

Trading between
Architecture and Art

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Trading between Architecture and Art

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Rooms and Clouds

Gerhard Richter and
Architecture

Guy Léon Châtel and Wouter Davidts

I look for the object and the picture: not for painting or the picture of painting, but for our picture, our looks and appearances and views, definitive and total. How shall I put it: I want to picture to myself what is going on now. Painting can help in this, and different methods = subjects = themes are the different attempts I make in this direction.

—Gerhard Richter, 1977¹

In the early years of the *Atlas* project—the vast album of photographs and sketches initiated around 1969—the artist Gerhard Richter included a group of remarkable architectural drawings and collages. In these plates—*Räume* (*Rooms*) as he himself calls them—the artist played with the imposition of sketchy or more elaborated perspective frames upon photographs of mostly clouds, sometimes mountains and, more rarely, enlargements of paint strokes.² In doing so, Richter made these pictures part and parcel of representations of rooms and halls of different sizes and dispositions. While

1. Gerhard Richter, 'From a letter to Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 23 May, 1977', in *Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting, Writings 1962–1993*, ed. H.U. Obrist, trans. D. Britt (London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995), p. 84 (further referenced as *Writings 1962–1993*); reprinted in *Gerhard Richter Writings 1961–2007*, ed. D. Elger and H.U. Obrist (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2009), p. 93 (further referenced as *Writings 1961–2007*).

2. The first panels in *Atlas* are dated 1962–1966. Richter only started to save the materials he had employed in his painting practice around 1964, and decided in 1969 to combine on panels all the photographs that he had either used or could have used. Armin Zweite, 'Gerhard Richter's "Album of Photographs, Collages and Sketches"', in *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter: Four Essays on Atlas* (Barcelona: Llibres de Recerca, 1999), p. 70. The first exhibition of the project dates from December 1972 in a museum in Utrecht, where it was entitled 'Atlas van de foto's en schetsen'.

3 For an overview of the *Rooms* group: Panels 219 to 252. Zweite, 'Gerhard Richter's "Album of Photographs, Collages and Sketches"', pp. 81–82. Apart from Zweite's detailed discussion of the respective plates in *Atlas*, the *Rooms* group is only mentioned in passing in the vast literature on Gerhard Richter. In an essay accounting for the filiation Picture-Window-Glass-Mirror and the correlated connivance of Painting with Architecture, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh doesn't even mention the group. Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's *Eight Gray*: Between *Vorschein* and *Glanz*', in *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray*, exh. cat. New York (Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation), 2002, pp. 13–28. A rare exception is an unpublished lecture by Rachel Haidu, delivered in 2005 and updated in 2008. Despite her claim that the drawings 'reveal a sense of worry about exhibition and exhibition spaces', Haidu pays little to no attention to either the material construction or the formal qualities of the drawings, let alone to Richter's motivations for making them. Rachel Haidu, 'Gerhard Richter's Public/Private Atlas' (<http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/english/365>; last accessed on 26 February 2018).

4 In the *Atlas* reader, editor Iwona Blazwick ('Introduction', in *Gerhard Richter: Atlas: The Reader* [London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2012], pp. 6–9, p. 9) states for example that 'Richter also projects images of his works into imaginary exhibition spaces, tracing potential installations and lines of perception.'

5 A drawing dating from 1975 that presents the disposition of *8 Gray Pictures* (1975) in a square room with diagonal opening, anticipates the works' later installation in Hans Hollein's yet to be built 'clover-leaf' galleries of his Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach (1982); the drawing in *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray*, p. 51.

