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'ON THE QUESTION OF PAINTING'

THE WORK OF GERHARD RICHTER

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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

'ON THE QUESTION OF PAINTING'

THE WORK OF GERHARD RICHTER

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INTRODUCTION

Gerhard Richter is engaged in an exploration of painting. The
heterogeneous nature of his work initially makes it difficult to
recognise how consistent this examination is and what form it takes
within his various "styles".

Richter is committed to painting, a traditional medium, but his position
as an artist is very much within the avant garde: he has attempted
to reconcile these two phenomena in his work. Beginning with the Photo
Paintings which were at the time the answer to the problem of how to
start this process, Richter continued working through to the
Constructive Works (1966-67) where a reconciliation was becoming less of
a possibility. The point where it no longer seemed feasible was with the
Gray Paintings. Richter appeared to have reached the point where
painting no longer seemed to have any validity as an investigative
procedure.

Yet following on from this point came the Abstract Paintings which
appeared to be a total contradiction of what Richter was saying with
the Gray Paintings. The conclusiveness of one was challenged by the
almost celebratory nature of the other. But the Abstract Paintings
continue the dialogue about painting that Richter started. The difference
is that Richter has worked through the end to emerge with a continued
conviction in the possibilities of painting.

> Let us simply say that the desire for painting
> remains, and that this desire is not entirely
> programmed or subsumed by the market; this desire

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is the sole factor of a future possibility of
            painting, that is of a non-pathological mourning.
            (Bois Yves Alain, 1986, p.47)

Richter is concerned with the nature of reality and how it can be

investigated through painting. In order to avoid his work being

seen as an interpretation of reality, Richter seeks a position of

neutrality as his starting point. Because he is not certain of the

nature of reality his pictures do not attempt to resolve this. Instead

they are a reflection of the complexity of reality, and as there

can be no one solution, there can be no one way of exploring it.

It is this heterogeneity, essential to Richter's investigation of

painting and his search for reality through this examination, that

I wish to discuss in this essay.

Gerhard Richter works against the idealism of painting through a

systematic examination of the medium within his own work. In this

he bears similarities to artists like Robert Ryman or Daniel Buren

who also work against this idealism by reducing painting to its stark

physical components. This was the path Mondrian had taken earlier

when he assigned the painter the complicated task:

> The destruction of all the elements on which the
> particularity of his art is based, the destruction of
> coloured planes by lines, of lines by repetition and
> of optical illusion of depth - by the sculptural weave
> of the painterly surface, this amounts to the abolition
> of the figure ground opposition which is the perceptual
> limitation of the whole enterprise of painting.
> (Bois, 1986, p.42)

Mondrian was working towards the end of painting which he believed

was imminent. Historically the factors which were held responsible

- in varying degrees - for pointing the way towards the end of painting

were industrialisation, mass production and the invention of photography.

The latter event and its relationship to painting has probably been

the subject of great misrepresentation. Photography has been viewed

as essentially a technical rather than an aesthetic tradition and

therefore antagonistic to painting, an outsider who proceeded to

disrupt the course of painting. So it is necessary to look at the

origins of photography in order to refute this theory.

The desire for naturalism in art led in the 15th century to the invention

of linear perspective and it is in this discovery that the ultimate

origins of photography lie, Renaissance perspective adopted vision
as the sole basis for representation, each painting representing its
subject as it would be seen from a particular point of view at a
particular point in time. The great periods of innovation in the
function of perspective were the mid 15th, mid 17th and mid 19th
centuries and they were motivated by changes in artistic values under
historically specific conditions. By the nineteenth century paintings
were separated from the ideal drama of older art by the contemporaneity
of their subjects and the mediating conditions of perception the cropping
frame, the inclusion of the accidents of light and the relative point
of view which all served to make the paintings seem more immediate.
Perspective had changed over time from being the tool for constructing
the illusion of three dimensions, on a two dimensional surface, to
the derivation of a frankly flat picture from a given three dimensional
world. Unlike the Renaissance artist, the photographer cannot 'compose'
his picture, he can only take it and so photography belongs to the
later developments in perspective and was born out of this artistic
sense.

> In painting the new standards had been won through
> the long experiment and only gradually acquired a
> dominant role. In photography the camera's inability
> to compose rendered the old standards nearly obsolete
> from the outset. (Galassi, 1981, p.27)

Industrialisation and mass production led to an emphasis on the mechanical,
challenged by this shift painting had to redefine its status. Mass
production meant that the hand was no longer part of the process,
however the work of art could still claim this relationship between

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hand and production. The artists' response was, therefore, to focus on the now exemplary nature of their craft - that of the hand, the gesture, the brushstroke. Thierry de Duve:

> Certainly pleinairism was one of the first episodes in the long struggle between craftsmanship and industrialisation that underlies the history of "Modernist Painting". It was one of the first instances of an avant garde strategy, devised by artists who were aware that they could no longer compete technically or economically with industry, they sought to give their craft a reprieve by internalising some of the technology threatening it, and by the mechanising of their own body at work. (Bois, 1986, p.32)

Where painterly procedure is concerned the mechanising can be of either a mechanical or organic nature. The mechanical influence meant that artists focussed on the repetition of the brushstroke, and by implication progress was no longer possible in painting and so it was working towards its end. Robert Ryman, for example, would not be concerned with affirming the uniqueness of the production of a painting, but with decomposing it mechanically, to illustrate this, his description of his Delta series

> A very wide brush, 12 inches. I got it specially - I went to a brush manufacturer and they had this very big brush. I wanted to pull the paint across this quite large surface, nine feet square, with this big brush. I had a few failures at the beginning. Finally I got the consistency right and I knew what I was doing and how hard to push the brush and to pull it and what was going to happen when I did. That's kind of the way to begin. I didn't have anything else in mind except to make a painting. (Crimp, 1981, p.76)

Richard Hennessy is an example of an artist whose emphasis is on the organic nature of painting. He is one of the painters who exhibited in Barbara Rose's American Painting: The Eighties (1979)

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> The role of intention and its poetry of human
> freedom is infrequently discussed in relation to art,
> yet the more a given art is capable of making
> intention felt, the greater are its chances of
> being a fine, and not a minor or applied art.
> Consider the paintbrush. How many bristles or
> hairs does it have? Sometimes twenty or less,
> sometimes five hundred, sometimes a thousand -
> more. When a brush loaded with pigment touches
> the surface, it can leave not just a single mark,
> but marks of the bristles of which it is composed.
> The 'Yes, I desire this' of the stroke is supported
> by choir of the bristles 'Yes, we desire this'. The whole
> question of touch is rife with spiritual association.
> (Crimp, 1981, p.81)

Although this description may be somewhat overenthusiastic, it nevertheless

celebrates the organic and more subjective nature of painting where

the brushstroke becomes a 'gesture of symbolic liberation of unconscious

forces', (Buchloh B.H.D., 1985, p.1) it is the artist expressing him

or herself.

