

Gerhard Richter: Between the sayable and the intelligible

Cristina Susigan

A B S T R A C T

It is a fact that the history of art has sought new theoretical foundations and new methodologies, driven by the desire to become more "global". In Peter Sloterdijk's thinking, art is more potent, and therefore would reject any categorization (2014, 479), going beyond the sayable and the intelligible; Gilles Deleuze (2001: 88) says: "Art thinks only of philosophy, but thinks of objects and percepts". In the heated debate provoked by this desire for a more critical Art History, a question can be raised: Who holds the power in the field today, and where do the theories that govern interpretations emanate from, for the restructuring of a more democratic and inclusive Art History? This communication aims to question the artistic representation produced after World War II and the multiple connections that help sediment what we can call "the end of art", in the sense of Hans Belting - like the artist's liberation -, at the same time that it debates the end of utopias of the avant-gardes. In a fragmented world, where according to Theodor Adorno it was impossible to produce poetry after Auschwitz, let us analyze the works of Gerhard Richter (1932-), whose works can be understood as mirrors to reflect a world in which reality and image are equally present in contemporary life, in search, according to the artist "of the truth of the image".

K E Y W O R D S

Art History, Gerhard Richter, sayable and intelligible.

Faculdade Santa Marcelina e Pesquisadora do CEAA
Santa Marcelina College and Researcher of CEAA, São Paulo, Brazil

When we come across a work of art our first impulse is to rationalize, theorize, because western cultural thought gives more importance to the text; interpret the image through the word rather than the aesthetic fruition and the approximation of images. If we return to Upper Paleolithic, we will already find in what we call "rock art" - or more recently the indigenous objects, which only acquires importance when there is a context -, images, which by themselves speak of themselves, at the same time that remind us of the reflection of that we will never know the true intention of these images and why they were made. According to Marie-José Mondzain:

"(...) The negative hand is the first self-portrait, non-specular, mirrorless self-portrait of the man who is a subject who knows only of himself and the world the trace left there by his hands. The self-image is a proof of separation, the establishment of a regime of separation and untied subjectivity."

(Mondzain, 2015, p. 42)

The idea that the human being is an artist and art producer, in turn, is strongly linked to the historical thought developed in the Renaissance by Vasari, where the desire to immortalize those who produced and produce the third space arises (the third space as a proposal of a sensitive logos trying to separate the distemation between man and animal, and as well reflects Emanuele Coccia (2015: 85): '... the sensible exists within matter / in the object, not in our soul / in the subject, but it is the place where nature and culture, life and history exile themselves.'

These parameters will be based on the new theories of the image, with the intent of a knowledge of the world, to move away from the concept of art to approximate the concept of image, a more comprehensive one.

When we look at the images of René Magritte (1898-1967), for example *Key of Dreams* (Figure 1),

which creates a play between saying things and seeing – a fight between the speakable and visible image and the meaning of the written word-, they defy us and shuffle our gaze, which sees the object and can be redirected to the words.

This conflict between words and image - a medium widely used nowadays -, retrieves Plato's dichotomy between word and truth and reminds us of what Marilena Chauí, by summarising the Socratic thought.

