

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

Documents of Culture and Barbarism: Richter's *Birkenau* Paintings

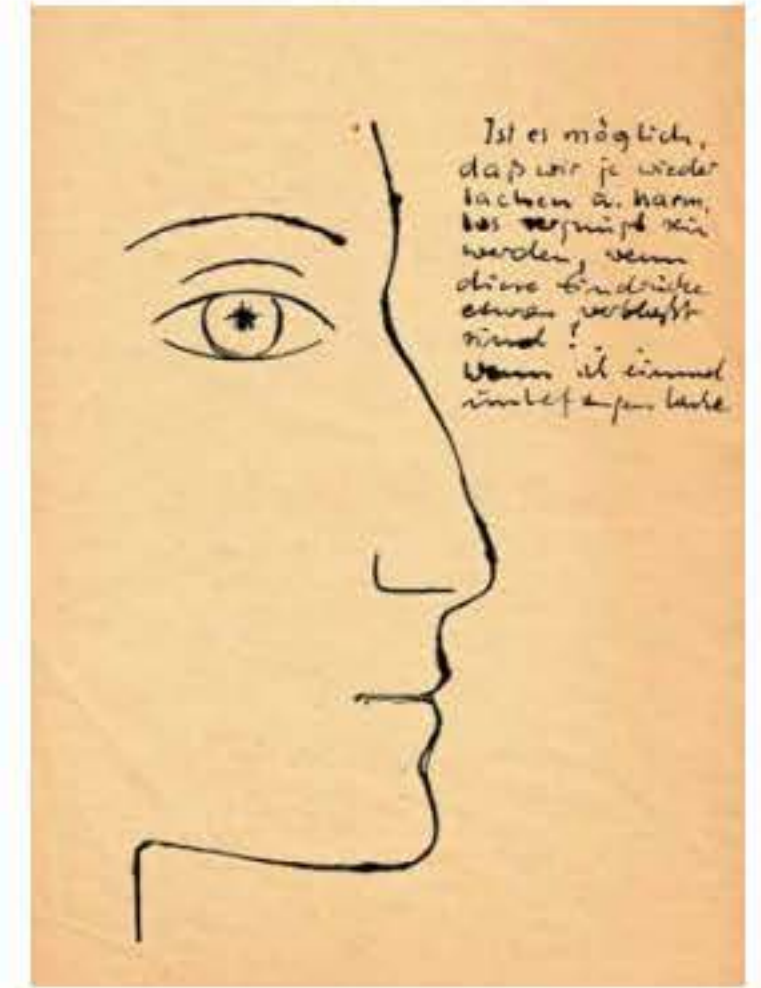
Among the many discontinuities and epistemic ruptures in Gerhard Richter's life and oeuvre, several deeply connected strands run across a trajectory of six decades, from 1957 to 2017. One is Richter's repeated return to the question of whether any artist, and more improbably any German painter, could possibly construct a credible mnemonic representation of the destruction of European Jews under the rule of German Nazi Fascism. Despite this ongoing preoccupation in his work, his statements on the topic are often opaque. For example, when queried on several occasions about his awareness of artists Lea and Hans Grundig,¹ who were prominent faculty members at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, where Richter had studied—and who were among the first German artists in the immediate post-World War II period to have engaged in representing the concentration-camp system and the Holocaust—Richter either claimed to have been hardly aware of their activities or dismissed them as irrelevant for his artistic formation. Thus, we must assume that the artist, at that stage of his development, simply doubted the Grundigs' artistic competence, or that he was indifferent to the testimonies of witnesses and victims of Nazi Fascism, or that his indifference suggested a fundamental skepticism about the qualifications of painting—as opposed to poetic, philosophical, or photographic means—for the mnemonic representation of the Shoah (to use the Hebrew term for the Holocaust).

Yet already in 1957, having just graduated from the Dresden Academy as a Socialist Realist mural painter, Richter made a series of twelve drawings to illustrate *The Diary of Anne Frank* (figs. BB1–BB3).² Regardless of the drawings' almost painfully naive Picassoesque features, their subsequent withdrawal from exposure and documentation seems to attest to the young artist's growing insight that a highly stylized, benevolent homage to one of the most prominent Jewish victims among six million was no less problematic than the cruelly realistic depiction of the anonymous victims of industrialized mass murder in Lea Grundig's drawings and print portfolios (fig. BB4).³

Shortly after his flight from State Socialism in 1961 and his arrival in West Germany, Richter returned to the challenges of whether and how his paintings could confront the historical legacies of German Fascism and the Holocaust. One of his earliest works, painted in 1962, was a pathetic attempt at a portrait of "der Hitler" (as Theodor Adorno had called him in a famous 1959 lecture); the canvas, which he soon erased, became the verso of *Deer* (1963; see fig. BK13). Two other paintings with explicit Holocaust imagery were displayed in his first group exhibition in the West, which opened on May 13, 1963, in an empty butcher shop in Düsseldorf's Kaiserstrasse.⁴ One, titled *Erschießung* (Execution) (fig. BB5), juxtaposed a painted photographic image documenting a Fascist execution of political prisoners with a serialized image of an eerily smiling starlet, inverted to form a Warholian frieze below the hanging corpses. The other (fig. BB6) combined the enigmatic letters *Tagebu* (undoubtedly a fragment of the German title of the *Tagebuch* [Diary] of Anne Frank) with a large-scale, crudely painted depiction of a headless photographic pinup. Soon after the exhibition, the artist destroyed both paintings.

Adorno's above-mentioned 1959 lecture, called "The Meaning of Working through the Past," was soon recognized as one of the most important of his early philosophical reflections on the conditions of collective disavowal and the concomitant destruction of historical and mnemonic abilities in postwar West Germany. Surprisingly to some, Adorno had referred to the German cult of Anne Frank's diary (which had even been adapted to a stage production) precisely as a paradoxical psychosocial symptom of that disavowal, in which the erosion of authentic compassion, resulting in the inability to actually mourn and remember the victims, had become painfully evident:

I was told the story of a woman who, upset after seeing a dramatization of The Diary of Anne Frank, said: "Yes, but that girl at least should have been allowed to live." To be sure, even that was good as a first step toward understanding. But the individual case, which should stand, and raise awareness about, the terrifying totality, by its very



FIGS BB1–BB3
Gerhard Richter, Illustrations
for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, ca. 1957.
Ink on paper, each 11 1/4 × 8 1/4 in.
(29.6 × 21 cm). Gerhard Richter
Archive, Dresden (inv. 497/13, 500/13,
501/13)



FIG BB4
Lea Grundig, *Eternal Shame*, 1944.
Folio 17 from the artist's lithographic portfolio *In the Valley of Slaughter*, published in Tel Aviv

individuation became an alibi for the totality the woman forgot. The perplexing thing about such observations remains that even on their account one cannot advise against production of the Anne Frank play and the like, because their effect nonetheless feeds into the potential for improvement, however repugnant they also are and however much they seem to be a profanation of the dignity of the dead.⁵

Richter read this published lecture only many years later, and since then Adorno's writings have increasingly informed his thinking, all the way up to his recently renewed reflections regarding the viability of his *Birkenau* paintings (2014; pls. XX–XX), which are discussed at length below.⁶ But the artist's seemingly disrespectful, diffident fragmentation of *Tagebuch* in the title of his 1962 painting might well have signaled his own awareness and increasing discomfort (precisely along the lines of Adorno's criticism) with the emerging state-sponsored memory culture. Officially titled *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, this “mastering of the past” had shifted from the mute repression of the initial postwar years into mandated forms of ritualistic remembrance. After Richter's arrival in West Germany, it became obvious that he was facing not only the ethical challenge to rupture the mechanisms of this enforced memory culture but also the aesthetic challenge to define his speaking position as an artist emerging from that history and attempting to construct means and modes of representation.

