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**Gerhard Richter: Painting after the subject of history**

**Buchloh, Benjamin H. D., Ph.D.**

**City University of New York, 1994**

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GERHARD RICHTER: PAINTING AFTER THE SUBJECT OF HISTORY

by

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1994

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Benjamin H.D. Buchloh

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## Introduction

Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History

In the past decade it has become increasingly apparent that the oeuvre of the German artist Gerhard Richter is of considerable interest to audiences outside the immediate context of postwar West Germany and the neo-avant-garde activities of the 1960s to 1980s. In fact, if one accepts the following basic definitions as integral to the periodization of twentieth century avant-garde art, one could argue that his work functions as an exemplary case within a general theory of critical postmodernism.

First of all, Richter's oeuvre, although restricted for the most part to the medium of painting, openly defies all traditional claims for organic continuity and coherence. It actually makes the radical inversion of stylistic principles its operational basis. As such, it situates itself within the context of practices of citation and paraphrase that seem to oppose any notion of authenticity and originality from the start, privileging instead the structural model of an already given convention (linguistic or pictorial) as the founding condition of painterly articulation.

Second, the work positions itself in an incessant dialogue with the techniques of mass-cultural representation, more precisely, with the condition of the

artistic image as something always-already produced and reproduced. Thus, in Richter's paintings from the early sixties onward, photography is a persistent presence: from the amateur photographs of the family album to the tawdry imagery of cheap pornography; from the journalistic productions found in newspapers and magazines to the advertising imagery accompanying or increasingly replacing editorial copy. But it is not just in the photographic paintings of Richter that the photographic condition is pervasive: even in the abstract gestural paintings that originate in the late 1960s as well as in the Color Charts from 1966 onwards, the sense of a non-organic, technical production is always present, even the works' chromatic scale seeming to have been derived from the unlimited range of tints that photographic technologies provide rather than from the relatively limited array of fine art oils.

But unlike Andy Warhol, an artist with whom Richter repeatedly engages in a complex dialogue, the latter never approaches the question of painting as a closed case. Rather painting visibly remains, even in its most mechanical exposures--such as in the monochrome gray paintings that are produced with a paint roller -- a separate but continuing sphere of craft and knowledge, and therefore of audience experience and historical memory.

A second theoretical model, beyond that of mere, internal discontinuity, seems important to bring to bear

when looking at the development of Richter's oeuvre: his work now appears not only integral to an understanding of postwar German art, but central to that more general European predicament which Peter Bürger has termed the "neo-avant-garde." Bürger's theorization of the relationship between what he identifies as the "historical avant-gardes" (1910-1925) and the subjects of the neo-avant-garde in postwar Europe, forms the basis of my theoretical argument, and it is from Bürger's model that I draw the notion of artistic paradigms, invented in the teens and early twenties, and then repeated in the postwar decades through specific acts of reception--hence the appellation "neo." The original, or historical, avant-garde paradigms represented massive reinterpretations, of course, of the earlier, traditional practice and understanding of painting. They include the monochrome's attack on composition, collage's (and later photomontage's) attack on both fine-art materials and representations skills, and the readymade's attack on notions of both artistic skill and the priority of aesthetic intention, to name but three such paradigms.

Bürger's model is concerned not just with how the original paradigms were developed but goes on to argue that their reception at the hands of the neo-avantgarde could not but consist of an empty, trivializing repetition, on the order of Hegel's formula, repeated by Marx, that everything in history happens twice, first as tragedy and then,

subsequently, as farce. It will emerge, however, that in developing Bürger's model into a specific and detailed study of the various strata and phases of Richter's painting, I will end by criticize that model as inadequate to addressing the complex, and far from either trivial or farcical, task of historical acknowledgement and commemoration that Richter's work sets itself.

To understand this one needs to add a third aspect to the dissertation's proper field of concerns, namely the peculiar biographical circumstances of Richter's double identity, formed first in the context of East German State Communism, and subsequently within a West German late capitalist consumer industry busily embracing the success of the United States postwar economy. First of all there is his education up to 1960 as a painter at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden in the legacies of Neo-Classicism (from German *Neue Sachlichkeit* to Stalinist Socialist Realism). This experience equipped him with an arsenal of anti-modernist tools that would be continuously and cyclically reintroduced in the artist's works after his arrival in West Germany in 1961.

Second, there was the abrupt confrontation with the work of artists from Western Europe and the United States in 1958 at Documenta I (Dubuffet, Fautrier, Fontana and Pollock), an encounter that would become a major contributing factor for his departure from East Germany in 1961. This was then

followed by the peculiar conditions of reception that would constitute Richter's "new" Western identity after his second enrollment at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf in 1961, where he would be confronted with a range of practices from the work of Yves Klein to that of Robert Rauschenberg and American Fluxus artists, all of whom contributed to the dramatic transformation of Richter's painterly practices after 1961.

These three factors, rather schematically outlined here, circumscribe an historical field of considerable interest as well as of complex theoretical questions. In the following study I attempt to address both dimensions in tandem. At the political-historical level, the peculiar and unique biographical circumstances of this German artist qualify him to be considered as the quintessential representative of the "divided heritage." But at the level of a history of style, the study of Richter's work allows me to clarify some aspects of the more general difficulties in understanding the continuing dialectic of neo-classicism and photography in the twentieth century as well as the dialectic of anti-modernist figuration and modernist abstraction. Richter's shift from East to West will allow me to study--almost under laboratory conditions--how a neo-avant-garde artist constituted himself in the postwar period in Western Europe. In particular one can explore the systematic integration of painterly paradigms of the

historical avant-garde (e.g., the monochrome, gestural abstraction, and the grid) that were to become important strategies in Richter's work. Or furthermore, one can address the phenomenon of an artist in West Germany who encounters the work of the American neo-avant-garde and its paradigms (e.g., Rauschenberg's combines and photomontage-paintings) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, before actually recognizing the origins of those practices on his own territory, in the Weimar Republic's German avant-garde (e.g., Heartfield and Schwitters).

In fact I want to suggest at the outset that Richter is--after Beuys, if not against Beuys--the quintessential artistic figure in which the needs and interests of a German postwar public were most clearly articulated. That peculiar condition of all post-war European artists, of having to reconcile the legacy of the prewar, heroic avant-gardes--their utopian aspirations towards a radical transformation of social and political reality through the intervention of avant-garde culture--with the historical experience of utter catastrophe in the encounter with Fascism and World War II, was exacerbated all the more for artists of postwar Germany. Clearly what was at stake for the generation of Beuys and Richter was the question of how, in the face of that experience, artistic practice could be justified at all, and if initiated with credibility, how it could be socially situated. And this issue of social function was multiple,

opening onto: the question of the utopian functions of traditional avant-garde culture; the question of audiences and their class determination; the question of the inevitably affirmative implications of any artistic practice whatever; and, finally, the question of how these activities could be positioned in relationship to the ever-increasing power of the apparatus of the culture industry, newly consolidated at the beginning of the 1950s in the various European countries, and progressing at uneven speed.

This study will therefore analyze the work of Gerhard Richter from a multiplicity of methodological perspectives, an approach that seems as necessary to its subject as it is appropriate to the conditions of contemporary art-historical writing. In response to Richter's multiplicity of aesthetic practices, a formal and structural analysis of painterly paradigms and the various phases of his work seems called for. Yet at the same time, approaches developed by social art history and reception theory seem necessary to position the work in the complicated process of postwar German reconstruction and the overall dialogue that the work establishes with the legacies of pre - and postwar painting.

Unlike Bürger, however, I am not attempting to maintain a transcendental model of avant-garde practice, one that situates the "original" and "historical" avant-garde moment somewhere between 1910 and 1925 and assumes that the extreme diversity of practices developed internationally during this

period can be adequately theorized by a single, global term. Such a term is encapsulated by Bürger's claim that these historical avant-gardes can be collectivized around a critique of the institutionalized concept of aesthetic autonomy. Unlike Bürger I do not think it productive or possible, furthermore, to establish a hierarchy of avant-garde instances, judging the authenticity of each by the anteriority of the paradigm's "original" definition. The mere binary structure of an "authentic" versus an "unauthentic" moment of entry seems deeply at odds with a set of practices whose epistemic intervention is meant specifically, to address such claims for authenticity and originality as false.

By contrast, what does concern me is first, to give an optimal description of the peculiar, historical force field within which an artistic practice such as Richter's is constituted. Second, again in opposition to Bürger, I am concerned to articulate the historical specificity of the set of practices universally dismissed by him as the "semantic atrophy of the neo-avant-garde." From the time when it was first pronounced, this epithet has been all too reminiscent of a certain type of prejudice as enunciated by a certain type of (German) art historian, who declares a ban on the study of art after 1900, or a certain type of philistine academic who denounces the contemporary as so much fraudulence and hype, and as innately invalid when

compared to the serious masterpieces of the (authentically historical) "past." This prohibitionist impulse, cyclically declaring the bankruptcy if not the end of artistic production in the present, is not only methodologically insufferable, with its unreflective prioritization of historical sequences and the transcendence of its hierarchies, it is also profoundly problematic as a handicap to historical insight into the present (and Bürger does, after all, claim to be engaged in a historical as well as theoretical project).

Accordingly, then, I have constructed several axes along which Richter's work will be considered. And while these axes inevitably intersect, it is important to realize that--like the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes in Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic model--they operate independently of each other and function in different registers.

The paradigmatic axis is the one that traces the transformations of a limited number of identifiable avant-garde paradigms in Richter's work. The first paradigm I consider is that of the legacies of collage/photomontage which--in a continuous process of assembling and disassembling the semiotics of found photographs--operates as the avant-garde's response to the universal order of photographic reproduction.

The arguments of the chapter titled "The Anomic

Archive" are based on the hypothesis that Richter's extensive archival collection of photographic source materials--their selective deployment as the iconographic basis of the first ten years of his paintings in the West, as well as the eventual declaration of the collection of source materials itself to be a "work" in its own right--not only continues to participate in but also substantially alters the logic of the historical avant-garde's attempt to use photomontage as a strategic way of coming to terms with the universal photographic structuring of visuality and historical memory.

The second paradigm I address is that of reductivist pictoriality as it is articulated historically in the emergence of monochrome painting and in the simultaneous subjection of all compositional principles under the order of the grid. Along with their original attempt to oppose the universal reign of the photographic, both versions of the reductivist approach to painterly representation, reemerge in Richter's work in the mid 1960s (in the Monochrome Series and in the Color Charts), after the series of photographic paintings seems to be temporarily concluded.

The peculiar coexistence of a photographic with a pictorial aesthetic that had bewildered Richter's earlier audiences, does not appear surprising once one has recognized that their simultaneity is in fact given in the

very first instances of these paradigms. This case could best be made by remembering that Alexander Rodchenko for example developed a rigorous photomontage aesthetic at the very same moment (around 1921) that he defined the apogee of pure pictoriality in the Monochrome Tryptich in 1921, or that in the context of the neo-avant-garde, Robert Rauschenberg phased the photographic order into his work at the very moment when he just had articulated a radical redefinition of the monochrome paradigm in 1949-51.

The third paradigm that I analyze in the second and third chapters belongs less to the progressive avant-garde than it does to an anti-modernist syndrome: namely the peculiar hybrid of neo-classicisms and nineteenth century realisms that emerges in various cycles and contexts of the twentieth century as a complicated opposition both to the photographic (on which it is heavily dependent at the same time despite its disavowal), as to the purely pictorial. While I attempt to clarify the historical circumstances of Richter's peculiar involvement with that syndrome in a historical and biographical analysis of the first chapter, in the third and fourth chapters I assume that the anti-modernist practices in Richter's work manage to take on the functions of a paradigm quite as much as his "modernist" practices do.

Richter's continuing involvement with both a neo-classical iconography and a photographically disguised, neo-

classicist style are therefore understood in the following not only as a working-through and a working out of his entanglement with Socialist Realism, but also as a continuous attempt to address the quintessentially anti-modernist question, originally posed by Giorgio de Chirico and rearticulated since then in a variety of ways right down to Richter's contemporary Jannis Kounellis: how can the avant-garde's impulse to annihilate historical memory--in its positing of a radical stance of auto-determination, outside the boundaries of bourgeois institutions of culture--be counteracted by strategies of cultural commemoration that oppose the erasure of the mnemonic functions of culture, without inevitably finding themselves in the embrace of politically reactionary and culturally conservative forces? Or, to phrase the question in reverse (which is probably more appropriate to the situation within which the neo-avant-garde finds itself after World War II): how can the culture industry's systematic erasure of historical experience be opposed by neo-avant-garde practices if in fact -- as avant-garde strategies -- they are committed to the annihilation of conventions, thereby inadvertently increasing precisely the very effects of the general process of historical desublimation. Richter's working through and around the problem of the category of the Nude in his painting Ema (1966) seems to address this problem just as his continuous attempts to question the

possibilities of history painting return to this question as one of the central problems of his practice.

The last of the paradigms as I formulate them would be defined by Richter's extensive involvement with the procedures of gestural painting. And while I am aware of the difficulty of claiming a separate status for gestural abstraction as a paradigm (rather than situating it in direct oppositional relationship to the monochrome and the grid, for example, or in the general context of a history of reductivist strategies of pure pictoriality) I believe that a case can be argued with some credibility in which the intricate dialectical relationship between Richter's neo-classical (and paradoxically photographic) anti-modernism and Richter's abstract gestural and pure pictoriality (and paradoxically highly mechanical process) can be established.

In the context of both Richter's incessant pursuit of an infinity of painterly options or the dictate of an absolute equivalency of randomly accessible pictorial options (along the parameters of mechanical processes of production; or of chance operations and non-composition; or of an extreme diversity of non-relational and non-organic chromatic definitions perhaps best described as Richter's color disorder), Richter's abstract gestural paintings seem to acquire an extraordinary mnemonic dimension that reaches dialectically into the history of painterly experiences and

practices. These seem to range from the semblance of pure visual gratification and the explicit access to sensuality posited by a painterly activity grounded in notions of sublimation to the empiricist self-reflexivity and the refusal of the scopic and compensatory functions of painting assumed by a modernist stance of self-criticism.

It is my claim that the defining of paradigms in what follows avoids some of the obvious deficiencies of Bürger's model as outlined above. The dynamic conception of the paradigm as a system of established artistic operations where both the micro-structures and processes of historical experience and artistic intervention can and must be articulated first of all before any larger context can be addressed, might prevent the misconceptions that inevitably emerge from a continuous comparison with the "authority" of some stable "authentic" antecedent within which an "original" value is encoded only subsequently to be lost. At the same time I would argue that it is only on the ground of such an analysis of the internal modifications within the paradigmatic structure that the larger questions of external determination by ideological and political factors can be addressed. I have therefore attempted to weave into the analysis of the minute shifts on the territory of pictorial paradigms a different, macro-level approach. This entails reflections on the larger context within which Richter's work is constituted due to the peculiar condition

of his biography: the specific confrontation of the Eastern and the Western ideologies of postwar Germany; the discoveries of the peculiar difficulties of becoming an artist under the West German culture industry, such that any efforts to develop a critical position that opposes both the complicity of the avant-garde within that apparatus of domination will also entail refraining from adopting a reactionary, high-cultural position of defending privileged territory.

In methodological terms, then, it seems highly necessary to search out those exact intersections where the microscopic operations within the paradigmatic system and the macroscopic determinations of a larger institutional, ideological, or political framework can be traced. For only then can one credibly describe the particular historical truth-value of Richter and the neo-avant-garde.

## Chapter One

Gerhard Richter: From Socialist Realism to the  
"Demonstration for Capitalist Realism" (1963)

The allergy against aura, from which nowadays not a single work of art can escape any longer, is inextricably bound up with the general emergence of inhumanity.

-- T.W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory

## Part I: Historical Background.

Gerhard Richter's first academic education at Dresden's venerable Staatliche Kunstakademie, occurred during the years of the consolidation of East German post-war culture along the lines of a State-prescribed and controlled form of Socialist Realism. The founding ideological principles of this 'style' had been formed in a complicated process of argument, censorship, and repression that had been developing in the Soviet Union since the mid-1920s. This was the case within the ranks of the Weimar avant-garde artists and the German political Left as well, even though similar debates about the continued use and validity of avant-garde culture for the projects of the class struggle, the proletarian revolution, and eventually, for the opposition against fascism had emerged in the 1930s.

In the immediate post-war years, in the Soviet Occupied Zone of the newly divided Germany, the party officials who

were in charge of outlining the cultural policy of the future German Socialist State, seemed initially to waver in their attitudes towards the legacies of the Weimar avant-gardes and Modernism in general. While between 1945 and 1948 this hesitation was partially due to a general reluctance (or inability) to reconcile ideological and artistic orientations, it was equally, if not more so, the result of a sense of moral obligation to differentiate the new "socialist" cultural policies in Germany from those of the National Socialists. Describing the development of the arts in the Soviet Zone, Hellmuth Lehmann-Haupt states that these programs "looked rather good at first, especially in comparison with the meager, or non-existent directives of the Anglo-American occupation program."<sup>1</sup>

It was certainly in response to these attitudes towards the legacies of Weimar culture as they were articulated by the Soviet Commissars and their German political executors such as Walther Ulbricht (soon to become the first President of the German Democratic Republic), that a large group of artists, writers, and intellectuals, who had been forced to emigrate during the reign of fascism, now chose to return from Moscow (e.g. Johannes R. Becher) or from Hollywood (e.g. Bertolt Brecht) to the Soviet Zone, rather than to the Western sectors. In addition to Brecht and Becher, the most eminent cultural figures to return in 1946-48 were Helene Weigel, Anna Seghers, Ernst Bloch, Hans Mayer, Walter Felsenstein, and Arnold Zweig, as well as painters like Hans

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<sup>1</sup> Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, Art under a Dictatorship, New York, 1954, p.201.

and Lea Grundig and, a few years later, John Heartfield and his brother, the publisher Wieland Herzfelde.

Confronted with the presence of such a prominent contingent of the Weimar avant-garde, and most importantly faced with the urgency of distinguishing its ideological position as drastically as possible from the totalitarian politics of the Nazi State, the Soviet commissars argued at first for a complete "freedom of cultural creation" in the future Socialist Germany. And in fact it appears that in the three years after the end of the war, cultural policies were developed (or reinstated) that even envisioned the reconstitution of a unifying German Modernist culture across the boundaries of the Soviet and Anglo-American sectors. At the same time these policies aimed to continue the modernism of the 1920s, to reconcile and repatriate its emigrés, and to compensate them, if only symbolically, for the destruction the Nazis had wreaked on the work of artists and writers of the Weimar State.

Thus, for example, the newly elected president of the Academy of Arts in Berlin (West), Carl Hofer, who had been prosecuted by the Nazis and whose work had figured prominently in the Entartete Kunst exhibition in 1937, now used all his power to reconcile the divided parts of the country, at least culturally. As a founding member, in 1945, of the bilateral Cultural Federation for the Democratic Renewal of Germany (of which J.R. Becher became president after his return from Moscow in 1945), Hofer and his colleagues initiated a variety of activities that would link the artists of the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany with

those working in the American, French, and English sectors. The inaugural address, delivered to the Federation by the actor Kai Moeller on July 4, 1945 on the Berlin Radio Station, stated:

A national hatred, rising to a level of passion the likes of which has never before been inflamed in Germany, must strike out against all those who still show themselves to be recalcitrant and who pursue a prolongation and perpetration of the Hitler outrage. Love for Germany and national disposition must be measured according to the extent to which a German is ready to become a new German man, a free German man, to the extent to which he participates self-critically in the destruction of the Nazi ideology, the imperialist and militarist ideology, and the extent to which he shows initiative for reparations.<sup>2</sup>

Richter's future teacher at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, Hans Grundig, had returned from his Moscow exile in 1946 and would become the Academy's first post-war director.<sup>3</sup> He was also involved in the Cultural Federation

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<sup>2</sup> Published in German in Berlin: Quellen und Dokumente, 1945-1951, Verlag Heinz Spitzing, Berlin, 1964, vol.1, pp. 772-775. English translation quoted from: Yule F. Heibel, Towards a Reconstruction of Modernism, or the Subject's Dialectic of Evacuation: Modern Painting in West Germany After World War II. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation Department of Fine Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Grundig had joined the Communist Party in 1922 and had since become one of the most active participants in the ASSO --an association of artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers, who attempted to link their cultural production in an activist manner to the goals of the Communist party. In the mid-thirties,

for the Democratic Renewal of Germany and participated in the Federation's congress in Düsseldorf in 1947. A year before, in collaboration with Will Grohmann, he had organized the first post-war version of the annual Deutsche Allgemeine Kunstausstellung, which took place in Dresden in 1946. Grohmann, who had been a small-time, fascist fellow-traveller, now became one of the most engaged post-war champions of (Weimar) avant-garde art, most particularly that of abstraction.<sup>4</sup> Grohmann's and Grundig's joint project still included not only artists from all sectors of the divided country but also from all aesthetic persuasions, bringing together representational and abstract work, in an effort to recognize the historical contribution of those artists who had been persecuted for their affiliation with the modernist avant-garde.

Grundig himself reviewed the exhibition with an attitude of critical tolerance towards the variety of positions evident in the reassembling of artists from German pre-war visual culture, artists who had either emigrated or

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Grundig and his wife Lea Langer-Grundig, who was a very accomplished painter in the context of the Neue Sachlichkeit, organized a network of resistance against the fascists in Dresden, were both imprisoned several times. Finally, in 1939 Lea Grundig--who was Jewish--barely escaped the Nazis by emigrating to Palestine, whereas Hans Grundig was finally deported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1940. When deployed to a penal military company at the front in Budapest in 1944, Grundig immediately deserted and joined the Soviet Red Army which eventually brought him to Moscow, where he was engaged in an institution of Antifascist Education and Propaganda.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Weber argues that Will Grohmann had in fact been a small-time Nazi fellow traveller and that he used his newly discovered passion for modernist abstraction in the post-war period as the basis for his legitimation. See: Jürgen Weber, "Kunst als Persilschein: Mit brauner Vergangenheit zur abstrakten Kunst," in: Linkskurve (1982), p.27 ff.

had been living and working in what was then called "inner emigration."<sup>5</sup>

Shortly thereafter, however, beginning in 1948, the tolerance towards Modernism in general, and abstraction in particular, seems to have rapidly waned in the newly founded German Democratic Republic. Soon, even a figurative painter like Carl Hofer was once again subjected to the accusation of being "bourgeois" and "decadent." From then on, artists in the Soviet sector were prohibited from all contacts with Hofer and his colleagues in the West because of their works' "decadence." But--paradoxically -- from that point forward Hofer would also be increasingly criticized in West Berlin, both for his efforts to sustain exchange with the artists of the Soviet Zone through his activities in the Cultural Federation for Democratic Renewal of Germany,<sup>6</sup> and for his insistence on continuing to paint in a representational style in the face of the ever-growing power of abstract painting as the true idiom of Western political and ideological self-determination (and of the newly rediscovered concept of aesthetic autonomy). At the end of 1947 the American authorities banned the Cultural Federation and its publication Der Ruf in the Western Zones altogether, and the cultural polarization of the eastern and western

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Grundig, "Berichte und Berechtigungen : Dresdener Bilanz: Betrachtungen zur Ersten Allgemeinen Deutschen Kunstausstellung," in: Prisma, vol.1, no.2 (1946), pp.33-34. See also the extremely informative memoirs/novel written by Hans Grundig, Zwischen Karneval und Aschermittwoch, Berlin, 1955 (14th edition), VEB Dietz, Berlin, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> See: Jost Hermand, "Neuordnung oder Restauration ? (Zur Beurteilung der faschistischen Kunstdiktatur in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit), in: Kritische Berichte, vol.12, no.1, p.82.

parts of Germany took its course, a polarization that would eventually form one crucial element in the foundation of Richter's schismatic artistic identity.

With the 1945 return from exile in Moscow of personalities such as Johannes R. Becher and Willi Bredel -- leftist intellectuals who had already participated in the original attacks on the Weimar avant-garde as "exemplary phenomena of bourgeois decadence and Imperialist Formalism " -- the New Socialist State now had the ideological resources, as well, to articulate its new cultural orientation. Already in the late 1920s, Becher had attacked the painters of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement (of which Hans Grundig and his wife Lea were crucial members in Dresden) as "profoundly reactionary."<sup>7</sup> With Becher's new promotion to first minister of culture of the German Democratic Republic, even Grundig--like Hofer--might have had to face trouble were it not for the fact that he had belonged continuously to the German Communist Party and had now been--rightfully--positioned as a heroic figure of German Anti-Fascism. As such--and in spite of his earlier association with Neue Sachlichkeit--Grundig now became installed as the Director of the Dresden Academy.

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<sup>7</sup> The critique of the Neue Sachlichkeit positions in literature, photography, and the visual arts in the decade 1926-1936, is fairly pervasive within the German Marxist left of that period, even though many artists such as Grundig were pronounced anti-fascists and members of the Communist Party. One of the more familiar examples of that critical debate would be the various demolishing references to the Neue Sachlichkeit in the writings of Walter Benjamin, in particular in his essays "Short History of Photography" (1931), "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduceability" (1934), and particularly the essay "Left Wing Melancholia" (1931).

Once the New German Socialist State--officially declared in 1949--hit its ideological stride, its party officials no longer seem to have felt bound to either the token compensation for the damage that National-Socialism had inflicted on the members of the Weimar avant-garde or to the even more complex demands of an actual attempt to link avant-garde practices with the needs of the new Socialist state culture. An opinion poll conducted in 1949 among the male population aged 28-35 on the subject of Modernist art indicated that forty percent disapproved of avant-garde art altogether, whereas in the older age groups seventy-five percent indicated tolerance or positive interest in Modernist art.<sup>8</sup>

With such a persistent or reactivated collective prejudice against Modernism on the part of the majority of the active working and voting population, it seemed not only desirable but perfectly safe to eliminate both the timid new beginnings and the remnants of an internationalist Modernist movement in the Soviet satellite state.

On July, 17 1951, a law was passed (identified as the "Ordinance Concerning the Establishment of a State Commission for Artistic Matters"), which specified that from now on "formalism is defeated in every area of art, that the fight against decadence is resolutely continued and that a realistic art is developed by picking up the traditions left

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<sup>8</sup> Lehmann-Haupt, loc. cit. p.189.

by the great masters of classical art."<sup>9</sup> This law was soon to be followed in 1952 by Walter Ulbricht's doctrine of the cultural functions to create images of the "New Man," which was a verbatim translation of Sarge Zhdanov's--the notorious theoretician of Socialist Realism and General Secretary of the Central Committee of Culture under Stalin--instruction to the Soviet artists to create images of the "New Man."

Or, as Alexander Gerasimov, President of the Soviet Academy of Arts had expressed it in 1949:

We must shed the old Adam and we have to begin to work in the manner that Marx, Engels, and Lenin have worked, and in the manner that comrade Stalin is now working."<sup>10</sup>

But in 1951, of course, one of the paradoxical aspects of the German Socialists' claim for a "realistic" art and to the legacy of the "great masters of classical art" and their appeal for a defiance of "decadence" and "formalism" was that it echoed almost word-for-word the anti-modernist

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<sup>9</sup> See: Martin Damus, Sozialistischer Realismus und Kunst im National-Sozialismus, Frankfurt, 1981, p.112 (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Gerasimov, "Concluding Remarks of the Session of the National Academy of Fine Art of the Soviet Union" (1949), quoted in Boris Groys, Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin, Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1988, p.64 (my translation). Alexander Gerasimov was the favorite artist of General Kliment Voroshilov, the general who lead the victorious campaigns on the Eastern front in the war against the German National Socialist Army in 1944-45. Voroshilov, an avid collector of nineteenth-century Russian landscape painting had promoted Gerasimov to the top positions in the cultural hierarchies of the Stalin Government, eventually to the position of President of the National Academy of the Arts of the Soviet Union. It is not surprising that Gerasimov became the "official" state artist of the Stalin government. It is in this role also that he visited the newly formed satellite state of the German Democratic Republic on many occasions.

language of the Nazis of 1933. Concepts such as "community" and "social consciousness" as well as "social relevance" were now reaffirmed as the key criteria to judge the legitimacy of contemporary art production; and, as in the language of the recent Nazi aesthetic doctrines, qualities such as "hermetic," "esoteric," and "elitist" were once again invoked to discredit artistic practices deviating from the newly (re)-established doctrines through which populist prejudice was projected.

In the course of this historical readjustment, however, one very significant modification regarding the avant-garde legacies of the Weimar Republic became necessary. For it suddenly emerged that to have been included in the 1937 "Entartete Kunst" exhibition or to have been barred from practice (by the "Berufsverbot") was now no longer in and of itself a condition that legitimated an artist in the (ever more closely scrutinizing) eyes of the officials of the so-called Antifascist German state. In fact, it became necessary to distinguish between artists such as Hans Grundig, who had worked in the resistance, who had been prosecuted by the National-Socialists because he had been Communist and Anti-Fascist (and, in addition to that, also an avant-garde artist), and, alternatively, those artists who, "quite simply" having been "bourgeois decadents" and "formalists" (such as Kurt Schwitters), had been persecuted by the Nazis for that reason alone. Increasingly, the latter group would be disqualified, now as they had been before, in the debates on the functions of culture in the German

Democratic Republic.<sup>11</sup>

The other paradox was obviously that there was no "great master of classical art" anywhere in sight, certainly not in recent German history -- since the "great masters of classical art" whom National Socialism had championed were intolerable -- at least officially (even though they manifestly corresponded in many ways to the aesthetic ideals of the new socialist functionaries). At the same time it was clearly both insufficient to perpetually invoke Menzel and the nineteenth century as models for the present, and unacceptable to turn to the model of French Impressionism, since that movement already smacked of bourgeois Formalism.

However, there was one cultural formation of rabid anti-modernism, one that had by then a twenty-year history at least, and was as well ideally suited in its ideological affiliations being grafted onto the new cultural agenda of the German Democratic Republic: Soviet Socialist Realism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a typical example of this adjustment, see Hermann Wiemann's article in the journal Die Bildende Kunst, vol.3, no.10 (1949), p.347-349, which advocates that the mere disqualification of an artist as "entartet" by the National Socialists does not necessarily clear this artist's work of its condition as "decadent" or "formalist."

<sup>12</sup> The official date of the "foundation" of Socialist Realism has been generally placed on April 23, 1932, the day when Stalin declared Socialist Realism to be the new state style. As of that date, all artists' unions were disbanded and one single organization under the patronage of the government controlled artistic activities. Membership in this organization of "creative workers" required a commitment to Socialist Realism.

It is obvious, however, that the debates around the conflicts between avant-garde practices and anti-modernist positions date back to the early 1920s, as is evident for example in the famous pamphlets of the AKHRR (The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), formed in 1922, or the group called The New Society of Painters (NOZH), formed in 1922 as well. The first

While Boris Groys's recent discussion of Soviet Socialist Realism is profoundly problematic in its disavowal of the anti-modernist tendencies that had articulated counter-positions in a variety of geo-political contexts throughout the twentieth century, his observations on the ideological eligibility of Socialist Realism as a highly "contemporaneous" cultural doctrine for the Soviet State of the 1930s are worth citing here, since they also illuminate the exact ideological needs of the East German Satellite state in 1949:

While initially seeming to be realistic, the art of "Socialist Realism" is in fact, not realistic, since it is not mimetic: its object is to project the new, the future, that which should be, and it is for this reason that it is not simply a regression to the mimesis of the nineteenth century, but belongs wholly to the twentieth century. The central issue of Socialist Realism remains, incidentally, why and how the transition took place from planning in the spirit of the

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exhibition of NOZH (a group of disciples of Exter, Malevich, and Tatlin) was announced by the following declaration:

We, former leftists in art, were the first to feel the utter rootlessness of further analytical and scholastic aberrations . . . We have not taken the road tramped by the theory of constructivism, for constructivism, in proclaiming the death of art, conceives man as an automaton . . . We want to create realistic works of art." See: John Bowlt, Russian Art of the Avantgarde: Theory and Criticism, 1904-1934, Viking Press, New York, 1976, p. xxxix.

