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Painting a photograph: The Work of Gerhard Richter

By

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Contents

Page

4 Introduction.

6 Chapter 1: The Copy.

18 Chapter 2: The Readymade.

29 Chapter 3: The index.

37 Conclusion.

40 Bibliography.

Introduction

In this thesis I will attempt to demonstrate that the work of Gerhard Richter, or more specifically his work concerned with the painting of photographs can be seen in relation to the historical progression of modernist painting which has been a dominant historical concern since the beginning of this century.

In so doing I lay myself open to the accusation that I make a massive assumption in assuming that Richter ever made an artwork in terms of modernism, or that he ever considered himself subject to any kind of modernist legacy. I could choose to answer such accusations by saying that regardless of Richter's own intentions, his work can be seen to account for theoretical issues that stand outside of the sphere of his own concerns.

I could not promote this view with any sense of real conviction. I believe that, even if Richter never consciously thought in terms of what modernist theory deemed to be legitimate in the practice of painting, he was at least aware of some of the ideas that were fundamental to modernist painting in its overall sense.

My belief that Richter's work can be seen to answer the theoretical concerns of modernist painting is primarily based on a statement made by Richter in an interview in 1977. In truth it is based on my inference of that statements meaning. The statement was made in response to a question asked by the interviewer Amine Haase. Haase nominated

fifteen works attributed to Richter since 1964 and followed the list by asking him why, in his work, there was to be found such a multitude of themes and forms? Richter's reply was to assure Haase that throughout the multitude ran a basic intention which always remained the same. When Haase inquired as to what this was Richter answered: "to try out what can be done with painting; How can I paint today?"(Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.92)

When I consider Richter's reference to 'today' or the present time, I consider the statement to be made, perhaps not in binary opposition to, but certainly in terms of yesterday. My implication is that yesterday refers to the history of painting that precedes his own work. Of course I accept that Richter's own understanding of yesterday may not necessarily constitute a consideration of modernism, but even so, in reading his writings concerning the production of paintings I feel assured that to some extent he was aware of a kind of legacy left to painting by modernism that is approximately similar to my own understanding of it.

In chapter one of the thesis I aim to demonstrate that in their capacity as copies, Richter's photopictures while also depicting recognisable objects, can be seen to be formalist executions of painting. In chapter two my aim is to consider the way in which the paintings can be seen to realise a reality of the medium that is intrinsically bound to their capacity to exist as readymade artworks and finally in chapter three I wish to illustrate that in choosing the medium of the photograph as a vehicle for the medium of painting Richter can be seen to have married the reality of paint as a medium to the reality of the external world. In this, he has justifiably retrieved for the practice of painting, a content that is more than just entirely bound to the subject of its own condition.

Chapter 1

The Copy

It is not in principle that modernist painting in its latest phase has abandoned the representation of recognizable objects. What it has abandoned in principle, is the kind of space three dimensional objects can inhabit

(Clement Greenberg)

In the essay, "Modernist Painting" of 1960, Clement Greenberg attempted to explain why painting in its latest stage was largely abstract. What Greenberg undertook to do was to trace a path of logical progression through the major movements of painting from the beginning of the century onward. The task involved determinism, generalisation and was of course predisposed to subjective opinion. The essay first appeared in the form of a pamphlet that was published by the '*Voice of America*' and later broadcast on the same agency's radio station. Because of the wide circulation and influence of this and other pieces written by Greenberg (who wrote for several magazines including the '*New York Times*'), many art historians and theorists consider the current understanding of the progression of modernist painting to be unbalanced or biased towards Greenberg. Today many art historians feel that modernist painting's arena of discourse is too solely based around the theories of one man. Similarly many people consider Greenberg to be responsible for the exclusion of figurative painting in the record of recent history. Indeed I imagine that many people, like myself, are aware of Clement Greenberg for a long time before they realize that modernist painting was more than just a complete abolition of representation in painting. It was a long time before I realised Greenberg accepted that the recognisable object might one day return to the field of

painting. It takes a further investigation of modernist painting to understand how this might occur without painting negating a large history that precedes its more recent manifestations.

At the beginning of the essay "Modernist Painting" Greenberg establishes where he believes the essence of modernism lies, regardless of specific media or artistic practice.

The essence of modernism lies as I see it
in the use of characteristic methods of a
discipline to criticise the discipline itself.
Not to subvert it but in order to entrench
it more firmly in its area of competence.
(Greenberg, 1990, p.85)

This proposal is meant to ground the readers understanding of modernist paintings progression in a motive that is common to all the mediums that constitute modernism as a general trend. In demonstrating modernism's condition in specific disciplines Greenberg exemplifies the activity of the philosopher Emanuel Kant.

I conceive of Kant as the first real
modernist ...Kant used logic to establish
the limits of logic.
(Greenberg, 1990, p.85)

By applying this logic to painting as a specific discipline it can be seen that a modernist painting is one that uses painting to establish the limits of painting. Or one that employs the characteristic methods of painting, as a discipline, to criticise its own condition and therefore establish itself more firmly as a painting in its own area of competence.

