Painting Over Photography: Questions Of Medium In Richter's Overpaintings

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I'm not trying to imitate a photograph; I'm trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I am practicing photography by other means. – Gerhard Richter, 1972¹

German painter Gerhard Richter is known to engage directly with questions of medium, yet his provocative statement above has generally been treated as rhetorical. Given that today art and theory are commonly understood to be engaged in a reassessment of the role of medium, perhaps to have even arrived at a moment of crisis in the understanding of medium's role in art making and in its judgement, it seems timely to reconsider Richter's claim and to take it more literally and seriously. To this end, my discussion outlines some of the background to these debates as found in arguments from Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss, and proposes that Jacques Derrida's conception of idiom in language offers a new inflection on understanding the contemporary role of medium in art. Questions of idiom and of medium are staged almost schematically in Richter's 'overpaintings'. In these seldom-considered works, small snapshot photographs are painted over with thick globs of paint, smeared and dragged in Richter's abstract style. The overpaintings and the concept of idiom help to clarify the complex relationships between painting and photography across Richter's oeuvre and demonstrate his development of medium in contemporary art.

It seems reasonable to say that the current uncertainty of our understanding of medium's role in art has been brought about by the diversity of media used by contemporary artists across their work and the heterogenous combinations of media found even within the same work. There is a certain inevitability in postmodernism having generated chaotic formulations of medium, given that Greenberg's theory of medium-specificity so thoroughly defined modernism.² In these circumstances, the most obvious thing to seek radical change in is the relationship between art and medium, so as to be seen to have moved beyond modernism. The received view is that contemporary art arrived at this condition because painting, the putatively central medium of art, reached the end that was entailed in modernism's emphasis on medium-specificity and artistic progress. Accordingly, it was a common view in the 1970s and 1980s that painting as medium was over. Artists who continued to paint were purportedly left with the job of endlessly recycling its history; a charge

often made against Richter and one of the most common ways in which his work has been misunderstood.³ Recently, this claim of the end of painting seems to have been disproved by its continued success and by a certain hegemony of the discipline of painting beyond its self-evident medium. This phenomenon is demonstrated by exhibitions of painting that include works made with ostensibly other media. One such self-proclaimed exhibition was Tate St Ives's *Painting Not Painting* (2003). It included few canvas-bound painted works, also installation works by Jim Lambie, along with Richard Slee's ceramic cartoon figures.⁴ This may be the beginning of a new conception of medium; it is nonetheless also a symptom of the current crisis in our understanding of the relationship between medium and art. It is also clear evidence that medium has come to mean something quite different from what it meant during modernism.

In this context, references to the 'post-medium condition' of contemporary art are now familiar. Post-modern irreverence for the purity or unity of medium and, more particularly, the medium-specificity defined and pursued during high modernism is particularly evident in the way that artists have taken up photography. We can think here of an endless array of contemporary examples to support this view – Thomas Demand's photographs as sculpture, Lynn Cazabon's photographic 'weavings', Jennifer Bolande's porcelain sculptures of high-speed photographs or her photographic architecture, Gregory Crewdson's filmic tableaux – to name but a few.⁵ In this purportedly post-medium era, photography's specific condition is signalled in the unequivocal term 'post-photography'. The term has been present in the literature since the mid-1990s and, as is so often the case with the rhetoric of 'post-ness', the claim to a 'post' condition for photography makes the issues of medium all the more acute in that we remain enveloped by photography at the same time that we are asked to think about its being over in some way.⁶ The most common conception of post-photography is that we can no longer think of photography as a unified medium. First, this is because, as neatly characterised by Geoffrey Batchen: 'Photography is everywhere and nowhere in particular.'⁷ Second, digital imaging technology has meant that what was once a relatively defined set of photographic chemical processes is now either riven by new permutations of image capture and manipulation, or made completely redundant by images generated entirely by means of digital technology. Richter has been drawing together painting and photography from the early 1960s to the present and as such his works span these years of shifting and contested medium relations in both painting and photography. They can tell us a great deal of the reformulations of medium currently at stake.

In reassessing medium today we must inevitably refer to the central theorist of late modernism. For Greenberg, writing in 1960: 'The essence of Modernism ... lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.'⁸ But to insist on this medium-specificity is to say that, ultimately, image-making in art is quite distinct from the broader society of images and culture, with little means to understand how art is a distinct cultural form and how art is divided into numerous disciplines. In 'Avant-Garde And Kitsch', Greenberg argues that 'once the world

of common, extraverted experience has been renounced', there is only one subject for art, and that is to 'be found in the very processes of disciplines'.⁹ If art was not committed to this principle, then it risked slipping into what he thought the mere nominalism of the readymade, or what Michael Fried called 'theatricality'.¹⁰ It was perhaps inevitable that artists following the moment of high modernist formalism would react both against the givenness of art as a category and against its division into disciplines. But, decades after pop and minimalism, artists such as Richter (and many others, for example, Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand and Glenn Brown) provide a new challenge to this modernist account of medium. These artists are not strictly loyal to a single discipline; their art is not that of the readymade, but nor does it follow the theatrical structure of minimalism.¹¹ Greenberg's conception of medium as based in internal specificity cannot account for the way these contemporary works function, though it will always be relevant to the debate, because media-specificity, if no longer a viable theory, is now a part of history, and itself a locus for art historical references.

