GERHARD RICHTER : THE POSSIBILITY OF PAINTING

by

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Abstract

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ABSTRACT (INTRODUCTION)

Gerhard Richter is the most important painter of his generation, and as important as any painter of subsequent generations, for the invaluable contributions he has made to the art of painting: as a critical art form, capable once again of transcendence and meaning. His body of work, examined throughout this thesis, is as expansive as any in the history of Western Art. Not only in sheer number of paintings, but in the ground he has covered through his tireless research of the medium. In the illustration for this thesis, I have tried to represent the variety of his oeuvre, in relation to the trajectory of the argument.

Most importantly for this thesis is Richter's use of photography in painting as an analysis of the real. His movement into abstraction is, of course, massively significant and is taken into account into the argument, but mostly in term of his linkage to the real via the use of photography.

The emphasis on the real in this analysis of Richter's work is due to the involvement of Jean Baudrillard, the controversial French theorist of simulation and hyper-reality. I have attempted to uncover elements of his thought which will benefit a new reading of Gerhard Richter's work.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

all Gerhard Richter

Chapter 1: TRANSPOSITION - Richter and the Real (Minimal Separation).

Transposition, the act of putting one thing in place of another; state of being transposed; a change in the order of words. Oxford Shorter Dictionary.

The literal definition above is suitable as an introductory description of Gerhard Richter's pictorial act. His photo/pictures are basically an enactment of transposition, putting one element in place of another, in this case elements of photography. It is the enactment of an exchange in which the constant is the canvas. In this process of sublation - the resolution of opposites into a higher unity, distinct here from sublimation[1], a process of redirection of motivations - there is a dialectic of exchange of qualities of each medium. The expressive potential of oil paint, its natural fluidity and the opportunities which this presents the artist for stylisation, and which lends painting to interpretation based on a hypostasis[2] of paint itself, is restrained - denied, in fact, to the viewer. The objectivity of the photographic process, its mechanical, inhuman touch, is subtracted from the transpositional equation due to the very fact that the picture is produced by the imperfect, subjective human hand of the artist.

A semiotic reading of the transposition in Richter's photo/pictures would be productively unyielding. The 'signifier' of paint and the 'signified' of photography - this would be reductive and limiting because the essential characteristics of each medium, where if they were preserved inviolate would qualify them to be either signifier or signified, are denied, subtracted - neutralised. Peter Gidal [3] writes:

No palimpsest because 'condensation of signifiers' which determines that concept here is condensation of signifiers-which-aren't. Condensation (Verdichtung, which also means poetization) in this picture never coalesces. In German it's called Leerlauf ('running on empty', 'treading air') . So no Verdichtung.

And no palimpsest because nothing has been scraped away to make room for another. Photography, at least the appearance of photography, its essential objectivity having been negated, is transposed and held in suspension with painting, whose potential for subjective manipulation of form is denied to it. The paint is applied in a workmanlike, inartistic fashion, as would a sign-painter. "A superb impasto," says Richter "would be too evocative of painting and would wreck the illusion." [4] (Obrist: 1996: 140).

So to suppress painterly illusionism, Richter's brushwork is effaced, smoothed out with the dragging of a spatula, squeegee or ruler across the half-dry surface of the canvas. The resultant blurring is now more evocative of *tremble* or the camera-shake of an amateur photographer. This is not one technique of stylisation replacing another.

Richter explains:

I don't blur or smear, I don't proceed by erasure. The fact of blurring things is not the particular sign of my paintings. If I soften the edges, if I create transitional zones, it is not in order to destroy the representation, to render it more artistic, or to make it unclear. The fluidity of the transitions in hue and the smooth, glossy surface act to bring out the content and render the figuration more credible ...I blur things to make a homogenous whole, so that all is of equal importance and without importance. I blur so that nothing will have an overdone, artistic look, but instead will be technical, smooth, perfect. Maybe I also blur the superfluous, unimportant information.

Birgit Pelzer, Feigning to Imitate, pp.140 (Obrist: 1996: 138-141)

The horizontal flash-lines of blurring are a fact rather than an appearance, an effect of the process rather than a stylistic device intended to look clever. "The material quality of the medium," writes Jurgen Harten[5] "is part of the appearance of the picture." (1986: 24) To expand slightly on this, Richter's working of the surface of the painting to a the highly finished smoothness of a glossy photographic print, would lead us to conclude that something of the material quality of each medium is sublimated into the appearance, the physical manifestation of the picture. And also, by this token, we see that something of paint's versatile mimetic quality has been restored to it - a common denominator is shared, the fact of blurring, of the fluidity of paint and photographic light. The transposition is an equalisation.

"From object to image there is of course a reduction - in proportion, perspective, colour - but at no time is this reduction a transformation, (in the mathematical sense of the term)." Thus wrote Roland Barthes, theorist of media and modern mythology, in *Camera Lucida*[6] , his meditation on photography and death (1980: 18). Richter's transposition may not be subject to mathematical analysis, but it is eminently logical. There is no invention of shapes or forms - no intentional distortion, no 'transformation' - involved in the process. There is only the minimal intervention of the episcope, used to project the images onto canvas. Richter remains true to the original, maintaining what Barthes called the *analagon* of photography (ibid.).

Richter began making these photo/pictures as a deliberate break with traditional painting practice, its norms and givens. Trained as muralist in the state-sanctioned Social-

Realist manner, he left the Dresden Academy in 1961 (just two months before the erection of the Berlin Wall) to study under K.O. Gotz in the Dusseldorf Academy where, under the guidance of Joseph Beuys (who had just taken up professorship there) was attracted to Fluxus events (in fig.1, the 'Demonstration for Capitalist Realism' with Konrad Leug: the two artists, the television and all the furniture set on plinths, as 'living sculpture', in the very furniture shop, in 1963). Fluxus was. In Richter's words, "the catalyst" (Van Bruggen: 1985: 85)[7] Under Fluxus' influence, Richter began to produce photo/paintings. These were paintings as non-statements.

Engaging in a dialogue with Anglo-American Pop-painting (Warhol, Richard Hamilton), they utilised images culled from mass-circulation German magazines. They were spoiled votes, undermining preconceived notions of authenticity and individual creativity. Richter:

Do you know what was great? Finding out that a stupid, ridiculous thing like copying a postcard could lead to a picture. And then the freedom to paint whatever you felt like ....Not having to invent anymore, forgetting everything you meant by painting - and all the things you knew and thought. Suddenly none of this was a prior necessity for art. (Obrist: 1995: 33/34)[8]

A work typical of this era is the *Eight Student Nurses* of 1966 (fig.2), and *48 Portraits* of 1971/72 (fig.3), depicting the eight victims of a serial killer in Chicago and forty-eight influential historical figures respectively, the former in response to Warhol's *13 Most Wanted men* of 1964 - as Benjamin H.D. Buchloh describes it "a European inversion of Warhol's position of anomy in regard to history" (1989: 50)[9] - and the latter

an installation which asserts the principle of homogeneity (and irony: they are all male) in regard to representations of history. They are important as precursors to Richter's *18.Oktober.1977* cycle,(figs) discussed in the conclusion.

A constant throughout these phases is Richter's evident fascination with the photographically apprehended object - the real, as a specimen for research:

My sole concern is the object. Otherwise I would not take such trouble over my choice of subjects; otherwise I would not paint at all. What fascinates me is the alogical, atemporal, meaningless occuring of an occurrence which is simulataneously so logical, so real, so temporal and so human, and for that reason, so compelling. And I would like to represent it in such a way that this clash is maintained. Obrist: 1995: 37.

Baudrillard's real is more elusive and problematic, but alogical and atemporal like the real above. It is no longer that which precedes the representation of itself, its mapping into two-dimensional form. It is the real separated from its referent. "It no longer needs to be rational," Baudrillard writes in *The Precession of Simulacra* [10] (1981: 2), "because it is no longer anything but operational.":

In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. Ibid.

Richter's transposition of the real into the simulacrum of painting produces a form of hyperreal, the exacerbation of the reality/unreality of the apprehended object, rendered even more 'atemporal, alogical' by its isolation, its detachment from the

referent of which we have but a trace of evidence. The proof of this is itself undermined by the transposition's negation of photographic objectivity.

The transposition effects the minimal separation of the representation from the simulacrum. It re-separates the concentration of the hyperreal within the painting. Hyperreality, Baudrillard argues, effaces the principle of differentiation: that of the real/the imaginary, representation/simulation. In art, there are several modalities of this 'vertigo of simulation'.

Warhol, as an example of *hyperpainting*, typifies one such modality, that of 'a death realised in the infinity of reproduction derived from the model' (Gane: 1990: 102)[11] . Richter, in an inversion of Warhol, again, typifies the fourth of these modalities in art, where there is :

The minimal separation, the least amount of inflection between the two terms, that is to say the 'very smallest common paradigm' that the fiction of sense could possibly support. Combination of differentiation internal to the pictorial object and to the object of communication, this simulation retreats in contemporary art to be no more than the minute difference that still separates the hyperreal from hyperpainting.

The Hyperrealism of Simulation,[12] *1983: 145.*

In *Young Girl Reading* of 1994 (fig.4), the minimal separation of photography from painting, painting from photography is brought to the point of the 'minute difference..' above. It is the most exemplary piece of photo-painting where the real is transposed, suspended, from medium to medium. It is hallucinatory - hyperreal.

Endnotes

[1] *Sublimation: "Process postulated by Freud to account for human activities which have no apparent connection with sexuality but which are assumed to be motivated by the force of the sexual instinct. The main types of activity described by Freud as sublimated are artistic creation and intellectual inquiry. The instincts said to be sublimated in so far as it is diverted to a new, non-sensual aim and in so far as its objects are socially valued ones ... " from Gidal, Peter: The Polemics of Paint; 1995.*

[2] *hypostaris , n. (philos) the substantial essence of things as distinguished from their attributes (Webster's)*

[3] *Gidal, Peter ; The Polemics of Paint, 1995*

[4] *Obrist, Hans-Ulrich (ed.) ; Pelzer, Birgit : Feigning to Imitate, 1996.*

[5] *Harten, Jurgen : The Romantic Intent for Abstraction : Gerhard Richter Paintings 1986*

[6] *Barthes, Roland ; Camera Lucida; 1980.*

[7] *Van Bruggen, Coosje ; Gerhard Richter Painting as a Moral Act ; Artforum n•23 ; 1985*

[8] *Obrist, Hans-Ulrich, Gerhard Richter , The Dail;y Practice of Painting, Selected Writings & Interviews 1963 - 95; Thames & Hudson ; London 1995.*

[9] *Buchloh, Benjamin H.D.; A Note on Gerhard Richter's 18.Oktober 1977; ICA Thames & Hudson 1989.*

[10] *Baudrillard Jean; The Precession of Simulacra ; Editions Galitec ; Paris, 1981.*

[11] *Gane , Mike ; Beaudrillard's Bestiary ; Routledge ; London 1989.*

[12] *from Simulations ; Semmiotext (e) ; New York, 1983.*

Chapter 2: ILLUSION: Richter and Simulation.

By the middle 1980s there emerged in New York a geometric painting that, in keeping with the manic marketing of the time, was given two labels very quickly: neo-geo and simulationism. Associated with artists like Peter Halley and Ashley Bickerton, this work assumed an ironic distance from its own tradition of abstract painting. In effect it treated this tradition as a store of readymades to appropriate, and in strategy if not appearance neo-geo was closer to appropriation art than to abstract painting.

Hal Foster, The Art of Cynical Reason.[1]

The neo-geo/simulationist painters provide an example of a form of painting which overtly aligns itself with theory in order to deal with abstract concepts of social and cultural realities. Peter Halley, probably more effective as a writer/cultural commentator than as a painter, became the spokesman for what was a movement doomed to genericisation due to its adoption of easily recognisable trademarks: op art, geometric modernism, minimalism and the day-glo paint which Halley manifestoed, 'stands for low-budget mysticism' [2].

Baudrillard's writing's were being widely disseminated and consumed throughout the American art world at this time in the early 80s, and it is a sign of the impoverished status of painting at this time that it required an inflation of European theory to assume some sort of critical position as art. For example, Halley claimed that the garishly coloured squares and interlinking strips were the 'cells and conduits' of Foucault's society of the panopticon; where bodies are controlled by omniscient surveillance [3].

In his essay *Painting: The Task of Mourning* [4] , Yves-Alain Bois describes the outcome of such strategies:

It seems to me that although the young artists in question address the issue of the simulacral - of the abstract simulation produced by capital - they have similarly abandoned themselves to the seduction of what they claim to denounce: either perversely (as in the case of Philip Taaffe who refers to Newman's sublime while he empties it of content); or unconsciously (as in the case of Halley who seems to believe that the iconic rendering of simulacra - through his pictorial rhetoric of "cells" and "conduits" - could function as a critique of them.