6 'Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 1993', in *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 267 and *Writings 1961–2007*, pp. 302–303. For a discussion of Richter's contribution to documenta IX and an evaluation of the cabinet's architecture by Robbrecht en Daem architects, see: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'The Allegories of Painting', in *Gerhard Richter: Documenta IX, 1992: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1993* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1993), pp. 8–14.

the importance of the *Rooms* group within Richter's vast body of work is repeatedly acknowledged, these architectural drawings and collages have been rarely discussed in detail.³ All too often they are merely understood as speculative sketches of future installations or as projections of works into either existing or imaginary exhibition spaces, failing thereby to grasp the critical stakes of Richter's early forays into architecture.⁴

Gerhard Richter and architecture form an intricate relationship indeed. In his work and practice the artist has engaged with architecture on many levels. He has touched upon real as much as on abstract spaces, ranging from elemental representations of doors and windows to elaborate interiors, and from buildings to cities. He also fabricated several 'architectural sculptures', such as the *4 Glasscheiben* (*4 Panes of Glass*, 1967) and *9 Stehende Scheiben* (*9 Standing Panes*, 2002/2010) and set up installations of series of works with a clear sensitivity to their spatial arrangement in the exhibition venue—such as (among many others) the *48 Portraits* in the German Pavilion in Venice (1972), the *8 Graue Bilder* (*8 Gray Pictures*, 1975) for the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach (1982) or the *Acht Grau* (*Eight Gray*, 2001) in Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin (2002).⁵ In addition, the artist conducted fruitful collaborations with architects. So, for his contribution to documenta IX (Kassel, 1992) housed in the Aue Pavilions, he took up architect Paul Robbrecht's proposal to cover the walls with wood panelling. In this case, Richter not only relinquished the obligatory 'white cube' formula but also responded to the ensuing cabinet-like condition with a floor-to-ceiling disposition of his work.⁶

Throughout Richter's career one can discern a genuine desire to grant his paintings architectural amplitude—an

aspiration that the *Rooms* series seems to exemplify. Yet in an interview with Dorothea Dietrich in 1985, answering a question about the meaning of the ‘drawings of entire rooms, architectural drawings’ in *Atlas*, the artist gave her a double-sided, overtly antithetic response. When asked whether these drawings represented the desire to devise a total environment, the artist concurred: ‘Oh, yes, that is such a dream of mine—that pictures will become an environment or become architecture, that would be even more effective.’⁷ Yet in one fell swoop the artist derided the inescapable nature of architecture. The fact that ‘a building is there and one cannot avoid it’ bothered him profoundly:

That is why I sometimes hate architects so much. To erect a building is such a brutal thing, such an act of aggression. Painting is never like that... One can look away. It is fortunate that one cannot turn one’s paintings into buildings.⁸

In this essay we will try to make sense of the *Rooms* group’s appearance in *Atlas* and of the apparent inner dissension that goes along with it. Moreover, we will attempt to figure out what the group stands for in relation to Richter’s oeuvre as a whole, and how it exemplifies the artist’s idiosyncratic understanding and use of architecture.

Atlas appears as a bulky collection of images—mostly photographs, self-made or found, whether clipped or not, generally devoid of specific artistic claims—presented sometimes individually, but usually in groups and often in grids on standardized cardboard supports, consistently framed and numbered, and loosely articulated in more or less discernible sets. These sets rely on a mix of subject-related and formal associations. *Atlas* is not a random accumulation of images. It is held together through associative relations. On the one

7 ‘Interview with Dorothea Dietrich, 1985’, in *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 154.

8 *Writings 1961–2007*, pp. 154–155. Richter made a similar statement on his dislike of architects in a letter of reply to a questionnaire issued in preparation of a new building for the Tate Gallery’s collection of modern art, apologizing to Tate Director Nicholas Serota for his ‘incapacity in answering [his] questions’. Even though he expressed a sincere interest in architecture, he declared: ‘that matter is so difficult for me and my aversion for architects is so distinct, that I rather could try to design a museum than being able to give you any useful answer.’ See: Gerhard Richter, *Questionnaire Response [letter]*, 1994; Tate Gallery Research Centre, Archives, Map TG 12/4 [Architectural Competition]. For a facsimile of the letter, see: Wouter Davidts, ‘A Ziggurat of Brick and Concrete’, in *Tate Modern: Building a Museum for the 21st Century*, ed. C. Dercon and N. Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), p. 46.

