**The Intermediary’s Approach**

“Each artwork is the mortal enemy of the other.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

-Theodor Adorno

Though Gerhard Richter expressed deep agreement with Adorno’s admonition in the 2012 film *Gerhard Richter Painting*, he has still exhibited artworks together, even if he is always hiding behind them. In March 2020, the Met Breuer presented “Gerhard Richter: Painting After All,” originally planned to run for four months, though the exhibition only lasted nine days because of the coronavirus. Thanks to exhaustive online resources, visitors who could not attend the exhibition were able to appreciate Richter’s prolific and broad career spanning nearly sixty years. Rather than seeing it as an almost commanding affirmation, it might be better to understand the exhibition title as a question: Why paint? More specifically, after experiencing all this—painting has been declared dead many times, and art itself is often interrogated—why continue to paint?

This exhibition, which is not a retrospective, occupied the third and fourth floors of the Met Breuer, beginning with *Table* (1962), the work that also opens Richter’s catalogue raisonné. Visitors at the third-floor entrance may be puzzled, because even before they have approached the piece, they clearly see that three works occupy the same wall, like a triptych. *Table* on the left and *September* (2005) on the right are based on media photographs. Richter’s scraping and covering process pauses the image in a specific moment in the transition from figuration to abstraction. The images are given a mutually contradictory quality: they are simultaneously being constructed and deconstructed. If the presentation of these two elements in *Table* is an overly direct and detached confrontation, then the vague effect in *September,* created more than forty years later, makes the scraped attacks on the canvas much gentler. Considering the fact that *September* touches on the tragedy of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the damaged image and the wounded people are emotional records that connect historical memories.

The installation *11 Panes* (2004) is located between the two paintings. The layering of multiple glass panes attenuates the transparency of the glass and strengthens the mirror effect. Strictly speaking, the work is not painting. Through reflections, the glass becomes an imaginary canvas on which visual forces—the viewer, the surrounding landscape, and anything that randomly appears—come together. Glass is an anti-painting method of painting. The self-assembled triptych before us suggests that Richter’s work is a closed-loop structure. On the fourth floor, he has also placed a mirror between two paintings of family photographs. Richter’s works from the show can be generally divided into photo-based paintings, abstract paintings, and derivatives of the two (in his glass or mirror installations). Richter was born in 1932, and he crossed the border between East and West Berlin in 1961. He never went back until German reunification. His experiences with multiple political systems (Nazi Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and the Federal Republic of Germany) has meant that he keeps his distance from any ideology. As an outsider to the West, it seems that Richter can only respond to fear by avoiding reality; the pictures have become an intermediary option in the service of this goal.

In *Uncle Rudi* (1965), which is based on his family photo albums, the figure is smiling, seemingly unprepared to fight a war. (During World War II, Rudi died in action fighting for Nazi Germany). The work is hung on a white wall, and the building on the other side of the street is visible through the adjacent window. Beyond the wall on which the painting hangs, visitors can see the hidden trees and buildings. This wall touches a nerve in the viewer time and again, hinting at Germany’s Nazi past and directly pointing to the controversies of the present. Due to the blurriness of the image, the historical subject matter is muddled with the present. By depicting the Nazis in his family, Richter attempts to respond to Germany’s terrifying past, and family memory is fused with national guilt. As Richter wrote, he produced photography “not to use it as a means to painting but [to] use painting as a means to photography.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Style-less amateur snapshots, as in *Family at the Seaside* (1964), and ordinary objects, as in *Kitchen Chair* (1965), suggest a lack of intention, or point to a pursuit of neutrality. The pictures float between hand-painted paintings and photographs.

