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## **Idiomatic Différence: Reflections on Intranslatability in the works of Gerhard Richter**

### **Abstract**

Translatability of a work of art, according to Walter Benjamin, is an essential ability to allow a translation to take on »a specific significance inherent in the original« so that it will retain a close relationship to the original. In contrast, Gerhard Richter's photo-based paintings show such an auratic significance of the original in its innate deficiency or intranslatability. As Rosemary Hawker puts it, the striking effect of blur in his paintings represents itself at once as a unique photographic idiom and a distinctive shortcoming of photography which impedes the medium from providing viewers with clearly perceivable images; the blur creates a site of différence in which both media come to a common understanding of one another's idioms by telling what those idioms always fail to achieve. In this short essay, I will examine ways in which Richter's photographic and pictorial works, including early monochrome paintings and recent abstract works based on microscopic photographs of molecular structures, attempt to untranslate photographic idioms in order to see painting's (in)abilities simultaneously. In doing so, I intend to observe in the artist's pictorial practice an actual phenomenon that the image can designate certain facts or truths only through its inherent plurality, faultiness, and partiality.

### **Introduction**

<1>

For postwar artists, if not all, it was a compulsion to withdraw their artworks from the conventions of art making. Without taking examples of Pop Art's coexistence with the social reality of mass media and happenings by Fluxus, ›negation‹ as a mode of production has been given a specific moral quality the artists can follow to free something from conventional artistic practices. There has been a legitimated assumption that the historical convention of art is not on which one's work is based but an obstacle that it has to overcome. This negative mind-set, however, does not appear as a mere derivative of Dadaistic tradition in Richter's photo-paintings, though it provides a basis for his critical attitude toward picture making. Indeed, it is not only the denunciation of the past, but also the negation of the ideological belief that proclaims the demise of painting, in that Richter has simultaneously criticized and continued to engage in a habitual pictorial practice by painting photographs. Unlike those who have embarked on subversive projects to renounce the genealogical association with modernist discourses, Richter has insisted on the sincerity of his commitment to the medium

of painting whose social, historical, and symbolic qualities have been challenged under the discursive name of the avant-garde. Nonetheless the intimacy with painting indicates less a galvanization of the obsolete legitimacy of the medium than an ironic acknowledgment of the so-called productive disablement of picture making with the reflexive aids of photography. He has sought not to paint but to produce ›something‹ that would be definitive rather than authentic: something that would be neither what painting nor photography can represent; and something that would only be engendered through the radical negotiation of each medium's inherent characteristic, shortcoming, or *idiom*.

## The Idiom

<2>

In accounting for what is idiomatic to each medium, it is worth referring to the discussion on the nature of the idiom in Jacques Derrida's »Passe-partout«, the preface to his book *The Truth in Painting*. For Derrida, the idiom does not mean mere locutions in a language. It is what makes each medium unique. He found that a statement, ›I am interested in the idiom in painting‹, would infinitely diverge and thus could never be reduced to a single definition. When one says ›I am interested in the idiom in painting‹, according to Derrida, she might be interested in 1) the painted idiom in painting, 2) the idiom ›in painting‹, 3) »the idiomatic trait or style (that which is singular, proper inimitable) in the domain of painting«,<sup>1</sup> or 4) the specificity of pictorial art as if it were that of language. Derrida said: »but each one divides again, and is grafted and contaminated by all the others, and you would never be finished translating them.«<sup>2</sup> Here Derrida indicated the essential plurality of the idiom, namely the idiom within the idiom. While there is an idiom in the statement that allows no one to match each of four referents with what the statement truly means, one can infinitely ›generate‹ remainders by contemplating what the statement can tell her. Although all the remainders amount to the memory that one has failed to describe the idiom in the statement, each can be a fragment of some other truth. Every attempt to detect ›what is idiomatic‹ incompletely but certainly delineates the truth in an object, and points out something other than that truth, the truth in a different object, or another truth in the original object. If there is any reason that Richter insists on the intranslatability of the idiom when he paints a photograph, it seems to be this generative principle of incessantly pondering what is idiomatic to photography: a chance to cause ›something‹ different from the photograph he used by displacing the meaning of the remainder. Richter says: »I'm not trying to imitate a photograph; I'm trying to make one.«<sup>3</sup>

