

GERHARD RICHTER *and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art* at the CCCS Florence

Gerhard Richter and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art, an exhibition staged in collaboration with the Kunsthalle Hamburg, will take place at the CCCS (Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi), Palazzo Strozzi, in Florence from Saturday 20 February to Sunday 25 April 2010. The show's title is a tribute to the acclaimed German painter Gerhard Richter (b.1932).

The exhibition, conceived by Franziska Nori (project director of the CCCS) and Hubertus Gassner (director of the Kunsthalle Hamburg), presents eleven works by Richter, nine of which are loaned by the Collection Böckmann, Berlin, and the Kunsthalle Hamburg, which demonstrate the range of different styles in his painting from blurred figurative photo paintings to abstract pictures. These will be placed in dialogue with works by seven international contemporary artists: Xie Nanxing (China); Wolfgang Tillmans (Germany); Lorenzo Banci (Italy); Antony Gormley and Roger Hiorns (UK); and Marc Breslin and Scott Short (USA); who all share Richter's profound distrust of the image as a guarantee of truth.

Gerhard Richter and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art follows the current CCCS exhibition *Manipulating Reality* (on view until 17 January 2010), which explores the relationship between reality and representation in the medium of photography. Gerhard Richter, one of the best-known and most sought-after living painters, has made the theme of the disappearance of the image a hallmark of his work and laid the foundation for the next generation of artists.

Richter, one of the pioneers in depicting the dissolution of both the motif and the medium, paints over original pictures or uses a blurred painting technique. He deliberately selects trivial or random motifs as the starting point for his paintings. Well aware of the power of images, Richter strives to break or at least question their authority by making his pictures merge or disappear. He plays with reality and appearance and converts figurative images into abstract ones by focusing, for example, on fragmentary details. He pioneered the use of existing images as the basis of his paintings, primarily as a means of transferring the characteristics of one medium to another, and for placing different genres on an equal footing. Through his entire body of work, Richter addresses the difference between subjective perception and the objective experience of reality in which the artist can only offer possible approaches to address the difficult relationship between the object and its representation.

The CCCS has invited seven contemporary artists who also use the dissolution of the image to engage in a dialogue with Richter's work. To maintain their own artistic identity, the work of each artist will be presented in its own space. Xie Nanxing (b.1970) uses video and photography as intermediate media for his reflections on painting and the human condition; Lorenzi Banci (b.1974) investigates the boundaries between representation and abstraction by painting dissolving shapes in which mere light is the object; while Scott Short's (b.1964) conceptual work is based on photocopying a blank sheet of paper hundreds of times until incidental marks

create an accidental image which then becomes a painting. Roger Hiorns (b.1975), one of the four artists shortlisted for the 2009 Turner Prize, works with chemical components and choreographs planned incidents to create his sculptural work. Marc Breslin (b.1983) uses the pictorial surface like a palimpsest, scratching signs and graffiti into the many layers of paint, thus creating a metaphor for mental processes, memory and oblivion. Wolfgang Tillmans (b.1968) treats the photographic paper as canvas. He started by representing everyday subjects and from there he went further into abstraction, following the logic of the medium itself. Antony Gormley (b.1950) will produce a site-specific installation for the exhibition, that further develops his research for a new social art where the interplay between abstraction and figuration is the result of a process of dissolution of the human figure.

Meanwhile Richter remains true to the medium of painting, yet questions its possibilities against a backdrop of the "end of painting" declared by Duchamp. The other seven artists take as their theme the absence (and sometimes impossibility) of making a clear statement by means of a picture today.

Gerhard Richter and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art will present visitors with a display of works by a fascinating group of internationally-known artists that are both intellectually stimulating and visually beautiful.