Krauss has been influential in turning our attention back to medium in art. In a series of essays from the late 1990s to the present, Krauss has explored what she terms a post-conceptual post-postmodern return to medium. She sees this shift as driven by the desire to 'reclaim the specific from the deadening embrace of the general'.¹² Krauss describes this general as the condition developed under the conceptualism of the 1970s and 1980s which privileged the ends over the means of making art and as such rendered Greenberg's medium specificity an irrelevance. The generality that Krauss distains is, she argues, particularly evident in the way that artists have taken up photography and it is the dispersal of photography across the arts that she sees as leading to multimedia or intermedia works defining postmodern art. While the flexibility of photography's physical and conceptual range allows the medium to transport countless theoretical debates, the photograph has through this use, Krauss fears, lost its aesthetic status. Krauss does not address Richter's role in this but argues that artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, James Coleman and William Kentridge reinvigorate art through making another kind of specificity of medium central to their concerns and in making new conceptions of medium outside of questions of material.

Krauss maintains that, despite the prevailing reductive view of medium, which saw painting's significance as medium reduced to the flatness of its surface, artists such as Broodthaers continued to work with media in such a way as to emphasise and exploit their heterogeneity. Such artists:

understood and articulated the medium as aggregative, as a complex structure of interlocking and interdependent technical supports and layered conventions distinct from physical properties. For them the specificity of a medium lay in its constitutive heterogeneity – the fact that it always differs from itself.¹³

In this way, Krauss argues, the specificity of a medium cannot be reduced to the physicality of its support or the unity of its means. Broodthaers' layering of media

supports and conventions, in producing a 'network' or 'complex' of media, relies, she argues, on a 'differential specificity' that coheres due to the constancy of his conceptual thematic. Medium for Krauss is therefore made, not given, because medium can only be constituted and known through use. More than this, this making of medium is only possible in dialogue between and across media. The 'complex' of medium relations produced is able to reside within the work of art while allowing the differences of each medium to be maintained outside this structure. In effect, Krauss extends Greenberg's claim for medium-specificity by introducing the necessity of difference, identifying medium as constituted beyond its material form and, most importantly, as the result of both internal and external relations.¹⁴

While Krauss's argument takes us much closer to understanding the place of medium in art today, I find the particularity of Derrida's discussion of language and translation to bring me even closer to understanding what Richter articulates so effectively in bringing painting and photography together. Derrida helps us understand that medium is not just made by an aggregate of uses by individual artists across art history. Instead, there is also a native or essential state of medium that asserts itself, but which can only do so in use. In describing the impossible and yet necessary task of translation, Derrida relies upon the concept of idiom. And it is the idiomatic aspects of media that appear in the intermedial art that I have been describing that provide the means to understand Richter's use of photography and its significance in art today.

In describing the story of the Tower of Babel, in his essay of the same name, Derrida argues that we only ever know things through translation, and by implication, that there is nothing that we can know in some original unmediated form.¹⁵ Yet, while such translation is necessary, it is also an impossible task. That is, the translation will always fail to communicate all that is entailed in the other language. Yet, it is this impossibility that enables translation to produce meaning. It is translation's inability to thoroughly remake a meaning from another language that enables it to make yet another meaning, to produce something else again through the process of translation. This is what we can see at work in Richter's taking photography into painting. In the strictest sense, his translation of one medium into the other fails. Derrida tells us that the original is always modified through translation but, importantly, survives as well.¹⁶ What does not survive of the original in its translation is idiom, and therefore it is idiom that distinguishes the original and the new form. Richter's failure of translation reveals something of what is particular to each medium, what is idiomatic to them. It is idiom, the thing that cannot be carried over into another language, which prevents the mixing of media presumed in claims to media hybridity. More importantly still, it is the function of idiom as the failure of translation that results in the nature of painting or photography only being graspable in another medium – a state of relations that Richter makes clear in claiming to paint a photograph – because it is only through this failure that photography becomes visible. But even in describing idiom in this way, Derrida also establishes what it is not – 'were it what it was thought it must be, it would not be that'¹⁷ – because its strength and function as language (or medium)

resides in an inability to be accounted for through definition or translation into any language at all. So if painting were to claim to have translated something of the idiom of photography, it would not be idiomatic but rather an assimilation of that language; its only strength would be found in referencing idiom's existence elsewhere.

