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PAINTING IN THE NINETIES

Gerhard Richter and the Tradition of Abstract Painting

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Gerhard Richter and the Tradition of Abstract Painting

by

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the work of Gerhard Richter exhibited for the first time in July 1995 at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London. With the exception of a single cibachrome print, the forty-six works consist of abstract paintings ranging from a large triptych to a series of works executed on pages of a book. By comparing these works to earlier paradigms of abstraction and to the works of other contemporary artists, I demonstrate that, rather than simply referring to a tradition established at the beginning of the century Richter redefines the practice of abstract art.

Abstract art developed against the background of a rapidly changing world. By the beginning of the twentieth century a number of accepted scientific, religious, and social attitudes and beliefs had been questioned. Darwin claimed that the origin of the species was natural rather than divine. Nietzsche rejected Christian morality. Freud offered insight into the subconscious mind. In the field of science, Einstein produced his theory of relativity and Rutherford split the atom. Social change occurred as a result of war, industrialisation, the growth of capitalism and the rise of socialism. A further equally important change came from within the field of art itself. With the development of photography the artist's role in depicting reality was called into question.

In many ways, abstract art developed in reaction to these developments and was characterised primarily by a sense of independence or autonomy. However, as the world continued to change, so too did the concept of autonomy. On the one hand, it was the practice of art that was considered to be autonomous or specialised. While that practice was not unaffected by outside forces, the desire for change came from within the realms of art itself. On the other hand, autonomy was accorded forms of art. It was not the representational values of forms that mattered but the manner in which they functioned within a self contained aesthetic whole. Alternatively, it was the experience of art that was considered to be autonomous and unaffected by non aesthetic desire or influences.

While a diversity of practices emerged as a result of these various concepts of autonomy, they were generally reductive in nature. Taken to the extreme they resulted, for example, in the reduction of art to thin air in Yves Klein's sale of zones of "immaterial pictorial sensibility" (1959), or to flat monochromatic surfaces in Rauschenberg's *White paintings* (1951). Once these extremes had been reached, further development became increasingly difficult, so much so that many critics and artists declared that painting was dead. Contemporary abstract art may be viewed as a response to this predicament. While these responses are diverse, they tend to fall into two distinct categories. On the one hand, artists no longer see abstract painting as a developing tradition, but continue to refer to it nostalgically. On the other hand, artists remain faithful to particular paradigms abstraction, ignoring contemporary theory and the recent history of the medium. Richter's abstract paintings demonstrate, albeit with difficulty, a third approach in which abstract art is redefined as a viable contemporary practice.

CHAPTER ONE : A RETURN TO THE SPIRITUAL

With the exception of three small works exhibited in a separate room the exhibition *Painting in the Nineties* consists of abstract paintings on canvas. As such they refer to a tradition of painting that spans almost a century and encompasses a diversity of practices. These practices, however, fall loosely into two categories, each characterised by a distinct attitude to the nature and function of abstraction. The first approach is characterised by the belief in art as an expression of spiritual values. Influenced in particular by theories of theosophy and neo-platonism, the early pioneers of abstraction, Mondrian, Malevich and Kandinsky, believed that a more significant reality lay beneath the surface appearance of things and that the artist was capable of peeling away layers of material existence to express an underlying spirituality. The belief that abstract art could express a deeper reality persisted into the mid-century in a variety of guises including Suprematism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. Mary Martin wrote in 1962: "The artist and the philosopher pursue reality. The philosopher expresses it and the the artist creates it." (Moszynska, p.175)

In the meantime, however, an alternative approach had emerged which focused on the form rather than the essence of the artwork. Its main advocate, Greenberg, stated that "the great masters of the past achieved their greatness by virtue of combinations of pigmentand that their greatness is not owed to the spirituality with which they conceived the things they illustrated so much as it is to the success with which they ennobled raw matter to the point where it could function as art." (Harrison & Wood, pp.529-541) Greenberg did not deny the expressive element in art. Although he deplored the expressionistic elements in German expressionism and Surrealism, dismissing them as mere decoration, he criticised the absence of expressive qualities in Suprematism. For Greenberg, however, expression was not generated through the act of painting but was instead inherent in the physical properties of the materials themselves. In order to exploit this emotional content, Greenberg insisted that the emphasis should shift from the content

of the work to its material attributes, that is, the pigment and the shape and flatness of the canvas. Artists were to "avoid subject matter like the plague" and to concentrate on the problems intrinsic to the medium. For Greenberg, autonomy was a means of preserving the purity of painting against the influence of outside forces including other media and the "culture industry".

Adorno offered a variation on this approach. He dismissed the essentialism associated with early abstract art but at the same time criticised the reasoning behind Greenberg's formalism, stating: "You have swept art out of the corners of its taboos -but it is as though you feared a consequent inrush of barbarism (who could share your fear more than I ?) and protected yourself by raising what you fear to a kind of inverse taboo." (Frascina & Harris, p.75) For Adorno, autonomy was not just a means of defending the status of art against outside influences. It was, more importantly, a way of making a socio-political statement. By claiming autonomy, art took up an oppositional position to society itself, thus highlighting the forms of alienation in modern capitalist society. Adorno stated: "...an emphasis on autonomous works is itself socio-political in nature.....Today every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet, paradoxically, in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics." (Frascina & Harris, p.79)

When taken at face value, Richter's paintings suggest that he has returned to a traditional understanding of abstraction as an expression of spiritual values. The catalogue of the exhibition contains a photographic record of the painting *Red* at various stages in its production. This record reveals how the painting develops through the repeated application and removal of paint. Richter applies an initial layer of vibrant pigment in a few arbitrary gestures. He then draws a spatula across the canvas causing the still wet paint to smear and smudge. The spontaneity of these actions is however undermined by the

mechanical use of the spatula. Richter works his way methodically across the canvas limiting his use of the spatula to horizontal and vertical actions.

The composition is not predetermined in accordance with any theories of colour or form. Instead, it evolves as the spatula moves through the paint. Where the movement ends, the scraped paint which accumulates on the spatula is deposited, forming vertical marks. As it moves again across the canvas, it leaves horizontal ridges and smudges in its wake. Each new layer of paint consists of a vibrant primary or secondary colour, but as the process is repeated the previous layers merge to form tertiary, mucky browns, greens and purples. Yet, while the painting develops through a series of arbitrary and automatic actions, each action is followed by a critical analysis, as Richter explains: "The actual work consists in taking what appears, looking at it and then deciding whether it's acceptable or not." (Obrist, p.230)

The dilemma is always whether to obliterate what is there or to leave it alone. Richter never manipulates or enhances the painting. Painting is always a destructive process of scraping away or covering up. The solution sought is not simply an aesthetic one. The record of *Red* suggests that, if Richter's goal was merely an aesthetic one, he could perhaps have stopped at any one of a number of stages in the painting's development. However, the flamboyance of the abstract paintings initially disguises their painstaking evolution. Close examination reveals a sense of perfectionism. Richter himself claims to "struggle against the seductive". This struggle could be seen as an end in itself, the desire to avoid ideal solutions in itself becoming an ideal. Yet the various procedures, blurring, scraping, smudging and layering, also suggest some hidden content or meaning.

