

# **(Dis)Figuration of Memory In, Around, and Beyond Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: Between Photography, Abstraction, and the Mnemonic Construction**

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## **Abstract**

Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* is a collection of photographs and sketches that the artist started to assemble in 1961. This article aims to demonstrate that Holocaust imagery plays a unique and irreplaceable function in *Atlas*, creating paths throughout the project and pointing towards some of Richter's most important ideas and contexts within which his pictorial work comes into being. The article places particular emphasis on the photographs assembled in panels 807 and 808 of *Atlas*, which are the basis for Richter's series of abstract paintings entitled *Birkenau* paintings, from 2014. The article argues the importance of this series, making a case for a different interpretation of *Atlas*'s dynamics, and pointing out alternative ways of addressing the tensions between photography and painting – and, in particular, figuration and abstraction – that pervade Richter's practice. The themes concerning Richter's position on photography and the role played by the medium in the pictorial exploration of the traumatic past are thoroughly discussed in the article, generating new insights into the concept of the historical image in the work of the German artist.

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## **Introduction**

[1] Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* is an ongoing project composed of original and found photographs, media reproductions and sketches arranged in various

groups of panels forming constellations of images and ideas. *Atlas* has its roots in 1962, when the artist started collecting and saving a variety of iconographic material, some of which he used as source images for his Photo Paintings. It was only in the late 1960s, however, that Richter began to arrange these images on panels. First exhibited in 1972 in Utrecht, the Netherlands, under the title *Atlas of Photos and Sketches* (Richter had previously shown the boards as part of the exhibition: *Gerhard Richter. Graphik 1965-1970*, Museum Folkwang, Essen 1970), the project has since been supplemented with new panels and shown in several international venues: *documenta 10*, Kassel (1997); MACBA, Barcelona (1999); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2004); Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Kunstbau, Munich (2014), just to name a few. At present, *Atlas* consists of [809 panels](#) and comprises more than 5.000 photographs, reflecting different phases of Richter's work throughout a period of almost six decades.

[2] In terms of its content, *Atlas* juxtaposes elements of political history, autobiographical materials and studies for artistic projects. Juxtaposition and discontinuity, as opposed to sequential and taxonomic ordering, are the order of the day. *Atlas* gathers an outstanding diversity of visual material: it combines family photos with media images, historical archives with landscapes, as well as intimate snapshots of Richter's wives and children with Holocaust images, sketches of exhibitions and commercially printed photos of sunsets, still lifes and travel vistas.

[3] Taken singularly, the panels share some characteristics with the projects of contemporary artists like Bernd and Hilla Becher, Hans-Peter Feldmann, and Christian Boltanski, revealing a propensity for organizing groups of images in grid-like structures. Nevertheless, when we consider the overall effect of Richter's *Atlas*, its impressive heterogeneity and thematic diversity, the way it resists taxonomic ordering and processes of cataloguing, rather advancing towards what Armin Zweite defined as "a dialectic of order and latent chaos",<sup>1</sup> then we conclude that Richter's project is quite different from the projects mentioned above.

[4] Lynne Cooke goes straight to the point when she affirms that "[Richter's] *Atlas* is not an archive: there is neither a coherent and systematic compilation of an identifiable body of material nor an archaeological exhaustion of a specific subject".<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Giuliana Bruno has argued that "[Richter's] *Atlas* is not an encyclopaedia. It does not wish to be all-encompassing. It gives no definite form to the knowledge it presents".<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, despite including intimate registers associated with the

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<sup>1</sup> Armin Zweite, "Gerhard Richter's 'Album of Photographs, Collages, and Sketches'", in: *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter: Four Essays on 'Atlas'*, Barcelona 1999, 61-101: 92.

<sup>2</sup> Lynne Cooke, *Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas'*, Dia Center for the Arts (2012), <http://www2.uiah.fi/to/SITES/Dave%20Hickey%20Lecture%20Press%20Release-filer/Richter%20Essay.htm> (accessed 22 September 2017).

construction of an autobiographical and self-reflective self, I argue that Richter's project should not be reduced to an "architecture of the interior", as advocated by Bruno, whose arguments tend to overestimate the sentimental aspects of *Atlas*,<sup>4</sup> to the detriment of its historical and meta-reflexive significance.

[5] In fact, a crucial feature of Richter's *Atlas* is that it frequently elaborates on meanings of historical interest, offering a field of experimentation with images that draws from collective and individual experiences directly related to the impact of traumatic history. Thus, Richter's *Atlas* can be better defined in relation to meta-reflexive projects of historians like Walter Benjamin and his *Arcades Project*, and, in particular, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* of Aby Warburg. Similarly to these projects, Richter's *Atlas* hovers between the "promise of taxonomic order as divulged in the archive and the total devastation of that promise".<sup>5</sup> It reveals the potentialities of fragmentation, extraction and montage in the work of historical and mnemonic construction. Subverting the conventional principles that define the archive, Richter's *Atlas* meets, in fact, a broader concept of atlas that can be traced back to Benjamin and Warburg's historiography. As opposed to the usual notion of archive as a system of accumulation and hierarchical ordering of visual information, the atlas defines a new epistemological and methodological category through which historical knowledge and ways of remembering take explicitly visual forms related to dispersion, randomness and the hieroglyphic juxtaposition of images.

[6] In this regard, I will argue that Holocaust imagery plays a unique and irreplaceable function in Richter's *Atlas*. Holocaust photographs create paths throughout the project, attracting groups of other panels and producing meaningful interconnections between internal blocks of apparently unrelated images. Therefore, any attempt at dividing Richter's project into an earlier and later *Atlas* is rendered artificial. However, the sections related to Holocaust imagery also point beyond the *Atlas*, towards Richter's most important ideas, thought processes and contexts within which his pictorial work comes into being.

[7] In this sense, the present article follows Kate Palmer Albers's methodology, sustained in the reading of specific panels of *Atlas* to connect them outward to Richter's other creative output, therefore moving beyond "a one-to-one correspondence from source photo to completed painting".<sup>6</sup> Contrary to Albers, however, I consider that looking at individual images and

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<sup>3</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, New York and London 2002, 334-335.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 335, 338.

<sup>5</sup> Cooke, *Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas'*.

<sup>6</sup> Kate Palmer Albers, "Reading the World Trade Center in Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas'", in: *Art History* 35 (2012), no. 1, 2-22: 3.

series does not invalidate the attempt to read *Atlas* in its totality. Whereas Albers's study focuses on the specific case of World Trade Center images, assembled by Richter in [panel 744](#), subsequently exploring their connections to works that are thematically related, I opt to address the presence of the Holocaust images in order to reach a global perspective of Richter's attitude towards photography and painting, and, most importantly, of the way this confrontation brings to the fore issues concerning the use of colour, the tensions between figuration and abstraction, and the problem of the referent and nature.

[8] For Richter, the Holocaust appears as a decisive event in defining the conditions of contemporary culture and human subjectivity, also determining the possibilities of painting and representation. As argued by Benjamin Buchloh, among the several discontinuities of Richter's work, the return to the mnemonic representation of the Holocaust stands out as one of the few elements of continuity, reflecting a lifelong preoccupation that was manifested on several occasions through distinct practices and discourses.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on Holocaust imagery gathered in *Atlas* also constitutes a propitious way to approach the tensions between figuration and abstraction that pervade Richter's work, acquiring, as we will see, particular emphasis in the recent series entitled *Birkenau*, concluded in 2014. I will try to demonstrate that the careful reading of this and other series dedicated to the themes of the Holocaust and the Nazi past allow us to better understand Richter's aesthetic and political questioning around the broader concept of image, revealing its decisive role in the exploration of unconventional mnemonic experiences and alternative forms of historical knowledge.

### Photography, painting and traumatic history

[9] By incorporating photography's historical facticity in painting, Richter aims to construct "a pictorial representation of the act of recalling and understanding"<sup>8</sup> personal and collective experiences in its relation to fracturing events in history. In this regard, two important moments in Richter's work should be highlighted. The first takes us back to the Photo-Paintings of the mid-1960s, painted with particular intensity between 1964 and 1966. In these paintings, which include several family portraits, Richter addresses themes concerning both the influence of the Nazi past in the lives of members of his own family, and the presence of former perpetrators in post-war German society. The second moment was in 1988, the year that marks the completion of a cycle of fifteen paintings, whose title, *October 18, 1977* (Catalogue Raisonné: [667-674](#)),<sup>9</sup> refers to the date in which the members of the far-left militant group Baader-Meinhof, also known as the

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", in: idem, *Gerhard Richter's Birkenau-Paintings*, Cologne 2016, 5-34: 5.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, "A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*", in: *October* 48 (spring 1989), 88-109: 97.

Red Army Faction (RAF), were found dead in their cells in Stammheim high-security prison.

