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The Artist Abstract

«Number II»

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# The Artist Abstract

## I

The area between the Museum's offices and the west side of the main lobby served as ante-chamber between the visible institution and its private offices. The elevator took up the little room's North wall. Before the East wall a secretary sat at a desk, monitoring who came in and out of the elevator. The elevator was currently at rest on the fifth floor, and she was talking on the telephone.

A visitor approached, hesitantly.

The secretary swallowed her mirth, her expression at once businesslike, dead. She frowned and lowered the receiver. Though she was a service employee at a desk in a public space, her business was usually with other Museum employees. She regarded the visitor with a dead and businesslike expression.

The pale young man before her desk wore a second-hand overcoat, held closed by two of its three surviving buttons. A yellow scarf was wrapped about his neck and stuffed awkwardly into his front. This though the City was in the midst of an Autumn heat wave. He was evidently nervous.

"I'm to use the Library," he said. "I have an appointment."

The secretary sighed, placed her call on hold. She took ahold of a clip-board.

"Library?"

"That's correct. I've made an appointment. October 14 . . ."

"1992. Yeah I know. Name?"

“Standish Rehl.” He spelled the last part out .

The name of course would mean nothing to her, and she had difficulty locating it on her clip-board. Because she was, by extension, the Museum. And this young man was the Artist. The Unknown Artist. The Artist, so reasoned the Library, Abstract.

The secretary located the name and turned the board his way. It was spelled there, *Real*.

Standish reached for the pen in his overcoat, so as to sign beside his name, but she yanked the board away before he found it and crossed his name out herself with a bold swift stroke. She put down the clip-board and looked at him.

On the north side of her desk a large but low-walled wooden box showed two open compartments. One contained a heap of laminated pink badges. The other was empty. Careful not to endanger her nails, the secretary selected a badge from the former and handed it out.

He took it and fixed it to the lapel of his coat.

“You’re early,” she said. “You’ll have to wait till eleven. Then you can take the elevator to the sixth floor. Turn left when you exit and walk straight. The Library is at the end of the hall.”

High behind her, the clock on the wall said it was four minutes to eleven.

She returned to the telephone.

Standish Rehl turned and strolled to the west side of the ante-chamber. Here, directly across from the secretary’s desk, there was a small black-cushioned bench. Above it hung an unusually long and horizontal black and white photograph. A compound of rectangles and words, it showed a

stretch of store-fronts along Broadway. No humans were visible. The picture was signed by the artist in pencil at the bottom right-hand corner.

He turned and sat down. No one else was waiting for the elevator. It was still on the fifth floor. Standish looked again at the clock. One minute had passed.

## II

The Library had come to Standish Rehl on its own volition. The young man did not seek libraries out so often. He didn’t read much, because when he did it was difficult for him to stop. Any claim an author made opened up so many possible interpretations that he that he saw no end to the argument. Language, slippery and vague, demanded precision of thought and he was, he knew, something of a clumsy thinker, who cared more about foundations of ideas than their uses.

It was in an Irish bar with an Italian name that Standish had overheard a woman speak of our Library. It was late, near closing and she and Standish were waiting for the same person, but she didn’t know it and was talking to someone else. “They give you folders filled with primary documents,” she said. “They just hand them to you. Some are really valuable. There’s no proper checking or security. It’s an art library, so the librarians are n’t even professional.”

“The best libraries are the ones you can steal from, would steal from, but don’t,” said the male she was with, inanely.

“You just phone the Museum the day before you want to come,” the woman continued. “Give your name and say when you plan to come. They have little exhibitions of

ephemera there too. Right now there's a Reinhardt . . . ”

She stopped speaking, for the man had turned to pay for a drink and was no longer listening.

But Standish Rehl had been listening.

He heard. The Artist Abstract, or so thought the Library, heard.

### III

As for the Library he was the Artist Abstract and the times being what they were, Standish Rehl was white and male. He was also a painter. Reactionary? Pop and Conceptualism had not yet been granted centrality and appeared to Standish as jokes played on the establishment by well-dressed hippies clowning about on an escapade to which his generation had n't been invited. Nevertheless the influence of these movements was felt. Art schools were at this time growing influence, but still relatively marginal. Europe was oblique. Standish still understood that one only came to New York City to become an artist. That only there was it a way of life.

