GERHARD RICHTER

edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

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OCTOBER FILES 8

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

This book was set in Bembo by Graphic Composition, Inc. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gerhard Richter / edited by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh.
p. cm.—(October files)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-262-01351-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-262-51312-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Richter, Gerhard, 1932– —Criticism and interpretation. I. Buchloh, B. H. D.
ND588.R48G47 2009
759.3—dc22
2009001696

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

An Interview with Gerhard Richter (1986)

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

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?

No, much later on, in Paris. But I knew it from reproductions. A very beautiful painting, and utterly traditional.

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.

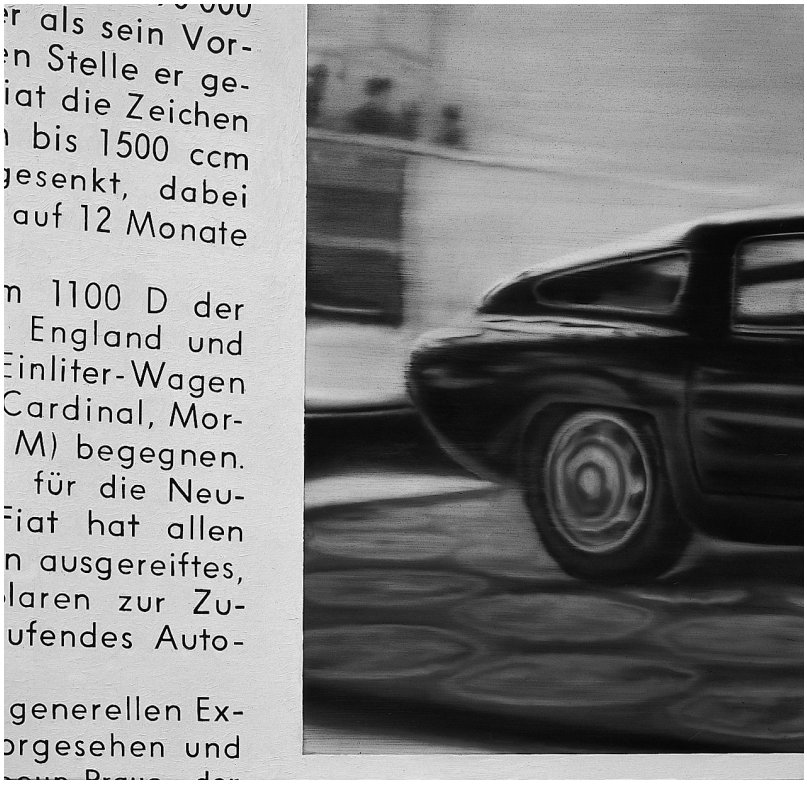
Have you ever tried leaving a photograph as a photograph, in other words adding the pictorial quality just by enlarging it, blurring it, and manipulating it in that sort of way?

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.



Alfa Romeo (with Text), 1965, 150 x 155 cm, oil on canvas, Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, CR 68

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.

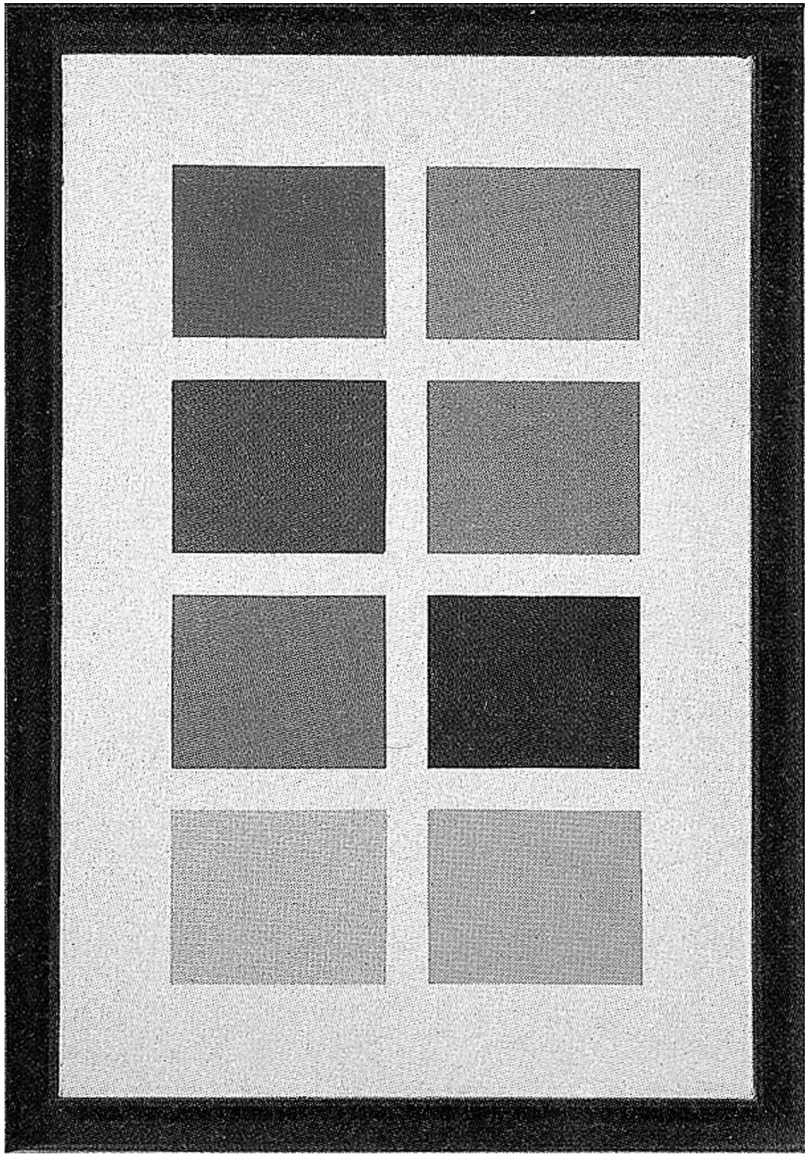
And minimal abstraction—did that interest you?

