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**The Difficult Task of Art in the Technological Era:  
Gerhard Richter's and Martin Heidegger's transcendence  
without a transcendent**

For Martin Heidegger, as it is well known, the current technological era is dominated by *Ge-stell*<sup>1</sup>. *Ge-stell* is the term used by Heidegger to describe the essence of modern technology. It generally entails reducing Being to a one-dimensional rationality. The consequences of this reduction are standardization and permanent maintenance of the same, since, within the technological logic of *Ge-stell*, beings only 'come to presence' in a predefined frame which is prior to their 'coming to presence'<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, Heidegger maintains that, in a technological society, beings are transformed into *Bestand* (standing reserve). As a standing reserve, everything that 'comes to presence', everything that is unveiled and is brought-forth, is transformed into raw material to be infinitely manipulated and reused within the same frame. Therefore, the *Ge-stell* also corresponds to a closed, unchangeable vision. This is why in Heidegger's opinion, in modern technology maximum disclosure (where everything is available) also corresponds with maximum concealment (driving out of any other possibilities).

Heidegger's criticism is evidently related to his concept of Being. Let us recall that Heidegger sees Being as *aletheia*, which means unconcealment/concealment. According to Heidegger, unconcealment is a disclosure which implies both unconcealment and concealment. Being means 'coming to presence', but a 'coming to presence' which always demands the existence of a not-yet-unveiled reserve. This is the fundamental question of Heidegger's ontological difference: Being always transcends beings; there is a difference between Being and beings.

However, according to Heidegger, the ontological difference explains that Being cannot exist as a whole outside its 'coming to presence' in concrete beings. This means that, to Heidegger, Being does not exist outside immanence. Therefore, Heidegger refuses to acknowledge the existence of

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<sup>1</sup> William Lovitt translates '*Ge-stell*' by 'Enframing'. See Heidegger, Martin, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 19.

<sup>2</sup> 'Coming to presence' is a translation of the gerund *Wesend*.

Being outside the limits of our experience, but also to reduce Being to the existing.

In the following lines, I will try to describe Heidegger's ideas in Gerhard Richter's work, mainly referring to what I call the transcendence without a transcendent.

In 1988, Richter concludes *18 October 1977*, a series of 15 black and white paintings based on photographs of real events concerning the life and death of four political activists (Baader, Ensslin, Meins and Meinhof) who became terrorists in a radical wing of the Red Army in Western Germany, the Baader–Meinhof group. The collective title of the work, *18 October 1977*, refers to the day when Baader and Ensslin were found dead in their prison cells where they were serving time for murder and other political crimes. Meins and Meinhof had already passed away. The four deaths were officially considered suicides, although they were all rumoured to have been murdered in prison.

Richter's paintings immediately take the spectator by surprise because, against all expectations and although Richter does not ignore the claim to autonomy of contemporary art, the painter demands such interpretations of his work that violate this autonomy and question the ability of a contemporary painting to represent history, politics and the present. It is interesting to note that the death of the leaders of the Red Army was painted a year before the fall of the Berlin wall. Richter, who grew up in divided Germany and spent his childhood and youth in the German Democratic Republic, could not disregard the political dimension of the events.

The series opens with the *Youth Portrait*, which is vital for instilling a sense of tragedy emerging from the paintings. It is an impressive portrait of Meinhof in a classical pose, based on a photograph taken shortly before Meinhof abandoned her normal life to join Baader and Ensslin in order to carry out a series of radical terrorist acts which included murdering civilians. In this painting, Meinhof is portrayed as a young woman who gazes directly at us in a serene and serious manner. Her dark hair and what seems to be a black high-necked jumper blend in with the painting's black background, in a blackness that already seems to surround and encompass the whole image, despite the bright areas of her face and hands. Meinhof's serenely confident looks, as well as the bright places, make us ask what may be hidden behind this serenity. Is she aware of the black smoke surrounding her? The light/shadow contrast stresses the fact that this work is full of paradoxes regarding the condition of painting, Meinhof's fate and of our own contemporary life. Several issues arise here that have no obvious answer: is it actually a portrait of Meinhof's tragic heroism, of a person who is all too aware of the fragility of her utopia, but still remaining a firm believer in the fight against opacity? Is it a portrait of absolute tragedy, in which a young woman is willing to be swallowed up by darkness and her illusion is about to fade away? Is this illusion an 'appearance' or a 'disappearance', that is, has this image just emerged from the darkness or is it about to be swallowed up by it? Is it