[10] Beginning with the Photo-Paintings from the mid-1960s, it is important to note that in Richter the theme of continuity between the Nazi past and Germany's post-war present was entangled with the artist's autobiography and the stories of members of his own family who were directly affected by National Socialism. Art historian Paul B. Jaskot demonstrates that in paintings such as *Uncle Rudi* (CR: 85) and *Aunt Marianne* (CR: 87), both concluded in 1965, the direct biographical connection to the Nazi past is simultaneously veiled and revealed by the banality of the family photographs, used as sources, and by the absence of explicit reference to the story of the depicted individuals.<sup>10</sup>

[11] If in *Uncle Rudi* the historical reference is directly established through the depiction of Richter's maternal uncle, Rudolf Schönfelder, as a Wehrmacht soldier, revealing the familial ties to Fascism and the ruthless violence of war (Rudolf died in active service), the portrait of the artist's aunt, Marianne Schönfelder (with baby Gerhard), is less obvious. Yet, the relation to the violence of Nazism also exists and acquires an even more brutal meaning in this case. Marianne suffered from schizophrenia and was institutionalized in 1938. She died in 1945 at the age of twenty-seven, allegedly of natural causes, but in fact she was a victim of the Nazi policy against the mentally ill: Marianne was sterilized and eventually died of starvation, facts that have been acknowledged by the family. "It was said that they starved her to death there, naked, and gave her medication. But starving was the most terrifying thing", Richter stated in a recent interview for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.<sup>11</sup>

[12] Moreover, the investigative journalist Jürgen Schreiber, working in close collaboration with Richter, discovered that his father-in-law, Heinrich Eufinger, was an SS doctor responsible for forced mass sterilizations of women with mental health problems. Yet, he died undisturbed and highly respected in 1988.<sup>12</sup> In Richter's Photo-Painting *Family at the Seaside*, from 1964 (CR: 35), Heinrich Eufinger is depicted occupying the centre of a holiday photograph among elements of his family. The banality of everyday

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<sup>9</sup> The Catalogue Raisonné (CR) references and the numbers of the panels that compose the *Atlas* are indicated in order to provide the readers access to the commented works through the digital platform <https://www.gerhard-richter.com>, an excellent and comprehensive repository of Richter's complete oeuvre.

<sup>10</sup> Paul B. Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator: Postwar German Art and the Politics of the Right*, Minneapolis and London 2012, 48.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Richter, Interview by Julia Voss and Peter Geimer, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (25 February 2016), <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/gerhard-richter-im-interview-ueber-gemaeldezyklus-birkenau-14088410.html> (accessed 22 February 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 48.

content and the constructed protocols of family representation are thus penetrated by the cold evidence of crime. Richter disrupts the apparent sense of belonging and security, revealing the family as an unexpected place of silence and amnesia.

[13] In fact, the paintings of this period are saturated with historical references to the Nazi past and to the presence of both victims and perpetrators in Richter's own family. In her careful analysis of Richter's iconographic choices, Susanne Küper argues that Richter's earlier Photo-Paintings are prominently political, surpassing strict subjectivity and personal memory.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the idea defended by Christine Mehring that these paintings must be understood against the backdrop of Richter's emotional longing, motivated by the experience of his relocation from East to West Germany in 1961 (just five months before the erection of the Berlin Wall), is at least questionable.<sup>14</sup>

[14] That Richter's interest in the resonance of the Nazi past extends well beyond the limits of familial biography is also demonstrated in other paintings of the same period. For example, in *Mr. Heyde* ([CR: 100](#)), a painting completed in 1965, the same year as *Uncle Rudi* and *Aunt Marianne*, Richter depicts the arrest of doctor Heyde by West German authorities in 1959, using a press photograph as a source for the painting. Heyde was a neurologist responsible for establishing a programme for the extermination of the medically undesirable in Nazi Germany, and, as observed by Robert Storr, "in that capacity, Heyde had pioneered the gassing techniques employed in the *Final Solution*".<sup>15</sup> Living comfortably under a false identity in the post-war period, with the knowledge of local officials in Schleswig-Holstein, Heyde turned himself in after being discovered. He ended up committing suicide in 1964, five days before he was to stand trial.

[15] As pointed out by Jaskot, in *Mr. Heyde* Richter makes an explicit reference to the public event of Heyde's arrest by including a painted caption of the newspaper's text, where we can read: "Werner Heyde in November 1959, turning himself in to the authorities". By portraying a public figure pervasively involved in the Nazi past (and, in addition, someone who also had been able to retain a high-profile position in post-war society), Richter explicitly engages with broader political issues of that time.<sup>16</sup> As

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<sup>13</sup> Susanne Küper, "Gerhard Richter: Capitalist Realism and His Painting from Photographs, 1962-1966", in: *German Art: From Beckmann to Richter*, ed. Eckhart Gillen, Cologne 1997, 233-236.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Christine Mehring, "East or West, Home is Best: Friends, Family and Design in Richter's Earlier Years", in: *Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, exh. cat., London 2011, 11-35: 32-34.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, New York 2002, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Such issues also include the critical reflection upon the ambiguity of the images and the use of photography's perceived objectivity to enforce ideology during the Cold War conflict, as demonstrated by John J. Curley. By providing visual evidence

Jaskot asserts, the presence of former common perpetrators and bureaucrats in contemporary society, some of them occupying important positions within Konrad Adenauer's government, became a prominent issue in socio-political debates in West Germany in the 1960s, repositioning the discussions around the expellees and the German prisoners of war (POW) that had dominated the previous decade.<sup>17</sup>

[16] Thus, it can be affirmed that the issue concerning the presence of former Nazi Party members and supporters in families, institutions, and government offices, exerted a crucial influence on Richter's Photo-Paintings of the 1960s. Other paintings of that time, like *Eight Student Nurses* (CR: 130), representing a series of portraits of eight young students murdered in Chicago in July 1966, and *Helga Matura* (CR: 124), depicting a murdered sex worker in Frankfurt, both from 1966, demonstrate that Richter was also interested in exploring the more general presence of crime, perversity, and senseless tragedy in contemporary society.

[17] It is true that, like many other West German artists, Richter's earlier work reflected social and political issues that pervaded the cultural context of contemporary German society. Jaskot demonstrates that in the late 1950s and early 1960s several artists and cultural agents increasingly engaged with the Nazi past and current public history.<sup>18</sup> Joseph Beuys' *Auschwitz Demonstration*, a work displaying several objects collected from 1956 to 1964; the project *Design for Auschwitz Memorial*, presented by Beuys for the 1957-1958 international competition organized by the International Auschwitz Committee (consisting of a series of geometrical forms that traced the way from the entrance of the camp to the site of the gas chambers);<sup>19</sup> Hans Peter Alvermann's installations combining political and

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that *Uncle Rudi* includes elements that directly refer to both the Berlin Wall and the uniforms of the border patrol guards in the East, which resembled those of the Wehrmacht (the armed forces of Nazi Germany), Curley proves that the theme of the Cold War was also decisive in some images of Richter's earlier Photo-Paintings. See John J. Curley, "Richter's Cold War Vision", in: *Gerhard Richter: Early Work, 1951-1972*, eds. Christine Mehring, Jeanne Anne Nugent and John L. Seydl, Los Angeles 2011, 11-35; and also, by the same author, *A Conspiracy of Images: Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and the Art of the Cold War*, New Haven 2013.

<sup>17</sup> See Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 59-62 and following pages. For a detailed analysis on these and related issues concerning the status of victims and perpetrators and the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting that marked the post-war decades after WWII in West Germany, see, for example, Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories. The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*, Berkeley 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 51.

<sup>19</sup> For a description and discussion of Beuys' *Auschwitz Demonstration*, see: Matthew Biro, "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust", in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16 (2003), no. 1; Gene Ray, "Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime", in: *Joseph Beuys: Mapping*



sexual imagery; Dore Vax's reference to fascism in painting; Gerhard Marcks's sculptures and war memorials; the exhibition held in 1960, *No Butterflies Fly Here*, featuring the work of children sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp; and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Degenerate Art* show in 1962,<sup>20</sup> widely covered by the specialized press of that time, constitute some examples that reveal the importance given to the public discussion of the Nazi past and its presence in the artistic and cultural context of post-war West Germany.

[18] Nevertheless, Richter's earlier work reflects a degree of systematization of the Nazi past that, as Jaskot asserts, had been merely selective and inconsistent in the case of his contemporary fellow artists.<sup>21</sup> For Storr also, "there is nothing in German painting of that time that presents the continued Nazi penetration of daily life so matter-of-factly, so unflinchingly, or from so many sides of the German experience" that could be compared with Richter's work.<sup>22</sup>

[19] In the late 1980s Richter's interest in political history explicitly returns through the above-mentioned cycle *October 18, 1977*, dated 1988. *October* is constituted of paintings derived from the investigation of a photographic corpus consisting of press images, stills of video footage, and evidentiary images from police archives not readily accessible, or simply clipped by Richter from news magazines. Taken together, the paintings of the *October* cycle documented the stories of detention, captivity and death of the members of the Baader-Meinhof group. The only exception is the painting entitled *Youth Portrait* (CR: 672-1), which was based on a studio photograph of Ulrike Meinhof, taken shortly before she abandoned her career as a political journalist to join the RAF.