9 Whereas the *Atlas* is 'sometimes used as a source for his paintings', Iwona Blazwick suggests, 'Richter's album of pictures also demonstrates the complex dialogues he has explored between painting and photography, history and memory, and perception and representation.' Blazwick, 'Introduction', p. 7.

10 The definitive numbering of the plates, which was established for the Lenbachhaus publication of 1997 and was strictly followed in the book, does not correspond to the order of display for future exhibitions prescribed at the same time. Furthermore, the numbering does not give evidence of a chronology regarding the composition of the sheets. So, the *Seascapes* were made in the period from 1969 to 1973, whereas the *Clouds* comprised in the next section (pp. 203–220) are all from 1970 and the *Rooms* (pp. 218–252; there is manifestly an overlap with *Clouds*) are from 1970–1971.

11 Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter, Maler* (Cologne: Dumont, 2008), p. 215. Richter confirmed this in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. See: Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Interview with Gerhard Richter', in *Gerhard Richter: Pictures/ Series*, ed. Obrist, exh. cat. Basel (Fondation Beyeler)/(Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2014), p. 95. The design is effectively included in the catalogue where it succeeds the list of exhibited works. It consists of a 3-pages-wide spread representing the plans of the three provided exhibition halls; these plans are surrounded by the wall projections showing the disposition of the paintings, every single one of them recognizable in the hand-drawn outlines. *Katalog zur Ausstellung Gerhard Richter: Arbeiten 1962 bis 1971* (Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 1971), n.p.

12 See: *Gerhard Richter: Atlas van de foto's en schetsen*, exh. cat. Utrecht (Hedendaagse Kunst), 1972.

13 However, installation shots of the exhibition in Düsseldorf (Images from the Negative Archive of the artist, Gerhard Richter Archive Dresden, Exhibition-ID: 338) show a stark contrast between the dense hanging of paintings in the rooms of the Kunstverein with the eerie display imagined in the *Atlas* Sheet 245. Apparently, it is nonetheless the only sheet in the series in which the architectural setting can be traced back to a concrete exhibition space. While some sheets are reminiscent of the architecture of previous exhibition venues, such as the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart (cfr. Images from the Negative Archive of the artist, Gerhard Richter Archive Dresden, Exhibition-ID: 407), where Richter participated in 1969 in the group exhibition 'Figurationen' (19/07–10/09) (Sheet 227), the dates do not correspond.

We wish to thank Dietmar Elger and Kerstin Kürster at the

hand, it is an open-ended compilation of working material, on the other it is a formally ordered artistic project.⁹

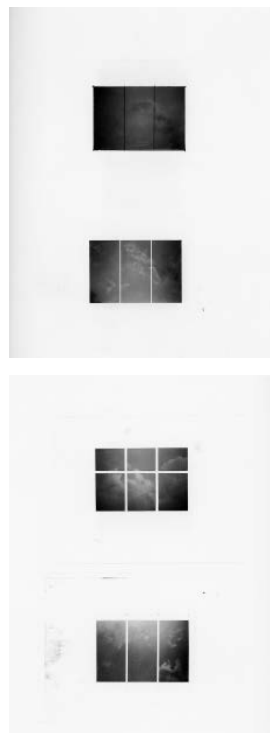
The *Rooms* have the main part in the *Atlas* section going from Sheet 218 to Sheet 252.¹⁰ This group proceeds, so to speak, from the respective sections dedicated to the *Seestücke* (*Seascapes*) and the *Wolken* (*Clouds*), two preceding groups of images which themselves partially interfere and overlap. Certain factual data provide some clues about the context in which the *Rooms* group took shape in the period 1970–1971. Richter was given the opportunity of a first major retrospective at the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf from June to August 1971. In the build-up to that important event the artist engaged in making a vast set of architectural perspective drawings. He even created a scale model of the venue (1:50 scale) replete with miniaturized versions of the works to be exhibited. He showed the model during the exhibition itself and had it reproduced as an architect-like drawing in the catalogue.¹¹ Richter included the collages with scaled water colored versions of the works in the very first version of the *Atlas* presented in Utrecht in December 1972 but withdrew them from later versions.¹² Sheet 245 of the latest version of the *Atlas* still distinctly shows the architectonic features of the Kunstverein venue and appears to aim at exploring its possibilities as exhibition space.¹³

