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A Paradox of Modernity: Bridging the Gap of Existence *and* Meaning through Medium in
Gerhard Richter's *Townscapes* and Dan Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban House*

In 1968, Gerhard Richter began painting a series of loose architectural renderings of post-war European cityscapes. Devoid of color (with the exception of Townscape PX and its muted colors) and depicted with a painterly style, Richter's *Townscapes* bring us into various images of post-war industrial Europe that appear to simultaneously represent, and depart, from the aerial photographs and architectural models (some originals of which we can see embedded within Richter's encyclopedic work of *Atlas*) from which they are based. From a distance, the informed viewer can recognize the scenes that Richter bases his photographic painting off of: certain *Townscapes* depict the war-torn aerial cityscapes of Spain, France, Italy (Fig. 1), while other *Townscapes* show the modernist, minimalist architecture rebuilt on top of these (Fig. 2). At a certain spatial proximity, however, as well as in several of the more abstracted *Townscape* pieces (Fig. 3), we lose recognition, we lose the visual cues of windows, walls, streets, and sidewalks that allow for our semantic understanding. We can only see Richter's thick, expressive brushstrokes. Close up, the painted image that we are confronted with has lost its form and documentative quality, instead taking on a new reality. Taken as a body of work, *Townscapes* illustrates Richter grappling with his material reality and geo-historical context, which are tied to the photographic images that he uses as the source images for his works, *and* the metaphysical beyond liberated through his exercise of painting.

Ten years after Richter began painting his series of *Townscapes*, Dan Graham began experimenting with artistic expression through the medium of architecture. Graham's *Alteration*

to a Suburban House (1978) (Fig. 4) takes the vernacular architecture of a 1970s American suburban house, and alters it. The material of one of its facades is entirely replaced by transparent glass, and a mirror is placed in the middle of the structure. Prior to Graham's alteration, the suburban home functions as a closed, private typology with a clear separation of the interior and exterior, the private and public. But after Graham's architectural intervention, the suburban house is imbued with contradicting interpretations. Graham's *Alteration* is no longer understandable in the context of established ideas of suburban domestic norms. Through the transparent glass window, we, the viewer, can penetrate into the previously hidden interior space of the house. And through the mirror placed within the house, the exterior surrounding the house, including two suburban homes that sit across from the altered suburban house, is brought inside the house, and at certain angles, we are confronted with glimpses of our self, implicated in our active voyeurism into this superficially familiar, yet substantially foreign environment. Graham's use of transparency and reflection in his architectural *Alteration* takes the suburban house outside of its 1970s American geo-temporal context, into our present context and present reality. *Alteration to a Suburban House* is simultaneously historical and timeless; the architectural alterations offer an alternative existence to the typology of the suburban house.

These two artists, Richter and Graham, used two different mediums on works of art created within two cultural contexts separated by an ocean. Yet although the artworks take form in varied ways and are motivated by different lived experiences, Richter's *Townscapes* and Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban House* both seek to answer the same fundamental questions: How can mediums of artistic expression be used to bridge the gap of existence *and* meaning for art in a post-war world? And how can works of art bridge this gap, offering possibilities of hope, of tranquility, to the viewer?

George Kubler's *The Shape of Time*, writes on the contemporary paradox regarding the first question Richter and Graham attempt to answer: how can mediums of artistic expression be used to bridge the gap of existence and meaning in a post-war world? Kubler describes how in recent artistic practice, there exists a "reciprocal misunderstanding" between historians and artists. While "recent movements in artistic practice stress self-signals alone, as in abstract expressionism," "recent art scholarship has stressed adherent signals alone." According to Kubler, the two fields of art and history have diverged to each focus on a single aspect of experience, of being. Such a paradoxical division threatens the very "existential value of the work of art" because, Kubler, states,

> (This existential value) cannot be extracted from the adherent signals alone, nor from the self-signals alone. The self-signals taken alone prove only existence; adherent signals taken in isolation prove only the presence of meaning. But existence without meaning seems terrible in the same degree as meaning without existence seems trivial[i]

The historical fine painting merged both self-signals, in its use of illusion utilizing perspective, light, and color, and adherent signals, in its use of semantic symbols utilizing history and social information. Yet the *modern* artist struggles to reconcile the self-signal and the adherent signal, art and history, existence and meaning.

But what about the *modern* world that Richter and Graham live in, makes it so difficult to bridge this gap? Why have modernist painting and architecture broken off and turned away from history (adherent signals), turning instead towards solely self-signals, manifesting in the styles of abstract expressionism and functionalism?