Bois: 1990: 242/43.

The critique of the perceived failure of utopian modernism - the appropriation of the stripes of Op art in the work of Ross Bleckner; the attempt "to construct a conceptual relationship to abstraction" (Foster: 1996: 100) - was ultimately only ever going to be a hollow victory for the simulationists. In *Objects, Images and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Illusion*[5] , Baudrillard himself disparages such appropriationist painting: "Employing quotation, simulation, reappropriation, it seems that contemporary art is about to reappropriate all forms or works of the past, near or far - or even contemporary forms - in a more or less ludic or kitsch fashion." (Zurbrugg: 1994: 7). This art seeks to be ironic to the end, ever-knowing and willing to cannibalize itself through consumption of its own tradition. Their ultra-irony is "the irony of repentance and resentment against our own culture." (ibid.).

It fails to realise fundamentally that painting is a simulacrum, always has been, and to refer through appropriation to only itself it merely adds one simulacrum to another and thus relinquishes what Baudrillard calls "its own illusion":

This painting has become completely indifferent to itself as painting, as art, as illusion more powerful than the real. It doesn't believe any longer in its own illusion, and so it falls into the simulation of itself and into derision.

Abstraction was the great adventure of modern art. In its 'irruptive', primitive and original phase, whether expressionist or geometric, it was still part of an heroic history of painting, of the deconstruction of representation and of the object. By volatilizing its object, the subject of painting itself advanced towards the limits of its disappearance. By contrast, the forms of contemporary abstraction (and this is also true of the New Figuration) have passed beyond this revolutionary acting out, beyond this act of disappearance - they simply reflect the undifferentiated field of our daily life, the banality of the images which have informed our social practices.

ibid.: 10.

It is in writings such as the above that Baudrillard belies his indebtedness to Benjamin's[6] *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1939) . In this seminal analysis, Benjamin prefigures Baudrillardian simulation - the abstraction of the real and its subsequent self-perpetuation as simulacra - through a description of the loss if art's illusion, or 'aura' in parallel with the Marxian democratisation of the image, as a component of free-exchange capitalism.

Simulation, after Benjamin, seems to be the inevitable outcome of capital's progress, whereby the underlying conditions of capitalist production would prognostically "create conditions which would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself" (1968: 217). Once capital has disappeared as an 'ism', it would thereby abstracted, ex-nominated and therefore omnipotent. Baudrillard wrote of disappearance:

For passing from one form to another, from one form to another is a means of disappearing, not of dying. To disappear is to disperse oneself in appearances. And dying doesn't do any good; one must still know how to disappear...

..from Metamorphoses, Metaphors, Metastases, pp.47[7]

The work of art, through its evolution onto something of which portability, reproducability - and therefore ephemerality - is incorporated into its very conception and design, has lost its 'aura'. Benjamin: "we define the aura ... as the unique phenomenon of a distance, no matter close it may be." (ibid.: 222). The positivist ethos of modernism - of progress and utopia - sought to progressively eradicate this phenomenon of distance, in its

irrepressible desire for immediacy as a means of progress. Thomas Lawson, in 1981 [8], reflects on this:

While it was still a creative force modernism worked by taking an adversary stance toward the dominant culture. It raged against order, and particularly bourgeois order. To this end it developed a rhetoric of immediacy, eschewing not only the mimetic tradition in Western art, but also the aesthetic distance implied by the structure of representation - the distance necessarily built into anything that is understood as a picture of something else, a distance that sanctions the idea of art as a discursive practice...

Artforum, Oct.1981, pp.40.

Any illusion of distance in modernism is therefore a return to the idea of illusion itself, of aura, and therefore retrogressive or naïve. This approach culminated in the withdrawal of art into autonomy - the esotericism *ad absurdum* of Abstract Expressionism was the unsupportable apex of the modernist project, with all of its emphasis laid on positivist notions of authenticity, individual creativity and the resultant obscene commodification of the art objects themselves.

Richter has maintained a principle of aesthetic and, through the transpositional technique, literal distantiation in his work. From the photo/pictures through to his abstracts the transposition is intact. It is a mediation of the real through photography - an interface maintained in order to keep the implicit concepts of modernist authenticity and creativity at the arm's length of the photographic *analogon*, metaphorically speaking. When Richter initiated, in the summer of 1976, a series of abstractions based on the

illusionistic space created by the figure/ground construct (see fig.5), he made a large series of sketches in oil on paper. These obviously represented a significant departure for Richter, who had been producing photo/pictures - both the Pop-inspired type and further landscapes transposed from photographs taken by himself - since the early sixties. To consider them as serious pictures, Roald Nasgaard[9] tells us, Richter had first to take hundreds of photographs of one of these impastoed sketches and then transpose it into the first of his Smooth Abstracts (1988: 106)

Richter thus approached once again the end of painting; its disappearance and not its death. The first disappearance of painting for Richter was the liberating act of photo/painting ("not having to invent anymore, forgetting everything you meant by painting.." , see Ch.1; 4), where Richter brought his pictorial act to its logical conclusion and thereby discovered new possibilities for art. Bois described how this 'end of painting' was achieved by several painters when, as Lawson would say, modernism was still a creative force. These were different ends, and they all rested upon the 'apocalyptic speech' of positivist modernism; where art must reach a point of dissolution and become one with the praxis of life in the modernist utopia, the society achieved through industrial and technological progress. Three different artists reached three different ends:

But is the end ever to be gained? Duchamp (the imaginary), Rodchenko (the real), and Mondrian (the symbolic), among others, believed in the end - they all had the final truth, all spoke apocalyptically. Yet has the end come? To say no (painting is still alive, just look at the galleries) is undoubtedly an act of denial, for it has never been more evident that most paintings have abandoned the task belonging to modern painting

(that, precisely, of working through the end of painting) and are simply artefacts created for the market and by the market (absolutely interchangeable artefacts created by absolutely interchangeable producers). To say yes, however, that the end has come , is to give in to a historicist conception of history as both linear and total (i.e., that one cannot paint after Duchamp, Rodchenko, Mondrian; that their work made paintings unnecessary, or: one cannot paint anymore in the era of mass media, computer games, and the simulacrum). Bois: 1990: 241.

It was also in 1976 that Richter despaired of the possibility of painting, of suitable subject matter. The *Grey* canvas (fig.6) is one of a series of Richter's Constructive works (see ch.3, *Oeuvre*) where grey paint is applied in uniformity, and the painting becomes the ultimate non-statement once again. The seemingly logical conceptual outcome of the photo/pictures, Richter said of them:

It was the ultimate possible statement of powerlessness an d desperation... Then you realise after you painted them that one's better than the others and you ask yourself why that is.. I wanted to avoid painting. I forbade it. But I also wanted to avoid representing life in any way; nevertheless, I did represent it.

Van Bruggen: 88.

Richter reached the zero degree of painting again, and found possibility, a last exit: abstraction. Through the transition of the Smooth Abstracts to the densely layered palimsestual Free Abstracts (figs. 7&8), where technique manifests itself as the referent, the real transcendent of the simulacral. They are in principal extensions of the figure/ground structures laid down and transposed in the Smooth Abstracts, exacerbated beyond their referent, the polychromatic layers discontinuous to themselves - where the figure and ground are progressively obliterated, differentiation between either/or is effaced - becoming hyperreal models of a shifting, volatile perceptual paradigm. Of their transpositional link to the mechanical, Peter Osborne [10] writes:

...they enact an organic recuperation of the 'mechanical mediation of the organic', a counter-movement which restores the primacy of the organic over the mechanical at a higher level. In this respect they continue the appropriative strategy of the photo-paintings..., but with one crucial difference: here, the photographic mediation vanishes in the act of painterly reappropriation.

Benjamin, A: 1991: 75.

The Free Abstracts achieve the distanciation necessary for aesthetic illusion. The photographic mediation of the transposition maintains this distantiation, while simultaneously relating the work to the real, and not the simulacral, as in the case of the simulationist painters. The paintings have an autonomy of being, they are objects in the world as opposed to signs. They are the culmination of Richter's oeuvre, the restitution of aesthetic illusion.

Richter regards painting as truth: "Art must be truthful - that's its moral aspect" (Van Bruggen: 82). Kierkegaard, in his *Concluding Scientific Postscript* of 1846, wrote of truth:

> *When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must make clear that subjectivity is the antithesis of objectivity: it must mark the fork in the road where the two ways diverge. And it must also indicate the tension involved in the subjective way. Here is such a definition of truth: an objective uncertainty appropriated within a subjective passion. At the point where the two ways diverge (and this point cannot be specified objectively, since it is a subjective matter), objective truth is placed in abeyance. Objectively the subject is now in a state of uncertainty; and this uncertainty increases the tension which the passion for the infinite induces. The truth is that virtue which is rooted in the passion for the infinite, thereby chooses objective uncertainty.*

Richter advances to the disappearance of painting, and chooses objective uncertainty, thus attaining aesthetic illusion.

Chapter2,Endnotes

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[1] *Foster, Hal ; The Return of the Real ; MIT Press ; Cambridge, Mass., 1996.*

[2] *Halley, Peter ; Collected Essays 1981 - 1987; Univeraity of Michigan Press ; 1990.*

[3] *Foucault, Michel ; Discipline & Punish ; Tavistock, London, 1969.*

[4] *Bois, Yves- Alain ; Painting as Model, MIT Press ; Cambridge, 1990.*

[5] *Zurbrugg, Nicholas (ed.) ; Jean Baudrillard, Art & Artefact , Thames & Hudson ; London 1994.*

[6] *Benjamin , Walter ; Illuminations ; Schocken; New York 1968.*

[7] *Baudrillard , Jean, The Ecstasy of Communication ; Semiotexte; New York 1987.*

[8] *Lawson, Thomas; Last Exit.Painting; Artforum, October 1987.*

[9] *Nasgaard, Roald, Gerhard Richter Paintings 1988 ; Thames & Hudson ; New York 1988*

[10] *Osborne ,Peter , Modernism, Abstraction and The Return to Painting, from Thinking Art; Beyond Traditional Aesthetics ; Benjamin, Andrew (Ed.); ICA, London 1991.*

Chapter 3: Oeuvre: An Essential Dialectic.

Oeuvre, n. A work of art, music, literature, etc. The whole body of work produced by an artist, composer, etc. Oxford Shorter Dictionary.

Another literal definition: *oeuvre* - two meanings, the particular and the generic - Richter's extensive body of work is characterised by a quality which is something of a conflation of the two meanings. Like the expansion of the term *transposition*, this is a sublation of the singular and the plural into a higher unity. Jill Lloyd [1], in her description of Richter's more recent Free Abstracts, details a "process of critique, carried on internally within a single work and across the series as a whole" (1988: 5).

Lloyd is writing specifically about the polychromatic permutations of Richter's layering process, but this 'process of critique' is cannily apt to an examination of Richter's exemplary body of work, described fittingly by Guy Tosatto [2]: "More than twenty years hindsight were needed to grasp the dialectical movement that structures his research, determining its unprecedented attempt at an ontological exploration of painting's foundations and limits.." (Obrist 1996: 7).

Richter's multifarious output - ranging stylistically from austere photo-realism through cerebral conceptual painting constructions to the fully developed Free Abstracts - will obviously lend him, on cursory examination, to labelling as a sort of post-modern eclecticist. This is a misreading, a gross misinterpretation of an artist with central concerns, a well defined paradigm. Richter, throughout the four decades now spanned by his career has, as Tosatto says, attempted an 'ontological exploration of painting's

foundations and limits', but more significantly has explored painting as a vehicle of perception; to grasp visual reality.

Richter has, since the inception of his first photo/pictures in 1963, documented his painted output in his Worklist [3], which he began to publish in 1972, and which now contains near to one thousand works. This worklist is an ordering structure for a stridently production-oriented artist who believes, for example that "making is not an aesthetic act." (Nasgaard: 49) and for whom homogeneity is a constant. The various styles he posits and counter-posits in his oeuvre originate him, by default almost, as creator of the body of work, and distance him from modernist preconceptions of individual creativity as being tied to personal stylisations.

Subgroups are easily identified by their linked characteristics - photo/pictures, townscapes, colour-charts, greys, seascapes for example - yet these characteristics are generally perceived in their differences to one another, rather than by what links them to a common core of artistic activity ...Yet the centrality of the artist as the originator of the work has never been in doubt. Not merely through their common signature and provenance, but also in their unmistakable characteristics, Richter's paintings and his modes of working are instantly recognisable. Within a wider context, his means have been little emulated and suggest an irreducible reservoir of identity that marks them as products of one hand, whatever their outward appearances and opposition to stylistic orthodoxy. Rainbird, , 1992: 18.

