Historical and Aesthetic Action in Gerhard Richter's *Birkenau*[1]

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The following essay presents Gerhard Richter's 2014 painting cycle *Birkenau* as an example of aesthetic action. It does so, first of all, by placing aesthetic action in contrast to historical action or action at large. The latter is such action in which, according to a common philosophical understanding, we determinately know the concept under which our action falls, which is to say we know what we are doing as we are doing it;[2] whereas acting aesthetically is to suspend the determinacy of that concept and instead to perform an indeterminacy. If historical action is held together by logical relations in which, being broadly based in determinate negation, actions relate as means and ends, then aesthetic action, in suspending determinacy, places itself beyond those logical relations. Though it is produced from historical conceptual means, it nevertheless is not reducible to those means and, in a way that our example will demonstrate, it unsettles and transforms those means.[3]

1 This essay is an adaptation of Florian Klinger, »Gerhard Richter's *Birkenau*«, originally in the exhibition catalogue *Gerhard Richter: 60 Years of Work*, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, 2025.

2 See the influential account in Anscombe 1957.

3 I propose the concept of aesthetic action in Klinger 2024.

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In showing this, the essay implicitly contrasts the indeterminacy of aesthetic action as exemplified by Richter's painting with other kinds of artmaking that do not result in an unsettling and transformation of historical action, but rather in its logical continuation. Along those lines, artmaking may broadly commit to Hegel's view that the arts present us to ourselves and thus say something determinate about the human form, the concept of the human—which requires that artmaking should follow a determinate concept in so far as it belongs to historical action. Aesthetic action, in contrast, says nothing determinate but actualizes the human form as an indeterminacy—thus putting in question, rather than affirming, who we are. This poses the basic conceptual alternative that all artmaking faces and must decide between: considering aesthetic production either as determinacy or as indeterminacy.[4]

Of course, this is only an interesting difference to the extent to which it can be shown to be of relevance for actual artistic work. The discussion of Richter's painting will show how for him, the problem of representing the Holocaust is specifically addressed by the aesthetic indeterminacy, how the latter enables the painter—on the level of the conceptual makeup of the action—to do something that he could not otherwise perform. This also shows that aesthetic action is not ultimately separate from historical action but, precisely by way of its indeterminacy, is able to fulfill a particular historical purpose.

When you first encounter Gerhard Richter's cycle of four large oil paintings, you may be under the impression of their austerity; they give away little in their dark and sparse colors, looming format, harsh surface articulation, and absence of representational cues—features common to them all.[5]

4 I consider artistic action to be an empirical sociological concept—an action performed as part of the practices called the arts—and aesthetic action to be a fundamental conceptual possibility articulated by the actualization of the human form and therein in no way bound to the arts, but capable of being exercised in any number of ways.

5 Armin Zweite characterizes the work's atmosphere as »dark, desolate, melancholy« (Zweite 2019, 368. Translation: author).

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The only direction you receive is through the title *Birkenau*, referring to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. And perhaps you have been preparing for this encounter by learning about the four photographs secretly taken there in August 1944 by a member of the *Sonderkommando*, a group of prisoners tasked with working in and around Crematorium V; photographs showing the incineration of bodies, a group of women on their way to the gas chamber, and trees in bright sunlight—one of which underlies each of Richter's paintings.[6] This happens via an artistic process that projects the photo onto the canvas, then renders it in graphite drawing and develops it into a representational grisaille (black and white) painting, and finally erases all depiction to arrive at the abstract canvas in which no representational link to the photos remains (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2023–2026).

