DISTANT PRESENCE: REPRESENTATION, PAINTING AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN GERHARD RICHTER'S READER

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In this essay, I offer thoughts on the constitution of images in art, especially as they are constituted in painting and in photography. Utilizing ideas from Gadamer, Derrida and Adorno, I shall argue that representation should be conceived as a performative concept and as an act of formation; i.e., as a process rather than as something "fixed." My reflections will be carried out in connection with a careful analysis of Gerhard Richter's painting Reader (1994), which is a painting of a photograph that depicts a female who is reading. I demonstrate how a close analysis of this fascinating painting leads us deeper into the problem of painted images, insofar as it enacts what it is about, namely, the constitution of itself as an image by means of a complex and enigmatic relationship between seeing, reading, memory, inner, outer, gaze and blindness.

The graceful is based on distance.
– Goethe, "*Das Anmutige beruht auf der Ferne*"[1]

Introduction

In his recently published lecture course on aesthetics given in 1958/59, Adorno introduced a term that, two years later in his Mahler book, he would take up in a different fashion, namely, the term "breakthrough." The term "breakthrough" (*Durchbruch*) refers to the moment in which the idea of freedom and being liberated "breaks into" the experience of art in the form of being beyond the empirical world. This transcendence can be achieved by the work of art because it is able to push us and itself

[1] In *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur. Maximen und Reflexionen*, Werke, Band 12, Hamburger Ausgabe (München: DTV, 1998), 217.

beyond the everyday world and to leave behind all instrumentality encountered in the world.[2] This transcendence is the experience of liberation, according to Adorno. On the one hand, this possibility of a breakthrough is a real possibility, and, on the other hand, it remains a semblance. It is real, since such breakthrough moments can indeed be experienced in "being overwhelmed," but it remains a semblance, as the breakthrough only *seems* to be something immediate[3]; as, for example, when the experience merges with the object. Indeed, a breakthrough is truly non-reified experience and cannot be possessed. As such, it must negate itself as soon as it is experienced. Ideality and present moment contradict each other in a breakthrough moment. These moments, which for Adorno are moments of the disappearance and dissolution of the subject, are not, as one might think, simply moments of enjoyment, or feelings of exaltation, or of being excited or of being entertained; rather, according to him, it is happiness that breaks through in these moments. And this happiness breaks through as an objective moment, i.e., as an aspect of work in a world within which the experience of happiness becomes increasingly destroyed. It is, accordingly, a special form of happiness that Adorno has in mind, as he does not think of it as an ethical or a psychological concept; rather, happiness is based in this case upon the ideal of being merged with the object. He also thinks of it as a form of containment, which implies that the subject is *taken over* and "carried forward" by the object. The object holds the subject and—echoing lost childhood experience—art is able to bring out this a-subjective possibility of being related to an object. The following essay ultimately goes back to such an experience.

Whenever we encounter such a breakthrough, we have the impression that this experience is sufficient, enclosed and closed off; however, this impression is wrong, as any reference to an immediate "having" and possession on our side would abstract from the work and lead us back to ourselves—and decidedly away from the painting. Accordingly, I agree with Adorno's claim that the work of art is in need of reflection because it *seems* to speak, but whenever we try to listen to it we are confronted with the fact that the work is in need of a language in or-

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[2] Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetik (1958/59), Nachgelassene Schriften, Vorlesungen*, Band 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 195.

[3] *Ibid.*, 196.

der to understand it. Though reflections on art, as I said before, ultimately stem from an impulse outside of our rational conceptions of them, they are unable to be experienced in their own right without letting them speak. The claim that the work of art does not need conceptual reflection, as some phenomenologists would claim, is thus incorrect, as this would lead us to a subjectivisation of the work of art, since the claim that experience is itself independent from reflection is based on the assumption that experience is something immediate, i.e., without mediation. Conceptual reflection, however, is not something that we perform "on top" of our experience, or that we "add to" an experience; rather, the work of art implies its own understandability *as* experience, which I take to be a genuine hermeneutic insight. Accordingly, any claim upon an *immediate* possession of works of art remains an illusion produced by the culture industry and the commodity form.[4] A work of art is always mediated. As a consequence, my own position lies somewhere between Critical Theory and Hermeneutics.

In reflection 509 in his *Maxims and Reflections*, Goethe said that we are in need of a "delicate" (*zart*) theorising that "makes itself identical with the object and becomes true theory,"[5] a sentence which could have been chosen by Adorno (and Benjamin) as their own theoretical guiding principles, as Goethe's call implies that a successful philosophical reflection must merge with its object and do away with both idealist or logical abstraction and naïve or positivist accounts of the object about which we want to philosophise. Interpreting works of art in the former way would transform *concrete* unities of meaning into *signs* of theoretical insights that were reached *outside* of the concrete work, on the basis of which this outside knowledge is then applied to selected works, artists or movements. In contrast, I believe that theoretical reflection about art can only be successful if it comes *out of* the concrete work such that through theoretical reflection the work itself changes its character in such

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[4] For this, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (tr.) Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 13. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AT.

