greenberg in an essay “The Late Thirties in New York.” This article was published in the late 1950s and reprinted in his very influential book *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). In it, Greenberg wrote “some day it will have to be told how “anti-Stalinism,’ which started more or less as “Trotskyism,” turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.” This remark has been taken to mean, particularly in recent writing, that the Abstract Expressionists moved from a political “anti-Stalinism” to a still political, that is, still marxist “Trotskyism” to quitting it all to concentrate on style. In other words, they gave up politics for formalist invention.

This interpretation, however, does not hold up to close examination. “Trotskyism” in the thirties was largely “anti-stalinism” by definition, no transformation was necessary, and the artists were never formalists, that is, supporters of “art for art’s sake.” This remark is well known because it seemingly repeats the usual marxist-leninist cliché that “bourgeois” culture should be social criticism. If it is not, it has sold out to “decoration” (formalism), selfishness (“individualism”), and despair (“alienation” and

“mysticism”). Greenberg’s remark proved useful in setting up this scheme for the Abstract Expressionists, hence its popularity.

But Greenberg’s actual thinking was more complicated. Because of the exploitation of the remark, in 1991-2, I decided to ask him directly about the remark (when I was New York Director of The Archives of American Art). What follows is the course the discussion took over a year just before he died. I think it best to reprint my correspondence with Greenberg not only because it is self-explanatory but also because it captures the complexity and difficulty of the man in his last years. As the notes indicate, he agreed to them, away from what he said, but returned months later. In the process, I learned not to take Greenberg’s phone calls and not to speak to him in the afternoon. By then his heavy drinking had made him ornery and nasty. These remarks I publish (and they have been given to the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art) are from his sober moments.

September 10, 1991

Clement Greenberg  
275 Central Park West  
New York, New York 10024

Dear Mr. Greenberg,

I write to you as a scholar of Abstract Expressionism and director of the Archives of American Art in New York. I wonder if I may ask you a question about something you said years ago? It has since become a source of controversy that only you could clear up. I would like to clarify one of the main areas of contention in recent art history, the political transformation of American artists from the 1930s to the 1940s.

In an article "The Late Thirties in New York," you wrote that someday it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism in the American art world in the late 1930s which began as Trotskyism became art-for-art sake and thus cleared the way to what was to come.

May I ask to whom were you specifically referring? American artists as a whole, the art world including critics, the social realist artists of the 1930s, or the future Abstract Expressionists? Of the latter, which ones did you have in mind if any? Which ones did you know in the late 1930s? What were their politics? Were they profound or of the parlor variety?

If you do not have the time to write, perhaps I could call you sometime soon and we could discuss this question. I would greatly appreciate it.

Sincerely yours,

Stephen Polcari  
New York Director

October 2, 1991

Clement Greenberg  
275 Central Park West  
New York, New York 10024

Dear Mr. Greenberg,

I am writing to you to put on paper today's phone conversation that was in response to my letter of September 10, 1991. I believe it to be very important historically and thus the scholarly community would be indebted for an accurate summary or transcription of your remarks. I will deposit both my first letter and this one in the Archives. Certainly, this one or its contents should be made known.

In my letter, I asked you to clarify comments you made about the politics of American artists in the late 1930s in your article "The Late Thirties in New York" of 1957. In the article you had stated that someday it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism in the American art world of that time became Trotskyism and then later art-for art's sake. I asked you to which artists you were specifically referring since the remarks have been taken to mean that the Abstract Expressionists evolved from being Stalinists to becoming Trotskyists and then "formalists."

In our phone conversation of today, you responded. You recalled that your remarks in the article were sparked by a conversation you had in the late 1950s with Lee Krasner when you and she talked of the Artists' Union. With Lee you noted that there had been a battle in the Artists' Union between the Stalinists and their opponents who were generally called Trotskyists even if they were not. Lee was in the Union and was so labeled. You yourself were not a member of the Union because you were not an artist but you had heard of the battles.

The future Abstract Expressionists were among neither the Stalinists nor Trotskyists. The Abstract Expressionists who were members of the Union were essentially in it because the Union was the only one there was for artists, and their friends were there, not because they were committed in a

hardcore fashion to political revolution like others. In other words, they were apolitical. Besides Lee you recalled Adolph Gottlieb was a member that was very savvy about politics, perhaps the most savvy of the group. You said he could spot a Stalinist ten miles away. Willem De Kooning was another member you recall who went along with the Union but who was unpolitical. By the time you met Jackson Pollock in the early 1940s, he was uninterested in politics, too. In contrast, when Robert Motherwell came to New York at that time, (1940- ) he wanted to become interested in Marxism but, by then, everything was over --not completely, but politics as an artist's interest was on the decline. You remember Harold Rosenberg as an active anti-Stalinist.