a portrait of Richter's own painting, too aware of its own limitations, of its vain effort to represent the ineffable, an image of the painful attempt to keep alive brief moments of revelation, danger and uncertainty, an image of a life in an instable place that requires an all too painful awareness of its own limitations? The work refuses to give answers and Meinhof dies some years later, at a time when the utopia disappears upon coming into contact with reality, and death strongly contrasts with the light transcendence of youth. The darkness ends up by engulfing Meinhof's face and what remains of her is a cold, naked, objective representation of her corpse with a rope mark on her neck. Richter claimed that the whole series was a portrait of the situation of painting itself. And the series ends with a painting representing Baader–Meinhof's public funeral, which is completely blurred, and in which reality is transformed into smudges of white and grey, of light and darkness: the great public event of painting, of representation and of life.

Thus, the series covers all issues that have always been dealt with by Richter: the nature of illusion, representation, the need to believe, transcendence and its tension with immanence, as well as others, such as narration, the relationship between mechanical and manual reproduction, objectivity and the current situation of painting, wedged between utopia and reality, between the image of transcendence and the camera image, between the desire to create and the impossibility of doing so in the current situation. We can also consider it as a metaphor of Richter's own path: *18 October 1977* is a turning point in his work. Three giant abstract paintings follow, suggestively entitled *November (1989)*, *December (1989)* and *January (1989)*. All of them depict the same tragic sensation which was present in *18 October 1977*, with its contradictions and questions. One can feel the vital impulse of light wanting to *appear* amongst the grey. One can feel the fragility of that *appearance*. One can almost physically experience the heroism of unconcealment, somewhere between the painful physicality of birth with the inherent dose of immanence and transcendence it entails, on the one hand, and the universal presence of death, opacity and darkness, on the other. One can feel the strong presence of grey, which is a black hole where everything fits, an absolute mirror of maximum opacity. And there is also a sense of not being able to represent *after* these events. After death, only the absolute silence of total indifference is heard, a silence which is, nevertheless, broken by small rays of light. The vital impulse. The difficult task of painting in the technological era. Painting's search for something lost or concealed. Gerhard Richter's search.

Gerhard Richter depicts the possibility of painting in a contemporary scene in an extremely rich way. His works are dominated by the difficult relationship between art and technology. The reasons for this are numerous and complex.

Firstly, this must be said, because his works are admirable. Secondly, due to the dialogue they establish with the current technological, cultural,

social and above all artistic aspects of history. Each of Richter's works is a complete image with its conquests and deficiencies, but it is also a reflection on illusion, on the nature of representation, on painting, and on the present.

Until now, we could say that Richter is at one with the mainstream of artistic movements of the twentieth century, as this duplicity of art, this being inside and outside the image, is one of the great impulses of modern art. Richter started painting in the era of conceptualism and at the peak of modernism, but he always moved in various directions, and this is why his creations are simultaneously incarnations and reflections of changes undergone by art and of dilemmas surrounding it.

Richter is simultaneously inside and outside the artistic mainstream, never abandoning the dialogue of painting with its own past and present, but also never giving up the search for his own individual path. This idea becomes evident when we notice the profoundly original and critical way he maintains a background dialogue with painting itself.

It is undeniable that Richter builds his works on paradoxes, on contradictory or overlapping relationships: photography/painting; beauty/idea; presence/absence; immanence/transcendence. With Richter, the very contradictions of modernism are brought together in a growing vortex, and gathered in dialectical relationships that assume various forms of representation. As an abstract painter, he refuses, on the one hand, the sufficiency of making artistic means absolute and, on the other, he rejects the neoplatonic calls of suprematism and neoplasticism. On the one hand, he adheres to the modernist claim that forms of expressions are delusions; on the other, he rejects art which isolates itself. As a realist, he agrees with the idea that reality is an image, but he also rejects any subjectivist *nuance*. He never represents reality directly, without photographic mediation, not even when the subject-matter is strictly intimate. He therefore always rejects a subjective look in favour of an objective picture taken with a camera. Nonetheless, all his realist works demonstrate the helplessness of this image, as well as the desperate attempts of the painting to capture the essence of the represented object. The objectivity turns into absolute despair; transcendent hope becomes an attempt in which feelings of disappointment and, above all, of helplessness become visible, in which self-confidence is replaced by a feeling of the most profound humility. Richter's aim is to redeem something that only very fleetingly appears inside the technologically mediated objectivity of our relationship with reality, in our understanding. Painting for Richter is a mirror of the will and, at the same time, of the total impossibility to paint like Vermeer. Like the death of the members of a terrorist group, it acts as a metaphor of the strength that hides behind utopia. As we have seen, it is possible to establish in this work a historical parallel with the current situation of painting: the disenchantment and, at the same time, the heroic attempt to defy death, the idle belief, the awareness of its own inadequacy, but at the same time, the brutal desire to always refuse to surrender, the force of a fleeting unconcealment.