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.

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?

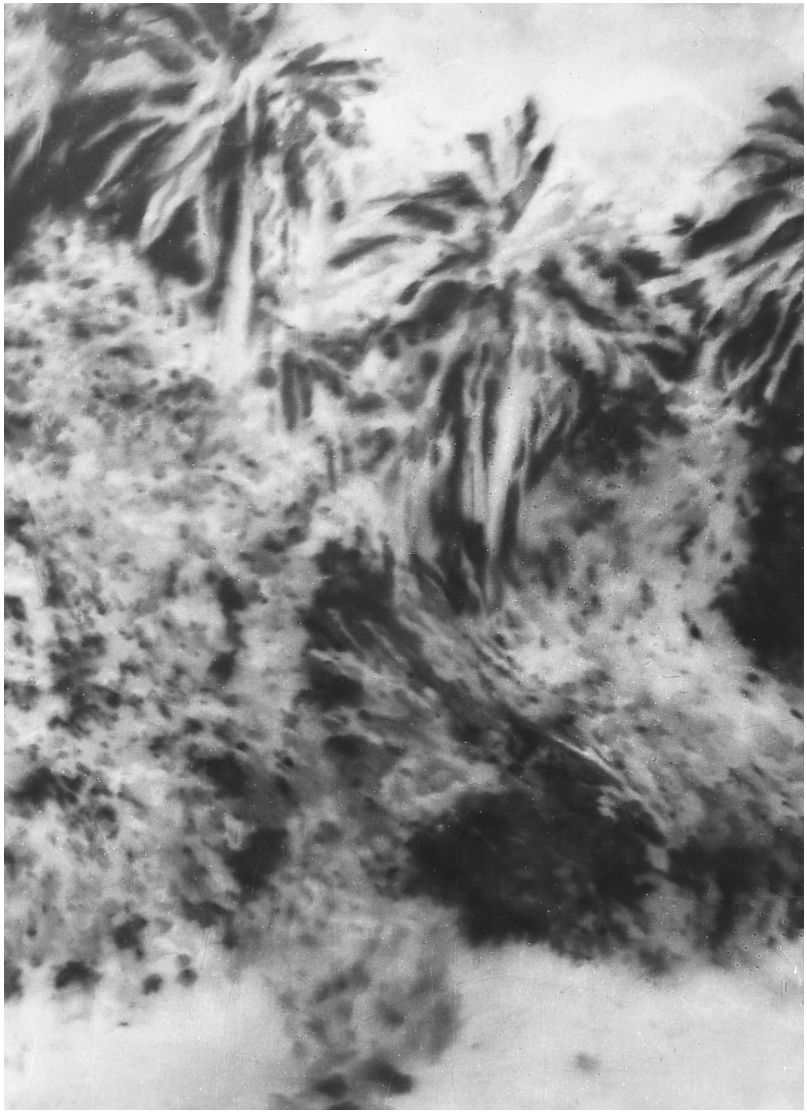
Content, definitely—though I may have denied this at one time, by saying that it had nothing to do with content, because it was supposed to be all about copying a photograph and giving a demonstration of indifference.

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.

