



ARTFORUM

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Gerhard Richter, installation at Sperone Westwater Fischer, 1978.

point subtly; in this case, the mixed media sculptures looked on as you fumbled through the documents spread out before them. As if you had been called to deliver the verdict.)

But the exhibition veered between stating and overstating its point: parts repeated themselves—the same facts, the same images over and over again, from tape to manuscript, slides to sculpted tableaux to xeroxes of faces. The point was made, and then over-made, the viewer informed, then over-saturated. The tape of Millett reading from her manuscript told Sylvia's story, which was really Millett's reading of the story; it was the carrier of heaviest emotion, and seemed artificial, the story manipulated, manipulative, in places, like propaganda. In terms of its effect, it transformed the gallery into a church. A church or a kino, where we lived the torture, died the death, and then left, having done it for the week, feeling good, feeling brave, but having done nothing.

This, I think, is dangerous. Maybe the whole exhibition was dangerous, but in the wrong sense of the word, because it was an end in itself, the communion with others, the purge. It hadn't the stuff to stimulate a reaction outside of itself. If it had wanted to incite action, it didn't, it even encouraged a slip back into passivity. And all that because the exhibition—more specifically, Millett—did too much of the work for us. I think that the information alone, presented 13 years after the fact, at one

remove from the press coverage, the courts, the sensationalism of 1965, could have accomplished more.

I've never believed, as GERHARD RICHTER once claimed, that pictures can be made according to recipes, without personal involvement, that the making of pictures isn't an artistic act. I've never thought this mission impossible ever had anything to do with how or why Richter paints. The remark is 13 years old, but it's been quoted again on an information sheet for his recent exhibition. It comes from a "textcollage" Richter made with Sigmar Polke, another artist, in 1965 (it was later exhibited in Hannover), when they were both students at the art academy in Düsseldorf. Their '60s tabula rasa was designed to rid painting of its stifling *ich*, the gesture, the subjectivity; Polke decided that all dots were his friends (another quote), and polka-dotted his paintings (to simulate the raster of the printed page); Richter, painting after amateur photos, said the paintings that resulted were really photographs. He stressed the "arbitrariness" of his selection, the banality of the views, and tried to drain painting of its *Zwang* to present a world view, as I said before, to kiss goodbye to the *ich*.

It never worked; as soon as he decided on a certain source material, selected something, began to paint, decisions were made, and a certain esthetic projected, even when the esthetic posed as no esthetic. I have

always seen a statement made in the old paintings, which was a neutral, apathetic statement, but still a statement. I was always mystified, granted, at the recognition of forms in the paintings for naught; at the way Richter gave them a content which really wasn't any. At the way they had no political or social message. They always seemed compromises to me, paint, varnish and surfaces, images, paintings in the strictest sense of the word, that tried not to be any. They are the most indecisive paintings I know.

So, in the new paintings you recognize Niagara, jet trails, jealousy; you've got a hold, you move closer, but the image blurs, becomes unreadable as you try to see more—it knocks at your knuckles until you let go. The same game is being played with your eyes and expectations, by pictures that invite, but don't want, to be understood. The images you see are there, but they mean nothing.

The pictures undermine their own content, and force you back to concentrating on surfaces alone. And these are well-painted, fascinating surfaces you can lose yourself in. Surface is so scintillating in fact, everything so meticulously painted, that it's hard to become convinced of the hands off, "objective," "painting is idiocy" position many credit Richter for maintaining, to make the paintings more conceptual than they are, and Richter himself more intellectual, more in control than he is. I've never made the leap of faith. I like

looking at these paintings, which is a lot as far as I am concerned, but I've never bought the theoretical groundwork that goes along with them. I've always felt it was the work of people who liked to look at the pictures as I do, but went too far in explaining why.

Richter puts a lot of his ideas into paint; new paintings seldom look like what he's done before, and all his works together reflect a versatility that used to fascinate me. I saw in the versatility a flexibility of thinking and the guts to paint whatever he wanted. But today the variations look like empty moves, skittishness, a lure for rather than a trick on the market. A look to Polke explains a lot, because he shared the beginning, and for a long time acted out the same inconsistencies, with dot paintings, cloth paintings, flamingo paintings, potato houses, paintings left in their packing wrappers (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1976), no paintings. Always stylistically inconsistent while ideologically very consistent, if arrogance, wit and finally dropping out can be considered an ideology. Richter, for his part, has remained the serious player. But without a strategy of play the moves he makes become uninteresting.

Writing this review has been a wrestling match with works I felt at first gave me too little to go on. HEIDI GLÜCK's paintings looked too skeletal, the signposts too scant: there were lines, geometric forms, empty blocks of space between forms—the forms your eyes sketched into the empty spaces. You read from left to right, covered ground or kept time with your eyes which were held in, and sent back and forth, by the clearly marked edges of the canvas.

Some of the longer paintings on canvas look like the last possible paintings one could make short of working directly on the wall, as if they have been stretched to a point at which all forms and colors must maintain a delicate balance to keep the whole thing from breaking. The paintings hold tightly together, are things in themselves, succinct, tense, self-sufficient, most of all, rational. But some of those triangles are really crocodiles with irrational undersides: they're not platonic forms, they have their start in fantasy. They look like what they're not: rational, cool, diagrammatic forms, cryptic.

Likewise the short, vertical lines (stops) in the paintings and the spaces which they mark out. Our eyes busily fill in the mirror images of other forms or

REVIEWS
NEW YORK

Gerhard Richter

Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery

By Barbara Flynn

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—*Barbara Flynn*