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Comparing and contrasting the **Mark Rothko**
Seagram Murals and the **Gerhard Richter** ***Cage***
Series paintings at Tate Modern: how do Rothko and
Richter differ in their attitudes towards the creation of
these abstract works?

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Comparing and contrasting the **Mark Rothko *Seagram Murals*** and the **Gerhard Richter *Cage Series paintings*** at Tate Modern: how do Rothko and Richter differ in their attitudes towards the creation of these abstract works?

Introduction

On the second floor of London's Tate Modern gallery it is possible to stroll from the room containing Mark Rothko's *Seagram murals* to the room containing Gerhard Richter's *Cage series paintings* in less than five minutes, but the fifty years that separate the contents of these two rooms represents a paradigm change in abstract painting. The change is represented not only in the content of the works and in the motivations of the artists but also in the cultural shift that has seen abstract painting move from its position in the avant-garde to mainstream acceptance and, for some critics at least, to a lingering death in the graveyard of Kitch.

This dissertation asks to what extent the differences between these two sets of work reflect different approaches by their creators to the creation of abstract art. Rothko and Richter were very different men painting in very different times and it is by examining the creative personalities behind these works, the historical, social and cultural context in which they were created and how that context affected the motivation of the artists that I hope to make a worthwhile analysis.

Firstly, with a subjective description of the works, the rooms in which they are displayed and some details of the creative techniques employed. Secondly, with brief biographies of the two artists and some discussion of their respective artistic philosophies. Thirdly, with a look at theoretical contexts that may be relevant to this analysis, and finally a brief thought on how undertaking this dissertation has informed my own practice and subsequent conclusions resulting from that research.



fig.1.

Tate Modern, second floor, room 4, Rothko's *Seagram Murals*.

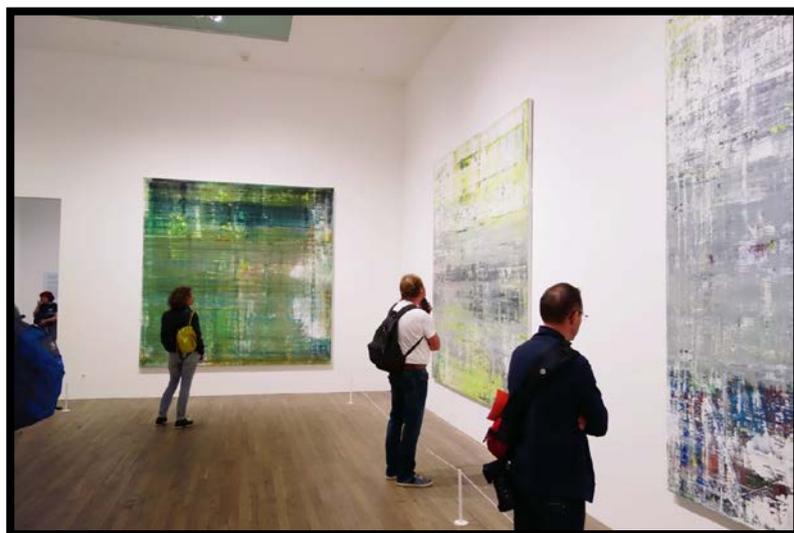


fig.2.

Tate Modern, second floor, room 10, Richter's *Cage Series Paintings*.

A Subjective View

The two rooms in which these works are displayed are both epic in scale containing canvases that dwarf the humans who view them. Both series of paintings are unequivocally non-representational. The biggest difference is in the emotions evoked by entering each of the rooms.

Rothko's murals lurk in a darkened chamber and it is noticeable that visitors to this room lower their voices and move carefully from canvas to canvas, respectfully, as in a church. There are nine canvases in varying shades of red, black, maroon and purple. There are also varying textures to the paint, where some shapes seem to reflect light and others seem to suck the light in. Each painting is lit individually by subtle spotlights from above. The vast fields of colour float in the space, hovering in the room. They seem substantial, significant, important. The geometric shapes are fuzzy and indistinct and where textures meet on the canvas the colours move against each other. 'The colours seep up through the canvas like new blood through a bandage in which old blood has already dried'. (Banville, 2006)



fig 3. *Red on Maroon Mural, section 7 (1959)* [Above]
Red on Maroon Mural, section 5 (1959) [Below]

Rothko sprinkled raw pigment into his oil glazes to achieve the effect of iridescence, for example, in *Red on Maroon, (1959)* light is reflected from the red and absorbed by the maroon presenting the viewer with an almost 3D illusion that seems to swim in and out of focus. This illusion is enhanced by the warm grey background on which the canvases float.