Richter's opposition to stylistic orthodoxy is a reflection of his disavowal of ideological thinking *per se*. His formative experience of state-sanctioned artistic training, and his subsequent distaste for the *art pour l'art* ideology of late modernism in the supposedly free west, led him to distance himself from anything remotely doctrinaire, to the point where he made the following statement: "I have committed myself to thinking and acting without the support of any ideology ....No regulation determines how, no belief points the way, no construction or vision of the future provides an overarching meaning ..." (Obrist: 1996: 147)

In the Worklist, there are three subgroups: the Figurative (the photo/pictures), the Abstracts, and the Constructives (an umbrella term taking in series and phases of experimentation Richter undertook, in the 1970s mostly, and maintains up to the present - the *48 Portraits,* for example, are included in this subgroup). The Constructives are an area of research for Richter, but that is not to say he does not include them in exhibitions. They are used to diffuse the polarity of abstract/figurative work.

The Constructives notwithstanding (they shall be discussed later), the *oeuvre* revolves mainly around a dialectic which comprises the figurative and abstract strands of Richter's work. His practice of abstraction began its evolution in the summer of 1976, when he embarked upon a series of 'sketches' in oil on paper, on a small scale. This was in the wake of his Grey Paintings - elements of the Constructive work which are simply grey paint on canvas, Richter's ultimate 'non-statement'- and can be seen, in a similar manner as the liberation he experienced when he began to produce his first

photo-based pictures, as an escape-hatch for a painter who was re-experiencing a desperation for suitable subject-matter. Richter was breaking his own mould again. This juncture in Richter's career, while not the landmark that was the inception of the photo/picture, is nontheless a significant watershed, in that it introduced the idea of "the break in style as a stylistic principle" (attributed to Klaus Honnef) [4].

> *The transition was not easy. In the 'sketches' as he called them at first, still unsure about their implications, he rallied the full arsenal of the painting craft to lay the groundwork for the compositionally complex, heavily impastoed, and richly polychromatic Abstract Paintings that have dominated his work. At first Richter did not quite dare consider these sketches regular paintings. They were too subjective, so that to turn them into paintings required distancing them by taking photographs of them . (Nasgaard, 1988:106)*

So we see that there was a 'transitional break', in keeping with the paradoxical nature of Richter and his work. He needed a change, something radical was called for, but he also required a transition, an interface. The transposition provided by photography, the analogical linkage to the real, was maintained by Richter, who also desired the objective distantiation from the real provided by photography. The first fruits of this transition were the Smooth Abstracts, essentially photo/pictures but very much directed toward something transcendent of the niche Richter had established for himself, not to mention flying in the face of the strident conceptualism which was rife in the 1970s and which did not take painting into account as a vehicle for artistic progress. The Free Abstracts, which resulted from Richter's experimentation with figure/ground

relations and illusionistic space in the photographed oil-sketches, combined with progressive layering and spatula-dragging, were definitely at odds with the neo-expressionism of early 1980s New York (seen at the time as a positive return for painting as a critical medium), but they were vital for Richter in the establishment of the critical dialectical movement in his *oeuvre*, and which have subsequently helped to position him as arguably the most critically important painter of his generation.

As mentioned by Roald Nasgaard in the quotation above, the Free Abstract Paintings have dominated Richter's work since their development in the late '70s ("The abstract works," said Richter "are my presence, my reality, my problems, my difficulties and contradictions.[5]"). This may be a fact, but in terms of his *oeuvre* they must not be allowed to dominate, either in sheer catalogued numbers, in Richter's practice of them, or in our consideration of them in relation to the figurative work. The photo/pictures are vital in their constitution of the first element of the essential dialectic which informs Richter's pictorial activity (in this light the Smooth Abstracts could be considered to be manifested conflations of this dialectic). The abstracts, even if they are dominant, form the second element. "Continuity in Richter's art," explains Lloyd "involves an attitude of mind rather than a style, characterised by an enquiring, experimental approach to the potentials of his medium, which is not to be confused with eclecticism" (Lloyd: 1988: 8).

Richter still insists on exhibiting photo/pictures alongside abstract works, as is evident in his most recent shows. This demonstrates, explicitly, their mutual importance, and again this should not be confused with eclecticism on Richter's part, or showmanship either. Their purpose is one of critical distantiation, for artist and spectator alike. In practice, the photo/pictures present Richter with the opportunity to reflect objectively on the processes of painting which culminate in the abstracts and also to distance himself from his artistic subjectivity. As well as this, the selection of photographic imagery provides the spectator with certain frames of reference with which to aid reception and reading of the non-figurative work. Paradoxically, the essential dialectic here offers the artist distantiation, yet offers the viewer something which is somewhat opposite - familiarity, a starting point. Paradoxes such as this are more important to Richter's *oeuvre* than any effects of juxtaposition, which are relatively superficial.

I admit that I hadn't taken much interest in his work up until then. It had such a confused appearance: the painter kept changing his style, switching from abstraction to realism; he had even hung a mirror at the outset of the show. It all seemed to mark a strange lack of consistency, a kind of off-hand, inconsequential approach that didn't fit my conception of art. In a word, I didn't find it very serious. (Tosatto: 1996: 9).

Richter's use of the mirror stems from his experiments involving glass panes, mirrors and frames, in the 1970s, as part of his Constructive work. For example, in one such piece, the viewer is presented with a series of windows, Four Panes of Glass, 1977. (fig.9), all of equal dimensions and size, mounted on movable axes.

"Its proper function, however," opines Nasgaard "is to aid seeing and representing. It is a practical invention, in the tradition of Renaissance viewing devices for constructing artificial perspective, and the camera viewfinder, its purpose being to frame reality direct, without an intermediary photograph. But what it reveals on the other side of the severed curtain is, of course, only more dumb unorganised reality, rendered even more unstable because of the multiple (infinite) framing choices made possible by tilting the four panes and *by the spectator's own movement."* (Nasgaard: 1988: 76).

This is fascinating on an ideational level, but also important as a symbolic gesture. Such a work, or deed the simple mirror at the start of a show, reminds the spectator that the surface appearance of the paintings is superficial to their reality, that style is an ephemerality. The most important and alluring thing about a mirror is its natural capacity for sheer, unadulterated, and sometimes intimidating representation of reality. The spectator is thus reminded that everything viewed thereafter relates to perception, as transcendent of appearance. The *Four Panes of Glass* relates to perceptual framing conditions in relation to art, painting and representation - the essential concerns of Richter's *oeuvre.* "...Richter's paintings are not different from one another in their essential concerns, but it is only their method that changes... (Ibid.:106).

This brings us back to the paintings and the essential dialectic between the abstract and the figurative. Although the deliberate position of opposite styles was a masterstroke in the elision of any archaic debates concerning the superiority of one form of painting over another, just as in the transpositional photo/pictures the similarly archaic debate concerning photography and painting is circumvented ("..the dead end of

the choice between abstract and figurative art. One shouldn't even enter the net." Jacques Lacan: 1986: 169-70 [6], it does, as reflected in the quotation of Guy Tosatto above, raise difficulties for some spectators and critics, difficulties concerning questions of authenticity. Traditionally, this notion was central to the concept of an *oeuvre*, and in relation to Richter it retains importance, but in different ways.

Authenticity in relation to the *oeuvre* of an artist in modernity, and the factor of the *oeuvre* itself in relation to the reception, interpretation and conferral of value on the work of art is discussed by Baudrillard in *Gesture and Signature: Semiurgy in Contemporary Art* [7]. Important ideas raised in this piece of writing have relevance to aspects of Richter's *oeuvre.* For example, given the drastic overhauls wrought on the status of the work of visual art brought about by the technological advances of the modernist project, a situation has developed whereby certain demands are placed upon the work of visual art, in this case the painting. These demands, in Baudrillard's view, are the demands of a viewer who expects dividends to be yielded by an artwork, dividends which, given the situation of modernity, are not realistically possible to yield. These demands are premised on preconceptions of originality, authenticity and creativity.

It is useless to argue that the forgery, the copy of the counterfeit are unacceptable today because photographic technique has disqualified "photocopy" by hand. That sort of explanation is specious. Something else has changed: the conditions of signification of the oeuvre itself. Baudrillard: 1982: 103.

Richter's photo/pictures - obviously Baudrillardian 'photocopies by hand', where Richter "uses photography to make a picture, as Rembrandt used drawing, or Vermeer the camera obscura" (Pelzer: 1996: 138) - are not as threatening to the desire for 'serious' authenticity expressed by Tosatto as the fact that they are conjoined by free, non-representational abstract works, under the name of one artist, and thus negate the very idea of individual style, the idea which underpinned quintessential modern theories and practices of value conferral in an age of democratised proliferation of copies of artworks. Individual style - connotations of modernist myths of freedom, expression and the individual self notwithstanding - denoted to the modern viewer that they were beholding an object imbued with an unreproducible originality, arising from an unrepeatable moment of creativity. This made the object unique in a reality where every image is rapidly reproduced - is designed with this fact in mind - and every object repeated and disseminated (exemplified by Benjamin as the film). Baudrillard:

Otherwise, how could we explain the insistent mythological demand for authenticity in contemporary art - that each painting be the emanation of a unique moment, often sanctioned by the very day and hour of its execution, and by the signature? And how explain the fact that any contemporary oeuvre is constituted as a declension of objects - each painting being a discontinuous term in an indefinite series, and thus legible first, not in relation to the world but in its relation to the other paintings by the same artist, its meaning being thus tied down to succession and repetition? 1982: 104.

In the case of the Abstracts, a number of canvases are worked on at any given time - about three or four months - and are maintained in a state of unfinished fluidity

until they are each brought to a state of completion in the final month. In the meantime Richter produces smaller-scale landscapes and portraits, giving him the opportunity to reflect on the direction of the abstract works. Also, "the process of painting must be interrupted," says Nasgaard "so as to resist the painting's being dominated by one creative direction or settling into a single mode." (1988: 108). This resistance of domination of one single mode over another reinforces the idea of an essential dialectic between two polarities and the importance of its maintenance.

Richter has said that "making is not an aesthetic act" (Ibid.: 49), meaning that he does not attach any artistic significance to the actual production of the works - 'that each painting be the emanation of a unique moment, often sanctioned by the very day and hour of its execution, and by the signature'- nor to the 'signature'. Richter does not sign his paintings, not with a monogram, but also he does not employ a single definitive style with which to sign his works either. His only style is he continuously disavows individual style as a 'stylistic principle' (Nasgaard: 74). Richter's individuality and aesthetic sensibility are given expression through his *oeuvre*, his 'attitude of mind' (Lloyd: 1).

A reading of Richter's work benefits by knowledge of the seriality of the *oeuvre* to which it belongs (and which belongs to it), but this reading is not limited by the *oeuvre*. Baudrillard says of the serial nature of the archetypal modern oeuvre:

"*In fact, it is precisely because the series has become the constitutive dimension of the modern oeuvre that the inauthenticity of one of the elements becomes catastrophic. Each term in its specific difference is essential to the functioning of the*

series as such, and to the the convergence of meaning from one term to another toward the model (here the subject himself) (1982: 105).

So any significant conferral of meaning on the work of art is singularly dependent on the demanded authenticity of each consecutive element of an oeuvre which 'becomes the original' (Ibid.: 104), not to mention dependent on a desired authenticity of the artist as an original, as a *subject-creator,* in Baudrillardian terms. In Richter, an effort is maintained to keep the means of production in one series consistent; one painting is made more or less in the same manner as the preceding one, and likewise for the next, but the desired result is that the paintings manifest themselves differently in their actuality.

[Still neither sublime nor sublimated], Richter's paintings in the 1990s make no radical break with those that came before. The radical problematic of his paintings, recent and otherwise, is one of producing the unrecognitions of substance (the material of ideas, the material of paint) whilst still recognisably being work by 'Richter'. Peter Gidal: 1994: 17.

In a way, Richter is demanding that his work be as 'new' for him as for the viewer; he is as curious as to the 'authenticity' of his abstractions as the viewer. In contrast to the predictable material form that the photo/pictures will take, the abstracts are intentionally unpredictable. Nasgaard: "What is sought is something else: "a pictorial quality that the intelligence cannot fabricate."" (1988: 108).

Returning now to Baudrillard, we can detect a synchronicity between Richter's *oeuvre* and the conditions of reception of the modern work of art in relation to

preconceptions of originality and truth. The oeuvre in modernity is placed under more pressure to deliver truth in present circumstances than it was in the classical era for example, when, according to Baudrillard (and Foucault), 'appearance held the keys to the city' (Baudrillard: 1982: 103). The artist of the classical age was privileged, in that the world was 'a reflection of an order (that of God, of Nature, or , more simply, of discourse), in which all things are representation, endowed with meaning and transparent to the language that describes them ….that artistic "creation" proposes only to describe.' (Ibid.)

