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Not Ultimate Enough: Ad Reinhardt's Great Refusal

When Ad Reinhardt declared his black paintings 'the last paintings one can make,' he made a claim both prophetic and flawed. Prophetic, because his *Ultimate Paintings* achieved a purity that seemed to resolve debates on abstraction. Flawed, because 'Ultimate' overreached, claiming a universal culmination across the full range of visual conventions—Realism, Abstraction, Decoration, and Symbolism. In reality, Reinhardt delivered not a truly ultimate conclusion but the appearance of one—a mausoleum disguised as a manifesto.

This essay traces how Reinhardt's claim to ultimacy restricts artistic vision, championing purist singularity at the expense of traditions he once mastered and might have integrated. In contrast, LG Williams' *So-Cal Midrise Paintings* (2010–2016) embody an inclusive synthesis, forging a new model for the 'ultimate' painting—one built on breadth rather than refusal. The following sections outline this evolution, from the integrative tradition through Reinhardt's reductive manifesto to Williams' broad resolution.

A Tradition Betrayed: The Grand Style and Its Aftermath

The idea of artistic 'ultimacy' has roots in the grand tradition of painting. Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses on Art* (1769–1790) called for synthesizing all artistic conventions to achieve universal dignity. Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509–1511) embodied this, blending philosophy, architecture, and portraiture, while Thomas Couture's *Romans During the Decadence* (1847) extended the tradition as one of its last monumental syntheses before modernism fractured the field.

Reinhardt's 'Ultimate' points to tradition but ignores its aim to unite. Reynolds valued new ideas, composition, and richness; Reinhardt set these aside. Williams doesn't just bring back the tradition—he makes it bigger and bolder. By joining different styles, he brings back

monumentality. Allan Bloom said, "The refinement of the mind's eye... is impossible without the assistance of art in the grand style." Williams takes up that challenge, recapturing the wide vision once owned by Raphael and Reynolds—a vision now rebuilt piece by piece. Williams' *Midrise* paintings show the world and give us ways to see it.

Reinhardt's Aesthetic Extremism

Reinhardt's *Ultimate Paintings*—five-foot-square black canvases with faint cross grids—show his belief that 'the one object of fifty years of abstract art is to present *art-as-art* and as nothing else.' These works remove color, texture, movement, and story to find a 'timeless' core, summed up in his *12 Rules for Pure Art*: 'No texture,' 'No colors,' 'No movement,' 'No object, no subject, no matter.' This strict style profoundly shaped Minimalism and Conceptual art, influencing artists like Frank Stella and Robert Mangold, who echoed Reinhardt's drive for purity.

Exhibitions from 1963 to 1965 at MoMA, Galerie Iris Clert, and the Betty Parsons Gallery imposed strict rules, including roped-off rooms, controlled lighting, and no-touch policies. Their matte surfaces resisted photography. Reinhardt's purity led to a \$100,000 lawsuit from Barnett Newman and strained relations with peers like de Kooning. Critics such as Harold Rosenberg praised their finality, writing, "Reinhardt turned out the lights."

Reinhardt's paintings are rigorously abstract, but not universally applicable. While their cruciform grids reference Byzantine icons he admired, stripped of content, they become hollow rituals—forms without revelation. His focus on purity narrows his scope; in contrast, Williams reintegrates figuration, symbolism, and decoration into an open visual language.

Yet this limitation was not inevitable. The tragedy—and the opportunity—lies in what Reinhardt deliberately abandoned. Archival evidence reveals the fuller scope of his unrealized potential.

The Art He Refused to Make

Archival material shows what Reinhardt deliberately set aside. He produced thousands of cartoons and illustrations for diverse outlets, inventing collage-cartoons—an innovation for newspapers. His *How to Look at Art* series, read by hundreds of thousands, blended wit and pedagogy to clarify abstraction.

He also maintained a vast personal archive, a visual atlas of illustrations, clippings, and photos. His slide library covered Asian calligraphy, African masks, and medieval mosaics, inspirations that rarely surfaced in his black paintings.

His political cartoons show skill in drawing people and telling stories. His commercial art demonstrates that he has mastered the visual language for the public. He taught using this work, but rejected its range, standing by his rule: 'the more stuff in [art], the worse it is.'

This deliberate incompleteness created a vacuum in the art world—a space where synthesis remained possible but unexplored. Reinhardt's refusal defined the limits of abstraction; Williams accepts that challenge and dissolves the boundary entirely, reclaiming the integrative potential Reinhardt abandoned.