The nature of illusion. And the fight against opacity in this myriad of contradictions which, as a 'safe keeping of Being', is the task of an artist in the era of *Vor-stell* and *Ge-stell*, that is, in the era of modern technology, as Heidegger would say.

Here we see another of the crucial points in Richter's work: its fundamental relationship with the mechanization and the objectivity of the image. This relationship is mainly based on the question of photographic mediation as a representation of reality. Richter is clearly aware that, in the twentieth century, photography became the figurative canon of our culture. This status allows it to introduce itself, not as *an image* of reality, but as *the image* of reality, more real than reality itself. Photography is presented as a technological product that is the builder of History. Without it, is it even possible to obtain pictures? This is an ever-present question.

### 1. Photography as absence and painting as presence.

Faced with the complex relationship between photography and painting as two different means of representation, Richter deals, in a very original manner, with the question of technique and its integration in pictures. Since the beginning of the sixties the artist has been painting photographic objects, producing on canvas pictures based on photos. His attempts were similar to those undertaken on the other side of the Atlantic by American Pop Art artists. He uses photographs taken by himself, found in family albums, tourist postcards, or – as in *Motorboot* (1965), *Party* (1962) and *Turmspringerin I* (1965) – in newspapers and magazines.

In these three paintings, we find numerous reading lines in overlapping layers: the first is related to the use of objects taken from the mass media, with the use of an image which is already an image in itself. The decision to paint an object which is already an image affirms an essential aspect of our contemporary life in which the relationship between reality and its representation is extremely complex. Richter offers us a kind of image of another image, a hyper-image whose reference is another image, questioning the hyper-reality created by the mass media which attack us with images that refer to other images, to realities that are more real than reality itself, touching on the issue of the nature of the simulacrum. Richter demonstrates that images are reality and that they are objects just like landscapes. Both can be subjected to a different gaze and take on a different meaning when represented on canvas. This process of changing meanings occurs when objects are placed in a new context. Two changes happen automatically: a change in the object itself and a change of meaning. Non-artistic objects placed in a new context are transformed into art, but not like Duchamp's *ready-mades*. Images are transformed even though they are almost mimetic reproductions of photographs. In this sense, Richter demonstrates that painting is not an idea; it is a statement that, by itself, generates a surplus or a new meaning.

Accordingly, Richter places himself right in the heart of modernism's semiotic turning that, generally speaking, may be defined as an abandonment of the represented object for the possibility of representation itself. This is a matter I will describe in more detail below. For now, it is important to highlight a second reading line of these works, which is related to the dialogue they establish, possibly at the syntagmatic level, with art itself and with the artistic field: with American Pop Art and with Duchamp's Anti-Art and its conception of time as an illusion, its need to stop the impression of movement, its idea of painting as *retarde*, its attack on retinal illusion, the '*bêtise de l'oeil*', in defence of a purely Conceptual Art, the Anti-Art.

For all these reasons, and because his relationship with pop becomes mingled with the idea of using photographs from magazines and newspapers as models for his paintings, in the sixties and seventies Gerhard Richter is most famous for his complex relationship with Pop Art. However, with Richter, Pop Art is shown in reverse. The artist is interested in photographs as trivial images which are used not to unveil the absolute domain of mechanization and serialization of image in the era of its technological reproduction and under the reign of stereotype (rethinking, from this moment on, painting's place in this scenario, such as in the case of Warhol, Lichtenstein or Rauschenberg), but mostly in order to discover and demonstrate the differences and the distance between these two reproduction forms: mechanical and manual. Since 1960s Richter hasn't foreseen in his works the end of painting, nor has he taken for granted a transfiguration of painting in the era of the technological reproduction of image. What matters to Richter is painting and the possibility of its existence in the contemporary technological, cultural and social environment. This is why in the 1960s his realist paintings based on photographs started reflecting on an image that does not give up searching for the founding act or moment of painting. At the same time, each of them, despite their obvious impressive mimetism and technical mastery, accentuates and highlights the impossibility to pass from a painting to a technical image. Paintings are similar to photographs that serve as their model, but also completely different. Works based on photographic models – photographs taken by him or by his relatives, photographs from family albums, pictures in magazines or newspapers, landscapes reproduced on postcards – are an attempt to search for the unity of the founding act of art, its essence as a unique and inescapable event, that is, the *possibility* of a painting as an image. As such, all of his works allow us to visualize the sense of his action: they are a dialogue with an image and with the creative act of painting; at the same time they are always and above all paintings, images, 'appearances', to recall an expression used by Richter himself.<sup>3</sup> All of Richter's works are paintings. They blossom from his own ashes, pungent and unique in comparison with mediatic images and other forms of reproductions; immanent in their own physicality; beauti-