Another example would, of course, be the famous "Photography Debate" between Boris Kushner and Alexander Rodchenko in the pages of Novy Lef from 1928.

avant-garde to planning in the spirit of realism. This transition was connected both with the immanent problems of avant-garde art and with the overall process of Soviet ideological evolution in the 1920s and 1930s."<sup>13</sup>

The very figures who would now establish themselves as authorities, exercising cultural control and determining the criteria of artistic production in the German Democratic Republic (e.g. J.R.Becher, Willi Bredel), had been the first to be engaged in the original anti-modernist arguments of the 1920s (such as the famous "Expressionism" debate) and had subsequently--in their Moscow exile--become key thinkers on the policies of Socialist Realism. Therefore it does not come as a surprise that in the visual arts it would be increasingly the key figures of Soviet Socialist Realism such as Alexander Deineka, Isaac Brodsky, and most importantly, Alexander Gerasimov, who would now be presented as the models and masters since they offered all the required criteria: popular representational values; neo-classical skills; traditional anthropomorphic depiction and spatial and chromatic illusionism; as well as as a systematically supervised and party-approved ideological program that promised, officially, to reconcile art with the new proletarian masses (while unofficially serving to

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<sup>13</sup> Boris Groys, "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-garde," in: The Culture of the Stalin Period, edited by Hans Günther, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1990, pp. 122-147.

assuage petit-bourgeois resentment against the avant-garde practices that had captured the imagination of both the left party officials and the largest part of the German audience throughout the twentieth century).

Therefore, what Boris Groys argues for in the context of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s would certainly apply to the situation of the newly founded German Socialist state as well:

In these new circumstances Socialist Realism put into effect practically all the fundamental watchwords of the avant-garde: it united the artists and gave them a single purpose, erased the dividing line between high and utilitarian art and between political content and purely artistic decisions, created a single universal and recognizable style, liberated the artist from the service of the consumer and his individual tastes and from the requirement to be original, became part of the common cause of the people, and set itself not to reflect reality but to project a new and better reality.<sup>14</sup>

## Part II: The Case of Gerhard Richter.

Having applied in vain for admission to the Academy in 1950, Richter's second application was supported by the fact that he had served in the interim period as a "factory" painter for political propaganda in a "people's republic

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<sup>14</sup> Groys, loc. cit., p.134.

enterprise." It was the factory council of this "people's enterprise" which delegated him with the necessary political credentials for successful admission to the Academy the following year.

Beginning in 1951, Richter spent four years at the Academy, in his last year specializing in the class for mural painting and concluding his studies with a diploma as a mural painter in 1956. In recognition of his talent and of his promise as a painter devoted to the political cause of socialist art, he was allowed to maintain a studio at the Academy during the three subsequent years (that is, until 1959).

Given these circumstances it only makes sense to consider Richter in 1959, at the age of twenty seven, with an eight-year artistic education behind him, as an artistic subject formed -- indeed, overdetermined -- by the ideology and the practices of Socialist Realism. As problematic as any comparison between individual artists may be as a matter of principle, it might be useful to recall at this moment that in 1959, Frank Stella, four years younger than Richter, had almost completed his series of Black Paintings, begun at the age of twenty six in late 1958. It seems all the more unreasonable therefore that this formative stage in Richter's development has been traditionally ignored in the literature on his work, if it is discussed at all, that it is presented in a rather haphazard manner, as a peculiar or eccentric episode in the artist's early biography, a negligible phase before Richter became a "real" artist after

his transition to West Germany in 1961.<sup>15</sup>

It would appear then that the denial of Richter's solid grounding in the aesthetics of Socialist Realism reiterates two different but related acts of historical repression: on the one hand, the artist's own manifest disavowal of this past, in his programmatic reversal of all the aesthetic principles he had acquired by 1959 (and the physical destruction of almost all work painted up to that moment); and on another, more general level, the German repression of historical memory in the post war period--which in the West took the form of the disavowal of both the legacies of National-Socialism and the very existence and separate history of the Communist German state.

Richter himself has acted out this prevailing attitude of denial, by exhibiting an almost phobic need to differentiate himself from the cultural legacies of the East German Republic on at least two occasions, by means of a remarkably ostentatious piece of declamatory behaviour. First, he decided to remove his paintings from the 1977 Documenta VI in protest against the participation of the East German painters Werner Tübke and Wolfgang Mattheuer in

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Jürgen Harten's lengthy catalogue text, "The Will to Abstraction" -- the first essay to introduce the subject at all-- devotes as much as one page to Richter's exposure to the doctrine of Socialist Realism, describing it primarily as a biographical detail. See: Gerhard Richter: Paintings 1962-1985, exh. cat., ed. by Jürgen Harten, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1986, p.11.

More recently, Susanne Küper approaches the subject, in her discussion of Richter's Demonstration for Capitalist Realism (1963), but unfortunately, once again, in a rather cursory manner. See: Susanne Küper, Konrad Lueg und Gerhard Richter: "Leben mit Pop eine Demonstration für den Kapitalistischen Realismus" 1963 in Düsseldorf, Unpublished Master's Thesis, München, 1990, especially pages 61-69.

the exhibition; and more recently, after the unification of the two German states, he resigned his membership in the German Academy of Arts and Sciences in protest against the fusion of the West German Academy with its East German counterpart, because that fusion would have implied future cohabitation with the painters of his unacceptable past.

This denial has prevented historians and critics from recognizing that Richter's approach to the legacies of his own artistic formation is in fact a much more complicated operation than either of his acts of distantiation would seem to indicate, whether the denial operates on a level of auto-biographical and public political positioning or on that of his manifestly successful assimilation of the stylistic idioms of Western post-war neo-avant-garde practices. The price that is paid for this in historical understanding is measured by the fact that while the manifest rupture in 1962, performed after leaving the GDR for the West, seems radical and definitive, Richter's subsequent painterly development is all the more overdetermined by the latency of a continuous working-through of the first part of his ideological and artistic formation (which means as well a working-through of its repression).

The specific profile of Richter's own post-1962, "modernist" development emerges all the more sharply when put in comparison with his American ideological counterparts. For one we remind ourselves of the fact that there was not a single member of that first post-war generation of painters in the United States--the artists who

would soon become so integral to Richter's own paradigm shift--who had not undergone a transformation similar to Richter's, from some type of 1930s American Social Realism into a heroic form of 1940s abstraction (e.g. Rothko, Pollock, Still, and Kline had all painted extensively in a figurative manner before their respective "breakthroughs" to Abstract-Expressionism), it also becomes important to remember that none of these painters ever returned to their figurative origins (with the exception of Pollock's brief and desperate attempt at figuration in 1950-51).

Furthermore, while abstraction became a rigorously enforced position within the American post-war moment, a model by which painters could distantiate themselves from recent, naive involvements with painting that focussed on social rather than pictorial concerns, it was not until a second generation emerged (e.g. Rauschenberg) that quotation of the photographic image--so decisive to Richter's own dialectical practice of modernism--would serve to announce a definitive separation from the traditional models of "organic referentiality" and the seemingly naive conventions of an unmediated, figurative, representational art.

Thus the historical question that has to be asked is why Richter's subsequent splitting of his pictorial production along the cyclically repeated lines of a division between photographic reproduction and non-representational, gestural painting appeared to him as the solution to the contradictions of Socialist Realism that he had--at first gradually, and then suddenly--recognized after his visit to Documenta II in Kassel in 1959. Or to put it more

generally, why would Richter be convinced from 1962 onwards that photographic citation and gestural abstraction would combine, to overcome the historical and paradigmatic limitations of the Socialist Realist framework?

Alternatively, even if one wanted to make an argument for Richter's complete self-invention in 1961, an act in which all traces of his former identity were erased, the dynamic the self-invention would still have to be considered. The historian would still have to face the fact that every single step towards the constitution of that "new" identity would inevitably) articulate the traces of the "former" disavowed identity.

This is to say that if the depth of Richter's foundations in Socialist Realism is not recognized, the complexity of his act of self-renewal will also not be understood. And that this act could be nothing else but a radical reworking, a slipping from one aesthetic attitude to its historical opposite, something which in and of itself confronts us with a whole range of questions concerning the credibility of concepts of authenticity and continuity, will not be comprehensible either. Moreover, Richter's act of aesthetic reversal also confronts the historian with the question of evaluating one paradigmatic formation as against another, according to Adorno's somewhat daunting term, the question of a work's "truth content." It is not "naturally" self-evident that an artist who acquires the predetermined apparatus of the Western neo-avant-garde practices of the post-war period (the paradigms of found photographic imagery, gestural abstraction, the monochrome) with the kind

of wholesale conviction that Richter demonstrated once he settled in the Western part of Germany, would automatically deserve higher esteem and possess greater "truth value" than that of an artist who is overdetermined by the Party rules, the ideological constrictions imposed upon him during his education under a different political system and his subjection to the laws of opportunity which that system provided.

Even more difficult perhaps are the questions that Richter's transformation poses in a more general way: questions having to do with those changes in the conventions of representation through which he articulated his transition from Socialist artist to Western Neo-avantgardiste and the particular role photography and abstraction played (and continue to play) in this adventure of transmutation. Why would we credit highly mediated imagery such as the iconography of found photography as Richter deploys it under the spell of his encounter with the work of Rauschenberg, as more aesthetically credible than the conventions of representation operative in his Socialist Realism? And why, once again, would we consider the development of a paradigm of highly gestural abstraction, which by the mid-1960s (if not ten years before) already seemed utterly discredited and academicized, an appropriate answer to the limitations of painterly representation as defined in his recent past?

This triangulation of Richter's entire oeuvre--with its foundation in the anti-modernist pictorial conventions of Socialist Realism and its dialectical negation of that

foundation in the counter-formations of abstraction and photography: the first a rejection of and the second avoiding the automatic access to the values of the iconic sign--will remain the focus of this study of Richter's development.

Looking at three works -- all as group portraits of male figures: workers, artists, soldiers--from the last three years of Richter's affiliation with the Dresden Academy, will allow us to recognize that his involvement with Socialist Realism was in fact not simply an act of opportunistic assimilation, the kind of protective but highly cynical mimicry that has been suggested as a way of accounting for it.<sup>16</sup> Quite to the contrary, we can observe a continuous development towards an ever more accomplished execution of the program's iconographic and stylistic principles, as well as an ever increasing conviction about and internalization of its ideological demands.

According to the artist, the first of the three paintings (fig. 1) to be considered here was painted "sometime around 1956," and shows three workmen during a lunchbreak at a construction site, clearly content within their moment of repose: the figure on the left, with his unclad back turned to the beholder, is engaged in reading a newspaper; the figure in the center, his nude torso turned sideways, is consuming his meal with the help of an inordinately large spoon; while the figure in shirtsleeves,

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<sup>16</sup>See Jürgen Harten, loc. cit., p.11.

depicted frontally on the right , stares out of the picture, avoiding the viewer's gaze and seemingly absorbed in contemplation while smoking an overly large cigarette.

The painting's formal and compositional structure, the style of its figuration as of its facture immediately recall Neue Sachlichkeit painting. But it would be more accurate to say that these elements constitute a reconfigured, post-war, Neue Sachlichkeit, such as that of Hofer's and Grundig's work of the late 1940s. For in the two decades that had elapsed, the original style had been reconfigured either through the addition of a new layer of proletarian, heroic optimism aimed specifically at overcoming the petit-bourgeois melancholy of which Neue Sachlichkeit had been consistently accused by the Left (as already mentioned, above). Or in the opposite direction, a new type of post-war misérabilisme was developed, one that was thought of as escaping the air of complacency that the practitioners of 1930s Socialist Realism maintained in their insistence on "objective truthful depiction." Whereas now, after the catastrophe, painting had to register at least a modicum of concern (much like the token of painterly compassion which reached a grotesque climax in the work of Bernard Buffet in the 1950s, which acquired the highest visibility in Europe at that time).

A comparison between Richter's Lunch Break and Hans Grundig's proposal for a mural painting for Dresden's City Hall, makes this shared basis fully evident. Clearly neither of the two painters at this moment wholly embrace the official Soviet version of Socialist Realism. Quite

obviously Grundig attempts to hold on to the melancholic qualities of the figural style of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, while at the same time imbuing them with a modernist angularity that evidently had to signal both an optimistic outlook in terms of the continuing progress of the proletarian revolution and a temperate awareness of pictorial modernity. After all, at least in the formative years of East German culture, an artist like Grundig would have still aspired to a fusion of the social progress of the Socialist State and the progressive appearance of its visual representation.

In Richter's Lunch Break the delicate balance between ideologically prescribed representational functions and necessary stylistic markers that signal "progressivity" and "optimism" in iconographic as well as pictorial terms, has been tilted quite a bit more in the direction of "advanced" pictorial execution. The angularity of the figures (or rather the figures' inscription in pictorial space by surrounding them with the angular, often triangular, interlocking forms of negative and positive spaces) gives the image a quality of tectonic calm and order. Similarly, the background of the painting is almost evenly split in half, a light plane on the left and a dark plane on the right, both flattening the pictorial space in a dramatic effort at modernization that seems to correspond almost literally to the modernization of housing at the construction site depicted in the painting, with its various half-finished buildings forming a kind of plan backdrop.

The very same approach, both conciliatory with and

compromised by its relation to "advanced" painting, is articulated throughout in the work's multiple references to the organic signs of vegetation that hold their own against the mineral and technical morphology of the both the picture's constructed space and its internally depicted construction site. A large leafy plant at the feet of the construction worker in the center of the image as well as the silhouettes of trees on the left and along the large white--almost abstract--rectangular shape of the newly built housing project, seem to calm our fears about the threat to nature that industrial progress under socialism seem to mount. In fact, the pastoral ambience of the semi-nude workers, their own bodily morphology, enacts the best of all possible reconciliations between the organic and the tectonic, between heroic work and well deserved leisure, between the monumental form of public responsibility and the particulars of individual experience.

At this point, Richter's "realism" still seems far from having accepted the task of pure, propagandistic adulation, even though the degree of contentment articulated in the painting, as well as its insistence on the worker as a "type" that will comprise a new governing class, endow the work with an eerie dimension of "reconciliation under duress," as Adorno would later title his essay on Lukacs's thinking on Realism.

The second painting to be considered (fig. 2), dates from 1957 according to Richter, and once again depicts a group of three male protagonists, although here cultural rather than construction workers. The three painters

depicted were at this time officially celebrated in the German Democratic Republic as heroes. Moreover they were seen as the living evidence of the Internationalism of Socialist culture. Pablo Picasso (who had joined the French Communist Party in 1944 and had aroused international consternation by his public salute to Joseph Stalin on the occasion of his birthday in 1949) is shown waving a white piece of fabric, presumably as a gesture of peace. Next to him, looking to the opposite side, is the painter André Fougeron, the key representative of Socialist Realism in France (along with Boris Taslitzky and Edouard Pignon), which had evolved in the post-war years in close consultation between intellectuals such as Louis Aragon and the French Communist Party, itself under the guidance of Maurice Thorez, the strongest ally of Stalinist politics among the Western European Communist parties.

The third figure on the right, not surprisingly then, is Alexander Gerasimov, the Soviet master of Socialist Realism, who frequently travelled to the satellite states in order to spread the message of official Stalinist state culture. Here he stares out of the painting in a posture of seemingly benign patriarchal complacency.

The painting is utterly unremarkable, except perhaps for its surprising lack of competence in its attempt to construct a visual likeness--Picasso's portrait being the most evident, almost grotesque failure -- followed closely by the awkwardness of its anatomical drawing, evident in Picasso's waving arm. And were it not for its programmatic depiction of three heroes of Socialist visual culture, it

could be easily dismissed as the early work of a rather unaccomplished painter. What interests me here, however, is the peculiar, rather drastic shift that occurs between Lunch Break and this untitled portrayal of the masters of Socialist art.

Clearly what has taken place is a move towards a type of painting that aims even more directly at a naive concept of realism, at a fiction of crude immediacy, at producing an image type that could promise an uninterrupted continuity between the figures depicted and their depiction: a seemingly unmediated correspondence between signifier and signified in the manner of the declamatory rendering of propaganda pictures or the subcultural styles of the advertisement aesthetic.

In the course of this venture toward a greater realism--which certainly must have claimed a proletarian audience as its addressee in order to justify the insistence on the unmediated reproduction of (heroic) reality--Richter has clearly purged his work of all residual painterly devices that earlier had still linked him historically to the Neue Sachlichkeit and his teacher Hans Grundig. Here, anatomical and luminous modelling have been reduced to an absolute, functional minimum, and the pictorial pointers of modernity that had still, in Lunch Break raised hope for an emerging pictorial self-consciousness, have now been eliminated.

There is, however, one detail in the painting that is easily overlooked, and yet, once discovered, seems to be almost prognostic: in the lower left corner of the frontal plane of the painting we see the fragment of a figure--a

small part of a man's back and shoulder, and his angled upper arm and elbow--an anonymous character who seems to be on his way out of this picture. In a monumentalizing composition of a triple portrait of the masters of Socialist Art there could not be room for an anonymous onlooker or bystander stealing out of the frame as an unidentified object/body fragment. It would be mere speculation to suggest that the vanishing figure is an ironical inscription of the artist himself and his intuition of his own future departure, literally leaving (as he would in fact do four years later) the site and the scene of adulation as well as the prescribed tone and format of Socialist Realist official culture.

It would be less speculative to argue that the body fragment moving out of the picture frame constitutes an element of negation that suddenly tips the whole heroic display into doubt, and as such suggests a hint of clandestine critique of the ideological program to which the painting otherwise seems to subscribe in perfect obedience.

The third of the works (fig. 3), again dated one year later, confronts us with the culmination of Richter's decline into Socialist Realism and with an almost dramatic pitch of ambiguity, not to say, disingenuousness. The work is a tempera painting on paper, presumably a poster design, commissioned on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the German Communist Party in 1958, and it depicts two armed worker/soldiers, wearing helmets, worker's militia-uniforms and carrying guns--once again a small group of male protagonists, almost as if to complete the virtuous triad of

Socialism (workers, soldiers, peasants).<sup>17</sup>

The two figures are depicted in rather graphic chiaroscuro, marching one after the other towards the frontal plane of the poster, emerging with monumental resolve, in an almost threatening manner, from a dark field of strangely indented, geometrical shapes (the torn curtain motif of a Soulages painting comes to mind). In the upper right corner, in one of the horizontal bars of the modernist ground, the dates 1918-1958 have been positioned in rather large numerals to remind the viewer/reader of the 40th anniversary of the German Communist Party, the KPD. At the bottom, the ominous abstractionist ground is cut off at a slight diagonal to create a white wedge for a propagandistic slogan, inserted in script in the manner of a spontaneously

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<sup>17</sup> There are of course numerous other sketches, drawings and paintings from the period between 1955 and 1960 and they are documented in photographs which indicate that Richter's iconographic program was not at all as strictly confined to images of male protagonists such as soldiers, workers, and artists, as our selection of these three images might suggest (see for example the portrait of his future wife as Reading Woman from 1960, painted in the more private stylistic idiom supplied by Renato Guttuso, another member of a Communist Party in a Western country [Italy] whose work was acceptable to the East German authorities). Our selection of these three images seems justified, however, by the need to give a brief overview of Richter's development in the last three years of his work before his 1959 visit to Documenta II in Kassel, to which he has referred in many conversations and interviews as the crucial turning point (and breakdown) in his early artistic adulthood, leading to his departure from the German Democratic Republic.

The fact is, however, that the scene of heroicized labor occurs in several works from that time, paralleling the scenes of socialist leisure in the proposals and execution for the mural decoration of the Hygiene Museum in Dresden (no longer extant, but reproduced in Harten, p.11), and since I wanted to compare the development of political, figurative representation in Richter's work, the selection seems less arbitrary.

Angelika Thill is currently working on a dissertation on Richter's 1956-1960 work at the University of Bonn under the supervision of Professor Tilmann Buddensieg and I did not have access to her research.

handwritten caption across the entire field of the image.

What is iconographically remarkable about Richter's poster design is the manifest Sovietization of the figures, both in terms of figure-style and in the depiction of facial expression and details of costume: the hulky body of the first soldier with the mask-like sternness of his physiognomy, the round-headed robot who follows him with his featureless face, both corresponded exactly to a popular prejudicial vision in post-war West Germany (and secretly operative in the East as well) concerning both the "proletarian" and even more so, the "Soviet Russian" proletarian as the invading "Hun" from the East.<sup>18</sup>

Both soldiers are depicted in the peculiar uniforms that seem to be a crossover between worker's overalls and the Red Army military drill and as such would not only have followed the publicly prescribed image of the working-class hero but also the actual features of the "German Volks-Armee" (The German People's Army). This official public image of the East German People's Army had itself been modelled in hair and uniform style on the example of the occupying forces of the Soviet Union's Red Army for two

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<sup>18</sup> The association of the "Bolshevik" with the Asian / Mongolian and by implication the "Hun" could count on the fertile ground of developed German racist phobias: immediately after World War I and the Russian Revolution, the parties of the center and right were already exploiting this unconscious association of Socialist thought with the Asian and therefore as an ideology deeply alien to the "German psyche."

For one of the many visual examples see Hermann Keimel's poster Bayern, der Bolschewik geht um! (1919), where the Soviet soldier is clearly featured as a caricature of the physiognomy of the Mongolian. (Reproduced in: Paris/Berlin 1900-1933, edited by K.G.P.Hulten et al., Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1978, p.412.)

reasons: first of all, to signal the army's newly won class affiliation and to declare the new military forces as an extension of proletarian rule (rather than, as the Prussian and German armies had been traditionally deployed, as instruments of feudal or bourgeois control and domination). And more importantly (and more recently) to distinguish the appearance of the anti-fascist people's army--whose only declared goal it was to protect the working class from the perpetually renewed threats of a bourgeois counter-revolution and/or a relapse into fascism--from the soldiers of Nazi Fascism whose goals had been military and economic conquest in the interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie and the military prevention of the revolutionary liberation of the working class.

At the bottom of the image we read an inscription in a peculiar mixture of a stilted German fracture script (residues of the so-called Sütterlin style that was made obligatory by the Nazis in schools after 1934 to "germanicize" the handwriting of Germans) and a seemingly casual everyday/everybody script, emphatically announcing that "die deutsche Arbeiterklasse wird die Waffen nie wieder aus der Hand geben!" (the German Working Class will never again yield its weapons!).

Both Richter's slogan and the inscription's emphatic claim to the immediacy of the handwritten seem to follow the famous humanitarian, pacifist slogan "Nie wieder Krieg" (Never again War), originally coined after World War I and prominently displayed on one of Käthe Kollwitz's widely publicized posters of the 1920s, produced in 1924 for the

Social Democratic Party.

Richter seems in fact to follow Kollwitz's example right down to the detail of the underlined lettering of Nie wieder in the anti-war poster for the Social Democrats, but the slogan in Richter's poster design now responds dialectically to this humanitarian pacifist promise--one that was once again commonly proclaimed in the Western part of Germany in the post-war period.

In fact, the poster's inscription articulates a position typical for the official ideology of the East German Socialist state in the decade after World War II: the German Democratic Republic disavowed any responsibility whatsoever for the emergence of National Socialism in 1933 and stylized itself increasingly as both the victim of German Fascism and militarism and the new proletarian bulwark against any fascism of the future.<sup>19</sup>

What is remarkable about Richter's propaganda project in formal terms, is his apparent ignorance of the historically available conventions of propaganda- and advertisement-design developed in both Weimar culture and more recently in the Soviet Union. Richter's project appears to be either completely unaware of the various techniques of photography and typography which the avant-garde had used in

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<sup>19</sup> The official version of this historical argument was that the expansionist and military interests of the German imperialist bourgeoisie had lead to fascist rearmament and it had thus caused World War II. It was argued further that the proletariat--had it been armed to fight against fascism in its early stages--could have preempted and avoided the war and the holocaust. One of the many inadmissible truths for the East German Socialists was, of course, the fact that the vote of large segments of the disenchanted, formerly Communist, working class had initially brought Hitler to power in 1933.

the 1920s to generate dynamic photo/image/text montages; or a programmatically rejected or perhaps forced rejection of the design strategies of the pre- and inter-war avant-garde artists.

Both possibilities appear to be half true and half false: according to Richter's own testimony, the legacies of John Heartfield for example, the outstanding figure of Weimar photomontage culture, were all but unknown to him in the mid-to-late 1950s, and he stated repeatedly that whatever he might have seen or known of this work did not interest him at all at the time.<sup>20</sup>

Richter's surprising attitude towards the most important artist of the Weimar avant-garde and the most outspoken of the anti-fascist Left, would appear all the more unfathomable since it is articulated by an artist who-- as we have seen--was deeply entangled in the propagandistic demands of East-German State Socialism and its claims to present itself as the anti-fascist state. It is, however, explainable as a general condition of institutional and ideological control that required yet another layer of avant-garde repression in the early to mid-1950s in the German Democratic Republic where Heartfield-- after his return in 1950 until his rehabilitation in 1957--was suspected by the authorities of being a "formalist." The East German art historian Roland März, writing from a position within the East German cultural institutions as late as 1981, is very cautious about explaining the delayed

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author, December 20, 1992.

reception of Heartfield in the German Democratic Republic. His explanation also elucidates the reasons for Richter's aggressive indifference towards Heartfield in the mid-to-late 1950s:

John Heartfield returned to Germany at a time when the political and the art-political circumstances were--at least temporarily--not very favorably disposed towards a new beginning of the photomonteur Heartfield's creativity. First of all there was the problem with having emigrated to the "West," the difficult situation that all emigrants faced when returning home from the Western (Capitalist) countries. This was also the reason why the exhibition that Johannes R. Becher had announced on the occasion of Heartfield's sixtieth birthday in 1951 could not take place.

Furthermore there was the lasting impact of the Expressionism debate of the 1930s and the very influential ideas of Georg Lukacs on montage, on the theory and practice of art in the first half of the fifties. It cannot surprise us then that Heartfield was neither represented on the third Annual Art Exhibition in Dresden in 1953 nor was he represented at the International Poster Design Exhibition in Berlin in 1954.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See: Roland Maerz, John Heartfield : Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit, Fundus/VEB Dresden, 1981, p.434.

The fate of the John Heartfield reception in the German Democratic Republic, let alone in the Federal Republic of Germany, is particularly revealing with regard to the question of how post-war Germans related to the key figures of pre-war avant-garde artists.

Heartfield returned to the GDR in August of 1950 from

Equally surprising, if not even more contradictory, is the seemingly total absence of the Soviet avant-garde in Richter's historical awareness at the time. According to the

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England after having submitted applications asking for permission to return to the "Socialist" part of Germany that had been divided since 1947. The obstacles erected by the East German bureaucracy, coupled with his own health problems, delayed his departure. Once his return had been approved by the East German authorities, it took those authorities "more than eight months to actually enact his repatriation," as Heartfield explains in his autobiography. See: Klaus Honnef and Peter Pachnicke (eds.), John Heartfield, Berlin, 1991, p.405.

After having finally returned, it would take Heartfield six years to be readmitted into the German Communist Party, without whose support admission into the Professional Artists Association and therefore professional practice as an artist seems to have been totally impossible in the GDR. The party's official argument against his readmission was that Heartfield -- while being in exile in London -- had been a member of an organization entitled the Unitarian Service Committee, headed by the agent Noel Field. As investigations by the Secret Service of the party could verify later in 1956, Heartfield had in fact only been treated by Field's brother, who was a dentist in London.

But clearly, aesthetic and ideological problems were of equal, if not higher importance in the obstruction that Heartfield encountered with the "Socialist" party officials. In spite of the highest esteem and support that Heartfield received from Johannes R. Becher and Bertolt Brecht after his arrival in the GDR, not a single exhibition of his work could be organized until 1957, after he had been finally readmitted into the party in July of 1956. Subsequently he was honored with membership in the National Academy.

Becher writes to Heartfield on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday in 1951, apologizing in a strangely contorted language for the fact that "...this day unfortunately cannot be celebrated by us all in the way that we would have wished it..." (presumably referring to the recent rejection of Heartfield's application for readmission to membership in the Communist Party and the Party bureaucracy's prohibition of the exhibition of a Heartfield retrospective on the occasion of his birthday). Becher concludes the letter by promising that he will do everything possible to convince the authorities of the necessity of organizing a retrospective exhibition of his work in the future. See: Roland Maerz, John Heartfield : Der Schnitt entlang der Zeit, Fundus/VEB Dresden, 1981, p.437.

Wieland Herzfelde, John Heartfield's brother, also explains the fact of the delay of Heartfield's reception in rather veiled terms by saying that the "...cultural-political climate at the time (the early to mid-fifties) was not very favorable to such a project." See his introduction to the third edition of the first monograph to be published on Heartfield in the GDR in 1962, in: Wieland Herzfelde, John Heartfield: Leben und Werk, VEB Kunst, Dresden, 1976, p.6.

artist's testimony, information on any of the key figures of Soviet photomontage and the subsequent developments of a photography-based propaganda practice (like Gustav Klucis, El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova), seems to have been totally unavailable in the mid-to-late 1950s.

At first this information seems all the more astonishing in that it was precisely this group of artists who had, after all, developed the most coherent propaganda style in the decade between 1928 and 1938 (and beyond) and who had been engaged in the service of Stalin's propaganda ministry. Politically and ideologically therefore, these Soviet avant-garde artists and their production which adulated Stalin and his policies, should have been perfectly acceptable, if not desirable for the ideological needs of the officials in control of culture in the East German satellite state. Aesthetically, however, their production was not acceptable -- for after the official declaration of Socialist Realism in 1934 -- a reconfiguration of the technological and stylistic principles, even in the field of propaganda production in the Soviet Union, had been required and considerable adjustments had been made.

From then on, photographic and typographic montage design no longer appeared the self-evident means to produce representations that fulfilled the criteria of Socialist Realism. But the demands of propaganda could not so easily and logically exclude photography: after all it was clearly the most powerfully successful of all systems of representation to provide illusionistic access to a fetishized substitute for the real and a need for mass

communication. Furthermore, photographic images and the photomontage provided an optimistic image of technology and modernity, of progress and dynamic change, one that seemed ideally suited to convey the increasingly abstract values of rapid and radical transformation to proletarian audiences, inspiring them to work harder and produce more according to the laws of Taylorization.

Even further, the photographic and typographic montage imagery of the mid-1920s retained not only the promise of active viewer participation in the bodily synecdoches employed by Lissitzky or the direct instigation to participate in the processes of political self-determination in the posters of Klucis and their programmatic suturing of the viewer. Photography now seemed to remind its viewers even more of the movement of working class correspondents (both writers and photographers), not only practicing their newly found technological and visual literacy, but also actively reporting on the conditions of the work place with the aspiration to contribute to change, thereby generating precisely that political enablement that Socialism had originally announced in promising the development of active individual voices within the socialist collective.

But precisely these promises of collective enablement and socialist empowerment of the working class had come to be betrayed by the increasing bureaucratization of Socialism and the formation of Stalinist politics. What had been dismantled in the radical reformulation of cultural production, in the redefinition of authorship and audience relations, and in a systematic transformation of the

distribution form of the work of art which was conceived as always-already reproduced and reproducible, would now be reinstated. Specifically this concerned the renewal of the artist as a highly trained specialist, who had to acquire the traditional skills of the classical genres and categories of artistic production, coupled with the repositioning of the audience in a discursive and institutional place of passive receivership, accompanied by the modes inherent to a contemplative experience, the insistence on the art object's unique and auratic status. In this context, it is illuminating to see the many paintings emerging out of this phase of Socialist Realism that depict groups of workers or soldiers in rapt attention in museum spaces (most often the Tretyakov Gallery), contemplating the work of Repin and the Wanderers or other nineteenth-century realists. In these images the ideological project of Socialist Realism is perfectly articulated: to re-institutionalize the experience of the aesthetic object and to legitimate this process under the auspices of finally giving the working class access to the legacies of bourgeois culture--its forms of seeing, its experience of objects, and its institutions. In that very strategy, the betrayal of the promise of a post-bourgeois culture of active participation and self-determination is achieved, since all the traditional lines of division and separation are reinforced.