As the “heir to a vast, great, rich culture of painting,”[[3]](#endnote-3) Richter’s defense of tradition is inseparable from the recasting of the academic painting genre. The thick mist in *Iceberg in Mist* (1982) places everything behind a veil. The indistinct iceberg poking out of the surface of the water disappears against the backdrop of the ocean meeting the sky. The placement of almost minimalist elements makes the image lose all narrative, while opening the possibility for deeper contemplation. In works such as *Seascape* (1975) and *Study for Clouds* (1970), Richter uses landscape pictures (and not the landscapes themselves) to depict a mediated reality, connecting the history in the pictures. Richter strives to pay “homage to Caspar David Friedrich,”[[4]](#endnote-4) simultaneously capturing Romantic taste and conviction with his keen sensitivity to nature and his passion for mysterious, distant things.

The “Chromatic Abstractions” section of the show is situated between the “Family Pictures and Artist Portraits” and “Scenes and Scapes” galleries; this juxtaposition highlights Richter’s sudden shift from representation to abstraction. As the only color charts work included in the show, the underlying compositional principle in *4900 Colors* (2007) is randomness. Arranged in a grid structure, all of the elements are connected to one another on equal footing, smoothing out any kind of ranking of colors. When viewers try to identify them, this work is experienced as a rich display that transcends words. The composition echoes the gridded patterning on the floor and ceiling of the gallery, making it the most modernist part of the entire exhibition space. In fact, in the mid-1960s, Richter had already conceived of the color chart concept, using paint sample books as a model and attempting to move beyond the limitations of picture-based painting. Regrettably, because this is just one work, the exhibition overlooks this important transformation in his work and attenuates the moment in which Richter moved toward abstract ready-mades.

The six-part *Cage* (2006) in the central exhibition gallery shows the changes that Richter introducing the squeegee as a painting tool brought to his abstract work. In contrast to his previous abstract pieces, which were primarily presented with mixed colors and the strokes of a brush, the squeegee dispersed, condensed, and mixed the paint layer in an unexpected way, leaving its mark on the original paint layer. In these paintings, the places where the squeegee stopped can be clearly discerned. Chance and control are sometimes manifested as the simple alternation of two tendencies, but sometimes it can be extremely complex, because these two tendencies are often combined in one act of painting.

Grey, cut off and isolated from emotions and associations, has an intermediary effect, much like a photograph, in the world of color. Richter’s early grey paintings still retain identifiable representational subjects, which later evolved into canvases entirely covered with scrawled grey brushstrokes. In some of the works, the marks left by the movement of the brush (and sometimes the hand) can still be seen clearly, and the impenetrable surface texture allows us to envision the actions and rhythms of the creative process. Richter’s greys are never singular or undifferentiated; they are always a mixture. The repetitive exteriors and minutely differentiated interiors of his grey paintings represent the presence of a neither/nor construction, full of ambiguity and insight.

*Birkenau* (2014), shown in the middle of the fourth floor, comes from pictures that survivors had secretly taken of the Nazi concentration camp. Through Richter’s process of smearing and scraping paint, the representational characteristics are completely obscured. This estrangement delays the viewer’s emotional reaction. The vague imagery and the ash grey intensify the horror; the color no longer evokes any harmony. The massacres happened in an area hidden by trees; the forest, once considered a refuge, is here depicted as a dark, sealed-off accomplice to those crimes. The reflection in the massive mirror in the same gallery transcends the space to include this foundational resource for Richter’s work.

The perpetual stylistic breakthroughs and the coexistence of divergent attitudes show that Gerhard Richter will explore all possible options. He moves from one extreme to the other, but never entirely arrives at either. Richter’s works are answers expressed as questions. By highlighting its existence, he questions the traditional medium of painting, while showing its resilience.

1. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor(London: Continuum, 2002), 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gerhard Richter, “Interview with Rolf Schön, 1972,” *Gerhard Richter: Text, Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gerhard Richter, “Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloch, 1986,” ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting – Writings and Interviews 1962-1993* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gerhard Richter, “Conversation with Paolo Vagheggi, 1999,” *Gerhard Richter: Text, Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 348. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)