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The Abstract Paintings of Gerhard Richter

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INTRODUCTION ABSTRACTION AND THE DEATH OF PAINTING

The nature of abstraction lends it a problematic status within contemporary art practice. In its refusal of representation, abstract art positions itself outside the discursive area of representation which is effectively seen as outside the critical discourse of contemporary art. If a requirement of contemporary art is the knowing representation of the historical conditions of art, then the problem with abstract painting is that it cannot fulfil this requirement and in fact appears to ignore it altogether. As Kenneth Baker puts it:

“The problem with abstraction is it appears to deny everything about the contemporary world with which a historically informed view of culture must be concerned. By its negation of reference, abstraction seems necessarily to cut itself off - not in a critical spirit but in an oblivious one - from a world founded on representations.”(Baker 1989 p136).

The critical reception of abstraction is problematic also due to its history. Abstraction was developed in the fifties in America against the background of a fast changing society. It rose to be an iconic emblem of modernist ideology and aesthetics. Since the end of modernism the role of abstraction in art has been left unresolved, to paint abstractly today is to therefore raise the issue of the aesthetic and historical significance of abstraction. The question remains, is abstraction a thing of the past no longer relevant to contemporary art in the way that easel

painting does not belong in contemporary art practice, or is abstraction a valid part of contemporary painting with as much critical significance as any other form?

To consider the problems of contemporary abstract painting one must refer to its historical situation and its engagement with its own 'death'. The proclamation of its death or end has haunted painting for years now and yet it continues practically to live on. This end has been desired by many artists and critics and emphatically denied by others. Most, however have acknowledged that the end simply has not occurred. This desire for painting to end stemmed from the 'beginning of its end' in modernism.

"The whole enterprise of modernism, especially of abstract painting, which can be seen as its emblem could not have functioned without an apocalyptic myth. Freed from all extrinsic conventions, abstract painting was meant to bring forth the pure Parousia of its own essence, to tell the final truth and thereby terminate its course" (Bois 1993 p230).

This deconstruction of painting was based on an experimental breakdown of traditional conventions of painting which would eventually cause its own end by exposing the impossibility of painting through the reduction of its elements to the point where it had exposed itself completely, making it pointless to continue and impossible to re-establish its former position.

The development of modernist painting was concerned with its own end. It came about due to the historical

crisis of industrialisation. Mass production, the invention of photography and the threat of commodification of the art object represented the end for painting. Modernist abstraction was a response to, and a working through of this end. The invention of photography challenged the mimetic role of painting. Obvious defeat in the area of representation meant painting had to establish a new role. The introduction of Duchamp's readymade directly challenged the autonomy of painting by exposing the structure and conditions (frame, museum) required to make it exist as art. The privileged position of painting as high art was threatened. The initial resistance was to emphasise facture, gesture and such artistic or authorial qualities that could not be reproduced mechanically. Resistance however proved such painting to be all the more irrelevant by not acknowledging technological advances. As Germer put it: "Because it clung to qualities dismissed as irrelevant by its social context, painting became an anachronism"(Germer 1991 p24).

To avoid becoming immediately obsolete, painting was forced to acknowledge its position and the logical deconstruction of painting began. Repetition, mechanical application of paint and use of equipment occurred. The significance of the artist was abrogated in favour of a critique of production. Robert Ryman's deconstruction of the components of painting i.e. mark, trace, colour, form etc. was a direct response to this concern with the end of painting. Avant garde artists such

as Mondrian, Duchamp and Rodchenko each contributed to the assault on painting, attempting to work through ^{its fundamentality} the conditions. Rodchenko's three primary colour canvases produced in 1921 represented for him the realisation of the end of representation and the end of painting by reducing it to its basic elements. Paradoxically, by continuous negation of painting as an existent reality, it continued to remain in existence. Numerous 'last paintings' were produced and the result was always more paintings.

Two basic forms of abstraction evolved within what might be called the modernist era (1890's - 1960's); mechanical abstraction and spiritual abstraction. The first was a response to mechanical advances in the wider cultural sphere, the second was an attempt to reinstate concepts of spirituality and universality in painting. This renewed the significance of the artist's creativity in production. The introduction of spirituality to abstract painting culminated in the movement of abstract expressionism in the United States, that was supported, if not designed, by Clement Greenberg. Spiritual or organic qualities were attributed to the paintings of Jackson Pollock and his contemporaries. This type of abstract painting focused on gesture and self expression in the painted mark and the unleashing of subconscious drives. The artists believed in transcendental, eternal values of painting and its ability to evoke an emotional response in the viewers. This spiritual form of abstract painting

derived from the abstraction of Kandinsky and Klee in Europe and was taken to its extreme in the expressionist movement in America in the nineteen fifties. This was often seen as negating the achievements of modernist art which exposed the material conditions of production and reception on which painting depended by ignoring developments and returning to notions of pre modern painting. It was also seen, however, as the much needed reinvestment of notions of the aesthetic and human experience into the practical considerations of modernist painting.

Yve-Alain Bois dealt specifically with the claim of the end of painting in his essay 'Painting: the task of mourning.' He recognised the problem of denying the end, or declaring the end of the end. His solution relied on the separation of the practice of painting as a historical theme from the specific epochs within it. Modernist painting had indeed died but that did not deny the possibility of future painting. The proclamations of the end had produced much painting in modernism that has perhaps been left unresolved in the overall picture. Bois concluded that painting remains because of a desire for it to do so and is therefore historically relevant.

"Let us simply say that the desire for painting remains, and that this desire is not entirely programmed by the market: this desire is the sole factor of a future possibility of painting, that is of non-pathological mourning". (Bois 1993 p243-244).

Problems of reception have remained for abstraction, problems that need to be investigated in relation to the demands of contemporary art practice. Its position within modernism, its refusal of representation and the inability therefore to represent the historical conditions have provided obstacles in the critical reception of abstract painting.

This dissertation is designed to examine problems as they were highlighted in the practice and reception of Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings made in the mid seventies. Richter by that stage had worked with various genres such as landscape, portraiture, still-life and paintings based on photographic imagery. This use of abstraction challenged the perception of its historic and aesthetic significance in contemporary art. The critical responses varied, what was apparent nonetheless was that Richter's abstraction posed a critical move, not an oblivious one and therefore demanded knowing evaluation. Rather than dismiss the work as mellowing or naiveté on the part of the artist (which many did initially) critics were forced to assess the success of this work and hence reassess the problematic nature of abstraction.

The critical reception of Richter's late abstraction shall be examined here in relation to the artist's oeuvre and ideals, to fully understand the nature of abstraction and the significance of ~~the~~ these works. It is proposed that Richter's abstraction is of particular contemporary significance. It

succeeded in challenging the problematic nature of abstraction and exposed the difficulties in critical analysis of abstract painting. Richter's precise knowledge of the historical situation of painting meant that the work was of critical importance while he managed to incorporate an optimism in to painting that restores faith in its capacities without denying its history and the paradox of its ineffectuality.