To which "school" does Gerhard Richter belong? The heterogeneous

nature of his work makes it difficult to categorise. Benjamin Buchloh

explains Richter's position when he says:

> On the one hand we see the artist as traditionalist
> painter who consequently reduces his own activity to
> the most elementary analysis and only as such succeeds
> in maintaining credibility for his positive gesture
> of formal invention, on the other hand we see every
> element of subjective presence in his work to become
> the actual historian of collective forms of
> production. This schism seems to be at the centre
> of Richter's work. (Buchloh B.H.D., 1977,p.107)

Marcel Duchamp invented his ready mades as a negation of painting.

He wished to demonstrate the mechanical nature of painting and to

focus on the art object as a commodity although it was a special

kind of commodity, the ready made became an art object through its

removal and abstraction from the realm of its original use value.

Marx had remarked on the special place of the art object,

> Having no use value, the art object does not have
> any exchange value per se. The exchange value being
> dependent on the quantum of social work necessary for
> its production. (Bois, 1986, p.37)

However, this special kind of commodity was subjected to a range

of experiments by Duchamp which was to reveal the mechanism of the art

network, by challenging the notion of authenticity, with works like his

Fountain 1917. Duchamp and his heirs are deconstructing one aspect of

what they negate, painting, specifically the imaginery aspects of

painting, and with that the isolation of the artist from socio political

practice, and the elitist position of the artist within society.

The appropriation of images or objects from popular or mass culture

and placing them within the realms of high culture has been one way

for artists to make these criticisms from within the art world.

This appropriation was evident in the first decade of the century with

the avant garde, in its confrontation with the mass produced object

and its impact on the work of art. Continuing on from Duchamp these

means of appropriation were being discovered, by the new generation

of American artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichenstein for example,

as part of a more general understanding of the implications of the

work of the Dada artists. In West Germany artists like Gerhard Richter,

and Sigmar Polke also adopted strategies of appropriation, quotation

and parody in their work, in a similar way to the American artists.

These artists faced similar problems as those before. The impact
of technology, the process of reproduction, the <u>contradiction</u> between
mass culture and high culture and the idea of the artwork as elitist.
But there also existed television, photography, cinema, and advertising, as
means of visual manipulation. When Roy Lichenstein talks about his interest
in the iconography of the comic strip, and Gerhard Richter refers to
snapshots, they both refer to those aspects of their sources that seem to
protect their own artistic production from being prematurely identified with
high art practices.

Mondrian believed that:

> Abstract art can evolve only by being developed
> consistently. In this way it can attain the purely
> plastic which is achieved by neo-plasticism. The
> consistent development of this art expression can
> result in nothing other than its realisation in our
> tangible environment. For the time will come when
> because of the changed demands of life, painting
> will lose itself in life. (Bois, 1986, p.41)

Mondrian felt that painting could only be deconstructed abstractly
by analysing one after another, one against the other, all of the
elements which historically formed its symbolic order. Engaging
in painstaking formal analysis was for him the only way painting
could reach its own end. This legacy of Mondrian's has passed to
artists like Gerhard Richter, Daniel Buren, Robert Ryman and is in
direct opposition to work which upholds painting as a high art, a
liberal art, an art through which we can achieve transcendence, and
the belief that painting is a great unbroken tradition that encompasses
the entire known history of man.

Gerhard Richter left East Germany and went to Dusseldorf in 1962.

He had grown increasingly weary of the official aesthetic doctrines

of East Germany. Picasso and the Italian Socialist Realist painter

Renato Guttuso, were both members of the Communist party, and therefore

among the few foreign contemporary artists who were allowed to exhibit

in East Germany. When Richter came to West Germany he quickly acquainted

himself with stylistic developments in the West. He didn't fall

under the spell of Yves Klein, nor indeed did he follow Josef Beuys

as others did. Pop Art which emerged in 1962-63 and the Fluxus Movement

were to have stronger interest for him. In the early 1960's in West

Germany, until the advent of Fluxus, the impact of Dada, Duchamp,

the positions of the Constructivists and Productivists were not

recognised, nor were they being reinterpreted within the German context.

The Fluxus movement headed by George Maciunas staged various concerts

and demonstrations. Josef Beuys initiated the Festum Fluxorum Fluxus

which was held in February 1963 and organised by George Maciunas. This

was followed by other Fluxus events such as the Nam Paiks Fluxus

Champion contest, a performance of Syberische Symphonie I Satz (Siberian

Symphony) by Josef Beuys, the Decollage Musique, Kleenex 4 by Vostell and

John Cage who appeared on the poster and possibly on audiotape but not

in person. In a letter to Thomas Schmit, George Maciunas summarised

the goals of the Fluxus Movement. It read as follows:

> The goals of Fluxus are social not aesthetic.
> Ideologically they relate to those of the Lef
> Group in 1929 in the Soviet Union and they aim
> at the gradual elimination of the fine arts.

Therefore Fluxus is strictly against the art
object as a dysfunctional commodity whose only
purpose is to be sold and support the artist.
Not least it can have a temporary pedagogical
function and clarify how superfluous art is and
ultimately it is itself. Secondly Fluxus is against
art as a medium and vehicle for the artist's ego,
the applied arts must express objective problems
which have to be solved, not the artist's individuality
or ego. Therefore Fluxus has a tendency towards
the spirit of the collective toward anonymity and
anti-individualism.   (Buchloh,   1982,   p.42)

Richter summarises the Fluxus events:

It was all very cynical and destructive. It was
a signal for us and we became cynical and cocky
and told ourselves that art is bull and Cezanne is
stupid etc. and .... I'll paint a photo, Fluxus
was the catalyst. (Van Bruggen, 1985, p.84)

Richter's first public exhibition in 1963 was a Demonstration for

Capitalist Realism (Fig. 1) in a Dusseldorf furniture store. He

performed with Konrad Fischer Lueg, they sat on white sculpture bases

and presented themselves as living sculptures. The concept for the

demonstration had three parts: first, the complete furniture store

would be exhibited in an unaltered state; second a programmed viewing

of the demonstration would be presented to spectators on October 11th

finally in a separate space an average living room would be exhibited

as if it were being lived in, along with food, drinks, books and

household items. This was where the two artists sat. Richter and

Lueg's exhibiting themselves recalls Piero Manzoni's presentation

of himself on the pedestal he called base magica in 1961.

