

TISCH: MEMORY IMAGES AND GERMAN DISAVOWAL IN 1962

I take photos from illustrated journals and dissolve them with a chemical solution and swipe and smear them. That is fabulous fun. I have always loved illustrated magazines, perhaps because of their documentary actuality. I have also already made a few attempts to paint something like that in a larger format. Curious to see how it will continue. I am pursuing something which in a certain way resembles the most recent movement: Pop Art (from popular), probably came up in America and is now heating up the minds here.

Gerhard Richter, letter to Helmut Heinze, June 1963

PREAMBLE

One assumption underlying the following discussion is the somewhat speculative and perhaps all too general claim that key paintings in the history of the twentieth century have not just signaled crucial aesthetic changes, but have equally announced and enacted fundamental epistemological shifts. Inevitably, the precise historical contextualization of these shifts—which

we consider to be one of the tasks of this study in relation to Richter's oeuvre—would vary tremendously, yet their concrete and specific determinations have been all too often subsumed under formalist or structuralist abstractions (for example, in my own earlier discussions of Richter's work, posing the question of photography and painting after the readymade), or following general aesthetic and art historical concerns (as in Richter's supposed proximity to Pop art).

An earlier case from avant-garde history could serve as an example of the type of contradictions we will face in the following: while abstract painting in 1913 had designed radical utopian reorderings of bourgeois subject formation, and had become an active agent seeking to abolish all forms of sociopolitical domination and subjective hierarchies, other practices of that very same historical period responded more passively to the same sociopolitical and economic conditions or ignored them altogether. While some works that had emerged after 1913 had called for sociopolitical changes at different rates of rapidity and radicality, others seem to have been formulated as sly and subversive critiques of the apparently irresistible and unstoppable advancement of alienation and universal reification (Marcel Duchamp's most famously). Other artists, yet again, had just passively resonated with the external pressures to sustain convention, following a melancholic drift toward retrospection, or had been mourning the losses of previously held affective aesthetic structures, blinded by a refusal to recognize the failures of their former epistemological aspirations (as did Matisse and Picasso, during the mid-1920s, to name just the two most obvious examples). While more pessimistic or more indifferent to the questions at hand, they might have thought of the collective conditions of reification as having been too deeply ingrained within the cognitive and perceptual apparatus to be transformed any longer by artistic means and painterly culture alone. Or they might have doubted the competence or even desirability of artistic interventions in history and collective and individual subject formations altogether. This type of a fundamentally passive, affirmative, and compensatory aesthetics had been formulated best in Henri Matisse's



Figure 2.1 Gerhard Richter, *Table (Tisch)*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (90 × 113 cm). CR 1. Collection of Anne Simone Kleinman and Thomas Wong. © Gerhard Richter.

famous statement about painting's ideal service as an armchair for the tired businessman.

I will be dealing in this chapter with Gerhard Richter's *Tisch* of 1962,¹ a painting whose aesthetic and epistemic importance seems to originate partially from the precision with which it positioned itself in such a set of collective and subjective historical schisms. These contradictions, however, no longer addressed the conflicted status and functions that painting had performed in avant-garde history (such as radical progressivist abstraction versus conservative representation), or painting's problematic relation to the challenges of political agency, or its confrontation with the public functions of photography and montage culture of the 1920s and 1930s. I will argue that the painting's almost ostentatious declaration, if not its performative enactment, of those private and public epistemological breaks addresses the collectively ruling forces of historical disavowal in post-World War II Germany. Simultaneously, the painting manifestly embodies the desire to oppose that collective disposition of disavowal with a demand for artistic and cultural anamnesis, one of the few available counterforces to socially established and enforced forms of collective repression at the moment of German reconstruction culture in the early 1960s.

MEMORY CRISIS AND MNEMONIC PAINTING

It is now widely understood that historical disavowal and repression of the recent political past were ruling the sociopolitical and psychosexual forms of cognition and perception in post-World War II Germany at the time of Richter's arrival in the West in 1961. And in the past forty years or so, the debates in German literature and art history have developed a new concept of *Erinnerungskultur*, or the culture of memory, as a cultural formation and a set of practices which responded to these conditions of disavowal and repression. Quite rightfully, artists such as Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, filmmakers such as Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and Edgar Reitz, or writers such as Paul Celan and W. G. Sebald have been posited as central in such

a project of reflecting on and commemorating the destruction that Nazi fascism wrought on Jewish lives and cultures, and on European bourgeois culture at large. Furthermore, these artists also attempted to work through the Holocaust's lasting impact on life and cultural production after the war by questioning the (im-) possibility of cultural continuity in general and that of the culture and subjectivity of the German nation-state in particular. While there have been many moments when one could have wondered whether the compensatory functions of memory culture had been publicly initiated in order to finally forget the memories of that unmasterable past, we do not dispute that this introduction of a necessary memory culture has had fundamental and integrating functions for the partial reconstruction of German post-World War II identities at large.²

Thus, our first set of questions will attempt to clarify whether Richter's *Tisch* can in fact be seen as an integral example of these early efforts at constructing a mnemonic approach to the recent German past, a performative enactment of an opposition to the collectively ruling forces of historical disavowal in post-World War II Germany, countering the comforting forms of repression with a demand for artistic and cultural anamnesis. However, I want to slightly complicate the historical account of German reconstruction culture by first confronting an earlier and more hermetic phase, the period of 1955 to 1962, when German disavowal and historical repression were unchallenged in the visual arts, a phase that preceded the successful development of a specifically German memory culture in the mid- to late 1960s. That period was in fact most clearly defined by what Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich would call the German "inability to mourn" in their 1967 foundational study, a text which became utterly crucial for at least two generations of postwar Germans in actually confronting German history.³ But to speak of a culture of disavowal is of course a paradox, since we generally assume that genuine cultural articulation dismantles any type of repressive apparatus; in fact, that it is precisely one of the foundational aesthetic functions to make visible and readable what has been withheld from comprehension and symbolization.