CHAPTER 1A - THE MOVE TOWARDS ABSTRACTION

The 1980s saw the re-appropriation of abstraction as an icon or emblem of American art of the sixties. This was the driving force of the artists of Endgame, namely Peter Halley, Sherry Levine, Philip Taffe and Ross Bleckner. In analysing their decision to re-examine abstraction it is important to recognise that the lapse of time since modernist abstraction was at its peak meant that Endgame were able to look at its qualities and historical significance in retrospect. Secondly, their use of abstraction was as a signature or representation of sixties abstract painting. They dealt with the commodification of abstract painting and the kitsch and pop art recognition of this commodity status. As an idealistic practice their suggestion was that abstraction has indeed come to an end. What was fundamental to this work was that they had acknowledged and chosen the centrality of painting in the market place as a reason for dealing with painting. Instead as Elisabeth Sussman points out "of dealing with ideas disembodied from an object (i.e. Photography and installations)". (Sussman 1986 p51).

This centrality of painting has been consistent since the announcement of its death, making it central to the issues of contemporary art and therefore the best means in which to examine them. As Thomas Lawson's essay 'Last exit; Painting' (1981) demonstrates, the last option for the radical artist was to

deal specifically in or of painting. Lawson referred to Douglas Crimp's 'The end of painting' to demonstrate the failure of conceptual sculpture to address conditions of painting: Crimp suggested the final farewell to painting lay in the recognition of the work of Daniel Buren as painting. The presentation of Buren's vertical stripe pieces as painting was fundamental to the understanding of his aim. Crimp emphasised that Buren's work had been exhibited more frequently than any other painter of the decade and had not employed any stylistic change. It was when it became widely realised that his work was painting, that painting would come to an end and the 'pure idiocy' of it would be seen. "At the moment when Buren's work becomes visible the code of painting will have been abolished and Buren's repetitions can stop: the end of painting will have finally been acknowledged". (Crimp 1981 p86). For Lawson, this was inadequate as the work failed to be widely understood as painting. If it was perceived as sculpture then the critical objective failed to be understood, consequently negating the significance of its attack on painting. It was work produced from the comfort of institutional security attempting to cast doubt on perceptions of art frequently displayed within such institutions. The last exit for the radical artist out of nihilism was to readdress the area of painting. Work involving photography and film that attempted to convey the mediated way in which the natural is presented to us has failed in

that it was perceived not as a critical assault, but as more of what it attempted to undermine, (more mediated images of reality).

Thus, the continued declaration and willingness for the end of painting was coupled with a consistent return to it as a significant medium through which to produce art, its discursive nature and easy access being key to its potential possibilities. Critical responses to the many returns or reaffirmations of painting were varied. The pluralistic state of post modern painting provided an openness as well as a scepticism as to the new position of painting in art. Of specific concern here is the critical response to the work of Gerhard Richter, particularly to his abstract painting. Richter's heterogeneous oeuvre has caused him to be attributed various critical projects in relation to the situation of painting. If the failure of Buren's work to cause the final 'end' lay in the fact that it simply did not work through the end, I would argue that the work of artists such as Gerhard Richter offers the means for a deeper engagement with these issues. Richter's work represents the possibility of concluding painting by working it out to its logical end, not an impatient negation of the whole practice. Thus, it is with Richter's personal and unusual ideals, and the success of his figurative paintings in mind that I want to examine the responses to his abstract paintings, to deal with both the artist's and the critic's view of the position of abstract painting within contemporary practice, its political, aesthetic and historical significance.

CHAPTER 1B - THE WORK OF GERHARD RICHTER

Gerhard Richter was trained in the style of socialist realism while studying at the Dresden Fine Art Academy from 1952 to 1957, an ideology-based classical style where Richter focused on learning the skill and perfection of the illusionism of painters such as the nineteenth century painter Casper David Friedrich. In 1961, two months before the erection of the Berlin Wall which would have stopped such travel, Richter moved to Dusseldorf to study at the Academy of Fine Arts there. Dusseldorf had become a growing centre for culture and art and it was there Richter was exposed to the ideas of the Avant garde, Fluxus and Pop art. During his two years there, Richter briefly encountered the avant garde anti-painting issues when he staged a 'happening' (performance) with Sigmar Polke and Konrad Fischer. This event titled 'Capitalist Realism' 1963 was a cynical attack on both socialist realism and its possible replacement 'Capitalist Realism'. Richter however was still concerned with painting, after exposing himself to various influences and visiting exhibitions, he was faced with the problem of what was viable to paint.

The arrival of Pop art in the early sixties impressed Richter, and in a reproduction of a Roy Lichtenstein painting, Richter found possibilities in painting that broke from his traditional background. Lichtenstein's painting was

unconventional and inartistic and basically caused Richter to start anew. In 1962 he began to paint from photographs. The absurdity of this appealed to him : it broke all the rules and conditions of painting. His first catalogued picture after this new beginning was Table 1962 (fig 1). This featured a figurative image of a table taken from an interior design magazine. The centre of the image was covered with an abstract gestural mark. The photo-like blurring of the background was also ruptured with marks where the paint had been peeled off due to the pressing of a sheet of paper over the image (lifting or blotting of excess paint). This black and white, oil on canvas has been placed by Richter as his first significant painting which illustrated his new concerns.

For most of the sixties Richter's painting was based on photographs. He used imagery from news and media photographs as well as family snapshots, but his use of popular images differed from that of the American Pop artists. Richter's work did not employ ironic treatment of popular iconography and kitsch objects and a Pop artist such as Warhol's industrial style of production and paintings of celebrities were not related to Richter's aims. Richter's use of photographs was an answer to his problem of subject matter, while his concerns developed about the reality of representation. His work did not propose either painting or photography as superior and adhered to the conventions of neither. He copied a photograph, enlarged it and

represented it in paint. The deconstructive investigation of the means of representation in painting was Richter's critical project of the sixties and seventies. His appropriation of the photograph was seen as a direct response to the introduction of the readymade in art, making the paintings historically significant. His use of imagery from the media and famous portraits focused on the gulf between experience and representation and the power of representation. The blurring technique was a device developed to heighten the ambiguity of the final product, so that it appeared be neither a photograph nor a painting. As Peter Osborne declared, this double negation of both practices meant the possibility of achieving conviction in his work. Richter's painting represented a familiar image with no further insight or personal slant of suggested meaning. His eight student nurses 1966 (fig.2) was painfully silent. The larger-than-life portraits of eight young women who had been murdered seemed to represent a reality without comment but with haunting conviction. Richter's much quoted statement that he found some amateur photos 'better than the best of Cezanne', illustrated his concern with the primacy of modern painting in the early sixties. Amateur photography, he said represented his reality, the important concerns which were not often reflected in the canon of modernism. Representing a photograph was a representation of a reality - altered but preserving some qualities, it was not concerned with the formal issues of either painting or

