

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

frieze

More Light

by Jennifer Allen and Dominikus Müller (Spring 2012)



Gerhard Richter, Ballet Dancers, 1966 (Courtesy: the artist)

To mark the Gerhard Richter retrospective at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie, frieze d/e spoke with Hal Foster about the painter's take on light, Pop and politics

Did you see the Richter show 'Panorama' at Tate Modern?

Hal Foster: Yes, I thought it was much better than MoMA's 'Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting' from 2002 because 'Panorama' showed his work in its full range. The MoMA exhibition wanted to preserve Richter for painting and so failed to show how Richter also takes on the Duchampian line of the avant-garde, how he is able to hold on to painting even as he absorbs its Duchampian other. There are exhibitions in which you learn less than you already know – you are made a little more stupid. The MoMA exhibition was like that for me. The Tate Modern show was the opposite – I learned a lot from it. The presentation of 'Panorama' at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie offers yet another learning opportunity.

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What kind of lessons might be learned in Berlin?

There's a German dimension in Richter – and not just in his subject matter – that is so important, and Americans and Brits don't see it very well. Richter has a deep engagement with both German Idealist philosophy and German Romantic painting, which is not understood from the Anglo-American perspective – we read him too much through Pop. Obviously, his encounter with American Pop was a crucial moment in his development. But the extraordinary thing about Richter is that he is able to use a Pop idiom to rethink deeply philosophical problems in painting. Everyone sees a great division in his work between the abstractions and the works based on photographic images, but for me they're part of one and the same project. Richter is interested in figuring out what modernity has done to basic ideas of appearance and truth – classic concepts in German philosophy. His project looks heterogeneous, but it's consistent.



Gerhard Richter, Seestück (See-See), 1970 (Courtesy: the artist)

In my book *The First Pop Age* [2011], I see him as a traditional artist in the strong sense. Richter takes on what is given to him in terms of our historical predicament, but he allows that present to affect how he thinks about past forms and past conventions – and vice versa – and so he works to keep that dialectic alive. Even as Richter moves across different pictorial genres and image sources, his work remains consistent in the sense that he wants to figure out what Schein (‘semblance’, ‘appearance’) looks like, what the relation is between appearance and truth, appearance and beauty, right now. And that's true across the panorama of his oeuvre.

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You translate Schein as ‘semblance’ in your book, but you also use ‘light’ and ‘appearance’.

Richter says early on that the key problem in his work is light. What is light now? Can light be understood apart from its various mediations – from candles to electric lights and camera flashbulbs and on to our glowing computer screens today? His answer is ‘No’, but he uses painting, that ancient medium, to reflect on these different modalities of appearance. For Richter only painting has the distance from media technologies to reflect on what Schein looks like and means now.

This insight only came to me after I spent time in Berlin and began to feel how different the light and the landscape are here – Mies van der Rohe’s glass box for the Neue Nationalgalerie will make that difference visible in the exhibition. In the American story of modern art, there’s a trajectory from Parisian painting, which usually looks south to the classical Mediterranean, to the New York School. But there’s a northern route too, as described by Robert Rosenblum in his book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* [1975]. Rather than a line from the Paris of Courbet, Manet, Cézanne and Picasso to New York – which is how Americans were taught modernism, in a way that completely bypasses Germany – there’s another line that connects Caspar David Friedrich and Edvard Munch and others in the north to Mark Rothko and company and then on to Richter. It’s about the ‘luminous’ and the ‘numinous’: How light works, and how light suggests the truth of the world beyond appearance. The extraordinary thing is that Richter is somehow able to make those two lines of modern painting converge again.

Take a typical Friedrich painting of a couple of wanderers in a dim landscape under a misty moon. The painting asks: Is there any numen to that lumen? Any God to that light? Is there anything out there at all? There’s doubt in Friedrich already. For me Richter suggests that this question must continue to be asked, but he knows the terms have changed. He still wants to think about what ‘appearance’ means today. There is a great ambiguity in the word Schein – it means both ‘appearance’ and ‘illusion’ – and this same ambiguity is in Richter: Is there access to truth through illusion, his paintings ask, or does illusion defeat any idea of truth? Is it just a matter of the sheer relativity of images in his work, or can the image still be a way to come to terms with truth? And, again, these questions of light and semblance cut across the two modes of abstraction and representation in his oeuvre.

Could you elaborate on what you call the ‘homeless semblance’ in his work?

I adapt the idea from Clement Greenberg, who wrote that in de Kooning there are fragments of representation which have become homeless, maybe unheimlich too, because they are no longer attached to any representational scheme. That’s what I sense in some Richters too: there are bits of appearance, moments of light, that seem a little lost, a bit homeless, in that sense. This is true in the abstract works as well as the representational works.