Like his fellow citizens in the West, Richter could neither claim a place of ethical transcendence and historical exemption due to his age nor identify himself as a subject removed from responsibility and collective guilt (a role that the Communist East's mythical history of collective anti-Fascism had falsely posited for its citizens). It is highly unlikely that Richter would have read Hannah Arendt's recently published series of essays in the *New Yorker*, reporting from the 1961 trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, yet her diagnosis of postwar German mentalities (including yet another comment on the German cult of Anne Frank) corresponded to Richter's, as it articulated the Germans' increasingly manifest conflicts in the processes of subject and cultural identity formation.

It is quite gratifying to feel guilty if you haven't done anything wrong: how noble! Whereas it is rather hard and certainly depressing to admit guilt and to repent. The youth of Germany is surrounded, on all sides and in all walks of life, by men in positions of authority and in public office who are very guilty indeed but who feel nothing of the sort. The normal reaction to this state of affairs should be indignation, but indignation would be quite risky—not a danger to life and limb but definitely a handicap in a career. Those young German men and women who every once in a while—on the occasion of all the Diary of Anne Frank hubbub and of the Eichmann trial—treat us to hysterical outbreaks of guilt feelings are not staggering under the burden of the past, their father's guilt; rather, they are trying to escape from the pressure of very present and actual problems into a cheap sentimentality.⁷



FIG BB5
Gerhard Richter, *Erschießung* (*Execution*), 1962. Mixed media on canvas, 66 1/4 × 78 1/2 in. (170 × 200 cm). Destroyed



FIG BB6
Gerhard Richter, *Tagebuch(ch)* (*Diary*), 1962. Mixed media on canvas, dimensions unknown. Destroyed

As a new West German citizen and as an artist, Richter was defined within these extremely contradictory parameters of ethical and aesthetic demands. The ethics mandated, more urgently than in the East, that he be politically conscious in order to counteract both the collective condition of disavowed guilt and the repression of Fascist history. And the aesthetics demanded that the geopolitically repositioned artist represent what had been previously utterly unthinkable and was now rightfully considered—and might well prove to remain—utterly impossible to represent. One would only have to think of some of Richter's prominent contemporaries in Europe such as Yves Klein or Piero Manzoni (or even less comparable, an American like Jasper Johns) to recognize the fundamentally different spectrum of historical, political, and social challenges that Richter actually chose to confront.

Although this spectrum of critical reflection was atypical for most visual artists of Richter's generation, it had already been explored by a number of philosophers, poets, and writers in the immediate aftermath of the war. The resulting theoretical analyses were formulated not only by Arendt and Adorno, German Jewish philosophers writing from the perspective of exile,⁸ but equally by writers such as Georges Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre, coming out of the French Resistance. Therefore, Richter's growing consciousness of the Holocaust was not motivated merely by aesthetic questions concerning the possibilities, or rather, the impossibilities of representation. To an equal if not greater measure, it was defined precisely by those ethical questions that the philosophers posed. The first question concerned the indisputable condition of collective German guilt, which Karl Jaspers had already addressed in 1946:

Metaphysical guilt: There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty. If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally. That I live after such a thing has happened, weighs upon me as indelible guilt.⁹

The second question asked not only how a post-bourgeois and post-national subjectivity could be credibly constituted after Auschwitz, but also whether any artistic or cultural identity could be reconceived that would not recognize the genocide of the Jewish population of Europe as one of its foundational historical paradigms. Bataille posed this very question in response to Sartre's notorious essay "Anti-Semite and Jew":

In being a man, there is generally an oppressive, sickly element that must be overcome. But this weight and this repugnance were never as heavy as they have become since Auschwitz. Like you and me, those responsible for Auschwitz had nostrils, a mouth, a voice, human

reason, they could unite, could have children. Like the Pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is the fact, the sign of man. The image of man is inseparable, henceforth, from a gas chamber.¹⁰

The Italian social historian Enzo Traverso has argued that if neither philosophy—in Traverso's argument, primarily Marxist philosophy—nor anthropology has proven capable of understanding and adequately addressing the legacies of Auschwitz, then these disciplines themselves have to be rethought accordingly. That this argument applied equally to the epistemology of aesthetic representation and cultural production in the immediate postwar period, if not the following decades, seems to be a compelling proposition, even though the artistic and art-historical evidence of that period contradicts it, with very few exceptions.¹¹

The first and most frequently quoted of Adorno's critical reflections on the possibilities of cultural production after Auschwitz had been formulated shortly after the philosopher's return to Europe from the United States in 1949.¹² While it stated absolutely that "the production of lyrical poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric," the sentence remained relatively vague in determining the criteria of this qualification. Did a poet's mere claim to have survived with a voice intact qualify as barbaric, or did the verdict of barbarism apply generally to poetry's traditional promises to enunciate privileged forms of experience, ranging from the sacred to the spiritual, or from the ravishing to the ravaged recordings of the unconscious, as in recent Surrealist automatism? Or did Adorno's prohibition of poetry situate itself in the lineage of the most advanced epistemology of poetic practices, beginning with Stéphane Mallarmé and reaching a first climax in Dada during World War I? This lineage had defined twentieth-century poetry as a negation of all traditional lexical, phonetic, and grammatical principles, and it had refused the conventions of poetic substitution and condensation precisely in order to foreground those collective forms of linguistic articulation and self-representation that the bourgeois hierarchy of literary genres had perpetually prevented. Not surprisingly, Samuel Beckett, the writer who had fused a narrative of the somatic annihilation of historical experience with the phonetic anti-aesthetics of the Dada avant-garde, emerged as both Adorno's and Richter's favorite post-World War II author.

It has gone previously unnoticed that Adorno's verdict might well have been inspired by Walter Benjamin's seventh thesis from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which had—now famously—stated:

There has never been a document of culture that is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another. The historical materialist thus moves as far away from this as measurably possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.¹³

It is also little known that Adorno subsequently revised his initial position on poetry on several occasions. His second major statement concerning the conditions of postwar cultural production no longer voiced a prohibition, but rather a fulminating, if not outright nihilistic, critique of culture that resuscitated the most radical anti-aesthetic positions of the first decades of the twentieth century, from Marcel Duchamp's urinal to the writings of Bertolt Brecht. These had already insisted that all artistic propositions should simultaneously enunciate their proper negation, visibly signal the inevitable failures of their utopian promises, and underline the dialectics of culture and barbarism as being inextricably innate to their practices. Thus, Adorno stated in 1965:

Culture intensifies and perpetuates the stench, since it is stench itself, since its palaces are built from dog turds—as Bertolt Brecht once stated in a wonderful passage. A few years after these lines were written, Auschwitz gave us the incontrovertible evidence that all culture had failed. . . . Thus all culture after Auschwitz, including its own urgently necessary critiques, ends up as mere garbage.¹⁴