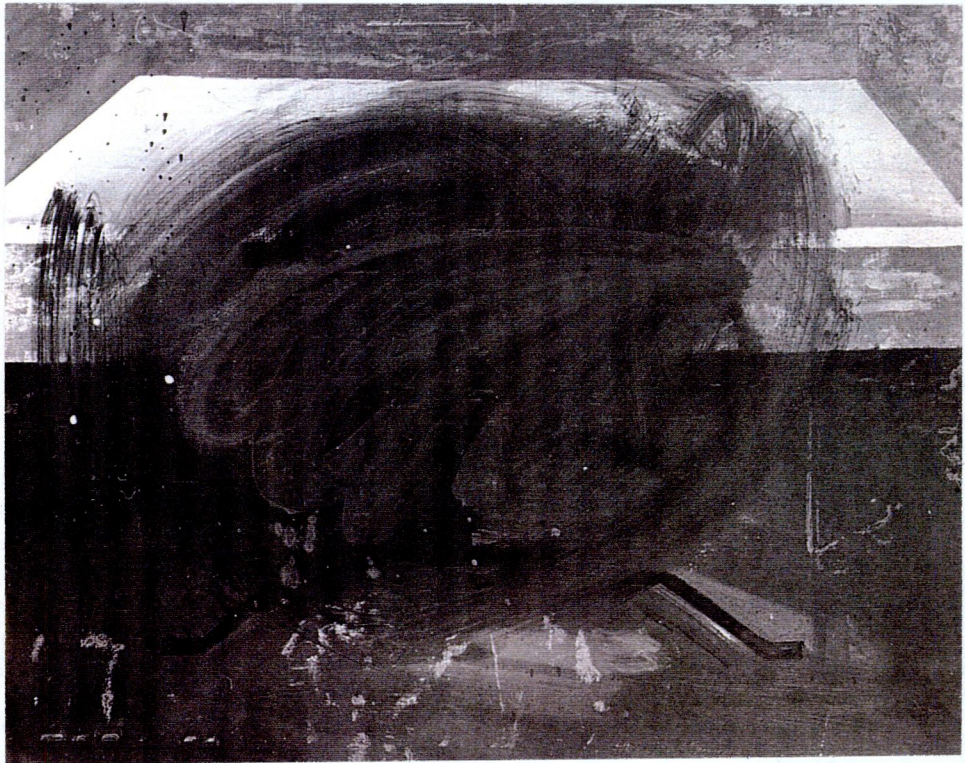


Fig. 1; Table, 1962, Richter no. 1.



Fig. 2; Eight student nurses, 1971.



photography but sought to represent an element of both realities. Richter produced various works in this photo painting style over the years-the skulls, candles and romantic landscapes but his controversial Badder Meinhoff paintings of 1988 were the most well known. This was a series of paintings based on the prison and press photographs of members of the Red Army Faction group who died in prison under mysterious circumstances in 1977. Richter's blurred photo paintings of the group were hauntingly silent. He was attacked by all sides for neither condemning the groups actions nor condemning the official system for the scandal of their death. The paintings seemed to question representation and perception of truth. They were images already seen by the public eleven years before but their re-appropriation was convincing and shocking. (See fig.3. Confrontation 1988).

During the late sixties and seventies Richter produced paintings of urban sprawls and modern cities such as Cityscape Madrid 1968 (fig.4). They were produced in black and white with heavy impasto use of oil paint. The painting appeared coherent from a distance and became abstract when one steps nearer. In this period Richter developed a process of abstraction in his paintings. He began to overpaint and attack the figurative images he was producing in favour of semi-abstraction. In the following years he produced the 'colour charts' such as '256 colours' which resembled large paint cards. The abandoning of

the photograph as source image involved a new direction. In 1968 to 1976 Richter produced his grey paintings, the 'monochromes', which he claimed were the ultimate statement of despair.

The monochromes were a response to the crises in contemporary painting. For Richter his grey paintings were the most complete. His continual use of one particular grey, free of associations was a representation of nothing. It was the 'epitome of non statement'. For him it was the only option to comment other than despairing apathy or denial of the problem. On completion of numerous grey monochrome paintings, Richter deduced that the paintings differed in respect of quality. Some were better than others, when due to their nature of production they should have been all the same. As Richter described the process, he covered the canvas in blobs of white and black paint and methodically dragged a brush over the surface causing the black and white to merge into grey. The fact that they possessed different qualities and that some could be deemed more successful than others restored Richter's faith in the possibility of painting. (See fig.5, grey 1974). Richter derived a sense of possibility from these works, the possibility of painting that could carry conviction. Richter began anew incorporating new concerns into his paintings and his abstracts evolved out of the grey monochromes. His initial approach to abstract painting was to produce small sketches that looked like generic abstract gestural



Fig. 3; Confrontation, 1988.





Fig. 4; Cityscape Madrid, 1968.



paintings. This was a deconstructive approach possessing similar concerns to his paintings of photographs.

The early abstracts have a photographic appearance (see fig.6 Abstract Painting 1977-Richter no.418). They consist of a blurred background with glossy finish interrupted by a large gestural brushstroke that charges the composition. The latter painting had garish colour applied in layers over dull colours and obliterated again with one overall colour. The horizontal drag similar to that in his figurative painting reoccurs in his abstracts, producing a merging of colour in uneasy thick layers dotted with holes revealing the history of the painting underneath.(see fig.7 Confus 1986-Richter 613-1). Since the mid seventies, Richter's work has remained diverse, his predominant concerns appear to have remained with the parameters of abstraction.

