GERHARD RICHTER

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BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH: Did you know the history of the twentieth-century avant-garde before you came to West Germany in 1961? What did you know about Dadaism and constructivism—and in particular Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray, Malevich? Was all this a great discovery, as soon as you arrived—or was it a gradual and uncontrollable process of absorption and learning?

GERHARD RICHTER: The latter, really; an uncontrolled and gradual learning process. I knew nothing: neither Picabia nor Man Ray nor Duchamp. I only knew artists like Picasso and Guttuso, Diego Rivera, and of course the classics down to the impressionists, because everything after that was denounced in the GDR as bourgeois decadence. And in that state of naivety I went to the Documenta in Kassel in 1958 and was enormously impressed by Pollock and Fontana.

Can you remember what particularly interested you about Pollock and Fontana?

The sheer brazenness of it! That really fascinated me and impressed me. I might almost say that those paintings were the real reason why I left the GDR. I realized that there was something wrong with my whole way of thinking.

Can you enlarge on the word “brazenness”? It has connotations of morality; surely that’s not what you mean.

But that is what I mean. I lived my whole life with a group of people who laid claim to a moral aspiration, who wanted to bridge a gap, who were looking for a middle way between capitalism and socialism, a so-called
Third Path. And so the way we thought, and what we wanted for our own art, was all about compromise. In this there was nothing radical—to use a more appropriate synonym for “brazen”—and it wasn’t genuine, either, but full of false deference.

*Deference to whom or to what?*

To traditional artistic values, for instance. I realized, above all, that all those “slashes” and “blots” were not a formalistic gag but grim truth and liberation, that this was an expression of a totally different and new content.

*Did you always see the causes as inner and existential, rather than as formally inevitable, or as the next steps in a long evolutionary process rooted in the earliest decades of the twentieth century, or as responses to painterly problems? Was that way of thinking totally alien to you?*

Yes, and it still is.

*That’s why I asked about your knowledge of the first generation of avant-garde artists, from 1915 to 1925 or thereabouts. You said practically nonexistent; and the same goes for many artists of your generation. It had to do with universal repression of the past, the Second World War, and many other issues besides. The same went for the American artists who had no direct experience of fascism or the Second World War on their own home ground. They misunderstood and repressed Dada and constructivism as much as the Europeans did. And, if you say that Fontana and Pollock were the first who touched you so powerfully that they almost prompted you to leave the GDR, who was the next influence in this learning process? Was it Rauschenberg or Johns, or was it Yves Klein and Manzoni?*

It was a slow process, of course, and for the time being I was mainly interested in transitional figures, who seemed less radical to me: Giacometti, Dubuffet, and Fautrier, for instance.

*Fautrier—can you reconstruct what interested you about him?*

The impasto, the painterly messiness, the amorphous and material quality.

*So it could be said that what interested you was the anti-artistic impulse in painting. The same applies to Fontana and Pollock, doesn’t it?*

Yes, everything that tried to break with the past.

*And Tàpies?*
I have always found him too decorative.

Too little existential weight?

None at all, to speak of; and it shows now more than ever.

There’s a bit of a contradiction here. Earlier, you said that Pollock and Fontana were really important because they conveyed a sense of crisis, because they carried an existential weight. I tried to bring that down to the formal level, and you couldn’t accept that. Which clearly means that you must have had a synthesis in mind from the outset, as to what meaning the practice of painting can have, and as to how it can have meaning. A synthesis well outside the conventions, as they were then defined. So you attached more importance to everything that was strongly radical in formal terms, everything that was not literary or narrative or symbolic.

Yes, because it had more to say to me.

How about the artists of the New York School, in the early 1960s? Did you see works by Barnett Newman and Willem de Kooning at the same time as Jackson Pollock?

Hardly at all. Palermo introduced me to some of the work, a bit later. Maybe at the very end of the 1960s. Then I saw, among other things, paintings by Morris Louis, which were very highly thought of.

By you?

No, I found it quite impressive that someone should just be letting paint trickle down in this way, but I didn’t think highly of it.

And Kenneth Noland?

I got no more out of him. What amazed me was more the fame of these people.

Did you ever wonder how it came about that American painters interested you more than any Europeans, let alone Germans?

No, I took it for granted that Germany could be written off. With a past like that.

