

[Concluding section from "The Death of Poignancy," *Parallax* 2004, 10:3, pp. 99-112.]

The Mortification Thesis

Actually, I wonder about nothing being definitive in Gerhard Richter. His indifference, for example, masks considerable contempt for other artists. 'In the Federal Republic', he said back in 1983, 'we have more than a dozen such Academies, where the worst artists of all lurk as parasites and elevate their own cohabitation into a system of debauchery and tedium... There they not only cultivate and disseminate their own imbecility, and defile their students therewith; they are also in a position to make every effort to ensure that every student and every newly appointed colleague is kept below their own lowest level, so that they can remain undisturbed in their own thick fug [sic?].'¹³ This sort of language is more than slightly reminiscent of fascist rhetoric on the topic of degenerate artists. Academics aside, Richter's assessment of major contemporary artists like Anselm Kiefer fare little better. Decrying Kiefer's 'so-called paintings' in 1985, Richter speaks of Kiefer's 'formless, amorphous dirt', his 'mushy crust', his 'nauseating filth' as at best a 'stage set'.¹⁴ The fact that some of Richter's adjectives could indirectly refer to his own work (formless, amorphous, mushy, nauseating) is complemented by the rejoinder that if Kiefer is a set designer, Richter is merely a bad photographer. Indeed, it's the self-reflexivity of what is the heaping of shame upon the academics and rival artists (Richter explains that Warhol was a mediocre talent) that should be of interest.

Of relevance here may be Roy Schafer's recent book of psychoanalytical reflections, *Bad Feelings*. Aimed at making theoretical links with psychoanalysts of the 'British School' (Melanie Klein and company), Schafer, an American psychoanalytical theorist, makes some implicit connections with Richter, too. Although we'll have to take this at the level of what Freudians call 'suggestion', it may be that the blur in Richter may well have something to do psychologically with what Schafer calls 'mortification': a feeling of shame that is so strong that one wants to simply vanish or disappear on the spot. (When Richter denounces other artists, one senses this is what he thinks they should do – exit in humiliation).

We could usefully 'project' Schafer's idea onto Richter's portraits of famous men, Valery, Stravinsky, Hindemith, Einstein, Kafka, Proust, Dilthey, Gide, Webern, etc., [*Portraits*, 1971–72, Oil on Canvas, 48 paintings, each 70 × 55cm]. After all, these don't quite come into focus or full presence as once living persons, their slightly out of focus images looking more like death masks, given that the blur makes the face appear as if it has been embalmed (Hindemith's eyes, for example; or his mouth which seems unfastened from his skull). In other words, the blur 'mortifies' the image. Schafer creates some context for mortification by asking: 'Think of the words, mortal, immortal, and mortuary and the phrase mortal combat, and again you enter the fantasized realm of death, dying, and even killing'.¹⁵ Schafer means that mortification is, in fact, a fantasy that can't fully decide whether one kills oneself as a response to humiliation or whether one lashes out in mortal combat. In Richter's portraits, it's as if all these early twentieth-century or late nineteenth-century figures were being subject to 'losing face'.

'Losing face can be a devastating experience in that it implies that one has lost identity by having been abandoned, utterly devalued, or finished off'.¹⁶ To be mortified is to feel shamed: devalued, ostracized, ignored, abandoned – a sort of living death in which one's identity has been taken away from one. Again, the portrait of Hindemith,

who was driven out of Germany, seems exemplary. Mortification, Schafer says, 'is an act of effacing, that is, giving up your subjectivity to get rid of the painful bad feeling'.¹⁷ Based on his clinical observations, Schafer says that the fantasy of wanting to be dead resolves bad feeling by promising to put an end to it. At the very least, when we're effaced (dead or out of sight) no one can look at us disapprovingly anymore. Hence: 'where you are, I am not'. In the case of immigrants to the U.S. who had to flee Germany under a torrent of ridicule and humiliation, as some of the figures in Richter's series did, one might do well to recall that an exile might well be a permanent mortification.

Given the history of Germany that Richter has lived, it would be hard to imagine that humiliation and mortification couldn't be directly relevant to his use of the blur, both in the painted and the written work. Especially in the famous paintings of the Baader-Meinhof group it's hard to miss the indifference of the grey/black tonalities as a mortification of the dead, as an effacement that gives up subjectivity in order to not only get rid of painful or bad feeling, but to enact something that runs counter to it, a sublime or beautiful blurring of art and politics, the result being works that are curiously alien to or outside of the reality they depict.

