

The Silence: Non-Discursive Agency in Photography

“It is the activity of the intellect that constitutes complete human happiness. . . . Such a life as this however will be higher than the human level: not in virtue of his humanity will a man achieve it, but in virtue of something within him that is divine.”¹ – Aristotle

I. Photography as Painting



There are many and varied readings of the path of modernity in art, from a type of “whenever one wishes to place its origin” to the travails of representational orders circa 1900 as forms of discursive agency in art fell away to reveal an austere territory within representational orders given to formal agency. Not reducible to art for art’s sake, forms of formalism were and remain legion. While this latter reading is given to arguments over when modernist abstraction first appeared, however yet buried in the figurative mimetic exercises of nineteenth-century art or, in many cases, baroque and neoclassical art, the first and foremost gesture within this incipient gesturalism is something also present in

present-day photography, as surplus, and perhaps no better seen than in the work of Thomas Struth, especially the Prado series (2005-2007).²

It is perhaps not without accident that Struth’s Prado work privileges Velázquez and many of the most stunning paintings Velázquez executed for Philip IV, inclusive of *Las Meninas* (1656). Yet what seems obvious in Struth’s portrayals of art tourists gazing at or milling about the great museums of the West, is that a certain noise remains in the foreground (or in the picture plane proper), while the art work vanishes or slowly recedes into the background, and the pictorial value of photography shifts from its own inherent documentary agency to revealing the shadowy realm of a non-discursive agency that is in part, in Struth’s case, borrowed from painting. It is possible, then, to argue that photography has become the new painting, and that the insistent scale and color regime of the Chromogenic print has pushed photography up against the same limits that painting confronted as it headed for the abstract and formal austerities of what has become known as “the modern.”

Yet it is in the nineteenth century, and it is primarily through John Ruskin, that we see another shift underway, one often discussed in terms of Ruskin’s defense of Turner in *Modern Painters* (1843-1846), but one that is ineluctably a shift from discursive to non-discursive agency, versus a mere shift from figurative to non-figurative representational orders. It is axiomatic that abstraction reduces or eliminates narrative content of the most obvious kind, yet it is also a well-established fact that what emerges is another order regarding art and mimetic functions best characterized as “ontological” insofar as this means this wholly liminal order of representation takes art back to the threshold of its very appearance as art (art qua art). One need not argue, as with Alain Badiou, that the event of art is also the appearance of purely abstract (logical/formal) and/or purely immanent (transcendental/representational) conditions given to the production of worlds. Badiou’s critique (via *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*) is certainly apropos of the moment (as it attempts the same short circuit of representational orders that he seeks in political and economic regimes), and foremost because art, and most clearly photography, once again stands up against the apparent wall of endless contradictions implicit to instrumental logic

(instrumental reason).³ It is the speculative intelligence of art that, in fact, saves art, and it is the embedded speculative intelligence of photography that reveals it is secretly allied with painting in, as Badiou might say, the production and instantiation of other worlds.



Pictorial regimes (and this includes architecture, as long as it is essentially an optical, versus haptic art) have long been shown to embody ideological regimes. (The haptic, in art, is always an end run on the eye, and photography is, first and foremost, an art of the eye.) Perhaps it was Giambattista Vico who most clearly showed how this operates in the institutional or authorized manner of the Baroque machine. Both the singular object (the palace) and the ensemble (the city or town), plus the setting (the landscape) are thoroughly given to expressing the intellectual and ideological spirit of the times, repressive or otherwise. In rebelling against such mimetic frontiers, the artist finds several options, none more compelling than to “head for the hills” in the form of abstraction (Turner) or painterly painting (Velázquez). Such insurrections are only possible within the charmed or charred world of a singular discipline, and rarely become wholesale rebellions. Yet the modern became, with the onset of the twentieth century, a wholesale abandonment of those pictorial resources given to servicing ideology, while they quite often embraced a more radical and timely ideology. (A critique

of ideology or instrumental reason is almost always a critique of *someone else's* instrumental and constructive logic, as Theodor Adorno's Marxist reading of bankrupt systems of capitalist reification was also intent upon installing an alternative order, albeit a permanent critique of all means of aestheticizing the political.) Modernist abstraction in both painting and photography can be traced back to the beginning of the end of Ruskin's somewhat immodest assault on humanist agendas hiding what can only be called inhuman agendas, whether socio-economic or aesthetic-theological. His intense critique of Michelangelo, while somewhat hysterical, seems appropriate when one considers his valorization of Tintoretto or Veronese.⁴ What remained inviolable in both of the latter artists was a form of moral agency that Ruskin saw slowly evaporating with the onset of the late Renaissance and Mannerism, and all but absent in his own day. Despite all attempts to dismiss Ruskin as a Victorian aesthete mired in endless neurotic readings of art as a means of moral suasion, it is also all but impossible to dismiss the fact that his agenda was carried into the twentieth century under the “red” flag of formalism, and, in the process, the moral agenda was either bracketed or thrown out altogether for various postures reducible to “the political” or “the ethical.”⁵

Thus, in present-day photography that has attempted to reduce the discursive noise of the representational field (Badiou's so-called transcendental field, after Kant), there is an aesthetic gesturalism at work that plays at the edge of figuration and introduces forces given to art that have all but vanished with the postmodernist return to high discursivity or the late-modern turn toward art as commerce (commodity and artifact). Photography as painting is in this scenario (the postmodern caesura as defined by Deleuze, Guattari, and Negri) a notable means of erasing certain cyclical (contingent) conditions inhabiting photography and re-introducing certain universal (abstract) conditions common to non-discursive agency, or – at the least – *identifying* latent forces found at the crossing of the two (from noise to silence and vice versa).⁶

Struth's Prado images contain that very conflict of two worlds; the world of silence (the painting) and the world of noise (the museums and the art spectators). One finds in all of his photographs of this period the same mirror games of spectator, artwork, and photographer engaged in an elegant game of cat and mouse.