In painting this meant that throughout the first half of the twentieth century the cardinal norms of painting were revised. "The frame, finish, paint texture, colour contrast and value"(Greenberg, 1990, p88), were all revised and accentuated in the name of understanding that which was unique to painting. The reason however that painting progressed towards abstraction was, according to Greenberg, that the revision of cardinal norms ran parallel to an expulsion of any quality that painting might have, "conceivably borrowed from the medium of any other art"(Greenberg, 1990, p.86). For painting this effectively meant divesting itself of anything it might share with, for example, sculpture. After all, painting could not establish its own condition through means that were the concerns of other mediums. This according to Greenberg accounts for the apparent flatness of the works that constituted the modernist movements of impressionism, cubism, etc. But it further accounts for the abandonment of the recognisable object: "All recognisable objects exist in a 3 dimensional space" (the domain of sculpture) and (in painting) "the barest suggestion of a recognisable entity suffices to call up associations with that kind of space"(Greenberg, 1990, p.88). This is why according to Greenberg painting went abstract.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s Gerhard Richter painted pictures that were based on photographs. A lot of the pictures would appear to be based on what can be seen to be technically bad photographs. In fact viewed as a whole they can be seen to reference characteristics that are specific to the medium of photography- blurring and double registration due to camera shake, blurring due to bad focus, glares due to camera flash, compositional cut off's, etc.- and yet by definition they are paintings.

Perhaps it is preferable to see them as photographs that have been translated into the medium of paint. Whichever the case they are painted pictures that regardless of Richter's intention, represent recognizable figures and objects.

In her essay, "This new art: to draw in space"(Krauss, 1985, pp. 119-129), Rosalind Krauss demonstrates a condition that is peculiar to some pieces of artwork in the position they hold as the end result of a translation or copy. I would like to discuss this essay with reference to Richter's photopictures, as I have previously suggested that they might be referred to as photographs which have been copied or translated into the medium of paint.

In the essay Krauss exemplifies a piece by Julio Gonzalez as the embodiment of her thesis. She first explains that the piece was a result of a series of collaborations between Gonzalez and Picasso, who had visited Gonzalez's studio in 1928 with the intention of translating some drawings he had made into free standing metal wire models. The success of the collaboration led Picasso to return in 1930, this time insisting that they would commit themselves, as much to the demands of the materials they would use as they would to the demands of the original drawings from which they would work. On this occasion Gonzalez considered the outcome earthshaking, and was imported to embark upon his own series of sculptures which were to be based upon an investigation of this process. For him, unlike Picasso, who was compelled towards assemblage, this would mean a more stringent adherence to the original drawings.

In Krauss's text the sculpture exemplified, "Woman combing her hair"(1931) is photographically reproduced in juxtaposition to a reproduction of the original drawing. Krauss employs the near identical profile of each by concentrating on a "W" formation common to both. The 'W' of the sculpture is almost unintelligible without reference to the original drawing which reveals it to be the jagged edge of a woman's crop of hair as it is flung forward and hung over the aforementioned comb. The configuration of iron rods in the sculpture betray the fact that in translating the drawing to space, Gonzalez copied the drawing in its aesthetic as a 2 dimensional arrangement of shapes and lines. He did not make a sculpture of a woman combing her hair in as much as he made a sculpture of a drawing that happened to be of a woman combing her hair. And even at that he may have compromised the drawing in respect to the materials he was working in- the medium of sculpture in the domain of three dimensional space.

But why are we more likely to understand what the 'W' represents when we consult the drawing? Perhaps because the mimetic process of recognition is more heavily employed in the reading of a drawing. So Gonzalez has in fact, by translating a drawing into the medium of space enabled the viewer to appreciate the drawings abstract quality, by lessening their compulsion towards mimesis. In being abstracted from a drawing do we observe the sculpture (which is the final article) to be an abstraction? Is that possible? It is after all a two legged structure, the title of which relates to us exactly what it represents. Krauss suggests that the sculpture exists as a relaxation of the oppositional frontiers of abstraction and mimesis and proposes that this existence has always been particular to the copy, in its position as the end result of a translation.

Krauss says that in the Gonzalez sculpture the abstraction occurs in the details of the form where meaning is elided in the literalness of the copy. She equates the translation of the drawing to space to the translation of language, e.g. when 'n'est ce pas' becomes 'isn't it'. When the smaller component parts of the phrase are singularly translated to their equivalent parts and reassembled the structure remains the same but the coherence of the meaning is abstracted; "abstraction is thus the function of a specific process- in this case the process of making a copy", (Krauss, 1985, p.124).

She further qualifies this notion by recalling instances of images being subjected to change due to the procedure of copying. She exemplifies the procedure of translating paintings to print engravings in the era preceding the invention of photography. In further copies made of these prints, usually made by students for their own purposes or as a matter of exercise, there often occurs differences of representation. For example having no access to the original paintings, student print makers would often be confronted, in the original prints, with ambiguous dark patches that might be seen to represent either cloth or shadow. They usually decided upon one or the other sometimes guessing wrongly. Here again there is the translation of a component part changing the coherent meaning of the whole image.

Krauss says that every form of communication has its particular mode of breakdown or rupture and claims that in the sphere of the visual arts it is located in the channel of transmission that involves the translation or copies. She would seem to suggest that in the act of translation or copying a copyist observes the formal qualities of an image that they copy.

In her own words she describes this as, “the magic trick from the wings of the theatre” or the “view of the bees in the hive rather than the taste of honey”, (Krauss, 1985, p.126). This finds parallels with Greenberg’s suggestion that the Impressionists sought this kind of “optical experience as against optical experience as revised or modified by tactile associations,”(Greenberg, 1990,p.89) or indeed the associations called up by any other sense.