<3>

Let us think about what kind of photographic idioms Richter has applied to his paintings. Richter begins by choosing a photograph that fascinates him, that he wants to paint. He then deliberately transforms the photograph into a painting and adds distinctive visual turmoil to the picture surface. This enables the viewer to see the finished work as neither a masterly painted photograph nor as a photographically realistic painting. In this dialectical manipulation of two media, the effect of a blur is significant. The blur opens up a path through which one can come close to the specificity of photographic representation. In the early history of photography it was an appealing photographic trope that could echo »the excitement of the modern age« epitomized by Futurist experiments with the depiction of speed and movement.<sup>4</sup> But at the same time the blur signifies the technical naivety of photography. The medium ends up with a lack of visual clarity whenever it captures moving objects »because the camera does not apprehend objects: it sees them«.<sup>5</sup> It is this paradoxical nature of the blur in which Richter touches upon some truth in either photography or painting.



1 Gerhard Richter: *Two Fiats*, 1964, oil on canvas, 130 x 200 cm,  
Baden-Baden, Museum Sammlung Frieder Burda

<4>

Rosemary Hawker finds this truth as »a clear index of the different temporality that shapes the media of photography and painting«.<sup>6</sup> In Hawker's view, Richter's *Two Fiats* (fig. 1) becomes a key for understanding what is idiomatic to each medium's perception and

representation of time. Photography always attests to the barest form of consecutive time at the expense of interpretation, whereas painting takes its time negotiating with the concept of temporality by painting it. *Two Fiats* tries to refer not only to the idiom in photography but to that in painting by simultaneously acknowledging and criticizing the former. In the very same way, at this site of collision of the idioms, the painting demonstrates the shared inadequacy of the media's ability to depict what one calls ›reality‹. Hawker writes: »This image is about the capacities and limitations of the medium it is rendered in, painting, and also the medium to which it overtly refers, photography. It is so much about the limits of representation, in either media, that without the title it would be difficult to ascertain what is shown here.«<sup>7</sup> Hawker suggests that the intranslatability of photographic idiom can be ascribable to the idiom in the medium that tries to translate it: that thinking about the idiom in photography becomes synonymous with thinking about the idiom, or the truth, in painting and vice versa. *Two Fiats* can then be said to detect more benefits from contemplating what the media ›cannot‹ than what they ›can‹, that is, from visualizing what is idiomatic to each medium than being disappointed at the loss of the visually informative.

## Magnifying Vision

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While the blur occupies an important place in Richter's art, there is another striking example of the photographic idiom which he has long explored. *128 Details from a Picture* of 1978 is the earliest work in which the artist utilized ›magnifying vision‹ that is idiomatic to photography. Unlike the case of *Two Fiats*, ›painting from photography‹, Richter photographed the surface of an abstract oil sketch that had been exhibited at the Anna and Leonowen's Gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. The 128 photographs of the surface had been taken »from various sides, from various angles, various distances and under different light conditions« and were mounted in groups of sixteen pictures on eight individually framed panels, presented in two rows.<sup>8</sup> In 1998, the artist made offset prints from the panels, which can be shown either lined up or presented as a two- or four-row block. To date, he has made two artist's books and one photo edition featuring the motifs of the 128 photographs.

<6>

›Photography from painting‹ is one of the recurrent themes in Richter's art, which often appears in the proactive reintroduction of his own paintings in the form of photo editions such as *Loo Paper* (painting 1965; photo edition 1994), *Uncle Rudi* (1965; 2000), *Ema* (1966; 1992), *48 Portraits* (1971-72; 1998), *Cathedral Corner* (1987; 1998), *Betty* (1988; 1991), *Small Bather* (1994; 1996), and *Ravine* (1996; 1997). On the face of things, *128 Details*

seems to be a step in this direction. However, the contrast between the work's sham proximity to and telling distance from the original painting distinguishes it from these editions. The work concerns not so much the reference to the painting to which it is supposed to refer but the difference from its supposed referent. In essence, the magnifying vision of photography is the way to unteach us that a part is fragment, and that the sum of parts becomes a certain integral. For each photograph depicts the incomplete surface just as the collective of the 128 fragments never reconstructs the original wholeness. Even if the viewer had already seen the photographed painting, she can hardly retrieve from the scattered scenery what it once revealed to her. Moreover, since the actual size of the painting is even smaller than that of each panel constituting *128 Details*, all efforts to re-cover the cortical layer of the painting with grossly-enlarged photographic cutis would be in vain. Each photographed fragment is thus deprived of its marked fragmentality. Or, it is no longer able to avoid exposing its ever-increasing entirety that never allows us to recognize it as a part of something. This entirety would never be given by any pictorial practices. It is not a predicted outcome, but a residuary visual experience caused by failing to find any veritable fragments from the recorded details even through the penetrating gaze of a camera.