Rents in various parts of Manhattan were still rather affordable and his one bedroom apartment on East 3rd Street came with the first month free. In New York, he found jobs a'plenty, some of them quite remarkably odd. An extra fifty dollars a month paid in cash to his landlord gave him a large basement room to use a studio.

The studio was n't much. Two grimy foot-level windows leaked an always grey light into a cobwebbed cube otherwise only illuminated by a bare bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling. With some ingenuity, Standish conglomerated a small workspace beneath it by the shifting

about of long lost tenants' boxes and furnishings.

He liked working in the basement. It was, in fact, just the sort of space he needed. The limitations of light in the room placed him at a helpful handicap. He needed the difficulty to be able to paint at all. For what, he often wondered, was motivating him, at his most base, to paint? What would constitute success in the endeavor?

Standish avoided the issue by a simple confidence game. He guaranteed that each painting would be a failure. Often the failures were quite explicit. His negligible representational skill, for instance, was easy to prove. A particularly successful stove pipe? It had been intended as a bust of Lincoln. A morning tug-boat? A banana. In the all-wrong light of the basement, abstraction came like representation. And then one had to reach over the painting to wash brushes, to open cans, and do away with turpentines. Spills and drops easily spoiled dozens of potential pristinities, yet instantly appeared forced.

Standish Rehl became, in fact, in his basement room, an artist of failure. He contented himself with the thought that he had joined a rich tradition. Who could know his significance? No one. Who could know his true motives? Not the other failed, of course, who were already excluded from all categorization. He was willing to float failing along in time, propelled by the unconscious mass of the failed.

He had an Observer, of course.

Usually, after Standish carried a small board up his fourth floor rooms and subjected it to a blast of early morning sunlight, the Observer would scoff. But once or twice, here and there, the Observer would fall briefly enamored with a particular work. The little grimy painting would

have seemed to bloom into a surprising happy accidental perfection. Standish would keep it like a pet, look after it for a few days. But soon enough, the Observer would lose interest, chuckling over a recent debacle. It would demand another painting and Standish would bring that old one back downstairs. He found quicklime worked the best. Simultaneously a primer and a gesso, it blanked the previous history with totalizing power.

He concentrated on the Observer. He would attempt to force the Observer into one of these rare transcendent experiences. How to get him there? What shade of blue appears as pure black in the basement? What allegorical symbol can emerge from chaos? By manipulating these effects, he was able to de-fang the Observer, whose irony would be for now always delayed.

He passed his first year in the great city amid such byzantine fantasies. He had a few acquaintances, some from where he came from, some whom he'd met on jobs. He was even almost friends with a professional artist. Con-artist? His name was Thom Jack, and he seemed always on the make.

In public, for instance, Thom Jack would look away nervously while in conversation. But he seemed to see Standish as something of a co-conspirator, for reasons of his own. And when he looked away, he would look back at him from the corner of a twinkling eye, and listen to what Standish had to say. Standish appreciated this confidence, however undeserved.

Thom Jack was always on the lookout for various insider tips. He had told our friend, the last time they talked, of a space in Williamsburg Brooklyn available for long-

term lease for next to no money. An entire 19th century factory. It was to be shared by four artists and the three were looking for the fourth. "Do you know anybody who might be interested?"

The twinkle again. Standish considered what it would be like to live there.

"I don't know anybody," he said.

But Thom Jack was no longer listening.

There were evenings when Standish Rehl would day-dream of that old factory, with its long-lit windows and its view of an enormous wall painting of a fish advertisement on the building across from it. He would imagine his bohemian antics there. The vast canvases he would leave about, some two stories high, spot lit by the ranks of cross-barred windows. The woman he would meet there.

But no, Thom Jack would not call again. He would see this as some sort of resistance. Which it was, of course, in its way, or so the Library thought.