Richter's paintings open directly upon these issues. In his statement – 'I'm not trying to imitate a photograph; I'm trying to make one'¹⁸ – his distinction between imitation and making is important. To imitate photography would simply be to reproduce its appearance, even the appearance of its idiom, whereas to make a photograph is to claim its idiom as your own. But Richter's photography is 'by other means', in material other than paper exposed to light, another medium, another language. Despite the apparent problem caused, I want to insist upon Richter's use of photography, found most obviously and importantly in the appearance of the blur of photography, as a material form and as the idiom of photography as medium. Derrida helps us understand that it is the idiomatic aspects of the blur that are most necessary to the dialogue it enables Richter to enact between photography and painting. Richter does not translate photography's idiom. As he notes himself, this is impossible: 'How can, say, paint on canvas be blurred?'¹⁹ In photography, blurring is contingent. In painting, blurring is not at all marginal – paint is smeared onto the canvas, combined and worked to deliberately produce the effect. In this way, the stuff of painting, something of painting as medium, is made visible through the evident labour of the translation. This is how Richter demonstrates both translation's impossibility and the necessity of translation in knowing anything at all – 'its necessity as impossibility'. It is only through translation that we can know painting or photography because what is essential to a medium is lost in translation. Having been lost it becomes visible.

So idiom enables us to know something of individual media in their irreconcilable multiplicity, their 'differential specificity', and at the same time to know something of what is common to all languages and media – the space of their difference.²⁰ Derrida describes this when he writes: 'Through each language something is intended which is the same and yet which none of the languages can attain separately ... They complete each other.'²¹

To this point I have been addressing questions of medium as a general condition in contemporary art and theory. I turn now to consider specifically what Richter's engagement with the medium of photography in painting tells us of painting, photography and relations between media. It is obvious that much of Richter's work begins with the appearance of photography and the seeming immediacy of its origins in the technology of the camera. If it were concerned only with this it would quickly become banal. Richter achieves much more than this because he uses photographic appearance to connect us to a far more potent and immediate experience of the image, an experience that has an artistic genealogy before and outside of photography as medium. So, while Richter's paintings tell us about inter-medial relations, more significantly still, his engagement with photography and questions of medium can be understood as a claim to make clear what has always been the essential but enigmatic condition within painting – that in searching for

a direct connection with the singular experience of the world, painting has always been in pursuit of something that we now think of as the photographic.

To understand the photographic in this sense is to suppose that we can describe it as a concept and as an affect that is anterior to both the apparatus of camera and to the culture of photography.²² In this way, the photographic is the model of the most direct relationship possible between an image and its subject. It relies upon a physical and indexical connection between the two. This is what Roland Barthes refers to as photography's 'reality effect'²³, the palpable sensation of the apprehension of an image. Since the invention of camera photography, this quality, as found in images, has come to be defined exclusively in terms of that medium. In the excitement of the early history of photography, this reality was understood to be one and the same thing as the faithful mirroring of appearances. Yet, in a different conception of the real, we can also read historical accounts of the shock of photography's verisimilitude as evidence of palpable lived experience – that is, of the affect of the photograph. While we have become relatively blasé about the immediacy of photography we continue to respond to photographs according to this direct relationship with the real.

Richter's work extends the general condition of the photographic reality effect that Barthes has described by showing us that the photographic can exist not merely abstractly as a concept, but concretely in another medium: painting. Painting has long aspired to – and been described according to – its ability to affect the viewer through a profound apprehension of its immediacy, its status as a spontaneous and inimitable work of art. The meaning of this shock of apprehension will vary. A fresco by Fra Angelico representing the life of Christ and a painting by Francis Bacon showing muscular bodies writhing on a bed can be equally photographic in the immediacy of their affect but entirely different in the nature and purposes of that affect. As different as such examples are, they, and Richter, are alike in a key aspect of their means towards this photographic end and this is one of the things that Richter shows us about painting as medium. Paradoxically, the photographic as affect can be achieved in painting, and perhaps only achieved there, through non-resemblance and what cannot be seen, the very opposite conditions to those fêted by photography as medium and discipline. It is through coupling the non-resemblance and yet physical substance of painting as medium with the verisimilitude and yet insubstantiality of photography that Richter (and others in art history) pushes painting as medium to occasion its most profound affect.

Richter's paintings, most obviously and insistently his 'photopaintings'²⁴, are visibly, some would say superficially, photographic. That is, they have the appearance of photographs, adhere to their visual organisation, and gesture towards the matter-of-fact realism according to which photography is defined. This would not normally be seen as anything more than debts to photography played out in paint, as the older medium taking stock of the impact of the younger medium upon broader visual culture. Yet with Richter something more is happening. Across the range and diversity of his enactment of the photographic, his single most persistent and effective instrument for achieving this is the blurring of appearances and in the

process the highlighting of paint as substance. The blur for Richter is both idiomatic of photography as medium and able to open up the photographic affect in painting. Its signifying range as played out by his painting is extraordinary and yet it remains necessarily meaningless.

In photography, blur is the index of a subject that is beyond the apprehension of the camera lens, formless because of a mistaken reading of depth of field or movement of the camera or subject as the film was exposed. No matter what its specific origins, this blurred appearance is commonly understood as an unintended outcome: quite simply, a mistake. By calling the blurred photograph a mistake, we insist that the essence of the medium of photography lies in its verisimilitude. Curiously, the blur, the ever-present possibility of the failure to represent adequately, also confirms the photograph's reality effect. For example, a person blurred in movement in a group portrait attests to the truth of the appearance of the others shown there; the blur acts to confirm the indexical status of the photograph – that

is, to register the reality embedded there even when that reality cannot be seen or named. Despite his different material means, Richter also succeeds in embedding this reality within his painting by way of the seemingly inarticulate and meaningless blur.

