

**Title**

Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History

**Author(s)**

Matthew Bowman

**Article DOI****Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/gerhard-richter-painting-after-the-subject-of-history>

**ISSN**

2631-5661

**Cite as**

Matthew Bowman: 'Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History', *Burlington Contemporary* (11th January 2023), <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/gerhard-richter-painting-after-the-subject-of-history>

**About the author(s)**

is an art critic and historian lecturing at the University of Suffolk, Ipswich. His research focuses on twentieth-century and contemporary art, criticism and philosophy in the United States and Europe. In 2018 he published 'Indiscernibly bad: the problem of bad art/good painting' in *Oxford Art Journal* and in 2019 'The intertwining—Damisch, Bois, and "October"'s rethinking of painting' in the *Journal of Contemporary Painting*. He is working on two publications: *The Price of Everything and the Value of Nothing: Art Criticism and the Art Market* (forthcoming) and *October and the Expanded Field of Art and Criticism* (forthcoming).

Cover image:

# Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History

by Matthew Bowman • 11.01.2023

David Farrell Krell once commented that when Martin Heidegger published his lectures on Friedrich Nietzsche, the design of the book's spine playfully allowed the reader to misconstrue it instead as a tome authored by Nietzsche concerning the work of Heidegger.<sup>1</sup> A similar reading is permitted by the simple arrangement of the names of Gerhard Richter (b.1932) and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh on the spine of Buchloh's long-awaited volume on the German artist. No doubt Buchloh and Richter – both of whom are committed to the writings of Theodor Adorno, who loathed Heidegger's ideas concerning language and ontology – would find the Heideggerian comparison mortifying, however it is still instructive in this instance.<sup>2</sup> Just as Heidegger was at pains to stipulate that his 'decisive confrontation' with Nietzsche amounted not to a straight interpretation of the philosopher's writings, but instead to a 'reading with, through, and against Nietzsche', it can likewise be claimed that Buchloh's own far-reaching engagement with Richter takes on a corresponding structure.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the book's introduction, Buchloh stresses that his interpretations do not always accord with Richter's stated intentions.

At the heart of Buchloh's book is not only the question of how German artists in the post-war context can work through the National Socialist past in the face of state-sanctioned and personal instances of collective 'amnesia', but also how that 'working through' can occur when manifold avant-garde strategies seem exhausted and confronted by a burgeoning culture of commercial imagery. Much of the material collated in this book might be familiar to readers already as many of the chapters have been published elsewhere over the past two decades. Although Buchloh has made minor revisions, some of the essays betoken the circumstances of their original publication. For example, in the sixth chapter, which examines Richter's large-scale collection of photographs, newspaper cuttings and sketches, *Atlas* (1962–2013) **FIG.1** **FIG.2**, originally published in 1999, Buchloh refers to a 'recent' essay by Kurt Forster on Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* and, in the footnotes, to an 'unpublished manuscript' on Warburg and Walter Benjamin by 'Matthew Rampling' (a misattribution for Matthew Rampley). However, Forster's text dates back to 1991 and Rampley's manuscript was extended and published in 2000 as *The Remembrance of Things Past*.<sup>4</sup> Although these errors are somewhat negligible, and could have been simply fixed in the editing process, they cast light upon the relative

paucity of scholarly references to sources on Richter during the 2000s, which, admittedly, have become veritably mountainous and compel herculean effort to address.



**Fig. 1** *Album photos (sheet 1)* from the series *Atlas*, by Gerhard Richter. 1962–66. Collaged photographs, 51.7 by 66.7 cm. (© The artist; Lenbachhaus, Munich).

