



Leseprobe

Gerhard Richter Abstraction

Gerhard Richter Abstraction

MUSEUM BARBERINI
POTSDAM

PRESTEL

Bestellen Sie mit einem Klick für 39,00 €



Seiten: 240

Erscheinungstermin: 05. Juli 2018

Mehr Informationen zum Buch gibt es auf

www.penguinrandomhouse.de

Gerhard Richter

Abstraction

A publication series by the Museum Barberini

Edited by

Ortrud Westheider and Michael Philipp

Exhibition

Dietmar Elger

Ortrud Westheider

with Valerie Hortolani

With contributions by

Janice Bretz

Hubertus Butin

Dietmar Elger

Valerie Hortolani

Matthias Krüger

Kerstin Küster

Ortrud Westheider

Armin Zweite

- 7 Foreword
- 8 Across Art History: Gerhard Richter and Abstraction
Ortrud Westheider
- 22 Abstraction and Semblance in Gerhard Richter's Oeuvre
Dietmar Elger
- 34 Grids and Readymades: Gerhard Richter's Color Chart Paintings in the 1960s and 1970s
Hubertus Butin
- 46 "In Painting Thinking is Painting": The Primacy of Form in Gerhard Richter's Art
Armin Zweite
- 58 Richter's Squeegee: The Artist and His Tools
Matthias Krüger

Catalog of Exhibited Works

- 70 Structures and Illusions: Abstract Works in the 1960s
Valerie Hortolani
- 88 Chance and Concept: Color Charts
Dietmar Elger
- 104 Gestures and Blendings: Inpaintings and Gray Paintings
Valerie Hortolani
- 120 Blurrings and Close-Ups: Details and Early Abstract Paintings
Dietmar Elger
- 146 Nature and Materials: Abstract Landscapes
Dietmar Elger
- 168 Paints and Layers: Abstract Paintings from 1986 to 2005
Kerstin Küster
- 194 Transparent and Reflected: Mirrors, Glass, and Strips
Janice Bretz and Kerstin Küster
- 208 New Abstract Paintings from 2005 to 2017
Kerstin Küster
- 228 Biography of Gerhard Richter
Dietmar Elger and Valerie Hortolani
- 234 List of Exhibited Works
- 237 Selected Bibliography
- 238 Authors
- 239 Image Credits

Lenders to the exhibition

Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden
The "M" Art Foundation, Belgium
Block Collection, Berlin
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
Kunsthalle Bremen – Der Kunstverein in Bremen
Gerhard Richter Archive, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst, Duisburg
Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven
Kunsthalle Emden – Stiftung Henri und Eske Nannen und Schenkung Otto van de Loo
Olbricht Collection, Essen
Hamburger Kunsthalle
Sprengel Museum Hannover
Stefan Asbrand-Eickhoff, Hesse
Gion Collection, Japan
Kunstmuseen Krefeld
Würth Collection, Künzelsau
Collezione Prada, Milan
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich
Neues Museum. Staatliches Museum für Kunst und Design, Nuremberg
Vanmoerkerke Collection, Ostend
Fundação de Serralves, Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto
Museum Wiesbaden
Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich
Anthony d'Offay

as well as private collections which do not wish to be named

Foreword

Gerhard Richter's work has already been honored in major retrospectives. In 2002, the Museum of Modern Art in New York devoted a solo show to the artist. In 2011, Tate Modern in London, the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris mounted an exhibition that took a wide-ranging view of Richter's life work, as encapsulated in its title, *Panorama*. Our exhibition, *Gerhard Richter: Abstraction*, also traces a broad arc from the 1960s to more recent works that have not yet been seen in public. Unlike the retrospectives, however, the exhibition at the Museum Barberini concentrates upon a theme crucial to Richter's painting: abstraction.