The Artist Abstract would not hesitate to say no to power. The glittering fires of his revolutions would burn out unseen by all but the Observer, who tended to see through them anyway for what they really were. They often overturned his intentions. One day when he was working a temporary job in an office in Manhattan, his "boss" asked him to go get a cup of coffee for her. He "quit." No one ever mentioned it at the agency and Sylvie, his "contact" paid him for the full week.

We report that Standish Rehl became increasingly solitary and self-involved. Nevertheless the Library did n't have to work very hard to catch his attention. He was a New Yorker, after all. He was a painter, working quite

steadily, in fact, these days.

He went to the Museum, to the current Retrospective.

#### IV

The current Retrospective had met with modest excitement in the press. Several critics demanded a re-examination of the painter as the first of what they now understood as a new generation of minimal and conceptual artists. Others pointed to what they saw as an unmistakable romanticism lurking in the recesses of these most ostensibly rigorous abstract works. There were raves. One or two writers described the final room, with its ranks of black monochromes, as constituting one of only a handful of truly moving moments in their professional lives. Standish did n't particularly notice how frequently the terms "the end of art," "the last paintings," and the "last painter" popped up—these being terms, apparently, of the artist's own invention and thus not taken seriously by critics.

But it was n't in the "last room" with its racks of black monochromes, as it happened, where the exhibition most moved Standish Rehl. He did linger there the longest. It was in the true last room, that is to say the first room, through which you had to pass again to exit. This room contained large print reproductions of baroque and ugly cartoons. It was n't only the images that accosted him violently. Not at all. It was their texts too, often quite sophisticated.

Moved? You might say so. Standish Rehl quit painting for good.

#### V

No problem whatsoever, thought the Library. He can still

be an artist. In the generalizing light of the coming Apocalypse, his paintings will be but shadows anyhow. It was the past the Library sought to preserve.

Standish Rehl did very well not working. Without the weight of his failed paintings upon him, he turned again to the city and the world. He purchased things and arranged them, fixing up his apartment, avoiding the basement altogether. He took long walks. Through Chinatown, along Canal Street, down to the old ships on the water-front and up the sparkling band of East River park. He enjoyed the walks, enjoyed the city's grits and real ways. When he walked he knew where he was.

One afternoon late in July he passed, as he often did, a table of books. He usually avoided St. Mark's Place, but lost in anxious thought concerning a letter he had received from the Sheriff's Office calling him "delinquent," he had turned North on 2nd Avenue and turned West on St. Mark's.

So passing by one of the outdoor cafes that crowded the block to afford tourists the better viewing of delinquents, Standish found his eyes straying to a person seated in a small grouping at a sidewalk table at a more exclusive venue crosswise across 2nd avenue.

The Observer stopped him in his tracks. It was the very same sculptor, this Thom Jack, who'd told him about the vacant studio. Thom Jack was, in fact, looking just his way, at that moment avoiding his interlocutor's eye. Standish immediately turned to Saint Marks and pretended to be examining books at the nearest table.

The business of hawking second-hand books was flourishing on the streets of New York at this time. The Library had agents all around. Many of the tables stretching along

the little street concentrated refugees of the paperback revolution, apex of enlightenment's parabola, now under sustained counter-revolutionary assault by corporate publishers, and offered them at low prices. Darwin competed with von Däniken, and von Däniken with Colette. The sellers were often quite desperate and uninformed. A first edition Dashiell Hammett might still go for twenty-five cents, while an 11th printing mid-career Steven King would take in 10 dollars as hard back.

As the book-sellers' tables today concentrated at the corner on which Standish Rehl now stood, his eyes bounced off Thom Jack's gaze over a thick field of little doors of escape, settling down to come to rest on one.

A black hardbound book lay face up on the table next over to his left. It still retained its paper cover. A photograph on the cover showed a familiar black and white man seated upon a chair.

Standish did n't look away. Handing the sad hippy seven fifty, receiving a first edition 1975 *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, edited by Barbara Rose, in a little brown paper bag, he imagined the wandering eye of Thom Jack still upon him.