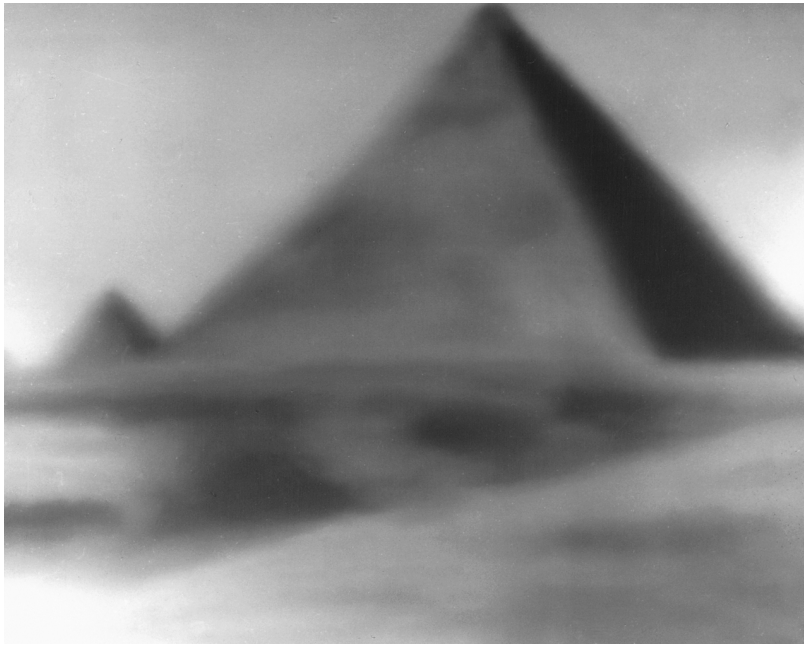
So you think I was looking for motifs that would be just a little bit shocking, while all the time I was totally indifferent to them?

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



Large Pyramid, 1966, 190 x 240 cm,
oil on canvas, Stedelijk Museum voor
Actuele Kunst, Gent, CR 131

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.

Were you aware of the criteria by which you made your selection? How did you go about choosing the photographs?

I looked for photographs that showed my present life, the things that related to me. And I chose black-and-white photographs, because I realized that they showed all this more effectively than color photographs, more directly, more inartistically, and therefore more credibly. That's why I picked all those amateur family pictures, those banal objects and snapshots.

What about the alpine pictures and the cityscapes?

Those were done when I no longer felt like doing figurative photo pictures, and wanted a change from the unequivocal statement, the legible and limited narrative. So I was attracted by those dead cities and Alps, which in both cases were stony wastes, arid stuff. It was an attempt to convey content of a more universal kind.

But if you really were concerned with that kind of content, how do you explain the fact that at the same time you brought nonfigurative painting into your work? The Color Charts, for instance, or other abstract paintings, done concurrently with the figurative ones. You were working on two levels at once, and this confused most of your critical commentators, who started to see you as a painter who knows all the tricks and techniques, and who simultaneously discredits and deploys all the iconographical conventions. At the moment, this makes you particularly attractive to many viewers, because your work looks like a survey of the whole universe of twentieth-century painting, presented in one vast, cynical retrospective.

Now that definitely is a misunderstanding. I see no cynicism or trickery or guile in any of this. On the contrary, it all seems rather amateurish to me, the head-on way I've tackled everything, and how simple it is to read off what I had in mind and what I was trying to do. That's why I don't really know what you mean by the contradiction between figurative and abstract painting.

Let me take Table *as an example, one of your earliest paintings.* Table *already has both elements within it: a totally abstract, gestural, self-reflective quality on one hand and on the other the function of depiction. And this is surely one of the great twentieth-century dilemmas: this apparent conflict, this apparent antagonism within painting between the functions of depiction and self-reflection. In your*

painting, the two run very close together. But aren't they juxtaposed in order to show up the inadequacy, the bankruptcy of both?

Not bankruptcy, but always inadequacy.

Inadequacy in relation to what? The expressive function?

In relation to what is expected of painting.

Can that expectation be formulated?

That painting ought to have more effect.

So you would reject the accusation that is so often leveled at you, of cynical complicity with painting's lack of effect?

Yes, I would, because I do know that painting is not without an effect—I only want it to have more of one.

So the simultaneous pursuit of depiction and self-reflection has nothing to do with the two canceling each other out; and you are just using different means to give substance to what is expected of painting?

Yes, more or less.

So, in the early 1960s you don't see yourself as the heir to a historical dichotomy, a state of fragmentation, in which no strategy is really valid anymore?

I do see myself as the heir to a vast, great, rich culture of painting—of art in general—which we have lost, but which places obligations on us. And it is no easy matter to avoid either harking back to the past or (equally bad) giving up altogether and sliding into decadence.

Which brings you, of course, to the brink of a political argument, which maybe you don't relish. But how would you explain this loss, if not in terms of politics, or social history, or just plain history? The way you put it, it almost sounds like Adorno's famous statement that "After Auschwitz, lyric poetry is no longer possible." Does that ring true for you?

No. There is lyric poetry after Auschwitz.

When you say that no one can paint that way anymore—

By that I meant first and foremost a specific quality that we have lost.

How?

Photography is certainly one external factor involved in the fact that we've forgotten one way of painting and can no longer produce a certain artistic quality.

It can also be put in entirely functional terms, by saying that—among other things—paintings have lost their descriptive and illustrative functions because photography has assumed those functions so perfectly. The result is that the job is no longer there to be done, and the high artistic quality of old paintings, which you mention, has its material and historical roots partly in those very same descriptive and illustrative functions.