Richter confirms this suggestion: "In abstract painting we create a better means of gaining access to the unvisualizable, the incomprehensible; because abstract painting deploys the utmost visual immediacy - all the resources of art, in fact- in order to depict 'nothing'. Accustomed to pictures in which we recognise something real, we rightly refuse to regard

mere colour (however multifarious) as the thing visualised. Instead we accept that we are seeing the unvisualizable: that which has never been seen before and is not visible. This is not some abstruse game but a matter of sheer necessity: the unknown simultaneously alarms us and fills us with hope, and so we accept the pictures as a possible way to make the inexplicable more explicable, or at all events more accessible.” (Obrist, H. p.100)

Richter anticipates “that something is going to come up” which he does not know. In two instances in particular, images emerge which to Richter suggest aspects of Nature. Richter acknowledges this similarity, calling the works *Snow* (1994) and *River* (1995). As references to Nature, the works relate to those of the Abstract Expressionists such as Gorky’s *Waterfall* (1943) and Pollock’s *Lavender Mist* (1950). Rosenblum (1975) links works such as these to the Northern Romantic tradition of landscape painting, tracing a path from Friedrich to Rothko. Artists following this path shared a need to express spiritual meaning, but in a manner which did not depend on traditional Christian iconography, too clichéd for the northern Protestants of the 19th century and unsuited to the modern secular world of the Abstract Expressionists. Attributed to the landscape were transcendental powers such as those described by Moore: “We arrive at the new ladder and descend to the bottom. Here, all it’s awful sublimities rushed full upon me. My whole heart and soul ascended toward divinity in a swell of devout admiration which I never before experienced. Oh, bring the atheist here that he cannot return an atheist.” (Rosenblum, p.18) *Snow* and *River* therefore reinforce Richter’s claim for his work as an expression of spiritual values.

While this belief was common to the pioneers of abstraction, two distinct practices evolved from their need to express the spiritual. On the one hand art was viewed as an organic process which both evoked the spiritual impulse of the artist and appealed to the spiritual sensitivity of the viewer. Kandinsky shared this belief. In the essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) he states: “Generally speaking colour influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings.

The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively, to cause vibrations in the soul.”(Harrison & Woods, p.94) While from this perspective spirituality was expressed spontaneously in the act of painting, each brush stroke being a “gesture of the liberation of symbolic forces”, from another perspective art was viewed as a mechanical process. Each brush stroke was simply “a fragmented unit of repetitious activity”. (Papadakis, Farrow, Hodges p.121) Spiritual meaning was not conveyed in the act of painting itself but instead identified with painterly values inherent in geometric shapes and colour harmonies. Mondrian, for example, wished like Kandinsky to produce a harmonious chord that would strike in others. However, unlike Kandinsky, he attempted to do so by the use of what he believed to be universal absolutes, primary colour and the orthogonal. Malevich also experimented with geometry and colour, but he was more interested in universal truths than in inner spirituality. Influenced by Ouspensky’s theories of the fourth dimension he considered the three dimensional world to be a result of man’s limited “psychic apparatus”. He believed that abstract art had transcendental powers with which “cosmic consciousness” could be achieved enabling the individual to perceive four dimensional reality.(Moszynska, p.57) It was not, therefore, the spiritual impulse of the artist that was evoked. The artist was simply a cipher for transcendental meaning.

Kuspit suggests that, while the development of abstract art was driven by a conflict between these two once revolutionary positions, the revival of either tradition is regressive. “ If abstract art remains a case of arrested development - however originally revolutionary - it cannot be regarded as ‘creative’. As an end in itself, it becomes an obsolete reason for art - ‘aestheticist’. Every revolutionary style becomes stylised - a historical code of art - or grows to maturity,.....” According to Kuspit, this maturity occurs through the “dialectical working through of contradictions”. (Kuspit, p.47).

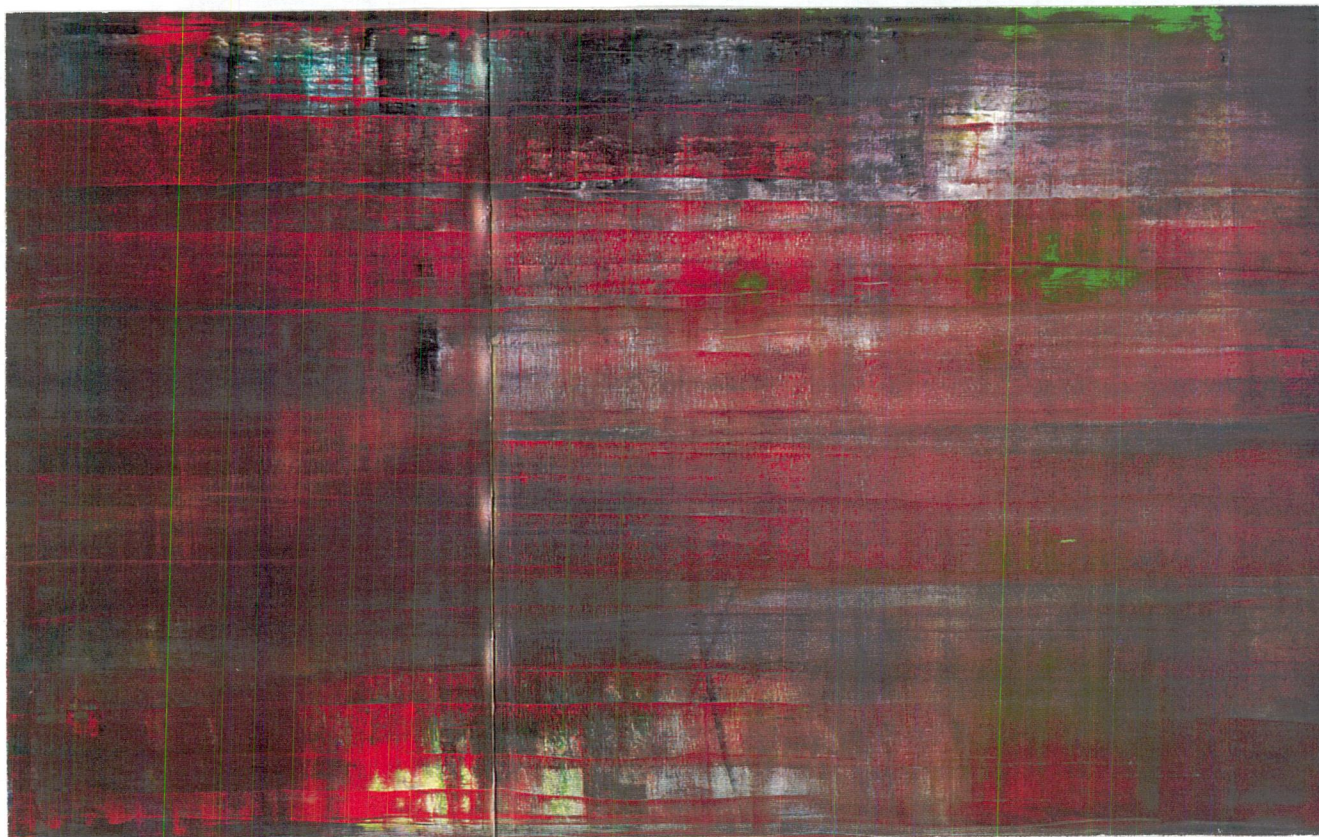
Richter’s work does not fit easily into either of the traditional categories. On the one hand, the element of chance links it to the organic tradition and in particular the practice developed by the Surrealists. Influenced by Freud’s use of free association as a means of