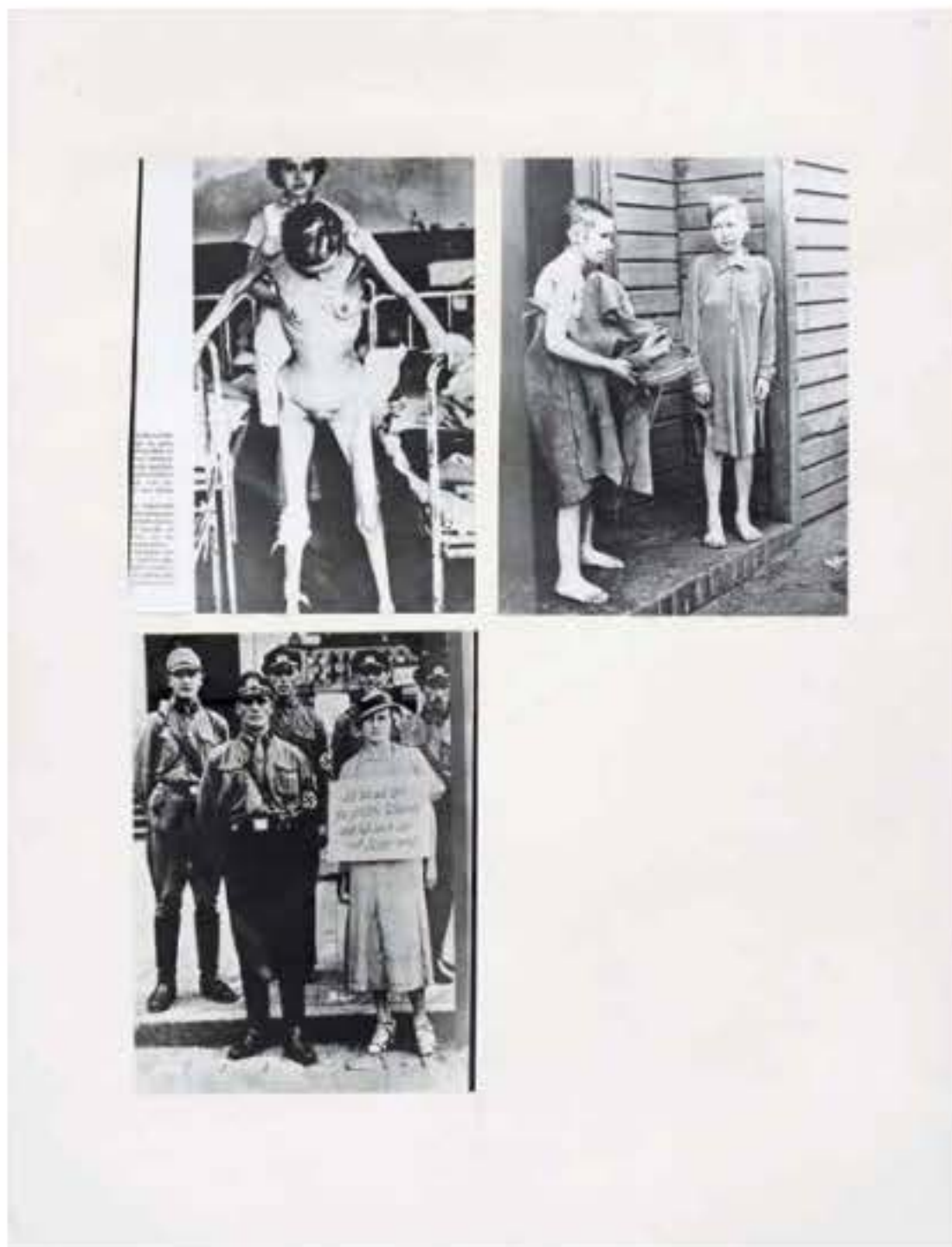
We should not forget that modernism's first truly nihilistic epistemology—the post-World War I anti-aesthetic—had defined itself simultaneously within a dialectic of previously unimaginable forms of collective and subjective self-determination while it registered the impact of equally unimaginable catastrophe, annihilation, and trauma. Adorno's surprising citation of Brecht (whose work he generally disparaged) draws on the tropes of scatological debasement to discredit any aspirations for one's privileged elevation in the acts of cultural production and consumption. Yet, while this dialectic of the documents of culture and barbarism might have prevailed during the first three decades of the twentieth century, inevitably, authentic culture after World War II would have to take barbarism as its primary, if not singular, point of departure, bereft of any utopian or redeeming powers that culture might have previously promised.

Adorno's philosophical trajectory was modified a third time, in 1965: I once said that after Auschwitz one could no longer write poetry, and that gave rise to a discussion I did not anticipate. . . . Just as I said that after Auschwitz one could not write poems—by which I meant to point to the hollowness of the resurrected culture of that time—it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one must write poems, in keeping with Hegel's statement in his Aesthetics that as long as there is an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be art as an objective form of that awareness.¹⁵

The author's spectrum of theoretical aesthetic demands, beginning with a fundamental prohibition of poetic language (and, by implication, all forms of cultural depiction and narration), passing through an annihilating anti-aesthetic, and

culminating in the declaration of artistic production as an act of mourning and solidarity in human suffering, could well be cited as a model for Richter's own shifting and increasingly differentiated positions. Following the Anne Frank drawings of 1957 and the now-destroyed paintings of 1962, his third attempt to address these ever more urgent and complex questions was a group of particularly important paintings completed in 1964–65 that differed dramatically from his earlier efforts to engage explicitly with German political history; among them are *Family at the Seaside* (pl. XX), *Uncle Rudi* (pl. XX), *Aunt Marianne* (pl. XX), and *Mr. Heyde* (pl. XX). In them, he avoided the fallacies of a transcendental position of exemption; they are neither falsely affirmative and treacherously sentimental, like the Anne Frank drawings, nor deceptively self-righteous, like the disturbing juxtaposition of Holocaust references with pinup imagery. In contrast, Richter's photo paintings of 1964–65 almost ostentatiously implicate their author and his family within the very triangulation of actual complicity, guilt, and disavowal. Consider, for example, the portrait of his uncle Rudi, a German Wehrmacht soldier in uniform, who had died in the first six months of the war. The painting that was destined to be a gift to the Czech town of Lidice on the occasion of a commemorative exhibition, organized by the Berlin dealer René Block. This exhibition aimed to remind Germans of the massacre of the town's population and the destruction of its buildings that German soldiers had performed in retribution for the 1942 execution of Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi commander in occupied Czechoslovakia, by Czech and Slovak resistance fighters. In his apparently affirmative identification with the perpetrator in his own family and with the photographic memories of the family album, the artist explicitly opposed the false sentimentality of commemorative postures promoted by the emerging official memory culture. Even more provocative was Richter's decision to paint Werner Heyde, a protagonist of the Nazi euthanasia program, thus inverting the traditional function of the portrait genre, which was to portray admired agents of history or beloved subjects. The erosion of this convention by depicting a high-ranking (yet now seemingly anonymous) Nazi criminal was both a public incrimination of the German people at large—for crimes committed during the freely elected and voluntarily sustained Fascist regime—and an indictment of the scandalous protection former Nazis had received during the period of reconstruction under the government of Konrad Adenauer.¹⁶

