

Beginning Again

New Abstract Paintings and Drawings by Gerhard Richter

Between December 2014 and May 2015, Gerhard Richter painted a group of thirty abstract pictures. It was a fresh start for him, because – until he commenced the Birkenau cycle in the summer of 2014 – Richter had not painted for four years. Birkenau was in many ways an exception and, after another pause, Richter then began working on a larger group of abstract paintings. This followed years of doubt about whether and how to begin painting again, years of uncertainty and of thinking about what it means to stop and then start again.

“On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.”¹ Samuel Beckett begins his prose piece ‘Worstward Ho’ with these sentence fragments. Off we go – somehow – or does it only seem that way? The word “nohow” is a homonym for “know-how” – knowing how to do something sounds just like something it is not possible to do. Linguistically, action and doubt are closely intertwined. Beckett’s text, which speaks of setting off towards a destination and at the same time the futility of the endeavor, was the writer’s second-to-last work. The above description of the failure to begin something would thus be followed for him by a further fresh start, one more at least.

The theme of beginning is inherent to Richter’s body of work, because he has never understood painting as a matter-of-course organic process but has instead always tied it to decisions. His work explicitly deals with decisions, and likewise with the fact that such decisions cannot be made; they happen of their own accord, in a different way than might be expected. Richter’s oeuvre harbors within it the contradiction between impressive productivity and recurring prolonged interruptions. Painting presents itself as an act of will, which begins with picture no. 1 in his catalogue raisonné (‘Tisch’, 1962) and, after over fifty years and countless further acts of volition, arrives at work groups 938 to 941, which are the subject of his essay. As a visible object, however, painting obliterates all traces of a distinct will. With each individual picture, it presents a beginning that also contains within it an end. Painting a picture based on a photograph thus already prohibits any continuation, because such a picture is a reminiscence of a model that it then replaces, declaring through blurring that the original is a mere

1 Samuel Beckett, “Worstward Ho”, John Calder, London 1983, p. 7.

illusion. For the next picture, a different photograph will serve as the template; it will show another moment in the past that comes after the previous one in an unexplained relationship, as a succession of mere contingency, a juxtaposition that will only be read retrospectively as connoting a connection. This also applies in a different sense to the abstract images. Since they have no prescribed reason for being but rather create this rationale each and every time both de facto and symbolically, they, too, can have no continuation. Like the mirrors that Richter has often placed between these pictures, they create an intimate connection between viewer and image surface, which emerges instantly upon the confrontation between the two and ends again when the viewer leaves the scene. As long as this encounter persists, viewer and image are inextricably bound together, because the viewer is compelled to continually try to decipher something in the abstract image. This endeavor is however rebuffed by the attractive surface – whether painted in monochrome gray or blurred by the artist's squeegee.

There are two ways to begin something – beginning based on assumed knowledge or beginning based on, likewise assumed, non-knowledge. Richter's painting can be positioned on the side of knowledge, because he has an academic background that has taught him the tools and techniques of painting. Beginning means to apply this knowledge, but also to destroy it, because mere application means nothing else than the death of painting, its petering out in purely academic art. Beginning based on knowledge seeks to end in non-knowledge, in a place where the painter can discover something never before seen. This describes Richter's abstract painting in a nutshell.

Exemplary of painting beginning from a state of non-knowledge is the work of Robert Ryman, which is antithetical to that of Richter. Antithetical not only for biographical reasons – Ryman is a jazz musician and self-taught amateur artist – but even more so because of the attitudes the two painters bring to the activity of painting. For Ryman, painting is a purely empirical activity that relies on nothing more than the experiences the painter has with the tools he chooses to use to shape its surface. Even the question of what will happen to the painting, how and by what means it will be hung, likewise remains undecided. Beginning work on a painting has no consequences for the next painting, because non-knowledge does not culminate in knowledge of painting but instead persists as such. If the painter commits to this attitude with all its consequences, painting does not bring

with it any learning, because no experience is transferable. It is applicable only to the specific case, and every nuance of change leads to a new painting that is incompatible with what has gone before.