Rothko gave very precise instructions on how the canvases should be placed and lit, and specified exactly the shade and hue that should be on the background walls. He said that the walls should be 'made considerably off white with umber and warmed by a little red', noting that 'if the walls are true white, they are always fighting against the pictures'. He said that the canvases should 'either be lighted from a great distance or indirectly by casting lights at the ceiling or wall' and

that 'the entire picture should be evenly lighted and not strongly'.

(Borchardt-Hume, 2008. 96)

He gave instructions, sometimes for the hanging of individual canvases, and generally for the hanging of all his work.

Larger pictures should all be hung as close to the floor as possible ideally not more than 6 inches above it. If this is not observed proportions of the rectangles become distorted and the pictures change.
(Borchardt-Hume, 2008. 96)

While it is not unusual for artists to be involved in the hanging of their work Rothko's instructions seem to border on the obsessional. It is clear from the quote above that Rothko was very definite about the impression that he wanted to create.

When in 1955 Sydney Janis was showing 12 of Rothko's large canvases in his New York gallery there was considerable conflict between him and Rothko over the lighting in the gallery. Whenever Janis would turn up the spotlights Rothko would turn them down. Janis is quoted as saying:

No matter how low it [The lighting] was he would reduce it. It made the gallery so abysmal but he wanted some kind of mystery attached to his painting. (Seldes, 1996. 34)

This conflict is a perfect early example of how Rothko wanted to control every aspect of his work, particularly how his work was curated, and if Janis is correct in his supposition that Rothko wanted some kind of

mystery attached to his painting it is also a telling example of Rothko wanting to control the public's perception of his work. It may be relevant to note that in 1955 Rothko was still an up-and-coming artist and therefore Janis felt justified in arguing with him about the dismal ambiance surrounding his work (Janis was, after all in the business of selling the paintings, something he presumably felt unable to do if his wealthy clientele could barely see the things). Whereas in the late 1960s when Rothko was negotiating the installation of nine of his murals with the Tate Gallery in London he was an established and lauded artist, and his precise instructions for the installation of his work was considered by the Tate to be part of the work itself. (Borchardt-Hume, 2008. 9)

Richter's *Cage* paintings are a welcome relief after the oppressive murkiness of the Rothko room. This room is high and bright and open. The entire room is well lit and visitors talk and laugh and point out parts of the paintings that remind them of something or other. They are complex and vivid. Dashes of colour are revealed in textures of layered pigment. The paintings are linked thematically by a warm grey colour through which bold vivid greens and yellows and startling reds and purples emerge as if claiming their ground on the canvas after some kind of battle. The surfaces of the six massive squares are seemingly rough, hinting at the swiping destruction of layers of paint revealing more carnage beneath. The paint is pitted and scarred, pulled and twisted, building up colour and texture like, for example, in *Cage 4*

where a bright rash of red has been uncovered like a wound on the knee of a giant child. (see fig. 4) They might be glimpses of light and colour in a forest of grey denseness or the war scarred cityscape of a bombed town where flowers and grass are emerging to claim the rubble. T.J. Clark (2011) aptly describes them as having 'imperfect lushness'.



fig. 4. Detail from *Gerhard Richter, Cage 4 (2006)*

The six *Cage* paintings are named after the American avant-garde composer John Cage. Richter says he was listening to the music of Cage while working on these canvases.

Richter has developed his own painting technique to create these huge abstract tracts of textured colour.