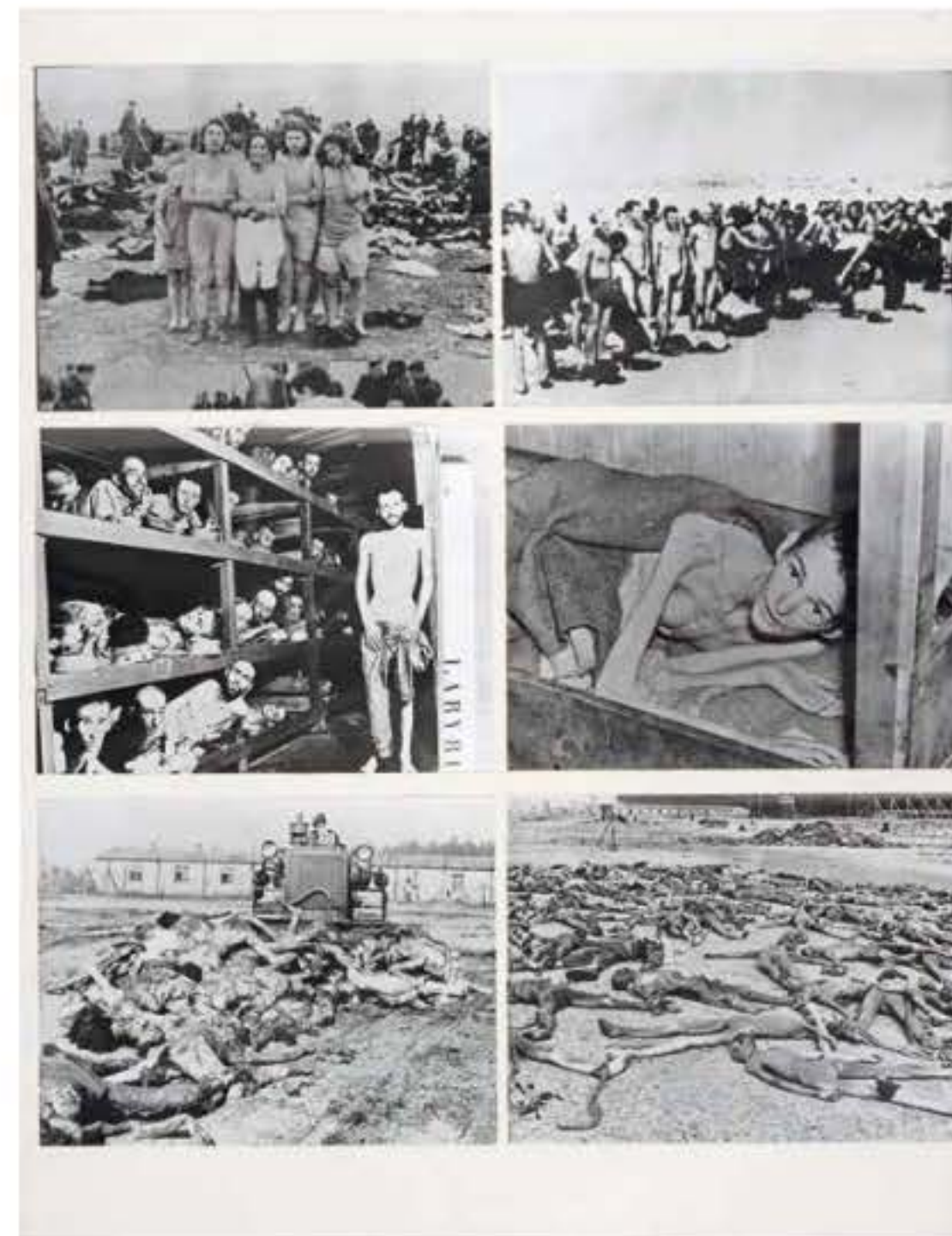
Thus, Richter's portraits of 1964–65 achieve a dual resolution of the conflicts he had faced during his first years in the West by abolishing the false distancing position of both affirmative sentimentality and pseudo-critique. Furthermore, by conflating photographs of Heyde and other perpetrators with the hallowed genre of the portrait, Richter collapsed the difference between the documents of culture and the documents of barbarism, in fact, positing the latter as the primary reference and point of departure for any critical reflection.¹⁷ And



FIGS BB7-BB10
Gerhard Richter, *Atlas* sheets 16
and 18-20, "Photographs from
Books," 1967. Each 26 1/4 x 20 1/4 in.
(66.7 x 51.7 cm)

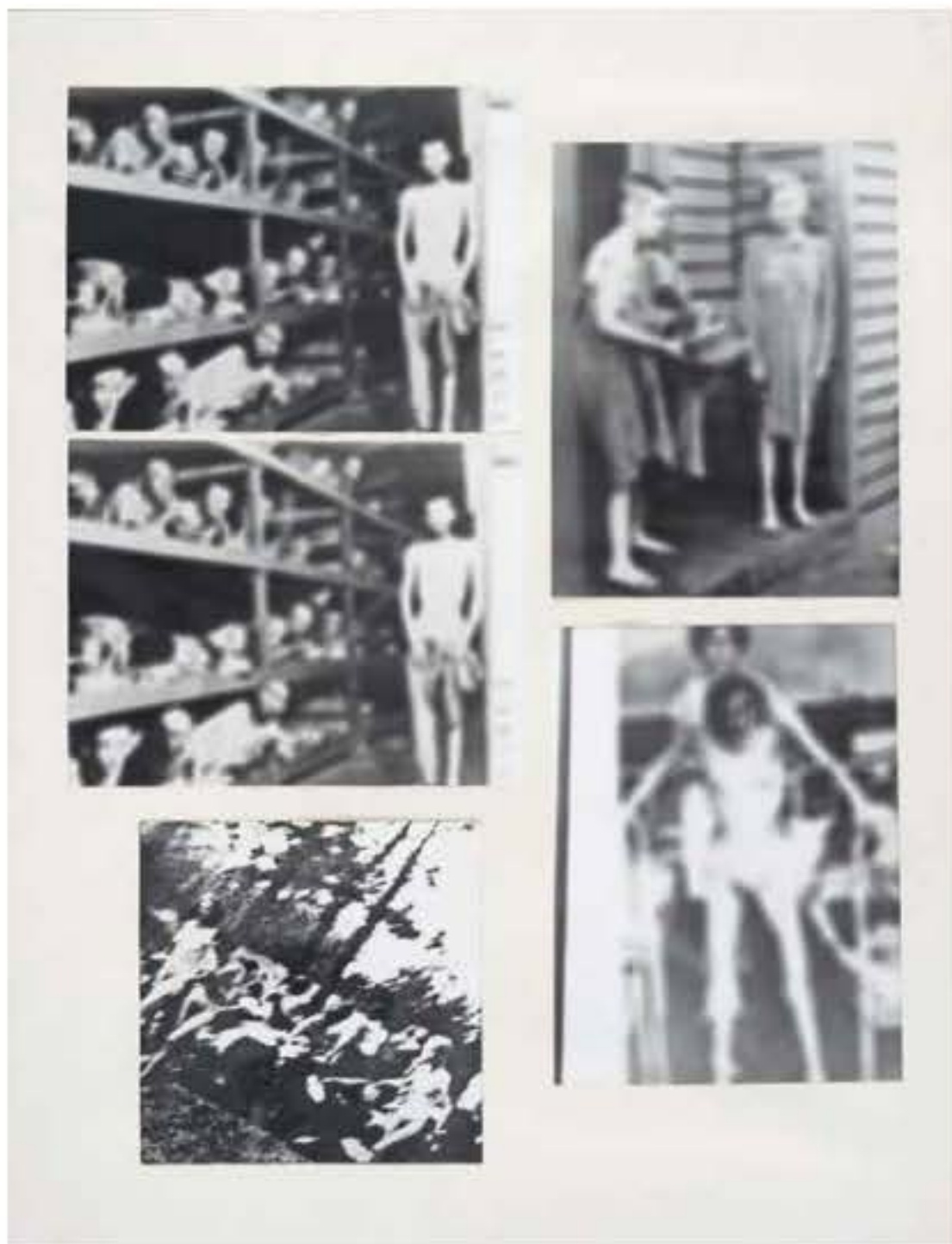
finally, even on a purely epistemological level, the artist's mapping of the two types of documents generated a fundamental transformation of the ready-made aesthetic itself, whose substitution by the rule of the photographic image had permeated painterly production since Robert Rauschenberg and had culminated with Andy Warhol (both of whom had left an immensely important imprint on Richter's formative years in the West). Richter's iconographic choices finally uncovered and incorporated the photograph's actual historical and political abysmal depths to include the images of trauma and devastation, originating from their ultimate reference to the instantiation of extreme political barbarism, as both Bataille and Adorno had diagnosed.