This puts me in mind of an exercise I once had to perform. My objective, strangely enough, was to make a copy of a photograph. I attended a print module in my first year in art college, in which it was suggested to me that I choose a black and white photograph from a magazine, cut it out, turn it upside down, mount it on paper, grid it and copy it, with an emphasis on tonal variety. While I laboured away my tutor explained to me that because the image was upside down in my own mind I was no longer recognising the objects that could be seen to exist within it. The suggestion was that if my mind were allowed to recognise the objects within the picture then the quality of the copy would be disturbed by the visible interjections of preconceived notions I had about the objects represented. An example of this would be giving a child a picture of a car and asking them to copy it. Most children, rather than copying the image as a simple arrangement of shape and colour, would say to themselves: “This is a car, I already know how to draw a car; a rectangle, two circles, the nuts of the wheel, etc.” The resulting copy would be upset by the intrusion of notions they have about representing objects. In my case with the picture upside down I was forced to disregard the objects represented and see only the formal variations of tone. In this case the act of seeing that proved to be most effective for the procedure of copying involved a lack of recognition.

I simply copied the photographs in paint
and aimed for the greatest possible
likeness.

[Richter, (1964) in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.22]

In the act of copying photographs into the medium of paint Richter will have been exposed to the formal aspects of the image, or at least I would feel justified in saying that to some degree he must have observed the image as a formal arrangement of colours and shapes which is surely an abstract appreciation of the image. It is also reasonable to assume that while appreciating the formal qualities of the image it is impossible at the same instant to consider the formal objects represented within (as in a photograph where the image is always one that is the direct physical result of the action of light on the external world). So in deference to Greenberg's writings concerning recognisable objects and the associations they call up, can I assume that in the execution of a copy Richter can have no understanding of the real space that is represented within? Richter himself in writing about the painting of photographs has said: "As a record of reality the thing I have to represent is unimportant and devoid of meaning", [Richter, (1964) in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.37] . This denial of the represented object would seem to suggest that his works are abstract and yet in the same piece of writing he says: "I am not saying that the thing represented is abolished as such (the picture cannot be turned upside down)". So the denial isn't total.

In the past Richter has claimed his pictures to be as much photographs as the photographs from which they are painted, which would make it preferable to seek an amnesty from the judgements of abstraction

or representation, in that historically we don't know whether these judgements can be applied to photographs. However if one chooses to opt for this amnesty one does so only to disregard Richter's own terms of reference. In his writings and interviews he frequently employs both standpoints when describing his paintings:

The photograph makes a statement about real space, but as a picture it has no space of its Own. Like the photograph I make a statement about real space, but when I do so I am painting; and this gives rise to a special kind of space that arises from an interpenetration and tension between the space represented and the pictorial space.

[Richter, notes, 1964, Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.38]

Richter's interviews and writings frustrate both those of his admirers who seek to judge the work in terms of abstraction or representation, and those who seek to judge the work outside of these frames of reference. When asked if his pictures are truly abstract he replies: "possibly."

The end product may not be entirely representational for reasons of productive procedures, but that doesn't mean that outside of Richter's intention the paintings exist as abstract works. In appearance they certainly aren't abstract. Despite the activity of translation that the image has been a party to there are no visible ruptures. In the examples given by Krauss in her essay, the end copies of both pieces were visibly more abstract than the original representations. On both occasions this was due to the interjections of the authors. In the case of the engraver it is an interjection that is due to

their inability to accept the abstract form as purely formal but in the case of the sculpture the author interjects with an idea of a quality he sees as being intrinsic to the medium he uses, i.e. that a sculpture should be active in a three dimensional space.

Krauss's essay was written to dispel the myth of originality in avant garde art, or myths concerning abstraction as a language of spiritual or intellectual origin. She says that modernism suppresses the idea of the copy and ignores its existence in the history of painting. However in demonstrating how abstraction can be the result of the process of copying she proves something that Greenberg suggested in his essay on modernist painting: in these circumstances abstraction may be the result of an adherence to the essential qualities of the medium used to represent. When Gonzalez copied the drawing of the woman into space he wasn't just exposed to the formal aspects of the drawing, he was concerned with the most intrinsic quality of the medium used to represent. He turned and twisted the image and made it active in three dimensional space. This is where the rupture or abstraction visibly occurs.

While relating the privileged view of the copyist to Richter it is important to note that in the finished paintings visible abstractions do not occur (although occasionally a painting is blurred when the original is not, this would seem to represent qualities that are intrinsic to the medium of photography and not painting). In considering the change of medium that occurs in his own form of translation (from photograph to paint) it must be assumed that Richter unlike Gonzalez does not interject with ideas concerning the intrinsic qualities of the medium. Thus it must be assumed that Richter ignores the qualities that are deemed by Greenberg to be the

essential qualities of the medium of painting- the frame, finish, paint texture, colour contrast, etc. In fact it would seem to be the same perceptual state of mind that is responsible for his denial of the objects represented in the pictures painted; that is responsible for his denial of the 'cardinal norms' of painting.

Richter acknowledges an altered way of seeing that is present in his copying of photographs, but in his description of this way of seeing there is a negation of formal qualities as well as a negation of a picture's content:

I don't copy photographs laboriously with painstaking craftsmanship: I work out a rational technique- which is rational because I paint like a camera and which looks the way it does because I exploit the altered way of seeing created by photography.

[Richter, (1964), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.35]

The photograph reproduces objects in a different way from the painted picture because the camera does not apprehend objects, it sees them. In freehand drawing the object is apprehended in all its parts dimensions proportions, geometric forms. These components are noted down as signs and can be read off as a coherent whole. This is an abstraction that distorts reality and leads to stylisation of a specific kind. By tracing the outlines with the aid of a projector, you can bypass this elaborate process of apprehension. You may no longer apprehend but see and make (without design) what you have not

apprehended. And when you don't know what you are making you don't know either what to alter or distort. Your apprehension that an arm is so wide, so long, so heavy, is not only unimportant, but it becomes a fraud if it leads you to believe that you have fully apprehended that arm.