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Gerhard Richter, Domecke II, 1988 (Courtesy: the artist)

Is there a different critical stance in American, British and German Pop?

For me Pop is never strictly critical or complicit; it is always ambiguous. The movement was badly misread in its first moment – really compromised – when it was taken as a simple celebration of the new world of consumerism.

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Even though that consumerism was identified with the US, I wanted to get away from the mistaken idea that Pop is simply American. So in my book I mix the Americans Lichtenstein, Warhol and Ruscha with the British Hamilton and the German Richter. The contexts are so different. In Britain, after the war, it is a time of austerity, of rationing. The Brits see American consumerism as a fantasy on the horizon. Even though they are on the left, they embrace this fantasy, but they do so ambivalently, ironically. They love American magazines and American movies, but they also – in part through distance from that world – see it as a myth. And they begin to explore how the fantasy is produced. Thus Hamilton picks apart different magazine ads – for cars and other commodities – focusing on the archetype, as he calls it, of the woman-product: the offering of the commodity as also the offering of the female body. It is a compounding of commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism that he sees and rehearses. Even though Hamilton loves it, he also wants to break it down analytically and put it back together again aesthetically. So his approach is very different from the operation of American Pop, which is not so analytical. Nor do the Americans break the image down as Hamilton does: they tend to take the image whole and to keep it whole – indeed, they make it even more emphatic. Lichtenstein wants to make the ‘Pow!’ of the cartoon all the more powerful, even more Pop. And Warhol does too. Instead of the analysis that Hamilton undertakes, Lichtenstein and Warhol develop a strategy of mimetic excess. They do not repeat popular images so much as they push them to the point that they are exposed – or explode.

And then artists like Richter and Ruscha come along, who are a bit younger. They see these developments and ask how they bear on traditional forms of art. Can painting survive in a Pop world? How do different kinds of genres, like landscape, take on the formats of TV and the movies? Richter and Ruscha begin to assimilate the Pop explosion into the forms of painting as such.

In my book, I move out from the epicentre of Pop, which is Britain – Pop was invented in London after all – back towards the United States, and then out a bit further to West Germany on the one hand and Los Angeles on the other hand, to see how that first moment of Pop is developed by a second generation.

Could you elaborate on American and German Pop? Where would a figure like Sigmar Polke fit in?

Here is one key difference. American Pop seemed to be an evasion of history. That’s why the word ‘banality’ came up again and again when Lichtenstein and Warhol first emerged. It was exactly the time that Hannah Arendt developed her famous thesis about ‘the banality of evil’ in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* [1963]. All kinds of depth – moral, aesthetic, historical – seemed to be at risk then. Again, history as such seemed to be blotted out by the sheer superficiality of Pop. But today the greatest history paintings of the 1960s are the ‘Death and Disaster’ series [1962–3] of Warhol – his silkscreens of car crashes, electric chairs, civil rights protests, and so on.

German artists like Richter and Polke did the most counter-intuitive thing: They used a Pop idiom to delve into history. In part they were able to do so because one dimension of the history that interested them was the Americanization of the European mind, not only its consciousness but also its unconscious – remember that line from Wim Wender’s film *Kings of the Road* [Im Lauf der Zeit, 1976]: ‘The Yanks have colonized our unconscious, too?’ Even as Richter and Polke embraced American Pop, they wanted to think about how it could be turned to show how American culture had reformatted European culture.

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They seemed to embrace Pop, but they pushed back on it at the same time. If the Brits looked to America and saw the future, the Germans stepped back a little and reflected on the consequences of that arc of history.

How do you see Richter's 'blurring' technique versus Polke's Ben-Day dots?

Of course they both call up technologies of photographic reproduction and suggest that everything is mediated. There's a way in which the Ben-Day dot, even by the time Lichtenstein picks it up and passes it along to Polke, is already archaic, a historical residue, because that technology was outdated by the 1960s. But its use does announce that there is no longer any way to think of painting and photography – or the pictorial and the filmic – as separate. Even though that point was already clear for critics like Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin a generation before, to demonstrate as much in the 1960s was still important.

The blur is different because the blur is still with us. It is not just the photographic blur; it is also now the digital blur. The

blur signifies, among many different things, not just that the world of appearance is already mediated but also that everything is now coded – that is, there is so much information to be processed and reprocessed. What the blur suggests – we see this everywhere – is that the pictorial, in the sense of the grand tradition of European painting, has returned through the digital. This is the happy argument of Michael Fried: great European painting has come back with digital photography. It is an argument I want to contest, but there is a certain truth to it – pictorialism has returned. Yet for Michael that is a triumph; for me it is a problem.