[5] "*Es gibt eine zarte Empirie, die sich mit dem Gegenstand innigst identisch macht und dadurch zur eigentlichen Theorie wird. Diese Steigerung des geistigen Vermoegens aber gehoert einer hochgebildeten Zeit an.*" (See Goethe, *Schriften zur Kunst*, 435.)

a way that work and reflection are shown as dialectically related, and as forming themselves into a higher unity. Simply put, what we think *about* a work of art is—at least in an ideal situation—*part of* the work of art. Accordingly, in what follows, I neither apply a ready-made theory to a painting (as is often done in contemporary art interpretation), nor do I remain on the side of the painting alone; instead, I try to present a reflection that mediates the conceptual with the object so that both the conceptual side and the side of the object are mediated with each other; in addition, I hope, to steal words from Adorno again, that the "solution springs forth" as a constellation of its elements.[6]

The positions I hold will hopefully become clear during the first part of what follows, insofar as the first part of my essay presents the point of view from which this essay has been developed. I will then in the second part try to bring these theoretical viewpoints into play and focus on a single work of art, namely, Gerhard Richter's painting *Reader* (1994). I will follow two main intuitions: (1) Against the mainstream of semiotic conceptions of images, I submit that images have a totally different structure than signs. Images, according to my position, are formations through which something presents itself as a process. This concept of image, then, which has its roots in Adorno and Gadamer, is both mimetic and performative. (2) Against contemporary attempts to reduce art to its experience, such as in some phenomenological circles, or to reduce it to non-representational accounts, such as in Deleuze, I contend that we are unable to give up a substantial concept of representation, at least if we use the concept of representation that I favour. Having said all this in advance, I shall now turn to the first step.

Representation and Image

The concept of representation has a long history, which is difficult to untangle, as not only epistemological considerations go hand in hand with aesthetic considerations, but also because the different languages handle the term in very different fashions. As will soon become clear, the conception that I would like to present here is closely connected to the German word for representation. There are two German terms for "represen-

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[6] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," in *The Adorno Reader*, (ed.) Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 23–40, here 32.

tation" in this context: on the one hand, it can mean "*Vorstellung*," which refers to a mental representation, and on the other hand, it can mean "*Darstellung*," which means to present something to someone.[7] Neither has to do with being a copy or imitation. The confusion is even deeper if we take into account that the German word for mental representation (*Vorstellung*) is also used, for example, for theatre presentations. The word "*Vorstellung*" here means "show" or "presentation." Accordingly, even the term used for mental representations in German has a non-mental aspect, namely, it has the sense of "to present" and "to show."

Moreover, "*vorstellen*" as a verb can be used to introduce a person to another person. Finally, in the Latin context, the word "*representare*" did not mean that *something stands in for something else*; rather, the term was used in a legal context and meant that a person herself *shows up as herself* in the courtroom (accordingly, it comes closer to the German word "*vorstellen*"). Whereas often we think of representations as a relationship between something and something that it is not, here we can see that representation has the sense of an *internal* relation: something shows *itself as itself.*

These linguistic considerations are important, for discussions about images usually deal with similar problems. Scholars who argue that representations in the form of images can be reduced to semiotic beings imply that something stands in for something else and therefore points to something beyond itself. For example, the word "table" points to something beyond itself, which is external to itself. If objects such as symphonies or paintings are semiotic beings, too, then it has the consequence that these representations point beyond themselves and make something present that is *external* to them. I believe, on the contrary, that representations always refer to themselves and that we should therefore speak of an internal negativity that constitutes the structure of representations. I think that this is the correct position for three reasons: (1) a semiotic approach to representations overlooks the materiality and material organisation of the representation, which is the decisive aspect of art, in-

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[7] Both Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe have argued that this term is not translatable into English. For this, see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, (tr.) Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).

sofar as here meaning constitutes itself only in and through the material; (2) a semiotic approach to art, in particular, leads to the ontological assumption that works of art are a subclass of signs (or a form of language). If this were true, though, then a genuine theory of art *as* art would be impossible. In this vein, Heidegger has presented the most forceful analysis at the beginning of his art essay[8]; (3) it is phenomenologically not convincing to claim that images point beyond themselves, since one necessary condition of images is, to use the term that Richard Wollheim introduced, that we can see something *in* them, or, for that matter, listen to something in them. This position was, by the way, also held by Husserl.[9]

In contrast to semiotic positions, I think that we should argue that representation in this context refers to the level of the *presence* of something *in itself*, i.e., in its own presentation, in the sense mentioned above. Representation is, in other words, a self-relation and not the relation between two externally related entities. Rather than thinking of imitation and mimesis in a naïve sense, we need to reflect more on this internal relation between representation and presentation. One philosopher who thought—but who unfortunately went unnoticed because of the linguistic problems that I mentioned above—about this relationship in a different fashion is Hans-Georg Gadamer. In *Truth and Method* he writes:

> The situation basic to imitation that we are discussing not only implies that what is represented is there (*das Dargestellte da ist*), but also that it has come into the There more authentically (*eigentlicher ins Da gekommen ist*). Imitation and representation

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[8] Heidegger not only rejects three thing ontologies, he also—which is often overlooked—rejects the claim that the work of art is a "symbol." For this, see Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, (ed.) David F. Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 145.

[9] For this, see my own overview "*Im-Bilde-sein: Husserls Phänomenologie des Bildbewusstseins*," in *Das Bild als Denkfigur. Funktionen des Bildbegriffs in der Philosophiegeschichte von Platon bis Nancy*, (ed.) Sabine Neuber (München: Fink, 2010), 167–81. See also my critique of Husserl in "Depiction and Plastic Perception: A Critique of Husserl's Theory of Picture Consciousness," *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 2 (2007), 171–85.

