

Gerhard Richter: Painting and Mass Media

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Can that mute and static medium, painting, give the viewer anything like the stimulation of its more technologically advanced rivals, can it compete with their vertiginous heterogeneity, with their fusion of reality and fantasy? By examining in painting the future of the medium, Gerhard Richter’s works address this issue. There is a sense of vertigo experienced when first confronting Richter’s painting, not only because it enforces on the viewer a fruitless searching for an elusive object, but also because of its bewildering diversity, which encompasses minimalist grey work, precise copies from photographs, and large, apparently gestural, highly coloured abstracts. Curiously though, this feeling of a loss of position lessens when many works are seen together, and when something of an overall project underlying this diversity begins to emerge.¹

Richter’s stylistic eclecticism has received most critical attention but while the abstracts and the photo-paintings appear to stand at opposite poles, relations between them can be discerned. Recognizable objects appear in the photo-paintings but blurring and fudging, a lack of resolution, withholds their details. In the abstracts there is a strong sense of an emergent but ungraspable object, blurred by movement, veiled or obscured. In front of both types of painting the viewer is left groping to make sense of an image which emerges or submerges behind some immaterial screen, forever withheld.² In the photo-paintings Richter uses a number of means to achieve this loss of solidity. Paint simulates the familiar features of snapshots and, in doing so, lowers definition: the merging of masses in dark areas due to underexposure (caused by the brightness of the sky); the blurring of branches moving in the wind; the dissolution of forms by points of back-lighting. Anyone who has tried to copy a photograph will know that even in an apparently clear image there are always areas which, when it comes to drawing them, remain ambiguous, areas of tone which we cannot fix as belonging to one object or another. Richter faithfully retains and even focuses on these points of uncertainty. Painting however is as evident as photography in many of these pictures.

¹.There is a retrospective exhibition of Richter’s painting at the Tate Gallery running until 12th January 1991. A catalogue with essays by Sean Rainbird, Stefan Germer and Neal Ascherson accompanies the show.

².The unity of the abstracts and the photo-paintings is reinforced by various types of painting which form intermediate stages between them. Richter’s ‘squiggle ‘ paintings sometimes contain subjects, and are sometimes abstract. The almost unidentifiable subjects of some of the photo-paintings, merged into blurry masses, and of the paintings after Titian, form further links. A whole spectrum of possibilities is explored.

Passages where the paint surface becomes evident rupture the homogeneity of the surface, causing the viewer to oscillate between seeing an image and the material which constitutes it. This effect is further exploited in over-painted photographs where photographic reality forms a backdrop to a messy and material intrusion of paint.



Gerhard Richter *Düsenjäger*, 1963

Various explanations have been offered for Richter's loaded diversity. His origins in East Germany, where he trained at the Kunstakademie in Dresden and his move to the West in 1961, have been used to support the idea that he has rejected both Eastern and Western models of post-war art.³ The photo-paintings, for instance, might be thought to confront both traditions, mocking the ideal of realism in the East and those of artistic individuality and authenticity in the West. It could also be claimed that when faced with the post-modern dilemma of limitless possibilities, Richter thematises the problem and makes it his subject by, as it were, painting his own non-identity. Meaning is found only in the continuing change which painting undergoes.⁴ If this is so, it is achieved through contradiction and conflict. The artist has written that he hopes

³In the West, Richter studied at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie with Polke and Palermo (also from the East), and had some contact with Beuys who taught there.

⁴As argued by Wieland Schmied, 'Points of Departure and Transformations in German Art 1905-1985', Royal Academy, *German Art in the Twentieth Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-1985*, London 1985, p. 63.

[...] to let something come into being rather than to create. That is, no declarations, no constructions, nothing supplied, no ideologies - in this way to achieve something real, richer, more alive, something that is beyond my understanding.⁵

This is a hope born of postmodern powerlessness, the futile wish that utopia might, after all, turn up unasked by the back door. Richter escapes to this ideal realm by ruining his work: he first creates fine, coherent geometric paintings, or detailed photographic representations, only to deface them with scratches or messy irruptions of paint, or to efface them completely by scraping the surface with broad spatulas. Richter flirts with failure, making works which seem deliberately botched. The loss of artistic identity is transferred to the viewer who experiences a loss of self in the deep and ambiguous space of the abstracts. Space in these paintings is contradictory, produced by the perceived distance between sharply delineated but apparently indeterminate layers. The feeling of constant flux in these large works might best be described as vertigo, caused in part by the ungraspable aspect of the forms, in part by the contradictory space, leaving a sense of disorientation.