[Richter, (1964), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.35]

In this quote Richter can be seen to deny the associations brought to an image by recognising the objects within- "your apprehension that an arm... is so heavy"- and although it can be said that in copying he became exposed to the formal aspects of the image, he would seem also to deny the component parts of construction, "dimensions, proportions, geometric forms". In this way he would seem in both instances to deny painting as a communicative language:- "signs that can be read off".

The absence of intervention by Richter as the author of the paintings has led to critics comparing his works to readymades. Richter would seem to have taken ordinary everyday objects (photographs) and presented them to the discourse of art as a general practice. The confusion would seem to occur in his simultaneous presentation of 'paintings'. Traditionally readymades are not considered to be paintings and they would seem to refer to art outside of specific disciplines. The marriage of the two would appear to be contradictory.

Chapter 2

The Readymade

The word art etymologically means to make. Now what is making, making something is choosing a tube of blue a tube of red ... and always choosing the place to put it on the canvas, its always choosing. So in order to choose you can use tubes of paint, you can use brushes but you can also use a readymade thing. Choice is the main thing even in normal painting.

(Duchamp, Radio interview with Carbonnier RTF, 1961, Quoted in De Duve, 1996, p.161)

Buchloch:- So the negation of the productive act in art as introduced by Duchamp and revised by Warhol was never acceptable to you?

Richter:- No because the artist's productive act cannot be negated. It's just that it has nothing to do with the talent of 'making by hand' only with the capacity to see and to decide what is to be made visible. How that then gets fabricated has nothing to do with art or artistic abilities.

[Richter in interview with Buchloch, (1986), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.140]

'Readymade' was a term invented by Marcel Duchamp to describe the various pieces he had proposed for exhibition between the years 1913 and 1924. Perhaps the most famous of Duchamp's readymades was the one called 'Fountain'(1917). 'Fountain' was a urinal that Duchamp

signed under the pseudonym Richard Mutt and submitted to an independents show for exhibition. Needless to say it was refused, then lost and then reproduced. Regardless of it's refusal or acceptance it exemplifies the term Duchamp used for such pieces. What Duchamp had done was to take an object from normal everyday life, remove it from it's functional position, and deposit it in the space of the gallery. The term readymade was meant to describe the condition of the pieces when he received them, given that they were already made. What Duchamp demonstrated by doing this is, for the moment, unimportant. What is important is that I establish why theorists and critics have used the word 'readymade' in relation to Richter's photopictures.

In the same way that Duchamp chose an object from everyday life and exhibited it in a gallery without any visible interjections (other than a bogus signature) Richter can, because of his own lack of visible interjections, be seen to have taken the everyday object of the photograph and simply deposited it in the space of the gallery for exhibition as art. Richter himself acknowledges the term in reference to the photopictures and with his acknowledgement of his own non-interjection, it would appear that he accepts it in the same vain as the critics use it. Indeed he has said that in his photopictures he hoped to, "achieve the same coherence and objectivity that a random slice of nature (or a readymade) always possesses"[Richter in interview with Sabine Schutz, (1990), Obrist, 1995, p.216]. The confusion over the term would seem to arise from it's use as a description of artworks that are also paintings. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, in interviews Richter has been subject to interviewers that have found themselves theoretically unable to marry these terms or resolve their apparently oppositional points of reference. Although Duchamp

loosely used the terms in reference to some pictorial objects he produced, it was never considered a term that could be used to describe paintings. Certainly in the practice of painting during the 1960s and 1970s the term was rarely if ever used to describe the contemporary paintings of prominent artists (that is with the notable exception of Richter). It is perhaps a generalisation and an oversimplification, but in the historical record of most art historians the readymade stands outside the sphere of painting.

In the chapter of 'Pictorial Nominalism' entitled 'The Readymade and Abstraction', Thierry de Duve makes an analysis of painting's progression towards abstraction. He focuses on three figures who are historically accepted to have been among the first painters to have intentionally arrived at total abstraction. The three painters in question are Franz Kupka, Robert Delauney and Kasimir Malevich. De Duve proposes that the motives and intentions of these three painters are comparable to those of Duchamp given that he was painting at the same time and in the same historical conditions as the above. The suggestion is that while Kupka, Delauney and Malevich made their transition to abstraction through painting, Duchamp, for reasons that were common to all made his transition from painting to the readymade. While the end results might seem totally different in outward appearance they are all answers to the same question: What is the function of painting when in the industrial era of the photograph it is no longer called upon to represent reality?

For Kupka and Delauney the concern lay with 'pure colour'. De Duve says that neither Kupka nor Delauney could have made the transition to abstraction without their investment in the 'science' of pure colour. Duchamp never employed pure colour in his paintings previous to his

invention of the readymade and upon immediate consideration the connection would appear to be tenuous. But, according to De Duve, the origin of the formers ability to employ pure colour lies in their referral to Seurat, Chevreul and Divisionism. As De Duve explains more fully in his book ,‘Kant after Duchamp’, Seurat was the only painter whom Duchamp ever said he respected. The reason for this respect would seem to have been Seurat’s scientific application to painting and his attempts to disqualify the style and craft of the hand painted picture.

