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Painting After All

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Documents of Culture and Documents of Barbarism: Richter's *Birkenau* Paintings

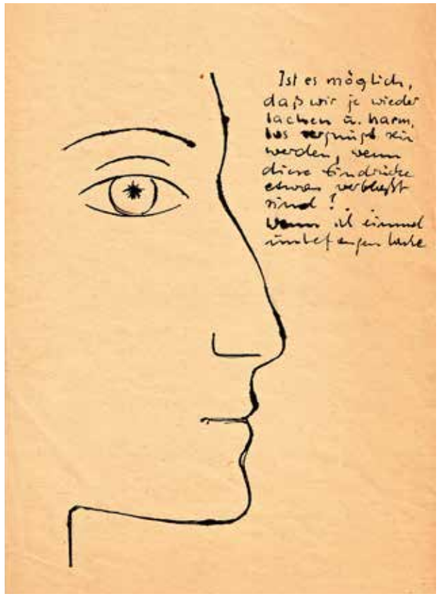
Among the many discontinuities and epistemic ruptures in Gerhard Richter's life and oeuvre, several deeply connected strands run across a trajectory of six decades, from 1957 to 2017. One is Richter's repeated return to the question of whether any artist, and more improbably any German painter, could possibly construct a credible mnemonic representation of the destruction of European Jews under the rule of German Nazi Fascism. Despite this ongoing preoccupation in his work, his statements on the topic are often opaque. For example, when queried on several occasions about his awareness of artists Lea and Hans Grundig,[1] who were prominent faculty members at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, where Richter had studied—and who were among the first German artists in the immediate post-World War II period to have engaged in representing the concentration-camp system and the Holocaust—Richter either claimed to have been hardly aware of their activities or dismissed them as irrelevant for his artistic formation. Thus, we must assume that the artist, at that stage of his development, simply doubted the Grundigs' artistic competence, or that he was indifferent to the testimonies of witnesses and victims of Nazi Fascism, or that his indifference suggested a fundamental skepticism about the qualifications of painting—as opposed to poetic, philosophical, or photographic means—for the mnemonic representation of the Shoah (to use the Hebrew term for the Holocaust).

Yet already in 1957, having just graduated from the Dresden Academy as a Socialist Realist mural painter, Richter made a series of twelve drawings to illustrate *The Diary of Anne Frank* (figs. BB1–BB3).[2] Regardless of the drawings' almost painfully naive Picassoesque features, their subsequent withdrawal from exposure and documentation seems to attest to the young artist's growing insight that a highly stylized, benevolent homage to one of the most prominent Jewish victims among six million was no less problematic than the cruelly realistic depiction of the anonymous victims of industrialized mass murder in Lea Grundig's drawings and print portfolios (fig. BB4).[3]

Shortly after his flight from State Socialism in 1961 and his arrival in West Germany, Richter returned to the challenges of whether and how his paintings could confront the historical legacies of German Fascism and the Holocaust. One of his earliest works, painted in 1962, was a pathetic attempt at a portrait of "der Hitler" (as Theodor Adorno had called him in a famous 1959 lecture); the canvas, which he soon erased, became the verso of *Deer* (1963; see fig. BK13). Two other paintings with explicit Holocaust imagery were displayed in his first group exhibition in the West, which opened on May 13, 1963, in an empty butcher shop in Düsseldorf's Kaiserstrasse.[4] One, titled *Erschießung* (*Execution*) (fig. BB5), juxtaposed a painted photographic image documenting a Fascist execution of political prisoners with a serialized image of an eerily smiling starlet, inverted to form a Warholian frieze below the hanging corpses. The other (fig. BB6) combined the enigmatic letters *Tagebu* (undoubtedly a fragment of the German title of the *Tagebuch* [Diary] *der Anne Frank*) with a large-scale, crudely painted depiction of a headless photographic pinup. Soon after the exhibition, the artist destroyed both paintings.