Therefore we will attempt first to clarify the difficulties aesthetic interventions face whenever they confront massive social and ideological formations of interdiction or prohibition, and whether authentic memory images can only be developed to the very degree that they actually inscribe themselves within the hardened and pervasive forms of collectively ruling disavowal. Then I want to ask a second, more concrete question: To what extent was Western European culture of the 1950s and early 1960s in general, and the reconstruction culture of West Germany in particular, inevitably marred by such an intense defiance of the labors of memory and mourning? In West Germany this defiance would be most evident in a variety of emphatic artistic counteridentifications with positions formulated by an international neo-avantgarde immediately after World War II, a spectrum that ranged from Lucio Fontana to Yves Klein's impact on forming the German Zero movement, and from Robert Rauschenberg to Andy Warhol's impact on forming the movement of Capitalist Realism, propagated by Richter and his peers Konrad Lueg and Sigmar Polke.

This paradoxical structure of a simultaneous embrace of international art and disavowal of local history in German postwar culture becomes even more apparent when we consider any of its multiple foundational contradictions: for example, the fact that reconstruction culture in its initial efforts during the 1950s (from the generation of German *tachistes* and *informel* painters to the Düsseldorf Zero Group, for example), on the level of artistic production as much as on that of historical and cultural reception, did not pause at all to reflect on the recent political past of German fascism; least of all did it become a culture mourning the victims of the Holocaust. Rather, its efforts seem to have been motivated primarily by the desire to restore the former German *Kultur* to the status of a newly internationalist cultural-industrial complex, and artists and institutions of that moment hastily attempted to overcome the pall of cultural prohibitions and the delays of avant-garde reception which the cultural policies of German Nazi fascism had forced on the country. One significant and by now well-studied example of cultural reconstruction that both retrieved and

repressed at the same time would be the policies of the first two Documenta exhibitions in 1955 and 1959 in what was then the border town of Kassel (the second exhibition was of extraordinary importance in Richter's formation, as we will argue shortly). Both exhibitions claimed that the retrieval of avant-garde culture was of primary urgency, yet their efforts to establish retrospective links with the lost artistic legacies focused on the more conservative dimensions of the European avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, in particular on German Expressionist painting. These claims themselves were thus already tainted by a dual disavowal: rather than inducing the critical processes of actual political and cultural reflection on the historical forces that had led to the destruction of Weimar culture, or addressing the still very recent past of Nazi Germany, the mnemonic impulses of the first two Documenta exhibitions were deflected onto the art historical reconstruction of an acceptable cultural past. Furthermore, the very criteria of selecting aspects of these lost or forbidden "avant-gardes" performed the second elision: all antipainterly practices (e.g., from Dada to Duchamp), let alone all politically inflected practices of Weimar and European avant-garde history (e.g., from John Heartfield to radical Surrealism, not to mention the Soviet avant-gardes of 1919 to 1929), were completely excluded from these initial exhibitions of German reconstruction culture, since they seem to have posed extreme obstacles for a recovery process in a country that was ruled at that time by a phobic and violent anti-Communism. Similar paradoxes can be found in the manner in which German artists of that generation attempted to reposition themselves within the international neo-avantgarde. In the context of this chapter, we will specifically refer to artists working in Düsseldorf before Richter's arrival and who had recently imported French *informel* to West Germany, such as K. O. Götz or Gerhard Hoehme, who would become Richter's—and also Sigmar Polke's—teachers. Or we could equally think of Richter's slightly older peers such as Gotthard Graubner or Günther Uecker who had left East Germany a few years earlier to establish themselves in the West as innovative neo-avantgardists. What seems to have driven these artists

initially, however, was precisely the desire to exempt themselves from the baneful German legacies, and to (re-) connect as quickly as possible with a new internationalist neo-avantgarde by imitating Parisian, Italian, or even American gambits. Rather than initiating actual historical reflection, they claimed a dislocated and contextless radicality which paradoxically generated a whole spectrum of aesthetic pacifiers and placebos pleasing the neo-bourgeois audiences of West Germany. One particularly telling example would be the artists of the Zero Group in Düsseldorf. The group reiterated the predefined neo-avantgarde idioms of Lucio Fontana and Yves Klein, who both had practiced their own versions of a historical disavowal of Italian fascism and French Vichy collaborationism and both now eagerly performed the spectacularization of culture. The Zero Group insisted on having access to a mythical *Stunde Null*, literally a zero hour of new beginnings, unencumbered by memory and history, claiming to start with a technocratically modernized *tabula rasa*.

We will try to clarify whether Richter's literal enactment of the *tabula rasa* actually formulated an opposition to this deceptive promise that cultural production could serve as erasure and elision of history, and whether this opposition could be seen as one of the decisive historical determinations for his foundational early work. Thus I will analyze in the following some of the first artistic efforts at undoing the apparatus of silence precisely at the moment of 1962 as a dialectical constellation, claiming that this context was one of the formative historical contexts for Richter's early work. It is a constellation in which efforts at inducing the work of memory (most manifestly in the case of an exemplary predecessor, Joseph Beuys)⁴ would still collide with these forms of collective cultural and political disavowal and repression of the late 1950s that had dominated European reconstruction culture at large.

Accordingly, I will have to concretize my initial question further: Were the actual political and cultural conditions confronted by Richter during his upbringing and education in the East German DDR and at the Academy of Fine Arts of Dresden more conducive or more prohibitive to the

development of a mnemonic culture than those conditions which he had to confront after his transition to West Germany in 1961, when he started his second course of studies at the Academy of Fine Arts of Düsseldorf? The Communist state in which Richter had grown up, whose party apparatus had finally supported his admission to the academy in Dresden and his education as an artist (after his first application had been rejected), and where he had achieved his first professional recognition as a Socialist Realist mural painter in 1957–1958, had defined itself officially as the German antifascist state. The so-called Socialist government of the DDR would neither recognize the State of Israel nor share the West German politics of reparation to the victims of the Holocaust and their families. The doubly deceived and self-deceiving population of East Germany declined any acknowledgment of participation in or responsibility for the Nazi crimes and the Holocaust, and party officials claimed that the population of the DDR now would collectively inhabit a self-declared antifascist, Socialist territory of exemption from participation in, if not even resistance against, Nazi fascism (a status that had been politically enacted with credibility only by those members of the Communist Party who had actually emigrated to Moscow or other exiles, but certainly not by the population of East Germany at large, which contained, now reinstated in common functions of everyday life, almost as many former members of the Nazi party as had been reinstated in ruling positions in the West). Thus, when Richter made his transition to West Germany, he not only had to discover and embrace the so-called miracles of a zealous German economic reconstruction and its newly imported models of American-style consumer capitalism, but also to confront the actual legacy of German Nazi history for the first time and, simultaneously, the ruling principles of disavowing it.