He starts with splashes of colour or some geometric composition, usually something gaudy and generic. Then he employs homemade wood-and-plexiglass squeegees to wipe and drag the paint. The process entails repeatedly building up and wiping off. The

effects change depending on where and how he applies pressure with the squeegee. He has become very adept at this, but there is still an element of chance involved. (Kimmelman, 2002. 8)

Richter has described the *Cage* paintings as possessing 'a certain aggression and unpredictability' which, he says, makes them optimistic, and also that they are the result of coincidence and surprise, unplanned but within a disciplined structure. (Elger and Obrist, 2009. 531-533)

In a 1998 interview with Mark Rosenthal, Richter was asked how his approach differed from Rothko's. He described *The Seagram Murals* as having a meditative quality, seeming to be magical and mysterious, with any trace of chance removed. He said that the deepness in Rothko's work had something religious and that, as he distrusted that message, he 'tried to avoid every similarity with Rothko's art'. (Elger and Obrist, 2009. 330)

Here is clear evidence of the difference between Rothko's and Richter's respective approaches to their paintings, with Richter recognising Rothko's authorial imperative and declaring his intention to take the diametrically opposite approach to his own art.

Rothko

Rothko was born Markus Yakovlevich Rotkovich on 25 September 1903 in Russia (now Latvia). At the age of ten he emigrated with his family to the United States. His father, a pharmacist, died shortly after they arrived at Ellis Island leaving the family struggling to survive. Rothko proved himself a hard-working and intellectually able student winning a scholarship to Yale College to study liberal arts where, 'Rothko, born into a humble Russian Jewish family, faced WASP anti-Semitism at Yale in 1921-23, seeing himself as an outsider to a hostile society'. (Anfam, 2015. 16) Which is why, perhaps, he dropped out of Yale and made his way to New York.

He did what jobs he could find and taught art to schoolchildren while continuing to paint figurative works. In 1940-41 Rothko suffered a bout of depression (Rothko, 2004. xvii) and stopped painting for almost a year to read philosophy and mythic literature. Rothko's son Christopher, in the introduction to his father's book *The Artist's Reality*, notes that around this time his work shifted notably.

Embracing aspects of surrealism, which at that point was very much in the vanguard of modern European painting, he began to produce fanciful landscapes and wildly distorted figures with multiple heads and limbs often dismembered then reconstituted in striking and disturbing synthetic beings. (Rothko, 2004. xvii)

This is an important shift in Rothko's practice, moving from conventional work, adhering to the American artistic orthodoxy of the time, to more surrealist work and apparently letting his imagination and his fragile emotional state dictate the subject matter for his paintings. This may have been the decisive moment in Rothko's artistic journey, where his dissatisfaction with figurative convention led him to seek out European surrealism and to take his first tentative steps on the path that would lead him to pure abstraction.

The story of how the Seagram Murals were commissioned and how Rothko withdrew from the commission has become one of the much-told myths of art history, casting Rothko as the dedicated artist unwilling to have his works sullied by commercial elitism. Like so many myths it has become difficult to determine where the truth lies with any great precision, particularly since there is a sense of Rothko enjoying the controversy and being aware that his growing notoriety enhanced his idea of himself as a heroic figure producing heroic works. It also enhanced the prices achieved for his works in the galleries of New York.

Rothko wanted the murals' tragic grandeur to prove once and for all the existentialist endeavour underpinning his art and in so doing to vindicate the seriousness of all his work to date. (Borchardt-Hume, 2008. 20)

This quote goes to the heart of Rothko's authorship. It is desperately important to Rothko that he is taken seriously and that his integrity is thought to be beyond question. Rothko was commissioned by architect

Philip Johnson and Seagram heiress Phyllis Lambert to create works for the Four Seasons restaurant on the ground floor of the Seagram skyscraper in June 1958. Dan Rice, Rothko's assistant at the time, claims that Rothko embraced the commission enthusiastically, (Borchardt-Hume, 2008. 5) immediately renting a former basketball court in which to start work and creating a full-size mockup of the Seagram restaurant within the basketball court so that he could be precise with the design and placing of the restaurant's murals.

He completed most of the work by early 1959 when he went on holiday to Europe with his wife Mell and daughter Kate. Part of their European tour took them on a visit to Paestum on Italy's Amalfi coast in the company of John Hurt Fischer and his family. Fischer was an editor at Harper's Magazine, befriending the Rothkos on the sea voyage. Paestum is famous for three Graeco-Roman Doric temples where, Fischer reported, his daughter acted as their interpreter as the native guide showed them the Temple of Hera. The guide was curious about the Americans asking Fischer's daughter what the two men in the party did for a living. When she told the guide that Rothko was a well known artist the guide asked if Rothko had come to paint the temples. Rothko replied that he had been painting Greek temples all his life without knowing it. (Banville, 2006)

This may give a clue to Rothko's own attitude towards his work: that he saw his own work as something mystic, sacred or numinous. However,

notes he made in 1950 seem to suggest a much more earthly approach, more concerned with the possibilities of humanity and reason.