The success of the blur lies in its ability to disrupt the logic of the image, in particular the logic that is based in resemblance and recognition. This disruption enables the far more potent form of signification based not on what is shown but rather what is felt. At one level, this is not at all unusual, painters have since medieval times deliberately disrupted their images with various obscuring strategies in pursuit of similar outcomes.²⁵ In this way, what Richter does in his photopaintings refers not only to photography but also shares a lineage with such unlikely artists as Leonardo da Vinci, Jan Vermeer, W.J.M. Turner and others.²⁶ In an analysis of Fra Angelico's fresco *Noli Me Tangere* (1425-30), Georges Didi-Huberman describes these strategies in terms of the power of dissemblance over resemblance. He explains how an artwork is only able to communicate the most ineffable truths when it challenges the figurative and recognisable with what is outside convention. Didi-Huberman describes the red blotches of *Noli Me Tangere* in terms of this dissemblance. It is the refusal of these marks to engage in traditional representational schemas that enables the representation of the idea of God. At the same time, the signification of the more traditionally figural elements of the images – the 'characters' of Christ and Mary, as Didi-Huberman terms them – is amplified by the action of these ambiguous, non-imitational, non-figural and non-representational marks. Didi-Huberman describes them as:

[T]hose moments in the painting where the visible vacillates and spills into the visual. It is a way of naming the 'cursed parts' of paintings, the indexical, nondescriptive, and dissemblant part. In fact, paintings often reserve – and this is once more their gift for disconcerting – a part of themselves for negating or clouding what they affirm in the mimetic order. Something of their aspect collapses at that point and dissemblance, a sort of disturbance, comes to reign there as the omnipotence of strangeness.²⁷

Didi-Huberman makes clear that this necessary disturbance is achieved by a combination of the familiar figural and mimetic elements (form) and the unfamiliar, disruptive, non-traditional, non-descriptive (formless) elements of painting. The strangeness that results from the play of signification between these modes is essential to an art that moves beyond the visible and recognisable into new knowledge. Despite the distance between Angelico and Richter, there is much in common between the blur and the blotch and much that we can take from Didi-Huberman to help us understand the power of Richter's photographic blur.

Of course, in painting, the non-resemblant blur is produced through quite different means than in photography. It is made through the manual smearing and dragging of paint across the canvas. While this blurring may refer to the spontaneous and accidental, and may mark a concept of visual empiricism like that

of photography, it is hard to understand this painted blur as a mistake in the same way we do when it is generated in photography. Instead, in painting the blur is able to act as the sign of everything that painting aspires to, both physically as sensual paint and conceptually as the embodiment of the most potent of ideas. The blur shows nothing, represents nothing and has no relationship with the real outside of itself. Yet, paradoxically, the blur is at the same time the most indexical of signs: it registers the purest form of the real, the most fundamental image-making impulse, in the form of a mark that appears self-generated through the camera, and entirely in and of itself in painting. Not just in Richter's work, but in painting as a whole, the blurred out-of-focus diffuse appearance gestures towards a figurative intent at the same time as it denies the possibility of its success.²⁹ We could say then that the blur is the sign of all that is possible for painting, bound inevitably to its impossibility.²⁸ The paradox of the blur is that it represents the un-representable (what is beyond the limits of photography's technology, what is outside of the visible and recognisable in painting) and as such is the founding trace of photography and painting – the site at which both media begin and end – and therefore idiomatic of both painting and photography. To say that representation has limits would be trite if we merely thought of photography and painting as alternative means of image-making. Richter's work escapes this self-evidence by maintaining what is irreducible to the media despite the common condition of painting and photography.

All aspects of Richter's oeuvre are connected to photography technically and/or conceptually. Richter's photographic archive, *Atlas*, is most directly and obviously based in photography; the photopaintings use the appearance of the photographic blur and lack of focus; the surfaces of the grey paintings and the mirror works refer to the seamlessness of photography and the middle-ground of the grey scale; the colour chart paintings are variously pixilated, like digital photographs; the abstract works are like photographic blow-ups and also treated as landscapes from which details are taken for later works; the overpaintings are painted over snapshot photographs; I could go on. Elsewhere, I have also considered these issues through Richter's photopaintings but in this instance I turn to one of the least discussed aspects of his work, his 'overpaintings' or overpainted photographs, where the relationships he plays out between painting and photography are even more starkly drawn.

In the overpaintings we can see Richter's investigation of the possibilities for painting as medium specifically played out within individual works and in a manner that is literal and direct when compared to his photopaintings. In these works, Richter paints over small snapshot photographs in his abstract style, and therefore brings together – very directly and visibly – the figurative photograph-like and abstract painterly elements of his thinking about the image. These explicitly composite images show photographed landscapes directly below a layer of paint that has been applied using the dragging technique typical of Richter's abstract paintings. While the process of the overpaintings is easily understood and self-evident, the works are strangely confounding in their effect.

