

Idiom post medium: Richter painting photography
Modern Painters, Spring 2004, Special Photography
Issue,

Abstract

At a time when it is argued that we have arrived at a post-medium condition, German artist Gerhard Richter demonstrates that questions of medium remain vitally relevant to art today. In particular, his paintings and their explicit relation to photography make clear that media define each other and that this is essential to their use and function. That is, we can only ever know painting through photography or photography through painting. This is what Rosalind Krauss calls the 'differential specificity' of media and what Michel Foucault calls 'disguised difference'. Richter makes these differences and their signifying potential visible and this enables us to know far more of the role of medium in art today. More particularly, the success of Richter's sustained critical attention to mediality, as enacted through this dialogue between photography and painting, is based in what Jacques Derrida describes as the function of idiom. It is idiom that enables the differences between media that are crucial to their signification and upon which the medium exchange that is necessary to art is based.

Idiom post medium: Richter painting photography

Modern Painters, Spring 2004, Special Photography
Issue, Now On Sale.¹

While German artist Gerhard Richter cannot be held solely responsible for the circumstances that give rise to the

¹ Advertisement for *Modern Painters*, in *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 8, 2004, p. 13.

unremarkableness of such an advertisement, as one of the first painters to take up a close dialogue with photography, and the most persistent of these, he is certainly at the centre of the reconfiguration of medium that it signals. In stark contrast to the medium-specificity of high Modernism, today, a great many art works are made using more than one medium. The changed relations between media in contemporary art have typically been discussed in terms of the development of hybrid media or, more recently still, as proof of a post-medium condition for art. Richter has drawn painting and photography together in his work since the 1960s (Fig. 1). Provocatively, he has claimed to paint photographs: '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.'² It is therefore easy to see Richter as having had a considerable influence on this outcome, as one of the artists who have brought about this post-medium condition. This impression is made all the stronger by the fact that many contemporary art works, both in painting and photography, superficially resemble Richter's work, so much so as to have occasioned the now familiar label of 'Richteresque'.³ While Richter should be

² Gerhard Richter in an interview with Rolf Schön, 1972, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed., *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993* (Thames and Hudson, Anthony d'Offay Gallery: London, 1995), p. 73.

³ Many diverse artists can be referred to in this way, including Dimitris Antonitsis, Uta Barth, Vija Celmins, James Lahey, Damien Loeb, Fiona Lowry and Luc Tuymans. For examples of such comparisons, see Pamela M. Lee, Matthew Higgs, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Uta Barth* (Phaidon: London, 2004); Tina Sotiriadi, 'Dimitris Antonitsis at Steven Makris-

understood as having had a marked impact upon art history, to see his work as pursuing hybrid media or in support of reading contemporary art according to a post-medium state is to misunderstand his role. Rather, Richter's very particular engagement with painting and photography emphasises the crucial role of medium in art as enabled by differences between media. His articulation of the relationship between painting and photography, achieved in large part through the complex economy of the photographic blur, has resulted in a critical inter-mediality that has prompted artists to address photography, painting and the concept of medium in new ways. Contemporary artists, due in part to Richter's impact, but also in the broader context of a re-evaluation of medium in art, produce images according to a self-reflexive dialogue between media as opposed to working within a particular medium.

Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss and Michel Foucault have, at different times, examined the relationship between media as based in difference. Their works have been useful in articulating how medium functions in art today but, arguably, Jacques Derrida's conception of idiom has an even greater, overarching value in considering the signifying range of media, as demonstrated so effectively by Richter, and it is this argument that is presented here. Before

Athens', *Art in America*, April, 2002. Both Rex Butler and I have written about a Brisbane artist, Arryn Snowball, who could be included in this list. Butler describes Snowball as 'one of that multitude of practitioners working in Richter's long shadow'. Rex Butler, 'Kept at the Edge of the Discernable', *The Courier Mail*, 21 February 2005, p. 13; Rosemary Hawker, 'Dissolution: Paintings by Arryn Snowball', ed. David Broker (Institute of Modern Art: Brisbane, 2004), n.p..

making this argument, however, it is necessary to revisit the historical discourse on the concept of medium in art, to outline the broader context that the present study addresses.

Post-modernism, post-medium, post-photography
After Modernism, hybridity of means appears as the juggling act most necessary to the ascendancy of the contemporary artist, the pursuit of singularity or purity of medium has been seen as mistaken or even antiquated. There is a certain inevitability in post-modernism having generated chaotic formulations of medium, given that Clement Greenberg's theory of medium-specificity so thoroughly defined Modernism.⁴ In these circumstances, the most obvious place to seek a radical break with Modernism is in the relationship between art and medium. The received view, supported by Michael Fried's 1960s writings, is that contemporary art arrived at this condition because painting reached the end that was entailed in Modernism's emphasis on medium-specificity and artistic progress.⁵

⁴ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting,' in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell: Oxford, 1992).

⁵ Fried's account of Modernism is found across his many publications but an overview of his arguments is given in 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism' in a collection that takes its name from his influential essay of 1967. Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1998). Fried famously disagrees with Greenberg on the central motivations of art, more specifically painting. He argues that instead of what is irreducible to painting being understood as its mode and purpose as art, it should be seen as the minimal conditions of something being

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.⁶ Recently, however, this claim of the end of painting seems to have been disproved by its continued success and by the hegemony of the discipline of painting beyond its self-evident medium, as evidenced by examples such as the *Modern Painters* 'Photography' issue.⁷ While this is in another sense the beginning of a new conception of painting, and indeed photography, as media, it is nonetheless also a

considered a painting: 'and the crucial question is not what those minimal, and so to speak, timeless conditions are but rather what, at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction, of succeeding as painting.' (Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, p. 38) Fried's more specific argument is that minimalism, or literalism, as he called it, marked the end of the usefulness of the Modernist self-criticality Greenberg admired by playing it to an absurd conclusion where it took painting into an empty, self-entailed, theatricality unable to compel conviction in the viewer.