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<sup>3</sup> See below note 5.

ful but with a profoundly mature beauty, highlighted by the marks of their own imperfection; aware of their enormous difficulty, of the complexity of their own metamorphosis; but above all, of their transcendence; without a trace of innocence.

This is how Richter's paintings invert the idea of emptiness and superficiality of Warhol's mediatic images, whose completion is a way of unconcealing their opacity so as to affirm the sole founding act of painting. In these images, Richter states his opposition to the death of painting, to the prophets of painting's decadence and defenders of pure ideas. Amidst the multiple standardized and serialized images, objects appear that are likely to produce an aesthetic sensation when appropriated by painting. Painting is a statement of uniqueness.

In this sense, *Woman with Umbrella* (1964), based on a newspaper photograph of Jackie Kennedy after the murder of her husband, president John F. Kennedy, seems to be the inverse of Andy Warhol's *Multiplied Jackies* of the same year. On this canvas, Warhol reproduces 35 identical photographs of Jackie Kennedy. This effect of uniformization and mechanization is undisputed and its aim is to show the automatic reproduction, uniformization and massification carried out by popular culture and the mass media. Richter's work, on the other hand, is the opposite to the repetition of the mediatic cliché 'Jackie'. Reproducing a newspaper photograph, Richter paints a casually dressed woman, carrying a simple umbrella in her left hand. Her right hand is covering her mouth and chin in an expression of pain that is restrained and hidden. It is not immediately clear that this woman is Jackie Kennedy. The image represented is the antithesis of *glamour*, celebrity and mediatic production usually associated with her. It is also, and above all, the antithesis of mediatization of death. *Woman with Umbrella* demonstrates that death, pain and loss are events of an absolute solitude. They are totally unique tragedies and demonstrate, by antithesis, the artificiality and superficiality of the mediatic pop show. By portraying Jackie as an anonymous and ordinary woman, Richter deviates from the multiple to the original; he goes from uniformization and repetition, that is from massification and opacity, towards the singular. However, this is based on a paradox: the object Richter represents as an image of the singular is, at the time, the most mediatized person of all and is painted from an image taken from the news. Based on this mediatic photography, Richter goes from the plural to the singular, demonstrating that pain and the perception of death, regardless of the way it may have been previously presented to us, are the ultimate testimony of individual solitude. Thus, the use Richter makes of the mediatic photographs is an act of denial of both the mediatic screen, and of the spectacularization of the vanguardist act of critical denial. Richter's images are focused on the singular and the individual and never on an abstract idea or a stereotype. In his refusal to abandon what we refer to here as the 'immanence' of the image, Richter becomes unfamiliar with any of the themes, rejects all spectacularization processes and concomitant detachment of the represented object (because spectacularization is always a process of detachment of the

representation from the represented object). For Richter, image and object function as an absolute unity and we cannot detach ourselves from the object without detaching ourselves from the image and vice-versa.

Death, the ultimate denial of all themes, the ultimate and radical presence that refuses to let itself be known, the most radical affirmation of individual uniqueness, is a constant theme in all of Richter's work. From Heidegger's point-of-view, death is the extreme possibility that determines the totality of Being.

*Eight Student Nurses* (1966) is a work from the same decade as *Woman with Umbrella*. It is a series of eight small paintings of photographs, taken from school jotters of eight nurses, victims of a serial killer, Richard Speck. In this work, despite the image's uniformization, the individual peculiarities and each of these deaths and of these individual narratives, provide these girls with an opportunity to become irreducibly unique from the apparently stereotyped form used. The serial murder, the serial photography and the serial image contrast sharply in Richter's work with the refusal of each of these portraits to limit itself to its stereotyped serial form. Despite the apparent conformity with serialized formats, death appears as the ultimate reserve of uniqueness.

