Photography and painting after the 1960s
Bechtle, Hamilton and Richter

In the 60s several painters decided to bluntly incorporate photography in their canvases. It was a bold and radical break both with the then dominating Abstract Expressionism and with the taboo that banned photography from the pictorial space since the appearance of the latter. Yet they did it, and they did it independently. A look at the works of Robert Bechtle, Richard Hamilton and Gerhard Richter might helps to unveil the subterranean link that connected them and give some insights on this 'new' practice.

Fig.1 Hamilton, R. (1956) *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different so appealing?* Reconstructed in 1992. Cibachrome Collage. Private Collection

This group of rebels shared some demographic facts. Apart from a few exceptions, they were all born between the 1920s and 30s, and were raised in the western culture. Most of them either grew up in or moved to the US before the 60s. The rest, with the exception of Gerhard Richter, grew up in Western Europe.

The 1950s in the US is often referred to as the "Golden Age" for the prosperity and the affluence that characterized them. The improved economic and credit conditions created the premises for mass consumerism, and this new practice was to alter drastically the domestic landscape and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. Households were equipped with all sorts of technological appliances making the outside world implode in one's private life. Already in 1956 Hamilton's *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different so appealing?* (Fig.1) epitomized how technology invaded the private soil, namely through (from the left to the right) the newspaper, the radio/tape recorder, the movies, the comic strips, the telephone and the TV. Hamilton represented here the exterior colonizing the interior. He added an emblematic object bearing an "antique" aura. It is a black and white photograph of a traditional, properly framed portrait painting. Was it a warning or a premonition?

Across all sectors, technological development generated new products at a lower price thus making them accessible to the masses: consumerism was born. Its most notable creature was the mass media. Since the beginning, mass consumerism and media fed on each other; the former by expanding the media's audience, the latter by nurturing consumption's greatest catalyst: advertisement.

Those "innocent" appliances not only drastically modified men's lifestyles, through the mass media they started to heavily affect how individuals related to the world. Before the 50s, 'radio books and handbills or newspapers [or historical artworks] were the primary forms of information and knowledge-sharing beyond the spoken word' (Sturken, Cartwright, 2009, p 226) but starting from then, the mass media and the world were to be flooded by a visual reality. Not only did the press bear increasingly more photographs; TV, videos and cinema became part of the masses' lives who finally had the means to buy the mediatic technological devices.

The magnitude of the phenomenon drew the attention of several intellectuals who started to analyze its social implications on both sides of the Atlantic. Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, the US based Frankfurt School theorists, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse and French social theorist Guy Debord (1967 *Society of the Spectacle*) were the most influential.

Yet the art establishment seemed to be totally indifferent to this upheaval. Walled within the modernism's boundaries, Abstract Expressionists were solely exploring the potential of the two-dimensional surface. Form was the mantra into which content was to deliquesce. Clement Greenberg, the greatest advocate of the movement, predicated that the purity of each media shall not be compromised with any sort of promiscuity whatsoever, be it reality or other media (Rorimer, 1989).

In the 60's, while Abstract Expressionism was at its peak, western societies were shaken by violent civil rights movements and student protests. While modernist painters seemed to pursue undaunted their ascetic quest, a growing number of painters were infected by the rebellious atmosphere. They were living in a rapidly and drastically changing environment where all certitudes were crumbling into pieces. They were affected by it, and they wanted to voice it.

Pop art funneled their uneasiness, very likely as much as a reaction to Abstract Expressionism as a genuine need of expression. Andy Wahrol's groundbreaking *Golden Marilyn* and *Campbell's Soup* were figurative. Their subject matter was the despicable mass consumer world strongly connected to and grounded in their surrounding reality. The pictorial techniques dissolved the artist's unique skills. Most of Wahrol's artworks were produced in "the factory", his studio, not by the artist, but by many anonymous collaborators, using the mass media printing techniques (silkscreens). The unique brush stroke that sublimated the identity of the painter was dilapidated by an impersonal sequence of mechanical steps, and with it the concept of artist started to blur.

Pop Art heralded rebellion, and Hamilton was one of its founders. Although they were not part of the movement, Bechtle and Richter drew from its impetus. Each one of them found his own personal way to express their modern times. What they all shared was the rebellious presence of photography in the painterly domain.