In the 1960s, "abstraction" was a word which often triggered negative emotions in both East and West Germany. In East Germany, where Richter began studying at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts in 1951, abstract art was attacked as an elitist, aloof, and Western style. In West Germany, where Richter continued his studies at the Düsseldorf Art Academy from 1961 onward, abstraction was already regarded as conservative, because new art was being created using new forms of expression, and painting seemed obsolete. Richter seized upon the unpopular abstract style to reexamine the possibilities of painting. It also allowed him to draw connections to the modernist tradition denounced by the Nazis, and gave him the opportunity to shape a sustainable way of painting. *Gerhard Richter: Abstraction* shows his development from the black-and-white Photo paintings and Color Charts to the Detail paintings, the Gray paintings, the Inpaintings, and the Abstract paintings, as Richter often titled his works from the late 1970s onward.

Abstraction is Richter's method, because it takes him out of visible reality and creates a new kind of reality that can be discovered through art. In 2016, the year before the Museum Barberini opened, the Hasso Plattner Foundation acquired the 1986 Abstract painting *A B, Quiet* [612-4] (cat. 63), which prompted us to propose an exhibition on the theme of abstraction to the artist himself. To our great delight, Richter agreed, and supported the exhibition with numerous loans of his own works, some of which have never been seen before. He also carefully considered the concept for our exhibition and contributed his own ideas. This exploration took place during a time when he was intently focused on preparing his exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2019. Together with Dietmar Elger, director of the Gerhard Richter Archive at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and cocurator of the exhibition in Potsdam, I would like to thank the artist for his generosity.

The exhibition catalog draws on a public symposium that took place on March 5, 2018, at the Museum Barberini. I join with Michael Philipp, the chief curator at the Museum Barberini and coeditor of Museum Barberini's publications, in thanking all of the authors for their latest research on Richter's abstract works, which can be read in this book. We would also like to express our gratitude to Valerie Hortolani, curator at the Museum Barberini, for editing the texts and supporting the curators in realizing the exhibition. In doing so, she worked closely with Konstanze Ell of Atelier Richter and Kerstin Küster of the Gerhard Richter Archive, and we are indebted to them both for their support.

We are grateful to Dietmar Elger and the Gerhard Richter Archive for arranging the loan of many rarely exhibited works from over twenty private collections. We are pleased that, in only its second year of existence, the Museum Barberini enjoys these collectors' trust. Our thanks also go to our colleagues at museums in Germany and abroad who have agreed to lend their works.

Abstraction runs like a golden thread through Richter's painting. As volatile and diverse as his changes from one phase to the next may have seemed to some of his contemporaries, Richter's work has nonetheless resolutely furthered and transformed abstraction. We hope that our visitors will enjoy tracing this resolute development across more than five decades in Gerhard Richter's oeuvre.

Ortrud Westheider
Director, Museum Barberini

Translated from the German by Allison Moseley

Across Art History: Gerhard Richter and Abstraction

Ortrud Westheider

Gerhard Richter paints abstract pictures. To this day. In the 1970s he began a series known as the Abstract paintings, and he has been working on it ever since. Yet his exploration of abstract art is not limited to this series alone, and nor did it begin with it. Instead, the relationship between abstraction and realism has left its mark on Richter's entire oeuvre. His work deals with abstraction as a method of painting, and is therefore deeply rooted in art history. Richter reflects upon the liberating ideas of modernism and contrasts them critically with the idealism of a "universal language" of abstraction. This universalism influenced the understanding of art in West Germany when Richter left the German Democratic Republic for the Federal Republic of Germany in 1961. There, new art had begun to respond to a Germany ideologically divided between socialist realism and informalism by "departing from the picture"¹ and turning its back on painting. Richter, too, played with these ideas and cofounded a group of artists who called their movement "capitalist realism" and tested new forms of expression through their actions.²

Painting Systems

Number one in his catalogue raisonné, however, is a painting titled *Table* [1] (1962, fig. 1). A year after he left the GDR, the painter confronted a depiction of an everyday object with a nonrepresentational swirl of color. The shift from one system to another was carried out in a two-stage process. First, he created a realistic image of an object found in every household. The table is a place of togetherness, from family meals to banquets. People talk, study, write, compose poetry, and also do practical work at tables. In its universality, the object Richter chose is in no way secondary to the painterly gesture he added to it. In the West it was considered an ideologeme for artistic freedom.