So, Richter's gesture in this work is, simultaneously, an act of criticism towards mass culture and an act of restrained and extremely profound emotion. The same way *Woman with Umbrella* seems to be the reverse of Warhol's *Jackie*, *Eight Nurses* function as the reverse of Marcus Harvey's *Myra*, created 30 years later. The latter is a portrait of a child killer – Myra Hindley – an image that was continuously reproduced by the media and exhibited for the first time in London in September 1997 as a part of the *Sensation* exhibition. *Myra* is a portrait of the mediatic anti-hero. It is the real version of the cartoon's anti-hero, of someone whose portraits, continually reproduced by the media, say nothing about the character, the terrible acts performed or about the death or the victims. In *Myra*, we experience horror, we see the truth about mass media, about society, about fear... a universal feeling of horror. We can see no human being in *Myra*, not in the victims in general and not in any one of them in particular. And this lack of humanity in the image also reflects the unreality of the work, the obscene character of maximum opacity.

In Richter, the act of portraying the same theme, that is, a serial murder, has a radically different sense: Richter does not portray the killer, he portrays the victims. As a result, the apparent stereotype of the form is contrasted with the image of each victim individually contained inside that form. The serial death of a serial killer, the serial image of each victim is, thus, rejected by Richter. This is not a feeling: these are people. These are not mediatic products: these are individual stories. What we can see are not mass media characters but individual people, irreducible to the stereotyped form in which they are portrayed. It is not a serial death: it is an individual death. For Richter, the human soul always surpasses the image and it is this immanence/transcendence that contradicts the abstraction and opacity of



Harvey's image. It is as if Richter had already foreseen, in the sixties, the empty space portrayed in *Myra* and somehow wanted to offer a glimpse of hope, a path for painting to follow far from mechanization and the absolute domain of modern technology.

This is what surprises most in Richter's works. Through his reproduction of realistic photographs, partly taken from the media, he demonstrates that there is a unique vitality in painting, a flicker of life that appears in an image that is already a reproduction of another image, an image of an image, a double simulacrum, although it does not show itself as a substitute for reality. Being a reproduction of a reproduction creates a distance towards realism and demonstrates the constructivist nature of the image, all the more so because it destroys the photorealistic illusion and realism of painting at the same time; it does so by unconcealing, not the artificiality of all image as in Warhol's case, but its enormous reality. By presenting a totally realistic image that is, however, already a copy of another image, Richter exposes the image's illusive nature, its imaginary aspect and, above all its artificiality, that is to say, the fact that it is an image which is a vision, a result of the physical activity of looking, mediated by a technological apparatus whose construction is based on abstract, mathematical, geometrical principles.

This is how Richter's use of photography, initiated in the sixties, has several goals: a) on the one hand, it is a declaration against the assumed closure of art and the alienation of the artistic domain from other spheres. Photography appears here as a way of introducing existential content, integrating it in specific issues of daily life. b) But, simultaneously, it is used as a way of 'cleaning art'. Its content and its forms contrast both with the *pathos* of abstract expressionism and the pure coldness of the new and more radical minimalist concepts. At the same time, photography became an instrument of that anti-sensitivity which Ivan Karp considered the defining characteristic of painting in 1963, and of the total anti-conceptualism of the idea of art that, in itself, does not have anything specifically aesthetic. Contrarily to Warhol – and, in this aspect, similarly to Lichtenstein – Richter never surrenders entirely to the idea, always searching for the material aspect of painting. Richter's approach has always taken into account the eminently aesthetic nature of images (in the original sense of the word), that is, their effect on the senses and on sensibility; he has always considered vision as a physical and emotive process; c) In this sense, photography allowed him to integrate the image's emotional impact, through an iconography that goes way beyond the formalist approach, whether abstract or representative (and in this aspect Richter is unique). However, Richter's images have an emotional or a sensorial impact, both as absence and presence. This idea seems close to Adorno's aesthetics of non-reconciliation, where art can express the ineffable only through denial. We will return to this issue further on. For now, it is important to highlight the last implication of Richter's use of photography: by doing so, he placed himself in the core and heart of the main issue of artistic modernity in general, and its pictorial aspect in par-

ticular: the theme of representation, of the final product's relationship with the represented object, the issue of artificiality of image and the difficult relationship between painting and photography.