When I say that my paintings are Western, what I mean is that they seek the concretization of no state that is without the limits of western reason, no esoteric, extra-sensory or divine attributes to be achieved by prayer and terror. Those who can claim that these [limits] are exceeded are exhibiting self-imposed limitations as to the tensile limits of the imagination within those limits. In other words, that there is no yearning in these paintings for Paradise, or divination. On the contrary they are deeply involved in the possibility of ordinary humanity. (Banville. 2006)

This quote shows Rothko to be firmly existentialist in his approach to abstract painting. He claims the human condition as more mysterious than any numinous mysticism and explains in eloquent detail his authorial vision for the work.

Rothko told Fisher that he had taken the Seagram job with strictly malicious intentions and that he hoped to paint something that 'would ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch that ever eats in that room'. Rothko thought the greatest compliment to his work would be if the restaurant refused to put up the murals. (Seldes, 1996. 45)

Returning to New York and dining at the newly opened Four Seasons restaurant he saw how opulent the decor was and how upmarket and elite the clientele were. He decided not to

deliver the work and in 1960 he repaid the money he had been given and withdrew from the commission. There was a great deal of media coverage of these events and some admiration for Rothko's idealist stance. Rothko encouraged press speculation that he had originally thought the commission was to decorate a workers' canteen and that when he discovered that his work would hang in such an exclusive and expensive den of elitism he refused to fulfil the contract. However, Philip Johnson the designer of the restaurant's interior insists that Rothko knew exactly the elite nature of the establishment. (Seldes, 1996. 45) It is certainly true that the publicity generated increased interest in Rothko and his work.

Rothko faced a good deal of scepticism about the worth of his abstract painting. It is against this background of scepticism, doubt and sometimes hostility that Rothko struggled to have his work taken seriously.

An example of the resistance to Rothko's work felt by the established art world occurred after the 1950 Rothko exhibition (at Parsons Gallery, New York: his first really successful show) where Alfred Barr wanted a Rothko for the Museum of Modern Art but feared that the acquisitions committee were too hidebound in their attitudes to abstract painting to accept the addition of a Rothko to the prestigious museum's collection. He asked an architect friend who was also a trustee of the museum to

buy the painting and donate it. When the painting came before the acquisitions committee they decided not to display it but they hid it away for two years. When in 1952 it was accepted for display one of the museum's founders, A. Conger Goodyear, resigned in disgust. (Seldes, 1996. 26)

Richter

Richter was born on 9 February 1932 in Dresden, into a Germany already dominated by the National Socialists. At the age of ten he was enrolled as a member of the German Young Folk (the junior branch of the Hitler Youth) at a time when his father (a school teacher) joined the Nazi party for fear of losing his job. He remembered his impressions of the war in an interview for the New York Times:

When I got my first uniform as a child, I liked it...
later we had pistols and cigarettes and there were big
guns around, and you know for a boy, society
breaking down is a big adventure. (Kesselman, 2002)

Even at such an early age Richter thrives on the breakdown of his society. There are no certainties, no philosophy to be followed, only Richter's interest in the detail and enjoyment of the process.

After the war Dresden, devastated by Allied bombing, became part of Communist East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) and the teenage Richter started drawing. He was accepted into the Dresden art academy in 1951 to undergo a strict training in Socialist Realism, the prevailing artistic orthodoxy dictated by the Russian establishment.

He became a successful muralist, toeing the party line and fulfilling commissions in government buildings. This success allowed him certain privileges, including permission to travel to West Germany. It was here he first saw work by Jackson Pollock, Lucio Fontana, Franz Kline and

even Mark Rothko. The famous MoMA exhibition *The New American Painting* started its European tour in Basel on 19 April 1958 and was also shown in Berlin later that year. Richter attended the second *documenta* exhibition in Kassel in 1959 and has spoken of how impressed he was by Pollock and Fontana saying 'this was a great new experience to see these things which we have not been allowed to see during the Nazi regime'. (Elger and Obrist, 2009. 106)

The effect of exposure to these exhibitions on Richter's life and subsequent work cannot be overestimated. In a 1961 letter to his former East German professor, (Heinz Lohmar, Dresden Academy of Fine Arts) explaining his decision to start a new life in West Germany he said his reason was largely to do with his career, writing 'that the whole cultural "climate" in the West offers me and my artistic endeavours more'. (Elger and Obrist, 2009. 13)

Richter relocated to the West in 1961 just before the construction of the Berlin wall, enrolling in the Dusseldorf *Kunstakademie* under Joseph Beuys.