Who is looking at who? In certain instances we see the artwork only in the eye of the beholder (reflected in the eyes of the spectators, literally and figuratively). Paradoxically, in Candida Höfer’s extraordinarily silent and “empty” architectural photographs, we only find the human, by accident, secreted at the vanishing point; that is, Höfer herself reflected back to the polished lens of her camera by the polished mirror at the far, perspectival “dead” center of her composition.⁷ This doubling of representational hubris (the act of seeing and being seen) leads not further into the house of mirrors but away from it in these late examples of photography as painting, in that the purpose is no longer to indulge endless multiplication of image (*mise en abîme*) but to signal the presence of the speculative intelligence of the work of art itself (a non-discursive intelligence) that silences all narrative and all documentary pretenses to presence (signification). It is this escape from false presence that marks the crossing (nexus) of art as speculative intellect, and it is photography as painting that has brought us the closest in perhaps half a century to the resurrection of formal agency *as moral agency*. This specter is also the *bête noire* of capitalist reification. Art while co-opted by capital is harmless. Art that refuses any relationship to the capitalist exploitation of all things given is either effectively useless and/or truly dangerous.

Photography has long flirted with its role as art, while often being held in thrall to its documentary origins and its cyclical turns into narrative or critical territories aligned most often with the ravages of the postmodern neurosis visited upon the art world since the arrival of neo-liberal capitalism in the 1970s. As late-modern art par excellence, or, as Vilém Flusser wrote, *post-industrial* artifact par excellence, photography is essentially a purely discursive art that, as painting, might ascend the anagogical ladder to full synthetic knowledge of worlds.⁸ It is, then, hyper-critical, in that it can survey and comment on the deranged state of things (Susan Sontag’s point) or it can focus its intentions on the production of worlds yet to come. Worlds yet to come, paradoxically, signal worlds gone endlessly astray. And it is this syrrhesis of possible worlds and lost worlds that determines the exquisite moral agency of art as act of redemptive insurrection.⁹

II. Gerhard Richter and “The Dark School”

“So the most beautiful aesthetics – the most desperate, too, since they are generally doomed to stalemate or madness – will be those aesthetics that, in order to open themselves completely to the dimension of the visual, want us to close our eyes before the image, so as [to] no longer see it but only to look at it, and no longer forget what Blanchot called ‘the *other* night,’ the night of Orpheus. Such aesthetics are always singular, strip themselves bare in not-knowledge, and never hesitate to call *vision* that which no waking person can see.”¹⁰ – Georges Didi-Huberman



Georges Didi-Huberman’s recourse to Tertullian and “the radiance of the visual,” as above, in *Confronting Images* in a sense revives the late Medieval Latin idea of *visualitas* used by Thomas Carlyle to valorize a form of seeing that is essentially intellectual versus merely sensory. It also revisits a contrarian’s perspective, midcentury, insofar as Leo Steinberg’s assault on received opinions as often as not took the form of visual exegesis approaching a form of elective madness.¹¹ Such a form of cognition fuses visuality and intellection, and in Didi-Huberman’s estimation risks insanity (Ruskin and Nietzsche come to mind). The mental picture or vision implied by pure visuality collapses

antinomies in the same fashion that Walter Benjamin considered the photographic image “dialectics at a standstill.”¹² Sublimities of the image are, therefore, like linguistic shadings, “borrowings” (subtle and often frightful), and as often as not connote, per Louis Marin, the arcanian realm of the tomb (the inside/darkness/subjectivity/Caravaggio) versus anything arcadian (the outside/light/objectivity/Poussin).¹³

Yet all of this regards “reading,” as images still must be read as perilous, compressed critical moments. For Gerhard Richter, painting is a series of negations, a negative dialectics of seeing, even when he is painting as a photographer, and most especially when he is painting *over* photographs (ca. 1989). The actually existing Sils Maria, and the series of photographs (landscapes) effaced by paint, double the elemental force in mimesis bringing into play the very reason Nietzsche, in 1879, found in the mountains and lake in the Upper Engadine of Switzerland the perfect embodiment of a supernal “limit”: “the same direct exposure to the laws of Nature that he had experienced in his artistic creation to the basic principles of morals and aesthetics; these laws completely reshaped his concepts, forms, images, and comparisons.”¹⁴ The Eternal Return of the Same is the supernal limit par excellence.