In coming around to an almost crude psychological interpretation of the blur, of the blur as mortification, let me even propose that it is this which stands in for something like the dart of the punctum, mortification having the function of the punctum, whose effect is one of 'le fading' (in Lacan's terms) as opposed to, say, poignancy (emotional stinging). That Lacan may have been talking about mortification is perhaps obvious in *Seminar XI*: 'Now aphanisis is to be situated in a more radical way [than in Ernest Jones] at the level at which the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that I have described as lethal [...] I have called this movement the *fading of the subject*'.¹⁸ Lacan, who is used to employing his terms in rather disparate ways, thinks of fading as an effect of alienation and as the obverse (*l'envers*) of locating oneself in signification (retroactively in the signifying chain). Of course, mortification would be precisely what Lacan is thinking of as alienation, defined in terms of impossible choices, as in the choice given to William Styron's Sophie (of *Sophie's Choice*) as to which of her two children is to be gassed. How is one to survive the ethical humiliation of such a forced choice? Into what realms of psychosis does one escape after the fact of one's having survived? Into what frigid indifference? Here the subject 'fades' before the humiliation (and castration) posed by the lethal factor of an Other, precisely because the subject cannot locate itself in that choice without sacrificing a substantial part of itself, if not itself entirely. The indecency, humiliation, and horror of having to collude with an impossible sadistic choice that falls outside of any comprehensibility is what prompts fading as self-effacement, fugue, disappearance. In fact, given that these tortures are perpetrated anonymously (the sadist selects anyone more or less at random, much as a camera can shoot photographs at random) reflects the fact that the sadist isn't cathected with the object of his or her brutality, cathexis being the absence that sadism is trying to conjure up.¹⁹ But, again, consider the photograph which seems to do the same thing in certain circumstances, for example, photographs of inhuman atrocities or, more simply, mug shots wherein the human seems forever alienated, since in this sort of photography persons are treated as if they were just specimens, their person having been disappeared (*Verschollen*).

It's the case that Richter himself 'disappeared' from East Germany, a disappearance mirrored in countless other disappearances during and after the war. If it's true that Richter and his wife simply took a day trip to West Berlin and never returned home, are we certain that we can absolutely divorce it from millions of other disappearances in recent German history? It's telling, for example, that the series of paintings Richter

did of the Baader-Meinhof group is unquestionably his most important work and that its subject matter is, precisely, that of disappearance, whether by suicide or not (the situation is still unclear). The Richters themselves had to transgress politically in order to emigrate to West Germany and though this is obviously not of the order of Baader-Meinhof, there is something of a unifying trait there: that disappearance is an aggressive act in the face of what is perceived to be shameful and senseless. Again, there's the spectre of alienation. Of making a choice that was 'forced' and that, however things turned out, would be bad, in some respect. That is, being caught would have been totally mortifying, but escaping successfully would mean being cut off from one's past 'life': to be dead, in some respect.

I can't imagine that such a biographical connection could in any way account for Richter's art, generally, but I find it hard to overlook the parallel of political/aesthetic disappearance, given the huge fact of 'the disappeared' in recent German history: the disappearance of the Jews (no one even knows how many were actually exterminated, who all died where or how, etc.), the disappearance of the war criminals after the war (including Hitler), the disappearance of German soldiers captured after the war, the disappearance of what once was German territory, the disappearance of Germany's cities due to bombing, the disappearance of East Germans in the post-war period, the disappearance of the NS period in the schools, the disappearance of the Holocaust (its not being recognized or outright denial), the disappearance of Baader-Meinhof. Clearly, it would be perverse to argue that there isn't considerable humiliation and mortification in this tale of the disappeared in Germany, that it isn't a dominant cultural context for any artist to be working within.

In terms of deconstruction, the mortification thesis points towards the past (as yet to be sufficiently worked through) and not the future (Derrida's avant-gardist posture). Blur is not merely a conceptual aesthetic device but more than likely also a psychological defense that is aggressive and ambivalent, saying in effect: 'where you are, I am not', 'you can't get me', 'I'm not worth looking at, so look away', 'I'm just a fake photograph, not worth your trouble', these prototypical statements being the stereotypical defense of those who deal with shame aggressively (Schafer's point that if I aggressively downplay my significance, you won't bother with and shame me). Here again there is obvious warding off of 'bad feeling' as if it were this feeling that needs to be made to disappear by mortifying the image: its refusal of the punctum as poignancy, its flat indifference, its self-doubt, its *Versagung* (denial), its self-presentation as something that is degraded (not good photography, not good painting either), and, in the abstract paintings, the aggressivity of tearing up the surface, as if one were tearing off the face or skin of the artwork altogether (look closely at these paintings, the surface is like skin). Effacement and blurring is often so extreme in the abstracts that one doesn't know quite what one is looking at, even when one sees the works in museums and can observe them closely. What's in front and what's behind? What's figure and what's ground? Standing back, the whole picture plane can appear like some sort of electronic break-up of the image that one would ordinarily associate with video (Nam June Paik's work, for example), there being a minimum of image and a maximum of distortion, a sort of mechanized anamorphic field (the paintings look machine-made, not hand-made) that can't be righted (no looking awry can fix it). In Schafer's account of analysands with lengthy histories of dealing with shame, we're told that their world views are highly distorted because they cannot observe and judge themselves independently of humiliating accusations such as those that would make one continuously change one's tune: 'if I said x I also mean y; but don't think I'm retracting myself either, because I also mean x, just the same'. Such analysands are constantly effacing what they say, rubbing their statements and themselves out, much to the frustration of the analyst who is trying to bring them back into the world from

the shadows of shame, guilt, and self-mortification. But such analysts are not making art. And therein lies a major difference insofar as the work stands in defiance of mortification and fading, that it brings what has disappeared into an appearance that is tangible and discussable on the hitherside of apparatuses of mechanical reproduction and that the work is redemptive in that it is something of which the artist can be proud. It is in this sense that for Richter, apparently, the work of art is in a direct confrontation or *Auseinandersetzung* (we could translate this as 'altercation') with a shameful reality. In Richter's words, 'Reality may be regarded as wholly unacceptable. At present, and as far back as we can see into the past, it takes the form of an unbroken string of cruelties. It pains, maltreats, and kills us. It is unjust, pitiless, pointless and hopeless. We are at its mercy, and we are it'.²⁰