Venue: Centre for Contemporary Culture Strozzi (CCCS), 50123 Firenze, ITALY
Opens: Saturday 20 February 2010
Closes: Sunday 25 April 2010
Website: www.strozzina.org
Public Info: Tel. +39 055 2645155
Opening Times: Daily: 10.00 to 20.00; Thursday: 18.00 to 23.00 free
Closed Monday

Admission Prices: €5.00 (valid for 5 visits in a month, including lectures)
€4.00 concessions,
€3 schools

For further information and images, please contact:

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FRANZISKA NORI Project director Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi CCCS

Gerhard Richter and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art *

The "Gerhard Richter and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art" project came into being through the collaboration of the Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi (CCCS) and the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, as part of the CCCS's programme of international partnerships that has enabled us to bring to Florence works by great masters and also younger artists on the international contemporary art scene.

This exhibition develops the critical approach of the recent show "Realtà Manipolate/Manipulating Reality" held at the CCCS from 25 September 2009 to 17 January 2010, which explored the concept of reality in relation to the possibilities of its representation in contemporary society. Indeed, both projects are informed by an awareness of the problem of representing reality in the modern world. "Realtà Manipolate/Manipulating Realities" was mainly concerned with shedding light on the contradiction of recording reality and, at the same time, falsifying it, which is typical of photography and of video. The new CCCS exhibition goes further to analyze the role of the image itself in the light of its increasingly fragile status as an objective description of reality, and its value as a reflection on the world that is able to achieve its own autonomy rather than being merely the specific object of representation.

Gerhard Richter has devoted his whole artistic career to searching for what one might call the essence of the image, where it is no longer a representation of the real but the creation of a reality unto itself. The well-known critic Dietmar Elger, the author of the first biography on Richter, describes his works as "material that illustrates a lost truth", since they appear to represent the real but accentuate the archetypal characteristic of a specific subject rather than its actual value. Richter makes not only the subject of his works disappear, but also pictorial technique itself, questioning the construction of a work by combining diverse artistic genres or techniques in the same piece. Well aware of the power of images, Richter strives to destroy or to cast doubt on their clarity. His signature blurred painting goes as far as making the subject unrecognizable, while at the same time questioning it by oscillating between abstraction and figuration and creating a play between reality and appearance. By employing a deconstructive painting procedure and challenging established principles, he experiments with the value and the various meanings of the image within a contemporary society based on the constant production and reproduction of images.

Richter's works create a dialogue with those of seven contemporary artists whose activity has focused on the disappearance of the image and the problem of its very definition, through the use of various media. They are the Brits Antony Gormley and Roger Hiorns, the Americans Marc Breslin and Scott Short, the Chinese Xie Nanxing, the Italian Lorenzo Banci and the German Wolfgang Tillmans. The work of each artist is assigned its own space in the exhibition, which enables the visitor to evaluate the specific characteristics of their respective researches within the overall context.

A typical element of Richter's painting is the direct confrontation with photographic models extracted from the flood of mass-media images. This has enabled him, from the mid-Sixties on, to reflect on media images and the way we relate to them. He chooses ordinary, almost banal images, citing the visual repertoire of his time: illustrations from magazines, family snapshots, motifs from genre painting, used like *objets trouvés*. He draws on what one might describe as a collective visual vocabulary as well as private worlds captured at an amateur level. Their reproduction through painting is neither clear nor precise, however. Richter nebulizes the images with his trademark blurred effect: outlines and details seem to disappear.

He aims for a resemblance to photography to verify the presumed authenticity and objectivity of painting in the age of the technological reproduction of the image. However, at the same time, he negates these values by emphasizing the constant 'mobility' of his pictorial activity: the superimposition of different layers of painting, the blurrings, the interventions on the painting itself with secondary tools. While, on the one hand, Richter's using photography is consonant with the need for 'simplification' typical of Pop Art in conflict with the generation of Abstract Expressionists; on the other, the German artist seeks a new complexity in painting, which through diverse genres, typologies or formats makes it possible to find an innovative new key for interpreting an image that was originally produced by technical means.