The *Rooms* group however stands out in a different sense. Among the vast majority of photographs, *Atlas* every so often includes installation schemes, sketches for exhibition settings and tentative set-ups for commissioned works. So, the large dimensions of the magnified details of brush streaks for the BMW commission (3 × 6 m) are verified by setting them against the representation of human silhouettes (1973, Sheet 103). What is more, the *Städte* (*Cities*) group even contains two plates with trapezoid cut-outs of aerial views

mounted in perspectival sketches of interiors strongly akin to those appearing in the *Rooms* group (1968, Sheet 122). But in these cases the bodily and architectural expansion of the image seems to be fueled by the problem of concretization. They appear to aim at bridging the gap between a picture-photograph and a picture-painting, that is, at overcoming the challenges of transmogrifying the image of a photograph into a pictorial object in space. The perspectival spatialization achieved by Richter in the *Rooms* group however is far more intricate as well as being more projective or exploratory—an argument that may be supported by the artist's later withdrawal of the concrete installation schemes for the Düsseldorf exhibition from the *Rooms* group in the Atlas.

The *Rooms* group is launched by the superimposition or erasure of the outline of window frames onto cloud pictures (Sheets 214 and 215).¹⁴ This is only a small step away from evoking a room around a picture (Sheet 218).¹⁵ As the artist loosely draws a perspectival extension from the four corners of the picture, the whole gains an architectural dimension. Such an operation may still be understood within the search for concretization or materialization: the problem of the transformation of a photographic image into a painting obviously requires judgments concerning dimension and scale, and their influence on the painting's effectiveness in display. Yet, it is with this elementary gesture—the act of sketching a room around a picture-photograph which by the same token becomes an imposing picture-painting—that the *Rooms* series starts up.

From there on, various lines of development spin out. A first series of sheets shares the concerns of framing and repetition, as a regular paneling comes to articulate a neoclassical architectural order (Sheets 228–232, 234, 237, 239–240, 252).¹⁶ This plot gets a counterpoint in Richter's adoption of a



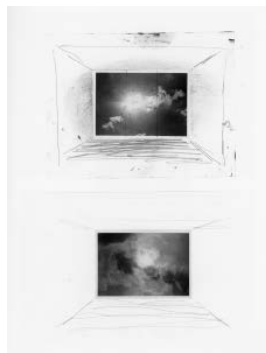
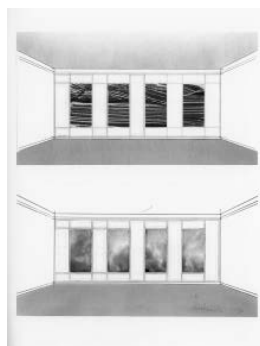
14 *Atlas der Fotos, Collagen und Skizzen* (Munich: Lenbachhaus, 1998): Sheet 214 (*Clouds*, 1970, 51.7 × 36.7 cm); Sheet 215 (*Clouds*, 1970, 51.7 × 36.7 cm).