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Note that the magnifying vision does not intend to stress the rupture between the signified and the signifier. Rather, it concentrates on the manifold aspects of ceasing to be a mere surface by insisting on each photograph's autonomous spatiality. Some of the 128 pictures succeed in illustrating this situation by articulating the essential ambiguity of the generic word ›surface‹ through the intensified heterogeneity and inability to identify the painting as a whole. Here we have two achromatic illustrations in tandem from the artist book of 1980 (fig. 2), each taken from a horizontal perspective with an enhanced contrast in lighting, dimly obscuring the picture plane from which they originate.

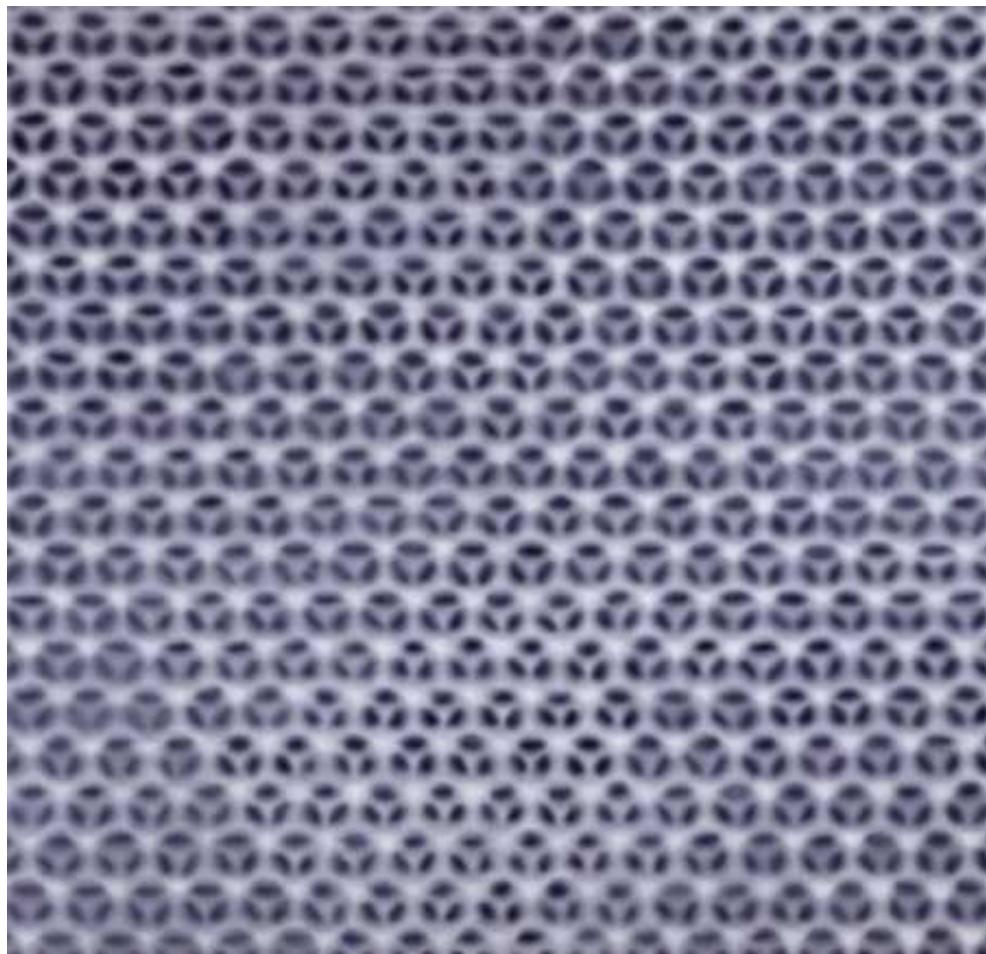


2 Gerhard Richter: Two illustrations from the artist book

*128 Details from a Picture (Halifax 1978),*

Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1980

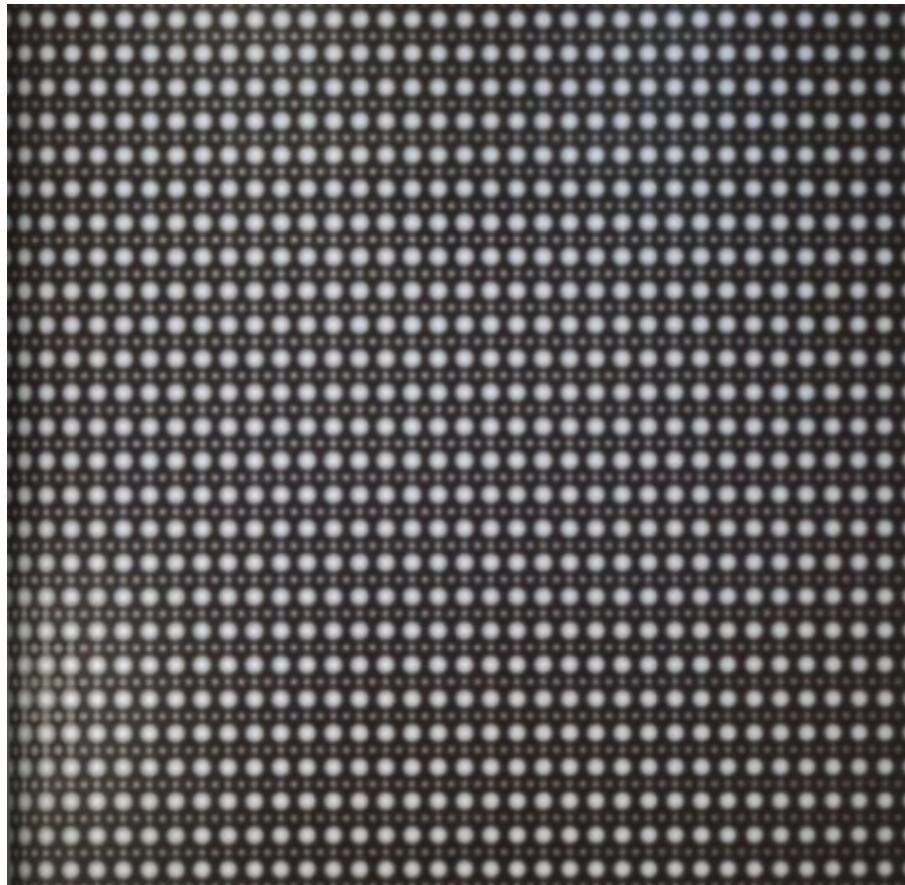
These illustrations redefine the texture of the painterly surface as that of firm ground on which we can step and walk. The lively brushstrokes all over the surface become the analogue of ›urban skin‹ as if we were looking at the cold asphalt that is shiny with the street lights glistening off the rain. While the original brushwork used to ›enshroud‹ the surface of what is supposed to be hung in a wall in the exhibition space, the new textured surface enables the viewer to anticipate the emerging field in which various movements, activities, operations, and narratives would take place. In this sense, the concept of the picture plane no longer proclaims confrontational verticality but alludes to immersive receptivity that draws the viewer into the alternative dimension