⁶ Benjamin Buchloh's numerous publications on Richter typically include this argument. See, for example, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'The Allegories of Painting', in *Gerhard Richter*, ed. Martha Buskirk (Marion Goodman Gallery: New York, 1993), pp. 9-14; 'Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive', in *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter: Four Essays on Atlas*, eds Manuel J. Borja-Villel and Jose Lebrero Stals (Llibres de Recerca, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona: Barcelona, 2000), pp. 11-30; 'Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History', PhD Dissertation (The City University of New York: New York, 1994).

⁷ As is emphasised in the stated remit of this publication, working as it does against the self evidence of its title: 'The magazine offers a direct and uncompromising approach to exploring art in every aspect, along with photography, film, fashion, architecture, books and design.' <http://www.modernpainters.co.uk/> (accessed 18 April 2007).

symptom of the current crisis in our understanding of the relationship between medium and artwork. It is also clear evidence that medium has come to mean something quite different from what it meant for theorists of Modernism.

In these circumstances, references to the 'post-medium condition' of contemporary art have become 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. Krauss has argued that the dispersal of photography across the arts, begun in earnest in the 1960s, helped lead to combined, or intermedia, works defining the post-modern era and its art.⁸ A vast array of contemporary art practice can be used to support this view—Lynn Cazabon's photographic 'weavings'; Jennifer Bolande's sculpture of high-speed photography; Gregory Crewdson's filmic tableaux, to name but a few from a plethora of possible examples.⁹ That this phenomenon involves more than photography is demonstrated by many contemporary exhibitions, such as the Tate St Ives' *Painting not Painting* (2003). This exhibition included few canvas-bound painted works, but installation works by Jim

⁸ Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium: Art and Photography', *Critical Inquiry* vol. 25, no. 2, 1999, pp. 289-305.

⁹ Although these are all very contemporary examples, it could be argued that the sorts of dialogues these artists establish around questions of medium began as early as the 1970s. At this time, a number of 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 and titled *Photography into Sculpture* was shown at MoMA in 1970.

Lambie, and Richard Slee's ceramics. Other examples of this expansion of painting include artists such as Francis Alÿs and Paul McCarthy, who both produce performance video works yet are routinely referred to as painters.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ With Krauss's arguments in mind, it is easy to understand the idea of a post-medium age as a misconception, principally because it is predicated upon a limited sense of medium-specificity as defined by the essence of the material support and internal relations, as most obviously theorized by Greenberg.¹²

¹⁰ The Walker Art Center's exhibition *Painting at the Edge of the World* (2001) also included Lambie's work along with works by Alÿs and McCarthy. The curator of the exhibition, Douglas Fogle, writes:

The artists in *Painting at the Edge of the World* demonstrate that a philosophy of painting is found today not only in the medium's traditional modes, but also in a photograph (Andreas Gursky), in a walk through a city (Francis Alÿs), in a club culture-inspired application of vinyl tape on the floor (Jim Lambie), or in paint applied directly to a wall (Richard Wright, Franz Ackermann).

<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/7/AB73C130934F857A6169.htm> (accessed 20 January 2009).

¹¹ Morgan Falconer, 'The Undead', *Art Monthly*, no. 270, 2003, p. 4. Falconer's comment neatly parallels Krauss's argument that photography has been constructed as a theoretical object. Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium'.

¹² There is also an internal inconsistency in Krauss's argument that comes about through her needing to claim a post-medium condition for contemporary art at the same time as arguing for the reanimation of issues around medium and the essential medium hybridity of post-modern art. In short, Krauss must establish a prevailing post-medium climate

In this putatively post-medium era, photography's specific condition is signalled in the unequivocal term 'post-photography'.¹³ The term, present in the literature since the mid-1990s, opens upon a number of issues for understanding the current status of medium in art. 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. 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 Geoffrey Batchen suggests: 'Photography is everywhere and nowhere in particular', a lamentable state in Greenberg's terms.¹⁴ Second, photography, once a relatively defined set of photographic chemical processes, is now, as a result of digital imaging technology, either

in order to argue the special cases of her artists as examples of a counter-tendency. At its least problematic, this means that Krauss denies the relevance of medium to most contemporary artists at the same time as arguing for hybrid medium as a defining characteristic of the art of James Coleman and William Kentridge. In the process, she also overlooks an artist like Richter who has foregrounded questions of medium throughout his career.

¹³ Quite 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, Mass., 2001); Susan Fereday and Stuart Koop, *Post: Photography Post Photography* (Centre for Contemporary Photography: Sydney, 1995); Rosalind Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium'; Fred Ritchin, 'The End of Photography as We Have Known It', in *Photo Video: Photography in the Age of the Computer*, ed. Paul Wombell (Rivers Oram Press: London, 1991), pp. 8-15.

¹⁴ Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*, p. 109.

riven by new permutations of image capture and manipulation, or made completely redundant by images generated entirely by means of digital technology.

