In the pages of *Art News* (March 1965) the painter Ad Reinhardt conducted an interview with himself; he claimed that no one else was interested in the job. In it he addresses the question of his relationship with a putative avant-garde:

“You’re the only painter who’s been a member of every avant-garde movement in art of the last thirty years, aren’t you?” I asked him in his Greenwich Village loft-studio where Lower Broadway meets Waverly Place.

“Yes,” he said.

“You were a vanguard pre-abstract-expressionist in the late thirties, a vanguard abstract-impressionist in the middle forties and a vanguard post-abstract-expressionist in the early fifties, weren’t you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“You were the first painter to get rid of vanguardism, weren’t you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

(Reinhardt 1991: 11)¹

Leaving aside the implicit critique of the conventions of magazine interviewing performed by relentlessly foregrounding the directive content provided by the interviewer, this auto-interview stages a crucial paradox for the theorising of avant-gardism. How is it, we
might want to ask, that someone who consistently identifies with avant-gardism ends up characterising themselves as anti-avant-garde or non-avant-garde? And more precisely: under what conditions might anti-avant-gardism be seen as a form of avant-gardism? The example of Ad Reinhardt will do nothing to make the job of theorising avant-gardism any easier. Yet to ignore awkward cases like Reinhardt’s will only produce a theory incapable of dealing with some of the most intransigent contradictions within modern culture.

From 1960 until his death in 1967 Reinhardt painted only one type of picture. Five feet square and “black”, these paintings were for Reinhardt “the last paintings which anyone can make” (1966: 13). When displayed within group exhibitions in Paris (1963), New York (1963), and London (1964), the paintings had to be roped off from an angry viewing public. If this was anti-avant-gardism, its success as an affront to bourgeois sensibility (épater le bourgeois) echoes with the memory of much earlier avant-garde events.

In a bid to defend these paintings from being absorbed within the interpretative frameworks for modern art at the time, Reinhardt surrounded them in a barrage of what he termed “Art-as-Art Dogma”. Reinhardt worked hard to tell us exactly what these paintings were not. First of all they were not expressive: “no scumble-