In West Germany from the late 1950s onward, abstract art had established a sense of exclusivity through European informalism and American abstract expressionism, which made it difficult or even impossible to connect to the work of the older generation of new objectivity painters before the Nazi era.³ Mass murder, persecution, and the questioning of individualism had shaken the foundations of humanism that had nurtured modernist abstract art and its idealistic model of antimaterialism. Existentialism was a philosophy much admired by artists, and it centered on the individual.

In this context, after the end of World War II, the most important reinterpretation of abstraction in art history took place in Western Europe and America: Vasily Kandinsky's idealistic pursuit of the grand gesture became the spontaneous self-expression of the individual artist. Jackson Pollock's action paintings (fig. p. 61), for example, demonstrated pure subjectivity, and once again the painterly gesture embodied the presence of the painter/creator. After the failure of the great ideologies, artists overwhelmed viewers with nonhierarchically organized large-scale works and challenged them to form their own opinions. Whereas East German artists sought suitable visual motifs and artistic methods to explore the theme of social progress as a collective experience within the socialist order of the GDR, individualism in the West was literalized and identified with abstraction.⁴ Karl Otto Götz, Richter's teacher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, represented this generation of artists (fig. 2). Richter had seen and photographed Götz's work, as well as paintings by Pollock and other American abstract artists at the II. documenta in Kassel in 1959. Back in Dresden, he tried out the informalist style for himself.⁵

Yet Richter's kind of abstract art should not be equated with an uncritical affirmation of the Western ideologeme. In the GDR he had become familiar with the aims of socialist realism through his studies at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, and through the formalism debate⁶ he had been exposed to the defamation of abstract art as a decadent expression of the capitalist bourgeoisie. After leaving the GDR, though, he encountered the emphasis on abstraction in West Germany, as well as the protests of a younger generation of artists who were critical of this fixation.

In Düsseldorf, Richter attended the fluxus actions by Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik. They gave art a new twist, added new methods of expression and media, and expanded the concept of art. Richter, however, sought opportunities beyond the polarity of figurative and abstract art. Looking back, he observed: "I was looking for a third way in which Eastern realism and Western modernism would be resolved into one redeeming construct."⁷ In this context, the painting *Table* [1] should not be regarded as a way of replacing the realist system with abstraction. The object is not painted over with a painterly gesture intended to obliterate it and depart from the path of realism in favor of abstraction. Richter's third way initially opened up in the Photo paintings. Realistically capturing/citing a found, mass-produced object gave him neutrality. This was how he was able to grasp realism (in the sense of

the German pop art he propagated)⁸ while at the same time separating abstraction from its ideological function in the conflict between East and West Germany. For Richter, however, the most important thing about this third way was that his Photo paintings made it possible for him to carry on painting.⁹

From the early 1960s onward, Richter went through a variety of very diverse phases. In the 1980s, critics were still reacting with skepticism to new stages of his oeuvre, accusing him of randomness.¹⁰ This essay investigates how Richter—in clinging to painting and continuing the search for a third way between realism and nonobjectivity—continually worked to convey the realism of the illusory, while citing and updating modernism.¹¹ This text is divided into two parts. In the first, two contemporary depictions of the history of abstract art form a context for Richter's artistic references. The second analyzes Richter's citations of avant-garde artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Rodchenko, and Piet Mondrian, interpreting the development of his style as an act of critical commentary.

Abstraction: The Sources

In the 1960s, several art historians began writing about the antecedents of abstract art. They did not primarily consider modernism a break with the traditions of realist art. Rather, they traced the abstract tendencies of art all the way back to antiquity. Richter's works stem from his examination of these sources.