Modernity too had its originality myths and positivist myths of destination, progress and utopia. Richter exists in a world without God, without any 'idea to help me.. no overarching meanings' (Pelzer: 1996: 147), no such ideology of the way things shall or should ultimately take shape, with his task as an artist to simply 'give them forth to be seen' (Ibid.: 136). Richter's motivation is one of Kierkegaardian objective uncertainty. As a painter he creates the origins for his models of perception of visual reality. For the viewer, the original is the *oeuvre* as a whole, and the *oeuvre* in the individual works. Baudrillard:

Today the conjuncture of values is entirely different: transcendence has been abolished, the oeuvre becomes the original. Its meaning passes from the restitution of appearances to the act of inventing them. Value is transferred from an eminent, objective beauty to the singularity of the artist in his gesture. 1982: 104.

The singularity of Richter is in the symbolic gesture of his *oeuvre*, which is transcendent of styles, oppositions of painting and photography, abstraction and

figuration. There is transcendent meaning in what Tosatto calls Richter's 'unprecedented attempt at an ontological exploration of painting's foundations and limits' (1996: 7). His body of work represents a comprehensive inquiry into modes of perception of visual reality, demonstrating an ongoing fascination with the conditions of perception in relation to the works of art he produces. There is an essential dialectic which comprises the two main polarities of his *oeuvre*, matched by the overt dialectic between artist and viewer, with the artist himself as viewer and the viewer being privileged as co-creator of meaning in the exhibited works. This should not be considered a shifting of authoritative responsibility by an artist unsure of his artistic motivations, but as a gesture of shared subjectivity between producer and receiver of these models of visuality, a gesture of consolidation and equalisation. The shifting of subjective positions of producer and receiver of meaning that these works provoke can be seen as an example of the paradox which informs and permeates the work of Gerhard Richter - one which he never tries to hide.

Chapter 3.Endnotes

[1] *Lloyd, Jill, Gerhard Richter , The London Paintings ; Anthony D'Offay Gallery, 1988.*

2 Tossato, Guy, Preface; Gerhard Richter 100 Pictures ; Olbrist (Ed.) Editions Cantz ; Cologne 1996

[3] *Worklist: from Rainbird, Seàn; Worklist as Structure; Gerhard Richter (cat.); Tate Gallery 1992.*

[4] *Honnef, Klaus : see Rainbird; 1992 : 11.*

[5] *Danoff, I.Michael, Heterogeneity - An Introduction to the work of Gerhard Richter; from Nasgaard, R.(ed.); G.R.Paintings 1988 : Thames & Hudson, New York 1988.*

6 Lacan, Jacques; Séminaire VIII, L'Éthique de la Psychanalyse (Paris : Seuil 1986),p.p.169-70, from Obrist : 1996 : 138.

[7] *Baudrillard, Jean; For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign ; Telos Press; St.Louis, Mo.,1982.*

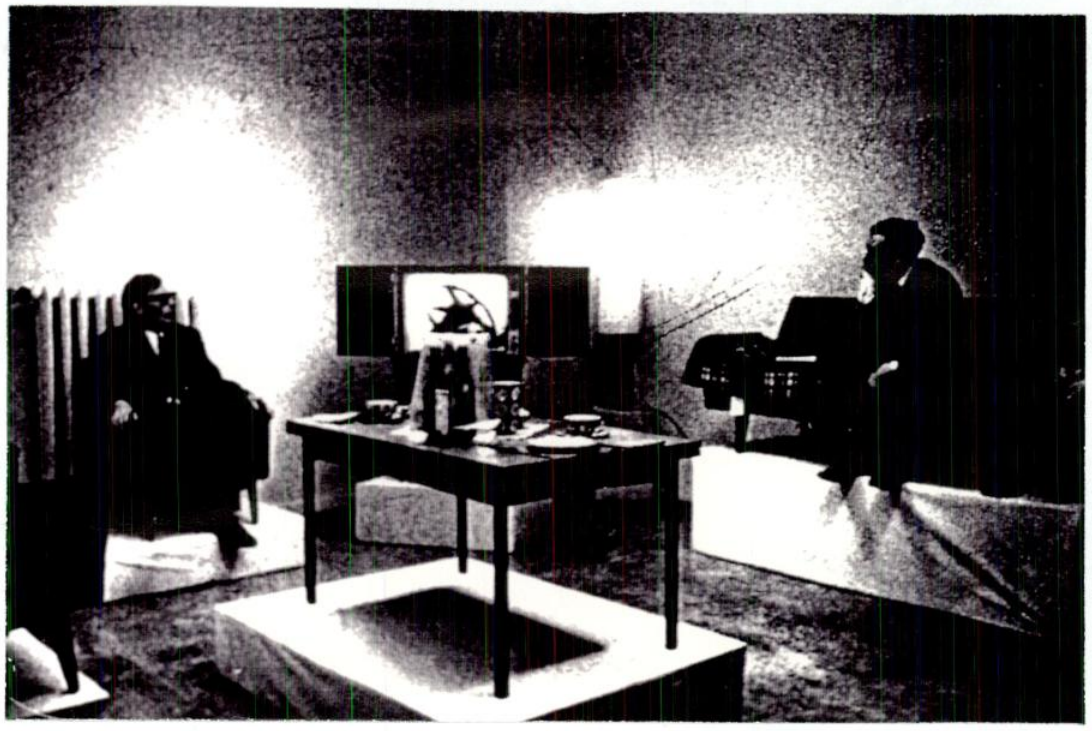


Fig.1. 'Demonstration for Capitalist Realism' (with Konrad Leug, left). 1963.

Fig.2.Eight Student Nurses. 1966. 92 x 68 cm ea.

Fig.3. section of 48 Portraits. 1971/72 . 70 x 55 cm ea.

Fig.4. Young Girl Reading. 1994. 72 x 102 cm.

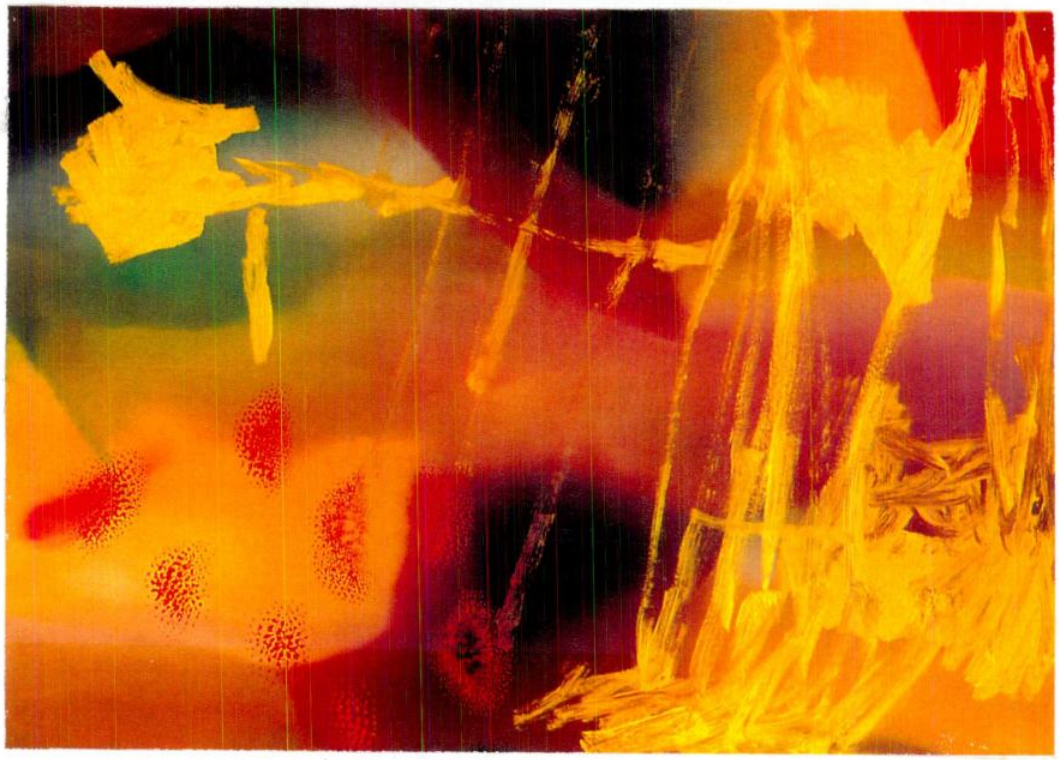


Fig.5. Abstract Painting (showing figure/ground construct) 1980. 60 x 85cm.

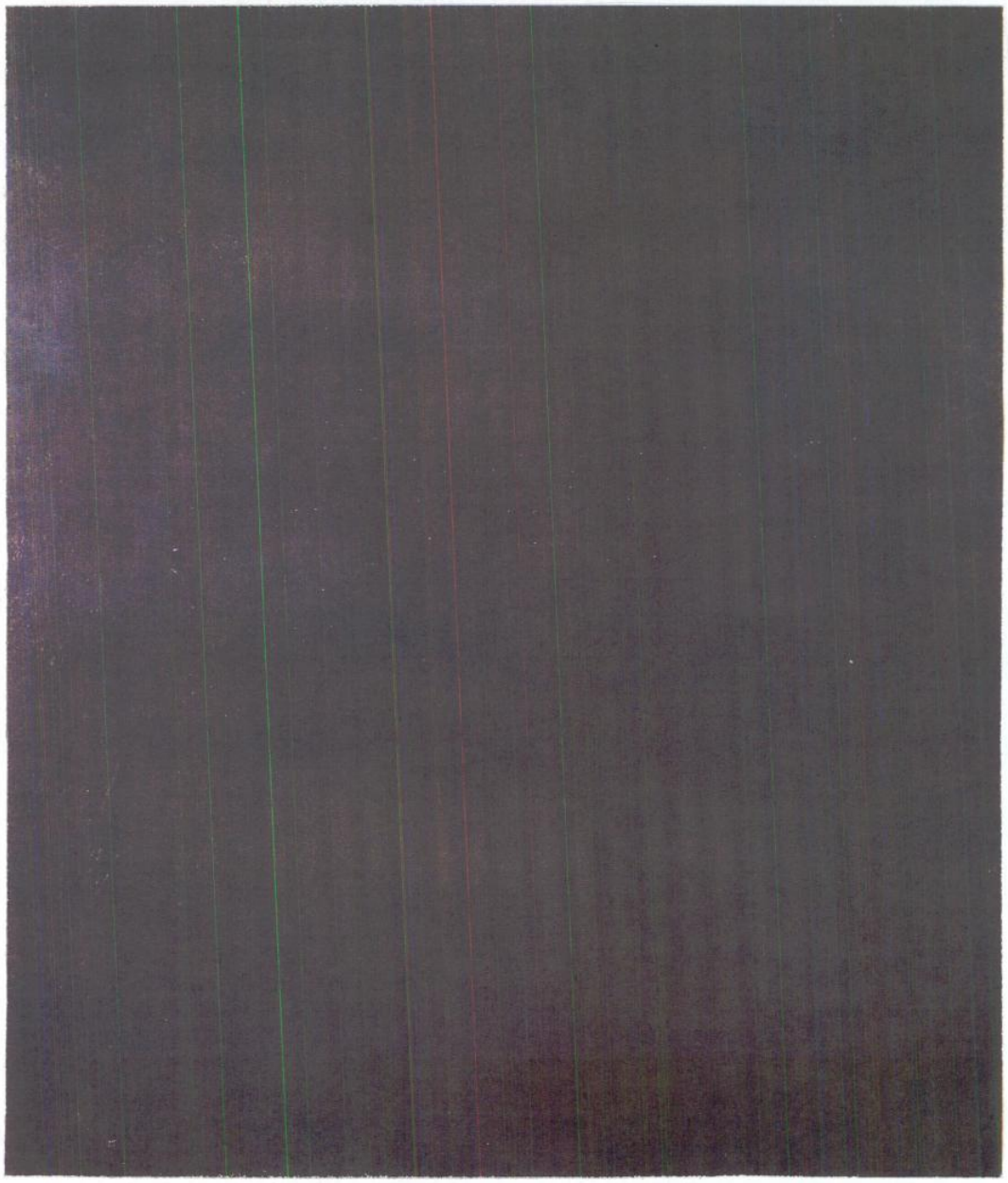


Fig.6. (397) Grey . 1976. 200 x 170 cm.