Gerhard Richter, *Meadowland (572-4)*, 1985

⁵.Museum Overholland, *Gerhard Richter - werken op papier, 1983-86*, Amsterdam 1987, pp. 8, 14.

In contrast to this sublime if flawed depth, Richter often dallies with kitsch. This is obviously the case with the blurred landscapes which seem to be failed attempts at romantic, tourist photographs. They are picturesque scenes which fail because of their clumsy viewpoint, dull light, or some formless intrusion in the foreground. These scenes have been described as emotionally neutral, but they are rather botched sentimental scenes, again sporting the inadequacies of the amateur enprint. Kitsch is not however just a feature of the photo-paintings. The exaggerated colours of many of the abstracts, their heightened chromatic lushness (certainly in the later works), the use of juxtaposed primaries in startling oppositions skirt close to being tasteless, even painful. The play with kitsch brings out what many think is a central theme of Richter's painting - assimilation. Richter's entire project can be seen as an attempt to reach beyond the universality of assimilation in capitalist culture. His strategies of distancing and displacement are then directed against the commercial appropriation of artistic material: under this interpretation, the photo-paintings, by making us aware of the act of appropriation, resist the process.⁶ Yet it is questionable whether this resistance is really effective, for the act of appropriation might become the ironic subject of appropriation itself. The appropriation of fine art images in some advertisements is so overt as to become a theme in its own right, and a humorous, even faintly shocking one at that.



Gerhard Richter, *Man Shot Down 1*, 1988

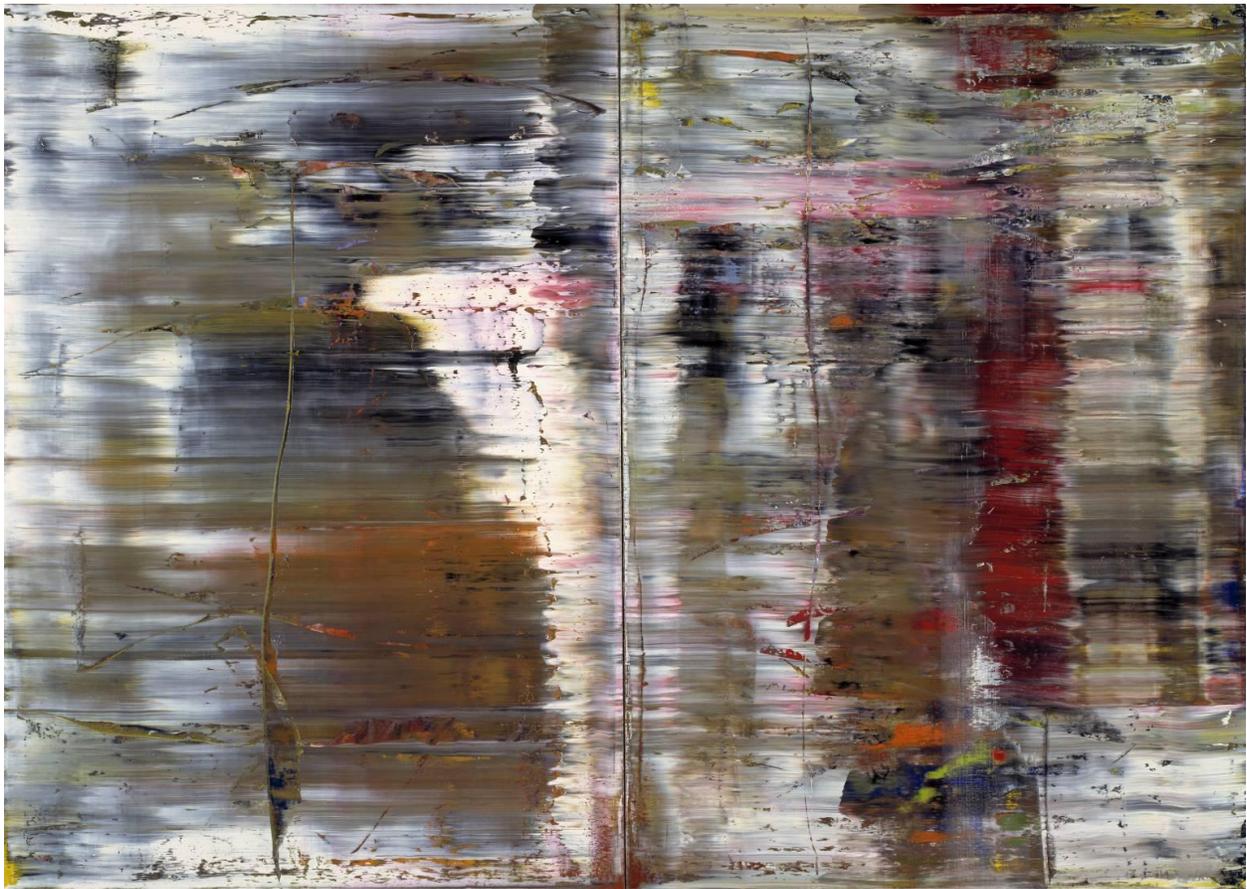
⁶. This is argued by Jill Lloyd in her catalogue essay to *Gerhard Richter: The London Paintings*, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London 1988.