Heinrich Lützeler's book *Abstrakte Malerei* is marked by the immediate postwar situation in which he—a professor of art history and dean of the faculty at the University of Bonn—committed himself to the recovery of academic life after the end of the Nazi era. Even though it was not published until 1961, his book reflects the situation of abstract and nonobjective art during its process of rehabilitation after having been outlawed under the Nazis. Lützeler described abstract art as a European phenomenon that found resonance in America. He identified Japan and Japanese calligraphy as the most important sources of inspiration.¹² Lützeler began his history of the development of abstract art with Paul Cézanne. In his explanation of the concept, though, he equated abstract art with nonrepresentational art. This was not a self-evident assertion, since the first definition of abstraction is simply *abs-trahere*, drawing or moving away from the object. Lützeler was however writing from a background influenced by Christianity and Paul Klee's notion of an "expanded creation,"¹³ and so he targeted the nonobjective, suggesting the term "concrete art" for it.¹⁴ At the same time he elucidated numerous "abstract features" in representational art from the early Christian era onward¹⁵ and presented a first collection of influential philosophical source texts, beginning with Plato's allegory of the cave.

On his search for a path between realism and nonrepresentational art, Gerhard Richter addressed himself to some of the central references in artistic discourse since antiquity. The curtain motif comprises a first group of works in Richter's oeuvre that is not based on photographs (cat. 1, 2).¹⁶ In these paintings the artist adhered to photographic, documentary-style black, white, and gray.¹⁷ The motif itself can be traced back to Pliny the Elder, who, in his *Naturalis historia* (circa 77 CE), reports the argument between the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius about the authenticity of art. According to Pliny, Parrhasius had painted a curtain in such a deceptively realistic way that his opponent allegedly demanded that the curtain be pushed aside, so that he could study the painting.¹⁸ Richter's painting is a detail of a curtain. He cites the motif showing the bottom hem of the curtain. His concern is not to replicate the illusion that Pliny had discussed; instead, it seems as if he is folding the canvas. As the body of the painting itself began to be treated as an object in the 1950s, this was a practice that could be found in the works of Düsseldorf's ZERO artists, such as Günther Uecker and Herbert Zangs. Still, Richter's study of the curtain motif and his reference to painting's ubiquitous tradition of playing with cloth folds remain firmly within the medium of painting.¹⁹

In 1964, Otto Stelzer published his book *Die Vorgeschichte der abstrakten Kunst*. Unlike Lützeler, Stelzer traced the sources of abstraction against the backdrop of informalist art.²⁰ Stelzer had been a professor at the Hamburg University of Fine Arts since 1955. He was interested in the role of chance and in liberating the painting from signature brushwork. Stelzer's agenda excluded geometrical abstraction. He also equated abstraction with nonobjective art. Stelzer's book was influential because it did not regard the history of modern art as a break with tradition, but traced abstract strategies in painting and literature back to the eighteenth century. Even though Richter did not read the book, he would have encountered Stelzer's ideas, because they were generally discussed among artists and at art schools.

Stelzer pursued the question of whether there is such a thing as art without form, and expanded his field of investigation beyond the nonobjective to the formless.²¹ In his disquisition on this question he added Leonardo da Vinci's traditional rejection of the landscape study to the history of abstract art. One need only throw a sponge at the wall and, with a little imagination, turn the impression it makes into a landscape of sorts. He also cited Leonardo's recommendation that artists should study rough, stained walls in order to discover faces or landscapes in them. Clouds, too, provided opportunities to observe the *trasmutazione di forme*, the constant transformation of nature, and to find parallels in art.²²

Richter, who has spoken vaguely about the beauty of Leonardo's work in interviews,²³ has reacted to Leonardo's recommendations repeatedly and in many different ways over time. He began his series of Cloud paintings in 1967, continuing to work on them until the early 1970s. Whereas the pioneers of cloud painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—artists such as Alexander Cozens, William Turner, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir—translated Leonardo's advice into a form of blot painting, which culminated in straightforward formlessness, Richter followed a middle way via photography, as evidenced by the many photographic sources in his *Atlas*. Even though some of these paintings seem like a consequential further development of his monochromatic Gray paintings (cat. 25, 26), the photos in the *Atlas* show that Richter did not, for instance, lighten the gray surfaces with freehand brushwork because he observed passing, ephemeral manifestations in the sky. Richter acted counter to Leonardo's advice and the modern adaptations executed by the nineteenth-century cloud painters. Following his work with the photographic source, he moved on to a motif that inspires formlessness in a mimetic, realistic style, thus tying one of abstract art's most powerful and enduring leitmotifs to photorealist painting.²⁴ The results are so reminiscent of romantic art that Richter's Cloud paintings are never linked to the German pop that Richter advocated in the 1960s, although they do in fact belong in this category.