of the flatness. Although this view can remind us of what Leo Steinberg once described as »opaque flatbed horizontals«,<sup>9</sup> Richter encounters the altered pigmented surface through none other than the magnifying vision of photography. Just as the entirety of what was once a fragment appears, it unfolds onto the surface the distinctive spatial reality that would never be accomplished by means of painting.



3 Gerhard Richter: *Silicate*, 2003, oil on canvas, 290 x 290 cm,  
Düsseldorf, K20 Kunstsammlung

<8>

After more than two decades of observing these complex dialogues between the part and the whole, the surface and the space, Richter was endowed with an ever intriguing motif that would make him realize another truth in the magnifying vision. In 2003, he worked on a series of four large photo-paintings titled *Silicate* (fig. 3) based on microscopic photographs of molecular structures in silicate minerals. The structures »are painted in, as mechanically as possible, and further painted over until all the brushstrokes have been painted away, and everything becomes as blurred as the microscopic photo and similarly mysterious looking«.<sup>10</sup> A year later, he worked with the printer Mike Karstens to make the gigantic digital print *Strontium* (fig. 4) for the new building of the de Young Museum in San Francisco designed by Herzog and de Meuron. The print, consisting of 130 parts and nearly ten by ten meters large, depicts an orderly arrangement of two different-sized spherical atoms in strontium titanate. The artist's exploration of the motif of the atomic structure also brought some editions, such as *30.12.04*, *31.12.04*, and *Graphite*: each presentation of the interior of matter is covered with grey oil paint applied with a squeegee.