Richter's training at the Academy of fine arts in Dresden had been very academic and very traditional. He learned to draw from plaster copies and nude models. He has said he was dissatisfied with his situation and with the prevailing insistence on Socialist Realism. He recalls that the students were not allowed to paint from photographs. After his move to the West he was involved in two art movements, one called Zero and

one called Fluxus, which were, according to Richter 'very successful in expanding the boundaries of art'. Richter says he wanted to do paintings which had nothing to do with art so he started painting from photographs. (Elger and Obrist, 2009. 106)

In 2005 in an interview by Susann Beyer and Ulrike Knöfel in Der Spiegel magazine Richter was asked whether his conservatism was linked to having lived through the Nazi period, the German democratic republic, and the old and new Federal Republic.

Perhaps. When you've experienced so much lunacy and have managed to remain relatively unscathed, you tend to want to preserve what's good, remain sceptical, and not trust the latest hype. I had a great deal of luck. (Elger and Obrist, 2009. 508)

Here is evidence of Richter's anti-ideology stance. He claims his scepticism as a virtue and part of his mental armoury in not being swayed by fashions and fads. When he declares that he has had a great deal of luck it may be that he is attributing his independence of view, which has led him to follow his own individual path to success, to a learned distrust of systems, philosophies and that which is supposedly axiomatic.

A major difference between Rothko and Richter is in the scope and variety of their artistic practices. Rothko, having found the path of colour field abstraction became single-minded in his pursuit of perfection in that field. His concentration on one grand idea and his

experimentation driven by the desire to achieve its philosophical goal gave him, in the eyes of many critics, a worthwhile artistic integrity. Whereas Richter is known for the variety of his practice; so much so that he seems to reinvent himself with every new project. Richter takes photographs, appropriates photographs, paints figuratively, produces sculpture, paints on photographs, paints direct copies of photographs, creates abstract works using mathematical algorithms, has worked in glass producing both free standing contemporary conceptual sculpture and controversially an extraordinary stained-glass window using random colour choices. His figurative painting has featured a diverse range of subjects including skulls, candles, portraits of both his intimate family and public figures, and of random strangers found in the pages of magazines and newspapers.

Gerhard Richter, perhaps influenced by his own experiences of two of the Twentieth Century's most destructive ideologies, fascism and communism, declares himself to be anti-ideology.

'By nature I am a skeptic,' he says. 'I don't dare to think my paintings are great. I can't understand the arrogance of someone saying, 'I have created a big, important work.' I want to reject this pathetic behavior, this notion of the heroic artist.' His point is directed at what he sees as a culture of excessive self-regard among artists who should know enough to admit the limits of what they do. 'Pollock, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline, their heroism derived from the climate of their time, but we do not have this climate.' (Kimmelman, 2002)

Richter has proved himself to be a master manipulator of media and message, often producing the most powerful effect by saying absolutely nothing, but here we may be seeing his disingenuous self-effacement slip. Is it surely with some regret that Richter complains how living and working in late twentieth century Europe, with its post-modern acceptance of abstract art, rather than the pioneer frontier of mid-century American Abstract Expressionism, has robbed him of the ability to be 'heroic'. There may be a sense here of Richter mourning his own death as an author but in notes he made in 1966 he declares that he 'pursues no objectives, no system, no tendency,' and that he has no programme, style or direction, and in stark contrast to Rothko declares that he has no time for 'working themes or variations that lead to mastery'. (Elger and Obrist, 2009. 46)

Theory & analysis

Bloomsbury Group art critic Clive Bell, in his 1914 essay *The Aesthetic Hypothesis in Art*, (Francis and Harrison, 1984. 83) identifies 'significant form' as 'the quality shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotion'.