Therefore, the practices of Socialist Realism enact in the cultural sphere, the larger ideological and political shifts that occurred in the decades from 1924 until Stalin's death in 1953 and beyond. As the cultural legitimation of

political control they had increasingly to be disguised in the concomitant monumentalization of the hero and of history. And for these purposes nothing could provide an idiom as powerful and reliable as the return to traditional artistic genres and techniques of representation, drawing at first on the sources of classical bourgeois high art (in Gerasimov's case from Titian to Courbet's Realism) and increasingly upon Neo-Classicism, which had repeatedly served since the French Revolution as the idiom of a collective, seemingly having found its voice.

Coming increasingly under attack as "formalist," the photographic/photomontage avant-garde desperately attempted to adjust to these pressures. One of the most aggressive figures in the articulation of the new positions was Alfred Kurella, a founding member of the OCTOBER group in 1928, who would later, from 1954 onwards also develop the normative aesthetic of the East German version of Socialist Realism. The positions and goals of the OCTOBER group were described in 1929 as follows:

The OCTOBER group was founded in 1928 in order to defeat both the petit-bourgeois and the Lef-positions in art (Lef meaning the formalist "left front" of Soviet art), the group having been primarily artists who defined themselves as easel painters. The group joins together in a clear and intransigent manner and on a proletarian ideological basis, satiric artists such as Moor and Dejneka, poster designers . . . fresco painters (such as Diego Rivera). . . . It is an organization that wants to respond in an ideologically

and technically adequate manner to the growing cultural needs of the industrial proletariat, however it tolerates some formalist deviations and dangerous positions in its right wing (Lissitzky, Klucis, Senkin). But this group has nothing whatsoever to do with so-called "abstract art." In its founding declaration it categorically rejects the aestheticizing, abstract industrialism and the naked technicism which together pretend to perform as revolutionary art.<sup>22</sup>

What this phase generated increasingly then in the years from 1932-42 (in particular in the last works of Klucis before he was liquidated in 1938, in the work of Lissitzky up to his death in 1941, and in Rodchenko's work throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s) is an utterly astonishing hybridization of the avant-gardiste aesthetic of the former constructivists and productivists with the painterly practices of the Socialist Realists.

In many instances, within the journals such as USSR in Construction or the various book and poster designs produced by these artists at that time, the photographic aesthetic was literally fused with the neo-classical painterly aesthetic by means of a systematic retouching of the

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<sup>22</sup> See: Alfred Durus, "Bildende Kunst in der UdSSR," in: Die Front, no.2, 1929, pp.53-56. Reprinted in: Wem gehört die Welt ?, edited by Autoren Kollektiv, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, 1977, p.252. Durus, who was of Hungarian origin (his real name being Alfred Kemeny), had become one of the most articulate and informed critics in the Weimar debates on Expressionism, Realism, and the Soviet avant-garde.

photographic image, an increasing monumentalization of the single image, and a reconstitution of the illusionism of "organic" (rather than 'constructed') spatial relations. These practices generate a hybrid photographic aesthetic that is reminiscent of Pictorialism, since in a very similar manner it attempts take on the appearance of high-art aura and of the hand-crafted while also trying to reconfigure a sense of the "interiority" of a centered subject (rather than that of the subject's contingency and dependence on context), and of the spatio-temporal continuity of experience (rather than that of total rupture and fragmentation).

Thus Richter's disavowal of the practices of the photographic avant-garde and his insistence on painterly realism, both at the level of his practice (his poster design in 1958) and of his historical consciousness (his recollections of a profound ignorance of and indifference to Soviet photographic and photomontage aesthetic), becomes more comprehensible. In the same manner that he had rejected the Weimar legacies and the work of John Heartfield, he had also adopted and internalized the very aversion to the promises of a new technology-based avant-garde culture and its emancipatory potential promulgated by the doctrines of figures such as Alfred Kurella and Georg Lukacs, with his increasingly influential prescriptions of proletarian Socialist realism.

Chapter Two:  
The Anomic Archive

We can no longer speak of "photography" in terms of a homogeneous formation of practices, discourses, and institutions (no more than we could speak of "politics"). The manifest failure of those books that last attempted to circumscribe the photographic universe, such as Susan Sontag's On Photography (1978), attests to this; just as Roland Barthes's success in Camera Lucida (1980) proves the opposite: Photography can be discussed as a private phenomenology and as a partial semiotics, but not as a coherent, comprehensive history.

More obviously even than the history of modernist art, the history of photography tells us that there never was a single moment when one particular photographic strategy would have been dominant, never a teleological or evolutionary order. For example, even when looking at the height of social documentary photography in the culture of the 1930s, one would still have to think simultaneously about the heights of fashion and advertising photography in order to grasp the internal contradictions of the medium.

But we can address a "photographic condition,"<sup>1</sup> i.e. a particular sedimentation of photographic practices evident in either an individual oeuvre or a specific moment in time,

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<sup>1</sup>The term "photographic condition" was first introduced by Rosalind Krauss in her discussion of Surrealist photography in her essay "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," in L'Amour Fou, edited by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, New York, Abbeville Press, 1986.

or in a particular social or artistic application of photographic technology and its linguistic conventions.

The photographic condition I want to single out here is the result of a sudden transformation in the work of Gerhard Richter, and perhaps it is only the first of many subsequent ones in the development of his practice: his decision in 1961 to abandon the iconography of Socialist Realism and to exchange it for the imagery of amateur photography. I want to analyze how that decision situated Richter's work from 1962 to 1966 within a complicated relationship between conflicting conventions of (photographic) representation: the authoritarian (Socialist and National Socialist) Realisms of his recent past, the avant-garde photographic cultures of the Weimar Republic and their post-war rediscovery (by artists such as Robert Rauschenberg for example), and lastly, the actually existing photographic conditions of industrialized amateur photography and banal photojournalism, which Richter encountered upon his arrival in the advanced consumer culture of West Germany.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>We should of course remember that the transition from a figurative mode of representational painting, affiliated with a reactionary political ideology, to a presumably progressive mode of modernist abstraction, affiliated with the free market ideology of late capitalism, or more explicitly with the newly emerging ideological discourses and institutions of the culture industry, was by no means a task Richter alone had to face. In fact, two of his key models in European and American post-war art, Lucio Fontana and Jackson Pollock, had --at that time unbeknownst to Richter--made their way through similarly delicate shifts and passages, adjusting to inter- and post-war necessities.

In that peculiar shift from a figurative mode of painting derived from an imaginary neo-classical ideal (in whatever distorted and distant configuration), Fontana, Pollock, and Richter seem to enact the mirror reversal of the historical movement that had been performed roughly thirty years before, when the newly discovered continent of abstraction and its

The common interpretation of Richter's work has explained this conversion in terms of Richter's newly found liberation and identification with Western consumer culture on the one hand, and his desire to associate himself with the neo-avant-garde context of the early 1960s (for example that of Nouveau Realisme and Pop-Art) on the other. In what follows I will argue that this interpretation should be revised in at least two respects. First of all it should have become evident that Richter's efforts to establish a relationship with this peculiar iconography and the strategies of the Western neo-avant-garde of the post-war moment were, from the beginning, laced with skepticism and thus far from radiating a triumphant sense of liberation or an affirmative embrace of the promises and attractions of consumer culture.

The second revision, perhaps less obvious, should recognize Socialist Realism as a latent, but no less constitutive element of his work since 1961. Richter's decision to incorporate the peculiar aesthetic of amateur photography immediately after his arrival in West Germany, surely originated in his need to work his way through the history of his subjection to authoritarian Realisms: first that of the National Socialists to which he had been involuntarily exposed as a child and adolescent and later the Realism of the Stalinist Socialist regime which he had to adopt in the early years of his artistic formation and

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promises had been severely criticized and/or abandoned, often by political enforcement, for a return to the safe grounds of iconic representation.

the beginnings of his career. At such a moment of a counter-identification he was inescapably involved with the labor of detaching himself from the false investments that had determined his first artistic identity, even if that disengagement was, perhaps, now performed more as a ritual of exorcism than one of mourning.

### Socialist Realism and Photography

Particularly in its Germano-Soviet version, which constituted Richter's first academic education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, Socialist Realism is not known to be a photographic style, but, quite to the contrary, is an ensemble of painterly and sculptural traditions and representational strategies that opposes photography in a complicated set of relationships, marked at one and the same time by manifest denial and secret mimetic embrace, by disavowal and competitive rivalry. One could argue in fact that Socialist Realism--like its predecessors and parallels from retour à l'ordre painting to the Neue Sachlichkeit--is intertwined with the photographic in a knot of double historical negation. On the one hand it identifies primarily with Neo-Classical painting as the last moment of a pre-industrial and pre-photographic art production; on the other, it relates to photography in its programmatic opposition to the practices of the 1920s avant-garde, in particular that of collage and photomontage.

Precisely because of its pervasive and almost repressive act of discrediting, it is necessary to recollect for a moment the basic arguments of Socialist Realism. First

of all, it insisted on the separateness of painting and sculpture as discursive conventions that operate independently of and unaffected by the ever-increasing presence and pressures of technical reproduction. Socialist Realism articulated its conservative opposition to the media not only in order to prevent the final dismantling of the distinct categories of the various Fine Arts genres, but more importantly, in order to preserve the spaces and modes of high culture for those social classes that had always been barred from access to traditional forms of visual culture. This latter was the more naive and reactionary aspect of its aspiration. It was the function of Socialist Realism--at least in the mind of Georg Lukacs--to preserve the differentiated forms of bourgeois experience as they were concretely embedded, on the one hand, in the collective memory of artistic tradition passing down particular competence and skills and, on the other, in discursive categories and institutional conventions, so that these forms could be delivered to the emerging proletarian class. But precisely the deskilling of these techniques and the dismantling of the discursive categories had been essential to the avant-garde project and it is this assault which--according to the argument of Socialist Realism and cultural conservatives alike--threatens cultural memory with erasure and attacks differentiated experience by desublimation. Therefore the perpetually renewed concern of conservative cultural positions--among which Socialist Realism is perhaps only the most contradictory case--is just as urgently to restore the validity and credibility of

artistic skills and categories as transhistorical as it is to insist on the autonomy of the sphere of artistic production.

To the same degree that Socialist Realism conceived itself in the image of pre-photographic Neo-Classicism, it also defined itself as the anti-photographic aesthetic, in programmatic opposition to the prevailing photographic practices of the avant-garde of the 1920s (as much that of both Constructivism and Productivism as of Surrealism in Paris). The debates in the Soviet Union and in Weimar Germany that evolved around the question of what type of work within photography could be considered adequate for the proletarian masses (avant-gardiste montage or monumental single imagery) would eventually be replaced by a debate about whether photography could be considered as a truly proletarian aesthetic proposition at all. Ultimately Socialist Realism stated that, in fact, only the traditional categories of painting and sculpture, based on the acquisition and virtuoso execution of traditional artistic skills, could legitimately respond to the aesthetic needs of the new urban masses.

The persistent fusion with the Photographic that Richter's paintings enact over and over from 1962 on, negates any aspiration to re-establish the traditional categories of high art outside of the control of mass-cultural conventions of representation. And this fusion functions as well as a retroactive indictment of the secret dependence of Socialist Realism upon the very Photographic it condemns. Yet to the same extent that this ritual

operates with hindsight as an anamnestic process it deliberately acts in the present to erode the boundaries of a presumably independent and advanced avant-garde production.<sup>3</sup>

### Weimar Culture and Photography

In order even to sketch an outline of the profound discrepancy between Richter's use of found, amateur photography and the photographic legacies of the historical avant-gardes, I will have to rehearse briefly the basic arguments of the photographic paradigms of Weimar culture.

We can distinguish at least three different, yet related photographic practices that Richter inherits from the pre-war avant-garde: photomontage; New Objectivity's conception of the "archive"; and the Productivist model of Worker's Photography Clubs.

All of these, despite the political repression during the Nazi period that led to their delayed reception, have had a considerable impact on the formation of the historical conditions of photography in the post-war period. In fact, one could argue that Richter's photographic aesthetic partakes of all of them, at least to a certain degree--even

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<sup>3</sup> At that time the provincial culture of West Germany (especially in Düsseldorf and the Rhineland) was still under the spell of both its recent repression during the Nazi period and a newly discovered Modernist legacy emanating primarily from Paris and its Ecole. Belated abstraction and most importantly Informel painting had excluded any consciousness of the intricate links between the photographic as both as a mass-cultural medium of representation and an avant-garde practice. Typically the cult figures of the reconstruction period, Picasso and Matisse, embody that quintessentially anti-photographic stance, an art practice that has never even once admitted its inevitable proximity to mass culture and its imbrication with the photographic.

if unknowingly--as he alters the original intentions and implications of the photographic positions of the Weimar avant-garde. This is particularly evident in Atlas, the systematic collection and documentation of his photographic source materials that, beginning in 1962, he assembles in montage form.

Each of the photographic paradigms that defined the photographic legacy of German avant-garde culture implies specific constructions and positions of a subject--positions that are articulated both in the definition of the author as in that of the recipient--and are inherently given in the structural relationships of the photographs as in their semiotic status, in their iconography as in their form of distribution.

As we now know, there was not a singular or intrinsically progressive semiotic operation that photomontage performed qua montage principle. Its implicit ambition of functioning as an avant-garde education of the senses operated across a broad spectrum of political positions, from the conservative techno-cult of the Futurists, through the emancipatory socialist projects of the Soviet avant-garde, to the radically activating and politicizing work of John Heartfield.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>First of all one would have to question Richter's purported ignorance of the legacy of the photomontage aesthetic, since, after all, he was developing in East Germany, where John Heartfield had installed himself after his return from exile in England in 1950. Yet, paradoxically and significantly, Heartfield's contribution to 20th-century art was as obliterated within the political climate of Socialist Realism as his political integrity had been doubted for the longest time by the party officials of the German Democratic Republic. Moreover, it seems to have been virtually impossible at that moment in any

The structural emphasis on discontinuity and fragmentation in Dada-derived photomontage introduced the subject's perceptual field to the "shock" experience of daily existence in advanced industrial culture. In this manner, photomontage unwittingly collaborated in the social project of perceptual modernization and its affirmative agenda. On the other hand, the metonymic procedures of photomontage and its continuous emphasis on the fissure and the fragment--at least in their initial appearance--operated to dismantle the myths of unity and totality that advertising and ideology consistently inscribe on the consciousnesses of their consumers.

But this revolutionary effect of the semiotic upheaval of poetic language was short-lived. Already in the moment of Dada collage the heterogeneity of random order and the arbitrary juxtapositions of found objects and images, and the sense of anomie this supports, was challenged as either apolitical and anti-communicative, or as esoteric and aestheticist. The very avant-garde artists who initiated photomontage (e.g. Heartfield, Klucis, Lissitzky, Rodchenko) now diagnosed this anomic character of the Dada-collage/montage technique, mounting a criticism that called, paradoxically, for a re-instating of communicative action and instrumentalized logic: the very order and laws that collage had just assaulted if not attempted to dismantle altogether.

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political and cultural context to recognize the fundamental implications of Heartfield's photomontage aesthetic for the discussion and conception of artistic practices in the post-war period.

But what had really been at stake in this assault on the hierarchical structure of the aesthetic and on the centered subject (author as well as viewer) was not so much the rational logic of communication or the order of representational form (i.e. the linguistic functions of denotation and referentiality) as it was the particular formation of the subject that had emerged within bourgeois culture. The social subjects addressed in these practices were both the dominant bourgeois character whose subjectivity had to be dismantled while--within the same gesture--the not-yet existing proletarian identity had to be conceived. This seems to have been the inherent dialectic of the collectivist aesthetic operating in the post-Dada/post-constructivist photomontage work of Heartfield and Klucis as it was also that of the emerging worker's photography clubs.

One could argue, therefore, that these artistic efforts towards a radical effect of decentering (e.g. abstraction in painting or the purely phonetic/graphic versus the semantic in textual representation) were never meant to acquire the status of aesthetic models of universal validity, even though that is of course what happened as the modernist avant-garde achieved heroic proportions within the history of its reception, however belatedly this might have occurred.

When the Dada-derived techniques of photomontage were abandoned in the mid-to-late 1920s, a particular dialectic unfolded around the question of authorship versus anonymity and the concomitant demolition or retention of conventional photographic craft. Two positions emerged. On the one hand,

with the rise of Neue Sachlichkeit, there was a renewed emphasis on the photographic author and the necessity of articulating that authorship not just by iconographic choices, but equally, if not more so, through the display of technical excellence and photographic skill. In the German context of the 1920s this is particularly evident in August Sander's archival project, where the author as well as the viewer are reconceived as centered subjects who participate in a coherent, rationally organized, and transparent social formation. Its imaginary rational order is paralleled in the photographer's project of representing that social totality: its subjects are clearly circumscribed and finite; they are potentially complete and exhaustive; they are all-encompassing and universally valid; and they are organized according to transparent principles of structure and legibility.

The opposite of this was the development of the worker's photography movement, where the project of a radical collectivist anonymity was retained to a certain degree and where the definition and actual development of authorial skills was intricately linked to the functional dimension of political self-representation. If in the collage/montage aesthetic the identity of the bourgeois artist as author, embedded in the mastery of skills and techniques, had been abolished, in the new worker photography proletarian anonymity was broken and functional skills were acquired for the articulation of the voices of the heretofore unrepresented and unrepresentable masses.

Considering these dominant avant-garde strategies in

photographic production of the 1920s and 1930s in Weimar alone, we can easily recognize that Richter's choice of amateur photography inverts the utopian aspirations of that culture on every level: if the avant-garde practices assumed a teleological perspective of enactment and empowerment, of articulation and of self-determination, Richter's work assumes an attitude of critical negation; if the agitational dimension of Heartfield originated in an attitude of radical transcendence of the given socio-political conditions that determine authorship and production, Richter's work departs from this attitude of absolute affirmation; if the Workers' Clubs photographic movement aspired to the potential of photography as a weapon of self-definition, Richter breaks with the advanced conditions of amateur photography within consumer culture, where the mere acquisition of minimal photographic skills has long become the basis for yet another domain of rigorously enforced and muted consumption.

#### Richter, Rauschenberg, and Photography

Richter has emphatically denied any awareness of the photographic legacies of the Weimar avant-garde and has affirmed that he had absolutely no interest in and no knowledge of Heartfield's work at the time of his studies in Dresden.<sup>5</sup> More paradoxically, perhaps, when queried about the impact on the formation of his selection of randomly

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<sup>5</sup>Benjamin Buchloh, "Interview with Gerhard Richter," in: Gerhard Richter, exhibition catalogue, (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago), Thames and Hudson, London/New York, 1988.

found and assembled imagery of the paradigms of collage or the Readymade, he has also denied any particular awareness of the work of Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, or even Kurt Schwitters who had defined the Dada usages of collage/photomontage in the 1920s. From a position quite typical for post-war German artists, primarily oriented toward the New York and Paris activities of the moment rather than toward the overshadowed legacies of the historical avant-garde of the 1920s, Richter credits the work of Robert Rauschenberg with having provided his introduction to collage/montage aesthetics. This paradoxical historical and geo-political shift poses a number of additional questions in the reading of Richter's photographic appropriations.

First of all it poses the question of how the principle of random accumulation operates under substantially different circumstances, i.e. at a moment when randomness and arbitrary juxtaposition are already functioning as established aesthetic procedures. Collage aesthetic and Duchamp's originary model of an aleatory selection of objects via the readymade, had inaugurated the elimination of authorial choice and artistic authority by intrinsically linking authorship to the actual conditions of experience within advanced consumer culture, where the formation of exchange-value residing in the sign itself determines the constitution of the identity of the consuming subject.

Clearly, in the post-war moment, techniques of decentering the subject and dismantling authorial claims had changed once again in the transmission from Duchamp to John

Cage, one of the formative figures for Rauschenberg's collage culture.<sup>6</sup> It is not easy to determine whether, in what was now the period of the neo-avant-garde, the radically subversive decentering of the (bourgeois) subject had just become a principle of affirmative indifference towards subjectivity altogether (e.g. Cage's Zen approach); or whether, in the post-war recurrence of these strategies, the politically enforced elimination of subjectivity necessitated this aesthetic recourse to anomie, since this model alone seemed to enact the decreasing validity of concepts of communicative action, self-determination, and transparent social organization.

The very critical revisions to which the original avant-garde strategies had been subjected by their respective inventors were now repeated, step by step, and the fact that seemingly unrelated photographic practices on the part of the neo-avant-gardes in apparently unrelated cultural contexts operated along similar lines of internal critique, could find its explanation in this condition. The very same shift that had occurred in Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union--from the aesthetics of montage to a single-frame aesthetic--is now reiterated. Rauschenberg's affiliation with the procedures of collage/photomontage and the infinite play of differentials in Rauschenberg's painterly reception of that legacy will precisely become the

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<sup>6</sup>The consistent decay of the dialectical potential of the procedures of fragmentation, aleatory order, and arbitrary relations already evident in the first instances of their post-war rediscovery in the work of Rauschenberg and Paolozzi leads ultimately to their deployment as mere strategies of domination in contemporary advertising.

first target of such a revision in the early 1960s: in Warhol's return to the single image and/or serial image aesthetic, soon to be followed by Ed Ruscha's and later Dan Graham's reintroduction of a serialized, single image approach.<sup>7</sup>

Richter's work traces exactly the same trajectory, yet in his case the critical revision of the photographic legacies is complicated by the fact that from the beginning he situates his work at the crossroads between painting (both European and American traditions) and contradictory--if not mutually exclusive--photographic parameters. It is certainly within this spectrum of historical transformations of the collage/readymade aesthetic and its inherent contradictions that we have to consider Richter's engagement with the random imagery of amateur photography in his paintings from 1962 to 1966 and perhaps all the more so if we attempt to understand the principles that structure his vast project Atlas (figs.4 and 5).

From 1962 onwards, Richter collected his used and unused pictorial sources in panels that are ordered in the traditionally rigorous format supplied by the grid, panels

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<sup>7</sup>And the three years that it took the artists of the original avant-garde to move through the fallacies of Dada's semiotic revolution to the aesthetics of communicative action in photomontage or to move--in not much more than three years--from photomontage to the serialized/single-frame imagery of long term observation (as in the productivist aesthetics of Rodchenko), become the extremely attenuated thirty years of a farcical repetition of history that it would take to go from the recovery of those practices of collage and photomontage in the work of Paolozzi and Rauschenberg in the early 1950s to Barbara Kruger's work in the early 1980s. And when the Productivist dimension is finally recovered, it is just barely radical enough to ornament the covers of hip fashion magazines like Esquire.

that are sometimes--but not consistently or continuously-- organized around a particular subject (clouds, flowers, portraits) or iconographic axis. As in the arbitrary relationship that determines the linguistic sign's relation to its referent, Richter's peculiar archival order distinguishes between its represented objects and their visual signification in an emphasis on the arbitrariness of their links that parallels the arbitrariness of the readymade or montage object. Furthermore, the internal discontinuity and structural coherence of the Atlas is congruent with the principle of differential (spatial) relations as they occur in the distribution of imagery in the collage/montage tradition.

But the dialectic effect of these decentering strategies oscillating between a sudden shock of the experience of liberation and a concomitant lapse into the anomic disorder that governs the encounter with randomly juxtaposed objects and semantically depleted phonetic or graphic textual fragments is also at work in the experience of the infinite variants of differential relationships among Atlas's photographs. For at one and the same time, they generate meanings and disintegrate readings. To the same degree that the breakdown of the centered subject seems to promise a critical resistance against the instrumentalization of reason (especially in its debased versions of the logic of the commodity, of rigorously functional and utilitarian thought, and the ideologies of control emanating from the centered consciousness of domination), this breakdown also seems to affirm the

inevitability of the universal reign of anomie.

Richter and Bernd and Hilla Becher

At the same moment, in Europe, one witnesses the reemergence of the archival orders of Neue Sachlichkeit's photography in the serialized single-image aesthetic of Bernd and Hilla Becher. The profound differences between their position and that of Richter's Atlas is illuminating. Random selection and dissemination of incoherent images, of an infinity of unrelated subjects in Richter's work, is opposed by the Bechers' use of coherent, rationally ordered series (fig. 6).

The demonstrative deskilling of photographic practice--the manifest neglect of the criteria of craft and of the conventions of the medium--is at the center of Richter's choice of amateur and journalistic photography, just as this same principle would govern his own approach to photography when, from 1966 onwards, he began to make his own images. (This is also determinant in Ruscha's and Dan Graham's architectural photographs in the early-to-mid 1960s.) By contrast, in the Bechers' work, the highest standards of Neue Sachlichkeit photographic traditions are resurrected; and these have since become the model for a whole generation of disciples for whom the problem of photographic deskilling is no longer even an issue to consider.

Both practices engage with the notion of anonymity. In the work of the Bechers, the anonymous achievements of early industrial architecture set the standards against which their own project as photographic archivists of that

historical moment has to be measured: the anonymous architects/engineers' devotion to function and use-value has to be matched by the Bechers' own devotion to the standards of photographic quality and the functions of the archive, its use-value being the photographic recovery of a rapidly vanishing past of early industrial architecture.

Paradoxically, it is in that devotion to the anonymity of the architects and engineers of the industrial past that the Bechers define themselves all the more securely as photographic authors; their commitment to an abstracted value system of function and quality suddenly reveals the conservative component of their project. The absence of the actual producers within that architecture finds its correlative in the absence of a reference to the contemporary conditions of production of the recipients of these photographs.

By contrast Richter's "archive," as it appears in the random iconography of his paintings from 1962 to 1966, and even more so in the assembled photographic sources of these paintings, denies all of these qualities. Its subjects are infinite and unrelated, its scope is at any moment an obviously endless variation, since no particular criteria are apparent upon which exclusion or inclusion could be based. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that Richter's photographic sources do not address an idealized moment that is threatened with disappearance and therefore has to be photographically redeemed. Quite the opposite is the case. The moments and subjects of Richter's photographic archive seem perfectly interchangeable, with the willful

constellation of the photographs generating a sense of a continuous and mutual erasure of their inherent historical specificity.

As for the construction of the subject using the means of industrialized amateur photography, this is always-already aborted in that the amateur photographers can only photograph what "has to be photographed." It is that failure that Richter addresses persistently in his choices of amateur and journalistic examples. Yet at the same time, there is an equal and opposite effect, namely the redeeming power of the skills of photography or painting as an invocation of that very bourgeois subjectivity that can serve as a site of memory and thus a model for resistance against the desublimatory power of mass culture, an invocation of subjectivity that would thus falsify the actually existing conditions of subject formation. Therefore, the resurrection of the photographic crafts of the Neue Sachlichkeit is no more invoked in Richter's work than is painting itself, which Richter never situates in opposition to photography in the manner in which both Socialist Realism and School of Paris painting had, as they claimed their absolute independence from it. Quite the opposite, Richter's painting manifestly and completely devotes itself to the dominant technological practices of photographic representation, merging with them and seemingly being consumed by them.

What distinguishes Richter's painting from that of the majority of his German and American peers working with photography, is the lack of decisiveness and the resulting

ambiguity with regard to both the abandoned legacies of high-art ambitions and the acquired promises of the neo-avant-garde. Both appear to gain and lose in their unexpected juxtaposition, seeming mutually to enhance each other not only in their worst consequences but as well in the corroboration of their potential. Thus even while his painting is devoted in its entirety to the absurd fabrication of a photograph (as his notorious and still totally enigmatic statement had it when in the early 1970s he suggested that he painted in order to make photographs), it is at the same time evident that this peculiar devotion allows him to do two things at once. On the one hand he can pursue a continued engagement with the representational functions of traditional painting, and on the other, he can engage in a continued commitment to the question of what artistic practice could be at the moment of a post-fascist, post-socialist politics. More importantly, perhaps, the programmatically anti-aesthetic attitude evinced by the selection of amateur photography guarantees an art that refuses to lend itself to the hegemonic structure of culture even while it simultaneously refuses to partake in the desublimatory process of the culture industry.

Thus by simultaneously salvaging and dismantling the legacy of his East German past and by both questioning and embracing the newly emerging forms of American avant-gardist practice, Richter succeeds in constructing a peculiarly complex position within post-war painting and photography. If Socialist Realism had heroicized the abject condition of the socialized body, placing it in the mythical realm of a

transhistorical set of norms and of visual plenitude, enacted for the viewer by the artistic display of skills and the delivery of scopic gratification, then the continuous and repetitive construction of the socialized body in Richter's photographic representations denies both these mythical forms. That of an actually accessible site of self-determination is rejected along with the myth of scopic gratification supplied by the aesthetic construct and the artistic skills necessary for its production.

## Chapter Three:

A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde: Richter's Ema (1966)

Woman is for the artist in general . . . far more than just the female of man. Rather she is divinity, a star . . . a glittering conglomeration of all the graces of nature, condensed into a single being; an object of keenest admiration and curiosity that the picture of life can offer its contemplator. She is an idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching. . . . Everything that adorns woman, everything that serves to show off her beauty, is part of herself. . . . No doubt woman is sometimes a light, a glance, an invitation to happiness, sometimes she is just a word.

--Charles Baudelaire, "The painter of modern life"

So we must enquire why the territory of modernism so often is a way of dealing with masculine sexuality and its sign, the bodies of women--why the nude, the brothel, the bar? What relation is there between sexuality, modernity and modernism ?

--Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity"

Ema, painted in 1966, occupies a peculiarly important place in Richter's oeuvre. It is both the first work painted after a photograph taken by the artist himself (all previous paintings had been painted after found photographs) and the first to employ a relatively developed chromatic scheme (all previous paintings had featured monochrome grisaille or sepia tones in an attempt to imitate the photographic image) (fig. 7).

Ema is the representation of a female nude figure, a category all but absent from the practices of the major European and American painters of the 1960s, if we think of artists like Lichtenstein and Warhol with whom Richter should obviously be associated (I am not counting Tom

Wesselmann or Mel Ramos among the major artists of that generation).<sup>1</sup> The nude (actually a full-size portrait of the artist's wife, six months pregnant) will also remain an exception in Richter's work, even though the painting Student (1967) and a group of canvases executed in 1967 after pornographic photographs, as well as the portrait series of Brigid Polk (painted in 1971 after polaroids taken by Richter), relate to this high-art category even while rupturing it by their proximity to the condition of pornography.

The work solicits initial attention through a peculiar doubling of seemingly incompatible historical references. First of all there are those established by the painting's explicit quotation of one of the more notorious works of twentieth-century modernism: Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase (1911), whose second version (1912) had caused a scandal at the New York Armory Show and had since then become synonymous with avant-garde radicality (fig. 8). Second--and more immediately visible--there is the painting's fusion of the discursive conventions of pictorial Neo-Classicism with those of the photographic image. In its radiant luminosity and the careful modelling of the nude, the work inevitably associates itself with those deployments of Neo-Classicism in French retour à l'ordre and German Neue

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<sup>1</sup>There is one exception in Warhol's work: a nude female torso commissioned by Hugh Hefner, the owner of Playboy magazine; appropriately for both the commission and the discussion that follows here, Warhol's Nude only becomes visible under ultraviolet light. In the terms of my argument on the increasing problematization of scopic access in the category of the nude by means of a technological (photographic) intervention, Warhol's work would deserve additional attention.

Sachlichkeit painting that had been thoroughly discredited in post-war Germany due to their having been recruited by both Fascist and Socialist Realisms. These references situate Richter's painting at the opposite end of the spectrum of twentieth-century practices.

### Deskilling the Nude

Very few artists of that post-war formation now generally referred to by Bürger's somewhat derogatory term neo-avant-garde offer us a second look, so to speak, at the dialectic of figuration versus abstraction, one of modernism's founding oppositions. We are of course familiar with the narratives of that dialectic in modernism's "original" and "heroic" moment of circa 1912, when several artists simultaneously abandoned the representational functions of painting and drawing--more specifically, when post-cubist artists such as Duchamp denied the validity of anthropomorphic and anatomically exact design altogether.