As I have suggested, it would be a mistake to see Richter's and other contemporary artists' works as explained by, or as examples of, this post-medium, post-photographic condition. On the contrary, this work makes clear the necessity of continuing to consider the role of medium in the production and reception of art. One of the things that Richter's work precipitates is the reassessment of photography as a medium able to be articulated through multiple material supports and technologies and from within other disciplines. Perhaps in this respect we need to think of photography as being more like sculpture and painting. Such comparisons once seemed merely rhetorical, as they did in 1972 when Richter claimed to paint a photograph, yet they are exactly the sorts of relationships that we see driving the work of prominent contemporary artists. Here I am thinking of the work of well-known and diverse artists such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Demand, and Jeff Wall. Their work at once shows us some of the forms that so-called post-photography or post-medium takes, and also offers evidence that artists have learnt from what work like Richter's has demonstrated about the relationship between photography and painting. These artists pursue a kind of image or image condition that cannot be understood within the bounds of any one medium. Each artist constitutes the image differently, but in all cases this involves photography. Theirs is a highly self-reflexive dialogue between media—be it photography and architecture, photography and sculpture, photography and painting, or

painting and its photographic reproduction in publication. As these artists are a generation younger than Richter, their work is inevitably seen in the light of his prominent dialogue with photography in painting. In this way, their work demonstrates the success of Richter's approach having opened questions of medium by painting photographs.

Medium

Any account of the ways in which the concept of medium has typically been understood to work, must refer to the central theorist of late Modernism: Greenberg first identified the central role of medium in art in 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', of 1939, where he argues that if art, in his example, abstract art, is to have an aesthetic value, it cannot be arbitrary or accidental but needs a constraint by which to generate itself and against which to be judged: 'This constraint, once the world of common, extroverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature.'¹⁵ For Greenberg, if art was not committed to this principle, then it risked slipping into the mere nominalism of the ready-made, or what Michael Fried would later call 'theatricality'.¹⁶

These issues became an even more central focus for his understanding of Modernism when in 'Modernist Painting' of 1961 he wrote: 'The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it,

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell: Oxford, 1939, 1992), p. 532.

¹⁶ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988).

in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.’¹⁷ To insist on medium-specificity in this way is to say that art is quite distinct from the broader society of images and culture, but without providing the means to understand how art is a distinct cultural form, and how art is divided into numerous disciplines. Of course, the necessity of separating art from other cultural forms is entirely Greenberg’s point; he champions what he calls the self-critical tendency of Modernist art which is described as sharing a lineage with ‘Kantian’ immanent criticism’ and scientific consistency.¹⁸ All, he argues, are committed to using the methods of a discipline to understand the discipline itself and do so as a matter of common logic: ‘Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized.’¹⁹ For Greenberg, it is only an internally based and expressed criticism that is capable of establishing and claiming possession of what is irreducible for that art:

What had to be exhibited and made explicit was what was unique and irreducible not only in art in general, but also in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through the operations particular to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. By doing this each art would, to be sure, narrow its

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’, *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell: Oxford 1992), p. 755.

¹⁸ Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’, p. 755.

¹⁹ Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’, p. 755.

area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of that area all the more secure.

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium.²⁰

My concern here is not to establish the accuracy of Greenberg's account of the threats to, and strengths of, Modernist art, but rather to identify the central place he makes for medium in defining art as such. Of added interest for my discussion is the way in which he suggests that the characteristics of art forms are made known through a deliberate playing out of their effects.

At this point it might appear that Greenberg's theory is able to account for much of what I have alluded to in contemporary art's approach to medium and in the specific case of Richter's photopaintings.²¹ Richter certainly insists upon his work being an interrogation of painting's possibilities as carried out through painting itself, a thoroughly internal, self-critical approach that, one could claim, aims to identify what is 'irreducible' in painting and to make this visible in painting itself. But Greenberg goes on, however, to insist that the central part of this process is the elimination of effects borrowed from, or

²⁰ Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p. 755.

²¹ In English publications, these paintings are most commonly referred to as 'photopaintings'. Richter also refers to them as 'photo pictures'. See, for example, Richter's notes in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed., *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993* (Thames and Hudson, Anthony d'Offay Gallery: London, 1995).

able to be borrowed by, other media: 'Thereby each art would be rendered "pure", and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.'²²

Richter's photopainting alone, amid a countless array of contemporary cross-medium works, show clearly that we cannot carry Greenberg's account of art (as based in the internal specificity of medium) over into the twenty-first century in any way other than as a locus for art historical references and as proof of a pronounced shift in how artists engage with medium today.

It was perhaps inevitable that artists following the moment of high Modernist formalism would react both against art as a given category, and against its division into disciplines. Decades after Pop and Minimalism, however, artists such as Richter (but also arguably Gursky, Wall, and Demand), 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, yet nor does it follow the theatrical structure of minimalism.²³

²² Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p. 755.

²³ Though I do recognise that a number of writers have identified aspects of Richter's oeuvre according to the Duchampian ready-made. These include: Stefan Germer, 'Retrospective Ahead', *Gerhard Richter*, S. Rainbird and T. Severne (eds) (Tate Gallery: London, 1991), pp. 22-31; Peter Osborne, 'Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives', *October*, no. 62, 1992, pp. 103-13; Lisa Baldissera (ed.), *Slippage: Gerhard Richter, Lucio Fontana, Taras Polataiko (Nov. 24, 2000 - Feb. 11, 2001)* (The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada: Greater

In the preface to her 1999 publication *'A Voyage to the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition*, Krauss recognises the impossibility of referring to questions of medium outside of the Greenbergian conception where 'a medium is purportedly made specific by being reduced to nothing but its manifest physical properties'.²⁴ Krauss maintains that, despite the prevailing reductivism of this view of medium, which saw painting's significance as medium reduced to the flatness of its surface, artists such as Marcel Broodthaers continued to work with different 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.²⁵

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. She describes Broodthaers as layering media supports and conventions in order to produce a 'network' or 'complex' of media. This produces a

Victoria: 2001). Mark Cheetham, 'Mirror Digressions: Narcissus and the Readymade Monochrome', Baldissera (ed.) *Slippage: Gerhard Richter, Lucio Fontana, Taras Polataiko*.

²⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, *'a Voyage on the North Sea' Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (Thames and Hudson: New York, 1999), p. 7.

²⁵ Krauss, *'a Voyage on the North Sea'* (Quotation from dust jacket. My emphasis.)

'differential specificity' that rests upon the constancy of Broodthaers' conceptual thematic, which, Krauss argues, can itself be understood as medium because of its contrast with the heterogeneity of the material support of his work. 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. In this way, a 'complex' of medium relations is produced which 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 reconfiguring the necessity of difference he identifies in his concept of medium purity, identifying medium as constituted beyond its material form and, perhaps most importantly, as the result of both internal and external relations. In this way, Krauss takes us much closer to understanding the place of medium in art today. This is not simply to say that Greenberg's account of medium is wrong; it is absolutely apposite to the art of his time, but its usefulness is restricted by this contingency. Theories of medium that allow for the relation of media as constitutive of art, on the other hand, are better able to account for the function of art across its history.

Krauss's arguments may be well-known, but perhaps less so are related ideas set out by Foucault, who also addressed medium in his 1975 analysis of what he terms the 'photogenic painting' of the French artist Gérard Fromanger. Here Foucault, like Krauss, identifies the productive space between media but in doing so he also

encompasses nineteenth-century photography and painting. This larger historical frame results in a somewhat different formulation of medium from Krauss's which is perhaps even more apposite to today's art.

Foucault understands Fromanger's work of the 1960s and 1970s, originally driven by the political turmoil in Paris, as exceeding the best of Pop art and hyperrealism.²⁶ Fromanger began these works with photographic images from the press and his own haphazard snapshots of nondescript Paris street scenes. These were projected onto his canvas and then painted in a flattened, graphic style that leaves these origins unmistakable. (Fig. 2)²⁷ However, rather than describe Fromanger in the post-modern terms that were taking form at the time (that is, as transgressive innovation, forward thinking and in pursuit of medium hybridity), Foucault celebrates Fromanger's work as a return to much earlier conditions of image-making which he locates precisely in history: 'between 1860 and 1900 there existed a shared practice of the image, accessible to all, on the borders of photography and painting, which was to be rejected by the puritan codes of art in the twentieth century'.²⁸ Foucault describes these early years of photography as a time of liberated image-making when artists, photographers and amateurs alike made use of all means at their disposal to make images. They were, at least

²⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting', *Photogenic Painting: Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Gérard Fromanger, Sarah Wilson (ed.)* (Black Dog: London, 1999), p. 91.

²⁷ Sarah Wilson, 'Editor's Introduction', *Photogenic Painting: Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Gerard Fromanger*, p. 19.

²⁸ Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting' p. 88.

in part, animated by the excitement of the photograph as a new means, and exploiting its every possibility:

[These] years ... witnessed a new frenzy of images, which circulated rapidly between camera and easel ... with all the new powers acquired there came a new freedom of transposition, displacement and transformation, of resemblance and dissimulation, of reproduction, duplication and trickery of effect ... Photographers made pseudo-paintings, painters used photographs as sketches. There emerged a vast field of play where technicians and amateurs, artists and illusionists, unworried by identity, took pleasure in disporting themselves. Perhaps they were less in love with paintings and photographic plates than with the images themselves, with their migration and perversion, their transvestism, their disguised difference.²⁹

Foucault's account of this period in photography's history would be idiosyncratic if it were not for the host of named examples he offers of this frenzied exchange between photography and painting, all familiar to us through more conventional historical accounts: Julia Margaret Cameron (and Perugino), Richard Pollock (and Pieter de Hooch), Oscar Rejlander (and Raphael); but each convincing as an example of the medium exchange that Foucault describes. Through such examples, Foucault argues that at this time image was emphasised over medium. He sees Fromanger's work as a return to the creative freedom this afforded by way of the rediscovery of photography by painting, which once

²⁹ Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting', pp. 83-84.

again allows for the transport, exchange and circulation of images, 'their migration and perversion, their transvestism, their disguised difference'. This life of the image is, for Foucault, quite contrary to what he perceives as the restricted purview of painting in his own time, dominated as it was by abstraction and its 'puritan codes':

Painting, for its part, has committed itself to the destruction of the image, while claiming to have freed itself from it ... They have tried to convince us that the image, the spectacle, resemblance, and dissimulation, are all bad, both theoretically and aesthetically, and that it would be beneath us not to despise all such folderols.³⁰

For Foucault, Fromanger helps maintain a vibrant image economy that allows us to understand images unfettered by objects and as generated by multiple means:

Pop art and hyperrealism have re-taught us the love of images. Not by a return to figuration, not by a rediscovery of the object and its real density, but by plugging us into the endless circulation of images. This rediscovery of the uses of photography is not a way of painting a star, a motorcycle, a shop, or the modelling of a tyre; but a way of painting their image, and exploiting it, in a painting, as an image.³¹

³⁰ Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting', pp. 88, 89. It is easy to read this criticism of 'puritan codes' as directed at Greenberg's conception of medium.

