

All Over

But Monet and Pissarro anticipated at a long remove a mode of painting, now practiced by some of our most 'advanced' artists, that threatens the identity of the easel picture at precisely these points: the 'decentralized,' 'polyphonic,' all-over picture which, with a surface knit together of a multiplicity of identical or similar elements, repeats itself without strong variation from one end of the canvas to the other and dispenses, apparently, with beginning, middle, and ending.

Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," 1948

Once a legible entity, the city has become an amorphous field—urban space that extends without comprehensible limits or structures to define it. This change has disturbed architecture, casting doubt on what had been a foundational ambition of the discipline from its Renaissance inception through modernism: to re-imagine the city; to distinguish and organize its elements; to impose form after the image of man or in the name of reason. Shaken from its original calling into pursuits either autonomous or interdisciplinary, adopting some simulacrum of the complexity of the city without acting anymore *on* the city, architecture has lost its critical force. All-over, an expression once used to describe the diffuse compositions of certain modernist painters, accurately describes what has become of the city spatially and, in at least some narratives, temporally. It also describes where architecture has come to rest after modernism—all over the place.

On its surface, this painting by Gerhard Richter—one of the many so-called large abstracts he has produced in recent decades—features a number of all-over formal characteristics that could be correlated with those of contemporary urban space. Traces of grids, lines, serial markings, and local symmetries can be identified, but all are subsumed within an evening field of paint scraped across the canvas. The painting accommodates a deep complexity and range of marks and colors, with no center, repeatable pattern, or particular relationship to the edge to organize them.

There is cohesion without legibility—the painting cannot be further abstracted into its structural or compositional logic. Richter's painting suggests the simultaneity and density of urban space, where the continual layering of development and infrastructure forms an irreducible and vast accumulation, its origins or modes of organization no longer self-evident.

Though they stand at a remove from the literal machinations of capital in the production of urban space, Richter's paintings could be read as simply another manifestation of its totalizing logics, the direct correlative of urban space on canvas. They are distinguished, however, by the evidence of authorial choice and control that binds the whole. Richter begins with a composition of defined brush strokes and areas of color. He then applies layers of paint with a squeegee, dragging the tool from one side of the canvas to the other until he has merged the painting into a state of completeness that he determines. The tension between the automatic and the idiosyncratic is manifest in the complex form, no longer composed of individual components that can be identified, and absolutely unique and non-repeatable.

These paintings exist at a limit between the human and the mechanical, suggesting, through the simultaneous presence of the unforeseen outcomes of automatic processes and the individual intelligence that invents and edits such processes, the persistence of modernism and its critical dialectics. They suggest the potential for an architecture that once again has the ambition to engage with the totality of urban space, a potential residing in experiments with serial, scripted, and other automatic processes that have grown out of conceptual art and computation. In the pages of this journal, we have seen architects resuscitate the absolute reductions of Malevich and the mechanical reproductions of Warhol as diagrams for critiques of the urban space of capitalism that are based on iconic gestures. Richter's work raises the possibility of something different: an architecture of irreducible complexity that directs the all-over-ness of urban space on its own terms.