Fig2 Bechtle, R., (1968-69) *61 Pontiac*. Oil on canvas. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Fig.3 Bechtle, R., (1974) *Almeda Gran Torino*. Oil on canvas. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), San Francisco.

Fig.4 Bechtle, R., *Alameda Chrysler* (1981). Oil on canvas. Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York.

Fig.5 Bechtle, R., (1984) *Sunset Intersection*. Oil on canvas. Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Bechtle can be ascribed to the photorealists, a group of mostly American painters. They paint on large scale blown up photographs (either their own or taken from others) with painstakingly precision of details. The overall result is a puzzling experience for the viewer who, standing in front of a painting, identifies it clearly as a photograph. The overlapping of two different modes of representation, and consequently of their different semiotic codes is quite destabilizing and brings forth the question of perception of reality. Not only is the authentication of photography is implicitly questioned but also the contemporary gazed is revealed as a mediated one. This vantage point abates all the vilifying critics that liquidate these painting as merely mechanical and sterile copying processes devoid of meaning to open instead a fertile and postmodern debate about simulacra, image and reality. (Schneede, 2013) This probably explains the success of these paintings at the 1972 ground breaking Documenta 5, *Questioning reality – pictorial worlds today*, an exhibition 'focused on the relationship between image and reality' in 'a world that was increasingly dependent on the agency of the (mass) media for its representation.' (artnews.org,2013).

Born in San Francisco in 1932, Bechtle, after an initial approach to abstraction, found in photographically realistic figuration his means of expression. If he started as a reaction to the dominant art style, he soon found in photorealism the way to bring forth 'the real subject of the painting.. [:] representation itself.' (Bechtle, 1972).

Photography is an integral part of his pictorial process. He refers to the camera as a sketchbook tool, and his "sketches" are slides that he examines on a light table to find a photograph that "jumps out and says paint me" (Bechtle1, 2004), a sort of "punctum". He then projects the slides on the canvas to trace the pencil outlines which are crucial to place shapes meticulously on the canvas. He then scrutinizes the print with a loupe to caliber the colors against one another. This accuracy is crucial to obtain an effective realistic representation, and faking such information would impair the hyperrealistic look. Starting from this base his work is wholly and traditionally: brushes, palette and a timely process (Bechtle1, 2004). The

photographs mechanically (impersonally) determine the structure of the painting so that the viewer's attention is not detracted by the traditional (subjective) pictorial concerns of drawing, composition and color relationships. His initial subject, the vast and pictorially neglected American landscape, a context he could relate to, was strongly influenced by Pop Art (Bechtle1, 1972). Eventually his need to bring forth representation, made him evolve from still painting to what he describes as a landscape style, where all objects, e.g. cars, houses become incidental "to allow the two-dimensional thinking about the painting surface to take over." (Bechtle2, 2004). He claims that even though photography is an integral part of his pictorial process, his paintings "are not photographic at all...nor are they nearly as ephemeral as a photograph would be." (Bechtle3, 2004). His emphasis on representation is exquisitely as contemporary as the mass media.

The four paintings show the progress in the exactitude of Bechtle's marks on the canvas. The shadows have a strong connotative value, because their precision is a clue for our "unconscious" eye to distinguish an illustration from a photograph. In fact, in most figurative paintings the shadows are approximate reproductions of the real ones. A painter would concentrate on the subject matter and go swiftly on the details. Bechtle does the very opposite. Here we observe that, chronologically, the shadows grow sharper, their color relationship is more accurate and so is their contrast (against white surfaces). Their shape is increasingly elaborated, and their presence on the canvas both more ubiquitous and central. Bechtle also adopted a photographic compositional style, not only through the indiscriminate cropping of some objects (e.g. the cars in fig.2 and fig.4) but also through the crowding of the space with many details and "big" objects that a "traditional" painter would have eliminated not to distract the viewer from the subject. *Sunset Intersection* (1984) is emblematic of the evolution towards Becthle's ambition. The road is marked with the wires' shadows, the contrasts in the sequence of houses are exactly those that one would expect to see from reality. The human gaze that selectively inspects reality becomes restless; when facing these representations it cannot here repose on a single focused subject. It wanders as it would do if one were standing where the camera's iris froze the scene. Facing this painting the viewer can only become spectator of his own seeing.