[20] The wave of terrorist attacks carried out by the RAF in West Germany during the 1970s occurred in the context of a violent and open generational conflict. Politicized groups of students and left wing activists began to organize protests with increasing fervour in the late 1960s, especially motivated by the aggressive questioning of the older generation's involvement in the Nazi crimes. As Storr points out,

*[the six elements of the Baader-Meinhof group] stood for a loose confederation of youthful activists – mostly anarchist and Communist – who in turn represented a much larger segment of their disaffected generation, a*

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*the Legacy*, New York 2001, 55-74; and Mario Kramer, "Joseph Beuys: 'Auschwitz Demonstration' 1956-1964", in: *Deutschlandbilder: Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*, ed. Eckhart Gillen, Cologne 1997, 293-303. For discussions on *Design for Auschwitz Memorial* see Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 52-53.

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth reading of this event and its reception by German art critics at the time see Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 54-57.

<sup>21</sup> Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 53, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 41.



*generation for the most part born after the war and at odds with that of their parents who had acquiesced to, if not supported, Hitler.*<sup>23</sup>

[21] The rebellion also involved the critique of the rampant materialism of Western consumer society and fierce opposition to the American military campaigns, particularly in Southeast Asia, which fuelled the escalation of Cold War tensions and ideological divisions. The violent response from West German authorities to initially peaceful actions triggered the emergence of rebellious armed groups that adopted the tactics of urban guerrilla attacks, with the RAF group becoming the most prominent of them. Its main members were arrested in 1972, but others outside the Stuttgart-Stammheim prison continued to resist the West German state through violent retaliations that included bombings, invasion of embassies, and kidnappings of high government officials. The confrontation would culminate in tragedy: following the death of Holger Meins in 1975 from a hunger strike, and of Ulrike Meinhof, found hanged in her cell in 1976, Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe also died in the Stammheim Prison in 1977. Officially presented as collective suicides, these tragic deaths were nonetheless surrounded by suspicions of having been state-ordered police assassinations, constituting a political and historical event that greatly disrupted West German society.

[22] The paintings of the *October* cycle are pervaded by an uncertain and misty darkness, adding connotations of despair and mortality to these politically charged pictures. Moreover, the painterly alterations of size, framing, proportion and tonalities of the photographic sources, introduce, as observed by Storr, elements of doubt and ambiguity that undermine the idea that "such documentary sources can be trusted to testify to the truth of the situations or events they ostensibly register faithfully and without visual distortions or bias".<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the images of the *October* cycle establish a continuation of the Photo-Paintings of the mid-1960s, since the social and political readings in these paintings are also persistently obfuscated by compositional strategies that introduce iconographic ambivalence and contradictory feelings, undermining the stability of the information conveyed by the source images. But if the Photo-Paintings reflect a thematic and formal ambiguity, the fact is that the gloomy effect of the *October* paintings, and, more importantly, the introduction of an unprecedented tension between figuration and abstraction, carried out by Richter through an important set of correlated works, make us understand that important differences also separate these two important moments in Richter's career.

[23] In *Blanket*, 1988 (CR: 680-3), a painting included in exhibitions of the *October* cycle, Richter covers the canvas with white paint, cancelling out the figurative representation that remains occluded in the background. In the margins of the canvas we can perceive the shadowy forms of the second

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<sup>23</sup> Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 76.

version of *Hanged*, a painting of the *October* series that depicts Gudrun Ensslin, a founding member of the RAF (together with Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof), hanging from the bars of her cell in Stammheim prison. Also, in *Abstract Painting (H.M.)*, from the same year (CR: 686-9), Richter overpainted a photograph of Holger Meins previously transferred to the canvas. Part of the original image is recognizable, blending with the pasty application of paint to form a new composition. A similar painterly strategy is applied by Richter in the group of twenty-three works entitled *Stammheim*, in which thick layers of oil paint are applied over the pages of the 1986 book *Stammheim: Der Prozeß gegen die Rote Armee Fraktion* [Stammheim: The Trial Against the Red Army Faction], by defence counsel Pieter H. Bakker Schut, partly covering and partly revealing the text underneath.<sup>25</sup> Along with these works we should also consider the abstract painting entitled *Gudrun* (CR: 633), dated 1987, which is dominated by a foreground layer of red paint dragged across the canvas with a squeegee, creating a supplementary and unexpected version of *Hanged*. The images here are abstract, but they can be all considered as being photographs produced *by other means*,<sup>26</sup> reflecting an overlapping of figuration and abstraction that the artist also begins to consistently explore through his Overpainted Photographs' experimentations, from 1988 onwards.

[24] What is at stake here is not to argue for an evolution that would be translated into a higher state of Richter's career, but to identify the moment of a unique confrontation developed between figuration and abstraction, which, I will argue, decisively marks his later efforts in representing the memory of the Holocaust. In this sense, the artist's concentrated efforts on Abstract Paintings from 1977 to 1987 have to be also considered as important forerunners of his later investigations of abstraction as an efficient vehicle for conveying traumatic events in history. We will see that the tensions between abstraction and figuration play an invaluable role in the assessment of Richter's ambiguous approaches to the Holocaust photographs, helping us to understand the multiple doubts, scepticisms, and hopes that surrounded the possibility of representing those documents through the means of painting.

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<sup>25</sup> Richter's *Stammheim* cycle is reproduced in a facsimile limited edition published in 1995: Anne Seymour, *Stammheim. Gerhard Richter*, London 1995.

<sup>26</sup> It is worth remembering how Richter voiced his position on the relationship between photography and painting, including abstract ones: "I do not wish to imitate a photograph; I want to make one. And if I ignore deliberately that photography is generally understood to be a piece of exposed paper; I am making photos with different means and not pictures which resemble a photograph. And seen from this angle, even pictures which have been painted without a model (abstract ones, etc.) are photographs." Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Rolf Schön (1972)", in: *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2012, 362-363: 362.

## *Atlas* and the Holocaust imagery

[25] Richter's interest in the Holocaust photographs, first assembled in the *Atlas* in 1967 (hence, right after the Photo-Paintings that explored the subject of the Nazi past and its presence within post-war society), was triggered by a personal experience that goes back to Richter's years as a student in the Dresden Academy of Arts. Richter explains that:

*[...] for the subject of the Holocaust there was a key experience: I was about twenty when a student showed a photographic reportage on the playground of the Dresden Academy of Arts, a documentary about concentration camps. Terrifying images taken by the Americans at the end of the war. I could not speak a word of English, but the pictures did not go out of my head. Then I had wondered that there was no such thing in the GDR.*<sup>27</sup>

In an earlier interview from 1989 for *Flash Art*, Richter claimed that his monochromatic paintings from the 1970s, the *Graue Bilder* [Gray Paintings], – of which some exhibition drafts appear in [panel 737](#) of *Atlas* – would be "the only way [...] to paint concentration camp panel 737s. It is impossible to paint the misery of life, except maybe in gray to cover it", said Richter.<sup>28</sup>

[26] Despite this scathing remark, the Holocaust photographs appear in different moments of *Atlas*, acting as a sort of latent energy that disrupts the sometimes apparent banality and neutrality of the panels. The Holocaust archive images can be identified at crucial moments of *Atlas*'s structure, more precisely, in panels 16 to 20, 635 to 648, and, finally, in panels 807 to 808, marking a sort of *intermezzo* that punctuates the project; to those panels we can also add [panels 131 to 132](#), which are devoted to photographs of Hitler's rule.

[27] These re-photographed images constitute the only motif that is repeated throughout *Atlas*, from its initial stages in 1962 to the last panels added in 2013 and 2015. Their presence leads us to the idea that Richter's earlier failed attempts to represent the specific memory of the Holocaust (which the artist had tried to achieve on several occasions through paintings of the 1960s that ended up being destroyed) were never related to any claim about the unrepresentability of the event. On the contrary, Richter's violent questioning about the possibility of representing the images of the camps reflects a more general concern to include in his pictorial practice the violent memory of the Holocaust conveyed by the photographs.

[28] Such commitment seems to incorporate, first of all, the necessity to avoid the reduction of those photographs to black and white documents of horror ritualized in media culture. On the other hand, the attempt to integrate the Holocaust archives into painting seems to also comprise the aspiration, even if not always successful, and pervaded by innumerable

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<sup>27</sup> Richter, Interview by Julia Voss and Peter Geimer, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Gerhard Richter "Interview with Gregorio Magnani", in: *Flash Art* (May/June 1989), 94-97: 97.

ambiguities and scepticisms, to go beyond the symbolic refusal and historical prohibition materialized in the *Gray Paintings*. These different aspects can provide a useful framework to address the Holocaust series of photographs included in *Atlas*.

[29] The first series of Holocaust photographs (some of them taken by English and American army photographers on the occasion of the camps' liberation), appears on panels 16 to 20. According to Buchloh, Richter's decision was based on the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials of mid to lower-level officials in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp complex. The trials began in 1962 and ended in 1965, charging 22 defendants, for the first time under German criminal law.<sup>29</sup> Evidence exists that Richter had been particularly interested in the Frankfurt trials, closely following the daily press reports and the intense documentation of the event in newspapers. Along with the previous Israeli trial of Adolf Eichmann, from 1961 to 1962, the Frankfurt trials constituted a major event that triggered heated debates on the presence of former perpetrators in West German contemporary society. But if during these years German society was thoroughly involved in the discussion of the Nazi past, the recognition of society's larger implication in a regime that led to an unprecedented genocide was generally avoided, reflecting the failure to engage with the idea of collective guilt.