Richter's *Birkenau* cycle is distinctive in that it starts from a double reference—to the photos, and to the events depicted by the photos—that is absorbed into the painting where it is representationally erased. The cycle thus performs an operation that Dieter Schwarz calls an elegiac abstraction (Schwarz 2023: 7; Schwarz 2016: 60)—one that differs from an abstraction that never had a reference in that it contains this double loss and double memory and is in a sense sustained by it: mnemonic erasure, abstracting from depiction, on the one hand, and mnemonic presentation, keeping reference alive, on the other, being the main activities that constitute the painting. Richter's strategy, in short, is to erase depiction while affirming reference. The aim, we will see, is not a mere stocktaking of existing memory, but a mnemonic recovery that is the production of memory specifically in the medium of painting, and therein a transformation of the available mnemonic resources.[7]

6 Richter came across the four images in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Didi-Huberman 2012).

7 For Richter's conception of painting's transformative role, see Klinger 2022, ch. IV. For a summary of how history painting in the German context shifts from representing historical events to becoming »memory painting«, undertaking a project of mnemonic recovery of the possibly irrecoverable, see Wagstaff 2020: 19–21.

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What is the point of erasing all depiction of the photos while sustaining reference to them? For Richter, painting must always show something, for if the painting did not refer, it would not attach to anything and there would be no reason for it to be made or seen. His broad understanding of what counts as showing something includes depiction as well as abstraction; while depiction represents its subject matter, abstraction refers to it via gesture, color, proportion, texture, or any other features by which the painting produces associations with its reference.

So, when to use depiction and when abstraction? Depiction (found typically in Richter's paintings from photographs) comes with the upside of binding and directing reference in a precise way, and with the downside of reference remaining thin—for the very reason of it being so directed. Abstraction (found in the abstract paintings from the 1980s, *Cage*, and the abstract paintings of recent years) comes with the upside of unbinding and thickening reference to any desired degree (if not especially directed it allows us to associate a great deal) and with the downside of reference remaining less precise. And as for hybrids of both genres (found in distorted depictions such as *September* or *Tisch*, overpainted photographs, and the short film *Volker Bradke*), there seems to be a compromise negotiated between the upside and downside of each genre.

And here we can see what is special about *Birkenau*, which draws only on the upside of both depiction and abstraction that here seem to eliminate each other's downside. As for depiction, since the viewer has both the title and knowledge of the underlying photographs, its associations are from the outset bound—directed toward the treatment of the Holocaust, and, more precisely, particular scenes from the crematorium at the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp; one is not at all encouraged to freely associate whatever comes to mind. As for abstraction, since the viewer is confronted with canvases from which all depiction is erased, the association is, in its very boundness, unbound; the full associative import of abstraction is channeled into the confined articulation of its reference—which shapes the referential activity in a way not found elsewhere in Richter.

We can further characterize this special kind of referential activity at work in *Birkenau*: The activity of the

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painting is fully abstracted from depiction and *as such* directed toward a determinate historical reference. Now, as the abstracting activity performs the erasing of the depiction, are there not also abstract features that contribute to the painting without therefore being erased? Not quite, because any activity not bound to depiction as its erasure would, strictly speaking, fall outside the referential focus to which this particular painting is bound. As every bit of activity is tied to that which it cancels out, the presentation of all features of the painting is the negative referencing of the painting's historical subject matter through erasure. Taking this as our point of departure, we identify the coupling of erasure and presentation to be the conceptual premise of the *Birkenau* canvases.

Benjamin Buchloh here speaks of a dialectics of amnesia and anamnesis, and relates those terms to the particular stakes that for Richter attach to a painterly treatment of the Holocaust (Buchloh 2016: 34). Behind amnesia or erasure as the inability to give memory anything other than a negative shape stands Richter's belief that the Holocaust defies depiction for various reasons: showing the bodies in a concentration camp might be sensationalist the way pornography is; it might run the risk of clichéd sentimentality and even kitsch; and the catastrophe for humanity might be such that it is generally impossible to capture in a valid iconic image. Behind anamnesis or presentation as mnemonic recovery stands Richter's desire to reference the Holocaust as shaped by his upbringing in the German Democratic Republic, which denied all complicity with National Socialism; by his emigration to western Germany with its partial though repressed recognition of it; and finally, by his often-declared conviction that paintings should do justice to the historical events they reference. Throughout his career, Richter appears torn between the impossibility of representing the Holocaust and the necessity of doing so (Richter/Serota 2011: 25).