Bell might well have found 'significant form' in both the Rothko *Seagram murals* and the Richter *Cage series* of paintings. There is an aesthetic balance in both sets of works that is satisfying for the viewer without reference to the context, history or iconography referenced in their creation.

Clement Greenberg defined and promoted the concept of American Abstract Expressionism and, in the view of some critics, fed both his own ego and that of Mark Rothko's by bringing the idea of abstraction as a new and important progression in world art into mainstream cultural discourse in post Second World War America. It is clear that Greenberg saw modernism as the next stage in a teleological progression building on Bell's ideas of significant form and a history defined and illustrated by Alfred Barr (First Director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, 1929-43) in his 1936 chart of modernist art history *Cubism and Abstract Art*. (See fig. 5)

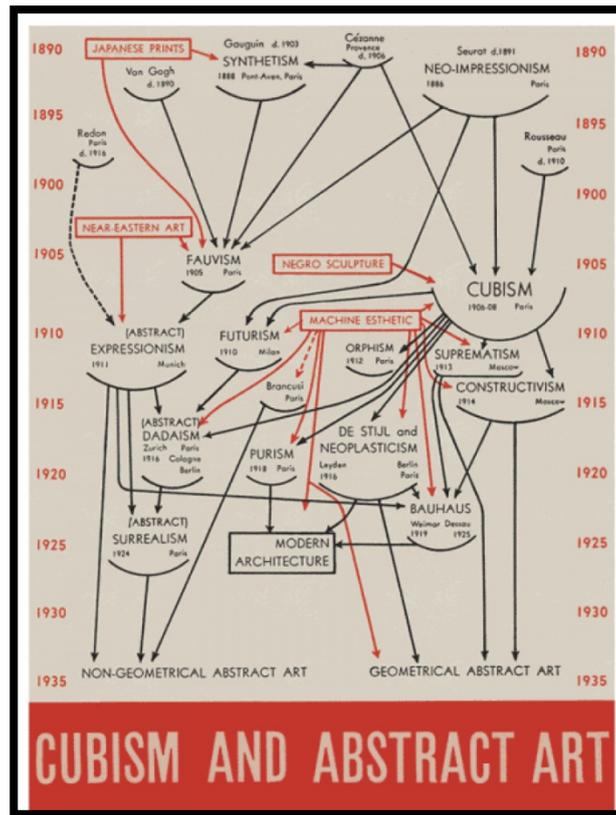


fig.5. Barr, A. (1936) *Cubism and Abstract Art*. MoMA. New York.

Greenberg says,

I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant, and does not mean now, anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unravelling of tradition, but it also means its further evolution. Modernist art continues the past without gap or break, and wherever it may end up it will never cease being intelligible in terms of the past. (Greenberg, 1960: 6)

Aesthetically, Greenberg might well have approved of Richter's colourful canvases, both in terms of their heroic scale and the spatial play of their composition. They would have complied with Greenberg's insistence that 'visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in

any other order of experience', (1960. 5) meaning that Greenberg's ideal modernist art-work should make no reference to the outside world but that the painting, as object, should exist as a world of its own; that the viewer first sees the painting as a painting, viewing the two dimensional surface as a surface and then appreciating the form and colour within that surface.

The theories of Gille Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *A thousand Plateaus* (1980. 24-46) could be applied to the working practice of both Rothko and Richter to usefully identify differences between those artists' approaches to their work. Rothko's progression was linear, exploring a central theme and dedicating himself to finding a singular solution which could be promoted and acclaimed as the rightful heir to the art that had come before. His attitude echoed Greenberg's idea that modern abstraction could only be understood in relation to its past. The visual metaphor of Alfred Barr's 1936 tree leading to the twin branches of either geometric or non-geometric abstraction is an apt one for Deleuze and Guattari who describe such a linear progression as arborescent. Whereas Richter's work 'which switch-hits, sometimes almost as if arbitrarily, between realism and abstraction' (Kimmelman, 2006. 6) has no central 'trunk' from which branches emerge, rather it has 'transformational multiplicities' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980. 32) and would be better described, metaphorically, as couch grass where many nodes extend through the soil forming a rhizome.

There is a theoretical concept, however, that goes to the heart of the difference between the work of Rothko and Richter. It speaks to the major change in cultural context that has taken place in the 50 years that separate these two series of works.