But if that is so, how is the artist to confront what it is he himself is guilty of? And might one be right in assuming the paintings *are* this reality too? Again, things start to get blurred. In *Evening Mood* [1969; oil on canvas 120 × 150cm] we seem to be looking out over a vast anonymous expanse of dark flat water behind which is a darkening sky with bright diffused white light radiating forth in the lower middle, which is remote, cold, and uninviting. Some sea near the horizon is brightened, because the sun has already descended behind the curvature of the earth. In this painting there are no signs of life. Even if that dark water is really dry land in shadow, one can't imagine existing in this windless darkened world, though perhaps one belongs to it, in any case. Richter calls this painting a mood, but if that's so, it's mood devoid of feeling. 'Evening Hues' or 'Evening Tonalities' might be a more accurate title for the painting, the hues or tonalities being autonomous and other-worldly, if only because they don't seem to be intended for us to admire or even think about. In other words, these evening tonalities have nothing to do with us. They just are what they are. Which is to say, that as Dasein (existence) they're indifferent and inaccessible.

Now, consider Schafer's point that a defense against shame is one's becoming so ordinary – anonymous, vacant, low profile – that no one can reach the humiliated, since he or she occupies a dead zone of anonymity beyond reach. What this suggests is that in addition to all else it might be possible to imagine *Evening Mood* as a selfportrait characterized by an incandescent *Untergang* (going under, defeat) followed by darkness: indistinction, dubiousness, and shroudedness. Devoid of feeling for anything in particular, mood is reduced to tonalities that are not the artist's but merely a product of the earth's physical rotation, autonomously captured on film and translated into painting. Nothing is expressed here, because the inaccessibility and concealment of the artist requires a lack of expression and expressivity. Is this why the photograph is in collusion with painting, that it can anonymously replicate the world visually without the risk of expression or of feeling, either good or bad?

This would fit in with Richter's statements in 1966 that 'I don't want to be a personality or to have an ideology', or 'I want to be like everyone else, think what everyone else thinks, do what is being done anyway'. Or, as if disappearing into the mass of Das Mann, Richter says too, 'nor must we have views or opinions; leave that to others'. Or, 'there is no such thing as freedom. Nor would I know what to do with it'; or 'talk about painting: there's no point'; or 'the photograph confronts me as a statement about a reality which I neither know nor judge, which does not interest me, and with which I do not identify'.²¹

Schafer's argument that shame triggers self-disappearance – not sticking out by knowing one's place, not asking questions, refusing to judge, blending in – strikes me as not just part of a psychology that is reflected in Richter's work but in the context of Germany more generally, that is, of a holding over of a collective psychological

response to mass humiliation that was perpetrated by the Nazis on really just about everyone, though in various degrees of severity. That the population was shamed and mortified in general was not a post-1945 experience only, but a psychological condition of the mass that expressed itself in terms of by-standing, non-commitment, and bad faith (and, to be fair, not only in Germany). After the war this was expressed as denials, flight, changes of identity, self-disappearance, de-nazification, immigration and, as wonder-economy, work as self-enforced forgetting. In even as abstract a landscape as *Evening Mood* the painting seems to forget that it is a painting, that it is referring to a world in which people live, that it is, in fact, even supposed to convey a mood or feeling, the painting being a denial of painting that, curiously, still affirms itself in any case as something that has thereness: as a picture taking up space. Certainly, this is minimal art by other means, the minimalism here being historically constituted in terms of a transference from the past, a collective psychological condition that I think much of Richter's work exemplifies. Why is it, for example, that in *Park Piece* [1971; Oil on Canvas 300 × 375cm 3 parts] the big gestural expressionist brushstrokes depict a landscape more like *Evening Mood* than not? Why is it that even the most colourful of the later abstract paintings look so mechanically remote? So allergic to intimacy? So totally anonymous? It is certainly not, as Benjamin Buchloh has argued, merely the result of a critique of modern art, the perception that we're no longer in a period where a Rothko could make credible art and that something less metaphysical must take its place.²² In other words, the art historical argument is far too restricted to throw much light on Richter's many deaths of poignancy which are part of a European historical experience that transcends the style wars of art history, namely, the many mortifications of the death of the person, which is, at the end of the day, what the death of the subject is really about, not a concept, but something that has actually transpired in European history, something we're still not quite able to accept as a *fait accompli*.