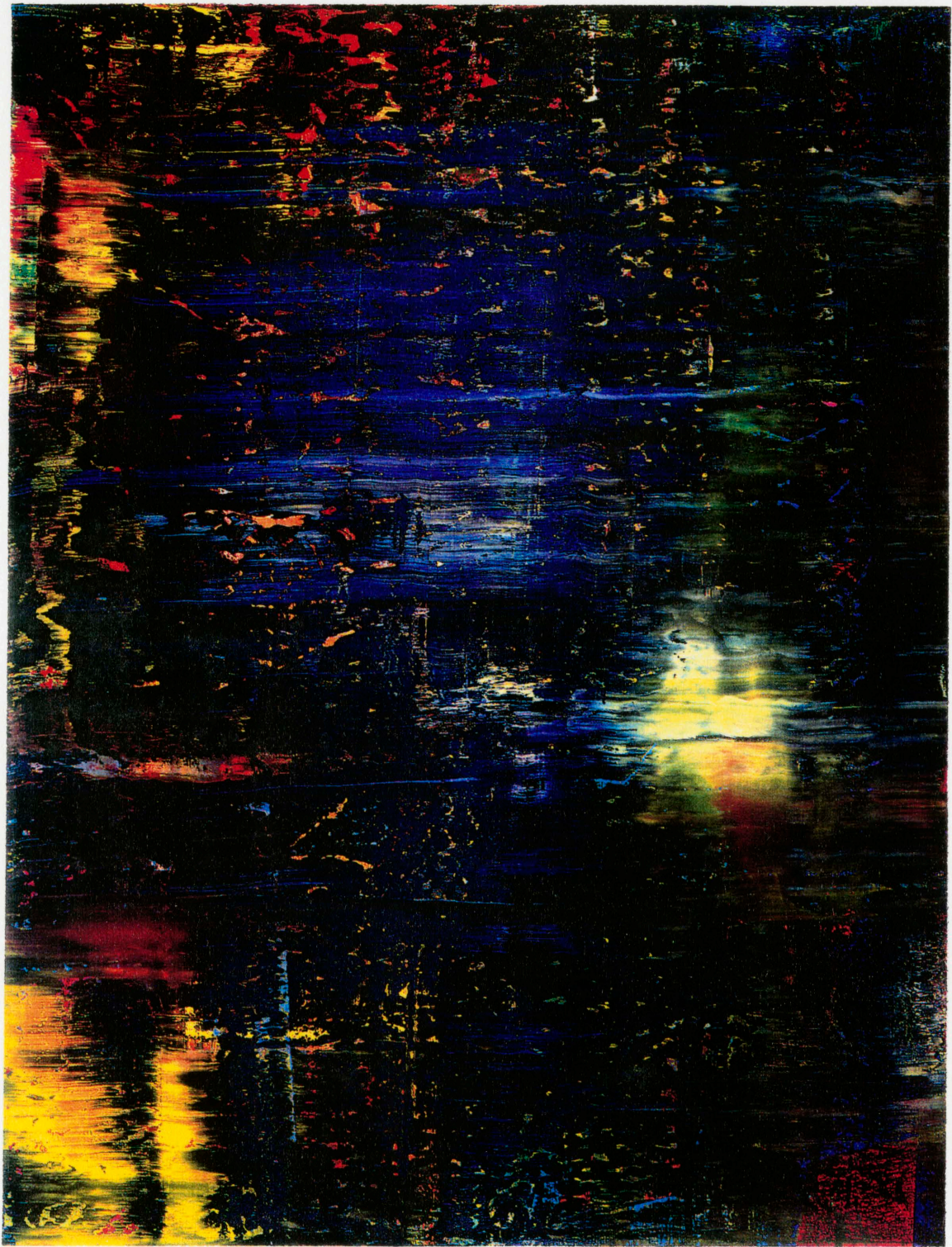


APPLICATION AND MANIPULATION

The Abstract Painting of Gerhard Richter (1988-93)

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Spring 1994



Introduction

As a graduate student pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree in painting at Colorado State University, I am often asked which contemporary painter is my favorite. In recent years I have usually answered this question by saying that I had no one particular favorite, but instead appreciated and was influenced by the accomplishments of a number of artists for varying reasons. At this time however, in the Spring of 1994, I answer the question by saying that I currently find the work of German painter Gerhard Richter to be most compelling. Of Richter's oeuvre, it is his recent (1988-93), large scale, nonobjective, non-photographically derived oils that interest me the most.

These paintings, which are created and achieve their unique visual structure solely through the application and manipulation of oil paint, have established Richter as one of the foremost practitioners of contemporary abstract painting. Because Richter is accomplishing his visual image exclusively through paint quality and paint manipulation, with no overt figuration and with very little, if any, visible sign of paintbrush usage, I find him belonging to and continuing a twentieth century tradition of abstract painting which includes such historically established figures as Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and to a lesser degree Willem De Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler and Larry Poons. It is important here to further qualify and identify this type of abstract painting that I am calling a tradition. When considering the masterwork's of the first three artists just listed: the poured paintings of Louis and Pollock; the field paintings of Rothko, the major unifying formal factor of the work is that image quality, in all three styles, is almost exclusively dependent upon the physical properties of the oil, alkyd or enamel paint used. This is to say that the construction of these images did not utilize the very standard structural elements of virtuosic and textural brushwork, objective figuration, chiaroscuro, or geometric design, nor did they utilize such physical embellishments as nonrectangular supports, collage, assemblage, mechanical paint application (airbrush, silkscreen,

sprayer, etc.), or media mixing. There are some minor exceptions to these conditions, such as Pollock's inclusion of such foreign matter as sand, bits of glass, or small pieces of studio detritus in some of his paintings, and the geometric nature of Rothko's floating fields of color; but the primary visual force of image is paint, not composition. That is to say that Pollock's electrified fields and intensely choreographed webs of dancing line owe their existence to the physical qualities of fluid oil or enamel paint, and to Pollock's harnessing and application of those qualities. Louis's extremely rich and luminous veils of color owe their appearance to the ability of fluid oil and alkyd paint to stain unprimed canvas and create transparent layers of color wash, as well as the artist's control of these effects. The evocative and engulfing, looming presence of a Rothko is due to careful application of many thin layers of color wash or glaze; the effect is one of floating, luminous emanation of color and it is due to Rothko's application of oil paint, not to his compositional arranging of shapes or symbols. All of these artists pursued a direction which sought an image that had its genesis in the optical effects of paint itself. They were not using paint to render anything but itself and thereby arrived at previously unseen visual images or fields which indeed had an amazing metaphorical power to suggest profoundly more than just paint. It is important to interject here that the work of these artists is not cold and lacking in emotion. On the contrary, all three painters have an expressive intent at the core of their enterprise and there is a gestural aspect in all the painters' methods of application, most obviously Pollock's. It is my belief that Gerhard Richter is achieving the same power of image by related process and concept in his recent abstract painting.

I believe that there is a real significance in both Richter's continuation of and his contributions to this style of abstraction which has been called "pure painting" by H.H. Arnason¹. Aside from the controversial nature, even in today's pluralistic art world, of continuing to practice a gestural and somewhat expressive, nonreferential abstraction, the fact that Richter has succeeded in developing a powerful and truly new visual style and effect, with only the very traditional

elements of rectangular supports, canvas, and oil paint, is a significant accomplishment in the Postmodern 1990s.

Richter has been painting professionally since 1963, and in the intervening thirty years he has established himself internationally as one of the world's major contemporary painters. Interestingly, his initial recognition was not due to his explorations of nonobjective, painterly abstraction, but for a Pop influenced style of photographically derived, figurative painting. This photographic imagery was transferred to the canvas by hand and usually rendered by brush in black and white oil paint. This photographically derived style continues to be used and explored by Richter alongside his more purely abstract style.