Because everything can be manipulated in the digital darkroom?

Yes, everything is 'painted' now. And yet, as Alan Sekula likes to say, we have passed from the myth that a photograph is the truth to the myth that it is always a lie. The reality, as usual, is more difficult.

Has digitization brought us to the Tenth Pop Age?

Things move more slowly to me: I end my book with an intimation of a Second Pop Age only! In many ways the Pictures Generation of the 1970s and 1980s was still obsessed by the image in a Pop way, though these artists complicated its relation to sexuality and to subjectivity in general – a development closely linked to feminism. Today things are different, especially with digitization. On the one hand, the digital supports the image. On the other hand, the logic of the digital is not simply imagistic – its coding is more algorithmic. I'm not sophisticated enough to decipher that logic, but right now the dominant language of appearance seems neither visual nor verbal but a weird hybrid of the two. Turn on any electronic apparatus, and it looks imagistic, but its address is textual – so many word commands: 'buy now', 'click here' and so on. How this new digital logic bears on art is not clear to me, but artists like Seth Price and Wade Guyton are concerned with it. What doesn't interest me is art that simply follows on from Pop and the Pictures Generation, only to drive their strategies into the ground.

Could you offer an example?

Well, it's too late in the day to be Warholian in the way that Jeff Koons continues to be. There's a great line from Walter Benjamin in which he suggests that the bourgeoisie somehow figured out how even nihilism could be used as a form of domination. That captures for me the bad residue of Warhol not only in Koons but in Damien Hirst, Takashi Murakami and their many followers.

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I'm more interested in young artists who somehow combine Pop with the performative. For example, I was taken with Cyprien Gaillard's project *The Recovery of Discovery* [2011] at the Kunst-Werke last year. Gaillard was able to take a Pop idiom – which is also a Minimalist idiom because they're both bound up in the serial logic of the commodity – and use the pyramid of cases of Turkish beer to create an event, but it was an event that also commented on the specificity of Turks in Germany, on the old imperialism of the Pergamon Altar, on German empires past and present. It was resonant.



Cyprien Gaillard, *The Recovery of Discovery*, 2011 (Courtesy: the artist; Photograph: Josephine Walter)

If you see a decline in the critical value of Pop from Warhol to Koons, how do you evaluate the move from Richter to the New Leipzig School?

The Leipzig School painters elaborate on problems in Richter, but they also seem to empty them out, make them less complex – partly because, even though they seem to question painting, they in fact restore it too much.

You end the Richter chapter by arguing that his work is close to Roland Barthes's concept of the neutral, which Barthes developed during a seminar on 'Le Neutre' at the Collège de France in 1977–78. Why end on a French note?

As I say, Richter develops certain problems of Idealist philosophy and Romantic painting that are specific to Germany as well as consequences of the war that are again particular to the country. But as the work evolves, he enters into an international field where other ideas exist. I brought in Barthes – his fascination with the neutral as a 'third way' which 'baffles' the binarism of the paradigm – because Richter also seeks to be neutral when it comes to ideology. He was born into a fascist regime, only to grow up in a totalitarian one, only then to be delivered into a capitalist one. Richter is so sceptical of any ideology that his work resists all 'either/ors' and seeks a 'neither/nor' position instead. Nothing is ever affirmed in his work without its negation close behind.

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After early kinds of political commitment, both Barthes and Richter wanted to get to a place outside the 'either/or' of the Cold War – outside oppositionality altogether. After *Mythologies* [1957], Barthes develops a mode of criticism that is political almost through the suspension of any political commitment. I think Richter does the same: He produces a kind of 'painting degree zero'. Some people see this position as compromised – playing it not only both ways but all ways. There's almost a desire to please all parties in Richter. But for me one could flip this and say: He supports nothing – except the ability of art to support nothing.

And that's where Richter's commitment to the aesthetic comes back. It's only in the aesthetic that one can suspend contradictions and not be overcome by them. If there's no way to work through contradictions politically or aesthetically now, if there's no sense that art history moves forward in any narrative of progress, then one can show how it doesn't move forward, which is what Richter does. One is not simply condemned to support this or that position but can be skeptical about them all. For me that's the great question Richter raises: How do we feel about that skepticism? Is it again just the nihilistic refusal to believe anything? Or is it a way to hold open the possibility of other kinds of belief?

That sounds like a happier version of the aestheticization of politics, which Benjamin diagnosed as part of fascism.

Maybe so. But that's what makes Richter such a terrific artist. He forces us to think about all of those questions.