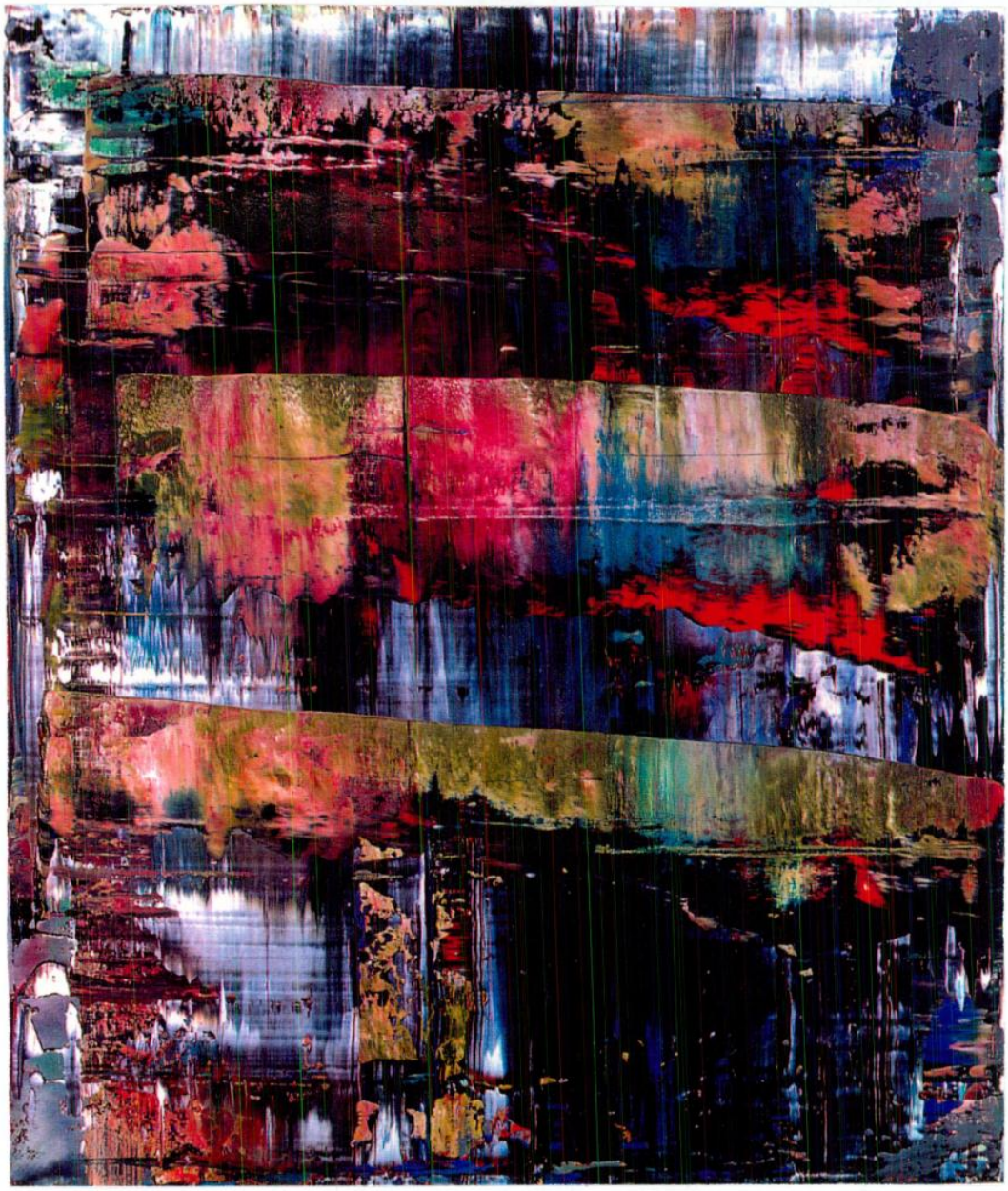


Fig.7. (801-2) Abstract Painting . 1994. 71 x 61 cm.

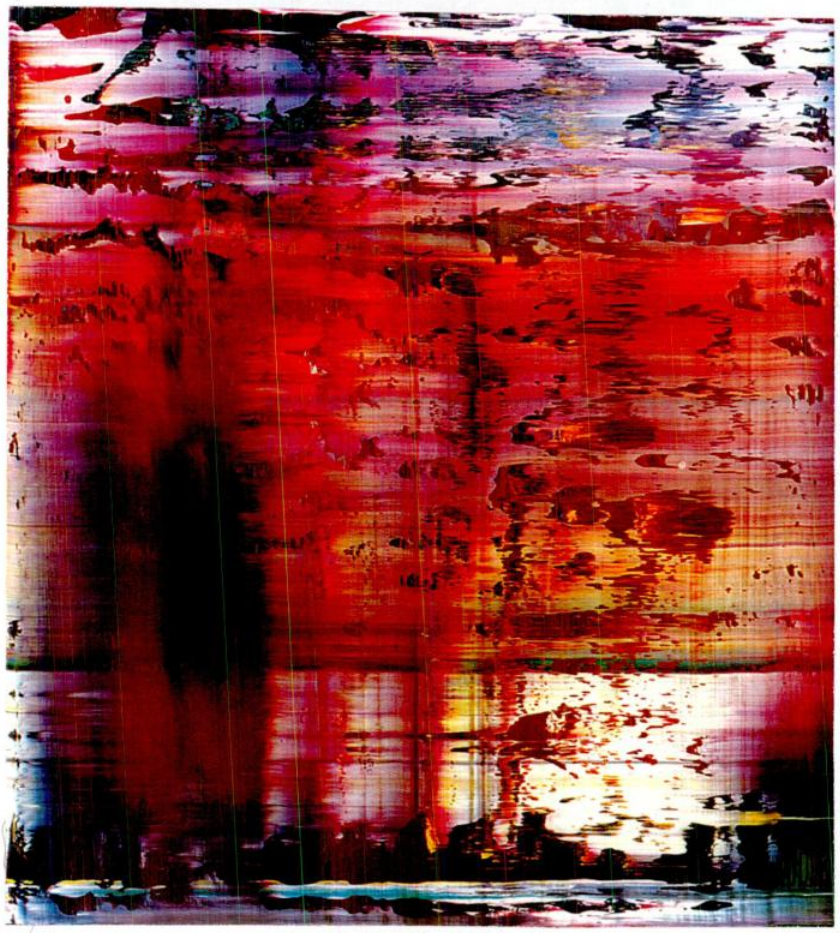
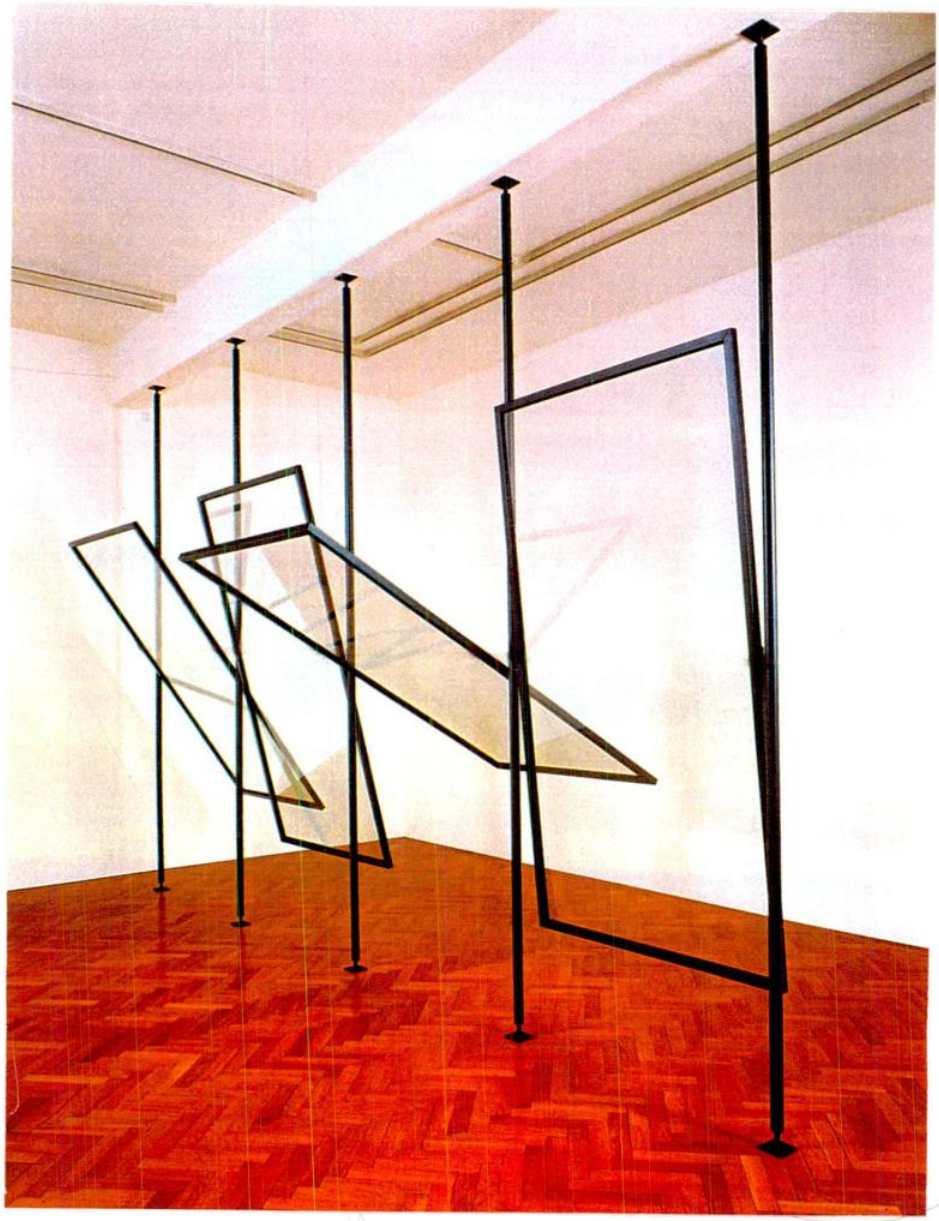


Fig.8. (845-7) Abstract Painting . 1997. 100 x 90 cm.



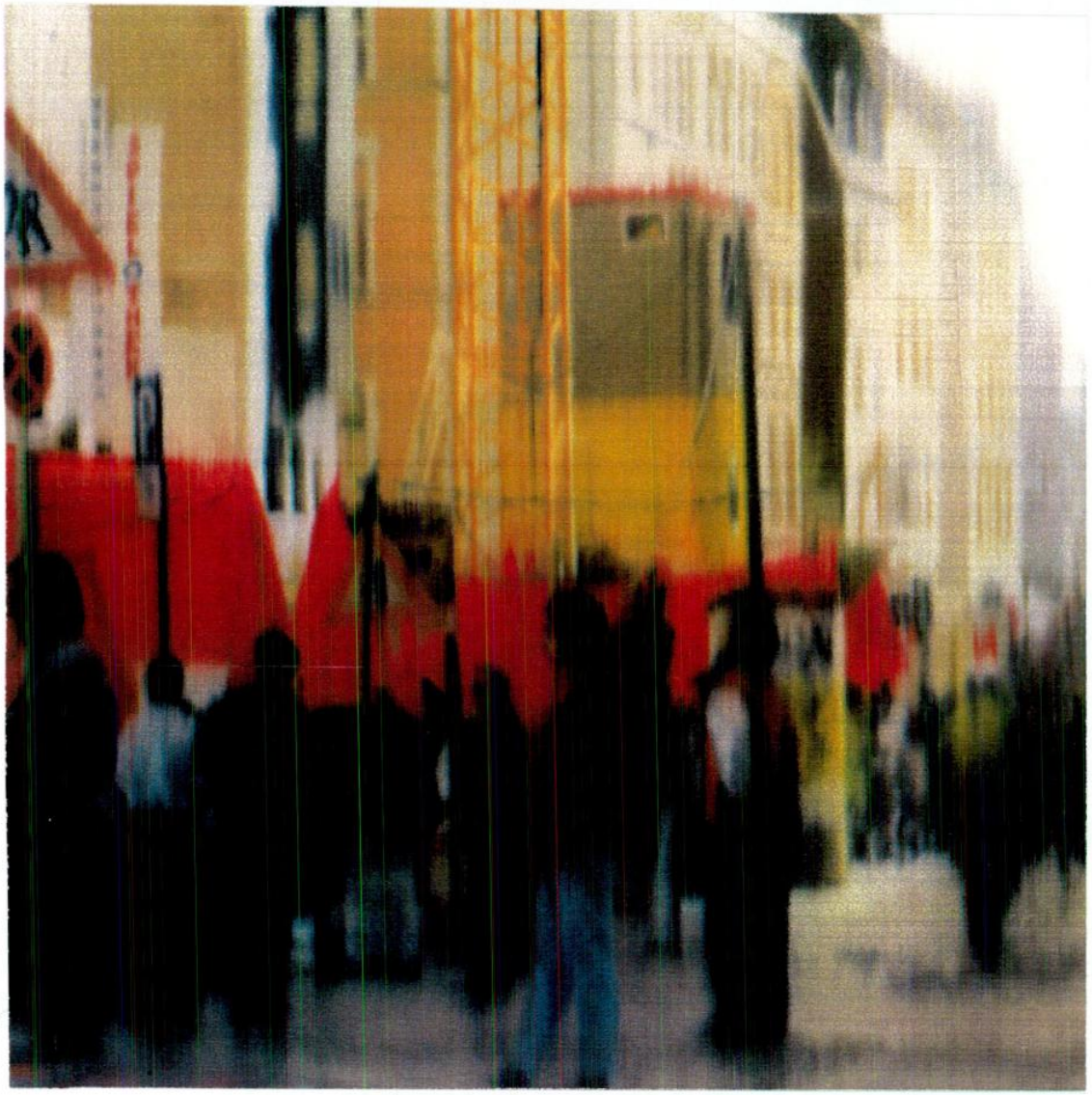


Fig.11. Installation of 18 Oktober 1977 at Portikus , Frankfurt.