This very direct combination of painting and photography might at first seem to

be evidence of Richter stating the equivalence of his means. That this is not the case is underlined by the particularity of his inquiry and the rigor of his investigation – not of sameness, but of difference and specificity of means. All of this is evident in the productive and insistent activity of these small overpaintings, which also provide Richter's most acute articulation of the relationship between the materiality of photographic and painterly looking. The first of these works was produced in 1989, and the most recent series dates from 2002.³⁰ Richter comes to describe the earliest of these in response to a question about his use of photography in painting:

There is never any such thing as equality of status. But I've never thought about what significance photography has for me. Painting is the form of the picture, you might say. The picture is the depiction, and the painting is the technique for shattering it. Now there's painting on one side and photography – that is the picture as such – on the other. Photography has almost no reality; it is almost one hundred percent picture. And painting always has reality: you can touch the paint; it has presence; but it always yields a picture – no matter whether good or bad. That's all theory. It's no good. I once took some small photographs and smeared them with paint. That partly resolved the problem, and it's really good – better than any thing I could say on the subject.³¹

In this description of photography and painting, Richter reverses conventional understandings of their proximity to reality. Here, reality is the physical materiality of paint, its existence as substance. This is contrasted with the relative insubstantiality of the photograph, its lack of physical presence, its limited reality in this sense. In this way, Richter's overpaintings are his most direct articulation of an ongoing investigation of the dimensionality and materiality of each medium. These are matters of idiom. On the one hand, they demonstrate photography's relative lack of materiality by emphasising the featureless smoothness of the photographic surface that offers no physical opposition to the paint that overtakes it. On the other hand, while painting yields a picture, this yielding is a process of work and effort, whereas the photograph asserts its status as picture automatically and effortlessly. This reversal of the more usual understanding of the relative proximity of painting and photography to reality is based upon the disruption of photography as the ground of the work by painting, where the greater physical weight of painting as paint meets and equals the weight of photography's verisimilitude. It is no coincidence that this disruption is formless, assiduously non-figurative painting – that is, a type of blur. The relationship between the qualities of painting and photography that Richter plays out in these overpaintings is entirely parallel to the one that Didi-Huberman describes as the dissemblance that enables the potent signification of Fra Angelico's fresco. That is, it is the dissemblant smeared paint in conjunction with the figurative photograph as ground that opens the work to meaning in a way that neither means of expression could achieve alone. This blurred paint and its effects are apparent in Richter's photopaintings but in the overpaintings the starkness of the smeared asignifying paint is played out almost

brutally against the clarity but insubstantiality of the photograph. It is useful to think about both as different registers of reality, as does Dietmar Elger when he adds the 'graphic' to Richter's conception of painting and photography's relations to reality:

In his overpainted photographs Gerhard Richter confronts two opposing though not contradictory concepts of the experience of reality. The photograph shows the illusion of a naturalistic pictorial space, while the pastose paint itself possesses materiality, and thus reality, though it remains graphically absent. Only by interlinking the two concepts of reality in the overpainted photographs does Richter succeed in making them not only question one another, but also mutually assume their respective qualities.³²

This very direct exploration of painting and reality through the combination of traditionally opposed aspects of image making, figuration and abstraction, is not new to Richter's oeuvre. Elger quite rightly identifies the strategy as dating from as early as 1962, with Richter's first numbered work: *'Tisch [Table], 1962*, presents this problem of imitative depiction and abstract gesture as an equivalent juxtaposition of different painterly possibilities on one pictorial plane.'³³ While this early work has obvious parallels with the overpaintings, *Table*, with its gestic abstract scribble over a page from a magazine, must also be understood to negate the visual logic and cohesion of the representational image that underlies it. The more recent overpaintings largely avoid this, even when the paint almost totally obliterates its photographic ground. Instead, here there is a constant push and pull between photography and painting which sees each medium assert itself but neither wrest control of the image. Richter manages to communicate that this is a coming together of two very different pictorial systems, rather than one of these (abstract painting) taking over the other (photography). It is only through this sense of an exchange or dialogue that they are able to 'mutually assume their respective qualities'.

In the overpaintings, photography is able to maintain itself against fairly formidable painterly incursions. This is possible for at least two reasons: the size of the photograph and its indexicality.³⁴ The size of the photograph – that is, standard 15 cm by 10 cm snapshot size, sometimes trimmed even smaller by Richter to make a square format – always speaks of the most intimate and familiar engagement we have with the substance of the photograph and hence the medium of photography. The potency of the photograph as artefact allows it to assert itself as at least equal to this encounter with the much more physically evident paint.³⁵ But there is a curious inversion at work in this foregrounding of the physical presence and reality of painting when this is how photography is typically defined. Here Richter sets aside the long history of photography's representational status, its proximity to reality through its indexicality and the physical relationships that underpin that quality. To do this, Richter must emphasise the painterly trace over the photographic trace. His conception of the physical and the real is one that privileges the substance of paint over the substance of emulsion. In this configuration of these media, photography slips away into a substanceless nothingness – 'it has almost no reality', as underlined

by the seamlessness of its surface – whereas painting is emphatically present, made all the more tangible in its substance as paint by the slickness of its support in the surface of the snapshot. The reality and physicality that Richter describes are located in the medium itself as opposed to what the medium shows.