In that epistemic break two crucial interventions were in fact made in one single gesture: the first seemed to exclude the depiction of the female nude henceforth from serious painting, abolishing as it were one of the "classical" categories that had held a central place in five hundred years of Western European painting. Thus--to give another example from that moment--in the very first sentence of his 1915 manifesto "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," Kazimir Malevich declares: "Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures (...) Madonnas and shameless Venuses shall we witness a work

of pure living art."

Yet it is not just the category of the nude that was challenged, of course, but rather its inherent definition of artistic behavior on the one hand and the conventions of spectatorship on the other, which the category enforces. Therefore, one could argue that Malevich's wrath against the "shameless Venuses" was directed first of all against the social division of experience that positioned the artist in the role of a privileged supplier of scopical gratification and the paying (and prying) audience in that of a passive receiver of culturally legitimized substitutes. Malevich envisages the liberation from these fetters of the bourgeois model of sublimation with its innate instrumentalization of art and its inherent prohibition of sexuality as the beginning of "pure, living art."

The other intervention inherent in the challenge to the category of the Nude--intricately related to the first, yet not identical--questions the validity of the concepts of artistic competence and the manual and perceptual skills traditionally acquired to perform the tasks of anatomical representation. This project of the deskilling of painting is directed against a cultural tradition that sustains the hierarchical order of competencies and of sublimation: the artist as exemplary figure performs the ritual of cultural sublimation and substitution on the audience's behalf.

Every act of deskilling, therefore, implicitly aims at the abolition of that hierarchical division, culminating in Malevich's "zero degree of form," or, more manifestly, in Duchamp's readymades, in which all differences of status and

of sublimatory competence between author and recipient seem to have been erased once and for all. Every act of deskilling, therefore, is also a programmatic act of desublimation, contesting the validity of those aesthetic models on their own privileged territory.

While we know that within the arsenal of desublimatory assaults driving the modernist project, deskilling is only one, it is crucial for our discussion here to emphasize the various alliances which deskilling formed in the course of its historical evolution: from the association with the industrial object to the link with photographic and scientific vision; or from its mimetic embrace of advertising to a general identification with other mass-cultural practices.

One of the first instances in the nineteenth century in which Neo-Classical representation as a mode of providing scopific plenitude and performing masterly competence was displaced by linking the strategy of deskilling with the photographic condition is to be found in the drawings of Georges Seurat. The discrepancy between his last academic nudes conceived in the iconic exactitude and enforced anatomical manner of Ingres and his first drawings in the indexical and mechanical manner of the photograph articulates one of the fundamental tensions in painterly representation, the tensions that are operative in and constitutive of painting up to the moment of Richter's Ema, in 1966.

It is perhaps not accidental that in his first drawings to demarcate that transition Seurat selected sites and

figures of urban labor: the radical opposite of the Neo-Classical body of promise and plenitude, these drawings show places and positions of the laboring body. And at the same time that Seurat chose the different iconography of the Parisian industrial banlieue, he introduced the deskilling of drawing as the artistic procedure corresponding to both the recognition of photography's inescapable reordering of the visual field and the necessity of depicting the socialized rather than the idealized body. It seems evident that, from now on, the depiction of bodily plenitude in the Neo-Classical manner, in the face of the actually existing conditions of the socialization of the body in industrial labor, would border on historic obscenity (an obscenity that the art of the Salon, that of the Gérômes and the Bouguereaus amply provided).

But deskilling not only refuses the display of an imaginary corporeal wholeness in a manifest act of solidarity with the socialized, fragmented, and instrumentalized body, it even effaces and counteracts--in the name of aesthetic veracity--the virtuoso display of the manual and representational capacities that construct this imaginary body in anatomical verisimilitude.

Throughout the project of early Cubism, the category of the (female) Nude--along with that of the portrait, the landscape, or the still life--and its inherent representational conventions are subjected to an ever-increasingly acerbic, critical analysis of both the function and the tools of bodily representation. Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase (the painting with which Richter's

Ema engages in a rather opaque dialogue which I am here trying to clarify) was of course one of the culminating instances in which the representational techniques of Analytic Cubist painting were programmatically linked with the photographic strategies of measuring and surveying the socialized body via chronophotography. And yet in the triumphant moment of Cubism's analytic dismembering of the representation of the body, an increasingly melancholic awareness already seemed to emerge within these paintings.<sup>2</sup>

Cubism's mourning over the inevitable loss of the representational functions of painting seemed to project a realization that painting's emancipation from mythical thought--still operative even in the apparently transhistorical validity of pictorial categories--could be achieved only at the price of delivering the very forms of experience embedded in these categories (and their representational conventions) over to the control of technological and scientific rationalism. To the very same extent that the traditional categories had been dismantled by a critical awareness about perception and by an analysis of the conventions of vision and representation, artistic production had internalized the very forces of measurement, surveillance, and regulation that it--qua aesthetic intervention--had once promised to oppose. Duchamp's peculiar fusion of the indexical traces of chronophotography with the painterly category of the female nude seemed to

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<sup>2</sup>Rosalind Krauss was the first to recognize the melancholic condition in Cubist painting resulting from the loss of its representational functions. My conclusions drawn from this observation, however, differ from hers.

enact that very contradiction integral to the dialectic of enlightenment operative in the project of Cubist painting.

To the same degree that the iconic representation of the Nude would recede into the historical realm (that of the displaced, the obsolete, and the repressed), this pictorial category would now also acquire the particular status of that which is prohibited and thereby become invested with the attractions of those lost objects that embody desire for the capacities of the past. And it would be from this realm of the obsolete that the Nude would stage returns in seemingly endless variations.

For example, in the period immediately following Cubism, the moment now generally identified as the retour à l'ordre, painters like Picasso incessantly attempted to restore and preserve at least some of the fullness of representation, some of the scopical gratification that painting had earlier promised to supply to author and spectator alike. Or, in a different and even more sordid moment, that of the early 1940s, Francis Picabia's nudes appear, positioning themselves perhaps for the first time as high art objects explicitly in the proximity of pornography while still posing as avant-garde paintings. Thus Picabia's paintings at least acknowledged--as photographic Surrealism had before them--that since the historical moment when the iconic representation of the body had been taken over by the industrial production of photographic pornography, the certainty of distinctions between the pornographic and the aesthetic would become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Only a few years later, in 1949-51, in the context of

an emerging American reception of Surrealism, Robert Rauschenberg (in collaboration with Susan Weill) would once more reconceive the Nude, but now entirely in the indexical terms of the photographic trace (and like Duchamp before him, Rauschenberg's work would implicitly declare itself as the very last in its category). The body appears here in its totality as the direct physical inscription of its shadow onto the light-sensitive surface of the architectural blueprint paper (fig. 9); and in the literalness of its production the image seems to safeguard itself as much against any transcendent representational dimension as against the functions of pornographic and scopic gratification. But when Rauschenberg produced these indices, re-enacting the radical critique of iconic representation that Surrealist rayograms had initiated, one peculiar condition seems to have escaped his artistic acuity. Namely, that neither the critical potential of photography nor its apparent guarantee of the trace's materialist opacity would escape the continuously expanding demands of the culture industry to bring every gesture of artistic dissent immediately within the realm of its control.

Thus the publication of the restaged performances of Rauschenberg's production of the blueprints in Life in 1951 (the issue of April 9, 1951 publishes images such as fig. 10), with the nude model spread out on the floor while the artist is shining "his" light on her body in order to register the trace on the blueprint paper, continues a tradition already signalled a year before with the

publication of Pollock's performances in the pages of the same magazine: namely that even the most critical and radical assaults on the specularly of consumer culture would now be produced on the very threshold of their imminent transformation into spectacle.

Ten years later, Yves Klein would follow Rauschenberg's public performance (fig. 11); and he would subject both the process of indexical mark-making as well as the dismantling of the category of the Nude to a process of a reactionary recoding (fig. 12). What had only been dormant in Rauschenberg would now, in Klein's travesty, become a manifesto: that all aspirations within the neo-avant-garde to sustain and expand the realm of critical negativity and defetishization were doomed from the start. Artistic objects and activities could from now on legitimately claim to appear as culture only if--from the very moment of their conception--they submitted to the laws of spectacle culture governing all forms of distribution and reception.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Yves Klein had this to say about his activity: "Personally I would never attempt to smear paint over my own body and become a living brush; on the contrary, I would rather put on my tuxedo and wear white gloves. I would not even think of dirtying my hands with paint. Detached and distant, the work of art must complete itself before my eyes and under my command. Thus, as soon as the work is realized, I stand there, present at the ceremony, spotless, calm, relaxed, worthy of it, and ready to receive it as it is born into the tangible world" (Yves Klein, "Due to the fact that," a text dated "Hotel Chelsea, New York, 1961," reprinted in : Yves Klein, exhibition catalogue Alexandre Jolas Gallery, New York, 1962 , quoted by Nan Rosenthal, "Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein," in Yves Klein 1926-1962 : A Retrospective, Houston, Institute for the Arts, Rice University. et al., 1982, p. 124.).

And, of the imprints of the body he had this to say: "I very quickly perceived that it was the block of the body, that is to say, the trunk and part of the thighs, that fascinated me. The head, the arms, the hands, are only intellectual articulations around the bulk of flesh that is the body" (Yves

In Klein's "Living Brushes," used in his production of the Anthropometries, the re-enactment of the seemingly obsolete category occurs at its most concrete and literal level. If the increasing proximity between the artistic category of the nude and images of prostitution and pornography had already been suggested in nineteenth-century modernism, then their eventually inevitable confluence was indicated in the twentieth, from Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon in 1907 right down to Picabia's paintings of the 1940s. Finally, under the reign of spectacle culture and its appropriate neo-avant-garde artists, they seem to coincide. In Klein's picture-production the paid nude models appear in the spectacular performance of their "artistic" tasks directly in front of an audience (or a camera) like in any other floor show or variety act.

It seems, then, that in 1966 Richter's mobilization of the obsolete category of the female nude and its iconic representation emerged from the reflection on these very circumstances, establishing itself in an uneasy interim space of opposition, suspended between Neo-Classicism and the neo-avant-garde. The apparent conventionalism of Richter's decision to re-introduce the Neo-Classical legacy within his depiction of the Nude contests these exact contradictions as they had become evident first in the neo-avant-gardiste radicality of Rauschenberg's Blueprint and had culminated in Yves Klein's Anthropometries as the

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Klein, "Truth becomes Reality," originally printed in Zero No.3, July 1961, Düsseldorf, reprinted in Yves Klein: Retrospective, 229.).

travesty of a critical dismantling of the category.

Richter seems to have understood that the provocative acts of erasure of both category and skills, would inevitably coincide with an altogether opposite function in the post-war period: the turning of the avant-garde gesture of critical negation into spectacle. And it is in this reversal of terms, in the moment where the very gesture of bodily mark-making along with the direct indexical inscription of the trace as the most radical denial of specularly itself becomes the spectacular object, that the semblance of a conservative opposition in Richter's gesture gains an unexpected dimension of critical resistance.

Richter's work originates in the recognition that the apparent victory of the process of deskilling is in fact a Pyrrhic delusion, as he realizes that the vanishing credibility of the categories and the disappearance of the competence necessary for their production is as much an irreversible historical loss as it is a semblance of emancipation from myth. Richter's painting Ema acts as an elegy on that loss of experience, mourning the disappearance of the socially acquired forms of sublimation in the process of the formation of the subject that the very tradition of the category of the nude had once enacted and upheld.

But, paradoxically, the elegiac condition of Ema resulting both from the painting's chromatic range between bodily luminosity and the muted purple space of the staircase, as well from the painting's absolutely unique status in the context of Richter's oeuvre, emphasizes all the more the ultimate inaccessibility and the actual

illegitimacy of those lost aesthetic categories and artistic skills as sites of cultural memory and as instances of the differentiation of the subject in the present.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike retour à l'ordre Neo-Classicism or more contemporary forms of culturally conservative or reactionary thought, however, Richter's invocation of the vanished models of subjectivity refuses to identify the commemorated instant of the past as one superior to the present. Even less does his work seem to claim the privileged forms of experience of the past as a guarantee of their continuing and universal availability in the present. Almost as if to deny the validity of his melancholic reflection on the Nude's obsolescence as an aesthetic category, he supplies his own travesties on the elegiac Ema: in 1967 he paints a series of "nudes" after pornographic images (e.g. Female Student) enacting the very fatality from which Ema supposedly promised relief, namely that in the face of the industrial production of the pornographic nude on the one hand and the spectacularization of the avant-gardiste gesture on the other the artistic category faces its certain disappearance, along with the forms of experience once embedded in it.

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<sup>4</sup> A much later correspondence to the uniqueness of Ema would be the painting Betty, equally Neo-Classical, not to say Ingresque in its mode, equally an image of one of Richter's closest family members, his daughter, and equally exceptional in terms of its subject and coloration since it was the only color painting to be painted during the production of the cycle October 18, 1977 in 1989.

## Chapter Four:

The Divisions of Memory : Gerhard Richter's  
'Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo.'

Never has decadent art been interested in the construction of monuments. It has been left to Fascism to unite the decadent theory of art to a monumental praxis. Nothing is more instructive than this meeting of elements, which are, in themselves, contradictory.

Walter Benjamin, "Andre Gide et ses nouveaux adversaires"<sup>1</sup>

Thus the genius reappears as the fascist leader, the contemplative recipient becomes the manipulated following and beauty, once reserved for the autonomous work, is projected onto the battlefield. Fascism, as the aestheticization of politics is therefore specifically modernist insofar as it participates in the demontage of autonomy aesthetics, but it preserves the substance of an earlier bourgeois culture, just as it preserves bourgeois property relations, by restructuring domination as an aesthetic object.

Russel Berman, "The Wandering Z: Reflections on Kaplan's Reproductions of Banality"<sup>2</sup>

The question I have attempted to clarify in the preceding chapter is how Richter succeeded in constructing a set of painterly strategies that seem to integrate mutually exclusive, cultural demands: those of a post-national, artistic identity

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<sup>1</sup> Oeuvres de Walter Benjamin, trans. Maurice de Gandillac, vol.2, p.217, Paris, Denoel, 1971. German original in Das Wort, vol.1, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> In, Alice Yaeger Kaplan, Reproductions of Banality, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. xix.

and those of a typically post-modern dismantling of the traditional categories and conventions of painting (figurative versus abstract, for example). Or, more specifically, how Richter engages with another set of dichotomies, the questions that concern us here most: how did he succeed in reconciling the exorcism of his painterly past formed within the two Germanys (the painting of the National Socialists first and that of Stalinist Socialist Realism second) with the experience of a third, hastily concocted painterly culture of post-war West Germany, which meant the sudden and rapid acquisition of a range of at first French and then mostly American neo-avant-garde strategies.

We should of course remember that the transition from a figurative mode of representational painting, affiliated with a reactionary political ideology, to a presumably progressive mode of modernist abstraction, affiliated with the free market ideology of late capitalism or more explicitly with the newly emerging ideological discourses and institutions of the culture industry, that this transition was by no means a task Richter alone had to face. In fact, two of his key models in post-war art, Lucio Fontana and Jackson Pollock, had--then unbeknownst to Richter--made their way through similarly delicate shifts and passages, adjusting in their own manner to the post-war necessities.

In that peculiar reversal from a figurative mode of painting emerging--in whatever distorted and distant configuration--from an imaginary Neo-Classical ideal, Fontana, Pollock, and Richter almost seem to enact the

political coercion, for a return to the safe grounds of iconic representation.

The consistency in Richter's work of his preoccupation with these questions is evident by the almost cyclical return in his paintings of his engagement with the figurative legacies of Neo-Classicism. Ema (1966) is neither the first nor the last of the paintings in which Richter re-engages these Neo-Classical traditions. In fact, already a year before, in the painting entitled Uncle Rudi (1965 fig.13), and as late as 1989 in the most recent example entitled Betty (1989 fig.14), this process of reworking his original formation as a Socialist Realist painter is evident within the continuous alternation between representational and abstract painting.

And it is certainly not accidental that in the most prominent examples of this process the revision of that legacy is fused intricately with an image of a member of the artist's immediate family or, as in the sculptural installation Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo (1971) (see fig. 15), an image of the artist's own self so that one could argue that Richter's re-inscription of his complicated artistic legacy is linked directly with a larger process of personal anamnesis.

The painting Uncle Rudi (1965) is Richter's second effort (after a strangely failed attempt in 1962 to paint a portrait of Adolf Hitler [fig. 17]) and one of the earliest examples in German post-war art altogether to introduce the subject matter of Germany's recent Nazi history into a work of neo-avant-garde art. A full-size portrait of the artist's

uncle in the uniform of the German Wehrmacht, the painting retains the naive central composition typical of a family photograph (which was its source) thereby already generating a first conflict for the reading of the painting. Frontality and centrality in painting traditionally indicated to the viewer the prominence of the sitter, emphasizing the figure's qualifications and providing a spatially mediated legitimacy for the figure to function as an object of historical representation.

In Richter's portrait of his Nazi uncle, however, these conventions clash with a heretofore unrepresentable subject of history, thereby not only challenging the naive beliefs in a continued validity of those pictorial conventions of realist history painting that Richter had acquired, but more importantly, articulating the difficulties of constructing images of historical recollection at all under the circumstances of post-fascist Germany. The difficulty seems to consist precisely of working through both the pictorial prohibition of the unrepresentable subject (the familial tie to the fascist legacy at large and the fascist legacies of painting) and the necessity of representing this subject within the conventions of painting traditionally provided for the purposes of historical recollection. The conflict between the necessity of constructing an historical memory and the inadequacy of the traditional means available to do it, is acted out further through the functions of the photograph. After all, it is in the medium of photography that the sunken conditions of the once heroic traditions of historical representation can still be seen at work in the

placement, the framing, and the presentation of its rather problematic subject, as it is also in the photograph that the "banality of evil" finds its proper concretization. In linking the bankrupt conventions of history painting with the banality of the family photograph, Richter succeeds in challenging both that aesthetic of official history painting that he had acquired in the East and that aesthetic of abstraction that voluntarily deprived itself of all social tasks of commemoration, an aesthetic which governed West Germany at the moment of his arrival from the East.

Six years later when producing the sculptural self-portrait, his second sculptural work, Richter once again enacted this dialectic of the "divided heritage" that concerns us here.<sup>3</sup> It could be considered as a culminating point of that examination of the validity or obsolescence of traditional categories and it links this process with the probing of the personal condition and the public role of the artist.

Invited to produce an exhibition for the Cologne space of the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in 1971 (one of his first dealers, with whom he had shown paintings in Munich in 1966), Richter decided to work on a joint project with his close friend and colleague, the painter and sculptor Palermo (Peter Heisterkamp), who like Richter had emigrated from

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<sup>3</sup>Only one year after Ema, Richter had produced his first sculptural object, entitled Four Panes of Glass (1967); and it seemed as much to continue the critical dialogue with Marcel Duchamp in a rather straightforward and lapidary manner as it was obviously an effort on Richter's side to reply to the challenges of American Minimalism, which at that time emerged into higher visibility in Germany and displaced the recent prominence of American Pop Art.

East Germany and had studied in the 1960s at the Düsseldorf Academy with Joseph Beuys. The resulting collaboration entitled Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo consisted of two plaster casts of the heads of the artists on tall plinths, positioned at opposite ends of the room in a hieratic display reminiscent of the spaces consecrated to the memory of historical heroes and artists in mausolea and halls of fame, complemented by the monochrome wall paintings executed by Palermo covering all four walls of the gallery space in a yellow-ochre hue typical of German Neo-Classical architecture (fig. 18).

While the two portrait-faces were cast in plaster by Richter in the manner of death masks, he had modelled the remaining parts of the heads and covered them delicately with the grey oil paint typical of his work of the early to mid-1960s. This peculiar application of grey oil paint immediately linked the two portrait busts with the photographic dimensions in Richter's earlier paintings, where the grey color simulated the intricate links between his conception of painting and the popular conventions of amateur photography. And yet in another way the surface treatment of the plaster casts also established a dialogue with the reflection on mimesis and representational truth that had been initiated earlier in the work of Jasper Johns who, like Duchamp, presented Richter throughout the 1960s with a number of provocative obstacles. Clearly Johns's earlier sculptures of direct casts from found objects, such as his Light Bulb series begun in 1955, made of sculpmetal or bronze, sometimes painted grey (fig. 19), or even his

insertion of bodily fragments, indexical casts in plaster collaged into his paintings, as for example most notoriously in paintings such as Target with Four Faces (1955) or Target with Plaster Casts (1955), would have served as both provocation and model for Richter's own variation on this hybrid category operating between the readymade and painting, between sculpture and the photographic imprint.<sup>4</sup>

It is precisely with this continuous alternation between the categories that Richter seems to engage in the peculiar configuration of the portrait busts. As much as the brushstrokes in grey oil paint on the faces of the depicted artists remind us of Richter's photographic paintings, they also correspond--as traces of direct paint application--in an exact manner to the condition of the direct, indexical cast of the figure itself. They thereby correlate three elements at the same time in an eloquent elision: the direct cast of the sculpture, the direct imprint of the photographic image, and painting's use of the indexical mark--such as runs of paint or traces of brushstrokes--to create a condition of self-reflexiveness.

It is important to stress once again that it is this dimension of an utter reduction to a zero-level of

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<sup>4</sup>Obviously, as so often in Yves Klein's case, there is also a Klein version of the Duchamp-Johns paradigm and it is highly possible that the Klein version would have been known to Richter at the time as well. In 1962, shortly before his death, Yves Klein was planning to cast five three-quarter-length portrait reliefs of himself and his friends Martial Raysse, Arman, Claude Pascal, and Pierre Restany. Four reliefs would be blue, suspended in front of a gold monochrome panel, whereas the self-portrait of Klein would be a gold figure in front of an IKB monochrome panel. Only one of these works, Arman (1962), exists as a prototype for the series, which was never accomplished.

signification within the readymade image/object that links Richter's approach with that of the generation of American artists, in this instance in particular, with Jasper Johns, who was coming to terms with the legacy of Duchamp at an earlier moment. But at the same time Richter is distinguished from his American predecessors and peers by the fact that this radical reduction of the wealth of signification traditionally available to painterly and sculptural categories and conventions is always immediately linked to the more specific historical conditions of Richter's suspension between the two historical phases of German pre- and post-war culture and the transition from one political system to another.

In Richter's attitude--and here his work differs profoundly from the epistemic concerns articulated in the work of Jasper Johns--the mere juxtaposition of these means and their epistemic implications is only one element in the construction of the pictorial/sculptural paradox. At the same time that he empties the pictorial/sculptural categories of all traditional forms of signification by juxtaposing them in their mutual reduction to the status of pure indexicality, he resituates these within the most charged and difficult of all historical categories: monumental sculpture and the artistic self-portrait.

More precisely, his example is lodged within the particular local versions and the particular historical status those categories had acquired in the period of totalitarian German politics. After all, nothing could have been more discredited than the genre of the portrait bust,

widely used in the context of the most reactionary forms of the restaging of the myth of the hero and the leader, the exceptional subjectivity in the fascist and Stalinist socialist histories of Richter's background. To permeate collective societies with the structures of hierarchical domination was one of the functions of the continuous re-positioning of the images of its leaders. As Igor Golomstock has observed on the subject of official portraits under totalitarian regimes:

There are many thousand surviving portraits of Lenin and Stalin, but not more than twenty or thirty accessible portraits of Hitler -- a tiny fraction of the number produced. Heinrich Hoffmann witnesses that every year the jury had to go through up to 150 portraits of Hitler, mostly executed from photographs. Most of them were destroyed after the war, but in any case, until 1939, Hitler himself sifted through them; obsessed with the idea of "high art," he was extremely dissatisfied with the quality of the portraits and gave instructions that not more than one portrait of him should be shown at each Great Exhibition. Even judging by those that were chosen, the general level was extremely low, even lower than that of the work of the Soviet artists, who had after all had fifteen years of practice at the somewhat obsolete genre of the "official portrait."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>See Igor Golomstock, Totalitarian Art, Icon Editions, Harper Collins, New York, 1990, p. 230.

And in fact one could argue that it is the uncanny collision between the photographically enforced presence of the portrait of a living person and its simultaneous monumentalization for the purposes of an authoritarian adulation and the blatant absence of any and all features of a space for historical memory that is at the root of the fatality of sculptures like those described by Golomstock, of which Arno Breker's notorious bust of Hitler is perhaps only the best known case. While Richter claims not to have worked with any particular example in mind, it is rather evident that it is precisely this uncanniness that Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo reconstitutes. Here, however, the enforced commemoration of a living person is not aiming at a higher degree of control and domination, or at a consistent permeation of the social collective with the hieratic presence of the leader, but rather, the act of enforced commemoration seems to challenge the contemporary presence of artistic identity.

The numerous correlations--deliberately established by the artist--between the two operations at work in the monumental busts of totalitarian cultures and their paraphrase by Richter are, clearly, inescapable. For one, the modelling and the placement of Richter's portrait busts make them manifestly inhabit the very threshold between the photographic and the monumental upon which the monstrous legacy of Breker's work and that of all other official artists of authoritarian regimes had only secretly depended. But every aspect is now reversed. If the disavowal of the photographic origins of the monumental, authoritarian

sculptures had been one of their most involuntarily paradoxical features, the photographic origins of Richter's busts are now emphasized in their explicit association with the chromatic tint and the photographic sources of his paintings as much as with the analogy between direct casting and the photograph's status as index. After all, it was precisely the impact of photography as the quintessentially democratic means of representation that originally initiated the disappearance of the portrait, as it also rang the death knell for the monument, given photography's capacity to construct images of the exceptional individual and to imbue them with credibility.

Furthermore, the very act of juxtaposing two busts facing each other is inherently at odds with the principle of a presentation of official images of power (as Heinrich Hoffmann observed clearly in the above quotation, Hitler made sure that never more than one image of himself was on display), since the dialogic relationship established in Richter's placement of the portraits contradicts both the hieratic appearance of the unique and chosen individual and the cultic veneration that the single-image presentation of the "leader" induces.

And lastly, it is important to recognize the duality of the presentation as it emerges from Palermo's contribution to this collaborative project. In the same manner that Richter's busts emphasize their photographic origins and thereby their innately anti-monumental dimension, so Palermo's wall paintings shift continuously between the traditions of Neo-Classical decoration and the merely

functional application of coats of decorative housepaint. Thus Palermo's wall painting correlates the theatricality of commemorative architecture and that of the Neo-Classical decorations typical of mausolea and halls of fame to the functional simplicity of housepainting and interior design.

But even if the denial of hero worship and of the celebratory dimension of traditional commemorative images of cultural or historical figures is inherent in the photographic dimension of Richter's sculptures, just as it is in the decorative dimension of Palermo's wall paintings, they are both equally far from a parodic position: equally far from an approach that would support the critical annihilation of the mnemonic functions of representation.

To the same degree that this collaboration recognizes the condition of the commemorative category as one that has been emptied by its historical abuse, its artists also seem to recognize the loss of the commemorative function as an element of a larger process of destruction--the destruction of subjectivity. If it is the figure of the artist who will now take the place of the historical subject of the past, this artist, in Richter's presentation, now finds himself suspended between the role of the democratic substitute hero, on the one hand, and the task of performing a contemporary cultural alibi to cover up the intolerable conditions of memory, on the other. It is well known by now, of course, that it was precisely the avoidance of a process of mourning and of historical insight that drove post-war Germans to an avid, almost desperate reception of international, for the most part American, neo-avant-garde

culture.

It seems then that Richter's paradoxical positioning of the artist in the self-portrait (which would remain the only self-portrait until, in the late 1980s, he produced a series of photographic self-portraits in his studio that would subsequently be presented as overpainted photographs) relates simultaneously to a condition of aggrandizement and demotion, to one of bankruptcy and aspiration. On the one hand, in its status as a purely indexical imprint, imbued with the mechanical quality of the readymade and the photograph, it concretizes the egalitarian aspirations of the late 1960s (the moment when Andy Warhol could articulate the prognosis that in the future everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes) and their re-radicalization of the anti-hierarchical and the anti-monumental potential of the photograph (the moment when Douglas Huebler embarked on the conceptual project to make a photographic record of every living being on earth).

On the other hand, in its manifest occupation of the corrupted tradition of the monumental and hierarchical display of the exceptional historical personality, deeply implicated in the exertion of power and domination, the portrait bust seems to question to what end the artist's persona and position will be socially employed, now that the figure of the historically exceptional subject had been so thoroughly discredited by fascist politics and at a time when the new democratic societies of the West were enforcing belief in a condition of non-hierarchical relationships mediated through a system of consumption rather than one of

true political participation.

Richter's reflection on the crisis of a category such as the self-portrait or the monumental sculpture amounts, therefore, to a simultaneous reflection on the crisis of the artist's specific identity and social role as much as on traditional concepts of identity in general. For on the one hand it seems obvious that recent German history had made the status of the chosen historical subject, the one who would be worthy of commemoration, deeply problematic.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the concomitant loss of subjectivity and cultural identity altogether is clearly an even more disastrous prospect, one of an endless repetition which is the fate of those who cannot remember. And thirdly, the re-positioning of the artist in the role of the exemplary subject, as he who enacts the process of commemoration in lieu of society at large, is profoundly dubious under the circumstances of the construction of a post-traditional identity. This refusal of the task assigned to the artist is concretely present in the deeply discomfoting physical presence of the figures: what one could call the normalcy of their photographic or indexical condition disqualifies them from rising to the level of an exemplary commemoration in the same manner that a sculpture by George Segal in the early 1960s seemed deeply unqualified to assume the role of a monument.

But if the artist is in fact the first to engage in the

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<sup>6</sup> For an excellent discussion of these questions see the recent article by Eric L. Santner, "The Trouble with Hitler: Postwar German Aesthetics and the Legacy of Fascism," New German Critique, Number 57 (Fall 1992), pp.5-25.

labor of mourning and the symbolic work of memory, then inevitably, he also has to be the first to confront the actually existing status of the traditional tools available for commemoration and he has to confront them at the actual level of their profound corruption by totalitarian power and historical discreditation. The artist as fascist or as socialist realist as presented by Richter's sculptures takes, then, the first inevitable and necessary step towards the work of memory which, precisely, cannot bypass at all the totalitarian realities of its history, embedded as they are in the very categories of commemoration. And in the same way the very role of the artist is itself contaminated and made suspect in its analogous position to that of the ruler by being identified as the socially exceptional individual, since any claim to a transcendence, i.e. an enlightened position of unblemished knowledge or of political resistance, would in and of itself already constitute yet another ideological condition continuing the mythology rather than constituting the initiation of memory and historical insight.

## Chapter Five:

The Subject as Specimen--Richter's 48 Portraits

The subject is irredeemable.

--Ernst Mach

Barely a year later, Richter would be confronted with an opportunity to examine the subjects of his sculptural installation on a much larger scale and in an exceptional public setting when he was chosen to represent the Federal Republic of Germany at its pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 1972. Starting the new project in late 1971, he would continue to address all the questions and contradictions that he had confronted a year before in Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo: first of all those concerning the traditional artistic identity and the public social functions of the artist in a newly de-hierarchicized democratic society, obviously a particular challenge to an artist who had recently emerged from the two opposing totalitarian phases of German history.

Furthermore, the contradiction of performing the role of an international avant-garde artist, supposedly operating from within a model of critical negation while de facto already legitimizing the new state and affirming its attempts to reconstruct traditional concepts of national identity with the forms of contemporary culture as its means. This must have been particularly problematic since only ten years before Richter had barely escaped his apparent destiny of becoming a representative of official

Socialist state culture.