Kubler writes that "adherent meaning is largely a matter of conventional shared experience, which it is the artist's privilege to rearrange and enrich under certain limitations."[ii] It

is this idea of *conventional shared experience* that seems impossible, irreconcilable in the post-war world.

Walter Benjamin's *The Storyteller* writes about the death of the storyteller and the loss of our ability to share experiences. Benjamin describes how experience has fallen in value because the sheer communicability of experience is decreasing. Richter and Graham live in a world where "the image not only of the external world but also of the moral world has undergone changes overnight, changes which were previously thought impossible."[iii] Benjamin writes

Never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.[iv]

In the post-war world, impossible changes have overwhelmed people with information that have radically changed what they know. All throughout history, there has existed a gap between words and seeing. As John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* puts it, "the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled… The knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight."[v] But in Richter and Graham's world, this gap between seeing and knowledge, existence and meaning, has been infinitely expanded. War, capitalism, mass media, totalitarianism have inserted an overflow of images and information into the human consciousness that divides all experiences. There seems to be an *impossibility* in bridging this paradoxical gap.

A comparison of the artist statements for each of their works provides us with perspective on each artists' attempt to bring together existence and meaning within their respective contexts.

In his artist statement for his three-part work *Townscape TR* (Figure 5) in particular, Richter describes how the source image for his photograph painting came from an architectural model within an architectural magazine. But although *Townscape TR* used the architectural model as its source, Richter did not paint the model with the intention of imitation. Rather Richter intentionally destabilized the image through the medium of painting. He describes how:

> in this painting, the model does not fit together– there is a sense of discontinuity about the image… I was able in this painting to achieve a sense of presence. I put the paint on very thickly in black and white, creating with the two a grey. It was quite musical, almost like a fugue.[vi]

Richter describes a "sense of presence" within his artwork. Richter references *his* present, the surrounding context of postwar destruction and modernist rebuilding in Western Europe, within his source images for *Townscapes*. Looking at *Townscape TR*, we can identify elements of the European modernist architecture that was constructed following the tabula rasa of WWII: various buildings composed of geometrical volumes with functionalist concrete slabs and ribbon windows make up the cityscape. But the "sense of presence" Richter refers to in his artist statement is not produced by Richter's present, or the source image of his work. The "sense of presence" is produced by Richter's act of *painting* the photograph. Painting creates a new, *autonomous* image, a new timeless reality, divorced from its prior context. Richter literally breaks apart the townscape by splitting it into three discontinuous panels, neutralizes color into flowing black and white tones, and paints using thick brush strokes that threaten to dematerialize the building forms. In effect, Richter renders an autonomous image sitting outside of time and space, that is simultaneously recognizable and unrecognizable. The photograph painting of the townscape exists *in between* the semantic definitions embedded in the source photography and

the de-materialist existence outlined in *Townscape TR*'s reimagined forms, loose brush strokes and monochrome tones.

In his artist statement for *Alteration to a Suburban House*, Graham describes the mechanisms of his architectural interventions saying:

> The front section is revealed to the public, while the rear, private section is not disclosed. As the mirror faces the glass facade and the street, it reflects not only the house's interior but also the streets and the environment outside the house. The reflected images of the facades of the two houses opposite the cut away "fill-in" the missing facade.[vii]

Graham uses reflective architectural surface to also bring about a "sense of presence" within his *Alteration*. The architecture he references, like Richter, refers to Graham's present context: the standardized, modernist housing projects in suburban America. In *Alteration*, three suburban homes appear to be situated on a gridded housing layout. The houses look like the typical modern suburban homes that Graham photographs in *Homes for America* (1966-1967): they appear mass-produced, constructed using standardized, more-or-less identical, geometric forms. But like in Richter's *Townscapes*, *Alteration* finds its "sense of presence," not in the imitation of the source architecture's present reality, but rather in the effects created through architectural alterations. Graham attaches timeless meaning to a semantic context through the use of the architectural medium. He finds a "sense of presence" by disrupting one of the standardized suburban houses with transparent and reflective surfaces that subvert domestic norms and directly bring the self-conscious viewer into the work of art. *Alteration to a Suburban House* is tied to both its 1978 context and the viewer's present context; it exists *in between* existence and meaning, grounded to its time and place *and simultaneously* devoid of a specific time and place.