Beginning does not mean executing a project, even though it may seem that way at first. By beginning, the project as such is wiped out, because as he paints, the painter removes himself further and further from it, and the project is only still there in a limited way, as part of a growing body of not-knowing common to both the trained and untrained painter. In any case, beginning represents the counterpole to the thought of the last picture that was done, an idea that art critics have ascribed to various painters of recent decades, for example Ad Reinhardt. On the contrary, beginning is symbolically about the first picture instead, about a fresh start that has nothing in common with falling silent. The hope of starting anew strongly opposes any philosophical dogma, any Hegelian notion of a history developing toward a specific goal that aims only at subordinating the production of art to this goal and thereby ultimately annulling it. This is the backdrop against which we can describe Richter's period of not painting mentioned above – as a transition period and a time for initiatives directed toward recasting painting from a distance in various ways, in order to come back to it in the end.

Richter had completed his last abstract paintings in September 2009, exhibiting them that same year at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. This was a large group of works in which Richter experimented with various stages of condensing and obliterating a composition, culminating in large-format paintings that have been so thoroughly worked over with the squeegee that their dense white surfaces prevent the eye from penetrating through to the deeper layers of paint.² The exhibition included the 50 'Sindbad' diptychs from 2008, with which Richter had that year for the first time set a surprising counterpoint to his mostly large-scale works in the exhibition 'Abstract Paintings' at Museum Ludwig in Cologne.³ In 2010, Richter then turned his attention exclusively to painting behind glass, creating well in excess of one hundred small-format images, namely the work groups 'Bagdad', 'Ifrit', 'Perisade', 'Abdallah', and 'Aladin', from which five works are included in this catalogue. For the behind-glass paintings, various colors of lacquer were poured onto a plate of plexiglass, the viscous paints flowing into one another without completely mixing, so that

2 Cf. "Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings 2009", exh. cat. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 2009.

3 Cf. Gerhard Richter, "Sindbad", Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2010.

individual strands of color were still recognizable. With the help of a paintbrush and scraper, Richter manipulated the flow and the mixing of the colors. Then he interrupted this process using a second glass plate in order to freeze a specific state, like in a photograph. Like photo plates in a camera, the glass paintings had a fixed format. For the viewer, the lacquer colors behind the glass surfaces are visible only indirectly, lending them an untouchable objectivity. In contrast with Surrealist methods, this manipulation of paint colors does not bring unconscious elements to light, because the configurations behind glass present to us only a shimmering surface. These pictures, so unusual for Richter, by no means constituted a mere episode in his oeuvre, because he after all worked on them for three years. After a two-year break, Richter then began to replace the small plates of glass with larger panels in 2013, which he even took to pairing together. The isolated pictorial phenomena were thus replaced by the imaginary landscapes of the 'Flow' diptychs. These exuberant rivers of color were followed that very same year by the four 'Doppelgrau' (Double Gray) paintings. These are likewise diptychs, consisting of two large glass panels of different widths in which the principle of painting behind glass was continued but the intermingling of colors on the glass was replaced by a uniform coating of gray lacquer. Exerting an irresistible pull similar to that of the 'Flow' diptychs, the glossy dark surfaces of the 'Doppelgrau' pictures likewise draw the viewer's gaze, but he finds in these somber monochrome panels only his own reflection and is thus remanded back to his place outside the image. The asymmetrical division into two different gray-colored panels with a fine line running between them fractures the impression of a continuum and a broader spatial context, declaring it invalid just like in the irreversible intrusion of the "zip" in Barnett Newman's vast color fields.