And thirdly, the architecture of the German pavilion, an environment suffused with historical and concrete architectural references to the culture of Nazi Germany, seemed to provide the ideal circumstances for Richter's ongoing reworkings of modernism in juxtaposition with its inherent opponent, the legacies of Neo-Classicism.<sup>1</sup>

Mimetically obedient to the impositions of the architectural plan and its pretensions toward monumentality, Richter's work consisted of a series of 48 portraits (fig.16), all of equal size, to be installed throughout the central spaces of the pavillion and its apses, thereby creating a highly hieratic installation, reminiscent of a hall of fame or a mausoleum. Despite Richter's claims to have randomly selected photographic reproductions of public figures from various encyclopedias, this principle of an arbitrary selection was overdetermined by a more or less hidden set of rather rigorous criteria, a paradoxical condition that--at least since Duchamp's claim to have chosen the readymades according to chance--has characterized almost all aspirations towards random selection and chance

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<sup>1</sup>The complex history of the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale has been extensively studied by Annette Lagler in her essay "Biennale Venedig: Der Deutsche Pavillon 1948-1988," in: Jahresring: Jahrbuch für Moderne Kunst, vol.36, München, 1989, 78-133. More recently, Walter Grasskamp has explored the history of the exhibitions in the Sixties in this pavilion and the attempts of the artists to come to terms with the historically charged architecture. His brief remarks on Gerhard Richter's installation in 1972, identifying the work as "pure artistic sarcasm" and as a "distant parody of Walhalla" reveal a profound misunderstanding of this particular work and Richter's work in general. See: Walter Grasskamp, "No-Man's Land," in: Klaus Bussmann (ed.), Hans Haacke : Bodenlos, Venice, 1993, 56.

operations.

First of all, as if intent on an exact inversion of the principle of Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo, which had presented the artist as a unique individual (the sole and single agent of history, presented in analogy to the fascist hero), Richter now explicitly banned all visual artists from his pantheon. If this exclusion of the professional practitioners with whom Richter was most obviously identified, already limited any claim to a principle of random choice, a second, equally glaring limitation imposed upon this supposedly open selection was the one of gender: Richter's collection of authors and scientists, composers and philosophers--like Andy Warhol's collection of criminals called Thirteen Most Wanted Men (1964, fig.17), which certainly was one of the works inspiring Richter's continuing dialogue with his American opponent and counterpart -- consisted entirely of male portraits.<sup>2</sup> When recently confronted with the question about this rather peculiar decision, Richter argued that at one point he had actually considered including Marie Curie in his cultural and scientific panorama of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, yet, as he put it, "She seemed at the time such a lonely figure in her exceptional achievement that it would have generated an unnecessary rupture in the sequence of images to suddenly depict a

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<sup>2</sup> Richter had visited the exhibition of Andy Warhol's Thirteen Most Wanted Men at the Rudolf Zwirner Gallery in Cologne in 1967.

singular woman."<sup>3</sup>

The barely hidden sexism of Richter's remark is as insufficient an explanation for this decision (after all, there are hundreds of women in that historical period whose achievements would easily match those of the male figures actually incorporated into the series) as is a benevolent attempt by Coosje van Bruggen to explain this--at first glance--rather problematic and provocative condition by arguing that it was for reasons of formal continuity, not to say uniformity, that only male personages were selected.<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, the historical framework chosen by Richter is much narrower than it might have appeared at first and it seems relevant to consider the significance of that peculiar limitation as well. If the first collection of images, as it has been recorded in the plates of the Atlas (see Zweite, pp.35-37 [figs.18-19]),<sup>5</sup> still included a number of figures that one could generally consider to be among the most eminent of the nineteenth century (for example Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Richard Wagner among others), none of them would eventually find his way into the definitive selection of the series. In that final version, the historically most distant figure would be the composer Anton Bruckner (born in 1824) and the youngest one the novelist Graham Greene (born in 1904), and at the time of

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<sup>3</sup> In conversation with the author, Spring 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Coosje van Bruggen, "Gerhard Richter: Painting as a Moral Act," Artforum (May, 1985), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Armin Zweite (ed.), Gerhard Richter: Atlas, Exhibition catalogue Städtische Galerie Lenbachhaus, München, 1989.

the first exhibition of the work in 1972 numerous personalities among the 48 Portraits were actually still among the living, a condition that has changed since then. This allows us to draw two conclusions for the moment. For one thing, it would seem that Richter decided to remain within a time frame that seemed accessible to memory (in the manner of a familial affiliation with the preceding generation of the father or the grandfather at the most). And for another, that he decided to remain within a spectrum of limited fame since at least half of the figures in Richter's pantheon are only relatively eminent within their fields: choosing a status that did not situate too many of the depicted figures outside of the reach of a fantasy about achievable human accomplishments prevented him from confronting the viewer (and himself) with the problematic condition of having selected them only according to their world-historical importance or their undemocratic stigma of genius.

Fourthly, in the preliminary selection documented in the Atlas, a considerable number of representatives of the political and philosophical history of Dialectical Materialism, Marxist, and Socialist thought appear, including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Lenin and Leon Trotsky, Ho-Tschi Minh and Mao Tse Tung, as well as the more contemporary philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch as well as Bertolt Brecht (the latter two living in the DDR during Richter's adolescence and early adulthood). Yet ultimately, none of them would enter Richter's personal pantheon in its final constellation, clearly suggesting once

again that a carefully plotted system of omissions operated within the declared principle of random choices to effect the actual erasure of all politicians, or more specifically even, the theoreticians and practitioners of the principles of Marxist utopian thought and politics who had accompanied Richter's own intellectual development until 1961.

At the same time it has to be noted that figures from the intellectual right, let alone political figures from the history of German or Italian fascism, do not even enter the preparatory collection of images recorded in the Atlas and the most explicit acknowledgement of that history--if any--is the consideration of Oswald Spengler and Stefan George in the preliminary studies; but yet again both fail to enter the final group.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that beyond the willful exclusion of artists, women, and politicians (Marxists or fascists), the few non-Western, non-Caucasian candidates who had at first been under consideration for Richter's tentatively constructed republic of knowledge have also been left out. An ethnically and nationally small variety of mostly Western European (and a few American) citizens, Christians and Jews, inhabit this fictitious historical pantheon, a fact which could easily be misconstrued as an indication of Richter's latent Eurocentrism just as one could attribute to it a sexist attitude and a patriarchal conception of history.

In order to avoid these misreadings, which project a range of banal pitfalls onto the 48 Portraits, it seems advisable to recognize that multiple processes of

displacement and secondary revision operate in Richter's principle of randomness, functioning as acts of an unconscious reworking analogous to the censoring that occurs in dreamwork. One could suggest therefore that Richter's series of 48 Portraits functions first of all as an imaginary construction of a retroactive paternal identification organized by a subject who has been both individually traumatized by the destruction of the paternal image and historically traumatized by the hypertrophic adulation of an image of the male "Führer".

Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich have described this condition in their by now classical study on the subject as follows:

For millions of Germans the loss of the "Führer" (for all the oblivion that covered his downfall and the rapidity with which he was denounced) was not the loss of someone ordinary; identifications that had filled a central function in the lives of his followers were attached to his person. The loss of an object so highly cathected with libidinal energy was indeed reason for melancholia. Through the catastrophe not only was the German ego ideal robbed of the support of reality, but in addition the Führer himself was exposed by the victors as a criminal of truly monstrous proportions. With this sudden reversal of his qualities the ego of every single German individual suffered a central devaluation and impoverishment.

This creates at least the prerequisites for a

melancholic reaction.<sup>6</sup>

Both conditions had been determining the subject-formation of countless adolescent Germans in the 1930s and 1940s in a manner that would make any future paternal identification highly problematic. If any subsequent construction of a paternal image or national legacy could become acceptable at all, it would have to bear the marks of that traumatic experience and its subsequent secondary elaborations. It would have, that is, to operate continuously between radically negating the "natural" paternal image of the Germans as fascists and laboring perpetually to construct a radically different paternal legacy and a post-traditional national identity, while emphasizing at the same time the artificiality of any such retroactively constructed positive paternal identification. This contradictory principle seems to govern Richter's imaginary panorama of post-traditional identity, just as it seems to generate its discontinuities (it is simply not possible to construct a cohesive cultural canon out of these figures nor is it likely that even the most eccentric person

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the difficulties of the German post-war generation to dis-invest itself from the collective identification with the Nazi figures, in particular Adolf Hitler, see the classic study on the subject by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern, Frankfurt, 1968 and subsequent editions (English translation as The Inability to Mourn : Principles of Collective Behavior, trans. Beverly Placzek, New York, Grove, 1975).

As for the personal condition of Richter's adolescence, it should be emphasized that Richter's father and immediate family were distinctly anti-fascist, yet at the same time Richter's mother revealed to him at a much later point in his life that his father who committed suicide had in fact not been his real father.

would integrate these plainly incompatible individuals into a private emporium of cult figures). The resulting instability, if not the actual breakdown of this fiction of a transnational, liberal-humanist community was, then, as integral to its constitution as were the careful omissions that guaranteed its successful function as an acceptable fiction of a paternal history. In the light of this reading, the seemingly absurd exclusion of visual artists, of women, of people of color, of political radicals of the left or right, becomes a perfectly lucid decision since the artist's oedipal construction of an acceptable image of identification would inevitably excise all of these from his necessary fiction.

Richter's pandemonium functions simultaneously, then, as a secondary elaboration of the process of identity-construction and as a manifesto of dis-identification. Therefore, it cannot be judged by applying criteria of historical exactitude or moral adequacy and any attempt to criticize his paradoxical inclusions or erasures from this imaginary association of acceptable paternal subjects is as problematic as a critique of a dream's paradoxical, "unjust," or "ahistorical" constellations would be ludicrous.

In the first part of my discussion of the 48 Portraits, I have basically tried to demonstrate what motivations determined the selection of images necessary for Richter's construction of both an imaginary congregation of acceptable paternal figures and a desirable model of a society based on a conception of post-traditional identity. Rather than

limiting the exploration of the work to the "iconography" of this "ideal republic of knowledge," however, it seems equally appropriate to consider the modes of its depiction and presentation as important for the reading of this highly contradictory and enigmatic work.

First of all, Richter would assure that the very principle of the technical reproduction would continuously erode the commemorative monumentality of the project just as it would resituate the promise of subjectivity within photographic representation. Immediately after the original installation (and the sale) of the 48 Portraits, Richter decided to negate the work's pictorialization of the painted photographs and its precarious monumentality by producing an exact photographic facsimile edition of the series. This seemingly paradoxical inversion of the process of representation (from photographic reproduction to original painting to photographic reproduction) was paralleled in the inversion from monumental installation to the reinscription of the images onto the plane of the archival registry and the photographic document from which they had originally emerged.

Richter's dialectic of the forms of distribution implies more than a mere play on the nature of the reproduction that has become invested with aura or the originally auratic image that is turned into reproduction. Quite obviously its implications transcend reflections on the media status of the work. Rather it seems that just as the very condition of hieratic monumentality, barely established in the series's installation in the pavillion,

had to be immediately negated, so the radical democratic potential of the photograph and the inescapable realities of the conditions of technical reproduction (and its historical register of a newly to be defined collective subjectivity) had to be re-affirmed.

These aspects seem to become more plausible in a comparison of the 48 Portraits with their rather evident historical point of reference, Andy Warhol's Thirteen Most Wanted Men (1964), acknowledged by the artist as a major factor in triggering the conception of the series. Both works, not accidentally it seems, first appear in the context of a public presentation of state power (the one at the pavillion of a nation, the other at the pavillion of a state at a World's Fair)<sup>7</sup> and operate therefore at the threshold of the monument, assuming its traditional functions of official, state representation--even if reluctantly--at least to some extent. Yet at the same time they criticize these functions of legitimation performed by the monument, or at least they reveal the historical conditions that make the conception of monuments as the significant representation of the social subject and of social collectivity impossible. Richter seems to respond to Warhol's apparently romantic and nihilistic heroicization of the criminal with the emphatic affirmation of a bourgeois liberal-humanist belief in the civilizing presence of

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<sup>7</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the circumstances of Warhol's commission for the New York State Pavillion at the 1964 World's Fair in New York and its eventual censoring by Governor Rockefeller, see my essay "Andy Warhol's One Dimensional Art : 1956-1966" (Andy Warhol, ed. Kynaston McShine, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1989, pp.39-62).

historical figures, if taken as models of conduct and achievement. While Richter's horizon of historical aspiration comprises a concept of post-national and post-traditional identity, it is quite evident at the same time that his "ideal" grouping has--as I have argued--neither a present reality nor a potential to function as a model of an enlightened collectivity of the future. Worse yet, if mistaken as such it would turn instantly into an adulation of white male superiority, an elitist model of chosen subjects, a blueprint for patriarchal and eurocentric hegemonic claims.

While Richter rotates his pantheon according to an abstract principle of ordering the gaze, Warhol's figures are presented according to the rigorous principles of front view and side view as found in Alphonse Bertillon's original physiognomic photographs of criminals undertaken as a species of scientific exploration. Both works, however, coincide in their photographic condition, i.e. they structure subjectivity ultimately around the image of photographic reproduction. While in Warhol's project it is the police mug-shot and the search warrant that serve as the "found" photograph upon which the painting is based, in Richter's project it is the photographic encyclopedia image and its peculiar banality that initiate the procedure of painterly transformation.

While Warhol suspends the portraits of the criminals in the chintzy glamor of his silver surfaces and the gritty pictorial appeal of his silkscreen technique, Richter executes his paintings in the manner of the historically

discredited chiaroscuro of Neo-Classicist painting, only to emphasize their photographic origins once again in their second version as photographic prints.

The various studies produced for the series that were eventually rejected provide us with some significant clues about the painterly and spatial criteria developed by Richter in the preparation of the 48 Portraits. While it was evident from the beginning that the series would depart from a category of "found photographs" in the way that all of his representational work had operated until 1966, the category of "encyclopedia photographs"--while not essentially different from the other printed "found" photographs Richter had previously used--was new and required some presentational modifications. Most significant in this context are perhaps the two portrait studies of Sigmund Freud (cat. Gerhard Richter no.323/2/3) , where the traditional painterly execution (and its subsequent grotesque exaggeration and erasure in no.323/3) appear to be a direct response to the sitter's imposing historical presence. In these studies the subject appears in the conventional atmospheric space of the bourgeois portrait, removed from the immediacy of the presentational photographic surface and imbued with the chiaroscuro that traditionally signals interiority and privacy, if not intimacy and introspection. Not only will Freud be dropped from the final series altogether, but most importantly the painterly style and the pictorial presentation will be drastically altered.

In the portraits that would eventually qualify for inclusion into the series, the feathery execution of the studies for Freud's portrait will be replaced by the glacial and anonymous style of the photographic simulacrum. Corresponding to this mimicry, the final pictures--like scientific specimens--will also position their sitters as tightly locked into the frame and as closely compressed onto the surface (the mediation between the photographic original and its pictorial re-articulation in fact exaggerates this effect). Therefore, no doubt can occur in the viewer about the invalidity of the pictorial conventions of portrait painting, and more importantly, about the disappearance of the spaces and modes of subjectivity that the conventions of portrait painting once articulated [figs. 26-31].

Barely established, then, in a complicated process of contradictory operations, Richter's pantheon of historical subjects is--at the very moment of its constitution--always already depicted as a precarious enterprise, if not derided as a fraudulent promise to re-establish conditions that are irretrievably lost.

But beyond the reduction of the portraits to mere photographic specimens of memory, a second major formal intervention determines the viewing of the work and enforces the counter-tendencies to the delusion that an ideal community of formed subjects could in fact have been depicted. This intervention concerns the arrangement and the display of the portraits. In their initial presentation for the German Pavillion they were subjected to a rigorously "formal" principle of spatial organization: namely that of

arranging the sequence of the portraits according to the head-position of the sitters, rotating slowly and symmetrically from a frontal position in the center of the apse, to a left profile or a right profile, respectively, at either end of the sequence.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than invoking the exchanges of corresponding gazes in Baroque painting as one of the sources of his decision to arrange the 48 Portraits according to the sitters' visual orientation, Richter cites photo-journalistic techniques as a model for his decision, something he had discovered in the layout for the photographs of the Eight Student Nurses (1966), his first work to engage in serial portrait imagery (fig. 32). But the anonymous mechanicality with which mere spatial orientation becomes the governing principle of order here, inevitably calls to mind precisely those traditions of enforcing obedience and collective submission for which German culture was infamous: from the histories of Prussian military drill to the violent subjugation to collective behavior in the form of "mass ornament" (as Siegfried Kracauer had called it in his prognostic text) that fascist rituals had so successfully deployed in order to eradicate even the last impulses of independent subjectivity. Thereby the spatial ordering of the gazes of the depicted individuals subjected them--as in an allegorical reiteration of a destruction

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<sup>8</sup> Richter has recently reaffirmed that the installations at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne and at the Museum Ludwig in Aachen, the owners of the two versions of the 48 Portraits, were "totally non-sensical" since they did not respect the artist's instruction to organize the sequence according to the head positions of the depicted sitters (in conversation with the author, June, 1993).

already fully accomplished by history--once more to their physical extinction as individuals and self-determining subjects.

Ultimately, then, the grotesque abstraction of place and position of the figures in Richter's pantheon, their puppet-like, mechanical or cinematographic movement, instantly dismantles the pantheon's credibility: neither the awe-inspiring monumentality of a space of commemoration that the work had struggled to achieve iconographically nor the reading of the work as a promise of a future realization of a democracy of independent subjects could be sustained.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>When it turned out, however, that in the original installation in the Venice Pavillion the frontal portrait of Franz Kafka inspired viewers to immediately interpret this positioning as an homage to the novelist (whom Richter does in fact hold in the highest esteem) he rearranged subsequent installations so that the reading of an implicitly renewed hierarchy of evaluation and preferences would become at least more difficult, if not impossible.

Thus Richter argued, in a different context, that his work in general was attempting to avoid "subject matter," however, he hoped at the same time that his pictorial maneuvers would "...yield a new subject matter by accident, so to speak, a subject that I have not invented myself and which therefore should be better, less easily consumable and more generally valid." See: Gerhard Richter : Werken op papier 1983-1986, ; notities 1982-1986, Museum Overholland, Amsterdam, 20.2.1987-20.4.1987, p.15.

## Chapter Six:

October 18, 1977

Even amnesia suffers from the compulsion of being unable to forget; that is what we call repression.

--Jürgen Habermas, "Keine Normalisierung der Vergangenheit"

The group of paintings entitled October 18, 1977 that Richter completed in the late fall of 1988 immediately confronts its viewers with the question of the very possibility of representing history, both in contemporary painting and in modernism in general (figs. 18-23). Despite their apparent continuity with Richter's early photopaintings, these works in fact constitute the first attempt in Richter's oeuvre to address historically specific public experience. The two earlier series of paintings that one could most easily identify as the precedent for the new series would be the Eight Student Nurses (1966) and the 48 Portraits (1971-72). As depictions of recent murder victims,<sup>1</sup> on the one hand, and as presentations of figures of public history, on the other, however, a comparison with these two groups instantly clarifies their distance and their difference from the paintings October 18, 1977. Richter's recent decision to represent current public history, that is, simultaneously to violate the prohibition against representing historical subjects in modern painting

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<sup>1</sup>Eight Student Nurses is a group of portraits based on newspaper images of the victims of the Chicago mass murderer Richard Speck.

and to break the taboo against remembering this particular episode of recent German history--the activities of the Baader-Meinhof Group and the murder of its members in Stammheim Prison--distinguish these paintings from all earlier works by Richter.

That this group of paintings was first exhibited in a building by Mies van der Rohe seems an appropriate historical accident,<sup>2</sup> for Mies is the architect who constructed the only German contribution to public monumental sculpture in the twentieth century, devoting it to the memory of the philosopher Rosa Luxemburg and the revolutionary Karl Liebknecht, both of whom had been murdered by the Berlin police. This coincidence establishes a continuity between a bourgeois architect in the Weimar state of the 1920s and a bourgeois painter in the West Germany of the 1980s. And indeed both artists differ from most of their contemporaries in their ability to tolerate, in public view, challenges to the very political and economic system with which they identify as artists. Moreover, through their acts of aesthetic commemoration, they resist the constantly renewed collective prosecution of those victims in the form of their eradication from current memory, thereby dignifying the victims of a state whose opponents they had become because of their public challenge.

The first temptation is to respond to the shock these paintings generate with an art-historical reflex, deflecting

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<sup>2</sup> The work was first shown at the Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld; see the catalogue Gerhard Richter/18. Oktober 1977, Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1988.

their impact by an excursion into the history of history painting. This is especially true because two works within October 18, 1977 (Funeral and Dead Woman [figs. 22 and 24]) seem explicitly to establish a reference to two of the central images from the complex prehistory of the destruction of history painting in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

But the history of history painting is itself a history of the withdrawal of a subject from painting's ability to represent, a withdrawal that ultimately generated the modernist notion of aesthetic autonomy. In this development, forms of traditional representation were divided into, on the one hand, a referential function based on resemblance (a function that photography would increasingly assume beginning in the mid-nineteenth century) and, on the other, the complementary formation, that of a liberation of painterly means, whose lasting and only triumph was to become the systematic negation of the functions of representation.

In their refusal either to give up painting for photography tout court or to accept the supposed lucidity of photography's focused gaze, Richter's photopaintings have consistently opposed the universal presence of that gaze and its ubiquitous instrumentalization of the look. This has particular importance within the group October 18, 1977 in relation to a gaze that, in the police-commissioned press photographs that served Richter as a point of departure,

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<sup>3</sup> The former has inevitable associations with Courbet's Burial at Ornans (1849-50), the latter with Manet's Dead Toreador (1864).

seems ritualistically to assure itself of the final liquidation of the enemies of the state. But at the same time this group resists the modernist restriction of painting to a mediation of historical experience exclusively in the discursive reflection on the evolution, the materials, and the procedures of the pictorial medium itself. It is in the construction of this dilemma, marked by both the conflict in the medium--painting/photography--and the conflict in ideas about representability--painting's self-referentiality/photography's "transparency" to the event--that Richter's work testifies to the contemporary difficulties in the production of historical representation in painting.

The inability of painting to represent contemporary history resulted first of all from the transformation of historical experience into an experience of collective catastrophe. It therefore seemed that only photography, in its putative access to fact and objectivity, could qualify as an instrument of historical representation. Secondly, insofar as catastrophe democratizes historical experience, it also destroys the artistic claim to a privileged mode of seeing and of historical interpretation. This has become most evident in the work of Warhol, in which the long and complicated process of the democratic experience of catastrophe and the mechanical representation of death are integrated. In his work, heroes and victims are equally the objects of photographic representation; their only difference lies in the distinction between "famous deaths" and "anonymous deaths." The nearly unbearable cruelty of

the photographic detail in Warhol's paintings (Warhol selected archival photos of accidents which had even been rejected as unpublishable by the tabloids), goes hand in hand with the laconic and affectless execution of the representation. The de-differentiation of the artistic process corresponds to the arbitrary fatality and the utter desublimation of the experience of death.

Since the mid-1960s Richter has been engaged in a dialogue with Warhol's painting, a dialogue in which the differences have been occasionally obscured by an emphasis on the parallels between their points of departure. The construction of an "iconography of death" by art historians concerned with this period--an "iconography" that supposedly links the work of the two artists--has especially failed to clarify how Richter's 48 Portraits should be distinguished from Warhol's 13 Most-Wanted Men (1964). Nor is this construction able to address the manner in which the series October 18, 1977 redeems this dialogue with the 1960s, especially the implied annihilation in Warhol's work of the last possibility of constructing historical memory through the means of painting.

In distinct contrast to Warhol's work, the victims in Richter's 1988 paintings are not the victims of anonymous accidents, but are agents within a historically specific moment. In further contrast to Warhol's, Richter's paintings do not affirm collective amnesia of the experience of death; rather they attempt to construct a pictorial representation of the act of recalling and understanding personal experience in its relation to history. In this

respect Richter's paintings constitute a European inversion of Warhol's position of anomie with regard to history. Inasmuch as they emphasize the individual's capacity to act (both that of the individual depicted and that of the individual depicting, the painter), they insist on this capacity as a necessary condition of contemporary artistic production. In that respect October 18, 1977 resembles the representation of Stephen Biko, the South African revolutionary, in Hans Haacke's work Voici Alcan (1983), a relationship with Richter's painting generally would not have called to mind.

If Richter's October 18, 1977 works reflect the difficulties of painting to engage now in the representation of contemporary history, their very unexpected commitment to historical subject matter also comments implicitly on other contemporary practices of history painting in Germany. Clearly Richter's struggle with the issue of historical representation begins in his assumption that the historical dimension of painting is primarily the discursive history of the medium. By contrast, recent German history painting, the type of "polit-kitsch" produced by a new generation of German artists, has no such struggle to contend with, since it appears to insist that the negation of historical representation in twentieth-century painting was at best a brief interlude, a failure that has to be redress--as through such artists as Mondrian and Newman had voluntarily

deprived themselves of the capacity to represent the "historical."<sup>4</sup>

Richter has articulated his explicit resistance to this type of historical grave-robbery, beginning especially in

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<sup>4</sup>"It seems that the one attitude starts from the assumption that the work of distancing and comprehension opens up a space for commemoration and the autonomous confrontation with ambivalent historical legacies, while the other attitude would like to employ a revisionist history in order to revamp its concept of traditional identity for the sake of reconstituting a national history" (Jürgen Habermas, "Apologetische Tendenzen," in Eine Art Schadensabwicklung, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1987, p. 133). Anselm Kiefer is only the most prominent of the German artists who have modeled themselves on concepts that Habermas has defined as "traditional identity." In the course of their restoration of these concepts, these artists have produced a type of work--widely disseminated in the 1980s and have produced its own kind of fall-out in North America as well--that could best be identified as polit-kitsch. Its attraction seems not only to be its reconstitution of traditional identity for the generation of West Germans who wish to abandon the long and difficult process of reflection upon a post-traditional identity. The attraction of polit-kitsch also appears to be--and herein lies its international appeal--its reconstitution of the artistic privilege associated with traditional identity, i.e., the claim to have privileged access to "seeing" and "representing" history.

During the planning stages of the 1987 Anselm Kiefer retrospective--the largest and most important commitment, ever, to a postwar European artist by the four major American museums involved--one of the curators gave me an unforgettable answer to a naive question. Having asked whether, as an art historian, he did not first feel the need to exhibit the work of a major artist of the '60s generation--an artist such as Richter--before according such an enormous retrospective to a relatively young artist of the current generation, he said briskly, "Kiefer is sexier than Richter." The quip has stayed with me for several reasons. First, it constituted my initial encounter with the language of the new managerial type of curator, a type that has increasingly replaced the traditional curator, who perceived himself or herself essentially as a scholar in the service of an institution of the public sphere. Condensed as this casual remark may have been, it nevertheless indicated that the managerial curator would conceive exhibitions on the model of the advertising campaign and seasonally determined product innovation.

Second, the quip suggested to me that expectations for and responses to certain contemporary art production exceeded even the most pessimistic predictions for the future of high culture by, for example, the Situationists. The particular fusion (and confusion) of separate modes of experience that the curatorial quip performed proved that the social tendency that forces the work of art to function as a mere fetish of sign exchange-value had already been fully accepted as a commonplace.

the early 1980s, by recuperating historically inaccessible pictorial types such as the still-life-as-memento mori, to which his Skulls and Candle paintings refer (figs. 40 and 41). This recuperation, however, acts explicitly as a resistance to false immediacy and to the claim that the irreversible loss of these categories of painterly commemoration could be redeemed. What is convincing in Richter's Skulls and Candle paintings is their character as grotesques: they brilliantly perform the purely technical availability of these pictorial types while at the same time they publicly invalidate any actual experience once conveyed by this genre. But since the paintings October 18, 1977 are as different from this mode of the grotesque as they are from the early photopaintings to which at first glance they seem to return, it seems all the more difficult to clarify their attitude toward the historical subject. Unlike most contemporary German painting, which simply ignores the fact that the prohibition of representation itself has become an irreversible historical reality that can only be ignored at the price of mythicizing painting, Richter's nonetheless insists on transcending that irreversible historical fact with the very means of painting.

But if painting's own recent history raises barriers to the accessibility of a language with which to represent historical and political fact, the historical field itself is riddled with instances of amnesia about specific events, making it clear that history's own accessibility to itself is at issues. "Polit-kitsch" painting is as unconcerned with this second issue as it is with the first, having

settled into the comfort of a repetitively enacted, gratuitous ritual of engaging with history without even addressing the concrete instances of actual recent repression.

Richter's shift from the current fashion within German painting--the fashion for pointing to the history of fascism--to an attempt to recall the seemingly inaccessible moment of extra-parliamentary opposition and its terrorist consequences in the history of the Baader-Meinhof Group and the Red Army Faction thereby also implies a criticism of the irresponsible dabbling in the history of German fascism with the meager means of generally incompetent painting. At the same time, it is also an attempt to reflect upon the actual power of contemporary repression and, through Richter's own pictorial means, to transform this power of repression into the question of its very representability.

The extent to which the Baader-Meinhof Group has in fact become the object of collective repression (or the object of internalized state censorship) is reflected in the fact that only rarely--as in the case of Joseph Beuys's spontaneous declamation "Dürer, I will personally guide Maader and Meinhof through Documenta V" (1972) and Alexander Kluge's cooperative film project Germany in Autumn (1977-78)--has an artistic project addressed this particular subject. The film Introduction of Arnold Schönberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene (1972), by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, was banned from German television because it was dedicated to the memory of Holger Meins, a young film director who had participated in the

activities of the Baader-Meinhof Group and became one of the victims of the events at Stammheim Prison (events surrounding the deaths of the five members of the group, which were presented as a collective suicide, but were suspected of having been, instead, a state-ordered police assassination).

In order to recall the collective inability of West Germans to reflect upon the history of the most radical challenge to their postwar economic and political order, we should compare it to the way the Italian government succeeded in treating an incomparably larger, more efficiently organized anarchistic opposition movement at the same time. The astonishment of the German reader at this comparison (perhaps also that reader's secret shudder at the contemplation of Italian liberality in the treatment of the enemies of the state) becomes apparent in a recently published essay by the German historian Arnulf Baring:

One consequence was the enormous movement of left-wing terrorism haunting Italy in the 1970s. . . . One almost spoke of an armed party. The number of arrests surpassed several thousands. State-of-emergency laws were introduced, and one of the most important politicians of Italy, Aldo Moro, was kidnapped and murdered. It is all the more remarkable to see to what extent the Italian state remained willing to communicate and negotiate: after only a few years the conflict that had approached civil war was successfully defused and finally resolved. According to Bolaffi it was the intervention of the Catholic church in

particular that allowed for a reconciliation within a brief period of time. The sentences of those convicted were reduced, their living conditions in the prisons were improved, and many of them were granted early release.

In comparison it seems that throughout the 1970s the German state was unable to afford such a degree of tolerance. Even at the end of the 1980s its citizens seem to have difficulty developing even the mnemonic basis for reconciliation. The intended effect of the elimination of this group, however, was clearly accomplished: not only has their history become the object of collective repression, but, at the same time, the project of an extra-parliamentary opposition and the active presence of a radical, interventionist critique of the social order (euphemistically called the society of consumption) has been eradicated.

Richter's October 18, 1977 attempts to initiate a reflective commemoration of these individuals, whose supposed crimes remained to a large degree unproven (despite years of pretrial investigation, which never even resulted in an indictment), as was that crime (never even investigated) whose victims they became. These paintings contradict the historical moment of their own present, which prohibited reflection on the activities of one of the most important left-wing journalists and pacifists of postwar Germany, Ulrike Meinhof, a young literary historian, Gudrun Ensslin, and a young film director, Holger Meins.

In their engagement with a historical subject the 1988

paintings are no more desperate than are Richter's abstract paintings in their engagement with the very possibility of painting. Since, therefore, both series are focused on the crisis of contemporary painting, that crisis is reflected upon along its various axes: production no less than reception. In his explicit refusal to break the group of paintings October 18, 1977 into individual objects or to have them enter into the usual channels of market distribution, Richter contests, even if in a singular construction of an exception situation, the modes of consumption current to them as the exclusive form of responding to artistic practice.

## Chapter Seven:

Betty

[Spectacle] . . . creates an eternal present of immediate explanation: memory ceases to be necessary or desirable. With the loss of memory the continuities of meaning are also lost to us. The camera relieves us of the burden of memory . . . the camera records in order to forget.

--John Berger, About Looking, p.59.