With the outline of window frames superimposed or left blank on cloud paintings, Sheets 214 and 215, which immediately precede the *Rooms* group, attest to an awareness close enough to the one demonstrated by Blinky Palermo in works like his *Fenster* (*Window*) wall drawings and paintings dating from the same period. Sheet 219, then again, represents a wall treatment that parallels Palermo's usually monochrome murals assumed to 'sectionalize space.' In the period 1970–1971 Richter engaged in an intense interchange and collaboration with his friend Palermo. In 1970 they had their first collaborative exhibition, 'Für Salvador Dalí (For Salvador Dalí)', in Galerie Ernst, Hanover (Sheet 95); in 1971 Richter would include *Fingerspuren* (*Finger-Marks*), a diptych made in collaboration with Palermo, in his Kunstverein retrospective (no. 253 in the *catalogue raisonné* ed. Dietmar Elger); moreover, in the same year he made *Zwei Skulpturen für einen Raum von Palermo* (*Two Sculptures for a Room by Palermo*, Sheets 42 and 262–264). 'At the time', Richter once remarked, 'one felt quite isolated and was happy to find someone else who painted and thought in a similar way.' Entries 1970 and 1971 in 'Chronology', URL: www.gerhard-richter.com; the quote is from Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting*, trans. E.M. Solaro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 189.

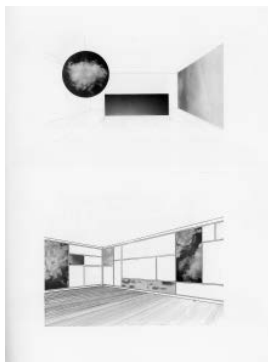
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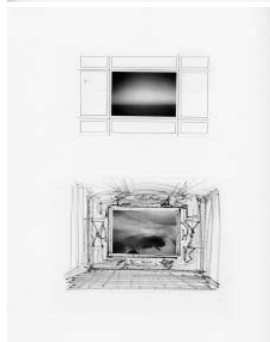
16 *Atlas*, Sheet 237 (*Rooms*, 1971, 36.7 × 51.7 cm); Sheet 252 (*Rooms*, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).



15 *Atlas*, Sheet 218 (*Clouds*, 1970, 51.7 × 36.7 cm).



17 *Atlas*, Sheet 250 (*Rooms*, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).



18 *Atlas*, Sheet 242 (*Rooms*, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm); Sheet 251 (*Rooms*, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).

19 Obrist names Sheet 251 as an example of depictions looking 'a bit like stage sets of diorama images' in 'Interview with Gerhard Richter', p. 93.



one-off deviant De Stijl- or *Proun*-like arrangement (Sheet 250).¹⁷ A second plotline consists in a mode of 'theatricalization', which results in stage-like environments (Sheets 224, 242, 251).¹⁸ 'I wanted to find out what happens when pictures are staged', Richter recently explained to Obrist, 'if it's possible to increase their effect and, if so, how and with what motifs'.¹⁹ This story line abuts on the representation of a total environment with pictures occupying the ceiling, walls and floor—a setting that seems to completely rule out the public (Sheet 222):

That was the 'total picture' I talked to Sigmar Polke about in the fictional interview with him in 1964. We discussed pictures so overwhelming in effect they could have been used to torture or kill and so weren't allowed to be shown again in public.²⁰

A third line resumes the question of the effect of painting by betting on a quasi-unlimited magnification of scale. These plates (Sheets 234, 243 and 249), Richter indicated in an earlier interview with Obrist, represent 'sanctuaries ... for pictures with an incredible total effect'.²¹ 'Utopian spaces?' asked Obrist. 'And megalomaniac ones' was Richter's retort, revealing his own awareness of their vexed nature.²² In the more recent interview, the artist further elucidated:

That was wishful thinking or pleasure in provoking and opposing, because at the time there was a general move to reduce barriers, plus a certain degree of skepticism toward the sublime. Cologne Cathedral wasn't allowed to have steps anymore, which is why there is this ugly square in front of it. And the Haus der Kunst in Munich was supposed to be demolished because it was fascist.²³

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20 *Atlas*, Sheet 222 (*Rooms*, 1970, 51.7 × 36.7 cm).