It was difficult for Richter to be a painter with great technical

skill but with nothing to paint that was not redundant or untrustworthy.
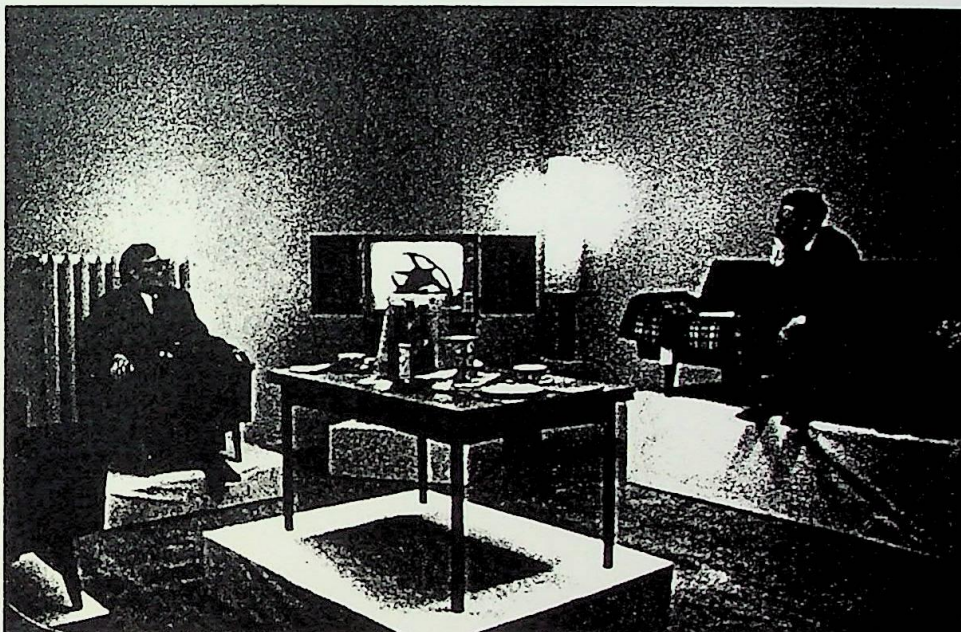
11 Demonstration für den ›kapitalistischen Realismus‹ · *Demonstration for ›Capitalist Realism‹*, 1963

Fig. 1

'The doctrinate heroics of Social Realism, Art Informal, the spirtuality of Yves Klein, or the Zero Group', (Naasgard, 1988, p.40) did not interest him sufficiently. Through Fluxus and Pop Art there came the solution of copying photographs. The selection and painting of them like ready mades, was to find a way to work that had nothing to do with received ideas about art. It didn't involve the old problems of subjectivity and creativity, colour, composition and formal invention.

> I wanted to do something which had nothing in common with art whatsoever, at least not as I knew it, nothing to do with painting, composition, colour, formal invention, creativity. Therefore I felt surprised and attracted by the kind of photography that we all see and use daily in large quantities. All of a sudden I could see this in a different way as an image, which gave me a different perception, a mode without all the traditional criteria that I had related to in art, beforehand. The photography did not have any style, no concept, no judgment, it rescued me from personal emotion, it had nothing at all, it was pure image. Therefore I wanted to use it not as a medium for painting, but the painting as medium for the photograph. (Buchloh B.H.D, 1977, p.108)

In 1962, with the climax of Nouveau Realisme in Europe which was essentially concerned with the object, Richter differed by demonstrating that his concern lay not with the object itself but with the objectified image in the photograph. This had happened before in the work of Robert Rauschenberg. In his combine paintings and collage drawings, the found photograph was a substitute for the found object: this substitution went back historically to the work of Kurt Schwitters and the Dadaists, and was an influence on Richter. However Rauschenberg and Richter differed in that Rauschenberg's selection of found photographs maintained a literary position, and they were mainly journalistic photographs (Fig. 2). Richter's choice of amateur snaps was to maintain his position of the found photograph being meaningless.

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Fig. 2

Robert Rauschenberg along with Andy Warhol began to use silkscreen
reproduction as a means of transferring blowups of photographs to
canvas. In Tisch (Table 1962) (Fig. 3), Richter, using a tradition
of painting a photograph arrived at a similar result as Rauschenberg
had. It was begun as a fairly precisely painted copy of a black
and white illustration taken from the Italian architecture and design
magazine Domus. Richter overpainted the central part of the image
with some quick brushstrokes. He also pressed a newspaper onto the
surface of the painting which had become too thick, so as to soak
up some of the excess paint. When he pulled the newspaper off, patches
of paint came away leaving the gessoed canvas exposed. The result pleased
Richter and became a new departure point for him. Although Tisch
bears some similarity in style to work by Rauschenberg or the decollages
of Vostell, in that the elements of photography, expressionist-like
brushstrokes, and destruction of the surface are there. But unlike
Vostell or Rauschenberg whose pictorial elements are placed side
by side, although they overlap in places across the picture surface,
Richter works on the image in layers one on top of the other. His
work differs from Rauschenberg in that it is more of a photograph
than a painting, but when compared to Andy Warhol's work, the reverse
is true. Instead of choosing between photography and painting,
abstraction and realism, he combines the experience of both.
This dualism meant that he was now free to explore the territory
between realism and abstraction, photography and painting, having
gained a freer passage to and from both.