The force of visual knowledge has repeatedly been eclipsed by exegetical exercises in criticism and literal readings of the image. The often deranged discursivity of such exercises did not begin with Roland Barthes. Yet New Criticism and its reliance on formal properties of the artwork in/for itself in many ways sponsored the antithetical readings that indulged the reader’s subjectivity. New Criticism (an Anglo-American school of literary criticism), from the 1940s to the 1970s, relied on a form of formalism that bracketed subjects given over to unitary disciplines (for example, history and politics), a process that in turn contaminated art criticism. Suffice to say the reaction came in the 1970s and 1980s in the irruptive form of the return of the repressed (contingency and the abject subject). This New Historicism in turn, and since, has sponsored a New Formalism.¹⁵

Yet all along the way there have been dissident readings of images and texts (anti-modernisms). The Dadaists and the Surrealists are only the most prominent. The psychoanalytical model has been in play since Freud and took a particularly trenchant turn with Fredric Jameson’s seminal *The Political Unconscious* (1981). The torsion in structuralist readings has to do with the surface/depth dichotomy (and its analogue, form/content), essentially a linguistics-inspired modality of interpreting the formal apparatus of an artwork via somewhat abstract, disembodied forces given to a focus on “formal grammars” (semantics and syntax). The New Formalism present today, as reaction to the “symptomatic reading” of Jameson (the Marxist-Freudian reading of texts and images), suggests not so much a return to the New Criticism of midcentury modernism as a detour through discursivity itself, an end run, with all the attendant suggestiveness of an aesthetics of “surface” (not a literal denunciation of depth, but a premiation of performative formal agency per se).¹⁶ This new focus on contingency is also a red herring, as formal agency is embedded as much in the interior spaces of texts and images as residing at their surfaces. What is notable, and perhaps consistent with the evacuation of ideological readings of artworks, is that this perhaps elemental aspect of artworks (literary and otherwise) – the so-called surface – is wholly consistent with a return to the formal agency of *pre-modern* art. A focus on “intellection” in its contracted “visual” form today is not necessarily also a form of anti-intellection. And if we determine that modern art began with Manet, or thereabouts, and resist thrusting it backward toward the Renaissance, we begin to understand what was at risk in Ruskin’s worldview (the receding or collapsing horizon of painting as superior to literature, and *for very specific reasons*). This something at risk is/was “visuality.” Its mutations over the last century, multiple and conflicting forms of formalism notwithstanding, elicits the expectation that Bruno Latour raises in 2004, at the end of the “symptomatic” reading (the beginning of the so-called “post-critical”): “While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices?”¹⁷ The answer is, of course, “Yes.”

One might find a certain consilience between Ruskin’s pictorial philosophy and Richter’s were one to admit, Art is not meant to solve problems, it is meant to state the truth. And this truth is told in dialectical procedures (dialectical truths as dialectical images/syntheses, at a standstill or otherwise). One cannot help admire Jameson’s totalizing inquest of literature and art (and architecture) insofar as that inquest is Hegelian (and essentially immaterial). The teleology (end) of the interrogation of form is always inverse

to its target; that is, mostly retrospective and mostly concerned with dematerializations of apparent singularities toward releasing aspects of formal agency (repressive or progressive). In many senses the “end” of such maneuvers is also *anti*-historicist (despite Jameson’s well-known bromide to “always historicize”). Deranged discursivity opens on the purely visual. Reading discursively and reading visually are, oddly, one and the same procedure, while visual reading engages a set of formal apparatuses given, simply, to the visual.

It is Badiou’s critique, in *Logics of Worlds*, of Hubert Robert’s painting *The Bathing Pool* (ca. 1777-1779) that formally announces such a set of apparatuses of the visual that are in excess of the verbal, but without that being quite the intention. Whereas in Agamben one finds an allegiance to a metric within artworks that signals an instantiation of a unique form of (subjective) time, in Badiou one finds an extreme form of the outside brought inside under the name of the Event, obliterating the individual, and – in the case of Robert’s painting – the artwork nailed to the cross of the austere model (the logical sets and determinants) that forms worlds (political, artistic, and amorous).¹⁸ This reductive force is typical of formalist agendas that are “intelligibly” based. It is a Platonic or neo-Platonic model (and Badiou admits such). Yet this is the antithesis of Tertullian’s statement regarding the “radiance of the visual.” Intellection of the order of the world of logic is inapplicable to the formal apparatuses of the artwork *as* artwork. “Radiance” in this case is not the beauty of mathemes and discursive sets, but instead the advancing forms of an engendered world (a moral universe, in Ruskin’s worldview), one that falls into Badiou’s transcendental field (an immanent field marked by universals) by way of coordinates that are strictly antithetical to the subject of the work. Badiou indulges anti-humanist forms of an austere formalist agency (a non-ontological agency) toward the resurrection of absolute political, artistic, and amorous truths. Each of these events is already marked by contingency, and Badiou’s task is to re-mark them with the abstract, universalizing tendencies of hyper-formal logic. His “transcendental field” is neo-Platonic and Kantian. Yet it is also a discursive, non-aesthetic “representational field” that he surveys, a territory in-between the Lacanian Real and the often abject state of the subject. As such, it remains spectral. His animosity toward Agamben is telltale: It is the ethical and moral horizon of Agamben’s “tragic humanism” that Badiou rejects. Yet it is Agamben’s tragic humanism that brings us closer to the inherent plenitude in the very notion of “pure visuality,” and the interaction of painting and photography seems ineluctably marked by this inherent plenitude of *non*-signifying agency.¹⁹ Visuality of this order implies a visual poverty wholly inconsistent with modernist forms of abstraction and resistant to analytical models based on a critique of cognition or perception. Pure visuality, in fact, in both Ruskin’s and Richter’s case, implies the return of the existential-metaphysical fuse in art long vanquished with the onset of “form” (surface) without “depth” (intellection), inclusive of midcentury turns into gestalt and pure plasticity, but also inclusive of the more recent forms of New Formalism with recourse to transversal readings based seriality, geometry, and affect, plus the cyclical, syntagmatic excesses of the neo-avantgarde. Accordingly, both Badiou and Agamben are “symptomatic” of the contemporary “situational reading” – but toward entirely different ends.²⁰