Obrist, 'Interview with Gerhard Richter', 94; the text of the so-called 'Interview between John Anthony Thwaites and Gerhard Richter' is included in *Writings 1962–1993*, pp. 26–27, and *Writings 1961–2007*, pp. 24–25.



21 Sheet 249 (*Rooms*, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm); *Atlas*, Sheet 234 (*Rooms*, 1971, 36.7 × 51.7 cm).

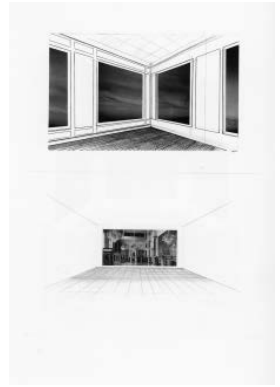
22 'Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 1993', in *Writings 1962–1993*, 266 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 301.

23 Obrist, 'Interview with Gerhard Richter', p. 94.

As a similar 'kind of act of defiance' Richter justifies the predominance of cloud and mountain scenery in the *Rooms* group: 'traditional subjects were really looked down on, especially if they were done in oil on canvas ... there was something nostalgic about it, something neoclassical.'²⁴ However, apart from such a contrarian motive and the avowed pleasure in yielding to it, it seems significant that the pictures involved in these spatial set-ups are actually devoid of perspectival markers such as traceable horizons and vanishing points—even though they are obtained through a perspectival apparatus as photographs obviously are. In this respect these pictures are technically insensitive as to their degree of enlargement and their position vis-à-vis a beholder. To put it simply: they may fit in whatever place, regardless of their scale. Therefore, the picture of a stately—perhaps authoritarian—neoclassical interior (Sheet 223), mounted in the scheme of a room drawn in central perspective with concurring horizon and vanishing point, is not only an exception, but arguably a kind of counter-image for the whole *Rooms* group.²⁵ If this picture were to match the view of a beholder standing in the envisioned room, the dimensions of both room and picture would have been fixed within narrow margins. Yet, even if the pictures integrated in the *Rooms* group represent the reverse of such a severe constriction, they are totalizing images nonetheless. The rooms look out on racks of cloud or over mountains (Sheet 246).²⁶ One may think of the picture-window of the Berghof residence near Berchtesgaden and realize that the overbearing, totalizing vision threatens to open onto a totalitarian prospect.²⁷

With the painting as a window, Richter reconnects pictorial representation with the old episteme that determined about six centuries of modern culture and science: the postulated unity between the world and the perceiving (and

24 Ibid., p. 93.



25 Atlas, Sheet 223 (*Rooms*, 1970, 51.7 × 36.7 cm).



26 Atlas, Sheet 246 (*Rooms*, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).



27 Postcard: 'Der Berghof Obersalzberg, Blick aus der großen Halle auf den Untersberg', Photo Hoffmann, Munich, 1930s.

The Berghof was Adolf Hitler's vacation residence on the Obersalzberg in the Bavarian Alps near Berchtesgaden, Germany; also generally acknowledged as his headquarters during World War II. We are indebted to Steven Jacobs for the suggestion of this reference.

In the Tate retrospective catalogue Mark Godfrey mentions the *Rooms* group's possible reference to fascist architecture. Godfrey indicates that 'the *Rooms* were indeed drawn up in the year Richter visited Speer's parade grounds in Nuremberg', and points out the similarity between the arched windows in Sheet 224 and photographs Richter took of the exteriors of the building. Mark Godfrey, 'Damaged Landscapes', in *Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, exh. cat. London (Tate Publishing), 2011, pp. 85–86.

28 'Interview with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 1986' in *Writings 1962–1993*, pp. 148–149 and *Writings 1961–2007*, pp. 175–176. The reference is to Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte* (1948), trans. B. Battershaw as *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2007). On Richter's acquaintance with Sedlmayr's argument, Jeanne Anne Nugent, 'From Hans Sedlmayr to Mars and Back Again: New Problems in the Old History of Gerhard Richter's Radical Reworking of Modern Art', in *Gerhard Richter: Early Work, 1951–1972*, ed. C. Mehring, J.A. Nugent, J.L. Seydl (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010), pp. 36–62.