Attempting to resituate himself within West German culture, the artist thus became both witness and subject to a newly intensified tendency of cultural and political Americanization, a process which obviously served a broad spectrum of economic, ideological, and psychosocial functions. And if the adulation of American consumer culture had been massively

enforced and embraced throughout Europe with the introduction of the Marshall Plan in 1948, the admiration for all things American did not solely originate in a sense of gratitude, as we now know through the work of Jeffrey Herf and Eric Santner. Rather, the embrace of American culture in West Germany was at least equally driven by the desperate need for a counteridentification with the victors.⁵ After all, the narcissistic investment in the fascist figures had been dismantled not by internal resistance, critical opposition, and eventual emancipation, but merely by an enforced liberation that had been brought about from the outside by the forces of the Allies, literally liberating Germany from itself.

At that moment of 1961, the process of what was then just newly named in the rather revealing and dubious term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the mastering of the past) had originated only fairly recently. From the beginning, the process was rightfully criticized by Adorno, who recognized that the so-called mastering of the past seemed to facilitate forgetting for many of the citizens of the new West German state rather than to initiate a process of working through that history. Adorno recognized it as a process of self-justification rather than a process of accepting guilt and responsibility, and least of all, as he emphasized, was it ever meant to initiate a process of an actual mourning of the victims of the Holocaust.⁶

Accordingly, within the sphere of culture, similar mechanisms determined the processes of cultural reconstruction and representation. While the veneration of the artists of the New York School was at that time pervasive in all European countries, nobody seems to have internalized the ethics and aesthetics of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman more intensely than this generation of German artists. Whether it was Beuys or Blinky Palermo, Gotthard Graubner or Imi Knoebel, all of these artists still claimed as late as the 1970s a vital connection to these constructed, imaginary precursors, sustained all the more and as long as they seemed to offer a lifeline that was uncontaminated by German history. Heroicizing painterly traditions with which they had in fact hardly anything in common at all, Uecker sutured his Zero projects to Klein and

Fontana, Graubner attempted to become the local Rothko, and Knoebel clamored to become a regionalist version of Ellsworth Kelly.

A slightly modified yet structurally comparable model of dialogic interaction, if not influence, could explain the recently Westernized Richter's initial encounters with American Pop art, in particular the artist's discovery of the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein. Clearly, Pop art's aesthetic and epistemic inversions of Abstract Expressionism had generated the most succinct diagnosis of the status of painting under the advanced forms of an American culture industry that would now have to be applicable with modifications in Europe as well. And it seems accurate to assume, as Richter's stunningly naive statement in the epigraph suggests, that these inversions were embraced by him with the same enthusiasm and almost self-deceiving naiveté with which the populace at large had embraced all other unmediated cultural and industrial imports as well (ranging from films to the cult of cars, from the adaptation of the rules of clothing to the literal internalization of American standardized forms of nutrition).

AVANT-GARDE DISAVOWALS

We will therefore have to address further the question of the extent to which Richter's painterly processes and performativity (as opposed to a merely photographic iconicity) aimed—and succeeded, or failed—to generate an authentic mnemonic cultural practice of that time. Furthermore, we will have to ask, more precisely, whether we can simply speak of an iconography of memory, or whether mnemonic cultural practices actually have to perform a particular type of semiotic operation in order to work through a given system of historically determined and socially sustained repression (such as the governing *informel* and *tachiste* painting of Richter's teachers in Düsseldorf at the time of his arrival in 1961, or the ideology of the Zero artists). In other words, we must ask whether the elaboration of mnemonic experience would require a specific performative rupture of the

prevailing conditions of disavowal at each particular historical moment, and whether these specific discursive operations would be more crucial than what any iconographic representation of a historical event itself might falsely promise.

My third set of questions will attempt to clarify what the actual texture of artistic memory could have been in such a historical situation which had to rupture and efface all forms of cultural continuity. After all, we still presume that even avant-garde practices and objects depend on a minimum of cultural precedence and dialogic continuity across generations, movements, and formations. (Not even Duchamp's readymade or any of the most radical Constructivist reliefs by Vladimir Tatlin in 1914 could be thought of as purely innovative inventions; neither could they be seen as sudden adaptations of an idiom that had originated in an utterly indifferent or incompatible context. Rather, both the readymade and the relief had consequentially evolved out of the propositions of Cubism in 1912, and thus exemplified continuity at the moment of an apparently total rupture.)

One of the decisive conditions, however, that defined postwar reconstruction culture in Germany was precisely the total discrediting of all conventional structures of identification, whether by the devastation that fascist ideology had wrought on concepts of the nation-state, or on the institutions of the public sphere like universities and museums, or on the parameters of class consciousness and its economic and political strategies. Even more destructive was the apparently inescapable dilemma that German postwar artists could reposition themselves least of all in relation to the avant-garde cultures of Weimar Germany. Some explanations for this seemingly insurmountable chasm seem obvious by now, but others still need further exploration, since the phenomenon has not been systematically addressed at all. For reasons that still seem to be only partially understood, German artists after World War II could neither identify successfully with the more conservative painterly positions (for example, those of Max Beckmann) nor with the more radical forms of montage practice (for example, those of Hannah Höch or John Heartfield). And those artists

who attempted to construct artificial continuities, as did Georg Baselitz, by cathecting onto the legacies from Lovis Corinth to German Expressionism failed to gain any credibility in their endeavors precisely because any such claim for an uninterrupted continuity was manifestly false, if not outright fraudulent.

