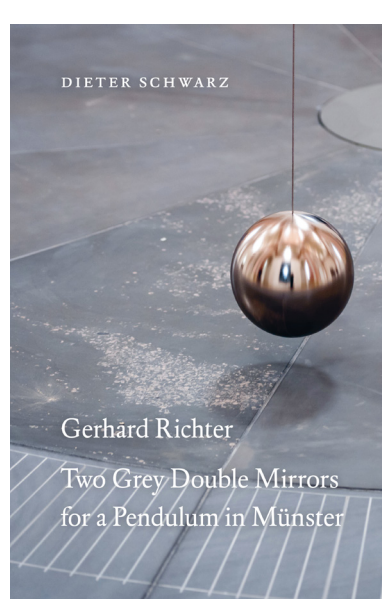


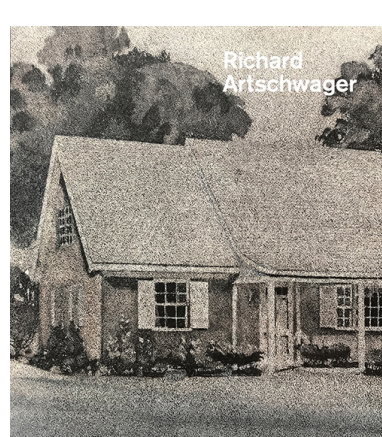
August 2021

Richard Artschwager – Gerhard Richter

In 1962 Richard Artschwager in New York and Gerhard Richter in Düsseldorf both began to paint pictures from photographs. This fact, however, brings any correlation between their ways of working to an end; what appeared to be similar proved subsequently to be profoundly different. The detachment from the motif that such a neutral painting technique established was comparable, along with an interest in grisaille, but otherwise the approach of the two artists to a picture as such was quite distinct. Richter projected the photo onto the canvas, drew around the contours of the figures and then filled these out with paint, in order to preserve the integrity of the source material; Artschwager divided the photo into squares and copied each section one after the other, without paying attention to the coherence of the image. Whereas Richter attributed fundamental significance to the picture itself and thereafter always saw himself as the creator of pictures, Artschwager was mostly interested in the context of the picture and how this could be manipulated by framing his paintings and then coating the frames with reflective sheet metal, printed Formica or veneer, or painted wood grain. Artschwager's paintings and objects are surrogates that result in a vacuum, as the depicted disappears during the process of depiction. A reassessment of the values connected with the artwork, a deeply Nietzschean gesture, meant that Artschwager's oeuvre was incomparable — and at the same time inexcusable — for all those tasked with making sense of it.



Two recent publications gave me a good opportunity to consider and comment on the work of both artists again. My book published by Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne (ISBN 978-3-7533-0026-9) addresses the work «Two Gray Double Mirrors for a Pendulum» that Richter created for the Dominican Church in Münster in 2018, where it is permanently on display. The catalogue for an Artschwager exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in Rome in spring 2021 covers a concise selection of paintings and objects from a former private collection.



Themes with a long history in Richter's practice are brought together in the aforementioned work – glass, reflection, the colour gray and the concept of monumental spatial compositions. An additional factor is Foucault's pendulum, a device that provides scientific evidence, underscoring the programmatic communicative power of Richter's work. On the occasion of the inauguration of his work Richter spoke about how he found the location of this pendulum in a church particularly thought-provoking: "It offers decisive proof of the rotation of the Earth – a triumph of science." The scientific fact as a part of established reality is juxtaposed unaltered in relation to the artistic invention, without being aestheticized or declared to be a work of art. The pendulum oscillates in a regular manner among the transient images reflected by the mirrors on the lateral walls of the church. This confrontation and its significance are treated in the book in terms of both content and formal considerations.



When Artschwager received the Wolfgang Hahn Prize in October 2005 I suggested paying a visit to Richter, since both artists had met and exchanged works in 1968, when Artschwager exhibited at Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf; they had not seen each other again since that occasion. Richter agreed, and so in the afternoon prior to the prize-giving ceremony we drove to Hahnwald. Artschwager was impressed by the dimensions of Richter's studio spaces; then we entered the house, where a table was laid for tea. All at once, Artschwager opened the lid of the piano and, to Richter's astonishment, played some keyboard runs in a virtuoso manner. While having tea, there was polite conversation about this and that and one sensed the contrast between bourgeois formality and merry light-heartedness. When Artschwager started reminiscing about the time when he was stationed as an American soldier in Vienna at the end of the World War, he struck up a Heuriger song with a wry smile – "We get older and older, we get colder and colder ..."



During his stay in Cologne Artschwager gave an interview in which he said that a work of art is "a thing in itself. It is self-sustaining, and it needs no explanation beyond: Shut up and look!" And when asked whether there could not be any more than that, he replied: "But then it belongs to language and not to art. You can see clouds or the brushstrokes that produce the clouds. Representation or reality, to a like degree, elicit a total aesthetic experience. For the eye. Language is an abbreviation."

Dieter Schwarz