29 'Notes, 1986', in *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 129 and *Writings 1961–2007*, pp. 161–162.

30 'Notes, 1973' where Richter designates the obliged attitude facing the fact that 'the centre cannot hold', in *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 78 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 70.

thinking) subject. It is well-known how photography supplanted painting on that field, and how, on the level of thought, this unity was undermined through the demise of the certainties about both terms of the relation. Richter came to painting when the soothing unifying idea of painting was already exhausted. In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in 1986, he explicitly relativized the impact of photography on painting's attrition, shifting register from the 'descriptive and illustrative function' to the moral realm. Observing that literature and music 'are in the very same mess' even though they have not 'been edged out by anything analogous to photography', he (at first sight quite) incidentally alluded to Hans Sedlmayr's diagnostic of the Lost Centre. When his interlocutor expressed his dismay about this touchy reference, Richter asserted: 'what he was saying was absolutely right. He just drew the wrong conclusions, that's all. He wanted to reconstruct the Centre that has been lost... I've no desire to reconstruct it.'²⁸

In his *Notes* dating from the same year, Richter wrote:

What offends me most of all is the slack apathy of such people, who ultimately regret only the loss of a centre, and who are too comfortable to give up the apparent pleasures of a corrupt and cretinous ersatz art.²⁹

'Sacrifice oneself to objectivity', he proclaimed; in sum, the anguish of being reduced to 'a reaction machine, unstable, indiscriminate, dependent' is preferable to business as usual.³⁰ The artist's lucidity and antagonistic stance leads him to 'bracket off' ideology, not unlike Manfredo Tafuri's call for a dispassionate historiography wherein 'anguish' would be replaced by 'accomplishment':

Fortunately for us, the reception of specific moments in the history of modern criticism permits a 'bracketing off' of the ideological sign originally stamped on them. For example, it is difficult indeed not to sense the close affinity between Sedlmayr's intuition of loss, [Walter] Benjamin's concept of the 'decline of the aura', and Robert Klein's reflections on the 'anguish of the referent'.³¹

31 Manfredo Tafuri, 'Preface' to *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects* (1992), trans. D. Sherer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), xxviii.

32 'Notes, 1986', in *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 125 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 159.

33 *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 129 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 162.

34 Ibid.

35 *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 128 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 161.

But beyond the resemblance qua analysis and the dramatic dissimilarity qua fate, what basically distinguishes the victims (respectively fugitive and exile) of violent oppression from a benevolent contributor to National Socialist ideology and unremorseful reactionary, is the personal conduct in general, and more specifically their deeds and works, and the moral sense the latter reflect. 'Action in pursuit of ideology creates lifeless stuff at best, and can easily become criminal', Richter pens down on February 25, 1986.³² Hence, in his artistic practice he places deeds before ideas and the 'How' before the 'What'.³³ In the register of intentions this results in the following bias: 'to invent nothing—no idea, no composition, no object, no form—and to receive everything: composition, object, form, idea, picture'.³⁴ On April 21, 1986 he formulates what may be considered the crux of his positioning:

This plausible theory, that my abstract paintings evolve their motifs as the work proceeds is a timely one, because there is no central image of the world any longer: we must work out everything for ourselves, exposed as we are on a kind of refuse heap, with no centre and no meaning; we must cope with the advance of a previously undreamt-of freedom.³⁵

36 *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 163 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 185.

37 'Answers to questions from Marlies Grüterich, 2 September 1977', in *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 90 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 95.

38 This is implied by his critique of the curtailed practice in GDR, where painting 'is always forced to run along behind and so can never set an example.'