If we perform a situational reading of Badiou and Agamben we can extract certain procedural and eventual agencies toward a theory of “pure visuality” wholly appropriate to the conflation of photography and painting; one that unites the two in an unholy alliance of “figuring the transcendental field” of art qua art. For Badiou, we might favor the exceptional rendering of pure formal agency (an old, anti-humanist agenda), while with Agamben we might accept and premiate the existential-metaphysical fuse that leads to the catachresis (appropriation) of the “tragic” (a new, proto-humanist agenda), insofar as both bear witness, in antithetical ways, to what passes in postmodernity as an elective “dark school” – one figuring the outside, the other the inside, and each engendering the other. What is critical is the relationship of the subject in/for itself (subjectivity itself) to these events. On the one hand (Badiou), the subject is after the fact; on the other (Agamben), the subject *is* the fact, but a subject reduced to its most salient, irreducible form (bare life). A purely solipsistic approach would place the subject *before* the fact. In synthesizing these two views, an anterior subject emerges. In turn, by enlisting Richter in the “dark school”

(“subjective night”), we also ignore his inexorable image as painter-clinician, that somewhat misleading (cold) persona of artist-coroner.²¹ In performing his autopsies on art Richter nonetheless is reaching backward into the arsenal of representational casuistry/casuism (all arguments for and against the idea that painting paints painting). The artist-coroner is also, in this case, the artist-artillerist, firing barrage after barrage of figurative (anti-figurative) missiles at the picture plane, not unlike Marcel Duchamp with his *Grand Verre*. One finds, in the midst of the wreckage, the figure of “landscape” as the irrefutable other – “landscape” not as mimetic entourage, nor as figural pendant or surplus (as in neoclassical painting). To further complicate matters, we have Badiou obsessed with Duchamp but “not loving him.” Instead, we have Badiou citing Anselm Kiefer as one who is faithful to the “event of painting.”²² With Kiefer, as with Richter, and denoting a certain excess in painting that has come over to photography, we have a form of hyper-realism that draws its inordinate fire power from the representational (transcendental) field of the “given” (or, arguably, “the real real”).

Richter is best understood as a “conceptual” painter, having worked through the stages of demolishing ideology in the pictorial regime of art, both as provocateur and as artist-coroner. “Paintings are statements about ideas for paintings – almost tautologies but more evasive and unsettled.”²³ Straddling “the divide between conceptual and perceptual art – art as analytical method and art as the material expression of intuitions and emotions,”²⁴ Richter’s perpetual peregrinations between fields of forces in art (representation) and nature (the real) consist of a dialectical crossing back and forth between the frontier that marks the penumbral zone in two contiguous but distinct categories of mimesis – the ideological (which is essentially the anthropomorphic) and the figurative (which is, oddly, the realm of the copy and the realm of purely formal agencies given to representational systems). It is this latter formal agency – *in* figuration – that returns in the most telling ways in the series that leads to and away from landscape. On the one hand, there are the photo-realist and defaced figurative paintings, and, on the other, there are the so-called Abstract Pictures. Richter’s rebellion against the twin exigencies of abstraction and expressionism (and his “cool” approach to Abstract Expressionism *per se*) favor, in ways that are concealed in the multiple means of effacement, works that approach the pure other in landscape (and, in turn, reveal the purely visual excess of forms of mimesis). That he comes at this through photography (through photo-realism and through over-painted photographs) also suggests that photography and painting quietly share an august and austere (perhaps ancient) colloquy regarding figuration proper, an unnamable something that resides at the frontier between something and nothing.

The dialectical fuse within Richter’s pictorial regime is reducible to a series of antitheses: “faith versus skepticism; hope versus pessimism; engagement versus neutrality; self-determination versus fatalism; imaginative freedom versus ideology.”²⁵ The biases produce a material force in all of the works that underscores the principle of excoriating surface matched to non-ideological depth: “impersonal iconography versus delicacy of facture; veiled intimacy versus formality of presentation; chromatic austerity versus rich tactility; optical splendor versus physical remoteness; gestural exuberance versus strict self-censorship; resistance to easy pleasure versus exquisite hedonism; somberness versus playfulness; forthright assertion of image versus mistrust of the image as representation.”²⁶ If these figural possibilities include the art-historical quotation Richter is often accused of, it is subservient nonetheless to the larger cause of the non-ideological materialist vision of the works. The dialectical process cancels shortsighted antinomies (and these are intentionally shortsighted, insofar as they are intended to, in many ways, remove that aspect which is introduced by introducing it). Such apparent paralogisms suggest the distressed relationship between painting and photography is, indeed, a false dichotomy resolved in the recourse to the anterior territory common to both, a territory brought most forcefully into the work via the appropriation of landscape.