And what about the past before the Nazi period, why was that not worth discussing?

I knew nothing about it.
Did you make any attempt to find out about the history of the German avant-garde?

No, or only very superficially.

Do you now see that as an issue? Does it now surprise you that Schwitters was never or hardly ever mentioned at that time? There were German artists, after all, great German artists who belonged to the avant-garde.

I came to them by way of Rauschenberg—Schwitters included.

*Everything got absorbed during the 1950s and 1960s: the way the West German artistic landscape was reconstructed after it had been reduced to provincial status by war and fascism—all this was a highly artificial reconstruction, as we’ve just seen.* The most important German avant-garde artists fell outside its scope altogether: Schwitters, Hannah Höch, and John Heartfield were forgotten, as was the whole of German Dadaism. Reconstruction went by way of Paris painting and American painting. That is what the whole of the German informel is based on, dismal as it is—and that’s how the foundations of modernism in Germany were relaid. That was the situation you found when you arrived.

Which is my basis.

*First you see the American Rauschenberg, then you discover the German Schwitters through the American. That’s an interesting paradox.*

Yes, but I don’t think it’s that bad. And I don’t regard Schwitters as the innovator and Rauschenberg as the exploiter.

That’s not the point. The point is whether it means anything. Did you also see Twombly in the early 1960s, and did that interest you?

Yes, certainly.

*As much as Rauschenberg?*

Almost.

*And the equivalent to Rauschenberg in the European context, nouveau réalisme and décollage—to leave Yves Klein right out of it for the moment—had no comparable importance for you? You didn’t know the décollage people?*

Yes, I knew them all right. I thought they were interesting, but a bit old-fashioned.

*Old-fashioned in what way? Old-fashioned like Schwitters?*
Maybe. The technique seemed so old-fashioned to me.

_How come? It seems more radical than painting, if someone sets off down the street and tears great strips off the posters on the walls and declares that to be his work._

Maybe it was jealousy, because I’d never thought of anything like that myself, and “invention” was very much in the air then.

_And how did you relate to Manzoni at the time?_

Badly. I didn’t like him. And least of all his “Artist’s Shit.” As far as I’m concerned, that’s just about as funny as selling cans with “Berlin Air” in them.

Or was it too radical for you, all of a sudden? Earlier on, you valued the brazenness of Pollock and Fontana. It even seemed to be a factor in your move to the West. Did Manzoni go too far?

He didn’t go far enough. He got no further than the joke stage. It was only a commentary. And he wasn’t painting.

**Duchamp and Fluxus, Warhol and Pop Art**

_And what was your knowledge of Duchamp at the time?_

It evolved very slowly—through Beuys, in fact. I saw the Duchamp exhibition in Krefeld in 1963, which reminded me of Beuys, and that was when I really began to get interested in Duchamp.

_Jürgen Harten writes that your Four Panes of Glass of 1967 bears relation to Duchamp, but that you had no knowledge of him at that time. I find this hard to believe._

It’s really hard to say. I do know that I didn’t know the _Large Glass_ at that time; but it may be that I had repressed the knowledge of it so thoroughly that I could make my _Four Panes of Glass_ with a clear conscience. And with hindsight I can say that my _Panes of Glass_, like the _Nude on the Stairs_ [Ema, 1966], involve something of an anti-Duchamp attitude, because they are so plain and deliberately uncomplicated.

_When did you first see any pop art? Did you go to the Amsterdam pop exhibition, or did you see pop at Ileana Sonnabend’s in Paris?_
Ema (Nude on a Staircase), 1966,
200 x 130 cm, oil on canvas, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, CR 134
The first pop art I saw was shown to me in reproduction by Konrad Fischer. It was a cooker, painted by Lichtenstein. And then something by Warhol, not quite so extremely anti-art as Lichtenstein, or so I thought then.

*That was in 1963–64?*

In ’63 or ’62. And then we went over to Ileana Sonnabend’s, to present ourselves with our portfolio as the “German pop artists.” That was when we first saw originals by Lichtenstein.

*So then Lichtenstein was suddenly more important to you than Rauschenberg?*

Yes, and that went on until later, when he became rather vacuous and decorative. The important artists to me then were Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Oldenburg.

