

group of artists known as Art & Language, whose theory and practice were based on analytical philosophy of language and reflections on scientific theory. This implied a radical questioning of traditional forms of representation. It also put into question traditional ideas of the artist's role and the significance of craft skills, while at the same time attributing greater importance to the viewer as the subject who constitutes the work, as it were.

None of these features of the rigorous variant of Conceptual Art apply to Gerhard Richter's works, Sol LeWitt's definition least of all. If "philosophical considerations about the production of art became the genuine activity of art,"⁴ as Pamela M. Lee has written of Conceptual Art, then Richter cannot be subsumed under that term, at least not at first glance. And yet many art historians attribute an extraordinary conceptuality to this artist in his pictorial productions. Peter Osborne has characterized Richter's paintings as "philosophical explorations in paint of the state of contemporary painting."⁵ As early as 1977 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh also viewed Richter's artistic practice in this respect as "the most elementary analysis" and Richter himself as "the actual historian of collective forms of production."⁶ Hence it is no coincidence that he participated that year in an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago among representatives of nothing but Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, and Land Art.⁷ In the secondary literature since the 1970s he is repeatedly defined as a painter who thinks like a Conceptual Artist. Or, to put it the other way around, as a Conceptual Artist who works entirely pictorially.

Richter has indeed produced highly sensuous, sometimes seductive images that attain the intellectual level of many Conceptual Artists. Even if his productions generally differ in their formal-aesthetic appearance, the general claim to analytical reflexivity is on a plane with Conceptual Art. "Reflexivity" in artistic practice refers here to the ability to reflect on the transformed cultural meanings of image and representation, to the ability to refer to historical developments in art, and thus to the opportunity to examine critically the conditions

under which current artistic production can exist. The highly complex ways in which Richter's art undertakes a reflective exploration of its own media, of artistic genres and paradigms, will be demonstrated in the following chapters by means of selected examples. The fruitful opportunities for interpretation, as well as the problems, that result from this approach to Richter's artistic works will also be discussed. The focus will be on the editions (prints, editions of photographs, artist's books, multiples, and editions of oil paintings), which continue to be by and large underappreciated; certain unique works will also be discussed, however, in order to provide a broader overview of Gerhard Richter's artistic practice. Numerous works by other artists are discussed for purposes of comparison, the point being not to reveal superficial analogies but to elucidate the differences in artistic approach. The comparisons are intended to make the specific nature of Richter's art that much more clear.

II

First, let us return to the issue of reflexivity. In 1994 Stefan Germer formulated one possible criterion for judging contemporary art against the backdrop of the ways in which it is conditioned historically: "History and the present both teach us that the production of art is a highly questionable and dubious matter. Any production that merely relies on the existence of the institution 'art' or builds on the idea that there are traditions that can simply be continued unbroken, risks becoming irrelevant, sooner or later. If there is a tradition, it is only that no tradition can be continued unbroken." The old avant-garde ideology of the new cannot help in this respect, since it already lost its "value as justification for artistic creativity when the master narrative of modernity—that the history of art could be conceived as endless progress—came to nothing. Today it is not innovation, but only thinking through history that can justify the possibilities and conditions of artistic creation. Consequently, I am interested in works that do not repress this element of doubt but surrender to it and adopt it, make it their theme, or reflect on it in their approach."⁸