I hope this is an accurate transcription of your comments. The historical record must be made as accurate as possible. If you would like to change or add something, please feel free.

I thank you again for your time and effort. Your thoughts are yet again of great interest to the art world.

Sincerely yours,

Stephen Polcari  
New York Director

October 21, 1991

Mr. and Mrs. Clement Greenberg  
275 Central Park West  
Apartment 17C  
New York, New York 10024

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Greenberg,

. . . . [Discussion of Archives's business]

P.S. If my letter documenting your remarks in our telephone conversation about the politics of the Abstract Expressionists is sufficient, could you send it along with your approval and whatever additions or changes you may like to make? I include another two deed of gift forms for this.

November 20, 1991

I am recording this today after a phone call with Clement Greenberg. He has decided not to allow the release of his remarks about the politics of the Abstract Expressionists. He says he does not want to be associated with calling David Smith a fellow traveler.

His knowledge about the politics of the Abstract Expressionists is based only on hearsay and on what they what they signed. It would be up to others to check things out, he declared. I expressed my disappointment with his withdrawal and tried to get him to continue. I reiterated that his remarks in the 1957 essay ("The Late Thirties in New York") had started a debate and that it was necessary to add to and to clarify them. Some writers were using the remarks to say that it was the Abstract Expressionists who moved from communism to trotskyism to formalism. He denied that the remarks referred to them saying, "they were apolitical." I indicated this clarification was why we needed his comments, but he still insisted on their withdrawal and I concurred.

I write this to say then that these remarks will be kept among my papers and that his previous comments and these should now enter the Archives as belonging to my papers and not Greenberg's. I also will say here that Greenberg's withdrawal is in keeping with his recent desire (fall 1991) to demand that writers get permission from him before reading his papers because they may negatively interpret them. It is also in keeping with his objection last week of the brief identifying characterization in the Archives' catalogue of Greenberg as a critic who favored flatness and purity of the medium. These remarks he felt were not accurate.

July 6, 1992

Clement Greenberg  
275 Central Park West  
New York, New York 10024

Dear Mr. Greenberg,

Last fall we spoke on the phone about a question that has assumed some significance in recent art historical studies: whether the Abstract Expressionists were heavyweight political artists. The remark you made in an article, "The Late Thirties in New York," about a sequence among American artists of marxism/troskyism/art- for-art-sake has played a fair role in this discussion. With your remarks in September/October, we clarified the Abstract Expressionists' position. However, one comment you made about David Smith being a fellow-traveler you regretted and called me to nix your whole statement. That I have done.

I write to ask you to reconsider. Your other remarks about the Abstract Expressionists as being apolitical are too important to put aside. So I send along another copy of your remarks with the comments about David Smith crossed out. This is the way I would like to record your statement. Art history needs your words to clarify the misunderstandings prompted by the misreading of your first remarks. Only you can do this.

I hope this is satisfactory to you. Thank you for your efforts.

Sincerely yours,

Stephen Polcari  
New York Director

On August 11, 1992 I telephoned Clement Greenberg who will now allow his remarks to be put in the Archives.

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If the Abstract Expressionists were heavily political, it is logical to assume that their political action would be on file not only in their art but also in records kept by the agency responsible for so much “hysteria” – the FBI. And indeed there are files at the FBI that I obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. My request was to see what the artists did in the tumultuous years of the 1930s and beyond. Some of them of course signed petitions but that does not mean much. Social pressures, the moment, general belief in the larger goals lie behind petitions than any necessary hardcore politics. For example, several artists signed their support for marxists Meyer Schapiro and Harold Rosenberg’s magazine *Dissent* in 1962-63 including Alice Neel, Milton Avery, Grace Hartigan and others. It is as likely, if not more likely, that they signed more because they were friends and supportive and needy of Schapiro and Rosenberg than because of any deep-seated commitment. Rosenberg and Schapiro’s marxism is well known but it is hard to fathom most of the artists who signed their support for their magazine as marxists. And as the artists

said about politics and the artist's unions in the 1930s, how can you not be against "war and fascism." But it is a large leap from general sympathy to active, driven, activist support.