What Richter's abstraction raises is the issue of aesthetic evaluation in contemporary art. The modernist aesthetic of the institutions was obviously not sufficient or desirable for post conceptual painting. The aesthetics of modernism were linked in theory with the ideology of capitalist society and relied on the structure of contemporary capitalism. The movement of Conceptualism succeeded in destabilising these institutional ideologies and pushed back the aesthetic in the evaluation process of art due to the connection with ideas of autonomy and transcendentalism. The post modern concern with



Fig. 5; Grey, 1974

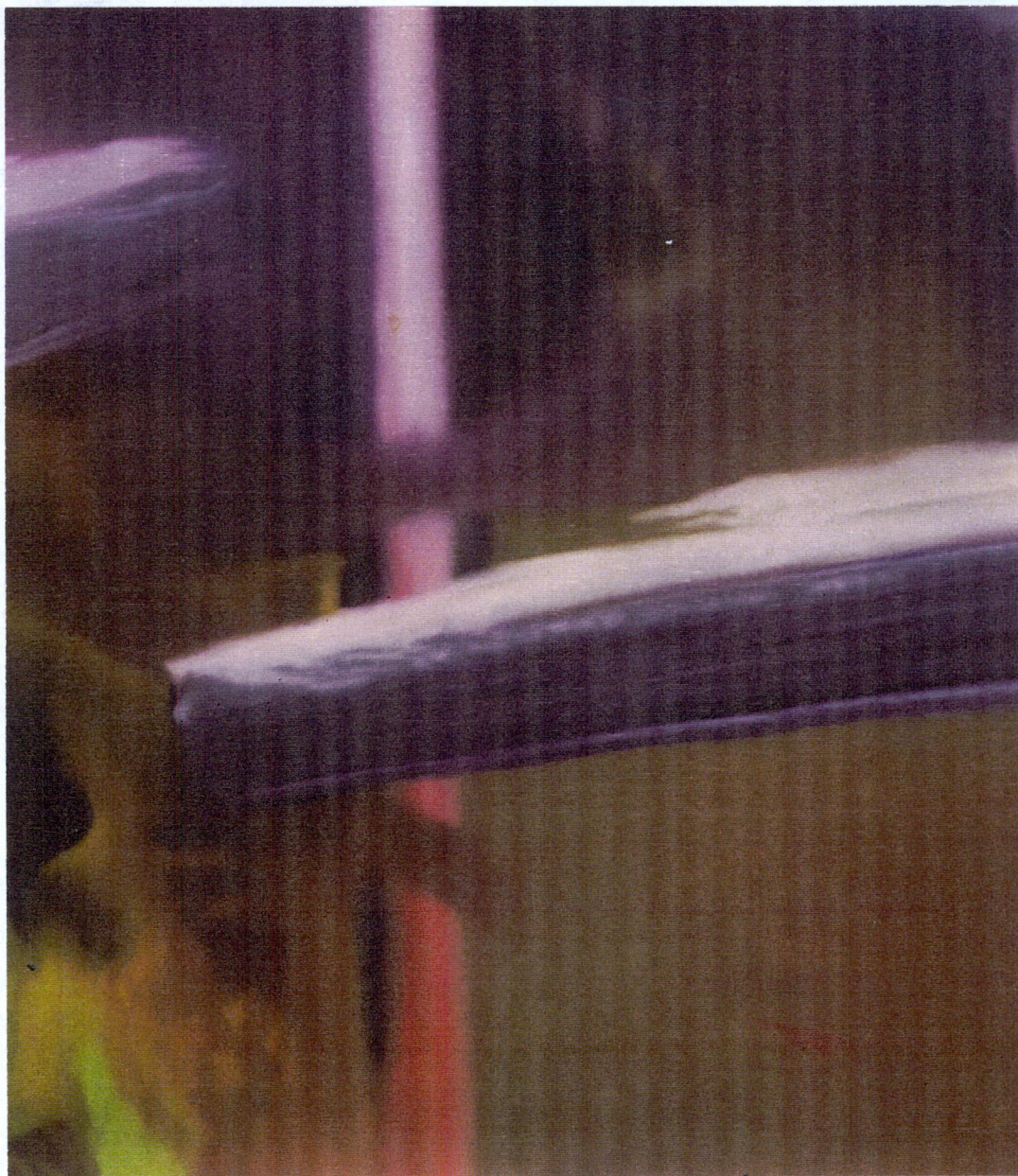


Fig. 6; Abstract Painting, 1977, Richter no. 418



Fig. 7; Confus, 1986, Richter no. 613-1



difference of class, race, gender etc. were incorporating cultural politics into the concerns of art. This did not accommodate a notion of universal aesthetic, focusing instead on particular social issues of representation, identity and power. The notion of the aesthetic requires the possibility of disinterested transcendent appreciation and is accompanied by an implication of universality. This is problematic as it reinforces notions of artistic autonomy in the art object and excludes practical concerns of a cultural or social nature.

The problem however with the refusal of the aesthetic is of great concern here. According to Paul Wood, the fear of reintroduction of the traditional aesthetic fuelled a resistance to any notion of the aesthetic. This exclusion had become an institutional convention in itself and therefore needed to be counteracted. To abandon the role of aesthetic evaluation was not sufficient for all art. A related problem was the refusal of the imagination implicit in the refusal of the aesthetic. A refusal of art's possibility of social, theoretical or cultural change.

“..... we are thereby condemned to be creatures of our variant accidents of birth with neither the hope nor the desire for transcendence. We are literally the prisoners of our skin, our shape and our place, robbed of the possibility of sympathetically imagining the legitimate demands of the Other”. (Wood 1994 p191) .

This concept of imagination in aesthetics is necessary to keep art from being more than merely running commentary. For art to

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adopt the philosophy of cultural politics alone is to deny the possibility that it can do anything other than comment on a particular cultural condition. The possibility of transcendence of social particulars and constructed identities is the imaginative element necessary for art that can offer, or suggest, an alternative, to the reality one is forced to perceive each day. The notion of the aesthetic is therefore an issue for post-conceptual painting.

The 'new spirit' painting that sprung up in America Europe in the eighties was received sceptically as it suggested a return to traditional aesthetics in that it did not supply an alternative notion of the aesthetic. But on the other hand, the art concerned with cultural politics avoided the issue in its avoidance of the aesthetic altogether. The demand left for painting after conceptualism was essentially to re-establish a renewed aesthetic. "It is the mark of art with ambition to be more than cultural symptom, that it addresses the question of what it is to make - or remake an aesthetic totality" (Wood 1994 p192). Richter was aware of the fluctuating historical situation of painting. His use of abstraction in the mid seventies was a defiance of the fashion that was anti - painting. I believe that the critical reception of his abstraction provides an insight into contemporary problems of reception particular to abstraction and it is to those questions that I now turn.

CHAPTER 2 - THE CRITICAL RESPONSE TO GERHARD RICHTER'S ABSTRACT PAINTINGS

Richter's abstract paintings were received in a variety of ways by critics. Their historical place and aesthetic significance was initially a challenge to determine. Richter was by the seventies a respected avant-garde painter so his move into the problematically traditional area of abstract painting was generally received sceptically. The nature of abstraction meant that the source or aim of Richter's abstract paintings was not obviously apparent. The input of critics on the subject was therefore key to the reception and understanding of the work.

Assumptions as to Richter's critical project regarding these paintings ranged from declaring he was attempting to convey cynical irony, or demonstrate the impossibility of meaning and expression through painting to alternative declarations of an affirmative stance, celebrating the possibilities of painting by abandoning his prior critical project. Despite the various responses there was an apparent consensus that it was a regressive move. The scepticism stemmed from the history of abstraction and its problems of reception. The various misinterpretations and contradictions that constitute the critical response to Richter's abstraction shed light on the overall problem of painting abstractly in the eighties and nineties. Stefan Germer, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Peter Osborne have all

written substantially about Richter's painting. In subtly varying ways each developed ideas of the artists intentions and success of the abstract paintings.