Why landscape? “Just because landscape is beautiful, it’s probably the most terrific thing there is.”²⁷ This statement by Richter in 1970 suggests that at that point (and landscape as a subject for art was considered anathema in conceptual terms, as was painting in general) a certain anti-Romantic vision of the “given”

was operational within his inquisition of painting itself. “Richter stresses a simultaneous and disconcerting awareness of nature’s inherent beauty and its complete disregard for human needs, desires, and fears.”²⁸ The anthropomorphic projections denounced by Ruskin regarding neoclassical painting reappear, here, in a viscerally antithetical form given to painting qua painting, a theme Richter will return to repeatedly in different genres, no less crucially in the series examining the demise of the Baader-Meinhof group, entitled *October 18, 1977* (1988).

By the early 1980s, Richter has begun to obliterate the picture plane in a series that leaves the figurative underpainting visible below the increasingly scoured surface. Along the way, *Abstract Picture* (1976), the first of the series introducing a chromatic effacement of both photo-realistic paintings and later photographs (as with Sils), inaugurates an approach to what will later be called an “esthetic moralism.” In the landscape paintings that revisit Romantic themes, “the viewer is thus left in a state of perpetual limbo bracketed by exigent pleasures and an understated but unshakable nihilism.”²⁹ While critics have pointed out the Romantic “art-historical” quotations of Caspar David Friedrich and others, the “aesthetic solace” that emerged with these works is decidedly *post*-Romantic. The loss of aura and the impending gloominess of a thoroughly disenchanting world is a post-Romantic gesture, while with Richter it is also supplemented by a form of non-ideological visuality that restores depth while attempting at once to destroy it. This is, in a word, the first sign of the “dark school” – knowing as unknowing.

Richter’s nihilist phase does not last long. It is gone by the 1980s, as it was in part a response to conceptual art and a last assault on neo-Expressionist tendencies (often applied to German art of the period). “Painting is the form of the picture, you might say. The picture is the depiction, and painting is the technique for shattering it.”³⁰ The divine (“real”) presence in painting as in nature (demoted to suspect forms of ideology and killed off with the “death of painting”) has, with Richter, reformulated itself as pictorial excess. Richter’s nihilist stage is fully Nietzschean in this regard. As transitional rite of passage, one kills off the god of spectral ideological projections to access the one true form of knowing anything. In this case, the outcome is a type of Kantian aesthetic-moral vision that crosses back and forth between painting and photography, and one that does not become a substitute religion in the process, but, instead, a form of knowledge that is inclusive of “moral truths” through aesthetic austerities that produce an art of formalizing formal agency itself. While it is negative, it is also consistent with “dark theology.” Affirmation lies in the revelation of the non-discursive, formal agency given to art qua art. Painting in this manner becomes moral by its very relationship to negative forms of knowledge – through negation upon negation.

This becomes exceptionally forceful with regard to *October 18, 1977*. This series of paintings, first exhibited in Krefeld between February 12 and April 4, 1989 (almost twelve years after the event), unleashes the full “tragic” dimension of Richter’s mimetic project, the subject matter certainly mattering but Richter’s insistence that the paintings of photographs be understood as paintings is telling as all comments for and against the exhibition value of the works. Richter has moved from the non-ideological postures of postmodern art to an anti-ideological pathos. The German Autumn of 1977 was perhaps the turning point. The “murders” of the Baader-Meinhof group in prison, after an autumn of escalating terrorist attacks in an attempt to free them, brought Richter’s “photo-based” work in black and white back from the past (1962-1972) with all the inherent values of the intervening works. This series (eventually purchased by the Museum of Modern Art, New York) led critics to fall over themselves with either denunciatory or adulatory reviews. The “fifteen austere gray paintings” intentionally or otherwise ended up as an index of the path of Richter’s work up till 1989. Tellingly, these works index the entire spectrum of concerns, most especially – however – the 1985 maxim, “no ideology, no religion, no belief, no meaning.”³¹ It is an appalled Peter Schjeldahl who ironically locates the critical nexus of Richter’s path toward a new “transcendental” field for painting in writing about *October 18, 1977*, noting “a collision of irresistible estheticism and immovable moralism.”³² One senses in Richter’s statement that paintings should be read as paintings, not as statements, both a reaction against the last vestiges of pathos-laden

modernist abstraction and its political agency, and a formal bracketing of an emergent moral agency that is held in tension within the works not as subject matter or narrative content per se but as a form of what had been effaced in the earlier naturalistic and photo-realist works – that is, an austerity that approaches purely visual and visceral elemental forces in art that are extracted from the “real” (or the “given”), which almost always translates back to “nature.” The “perpetual limbo” the viewer is often left in and “the unshakable nihilism” that some find numbing seem to figure the unfigurable (as Richter has been said to “paint the unpaintable”). The dialectical analytic of the works reaches a visual crescendo in the series *Sils*. It is here that we see the Eternal Return of the Same as the very model of painting Richter embraces (a form of knowing drawn from the irreducible “otherness” of landscape). Perhaps it is not coincidental that the over-painted landscapes (photographs) appear especially around 1989, just after *October 18, 1977* is unveiled.