exploring the unconscious, artists such as Miro and Masson began their pictures with a spontaneous gesture. This action was followed by a conscious stage in which the artist used the marks on the canvas to prompt imaginative associations. While, for the Surrealists, this process resulted in paintings which were never entirely abstract, their use of gestures to reveal the unconscious was used in a more direct, less literal way by the Tachistes and the Abstract Expressionists. In his essay *Systems and Dialectics of Art* John Graham described the work of the Abstract Expressionists as an attempt to 're-establish a lost contact with the unconscious (actively by producing works of art and passively by contemplating works of art) with the primordial racial past.....in order to bring to the conscious mind the throbbing events of the unconscious mind'. (Moszynska, p.149)

On the other hand, the underlying geometry in Richter's work is reminiscent of Mondrian's neo-plasticism, a practice which influenced De Stijl and subsequent developments in geometric abstraction. Mondrian wanted art to reflect a higher reality, a truth that transcended nature, believing that in its perfection such art would help others to reach greater understanding and knowledge. Influenced by Mme Blavatsky's theosophical belief that the cross formed by the intersection of two lines expressed the single mystical concept of life, he restricted compositional elements to vertical and horizontal marks. In comparison to the apparent simplicity and predetermined character of Mondrian's work, Richter's paintings convey constant dissatisfaction, a sense of struggle. However, Richter's repeated use of a limited orthogonal language, the obsessive vertical and horizontal scraping of the spatula, suggests that he too is striving for perfection or equilibrium. This is particularly evident in *Snow* and *River*, where Richter's repeated use of the vertical and horizontal recalls Mondrian's description of the *Pier and Ocean* series (1915): "Observing sea, sky, and stars, I sought to indicate their plastic function through a multiplicity of crossing verticals and horizontals. Impressed by the vastness of Nature, I was trying to express its expansion, rest and unity." (Moszynska p.50)

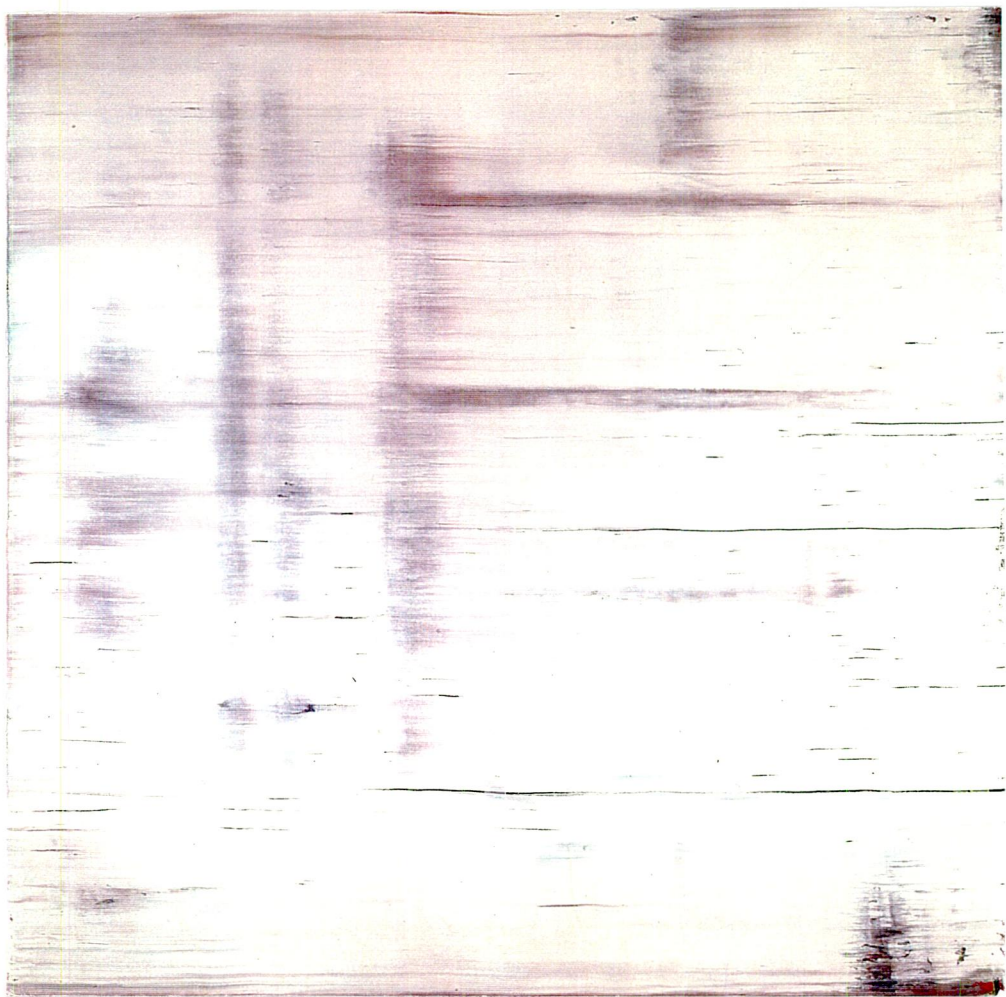
By producing work which is concerned with spontaneity yet at the same time appears to be mechanical and perfectionist, Richter integrates two conflicting traditions. In doing so he fulfills Kuspit's expectations of a "mature" abstract art. However, if a revival of any combination of these traditions is to avoid being merely superficial, it must also involve a revival of the understanding of the artwork as an autonomously meaningful object. Richter's work must, therefore, refer to the past when, as Buchloh suggests, "gesture could still engender the experience of emotional turbulence, when chromatic veils credibly conveyed a sense of transparency and spatial infinity, when impasto could read as immediacy and emphatic material presence, when linear formation read as direction in space, movement through time, as operative force of the subject and when composition and successful integration of all these elements into painting constituted the experience of the subject." (Buchloh, 1989, p.45) In the mean time, Minimalism, Conceptualism and Pop have highlighted the various conditions upon which the work of art depends for the production of meaning. Thus, when taken at face value, the large abstract paintings are regressive. Richter either chooses to ignore his location in art history or, as Buchloh describes, has merely managed "...to have mastered a craft and a skill at a moment in history when the practices of meaning production have already moved on to other necessities, requiring different techniques, and where the meaning produced by the belatedly acquired virtuoso performance generates an empty speech" (Buchloh, 1989, p.43)