The time-capsule quality of each chapter might strike some readers as unfortunate, as the current result – it is accurate to say ‘current’ rather than ‘final’ as Buchloh’s dealings with Richter are far from over – is more suitably regarded as a collection of essays rather a great monographic volume comprising the fruits of Buchloh’s protracted research into, and his longstanding intimacy with, Richter. Yet it is also worth imagining that Buchloh, as a committed reader of Adorno, envisaged the book as an exploration of the ‘essay as form’.<sup>5</sup> This helps to make sense of some of the editorial decisions, most particularly those that resisted curtailing repetition and substantially updating the research or discussion. We might even consider Richter’s extraordinarily diverse output as analogous to the provisionality and fragmentation that Adorno ascribes to the essay. As Adorno argues, the essay reflects but, crucially, also critically discloses the fragmentation of social existence under advanced capitalism; Buchloh’s own essayistic approach, then, makes an ideal companion to Richter’s works.

Amassed together, the essays invite questions regarding their shared methodological premises. Buchloh repeatedly speaks of painting in terms of ‘epistemology’, but the actual import of this term, its function within his particular system of art-critical and art-historical evaluations, would benefit from more clarification. At stake here appears to be less a question of ‘knowledge’ and more





For example, in his 1981 essay 'Figures of authority, ciphers of regression', Buchloh lambasts such painters as Georg Baselitz (b.1938) and Anselm Kiefer (b.1945), who seemingly set out to revive early twentieth-century Expressionism.<sup>6</sup> Such efforts struck Buchloh as doomed from the outset, demonstrating a failure to understand that the historical movement was embedded in a specific context, and that it has subsequently been thoroughly contested by developments in abstract painting, such as the grid and monochrome. Neo-Expressionism also failed to perceive the possibilities of painting in its own time, as shown by Richter and Robert Ryman (1930–2019). All in all, Buchloh suggests, if Neo-Expressionist painters paid attention to the relevant art-historical and art-critical discourses available to them, they would have known that repeating Expressionism was impossible and therefore embarked upon a different artistic path.

Buchloh, perhaps, simultaneously does and does not believe in the absoluteness of this framework. On the one hand, dates such as 1863 (Manet's *Olympia*), 1912 (the arrival of Pablo Picasso's and Georges Braque's papier collés), 1913 (Marcel Duchamp's first readymade, *Bicycle Wheel*) and 1915 (Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*) are dispensed as moments of epistemological rupture that reconfigure possibilities so thoroughly that artists blind or resistant to the consequences can only be judged as conservative. Little scope is assigned by Buchloh here for weak understanding, outright ignorance or strong misreading. On the other hand, however, Buchloh does not always hold to the punctuality and irreversibility of such ruptures: the understanding of an episteme can be lost by a subsequent generation, and efforts to recuperate or reconstruct it can produce new mediations. Although Buchloh does build his analysis around them, these periods of epistemological uncertainty could be acknowledged more forcibly by him to destabilise the image of Richter as the Hegel of art history, who bravely cuts through all its dialectical conundrums. After all, ambivalence is often characteristic of Richter's work and pronouncements, as emblematised by his oft-cited note:

One has to believe in what one is doing, one has to commit oneself inwardly, in order to do painting [...] But if one lacks passionate commitment, there is nothing left to do. Then it is best to leave it alone. For basically painting is total idiocy.<sup>7</sup>

Buchloh does attend to this in deeply intriguing ways. However, by the same token, he has less time for irony, even if it also derives from ambivalence, and this leads him to – perhaps rather unfairly – disparage such artists as Yves Klein (1928–62) and deny their practice any critical function within a given episteme.<sup>8</sup>