Roland Barthes's 1967 essay *The Death of the Author* makes a theoretical argument that reflects the cultural and social changes that were taking place in America and Western Europe around this time. It also offers a pertinent illustration of the differences between Rothko and Richter's motivational philosophies.

Barthes questions the importance of the artist's thinking behind the creation of the work and shifts responsibility for interpreting that creative work to the viewer. This idea of *The Death of the Author* is central to early post-modernism (Osborne and Sturgis, 2006. 166) suggesting that signs within art or text have no fixed meaning but depend on the system within which the work is viewed. Barthes questions the importance of the artist's intentions when making a work of art because, according to him, it is the viewer who creates the meaning when they decipher the work. Barthes suggests that to assign an author to a text, 'is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing'. (Barthes, 1967. 147) he goes on to claim that leaving art without an author is truly revolutionary since 'to refuse to fix meaning is in the end to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, and law'. (Barthes, 147)

Barthes is describing a cultural shift away from hegemonic faith. This had particular relevance to the interpretation and appreciation of art as the modern era, loosely thought to be the Western period of industrialisation 1860 – 1960, came to an end. (Osborne and Sturgis, 2006. 99)

It is quite possible for a viewer without knowledge of Rothko or Richter's biographical details, of their philosophies or of the nature and manner of their artistic practices to form their own response to the works. A child, viewing these works for the first time and with no knowledge of their provenance could appreciate the works in the way that Clive Bell describes as *significant form*, appreciating form, colour and texture alone.

In his 1969 essay *What is an Author?* Michel Foucault extends Barthes's original theory, refuting its monochromatic simplicity, to an understanding of the inevitable possibility of a viewer whose knowledge does extend to the context of the works being informed by that knowledge.

An author's name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like); it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. (Foucault, 1969. 210)

That 'classifactory function' is a significant extra factor when viewing both sets of works, and however much Richter seems to want to abdicate his position of author there is a view of his work to be taken which incorporates a knowledge of his history, his biography and his philosophy. It might be argued that Rothko does not give his viewers the option of making their own interpretation. Rothko's brooding presence is palpable in the Seagram room at Tate Modern whether or not you know the history of the paintings or the context in which they were created. Knowing, however, that Rothko committed suicide on the day that these paintings arrived at the Tate (Borchardt-Hume, 2008. 222) cannot help but colour the viewers' feelings towards these canvases.

My practice

Paul Klee wrote in his diary in 1915 'The more horrible this world (as today, for instance) the more abstract our art, whereas a happy world brings forth an art of the here and now', and it might be argued that the surge of European abstract art in the early twentieth century coincided with the First World War and the Russian revolutions, and that the rise of American Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s coincided with the aftermath of the second World War, the legacy of the holocaust and the use by the US of the world's first nuclear weapons.

If then we draw a line from the beginning of the twentieth century to our immediate future and link points on it to a) the use of photography b) the social anxiety brought about by current international conflict and c) the surge in the production and popularity of abstract painting we may, without much of an imaginative stretch, link a) the current ubiquity of the smartphone camera, and the means to disseminate images via the internet, b) the current and growing social anxiety engendered by the rise of extremist militancy in general and the December 2015 Paris terrorist attacks in particular, and extrapolate a rise in the production and popularity of abstract art in the coming years.

The issues raised and the questions uncovered from researching this dissertation are keenly relevant to my own practice as an abstract painter. It may be possible to argue that there will be a resurgence in

the appreciation of abstract form but for my own practice the question is about the progression from Rothko's formal teleological approach, through Richter's seemingly laissez-faire indifference to the interpretation of his work, to ask what form of philosophy will underpin the next wave. Predictions in the world of art are notoriously inaccurate but if the trend examined here prevails my practice will be in the creation of smaller more personal work since the insecurity of feeling that such work will not be taken seriously is gone. The acceptance of abstract painting as valid mainstream art is established and a quiet new wave of abstract artists, like Laura Owens and Jacqueline Humphries, are mixing media and creating experiences in non-representational forms that solve visual and philosophical questions with a delight in simple aestheticism. Perhaps it may be said that abstract painting has come of age, no longer having to justify itself by tackling grand themes on a grand scale.