Richter also employed informalist pictorial structures in photographically enlarged views of his own paintings. He blew up and zoomed in on the paint itself as a material, in order to reproduce it in a larger format as in the painting *Detail (Makart)* [288] (cat. 29).²⁵ Here, the formlessness of the paint becomes equivalent to constantly changing cloud forms. Since it can give shape to everything, the potentiality of paint is thematized. Yet just as he did with the group of Cloud paintings, Richter interposes photography, a medium that fixes the moment. In doing so, he distances himself from any sort of emphasis ascribed to the processes of informalist art—the kinds of emphases found in Stelzer's reception of Leonardo and in his reading of Jean Paul's ideas about the correspondences between the very large and distant and the very small and nearby: for example, when wagon tracks on clay roads are described as high mountains.²⁶

Richter's interest in Leonardo's theory of association can be traced into the 1990s. One cannot help seeing things in his Abstract paintings.²⁷ The title of his squeegeed painting *Wall* [808] (cat. 70), which was not based on a photograph, alludes to the renaissance painter's practice of associating spots on a wall with objects and landscapes. In this painting, Richter moved the squeegee in parallel, vertical stripes, one after the next, across the surface of the canvas, blending the last color, a brilliant carmine red, with the dark ground. This results in a texture similar to wood. Removing the paint creates a kind of motif: Like the curtain and the wall, the wall made out of wooden slats is tied to the phenomenon of optical illusions in art discourse.²⁸

As early as 1965, Richter had referred to the trompe-l'oeil tradition (fig. 4) in a group of paintings called *Turned Sheets* (fig. 3), the theme of which is the gaze that underlies the painting.²⁹ In Richter's paintings, one white sheet of paper lies underneath another. He is concerned only with turning over various layers and making them visible. He has also been examining the theme of layering since the 1990s in his Photo Overpaintings (cat. 56–61). Within the series, there is one work that is again identified as a *Wall* (fig. 5). The photo is of a perfect, white garden wall. The paint is slapped on top in vertical blocks—walls of paint that obstruct the view, leaving only few gaps that allow the viewer to see through. Even in a small format, Richter achieves monumentalism. He presents paint as both raw material and a powerful texture.

In the subtitle of the 1964 painting *Curtain (Morandi)* [58] (private collection, New York), Richter renders homage to the Italian painter. This is one of his rare explicit references to other artists. It takes on added significance in light of Richter's study of the sources of abstraction, because Giorgio Morandi represents a position between abstraction and realism. Even before he left the GDR, Richter

had painted still lifes inspired by Morandi. He had seen works by the Italian painter (fig. 6) at the II. documenta in Kassel in 1959. Morandi's still lifes are variations on diverse constellations of solid figures: jars and bottles whose color scheme is concentrated upon very few colors. This resulted in works with stripped-down colors and forms that explore the themes of surface and volume. Realism and abstraction balance each other, and this is what made Morandi so attractive to Richter in his search for a third way. In 1965, Richter produced several sculptures made of PVC or cardboard tubes painted in oils (fig. 7), which are reminiscent of Morandi's reduced volumes. As was the case with the Curtain paintings, Richter painted the tubes in black, white, and various grays, creating an illusion that doubles the actual volume.