Richter has in common with Rauschenberg, Lichenstein, Warhol and
others, their rejection of the more traditional subject matter in
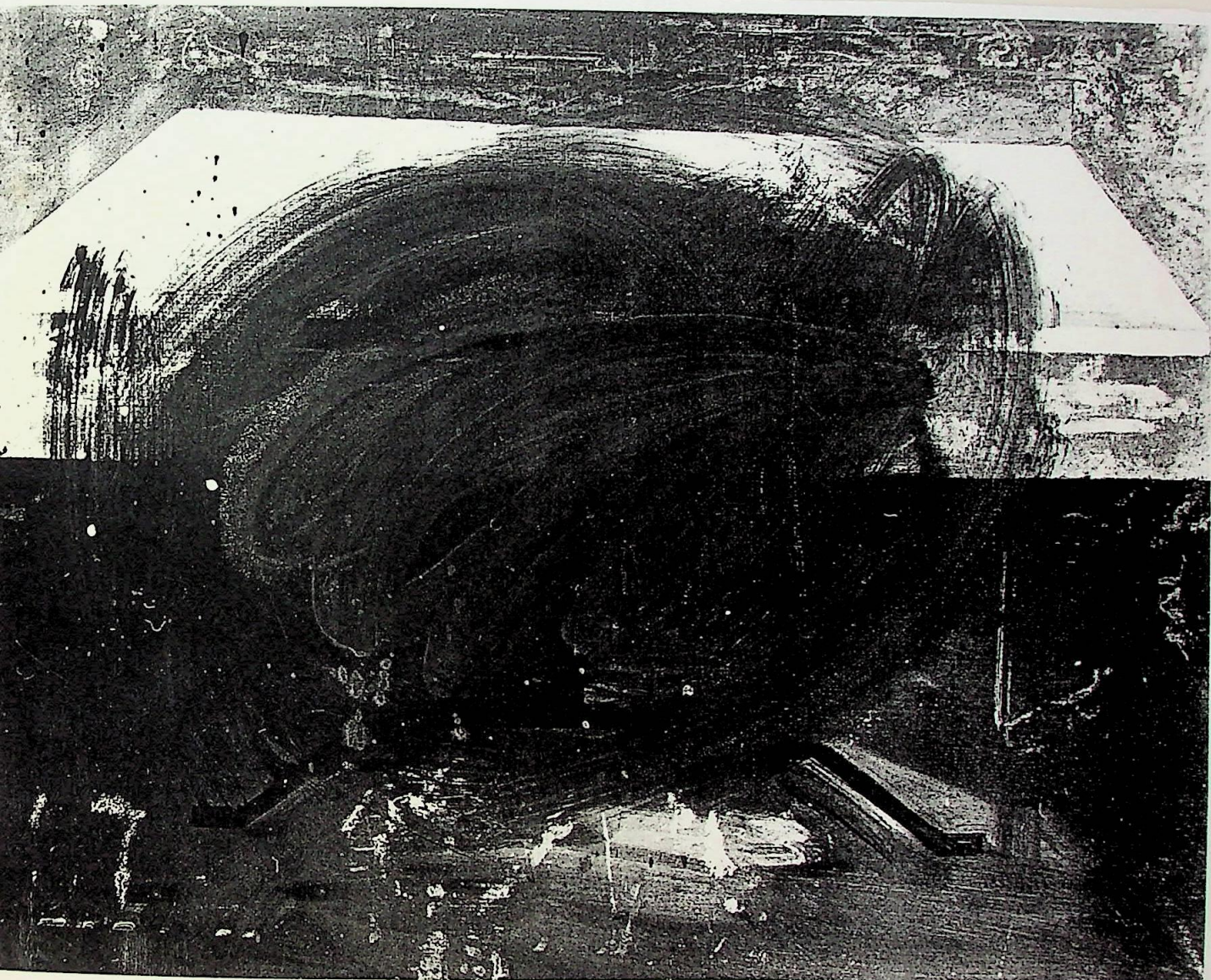
Fig. 3

favour of using iconography that is related directly to everyday life, illustrated by their use of photography. But it is important not to make comparisons solely on their use of subject matter, although they were united in their desire for the impersonal in their work, some more strongly than others. Andy Warhol's detachment seems to be complete in his use of an objective mechanical style to depict such gruesome subjects as the electric chair or disastrous car crashes (Fig. 4). Lichenstein concentrated on the highly mechanical and detailed style of comic book images, searching for a technique that would seem to be, but would not be, commercial. 'I prefer that my work appears so literary that you can't get into it as a work of art' (Fig. 5) (Van Bruggen, 1985, p.86). Richter also wanted an impersonal procedure

> Pictures should be made according to a recipe. The act of making should occur without inner involvement like crushing stones or painting a building. Making is not an aesthetic act. (Van Bruggen, 1985, p.86)

Here Richter is stating his belief in a position of neutrality, especially when dealing with subjects with strong emotional content. He found a way in his Photo Paintings to handle subjects such as love, war and crime in a common manner. But he didn't choose an industrial style like Lichenstein's application of benday dots, or Warhol's assembly line use of silkscreen reproductions which builds up the image; he uses paint.

He does have in common with Warhol his use of the newsphoto and the snapshot which were images taken from public and private life.

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Fig. 4

Fig. 5

However Richter differed from Warhol who speeded up the painting process to compete with media images. He chose newsworthy dramatic images and used them with calculated timing, for example in his silkscreens of Marilyn Monroe done just after her death. Richter on the other hand, half stifled the media load of his imagery, and even when he used front page material he always underplayed the sensational as in his Woman with Umbrella, 1964 (Fig. 6):

> I painted Jacqueline Kennedy, but I made her unrecognisable, because I was embarrassed to paint Jacqueline Kennedy. It was such a beautiful photo, of a woman crying. (Van Bruggen, 1985, p.86)

In order to achieve the effect of a newspaper, smudging, out-of-register colour printing, blurrings, Richter employs all the Old Master techniques, including transferring the image on to canvas using a grid. This has the effect of altering the way we look at the photograph in the photo-painting. It seems that Richter's dialectical thinking has found its major expression in this encounter between photography and painting. Part of this encounter that is examined by Richter is that of the objectivity of the artistic activity. In the words of Allan Sekula:

> From 1839 onwards positive commentaries on photography have engaged in a comic shuffling between technology and auteurism, between faith in the objective powers of the machine and a belief in the subjective imaginative capabilities of the artist. (Sekula, 1981, p.15)