It is the so-called apparatuses of art that supply discursivity, while it is the purely formal agency of the media that supplies art’s inexorable means of appearing in the world. For certain forms of formalism, content is simply the formal operations of the transcendental field of appearing, while all else is repressed or voided, including (though never totally) the subject (artist/author). In the most strenuous forms of formalism, formal agency is simply a matter of the rules of the discipline and the will of the artist/author in accord or in conflict with those rules and conventions. This existential divide often produces the mythology of the heroic artist, while the actual terms of the encounter reveal the principles of representational fields derived almost wholly from austere models of already existing worlds. Richter would seem to have circled the problem and returned to the beginning and end point of the cycle. Having pinpointed an “aesthetic-moral” nexus in assaulting the picture plane, he has also returned to a point more primitive than the Alpha and Omega of painting itself. Yet this remains bracketed, as it is the temptation to “real presence” he has resisted all along. (Badiou, in *Being and Event*, and elsewhere, requires of the artist/poet that s/he resist all “temptations” to presence.) In a sense he has come face to face, as did Ruskin, with the absolute mystery of worlds, and this confrontation has produced the “aesthetic-moral” dimension of his later works. In obstructing that distance in representational systems (and by privileging the picture plane, by negation) it is also possible that he has sided with painting’s version of the “real” (pure visuality) as an order of truth equivalent to any that might exist on the other side of the “closed” window of his paintings. To constitute this as a form of “truth,” it must be an “aesthetic-moral” real that is revealed (a “given” within the apparatus of painting or photography). In constituting his field of visual truth, Richter has also returned to the subject of painting that is most contentious – the conscious “I” that sees worlds, and the conscious “eye” that sees worlds looking back. It is this conundrum that inhabits the visual tableau of the photographs and over-painted photographs that comprise *Sils*. One is confronted, as always, with the same problem – one that cannot be resolved. This world that looks back is the very same “apostrophized” world of the “I” that looks at the world. It requires an entirely different concept of subject to parse, and this is the point of Didi-Huberman’s recourse to the “Night of Orpheus.” This confrontation also produces an otherworldly silence. And this silence is always already given to nature as it is given to art. The absence of ideology and discursivity produces the purely visual. Such emblems of silence are what constitute worlds.

7960 words with endnotes

5517 words without endnotes

Gavin Keeney
 Agence ‘X’
 1437 First Avenue, 3FN
 New York, NY 10021
 agencex@gmail.com

Images – Thomas Struth, Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, New York.

C.M., Dos personas observan el *Cristo crucificado* de Velázquez, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Courtesy of *El País*, Madrid. From Ángeles García, “Fábula, mitología, Velázquez: El Prado exhibe la vertiente más narrativa y menos retratista del genio,” *El País*, November 11, 2007.

Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*, plate no. 769 (Sils). © Gerhard Richter, 2010. Courtesy of Atelier Richter.

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), Book X, VII, 7-8, p. 617.

² See *Thomas Struth: Making Time*, trans. Wade A. Matthews (Madrid: Turner, 2007); and *Thomas Struth: Museum Photographs* (Munich: Schirmer-Mosel, 2005).

³ See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005); and Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009).

⁴ See John Ruskin, *The Relation Between Michael Angelo and Tintoret: Seventh of the Course of Lectures on Sculpture Delivered at Oxford, 1870-71* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1872).

⁵ See Robert Kaufman, “Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third Critique in Adorno and Jameson,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000): pp. 682-724.

⁶ For Antonio Negri, the outside (equivalent to a form of “exile” in art) is a futile zone of activity (negativity) given to political impotence. “When resistance ceases to appear on the central stage of historical development . . . and is relegated on the contrary to a marginal, synchronic, and transversal dimension, we can no longer conceive an *idea of potency* (puissance), a position of antagonism or an instance of liberation. Apparently, the only solution remains the star of redemption or that of messianic time.” These comments underscore the disagreement between Negri and Giorgio Agamben on the “way out” of the stalemate of advanced nihilism (late-modern capitalism). See Antonio Negri, “Modern and Postmodern: The Caesura,” in *The Porcelain Workshop: For a New Grammar of Politics*, trans. Noura Wedell (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), pp. 13-28. The citation above regarding “the star of redemption or that of messianic time,” p. 25, is a swipe by Negri at Agamben’s return to the august regime of “eschatological time” (by way of Walter Benjamin). See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Also see note 19, below for Badiou’s objections to Agamben. Agamben’s *The Time That Remains* was published in 2000 in Italian and in 2005 in English. Negri’s lectures at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, collected in *The Porcelain Workshop*, occurred between 2004 and 2005. This difference of opinion is, in one respect, the difference of attitude between a Marxist and a post-Marxist approach to the postmodern condition Negri notes as a “caesura” (what Félix Guattari called elsewhere an “impasse”), or when capital has begun its last conquest through the agency of the biopolitical and, in Agamben’s words, the “anthropological machine” is idling. See also Félix Guattari, “The Postmodern Impasse,” in *A Guattari Reader*, ed. Gary Genosko (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

⁷ *Candida Höfer: Em Portugal / Candida Höfer: In Portugal* (Munich: Schirmer-Mosel; Fundação Centro Cultural de Belém, 2007); catalogue of an exhibition at the Centro Cultural de Belém in Lisbon, December 1, 2006-February 25, 2007, with texts by José Saramago and Shelley Rice.

