

Extrait de Benjamin Buchloh, "*Tisch: Memory Images and German Disavowal in 1962*", *Painting after the subject of history*, 2022, pp. 43-88 (ici 74-88)

#### AVANT-GARDE DISAVOWALS

Therefore, our final set of questions addresses the considerable delay with which painterly practices of the post-World War II period recuperated an awareness of the former centrality of photography in the avant-garde cultures of the prewar period. In 1963, Rauschenberg's chemical collages *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* were published as a portfolio of offset lithographs. Given the almost universal ignorance of the history of montage aesthetics throughout the 1950s, these images now were widely discussed as a sensational work, and circulated and reviewed all through the early 1960s. Eventually Rauschenberg himself referred to the series as the most important project he thought he had ever done. The portfolio bridges the historical chasm between pre- and postwar collage and photomontage

practices; or rather, it established one of the first American outposts of a renewed attention to the legacies of collage and montage aesthetics in the post-World War II period. More importantly, perhaps, it also released American and European neo-avantgarde practices from the hegemony of painting that had determined the first decade of cultural reconstruction, particularly in Paris and New York. Rauschenberg's recovery of Dada collage and of the photographic image not only disrupted the prevailing painting of gestural abstraction from within, but constituted an almost irreversible paradigm shift, the turn to the photographic medium and its complex histories, that from then on, after Rauschenberg, would refigure artistic projects from Warhol to Richter. And if the work by Rauschenberg in the 1950s could serve as the American epitome of post-World War II painting's delayed reception process of an earlier photographic culture of the prewar avant-gardes, Richter's own, even more belated rediscovery of the photographic medium was undoubtedly mediated by his responses to Rauschenberg's work. As had been the case with gesture and facture, erasure and iconic inscription, the painting *Tisch* places these epistemological conflicts between painting and photography once again almost literally on the table/tableau as the surfaces of their most cogent display.

Therefore, as image and idiom of the photographic had become the new (or renewed) matrix of Richter's pictorial production, a broad range of critical challenges and interpretive fallacies opened up for reading these new fusions of painting and photography. After all, these hybrids, which had reconfigured the paradigms of the artistic image, had not only been conceived in opposition to the hegemony of painting after World War II, and had not only initiated the reemergence of photography as a mediation of the readymade aesthetic; rather, the fusion of photograph and painting had also recorded a particular sociopolitical and historical constellation in the post-World War II moment. Hal Foster's essay on Warhol has succinctly described the dilemmas we face when confronting the photographic image in postwar art:

Our two basic models of representation miss the point of this pop genealogy almost entirely: that images are attached to referents, to iconographic themes or real things in the world, or alternatively, that all images can do is represent other images, that all forms of representation (including realism) are auto-referential codes. Most accounts of postwar art based in photography divide somewhere along this line: the image as referential or as simulacral. This reductive either/or constrains such readings of this art, especially in the case of pop.<sup>10</sup>

And Roland Barthes, in one of his last exceptional essays, "That Old Thing, Art ..." (1980), addresses the same problem in an almost explicitly Warholian manner, making it even more pertinent for us to question whether Richter's work should be read iconographically or semiotically:

What Pop art wants is to de-symbolize the object ... that is, to release the image from deep meaning (metaphoric association or metonymic connection) into a simulacral surface. In the process the author is also released: The Pop artist does not stand behind his work, and he himself has no depth: he is merely the surface of his pictures, no signified, no intention, anywhere.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, with historical hindsight, Barthes's emulation of the Warholian principles, or rather, should we say, Barthes's projection of his own key concepts onto Warhol's project, appears as a rather peculiar amalgam, fusing various theoretical and aesthetic tenets. Even a brief comparative sketch will help us to establish some of the crucial differences between Barthes's brilliant analysis and Warhol's and Richter's work, and it might help us to clarify whether any of Barthes's (or Warhol's) criteria might even be applicable to Richter's oeuvre at all. But that sketch should also clarify whether Richter really followed the Rauschenberg-Warhol axis of the deployment of photography, or whether he ultimately developed an altogether different

approach to the question of photographic representations in painterly guise, and of painterly production procedures in a photographic matrix.

