

ETC



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Numéro 5, automne 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (imprimé)

1923-3205 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Campbell, J. D. (1988). Compte rendu de [The virtues of heterogeneity: Gerhard Richter]. *ETC*, (5), 104–105.

The virtues of heterogeneity : Gerhard Richter

The paintings of Gerhard Richter exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario (April 29 through July 10) are a living testament to the sheer breadth and integrity of an artistic vision that has eschewed the easy vicissitudes of sameness. Instead, Richter's paintings demonstrate the virtue of heterogeneity — and consequently elude the taxonomic gaze that would neatly pigeonhole them. For over twenty-five years — from the early Photo Paintings of 1962 through the latest abstract paintings — Richter has resisted the entropic inclination towards homogeneity that would reduce his diverse works to a holistic, easily categorized oeuvre.

But, in their radical heterogeneity, Richter's works still have phenomenal depth — structures in common which relate to perception and its modelization; a richly articulated framework for seeing is implicit to all his paintings.

For Richter, knowledge is not synonymous with certainty. The apprehension of the real, perceptually-speaking, is always full of uncertainty. Hence his preoccupation with models that seemingly promise a certain certitude but which are, in fact, highly personal ways of seeing that do not seek to taxonomize elusive reality but that, in their very fragmentation and perceptual discontinuity, thematize that elusiveness. The diverse models of perception he uses are deliberately characterized by this contrariety and uncertain codification of the real rather than by a desire for any stabilizing taxonomic apprehension.

This retrospective covered the various (and co-extensive) phases of the work, which have been subsumed in the exhibition catalogue under three general rubrics: the figurative work, the constructive work and the abstract paintings. My emphasis in this essay will be on the latter since these paintings have lent contemporary abstract painting, in general, a new and revivifying vocabulary — but one that resists taxonomy while subverting prevailing norms as effectively as any of the other figurative or constructive work.

Richter's statement concerning the Abstract Paintings (in the 1979 *Documenta 7* catalogue) is highly instructive: "Every time we describe an event, add up a column of figures or take a photograph of a tree, we create a model; without models we would know nothing about reality and would be like animals. Abstract paintings are fictitious models because they visualize a reality which we can neither see nor describe but which we may nevertheless conclude exists."

For Gerhard Richter, the visualization of this reality is, in effect the pursuit of "nothingness", the invisible which was never given over to form before and suddenly lurches into the real through the act of painting. Richter feels that abstraction is the best

method for apprehending the "unknown" with utter clarity. In this sense, there is a comparison to be made between the spinal landscapes of surrealist painter Yves Tanguy and Richter. Tanguy, whose paintings depicted with seeming verisimilitude landscapes never before seen in the fact-world, was as interested in giving birth to what was non-visible, "nothing", unknown as Richter is.

But, with Richter, it is of cardinal importance that the paintings themselves never devolve into "decipherable metaphors for this incomprehensible reality".² Yet they do have a strange "quasi-metaphoricity" in that they seem to have qualities which could be described as constituting or transcendent, while being neither constitutive nor transcendental. Hence the wilful anarchy of these works; the absence of a hierarchy of categories or appearances, and the myriad displacements that the addictive process of their making effects.

These paintings gestate in the making through a long and problematic chain of accretions and subtractions (perhaps when the painter realizes his strategies risk their own taxonomization or become too assertively self-conscious) that reach a crescendo only when the painter intuits a sort of whole, even if one defined precisely by the absence of any perceptibly dominant ethos. A remarkable controlledness is imposed on their apparent spontaneity. It takes almost four months to complete eight of them and they are worked on co-intensively throughout that period. Only in the last month are they actually finished, one by one.³

This period of production is not confined to one session but requires an interregnum in which the painter has an opportunity to reflect and methodologically elude the expression of identifiable emotional or psychological content. He seeks instead "a pictorial quality that the intelligence cannot fabricate".⁴ Painting is its own reality.

These works are "fictions", not in the sense of yielding a narrative or identifiable psychological content, but in the sense that the experience of them as such designates nothing other than the projection of the work into the world of action. They are "fictional models" in the sense that the work alone projects them, and are akin to the status of "fictions" in the cognitive psychology — as functional cognitive illusions.

These paintings grasp our seeing *qua* seeing; that is, not as mere capacity or competence but as an event in its own right; an invitation to exercise our capacity to see and, in seeing, to understand. The eye is caught up in the play and sheer sensuous pleasure of color and form.

Roald Nasgaard, in his superb catalogue essay, perhaps says it best: "The eye roves, in swept into deep, immeasurable spaces soon checked by a thick, squeezed paint track, a countering gesture, a haphazard

splatter, a quick line — moving over, under, sometimes interpenetrating — their looseness contrasted to emergent geometric forms or near objects, all stated in a brilliant range of hues that are somehow also representational.”⁵

The “meaning” of these unresolved and unresolvable works is immanent only within the horizon of our seeing them, as we seek a resolution never here to be realized, as we yearn after a formal stasis forever withheld. In a sense, these works are about their own continuing deconstruction, felt heterogeneity, and changing focii. In one narrow sense clearly unified compositions, they nevertheless remain discursive entities, multi-tiered conceptual structures that thrive on their own interruptions, fluxes and discontinuities, eluding holistic unification just as they compositionally promise it.

In paintings like *Halifax* (1978) and *Mediation* (1986), all is in flux. In these indeterminate spaces, that function as analogues for the unknown and the infinite, a pre-predicative state of being is posited that is also a process of becoming in which nothing is allowed to resolve into stasis. Herein, heterogeneity is the highest form of truth Richter himself holds that these abstractions are “more real” than his landscapes. He has said: “The abstraction is more real, the other [landscape] more a dream.”⁶

Richter’s abstract paintings — as well as his constructive and figurative work — clearly defeat our preconceptions about the modernist agenda for painting. The inherent heterogeneity of his vision enables his œuvre to resist all ouvertures of closure and his abstract paintings — as shifting paradigms of open perception — demonstrate the ultimate futility of formalist taxonomy.

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NOTES

1. Gerhard Richter, “Statement” in *Documenta 7* (Kassel, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 84-85, reprinted in English trans. by Leslie Strickland in *The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today* (Toronto: The Art Gallery of Ontario, and Milan: Mazzotta, 1985), p. 365.
2. *ibid.*
3. I. Michael Danoff, “Heterogeneity: An Introduction to the work of Gerhard Richter” in Roald Nasgaard, *Gerhard Richter Paintings* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1988) p. 12.
4. Cited in Nasgaard, *Ibid.* p. 108.
5. Nasgaard, *Ibid.* p. 109.
6. Cited in I. Michael Danoff, *Ibid.* p. 13.