Moving from Bechtle's to Hamilton's canvases one readily grasps the chameleonic nature of photography within a painting. Born in London in 1922, Hamilton became a precious witness and protagonist of its swinging times. Starting from the 50s, he actively participated in the Independent Group, an interdisciplinary circle of artists and intellectuals set out to overthrow modernism, with its suffocating aesthetic and purpose, in favor of a new conception of the fine arts, namely ' to be one of the possible forms of communication in an expanding framework that also includes the mass art' (Wilson, 2011, 4).

Hamilton fully translated this approach into his work. He chose his subject matter within mass culture. He employed a wide variety of media and techniques with the purpose both of communicating and of reasoning critically about communicating. Briefly, it was almost inevitable for him to use photography:

> I would like to think I am questioning reality. Photography is just one way[...] Painting has long been concerned with the paradox of

> informing about a multidimensional world on the limited dimensionality of a canvas. Assimilating photography into the domain of paradox, incorporating it into the philosophical contradictions of art is as much as my concern as embracing its alluring potential as medium. (Wilson, 2011, 84).

He used photographs as basis for its representation. He purposefully altered them through pictorial techniques to bring forth the subtle mechanisms of persuasion imbricated in the media.

My Marilyn, (1965) is a contact sheet covered with collage and oil painting where Hamilton reflects on the identity and the image. Shortly before her death, Monroe edited a contact sheet of portraits of herself. Hamilton reworked this private selection into a public object. In her rejected pictures the identity is erased by the paint. Only the picture she picked remained visible. The way Marilyn constructed her public persona alludes to the negotiation between private and public image (Tate, 2014).

