

# Gerhard Richter's Use of Photography to Challenge Our Understanding of the Real<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

I still find it striking that all of Richter's work is related to photography. ...The incessant layering by which Richter develops his abstract images seems to mark a journey, a complex psychological struggle to understand the world. What he displays in these paintings is finally the search itself (Struth, 2002).

We have been too eager to define reality and then treat it as done with (Richter, 1993:68).

What has Gerhard Richter, among the world's greatest living painters, been telling us about photography? Richter has long mistrusted the picture of reality conveyed to us by our senses. He has told several interviewers over the past forty years that he finds our encounter with reality to be "imperfect and circumscribed" (1993:73). Further, he does not believe that a photograph provides us with a picture of reality any more than a painting does – both media are merely imperfect tools used to make images which are a substitute for reality. When he paints from a photograph, which he has often done since 1962, Richter finishes the work by blurring it (usually using a light brush, or squeegee) to apply a thin layer of white paint (as in *Two Fiats*, 1964). For Richter this blurring concerns the human incapacity to know reality which for him is always subjective, imprecise, uncertain, transient and incomplete (*Ibid.*:74). By examining the relationship of Richter's painting to photography this chapter points to how he has destabilized the photograph as part of his overall effort to reduce our faith in objective reality. By asserting the shared possibilities and limitations of painting and photography Richter too makes an important visual contribution to our theoretical life in poststructural times.

## II. Richter and the Inhuman

Every word, every line, every thought is prompted by the age we live in, with all its circumstances, its ties, its efforts, its past and present. ...there will always be possibilities, even in disaster. ...There is no excuse whatever for uncritically accepting what one takes over from others (Richter, 1993:11).

Richter is an image maker to whom personal biography is unavoidable in assessing his images. He was born in Dresden, a city which the British destroyed with firebombs towards the end of the second world war. Members of his family were part of the German war machine (he painted his *Uncle Rudi* [1965] in uniform) and Richter himself was pressed into the Hitler Youth at age 10. He returned to study art in Dresden 1951 in a partitioned Germany as a result of Soviet State communism's transplantation into East German lands. His artistic training saw him become a banner and mural painter in what Westerners would then call the "Soviet Realist" style (see Storr, 2002:19 ff.). Just before the erection of the Berlin Wall, he slipped to the West.

Among Richter's clearer statements concerning image making and the real is that "to confer meaning is inhuman" (1993:79). Richter's experiences as a boy, as a student in the former German Democratic Republic, and later in the West have impressed upon him that we do not know the real, merely the appearances behind which it hides. This lesson, which has also emerged from the work of Baudrillard (see chapters 2 and 3), makes good sense to Richter who does display a remarkably Baudrillardian conception of the real at times in his interviews (see especially 1993:235).

Richter had seen several times (in very different places) the incredible burden of ideology on the mind. At age ten he was instructed in the overtly racist eugenics theory of *Mien Kampf* in a Hitler youth organization where one was expected to believe unquestioningly. As a maturing adolescent and young artist he experienced the strictures of the East German state and its socialist fundamentalisms (maintained by a central ruling party supported by the state police force – the Stasi). After his passage to the West Richter experienced the post war market fundamentalisms of an earlier stage of globalizing capitalism. As his leaving the East was an act of defiance and resistance he also resisted the ideological fervor behind the Western modernism to which he was introduced: "Kandinsky – I can't stand any of his paintings or the work of most artists who have said: 'I am like a child' as if they could invent the world from the very beginning... I thought they were all stupid" (Richter in Storr, 2002:307). He also recalls: "I remember the worship around Malevich and others. I could never participate in that. I was never interested in that. I never shared any of those beliefs" (*Ibid.*:307). He understood early on that if the avant-garde was not dead it would be dead to him. He told Sabine Schütz: "I was never aware of belonging to the avant-garde, and that was never part of my intention. Avant-garde: that was usually too dogmatic and too aggressive for me" (Richter, 1993:215). Little wonder then why Richter kept his distance from the much adored Joseph Beuys and his shaman-like activities while teaching in the same department at Dusseldorf in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Richter has long been wary of anyone who assumes a public posture with an ideological motivation:

...the tremendous strength, the terrifying power that an *idea* has, which goes as far as death. That is the most impressive thing, to me, and the most inexplicable thing; that we produce ideas, which are almost always not only utterly wrong and nonsensical but above all dangerous. Wars of religion and the rest: it's fundamentally all about nothing, about pure blather – and we take it utterly seriously, fanatically, even unto death (1993:193).