First of all, Barthes suggests that Warhol's strategies aimed at reaching a radical dissolution of authorial identity, similar to Barthes's own structuralist critiques of the author function in the early 1960s. At that moment it might still have seemed possible to actually shift the hierarchical orders of writer and reader, of work, text, and language, and sublate these distinctions operative in traditional cultural structures. And it might even have seemed credible to recode the abolition of these hierarchical differentiations as politically efficacious forms of engaging alternate experience and conceiving countermodels to bourgeois subjectivity, as socially emancipatory propositions initiating renewed forms of agency. And it might not even have seemed utterly impossible that Barthes's utopian claims for the death of the author and the birth of the reader shared indeed some strategies and goals with Warhol's violent anti-aesthetic annihilation of traditional concepts of artistic subjectivity. This would hold in particular for Warhol's disenchantment with painting as an art (what we could also call the post-Cagean desublimatory aesthetic impulse that promised to enable spectatorial and readerly self-determination). Was it not even precisely Richter's share in the post-Cagean desublimatory impulses that had motivated his youthful provocative utterance that he actually did not want to make a painting based on a photograph but wanted to produce a photograph by painterly means alone?

Yet at the same time, this comparison would also illuminate the fact that Warhol's and Richter's anti-aesthetic gambits were equally-if not more-driven by insights fundamentally different from Barthes's, regarding the relations of power within the different spheres of high-cultural and mass-cultural production. For example, we might point to the insight that, at the moment of the early 1960s, it had become clear that the increasingly totalitarian regimes of the mass-cultural industries would have to be confronted and accepted as the singularly valid, or rather the fully devalorizing, parameters against which any type of artistic or critical departure would

have to position and measure itself. Thus, painting for Warhol (unlike for Jasper Johns, for example) could no longer be conceived outside of the registers of advertisement, product design, or photographic media culture, in the same way that the strategies of avant-garde filmmaking for Warhol (unlike for Hollis Frampton's structuralist self-referentiality, for example) could be conceived only in an incessant subversion and manifest opposition to all of the governing principles of Hollywood movie production.

This deep sense of an inextricable interdependence—not even to be called a dialectic anymore—of belated and withering avant-garde practices in the legacies of Duchamp and Cage on the one hand, and infinitely increasing and empowered culture industries on the other, or what we would now call the schismatic symbiosis between the conception of artistic practices and the actual dominance of mass-cultural regimes, was clearly one of the origins of Warhol's scathingly melancholic and scornful anti-aesthetic.

Thus, the shift from Barthes's early, Brecht-informed critical and progressivist semiology to Warhol's anomic despair, if not cynicism, spans the full spectrum of the theoretical and artistic responses to one of the most important questions of the post-World War II period: the question of whether cultural practices could still aspire even to a residual form of enlightenment, articulating collective desires and political aspirations; or whether they had actually canceled that old avant-garde contract with its presumed or actual audiences, as did Warhol, in favor of an anomic affirmation, a passivity of acceptance and an ostentatious embrace of the order of things. If this argument has any validity at all, it might appear a bit more difficult to sustain Barthes's reading of Warhol's strategies as corresponding to his own aspirations to a much more progressive structuralist enlightenment. Most importantly, however, this comparison allows us further to recognize the gulf that separates Richter's work from Barthes's seemingly universally valid description of artistic practices at the beginning of the 1960s, as it also elucidates the theoretical and aesthetic rift