[30] Proof of this was the fact that both the public responses and the press reporting on the trials privileged, in general, procedural issues and sensationalizing descriptions of acts of extreme violence, which, curiously enough, diverted the focus away from disputes over the policies of extermination and the charges of crimes against humanity. As a result, the climate tended to insidiously increase the distance between the events and the populace, constituting a response of avoidance that, for that matter, was fully in line with the ambivalence of Konrad Adenauer's government in dealing with criminal past activities.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, if Richter's Photo-Paintings of the mid-1960s can be interpreted as a consistent practice that addressed the blind spots of memory, the Holocaust photographs of *Atlas* appear – in their status of visual testimonies of political and active crime – as a response to forms of public avoidance that moulded spaces of impunity and foreclosed opportunities to mourn and engage with collective guilt.

[31] But we must consider, too, that what was at stake was also Richter's attempt to reveal through painting that which was not told by photography. In [panel 20](#), dated 1967, Richter picked three photographs of the camps (already used in the previous panels), and radically transformed them by adding unrealistic colorations, which Helmut Friedel associated with the frightening and uncanny illustrations of the fairy tale books of Richter's childhood.<sup>31</sup> The garish and unpleasant *wrong* colouring of the photographs gives the images an effect of external shock and offensiveness that

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<sup>29</sup> Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", 6.

<sup>30</sup> Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 66-67.

questions the adequacy of figurative painting in representing the subject of these photographs.

[32] At the same time, serious concerns were raised about the possibility of including such kinds of visual material in the context of an artistic assignment, as demonstrated by Richter's abandonment of a project with Konrad Lueg (who was to become, under his birth name, the influential gallerist Konrad Fischer), at the Galerie Niepel in Düsseldorf, which would involve the combination of Holocaust images and pornographic photographs. Reminiscent of Hans Peter Alvermann's arrangements of Nazi icons and sexual images that highlighted the delusions and perversities of German society, Richter eventually considered this kind of assemblage inappropriate to convey the memory of the genocide, and ultimately gave up the project. Nevertheless, Richter decided to maintain the possibility of this ambiguous articulation by including the pornographic photographs in [panels 21 to 23](#) of *Atlas*, immediately following those dedicated to the Holocaust photographs.

[33] In the second example of Holocaust imagery usage in *Atlas*, included in [panels 647 to 655](#), from 1997, similar sets of Holocaust photographs are incorporated in studies that would lead to the creation of a large-scale mural work, entitled *Black, Red, Gold* (1999). The work was planned for the entrance hall of the former Reichstag building in Berlin, which had been newly reconstructed to hold the Bundestag (since then the permanent location of the German federal parliament), and to mark Germany's reunification in 1990. In this case, the photographs of the camps are initially replaced with selected samples of colours randomly combined in mosaic structures (bringing to mind Richter's *Colour Charts*, initiated in 1966). The project ultimately gave rise to a vertical version of the German flag, composed of three large panels of enamelled coloured glass standing twenty-one meters high ([CR: 856](#)).

[34] Both Benjamin Buchloh and Helmut Friedel point out that *Black, Red, Gold* emerges as an abstraction with a clear heraldic meaning,<sup>32</sup> and that the relationship between the final design and its institutional setting is crucial. It must be remembered that the black-red-gold tricolour was readopted after the end of Nazi Fascism, establishing symbolic continuity with both the liberal movement of the nineteenth century and the foundation of the short-lived Weimar Republic, and that up until this time the presence and overall usage of the German national colours was still very rare. This is something that can be explained by decades of collective

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<sup>31</sup> Helmut Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", in: *Gerhard Richter. Birkenau*, exh. cat. Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, ed. Helmut Friedel, Cologne 2016, 7-20: 8.

<sup>32</sup> See Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", 9; and Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", 7.

practices of defence, aimed at withdrawing circumstances related to the former enthusiasm for the Third Reich.<sup>33</sup>

[35] At the same time, it must be noted that Richter's design for the Bundestag followed almost three decades after the first panels of *Atlas* were dedicated to images of the Holocaust, and that during that time a renewed and distinct public engagement with the Nazi past had taken place in German society. Rediscovered discourses of German suffering had gained prominence, motivating the collapse of the differentiation between the suffering of Germans and the suffering caused by Germans.

[36] For Robert G. Moeller, the assumption of the victim status, recovered from the narratives of the 1950s (which, as we have seen, focused on the experience of expellees that came from the East and on the German prisoners of war held in the Soviet Union), provided a mechanism by which the suffering inflicted upon Jews and the recognition of the collective implication in the catastrophe could be avoided. In this way, "mourning German suffering was the essential prerequisite for Germans to mourn the suffering of others",<sup>34</sup> thereby leading to a memory of avoidance that rapidly permeated the political discourses of right-wing parties.

[37] Indeed, as observed by Jaskot, West Germany's political shift to the right in 1982, with the chancellorship of Helmut Kohl (which lasted until 1998, marking the end of the previous Social Democratic Party's governments of Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt), played a decisive role in the political instrumentalizations of memory of that period.<sup>35</sup> The rise to

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<sup>33</sup> The German flag reveals competing pasts and meanings associated with a story of discontinuity. The black-red-gold tricolour appeared in 1778 and was adopted during the liberal and anti-autocratic Revolutions of 1848, in opposition to the competing imperial tradition of black-white-red. The so-called Weimar Republic, founded in 1919, re-adopted the liberal tricolour to establish continuity with the values of democracy of the German state. After the Nazi Party came to power on 30 January 1933, the black-red-gold flag was abolished in favour of two institutionalized and legal versions of the national flags: the black-white-red imperial tricolour and the flag of the Nazi Party. Following the end of World War II, the black-red-gold tricolour was again established, and, after the use of distinct heraldic bearings by West and East Germany during the Cold War, it became the flag of the reunified Germany after 1990. However, it was only during the FIFA World Cup, organized by Germany in 2006, that public use of the national flag greatly increased, making its symbolic meaning omnipresent.

<sup>34</sup> Moeller, *War Stories*, 183.

<sup>35</sup> Kohl's speech in the Reichstag building on January 30, 1983, delivered to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler's ascension, is paradigmatic in that it signalled Kohl's strategy to remove clear references to former perpetrators and to highlight instead the role of German soldiers who *heroically* suffered and fought for their fatherland during the conflict. Also important was the ceremonial visit by U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1985 to a military cemetery in Bitburg (a small city nearby a former U.S. air base), planned by Kohl to commemorate the fortieth

power of Kohl and the CDU also coincided with the so-called cultural turn of the late 1970s and 1980s. During this time, the Nazi past tended to be increasingly represented in cultural products like popular films, television series, and novels, whose common denominator was their preference for mythical and melodramatic representations of the traumatic past.<sup>36</sup>

[38] Therefore, within this predominantly conservative cultural and political context "the pasts of German suffering"<sup>37</sup> acquired greater visibility and influence. Not only in public discourses, but, fundamentally, in political commemorations encouraged by Kohl's government with the intention of promoting the idea of a normalized nation-state, freed from the Nazi spectre and its traumatic heritage. Kohl systematically avoided the horrors of National Socialism, chose strategies that removed clear references to former perpetrators and invested in ritualistic forms of mourning that diminished the sense of both criminal culpability and continuity of former policies in post-war democracy.

[39] Now, returning to Richter, and looking again at the sketches of the work devised for the Bundestag, we realize that Richter's insistence on using the documentation and traumatic violence of the Holocaust photographs in an artistic intervention (designed for an institutional space) can be interpreted as a response to this generalized conservative political and cultural climate. In this context, the resurgence of antisemitism and of racist positions, reinforced by some electoral successes for right-wing extremist parties in the late 1980s and early 1990s, constituted factors that, along with Kohl's systematic manoeuvres of mnemonic readjustments, must be considered important experiences that may have influenced Richter's initial decision in making use of the photographs.<sup>38</sup>

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anniversary of the end of WWII. Soldiers of the SS were buried alongside others in Bitburg's cemetery; a fact that aroused even more controversy when Reagan stated, at a press conference prior to his departure for West Germany, that the German war dead "are victims of Nazism also ... They were victims, just as surely as [were] the victims in the concentration camps" (cit. Moeller, *War Stories*, 187). Reagan's attempt at generalizing the status of the victims strategically coincided with Kohl's policy of mitigating the sense of criminal culpability by establishing a moral equivalence between victims of Germans and German victims, fostering narratives of exculpation that also intended to reposition the SS within a narrative of struggle against Bolshevism and the threat of communism during the Cold War. For a detailed analysis on Kohl's political strategies in relation to the memory of the Nazi past and the changing notion of the perpetrator, see Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, especially 85-120.

<sup>36</sup> For a systematic survey of some of the main movies and TV series produced during the 1970s and the 1980s in West Germany, see Moeller, *War Stories*, 182-186.