Adorno's above-mentioned 1959 lecture, called "The Meaning of Working through the Past," was soon recognized as one of the most important of his early philosophical reflections on the conditions of collective disavowal and the concomitant destruction of historical and mnemonic abilities in postwar West Germany. Surprisingly to some, Adorno had referred to the German cult of Anne Frank's diary (which had even been adapted to a stage production) precisely as a paradoxical psychosocial symptom of that disavowal, in which the erosion of authentic compassion, resulting in the inability to actually mourn and remember the victims, had become painfully evident:

I was told the story of a woman who, upset after seeing a dramatization of The Diary of Anne Frank, *said: "Yes, but* that *girl at least should have been allowed to live." To be sure, even that was good as a first step toward understanding. But the individual case, which should stand, and raise awareness about, the terrifying totality, by its very*



FIGS BB1–BB3
Gerhard Richter, Illustrations for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, ca. 1957. Ink on paper, each 11 ⅝ × 8 ¼ in. (29.6 × 21 cm). Gerhard Richter Archive, Dresden (inv. 497/13, 500/13, 501/13)

FIG BF3
Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973), *Mother and Child*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 56 ¼ × 68 in. (142.9 × 172.7 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago, Restricted gift of Maymar Corporation, Mrs. Maurice L. Rothschild, and Mr. and Mrs. Chauncey McCormick; Mary and Leigh Block Fund; Ada Turnbull Hertle Endowment; through prior gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin E. Hokin (1954.270)

What would it be to see Richter's family pictures—including the paintings of his aunt, his uncle, his father-in-law, his wives, his children, and so on—as part of the artist's lifelong speculation on painting rather than the product of his own biographical narrative? I'm suggesting that we need to set up some degree of friction between a "family picture"—which signals a type of picture—and a "family portrait," indicating a stronger tie to its sitters. My aim is not necessarily to refute the powerful interpretations grounded in the artist's own family history but to argue that the family picture also offered Richter a number of pictorial possibilities beyond the more immediate demands on a portrait to represent its subjects. I shall suggest instead that the family motif, understood as a unit of composition, serves as a temporal device within a body of work that first and foremost is concerned with the relation between painting and time. That such a temporal device can never be "pure," but is also mediated and even compromised by personal and historical experience, I take as a given.[1] Art history has been adept at describing spatial techniques and yet the temporal *as* technique has barely a vocabulary to help us. In part, therefore, my aim is simply to try to find a form of description for the family pictures that allows us to think what it might mean for a picture-type to recur so often and in so many different versions of itself.

Richter's preoccupation with families, both his own and other people's, both known and not known to him, was unusual from the outset and as anomalous for an artist of his generation as his ongoing commitment to painting.[2] Yet, the sheer number and array of his protagonists puts the category of family in jeopardy, not least suggesting a fundamental lack of clarity as to where one family ends and another begins. In the first and perhaps most concentrated episode in which he produced his family pictures, between 1964 and 1966, the likenesses between the various groups that he chose to depict come to override the differences. A generic cast of characters creates a strong sense of collective anonymity. Figures generally take on the informal poses and grisaille textures more typical of a mass image culture than of the formal traditions of portraiture. There is always a constant co-presence of the look of the photograph (the slight blur) with the fact of the painting (the strokes of paint).

It is hard to underestimate the disruption wrought on this supposedly affectless ground by the moment of recognition of Richter's family ties to his Nazi Uncle Rudi (pl. XX) or his SS doctor father-in-law (pl. XX). I do not intend to suggest that we should or even could "unsee" what we see, knowing what we do of their subjects. Nor can we forget, once we know, that *Aunt Marianne* (pl. XX) is a painting of Richter's schizophrenic aunt, who was killed in 1945 under the Nazi euthanasia program. But I am also interested in the relation of typology to temporality—and how this picture, which Richter originally called *Mother and Child*, can be seen as receptive to time rather than idealized as "timeless" or "universal." When it was first exhibited at the

FIG BF4
Gerhard Richter, *Three Siblings* (*Drei Geschwister*), 1965. Oil on canvas, 53 ⅛ × 51 ⅛ in. (135 × 130 cm). CR 82. Private collection, Chicago

Group of People, 1965 66 15/16 × 78 3/4 in. (170 × 200 cm)

Seascape, 1975 78 ¾ in. × 9 ft. 10 ⅛ in. (200 × 300 cm)

Seascape, 1975 78 ¾ in. × 9 ft. 10 ⅛ in. (200 × 300 cm)

Betty, 1977 11 15/16 × 15 ¾ in. (30 × 40 cm)

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A lavishly illustrated monograph that spans the entire career of one of the most celebrated contemporary artists.

Over the course of his acclaimed 60-year career, Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) has employed both representation and abstraction as means of reckoning with the legacy, collective memory, and national sensibility of post–WWII Germany, in broad and very personal terms. This handsomely designed book features 100 of his key canvases, from photo paintings created in the early 1960s to portraits and later large-scale abstract series, as well as select works in glass. Through Richter's rich and varied oeuvre, this book asserts the continued relevance of painting in contemporary art.

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