*Can you go into more detail as to why they were important to you? Did it have something to do with the isolation of the object, as against the complicated context in Rauschenberg?*

Rauschenberg was too artificial and too interesting. He hasn’t got that astonishing simplification.

*Instead of a complicated composition, such as you still have in Rauschenberg, which is still practically tied to the collage principle, an object in Lichtenstein or Warhol is presented as an isolated object, like a readymade.*

Yes.

*How about technique? Were you attracted by that perfectionist technique of Lichtenstein’s?*

Yes, very much so, because it was anti-painterly. It was directed against “peinture.”

*So did you see your relationship with Duchamp in terms of a rediscovery through Lichtenstein and Warhol?*

You mean the readymade quality? Certainly. But Duchamp also painted a very beautiful *Nude Descending a Staircase.*

*Which you saw in Krefeld?*

In terms of technique, but not in terms of the object.

In terms of the object too. It is a nude, for all the cubist/futurist handling.

It’s a bit of a mystery to me why you say “Lichtenstein and Warhol, yes, but not Johns.” The distinction must lie in the manner of painting. Which means you’re adopting a critical view of Warhol’s and Lichtenstein’s technique too. What was it that you didn’t like about Johns? Was it the complicated technique, the artistry?

Yes, because Johns was holding on to a culture of painting that had to do with Cézanne, and I rejected that. That’s why I painted from photographs, just in order to have nothing to do with the art of “peinture,” which makes any kind of contemporary statement impossible—

But when Warhol started to have his pictures done more or less anonymously, in silkscreen, that must have seemed like a slap in the face to you. This was a threat to your survival, for someone to demonstrate all of a sudden that painting is being supplanted by technology. It undermined the point of all painterly techniques, however radically simplified.

Maybe I was just admiring something that I can’t do—something I’m in no position to do. The same thing happened with the minimalists, who were also doing something I was in no position to do.

Have you ever tried leaving a photograph as a photograph, in other words adding the pictorial quality just by enlarging it, blurring it, and manipulating it in that sort of way?

Rarely, and it only ever worked if it was a photograph of a painting.

The theoretical implications that were read into Warhol, his radical opening-up of the definition of art, his anti-aesthetic position, of a kind that hadn’t existed since Duchamp, were also present as a characteristic of Fluxus. It must have attracted you very much at the time?

Yes, it attracted me very much; it was really vital to me. Fluxus above all.

There are contradictions here that are hard to understand. On the one hand you were attracted by Fluxus and Warhol, but on the other hand you’re saying, “I couldn’t do that; all I wanted to do and all I could do was paint.” You align your own painting with this anti-aesthetic impulse, and at the same time you maintain a pro-painting position. To me this seems to be one of the entirely typical contradictions out of which your work has essentially evolved.
Yes, it is curious, but I don’t actually find it contradictory. It’s rather as if I were doing the same thing by other means, means that are less spectacular and less advanced.

*So the negation of the productive act in art, as introduced by Duchamp and revived by Warhol, was never acceptable to you?*

No, because the artist’s productive act cannot be negated. It’s just that it has nothing to do with the talent of “making by hand,” only with the capacity to see and to decide *what* is to be made visible. *How* that then gets fabricated has nothing to do with art or with artistic abilities.
From Malevich to Minimal Art

When did you first encounter the great early abstract painters? Mondrian and Malevich, for example?

In the West, at some point, late. I don’t know.

But they were just as inaccessible to you as Schwitters? It was all a thing of the past, very much more so than the New York School and Rauschenberg were?

Yes, except for Mondrian, whose work I loved at first sight, far more than Malevich and that group.

So, in 1966, when you started to paint nonfigurative pictures, Color Charts, did that also have something to do with a head-on confrontation with minimal art? Was that another conflict situation, a rejection of American dominance, or was it through an evolutionary process of your own, rooted in the immediate, local context here in Düsseldorf? Was it through meeting Palermo, perhaps?

Yes, it certainly did have something to do with Palermo and his interests, and later with minimal art as well; but 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 neoconstructivists, Albers and the rest.

Did you know Barnett Newman’s work at that time?

No. But I came to love it later.

So your abstraction was something of an assault on the history of abstraction in Europe?

An assault on the falsity and the religiosity of the way people glorified abstraction, with such phony reverence. Devotional art—all those squares—church handicrafts.