In this way, the overpaintings connect Richter's concerns to those of contemporary photography. Many photographers, such as Americans Mike and Doug Starn and Australian Bill Henson, address the insubstantiality of the photograph as object, emphasising this quality by, for example, tearing the photographic print and variously corrupting it. Richter's purpose in painting over the snapshots is no more to refute the efficacy of photography through underlining this aspect of the medium than it is the purpose of these photographers. This is not a matter of the triumph of one medium over another, or an affirmation of photography through violence against it. Rather, Richter aims to bring 'aspects of the problem together', where the problem is that of making images today.

Two series of the overpaintings have been published. *Florence* (2001) is a series of 100 photographs – mostly snapshots of Florence, Italy – painted over by Richter. *City Life* (2002) shows a series produced in homage to music composed by Steve Reich, also based in travel snapshots. The fact that these works find form in such publications is also significant in the shifting relationships between painting and

photography seen in the overpaintings. As a reproducible medium, photography seems to triumph over painting in publications where both paint and photograph are part of the same homogenous, seamless surface. Yet it is also noteworthy that, as both publications proceed, the surfaces of the photographs appear increasingly dense with paint until, on the final pages of *Florence*, the image is constituted almost entirely by paint. All that remains of the photograph is an ambiguous glimpse of a far-off vista as seen through a painterly veil. Photography's graphic reality has been transformed into the physical reality of its role as support to painting. Paradoxically, photography achieves this physical reality only by becoming invisible. It is this invisibility that enables painting's materiality. At this point, we should however recall Elger's earlier conception of the paint in the overpaintings. He describes this as possessing materiality and therefore reality, while remaining 'graphically absent'. There is nothing recognisable in the paint as image. That is, it is not a painting of something that can be identified. Therefore, we can understand the overpaintings as enacting a two-fold invisibility. Photography is transformed into the physical support of painting and occluded, made invisible, in the process.³⁶ Painting, through its own abstraction, made all the more so by the graphic promise glimpsed in its photographic ground, shows us nothing other than itself, makes nothing visible. Yet this two-fold invisibility can also be said to produce the photographic two-fold, in the reality of the photograph's verisimilitude and in the reality of the disruptive smeared blur of paint in its confronting actuality. Both are idiomatic to their medium and maintain the differential specificity of painting and photography even as they make the one image.

There is a temptation with these works to see Richter's oeuvre as having come full circle. If photography and painting were first brought to bear on each other in the one work in the photopaintings, and if his abstract paintings refuse to admit a difference between abstraction and realism, as Richter claims, then the overpaintings seem to achieve a strange sense of resolution where all these things are possible at once. Here Richter's catalogue of painterly possibilities is able to cohere at a site that is the very model of the paradoxes I have been suggesting. At the same time, it can be argued that the issue is not the equality of status across media, but rather the inability to fix relative status between media.³⁷

There are countless examples of the ineffability of Richter's works being understood as the only means towards demonstrating the overwhelming experience of contemporary life and events and the inability of the image to account for this – in short, the failure of representation. But there is more at stake in Richter's strategies than the statement of this certainty. While Richter alludes to an underlying sense of futility in his task – that is, to a recognition of the failures of representation – he goes beyond this in his aspirations for the work: 'What fascinates me is the allogical, unreal, atemporal, meaningless occurring of an occurrence which is simultaneously so logical, so real, so temporal and so human, and for that reason so compelling. And I would like to represent it in such a way that this clash is maintained.'³⁸ In light of this discussion, we might say that for Richter this clash is not just understood as the essential struggle of the artist with the world he or she responds to but also

the necessary clash of the means to that response. In maintaining the meaningless and alogical alongside the meaningful and logical, and confounding the predictable allocation of such qualities, he opens the work to more than is possible through either system of effects.

While it might be argued that Richter's entire oeuvre demonstrates the renegotiation of medium currently in train, his overpaintings employ fearlessly simple means to articulate the complex relations we find across that oeuvre and elsewhere in contemporary art. The reconception of medium that we witness is, as Krauss and Derrida put it in their different ways, a relational differentiation that heightens rather than reduces the importance of media. It also moves medium away from issues of internal relations based on material identity and towards the historical interrelation of the art disciplines. While Derrida's idiom and Greenberg's brand of specificity have much in common, the crucial inflection that idiom allows

in understanding medium relations is that it alerts us to the way that medium is not defined or constituted internally or individually but rather is necessarily the result of relations between and across media. Richter's overpaintings show us, almost didactically, what we can see across his oeuvre – that this historicised and relational concept of media is still a material one. The immediacy of Richter's photographic effect lies in the inability of paint to feign photography. Many media are drawn together in contemporary art, yet photography, and its broader manifestation in the photographic, remain central to the reconfiguration of medium this activity signals. As Michael Fried says when asked about the relation between his theories and the conception of medium:

What happens on the other side of post-modernism ... is the return of all these issues ... this is a very interesting moment, it's a more heartening moment than I have lived through for awhile ... it has to do with the way the photographic is played out, the kinds of issues that it's coming to.³⁹

One of these issues is that, at a time when there is no common understanding of the relationship between media and disciplines in art, perhaps all that remains is idiom. As a concept necessary to the signification of images, perhaps it is the only relationship we can be certain of. In these circumstances, the material basis of media recedes from the central place of significance it enjoyed during high modernism. As with idiom we are considering how media are able to communicate beyond the sum of their parts or forms and according to a play with other media. It is idiom that enables images to feign one set of comparative relationships so as to more starkly mark out differences and in the process to generate a profoundly greater range of signification within, between and across media. That the traffic of images does not result in a mire of homogeneity – Krauss's 'deadening embrace of the general' – where medium distinctions are not just undesirable but impossible is, I argue, due to the strength and effect of idiom as specificity. In light of what Richter has demonstrated, we can extend the photographic beyond a piece of paper exposed to light. It is indeed possible to practice photography by other means.