⁸ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Martin Chalmers (London: Reaktion, 2000); first published as *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1983). The essence of Flusser’s argument is that photography and its mechanisms (its apparatuses or pretensions to truth) require a sustained critique (if not meta-critique) to prevent its manufacture of untruth.

⁹ The ideas of syrrhesis, the flowing together of disparate entities or forces to produce a synthetic whole (a world), and the suppression of noise (the silence) required to merely live, are derived from (and a *homage to*) Michel Serres.

¹⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2005), p. 157. Didi-Huberman further qualifies this remark in Note 41, p. 297: “In which regard the mystic subject, in history, perhaps does nothing save develop in the name of the Other (his god) an experimental, experienced, and written aesthetic.”

¹¹ Visuality (*visualitas*) is “the state or quality of being visual or visible to the mind; mental visibility.” James A.H. Murray et al., eds., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. XII (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 258-59. Intellection, derived from the late and Medieval Latin *intellectionem*, is “the action or process of understanding; the exercise or activity of the intellect.” *Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 369. See also, Leo Steinberg’s “the ineluctable modality of the visible,” in the essay “The Eye is a Part of the Mind” (1953), in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 293. Steinberg’s most strenuous exercise in this regard remains *The Sexuality of Christ* (New York: Pantheon, 1983). In more recent usage, visuality is considered “a screen” or “pattern of cultural constructs and social discourses that stand between the retina and the world.” Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. xvii; cited in Andreas J.M. Kropp, “Roman Art and Laughing Viewers,” pp. 427-31, *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 3 (2008): p. 427.

¹² See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 145. This idea comes from Benjamin’s unfinished Arcades Project.

¹³ Arcanian, as derived from *arca* (chest), implies the act of shutting within, concealing, and hiding, while, in turn, connoting a space that is mysterious, dim, and dark. “The inner space of things is black: black is dense, totally enclosed space, the space of the coffin. No longer the tomb seen from the outside in Arcadia [Poussin], but *arca*, chest, cupboard, casket, coffin, prison, cell, sealed tomb – impossible to know – to see – what is happening within. It contains, but what? Caravaggio’s black space, arcanian space; Poussin’s white space, Arcadian space. . . . If, in that arcanian space, a luminous ray is introduced on the basis of a unique source, then the light will be carried to its maximum intensity and will provoke an effect of lightning: dazzling, blinding, stupefying. Caravaggio’s paradox is the paradox of death as a metaphor for effacement: that is what allows me to say that one can say nothing about it.” Louis Marin, *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 281-82.

¹⁴ Peter André Bloch, “Around But Waves and Play,” in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Peter André Bloch, *Gerhard Richter: Sils* (London: Ivory Press, 2009), p. 70. Regarding the effacement of the “real” in Richter’s painting, see Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews, 1962-1993*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, trans. David Britt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

¹⁵ For a fascinating critique of the shift from New Criticism to New Historicism, with both Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980) playing pivotal roles, see Jeffrey J. Williams, “Prodigal Critics,” *The Chronicle Review* (December 11, 2009): pp. B14-15. Williams tracks the ascendance of the “verbal icon” (New Criticism) through its being turned inside out and upside down by the anti-objectivist assault (New Historicism) leveled by figures formerly schooled in its very practice – that is, Bloom, Fish, and Stephen Greenblatt.

¹⁶ See the special issue, *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009), entitled “The Way We Read Now.” See especially Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, “Afterword,” pp. 139-46, for a summary of the shift from “symptomatic” reading to “susceptible” reading. Jameson’s version of “psychoanalyzing” texts is heavily indebted to Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar’s *Reading Capital* (French, 1968; English, 1970), a methodology of “parsing blanks and slots,” or what is missing and repressed, as symptom, in a text. A symptomatic reading is a “holding on to texts, not as whole texts, but as synecdoches or clusters of mnemonic traces,” “reading the structure of knowledge.” Apter and Freedgood, p. 143. In such a view, a text has an “unconscious” and requires a metareading (a reading about reading) to expose its repressions, elisions, aporias. See also Christopher Nealon, “Reading on the Left,” pp. 22-50, for “situational readings” (for example, the critical methods of Badiou, Agamben, and Negri/Hardt), a peculiar and sometimes spectacular form of extracting from texts predetermined “clusters” of concepts (often so-called

universals) and pitching the rest. Three primary texts cited in this shift away from the symptomatic reading toward the situational reading are: Pierre Bayard, *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004); and Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004). See also, Marjorie Levinson, "What is New Formalism?" *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (March 2007): pp. 558-69.

¹⁷ Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern": p. 227.