The ostensible continuity of the flowing lacquer colors with all that they could be imagined to portend was interrupted with a jolt in 2011 by a new pictorial invention: the 'Strip'. The over sixty 'Strip' pictures Richter executed between 2011 and 2013 have an utterly different quality, because they are not the product of experimenting with the material of paint. Rather than creating these pieces by hand, the artist admits here to playing an auctorial role instead, merely participating in their manipulation. The 'Strips' involved the reproduction of an abstract image, which was systematically reworked: "divided mirrored repeated."⁴ The template was cut in half vertically, and then cut into quarters, eighths, and so on until it had been separated into 4,096 narrow strips, which were then mirrored

4 Richter began the artist book "Patterns" (Heni Publishing, London, and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2011) with this description.

until the points of color became horizontal lines. Richter could now choose any one of the 4,096 strips with its random, unpredictable color sequence, which was available only as a digital file, to print out on paper using an inkjet printer. With the 'Strips', Richter had gained an element that in its absolute randomness is simply always there for no apparent reason; it was an invention that unfurled infinite potential, offering a plethora of choices that also opened up a frightening dimension – almost like painting.

But only almost, because the phase outlined here, which lasted several years, was marked by Richter's decision in favor of exclusively non-painterly practices: practices that replace painting with a – one might say pseudo-painterly and yet potent – surrogate such as painting behind glass, or which involve seemingly up-to-the-minute digital techniques instead of the traditional manual application of paint on canvas. Some issues emerged here with special prominence: Both in the glass paintings and in the 'Strips' with their proliferation of individual images, the primary question now had to be how many of such works to produce and when the principle should come to an end, i.e., how to regulate the ratio of infinity to finite. In his works that involve random decisions, Richter formulated a possible answer to this question, but not a conclusive one.⁵ Here, however, it was not a working step such as the blind selection of colors that was left up to chance; the random element was instead the arbitrariness of the decision that Richter himself had to make. Analogous to beginning something, ending it is likewise an act of will, a decision that has to be made, which can only be justified based on pragmatic reasons, i.e., external circumstances such as time, place, and availability, but never based on content. This fact is reflected in the unlimited spectrum of variations in the flow of colors just as in the infinite expansion of the 'Strip' lines.

Finally, in 2013, with his large glass sculptures, which involved more and more panes of glasses placed one after the other, and with the work '7 Scheiben (Kartenhaus)' (7 Panels [House of Cards]), Richter added further works in which he formulated his vision of the nature of the picture in a surprising way outside of painting. The panes of glass set up one after the other in echelons are each absolutely transparent, and yet at some point, due to their sheer number, the eye gets lost in a milky twilight, in uncertainty. Unlike with painting, the viewer does not confront an unchanging surface, because with each movement, his reflection

5 Cf. "Gerhard Richter – Zufall, das Kölner Domfenster und 4900 Farben", Verlag Kölner Dom/Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2007.

in the glass panels changes and is refracted. Even more spectacular, but also more precarious, is what happens in the inclined glass panes of the 'Kartenhaus', which lean against each other in a fragile balance. Anything lying before or behind the sheets of glass is prismatically refracted across different planes. These glass works can thus be seen in two senses as metaphors for Richter's painting: On the one hand, when looking at the row of glass panels the eye concentrates on the image but is at the same time disappointed by what it cannot see. And on the other, the panes of the 'Kartenhaus' split what is visible into multiple simultaneously present and yet non-convergent images.

Richter's period of not painting is therefore neither a substitute for his painting nor a counterpart to it; it is a continuation and commentary. This period is not fundamentally different from his actual painting, with the self-reflexive, critical character it has displayed ever since his picture no. 1, the 'Tisch' from 1962. What the artist's decision to copy photographs in 1962 meant for painting – not its rejection and negation but its reconstruction as an unfamiliar pictorial process – Richter realized again during this period of abstinence from painting using other means. We should therefore take his comment seriously that he is actually not a painter but a picture maker. Making pictures by no means requires the virtuosity of the painter's craft, a virtuosity that Richter's work demonstrates more than sufficiently. More important than perfect craftsmanship is that Richter wants to show us something, and what exactly that is cannot be expressed in art with words but only demonstrated by the pictures themselves.