Gerhard Richter's Betty (1988) has not--in spite of the detailed attention it has received--been understood in the immediate context of its production, i.e. as the singular and exceptional color painting produced at the end of a period of approximately six months in which Richter conceived and executed the series October 18, 1977, based--like his earlier work of the 1960s--on black and white photographic sources (fig. 14). Inevitably the painting's Neo-Classical references (ever more explicit, certainly by comparison to previous work such as Ema [1966]) made it eligible for a range of instant projections and misreadings, since the painterly execution of a human (female) figure seems to have retained its irresistible attraction even after eighty years of non-representational art. Or rather, it appears that any display of masterful painterly competence regains a considerable spell cyclically--at least for some artists and for some audiences, aspects I hope to clarify in what follows.

But then, once again (as had already become evident within the discussion of Ema) the mere invocation of the

Neo-Classical legacy alone would not suffice even to describe the painting adequately. For, while Betty's manifest art-historical references partake in the apparatus of the Ingresque, particularly in their exact quotation of the profil perdu of Ingres's Valpinçon Bather (1808), as Thomas Crow and others have already observed, the viewer is reminded in an equally programmatic manner that Betty is actually the exact painterly reproduction of a photograph.<sup>1</sup>

The painting seems to articulate, then, the doubled difficulty of opening the visual space of memory with those available pictorial conventions of representation that are most opposed to the construction of the anamnestic process. On the one hand it invokes the convention of Neo-Classicism, forever discredited it seems, as that pictorial tradition, perpetually called upon at the moments of rabid anti-modernist reaction (and it does not appear obvious at all to what extent Richter's painting Betty does not at least share some aspects of that tradition, inscribing them into the present). On the other hand, it has recourse to photography, in all of its forms, but particularly in the highly chromatic definitions of advanced color photography offering itself now as a standard to the consumer, with its implicit guarantee as the above quotation by John Berger emphasizes, of effacing memory, of taking its place and of prohibiting the constitution of a continuity of experience and meaning.

Because of some original and occasionally reoccurring confusions of the two approaches it should be emphasized to

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Crow, "Gerhard Richter," October, no. 64 (Fall 1992).

what extent Richter's deployment of photographic strategies fundamentally differs from those of the so-called Photorealist painters or Hyperrealists (mostly American) of the late 1960s and early '70s.<sup>2</sup> But whereas in the photorealist work one can detect an almost slavish devotion to the reification of vision that color photography, as one of the central, strategic tools that a culture of spectacle and the commodity enforces, in Richter's deployment of the photographic it is the condition of painting--however problematic in its suspension in Neo-Classicism--that always emerges as a critical negation.

At the same time the painting's luscious, seductive opulence, with its haughty and almost grotesque aspirations to claim--at the end of the 1980s--a highly dubious Ingresque legacy for itself, is held in check as much by the continuous reminder of its photographic origins as by its hairthin distance from a saccharine seduction of both sentimental family photographs and the glamour techniques of advertising and fashion photography.

Situated in the context of the series October 18, 1977, the painting establishes a range of oppositions. Against the series's melancholic black-and-white scheme, which seems to rehearse an act of commemoration of Richter's own beginnings as a painter in the West even while it

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<sup>2</sup>For example the section of photorealist/hyperrealist painters curated by Jean Christophe Ammann for the Documenta V exhibition in 1972 which included work by Gerhard Richter. See catalogue Documenta V, edited by Jean Christophe Ammann and Harald Szeemann, Kassel, 1972.

commemorates the mysterious deaths of the depicted protagonists, Betty appears in a sensuous color scheme of crimson, white, and pink surmounted by the almost halo-like appearance of the figure's blonde and illuminated hair.

Furthermore, the status of the protagonists/victims of the Baader-Meinhof Group as historical figures, even if highly problematical and dubious ones representing political positions deeply suspicious to Richter, entailed a dispassionate portrayal, making it clear that these personages have been painted more from a position of distance than from a stance of desiring identification. Betty seems, however, to originate precisely from such identification. Her representation could be said to constitute an apparition of the process of desiring itself, deeply intimate and private to the very same degree that the portraits of Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin are treated as images of public personae.

Yet at the same time, Betty's proximity to the sordid conditions of socially constructed images of the regulation of desire instantly questions the social circumstances limiting the dimension of desire and memory to the restriction of the private space of the individual and the family. It is the narrowness of this definition of social relations that makes Betty emerge from or veer into the realm of kitsch. It thereby clarifies that the enactment of desire and the reconstruction of the historical dimension of memory within aesthetic practice can be enacted, if at all, only within the public dimension of social and political experience, and that to the same extent that artistic

practice is barred from access to this dimension, it suffocates from a restriction to the enforced condition of privacy or the intimacy of a special interest group.

Thus Betty poses the question of the representability of the past and whether the process of memory could be initiated with the means of painting at all. It asks, that is, whether the invocation of a historical condition such as that of bourgeois pre-modernist culture or that of the post-traditional identity of the liberal democracies of the postwar period in Germany (its supposed or actual modes of experience, its ethical standards, its political conduct, its definitions of subjectivity) can be addressed at all with the means of painting without instantly acquiring a fundamentally reactionary attitude in cultural if not in political terms.

Richter's Betty thus opens the prohibition on the representation of history and the ban on any mnemonic dimension of artistic production that Modernism's rule of non-representational self-reflexiveness had enforced for almost eighty years (one could ask, for example, what is the mnemonic dimension of Minimal art: the promise of an ever-more increasing totality of technological and scientific rationalization?). But in opening up that trove of repressed and prohibited topoi and rhetorical conventions of pre-modernist painting (very comparable to Marcel Broodthaers's insistent questions concerning the systematic exclusion of the literary dimension from contemporary art production), in questioning why metaphor and narrative, historical memory and political subject matter seemingly had to be eliminated

from painting altogether, Richter's work instantly confronts the etiology of that prohibition. This is what distinguishes Betty from the outset, therefore, from the reactionary backlash of which culture itself is capable at all times--assaults which the recourse to figurative painting have generally stood for from the 1920s to the 1980s (regardless of the rather different ideological context from which each gesture emerged).

The restriction of happiness to the familial structure and the almost exclusive cloistering of it in the realm of private existence are here juxtaposed with the images of the failure of historical protagonists whose fate it was to have rebelled precisely against that social division: defining the private as the public experience and insisting on the social realization of utopian thought rather than its private perversion in the familial haven. It was their argument that the social division of private and public life imposes this perversion on the individual. And, in fact, such a perception is shared by Betty, where the decrepitude of reducing the aspirations and desire to the sphere of familial ties and private existence are articulated in the almost incestuous intensity with which the young woman's hair and gown are rendered as images of a promesse de bonheur (with the daughter clearly having taken the place and having averted herself from it that her mother had once assumed when descending the staircase in Ema). Utopian promise, i.e. the aspiration toward an unfettered libidinal gratification, is here reduced to the bliss of the incestuous fantasy that appears both as prohibition and as

privation. The sense of deprivation generated by the anarchists in their prison cells and on their death beds and the experience of deprivation within the familial bond correspond to each other, both paintings formulating mutually complementary elegies on the impossibility of the articulation of historical, i.e. public, social, and political experience within painterly parameters and the insistent necessity on their articulation.

In this perspective Betty also comments of course on the condition of the aesthetic object itself: wrenched from history and from public political communication, the work becomes a chimera of private desire and gratification: in its reduction to this status it acquires the features of all those visual strategies that incessantly reduce the potential for public and political interaction into acts of instant gratification. It is this acquisition, both inevitable and involuntary, that determines the painting's uncanny proximity to the instant cult images of postwar Western culture--from Wyeth's Christina's World to the stylishness of recent advertising campaigns mimicking the supposed sophistication and languid existence of nineteenth-century, European, high bourgeois women.

## Chapter Eight:

Gerhard Richter: Painter of the Neo-Avant-Garde

The neo-avant-garde, which stages the avant-gardiste break with tradition for a second time, becomes a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever.

--Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde

To yield to the mere process of disintegration has become an irresistible temptation, not only because it has assumed the spurious grandeur of "historical necessity," but also because everything outside it has begun to appear lifeless, bloodless, meaningless and unreal."

--Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

Gerhard Richter's ongoing series of abstract paintings, developed in several cycles since 1966, seems to qualify more than any other oeuvre of postwar history for Peter Bürger's condemnation of the failure of the neo-avant-garde.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bürger's crucial essay was first published in German in 1974 as Theorie der Avantgarde, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt. The English translation of the text appeared as Theory of the Avant-Garde, translated by Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984. All subsequent quotations are from the English translation. A volume of critical responses to Bürger's thesis was published in 1976 with the title 'Theorie der Avantgarde' : Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft, ed. by W.M.Lüdke, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1976. My critical arguments concerning Bürger's theory are partially based on the essays in the above-cited volume, even though all of the essays fail--as did Bürger before--to develop their critiques from an even basic awareness, let alone empirical observation and a critical reading, of actually existing post-war artistic practices. For an earlier critical response to Bürger's theory see my "Theorizing the Avant-garde," in: Art in America, vol.72, no.10 (November 1984), pp.19-21.

The work fulfills all the criteria of Bürger's description of this failure, a description that reads like a catalogue of polemical epithets against the postmodern (and a highly vulgarized version of postmodernity at that): banal repetition of the originary historical paradigms through mere quotation; arbitrariness and parody of given discursive conventions; a dehistoricization leading to the loss of the original paradigm's context and its critical functions.

In my approach to Richter's by now rather transparent cyclical alternation between representational and abstract work, I want to distinguish further between the two most evident paradigms of abstract painting that Richter has been engaged with: monochrome painting (and its histories) and gestural abstraction (and its typologies).

The task of this chapter then will be--since until now I have been looking almost exclusively at the ramifications of the photography-based, representational work--to initiate a critical and historical discussion of Richter's non-representational paintings, arguing that they function both independently and as a dialectical negation of his representational work. As a result I hope to be able to historicize Richter's abstract painting by situating it

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Bürger subsequently historicized his own approach by situating the Theory in the context of the immediate aftermath of 1968 and his encounter with T.W. Adorno's Aesthetic Theory, and he responded to some of the criticisms articulated in the volume edited by Lüdke in an interview published in Adorno: Geist gegen den Zeitgeist: Erinnern an Adorno, edited by Josef Früchtl and Maria Calloni, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1986, pp.179-191.

within the overall discursive context of one of the fundamental oppositions of Modernism (representation versus abstraction). At the same time, however, I will attempt to generate criteria of intelligibility from within the works' specific, historical circumstances in the postwar period in which they were produced.

This double reading will allow me to argue against Bürger's ahistorical approach to the production of postwar art as a whole, and at the same time, to respond to those critics of Richter's abstract paintings who perceive them as belated and highly mannered paraphrases of New York School Abstract-Expressionism.

One of the central hypotheses in Bürger's important but problematic study is of particular relevance for my discussion of Richter's repetition of the paradigm of the monochrome on the one hand and of that of abstract, gestural painting on the other. This hypothesis needs briefly to be recounted to make the deficiencies of the theory evident when it is actually confronted with an example of the artistic production of postwar art history.

According to Bürger, one of the key goals of the original or, as he calls it, the "historical" avant-garde (occupying the period between 1910 and 1925), was to criticize the "institution of art" as a socially developed, separate sphere of artistic production and reception, along with its concomitant ideology of aesthetic autonomy.

These avant-garde practices attempted to rupture the claims for autonomy, by seeking instead to integrate artistic models with social forms of everyday experience, aesthetic concepts with political strategies, a process most evident in the Soviet avant-garde and in Surrealism. These claims were articulated--among others--in the continuous discussions of how to develop new artistic forms that would correspond to the needs of the new urban mass audiences as well as how to provide instances of critical negation of the false homogeneity and the totalizing functions of mass cultural production.

By contrast, Bürger globally discredits all postwar artistic activities as flawed from the outset by the mere fact of repeating certain avant-garde paradigms, stating for example that "the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates the genuinely avant-gardist intentions."<sup>2</sup> In this sentence two terms alone--the "genuine" and "intention"--deserve our immediate critical attention since they allow Bürger to establish a foundationalist discourse of original and authentic production in a binary opposition with a pair of terms one could identify as the derivative and the paraphrastic. This points to a number of theoretical and methodological problems, all the more clearly in that Bürger's stated ambition is to produce a preliminary outline to a

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<sup>2</sup> Bürger, p.61.

"materialist aesthetic."

The moment of "origin" (as is always the case with fictions of originality and the instance of originary intention) is clearly imagined by Bürger as one of irretrievable plenitude and truth, whereas the subsequent forms of experience are debased and deprived of authenticity and credibility. Since I cannot address the epistemological fallacies of Bürger's foundationalist approach in this context--a theoretical position that theories of post-structuralist deconstruction, in particular the work of Jacques Derrida, would immediately problematize<sup>3</sup>--I will limit my remarks to an immanent critique of the very claims that Bürger himself makes for his own theory: that it is based on a Marxist and Dialectical-Historical method and that it makes valid descriptive and critical statements about particular historical phenomena (i.e. the artistic practices of the postwar period).

Bürger's "lapsarian" approach to history is of course endemic to Marxist aesthetic thought in general and to Frankfurt School thinking in particular: ranging from Marx's own notorious and deeply ahistorical idealization of an unsurpassable moment of artistic production in Greece and Classical antiquity to Adorno's very well justified (but theoretically and historically increasingly problematic)

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<sup>3</sup> See, Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," and "Sincerely Yours," in The Originality of Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

sanction against the continuation of certain aesthetic conventions (e.g., lyrical poetry) after the experience of the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar manner, Bürger issues a prohibition on the credibility of all artistic production that does not comply with his ideal moment of an avant-garde critique of the institution of art and the modernist concepts of autonomy. But thereby he fails both as a Materialist historian and as a Marxist theoretician of the present, by acting--from a paradoxical position of transhistorical avant-garde authority--to deny both contemporary authors and recipients a historically specific (aesthetic) experience. He dismisses, yet claims to theorize, the very work that would allow for a spectrum of possibilities ranging from the articulation of cultural identity to the articulation of individual critical resistance, from the subjective forms of aesthetic pleasure to the forms of public opposition within artistic practices.

As a historian, he fails to recognize the necessity of performing a precise analysis of those specific material conditions (i.e. social, economic, and ideological) that determine the morphology and structure of works of art

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<sup>4</sup> By 'increasingly problematic' I simply wish to state that the explanatory power of Adorno's observation on the impossibility of certain poetical or artistic practices seems insufficient when it comes to recognizing the fact that lyrical poetry might have become impossible already at a much earlier moment in the twentieth century for a complex set of epistemological and historical determinations.

produced under the auspices of the postwar and post Holocaust experience. As a theoretician, he fails to recognize the need for an precise account of those external determinations (e.g. the structural transformation of the public sphere, the emergence of the culture industry, the formation of spectacle culture and late capitalist consumer society) that situate postwar production within a context, incomparably different from all anterior moments of the avant-garde. A Marxist aesthetic theory would have to articulate the impact of these structural transformations on the conception and reception of the work of art, rather than merely deploring the disappearance and dysfunction of earlier paradigmatic formations. A Materialist aesthetic theory--so it would seem--would have first of all to depart from the specific empirical givens of the works of contemporary artistic production.

The exigencies with which Hannah Arendt confronts the historian of the catastrophes of twentieth-century history seem relevant for the art historian of the postwar period as well:

Comprehension, however, does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from the precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden

that events have placed upon us--neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could in fact have happened otherwise. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality--whatever it may be or might have been.<sup>5</sup>

But as a historian Bürger also fails to recognize the particular transformations that have occurred within the formal conventions of painting as a linguistic and symbolic system. Such transformations of the various paradigms are not, however, as easily connected--at the level of cause--to the larger processes of the historical event as Marxist theoreticians might wish; and further, they might defy such an historian's totalizing explanatory claims altogether, as a matter of aesthetic principle. In fact, a careful study of the actual objects of artistic production of the postwar period might have led Bürger to an increased awareness of the problematical condition of certain philosophical assumptions about artistic subjectivity as they appear, for example, in his deployment of the concept of intention.

A type of awareness that results not only from empirical observation of the art object but also from a

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, Preface to the first edition, 1955, New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979, p. viii.

theorization of the historically specific circumstances of perceptual experience would then emerge as necessary. When discussing non-representational painting in the 1960s, Rosalind Krauss formulates just such an example where the exact study of the object seems to have generated the theoretical insight to the same extent that the theoretical model seems to have generated the necessary historical precision in the description of the aesthetic object. Her exposition of the precarious positions of American painting in the postwar period under the epistemological shadow of Duchamp's readymade unwittingly provides us with the most accurate description of Richter's historical and theoretical horizons as well: after all, his work emerges precisely from a dialogue with those American painters and their manifest difficulties with the conventions of non-representational painting as well as from his own attempt to come to terms with the Duchamp legacy:

If we consider that Stella's painting was involved early on, in the work of Johns, then Johns's interpretation of Duchamp and the Readymade . . . has some relevance in this connection. For Johns clearly saw the Readymade as pointing to the fact that there need be no connection between the final art object and the psychological matrix from which it issued, since in the case of the Readymade this possibility is precluded from the start. The Fountain was not made (fabricated)

by Duchamp, only selected by him. Therefore there is no way in which the urinal can "express" the artist. It is like a sentence which is put into the world unsanctioned by the voice of a speaker standing behind it. Because maker and artist are evidently separate, there is no way for the urinal to serve as an externalization of the state or states of mind of the artist as he made it. And by not functioning within the grammar of the aesthetic personality, the Fountain can be seen as putting distance between itself and the notion of personality per se. The relationship between Johns's American Flag and his reading of the Fountain is just this: the arthood of the Fountain is not legitimized by its having issued stroke by stroke from the private psyche of the artist; indeed it could not. So it is like a man absentmindedly humming and being dumbfounded if asked if he had meant that tune or rather another. That is a case in which it is not clear how the grammar of intention might apply.<sup>6</sup>

A comparison between Krauss's structural analysis of the conditions of postwar American painting and Bürger's supposedly historical theorization of the conditions of neo-

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<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility: Reflection On Post '60s Sculpture," Artforum, vol. XII, no. 3 (November 1973), pp. 43-52.

avant-garde activity over the same period reveals a rather astonishing discrepancy. First of all, it becomes evident that Bürger's historicization of the two avant-gardes ("original" and "neo") is profoundly ahistorical, since it does not succeed even at identifying, let alone describing the actual linguistic or painterly paradigms that constitute neo-avant-garde practice. Secondly, Bürger's model is profoundly atheoretical, since it does not arrive at characterizing the specific epistemological shifts that ground neo-avant-garde production, structurally.

By contrast, what Krauss's argument clarifies is the fact that the paradigms of painting had been radically altered in the postwar period, and the exactitude of her structural description points backwards to the model of Duchamp's readymade as one of the causal agents of these transformations. Krauss's analysis further clarifies the actual effects of this model on post-Abstract-Expressionist painting, namely that after Johns, painting has increasingly been articulated from a position comparable to that of structural linguistics. What this means is that on the one hand, it privileges the governing principles of langue as a generative and determining system over concepts such as "intention" or "expression." Or, on the other, it conceives the instance of specific artistic definition (the "art act") in a manner comparable to that of the concept of parole, which is to say, as the moment within which the artistic

subject-of-enunciation constitutes itself within the available system of utterances, paradigms, and language conventions.

What her analysis does not address, however, are the external motivations of this historical shift from Duchamp onwards, a shift which leads to an ever more urgently issued affirmation of the "Death of the Author." Concepts such as "intention," "ingenuity," and "expression" would henceforth become increasingly problematic in the production of art, and accordingly it would no longer be possible to maintain them as credible terminological tools when it comes to a critical discussion of the reception of artistic phenomena.

In the following discussion of the history of the paradigm of the Monochrome and Richter's major contribution to that history, in his series of the Grey Monochrome Paintings and more recently in the monochrome Glass Panes,<sup>7</sup> I will attempt to clarify to what extent a structural interpretation such as provided by Krauss could be productively historicized. This is to say that I will try to preserve the structural account even while simultaneously giving an historical analysis of the deep-level

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<sup>7</sup> An initial series was executed in 1970 (see catalogue nos. 274/1- 274/11, a second and a third one in 1973 (nos.340/1 - 342/8 and 348/1-348/9 and no. 349), and a fourth series in 1974 (nos.361/1 - 367/1-8). All catalogue numbers refer to the numbering system established by the artist and incorporated in the catalogue raisonné of his paintings. See: Gerhard Richter Paintings 1962-1985, ed. Jürgen Harten, Dumont, Cologne, 1986 with a catalogue raisonné by Dietmar Elgar.

transformations occurring within the production and perception of painting.

I am aware of the fact that any attempt to provide external motivations (e.g. socio-political and ideological) for internal structural effects, however, is immediately problematic [in the light of the epistemic implications of Krauss's method]. In a manner of speaking, it is precisely the break with an idea of signification that is externally motivated that is at stake in the structuralist /poststructuralist project of interpretation. Any attempt to reconceive historical or artistic signs as externally motivated, should therefore be incompatible with a structuralist/poststructuralist conception of subjectivity and signification. Yet, at the same time it seems necessary to attempt such a historicization in direct opposition to Bürger's transcendental concept of history and subjectivity and in order to clarify the actually constituent features of the neo-avant-garde.

I will therefore be arguing in the following that the positing of a moment of historical originality within modernist painting--as Bürger does--in the relationship between paradigm formation and paradigm repetition blocks one from understanding how the structures of repetition and paraphrase actually operate within postmodernist history. Furthermore, I want to argue that the concept of authenticity this presumes ignores structural operations

such as secondary revision or elaboration and thereby fails to focus on the peculiar dynamics of interaction between the two avant-garde formations (e.g. selective quotation, disavowal or outright repression).

But at the same time I would like to emphasize, by contrast, how a number of external factors determined the painterly practices of the neo-avant-garde in general and Richter's abstract painterly work in particular. Richter's gestural abstraction and his series of monochrome paintings will have to be considered in their peculiar relationship with two generations of New York School painting on the one hand (from Pollock through Johns to Stella and Ryman), and from the vantage of their engagement with the specific ideological transformations that affected the reception of the historical avant-gardes in postwar European culture.

A number of questions have therefore to be asked based on the obvious contradiction between a simplistic argument that suggests unmediated cause-and-effect relationships between the emergence of an aggressively expansive postwar consumer society and a correlative aesthetic of pure affirmation, as Bürger would have it. If in fact the conditions of mass production and consumption determined the early 1950s as a period of a rigorous social enforcement of what Mark Anderson calls "an oppressively stable, monolithically industrial, capitalist civilization," can we simply assume that these conditions would have affected

artistic production directly, henceforth making any continuation of an aesthetic of transcendental subjectivity impossible and blocking any return to an aesthetic--however desperate--of opposition?

Wouldn't Bürger's argument about the conclusion of modernism after World War II have, in the first instance, to confront the contradictory evidence of the contemporaneous rise of Abstract-Expressionism, a truly heroic oppositional aesthetic, desperately searching to establish links with the pre-capitalist past? And if they were only engaged in dismantling traditional concepts of the centered subject (as Krauss would have it), how would the positions of the second generation of postwar artists, represented by figures such as Jasper Johns and Yves Klein, relate in turn to these other factors, universally perceived to be the most radical changes of the postwar world, namely the increasing assimilation of the world of high art with the culture industry and the operative principles of spectacle culture?

#### I. Excursus: The Monochrome

Between 1919 and 1921, the monochrome became one of the most important reductivist strategies of the historical avant-garde in the context of post-cubist painting.<sup>8</sup> While

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<sup>8</sup> The following discussion of the Monochrome is to some extent based on an earlier version of this chapter, published as "The Primary Colors for the Second Time : A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," in: October, Vol.37 (Summer,1986), pp. 41-52.

in his series of Suprematist squares and of modular cross paintings of 1915-19, Malevich was the first artist to introduce a fully monochrome figure and to map this figure onto an achromatic or white field in a nonrelational, quasi-symmetrical and/or central composition, it was not until 1921 that one can speak of a completely monochrome canvas. This is one from which figure/ground relationships have been eliminated to the same degree that color has been evacuated of all denotative and relational functions.<sup>9</sup>

Alexander Rodchenko's triptych Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue (1921), is the first work not only to abolish the denotative functions of local color, but also to liberate color from all spiritual, emotional, and psychological associations: from all analogies with musical chords and all forms of transcendental spirituality with which the color of early abstraction, in the wake of Symbolist aesthetics, had still been charged ( 42). Thus, with Rodchenko's introduction of the monochrome, one witnesses not only the abolition of relational composition, but more importantly, the abandoning of conventional attributions of the "meaning" of color in favor of a concept of color as pure chromatic and luminous materiality. It is not surprising that this recognition of the materiality of

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<sup>9</sup> For an extensive discussion of the history of monochrome painting in the context of the Soviet avant-garde, see: Yve-Alain Bois, "Malévich, le carré, le degré zéro," in: Macula, no.1 (1978), pp. 28-49.

color coincided historically with the discovery of the chromatic values of materials, as pronounced one year earlier in the Realistic Manifesto of Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner and as it had already been put into practice with Duchamp's readymades.

What remains unreflected on, however, in Rodchenko's radical tryptich/manifesto is the relational nature of color itself, still evident even in the most reduced version of chromatic relations, the "pure" juxtaposition of the primary colors. This last refuge of a mythical, natural, chromatic order would become a model with which--as we will see--every subsequent generation of painters would have to come to terms by producing its own version of a "primary colors painting."

Still, Rodchenko makes a justified claim in 1939 when he retrospectively states:

[In 1921] I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow. I affirmed: this is the end of painting. These are the primary colors. Every plane is a discrete plane and there will be no more representation.<sup>10</sup>

Rodchenko's emphasis on the empirical verifiability of the features that make up the pictorial unit signals one of

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Rodchenko, "Working with Majakowsky," in: From Painting to Design: Russian Constructivist Art of the Twenties, Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska, 1981, p.191.

the climactic moments of modernity and modernist pictorial thought. The overtly scientific attitude proclaims itself as a further step in demythifying and secularizing the painterly object. In fact, by adopting in this way an empirico-critical model of scientific thought, Rodchenko's tryptich suggests that the last remnants of esoteric knowledge and transcendental thought have been eliminated. As such, with its rationalistic transparency and self-reflexivity, it implies that it might function as an example for a collectivized, cultural production.

The reduction to the monochrome also implied, then, a redefinition of the artist's role insofar as privileged forms of artistic experience, competence, and skills are thereby sublated. Insofar as the work's facture eliminates the marks of craft--Rodchenko eagerly emphasized the usage of a house painter's brush as the proper tool for the execution of his paintings--it functions in a manner similar to the readymade in opposing the traditional status of the work of art as a special type of object. Henceforth the avant-garde would denounce the aesthetically crafted, unique object. For, insofar as it had traditionally confirmed the idea of the artist as the singular, chosen individual in whom all talent is condensed to compensate for the total absence of creative imagination in the collective, such an object was seen as serving as the support for a social function that legitimates the division of labor since. These

implications of the Monochrome are programmatically stated in an anonymous text of 1924, written three years after Rodchenko's tryptich, either by Malevich or El Lissitzky (formulating a strategy that supposedly had already been carried out by Moholy-Nagy in 1922):

With the increasing frequency of the square in painting, the art institutions have offered everybody the means to make art. Now the production of art has been simplified to such an extent that one can do no better than to order one's paintings by telephone from a house painter while lying in one's bed.<sup>11</sup>

With the re-introduction of the paradigm of the Monochrome in the work of the postwar neo-avant-garde (especially the paintings of Lucio Fontana in 1949, Ellsworth Kelly in 1950, Robert Rauschenberg in 1951, and Yves Klein in 1953 [see figs. 44a and b), structurally, materially, and visually similar, if not identical, pictorial procedures were now confronting radically different audience expectations. It should be equally obvious, however, that the mere fact of repeating an avant-garde strategy such as the Monochrome will affect (to the point perhaps of altogether altering) how that strategy is read, just as a sentence is affected by its continuous

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Y.A. Bois, loc.cit., p. 37, note 40. Originally published in Hans Arp and El Lissitzky, Kunstismen, Munich, Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925, pp.IX-X.

reiteration, even though not necessarily in the simplistic manner that Bürger suggests when he speaks of the condition of "semantic atrophy" as a typical effect of the neo-avant-garde's repetition.

Exactly thirty years after Rodchenko's definition of the paradigm, Rauschenberg and Yves Klein--the two key figures with whom Richter seems engaged in a continuous dialogue throughout the 1960s and into the '70s--"reinvent" the Monochrome apparently independently of each other and under rather different circumstances. Both artists surprised an artworld audience of the postwar period that had little, or no knowledge of the activities of the Russian and Soviet avant-gardes and therefore neither Rauschenberg or Klein had any difficulty in presenting themselves to their respective spectators as the inventors of the strategy.

While several years after having proclaimed his "invention," when confronted with Malevich's and Strzeminski's paintings in Paris, Klein acknowledged his previous awareness of Malevich, there is for the time being no evidence that Klein had any information about Rodchenko's Tryptich, which he was soon to repeat in his own 1960 tryptich Monogold, Monopink, Monobleu ( 45).

When he did his first monochrome work in 1949-51, Rauschenberg, by contrast, was working at Black Mountain College, where he was put in touch with the legacies of the historical avant-gardes through the teachings of one of its

Bauhaus representatives, Josef Albers. He certainly would have known about the debates around Moholy's telephone paintings, if not about the Rodchenko tryptich itself.

This coincidence of the rediscoveries and the repetitions of the Monochrome (as well as that of the simultaneous rediscovery of the complementary founding paradigm of Modernist painting: the grid--in the paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, François Morellet, and Ad Reinhardt), supports the argument that formal conventions within Modernism operate analogously to the structural-linguistic notion of "langue," by providing the "speakers" of the neo-avant-garde, each in turn (and there will be several following the first rediscovery) with their instances of artistic self-constitution in the act of individual "parole."

But beyond these morphological and structural correspondences, one encounters peculiar features in each instance that call for one to examine it as an individual case, different from the others. Such features emerge, for example, from Yves Klein's manifesto-type text released in 1957 on the occasion of the first public presentation in Milan of his eleven monochrome paintings, all of them identical in color and size:

All of these blue propositions, all alike in appearance, were recognized by the public as quite different from one another. The amateur passed from

one to the other as he liked and penetrated, in a state of instantaneous contemplation, into the worlds of the blue. However, each blue world of each picture, although of the same blue and treated in the same manner, revealed itself to be of an entirely different essence and atmosphere; none resembled another, no more than pictorial moments or poetic moments resemble each other.

The most sensational observation was that of the "buyers." Each selected out of the pictures . . . the one that was his, and each paid the asking price. The prices were all different, of course. This fact proves, for one thing, that the pictorial quality of each picture was perceptible through something other than the material physical appearance. . . . So I am in search of the real value of the picture, that is, suppose two paintings rigorously identical in all visible and legible effects, such as lines, colors, drawing, forms, format, density of surface, and technique in general, but the one is painted by a "painter" and the other by a skilled "technician," an "artisan," albeit both officially recognized as "painters" by the public. This invisible real value means that one of these two objects is a "picture" and

the other isn't. (Vermeer, van Meegeren).<sup>12</sup>

It is in a confrontation with documents and works such as Klein's that the methodological problems of discussing the postwar neo-avant-garde appear. On the one hand, no comparison with any previously established strategy seems capable of shedding light on the maddening range of contradictions voiced by Klein in his text and embodied by the monochromes the text pretends to explain. On the other hand, Klein's specific references to the commodity status of the work of art, clearly demand a structural interpretation, one sufficiently flexible to incorporate economic and ideological factors as determinations of aesthetic objects.