The quality can't be entirely explained away in terms of the illustrative function. All that perfection of execution, composition, and so forth would still have been lost to us, even if there had never been such a thing as photography. Literature and music are in the very same mess. People praise Mozart and Glenn Gould to the skies, because the new composers can't offer the same thing anymore, even though music hasn't been edged out by anything analogous to photography.

So if the loss doesn't stem from the evolution of reproductive technology, or from the experience of previously undreamed-of historical catastrophes (as Adorno suggests in the sentence I quoted), or from the destruction of bourgeois culture, or from political factors of any kind—and you've rejected all those, at least in passing, as explanations—

No, they all play their part, but I see the basic fact as the loss of the Center.

In Sedlmayr's sense?[1] *You can't be serious?*

Yes, I am; what he was saying was absolutely right. He just drew the wrong conclusions, that's all. He wanted to reconstruct the Center that had been lost.

And to reconstruct the Center by using methods and means that were entirely incapable of achieving it. But how do you describe it, if it's so obvious to you?

I've no desire to reconstruct it.

No, but you must be able to describe it. And then it's a historical process after all—

Yes, but there are specific, new, concrete facts which have altered our consciousness and our society, which have overturned religion and therefore

changed the functioning of the State. There are only a few makeshift conventions left to regulate the thing, keep it practicable. Otherwise there's nothing there anymore.

Is painting one of those conventions?

No. The criteria of painting are conventions—and harmful ones, because they are ideologically defined. They block enlightenment. That's why I think so highly of psychoanalysis, because it takes away prejudices and turns us into responsible adults, autonomous beings who can act more rightly and more humanely in the absence of authorities, or God, or ideology. So it's a good thing to lose all that.

And you'd want the same for painting?

Yes.

So on one hand you see the process as irreversible, and above all impossible to reconstruct by cultural means—

That would only serve to delay it.

And political means seem to you at best problematic or questionable, or not directly applicable.

Politics operates more by faith than by enlightenment, so nothing is going to come of that.

But you see the role of art as a more important one than that of simply liquidating a false bourgeois cultural inheritance—though that is one of its functions, isn't it?

Liquidating? Yes, that's part of it.

But at the same time it also has another function, and that's where the contradiction comes in. What is the other function, if not a political one?

Above all, art does more than destroy. It produces something, a different image.

Of autonomy?

Yes.

And how is the painted picture supposed to constitute a model of that autonomy, here and now?

The painting is *one* important, possible way among others, one that can be used. At worst, it's on offer to those who are interested.

About your self-imposed limitation to the practice of painting—when it comes to liquidating the bourgeois inheritance while constructing the new autonomy, isn't that limitation rather a handicap? Shouldn't we suppose that there are other and more radical ways and means that will carry out the liquidation more quickly and thus also make anticipation more fruitful?

No, in this respect I'm extremely conservative. It seems to me like someone saying that language is no longer usable, because it is a bourgeois inheritance, or that we mustn't print texts in books anymore but on cups or on chair legs. I am bourgeois enough to go on eating with a knife and fork, just as I paint in oil on canvas.

So, all attempts to pursue one side of the dialectic more rapidly by artistic means seem to you to be unacceptable. Would you retrospectively criticize Duchamp, who gave up painting for this very reason?

I'm not sure that those were his reasons. But you can never take that as a sufficient reason to give up painting. To interpret Duchamp in that way, and go in for politics and criticism instead, is pathetic.

Pathetic in what way? In terms of painting's liquidation of bourgeois culture, or in terms of its capacity for anticipation?

Because it achieves nothing. It's neither artistic nor political action. It's amateur.

To put it in specific terms: Would you regard it as a premise of your present-day painting that it remains in the very dilemma you faced from the start: that is, to play off the real facts of mass culture, as you see them in photography, against the esoteric and elitist conditions of high culture, in which you as an artist have a part? And that you base your work on this dialectic, assuming yourself to be exempt from the contradiction; and that in practice there is no solution that you can accept? Is this still a premise, or did it apply only to the 1960s?

I see no such premise, then or now.

But your quoted statement on Cézanne says exactly that. When you say, "I consider many amateur photographs better than the best Cézanne," that seems to express this very contradiction.

Yes, but that doesn't mean that I could ever change anything directly through painting. And it certainly doesn't mean that I could do it without painting.

Why have you so firmly rejected any concrete political intention in your own art?

Because politics don't suit me, because art has an entirely different function, because all I can do is paint. Call it conservative.

But by limiting yourself to the medium of painting, mightn't you be espousing not just a conservative position but maybe also a critical dimension? Are you, for instance, calling into question the immediacy claimed by work like that of Beuys?

Naturally, by limiting myself to painting I imply a criticism of a lot of things that I don't like, not all of them connected with painting.

So you don't deny on principle that someone might validly intend to make a critical political statement through art?

I probably do deny it. But what counts is that I have to take as my starting point, my foundation, my own possibilities and my own premises.