Some critical questioning and controversy has arisen throughout Richter's career due to his refusal or inability to settle on a single painting style. Richter defends his position by citing the inadequacy of a single style or method of depiction to express more than a small fraction of reality. My personal opinion is that Richter's work has not suffered by his refusal to limit his formal concentration; but instead, that the visual effects that I find so compelling in his abstractions would not have evolved without the technical facility and aesthetic sensibility that Richter developed in making his photo/paintings. Interestingly, I find the aesthetic manifested in Richter's recent abstractions to be linked to the achievements of both American Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, as well as to some of the conclusions of Post-Painterly Abstraction, Minimalism and Conceptualism.

In this paper I examine the art historical significance of Gerhard Richter's recent abstract painting from 1988 to 1993. In doing so, I link Richter to a twentieth century tradition of abstract painting practiced by such historically established figures as Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. I will also discuss the visual elements which constitute what I feel is the real power of Richter's contemporary abstraction; and examine the stylistic development that has led Richter to paint in this manner, and which has set him apart in both international and German contemporary painting.

I

“ The invention of the readymade seems to me to be the invention of reality, in other words the radical discovery that reality in contrast with the view of the world image is the only important thing. Since then painting no longer represents reality but is itself reality (produced by itself). And sometime or other it will again be a question of denying the value of this reality in order to produce pictures of a better world (as before). “²

Gerhard Richter 1990

The reality of a recent Richter abstraction is one of oil paint; it is not a representation, symbol or illustration of anything other than its physical self. Through the application and manipulation of oil paint, Richter has managed to show us something previously unseen, without alluding to our physical and experiential world by symbol or illusionistic mechanism. I contend that very few Modern and Post-Modern painters have been capable of this without resorting to assemblage, media mixing, mechanically assisted paint application, or visible brushwork. The outstanding four are Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock, Gerhard Richter and Mark Rothko, and to a lesser degree, Helen Frankenthaler and Larry Poons can also be included in this group. It is important to qualify what it is that sets the work of these painters apart from the work of other twentieth century abstractionists.

Louis, Pollock, Richter and Rothko did not use paint to render anything but itself; in doing so, they created works that were more purely paint images than they were painted images. A very important qualification and condition of these paint images is the refusal of the artist to use the paintbrush for illustrative mark-making and gestural paint manipulation. This condition of negating the visual effects of the paintbrush excludes a majority of abstract painters from the stylistic category that Louis, Pollock, Richter and Rothko belong to.³ Two other important qualifications and conditions of these paint images are the absence of geometric compositional

elements (Rothko's color fields albeit rectangular, are soft edged and diaphanous), and absence of conventional figure/ground or positive/negative spatial relationships. These conditions exclude the work of such abstractionists as Joan Mitchell, Robert Motherwell, Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella for example. The paintings of Louis, Pollock, Richter and Rothko are created exclusively with rectangular supports, paint and canvas, thus excluding those abstract painters using methods of assemblage, media mixing, mechanical spraying equipment, or sculptural supports. Lastly, I do not include Minimalist, monochromatic painting because the work under discussion is multicolored and expressionistic.

All four of the painters were motivated in their creations as much by expressive intent as by theoretical exploration; but all four have succeeded in very eloquent and pure ways of achieving that most lofty of Modernism's intellectual goals; the objectification of painting. Their paintings have been created out of a deep distrust of conventional representational styles and the ability of these styles to adequately depict reality. Jackson Pollock, the first to truly achieve a visually forceful, nonobjective image true to the materials of paint and canvas, and devoid of the illustrative brushstroke, touched on this concern in a quote taken from an interview with William Wright, taped in 1951.

“ My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own techniques “⁴

On Pollock's technique, Ellen Landau writes:

“ No longer content with the interruption to free movement caused each time he had to reload his brush, Pollock devised a handy way to create a more continuous line by tilting a commercial can of thinner, more liquid paint, and allowing it to run down a stick placed in the can at an angle. In this way he believed that the energy behind his imagery could literally “ flow “ straight from his unconscious. “ 5

Pollock's technical breakthrough and unashamed nonobjectivity were influential. Here Sam Hunter comments on the stylistic development of Helen Frankenthaler which took place within the context of the New York School immediately following Pollock's accomplishments.

“ Beginning with her abstract landscape Mountains and Sea of 1952, which was probably influenced both by Rothko's dye technique of color application and Pollock's “ black “ paintings on unsized canvas, Helen Frankenthaler's improvisatory, lyrical abstractions pointed toward a new direction in American art. Her first paintings in the new manner were tentative and extremely personal, but they clearly rejected the lush painterliness and directed manual energies of the de Kooning-style Action Painting. By pouring or trickling paint on canvas and thus enlarging the accidentalism of the Abstract Expressionists while at the same time shrinking their repertory of gestural marks, Frankenthaler opened up a new set of formal alternatives. Her thin washes and stains, with their vibrant luminosity, led to Morris Louis's overlapped veils of translucent color and to the more cleanly structural forms of Kenneth Noland. In the process of depersonalizing and codifying the Action painters' autographic and Expressionist brushstroke, this significant trio of artists managed to create a new kind of color painting divorced from drawing, and injected new intellectual meanings into the art of their time. “ 6

On Morris Louis's technique Hunter writes:

“ In his first mature work of 1954, Louis flowed thin films of plastic pigment on unsized canvas to form faint, muted color shapes reminiscent of Action Painting in appearance, but far less active or aggressive. The even consistencies and the transparency of his diaphanous color shapes, their slowed velocities and rela-

tively indeterminate flow-defining edges were formed cunningly by the natural process of drying rather than by any expressive inflection of the hand - paralyzed the urgent expressiveness of Action Painting. “ 7

This negation or elimination of paintbrush signature or marking is very important to the visual impact of these works. Because they are freed from the tendencies of painterly and Expressionistic brushwork to read as pictorially descriptive or as visual records of the artist's hand and progress, these paint images become events and visual objects in themselves. They are their own reality, not representations of a separate reality.

Let me now discuss specific works by Pollock, Rothko, Louis and ending with Richter. I will begin with Jackson Pollock. Pollock began developing his famous poured technique in early 1947, and by the summer of 1950 he was producing what are recognized as his master-work's of this style. One of these paintings, Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950, is reproduced as Figure #1 in this paper. To create this painting, Pollock tacked a large, unstretched but sized canvas to the hard floor and then drew, composed and colored by dripping, pouring and directing liquid paint with a stick onto the rectangularly oriented picture plane. By 1950 Pollock's control of this technique was masterful. The range of pictorial incident is overwhelming upon patient examination. Thin, lightly suspended mists of pink, lavender and beige oil color permeate a branch and vine like network of black and white enamel paint. Splashes and drops of aluminum paint charge the woven linear network with a breezy movement similar to that of swaying leaves. There is a real crispness and sharpness of detail sustained throughout the entire painting, qualities due to the marriage of Pollock's artistic vision and his understanding and control of the physicality of liquid paint. The viewer is spared the blunted generalization of the brush and instead of rendering we get the authentic event and physical presence. The drops of paint dry in such a way that they look frozen at the point of impact with the canvas. Pollock

shows us the full range of effect, from fine droplets and mists, to lyrical splashes and pooled or flooded areas. On his line, Frank O'Hara writes:

“ There has never been enough said about Pollock’s draftsman-ship, that amazing ability to quicken a line by thinning it, to slow it by flooding, to elaborate that simplest of elements, the line - to change, to reinvigorate, to extend, to build up an embarrassment of riches in the mass by drawing alone. And each change in the individual line is what every draftsman has always dreamed of: color. “⁸

Figure #2 is a Pollock painting from 1952 entitled Convergence: Number 10, 1952, which I include to illustrate another aspect of Pollock’s poured style: that is his use of unique color blending effects inherent to merging areas of liquefied pigment. Jackson Pollock was really the first to manage a truly unique and powerful paint image that was dependent upon paint quality instead of quality of brushwork.