As mentioned above, paradoxically, the most explicitly political dimensions of Weimar cultural practices seem to have been perceived as a particular obstacle to historical reception, since artists with a political history were now even more disqualified from memory in the reconstruction culture of West Germany, regardless of whether they had been activist and oppositional and exiled (like John Heartfield) or whether they had perished under Nazi prosecution (like Otto Freundlich). We can only assume that in Heartfield's case (or in that of Bertolt Brecht, for that matter, who was barred from entering West Germany when returning from exile in the United States), his troubled reception was above all precisely a belated consequence of the political violence with which the Weimar avant-gardes had been destroyed by fascist Germans on their own territory. To deny to reconstruction culture a political dimension altogether, therefore, would seem a plausible defense mechanism, and would explain why any political dimension in post-World War II artistic production remained utterly unrecoverable during the first ten years of West German reconstruction. After all, what was now the order of the day was precisely a liberal democratic conception of culture that could operate on the presumably safe grounds of a separation of art from politics, bypassing any potential ideological contamination and political association whatsoever. And we can assume that in cases like that of Otto Freundlich, among others, the deferral of reception was motivated by having to acknowledge the unimaginable degree of destruction and annihilation of German Jewish artists during the Holocaust as the result of National Socialist cultural policies.

The very destruction wrought by Nazi Germany on the lives and work of the artists of the Weimar period seems to have been perceived in the first decade after the war with such intense shame that most artists of that

decade preferred to stay clear of any burden reminiscent of the history and traumata that had been inflicted on their predecessors by depoliticizing their own post-World War II work. After all, what was now at stake was precisely a reconstruction culture that could operate on safe ground by avoiding any ideological contamination and political association whatsoever. Not surprisingly, then, the younger postwar German artists were desperate to reorient themselves to a model of post-traditional and post-national identity formation. With this they avoided the question of the highly problematized interrelation between nation-state culture and artistic production altogether, assuming that the fiction of a new cultural internationalism (such as the ones promulgated by French *nouveau réalisme* or American Pop art, for example) would become the sole determining parameter of production.

To give one striking example: when I queried Richter about his relationship to the legacies of John Heartfield or Hannah Höch, the two figures who first conceived the practice of photomontage in Weimar Germany, Richter responded that he initially ignored them during his life in the DDR, and that he was totally indifferent to the Dada legacies in general. Worse yet, when the question came to Heartfield in particular, Richter stated that once he was confronted with Heartfield's work, he intensely disliked it. We must assume that from the perspective of Richter's early identification with Socialist Realism, the disdain resulted not only from Heartfield's early aesthetic and political affiliations with the radical left wing of Berlin Dada, but also because he had been the preeminent figure of photomontage aesthetics. This would signal to us further that Richter had in fact internalized the official policies of German state socialism which had initially marginalized Heartfield during the 1950s after his return from British exile to the DDR. That marginalization was undoubtedly first of all politically motivated, with the East German Stalinists inflicting chicaneries on Heartfield, falsely accusing him of having been a spy in the service of the British government. But the disdain for Heartfield originated even more from the ruling enforcement of the most reactionary versions

of Socialist Realism—the quintessential opposite of any form of montage aesthetic—the very aesthetic principles which Richter himself had internalized during the time of his education in Dresden. The history and theory of montage aesthetics had been totally effaced in all sectors of cultural production, and the authoritarian forms of so-called Socialist Realism had been forcibly instituted as the new principles of cultural production for the state socialism of the Soviet Union and its Stalinist satellites, of which the German DDR was of course one of the most ardent.

Richter's perplexing admission is amplified further by a second commentary. The artist stated that his own rediscovery of the legacies of photomontage aesthetics did not result from looking at Weimar culture, but from his actual encounter with an utterly different version of collage and montage aesthetics, Robert Rauschenberg's belated and depoliticized rediscovery of the paradigm of collage in general and of the photographic montage image in particular. Richter was confronted with this legacy for the first time at Documenta II in 1959, and again two years later when encountering reviews and reports on Rauschenberg's first photomontage work, the *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*. Made in 1959 and published in 1963 as a portfolio of lithographic reproductions, the original drawings had been exhibited in Düsseldorf in Jean-Pierre Wilhelm's Gallery 22 in 1960, and the encounter with these works had left a long and influential impact in the discussions among Richter's new circle of peers after his arrival in the West, in particular with his new friends Konrad Lueg (later Konrad Fischer) and Sigmar Polke, who had actually seen the exhibition of Rauschenberg's montage images.⁷

Undoubtedly these discussions triggered the enthusiastic, either brazenly naive or breathtakingly callous adoption of Rauschenberg's new techniques described in Richter's 1963 letter quoted at the beginning of this essay.⁸

Clearly, what differentiates this peculiar discovery from a mere adaptation and resuscitation of the photomontage technique is, first of all, the fact that the image itself is literally incorporated within the painterly process



Figure 2.2 Robert Rauschenberg, *Canto XXXI: The Central Pit of Malebolge, The Giants*, from the series *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*, 1959–1960. Solvent transfer with colored pencil, gouache, and pencil on paper, 14½ × 11½ in. (36.8 × 29.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2021 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

and matter. Rather than resulting from the collage and photomontage principles of cutting and assembling, the image is now simultaneously generated and erased in the transfer process, since it is physically fused with the draftsman's gestural striations. Or we could state that just as much as the procedure fuses the photographic image with the gesture of erasure, it endows the process with a dialectic in which iconic representation and semiotic erasure, pure mechanical gesture and iconic reference, are intricately intertwined, dislodging many of the key issues that had determined the core features of the photomontage practice itself.

