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NOT ENTIRELY GERHARD RICHTER AND THE PRINCIPLE OF DETAIL

Caroline Fuchs

The very first entry in Gerhard Richter's catalogue raisonné, *Table* (ill. p. 23), indicates that he is an artist who processes and reworks objects. The table, taken from an Italian fashion magazine, where it could be seen in its entirety, has now been obscured. The artist glued newspaper over a section of it, removed it again, and then worked the picture with solvent. The round brush marks are the result of this last process. They connect the various colored areas—the light-colored tabletop, the black legs, the dark green floor, and the dirty grey and ochre background—making the center of the picture unrecognizable. Some of it can be discerned, and the picture in its original form can be reconstructed mentally, but there is an unmistakable disruptive factor. An area of the colored layers in the picture has been blurred and made abstract. The table can no longer be seen in its entirety, but only a detail from it.

This eclectic approach to existing material and his own work is a frequent feature of Gerhard Richter's art. The principle of detail is a leitmotif throughout his oeuvre, albeit to differing degrees. The extent of Richter's use of detail can be seen most clearly in the group of works visibly based on photographs. In terms of the degree of recognizability, the blurred pictures stand out. They illustrate the principle of detail by reducing the visual information. In *Flowers* (1994, ill. p. 59), for example, Richter brushes over the still wet canvas, blurring the contours and details. In other works, like *Olympia* (1967, ill. p. 35) or *Townscape PL* (1970, ill. p. 39), he chooses a roughly structured painting style, which makes the specific view less precise. With both approaches the pictures are still recognizable, but only a fraction of the details in the original is present. Richter thus offers a homogeneous picture, which appears at first glance to be complete. Because of the imprecision, however, the original picture is not represented in its entirety in the painting.
By introducing imprecision with his brush into his reproduction of the photograph, Richter changes the original in a painterly way while retaining the photographic character in the form of blurred focus. This faulty use of the camera is just as much a part of photography as its deliberate use as a stylistic device in art photography, as seen particularly in the late nineteenth century in a style known as Pictorialism.[1] Richter was asked in an interview whether he used photographs because he mistrusted reality. He replied: "I don't mistrust reality, of which I know almost nothing. I mistrust the picture of reality conveyed to us by our senses, which is imperfect and circum-

scribed."[2] As with Pictorialist photographs, Richter's imprecise painting based on photographs has to do with an awareness of the selective and, in a scientific sense, inexact human perception.[3]

But blurring is not the only way in which Richter partially reproduces photographs. He overpainted some of his works—usually at a later date—such as *Blanket* (1988, ill. p. 56), under which Gudrun Ensslin, hanging dead from a window transom, is hidden, or *Abstract Painting* (CR: 687-1, ill. p. 51), which originally showed two candles. Like the use of solvent in the painting *Table*, the overpainting of finished works is an act of self-censorship. The important point here is that Richter does this openly by always leaving some of the original version visible. Instead of destroying the unloved work (which Richter also does sometimes) or hiding it by overpainting it completely, it is only partially covered. A detail remains visible as indication of the former state. This multilayered approach reflects Richter's mistrust of individual sensory impressions. If there is no valid perception of the world, an inhomogeneous construct is the logical consequence.

Richter's relationship with photography is thus not a question of the accuracy of the reproduction. It has nothing to do with the technical possibilities of photography but is an adaptation of the principle of detail, which is closely linked with photography as a medium. Richter uses photographs—in full cognizance of their subjectivity and idealizing potential—as part of a historical reality. In a technical sense, as many people have pointed out that photographs are inseparably linked with a past situation, regardless of whether it existed in reality or not. Through photography, Richter therefore selects a detail from the world. It has occasionally been pointed that by doing so he rejects the creation in art. And yet in his selection of photographs Richter is taking part in a creative process, but one that is traditionally associated not with painting but with photography.

In the struggle for photography to be accepted as an art form, the establishment of selection as an artistic principle was the decisive accomplishment of the early twentieth century. It was a way out of the muddled discussion of the artistic value of a mechanical device whose pictures were the result of a chemical reaction. In the context of Richter's work, the ennoblement of detail as a form of expression in photographic art, which marked the end of Pictorialism and of a phase in which photography sought to

imitate painting, is a timely irony, as he reintroduces photographic detail into what is clearly painting. Richter takes the photographic detail and transfers it in different ways to painting, making it a principle of his method of working. It is important in this regard that Richter's templates are not worldly details in the sense of artistic photography. On the contrary, he deliberately chooses photographs that cannot under any circumstances be construed as art—pictures from family albums or newspapers, for example. By using such originals, he appropriates the creative artistic process for himself in full. It is only through the selection of the detail, first the selection of the photograph itself and then through blurring, omissions, and overpainting, that he transports these mostly banal subjects into the sphere of art. But Richter's adaptation of details ranges even more widely.

From 1966, Richter started to include his own photographs in his *Atlas* collection. The first of these photos, a blurred portrait of Volker Bradke, a young man to be seen frequently at exhibition openings in Düsseldorf, already bears witness to Richter's love of experimentation with the medium, which he continued with double exposures and different types of lighting (flames, starry skies, dusk). These works interfaced directly with painting when Richter began in 1970 to photograph details of paint samples. He experimented with different colors on the palette, allowed them to merge and overlap, pile up, and run into one another. There are over fifty photographs of the results in *Atlas*. They range from marbling, reminiscent of delicate Florentine works, and smudging, recalling microscopic biology slides, to landscapes that seem to consist of brushstrokes and blobs of paint. Instead of using photographs as the basis for painting, Richter now photographed his experiments with paint.