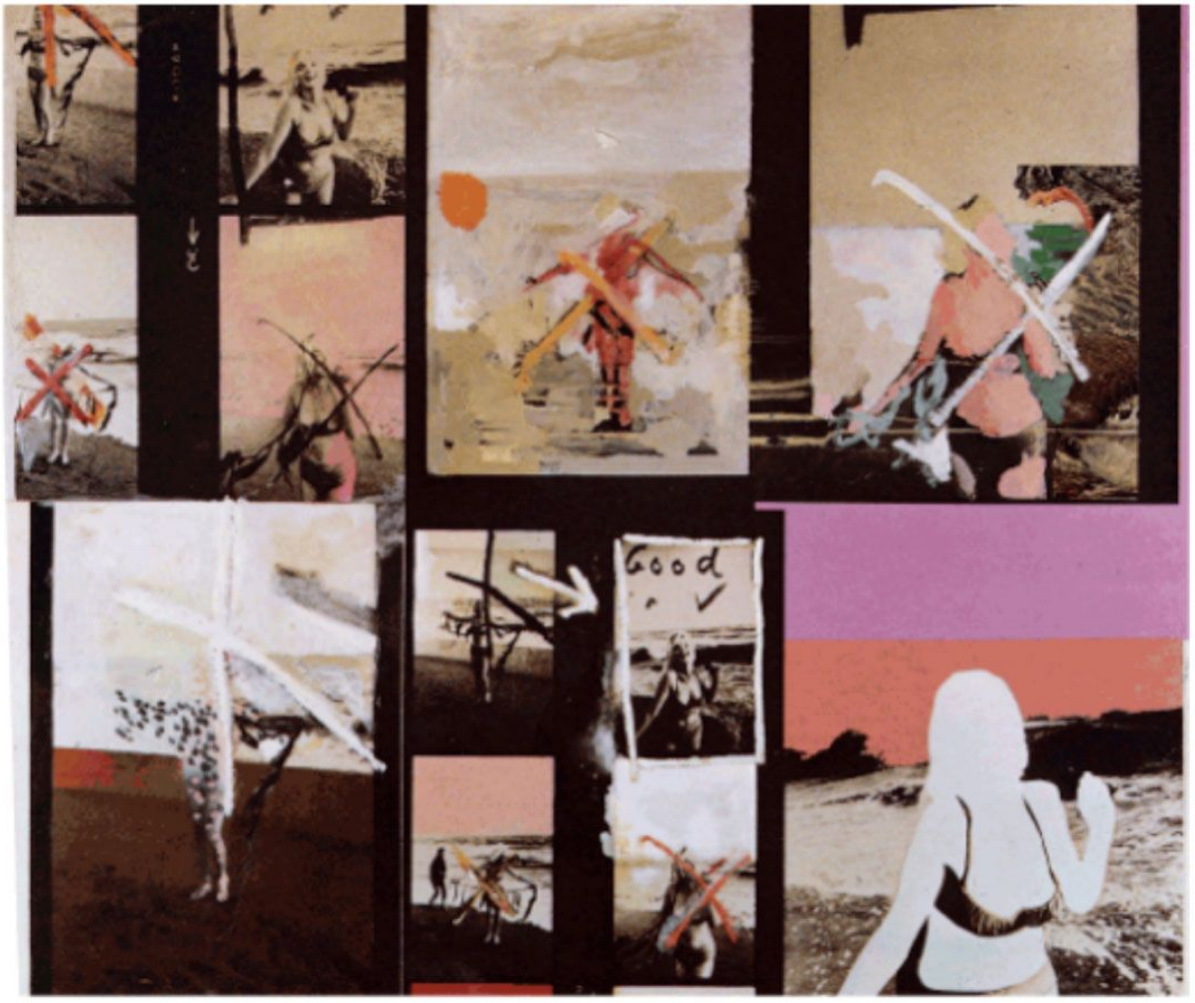

Fig.6 Hamilton, R., (1965) *My Marilyn*. Oil, collage and photograph on panel. Ludwig, Ludwig forum fur Internationale Kunst, Aachen.

Photographs are the means to explore manipulation within the advertisement. Hamilton was fascinated by Braun's design and made several series starting from the 60s up untill 2008. *Toaster* (1966-67) is a color photograph on which he applied chromed steel and Perspex. A then modern domestic appliance is transformed into a glamorous object where one can literally mirror himself. Advertisements lure consumers into products by sublimating. They also insinuates that the prestige of the product is one with the owner's status. The identity of the consumer melts with what one owns. The viewer sees himself reflected on the shining toaster and becomes part of it. To further emphasize the circular identity-consumeristic possession, he replaces Braun's logo with his own name. Hamilton becomes the emblem of what advertisement turns us into (Tate, 2014).

Fig.7 Hamilton, R., (1966-67) *Toaster*. Chromed steel and Perspex on colour photograph. Private collection.

Swingeing London 67 (f) is a screen print on canvas on which Hamilton added acrylic paint and foil. The source is a newspaper photograph depicting his friend art dealer, Robert Fraser and rockstar Mick Jagger handcuffed in a police van on their way to prison for drug offenses. Judge Block stated 'there are times when a swingeing sentence can act as a deterrent' (Wilson, 2011, p.49). Hamilton responded to the establishment by appropriating the judge's provocative pun and fiercely yet ironically depicted the swinging London being subject to a swingeing treatment. Counterculture