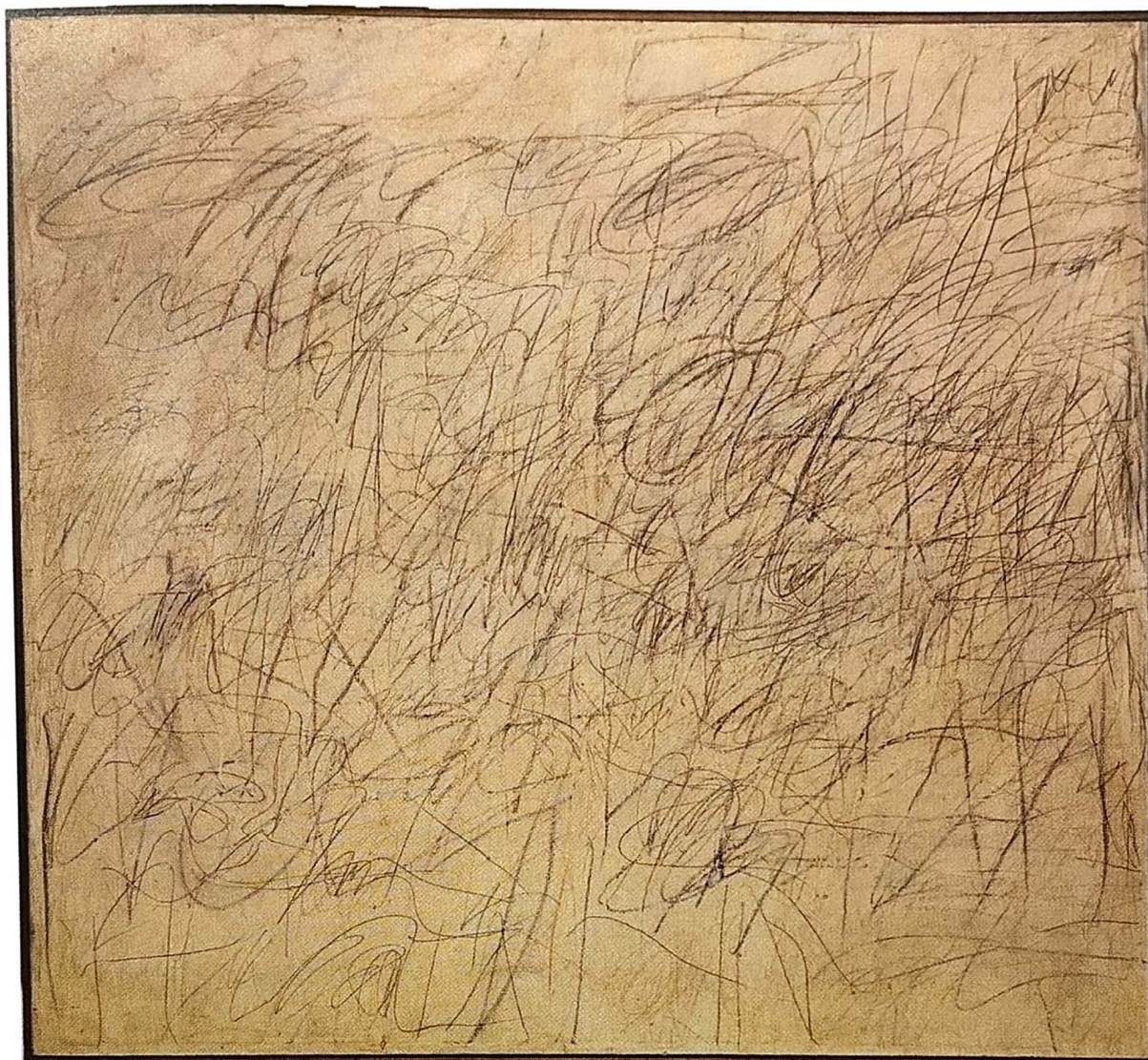


**Figure 2.10** Cy Twombly, *Free Wheeler*, 1955. Paint, chalk, pencil, pastel on canvas, 68Y2 X 74X in. (174 X 190 cm). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Sammlung Marx  
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between Warhol's and Richter's paintings. Neither the dissolution of the metaphorical dimension nor an abolition of the authorial presence, neither the appeal to the mere surface nor the simulacrum as the supreme form of detachment could describe the strategies of Richter's project. And the matter is made only more difficult by the fact that while these are undoubtedly integral elements of Richter's strategies, they are never exclusive or dominant in the manner that they had indeed been dominant in Warhol's work since the beginning of the 1960s. Yet rather than zeroing in merely on the differences in iconography, we would suggest that the crucial differences between Warhol and Richter can be finally discerned only in the dialectics of painterly process and technological image production, the manner and extent to which painting and photography are assimilated and collapsed into each other, or suspended in dialectical opposition in the actual execution of the painterly work of either artist.

If Warhol's slightly older peers Johns and Rauschenberg had still attempted to preserve or to redeem the last remnants of an autonomous painterly culture, Warhol would respond by allegorically delivering these remnants to their ultimate devalorization, to the inexorable and ultimate erosion of any form of painterly autonomy by the mass media machines. And we would argue further—even if hypothetically for now—that Richter, by contrast, attempted to retain a conservative attachment to the relative autonomy of the conventions of painting and the professional identity of the painter as one type of artistic articulation of resistance against the cultural industries' totalitarian desublimation of subjectivity. In spite of his earlier, already quoted rather juvenile provocation stating that his paintings merely made photographs by other means, Richter affirmed from the start that painting for him would remain fundamentally different from photographic practices, and from all other forms of mechanical and technological image production.