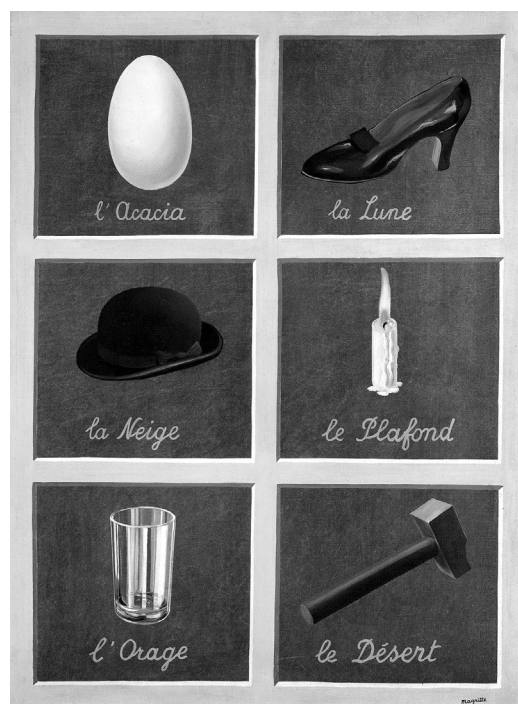


Figure 1

The reduction of the visible to the speakable, of the sensible to the intelligible was, in the twentieth century, first fought in philosophy by the definition of work of art by Martin Heidegger, who sought to regain the idea of truth, and then

Figure 1. *Key of Dreams*, 1930. Oil on canvas: 81 × 60 cm. Private Collection, Paris. <http://www.magritte.be/>

by artists such as Magritte and Joseph Kosuth (1945-). According to Heidegger:

"(...) As soon as the shock to the unsettling abyss is dampened in the field of the habitual and the expert, the art business around works has already begun. The very careful transmission of the works, the scientific efforts for their recovery, never again touch the very being-work, but only a memory of it. But you can also offer the work a place from which to make history. The most authentic reality of the work only comes to light where the work is safeguarded in the truth that happens through itself." (Heidegger, 2007, p. 57)

Magritte paintings can be interpreted through the idea of the unmasking of Heidegger's truth, and this truth would be the imbroglio of knowledge and the unsurpassed interval between the visible and the decidable, meaningful and non-meaningful, that other knowledge. They sought to tread an analytical and analytical-historical path. Kosuth (2006: 225), in turn, emphasizes the ability of the art to self-define itself: '... At this moment of mankind, after philosophy and religion, art can eventually be that activity that solves what other times may have called "the spiritual needs of the human being".'

Art has a potential that goes beyond the speakable and intelligible. However, for over two millennia

Figure 2



Figure 2. *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Installation. Chair 32 3/8 x 14 7/8 x 20 7/8" (82 x 37.8 x 53 cm), photographic panel 36 x 24 1/8" (91.5 x 61.1 cm), text panel 24 x 30" (61 x 76.2 cm). MoMA Museum.
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81435>

and a half, it has attempted to discuss it in relation to truth: either as dangerous, or as therapeutic, or as truth that must be safeguarded by philosophy. According to Peter Sloterdijk:

"... From the art the path is short to what in the philosophical language is called decentralized consciousness, that is, that form of consciousness in which the self leaves the strategic center of being-in-the-world in favor of a participation of a belonging without reference." (Sloterdijk, 2014, p. 479)

In philosophy, the idea of associating art with the intelligible persisted, although the association of art to philosophy by Deleuze and Guattari, who first declared all sciences as being creative to later recognize art as being able to think, primarily sought to break with the hierarchization between the sensible and the intelligible once and for all.

Before that, the potential of art was first claimed by the historical avant-garde and then by contemporary art. Today the aesthetic experience is no longer seen as didactical (Plato), therapeutic (Aristotle) or intranquilizing (Heidegger), but as able to provide a presence of spirit capable of disintegrating the self, to make us feel part of a deindividualized whole (Sloterdijk).

If the history of western art, rooted in eurocentrism, places us on the pedestal of being historical beings - that is, those who have possessed and still have an effect on the fate of others -, in parallel, an a-historical thought could be associated with both people who dispensed from these activities and writing as to those who were affected by historical thinking and so absorbed or assimilated it, but never actually practiced it or exclusively. In this context, we can include trans-historic thinking, it bridges the temporality of space-time, being a *continuum* of history and images, in our case.

When Adorno refers that after Auschwitz is impossible to write poetry, we can transmute this concept into painting. In the context of the "catastrophe", when the world collapses, the act of painting becomes a body to body with the painting; We see the figuration of the catastrophe, as if nature were to be deconstructed - the first painter to think of this concept was William Turner (1775-1851), with his dissolved paintings, where figuration, little by little is no longer visible to be only a perception. And it will be in this field that post-war artists would have to rebuild their subjectivity.