strikes back. Hamilton manipulated the newspaper image into a photographic looking canvas showing us how the establishment was disseminating a highly connotated message to the mass readers; how it framed the world under a specific ideology. With all its reworking and the foil handcuffs one sees the photograph yet knows it is not a documenting one, it is more of a surreal image. The viewer therefore starts questioning the culpability of these criminals who are well dressed, smiling and half hiding behind their hands. Their attitude borders on playfulness in a way, as if their concern was to protect their celebrity status more than their reputation (Tate, 2014).

Fig.8 Hamilton, R., (1968-69) *Swingeing London 67 (f)*. Acrylic paint, screen print, paper, aluminium and metalised acetate on canvas. Tate, London.

Finally Hamilton explored photography per se, as not only instrumental to painting. *People* 1965-66, is a blown up black and white postcard of bathers at the beach. After a certain level of magnifying, people turn into unidentifiable black spots: the signifier loses its status. Whilst exploring the informative limits of photographs he unveils the boundaries between abstract and figurative. So photography is a tool to work, is a subject matter, but is also a tool to understand the visual world (Tate, 2014).

Another proof of his inquires into the medium is his collection of Polaroid portraits of himself. The purpose of this series was to show the personality of the photographer who took the shot. His taste for paradox could not miss the subjectivity of the objective authenticator (Tate, 2014).

Fig.9 Hamilton, R., (1965-66) *People*. Oil and cellulose on photograph. Private collection.