We thus need to understand how the impasse of wanting to represent the Holocaust and being deeply wary of doing so is reflected in *Birkenau* through the coupling of erasure and presentation that we identified as the cycle's conceptual premise. We begin by accounting for each as a distinctive operation.

When we describe the canvases' features in terms of

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presentation, we note black and white paint manifesting all sorts of gray patches alternating with smudges of red and green; a highly resolved surface articulation producing a tense vibrancy that is nowhere slackened; the suggestion that we might make out depiction in the gray areas—especially those of us familiar with Richter's grisaille paintings; and finally the large format that presents the painting as a massive object to confront, as definitely something rather than nothing. Describing the same canvases in terms of erasure, we note that each feature presented is produced by way of negation: the black and white is the avoidance of color, and the red and green is of a sort that discourages any generic associations based on color; the surface articulation consists of a scratching out, pushing, and rupturing that deprives the paintings' surfaces of gestural expressivity as well as directional flow, evading randomness on the one hand, regularity on the other. Any attempt to make out depiction in the gray areas is defied by the absence of representational cues anywhere in the painting; and finally the format, which makes all the described negativity loom large and austere.

And we can at least briefly sketch how this coupling of erasure and presentation is accentuated differently in each of the paintings, thus shaping the cycle as a whole. The first canvas displays a balanced manifestation of erasure and presentation, with all painterly features seeming to show and to withhold in equal measure. In the second canvas's massive condensation of red that disrupts the integration of features of the first, both erasure and presentation seem rendered more starkly and their coupling seems dramatized. As green and red spread across the third canvas with delicate chromatic in-between tones, minimizing contrast and gestural expressivity, erasure and presentation appear finely articulated through one another, contrasting with their juxtaposition in the second, recalling their equilibrium in the first. In the last canvas, the massive condensation of green that echoes the activity of red in the second, seemingly trying to float free of the gray areas, produces a heightened suggestion that reference might after all be depicted, as well as its definite denial; erasure and presentation appear to drift apart.

For Richter's cycle as a whole, this suggests a development of the coupling of erasure and presentation in which each painting fulfills a noninterchangeable role,

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thus constituting the cycle as a single unit of four paintings; wherein canvases two and four have a diastolic or fallout character and canvases one and three a systolic integrating character, thus constituting the cycle as two units of two; and, finally, with a different rendering of the coupling in each case—as the referenced material of four different photos from Auschwitz-Birkenau would suggest—thus constituting the cycle as of four units of one.

The discussion has thus shown that erasure and presentation are distinctive operations at work in Richter's *Birkenau.* However, it has also shown that it is not possible to distinguish between such features of a painting that enact erasure and such other features that enact presentation. Every feature of the painting seems to be invested in both, as the two operations are strictly *through one another*: While erasure and presentation are each a distinctive operation, the paintings' abstracting activity is in no way non- or anti-referencing, and their referencing activity is in no way non- or anti-abstracting; rather, both activities appear to leave no space between them either for an adversarial relationship, or, in fact, for any logically articulated relationship at all.

That we are caught between erasure and presentation—abstracting and referencing, amnesia and anamnesis—indicates that they are not complementary operations contributing to a painting as its parts, but competing aspects under which Richter's work presents itself, competing renderings of each of the paintings and of the whole of *Birkenau*. Under one way of looking, the painting is erasure; under the other, it is presentation—and because the painting consists of both in a single unified action in which one *is* the other, you cannot dispense with either of them; the irresolution between competing aspects constitutes the painting as an indeterminacy.[8] This is aesthetic action in contrast to historical, nonaesthetic action that presents itself under a single concept only.