And that is where the FBI files come in. Can they make a definitive statement? A recent leftist argument believes they prove the artists' hardcore leftwing politics, but do they. The answer is that they can provide strong but not necessarily definitive evidence. They can, however, illuminate. What they reveal is, again, not what the left would like you to believe. (It is necessary for the left to define art as only political so it can become the judge, jury and executioner of the history of art. Everything else such all the rest of the human imagination is unimportant to them or theorized away as subordinate and irrelevant.)

From the FBI and other agencies, in December 1993 I asked for and eventually received the files of Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, David Smith, Ad Reinhardt, and Jackson Pollock. Because this is the government, it took a little more than two years (January 1996) for them to respond with the files. In a note on February 9, 1994 from J. Kevin O'Brien, Chief of the Freedom of Information-Privacy Arts Section in the Information Resources Division, the FBI explains that there are over 10, 600 requests for FOIPA that will requires a review of an estimated 4.5 million records.

In examining the FBI files of these six Abstract Expressionists, the conclusion that one must clearly and fairly reach is that there are virtually

no FBI records of serious political activity with the possible exception of Reinhardt. During the seasons of “hysterical “ paranoia, then, these allegedly deeply hardcore artists are virtually unknown to the FBI. To go along with the absence of virtually certifiable political Abstract Expressionists art, then, is the absence of recorded political activity. Indeed, the records are quite comical -- if not hysterically --- funny. Either the paranoia of FBI is not all it is supposed to be or the artists were not as political as the left wishes them to be. It is probably a case of a little of both of these.

Most of the files are straightforward with excisions made to protect the names of people involved -- those who made allegations about the artists and FBI agents. There are few of them because there are few allegations and precious few file pages.

Arshile Gorky's file, for example, is six pages, mostly centered on a two-page letter dated March 17, 1958 to J. Edgar Hoover by an unknown woman from New Jersey. She writes Hoover that she is

more than shocked that the United States is to be represented at the Brussel's [sic] Fair by the art (?) work of fanatics. Those so-called artists are members of the Museum of Modern Art that sponsors subversive art and recognizes the members of “The John Reed Club: The J.R. Club, as you know, is an organization of Communists engaged in revolutionary activities. The Congressional Records of the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 84<sup>th</sup> Congress in its proceedings, reveals the names of Wm.

Baziotes, Arshile Gorky, Rob't Motherwell and others who are communistic artists – they have been chosen to represent us at Brussels!! Our fine American artists are not considered. In 1956 a similar exhibition went to Europe, but thank goodness it was recalled!

The writer goes on to request that this exhibition be terminated, too. On March 24, 1958 the Agency responded, most probably an agent rather than Hoover himself. This agent thanks her for the letter and tells her that the “contents may be of interest to the Department of State,” since the exhibition will be abroad, and the agency has made copies of her letter available to it. In the event of any “additional data” this woman finds, she can happily communicate with the special agent in charge of the nearby Newark Office.

An additional sheet in the Gorky file sums up the findings of what the Bureau has investigated on the subjects at hand: it has nothing on the Museum of Modern Art; and it has no “identifiable information concerning Arshile Gorkey [sic].” The sheet further mentions that on “2-4-53” someone from Michigan called at the Bureau to report that Baziotes reminded her of Adolph Hitler and thought Baziotes might, in fact, be Hitler!!! (I have nothing to say about this, figs. 1-2.) The note goes on to say that the Bureau has nothing derogatory on Baziotes either, and that the MoMA file (?) should be subject to the usual guidelines.

That is the sum total of the files on Gorky (as is typical of all the files, the remaining pages reproduce these sheets) and as it turns out maybe on MoMA and Baziotos, too. (I did not request their files.) There seems, then, to be no records of any strong political activities except on the part of crackpot citizens in New Jersey and Michigan. No revolution here.

The same is true with Gottlieb, for his file consists of two pages (!) most of which is about an issue that forms the basis of his and Rothko's file, too – a published letter about Siqueiros. (See below). The pages are a reference letter of June 3, 1965 from the FBI to “Honorable Marvin Watson, Special Assistant to the President, the White House, Washington, D.C.” It refers to a memorandum “identifying some 45 individuals concerning whom the FBI has no derogatory information in its central files or the files of the Identification Division.” The letter also refers to apparently 13 enclosed memoranda relative to the remainder of the individuals on the list. All names are blocked out in one copy of the list at issue except for Gottlieb, and strangely by accident, Georgia O’Keeffe. That is the sole data in the Gottlieb file. No political heavy breathing here either.