Red, 1994



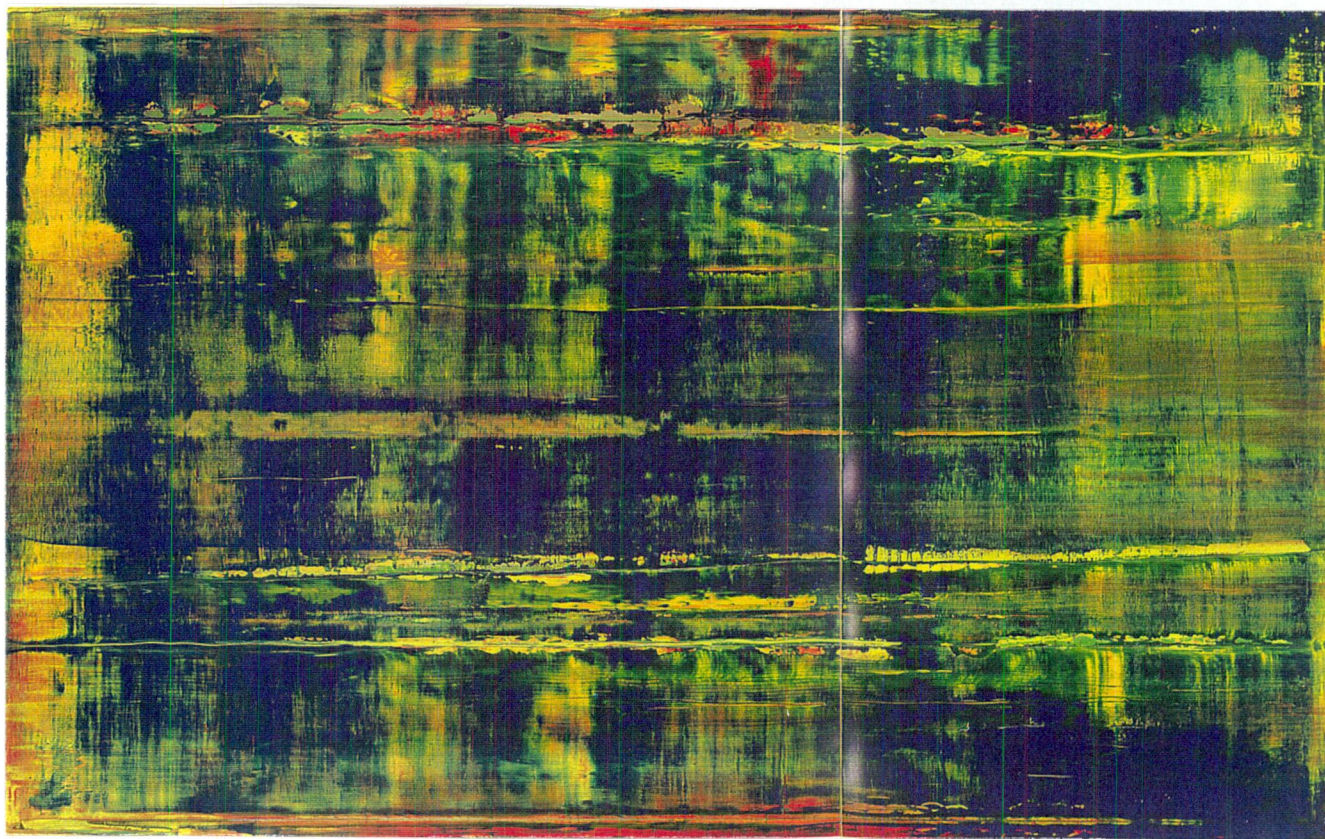


Snow, 1994





River. 1995





CHAPTER TWO: THE INFLUENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The first work in the exhibition *Painting in the Nineties* is conspicuous as the only figurative work in an otherwise abstract exhibition. Consisting of a cibachrome print of a painting of a photograph, *Loo Paper* (1995) is typical of the photopaintings which Richter began to produce in the sixties. In these works Richter explored the relationship between photography, painting and our perception of reality. The inclusion of *Loo Paper* in this exhibition could be interpreted in a number of ways. On the one hand it may simply be regarded as a reminder of the heterogeneous nature of Richter's work, suggesting perhaps a lack of commitment to any one practice. On the other hand, since the photograph always refers to the past, it could mark the end of a particular phase in Richter's work, a shift from figuration to abstraction. However, by comparing *Loo Paper* to the abstract work, *Souvenir*, against which it is juxtaposed, it becomes apparent that these works represent neither a lack of commitment nor a change in attitude. Richter establishes a relationship between these works which ignores traditional boundaries between abstraction and figuration. Photography plays a key role in this relationship.

Since its invention, photography has influenced the development of both abstract and figurative painting. Initially, figurative artists embraced photography. Delacroix, for example, recommended that "painters ought to use photography as a dictionary of nature which should be carefully consulted." (Buchloh, 1979, p.10) The attraction of photography was its accuracy and supposed objectivity in recording reality. These qualities resulted from the apparent absence of human intervention in the photographic process. As Burgin notes, "(the surface) offers no reassurance of the founding presence of a human subject. It is either glossy, 'slick', or matte, 'implacable'. Both appearances are grounds for suspicion. From a distance the surface offers a seamless modulation of tones which seem distributed at the arbitrary whim of brute contingent reality. Examined closely, it fragments into infinitely evenly spaced dispersions of grains. We can find no trace of an author." (Neff, p.48) Subsequently, this objective clarity posed a threat to painting.

Photography took over the task of documenting reality, making certain forms of painting such as the portrait and the history painting obsolete. In the sixties, it was photography's relevance to mass culture which caused figurative painters to embrace it once again. By incorporating images from advertising, journalism and popular culture, artists such as Warhol and Rauschenberg questioned the elitism of modernist art. As the critic Lawrence Alloway suggested, "Instead of reserving the word (culture) for the highest artefacts and the noblest thoughts of history's top ten, it needs to be used more widely as a description of 'what society does'." (Hughes, p.342) Similarly, by using snapshots to make painstakingly accurate paintings of the most banal aspects of modern culture, photorealists such as Morley and Close reacted against intellectualisation in modernist painting and the prohibition of representation.

Photography was also a key factor in the development of abstract art. Having lost its status as a document of reality, painting redefined its role, abandoning any task that could be served by photography. Rather than representing the observable world, painting focused on expressing intangible realities and on exploiting the qualities unique to painting such as touch, texture and gesture. These strategies resulted in the two main modernist practices, essentialism and formalism. While these practices developed in reaction to photography, contemporary artists have reflected on the extent to which photography has, in fact, threatened modernist ideals such as authenticity, originality and authorship. By copying photographic reproductions of paintings found in books, Levine emphasises the loss of scale, colour and texture that tends to occur in the process of reproduction. Her work draws attention to the fact that it is through reproductions rather than through original works that we are generally familiar with the tradition of abstract art and that as a result the importance of the "aura of the original work of art" has, as Benjamin warned, been undermined. (Harrison & Wood, p.514) By collaging reproductions from works by abstract artists such as Riley, Newman and Kelly to make work of his own, Taaffe demonstrates how the ability of photography to infinitely reproduce images, not just from

mass culture but from 'high' culture also, has undermined the importance of originality in modernist abstraction.