<sup>37</sup> Moeller, *War Stories*, 187.

<sup>38</sup> As noted by Jaskot, "the early 1990s began with the frightful spectre of the reconstitution of radical right-wing parties and a concomitant resurgence in anti-



[40] These images constitute the inscription of a particular referent, an indisputable proof of the massive scale of the Nazi perpetrators' actions. In this sense, the Holocaust photographs can be read as Richter's attempt at reintroducing a sense of a direct and contingent brutality conveyed by documentary representations, irreconcilable with ritualistic forms of mourning intended to disavow the brutality of the genocide. Reflecting Richter's struggle with the violent memory of the Holocaust, the sequence of studies that led to *Black, Red, Gold* demonstrates that, despite the failed attempt to explicitly address its horrors in this project, Richter rejected any form of representation intended to make the genocide more consumable and stylized.

[41] In this sense, Richter's attitude is in clear opposition to that of a new-generation artist like Anselm Kiefer (born 1945), for many the most prominent post-war German artist associated with the problem of Holocaust memory. After Kiefer's exploration of the themes of military iconography and generational confrontation in the 1970s, his paintings integrated, from 1980 onwards, mythic references and allegorical forms of mourning that tended to evacuate the Nazi past (and, more specifically, the Holocaust) of explicit signs of military and political criminality, as can be seen in paintings like the *Margarete* series (1981), and *To the Unknown Painter*, from the same year, just to name some well-known examples of Kiefer's art.<sup>39</sup>

[42] For his part, Richter was never interested in mythic death cults and ritualistic forms of remembering, which, inevitably, were also encountered in Beuys's speculative imbrications concerning the Holocaust and the autobiographical (re)inventions of his story as a Luftwaffe pilot. Richter's struggle with the representation of the traumatic past vehemently opposed strategies that tended to displace the focus from the violence that characterized Nazism as such: that is, as a violent and ruthless regime whose criminal actions were reflected in the horrors of the Holocaust. This is why Richter opposed his own work to expressionist forms of painting, whose heroes he referred to, in 1977, as "Nazis in disguise".<sup>40</sup>

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Semitic and racist attacks on German Jews, people perceived as Jews, foreign workers, and asylum seekers". Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> For critical responses for and against Kiefer's role in addressing the memory of the Holocaust, see, for example, Matthew Biro, "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust", in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16 (2003), no. 1, 113-146; Matthew Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, New York 1998, especially 75-134; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting", in: *October* 16 (spring 1981), 39-68; Bazon Brock, "Avantgarde and Mythos", in: *Kunstforum International* 40 (April 1980), 86-103; Andreas Huyssen, "Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth", in *October* 48 (spring 1989), 25-45; and Jaskot, *The Nazi Perpetrator*, 83-126.

<sup>40</sup> Gerhard Richter quoted by Mark Godfrey, "Damaged Landscapes", in: *Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, exh. cat., Tate Modern, London 2011, 73-89: 87.

## The *Birkenau* studies

[43] The tension between Richter's personal need to construct a mnemonic representation of the Holocaust and the seeming impossibility of the artist in re-producing its images by means of painting is particularly felt in the photographic experiments that I have just described. As argued by Didi-Huberman, the events inscribed in those photographs are particularly sensitive and painful (considered ethically and emotionally). However, instead of denying or disavowing their brutality, Richter opts, on the contrary, to explore the complexities and the aporias that are raised by the photographs, incorporating them into the artistic process as indisputable proofs of the massive scale of the perpetrators' actions.<sup>41</sup>

[44] It is precisely the comprehension of photography as a form of mnemotechnics, as an element of historical value, but also as an aporetic form of representation that intersects immediacy and distance, that would be further explored by Richter in the studies assembled in panels 807 and 808 of *Atlas*. In this third example of Holocaust imagery usage in *Atlas*, the photographs are presented by Richter as studies from 2013. Most notably, these studies would be at the basis of the *Birkenau* paintings, a series of abstract paintings produced one year later, in 2014 (CR: 937-1 to 937-4). They constitute, until now, the only series of paintings directly related to Holocaust imagery to be concluded and publicly exhibited by the artist. Moreover, the *Birkenau* paintings acquire a particular relevance in the reassessment of issues concerning the use of colour, the problem of referent and the relationship between photography and abstraction. For these reasons, from now on I will place the *Birkenau* paintings at the centre of an extended analysis that includes both the methodological specificity of the paintings and the broader connection to other studies and practices by Richter, developed within and outside *Atlas*.

[45] The set of photographs assembled in panels 807 and 808 (among which we could already find a cropped version of one image in panel 19, from 1967, situated in the lower left-hand corner), correspond to four photographic registers taken by actual prisoners inside the Extermination Camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau (Auschwitz II), which functioned from 1942 to 1944. According to Buchloh, Richter had initially discovered the reference to these images in a review of Georges Didi-Huberman's book *Images malgré tout* (2003) [*Bilder trotz allem*, 2007; *Images In Spite of All*, 2008], published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in 2008, prompting an encounter that would prove pivotal in the artist's decision to construct the *Birkenau* paintings.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, "Die Malerei in ihrem aporetischen Moment", in: *Gerhard Richter. Birkenau*, exh. cat. Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, ed. Helmut Friedel, Cologne 2016, 31-55: 34.

<sup>42</sup> Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", 21.

[46] In his book, Didi-Huberman explains that the photographs were taken by members of the *Sonderkommando*, groups of Jewish male inmates whose job was to dispose of the corpses from the gas chambers. According to Didi-Huberman, the photographs are simultaneously documents and acts of resistance carried out by a group of prisoners who somehow managed to record and smuggle the images to the outside, in order to convey the intolerable reality of the camps.<sup>43</sup> We cannot forget that the program of extermination instituted by the Nazis was persistently accompanied by the denial and concealment of extermination, therefore encompassing the program of extermination of memory as well. This could explain Richter's particular interest in these images, since we are talking about an artist whose work is decisively determined by the act of recalling and understanding traumatic historical events that tend to be repressed, subjected to cultural amnesia, or simply reduced to mere documentary information. At the same time, Richter recognizes that the fact that the four photographs were taken by the inmates themselves, thereby risking their lives, and that the photographer and their helpers were later murdered in Birkenau, means that they "convey a completely different mood and meaning than the photos you know".<sup>44</sup>

[47] At least since his influential essay on Richter's *Atlas*, in 1999, Buchloh stresses the condition of photography as an ideological visual element dependent on capitalist modes of production and reification. In Buchloh's view, Richter saw "photography and its various practices as a system of ideological domination",<sup>45</sup> an apparatus connected to the artificial desire of consumption that would serve to cover up Germany's traumatic past. However, by exclusively pursuing this line of thought, Buchloh is stripping photography of an emotional and affective experience that is important to consider in Richter's position on the photographic medium, not to mention photography's central role in Richter's claim for a new way of seeing with "no style, no composition, no judgement",<sup>46</sup> thus liberating him from the conventional criteria and moral requirements attached to art, which, for Richter, frequently turns out to be a form of ideological power.

[48] More importantly, in Richter's work photography emerges, as I have tried to demonstrate, as an element that comprises a mnemonic and historical value, integrating both the expression and enactment of a specific historical experience, both private and collective. Contrary to Andy Warhol, for example, for whom the impact of death and traumatic violence is annulled by repetition and the generalizing effects of spectacle and media

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<sup>43</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, transl. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago and London 2008, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Gerhard Richter, Interview by Julia Voss and Peter Geimer, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas': The Anomic Archive", in: *October* 88 (spring 1999), 117-145: 134.

<sup>46</sup> Richter, "Interview with Rolf Schön", 362.

conditioning, for Richter the choice of an image is never random or indifferent: the chosen photographs are strictly connected to content, denouncing an interest for the singularity and historical specificity of the photographic image, which, in its latent historical, cognitive, and sentimental power, "calls for pictorial fulfilment".<sup>47</sup>

[49] Thus, we must signal photography's significance at the level of a mnemotechnics that concerns the fabric that interlaces the past and the present, designating a specific type of memory that crosses over the public and the private sphere. This is a memory that could be called post-memory,<sup>48</sup> but also prosthetic memory,<sup>49</sup> or cultural memory.<sup>50</sup> All these contemporary definitions are related to the issue of traumatic and fracturing events, like the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, or 9/11. In such limit events, the links between individual persons and the normative foundations of community are broken and alternative modes of transmission of memories are required. Through technologies of mass culture, like photography and cinema, memories that do not belong to us can be acquired and integrated into our own archive of experiences, encouraging a connection to transgenerational spaces of remembrance.<sup>51</sup>

[50] This explains, at least in part, why in *Atlas* the images of the camps are presented alongside intimate snapshots of Richter's close family, as in the specific case that we are dealing with here, that of [panels 807 and 808](#), where the photographs of Birkenau are immediately followed by a sequence of photographs of his son Theodor. Richter shares with an author like Peter Haidu the sensibility that the Holocaust and its imagery are not limited to the past, determining instead private and collective memories of self-

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-François Chevrier, "Between the Fine Arts and the Media. The German Example: Gerhard Richter", in: *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter: Four Essays on 'Atlas'*, ed. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona 1999, 31-59: 37. Richter made his position overt and clear when he stated that: "They [the photos chosen] very definitely were concerned with content. Perhaps I denied that earlier, when I maintained that had nothing to do with content, that for me it was only a matter of painting a photo and demonstrating indifference." Richter has maintained this position until today. Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 1986", in: idem, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews, 1962-1993*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist, transl. David Britt, Cambridge MA 1995, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (2001), no. 1, 5-37.