Richter understands that it is very important to have things in which not to believe even more than objects of belief (see Baudrillard [1995a] 1996:142). He also expresses a poststructuralist's preference not for meaning but in meaninglessness (in terms of shared meaning) that is often the result of an individual thinking for him/herself: "In the Photo Pictures, for example, I set out to grasp this beautiful meaninglessness from the subject angle" (1993:79). For Richter it is the quest for meaning and belief beyond the individual, in the form of collective beliefs and actions, that often leads to a debased ideological existence wherever one lives.

Painting and photography are both important to him because they help us understand our epistemological confines.

For Richter: “A picture represents itself as the unmanageable, the illogical, the meaningless” (1993:35). Here he sounds quite similar to Baudrillard’s notion that the task of thought is to seek unintelligible and enigmatic outcomes (2000a:83).

It is interesting in this philosophical context that Baudrillard was also a photographer and from his images we see that he much preferred to take photographs which made the world appear more enigmatic (see Baudrillard, 1999b; Coulter and Reid, 2007; Coulter, 2008). Richter was however a painter who, from his earliest days in the West, sought to make ‘photographs’ by using oil paint on canvas. What we learn from his experiences of these media tells us as much about photography and about our relation to the ‘real’ as it does about contemporary oil painting.

### III. Painting and Photography

I am a painter, I love to paint. Using photographs was the only possible way to way to continue to paint... the notion of neutrality and objectivity is an illusion (Richter in Storr, 2002:295, 298).

The first impulse towards painting, or towards art in general, stems from the need to communicate, the effort to fix one’s own vision, to deal with appearances (Richter, 1993:11).

Richter emphasized enigmaticalness and multiple ways of seeing the world in his early years often by painting it in shades of grey. *Woman Descending the Staircase* (1965) is a grey painting of a found object, a photograph (with an obvious poke at Marcel Duchamp’s “pseudo-complexity” (1993:272) and the notion that artistic production can be denied) (in Nasgaard, 1988:18). Richter also painted his first wife Ema as *Nude on a Staircase* (1965). The problem of photography which Richter confronted is that people tend to take for granted that what they see in a photograph as representative of a ‘real world’ ‘out there’ to be known. For Richter, who worked as a developer’s assistant as a teenager: “The photograph is an abstraction of its own... photography took on a religious function ...altered ways of seeing and thinking. Photographs were regarded as true, paintings as artificial” (1993:30-31). At the time he was beginning to paint from photographs he said: “I feel sorry for the photograph because it has such a miserable existence” (*Ibid.*:33). The reason for this miserableness he tells us is that “the camera does not apprehend objects: it sees them” (*Ibid.*:35). The photograph then is the result of a miserable technological way of seeing because it purports to mechanically reproduce a reality which Richter, nor any of us, can know. When asked by Dieter Hülsmanns and Fridolin Reske “How significant are the things represented in your pictures? Richter replied: “Highly significant, definitely. Just not significant in the sense of conveying information about reality” (1993:58). As he put it at the time he painted *Woman Descending the Staircase*:

As a record of reality, the thing I have to represent is unimportant and devoid of meaning... I am not saying that the thing represented is abolished as such. The representation simply acquires a different meaning: it becomes the pretext for a picture. Photography suits my purposes here: the photograph confronts me as a statement about a reality which I neither know nor judge, which does not interest me, and with which I do not identify. All that interests me is the grey areas, the passages and tonal sequences (*Ibid.*:37).