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, pp. 199-230. Badiou's reading of Robert's painting is absolutely reductive to the formal (logical) coordinates of his project. It is not the painting that matters but the exegetical integrity of his project to delimit "a new thinking of the object." The painting is effectively analyzed for signs of weak and strong "existents" (forms of transcendental within being-there-in-the-world). For Badiou, the intensity of these forms signals the relative value of the "existent" apropos of the "world in question." Behind Badiou's critique of numerical relations, luminosity and opacity, color and its formal apparatus in concert with shade, plus a nod toward semiological characteristics typical of neoclassical painting, is another more profound reading not pertinent to his purposes. This "next" reading is the reading that led Ruskin to despise most neoclassical painting. Badiou hints at it in his sidewise mention of French "libertinage"; that is, in passing. The painting was owned by the Comte d'Artois, brother of Louis XVI, and is part of a cycle. Yet the subject of the painting is exactly this "hidden" (voyeuristic) aspect, and it is the relationship to the Real or the appropriation of the Real to "tell" this tale that is typically "neoclassical." This is reductive, in turn, to a literary quality wholly inappropriate or unnecessary to painting by Ruskin's estimation. See also *Paolo Veronese: The Wedding at Cana, A Vision by Peter Greenaway* (2009), a multimedia projection staged at the Venice Biennale in 2009 at the Fondazione Giorgio Chini. For a critique of this project, see Teresa Stoppani, "After the First Miracle: Greenaway on 'Veronese,'" *Log* 18 (Winter 2010), pp. 59-64. Greenaway effectively "releases," through a type of "insane discursivity," all of the "temporal" agency embedded in Veronese's painting *The Wedding at Cana*.

¹⁹ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, pp. 558-59. Badiou objects to Agamben's presentation of "being as weakness, as presentational poverty." He calls him the "Franciscan of ontology," who "prefers, to the affirmative becoming of truths, the delicate, almost secret persistence of life." Badiou, p. 559.

²⁰ See note 15. In many senses, the collapse of the vertical (paradigmatic) axis is the point. The vertical axis is considered, in Marxist critique, the axis of the "hegemonic." The "absence" (or silence) of this axis and its abandonment by progressive critique has effectively shut down all discussion of "transcendence," "presence," and "the real" except as aberration or phantasm. The avoidance of this axis within representational orders in progressive political and artistic terms also coincides with the spectral "surpluses" of poststructuralism (all that evades "closure" in the archive/tomb, or the circular rhetoric of the absence of presence, the presence of absence etc.).

²¹ See *L'uomo Vogue* (May/June 2007). The astonishing spread of photographs of artists from the 52nd Biennale di Venezia, and associated events, includes Gerhard Richter, in his studio, in a white lab coat, photographed by Michel Comte.

²² Alain Badiou, "Some Remarks Concerning Marcel Duchamp" (lecture, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, NY, November 16, 2007).

²³ Peter Frank, "Gerhard Richter (Onnasch)," *Artnews* 72, no. 9 (November 1973): p. 100. This statement was made in response to Richter's first American exhibition at Reinhard Onnasch Gallery, New York, in 1973.

²⁴ Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), p. 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* For a definition of the critical term *facture* (how an artwork is manufactured and the importance of this in the work per se), see Hal Foster, Rosalind E. Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D.

Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 684.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65. For the period in which Richter developed his dialectical approach to the discredited genre of landscape painting, see pp. 65-68. This comment comes from *The Daily Practice of Painting*, p. 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66. Storr suggests that this statement underscores Richter's appropriation of Romantic painting to reverse what Ruskin called "the Romantic fallacy" – the idea that nature is imbued with a "proto-psychological" dimension that mirrors our interior subjective worlds, and the foundation stone for all psychological readings of landscape. This idea has become further problematized as "the blind spot" in all views of so-called objective or empirical worlds; that is, that sense that the world is often looking back at us is reducible to the fact that we have projected part of our consciousness into that world. We are, then, essentially, looking back at ourselves looking at ourselves, etc.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69. Regarding the shift to excoriating abstraction, see pp. 68-74. This quotation is from *The Daily Practice of Painting*, p. 227.

³¹ For the nihilist phase of the mid-1980s, see Ulrich Wilmes, ed., *Gerhard Richter: Large Abstracts* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008). This maxim is extracted from "Notes, 1985," in *The Daily Practice of Painting*.

³² Peter Schjeldahl, "Death and the Painter," *Art in America* 4 (April 1990): pp. 252, 256. Cited in Robert Storr, "Introduction: Sudden Recall," pp. 198-205, in *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), p. 203. A second reference made by Storr to an article by Michael Brenson, "To Paint the Unpaintable," in the *New York Times*, March 25, 1990, pp. 35, 39, reminds anyone unfamiliar with Richter's stand regarding ideology that the series *October 18, 1977* is as anti-ideological a testament as one might make (*paint*), given that it portrays the very temptation "to ideology and its price." Here projection is also "deflected." One merely observes the "price." Storr writes that these "cool black-and-white photo-based-images" depict in wholly indeterminate (blurred) ways the "controversial lives and deaths of four German social activists turned terrorists." The first exhibitions in America were accompanied by documentary details of the years leading to the German Autumn, with copies of the original images (television, newspaper, and police archive) from which Richter worked. While Richter insisted on the paintings being received as paintings, he also understood that the reception required the *apparatus* of the actual events leading to the series. This latter supplement is typically repressed, and constitutes a portion of the transcendental field of art insofar as it is reconstituted from memory or, as is often the case, through art criticism/scholarship.