But painting is interesting to Richter because of its ability not to represent but to make visible.<sup>4</sup> This is, once again, the great singularity of Richter: his paintings always assume a first reading line that cannot be separated from perception and from the sensation of any particular object in its immanence, but also in its transcendence. And, at the same time, Richter offers us presence, tactility, the presence of physical, material entities, made visible in their corporeity on a canvas through the act of painting. They are constructed images, just like reality is an image, but they are not images of absence, they are images of something made visible, therefore, something *appearing*. They are revelations of the Being in its immanence, we would say with Heidegger.

This permanent tension between the creative potentials of painting and the tremendous difficulties it encounters, between concealment and appearance, may partially explain the fact that Richter's images are always offered to us at the same time they are denied. And this being inside and outside the image, in Gerhard Richter, means something surprisingly innovative. Richter creates images that are, first of all, immanent entities, images whose sense of immanence is felt in each stroke of the brush, images whose immanence is permanently immersed in a profoundness that is physically felt. Images, in Richter, are emotions which simply refuse to cause emotions, and whose ultimate purpose seems to be to show that they are there, but do not surrender to us, showing what they are allowed to and what they are not. In Richter, the relationship between the sensorial, the intellectual and the intuitive, as well as the tension between representation and creation are therefore open to debate and it is also in this sense that he may be one of the most influential painters at the turning point of this millennium.

With Richter, photography acquires an ambiguous status in relation to its mediatic and daily use: it is a technical, mechanized and, therefore, not subjective image which is also perceived as a construction, a simulacrum, a substitute, something that 'replaces'. Being something that replaces implies that basically it is always an absence and never a presence. The opacity and the distance generated by photography come precisely from its phantasmagorical nature. In Richter it is precisely painting that gives images materiality, presence, immanence and, mostly, tactility. The immanent and tactile nature is given by the texture of the canvas, the texture of paint and the presence of the image in itself. In Richter's work, photography is used as absence and painting lives in this tension between presence and absence.

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh, Richter says: 'The artist's productive act in art cannot be negated. It's just that it has nothing to do with the talent of 'making by hand', only with the capacity to see and to decide what is to be made visible. *How* that then gets fabricated has nothing to do with art or with artistic abilities', Richter, Gerhard, *The Daily Practice of Painting. Writings 1962–1993* (London, Thames Hudson 2002), 140.

A painting is not a *representation*, it is an *appearance*<sup>5</sup> that, nonetheless, does not conceal an absence. It originates in the heart of the tension between revealing and concealment; it mirrors, simultaneously, what appears and what remains concealed in each revelation. It is instituted as a presence that is also the appearance of an absence.

This idea is obvious in various moments of the artist's path. In the *Florence* series, created between November 1999 and March 2000, the painter uses a series of 103 pictures of the city of Florence taken by him. He has been using this technique since 1989. It consists in painting pictures which are afterwards integrated in two panels of the *Atlas*. In the *Florence* series, however, this way of painting over the photographic image gains a new poetic dimension. It is immediately obvious that he attempts to establish a direct interaction between photography and painting. They are considered two ways of producing images and their overlap pushes him to question the issue of representation and, above all, to explicitly demonstrate how their core aspect differs (the question of presence, tactility). Richter says: 'Photography is not really based on reality, it is just a picture. And paintings always have reality; painting is tangible, has presence, but it always results in a picture... I have taken small photographs which I then smeared with paint. This brought aspects of the problem together.'<sup>6</sup>

This issue is constant in Richter's work and has been analysed in several ways and by several means since the sixties.

It is e.g. the case of *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)* (1966). This nude of Richter's first wife was painted from a photograph taken by the artist. The allusion of the work is evident: it refers to Duchamp's mechanical nude in *Nu Descendant un Escalier* (1912), a profoundly conceptual work whose objective is to reveal and decompose movement in a succession of fixed images and successive and static instants. The painting is a nude without flesh or bones; it is a mechanical nude that goes against the classical nude code. In Richter's work, on the contrary, the representation of the nude seems to get closer to the classical canons. Richter questions both the nature of representation and of illusion, and experiments with an answer to Marcel Duchamp's anti-art and conceptualism, by reversing it: 'it is not just a depiction of any nude descending a staircase, it is Ema.'<sup>7</sup> This fact makes all the difference. It is neither the coldness of an idea, nor the 'absence' of a picture, it is Ema, Richter says. Richter's painting increases presence, and tactility, but still it rejects the illusion of all-seeing. It lets us finally understand, in a new light, a very specific feature of the work: its coldness and distance, a kind of haze

<sup>5</sup> Richter says, for example: 'Appearance, that to me is a phenomenon', Gerhard Richter, interview with Robert Storr, in Richter, Gerhard, *Forty Years of Painting* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 292.