Furthermore, the procedure's apparently dumb and deadpan desire to copy whatever the mass-cultural apparatus of advertisement and picture-post journalism might have spewed at its spectators has now evacuated the most urgent of the theoretical questions with which the genre and process of photomontage had confronted us: whether photomontage was a denotative and referential image production, generating a critical narrative, or whether it was rather to be seen as a radical semiotic operation dissolving and leveling iconicity in order to liberate readers from the very fetters of iconic representation and ideologically motivated narratives. Lastly, one more feature that would have intrigued Rauschenberg as much as it must have fascinated Richter: the fact that even in naive child's play, an operation as seemingly harmless as copying found, industrially produced images, the proto-totalitarian applications of a process of mass-cultural indoctrination and control were already enforced.

We will therefore have to address the actual status of images and materials in the emerging mnemonic cultural practices of that time: can we simply speak of an iconography of memory, or must we ask whether mnemonic cultural practices, rather than being mere iconic representations, are first of all performative semiotic operations? We would argue that the semiotic performance of acts of memory, i.e., actually working through a given system of repressive representations, seems to be at least as crucial, if not more integral, to the elaboration of mnemonic experience as its iconographic representation. In order to generate an actual rupture of

the prevailing conditions of disavowal and forgetting in each particular historical moment, mnemonic strategies would have to simultaneously conduct discursive and iconographic, and political and performative, operations.

Even a cursory glance at the contradictory iconographies of Richter's painting in the early 1960s confronts us instantly with the question: are the explicitly denotative, referential images, in which we suddenly encounter actual historical subjects, seemingly unmediated by any predecessor, establishing a previously unthinkable iconography of memory in 1962? Such a purely iconographic interpretation, however, would be instantly problematized by the fact that these paintings simultaneously depict perpetrators and victims, i.e., *Horst with Dog* (1965), a scathing portrait of his detested father; *Uncle Rudi* (1965), Richter's own uncle depicted as the Nazi soldier who would die in the first months of the war; as well as *Aunt Marianne* (1965), the schizophrenic aunt who died as a victim of the Nazis' euthanasia program.

Or a painting such as *Family at the Seaside* (1964), which depicts Dr. Eufinger, who was one of the medical authorities in the fascist euthanasia program (and therefore indirectly contributed to the death of Richter's beloved aunt Marianne), and who would later become Richter's father-in-law. Or a painting like *Herr Heyde* (1965), a portrait of a man who had been one of the central figures in the application of those programs of medical torture and extermination in the concentration camps. Herr Heyde had gone into hiding after the end of the Nazi regime in 1945 and had lived for almost twenty years under an assumed name, continuing his practice as a jovial local doctor, portrayed here shortly before he committed suicide in jail during the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt in 1965.

If these images quite decisively introduce us to an iconography of mnemonic confrontation, how would we then relate them to those other paintings from the same moment, painted in exactly the same manner of a photographically mediated grisaille, the classic technique and genre of commemoration, which confront us with an apparently utterly illegible

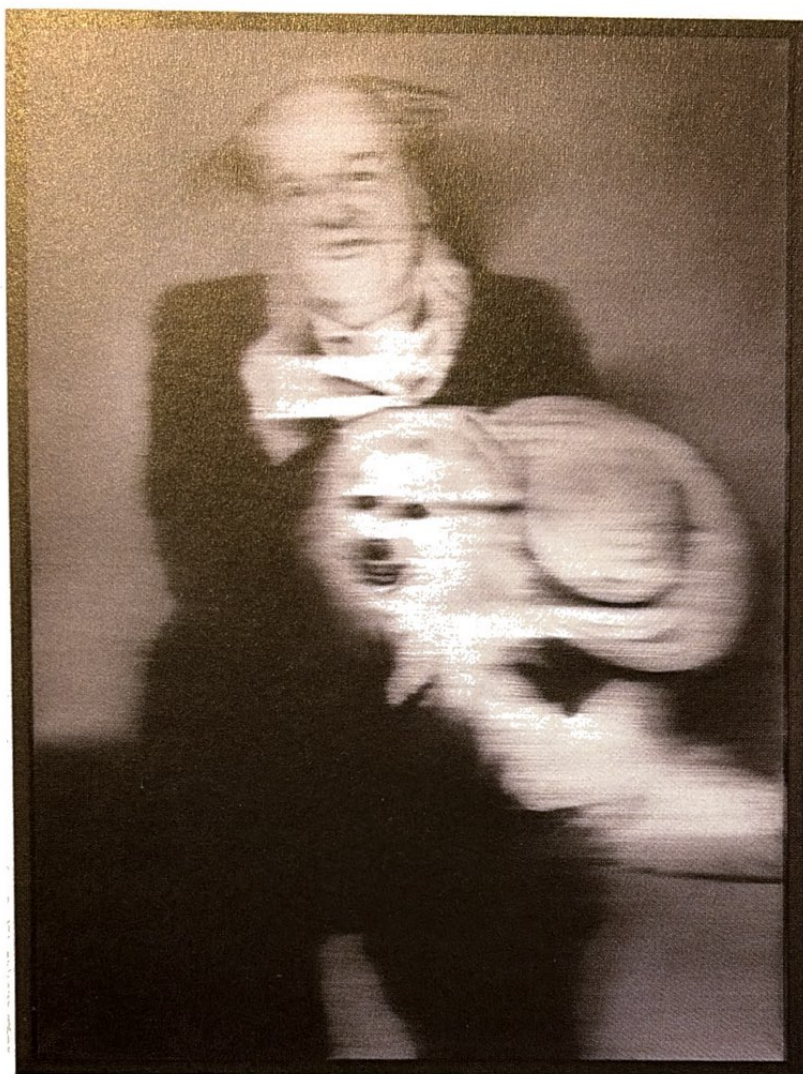


Figure 2.3 Gerhard Richter, *Horst with Dog* (*Horst mit Hund*), 1965. Oil on canvas, 31½ × 23⅝ in. (80 × 60 cm). CR 94. © Gerhard Richter.