1. Gerhard Richter 'Interview With Rolf Schön' (1972) *The Daily Practice Of Painting: Writings 1962-1993* (ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist) Thames and Hudson and Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1995, p73.
2. Clement Greenberg 'Modernist Painting' *Art In Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology Of Changing Ideas* (eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood) Blackwell, Oxford, 1992.
3. Benjamin Buchloh's numerous publications on Richter typically include this argument. See, for example 'The Allegories Of Painting' *Gerhard Richter* (ed. Martha Buskirk) Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 1993; *Gerhard Richter: Painting After The Subject Of History* PhD Dissertation, City University Of New York, 1994; 'Interview With Gerhard Richter' *Gerhard Richter: Paintings* (ed. T.A. Neff) Thames and Hudson, London, 1988; and 'Ready-Made, Photography And Painting In The Painting Of Gerhard Richter', 'Photography And Painting' and 'The Painting Of Painting' *Gerhard Richter: Abstract Paintings* Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1979.
4. Other examples of this expansion of painting include artists such as Francis Alys and Paul McCarthy, who both produce performance works yet are routinely referred to as painters. As Morgan Falconer writes: 'Side by side with the notion of painting's expansion has been the idea that it is a mode of thought, rather than simply a medium of art practice.' Morgan Falconer 'The Undead' *Art Monthly* October 2003, p4.

5. Although these are all contemporary examples, it could be argued that similar dialogues around questions of medium began as early as the 1970s. At this time, many artists took up the materiality of photography – that is, its status as object – to such an extent as to produce sculptural works. An exhibition addressing this theme, *Photography Into Sculpture*, was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1970.
6. Diverse writers such as Geoffrey Batchen, Rosalind Krauss and Fred Ritchin refer to ‘post-photography’. See Geoffrey Batchen *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001; Susan Fereday and Stuart Koop *Post: Photography Post Photography* Centre for Contemporary Photography, Sydney, 1995; Rosalind Krauss ‘Reinventing The Medium: Art And Photography’ *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 25, No. 2, Winter 1999; Fred Ritchin ‘The End Of Photography As We Have Known It’ *Photo Video: Photography In The Age Of The Computer* (ed. Paul Wombell) Rivers Oram Press, London, 1991.
7. Geoff Batchen, op cit, p109.
8. Clement Greenberg ‘Modernist Painting’ op cit, p755.
9. Clement Greenberg ‘Avant-Garde And Kitsch’ (1939) *Art In Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology Of Changing Ideas* (eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood) Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p532.
10. Michael Fried *Absorption And Theatricality: Painting And Beholder In The Age Of Diderot* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988.
11. Though a number of writers have identified aspects of Richter’s oeuvre according to the Duchampian readymade. These include: Stefan Germer ‘Retrospective Ahead’ *Gerhard Richter* (ed. S. Rainbird and T. Severne) Tate Gallery, London, 1991; Peter Osborne ‘Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter’s Negatives’ *October* 62 1992; Mark Cheetham ‘Mirror Digressions: Narcissus And The Readymade Monochrome’ *Slippage: Gerhard Richter, Lucio Fontana, Taras Polataiko* (ed. Lisa Baldissera) Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada, 2001.
12. Rosalind Krauss ‘Reinventing The Medium’ op cit, p305.
13. Rosalind Krauss *A Voyage On The North Sea: Art In The Age Of The Post-Medium Condition* Thames and Hudson, New York, 1999, p7.
14. A productive connection between Krauss’s conception of medium according to difference and use can be made with a similar argument from Michel Foucault. In describing Gerard Fromanger’s ‘photogenic paintings’ Foucault refers to the necessary play between medium and disguised difference. Krauss’s notion of differential specificity still assumes that medium is apparent even if as a relation. However, Foucault’s notion of disguised difference, of an identity that is inviolable but which can nevertheless be feigned, brings us a step closer to painters taking on photography, photographers who produce the appearance of painting, and photographers who allude to photography as image in such a way as to stand outside their own medium. I make this argument in my PhD thesis *Blur: Gerhard Richter And The Photographic In Painting* University of Queensland, Brisbane, 2007. Foucault’s discussion is found in Michel Foucault ‘Photogenic Painting’ *Photogenic Painting: Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Gerard Fromanger* (ed. Sarah Wilson) Black Dog, London, 1999.
15. Jacques Derrida ‘Des Tours De Babel’ *Difference In Translation* (ed. Joseph F. Graham) Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1985, p170.
16. Ibid, p192.
17. Ibid, p7.
18. Gerhard Richter ‘Interview With Rolf Schön’ op cit, p73.
19. Gerhard Richter ‘Notes, 1964’ *The Daily Practice Of Painting* op cit, p23.
20. Rosalind Krauss *A Voyage On The North Sea* op cit.
21. Jacques Derrida ‘Des Tours De Babel’ op cit, p201.
22. This is an easy supposition when so many references to ‘the photographic’ do not refer to the medium of photography as such but rather to its properties as found elsewhere. For examples see James Elkins ‘What Do We Want Photography To Be?: A Response To Michael Fried’ *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 31, No. 4, 2005; and Michael Fried ‘Barthes’ Punctum’ *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 31, No. 3, 2005.
23. Barthes describes this effect across a number of publications and as located in literature, historical texts, diaries and photography. See, in particular, Roland Barthes ‘Historical Discourse’ *Structuralism: A Reader* (ed. Michael Lane) Jonathan Cape, London, 1970.