Both Richter and Graham attempt to bridge the gap between existence and meaning by inserting revisions that directly confront the viewer within *their* present into images of environments that represent Richter and Graham's present. Their use of medium, painting in Richter's case and architecture in Graham's case, allow for the simultaneous presence of both adherent signals and self-signals—thus offering a possible solution to the existential paradox in postwar art.

The second question that Graham and Richter converge upon extends upon the first, questioning how works of art can bridge the gap of existence and meaning to the viewer, offering them possibilities of hope. In an interview conducted between Richter and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Richter describes what he seeks to express through the rhetoric of painting. Richter tells Buchloh that he wishes to set up not only aesthetic pleasure but *moods*. Buchloh, baffled, responds "A mood? You mean it really sets up an emotional experience?" To which Richter answers:

> Surely you don't think that a stupid demonstration of brushwork, or of the rhetoric of painting and its elements, could ever achieve anything, say anything, express any longing. For lost qualities, for a better world—for the opposite of misery and hopelessness… I might also call it redemption. Or hope—the hope that I can after all effect something through painting. [viii]

Richter not only attempts to bridges the gap of existence and meaning for the *work of art*. Richter also attempts to use the work of art to redefine existence and meaning for the *viewer*. By setting up a *mood*, an emotional experience, within his works of art, Richter wants to the viewer to use his work of art as an apparatus to find hope.

When we look at Richter's *Townscapes* as a viewer, we are confronted with loose, painted images where surfaces and forms flow. We see brushstrokes that refuse to obey the architectural forms within the images of the townscapes. Richter's treatment of the modern material surfaces contradicts their functional reality in the material world: the sturdy, smooth, reinforced concrete of modernist building becomes ephemeral and unstable under Richter's paintbrush. Richter also reduces color to tone in his *Townscapes*, making it more difficult for the viewer to isolate each individual structure. Once again, tone reminds us of the fleeting nature of Richter's images: for a slight change in the lighting or perspective of any of the image may fully distort the image, rendering the work wholly unrecognizable. Richter's paintings play with surfaces and structures, threatening to dematerialize them in any instant. Within each *Townscape*, Richter has captured a moment where time and picture has come to a stop. When we view each *Townscape,* we are brought into this timeless moment, and reminded of our fleeting existence within the moving world of changing images.

Nietzche's *Schopenhauer as Educator* elucidates why contemplation of our existentiality may provide us with hope. In the beginning of the chapter, Nietzsche states:

> Even if the future were to give us no cause for hope—our curious existence in precisely this Now gives us the strongest encouragement to live according to our own standards and laws: the inexplicable fact that we live precisely today and yet had the infinity of time in which to come into being, that we possess nothing but this brief today in which to show why and to what purpose we have come into being precisely at this moment[ix]

According to Nietzsche, "our curious existence" at "precisely this moment" is itself a hopeful premise. Every moment in which we exist is a moment in which we, individually, can move freely and independently, perhaps, Richter believes, towards a better world. Richter's

Townscapes freeze various images of the post-war material environment that surrounds him. But rather than depicting the surfaces, buildings, and forms as still and unchanging, Richter paints the surfaces as flowing, moving, fleeting. We, the viewer, even when brought into Richter's image, are not dictated by Richter's material surroundings or external conditions. We are aware that this image, this moment, is temporary and we can find tranquility in knowing that we, too, are not forever tied to our material context. We can find our own meaning, or as Nietzsche states, "live according to our own standards and laws."

Graham's *Alteration* also directly asks the viewer to confront themselves, literally, through the use of reflection. The mirror surface placed within one of the suburban houses functions to reflect the two suburban houses opposing it, but it also places the viewer into Graham's constructed environment. Unlike Richter's painting, Graham's *Alteration* is a three-dimensional architectural work thus even though Graham's *Alteration* remains stationary, our movement moves and changes the work of art. But like Richter's painting, we are not trapped within the material conditions of Graham's piece. We can freely walk around *Alteration*, angling ourselves to find our reflections within the suburban house context or angling ourselves to see without being seen. We can choose to enter within Graham's 1970s suburban home context, or we can hide outside of it. Graham's *Alteration* offers us the choice of choosing our context. Like Richter's *Townscapes*, Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban House* reminds us that we have the agency to dictate meaning within our existence; there exist alternatives to our present, we only have to shift ourselves to find it.