The apparent neutrality of Richter's work is due in part to its diversity of style and subject matter which calls into question the engagement of the artist, in part due to the disappearance of the object. Further, there is a degree of dryness to the works, with their slick surfaces and synthetic colours which produce a style somehow expressive of distance. The neutral, objective air of the photo-paintings is sometimes contradicted, sometimes echoed by their subject matter. Some of the subjects are highly emotive - military hardware, soft porn, the faces of the murdered, and the series 18 Oktober 1977 about the death of RAF members in gaol; others, though, are banal - average snapshots, still life, landscape or portrait. Kitsch receives the same even-handed treatment. Diversity is surely the point for the medium reduces disparate subjects to a comfortable homogeneity, presented under the protective sheen of matte or screen. This reductive neutrality in painting can only operate across a number of pictures, not within the single frame. The minimal works (the grey paintings, and monochrome mirrors) play with emotional flatness. Richter himself has said that grey is an absence, a colour that makes no statement, imparts no emotion and triggers no association.⁷ This is patently not so, for grey itself has a variety of (often negative) connotations. The attempt to create a neutral art succeeds rather when one statement is canceled by another: an additive rather than simple monochromatic greyness.

So Richter's painting presents a diverse art where subject and object lose themselves, and where features of the assimilation of images in capitalist society are echoed. The techniques used to achieve these works add an entirely different dimension to their interpretation, yet leaves little trace on their final form: these paintings are often deceptive. Richter's method of producing his paintings, at least up to 1981, have been methodical, mechanical and even quasi-industrial: large scale work, apparently gestural, has actually been precisely copied inch by inch from smaller 'studies'. Not only does the handling of the photo-paintings echo photography, but a variety of photographic means are evident across the entire work: the production of colour and monochrome versions of the same work, mechanical enlargement. Given his early involvement with Neo-Dada, this may be seen as a pastiche of the production process, or an echoing of the industrial in art, pointing to the processes of reproduction and appropriation. There is also a mechanistic Neo-Dada play in Richter's practice of re-photographing his work from various angles and under different lighting and then repainting the resulting images. In the colour charts, the constituent colours are found (in the sense that the hues are unaltered, industrial productions) and then randomly combined. Chance is also seen in the indeterminate but sharp edged forms of many of the abstracts which make their scraped origin apparent. These are forms which we are not used to seeing in painting, which evoke the surfaces of walls or boards, materials which have been worked on or are subject to wear. The natural look of some of these distorted surfaces is chaotic. Blurring becomes a matter of resolution, or rather the lack of it - resolution both in terms of definition and of working out definitively. The work remains forever unresolved while the viewer strives for a greater but always unrealized definition of the image.

⁷. Letter to E. de Wilde, 23 February 1975; reprinted in Tate Gallery, *Gerhard Richter*, London 1991, p. 112.