Williams' Grand Synthesis: Atlas and Abundance

Reinhardt's refusal made art's scope smaller, creating an opening for a more expansive vision. LG Williams filled this gap not with simple opposition to minimalism, but with systematic complexity. Williams' six-year *Midrise* project trades purity for fullness, negation for synthesis. Like Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, and Richter's ongoing photo archive, Williams builds meaning through systematic accumulation. But where these predecessors created research tools, Williams transforms the atlas concept into finished art—combining fragments into one clear system of meaning that functions both as archive and aesthetic object.

While Reinhardt looked to Byzantium—flattened space, spiritual austerity, and cruciform structure—and then stripped away everything but the structure itself, Williams' teaching led him elsewhere. Where Reinhardt found in Byzantine art a model for reduction, Williams discovered in Asian traditions a precedent for layered complexity. Decades at UC Davis, USC, and CCA exposed him to diverse visual traditions. He viewed Chinese literati painting with the legendary C.C. Wang at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He attended lectures by James Cahill at UC Berkeley. He spent two years in Tokyo and Kyoto as an art critic for the *Tokyo Weekender*, Japan's largest English-language weekly.

These experiences shaped his understanding of visual time, negative space, and pictorial logic. For Williams, Xerox is not mere reproduction but resonance. Flowing blacks mimic ink; tonal gradations evoke the feel of handscrolls. Reinhardt studied Asian aesthetics but silenced them. Reactivated through Xerox, the motifs become layered, referential, alive.

Who could have predicted that the luminous afterlife—and future—of literati painting would emerge not in Beijing or Tokyo, but on the xeroxed walls of a cardboard shelter off Zuma Beach? Someone should inform the senior curators at the National Palace Museum in Taipei and the Tokyo National Museum. Williams's *Midrises* could hold their own beside Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (1072) or Hasegawa Tōhaku's *Pine Trees* (c. 1595)—and point the way forward for both Eastern and Western artistic traditions.

Williams avoids the pitfall of aggregation common in contemporary art. Unlike digital artists such as Beeple, who amass imagery without cohesion, Williams builds a structured 'Unified Theory of Everything.' This coherence distinguishes his work.

Williams' distance from institutional validation was not a liability but a condition of vision. Detached from mainstream systems, he imagined synthesizing all that Reinhardt excluded—high and low, sacred and profane. Williams follows in the path of avant-garde figures like Duchamp and Henry Darger, using marginality as a mode of invention. *Midrise* found an audience in modest venues and online, valued for its density and anti-elitist stance, in part due to its independence from institutions.

The idea itself was an act of aesthetic brinksmanship. His notebooks reveal a meticulous process—an image-maker methodically reverse-engineering the canon—mappings of visual life across domestic, corporate, historical, and metaphysical terrains. As early as 1999, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* noted Williams's "abstract collage paintings, composed of layers of seemingly random information," pointing to his use of "clip art—crop marks, dingbats, dollar signs... and even satirical art-world comics by Ad Reinhardt." Even then, he was remixing the visual detritus of mass culture into new pictorial grammars.

Each *Midrise* painting contains approximately 3,000 images, which roughly corresponds to the daily visual input of a Westerner. Instead of chaos, the imagery is structured into perceptual tools—what Williams calls "windows." His 'windows' are architectural and conceptual, framing thought. Reinhardt's black squares block entry; Williams' windows invite exploration. Art frames self and world, and Williams' windows illuminate our imagination.

Identity, in his art, is not fixed but emerges as a personality shaped in resistance to cultural, symbolic, and civilizational chaos. His *Midrise* series offers what one might call a "framed personality": a structure

distilled from chaos, a coherent self-drawn from visual entropy.

The *So-Cal Midrise Paintings*, each 96 by 96 inches, absorb it all: logos and scripture, architectural plans and calligraphy, irony and earnestness. Both Reinhardt and Williams produce work that resists photographic capture, but for opposite reasons: Reinhardt conceals through darkness; Williams dazzles through visual saturation.

The Framework of Everything: Materials, Pedagogy, and Counter-Actives

Williams studied under two legendary but ideologically opposed West Coast artists. Wayne Thiebaud's windowed cityscapes elegantly reconcile abstraction and observation. Wally Hedrick's black paintings paralleled Reinhardt's minimalism but served as "protests aimed against the waste of lives in Korea, and at Cold War adventurism in general." For Williams, the *Midrise* series became a way to synthesize these exceptional influences with his later encounters with Asian aesthetics, fusing Thiebaud's formal clarity, Hedrick's radical force, and the spatial logic he absorbed from Chinese literati painting and Japanese ink traditions. No small feat indeed.