Richter used grisaille for motifs such as corrugated metal, tubes, doors, and, since 1968, windows (cat. 4), alluding here to the *paragone* between painting and sculpture that rose to prominence in artist treatises during the latter half of the fifteenth century. Richter's exploration of the comparisons between these media probably goes back to his days as a student at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, where he was taught mural painting. Among the works he completed in the GDR is a wall mural for the Dresden Hygiene Museum. Ever since then, the interplay with architecture has been one of his themes.³⁰ In Düsseldorf, Richter continued to paint curtains and windows, iconic motifs that point to the medium itself. Since the Renaissance, the window has represented the most effective metaphor for painting. The reduction to black and white, which is very close to architecture, and the framing that relates to the surface of the painting, brought him shortly afterward to create the first of his glass objects (fig. 8, cat. 79).

Richter was referring to painting's art historical foundations at a time when the genre was generally suspected of conveying a bourgeois, reactionary concept of art. *Arte povera*, minimal art, and performance and video art saw artists in both Europe and America setting off in new directions. By contrast, Richter legitimized painting by studying its foundations. This alone, however, does not explain his art. Through this exploration, his paintings take on an objectivity that robs realism of its deceptiveness and abstract art of its emotion. It fluctuates independently between media. Richter's third way took his work far beyond his Photo paintings.

Links to Modernism: Duchamp, Rodchenko, Mondrian

In summer 1965, Gerhard Richter attended the exhibition *Marcel Duchamp: Ready-mades, Objects, Collages, Sculptures* (Marcel Duchamp. Ready-mades, Objekte, Collagen, Skulpturen) at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld. Duchamp's utilization of the *objet trouvé* imbued the Rhineland art scene with the impetus to develop artworks referring to the exhibition space. Richter also took inspiration from the exhibition, returning with ideas for an installation with four panes of glass (fig. 8). Yet unlike many of his artist friends, Richter again brought his exploration of Duchamp back to painting.

In this first glass object, Richter followed the early twentieth-century avant-garde tradition, which regarded glassy transparency as the ideal realization of the utopia of the spiritual in art.³¹ Surfaces seem to dematerialize in glass. Still, glass was an austere material and not an illusion. Glass released the painter from having to decide upon a color. After reducing his colors to black, white, and gray, this was the next logical step. It raised the question of whether this experiment would lead the painter permanently to sculpture in its current form, the installation. Richter, however, continued to contemplate the possibilities for expanding painting. At the same time the anti-form movement, represented by Robert Morris (and his hanging felt sculptures) and Richard Serra (with his lead splashings), used the medium of sculpture to track the morphology of the unformed, which opposed geometrical abstraction.³² Yet in parallel with his work with glass, Richter found a way to employ the cloud motif to channel elements of traditional landscape painting into the discourse about formlessness.

In 1966, he began his series of Color Chart paintings (cat. 13–20). Twenty years later, Richter recalled, "when I painted my first color charts in 1966, that had more to do with Pop Art. They were copies of paint sample cards, and what was effective about them was that they were directed against the efforts of the Neo-Constructivists, Albers and the rest."³³ Richter's reference to Duchamp, therefore, took him back to the medium of painting. With the help of the color cards he found, he was able, however, to separate himself from the continuity of geometrical abstraction promulgated by Josef Albers, and grounded his own kind of abstraction on new terrain (see the essay by Hubertus Butin, pp. 34–45).

While Richter used opaque colors to create a flat, non-relational type of painting in his Color Charts, in the Inpaintings, which were completed in parallel to the Gray paintings, he returned to modulating the material, and hence to the characteristic style of painting and its representations of the artist individual (cat. 21–24). In the neutral Gray paintings (cat. 25–27), the brushwork takes center stage, while the series of gray Mirrors took the opposite approach (cat. 75). This juxtaposition of different modes of painting recalls the dispute between advocates of surfaces that have the glazed, smooth, cohesive style of photography, and the impasto style that broke the academic rules of scumble in the nineteenth century. Jean-Léon Gérôme represents one side of the debate, and Vincent van Gogh the other.³⁴ In its freehanded, gestural application of paint, Van Gogh's painting exposes the traces of the individual.