The artist's work is marked by a constant effort to rid images of a single interpretation by not only removing but also isolating them from their original context (e.g. personal photos taken from family albums or media images clipped from magazines and newspapers) by placing them in the new dimension of the "painting-object". The adoption of ordinary photographic models gives

Richter the freedom of action he needs to dispense with formal registers, iconographic constraints or precise symbolic connotations. Thus an 'image of the image' is created, a work that exists according to its own laws, with diverse characteristics, conditions and meanings from those it possessed at the outset. "I do not wish to imitate a photograph; I want to *make one*. (...) I make photographs with different systems, and not paintings that resemble a photograph." (Interview with Gerhard Richter by Rolf Schön, catalogue of the 36th Venice Biennale, German Pavilion, 1972, pp. 23-25)

Richter makes the motif disappear by using diverse techniques: painting over the original motifs, bringing into focus some of their smallest details, eschewing definite outlines and making the figure less recognizable by using various tools. He thematizes the difference between the subjective perception and objective experience of reality and stresses the fact that an artist can only offer tentative solutions regarding the difficult relationship between the object and representation. Making the initial image disappear can thus be interpreted as a metaphor of the conditioning of perception itself, which enables us to become consciously aware of an object for a second, before it vanishes again to become a mere probability. Richter sees the image as an *object* but not as *objective*; it is placed on the plane of perception and of its nuances, but does not take the form of a simple and direct statement.

Richter's intention is clearly expressed in the so-called *Bilderverzeichnis*, a catalogue raisonné of his works from the beginning of the Sixties, which he himself compiled in 1969 and is considered a work of art in itself. This reclassification of the works enables us to evaluate precedents and significant elements pointed out by Richter himself and hence particularly meaningful. The opening piece in this catalogue is *Tisch* (Table, 1962), which thus assumes a fundamental importance. The picture shows a realistically painted table on which Richter has superimposed broad brushstrokes of colour that partially obliterate the motif. This seems to be an almost programmatic statement by the artist about the image being central to his work, its original relationship to photography and his conviction that representation-as-reproduction and the abstract gestural form are both equally valid means of conveying reality.

Richter's distrust of painting that represents explicit stances or sends explicit messages derives, first and foremost, from his experience as a young artist in the Democratic Republic of Germany and from his having been born during the Nazi dictatorship. While Nazism branded avant-garde art as degenerate, in a Socialist context the State is the sole patron of art, thus making it a mere tool of political ideology. Nevertheless, Richter's move to the West only caused him to reject more vehemently art with political or ideological content, which in Western countries is translated into an equally standardized subjection of art to capitalist power. The artist presents himself as a lone figure who is sceptical of current art trends and assumes independent stances.

The works in the exhibition represent various stages in Richter's career that spans over fifty years. However, if we compare periods and styles, they reveal a constant experimentation that distances him from any hierarchy of values regarding the different types of works and from a consistent, progressive, linear evolution of styles, genres and techniques.

Richter's *Fotobilder* ("photographic images") are represented by *Familie Schmidt* (Schmidt Family, 1969) and *Porträt Liz Kertelge* (Portrait of Liz Kertelge, 1966) which exemplify the pictorial reworking of photographic models projected onto the white canvas, and attest to two of the artist's principle means of iconographic appropriation. On the one hand, we have images taken from the media, like the portrait of the actress in a close-up that develops the models of American Pop Art according to new criteria; on the other, ordinary snapshots from a family album, represented according to conventional middle-class iconography: father, mother and children seated on a sofa at home.

Executed in 1969, *Wilhelmshaven* and *Brücke (am Meer)* (Bridge Over the Sea) attest instead to the artist's approach to a traditional genre like landscape painting. Richter addresses the technical and linguistic characteristics of this subject, but also stresses his complete indifference to the original topographical reference.

The absence of a hierarchy of the various genres embraced by Richter is evinced by the dates of works such as *Eule* (Owl, 1982), *Schädel mit Kerze* (Skull with Candle, 1983) and *Krems* (1986). While exploring the memento mori genre through calm and meditative painting reminiscent of the 17th century, Richter also conducted radical research on the elimination of the figure by means of a powerful gestural element that was either of a decidedly abstract nature or was used to obliterate the original figurative motif. He took this research further in *Abstraktes Bild* (Abstract Image, 1988) and *Canaletto* (1990), in which a complex colour scheme, large format and a persistent confrontation with tradition are translated into works that accentuate Richter's ability to construct, destroy and reconstruct the relationship between the human being and the world through images.