The Rothko file contains eleven pages revolving around this published letter containing mostly a list of signers. The most important page is an “enclosure to letter to Honorable Lee C. White,” White House Associate Council to the President, dated January 14, 1965. Why he is involved is not explained but the page notes the following. Under the title of Mark Rothko, his place and date of birth,

according to FBI files, “The New York Times” of December 31, 1962, carried a story from Mexico City about an advertisement inserted in a local newspaper by a group of American writers, artists and intellectuals appealing for the release from prison of Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros. The advertisement was a salute to Siqueiros on his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday ‘from the intellectuals of the United States’ and urged his release from prison so that ‘he may continue enriching the art of Mexico and the world.’ Appearing on the list of signers was a Mark Rothko, not further identified.

The FBI page goes on to describe Siqueiros actually fairly accurately:

David Alfaro Siqueiros, a top Mexican Communist Party leader, had been imprisoned for several years for engaging in acts of ‘social dissolution’; that is, acting to dissolve illegally the Mexican Government. He reportedly had been engaged in activity in behalf of Soviet intelligence, and in 1940s, was reported to have led an abortive attempt on the life of Leon Trotsky.

So ends the letter of January 14<sup>th</sup> to Lee C. White. A second copy of this letter dated June 4, 1965 (obviously part of a discussion that became the Gottlieb file) in the Rothko file referring to the memorandum above, however, includes one more paragraph. After the paragraph on Siqueiros is the following:

On April 5, 1965, the FBI received information that an individual by the name of Mark Rothko signed a 'Writers and Artists Protest' against the continuation of the present American policy in Vietnam. The protest was a pleas to obtain funds in order to publish an advertisement in "The New York Times" encouraging individuals to protest to the United States Government relative to a demand 'for an immediate turning of the American policy in Vietnam to the methods of peace.' The page then concludes as did the January 14<sup>th</sup> version in the same way the files of Gorky, Baziotos, Gottlieb, and MoMA concluded: "files of FBI contain no additional information of a derogatory nature" nor record of arrest at any time.

Rothko's file, then, makes clear that for virtually the entire length of his career, after a brief youthful attendance at a speech by Emma Goldman, the anarchist – that is between the late 1920s and the early 1960s, Rothko participated in little known oppositional political action. In other words, the Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko and his paintings were not actively engaged with politics for virtually his entire life. And one can say even more than "virtually" but completely for a letter for the freeing of a jailed artist, whatever his politics, is not so much a political activity as a creative and artistic one. Rothko was not known to be influenced by the Mexican artists such as Siqueiros as his colleague Jackson Pollock was, although, in my opinion, Gottlieb was – by the anti-Marxist Tamayo who fled specifically the politics of Mexico City and its repressive political muralists and settled

in Brooklyn in the 1930s. The letter protesting the continued life of the Vietnam War was ahead of the curve on the future opposition of the cultural elite to the war. That is why the FBI or rather, the White House, probably noticed. The White House could not have known of the deluge to follow and was probably reacting to a rarity of protest in America at that time. Further, the people who signed the letter were probably prominent intellectuals, mostly Democrats, and past and future winners of Presidential medals. President Lyndon Johnson was always sensitive to their opinion that, in the later years of the Vietnam War, would embarrass him. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the letter and Rothko's participation in it is a plea for peace, not for radical political action. In other words, to no surprise, Rothko is for peace over war. This is not a terribly radical position since the Somme in 1916.

The few other pages in Rothko's file typically crisscross about these two items and have little that is new. Four pages consist of another memorandum and copy of the letter. It was sent separately to me from the Marine Corps in the Department of the Navy for some inexplicable but probably bureaucratic reasons. One page does mention, again in April 1965, the need for a name check on another protest about Vietnam -- a telegram from Hannah Arendt and nineteen others whose names are crossed out. It is not clear if Rothko signed this letter, although that may be why it was included in his file. A written title on this page simply says "southeast Asia situation." And the remaining pages consists of the cross

out names of those who signed Rothko's request for funds for the New York Times ad. Only the names of Rothko, Archibald MacLeish and a Diana Sands manage to appear. Obviously, Rothko has joined other intellectuals in 1965 in opposing the feared expansion of the war in Southeast Asia.