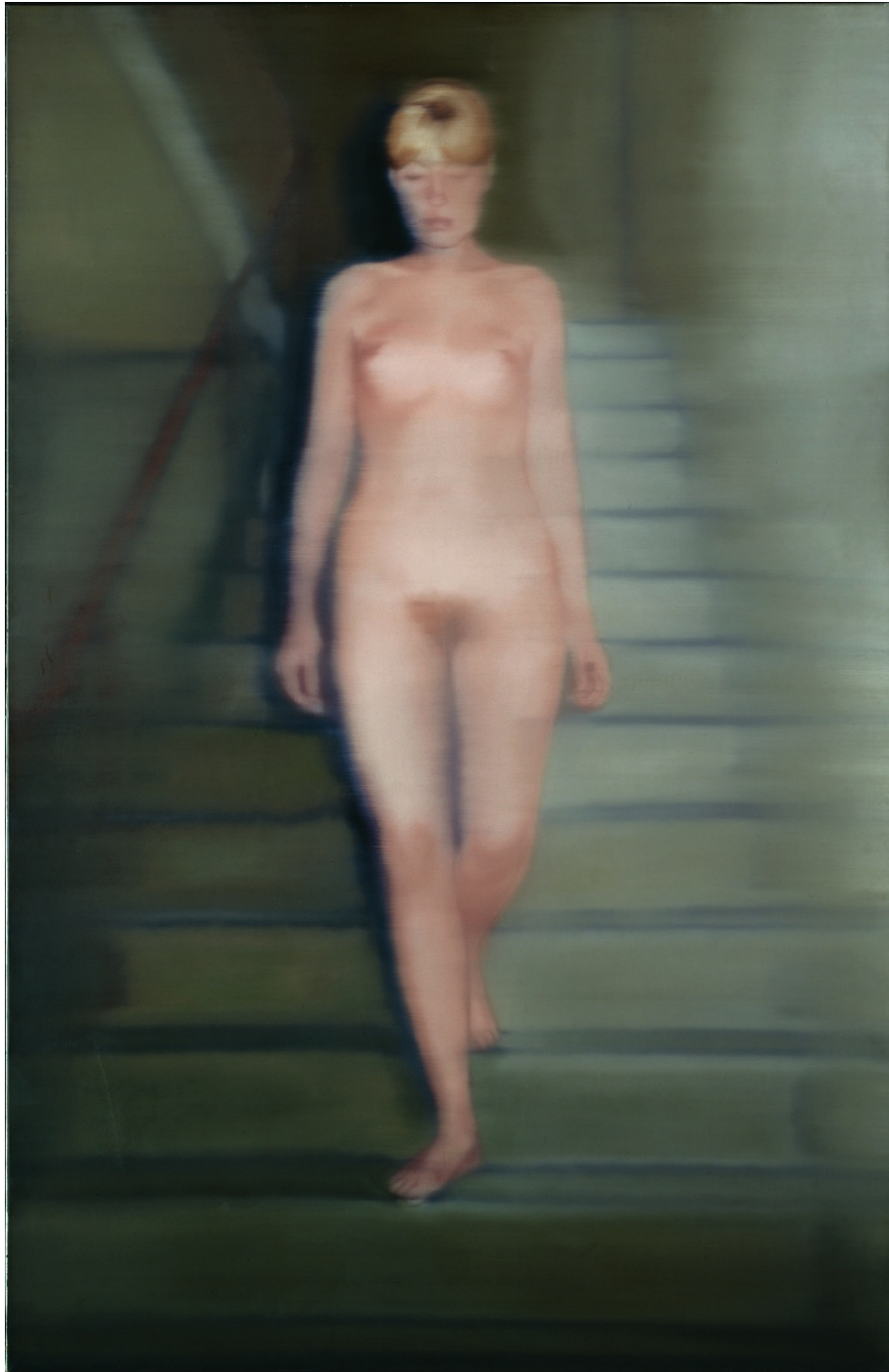


Fig. 3 *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)*, by Gerhard Richter. 1966. Oil on canvas, 200 by 130 cm. (© The artist; Museum Ludwig, Cologne).