Gerhard Richter (1932-) is one of the greatest living artists. Multifaceted, he experienced throughout his career a contrasting changes in techniques and concepts, redirecting historical crises, revisiting consecrated artists, exploring new procedures. Its dialogue between figuration and abstraction is diachronic and constant, goes beyond following a single pathway, we see a mixture.

Within the context of "catastrophe", we can analyze the formation of the *Atlas* of Richter. After the World War II, the division of Germany, the collectiveness of images would become a form of memory preservation - the loss of the family and social context of the artist and the self-destruction that was inflicted on the identity of the German State. But beyond this personal factor, as a professional, Richter had to debate whether the medium of painting would remain, in its confrontation with the culture of mass and photography. With this double view, Richter would make a transition: from photography, he would create painting, taking the *Atlas* as a starting point. To establish the dialogue with the *continuum* of history, we chose the painting *Reader*, 1994, (Figure 3) for our analysis.

This disassociated image of Richter's large abstractions creates a dialogue with the history of art,

bringing a new meaning which we can approach through the thought of Hans Belting:

In other words, the restriction present at the end of art history offers the desired opportunity to treat art history with some distance and under the motto: "The king is dead, long live the king!". But the small number of art historians, however, provides sufficient assurance that the subject they have made a profession will never end, and this is similar in other humanities. Still, I see enough reason to give importance to the problem if we take seriously the original idea that is present in the concept of an 'art history': the idea, namely, of restoring an effective history and bringing its meaning to light. In

the concept is present both the meaning of an image and the understanding of a frame presented by the written history of art. Art has adjusted to the framing of art history as much as it fits it. Today we could, therefore, instead of the end, speak of a loss of framing, which results in the dissolution of the image, since it is no longer delimited by its framing. The discourse of the "end" does not mean that "it is all over," but it calls for a change in discourse, as the object has changed and no longer fits into the old frames." (Belting, 2016, p. 13)

Reader is a specific reference to one of Johannes Vermeer's paintings, namely *Woman in Blue Reading*

Figure 3



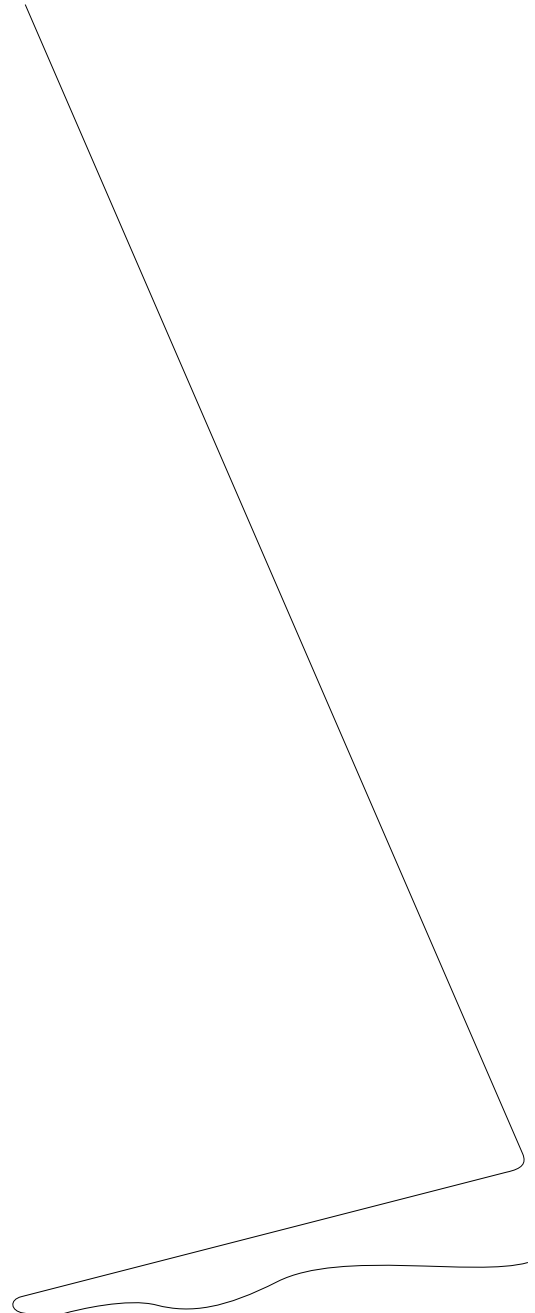
Figure 3. *Reader*, 1994. Oil on canvas: 72 × 102 cm. Catalogue Raisonné: 804. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). <https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/women-27/reader-8054>