Richter's initial use of the photograph resulted from his desire to make work which did not conform with received ideas about art. He rejected traditional theories of form, colour and composition and reacted against the idealism and elitism which characterised the work of his contemporaries such as Informel, the Socialist realists, the Zero group and Yves Klein. It was the work of Fluxus and in particular their use of the readymade that interested Richter. To him, the ease of production of the amateur snapshot and the randomness of its subject matter gave it the quality of the readymade. He did not, however, exhibit the photograph as he found it. He states, "I wasn't able to simply declare a photograph to be a work of art by saying it out loud. I could not let the photograph remain a photograph. This would not reveal its special character." (Neff, p.47.)

In order to reveal its "special character", Richter painted the photograph. Having plotted the image onto canvas, enlarging it in the process, he painted it in thick oil paint matching the original colours. Then, working his way systematically down the canvas he dragged a spatula in horizontal strokes through the wet paint causing it to smear and smudge. The process was mechanical, eliminating spontaneity and aesthetic judgement. Yet all the effects were specific to the medium of paint. Thus Richter achieved the characteristic objectivity of photography, but by using painterly rather than photographic techniques. He stated, "It is not a question of imitating the photograph. I want actually to make a photograph and because I want to go beyond photography conceived merely as a piece of light sensitive paper, I make photographs with other means, not just pictures that are derived from photographs." (Buchloh, 1979, p.8)

Several critics have questioned the legitimacy of Richter's photographs as "found objects" by highlighting a similarity in their subject matter. Naasgard, for example, refers to the "household iconography of the German petit bourgeois" (Neff, p.40.), implying perhaps

that the work has a political angle. Yet, by painting the photographs, Richter undermined the significance of the unpretentious, familiar subjects. In contrast to the photograph's smooth, even finish, the surface texture created by Richter's method of painting had the effect of shifting attention from the subject depicted to the actual method of depiction. The painting no longer simply referred to reality but became an object of reality itself.

The photopaintings therefore had a dual effect. On the one hand, their success in achieving the condition of photography was sufficient to allow them to be read as records of reality. On the other hand their painterly qualities emphasised their own material presence. As Naasgard remarked, "By posing as a photograph (the photopainting) arouses expectations of certainty and by being a photograph refuses them again." (Neff, p.49.) In *Loo Paper* however, this duality is eliminated. Richter re-photographs the photopainting. The painting's object quality becomes absorbed into the smooth, two dimensional surface of the photograph again and the work functions simply as a record of reality. However, the photograph documents not the original object, a toilet roll, but a painting of a toilet roll, a still life. By re-photographing the work, Richter highlights the obsolescence of the still life and other traditional forms of painting while at the same time suggesting that the history of painting cannot be ignored. As Buchloh notes, "Photography transposes a lived reality into history by the fact of fixing it in a reproduction, while simultaneously rescuing from time what was doomed to oblivion...." (Buchloh, 1979, p.10) A comparison between *Loo Paper* and other works in the exhibition confirms that the re-photographing of the work, creating what Buchloh goes on to describe as 'the permanent encroachment of the past on the present' may also comment on his own oeuvre, that the figurative work he produced in the sixties informs his practice today.

In the hanging of the exhibition, *Loo Paper* is juxtaposed against a series of five works entitled *Souvenir* (1994). These works consist of small abstract paintings on canvas. The formal characteristics appear to result from either mechanical procedures, such as streaking and stippling, or by chance happenings such as cracking and smudging. With the

exception of the occasional tint of purple, colour is confined to black and white. By draining the work of colour and by regulating, the gesture, Richter deprives the medium of its potential for expressing intangible reality. The absence of any figurative image confirms that he is not interested in reproducing existing reality. Thus, as in the photopaintings, attention focuses again on the materiality of the paint, on the work as an object of reality.

The apparent absence of human intervention gives the work an objective quality similar to that of photography. A more direct comparison may, however, also be made. Richter works on a black ground reminiscent of the photographic negative. He not only suggests, as in *Loo Paper*, that the work is "out-of-focus" by streaking the paint; by stippling and cracking it, he also refers, perhaps, to the accidental splattering and scratching of the photographic surface. The restriction of colour to a single tint of purple suggests the discolouring of old photographs or sepia prints, while the small size of the works suggests the loss of scale which occurs in photographic reproduction. Despite the absence of a figurative image, the process of painting in *Souvenir*, as in the photopaintings, is inspired by photography.

This process produces works that resemble modernist abstract paintings. Yet, by ignoring the expressive power of colour and gesture, Richter rejects the transcendental properties claimed for painting by artists of the spiritual tradition. By engaging with the process of photography, he rejects the autonomy of the conditions of production that characterised formalist abstraction. Thus, as with *Loo Paper*, Richter recalls a past tradition but also highlights that it can no longer serve its original function. As the title suggests, *Souvenir*, like *Loo Paper*, acts as a memento to a past tradition of painting. Unlike *Loo Paper*, however, Richter does not re-photograph the painting. Yet, in spite of the painterly quality of the finished work, the reference to photography is sufficiently blatant to evoke a sense of loss similar to that identified by Nasgaard in the photopaintings: "Despite any manipulation that has occurred in the making of the photopaintings, they maintain so much

of the transparency to reality of the original photographs that behind them rise up the shadows of real past events..." (Neff, p.40.)

This nostalgic reference to modernist abstraction relates *Souvenir* to the work of a number of contemporary artists including Bleckner and Halley, as well Levine and Taaffe, who produce works which superficially resemble those of modernist abstraction. Characteristic of their work is a sense of loss, a belief that the tradition reached its peak in the sixties. Their work is influenced by the developments in technology, the rise of consumerism and the loss of political idealism that characterises contemporary society. Therefore, rather than perpetuating the theories underlying the works which they appropriate, they highlight, instead, the loss of modernist idealism. While Levine and Taaffe use reproductions to highlight issues of authenticity and authorship, Halley demonstrates the belief that the originality and intellectual content of the work of art are now regarded as secondary to its accessibility and market value. Making a mockery of Greenberg's insistence on truth to materials, he produces works which have characteristics of hard edge abstraction but substitutes the materials of "high art" with household materials such as day-glo paint and fake stucco. The suggestion is that anyone can make a work of art. While Richter shares a sense of nostalgia with these artists, his practice is not leavened by any hint of parody or inventiveness. He does not resort to day-glo paint or glitter. Instead he purges his work of all that is spectacular or evocative. Whereas Bleckner and Taaffe's practice of combining modernist motifs to make new work seems endless, Richter, in contrast, conveys a sense of exhaustion of inspiration and of will.

Loo Paper and *Souvenir* achieve a common aim through complementary means. In both works Richter recalls a past tradition. At the same time, through the use of photography, he implies that these forms of painting are now redundant. Yet, while Richter uses the photograph to highlight the obsolescence of traditional practices, it also suggests to him a way of painting. Richter's aim is to achieve the objectivity of the photograph, but through painterly means. In doing so he draws attention not to the subject represented, but to the

process of painting . As a result, in *Loo Paper* the work's figurative role becomes unimportant. In *Souvenir*, however, while the process of painting is still emphasised, abstraction becomes a symbol of a past tradition. The work's role is, in a sense, figurative. Thus in Richter's work, the distinction between abstraction and figuration becomes insignificant.