Given the apparent solidity underscoring Buchloh's judgments, then, those instances where the discussion is freighted with indecision and puzzlement spotlight the reflexivity in his writing. His discussion of Richter's family paintings, proceeding from *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)* [FIG.3](#), is especially marked by uncertainty: does *Ema* reprise the problematic genre of the nude, along with its patriarchal and heterosexist foundations, thereby reversing the crucial devalorisation of that genre undertaken by Manet and Duchamp? Are Richter's family pictures questionable attempts to reskill artistic production in a manner analogous to the so-called

'return to order' art movement following the First World War? If so, what does it mean for Richter's own return to order to be aligned with the portrayal of, and seeming reinvestment in, the traditional bourgeois family, which often manifests itself through intimate depictions of the wife in the role of nude subject [FIG.4](#) and mother [FIG.5](#)? Is all this tantamount to a strictly conservative strain within Richter's work, one that threatens to upend its radicality as a whole?

Buchloh's art-historical knowledge and critical acumen means that he can, at the very least, instigate convincingly affirmative responses to such questions. Returning to the beginning of this review, in which the interchangeability between the subject and its erstwhile object was mentioned, one might propose that Richter's works of art are not merely placed under the art historian's microscope and enjoined to respond to his hermeneutic dispositions. On the contrary, the art historian and the interpretations they figure are put to the test by the work of art. Indeed, art historians can fail the works they take to be their 'object'. Also crucial here is the thought that interpretation functions as an activity in which both interpreter and interpretant are utterly transformed in the process of interpretation. The status of this book as a subtly fragmented series of essays rather than monograph, then, begins to acquire methodological plausibility. For in this way, he registers the extent to which his reflection continuously changes in response to the challenge posed by Richter's practice – a challenge that is itself incessant.



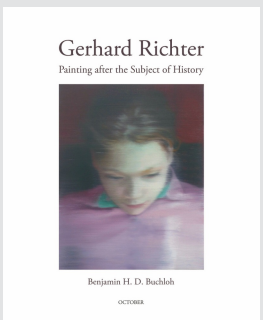


**Fig. 4** *Small Bather*, by Gerhard Richter. 1994. Oil on canvas, 51 by 36 cm. (© The artist).



**Fig. 5** *S. with Child*, by Gerhard Richter. 1995. Oil on canvas, 46 by 41 cm. (© The artist; Hamburger Kunsthalle).

## About this book



**Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History**  
 By Benjamin H.D. Buchloh  
 MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London,  
 2022  
 ISBN 978-0-262-54353-8

## Footnotes

- 1** D.F. Krell: 'Analysis', in M. Heidegger: *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, transl. D.F. Krell, San Francisco 1991, p.230. The spine of the English edition of the book is deliberately designed to avoid any such misreading.

- 2** See T. Adorno: *The Jargon of Authenticity*, transl. K. Tarnowski and F. Will, London 2002.
- 3** Krell, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.24.
- 4** See K.W. Forster: 'Zu Aby Warburg: die Hamburg-Amerika-Linie, oder: Warburgs Kulturwissenschaft zwischen den Kontinenten', in H. Bredekamp, M. Diers and C. Schoell-Glass, eds: *Aby Warburg: Akten des Internationalen Symposions, Hamburg 1990*, Weinheim 1991, transl. D. Britt: 'Aby Warburg: his study of ritual art on two continents', *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp.5–24; and M. Rampley: *The Remembrance of Things Past: On Aby M. Warburg and Walter Benjamin*, Wiesbaden 2000.
- 5** See T. Adorno: 'The essay as form', in *idem: Notes to Literature Volume 1*, transl. S. Weber Nicholson, New York 1991, pp.3–23.
- 6** B.H.D. Buchloh: 'Figures of authority, ciphers of regression: notes on the return of representation in European art' [1981], in *idem: Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art*, Cambridge MA 2015, pp.115–72.
- 7** G. Richter: 'Notes, 1973', in D. Elger and H.U. Obrist, eds: *Gerhard Richter – Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961–2007*, London 2009, p.70.
- 8** Klein is a recurring figure in Buchloh's book, often set in contrast to another artist judged as more critical, such as Ellsworth Kelly, Piero Manzoni and, of course, Richter.

THE  
**BURLINGTON**  
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved  
ISSN 2631-5661

**The Burlington Magazine**  
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