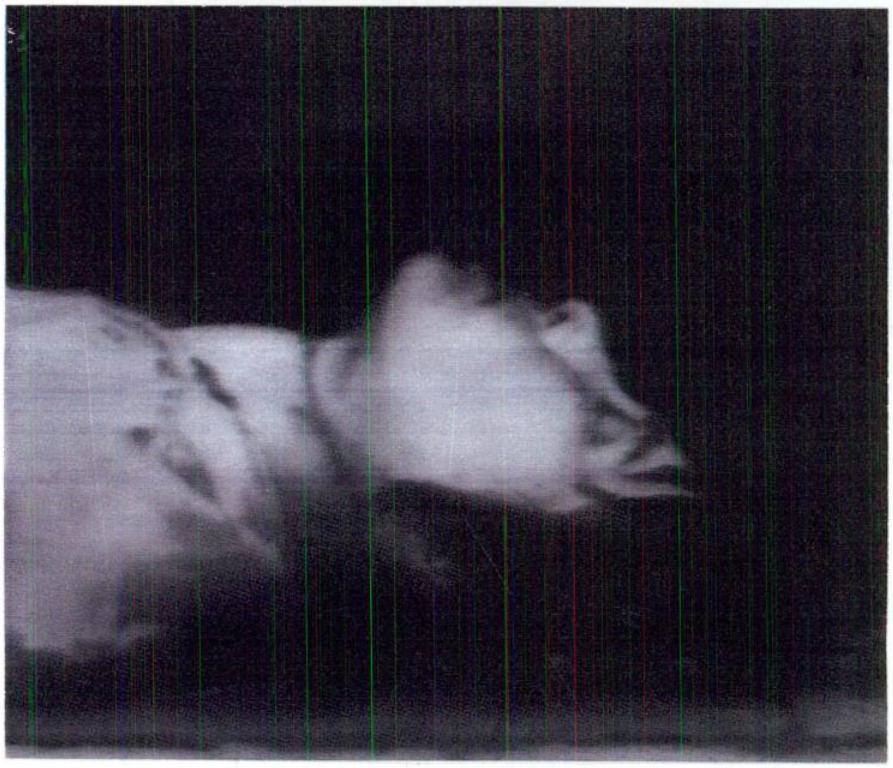


Fig. 12. (677-1) Dead (1), 1988 , 62 x 67 cm.

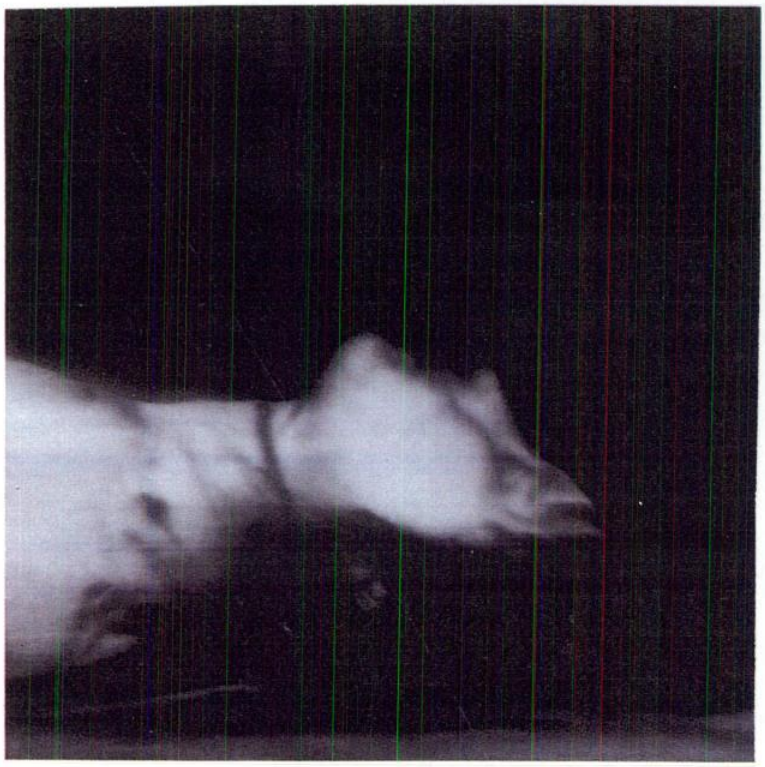


Fig. 13. (677-2) Dead. (2) , 1988 , 62 x 62 cm.

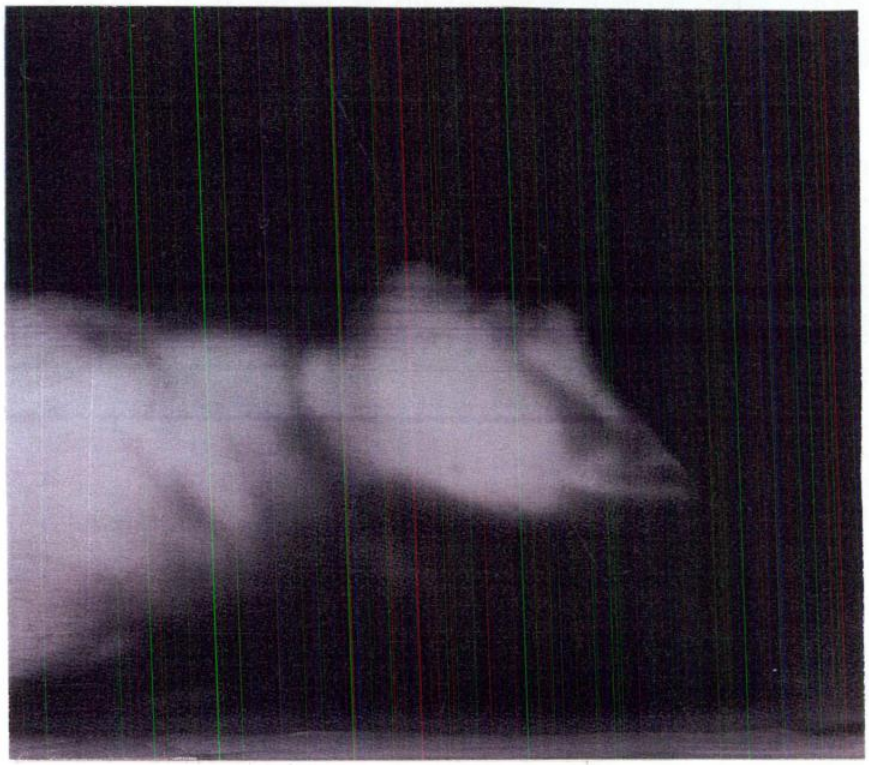


Fig. 14 . (677-3) Dead (3) , 1988 , 32 x 37 cm .

Fig. 15. (668) Hanged , 1988 . 200 x 140 cm .

Fig . 16 . (669 -1) Shot Down (1) , 1988 . 100 x140 cm.

Fig . 17 . (669 - 2) Shot Down (2) , 1988 . 100 x 140 cm .

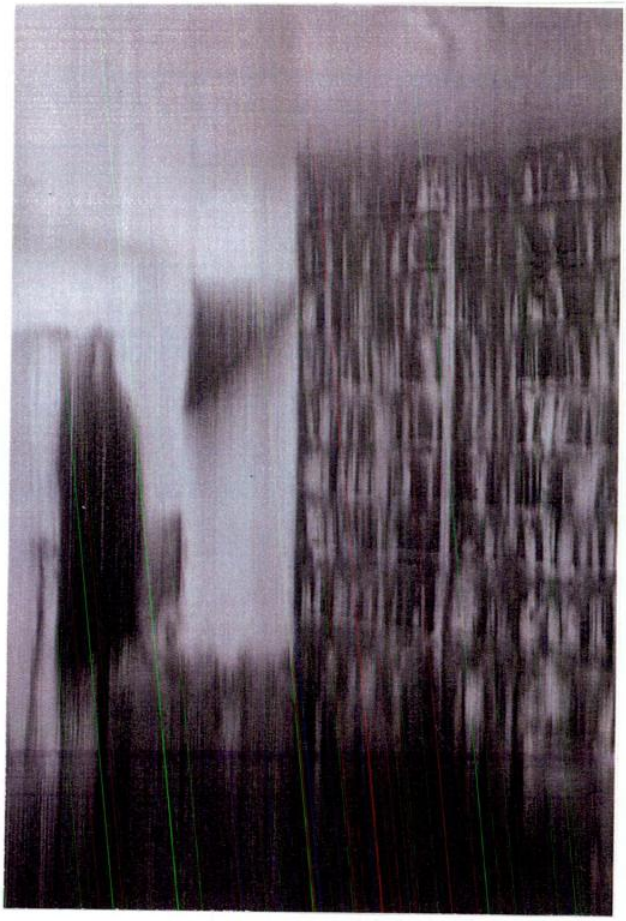


Fig . 18 . (678) Cell , 1988 . 200 x 140 cm .

Fig . 19 . (671 -1) Confrontation (1) , 1988 . 112 x 102 cm .

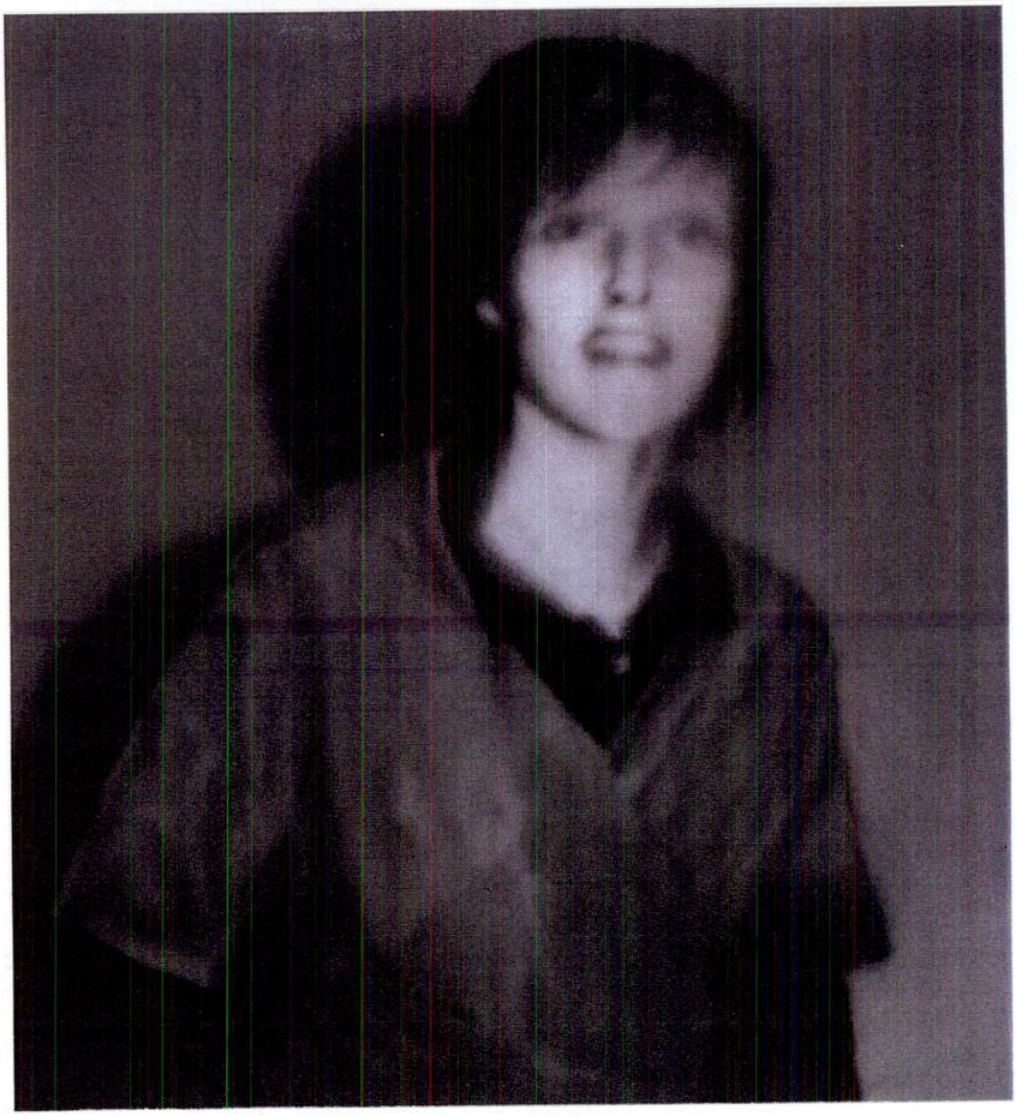


Fig . 20 . (671 - 2) Confrontation (2) , 1988 . 112 x 102 cm .