> are not merely a repetition, a copy, but knowledge of the essence."[10]

Here, Gadamer is dealing with the connection between representation (*Darstellung*) and imitation, the relation of which can be (going beyond the quote) expressed in two theses: (1) the relation between representation and the represented is not a copy or reproduction; and (2) what presents itself in the representation is not something static that could be immediately identified; rather, it comes into being and remains "fluid" throughout. The result of both (1) and (2) Gadamer calls "formation" or "formed image" (*Gebilde*), which the English translator unfortunately translates as "structure." The formed image is to be understood as an active and dialectical notion, and leads throughout its constitution to a clarification *of itself*. The constitution of an image, according to Gadamer, is a self-referential process. Accordingly, what I am proposing here is that we perform a sort of epoché and let our fixed concepts of subject and object go, as this would constitute an act of taking the image seriously and it would show us that by thinking about it we can realise that in truth we are thinking *with* it, given that our thinking about the image is truthfully a thinking about the image. This is true, so long as we can claim that what we think can be *seen* in the image. This process requires us to take the image as something that is not fixed in front of our eyes and removed from the temporal process; rather, we must see that our thinking of the image is in truth a process of two correlates that enrich each other throughout the process. The image—thoughout our reflection—will change because it dynamically unfolds itself in front of our thinking about it. An analogy might help: listening to a symphony is a very dynamic process that unfolds itself as a temporal unity of the retention of what *was* heard, the presence of what *is* heard, and the coming of what *will be* heard. This temporal synthesis is not something that we can have *without* the music heard; it is bound to the *performance* of the music score.

I think that the same thing happens in seeing paintings: if we immerse ourselves into seeing this painting, we build up a temporal unity with the painting, which will lead us to a formative process that includes

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[10] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (tr.) Joel Weinsheimer (New York: Continuum, 2003), 114.

both us and the image presented in and given by the painting. "Artworks," as Adorno similarly puts it, "are images as *apparition*, as appearance, and not as a copy." (AT, 85) Images are, accordingly, not stable unities, as they remain tied to *wherein* the meaning constitutes itself. It remains bound, in other words, to the material organisation of the work and to what Adorno called the "law of form." (AT, 9) The image can only appear *in* and *as* the material organisation of the work and, accordingly, cannot be conceived as a simple semiotic structure. Strictly speaking, it is nothing else than form. It is therefore false to approach an image with a question such as "What does this mean?" A work of art "has meaning," but in a different sense than the usual sense, as we need *to be with* and participate in the object in order to encounter the meaningfulness of the object, which is a step toward the less important role of subjectivity in this context. In contrast, we do not need to be in the presence of signs in order to refer to their meaning. (I could, for example, ask someone on the phone what the meaning of the word "table" is, but I cannot ask someone for the meaning of a symphony, as I need to be in its presence).

Thus, the meaningfulness of an image, as I have laid it out so far, does not depend upon a meaning that is somehow fixed to the object as a property; rather, the meaningfulness is *in* the material organisation and form. As such, the "process-character of art" does not permit the semiotic approach to art. As Adorno puts it, "aesthetic images are not fixed, archaic invariants: Artworks become images in that the processes that have congealed in them as objectivity become eloquent." (AT, 85) This conception of image as (1) performative, (2) self-related, (3) unstable and (4) material form should lead us also to rethink the concept of mimesis, as some scholars have argued that the concept of mimesis becomes obsolete once we introduce a performative concept of representation. Fischer-Lichte, for example, argues that the character or figure does not emerge from something *prior* to the performance and therefore that which comes to presence in a performance cannot be related to something *independent* from the performance.[11] Consequently, she implies that a performative approach to art must give up on the concept of mimesis and allow either for construction or for what the deconstructive school has called an

[11] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 256.

"event."[12] I do not think that her argument makes sense, however, since she implicitly falls back onto a semiotic theory. For the problem of mimesis is not primarily whether the image imitates something prior to the image; rather, the problem is that that which the image is an image *of*—seen from a phenomenological point of view—always constitutes itself *as* something independent from the active construction, but not—and this is important—as *externally* independent.

For example, when a child pretends to be a horse rider, then he/she does not simply imitate something outside his/her play. But how should this be the case, as there is no horse rider present who could be imitated in this moment? For, the pretended horse rider imitates something of its own kind, as the horse riding is not present as long as the child is not really riding a horse. It is not sufficient to point to the imitated as if it were a sign. Accordingly, the horse rider imitation is a *coming about* of not only the horse rider, but also of what a horse rider is (=image). Mimesis, accordingly, is an internal relation, namely, the relation between the performance and what comes into presence throughout the performance. In addition, it is related to the being of what presents itself as itself. Nevertheless, that which the play is performing is a horse rider and not any arbitrary object. Consequently, it *presupposes* mimesis. As Adorno points out, we need to think of mimesis as the attempt to *become* the object: "although art is imitation, it is not imitation of an object; rather, through its gesture and its whole attitude it is the attempt to reconstitute a situation, in which the difference between subject and object did not exist."[13]

Klopstock and Herder, though often forgotten, had already criticized in the 18th century the translation of "mimesis" as "imitation" (*Nachahmung*). They argued that it should rather be translated as representation in the sense of "to present something" (*Darstellung*).[14] It comes, then, as no surprise that the German tradition in aesthetics never

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[12] "Event" refers here to the material presence of the work of art that escapes representational structures. For this, see especially Dieter Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002).

[13] Adorno, *Ästhetik 1958/59*, 70 (my translation).

[14] For this, see the overview [Is the overview OF Schlenstedt? Or BY him?] of Dieter Schlenstedt, "*Darstellung*," *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, Band 2 (Hamburg: Metzler, 2000), 831–71, here 845.

gave up on this concept. In both Gadamer's and Adorno's aesthetics, mimesis is still one of the central concepts,[15] though I have to leave the differences aside for the purpose of this essay.[16] The concept of mimesis, consequently, has two aspects: (1) it leads to a recognition (*Wiedererkennung*) of something (the horse rider in the above example), and (2), it has a relation to "truth," as the vividness and level of presence decides about whether the image is successful or not.

Though the foregoing introductory reflections remained short, they hopefully prepared us well for the next step, within which I want to turn to a recent work of art in order to bring the notions developed so far into play. What I need to demonstrate in what follows is how an image comes into play, how it comes about, and how it establishes itself throughout our reflection and perception.