Figures #3 and #4 are Morris Louis paintings from 1959 entitled Saraband and Verdicchio respectively. These paintings serve as good examples of the image Louis was achieving solely by washing thin layers of paint across an expanse of unprimed canvas. What results is a beautiful, luminous veiling of color which possesses a structural integrity and visual presence all its own. They are poured paintings in which images are dependent upon the optical characteristics of thinned paint, but they achieve a visual form much different from those of Jackson Pollock.

John Elderfield writes:

“ I draw attention to the technical properties of the paint to aid in understanding the appearance of the veils, including the detailing they contain. Louis avoided small-scale drawn incident, especially the drips, splatters, and other signs of “ accident “ that characterize many Abstract Expressionist paintings. Generally, he seemed interested in effecting a sense of paint not having been drawn or acted on in any way (quoted in E. A. Carmean, Jr. “ Morris Louis and the Modern Tradition. “ Part 1. Arts Magazine 51 (September 1976), p. 71.). Nevertheless, the surfaces of the 1954 Veils reveal an extraordinarily rich form of detailing which

is not accidental in any other sense than that Louis could not predict it. But he could, and did, direct it, and he used this detailing to create a particularly intimate relationship between the closeup surfaces of these Veils and their distanced wholeness as images, and as pictures. “ 9

In Figure #5 we see an example of the work of Mark Rothko. Number 7 from 1960 exhibits the monochrome fields of color suspended in horizontal succession which Rothko utilized compositionally for most of his mature career. These blurry edged, rectangular areas are formed of a clean, almost living, pulsating color, unhampered or lessened by distracting surface or gestural activity. Rothko's image was one of carefully built-up, chromatic layers of thin paint, resulting in a unique visual presence. H. H. Arnason writes:

“ This is a kind of painting that by the sheer sensuousness of its color areas, by the dimensions, and by the sense of indefinite outward expansion without any central focus, is designed to absorb and engulf the spectator, to assimilate him into a total color experience. “ 10

Pollock, Louis, Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler were contemporaries of each other, and all were working in the United States with an awareness of each others' work. Gerhard Richter began working in his most recent style of abstraction in 1988; thirty years after the styles of the four Americans had matured. Richter's stylistic development during those intervening thirty years is discussed in Chapter II. It should be noted here that there are some artists of note, working in the years between 1958 and 1988, who produced works that meet the formal conditions of the type of painting we are discussing; a good example is Larry Poons. It must also be noted that Richter's motivation in developing his method of abstraction was derived more from desiring continued evolution and enlargement of his personal expressive means, than from consciously wanting to perpetuate or add to a specific school of painting. However, Richter does belong to a generation of German painters who have developed their art with an acute aware-

ness of the achievements and conclusions of their Modernist predecessors and peers.

Figures #6 - #11 are reproductions of Gerhard Richter's most recent style of oil painting from 1988 - 93. Figure #6, a painting entitled Abstract Painting (695) from 1989 is heroically scaled (8' 2 1/2" x 15' 9"). In accord with the practice of large scale abstraction established by Pollock and embraced by Louis and Rothko this canvas exhibits the visual results Richter achieves through his technique of squeegeeing, scraping, stretching and drawing with various straight edged tools richly pigmented oil paint across areas of his picture plane. His image is built through multiple layering of squeegeed on paint and also through the subtractive process of squeegeeing and scraping the built up paint surfaces back down. His use of a layering technique to achieve a unique result can be compared to the processes of Louis and Rothko; like these two artists, Richter is using multiple layers of paint to achieve a chromatic richness, and powerful sense of depth; and like Louis especially, Richter is achieving areas of transparency. Richter's methods of paint application, however, differ radically from the methods of Louis and Rothko; and probably owe more to the influence of Willem de Kooning's painting style. Morris Louis's veiling of color was achieved through the use of very thin washes of pigment and the transparency is both actual and illusory. Richter's transparencies are more implied than real; and are the result of actually scraping through a layer of paint and exposing in places the underlying color; the transparent effect is also achieved in Richter's work by squeegeeing a paint layer thin enough that a still wet underlayer can begin to bleed through. In Convergence: Number 10, 1952 (Figure #2), Jackson Pollock bled puddled areas of liquid red, yellow, blue, black and white into each other, accomplishing his color mixing right on the canvas, and incorporating both the result and the record of that mixing into the final painting. In Abstract painting (726) (Figure #7), Richter also mixes his pigments right on the canvas and also incorporates the result much the same way as Pollock; that is, paint is allowed to react physically and chromatically in a way that is not so much dominated and tightly manipulated by the artist, but

is harmoniously directed with an aesthetic adherence to the truth of its material nature. Richter mixes his oil colors by applying paint, in varied hue, consistency, and quantity, directly to tool or canvas and then squeegeeing, scraping and pulling the colors across, into, and through each other. A very important similarity between the painterly sensibilities of Pollock and Richter is that they both developed processes that leave a visual record, in paint, of both the artists physical gesture and the painter's progressive, structural and compositional decision making; in a way more direct and with a different sensitivity than that of the paintbrush. The critic Massimo Carboni describes Richter's process in this way:

“ The image is actually constructed: Richter uses a spatula to apply the color to the canvas, creating one layer over another, but at the same time he scrapes away and removes the paint from some of the surface areas. The rhythm that supports this technique is based on this double operation of accumulation and subtraction, stratification and diminution. The process by which these paintings slowly come to light - Richter often spends months on a single canvas - is fully and immediately clear in the image. All the later phases of his technical procedure are resolved on the supporting place. “ 11

There is an apparent affinity with Pollock in Richter's “ all over “ activation of surface and composition; and also in Richter's amazing range of fine detail and pictorial incident (Figure #8, Frost (1)).

II

In the Tate Gallery's 1991 catalog for their major retrospective showing of Gerhard Richter's paintings, Director Nicholas Serota writes:

“ Richter's impact has been singular and widespread. His career has been devoted to exploring the potential of his chosen medium in a variety of surprisingly diverse ways. The apparent opposition between abstract and figurative styles of painting has been suspended through his single-minded exploration of the possibilities of painting as a vehicle of its own realities and as a con-

veyor of truths about the way we see the world. “ 12

The final sentence in this quotation is most relevant to the thesis of this paper. By 1988 Gerhard Richter had developed a process or style of painting which resulted in the creation of a painted image which was in itself truly an image of paint. The stylistic evolution Richter has undergone during the course of his professional career which has led him to his current style of abstract painting is explored in this chapter.

In 1978, Richter published a book entitled 128 Details from a Picture . Sean Rainbird describes its contents:

“ A single abstract painting was photographed by the artist 128 times from different angles, suggesting in didactic fashion the infinite perceptual possibilities - and myriad realities - arising from each abstract painting that contains not a mimetic representation of reality, but rather an equivalent and equally convincing pictorial reality. “ 13

After completing graduate studies at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf in 1963, a substantial part of Richter’s conceptual rationale has been the exploration of that which constitutes the true content of a painting.