<sup>49</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance*, New York 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Marita Sturken, "Memory, Consumerism, and Media: Reflections on the Emergence of the Field", in: *Memory Studies* 1 (2008), no. 1, 73-78.

<sup>51</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2.

conscious beings that live "on the edge of multiple destructions" and recognize the "participation in the same genealogy as the [Holocaust]".<sup>52</sup>

[51] This position would also explain Richter's decision to explicitly reference the Holocaust in the title chosen for the *Birkenau* paintings, at first simply identified as Abstract Paintings. As observed by Buchloh, "[...] the hostility towards foreigners originating at that moment [...] might have contributed to Richter's change of title for these paintings".<sup>53</sup> Moreover, it was intended that *Birkenau* would be exhibited for the first time in Dresden, precisely the same city where unfriendliness and xenophobic reactions toward migrants and asylum seekers were most trenchant.

[52] The situation of economic strain, combined with the flows of migrants and refugees from countries of the Middle East and North Africa to Germany and Europe, and the resurgence of far-right fringe hate groups all over the world, contributed to the resurgence of racism and protectionist beliefs that frequently overlapped with neo-Nazism and renewed anti-Semitic positions (which, as we have seen, had already affected Germany's social and political climate of the early 1990s). In this light, Richter's *Birkenau* paintings can also be comprehended as a critical response to re-emerging nationalist impulses embodying new forms of perpetration actually linked to a contemporary situation of renewed racism and anti-Semitism, dangerously similar to the climate of Nazi Germany in the twentieth century.

[53] As a result, it becomes clear that Richter's explorations around Holocaust imagery are consistently guided, here and there, by ethical and political considerations that endow the past with a configuration of actuality, mobilizing the painterly gesture to draw attention to events of contemporary society. This defines what Paul Rabinow, for example, identified as an "ethos of the contemporary",<sup>54</sup> that is, a specific ethical *character* that distinguishes a practice that, as I have argued, consistently encourages critical thinking by crossing over multiple images and discourses, thus revealed in their ability to disrupt conventional perception.

### The *Birkenau* paintings

[54] I now would like to turn my attention to issues concerning the pictorial methodology that governed the construction of the *Birkenau* paintings. It must be noted that the large-format abstract canvases that compose the series result from an attempt by Richter to directly transform the photographs taken inside Birkenau into paintings.

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Haidu, "The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification", in: *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander, Cambridge MA and London 1992, 277-299, 292.

<sup>53</sup> Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", 5.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Rabinow, *Unconsolable Contemporary: Observing Gerhard Richter*, Durham 2017, 4-5.

[55] The photographs were first projected onto four equally sized canvases (260 x 200 cm each) and painted in a realistic manner, denoting a procedure similar to the Photo-Paintings. In this case, however, by applying successive layers of paint over the initial realistic depictions, Richter instigated, as observed by Buchloh, a long and slow process of abstraction carried out on the same canvases. The duration of the painterly process is not an insignificant detail here; as a matter of fact, it proves to be particularly important in our understanding of Richter's complex involvement with both the paintings and the photographs.

[56] In a letter to Gerhard Richter written by Didi-Huberman on his visit to the artist's studio on December 19, 2013 (therefore, at a time when the paintings were still in preparation and existed only as four empty white canvases hanging in the studio), the French author demonstrates that the paintings are not merely iconic transpositions. The paintings propose instead a new form of visual and mnemonic presentation of the photographs' *aporias*, in such a way that the crime, the destruction, and the incomprehensible nature of the events, evidenced by those photographs, would be preserved in the final pictorial representations.<sup>55</sup>

[57] This is to say that the abstract paintings do not claim to reproduce the photographic testimony of the prisoners. The great difficulty would be instead to know "how to paint a picture of evil, in such a way that the picture itself does not stop protesting in its modesty against evil",<sup>56</sup> in the same manner that Richter's Photo-Paintings of the mid-1960s were protests against the presence of crime in family and contemporary society.

[58] As pointed out by Friedel, although no longer visible, the photographs are conserved in the final paintings of *Birkenau*, even if in this case the photos are somehow cancelled out in order to allow their return as traces of memory and emotionally charged representations. "I have started to transfer these four pictures to the canvases and soon realized that it was not possible. So I have scratched and repainted, until I had the four abstract images. This process is not unusual, to start objectively and land abstractly", Richter stated.<sup>57</sup>

[59] In *Birkenau*, painting makes the photographic sources completely unrecognizable, giving way to pure abstractions connected to processes of destruction of the iconic image, or cliché. At the same time, though, abstraction integrates destruction and entropy as crucial components of the artistic decision, eradicating any claim for subjective expression or chromatic completeness.

[60] In fact, for Richter abstraction was never a matter of harmony and chromatic joy, aspects that are normally associated with the historical

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<sup>55</sup> Didi-Huberman, "Die Malerei in ihrem aporetischen Moment", 41.

<sup>56</sup> Didi-Huberman, "Die Malerei in ihrem aporetischen Moment", 38.

<sup>57</sup> Richter, Interview by Julia Voss and Peter Geimer, 2016.

movement of abstraction.<sup>58</sup> Richter's abstract paintings are "just as photographically mediated as all [his] other paintings",<sup>59</sup> acquiring a technical, physical, and even chemical dimension. This aspect is particularly manifested in the *Birkenau* series, whose canvases also make us evoke surfaces composed of multiple layers of photographic and off-set prints that would have been successively ripped and burned, resulting in an entropic picture that should be associated with the violence of trauma and destruction.

[61] Christine Mehring noted that what distinguishes Richter's general abstract paintings from other twentieth-century manifestations is precisely their "conspicuous layering", the way each picture "contrasts different modes of abstract form-making".<sup>60</sup> This is closely related to what Richter, in the early 1970s, referred to as *Vermalung*, or *Inpainting*, a process consisting of multiple blends, scraps and overpainting that obliterate the figurative images used as sources in some of these earlier abstractions. Different stages of the layering interaction in these works are documented by the artist in *Atlas*, revealing a "dialectic of making and unmaking" that marks the temporality associated with the picture's construction.<sup>61</sup> However, at the same time, as noted by Mehring, Richter's abstract pictures also included, from the beginning, specific modes of historical reflection, particularly detected in the ways the layering of the abstract pictures echo "the 'logic' of the raw materiality of a world destroyed and reconstructed, undone and redone",<sup>62</sup> in the wake of WWII.

[62] In the specific case of the *Birkenau* series, the viewer is also confronted with the historical and conceptual complexity of temporality as a multiplicity of different durations. After being transposed to the canvases, the photographs taken by the *Sonderkommandos*, in August 1944, were, coincidentally or not, *destroyed* and *recovered* by Richter during August 2014: on August 3, 2014, the photographs were covered with a brown colour that

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<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting this excerpt from a conversation between Buchloh and Richter in 2004, just ten years before the completion of the *Birkenau* paintings: "B.B.: [...] It is a bit strange that from the beginning your work had such a strict prohibition against the hedonistic dimension of painting. And this is actually true to this day. For, even in the large, colour Abstract Paintings, in which some of your interpreters have thought they saw chromaticist and even symphonic joy – it isn't there either. For those are always tones or constellations of colour, which cannot be discharged as symphonic joy, nor do they point to any promising future. Correct? G.R.: Yes, that's what I was afraid of." Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh 2004", in: Gerhard Richter, *Writings 1961-2007*, eds. Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, New York 2009, 488.

<sup>59</sup> Buchloh in Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh 2004", 487.

<sup>60</sup> Christine Mehring, "Richter's Willkür", in: *Art Journal* 71 (2012), no. 4, 20-35: 21.

<sup>61</sup> Mehring, "Richter's Willkür", 24. See, for instance, [panels 411-413](#), and [468-469](#).

<sup>62</sup> Mehring, "Richter's Willkür", 30.



seems to have been scratched and complemented with black brushstrokes; this was followed on August 13 by a progression of vertical and horizontal strong reds, alternated on the next day with similar patterns of green that become predominant; and, finally, on August 25, 2014, the paintings are concluded with black and white striations subjected to multiple blurring and scratches. The final paintings have a thickly painted surface and are composed of a progression of horizontal and vertical striations where shades of grey are interspersed with reds and greens,<sup>63</sup> forming a sort of ambiguous and terrific landscape. For Friedel "the greenness does not express a hopeful revival of sprouting nature, but resounds with corrupt, poisoned substance"; as for the grey, it moves between the extremes of white and black, bringing to mind a "rain of ashes" that covers the surface of the canvases.<sup>64</sup>

[63] Also from this perspective, the monochromatic general quality of the final paintings seems to establish an explicit reference to the black and white photographs (see, for instance, the fourth photograph of the sequence, in which we see *nothing* except the silhouette of the trees that surrounded the camp), even if we must consider the destruction of its iconic cohesion, carried out by the artist through the inscription of multiple durations.