The photographs that Richter uses are "banal" in that the subjects are scenes from everyday life such as Family at the Seaside, 1964, and An Administrative Building, 1964 (Fig. 7). They are,
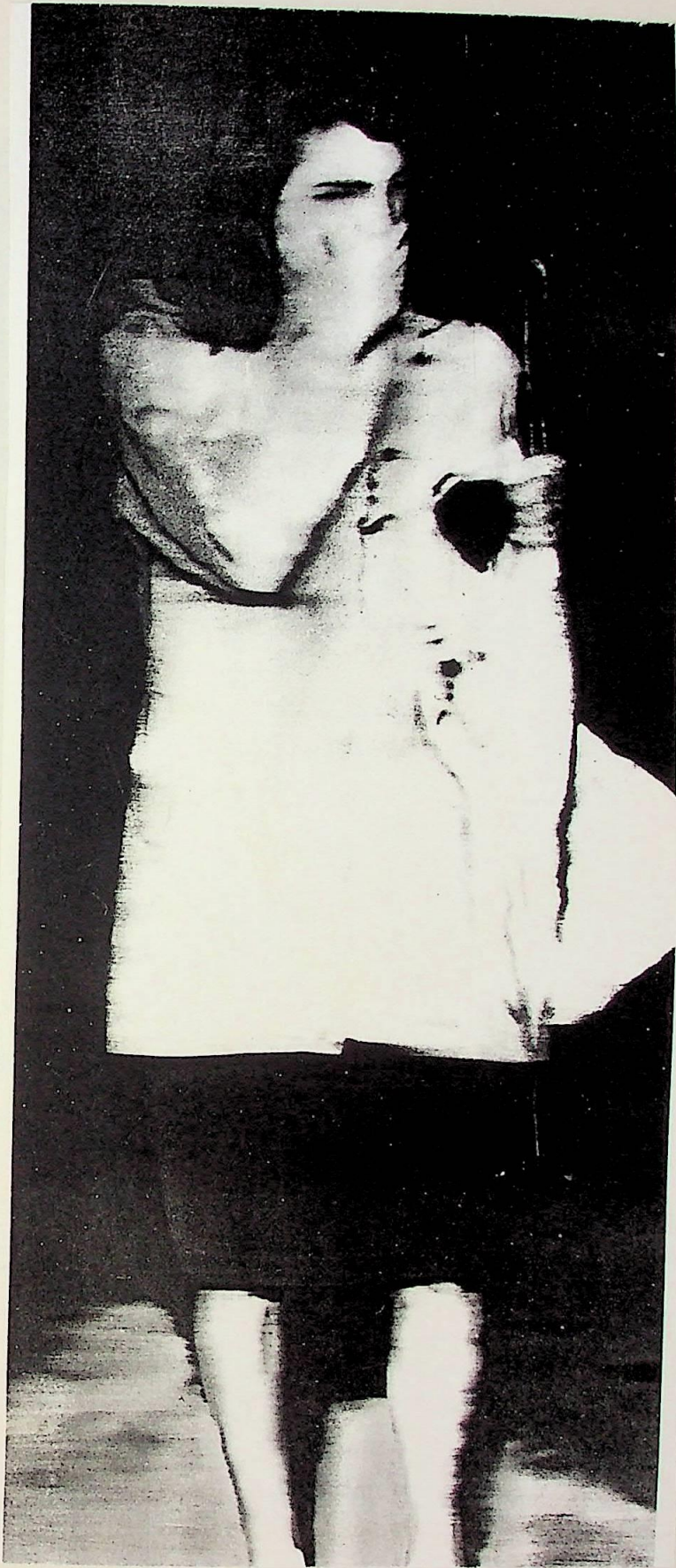
Fig. 6

Fig. 7

however, painted with great skill and in such a way that we

must examine these otherwise unremarkable images more closely,

perhaps causing the viewer to reassess their experience of the

photograph, which can either be as an "artwork" or part of one's

day to day existence.

> Although photographs may be shown in art
> galleries and sold in book form most
> photographs are not seen by deliberate choice,
> they have no special space or time allotted
> to them, they are apparently (an important
> qualification) provided free of charge -
> photographs offer themselves gratuitously,
> whereas paintings and films readily present
> themselves to critical attention as objects,
> photographs are received rather as an
> environment. (Burgin, 1982, p.143)

The photographs Richter uses seem ordinary and banal, they too

are initially offered "free of charge" but when presented in the

form of the photo painting, their emphasis changes. Richter

uses the:

> .....so called banal to show that the banal
> is the important and the human. The people whose
> images we see in the newspapers are not
> banal, they are only banal because they
> are not famous. (Naasgard, 1988, p.47)

Richter also felt that the photograph was the most direct index

of reality available to him at the time. He felt it was more trustworthy,

for reasons that closely parallel observations by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy:

> In the photographic camera we have the most
> reliable aid to the beginning of objective
> vision. Everyone will be compelled to see
> that which is optically true, is explicable in

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its own terms, before he can arrive at any
subjective position. This will abolish that
pictorial and imaginative association pattern
which has remained unsuperseded for centuries
and which has been stamped upon our vision by
great individual painters. (Burgin, 1986, p.8)

He investigated the objectivity of the photograph, his aim being

to try and combine the objectivity of his surroundings with the

objectivity he was trying to achieve in his paintings. Other

artists, like Yves Klein's investigation of reality, did not

have credibility for Richter - who felt that they were perhaps

confusing further an already complex and unclear issue.

The photograph had to mean more to me than
art history for it was the reflection of my
reality, our reality, and I took it not as a
substitute for reality but as a crutch to help
me understand reality. (Stachelhaus, 1972, p.79)

So Richter began his investigation of reality through the photograph.

The photograph could not be presented without alteration, as a

ready made, that wasn't enough. Because although the photograph's

immediate value was its seemingly objective relation to reality

deeper investigation of the photograph revealed that it possessed

a certain obduracy that had to be taken into account. Painting

the photograph was the way for Richter to explore this obduracy,

it was:

The only means to preserve the photograph
the only way to reveal what it contains, what
it still withholds... something to do with
colour, composition, rhythm or whatever,
something I cannot explain. (Stachelhaus, 1972, p.79)

He began with Table and went on to paintings such as Administrative Building, 1964 and Helga Matura, 1966 (Fig. 8). In the lattter two paintings the subject matter is relatively simple in its presentation. The photograph first convinces the viewer of its objectivity, its immediate look on reality - yet the subtle painting disrupts this certainty. Although the photograph appears to possess an objective clarity it does not become a vehicle for us to understand that reality because it gives information, but also withholds it, and is reflected in Richter's painting.