And you say that these are unchangeable—

Largely unchangeable.

Monochrome Gray Pictures and Abstract Pictures

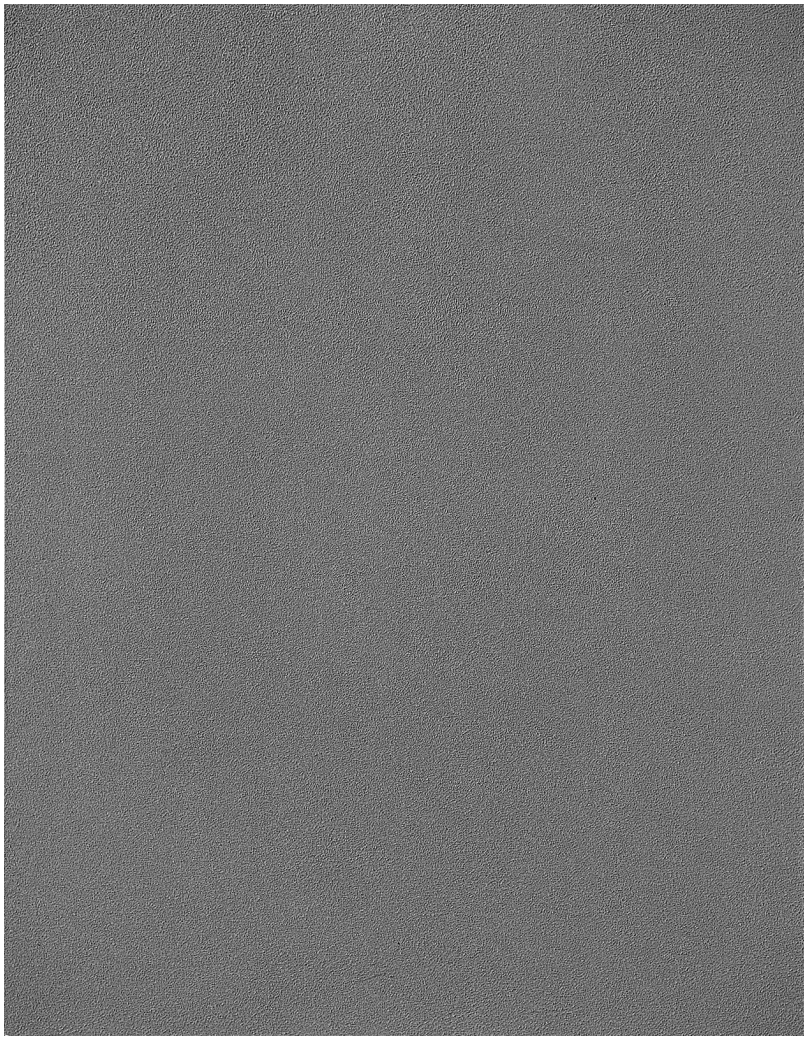
The Gray Pictures were done at a time when there were monochrome paintings everywhere. I painted them nonetheless.

When you say there were pictures like that everywhere, who are you thinking of? Klein and Kelly?

Not Kelly, but Bob Ryman, Brice Marden, Alan Charlton, Yves Klein, and many others.

Paraphrase as a strategy. Was that deliberate?

Not really. I thought I had every right to do it because I was doing it for a different reason, because the paintings have something different to say and also look different. It never occurred to me for a moment that this might be eclecticism.



Gray, 1974, 250 x 195 cm, oil on canvas, Tate Museum, London, CR 363-2

Although at the present moment in history you have no choice but to be an eclectic.

I don't know. I don't believe that.

Why are your monochrome paintings any different? Because you painted them?

Yes, because I intended something different, because the similarity is merely superficial.

Because you regarded it as an intention of your own and not as a linguistic tradition?

But it is an intention of my own: the intention to use it to convey a different content.

The intention still stands—and so the abstract pictures too are intended to convey a content?

Yes.

They're not a negation of content, not painting-as-fact, not an ironic parody of present-day expressionism?

No.

Not a perversion of gestural abstraction? Not irony?

Certainly not! What kind of questions are these? How can my pictures be devoid of content, and what is this content that the abstract expressionists are supposed to have had as distinct from me?

They painted with a different intention in mind. Rothko, for example: he uses thinning and grading of color to create an illusion of space, which is not simultaneously negated—as it is with you—but really represents depth, mist, shimmering, transcendence. And then, in Rothko's work, color combination is an important element: that is, two or at most three hues or color values are juxtaposed in a very precisely calculated, differentiated way, so that the combination generates a particular color harmony, which is then supposed to produce a specific emotional effect.

In my work the principle is the same; it's just that different means are used to achieve a different effect.

No, because if the ability of color to generate this emotional, spiritual quality is presented and at the same time negated at all points, surely it's always canceling itself out. With so many combinations, so many permutational relationships, there

can't be any harmonious chromatic order, or composition either, because there are no ordered relations left either in the color system or in the spatial system.