Richter's *Reader*

Reader, painted in 1994, appears at first as an extremely classical painting, since it defines itself with a schema that secures the importance, weight and identity of the image. As we know, up to the 19th century, the idea of the classical artist and the idea of the classical image were substantially ruled by the repetition of a schema, which secured the truth and reality of the topic chosen by the artist. It was self-explanatory for a classical artist throughout the Middle Ages and up to the end of the 18th century, to have full power over and access to the repertoire regarding the topic chosen. Richter places himself in this tradition by choosing a topic that has been painted over and over again throughout the last two thousand years of Western history, namely, women reading. *Reader* is a specific reference to one of Vermeer's paintings, namely *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, painted around 1662, although Vermeer's painting shows a few aspects that we do not find in Richter's painting. Vermeer's reader is placed in a more prominent social context, which includes reading a letter, being pregnant, being in Holland, and reading in a bourgeois

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[15] For example, see Adorno, *Ästhetik 1958/59*, 70.

[16] Mimesis is here understood as the livelihood of what is presented in an image. As Goethe had already pointed out, it is the vividness and presence of that which presents itself in art that we need to pay attention to. For this, see Goethe, *Schriften zur Kunst*, 510.

interior. Moreover, whereas Vermeer's reader is placed in front of a window, the surrounding area of Richter's reader is almost abstract, as if she reads in front of an abstract formalist painting. Richter's reader is not without any social references, though: we notice the pearls, the carefully knotted hair, as well as the earring. In addition, Richter's reader reads a magazine and not a letter. In the following, I shall leave these social aspects aside, so that we may look more deeply into the actual structure of the painting.

Expressiveness

We should note that Richter's explicit embracing of the art-historical tradition is immediately negated by the way in which he takes up a modern position in this painting: the painting is based on a photograph. What we find here is the tension between two moves that the image introduces, namely, on the one hand, an affirmative and almost celebratory character of beauty resulting from the affirmation of the classical conception of images, and, on the other hand, an equally celebratory process of distancing this image from the tradition it tries to embrace. Distance and identification is the main structure in *Reader*. In what follows I shall address the problem of distance in regard to three aspects: I will first develop what I call "expressiveness," which will then lead me to a brief reflection on painting and photography, before I finally push the problem onto the level of reading and seeing.

As to the first aspect, we need to reconsider both the materiality and the bodily aspect of a painting, for it will help us to understand the difference between paintings and photographs. Every painting, which binds us in its presence, is not only the process of image formation as such, but, in addition, it is an effect of the material and bodily expressiveness of the painting, which makes it impossible to understand paintings as simple realisations of intentions on the side of the painter. Instead, we should say that "the materials of painting...become a world the painter inhabits,"[17] a thesis first put forward by Merleau-Ponty. As much as I agree with this thesis, I do believe that the expressive effect of painting is more than a simple bodily expressiveness. Instead, I would further

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[17] Nigel Wentworth, *The Phenomenology of Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 49.

claim that speaking of bodily expressiveness only makes sense if we take into account that the expressive form implies an *attitude toward sensuality and materiality*. A painting, in other words, comes with a specific character that is produced by the expressiveness of how the materiality *appears* in the painting. It is not simply the paint or simply the way the painter paints; rather, the expressiveness and bodily quality of a painting is *how the materiality shows up* and brings itself to presence within the whole of the painting. The materiality becomes a moment of the image and, hence, cannot be thought of as being outside of any representational structure. In Adorno's words, "The spirit of the artworks is their immanent mediation, which transforms their sensual moments and their objective arrangement; this is mediation in the strict sense that each and every element in the artwork becomes manifestly its own other." (AT, 87) What Adorno has in mind is exactly what I introduced earlier with my claim that we need to deal with a relation between three sides and not two. Richter's *Reader* is not simply an imitation of a reader; rather, it introduces a new level—that which Adorno calls spirit and I call image, namely, the level through which all elements of the painting become mediated through a new level of appearance. The sensuality of a painting, then, is never simply a twofold relation of senses and spirit or image; rather, the spiritual dimension is constituted by the relationship *to* the senses. *What is represented here is that relation itself.* The sensual materiality of a painting is not simply "there," nor can it be described as something objective, such as an objective property; rather, the sensuality and its character must show up themselves, and as a consequence, they become a moment of the representation.

In the *Reader*, the brushwork is only visible in the form of a fine pattern produced by the brush with which Richter produces the smooth and blurry effect in his paintings. Even in his abstract paintings that seem to be very expressive—such as the *Wald* series (2005)—the rhythm remains neutral, since we do not find any traces of Richter's *hand*. Instead, we feel the tools that Richter uses for his paintings, such as large wooden beams, spatulas and scratchers. Accordingly, what we find embodied in Richter's work is not only the negation of his own person and individuality, but also a negation of the bodily dimension. This attempt at negation remains unsuccessful, though, since the attempt to negate the bodily dimension in painting is itself a form in which the bodily dimension is expressed. In regard to Richter, this means that the body is visible in his

paintings in the form of an intellectual *rejection*, the consequence of which is that the assumption that in Richter's paintings the gestural quality remains without author must be corrected. This is the case since the attempt to avoid a style that implies an author and the subject is a *privative* phenomenon: the non-expressive style in Richter refers to a style, namely, the absence of expressive gestures. The style thereby presents itself in a distanced way, which reflects itself in how the paintings *distance* themselves from emotionality, feeling and affection.