Thus, on the one hand, *Souvenir* and *Loo Paper* subvert the optimism and vitality of the large abstract paintings and undermine their apparent spiritual content. Yet, while Richter suggests that a return to tradition can only be superficial, by breaking down the boundaries between abstraction and figuration he suggests that there is still the possibility of redefining the practice of painting.

CHAPTER THREE: REDEFINING ABSTRACT PAINTING

The *Stammheim* series (1994) consists of twenty three small abstract works executed on pages torn from a book entitled *Stammheim; the case against the RAF*. Written by Pieter H. Baaker Schut and published in 1986, the book examines the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Holger Meins and Jan-Carl Raspe at Stammheim prison Stuttgart on 18 October 1977.

This is the second time that Richter has referred to this event. In 1988 he produced a series of photopaintings entitled *18 October 1977* based on police photographs documenting the events surrounding the deaths at Stammheim. Apart from their socio-political content, these works had a number of formal qualities in common with key works from the tradition of history painting. These included their larger-than-life scale, the absence of colouristic effect and the restrained impersonal style of painting. More specifically, Buchloh identified explicit compositional links between Richter's *Funeral* and Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1850) and between Richter's *Dead Woman* and Manet's *Dead Toreador* (1864). (Buchloh, Germer, Stork, p.51) However, in contrast to the traditional subjects of history painting, the incident at Stammheim is one which the German government would rather forget. To this day it is still unclear what actually took place at the prison. While the deaths of the prisoners were presented as suicide, it is suspected that they were in fact the result of a state-ordered police assassination. However, the questioning of official accounts of the incident is interpreted as support for the group's cause. As a result, the event remains surrounded in silence. This silence does not simply result from a social taboo but also from official censorship. The film *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene* (1972) by Straub and Huillet was banned from German television because it was dedicated to the memory of Holger Meins. The series of works *18 October 1977* therefore linked Richter with a number of contemporary German artists, including Kiefer, Baselitz and

Lupertz, who draw on the practice of history painting in order to reflect on their own repressed national history.

The revival of history painting is however problematic. The development of photography and the aesthetic autonomy which dominated modernism both affect the accessibility of a language with which to represent contemporary historical and political fact. The tendency in contemporary German painting is, however, to ignore the history of modern painting or, as Buchloh suggests, “to insist that the negation of historical representation in twentieth century painting was at best a brief interlude , a failure that has to be redressed - as though such artists as Mondrian and Newman had voluntarily deprived themselves of the capacity to represent the ‘historical’.” (Buchloh, 1989, p.50)

However, unlike his contemporaries, Richter accepts that the modernist prohibition of representation is an irreversible historical reality. In *18 October 1977*, as in other photopaintings, he highlighted the material qualities of the painting, demonstrating the extent to which the modernist’s emphasis on object quality had undermined the representational function of the work of art. It was, therefore, by highlighting the difficulty in representing history through the medium of painting that Richter indirectly drew attention to the incident at the prison. In the *Stammheim* series, Richter again acknowledges the impossibility of reviving history painting. While the earlier series had formal qualities characteristic of the tradition, in the *Stammheim* series Richter severs these links with history painting by producing a series of small abstract works.

In these works pigment ranging from murky purple, brown and grey to vibrant green, red, blue and yellow is smeared across the pages of the book, obliterating the text. Where the text remains visible the oil from the pigment causes the paper to become transparent. As a result words overleaf become visible, causing further confusion. The mechanical gestures may suggest the actions of the censor or the layer of paint a veil concealing truth. Thus Richter highlights the silence, the absence of debate about the deaths. The veil of paint is,

however, always incomplete. The text is never completely obliterated. Through fissures in the paint, words and in many cases entire sentences remain visible, suggesting that memory of the event cannot be completely erased: "The deaths of the terrorists, and the related events both before and after, stand for a horror that distressed me and has haunted me as unfinished business ever since, despite all my efforts to suppress it." (Obrist, p.173) Like the *18 October 1977* series, the *Stammheim* series therefore, symbolises what Stork describes as "this blind spot where being unable to forget and not wanting to remember cross paths." (Stork, p.11)

While the paint may be dumb or meaningless, we are acutely aware of its presence. The richness of colour and depth of the painted surface contrast with the flimsy, printed support. The material qualities of the work, the rippling and smudging of the paint, the bleeding of oil into the paper, suggest that the paint has an authenticity that the mass reproduced text does not share. Just as we were made to question the accuracy of the police photographs in *18 October 1977*, in *Stammheim* we are made to question the written word.

While Richter exploits the material qualities of paint, its emotive power is not entirely eliminated. His overt use of colour and texture goes against the grain of generic tradition. History painters avoided colouristic and painterly effects as they suggested subjectivity. In contrast to the cool empirical nature of the text, the paint could be read as an overwhelming surge of emotion. However, this reading conflicts with the restrained quality of the work. Richter does not attempt to craft or manipulate the paint. In emphasising his role as creator, he would imply personal opinion. Instead, the mechanical application of the paint functions as a means for Richter to distance himself from the work. This objectivity is reinforced by his use of text of another author rather than any statement of his own. Rather than expressing his personal grief, Richter simply initiates the mourning process.

The interpretation of the work as a process of mourning is supported by a sense of spirituality. Describing the *18 October 1977* series, Buchloh suggested that the work demanded a space on a par with the Rothko chapel. (Obrist, p.266) In contrast, the first viewing of these works took place in a small unpretentious converted gallery space which offered a glimpse of its works to passers-by through a shop-front window. However, the spiritual aspect of this work cannot be ignored. If Richter is anxious to avoid direct involvement on his own part, he encourages it on the part of the viewer. One of the most obvious links with history painting in earlier series is the larger than life scale of the works. The viewer is forced to stand back to read the work. In contrast, the *Stammheim* works are small, the size of a page from a paperback book. He makes us go close to scrutinise the work so that we might reflect on the event. There is a sense of intimacy. The absence of rhetoric and the sense of loss which characterise the only other works exhibited in the room, confirm the suggestion that, rather than wishing to stimulate debate, Richter simply wants to commemorate the victims. The exhibition is an effort to lay the memories of Baader, Ensslin, Raspe and Meins to rest.

Referring to the deaths of the group's members, Stork comments: "Every effort to discuss the event was characterised by the necessity to declare ones distance from the political aims of the RAF." (Stork, p.7) Richter rejects this compromise. By using paint not to express meaning, but instead, the absence of meaning, he refuses to reveal his own views about the event. In emphasising the material qualities of the work, his approach is similar to that of Adorno: "In Germany, commitment often means bleating what everyone else wants to hear. The notion of a message in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world: the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be rescued from deception by refusing it.....social truth thrives only in works of art autonomously created". (Frascina & Harris, p.78)

While Richter makes work which has both political and spiritual effect, he does not attempt to return to the practice of using colour or gesture to convey meaning. Instead, it is through exploiting the medium's lack of representational and expressive potential that Richter generates meaning. While he emphasises the material qualities of the work, he does not share the formalist concern for purity of the medium. It is photography that suggests to Richter a way of painting. The origins of the semi-mechanical techniques, such as blurring and scraping, can be traced back through *Souvenir* to the photopaintings. The *Stammheim* series demonstrates clearly, therefore, that Richter believes in the possibility of further developments in the tradition of abstract art. He neither ignores the impossibility of reviving obsolete traditions nor simply reminisces about the past. This attitude conflicts with the historical ignorance which Richter suggests in the large abstract paintings. When taken at face value, the large abstract works constitute a revival of the original belief in abstract art as an expression of spiritual values.