In deriving the meaning or analysing the significance of these works, the general approach by the critics was to focus on the process of their production and the significance of their position within Richter's diverse oeuvre. Stefan Germer's response to the abstract paintings was to redefine the process not as abstraction but as 'concretisation'. The term abstract was inappropriate due to its presupposition of an external reality and the then abstraction of that reality. By contrast, concretisation, rather as Germer declares, "involves neither hierarchical order nor pictorial syntax, being focused on no such notion of an external reality". (Germer 1991 p31). This process involves not a reduction of something but an irreducible variety of 'visual phenomena' presented on canvas. Germer suggested that the abstracts eluded not only the audience but also Richter himself in that the final result of the painting is determined by the original readymades and various accidents of production, and is therefore beyond the total control of the artist whose interventions can only influence the painting. For Germer the paintings are defined by "the difference between experience and representation"(Germer 1991 p31).

This interpretation emphasised the process as generative of the meaning and focused heavily on the production

of the painting and perhaps not sufficiently on the final product, only to declare that the motivation for the painting cannot be derived from the finished painting as it remains hidden behind the forms. The forms however, are what the viewer sees and often the process is not visible within them, so according to this interpretation, the work is essentially inaccessible to the viewer. The fact that this essay was written for an exhibition catalogue of Richter's painting and is not an independent piece of critical writing explains the positive tone and rather simplistic angle and ambiguity of the analysis. Germer's redefinition of the term shies away from the complications of the critical analysis of abstraction and effectively offers an interpretation that does not recognise the problematic abstract nature of the work in contemporary art. For Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Peter Osborne by contrast, the interest of the paintings lies in the very abstract and organic nature of the final product. Their refusal to depict or the 'inaccessibility to language' which for Germer was the most important characteristic is undoubtedly also the most problematic. The works had to acknowledge certain conditions if they were to be seen as historically significant, yet there was much doubt and scepticism as to the ability of the abstract paintings to register these conditions.

Buchloh also focused on the method of production for the works critical weight. The process of photographing, mechanically enlarging and registering the image in paint was the

fundamental difference between Richter's abstraction and other abstract painting. This for Buchloh signified the deconstructive investigation of material forms of representation and thus justified the use of abstraction. The impersonal relationship with abstraction was for Buchloh the only possible critical project applicable to the work. The process rendered a different approach and a different attitude, therefore a difference to modernist abstract painting and the modernist aesthetic. This difference however, was known by Buchloh, rather than perceived in the painting. The knowledge of the working process was the critical insight with which Buchloh formulated his opinions of the paintings. A knowledge of their placement in terms of Richter's oeuvre was also key to Buchloh's interpretations i.e. their production after the semi-mechanical grey monochrome paintings of the early seventies. The modernist reduction of painting to the monochrome, while limiting concerns also restricted scope and curtailed the possibility of continuation or recovery. Richter's colour sketches (earliest abstract paintings) which stemmed from the dilemma of his monochromes were 'multi-chromatic' and 'complicated' incorporating new concerns and problems into his painting.

In Buchloh's opinion it was Richter's deconstructive approach to production that carried the critical weight of the paintings. The 'manifest subject' according to Buchloh was the mechanical mediation of the organic painterly activity. That

essentially was what the works were about. The structural transformations that led to the final painting constituted the meaning of the painting. They therefore dealt with the demands of contemporary painting in Buchloh's words 'to exist between the irreconcilable demands of the spectacle and the synecdoche'. (Buchloh 1991 p194). The 'spectacle' Buchloh refers to presumably relates to the finished painting which is seen by the public, while the 'synecdoche' relates to the concept of a piece of work which represents an idea or condition within contemporary art. The demands of the synecdoche are ~~the~~ critical demands *perhaps* placed on painting for it to exist as art, and the demands of the spectacle are those placed on art in relation to the public audience. While attempting to fulfil these demands however Buchloh refers to Richter's abstract paintings as a :

"memory of past painting , when 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 will of the subject and when composition and successful integration of all these elements into painting constituted the experience of the subject". (Buchloh 1991 p194).

The array of pictorial devices that constitute the final painting spurred Buchloh to make the above statement. Despite a reading based on the mechanical re-appropriation of the

organic imagery, the above comment suggests a negation of the significance of that process in the final product. By outlining certain contradictions implied in statements made by Gerhard Richter, Buchloh declared that the abstract painting negated former implications and concerns of his previous work, ultimately renewing the mythification of painting. In an interview with Richter in 1986, Buchloh continuously tried to attribute various political and radical ideals to Richter's intentions. Huge differences of opinion became apparent. During this interview Buchloh explained an occasion where he had declared Richter's intentions (in print). Richter explained that he was in fact completely wrong. Troubled by Richter's explanations for his abstract painting, Buchloh enquired 'They are not a negation of content, not - simply the facticity of painting, not an ironic paraphrase of present day expressionism?Not a perversion of gestural abstraction? Not ironic?'. To which Gerhard Richter responded: 'Certainly not! What sort of things are you asking?' (Nasgaard. 1986 p.24). All of Buchloh's critical insights into Richter's abstraction were not only contradictory to the artist's theories but relied on a negative ironic attitude. For Buchloh the only possibility of abstraction was to employ it cynically as a demonstration its own impossibility. Buchloh's attempt to assign meaning contradictory to the artist's intention reflects the problem with critical interpretations of abstraction.

This has been the focus of Peter Osborne's analysis of Richter's abstraction; the gulf between the artist's aims and the ability of abstraction to demonstrate them. Peter Osborne's writings on the works of Gerhard Richter focus on the wider issue of the reception of the abstract painting and the complications due to the nature of abstraction. Osborne stated that the main problem for painting after conceptualism was to avoid the reinstitution of the traditional notion of the aesthetic object. In this he refers to the notions of the autonomously meaningful art work. To address the framing conditions of representation, which painting must acknowledge, one is forced to engage with the very process of representation. Therefore in its refusal to represent, abstraction is at a certain disadvantage in fulfilling this contemporary critical requirement. "If a return to painting is to be critical, it would seem it must 'represent', at least two levels, the second of which will involve some kind of distancing depiction of the representational forms of the first level" (Osborne 1991 p71).