First of all, Klein's account of the Monochrome inverts every single feature of the Modernist paradigm's original implications as sketched out above. If for Rodchenko the tactility of the monochrome relief had been one step towards the abolition of the contemplative mode of pictorial perception that bourgeois culture had instituted through what Walter Benjamin called its theologization of aesthetic autonomy, the Monochrome now conjures up for Klein, once again, a state of "instantaneous contemplation." If the purging of chromatic experience of all mythical, spiritual

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<sup>12</sup> Yves Klein, "The Monochrome Adventure," translated and quoted by Nan Rosenthal in: "Assisted Levitation : The Art of Yves Klein," Yves Klein, ex.cat. Houston, Institute for the Arts, Rice University and New York, The Arts Publisher, 1982, p.105.

and symbolist ties was one of the tasks of Rodchenko's Tryptich, Klein now invokes the "essence and the atmosphere" of the "poetic moment" of each individual painting. If the historical avant-garde's monochrome aimed at destroying the "aura" of the work of art, Klein's argument now seeks to reinstitute it with a vengeance. And crucially, as I argued above, one of the most far-reaching implications of the Monochrome had been its redefinition of the artist's role, the sublation of specialized competence and privileged vision. In the concluding part of his statement Klein emphasizes precisely the opposite, i.e. an almost ontological difference between the authentic and the fraudulent, a distinction that according to him can be intuited at all times by competent spectators.

And finally, if modernist, avant-garde paradigms defined themselves as utopian projects, opening spaces of critical resistance from which to negate the totalizing claims of ideology and commodity culture, if they defined themselves against the universal rule of instrumentalization and the dominance of exchange value, Yves Klein, as the emblematic practitioner of the neo-avant-garde, now identifies the commodity status as the work's very basis, as the guarantor of the spiritual life of his fetishes. In fact, Klein seems to voice an aporetic condition of the work of art under late capitalism that anticipates Adorno's famous diagnosis: "Only in rigorous subjection of the

aesthetic to the order of the commodity form does the work of art find the guarantee of its freedom."

And yet, the systematic inversion and/or denial of every characteristic of the modernist avant-garde makes Klein appear as a profoundly conservative figure. Unlike Warhol, with whom Klein otherwise shares numerous positions (most importantly the recognition that only in the adoption of the strategies of spectacle culture can the neo-avant-garde artist appear as historically authentic), Klein actually seems to want to reconstitute aura against all odds and to reenforce specialized vision at all costs, resurrecting the traditional status of the artist and the object's condition as the non-exchangeable original.

In fact, the paradoxical forms of experience that Klein outlines, namely the salvaging of traditional modes of subjectivity at the cost of an aggressive form of fetishization, seems best theorized by Jean Baudrillard's later notion of sign exchange-value. Klein's positing of an unconditional and unmediated, purely visual encounter (the quintessential precondition of fetishistic experience) and his demand for an equally inescapable condition of pure exchange value, are intricately linked.<sup>13</sup> The ranking of

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<sup>13</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, For a Political Economy of the Sign, St. Louis, 1979, passim. Without introducing Baudrillard's term, Thierry de Duve develops a somewhat similar approach to Klein, yet he comes to rather different conclusions, in his essay "Yves Klein or The Dead Dealer," October, vol. 49 (Summer 1989), pp. 73-90.

identical objects by their arbitrary assignment of different exchange-values (the different prices Klein assigned his eleven identical panels) reveals the condition of pure sign exchange-value in the moment of its proper historical constitution in the emerging consumer culture of postwar France.

Historically, however, this reconstruction of archaic forms of experience is only to be had at the price of a massive denial: in this instance it is Klein's systematic disavowal or ignorance of the actual legacies of the Monochrome within the history of Modernism that guarantees the inevitably fetishistic nature of Klein's retrograde objects. Neither the original implications of that strategy nor its subsequent consequences (in Rodchenko's case the transition to Productivism and photography) can now be reflected within the act of the paradigm's reconstitution. Aesthetically that process will concretize itself in Klein's work in numerous, remarkably self-evident, yet hardly recognized manifestations.

For example, according to Klein and his later exegetes, one of his great formal achievements was to have "liberated pigment" from its traditional matrix or medium. This was accomplished by researching, with the help of a technician, the chemical and technical possibilities of binding pigment onto a surface without altering its pure state of colored particles of matter. It would seem that this obsession with

exposing pigment itself as a form of matter that had rested for centuries in the medium of its technical and chemical compound, thereby celebrating its exposure as an experience of "liberation," performs the very mechanism of fragmentation necessary to accomplish the task of fetishization. This exposure of the heretofore unseen is no longer part of the modernist tradition of self-reflexivity or its other credo, the tradition that emphasized transparency of materials and of making. Rather, the need to construct an illusion of the pure, liberated pigment (which of course is held in a transparent acrylic binder on the picture's surface in the way that all other paint is traditionally attached to vertical surfaces) now enacts precisely the logic of the spectacle within the most elementary conventions of painting, while attempting to sustain them in a reactionary redemption of the lost technique and its historical implications.

Klein's other major claim, related to the first, was to have "invented" a new color. Accordingly, he actually had the color as well as the new process patented and identified --as any designer product soon would be--by a new name and logo, i.e. International Klein Blue. In this performance of extracting a common material (i.e. pigment) from its embeddedness in artisanal practice and the conventions of art production, we witness how the logic of sign exchange-value is enacted in nuce. Since in the culture of the

spectacle only those objects can be recognized whose function and value has been transposed onto the level of visibility and display (extracted from their mere anonymous rootedness in use value and function), painting such as Klein's that wants to rescue (or reenforce) its lost options of constructing subjectivity within traditional concepts of author and aura have to proceed exactly according to that logic. They must, that is, proffer a universal substitution for subjectivity under the auspices of the commodity.

And another detail of Klein's tryptich--glaring but generally unnoticed--needs to be discussed: the transformation of Rodchenko's primary colors into the unusual hues of pink, gold, and International Klein Blue. While the destruction of the denotative and relational functions of color had generated a seemingly infinite array of possible chromatic combinations, it was not until the postwar period that artists such as Lucio Fontana introduced markedly artificial hues into the chromatic schemes of painting (those schemes were of course common within fashion and industrial design ever since the discovery of anilin had allowed for a potentially infinite range of artificial hues). Fontana began using gold leaf and gold paint in 1949, producing monochrome pink paintings in 1959 and painting several monochrome gold paintings in 1961, similar, but not identical in attitude to Pollock's deployment of industrial aluminum lacquers in his paintings since the late

1940s.

But it was left to Klein's 1960 tryptich and to his claim for a patent for a hue that would henceforth bear his name (International Klein Blue) to make us recognize the final and seemingly inevitable approximation of the avant-garde pictorial project to that of the fashion statement. On the chromatic level, the shift from red to pink or that from yellow to gold, or from blue to IKB, signals the very same transition we encountered at the level of materials in Klein's "liberation" of the pigment. And the internal mechanism that determines the increasing tension between contradictory elements is the same as that of the fetishization of the pigment: here, on the chromatic level, the mere insistence on continuing such a pure pictorial category and the forms of experience embedded in it now generates a travesty of the experience of the organic and the natural that color had traditionally provided. In the same way that Klein extracted the raw matter of the pigment from its natural status, the chromatically basic and thus natural hues of painting (its "primary" colors) are now transplanted to make them directly associated with the most purely transient color schemes of fashion design (it is not surprising that after Fontana and Klein, only Warhol and Stella would use color in a similarly unrelational and unmediated, industrial fashion).

This rigorous purging of the last residue of an organic

dimension of color and the elimination of any experience of the "natural" that pictorial chroma still stood for, has now effected a type of painting that itself appears to be at the summit of the fashion object: its place within that discourse is the result of its own willful insistence on a continued existence and validity of painting counter to its deeply threatened obsolescence as a category of aesthetic experience.

"Branding" pigmented matter and subjecting it to the claims of property, authorial invention, and the laws of copyright, as Klein stages it in the "invention" of IKB, completes that project of pictorial reification and anticipates the future inscription of design as the corporate claim of control, even over the most minute and banal of naturally produced objects.

Not surprisingly, among the first and most eager audiences for Klein's performances and his spectacular fetishization of pictorial autonomy, were several West German dealers, curators, collectors, and artists, Presumably as a result of their tremendous deprivation, these figures were more eager than most of the French specialists to be initiated into the newest type of avant-garde activity. They recognized immediately (as early as 1957) that Klein's work confronted them with a proposition that not only redeemed an avant-garde tradition that had been heretofore inaccessible (i.e. Malevich and his

successors), but more importantly one that uncannily rehearsed the future folding of the aesthetic into the spectacular.<sup>14</sup> After the first phase of their uncritical reception of French Informel painting and New York School Abstract-Expressionism, the German art audience of the late 1950s was preparing itself for the next phase of engaging with the newest international avant-garde to repress the memories of the recent past.

Richter's monochrome Gray Paintings (figs. 46 and 47) depart once again-- as we had already seen in the discussion of Ema --from the historical dialogue with Klein. Already in 1966, Richter had produced a series of sketches for a peculiar object--his first sculptural construction--to be displayed as a series of framed, rotating glass panes in 1967. Within the general context of reflecting the logical last steps of painting, which in the United States had led by 1965 to the articulation of Minimal Art, Richter

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<sup>14</sup> Klein had exhibited in Düsseldorf (and in museums in the immediate vicinity such as Leverkusen) on several occasions since his first one person exhibition there at the Galerie Alfred Schmela in 1957. In 1961 he spent extended time in Krefeld (twenty minutes from Düsseldorf) to prepare a major exhibition at the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum with its director Paul Wember, who was one of the earliest supporters of Klein's work. Richter saw the exhibition at the Krefeld Museum after his arrival and he was continuously confronted with Klein's ever growing celebrity in West Germany. At that time Klein's reputation in West Germany clearly exceeded that at home in Paris. In addition, since 1960 Klein had clearly emerged as the model artist for the Zero group of Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker with whom Richter was friendly at the time. Klein became increasingly attached to the Zero group by publishing in their magazine and by marrying Uecker's sister in 1962.

formulated his own peculiar response to the evident problems inherent in Klein's practice.

On the one hand Richter exhibits the growing recognition that the visual object's only appropriate response to the increasing control exerted by spectacle culture would be an aesthetic strategy to decrease the participation of visual (aesthetic) culture in the condition of specularly. Such a decision (which would ultimately lead others to the development of Conceptual Art), operated clearly in Richter's transparent glass panes as in the subsequent series of Gray Monochrome Paintings in 1974-75 (figs. 48a and b).

In fact, one of the strategies that Minimal artists such as Donald Judd seemed to have formulated in response to the increasingly evident fetishization of color itself--as exemplified in Klein's IKB paintings--was to pretend that the fusion of the chromatic matter with its supporting surfaces (as in anodized aluminum, or tinted plexiglass) would prevent the contamination of color by specularly. Another response, given by sculptors such as Carl Andre and Richard Serra as was to excise the chromatic altogether, disqualifying it once and for all as a merely contingent element, and to insist on the pure chromatic qualities inherent in materials themselves.

A third strategy, fusing the first and the second, was the decision by Dan Flavin to redefine the experience of

seemingly organic chroma as one of synthetic luminosity, a strategy that--as it turned out very quickly--was in fact perfectly equipped to shift the register of color/sculpture/space/ far more efficiently into the dimension of spectacle culture than Yves Klein could have ever dreamt of.

And the last of the options taken at that moment was "simply" to refrain from color's traditional range altogether and to engage actively with what was perceived as the "non-color": grey. In the context of Minimal Art this was the position Robert Morris adopted. And in Richter's work from 1961 to 1966 the grey scheme is almost exclusively applied in all of his painting. Jasper Johns, however, had been the first in the postwar moment to articulate the advantages of restraining color schemes, arguing:

I used grey encaustic to avoid the color situation. The encaustic paintings were done in gray because to me this suggested a kind of literal quality that was unmoved or unmovable by coloration and thus avoided all the emotional and dramatic quality of colors. Black and white is very leading. It tells you what to say or do. The grey encaustic painting seemed to me to allow the literal qualities of the painting to predominate over any of the others.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Joseph Young, "Jasper Johns : An Appraisal," Art International, vol. 13, no.7 (September 1969), p. 50.

And Richter commented in similar terms when questioned about his use of the non-color grey in an interview in 1970: As to color: black and white are really non-colors in the sense that I wanted to avoid color. That they became "my colors" in the process of painting, was of course unintentional. . . . Grey became my color-scale for a period of time, a fact that forced me later to abandon it because I did not want to have anything to do with this problem anymore.<sup>16</sup>

Or, in a later interview he would respond to the question of why he refrained from using color by simply answering, "Grey is a color too and sometimes for me it is the most important."<sup>17</sup>

While clearly multiply determined, this strategy of perceptual withdrawal--initially withholding chromatic qualities and eventually suppressing almost all perceptual data--is clearly operating in Richter's transparent glass panes in 1967 and the subsequently developed monochrome work since 1969. My argument is confirmed by the fact that eventually the glass-pane objects and the monochrome gray paintings would be fused in a set of peculiar gray-painted

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<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Richter, interviewed by Rolf-Gunter Dienst, in: Noch Kunst, edited by Heinz Ohff, Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1970 (my translation).

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard Richter, interviewed by Rolf Schön, in: Deutsche Zeitung (April 14, 1972). Reprinted in H. U. Obrist, ed. Gerhard Richter : Text, Frankfurt, Insel Verlag, 1993, pp. 66-69.

glass panes, presented once again as sculptural objects, but this time in rigid rather than in rotating steel frames in the manner of display panels (1978). Or more recently in the painted Glass Panes (1991-92), exhibited in the Documenta IX installation, and discussed below.(fig.25) <sup>18</sup>

Unlike Klein's turning of the monochrome into fetishized spectacle as the last attempt to redeem painting from oblivion in an act of rigorous obedience to the newly governing laws of the hypertrophy of pure visuality, Richter's monochromy inverts those laws. The works' insistence on the non-color grey as an exemplary chromatic self-effacement initiates a more general experience of effacing the visual as a privileged sense by emphasizing the procedural as well as the technical aspects of the paintings' production. The various modes of paint application (rubbed with sponges, applied with paint rollers, smeared with fingers) emphasize the corporeal as much as the mechanical and inform the spectator at all times about the peculiar circumstances and materials of their production. And they do this without having recourse either to a reconstitution of the idea of authorship with its concomitant skills or to an homage to the viewers' privileged forms of auratic experience supported by the traditional object.

Folding the pigmented surface back into (or rather

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<sup>18</sup> See Chapter Nine.

behind) the support (as in the glass panes) is a gesture of re-embedding it rather than exposing it. Yet Richter's fusion of pigment with the support (unlike Judd's) does not make any claims to have transcended the dilemma of the painterly object in a premature assimilation to the conditions of sculpture or even a utilitarian or architectural dimension of decoration.

Not surprisingly, among the first and most eager audiences for Klein's performances and his spectacular fetishization of pictorial autonomy, were a range of West German dealers, curators, collectors, and artists. As a result of their tremendous deprivation, these figures were more eager than most of the French specialists to be initiated into the newest type of avant-garde activity. They immediately recognized (as early as 1957) that Klein's work confronted them with a proposition that not only redeemed an avant-garde tradition that had been heretofore inaccessible (i.e. Malevich and his successors), but more importantly, one that uncannily rehearsed the future folding of the aesthetic into spectacle.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Klein had exhibited in Düsseldorf (and in museums in the immediate vicinity such as Leverkusen) on several occasions since his first one person exhibition there at the Galerie Alfred Schmela in 1957. In 1961 he spent extensive time in Krefeld (twenty minutes from Düsseldorf) preparing a major exhibition at the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum with its director Paul Wember, who was one of the earliest supporters of Klein's work. Richter saw the exhibition at the Krefeld Museum after his arrival and he was continuously confronted with Klein's ever-growing celebrity in West Germany. At that time Klein's reputation in West Germany clearly exceeded that at home in Paris. In addition, since 1960 Klein had clearly emerged as the

Richter's monochrome Gray Paintings depart once again-- as we have already seen in the discussion of Ema--from the historical dialogue with Klein.

II. Richter's Fracture: Abstract Gesture between the  
Synecdoche and the Spectacle

The dialectic between the organic and the mechanical aspects of painting is one of the founding oppositions of Modernism. Whenever the seemingly mechanical aspects of the application of pigment on canvas were foregrounded-- brushwork as repetitive labor, the brushstroke as fragment-- the approach was either hailed or condemned (depending on the critics' positions) as an indication of the imminent end of painting.

Whenever the apparently organic aspects of painting were reinstated and brushwork declared a gesture of the symbolic liberation of unconscious forces, or the brushstroke presented as the immediate tool and trace of subjectivity, responses were equally divided. Opponents now accused painting of betrayal and of falsifying the real tasks of modernist painting (e.g. Cézanne's accusation of van Gogh as a "madman"). Defenders, to the contrary,

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model artist for the Zero group of Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker, with whom Richter was friendly at the time. Klein became increasingly attached to the Zero group by publishing in their magazine and by marrying Uecker's sister in 1962.

considered the shift as a recovery of the ties between the aesthetic and the unconscious in an opposition to the positivist empiricism that seemed to have ruled modernist painting before.

The clarity of this opposition was often more pronounced in the responses of the critics than in the actual painterly practices (see for example the utterly different readings of Pollock in Harold Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters"<sup>20</sup> and in Clement Greenberg's writings on the artist and the experience of opticality). Yet it seems necessary to address the cyclical nature of the shifting orientations, since it is within that opposition that Richter's abstract gestural work situates itself from the very beginning.

#### Excursus : Abstract Gesture and Facture

As early as 1886, the critic Félix Fénéon had remarked upon the mechanical nature of painting in Georges Seurat's work, expressly differentiating it from the traditional values of academic painting conceived in such terms as "avoir une patte" or the bravura of "facture":

Monsieur Georges Seurat is the first to present this new painting in a complete paradigm. Wherever one examines his gigantic painting La Grande Jatte, it

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<sup>20</sup> Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in: The Tradition of the New, Horizon Press, New York, 1959, pp.23-39.

spreads out in a monotonous and patiently speckled surface, like a weaving; actually here "the hand" is superfluous and tricks are impossible. . . . Let the hand be numb but the eye be agile, aware and knowing; be it on an ostrich, a bottle, a wave or a rock, the manoeuvre of the brush remains the same.<sup>21</sup>

Fénéon's observation of the change in painterly procedures indicates that the practice had come under increasing pressure both of a critical nature with regard to its claims to "truth" and of a competitive kind. On the one hand it was being examined by the laws of optical science and color theory while on the other it was competing with the new technologies of representation: lithographic advertisement imagery and photography. But yet another development exerted increasing pressure on the credibility of painting understood as a craft: the increasing mechanization of all production processes as signalled by Fénéon's comparison with the mechanical weaving of tapestries. Forty years later, André Breton would once again voice the same critique of the manual and artisanal dimensions of painting when arguing:

Painting tends to glorify the hand and nothing else.

The hand is the great culprit, how can we accept to be

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<sup>21</sup> Félix Fénéon, quoted by Paul Signac in: D'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionisme, Paris, 1911, p. 133 and p. 167.

the slave of our hands? It is unacceptable that the hand, that painting, are still on a level today where writing was before the invention of Gutenberg.<sup>22</sup>

After Breton (and after Duchamp as we have seen), in the face of photography and universal mechanization, the facture of painting was increasingly confronted with the question of its proper, "medium-specific" competence (claimed as a source of authenticity), a process of reflection that would find one of its most coherent articulations in the theory of Modernism as formed by Greenberg in the late 1940s throughout the mid-1960s.

Richter's so called Abstract Paintings (fig.26), the highly chromatic and gestural work that he began in the mid-1970s continues into the present and is consistently going through subtle transformations. As in the earlier Monochromes, this segment of Richter's oeuvre--by now quantitatively the largest one--confronts us once again with the question of how to position it, first of all, with regard to the problem of intention and authenticity with their accompanying pitfall of expressive immediacy. And second, these gestural abstractions raise a question concerning the problematic relationship with the Abstract-Expressionist paradigm, which clearly had been one of the

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<sup>22</sup> André Breton, as cited by Jacques de la Villeglé, Dufrêne, Hains, Rotella, Villeglé, exhib. cat., Stuttgart, 1986.

most important elements of reception in Richter's newly found Western identity after his 1959 encounter with the work of Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock at Documenta II.<sup>23</sup>

Responses to Richter's gestural abstractions have again ranged from blame to praise. On the one hand he is accused of being the quintessentially cynical, post-modernist painter, whose entire oeuvre consists of a continuous operation of paraphrase and quotation, the apogee of inauthenticity; while on the other, claims are made for him (often encouraged by the artist's own statements) for a newly found sincerity and sublime painterly expressiveness that should be ideally suited to carry on the legacies of the great figures of the New York School.

A third reading that seems to resolve the dilemma of these incompatible approaches claims that Richter's abstract gestural work is supremely ironical, in the tradition of

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<sup>23</sup> Richter has repeatedly emphasized how important his encounter with Abstract-Expressionist painting at Documenta II in 1959 had been as a motivating factor in his leaving the German Democratic Republic two years later. In these reminiscences he always singles out Newman and Pollock from the much larger group of American Abstract-Expressionist painters who were actually exhibited on this occasion (Baziotes, Frankenthaler, Gottlieb, Guston, Hofmann, de Kooning, Motherwell, Rothko, Tomlin).

Newman showed two crucial paintings in the exhibition, Tundra (1950) and Cathedra (1951), while Pollock was represented by sixteen paintings, ranging from Pasiphae (1943) to Scent (1955). See: Arnold Bode/Werner Haftmann (eds.), Documenta II, exh. cat., Vol. I Malerei, Dumont Schauberg Verlag, Köln, 1959.

It is important to recall here that this exhibition also provided the occasion for Richter's first encounter with the work of Robert Rauschenberg, who was represented in Documenta II with Bed (1955), Thaw (1958), and Kickback (1959).

Thomas Mann's culture of irony (with Mann being in fact, along with Franz Kafka and Thomas Bernhard, one of Richter's most favored authors). Careful observation of the Abstractions, however, would reveal to a viewer that these paintings are not any more involved in the rhetorical conventions of irony than are the paintings by Robert Ryman for example.

According to Richter's own testimony, the first coherent series of gestural paintings emerged as a response to the series of large-format, gray monochromes that were produced--as we have seen--by semi-mechanical means (the sponge and the paint roller) in 1974-75. In retrospect Richter commented on these Gray Monochromes as "the most complete paintings I could imagine," and he commented further that they were:

The welcome and the only correspondence to indifference, to a lack of conviction, to the negation of commitment, anomie. After the Gray Paintings, after the dogma of "Fundamental Painting" whose purist and moralizing aspects fascinated me to a degree bordering on self-denial, all I could do was to start all over again. This was the beginning of these first "color sketches," conceived in complete openness and uncertainty under the premise of "the multichromatic and the complicated," which obviously meant the opposite of anti-painting and of painting that doubts

its proper legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, according to Richter's own testimony he seems to have undergone a conversion in the wake of his Gray Paintings, an experience that seems to have brought about deeper doubts about the validity of Modernist readings of the works of the historical avant-garde as well. Thus the central concepts of self-reflexivity and self-reference that had been crucial to the debates around painting into the mid-1960s, are now explicitly discredited by Richter, not just in terms of their validity for the continuation of painting but also in terms of their interpretative power for the key historical works of Modernist painting such as Malevich's Suprematism: "there is no color on canvas that means nothing but itself and nothing beyond it, otherwise the Black Square by Malevich would be just a silly coat of paint."<sup>25</sup>

Richter's seemingly programmatic rejection of the empirio-critical positions held in the painting of the 1960s (e.g. Stella and Ryman), confronts us with a considerable theoretical problem. Either we have to argue that at this point Richter simply abdicates the credo he and others had

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<sup>24</sup> This and all following quotations on Abstract painting are taken from an interview with Gerhard Richter conducted by Heribert Heere, published in the exhibition catalogue Gerhard Richter : Die Abstrakten Bilder 1976-1981, Kunsthalle Bielefeld/Kunsthalle Mannheim, 1982, pp.9-20, (my translation).

<sup>25</sup> Heere interview, loc.cit.

held throughout the decade of Minimalism and Conceptual art in order to reconventionalize the production and reception of his painting--an attitude that would then anticipate the tendencies soon thereafter to become highly visible (in the early 1980s) with the general rediscovery and rise of a new type of subject matter (Kiefer), subjectivity (Clemente and Schnabel), and expressiveness (Baselitz), in American, Italian, and German painting. Or we would have to maintain that Richter conceives of a more complex form of signification within the parameters of Abstraction, one that could transcend the extreme theoretical limitations that Greenberg's modernism and Bürger's avant-garde model had imposed on the (self-)perception of avant-garde and neo-avantgarde practices. Such a form would thus have to be conceived as not necessarily reverting backwards toward traditional forms of transcendental meaning, let alone the simple reaffirmation of traditional categories as his junior colleagues in the 1980s would suggest.

To clarify what type of structural operation, what type of recoding of pictorial signification this approach would actually entail in Richter's subsequent Abstract Paintings is the task of the remaining chapters. It seems fairly easy to refute the first assumption that what took place was simply a massive reconventionalization in Richter's thinking

about painting, in concert with the Zeitgeist.<sup>26</sup>

First of all this argument can be clarified by tracing the actual transition during which the Abstract Paintings were developed, as well as by analyzing details of their technical production. The transition phase has been identified by Richter as the production of "color sketches," a rather modest term either for paintings that would grow to rather substantial formats or for works that would want to be associated with a re-established traditionalist position. When describing the work done in this initial phase he states: "I called these paintings 'color sketches' to make them appear harmless so that I could continue to work in this manner."<sup>27</sup>

But the term "sketch" itself points to a technique that has become one of several essential working procedures in the production of the large-scale abstractions since 1976: namely, the photographic projection and enlargement of the sketch, which in turn serves as the basis for the open-ended execution of the actual large-scale painting.

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<sup>26</sup> It is not uninteresting that the major exhibitions of the early 1980s, in which the newly rediscovered paradigms of expressionist painting were programmatically presented, seem to have excluded Richter as a matter of principle, even though they were clearly emphasizing the importance of German painters at that moment. See for example, the notorious exhibition Zeitgeist, organized by the team of Christos Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal for the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin and the Royal Academy in London in 1982 as well as its American counterpart entitled Expressions : New Art from Germany, organized by Jack Cowart for the St. Louis Art Museum in 1983.

<sup>27</sup> Heere interview, loc.cit.

Two projects produced by Richter in 1978 and 1980 respectively illustrate the procedure in its extreme form (whereas in the Abstract Paintings it is often only one of many different and often contradictory operations). In 1978 Richter decided to photograph one of these small abstract paintings, collectively called Color Sketches, after having unstretched it and having placed it in various positions on a chair (fig.27). Richter's description of the exact procedure is rather revealing in terms of his approach to the new abstraction in general:

In the summer of 1978 I took photographs of the surface of an oil sketch on canvas. . . . The photographs were taken from various sides, from various angles, various distances and under different light conditions. The resulting photographs were organized in two versions: one, the sequential order that is presented here under the covers of a book, and a second order which is presented pictorially in a grid form (figs. 49 and 50).<sup>28</sup>

The second instance, equally corroborating the "photographic condition" of Richter's abstraction, is structurally comparable yet technically different; it emerged in the context of a commission to produce two mural

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<sup>28</sup> Gerhard Richter, Introductory statement in : Gerhard Richter : 128 Details from a Painting, Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1980, p.65.

paintings for a public institution in 1980. The two paintings, entitled Zwei Gelbe Striche (Two Yellow Brushstrokes [figs. 28 and 29]), measure six by sixty-three feet and are the largest that Richter has yet produced. A single yellow brushstroke travels across the entire length of the canvas. But in fact this mammoth mark is the minute painterly reconstruction of a large-scale projection of a regular-scale brushstroke: the photographic details of the brushstroke serving as the model for the subsequent transfer of the molecular elements of painting onto the giant canvas surface.<sup>29</sup>

This process of mediating an organic gestural inscription found in the sketch, transforming an original, immediate trace into a large-scale visual representation of

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<sup>29</sup> This process reminds one, of course, of the by now notorious, but long repressed anecdote recounted by Elaine de Kooning on the subject of Franz Kline's discovery of a proper mode of achieving large-scale abstraction. Apparently in 1948 Willem de Kooning suggested to his friend that he project one of his typical ink sketches through the overhead projector that de Kooning used for the enlargement of the preparatory sketches of his own work. When confronted with the projection, Kline apparently "discovered" his entry into the Abstract-Expressionist idiom, stating: "A 4 x 5 inch brush drawing . . . loomed in gigantic black strokes which eradicated the image, the strokes expanding as entities in themselves, unrelated to any reality but that of their own existence" (see: Elaine de Kooning, "Franz Kline: Painter of His Own Life," Art News, Vol. 61, no.7 (November 1962), pp.67-68; quoted by Albert Boime in his "Franz Kline and the Figurative Tradition," in: Franz Kline: The Early Works as Signals, Binghamton, State University of New York, 1977, 1-21).

This anecdote has recently been quoted and discussed with regard to the more general implications it might have for a revision of the received ideas on Abstract-Expressionism in David Deitcher's essay "Unsentimental Education: The Professionalization of the American Artist," in: Hand Painted Pop, exh. cat. ed. Paul Schimmel, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993, 95-118.

that "original" mark through the techniques of recording, projecting, and enlarging, could be called the manifest subject of Richter's Abstract Paintings (in the manner that Lubov Popova stated in 1919 that facture was the subject of her painting). This structural transformation from an organic, originary trace or moment of inscription to a highly-mediated and manipulated sign of such gesture is constitutive of all of Richter's abstract paintings, even though it is not necessarily as exaggerated and as exclusively mediated by photographic processes as in the two extreme examples just mentioned.

As a matter of principle Richter's large-scale abstractions are subjected to numerous and rather different technical procedures ( 52). These range in the first phase from the traditional design of an overall pictorial scheme executed by means of underpainting to the application of paint by hand and brush. In a second phase almost all of these elements are either altered or destroyed by adding layers and layers of new formal and material elements that are largely dependent on mechanical or chance operations (e.g. the application of large quantities of paint with a squeegee or the subsequent scraping and removal of large quantities of paint with knives leaving areas of pre-painted stages exposed). In its ensemble of premeditated results and mere accidents, of controlled procedures and random mechanical operations, none clearly marked off from the

other, Richter's abstractions acquire a condition of being "reproduced." So that even if not photographically mediated, in the literal sense, they take on that unfathomable ambiguity between the organic and unmediated painterly gesture and the merely mechanical accident that Michael Fried had already discovered in 1965 in the work of the second generation of the Abstract Expressionists:

Roughly the essence of this synthesis . . . conveys the strong impression of not having been circumscribed by any cursive, draughtsman-like gesture. It resists being read as drawn. . . . At the same time the stain technique identifies the painted image with its woven ground almost as if the image were thrown onto the latter from a slide projector. . . . Finally it has been observed that the stain technique entails relatively depersonalized execution. Because the liquid pigment is for the most part either poured onto the horizontal canvas, rubbed into it with sponges or rolled on with commercial rollers, the technical virtuosity and bravura touch associated with painterliness from the Venetians to de Kooning is renounced from the start.<sup>30</sup>

What David Deitcher has recently identified as one of

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Fried, Three American Painters, exh. cat., Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, 1965, 37.

the crucial differences between the first- and second-generation New York School painters could also quite adequately describe one aspect of Richter's Abstract Paintings:

The very real differences between Abstract Expressionism and post-Abstract Expressionist art are discernible in this shift from art that proclaims itself an analogue for natural experience to art that heralds the death of all nature; from art that insists upon being taken as the unprecedented creation of a sovereign subject to art that presumes the codification and cultural contingency both of experience and subjectivity.

These different forms of art, however, must be understood as cultural responses to the same mutable post-war reality. As critics like Greenberg never tired of noting, the muscular negations of the Abstract Expressionist artists actually found ways to highlight the contradictions embedded within it. By acknowledging, and even appropriating, some of the techniques of commercialization, these artists were able, paradoxically, to reveal "difference" among the homogenizing effects of late capitalist culture.<sup>31</sup>

What Deitcher's model fails to articulate, however--as

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<sup>31</sup> David Deitcher, loc. cit., p. 98.

much for the work of the American Pop artists who are the explicit subjects of his essay, as for a discussion of Richter's painting--is the scale of contradictions within which such work defines itself. That scale would precisely allow one to describe the actual aesthetic experiences that the work generates, experiences which are now obscured in Deitcher's argument by the concept of "difference."