I can't see it as a situation where composition and relationships have disappeared. When I place one color form next to another, then it automatically relates to that other.

Yes, but there are differently structured forms and laws governing relationships, right through to the realization that even total negation is a composition. But everything in your abstract pictures aims at abolishing traditional, relational forms of order by showing the potentially infinite variety of structurally heterogeneous elements.

Yes, but even so I still have to get all that into the right context—a context that always gets harder and harder, the more advanced a picture gets. It all starts out easy and unspecific, but gradually a context starts to take shape, and this has a coherence that is the utter opposite of randomness.

Yes, of course, but then that's a different kind of perception, and so a different form is generated—in some cases an antithetical one.

It may well be. What always is antithetical is my method, or the anticipation that as it were impels me to paint.

And what do you anticipate?

That something is going to come, which I do not know, which I have been unable to plan, which is better and wiser than I am, and which is also more universal. More directly, I tried to do that in the paintings, organizing one thousand or four thousand colors by chance, in the anticipation that a picture would emerge.

What sort of picture?

One that presents our situation more accurately; one that has more truth in it, one that has something of the future in it, so it can also be interpreted as a project, a design—and more besides. Not didactic, not logical, but rather free and—however uncomplicated—also effortless in appearance.

That's what your paintings have at their best; they seem not to try too hard, but to be produced with verve, indifference, and virtuosity. But—to revert to the issue of content for a moment—how can you say that the palette-knifed surface on this painting here doesn't stand for process or materiality as such, when the painting itself has been made with such obvious emphasis on the process of its making? If

you weren't interested in these qualities, you surely wouldn't use the palette knife in this way, depriving the colors, composition, and structure of the painting of any possibility of generating a meaning beyond the bare materiality of the picture. It seems to me that you introduce process-related paintings as just one of painting's many possibilities, while not insisting, as Ryman did, that this is its only aspect. It's one aspect among others.

Then why should I go to such lengths to make it so varied?

Because you're setting out to call out all the aspects there are, like a catalog; because you're really trying to pursue both a rhetoric of painting and the simultaneous analysis of that rhetoric.

If all this were just a display of matter—the way the yellow, tatter-edged area rises up against the blue-green background—how could it tell a story or set up moods?

A mood? You mean it really sets up an emotional experience?

Yes, and aesthetic pleasure, too.

That's something different. Aesthetic pleasure I can see, but absolutely not a mood.

So what is a mood?

A mood has an explicitly emotional, spiritual, psychological quality.

That's exactly what is there.

Fortunately only in the weakest parts.

Surely you don't think that a stupid demonstration of brushwork, or of the rhetoric of painting and its elements, could ever achieve anything, say anything, express any longing.

Longing for what?

For lost qualities, for a better world—for the opposite of misery and hopelessness.

The longing to be able to present culture as a contemplative spectacle without losing credibility?

I might also call it redemption. Or hope—the hope that I can after all effect something through painting.

Again, this is all so generalized: "effect" in what sense? Epistemological, emotional, psychological, political?

All at once. I don't know.

So if you maintain that art can have this function—something that other artists would deny absolutely—then it's all the more of a paradox that you simultaneously insist on being able to do it only with the means of painting. Or, to put the question another way: Do you believe that this dichotomy is concretely visible in your paintings?

Yes, possibly.

Do you believe that these are ultimately conservative paintings, conservative in the sense that Broodthaers's art seemed conservative?

In terms of the means—oil on canvas—even more conservative. I knew Broodthaers, and I had a lot of respect and sympathy for him, but I never really understood his pictures. Conservative—I certainly don't intend to be, and I also know that painting per se does not have to be conservative. So I can carry on in the same way, just better if possible.

The question is, how far can this schizophrenia be stretched, how far can it really be kept alive, or when does it become an empty pose: to assert this contradiction over and over again, and to act within the contradiction again and again, but without trying to get over the contradiction?

I don't know what contradiction you're talking about.

It's the contradiction of knowing full well that the means you are using won't achieve what you aim for, and at the same time not being prepared to change those means.

That's not a contradiction, it's a perfectly normal state of affairs. The normal mess, if you like. And that couldn't be changed by choosing different means and methods.

Because all means are of equal value?

No, but all are similarly inadequate. The question is, what are my means, and what can I achieve with them?

But under certain historical conditions painting had different functions, and had a possibility of having an effect on its contemporary context.

If I'm thinking of political painting in our time, I'd rather have Barnett Newman. He painted some magnificent pictures.

So it is said. But magnificent in what way?

I can't describe it now, what gets to me in them—I believe they're among the most important paintings of all.

Perhaps that's a mythology that needs reexamination. Precisely because it's so difficult to describe; and because, in the encounter with paintings, acts of faith are not enough.

Acts of faith are unavoidable. They're part of us.

Do your paintings invite acts of faith, or analyses? Which matters more to you?

Either would be fine with me. In your case they invite you to analyze; others find them an invitation to perform acts of faith.