Through PCP Press, Williams has published works by Dave Hickey, Raymond Pettibon, Bryan Reynolds, and an edition of Wayne Thiebaud's artist lectures. His *Drawing Upon Art* (based on EH Gombrich) and *Art & Art History Lecture Notes* bring classical texts and concepts alive through interactive drawing. His cunning introductory essay—written under a pseudonym and featured in *The New York Times* (2008)—on Shepard Fairey's *E Pluribus Venom* highlights his critical range, subversive skill, and erudition. This essay laid the intellectual groundwork for the *Midrise* project's critique of commodified artists and art. More than satire, it is a surgical dissection of contemporary artists' complicity: branding as politics, repetition replacing invention. Critical recognition followed. Art critic Kenneth Baker noted that Williams "holds open a space for painting to resume in earnest." His inclusion in Donald Preziosi's *Art, Religion, Amnesia* (2014) affirms his broader theoretical impact.

That critique of commodified art became the foundation for Williams's larger project. In what Jason Farago recently called "the least artistically innovative century in 500 years," Williams wagered that the greatest work might arise not from prestige, but from dislocation. Over the course of six relentless years, working from FedEx counters, beach shelters, and public libraries, he recast marginality as a methodology—an approach grounded not in irony, but in invention.

Ad Reinhardt polished his way to silence; Williams gathers meaning through many fragments. His approach addresses a stagnant culture, not just with new inventions, but by combining old forms into

something new. While Farago calls the 21st century stuck in "polar inertia," Williams answers with a bold rethink of visual culture's copies and blends. This is not retro or ironic. It is a way to save meaning.

As Benjamin Buchloh warned decades ago, the institutionalization of spectacle breeds aesthetic complicity. Farago merely measures the wreckage. Williams counters that wreckage can be transformed through active creation.

Williams challenges Reinhardt's adherence to "high" materials. Instead, Williams turns to office paper, toner, and tape—accessible, contemporary, and reflective of reproducibility. These choices reframe relevance and invention in art, demonstrating that exceptionalism is about intellect and ambition, rather than rare materials.

Williams' materials are both conceptual and strategic. While Reinhardt's linen canvases symbolize formalism, Williams uses ordinary office supplies to reflect today's reproducibility and reposition the art world. He does not reject elitism—he redefines it, relocating quality from rare materials to intellect and skill. The copier makes the readymades—not ironic but generative.

Office toner and transparent tape challenge the material conventions of modernism, as well as the speculative inflation of contemporary art with no lasting artistic or historical significance. Williams' printouts shout accessibility, just as their iconography does. Form and content fuse. These layered, everyday materials stage a confrontation between aesthetic tradition and improvisational practice—between the atelier and the beach shelter, the cloister and the cubicle. His tools reflect economic necessity: much of his work has been made not in studios but in libraries, homeless shelters, and improvised pop-up spaces assembled from whatever was at hand. Art critic Mark Van Proyen likened Williams's surfaces to "an archeologist's diagram of the levels of an ancient city," with schematic layers "rendered in brackish black and white." This tactile, sedimented aesthetic anticipates the palimpsestic logic of *Midrise*. His *Selected Iconography 1990–2025* catalogues the underlying logic. Williams insists that humans are not anti-representational, but *homo symbolicum*—the animal that represents.

Resolution, Not Reduction

Williams' paintings reach a truer 'ultimate' not by cutting away, but by resolving. His *Midrise* works hold order within chaos. Where Reinhardt's refusal was noble but escapist, Williams shapes disorder into active, ordered images—a direct answer to our scattered age.

His materials are conceptual tools that literalize cohesion in an era of fragmentation. This is transparent picture-making in every sense: a meta-art of visual logic. His works don't depict the world; they demonstrate what the visual world can coherently picture.

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that “language is a picture of the world.” Williams reverses this: visual language is a picture of artistic reality. His collages function like propositions—arranged not to illustrate meaning, but to test its boundaries. What lies beyond—ethics, metaphysics, even aesthetics—is gestured at through contradiction and shadow. If Reinhardt’s black paintings turned meaning off, Williams’ *Midrise* compositions turn picturing on.

Only two *Midrise* works exist: one definitive painting embodying the unified vision, and a second for contingency, ensuring survival. This wasn't restraint, but resistance: a rebuke to a culture addicted to infinite iterations of "last" works. Where Reinhardt's black squares became endlessly editioned relics, Williams insists that ultimacy is singular, not serial.

The 'ultimate' painting in 2016 isn't a black square but a layered, taped, and marked work left in a library for others to change. Instead of Reinhardt's closed and finished image, Williams offers a living draft that invites people to join in.

Reinhardt's achievement was precise, profound, and deliberately incomplete. Williams' *Midrise* series completes what Reinhardt refused: not the last painting, but the first truly ultimate picture, teaching us not how to end art, but how to see what comes next. In 2016, 'ultimate' means not the elimination of complexity, but its orchestration—not the final word, but the continuing conversation.

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