In Richter's abstractions the spectator could identify one such contradictory axis as that between synecdoche and spectacle, with one assigning, somewhat schematically, the former pictorial trope to the legacy of Modernism and the latter condition to that of postmodernity.

In each instant of Richter's "abstraction" there is, then, a desire to recognize the very unfolding of pictorial procedure, to make the actual emergence of an illusion of expression and sensuality transparent, which is, however, in the very moment of its formation always-already linked to a massive pressure to "expose" such details and to shift them into the larger register of pure visuality and pure effects of display. Yet each moment of this transformation of painting into spectacle is also immediately counteracted with an uncontrollable range of painterly differentiations and side effects, establishing within the violence of the spectacle a pictorial counter-memory. And within this counter-memory the paintings rehearse a recollection of the lost potential and the devices of painting's past. Richter's

gestures thus constitute a catalogue of pictorial tropes, once more enacted as if in preparation for their disappearance in the final act of display.

It had been the self-imposed plight of the modernist painter to undo these tropes one after another in favor of a highly fragmented vision, and to construct a partial experience of truth in the reductions executed in the name of an interdiction against "totality" and the imaginary plenitude of representational painting of the past. Visual truth, so it seemed, could only be constructed in the restriction to detail and within a self-schooled limitation of means, foregrounding both the technique and the device. What this synecdochic restriction had promised was the resistance against the totalizing functions of myth and ideology within mass-cultural representation.

Richter has explicitly stated that he aspires to a form of resistance within, however, the hermeticism of his irreconcilable abstractions, when he says that "painting is the creation of an analogue for the invisible and the unintelligible, which should become figure and should become accessible. . . . Good paintings are therefore incomprehensible. . . . They are incomprehensible so that they cannot be consumed and remain essential."

III. Pandora's Painting: From the Fallacies of Abstraction  
to the Travesties of Painting

I want to affirm the loss of the "center" just as much as the loss of convictions, of attitudes, and of individuality. To react merely like a machine, extremely susceptible, indifferent, dependent. To yield one's self for the sake of objectivity. I have always detested subjectivity. Even lack of success, minor quality, opportunism, and lack of character should be accepted if necessary, if that's what it takes to produce something that is objective, relevant, general, and adequate.

--Gerhard Richter, Notes (1973)

From its inception in 1912, non-representational painting faced (or repressed) a number of fallacies inherent to its condition that have continued to haunt it right up to the present day. One of the less obvious of these is the threat of seriality and the condition of boundless repetition.

To put it differently, since abstraction promised universality and non-hierarchical relationships (as much within the aesthetic structure as in the social and political one), it had to dismantle painting's traditional commitment to a centralized and unique organization. But this brought with it, inevitably, the threat that the uniqueness of the painterly construct might succumb to a condition of mere production similar to all other technically produced objects. In fact, whatever model of the

first moment of abstraction one wants to invoke, be it that of Malevich's squares or Delaunay's discs, Kupka's vertical planes or Kandinsky's all-over watercolors, the hierarchical organization of traditional compositional order that had guaranteed the uniqueness of the picture was, in all instances, replaced by structural models that suggested endless repetition, infinite permutation, and, worst of all, anonymous reiteration.

In these early instances of abstraction, organizations of hierarchy and centering were abolished either by principles of decentered distribution (in which chance often replaces conscious decision-making) or, paradoxically, by an actual emblem of centrality (the circle, the square). The role of the latter was now to declare and thereby to displace the compositional principles of centralized order that had traditionally indicated intentional if not rational decisions and the presence of a Cartesian subject. And, as in all investigations that evolve in opposites, the third option that synthesized the two dialectical halves was articulated at the very same moment, in Piet Mondrian's early checkerboard paintings, where the grid structure's absolute centrality regularizes the compositional distribution even as the very same structure's absolute decentralization disseminates all units at equally valid positions.

Since it was integral to the project of abstraction to

universalize its linguistic forms as the inscription of the authorial presence, drawing (as the performance of the masterful skills of the artist) was banned: following one tendency, drawing would end up as direct graphic notation in Kandinsky's 1912 watercolors, which must have appeared to his early audiences like so many infantile scribbles or as the traces of an absent mind (a mind distracted, that is, beyond competence and control). Kandinsky's early redefinition of drawing set the graphic tone for all Abstract-Expressionist drawing up to Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly. But the radical potential of the Symbolist legacy that had enabled Kandinsky to replace its icons of spiritual expression with immediate correspondences of line, chroma, and design was all too soon fulfilled and in turn criticized and finally abandoned. Design was--at first tentatively and then systematically--relegated to a type of structure that carried all of its determinants within itself, as for example in Mondrian's checkerboards, Delaunay's concentric rings, or Malevich's holistic shapes, a principle that continued right up to Sol Lewitt's systematized drawing that fused automatism with mechanicality altogether. These structures eliminated spatial as well as tonal modelling, and they increasingly transformed graphic gesture into mere facture.

With the same transformation occurring on the level of chromatic and tonal values (culminating in Rodchenko's

invention of the monochrome), all of these analytical reflections coincided when the spatial expansion of primary color and that of the pictorial support were mapped onto each other to become one continuous surface, just as the material delimitation of the ground became the physical design and the sole linear/graphic definition of the figure.

One could argue that at this moment the history of abstract painting came to a mature conclusion, one that generated, however, two oppositional responses. The first of these was voiced by artists like Picasso and Matisse, who-- while they had been key figures in developing painting toward the threshold of non-objectivity--also became the crucial figures who initiated the restoration of the traditional structures of narrative and representation. It is in their panic to arrest painterly evolution at the threshold of abstraction and to sustain at least the elementary principles of conventional representation that one can best recognize the losses actually at stake (and also, of course, the inevitability of those losses and the impossibility of recuperating those conventions).

But the second response to the conclusion of abstraction would make of it an originary moment of endless repetitions, reworkings, secondary elaborations--an infinite series of plays and processes continuing into the present and constituting an historical theater within which Richter's abstract paintings play a crucial part.

Although it was the explicit project of abstraction to eliminate all of the aspects of individuation from the body of painting, from the production of the artist as much as from the experience of the spectator, even the most daring of abstract aspirations did not necessarily anticipate the thresholds soon to be reached: namely, that the abolition of drawing as the trace of individual inscription and the elimination of color as denotative reference would inevitably lead to a mere spatial demarcation of boundaries and to willful chromatic denominations that could eventually just as well have been defined by mere mechanical decisions (which is, of course, the conclusion to this project of abstraction that Minimalism would eventually achieve). Scale, size, and the chromatic definition of a painting suddenly opened to absolutely random determinations, for the seemingly organic limits of bodily perception had been abandoned, both in the sense of the depicted body as a figure determining size and scale and in the literal sense of the painter's physical competence at the level of execution.

If abstract painting of the prewar avant-gardes had in fact dismantled the centered subject and the complete and unified unique object, or had at least conducted the visual protocol of the demise of the bourgeois subject, it also immediately went about the conception of a new postbourgeois subjectivity. Inevitably, painters coming from such

different intellectual milieux as Mondrian and Léger or as Malevich and Rodchenko would align themselves with socialist thought and imagine the new subject to be the socialist subject.

Once these utopian constructions of a new subjectivity had lost credibility--as was definitely the case after World War II--abstraction had to confront not only the failure of its own utopian promises but also a range of prohibitions articulated by the newly emerging rule of the culture industry and its forms of neo-avant-garde production (conflicts variously described after the war by Adorno, Brecht, and Sartre).

There is a considerable discrepancy in postwar attitudes, a conflict between, on the one hand, the attempt to reconstitute a traditional avant-garde (the first on its soil) in the United States and, on the other, the growing realization that this model of the avant-garde had been destroyed and would be lost forever. If the first position was best embodied by Jackson Pollock, then the second was most evidently articulated in the work of Lucio Fontana, and it is certainly not accidental that Richter would claim both artists as major influences after his arrival in West Germany in 1961.

From their initial formulation in the mid-1960s onward, Richter's abstract paintings have seemed to confront precisely those conflicting conditions in order to clarify

the circumstances that had worked on abstraction's paradigms from within, acting to devalorize them ( 54). These questions seem to be posed with ever-increasing persistence in the most recent series of abstract paintings, a series that is interrupted only occasionally by exceptional, photographically mediated representational paintings such as the two floral still lives of 1992 and 1993 (figs. 30 and 31).

To describe in even the most schematic manner how the two positions differ from each other irreconcilably -- and thereby to capture some of the contradictions that govern Richter's abstract paintings from the very beginning -- would require first of all a description of the transcendental, utopian dimension inherent in the "historical" avant-garde position. While it was enacted in a variety of models of transgression, all avant-garde attitudes presumed that such transgression could in fact be socially and politically concretized and that, as a result of this transgressive behavior, an actual consequence in the realm of the ethical and political codes governing social experience could in fact be established.

The postwar artist of the neo-avant-garde departs from a rather different position, one that first of all denounces transcendental thought and utopian aspirations, an attitude most flagrantly concretized by Klein in Europe and by Warhol in the United States shortly thereafter. But in Richter's

attempt to integrate the two artistic models [the utopian and the anti-utopian one], a recognition that artistic production is henceforth bound within the culture industry is not allowed to efface traditional aesthetic functions altogether. Rather, it redefines and adjusts aesthetic experience to the actually available forms of social and political self-determination. What this means is that instead of employing the anti-painterly strategy of the readymade to criticize the conditions of avant-garde abstraction, Richter has made the quixotic decision to align himself with the medium of painting. He has thereby embraced a medium that, insofar as it is considered irrelevant to the total instrumentalization of culture (at least in terms of the culture industry's evaluation), is widely considered incapable of contributing significantly to contemporary discussions within artistic practice, an incapacity in turn that, in the eyes of many, render it obsolete.

In subscribing neither to a traditional claim for an aesthetic opening onto the transcendental nor to an attitude of blind affirmation of culture-industry aesthetics, Richter's position differs then from either the rescue operations conducted to save painting from its inexorable desecration or from the applause of Klein and Warhol. In fact, the transcendence of Richter's paintings originates in their continuous vacillation-between mechanical vapidty and

the sudden semblance of a sublime differentiation. Yet his approach is one that never opens toward a false redemption by painterly means alone.

A consideration of Richter's abstract paintings in those terms (especially of the series he produced in 1992-93) would also explain their profoundly retrospective character. They are retrospective in the sense that they seem to work through, step-by-step, strategy-by-strategy, technique-by-technique, abstract painting's past. But one peculiar quality of Richter's works remains: they do not resuscitate the choices of non-representational painting in a spirit of confident revival, trying to blow a spark of life from that history's ashes. Rather, they redefine a practice of painting in constant opposition to modernism's injunctions against painting, opposing every single prohibition and repression that the laws of modernist abstraction had encoded. Thus painting itself becomes both the object and the process of historical memory in a continuously developing and differentiated anamnestic procedure designed to reconstitute painting's past and lost capacities.

Richter's reiteration of painting's past structures and strategies operates simultaneously, then, as an attempt to historicize and an effort continuously to resist turning into spectacle. And it is abstraction's major fallacy--its capacity for endless serial repetition, for the infinite

refinement of its permutations, for the boundless range of its pictorial mechanisms--that turn out to be the very resource of that resistance. For spectacle culture's basic drive to instrumentalize vision simply cannot control the degree of differentiation that Richter's emphasis on pictorial complexity engenders.

It still remains to show how Richter's paintings actually escape the random production and repetition that are the pitfalls of abstraction. How do they differ, for example, from the type of empty gestural painting that came at the tail-end of Abstract-Expressionism and with which they seem at times to compete in terms of that movement's inherent vulgarity?<sup>32</sup> More difficult still would be the question of differentiating Richter's abstractions from the later work of Frank Stella, an artist with whom he inevitably has to be compared. This is not for reasons of historical contemporaneity (since Stella's crucial series of Black Paintings [1958-59] predates Richter's transition to the West and his defection from Socialist Realism in favor of a confrontation with the systematic recycling of the paradigms of early modernism being conducted by the neo-

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<sup>32</sup> For an astonishing discussion of the concept of "vulgarity" in the context of Abstract Expressionism, see Timothy J. Clark's essay "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," in the conference papers of the International Congress of Art History, held in Berlin, July 1992 (forthcoming). The essay appeared in German in Texte zur Kunst, vol. 2, no. 7 (October 1992), pp. 43-56.

avant-gardes in Europe and the United States), but because of their later and simultaneous devotion to the seemingly endless resources of abstract production. One of the more serious questions to emerge from a comparison of Richter's recent abstract paintings with the contemporary work of Stella is a clarification of the manner in which, if at all, Richter's paintings avoid the pitfalls, on the one hand, of the merely decorative and, on the other, of the merely spectacular, problems that have marked Stella's work for almost thirty years now.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> But how oppositional these artists have in fact become is best illustrated in a recent, indirect confrontation that took place between Richter and Stella on the historically and personally charged territory of Richter's birthplace, the city of Dresden. This endgame of abstraction was initiated--as is only appropriate for the historical moment of the early nineties--by the magnanimity and vanity of a West German collector who promised his collection of contemporary art to the city of Dresden, recently liberated from the socialist yoke and the barbaric rule of its representational realisms, under one important condition (there were, in fact, many others, but this one commanded the public's attention to the patron's passion): namely, that Frank Stella, the quintessential American corporate artist, would have to be commissioned to design the buildings of the new museum on the grounds of the former Orangerie at the site of the ruins of the Schloss of Dresden. Richter was one of the very few figures from the cultural life of Germany actually to engage himself in public opposition to this project, and he did so at the obvious risk not only of alienating himself from the governing group of powerful German industrialists and collectors but of being accused of dubious motivations in his contestation of a major architectural commission being awarded to one of his senior colleagues and competitors in the field of abstract painting in corporate culture.

But in Richter's vigorous opposition to the project of Stella's abstract architecture, numerous aspects of his own evaluation of the positions and functions of nonrepresentational painting in the present moment became apparent. Most important, I would argue, is his opposition to abstraction as an enforcement of myth, which is, of course, precisely the principle according to which Stella's abstraction has functions successfully for a

In Stella's work from the Protractor Series onwards, color and gesture, drawing and design, composition and overall form are delivered as mere schemes of pictorial decoration that will provide adequate embellishment of corporate lobbies. What distinguishes Richter's paintings from Stella's--especially the most recent ones, which seem to come closer to the destructive delivery of painting's inheritance than any work Richter has done in the last twenty years--is precisely their continued emphasis on the way these devices once generated meaning and expression, and thus functioned as credible indices of spirituality. What is lost for the practices of painting is not necessarily lost for the conditions of visual experience Richter's work seems to argue.

This is the dialectical dimension altogether absent from Stella's work, even if these forms of experience cannot be credibly claimed for the present with pictorial means. Stella's work seems to embrace the total subjection of chroma and composition, of drawing and design to the needs of a culture of the spectacle: there is no trace of transparency and depth in Stella's alkyd color schemes or his stereometrical designs, no hint of a potential

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considerable period of time. This function of abstraction as myth, as it is practiced by Stella and other American artists who emphasize the viability of their interventions in public spaces, displays the promises of liberation that abstraction once stood for as the damaged goods in the triumphant march of corporate culture, as the trophies of the defeated enemy of avant-garde utopian thought.

transgression, no trace of painting's metaphysical past. In any of Stella's burgeoning and affirmative tautologies--that which is . . . is, being always beyond doubt and beyond reproach, like the articulation of corporate power--there is no dimension of painting's innate desire for the transformation of merely given factuality.

At the same time, Richter denies historical continuity altogether, for nothing would seem more implausible to him than Stella's pretense of reconstituting Baroque conditions of painting for a present moment that can barely be reconstructed as one in which the individual's sensorial capacities are not immediately delivered to their subjection in spectacular experience.<sup>34</sup>

Or, in yet another comparison, one might ask whether and how Richter's paintings actually differ from the empty pretense to serious pictorial investigation that seems to have become the condition of Robert Ryman's work (and of Minimalism in general), a deconstruction of painting that has long since lost its acumen so that it has become the mere rehearsal of administrative paradigms, adding a new dimension to the decorative through the subjection to painting's self-imposed restrictions.

Richter's paintings do not claim that there are infinite dimensions of experience to be gained from the

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<sup>34</sup> For Stella's argument concerning the Baroque, see Frank Stella, Working Space (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

endless repetition and refinement of the very same set of limited parameters and the voluntarily embraced restrictions with which new paradigms of painting were articulated in 1912 and then again in 1955 (by Jasper Johns, for example). Richter seems to acknowledge that the cult of sparsity and infinitesimal modification, far from guaranteeing a puritanical protection, does not lead to anything but yet another line of production and decoration. Abstraction's incapacity to articulate the historical within the aesthetic--even in the most elementary terms, as in Richter's work, where the memory of painting is claimed as its proper historical dimension--has generated the spectacle of withholding and withdrawing. It has become impossible to recognize the continuous emphasis on a merely analytical approach to painting and its elementary constituent materials and strategies as an advance over the entanglement of those past artistic practices that had struggled with the social and political referent, with their proper ideological functions, their object condition.

Abstraction's potential to oppose fetishization because of its recourse to empirico-critical reflexiveness has long since been transformed into pictorial complacency, for it has not even risked challenging its own paradigmatic foundations. Rather than pretending that the endless reiteration of the strategies of abstraction was in fact an absolute guarantee of abstraction's continuing radicality,

emancipatory power, and phenomenological constitution of individual viewing experience, Richter's work questions the credibility of all of his strategies from within, confronting each category with its opponent (e.g., pure abstraction with Neo-Classical figuration, the monochrome with the floral still life), each convention with the one that denies its validity, each pictorial cancellation with its proper reinstatement, each prohibition with its critical negation.

Chapter Nine:  
The Allegories of Painting

Painting, the most traditional form of making the aesthetic impulse concrete, sees itself increasingly threatened with extinction. On the one hand it is continuously embraced by admirers who no longer make much of an effort to conceal the simple reasons for their infatuation with painting: for public institutions such as museums it remains the most manageable of all art objects, and for private collectors it remains the most marketable one. On the other hand--and more recently--painting seems menaced by another development: the territorial claims being made for a newly academicized practice of installation work.

The claim that is made for these institutionally legitimized environments is that they have overcome the historical limitations of painting while simultaneously inheriting the legacies of the site- and context-specific practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet it must be said that if environmental work has moved in on this heritage it has been done without considering either the original motivations or the historical limitations of such practices. After all, site-specific installations could challenge the credibility of painterly and sculptural objects only as long as the convictions holding those more traditional forms in

the imaginary space of [autonomy remained operative.

Recent installation work, however, seems to suffer from an expansionist delusion, from the confusion of spatial control with discursive and institutional self-determination. Or, worse yet, such works deny their actual institutionalized status under the guise of theatricality, and they disavow their commodity status even as they comply with the scopic regime of spectacle culture, where every utilitarian object has to be transformed into an object of visual display. This condition is undoubtedly one of the most paradoxical challenges artistic practices currently confront: to have to construct objects of visibility that resist the continuous process of the transformation of experience into specularly.

In one of Richter's most recent major works, twelve paintings (of which one was in four parts) and a relief of two glass panes were installed in the space of a room constructed to imitate the "cabinet" of the aristocratic or high bourgeois collection (fig. 32). This installation, which was his contribution to Documenta IX in 1992, constituted a precise reflection of the contradictions I have been outlining, yet it seems that German critics were unable to understand Richter's painterly intervention into the territory of current installation art. One could argue, in fact, that the critical attacks this work generated confirmed the precision of its conception: the use of

seemingly obsolete pictorial means to discredit installations provoked the critics' anger--particularly, one assumes, at their own condition of perpetual dependency on convictions originating in artistic fashions.

The most obvious element of the installation was the simulated "cabinet" itself, lined with a layer of African walnut panelling, that contained the thirteen works. Clearly Richter's play on the condition of pictorial display suspended itself between the long-lost intimacy of the collector's "cabinet" and the board rooms of contemporary corporate culture. Furthermore, the room-like alcove was conceived by Richter in collaboration with the architect of the exhibition pavilion, Paul Robbrecht, and its design reflected the architecture within which it was housed. This architecture, which invoked the German railroad freight car as its model, figured-forth a metaphor for exhibitions as phenomena of transience and transportation, foregrounding the actual conditions of ephemerality that currently determine the status of the work of art, namely, to be shipped from one exhibition to the next, from one auction or exchange to another.

Richter's design for the exhibition seemed intent on opposing these conditions of transience with the imaginary stability and intimacy that the collector's cabinet supposedly had provided in the past. Yet, paradoxically, his "cabinet" never even attempted to conceal the transient

design of the exhibition pavilion itself, for it left its prefabricated architectural support structure exposed, thereby denouncing the more illusionistic and theatrical delusions of current installation work.

To the extent that a failed opposition to the universal conditions of transience was made the subject of the installation itself, this exhibition design was reminiscent of the earlier work, first exhibited at the Galerie Heiner Friedrich in Cologne in 1971, that Richter had conceived jointly with the painter Blinky Palermo. There a display of two bronze portrait heads of the artists, which Richter had modelled and positioned hieratically opposite one another, articulated the hypertrophic and hopeless aspirations for a lasting authorial identity. This grotesque work was just as bewildering to its audiences as the Documenta installation, since its attitude was neither clearly ironic nor clearly affirming.

In the Documenta "cabinet" Richter emphasized his search to retrieve the circumstances of intimacy and privacy in viewing, of permanence and stability of display, in a similarly grotesque manner. While acknowledging the conventions of bourgeois modernist painting, he attempted to reconstruct conditions that dated from the time before painting and its exhibition had become an integral part of the culture industry.

The group of twelve paintings that formed the second

element of the installation was obviously in many ways the most important component, even though the hierarchical relationship between architectural support and painterly object seemed strangely suspended in the "cabinet." Eleven of the paintings were large-scale abstract works, and a twelfth was a small painting of a photographically produced floral still life, which was exceptional within the still lives painted heretofore by Richter.

Modern assumptions about the role of painting would lead the viewer to expect the paintings to take a privileged position within the architectural structure of a "cabinet," one of establishing a hierarchical relationship between painting and architectural support; yet here they seemed strangely assimilated to the display surfaces of the alcove. Their format and placement making them appear less like autonomous works than like decorative wall panels, themselves part of the architectural structure of the "cabinet." Instead of establishing a strict distinction between the paintings and the wood panelling of the room, the facture and chromatic definition of the paintings approached the texture and color of the wood panels, in a precarious likeness. Rather than defying their potential exploitation as decorative objects, then, these paintings seemed voluntarily both to anticipate and to embrace their ultimate destiny as decoration.

If Richter's incorporation of his paintings into an

architectural structure contributed to a liquidation of the aspirations with which abstraction had been invested since 1912, the pictures in the "cabinet" seemed like allegories of the failure and decorative misuse of abstraction. And it is in this very allegorical repetition that Richter's paintings suddenly seemed to have recaptured at least one of the original critical dimensions of that history.

Additionally, rather than being limited to a criticism of the social-utopian aspirations or the spiritual and musical analogies with which abstraction has been traditionally invested, Richter's new abstraction appeared to turn against its own recent historical context even more: the positivist attitudes of the painters of the 1960s and 1970s, painterly positions that had been articulated from Stella through Ryman to Buren, and with which Richter, in his own work, had sustained a continuing pictorial dialogue since the late 1960s. The emphatic rhetoric of Richter's abstractions, with their continuous oscillation between the vapidness of the grand expressive gesture and the microcosmic precision of scientific vision, explicitly denied any such optimistic claims for empirico-critical truth and self-reflexiveness.

The paintings in Richter's "cabinet" seemed to take an historically acquired insight as their point of departure, namely the assumption that there are no guarantees to be obtained either through a rigorous limitation to medium-

specificity or through any other literalist theory of painterly self-reflexiveness. And they furthermore suggest that no single theory of institutional critique can offer a higher form of resistance against the universal fate of painting to succumb to its socially assigned tasks: to provide institutions with cultural legitimation; to exist as a commodity; and, ultimately, to perform the affirmative functions of the decorative object (a suspicion confirmed recently in the fate of Buren's work in the vitrines of Nina Ricci's Paris fashion house).

This critique was particularly evident in the four large vertical works (figs. 33 and 34), both in their chromatic definition (mostly a tonality of muddy tertiary colors, a blending of grays, purples, and browns) and in their painterly execution and compositional structure (a seemingly negligently composed vertical division of more or less equal bands that had been applied in a haphazard fashion). In the set of smaller, almost square works installed in the second register of the room, this observation was confirmed in a number of corresponding painterly strategies. If the large panel paintings were distinguished by their almost monochromatic extinction of color, then the smaller grid paintings signalled pure luminosity in an absolutely random fashion.

In these paintings the cartographic origins underlying the pictorial episteme of the grid were once more invoked,

but the gesture of a horizontal and vertical mapping of the pictorial surface was performed with an intentional lassitude. The lack of conviction inscribed in their production suggests a sense of doubt about the reception of their formal strategies, thereby undermining all the more successfully claims for the continued validity of non-representational painting. The random chromatic definition corresponds dialectically to the extinct epistemes of the grid structure's vertical and horizontal pictorial mapping: Richter's rigorous elimination of color values and tonalities and the combinations that "read" as premeditated or as correspondences rigorously deny any assignment of chromatic meaning, be it the semantic domestication of color in terms of a denotative relation to natural phenomena, or as emotional or psychological expressivity, or as spiritual correspondence.

Richter's new abstract paintings differ in a crucial respect from the work of his contemporaries such as Stella, Ryman, or Buren. In Richter's work the prohibition against chromatic expressiveness that history imposed on painting, following the suppression of figurative representation, is not celebrated as a liberation from mythical experience. Even less is abstraction presented here as a heroic achievement that painting has accomplished all by itself in the process of its voluntary submission to the principles of total rationalization. The semblance of gestural and

chromatic opulence in Richter's abstract work does not participate in claims about painting's continuing capacities to generate either meaningful gestures or credible chromatic gratification (for example in the naive manner of German Neo-Expressionist painters of the 1970s, whose work did not even pose the question of the validity of traditional assumptions about painterly signification).

But just as Richter's abstract paintings do not claim to celebrate the rediscovery of what are in fact irreversibly lost forms of pictorial experience (of visual differentiation and of the capacities of aesthetic sublimation), neither do they celebrate the historical erosion of such once-accessible capacities of painterly practice as an emancipatory triumph. Quite the opposite, the demands of administrative order and increasingly rationalizing control, which were unconsciously articulated in the history of modernism in the structural laws of abstract painting, are here critically dismantled with the same degree of acuity with which Richter's work annihilates all naive or fraudulent claims for the possible resuscitation of an expressionist aesthetic, of an aesthetic that would continue to claim painting as a valid substitution for sensuality, depth of emotion, or expression.

There was also, however, a third element of the "cabinet" installation: the two vertical monochrome grey

glass panels (fig. 59), which are a type of substitute painting established in the development of Richter's oeuvre since his Four Panes of Glass in 1967 (fig. 35). Attached to the wall by means of two discretely placed hinges on the back of the panels, and therefore not at all signalling immediate tactile participation to the spectator, the panels could in fact be rotated along their vertical axis by about forty-five degrees against the surface of the cabinet wall. Depending on their respective position they appeared at one moment like opaque windows opened toward an imaginary outside world; at another, like mirrors that reflected both the spectator and the cabinet's architectural container. In their vacillation between window and mirror--the classical paradigms of painting's functions--the full range of relations and mediations became manifest in the infinite number of possible constellations between the two monochrome panes and the display surface of the wall.

The last element of the installation, and the radical inversion of the monochrome glass panes, was the small floral still life (see fig. 30), photographically mediated and chromatically mimetic, that Richter, following the tradition of salon installations that placed the seemingly lowest category of painting (i.e., the still life) in the highest and therefore least accessible location, positioned in the highest corner of the opposite wall of the "cabinet."

Nowhere is the substitute character of painting more

clearly revealed than in the false harmlessness of the floral still life. This nature morte, the smallest of the twelve paintings in the room and the only one derived from a photographic representation, drew its life from the dialectic of the first and the last glance, a dialectic insinuated by the peculiar angle of vision and the unusual camera position determined by Richter when taking the photograph of the flowers. For one thing, the flowers in still life depictions are rarely, if ever, viewed from below or from such a fragmenting proximity as suggested by Richter's camera vision. The unusual perspective upon these objects taken from nature seemed to establish a perception ostensibly free of the domination of convention, yet it did so from within a category that--particularly in its decrepit forms--has always served to offer its viewers and owners a gasp or a gaze of control and possession even if it did not, as a category, justify outright the domination of nature at large.

When we speak, then, of the "first glance" operative in Richter's Flowers (1992), it is a reference to the sense that painting could have originated altogether in the mimetic impulse and in the desire for highly illusionistic representation (as in the famous anecdote of Zeuxis and the grapes) and therefore could have coincided with the invention of the category of the still life, a category within which the concept of the naturally beautiful and the

aesthetically beautiful could easily be confused.

If we speak of the "last glance," however, it is a reference to the fact that it was precisely the category of the nature morte that offered itself to painters as a last resort and escape (and last reconciliation as well) when all other discursive options and pictorial categories seemed to fail. Not even the category of the portrait seems ever to have attained the profound level of painterly decrepitude that the still life would attain in sinister harmlessness in the work of Matisse or Maurice de Vlaminck in the twentieth century. But it is also a "last glance" in the sense that it is perhaps expressly the degree of obsolescence inherent in the category of the floral still life that allows Richter to use it to spark a moment of resistant experience without that moment being instantly adapted to the terms of the spectacular. Or, should this assumption prove to be too optimistic, then one could at least speculate that Richter's decision to search out the most obsolete of all still life types might originate in an inverted gesture of opposition to the universal reduction to the condition of spectacle to which all avant-garde models are now incessantly subjected.

Inevitably, Richter's "cabinet" design invoked earlier propositions through which artists conceived the painterly object and its conventions of display at the same time (fig. 61). And it is also connected to fictitious display situations constructed by artists in order to allow them to

reflect on the fluid boundaries of visual disciplines and categorical boundaries: those between the painterly and the decorative object; those between the space of painting and the space of architecture; those between the conventions of painting and the conventions of institutions.

In this respect, El Lissitzky's Abstract Cabinet of 1926-28 for Dresden and Hannover (fig. 62) is as present in Richter's art-historical unconscious as is its historical opposite, Marcel Broodthaers' Salle Blanche (1975) in Paris (fig. 63). The two works constitute a dialectic and historical axis that is further differentiated by Richter's intervention, which negates both positions. Richter does not share Lissitzky's utopian aspiration that painting be transformed, almost by its own inherent logic, into architecture at the same moment as the museum's transformation from a temple of aesthetic contemplation to an archive of historical consciousness. And neither does he perceive the fiction of his painterly cabinet as a site where the activated spectator would be emancipated from aesthetic experience in the manner that the aesthetic experience had once functioned to emancipate the spectator from magic and later from religious experience.

At the other end of this axis, however, Richter also does not share the radical pessimism of an enlightened critic of Enlightenment thought such as Broodthaers, who, by means of in his cabinet installation La Salle Blanche

mourned the loss of visual and cognitive production and the forms of historical consciousness embedded in them as an already irreversible condition. For Broodthaers, this loss of the conventions of visibility is inscribed as a purely allegorical statement within the walls of the artist's fictitious reconstruction of his own studio.

For Richter, by contrast, painting still accomplishes the task of memory and of the labor of mourning over its lost capacities. Yet at the same time it is not the disappearance of painting as a privileged form of knowledge and as a highly specialized convention of representation that Richter mourns; it is the destruction of those forms of knowledge and experience once provided by painting for its spectators that Richter considers a loss, and it is a loss that in turn engenders the elegiac conditions of painting. This conservative revision of the functions of painting, of its purpose as an always already lost model of visual differentiation and sublimation, as much as the allegorical recapitulation of its obsolete epistemes, its outmoded categories, its vanished enlightenment ambitions, and its promises of sensual gratification--all of these operate as a resource of resistance against the factual and final incorporation of these experiences into a culture of the spectacle.

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