The *Stammheim* series, as well as *Loo Roll* and *Souvenir*, either contradict or alter our perception of the large abstract paintings. Dating from 1991 at the earliest, the works in this exhibition represent a relatively short period in the development of Richter's practice as a whole. It is unlikely, therefore, that the works represent a change in attitude. Instead, the suggestion that the three works exhibited separately alter our perception of Richter's practice is confirmed by the large abstract paintings *River* and *Snow*.

While, when taken at face value, these works suggest that Richter is returning to the spiritual tradition described by Rosenblum, the extent to which these works are actually inspired by Nature is debatable. Richter's process of painting simply parallels natural phenomena. The blanketing of a landscape by snow is evoked by the layering of paint, the dragging movement of the spatula creates effects reminiscent of calm water. Richter's process of painting can not evoke the turbulent landscapes described by the Romantics. He refers, instead, to snow covered parks and gently flowing rivers similar to those in his album of bland snapshots. In contrast to the roaring cataracts, turbulent oceans and

towering cliffs which feature in the work of Romantic artists, Richter's landscapes are not particularly awe inspiring. Rather than being an overwhelming force against which man struggles, Nature, in Richter's work, is controlled as in an Arcadian landscape. Richter's work does not therefore suggest a religious interpretation of Nature.

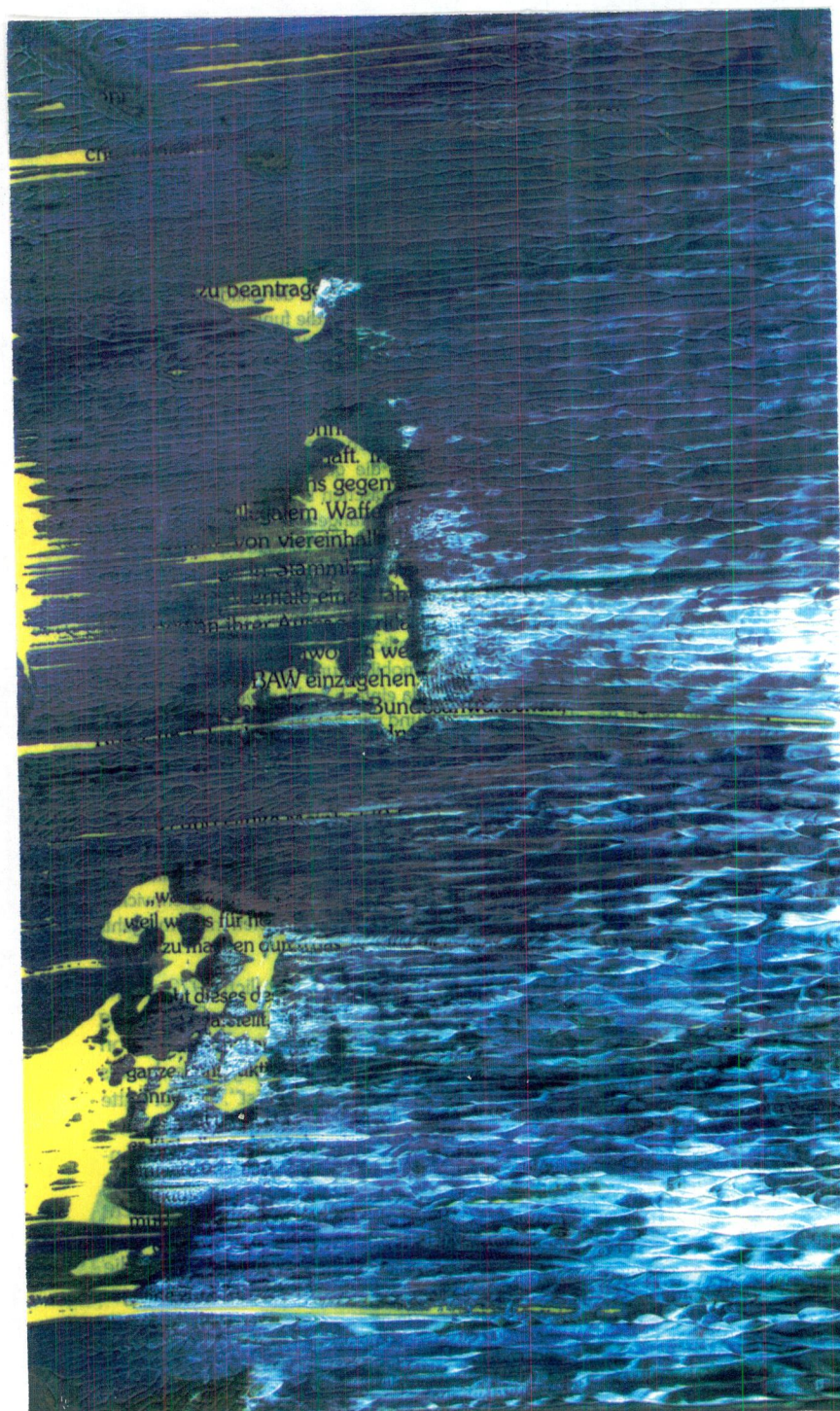
The Romantic's aim was to transcend the material world. The viewer was made to stand back in awe, his position often being reflected by the figure standing, not in the landscape, but on the brink. The photo paintings suggest that Richter is instead interested only in tangible reality. In all his works he draws the viewer up close to scrutinise the painted surface. Whereas Friedrich suggested "Close your bodily eye that you may see your picture first with the eye of the spirit", Richter demands that we open our eyes and analyse what we see. He demands an intellectual rather than an emotional response. (Rosenblum, p.14)

If Richter's abstract landscapes do have a precedent in art history, it is in the landscapes of Monet. In terms of content and composition, the link between *River* and Monet's *Water Lilies* (1916) is strong. As in *Water Lilies*, the reference to the landscape in *River* is almost incidental. Like Monet, Richter is concerned, not so much with what is painted as how it is painted. For both artists the landscape becomes a vehicle for exploring visual perception and the process of painting. However, Richter is not interested in the purity of the medium. His use of blurring and streaking again allows the process of painting to be traced back to the photopaintings. In this case the lurid colour reminds us not of nature but of photo-chemicals. Where the pigment is forced into the web of the canvas, we are reminded of the even dispersions of brightly coloured grains in enlarged colour reproductions.