This transition from painting to photography occurs frequently in Richter's work. In *128 Photographs of a Painting (Halifax)* in 1978, for example, he investigates the surface of *Halifax*, a work completed in the same year,[4] by photographing details of the canvas from different angles and under varying lighting conditions (ill. p. 83). This partial transfer of the medium of photography provides a detailed documentation of the deliberately imprecise painting style of *Halifax*. By being photographed very close up, the broad brushstrokes become worthy objects of more intensive consideration.

Gerhard Richter
128 Fotos von
einem Bild (Halifax)
128 Photographs of
a Painting (Halifax)
1978 (Detail)

Richter does not always stop at this single transfer from one medium to another, however. In *Detail* (1971, ill. p. 40/41) this investigation of forms of expression goes a step further. Richter transferred one of the above-mentioned marbled color sample photographs to canvas, still in monumental form and as a three-part picture recalling a triptych. By way of photography, the experimentation with color, he creates an object that through its size and the fact of being in three parts becomes a significant work of art. This self-conscious act recalls the history painting of the nineteenth century, which among other things demanded recognition of the representations by way of the format. Richter's naming of a further painterly adaptation of the color sample photographs after a prototypical representative of nineteenth century history painting Hans Makart (*Makart*, 1971, ill. p. 26), may be seen as an indication of this parallel, which can also be inferred from the opulent coloration.[5] At the same time, by stripping the historically charged formats of content, Richter also ironically breaks with this self-conscious gesture. Alongside the experimentation with artistic media, which he demonstrates through the multiple transfer of a composition, there is thus also the allusion to the tradition of art history. At both levels it is a question of recognition, value, and at the same time of avoiding answers. Richter's

switch from painting to photography and back, which he takes in the development of *Detail*, is a confusing game that rejects any clear positioning of either media. The same applies to the linking of the large format, the three-part objects, and the abstract representation that is based on a photograph. It is not a question of recognition but of the blurring of boundaries and of arbitrariness for the purpose of pointing to the equal validity of the different forms of expression.

Richter's transfer of photographic detail to painting can also be understood in this way, in particular since the underlying principle of fragmentariness is also applied to his abstract painting. As in the overpainted works based on photographs, the detail in these works functions through the use of several layers. Richter's abstract works show visibly what is underneath and what is on top, visualizing the overpainting process, even if the multiplicity of layers or their omission often make it difficult to identify their composition (for example in *Abstract Painting*, 1991 (CR: 750-2, ill. p. 57). Richter's frequent use of a squeegee for these pictures, which leaves random gaps, is a mark of his rejection of the grand artistic gesture. His habit of studying the result and hiding it again either by scraping it off or by overpainting it, means that he has complete control over the final result. Through the exercise of this right of selection, the finished product is entirely a creation by the artist.

In view of the multilayered significance of selection in Richter's work, it is once again evident that his painting based on photographs is much more than the mere transfer of photography and its aesthetics to painting. It is rather the logical continuation of an artistic principle established through photography and its transfer to painting. Richter himself spoke of this basic adaptation of photography, which goes far beyond the use of photographic models, in 1972: "I am not interested in imitating a photograph but in making one. Disregarding the fact that a photograph is usually understood just as a piece of exposed paper, I make photos with other means, not pictures that resemble a photo. Seen this way, the pictures of mine that are created without a photographic model (abstracts, etc.) are also photos."[6] This statement may be understood as a principle. Richter's selection is closely connected with the history of photography, which is adapted and reflected in his method of working. His investigation of photography is not just a "double negation" taking place at a "technical level," in the sense of a "negation of painting through photography and a negation of photography through

Gerhard Richter
Layout für das Buch
War Cut
Layout for the book
War Cut
2004

painting," as Peter Osborne notes.[7] By applying a photographic principle to painting on the basis of a photographic model while at the same time distancing himself increasingly from the photographic origins and using it as a general working principle, Richter's appropriation of photography is an all-embracing one. The interaction between photography and painting, as illustrated by *Detail*, is an indication of the equality of different forms of expression, which Richter uses even, as in his recent art book *War Cut*,[8] when he gives photographed details of his paintings the same space as details from newspaper articles and empty surfaces.

By using excerpts from photographs, Richter makes fragmentariness a working principle used independently of the medium, object, material, or method of depiction. Richter's disregard for media-specific conventions, which can already be seen widely in his painting *Table*—through the transfer of a publicity photograph to painting and the partial destruction of the paint surfaces—is evident not only through his adaptation of a process connected with photography. It must rather be seen in relation to the concept of detail as a matter of principle. It is at the same time an instrument and the expression of an ideology based on the plurality and incompleteness of individual perceptions.

1 These are the two associations of soft focus in photography that are relevant for Richter's work. For a detailed discussion of blurred images in photography and painting, see Wolfgang Ulrich, *Die Geschichte der Unschärfe*, 2nd ed., Berlin 2009.
2 "Interview mit Rolf Schön 1972," in: Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds.), *Gerhard Richter: Text 1961 bis 2007 – Schriften, Interviews, Briefe*, Cologne 2008, p. 60.
3 On the parallels between blurred focus in Richter's work and in art photography, see ibid., pp. 113–14.
4 This work was published by Richter in 1980 as an art book; Gerhard Richter, *128 Details from a Picture (Halifax 1978)*, Halifax 1980.
5 A further parallel and similarity may be seen in the fact that Makart was also highly interested in photography. For Markart's interest in photography, see Uwe Schögl, "Hans Makart und die Fotografie," in: Agnes Husslein-Arco (ed.), *Hans Makart. Maler der Sinne*, Vienna/Munich 2011, pp. 211–21.
6 Elger (see note 2), p. 60.
7 Peter Osborne, "Abstrakte Bilder: Zeichen, Abbild und Ästhetik in Gerhard Richters Malerei," in: ibid., p. 163.
8 Gerhard Richter, *War Cut*, Cologne 2004.