Seurat was a painter who studied the texts of the physicist Emanuel Chevreul. Chevreul wrote a text on colour theory that was largely influential in the Impressionist’s abandonment of chiaroscuro as a technique of representation. The text theorised that all visual perception was based on colour contrast and that all visual experience was the result of the action of light, which was elementally composed of three primary colours. Seurat was a painter who more than any other invested in these theories which led him to invent his own method of painting called divisionism or pointilism. The technique involved the application to the canvas of these three primary colours in paint unmixed and without blending. The colours would sit next to each other in tiny daubs and would appear in uniform configuration but would occur in varying quantities. The effect was such that at close quarters the paintings would appear to be just a simple arrangement of these primary colours. However when viewed at a distance the colours would merge to effect all the colours and shades necessary to create whatever scene was to be represented. This demonstration of colour theory undoubtedly influenced the pure colour abstractions of Delauney and Kupka but it takes a more precise reading of

what this process meant to representation in order to understand its relevance to the readymade.

In the instant that Seurat laid down pure colour, unmixed on canvas, he freed painting from its duty to imitate and made painting a matter of simulation. In 'Kant after Duchamp' De Duve quotes Kandinsky's writings on painting "up till now it has consisted of imitating" (De Duve, 1996, p.156) and follows the quote by suggesting that this set the pace for other artists to use paint "outside the conventions of imitation" (De Duve, 1996, p. 115). In the same way he equates the notion of pure colour to the readymade reality of the tube of paint. This is why I say that Seurat freed painting from a duty to imitate and made painting a matter of simulation. When you imitate something you need only effect a similarity to its outward appearance, but when you simulate something you create an active system of fundamental components that synthesise the experience of that thing. When Seurat used primary colour to paint pictures he was using what Chevreul considered to be the fundamental elemental component parts of that which constituted visual experience.

In effect Seurat was simply presenting the viewer with an arrangement of colour. Seurat did nothing to make the viewer see anything other than an arrangement of paint on canvas. If the viewer imagined a scene (such as a lakeside gathering) that was due to the mechanical operation of their own eyes and their tendency towards mimesis. By placing the imaginary activity outside the realm of painting he made paint real. He began to present pure colour instead of representing objects. In the same way that Seurat presented a real 'thing' and let the viewer imagine

what it represented, Duchamp presented a real 'thing' and let the viewer imagine what it represented.

While De Duve acknowledges that Delauney and Kupka had a realisation of pure colour as a reality, he is quick to point out that for them, the reality of paint as the idea of pure colour had already invested within it an intrinsic quality of spiritual value. Chevreul wasn't the only theorist whose writings largely influenced the idea of pure colour. In Munich where Kupka had studied, theorists like Goethe were held in high regard and pure colour as an Idea was invested with a spiritual and emotional content. Goethe unlike Chevreul didn't believe that pure colour was the objective quality of light. He believed that pure colour could only be described as the subjective experience of the individual. So, as such, pure colour already had an intrinsic content. It was only when Kupka reread Chevreul against a symbolist background that he found license for colour to be applied outside its duty to faithfully imitate the model of external reality.

A reading of Chevreul alone would cause a realisation of pure colour as a reality in itself and therefore disqualifying it from representing the reality of the external world, but also then disqualifying its application at all in that it had no content other than that of visual experience which was the action of light on the outside world. A reading of Goethe's theories alone gave colour a content but it had no formal laws of application. When pure colour was thought of as one thing and in both these ways, it found a content outside of the external world and Delauney and Kupka were justified in making the transition to abstraction.

This new reality is nothing less than the
ABC of expressive method.

(Delauney, quoted in De Duve, 1996, p.115)

Thus pure colour was conceived of as a language, not one that would be used to describe the outside world as Seurat had done but one that would be used to communicate emotion. The realisation of this formal reality was one of pure colour which already had, for certain groups, an intrinsic content and thus Delauney and Kupka had license to paint on and on. In this case the realisation of formal reality was that of pure colour which as I have said had a built-in content but for Malevich and Duchamp the realisation of a formal reality was not that of pure colour, but that of the medium of paint in general. Thus without a content to justifiably believe in, painting became a matter of abandonment.

De Duve exemplifies Malevich's path to abstraction because it so closely mirrored that of Duchamp's passage to the readymade. Malevich wasn't concerned with painting as a language that spoke only of its own intrinsic values. For Malevich painting's value had been that of a craft whose function it had been to faithfully depict reality. Now, in the industrial era of photography, it was no longer required to do so and as such its functional value had ceased to exist. Photography had certainly forced painting to realise its own formal reality but for Malevich this formal reality was just that of the useless object. Like the urinal painting had been abstracted from its position of functionality and deposited in a place where it was useless. These qualities of the readymade are reflected in Malevich's seminal work the 'Black Square'. Like the readymade the craft involved in its production is nil. It is a black square that has been coloured in with a

graphite pencil. It is the ultimate do-it-yourself piece of art and like the readymade it is dumb. It demonstrates the formal reality of painting that is incapable of saying anything.

It would seem that the invention of the readymade was the invention of a reality...since then painting has never represented a reality it has been a reality.

[Richter, (1990), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.218]

Here we can see that not only does Richter acknowledge a reality of paint and also equates it to the reality of the readymade. For De Duve like Greenberg modernism in the theoretical sphere of painting was concerned with a realisation of the reality of the medium. Greenberg proposes that it was a realisation of the reality of the medium that led to abstraction and correspondingly De Duve equates the reality of the readymade to the progression of painting towards abstraction. The fact that Richter recognises the reality of the paint as a medium and the reality of the readymade as part of the same reality would lead me to believe that he sees both as symptomatic of a universal realisation of the condition of representation posed for paint by the imposition of photography. Indeed Richter has said, "it's so obvious that painting has taken away one important part of painting, the function of portraying or depicting", (Richter, in interview with Jonas Storve, 1991, Obrist, 1995, p.227). But besides recognising the cause, Richter demonstrates an understanding of what this means for representation.