³¹ Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting', p. 90. There is a striking similarity between Foucault's description of this relationship and

But more than this, the understanding that Fromanger's work generates (like that of the nineteenth-century image-makers that Foucault describes), is that the image resides not simply within painting, or within photography; that is, within medium in the sense that Greenberg would have it, but rather between the categories:

Pop artists and hyperrealists paint images. They do not however incorporate images through their painting technique, but extend technique itself into the great sea of images, where their paintings act as a relay in this endless circulation ... what they have produced when their work is at an end is not a painting based on a photograph, nor a photograph made up to look like a painting, but an image caught in its trajectory from photograph to painting ... the new painting takes its place enthusiastically in the circulation of images which it does its own part to drive on.³²

In this way, Foucault emphasises the transport of ideas between images and between media. The between-state of the image, as importantly neither painting nor photograph, is the source of the significance of its function and interest. This same between-state is articulated and explored by Richter, and certainly his commitment to the circulation of images is evident in his taking up pre-existing images as his subject (as do Fromanger, Brown, Demand and Wall), a fact he underscores with his *Atlas* (1962-present) project. Furthermore, Foucault's use of the umbrella

aspects of Richter's account of why he uses photography in making paintings.

³² Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting', p. 91.

term or concept of 'image' in referring to the diverse outcomes he describes raises further questions about medium. Richter's *Atlas* is entirely consistent with Foucault's notion of the 'image' in that it does not privilege image types: snapshots, advertisements, family portraits, design magazine photographs, are all part of the same largely uncategorized archive. The only thing excluded from Richter's collection is, he says, art. While we can contest this declaration through pointing to individual exceptions to this rule, this sense of a democratic image economy separate to art is the exact reverse of what Greenberg argued was necessary to the survival of art, its resistance to what he called the 'levelling out' of cultural forms. Yet for Foucault there is considerable advantage in not being able to designate works as paintings or photographs but according to a determination outside of any single medium.

The sense of exchange and circulation, as embraced by both Foucault and Richter, albeit in very different contexts, is made even more acute by the example of Thomas Struth's photograph, *Waldstrasse auf den Lindberg-Landscape No. 3, Winterthur*, 1992 (Fig. 3). We cannot help but understand this photograph in terms of its appearance as a characteristic landscape painting by Richter (for example, Richter's *Kleine Straße*, 1987, Fig. 4) and importantly not as 'a photograph made up to look like a painting, but an image caught in its trajectory from photograph to painting'.

Foucault describes the inverted yet parallel relationship, and one more familiar to us today, when he writes:

When painting recovers the photograph, occupying it insidiously and triumphantly, it does not admit that the photograph is beautiful. It does better: it produces the beautiful hermaphrodite of instantaneous photograph and painted canvas, the androgyne image.³³

The hermaphrodite and androgynous are conditions that rely on the external differences with which they intersect, so therefore we should not understand Foucault's description in terms of homogeneity. In relation to Struth's photograph, Foucault's point would be that such an image is at once both photograph and painting, which is not to say that it is a combination of the two, which would be to incorporate images through photographing or painting them. Rather, the image lies at the intersection of the rhetorical trajectories of each medium. Photography and painting are apprehended at once and in the same place, that is, in the image. At the same time, the two well-known artists' oeuvres intersect and amplify this dialogue. Photography and painting are present and known according to their disguised difference and each artist's sustained attention to medium but all are subordinate to the image in and of itself as image. It is this difference and its articulation by Richter and Struth that has opened up the space between the two media in a way that allows the image its place.

Although it could be argued that Krauss's notion of the 'differential specificity' of media still assumes that medium is apparent even if as a relation, Foucault's notion of 'disguised difference', (an identity that is inviolable

³³ Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting', p. 83.

but which can nevertheless be feigned) brings us a step closer to painters taking on photography. And not only painters, but 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. From Krauss's concept of 'differential specificity', it might be assumed that it is the impossibility of the merger or complete sublimation of one medium in another that empowers the strategies of each of such artists. Yet at a level of operation they clearly proceed as if translation were possible. As Foucault puts it, they disguise the differences that constitute their practice. It is not media that are translated in this process, but the idiomatic aspects that every medium possesses and which are visible only in citation.

Translation, idiom, signature

This story [the Tower of Babel] recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility.³⁴

Derrida's description of the impossible and necessary task of translation hinges on the concept of idiom. Idiom, or rather, the idiomatic aspects of media that appear in intermedial art practices, it could be argued, provides a means to understand not just Richter's use of photography

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours De Babel', *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (ed.) (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1985), p. 170.

but the function of medium in contemporary art more broadly.

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. Yet, while such translation is necessary, it is also an impossible task. The translation will always fail to communicate all that is entailed in the other language.³⁵ It is this impossibility—'its necessity as impossibility'—that enables translation to produce meaning. It is translation's inability to thoroughly re-make a meaning from another language that enables it to make yet another meaning, to produce something else again through the process of translation. 'If the translator neither restitutes nor copies an original, it is because the original lives on and transforms itself. The translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself *in enlarging itself.*'³⁶ Derrida tells us that the original is always modified through translation, but—importantly—survives as well.³⁷ 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.

Idiom is the element of language use that is untranslatable yet, paradoxically, known only through translation and its

³⁵ Greenberg makes a similar point when he states that in translating a literary theme into an optical, two-dimensional painting, the literary theme loses all the characteristics that make it literature. Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p. 758.

³⁶ Derrida, 'Des Tours De Babel', p. 188.

³⁷ Derrida, 'Des Tours De Babel', p. 192.

failure. It is idiom, the thing that cannot be carried over into another language, which prevents the mixing of media that the claim to media hybridity suggests. More importantly still, it is the function of idiom as the failure of translation that results in the nature of painting 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 it becomes visible at all. The British painter Glenn Brown draws our attention to this same set of relations in his meticulous rendering of painting as it appears in its printed reproduction. For example, Brown's *Shallow Death* (2000) reinterprets a painting by Frank Auerbach, reproducing his characteristic impasto while distorting the figure as shown in the original painting. Yet Brown's paint surface is in fact uniformly flat, and the trademark troughs and peaks of Auerbach's paint are rendered in an impressive trompe l'oeil.³⁸ This, however, is a twice-inscribed failure of translation in that the reproduction Brown copies failed to translate certain aspects of painting into print (its physical substance as paint) and yet again, when he paints the reproduction, he fails to equal the flatness of the page even as he feigns its appearance and its flatness in the stuff of paint.