With his 'Birkenau' cycle from 2014, which Richter once again painted in the classical manner in oil, he fulfilled a long-cherished plan. Many years before, Richter had discovered in a book by Georges Didi-Huberman four photos taken clandestinely by a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, and he wanted to copy them in paint on large-format canvases. For a long time, however, he had been kept from doing so by a hectic round of exhibition projects, but perhaps also due to a certain trepidation at approaching the topic. In the summer of 2014, he then finally transferred the black-and-white photographs onto canvas. While working, though, he grew more and more aware of the impossibility of dealing with the subject matter in this way, and he began, after completing the transfer of the motifs, to immediately paint over them. After several steps, anything resembling a depiction was obliterated. By renouncing representation, the four-part, now

abstract, image cycle evolved into an elegy, with only the title 'Birkenau' hinting at what had come before. The elegy is in a literal sense based on a depiction that has now been rendered just as out of reach as the distant historical moment, the horror of which the viewer may be aware of, but is unable to connect to a real experience.

This digression through the works from 2010 to 2014 is necessary in order to be able to understand the moment of beginning. In December 2014, Richter began to paint again, and after completing thirty abstract paintings by the spring of 2015, he proceeded to produce forty drawings from May to September of that year.⁶ The latter are thus not preparatory studies for paintings but rather a kind of finale, which can be understood in relation with the introduction, crescendo, development, and conclusion of the painting sequence. These are musical terms that would appear apt for delineating its course as expressed in the choice of formats and the content of the paintings. As so often, Richter began with a group of works on small wooden panels executed with short brushstrokes so that their appearance can be changed completely with a single improvised pass of the squeegee. Due to their small size, these works seem like details from a larger image. While for the artist books he conceived, Richter had photographed details of larger paintings and lined them up page by page in order to reverse the priority of whole to detail – thereby implicitly calling into question established hierarchies such as cause and effect, model and copy – now the tide turns again. The detail and the whole are one here, and there is nothing that leads beyond each given painterly detail.

Via a number of medium-sized pictures, Richter then arrived in the course of the process at vertical compositions nearly two meters in height, followed by a series of horizontal works. In the square images numbered 939-1 and -2 in the catalogue raisonné, as well as in the further numbers in that sequence, whose modest size ensures them a feeling of immediacy, there can still be found the sudden shock of the picture detail that seems to have been cut out of a larger context. The overlaying of divergent impulses and the confrontations between chromatic layers that do not obey any general scheme appear to the viewer like magnified individual details. The material aspect of the application of paint and its mechanics as underlined by the path of the squeegee, which does not allow any manual brushwork to shine through, place this brand of abstraction at a

⁶ An initial selection of nine paintings was shown in Tokyo in November 2015 (cf. "Gerhard Richter: Painting". exh. cat. Wako Works of Art, Tokyo 2015); the present exhibition at Marian Goodman includes twenty additional paintings.



Gerhard Richter, Abstract Painting (939-1), 2015.
Oil on wood, 62 x 62 cm. Private collection.

distance from traditional forms of expression. The snatches of color scattered by the squeegee prevent a harmonious whole from coming together either through the stratification in depth of various layers or atop the painting's surface. By thus refusing to form a composition, the individual moments exercise a direct impact, not bound by any overarching system.

In the three large paintings numbered 940-6, -7, and -8, as well as in the central works that go furthest in the direction of pictorial unity (941-1 and -2), Richter brings out the narrative dimension we are familiar with from his abstract paintings from the mid-1980s – for example from the two 'Courbet' paintings (615 and 616) or 'Mediation' (617). What does narrative mean when it is tied to paintings without literary aspects, to an abstraction without symbolic aspirations? Narrative structures do not come to the fore here as a basic order, but we can instead detect fragments of stories in processes that take place on the picture surface, in the amplification or contrast of colors and paint application – in principle in all elements of the picture surface that can be identified as signifiers, i.e., as signs. In the new abstract paintings, for example, the commencement and discontinuation of the application of a particular color as it is pulled across the surface is such a sign, or a sign might be construed in the change in direction of the squeegee, leaving behind an edge in the continuum of color, or perhaps in the balancing entanglement of horizontal and vertical movements. Pictorial signs of this type are not used for referring to a hidden or exposed motif – whether a mood or a landscape. Because they are deprived of any referential level, they take on a free-floating suggestiveness, which Richter controls by carefully weighing both the color scheme and the internal dynamics of the image. Red, yellow, blue, and green are used in comparable quantities in the course of the painting process, so that the colors are present locally and no one color predominates. At the most, one or two colors added in the final passes of the squeegee take priority over those that went before. Richter also keeps an eye on the equilibrium of the all-over treatment of the canvas, so that movements can be sensed without any one of them encompassing the entire surface. While in the work 941-1, a cross-shaped division of the surface is hinted at but does not reach up to the top layer, 941-2 is so cleverly worked over that the variety of color and formal relationships within the picture plane defies any attempt at definition. The above-described suggestiveness of the signifiers is thereby not sealed for good – on the contrary, they captivate the viewer as the open ends of each image. They are the