a Letter, painted around 1662, although Vermeer's painting shows a few aspects that we do not find in Richter's painting. Vermeer's reader is placed in a more prominent social context, which includes reading a letter, being pregnant, being in Holland, and reading in a bourgeois interior. Moreover, whereas Vermeer's reader is placed in front of a window, the surrounding area of Richter's reader is almost abstract, as if she read in front of an abstract formalist painting. Richter's reader is not without any social references, though: we notice the pearls, the carefully knotted hair, as well as the earring. In addition, Richter's reader reads a magazine and not a letter. In the following, I shall leave these social aspects aside, so that we may look more deeply into the actual structure of the painting. We should note that Richter's explicit embracing of the art-historical tradition is immediately negated by the way in which he takes up a modern position in this painting: the painting is based on a photograph.

These changes do not weaken the power of the image. The starting point, be it nature, is a technical support that, according to Walter Benjamin, encapsulates the aura, in the referential model of the new theory of image - it is worth remembering that it takes into account cave paintings or the indigenous artifacts that are activated within a context, or even the African masks, which were fetishized by modern artists. Between the speakable and the intelligible, in a world where the proliferation of images is beyond what our gaze can grasp, the sensitive resides perhaps in looking back and resignifying the starting image.

By potentially enabling the decentralization of the position of the human being as a transcendental and analytical-historical subject, art contradicts all attempts by other areas of knowledge to constitute it through an outward understanding. There lies its emancipating potential. Heidegger had already claimed that art neither reproduces

nor represents nor imitates the world. Today, there is increasingly less doubt that art is at the same time sensitive and intelligible, and that its potential lies in making us feel - the feeling can make us think, and thinking can make us act.



R
E F
E
R E N
E S
C

*Belting, H. (2016). *O fim da história da arte: uma revisão dez anos depois*. São Paulo: CosacNaify.

*Cocchia, E. (2015). "Física do sensível – pensar a imagem na Idade Média."
In: Emmanuel Alloa (org.). *Pensar a imagem*. São Paulo: Autêntica, p. 77-92.

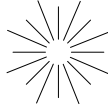
*Heidegger, M. (2007). *A Origem da Obra de Arte*. Edição Bilingue.
São Paulo: Almedina Brasil – Edições 70.

*Kosuth, J. (2006). *Art after philosophy and after: collected writings, 1966-1990*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.

*Mondzain, M. (2015). "A imagem entre proveniência e destinação."
In: Emmanuel Alloa (org.). *Pensar a imagem*. São Paulo: Autêntica, p. 39-54.

*Sloterdijk, P. (2014). *Der ästhetische Imperativ*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

E
B E N
E
E
B
C



GERHARD RICHTER:
BETWEEN THE SAYABLE AND THE INTELLIGIBLE

Cristina Susigan holds a PhD in Education, Art and History of Culture from Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, with a thesis related to contemporary art and women. Master's degree in American Studies from the Universidade Aberta, with a dissertation in the area of interarts (painting, literature and cinema). She has been teaching of in higher education at the Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal, in the field of visual studies. In research, she dedicates herself to appropriation in the arts, history, theory and critique of art and interart relations. She has taught courses in the field of visual arts and audiovisual language. She is currently a lecturer at Faculdade Santa Marcelina in São Paulo.

Cristina Susigan