It might not be accidental at all that these paintings—constituting the first fully credible painterly project to address the history of German Fascism and its consequences for the formation of a new post-Fascist and post-national subjectivity—would emerge as if in tandem with the famous Auschwitz trials conducted in Frankfurt, under the leadership of General Attorney Fritz Bauer, between 1963 and 1965. After all, as is now generally understood, the initiation of these trials not only began a serious process of collective reflection and recognition but also prompted critical interventions by the emerging generation of students and intellectuals who finally dared to confront the silence of the generation of the Fascist fathers.¹⁸



Two years after making the photographic paintings, the artist again forced these questions about the representation of the Holocaust. This time, however, he reached for a threshold beyond which any further debates seemed decisively canceled. Deploying two equally offensive strategies, Richter appeared to suggest that, given the historical context, even the very desire for documentary imagery depicting that history would more likely originate from obscene and parasitical voyeuristic compulsion than from evolving forms of belated compassion. Enacted in Richter's *Atlas*, the first strategy juxtaposed photographs from the concentration camps with pornography, and the second one—being no less offensive—inflicted a layer of garish felt-tip marker colors on the former (figs. BB7-BB11).¹⁹ As

is by now well known, the scandalous confrontation between traumatic images of bodily annihilation and images of extreme pornographic banality had already occurred in at least two instances, both certainly unknown to Richter in 1967. Five years earlier, Boris Lurie, a survivor of Buchenwald and a member of the NO!art group violently attacking Pop art in New York,²⁰ made photocollages in which he compiled similarly insufferable juxtapositions of imagery, asserting the paradox that the phenomena of the Holocaust were unspeakable and unthinkable, yet apparently not unviewable. And, as Georges Didi-Huberman has pointed out, Jean-Luc Godard in his film *Une femme mariée* (1964) had forged a constellation of pornographic sex scenes along with clips from Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*



(1956), a concentration-camp documentary that had become the most important early documentary film for the broader dissemination of the history of the Holocaust and one of the first films to present the subject with actual photographic material taken at the camps immediately after their liberation.

One preliminary explanation of this startling tactic, practiced by three artists more or less simultaneously, recalls an observation by the German Jewish writer and literary historian Ruth Klüger, who stated, "there was something resembling the pleasure of pornography about the interest at the time in the Holocaust which had not yet been given that name."²¹ A second explanation draws on Richter's frequent references to the fact that these photographs of the camps had haunted him since

his days as a student in Dresden,²² when he first encountered them in American and British publications, and that a final reckoning with them in a prospective exhibition and publication might have promised a cathartic relief from years of fixation.²³ And a third, more conclusive interpretation suggests that Richter recognized these images—the ultimate documents of barbarism of the twentieth century—as a paradigmatic dialectical negation of any possible, easily achievable painterly representation in the future. From the painter's perspective, therefore, the true scandal of these images is not just the voyeuristic compulsion that draws the viewer but the fundamental and irreparable schism of vision and desire that they have imposed, complemented by the degradation of painting, that is,



even the mere act of coloring a surface. Thus, even the very matter of color—ultimately, the practice of painting itself—aspires to, or inevitably succumbs to, that status of allegorical annihilation.

The Banality of Color

It seems appropriate then to recognize that the garish Warholian application of paint on these photographs not only offends us visually but also devalues color itself as one of painting's traditional essences, corresponding to photography's erasure of painting. Richter's almost exclusive deployment of grisaille in the first five years of his practice had

initiated this dual cancellation of painting's presumably essential foundations. Simulating the regime of the photograph, this monotonal scheme insisted that, *sub specie* of (recent) history, any conventional denotative use of color could only betray naiveté, banality, or conciliatory delusions.

Richter's iconic and chromatic *Atlas* images, in contrast, explicitly present themselves as actual documents of barbarism. As such, they exemplify a paradigm of absolute negativity that altered the epistemology of painterly practices in the second half of the twentieth century, similar to the impact of the initial paradigm formations in the 1910s that ranged from abstraction to the ready-made. Taking such imagery as their point of departure, Richter's *Birkenau* paintings (pls. XX-XX), his



FIG BB11
Gerhard Richter, *Atlas* sheet 22,
"Photographs from Magazines," 1967.
26 1/4 x 20 1/4 in. (66.7 x 51.7 cm)

most recent major work, extend the artist's meditations on the Holocaust and its impact on culture, subjectivity, and nation-state identity into the present, expanding this opposition between photographic documents of barbarism and painterly documents of culture into an almost monumental form.²⁴

This group of four paintings is complemented by four digitally produced copies (pls. XX-XX), each of which is divided into four quadrants. The paintings and the copies are to be installed on opposite walls, accompanied by reproductions of four photographs (pls. XX-XX) that had been taken secretly in August 1944 by Alex, a Greek prisoner at Auschwitz and a member of the Sonderkommandos, who risked his life smuggling them to the Polish resistance in order to inform the

world what was happening in the death camp. As early as 1967, Richter had inserted one of these photos into sheet 19 of his *Atlas* (fig. BB9), indicating that he had been familiar with these images before rediscovering them in a review of Didi-Huberman's crucial study, *Images in Spite of All*.²⁵

Working from initial studies (figs. BB12, BB13) Richter attempted to transform these four photographs into paintings, at first projecting them and subsequently sketching them in graphite on four large, equally sized canvases, possibly planning to execute them in the manner of the dark grisaille paintings of his cycle *October 18th, 1977* (1987). His work on this project started and stalled over almost a year, a lengthy period of hesitation that ended only when the artist decided

he could not achieve what he had first intended. He erased the figurative drawings by overpainting them, starting a slow and prolonged process of producing palimpsests of four large-scale, abstract paintings (figs. BB12–BB21 illustrate the stages of execution for one of the group).