Born in Dresden in 1932 and studying at the Kunstakademie in Dresden from 1951 to 1956, Richter’s art education in the German Democratic Republic was based upon a promotion of Communist embraced Socialist Realism and a repression of those artistic freedoms expounded by Modernism and flowering at that time in the United States. Richter’s questioning about the potential of his artistic development under this structure was agitated by his exposure to some of the advanced painting taking place in the western world particularly the works of Lucio Fontana and Jackson Pollock at “ Documenta “ in Kassel in 1958. ¹⁴ Richter was able to leave

East Germany in 1961, two months before the construction of the Berlin Wall. The following quotations taken from an interview with Richter by Benjamin H. Buchloh expose some of Richter's thinking at this time in his career.

“ I only knew artists like Picasso and Renato Guttuso, Diego Rivera, and naturally the classics as far as the Impressionists. Everything after that was labeled in East Germany as bourgeois decadence. That's how naive I was when I visited “ Documenta “ in Kassel in 1958, where Pollock and Fontana made a great impression on me. “ 15

When asked by Buchloh what it was in Fontana and Pollock that he found most compelling, Richter answered:

“ The unashamedness. I was fascinated by that, really taken aback. I might almost say that these pictures were the real reason for my leaving East Germany. I noticed there was something that was wrong with my way of thinking. “ 16

“ For at that time I was part of a circle that claimed to have a moral concern, that wanted to be a bridge, or to find a middle way, a so-called third way, between capitalism and socialism. As a result, our whole way of thinking was preoccupied with compromise. So, too, was what we sought in art. That simply wasn't radical, to use a more suitable word for unashamed. It wasn't truthful. It was full of false considerations. “ 17

Asked by Buchloh, “ What sort of considerations? “ :

“ Well, for traditional artistic values, for example. What I chiefly noticed was that those “ slashings “ and “ blotches “ were not a Formalist gag, but rather the bitter truth, liberation, and that here a completely different and new content was expressing itself. “ 18

It has been a purposeful elimination of “ Formalist gags “ and an attempt to express this “ bit-

ter truth “ that connects and supports all of the superficially disparate painting styles Richter has developed in the years subsequent to his leaving East Germany. Besides Richter’s early interest in Fontana and Pollock, another influence of this early period was the French Postwar abstractionist Jean Fautrier.¹⁹ Fautrier is important to note because of his influential role conceptually, in demanding that a painting exist as an object in itself, with its own tangible, physical reality.²⁰ Buchloh articulated this concern in his interview with Richter:

“ In other words, right from the beginning you were evidently trying somehow to synthesize *what* painterly praxis can mean with *how* it conveys meaning, a synthesis which departed from the conventions that existed at the time. So everything that was, formally, much more radical, everything that was nonliterary, non-narrative, nonsymbolic, all that seemed to you really more important? “ ²¹

To this Gerhard Richter’s reply was, “ Yes - because it had more to say to me. “ ²²

At this early stage in his career, Richter was challenged by a somewhat paradoxical problem; that is, having made the decision to paint, but acknowledging that painters such as Pollock and Fontana had put to death the Modernist culture of painting that evolved from Cezanne.

What Richter did at this point was to pay attention to the American Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, deriving his direction from their accomplishments. His answer to the question of what and how to paint was to begin doing a series of paintings of black and white photographs. In their visual effect and pictorial content they share qualities with Warhol’s silkscreened photo/paintings of the 1960s, but they also differ significantly in their handpainted aspect. Roald Nasgaard describes the conceptual rationale behind the photo/paintings:

“ Richter’s original motivation in turning to photographs was a willful act of negation. He chose to copy photographs primarily to escape the alternative options for making art that were available in the early 1960s: the doctrinaire heroics of Socialist Realism, the cult of subjectivity of Art Informel, the spirituality of

an Yves Klein or the idealism of the Zero group. It was only in the antiart stances of Fluxus activity or the artless subject and style of early Pop Art that he could discover any basis of authenticity. It was no doubt a strange position for a young artist to have been in in the early 1960's, to have been a painter with so much material facility and technical skill as Richter's but with no satisfactory outlet for it, with nothing to paint that was not redundant or untrustworthy. To hit on the solution of copying photographs, to select and paint them like ready-mades, outside aesthetic delectation, against habit, indifferent to their artistic visual worth, or the significance of their subject matter, was to find a way to work that had nothing to do with received ideas about art, with the old problems of subjectivity and creativity, color composition, or formal invention. A photograph with "no style, no concept, no judgement" ("Composition is when the principal person stands in the middle" (Cited in Peter Sager, "Mit der Farbe denken," *Zeitmagazin* 49 (Nov. 28, 1986): 33.)) rescued him from the burden of inherited tradition, and from the alternative traps of the prevailing aesthetics and ideologies around him. " 23

A journal note by Richter from 1984 serves to reinforce Nasgaard's conclusions:

"I have let myself in for thinking and acting without the assistance of an ideology; I have nothing to help me, no idea that I serve and in return am told what is to be done, no faith that points me in a particular direction, no picture of the future, no construction that gives higher meaning. I recognize only what is and accordingly consider senseless any description and depiction of things that we do not know. Ideologies seduce and always exploit ignorance, legitimize war. " 24

Richter has continued to paint from photographic source material throughout his career up to the present day. After what is considered his "Pop" period from 1962 - 1966, Richter began to utilize his own photographs, both color and black/white, in addition to those culled from outside sources. The imagery of the photo/paintings has ranged from news photographs of crime and accident victims, to family snapshots, to classically composed landscapes, to still-life and *momento mori*, to portraiture. Some examples of this type of painting dating from 1988 are illustrated as Figures #12 - 14 in this paper. Relevant to his recent abstractions are some of the

unique visual effects Richter was achieving in the photo/paintings by choosing to render them slightly out of focus. Erschossener (1) (Man shot down) (Figure #12) and in Cell(Figure #13) demonstrate the degrees of distortion Richter achieves. This way of stretching and smearing paint to create a blurred and out of focus effect has been utilized by Richter in his purely abstract paintings as well. For example, compare aspects of Cell (Figure #13) with some of the blurred areas in Abstract painting (726) (Figure#7) and in Uran - 1 (688-1) (Figure #9). Some interesting abstractions of Richter's are those dating from the 1970s where Richter would do a photo/painting from the photograph of one of his colorful, Abstract Expressionist paintings (Figure #15).²⁵

Richter's experiments with abstraction have led him through series of paintings that, independent of each other, could be classed into categories such as Monochromatic, Color Field, Minimalist, Gestural and Expressionist. It was not until 1976, however, that Richter fully committed to working predominately with gestural abstraction. Nasgaard comments on this change of direction:

“ Even with hindsight, and knowing that Richter's paintings are not different from one another in their essential concerns, but it is only method that changes, it would have been impossible to predict, even from their gray predecessors, the group of colorful, gestural, and spontaneous small sketches of 1976 that mark Richter,s sudden and irrevocable turn to abstract painting. For a while he had been feeling distanced from his work and inhibited from taking consequential risks. The series *Tourist*, 1975, based on photographs of a luckless game farm visitor who foolishly had left his vehicle and was attacked and killed by lions, was painted as a warning to himself about his potential fate if he continued to act like a tourist in his own work. Because they had become so impersonal and generalized, Richter recalls, “ Then I was totally outside my paintings. But I didn't feel well either. You can't live like that, and therefore I decided to paint the exact opposite, “ (Dorothea Dietrich with Gerhard Richter, *Gerhard Richter: An Interview* “ , *Print Collectors Newsletter* 16 (Sept. - Oct. 1985): 131.).²⁶

Richter began cautiously; diluting the drastic nature of his stylistic change by doing photo/paintings of his abstractions (Figure #15). By the late 1970s though, he was producing the kind of multicolored, gestural, abstract painting (Figures #16 and #17) that evolved into the work done between 1988 and 1993. In Abstract Painting (Figure #16) from 1984, Richter's expressive use of the brush, superseded by the squeegee by 1988, can be seen. In S.D.I. (Figure #17) from 1986, a technique Richter was implementing using a hard-edged, receding perspective, underpainting of shapes in space to indicate deep space in sections of his paintings is evident. Of note are the rectangular shapes on the far left side of the painting. I am not aware of any understructure like this in the recent abstract paintings (1988 - 1993). I end this chapter with two of Richter's journal entries from the 1980's.