If Hamilton tended to critically infer on how society operates on its single members, Gerhard Richter expresses his own individual discomfort facing a reality dominated by perverse ideologies. He does not want to impose on the viewer yet another set of values, i.e. his own, he wants to share what he sees of his times. He stands back to let appearance come forward and speak for the reality it represents.

Photography is the medium within painting that allows him, as much as possible, to stick to the surface. Photography mechanically, hence impersonally, depicts whatever stands before its frame. Through a great depth of field it can record all the objects with the same degree of accuracy, so that whatever is within the composition is democratically leveled. Of his photo paintings only two notable examples stand out for a shallow depth of focus, *Betty* (1983)

and *Reader* (1994), two portraits of family members. Otherwise his gaze operates with a depth of field as great as possible, as it is the case in the figurative paintings below. In *Atlas* (Richter, 2006), a more than 50 years long collection of photographs (more than 5000) drawing and sketches (he is not as radical as Bechtle) the number of pictures with a shallow depth of field are an irrelevant minority.

He first achieves an accurate photograph by projecting the image on the canvas. Then he needs to mechanically wipe out every detail in order 'to concentrate on the essential' which is 'the quintessential task of every painter in any time' (Richter, 2004, p. 32). By applying the squeegee, along with the details, he dissolves the focus. The absent presence of the details, whose traces remain on the canvas, along with some identifiable yet blurred subjects operate like an impersonal filter on reality. Not only does he distance himself from ideology, he also offers a chance to the viewer to do the same. In his appearances of reality the lack of exact representation leaves room for the viewer to construct his own signified around the depicted signifier. Gerhard achieves a neutrality both from the subject and for the viewer.

Having lived through two murderous ideologies, Hitler first and Stalin second, Richter has developed a comprehensibly profound despise of ideology and he tries to distances himself from it as much as he can. His compelling and palpable struggle for neutrality is probably so intense because it arises from a genuine and profound existential need. His own words are quite eloquent:

I never wanted to capture and hold reality in a painting [...] But I wanted to paint the appearance of reality. That is my theme or my job. It was my wish to be neutral. I saw it as an opportunity. It was the opposite of ideology. (Richter, 2004, p. 33).

Richter's historical paintings best express his sensitivity. Breaking with the tradition, they do not represent or sublimate the voice of power, they bring forth a fragmented and contradictory reality (Storr, 2009).

Uncle Rudi and *Aunt Marianne* were both painted in 1965. The former was painted to commemorate a German massacre in Czechoslovakia, and Richter donated it to the local museum. This is a

Fig.10 Richter, G., (1965). *Uncle Rudi [Onkel Rudi]*. 87cm x 50cm. Oil on canvas. Lidice collection. Lidice, Czech Republic.

highly symbolic gesture. Asked to comment on the atrocities of fascism he delivers a "picture" of his own uncle who not only was a Nazi but was killed shortly after enrolling. He depicts the tyrant and the victim at the same time. Furthermore, by simultaneously producing a photo portrait painting of his aunt who was killed by the Nazi because of her handicap, his whole family as a whole becomes tyrant and victim.

Fig.11 Richter, G., (1965). *Aunt Marianne [Tante Marianne]*. 100cm x 115cm. Oil on canvas. Yageo Foundation, Taiwan.

Dead (1988), Fig.12 to 14, portray the cadaver of Ulrike Meinhof, a famous journalist who became a member of the Red Army Faction (RAF) and hanged herself in 1976 while serving a prison sentence. They belong to the *October 18, 1977* series 'the day on which RAF members Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader and Jan-Carl Raspe were found dead in their prison cells.' (Gerhard Richter) As the focus blurs, the size of the canvases shrink and their tragic death dissolves into nonsense. Richter finds no answer to why this happened, he can only express "sorrow for the people who died so young and so crazy, for nothing." (Richter).

Fig.12 Richter, G., (1988). *Dead [Tote]*. 62cm x 67cm. Oil on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA.

Fig.13 Richter, G., (1988). *Dead [Tote]*. 62cm x 62cm. Oil on canvas .The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA.

Fig.14 Richter, G., (1988). *Dead [Tote]*. 35cm x 40cm. Oil on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA.