In a superficial-level comparison, Richter and Graham's artworks resemble each other because they each display images of modernist architecture within their artist's respective geographical contexts. But both Richter's *Townscapes* and Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban*

House are much more than a passive, objective image of their artists' architectural context. Richter and Graham modify and remake their own images, *new realities*, on top of the documental, photographic images they source. These new images converge and diverge with the structural norms and historical symbols of their source images. At a fundamental level, Richter's *Townscapes* and Graham's *Alteration to a Suburban House* resemble each other because they are both artworks that attempt to bridge the gap between existence and meaning through the layered use of media. Richter and Graham both create images that reference a postwar semantic while simultaneously imposing their own autonomous image, existence, reality. And this new autonomous image is constantly active, forcing all viewers of the artwork to question and contemplate their own hopeful positionality *in between* existence and meaning.

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[i] Kubler, George. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008., 25.

[ii] Ibid., 26.

[iii] Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, v. 3 (1935-38)*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002., 143.

[iv] Ibid., 144.

[v] Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*, London: Penguin, 1972., 7.

[vi] Richter, Gerhard. "Comments on some works, 1991." *Gerhard Richter: Text, Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2009., 263.

[vii] Graham, Dan. "Alteration to a Suburban House (1978)." *Buildings and Signs*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981., 34-35

[viii] Richter, Gerhard, and Buchloch, Benjamin H.D. "An Interview with Gerhard Richter (1986)." *Gerhard Richter: 18. Oktober 1977 / with Contributions from Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Stefan Germer, Gerhard Storck; and a Discussion with Gerhard Richter and Jan Thorn-Prikker*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989., 25.

[ix] Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Schopenhauer as Educator." *Unfashionable Observations,* trans. Richard T. Gray. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998., 173.

Figures

Figure 1. Gerhard Richter, (left to right) *Townscape Madrid*, *Townscape Paris*, *Townscape M3*, 1968.
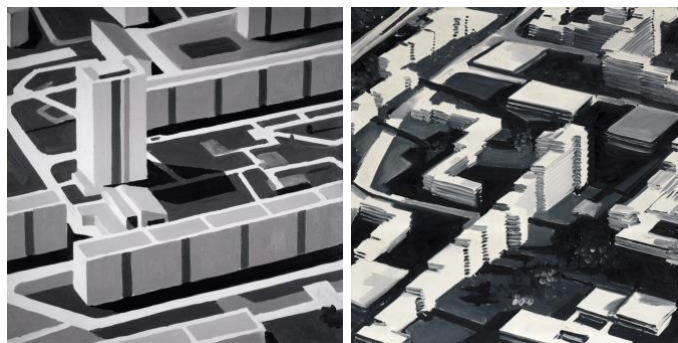

Figure 2. Gerhard Richter, (left to right) *Townscape SL*, *Townscape SA*, 1969.

Figure 3. Gerhard Richter, (left to right) *Townscape*, *Townscape M8 (grey)*, *Townscape PX*, 1968.
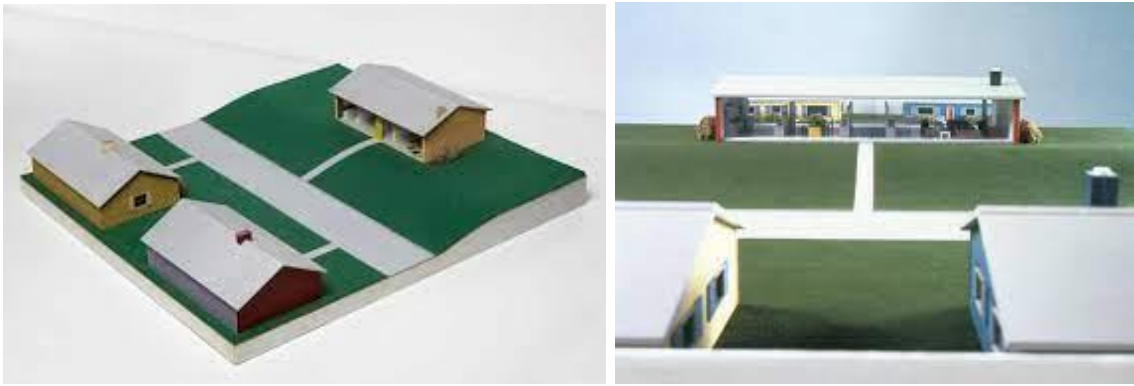
Figure 4. Dan Graham, *Alteration to a Suburban House,* 1978.

Figure 5. Gerhard Richter, *Townscape TR*, 1969.

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   University Press, 2008.

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