Gerhard Richter, Abstract Painting (940-7), 2015.
Oil on canvas, 140 x 160 cm. Private collection.

visual supplement that gives him the impression of sharing in something that is happening before his very eyes.

Compared to the two large paintings with their synthetic heft, the group of horizontal images displays a surprising air of drama. They form the stage on which the narrative dimension of the abstract painting unfolds before us as a spectacle. Each exhibits in a different way an abrupt change in the horizontal course of painting, which Richter stages either through broad and commanding brushstrokes, as in 940-4, or through the planar or linear scraping away of the last coat of paint with a palette knife. While in 940-4, -6, and -7, the polyphony of painterly effects is merged in the end by means of a finely structured uppermost paint layer, the last images, especially 941-6 and -7, stun us with the downright aggressive interventions that Richter inflicts on the painting surface as his final step. He shows us here what he is otherwise at pains to conceal in his painting, namely an agitated, disparate picture surface that is not intact but rather in some places so mangled that the white canvas shows through. He shows us this – but what does Richter really show us when he breaks with pictorial illusion? Does he show more than when he closes these wounds again by overlaying them with a coat of paint? What he shows is the formulative power of the gesture of showing, its ability to arrest the gaze – breaking with the illusion is itself an illusion. The beauty of the gesture beguiles us even when it verges on aggression, because what the picture presents to the eye is always part of the image and hence part of a fascinating prospect from which our gaze cannot tear itself away.

As a kind of postscript, Richter turned to drawing after finishing these paintings, executing in the summer of 2015 a suite of forty drawings on plain paper in letter format, the same kind he usually used in earlier years. As is immediately evident in the transition from the last paintings to the drawings, the latter are the opposite of picture studies. Instead, they are an echo of the intense months that Richter had spent painting – small images, now executed in a different medium. This sequel came as a surprise, because Richter had never viewed himself as a draftsman but had only turned to the genre in isolated instances, for example around 1964 and then again in the late 1970s and during certain phases over the following decades. After producing a sequence of forty-five works in preparation for the retrospective of drawings mounted by the Kunstmuseum Winterthur in 1999,⁷ Richter did not exhibit any further drawings except for four large-format

7 Dieter Schwarz, "Gerhard Richter: Drawings 1964–1999. Catalogue Raisonné", exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf 1999, CR nos. 99/1–45.



Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Painting (941-7)*, 2015.
Oil on canvas, 92 x 122 cm. Private collection.

sheets in 2005,⁸ and it seemed that his interest in the genre had waned. It was not until he made the gift of a larger group of drawings to the Kunstmuseum Winterthur in 2014 that it was clear that Richter had resumed drawing at various points in time, once in the year 2000 and sporadically from 2009 to 2011.⁹