In September all that is in the picture, the plane, the building, the people, are on the verge of exploding into fragments likewise the image is frozen in the process of dissolving before the viewer‘s eyes. He has scraped the paint so much that colors blur with one another and the canvas emerges from behind. The modest scale takes away any heroic connotation, and its format echoes a TV set. Nothing is left of the spectacle that the mass media conveyed through their colorful photographs. The viewer is confronted with a pervading lack of meaning. (Storr, 2009)

Fig.15 Richter, G., (2005). *September.* 52cm x 72cm. Oil on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA.

Similarly to Hamilton, Richter also manifests an in-depth knowledge of the photographic medium. He exploits double exposures, e.g. Fig. 16 where the sea is transposed above itself onto the sky, and the blow up technique, e.g. Fig.17. The latter has been his starting point to explore the abstract subject matter.

All three artists were painting the modern times (Rugoff, 2007), and they all found in photography the appropriate tool to express themselves, each one according to his own sensitivity. Bechtle used photography to achieve a neutrality towards representation, Richter towards the representation of reality. Hamilton used it to instigate critical thinking about the surrounding reality.

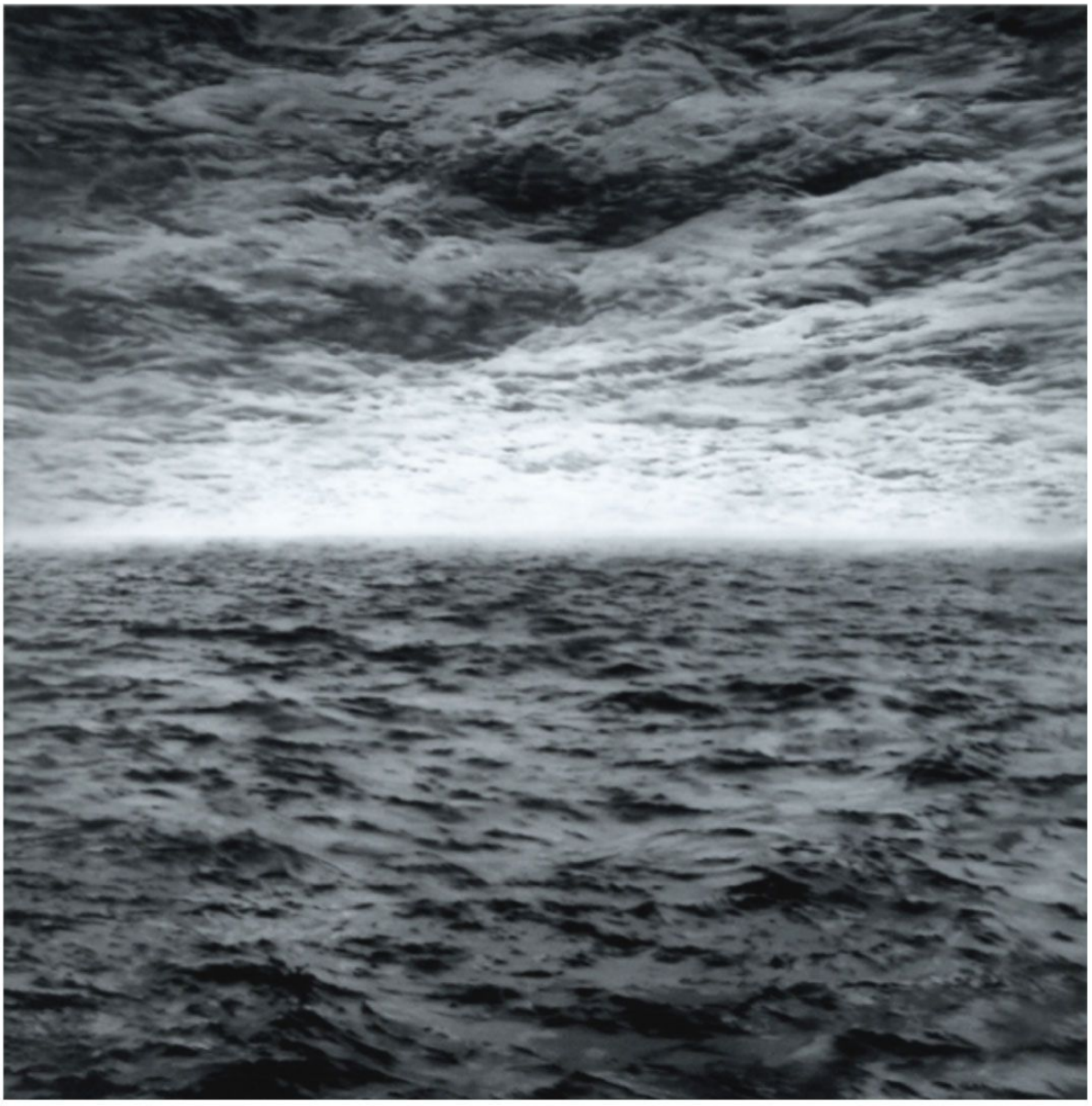

Fig.16 Richter, G., (1970). *Seascape (Sea-Sea) [Seestück (See-See)].* 200cm x 200cm. Oil on canvas. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany.

If they embodied Baudelaire's (1863) incitement to paint modern life, ironically, they also subverted his prejudice against photography: 'this industry, by invading the territories of art, has become art's most mortal enemy, and that the confusion of their several functions prevents any of them from being properly fulfilled.' (Baudelaire, 1859, p.125).

Baudelaire also thought that the painter should capture beauty: 'The pleasure which we derive from representation of the present is due not only to the beauty with which it can be invested, but also its essential quality of being present.' (Baudelaire, 1863, p.1). Yet these painters' modern times were complex and burdened by the recent world wars. If Abstract Expressionists avoided reality, the figurative artists, when capturing 'the moral and aesthetic

feeling of their time' (Baudelaire, 1863, p.2) had barely no space to represent pure and ephemeral beauty. This is not what those times were about. To be fair it would be too much to ask Baudelaire to foresee what came clear only in the mass media world; in the end, the French intellectual was himself "depicting" his own times.