“One cannot really paint in the way in which I paint, because the essential prerequisite is missing: the certainty of what is to be painted, the “ subject “ in other words. If I were to name Raphael or Newman, or less complicated people like Rothko or Lichtenstein, or all the others, right down to the last provincial painter - all of them have a subject that they follow, a “ picture “ to which they are always aspiring. If I paint an abstract picture (the problems are not dissimilar with the other works) I neither know in advance what it is supposed to look like, nor where I intend to go while I am painting, what could be done, to what end. For this reason the painting is a quasi blind, desperate effort, like that made by someone who has been cast out into a completely incomprehensible environment with no means of support - by someone who has a reasonable range of tools, materials and abilities and the urgent desire to build something meaningful and useful, but it cannot be a house or a chair or anything else that can be named, and he therefore just starts building in the vain hope that his correct, expert activity will finally produce something correct and meaningful.”²⁷

“Nature/structure. There is no more to be said, that is what I reduce things to in the pictures, though ‘reduce’ is the wrong word, for it is not a matter of simplifications. I cannot verbalize what I am working on there, what I see as fundamental, multi-layered, as important and more true.

(Everything that one can think out of oneself in this way, all this idiocy, these foolish things, cheap constructions and speculations, amazing inventions, harsh, surprising juxtapositions, which one is of course also forced to see a million times day and day out, this mentally deficient misery, the whole stupidly bold blotch) -

All this I paint away, clear out of my head when I start a picture, that is my ground, which I deal with in the first few layers, which I destroy layer by layer, until all frivolous rubbish is destroyed. Thus what I ultimately have is a work of destruction. It goes without saying that I cannot do without these detours, thus that I cannot begin with the final state.”²⁸

III

“What Richter attempts to reveal is a reality as various as the instruments by which it is perceived and communicated. For him, no single ideological or stylistic view is necessarily truer than another. Therefore, Richter intermingles, across his diverse, prodigious oeuvre as well as within single canvases such established opposites as abstraction and representation; beauty and kitsch; the mechanical and the gestural; the intimate and the grandiose.”²⁹

Sarah McFadden 1988

In his 1988 - 93 abstract paintings, there is both intimacy and grandeur. Through his development and mastery of a unique process of paint application and manipulation, Gerhard Richter gives us a glimpse of something previously unseen; an image whose visual structure is so intricate and complex as to suggest a reality on the level of our own; an image whose visual richness of detail is comparable to that of such witnessable natural phenomena as corrosion, emulsion, combustion, and the dynamics of fluid. Because of his achievements in abstract painting, I feel comfortable in classing him with such established masters as Morris Louis, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.

Richter is a painter of international stature. By pursuing artistic growth in the shattered cultural environment of postwar Germany, Richter had to take lessons from the contemporary art of Western Europe and the United States. What has coalesced from this over the past thirty years is an informed but individual vision creating advanced contemporary paintings. With his recent paintings, Richter has made a significant contribution to one of twentieth century western art's greatest accomplishments: abstract art.

ENDNOTES

1. H.H. Arnason, History of Modern Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), p.490.
2. Sean Rainbird and Judith Severne, editors, Gerhard Richter, Exhibition catalogue, (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1991), p.124.
3. It must be noted here that Mark Rothko did indeed apply his paint with a brush: but I include him because he did not use the brush to draw or to render edges, but only to apply paint in glazes and thin opaque layers. Rothko was concerned with coloration and color saturation, specifically the coloration peculiar to applied and manipulated paint.
4. Elizabeth Frank, Jackson Pollock (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), p.110.
5. Ellen G. Landau, Jackson Pollock (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), p.169.
6. Sam Hunter, American Art of the 20th Century (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1971), pp.320-21.
7. Ibid., p.321.
8. Frank O'Hara, Jackson Pollock (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1959), p.26.
9. John Elderfield, Morris Louis: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Exhibition catalogue, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), p.34.
10. Arnason, p.7.
11. Massimo Carboni, Exhibition review of Gerhard Richter, translated by Marguerite Shore, Artforum, March 1993, p.104.
12. Rainbird, p.7.
13. Ibid., p.13.
14. Roald Nasgaard, Gerhard Richter: Paintings (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p.15.
15. - 19. Ibid., p.15.
20. Arnason, p.417.
21. Nasgaard, p.16.

ENDNOTES

22. Ibid., p.16.
23. Ibid., p.40.
24. Rainbird, p.114.
25. Richter has experimented with and explored abstract painting styles concurrently with the photo/paintings throughout his entire career.
26. Nasgaard, p.106.
27. Rainbird, p.116.
28. Rainbird, p.121.
29. Sarah McFadden and Joan Simon, editors, Carnegie International 1988 (Pittsburgh: The Carnegie Museum of Art, 1988), p.116.

LIST OF REPRODUCTIONS

- Frontispiece: Gerhard Richter
Forest (731), 1990
oil on canvas, 133 7/8" x 102 3/8"
Frances and John Bowes Collection
1. Jackson Pollock page 23
Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950, 1950
oil, enamel and aluminum paint on canvas
87" x 9'10"
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund
2. Jackson Pollock page 24
Convergence: Number 10, 1952, 1952
oil on canvas, 93 1/2" x 13'
Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York
Gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1956
3. Morris Louis page 25
Saraband, 1959
Magna on canvas, 8'5 1/2" x 12'5"
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
4. Morris Louis page 26
Verdicchio, 1959
Magna on Canvas, 6' x 8'7"
Collection Mrs. John D. Murchison
5. Mark Rothko page 27
No. 7, 1960
oil on canvas, 8'9" x 7'9"
Marlborough Gallery, New York City
6. Gerhard Richter page 28
Abstract Painting (695), 1989
oil on canvas, 2 parts, overall size 98 1/2" x 189"
St. Gallen Graduate School of Economics, Law,
Business and Public Administration

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7. Gerhard Richter page 29
Abstract Painting (726), 1990
oil on canvas, 98 1/2" x 137 3/4"
Private Collection
8. Gerhard Richter page 30
Frost - 1 (703-1), 1989
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Marian Goodman Gallery / Sperone Westwater,
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9. Gerhard Richter page 31
Uran - 1 (688-1), 1989
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10. Gerhard Richter page 32
December (700), 1989
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Marian Goodman Gallrey / Sperone Westwater,
New York
11. Gerhard Richter page 33
Abstract Painting (747), 1991
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Durand - Dessert Gallery, Paris
12. Gerhard Richter page 34
Erschossener - 1 (669-1), (Man Shot Down), 1988
oil on canvas, 100cm x 140cm
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13. Gerhard Richter page 35
Cell (670), 1988
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14. Gerhard Richter page 36
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oil on canvas, 40 1/4" x 28 3/8"
Anthony d' Offay Gallery, London