Decke (Cover or Ceiling, 1988) would appear to be part of the 'Abstrakte Bilder' series dating to this period, but it is also linked to the cycle of works Richter dedicated to the suicide of Gudrun Esslin and other members of the RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion, better known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang) during the night of 17 and 18 October 1977 at Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart. Richter applies a layer of white paint over the original painted image similar to those in the cycle *18. Oktober 1977*. In keeping with the ambiguity of the title of the work, Richter "covers" the subject of the image (Esslin's hanged body painted from the photograph published in the German newspapers), leaving only a few recognizable elements, including the ceiling of the room, and thus focusing on a play of language, reality and image.

Florence, 19 February 2010

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JAMES M. BRADBURNE
General director
Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi

The mission of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi is to revitalise the public spaces of the Palazzo Strozzi, one of Florence's finest examples of Renaissance architecture, and to establish it as an exciting, dynamic and international cultural destination for visitors of all ages and interests. Now, after just three years, the exhibitions held in the Palazzo's grand spaces on the first floor are attracting international attention for their quality, their innovation and their diversity. The Palazzo's courtyard now hosts a café, a shop and a permanent exhibition on the history of the Palazzo, as well as a varied programme of concerts, fashion shows and performances. From the outset, a key part of the Palazzo Strozzi project was to create a centre for contemporary culture at the very heart of Florence, and the *Centro di Cultura Contemporanea Strozzi* (CCCS) was created in November 2007 as platform for the different approaches and practices that characterise the production of contemporary art and culture.

The centre is located in the beautifully restored spaces under the courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi – known as 'La Strozzi' – which hosted Florence's most important international exhibitions in the years after the Second World War until the flood of 1966. The CCCS comprises eleven rooms of different sizes, approx. 850 square metres in total. The challenge posed by the Renaissance architecture of Palazzo Strozzi for contemporary art is a stimulus to treat each new event and project almost as theatre, constantly pursuing new possibilities of artistic communication, presentation and mediation.

The exhibition *Gerhard Richter and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art* showcases 12 selected works by Gerhard Richter that demonstrate the range of different styles in his painting, from blurred figurative photo paintings and colour field painting to abstract pictures and monochromes. These works are confronted with works by seven contemporary artists, who also focus on the theme of the dissolution of the image. These works are united in their contextual proximity to Richter's distanced relationship with the *motif*, in which he often goes as far as to negate it entirely. Richter has remained true to the medium of painting, yet questions its possibilities against the backdrop of the "end of painting" declared by Marcel Duchamp. The artists with whom he is juxtaposed wrestle with the difficulty (and sometimes impossibility) of making a clear statement on the image in today's world. In our present media and communication-based society, artists are submerged under an immense flood of images against which they have to struggle, and seek alternative strategies. These include installations, photography, and objects in space. The exhibition continues the CCC Strozzi's commitment to thematic exhibitions in a new way: the artists featured in this exhibition work with highly differing approaches and media, but each of them is indebted in one way or another to the work of Gerhard Richter, and explores the concept of distance as a means to cause the image to dissolve and mutate.

Richter himself said of this approach: "I blur in order to make everything equal, everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur so that all parts come together somewhat. I also, perhaps, blur to wipe out superfluous, unimportant information". Many years earlier, the Czech writer Karl Capek had taken a similar position on the philosophical importance of letting distinctions blur and dissolve: 'When you climb to the top of a high mountain, you see that things somehow blend together and level out into a single plain. Even truths blend together from a certain height. Of course man does not and cannot live on a mountaintop [...] but now and then he can look at a mountain or the sky and say that from there his truths and such things still exist, and nothing has been stolen from him; rather they have been blended together with something more far more free and unbounded that is no longer his property alone'.

Richter's work – and that of the artists shown with him in this exhibition – asks us to reflect about the nature of the distinctions we make, and to question our need to insist on knife-like sharpness, on fundamental precision, on ruthless clarity. Today, in a world sorely in need of tolerance and flexibility – of a softer focus perhaps – the issues explored by *Gerhard Richter and the Disappearance of the Image in Contemporary Art* are ones that reward our close and critical attention.

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