Figure 2.4 Gerhard Richter, *Aunt Marianne* (*Tante Marianne*), 1965. Oil on canvas, $39\frac{3}{8} \times 45\frac{1}{4}$ in. (100 × 115 cm). CR 87. The YAGEO Foundation, Taipei. © Gerhard Richter.



Figure 2.5 Gerhard Richter, *Family at the Seaside (Familie am Meer)*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 59 $\frac{1}{6}$ $\times$ 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (150 $\times$ 200 cm). CR 35. MKM Museum K ppersm hle f r Modern Kunst, Duisburg (Sylvia and Ulrich Str her Collection).   Gerhard Richter.

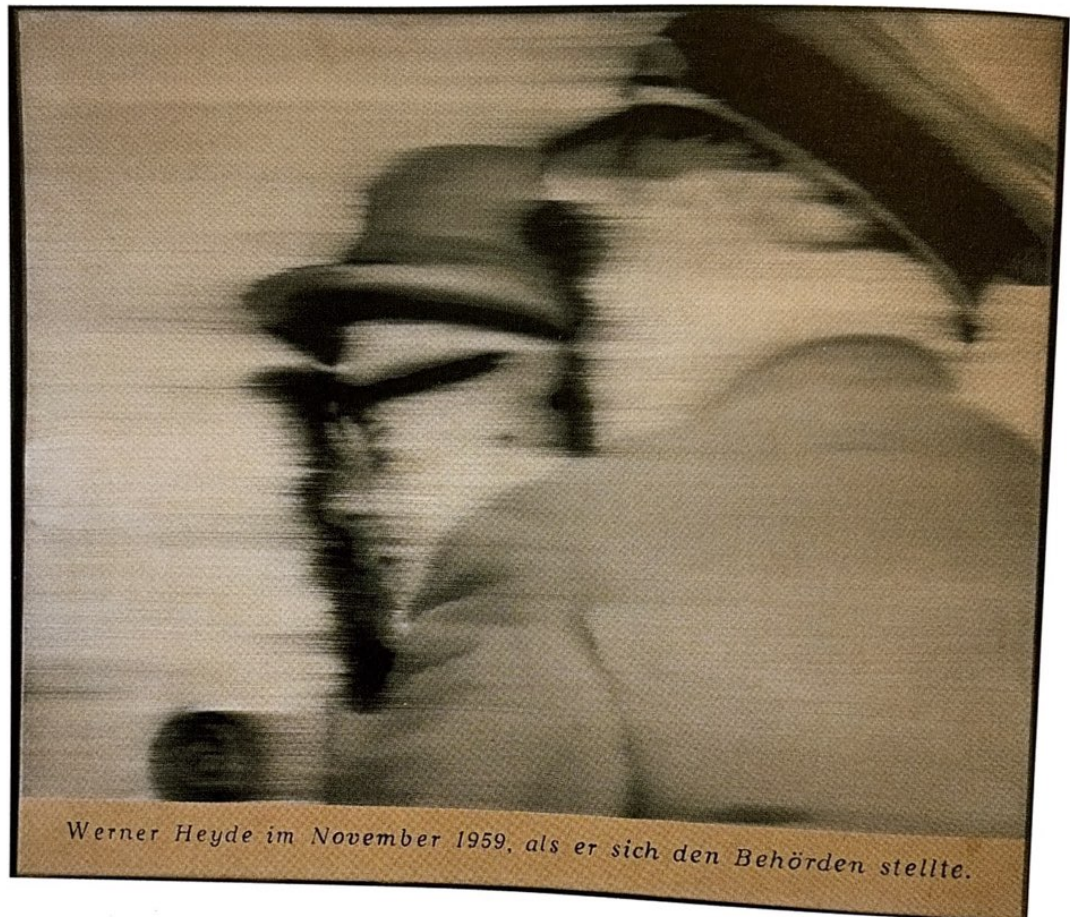


Figure 2.6 Gerhard Richter, *Mr. Heyde* (*Herr Heyde*), 1965. Oil on canvas, $21\frac{3}{8} \times 25\frac{5}{16}$ in. (55 × 65 cm). CR 100. © Gerhard Richter.

iconography (at least as far as their status as historical objects is concerned)? What, for example, could be the iconographic significance of a simple *Kitchen Chair*, or a *Flemish Crown*, or, more basic and base than any other object, a roll of *Toilet Paper*, all painted by Richter in the same manner and during the same period of 1964 to 1966?

Do these apparently un-iconic images precisely lack or discredit any mnemonic credibility that the other, supposedly iconographic representations might claim? Or do these images perhaps even discredit any of our attempts to construct a particular iconography of critical commemoration in Richter's oeuvre? According to Richter's initial commentaries, the photographs for all of these paintings were randomly selected from a very large, potentially infinite range of available sources: family albums and amateur photography, illustrated magazines, advertisements, the whole gamut of the newly available photographic image world of everyday life in postwar capitalist consumer culture. Yet we would argue that even these images of everyday objects in Richter's depiction suddenly confront us with an intensely uncanny banality of objects, as though they themselves had now become the condensed carriers of disavowal. And their supposed normalcy and apparent harmlessness only intensify the sense of an undercurrent of repression that links these objects all the more to the collectively prevailing behavior in the culture of disavowal ruling Germany in the early to mid-1960s.

Typically, in Richter's approach to the problems of interpreting his work, the artist has occupied two extremely divergent positions in his commentaries on these questions. In the first one, sustained until the mid-1970s, he argued that he had selected the photographic images purely for painterly reproduction in the early to mid-1960s. Their iconographic features had no meaning and no significance whatsoever in the process of selection, and they were indeed only aleatory markers of an epistemological conflict, such as the one between the ready-made photographic image and its service as a matrix for a painterly (re-) production. Furthermore, he argued that all of these images were randomly chosen like readymades, and



Figure 2.7 Gerhard Richter, *Kitchen Chair (Küchenstuhl)*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm. © Gerhard Richter.

that in a way they were even following his impulses to stage a most provocative anti-hierarchical universal equivalence of all objects and images, crucial impulses that he had received in his transformative encounters with artists and practices of the Fluxus movement in Düsseldorf in 1963.