Richter, who learned young to detest interpretations which were handed to him, says “the photograph makes a statement about real space but as a picture it has no space of its own. Like the photograph I make a statement about real space, but when I do I am painting; and this gives rise to a special space that arises from the interpretation and tension between the thing represented and the pictorial space” (*Ibid.*:38). Like most influenced by a poststructuralist way of seeing he says that he does not want to have an ideology because to have one “means having laws and guidelines; it means killing those who have different laws and guidelines” (*Ibid.*:39).

In an interview with Peter Sager (1972) Richter clarified the concern he had for human seeing and photography in his early Photo Paintings: “We can’t rely on the picture of reality that we see, because we see it mediated through the apparatus of the eye, and corrected in accordance with this experience. ... Because we want to know if it can be different, we paint” (in 1993:68). When Sager says to Richter: “You mean to show that what we regard and describe as real is a fundamentally uncertain thing?” Richter replies in a way that shows us the theoretical depth of his poststructuralism:

Yes, and also that certainty is the less safe option... our assessment of things and situations, it can’t be relied upon... However many subcategories of realism you invent: it clarifies nothing... restrictions placed on art... a way of domesticating it. ...You recognize that you can’t represent reality at all – that what you make represents nothing but itself, and therefore is itself reality (*Ibid.*:69-72).

He told another interviewer probing along the same lines that: “uncertainty is part of me; it’s a basic premise of my work. After all, we have no objective justification for feeling certain about anything. Certainty is for fools, or liars” (1993:215). This is precisely why Baudrillard’s insights concerning the real and its representation in media are such matters of personal experience for Richter for whom the painted picture is even closer to appearance than to reality than is the photograph (which is itself a record of appearances). Richter simply intuitively grasps an aspect of Baudrillard’s thought here because of his own experiences. To put it succinctly – our human eye, a photograph, or an artist’s rendering of an object in paint, can never represent “the real” because we never know the real – merely the appearances behind which the real always remains hidden. For Richter, while the artist can hope for more, it is unlikely that s/he will accomplish lofty goals in our times: “I have always been resigned to the fact that we can do nothing, that Utopianism is meaningless, not to say criminal. This is the underlying structure of my Photo Pictures” (in 1993:103).

It is useful at this point to discuss two examples of what Richter is feeling. First, we “know” from science that a table is a collection of atoms and sub-atomic particles and micro-gravitational forces. We now believe science when it tells us that the spaces between the atoms occupies more total space than do the atoms themselves. We do not see this sub-atomic “reality” but rather, we experience the cool smoothness, flatness, and firmness of the table. We know the appearance of the table not its sub-atomic reality. As a second example of how we know merely appearances and not the real, we can recall the experience of a range of mountains, over the course of a day, in many colours due to the passing of sunlight and clouds. Which mountains do we know? Those which “appear” bright white at noon or those which are dark orange at 7 pm? What we know is the multiple and varied appearances behind which the mountains exist which we can actually claim to “know”. Knowing based on sensing is highly subjective and appearance based and among the more penetrating insights of poststructuralism has been a recognition that we cannot, for all of our science, penetrate past appearances. The best science we have shares with poetry, literature, and art the ability to point to the unconquerable enigmaticalness of the world. This is, according to Baudrillard,

thought's highest task – “facing a world that is unintelligible and problematic, our task is clear: we must make that world even more unintelligible, even more enigmatic (Baudrillard, 2000a:83). Richter's art and what it has to say to the photograph and to the real makes a significant contribution to a broader poststructural awareness of the poetic value of thinking and sits well beside Baudrillard's writing so comfortably.

The blurring which occurs in Richter's Photo Paintings emphasizes the subjective aspect of seeing and of image making. If Richter merely painted a copy of a photograph he could be understood as claiming it has a purchase on reality when all it has is a purchase on his subjective interpretation of appearances. The gossamer thin blur across his photo paintings makes a vitally important epistemological statement concerning our ability to know only appearances. If we cannot trust paint, or a camera, or even our human eyes, why then should we believe in anyone else's interpretation of anything – including ideologies? What is blurred, distorted, destabilized by Richter is the epistemology of those who would claim that we can know reality – and the photograph – because it has so often been a repository of this kind of thought becomes a useful subject for Richter's attack on common sense epistemology in a world of appearances.