Later you realise that you cant represent reality at all - that what you make represents nothing but itself and therefore is itself a reality.

[Richter, in interview with Rolf Schon, Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.72]

The irony is that it is in the specific condition of the photograph that Richter would seem to have found a reality for paint. In the way that his photopictures can be seen to appreciate the quality of the readymade the medium of paint can be seen to appreciate the condition of simple presentation while seemingly representing. The contradiction is exactly the one that is found in the example of Seurat's divisionist paintings. While Seurat can be seen to have presented a real 'thing' (pure colour) and left the viewer to imagine what it might represent, so Duchamp can be seen to have presented a real thing (the urinal) and left the viewer to imagine what it might represent. Furthermore if we accept that Richter's photopicture's can be seen as photographs then he too can be seen to have presented a real thing (the photograph) and left the viewer to imagine the objects within. The reality of the paint in the photopictures is guaranteed by its readymade quality, in that it is also the imposition of a painted 'thing'. Thus we can also say that in the exact same way that Seurat presented the reality of the paint as colour Richter presents the reality of paint that in its readymade quality is the simultaneous reality of the photographic 'thing'. The paint is guaranteed its reality by the imaginary activity of the viewer.

The reality of the medium is undoubtedly a consideration of Richter's but his position on whether that reality has the possibility of

carrying within it an intrinsic content is unclear. While Richter can be seen to acknowledge a reality of paint his use of it in its readymade capacity would seem to disqualify it from any intrinsic content that it might be believed to have had. Certainly in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in 1984 he concedes to Buchloh that the preconceptions of colour that were at the time associated with neo-expressionism were notably absent from his own use of pure colour (the colour charts), and indeed if the intrinsic value of paint is where painting as a communicative language finds its genesis then Richter would seem opposed.

When painters 'communicate' they
illustrate and give visual expression to
their own stupidity. Their message is
always distressing ...untruthful...the issue
of content is thus nonsense there is
nothing but form. There is only
something: there is only what is there.

[Richter, (1986), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.12]

In this instance Richter would seem to correspond to De Duve's understanding of Malevich's reality of paint, that the medium of paint as a reality is devoid of an intrinsic content and as a result is unable to function as a communicative language. De Duve suggests that the difference between Duchamp's 'urinal' and Malevich's 'Black Square' is one of a 'thing' and a painted 'thing'. Seen in this way Richter's photopictures would seem to correspond exactly to the Malevich reality, being that of the painted 'thing'. For Malevich this realisation of the medium constituted an abandonment. He could not believe in painting that had no function. Richter on the other hand certainly hasn't abandoned

painting, and appears to see its uselessness as the very prerequisite for belief.

Belief....is depriving the object of it's
utilitarian value and believing in it.

[Richter, (1964), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p38]

When Richter appreciated the condition of the readymade with his exhibition of photographs that were largely unaltered he seemed to have been like Malevich depriving paint of it's utilitarian value, i.e. its function of communication. But for him it did not constitute a death of painting in the sense that it could no longer be believed in. For Richter it would seem that depriving something of its utilitarian value would seem to be the very condition that could only justify his belief in it. Not that we should believe in something because of some tangible function it can be seen to perform but rather that true belief can only be applied to the thing itself outside of its function. As before where Richter equated the reality of the readymade to the reality of the paint, so De Duve equates the reality of the readymade to the realisation of the medium that led to abstraction. In this sense he directly relates Malevich's understanding of the medium (as functionless) to the reality of the readymade. I propose that in the photograph Richter found a vehicle for a reality of paint that was functionless and could therefore be believed in.

Chapter 3

The Index

Painting is after all an inferior way of making likenesses, an ersatz of the process of reproduction. Only the photographic lens can give us that kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation....The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the condition of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy distorted or discoloured, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image might be, it shares by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction. It is the model.

(Andre Bazin quoted in Krauss, 1985, p.203)

In the essay 'Notes on the Index' Rosalind Krauss suggests that the diverse forms and styles of contemporary art in the 1970s has a unity that underlies the apparent absence of a collective style (Krauss, 1985, pp. 193-219). She suggests that in many of the artworks of the 1970's there can be observed a general tendency towards indexical signification. The relevance here lies in her further proposal that as artworks which demonstrate the operation of indexical signification, these works reflect and adhere to the condition of the photograph.

Krauss outlines the index as that sign which is dependent for meaning on the existence of a physically real thing. The most obvious example of an index would be a footprint in mud or a fossil found in stone;

the impressions or traces of physically real things found in pliable substances. But as Krauss points out, resemblance is not the necessary condition of indexical signification. She instances the examples of the words I, You, This, That, etc. and demonstrates that these terms called shifters as signifiers are totally dependent on the existence of real things to signify and, by virtue of this fact, fall into the category of the index.

In part one of the essay Krauss seeks to explain why art would be tending towards indexical operation and in doing so exemplifies the pictorial works of Marcel Duchamp, after his break from painting and his invention of the readymade. The first piece she exemplifies is called 'Tu' m'. It is a ten foot wide canvas that Krauss suggests can be seen as a veritable panorama of the index. Stretched across the canvas are the elongated shadows of everyday objects that have been registered in pencil—a hatstand, a corkscrew, etc. Cast shadows of course fall into the category of the index as do the words of the title; 'Tu' m', (or You, Me) but Krauss also points out that at the center of the piece is a realistically painted hand with an index finger outstretched in the manner of pointing, and, as Krauss says, "enacting the process of establishing the connection between the linguistic shifter 'this... and it's referent'" (Krauss, 1985, p.199).