24. In English publications these paintings are commonly referred to as 'photopaintings'. Richter also calls them 'photo pictures'. Ironically, given the discussion of idiom and the untranslatable that underlies my discussion, this variation in nomenclature is largely attributable to the ambiguities of translation. Richter labels his work 'Bild' in German. In English, this is translated as 'picture' as opposed to 'painting'. In German, as in English, although there is a separate word for painting – 'Malerie' – 'Bild', like 'picture', is able to refer to any sort of image, a painting, or a photograph or a drawing, and so on. 'Bild' is therefore able to designate Richter's work as constituted in all three visual forms at once. In English, it is unusual to hear a painter refer to her works as 'pictures' rather than as 'paintings'. As 'Bild', Richter does not designate his works as belonging to any one category of image-making, instead insisting that they are of a more general encompassing category of 'picture'. It is as if, in German, the 'photo picture' is already linguistically predetermined as a complex image form that questions both specificity and generality in art.
25. Here, blur can include many things: diffuse form, smeared and scrubbed paint, un-delineated surface or formless blotch. All share the fact that they cannot be accounted for by familiar categories of representation, imitation or figuration.
26. This comparison of artists according to their use of various blurring strategies is not made in order to demonstrate relationships of influence (though some historians have done just that) or to present a history that explains how the blur has evolved as a representational strategy. Instead, I simply aim to point out the history of such strategies before the example of Richter and their similarity in disrupting the visual organisation of the image.
27. Georges Didi-Huberman *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance And Figuration* (trans. Jane Marie Todd) University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p9.
28. It should be noted, though, that the concept of figuration is contested across art history. Georges Didi-Huberman provides an apposite account of what is at stake in such debates in his writing on Fra Angelico. See *ibid*.
29. This entailment of possibility and impossibility is entirely consistent with Richter's oft-repeated hope and faith in painting followed by his despair at its failures. These are prominent themes in Richter's notes and interviews. See, for example *The Daily Practice Of Painting* op cit.
30. Related examples of this technique based on other reproductive supports include *Kassel* (1992, oil on offset print) and *Hood* (1996, offset print). Both works were included in *Gerhard Richter: Survey Exhibition* (Arken Museum, Ishøj, Denmark; Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, Stuttgart; 2001).
31. Gerhard Richter 'Interview With Jonas Storsve' (1991) *The Daily Practice Of Painting* op cit, p227.
32. Dietmar Elger 'Epilogue' *Gerhard Richter: Florence* (ed. Dietmar Elger) Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2001, np.
33. *Ibid*.
34. The status of the photograph as document and index is underscored in some of these works by the snapshot including the date the photograph was taken.
35. The ability of the partially obliterated photograph to assert itself in this way is particularly evident in a series of overpaintings entitled *4. Jan.–15. Jan. 2000* (2000). These 12 overpaintings are based on snapshots of a new-born baby.
36. 'Occluded' seems particularly useful here, as the paint actually blocks the photograph, preventing its communication to the eye.
37. Jean-Philippe Antoine describes these paintings as demonstrating the essential and inevitable link between landscape and abstraction as well as highlighting the 'organic' ties between the abstract pictures and photography: 'the screen-like nature of the surface of the abstract paintings is disclosed with no trace of ambiguity ... If landscape was an obligatory stage in the search for abstraction – if within what can be pictured or "figured" it is what sends us back, with no allegorical recourse, to that which cannot, the "unfigurable" – it doubtless is also the figure which comes forth, refusing to cede to "nothing", when the gaze falls on the screen of the painting, even though one has ceased representing anything at all there, to instead distribute, semi-chaotically throughout it, traces of color.' Jean-Philippe Antoine 'Photography, Painting And The Real: The Question Of Landscape In The Painting Of Gerhard Richter' *Gerhard Richter* (ed. Jacinto Lageira) Éditions Dis Voir, Paris, 1995, pp88-9.
38. Gerhard Richter 'Notes 1964-65' *The Daily Practice Of Painting* op cit, p37.
39. Michael Fried *Painting Present* lecture, Tate Modern, London, 15 October 2003. www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/painting_present/michael_fried/default.jsp