However, this—we might say Protestant—attempt to free painting from affection ultimately turns into its opposite, insofar as the absence of emotion is itself a mode of being emotional. Let us first work with an analogy: it does not make sense to speak of a cold, neutral and very distant person as a person who has *no* emotions, since this, given human nature, is impossible. Coldness, neutrality and distance are forms in which such a person expresses out her feelings and displays herself as a feeling person. For such a person, being feeling is here identical with coldness, as coldness is a *form of* feeling. Richter's paintings work in a similar fashion: the apparent absence of wild brushwork, subjective expressions, transgressions, grotesque elements, etc., have to do with an almost *rational* attitude that is materially present in these paintings. Richter's style of painting is neither expressive nor formalistic. Instead, what we find here is the "spirit" of *suppressed emotionality*. To repeat this point: sensuality shows up in *Reader* as the relation *to* sensuality. In *Reader*, suppressed emotionality and distance are represented in the sense outlined above. In other words, although Richter tries to *hide* the genesis of his paintings, this does not mean that they do not have a genesis. His attempt to negate the *bodily narrative* remains unsuccessful, because the question of bodily narrativity (its rhetoric, movements, expressions) becomes even more of a question when confronted with its absence. In addition, in a person who represses all visible emotional expression, the *gaze* becomes important, inasmuch as desire now turns away from the body to what can be held at a distance. The gaze is also the centre of Richter's photo-paintings. Instead of being obsessed with the hand, Richter's photo-paintings are obsessed with vision, seeing and looking. In *Reader*, this dimension is reflected *in* the image. Accordingly, distance is Richter's obsession, not touch.

Paining and Photography

It is important to note in this context that Richter, when asked about his motivation to paint from photographs, repeatedly points out that it allows him to paint without any reference to his own subjectivity and personal preferences, which in turn points to a conception of painting based on vision instead of on imagination or narrative. For example, in response to the question of why he started to paint from photographs, he said: "There was no style, no composition, no judgment.... It liberated me from personal experience. There was nothing but a pure image."[18] Accordingly, painting from photographs has two aspects: first, it belongs to Richter's attempt to eliminate expressiveness in his paintings in the sense outlined above. *Reader* is an extremely unemotional painting, almost totally removed from any affective expression, which is not only the effect of distance, but also the effect of the fact that we look here at a painted image of a photograph. Painting from photographs should also be taken as the attempt to *negate* the bodily dimension and to suppress the bodily quality, especially if we take into account that *the* difference between paintings and photographs is what Roland Barthes calls the "flatness" of the photographic image.[19] I shall briefly turn to this concept.

Some scholars have discussed photography in relation to painting in terms of intentionality and causality, but I think that these concepts only make sense if we understand by intentionality a form of bodily intentionality (which I have called "expressiveness" above). The difference between how a photograph is given and how a painting is given is not that one is the product of a mental act whereas the other is a product of causality; rather, how the photograph embodies its meaning is different, since it does not have *any* expressiveness or gestural quality. Put differently, photographs do not have a bodily dimension and they thereby lack what Deleuze calls the "pathic" quality of a painting.[20] One consequence

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[18] Gerhard Richter, quoted in Susanne Ehrenfried, *Das Portrait bei Gerhard Richter* (Wien/New York: Springer, 1997), 170.

[19] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 106. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CL.

[20] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, (tr.) D.W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 37.

of this consideration is that in photographs we can only find a view from the outside of the *objectified body*, that is, the body taken as an object; however, in painting we always also find the *lived body*, that is, the movable and intentional body experienced from the inside. Accordingly, the recipient is part of the formative power of painting, whereas in photography the recipient's involvement in the image is blocked, given that the photograph ultimately remains *impenetrable* by our body (to use, once again, a term introduced by Barthes in his famous essay on photography). This impenetrability goes back to the other main difference between a painted and a photographed image, namely, the indexical nature of the photograph. By "index," Charles Sanders Peirce meant a sign that is in its materiality a trace of what it is a sign of.

As we know, the photograph can be manipulated, changed, cropped and transformed in many ways, but ultimately—as long as it is a photograph—the photograph is unable to invent or construct its referent internally. Instead, in the photographic image, the referent appears as a *fixed* and passive referent, but not as a constructed referent. It might be extremely difficult to figure out what we see in certain photographs, but whatever we see and however we "interpret" the photographic image, ultimately we must take the photograph as an *arrest* of something that passed by in the moment at which the photograph was taken. Barthes writes:

> I might put this differently: what founds the nature of photography is the pose. The physical duration of this pose if of little consequence; even in the interval of a millionth of a second (Edgerton's drop of milk) there has still been a pose, for the pose is not, here, the attitude of the target or even a technique of the *Operator*, but the term of an "intention" of reading: looking at a photograph, ... I project the present photograph's immobility upon the past shot, and it is this arrest which constitutes the pose. (CL, 78)

Barthes describes the "pose" neither as an intention on the side of the photographed person nor as an effect of the photographer; instead, as he claims, the pose is the effect of the moment in which the motive was fixed *for* an eye or a camera, which, and this is important, establishes a

temporal relation between past (the pictured) and present (the viewer and the picture). The viewer *takes* the present photograph to have been there when it was taken (which is *not now*). Of course, what Barthes has in mind is that something that belongs to the past can never be *totally* constructed. Something that we claim to have been in the past we take to be part of a past *reality*, but we do not take it to be there *now*. A photograph, to borrow again Barthes' language, does not show "*what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*." (CL, 85)[21] Photography is an art of the past because, due to its indexicality, it remains bound to its referent as something that was there (whenever and wherever). As long as we do not take the image as a total construction—which we are unable to do as long as we take it to be a photograph—we take the photograph as an image of something that *was* present somewhere when it was taken. This temporal structure that constitutes the indexicality of the photographic picture is certainly *not* applicable to painting. Accordingly, we need to understand what happens to the photographic image when painted.