In an attempt to shed light on Richter's skepticism toward drawing, it is worth taking a look back at the context of contemporary drawing at the time when Richter was defining his painterly work. The gestural quality of American Abstract Expressionism culminated in the work of Cy Twombly with scribbling, writing, and listing as a decentralized, self-referential marking up of the drawing surface. The opposite approach was the project-type drawing, taken up by numerous, especially American, artists with results ranging from sober diagrams to multi-tonal painterly sketches – from Dan Flavin to Claes Oldenburg. The traces of the drawing hand were replaced in Europe by the mechanical, repetitive structures of the ZERO artists, while Joseph Beuys interpreted drawing as a record of the actions of the artist, as fragmentary narrative. At cross-purposes with both these emerging trends was American Pop drawing, in particular Roy Lichtenstein's images reduced to mere outlines. The provocative aspect here was that Lichtenstein was able to bring out in even the crudest of motifs a new classicism, utilizing for this purpose the abbreviated style of illustrations and comics. While Richter's early drawings oscillated between figural representation and technical studies, thus responding in a reserved manner to the contemporary context, in 1978 he approached abstraction for the first time with his series of Halifax drawings and a few other works on paper.¹⁰ The fact that these drawings are each set on the paper surface within a window-like frame makes them appear to be depictions, copies after an imaginary template, thus conveying something of the distance the draftsman attempted to preserve between himself and the subject he was seeking to convey. The abstract drawings that Richter has produced up to recent years can be understood against this backdrop as abstractions that paradoxically relate to a lost motif. He has rarely returned to figural drawing, because painting appears to him to be the more fitting medium for depictions of such import. In his graphic works of the 1980s, a revolt could be felt against a kind of drawing that purports to be more than an unconscious

8 "Gerhard Richter: Paintings from 2003–2005", exh. cat. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York 2005, pp. 116–123.

9 Dieter Schwarz (ed.), "Von Lucio Fontana bis Thomas Schütte (Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Graphische Sammlung: Erwerbungen 2000–2016 und ausgewählte ältere Bestände", vol. 2), Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Winterthur 2016, nos. 91–104.

10 Schwarz 1999 (see note 6), nos. 78/15, and Gerhard Richter, "66 Zeichnungen, Halifax 1978". Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 1997.



Gerhard Richter, 14.9.2015. Graphite on paper, 21 x 29,7 cm. Private collection, Zürich.

scribbling, with the artist seeming to resist a regular composition and instead doing everything in his power to maintain the disparity of line and effects and even to make this his theme. In comparison, the new drawings seem more lyrical, with the aggressive fragmentation of the composition standing out less harshly. This can be attributed on the one hand to the precise drafting that takes every single sheet from the status of sketch to finished picture. As regards his drawing technique, Richter uses the frottage pioneered by Max Ernst to first create an irregular drawing ground that inspires myriad associations, onto which he then sets his lines. The loose line acts in the drawing like a critical interpretation of the harmonious background, from which it picks out certain details and connects them, literally takes them up, in order to metaphorically interpret them, pushing them further or negating them. Against the illusionistic, quite scenic space of the drawing, the line appears as an element that, together with the negative areas of brightness, breaks with the primary continuity, in order, in its further course, to create new connections atop the surface, albeit still remote from any Surrealist narrative. A gestural type of drawing is unable to assert itself here, which Richter would probably reject anyway as too frivolous, nor does this closely observed, reflective working method allow for any smug romanticism.

If we are to view the new abstract paintings as an implicit response to the concept of the 'Strips', then this also applies to the drawings that followed, because with his first 'Strips', mechanically conceived and then printed on paper, Richter had resolutely confronted drawing with a new possibility whose undreamt-of capacities surpass by far any manual technique. Like beginning to paint, resuming drawing is likewise a symbolic gesture with which Richter embraces the hope that an art based on the artist-subject can still persist in the face of the infinite possibilities of digital image production. Not that this game has already been won, but that it can continue to be played. Or at least that it can begin again anew, because no matter how the paint layers are piled up or the lines are drawn, they still promise to be more than the phantom of the last image as endorsed by a teleological philosophy of history. In Beckett's 'Worstward Ho', the subject pushes on, with language defying ostensible failure to become a musical sequence: "The void. How try say? How try fail? No try no fail. Say only –"¹¹

Dieter Schwarz

¹⁰ Schwarz 1999 (wie Anm. 6), WVZ-Nr. 78/15, bzw. Gerhard Richter, 66 Zeichnungen, Halifax 1978, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln 1997.

¹¹ Beckett 1983 (see note 1)