Yet, after a number of scholarly commentaries had revealed the specificity of the family images in particular, Richter inverted his position.⁹ He admitted, even if reluctantly, that a principle of latent iconographic selection had indeed been at work in the parsing out of the family images, and that he had initially intended to keep this deeply personal dimension of the project a private one; he had hoped to prevent the iconography of the family history from becoming a manifest feature of his artistic production. In other words, he admitted that his selections had pursued a more secret project of a critical and mnemonic reflection on the troubled and tragic history of his own family, deeply mired and implicated in the conflicts of German Nazi history and post-World War II history at large. But he also acknowledged that his assimilation to the Fluxus aesthetic of randomness and arbitrary choices had actually served him in concealing the seemingly private motivations of the mnemonic impulses in the iconographic selection process.

TABULA RASA AND TISCH

Long recognized (or rather, declared by the artist) as the pictorial *Urszene* of Richter's oeuvre after his arrival in the West, and having been ostentatiously positioned by the artist as number 1 when authorizing his catalogue raisonné, the painting *Tisch* (1962) has received rather extensive discussion. While it is by now generally recognized as one of the key works of German if not European reconstruction culture, it appears that its meaning and the causes for its historical centrality have remained ultimately opaque. What visual evidence could we distill from the painting's contradictory features, evidence that would amount to a verifiable historical argument without exceeding a modicum of interpretive speculation?

This first official work painted by Gerhard Richter in the West (as opposed to his peculiarly anodyne and simultaneously insidious version of East German Socialist Realism as exemplified in the works we have mentioned earlier, such as his mural *Lebensfreude* from 1956, or his painting *Lesende am Strand* from 1960) tells us as much about his recent and sudden adaptations as it does about the programmatic elimination and literal erasures of his earlier identity.

First of all, of course, it tells us about his departure from East Germany, and his detachment from his first formation as a fully trained mural painter for the Communist Party of Stalinist state socialism, to which the artist in his initial years at the academy in Dresden seemed to have been devoted, whether by youthful naiveté, by careerist desire, or by ideological opportunism. Second: beyond this programmatic pictorial exorcism from Socialist Realism, the painting engages in an infinitely more complex and subtle set of operations: an initiation, a rehearsal, and an ultimate transformation, if not a travesty, of all of the blinding discoveries that the young Richter had made at Documenta II in 1959, when discovering the new epistemes of contemporary European and American pictorial practices. Other than the American cult figures of Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg, two European artists in particular had left an enormous impression on him, as he has frequently confirmed in conversations, Jean Fautrier and Lucio Fontana. And now, in Richter's first attempt to emulate these discoveries in an astonishing palimpsest of recent painterly pursuits (*nota bene*, American, French, and Italian, not German sources, once again), he will have to construct a paradoxical simultaneity of these contradictory citations and compound them with an additional set of erasures. And thirdly—perhaps most importantly—we will have to address the artist's adaptation of a radical counterformation to European postwar painting, Rauschenberg's montage and collage matrix, which Richter had equally just discovered at Documenta II in 1959, and in even more condensed form, as we argued, after having moved to Düsseldorf in 1961.



Figure 2.8 Jean Fautrier, *La Juive*, 1943. Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 28¾ × 45½ in. (73 × 115.5 cm). Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Figure 2.9 Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955. Combine: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet, mounted on wood support, $75\frac{1}{4} \times 31\frac{1}{2} \times 8$ in. ($191.1 \times 80 \times 20.3$ cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Leo Castelli in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. © 2021 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

After all, *Tisch*, at least according to its status in Richter's catalogue raisonné, is also the first of that extended series of so-called photo-paintings whose profoundly contradictory iconography, oscillating between programmatic historical representation and abject nonsensical common object, we have already sketched out above.

Tisch thus seems suspended in a climactic confrontation between the American and the European modes of post-automatist gestural painting—or rather, the various painterly and gestural gambits with which artists were engaged after Surrealism: either to mechanize and eventually spectacularize gesture, or to erase painterly ductus altogether. In combining and synthesizing all of these elements (gesture against *and* as erasure, gesture defying *and* delivering a pictorial and spatial void, gesture containing *and* undoing a photographic matrix), Richter would simultaneously perform and cancel these recently conquered pictorial strategies, eventually reaching his own, newly discovered paradigm of a painted photograph and a ready-made painting.

Even though the radical painterly discourses that had reemerged during the postwar period were generally defined by extreme discontinuities and incompatible oppositions (all the more so since they were citational, for the most part, originating in utterly different contexts of avant-garde formations of the 1920s), it would be hard to imagine a greater painterly (and also critical and art historical) challenge than to attempt a synthesis of Fautrier and Fontana, and of Pollock and Rauschenberg, as Richter tried in *Tisch*. To encounter these decontextualized citations of monochrome painting, abstract automatist gesture, and photomontage aesthetics, and to try to integrate them, would have caused major collisions, if not a chasm, of painterly identity in any young artist at that time. But in Richter's case, the apparent lack of any historical comprehension of what he had discovered at Documenta II manifested itself even more candidly, featuring a fusion of attractions and repulsions which often distinguishes the genuine encounter with a heretofore unknown artistic idiom from a mere adulatory acculturation of given conventions.

Revealing his own misreading of the works under consideration (and even more so his inevitable lack of familiarity with Western European and American neo-avantgarde strategies of the 1950s), Richter emphasized that what attracted him most at that moment was the "shock value" of his predecessors' paintings. While it is obvious, for example, that the Dada avant-gardes had responded to World War I with a certain degree of provocative shock, one would certainly not credit either Pollock's or Fontana's or Fautrier's painting after World War II with a strategy of shock protesting against the recently experienced collective forms of barbarism. However, if anything made these objects of American, Italian, and French descent comparable at all, it would have been their shared disillusion with the avant-garde's presumed sociopolitical ambitions and utopian powers. Their "zero degree of painting" was certainly not the utopian reductivism from which revolutionary new forces had once emerged (as had been the case with the empiriocritical reduction of painting in the hands of the Dutch or the Russian and Soviet artists forty years before). The new degree zero originated now more in the historically determined final detachment of painting from any investment with progressive and critical aspirations, possibly even from the insight that aesthetic practice and transformative political promises from now on would have to remain severed, and it was that zero degree of utopian despair which now had to be conveyed as culture.