In the preface to *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida's discussion of idiom moves close to the terms of this inquiry. Here, in a series of movements between idiom,

³⁸ Brown's painting can be seen at:

http://www.art2bank.com/international_art_news/featured-galleries/glenn-brown-at-the-tate-liverp.php (accessed 21 January 2009)

painting and truth, he establishes the special status of idiom in mapping out the specificity of media and engaging with questions of truth in art. Beginning with the statement, 'I am interested in the idiom in painting', Derrida poses a range of translations of the statement, all of which recast that to which the idiom may refer, but none of which describe what it is. This in itself tells us something of Derrida's claims for idiom and translation.

For Derrida, idiom and truth are found to come together in a letter written by Paul Cézanne, which includes the statement: 'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you.'³⁹ Derrida seizes upon Cézanne's promise as both a highly idiomatic statement and a powerful model of idiom. This short sentence is able to refer simultaneously, and in a manner which escapes adequate translation, to three possible relations of truth and painting: to Cézanne's knowledge of the truth of the medium; to the truth of the world as rendered in painting; and to the truth about painting as told through language. In turning to Cézanne's statement, the idiom in painting with which Derrida began is now understood as the truth in painting. Here truth is both the problem of representation more broadly and specifically the problem of representing the medium of painting—or rather, representing the medium of painting in writing, or indeed in painting. Derrida's final configuration of these paired terms, 'I am interested in the idiom of truth in painting', completes his equation,

³⁹ Cézanne's letter was to Emile Bernard, 23 October, 1905. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1987), p. 2.

joining idiom, truth and painting, but only insofar as it makes clear the folly of attempting to reproduce the idiomatic. Derrida writes:

One is always tempted by this faith in idiom: it supposedly says only one thing, properly speaking, and says it only in linking form and meaning too strictly to lend itself to translation. But if the idiom were this, were it what it is thought it must be, it would not be that, but it would lose all strength and would not make a language.⁴⁰

Here Derrida identifies the paradox of idiom as broadening from the untranslatable into the unrepresentable. We know what idiom is meant to be; we understand its functioning in language in the broadest sense. But when we extract an instance of the idiomatic for contemplation, we can be sure that what we have in our sights is the appearance of a form too idiosyncratic to be isolated. Idiom works invisibly as the self-identity of a language, and instances of idiomatic usage are visible in translation only where they no longer function idiomatically. It is the incidental quality of idiom that is at the heart of this, and we once again know this through Richter's example. At the same time that the blur is able to evoke the medium of photography so effectively and economically, in using it as a sign of photography's idiom, Richter fastens upon something incidental to medium—something that is generally understood as resulting from chance and quite apart from the medium's central unifying characteristics (whatever these might be). It is the double duty that the blur does for Richter—its

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 7.

ability to be incidental to photography at the same time as central to painting—that makes it such a powerfully affecting tool device in his painting.

So if medium is understood as a type of language, idiom is the aspect of a medium (as founded in the incorruptible connection between form and meaning, material and signification, signifier and signified) that cannot be carried over (reproduced, represented, translated) into another medium. 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'—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 found in referencing that idiom's existence elsewhere. It could be argued then, that Richter's photopaintings raise precisely these same issues. Recall his statement, '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 practising photography by other means.'⁴¹ Richter's distinction between imitation and making is an important one but before discussing that distinction it is worth noting that this reference to imitation connects us, unexpectedly, to Greenberg's account of the 'processes or disciplines' of art and literature as imitating 'the world of

⁴¹ Gerhard Richter, 'Interview with Rolf Schön, 1972', in Obrist, ed., *The Daily Practice of Painting*, p. 73.

common, extroverted experience' and how those processes and disciplines become the subject matter of art. 'If ...all art and literature are imitation, then what we have here is the imitation of imitating'⁴². If we take on the inevitability of imitation that Greenberg argues for, Richter need not reject imitation quite so adamantly. Yet according to his distinction between imitation and making, 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. To recall Derrida's terms, an attempt to translate idiom into another language always and necessarily results in a remainder, an idiomatic excess, because what is idiomatic is always and necessarily outside of translation. I would argue, however, that Richter's photopaintings do achieve a photographic affect within painting, and they do so, at least in part, through a connection with photographic idiom in the form of a blurriness that seems irreducibly photographic. Although, given Derrida's caution that 'were it what it is thought it must be, it would not be that, but it would lose all strength and would not make a language', we might be reluctant to attribute too much to this relationship.

Richter does not translate photography's idiom directly. As he notes himself, this is impossible: 'How can, say, paint on canvas be blurred?'⁴³ In photography, blurring is in an important sense contingent. For the most part, it happens

⁴² Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', p. 532

⁴³ Richter, 'Notes, 1964', in Obrist, ed., *The Daily Practice of Painting*, p. 23.

by chance and indicates some loss of control of the camera technology. In painting, blurring is not at all marginal in this sense: paint is smeared on to the canvas, combined and worked to deliberately produce the effect. In this way, the labour of the translation is evident. Richter has focused on an incidental trait of photography and, in an attempt to reproduce it, has shown how a familiar, central problematic of painting's history (its tendency to place dissemblance before resemblance), can be understood in a new light as photographic.⁴⁴ In making his claim to paint a photograph, 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. More particularly, it is only through the dissemblance of photographic idiom to itself, its failure to remain idiomatic when Richter paints it, that we know something of either medium and of medium more generally.