Essentialisation

In Richter's *Reader*, the person depicted is precisely *not* presented as fixed in its past form. In contradistinction, the fixation in this painting is an effect of what we could call *its essentialisation*. What we must take to be a fixed image of Richter's wife in the photograph that Richter used becomes, through the act of painting, something else: the "aboutness" of the image is no longer necessarily tied to the past existence of its referent and its pose. We no longer *take it to be something that was there*. Instead, what we find here is a strange bracketing or *neutralisation* of the referent's existence. By "neutralization," Husserl understood the possibility of transforming every act into what he called the "as if" mode of belief. It is as if we leave it open as to whether the referent exists or not, which enables the painting and us, the viewer, to form an image in the way we described above. Something *totally* independent from the has-been of the referent can come into presence, which no longer *with neces-*

[21] For a phenomenological reading of Barthes, see my "The Photographic Attitude: Barthes with Husserl," in *Phenomenology, Archaeology, Ethics: Current Investigations of Husserl's Corpus*, (ed.) Sebastian Luft and Pol Vandevelde (New York: Continuum, 2010), 152–67.

sity is bound to the external referent. As a consequence, as one commentator put it, "the painter is actually liberating the photograph's captured moment, his action is breaking the spell of all our yesterdays that had been woven round it and shifting it into the time-free presence of the artworks."[22] As Richter himself said in a famous interview with Jan Thorn-Prikker, "what counts is that the pictures...become universal. They are there to show themselves and not me. That's why form is so important—and that is difficult nowadays."[23] In another interview, he outright rejected that portraits (if understood as paintings of something individual) are possible, "since one is unable to paint an individual human being, but always only an image, which has absolutely nothing in common with the original."[24] The image lets us see something non-individual, although it seems at first *as if* it shows an individual. The individual as the referent, however, is bracketed and neutralised in the painting because the painting forms its own referent and, as explained, becomes an *image*. What are the moments of this formation as essentialisation that the painting introduces? I think we should note at least five aspects: (1) if Barthes' analysis of photographs is correct, then we need to think about painting and memory; (2) with this move, we need to recognise that we encounter in this painting a strange conflict of acts, namely, of inner and outer; (3) this conflict is deeply related to painting itself, as painting was always connected to an activity *from memory*; (4) the conflict is intertwined with the problem of seeing and vision itself, since, finally, (5) the conflict has much to do with the reader herself and her activity, namely, reading. Is reading a form of vision? What does she see when she reads? And what does she remember when she sees? In addition, we must ask what *we* see when we see her reading. All of these questions should lead us deeper into the painting, as we should now realise that this painting is an image of something that does not lie at the surface of the picture. Something presents itself here that needs to be carefully laid out.

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[22] Botho Strauss, "The Painter Breaks the Spell," *Gerhard Richter: Overpainted Photographs* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2008), 203–07, here 207.

[23] Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 197.

[24] Gerhard Richter, quoted in Ehrenfried, *Das Portrait*, 147.

Distance

Distance, as already noted above, is important for several reasons, for distance is connected with the sense of vision, seeing and the gaze. How is the gaze visible in this painting? On the one hand, we should recognise that the place of the viewer is *extremely* close to the object of the painting. It seems to be as if we are standing right in front of her, since otherwise we would not be able to see what she is reading, but we do catch a glimpse of what she is reading, and that moves us *extremely* close to the object of the painting. This distance can be spelled out spatially; however, I do not think that this is the main aspect, as we notice that we remain at a distance from the object of the painting only because we remain at a distance from *the activity* of the reader, which itself has two aspects: looking and reading. Why is this so? I think the reason for this form of distance has to do with the absorption of the reader in her own activity, and, in addition, with the gap presented by vision and reading. We, the viewers, are unable to see her reading. We can see what she is seeing, but how could we ever see what she is actually *reading*? In this way we might say that this painting becomes an exercise in phenomenology. Finally, the distance structure is also prominent because of the magazine that the reader is apparently reading. As Svetlana Alpers, in her famous book on letter-writing in Dutch art has pointed out, a painter "introduces the letter because of its ability to close distances, to make something present, to communicate secretly—all of which confirms what we have seen of the painted letter in Dutch paintings."[25] Accordingly, *to* the reader, reading a magazine is about *closing* the distance, by bringing the world nearer to her and overcoming the problem of vision through reading. Reading is, for her, the attempt to overcome seeing and perception because the magazine brings something into her presence that she cannot see.

In sum, the painting confronts us with the question of what we see when we see, as well as whether we see anything at all. Perhaps this painting is an image of blindness, a blind spot, an overlap of different acts that exclude each other. Since we know that what we see here in

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[25] Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the 17th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 200.

Richter's *Reader* is ourselves, perhaps this painting is not about the reader; rather, it is about us and about what we do not see when we look at a painting. Finally, let us not forget that Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida claimed that reading is a form of listening. "Reading proceeds in no other way," as Derrida put it in *Memoirs of the Blind*—"it listens in watching."[26] We should, then, think about whether this painting is about reading and self-consciousness as a form of listening. In what follows, I shall try to untangle these moments.

Reading

Let us first think about reading. Objectivity and authenticity are the goal of these paintings. However, the effect is thoroughly paradoxical, insofar as the beholder is introduced *as* a beholder *through* her as-if absence. It is as if we observe a reading scene *without* the knowledge of the reader. She does not *know* that and what we *see*. Accordingly, though she is there as if we were not there, it is precisely this fact that makes our voyeurism even more apparent than in theatrical works of art. It is *we* who know more than she. We find a double secret worked into this illusionistic painting, namely, the secret of the reader *and* the secret of the spectator. Accordingly, what *her secret* is on the reflective level becomes *our secret* through our being absorbed in the picture. *We* are the reader(s). Thus we find in Richter a strategy for giving the viewer a position *in front* of the image that the person *in* the image has.[27] What it forms, accordingly, is not simply a painting and a viewer; rather, the image itself forms this aspect *internally* by forcing us to participate in it.