So you would be quite happy if—as Rothko demanded for his own work—someone were to fall on their knees in front of one of your paintings and burst into tears?

Unfortunately painting can't produce such an effect. Music is better off in this respect.

Chance and Open Form

What part does chance play in your paintings?

An essential one, as it always has. There have been times when this has worried me a great deal, and I've seen this reliance on chance as a shortcoming on my part.

Is this chance different from chance in Pollock? Or from surrealist automatism?

Yes, it certainly is different. Above all, it's never blind chance: it's a chance that is always planned, but also always surprising. And I need it in order to carry on, in order to eradicate my mistakes, to destroy what I've worked out wrong, to introduce something different and disruptive. I'm often astonished to find how much better chance is than I am.

So this is the level on which openness is still thinkable and credible in real terms? Chance?

It introduces objectivity, so perhaps it's no longer chance at all. But in the way it destroys and is simultaneously constructive, it creates something that of course I would have been glad to do and work out for myself.

But you don't take that personally anymore? You don't regard it as a failure on your part? You see it as a generalized factor?

No, I now see it as a generalized factor, something entirely positive. Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity*, and all sorts of other facts and reflections that have evolved on the subject, all confirm me in that.

Would the same principle apply to the structure of the work itself, its apparent repeatability, the apparent arbitrariness and openness of every individual painting? Is there a structural analogy to the structure of chance, in the fact that the work itself—like the separate work clusters—has no closed quality left but appears totally open?

Possibly; and, if we disregard the closed quality that every picture has to have—if it is not to be a random detail of something else, or just plain unfinished—then nonclosure may perhaps be a positive quality, because it relates more closely to our reality.

Then it might be said that the compositional structure, in its openness, is the other dimension of a still-credible, substantive utopian factor?

That may be so. Especially because so many paintings nowadays look so stupid precisely because they lay claim to being closed works. That's the deception.

Yes, and I find this open dimension in very few artists. It's the radicalism that leads the artist to run the risk of ending up with a work that looks unfinished, infinitely reproducible, and internally repetitive.

The only paradoxical thing is that I always set out with the intention of getting a closed picture, with a proper, composed motif—and then go to great lengths to destroy that intention, bit by bit, almost against my will. Until the picture is finished and has nothing left but openness.

The fiction of an openness, a total openness, just as the use of chance is not real but a fiction of chance.

I can only hope that I haven't lost my naivety, and that I shall go on making all the same effort—which is actually quite superfluous.

What about color—I mean, can the involvement of chance be extended to color relationships, the color scheme? Up to now, we have only talked about the compositional order, but I'd say that the same principle defines the relations between colors.

Not to the same extent. It sometimes happens that I mix the paint for a particular painting and then put it onto another—and this has hardly ever turned out to be a mistake. But this is really an unconscious strategy that I can use to outwit myself.

In the permutational color paintings, you worked on a logical, consistent, random basis. There it was the form that was laid down in advance, and here in the abstracts it's largely the color. And in contrast to the systematic manner of the Color Charts, the permutations in the abstract pictures emerge naturally.

Yes, chance is natural too, and it's an element that modifies.

This freedom of color, of this apparent arbitrariness of colors, as found in your abstract pictures, never appears in neo-expressionism, where the color is always still regulated by aesthetic preconditions, representational functions, and harmonic compositions.

Yes, that's right.

The Rhetoric of Painting

What about the objectivization of the process of painting itself? You paint your big pictures not with an artist's brush but with a decorator's brush; isn't this all part of the anonymization and objectivization of the painting process, along with permutation and "chance," color relations and compositional organization?

Certainly not.

The change in the instruments of production doesn't imply that the production of painting is once more critically called into question?

It changes the pictures only in one respect: they get louder; they are not so easily overlooked.

I was talking about the instruments—that is, the instruments also influence the perception of the picture. The fact that a monochrome was painted with a roller decisively influences the perception of the work. And in these big paintings here, where the brushstrokes suddenly turn into a decorator's brush marks, they take on a new dimension that I would describe as a quasi-mechanical or anonymous quality.

No, not in this case. A brush is a brush, whether it's five millimeters wide or fifty centimeters.

So, in the two yellow Strokes*, their giant size doesn't add a new dimension?*

That's something different again—they only look like two strokes of a giant brush. In reality they were painted with a lot of little strokes. Here, on the other hand, it's all genuine, so to speak.

But here in the two big paintings a new dimension comes in, not only through the sheer size but also through the fact that the techniques and the act of painting have been carried to the limits of the possible.

The physical limits?

Yes, but also the limits of the perceptibility of the act, as an act of painting. And there another dimension opens up in practical terms—a dimension that is not regarded as subjective.

These are just as subjective as the small ones; they're just spectacular, that's all.

Spectacular they certainly are, even in a small format. In my catalog text, I tried to describe how in your abstract painting the system is always "on show," as it were—that they always have a certain declamatory, rhetorical quality. One always gets the feeling that you're showing the various possibilities just as possibilities, so that they simply stand alongside or against each other, without performing any other function.