Osborne uses Buchloh's description of the 'memory of past painting' to demonstrate the difficulty in registering that distance in abstract painting. In their final state, the abstract paintings could be seen superficially as a historical catalogue of painterly devices, and nothing more, due to their inability to represent that critical distance within the frame of the painting. This is something Osborne feels is necessary to the success of a

post-conceptual painting. He focuses on the dilemma of achieving conviction in painting while somehow appearing to register historical difference specifically within the painting itself. Osborne had written extensively about Richter's 'photo painting'. It was he who coined the term 'double negation' to express how Richter's paintings negated the negation of painting by photography, thus restoring the critical possibility of painting. Clearly, Osborne felt the photo-paintings were very successful, however, with regard to the abstracts, he reflected other critical statements in an expression of doubt as to their success:

"The doubt that lingers concerns the extent to which the latest works (the abstracts) maintain the tension produced by such a double negativity, the moment of historical reflexivity, and the extent to which this is annihilated or suppressed in a merely affirmative celebration of the possibilities of paint." (Osborne 1992, p.113).

The final organic painterly nature of the mechanical process negates the mechanical intervention by representing an organic image as the finished product. The disappearance of the photographic influence was the important factor. One cannot necessarily derive from the painting that this process occurred, therefore it is not sufficient to focus on it to establish meaning. The process is not visually present in the final product. In a critical assessment, one must take the finished painting as it is, and Richter's abstract painting can be seen to look like a

traditional modernist abstract painting or any other abstract painting. This huge problem of reception is the fundamental problem of all contemporary abstraction. As Osborne explains; "If the return to painting is to involve more than a simple repetition of past practices it will have to register its difference - a difference of historical time - immanently within its forms" (Osborne 1991 p76). According to Osborne the conditions of the art market i.e. the reception of the work, are part of the historical conditions one must acknowledge. To ignore or refuse to deal with this condition specifically is to assume a "traditional conception of the aesthetic object". This extremely difficult task i.e. to acknowledge the conditions of the art market and a difference historically and aesthetically from Modernist painting, all within the frame, is basically impossible. This calls into question whether it is necessary to 'know' the intention of the artist or should there be an alternative way of assessing abstraction. The element of authorial input shall be dealt with in chapter 3, what is of concern here is a more sympathetic analysis of abstract painting, one that does not make such impossible demands of it.

Confronted with the inability of abstract painting to register the various historical conditions within the frame of the painting, one is forced to reassess the absolute necessity of such registration. In a more positive way, one can rather consider the historical conditions as being implied in the very form or act of

painting. To paint is to engage in the discourse of the contemporary conditions of painting, and to paint abstractly is perhaps to deal directly with them. Richter viewed his abstract paintings as representative of the harsh realities of their time (in this he refers to the position of painting in art and the reality of representation). His prevailing concern for the possibility of painting was the motivation for the work. It could be argued that in dealing practically with painterly devices and form Richter challenged conventions of composition, meaning, colour and representation. Indeed, in the very use of abstraction in the seventies and eighties Richter's work challenged aesthetic perception and achieved a great deal within the realm of possibility^{for} of abstraction.

Paul Woods claim for Richter's work as constitutive of a new aesthetic totality is based on the illogicality of condemning it on the grounds of lack of authenticity which would affirm a culture or aesthetic of authenticity.

"Richter's late abstraction re-constitutes aesthetic totality 'from' the ruin of modernism. It compels conviction because rather than pretend that the ruination never happened, it is made 'of' that debris, that negation. In this circumstance, the charge of a decline into 'affirmation' in the Marcussian sense appears misplaced" (Wood 1994 p193).

Wood refers here to the misinterpretations of Richter's painting that ironically declare the artist's intention as the affirmative

celebrations of paint. Where modernist aesthetics in its distance from material concerns, and the post modern refusal of aesthetic fail, the way forward, according to Wood, is a combination of both historical materialism with a human element, a notion of an embodied being. Wood used Richter's painting and philosophy to highlight the necessity of an evaluative aesthetic notion in contemporary art. In this, he shares Richter's theories of possibility in art at least through imagination: imagination of the possibility of difference. He declares what is involved in Richter's abstraction is "a refusal of both the way things are and of extant remedies".

Wood acknowledged the grounds for Buchloh's claim of Richter's impersonal deconstruction of the rhetoric of painting. He says however that the later abstracts shed this appearance of being demonstrations. They become totalities in themselves representing the constraints of meaning in contemporary art and are certainly able to carry the conviction apparent in Richter's figurative paintings. Wood suggests a similar mood apparent in some of Richter's abstracts and the 'Baader Meinhof' paintings which were completed around the same time. He refers to the 'grandeur' and 'austerity' of the abstracts which outweigh the influence of the semi - mechanical process of production in the final painting. Wood's analysis of Richter's painting involve the concept of painting as a model, representative in a constructive way of possibility and particularity. The necessity of the

possibility of imagining difference with the realisation of the limits of ones means (painting) is the paradoxical situation of such painting. Wood's interpretation differs from both Buchloh's and Osborne's in that it acknowledges the importance of the aesthetic dimension in determining meaning and significance, rather than focusing on the implications and methods of abstract painting. It also takes into consideration the nature of abstraction as the fact rather than the failing of the works. Wood's understanding is not derivative of the autonomous aesthetics of art but represents the artistic input to fully explain the work. This assessment successfully attributes Richter's ideas to the success of the abstract paintings. It refers critically to an element that no other interpretation of Richter's abstract painting does, that of the notion of shared human experience, of the presence of imaginative possibility that ^{underpins} constitutes Richter's abstracts. ✓

The consensus in the critical assessment tends to be in recognition of Richter's dealing with representation critically through his abstraction, the assessment of his success however varies. Richter's use of abstraction at a time when representation constituted everything, every human experience, has been recognised as a critical move despite the history of abstraction and its tendency to be interpreted along traditional lines. Its very nature and the 'failing' to represent, made it precisely the medium with which to deal with the historical and cultural concerns of representation. As Kenneth Baker outlines;

“[Richter] shows how abstraction can make a subject of representation, can address it not as the discarded artistic alternative but as the type of transaction that burdens the consciousness continuously (often wordlessly) when culture is ruled by institutions that overpower individuals with images, and with things and notions surcharged with engineered fantasies. Clearly the old sense of abstraction as the negation of representation is anachronistic.”(Baker 1989 p137).

Baker's interpretation of Richter's abstract painting is based on the element of humour apparently suggested in the painting. He refers to them as 'comic abstraction' comparing the humour in the situation to the inclination of a person facing a grave illness to joke or laugh about it. In this he proclaims work of this nature the most optimistic of contemporary art that he knows.