[64] Thus, contrary to Buchloh's claim that "no visual traces of the photographs" remain in the paintings,<sup>65</sup> the temporal and (dis)figurative relation between the photographs and the paintings, which Buchloh strived to deny, is actually enhanced by Richter. This strategy is also stressed by Richter's decision to include the *Birkenau* abstract paintings in installations that comprise a specific montage of both photographs and paintings, as can be seen in the major exhibition entitled *Birkenau* (2016), at the Museum Frieder Burda, in Baden-Baden, Germany. Here, the four *Birkenau* paintings were exhibited alongside two complementary groups of photographs. On the one hand, small prints of the *Birkenau* photographs were exhibited on a transversal wall of the same room; and, on the other hand, a set of integral photographic duplications, directly produced from the canvases (each duplication exactly the same size as the original painting and perceptibly divided into four equal quadrants), were displayed on an opposite parallel wall, evoking a sort of mirror-like effect, a sort of photo-version of the abstract paintings.

[65] Like in Richter's other work, the *Birkenau* paintings are therefore positioned between the reproducibility of the photograph and the affirmation of the inflated presence of the motif in the pictorial plane. But in *Birkenau* this mode of ambivalence is particularly penetrating since it intersects

<sup>63</sup> For the visual documentation of the different stages of the *Birkenau* paintings, see Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", 12-13; or Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", 30-33.

<sup>64</sup> Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", 7.

<sup>65</sup> Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", 26.

photography and abstraction in a unique way: abstract painting marks the exploration of what is unresolvable and unattainable in the four photographs of *Birkenau*. At the same time, according to Friedel, the duplication of the paintings as photographic prints of exactly the same size produces a transformation of the paintings into another medium associated with reproducibility, evoking the erosion of the unique and elevated status of painting. In this way, the image can be "perpetuated in its meaning and effect. It remains indestructible because it can be resurrected".<sup>66</sup>

[66] Furthermore, in Baden Baden Richter also presented 93 photographic details directly produced from the four paintings. The details were organized in a book from 2015 entitled *Birkenau*, and prefaced by the statement "93 details from my picture *Birkenau*". In this way, Richter alludes to "a single image" that can be read in a different way: single pages, blank pages and double pages alternate, creating, as Friedel points out, new constellations and levels of meaning.<sup>67</sup> Richter continues to use this method of creating new vibrations and interpretations by using 15 sections of the *Birkenau* paintings to compose the covers of a 15-volume edition containing the testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust who recall their time and shocking experiences in German concentration camps.<sup>68</sup>

[67] In all these works and modes of display combining different media, reproducibility and montage are dynamic and open-ended processes through which fragments of images are (re)appropriated and reassembled into a hybrid structure. As I will try to demonstrate in the next section, Richter forges networked patterns of thought and perception that expand the meaning of the images, offering dissociative modes of narration that include multiple historical levels and constellations of meanings.

### Abstraction, montage and landscape

[68] In *Images malgré tout [Images In Spite of All]*, originally published in 2003, Didi-Huberman argues that the photographs taken by the *Sonderkommandos* already constitute a form of montage. No image can be isolated and its significance is formed within the ensemble created by the four images. For Friedel, it is significant that the four *Birkenau* paintings had been arranged by Richter from the beginning with relatively small distances between each other; according to Friedel, this option demonstrates that the

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<sup>66</sup> Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", 17.

<sup>67</sup> The editor, Ivan Lefkovits, himself suffered in the camps of Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen. See "*Mit meiner Vergangenheit lebe ich*". *Memoiren von Holocaust-Überlebenden*, ed. Ivan Lefkovits, box-set with 16 booklets, Berlin 2016.

<sup>68</sup> This work is in part reminiscent of the procedure that led to the book *War Cut*, consisting of an arrangement of 216 photographic details of an Abstract Painting from 1987 (CR: 648-2) and newspaper texts related to the beginning of the Iraq War, the layouts of which are presented fully in a long stretch of *Atlas*, covering [panels 697 to 736](#).

four paintings must be understood as "an image continuum from which the individual image parts cannot be liberated".<sup>69</sup> (Notably, at the time of Didi-Huberman's visit to Richter's studio, in which he saw the arrangement of the empty canvases planned by the artist, the French author argued that Richter was envisioning the paintings as a "polyptych-like composition":<sup>70</sup> a prediction that, in the end, turned out to be exactly right). As Friedel asserts, *The search for treatment of these photographic documents makes it clear that the artist was not interested in the reproduction of one, or even the right image. He was faced with the pressing truth about the knowledge of this crime, which was committed in the German name and cannot be represented through the simple reproduction of a section of history.*<sup>71</sup>

[69] By explicitly combining the four paintings not only with the four black and white photographs from Birkenau, but also with the integral photo-version of the work and the 93 photographic fragments extracted from the canvases (not to repeat the reference to the aforementioned arrangement of image and text in a complementary book), Richter accomplishes, through specific modes of display, exhibition, and circulation, a more complex notion of montage. It is a form of montage that Didi-Huberman identified, in *Images In Spite of All*, as an integral movement of thought and affection through which the photographs resonate with other images in differential associations, conflicts and analogies that sustain a new "readability" of the photographs.<sup>72</sup> Didi-Huberman writes:

*Montage is valuable only when it doesn't hasten to conclude or to close: it is valuable when it opens up our apprehension of history and makes it more complex, not when it falsely schematizes; when it gives us access to the singularities of time and hence to its essential multiplicity.*<sup>73</sup>

[70] Similarly to what happens in the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, discussed at length by Didi-Huberman in the second part of his book, Richter assumes the act of historical representation as a mobile and heterogeneous process involving the juxtaposition of already existing images that become new. The memory of the Holocaust is therefore reconfigured through what Didi-Huberman characterizes as "montages of intelligibility" that create new resemblances, new differences and new movements of thought/affection, disrupting fixed and secured meanings.<sup>74</sup>

[71] Similarly, the combination of multiple images allowed by the exhibition space gives rise to a sort of cinematic form of apprehension that is equally

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<sup>69</sup> Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", 15.

<sup>70</sup> Didi-Huberman, "Die Malerei in ihrem aporetischen Moment", 42.

<sup>71</sup> Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", 14.

<sup>72</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 120.

<sup>73</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 121.

<sup>74</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 159.

pursued by Richter in *Atlas*, that is, in the way this device operates according to the assemblage of disconnected elements and the materialization of conflicts and attractions that put the images in motion. Through the utilization of traditional devices (in this case, painting, photography, and the archive), now acting as mnemonic supports reinvented in their multiple passages, tensions, and attractions, Richter activates a dialectic confrontation between various media. This confrontation is played at the level of what Susan Laxton termed as a space of a "productive agonism",<sup>75</sup> a space capable of stressing the mutual and positive implications between singularity and multiplicity, anamnesis and erasure, and private and collective memory.

[72] Therefore, contrary to what is frequently emphasized by Buchloh, in Richter photography must not be understood as a simple alienating instrument of Western consumer societies. We must certainly recognise a shift in Buchloh's thinking between his analysis of *Atlas* and the essay devoted to *Birkenau*. The author evokes, for example, Richter's monumental effort to construct an iconography of both private and public mnemonic recovery, emphasizing the importance of the Holocaust in Richter's overall work.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, in his latter texts on Richter, Buchloh also connects the photographic image again and again to the operations of denial, disavowing, and fetishist construction.<sup>77</sup>

[73] Richter would certainly agree with the idea that the photographs of the *Sonderkommandos* do not *deny* the reality, but *testify* it, as Didi-Huberman puts it. Accordingly, accepting photographs is, for Richter, the "exact opposite of trying to appropriate them and dissolving them into art".<sup>78</sup> It is the exact opposite of merely moving from images of the cultural industry to avant-garde art works. "The [photographic] image is the picture, and painting is the technique to break it up",<sup>79</sup> said Richter. So, to move from photography to painting is not simply to move from one medium to another, from one category to another (not least because, for Richter, both are "much the same medium"),<sup>80</sup> but, on the contrary, it amounts to opening up

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<sup>75</sup> Susan Laxton, "As Photography: Mechanicity, Contingency, and Other-Determination in Gerhard Richter's Overpainted Snapshots", in: *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2012), no. 4: Photography Between Art History and Philosophy, eds. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, 776-795: 788.

<sup>76</sup> Buchloh, "Amnesia and Anamnesis", 19.

<sup>77</sup> For a similar critical appreciation of Buchloh's arguments and their dissonance with Richter's own positions on photography and on the broader concept of image, see Didi-Huberman, "Die Malerei in ihrem aporetischen Moment", 37, 46-47.

<sup>78</sup> Didi-Huberman, "Die Malerei in ihrem aporetischen Moment", 49.

<sup>79</sup> Gerhard Richter quoted by Didi-Huberman, "Die Malerei in ihrem aporetischen Moment", 50.