And minimal abstraction—did that interest you?

Yes, that’s what turned two or three of the Color Charts gray.

What about Stella? When did you see his work?

Early on, but it didn’t interest me.

Did you see the Black Paintings?
Color Chart, 1966, 75 x 50 cm, oil on canvas, CR 139-6
I must have seen them in the 1960s.

*Did you feel they were better than Vasarely and Albers?*

Oh, yes.

*Can you reconstruct that feeling? Why did he leave you relatively cold?*

It was all too arty-crafty and too decorative, too elegant and precious.

*And his symmetrical compositions didn’t impress you at all?*

Carpets are symmetrical too.

*And Robert Ryman—you didn’t see his work until much later?*

I saw a first show at Konrad Fischer’s in 1970 or so, I thought it was very good.

*And why was that better, or different?*

Because for the first time it showed nothing. It was closer to my situation.

*Which artists were most important to you in the late 1960s?*

Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Bob Ryman, Dan Flavin, Larry Weiner, Walter De Maria, and others.

*Judd?*

Not so much.

*And would you say that Carl Andre had an influence on your paintings?*

I thought a lot of him. But at that time I was also painting romantic landscapes.

*So the serial quality of your monochrome Gray Pictures has nothing to do with minimal art? The Color Charts are suddenly overtly serial paintings, either serially structured as individual works or serially arranged as a group.*

The serial thing has been around since pop art. And as for the Color Charts, especially the late ones, in those I’d tend rather to see the influence of conceptual art: the theoretical, didactic dimension. But it all came down to the desperation of not knowing how I could ever arrange colors meaningfully—and I tried to fabricate that, as beautifully and as unequivocally as possible.
Iconography and Photography

Your photo painting of the early 1960s does have an anti-artistic quality; it negates individual handling, creativity, originality. So up to a point you do follow Duchamp and Warhol. And your painting also negates content, by demonstrating that the motifs are picked at random.

But the motifs never were picked at random: not when you think of the endless trouble I took to find photographs that I could use.

So in every case the selection process was highly complex and explicitly motivated? So when I said in the Paris catalog that the choice of photographs was basically random, that was a highly questionable statement?

Maybe it was a good thing for it to look random.

So what were the criteria by which you chose photographs for your iconography?

Content, definitely—though I may have denied this at one time, by saying that it had nothing to do with content, because it was supposed to be all about copying a photograph and giving a demonstration of indifference.

And now the critics are trying to ascribe to you this iconographical concern with content. Ulrich Loock and Harten talk about a “death series”: the airplane stands for death, the pyramid and the accident stand for death. To me it all seems rather forced, this attempt to construct a continuity for the death motif in your painting.

So you think I was looking for motifs that would be just a little bit shocking, while all the time I was totally indifferent to them?

I would agree, in that no selection can ever really be random. Every choice implies an attitude of sorts, however complex and unconscious. But, looking at your iconography in the 1960s, I find it very difficult to read into it a consistent theme of death. The Eight Student Nurses, all right; but then there are the 48 Portraits. It’s irrational to read a death theme into those. What have the Chile paintings got to do with the pyramids? Or what have the townscapes to do with the mountain landscapes? The iconographical elements can all be connected, but not in the sense of a traditional iconography, where you say, “That’s a death theme.” To me it seems utterly absurd to try to construct a traditional iconography for your painting.

Maybe it is just overdoing it a little to talk about a death theme. But as to whether the pictures have anything to do with death and pain, I think they have.
Forest Piece (Chile), 1969, 174 x 124 cm, oil on canvas, Würth Collection, Künzelsau, CR 216-1
But this feature of content is not the determining, the decisive element in the selection.

That I don’t know, and I can’t really reconstruct my motives now. All I know is that there were reasons of content why I chose a particular photograph, and why I decided to depict this or that event.

In full awareness of the fact that content can no longer be conveyed through iconic depiction? So this is another contradiction: although you knew that—for example—a death theme cannot be conveyed through straight depiction, you nevertheless tried to do just that, knowing full well that it was impossible.

For one thing, it isn’t impossible at all. A picture with a dead dog in it shows a dead dog. It only gets difficult if you try to convey something above and beyond that, if the content gets too complex for straightforward depiction. But that doesn’t mean that depiction can’t convey anything.