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15. Gerhard Richter page 37
Annunciation after Titian (344/1), 1973
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Crex Collection, Hallen fur neue Kunst, Schaffhausen
16. Gerhard Richter page 38
Abstract Painting (552/2), 1984
oil on canvas, 102 1/2" x 78 3/4"
Pheobe Chason, New York
17. Gerhard Richter page 39
S.D.I. (590), 1986
oil on canvas, 126" x 157 1/2"
Hess Holding Limited, Berne, Switzerland

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

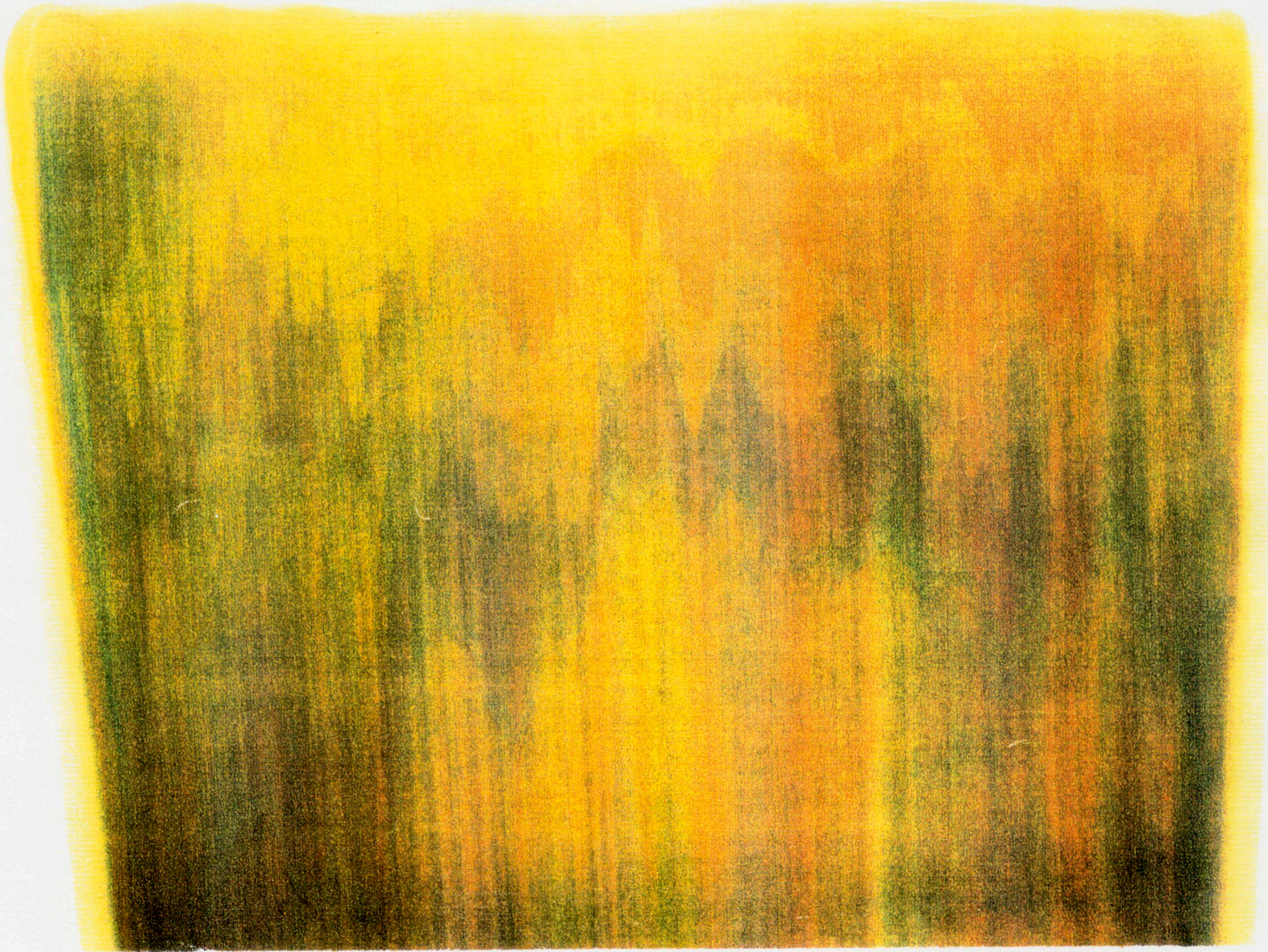


Figure 5

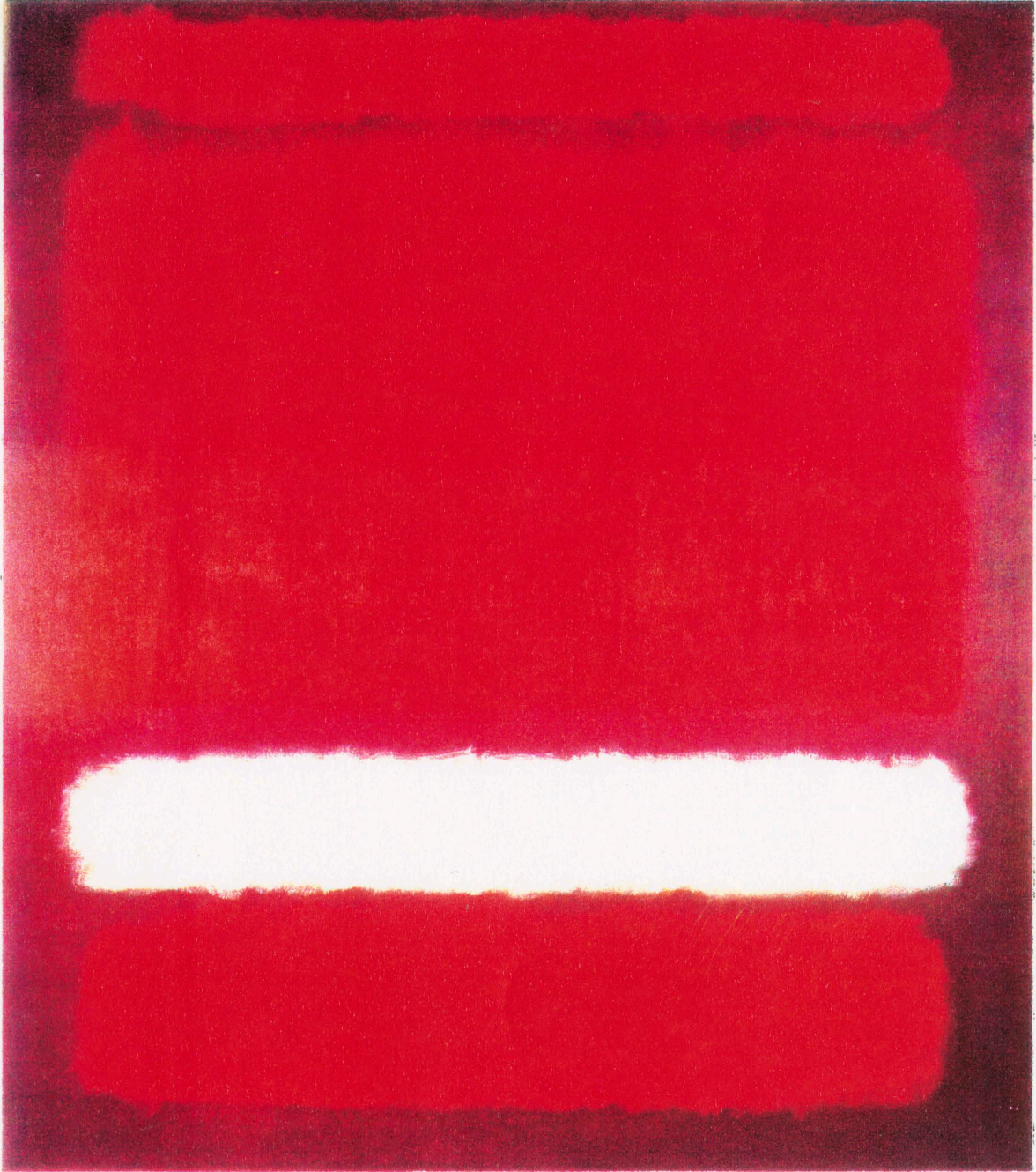


Figure 6

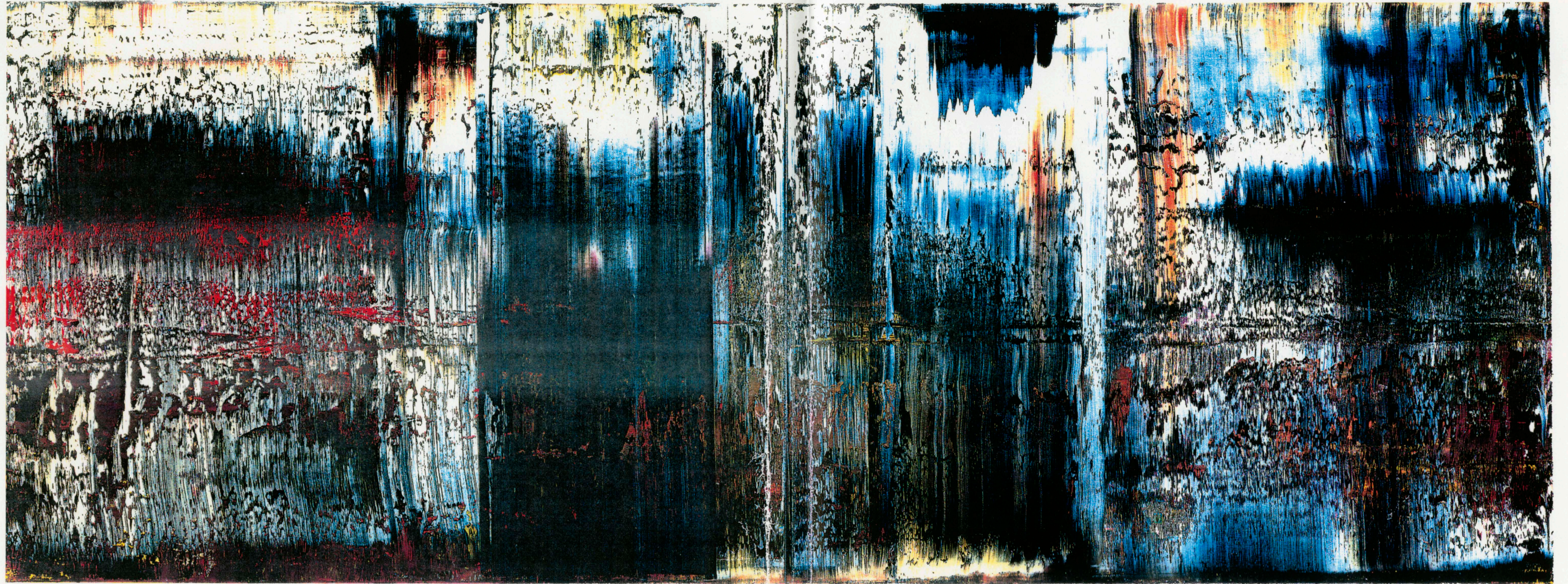


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

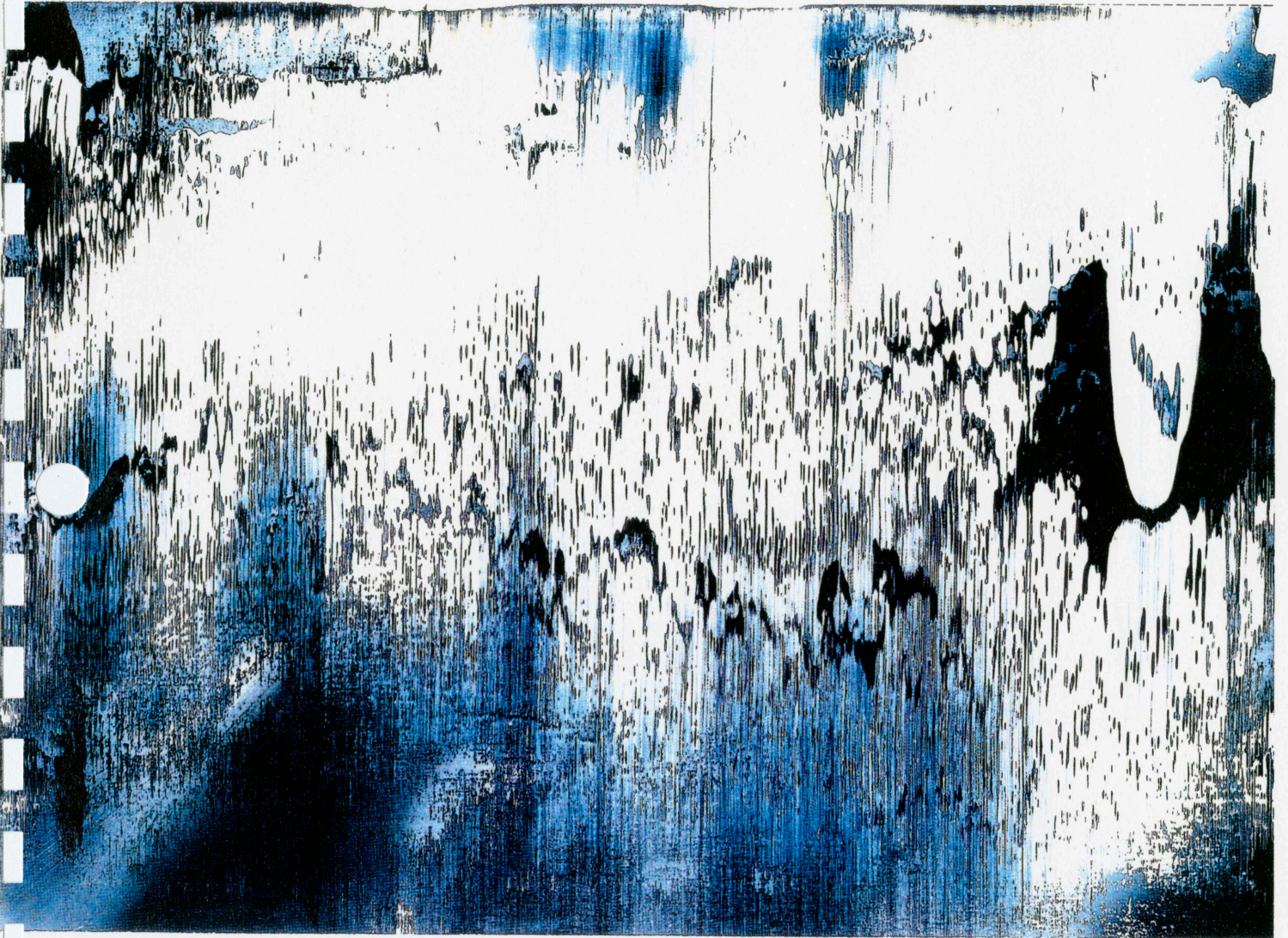


Figure 10