Once completed, these four paintings covered the drawings of the photographs with a netlike abstraction, an irregular grid structure consistent on all four surfaces, whose facture, rather than being gesturally expressive, appears hesitant, insecure, and confined. And chromatically, these canvases are limited—rather atypically among Richter's abstract works of the last twenty years—mostly to the interaction of the complementary colors of red and green and the noncolors of black and white. If one compares *Birkenau* to Richter's recent large-scale abstract paintings such as the *Woods* (2005) and *Cage* (2006) series, their intrinsic differences in color, texture, and facture become instantly evident. Such a comparison also forces us once again to confront the questions of whether and how painterly abstraction could actually represent a fundamentally unrepresentable historical subject. In the *Birkenau* paintings, where would one find the marks of distinction and the criteria of differentiation between the mnemonic and spectacular morphologies of Richter's abstraction? After all, in Richter's large-scale abstractions the transubstantiation of visual structures and chromatic contrasts into registers of seemingly pure optical delectation often borders on the spectacular, a condition—as Guy Debord famously argued in 1967—that subordinates all other forms of communication and experience to specular exchange and gratification.²⁶ Could one discern the documents of culture and barbarism within the register of texture, facture, and gesture, or would one more likely discover their fundamental incompatibility and incomparability within the chromatic register? Or, if neither, what other specific criteria would the paintings offer to develop a credible differentiation?

Structure and facture in the *Birkenau* paintings manifestly suspend, if not terminate, the principles that had previously ruled Richter's abstractions. They exchange the grand gesture, even if it had been semi-mechanically produced with a squeegee, for a painterly procedure that appears almost as a stultified stutter. And the paintings' chromatic differentiations correspond to this facture with a closed circularity, given that the spectral flows and glissandos of Richter's previous abstractions have been reduced to the arrested bipolarities of green and red, black and white. If they indeed convey a sense of recalcitrance against the chromatic opulence and seductive plenitude of Richter's earlier abstract paintings, they demarcate a decisive difference from the spectacular in painting itself, a difference that at times might not have been all that clearly defined. All hopes that color might be redeemed seem finally vanquished; a perfidious green, for example, reminds us that this tint can never be extracted from its attachment to

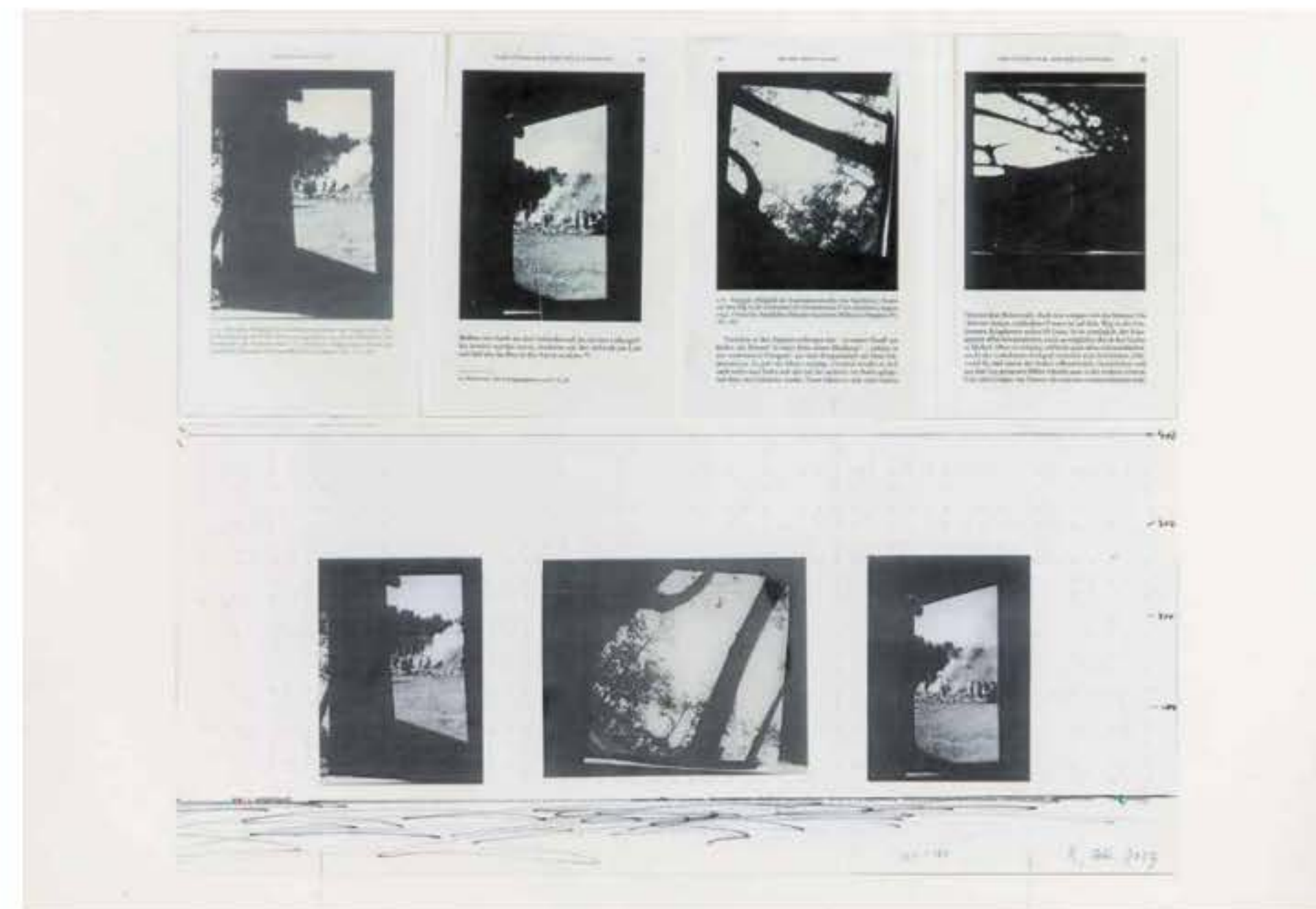
the referents of nature. And the complementary red—strangely never condemned by the great avatars of abstraction,²⁷ even though its referential bonds with nature (ranging from roses to blood) are just as fixed—appears here as an equally impertinent tint, suggesting that red and green serve as the two foundational hues of a cruel cycle of growth and destruction, of remembering and forgetting, as if their complementarity could naturalize the eradication and resuscitation of life. In their juxtaposition with red and green, the small units of black and white, remnants from Richter's melancholic grisaille paintings, are equally fragmented and particularized. Thus, the hesitant morphologies and confined chromatic constellations seem to trace the contradictions operative within the mnemonic process itself, as both an inevitable necessity and an inevitable failure, echoing Beckett's famous statement: "I can't go on, I must go on."

Given that no traces of the photographs or the drawings of them remain visible in the paintings, the only connection to the images published in Didi-Huberman's study is the eventual choice of the title, *Birkenau*. Prior to their first presentation, at the Dresden Albertinum in 2014, Richter had simply identified the works as *Four Abstract Paintings*. Only after a period of additional reflection did the artist reluctantly decide to refer to these works as the *Birkenau* paintings, thus making explicit their origins and historical references.