This optimism is perhaps the most significant factor in the influence of Richter's painting on later generations of painters. According to Charles Hall in a essay in 'Art-Review' in April 1994, Gerhard Richter's has influenced a generation of young abstract painters. Hall puts the emergence of a new intellectual body of abstract painting down to his influence. Richter, he claims, while undercutting two stereotypical ideas of the artist, that of 'inspired, improvisational seer' and 'authoritative history painter' offered something in their place, i.e. the artist as 'puzzled observer', struggling to make sense of the world that is represented. Hall points to the work of Mark Francis and Mark Wright whose work has moved from more

organic abstraction to a purer form of abstraction. Francis's work in particular he declares was similar to the work of Richter in its origins in photographic imagery (cells and internal portraits), but has evolved into a form of pure abstraction, images of unseen reality that bear no reference to photography. By reduction to the source, Francis's work bordered on nihilism while at the same time reopening painting as significant and meaningful, putting it "not only back in fashion but back on course". (Hall 1994 p32).

CHAPTER 3 - PAINTING AS A MORAL ACT

It can be derived from the critical reception of Richter's abstract painting that the most significant interpretations take Richter's philosophy into consideration while also examining the critical context of abstraction. Though not necessary in the assessment of all painting, the view of the artist becomes necessary in this case if a balanced opinion is to be constructed. The reason for this is the ambiguous nature of abstraction and more importantly the extent of the critical misinterpretations. If so much is to be written about the origin and intent of the work (as is the case here) one might benefit from the writings of the artist, an insight arguably less weighed down with political implications and cynical attributions. The 'death of the author' argument is not sufficient here as the position of the author (of the meaning) has already been usurped by the critic and so to abstain from expressing one's own opinion (as the artist) would be to foolishly abandon all critical attributions of meaning to the critics alone. While this is often the case in art, and is the basis of a different debate altogether, the suggestion here is that in the case of Richter a more valid understanding of the abstract painting is obtained when one takes into consideration the view of the artist, not as supreme author of the meaning but as author of a valuable opinion.

In the past few years there have been numerous retrospectives of the work of Gerhard Richter. These have been

on an international scale and have travelled to various locations around the globe. While they can be detrimental to some artists the concept of a retrospective has been complementary to the understanding of Gerhard Richter's painting. Richter's awareness of the historical situation of painting was reflected in his work from various periods. The importance of the author is investigated in a retrospective, they are helpful to reassess the work of an artist in the context of his / her oeuvre and with some measure of distance from the broader historical context.

What becomes apparent when reassessing the work of an artist with as diverse an oeuvre as Richter's is the certainty and conviction that has featured throughout. One gets a sense of a continuous thread of content. Richter's abstraction epitomises that thread or concern in its perceptions of reality. Richter's motives for painting, his belief in art as the 'highest form of hope' or a 'moral act' has fuelled his commitment and production. While many painters have gone unnoticed, Richter's work managed to achieve critical and international recognition. Even when the avant-garde critical consensus was anti-painting, Richter's painting contained a critical awareness that ensured its co-existence with avant garde art throughout the decades. This critical awareness rescued Richter's painting from falling into the mode of mere irony or cynicism into which many other critical assaults on painting degenerated. The motivation to paint for Richter is that it is a necessity, fundamental to society. This

unusual force of ideas has loaded Richter's work and complicated its critical reception somewhat. Thus, to fully examine the success of the abstraction one must examine the nature of Richter's aims and ideas which have fuelled his immense output.

The role of the author may have been proclaimed redundant in recent years but realistically, it is as important as it was in its modern heyday in that the market still desires concepts of creator, unified oeuvre - recognisable painting by recognisable artist. In this light, to examine the success of a body of diverse work such as Richter's, one must consider a unifying thread, not that of the artist but rather that of his ideals, his own critical theories. In Richter's case, his ideas have been extreme and the basic aim of his work has been the same. Richter's commitment to painting meant the survival of painting into further generations where it had previously looked to be redundant. Although it was not a survival he single-handedly achieved, he has been noted as one of the major painters of this era that have credibly overcome the problems of painting and remained as key painters since.

The abstract painting seemed to express Richter's idea in a culmination of years of practice and certainty of the necessity of painting. Through out his interviews Richter maintained that art has the obligation to tell the truth - this is its moral element. His commitment to such ideas sheds light on his work that is different to the general critical input. What Richter expresses is an optimism or positive outlook that runs completely

counter to the cynical and negative intentions that have been ascribed to him by critics. For example, during an interview in 1986 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh asked if Richter saw himself as heir to a "historically divided and fragmented situation, in which there was no pictorial strategy that still had real validity?". Richter's response was characteristically optimistic:

"I see myself as the heir to an enormous, great, rich culture of painting, and of art in general, which we have lost, but which nevertheless obligates us. In such a situation it's difficult not to want to restore that culture, or what would be just as bad, simply to give up, to degenerate". (Richter 1986 in Nasgaard p.21).

The obligation of art in Richter's opinion lies in the lack of any logic in simply abandoning painting. We are obliged to continue neither in an attempt to restore the former culture nor to conceivably construct another, nevertheless we must continue to paint and produce art. This production however must continue in the face of an irony: the recognition of paintings inability to provoke social change or even ensure its own necessity. Richter has adamantly proclaimed the vital importance of painting as a practice while acknowledging the doubt in its potential effectiveness. He repeatedly declares his desire for painting to 'accomplish more'. When Buchloh asserted that Richter's abstract painting was a simultaneous analysis of the rhetoric of painting and not generative of mood at all, Richter, in disapproval, replied that if it was merely such a

display of devices, it could not express yearning. When asked to reconstruct this yearning, Richter answered ;

“For lost qualities, for a better world; for the opposite of misery and hopelessness [.....] I could also say salvation. Or hope. The hope that I can still accomplish something with painting” (Richter 1986 in Nasgaard p25). When forced by Buchloh to explain what painting could accomplish Richter answered that he did not know, again claiming that it was nevertheless necessary to carry on, as no other means could necessarily accomplish social change either.

Buchloh : How long can one go on asserting this contradiction, without attempting to get beyond it?

Richter : I have no idea what contradiction you’re talking about.

Buchloh : It’s the contradiction of knowing fullwell that with the methods you’re using you can’t achieve what you want, but being unwilling to change your methods.

Richter : But that’s not a contradiction. That’s just the normal state of things. Call it our normal misery if you want. It certainly could not be changed by choosing different means or methods.

(Interview with Buchloh 1986 in Nasgaard p25-26).

The problem with Richter’s ideas for Buchloh and many others who have interviewed him is his refusal of a political or social element in his ideas. He refers to ‘change’ but not to

specific ideals with possible social references. Buchloh called this thinking 'like a Romantic' because of Richter's continued reference to models of a natural rather than social kind. Richter answered that he was thinking 'like a painter'. "The reason I don't argue in 'socio - political terms' is that I want to produce a picture and not an ideology. Its always its factuality and not its ideology that makes a picture good" (Ibid. P29). Richter's refusal of ideologies has been consistent throughout his statements. His faith and belief in painting's necessity may at first appear to be an ideological stance or manifesto but a closer look reveals that his conviction is not coupled with a promise or even possibility of solution. His contempt for ideologies, and art that degenerates into ideology, lies in their narrow-minded hope for perfection or utopia which discriminates against all others. "Art can be truly relevant only when it isn't directly employed to do a job. If art represents itself, society can use it ; but not if it advertises anything." (Richter interview with Peter Sager 1972 in Obrist p69.)