4 Gerhard Richter: *Strontium*, 2004, C-print, 910 x 945 cm,  
San Francisco, de Young

<9>

To be sure, all the images on which these works are based would have never been possible without the new scanning electron microscope. For Richter, technology has been the most cogent means to reflect on the problems of meaning and potency of painting in a postmodern era. But at the same time, any seemingly scientific approaches toward his picture making have never been able to show its taken-for-granted objectivity that painting has never achieved. While the artist has cuddled up to photography's relatively simple and honest look at the phenomenal world in order to cancel out all the axiomatic pictorial elements, he has kept using the medium to expose its intrinsic flaws in representation. Thus, although the atomic structure constitutes the foundational part of every substance on Earth, its exaggerated and obscured manifestation is destined to attest to the absence of a referent. None of the works with atom motifs will reveal to the viewer anything about what they represent except the mechanical repetition of molecular chains in an unassertive manner. The deeper the viewer looks into the inside of a substance, the more obscure the cell-like image signifies to her. As Richter remarked in the interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in 2004, at first there was no choice but to call the paintings of silicate *Strukturen* because, in

his words, »I don't even know what kind of substance the [original] illustration is supposed to depict.«<sup>11</sup> In this sense, every idiomatic expression that identifies the inmost center of an object with the domicile of the truth would be forced to divest itself of its immediate significance. Therefore, what we can learn from seeking the truth in the expressions that point out the location of the truth, is that each speculation about what is idiomatic to the expressions diversifies and multiplies what they can mean to us, which is exemplified by the blurry visualization of the uniform, repetitive atomic structure.

## Conclusion

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It is worthy of note that all of Richter's works that we have examined here correspond to Derrida's argument about the idiomatic implications of the structural in the tradition of post-Kantian Western philosophy. While Derrida aimed to strip the structure of the structural that framed and regulated the regime of art so that he could anticipate any possible displacement of the meaning of the structural, Richter's works can be said to simulate Derrida's deconstructive scheme to produce the alternative that is able to shed light on some truths in representational media. Richter's radical reflections on the tensions between the part and the whole, the surface and the space, the inside and the outside illuminate how these conflicts are discursive and contingent. Indeed, to look for what is idiomatic to photography from the perspective of painting is by no means to revalidate either medium's established advantages, but to notice the fundamental unproductiveness to differentiate the undifferentiable. For Richter has tried to encounter something that we have always failed to recognize – not to translate, interpret, or represent what we already know.

## Picture Credits

Gerhard Richter, Cologne: fig. 1-4

The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax: fig. 2

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Passe-partout*, in: idem: *The Truth in Painting* [first published as *La vérité en peinture*, Paris 1978], Chicago 1984, p. 1-13, here p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida 1984 (as note 1), p. 2.

- <sup>3</sup> Gerhard Richter: Interview with Rolf Schön, in: *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962-1993*, ed. by Hans-Ulrich Obrist [first published as *Gerhard Richter: Text: Schriften und Interviews*, Frankfurt 1993], Cambridge (Mass.) 1995, p. 71-75, here p. 73.
- <sup>4</sup> Rosemary Hawker: The Idiom in Photography as the Truth in Painting, in: *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, 2002, p. 541-554, here p. 545.
- <sup>5</sup> Richter 1995 (as note 3), p. 35.
- <sup>6</sup> Hawker 2002 (as note 4), p. 546.
- <sup>7</sup> Hawker 2002 (as note 4), p. 545.
- <sup>8</sup> Gerhard Richter: Artist's Note, in: *idem: 128 Details from a Picture: Halifax 1978, Halifax 1980*.
- <sup>9</sup> Leo Steinberg: Other Criteria: Confrontation with Twentieth-Century Art, Oxford 1972, p. 82.
- <sup>10</sup> Gerhard Richter: Benjamin H. D. Buchloh/Gerhard Richter: Interview, November 2004, in: *Gerhard Richter: Paintings from 2003-2005, Exh.Cat. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 2005*, p. 59-70, here p. 60.
- <sup>11</sup> Richter 2005 (as note 10), p. 59.