The Duplicate

One of the stranger features in Richter's conception and execution of *Birkenau* was his decision to subject these paintings immediately after completion to a process of digital duplication. On the occasion of the Dresden exhibition, the artist decided to install the two groups—the four original paintings and the four reproductions—on opposite walls. The digital duplications are differentiated from the paintings by the partitioning of each into equally sized quadrants, the demarcation of which inserts a negative white space into the previously unified and unique painterly body. Viewers might associate this partition with a cruciform grid (like a window frame), the crosshairs of a weapon's scope, or the religious emblem of a cross. Given that Richter had previously duplicated some of his paintings photographically (at first in 1972, after the sale of his series *48 Portraits*) and more recently had reproduced key paintings (including *Ema*, *Uncle Rudi*, and *Mr. Heyde*) in photographic editions without partitioning the prints, we must assume that the spatial and perceptual division of the *Birkenau* reproductions was motivated by more complex demands.²⁸

The first reason might have been to sustain the dialectical opposition between singularity and multiplicity, which has served as a formal and conceptual strategy in many of Richter's crucial works and has permeated his thinking since the mid-1960s. Painting's innate claims to be unique and singular were always challenged by the potential for proliferation and



FIGS BB12, BB13
Gerhard Richter, *Atlas sheets 807*
and *808, "Studies for Birkenau,"* 2013.
Each 19 1/2 x 27 1/2 in. (50 x 70 cm)



July 15



July 29



August 3



August 3



August 4



August 13



August 14



August 25

confronted with the inevitable multiplicity of reproduction. A second motivation for the digital duplication of the *Birkenau* group could have been the desire to simultaneously resist both the work's incumbent monumentality and its equally inevitable fetishization as spectacularized painting, the principle modes of reception with which contemporary culture obstructs any intrinsically mnemonic project. And even a third reason, an economic calculation, might have motivated the digital reproductions. Unlike the paintings, which Richter has identified explicitly as originals that cannot be sold, the two sets of reproductions, each comprising sixteen digital prints, can paradoxically realize their immense potential in the art market.²⁹

Thus, one may wonder whether the paintings' duplication should be read primarily as an allegorical devaluation of their singularity, or whether this technological permutation augments their importance, as if functioning almost like a proliferating parthenogenesis of mnemonic images. One may also consider whether this extension from unique painting to digital copy transforms a memory image that meditates on the past—and represents the singular history of the Shoah—into an operative document that confronts the present and future, recognizing an apparently iterative cyclical structure of violence and barbarism within the current political sphere. Thus, the relationship between the original *Birkenau* paintings and their reproductions appears to actually dehistoricize the legacy of the death camps and to redirect the emphasis toward conditions of extreme political violence today.

If read in this manner, Richter's diptych (composed of the two groups) probes further philosophical questions that relate to the theorization, historicization, and representation of the Holocaust. The first one queries to what degree any attempt to construct a mnemonic representation of historical trauma in the present is itself inevitably and involuntarily implicated in the very process of spectacularization, a social tendency whose primary motivation aims precisely at the elimination of mnemonic and historical thinking. Whether any painting, particularly Richter's large abstractions, can resist its immediate subjection to spectacle culture is a challenge that his work has faced for several decades, one that the artist had to confront all the more in the *Birkenau* series. That Holocaust memory can and will all too easily be transformed into a product of the culture industry was lamented by the Hungarian writer and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész:

*Many more are those who steal the Holocaust from its guardians only to make cheap junk of it. . . . A Holocaust conformism was formed, as well as a sentimentalism, a Holocaust canon, a system of taboos and its ritual language, Holocaust products for the consumption of the Holocaust.*³⁰

The second theoretical question Richter's *Birkenau* addresses is the seemingly unresolvable conflict among historical, ethical,

and aesthetic demands. If some historians contend that all images of the Holocaust should be publicized, others insist that only abstraction—as an ethical and aesthetic prohibition—can abolish the repression of history and induce mnemonic representations without (re-)activating the viewer's sadistic desires for spectacle that victimize the victims once again. Richter's *Birkenau* precisely stages this dialectical tension between the photographic document of trauma and the mnemonic, if not redemptive, painterly sublimation.

The most incisive distrust of photographic documents as authentic traces that promise to bring the viewer closer to the unimaginable but, in fact, veil it, or parasitically share its scopophilic violence, was voiced by Adorno. In his 1962 text "Commitment," one of the first philosophical critiques of the representation of trauma in Holocaust imagery, the philosopher warned against the tendency among politically committed artists to aestheticize suffering.³¹ Even the most faithful image of suffering positions viewers at a safe, almost pornographic remove from the event, allowing them to feel in control of the depicted scene. Though he was not specifically differentiating between painting and photography, Adorno's critique of the iconic mimesis of suffering is decisive:

*The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite.*³²

In the mid-1980s, Adorno's prohibition of representation was voiced even more forcefully by Claude Lanzmann, ironically a close ally and friend of Sartre, who had been at the center of Adorno's critique in "Commitment." Eleven years in the making, Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1974–85), a documentary film of almost ten hours, consists solely of present-day footage of Holocaust survivors and members of the resistance, as well as, on occasion, interview attempts with some of the Nazi perpetrators. In certain ways, Lanzmann opposed and inverted the principles of Resnais's *Night and Fog* by programmatically rejecting the use of archival footage and documentary photographs. Coining the phrase "obscenity of understanding," he insisted that the iconic and mimetic representation of the victims, no matter how pedagogical the shock might be, amounted to an obscene act—one that would essentially comfort viewers by placing them in the mastering position of the perpetrators. Taking a position similar to Adorno's, he negated the assumption that a historical trauma of the magnitude of the Shoah could ever be visually grasped and understood.

And the third question—possibly the most difficult—posed by Richter's *Birkenau* is whether the Shoah should, and can, be historicized at all, as authors like Enzo Traverso have extensively argued. Or whether the Shoah, following Elie Wiesel's theological demand, should be considered a unique and singular

catastrophe that solely concerns the Jewish people, a catastrophe that cannot be theorized outside of the history of European anti-Semitism and should not be compared with other genocides in different historical and political contexts, let alone with any present situation. Richter's strategy of subverting the unique sanctity of the *Birkenau* paintings by replicating them with their digital mirror, and thereby increasing their circulation, suggests that he shares the former position, implicitly stating that the violence of Nazi Fascism, while the most horrendous of the crimes against humanity in the twentieth century, should not be isolated and singularized. Rather, the multiplication of the works could suggest that any commemorative approach to understanding the Shoah inevitably has to expand the scope of its critical reflection to include the catastrophes of the present and the imminent future.

Naming Abstraction

In his groundbreaking study *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, Mark Godfrey traces both the history of post-World War II American modernist abstraction and the various efforts—successes and failures—of artists, historians, and critics in that period to either utterly ignore the intersection of Holocaust history and the culture of abstract painting or to confront it in a variety of complicated maneuvers.³³ The first of the few possible challenges to his important thesis, as much as to our own interpretation of Richter's *Birkenau* paintings, derives from the insight that actually only a very small number of works could be explicitly

positioned within the historical trajectory that took the caesura of the Holocaust as its point of departure. Thus, a first question emerges concerning the formal and morphological status of these abstract paintings: having been produced by these postwar artists before, during, and after their temporary engagement with that history, would they now not have to appear totally indifferent, if not outright defiant, to any such contextualization? Among the few figures for whom this engagement was momentous or foundational (i.e., Barnett Newman, Morris Louis, and Frank Stella), only Stella, in his early Black Paintings,³⁴ allows for a productive comparison with Richter; both belong to the same generation (born in 1936 and 1932, respectively), and both respond to the powerful legacy of American Abstract Expressionism. Taking Godfrey's extensive discussion of Stella into account,³⁵ our brief comparison will allow us also to pose a second question: Can the mere act of establishing a reference by naming a non-representational painting, such as Stella's *Arbeit Macht Frei* (fig. BB22), in 1958, or Richter's *Birkenau*, in 2016, possibly justify the work as a credible, critical, or mnemonic attempt at painterly representation after the Holocaust?