This indeterminacy is unlike anything that we can find outside the encounter with a painting or action that has the same distinctive characteristics. It denies any sense of vagueness or inarticulation that the term *indeterminacy* may otherwise convey, and neither is it the incomple-

8 For the concept of this indeterminacy, see Klinger 2024.

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tion of something interrupted or failed or undecided and yet to be brought to its full actuality. To the contrary, this kind of painterly indeterminacy has fully arrived in its end, fulfilling its intended purpose.

Instructively, this is denied in the description of it as a dialectics—a movement based in determinate negation in which a contradiction is resolved or able to be resolved—that connects actions insofar as they are historical. In the case of *Birkenau*, this would relate erasure and presentation through determinate negation; that is, on shared terms. On shared terms would mean that either presentation is subordinate to erasure, which is obviously not the case as we see something rather than nothing; or that erasure is subordinate to presentation, which is not the case either as our seeing is given no referential link to the photos; or, finally, that both are subordinated to some further concept in which their contradiction appears resolved or able to be resolved. And we already saw that Richter's *Birkenau* provides one with no such concept: erasure and presentation relate qua indeterminate negation as competing aspects of the painting, not its parts, thus unsettling the rule of dialectics for its domain.

Finally, how does this discussion of *Birkenau* reflect the particular stakes that we found attached to a painterly treatment of the Holocaust? Richter's strategy of erasing depiction while affirming reference seems to address those concerns that we found to manifest the impossibility of representing the Holocaust: as no depiction is produced, no bodies can be sensationalized; no clichéd sentimentality can be evoked; and no iconic image can be expected. At the same time, we saw that Richter not only does not abandon the historical reference, but that, precisely by binding abstraction to depiction qua erasure, he qualifies the referential activity in a way that we found not to be available to either depiction or abstraction alone.

We can now also say how the indeterminacy of Richter's paintings, by declaring erasure and presentation as not external to each other, contributes to the project of mnemonic recovery: the indeterminacy ensures that the abstraction does not relate to the referential import it carries as something different from itself (as would be the case in a dialectic relationship), but that it *is* this import. This makes it possible for the abstraction that we see, in

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each of its features, to be charged with the full mnemonic import of the reference of the photos. We have thus established a sense in which this recovery deserves to be called productive rather than merely recuperative, and transformative of mnemonic resources rather than perpetuating their status quo.

Clearly, then, Richter's *Birkenau* does not accept the terms set out for it by Buchloh's picture. If, according to that picture, painting the Holocaust is impossible yet necessary, with both of these things relating in a dialectic, then any painting that subjects itself to this premise would be reducible to the terms of the picture. In constituting itself instead as an indeterminacy, Richter's painting never subjects itself to those terms, precisely in as much as they are undeniably determining factors in its historical circumstance. The making of *Birkenau* is still bound to those factors as its constituents; as we saw, erasure of depiction is taken up by the painting, and so is the affirmation of the historical reference. From these determinate actions, however, Richter builds the aesthetic indeterminacy in which their historical dialectical relating is unsettled, and the mnemonic recovery presents itself as productive and transformative in the way described.

Of course, to locate *Birkenau's* constitutive indeterminacy specifically in this erasure and presentation, and not in other features of the paintings, is a decision that has a quasi-programmatic character. For while we have no reason to assume this kind of indeterminacy not to be at work in paintings such as *September* (say, between depicting and abstracting) or *Aunt Marianne* (say, between exhibiting and dissolving the human figure), and there is no limit to the ways in which it can be brought about, Richter specifically links it to erasure and presentation only in *Birkenau*, thus making this the place where the relationship of his painting to its historical circumstance comes to be articulated in a certain decisive way.

What does this mean? It means that in Richter's communication about the Holocaust, the ideological constraints of the historical circumstance do not determine the painting, but are taken up by it and, in this taking up, transformed. The point is perfectly general and it receives special emphasis in the context of the Holocaust: the act of painting doesn't let itself be tied to ideological coordinates. Painting, Richter demonstrates, comes from the

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midst of ideological commitments, but it is not therefore reducible to them. To be able to paint or to be unable to paint are alternatives that the act of painting answers with a yes (presentation) and a yes (erasure), and thus reveals to be false when applied to the domain of the painting itself.