<sup>6</sup> Richter, Gerhard, quoted in: Dietmar, Elger, "Epilogue" in Richter, Gerhard, *Florence* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), iii.

<sup>7</sup> Storr, Robert, *Gerhard Richter. Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 57.

that is well expressed in various technical aspects, e.g. the effect of fogging and the choice of an artificial black and white medium. Both contribute to the idea that the image refuses to express, that it arises from the centre of numerous restraints which leave deep marks. This feeling that we are faced with a concealment/revelation is reinforced by the fact that we cannot see Ema's eyes. She looks down in what seems to be a kind of modesty that deeply contrasts with her nakedness. This refusal to show her eyes mirrors another refusal: the refusal of the image to appear, to totally surrender.

## 2. Portraits: Illusion, Representation and Utopia.

The most beautiful of Richter's paintings are those of his daughter and of his third wife, Sabine Moritz.

*Betty* (1988) is a portrait of the artist's daughter posing like Ingres' models, with her face turned away from the spectator, like in *Baigneuse Valpincon* (1808). This oil painting on canvas seems to comply with all the formal requirements of the classical portrait, even in its tremendously intense realistic effect that makes us doubt whether we are looking at a picture or a painting. The realistic representation of the white jacket with red flowers the model is wearing is absolutely perfect (and, once again, it reminds us of Ingres), the effect of light in her golden stranded hair almost makes us want to touch it. We feel how comfortable the childish clothes she's wearing must be, how silky her still childish hair. In this almost physical presence, we feel that Betty is already a teenager, a young woman leaving childhood behind. All this is easily seen in the image. However, this work, apparently so in line with the formal classical canons, breaks away from them in the most direct and ostensive way possible. Betty turns her face away from us. Her face, eyes or expression are invisible. Instead of looking at us, she gazes at something inaccessible, since the background is a uniform streak of dark colour, maybe one of Richter's abstract grey paintings, a background that strongly contrasts with the light emanating from her. Once again, this work contains numerous layers of reading: a portrait of a relationship between the observer and the observed, between the subject and the object? A more naive portrait of a relationship between father and daughter or the coming of age? A proof of the painting's vain attempt to entirely reveal itself, of the image's hope and despair and its inability to become transparent? The truth is that, once more, this work lives in and off the tension between unveiling and concealing, between the unveiled and the concealed, between offer and denial, between the visible and the invisible. That is why it is probably one of the greatest works of the twentieth century.

It's the perfect parallel of *Reading* (1994), two portraits of Richter's third wife, Sabine Moritz. In both cases, we can see a young woman reading a newspaper, totally focused on herself, emitting a light that reminds us of Vermeer and that contrasts with the dark backdrop. The first version is a diffuse and blurry image of the young woman's neck and her delicate head turned away from us, looking slightly downwards as if she

were reading. Against the dark background, her light hair and young skin shine through. A blurry effect accentuates the feeling of intangibility. We admire a subtle picture of an epiphany of light emanating from the grey background and the surrounding darkness. In the second version, the image loses the blurry diffuse effect. We can now see very clearly the profile of the young woman. But, even though the painting is much sharper than the previous version, she still remains unfathomable in her beauty. In both cases, two ideas prevail: a tactile perception that, in the former, provides us with a sense of immateriality, whereas in the latter, it suggests an almost physical contact with the model (in the second version, we can almost hear her breathe); and, at the same time, gives a sense of absence. Her presence is tremendously real, almost physical, but she is also totally absorbed, absent, enclosed in her inner world. This sensation has nothing to do with the sharpness of the image, it is not related to the fact that she faces away from us or stands sideways. Curiously, the beauty that beams from the painting transcends its physical outlines and arises directly from a purely transcendent place where the woman is in both paintings. The tension between absence and presence is uniquely and magnificently outlined here.

### 3. Immanence and Transcendence.

Gerhard Richter moves, as we saw, in the tension between appearance and concealment. Between what *appears* and what is hidden. Betty turns her face away from us. Some of his realistic paintings seem black and white or filtered through a fog reminiscent of a veil: Ema refuses to look at us, Sabine is totally focused on herself and ignores us; on other occasions she is portrayed with Moritz, but this act of painting her appears even to our eyes as an extremely painful one, in which she is torn away and pulled out of the reality in which she's moving.<sup>8</sup> These are only some examples of what seems to be what we will refer to here as Richter's 'transcendent immanence', which echoes Heidegger's 'transcendence without a transcendent'. Similarly, Richter seems to exist and create in the heart of his own 'ontological difference', totally aware that his bringing into presence, i.e., that image, contains the visible and the invisible, what is seen and what is necessarily concealed by this disclosure.