If our first question acknowledges that post-World War II artistic cultures could not possibly have fulfilled the aesthetic mandate that all artistic practices after Auschwitz (and historical trauma) would have to depart from documents of barbarism, it also entails another acknowledgement, namely, that all common cultural production since then has inevitably acquired the condition of compensatory, if not fraudulent, consolation. Similarly, if our second question acknowledges that the ethical



FIG BB22
Frank Stella (American, born 1936).
Arbeit Macht Frei, 1958. Enamel on
canvas, 85 × 121 1/2 in. (215.9 × 308.6 cm).
Private collection

aspiration for cultural practices is to initiate processes of forming truly post-national identities, then we would have to admit in analogue that the actual features of national identities provided by cultural production inevitably always reveal the fraudulence of all Identitarian claims.

Stella's nominalist incursion in 1958—what we could call an act of deictic voluntarism—reminded the emerging American art world (at the time about to be newly renovated with a post-Duchampian aesthetic) of the actual historical and socio-political conditions of experience that determined the conception of painting after the Holocaust. His diffident gesture was as powerful as a provocation as it was temporary in its effects on

the new concepts driving cultural production. Richter's naming of his work in 2016, almost fifty years later, performs a similarly provocative, if not more profound, staging of the near-impossible aspirations to induce and sustain a mnemonic, critical, and political practice, given the universal rule of spectacle and exchange value in the art world. The mere act of naming by both painters seems to acknowledge, after all, that abstraction will inevitably have to fail in the face of its immense task to represent the unrepresentable with painterly means. And only the chasm between the act of naming and the gesture of a nameless and comparatively meaningless painting can confront viewers with the actual demands to be literally faced.

Nation-State Culture after Auschwitz

In 1997, almost ten years before the *Birkenau* project, Richter had returned once more to the photographs of the concentration camps in his *Atlas*. The occasion was a commission from the German government to contribute a site-specific work to the restored Reichstag in Berlin, which had become the seat of parliament in the recently reunified Germany. And again, Richter's initial conception to take the documents of barbarism as his point of departure—this time, by installing the photographs as mural-size billboards in the building's entrance hall (fig. BB23)—was eventually rejected by the artist. Clearly, we must assume that he recognized once more that the photographic depiction of the victims would only amount to renewed spectatorial scopophilic abuse. More importantly, the artist figured that the monumental and ostentatious display of these presumably mnemonic devices could only legitimize a reconstituted, self-righteous nation-state ideology. Thus, in a perplexing reversal, Richter submitted a comparatively bland final project that merely decorates the wall space assigned to him with a monumental construction of six large, enameled-glass panels in the three colors of the German flag (fig. BB24). Anticipating the fate of his work, like all cultural production to be subjected to a “process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another,” as Walter Benjamin stated, Richter knew that, at this moment in history, memory itself would be recruited to the ceremonious celebration of a newly found nation-state pride.

Yet, Richter's resuscitation of the memory of Auschwitz in the *Birkenau* paintings might not have been motivated only by his desire to contest these conditions of assimilation to nation-state culture, or by his almost compulsively cyclical return to the question of how his painting could serve as a mnemonic project reflecting the possibilities of cultural production by a German artist after the Holocaust. It might have been actualized by the recognition of an evolving insight that artistic practices under present political circumstances increasingly face the near-universal renewal of proto-Fascist nationalist ideologies that urgently warrant a manifest cultural and political opposition. Consider the following random sampling of recent symptoms from the actual sociopolitical climate in which Richter created *Birkenau*, drawn from a broad spectrum of current German class society and its semblance of universal economic might.³⁶ We can start the ladder with the proto-Fascist Berlin Islamic *lumpenproletarian* rappers Farid Bang and Kollegah, who mock the bodies of Auschwitz victims in their “songs” and announce a “future Holocaust”—only to receive the highest official annual award of the German music industry, appropriately named the Echo. Or we can step up the social ladder to hear a German corporate superpower broker, the CEO of Volkswagen, entertaining his stockholders at a conference with the slogan “Ebit Macht Frei.”³⁷ Or we can quote a petty bourgeois middle-class politician, reminded as the reactionary leader of a new

right-wing populist party, stating in 2019: “Hitler and the Nazis are only a bit of bird shit on over a thousand years of successful German history.”³⁸ Or we can read seemingly liberal art historians, devoted to triumphantly restoring an innately patriarchal discourse of mastery and national identity, asserting: “Germany is now recognized worldwide for its exemplary responsibility in engaging with history....All four artists (Baselitz, Kiefer, Polke, Richter) represent what one could call an *Ur-deutsche phenomenon* evident in their works embedded in German history since the early 1960s.”³⁹ All of these statements claim a new nationalist legitimacy and strike Identitarian poses that emulate the legacy of Auschwitz within a new cocoon of national pride and a decisive repression of historical memory.

The most sinister of these maneuvers in the cultural register is perhaps to be found in a seemingly elegant passage by the art historian Götz Adriani, suggesting that now even the poet Paul Celan's famous phrase “Death is a master from Germany” can be convincingly dismissed and traded for a reference to Richter and others as the new “Masters from Germany”:

*How could art now take the place of death that had been implored by Celan as the Master from Germany? This interest in a quality brand “Made in Germany,” paired with a seemingly irreducible market demand, was not a foregone conclusion, since German art in the course of its history for the most part had lived in the shadow of its 500-year history only Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein the Younger, and Adam Elsheimer achieved international recognition beyond Germany during their lifetime.*⁴⁰

And once the master discourse of this patriarchal Mercedes mentality is spun into action and out of control, we learn that those four male masters are the sole and the first German artists to ever have achieved international recognition (as though Käthe Kollwitz, John Heartfield, Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch, Eva Hesse, Hanne Darboven, and Isa Genzken had never existed and had not been known in the world). It is precisely this recruitment of painting, and of cultural practices in general, for the purpose of sustaining the nationalist and masculinist discourses of the so-called imagined communities that Richter's *Birkenau* opposes. The work undermines those discourses with the weak and pervasive negativity of allegorical abstraction, a visual language that had to define itself historically in the dialectical negation of its utopian origins and aspirations, without, however, yielding even the slightest impulse of its critical opposition to ideological deployment. After all, Adorno's insight that the “unspeakable dimensions of utopian thought are only to be represented in absolute negativity”⁴¹ determines Richter's oeuvre to this very moment.



FIGS BB23, BB24
Gerhard Richter, *Atlas* sheets 648
and 655, “Reichstag,” 1997.
Each 28 × 20 1/4 in. (71 × 51.7 cm)=

Sheena Wagstaff TK