Finally, we will have to clarify the different functions Richter assigns to his deployment of photographic images. First there is the question of the photographic *syntagma*. We have to ask to what extent Rauschenberg's,

Warhol's, and Richter's organization of photographic materials follows each in a different way, an initial montage and collage principle to render a sequential reading of images, either disjointed and conflicting (as in Rauschenberg) or iteratively combined. This question becomes more difficult in Warhol's and Richter's paintings, since here the photographs have been effectively singularized (or with Warhol, identical images are not just serialized but also singularized). Thus, individual photographs have now been extracted from the polysemic wealth of the sheer infinite syntagma of montage images, and either have been replaced by a more or less serialized repetition of the same image (as in Warhol) or have been extrapolated and singularized into the status of an un-iconic icon (like Richter's *Table* or his *Chair*, for example). This question of how photographic meaning is altered from montaged multiplicity to the individual or serialized citational image will be of particular importance for our final set of questions concerning Richter's *Tisch*.

Second, and equally if not more complex and important, is the question we had already sketched out before (and which has haunted all discussions of photomontage from Hannah Hoch to Robert Rauschenberg): should these images be read *iconographically* (and it matters less now whether they are either singular or serialized) or *semiotically*, as an effect of a simulacral semiosis or *signifiance* (in Julia Kristeva's definition)? The semiosis of a photomontage (with the manifest exception of John Heartfield's work) precisely effaces the iconographic dimension, and even dissolves the denotative meaning and the implicit or explicit narrative of the photographic syntagma. Instead, what is generated by the semiosis of an aleatory accumulation of randomly chosen images is an overall effect of iconic dissolution, if not effacement, favoring a more fundamental comprehension of the principles and procedures producing photographic meaning within the confines of the mass-cultural apparatus at large. Thus, what we would call the approach of semiosis would describe the very fact that a seemingly random accumulation of more or less meaningless photographs is assembled in order to articulate the invasion of the pictorial surface and of the

perceptual field at large. Both painting and perceptual field—prior to the arrival of the photomontage aesthetic in 1919 and its revival in 1959—had been restricted to more or less artisanal depictions of figures, of objects of nature and culture, or to abstract gestural or geometric morphologies. Once these parameters of the pictorial had been dislodged, the invasion of the photographic image also had dissolved painting's particular textualities and textures, its specific modes of production (artisanal versus technical), and now introduced dramatically different pictorial supports (e.g., images derived primarily from having been printed on paper versus painted on canvas), inevitably inducing the condition of multiplicity and reproduction already on the very level of the painterly surface itself even before any iconic question had had to be posed.

This aspect of introducing the universal rule of the photographic image into the very structure of pictorial conventions emerges in Richter's work soon thereafter with a vehemence that is similar to its initial appearance in Rauschenberg's work in the 1950s. And the interpretive dilemma in the confrontation with Richter's work increases even more when we recognize that he now singularizes the iconic image, yet each painting unfolds and appears in a seemingly random range of arbitrary photographic reproductions. After all, it is relatively compelling to read an image such as *Uncle Rudi* in 1965 as the crucial onset of an iconography of historical remembrance in post-World War II German art, but what are we to do with the quantitatively much larger images from the same period, beginning precisely with *Tisch*, where an iconographic interpretation seems to fail us completely at first? And Richter's initial provocation, in which he celebrated the arrival of found photography on his artistic territory, confirms the necessity of this reading. If it cannot be the sole mode of interpreting his photo-paintings, at least it induces one dialectical dimension in a complex and contradictory pictorial structure.

We will have to recognize that the photographic order that governs Richter's photo-paintings will forever remain divided, a necessary chasm originating in the photographic image itself: to be a random record and a