Idiom enables us to know something of individual media in their irreconcilable multiplicity—their 'differential specificity', as Krauss calls it—and at the same time to know something of what is common to all languages and media, the space of their difference.⁴⁵ 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

⁴⁴ Here I am referring to Georges Didi-Huberman's distinction between resemblance and dissemblance. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1995).

⁴⁵ Krauss, 'a Voyage on the North Sea'.

other.'⁴⁶ So we can know painting only through photography or photography through painting. Their failed translation is no happy accident, but a failure that is necessary, and one that constitutes the concept of medium.

When Jeff Wall, for example, 'paraphrases' famous paintings in photography, this opens the same structure of idiom and medium but in slightly different terms to translation. Samuel Weber calls this type of gesture a 'citation' of photography as opposed to a direct translation of its idiom into another medium.⁴⁷ It is this very quality of citability that marks out the articulation of images between media as being something beyond simple differences and commonalities and opens to the sense of their completing each other as described by Derrida. Citation necessarily interrupts a text's context, bringing to it something from another context, and this citation as interruption, and as proof of supplementation from elsewhere, suspends the text's claim to totality. So if we say that Richter cites the blur as photography's idiom, then he interrupts what is proper to painting - its context - and admits another mode of representation. In so doing he cedes any claim that painting, and by implication photography, may have had to adequately represent a totality. This is certainly one of Richter's aims. Citation is used when paraphrase, précis, translation or visual proximity will simply not do the job. In citing other languages, other means of representation,

⁴⁶ Derrida, 'Des Tours De Babel', p. 201.

⁴⁷ As discussed by Samuel Weber in the seminar series *Medium Cool*, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 1996. This argument is now published in Samuel Weber, *Theatricality of Medium* (Fordham University Press: New York, 2004).

we acknowledge the very particular, idiosyncratic perspective these citations can bring to our text. The idiom of the language that is cited is not just maintained but only visible in citation. It no longer functions idiomatically; rather, its idiom becomes the object of our attention and our means to see into a world where that idiom is native and functions invisibly. We see this in the process by which Richter's painted citations of photographic blur help us know more of what is idiomatic to the medium of photography, not despite but because of being unable to reproduce it, only to cite it. We also see this in Wall's citation of paintings from history. However, whereas Richter, in citing the idiomatic blur, cites something that is usually only incidental to the medium of photography, Wall cites a major aspect, or component of painting: its discursive construction of complex narratives.

Richter's citation maintains the appearance of the blur within its new location, but it is only this appearance that is present. The blur can appear in painting in a way that it cannot in photography. That is, the blur as something that is visible is decidedly not idiomatic of photography because the quality of the photographic is not located in resemblance but rather in affect as brought about by the dissemblance of the blur. It is idiomatic of photography that there is no distinction, no relation of cause and effect, between the state of an image being blurred and the affect it occasions in the viewer. The photographic blur is the jolt of the real, experience as sensation and sensation as felt. Richter, by citing the blur, makes it appear and introduces a gap, explaining and

putting to his own use the 'reality affect' of photography to say something of painting.

The photopaintings' visual resemblance to the photographic is central to Richter's project. It is a relationship that it is essential for him to articulate for a range of reasons: to show the contemporary state of the image; to establish the connection to history and history painting; to maintain a political and emotional separation from subject-matter; as a gesture towards the referent; and to call forth the potency of the index. Finally, though, the correspondence of the appearance of his painting with the appearance of the blur of photography functions as a *trompe l'oeil* that lures the viewer into the image, where this blurring, as an inevitably and necessarily failed translation or as a citation of the idiom of photography, is shown to be incidental to photography but crucial to painting.

Derrida's formulations of the necessary and paradoxical relationship between originality and repetition and the relationship between translation and idiom are able to bring us closer still to understanding the case of Richter:

As a promise translation is already an event and the decisive signature of a contract.⁴⁸

In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from its present and singular intention of its production. It is this

⁴⁸ Derrida, 'Des Tours De Babel', p. 191.

sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal.⁴⁹

idiom ... peculiarity, property, peculiar phraseology, to make one's own, appropriate.

idiomatic ... Peculiar to one person, individual.⁵⁰

What follows from the arguments about translation that I have taken from Derrida is that Richter's own work, and its basis in translation, is also therefore not original. His copying of photographs and the endless repetition of this strategy is one proof of this, a fact corroborated by his statement that it is photography's lack of originality that he values most.⁵¹ Paradoxically, repeating the photographic blur as motif and as signature is precisely what has enabled Richter to take up significant episodes of art history and to make them his own—that is, inimitable and idiomatic. Richter articulates the fact that painting has always pursued what we might call the photographic and he makes this clear by cleverly using the blur—as the appearance of the medium of photography—in translation. Richter's translation is a productive act in that he was the first to articulate this as the true state of painting—that is, he was also the first to demonstrate what Derrida has called 'the idiom of truth in painting' through the idiom of photography. However, to repeat Richter's project, to translate his translation as his imitators do, is to risk cliché.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Limited Inc.* (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Ill., 1988), p. 20.

⁵⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵¹ Obrist (ed.) *The Daily Practice of Painting*.