<sup>80</sup> Gerhard Richter, interview with Sabine Schütz (15 January 1990), <http://www.jca-online.com/richter.html> (accessed 1 May 2018).

the image in its uncertainty and vulnerability through creative processes of affective and intellectual montage.

[74] By deploying a unique mode of working with the dialectic tension between abstract painting and photography, in *Birkenau* Richter moves towards making the event of painting an analogue to photographic mnemotechnics. If abstraction induces the disappearance of iconic resemblance, at the same time, its ties to the photographic process also cause, as Jean-Philippe Antoine puts it, the (re)appearance of a type of resemblance that has ceased to represent a stabilized or univocal reality.<sup>81</sup> For Antoine, "the corollary to this destructive process is the progressive recording of a variety of painting events" that are semi-mechanically produced and preclude iconic resemblance.<sup>82</sup> But in preserving its relation to photography, the disappearance of resemblance is paradoxically recovered at the limit of the photograph's indicial quality.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, this leads to the reappearance of a *figure* under the form of a mnemonic trace, designating a mode of *(dis)semblance* that reinforces the sense of destruction, emptiness and void created by the mass murder.<sup>84</sup>

[75] I argue that these aspects are equally relevant in terms of revealing the centrality of landscape in Richter's explorations of Holocaust trauma. It was Mark Godfrey (2011) who brilliantly demonstrated that for Richter the problem of nature is firmly bound up with the images of the camps, and that these images and the images of the trees around Birkenau haunt the forests and vision of nature in Richter's works. It is important to note, at this point, that *Atlas* comprises long stretches of images of forests and nature,<sup>85</sup> an element that Richter asserts to be essentially deceitful. For Richter, nature "knows neither sense nor mercy nor sympathy, because it knows nothing, is absolutely without mind or spirit, is the total opposite to ourselves, is absolutely inhuman".<sup>86</sup>

[76] It is possible that this negative vision of nature complements, as Godfrey observes, the even more terrifying and intolerable vision of men after the Holocaust. After this event, subsequent descriptions of men have to include hideous dimensions that would have been hardly imagined in earlier definitions of humanity. In this sense, the *Birkenau* paintings could be read as the figuration of an insurmountable void, as metaphorical landscapes that dramatize the distance between the viewers and the absence of people.

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<sup>81</sup> Jean-Philippe Antoine, *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*, eds. Kristine Bell and Greg Lulay, exh. cat. Zwirner & Wirth Art Gallery, New York 2004.

<sup>82</sup> Antoine, *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*.

<sup>83</sup> Antoine, *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*.

<sup>84</sup> Friedel, "Gerhard Richter. Aufgehoben im Bild – Zum Birkenau-Bild", 15.

<sup>85</sup> See, in particular, [panels 757 to 768](#).

<sup>86</sup> Richter quoted by Antoine, *Gerhard Richter: Landscapes*.

[77] The metaphorical and metonymical implications of Richter's landscapes are also resonant in the context of his ambiguous relationship with the romantic tradition in German art. When we consider paintings such as *Landscape Near Hubbelrath* (CR: 221), and *Landscape with Little Bridge* (CR: 227), both from 1969, Richter seems to repeat the aesthetic conventions of German Romanticism, and, most notably, the strategies and themes that informed Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes in the first decades of the nineteenth century (see, for example, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809, and *Large Enclosure*, 1832). A connection between Richter and Friedrich can and should stress the interest of both artists in landscape as an act of obstructing the view, placing the viewer at the centre of an insuperable distance that undermines the clear identification of the objects.

[78] Nevertheless, Richter's landscapes reveal something other than the desire to recreate a romantic tradition, rather involving a critical apprehension of that legacy and the exploration of the tensions between the old and the new, and, in particular, the conflicts between the concept of beauty and its obsolescence and falsity in the present. For Storr, these paintings of nature "are no more a throwback to lapsed aesthetic conventions than they are ironical recapitulation and then dismantling of them".<sup>87</sup> More importantly, Mark Godfrey demonstrates that the natural and religious elements of Friedrich's paintings "make way for the banal features of the modern landscape" (cathedral spires are substituted by road signs, wet tarmac replaces reflective pooled water, etc.).<sup>88</sup> Thus, Richter's *romantic* landscapes reflect, in fact, a violent separation, a fundamental *caesura* through which the artist forcefully responds to the ideal of beauty in a post-Holocaust situation. As a result, what the attachment to the referent of nature in the *Birkenau* paintings implies is not the alleged exactitude of photography, much less the ideal sublime of landscape, but rather a process of historical re-inscription that provokes the destabilization of viewers' conventional perceptions and modes of thought.

[79] It is in light of this more complex equation, one that prevents us from reducing photography to mere effects of reification and amnesia, that we can assess some of Richter's manipulations of photographs included in *Atlas*, namely those in which an effect of greyish blur is added, as is the case in the series comprising both the Baader-Meinhof photos (assembled in panels 470 to 479), and the photographs of the camps (see, for instance, [panels 641](#), 645 and 646).

[80] According to Borchardt-Hume, the technique of blurring creates distance whenever the viewer's gaze is at risk of becoming voyeuristic in its search for horror.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, however, like abstractions, the blur refers us back to what Kaja Silverman termed as "the ineffable",<sup>90</sup> a category which Richter makes reference to when he says that "painting is the making

<sup>87</sup> Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 68.

<sup>88</sup> Godfrey, *Damaged Landscapes*, 80.

of analogy for something non-visual and incomprehensible: giving it form and bringing it within reach".<sup>91</sup> On another occasion, Richter claimed that "with abstract paintings we created for ourselves a better possibility of approaching what is non-visual and incomprehensible, because it portrays 'nothing' directly visually, with all the means available to art".<sup>92</sup>

[81] Thus, despite Richter's earlier remarks against abstraction's capacity to represent the unrepresentable (for example, Richter described his abstractions of the late 1970s and early 1980s as "an assault on the falsity and the religiosity of the way people glorified abstraction"),<sup>93</sup> the fact is that, as Storr states, "his thinking on the subject evolved" and became increasingly receptive to the psychological and spiritual resonances of the abstract works of artists such as Mark Rothko, and, in particular, Barnett Newman's "sublime fields" of colour, as described by Richter himself.<sup>94</sup> For Storr, in Richter "abstraction cannot claim to embody the absolute as it did from Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, to the Abstract Expressionists, but it can lend substance to otherwise elusive aspects about our makeup".<sup>95</sup>

[82] It is more important, however, to comprehend how Richter expanded the possibilities of abstraction by giving painting a historical significance. Such consideration is important in terms of discussing Richter's *Birkenau* paintings as a challenge to the conventional processes of abstraction – in Richter's work abstraction emerges as an operation that intersects with political and historical enquiry. As Mark Godfrey puts it in his book *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, from 2007, in which he discusses the works of major artists and architects (Morris Lewis, Frank Stella, Barnett Newman, Peter Eisenman, and others), to eschew the notion of the unrepresentable in favour of art's capacity to represent the calamities of history is to refuse the idea of transcendent identifications and monumentalist forms of remembering.

[83] Godfrey does not address Richter's work in this book, but his position is relevant in the ways it invites us to think of abstraction not as a silent art, but, on the contrary, as a "tortured art", that is, a form of art that denies redemptive narratives, setting in motion a dynamic between meaning and its collapse, between representation and the vulnerability of painting, in

<sup>89</sup> Achim Borchardt-Hume, "'Dreh Dich Nicht Um': Don't Turn Around. Richter's Paintings of the Late 1980s", in: *Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, eds. Mark Godfrey and Dorothee Brill, exh. cat. Tate Modern, London 2011, 163-175: 167.

<sup>90</sup> Kaja Silverman, "Photography by Other Means", in: idem, *Flesh of My Flesh*, Stanford CA 2009, 168-222: 178.

<sup>91</sup> Gerhard Richter quoted by Silverman, "Photography by Other Means", 178.

<sup>92</sup> Richter quoted by Antoine, *Gerhard Richter. Landscapes*.

<sup>93</sup> Richter quoted by Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 69.

<sup>94</sup> See Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 69-70.

<sup>95</sup> Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, 70.



giving form to the memory of devastation and crime.<sup>96</sup> In this sense, Richter's *Birkenau* paintings seem to exemplarily fit the concept of "the differend" appropriated by Godfrey from J.-F. Lyotard. The differend (whose implications are notably similar to the image's aporetic condition defined by Didi-Huberman) refers to what urges to be witnessed and represented but cannot be put into phrases right away. It includes both the urgency of representation and frustration in the face of the destruction of habitual representational tools.

[84] In this way, abstraction appears not as a mode of non-representation, but as an alternative process of making pictures that bear witness to differends: representation must take place, but it should "witness the very shattering of traditional representational forms".<sup>97</sup> Consequently, abstraction emerges, as in Richter's *Birkenau* paintings, as a composition that includes symbolic suggestions, associations, and forms of montage that offer a (meta-)reflection on both the traumatic aspects of history and the vulnerability of images.

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<sup>96</sup> Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, New Haven and London 2007, 11, 13.

<sup>97</sup> Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, 12.