In the earlier stages of structuralist semiology works like Elements of Semiology (1964), by Roland Barthes contributed to the attention being paid to the analogy between natural language which would be speech and writing, and "visual" language. From studies in this area the photograph was seen to have no "language" of its own.

> There is no single signifying system upon which
> photographs depend, instead there is a heterogeneous
> complex of codes upon which photography may draw.
> (Burgin, 1982, p.143)

Whatever autonomy of language photography could claim, it was never from from the determinations of natural language. Photographs are most often seen accompanied by a text or a caption and even when a photograph does not have a caption it is 'traversed by language when it is read by a viewer' (Burgin, 1982, p.144). Roland Barthes has said that describing a photograph:

Helga Matura

Fig. 8

> Consists precisely in joining to the denoted message
> derived from a code which is that of language
> and constituting in relation to the photographic
> dialogue however much care one takes to be
> exact, a connotation to describe is this not
> simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is
> to change structures, to signify something
> different to what is shown. (Barthes, 1977, pp.18-19)

Work in semiotics has shown that the photograph cannot be reduced

to pure form, which according to Victor Burgin is counter to the

nineteenth century aesthetic which still dominates much teaching

and writings on photography. The photograph is not a "window on

the world", it is a place of work:

> A structured and a structuring space within
> which the reader deploys and is deployed by
> what codes he or she is familiar with in
> order to make sense. (Burgin, 1982, p.153)

The Photo Paintings would appear to recognise the dualism of the

immediately recognisable and the hidden inherent in photographs.

Richter does not see photography as a transparent index of the

reality that lies beyond it, nor does he see photographs as subjects

for semiotic interrogation. His Photo Paintings become objects

which neither capture reality or help to explain it. The complex

nature of the Photo Paintings is made visible through the use of

the paint and the blurring and out of focus technique that he uses.

But if Richter painted more precisely in the way that the Super

Realists do he feels it would draw undue attention to the subject

matter and to craftsmanly perfection. However, if he were to abstract

the photograph anymore it would cloud the objectivity by opening

discussion on the motivation for doing so. It is a question of

balance. The painting poses as a photograph arousing expectations

of certainty in what we can recognise, but by being in fact a painting

refuses them again. It is a wedge that Richter drives into the

viewer's senses.

> I do not blur my pictures to make a
> representation seem more artistic through
> lack of clarity or to give my style an
> individual note. I rather equalise,
> neutralise what is depicted, attempt to
> retain the anonymous gloss of the photograph
> to replace the craftsmanly artistic with the
> technical. (Stachelhaus, 1972, p.78)

It is through this neutralising that Richter reconciles the subjectivity

of the hand drawn mark against the passive object of the photograph

and which allows him to be more anonymous. In Helga Matura he

uses the out of focus effect as a disruption to one's viewing of

the painting, and although it contains a caption which should make

the painting clearer, it only serves to make it more inaccessible.

Richter has expressed his wish to dispel the certitude we assume

when we know the names of things. It is:

> Something we must wean ourselves of,
> we disguise and misconstrue too much,
> when we give each thing a name, it lets
> us contain reality too easily and then
> dispose of it. (Naasgard, 1988, p.50)

It is interesting how Richter focuses on the desire to make recognisable

what we see, to make sense of the image. It is something which

Victor Burgin speaks of in relation to photography. When we are

faced with an image we don't recognise we attempt to figure it

out so that it is:

> ... no longer a confusing conglomerate of light
> and   dark   tones,   of   uncertain   edges   and
> ambivalent   volumes,   it now shows a "thing"
> which   we   invest   with   a full identity, a
> "being". (Burgin, 1982, p.147)

This takes place unconsciously in most cases. 'The wholeness, coherence,

identity which we attribute to the depicted scene is a projection, a

refusal of an impoverished reality in favour of an imaginary plenitude.'

(Burgin, 1982, p.147).   The imaginary object here, however, is not

imaginary in the usual sense of the word. It is seen, it has projected

an image. Is it this coherence and identity which Richter is disrupting

in his Photo Paintings, which is more surprising when we discover it

because of the deceptive simplicity of them.

Although the means employed by Richter are varied, the central

issue remains the same, the search for reality through his work,

and he chooses to search in different ways acknowledging the diversity

and possible elusiveness of that reality.

CHAPTER THREE

Richter more or less abandoned the smooth photo-based Photo Paintings

around 1966 but his interest in figurative or realist based art remained.

This interest continued to act as an undercurrent in a broad and

diverse stream of activity which included the theoretically based

Constructivist Work, Figurative and later the Abstract Paintings.

From 1966-67 to the Abstract Paintings in 1976 Richter's work was

very varied, Landscapes with romantic overtones (1968-) (Fig. 9),

the Constructive Works (1966-67), and collaborations with Blinky,

Palermo and Sigmar Polke, and the Gray Paintings (1968-1976) (Fig.10).

It is from these Gray Paintings that the Abstract Paintings emerged,

they were:

> The welcome and only correspondence to indifference,
> to a lack of conviction, the negation of commitment,
> anomie. After the Gray Paintings, after the dogma
> of Fundamentalist Painting whose purist and moralising
> aspects fascinated me to a degree bordering on self-
> denial all I could do was start all over again. This
> was the beginning of the first colour sketches
> conceived in complete openness and uncertainty under
> the premise of "multi-chromatic" and "complicated",
> which obviously meant the opposite of anti-painting
> and of painting that doubts its proper legitimacy.
> (Buchloh B.H.D., 1985, p.4)