Krauss not only exemplifies instances of the index in the pictorial work of Duchamp but also suggests that his demonstration of indexical operation ran parallel to a, "strategy for infecting language with a confusion in the way that words denote their reference", (Krauss, 1985, p.200). To demonstrate this she recalls an inscription he wrote around one of his 'Machine optique' pieces in 1920. The inscription reads; "Rose Selavy et moi estimons les ecchymoses des Esquimaux aux mots exquis".

Rose Selavy is at one instant a proper name (one that Duchamp used in reference to photographic self portraits of himself in drag) while at another instant Rose Selavy is a sentence. By virtue of its pronunciation, it amounts to the words, "Eros c'est la vie" (or, eroticism such is life). The remainder of the sentence translates as, - 'we esteem the bruises of Eskimos with beautiful language'. While these words seem to refer quite directly, Krauss suggests that their meaning, which would seem to be deliberately nonsensical, is elided when in the moment of pronunciation their rhyme, alliteration, and meter all conspire to substitute sheer musicality for content. In both ways Duchamp is demonstrating that language by virtue of its operation is prone to indirectness, even in the case of the shifter *Moi* (or *Me*). Duchamp confuses its stability by splitting his own identity along the axis of sexuality.

Krauss says that as a painter prior to his investment in Cubism, Duchamp's work was notable for its "direct depiction", and that it wasn't until Duchamp adopted a cubist informed pictorial language that this directness was swamped. She says that, "it was as if cubism forced for Duchamp the issue of whether a cubist informed pictorial language could ever signify directly", (Krauss, 1985, p.202). Central to Krauss's text and indeed that of De Duve's is the idea that in the path of modernist painting, as outlined by Greenberg, painting's progression is marked along the lines of its invention as a language. In the stages of modernist painting preceding total abstraction- Impressionism, Cubism, etc.- real things in the external world were still being signified but the suggestion would seem to be that they were being described with words that were beginning to be thought of as part of a vocabulary of painting as a language. What Krauss would seem to be saying is that while Duchamp abandoned painting in 1913 his

pictorial work after his abandonment can be seen to question the directness of words in their ability to describe real things. The problem with words as he demonstrates in 'Machine optique' is that they can at the same time mean many things to different people. Words can only refer to ideas. While instancing Duchamp's demonstration of the operation of language she goes on to suggest that in adopting the operation of indexical signification in his pictorial work, Duchamp found a way of keeping language or the operation of the symbolic, outside of the physical sphere of the pictorial.

Krauss goes on to make a reading of Duchamp's most famous pictorial piece the 'Large Glass' (1923). In her analysis of it she says that we can be made to feel the presence of the index. The example she uses is a photograph found in the notes written by Duchamp that now accompany the piece in exhibition. The photograph is of months of accumulated dust that rested on the surface of the glass as it lay flat. The dust itself can be seen as a type of index for the passing of time, but the photographic recording of it is in itself an example of indexical signification. Krauss attaches an importance to the photograph because it was taken by the photographer Man Ray who was the inventor of the photogram which is a particular type of photograph that recalls the indexical process of all photography. The process of the photogram is one in which an object is placed on top of a light sensitive piece of paper and both are subjected to a burst of light. The resulting image usually resembles an imprint like a fossil or a footprint, because the sheet can be seen to have registered the object through its obstruction and reflection of light as it is projected onto the paper. The significance Krauss attaches to the photogram is that it is a process that reminds us that every photograph is the result of the imprint of light as it is reflected off or obstructed by real things. She quotes Andre

Bazin who suggests that the physical attachment that the photograph has to that which it represents means that it is an icon that shares the reality of that which it represents. Krauss surmises that the photograph is a particular type of icon that would seem to, “short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematisation or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings”.(Krauss, 1985, p.203) Krauss suggests that in the absoluteness of its physical genesis the photograph can be seen to be, “ceding the language of art back to the imposition of things”.(Krauss, 1985, p.203)

Krauss suggests that if we read the ‘Large Glass’ as a type of photograph its process becomes absolutely logical. Not just in the way that it carries examples of indexical registration (the dust) or in the way it creates perspective only by securing flat physical substances within the field of the picture (between two sheets of glass), but also in the way that it is impervious to a coherent reading without a consideration of the notes that accompany it. She says that the notes act as a caption for the piece. She quotes Walter Benjamin’s text “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in which he says that the caption has become the obligatory companion of the photograph. She draws a comparison between the ‘Large Glass’, the readymade, and the photograph, by saying that, “a meaninglessness surrounds them that can only be filed with the addition of text”, (Krauss, 1985, p.205). She further says that in the photograph’s process of production there is relevance to the readymade in that they are both, “about the physical transposition of an object from its continuum of reality into the fixed condition of an art image by a moment of isolation”.

These photographs can be pictures. How
can I explain it...where the absence of
language begins.

[Richter, interview with Peter Sager, 1972,
as in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.68]

If in the condition of the photograph Duchamp can be seen to
have found a pictorial reality that stands outside of language, then Richter
can be seen to have secured this condition all the more effectively in his
direct use of photographs as pictures. In fact in the above quote he can be
seen to equate the condition of the photograph as picture to the absence of
language. In his writings Richter also acknowledges the inadequacy of
language:

By conveying a thing through the medium
of language you change it. You construct
qualities that can be said and you leave
out the ones that can't be said but are
always the most important.