Fig . 21 . (671 - 1) , Confrontation (3) , 1988 . 112 x 102 cm .

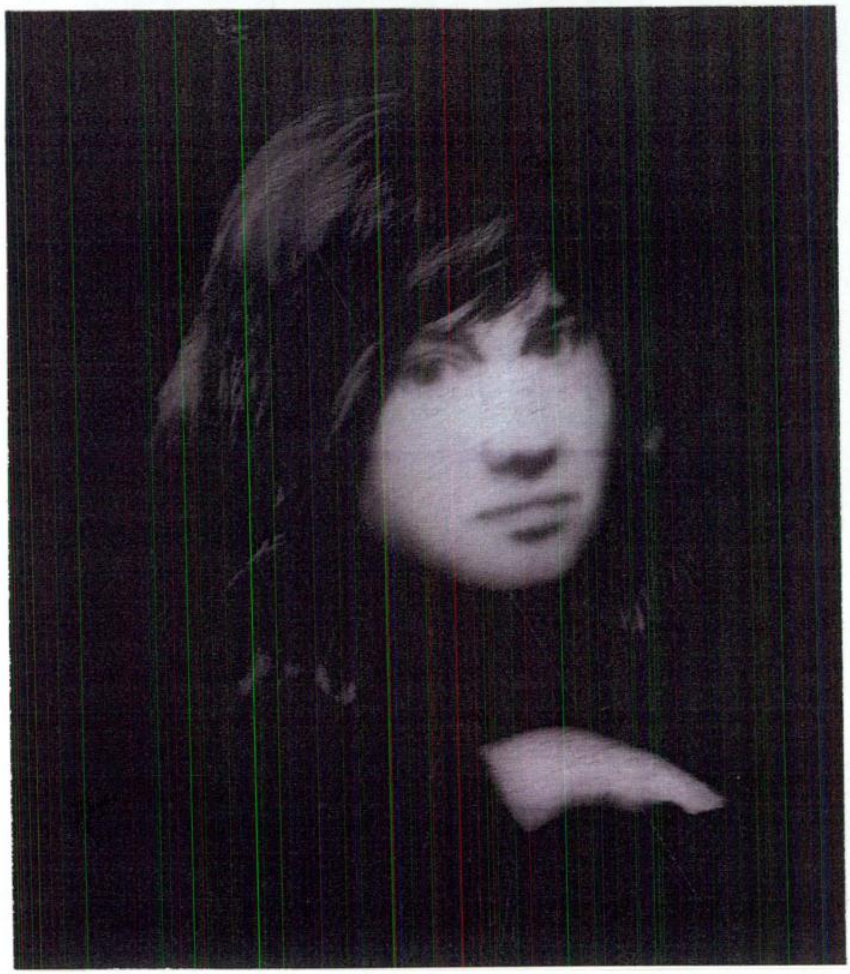


Fig . 22 . (672 -1) Portrait of a Young Woman , 1988 . 67 x 62 cm .

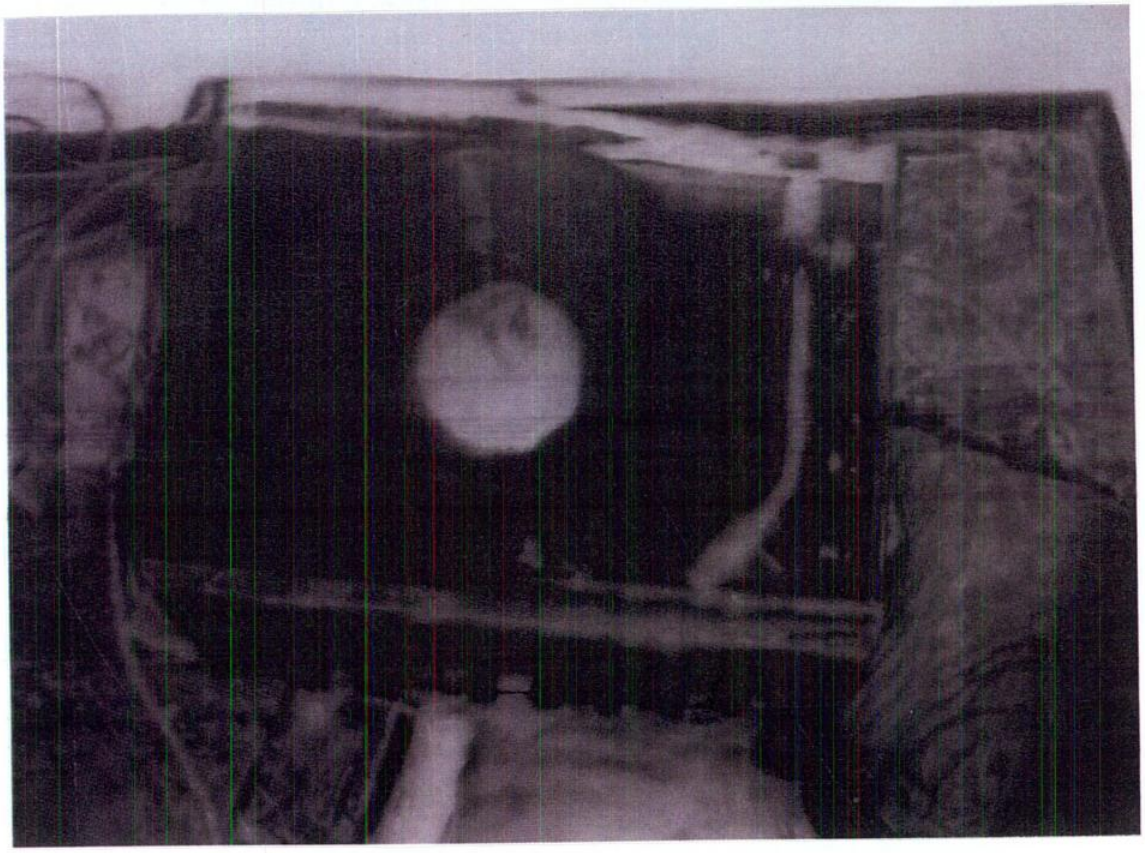


Fig . 23 . (672 -2) Record Player , 1988 . 62 x 83 cm .

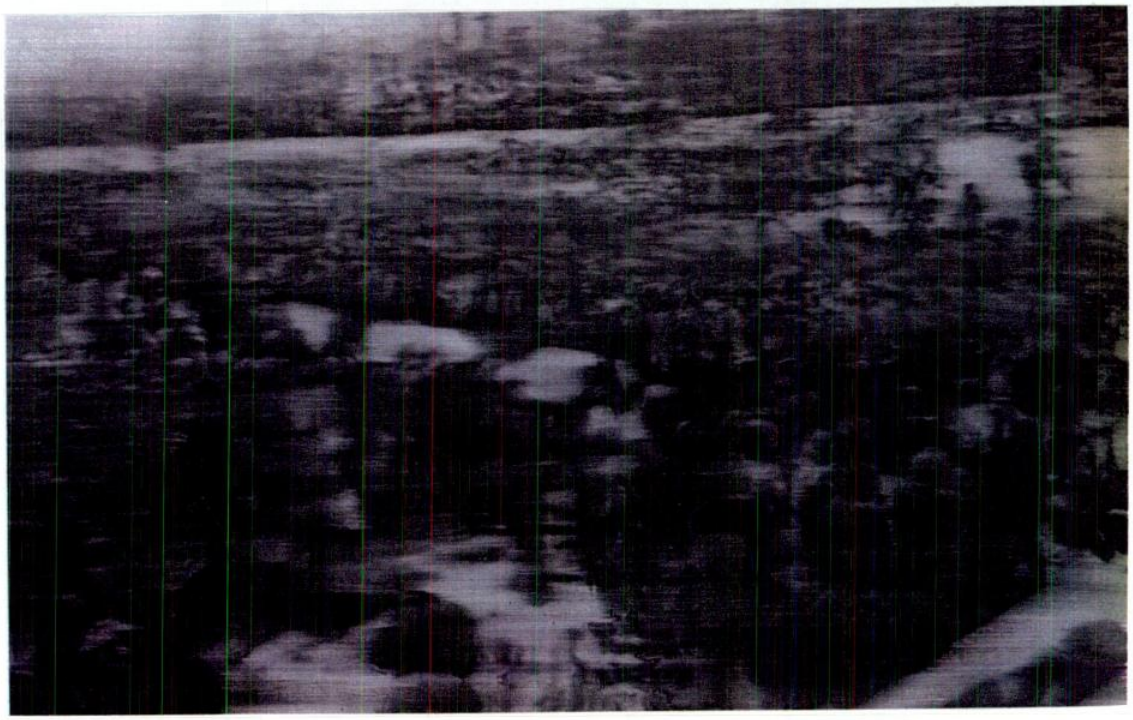


Fig . 24 . (673) Funeral , 1988 . 200 x 320 cm .

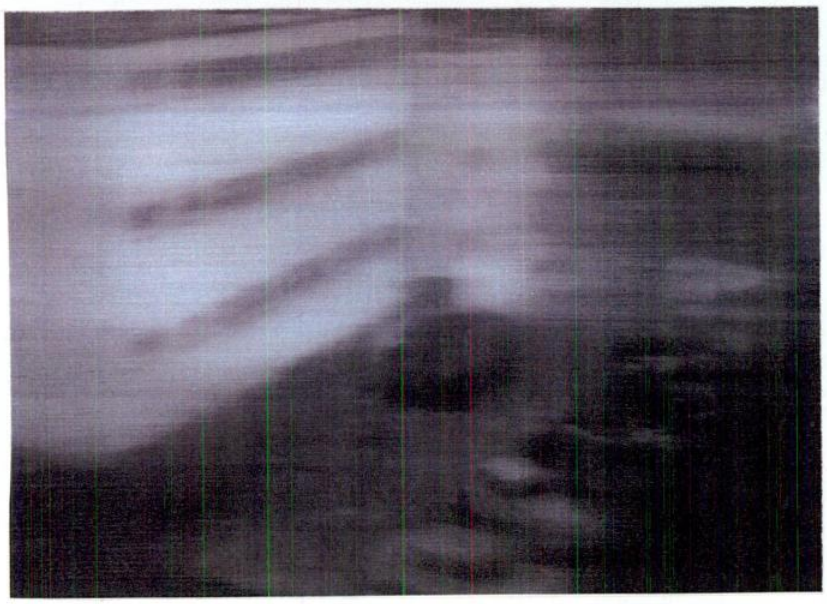


Fig . 25 . (674 -1) Arrest (1) , 1988 . 92 x 126 cm .