The artist acknowledges this disenchanting freedom with an extremely versatile production. Yet, in the stirring conversation with Buchloh already quoted above, he strongly denied the latter's hypothesis that his work would aim at making a sort of catalogue of the rhetorical possibilities of painting: 'I see no point in enumerating the old, lost possibilities of painting. To me what counts is to say something; what counts is the new possibilities.'³⁶

Despite the loss of the *Idea* of painting, the artist remains committed to the *Ethos* of painting. He does not propose another or a new *Idea* for painting, but his work is entirely captivated with the quest for it. As he puts it already in 1977, 'the own true element' of painting is 'that of formative thinking'.³⁷ Painting's assignment is to 'set an example'.³⁸ Therefore, we would like to argue, Richter's work is suspended in reflection. His thoughtful practice entirely inhabits the moment that precedes the *Idea*, where the universal is sought in the particular, via the example. Through individual closure (determination) every singular work—be it a smaller or larger abstract, or a cloud-painting, a small landscape or still-life, a color chart, striped, grey or monochrome canvas, or a mirrored or glass plated piece, etc.—is an 'example' of *Painting*. It is *as a whole* that his oeuvre 'exposes' the ethos of painting. Reflection is the place where antithetic formulas are played out. It is the proper place of dialectics. The space of reflection detaches itself from worldly determination. Commitment to the ethos of painting is this distance proper: the realization by the artist that his deeds and gestures do not belong to him, nor that they confront a swarming anonymous mass, but that they do address a society of peers, a grand community of culture.

Hence, we can understand why *Atlas* is a necessary complement to Richter's oeuvre. It is the repository of the

antithetic movements of his *Daily Practice*. Rejected formulas, dismissed thoughts can be kept and somehow ordered there. Since *Atlas* is a storehouse of incongruous elements and a compendium of conflicting notions about painting, Buchloh aptly named it an 'Anomic Archive'.³⁹ But even within this overall unruly whole the *Rooms* group 'erupts' as an anomaly alike. Since it stands out, as the artist himself has intimated, as an intemperate attempt to maximize the 'effect' of painting. In the *Rooms* group the artist does not so much emerge as an architect or a curator but rather as a scenographer. However, the striving towards a maximum impact destroys the distancing effect carefully maintained in reflection. In an effort entirely oriented toward effect, reflection is ruled out. Such an overbearing exercise can leave a trace in *Atlas* but cannot be integrated in the oeuvre. By betting on the effect of painting, the *Rooms* group works against Richter's oeuvre as a whole. It overestimates painting's determination and likewise devalues the artist's reflective practice.

As for architecture then: In the *Rooms* group it appears as an accrued subject to painting. That is, architecture is the subject on which this adventurous but sidetracked expansion of Richter's practice is piggybacked. It is a dead branch of *Atlas*, bearing neither fruits nor offspring. In a recent interview with Obrist, the artist called it a moment of 'wishful thinking'.⁴⁰ Twenty years earlier, he had already conceded that the sketches were marked by a megalomaniac impulse. Hence *Rooms* did not hold an appeal to be built in reality. 'That sort of thing only works in sketches', he acknowledged, 'because the execution would be unendurable, overblown and bombastic.'⁴¹ Nevertheless he maintained the importance of making them: 'it was good to design sanctuaries of that kind, for pictures with an incredible total effect.'⁴²

39 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive', in *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter: Four Essays on Atlas* (Barcelona: Llibres de Recerca, 1999), pp. 11–30; reprinted in *Gerhard Richter: Atlas: The Reader* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2003), pp. 87–101 where the original bibliographic reference is mentioned: Buchloh 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: Das Archive der Anomie', in *Gerhard Richter, Vol. 2* (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1993); the English translation is from Buchloh himself.

40 Obrist, 'Interview with Gerhard Richter', p. 94.

41 'Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 1993', in *Writings 1962–1993*, p. 265 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 301.

42 *Writings 1962–1993*, pp. 265–266 and *Writings 1961–2007*, p. 301.

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