The implication of Richter's epistemology is that a painting tells us as much (and as little) about reality as does a crystal clear photographic image of something. Indeed, a blurred photograph contains no less information about an object than a clear image (in 1993:231 ff.). He has also noted that “You do not see less by looking at a field out of focus through a magnifying glass” by which he means one does not see more for the clarity of the camera (see Hawker, 2002:547). It is little wonder why Richter eventually turned to painting photographs of foggy landscapes, misty seascapes, and clouds – objects which wear their appearances with such striking temporality.

Richter set out from the 1960's not to use photography as a means to painting but to use painting as a means to photography: “I am not trying to imitate the photograph, I am trying to make one. I am practicing photography by other means” (1993:73). As such, photography becomes the basis for undermining belief in it as a reality bearing medium and a way into image making that is instead about the “the boundless, the meaningless, in which I place much hope” which he says “he sets out to grasp in the photo pictures (*Ibid.*:73). It is important to keep in mind then that for Richter our senses, the camera, and the painted picture are all equally unable to represent reality naked and unveiled of appearances. Both painting and photography are “fundamentally” he says: of the same medium – the principle difference is that “photography does it much faster” (in 1993:217). Photography is thus fundamental to Richter's challenge to the real and his (Baudrillardian) appeal for a way of seeing that favours enigma over clarity and ideology. Richter, like Baudrillard, possesses a cool sense of the real and if anything fears hotter treatments of it as we commonly find popular ideology and politics. Richter's cool relationship to meaning giving begins with *Table* (1962) and continues through his Photo Paintings for many years. In making his photographs by other means, Richter's painting has closed the space between photography and painting only to immediately reopen it and the result is a further contribution to the destabilization of photography (Hawker, 2002:541; 2006:5).

The thin white veil Richter paints over his photo paintings emphasizes the fragility and subjectivity of seeing, a way of destabilizing all ways of seeing by reminding us that even the photographic vision is subjective. Richter's doubting of photography is part of his greater project to divest the real of our faith in it. By understanding photography as a mere conveyor of appearances it can serve well the needs of painting

because the subject of all art, which can claim to be art, is illusion. Art as illusion can be used for Richter to challenge our eye's desire for form – something which photography rarely does (especially before the digital). Richter, a painter, as he must, remains on the side of illusion, which is for most photography, the side of evil. It is interesting that digitalization today is taking photography closer to Richter's view of it than most of its traditional manifestations have done. Richter's photo paintings precede the undermining of faith in the image by photographic technology itself by only a few decades.

#### **IV. Abstraction and A Return to Photography**

*Appearance*, that to me is a phenomenon (Richter in Storr, 2002:292).

Thus far I have focused on Richter's earlier work, including his writings and interviews, but we should not forget that he has, in recent years, become a leading proponent of abstract painting. He has also worked with painting over photographs and has even begun to photograph some of his paintings (which were originally painted from photographs themselves). Each of these efforts continues Richter's assault on epistemologies which seek to easily accommodate the real.

Our human eye constantly seeks to order and make sense of the enigmatic and unknowable physical and mental landscapes we inhabit. Richter's abstract paintings speak to the unknowability of the world despite the constant search for references and our tenuous grasp on our circumstances. For Richter an abstract painting can make as much sense of this world as can a photograph. His work points repeatedly to the vicious relation between image and its supposed referent, the supposed real – and argues for an understanding that the referent of the photograph, like the painting, is appearances and that the proper subject of art is illusion. Richter needs photography in order to work on behalf of painting, the task of which, is to communicate – and the main message Richter most wants to communicate is ambiguity – hence the blur reappears in his abstractions. The photograph is not understood by Richter to be the end of seeing, but the beginning of investigation into what photographs are – and into their demystification.