Both Fautrier and Fontana had confronted these new closures of utopian aspirations in the late 1940s from very different perspectives, or saw painting as approaching very different thresholds of dissolution. While Fontana articulated that sense of finality with ostentatious gestural histrionics, assimilating painterly gesture and chroma increasingly to the apparently inescapable conditions of spectacularization, Fautrier by contrast responded with a slow process of painterly decomposition, mourning painting's proper disappearance. Or, in different terms, we could argue that Fontana, after Pollock and in tandem with Georges Mathieu, announced painting's inevitable confrontation and eventual merger with

spectacle culture (which made him, of course, such an important influence on Yves Klein). Fautrier—in manifest opposition—literally performed painting's withdrawal from the grand gesture, tracing its gradual disintegration under the increasing pressures of spectacularization. As Fontana evacuated gesture of all expressivity, by forcing a declamatory mechanicity of execution upon it, the innate brutality is already evident in the shift from paintbrush to knife, or other tools such as screwdrivers, with which the pictorial surface was pierced, cut, and lacerated, often explicitly—and problematically—sexualized by the artist and his early critics as a virile attack on the canvas as virgin territory. Yet what was actually at stake in the violent laceration of painting was not the pictorial surface as an object of the projection of male desire, but rather the historically mandated task of having to evacuate desire and psychic presence from the act of painting altogether. All painterly practices, even the most aggressive and antagonistic ones such as Pollock's belated and hypertrophic automatism, were now recruited for the ever-expanding dominion of spectacle, even if they had been previously thought of as being exempt from—if not in opposition to—its universal claims for control and domination.

In manifest difference from Fontana's cutting, Fautrier's handling of paint and the gesso impasto had situated his work at the opposite end of that historical spectrum, endowing it with the exact dialectical counterparts of painting's dilemma after World War II. Questioning whether chroma and texture could actually still correspond to a phenomenology of the prelinguistic forms of the subject's constitution in haptic, tactile, and visual experiences, Fautrier's postwar work contemplated whether the somatic dimensions of the traumatized body could be painted. And in its explicit rejection of self-reflexivity as one of Modernist painting's epistemological foundations, Fautrier's work opened up once more the questions of painting's proper mnemonic potential, the extreme opposite of Fontana's succumbing to spectacle culture. Not surprisingly, the cognition of this oppositional force would exude equal, if not greater, attraction and impact on Richter's conversion on the road to the West.

If these were indeed some of the most crucial aspects of the historically determined fallacies of post-World War II European painting which Richter had discovered in his encounters with Fautrier and Fontana at Documenta II, the artist expanded these seemingly irreconcilable oppositions of painterly production even further when he painted *Tisch*. To fully grasp the extent of that epistemological expansion, we finally have to address the third foundational element in Richter's newly constructed Westernized self. Induced by his encounter with Rauschenberg and Fluxus, this element—still utterly absent from *Elbe*, discussed in the previous chapter—would now emerge from the discovery of a matrix of found photographs and the commodity objects of everyday life, depicted as quantitatively massive and qualitatively indiscriminate, apparently free-floating, and now fully detached from what seemed to have been the denotative and referential bonds of German and European photomontages of the first half of the twentieth century. Radically altering both models, Richter increased the effects of their random selection and their seemingly universal equivalence, while at the same time paradoxically foregrounding their iconic impact.

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 bridged 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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, 68½ × 74¾ in. (174 × 190 cm). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Sammlung Marx © bpk Bildagentur/ Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, SMB, Sammlung Marx / Mathias Völzke / Art Resource, NY. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



Figure 2.11 Andy Warhol, *Ten Lizes*, 1963. Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, $79\frac{7}{8} \times 222\frac{1}{8}$ in. (201×564.5 cm). Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. © CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. © 2021 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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 engender 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 Höch 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.¹² 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,¹³ generating an iconic image, and effacing it in the indexical tracing of the

chemical and the technical image production itself; denotative depiction and iconic legibility are simultaneously presented and withdrawn. It seems then that in this suspension, the procedure of forgetting and remembering itself becomes the subject of the painting, the simultaneity between the violence of forgetting and repressing and the desire to recall, the anamnestic desire. These paintings now appear as though they actually performed the compulsion to repeat and to forget as much as the desire to rupture that automatism of forgetting that photography fosters. Yet at the same time they originate also in the desire to reconceive experience and revise it, on the way to constructing an anamnestic representation, even though they are produced with images that make it clear that the photograph itself can never become the memory image, because it is always the afterimage of forgetting.

Let me sum up both my argument and my speculations: one concept to describe the historical situation from which Richter's work emerges in the early 1960s would be to call it a moment of a fundamental "memory crisis," the term that Richard Terdiman had initially coined to describe Baudelaire's modernity, and that has since been adapted by Susan Suleiman to identify key structures of post-World War II French literature. Memory crisis in Baudelaire's case had been caused by Haussmann's destruction of Paris, its traditions and urban mnemonic spaces. The collective memory crisis in the postwar period, by contrast, was caused by the eruption of an annihilating violence that Jean-François Lyotard has identified as the "negative sublime" of the Holocaust experience that can be neither represented nor narrated anymore.¹⁴ The memory crisis of Germans in the 1950s and 1960s, however, was different, since first of all it was the memory crisis of the perpetrators, not of the victims, and their memory crisis was all the more pronounced not only because of the destruction inflicted on others, but because of the massive refusal or inability to initiate the process of mourning.

Recognizing this makes it even more difficult to call Richter's paintings true memory images. But how would we actually define a true memory

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.¹⁵

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.