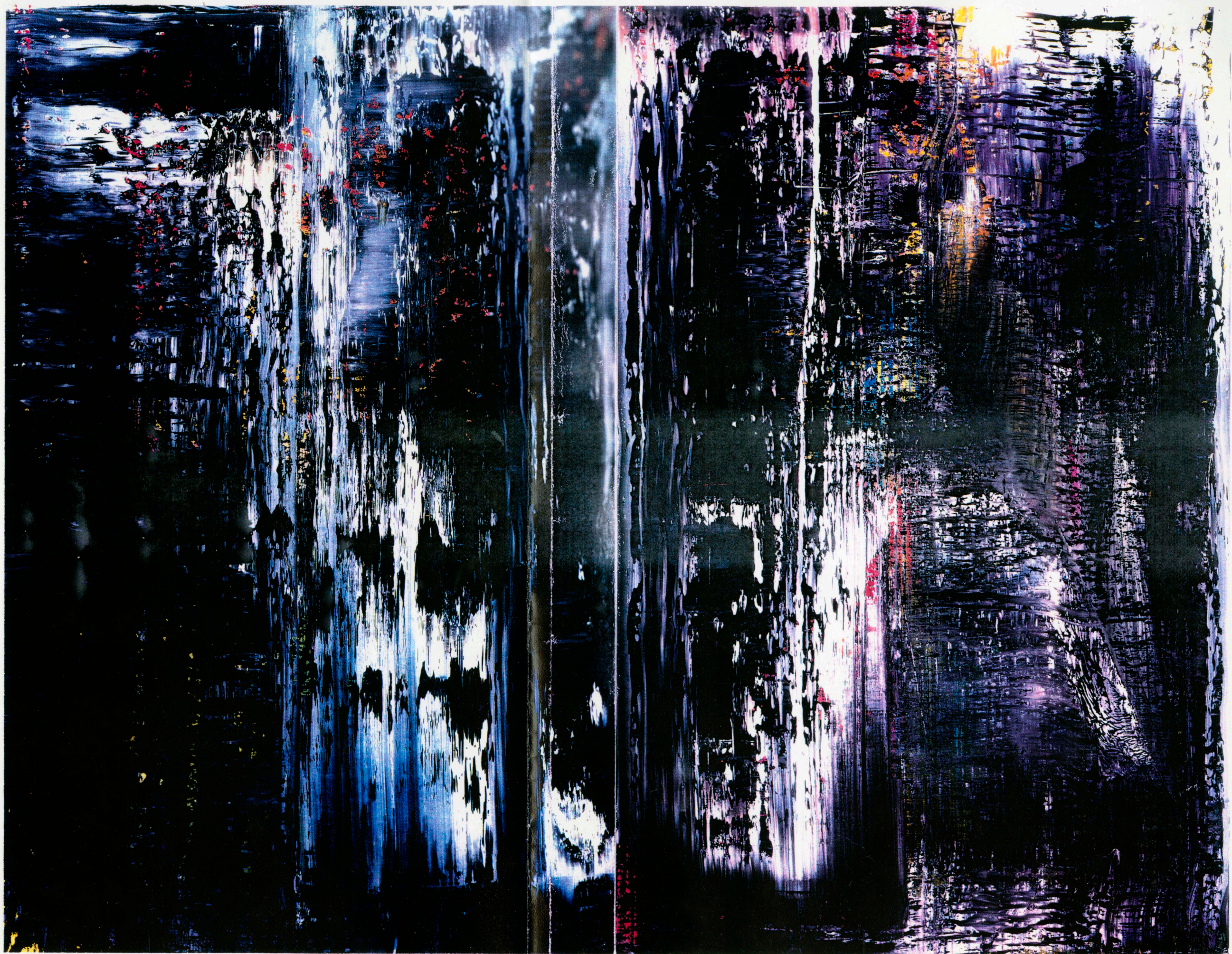


Figure 11

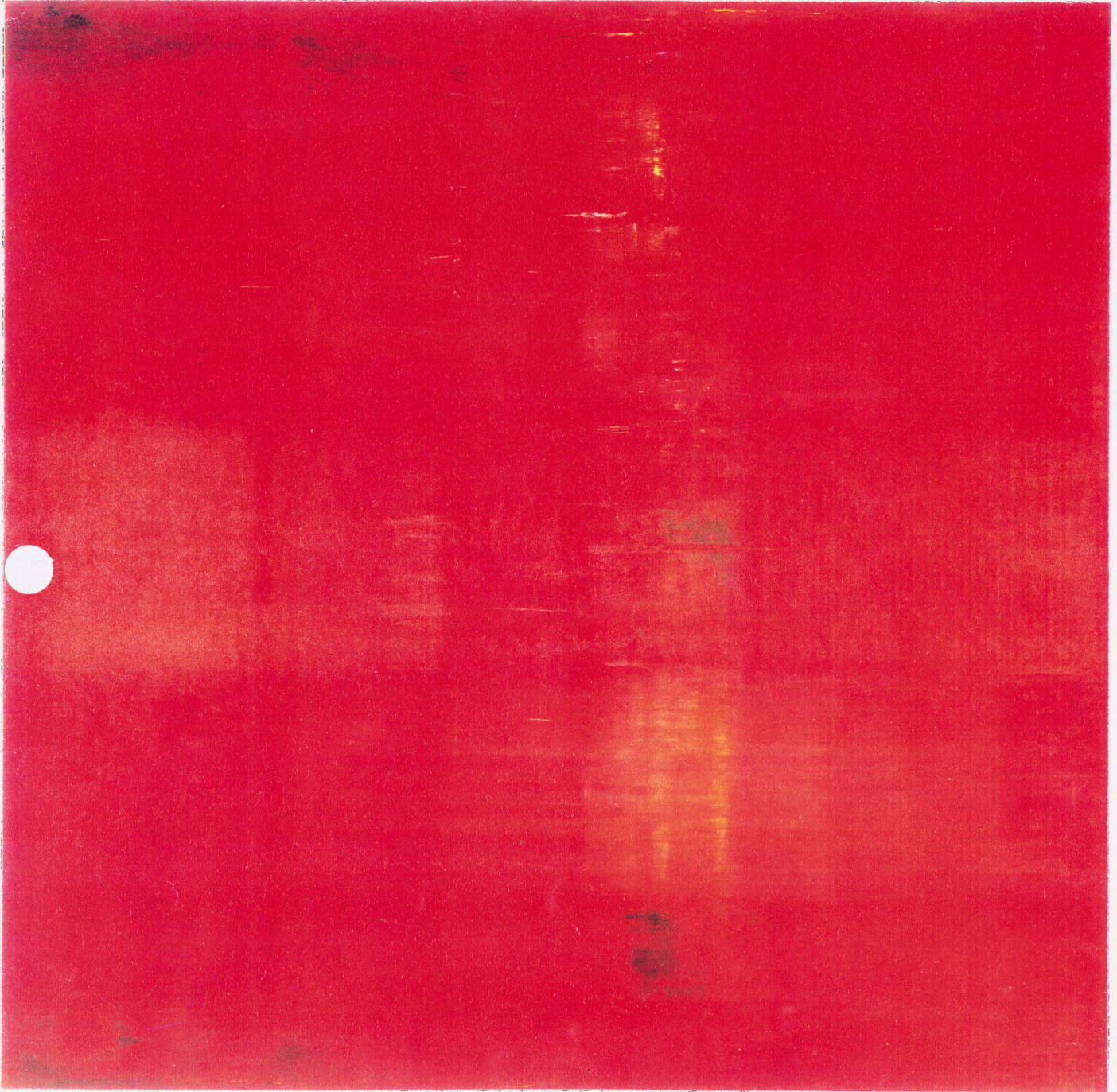


Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- * Museum Boymans-van Bueningen Rotterdam. Gerhard Richter 1988/89. Exhibition catalogue. Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Bueningen, 1989.
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- * source of illustrations.