Painting abstractions after the late 1970s was an unusual thing for a major artist to do and Richter has risen to the top of the art world as much on the basis of these works as any other. Against the somberness and stillness of geometric abstraction and the colour field painting of the 1950s and 60s, Richter's abstractions are about movement which involves the careful problematization of painting's ability to respond to contemporary ways of seeing. After his blurred photo paintings his blurred abstractions are, for Richter, the only kind of abstraction which is possible. His abstractions, like his Photo Paintings, show Richter to be a master of appearances. Far more subtle than the geometric abstractionists are Richter's frozen blurs of paint (like a photograph and very much like one of his painted photographs) – there is no depth to be contemplated here but rather movement which has been arrested. Even Pollock did not achieve this 'frozen in motion' quality as Pollock's paint is at rest and appears to be at rest. Importantly, Richter's abstractions are the result of the painter alone with paint, canvas and the artist's tools – they are not made from photographs. Yet, it is not at all surprising to hear Richter say that his abstractions are a kind of photography (as are his photo paintings): "Those of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts etc.) are also photographs" (in 1993:73).

In his later years Richter has also taken up the over-painting of photographs. During a discussion concerning how "painting is the technique for shattering it [photography]" Richter made a telling remark: "I once took some small photographs and then smeared them with paint. That partly resolved the problem, and it's really

good – better than anything I could say on the subject” (in 1993:227). In his more recent over-painted photographs Richter lays an abstract layer of paint over a photographic image in his most personal challenge to the camera. These works are not an unexpected product of a painter who has made so many blurred photo paintings and abstractions. They are a kind of shorthand for what he has been doing with his painting and blurring for decades. Rather than paint his version of the photograph and then apply his characteristic white blur, here Richter directly confronts the false clarity of the photographic image. The paint now stands in for doubt directly and as a representation of the artist’s (or anyone’s) subjective view of any image (photographic or otherwise). The power of the camera is driven out of these works as in his photo paintings to which photography is necessary to the completion of the work only in as much as it may be challenged, reevaluated, and deconstructed. Richter’s over-painted photographs speak to a cherished idea of Richter’s – if painting is to die, it will not be because of photography.

As photography once played a vital role in undermining the credibility of painting (few preferred a painting of a contemporary historical event over a photograph), Richter has played a key role in returning an important undermining photography. Richter has constantly reduced photography to the level of ephemerality and subjectivity of the painted image. This is not a surprising end to Richter’s original desire in the early 1960s to get out from under the weight of art history and the culture of painting by painting from photographs (see Nasgaard, 1988:18). Ironically, today that which we have long known as “photography” may itself be dying in the era of digitality and computer generated images. Just as this development is taking place Richter has surprised many by returning to the camera to make images of his own paintings (including those done originally from photographs).

Richter’s recent photography of his own paintings do to his painting what he has originally done to photography. It is Richter’s way of pointing to the inadequacy of all means of capturing reality and pointing out, with a camera as with a brush, that what art presents us with is always at least one major step short of the real – a recording of the subjective interpretation of the appearances which veil reality, and this is why his recent art is all the more interesting. Richter goes so far that today even the camera can be used as an artistic instrument if it is used thoughtfully, that is, with the awareness that what it records is the appearances as the subject sees them and aims the lens, not reality. As with his abstractions themselves, Richter’s blurred photographs represent the only ‘reality’ we know. Painting remains as useful (and useless) as any medium for recording reality: “In the photograph I take even more focus out of the painted image, which is already a bit out of focus, and make the picture even smoother. I also subtract the materiality, the surface of the painting and it becomes something different” (in Storr, 2002:291). The painter (or photographer) who understand that s/he can only master appearances, not the real, shares Richter’s view. By using the camera to blur his own paintings further as photographic images Richter seems to be taking a less tentative approach to art than his painted abstractions which he admits possess a tentative quality (in relation to the gestures of earlier abstractionists like Kline or De Kooning who he feels paint with utter assurance, see Storr, 2002:306). In our times of uncertainty though, with the heroism of modernism that Kline or De Kooning could still feel, a certain hesitancy in all artistic efforts is perhaps merely a way of distancing oneself from modernism’s vast hubris. Whatever self assuredness we may detect in his photography Richter understands that appearances are the principle subject of the artist: “every art, whether it is philosophy, literature, music, or painting, can touch something; it can’t depict, never depicts” (Richter in Storr, 2002:307). Again, a deep similarity between Richter’s art and Baudrillardian poststructuralism is apparent “...at the heart of the photographic image there’s a figure of nothingness, of absence, of unreality” (Baudrillard, [1997a] 1998:93). It seems that it is precisely this nothingness at the heart of the image that

Richter has sought these past forty-seven years. That, and undying faith in painting at a time when many were proclaiming it to be dead: “Painting is the only positive thing I have. Even if I see everything else negatively... I can at least carry on” (Richter in Storr [1996] 2002b).