In the Inpaintings (cat. 21–24), Richter worked the still-damp paint into the canvas with a broad brush, blending it evenly across the entire surface of the painting, at times coming close to monochromatic painting.³⁵ Beginning with the Inpaintings, he repeatedly explored the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue. For the BMW building in Munich in 1973, he produced three works of monumental size, measuring three by six meters each, in the style of the Detail paintings (fig. 9).³⁶ This preoccupation with primary colors goes back to the origins of monochromatic painting, which had been linked to discussions about the end of painting as early as the 1920s, and which became current again in the 1960s, when reservations about painting arose.

The Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko produced the first monochromatic paintings in art history. In 1921, he created three monochromatic panels in the primary colors, *Pure Color Red*, *Pure Color Yellow*, and *Pure Color Blue* (fig. 10). At the first presentation of these paintings in September 1921 at the $5 \times 5 = 25$ exhibition in Moscow, he said, "In this show I have proclaimed the three primary colors for the first time in art."³⁷ Looking back, he wrote in 1939: "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow. I affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation."³⁸ Alfred H. Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, described the three panels with the three primary colors as the end of painting in his 1929 lecture, "The Death of Painting: The Triumph of the Artist." Later critics joined him in his interpretation.³⁹ Only Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Peter Weibel saw a quality in the analytical character of the panels that went beyond a farewell to painting. Buchloh summarized Rodchenko's application of scientific methods to painting as the model for a new kind of aesthetic practice; Weibel wrote that the three canvases had triggered a crisis of representationalism and set up a "culture of becoming."⁴⁰

In January 1919, Rodchenko joined Asskranov, a circle of radical artistic innovators who had split off from the supremacists.⁴¹ The exhibition $5 \times 5 = 25$ two years later was also related to their ideas—not, however, for the purpose of proclaiming the end of painting, but to present painting based on facture as object.⁴² The three primary colors were supposed to formulate a concept for a new beginning. Monochromy, or "pure color," provided building blocks for future development: "Objectlessness in painting surprises you because painting precedes life and is not, as is thought, isolated from it. Objectlessness simply foresees the future," wrote Rodchenko in 1921.⁴³

Abstraction: Universalism

Rodchenko's conviction that abstraction preceded the depiction of reality chimes with Richter's concept of abstract art. Discussing the paintings he showed at the documenta 7 in 1982, Richter said, "When we describe a process, or make out an invoice, or photograph a tree, we create models; without them we would know nothing of reality and would be animals. Abstract pictures are fictive models, because they make visible a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can postulate."⁴⁴

In 1998, Richter painted the Abstract painting *Rhombus* [851-1] (fig. 11), citing the shape Piet Mondrian used in his paintings (fig. 12). Mondrian borrowed it from the traditional emblematic panels that ornament Dutch churches. In different contexts, the same geometric form is imbued with various different meanings. In churches, the panels commemorate the dead, but for Mondrian they illustrated theosophical ideas. Black grid lines seem to radiate into the space beyond the limited field of the painting. They sharpen the viewer's awareness of the cosmic connections within the space. In contrast, the picture field remains closed in Richter's piece. It features the primary colors of red, yellow, and

blue—also significant for Mondrian’s abstract work—in layers. The red dominates, but yellow and blue effect a fundamental influence on the appearance of the red. The red appears to be pulsing, held back by the blue, and fueled by the yellow, while the vertical shape becomes a counterpart to the viewer’s vertical position. Whereas in his rectangular formats, Richter uses the squeegee primarily vertically in order to establish this relationship with the viewer, here, it is the rhombus form that takes on this task. The paint extends both vertically and horizontally—yet another homage to Mondrian. In Richter’s work it has lost its ideological direction.

A motif runs through Richter’s exploration of art theory, artistic references, and avant-garde painting. Richter claims that his Abstract paintings have a kind of universalism that is different from the “global language” of abstraction that the documenta founders Arnold Bode and Werner Haftmann celebrated as the language of the Western world after World War II.⁴⁵ Richter’s universalism is not trying to convince anyone. For him, painting is legitimate because it precedes reality.

Translated from the German by Allison Moseley