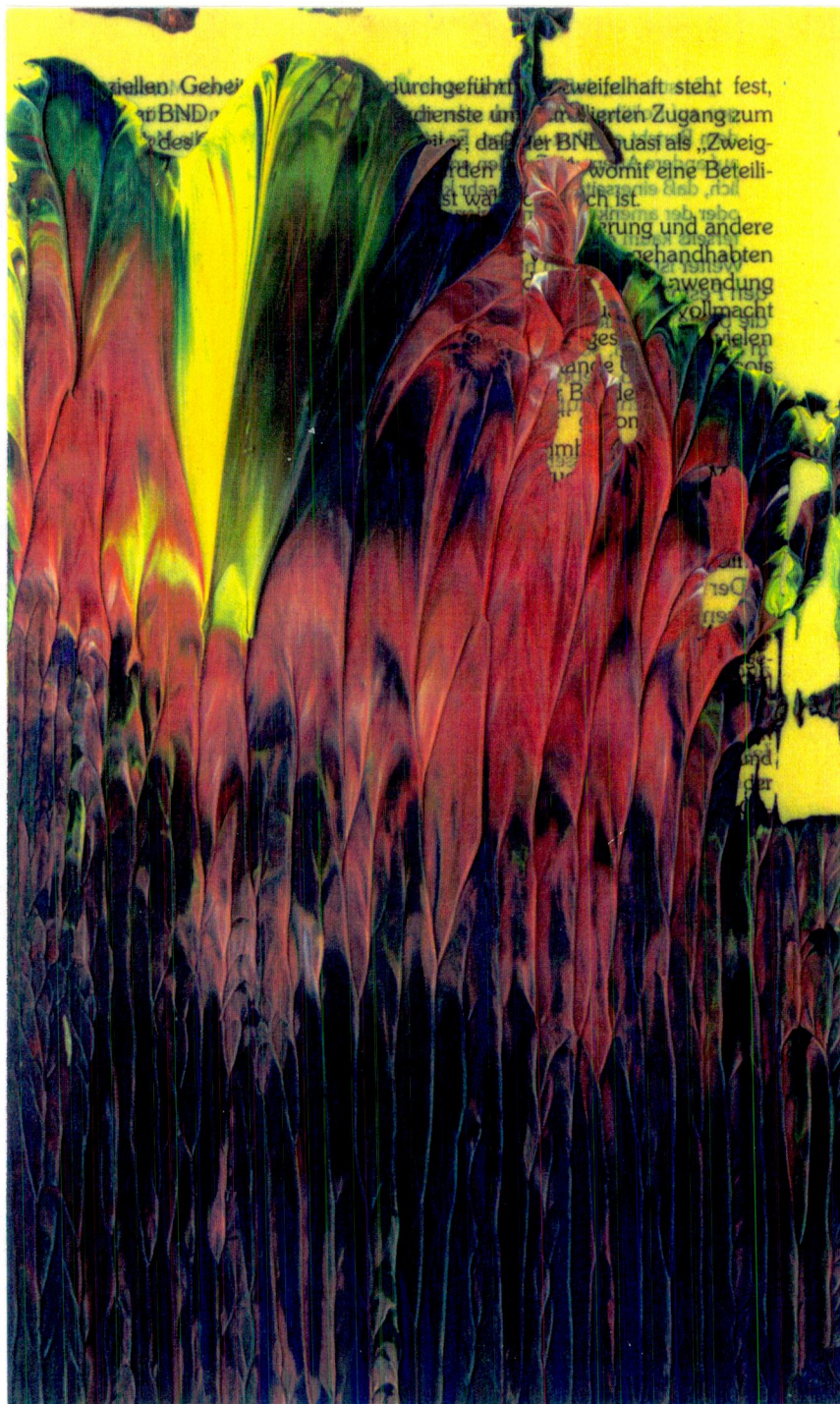
Nor is the work entirely self referential. As in the *Stammheim* series, transcendental meaning is replaced by social content. This meaning is not inherent in the materials themselves or revealed through the use of colour or gesture. It is, instead, generated

through the process of painting. The destructive nature of Richter's technique, the continual scraping away and covering up, as well as the harsh unnatural colours, suggests a sense of defilement. Richter's river is not quite as idyllic as Monet's. It is perhaps, a late twentieth century river like the one that, streaked with pollution, runs through the centre of Richter's home-town, Cologne.

Stammheim, 1994



Stammheim. 1994





CONCLUSION

The exhibition *Painting in the Nineties* refers not only to the tradition of abstract painting, but also to other traditions including still life, landscape and history painting. By refusing to commit himself to any one practice, either abstract or figurative painting, Richter appears to reject the fanaticism of modernism in favour of the pluralism that characterises much of contemporary art. However, while Richter refers to a variety of practices, his works share a unity of purpose and of means.

Every work refers, in some way, to the passage of time. *Souvenir*, for example, is a momento of modernist abstraction, *Stammheim* commemorates a specific moment in history and *River* refers to the destruction of the landscape. The language used in each case is the same. Meaning is conveyed not through the use of colour or gesture, but instead, through the process of painting. This process however, is not inspired by the medium of paint, but instead by photography. The use of photography and the rejection of the modernist attitude towards purity of means links Richter with Levine and Bleckner. However unlike these artists he does not use photography merely as a means of appropriation. Photography provides Richter with a language of blurring and scraping. Using these techniques, Richter builds up the surface in numerous layers. By allowing traces of each layer to remain visible he emphasises the painting's history, thus creating a sense of time. The meaning Richter can convey through paint alone is, however, limited. This general sense of the passage of time takes on more specific meaning only through the use of other signifiers, such as titles or text. In creating these meanings, Richter demonstrates an understanding of how, over the course of the century, the possibilities of assigning meaning to painting have changed. However, unlike artists such as Levine and Halley he does not simply resort to mere parody or pastiche.

Richter's appreciation of painting's history distinguishes him from modernist painters whose struggle to be considered avant-garde necessitated the rejection of tradition. An

awareness of the past is also shared by contemporary artists such as Halley ,Levine and Bleckner. However, Thomas Lawson aptly describes their work as "a funeral procession of tired cliches paraded as if still fresh, a corpse made up to look ever young". (Hertz, pp.147-153) Richter, by contrast, suggests that innovation is still possible. He demonstrates that while abstract painting is not dead, the only way to progress is to reject the parameters of modernist abstraction. In *Loo Paper*, *Souvenir* and *Stammheim* in particular, he breaks down boundaries, not simply between the different paradigms of abstraction, but also between abstraction, figuration and photography. These works radically alter our perception of the large abstract paintings, which when taken at face value, constitute an uncritical return to the original spiritual tradition.

However, in *Painting in the Nineties* the significance of these three works, is played down. They are segregated from the bulk of the exhibition and excluded from the catalogue. Thus, it becomes difficult to interpret Richter's large abstract paintings as anything other than revival of an obsolete tradition. His work, therefore, demonstrates only with difficulty, that painting in the nineties need not simply be a reflection on its own history: " ...I do see myself as heir to a vast rich culture of painting - of art in general - which we have lost, but which places obligations on us, and it is no easy matter to avoid harking back to the past or, equally bad, giving up altogether and sliding into decadence." (Obrist, p,148)

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