This tension between involvement and distance of the spectator is carried out again by the contrast between absence and presence, or between past and present. The reader clearly seems to be fully absorbed in her activity and herself. However, in contrast to a painting that depicts a melancholic topic, we do not find the inner presence of a past through

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[26] Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 2.

[27] For this, see Klaus Krüger, "*Bild und Bühne. Dispositive des imaginativen Blicks*," in *Transformationen des Religiösen. Performativität und Textualität im Geistlichen Spiel*, (ed.) E. Fischer-Lichte, I. Kasten, and E. Koch (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2007), 218–48.

being immersed in an inward activity (thinking), but rather, through being immersed in an outward activity (reading). Accordingly, what we find here is a self-relation that is closed off, private, and not accessible to anyone outside of it. We should take into account the following, though: what seems to be an outward activity, namely reading, in truth *is* an inward activity, if we take into account the nature of reading. In this connection, Richter's painting stands in the tradition of anti-theatrical imagery in which we see figures "who appear absorbed in what they are doing, thinking, and feeling and who therefore also appear wholly oblivious to being beheld."[28] These images, as Fried points out, have realist appeal due to this stress on absorption. They do not belong to what he called "theatrical" works that invite the viewer to explore the work[29]; instead, they try to keep the viewer at a distance. They are "*anti*-theatrical, which is to say that they treat the beholder as if he were not there."[30] This point is important, for one could argue that the person depicted in Richter's *Reader* knows that she is observed by an external gaze. In contradistinction, I believe that this claim should be rejected, for the idea that she *poses* in front of a camera overlooks that we are looking at a painting (and not a photograph). Richter's painting is *of* a (photograph of a) reader, and not a picture taken in front of a reading woman.

What is the structure of reading, then? We are certainly not directed toward the scribbles on paper when we read a text; rather, while we are reading, we are "living" through what the text and our mental activity construct in front of our "inner eyes." Reading is a formation of memory: we hold something in mind, anticipate something to come and thereby establish a unity and synthesis of everything we gather together. Reading, according to Wolfgang Iser, is the "concretization"[31] of the text, i.e., it means to enter a world in which the parts, relations and references have to be established through *performing* and entertaining them. As Iser further points out, "the degree to which literary texts transform reading

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[28] Michael Fried, "Barthes' *Punctum*," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2005), 539–74, here 549.

[29] *Ibid.*, 572.

[30] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

[31] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 274–94, here 279.

into a creative process...is far above mere perception of what is written."[32] In other words, as readers, we do not simply recognise facts and what is the case; rather, we *actively* engage with the text in order to understand its relations, its internal references and its unity. "This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination"[33] in the form of a "living process."[34] Reading, then, not only is a form of self-relation and listening to oneself, it is also imaging as participation in a text.

We are also turned *away* from the outer and the visible while we are reading, insofar as we are turned into our selves. Whereas writing has something to do with the transfer of something that is inner and in our memory into the outer world, reading is the transfer of something that is outer into the inner world. Accordingly, what we find here is a *self-reflective* form of absorption, a second-order type of consciousness. Let us not forget that the relationship between looking and reading is one between something that is present "in the flesh," as Husserl put it, and something that is re-presented in memory, as what we read belongs to our inner world and thereby enters the privacy of a self-relation. Memory is the best expression of this privacy. Reading, then, is a form of memory, as the formation of memory and the formation of an image: holding in mind, looking forward, restructuring through the text. During this process an "inner image" is formed. It is also not simply the case that we see someone absorbed in an activity, such as playing football or writing a letter, when we view *Reader*; rather, the absorption is characterised by an *attention to this being absorbed*. Consequently, the inwardness presented in this painting is pushed to its extreme because it not only builds up a first-level absorption, namely, the fictitious absence of an observer for the agent, but rather, it builds up *the total absence* of the agent, given that the agent is here turned inward *and* is related to her *inner* activity. As a consequence, we find ourselves totally alone in front of the painting. The secret encountered here puts us at an *absolute* distance to the painting. We are denied access, so to speak.[35]

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[32] *Ibid.*, 283.

[33] *Ibid.*, 284.

[34] *Ibid.*, 296.

[35] This should remind us of something else: The painter, according to the 19th-century painter Caspar David Friedrich, has to point her gaze away from the

Blindness

Consequently, this painting is not about seeing or reading; rather, we must come to the conclusion that it is about *not-seeing* and *not-reading*. We cannot see what she is reading, we cannot see what is going on in her, as we cannot see what she is absorbed in. Above all, we cannot see the activity of reading as such, for it does not make sense, if we take reading to be an inner activity. Just as we are unable to see thoughts, we are unable to see reading. Seeing, in other words, is treated in this painting (and in other paintings by Richter) with absolute scepticism. So, what seems to be so accessible at first, turns out to be almost impenetrable—though this impenetrability remains different from the impenetrability of photographs, as in this case it is presented as a problem of the gaze and of knowledge. Interestingly, Richter's *Reader* differs from Dutch depictions of the same topic in one important regard. Most of the Old Master paintings deal with letters, the topic of which is love (and the origin of painting).[36] In Richter's work, the reader is reading not a letter, but a magazine. It has been argued that the reader in this painting is reading a German news magazine called "*Der Spiegel*," which might lead us to ask: What is the function of news magazines such as *Spiegel*? The main function of these magazines and other news media certainly is to make something present that is absent from the situation of the reader, and, in addition, to give their readers an image of what otherwise remains hidden. Magazines such as this thereby make the world accessible. Finally, and not incidentally, "*Spiegel*" in English means "mirror." As is well known, a mirror reflects what is going on outside of the mirror. I submit that this can be taken as an ironic reference to the history of painting, within which females are looking into mirrors (which indicates vanity). Perhaps this tradition of vanity paintings can be read as a self-thematisation of painting itself: as Gian Pietro Bellori said, painting is like a woman seeing herself in a mirror. The gaze into the mirror is, thus,

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outer into the inner world. He says: "Close your bodily eye so that you see the image first with your mental/spiritual eye. Then bring to light what you have seen in the dark, so that it returns from the outer to the inner." Quoted in Werner Busch, *Caspar David Friedrich: Ästhetik und Religion* (München: C.H. Beck, 2003), 184.