The David Smith file, also of 11 pages, really contains just three items. The first is a call to establish the American Artists' Congress in February 1936 in New York. This page was taken from a book of the papers of the Congress published in 1941 as *Papers of the American Artist Congress*.<sup>1</sup> A second page is also about the American Artists' Congress. It consists of three lines that explain its establishment, the need for economic security and freedom, and the desire to fight war and Fascism and reaction. And it mentions that the Artists' Congress would fulfill its function through symposia, publications, and special art exhibitions. After these three lines, the names of those artists and others making the call on the reprinted first page and after are all blocked out except for Smith. The remaining items include a copy of an FBI memorandum stating that no investigation pertinent to an inquiry has been conducted. However, the memorandum states that this material does not mean that Smith has or has not been cleared. In sum, the FBI file consists of a page about the Congress. Not much here, then.

The biggest file of the six that I requested from the FBI was that of Ad Reinhardt. It is a *real* file of 79 pages. The FBI investigated and kept

tabs on Reinhardt for many years, from 1941 to his death in 1966. The file was begun when someone denounced Reinhardt as a communist on the WPA. The WPA, of course, denied communists employment and if he were a CP member, Reinhardt would have been fired. Before an investigation was mounted in 1941, Reinhardt resigned. An informant visited Reinhardt's apartment building and found that his mailbox, shared with another figure "McNeil" (George McNeil ?) contained one postcard from the United American Artists Work Shop, and another from the "A.C.A. Gallene" (A.C.A. Gallery) signed H.G (Hugo Gellert ?) who certainly had leftist leanings as did members of the gallery. The mailbox also contained a letter from the "Committee for Defense of Public Education" that HUAC considered an alleged Communist front organization. The informant then checked issues of the *New Masses* in the New York Public Library, the leftist publication, and found several drawings signed "R." most probably for Reinhardt. The FBI goes on to say that the sketches in themselves did not have any specific "Communitistic significance."

The Bureau dropped the investigation until it took it up again in 1955 for some unknown reason, possibly because of Reinhardt's successful application for a passport in 1952. At that time, it indicated that Reinhardt's name appeared on several real and alleged communist front publications for which he worked. This second investigation is the fullest, centralizing information on his marital status, military, criminal

(none), and employment records. It includes information from the Navy where he enlisted in 1944. He was discharged in 1945 for “anxiety psychoneurosis,” an honorable discharge.<sup>ii</sup> Fuller information on allegations in the 1955 report include the charge that informant considered Reinhardt a Communist Party member in 1939. Further, at that time, “The subject was introduced to him [the informant] as ‘Comrade.’” The informant also says that Reinhardt told him he had been elected into the “American Society of Abstraction” which, according to the informant, “a Communist organization of artists” that Reinhardt had contributed to. The report notes that Reinhardt had married an alleged CP member in the 1940s but divorced in 1949. It also notes work and contact with several other CP front groups, including the “Artists for Victory” group in the early forties, and the magazine *Soviet Russia Today* in 1948 and organizations. The former was not a front organization but the latter magazine was so obvious it would be hard to characterize it as a “front.” In a detailed biography, however, Reinhardt describes himself as a free-lance designer. Eventually in 1955, the case was dropped because of his teaching position, because the subject’s name was not mentioned on any editorial pages as an art contributor, because he was not enrolled as a member of the CP in its primary elections lists of 1936 and 1939, and because the subject displayed no recent activity. The issue of Reinhardt’s politics and concurrent information was reintroduced when Reinhardt applied for a passport to travel abroad later

in the 1950s and 1960s. In his applications for passports, however, Reinhardt had denied he ever was a member of the Communist Party and described his activities as freelance art work for numerous places and institutions including the Brooklyn Dodgers and Dell Publishing. The last entries pertain to the application in 1966.

The gist of these pages indicates that Reinhardt worked for publications and organizations that were both real and not real communist fronts. *Soviet Life Today* was a C. P. publication, the United American Artists and ACA gallery had

leanings but things are not that simple. Reinhardt says he simply did work and couldn't care less about their politics. Further while the American Artists Congress was a Communist controlled organ, it was anything but typical for many artists, if not a majority, were not communists. As we know, artists joined this and the Union for many reasons, and not necessarily hard political reasons.