Derrida says that 'a proper name remains forever untranslatable', and this is borne out in a curious way through Richter's insistent and repeated iteration of the photographic.⁵² Despite everything I have argued about the impossibility of translating idiom, Richter has effectively developed the blur as his own idiom. That is, the painted photographic blur has become so thoroughly associated with Richter as to be his signature style. Even photographers' use of blurring can be described as Richter-esque. As a repetition of what Richter has already identified - a translation of a translation - there is nothing new to be derived from this, except to make the Richter-esque visible.⁵³ This relationship between Richter and his imitators once more demonstrates that we only ever know something through its translation. That is, we only fully grasp Richter's painting when we see it played out in imitation. Once more, this translation cannot carry Richter's idiom into a new location, and what is lost in this process is the very thing that identifies Richter's singularity. To describe these images as Richter-esque is to signal this loss as an untranslatable and unrepeatable signature style that can only ever be marked out through its translation and repetition.

Even more curious than Richter's own idiomatic status is that he is successful in using repetition and visual formula to produce spontaneity and originality within his painting. More than just marking out the relationship

⁵² Derrida, 'Des Tours De Babel', p. 171.

⁵³ Derrida considers this redundancy of translating through reference to an argument from Walter Benjamin in 'Des Tours De Babel'.

between the photographic affect and painterly sensation described so effectively by Gilles Deleuze, Richter's paintings maintain the immediate affect and sensation that is possible through both media.⁵⁴ In doing so, he is producing immediacy through what has gone before. This recourse to the past could so easily signal the redundancy, or at least enervation, of the resulting works, yet its effect is utterly opposite. The degree of Richter's success and his implied influence is argued by critics and curators such as Robert Storr, who sees Richter's role as central to painting today: 'It is a medium that has come to depend for its survival on Richter's severe scrutiny,' says Storr, 'and has survived and thrived in large measure because of it.'⁵⁵

There is much renegotiation of media in contemporary art, but, as Krauss, Derrida and Foucault put it, in their very different ways, this is a relational differentiation that heightens, rather than reduces, the importance of the concept of media. It also moves medium away from issues of material identity and towards the historical interrelation of the art disciplines. These various engagements with questions of medium, return us time and again to photography as medium. This is in part because Richter makes the idiomatic aspects of photography visible at a time when digital photography is raising new questions for

⁵⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2003).

⁵⁵ Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter Retrospective in New York* [web site] (German Embassy, Washington DC, 2005: http://www.germany-info.org/relaunch/culture/new/cul_richter.html). (Accessed 10 November 2005);

the medium and discipline; does, for example, the apparatus of digital photography change the medium because of the changed status of its indexicality? Richter, and the artists who have taken up aspects of his approach show us that this is not the case, that the concept of medium is being renegotiated on more than technical material grounds and has as much to do with the history of media and art disciplines as with their future.

The anxiety over a putatively post-photographic photography is itself a part of this history. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes recognizes that he is identifying a type of photography that is soon to pass: 'And no doubt the astonishment of the 'that-has-been' will also disappear. It has already disappeared: I am, I don't know why, one of its last witnesses ... and this book is its archaic trace.'⁵⁶ Recently, Fried has referred to Barthes' book as 'a swan song for an artifact on the brink of fundamental change'.⁵⁷ Just as the end of painting was proclaimed after the invention of photography, and again as high Modernism played out its self-defeating narrative of medium purity, so too does the discourse surrounding photography proclaim its death as medium. Of course, it must also be noted that such claims are made at the same time as it remains commonplace to identify photography as the prevailing visual form of contemporary culture and even as a concern for *Modern Painters*. We might interpret the fact that photography has recently attracted the attention of writers

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (Fontana: London, 1981), p. 94.

⁵⁷ Michael Fried, Barthes' *Punctum*, *Critical Inquiry* vol. 31, 2005, p. 563.

like Fried and Norman Bryson as both the sign of its star continuing to rise or as sure evidence of a decline that prompts its objective analysis.⁵⁸

The current situation for art history as a discipline might be understood as the aftermath of the crisis of medium that has been played out in recent art and its associated discourse. Technological advances in photography ask us pressing questions about media, but if we understand media as a relational concept between disciplines, we see that this is a return to the role that it had in the nineteenth century. When asked about the relation between his theories and the conception of medium, Fried says:

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.⁵⁹

One of the issues that photography addresses, I would argue, 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, it is the

⁵⁸ The title of Michael Fried's recently published and long-awaited book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, unequivocally suggests the former. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2008).

⁵⁹ Michael Fried, *Painting's Present* (Tate Gallery, 2002) <http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/fried.htm>. (accessed 10 January 2007);

only relationship of which we can be certain. In these circumstances, the material basis of medium recedes from the central place it occupied under high Modernism, because to consider idiom in this way is to recognise 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 homogeneity where medium distinctions are not just undesirable but impossible is, I argue, due to the strength and effect of idiom: indeed, what is 'trafficked' is in fact this idiom, or at least its appearance.

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Word count - footnotes: 1777 words

Captions for Illustrations:

Fig. 1. Gerhard Richter, *Zwei Fiat*, 1964, oil on canvas, 130 x 200 cm. Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden. (Photo: Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden) © Gerhard Richter 2009.

Fig. 2. Gérard Fromanger, *En révolte á la prison de Toul II*, 1974, paint on canvas, dimensions not known. Location not known. (Photo: Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, *Photogenic Painting: Gérard Fromanger*, (Black Dog: London, 1999))

Fig. 3. Thomas Struth, *Waldstrasse auf dem Lindberg-No 3, Winterthur*, 1992, C-print, 116.5 x 126 cm (Photo: Atelier Thomas Struth) © 2009 Thomas Struth

Fig. 4. Gerhard Richter, *Kleine Straße*, 1987, oil on canvas, 61 x 82.6 cm. (Photo: Gerhard Richter Archive, Dresden - [TO BE CONFIRMED](#)) © Gerhard Richter 2009.

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