[36] For more about this, see Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 192–200.

self-reflective, self-related and closed off. Indeed, the closer we come, the further it seems to move away; the more we see, the less we understand.

However, in addition to this ironic reference to the history of painting, we should note the following tension: as we said above, the spectator is present here *because* of her supposed absence. The more we look at and the more we desire to enter into the painting, the more we experience distance and the limits of *our* vision, especially as the reader reading the magazine is *removed* from what is absent in two respects: the reader has only a representation of what she is reading about and, in addition, while reading, she remains removed from the action referred to in the magazine. What the image mirrors is, accordingly, the situation of the spectator in front of the painting. It is not only *her* turning away from vision; rather, it is *our* turning away from vision: in this moment, we realise what this painting is about, namely, *not-seeing*. The topic of this painting is seeing *as* blindness. It allows us to see the situation of our gaze as a failure.

As I outlined above, the relation between painting and photography should be seen as a process of essentialisation, since painting neutralises the photographic referent. Richter himself supports this view. In an interview, he said: "I believe that the quintessential task of every painter in any time has been to concentrate on the essentials."[37] This statement, as it now turns out, is thoroughly paradoxical because Richter's attempt to let us see something essential, on the one hand, utterly fails, and, on the other hand, is very successful. It fails because the painting pushes us to the limits of seeing as reading, as it tries to do the impossible, namely, to paint something that cannot be painted. It is at the same time also successful, as it does exactly that; namely, it demonstrates this impossibility in an astonishing fashion. Robert Storr pointed out that Richter attempts to work "away at the image and at the paint until you can see something."[38] We can now see that this essentialisation turns into its opposite: paradoxically put, we are able to see something because we do not see anything. "The strength of the work lies not in

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[37] Gerhard Richter, *Writings 1961-2007* (New York: DAP, 2009), 413.
[38] Storr, in Richter, *Writings*, 415.

what is shown, but in what is withheld," as one commentator said[39]; and, as another commentator nicely wrote, "all painted from photographs, these pictures at first seem accessible, almost documentary, but the distance at which each figure is caught never lessens, and over time the atmospheric haze of nostalgia and memory suggested by stiff brushstrokes, contributes to the mounting sense of uncertainty."[40] Hence, *Reader* is constituted by a dialectic of the installation of illusion, and at the same time the attempt to break down this illusion. The reader is not present for the spectator. Her position is based both on the invitation to enter the picture and, because we are unable to see her *as* a reader, on being blocked from entering fully into this illusionary sphere.[41] In other words, the painting brings out a tension between involvement of the spectator and distance of the spectator. In this way, we might say that the painting is a *broken promise*.

Conclusion

Benjamin's famous definition of aura is stated thus: aura is the "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be."[42] It is the distance, then, that is shockingly close to us, or, even better, it is the presence that is so shockingly far from us and outside of our reach. It is, in my view, precisely this structure that we find in Richter's painting: although it celebrates us in the presence of itself, it leaves us at a *total* distance from what it presents. We *believe* we see and understand, but in truth we don't see anything. Perhaps it is this auratic and almost holy quality of the image that makes it so beautiful.

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[39] Rosemary Hawker, "The Idiom in Photography as the Truth in Painting," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 101, no. 3, 2002), 541–54, here 548.

[40] Cornelia Homburg, *German Art Now*, with contributions from Sean Rainbird, Catharina Manchanda, and Robin Clark (London/New York: Merrell, 2003), 91.

[41] For more about this, see Klaus Krüger, "*Der Blick in das Innere des Bildes: Ästhetische Illusion bei Gerhard Richter*" in *Pantheon*, issue n. 53, 1995, 149–66, here 149.

[42] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I.2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 479.

Coda

We should finally conclude the foregoing reflections by returning to the beginning of this essay and the concept of performance that it introduced. Let us repeat the following sentence by Adorno: "Aesthetic images are not fixed, archaic invariants: Artworks become images [insofar as] the processes that have congealed in them as objectivity become eloquent." (AT, 85) What Adorno has in mind should be clearer now: for the image character in works of art is not something that we can read off these works as if they are simply signs with a meaning attached to them; rather, they unfold their content only *while* we make them speak for themselves. On the one hand, then, the task of understanding paintings such as Gerhard Richter's *Reader* is a rigorous phenomenological exercise. On the other hand, though, this exercise is reflective—and here I depart from Gadamer and side with Adorno—and, thus, conceptual. The performative dimension of the image, consequently, is *in* the image, *as* the image. Put differently, the apparition appears only in the space *between* the phenomenon and the understanding. Admittedly, the task of letting the work speak for itself from itself is difficult and often fails, especially since a reflection without the phenomenon remains empty and the phenomenon without reflection remains blind. The synthesis of both, though, is a temporal synthesis through which the image appears and becomes a *Darstellung*. This representation is *internally* related to itself, as the image and what the image is an image of, appears *in* the material form. Only by understanding this relation can we avoid the error of interpreting works of art that handle the works as signs, i.e., as things that simply point to things other than themselves. The formed image becomes, accordingly, a process through which the image clarifies *itself*. This is to say that the clarification comes about neither through the referent nor through the mind of the interpreter. If this happens, we can speak—with Adorno—of a "happy [*glücklich*] moment," since it would be as if we were, for a moment, part of the work. Indeed, it would almost be as if our life would be one with the work, without violating its integrity. This may be referred to as the "utopian impulse" in mimetic activity.

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