Richter's paintings exhibit a Neo-Dadaist combination of the found object, chance and mechanized reproduction. Richter apes the mechanical production of images in capitalist society, its seriality, neutrality, and its simultaneous occupation of all possible aesthetic positions. The way in which the authenticity of the work of art is altered by the reproducing process is especially highlighted: fine art becomes found object when reproduced, and especially when used as the raw material for a new piece of work. In the Tate Gallery retrospective there are a number of portraits from Richter's Venice Biennale series of the heads of famous writers, scientists and musicians. These were painted copies of the kind of portraits found in encyclopedias (themselves often heavily retouched, a cross between photography and painting) now rephotographed; photographs of paintings of photographs. The opposition between painting and the ready-made (the abandonment of painting)⁸ is established in the same structure as the contrast between realism and abstraction. Here though the point is not a fluid and elusive reality, but the process of assimilation and transformation, the insecure status of the fine art aesthetic.



Richter, *Abstract Painting (726)*, 1990

The sense of speed which we feel in front of Richter's painting may be related to an experience of the postmodern: a simulation of the experience of cultural blur, of contradiction resolved by the

⁸. See Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, Minnesota 1991.

speed of assimilation and the brevity of their exposure. This speed is not just the speed of the object but of the viewer; scenes are viewed as though from a speeding car, and suffer the same distortion as a frozen video frame. The resulting blurring, the uncertainty of interpretation, the fragmentation of the object, the denial of the luxury of being able to examine in detail may all stand as analogues for contemporary cultural experience. The abstracts work as incomplete or effaced communications. In this they correspond to the failed romanticism of the photographic landscapes. Yet while in the landscapes the effect is banal, the aim of the abstracts is surely the sublime: they are in some sense landscape pieces, of massive scale. The vague feeling of the importance of any cultural theme within the postmodern morass, where connections are endlessly complex, is just that of the sublime, and forms another dimension of the loss of the self.

The layering of diverse paint surfaces in the work can be read as a process of internal critique. The final surface is a palimpsest registering the traces of competing tendencies. An external critique is also suggested by Richter's stylistic heterogeneity. It is unclear just what these critiques amount to for there is no real sense of hierarchy, conflict, process or final ordering. It is more in the nature of a mere juxtaposition. The lack of critical grasp is typical in pastiche: it is unclear whether the target is the mass media, painting, the relation between them, or all of them. Richter's paintings may be seen to contain a series of conflicts and contradictions, none of which are in any sense resolved. As in Dada, there is an idea that the cultivation of contradiction might lead to a new realm of freedom, beyond rationality, language and assimilation, as though even the unconscious process of assimilation could not grasp the two sides of an opposition at once. As a corollary of this, Richter's work may be thought to above all thematise interpretation: the ever-increasing proliferation of competing readings attached to his work are encouraged by its nature yet the thematising of interpretation leads works open to radical readings which even the artist would repudiate.⁹

Assimilated images share many of the features of Richter's painting: pastiche, emotional neutrality, the slippage and constant elusiveness of meaning, mechanical action, chance (in the combination of images) and thus internal critique, the medium acting on consciousness to create a palimpsest, and finally the very range of interpretation which the work allows. All this is blurred by the speed of juxtaposition and superimposition, by the failure of memory to fix any single image. Perhaps Richter's aim is to give a painterly experience of this state of postmodernity. The residue of fine art might then give the viewer a point of reference, of leverage, from which to judge this experience. The paint surface is manifest, allowing the viewer to visualize the screen of the media itself. It has to be asked how much this is a mediated, critical experience and how much mere virtual reality. The whole nature of the project is paradoxical; can paint really provide some critical edge? Or is Richter merely playing a sophisticated game with those who happen to look at painting, the cultural cognoscenti? The very realization of some coherence beneath the diversity, lessens the mechanical air of senselessness behind the works, makes them more comfortable, and brings us back to something which we think we know. Richter's project is paradoxical in another way, for on one level

⁹This has certainly been the case with Benjamin Buchloh's readings of the works, in some ways more interesting than Richter's own, which are at total cross-purposes to the artist. See Buchloh's interview with Richter in Art Gallery of Ontario, *Gerhard Richter: Paintings*, Toronto 1988. It is unclear though what a misreading of Richter's work would be.

the artist pursues a critique of originality and artistic identity, while on another by doing so he creates for himself an original identity and initiates a process of his own assimilation into the traditional structures of the art world, including the accolade of a retrospective exhibition at the Tate. Here the radical aspects of Richter's work are effortlessly assimilated into the art-historical discourse of individuality, talent and even genius. The exercise of anti-individualistic devices, particularly ruining the work, become exercises in individuality. Richter's art, lacking any overt critical bite, appears as a dumb-show, mutely reproducing the heterogeneous delights of capitalist media.