And so it would seem that Richter in this statement, has abnegated

his previous stance of being one of the most radical painters of

the neo-avant garde. A painter who had challenged with each series,

the received ideas about painting in general as well as those about

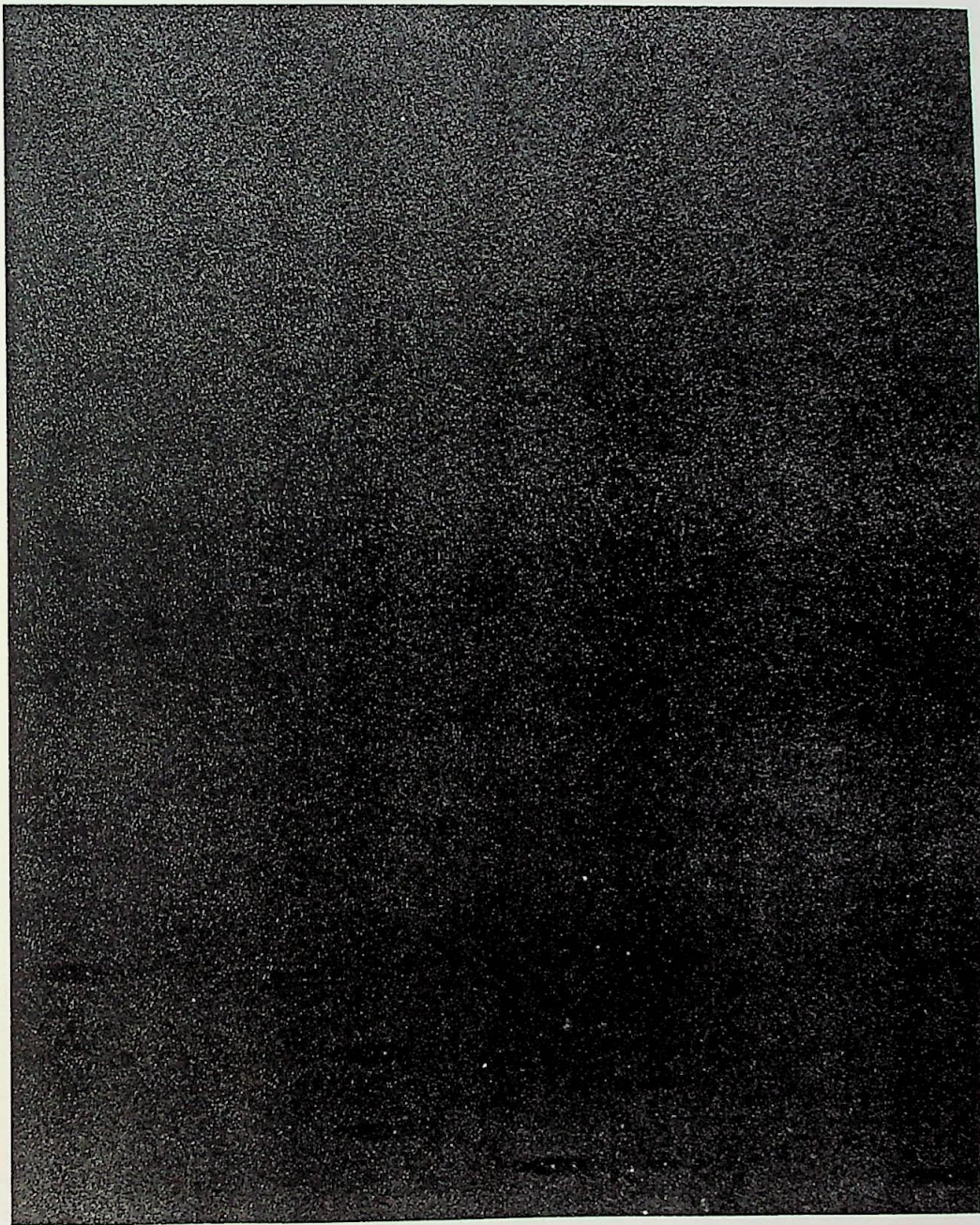his art. With the Abstract Paintings Richter's emphasis on the meaning

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

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of painting, as opposed to his previous attitude that he once

characterised as that of an anti-painter, would not allow his

paintings to be read in terms of either supreme irony and detachment

or that of a critical assault on the practices of painting that was

clearly an aspect of his work in the 1960's and early 1970's when

the refusal of meaning, the denial of the artist's role, which could

be said culminated in the Gray Paintings - and of its traditional

implications, were at the centre of Richter's concerns.

There was more of an emphasis put on the brushstroke and its

'expressive' possibilities in the Cityscapes 1968-1970 and

in some of the Landscapes like the Alps Series 1968-1969,

only then to be denied in the Constructive Work, only to re-emerge,

with greater force in the Abstract Paintings. This lead to

much speculation about Richter's position as a painter and

is probably best expressed in the statement by Benjamin Buchloh

when he says of Richter:

> He is not the omniscient author painter who
> commands the past practices of painting at ease
> and subjects them at will to the needs of the
> present, nor that of the obsolete but convinced
> practitioner of a craft whose moment of rediscovery
> has not yet come. (Buchloh B.H.D., 1985, p.4.)

It is important to understand the process of transition which led

to the new polychrome gestural paintings, which do resemble the attempts

of earlier artists, the Abstract Exressionists being the most immediate

example, to convey emotional and spiritual meaning through semi-automatist

highly gestural, non-representative painting. In his first "sketches"
Richter laid the groundwork for the compositionally complex Abstract
Paintings. But they were far too subjective and Richter was not
prepared to consider them as pictures. So he had to distance himself
from them - objectify them as it were. He did this by photographing
them, usually concentrating on details of them and so providing himself
with models to paint from. So in this technical process of reproduction
and scale differentiation Richter established the working process
for the early large scale 'gestural' Abstract Paintings (Fig. 11).

In these works the process of mediation of an organic painterly activity
through the various stages and practices of the mechanical construction
of a picture is done by the photographic recording of the "gestural"
and immediate brushstroke, its enlargement and change of scale and
pictorial execution. This constitutes the search for the nature of
reality through artistic means as well as continuing to examine the
contemporary conditions of painting.

It is difficult to see how, after the conceptual works, and the Gray
Paintings, the Abstract Paintings continue this examination as they
appear to be returning to that which has been established already
in painting. They could be seen as a reaffirmation of that which
painting explored earlier. But it is important to see the Abstract
Paintings as a dialectical negation of the implications of the Gray
Paintings. He seems to turn his back on the purity of means and
the self reflection of procedure that was evident in the Gray Paintings.
The Abstract Paintings would seem to be paying homage to the art
object and so involved with the idealism of painting and its renewed

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Fig. 11

mystification. In these paintings gesture is no longer about the
quality of its execution, it is an emotional display, colour is no
longer an examination of chromatic relationships and their interaction,
it is concerned with spiritual space. This is what the seductive
quality of these paintings would initially be hinting at. But in
these "Smooth" Abstract Paintings the gesture is mediated through the
incorporation of a technological process. The subjective element is being
eroded by Richter's distancing himself from this danger as much as is
possible. He works on the paintings slowly, leaving them for a while and
later returning to them, to avoid any one creative direction being dominant
and to avoid letting the paintings settle into a single mode. There is
room for spontaneity but Richter does not believe in the practioner's
confidence that as long as they worked as spontaneously as possible, good
pictures would result.