My own work explores the tension between chaos and order, the created and the destroyed, and the conflict between what is hidden and what is revealed. The works I produce are intimate and address viewers individually, abandoning a collective discourse for a personal interaction that changes, I hope, with each viewing of the work; a conscious antithesis to the digital age's clinically accurate reproduction and ubiquitous dissemination of both images and ideas.

Conclusion

The question posed at the beginning of this dissertation was predicated on the assumption that attitudes to abstract art have been transformed during the fifty years that separate these two particular sets of work.

These works do reflect different attitudes and approaches to abstract art. There are aesthetic similarities in the works themselves but the cultural landscapes in which these works were created were very different.

Although it is impossible to pinpoint one precise moment of change and a single instance of cultural progression it is possible to reference Roland Barthes' 1967 essay *The Death of the Author* and the revolutionary transformations of 1968 (cultural, social and political) in describing how the contextual landscape had changed by the time Richter picked up his Perspex squeegee.

Rothko's cultural context owed its optimism and ambition to the legacy of modernism and a pre post-modern cultural imperialism born of America's pre-eminent position as victor of the Second World War and as the major arbiter of post-war European reconstruction whereas Richter's cultural context owed its questioning insecurity to the legacy of German defeat in the Second World War and the artistic oppression of subsequent East German Communist orthodoxy. There was loss of faith in hopeful ideologies, of betrayal by respected hegemonies and the exposure of received truths as nebulous myth. Then, after 1968, the

uncertainty of revolutionary post-modernism where Barthes and Foucault exploded the delusion of heroic authorship and shifted the power in visual culture to an increasingly media-savvy audience.

For Richter the tree created by Alfred Barr to map the route ending in either non-geometrical or geometrical abstraction has been felled. He jumps from figurative work to abstraction to appropriation and photography without any grand guiding credo other than the belief that he has no guiding credo. His most quoted statement claims he 'knows nothing, can do nothing, understands nothing, knows nothing, nothing' branding him a nihilist who 'flaunts his inconstancy'. (Kimmelman, 2002. 6)

Inevitably there are contradictions. Rothko says that he thinks he has been painting Greek temples all his life but also that his paintings are about humanity. Richter professes nihilism, telling the world he knows nothing and yet he gives his work mystic status when he insists that his paintings are cleverer than him, with a life of their own.

Richter seems comfortable in the corporate world, in accepting sponsorship and commissions from big business and working with all ideologies while professing none of his own.

It might be argued that Rothko is present as the author of The Seagram murals, whereas Richter is an absent author. Rothko has a philosophy, an agenda and an ethos that informs the creation of the Seagram

murals. He wants them to be mysterious and he wants them to be read in a very particular way.

Richter's *Cage* paintings seem to be open to the widest possible interpretations and to no interpretation. They seem to allow for a very individual response from the viewer and Richter has deliberately absented himself from that response. Richter makes a virtue of leaving the interpretation of his *Cage* paintings entirely to the viewer.

There is a case for suggesting that Richter's early experiences at the end of the Second World War started him on the nihilist path. He has spoken about the great impression that was made on him at the age of ten, relishing the breaking down of society. Richter goes on to reject the orthodoxy imposed on him by East Germany. He even rejects the declaration by contemporary artists in the late 20th century that painting is dead and continues to use oil on canvas as his preferred medium.

Rothko was quite different. He came to abstract expressionism as a teleological progression from the European art movements that had influenced him in his search for the ideas that would allow him to produce meaningful work.

The saga of the commissioning of the Seagram murals and Rothko's refusal to fulfil the commission is a good illustration of Rothko's insistence on being the author of his work and on having that work interpreted according to his own philosophies. If his outrage is to be

believed he refused to fulfil the Seagram commission because he couldn't bear the thought of 'every son of a bitch that ever eats in that room' (Seldes, 1996. 45) interpreting his work as merely luxury decor as they tucked into their ribeye steaks.

Richter's open bright complex canvases hung plainly on bright white walls and generously lit put the onus on the viewer to interpret the work according to their own circumstance, attitude, philosophy, experience, prejudices and predilections.

There is a clear contrast between Rothko's full and eloquent justification of his work and Richter's sometimes taciturn non-statements and evasive analysis of his own creations.

Richter named his paintings for John Cage whose famous quote 'I have nothing to say, and I'm saying it' might well stand as Richter's epitaph, whereas Rothko had plenty to say, and even now his paintings are saying it for him.

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