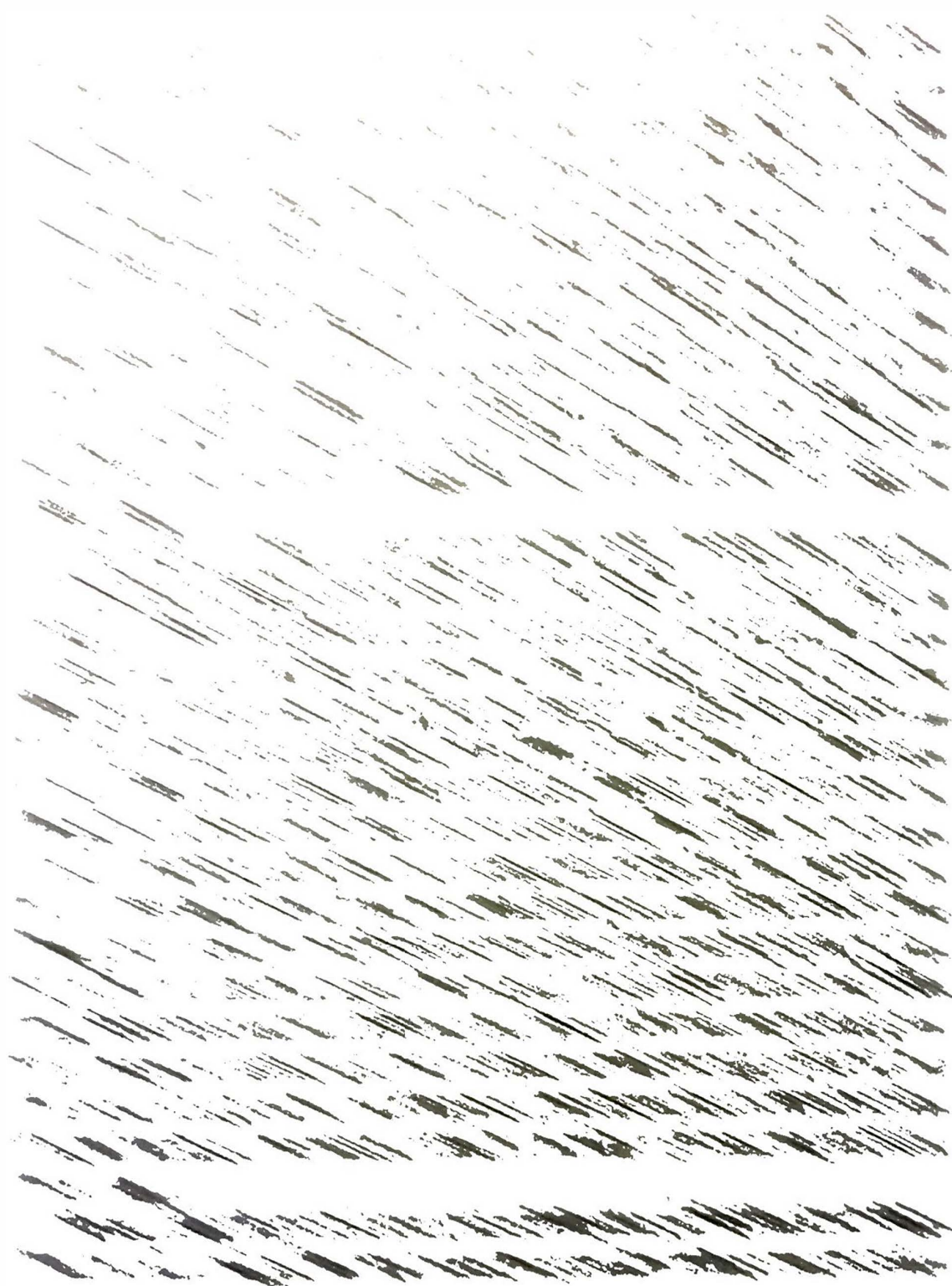
mere chemical and optical deposit, to be simultaneously an indexical trace and an iconic image, an aleatory record and a willful denotative document. In each context, however, these dualities will acquire historically very specific differences.

This insight will bring us to the last question, an attempt to understand how Richter's photographic paintings initiate a fundamentally different image culture altogether. Richter counters the principles of a universal validity and equivalence of the photographic image with a continuous and sudden piercing of the aleatory universality of the photographic regime by historically pregnant and pointed images. And these images will operate in a dramatically different manner, one that we will explore in the conclusion of this chapter as the dialectic of repression and remembrance, claiming that this is one of the central operations of Richter's photo-paintings, beginning with *Tisch* in 1962.