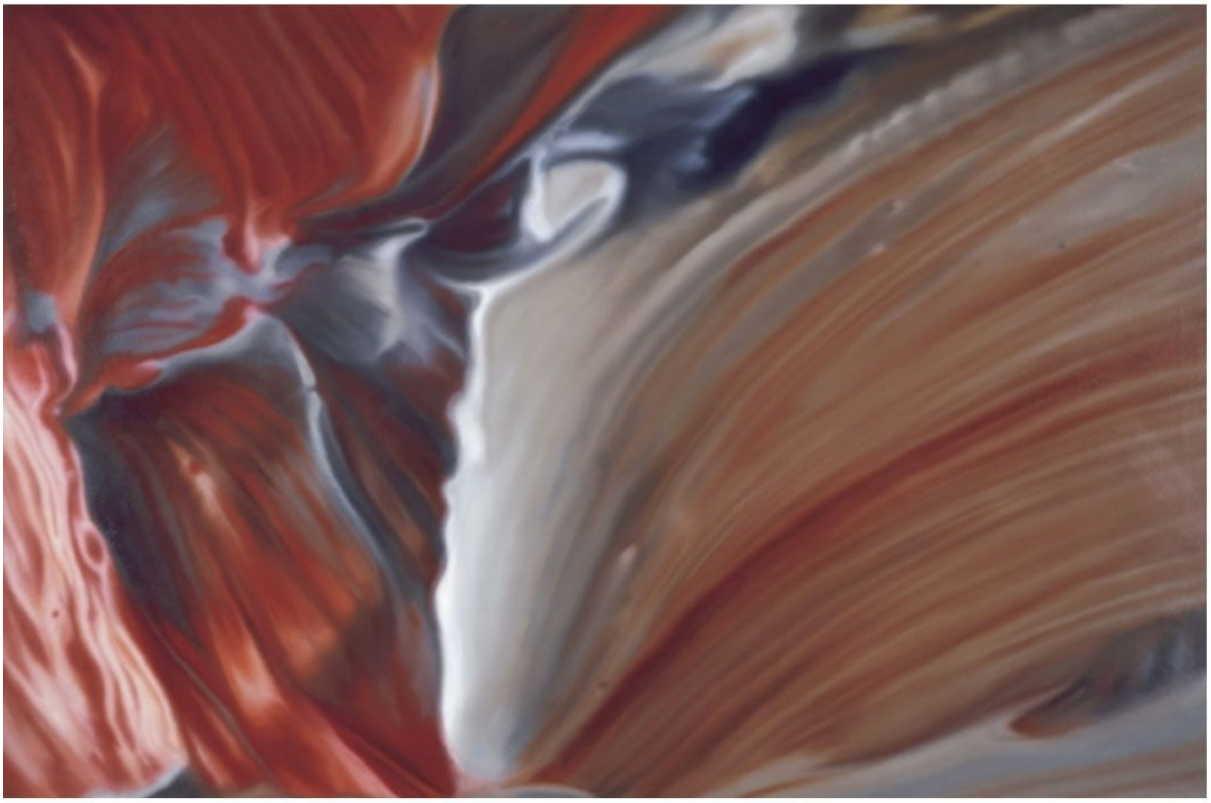

Fig.17 Richter, G., (1970). *Detail (Red-blue) [Ausschnitt (rot-blau)].* 200cm x 300cm. Oil on canvas. Private Collection

Last but not least, technology is deeply imbricated in this pictorial revolution. It invaded these artists' lives, and their visual world by means of photography. The painters acknowledged this fact in their pictorial practice. In 1931, in the midst of the heated debate that opposed art to photography, Walter Benjamin (2005) insisted that the true revolution was the social bearing that photography brought onto art. He claimed that the mechanical reproduction of images was to erode the artwork's aura thus changing the nature and notion of art within society. The monumental scale of this phenomenon brought us to the point where painting appropriated photography, but there was no Walter Benjamin in sight to warn us what's next.

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Fig.1 Hamilton, R. (1956) *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different so appealing?* Godfrey, M., Schimmel, P., Todolì, V., (Eds.). (2014). *Richard Hamilton*. London: Tate publishing p.49

Fig.2 Bechtle, R., (1968-69) *61 Pontiac*. [online image] Available from<http://whitney.org/ForKids/Collection/RobertBechtle> [Accessed: 8 April 2014]

Fig.3 Bechtle, R., (1974) *Almeda Gran Torino*. [online image] Available from<http://www.sfsu.edu/~news/2005/spring/15.htm> [Accessed: 8 April 2014]

Fig.4 Bechtle, R., *Alameda Chrysler* (1981).Letze, O. (ed.) *Photorealism. 50 Years of Hyperrealistic Painting*. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag [Exhibition Catalogue], pp. 53-54

Fig.5 Bechtle, R., (1984) *Sunset Intersection*. [online image] Available from<http://www2.huntermuseum.org/gallery/12/bechtle/sunset-intersection/?sortBy=artist_lastname&perPage=36> [Accessed: 8 April 2014]

Fig.6 Hamilton, R., (1965) *My Marilyn*. Godfrey, M., Schimmel, P., Todolì, V., (Eds.). (2014). *Richard Hamilton*. London: Tate publishing. p. 113

Fig.7 Hamilton, R., (1966-67) *Toaster*. Godfrey, M., Schimmel, P., Todolì, V., (Eds.). (2014). *Richard Hamilton*. London: Tate publishing. p. 139

Fig.8 Hamilton, R., (1968-69) *Swingeing London 67 (f)*. Godfrey, M., Schimmel, P., Todolì, V., (Eds.). (2014). *Richard Hamilton*. London: Tate publishing. p. 166

Fig.9 Hamilton, R., (1965-66) *People*. Godfrey, M., Schimmel, P., Todolì, V., (Eds.). (2014). *Richard Hamilton*. London: Tate publishing. p. 116

Fig.10 Richter, G., (1965). *Uncle Rudi [Onkel Rudi]* [online image] Available from<http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/search/detail.php?paintid=5595&referer=search&title=uncle> [Accessed: 15 April 2014]

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Fig.16 Richter, G., (1970). *Seascape (Sea-Sea) [Seestück (See-See)]*. [online image] Available from<http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/search/detail.php?paintid=5688&referer=search&title=Seestuck+%28See-See%29+1970> [Accessed: 15 April 2014]

Fig.17 Richter, G., (1970). *Detail (Red-blue) [Ausschnitt (rot-blau)]* [online image] Available from<http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/search/detail.php?paintid=4583&referer=search&title=Ausschnitt+%28rot-blau%29> [Accessed: 15 April 2014]

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