In the "Free" Abstract Paintings he has entered into the vocabulary of
picture making, form, colour, gesture, figure ground oppositions. These
relationships are not just purely formal or elements that were emptied of
reference, but ones which are fully attentive to their own evocative
capacity and associate meanings. But what is the difference between
Richter's work and others who engaged in the same vocabulary? Others
squeezed out of painting the last vestiges of representational space - they
did this by constantly stressing the flatness of the picture surface and by
reaffirming the material character of the paint and the canvas. Richter
takes the painting in a different direction. Rather than closing down the
painting activity by regarding this very activity as a means to its end,

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Richter reopens the Abstract Paintings (Fig. 12) to the illusionistic space
of realist representation. He allows the conflict that occurs with surface
making gestures rather than working for a reconcilation.

> So he creates a space for the awakening of objects
> and other references to the world outside, the
> aesthetic autonomy of art. (Naasgard, 1988, p.104)

Richter is engaged in the structure of the painting. And although
he is concerned with the relationship of colour being right, and the
different compositional elements are structurally related across
the picture surface even just by virtue of being placed a certain
way, there exists a contradictory place and movement in the depth
of space which Richter has introduced into these paintings, so that
the fabric that has been built up is simultaneously dissolved. These
paintings could be either reality recreated or a reflection on the
puzzling nature of reality. Richter believes that painting is a specific
reality while the painting process itself generates reality.

He is interested in the assumption about abstract works of art as
symbolic representations of ideas about reality and therefore he
feels: 'A line, a form, a colour is only interesting when it releases
an interesting association' (Naasgard, 1988, p.107). However abstract art
should take into consideration two criticisms levelled at it - that it has
been consigned to 'critical simulation and empty stylistic reference
making' (Naasgard, 1988, p.107) and so it is essential that Richter's work
rises above this if it is to proceed with any validity.

Fig. 12

Richter's starting point is to try to work from a basis free from ideology, which is a target for Ricther because 'it misleads, yields always ignorance and legitimises war' (Naasgard, 1988, p.107). So he does not believe in motifs or ideas which are old fashioned and reactionary as starting points. He tries to begin from the point zero, which is almost impossible unless one were to believe in the possibility of an unmediated image. However Richter would call this point a state of innocence, 'Where nothing helps me, no ideas, no rule, no belief to show me the way, no image of the future, no constructs to give me a superior sense'. (Naasgard, 1988, p.107)

Richter employs a methodology of doubt and scepticism which he considers appropriate to a search for authenticity of experience in a world otherwise disillusioned from the century's earlier expectations of modern and abstract art. 'That it could construct formal models for Utopian harmonies or spiritual values or subjective unities' (Naasgard, 1988, p.107). This scepticism is aimed at some of the various positions art has held not at its possibilities. 'Art is the highest form of hope' (Naasgard, 1988, p.50). But Richter is very serious about the basis for its realisation. It is achieved through very hard work and in this belief he is close to Mondrian who also believed that through enough work and time art could manifest an order of reality. Richter may not be sure of this reality but he is sure about what he does not want, and that is any ideologies with which to approach the beginning of the work and for those who in turn approach the finished work:

> I want to understand what is, I want to avoid
> all aesthetics in order not to have obstacles
> in my way and not to have the problem of people

> saying 'here this is how I see the world, this
> is an interpretation'. (Rorimer, 1987, p.2)

Richter has always stressed the hermetic nature of painting
as a means of avoiding the dominance of consumption. By remaining
distant and to an extent incomprehensible, the paintings are more
essential. They do not explain nor can we detect any attempts at
explanation from the artist. Such a distance can be difficult to
maintain.

> Too much distance is an advantage and a disadvantage.
> There is also another difference between the two
> modes of representation. Objects have too much
> importance, they give the painting a specific direction.
> Colour and structure are not given a chance to
> stand on their own. Because abstract painting does
> not represent - there is no man or table or whatever
> - one must only make sure that the relationship
> of colour is right like composing music, like
> Schonberg and Mozart. (Dietrich, 1983, p.129)

The later Abstract Paintings are even more layered, even more complex
arrangements of contradictory feelings. These coexisting contradictory
expressions and moods, the opposition of promises and denials, the
dispersal of their elements and not their resolutions, is the character
and strength of these Abstract Paintings, and of Richter's work as
a whole.

CONCLUSION

It would seem that Richter is operating from a position of ambiguity

in that he is aware that there are no certainties to offer about what it

is he paints, and his solution is to sustain a state of suspension as if

the most valuable quality of his work is this uncertainty. Of the

creative essence of ambiguity Arthur Kostler comments:

> ... biosociation; the perceiving of a situation or
> idea in two self consistent but habitually
> incompatible frames of reference which produces
> a transitory state of unstable equilibrium where
> the balance of thought and emotion is disturbed.
> (Barrow, 1982, p.7)

This is relevant to Richter's work in that he allows contradictions,

disturbances and different emotions in his work because they are

part of the nature of reality and therefore essential elements in

his paintings. He recognised the ambiguity inherent in the photograph.

On one level our confusion as to whether it is art or document, a

dichotomy which Allan Sekula terms 'binary folklore' and the other,

the ambiguity surrounding the photograph's relation to reality which

Richter explores in his Photo Paintings.

Richter brings the same level of inquiry and ambiguity to his later

work. It is probably in the dialectical form of the Abstract Paintings

that his mixture of scepticism and idealism is best expressed. He

continues to question and explore, but to offer no solutions as though

he is emphasising the uncertain nature of reality. But as Michael
Danoff said of him: 'The search for reality reaffirms identity
regardless of what remains unknown' (Danoff, 1988, p.13). Each
painting by Richter, within a series, is different, as are the separate
series one from another, yet all are similar insofar as they participate in
the questioning and redefinition of painting.

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