Thus we return once more to the original question of this essay, whether we can actually claim that Richter's painterly deployment of the photograph, operating within the historical dialectic of repression and remembrance, can in fact engender true memory images. It is also the question of whether photography can, and will now, even assume the function of the memory image, while operating simultaneously in the culture of disavowal and repression that Jacques Lacan had called the "automatist" vision. Might it be necessary for us to consider that photographic images in Richter's painting could have served both purposes simultaneously, that it was precisely this duality that defined the functions of the photographic image culture of the early to mid-1960s in Germany? Richter's simulation of painting as photograph exceeds Rauschenberg's and Warhol's tantalizing games of gesture and copy, of inscription and imprint, although we should remind ourselves that these games are, of course, precisely what is at stake in the assimilation of pictorial production to the photographic process of chemical and optical recording. And the simulacral operation that Richter performs for the first time with incomparably provocative rigor in *Tisch* operates simultaneously on all levels: in the ostentatious restriction

to the grisaille (invoking the tradition of painterly mourning as much as the banality of the black-and-white photograph for an object of fashionable interior design from *Domus* magazine, on which the image is based). Furthermore, it operates in the process of paint application itself, in the extreme juxtaposition of a grand gesture of painterly inscription serving simultaneously as the effacement of the image. Thirdly, it operates within the principle of a paint application that simulates intense gestural facture while adopting in other parts of the painting the principle of an emulsion and liquid distribution more than a painterly facture or compositional ordering.<sup>12</sup> Richter's *Tisch* and the following photographic matrix paintings articulate a fundamentally different conception of painting's relation to the unconscious, one suspended in an extreme duality: the act and the structure of painting are now situated between a micrological, indexical gesture that induces the grisaille copy of a photograph, and a gestural articulation that seems to lead to the mere erasure of the most banal of icons, a painting depicting a table.

And last of all, the iconic banality of reproducing an object of everyday life, which simultaneously invokes the literal and metaphorical condition of the *tabula rasa*, more importantly perhaps also induces the self-reflexive contemplation of the painting as *tavola*, as a table itself, a dimension which painting had invoked ever since Cubism as a foundational metaphor for the object and the support of the painterly practice itself. Yet, to complete the paradox in a fashion typical of Richter's projects to come, the centrality of this *tabula rasa* and the metaphorical *tavola* itself will soon thereafter be canceled. It will be followed by the much more banal images of a chair, or a lamp or a roll of toilet paper, so that once again we will be confronted with doubt about whether the painted photograph of these objects could ever function as an actual memory image. What type of memory could possibly be called up by these objects, if not the condition of collective disavowal itself? At the same time, Richter's simulacral imitation of the photographic blur suspends our reading in a perpetual undecidability,<sup>13</sup> generating an iconic image, and effacing it in the indexical tracing of the



image, and how could we differentiate it from the vast onslaught of photographic images whose function, especially in that period, served precisely to sustain repression and disavowal by all means of consumption, tourism, fashion, and entertainment culture? This question had, of course, already been posed by Siegfried Kracauer in his epochal essay on photography in 1927, evident in the famous passage where he distinguishes between the photographic function of forgetting and effacing, and the true ideal of the artistic memory image:

Never before has a time known so much about itself, if being informed means to have a picture of things, that resembles them in the manner of a photograph.... Yet if photography would offer its weekly rations to memory, it would be memory that would select the images. But the flood of photographic images ruptures the dams of memory, and the onslaught of images is of a violence that it will annihilate the consciousness of the essential traits of the subject.... In the illustrated magazines the public perceives a world, which the illustrated magazines prevent it from perceiving. The camera's spatial continuum and its perspective blurs and diffuses the contours of its history.... Never has a time known so little about itself.<sup>15</sup>

Thus Kracauer offers us some of the first criteria of a distinction between the photographic image and the memory image that we might introduce into our contemplation of Richter's work as well. What Kracauer argues is that photography lacks the memory of death which is integral to the memory image. And since it is the function of photography in the present to deceive its spectators about the universal reality of death, they are all the more subjected to it. The memory image, according to Kracauer, originates in a freely constituted consciousness, liberated from the drives as much as from the disavowal of death, and it contains both that which has been recognized and that which has been excluded.

And it is in this manner that I would suggest finally considering Richter's *Table* as a memory image after all, because it makes the actually governing conditions of repression and disavowal its very structures, and identifies these conditions as the governing conditions of experience at the time of its production. It defines the task of painting in the early 1960s in Germany as the task of dismantling repression, not as a successful construction of anamnesis or mnemonic representation, but as the initiation of the labor that these processes will involve collectively, and it signals itself as emerging from a deep rupture and caesura of civilized experience, not as the promise of painting's future reemergence and continuation along the mythical principles of the past.