[Richter, (1964), as in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.39]

While Richter would seem to recognise the inadequacy of
language in the same way that Duchamp did, he can also be seen to
recognise its absence in the photograph or more specifically in the
condition it appreciates in the process of production. To refer back to his
analysis of the process of freehand drawing in comparison to photographic
production, he can be seen to acknowledge that normal representation as a
matter of signification is intrinsically involved with communication in the
sense of language:

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These components are noted down as signs and can be read off as a coherent whole. This is an abstraction that distorts reality .

[Richter, (1964), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.35]

In indexical signification Duchamp bypassed this process of representation and, as Richter outlines in the same piece of writing, bypassing this process of signification was a matter of assuming the perceptual state of the camera- "By tracing the outlines with the aid of a projector you can bypass this elaborate process of apprehension". For Krauss, the short-circuiting of this process of symbolic intervention was ensured by the physical attachment to the reality of the real thing that was maintained by the process of photography. She argues that the photograph, by virtue of the absolute genesis of its production, shares the reality of the real thing represented. If we extend the proposal that the photograph is the physical projection of the reality of the real thing then here we can see that the reality of the photograph doesn't disqualify the reality of the external model, but rather that it is the same model. Thus in the photopictures as paintings and photographs the reality of the paint is the reality of the photograph (as readymade), is the reality of the external model represented within. In consideration of the photopicture's reality Richter writes:

Because it is itself a reality like the model, photograph and the painting.

[Richter, (1964), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.34]

In this way the reality of the paint achieves a content that while being the reality of the external world is also the reality of the photograph and therefore (by still being a painted thing) is the reality of the paint itself. The painting refers to the reality of its own condition as content in the way

that the latest paintings of modernist abstraction do, while simultaneously referring to recognisable objects and the space in which they can be seen to exist.

The photograph makes a statement about real space, but as a picture it has no space of its own. Like the photograph I make a statement about real space, but when I do so I am painting; and this gives rise to a special kind of space that arises from an interpenetration and tension between the space represented and the pictorial space.

[Richter, (1964), in Obrist (ed.), 1995, p.38]

Conclusion

While demonstrating that within the framework of a modernist history of painting Richter had found a content for painting that was more than the simple concerns of the specific medium it is important to acknowledge that the work was not limited to a content that was exclusive to a modernist realisation of representing media. To say that reality was the only conceivable content of Richter's work would be wrong. In interview Richter has said that he believes his pictures are capable of telling stories and setting up moods. These are things that exist outside of plain physical reality. Richter does not believe that mood is an intrinsic quality of paint. Like Duchamp and Malevich, Richter did abandon painting as a linguistic medium (or painting as a rhetorical language) but for him this did not mean that painting was incapable of saying anything. It meant simply that it would no longer use a conceived language to do so. As Richter has said language's reductive quality is that "language can express only what language enables it to express". [Richter, (1989), in Obrist, (ed.), 1995, p. 182] With this denial of language it would appear that, in painting, Richter also gave up the idea of function, or function as a preconceived notion of a task that painting is expected to perform. For Richter depriving a painting or any object of its utilitarian value is the very procedure that gives it a quality of potential. It makes the ordinary monumental and in a contradictory way symbolic. The difference is that what the object then symbolises is not predetermined by historical consensus.

In an interview with Doris Von Drathen in 1992, Von Drathen asked Richter if his work was trying to catch reality by surprise? He replied:

That's too difficult for me. This cup: it exists and it appears. The photograph shows only the appearance of the cup.

[Richter, in Obrist, (ed.), 1995, p. 233]

She then asked if that was the case with the painted picture and he replied: "The same".[Richter, in Obrist, (ed.), p.235]When asked if the painted picture was closer to the reality or the appearance? He replied:

In one sense its closer to the appearance, but then it has more reality than a photograph because a painting is more of an object in itself, because it's visibly hand painted, because it has been tangibly and materially produced. That gives it a reality of its own, which then as it were is substituted for the reality of the cup.

[Richter, in Obrist, (ed), 1995, p.235]

Rather than use this quote as an example of a concrete theoretical statement I would prefer to use it as an example of the transformation of the object that occurs in Richter's work as a whole. To begin with I would like to consider the difference between an object and a thing. An object is a real thing as it is experienced by the viewer- a real thing plus the associations it calls up in the mind of the viewer. In the example of the above quote Richter can be seen to suggest that the object of the cup as a photograph is reduced to its appearance alone. The cup no longer functions and is therefore reduced to just the physical 'thing'ness of its appearance. By suggesting this he would seem to strip it of its functional associations. But then by reintroducing that appearance as a painting he gives it a new possibility as an object that is not bound to function. An object whose associations in our minds have not yet been determined. An object of possibility.

I would like to apply this process of transformation to the larger objects in his work. I imagine that in the work of Richter there is the object of the external world, the object of the photograph and most importantly the object of painting. I imagine that he has taken them all outside of their functional existence's and therefore destroyed all the old functional associations that they might be seen to have had. In giving them the position of new objects he has given them an existence free from old associations. He has freed them and given them the possibility of a new existence outside of their historical purposes. Here there is the break from the past and the break from what can be known.

Buchloh: And what do you anticipate?

Richter: That something is going to come which I do not know, which I have been unable to plan, which is better and wiser than I am, and which is more universal. More directly I tried to do that in one thousand or four thousand colours in the anticipation that a picture would emerge

Buchloh: What sort of picture?

Richter: One that presents our situation more accurately: one that has more truth in it, one that has something of the future in it, and so can be interpreted as a project, a design- and more besides, not didactic, not logical but free, and- however complicated, effortless in appearance.

[Richter in interview with Buchloh, (1986), in Obrist, (ed.), 1995, p.155]

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