## VI

Black and black and before the black a blue. In as much as the blue could exist in hindsight without the black. It could not. Nor could the earlier color studies, hodge-podge representations, or any of the other pieces of the Artist Abstract. The black was all. Only in the black was the Artist "free of all passion, ill-will and delusion".

Or so said the book. Nowhere in the book did Standish

find himself surprised. Now directly confronting the static paradox of his new existence in thought, Standish showed himself naturally resilient. He himself was the Artist Abstract. An Artist, perhaps the first, who actually did no art. He took pleasure in the impossibility of his function.

The Observer suggested he change his name to Strandish. After reading the book, there had come an ultimate quality to his new lack of action, as if he'd approached some sort of Gödelian ideal. Standish walked no longer fearing the slippery slopes of expression and self-reflection. He really became, as it were, not an artist at all.

Of course, not acting was not without its own slippery, though quite opaque, surface. Standish lost control. He stopped working jobs, and lost weight at what the Observer felt was an "alarming rate." Meanwhile every day called for a certain amount of celebration, for like a dandy this Artist Abstract now existed in a world always announcing the opening of his greatest exhibition. As the Library had foreseen, he turned to heroin.

He enjoyed using drugs. He would stand for long periods in front of his full-length mirror and reflect on the shadows yawning hollow around his eyes, celebrating nothing as deeply as it was possible to celebrate it.

The rest was easy. The heroin led to drink and to theft. It led him to a bar where two other heroin addicts were, as we've seen, discussing the situation of the Library at the Museum of Modern Art. It was at that very moment showing a little exhibition of ephemera.

## VII

A diminutive worker sat in the elevator on a little stool. The

Artist Abstract thanked him as he exited onto the 6th floor. He turned left as instructed, and walked down the windowless carpeted hallway. He did n't look into the open offices he passed, but proceeded directly to the closed double-doors at the hallway's end.

*Museum Library*, they said, opening together inwards.

He was surprised by the brown and yellow room. Standish Rehl had never been to a proper research library. He saw few visible books, understanding at once that the Library was simply a small office with a reading room attached. The Collection itself would be invisible.

The L-shaped exterior room, which he had just entered, contained a small exhibition, a card catalog and a librarian's desk. There was a door to the reading room, and windows looking in. Through them Standish observed several long dark tables, at which patrons—inexplicably there were two already here—worked in quiet, evident sophistication. Farther windows looked out on the dead space of six-story Manhattan.

Standish approached the desk in the exterior L-shaped room. The librarian regarded him plainly, taking note of the pink badge. "Have you used the Library before?"

Standish turned to look at the little exhibition. As the woman in the bar had noted, it concerned Reinhardt. Two glass cases were fixed onto the walls, and one glass-cased table displayed the private collection of a college friend. He looked at old letters, photographs, various early socio-realistic and cubist graphic designs, and cartoon pages from *The Jester*, the Columbia University newspaper in which Reinhardt first published his drawings.

He turned back to the librarian.

"Yes," he said.

## VIII

The old oft-fingered manila folder lay open on the long beige table. Faintly penciled on its worn tab were the words, *Reinhardt, Adolf*.

Standish Rehl sat before it, unmoving, eyes closed.

The Library observed with some tension. While browsing, the young man's expression had at first been straight. When it had come to the card, the particular object with whose provenance the Library was in this case directly concerned, his thin lips had turned downward.

He read it carefully. The card announced an exhibition of Reinhardt's work five years after his death, at a high-powered gallery on 57th street. It was a blown-up reproduction of an actual post-card that Reinhardt had sent the dealer in 1967. At this time the dealer had apparently no desire to show Reinhardt's works at all, and the postcard's offer of an exhibition of the black paintings was rhetorical. It was evident to Standish, feeling he had recently come under a rather sophisticated sense of Reinhardt's history, that the card, though not hostile outright, was nevertheless thick with the author's characteristic strident irony.