While this cuts painting loose from false constraints, what Richter's indeterminacy positively means is not generalizable, as it is established in the scene of encounter in which viewers, one at a time, come to constitute *Birkenau.* This scene is captured as you turn toward the gray mirrors that are hung in the gallery opposite *Birkenau*. While merely looking at the paintings, you did not literally include yourself in the picture; but through the mirror, the human figure that is you appears almost epiphanic against the backdrop of the canvases that so laboriously eliminate all trace of the figure.

Seeing yourself against the backdrop of *Birkenau* is to find yourself visually implicated. You yourself, in your individuality as you move and watch, appear as the one whose viewing activity is made explicit. Depending on which group traits make up your individual identity at the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, and other marks, each in its specific historically articulated relationship to the crimes shown by the Birkenau photographs, your implication carries different political stakes. Still, you don't appear to yourself externally, from a third-person viewpoint, as the mirrors seem to suggest. Rather, since you know yourself to be the one in the mirror, you witness your own implication through your first-person knowing it to be yours.

While for most visitors today, this will not constitute an implication on the level of individual guilt, the conceptual point is that you are implicated nevertheless. The Holocaust is a crime that renders our humanity at stake by explicitly implicating us universally, by virtue of being bearers of the human form. »Like you and me«, Georges Bataille writes, »those responsible for Auschwitz had nostrils, a mouth, a voice, human reason, they could unite, could have children. Like the Pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is the fact, the sign of man. The image of man

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is inseparable, henceforth, from a gas chamber«.[9] Therefore, you don't encounter Richter's cycle from the outside, as one might from the vantage point of a different species; rather, you do so *as a human*, explicitly as someone who is implicated in the Holocaust qua belonging to the human form. Not even the newborn you are holding is exempt from this implication.

This generic implication, too, is rendered explicit by the mirrors. For their graying effect is such that while you are still able to recognize your figure as your own, the reduction of features homogenizes the inner of the figure and thus de-individualizes you at the same time, turning you into a generic rendering of the human form—into just *any* representative of the genus »the image of man«. Cast in this way in front of *Birkenau,* you individually and generically enact the human form against the refracted backdrop of its physical annihilation (the original photos show prisoners' bodies piled up for cremation)—an annihilation that resonates in the erasure of the human form on the canvases.[10]

What does it mean to be implicated in this way?[11] The mirrors (as discussed here) don't add anything that is not already conceptually part of your encounter with *Birkenau*; they make explicit your role in that encounter. Richter's treatment of the Holocaust manifests an indeterminacy that refuses to tie who we are as humans to set historical concepts and ideological coordinates, making painting, and the encounter with it, the place of this challenge. You take part in this indeterminacy through the implication of yourself as an individual bearer of the human form. Therefore, you represent humanity under this

9 As quoted in Didi-Huberman 2012: 27–28, in which Richter first found the *Birkenau* photographs—which shows that the thought of implication by kin belongs crucially in the context of the *Birkenau* paintings.

10 Dominic Williams and Nicholas Chare argue that at least in the third of the photographs, the victims are shown to be murdered as women, as (Jewish) women, and not as universal human beings. See Williams/Chare 2016. I owe this qualification to Sebastian Köthe.

11 For the concept of implication, see Rothberg 2019. Applying that concept to Richter's *Birkenau*, Amir Eshel emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between how we are implicated by the original photographs and how they are rendered through the paintings. See Eshel 2020: 78, 82.

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question—what it means to be thus implicated—and your encounter with *Birkenau*, since it works to suspend conclusions, establishes this question as open. Open in a sense that cannot be resolved because it is that which the encounter is about.

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