Like making a speech that doesn't mean anything?

Yes—

A speech full of eloquence and uplift, which everyone falls for because it sounds good, which fulfills all the formal requirements of a speech and actually communicates nothing?

It doesn't sound good if you describe it that way, but you could put it differently, by saying that someone is delivering a powerfully emotive speech in order to give an analytical presentation of the resources of language, emotive persuasion, and rhetoric. That is, you are making the spectacle of painting visible in its rhetoric, without practicing it.

And what would be the point of that? That's the last thing I'd want to do.

You don't see the abstract pictures—in the way I have tried to outline—as a kind of reflection on the history of painting, although that's precisely what distinguishes them from all other abstract and gestural painting known to us. They not only have the rhetorical quality but also a quality of reflection on what used to be possible, reflection at the very moment when it can no longer be made use of. And I can imagine some viewers supposing that you're still earnestly practicing what once was possible.

That would apply rather to the landscapes and some of the photo paintings, which I've described on occasion as cuckoo's eggs, because people take them for something they aren't. And that was a part of their popularity—a popularity which I thoroughly approve of, on principle, and which has now totally changed. Now it's genuine, so to speak.

That would make them parodic paintings. But the astonishing thing is that there's no parody in them.

They have a perfectly normal kind of seriousness. I can't put a name to this, so I always see them as musical. And in the structure there's a lot that reminds me of music. It's self-evident to me, but impossible to explain.

That's one of the oldest clichés that people resort to, when they are trying to find a firm footing amid the desolation of abstract painting.

That may well be. But I mentioned music in order to argue against something.

Against a catalog 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.

But reflection on rhetoric as a specific system of language is a highly important method, especially in present-day literary criticism. That means that people have suddenly realized the importance of looking at the linguistic conventions and the rhetorical laws behind utterances that have hitherto been examined only for their content.

Then it's just a private aberration on my part, if I always want to do something different from what I did before?

Perhaps it's not an aberration but a private dilemma, a gap between possibility and aspiration, and even so an important aspect of your work. If you were just

Landscape, 1985, 100 x 140 cm, oil on canvas, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, CR 586-2

a rhetorician, in the sense of an analytical exploration of the rhetoric of painting, there would be nothing particularly interesting about it. That's work that other people can do.

But if you refuse to see this as a rhetoric of painting, how would you define the details of the pictorial elements themselves? When one takes a look at the way elements of surface, line, and color are juxtaposed in an artificial enumeration, and with this declamatory quality, or how specific techniques of the application of colors are set out for all the world like a catalog—some with a palette knife, some with a decorator's brush, some with an artist's brush, some smeared, some as direct traces, some as clouds of mist—there is something systematic about it all. As you were saying, it's all very well pondered and prepared, including enumeration, juxtaposition, and combination.

As a whole and in every detail, its effect is emotional. It sets up moods.

That was the hard thing to figure out—whether it did, and, if so, what moods—when I said that the paintings curiously evoke no associations.

They do set up associations. They remind you of natural experiences, even rain if you like. The paintings can't help functioning that way. That's where they get their effect from, the fact that they incessantly remind you of nature, and so they're almost naturalistic anyhow.

But of course that then has to be defined. Not naturalistic in relation to nature?

Only in relation to nature, that's all we have.

The fact that nature appears to you as the only analogy or model that is ordered without a hierarchical structure—that you can't visualize a utopian construct of a society that would match this ideal of nature—that is the romantic element in your thinking.

That's not the romantic element. It has to do with the division of labor. Some people design model societies, some design paintings, each to the best of his ability.

That's not a direct answer to my question: Why nature to you is the only utopian dimension of nonhierarchical experience; why it is unthinkable for you to argue or discuss your idea of a nonhierarchical existence in social terms; why you can only fall back on the metaphor of nature, like a romantic?

No, like a painter. And I don't argue in social terms, because I want to make a picture and not an ideology. And what is good about a picture is that it is never ideological but always factual.

That's just what I see in the way color is treated like a material process; in the way color becomes an object that is presented and modified by means of these instruments, remaining constant within these various structures and showing how it was made and what instruments were used in its making; and in the way there is practically no external reference to motivate the generation or the structure of the color. These are all self-referential phenomena. Does this reading seem too narrow to you?

Yes, because all this effort is not there for its own sake; it is justified only if it takes all these wonderful methods and strategies and then actually produces something.

What?

A picture, and therefore a model. And if I now think of your interpretation of Mondrian, in which pictures can partly be interpreted as models of

society, I can also see my abstracts as metaphors in their own right, pictures that are about a possibility of social coexistence. Looked at in this way, all that I am trying to do in each picture is to bring together the most disparate and mutually contradictory elements, alive and viable, in the greatest possible freedom. No paradises.

Notes

1. Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984), Austrian art historian.