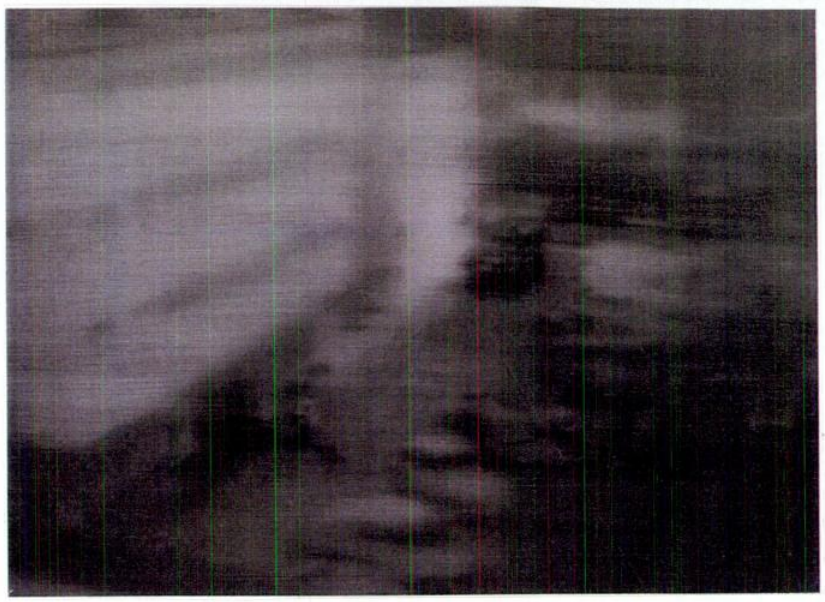


Fig . 26 . (674 -2) Arrest (2) , 1988 . 92 x 126 cm .

CONCLUSION: The Possibility of Painting.

But then everything comes back to this question: what are the possibilities, for modern art, of retracing the actuality of our world (the everyday reality of objects, social reality and its conflicts)? What can be its critical value? Artists themselves are often divided between the ideology of pure gestural values (authenticity) and this other ideology, the critical necessity of regrasping reality.

Baudrillard, 1981.

In conclusion, then, and as a meditation on the above questions, I shall examine Gerhard Richter's 18. Oktober.1977 cycle of paintings (see figs. 11 - 27). This series of paintings, fifteen in all, is ostensibly a collection of photo/pictures, their overt subject being the representation of the members of the Red Army Faction (or the Baader-Meinhof group, as they became more popularly known) who died in the Stammheim prison in October 1977. Officially pronounced by the state as suicides, yet, as much of the actuality of fact concerning the whole affair remains undisclosed, unproven or disbelieved (an actual trial, for example, never took place), this episode has come to represent the epitome of ambiguous history in a divided society, the willing collective amnesia of that society which consigns these events to oblivion. For Richter, as an artist, these pictures - documentary photographs of the deaths, prison interiors, connected objects, a portrait - presented him with the ultimate challenge for his work: to address issues such as those reflected in Baudrillard's questions above. How can history be

represented ? How can art represent the actuality of our world ? In the light of such questions these pictures can be seen as a culmination of concerns examined throughout this thesis, concerns central to Richter's artistic project: the restitution of potential for painting.

The 18.Oktober.1977 pictures, completed in 1988, are obviously not abstracts, but their status as a collective exhibited piece (Richter has prevented them from being separated by disallowing their sale on an individual basis) distinguishes them from the main body of photo/pictures which, as Richter's oeuvre has progressed, have taken on a more research-oriented position. This piece of work therefore not only represents a culmination of purpose for photo-based painting, but a watershed for Richter's abstract work, in that its success coincides with - or, better still mitigated - the full development of abstraction, which was to take precedence as Richter's preoccupation. Abstraction was not to completely dominate as a mode - the photo/pictures are still an element of Richter's oeuvre, and in his most recent exhibition at the Anthony D'Offay Gallery in London, photo/pictures are not only notably present as ever, but *Demo* (see fig.10) carries on the spirit of the 18.Oktober.1977 cycle, subtly re-questioning the possibility of representing social reality; "in its nagging intimations of conscience and of large public events, *Demo* is a gentler exercise in the vein of Richter's *"18.Oktober.1977"* series of 1988, on the Baader-Meinhof gang" (Frankel, /99: 89). Poetic on the theme of remembrance, occurring just ten years after *18.Oktober.1977*, *Demo* is another example of the inner, essential dialectic of the *oeuvre*: history repeating itself.

As usual, where the work of Richter is concerned, these works do not lend themselves to easy consumption. They are difficult to take, not only for a German citizen, or anyone familiar with these controversial events and their representations inevitably suggest, the polemic they have the potential to provoke, but more precisely they are difficult to absorb critically as art works. The nature of Richter's intention towards these pictures makes them difficult to define as 'statements' on the given subject, and therefore just as difficult to formulate statements about them. This lies at the centre of the works' paradox, and belies Richter's central paradox in the process.

"In the end, we find ourselves standing yet again amidst the ruins of all the contradictory fragments of fact, contrary conclusions, personal feelings, and interminable discussions. In the process the content of the painted pictures is entirely forgotten. The content? That is quite clearly, the death of three people which, in the autumn of 1977, led to a paralysis of thoughts and feelings which has remained with us until this present day....they have been left unresolved, repressed, exiled from the rest of experience because of their controversial nature - but nevertheless they have not been forgotten." Gerhard Storck (1988: 11).

A resolution of the actual issues, the controversy, the 'paralysed thoughts and feelings', not to mention the radical politics of the potently controversial matter at stake, is not only wildly beyond the remit and capacity of this thesis but actually beside the point of this conclusion, that of the possibility of painting, of Richter's achievement. Firstly, the 'content of the painted pictures': the photographic evidence of the events, their supposed undisputed nature, the referent ("I cannot deny that this person was

there," Barthes, Camera Lucida: 1980: 23). Photography, the quality of analogical truthfulness in the process, is deployed here as a sign of the establishment of the facts of the case. People were alive, people were in prison, people are now dead. That is what these images denote. The memory, willing or otherwise, is called upon to make any further sense, to formulate the 'narrative' desired, intentionally or otherwise, to draw them out of static meaningless-ness as mere pictures: to save them from dumbness. This is where any resolution must begin, in an engagement with perception, and any meaning-making must start with an examination of the preconceptions of the viewer. In a telling inversion of the norm, it is a suspension of belief, not disbelief, which is called for. Confronted with the *18.Oktober.1977* cycle - presented in the styleless factuality of the photo/picture - the viewer is first of all implicated in an act of description.

To describe a photograph, according to Barthes, "consists precisely in joining to the denoted message a relay or second-order message derived from the code which is that of language, and constituting in relation to the photographic analogue, however much care is taken, a connotation: to describe is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different to what is shown. Nasgaard: 1988: 49.

It is on this level of pure denotation, anterior to the burgeoning mass of connotation and subsequent mythicization that the reality of the object, the referent - the stark facts of death in *18.Oktober..* - is most piquantly exacerbated: here is the pure apprehension of reality. The quality of the transpositional method, the minimal separation of the real from its representation and the negation of simulation, is deployed here to significant effect. It is the apprehension of the real which fascinates Richter, the

real which he attempts to preserve in photographic stasis, in the 'death' of photography. This stasis is captured in every photo/picture, but in the *18.Oktober..* cycle it is particularly resonant. "From medium to medium," wrote Baudrillard in *The Orders of Simulacra* [3], "the real is volatilized; it becomes an allegory of death, but it is reinforced by its very destruction, it becomes the real for the real, fetish for the lost object - no longer object of representation, but ecstasy of denegation and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal."

Richter is uneasy at this apprehension, this isolation of fleeting reality, especially one so irradiated with cultural and political significance: so potentially entropic. The realities caught through the camera, which he utilised "as Rembrandt used drawing or Vermeer the camera obscura" (Pelzer: 1996: 140), throughout his body of figurative work, were similarly a means to an end, articulated into signs, allusive images. For example, the Landscapes represent for Richter something nostalgic, a certain classical notion: "A yearning for a whole and simple life" (Nasgaard: 1988: 52). The transposition of the real via photography to the picture - a simulacrum - and the distantiation involved (the 'minimal separation' of chapter 1) take on special meaning in the *18.Oktober..* pictures. The trademark blurring, maintained before in the process as a common denominator, is now lent a weight of signification. In conversation with Jan Thorn-Prikker [4]:

TP Why so blurred then?

GR I first paint an exact rendition of the photograph, sometimes more realistic than the model. That's possible with a little experience. What transpires is naturally an intolerable picture in every respect.

TP That reminds me of techniques in psychoanalysis. As if you were to suppress something initially, only to reconstruct it again….

(1989: 53)

So we see the exacerbation of the real, the 'intolerable picture', and the need to push it back, but not to alter it, merely to 'suppress it, only to reconstruct it again…'. Is this reluctance to fully - and without recourse at this point to illusion - apprehend and consume the real an attitude arising out of a sense of a fragility of the self-same real, the elusive referent? Does Richter through transposition, through deliberate treatment - the layers of protective overpainting involved in the process - seek to protect the real, seeing it as an elusive specimen? Baudrillard, in *The Precession of Simulacra*, describes how

Ethnology brushed up against its own paradoxical death in 1971, when the Philipine government decided to return the few dozen Tasaday who had just been discovered in the depths of the jungle, where they had lived for eight centuries without any contact with the rest of the species, to their primitive state, out of the reach of the colonizers, tourists, and ethnologists. This at the suggestion of the anthropologists themselves, who were seeing the indigenous people disintegrate immediately on contact, like mummies in the open air.

In order for ethnology to live, its object must die, by dying the object takes its revenge for being "discovered" and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it. …from Ramses, or the Rosy-Coloured Resurrection. (1981: 7).

The object to be apprehended here - the real - is volatilized by that which seeks to grasp and know it. Thus there must be effected a distantiation, and at no point must there be manipulation in the sovereign matter of the apprehended object - an appropriation - lest there be a disintegration, a

death of the object, the "evanescence of the object in its very apprehension" (ibid.). This 'death in stasis' is the subject of photography for Richter, and this fascination lends itself eminently to the exercise in mourning that is *18.Oktober.1977.* The mourning is also that of painting. Representational painting has brushed up with its own paradoxical death: photography. Painting sublimated into photography, and vice-versa - the transposition - is the equivalent of Baudrillard's paradox of simulation, where "representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation," while "simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as a simulacrum." (ibid.; 6).

There is no denial of simulation in *18.Oktober..* . "The distinction between painterly 'signifiers' and photographic 'signifieds'," writes Stefan Germer "has a subversive quality. It stresses the fictional character of the reality indirectly conveyed, and thus restores to painting - which has allegedly become obsolete since the arrival of the new medium - its critical function, in both senses of the word." (1989: 8). Painting acknowledges simulation, and retains representation. There is in this cycle of painting the idea of the possibility of reality - historical social reality - as fictive construct, produced by simulation: Baudrillard's 'fetish for the lost object.' The facts, for example, of the matter of the Stammheim prison deaths, of the mythicized RAF, are the matter of a repressed history, neither remembered nor forgotten, subsumed in a collective amnesia. The medium of history transforms the referent into an emblematic hyperreal, resurrected here by painting, removed from the shroud of the imaginary.

Such events as those depicted, commemorated, confronted in *18.Oktober.1977* are those which are untangible - save through myth - or unrepresentable. To comprehend them is to first apprehend them, to grasp their unendurable reality, and therefore to question their very reality. This is the stake of representing, the core of the matter. Baudrillard, in *The Illusion of War* [5], writes of a similar event:

> *The Americans fought the same war in respect of world opinion - via the media, censorship, CNN, etc. - as they fought on the battlefield. They used the same 'fuel air' explosives in the media, where they draw all the oxygen out of public opinion.*
>
> *The amnesia about it is, in itself, a confirmation of the unreality of this war. Overexposed to the media, underexposed to memory. Built in obsolescence, as with any consumer article... Forgetting is built into the event itself in the profusion of information and details, just as obsolescence is built into the object in the profusion of useless accessories.*
>
> *If you take one-thousandth of what you see on the TV to heart, you're done for. But television protects us from this. Its immunizing, prophylactic use protects us from this. Its effect and its images self-destruct in the mind. So is this the zero degree of communication? Certainly, it is: people fear communication like the plague.*
>
> *1992: 63.*

18.Oktober.1977 represents communication - a 'silent scream' - in art. It is imbued with desperation, a sense of hope conflicting with sadness and futility. Most of all , it is real. It is the culmination of the work, over decades, of an artist who has contributed to art not only an oeuvre of profound dimension, but one transcendent gesture. If painting is to be critical, effective, capable of communication - of acting withn history, not merely reflective of it - it must transcend its own limitations through a thorough knowledge of then, and above all stay trusthful to the real. Gerhard Richter : the possibility of Painting.

Conclusion - Endnotes

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[1] Frankel, David, in Artforum, February 1999; pp89

[2] Storck, Gerhard; Untitled (Mixed Feelings); from Gerhard Richter, 18. Oktober. 1977; ICA / Thames & Hudson, 1989.

[3] from Simulation; Semitext (e), New York, 1983.

[4] Thom-Prikker, Jan, Extracts from a Discussion on the 18.Oktober. 1977 cycle, from GR. 18.Oktober , 1977; ICA / Thames & Hudson; London, 1989.

[5] from The Illusion of The End; Polity Press; Cambridge.1992.

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