The card gave him a peculiar feeling. Was it the dealer's evident bid to glamorize himself by publicizing the fact that the artist had revealed his own weakness before him in this way years ago? Or the fact remained that the artist had made the original request, no matter how ironically? Questions of the sorts of things which did not ordinarily disturb the Artist Abstract had clearly been raised.

When our friend opened his eyes again, he found his

fingers had turned the card over so that its back was now visible. This side on the invite showed a magnification of the original card's backside. In the center, the Dealer's name was hand-scripted above the gallery's street number and zip-code. In the top right hand corner a Lincoln-head stamp looked across a *Brooklyn 1967* post-mark to survey the sender's name. The sender's name? There in the top left, Reinhardt had written

## NOT ME, AD

Standish slipped the card casually inside his overcoat and closed the folder.

### IX

The Library was ecstatic. But the Observer might have noted that if our friend looked like a young man who had successfully accomplished a precarious mission, he certainly betrayed little joy on the accomplishing of it.

He placed the Reinhardt folder on a library truck and exited the reading room. The librarian was no longer at the desk. Standish exited through the double doors, unobserved.

But outside he did n't proceed to the elevator.

He stopped in the Men's Room. He entered the single toilet stall. The Library watched in something like disbelief as Standish removed the card from his overcoat and without looking upon it, placed it temporarily atop the toilet paper dispenser. He and locked the door, opened again his overcoat and got down to business.

Finished, he turned to reach for the bathroom tissue so as to wipe away a droplet of blood. It happened that the open *Dixie / Marathon* dispenser, fixed to the wall by steel screws, was empty. It was exactly the sort of thing the Library had feared.

The other side of the dispenser was covered by a little steel door. On it were written the words, *When this side is empty / Slide door to the left until locked*. The Observer pointed out to Standish that the words were oddly phrased, since "this side" was in this case the other side and the door was already on it. Nevertheless, the sliding door in fact slid quite easily to the right, revealing in the dispenser's left compartment the fresh roll of toilet paper that had until that moment been concealed behind it.

He wiped away the blood, flushed it and exited. In all the commotion, he forgot about the announcement card. Blown by the wind of his movements, it dropped quietly to the tiled floor.

### X

Three weeks later Standish Rehl walked, aimlessly enough, onto the pier at Christopher Street.

The interview, the Observer saw, had gone well. Standish had come across, he knew, as an altogether serious and hardworking young man. Mr. Denture had said an artistic background would prove an asset. The salary started at twenty-five thousand.

The generous zeroes attached to this number gave our young friend a good feeling. He was thinking in fact how he might move out of his hovel and perhaps find something in a neighborhood like this. If he got the job, he would need

the studio no longer.

He would need a suit. Several suits, in fact, observed the Observer. It was at this point in the conversation that Standish Rehl wound up at the end of the pier, out upon the Hudson River as it widened into the Sound.

It was a cool weekday's afternoon, promising autumn and the winter behind it. Standish was alone at pier's end, except for a guard sleeping at the wheel of a blue Ford. Standish stopped at the chainlink fence and turned from the river to look back at the city. At the feet of its towers of stone, steel, cement and brick, bubbled smoke and steam from man-holes, windows, honked automobiles and trucks. It produced a fat consistent sound, like a single animal breathing.

Standish turned back to the river. He faced New Jersey. A weird yellow sky was rising around the orange setting sun, much of it in a spectrum invisible to his eye. A gentle breeze of undifferentiating waves cascaded against his pale, abstracted face.

On the other side of the fence a discarded coffee-cup lying on the old railroad tie that edged the pier began to move. The gentle wind, strangely, rocked the cup back and forth, like with two fingers stretching long and bony from behind the old horizon, from as far West as Malibu.

More abstracted than ever, Standish decided he would buy a suit today, directly. One the Observer could not deny. In Soho, in one of those new shops that looked like galleries. He would put it on the credit card he had never used.

The cup faced him directly, presenting the blue golden-edged Grecian design—the three smoking chalices and the words, *We Are Happy To Serve You*, cradled over the abyss.

As Standish Rehl was at last swallowed by the city, the cup blew away. The sun soon had set, leaving only a wide generalizing yellow filling up the sky.



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