Thus, the truth as to Reinhardt's politics seems to be somewhere in between. In the 1930s, Reinhardt did do leftwing cartoons. And in the 1940s he did work for many organizations that were not innocent. Barbara Rose, author of *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, considered him a socialist. But as we all know, he needed work as the Abstract Expressionists did for many years. Eventually, in the McCarthyistic 1950s the investigation was dropped because Reinhardt was available teaching at Brooklyn College, there was nothing new on

him at that time, and after being issued a passport, he did not travel to communist bloc nations. Aside from the frightening ignorance of the FBI and some people at large, e.g. the WPA, that is, their lack of sophistication about the art world, which produced false alarms and then surveillance of Reinhardt's activities, there is not much, aside from the cartoons, that is hardcore left.

And finally, the last artist we want to look at is Jackson Pollock. It turned out to be the smallest for I requested his file and was informed that this "exhibit A" of supposed left wing dedication has *no* file. Except for a record of a stolen painting, the FBI has nothing whatsoever on Jackson Pollock. Apparently, the "hysterical" FBI did not see his work as representative of or as a threat to "freedom and individualism."

What conclusions can be drawn from Greenberg's statement and from the FBI files? The most obvious one *is the most obvious one* that has been misrepresented for factional reasons: the Abstract Expressionist artists were not hardcore political creatures and did little politics during the tumultuous mid-century years and so came to no notice by the FBI. Any statement to the contrary is most probably unreliable. To be sure, as the sixties opposition to Vietnam began, some of them immediately opposed further American participation. They were for peace. In other words, they were the usual pacifists of the cultural elite. Have you met many artists that supported or even understood wars? Most prefer social service as America's foreign policy. One can and should summarize as

Abstract Expressionists liberal/left and conservative, too. They were anti-establishment, anti-bureaucracy, anti-extreme nationalism, anti-violence, but pro high culture and deep-down pro-America, etc. I am sure if they were alive today they would oppose smoking and drinking, be against school vouchers, and for the environment and gun control. They would fear the chimera of the religious right. In other words, they were what you would expect American artists and liberals to be. Some like Reinhardt were more left and others like the Abstract Expressionists were *bohemians*. If you want to circumscribe their politics – David Craven’s calls them social democrats, socialists, etc.– fine, if it makes you feel good but such relentless and ultimately authoritarian and coercive pigeonholing is self-defeating. Setting up the Abstract Expressionists as rightist flunkies, formalists, commercial, alienated, mystics or third-worlders is a useless game and to be distrusted.

Nevertheless, serious scholarship must say that the FBI files do not prove everything. The lack of active politics and evidentiary art, too, is a convincing double whammy but this “whammy” does not cover all the artists. David Smith did do political art – his *Medals of Dishonor* of 1938-39, for example, so despite the FBI one-shot record of merely the sponsorship of the formation of the American Artists Congress with many others, we have real evidence that he was at least political in the thirties, and because of other work, for example, the China medal, later. And Greenberg’s statement that he thought Smith was a communist even if

he never joined the party thus has more support. Certainly, his wife of those years, Dorothy Dehner, was left and perhaps the communist party member as opposed to Smith. The FBI file is not conclusive as it reminds us once again to look at the *total* package before determining an artist's politics – art, activity, words, and deeds.

Similarly, for all of the size of Reinhardt's file and the supposition that he was a leftist, no serious effort has yet been made or is likely to be made to create a political explanation of his work and particularly *Black Paintings*, his signature and mature work. Certainly, Reinhardt did political cartoons early on, but by the 1950s, there is no strong evidence of any political activity, art and deed. Unless one, bizarrely believes that all art is always and necessarily a direct reflection of political belief or that the art is really a cover or a serious equivalent for a political ideologizing – *pace* Marxist postmodernism.

Thus, the FBI files and Greenberg's famous statement cannot be used as they have been by a certain faction, which lacks fair play and some measure of maturity. Indeed, it becomes evident here as in all of their arguments, that if you want to know about art and politics, Abstract Expressionism and "history," those that specialize in just that are the last place to go.

## Illustrations



William Bazotes, Photograph,  
Courtesy of Marvin Lazarus

Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1. William Baziotes.

Fig. 2. Adolph Hitler.

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<sup>i</sup> Written by Stuart Davis, the complete page can be found in Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds. *Artists Against War and Fascism/Papers of the First American Artists Congress* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>ii</sup> During the Second World War, the Armed Forces most often did not draft or accept artists and creative people as a whole. They felt they were predisposed towards “shell shock” or “combat fatigue” and would not be good soldiers. Hence few were drafted. Reinhardt made it through, however, only to be predictably discharged for the same coded reason – “anxiety psychoneurosis.”