## V. Conclusion

I was certainly a child of the *Zeitgeist*. There’s absolutely no doubt about it. One is affected by what is going on at the time (Richter in Storr, 2002:305).

Photography...it’s changed painting so greatly... I have never seen them [photographs] as inhuman (Richter, 1993:187).

Isa Genzken’s portrait of Richter (1993) is the best photograph of him I have seen in that it captures something of the artist’s soul. The image is slightly out of focus which suits this artist who is ever a moving target for interviewers and for himself. Indeed, he has painted himself in a similar blurred manner (1996).

If giving meaning is inhuman as Richter has said it is, perhaps it is the job of art to stand in for meaning which is always absent. To a writer like Baudrillard it was, interestingly, language which was assigned this same task (not of conveying meaning, but standing in the place of meaning). This is an idea Baudrillard takes from Lacan (Baudrillard, [1987] 1990: 6, 159). Gerhard Richter’s work over the past five decades is the record of his communication with the world and I think it is important to keep in mind his liking for other “children of the *Zeitgeist*” such as Baudrillard or John Cage. In Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” he said “I have nothing to say and I am saying it”. Richter has discussed in an interview with Robert Storr how impressed he was with that lecture (Storr, 2002:299).

“I blur to make everything important and equally unimportant... Perhaps I also blur out the excess of all unimportant information” (Richter, 1993:37). The Genzken photograph and the Richter *Self-Portrait* (painted from a photograph), say something to how Richter himself likes to be portrayed and to portray himself somewhat enigmatically. Richter has long served as much as a source of frustration as knowledge for his interrogators who in interviews frequently become exasperated with his (very sincere I think) answers to their questions. The Genzken photograph and Richter’s *Self-Portrait* (one he approved for publication and the other he made himself), tell us something about Richter that Francis Bacon would understand. Bacon frequently painted a swirl right in the face of his portraits (including self portraits) to emphasize the unknowability of the artist’s subject, even if that subject is the artist him/herself (see Chapter Three). Richter’s blurs are no less frustrating to realist epistemologies than are Bacon’s swirls of paint. Both address the enigma and ultimate unknowability of the world which we can perhaps only return (with painters like Richter and Bacon and philosophers like Baudrillard) a little more enigmatic and unintelligible for their time spent considering it. In a time during which our faith in the photograph would come to be undermined by digitalization, computer generation, and virtuality, Richter’s art is central to discussions of image making, the real, and photography.

Gerhard Richter has become one of the most important artists of the contemporary era – and it is the photograph – that miserable object which he once felt so sorry for (and which we must “counter the tendency to take too seriously” – that we have to thank (“Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist [1993] 1993:260). As always with Richter, it is the grey areas – the passages, the tonal sequences, the blurs – that

are the most interesting for it is in these indeterminant spaces that he has challenged our understanding of 'the real'.

**Gerry Coulter** has written extensively on the arts and theory over the past two decades. His book *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert – The Poetics of Radicality* was published by Intertheory in 2012. His book *Art In/After Poststructuralism: Surviving Baudrillard's Challenge* will also be published by Intertheory (Skyland, North Carolina). Gerry is a past winner of Bishop's University's highest honour for teaching – The William and Nancy Turner Prize. He is the founding editor of the International Journal of Baudrillard Studies [www.ubishops.ca/ baudrillardstudies](http://www.ubishops.ca/ baudrillardstudies)

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#### Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will appear as Chapter 5 of Gerry Coulter. *Art In/After Poststructuralism: Surviving Baudrillard's Challenge*. Intertheory Press, Skyland, North Carolina, 2014.