What is fundamental to Richter's conviction about painting is that the only thing he insists on is to continue painting. Richter's ideas are based on a recognition of the modern loss of centre (in Hans Sedlmayr sense 'Art in Crisis: The lost centre' 1957), while not attempting to restore such ideological notions of centre and not giving up in cynicism or apathetic despair. For him, Richter's abstract paintings were essentially models

reflective of society with the possible suggestion of alternative reality hinted at and a personal belief in the importance of painting. When asked what his abstract paintings produce, he referred to the notion of painting as model :

“I can also regard my abstractions as parables, as images of a possible form of social relations..... What I’m attempting in each picture is nothing other than this: to bring together, in a living and viable way, the most different and the most contradictory elements in the greatest possible freedom. Not Paradise.”
(Richter 1986 in Nasgaard p29).

In the catalogue for Documenta VII (1982) Richter explained the nature of his abstraction. He painted abstract paintings as models of the ineffable, the unknown, that which is always represented negatively. Richter’s work had moved through a variety of styles and emphases and what remained was his initial perplexity with subject matter. Of his photo-painting Richter claimed they solved the problem of what to paint. The abstracts, it seems after exhausting the use of the photograph employed the next major concern with content. The depiction of models, paintings of unseen reality had become Richter’s main concern and was to last until the present day.

“Abstract pictures are fictive models, because they make visible a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can postulate..... in abstract painting we have found a better way of gaining access to the unvisualisable, the incomprehensible; because abstract painting deploys the utmost visual immediacy - all the resources of art,

in fact - in order to depict 'nothing'. (Richter 1982 in Nasgaard p 100).

The idea of the abstract painting was not decided or planned by Richter but evolved in a process of decision making in the production of a painting. Richter equated this with the development of nature which evolves subject to chance and conditions rather than being planned specifically. Its forms developed without method, without recipe.

Ian Heywood refers to the notion of particularity in abstract painting, the notion of the uniqueness or importance of something that cannot be replaced by something else. This equates to Richter's notion of painting, especially his yearning to produce something that mattered, something that was significant. "Particularity means here not just factual uniqueness but the significance in our lives of things, people and events for which neither substitutes nor reproductions are possible. Particularity in this sense defines an important aspect of our embodied temporal experience".(Heywood 1995 p132). The practice of painting was for Richter something unique that could not be replaced by anything else. He represented in his painting something that could not be replaced either :this concept of particularity, a single model or construction for which there could be no alternative.

To Richter the very concept of painting is to construct a model, what is important in Richter's work is the

concept of shared human experience, the imaginative element common to all down through the historical conditions of painting. This is something that everyone possesses and should not be forgotten, something that informs an appreciation of art on all levels despite cultural differences. Richter's work succeeds because of this basic element. Imagination of possible difference is an acknowledgement of one's own limits but involves faith nevertheless in the necessity of that imaginative element. Paul Wood best described Richter's aim when he says that to paint in the world of corporations is to accept such a reality exists but to also possess the possibility of imagining otherwise.

"The possibility of imaging such difference and of having grounds rather than mere desires for doing so, is a pre-condition of its realisation. It is this which separates art, conceived as a moral act, from ideology. It demands an extension of one's experience. Our capacity imaginatively to face the consequences of experience is the measure of our being in the world." (Wood 1994 p199).

CONCLUSION

The scale and complexity of the historical problems within abstraction has created a situation wherein an attempt at a definite conclusion is extremely difficult. While this dissertation has focused on the work of one particular artist of historical importance, to conclude from this investigation a general view or equation applicable to all abstract painting would not be appropriate. There are many areas for research that could not be dealt with here which would lend an insight perhaps contradictory to the argument here, or others that would focus on alternative issues to support the thread of argument in this dissertation. The national identity of the artist, his relationship with German political ideologies and other German artists might lend a social or historical background to Richter's philosophy while the investigation of historical doctrines similar to those of Richter's might also propose different angles on this debate. The conditions of the art market, the marketability of abstract painting at different periods in contemporary history and the reasons for the international success of the artist, are also issues that a broader examination of the history of abstraction would involve. Here, I have discussed the specific case of Gerhard Richter's abstract painting, and have considered a possible interpretation of the outcome of his work on contemporary art

practice, without offering a critical stance applicable to all forms of abstract painting.

What has been proposed here, is that the production and critical reception of the abstract paintings of Gerhard Richter has provided a forum for the debate of certain issues in contemporary art practice. The fate of abstraction has been altered to a certain extent by Richter's production of these works in the seventies and his continued use of this format into the nineties. The position of abstraction in the deconstruction and 'death' of painting was historically related to modernism and the modernist agenda. It has been proved that the desire for painting remained and the insistence on its termination proved pointless as production of painting continued. The re-appropriation of abstraction in post conceptual art led to the redefinition of abstraction and its continued critical existence in contemporary painting. Richter's decision to publish his writings - 'The Daily Practice of Painting' in 1995, altered the position of the abstract artist within the critical arena. He had positioned himself on par with the critics in the publication of meaning and interpretations of work. This was of particular importance as the critical opinion was generally contradictory to his own and therefore provided a one-sided view.

Considering the historical situation of abstraction and its problematic relation to representation, this dissertation has examined the result of the critical reception of Richter's

abstract painting in an attempt to assess the situation of abstraction in critical discourse. The problem of its abstract nature renders an obstacle in the critical evaluation process which produces theories that fall short of sufficient analysis. Richter's commitment to painting forced this problem to be re-examined, and while discrepancies still remain, one result has been a more widespread acceptance of abstract painting in contemporary art. Focusing on Richter's theories of art one discovers the presence of an optimism not evident in the intentions attributed to him in the wider critical analysis. This insight provides an understanding of the work that compensates for the negative and ironic readings that one receives from the critical sphere and thus aids a wider and more sympathetic understanding of the abstract paintings. However, Richter has expressed a perverse desire to complicate further the ambiguity of the explanation of his work. In his opinion, the more incomprehensible the result the more successful the painting. As if in acceptance of the problems of expression through abstraction, he is compelled further into the belief in its potential and continues to produce such work with more conviction than ever. The most recent abstract paintings are more layered, more complicated and are avowedly more expressive of Richter's desires and beliefs than ever. It is this element along with the optimism of his abstract painting that is the basis of the works'

success and in fact the most important element. As he puts it himself;

“So, in dealing with this inexplicable reality, the lovelier, cleverer, madder, extremer, more visual and more incomprehensible the analogy, the better the picture.

Art is the highest form of hope”.

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