On the one hand, Richter's works consent to be pure images, entities and disclosures; on the other hand, they are open-ended because of their disclosure of their own activity of disclosure. An appearance that reflects upon itself must carry the marks of its birth and, above all, of the insufficiency and incompleteness of what is said or shown.

This is the aim of Gerhard Richter's work, the aim of his painting. Photography is the figurative canon of our time and it's on its basis that Richter tries to represent. And, by doing so, he shows the fallacy of representation

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<sup>8</sup> As is the case of the magnificent works *S. Mit Kind* (1995).

itself: even though a painting is a representation of a representation, its nature is totally different from that of photography. The double nature of the representation in question demystifies the very idea of representation as truth. Through exaggeration Richter demonstrates in his paintings the artificiality of objective representation. And, above all, he affirms that it is impossible to deduce a faithful image of reality from a photograph.

We saw that modern representation establishes the domain of maximum objectivity and its reverse: maximum subjectivity. Reality, as an object, creates a subject that objectifies it. The world as a picture demands a separation between what is represented and who represents, it imposes a separation between the subject and the object. Positivism was contradicted by the subjectivism of the Nietzschean Will; both Heidegger and Richter consider them all insufficient.

Reality shows itself and the artist's task is to safeguard the Being's presence as a disclosure that conceals; to safeguard the essence of Being as *aletheia*. Like Heidegger, Richter focuses on the object's immanence but also on the disconnection from reality that seems to be announced by doubly representing it, but in fact works in the opposite way – it reconducts the image to its double immanence: its immanence as a representation that is deferred, not through a subject that filters, but through a universal rationality that objectifies and informs. All his works live in this tension: pictorial reality is an appearance, a being, but Richter fights so as not to establish it as a self-justifiable whole. Richter does not search for solutions, he raises questions. He does not search for truths but for paths, processes, ways and transformations. The major importance of Richter's *poiesis* lies in its opposition to the closure of the image in global technologies or philosophies, in the empire of technology that rules the destinies of art, with its illusion of power. It is a mistake to imagine one can create using a modern technology. One can only recreate the same object over and over again, until it is exhausted. The result is always the same, even when it is subject to the most radical deconstructions. For Richter, deconstructions are not actually sufficient creations. His search is unique, especially regarding reality that is already technologically informed. In his oeuvre, he strives to save art in the era of the *Ge-stell*, to make it reach beyond the modern representation. To achieve that, he simultaneously integrates and totally transforms his objects into a new poetic possibility. Escaping technological rationality in his works can be seen in painful forms of images struggling for survival in the technological domain, in a space dominated by the *Ge-stell* which threatens to entirely invade our intellect and emotions. The emotional restraint we find in Richter's paintings is also a strength of resistance against total manipulation of emotions by the *Ge-stell*, which permeates all spheres of life. A resistance against the present, but also a refusal to return to the past. Richter paints his own desolation at the impossibility of living the utopia of the past.

In a world dominated by the *Ge-stell*, emotions are standing reserves that are also subject to tremendous forces of ordering, manipulation, control and fixation. Art either denounces all these procedures or integrates

them, or both. However, it finds itself, through Richter's eyes, in a remarkable position: it is similar to Meinhof's, Ensslin's and Baader's desperate situation that led them to commit suicide in jail. Confronted with the end of utopia, painting at the end of the millennium is in a blind alley. And its situation is the same, either in the total surrender or in the absolute non-surrender. 'But where danger is, grows the saving power also,'<sup>9</sup> says Heidegger, paraphrasing Hölderlin. And the saving power is the new advent of Being: *Ereignis*.

### Abstract

In this essay, I will explore the idea that Gerhard Richter's work is consistent with what I refer to here as transcendence without a transcendent by Martin Heidegger. Furthermore, I will try to demonstrate how his use of painting is response to Heidegger's criticism of *Ge-stell* and the technological era. In order to pursue these objectives, I will start with a detailed analysis of Richter's work from the sixties to the present day.

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<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, Martin, "The Question Concerning Technology", in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 28.